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Opening extract from

Unwind

Written by

Neal Shusterman

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1 · Connor

"There are places you can go," Ariana tells him, "and a guy as smart as you has a decent chance of surviving to eighteen."

Connor isn't so sure, but looking into Ariana's eyes makes his doubts go away, if only for a moment. Her eyes are sweet violet with streaks of gray. She's such a slave to fashion—always getting the newest pigment injection the second it's in style. Connor was never into that. He's always kept his eyes the color they came in. Brown. He never even got tattoos, like so many kids get these days when they're little. The only color on his skin is the tan it takes during the summer, but now, in November, that tan has long faded. He tries not to think about the fact that he'll never see the summer again. At least not as Connor Lassiter. He still can't believe that his life is being stolen from him at sixteen.

Ariana's violet eyes begin to shine as they fill with tears that flow down her cheeks when she blinks. "Connor, I'm so sorry." She holds him, and for a moment it seems as if everything is okay, as if they are the only two people on Earth. For that instant, Connor feels invincible, untouchable . . . but she lets go, the moment passes, and the world around him returns. Once more he can feel the rumble of the freeway beneath them, as cars pass by, not knowing or caring that he's here. Once more he is just a marked kid, a week short of unwinding.

The soft, hopeful things Ariana tells him don't help now. He can barely hear her over the rush of traffic. This place where they hide from the world is one of those dangerous places that

make adults shake their heads, grateful that their own kids aren't stupid enough to hang out on the ledge of a freeway overpass. For Connor it's not about stupidity, or even rebellion—it's about feeling life. Sitting on this ledge, hidden behind an exit sign is where he feels most comfortable. Sure, one false step and he's roadkill. Yet for Connor, life on the edge is home.

There have been no other girls he's brought here, although he hasn't told Ariana that. He closes his eyes, feeling the vibration of the traffic as if it's pulsing through his veins, a part of him. This has always been a good place to get away from fights with his parents, or when he just feels generally boiled. But now Connor's beyond boiled—even beyond fighting with his mom and dad. There's nothing more to fight about. His parents signed the order—it's a done deal.

"We should run away," Ariana says. "I'm fed up with everything, too. My family, school, everything. I could kick-AWOL, and never look back."

Connor hangs on the thought. The idea of kicking-AWOL by himself terrifies him. He might put up a tough front, he might act like the bad boy at school—but running away on his own? He doesn't even know if he has the guts. But if Ariana comes, that's different. That's not alone. "Do you mean it?"

Ariana looks at him with her magical eyes. "Sure. Sure I do. I could leave here. If you asked me."

Connor knows this is major. Running away with an Unwind—*that's* commitment. The fact that she would do it moves him beyond words. He kisses her, and in spite of everything going on in his life Connor suddenly feels like the luckiest guy in the world. He holds her—maybe a little too tightly, because she starts to squirm. It just makes him want to hold her even more tightly, but he fights that urge and lets go. She smiles at him.

"AWOL . . ." she says. "What does that mean, anyway?"

"It's an old military term or something," Connor says. "It means 'absent without leave.'"

Ariana thinks about it, and grins. "Hmm. More like 'alive without lectures.'"

Connor takes her hand, trying hard not to squeeze it too tightly. She said she'd go if he asked her. Only now does he realize he hasn't actually asked yet.

"Will you come with me, Ariana?"

Ariana smiles and nods. "Sure," she says. "Sure I will."

Ariana's parents don't like Connor. "We always knew he'd be an Unwind," he can just hear them saying. "You should have stayed away from that Lassiter boy." He was never "Connor" to them. He was always "that Lassiter boy." They think that just because he's been in and out of disciplinary school they have a right to judge him.

Still, when he walks her home that afternoon, he stops short of her door, hiding behind a tree as she goes inside. Before he heads home, he thinks how hiding is now going to be a way of life for both of them.

Home.

