

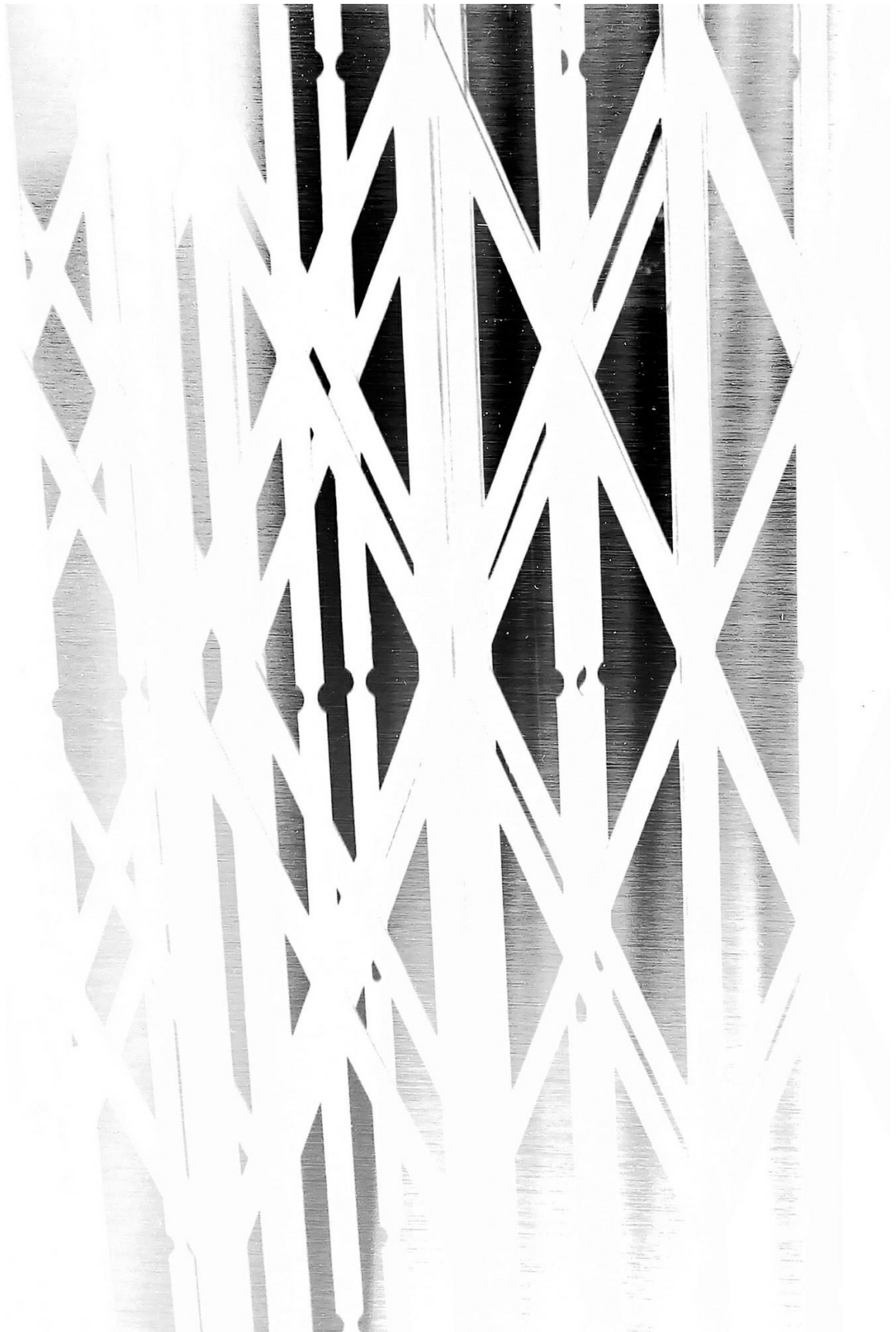


**LONG
WAY
DOWN**

**JASON
REYNOLDS**

NATIONAL BOOK AWARD FINALIST

For all the young brothers and sisters in detention centers around the country, the ones I've seen, and the ones I haven't. You are loved.



DON'T NOBODY

believe nothing
these days

which is why I haven't
told nobody the story
I'm about to tell you.

And truth is,
you probably ain't
gon' believe it either
gon' think I'm lying
or I'm losing it,
but I'm telling you,

this story is true.

It happened to me.
Really.

It did.

It so did.

MY NAME IS

Will.

William.

William Holloman.

But to my friends
and people
who know me
know me,

just Will.

