

It's not like I meant for
him to get hurt. . . .

Julian Twerski isn't a bully. He's just made a bad mistake. So when he returns to school after a weeklong suspension, his English teacher offers him a deal: if he keeps a journal and writes about the terrible incident that got him and his friends suspended, he can get out of a report on Shakespeare. Julian jumps at the chance, and so begins his account of life in sixth grade—blowing up homemade fireworks, writing a love letter for his best friend (with disastrous results), and worrying whether he's still the fastest kid in school. But lurking in the background is the one story he can't bring himself to tell, the one story his teacher most wants to hear.

"A vivid, absorbing story about one boy's misadventure, heartache, and hope for himself."

—Rebecca Stead, Newbery Award-winning author of *When You Reach Me*

"Mark Goldblatt is an amazingly wonderful writer."

—Chris Grabenstein, *New York Times* bestselling author of
Escape from Mr. Lemoncello's Library

randomhouse.com/kids

US \$6.99 / \$7.99 CAN

ISBN 978-0-375-97145-7



5 0 6 9 9



Exclusive discussion questions inside!
Also available as an ebook and on audio



YEARLING

RL: 3.2 • 9–12

Cover art © 2013 by Joanna Szachowska

Julian Twerski

JANUARY 11, 1969

The Pigeons of Ponzini

My English teacher, Mr. Selkirk, says I have to write something, and it has to be long, on account of the thing that happened over winter recess—which, in my opinion, doesn't amount to much. It's not like I meant for Danley to get hurt, and I don't think that what happened was one hundred percent my fault, or even a lot my fault, even though I don't deny that I was there. So I guess I deserved to get suspended like the rest of them. I mean, maybe I could've stopped it. *Maybe*. But now the suspension is over, and Selkirk says I've got to write something, and because he says so, my dad says so, and that's that. I know what's going on. Selkirk thinks that if I write about what happened, I'll understand what

happened. Which makes no sense, if you stop and think about it, because if I don't understand what happened, how can I write about it?

Besides, I've done worse, *much* worse, and never written a word about it, and the fact that I never wrote about it had no effect, good or bad, so writing about it or not writing about it isn't going to prove a thing. I've got a good handle on who I am, if I say so myself. Compared with most twelve-year-olds, I mean. I'm not saying that I'm done growing up. I know I've got a long way to go. Sixth grade isn't the end of the line. My dad says that when he looks back to when he was a kid, he doesn't know whether to laugh or cry. I know there's going to be a Julian Twerski in the future who's going to look back the same way and maybe shake his head. (That last sentence should make you happy, Mr. Selkirk.) But when I look back *right now*, I'm just saying that what happened with Danley Dimmel isn't the worst thing I've done.

I'll give you a perfect example: Last year, Lonnie and I were out back in Ponzini doing nothing, just yakking it up. Now, I guess I should mention that Lonnie's my best friend. Except calling him my best friend doesn't tell how tight we are. My dad says that if Lonnie told me to jump, I'd ask, "How high?" He's being sarcastic, my dad, but he's right in a way. Because here's the thing: Lonnie wouldn't tell me to jump unless he had a good reason. So, yeah, I'd

ask, “How high?” He’d ask me “How high?” too if I told him to jump. It doesn’t mean a thing. I’ve known Lonnie since I was two and he was three, and some of the stuff that’s gone on between the two of us he’d brain me if I ever wrote about, but I’m sure he’ll be all right with me writing about the thing with the bird.

Oh, and I should also mention that Ponzini is what we call the lot behind the old apartment building on Parsons Boulevard where Victor Ponzini lives. Why we started calling it Ponzini is another story, and it doesn’t matter for the bird story. So let’s just say that Lonnie was the first to call it that, and it caught on with the rest of us. But it fits. It looks like a Ponzini kind of place.

