

NEAL

SHUSTERMAN

Unwholly
BOOK 2 IN THE UNWIND TRILOGY

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About Neal Shusterman

For Charlotte Ruth Shusterman

Love you, Mom

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As Unwind and UnWholly represent a world turned upside down, what better way to keep you up to speed than giving the answer before the question, like on a certain quiz show? Read the answers and see how many questions you can get right! Get enough right and you may get to tear up your own unwind order! (Warning: Skipping the game may leave you feeling a bit unwound while reading. . . .)

This is the process by which an individual is dismantled. By law, 99.44 percent of a person must be used and kept alive in transplant.

What is unwinding?

America's second civil war—also known as the Heartland War—ended when the pro-life and pro-choice armies came to this agreement, which made life inviolable from conception to the age of thirteen but allowed for the “retroactive abortion” of troubled teenagers.

What is the Unwind Accord?

When a mother does not wish to keep a newborn baby, she has the legal option to leave the baby on someone else's doorstep. The baby then becomes the legal responsibility of the people in that home. This is the common term for the leaving of the baby.

What is storking?

When a person is unwound, since virtually all of them is still alive, they are not considered to be dead, but to be living in this state.

What is the divided state?

These are licensed facilities in which Unwinds are prepared for a divided state. While each facility has its own particular personality, they are all designed to provide a positive experience for youth designated for unwinding.

What are harvest camps?

This northern Arizona harvest camp, in a town named after the joyful lumberjacks who founded it, has recently been closed due to terrorist activity.

What is Happy Jack Harvest Camp?

This is a slang term for the clinic within a harvest camp where unwinding is performed.

What is a Chop Shop?

These young terrorists have introduced an undetectable chemical into their circulatory system that makes their blood explosive. They get their name because they detonate by bringing their hands together in powerful applause.

What are clappers?

This is the common term for the law enforcement officers who work for the National Juvenile Authority and are responsible for the policing of Unwinds.

What are Juvey-cops, or Juveies?

The act of chemically rendering someone unconscious by use of tranquilizer bullets or darts is the preferred method utilized by juvenile enforcement officers, because using bullets on Unwinds is both illegal and damages their vital organs, thereby reducing their value.

What is tranq'ing?

From the French word for "beef"—and probably the origin of the slang expression "buff"—this is the common term for a soldier, or a muscular teen on track for a military career.

What is a boeuf?

Originally a military term, it means "away without leave" but has more recently been used as a term for runaway Unwinds.

What is AWOL?

This organization fights unwinding by rescuing AWOL Unwinds. However, it's not as well organized as people think.

What is the ADR or Anti-Divisional Resistance?

This secret (not so secret) sanctuary for AWOL Unwinds is at a massive airplane salvage yard in the Arizona desert.

What is the Graveyard?

Also known as Connor Lassiter, this runaway Unwind from Ohio is believed to be responsible for the revolt at Happy Jack Harvest Camp, and is presumed dead.

Who is the Akron AWOL?

Derived from the term meaning "ten percent," this is a child designated from birth for unwinding, usually for religious reasons.

What is a tithed?

This title became a clapper who didn't clap, and by doing so, put a face on the resistance movement.

Who is Lev Calder

This is the last name given to parentless children raised in state homes.

What is Ward

A survivor of Happy Jack Harvest Camp, this former state ward became a paraplegic, because she refused to have her damaged spine replaced by the spine of an Unwind.

Who is Risa Ward

Wishing you a nail-biting, sleep-depriving, thought-provoking read!

Neal Shusterman

Part One

Violations

The only way to deal with an unfree world is to become so absolutely free that your very existence is an act of rebellion.

—*Albert Camus*

He's fighting a nightmare when they come for him.

A great flood is swallowing the world, and in the middle of it all, he's being mauled by bear. He's more annoyed than terrified. As if the flood isn't enough, his deep, dark mind has to send an angry grizzly to tear into him.

Then he's dragged feetfirst out of the jaws of death and drowning Armageddon.

"Up! Now! Let's go!"

He opens his eyes to a brightly lit bedroom that ought to be dark. Two Juvey-cops manhandle him, grabbing his arms, preventing him from fighting back long before he's awake enough to try.

"No! Stop! What is this?"

Handcuffs. First his right wrist, then his left.

"On your feet!"

They yank him to his feet as if he's resisting—which he would, if he were more awake.

"Leave me alone! What's going on?"

But in an instant he's awake enough to know exactly what's going on. It's a kidnapping. But you can't call it kidnapping when transfer papers have been signed in triplicate.

"Verbally confirm that you are Mason Michael Starkey."

There are two officers. One is short and muscular, the other tall and muscular. Probably military boeufs before they took jobs as Juvey-rounders. It takes a special heartless breed to be a Juvey-cop, but to specialize as a rounder you probably need to be soulless as well. The fact that he's being rounded for unwinding shocks and terrifies Starkey, but he refuses to show it because he knows Juvey-rounders get off on other people's fear.

The short one, who is clearly the mouthpiece of this duo, gets in his face and repeats "Verbally confirm that you are Mason Michael Starkey!"

"And why should I do that?"

"Kid," says the other rounder, "this can go down easy or hard, but either way it's going down." The second cop is more soft spoken with a pair of lips that clearly aren't his. In fact they look like they came from a girl. "The drill's not so hard, so just get with the program."