Connor wonders how he can call the place he lives home, when he's about to be evicted—not just from the place he sleeps, but from the hearts of those who are supposed to love him.

His father sits in a chair, watching the news as Connor enters.

"Hi, Dad."

His father points at some random carnage on the news. "Clappers again."

"What did they hit this time?"

"They blew up an Old Navy in the North Akron mall."

"Hmm," says Connor. "You'd think they'd have better taste."

"I don't find that funny."

Connor's parents don't know that Connor knows he's being unwound. He wasn't supposed to find out, but Connor has always been good at ferreting out secrets. Three weeks ago, while looking for a stapler in his dad's home office, he found airplane tickets to the Bahamas. They were going on a family vacation over Thanksgiving. One problem, though: There were only three tickets. His mother, his father, his younger brother. No ticket for him. At first he just figured the ticket was somewhere else, but the more he thought about it, the more it seemed wrong. So Connor went looking a little deeper when his parents were out, and he found it. The Unwind order. It had been signed in old-fashioned triplicate. The white copy was already gone—off with the authorities. The yellow copy would accompany Connor to his end, and the pink would stay with his parents, as evidence of what they'd done. Perhaps they would frame it and hang it alongside his first-grade picture.

The date on the order was the day before the Bahamas trip. He was going off to be unwound, and they were going on vacation to make themselves feel better about it. The unfairness of it had made Connor want to break something. It had made him want to break a lot of things—but he hadn't. For once he had held his temper, and aside from a few fights in school that weren't his fault, he kept his emotions hidden. He kept what he knew to himself. Everyone knew that an unwind order was irreversible, so screaming and fighting wouldn't change a thing. Besides, he found a certain power in knowing his parents' secret. Now the blows he could deal them were so much more effective. Like the day he brought flowers home for his mother and she cried for hours. Like the B-plus he

brought home on a science test. Best grade he ever got in science. He handed it to his father, who looked at it, the color draining from his face. "See, Dad, my grades are getting better. I could even bring my science grade up to an A by the end of the semester." An hour later his father was sitting in a chair, still clutching the test in his hand, and staring blankly at the wall.

Connor's motivation was simple: Make them suffer. Let them know for the rest of their lives what a horrible mistake they made.

But there was no sweetness to this revenge, and now, three weeks of rubbing it in their faces has made him feel no better. In spite of himself he's starting to feel bad for his parents, and he hates that he feels that way.

"Did I miss dinner?"

His father doesn't look away from the TV. "Your mother left a plate for you."

Connor heads off toward the kitchen, but halfway there he hears:

"Connor?"

He turns to see his father looking at him. Not just looking, but staring. *He's going to tell me now,* Connor thinks. *He's going to tell me they're unwinding me, and then break down in tears, going on and on about how sorry sorry sorry he is about it all.* If he does, Connor just might accept the apology. He might even forgive him, and then tell him that he doesn't plan to be here when the Juvey-cops come to take him away. But in the end all his father says is, "Did you lock the door when you came in?"

"I'll do it now."

Connor locks the door, then goes to his room, no longer hungry for whatever it is his mother saved for him.

* * *

At two in the morning Connor dresses in black and fills a backpack with the things that really matter to him. He still has room for three changes of clothes. He finds it amazing, when it comes down to it, how few things are worth taking. Memories, mostly. Reminders of a time before things went so wrong between him and his parents. Between him and the rest of the world.

Connor peeks in on his brother, thinks about waking him to say good-bye, then decides it's not a good idea. He silently slips out into the night. He can't take his bike, because he had installed an antitheft tracking device. Connor never considered that he might be the one stealing it. Ariana has bikes for both of them though.

Ariana's house is a twenty-minute walk, if you take the conventional route. Suburban Ohio neighborhoods never have streets that go in straight lines, so instead he takes the more direct route, through the woods, and makes it there in ten.

