

This is a short story that only touches on certain aspects, leaving room for the reader's imagination.

No sequel is planned, and it is not related to any other stories.

As always, the story describes things that are unacceptable and illegal. It is purely fictional and does **not** constitute a recommendation for action. Nor does it reflect the author's opinion.

# The Uniform

As so often happens, I slept in way too long again, even though today is the big day. I'm finally turning 12, and if I'm lucky, I'll get my cell phone today. Mom and Dad have always told me I can't have one until I'm 12, even though almost everyone at my school has one much earlier. I'm the oldest in my class—well, because I had to repeat the last grade. Everyone else there already has a cell phone, just not me. So it's really important to me. Unfortunately, though, there are only two days left until Christmas, which always makes my birthday seem a little less special than other kids' birthdays.

Anyway, the upside this morning is that school's out for the holidays and I can sleep in without any hassle. But now I'm already excited and jump out of bed in my pajamas to check the kitchen and see if there's anything to eat yet. My pajamas are a green Minecraft fleece onesie that I love wearing in the winter because it's so cozy and comfy. It's actually the second one I've had, and at my age it's really kind of silly, but only my family sees me in it. The first one got too small for me and wasn't comfortable at all by the end—after the summer, it had gotten tight around my upper body and was starting to dig uncomfortably into my butt crack. I had been so looking forward to wearing it again, and I even slept in it one night, but with every movement it would pinch somewhere, and I kept waking up. Luckily, I didn't have to wait until my birthday to get a new one. After begging my parents for a few days, I got a new one back in October that fits nice and loose and roomy again, just the way I like it.

So I'm heading to the kitchen now and already see Mom and Dad preparing breakfast.

"Oh, look who's here! Has our birthday boy slept in yet? Happy birthday, Mike."

With these words, my mom greets me and immediately plants a wet kiss on my cheek. I don't really like that—I'm 12 years old now, after all. But if it makes her happy, I can put up with it today.

"Thanks, Mom," I say, wiping my face dry with my sleeve.

"Come here, big guy, and let me give you a hug. Happy birthday from me, too,"

says my dad, lifting me up for a hug, even though I'm only 20 cm shorter than he is. The time when my dad used to carry me in his arms was nice, but I don't really need that anymore. Still, I think it's great of Dad.

I thank them for the birthday wishes and then look at the table to see what's for breakfast. When I see that Mom has actually made crêpes with Nutella, I have to hug her again right away, because I really didn't expect that after everything that's happened lately.

I have to admit that I really haven't been behaving very well. It all started, of course, with having to repeat the grade over the summer. But that didn't make things much better at school. It's still just as boring and no fun, even if you're hearing some things for the second time.

Then I got into a fight with Tobias from my old class, and well, let's just say things got physical.

And Mom and Dad had to come to the school for a meeting. After that, I was grounded for two weeks. And now, right before the Christmas break, I got a letter from school. I don't know exactly what it was about, but Mom and Dad have been unusually quiet ever since—except for this morning. Well, I guess it's about the D in English and the C in math that I'll probably get on my report card in January. It's a real bummer, but what can I do? I just don't get any of it, and it's not fun either.

Mom already has the first steaming crêpes on my plate when I notice a big, colorful package on my chair. It's wrapped in colorful wrapping paper without any Christmas motifs, which is always important to me on my birthday since it's so close to Christmas. But it's very unusual for me to get presents at breakfast, because in our family, I usually don't get them until after lunch.

Still, I'm really excited and grab it right away. It feels soft, and it's way too big for a cell phone—I'm guessing it's something to wear. That's okay, even though I'd obviously be happier with the cell phone. But I try not to let on.

"Mom, am I getting a present already? Can I open it right away? ... Please?"

I ask curiously; maybe it's another pair of Minecraft pajamas to change into.

"Mike, please let me just finish baking breakfast, then we can open it together. Okay, sweetie?"

"Yes, Mom, but you're here, so I can open it now," I say with a mischievous grin, barely able to wait. I pick up the package. It's soft and clearly made of fabric, but also much heavier than I'd expect for a fleece onesie.

Just a moment later, Dad stands behind me and puts his hands on my shoulders.

"Mike, have you been acting in such a way lately that you can afford not to listen to Mom?" came the very serious question from my father, who's also wearing a very serious expression.

I understand that my behavior hasn't been great lately, but today is my birthday and until just a moment ago, everyone was in a good mood. I hope it's not because of the gift that Dad is suddenly so serious. So I put it back on my chair.

"No, Dad, I can wait. It doesn't seem to be my phone in there," I say, trying to lighten the mood a bit. But Dad just rolls his eyes, sits down in his chair, and flips through the latest advertising flyers. I then stand next to Mom and watch as she flips the last crêpes in the pan.

Finally, Mom is done, and my mouth is already watering at the delicious sight on the kitchen table. I'm not so sure anymore if I really want to open the present first or if I'd rather have breakfast first, so I offer: "Mom, I can wait a little longer with the present. We usually don't get it until after lunch anyway. So we might as well have breakfast first."

"Well, Mike, there's a reason why you're getting this present first thing in the morning. There will indeed be more surprises for you today. So, now you can open your first present for your 12th birthday," says my mother, smiling at me beaming with joy again.

Of course, I'm excited about the gift too—I love gifts. So I pull my chair back from the table and tear open the colorful wrapping paper. Inside is a folded piece of clothing made of blue, relatively thick fabric. The fabric resembles denim, but when I touch it, I can feel that it seems thicker and also a bit stiffer. So I'm expecting a pair of warm pants for the winter. The blue is very dark and also much more uniform than I'm used to seeing on jeans. I think dark blue is okay—it's nice and understated and neutral—but what I don't like are the yellow-and-white reflective stripes that I can already see in some places. The garment is neatly folded, and I reach for the top layer to lift it up and unfold it.

A pair of overalls unfolds, and I'm holding the bib in my hand. As I do so, something heavy seems to fall downward, back onto the chair, causing a rather loud metallic clang. When I look down, I see the two straps of the overalls dangling down to the chair. At the ends of the straps are pieces of sheet metal about 10 cm long, but they're the same color as the pants. Next, I immediately notice the conspicuous reflective strips again; there are some just before the end of each leg, one strip goes all the way around the waist, and then there's another on the bib and the back panel, probably at the same height.

At first, I'm speechless and don't know what to make of it. I've never seen a 12-year-old who would wear something like this. Overalls alone are already so uncool that I wouldn't dare go out in public wearing them. But the reflective strips almost make it look like they're for a garbage collector—though they usually wear orange pants, which wouldn't make them any more fashionable, but then again, they're just garbage collectors.

I hold the pants up for a moment, then look silently at my mom, back at the overalls, and then back at my mom. She looks at me curiously, clearly expecting a reaction from me. So I lower my arm with the overalls and plop them back onto my chair in a heap.

"Ummm, yeah. ... Ummm, well ... thanks for the pants. ... But on what occasion am I supposed to wear THOSE?" is my first question, and then I suddenly remember that Mom said I was supposed to get the gift before breakfast.

"Am I supposed to wear this to dinner?" I ask, a little confused.

