

Julia Moore

Age: 13, Grade: 7

School Name: Macdonald Middle School, East Lansing, MI

Educator: Audrey Underhill

Category: Short Story

The Extraordinary Tale of the Balewood Book Club

The Extraordinary Tale of the Balewood Book Club

“Eliza! The bus is coming in 20 minutes! Come get breakfast!” My mom, Lily, shouts, pulling me from my sleepy haze.

I grumble a reply, but it’s all I can muster. School is starting up again from summer break, and apart from English, my favorite subject, the building feels like a prison.

I hate it here in Balewood, Michigan. And I have ever since my mom uprooted our Indiana life because she couldn’t pay the rent of our old house without my dad’s income supporting us.

My parents never officially divorced. My dad, Trian, simply decided Midwestern life wasn’t his “thing”- his words, not mine- and moved to the other side of the country, all the way in California. My mom refused to follow, claiming she had lived in the Midwest her whole life, and would not uproot her family. So instead, they decided to divide it in two.

And I miss him. His genuine laughter and his easy smile. He was the kind of person who would take our whole family out to dinner after I aced a science quiz I had been dreading or zoom me around the house like an airplane when I was little. He turned everything into an adventure.

At least, he was that kind of person *before*. Before he started going to the bar and coming home late, sleeping in and missing work, forgetting about my school events and piano concerts.

The strange thing is, I never had that *moment*. When it hits me that I won’t have a normal day with my dad for a long time. No more Christmas dinners together. Or summer barbecues. Or stories before bed. At least, not for a while.

When he left, it was barely with so much as a goodbye. He told us it would just be for a week. Well, a week turned into a month. A month into a year. But, if there’s one thing I know, Dad will get better again, and he *will* come back. He has to. To be with his family again. To be together, as a *whole*. He can’t be gone, because he never even said goodbye.

I glance at my watch and realize five minutes has already passed.

Great. Missing the bus is just what I need to add to my first day of 7th grade.

I throw on a T-shirt and shorts, not caring if they match, and hurriedly brush my teeth before I make my way down the stairs, picking at my bowl of cereal.

“Y’know,” my mom pipes in, “I bet there are gonna be a lot of new students today. It’s never too late to try to make a new friend.”

I shoot her a death glare, which shuts her up.

I know I should try to make new friends, but it’s just so *hard*. I don’t seem to fit in with any of the cliques, and there are no hobbies or after-school activities I’m interested in. The only way I can imagine making friends that I have anything in common with is through a book club, and there aren’t any of those in my school, at least none that I’ve heard of.

And I’ve explained this to my mom. Many times. But I suppose I can’t blame her for trying. She has oodles of friends at the clothing line she works at.

My mom is also probably not too happy about my fashion choices lately. She always dresses with style, though she claims it’s for her job. We both know otherwise. How she manages to turn a fifteen dollar thrift store item into something that looks like it should be on the cover of a magazine is beyond me.

I dump my half-finished cereal bowl in the sink and grab my backpack from its place on the hook.

I’m halfway out the door when Mom says to me, “Try to make a friend today, just *try*.”

“I’ll try,” I promise, knowing it’s a hopeless task.

R-ring! R-ring! The warning bell for third period goes off, and my classmates rush to get to class all around me. I see kids of all different ages wave goodbye to their friends. Everyone has their little groups. *Except me. Stop feeling sorry for yourself,* I think as I hurry to get to class.

My first two classes are a drag, but as I nestle into my English seat, my heart swells. Not only is English my favorite subject, with reading and poetry and fiction writing, (the only boring part is grammar) but Mrs. Winters, who teaches 6th and 7th grade English, is my absolute favorite teacher.

The class is the usual first day of school routine: Mrs. Winters introduces herself to the new students, tells us what to expect from this year, and hands out our planners. We don't have any work assigned, up until a few minutes before the bell.

"For your first assignment, I want everyone to do an essay on your favorite subject in school, and why it's your favorite," Mrs. Winters announces, her eyes twinkling with hopefulness. "This is just a placement test so I can see where you stand in this class, so don't feel stressed at all." She looks around the room, and I could've sworn her eyes locked on mine for a few seconds. "I'm excited to see everyone's essays, and remember: creativity comes from the brain and emotion comes from the heart, but true writing comes from both."

That night, I stay up late to work on my homework. Not because I need the grade, but because I just *want* to. I love writing about something I'm so passionate about. My mom says passion and love is all anyone needs in life. I really hope that's true, and that my lack of friendship making skills won't count against me in the long run. But it's hard to think so far in the future, right now at least.

