

Fly

Everything in the world makes you feel like you are fly or you can fly when you're a kid. With the right doorknocker earrings and Reebok classics, jeans fitting to your curves like buses speeding down Webster Ave, you feel like gravity is for punks.

But time tells you the truth. And life, I guess.

My best friend Trudy reads everything. Her hair is a black cotton ball forever reaching for the clouds. We are both the youngest in our families, which are like trees with tangled branches: Older siblings, different daddies, irritated mothers. She wears boys clothes from the Goodwill – trousers that her skinny legs peek out of at the ankle, white button down shirts with suit vests. My mother says she's odd. I figure she's just creative. I asked her once why she dressed that way and first she said, I like doing things different from everybody else. I nodded and looked in her face. She was staring at a distant plane overhead when she added, I can't really afford anything else.

That's why we're friends. Trudy tells the truth, even when it makes her feel bad. Only poor people spend all their money trying not to look poor, I told her. She pulled her eyes from the sky then and smiled at me like we had the juiciest secret ever.

Anyway, it was Trudy who said Toni Morrison wrote that if you want to fly you got to give up the shit that weighs you down.

How you figure out what that is, I asked her.

Practice letting go of shit, probably.

But we ain't got shit. What's to let go of?

She didn't answer at first. We sat on the cracked cement steps outside the

cafeteria after lunch during thirty-minute recess.

Finally, she said, Easier for us to fly, then.

It sounded dope, but it was easy for her to say. When kids stared at Trudy's latest thrift store gear and kids stepped to her to make a thing about it, she would roll up her sleeves like a magician or some shit and get into an exaggerated stance. She was Olive Oyl mimicking Popeye. It also happened that her father was a Black Belt. She was slim but she wasn't weak.

Still, if the wind blew hard, she might take off with the waxy Now and Later wrappers and empty Dorito bags into the air. I was always the kind of fat that oozed out of my t-shirt at the top of my jeans and spread when I sat. My weight made me believe I wasn't fly. I never imagined air under my arms, except when I dreamt about floating like Dipsy Doodle wrappers along the Bronx River. Fat kept me pressed to earth. Gravity was a bully, dragging me down, pressing my belly out, filling out my tummy and my breasts and my ass at the same rate so that I was a paperweight.

I wanted to get up off the ground, but I had no idea how I could even start.

The first time I tried, I was acting like my favorite fly girl, Queen Latifah. I learned all the verses to Ladies First, especially hers. Good thing, because one day after the substitute teacher left us for a while, Teisha challenged me to a battle. Teisha was big as me, just taller and bug-eyed. Her hair was a spiky perm hosting new growth, so she always looked like she had just run downhill to class. Her fists had dimples like giant baby hands. All the fat congregated in her chest. When she ran her boobs made a motion like they were swaddled together jumping rope above her stomach.

A rap battle in sixth grade is not real and it's not deep. You just have to know all the words somebody else wrote and spit them like you're a real emcee. I was beyond ready. I was never good at sports. I'm not that good at school. But I love rap.

I had listened to "Ladies First" so much for a moment just like this, rewinding the tape to the first note of those horns, turning up the TV so loud when the video came on my mother would yell.

Kelly turn it off, everybody else is sick of Princess Latifah.

Queen, I yelled back.

Turn it off or down, shit!

Thirty minutes before school let out for the week, we stood facing each other at front of the class. The lights were off, so we looked extra dramatic in the cool blue afternoon. When it was my time to shine, I knew every single line, even the ones she was supposed to rap as Monie Love.

Teisha, on the other hand, couldn't cash the check her mouth had written. She fumbled and stuttered. She paused awkwardly. She was embarrassed. What would have happened if it had been a real battle with words that we wrote ourselves? Anyway, I won and she was pissed.

We only won bragging rights but sometimes it ended up like a lopsided crush: One person took it more serious than the other. At the end, when the class quit whooping and hollering, Teisha said, I'm gonna beat your chubby ass.

