

# You Matter

Dennis shoved me to the ground. "Look at this pathetic piece of trash," he said. His whole gang laughed at me as I struggled to get up. "No wonder he can't get up, he's fatter than a pig," Dennis said. Anger blazed through my skin. I charged at him but right when I was about to tackle him he jumped to the left which caused me to dive through the air and land hard on the pavement. Dennis' gang roared with laughter. Dennis was about to say something else when a patrol car came around the bend. Dennis' gang ran away before the police officer could see anything. I slowly got up. Both my knees and elbows were badly bruised and my nose hurt really badly. I slowly trudged back to my house. I got my house key out of my backpack and unlocked the door. "Yo Ben, get me a drink from the fridge," my brother yelled from his room. Not a second after I had set one foot into the house and my brother was already on my nerves. "Get it yourself, lazy!" I yelled back. "What did you just say to me scumbag!" he snarled as he came out of his room. I knew I wasn't going to win a fight with Elijah no matter how hard I tried. "I'll get it," I surrendered. I went to the fridge and got a Sprite from it. I walked up the stairs and tossed the can to him. "Where's dad?" I asked. "He went to the grocery store. Said he wasn't gonna come back until dinner time," Elijah said. I breathed a sigh of relief. My brother might be a jerk but my father was even worse, especially when he was drunk. I flung my backpack on my bed and took out this week's literacy homework. "Write a summary for the book *Romeo and Juliet*." I sighed. Tonight was going to be a long night.

"Ok everyone, you had one whole week to do this homework assignment, which is far more than enough time," Mr. Sumner said. Mr. Sumner was my 10th grade Language arts teacher. I searched furiously through my backpack trying to find my report. Then I remembered I had left it on my desk by my bed. I silently cursed. Of all the days I could forget to bring my homework I had to forget to bring it today. "Mr. Adams, where is your homework?" Mr. Sumner asked. "Ummmmmm, I think I forgot it at home," I said sheepishly. "This is the third time this month you have forgotten your homework," Mr. Sumner said. "I'm sorry sir," I replied. "If you hand in one more homework assignment late I'm going to have to call your parents to find out what's

happening,” he threatened. “I understand,” I said, embarrassed. Mr. Sumner shook his head and walked back to the front of the room. Mr. Sumner was talking about poetry when a paper ball hit me in the side of my neck. I picked it up and read it. It read, “Pig brain.” I didn’t have to look around the class to find out who it was. I glared at Dennis. He grinned back at me. Throughout the class he kept throwing paper balls at me and it was getting on my nerves. “Mr. Adams?” Mr. Sumner asked. I snapped to attention. “Yes?” I responded. “Why are there so many crumpled pieces of paper beside your desk?” I looked down and cursed to myself. I was so distracted at being mad at Dennis that I didn’t realize the growing pile of crumpled up paper. “Those are just leftover worksheets from last semester that I wa-” before I could say anything further, Mr. Sumner picked up one of the pieces and read it. His expression changed from curiosity to anger. “Mr. Adams, come see me after class,” Mr. Sumner said. I couldn’t believe what I was hearing. How was I the one getting in trouble! I wanted to argue back but I knew it would be useless.

“Sir, you wanted to see me after class,” I said. Mr. Sumner looked up at me and smiled. “I believe you have a problem with bullies.” My head raced. If I told Mr. Sumner and Dennis<sup>3</sup> found out about it I would be dead, but I didn’t want to be caught lying to a teacher. I stayed silent which was probably the best option. “Don’t worry, I won’t go around telling everybody,” he said. I still kept silent. Mr. Sumner sighed. “Well if you’re not going to tell me anything, at least hear me out. You have to stick up for yourself. You can’t go around letting people push you around like a ragdoll. I’m telling you this because you matter. You could do great things in your future. You Matter.”

I was confused. What Mr. Sumner had said didn’t make any sense. I definitely wasn’t going to do anything great in my future. I was just an unimportant boy who was probably going to work at some insignificant job when I grew up, yet what Mr. Sumner said kept me awake throughout the whole night. I woke up to my alarm ringing in my ear. I stretched out my arms and turned it off. I quickly got ready for school and went downstairs. “Hurry up Ben! Don’t make me late for work!” My Dad yelled. I quickly ate my pancakes and got on my winter coat. I got in my dad’s car and we drove off. He

usually just drove me to the bus stop before driving to work, but today he went past my bus stop and towards my school. "Why are you driving me to school?" I asked. "You better be grateful boy, your teacher called me up last night and told me about the situation. If I wasn't so nice I would let those boys bully you. You need some toughening up," my dad said. I almost burst out laughing. You needed to be blind to see my father as nice.

I was on the way home when Dennis and his friends got me. "Looks like you told on us," Dennis sneered. A million thoughts rushed through my mind. How had Dennis figured out? Had my dad tipped them off? Had Mr. Sumner accidentally told someone he shouldn't have? All I knew was that I was in big trouble. Dennis took hold of me and dragged me into an alleyway where nobody could save me. I struggled against his hold but he was too strong. Then I remembered Mr. Sumner's words. I had let Dennis push me around too much. I used all my remaining energy to push Dennis away. He stumbled and fell to the ground. This was my only chance. I ran as fast as I could down the alleyway and in their shock, Dennis's friends were slow to react. I looked over my shoulder and my heart sank. Despite having the lead, Dennis's friends were catching up. I pumped my legs as hard as I could but they were too fast for me. Dennis had recovered from his fall and was barreling towards me. I got out in the open street gasping for breath. Dennis's group surrounded me and I knew I was done for. Right before Dennis landed his first hit, I curled up into a ball trying to protect myself. I didn't know if I was going crazy but I heard the sound of a siren. Before I knew it, Dennis's gang was being brought into police cars and Mr. Sumner was by my side. "Are you okay?" Mr. Sumner asked. "I'm fine," I lied. "What's going to happen to Dennis?" A dark look flickered across Mr. Sumner's face. "Dennis has a record stretching all the way back to middle school," Mr. Sumner said. "People have been reporting Dennis for bullying for a long time, but Dennis and his gang were careful to make sure there were no witnesses to prove that they were hurting other people, so the court couldn't rightfully give him a severe punishment. Now, since the police have clear evidence of Dennis and his friends committing physical abuse, they might fine him or send him to juvie," Mr. Sumner said. Mr. Sumner walked away to go talk to the authorities and left me alone. I

realized I had to thank Mr. Sumner. Without him I probably would have never tried to stand up to Dennis, but more importantly I would have never realized that I Mattered.

## 25 Years Later

“Good Morning America, My name is Angela Di Marco and today we have an exclusive interview with one of the most successful businessmen in the world. We have Benjamin Adams joining us via Zoom. So Mr. Adams, how did you find success in your life?” Angla asked. “For all you boys and girls out there I am repeating the exact words my 6th grade teacher told me. These words were a great inspiration to me. ‘You have to stick up for yourself. You can’t go around letting people push you around like a ragdoll. I’m telling you this because you matter. You could do great things in your future. You Matter.’”