If you want to picture it, picture a layer of brown dirt on a layer of gray cement about the size of a basketball court. It’s got weeds growing out of it, and it’s got broken glass around the edges, and it’s got a half-dozen rusted-out wrecks that were once parked in the underground garage but got pushed out back when their owners skipped town. It’s got rats, which should go without saying, but the rats only come out at night. In other words, it’s foul and useless, kind of like Victor Ponzini, who once squealed on Lonnie for cutting class. I mean, why is that Ponzini’s business? The guy’s a fifth grader and nothing but a tub of lard, but at least he knows it, which is about the only thing he’s got going for himself.

So Lonnie and I were hanging out at the far end of Ponzini, just shooting the breeze, when I noticed that about a dozen pigeons had landed between two of the rusted-out wrecks. I nodded at the birds, and Lonnie glanced behind him, and I said, “What do you make of that?”

But in the time it took for the words to come out of my mouth, another half-dozen pigeons swooped down and landed. It was crazy—like a scene from that Alfred Hitchcock movie where a million birds get together and attack a town for no reason. There was no reason for them to show up in Ponzini either. There’s not a thing for them to eat. I mean, it might make sense if someone had scattered bread crumbs for them. But there was nothing. It was as if one pigeon took it into its head that the far end of Ponzini would be a good place to rest for a minute, and then the entire air force joined in.

So the two of us were standing there watching, and in about a minute there were hundreds of pigeons crammed together between the two rusted-out wrecks, and the air was full of *prrrriiilllrrrps*—you know, that sound pigeons make. Their heads were bobbing up and down, ducking back and forth, and they were checking each other out. It was like a bird carnival. I’d never seen a thing like it.

That’s when Lonnie turned to me and said, “Chuck a rock.”

I just stared at him. It made no sense. “What do you mean?”

“I mean *chuck a rock*,” he said.

“Why would I chuck a rock?”

He gave a slight laugh. “C’mon, Julian, chuck a rock.”

“I’m not chucking a rock. *You* chuck a rock.”

“Don’t you want to see ’em take off at once?”

“I might hit one of ’em,” I said.

“You’re not going to hit one of ’em.”

“How do you know?”

“Plus, even if you do, they’re *pigeons*. They’re filthy.”

“I’m not chucking a rock—”

“C’mon,” he said. “It’ll be like a science experiment.”

“How do you get that?” I asked.

“You think you’ll hit one of ’em. I think you won’t hit one of ’em. It’s like you got a *hypothesis*, and I got a *hypothesis*, and now we’re going to do a scientific experiment to see which one of us is right.”

“You just want to see them take off at once.”

“I never denied that,” he said. “I’m just saying it’s also science.”

“Then why don’t you do it?”

“First of all, because you’ve got a stronger arm than I do, so you can chuck the rock higher, which will give them more time to take off, and second of all, because it was my idea, and I want to watch ’em take off at once.

The sky's going to be full of pigeons, and I want to watch the thing from start to finish."

"You don't think I'm going to hit one of 'em?"

"There's *no way* you're going to hit one of 'em," Lonnie said. "It's like survival of the fittest. Use your brain, Julian. Do you think a pigeon makes it even one week in this neighborhood if he can't dodge a rock?"

He had me there. I'd seen hundreds of dead pigeons before. Pigeons that got run over by cars. Pigeons that got caught and chewed up by dogs and cats. Pigeons that got electrocuted on power lines. Pigeons that froze on tree branches and then dropped to the sidewalk still iced over. But not one of them, as far as I knew, ever got beamed by a rock.

I bent down and picked up a rock. It was gray with streaks of black running through it, maybe the size of a Reese's Cup, except kind of jagged and much heavier. The weight of it in my hand gave me second thoughts. I knew that if the rock hit one of the birds, it was going to hurt it bad. But then I thought that Lonnie was likely right, that the pigeons would see the rock coming and they'd all take off at once, and it would be something to see.

So I did it. I chucked the rock.

I knew it was a dumb thing to do, but I did it—which, now that I think about it, kind of makes my dad's point about Lonnie telling me to jump. Except it had gotten to

where I *wanted* to chuck the rock, even though I knew it was dumb, because I wanted to see what would happen. Just to make sure, though, I screamed, “Heads up, birds!” real loud a second before I chucked it, and then I chucked it as high as I could, and that rock was no sooner in the air than the sky was full of birds, wave after wave of them, taking off before the rock even got to its highest point. There were so many of them in the air that it was hard to follow the upward flight of the rock because it was just another gray-and-black thing.