I wanted to point out that she was chubby, too. Her Public Enemy shirt was so small that the man inside the target disappeared and it looked like a black moon was struggling to rise through the weight.

That first time? I ran.

I wasn't a fighter yet. I could have practiced, but you gotta be ready to fail, to fall. Trudy looked at her hands when I told her about it and asked, You afraid you don't know how strong you are?

I just laughed at her. Nah, I said, getting hit looks like it hurts.

It might feel good to hit somebody though, she said.

Hells yeah, but then she hits back.

Kelly, that's why they call them fights.

I didn't even try fighting at first, but not because I was on some nonviolent Martin Luther King Jr. shit. I just didn't want to bleed. But Teisha never let that battle go.

She made up reasons to come after my ass: You stepped on my Jordans. You rolled your eyes at me. I'mma fuck you up after school.

Funny what you can do when you're trying to fly. I flashed my library card at the security guard at the Fordham library one afternoon when I thought it seemed better to run there for safety. If you had to be quiet in the library, they probably wouldn't let someone beat your ass there, either.

He paused and nodded saying, Slow down young lady while he let me through the turnstile, worn out but safe. Teisha was behind me sweating, trying to stroll in undetected.

He asked her for her library card and for a second I panicked, but she said, I don't have one. She didn't listen to him as he told her about applying, thank God. Teisha stared at me with a look that said I couldn't stay in the library forever (that was exactly my plan) and bounced.

At the library I could think about my life. People either fight or they run. Or they got something that's theirs that they do or they have and that's how you know them.

We knew this one fly girl around the way, Jeanie. She was like Teena Marie and Janet Jackson combined. Everybody called her white chocolate. I heard she started to mellow after she started having kids, but before that she carried a shank in her thick ankle socks and plaited razors in her braids which were too thick for anyone to notice the blades.

Jeanie was a guardian angel for wack kids around the way like me. She stuck up for this girl named Tasha who got sent away when she wasn't that much older than us. Tasha's mom Janet hit her one time too many, so she cut her and got sent away.

These were chicks with real ass problems. The things I thought about: I liked math, but I wasn't sure I would want to teach it for a living, though my mom decided it didn't matter what I wanted as long as I had a job. For the second school year in a row, I had a crush on a boy named Sean who probably would never leave Webster Projects and who didn't know I existed.

Math was fresh because it made sense. The whole world is made of numbers. A Little Debbie Pecan Swirl is really just 3.14 ways of explaining deliciousness.

Boys are something different. No equations help pin them down.

But Sean was such a good runner, when he sprinted, it looked like he was really flying because his feet didn't seem to touch the ground. (Trudy said I was bugging out, that he's a mere mortal and actually kind of slow and then I asked her if she was willing to bet our friendship on it and she changed the subject.) When he ran around the block with basketball shorts flapping around his muscular calves like flags, he was a flash of

red and white. I felt like a stalker when I watched him, perched on our fire escape like an owl, but I couldn't help it if he had the body of an Adonis.

I had tried to talk to him once during class and he just gave me a chin check, like he recognized that I was trying to say things to him but he didn't actually want to expend any energy talking. He scowled and talked with a low menacing whisper voice. The older boys he ran with exchanged small plastic bags of vials with white rock or green leaves, but I never saw him with any of that stuff, so I just assumed he wasn't a dealer.

How my mother knew I liked the boy, I had no idea, but when she found out it was one of her daily reminders to me.

Kelly, your homework and chores better be done before you go out.

Kelly, pick me up some milk on the way home since you eat every damn thing in here and if I have to eat cereal with water I am sending your ass to fat camp.

Kelly, stay the hell away from that boy Sean. We don't need another mouth to feed around here and I know you know what I mean.

I listened and nodded because that was the only response I could give without getting slapped in the mouth.

Teisha tried to pick a fight with me one more time before I started thinking about a more permanent solution to end it for good. The exercise was good, but Trudy was right – I couldn't let her bully me forever. I didn't like the way it felt to be afraid, like I had all the weight in my tummy wrapped around my ankles, keeping my feet on the ground.