He talks as if Starkey should have known they were coming, but what Unwind ever really knows? Every Unwind believes in their heart of hearts that it won't happen to them—that the parents, no matter how strained things get, will be smart enough not to fall for the net ads, TV commercials, and billboards that say things like "Unwinding: the sensible solution." But who's he kidding? Even without the constant media blitz, Starkey's been a potential candidate for unwinding since the moment he arrived on the doorstep. Perhaps he should be surprised that his parents waited so long.

Now the mouthpiece gets deep in his personal space. "For the last time, verbally confirm that you are—"

"Yeah, yeah, Mason Michael Starkey. Now get out of my face, your breath stinks."

With his identity verbally confirmed, Lady-Lips pulls out a form in triplicate: white, yellow, and pink.

"So is this how you do it?" Starkey asks, his voice beginning to quaver. "You arrest me. What's my crime? Being sixteen? Or maybe it's just being here at all."

“Quiet-or-we-tranq-you,” says Mouthpiece, like it’s all one word.

~~A part of Starkey wants to be tranq’d—just go to sleep and if he’s lucky, never wake up.~~ The way he won’t have to face the utter humiliation of being torn from his life in the middle of the night. But no, he wants to see his parents’ faces. Or, more to the point, he wants *them* to see *his* face, and if he’s tranq’d, they get off easy. They won’t have to look him in the eye.

Lady-Lips holds the unwind order in front of him and begins to read the infamous Paragraph Nine, the “Negation Clause.”

“Mason Michael Starkey, by the signing of this order, your parents and/or legal guardian have retroactively terminated your tenure, backdated to six days postconception, leaving you in violation of Existential Code 390. In light of this, you are hereby remanded to the California Juvenile Authority for summary division, also known as unwinding.”

“Blah, blah, blah.”

“Any rights previously granted to you by the county, state, or federal government as a citizen thereof are now officially and permanently revoked.” He folds the unwind order and shoves it into his pocket.

“Congratulations, Mr. Starkey,” says Mouthpiece. “You no longer exist.”

“Then why are you talking to me?”

“We won’t be for much longer.” They tug him toward the door.

“Can I at least put on shoes?”

They let him go but stay on their guard.

Starkey takes his sweet time tying his shoes. Then they pull him out of his room and down the stairs. The Juvey-cops have heavy boots that intimidate the wood of the steps. The three of them sound like a herd of cattle as they go down.

His parents wait in the foyer. It’s three in the morning, but they’re still fully dressed. They’ve been awake all night anticipating this. Starkey sees anguish on their faces, or maybe it’s relief; it’s hard to tell. He hardens his own emotions, hiding them behind a mock smile.

“Hi, Mom! Hi, Dad!” he says brightly. “Guess what just happened to me? I’ll give you twenty guesses to figure it out!”

His father takes a deep breath, preparing to launch into the Great Unwinding Speech that every parent prepares for a wayward child. Even if they never use it, they still prepare it, running the words through their minds while on lunch break, or while sitting in traffic, or while listening to some moronic boss blather on about price points and distribution, and whatever other crap that people in office buildings have meetings about.

What were the statistics? Starkey saw it on the news once. Every year the thought of unwinding passes through the mind of one in ten parents. Of those, one in ten seriously considers it, and of those, one in twenty actually goes through with it—and the statistic doubles with every additional kid a family has. Crunch those juicy numbers, and one out of every two thousand kids between the ages of thirteen and seventeen will be unwound each year. Better odds than the lottery—and that doesn’t even include the kids in state homes.

His father, keeping his distance, begins the speech. “Mason, can’t you see that you left us no choice?”

The Juvey-cops hold him firm at the bottom of the stairs, but they make no move to get him outside. They know they must allow the parental rite of passage; the verbal boot out the door.

“The fights, the drugs, the stolen car—and now being expelled from yet another school? What’s next, Mason?”

“Gee, I don’t know, Dad. There are so many bad choices I can make.”

~~“Not anymore. We care enough about you to end your bad choices before they end you.”~~

That just makes him laugh out loud.

And then there’s a voice from the top of the stairs.

“No! You can’t do this!”

His sister, Jenna—his parents’ biological daughter—stands at the top of the stairs in teddy bear pajamas that seem too old for her thirteen years.

“Go back to bed, Jenna,” their mother says.

“You’re unwinding him just because he was storked, and that’s unfair! And right before Christmas, too! What if I had come storked? Would you unwind me also?”

“We are not having this discussion!” yells their father, as their mother begins to cry. “Go back to bed!”

But she doesn’t. She folds her arms and sits at the top of the stairs in defiance, witnessing the whole thing. Good for her.

His mother’s tears are genuine, but he’s unsure whether she’s crying for him or for the rest of the family. “All these things you do, everyone told us they were a cry for help,” she says. “So why didn’t you let us help you?”

He wants to scream. How could he possibly explain it to them if they can’t see? They don’t know what it’s like to go through sixteen years of life knowing you weren’t wanted; a mysterious baby of uncertain race storked on the doorstep of a couple so sienna-pale, they could have been vampires. Or to still remember that day when you were three years old and your mom, a doped up on pain medication from your sister’s cesarean delivery, took you to a fire station and begged them to take you away and make you a ward of the state. Or how about knowing even on Christmas morning that your gift is not a joy, but an obligation? And that your birthday isn’t even real because they can’t pinpoint when you were born, just the day you were left on a welcome mat that some new mother took too literally?

