

Auggie & ME

three wonder stories



R. J. Palacio

CONTENTS

COVER

ABOUT THE BOOK

TITLE PAGE

INTRODUCTION

THE JULIAN CHAPTER

PLUTO

SHINGALING

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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About the Book

You can't blend in when you were born to stand out.

WONDER is the award-winning story of Auggie Pullman: an ordinary boy with an extraordinary face who is desperate to fit in.

Julian has always felt uncomfortable around Auggie – but a summer spent with his grandmother in Paris makes Julian see Auggie with new eyes.

Christopher is Auggie's oldest friend – and knows better than most that being part of Auggie's life comes with its challenges.

Charlotte has always been nice to Auggie: but in a year of torn loyalties and damaged feelings, is being nice really enough?

Now read a new side to the *WONDER* story, from three characters whose lives have been changed by Auggie forever.

**Auggie
& ME**
three wonder stories

R. J. Palacio

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Introduction

“Is there going to be a sequel to *Wonder*?” someone in the audience asks.

“No, I’m sorry,” I answer, a little embarrassed. “I don’t think it’s the kind of book that really lends itself to a sequel. I like to think that fans of *Wonder* will imagine for themselves what will happen next to Auggie Pullman and all the other people in his world.”

That exchange, or something like it, has happened at just about every book signing, speaking engagement, or reading I’ve done since *Wonder* came out on February 14, 2012. It’s probably the question I get asked the most, aside from “Will there be a movie of *Wonder*?” and “What inspired you to write *Wonder*?”

Yet here I am, writing an introduction to a book that is, for all intents and purposes, a companion to *Wonder*. So how exactly did that happen?

To answer that question, I have to discuss *Wonder* just a little bit. If you’ve bought this book or been given it as a gift, there’s a good chance you’ve read *Wonder* already, so I don’t need to tell you too much about it. Suffice it to say that *Wonder* is the story of a ten-year-old boy named Auggie Pullman, who was born with a craniofacial difference, as he navigates the ups and downs of being the new kid at Beecher Prep middle school. We see this journey through his eyes and the eyes of several characters whose lives happen to intersect with his over the course of that pivotal year, and whose insights enhance the reader’s understanding of Auggie’s passage to self-acceptance. We don’t hear from any characters whose stories don’t directly expand upon Auggie’s story within the time frame of that fifth-grade year, or whose understanding of Auggie is too limited to shed light upon his character. *Wonder* is Auggie’s story, after all, from beginning to end. And I was very strict with myself about telling his story in a simple and linear way. If a character didn’t propel the narrative forward—or told a story that ran parallel to, or before or after, the events in *Wonder*—then he or she didn’t get a voice in the book.

That’s not to say that some of these other characters didn’t have interesting stories to tell, however—stories that might have explained their own motivations a bit even if those revelations didn’t directly affect Auggie.

Which is exactly where this book comes in.

To be clear: *Auggie & Me* is not a sequel. It doesn’t pick up where *Wonder* left off. It doesn’t continue to tell the story of Auggie Pullman navigating middle school. In fact, Auggie is only a minor character in these stories.

What this book is, precisely, is an expansion of Auggie’s world. The three stories in *Auggie & Me*—*The Julian Chapter*, *Pluto*, and *Shingaling*, all originally published as short ebooks—are told from the perspective of Julian, Christopher, and Charlotte, respectively. They are three completely different narratives, telling the stories of characters who only occasionally, if at all, appear in each other’s stories. They all do have one thing in common, though, which is Auggie Pullman. His presence in their lives serves as a catalyst by which they’re each transformed in subtle and not-so-subtle ways.

Auggie & Me is also not a sequel in a traditional sense because there’s no continuation of Auggie’s story, other than a brief fast-forward in Julian’s chapter to the summer after fifth grade, which provides a nice coda to the Julian/Auggie story line. But other than that, readers don’t find out what happens to Auggie Pullman in the sixth grade, or in high school, or beyond. I can guarantee that *that* book, the de facto sequel, will never be written. And that’s a good thing, folks. One of the most beautiful by-products of writing *Wonder* is the amazing fan fiction it has generated. Teachers are using it in classrooms, asking students to get into character and write their own chapters on Auggie, or

Summer, or Jack. I've read stories devoted to Via, Justin, and Miranda. Chapters written from Amos's point of view, and Miles's and Henry's. I've even read one child's very poignant short chapter from Daisy's point of view!

But perhaps the most touching story-writing I've read has been about Auggie, with whom readers seem to have a passionate sense of involvement. I've had kids tell me they know for sure that Auggie will grow up to be an astronaut. Or a teacher. Or a veterinarian. They tell me these things with great—almost empirical—authority, by the way. No dillydallying. No guesswork. So who am I to disagree with them? And why would I write a sequel that would limit all those options? Auggie, as far as I'm concerned, has a bright and amazing future full of infinite possibilities, each one as lofty as the one before.

