

Stand Out To Fit In

Quote A: “There will always be storms of one kind or another, but I will always be buoyed by books—hopeful, encompassing, life-saving books.” Sophie Blackall

I did not want to be extraordinary.

I just wanted to be chosen.

I wanted someone to look across a crowded classroom and decide, without hesitation, that I’d be their partner. I wanted to be approached, not pitied. Included, not accommodated. Admired from a distance but never left alone in it. I wanted the kind of presence that drew people in effortlessly, like warmth in winter, something no one could quite touch, yet everyone wanted near.

I *wanted* friends.

Instead, I was the girl who rehearsed her sentences before speaking them. The girl whose laughter arrived a second too late. The weirdo. The too-loud, too-awkward, too-much girl. I carried my strangeness like a name tag no one had asked me to wear.

Group projects were battlefields.

The desks would scrape together, friendships forming in seconds, and I would feel it, that familiar tightening in my chest. While others shuffled confidently into their chosen circles, I stood still, exposed. Eventually, I would be placed somewhere, not invited. And I could see it in their eyes: the calculation. The silent question of what use I would be.

They were sharks, and I was an open wound.

Once, I broke. The fear swallowed whatever pride I had left, and I heard my own anguished voice cut through the room.

“Miss, please let me work by myself! I don’t want to be in a group!”

Time did not stop, but it felt like it should have. Heads turned. Brows furrowed. Not in concern, but confusion. In disbelief. Maybe even in distaste. My humiliation hung in the air longer than my words did.

I had forgotten where I was. Forgotten that fear is meant to be swallowed quietly, not displayed like a spectacle.

Of course, I worked in the group anyway.

And later, as if my vulnerability were a behavioral issue instead of a wound, I was handed a pass to the guidance counselor: my reward for unraveling in public.

Looking back, I don’t just remember the embarrassment. I remember the longing beneath it. The quiet, aching desire to be wanted without having to beg for it.

I did not want to be extraordinary.

I just wanted to be *chosen*.

I didn’t tell my mother about my day. Though, she would ask. I didn’t confess how Mrs. Samuel said I should visit her again tomorrow. I kept it to myself, having already learnt my lesson.

“How was your day, San?” My mother asked routinely, her eyes steady on the road.

My fingers dug into the fabric of my skirt, twisting the cloth until it wrinkled beneath the pressure. I turned toward the window, watching trees blur into green streaks. If I faced her, she might have seen it—the crack in my voice and the tremor in my mouth.

“It was good! We learnt about the Tainos today.”

“In Social Studies?” she prompted gently. “What did you learn?”

She would always ask those two questions to get me to talk. But my mind betrayed me. It emptied itself the moment I needed it most. Dates, facts, stories. Gone. All that remained was Mrs. Samuel’s solemn voice.

“Mummy, I’m tired. Could I tell you later?” My request was timid. If she pressed, I would unravel. And when I unraveled, I did not do so quietly.

She paused, glancing at me then back at the road. Her thoughts were poorly concealed on her face and I thought she would ask ‘why?’ But she didn’t.

“Alright,” was all she said.

The ride home was silent, but the air was thick. Full of all the words I did not say.

The next day, I sat once more in Mrs. Samuel’s office.

It was a medium-sized room dressed in calm colors and soft blues. Positive affirmations lined the walls in cheerful fonts. “*You are enough!*” “*Your feelings are valid.*” “*Breathe.*”

But my eyes found the emotions chart.

Small illustrated faces stared back at me—joy, sadness, anger, frustration. Each expression was labeled neatly beneath the cartoon faces. I studied them carefully, as if one might give me an answer. As if one might explain how I felt.

“Did you tell your mother what happened?” Mrs. Samuel asked from behind her neatly decorated desk.

Her smile was warm and encouraging. The kind that suggested secrets were safe here.

“No, Miss,” I admitted, my voice smaller than I intended.

“Why not?”

The question lingered in the air between us. I didn't know what to say. I didn't fear my mom. But deep down, maybe I believed she was already dealing with enough. That my trivial insecurity would only add problems to her plate.

I looked back at the poster.

Joy. Sadness. Anger. Frustration.

There was no face for shame.

I've stepped into Mrs. Samuel's office more times than I can count over the past few months. Not that I was misbehaving that many times, but her careful words and patient concern made me gravitate back.