The lights in Ariana's house are off. He expected this. It would have been suspicious if she had stayed awake all night. Better to pretend she's sleeping, so she won't alert any suspicion. He keeps his distance from the house. Ariana's yard and front porch are equipped with motion-sensor lights that come on whenever anything moves into range. They're meant to scare off wild animals and criminals. Ariana's parents are convinced that Connor is both.

He pulls out his phone and dials the familiar number. From where he stands in the shadows at the edge of the backyard he can hear it ring in her room upstairs. Connor disconnects quickly and ducks farther back into the shadows, for fear that Ariana's parents might be looking out from their windows. What is she thinking? Ariana was supposed to leave her phone on vibrate.

He makes a wide arc around the edge of the backyard,

wide enough not to set off the lights, and although a light comes on when he steps onto the front porch, only Ariana's bedroom faces that way. She comes to the door a few moments later, opening it not quite wide enough for her to come out or for him to go in.

"Hi, are you ready?" asks Connor. Clearly she's not; she wears a robe over satin pajamas. "You didn't forget, did you?"

"No, no, I didn't forget. . . ."

"So hurry up! The sooner we get out of here, the more of a lead we'll get before anyone knows we're gone."

"Connor," she says, "here's the thing . . ."

And the truth is right there in her voice, in the way it's such a strain for her to even say his name, the quiver of apology lingering in the air like an echo. She doesn't have to say anything after that, because he knows, but he lets her say it anyway. Because he sees how hard it is for her, and he wants it to be. He wants it to be the hardest thing she's ever done in her life.

"Connor, I really want to go, I do . . . but it's just a really bad time for me. My sister's getting married, and you know she picked me to be the maid of honor. And then there's school."

"You hate school. You said you'd be dropping out when you turn sixteen."

"*Testing* out," she says. "There's a difference."

"So you're not coming?"

"I want to, I really, *really* want to . . . but I can't."

"So everything we talked about was just a lie."

"No," says Ariana. "It was a dream. Reality got in the way, that's all. And running away doesn't solve anything."

"Running away is the only way to save my life," Connor hisses. "I'm about to be unwound, in case you forgot."

She gently touches his face. "I know," she says. "But I'm not."

Then a light comes on at the top of the stairs, and reflexively Ariana closes the door a few inches.

"Ari?" Connor hears her mother say. "What is it? What are you doing at the door?"

Connor backs up out of view, and Ariana turns to look up the stairs. "Nothing, Mom. I thought I saw a coyote from my window and I just wanted to make sure the cats weren't out."

"The cats are upstairs, honey. Close the door and go back to bed."

"So, I'm a coyote," says Connor.

"Shush," says Ariana, closing the door until there's just a tiny slit and all he can see is the edge of her face and a single violet eye. "You'll get away, I know you will. Call me once you're somewhere safe." Then she closes the door.

Connor stands there for the longest time, until the motion sensor light goes out. Being alone had not been part of his plan, but he realizes it should have been. From the moment his parents signed those papers, Connor was alone.

He can't take a train; he can't take a bus. Sure, he has enough money, but nothing's leaving until morning, and by then they'll be looking for him in all the obvious places. Unwinds on the run are so common these days, they have whole teams of Juvey-cops dedicated to finding them. The police have it down to an art.

He knows he'd be able to disappear in a city, because there are so many faces, you never see the same one twice. He knows he can also disappear in the country, where people are so few and far between; he could set up house in an old barn and no one would think to look. But then, Connor figures the police probably thought of that. They probably have every old barn set up to spring like a rat trap, snaring kids like him. Or maybe he's just being paranoid. No, Connor knows his situation

calls for justified caution—not just tonight, but for the next two years. Then once he turns eighteen, he's home free. After that, sure, they can throw him in jail, they can put him on trial—but they can't unwind him. Surviving that long is the trick.

