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Age: 15, Grade: 9

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Category: Short Story

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## **Back-to-School Night**

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It could have been any other day: another dry, warm, September morning, partially cloudy, with hints of autumn in the air. But this day was different from the others, because Rebecca was going to announce Back-To-School night. She wasn't sure why she found it so exciting; maybe she was just an optimist. Maybe she was just liked her job—which was true, of course.

She'd just begun teaching at the local elementary school, replacing the previous math teacher, Mr. Dovesworth. He'd been mean and grouchy, and everyone was quite relieved when he retired. "I've had it with them kids," he'd said, before walking out the door without looking back—or so Rebecca had heard.

She felt determined to be better than him; she wanted to be someone whom the children would look up to, someone they could go to when they needed help.

She stood at the front of the Homeroom, hands folded behind her, waiting for her students to arrive. She had memorized all of their names and faces, and already knew so much about each one. There was Conner, with his obsession with turtles; Josephine, who always wore a large bow on her head and liked to sing; Michal, who drew little aliens and spaceships and stars all over his homework.

Someone entered—a skinny, blonde-haired boy named Joseph—and he sat down on the large rug in the middle of the room. He fidgeted with the straps of his backpack, and kept his eyes cast downwards. Rebecca pulled everything she knew about him to the front of her brain. He was shy, extremely introverted, and usually didn't ask questions. But, from what she'd seen, he always paid attention, and was polite to his classmates.

A trio of giggling girls walked in, followed by a pair of boys who seemed to be debating which baseball team was the best. Hardly a minute later, a whole group of kids entered, right on time. The last one to enter had his head down and his hands balled into fists.

*Robert*, Rebecca thought. He sat down at the back of the room and wrapped his arms around his knees, looking balefully at the chattering children. When she'd first seen him at school three days prior, he'd seemed to Rebecca like the kind of child she should keep an eye on.

Rebecca walked over to close the doors after he entered, then went back to the front of the room.

"Good morning, class!" Rebecca said cheerfully.

"Good morning, Ms. Halson," the fourth-grade class said in unison—except for Robert, who was watching a stain on the carpet as if he expected it to suddenly spring to life.

"I have an exciting announcement for you all," Rebecca said. A murmur of interest swept around the room. "Next Tuesday, in four days, is Back-To-School night!"

More excited murmuring. Robert didn't seem to have noticed.

"One or both of your parents will be able to go with you, or anyone else you would like to bring. No pets, unfortunately."

A few children laughed. Robert grunted.

A girl raised her hand. "Yes?" said Rebecca.

"What about a fish?" she asked. "My fish just lives in a glass jar."

"Let's not," Rebecca said kindly. "You might break the jar or forget him. I think it would be best to leave him at home, alright?"

"Okay," the girl said.

A boy on the other side of the room raised his hand. When Rebecca acknowledged him, he asked wryly: "What about a pet rock?" All of the children laughed, except for Robert.

“Well, a pet rock might be okay,” Rebecca said with a smile.

Another girl raised her hand. “Can my Grandma come?”

“Absolutely!” said Rebecca.

She noticed that Robert appeared a bit more interested now, but still did not actively partake in the conversation.

“What about my baby brother? Then both my parents could come because neither of them would have to stay home to babysit him, and they could all come to Back-To-School night together!” asked one child.

“Of course,” Rebecca said.

“My dad won’t be coming,” said a little girl. “He’s going to see a football game that night.”

“Mine can’t come, either,” said the girl with the fish, a little sadly.

Now, Robert raised his hand. “Yes?” said Rebecca.

“There should be a rule so that both your parents have to come,” Robert said. That was unexpected.

Rebecca knew a rule like that wouldn’t work, but she couldn’t say that to him at the moment.

“Interesting idea, Robert,” Rebecca said carefully. “We can talk about that after class, alright?”

“No. You need to make it a rule. Right now. They both need to be there.”

“Well, now is not the time to put new rules into place. After class is over, we can talk about it.” Something about the intensity in Robert’s gaze told Rebecca she needed to be very careful about what she said.

“I don’t want to wait until after class,” Robert said.

“I’m sorry,” said Rebecca. “But we do need to go on with the lesson, alright?”

“You let the other kids talk,” Robert snapped accusingly. “You answered their questions and concerns. Why not mine? What’s your problem?”

Silence.

“Please don’t yell in class, Robert,” Rebecca said. “And making a new rule is a bit more complicated than answering questions about pet rocks, so we’ll talk about this later. Now, why don’t you sit down so we can continue with home room?”

Robert glared at her for a while. “Fine,” he said with an exaggerated sigh. He didn’t speak again for the rest of class.

Robert’s outburst during class seemed to have come out of nowhere. That kind of behavior was unacceptable, and therefore very concerning to Rebecca. She had spoken to a couple of the other teachers during her break; none of them had reported any odd behavior. Robert had just sat at the back of the room and done his work quietly.

