LadybugOlivia and I are sitting on her front stoop. She’s helping me with my lines. It’s a warm
March evening, almost like summer. The sky is still bright cyan but the sun is low and the sidewalks are streaked with long shadows.
I’m reciting: “Yes, the sun's come up over a thousand times. Summers and winters have cracked the mountains a little bit more and the rains have brought down some of the dirt. Some babies, that weren't even born before have begun, talking regular sentences already; and a number of people who thought they were right young and spry have noticed that they can't bound up a flight of stairs like they used to, without their heart fluttering a little. . . .” I shake my head. Can’t remember the rest

“All that can happen in a thousand days,” Olivia prompts me, reading from the script.

“Right, right, right,” I say, shaking my head. I sigh. “I’m wiped, Olivia. How the heck am I going to remember all these lines?”

“You will,” she answers confidently. She reaches out and cups her hands over a ladybug that appears out of nowhere. “See? A good luck sign,” she says, slowly lifting her top hand to reveal the ladybug walking on the palm of her other hand.

“Good luck or just the hot weather,” I joke.

 “Of course good luck,” she answers, watching the ladybug crawl up her wrist. “There should be a thing about making a wish on a ladybug. Auggie and I used to do that with fireflies when we were little.” She cups her hand over the ladybug again. “Come on, make a wish. Close your eyes.” I dutifully close my eyes. A long second passes, then I open them. “Did you make a wish?” she asks.

“Yep.”

 She smiles, uncups her hands, and the ladybug, as if on cue, spreads its wings
and flits away.

 “Don’t you want to know what I wished for?” I ask, kissing her.

“No,” she answers shyly, looking up at the sky, which, at this very moment, is the exact colour of her eyes. “I made a wish, too”, she says mysteriously, but she has so many things she could wish for I have no idea what she's thinking.

The Bus StopOlivia’s mom, Auggie, Jack, and Daisy come down the stoop just as I’m saying goodbye to Olivia. Slightly awkward since we are in the middle of a nice long kiss.

“Hey, guys,” says the mom, pretending not to see anything, but the two boys are giggling.

“Hi, Mrs. Pullman”

.
“Please call me Isabel, Justin,” she says again. It’s like the third time she's told me this, so I really need to start calling her that. “I’m heading home,” I say, as if to explain.

“Oh, are you heading to the subway?” she says, following the dog with a newspaper. “Can you walk Jack to the bus stop?”

“No problem.”

“That okay with you, Jack?” the mom asks him, and he shrugs. “Justin, can you stay with him till the bus comes?”

“Of course!”

We all say our goodbyes. Olivia winks at me.

“You don't have to stay with me,” says Jack as we're walking up the block. “I take the bus by myself all the time. Auggie's mom is way too overprotective.”
He’s got a low gravelly voice, like a little tough guy. He kind of looks like one of those
little-rascal kids in old black-and white movies, like he should be wearing a newsboy cap and knickers. We get to the bus stop and the schedule says the bus will be there in eight minutes. “

I’ll wait with you,” i tell him.

“Up to you.” he shrugs. “Can i borrow a dollar? I want some gum”.
I fish a dollar out of my pocket and watch him cross the street to the grocery store on
the corner. He seems too small to be walking around by himself, somehow. Then I think how I was that young when i was taking the subway by myself. Way too young. I’m going to be an overprotective dad someday, I know it. My kids are going to know i care. I’m waiting there a minute or two when I notice three kids walking up the block from the other direction. They walk right past the grocery store, but one of them looks inside and nudges the other two, and they all back up and look inside. I can tell they're up to no good, all elbowing each other, laughing. One of them is jack's height but the other two look much bigger, more like teens. They hide behind the fruit stand in front of the store, and when Jack walks out, they trail behind him, making loud throw-up noises. Jack casually turns around at the corner to see who they are and they run away, high-fiving each other and laughing. Little jerks. Jack crosses the street like nothing happened and stands next to me at the bus stop, blowing a bubble.

“Friends of yours?” I finally say.

“Ha,” he says. He’s trying to smile but i can see he's upset. “Just some jerks from my school,” he says. “A kid named Julian and his two gorillas, Henry and Miles.”

“Do they bother you like that a lot?”
“No, they've never done that before. They’d never do that in school or they'd get kicked out. Julian lives two blocks from here, so I guess it was just bad luck running into him.”

“Oh, okay,” I nod.

“It’s not a big deal,” he assures me.

We both automatically look down Amesfort Avenue to see if the bus is coming. “We’re sort of in a war,” he says after a minute, as if that explains everything. Then he pulls out this crumpled piece of loose-leaf paper from his jean pocket and gives it to me. I unfold it, and it's a list of names in three columns. “He’s turned the whole grade against me,” says Jack.