I am truly blessed that readers of *Wonder* feel close enough to him to envision for themselves how his life will go. I know they understand that just because I chose to end *Wonder* on a happy day in Auggie's life, it doesn't guarantee him a happy life. He will surely face more than his fair share of challenges as he grows older, with new ups and downs, new friends, other Julians and Jacks and, of course, Summers. Readers will hopefully intuit from how Auggie has handled himself over the course of his first year at Beecher Prep, with all its accompanying trials and tribulations, that he has what he needs inside of him to triumph over whatever life hurls his way, withstand the challenges as they come, stare down the starers (or laugh them away). There with him always, through good times and bad, will be his amazing family—Isabel and Nate and Via. “The only thing I know that truly heals people is unconditional love,” wrote Elisabeth Kübler-Ross, which may be why Auggie will never succumb to any wounds inflicted by the careless words of passersby or the choices of his friends. Those he has, too—friends both known and unseen—who will stand up for him when it counts the most.

In the end, readers of *Wonder* know that the book has never really been about what happens to Auggie Pullman. It's about how Auggie Pullman happens to the world.

Which brings me back to this book—or, more accurately, the three stories contained in *Auggie & Me*.

When it was first suggested to me that I write these short ebooks, these *Wonder* stories, I jumped at the chance—most specifically on behalf of Julian, who had become a much-loathed persona among *Wonder* fans. “Keep calm and don't be a Julian” is even something you can Google now, as people have taken it upon themselves to make their own cautionary posters.



And I completely get why Julian is so disliked. Until now, we've only seen him through the eyes of Auggie, Jack, Summer, and Justin. He's rude. He's mean. His stares, his nicknames for Auggie, his efforts to manipulate his classmates to turn against Jack are tantamount to bullying. But what's at the root of all this rage against Auggie? What's up with Julian, and why is he such a jerk?

Even as I was writing *Wonder*, I knew that Julian had a story to tell. I also knew that his story of

bullying, or why he bullies, was of little consequence to Auggie and had no impact on the story line, and therefore didn't belong in *Wonder*. It's not for the victims of bullying to find compassion for the tormentors, after all. But I loved the idea of exploring Julian's character in a short book of his own—not to exonerate his actions, since his actions in *Wonder* are reprehensible and indefensible, but to try to understand him better. It's important to remember that Julian is still just a little kid. He has acted badly, yes, but that doesn't necessarily mean he's a "bad kid." Our mistakes don't define us. The hard part is coming to terms with our mistakes. Will Julian redeem himself? Can he? Does he want to? These are the questions I ask and answer in *The Julian Chapter*, even as I shed some light on why Julian behaves toward Auggie the way he does.

The second short book in *Auggie & Me* is *Pluto*. Told from the point of view of Auggie's oldest friend, Christopher, who moved away several years before the events of *Wonder* take place, *Pluto* is a unique look into Auggie's life before Beecher Prep. Christopher was there with Auggie through his early hardships and heartbreaks—the horrific surgeries, the day Nate Pullman brought Daisy home for the first time, the old neighborhood friends who seem to vanish from Auggie's life. Now that he's older, Christopher struggles with the challenges of staying friends with Auggie—the stares, the awkward reactions of new friends. It's tempting to walk away from a friendship when it becomes difficult, even under the best of circumstances—and Auggie's not the only one who is testing Christopher's loyalty. Will he hang on or let go?

The third short book is *Shingaling*, told from the point of view of Charlotte, the only girl chosen by Mr. Tushman to be one of Auggie's welcome buddies. Throughout *Wonder*, Charlotte maintains a friendly, if somewhat distant, relationship with Auggie. She waves hello when she sees him. She never sides with the kids who are mean to him. She tries to help Jack, even if it's in secret so no one else knows. She's a nice girl—no doubt about that. But she never goes out of her way to be more than nice. *Shingaling* delves into the life of Charlotte Cody during fifth grade at Beecher Prep, and readers learn there was a lot of other stuff going on that year about which Auggie Pullman didn't know: dance performances, mean girls, old allegiances, and new cliques. Maya, Ximena, Savanna, and especially Summer feature prominently in *Shingaling*, which, like *Pluto* and *The Julian Chapter*, explores the life of an ordinary kid who is touched by extraordinary circumstances.

Whether it's about Auggie and Julian, or Auggie and Christopher, or Auggie and Charlotte, the three stories in *Auggie & Me* examine the complexities of friendship, loyalty, and compassion, and—most especially—explore the enduring effects of kindness. Much has been written about middle school and the preteen years, and how it's a time in kids' lives when they are almost expected to be unkind to one another as they navigate their way through new social situations on their own, often without parental oversight. But I've seen a different side to kids—a tendency toward nobility, a yearning to do right. I believe in children and their limitless capacity to care and to love and to want to save the world. I have no doubt that they will lead us to a place of greater tolerance and acceptance for all the birds in the universe. For all the underdogs and misfits. And for Auggie and me.

—R.

The
Julian
Chapter



Be kind, for everyone you meet is fighting a hard battle.

-Ian Maclaren

Before

Perhaps I have created the stars and the sun
and this enormous house, but I no longer remember.
—Jorge Luis Borges, “The House of Asterion”

• • •

Fear can't hurt you any more than a dream.
—William Golding, *Lord of the Flies*

Ordinary

Okay, okay, okay.

I know, I know, I know.

I haven't been nice to August Pullman!

Big deal. It's not the end of the world, people! Let's stop with the drama, okay? There's a whole big world out there, and not everyone is nice to everyone else. That's just the way it is. So, can you please get over it? I think it's time to move on and get on with your life, don't you?

Jeez!

