



**THEY WERE TWO** boys named Jacob and Jakob, and they lived next door to each other. They'd built snow forts together and leapt off backyard sheds together, and one summer they'd even broken their left wrists together in a freak trampoline accident.

At the end of fifth grade they'd also developed crushes on the same girl together—Bethany Miller, who could pitch a baseball so fast that not even the eighth-grade boys could hit it. Neither of the boys did anything about his crush, though, because neither wanted to risk ending their friendship.

Jacob with a C. Jakob with a K. That's what people called them. Since they even looked alike—each had the same shaggy haircut, the same lanky walk, the same light freckles—if you wanted one of them, you just called out, “Hey, Jacob with a C,” and waited to see which boy looked up.

“You need more friends,” their mothers sometimes told them. “This is getting weird.”

But why, Jacob thought, should he make more friends when he had Jakob? And why, Jakob thought, should he make more friends with Jacob around?

One late October day, when the last bell rang and another day of sixth grade was finally over, they met by the large pine tree to begin the lazy, drifting walk home. Above them clouds whirled slowly, and a light wind blew.

“Balotobob?” Jacob said when they were close enough to talk. They had their own language, and *balotobob* meant *How are you?*

“Blapo,” Jakob replied. *Good.* “Except I have to write a story for Ms. Jenkins’s class tonight. A whole story with characters and a plot and everything.”

They settled into a slow walk, matching each other stride for stride. The wind picked up, and they zipped their jackets against the chill.

“You hate writing,” Jacob said. “If you want, I’ll help you.”

“Skolototh!” *Awesome!*

At the end of the schoolyard, they pressed the button to cross Hanover Street, and a streak of lightening flashed in the distance. A storm was coming.

“Well,” Jacob said. “What does your story have to be about?”

“It can be about anything. But it has to be at least three full pages.”



BY JOSH ALLEN

“You could make it a creepy story.” As he said this, clouds thickened and swirled and the world’s colors faded. Even the boys’ faces paled in the changing light, taking on the faint yellow tint of old newspapers.

“A creepy story?” Jakob said. “You mean, like, with a monster?”

“Chellitarb,” Jacob said. *Totally.*

“That could work.” Jakob nodded.

“That could be cool.” Cars waited as the boys crossed the street and stepped onto a leaf-covered sidewalk. Dried leaves crunched below their feet. “I watched a TV show about vampires last night. I could write about vampires.”

Jacob let out a little puff of air. “No way!” he said. “Anything but vampires. They used to be creepy a long time ago,

but they’re all romantic and stuff now. Besides, you should make up a new kind of monster.”

“A new kind of monster? Like what?”

Jacob stroked his chin, the way people did in movies when they were thinking. They rounded the corner and passed Nielsen’s drug-store. Lightning flashed again, and a faded sign in the window showed a smiling woman holding a yellow bottle of laundry detergent. Across the top the sign said, “Spot-B-Gone Makes Stains Vanish!”

“Makes stains vanish,” Jacob said and pointed. “You could call your monsters the Vanishers.”

“The Vanishers?” The wind picked up even more, and dried leaves skittered along the sidewalk. “What are Vanishers?”

IT’S OUR SECRET LANGUAGE,  
BECAUSE WE’RE SO CLOSE.



SO SECRET I DON’T  
EVEN KNOW IT...

"I'm not sure yet," said Jacob.

The boys turned off the main road and into their neighborhood. They walked for a minute quietly.

"These Vanishers are creepy though, right?" Jakob said. The wind hissed through the trees, and the boys shoved their hands into their pockets.

"Oh, they're plenty creepy. They're klotman creepy." *Klotman* meant something so creepy and weird as to be almost unreal. "Just you wait."

They rounded a corner and walked in silence for a few minutes more.

"I've got it," Jacob said. "I know what Vanishers do."

"Let me guess," Jakob said. "They kill you. Because that's what all monsters do. Kill you."

"Not Vanishers," said Jacob. "Vanishers are different. They aren't murderers. Not really. They don't kill you. Instead, what they do is, they *vanish* you."

The clouds grew darker and thicker still, making the boys' faces appear faint and ghostly.

"Vanishers wipe you out," Jacob said. "They erase you, like chalk off a chalk board. If the Vanishers want you, they just get you, and there's nothing you can do about it. You'll be walking down the road one day, and all at once they'll zero in on you, and you'll get all strange and milky, like a crystal ball. And then, little by little, you just fade away."

The first drops of rain fell. The boys paused to put their hoods up and cinched the strings tight around their faces.

"So, you just disappear one day? And your parents and everyone have to wonder what happened to you?" Jakob said. "Like they do when someone goes missing on TV?" Jakob's voice came out muffled through his hood and the wind and the rain. "That's a little scary, I guess, but it's not *that* scary. It's just mostly sad."

"Well, it's worse than that," said Jacob. The boys walked with their heads down, braced against the weather. They turned onto their street. "Because when the Vanishers get you, you don't just disappear from starting right now. You disappear from *forever*. Your birthdays. Your learning to walk. Everything. It's like none of it ever happened. No one remembers any of it. No one remembers you. You're *vanished*. You get erased. From *everywhere*."

A gust of wind bent the trees along the sidewalk.

The boys' homes came into view. Jacob's mother was out front, in a long, black coat, dragging a gray garbage bin from the curb to the garage despite the wind and rain.

"Can you fight the Vanishers?" Jakob asked. "Can you outrun them?"

"No way!" Jacob hunched his shoulders and came to his driveway, where he'd peel off and Jakob would keep going for one more house. "Vanishers don't even have bodies. They just exist, like, everywhere at once. In



the light and the air and everywhere.” He waved one hand in the damp air around him. “When they decide to get you, you’re just gone. There’s nothing you can do.”

His mother pulled the garbage bin into the open garage. The bin rattled and slid. She paused, looked up, and with rainwater dripping down her face, she called out.

“Who are you talking to?” she said.

Jacob pointed to his side. “I’m talking to . . .”

He stopped. He’d been telling a story, hadn’t he? To someone? Talking about the Vanishers? He turned in a full circle.

No one was there.

He looked to the gray brick house next door. There was a name he tried to call to mind. It had something to do with a letter K.

Kevin? Kacey? Kyle?

He shook his head.

“No one,” he said. “I guess I was just talking to myself.” 

