

Wednesday: 8:50 a.m.

Lionel closed his eyes. His head began to pound, right at the base, and his chest ached, like someone was pressing on it, but slowly. He didn't dare let them notice, not for a second. If they saw his fear, sensed weakness, they'd pounce.

“Yo, Nick, I'm so open it hurts,” Bryan yelled.

Nick hurled the football, a tight spiral. Bryan jumped. The ball bounced off his hands.

“Great catch, loser. Try catching it with your butt next time,” Nick said.

“Try not throwing it over my head, moron,” Bryan said.

He reached for the ball.

“I'll show you how it's done,” Mohamed said, cutting across the school yard.

Bryan threw it. The ball wobbled, but Mohamed changed directions and scooped it up before it hit the asphalt.

Lionel glanced at the doors, anxious for the morning bell to ring. If he left school grounds, he might be late again. Principal Ryder was all over him lately. She'd even threatened to call his mom if he was late one more time. He pressed his back against the chain-link fence. At least at recess or lunch he could slip into a washroom stall, or the library, or head to the park.

Two boys, one blond with a round, soft face and freckles, and the other, short with brown hair and a backpack too big for his little frame, walked towards him. His heart began pounding. He

didn't need those two attracting attention to him. Lionel slouched down and pretended to tie his shoelaces.

"Hi, Lionel," the blond boy said. "How's it going?"

Lionel wanted to literally kill him. Nick would notice three loser kids talking.

"I'm good," Lionel muttered.

Stephane was so clueless. No wonder he was Nick's favorite target.

"Do you know if Whellan is gonna make us read our stories tomorrow?" Jaime asked.

"No idea," Lionel said.

Whellan was their English teacher. He'd made them write a short story, and now he was forcing them to read it out loud — in front of everyone.

He glanced over. Nick had the ball and Bryan was running for a pass. The bell had to ring soon. He might get lucky.

"I'm nervous about reading my story," Jaime said. "I wish we didn't have to."

The ball nicked Bryan's fingertips and bounced to the fence next to Jaime.

"Bro, toss me the ball," Bryan said.

Jaime underhanded it to him.

"Another awesome grab from Bryan Butterfingers Klutz-Face," Nick taunted.

He and Mohamed had come over.

"Toss it to me," Nick said.

Bryan slipped it over.

Nick whipped the ball into Jaime's chest in one motion. It bounced back to him.

"Sorry, weren't you ready?" Nick laughed.

Jaime gasped, and then laughed uneasily, rubbing his chest. Stephane gripped his backpack straps.

“You wanna toss the ball around with us?” Nick said. He stepped closer until he was practically nose-to-nose with Stephane.

“Hey, Nick ... um ... not really. I ... School’s about to start,” Stephane managed.

Lionel slowed his breathing and looked down at the ground, pressing his back against the fence. He didn’t dare move.

“Maybe another time?” Nick said.

Stephane nodded. “Sure. Maybe.”

The three boys roared.

“Absolutely, bro. We gotta get out on the field and play some ball,” Nick said.

He slapped Stephane on the shoulder. Stephane winced.

Nick looked over at Lionel. A big smile crossed his face.

“What about you? You gonna play ball with us?”

Lionel didn’t react. He was looking into his backpack, as if he’d lost something inside.

“Yo, retard. Do you ever know what’s going on?” Nick taunted.

Lionel pretended he still wasn’t listening.

“Ha!” Nick screamed, karate-chopping his hand in front of Lionel’s face.

Lionel slowly lifted his head. They’d throw some shade — and then go away.

“The kid is retarded. Told ya,” Nick said.

He shoved Lionel against the fence.

“You a freakin’ retard?” Nick yelled in his face.

Lionel barely moved a muscle. Inside, his head was ready to explode and he couldn’t breathe.

Nick backed away and nodded at two girls talking by the doors. “C’mon guys. The ladies need some of our awesomeness ... at least mine, anyway.”

He headed over, Bryan and Mohamed right behind.

“Those guys,” Jaime muttered, rubbing his chest again.

“They just like showing off,” Stephane said. “They’re not serious.”

“Nick is,” Jaime said. “Yesterday I saw him slam a kid’s head against a locker.”

“Why?” Stephane said.

Jaime shrugged. “Because Nick’s an idiot.”

Lionel moved away from them. They were the idiots for drawing attention to themselves. He’d had it under control, and then they had to talk to him. Nick scared him to death. That voice. He had a way of yelling that brought Lionel back to when he was a little boy, and his dad would yell so loud Lionel would pee in his pants. Once, his dad noticed and called him “Pee-Pee Pants” for a few days.

Lionel broke out in a cold sweat over his entire body, and for a horrible second, he thought he’d pee himself right then.

Nick and his friends were laughing with Kiana and Rashmi. Nick and Mohamed played on the senior basketball team, and Bryan was on the track team with Kiana, so Lionel sort of got why the girls hung with them — sort of. They were jerks, but the girls didn’t seem to care. These were popular boys, athletes, sure of themselves, funny, tough. They did what they wanted.

Lionel slouched down and made himself small.

Kiana was laughing. Nick rubbed her back. Lionel figured they were boyfriend and girlfriend. Nick was always talking to her in English and math.

The bell sounded.

Lionel stood up. He hated this place, but he was terrified of high school next year — things might be worse then. He could legally quit school when he turned sixteen, but that was three more brutal years.

Lionel steeled his nerve and pushed off from the fence. Nick and the girls were inside already, but there were others to watch

out for. Lionel walked slowly, evenly, but not so slowly that anyone would notice. He kept his eyes down and his shoulders soft, but not slouching, his breath shallow and weak.

No one looked at him. He bet no one even knew he was there.

Stephane and Jaime were talking to each other.

“You should tell Principal Ryder. He can’t throw footballs at people,” Stephane said.

“Yeah, right,” Jaime said. “Then he’ll really kill me.”

They pushed past Lionel and went inside. Lionel let people pass him, until he was almost the last to go in. He always made sure he wasn’t too early to class. Best to get there when it was full and kids were talking. Then they’d ignore you as you took your seat.

His back was sweaty. Nick had once noticed a sweat stain on his shirt and called him “The Big Stink,” which is why he always had some emergency deodorant in his backpack. He had math first period with Nick, and he was only a row over from him. After what just happened, he didn’t want to take any chances. He might miss announcements, but he could probably get by without a late slip.

Lionel turned at the bottom of the stairs and went into the washroom. This was the least-used one in the school, and he’d spent his share of recesses here. He took the far stall. For a moment he was tempted to skip math altogether and stay, but Kiana was in his class too. She was worth the risk.

Once in a while, Kiana even said hi.

He felt incredibly tired all of a sudden. The entire day seemed so long, and it hadn’t even started. He hoped it wouldn’t rain — he wanted to eat lunch at the park, away from everyone.

When Lionel finally left the stall, he saw himself in the mirror over the sink.

He turned away in disgust — a big, fat nobody.