I don't get it. I really don't. One minute, I'm like, the most popular kid in the fifth grade. And the next minute, I'm like, I don't know. Whatever. This bites. This whole year bites! I wish Auggie Pullman had never come to Beecher Prep in the first place! I wish he had kept his creepy little face hidden away like in *The Phantom of the Opera* or something. Put a mask on, Auggie! Get your face off of my face, please. Everything would be a lot easier if you would just disappear.

At least for me. I'm not saying it's a picnic for him, either, by the way. I know it can't be easy for him to look in the mirror every day, or walk down the street. But that's not my problem. My problem is that everything's different since he's been coming to my school. The kids are different. I'm different. And it sucks big-time.

I wish everything was the way it used to be in the fourth grade. We had so, so, so much fun back then. We would play tackle-tag in the yard, and not to brag, but everyone always wanted a piece of me, you know? I'm just sayin'. Everyone always wanted to be my partner when we'd do social studies projects. And everyone always laughed when I said something funny.

At lunchtime, I'd always sit with my peeps, and we were like, it. We were totally *it*. Henry. Miles. Amos. Jack. We were it! It was so cool. We had all these secret jokes. Little hand signals for stuff.

I don't know why that had to change. I don't know why everyone got so stupid about stuff.

Actually, I do know why: it was because of Auggie Pullman. The moment he showed up, that's when things stopped being the way they used to be. Everything was totally ordinary. And now things are messed up. And it's because of him.

And Mr. Tushman. In fact, it's kind of totally Mr. Tushman's fault.

The Call

I remember Mom made a big deal about the call we got from Mr. Tushman. At dinner that night, she went on and on about what a big honor it was. The middle-school director had called us at home to ask if I could be a welcome buddy to some new kid in school. Wow! Big news! Mom acted like I won an Oscar or something. She said it showed her that the school really did recognize who the “special” kids were, which she thought was awesome. Mom had never met Mr. Tushman before, because he was the middle-school director and I was still in the lower school, but she couldn’t stop raving about how nice he’d been on the phone.

Mom’s always been kind of a bigwig at school. She’s on this board of trustees thing, which I don’t even know what it is but apparently it’s a big deal. She’s always volunteering for stuff, too. Like, she’s always been the class mom for every grade I’ve been in at Beecher. Always. She does a lot for the school.

So, the day I was supposed to be a welcome buddy, she dropped me off in front of the middle school. She wanted to take me inside, but I was like, “Mom, it’s middle school!” She took the hint and drove off before I went inside.

Charlotte Cody and Jack Will were already in the front lobby, and we said hello to each other. Jack and I did our peeps’ handshake and we said hello to the security guard. Then we went up to Mr. Tushman’s office. It was so weird being in the school when there was no one there!

“Dude, we could totally skateboard in here and no one would know!” I said to Jack, running and gliding on the smooth floor of the hallway after the security guard couldn’t see us anymore.

“Ha, yeah,” said Jack, but I noticed that the closer we got to Mr. Tushman’s office, the quieter Jack got. In fact, he kind of looked like he was going to blow chunks.

As we got near the top of the stairs, he stopped.

“I don’t want to do this!” he said.

I stopped next to him. Charlotte had already gotten to the top landing.

“Come on!” she said.

“You’re not the boss!” I answered.

She shook her head and rolled her eyes at me. I laughed and nudged Jack with my elbow. We loved eggging Charlotte Cody on. She was always such a Goody Two-shoes!

“This is so messed up,” said Jack, rubbing his hand over his face.

“What is?” I asked.

“Do you know who this new kid is?” he asked. I shook my head.

“You know who he is, right?” Jack said to Charlotte, looking up at her.

Charlotte walked down the stairs toward us. “I think so,” she said. She made a face, like she had just tasted something bad.

Jack shook his head and then smacked it three times with his palm.

“I’m such an idiot for saying yes to this!” he said, his teeth clenched.

“Wait, who is it?” I said. I pushed Jack’s shoulder so he’d look at me.

“It’s that kid called August,” he said to me. “You know, the kid with the face?”

I had no idea who he was talking about.

“Are you kidding me?” said Jack. “You never seen that kid before? He lives in this neighborhood! He hangs out in the playground sometimes. You have to have seen him. Everyone has!”

“He doesn’t live in this neighborhood,” answered Charlotte.

“Yes he does!” Jack answered impatiently.

“No, *Julian* doesn't live in this neighborhood,” she answered, just as impatiently.

“What does that have to do with anything?” I said.

“Whatever!” Jack interrupted. “It doesn't matter. Trust me, dude, you've never seen anything like this before.”

“Please don't be mean, Jack,” Charlotte said. “It's not nice.”

“I'm not being mean!” said Jack. “I'm just being truthful.”

“What, exactly, does he look like?” I asked.

Jack didn't answer. He just stood there, shaking his head. I looked at Charlotte, who frowned.

“You'll see,” she said. “Let's just go already, okay?” She turned around and went up the stairs and disappeared down the hall to Mr. Tushman's office.

“Let's just go already, okay?” I said to Jack, imitating Charlotte perfectly. I thought this would totally make him laugh, but it didn't.

“Jack, dude, come on!” I said.

I pretended to give him a hard slap in the face. This actually did make him laugh a bit, and he threw a slow-motion punch back at me. This led to a quick game of “spleen,” which is where we try to jab each other in the rib cage.

“Guys, let's go!” Charlotte commanded from the top of the stairs. She had come back to get us.

“Guys, let's go!” I whispered to Jack, and this time he did kind of laugh.