And what about the taunts from the other kids at school?

In fourth grade Mason’s parents were called into the principal’s office. He had flipped a board off the top platform of the jungle gym. The kid had suffered a concussion and a broken arm.

“Why, Mason?” his parents had asked, right there in front of the principal. “Why did you do it?”

He told them that the other kids were calling him “Storky” instead of Starkey, and that that was the boy who had started it. He naively thought they’d rise to his defense, but they just dismissed it as if it didn’t matter.

“You could have killed that boy,” his father had reprimanded. “And why? Because of words? Words don’t hurt you.” Which is one of the hugest criminal lies perpetrated by adults against children in this world. Because words hurt more than any physical pain. He would have gladly taken a concussion and a broken arm if he never had to be singled out as a storked child ever again.

In the end, he got sent to a different school and was ordered to have mandatory counseling.

“You think about what you did,” his old principal had told him.

And he did what he was told, like a good little boy. He gave it plenty of thought and decided he should have found a higher platform.

So how do you even begin to explain that? How do you explain a lifetime of injustice in the time it takes the Juvey-cops to herd you out the door? The answer is easy: You don’t even try.

“I’m sorry, Mason,” his father says, tears in his eyes as well. “But it’s better for everyone the way. Including you.”

Starkey knows he’ll never make his parents understand, but if nothing else, he’ll have the last word.

“Hey, Mom, by the way . . . Dad’s late nights at the office aren’t really at the office. They’re with your friend Nancy.”

But before he can begin to relish his parents’ shocked expressions, it occurs to him that the secret knowledge could have been a bargaining chip. If he had told his father he knew, it could have been ironclad protection from unwinding! How could he be so stupid not to have thought of that when it mattered?

So in the end he can’t even enjoy his bitter little victory as the Juvey-cops push him out into a cool December night.

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The Juvey squad car leaves the driveway with Starkey locked in the backseat behind a bulletproof barrier. Mouthpiece drives while Lady-Lips flips through a fat file folder. Starkey can’t imagine his life could have that much data.

“It says here you scored in the top ten percentile in your early childhood exams.”

The mouthpiece shakes his head in disgust. “What a waste.”

“Not really,” says Lady-Lips. “Plenty of folks will get the benefit of your smarts, Mr. Starkey.”

The suggestion gives him an unpleasant chill, but he tries not to show it. “Love the lip graft, dude,” Starkey says. “What’s the deal? Did your wife tell you she’d rather be kissed by a woman?”

Mouthpiece smirks, and Lady-Lips says nothing.

“But enough lip service,” says Starkey. “You boys hungry? Because I could go for a midnight snack right about now. Some In-N-Out? Whaddaya say?”

No answer from the front seat. Not that he expects one, but it’s always fun to mess with law enforcement and see how much it takes to irritate them. Because if they get ticked off, he wins. What’s that story about the Akron AWOL? What did he always say? Oh yeah. “Nice socks.” Simple, elegant, but it always undermined the confidence of any figure of false authority.

The Akron AWOL—now *there* was an Unwind! Sure, he died in the attack on Happy Jack Harvest Camp almost a year ago, but his legend lives on. Starkey longs for the kind of notoriety that Connor Lassiter has. In fact, Starkey imagines Connor Lassiter’s ghost sitting by his side, appreciating his thoughts and his every action—not just approving, but guiding Starkey’s hand as he wriggles his handcuffs down to his left shoe—just low enough to fish out the knife from the lining. The knife he’s saved for special occasions like this.

“Come to think about it, In-N-Out Burger does sound good right about now,” says Lady-Lips.

“Excellent,” says Starkey. “There’s one up ahead on the left. Order me a Double-Double Animal Style, and Animal fries, too, because, hey—I’m an animal.”

He is amazed that they actually pull into the all-night drive-through. Starkey feels like the master of subliminal suggestion, even though his suggestion was not all that subliminal. Still, he is in control of the Juvey-cops . . . or at least he thinks he is until they order meals for themselves and nothing for him.

“Hey! What’s the deal?” He pounds his shoulder against the glass that separates their world from his.

“They’ll feed you at harvest camp,” says Lady-Lips.

Only now does it hit home that the bulletproof glass doesn’t just separate him from the cops—it’s a barrier between him and any part of the outside world. He will never taste his favorite foods again. Never visit his favorite places. At least not as Mason Starkey. Suddenly he feels like hurling up everything he’s eaten, backdated to six days postconception.

The night shift cashier at the drive-through window is a girl Starkey knows from his last school. As he sees her, a whole mess of emotions toy with his brain. He could just lurk in the shadows of the backseat, hoping not to be seen, but that would make him feel pathetic. No, he will not be pathetic. If he’s going down, then it will be in flames that everyone must see.

“Hey, Amanda, will you go to the prom with me?” He shouts loud enough to be heard through the thick glass barrier.

Amanda squints in his direction, and when she realizes who it is, she turns up her nose as if she’s smelled something rancid on the grill.

“Not in this life, Starkey.”

“Why not?”

“A, you’re a sophomore, and B, you’re a loser in the back of a police car. And anyway, don’t they have their own prom at the alternative school?”