When my chest felt tight or my thoughts tangled themselves into knots, she would nudge the bowl of candy toward me without a word. When the playground became a reminder that I had nowhere to stand and no one to stand with, I found a strange, secret pride in being allowed into a teacher's office. As if proximity to adulthood made loneliness look intentional.

But over time, the questions shifted.

They stretched beyond the classroom and into the spaces I kept guarded.

My home life, my free time, she wanted to know. I didn't tell her about the plethora of toys I have, just that I was an only child. I didn't mention all the cute clothes I got to wear, just that I was alone when I went home.

“Is mummy not at the house?” She asked, taking notes.

My lips pressed together. My fingers began their familiar dance: twisting, pulling, tapping each other. The tightness returned to my chest, unwelcome but predictable.

“She is.”

“How is she?” Her smile radiated sincerity, yet I didn’t understand my own feelings enough to form a coherent answer.

“She’s good.” I started. “She’s busy.” I concluded.

Mrs. Samuel squeezed my hand and nodded, as though we had reached an understanding. The relief of not having to explain further washed over me. I believed she understood the spaces between my sentences.

If she did, it was not the same understanding that reached my mother. There must have been some miscommunication somewhere.

Because when I went home that day, my mother was different. There were no customary questions. No occasional smiles. She was thinking—deeply, intensely. I could see it in the way her jaw tightened, in how her fingers gripped the steering wheel a little too long.

Her silence felt heavier than mine ever had.

When we got home, she asked me a question that wrapped around my heart and pulled harshly.

“Are you unhappy?” She stared at me, studied my expression. As if the truth might flicker across my face before I could cage it.

“No, I’m not!” I responded quickly. The speed of my denial startled even me. But there was something in her expression, guilt, maybe fear, that made me desperate to reassure her. To protect her from something I did not fully understand.

She held her tongue for a moment, my response clearly not what she wanted to hear. “So, why is the school telling me you’re a part of Ms. Samuel’s group? The one for girls who have problems? Which problem do you have?”

“I don’t...I just like talking to her” My explanation fumbled on my lips.

“But you’re *‘talking’* negative things because she thinks something is going on at home.”

My body swayed slightly, as if the ground beneath me had shifted. Heat crept into my fingertips; I pressed them into my palms to steady myself.

That’s not what I wanted.

My mother inhaled deeply, and something hardened behind her eyes.

“Stop it,” she said. “Don’t seek negative attention because you can’t get positive attention. I never sent you to school for friends. If people don’t want to be your friend, that’s their business.”

Each sentence detonated powerfully as if I was stepping across a field I didn’t know was mined. My throat dried. My heart pounded so loudly I wondered if she could hear it interrupting her.

“I sent you to school to learn! Not for friends or validation! Yuh hear me?” My mother’s English began to fray at the edges, slipping into the patois she usually kept folded away. “Nuh mek dem call me phone again fi tings dat nuh guh suh! Nuh bady touch yuh in dis house! Is me and you alone live here!”

The shift in her language carried something deeper than anger. It carried history. It carried roots she worked hard to polish for the house her daughter grew up in. In her broken cadence, I heard not just frustration, but fright. A woman who had built a bond brick by brick, now being told there might be cracks.

“Go read. Pick up a book! When you do your work, friends will start to flock to you! When they play, make sure you’re reading. Yuh hear me, *Shanasha?*”

My name rang through the room like a verdict.

“Yes, Mummy,” I replied automatically, before I had time to consider what I was agreeing to. Obedience was quicker than comprehension.

But her words did not disappear after they were spoken. They replayed in my mind long after the room grew quiet.

When you do your work, people will come to you on their own.

I wasn’t really a reader. At least, that’s what I told myself.

The next day, I stayed inside during lunch, a book balanced stiffly in my hands like an assignment rather than an escape. I wasn’t going to be invited outside anyway. And there is a particular kind of ache that comes from trying to join something already closed to you. I had learned to avoid that pain. So, it was just me and Ms. Stewart in the classroom. The screams of laughter and joy from outside taunted me. It seeped in through the windows and wrapped around me like a reminder of what I was missing. For a moment, I nearly put the book away. But I hardened my heart.

If I could not belong out there, then I would belong somewhere else.