Down by the interstate there's a rest stop where truckers pull off the road for the night. This is where Connor goes. He figures he can slip in the back of an eighteen-wheeler, but he quickly learns that truckers keep their cargo locked. He curses himself for not having forethought enough to consider that. Thinking ahead has never been one of Connor's strong points. If it was, he might not have gotten into the various situations that have plagued him over these past few years. Situations that got him labels like "troubled" and "at risk," and finally this last label, "unwind."

There are about twenty parked trucks, and a brightly lit diner where half a dozen truckers eat. It's 3:30 in the morning. Apparently truckers have their own biological clocks. Connor watches and waits. Then, at about a quarter to four, a police cruiser pulls silently into the truck stop. No lights, no siren. It slowly circles the lot like a shark. Connor thinks he can hide, until he sees a second police car pulling in. There are too many lights over the lot for Connor to hide in shadows, and he can't bolt without being seen in the bright moonlight. A patrol car comes around the far end of the lot. In a second its headlights will be on him, so he rolls beneath a truck and prays the cops haven't seen him.

He watches as the patrol car's wheels slowly roll past. On the other side of the eighteen-wheeler the second patrol car passes in the opposite direction. *Maybe this is just a routine check,* he thinks. *Maybe they're not looking for me.* The more he thinks about it, the more he convinces himself that's the case. They can't know he's gone yet. His father sleeps like a

log, and his mother never checks on Connor during the night anymore.

Still, the police cars circle.

From his spot beneath the truck Connor sees the driver's door of another eighteen-wheeler open. No—it's not the driver's door, it's the door to the little bedroom behind the cab. A trucker emerges, stretches, and heads toward the truckstop bathrooms, leaving the door ajar.

In the hairbreadth of a moment, Connor makes a decision and bolts from his hiding spot, racing across the lot to that truck. Loose gravel skids out from under his feet as he runs. He doesn't know where the cop cars are anymore, but it doesn't matter. He has committed himself to this course of action and he has to see it through. As he nears the door he sees headlights arcing around, about to turn toward him. He pulls open the door to the truck's sleeper, hurls himself inside, and pulls the door closed behind him.

He sits on a bed not much bigger than a cot, catching his breath. What's his next move? The trucker will be back. Connor has about five minutes if he's lucky, one minute if he's not. He peers beneath the bed. There's space down there where he can hide, but it's blocked by two duffle bags full of clothes. He could pull them out, squeeze in, and pull the duffle bags back in front of him. The trucker would never know he's there. But even before he can get the first duffle bag out, the door swings open. Connor just stands there, unable to react as the trucker reaches in to grab his jacket and sees him.

"Whoa! Who are you? What the hell you doin' in my truck?"

A police car cruises slowly past behind him.

"Please," Connor says, his voice suddenly squeaky like it was before his voice changed. "Please, don't tell anyone. I've got to get out of this place." He reaches into his backpack,

fumbling, and pulls out a wad of bills from his wallet. "You want money? I've got money. I'll give you all I've got."

"I don't want your money," the trucker says.

"All right, then, what?"

Even in the dim light the trucker must see the panic in Connor's eyes, but he doesn't say a thing.

"Please," says Connor again. "I'll do anything you want. . . ."

The trucker looks at him in silence for a moment more. "Is that so?" he finally says. Then he steps inside and closes the door behind him.

Connor shuts his eyes, not daring to consider what he's just gotten himself into.

The trucker sits beside him. "What's your name?"

"Connor." Then he realizes a moment too late he should have given a fake name.

The trucker scratches his beard stubble and thinks for a moment. "Let me show you something, Connor." He reaches over Connor and grabs, of all things, a deck of cards from a little pouch hanging next to the bed. "Did ya ever see this?" The trucker takes the deck of cards in one hand and does a skillful one-handed shuffle. "Pretty good, huh?"

Connor, not knowing what to say, just nods.

"How about this?" Then the trucker takes a single card and with sleight of hand makes the card vanish into thin air. Then he reaches over and pulls the card right out of Connor's shirt pocket. "You like that?"