“Not the whole grade,” I point out, looking down at the list.

“He leaves me notes in my locker that say stuff like ‘everybody hates you’.”

“You should tell your teacher about that.”

Jack looks at me like I’m an idiot and shakes his head.

”Anyway, you have all these neutrals,” I say, pointing to the list. “If you get them on your side, things will even up a bit.”

“Yeah, well, that's really going to happen,” he says sarcastically.

“Why not?”

He shoots me another look like I am absolutely the stupidest guy he's ever talked to in the world.

“What?” I say.

He shakes his head like I’m hopeless. “Let’s just say,” he says, “I’m friends
with someone who isn't exactly the most popular kid in the school.”

Then it hits me, what's he's not coming out and saying: August. This is all about his being friends with August and he doesn't want to tell me because I’m the sister's boyfriend. Yeah, of course, makes sense.
We see the bus coming down Amesfort Avenue.

“Well, just hang in there,” I tell him, handing back the paper. “Middle School is about as bad as it gets, and then it gets better. Everything’ll work out.”

He shrugs and shoves the list back into his pocket. We wave bye when he gets on the bus, and I watch it pull away.

When I get to the subway station two blocks away, I see the same three kids hanging out in front of the bagel place next door. They’re still laughing and yuck-yucking each other like they're some kind of gangbangers, little rich boys in expensive skinny jeans acting tough. Don’t know what possesses me, but i take my glasses off, put them in my pocket, and tuck my fiddle case under my arm so the pointy side is facing up. I walk over to them, my face scrunched up, mean-looking. They look at me, laughs dying on their lips when they see me, ice cream cones at odd angles.

“Yo! Listen up. Don’t mess with Jack,” I say really slowly, gritting my teeth, my voice all Clint Eastwood tough-guy. “Mess with him again and you will be very, very sorry.” and then I tap my fiddle case for effect. ”Got it?

They nod in unison, ice cream dripping onto their hands.

“Good.” I nod mysteriously, then sprint down the subway two steps at a time.

RehearsalThe play is taking up most of my time as we get closer to opening night. Lots of lines to remember. Long monologues where it's just me talking. Olivia had this great idea,
though, and it's helping. I have my fiddle with me onstage and play it a bit while I’m
talking. It's not written that way, but Mr. Davenport thinks it adds an extra-folksy element to have the stage manager plucking on a fiddle. And for me it's so great because whenever I need a second to remember my next line, I just start playing a little "Soldier's Joy" on my fiddle and it buys me some time.
I’ve gotten to know the kids in the show a lot better, especially the pink-haired girl who plays Emily. Turns out she's not nearly as stuck-up as I thought she was, given the crowd she hangs out with. Her boyfriend's this built jock who's a big deal on the varsity sports circuit at school. It’s a whole world that i have nothing to do with, so I’m kind of surprised that this Miranda girl turns out to be kind of nice.
One day we're sitting on the floor backstage waiting for the tech guys to fix the main
spotlight.

“So how long have you and Olivia been dating?” she asks out of the blue.

“About four months now,” I say.

“Have you met her brother?” she says casually.

It's so unexpected that I can't hide my surprise.

“You know Olivia’s brother?” I ask.

“Via didn't tell you? We used to be good friends. I’ve known Auggie since he was a baby.”

“Oh, yeah, I think I knew that,” I answer. I don't want to let on that Olivia had not told me any of this. I don't want to let on how surprised I am that she called her Via. Nobody but Olivia’s family calls her Via, and here this pink-haired girl, who I thought was a stranger, is calling her Via.
Miranda laughs and shakes her head but she doesn't say anything. There’s an
awkward silence and then she starts fishing through her bag and pulls out her wallet.
She rifles through a couple of pictures and then hands one to me. It’s of a little boy in a park on a sunny day. He’s wearing shorts and a t-shirt—and an astronaut helmet that covers his entire head.

“It was like a hundred degrees that day,” she says, smiling at the picture, “but he wouldn't take that helmet off for anything. He wore it for like two years straight, in the winter, in the summer, at the beach. It was crazy.”

“Yeah, I’ve seen pictures in Olivia’s house.

“I’m the one who gave him that helmet,” she says. She sounds a little proud of that. She takes the picture and carefully inserts it back into her wallet.

“Cool,” I answer.

“So you're okay with it?” she says, looking at me.

I look at her blankly. “Okay with what?”

She raises her eyebrows like she doesn't believe me. “You know what I’m talking about,” she says, and takes a long drink from her water bottle. “Let’s face it,” she continues, “the universe was not kind to Auggie Pullman.”