



CATHERINE AUSTEN

walking backward





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**M**y father is insane. He just came home from his appointment with the psychiatrist and handed me this journal. “You have to keep track of your feelings in this, Josh!” he shouted. Then he went into the basement to work on his time machine.

Dad only shouted so I could hear him over my music. He never shouts because he’s angry. He doesn’t get angry. I’m pretty sure he’s a cyborg. If Mom had walked into my room, she’d have shouted in anger. Not that she shouted often, but at that moment my friend Simpson was shoving a safety pin through my eyebrow, and I was bleeding down my face and neck. Mom would have had a fit. Dad could walk in and see body parts hanging from the ceiling and not raise an eyebrow.

I opened the journal to see if Dad had written any words of wisdom to get me started. Just as I turned the cover, two drops of blood dripped from my face onto the first page. They were perfect, sort of splattery and dark red, so I left the page blank. I think Dr. Tierney will appreciate the symbolism. He'll probably schedule an extra session to talk about it.

I finally got my face to stop bleeding, but now I can't get the ring in my eyebrow. I don't think the hole goes all the way through. That's just as well, because I don't actually like pierced brows. If your hair is too long, the ring gets snagged on your comb. If your hair is too short, you can't hide the hole when it gets infected. My hair is medium length—long enough for snagging but too short for hiding. It's guaranteed I'll develop a gross festering sore where my eyebrow used to be unless I let the hole close over right now. I only let Simpson do it because he said he was good at piercing, and I lost at Rock Paper Scissors, which is very out of character for me because I almost always win.

Simpson went home after he stabbed the safety pin halfway into his own thumb. I guess he lied about his piercing skills.

I like the way this journal feels. Mom used to give me notebooks for my story ideas and drawings, but they were always cheap dollar-store books like the kind she kept her own notes in. This one is fancier.

Dr. Tierney tucked in a photocopied article about using a journal to track your feelings. I'm supposed to treat it like an emotional database. After I've used it for a while, I can check what I was feeling on any given day and calculate how many times a week I get angry.

I don't think it'll track my feelings properly, because if I'm happy I'm not going to run to my journal. You only write in a journal when you're too miserable to do anything else. So this will probably be full of sad thoughts. Then when I check back on my emotional database, I'll think I was sad all the time, when actually I'm not. But maybe I'll become sad all the time because my journal says everything sucks, when actually it doesn't. This journal could ruin my life. But the article doesn't say that. It says I should write every day to work through my grief.

Dr. Tierney scribbled a note on the article: *It's very important to write every time you have a strong feeling, Josh, and review the journal each week.* So when someone makes me laugh or cry, I'm supposed to say, "Hey, man, I've got a strong feeling coming on," and rush off to write it down. It's supposed to be private, but Dad will probably sneak into my room to read it. Then he'll think I'm sad all the time, and that will turn him into a sad person too. Seriously, this thing is dangerous.

Dad got his own journal from Dr. Tierney but, since Dad doesn't have emotions, I can't see what he'll use it for except time-travel theories. Ever since Mom died, he's been obsessed with building a time machine. I asked him, "Why? So you can go back to when she was alive and ignore her some more?" He didn't find that funny. But it didn't make him angry either. He just looked confused, same as always.

Dad's the sort of nerd who might actually succeed in building a time machine. One day I'll walk down to the basement, and Dad will be gone. Sammy and I will be orphans. We'll be split up and sent to abusive homes. I'll be shipped to farm country, where some creepy foster father will use me for slave labor. Sammy will be herded into an orphanage, where they'll tease him about his stutter and turn him into an avenging psychopath.

As far as I know, Dad's time-travel obsession came totally out of the blue. I've never seen him pick up a science book in my life. He works in a government office where they make maps. It would be exciting to explore the world and draw maps of what you found. But that's not what Dad does. He sits at a computer and types in information he gets from satellite pictures and other people. That sounds boring. But who knows? Maybe he met an explorer from the future, or maybe he saw a hole in the fabric

of the universe, because for some reason he honestly thinks he has a shot at building a time machine. Which I'm guessing he'll use to go back to the day Mom died and stop her from taking the car.

I asked him yesterday how his time-travel plans were going. He flashed a smile and said, "Couldn't be better, Josh." His eyes sparkled like he was an inch away from a wormhole. When he's at work tomorrow, I might sneak a peek at his journal to see what's going on in his head. They still let him go to work despite his obvious insanity.

Dr. Tierney gave Dad a notebook for Sammy too. Since Sam's four and a half and the only letter he can write is S, I don't think it's going to be an effective therapy for him. Mom taught me to read and write before I started kindergarten, but she said that left me nothing to learn in school, so I turned naughty out of boredom. She made a special effort to keep Sammy as uneducated as possible.