Could she possibly be any denser? “Uh, as you can see, I’ve graduated.”

“Pipe down,” says Mouthpiece, “or I’ll unwind you right into the burgers.”

Finally Amanda gets it, and suddenly she becomes a little sheepish. “Oh! Oh, I’m sorry, Starkey. I’m really sorry. . . .”

Pity is something Mason Starkey can’t stand. “Sorry for what? You and your friends wouldn’t give me the time of day before, but now you’re sorry for me? Save it.”

“I’m sorry. I mean—I’m sorry that I’m sorry—I mean . . .” She sighs in exasperation and gives up, handing Lady-Lips a bag of food. “Do you need ketchup?”

“No, we’re good.”

“Hey, Amanda!” Starkey shouts as they drive away. “If you really want to do something for me, tell everyone I went down fighting, will you? Tell them I’m just like the Akron AWOL.”

“I will, Starkey,” she says. “I promise.”

But he knows she’ll forget by morning.

Twenty minutes later they’re turning into the back alley of county lockup. No one goes the front way, least of all the Unwinds. The county jail has a juvenile wing, and in the back of the juvey wing is a special box within a box where they hold Unwinds awaiting transport. Starkey’s been in regular juvey enough to know that once you’re in the Unwind holding cell, that’s it. End of story. Even death row inmates don’t have such tight security.

But he's not there yet. He's still here, in the car, waiting to be transferred inside. Right here is where ~~the hull of this little ship of fools is thinnest, and if he's going to sink their plans,~~ has to happen between the car and the back door of the county jail. As they prepare for his "perp walk," he thinks about his chances of breaking free—because as much as his parents may have imagined this night, so has he, and he's made up a dozen valiant escape plans. The thing is, even his daydreams are fatalistic; in every anxiety-filled fantasy, he always loses, gets tranq'd, and wakes up on an operating table. Sure, they say they don't unwind you right away, but Starkey doesn't believe it. No one really knows what goes on in the harvest camps, and those who find out aren't exactly around to share the experience.

They pull him out of the car and flank him on either side, grasping his upper arms tightly. They are practiced in this walk. Lady-Lips grips Starkey's fat file in his other hand.

"So," says Starkey, "does that file show my hobbies?"

"Probably," says Lady-Lips, not really caring either way.

"Maybe you should have read it a little more closely, because then we'd have something to talk about." He grins. "You know, I'm pretty good with magic."

"That so?" says Mouthpiece, with a twisted sneer. "Too bad you can't make yourself disappear."

"Who says I can't?"

Then, in his finest Houdini fashion, he raises his right hand, revealing the cuff no longer on it. Instead, it dangles free from his left hand. Before they can even react, Starkey slides the penknife he used to pick the lock out of his sleeve, grips it in his hand, and slashes it across Lady-Lips's face.

The man screams, and blood flows from a four-inch wound. Mouthpiece, for once in his miserable life of public disservice, is speechless. He reaches for his weapon, but Starkey is already on the run, zigzagging in the shadowy alley.

"Hey!" yells Mouthpiece. "You're only making it worse for yourself."

But what are they going to do? Reprimand him before they unwind him? The Mouthpiece can talk all he wants, but he's got no bargaining position.

The alley turns to the left and then to the right like a maze, and all the while beside him is the tall, imposing brick wall of the county jail.

Finally he turns another corner and sees a street up ahead. He charges forward, but just as he emerges into that street, he's grabbed by Mouthpiece. Somehow he made it there before Starkey. He's surprised, but he shouldn't be, because doesn't every Unwind try to run? And couldn't they build a twisting alley specifically designed to waste your time and give the Juvenile cops an advantage that they never really lost?

"You're through, Starkey!" He crushes Starkey's wrist enough to dislodge the knife and brandishes a tranq gun with trigger-happy fury. "Down on the ground, or this goes in your eye!"

But Starkey does not go down. He will not humble himself before this legalized thug.

"Do it!" says Starkey. "Tranq me in the eye and explain to the harvest camp why the goods are damaged."

Mouthpiece turns him around and pushes him against the brick wall, hard enough to scrap and bruise his face.

"I've had enough of you, Starkey. Or maybe I should call you *Storky*." Then Mouthpiece laughs, like he's a genius. Like every moron in the world hasn't already called him that. "Storky!" he snorts. "That's a better name for you, isn't it? How do you like that, Storky?"

Blood boils hotter than water. Starkey can vouch for that, because with adrenaline-pumped fury, he elbows Mouthpiece in the gut and spins around, grabbing the gun.

“Oh no, you don’t.”

Mouthpiece is stronger—but maybe animal-style beats strength.

The gun is between them. It points at Starkey’s cheek, then his chest, then to Mouthpiece’s ear, then under his chin. They both grapple for the trigger and—*Blam!*

The concussive shock of the blast knocks Starkey back against the wall. Blood! Blood everywhere! The ferrous taste of it in his mouth, and the acrid smell of gun smoke and—

That was no tranq bullet! That was the real thing!

And he thinks he’s microseconds away from death, but he suddenly realizes that the blood isn’t his. In front of him, Mouthpiece’s face is a red, pulpy mess. The man goes down, dead before he hits the pavement and—

My God, that was a real bullet. Why does a Juvey-cop have real bullets? That’s illegal!