“Well, Mike, I can see that your enthusiasm for the gift is somewhat limited. I can also understand that the look of these pants isn’t entirely to your taste. But that’s not what this garment is about. We’d like you to put these pants on before breakfast so you can get used to them a bit. Because we understand that these pants are quite different from the ones you’ve been wearing in recent years,” my mother replies to my question. Unfortunately, she didn’t answer my actual question, and the idea that I have to “get used” to these pants makes me a bit suspicious. I can’t remember ever wearing overalls, but why should I have to “get used” to wearing something like that before or during breakfast? That sounds like it would be uncomfortable. Which, of course, I can definitely confirm based on how the overalls look, but I can’t exactly “get used” to that at breakfast. That would only become relevant if I had to go outside wearing them, and I absolutely have to avoid that. If anyone saw me in them on my way to school, I’d be completely humiliated in front of everyone. “But Mom, surely this thing isn’t meant for breakfast. Is there somewhere I have to wear it?” I ask, relatively cautiously.

“Mike, yes, you’re absolutely right, there is. But now breakfast is getting cold, and we’d like to talk to you about the purpose of the PANTS—it’s not a ‘thing,’ it’s pants, or, if you prefer, overalls—over breakfast,” my father says with surprising energy, clearly wanting to rule out any premature discussion of the matter.

“Yes, Mike, Dad’s right. Come on, let’s go to your room and try the pants on, and we’ll explain it to you over breakfast. Okay!” says my mother, placing her hand on my head. I look down at the floor in disappointment and turn around to go to my room. As I do, I grab the pile on my chair and drag the thing behind me.

“Mike, please, it’s not the end of the world, and you’re going to get the new pants dirty on the floor,” says my mother, taking the thing out of my hand to follow me.

Just before I reach my room, I stop and turn around: “Give me that thing back. I’ll put it on, but only until after breakfast.”

“Go on into your room, Mike! I’ll help you with it.”

“Mom, I’m 12 now, I can get dressed by myself,” I reply, annoyed, and try to take the thing out of my mother’s hand.

“Mike, that’s enough now. If I say I have to help, I have my reasons. Come on now, get out of those pajamas and off to the bathroom with you!”

What’s going on today? Suddenly I’m being treated like a toddler again, and Mom’s even telling me to go to the bathroom. This is shaping up to be a great 12th birthday, I think to myself, but I don’t want to cause any more trouble, so I go to my room, where I take off my pajamas and toss them on my bed before disappearing into the bathroom while Mom opens my closet.

When I come back from the bathroom, Mom has laid the new pants out on the bed, and I can now see the overalls in their full size. I have no experience with overalls, but I notice the “buckles” on the straps again. Because these strange metal strips aren’t just attached to the ends of the straps—there are two more on each back side, at the height where the bib attaches to the waistband. I also notice triangular notches on the metal strips at both edges. Shouldn’t there be a few buttons on the side of overalls, or just an elastic band? Well, I don’t know much about this. But Mom is already drawing my attention to something else; she’s laid out more clothes from my closet on the bed.

“Okay, Mike, please put on these underwear first,” Mom says, holding out a pair of very thick, padded underwear. I’m very reluctant to put these on because they’re so thick and also quite tight. Normally, I only have to wear them when it’s very cold outside and we’re going to be out for a long time. So I grab the underwear and swap it with the pair I’m wearing, turning my back to my mom. As I do, I see a plain blue T-shirt lying on the bed, along with a bright red, thick turtleneck sweater with Christmas motifs on it. I usually only wear that when Grandma comes to visit for Christmas. But I’m imagining how I can use it to hide the top part of these stupid overalls from prying eyes. So I grab the T-shirt, pull it on, and then reach for the overalls.

“Not so fast, Mike, you have to put on the sweater first,” my mom says, holding it out to me.

“Mom, can I please put it on over my pants? It’ll look so much nicer that way, with Christmas coming up.”

“That’s a nice try, Mike, but first of all, it’s not Christmas yet, and second, the sweater goes under the overalls.”

“That’s stupid,” I say, frustrated, but I pull the sweater over my head anyway.

By the time I’ve got my head and arms through the sweater, my mom is already standing in front of me with the overalls, holding them right in front of my legs so I can step into them. I pull the sweater down to smooth it out, and then I have no choice but to step into the pants with my first leg. I immediately feel that the legs are significantly tighter than on my other pants. But not so tight that my legs wouldn’t fit. Once I’ve got my second leg in, my mom pulls the pants up high enough that I’m up to my hips in them, and I can feel the legs hugging my thighs and not sitting loosely.

I have a glimmer of hope that this stupid thing won’t fit and is too small. But Mom keeps going and folds the bib down over my chest. It’s a strange new sensation I’ve never felt before, as the heavy fabric of the bib presses against my upper body. On the one hand, I feel how heavy and stiff the fabric is, and on the other, a slight pressure builds from the base of my legs up to my chest. I’m not used to pants that go all the way up to my chest in one piece. Plus, I’m already pretty stuck in the pants up to the lower part of my belly; the side openings don’t start until the height where other pants already end.

“Mike, please hold the bib in place so I can put the straps over your shoulders,” my mother instructs me.

Somewhat overwhelmed by the new sensation of the overalls, I obey and place my right hand on the bib, holding it firmly against my chest. This only intensifies the slight pressure on my chest even more. I try to look down at the bib, but I can’t see the top edge; I suspect it ends a few centimeters below my neck.

Then my mother places the first strap over my left shoulder, and I feel the metal strip attached to it pressing against my chest—or rather, against my shoulder—since the strap ends so high up. The same thing happens on the other side. And now I can also feel the heavy fabric on my back as it’s folded against it.

Mom then stands in front of me and tells me I can put my hand back by my side. Then she takes the right strap in her left hand and reaches with the other for the top of the bib, pulling both upward, which instantly makes me jump up on my tiptoes.

“Ouch, Mom, this thing is way too tight, and it’s digging into my crotch. That’s stupid,” I complain. Of course, it didn’t hurt, but the constricting feeling in this thing is unexpected.

Suddenly I hear a soft giggle and immediately turn my head toward the door, where my dad is standing, watching everything with a slight grin.

“Hey, Dad, that’s not funny. This thing is really uncomfortable,” I continue to complain.

Then I hear a click on my chest, followed by more in quick succession, and I feel the strap tightening over my right shoulder while the bib is pulled tighter against my chest. Startled, I try to see what Mom is doing with the buckles on the bib and lower my head as far as possible, but I can’t see the buckle. Then the same sound follows immediately on the left side, and there, too, the strap seems to be digging into my shoulder.

I try to complain, but at first I can’t find the words, as the feeling of tightness overwhelms me. The thick, stiff fabric of the overalls now stretches from my crotch across my entire upper body, almost up to my neck. And I can feel the pressure on my shoulders, too. It’s a completely new feeling for me, since I usually only wear very loose and baggy clothes. Both my pants and my sweaters are always very loose and baggy. Especially since Mom often buys clothes that are too big so I can still grow into them, as she always says. But this thing here is something completely different.

I immediately feel the urge to loosen the straps and reach for the buckles. But I can’t grasp anything at the top of the bib with my hand except the strap itself. So I run my hand over the thick fabric of the bib and feel part of the metal strip beneath the surface, as well as some kind of mechanism, though it’s hidden between the fabric of the bib and the sweater.

It also seems as though Mom isn’t finished yet, because now she moves to my right side, and I can see that there’s another metal strip attached to the back of the pants, hanging down slightly. Mom reaches for it, and I can see that the metal strip is slightly flexible, like a steel ruler from art class.

Mom tucks it into the front of the pants so that the gap on the side closes significantly higher up than before. After the strip has disappeared a few centimeters into the pants, the quick click is heard again, and Mom pushes the strip further in and pulls on the front with her other hand to make it tighter. As she does this, I immediately feel how the bib now stretches not only from the bottom up across my chest, but also from the side up to the spot where the strap has already been attached in the same way. Then the other side follows, which makes the situation even more oppressive. Now the bib of the pants is stretched across my upper body in every direction, and I can even feel how large the part on my back must have been; it doesn't feel like two straps, it feels as if my entire back is covered by the heavy fabric.