"Okay, everyone! Pass your papers up to the person in front of you. Remember, this essay will not impact your grade, but it *will* tell me what books to assign you this semester."

I pass my paper to a girl I don't remember ever seeing in the school before. Not that I ever pay much attention to my classmates. She has a petite frame with wide, wire-rimmed glasses, and two ponytails coming down her head. When I pass her my paper, she takes far too long than I'm comfortable with reading it. I'm about to call her out for cheating, when she passes it up and I decide to let the whole thing go.

But, in the middle of class, she subtly slides me a hastily scrawled note when she gets up to use the bathroom.

Meet us in the library during lunch

-Vinnie

I have to read it five times before the meaning sinks in. Why would they want to meet with me? Did she mean to put it on someone else's desk? Am I freaking out for nothing?

All these questions make my skin sweat and it's suddenly harder to breathe than it was five minutes ago.

No. I decide. *Don't get worked up about this. You're not going to go, so it doesn't matter.*

This seems to ease the butterflies in my stomach, and by the end of English, I have a plan of action. I'll go into the girl's bathroom during my lunch break and flush the note down the toilet. Then, I'll request to switch seats in English and stay as far away from that girl as I possibly can. There, simple. Except, that's the thing about epiphanies. They always happen when you least expect them to.

I'm on my way to the bathroom when I suddenly get a strange sense of *longing*. To have a good friend, to be happy at school again. What if this note I hold in my hand is my one shot at making a good friend, and I blow it because I'm scared? I stare at the note and thousands of possibilities run through my head. Of me, talking with a friend before school. Having sleepovers every weekend. Not feeling *so lonely*.

I don't think I ever had a good friend before. I thought I did, back in Indiana, but Julie stopped staying in touch just weeks after I left, and I haven't heard from her in nearly 10 months now. I guess she moved on, just like I should be doing right now...

So I'll go. I'll go to the library. Right now. I take one step in the direction of the library doors. Then another. Soon, I'm pushing open the clear double doors.

No turning back now, I think as I step inside.

"You came!" The girl from English class exclaims. "We weren't sure if you would."

"We?" I ask, even though I should really be asking why I'm here or who she was.

"Yeah. Guys, come out."

Two boys and a girl step out from behind a bookshelf, all smiling sheepishly.

"Sorry, we find it hard to be in a library without looking around, and Vinnie has better hearing than all of us."

The boy who spoke has dark skin with ice blue eyes, closely cropped hair, and a sharp jawline. I think I recognize him from my social studies class, but I can't place a finger on his name.

“Plus, Zavier tends to be standoffish when it comes to new people.” The girl pipes in. She is tall, about three inches more than me, and has long, strawberry blonde hair with lightly glossed lips.

“Stop being so insensitive, Leila.” A boy who looks almost identical to the girl retorts. He has the same hair, but cut in a shaggy style, and the same gray-green eyes. They must be twins.

“Ahem.” The girl-Vinnie-clears her throat. “Eliza, this is Zavier, Leila, and Jackson, and I’m Vinnie.” She holds out her hand to shake, but I don’t take it.”

“Um...how do you know my name?” I ask. “And why did you read my essay in English? Or give me that creepy note?”

“Creepy? I would have called it straightforward. And that was all a simple initiation process,” Vinnie adds, as if that’s supposed to clear it all up.

When I continue to stare at her blankly, she continues, “I’ve noticed you in my class for a long time, and you always seemed to be a bit of a-” she pauses, figuring out how to phrase her next words. “Lone wolf.”

I suppose this is a valid statement. Though it uneasy me how straightforward she is.

She finishes, “and I had to know how you felt about books and literature to ask if you wanted to, y’know, be in our *book club*.”

“Wait, book club?” I ask.

“Gosh, Vinnie. Did you explain *anything* to her?” Leila says.

“No!” Vinnie says, clearly frustrated. “We couldn’t have people know about our secret book club if we don’t know if they were going to join, now can we?”

“*Secret* book club?” I ask, but then I realize I have a much more pressing thing to say. “Wait, how do you know that I want to join?”

“You came this far, didn’t you?” She asks. “*Do* you want to join?”

There are a million reasons I should tell her no, should walk away and never look back. It would be so much easier, so much safer, but...so much more *boring*. So much lonelier. And...I *do* want to join. I want friends. I want to be part of a book club.

So, even though its risky, and scary, I let an “okay” slip through my lips, until it becomes bigger, braver, bolder.