But as soon as we rounded the corner of the hallway and got to Mr. Tushman's office, we all got pretty serious.

When we went inside, Mrs. Garcia told us to wait in Nurse Molly's office, which was a small room to the side of Mr. Tushman's office. We didn't say anything to each other while we waited. I resisted the temptation to make a balloon out of the latex gloves that were in a box by the exam table, though I know it would have made everyone laugh.

Mr. Tushman

Mr. Tushman came into the office. He was tall, kind of thin, with messy gray hair.

“Hey, guys,” he said, smiling. “I’m Mr. Tushman. You must be Charlotte.” He shook Charlotte’s hand. “And you are . . .?” He looked at me.

“Julian,” I said.

“Julian,” he repeated, smiling. He shook my hand.

“And you’re Jack Will,” he said to Jack, and shook his hand, too.

He sat down on the chair next to Nurse Molly’s desk. “First of all, I just want to thank you guys so much for coming here today. I know it’s a hot day and you probably have other stuff you want to do. How’s the summer been treating you? Okay?”

We all kind of nodded, looking at each other.

“How’s the summer been for you?” I asked him.

“Oh, so nice of you to ask, Julian!” he answered. “It’s been a great summer, thank you. Though I am seriously looking forward to the fall. I hate this hot weather.” He pulled his shirt. “I’m so ready for the winter.”

All three of us were bobbing our heads up and down like doofballs at this point. I don’t know why grown-ups ever bother chitchatting with kids. It just makes us feel weird. I mean, I personally am pretty okay talking to adults—maybe because I travel a lot and I’ve talked to a lot of adults before—but most kids really don’t like talking to grown-ups. That’s just the way it is. Like, if I see the parent of some friend of mine and we’re not actually in school, I try to avoid eye contact so I don’t have to talk to them. It’s too weird. It’s also really weird when you bump into a teacher outside of school. Like, one time I saw my third-grade teacher at a restaurant with her boyfriend, and I was like, ewww! I don’t want to see my teacher hanging out with her boyfriend, you know?

Anyway, so there we were, me, Charlotte, and Jack, nodding away like total bobbleheads as Mr. Tushman went on and on about the summer. But finally—finally!—he got to the point.

“So, guys,” he said, kind of slapping his hands against his thighs. “It’s really nice of you to give up your afternoon to do this. In a few minutes, I’m going to introduce you to the boy who’s coming to my office, and I just wanted to give you a heads-up about him beforehand. I mean, I told your moms a little bit about him—did they talk to you?”

Charlotte and Jack both nodded, but I shook my head.

“My mom just said he’d had a bunch of surgeries,” I said.

“Well, yes,” answered Mr. Tushman. “But did she explain about his face?”

I have to say, this is the point when I started thinking, *Okay, what the heck am I doing here?*

“I mean, I don’t know,” I said, scratching my head. I tried to think back to what Mom had told me. I hadn’t really paid attention. I think most of the time she was going on and on about what an honor it was that I’d been chosen: she really didn’t emphasize that there was something wrong with the kid. “She said that you said the kid had a lot of scars and stuff. Like he’d been in a fire.”

“I didn’t quite say that,” said Mr. Tushman, raising his eyebrows. “What I told your mom is that this boy has a severe craniofacial difference—”

“Oh, right right right!” I interrupted, because now I remembered. “She did use that word. She said it was like a cleft lip or something.”

Mr. Tushman scrunched up his face.

“Well,” he said, lifting his shoulders and tilting his head left and right, “it’s a little more than that.” He got up and patted my shoulder. “I’m sorry if I didn’t make that clear to your mom. In any case, I

don't mean to make this awkward for you. In fact, it's exactly because I don't want it to be awkward that I'm talking to you right now. I just wanted to give you a heads-up that this boy definitely looks very different from other children. And that's not a secret. He knows he looks different. He was born that way. He gets that. He's a great kid. Very smart. Very nice. He's never gone to a regular school before because he was homeschooled, you know, because of all his surgeries. So that's why I just want you guys to show him around a bit, get to know him, be his welcome buddies. You can totally ask him questions, if you want. Talk to him normally. He's really just a normal kid with a face that . . . you know, is not so normal." He looked at us and took a deep breath. "Oh boy, I think I've just made you all more nervous, haven't I?"

We shook our heads. He rubbed his forehead.

"You know," he said, "one of the things you learn when you get old like me is that sometimes, a new situation will come along, and you'll have no idea what to do. There's no rule book that tells you how to act in every given situation in life, you know? So what I always say is that it's always better to err on the side of kindness. That's the secret. If you don't know what to do, just be kind. You can't go wrong. Which is why I asked you three to help me out here, because I'd heard from your lower-school teachers that you're all really nice kids."

We didn't know what to say to this, so we all just kind of smiled like goobers.

"Just treat him like you would treat any kid you've just met," he said. "That's all I'm trying to say. Okay, guys?"

We nodded at the same time now, too. Bobbling heads.

"You guys rock," he said. "So, relax, wait here a bit, and Mrs. Garcia will come and get you in a few minutes." He opened the door. "And, guys, really, thanks again for doing this. It's good karma to do good. It's a mitzvah, you know?"

With that, he smiled, winked at us, and left the room.

All three of us exhaled at the same time. We looked at each other, our eyes kind of wide.

