

IT'S THE
FIRST DAY
OF SCHOOL...
FOREVER!

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FEIWEL AND FRIENDS
NEW YORK

DAY ONE

I wanted the rest of the afternoon to drag on forever. I didn't want the final bell to ring. I knew it would be the final bell for *me*.

But the afternoon seemed to fly by in five minutes flat.

When the bell rang, I jumped to my feet. My legs felt shaky. My throat was too dry to swallow. My eyes darted from side to side, as if I expected Darnell and his buddies to jump me right in the classroom.

I hurried to the door, but Shelly stepped in front of me. "Did anyone warn you?" she asked in a whisper.

"Yes," I said. "I—"

"Did they tell you the football team plans to punch your lights out as soon as you step out of the building?"

“Yes,” I said. “They told me.”

“Okay,” she said. “Just wondered.” Then she added, “It’s nothing personal, Artie. I mean, Darnell and the other guys are really the nicest kids in the school. They never get into fights or anything.”

“Could I walk out with you?” I asked. My voice cracked. “Maybe if you and I are walking together, they won’t want to punch me into orange-juice pulp.”

“I wish I could,” Shelly said. “But I have a tennis lesson.”

She gave me a little wave and hurried out the door.

She’s so totally nice, I told myself. She really wanted to help me.

I was wasting time. I knew what I had to do. Get to my locker. Dump all my stuff. Sneak out through a back door and run home.

I had to be fast. The football players might already be ready and waiting for me. Maybe waiting by the front door. Maybe waiting down on the street.

I kept my eyes alert as I trotted down the hall along the row of lockers. I stopped in front of mine and dropped my backpack to the floor.

My hand was shaking so hard, I could barely grip the combination lock.

The hall was still crowded with kids. I kept

glancing behind me, expecting to see the angry football players swarming in on me.

I checked the back of my hand. That's where I wrote the lock combination this morning so I wouldn't forget it: "30" to the right. "12" to the left. "00" to the right.

I heard footsteps. Heavy running footsteps.

I gasped. Turned around.

No. A bunch of kids hurried past without looking at me.

I turned back to the lock. I held it with both hands to stop it from shaking.

30-12-00.

I tugged on the lock.

No. It didn't budge.

Did I do something wrong?

I checked the black Sharpie writing on my hand. "30-12-00."

I had it right. I must have turned it wrong.

I glanced all around. No sign of my punishers.

I took a deep breath. Began to twirl the lock dial again. Carefully . . . very carefully.

I tugged it down. No. The lock didn't spring open.

"Come on! Come on! *Open!*" I shouted angrily. I kicked the locker.

I was frantic. I had to get away from here before they found me.

I grabbed the side of the locker door with both hands and tried to pull it open. No.

I tried to slide my fingers under the metal door and pry it open.

I was straining my muscles, pulling on the door with all my strength when I felt a tap on my shoulder.

I gasped. And spun around. And stared at Darnell, breathing hard over me.

“Dude, what’s up with you? Now you’re breaking into my locker?” he said. “Is there something you want in there?”

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I made a gulping sound. I pulled my hands from the locker door and glanced at the number near the top.

Oops. Wrong locker.

“My bad,” I said. I backed away. “My locker is over there. Sorry. You know. First day of school.”

I could tell from the deep scowl on Darnell’s face that he didn’t accept my apology. He began to breathe harder, his big chest heaving up and down beneath his T-shirt.

He was about to pounce.

Down the hall, I saw a bunch of other boys with hard expressions on their faces. They were moving toward me with their hands clenched into fists. Somehow I could tell they weren’t coming to welcome me to my new school.

Time to run away.

I didn't wait. I moved like a running back. I took a few running steps right at them. Just to fake them out.

Then I made a sharp swerve, spun around, and took off down the hall in the other direction.

My move didn't fool them at all. Darnell led the way as they came thundering after me. It sounded like a cattle stampede in one of those old movies.

Kids leaped out of the way. The football players lowered their heads and ran like . . . like football players.

I whipped around a corner. I was looking for a door, a way out. Maybe if I made it outside, I could hide behind some parents who had come to pick up their kids.

But this hallway just led to another hallway. Gasping for breath, I tried to run harder. But my side started to ache. My leg muscles began to throb.

The team members were close behind, shouting as they ran:

“Hey, dead meat—”

“Don't run away. Be a man!”