I don't know what to say or even think. But I feel the need to take this thing off right away. So I reach for the upper bib section again, where Mom has attached the straps, and try to pull on it to figure out how to open it. The first thing I notice is that the fabric not only feels thick and stiff, but is also very sturdy and hardly stretches at all.

After a very brief inspection, Mom reaches for my hands and gently pulls them down.

"Mike, don't go tugging on it right away. Let me take a look at it first," Mom says, taking a step back and looking me over from head to toe.

"Well, I think it looks good. And it seems really practical, too," says my mother, but she's not looking at me—she's looking at my father.

"Uh, well, I think it sucks," I say very spontaneously, without thinking about the consequences.

"Mike, what did we say about using that kind of language?" my father says sternly, walking toward me.

"I'm sorry, Dad, what I meant to say was: It's way too tight and extremely uncomfortable. Why am I supposed to put this stupid thing on? And more importantly, when can I take it off again?" I say, raising my hands back to the bib. But I can tell from Mom's face that I shouldn't fiddle with it any further for now. So I run my hand down from the bib to my stomach. It's a strange feeling, how it's stretched tight across my upper body.

"Well, Mike, we'll explain it all to you at breakfast, and it's commendable that you're so honest. But whether it's really tight enough remains to be seen," says my father, reaching behind my back with his right hand. And I can feel how he can hold me there and even push me back and forth. It doesn't feel like he's grabbing the straps; there must be some kind of handle or loop attached to the pants. Besides, I can feel that there's still a tiny bit of room around my hips when he tugs on the pants.

"Let me take a look at that too," he says, then lets go of my back so I can turn around and face him. I feel completely pushed around and not taken seriously.

Then I feel and hear my father tucking the two straps on the side in three more clicks until even the last bit of slack around my hips is gone and I'd have to hold my breath to loosen it.

"Hmm, interesting. That works perfectly," my father comments on the action and then reaches for the right shoulder strap and the bib.

"No, Dad, please don't make it any tighter—it's perfectly fine the way Mom did it," I say, since I'm now afraid I won't be allowed to loosen it again while my parents are watching me. Even though I don't understand the point of why it has to be so tight.

My father nods and slides a finger under the strap, pushing it up to my shoulder, where he then pulls it upward—which he manages with surprising ease. I can feel the pants lifting slightly, but I also notice there's still some room in the crotch, even though I can already feel the back seam of the pants in my butt crack. And that's even through the thickly lined underwear.

"Mike, we're not going to decide that on our own. But I'd like to know how it works," my father says, and I hear three more clicks on both sides. It doesn't get so much tighter that it hurts, but it's definitely uncomfortable for me.

"Can you please tell me now why I had to put on this monstrous thing? Because I don't like it."

"Mike, we were well aware of that beforehand, but it is what it is. And this 'thing,' as you call it, will be with you for the foreseeable future, whether you like it or not," says my father, reaching behind my back again and pushing me toward the kitchen.

“Hey, Dad, I can find my own way, and besides, I’m not hungry anymore.”

“It’s precisely because of this kind of stubborn behavior that this uniform is so practical,” says my father.

I’m totally fed up—this thing is an absolute nightmare, but maybe I can just take it off again in my room after dinner.

But why did my dad call it a uniform? Did they sign me up for the youth fire brigade? We already talked about this two years ago—I have no interest in that. Only nerds go there, and they have to wear those overalls.

When we get to the kitchen, my dad lets go of me, and I stand next to my chair for a moment, taking a deep breath and immediately feeling the increasing pressure on my upper body as I inhale and the relief as I exhale. I can’t help but keep glancing at my chest, as if I’m looking for confirmation of what I’m feeling there. After my parents have sat down, I pull my chair back with one hand, turning my upper body as I do so; with this movement, the overalls are also clearly noticeable.

I sit down on my chair and am surprised that the pressure on my shoulders suddenly eases, and I can even feel the upper part of the bib—with the heavy metal strips inside—wobbling slightly loosely on my chest. That doesn’t make it any less noticeable, but the pressure is gone. Unfortunately, when I’m sitting, I feel the tightness around my stomach all the more. That’s because the side buckles—and thus the bib’s waistband—are a good 10 to 15 centimeters higher than the waistband on regular pants. Until now, I thought the waistband on overalls was the same height as on regular pants. But that’s not the case here.

My mom then put a delicious crêpe on my plate, and I spread Nutella on it myself. It was just as delicious as always, but I can’t enjoy it at all because every little movement reminds me again and again of this thing that’s way too tight.

After I’ve polished off my first crêpe and am just about to prepare the second one, my mom starts a conversation.

“Well, Mike, it looks like your appetite has returned. I’m very happy about that, and I hope you appreciate that we don’t have this breakfast every day.”

“Yes, Mom, you know it’s my favorite breakfast. And thank you for making it for my birthday,” I say meekly, but also gratefully.

“I’m glad to hear that, sweetheart, but now let’s get to the real point of the day. It’s your 12th birthday, and this age brings some changes. And for you, the situation is a bit more tense because of your recent performance in school.”

I chew more and more slowly, and I feel the tightness around my chest growing even tighter.

“We received a recommendation from your school to switch schools, and we’ve looked at the new school and thought long and hard about whether it’s the right move for you.”

Now the Nutella is really stuck in my throat.

“Your father and I have decided to give the new school a try. We realize that this will be a big change for you. The most obvious thing is your new school uniform, starting today.”

Now my mouth drops open; I put my fork down on the table and have to lean back. This monstrous pair of overalls is a school uniform. I’m supposed to wear a school uniform—and this thing, of all things.

“What... I... it’s a...?” I can only stammer and can’t form a coherent question, even though I have a thousand questions in my head.

“You don’t need to ask anything right now, Mike; we’ll explain everything you need to know at the right time. So, these beautiful new overalls are part of the school uniform required at the ‘School of Intensive Pedagogy’ for 12-year-old boys. It’s a full-day school where you’ll be supervised every day until 4 p.m. Which doesn’t mean you’ll have classes every day until 4 p.m. But the school requires students to wear the uniform on the way to and from school, and of course at school itself, and also in the rare case that you have to do homework after 4 p.m. Then the uniform must also be worn at home while doing homework.”

I still can't believe what my mom is telling me right now, but she definitely has my full attention, and I'm able to start formulating my first questions again.

"But it's still vacation, and it just started—so why am I wearing this thing already?"

"Mike, we already talked about this right at the beginning. But I'm happy to explain it to you in more detail. The point is to get you used to the new uniform; a first step would be not to call it 'this thing,' but rather a uniform—or, for all I care, just overalls. Furthermore, you've already noticed yourself that wearing the uniform brings some changes, and we—and the school—think it's best that you wear the uniform as long and as often as possible throughout the entire vacation, so that after the vacation, at the new school, you can focus on school and not on the new uniform."

I can't even imagine enduring that feeling around my body for a whole day right now. And then I'm supposed to be at school in it until 4 p.m. That's a horrible thought. Then Mom also mentioned something about the walk to school and the uniform, so I'd better ask.

"Where is this new school, and how do I get there?"

"Mike, there aren't many good private schools like this, but you're lucky—the nearest one is right in our county seat. So it's only about 40 km away."