"Okay," Jack said, "I don't know what the heck karma is and I don't know what the heck mitzvah is!"

This made us all laugh a little, though it was kind of a nervous type of laugh.

First Look

I'm not going to go into detail about the rest of what happened that day. I'm just going to point out that, for the first time in his life, Jack had not exaggerated. In fact, he had done the opposite. Is there a word that means the opposite of exaggerated? "Unexaggerated"? I don't know. But Jack had totally not exaggerated about this kid's face.

The first look I got of August, well, it made me want to cover my eyes and run away screaming. Bam. I know that sounds mean, and I'm sorry about that. But it's the truth. And anyone who says that that's not *their* first reaction when seeing Auggie Pullman isn't being honest. Seriously.

I totally would have walked out the door after I saw him, but I knew I would get in trouble if I did. So I just kept looking at Mr. Tushman, and I tried to listen to what he was saying, but all I heard was yak yak yak yak yak because my ears were burning. In my head, I was like, *Dude! Dude! Dude! Dude! Dude! Dude! Dude! Dude! Dude! Dude!*

Dude! Dude! Dude! Dude! Dude!

I think I said that word a thousand times to myself. I don't know why.

At some point, he introduced us to Auggie. Ahh! I think I actually shook his hand. Triple ahh! I wanted to zoom out of there so fast and wash my hand. But before I knew what was happening, we were headed out the door, down the hallway, and up the stairs.

Dude! Dude! Dude! Dude! Dude! Dude! Dude! Dude!

I caught Jack's eye as we were going up the stairs to homeroom. I opened my eyes really wide at him and mouthed the words, "No way!"

Jack mouthed back, "I told you!"

Scared

When I was about five, I remember watching an episode of *SpongeBob* one night, and a commercial came on TV that totally freaked me out. It was a few days before Halloween. A lot of commercials came on during that time of year that were kind of scary, but this one was for a new teen thriller I'd never heard about before. Suddenly, while I was watching the commercial, a closeup of a zombie's face popped up on the screen. Well, it totally and completely terrified me. I mean, terrified me like that kind of terrified where you actually run out of the room screaming with your arms in the air. TERRRRR-IFFF-FIED!

After that, I was so scared of seeing that zombie face again, I stopped watching any TV until Halloween was over and the movie was no longer playing in theaters. Seriously, I stopped watching TV completely—that's how scared I was!

Not too long after that, I was on a playdate with some kid whose name I don't even remember. And this kid was really into Harry Potter, so we started watching one of the Harry Potter movies (I'd never seen any of them before). Well, when I saw Voldemort's face for the first time, the same thing happened that had happened when the Halloween commercial came on. I started screaming hysterically, wailing like a total baby. It was so bad, the kid's mother couldn't calm me down, and she had to call my mother to come pick me up. My mom got really annoyed at the kid's mom for letting me watch the movie, so they ended up getting into an argument and—long story short—I never had another playdate there again. But anyway, between the Halloween zombie commercial and Voldemort's noseless face, I was kind of a mess.

Then, unfortunately, my dad took me to the movies at around that same time. Again, I was only about five. Maybe six by now. It shouldn't have been an issue: the movie we went to see was rated G, totally fine, not scary at all. But one of the trailers that came on was for *Scary Fairy*, a movie about demon fairies. I know—fairies are so lame!—and when I look back I can't believe I was so scared of this stuff, but I freaked out at this trailer. My dad had to take me out of the theater because—yet again!—I couldn't stop crying. It was so embarrassing! I mean, being scared of fairies? What's next? Flying ponies? Cabbage Patch dolls? Snowflakes? It was crazy! But there I was, shaking and screaming as I left the movie theater, hiding my face in my dad's coat. I'm sure there were three-year-olds in the audience who were looking at me like I was the biggest loser!

That's the thing about being scared, though. You can't control it. When you're scared, you're scared. And when you're scared, everything seems scarier than it ordinarily would be—even things that aren't. Everything that scares you kind of mushes together to become this big, terrifying feeling. It's like you're covered in this blanket of fear, and this blanket is made out of broken glass and dog poop and oozy pus and bloody zombie zits.

I started having awful nightmares. Every night, I'd wake up screaming. It got to a point where I was afraid to go to sleep because I didn't want to have another nightmare, so then I started sleeping in my parents' bed. I wish I could say this was just for a couple of nights, but it went like this for six weeks. I wouldn't let them turn off the lights. I had a panic attack every time I started drifting off to sleep. I mean, my palms would literally start to sweat and my heart would start to race, and I'd start to cry and scream before going to bed.

My parents took me to see a “feelings” doctor, which I only later realized was a child psychologist. Dr. Patel helped me a little bit. She said what I was experiencing were “night terrors,” and it did help me to talk about them with her. But I think what really got me over the nightmares were the Discovery Channel nature videos my mom brought home for me one day. Woo-hoo for those nature videos!

Every night, we'd pop one of them into the DVD player and I'd fall asleep to the sound of some guy with an English accent talking about meerkats or koalas or jellyfish.

Eventually, I did get over the nightmares, though. Everything went back to normal. But every once in a while, I'd have what Mom would call a "minor setback." Like, for instance, although I love *Star Wars* now, the very first time I saw *Star Wars: Episode II*, which was at a birthday sleepover when I was eight, I had to text my mom to come get me at two a.m. because I couldn't fall asleep: every time I'd close my eyes, Darth Sidious's face would pop into my head. It took about three weeks of nature videos to get over that setback (and I stopped going to sleepovers for about a year after that, too). Then, when I was nine, I saw *Lord of the Rings: The Two Towers* for the first time, and the same thing happened to me again, though this time it only took me about a week to get over Gollum.