When I was in elementary, Mom warned me that the pounds would just creep up on me. The pints of butter pecan I inhaled on the front steps of school instead of coming home to an empty house; the Chinese takeout; the four-for-a-dollar fried wings — It'll all

go right to your hips, she would say. Of course, she was right. The fat came on out of nowhere, like my period.

Mom worked all the time, which made me a lonely kid. And when I got lonely, I ate.

But one day, I literally ran into somebody who would help me figure out how to fly. Teisha was close enough I could hear her heaving over my shoulder once I bolted through the library door. The security guard just nodded – he didn't even bother to ask for my card anymore.

I barreled through the turnstile and right into this tiny woman who should have fallen down but instead only moved her weight back on her heels, like she was Neo from The Matrix. She was thin with braids pulled back from her face, a little overbite that showed when she frowned first and then slowly started to smile.

We just stared at each other for a minute. I was shocked I hadn't knocked her down, so I kept thinking about it while I watched her pick up her book.

Isn't there something you should say to me?

I'm so sorry, I said in one breath. I didn't realize I wasn't talking to you. My eyes went to the book on strength training. You lift weights, huh? Maybe that's why you didn't fall when I rushed you. Because I'm like twice your size.

She laughed at me the way Trudy always does. No, I train boxers. You play sports?

Is snacking a sport?

She laughed again, shorter that time, looking sad. Maybe run over by the gym instead of here some time. We could use more girls in the gym. I can show you some

moves. Behind the pizzeria. There's no sign but you'll hear us. The window's usually open.

Cool, I said. Sorry again for dropping your book and bumping into you.

No problem, kid, she said, tucking the book against her muscular forearm. It's not the first time something almost knocked me down and failed.

All night after that I thought about what that gym must be like. Were other fat girls training to be boxers over there and this was the first I knew about it, all by mistake? Was this the place where I would learn how to fly? I even called Trudy about it.

I've seen that place, she said. Doesn't look like much, but that could be cool.

That's it? That's all you got?

It ain't the damn Chocolate Factory or anything. Just a building where people fight. Chill.

I couldn't chill over it for some reason until the next afternoon when I walked over and peered inside. From the outside, the sad leather ropes sagged on a corner ring swaying slightly. Brown, lean men in dingy white t-shirts and basketball shorts, old gloves at their chins, eyes focused on the future. The salty smell of sweat like an ocean of evaporated anger in the air.

Gravity had skipped this place. Even if their feet were on the ground, all the boxers here had to do was decide.

Mira, you came! The lady from the library said putting her arm around me. I'm

Diana, she said.

Kelly, I said, still staring. No fat girls like me, just another lady, older, muscular and compact like Diana.

Congratulations for making it through the front door. A lot of kids don't even take the first step. But there's something about you. You have a lot of heart.

I have a lot of a lot of things, I said.

Don't say mean things about yourself. I've trained girls and boys twice your size, so big they couldn't breathe. Some of them lost weight — only because they stopped being mean to themselves first — but some of them didn't. They just knew how to stand ready for whatever and not back down.

I had never thought about being mean to myself with fat jokes. Dissing myself first was a habit. It kept anybody else from having the first chance at it.

Sorry, I said to Diana. Force of habit.

No need to apologize, not to me, anyway. Let me show you around. You saw most of what there is to see from the sidewalk, but get acquainted, see what you think.

About the gym?

Yeah, the gym, the way it feels to be in here. If you feel like you want to come back?

I liked that Miss Diana always made me feel like I had a choice.

Word, was all I could think to say.

An old swinging black punching bag looked smudged with loser tears. The beige walls held framed pictures of lightweight guys and one woman — Maureen Shea — declaring them boxing champions from around the world who had trained here. All of

them looked at the camera, mad as fuck, holding up their fists. Proof they had knocked at least one person out and would do it again.

A dozen people moved around the rest of the space, jumping thick brown ropes like they were weightless, or punching out a rhythm on the speed bag, so that the only sound aside from the occasional shout from a coach and the faint salsa music playing from a small CD player was weight against the ground, shoes and leather.

