It is, at first, a linguistic seduction:

On an otherwise unremarkable September morning, long before I learned to be ashamed of my mother,

If you’ve ever lived near the ocean, perhaps you, like me, equate one or more dependent clauses at the beginning of a periodic sentence to a wave gaining amplitude before it crashes on the shore. It’s a rudimentary metaphor: the wave builds, and by the time we get to the period at the end of the sentence it has crashed. There is a rhythm to the periodic sentence, and it’s near impossible not to be pulled into it. With its sly promise to deliver something remarkable, that first dependent clause—On an otherwise unremarkable September morning—is a somewhat seductive lead in its own right. But it is the second dependent clause—long before I learned to be ashamed of my mother—that gives us our first glimpse into the story’s retrospective, mournful heart. If you’re anything like me (lousy metaphors aside), even at this early point the story has you in its grasp. The rest of the sentence, in conjunction with the story’s title, fulfills the tension by providing a simple explanation for what the story will be about:

. . . she takes my hand and we set off down New Jersey Avenue to begin my very first day of school.

Text and subtext, surface meaning and hidden meaning: Edward P. Jones’s short story “The First Day” begins with a multi-clausal, retrospective first-person intro (something I typically associate with memoir). It is the choice of first-person-present-tense, though, that signals to me that this is carefully crafted art. Just a hint of character, too: a young child, gender not yet revealed, and a mother, her strength and forthrightness (she takes my hand and we set off . . . ) already subtly implied. In my mind I am already on New Jersey Avenue, about a half block away, running to catch up so I don’t get left behind.
I am wearing a checkered-like blue-and-green cotton dress, and scattered about these colors are bits of yellow and white and brown. My mother has uncharacteristically spent nearly an hour on my hair that morning, plaiting and replaiting so that now my scalp tingles. Whenever I turn my head quickly, my nose fills with the faint smell of Dixie Peach hair grease. The smell is somehow a soothing one now and I will reach for it time and time again before the morning ends. All the plaits, each with a blue barrette near the tip and each twisted into an uncommon sturdiness, will last until I go to bed that night, something that has never happened before.

Presently we have fallen out of the retrospective mode and entered the fictive present of the story’s world, to find ourselves in the mind of this sensitive and observant little girl. In three sentences, she cycles through three senses: the blue-and-green checks of her dress; the tingling sensation on her scalp; the scent of Dixie Peach grease in her hair. The sense of ceremony and ritual—we may each be remembering our own first days here—the sense of *everything mattering so much*. The small hint of anxiety when the retrospective voice briefly returns—*I will reach for [the soothing scent of the hair grease] time and time again before the morning ends*—coupled with an almost triumphant last line, another “first.” All the little girls in the world and all their mothers seem to exist in these sentences, each morning’s long fight with brush or comb, though it would be disingenuous not to bring up race at this point, signaled so strongly in the image of the little girl’s mother plaiting her hair.

My stomach is full of milk and oatmeal sweetened with brown sugar. Like everything else I have on, my pale green slip and underwear are new, the underwear having come three to a plastic package with a little girl on the front who appears to be dancing.

Four senses have been evoked now, and we feel the heaviness of the oatmeal in our stomachs and the sugary milk still on our tongues. A touch of humor here, too, but also an awareness on the little girl’s part that other little (white) girls may have more frivolous lives, lives that involve dancing in one’s underwear. A slight heaviness in our hearts now, and thus the story subtly shifts into a conversation about race and class—and we are not yet through the first paragraph:
Behind my ears, my mother, to stop my whining, has dabbed the stingiest bit of her gardenia perfume, the last present my father gave her before he disappeared into memory. Because I cannot smell it, I have only her word that the perfume is there.

Here, for me, is the dark room at the center of the house (if I may paraphrase Alice Munro). And by that I do not mean the disappeared father, as absent fathers in life and literature are hardly unusual, but this lone, beautiful line: *Because I cannot smell it, I have only her word that the perfume is there.* Here is the depth of Jones’s sensitivity to the parent/child relationship laid plain on the page; here is Hester Prynne and her daughter, Pearl; here is the deep under which a lower deep has opened; here is the symbiotic, often co-dependent relationship between single parent and child. *I have only her word*—in this moment, the story reveals that this little girl’s personality has been already shaped, to some degree, as a *reaction* to her mother’s needs. It is not only the perfume that is the salve; it is also the child’s acceptance of its existence. In this way, both mother and child have comforted each other, as each will presumably continue to do so for the rest of their lives.

I am also wearing yellow socks trimmed with thin lines of black and white around the tops. My shoes are my greatest joy, black patent-leather miracles, and when one is nicked at the toe later that morning in class, my heart will break.

And what of voice, that element that separates one writer from another? Any narrator who calls her shoes “black patent-leather miracles,” is an instant friend of mine. Hooked now, deep within the world of the story, we’re halfway down New Jersey Avenue, and the “timeworn, sad-faced” school is looming up ahead, and it’s time to go inside.