By the time I turned ten, though, all those nightmares had pretty much gone away. Even the fear of having a nightmare was gone by then, too. Like, if I was at Henry's house and he would say, "Hey, let's watch a scary movie," my first reaction wasn't to think, *No, I might have a nightmare!* (which is what it used to be). My first reaction would be like, *Yeah, cool! Where's the popcorn?* I finally started being able to see all kinds of movies again. I even started getting into zombie apocalypse stuff, and none of it ever bothered me. That nightmare stuff was all behind me.

Or at least I thought it was.

But then, the night after I met Auggie Pullman, I started having nightmares again. I couldn't believe it. Not just passing bad dreams, but the full-blown, heart-pounding, wake-up-screaming kind of nightmares I used to have when I was a little kid. Only, I wasn't a little kid anymore.

I was in the fifth grade! Eleven years old! This wasn't supposed to be happening to me anymore!

But there I was again—watching nature videos to help me fall asleep.

Class Picture

I tried to describe what Auggie looked like to my mom, but she didn't get it until the school pictures arrived in the mail. Up until then, she'd never really seen him. She'd been away on a business trip during the Thanksgiving Sharing Festival, so she didn't see him then. On Egyptian Museum day, Auggie's face had been covered with mummy gauze. And there hadn't been any after-school concerts yet. So, the first time Mom saw Auggie and *finally* started understanding my nightmare situation was when she opened that large envelope with my class picture in it.

It was actually kind of funny. I can tell you exactly how she reacted because I was watching her as she opened it. First, she excitedly slit open the top of the envelope with a letter opener. Then, she pulled out my individual portrait. She put her hand on her chest.

"Awww, Julian, you look so handsome!" she said. "I'm so glad you wore that tie Grandmère sent you."

I was eating some ice cream at the kitchen table, and just smiled and nodded at her.

Then I watched her take the class picture out of the envelope. In lower school, every class would get its own picture taken with its own teacher, but in middle school, it's just one group picture of the entire fifth grade. So sixty kids standing in front of the entrance to the school. Fifteen kids in each row. Four rows. I was in the back row, in between Amos and Henry.

Mom was looking at the photo with a smile on her face.

"Oh, there you are!" she said when she spotted me.

She continued looking at the picture with a smile on her face.

"Oh my, look at how big Miles got!" said Mom. "And is that Henry? He looks like he's getting a mustache! And who is—"

And then she stopped talking. The smile on her face stayed frozen for a second or two, and then her face slowly transformed into a state of shock.

She put the photo down and stared blankly in front of her. Then she looked at the photo again.

Then she looked at me. She wasn't smiling.

"This is the kid you've been talking about?" she asked me. Her voice had completely changed from the way it sounded moments before.

"I told you," I answered.

She looked at the picture again. "This isn't just a cleft palate."

"No one ever said it *was* a cleft palate," I said to her. "Mr. Tushman never said that."

"Yes he did. On the phone that time."

"No, Mom," I answered her. "What he said was 'facial issues,' and you just assumed that he meant cleft palate. But he never actually said 'cleft palate.'"

"I could swear he said the boy had a cleft palate," she answered, "but this is so much worse than that." She really looked stunned. She couldn't stop staring at the photo. "What does he have, exactly? Is he developmentally delayed? He looks like he might be."

"I don't think so," I said, shrugging.

"Does he talk okay?"

"He kind of mumbles," I answered. "He's hard to understand sometimes."

Mom put the picture down on the table and sat down. She started tapping her fingers on the table.

"I'm trying to think of who his mother is," she said, shaking her head. "There are so many new parents in the school, I can't think of who it might be. Is she blond?"

"No, she has dark hair," I answered. "I see her at drop-off sometimes."

“Does she look . . . like the son?”

“Oh no, not at all,” I said. I sat down next to her and picked up the picture, squinting at it so my eyes wouldn’t see it too clearly. Auggie was in the front row, all the way on the left. “I told you, Mom. You didn’t believe me, but I told you.”

“It’s not that I didn’t believe you,” she answered defensively. “I’m just kind of . . . surprised. I didn’t realize it was this severe. Oh, I think I know who she is, his mom. Is she very pretty, kind of exotic, has dark wavy hair?”

“What?” I said, shrugging. “I don’t know. She’s a mom.”

“I think I know who she is,” answered Mom, nodding to herself. “I saw her on parents’ night. Her husband’s handsome, too.”

“I have no idea,” I said, shaking my head.

“Oh, those poor people!” She put her hand over her heart.

“Now you get why I’ve been having nightmares again?” I asked her.

She ran her hands through my hair.

“But are you still having nightmares?” she asked.

“Yes. Not every night like I did for the first month of school, but yeah!” I said, throwing the picture down on the tabletop. “Why did he have to come to Beecher Prep, anyway?”

I looked at Mom, who didn’t know what to say. She started putting the picture back into the envelope.

“Don’t even think of putting that in my school album, by the way,” I said loudly. “You should just burn it or something.”

“Julian,” she said.

Then, out of the blue, I started crying.

