

First-Day Fly

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Adapted by Fishtank Staff

- 73 There are only two days that matter to you. Two days that count. Your birthday, which is like a million days away, and tomorrow, which is the first day of school. And normally you don't like school. Because there's not much to like about it. The hallways always smell funny, and they don't do nothing but lead you to teachers. And teachers don't do nothing but remind you that they already got their education and now it's time for you to get yours right before telling you to head back down the hallway to the principal's office because you can't stop talking about how Thomas Baker stepped on your foot with his dirty boots and turned your sneaker into a construction site. Thomas Baker got feet like surfboards. But he don't surf to school. He apparently hikes through a forest that you've never seen around here. Hikes through ditches or something. Swamps, maybe. Anyway, you weren't even talking to no one about him. You were just murmuring *Big Foot Baker* under your breath, bending over at your desk, licking your thumb
- 74 and scrubbing the brown crust from your babies, scratching the dirt off gently with your nail just like how your mother wipes sleep from your eyes on the mornings you're too lazy to wash your face. You know this is how you bring things back to life. But when it doesn't work, when Thomas Baker's boot mud proves itself to be gold medal boot mud, you decide to attack it with one of the pointy corners of a protractor.

How were you supposed to know geometry is apparently more important than your drip? How were you supposed to hear anything Mrs. Montgomery had to say about triangles and diameters and whatever a hypotenuse is when your sneakers are practically bleeding to death? Bleeding! I mean, can't she see what kind of stress you're under, dealing with such an emergency while also trying to figure out how to use a protractor (who knows how to use a protractor?) and then the rush of hallelujah that comes over you once you realize the protractor is the answer to really scraping the leather clean (*that's* how you use a protractor). Ain't she ever had her fresh ruined? Had her fit downgraded and dismissed because some little boy ain't learned how to use his grown man feet yet? Ain't she ever been through this kind of pain? Maybe she has, but she's forgotten. So Mrs. Montgomery sends you to the principal's office.

- 75 Again. And everybody moos like cows because they're all immature. Again. And you suck your teeth, but in a mature way.

And that's school.

Well, that's school every day after the first day. But tomorrow is the first day. A day that counts. And you are ready for it. *Ready*. Your older brother has finally given you his favorite pair of jeans, which happens to be your favorite pair of jeans, but when you've asked to borrow them in the past, he's always told you no and he's always said it with bite and growl. Told you they already broken in. Told you the knees are perfect, and you might step in wild and rip the knee from a slash to a hole, and a hole ain't fly. But now he can't fit them, so now he's told you yes.

Yes. You can't wait. A week ago, you turned them inside out, washed them in cold water, hung them over the shower rod to drip dry because the dryer would turn them into tights. And ain't nothing wrong with tights, but they'd surely guarantee a hole. Somewhere. In the wrong place. At the worst time.

76 You asked your mother to iron them because she's the best ironer you've ever known. Princess Press. Iron Woman. Can turn wrinkled fabric into something like thinly sliced pieces of wood. She knows how to steam and starch a thing to life. Make it look newer than it looked when it was new. But she said she ain't your maid and asked if you thought the reason she taught you to iron at six years old was so that she could keep doing it for you. You almost sucked your teeth, but didn't, because you love your life and would hate to lose it before the first day of school over a pair of hand-me-down jeans. Instead, you set up the ironing board, put water in the iron, and got to work. First the left leg. You set it flat and press the iron to it and push the button that triggers the steam, causing it to billow out like the ghosts of wrinkles being set free. You have no idea what it's doing — what the steam is really for — but you know this is what you do to make wrinkled things straight. This is ironing. Left leg, right leg. Back and forth across the fabric, steam steam steam. You're careful not to put creases in the jeans because no one should crease their jeans. No one. Not you. Not your brother. Not Mr. Sheinklin, who, for some reason, never got the no-crease memo. Should've been a geometry teacher because his jeans always have the wrongest right angles, and probably some hypotenuses, too. But he don't teach math at all. He teaches . . . you don't actually know what he teaches. But you have him this year for homeroom, and you figure this is your chance to show him what a smooth pair of jeans supposed to look like. Denim like a calm lake, not a rolling river, or a sharp iceberg. Creases are for church pants. And you ain't wearing church pants to school, even if Jesus asked you to.