“We won't hurt you *too* much!”

“Dead Meat! You know your name? It's Dead Meat!”

Very clever.

I knew I couldn't run much further. I spun around another corner—and spotted an open locker.

I didn't have to think about it. I dove into the locker and pulled the door shut.

Did they see me? Had I put myself in a trap?

My heart pounded so hard, my chest ached. I held my breath. I listened.

They thundered right past the locker and kept going.

I could hear them roaring down the hall. I waited a few seconds. Then I popped open the locker door and jumped out. I darted in the other direction, searching for a way out.

I knew in a few seconds they'd turn around and come back after me.

When I saw the stairs leading down to the basement, I screeched to a stop. Could I lose them down there?

There were definitely more places to hide in that dark, creepy basement, I decided. I grabbed the railing and dove down the stairs two at a time.

I found myself back in the dusty, dimly lit, cobwebbed hall. Ducking under the fat pipes overhead, I made my way past closed doors.

My shoes kicked up the thick layer of dust on the concrete floor. I heard machinery humming, water flowing through pipes, strange squeaks and squeals.

I listened for the shouts and heavy, galloping

footsteps of the football team. Had they figured out that I was down here?

Yes. I heard shouts far behind me. Getting louder. Where should I hide?

Shadows reached out as if to grab me. A fat spider dangled in front of my face. I brushed it away as I studied the long hall.

Most of the doors were closed. I passed a small supply closet filled with buckets and dried-up mops. No room for me in there.

I peered into the next room. Too dark to see anything.

“Oooooohhhh.” Was that a low groan from the back of the room? Was someone in there?

I fought back my fear. Tried to slow my thundering heartbeats.

I had to keep moving. I started to jog, brushing away cobwebs as I ran.

I didn’t stop till I reached the book room. I stepped inside, breathing hard. I glanced at the stack of monitors against the wall. They all showed empty classrooms.

No sign of Mr. Blister.

I gazed around the room. Books were stacked from the floor to the ceiling.

I decided I could hide back in the bookshelves.

The tall shelves rose up like dark walls. A perfect place to lose my pursuers.

I slipped between two rows of shelves and made my way to the back wall. The shelves blocked out all light. It was hot back here. It smelled of old dust and decay.

I heard shouts out in the hall. The football players were coming close to the book room.

I started to hunch down against one of the shelves. But then I glimpsed an open doorway in the back wall.

What was back there?

My heart pounding, I crept along the shelf, then darted into the room. I pulled the door shut behind me.

Total blackness.

My hand fumbled against the wall till I found a light switch. I clicked it, and a ceiling light flashed on. Blinking, I waited for my eyes to adjust.

I was in a long, narrow room. The floor was black. So were the walls.

“Hey—” I cried out. I wasn’t alone. I saw dozens of people jammed into the room. People standing together side by side in rows of four. Some standing on low metal tables.

It took only a few seconds to realize they weren’t

moving. They weren't alive. Were they mannequins?

They were wrapped in some kind of gauze. Like mummies. Four long rows of human-size mannequins. Their heads and bodies were hidden under thick layers of gauze.

I swallowed hard. My throat suddenly felt dry. I felt a stab of fear in my chest.

What *were* they? Why were they hidden down here in the basement of the school?

I took a step closer. I reached out a hand. I touched the head of the nearest figure.

And it *spoke*.

"I'm Artie," it said in a tinny voice. *My* voice!

"I'm Artie. I'm Artie. I'm Artie."

"*Noooooo!*" I opened my mouth in a scream of horror.

I fell back . . .

. . . fell back . . .

. . . and woke up in my bed. Still screaming. Woke up in my bed, shrieking my lungs out. Back in my room. Under the covers in my own bed.

Was the whole school day a dream? *Was* it?

DAY ONE

I stopped screaming a few seconds before the alarm went off.

The loud buzz startled me, and I fell out of bed. I landed hard on the wood floor. My head hit the floor and bounced once or twice. I actually saw stars, just like in the cartoons.

I tried to blink away the pain that throbbed through my head. And tried to make the room stop spinning.

Before I could pull myself up, Mom walked into my room.

“Artie, what are you doing down on the floor?”

“I can’t believe it,” I muttered. “How could I fall out of bed two mornings in a row?”

Mom stared hard at me.

“And I hit my head again,” I said.