It was lunch time before Rebecca got to talk to Robert again. She found him sitting alone at a table, picking at his food irritably. Calmly, she approached him.

“Good afternoon, Robert,” Rebecca said. “May I talk to you for a minute?”

“Sure,” he said.

“I saw you were in a bit of a bad mood during class,” Rebecca said, choosing her words carefully.

“You wouldn’t answer my question,” he said flatly.

“Well,” Rebecca said. “I’ve been thinking, and a rule saying both parents had to be there at Back-To-School night might not work very well.”

Robert raised his eyebrows. “Why?” he demanded.

“One parent might need to be somewhere else,” she said. She tried to sound as kind and understanding as possible. “Your mom or dad might need to work or go to the doctor. So we shouldn’t force them to come when they might not be able to. Saying that both parents have to be there might also hurt some children’s feelings, since they may not have a mom or a dad. Do you understand?”

Robert scowled at his food. “I understand,” he said. Rebecca noted that he sounded surprisingly genuine.

“Alright. I’ll let you finish your lunch now,” Rebecca said, then turned to walk away.

As she was walking, she heard Robert mutter something under his breath. She turned to look at him. “What was that?”

Robert’s ears turned bright red. He wouldn’t look at her. “It’s nothing,” he said.

Not much happened over the weekend. Rebecca got a few emails from the other teachers, and a parent called her to ask about Back-To-School night, but that was it.

Rebecca sometimes found herself thinking about Robert. She remembered his behavior in class on Friday, but wasn’t sure what to do about it—or if there was anything she could do. It seemed to Rebecca that something was wrong, but she didn’t quite know what.

Mr. Dovesworth wouldn’t have done anything about it, so Rebecca decided to do as much as she could.

On Monday, Robert had another outburst.

It was during recess; the children were all outside. Sunshine streamed down on the neatly manicured lawn and clean pavement. Laughing kids swarmed across the playground.

There was a bench positioned in the shade of a tree. On one side, two girls sat and talked. On the other end of the bench, Robert was playing with a pair of sticks. Rebecca sat down on another bench nearby. She looked towards the playground and pretended not to be listening.

"My mom took me to the store and got me these hideous shoes," one girl was saying. "And she *forced* me to wear them to school today! And my dad thinks they're adorable, but I simply *hate* them!"

"That's awful," said the other girl. "But my parents wanted to go to the beach last Saturday, and they made me come along and I don't even like the beach! They wanted me to build a sand castle with them, but I'm *not* getting all sandy just to make some stupid castle!"

Rebecca looked over and noticed Robert glance at the girls with a look of absolute disgust, then return to playing with his sticks.

"Ugh, that's terrible. I don't like the beach much either. But you know what's worse?" said the first girl.

"What?" said the other one eagerly. A breeze made a couple of leaves flutter down.

"Both of my parents insisted on coming to Back-To-School night! I'm *so* embarrassed! Seriously, I'm not five!"

Without warning, Robert threw down his sticks, stood up, and turned towards the girls with a furious expression. "SHUT UP!" he bellowed.

The girls stared at him in shock.

"Robert," Rebecca said. Robert turned to look at her. He appeared even angrier. "Please don't shout, alright? And don't be mean to your fellow students."

"Why won't you leave me alone!?" Robert yelled, then stormed off. The two girls got up slowly and settled themselves onto the swings.

Rebecca sighed as she heard Robert slam the door on his way inside.

The indoor basketball court was decorated. Orange and purple streamers hung from the ceiling and lined the walls. On one half of the court were an assortment of plastic folding tables and cheap chairs. Clusters of brightly colored balloons had been placed around the room.

Rebecca admired the large banner hanging from the ceiling. **Back To School!** was written on it in bold, purple letters. She looked towards the doors; the students and their parents would be arriving in a few moments.

Including Robert.

Rebecca had tried to email his mother to inform her of Robert's behavior, and later tried calling her, but had never gotten a response either time, which was strange.

At 6:00, guests began to file in, just as Rebecca expected. "Welcome," she said, smiling, as each party entered. One of the girls who had offended Robert entered, with both her parents trailing along behind her, smiling and chatting.

Another girl entered with her mother. A boy holding his pet rock, with his parents walking in behind him, followed. Another girl and an older woman—possibly the girl's grandmother—stepped across the threshold.

"Welcome," Rebecca said. The old woman nodded politely to her.

The parents and children were sitting at tables and chatting. Some were getting pizza and brownies. Others were admiring the decorations. And still more people were coming.

And then, there was Robert, walking into the room with his hands jammed into his pockets. Behind him was a tall, dark-haired man who Rebecca assumed was his father.

"Welcome!" Rebecca said with as much happiness as she could.

"Thanks," the man said. Robert nodded.

"How are you this evening?" Rebecca asked.

"I'm alright," the father said. Rebecca noticed that he looked tired. He followed Robert to an empty table and they sat down next to each other. Neither of them looked like they wanted to be there, the father in particular.