I'm part boy, part experiment. Mom was a professor of epic literature in the medieval studies department of the university, and she turned me into a freak by reading me *Beowulf* and *The Song of Roland* instead of letting me vegetate in front of *Caillou* and *Ninja Turtles*. Some of what she taught me required me to learn French and German. For other stuff I had to read the Bible, the Greek myths and ancient

history. I'm a bit advanced for my age, which is twelve. Fortunately, I'm an excellent soccer player so I'm not a total geek.

My friends like it that I know about history and mythology, but with adults I pretend I don't know so much. Grown-ups don't like kids with classical educations. "No one likes a know-it-all," my mom used to say. I tell my teachers I learned everything from computer games.

On the upside, I am the player to fear in *Civilization*, *Age of Empires*, *Age of Mythology* and even *Call of Duty*, which I can play now that Mom's not here to monitor game ratings, and Dad's too busy on his time machine to notice if I'm even home. On the downside, I actually like history, but there's no one to talk to about it other than creepy chat-room people lurking in wait for underage overachievers.

Sammy will never have to face this dilemma. Instead of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, he got Mother Goose and Teletoon. And every spare minute of Mom's time.

Sammy just walked into my room a second ago. He's jumping on my bed. I have the best bed for jumping in our house. Sam's ceiling is sloped, so he smashes his head if he jumps on his own bed. That doesn't stop him from jumping on it every afternoon before smashing his head and then coming into my

room to jump on my bed. Mom and Dad have a futon, so it's not very bouncy. Plus the cats are usually asleep on it. I have a double mattress and a nine-foot ceiling, so a kid Sam's size can catch some truly awesome air.

I can't bounce so high because I'm five feet tall. Which is not tall for my age, but I'm good at basketball anyway. I'll be thirteen on February 10. I'm in grade seven. Or I will be when school starts in September.

Before Mom died, I was excited about going into grade seven. The junior high school is huge, with a swimming pool and two soccer fields and an auditorium separate from the gym. Now I'm not looking forward to school so much. Once your mother dies, you're either unhappy because your mother died, or you're happy but you think you shouldn't be because your mother just died, or you're happy and not thinking about it until other people look at you like you're a freak for being happy when your mother just died. Any way you look at it, it's not happy.

On the upside, you can do things you ordinarily wouldn't be allowed to do—like pierce your eyebrow—because everyone thinks it's a reaction to your mother's death. Sammy and I have been staying up till eleven every night, wearing our pajamas all day long and spending our outdoor time destroying the walnut tree in the backyard by whacking it with plastic swords. We've broken almost all our swords



over the past month, and we had quite a collection. The neighbors walk by and see us attacking the tree in our jammies, and they just wave. So that's the upside.

The downside is that everyone thinks they know what you're feeling, but they're usually wrong. If somebody ticks you off, they'll say, "I know you're angry because your mother died," when really it's like, "No, I'm angry because you ticked me off."

The worst downside is that your mom's dead.

Right now Sammy is bugging me, asking, "Can I play *Scooby-Doo*?" That means he wants to sit beside me while I play his video game. He's addicted to Scooby-Doo—the show, the movies, the board game, the books. He has Scooby-Doo jigsaw puzzles and doodle bags and coloring books. Half the things he says are quotations from Fred and Velma. When I look at Sammy, I understand how I learned so much when I was young. When *Scooby-Doo* comes on TV, he can tell right away which episode it is. From one camera shot, he knows. He has all the mysteries and monsters catalogued in his mind. It's like this amazing mental potential gone wrong.

Mom got him the PlayStation game *Scooby-Doo! Mystery Mayhem*, but Sam can't play it. He can't press the controls quickly enough. He's too scared. He can't handle the ghosts and zombies, even when I'm playing it. He screams and patters his feet on the ground as if

he's running away, when really he's sitting on his butt. And it's not like it's ever game over for Scooby and Shaggy. I don't know why he's so scared. But he's less afraid of Scooby-Doo than just about anything else in the world.

Dr. Tierney says that being afraid of everything is a normal reaction to Mom dying. But Sammy has *always* been afraid of everything. Except snakes and spiders and mice, which normal people are afraid of. Sam loves them. He's afraid of everything else: darkness, dogs, crowds, elevators, escalators, steak knives, swimming pools, old people, little girls. You name it, he's afraid of it. Mom used to lie down with him after story time because he was too scared to be in his bed alone. I gave her a hard time about that, but she said she was the same when she was little and had to go to bed before her sister. So she lay with Sammy until he fell asleep. I told her she was spoiling him, because he had to learn to do it on his own, but she said no. She said, "He needs to know I'll always be there to protect him."

So much for that theory.

Since Mom died, exactly one month ago, Sam has been staying up with me at night. If I'm doing something scary, like watching anything other than *Scooby-Doo*, he'll sit in the basement with Dad. I don't think it's right for a four-year-old to hang out

with a grown-up who thinks he's building a time machine. But what do I know about kids just because I am one?

Sammy is screaming in terror right now. Cleo, our cat, was sleeping under the covers, and Sam just bounced on her. She's fine, but he's scared half to death.