So call me Will,
because after I tell you
what I'm about to tell you

you'll either
want to be my friend
or not
want to be my friend
at all.

Either way,
you'll know me
know me.

I'M ONLY WILLIAM

to my mother
and my brother, Shawn,
whenever he was trying
to be funny.

Now
I'm wishing I would've
laughed more
at his dumb jokes

because the day
before yesterday,
Shawn was shot

and killed.

I DON'T KNOW YOU,

don't know
your last name,
if you got
brothers
or sisters
or mothers
or fathers
or cousins
that be like
brothers
and sisters
or aunties
or uncles
that be like
mothers
and fathers,

but if the blood
inside you is on the inside
of someone else,

you never want to
see it on the outside of
them.

THE SADNESS

is just so hard
to explain.

Imagine waking up
and someone,
a stranger,

got you strapped down,
got pliers shoved
into your mouth,
gripping a tooth

somewhere in the back,
one of the big
important ones,

and rips it out.

Imagine the knocking
in your head,
the pressure pushing
through your ears,
the blood pooling.

But the worst part,
the absolute worst part,

is the constant slipping
of your tongue
into the new empty space,

where you know

a tooth supposed to be

but ain't no more.

IT'S SO HARD TO SAY,

Shawn's
dead.

Shawn's
dead.

Shawn's
dead.

So strange to say.
So sad.

But I guess
not surprising,
which I guess is
even stranger,

and even sadder.

THE DAY BEFORE YESTERDAY

me and my friend Tony
were outside talking about
whether or not we'd get any
taller now that we were fifteen.

When Shawn was fifteen
he grew a foot, maybe a foot
and a half. That's when he gave
me all the clothes he couldn't fit.

Tony kept saying he hoped he grew
because even though he was
the best ballplayer around here
our age, he was also the shortest.

And everybody knows
you can't go all the way when
you're that small unless you can
really jump. Like
fly.

AND THEN THERE WERE SHOTS.

Everybody
ran,
ducked,
hid,
tucked
themselves tight.

Did what we've all
been trained to.

Pressed our lips to the
pavement and prayed
the boom, followed by
the buzz of a bullet,
ain't meet us.

AFTER THE SHOTS

me and Tony
waited like we always do,
for the rumble to stop,
before picking our heads up
and poking our heads out

to count the bodies.

This time
there was only one.

Shawn.

I'VE NEVER BEEN

in an earthquake.
Don't know if this was
even close to how they
are, but the ground
definitely felt like
it opened up
and ate me.

THINGS THAT ALWAYS HAPPEN WHENEVER SOMEONE IS KILLED AROUND HERE

NO. 1: SCREAMING

Not everybody screams.
Usually just

moms,
girlfriends,
daughters.

In this case
it was Leticia,

Shawn's girlfriend,
on her knees kissing
his forehead

between shrieks.
I think she hoped
her voice would
somehow keep him
alive,

would clot the blood.

But I think
she knew

deep down in the
deepest part of
her downness

she was kissing
him good-bye.

AND MY MOM

moaning low,

Not my baby.

Not my baby.

Why?

hanging over my
brother's body
like a dimmed
light post.

NO. 2: SIRENS

Lots and lots of sirens,
howling, cutting through
the sounds of the city.

Except the screams.

The screams are always
heard over everything.

Even the sirens.

NO. 3: QUESTIONS

Cops flashed lights in our faces
and we all turned to stone.

Did anybody see anything?

a young officer asked.
He looked honest, like he
ain't never done this before.
You can always tell a newbie.
They always ask questions
like they really expect answers.

Did anybody see anyone?

I ain't seen nothin',

Marcus Andrews, the neighborhood
know-it-all, said.

Even he knew better than to
know anything.

IN CASE YOU AIN'T KNOW,

gunshots make everybody
deaf and blind especially
when they make somebody

dead.

Best to become invisible
in times like these.
Everybody knows that.

Even Tony flew away.

I'M NOT SURE

if the cops asked me questions.

Maybe.

Maybe not.

Couldn't hear nothing.

Ears filled up with heartbeats

like my head was being held

under water.

Like I was holding my breath.

Maybe I was.

Maybe I was

hoping I could give some

back to Shawn.

Or maybe

somehow

join him.

WHEN BAD THINGS HAPPEN

we can usually look up and see
the moon, big and bright,
shining over us.

That always made me feel better.

Like there's something up there
beaming down on us in the dark.

But the day before yesterday, when
 Shawn
died,

the moon was off.

Somebody told me once a month
the moon blacks out
and becomes new
and the next night be back
to normal.

