

★ **“POWERFUL, HEARTBREAKING, AND HOPEFUL.”**

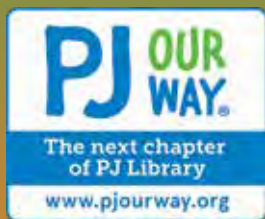
—*Kirkus Reviews*, **STARRED REVIEW**

ALEX IS TWELVE, AND HE DID SOMETHING VERY, VERY BAD.

As a result, he's sentenced to spend his summer volunteering at a retirement home where he's bossed around by an annoying and self-important do-gooder named Maya-Jade. He hasn't seen his mom in a year, his aunt and uncle don't want him, and Shady Glen's geriatric residents seem like zombies to him.

JOSEY IS 107 and ready for his life to be over. He has evaded death many times, having survived ghettos, raids, and a concentration camp—all thanks to the heroism of a woman named Olka and his own ability to sew. But now he spends his days in room 206 at Shady Glen, refusing to speak and waiting (and waiting and waiting) to die. Until Alex knocks on Josey's door . . . and Josey begins to tell Alex his story.

Soon an unlikely bond grows between them, and Alex starts to wonder: Can he rise to the occasion of his life, even if it means confronting the worst thing that he's ever done?



NOT NOTHING



GAYLE FORMAN

ALADDIN

New York Amsterdam/Antwerp London
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ALADDIN

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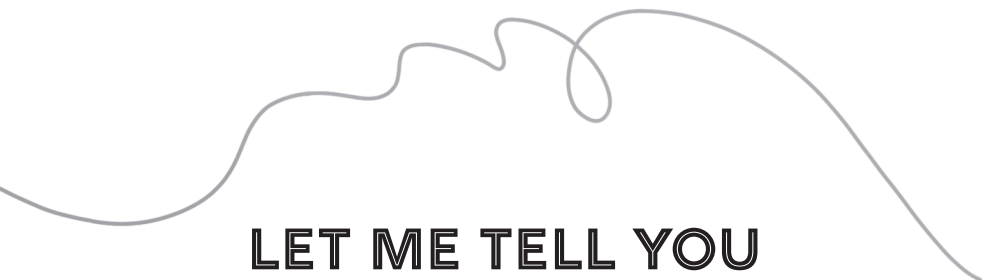
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LET ME TELL YOU A STORY

Actually, it's two stories, one you will recognize and one you won't.

One is about me and you. The other is about the boy. But it's also about me. And about you.

I know. I'm not making sense. I'm 107 years old. It goes with the territory. Forgive me my meanderings.

Before I start, I want to make it clear. He did something bad. Truly bad. I don't want you to think I'm sidestepping that, or excusing it, or even forgiving it; it's not for me to forgive, anyhow.

But I'm telling you the story so you understand how he

got where he did and how I got where I did and how both of us
learned to rise to the occasion of our lives.

Did that get your attention, Olka?

I thought it might.



OPPORTUNITY

If there was one word in the English language the boy hated most, it was *opportunity*.

Opportunity was the word his aunt had used when he came to live with her, as in “Finally you have an opportunity for a real home.” Maybe he and his mom had never lived in a condo with wall-to-wall carpeting or a TV the size of a small automobile attached to the wall, but any of those places had felt more like a “real home” than this.

Opportunity was the word the judge had used when he’d wagged his hairy finger at the boy, scolding him for wasting

so many opportunities in his young life, warning him he was dangerously close to running out of them.

And now *opportunity* was the word the social worker was using when he informed the boy that he had arranged for him to spend the summer volunteering at Shady Glen Retirement Home.

“Five days a week. Monday through Friday. You’ll start Monday morning,” the social worker told the boy over the phone. “I’ll pick you up and take you there and back the first day, but after that your aunt and uncle will have to arrange your transportation.”

“What am I gonna do there?” the boy asked.

“Whatever they ask you to,” the social worker replied.

“Do I get paid?”

“Not in money,” the social worker replied, and even though he was on the phone, the boy could tell he was smiling. The social worker was often smiling. It was one of many things that the boy disliked about him.

After he hung up, he sat down at the table with his aunt and uncle to eat the same bland chicken breasts they had every night on account of his uncle’s cholesterol and high blood pressure. The boy told his aunt and uncle what the social worker

had said. “I have to work at an old people home. For no money.”

His aunt was always complaining about how much things cost—about how much *he* cost—so he thought she would object on his behalf. She did not. Instead she told him, “You made your bed. Now you gotta lie in it.” This was rich. He didn’t have a bed in this “opportunity for a real home.” He slept on a lumpy couch, which he had to make and unmake every day.

“And I’m not going to be your chauffeur,” his aunt added. “You can take the bus. It’s free for kids. A lucky thing because this whole trouble is costing me a fortune.” She shook her head in the direction of his uncle, who merely grunted. But that grunt said it all. The boy wasn’t even worth words.