"What? I'll never make it there by bike, and the bus takes over an hour going through all those cow-filled villages."

"Yes, Mike, that's right. So there are three options. For the first few days at the new school, either Dad or I will drive you there. After that, there are two options left: the public bus with all the other kids going into town, for example to the high school, or a private bus from your new school, where only kids from the school ride."

"And which one is faster?" is my most important question.

"Mike, that's not what this is about. And I don't think it will make much difference how long the ride is, because with the public bus you have to transfer, and the private one takes a lot of detours to drop all the kids off at home. The decision won't be entirely up to you. Because the private bus costs a lot more, but it has the advantage that you'll be supervised all the way to our house. Two teachers or educators will ride along and look after you."

"Huh, why would they need to watch over me? I ride my bike to school by myself now—why would anyone need to watch over me when I'm on the bus?"

"Oh, Mike, I know this all sounds new and unfamiliar to you. But trust me, you won't be left on your own during the transition to the new school. I think it's going to be great, and of course we also hope your grades and behavior will improve there. I think you should just enjoy your vacation for now and get used to the uniform. You don't need to worry about anything else right now."

"Hmmm, I don't know. School's stupid everywhere," I say, looking down at the bib, which I can still feel with every movement.

"Mike, this is a great opportunity for you to improve your grades and maybe even start enjoying school again," my dad says encouragingly.

"How's that supposed to be fun with a thing like that as a 'uniform'?"

"Honey, you haven't even had those overalls on for an hour yet; there's a reason the adjustment period is planned for two weeks. But first, let's clean the kitchen, and then you can play for a bit until we go for a walk together this afternoon. So, you know what you have to do?"

"Yes, I'll load the dishes into the dishwasher and wipe down the table!" I reply.

"Great, sweetie."

So I get up to start on the dishes, and instantly I feel the straps tightening on my shoulders again and the back seam digging into my butt crack. "What a shitty birthday," I think to myself.

The constant bending over to the dishwasher and the other movements make me feel the overalls more and more intensely, instead of getting used to them, whatever that's supposed to mean. I'd expect not to be constantly reminded that I'm wearing them.

Then, as I wipe the table with a rag, my stomach bumps against the edge of the table—a familiar sensation whenever I have to bend over the table—but now it feels different. The thick, stiff, and above all taut fabric of the bib spreads the pressure from the table edge over a larger area. This

feeling isn't actually unpleasant, but somehow strikingly different. Kind of like a soft protective pad shielding you from the edge. A strange new sensation and yet another reminder of the overalls. I'm finally done with my kitchen chores and need to process it all for now, so I want to go to my room.

"I'm going to my room!" I say goodbye to my parents, who are still sitting at the table talking about boring stuff.

"Mike! We love you, okay. And we wish you a happy 12th birthday today," my mother says.

"And the new school is sure to be great, too. Don't let the uniform get you down—it's for your own good," my father adds.

Does he have to bring that up again? I try to smile and thank them for the lovely breakfast, because I can't bring myself to thank them for the "gift."

On my way to my room, I pass our large mirrored wall in the hallway and automatically stop to look at myself from every angle. The bib really does end just a few centimeters from my neck. The reflective stripes look so ridiculous and invite anyone who sees me to stare. And then I also notice how high the "buckles" are on the side. I can barely see any of those weird jagged parts anymore. It all looks so misshapen on me, as if it doesn't fit properly and I'm stuck in some kind of sack.

As I keep turning in front of the mirror, I can see the loop on my back where Dad held me earlier. It looks like a handle that's horizontal and at the same height as the side fastener. Is that really supposed to let someone hold me? At school? Why else would it be on a school uniform?

In addition, I can now see D-rings made of shiny silver metal sewn into several places on the pants. I don't understand the purpose of these either. Two are located on each of the shoulder straps, where the fabric of the strap is sewn to the jagged metal strips. Then there are two more on the sides, where the side metal strips are tucked into the front. Another one is right in the middle of the front, but much lower down, almost toward the crotch. And there are some at the bottom of the legs, too. None of this looks like a fashion detail, but I can't figure out the point of it either.

I've seen enough for now and head back to my room. But somehow, I don't feel like playing there. I need to think about everything Mom and Dad said first.

So I sit down on my bed and look at the overalls for a moment. Luckily, when I'm sitting down, the straps on my shoulders aren't as tight as when I'm standing. Plus, I can see right away how to loosen the straps a bit. Maybe these overalls won't be quite so bad then?

So I feel around for the clasp, which I suspect is on the inside of the bib, since it can't be seen or reached from the front. When I'm sitting down, the strap is loose enough that I can easily reach behind the bib with my hand, but unfortunately the fabric there is just as smooth as on the front. So the mechanism must be hidden inside between two layers of fabric. I try pressing on it from the front and pulling the jagged metal strip upward, but unfortunately that doesn't work. So I try to grip the buckle inside the fabric from the side, creasing the fabric slightly in the process, hoping that the release mechanism is hidden there. But I can't feel anything I could press to unlock it. Since I can get a good grip on the mechanism this way, I decide to wiggle the metal strip—it has to come loose somehow. Out of desperation, I shake it harder and apply a bit more force; maybe you have to twist it or something.

But suddenly I hear that rapid clicking again and realize that I've unintentionally pushed the metal strip a good 3 cm further into the mechanism. Now, even while sitting, I have hardly any slack left in the shoulder strap on the right side.

Startled, I let go of the mechanism and stand up with my heart pounding. As I do, I immediately feel that the pants are now pulling much tighter and tighter across my crotch, which is already starting to feel uncomfortable. But the pressure needed to do this is only being applied to my right shoulder.

This makes me sit back down immediately. This new "uniform" is slowly becoming a real nuisance, and I just want to take it off. But to do that, I have to figure out how these stupid buckles work.

Asking Mom or Dad is hardly an option, since I'm supposed to get used to this stupid uniform, but they didn't say how.

I try again on the left side, but I'm not getting anywhere here either; I can only push it in further. This time, though, I'm more careful and only push it in two more clicks. It could have been that

pushing it further would loosen it, like with a vacuum cleaner cord. But unfortunately, that doesn't work either. It can't be that hard to undo these buckles, can it?

After a while of more unsuccessful fiddling, I'm frustrated and lean back on my bed, exasperated. I immediately realize, however, that this is a mistake, because the strap on my right shoulder immediately tenses up uncomfortably again. So I sit up straight again right away and am even more frustrated. Then I get the idea to simply pull the straps to the sides of my shoulders and take the pants off that way. But I quickly realize that the straps won't pull far enough to the side.

Even more frustrated, I sit further back on my bed so I can lean against the wall to get a somewhat comfortable position. To keep thinking about the buckles—what other mechanisms do I know that could be used here on these “buckles”? Actually, I love mechanical puzzles; I enjoy examining and solving them. But this is something else—I just want to finally take off these damn overalls, or at least loosen the straps. Because I'm afraid that if Mom sees that I've taken off the pants and haven't “gotten used” to them yet, there might be trouble.

After pondering for a while, I remember my father's words from when he was helping me get dressed, saying that “we” don't get to decide on our own how tight the suspenders should be. Slowly, I begin to suspect that he might have been referring to the new school, which in turn increases the likelihood that it's intentional—that I can't loosen the suspenders myself.

Suddenly, a lot changes in my head, and my heart starts racing as I realize that I'm trapped in this “uniform.” The tightness suddenly feels like a shackle. Am I really strapped into this thing? And if so, why? Just to make sure the uniform is actually worn at school—that's absurd.

