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Opening extract from

# The Uniform

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The Uniform
by
Tommy Donbavand

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Chapter 1
**Stand Up and Be Counted**

“Mr Miller ...”
No, don’t do this. Please ...
“... would you stand up for me?”
Please, no!
My chair scraped noisily across the floor as I got to my feet. Everyone in class turned to look at me – the kids I'd spoken to since coming to this school, the kids who’d ignored me, and the bully who’d already begun to pick on me. Neil, the only real friend I’d made, screwed up his face at what we both knew was about to happen. He did that a lot when he was worried.
“How long have you been at Elm Road School, now?” The teacher’s voice echoed around the walls of the classroom.
“Three weeks, sir,” I answered, trying to keep my voice calm.
“And, in that time, have you noticed anything different about yourself, compared to your fellow pupils?”
I heard a noise. A sort of snigger and snort all rolled into one. I didn’t need to look round to see who’d made it – there was only one person who made a sound like that. Steven Chadwick, the bully who'd decided it was fun to make me his new target.
“I don’t know what you mean, sir.” My voice definitely cracked that time.
“Let me make it clear, Mr Miller ...” said the teacher. Mr Smith took me for History, and he always called people by their last names as though he was meeting them for the first time. I don’t think I'd ever heard him call me Matthew.
“If you look around the class, you’ll see that everyone is dressed the same. They are all wearing black trousers, white shirts, grey jumpers and yellow and blue striped ties.

In other words, Mr Miller, everyone is wearing correct school uniform. Everyone, except you, that is."

I felt my cheeks begin to burn. I'd been dreading this moment for ages and now it was happening, it was worse than I'd imagined.

"You, Mr Miller, are wearing jeans and a T-shirt. Is it possible that the school rules do not apply to you?"

"No, sir," I squeaked. Steven Chadwick laughed out loud.

Mr Smith wasn't going to let this go. "Then can you tell me why, after three weeks at Elm Road School, you are still not wearing the correct uniform?"

I heard Neil squirming in his seat. I wanted to look down at him and see a friendly face – even if it was screwed up – but I couldn't move. It was as though my whole body had frozen with embarrassment.

"My mum.." I said, fighting the burning sensation in my eyes. I wasn't going to cry. No way. Certainly not in front of Steven Chadwick. "My mum can't afford to buy me a school uniform yet, sir."

About half the class giggled. *Please let that be the end of it.*

"Then what about your father, Mr Miller?" said the teacher. "Can't he provide one for you?"

Why was he doing this to me? It was like torture.

"We don't know where my dad is, sir," I admitted. I swallowed hard. He shouldn't have brought my useless Dad into it.

This time everyone giggled.

"Don't know where he is?"

"He ran off with the woman from two doors down to us, sir," I said through gritted teeth. I might as well tell him everything now. "We couldn't afford to stay in our house, so we moved to a tiny flat near here, sir. My mum has two jobs and sleeps on the couch so I can have the only bedroom, sir."

*Now are you satisfied?* I fixed Mr Smith with a hard stare as the class began to discuss what had become my life in hushed whispers.

"That will be all, Matthew," said Mr Smith. He shuffled some papers on his desk as I sat down, unable to look straight at me.

Someone was looking straight at me, however. Steven Chadwick. He was grinning like all his birthdays had come at once.