

You told. You're Not Alone.

Matthew Clarke had enjoyed school until recently. Every day now Matthew sat on the edge of his seat, watching the clock above the whiteboard tick painfully slowly. Only three minutes to the bell. Three minutes until break time when the class would play outside. Three minutes until the part of the day he dreaded the most break time. There were other parts of the day that were difficult too like the journey to and from school on the school bus.

To most kids, the school yard was a place to run around, laugh, and have fun. To Matthew, that is how it used to be but now everything was different. It felt more like a stormy ocean, and he didn't know how to swim.

It hadn't always been this way. He used to hang out with a group of friends James, Stephen and Ava, who liked the same stuff he did—video games, drawing, and talking about cool comic book heroes. Matthew loved to draw, especially comic book heroes. But things had changed. Ever since Anne had started making fun of him in front of everyone.

Anne was popular. She was good at soccer, always knew the lyrics to the latest songs, had the latest iPhone and had a laugh that made other kids join in, even if they didn't know what was funny. But when Anne laughed at Matthew, it wasn't funny. It was painful. "There's the baby artist!" she'd sneer. "Still drawing your little cartoons, Mattie? Maybe you should draw yourself some friends!"

Some kids would giggle. Others looked away, pretending they hadn't heard. Matthew knew that they had heard. Even James and Stephen, who used to

come over to Matthew's house after school and play Minecraft with Matthew, didn't say anything anymore. Sometimes they laughed too. That hurt the most.

Matthew's stomach twisted just thinking about break time. He'd tried hiding in the toilets, but the teacher would notice that he had not gone out to the yard. As soon as he would arrive in the yard Anne always seemed to find him. The schoolyard became like a maze. If Matthew went near the benches, he'd hear sniggers and comments and feel eyes follow him. If he walked near the soccer pitch, Anne would call out mean comments loud enough for the entire yard to hear. Other children near him burst into laughter, and he had to walk away, pretending it didn't matter. He sat alone watching his classmates run and shout and play, like he was invisible. Sometimes he stood up and paced slowly, pretending he was looking for someone. Pretending he had a plan. Anything to avoid just sitting there, looking like he had no one. When he smiled or waved at people, they rarely waved back. And if they did, it was awkward, quick, like they weren't supposed to be seen talking to him. On some days, Anne took it even further. "Anyone wanna play with Mattie the Moaner today?" she'd say with a dramatic sigh. "No? Oh well, guess it's solo player mode again!" More laughter. Matthew clenched his fists and looked down at his shoes, wishing the yard would just crack open and swallow him whole.

Even his friends—James, Stephen and Ava stood nearby and said nothing. Sometimes they laughed along. Once, Matthew caught James looking uncomfortable, but he didn't say a word. That silence was worse than any joke Anne made.

The journey on the school bus was the worst part of the day. At least at break time in the yard, he could try to disappear into the crowd. But on the bus, there was nowhere to go. At first, Matthew had tried sitting with his usual friends James, Stephen and Ava. But after Anne started shouting comments about him on the bus, those seats started to feel... off-limits. The others would slide toward the window, leaving no room for him to sit. Or they'd toss their bags on the empty spots and say, "Sorry, it's taken." He knew it wasn't true. He knew they just didn't want to sit with him anymore. So, he started sitting near the front of the bus. Alone.

Anne always sat in the back with her crowd. But she still managed to make her voice heard over the hum of the engine. "Look who's sitting up the front of the bus with the babies again!" she'd call out. "Hey Mattie, need your crayons up there?" Laughter would ripple down the aisle like a wave. Matthew would sit perfectly still, gripping the straps of his school bag, his ears burning. No one sat with him. No one even looked his way—except when they were laughing. And when the bus stopped, he'd wait for everyone else to get off first, just to avoid the stares.

At home, he'd sit in his room, clutching his sketchpad drawing or playing video games like it was a shield. It was the only place he felt like himself—when he was sketching or designing a video game character he could breathe and forget about Anne.

As the comments and exclusion continued some days even drawing or playing video games couldn't make him feel better. When Matthew got off the school bus his ears would still be ringing from laughter that wasn't kind and that he was excluded from.

He remembered what the teacher had said during the Stay Safe programme. “Bullying is never okay,” she had told the class. “You must tell someone. If the first person doesn’t help, tell again. And again. And again.” But he hadn’t told. Not really.

His parents worked long hours and were tired each evening. Matthew didn’t want to make things worse. They’d be disappointed. They’d wonder why he couldn’t handle it himself.

That Friday, the worst happened. Anne grabbed his sketchbook while he was putting away his lunchbox. She held it up and flipped through the pages. “Oh look! It’s the magical loser with the pencil wand!” she laughed. “Give it back!” Matthew shouted, louder than he meant to. But Anne only smirked and tossed it to another kid, who passed it on again. By the time he got it back, his sketch pad was torn and it seemed like everyone was laughing at him.

That night, Matthew lay in bed with his face buried in the pillow. The tears came in silent waves. He didn’t even hear the door creak open. “Matt?” It was Colm, his older brother, standing awkwardly in the doorway.