“Oh, my darling!” said Mom, kind of surprised. She hugged me.

“I can’t help it, Mom,” I said through my tears. “I hate that I have to see him every day!”

That night, I had the same nightmare I’ve been having since the start of school. I’m walking down the main hallway, and all the kids are in front of their lockers, staring at me, whispering about me as I walk past them. I keep walking up the stairwell until I get to the bathroom, and then I look in the mirror. When I see myself, though, it’s not me I’m seeing. It’s Auggie. And then I scream.

Photoshop

The next morning, I overheard Mom and Dad talking as they were getting ready for work. I was getting dressed for school.

“They should have done more to prepare the kids,” Mom said to Dad. “The school should have sent home a letter or something, I don’t know.”

“Come on,” answered Dad. “Saying what? What can they possibly say? There’s a homely kid in your class? Come on.”

“It’s much more than that.”

“Let’s not make too big a deal about it, Melissa.”

“You haven’t seen him, Jules,” said Mom. “It’s quite severe. Parents should have been told. I should have been told! Especially with Julian’s anxiety issues.”

“Anxiety issues?” I yelled from my room. I ran into their bedroom. “You think I have anxiety issues?”

“No, Julian,” said Dad. “No one’s saying that.”

“Mom just said that!” I answered, pointing at Mom. “I just heard her say ‘anxiety issues.’ What, so you guys think I have mental problems?”

“No!” they both said.

“Just because I get nightmares?”

“No!” they yelled.

“It’s not my fault he goes to my school!” I cried. “It’s not my fault his face freaks me out!”

“Of course it’s not, darling,” said Mom. “No one is saying that. All I meant is that because of your history of nightmares, the school should have alerted me. Then at least I would have known better about the nightmares you’re having. I would have known what triggered them.”

I sat down on the edge of their bed. Dad had the class picture in his hands and had obviously just been looking at it.

“I hope you’re planning on burning that,” I said. And I wasn’t joking.

“No, darling,” said Mom, sitting on the other side of me. “We don’t need to burn anything. Look what I’ve done.”

She picked up a different photo from the nightstand and handed it to me to look at. At first, I thought it was just another copy of the class picture, because it was exactly the same size as the class picture Dad had in his hands, and everything in it was exactly the same. I started to look away in disgust, but Mom pointed to a place on the photo—the place where Auggie used to be! He was nowhere in the photo.

I couldn’t believe it! There was no trace of him!

I looked up at Mom, who was beaming.

“The magic of Photoshop!” she said happily, clapping her hands. “Now you can look at this picture and not have to have your memory of fifth grade tarnished,” she said.

“That’s so cool!” I said. “How did you do that?”

“I’ve gotten pretty good at Photoshop,” she answered. “Remember last year, how I made all the skies blue in the Hawaii pictures?”

“You would never have known it rained every day,” answered Dad, shaking his head.

“Laugh if you want,” said Mom. “But now, when I look at those pictures, I don’t have to be reminded of the bad weather that almost ruined our trip. I can remember it for the beautiful vacation that it was! Which is exactly how I want you to remember your fifth-grade year at Beecher Prep.

Okay, Julian? Good memories. Not ugly ones.”

“Thanks, Mom!” I said, hugging her tightly.

I didn’t say it, of course, but even though she changed the skies to light blue on the photos, all I ever really remembered about our Hawaii trip was how cold and wet it was when we were there—despite the magic of Photoshop.

Mean

Look, I didn't start out being mean. I mean, I'm not a mean kid! Sure, sometimes I make jokes, but they're not mean jokes. They're just teasing jokes. People have to lighten up a little! Okay, maybe sometimes my jokes are a little mean, but I only make those jokes behind someone's back. I never say stuff to anyone's face that will actually hurt someone. I'm not a bully like that! I'm not a hater, dude!

Attention, people! Stop being so sensitive!

Some people totally got the whole Photoshop thing, and some didn't. Henry and Miles thought it was so cool and wanted my mom to email their moms the photo. Amos thought it was "weird." Charlotte completely disapproved. I don't know what Jack thought, because he had gone over to the dark side by now. It's like he totally abandoned his peeps this year and only hangs out with Auggie now. Which bugged me, because that meant I couldn't hang out with him anymore. No way was I going to catch the "plague" from that freak. That was the name of the game I invented. The Plague. It was simple. If you touched Auggie, and you didn't wash off the contamination, you died. Everyone in the whole grade played. Except Jack.

And Summer.

So here's the strange thing. I've known Summer since we were in third grade, and I never really paid any attention to her, but this year Henry started liking Savanna and they were like, "going out." Now, by "going out" I don't mean like high-school stuff, which would be kind of gross barf disgusting. All it means when you're "going out" is that you hang out together and meet each other at the lockers and sometimes go to the ice-cream shop on Amesfort Avenue after school. So, first Henry started going out with Savanna, and then Miles started going out with Ximena. And I was like, "Yo, what about me?" And then Amos said, "I'm going to ask Summer out," and I was like, "No way, I'm asking her out!" So that's when I started kind of liking Summer.

But it totally bit that Summer, like Jack, was on Team Auggie. It meant I couldn't hang out with her at all. I couldn't even say "Wassup" to her because the freak might think I was talking to him or something. So I told Henry to have Savanna invite Summer to the Halloween party at her house. I figured I could hang out with her and maybe even ask her to go out with me. That didn't work, though, because she ended up leaving the party early. And ever since then, she's been spending all her time with the freak.

