

Jason Reynolds's Printz Honor Acceptance Speech

First, I'd like to thank YALSA and the Printz Committee for this honor. I couldn't have imagined I'd be receiving such an incredible accolade when I started this book. It was, for me, a passion project. A long shot. I'd also like to extend my immense gratitude to my agent, Elena Giovinazzo, my editor, Caitlyn Dlouhy, and the entire Simon & Schuster team for taking me on as their passion project. A long shot. I'm grateful that they continue to be unwavering as we journey through this process, time and time again.

In 2003, just two years before I would step foot in this industry, I was a college kid, juggling a job, school work, running around reading poems, selling self-published books out of the trunk of my car, and doing the best I could to care for my mother, who at that time was engulfed in the flames of Cancer. I would go to her house on the weekends, the home I grew up in. Eat her cooking. Kiss her cheek. Watch her try to smile through the nausea and the insecurity of now being without multiple parts of herself. Her children were gone. Parts of her body were gone. Her stomach flipped over, and so had her life. Weekend visits were a way to bring balance, to inject some sense of breath into a stranglehold, for us both.

One night—I believe it was a Saturday because I was at my mother's house—while spilling over the edges of my childhood twin bed, the phone rang. It was late. The kind of late that's so late it's early. Three or four in the morning, late. I answered. On the other end was the voice of a friend. A voice I'd always known as having a kind of warm strength, sounded cold, shattered.

He informed me that our friend had been murdered. That they'd found his body—what was left of it—in a cemetery. I don't remember what I said, if I said anything. But I remember the feeling. I remember the gutting of it. The cutting of it, some kind of invisible blade digging into my stomach, lacerating all the things that brought me joy. The blade of grief, rusted, jagged, unclean, unthoughtful, hacking at me like a child does a Thanksgiving turkey.

I don't remember saying good-bye, hanging up.

I don't remember sleeping, or waking.

I don't remember the next day.

But I remember the next night.

I remember being picked up and driven to our beloved friend's mother's house. I remember her face. Heavy. Tired. Her eyes like empty snow globes. Missing a part of herself. I remember all the other faces in the room. My friends. Our friends. Missing a part of ourselves. None of us knowing what to say. All of us engulfed in a different kind of flame. An anger, a pain, like a cancer metastasizing by the second, spreading around us and through us. We knew his death had changed us chemically, and that we could do, perhaps, what we never knew we could do before.

Kill.

I don't say that carelessly. I recognize the weight of it. This book, *Long Way Down*, is meant to help us all recognize the weight of it. Not just the weight of gun violence, but the weight of anger bearing down on fragile backs. The weight of slow-burning psychosis. The weight of community codes, family dynamic, tradition. The weight of The Rules. The weight of guaranteed cold cases. The weight of fear, and the

feeling of insignificance. The weight of dehumanization, of being stripped of personhood because of instinctual moments and feelings, unfettered. The weight of so many children—more specifically, so many black and brown children—jumping on this soiled American mattress, poverty, illiteracy, and prejudice serving as the coils.

This book is about the weight of us. And yet, everyone always asks *me* what happens at the end. My response is always the same—I don't know. But what I will say is, ask yourselves what you would do if the fate of a child was in your hands. Because the fate of a child is in your hands.

My friend's name is Randell Duncan. At nineteen years old, I carried his casket. I remember it being light. Because it was empty. After his funeral, I took a rose from his gravesite. Took it to my mother's house. She froze it, preserved it. It's still there fifteen years later, and I now also visit it on the weekends.

Thank you to everyone who has read *Long Way Down*. Thank you to everyone who has read it more than once. Who has sat with it, lived with it, thought about it, taught it. Thank you to all the kids who know it all too well. Thank you to the kids who know nothing about it, but know this book is meant to be more than entertainment. Thank you to the bias checkers, and those unafraid to sit and find breath on the floor of discomfort. Thank you to my younger brothers and sisters in detention centers around the country. I see you, and because I do, I am hopeful. Thank you to every teenager who screams and fights and claws at the quo. They will continue to rename you so they don't have to hear you. But I hear you, and because I do, I am hopeful. Thank you to Randell. Your number is still in my phone. Your name is still on my lips. You will never die. And now we are certain, your legacy will live on forever.

Thank you.

Thank you.

Thank you.