“You okay?” Matthew didn’t answer. Colm stepped inside and sat on the edge of the bed. “You’ve been acting weird lately. Is something going on?”

Something about hearing his brother’s voice cracked something inside Matthew. The words tumbled out between sobs—the names, the laughter, the sketchbook, how alone he felt on the school yard, on the bus and in the classroom. Colm rubbed the back of his neck, looking uncomfortable.

“You just gotta be brave, Matty. Stand up to them. Tell them to stop.”

Matthew stared at him. "You don't get it. It's not that easy." Colm sighed. "I guess I don't. But... you shouldn't have to deal with this alone. Would it be a good idea if I told Mum and Dad for you?". Matthew said "No please don't I don't want to talk to them about it". Colm was unsure what to do but he knew that he should tell his Mum and Dad but maybe he would wait a day or two.

The next morning, Matthew pretended to have a stomach ache. Then a headache. Then both. His mum gave him a concerned look but she said he could stay home and rest. He spent the day in bed, doodling half-heartedly and feeling like he was trapped in a loop he couldn't escape. That night, the tears came again. His parents came in to check on him. "Matt," his mum said gently, "are you okay? Is something going on at school?" Matthew hesitated. He wanted to lie again. To say it was just schoolwork. And he did. "I'm just stressed about homework," he muttered. His dad knelt beside the bed. "We can help. We'll talk to your teacher if it's too much or if the work is causing you difficulty." And that was it. That was the moment. Something inside him cracked wide open. "It's not the work," he whispered. "It's the people. Anne keeps picking on me, and my friends don't help, and everyone laughs, and I hate going to school..." His voice shook. His chest hurt. But he'd said it. He had told. His mum pulled him into a hug, warm and safe. "Matthew. Thank you for telling us. We're so sorry you've been carrying this alone." His dad looked serious. "We're going to help you. This is not okay, and you're not alone anymore."

The next day, Matthew's mum made an appointment to talk to his teacher, Ms. Daly. She listened carefully, nodding and taking notes. "I'm really sorry to

hear this has been happening,” Ms. Daly said. “We’ll deal with it right away. No child should ever feel unsafe in school. I will speak with the children involved. I will also talk to the whole class about behaviours that are not acceptable in our school/classroom”. After Matthew’s parents left Ms Daly spoke with the children individually and as a group. The children told the truth about what was happening. Ms Daly was sad and disappointed that this behaviour was taking place and she said she would be also informing the Principal about what was happening. Ms Daly contacted Anne’s parents too.

That night, Matthew didn’t sleep well. The thought of going back made his stomach churn. But he remembered what Ms. Daly had said. What his parents had promised. Maybe, just maybe, things could change. He took deep breaths on the bus ride the next morning. He clenched his fists to stop them from shaking. He kept reminding himself: You told. You’re not alone.

Matthew sat alone on the bus that morning. When the bell rang for yard time, Matthew almost didn’t go outside. But he made himself. One step at a time. He expected the usual whispers. The laughter. The cold shoulders. But instead, something surprising happened. “Hey Matt,” said a boy from his class—Jason, who used to play soccer with Anne. “Wanna join our game?” Matthew blinked. “Um... okay.” He walked over hesitantly. They were playing tag. Stephen and James waved and smiled at him. No one laughed when he joined. No one shoved him. It wasn’t perfect, but it was better. It was... normal.

Back in class, he was doodling quietly when James leaned over and whispered, “Matt... I’m really sorry. I should’ve stood up for you. I just didn’t want Anne to turn on me. But that’s not an excuse.” Matthew stared at him. Then he nodded, just once.

Later, Colm knocked on his bedroom door. This time, he came in without waiting. “I talked to Mum,” Colm said, rubbing his arm awkwardly. “I didn’t really get it before. But now I do. I’m sorry I wasn’t more helpful.” Matthew gave a small smile. “It’s okay.” Colm sat down beside him. “I mean it, Matty. I’ve got your back now.”

That weekend, Matthew picked up his sketchbook. He drew a new picture—a superhero with a glowing pencil and a shield made of truth. In class on Monday, Matthew did something even braver than talking to Anne. At lunch, he turned to his old group of friends—James, Stephen, and Ava. “I felt really let down,” he said quietly. “I thought you were my friends. But you laughed with Anne. You didn’t stand up for me.” There was a pause. Then Stephen nodded. “You’re right. We messed up. I’m so sorry.” “We were scared,” James added. “But that doesn’t make it right.” Stephen looked ashamed. “Thanks for telling us. We’ll do better.”

And they did.

Anne did say sorry but Matthew could not yet fully trust or believe that she would be kind and change her behaviour only time would tell. But Anne was quieter and didn’t say much at all after Ms. Daly had spoken to her and her parents. She stopped teasing. Stopped laughing. Stopped grabbing things that weren’t hers.

Matthew still felt nervous sometimes. But he didn't hide anymore. And he knew now that when something felt wrong, the bravest thing he could do wasn't staying quiet. It was telling. Telling again, and again if he had to. And drawing heroes—especially the kind who spoke up, even when their voice trembled.