Okay, okay. I know it's not nice to call him "the freak," but like I said before, people have to start being a little less sensitive around here! It's only a joke, everyone! Don't take me so seriously! I'm not being mean. I'm just being funny.

And that's all I was doing, being totally funny, the day that Jack Will punched me. I had been totally joking! Fooling around.

I didn't see it coming at *all!*

The way I remember it, we were just goofing together, and all of a sudden, he whacks me in the mouth for no reason! Boom!

And I was like, *Owwwww! You crazy jerkface! You punched me? You actually punched me?*

And the next thing I know, I'm in Nurse Molly's office, holding one of my teeth in my hand, and Mr. Tushman is there, and I hear him on the phone with my mom saying they're taking me to the hospital. I could hear my mom screaming on the other end of the line. Then Ms. Rubin, the dean, is leading me into the back of an ambulance and we're on the way to a hospital! Crazy stuff!

When we were riding in the ambulance, Ms. Rubin asked me if I knew why Jack hit me. I was like, *Duh, because he's totally insane!* Not that I could talk much, because my lips were swollen and there

was blood all over my mouth.

Ms. Rubin stayed with me in the hospital until Mom showed up. Mom was more than a little hysterical, as you can imagine. She was crying kind of dramatically every time she saw my face. It was, I have to admit, a little embarrassing.

Then Dad showed up.

“Who did this?” was the first thing he said, shouting at Ms. Rubin.

“Jack Will,” answered Ms. Rubin calmly. “He’s with Mr. Tushman now.”

“Jack Will?” cried Mom in shock. “We know the Wills! How could that happen?”

“There will be a thorough investigation,” answered Ms. Rubin. “Right now, what’s most important is that Julian’s going to be fine . . .”

“Fine?” yelled Mom. “Look at his face! Do you think that’s fine? I don’t think that’s fine. This is outrageous. What kind of school is this? I thought kids didn’t punch each other at a school like Beecher Prep. I thought that’s why we pay forty thousand dollars a year, so that our kids don’t get hurt.”

“Mrs. Albans,” said Ms. Rubin, “I know you’re upset . . .”

“I’m assuming the kid will get expelled, right?” said Dad.

“Dad!” I yelled.

“We will definitely deal with this matter in the appropriate way, I promise,” answered Ms. Rubin, trying to keep her voice calm. “And now, if you don’t mind, I think I’ll leave you guys alone for a bit. The doctor will be back and you can check in with him, but he said that nothing was broken. Julian’s fine. He lost a lower first molar, but that was on its way out anyway. He’s going to give him some pain medication and you should keep icing it. Let’s talk more in the morning.”

It was only then that I realized that poor Ms. Rubin’s blouse and skirt were completely covered in my blood. Boy, mouths do bleed a lot!

Later that night, when I could finally talk again without it hurting, Mom and Dad wanted to know every detail of what had happened, starting with what Jack and I had been talking about right before I hit me.

“Jack wath upthet becauth he wath paired up with the deformed kid,” I answered. “I told him he could thwitch partnerth if he wanted to. And then he punched me!”

Mom shook her head. That was it for her. She was literally madder than I’d ever seen her before (and I’ve seen my mom pretty mad before, believe me!).

“This is what happens, Jules!” she said to Dad, crossing her arms and nodding quickly. “This is what happens when you make little kids deal with issues they’re not equipped to deal with! They’re just too young to be exposed to this kind of stuff! That Tushman is an *idiot!*”

And she said a whole bunch of other things, too, but those are kind of too inapro-pro (if you know what I mean) for me to repeat.

“But, Dad, I don’t want Jack to get ecthpelled from thkool,” I said later on in the night. He was putting more ice on my mouth because the painkiller they had given me at the hospital was wearing off.

“That’s not up to us,” he answered. “But I wouldn’t trouble myself about it if I were you. Whatever happens, Jack will get what he deserves for this.”

I have to admit, I started feeling kind of bad for Jack. I mean, sure, he was a total dipstick for punching me, and I wanted him to get in trouble—but I really didn’t want him to get kicked out of school or anything.

But Mom, I could tell, was on one of her missions now (as Dad would say). She gets like that sometimes, when she gets so outraged about something that there’s just no stopping her. She was like that a few years ago when a kid got hit by a car a couple of blocks away from Beecher Prep, and she

had like a million people sign a petition to have a traffic light installed. That was a super-mom moment. ~~She was also like that last month when our favorite restaurant changed its menu and they no longer made my favorite dish the way I liked it.~~ That was another super-mom moment because after she talked to the new owner, they agreed to special-order the dish—just for me! But Mom also gets like that for not-so-nice stuff, like when a waiter messes up a food order. That's a not-so-super-mom moment because, well, you know, it can get kind of weird when your mom starts talking to a waiter like he's five years old. *Awkward!* Also, like Dad says, you don't want to get a waiter mad at you, you know? They have your food in *their* hands—duh!

So, I wasn't totally clear on how I felt when I realized that my mom was declaring war on Mr. Tushman, Auggie Pullman, and all of Beecher Prep. Was it going to be a super-mom moment or a not-so-super-mom moment? Like, would it end up with Auggie going to a different school—yay!—or with Mr. Tushman blowing his nose in my cafeteria food—ugh!

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