He can hear footsteps around the bend, and the dead cop is still dead, and he knows the whole world heard the gunshot, and everything hinges on his next action.

He is partners with the Akron AWOL now. The patron saint of runaway Unwinds is watching over his shoulder, waiting for Starkey to make a move, and he thinks, *What would Connor do?*

Just then another Juvey-cop comes around the bend—a cop he has never seen and determined to never see again. Starkey raises Mouthpiece’s gun and shoots, turning what was just an accident into murder.

As he escapes—truly escapes—all he can think about is the bloody taste of victory, and how pleased the ghost of Connor Lassiter would be.

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To be an AWOL Unwind is one thing, but to be a cop killer is another. The manhunt for Starkey becomes more than just your typical Unwind chase. It seems the whole world is put on alert. First Starkey changes his look, dying his straggly brown hair red, cutting it bookworm short, and shaving off the little victory garden goatee that he’s been cultivating since middle school. Now when people see him, they might get a feeling they’ve seen him before, but not know from where, because now he looks less like a face from a wanted poster and more like someone you’d see on a Wheaties box. The red hair is a bit of a disconnect with his olive complexion, but then, being a genetic hodgepodge has served him well all his life. He’s always been a chameleon who could pass for any ethnicity. The red hair just adds one more level of misdirection.

He skips town and never stays anywhere for more than a day or two. Word is that the Pacific Northwest is more sympathetic to AWOL Unwinds than Southern California, so that’s where he’s headed.

Starkey is prepared for life as a fugitive, because he has always lived in a kind of protective paranoia. ~~Don't trust anyone, not even your own shadow, and look out for your own best interests.~~ His friends appreciated his clear-cut approach to life, because they always knew where they stood. He would fight to the end for his friends . . . as long as it was in his own interest to do so.

"You have the soul of a corporation," a teacher once told him. It was meant as an insult, but he took it as a compliment. Corporations have great power and do fine things in this world when they choose to. She was a glacier-hugging math teacher who got laid off the following year, because who needs math teachers when you can just get a NeuroWeave? Just goes to show you, hugging a chunk of ice gets you nothing but cold.

Now, however, Starkey's one with the huggers, because they're the kind of people who run the Anti-Divisional Resistance, harboring runaway Unwinds. Once he's in the hands of the ADR, he knows he'll be safe, but finding them is the hard part.

"I've been AWOL for almost four months now and haven't seen no sign of the resistance," says an ugly kid with a bulldog face. Starkey met him while hanging out behind a KFC on Christmas Eve, waiting for them to throw out the leftover chicken. He's not the kind of kid Starkey would hang with in real life, but now that real life has flipped into borrowed time, his priorities have changed.

"I've survived because I don't fall for no traps," Dogface tells him.

Starkey knows all about the traps. If a hiding place seems too good to be true, it probably is. An abandoned house with a comfortable mattress; an unlocked truck that happens to be full of canned food. They're traps set by Juvey-cops for AWOL Unwinds. There are even Juvey-cops pretending to be part of the Anti-Divisional Resistance.

"The Juvey-cops are offering rewards now for people who turn in AWOLs," Dogface says, as they stuff themselves sick with chicken. "And there are bounty hunters, too. *Parts pirates*, they call 'em. They don't bother with collecting rewards—they sell the AWOLs they catch on the black market—and if you think regular harvest camps are bad, you don't wanna know about the illegal ones." The kid swallows a mouthful so big, Starkey can see it going down his gullet like a mouse being swallowed by a snake. "There never used to be parts pirates," he says, "but since seventeen-year-olds can't be unwound no more, there's a shortage of parts, and AWOLs fetch a huge price on the black market."

Starkey shakes his head. Making it illegal to unwind seventeen-year-olds was supposed to save a fifth of the kids marked for unwinding, but instead it forced a lot of parents to make their decision earlier. Starkey wonders if his parents would have changed their mind if they had another year to decide.

"Parts pirates are the worst," Dogface tells him. "Their traps aren't so nice as the ones the Juvey-cops set. I heard this story about a trapper who got put out of business when fur was made illegal. So he took his heaviest animal traps and retooled them for Unwinds. Man, one of those traps snaps around your leg, and you can kiss that leg good-bye." He snaps a chicken bone in half for emphasis, and Starkey shivers in spite of himself. "There are other stories," Dogface says, licking chicken grease from his dirty fingers, "like this kid in my old neighborhood. His parents were total losers. Strung-out druggies who prolly shoulda been unwound themselves, but they had unwinding back in the day. Anyway, on his thirteenth birthday, they sign the unwinding order and tell him about it."

"Why would they tell him?"

“So he’d run away,” Dogface explains, “but see, they knew all his secret hiding places, and they told a parts pirate where to find him. He caught the kid, sold him, and split the fee with the kid’s parents.”

“Son of a bitch!”

Dogface shrugs, and flicks away a chicken bone. “The kid was a stork-job anyways, so it was no great loss, right?”

Starkey stops chewing, but just for a moment. Then he grins, keeping his thoughts to himself. “Right. No great loss.”

That night the dogfaced kid takes Starkey to a drainage tunnel where he’s been hiding out, and once the kid falls asleep, Starkey gets to work. He goes out into a nearby neighborhood and leaves a bucket of chicken at some strangers’ front door, rings the bell, and runs.