She walked over and helped pull me to my feet. “You’re just nervous about your first day of school,” she said.

“Huh?” I tugged down my pajama shirt and squinted at her. “First day? Did you forget yesterday?”

“What was yesterday?” Mom asked. “Sunday. What about Sunday?”

“Yesterday was the first day of school,” I insisted.

She rubbed my hair. “Artie, I think you hit your head really hard. You *know* that today is the first day of school.”

She picked up a pile of dirty clothes I’d tossed on the floor. “Now hurry up and get dressed. Your brother is already downstairs. I’m making waffles.”

I watched her carry the clothes out of my room.

“We had waffles yesterday morning,” I said to myself. I reached up and felt the side of my hair. Not sticky.

I stood there without moving for a long moment. Trying to get my thoughts together. So . . . my first day at Aardvark Middle School had all been a dream. A nightmare because I was stressed about starting a new school.

It had all seemed so real. So *painfully* real.

But today was the actual first day of school.

How did that make me feel?

Awesome!

That had been the worst, most frightening, most horrifying day of my life. And it hadn't happened. None of it was real.

"Yaaaaaay!" I let out a happy cheer. I did a crazy dance around my room.

I was getting a fresh start. A whole new beginning to my school year.

What to wear on the first day? I'd spent hours thinking about it. But I just couldn't decide.

Two days before, I spread all my T-shirts out on the bed. Which was the coolest? None of them? I definitely needed new T-shirts.

Finally, I picked the black T-shirt that just said T-SHIRT across the front. It was pretty funny, I thought. I pulled it down over my jeans.

I picked up my phone. The little battery up in the corner was blinking. No power. But didn't I just power it up yesterday?

I guessed I was still mixed up because of that very real dream.

Oh, well. Plenty of time to power it up while I was having breakfast.

I found the charger. Stuck it into the phone. Then

I jammed the plug into the outlet near my floor.
And . . .

ZZZZZZZZZZAAAAAAP.

Electricity jolted through my body. I did a wild dance around my room. My arms thrashed the air, out of control.

Didn't the same thing happen in my dream?

I could still feel the current rushing through me as I hurried down to the kitchen for breakfast. Dad had already left for work. Mom was pouring herself a cup of coffee.

Wowser was at his usual place beneath the table. He spent his whole life waiting for someone to drop some food on the floor.

My five-year-old brother Eddy was already at the table, digging his fork deep into a stack of syrup-covered toaster waffles.

“Morning, Piggy,” I said.

He burped in reply. Eddy has one major talent. He can burp whenever he wants to. And his burps are totally wet and disgusting.

“Waffles again?” I said to Mom.

She squinted at me as she took a sip from her coffee mug. “Again? What do you mean?”

“Didn't we have them yesterday?”

Eddy laughed. “We had cereal. Remember? I spilled my milk?”

“We haven’t had toaster waffles in weeks,” Mom said.

“Oh. Right,” I replied.

I sat down across from Eddy. He swung his hand and knocked over his orange-juice glass. A river of orange juice came washing over to my side.

I jumped up. I’d almost gotten orange-juice stains on my jeans.

Eddy laughed. Then he burped again.

I rolled my eyes. “You are so not funny.”

Mom wiped up the orange juice. “Artie, don’t forget your dentist appointment after school,” she said. “Bring your cell phone. Take the bus to the dentist and call me when you get there.”

The toaster at the end of the table popped. I grabbed two waffles and dropped them onto my plate. They burned my fingers. But they smelled so good!

I reached for the syrup bottle. Eddy reached for it at the same time. “More syrup,” he grunted.

He squeezed the bottle. Thick brown syrup sprayed up from the bottle.

“Oh, nooooo!” I uttered a cry. I tried to duck away.

But a thick glob of syrup landed in my hair.

“This can’t be happening!” I shrieked. I jumped away from the table. Too late. I felt the sweet, sticky goo sliding down the side of my head. And I felt it trickle onto the shoulder of my T-shirt.

I reached my hand up and slid it along my hair. Now my hand was sticky and wet, too.

“Mom!” I cried. “Help me! You’ve *got* to help me!”

“Artie, calm down,” she said quietly. “It’s only syrup.”

“N-no. You don’t understand,” I stammered. “My dream. The horrible nightmare I had about my first day of school. I think it’s *coming* true!”