It takes a while for my heartbeat to return to normal, and I'm still horrified by the realization—or is it just the fear? I need clarity and have to ask Mom and Dad. So I stand up and hold my breath slightly—or rather, I breathe very shallowly to keep the pressure the right shoulder strap exerts on my shoulder as low as possible. As I do so, I notice that the thick underwear I was told to wear offers a certain advantage, since everything down below is cushioned a bit more softly. Even if it still presses a little in the crotch.

So I walk cautiously out of my room and look for my parents, whom I find sitting on the sofa in the living room. My mother looks at me intently right away. “Is everything okay with you, sweetie? What fun game are you playing?”

“Oh no, Mom, I'm not playing. I just can't get used to this thing—it's uncomfortable and stupid.” As I say this, I point to the overalls and want to sit down again as quickly as possible, so I head toward an armchair across from my parents.

“Come on, Mike, please sit down with us. We can talk about it,” my mother suggests, and they both make some room between them for me to sit down. I'm not really in the mood to cuddle with my parents. But she insists that I sit there, and as soon as I do, she gives me a hug, followed by my father. Fortunately, that eases some of my frustration with the tight overalls.

“Well, Mike, you've been wearing your new school uniform for a little over an hour now. Would you like to talk about your first impressions? We realize that this is a new and unfamiliar experience for you,” my mother says.

“Mom, why is it so tight, and can't I really loosen it myself?”

When I look at Mom as I ask the question, I can see a brief, quick smile on her face, but she immediately becomes serious again as she answers.

“Well, Mike, I'm so proud of you for figuring that out on your own. Yes, the fasteners are designed so that students can't open them themselves or help each other. That's part of the design required by the school. The uniform is meant to support certain regulatory and disciplinary measures at school, which is why the overalls fit relatively tightly against the body and aren't supposed to slip,” my mother then explains to me.

“But why didn't you tell me that when I was getting dressed? It's way too tight now, and I can barely stand or walk in it.”

“Well, Mike, the school gave us very specific instructions on how to proceed with your adjustment process during the holidays. You're supposed to gain a lot of experience on your own—that's the

plan. Besides, I checked the tension of the straps in your room after you put them on, following the school's guidelines, so the pants can't be too tight," my father then explains to me.

"But..." I start to say, then glance briefly at the floor because I hardly want to admit it.

"But I tried to loosen the buckles and accidentally made one side much tighter. How can I make it NORMAL again?"

A smile returns to my mother's face. "That's amazing, Mike, I think the school is really good."

"Huh, what do you mean, Mom?" I ask, totally confused.

"Well, Mike, the school listed a few ways you might react to the uniform, and so far, all of them have come true. You examined the pants and made the wrong decision, tightening the fit even more. Apparently, other students before you have done the same thing," my mother explains to me.

"Okay, I get it. I won't fiddle with the buckles again. Can you please help me undo it now?" I ask meekly.

"Well, Mike, you've correctly realized that you're not able to do this on your own. That's intentional, of course, and part of the school rules. There's a kind of key to unlock the buckles, and only we and the school have it. And you're forbidden from using it yourself, even if you somehow managed to get your hands on a key. Do you understand this rule?" my mother says, quite seriously and emphatically.

"Yes, Mom, I have. ... But what if I need to use the bathroom?" she asks, posing the logical question.

"Well, that's pretty clear. You come to us and ask us. And to get that out of the way, there's a set procedure for that at school. You'll learn about it at school along with the new school rules," my dad explains.

"Umm, okay!? That sounds like a hassle. But can you please reset the settings to normal now? Please!"

"Mike, part of the adjustment process is making mistakes. As I said, the school told us beforehand which ones you're most likely to make. That includes changing the settings on your own. But when it comes to mistakes, you only learn from them if you bear the consequences yourself—and in this case, endure them. The rule says we have to leave it the way you set it. At least for today," my mother explains to me.

"And one more thing, Mike, the school has listed other things you might do. Some of them will also lead to consequences you'll have to face. Some of them could also result in a punishment that might be imposed on you at school after the break. So for every action you consider, you should think carefully beforehand about whether it's really a good idea to do it. Or ask us first," my father adds.

"What? I have to walk around all day with this pain in my right shoulder? Just because you didn't tell me beforehand? That's unfair!"

"Mike, at 12 years old, it's time for you to take some personal responsibility and stop always blaming others," my mother says.

"But... But I didn't know."

"Well, Mike, we just explained that to you. That's just how experience and learning work. And believe me, the next time you mess it up, you'll know," my father adds.

I'm even more frustrated than before; I'm supposed to feel this way all day. I can't accept that.

"Mom, please, please, can we make a deal? I'll do anything you want!"

"Mike, the new school will only work for you if we all stick to the rules—you, and both of us. That's why we can't make an exception. Because we believe in the new school. And we also believe that you can stick with it if you try a little harder, sweetheart." With that, every hope I had is shattered by my mother.

"Okay, I'm going back to my room. This is all so mean," I say, getting back up. Which immediately brings back that uncomfortable pressure. I keep my shoulders as low as possible to ease it as much as I can as I walk toward the door.

"Mike, just two more points!" my mother stops me.

"It might look better if you do it the same on both sides, but that's up to you, and it can't be undone. And second, don't do anything stupid. Okay!"

“Yes, Mom!” I say and walk out of the living room back into the hallway, where I pass the mirror again. I stop and look at myself once more. It’s clear that one side is significantly higher than the other. So I think about my mother’s words. This lopsided feeling might actually make it worse. So I reach for the left side of the bib and the strap, but then pause again. “It can’t be undone.” I’ve rarely thought about a decision like this, that something could be final. It’s a strange feeling, but on the other hand, it’s not absolutely final—it’s just a punishment until evening, when I’ll finally be allowed to take the thing off again.

So I pull on the bib and slide the end of the strap further in, with many more clicks that now seem even louder to me than ever before. When it finally feels like it’s equally tight on both sides, I’m relieved that it doesn’t feel much tighter. On the contrary, it feels as though the pressure is distributed across both shoulders and isn’t as bad. I’m happy about this small success and head back to my room.

Since I’ve realized that I need to try to sit for most of the day to reduce the pressure, I sit down in my desk chair with a comic book. The backrest keeps me sitting very upright, and I immediately feel a new little annoyance. The bib is now so high that it presses against my neck. At first, it’s not so bad, but the longer I sit like this, the more I feel like the bib is cutting into my neck and slightly hindering my breathing. Which probably isn’t really the case, but it’s another thing that constantly reminds me of the new school uniform.

# Modern Times

## A report by Tim Schott

Dear Readers, I am always on the lookout for new trends and stories from the worlds of business and society for our publication. Today I am visiting the “School of Intensive Pedagogy.” A modern educational institution for children who present special challenges for their parents. I meet with the director, Dr. David, and have him introduce me to the innovative concepts and show me around the facility. Read my report.

My journey has taken me to a quiet, green residential neighborhood in Springfield. The building is constructed in the old style of the late 1890s, and the front yard is well-maintained. But as soon as I reach the door, it's clear that modernity has moved in here. An electronic sliding glass door lets me step into a spacious entrance area. It doesn't look like a school here either; there are no children's drawings on the walls, nor are there the typical school hallways with coat hooks. Since I've made an appointment, the principal immediately comes out of an adjacent office to meet me.

**MT:** Good morning, Dr. David, I'm glad you agreed to show me around your school.

**David:** Good afternoon, Mr. Schott, the pleasure is all mine. I'm delighted to have the opportunity to introduce my school to an interested audience. You see, we've only been in operation for three years and aren't yet very well known among parents. We have a special focus when selecting our students, which your readers should know about.