Connor lets out a nervous laugh.

"Well, those tricks you just saw?" The trucker says, "I didn't do 'em."

"I . . . don't know what you mean."

The trucker rolls up his sleeve to reveal that the arm, which had done the tricks, had been grafted on at the elbow.

"Ten years ago I fell asleep at the wheel," the trucker tells him. "Big accident. I lost an arm, a kidney, and a few other things. I got new ones, though, and I pulled through." He looks at his hands, and now Connor can see that the trick-card hand is a little different from the other one. The trucker's other hand has thicker fingers, and the skin is a bit more olive in tone.

"So," says Connor, "you got dealt a new hand."

The trucker laughs at that, then he becomes quiet for a moment, looking at his replacement hand. "These fingers here knew things the rest of me didn't. Muscle memory, they call it. And there's not a day that goes by that I don't wonder what other incredible things that kid who owned this arm knew, before he was unwound . . . whoever he was."

The trucker stands up. "You're lucky you came to me," he says. "There are truckers out there who'll take whatever you offer, then turn you in anyway."

"And you're not like that?"

"No, I'm not." He puts out his hand—his *other* hand—and Connor shakes it. "Josias Aldridge," he says. "I'm heading north from here. You can ride with me till morning."

Connor's relief is so great, it takes the wind right out of him. He can't even offer a thank-you.

"That bed there's not the most comfortable in the world," says Aldridge, "but it does the job. Get yourself some rest. I just gotta go take a dump, and then we'll be on our way." Then he closes the door, and Connor listens to his footsteps heading off toward the bathroom. Connor finally lets his guard down and begins to feel his own exhaustion. The trucker didn't give him a destination, just a direction, and that's fine. North, south, east, west—it doesn't matter as long as it's away from here. As for his next move, well, first he's got to get through this one before he can think about what comes next.

A minute later Connor's already beginning to doze when he hears the shout from outside.

"We know you're in there! Come out now and you won't get hurt!"

Connor's heart sinks. Josias Aldridge has apparently pulled another sleight of hand. He's made Connor appear for the police. Abracadabra. With his journey over before it even began, Connor swings the door open to see three Juvey-cops aiming weapons.

But they're not aiming at him.

In fact, their backs are to him.

Across the way, the cab door swings open of the truck he had hidden under just a few minutes before, and a kid comes out from behind the empty driver's seat, his hands in the air. Connor recognizes him right away. It's a kid he knows from school. Andy Jameson.

My God, is Andy being unwound too?

There's a look of fear on Andy's face, but beyond it is something worse. A look of utter defeat. That's when Connor realizes his own folly. He'd been so surprised by this turn of events that he's still just standing there, exposed for anyone to see. Well, the policemen don't see him. But Andy does. He catches sight of Connor, holds his gaze, only for a moment . . .

. . . and in that moment something remarkable happens.

The look of despair on Andy's face is suddenly replaced by a steely resolve bordering on triumph. He quickly looks away from Connor and takes a few steps before the police grab him—steps *away* from Connor, so that the police still have their backs to him.

Andy had seen him and had not given him away! If Andy has nothing else after this day, at least he'll have this small victory.

Connor leans back into the shadows of the truck and slowly

pulls the door closed. Outside, as the police take Andy away, Connor lies back down, and his tears come as sudden as a summer downpour. He's not sure who he's crying for—for Andy, for himself, for Ariana—and not knowing makes his tears flow all the more. Instead of wiping the tears away he lets them dry on his face like he used to when he was a little boy and the things he cried about were so insignificant that they'd be forgotten by morning.

The trucker never comes to check on him. Instead Connor hears the engine start and feels the truck pulling out. The gentle motion of the road rocks him to sleep.