But you could follow it on the way down.

It was the only thing going in that direction, and that was when I realized that lots of birds were still going to be on the ground when it hit. They were crammed together too tight. There was no more room in the air for the stragglers to take off and no space on the ground for them to get out of the way.

It was maybe a second between the time I realized that and the time the rock hit, but that was one *long* second. My mind was racing forward, and I was grabbing at the air, clenching and unclenching my right hand, as if that would bring the rock back, as if I could undo how dumb I was for chucking it in the first place. Meanwhile, I was still hoping—no, I was *praying!*—that the rock would just clack down on the ground and nothing would happen.

But then the rock hit, and the sound wasn't a *clack*

but a soft *oof*, and I knew, from the sound, I'd hit a bird. I couldn't tell which one for another couple of seconds. That was how long it took for the rest of the birds to scatter and take off, and then there was only one left on the ground, flapping its wings like crazy but just going around in circles and raising a cloud of dust.

"Holy—!" Lonnie said.

"Oh no! Oh God . . . you said they'd get out of the way!"

"That was my *hypothesis*."

I ran over to the bird for a closer look. The poor thing was spinning around and around, getting nowhere. It wasn't bleeding, at least not that I could see. I thought for sure the rock had gashed it or split its skull wide open. But it looked kind of okay, except for the crazy way it was flapping its wings. Maybe it just needed to calm down for a minute and figure out it wasn't hurt too bad.

"C'mon," Lonnie called to me in a loud whisper. "Let's get out of here."

"No, wait!"

"Let's cheese it, Julian. It's over and done with."

"No!"

Lonnie came up behind me, and the two of us stared for about a minute as the pigeon began to tire itself out. It went from flapping around in a circle, to hopping side to side, to walking back and forth, to standing still with its

head bobbing up and down. Then it stopped. It just sank to the ground and sat there.

“There, you see?” Lonnie said. “It’s going to be just fine.”

I took a step toward the pigeon. It stood up and walked a couple of bird steps away from me, then settled back down. I took another step, and so did the pigeon. “I don’t think it can fly,” I said.

“Sure it can. Watch. . . .”

Lonnie stepped in front of me and lurched at the pigeon. It fluttered its wings for a second but moved about six inches. Then he stamped his foot on the ground. This time the pigeon didn’t react, except to turn its head away—as if it wasn’t interested in what happened next.

Lonnie said, “That’s one messed-up pigeon.”

“What are we going to do?”

He shrugged. “Cheese it?”

“No, a cat’s going to get it.”

“Then there’s only one thing left to do.”

“What?”

“We’ve got to put it out of its misery.”

“Kill it?”

“That’s what you’ve got to do if it’s dying.”

“But we don’t know for sure it’s dying.”

“Then let’s get out of here!”

“But—”

“Julian, it’s got to be one or the other.”

Lonnie stepped past the pigeon and picked up the rock, the one I chucked, which was lying about a foot away. As soon as he picked it up, I closed my eyes real tight. I didn’t want to see what he was about to do. But then, a second later, I felt him put the rock in my right hand. I opened my eyes and saw it there.

“Oh no—”

“You have to do it, Julian.”

“Why do I have to do it?”

“Because you’re the one who chucked the rock.”

“But it was *your* idea.”

“But I didn’t chuck it.”

“*But it was your idea!*”

“*But I didn’t chuck it!*”

“C’mon, Lonnie—”

“Look, we can go back and forth forever. So I’m just going to tell you: *I’m not killing that bird.* So either you’re going to do it, or we’re going to leave the bird out here to die on its own. Those are the only two possibilities, okay?”

Say what you want about Lonnie, but he knows how to break things down. I didn’t want the bird to die a long miserable death, but that’s what was going to happen if I didn’t do what was necessary. It’s like Lonnie picked up the record needle and moved it to the end of the song. We

both knew what I had to do. We just got there quicker than if we'd gone around in circles.

