

Carvel

I remember seeing him for the first time in front of the Carvel on Amesfort Avenue when I was about five or six. Me and Veronica, my babysitter, were sitting on the bench outside the store with Jamie, my baby brother, who was sitting in his stroller facing us. I guess I was busy eating my ice cream cone, because I didn't even notice the people who sat down next to us.

Then at one point I turned my head to suck the ice cream out of the bottom of my cone, and that's when I saw him: August. He was sitting right next to me. I know it wasn't cool, but I kind of went "Uhh!" when I saw him because I honestly got scared. I thought he was wearing a zombie mask or something. It was the kind of "uhh" you say when you're watching a scary movie and the bad guy like jumps out of the bushes. Anyway, I know it wasn't nice of me to do that, and though the kid didn't hear me, I know his sister did.

"Jack! We have to go!" said Veronica. She had gotten up and was turning the stroller around because Jamie, who had obviously just noticed the kid, too, was about to say something embarrassing. So I jumped up kind of suddenly, like a bee had landed on me, and followed Veronica as she zoomed away. I could hear the kid's mom saying softly behind us: "Okay, guys, I think it's time to go," and I turned around to look at them one more time. The kid was licking his ice cream cone, the mom was picking up his scooter, and the sister was glaring at me like she was going to kill me. I looked away quickly.

"Veronica, what was wrong with that kid?" I whispered.

"Hush, boy!" she said, her voice angry. I love Veronica, but when she got mad, she got *mad*.

Meanwhile, Jamie was practically spilling out of his stroller trying to get another look as Veronica pushed him away.

"But, Vonica . . .," said Jamie.

"You boys were very naughty! Very naughty!" said Veronica as soon as we were farther down the block. "Staring like that!"

"I didn't mean to!" I said.

"Vonica," said Jamie.

"Us leaving like that," Veronica was muttering.

"Oh Lord, that poor lady. I tell you, boys. Every day we should thank the Lord for our blessings, you hear me?"

"Vonica!"

"What is it, Jamie?"

"Is it Halloween?"

"No, Jamie."

"Then why was that boy wearing a mask?"

Veronica didn't answer. Sometimes, when she was mad about something, she would do that.

"He wasn't wearing a mask," I explained to Jamie.

"Hush, Jack!" said Veronica.

"Why are you so mad, Veronica?" I couldn't help asking. I thought this would make her angrier, but actually she shook her head.

"It was bad how we did that," she said. "Just getting up like that, like we'd just seen the devil. I was scared for what Jamie was going to say, you know? I didn't want him to say anything that would hurt that little boy's feelings. But it was very bad, us leaving like that. The momma knew what was going on."

"But we didn't mean it," I answered.

"Jack, sometimes you don't have to mean to hurt someone to hurt someone. You understand?"

That was the first time I ever saw August in the neighborhood, at least that I remember. But I've seen him around ever since then: a couple of times in the playground, a few times in the park. He used to wear an astronaut helmet sometimes. But I always knew it was him underneath the helmet. All the kids in the neighborhood knew it was him. Everyone has seen August at some point or another. We all know his name, though he doesn't know ours.

And whenever I've seen him, I try to remember what Veronica said. But it's hard. It's hard not to sneak a second look. It's hard to act normal when you see him.

Why I Changed My Mind

"Who else did Mr. Tushman call?" I asked Mom later that night. "Did he tell you?"

"He mentioned Julian and Charlotte."

"Julian!" I said. "Ugh. Why Julian?"

"You used to be friends with Julian!"

"Mom, that was like in kindergarten. Julian's the biggest phony there is. And he's trying so hard to be popular all the time."

"Well," said Mom, "at least Julian agreed to help this kid out. Got to give him credit for that."

I didn't say anything because she was right.

"What about Charlotte?" I asked.

"Is she doing it, too?" "Yes," Mom said.

"Of course she is. Charlotte's such a Goody Two-Shoes," I answered.

"Boy, Jack," said Mom, "you seem to have a problem with everybody these days."

"It's just . . .," I started. "Mom, you have no idea what this kid looks like."

"I can imagine." "No! You can't! You've never seen him. I have."

"It might not even be who you're thinking it is."

"Trust me, it is. And I'm telling you, it's really, really bad. He's deformed, Mom. His eyes are like down here." I pointed to my cheeks. "And he has no ears. And his mouth is like . . ."

Jamie had walked into the kitchen to get a juice box from the fridge.

"Ask Jamie," I said. "Right, Jamie? Remember that kid we saw in the park after school last year? The kid named August? The one with the face?"

"Oh, that kid?" said Jamie, his eyes opening wide. "He gave me a nightmare!! Remember, Mommy? That nightmare about the zombies from last year?"

"I thought that was from watching a scary movie!" answered Mom.

"No!" said Jamie, "it was from seeing that kid! When I saw him, I was like, 'Ahhh!' and I ran away. . . ."

"Wait a minute," said Mom, getting serious. "Did you do that in front of him?"

"I couldn't help it!" said Jamie, kind of whining.

"Of course you could help it!" Mom scolded.

"Guys, I have to tell you, I'm really disappointed by what I'm hearing here." And she looked like how she sounded. "I mean, honestly, he's just a little boy—just like you! Can you imagine how he felt to see you running away from him, Jamie, screaming?"

"It wasn't a scream," argued Jamie. "It was like an 'Ahhh!' " He put his hands on his cheeks and started running around the kitchen.

"Come on, Jamie!" said Mom angrily. "I honestly thought both my boys were more sympathetic than that."