There’s no chicken in the bucket, though. Instead there’s a hand-drawn map, along with the following note:

Need money? Then send the Juvey-cops here, and you’ll collect a fat reward. Happy holidays!

Right around dawn, Starkey watches from a nearby rooftop as Juvies storm the drainage tunnel and pull out the dogfaced kid like so much earwax.

“Congratulations, asshole,” he says to himself. “You’ve been storked.”

ADVERTISEMENT

“When my parents signed the unwind order, I was scared. I didn’t know what would happen to me. I thought, ‘Why me? Why am I being punished?’ But once I got to BigSky Harvest Camp, all that changed. I found other kids like me and was finally accepted for who I was. I found out that every single part of me was precious and valuable. Thanks to the people at BigSky Harvest Camp, I’m not afraid of my unwinding anymore.

“The divided state? Wow. What an adventure!”

Every AWOL Unwind will steal. It’s an argument that the authorities like to use to convince the public that Unwinds are rotten apples from skin to core—that criminality is part of the very nature, and the only way to separate them from it is to separate them from themselves.

Theft, however, is not about predisposition when it comes to Unwinds. It’s simply a matter of necessity. Kids who would never steal a penny find their fingers stickier than molasses and full of all sorts of pilfered goods, from food to clothes to medicine—the various things they need to survive—and those who were already prone to crime simply become even more so.

Starkey is no stranger to criminal activity—although until recently most of his crimes were misdemeanors of the rebellious sort. He shoplifted if a shopkeeper looked at him suspiciously. He tagged bits of his own personal philosophy, which usually involved some choice four-letter words, on buildings that stood for the very things that ticked him off. He even stole a car from a neighbor who always made his young children go inside whenever Starkey came out. He took that guy’s car on a joyride with a couple of friends. Fun was had by all. Along the way he sideswiped a row of parked cars, losing two hub-caps and a bumper. Their ride ended when the car jumped a curb and mounted a very unresponsive mailbox. The damage was just enough to have the car labeled a total loss, which was exactly what Starkey wanted.

They never could prove it was him, but everybody knew. He had to admit, it wasn’t one of his shining moments, but he knew he had had to do something to a man who didn’t think Starkey was good enough to breathe the same air as his own children. The guy simply had to be

punished for that kind of behavior.

~~All of it seemed to pale now that he was a murderer. But no—It would do him no good to~~ think of himself that way. Better to think of himself as a warrior: a foot soldier in the war against unwinding. Soldiers were given medals for taking out the enemy, weren't they? So even though that night in the alley still plagues him in moments of insecurity, most of the time his conscience is clear. His conscience is also clear when he begins parting people from their wallets.

Starkey, imagining himself as a big-time Las Vegas magician someday, used to amaze his friends and terrify adults by making their watches disappear off their wrists and turn up in other people's pockets. It was a simple parlor trick, but one that had taken lots of time to perfect. Making wallets and purses disappear followed the same principle. A combination of distraction, skilled fingers, and the confidence to get it done.

On this night, Starkey's mark is a man who comes stumbling drunk out of a bar and slips an overstuffed wallet into the wide pocket of his overcoat. The drunk fumbles with his keys on the way to his car. Starkey strolls past, bumping him just hard enough to dislodge the keys, and they fall to the ground.

"Hey, man, I'm sorry," Starkey says, picking up the keys and handing them to him. The man never feels the fingers of Starkey's other hand in his pocket, lifting the wallet at the same moment Starkey's handing him the keys. Starkey strolls off whistling to himself, knowing the man will be halfway home before he realizes that his wallet is gone, and even then, he'll think he just left it at the bar.

Starkey turns a corner, making sure he's out of sight before he opens the wallet, and the second he does, a jolt of electricity courses through him with such power his feet fall out from under him and he's left semiconscious on the ground, twitching.

A stun-wallet. He's heard of such things but never saw one in action until now.

Within seconds, the drunk is there, not so drunk after all, with three others whose faces he can't make out. They lift him up and shove him into the back of a waiting van.

As the door is pulled closed and the van accelerates, Starkey, only barely conscious, sees the face of the drunk/not-drunk man looking down at him through an electrically charged haze.

"Are you an Unwind, a runaway, or just a lowlife?" he asks.

Starkey's lips feel like rubber. "Lowlife."

"Great," says the un-drunk. "That narrows it down. Unwind or runaway?"

"Runaway," mumbles Starkey.

"Perfect," the man says. "Now that we've established you're an Unwind, we know what to do with you."

Starkey groans, and some woman beyond his limited peripheral vision laughs. "Don't be surprised. Unwinds all got this look in their eye that lowlifes and runaways don't. We knew the truth without you saying a thing."

Starkey tries to move, but he can barely lift his limbs.

"Don't," says a girl he can't see from somewhere behind him. "Don't move or I'll zap you even worse than the wallet did."

Starkey knows he's fallen for a parts pirate's trap. He thought he was smarter, and he silently curses his luck . . . until the man who pretended to be drunk says, "You'll like this safe house. Good food, even if it does smell a little."

"Wh-what?"

Laughs from everyone around him. There may be four or five people in the van. But his vision still isn't clear enough to get an accurate count.

"I love that look on their faces," the woman says. Now she comes into his field of vision and grins at him. "You know how they tranq escaped lions so they can bring them back to safety before they get themselves in a heap of trouble?" she says. "Well, today you're the lion."