So I walked up to the bird until I was right over it—I didn't want to take a chance of missing with the rock or winging the poor thing and causing it to suffer even more. I had to go for the head. It had to be a kill shot. I thought about kneeling down next to the bird, but that meant I wouldn't be able to take a full windup. Instead I decided to straddle the pigeon, with one foot on either side of it, so that I could throw the rock straight down.

I reared back, but then, a split second before I fired the rock, I felt my eyes close. I came an inch from firing it blind—which was the last thing I wanted to do! So I shook my head, reared back again . . . and again I felt my eyes close. *C'mon!* I told myself. I reared back for a third time, and for a third time I felt my eyes close.

"What's the problem?" Lonnie said.

I took a deep breath. "It's no good."

"Just kill it."

"I keep closing my eyes."

"Well, then, don't close your eyes."

"Why didn't I think of that?" I said.

"You don't need to get sarcastic."

"I just want to get it over with."

"There's got to be a right way to do it." Lonnie started

glancing around, which is what he does when he's thinking real hard, and I knew, I just *knew*, he'd come up with an idea. Maybe ten seconds later he had one. He went running over to the far end of Ponzini and disappeared behind one of the rusted-out wrecks. Then, a few seconds later, he staggered back out.

He was lugging a concrete cinder block.

He shouted, "Hey, I could use a hand!"

So I ran over to him, and the two of us started lugging the cinder block back toward the pigeon. That cinder block weighed about a ton. I felt sadder and sadder with every step, thinking about what we were going to do with it, thinking about how helpless the pigeon was, thinking about how much pain I'd caused the poor thing so far, and about how much more it still had to go through. I mean, even if it was only for a split second, the pigeon was for sure going to feel the crush of the cinder block. But at least the end would be quick.

When we were about three steps from the pigeon, Lonnie stopped in his tracks and said, "You got it from here?"

I was huffing. "What do you mean?"

"It's a one-man operation."

"Lonnie!"

"Julian, you've got to do it."

“Why don’t both of us do it?”

“Because if we do it together, we might not let go at the same time. Which means it might not fall straight down. That’s the only way we might miss the bird.”

I shook my head. “What you’re saying is you won’t do it, right?”

That cracked him up, despite the situation. He laughed and nodded.

I inhaled, then exhaled. “Fine, I’ve got it from here.”

He let go of the cinder block, and I felt its full weight for the first time. I had to hold it tight to my body to keep from dropping it right there. It seemed to want to get out of my hands and fall to the ground, like I was keeping it from being where it was supposed to be.

With the cinder block hugged to my waist, I trudged the last three steps, and then I stepped over the pigeon so that the cinder block was centered above its skull, and I said a prayer for the pigeon—not out loud, just to myself—and I asked God to take mercy on it, and to take mercy on me for what I was about to do, and then at last I looked down, and the pigeon looked up at me, but it didn’t make a move otherwise.

Except I couldn’t do it.

I stepped back and dropped the cinder block a foot from the pigeon, which didn’t flinch at the dull *thud* it

made, the *thud* of concrete against concrete. Then I glanced back at Lonnie. He was standing with his hands on his hips, shaking his head.

“Now what?” he asked.

But then I had a thought. “I’ll take it home.”

He rolled his eyes. “You can’t take that thing home.”

“I’ll just take care of it until it heals up.”

“Your mom will go nuts. Pigeons are filthy birds.”

He had a point, but I’d made up my mind. I knelt down next to the pigeon, and I slid my right hand underneath its body. The bird didn’t like that one bit. It gave me a hard peck and fluttered out of reach. But I went after it. I knew the longer I chased it, the worse it would be. So I grabbed it with both hands before it could make another move. For a couple of seconds, nothing happened. I had it in my hands, and it didn’t seem to mind. But then it began pecking the daylight out of me. My fingers. My palms. My wrists. I held on to it. I could feel how mad it was. It was like a wadded-up ball of anger, except with flapping wings and a pecking beak.