**MT:** That's an interesting point you bring up. Could you briefly explain what makes your school unique to our readers?

**David:** I'd be happy to. We've focused on students who need a slightly more intensive education to successfully navigate their way through school. In other schools, these children are often neglected, which frequently means they don't receive the necessary guidance in terms of rules and discipline. And these students often need a bit more of that. We offer them that, so they're guided toward their goals with order and a firm hand.

**MT:** That's an interesting approach, Dr. David, but it sounds like very old-fashioned values and a lot of strictness for the students. Is that really modern and innovative? And if I may say so, it doesn't look very inviting for a child here either.

**David:** Well, first I should mention that we're in the administrative entrance area; the students enter the school through a different entrance at the back. Perhaps I should give you a little tour. But to answer your actual question: Yes, we believe that children should submit to authority until they've earned their place in society. That may be an outdated set of values for some, but we don't consider it old-fashioned—rather, we see it as time-tested. People who achieve something in life often demonstrate great discipline in their actions, and this can only be learned by experiencing it and being exposed to it. That is why authority and discipline are key components of our concept.

Next, Dr. David leads me through several electronically secured doors, using his access card repeatedly. In the blink of an eye, we find ourselves in a long hallway that looks much more like a modern school building. The walls are painted in bright, colorful hues. Some doors feature large murals that hint at the room's purpose or display the name of the respective grade level. I learn that these works of art are created anew by the students every year.

The building is laid out as a closed square with four wings, with a large playground featuring all kinds of play equipment in the center. The hallways all have large glass panels facing the courtyard, and the classrooms are located on the outer side. Then I'm shown a classroom where no lessons are currently taking place. It's noticeable that the windows are covered with a frosted film up to a height of about 1.5 meters. (5 feet)

**MT:** What's the story with these windows?

**David:** Well, since all the windows in the rooms face outside the school grounds, it's important to us that students can't look out the window during class to avoid distractions. This ensures that students can concentrate on the lesson.

**MT:** I can see that this classroom is quite modernly equipped. On the teacher's desk, in addition to several outlets and ports for a laptop, there's also a control panel, the kind I'd expect to see in an industrial setting. Could you tell us a bit about your equipment?

**David:** I'd be happy to. First, I'd like to mention our whiteboard—it's a state-of-the-art electronic board. On it, both the students and the teacher can write and draw by hand as well as display content from a computer. That said, I'd like to point out right away that we don't give our students access to electronic devices until 8th grade, which is around age 14. The children's desks are equipped with all the necessary ports for tablets and laptops, but these aren't used until 8th grade. Before that, we encourage handwriting and reading and avoid video and audio media.

**MT:** This doesn't seem like the most modern approach to me. I've heard of schools where children aren't taught handwriting at all anymore. Can you comment on that?

**David:** Of course. Recent studies suggest that the premature use of digital media by children can severely impair the development of motor skills. Swiping on a screen provides no real feedback to the finger, which the brain would use to learn to understand the physical world. In the long term, this leads to many developmental problems.

**MT:** Okay, that's interesting news. Let's get back to the technology.

**David:** I'd be happy to. You mentioned the console on the teacher's desk—well, that's used to control the students' consoles.

**MT:** That sounds very modern. But what can you control at a desk with it?

**David:** I'll show you; let's take a closer look at a student desk.

**MT:** Yes, at first glance, the design looks like the desks from the early 20th century. Even though the style is clearly modern, made of metal and plastic. There's a slightly slanted work surface and a bench for two children, just as was common back then.

**David:** Not everything from the past is bad, but in reality, this is high-tech. All connections for power and communication can be turned on and off or otherwise configured. But the real innovation is the student's own control.

**MT:** Oh, I think you'll have to explain that in more detail.

**David:** Yes, of course. As I mentioned at the beginning, we place great emphasis on discipline. That also means our students are expected to remain seated during class and are not allowed to walk around without permission. But posture is important to us as well. That's why the seat offers features that support these rules.

**MT:** Could you please elaborate on that?

**David:** Gladly. Look, the seat has five seat belts, similar to the child seats kids are familiar with from their parents' cars. The difference is that these belts don't run across the children's bodies; instead, they can simply be hooked into designated points on their school uniforms. Look here.

**MT:** Yes, I can see two buckles at the top of the backrest—oh, and you can easily pull them out, just like a seatbelt in a car. In addition, there are three of them for each seat between the backrest and the seat cushion. Why are there three?

**David:** Well, the students' uniforms essentially consist of overalls equipped with corresponding anchor points. Two points are on the straps at the shoulders to remind students to sit upright. Two are located on the sides in the belt area of the uniform to remind students not to stand up. Students also attach the last strap at the waistline, but from the front, so it has to be threaded through the crotch and serves as another aid to help them sit upright and not slide forward on the bench.

**MT:** That sounds like a complex design, just to remind the children of their posture. I also wonder if the resistance of the rollers is sufficient to achieve the desired effect?

**David:** Well, that's where the desk on the teacher's table and the high-tech behind it come into play. All five roller straps can be adjusted by the system to a certain tension or locked in a specific position. Then the student is no longer able to pull the strap further out of the desk. The control system is very intelligent, though; students need to be able to lean forward to write or read a book,

which requires the shoulder lines to be unrolled. The other three lines are usually locked at the start of class.

**MT:** Oh, that sounds like a strict measure. So it's not just a reminder?

**David:** Well, discipline does require a certain amount of strictness. In fact, once the children have buckled up, the system adjusts the straps to a preset tension and then locks them in place to keep the children as still as possible in their seats.

**MT:** Isn't that uncomfortable over time, especially the strap in the crotch?

**David:** No, not really. The straps are wide, and since they're attached to the uniform, the pressure is distributed across the entire upper body. It's certainly unusual for new students at first.

**MT:** And how do you prevent students from unbuckling the straps under the desk without anyone noticing?

**David:** The system has two mechanisms for that. First, the tension of the straps is continuously monitored, even when they're locked, so the teacher would receive a notification. Second, the buckles are locked and can only be released by the student after the teacher gives permission—either at the end of class or when a student is called to the board to demonstrate something.

**MT:** Those are really strict measures that allow students very little movement.

**David:** Oh, that has definitely been taken into account. We require our students to get a minimum amount of exercise during breaks. Along with physical education, this is important to compensate for the limited movement during class.

**MT:** Are there special supervised activities during breaks for this, or how do you ensure it?

**David:** Oh no, that's not necessary. You see, the vast majority of children love to play on their own during breaks and generally get enough exercise that way. But yes, of course, that's also monitored and supervised. There are scientific studies on how much exercise a child needs based on age, height, and weight. The school uniforms have a sensor that records and analyzes every movement the children make. If a child hasn't gotten enough exercise by the end of the school day, they have to do additional physical activity during the afternoon supervision period. You see, we're an all-day school, and because of the special demands placed on our students, the afternoon is filled with additional educational activities.

**MT:** Another interesting approach at your school—and I see you're using far more modern technology than one might initially expect. Oh, but I also noticed the small leather pads on the students' desks, which don't exactly look high-tech. Could you tell me the story behind them?

**David:** Yes, certainly, we have nothing to hide. At this point, I'd also like to mention that parents are thoroughly informed about all the technologies and measures here at the school before their children start. Because, as you can perhaps imagine, some parents might not understand why we strap our students into their seats, even though that's the most normal thing in the world in a car. Well, these pads here on the sides of the work surface are indeed high-tech. They're designed to hold the students' hands in place. The teacher can instruct a student to place their wrists on the pads and then activate a mechanism that grips the wrist and secures the hand.