Rebecca mingled with the other teachers, talked with the parents, and found it to be quite enjoyable. She got a plate of food, too—the chocolate-covered pretzels were surprisingly good.

The whole time, she kept an eye on Robert and his father; she saw them get up and grab some food, then sit at the table for a while longer, then get up to join the group of students and parents. The two split up, the father talking to some of the other dads, Robert sitting in a chair by himself, staring glumly at the other kids.

Rebecca watched Robert's father. She wondered if she should talk to him instead; he was less likely to

throw a fit if she annoyed him. So, she waited until Robert's father sat down at a table by himself, then walked over to him.

"Good evening," she said.

"Evening," Robert's father said.

"How are you doing?" Rebecca asked. It was at that moment that she realized she had no idea how she was going to ask him about Robert. Although, she had her doubts about discussing Robert's negativity during what was supposed to be a happy event.

"Oh, I'm alright," Robert's father said, with a finality that suggested this conversation was over.

Rebecca nodded and walked away, feeling awkward. The father's attitude was concerning, to say the least.

Rebecca looked at Robert, sitting alone in a chair on the other side of the room. This might be her only chance to talk to him.

Rebecca walked over to Robert casually. He looked up and saw her, mumbled a greeting, and looked down at his shoes again.

"Hey," she said. "Are you having fun?" That was a dumb question; clearly, he wasn't having fun.

"Yeah. Best day of my life." Robert said flatly.

A cold, impenetrable wall formed around Robert. He wouldn't look at her.

"I see," said Rebecca. There was a pause. Rebecca wasn't sure what to say to him. So, she sat down in a nearby chair.

"Did you have a good weekend?" she asked.

"More of the same," said Robert. "Sitting at home. Watching TV. Thinking."

"Sounds nice," said Rebecca.

There was another uncomfortable pause. Robert's wall bristled with annoyance. The air was tense, as if it threatened to shatter at any second.

"Have you tried the chocolate-covered pretzels?" she asked.

"No," said Robert.

"Oh," said Rebecca.

This meaningless small talk was getting them nowhere.

Robert glanced at the large clock, then looked back at the other children, laughing and playing games with their parents. Robert was glaring at the happy people, as if their joy was offensive to him.

She noticed Robert's dad, who appeared to be playing a game on his phone, his forehead wrinkled with annoyance. He somehow looked even more grumpy than he had before.

"I noticed your dad came with you tonight," Rebecca said.

"Mm-hm," mumbled Robert.

"How is he doing?"

"He's fine, I guess. I don't see him much anymore." Robert quickly fell silent, and looked down at his shoes as if he'd let slip some terrible secret.

There was a long, tense, pause. Rebecca began to wonder if he was ignoring her.

But then, catching Rebecca off guard, Robert went on. "My parents are getting a divorce," he said, pulling his knees up to his chest.

A bubble of silence seemed to close in around them. The talking faded into the background.

"They told me over the summer," he went on. "Mom said Dad would be moving away." He looked up at her, his eyes wide and sad. "But I don't want them to. I want them to stay together."

Rebecca didn't know what to say to him. She let him continue.

"I thought if I brought them to Back-to-School night, and they had fun together, it might make them realize that they didn't want to split up. But my mom had to work, so I thought if there was a rule that both your parents had to come, I could get them both to be here. That was my only chance. And it didn't work."

Complete silence. Robert rubbed his eyes.

"Robert. . ." Rebecca said, then stopped. She couldn't tell him that it was okay, since it wasn't okay at all. She wanted to say she was sorry about what he was going through, but "sorry" was such a pathetic, fragile, word.

Robert seemed to understand. "It isn't your fault. There's nothing you can do about it."

He was right. There wasn't anything Rebecca could do. So she said nothing else.

Rebecca looked down at her plate; there were still a few more chocolate-covered pretzels on there. She picked one up and handed it to Robert. He took it, and ate it.

"They're good," he said quietly.

"I'm glad," said Rebecca.

"My mom likes chocolate," Robert said after a pause.

"Perhaps you could bring some of those home for her," Rebecca suggested.

“Okay,” Robert mumbled, getting up from his chair, jamming his hands into his pockets, and walking away.

Rebecca watched him go. He didn’t pause to get any food, and instead sat down at the table with his dad. They were not talking to each other.

By the time the principle had given her welcome speech, and the parents and children had finished touring the school and talking to teachers, an hour had passed. Back-To-School Night was over. Families began to leave. Rebecca again stood by the door, this time saying “good evening” to the people who walked past her.

Rebecca noticed Robert and his father walking toward the door, both of them looking tired and mildly annoyed. As his father began to leave the building, Robert glanced behind him.

“Hold on,” Robert said to his dad, and ran to the food table. He took a few chocolate-covered pretzels, wrapped them up in a napkin, and followed his father to the door.