The ring of Connor's cell phone wakes him out of a deep sleep. He fights consciousness. He wants to go back to the dream he was having. It was about a place he was sure he had been to, although he couldn't quite remember when. He was at a cabin on a beach with his parents, before his brother was born. Connor's leg had fallen through a rotted board on the porch into spiderwebs so thick, they felt like cotton. Connor had screamed and screamed from the pain, and the fear of the giant spiders that he was convinced would eat his leg off. And yet, this was a good dream—a good memory—because his father was there to pull him free, and carry him inside, where they bandaged his leg and sat him by the fire with some kind of cider so flavorful, he could still taste it when he thought about it. His father told him a story that he can no longer remember, but that's all right. It wasn't the story but the tone of his voice that mattered, a gentle baritone rumble as calming as waves breaking on a shore. Little-boy-Connor drank his cider and leaned back against his mother pretending to fall asleep, but what he was really doing was trying to dissolve into the moment and make it last forever. In the dream he did dissolve. His whole being flowed into the cider cup, and his par-

ents placed it gently on the table, close enough to the fire to keep it warm forever and always.

Stupid dreams. Even the good ones are bad, because they remind you how poorly reality measures up.

His cell phone rings again, chasing away the last of the dream. Connor almost answers it. The sleeper room of the truck is so dark, he doesn't realize at first that he's not in his own bed. The only thing that saves him is that he can't find his phone and he must turn on a light. When he finds a wall where his nightstand should be, he realizes that this isn't his room. The phone rings again. That's when it all comes back to him, and he remembers where he is. Connor finds his phone in his backpack. The phone ID says the call is from his father.

So now his parents know he's gone. Do they really think he'll answer his phone? He waits until voicemail takes the call, then he turns off the power. His watch says 7:30 a.m. He rubs the sleep out of his eyes, trying to calculate how far they've come. The truck isn't moving anymore, but they must have traveled at least two hundred miles while he slept. It's a good start.

There's a knock on the door. "Come on out, kid. Your ride's over."

Connor's not complaining—it was outrageously generous of this truck driver to do what he did. Connor won't ask any more of him. He swings open the door and steps out to thank the man, but it's not Josias Aldridge at the door. Aldridge is a few yards away being handcuffed, and in front of Connor is a policeman: a Juvey-cop wearing a smile as big as all outdoors. Standing ten yards away is Connor's father, still holding the cell phone he had just called from.

"It's over, son," his father says.

It makes Connor furious. *I'm not your son!* He wants to shout. *I stopped being your son when you signed the unwind*

order! But the shock of the moment leaves him speechless.

It had been so stupid of Connor to leave his cell phone on—that's how they tracked him—and he wonders how many other kids are caught by their own blind trust of technology. Well, Connor's not going the way Andy Jameson did. He quickly assesses the situation. The truck has been pulled over to the side of the interstate by two highway patrol cars and a Juvey-cop unit. Traffic barrels past at seventy miles per hour, oblivious to the little drama unfolding on the shoulder. Connor makes a split-second decision and bolts, pushing the officer against the truck and racing across the busy highway. Would they shoot an unarmed kid in the back, he wonders, or would they shoot him in the legs and spare his vital organs? As he races onto the interstate, cars swerve around him, but he keeps on going.

"Connor, stop!" he hears his father yell. Then he hears a gun fire.

He feels the impact, but not in his skin. The bullet embeds in his backpack. He doesn't look behind him. Then, as he reaches the highway median, he hears another gunshot, and a small blue splotch appears on the center divider. They're firing tranquilizer bullets. They're not taking him out, they're trying to take him down—and they're much more likely to fire tranq bullets at will, than regular bullets.

Connor climbs over the center divider, and finds himself in the path of a Cadillac that's not stopping for anything. The car swerves to avoid him, and by sheer luck Connor's momentum takes him just a few inches out of the Caddy's path. Its side mirror smacks him painfully in the ribs before the car screeches to a halt, sending the acrid stench of burned rubber up his nostrils. Holding his aching side, Connor sees someone looking at him from an open window of the backseat. It's another kid, dressed all in white. The kid is terrified.