PUBLIC SERVICE ANNOUNCEMENT

"Hi, kids! Watchdog Walter here, eyes open and nose to the ground! Not everyone can be a bloodhound like me, but now you can join my Junior Watchdog Club! You'll receive your own Junior Watchdog kit, and a monthly newsletter with games and tips on spotting crime in your own neighborhood, from suspicious strangers to Unwind 'danger-houses!' With you on the job, bad guys and AWOLs don't stand a chance! So join today! And remember, Junior Watchdogs—eyes open and nose to the ground!"

Sponsored by Neighborhood Watch Inc.

The safe house is a sewer pump station. Automated. No city workers ever show up unless something breaks.

"You get used to the smell," Starkey is told as they bring him in, which he finds hard to believe—but it turns out to be true. Apparently one's sense of smell realizes it's going to lose the battle and just goes with it—and, as they told him in the van, the food makes up for it.

The whole place is a petri dish of angst, generated by kids whose parents gave up on them, which is the worst kind of angst there is. There are fights and ridiculous posturing on a daily basis.

Starkey's always been a natural leader among sketchy outcasts and borderline personalities, and the safe house is no exception. He quickly rises in the social ranks. Word of his escape is already churning out smoke in the rumor mill, helping his status from the very beginning.

"Is it true you shot two Juvey-cops?"

"Yep."

"Is it true you shot your way out of lockup with a machine gun?"

"Sure, why not?"

And the best part is that the storked kids—who, even among Unwinds, are treated like second-class citizens—are now the elite, thanks to him!

Starkey says the storks get served first? They get served first. Starkey says they get the best beds, farthest from the stinking vents? They get the best beds. His word is law. Even those running the place know that Starkey is their greatest asset, and they know to keep him happy because if he becomes an enemy, then every Unwind there is an enemy too.

He starts to settle in, figuring he'll be there until he's seventeen—but then in the middle of the night they're rounded up and taken away by the ADR—shuffled like a deck of cards to different safe houses.

"This is the way it works," they're all told. The reason, Starkey comes to understand, is twofold. One, it keeps the kids moving closer to their destination, wherever that might be. Two, it splits them apart to keep any alliances from becoming permanent. Kind of like unwinding the mob rather than the individuals to keep them in line.

Their plan, however, backfires with Starkey, because in each safe house he manages to earn respect, building his credibility among more and more kids. In each new location he comes across Unwinds who fancy themselves alpha males, trying to take charge, but in truth they're just betas waiting for an alpha to humble them into submission.

In every instance, Starkey finds his opportunity to challenge, defeat, and rise above. ~~The~~ ~~there's another midnight ride, another shake-up, and a new safe house.~~ Each time Starkey learns a new social skill, something to serve him, something to make him even more effective at gathering and galvanizing these scared, angry kids. There could be no better leadership program than the safe houses of the Anti-Divisional Resistance.

And then come the coffins.

They show up at the final safe house: a shipment of lacquered wood caskets with rich satin linings. Most kids are terrified; Starkey is just amused.

“Get in!” they’re told by armed resistance fighters who look more like special ops. “No questions, just get in. Two to a box! Move it!”

Some kids hesitate, but the smarter ones quickly find a partner like it’s a sudden square dance, and nobody wants to be stuck with someone too tall, too fat, too unwashed, or too rancid—because none of those things would fare well in the confines of a coffin—but no one actually gets in until Starkey gives the nod.

“If they meant to bury us,” he tells them, “they would have done it already.” As it turns out, he’s more persuasive than the guys with the guns.

He chooses to share his little box with a wisp of a girl who is giddy at having been chosen by him. Not that he particularly likes her, but she is so slight that she’ll barely take up any room. Once they’re wedged in together in a tight spoon position, they’re handed an oxygen tank and then closed into the darkness of the coffin together.

“I’ve always liked you, Mason,” says the girl, whose name he can’t recall. He’s surprised that she knows his first name, since he never uses it anymore. “Of all the boys in the safe house you’re the only one who makes me feel safe.”

He doesn’t respond; he just kisses her on the back of her head, to maintain his image as the safest port in her storm. It’s a powerful feeling to know you make others feel safe.

“We . . . *could*, you know . . .,” she says coyly.

He reminds her that the ADR workers were very clear. “No extracurricular activities,” they had said, “or you’ll use up your oxygen and die.” Starkey doesn’t know if it’s true, but certainly is a good argument for restraint. Besides, even if someone were stupid enough to tempt fate, there’s not enough space to move, much less generate any sort of friction, so the point is moot. He wonders if it’s some sort of twisted joke the adults are having, shoving hormonal teens into tight quarters but making it impossible to do anything but breathe.

“I wouldn’t mind suffocating if it was with you,” the girl says, which is flattering, but makes him even less interested in her.

“There’ll be a better time,” he tells her, knowing that such a time will never come—at least not for her—but hope is a powerful motivator.

Eventually they settle into a sort of symbiotic breathing rhythm. He breathes in when she breathes out, so their chests don’t fight for space.

After a while, there’s a jarring motion. With his arm now around the girl, he holds her a little more tightly, knowing that easing her fear somehow eases his own. Soon there’s a strange kind of acceleration, like they’re in a speeding car, but the angle changes, tilting them.