77 When you finished ironing them, you hung the jeans across the chair in your room. It's been a week. They're still there. You haven't touched them. Haven't even moved the chair, except for a minute ago when you grabbed the plastic bag from the seat. Something you bought yesterday. Always a tricky experience, moving through the store, past the jewelry counter through the jungle of women's underwear where everything hangs in single pieces, to the factory of men's underwear where everything is folded and packaged like cotton marshmallows. You push a finger through the packaging, puncturing the transparent skin of it, ripping it open before finally pulling a shirt from the strange plastic cocoon housing three of the most beautiful butterflies ever. The white is blinding. You shake the shirt free from its fold, lines cutting through it, a cotton tic-tac-toe board. But, like jeans, T-shirts also can't be creased. Especially not a fresh white. They're supposed to look like this is the first time they've been worn, but not *your* first time ever wearing them, if that makes sense. It makes sense to you. So you gotta get rid of the lines. But not by using an iron. Because it's still just a T-shirt. An undershirt, as your mother calls it. You don't want to take it *too* seriously. So you have to take it really seriously. You put it on a hanger, and hang it on the shower rod, right where you hung the jeans to dry. You close the bathroom door, lock it. Turn on the water. *Hot* hot. Then, sit on the toilet (not like that) and wait.

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And wait.

And wait. As steam fills the room, and the creases slowly soften and fall away. Until your brother bangs on the door. He has to go. You tell him you're almost done. He tells you he can't

wait. But you know you just need five more minutes, but he tells you he can't hold it. Then you hear another voice, a harder bang. This time it's your mother and she's telling you that water, like money, don't grow on trees, so if you ain't washing your body you need to cut the shower off unless you want to see steam turn into smoke, and you have no idea what that means but you know it would be foolish to find out. Even though,

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she was the one who taught you the shower steam trick in the first place. Taught you how to make fresh look like you and not a first day of school costume. But she's still your mother. So when she says turn the shower off, you turn the shower off. There's so much steam you can barely see, but you know the shirt has to be at least close to creaseless by now. You open the door to find your brother bent in half. He's angry but unable to speak. You know there's a punch or something he's saving for you, but you don't have time to stress about it.

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Because you still have to get your shoes together. Gotta unlace them, re-lace them, and make sure there's absolutely no evidence of *Big Foot Baker*, make sure his smudge from last year is gone — gone gone — and the creases and wrinkles you've put in these shoes over the course of the last however many months it's been since you got them on your birthday are at least clean, since they can't be ironed or steamed out. You've cleaned them almost every day with toothbrush and toothpaste, rag and soap, and sometimes the sharp corner of a protractor, which is even *more* useful when it comes to picking rocks out the soles.

In your room, you stand in front of the mirror for the dress rehearsal. Because you can't risk it on the day of. You have to run it through. Test it out. So you put the jeans on, pull them up and fasten them around your scrawny waist. They fit you how they used to fit your brother before he got grown. Before the knee slash became a thigh slash. You still got about an inch in the waist, and at least two inches waterfalling around your ankles — enough space to be comfortable. Enough space to wear them for a while if you take good care of them. Next the white tee goes on. Wrinkle-free, but not overdone. It looks like you ain't trying too hard to be cool. To be fresh. You just are because you are. And then, the sneakers. The shoes. The crowns of the feet. Not new, but faithful and dependable when it comes to your fly. Yeah. And you look in the mirror. Like, yeah. And you think. Yeah. You fly. I'm fly. Gon' be fly tomorrow. Gon' put some fresh in that funky hallway. On the first day. A day that counts. Again. And you are ready for it. Again. You, newer than you looked when you were new. And tomorrow, the excitement in the morning will somehow keep you from washing your face. And you will suck your teeth as your mother shakes her head, licks her thumb to clean crust from your eyes. Because that's how you bring things back to life.

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Again.
You.

Smile. Because.
You.

know. You k n o w.
You.

Will be.
Fly. So fly.