

THE
UNBREAKABLE
BOY

THIS IS FOR TERESA, LOGAN, AND AUSTIN
WE ARE FIGHTING THE GOOD FIGHT
WE WILL FINISH THE COURSE
AND KEEP THE FAITH

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A NOTE FROM AUSTIN LERETTE

My name is Austin. Richard Austin LeRette. But you can call me Auz. That's a true fact. When I meet new people, I tell them everything.

I've broken so many bones. I broke my back two times. I have osteogenesis imperfecta. I am not sure what this is; all I know is that my bones break real easy.

When I was little I had something wrong with my heart too, and the surgeons had to crack my chest open, fix it, and then wire me back together.

I also have autism. Autism stinks. Some autistic kids can't talk but I can. Sometimes I make up words. It calms me down to say words over and over again. Sometimes I say bad words, and I have a hard time listening. I wish it would stop. I wish I was a

better person. People don't understand how much I try. I freak out over little things and get mad a lot when feelings come.

I don't like my diseases. Logan is the lucky one because he can ride a dirt bike or skateboard. He's so lucky. No autism. Sometimes I wish Mom could just put me back in her belly so I could get born all over again and maybe my genes would change.

Dad says the odds of a person having brittle bone disease, heart defects, and autism are 1 in a billion. "I can prove you are special," he says. But I don't want to be special. I just want to be like every other dude.

Nothing hurts right now. I don't hurt every day, only every other day. My back hurts some days. My head hurts. My legs and my feet hurt. Sometimes I can't block it out. But if I have a good day, I'm very happy. Like the day I had the best strawberry milkshake in the world. I kept trying and trying to explain how good it tasted to my dad.

Loud music makes me feel good. Eating does too. Especially when I dip things in ranch dressing. Cooking calms me down, and I want to be a chef someday. I'm going to open my own hotel with a restaurant called Auzzie's Grand Diner. I'll wear a big chef's hat and apron and have butlers serving food. My special dish will be called "Heart Attack Ravioli."

I'm a happy person with a crummy disease, but it doesn't slow me down too much.

I love everybody. By the way, want to be my Facebook friend? And then how about a sleepover at my house? We can watch *Back to the Future*. I love you. Do you know that? Please, thank you, you're welcome, I love you.

I have a hat collection, a music poster collection, and a shoe-lace collection. I take lots of showers, and I like to dress up with

a jacket, shirt, tie, and hat. Wearing just the right hat makes my day. Sometimes when Dad sees how I'm dressed, he goes back upstairs and changes.

Dad says sometimes I am the one teaching and he is the one learning.

Whatever, Dad.

Right now it's time to go find him. Sometimes my dad hides from me.

Come on, Dad. I know you're in the closet. Where are you, Daddy-O?

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IN THE CLOSET

[[epigraph to come]]

I sit cowering in my closet, the one place I find refuge. Life is hard, really, really hard, and sometimes this is the only place I can find a few minutes to ease my brain and recalibrate my soul. Go ahead and laugh. A grown man, hiding in a closet like a little kid.

But even though I'm a dad and Austin is my son, I often feel like a child because I feel so helpless. Austin sees things differently, and I wish I could climb inside his brain and understand why he does the things he does. Some days it's like we're playing two different video games with two different controllers and two different sets of rules in two different virtual universes. I get frustrated. We all do.

Tonight is worse than usual. I'm scared and unsure what to do next as I sit on a kiddie chair alone in the dark, trembling and thinking and analyzing. I relive that night again. I can't get it out of my brain.

My stomach tightens, and I feel sick as I remember standing in the men's room at the country club, drunk as I'd ever been. I couldn't stop staring at the man in the mirror. I raised my hands and tried to touch his burning eyes.

I wanted to keep believing this was all normal and life was just fine, but the man looking back at me was someone else—lost, alone, and at the point of destruction. I didn't know who I was anymore, and I felt empty, like a lifeless cicada shell stuck on a post. I stumbled back into the dining room, the lights beating into my brain.

I have to get out of this place. Everyone is looking at me, and they just don't understand.

As the awful memory unfolds, I grab my two boys and stumble out to the parking lot, heading for the car. Then I forget how to walk. My keys go flying, and I am on the ground, staring at the rocks stuck in my palms. I have gravel in my knees too. I look up at the moon and laugh, out of my mind, hands bleeding and snot bursting from my nose.

Nothing makes sense. I laugh even harder when a random man helps me to my feet and hands over my keys.

"Be careful," he says.

"Sure. I'm fine. No problem."

I zigzag to the car. We get in.

"Dad, are you okay?" Logan says. "Daddy?"

I work the key into the ignition, start the car, and step on the gas. As we turn on the highway, I push the pedal all the way to the floor.

"Daddy?" Logan says again.

I can't remember anything that happens after that. Everything is gone. Black.

IN THE CLOSET

Much later, alone with my memories in the closet, I rock back and forth like Austin does sometimes, the tears running down my cheeks as I remember the next morning, the thoughts screaming through my hungover brain.

What have I done?

Did I kill my boys?

Oh my God.