“A plane?” asks the girl.

“I think so.”

“What now?”

He doesn’t answer because he doesn’t know. Starkey begins to feel light-headed and

remembering the oxygen tank, turns the valve so that it slowly hisses. The coffin isn't quite a tight, ~~but closed tightly enough that they would suffocate without that oxygen, even in the~~ pressurized hull of a plane. In a few minutes the stress-induced exhaustion puts the girl to sleep, but not Starkey. Finally, an hour later, the sudden jar of landing jolts the girl awake.

"Where do you think we are?" the girl asks.

Starkey is feeling irritable from the tight quarters but tries not to show it. "We'll find out soon enough."

Twenty minutes of anticipation, and finally the lid is unlatched and opened, resurrecting the two of them from the dead.

There's a smiling kid with braces above them.

"Hello, I'm Hayden, and I'll be your personal savior today," he says brightly. "Oh look! No vomit or other unpleasant bodily fluids. Lucky you!"

With barely any blood circulating in his feet, Starkey joins a limping procession out of the jet's cargo hold and into the blinding day. What he sees before him as his eyes adjust seems more like a mirage than anything real.

It's a desert filled with thousands of airplanes.

Starkey's heard of places like this, airplane boneyards where decommissioned aircraft go to die. Around them are teens in military camouflage, carrying weapons. They're not unlike the adults back at the last safe house, just younger. They herd the kids into a loose formation at the bottom of the ramp.

A Jeep drives up. Clearly this is the approach of someone important, someone who will tell them why they're here.

The Jeep comes to a halt, and out steps an unremarkable-looking teenager in blue camouflage. He's Starkey's age or maybe a little bit older, and he has scars on the right half of his face.

As the crowd gets a good look at him, people begin to murmur with excitement. The kid raises his hand to quiet them down, and Starkey spots a shark tattoo on his arm.

"No way!" a fat kid next to Starkey says. "You know who that is? That's the Akron AWOL. That's Connor Lassiter."

Starkey scoffs, "Don't be ridiculous, the Akron AWOL is dead."

"No, he ain't! He's right there!"

The very idea sends a surge of adrenaline through Starkey's body, finally bringing circulation back to his limbs. But no—as he looks at this teen trying to rein in the chaos, he realizes this couldn't be Connor Lassiter. This kid does not look the part at all. His hair is tousled, not coolly slicked back, the way Starkey always imagined it would be. This kid looks too open and honest—not quite innocent, but he has nowhere near the level of jaded anger that the Akron AWOL would have. The only thing about him that could even slightly resemble Starkey's image of Connor Lassiter would be the slight smirk that always seems to be on his face. Not this kid before them, trying to command their respect, is nobody special. Nobody at all.

"Let me be the first to welcome you to the Graveyard," he says, delivering what must be the same speech he delivers to every batch of new arrivals. "Officially my name is Elvis Robert Mullard . . . but my friends call me Connor."

Cheers from the Unwinds.

"Told you so!" says the fat kid.

"Doesn't prove anything," says Starkey, his jaw set and teeth clenched as the speed

continues.

~~“You’re all here because you were marked for unwinding but escaped, and thanks to the efforts of a whole lot of people with the Anti-Divisional Resistance, you’ve made it here. This will be your home until you turn seventeen and can’t be unwound. That’s the good news. . . .”~~

The more he speaks, the more Starkey’s heart sinks, and he comes to realize the truth of it. This is the Akron AWOL—and he’s not larger than life at all. In fact, he barely lives up to reality.

“The bad news is that the Juvenile Authority knows about us. They know where we are and what we’re doing—but so far they’ve left us alone.”

Starkey marvels at the unfairness of it all. How could this be? How is it possible that the great champion of runaway Unwinds is just some ordinary kid?

“Some of you just want to survive to seventeen, and I don’t blame you,” Connor says. “But you know that many of you would risk everything to end unwinding forever.”

“Yeah!” Starkey shouts out, making sure it’s loud enough to draw everyone’s attention away from Connor, and he starts pumping his fist in the air. “Happy Jack! Happy Jack! Happy Jack!” He gets a whole chant going in the crowd. “We’ll blow up every last harvest camp!” Starkey shouts. Yet even though he’s riled them up, one look from Connor throws a wet blanket over the whole crowd, silencing them.

“There’s one in every crowd,” says Hayden, shaking his head.

“I’m sorry to disappoint you, but we will *not* be blowing up Chop Shops,” Connor says, looking right at Starkey. “They already see us as violent, and the Juvies use public fear to justify unwinding. We can’t feed into that. We’re not clappers. We will not commit random acts of violence. We will *think* before we act. . . .”

Starkey does not take the reprimand well. Who is this guy to shut him down? He keeps talking, but Starkey’s not listening anymore, because Connor has nothing to say to him. But the others listen, and that makes Starkey burn.

Now, as he stands there, waiting for the so-called Akron AWOL to shut up, a seed starts to take root in Starkey’s mind. He has killed two Juvey-cops. His legend is already set, and unlike Connor, he didn’t have to pretend to die to become legendary. Starkey has to smile. The airplane salvage yard is filled with hundreds of Unwinds, but in the end, it’s no different from the safe houses—and like those safe houses, here is just one more beta male waiting for an alpha like Starkey to put him in his place.

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