

Yes, My Name Is Sooner!

If I take just one more, just one more 105-degree dang day, I swear I will get in that town pool without my clothes on!

Now really, did you expect me to wear just underpants in the pool? Underpants! Some people in life just make you sick to your stomach. Me, I'm more decent about things. It's too dang hot, I want to be cool, the shirt comes off, the jeans come off, so do the socks, so do those—yes those. The things parents buy when you're not looking, when they trot you off to Tulsa or Oak City (that's Oklahoma City for you Yankees) to buy cute, stupid, back to school stuff supposedly designed to make you look smarter or your folks get their money back.

But in case this is not clear yet, I'm neither cute nor stupid, and my real name is Justin, but you better call me 'Sooner' cause, well, that is who I am! I go to Catholic school and I'm in sixth grade now, for crying out loud. We wear uniforms there, not cute, stupid clothes, so let's say that altogether now, uniforms!

Admit it, mister, I open my little mouth once, and four letters come out of your big mouth—h-i-c-k.

Do you know—do *you* know I am from none other than Keyes, Oklahoma, population 324-ish? Spell it right, you dummy, because there is another Keys in the state! Ours ain't like the keys to your car where you spent the last half of your last date, I know that so don't pretend you didn't. Let's try this again, and try not to spill that coffee in your lap: K-e-y-e-s. See, you survived that spelling test, which shows you're way ahead of my last fifth-grade 65 grade in the subject at St. Lawrence School.

Larry would survive in Keyes, that's St. Lawrence when the nuns aren't looking, you know. When it gets hot as a griddle in Keyes, what does Larry do? Get upset? Hell no. Go swimming in his damn underpants? He's a saint

what is your problem? Stay inside and get too much gas drinking Dr. Pepper? I hope not.

Let me help me you here: Larry takes everything off (those too), takes a nap on the griddle when it's hot as a griddle, and when it gets to be too much here in the Panhandle, does he panic? Did you or did you not get the saint part of this? Larry simply says, "Turn me over, y'all, I'm done on this side!" Read it yourself, go to Mr. Butler's book on the saint subjects, and tell me I'm a liar!

See? Now that we've established that your new friend Sooner does not lie about saints called Larry that refuse to cool off on griddles in the Oklahoma Panhandle just wearing their underpants; can we go on to the county question now?

You can look up this one as well—this is Cimarron County, and do not, do *not* forget the second *r* or you will regret it! If you can't have a hullabaloo in my city of Keyes, we've got 2,500 of us in the county that can show you their

truck, or their cattle, or their big ass ranch, or our county seat of Boise City, or their church, which probably isn't Catholic but whoop-de-doo to them, too!

Look straight north, and that is Colorado. Slightly right from there is Kansas. Turn the hell around, and you would be in the most worthless, God forsaken, underprivileged state in the union when it's time for Texas-OU weekend in Dallas. Yeah, that one, and we pretend that one does not exist in mine. Look right before you vomit cow dung and you'll see New Mexico.

Figure it out yet? Having fun in my world yet? Do you possibly think I actually *care* yet? Don't get carried away on the friend thing yet, since you'll really never know me yet or forever.

Dad and Mom? Yeah, I have one of both, isn't that what the health textbooks say? No brothers or sisters, though. Dad can drive his 16 miles to the county clerk's office blindfolded after 20 years working there, the first eight after his wedding over in Guymon, then I came along and then there were the next 12.

Do we have to talk about Mom?

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What *About* My Mom?

And why are you here again, and don't you know how damn scared to death I am at this very moment?

I'm up for school's first day one second this second Monday of August, *one God forsaken second*, and already I'm hearing the shouting, shouting, shouting down the hall following an 80-degree summer breeze through the windows that ain't cool at all. "Sooner, Sooner!" Lather, rinse repeat that shampoo three more times in case your mop of sandy blonde, curly hair ain't clean yet, youngster, "Sooner, Sooner!" "Sooner, Sooner!" "Sooner, Sooner!"

Mom, damn it, I know my damn name, and I know what damn time it is, and your damn world may be again coming to a damn end again, and...do not, *do not* go back outside and start to scream and yell at damn 5:00 am and embarrass me and Dad and the neighbors and the entire damn world and the entire State of Oklahoma in the entire damn process.

Where the hell is Dad and where the hell are the pills? Did she take the pills *this time* and what were the pills supposed to do this time?

And she is outside now, in her slip and not her nightgown, oh God not again and thank the god St. Lawrence's nuns teach me about, thank that guy up way up there for a shotgun house that is blocks and not feet from most of the neighbors—the neighbors! The louder it gets, the more I get scared, and scared, and even more scared even still, and now they hear, and I hear before the roosters hear, "Sooner, Sooner!" "Sooner, Sooner!" "Sooner, Sooner!"

Dad, your most grateful son thanks you so kindly for joining this celebration 15 minutes after the fact, now please skip the standard “I’m up anyway to get down to work in Boise City” and help me, once again, *solve this damn problem!*

“Justin David, what is the problem now?” I hear from a father 30 years older than me, just as tall (or short) as me, but wiry stronger than me—and here we go again, the man doesn’t know my name yet again!

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“Dad, dad...my name is Sooner. Sooner! I’m 12 now, why don’t you get that?”

“What I do not get is why your mother is outside at 5:15 am, roaming the streets looking for you when you are not out there.”