**MT:** Oh, I didn't expect that. Is that a mandatory measure?

**David:** No, absolutely not. It's used very rarely and is seen as a punishment by the students, even though we don't communicate it that way. I'll give you three examples of when it's used, among other things.

1. During exams, the student's non-writing hand can be restrained to prevent cheating. But even that isn't mandatory; the teacher can decide on a case-by-case basis.
2. If a student has misbehaved, for example, by interacting with their neighbor in an unacceptable way. That comes very close to being a punishment.
3. You can imagine that having one's hands restrained is a major and unfamiliar experience for a student, especially since they must initiate the process themselves by placing their hands on the pads, after which a remote-controlled mechanism secures them. This can be overwhelming for students if they are unfamiliar with it and scenario 2 suddenly occurs. Therefore, new students are acclimated to this by being asked repeatedly and without any specific reason to place their hands in the position. The restraint is initially very brief, but we gradually extend it over the first few weeks

until the student in question is accustomed to being restrained for an entire class period without feeling uncomfortable.

**MT:** Well, I think you've put a lot of thought into all these measures. Could you show me a real class? I think our readers are also interested in learning how the students react to all of this.

**David:** Well, we have a rule that states students must not be disturbed by strangers during class. But I can offer you the opportunity to observe a class live from our security center. Our surveillance system is state-of-the-art; it doesn't interfere with the lesson, and the students don't notice that we're watching them.

We leave the empty classroom and walk through a few hallways to the third floor; here, it's immediately clear that this area isn't intended for the children. I'm told that only two floors are designated for classes and afternoon activities. After passing through several doors with electronic locks, we reach a room that looks more like the control tower of a modern airport. The room has many windows arranged in a quarter circle facing the courtyard, from which one can overlook the entire courtyard. In front of them are two long rows of desks, all filled with screens. A security guard in uniform sits in each row.

**David:** You see, this is our security control center, from which every corner of the school can be monitored. All classrooms and also all rooms to which teachers have access. It's not that we don't trust our teachers, but due to certain educational policies, it's important to us that we can refute any allegations from students or parents if it's claimed that a teacher has overstepped their authority.

**MT:** Oh yes, I can understand that you have to take special precautions in this regard.

**David:** Another advantage of the system is that we can observe the behavior of certain students more closely when necessary and analyze it afterward to adjust our teaching methods. But I can demonstrate that to you in more detail later. First, let's tune in to a class in session.

A camera feed of a classroom is displayed on a 100-inch screen on the back wall of the room. The image shows the entire classroom; there are about ten girls and ten boys sitting at their desks. On each of the double desks sits a boy in blue overalls and a girl in purple overalls. Everyone is sitting upright with their backs against the backrest. A girl is standing at the media board, solving a math problem in front of the whole class. Then the principal turns on the sound.

"That was very good, Maria, you may sit down again."

"Yes, Mr. Stone," says the girl and returns to her seat.

The principal taps Maria on the screen with his finger, and she is briefly outlined by a yellow square. Then the image automatically zooms in on Maria and follows her automatically to her seat. I can see Maria, once back at her seat, first reaching for the middle strap and pulling it out all the way to the table, then stepping over the strap with one leg to sit down on it. Then you can see her fasten the buckle of the front strap to a D-ring on her overalls, and the rest of the strap is pulled back under her from the bench. Then she reaches beside her and pulls the strap out a little to attach it to the side of her uniform. The same thing happens on the other side. To reach the rear straps on the backrest, Maria has to contort herself a bit, but she grabs both straps one after the other and then attaches them almost simultaneously to the D-rings on her shoulders.

After she has finished, she places her hands on the table in front of her, and you can see that her back is being pulled against the bench. As this happens, it looks as though the bib of her overalls is being pulled up a bit closer to her neck. Additionally, you can see that Maria is wiggling her hips back and forth slightly on the bench. One can only guess that the lower straps are also being tightened.

**David:** You see, Maria is a good student and already very experienced with the system and the routine expected of her. She straps herself in according to the rules, and the teacher doesn't have to do anything; everything runs automatically. And Maria feels secure again right away, and she's well accustomed to it.

**MT:** Is it a requirement that she place her hands in the center of the table?

**David:** No, not a strict requirement. But as part of the orientation process, we recommend this to the children, because the tightening of the straps unsettles some children at first, and they then tug at the straps or the bib of their uniform. However, this causes the system to detect it and attempt to suppress the children's resistance with even greater force. Maria has gotten so used to it that she's kept up the practice to avoid the system's extra steps.

**MT:** I could see that the bib of the uniform was pulled up a bit. Isn't that uncomfortable for the children?

**David:** No, not really. That effect is minimal. You see, we make sure the uniforms fit very snugly and have as little slack as possible to avoid that as much as we can. But when sitting, the distance between the crotch and the shoulders is naturally shorter than when standing. Basically, fastening the shoulder straps makes the bib of the uniform fit just as tightly as it does when standing.

"Mike, the next assignment is for you!" the teacher announces.

**David:** Oh, that's good—now you'll see the opposite. This student has only been with us for a week and is still getting used to things.

The principal taps the screen again, and the wide shot zooms out. Then he taps a boy in the front row, and the zoom now follows the boy. However, part of the teacher's desk is still visible. The boy nervously fiddles with the bib of his uniform and shifts his upper body slightly from right to left, but without being able to actually move on the bench.

Once the teacher has prepared the assignment for Mike on the board, you see him reach for the control panel and press a button. Then he asks the boy to come to the front to solve the problem. Mike suddenly leans forward and reaches for the straps on his shoulders, which can now be pulled out of the backrest, and unfastens the buckles. It seems, however, that he still cannot move from the bench. Only when the straps on the backrest are fully retracted does Mike stand up, and the other three straps can be pulled far enough out of the bench for him to get to his feet. Then Mike unfastens one strap after another, and it's clear he doesn't have much practice with this yet, as he has to fiddle with them a bit at times. Then Mike rushes forward to the board. As he does so, he keeps tugging at his uniform with his hands, trying to pull it down or smooth it out. Then he tackles the task, which he clearly struggles with and needs quite a bit of help from the teacher to complete. "Okay, you're getting better and better, Mike. Please go back to your seat and buckle up quickly!" "Yes, Mr. Stone."

**David:** See, with this student, the teacher is still giving precise instructions. That shouldn't be done later on; we expect students to know the rules and follow them on their own. But Mike is still getting used to things.

I continue to watch the scene as Mike returns to his seat much more slowly than before. He first stands between the bench and the table, reaches between his legs for the middle strap, and pulls it forward a bit. Then he sits down on the bench, causing the middle strap to retract automatically, just like a car seatbelt. Mike then fiddles with the buckle in front of his stomach for a while to fasten the strap there. Then he looks to the right and then to the left. It seems he can't decide which side to continue on.

"Mike, please, everyone's waiting for you," the teacher says.

"Yeah, I'm already doing it," Mike replies.

Then you can see that the teacher is holding down a button on the control panel.

"No, please, Mr. Stone, I'm hurrying," Mike says quickly, immediately reaching for the right strap and beginning to hook it onto his uniform.

**MT:** What's happening now, Dr. David?

**David:** Well, the student is clearly delaying buckling up on purpose. You could see with Maria that the system starts to adjust the straps once all five buckles are locked in place. But if the student delays fastening the buckles, then the teacher can and should intervene. In this case, Mr. Stone is doing what is intended. Since the student has already fastened one strap, he is already tightening it by hand, and as a rule, he holds the button down until the student has fastened the next strap. In the meantime, the first strap slowly shortens.