You want to try? Diana asked.

Fighting?

Boxing.

It might be too expensive but thank you, I said, looking at the door.

No fee.

Is this like a fitness pyramid scheme? Because my mother will kill me.

I could already picture it: One minute I was trying to be like Michelle Rodriguez and shit and then next minute goons would be at my house collecting my mother's jewelry to pawn. I wouldn't live to see thirteen.

Diana laughed again. No, no. Listen to you. I work with some champions, some Olympians, all the time. I love working with them but what I miss is finding someone like you, somebody who doesn't know what, if anything, they can do. There's no pressure, and no fee. But it's not going to be easy and at first, you won't think it's fun. But come by after school a couple afternoons a week. I'll teach you what I think I know. And at anytime you don't like it, you can quit, no sweat. We got a deal?

Yo, I didn't tell Diana this but I never get deals. I don't win contests. My last name is Smith, which is at the end of the alphabet, so when things are done in

alphabetical order, I'm usually the person in the back.

At school, in size order lines, I'm in the middle because I'm average height, so even when the teacher says reverse size order once a year to give the tall kids a shot at being in the front, I end up in the same spot. All that to say this offer was not the kind of thing that ever happened to me.

Yes, we have a deal, I said. Usually I would say, let me talk it over with my mother first, but this time I knew right away I didn't even want to talk to anybody about it, I just wanted to say yes.

Maybe learning how to box was going to get me up off the ground.

When I started I felt like Miss Diana had made the biggest understatement I ever heard. It wasn't just hard as hell, it was exhausting trying to run and remember my form and where to put my feet. Everything took more effort: I was so sore pulling on a t-shirt after punching bag drills it felt like moving my arms slowly through fire. Even after I stopped moving, I kept sweating. Something about my metabolism, Miss Diana said, but I just wanted to stop dripping when I wasn't actually moving anymore. Back at school during lunchtime, I told Trudy about Diana and the gym. She just looked out at the street at first. Then she asked, You a boxer now?

No, not for real. I'm going to learn how to box though, just to get in shape so I don't have to run all the time from people like Teisha.

Yo, if you put on gloves and go to a place where people are boxing, that makes you a boxer, she said, end of story.

I'm like twice your size, Trudy. Coach Diana says I shouldn't talk bad about myself, but I'm just being real. I'm not even close to dreaming about having a dream that I'll be a boxer, that's how far away I am. Right now, I walk then jog for 15 minutes without collapsing on pigeon shit and broken glass in the street. I jump rope and hit a bag a couple of times then I go home and try not to eat four Little Debbie Pecan Wheels in a row. Boxers don't do that shit.

One day you will be, though. That's the point. That's the part that's cool, Trudy said.

Yeah, I guess you're right, I said, and then I tried to change the subject. I heard Sean dumped his girlfriend.

I heard that, too, Trudy said, looking at me like she wanted to go back to talking about boxing. He goes through them pretty quickly, though. I think he hangs out at that gym, too.

Word? I said. I started having visions of us being the first husband and wife boxing duo out of the Bronx, even though that was a stretch, since I think I had said half a word to him in my entire life. You think he'll ever want to date me now that I'm working on being smaller?

Trudy rolled her eyes at me. No. He might be into dating an actual boxer, though.

What makes you say that?

Who doesn't like a girl who can knock somebody down?

Coach Diana was impressed at how serious I got about wanting to be fly and to

make my fists work. Maybe four or five weeks into working with her she said, I think you're ready for the next level.

What's there?

Sparring.

Is that the part where I put on the headgear and the mouthpiece and I dance around and try to avoid getting hit in the face even though I probably won't be successful?

Almost, she said smiling.

I know she couldn't believe half shit I asked her or said to her because I could hardly believe it myself. I just figured while we were in there doing crazy stuff that made me sweat half to death, I might as well get the pressing questions in, too.

I'm sparring another girl, right?

Actually, you're strong enough I thought I might pair you with a student about your height. His name is Sean.