Finally, because I was afraid I would drop it, I held it to my chest and rolled it up inside my T-shirt. That calmed it right down. I could feel its heart beating against mine, and I glanced over at Lonnie, and he was rolling his eyes again like I’d gone nuts, which maybe I had, but I was going to do the right thing and heal up that pigeon.

Lonnie gave me a rap on the back for luck, but then he headed home, still shaking his head.

You can picture the expression on my mom's face when I came through the door with the pigeon. I know I was picturing it as I walked up the two flights of stairs, past the Dongs. The Dongs are the old Chinese couple who own the two-story house I live in. We rent out the top floor from them. They're good neighbors, quiet as can be, except Mrs. Dong cooks the foulest-smelling food you'd ever want to get your nose around. It doesn't taste bad—at least that's what my sister Amelia, who's five years older than I am, tells me. I wouldn't go near the stuff myself. But Amelia had dumplings and noodles with them once, and she lived to talk about it. Even so, when Mrs. Dong's got that stove going, my advice is hold your breath and run up the stairs as fast as you can.

I lucked out because Mrs. Dong wasn't cooking when I came back with the pigeon. But I was dreading the look my mom was going to give me. She was in the kitchen, and she heard me come through the door and called out her usual, "Supper's almost on the table, so wash up."

I could've gone straight to my room. But to get it over with, I walked into the kitchen, and I told her what I had rolled up in my shirt. That's when the look came. Her eyes narrowed down to slits, and her face seemed to go tired, like, *Oh, good grief!* But the thing was, once I started

telling her what had happened, she softened up. She took a quick look at the pigeon, and she asked me if I was sure it couldn't fly, and I told her I was sure, and then she nodded and went into the hall closet and came out with a beat-up canvas suitcase. It was one she hadn't used in years. She told me I could keep the pigeon in the old suitcase until it healed up, and then I could throw out the suitcase. "Just make sure that bird doesn't wind up flying around the apartment," she said, then went back to the kitchen.

Sometimes when you brace yourself for a storm, you get a gentle breeze. The storm only comes when you're braced for nothing whatsoever.

I called out for Amelia, who was in her room at the far end of the apartment. I knew she'd lend a hand because she's soft for animals, so even if she had no interest in helping me out, she would want to save the pigeon. I was right. She dragged the suitcase into my room, and then she dragged in a week's worth of old newspapers my dad had piled up next to the couch. She tore up the papers and stuffed them in the suitcase so that the pigeon would have a nice feathery surface, and then I unrolled my shirt, and the pigeon plopped down and took a minute to collect itself—which is what you'd do too, if you'd been brained by a rock and then rolled up in a T-shirt.

But after a minute, the pigeon began to look around and seemed to realize it was all right.

Even though I didn't know if it was a he or a she, I decided to call the pigeon George Sauer after my favorite football player—the split end for the New York Jets. That annoyed Amelia. “If you name it, you're going to get attached,” she said. “Then you're not going to want to set it free.”

I told her she was wrong. I was only going to keep George Sauer until he healed up, and that was the end of it. “Once he can fly again, he's going out the window.”

But of course she was dead right. I never should've named that bird. Never should have started to think about “it” as “him.” You see, “it” isn't personal. But “him” . . . I mean, the minute I named the pigeon George Sauer, I began to notice how the name kind of fit him, how the shape of his head looked like a football helmet.

You've likely figured out the end of the story by now, so I won't beat around the bush. George Sauer never made it out of that suitcase. I fed him bread crumbs, but he got tired of that fast, and then I went to the pet store and bought him proper bird food, but he didn't take to that either. He couldn't right himself. He kept me up with *prrrriilllrrrp* sounds the two nights he was in the suitcase, but by the third morning he was in a bad way. I could tell

because when I reached into the suitcase, he didn't even bother to peck at me. So I picked him up, and I just held him for a minute. I stared into his eyes, as if he might forgive me for what I'd done to him. But I got nothing back. Not a thing. Just a look that seemed to be saying, *I'm a pigeon, for God's sake! I don't do stuff like forgive people!*

When George Sauer died that afternoon, I bawled my eyes out.