The cover read *Whatever After* by Sarah Mlynowski. The title felt childish. Almost unserious. I opened it with reluctance, determined only to fulfill my mother’s command. The first chapter felt like work. Words assembled across the page; I followed them dutifully. But somewhere between one paragraph and the next, something shifted. By the time I reached the end of the chapter, I turned the page not out of

obligation, but *hunger*. I was glued to the story like a thirsty wild animal. I didn't want the feeling to end. I was living a life through another person's eyes, the joys and tension so transparent I felt shivers as I read on.

When the bell rang, it startled me. The book did not return to my bag for the rest of the day. Not while I waited after school. Not during the car ride home. The world outside the window blurred, irrelevant. I needed to know what happened next.

My mother noticed. She didn't say much, but her proud smile returned. The quiet one she wore when she believed something was going right.

Lunch times were no longer empty. I had companions now: bold girls and cursed beasts, kingdoms and chaos. I laughed under my breath, unashamed by my own giggles. Ms. Stewart would glance at me from her desk, puzzled by my refusal to go outside, but the grin splitting my face must have reassured her.

Mrs. Samuels never saw me much after that. I found comfort in something unlikely, something I thought I'd never delve into. My vocabulary expanded miraculously. I became curious, obsessively so. I refused to let unfamiliar words pass without understanding them.

Then a gift was bestowed upon me by a teacher who I didn't think even knew my name.

I was sitting beneath the poui tree, its yellow blossoms scattered around me like fallen sunlight. I was deep into my third book of the series, *Beauty Queen*, a reimagining of Beauty and the Beast. I already knew I would reread it once I finished.

"Which book is that?" The voice was gentle and seasoned. I looked up to see the school librarian, Mrs. Stewart, the older one, with neatly brushed-back gray hair and watchful eyes.

"Whatever After!" I beamed, flipping the book to show her the cover. "This one's called *Beauty Queen*. It's based on Beauty and the Beast."

“I see. Isn’t that the seventh book? Have you reached that far in the series?” She questioned, skimming the pages thoughtfully.

“Oh no,” I admitted. “But I don’t have the others. I’m just reading the ones I found at the bookstore.”

Her face softened and she handed me back the book. “How about this? We have the entire collection in the library. I’ll allow you to visit during your lunch times. Whenever you like!”

My breath caught.

“Really? But don’t I need a—” I halted when she placed a finger gently to her lips. *Got it.*

I nodded quickly, gratitude rising in my chest so suddenly it felt like I was ready to fly. I did not waste the opportunity. Every day after that, Mrs. Stewart would see me, sometimes already waiting by the library doors before lunch even began. I moved through books with quiet urgency, finishing one series only to reach for another. Fantasy, mystery, adventure—I devoured them all. It felt like paradise. And selfishly, I didn’t want to share it.

The idea of friendship no longer was a priority in my mind. Yes, the urge to connect was still there but the solace an open page gave me was unimaginable.

Years passed, and the library remained my safe haven. My grades climbed steadily, then sharply, until teachers began to raise their brows in disbelief. Not because I had been failing before, but because something in me had awakened. I was no longer studying to avoid disappointment; I was learning because knowledge thrilled me.

I was structured by hard feedback and a total revelation: if fitting in would count me out of a sanctuary like this, then standing out was the only solution for me.

And my mother was right, as always. By my final year of prep school, girls began approaching me. At first, it was for help with assignments. A guaranteed good grade is a reason to speak to anyone. But slowly, it became something else. They stayed to talk. They laughed at my jokes. They sought my advice. Whether drawn by academic safety or by the kindness I offered despite everything, people wanted to be near me.

More than any other time, when I blocked the need for validation and let the world of endless knowledge consume me, my fears and doubts fled from me and my spirit was free.

When graduation arrived, my name could not be forgotten. For every subject, I'd rise, walk, collect and sit, then repeat. The applause grew familiar, almost rhythmic. When I glanced into the audience and found my mother, her face radiant with pride, something inside me swelled.

At least eleven certificates rested in my hands by the end.

My principal quieted down the audience.

“There is one final award,” she announced. “Phenomenal Lady—presented to the young woman who best embodies the values of this institution: deportment, manners, courtesy, respect, helpfulness, leadership...”

The air thickened and my heart slowed strangely, as though it already knew.

When they called my name, the sound that followed was no longer distant laughter beyond a classroom window. It was thunderous, immediate and encompassing. As I walked toward the stage, I thought of the little girl who had begged to work alone. The one who feared group projects more than failure. The one who thought her worth depended on others alone. I thought of her and smiled.

Despite it all, I became extraordinary.

And I was *chosen*.