

Hoping

Reality was a grimy wave. It engulfed them, uninvited and unwanted; left them sputtering and choking on wet dirt; left a salted aftertaste that stung their tastebuds, on the day August Pullman saved a boy's life.

The two days following August's fifth grade graduation were the happiest Mom, Dad and Via had seen in a long time. The audience cheered as he ambled up to receive the Henry Ward Beecher Award. For a fleeting moment, it was as if August was one of them, no different at all.

This third day, Mom decided to take them to a movie.

The sun warmed their backs, casting dancing shadows on the ground. Via strolled along the sidewalk beside a smiling August. He held his head high with a new bounce in his step, and his bangs no longer covered his face.

Another family passed by them. The mother gripped her son's hand as he tottered along the pavement. The older boy bounced a bold red ball.

They reached a crossing. The ball rolled forward, out of the boy's reach.

August ran. He grabbed the boy by the collar of his shirt. A car careened by in a blur and a whiff of gasoline.

Via, still in shock, stumbled toward the ball lying at the other end of the road. The boy writhed, wanting out of August's grasp. He wailed, then paused to look up.

The boy gaped. He squinted, his eyes widened. The boy let out a shrill scream that slapped August out of his happy trance—

As if by instinct Via wanted to tell August it was okay, it wasn't him.

The mother yelled at her son. She drew the ball out of Via's limp arms and smiled apologetically. She turned to August, stepping forward to retrieve her shrieking boy. Then she saw August.

Her eyes dropped for a millisecond that didn't go unnoticed to August or Via. She straightened with some effort and put on a shallow, lipstick-red smile. "Thank-you-for-saving-my-son," she murmured. The jumbled words fell useless at August's feet.

As they left, the contrite mother looked back. She saw three downcast silhouettes in the evening light, and vowed she would make up for her actions.

Mom, August and Via trudged home.

Via couldn't look at August.

He slammed his bedroom door. She opened it, shivering in the warm air.

August's tense and blank stare left Via speechless... fearful.

"Auggie," she whispered. He interrupted. "Via." His voice quavered, unyielding, and his cheeks trembled. A deafening silence echoed.

She glimpsed his heart through his shaking shoulders: callused from the eleven years, yet fragile.

She saw a truly normal boy beneath a Face that made the world cringe and shudder.

"Via, you'll always sacrifice for me because I'm different." "August," she reassured, "it's okay. We can always see the movie later."

He searched her eyes. "You know it isn't the movie, Via."

She didn't know how to respond. *So he knew he wasn't normal, that Mom, Dad and I weighed his painful needs more heavily than we did ours. He knew I had tolerated him, maybe even spoiled him. He knew,* she thought.

"August," she tried again, holding him by his shoulders. Now his pretty brown eyes were all she could see; now they blinded her as they had her mother on the day he was born.

"August, you saved the little boy's life. Do you know what could have happened?" He looked away. Teardrops coursed down August's candle-dripped features, out of his diagonally slitted, bulging eyes, down where his cheekbones were supposed to be, tracing past a cauliflower ear. For a moment tears washed away his differences, they flushed away everything that separated him from the world.

"August," Via said at last, "life isn't about who sacrifices for who." He shook his head, "don't you remember? You didn't want anyone to see me at your play. You didn't want me—" August choked up. "I'm sorry," he broke. Her eyebrows knit with concern and genuine regret. Fiercely she embraced him, crushing his perpetual hurt, their searing pain, into nothing that mattered.

Mom came in. "August, the mother we met earlier today wants you on the phone."

Shaken, August answered the phone. As he listened, a smile tugged on his lips.

And Via knew: waves of adversity would keep coming, but hope would come too, even if in just the beginnings of a smile.