I'll tell you one thing,
the moon is lucky it's not down here

where nothing
is ever
new.

I STOOD THERE,

mouth clenched
tight enough to grind my
teeth down to dust,

and looked at Shawn
lying there like a piece
of furniture left outside,

like a stained-up couch
draped in a gold chain.
Them fuckers ain't even

snatch it.

RANDOM THOUGHT

Blood soaking into a
T-shirt, blue jeans, and boots
looks a lot like chocolate syrup
when the glow from the streetlights hit it.

But I know ain't
nothing sweet about blood.
I know it ain't like chocolate syrup
at all.

IN HIS HAND,

a corner-store
plastic bag

white with
red letters

THANK YOU
THANK YOU
THANK YOU
THANK YOU
THANK YOU
THANK YOU
THANK YOU

HAVE A NICE DAY

IN THAT BAG,

special soap
for my mother's

eczema.

I've seen her
scratch until it

bleeds.

Pick at the pus
bubbles and flaky

scales.

Curse the invisible
thing trying to eat

her.

MAYBE THERE'S SOMETHING INVISIBLE

trying
to eat

all of
us as

if we
are beef.

BEEF

gets passed down like name-brand
T-shirts around here. Always too big.
Never ironed out.

gets inherited like a trunk of fool's
gold or a treasure map leading
to nowhere.

came knocking on my brother's life,
kicked the damn door down and took
everything except his gold chain.

THEN THE YELLOW TAPE

that says **DO NOT CROSS**
gets put up, and there's nothing
left to do but go home.

That tape lets people know
that this is a murder scene,
as if we ain't already know that.

The crowd backs its way into
buildings and down blocks
until nothing is left but the tape.

Shawn was zipped into a bag
and rolled away, his blood added
to the pavement galaxy of

bubblegum stars. The tape
framed it like it was art. And the next
day, kids would play mummy with it.

BACK ON THE EIGHTH FLOOR

I locked myself in my room and put
a pillow over my head to muffle
the sound of my mom's mourning.

She sat in the kitchen, sobbing
into her palms, which she peeled
away only to lift glass to mouth.

With each sip came a brief
silence, and with each brief
silence I snuck in a breath.

I FELT LIKE CRYING,

which felt like
another person
trapped behind my face

tiny fists punching
the backs of my eyes
feet kicking
my throat at the spot
where the swallow
starts.

Stay put, I whispered to him.
Stay strong, I whispered to me.

Because crying
is against

The
Rules.

THE RULES

NO. 1: CRYING

Don't.

No matter what.

Don't.

NO. 2: SNITCHING

Don't.

No matter what.

Don't.

NO. 3: REVENGE

If someone you love
gets killed,

find the person
who killed

them and
kill them.

THE INVENTION OF THE RULES

ain't come from my

brother,
his friends,
my dad,
my uncle,
the guys outside,
 the hustlers and shooters,

and definitely not from
me.

ANOTHER THING ABOUT THE RULES

They weren't meant to be broken.
They were meant for the broken
to follow.

OUR BEDROOM: A SQUARE, YELLOWY PAINT

Two beds:

one to the left of the door,
one to the right.

Two dressers:

one in front of the bed to the left of the door,
one in front of the bed to the right.

In the middle, a small TV.

Shawn's side was the left:

perfect, almost.

Mine, the right:

pigsty, mostly.

Shawn's wall had:

a poster of Tupac,
a poster of Biggie.

My wall had:

an anagram I wrote in messed-up scribble
with a pencil in case Mom made me

erase it:

SCARE = CARES.

ANAGRAM

is when you take a word
and rearrange the letters
to make another word.

And sometimes the words
are still somehow connected

ex: CANOE = OCEAN.

Same letters,
different words,
somehow still make
sense together,

like brothers.

THE MIDDLE DRAWER

was the only thing ever out of place
on Shawn's side of the room,

like a random, jagged tooth
in a perfect mouth,
jammed tight between the
top drawer of shirts
folded into neat rectangles
stacked like project floors,
and the bottom drawer of socks
and underwear.

Off track. Stuck. Forced in at an angle.

Seemed like the middle drawer
was jacked up on purpose
to keep me and Mom out

and Shawn's gun in.

I WON'T PRETEND THAT SHAWN

was the kind of guy
who was home by curfew.

The kind of guy
who called and checked in
about where he was,
who he was with,
what he was doing.

He wasn't.

Not after eighteen,
which was when our mother
took her hands off him,
pressed them together, and

began to pray

that he wouldn't go to jail
that he wouldn't get Leticia pregnant

that he wouldn't die.

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