The first thing the boy said when he entered Shady Glen Retirement Home was “*This place smells like death!*” He made the pronouncement in a loud voice, to clearly communicate that he did not want to be here, did not want to have another stupid *opportunity* shoved down his throat. He said it loud enough to drown out the pounding of his heart, which had only grown worse on the short walk from the parking lot to the circular driveway, where a handful of the Shady Glen residents were sitting in front of the flower planters, some in wheelchairs, some

on walkers, through the automatic glass doors, and into the lobby, where he immediately smelled something unpleasant.

“Oh really,” the social worker mused, stroking his beard as he approached the large wooden reception desk. “And tell me, what does death smell like?”

This stumped the boy. He didn’t actually know what death smelled like. And, for the record, the urine-and-antiseptic odor that he found “so gross”—his words, which I’ll use as much as I can in his story—may not have been a perfume. But it was a world away from the stomach-churning rot of death.

“It just smells so gross,” the boy told the social worker. “These people all seem half-dead, like zombies.” He gestured down the hall, where Nelson Lippincott was sleeping in his wheelchair and Ginny Koong was crooning a lullaby to her plastic baby doll.

Zombies, for the record, are the dead come back to life. The Shady Glen residents were the living waiting to die. Places like Shady Glen are antechambers of death, the last stop where you wait for the Last Stop. Ho! You can understand why they don’t put that in the brochure.

“You seem upset,” the social worker said to the boy. “Would you care to talk about it?”

The boy did not care to talk about it. In the past few weeks, all anyone had wanted to do was to talk. About feelings. About his mom. About the Incident. About his “history of instability,” which had given him “anger issues.”

If you asked him, this was a bunch of balderdash. That was the word his mom had once used to describe something ridiculous. “Just saying it will make you feel better,” she told him, and she was right. “Balderdash, balderdash, balderdash,” he would whisper to himself when he needed cheering.

But all the balderdashing in the world would not improve his current predicament.

“I don’t wanna be here,” the boy said, giving the heavy front desk a good kick, which did not hurt the desk but did bruise his toe.

“I understand that,” the social worker replied. “But here you are and here you must be.”

“You sound like Yoda.”

“I’ll take that as a compliment,” the social worker replied, smiling again. “My point is, being here for the summer is out of your control. But what you do while you’re here is in your control. You can either see this as punishment. Or as an opportunity.”

There was that word again! The boy might have been only twelve, but he knew already that *opportunity* = *balderdash*. And *balderdash* was a much better word.

“Let me introduce you to Etta. She’s a longtime nurse and was recently promoted to director of Shady Glen. She’s a good friend of mine,” the social worker said, and led him to a door. He knocked and opened it without waiting for a response.

In a small office, behind a desk piled high with folders, sat Etta. Even in her chair, the boy could tell she was very tall, very pregnant, and had very dark skin. She started to get up, but the social worker gestured for her to stay put. They spent some time talking about her pregnancy, which was both boring and gross, before Etta leveled a no-nonsense gaze at the boy. “Welcome to Shady Glen,” she told him. “I am Mrs. Winston.” She turned to the social worker. “Frank, I can take it from here.”

The social worker handed her a folder with the boy’s name on it in large block letters. He didn’t like that. People he didn’t know having folders with his name on them, reading things about him that were none of their business, thinking they were better than him. Though the social worker had sworn up and down that no one would know the reason he was here, the man was also the kind of person who called being forced to work for

no money in a building full of zombies who smelled like death an *opportunity*. In other words, a person full of balderdash.

After the social worker left, Mrs. Winston sucked her teeth and narrowed her eyes at him. “I’m letting you work here as a personal favor to my friend and because I believe in second chances, but I do not believe in third chances and I’m thirty-two weeks pregnant, so do not make my job harder, because you will be out of here before you can say ‘Mrs. Winston does not play.’”

Play? Did she think he was a baby? He was twelve and had way more responsibility than most kids his age—just ask anyone. He felt his heart gallop in his chest, like it was trying to escape from his body. He didn’t blame it. He wanted out of there too.

There was a knock at the door and in came another of the zombies. This one at least could walk and had a full head of hair.

“Good morning, Mr. McGinity,” Etta said. “What can I do for you?”

“Ginny!” he said. “I’m looking for Ginny.”

“Hmm, she’s not in my office,” she replied, gamely looking behind her as if the missing Ginny might be in a corner. “Let’s go look for her.” She turned back to the boy, and when she

spoke, her tone was markedly less friendly than it had been with Dickie McGinity. “So you and I have an understanding?” She pointed two fingers toward her eyes and back at the boy in an *I’m watching you* gesture.

He would’ve liked to say no. No understanding. Because, honestly, no one had asked him if he wanted to be here. No one had asked him if he wanted another stupid opportunity. But, remembering what the judge had said about him throwing away chances, and looking at Etta’s stern face, not to mention her bowling-ball stomach, he just concentrated on the star patterns on the carpeting and mumbled, “I guess so.”

“Good.” Then she hauled herself out of her chair and waddled to the door and gently took Mr. McGinity by the elbow. “Let’s go find your sweetheart,” she said to him in a kind voice before turning to bark another order at the boy. “And you go and find Ms. Sandler.”

“Who’s Mrs. Sandler?” the boy asked.

For a very pregnant woman, though, Mrs. Winston was pretty fast, because by the time he asked the question, she was already gone.