My mouth went dry. She couldn't have been talking about my Sean, the only Sean that mattered. But sure enough, Sean Williams, the boy of my dreams, was right there behind Miss Diana looking at me like he had never seen me before. Did I even utter half a word to him in my life, or what that only in my dreams?

You two know each other?

No, we go to the same school, was all I said. He approached and shook my hand. It was exactly how you shake a stranger's hand when you don't realize she's been stalking your entire life.

I'm Kelly, I said. He nodded to show that he heard me, but his eyes widened

quickly to indicate that he didn't give a shit.

Just a few things really frustrated me back then. I didn't like having to run for my life to the freaking library every damn time I did something better than somebody else. I didn't like having to catch my breath for so long before I started figuring out how to actually control it. But the number one thing on my list of pet peeves was being ignored. It wasn't even a fat joke, just a fact: I was big enough to be seen. Sean was doing the main thing on my list. I felt myself getting heated.

Good, this should be pretty simple, Miss Diana said, ducking into the ring and making space for me to duck in after her in one motion. Sean was on his own, dark brown eyes, smooth skin and dimples you could fit coins in. He seemed fine with it. I just got more and more heated.

Boys like him were worse than bullies. My brain wouldn't let it go. I was getting more and more mad thinking about how irritating it is to like someone who just never even sees you.

Think about control, she said. Sean, don't hold back because she's a girl. Kelly, don't be intimidated because he's a boy. I want you to remember every time you've ever run from somebody in your life. Take all of that fear and rage and channel it here, she said, touching my gloves.

I nodded and didn't say anything. I chewed on the mouthpiece, and looked at Sean again from the corner, rethinking my whole crush now. I could hear Teisha in my head, talking about beating my chubby ass. I thought of my mother telling me Sean wasn't worth shit, warning me about being fat, the nice security guard, the last time I tried on a dress that didn't look like a gray sack of clothing and the zipper stopped right

underneath my bra line.

By the time the bell rang, I smacked my gloves together and realized that I wanted all of that shit out of my body right then. Sean wasn't Sean anymore. He was the thing that was in my way. He was the weight of the world, wrapped around my ankles, my chest, my belly, trying to keep me on the ground. Every time I threw a jab or a hook, when I blocked one of his or two or three, I had this new feeling in my chest. Like I was making fire and tossing it out, dragon style.

When I saw a little spit fall out of his mouth when I connected with his jaw, I grinned. He didn't take it easy, and that was the part I loved the most, because he managed to sock me really good in the cheek so that I could taste a little bit of blood from my clenched teeth rubbing against my gum, a cut in a place that was sore long after the bell rang.

Ok, Ok, time, time! Diana yelled, rubbing her temple. She was raising her eyebrows at me as I snapped out of my trance. That was really, really good for your first time sparring. She had a look on her face like she had seen a ghost.

It was only then that Sean looked at me like someone he actually had seen before while he took off his gloves, more heated than even I was at first. He wasn't as beat up looking as me, but I could feel the grin on my face with the salt in my mouth.

Girl you were flying, Miss Diana said.

I couldn't wait to tell Trudy the news.

It was almost the summer before we went to seventh grade and started junior high

school for real. I wasn't skinny like Trudy and I didn't want to be. But I liked my body now.

Sean and I were buddies first — he said he respected a girl who could hold her own — and after we had sparred a couple times, he asked me to be his girl.

I told you, Trudy said, eating a bag of corn chips after lunch. She was starting to gain a little weight, I thought, but I didn't say anything until she brought it up. That's so fly, that was true and you didn't even believe me. I think you had the secret the whole time to being fly, girl. You just have to be a powerhouse. Big, you know. Take up room. I want that. I've been eating everything. I want to be huge.

You saying I'm huge, I asked her.

No, but you learned how to fly and be fly at the same time, being yourself. Looking just like you always have. You didn't have to change. You just had to stand in the place that was yours all along. That's what got you up off the ground.

I nodded and followed her gaze out into the street, listening to the sound of her eating herself bigger. Time does tell you the truth, I thought. And life, I guess.