

The Perfect Party
A Story for All Ages by Aaron McEmrys

Kellen was eleven the summer she moved to Rockford Springs with her family. They all really liked living in Swedeport, their old town, but her mom got a new job and so they had to move. Kellen missed her old neighborhood, her school and especially her friends.

It didn't take Kellen long to make up her mind about Rockford Springs. It sucked! It was a much smaller town than Swedeport and it seemed like there was nothing to do. She hadn't made any new friends yet, so Kellen spent most of her free time moping around the house. She also spent a lot of time down in the basement, all by herself. Nobody knew what she was doing down there, and her parents were worried about her.

There were only a few days left of summer vacation, and Kellen's mom had a terrific idea! She picked up the phone and got to work right away. Kellen came up for lunch was listlessly picking at her sandwich when she noticed a strange and disturbing look in her mother's eyes. "Oh, oh, she thought – this can't be good."

"Honey, I had the best idea! You'll love it. This is the last weekend before school starts and I know you are worried about meeting all those new kids – so I had a thought – wouldn't it be better to start making friends before school starts? So I called up the school and got a list of all the kids in your new class and then I called their parents and invited all of them to a giant pool party bash right here in our backyard! Isn't that great?"

Kellen was speechless. And mortified. And terrified. Did I mention she was mortified? "No. Mooooom, you can't do that. I am soooo embarrassed! I don't know any of these kids and what do they care about me or my stupid pool?! You can't do it. I won't come. I will just stay in my room the whole time and I won't come out even for a minute!"

Now it was Kellen's mom's turn to be speechless. Just a couple years earlier Kellen would have thought it was a great idea. "But honey, it's too late now. Everyone is invited. People are coming – I even hired a clown..."

"You did not!!! Mom!"

"No of course I didn't, just joking dear. But it really is too late. Unless you want to call everyone and tell them not to come yourself."

"Fine. We'll have a party, but I am going to hate every minute of it. This is going to be a disaster."

And so, Saturday morning rolled around to find the back yard of Kellen's house decorated and full of 5th graders. They clustered around in small groups of friends after their parents dropped them off, and nobody put so much as a toe into the swimming pool, even though it was hot outside. To make matters worse, Kellen discovered that she had outgrown her swimsuit since last summer and now it was way too tight. The party had all the hallmarks of a total flop. The boys seemed content to be gobbling down all the food piled up on a long table by the pool, but everyone else was just kind of standing around.

Kellen knew she was supposed to do something, say something, but she was so embarrassed and shy that she said nothing. Most of the kids probably didn't even realize it was her party.

After a while, some of the kids started swimming, and the party wasn't a total disaster, but Kellen had still not worked up the courage to say much to anyone. But then something weird happened. The sky, very quickly started to turn all greenish and a hush fell over the yard as all the birds went quiet. Everything was very still, and then, in the far distance, everyone heard the sound of a siren going off. "Tornado!!," someone yelled.

It was true, September is the beginning of tornado season in Wisconsin, and all the kids knew exactly what to do, except for Kellen, who was new. Kellen's mom looked at the sky and then yelled, "okay everybody out of the pool. We have to go down into the basement until the warning is over. Come on, get moving."

So everyone got out of the pool and hurriedly dried off as they poured into the house and then down into the dark basement. And it wasn't a big basement either. No video games, no carpeting no nothing, just piles of dirty laundry and unpacked boxes. As the kids packed into the basement, Kellen was more embarrassed than ever.

Kellen's mom brought down pillows and blankets to make the cement floor more comfortable, and also a big box of candles, flashlights and camping lanterns. And so they sat. Nobody was happy.

"Hey, what's this?" one of the boys asked. "Yeah, this is cool!"

Everyone looked over and saw that the boys had found a huge old-fashioned steamer trunk. It was a beautiful old thing, not even dusty like everything else down there. It was so big that probably four kids could fit inside in a game of hide and seek.

"It's nothing, you should leave it alone, Kellen blurted out. But it was too late. The boys opened the trunk and gasped. The box was full of all kinds of amazing things – tons of clothes like people used to wear in the olden days, small boxes of necklaces and scarves and even gowns! Bowler hats and derbies and collars and cuffs made of cardboard. There were even stacks of old letters and postcards from over a hundred years ago tied up with faded pink ribbons. And lots and lots of photos, the old fashioned kind where nobody smiles and everything looks brown. It was a gold mine!

Before Kellen could do anything to stop them, everybody was laughing and running around and putting on all kinds of ridiculous outfits! It was mayhem. They had found Kellen's secret world. One of the girls opened up some notebooks she found in the trunk and exclaimed, "Hey, these aren't old fashioned at all! These are new – I have exactly the same glitter pen! What are these...stories?"

Kellen didn't even know what she was doing. She just stepped up and grabbed the notebooks and said – "These are mine. And this is an old trunk from my great grandma's

attic. These are my private notebooks and they are full of stories I make up about the people who live in the trunk – well, they don't really live in the trunk, but I imagine all the people in the photographs who wear all these clothes and I make up stories about them – and if you think that is stupid then you are stupid. I never wanted to have this party in the first place!”

There was silence for a minute and then several people all said at once – “tell us the stories! That is so cool!” And before anyone knew what happened, Kellen was not only telling stories, but assigning parts and soon all the kids were wearing clothes and carrying fancy walking sticks and acting like the people from the trunk. The candles were lit and Kellen's mom brought down lemonade to drink out of tea cups and little sandwiches on trays and Kellen's party very quickly turned into the best party anyone could remember.

Even after the tornado warning passed all the kids stayed down in the basement in their own imaginary world, and they went home only reluctantly when their parents came to pick them up. Watching them leave, Kellen knew everything would be just fine.

It is hard being new isn't it – it's hard being a stranger. But when you can just open up and be yourself things will work out just fine. And you never can tell if the new kid at school or here at church might be someone like Kellen, a good friend just waiting to happen, with a world full of cool stuff to share. With friends, some imagination and an old steamer trunk – anything is possible!