“Okay.” I say again. “Sure! When do we meet?” And there was no ounce of worry in my words as I said them, for I knew, *somehow, right* then and there, that I’d made the right decision.

“Yay!” Vinnie exclaims. “We meet every Tuesday at lunch to talk about a book.”

“May I do the honors?” Leila asks. Vinnie nods, and Leila continues, “I hereby pronounce you an official member of the Balewood Book Club!” She taps me on the head, and my grin grows into a joyous laugh.

Yep, I have a feeling I’m going to like this school year.

“Okay! We’ll meet back here for lunch next Tuesday!” Vinnie concludes.

We all disperse to our next class, smiles on each one of our faces.

And my smile stays with me all throughout that day. And the next. And the next.

Because I finally found a group of friends. A *real* group of friends. Honest. Fun. Silly. Loyal. And for the first time since we moved, I find myself sincerely happy at school.

The thing is, big things never happen slowly. They come into your life without a warning, and the force knocks you off your feet. There’s no time for planning or thinking things over, just the sudden impact and then the result. That’s how it happened that one night, like a bolt of thunder, and now I know things will never be the same.

It had been multiple weeks since I had met Jackson, Zavier, Leila, and Vinnie, and life was looking up. School was fun, and I had lunch with the book club every day. I was happy, and that made Mom happy. Things were finally looking up, for the first time in over a year.

I had stayed up late reading, and I was just going into the bathroom to brush my teeth before bed, when I heard my mom’s voice, low but also giggly, coming from her bedroom. I put my ear against the closed door and listened to whatever mysterious conversation she was having.

“Yes, well, I haven’t told Eliza yet.”

What? What was she hiding from me?

“No, no, no. She knows that. He’s been gone for a long time.”

Who’s been gone for a long time?

“A year, I think. I don’t know, I’ve lost track of time.”

A weight thuds in my stomach as the puzzle pieces started connecting themselves, and I’ve never wanted to be wrong more in my life than at this moment.

“She doesn’t know I’m seeing anyone...”

Now I can’t help it. The tears come and they won’t stop. *She left dad! She’s moved on!*The words reverberate in my mind over and over. It feels like my life was shattered into a million pieces and put back together in all the wrong

places. I want to scream. I want to cry. I want to shout so the whole world can hear me. But I'm too upset, too *devastated*, to do anything but crawl into my bed and let the tears flow from my eyes, softly, like the trickle of water from a leaky sink.

Dad's never coming home again...we'll never be a normal, happy family again...I'll never get to be his daughter again.

I cry myself to sleep that night, whispering those words to myself over and over, like a demented sort of lullaby.

"What on earth happened to you, Eliza? You look like you woke up in a lion's pit." Vinnie's straightforwardness that would usually make me smile just makes me irritated today.

"Mind your own business, wouldn't you?" I snap back. Though it's true, I do look like a hot mess. My eyes are red and puffy and my unbrushed hair is an unruly assortment of tangles and knots. I still haven't been ready to tell mom what I heard, and I've gone from sad to completely infuriated at her. In her mind, I stayed up late reading last night (true) and didn't get nearly enough sleep, so I slept in late (also true).

"Jeez, sorry, Eliza," Vinnie replies defensively.

"Sorry, it's just..." I shake my head. "Nothing. I didn't get much sleep last night.

I want to tell everyone about what happened, but I don't know how to say it. Plus, my worst fear is my friends pitying me.

The bell rings, then, ending our conversation

I'm a zombie throughout the day, and lunch is no different. I'm picking my way through my food when Leila speaks up.

"Eliza, you know you can tell us anything, right? We're here for you, no matter what."

I look up at everyone and see earnesty in all their eyes. They really want to know what happened, and suddenly, telling them doesn't seem so terrible.

So I take a deep breath, and before I can let myself back down, I belt out my entire tale. I tell about my dad leaving, us moving, my hopes of him coming back, and finding out that Mom has a boyfriend. And when I'm done, it feels good. *Really* good. Like a weight being lifted off my chest now that other people know what I'm going through. No one says anything when I finish my long rant. Instead, they all simultaneously pull me into a great, big, group bear hug.

I can feel the love and support of all the friends I care about wrapped around me, like snuggling into a warm blanket. I think I know what it means to have true friends now, ones that will stick by your side, no matter what. Will comfort you and support you and love you in a way only a true friend can. I think I know now what it means to let people in, and lean on them during hard times.

Now I know what it means to be a true Balewood Book Club member.