"What's sympathetic?" said Jamie, who was only going into the second grade.

"You know exactly what I mean by sympathetic, Jamie," said Mom.

"It's just he's so ugly, Mommy," said Jamie.

"Hey!" Mom yelled, "I don't like that word! Jamie, just get your juice box. I want to talk to Jack alone for a second." "Look, Jack," said Mom as soon as he left, and I knew she was about to give me a whole speech.

"Okay, I'll do it," I said, which completely shocked her.

"You will?"

"Yes!"

"So I can call Mr. Tushman?"

"Yes! Mom, yes, I said yes!"

Mom smiled. "I knew you'd rise to the occasion, kiddo. Good for you. I'm proud of you, Jackie." She messed up my hair.

So here's why I changed my mind. It wasn't so I wouldn't have to hear Mom give me a whole lecture. And it wasn't to protect this August kid from Julian, who I knew would be a jerk about the whole thing. It was because when I heard Jamie talking about how he had run away from August going 'Ahhh,' I suddenly felt really bad. The thing is, there are always going to be kids like Julian who are jerks. But if a little kid like Jamie, who's usually a nice enough kid, can be that mean, then a kid like August doesn't stand a chance in middle school.

Four Things

First of all, you do get used to his face. The first couple of times I was like, whoa, I'm never going to get used to this. And then, after about a week, I was like, huh, it's not so bad.

Second of all, he's actually a really cool dude. I mean, he's pretty funny. Like, the teacher will say something and August will whisper something funny to me that no one else hears and totally make me crack up. He's also just, overall, a nice kid. Like, he's easy to hang out with and talk to and stuff. Third of all, he's really smart. I thought he'd be behind everyone because he hadn't gone to school before. But in most things he's way ahead of me. I mean, maybe not as smart as Charlotte or Ximena, but he's up there. And unlike Charlotte or Ximena, he lets me cheat off of him if I really need to (though I've only needed to a couple of times). He also let me copy his homework once, though we both got in trouble for it after class.

"The two of you got the exact same answers wrong on yesterday's homework," Ms. Rubin said, looking at both of us like she was waiting for an explanation. I didn't know what to say, because the explanation would have been: Oh, that's because I copied August's homework.

But August lied to protect me. He was like, "Oh, that's because we did our homework together last night," which wasn't true at all.

"Well, doing homework together is a good thing," Ms. Rubin answered, "but you're supposed to still do it separately, okay? You could work side by side if you want, but you can't actually do your homework together, okay? Got it?"

After we left the classroom, I said: "Dude, thanks for doing that." And he was like, "No problem." That was cool.

Fourthly, now that I know him, I would say I actually do want to be friends with August. At first, I admit it, I was only friendly to him because Mr. Tushman asked me to be especially nice and all that. But now I would choose to hang out with him. He laughs at all my jokes. And I kind of feel like I can tell August anything. Like he's a good friend. Like, if all the guys in the fifth grade were lined up against a wall and I got to choose anyone I wanted to hang out with, I would choose August.

Ex-Friends

Bleeding Scream? What the heck? Summer Dawson has always been a bit out there, but this was too much. All I did was ask her why August was acting like he was mad at me or something. I figured she would know. And all she said was "Bleeding Scream"? I don't even know what that means.

It's so weird because one day, me and August were friends. And the next day, whoosh, he was hardly talking to me. And I haven't the slightest idea why. When I said to him, "Hey, August, you mad at me or something?" he shrugged and walked away. So I would take that as a definite yes. And since I know for a fact that I didn't do anything to him to be mad about, I figured Summer could tell me what's up.

But all I got from her was "Bleeding Scream"? Yeah, big help. Thanks, Summer.

You know, I've got plenty of other friends in school. So if August wants to officially be my ex-friend, then fine, that is okay by me, see if I care. I've started ignoring him like he's ignoring me in school now.

This is actually kind of hard since we sit next to each other in practically every class.

Other kids have noticed and have started asking if me and August have had a fight. Nobody asks August what's going on. Hardly anyone ever talks to him, anyway. I mean, the only person he hangs out with, other than me, is Summer. Sometimes he hangs out with Reid Kingsley a little bit, and the two Maxes got him playing Dungeons & Dragons a couple of times at recess. Charlotte, for all her Goody Two-Shoeing, doesn't ever do more than nod hello when she's passing him in the hallway. And I don't know if everyone's still playing the Plague behind his back, because no one ever really told me about it directly, but my point is that it's not like he has a whole lot of other friends he could be hanging out with instead of me. If he wants to dis me, he's the one who loses—not me.

So this is how things are between us now. We only talk to each other about school stuff if we absolutely have to. Like, I'll say, "What did Rubin say the homework was?" and he'll answer. Or he'll be like, "Can I use your pencil sharpener?" and I'll get my sharpener out of my pencil case for him. But as soon as the bell rings, we go our separate ways.

Why this is good is because I get to hang out with a lot more kids now. Before, when I was hanging out with August all the time, kids weren't hanging out with me because they'd have to hang out with him. Or they would keep things from me, like the whole thing about the Plague. I think I was the only one who wasn't in on it, except for Summer and maybe the D&D crowd. And the truth is, though nobody's

that obvious about it: nobody wants to hang out with him. Everyone's way too hung up on being in the popular group, and he's just as far from the popular group as you can get. But now I can hang out with anyone I want. If I wanted to be in the popular group, I could totally be in the popular group. Why this is bad is because, well, (a) I don't actually enjoy hanging out with the popular group that much. And (b) I actually liked hanging out with August. So this is kind of messed up. And it's all August's fault.