I know a classic comeback when I see one, even if I am a 12-year-old boy damn scared to death. “What I do not get, Dad, is she is your wife, and *you* don’t know where the hell she is...”

“And you, young man, you do not know who your mother is!”

“Oh yes I *do*, mister! It’s that thing, roaming Keyes practically in her underwear, not knowing night from day, and getting ready to embarrass the living crap out of me at St. Lawrence just in time for my first day in damn sixth grade!”

Don’t look this way, don’t...now my new best friend (that’s you, in case you forgot) has seen what I’m so mightily unproud of, my own mom walk my neighborhood all but naked, past at least five St. Lawrence classmates’ houses, and head towards the playground and everything else that is Keyes. No cue is needed, there is a new chant in town and it’s not at 6:15 daily Latin Mass at St. Lawrence, it’s down that aisle of pavement and it’s not stopping the “Sooner, Sooner!” “Sooner, Sooner!” “Sooner, Sooner!”

And it’s not stopping a boy of 12 from a summer thunderstorm of tears, either, as he glances frantically out the window onto Hope St—what a laugh, y’all, my street is called hope—as Dad once again, once more races down hope against hope to catch his wife, and yes my mother, before she hits the main drag of Keyes and the police station to drive Chief Sam Sane (keep that one to yourself, idiot) off his fat butt, and drive her home in the patrol car *again* so we can hear *again* the most beloved Keyes Police Chief Sam Sane Memorial Lecture.

Give me a second here while I get into proper character, I’ve heard this one 50 times already. “I know she is sick, Mr. Justice, but she is your responsibility and I’m damn sick and damn tired of having my third shift coffee get cold taking care of her because you can’t or you won’t.”

Somebody you barely know is in a dark hallway now, scrunched in a sandy blonde curls caterpillar ball, and his pajama top is drenched in a little boy’s

tears. His head is buried looking into the dark hallway that is supposedly on Hope St, and he's not Sooner, he is not the snot ass boy that thinks he can go swimming naked, no he ain't Sooner now—he's Fearer.

How, I pray how in hell can it be, that I am taught by nuns in a Catholic school about goodness, and joy, and what family means? I know the drill, Dad: Stay at St. Lawrence where your good money goes, graduate with your eighth-grade class, and you'll still have the edge getting into Norman or Stillwater after you go to the public county high school. Fearer, the sandy, blonde curls caterpillar ball, has flushed all that down the crapper again. How, I pray how in hell can this all be?

And how the hell can a woman as small and weak as my mom, barely strong enough to survive my childbirth that sweltering Panhandle August night in that Guymon hospital 12 years ago, go from the most beautiful artist's brushstrokes of the angels I learn about in Catholic school, to this *thing*, this humiliating thing I'm supposed to call a mother?

Well, my new friend, we just can't put her away anymore. If it was up to yours truly, Mr. Justin David Justice, Jr—oh puke, ain't that another laugh, my family name is Justice—she'd be dumped away by now.

But I was born in 1946, right after the war when Justin Sr. met Precious (*please stop laughing*) at a Guymon church dance following his release from the Marines, and it's 1958 now, and how a big, big word that defines the Justins—make that Dad and Sooner—came into our little world.

Just saying it makes me think of those spelling bees at St. Lawrence School, those atrocious things where Sr. Veronica Mary lines up the boys on one side, the girls on the other, they giggle at us, we ignore them, and the words come flying.

There is a new one now: *D-e-i-n-s-t-i-t-u-t-i-o-n-a-l-i-z-a-t-i-o-n*.

There're 10 tears for every letter in that word for Fearer, the sandy blonde curls caterpillar ball. 220 more reasons for Fearer to sob his balls off. And there's more balling where that one came from.

How do you like these spelling apples? I'll give you 50 more crybabies for *A-c-u-t-e*, another 80 where that came from courtesy of *P-a-r-a-n-o-i-d*, and 90 additional big ones just for good measure if you get *P-s-y-c-h-o-s-i-s* right, and that is Sooner's mom, and you put every annoying, staring, gawking sixth-grade girl to be in her place in their boring spelling bee universe! And, and...that's another 220 tears on Fearer's PJs.

Except Fearer must soon—in five minutes, actually—return to being Sooner. Mom has her pills now, and she has returned to her post-nightmare usual half-asleep, half-zombie reality. What the hell, that gives Fearer another

130 ball busters for yet another spelling bee word carved in supposed justice to make her supposedly normal: *P-s-y-c-h-o-t-r-o-p-i-c-s*.

But don't forget I'm Sooner again now, and it's 5:30 am on my first day of sixth grade at St. Lawrence Catholic School here in mighty, mighty Keyes, Oklahoma. The white dress shirt, blue uniform pants, and cheater SLS emblem tie look mighty, mighty handsome in the mirror, and I have Latin Mass to serve at 6:15 am up at church with the cassock and surplice in the back seat ready to go.

Do you really expect a sandy blonde curl, caterpillar ball to do *that* while sobbing his ass off or his balls off up on the altar? Even if he could dominate the boy's side of that spelling bee with 80 more Fearer tears for *M-e-n-t-a-l-l-y*, and another 30 for *i-l-l*? Heck, I've got at least 680 tears out my eyeballs by now, why I never earned that many indulgences in kindergarten through fifth grade religion classes combined, for Christ's sake.

I'm coming, Justin Sr, the sandy blonde curls caterpillar ball is coming Sooner than y'all think.