**MT:** Couldn't that become uncomfortable or even painful if the student gets nervous and takes even longer?

**David:** Well, in this case, it's actually intended to be uncomfortable, since it's a disciplinary measure. But it's never dangerous, because the system has a safety mechanism that prevents injury. However, it's safe to assume that it will be a bit tighter than usual for the student for the rest of the class.

I watch as Mike quickly finishes on the right side and immediately turns to the left side, but here he has slight trouble with the buckle and is getting more and more nervous. When the buckle finally clicks into place there as well, he immediately looks at the teacher and asks him to stop, which happens right away. The teacher then presses another button, and the two straps on the side of the hips are also adjusted immediately. Meanwhile, Mike is already trying to reach for the upper straps, but his bottom seems to be held immovably in place on the bench, and he has corresponding difficulty grabbing the straps. After a few attempts, he succeeds and hooks the buckles onto his shoulders, which also seems much harder for him to do than it was for Maria.

The teacher then manually adjusts the shoulder straps as well, and Mike fidgets, repeatedly reaching with his hands for the bib and the buckles. Mr. Stone admonishes him several times to sit still.

Once Mike is fully strapped in, the teacher turns his attention back to the next task for the students. However, he is interrupted by a soft alert sound on his laptop. Since the Zoom camera is still focused on Mike, it's immediately noticeable that he's casting another nervous glance at the teacher and trying to wriggle a bit in the straps.

"Oh, Mike, now that's what I call perfect timing. It's time for your next acclimatization exercise. That's very fitting after your little drama just now. Please put your hands in position!"

Mike doesn't answer and shakes his head almost imperceptibly, but slowly moves his hands toward the table.

"Mike, please, by now you should know the procedure. Right?"

Still somewhat hesitant, Mike places his wrists on the pads and closes his eyes. The girl next to him looks at him sympathetically and places her hands in the center of her table.

Then Mike flinches, and a click is heard. It all happens so fast that you couldn't see it on the screen, but Mike's wrists are now secured to the pad with a kind of hook. He immediately pulls on his arms, but can no longer lift his hands off the table.

**David:** You can see that this student isn't quite used to the measures yet. That's why it's important for him to practice them regularly so he can get used to them. I'm sure that soon he won't mind at all when his hands have to be secured, and he'll accept it calmly. Buckling up will also soon be a familiar routine for him, one he'll master almost automatically.

**MT:** But isn't that also emotionally stressful for the children if they aren't used to it yet?

**David:** Well, that's a point we keep a close eye on, and our teachers are trained to recognize when the stress becomes too much. In such a case, the teacher has the option to call for immediate assistance, which would then take the affected student out of the classroom and look after them until training can resume. Every student learns and develops at their own pace. This ensures optimal development.

Over the next few minutes, I watch Mike for a while as he clearly tries to follow along with the lesson and keep up with his classmates as they work on the next set of problems. But I also notice

how he keeps looking down at his hands and occasionally tugs at them. Not very seriously, but I think I can see a certain disappointment on his face.

After another 10 minutes, a bell rings, apparently signaling the end of the current class. After the teacher has finished the lesson and said goodbye to the students, he presses two buttons on the desk. Since the zoom is still focused on Mike, I can only see Mike's neighbor unfastening her straps and leaving the room, which—with the exception of Mike—everyone else is obviously doing as well. The teacher isn't fully in the frame, but he seems to be packing his laptop into his bag and clearing his desk. Mike doesn't seem particularly surprised by this; even though he looks a bit restless, he doesn't complain that he's the only student who can't get up yet and that his hands are still stuck on the table. Then the teacher approaches him.

"Mike, why did you delay buckling up just now? You know the rules and the consequences. Was it worth it?"

"No, Mr. Stone, I don't like it when it's as tight as it is now."

"See, you know it's better to buckle up right away, and then the system does everything in the best way for you."

"Yes, Mr. Stone, I'm sorry."

"Okay, then please give me your hand," says the teacher, leaning toward his desk and pressing another button. The hook on Mike's right wrist releases, and he extends his now-free hand toward Mr. Stone. Mr. Stone has taken a kind of glove from his desk and slips it onto Mike's hand, fastening one cuff of the glove around his wrist. Only then is the other hand released and also fitted with a glove.

**MT:** Ohh, what's happening now? Is this another punishment for not buckling up properly?

**David:** No, that's already been addressed by tightening the belts a bit during the last 15 minutes of class. But this student made another mistake for which he must face the consequences. You see, when we discipline our students, we try to use something that's related to the misbehavior or at least intended to prevent it in the future. So it can also be helpful. In this case, the student tried to damage his uniform. He tried to cut it up with scissors.

**MT:** How did that happen?

**David:** Well, I should mention that the uniform is designed so that students cannot take it off by themselves. This should be understandable once you've seen the function the uniform must serve on the students' desks. You can imagine that a certain period of adjustment is beneficial even for a measure like this. So we ask parents of new students to make sure their children wear the uniform at home for two weeks before starting school to get used to the feel of it. Unfortunately, it happens time and again that some children reject the uniform so strongly that they try to take it off at any cost. Which was also the case with this student. Fortunately, the uniforms are cut-resistant, and he was unable to take it off. But the attempt was noticed. As a consequence, the student must wear these mittens for a period of two weeks whenever he is unsupervised—which is mostly during breaks—to prevent him from grabbing a pair of scissors.

**MT:** But is there a possibility that he could have access to scissors during recess?

**David:** No, of course not. For one thing, he's not completely unsupervised, and for another, it's more of a symbolic measure. But of course, it's also somewhat uncomfortable for him.

In the meantime, Mike has already been released by Mr. Stone and is leaving the room. As he does so, he continues to be tracked by the surveillance system. And as he steps into the hallway, the camera automatically switches, and we can continue to see him. It's noticeable that Mike is trying to walk quickly but not run, and in doing so, he keeps running his gloves over his uniform.

**MT:** Can you explain the student's behavior, specifically his strange gait and hand movements?

**David:** Yes, we've made some observations and conducted interviews, and we can explain many of our students' behaviors. In this case, it has a lot to do with the fact that the student is still new and many things are unfamiliar to him. On top of that, this student has particular difficulty accepting his

uniform. It's tight and covers almost his entire body—something the student wasn't used to before. So he keeps trying to pull at the uniform to loosen it. That's not possible, though, and even less so with the gloves on right now. It will take a while before he accepts it. As for the fast pace, I should explain another rule: Students are not allowed to run inside the building, but of course they know their steps and movements are being monitored. So all students strive to reach the playground as quickly as possible so they can start moving around there.

**MT:** Oh, okay, that makes sense, especially since he was the last one allowed to leave the classroom.

**David:** Yes, sure, that's part of his punishment, which he has to deal with.

The images on the screen keep changing until Mike reaches the door to the playground. As soon as he's in the playground, he starts running, and the system initially struggles to track him, but it quickly adjusts and zooms in. It's clear that nearly all the children in the playground are constantly on the move.

Then I glance out the window again and see some slightly older children running laps in the courtyard's square, just like on a sports field. In the center of the courtyard, they're also playing tag enthusiastically. Nearly all the playground equipment is in use as well.

If my report has piqued your interest, you are welcome to apply to the "School of Intensive Pedagogy" for a spot for your child as well. The school currently still has openings.