

Two-Minute Drill by Mike Lupica

Chapter One

There were a lot of bad parts that came with being the new kid.

Scott Parry was already used to eating by himself at lunch, having nobody to talk to yet at recess.

And after just four days in the sixth grade at Bloomfield South, he pretty much expected to be sitting by himself on the short bus ride home.

He had always been shy, even in his old school, in his old town. And in the school and town before that. He just hadn't realized that his new school was going to be this shy back.

It wasn't that Scott wasn't trying to fit in.

When they broke off into discussion groups, he tried to get with a new group of kids every time, hoping that at least one of them might want to talk to him when they were finished. And he knew better than to raise his hand every single time he knew the answer in class. But that was hard for him, because he basically knew the answer to any question his teachers asked.

It had been the same way for him at all his schools.

Sometimes he wished he weren't so smart, because it seemed to make the other kids mad. What he really wanted was to be a little less good in class and a lot more good at sports, football especially. But that's not the way things had worked out for him.

He knew teachers always liked the smart kids better, despite how they tried to act like they were treating every student the same. But he didn't want the teachers to like him. He wanted the other kids to like him. Girls or boys. So he tried not to act like he was showing off, even though his hand still shot up more than anybody else's in sixth grade.

It's true that Scott felt alone most of the time, like he was hiding in plain sight, but he knew he could handle being the new kid one more time. What he couldn't handle was what happened to him every single day while he waited for the bus home.

Because Jimmy Dolan, one of the biggest kids in his class and easily the meanest, was always waiting, too. Which meant that Jimmy had plenty of time to rag on Scott every day.

Scott wanted kids at Bloomfield South to talk to him.

Just not this kid.

The only kid in the whole school that Scott didn't want talking to him or hanging with him wouldn't leave him alone.

"Hey," Jimmy Dolan said now, "here comes the brain."

Just by watching the pickup touch football games at recess—nobody had picked Scott yet, not one time—he knew Jimmy Dolan was a good football player. At recess that day, Scott had overheard a couple of the teachers talking about how Jimmy's dad was going to be the coach of the sixth-grade town team this season. Mr. Burden, their science teacher, had said, "Maybe his father can control him." Just then one of the smaller sixth-graders had caught a pass and even though it was supposed to be two-hand touch, Jimmy had managed to send the kid flying.

"I wouldn't count on that," Mrs. Graham, their math teacher, had said.

Waiting for the bus now, Scott tried to ignore Jimmy, tried to act as if he were searching for something really important inside his backpack.

But he knew he was wasting his time, that you had about as much chance of ignoring Jimmy Dolan as you did a stomachache.

"What's the matter, brain? You don't want to talk to me today?"

Scott had his backpack on the ground and was kneeling over it. But Jimmy was right over him, blocking out the sun like a giant black cloud.

Scott leaned to his right a little, trying to see past Jimmy's legs, hoping the buses were starting to board.

They weren't.

"What're you looking for in there?" Jimmy said. "Maybe I can help you."

"No," Scott said. "I'm fine."

Too late.

Jimmy reached down and scooped up Scott's backpack like he was trying to beat him to a dollar he'd seen on the ground. And before Scott could do anything to stop him, Jimmy had dumped everything out on the ground.

Scott didn't care about any of the school stuff in there, his pens and notebooks and textbooks, so much stuff that his mother always asked if he was carrying bricks.

None of that mattered.

The picture mattered.

The picture of Scott's dog, Casey. Jimmy Dolan spotted it right away.

Scott tried to reach down and grab it, but once again Jimmy was too quick for him.

"Who's this?" Jimmy said. "Your girlfriend?"

"Give it back," Scott said, quieter than he wanted to.

"You carry a picture of your dog with you, brain?" Jimmy said, loud enough for every kid still waiting for a bus to hear. "That's like something the little nerd in that Lassie movie would do, right?"

Scott felt like this was some kind of assembly now, and he and Jimmy were up on stage in front of the whole school. If the other kids at Bloomfield South didn't know the new kid before this, they sure would now.

If I'm such a brain, Scott thought, how come I can't think of a way to get myself out of this?

As a last resort, he actually tried being nice, as hard as that was.

"Can I please have my picture back?" he said.

Jimmy smiled and shook his head no, waving the picture back and forth in front of Scott's face.

Scott lunged for it, trying to catch Jimmy by surprise.

Only he wasn't big enough. Or quick enough.

As he landed, Jimmy stuck out a leg and tripped him, giving him a little shove on the way down for good measure.

Scott went down hard, landing on knees and elbows.

All he could hear now was laughter.

Until he heard this: "Cut it out, Dolan."

Not a teacher's voice. Not a voice belonging to any grown-up. A kid, definitely.

Scott picked himself up and saw that it was Chris Conlan.

You only had to be at Bloomfield South for one day to know that even though Jimmy Dolan was one of the bigger football players in the sixth grade, Chris Conlan was the best.

Chris Conlan wasn't just the quarterback, he was the boy all the other boys in their class wanted to be.

"What's the problem, Chris? I was just playing—"

"Give him back his picture."

Scott could see by the look on Jimmy's face how much he didn't want to back down. "Why're you standing up for him?" Jimmy said, sounding whiney all of a sudden. "You don't even know this guy."

"I know you, though," Chris said. "And I know you're acting like a tool. Now, for the last time, give him back his picture."

And, to Scott's amazement, Jimmy Dolan did just that.