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Unstoppable

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“Unstoppable,” by Dylan J. McKevitt

Instructor’s Note

Dylan’s assignment was to recall an event in his life that had a transformative effect on him. This assignment allowed the writer to experiment with tension (conflict), how to pull the reader through an event so she continually asks: What happens next? He needed to have three scenes (a beginning, middle, and end), and he had to create the illusion of place and person with concrete details. Dylan experimented with both external tension and internal tension. How does Dylan create tension in each of his scenes? What is the internal conflict Dylan’s narrator struggles with? In both the external and internal conflicts: What does he want? Why can’t he have it? How is it resolved?

Writer’s Biography

Dylan McKevitt is a sophomore Geology major from the Upper Peninsula of Michigan. He runs cross-country and track outside of a busy class and work schedule. Dylan loves the outdoors and enjoys woodworking and reading in his free time.

Unstoppable

A couple years ago, I was unstoppable. I really did fly, almost recklessly, through, over or around whatever laid in my path. Sometimes that was a dirt road that flicked up dust with the touch of my feet, or sizzling blacktop, or ice glazed with fresh snow waiting to send me skidding with the smallest awkward stride, or even the forest floor flexing and branches reaching, bending, and sometimes snapping as I glided by. The truth was once I slipped on my running shoes, yanked the laces tight, stretched my legs forward and gained momentum, nothing really fazed me. Nothing could catch me, and nothing was beyond my reach.

Never has this feeling been as strong as during the early cross-country season practices preceding my senior year of high school. I cherished those late August early morning runs that blended into midday, before the stress of classes. I could just take off and cruise through town and over back roads with Steve – my one fast teammate – hanging at my shoulder. I remember one morning especially well. Even at 9AM it was hot and humid, with a glaring sun jumping up from the horizon. My coach's training plan for the day was no surprise: a long, slow run to recover from the previous day's workout. Translation: a quick ten miles with Steve and me alternately picking up the speed and pushing each other faster. So we took off.

Steve and I quickly left the other guys behind. However, a couple minutes later at the one main highway crossing in town the light stopped us. Cross-traffic picked up, and our coach and the rest of the team caught up. Then I had to endure once again my coach's warning to be careful crossing the roads, and to always wait for the light to change even when it looked safe to cross. I was almost 18 years old and knew what I was doing. When running, I was beyond those childish notions of being over-cautious. Fate was on my side- I was unstoppable. As soon as the light changed I sprinted ahead.

The next nine miles literally flew by. Every stride, every graceful stretch of the legs, smooth swing of the arms, and rhythmic cycle of the lungs brought me more in-touch with myself and the beauty of exertion, of flowing adrenaline-powered motion like a flooding river. Skirting along the edge of exhaustion has a way of bringing one's mind, body, and soul back into rhythm, of leading them to a refreshing peace. This particular day's run was no exception. Steve and I skimmed over the abandoned crumbling blacktop back roads, over the red sands of ATV trails that send the foot shifting to the side only to be brought back into line by the body's natural momentum. Leaping over a fallen tree, strongly pushing to accelerate up a short hill, a couple quick steps here and there to maneuver over uneven rocks or across a field of potholes, with every step calculated, visualized and realized in the runner's mind

and soul before the foot actually brushed the ground, the runner's reality constantly rolling forwards and always a step ahead, with the physical present struggling to keep up. Perhaps it was this combined with the weather that gave me a near out-of-body experience. By now- midday- the sun was really beating down from a cloudless sky. My body poured sweat. My eyes stung. But I was alive, reveling in the joy and beauty of what I was doing, in the competition and fellowship with my teammate trailing at my shoulder. We were more than human, almost immortal, flinging miles behind us like dust in the wind with impossible dreams stretching before us, only a few strides away. The heat didn't faze us, nor did fatigue. Nothing could.

Everything around me moved sluggishly under the thick, humid air as I glided back into town. Muffled sounds of barking dogs, a humming lawnmower, and children yelling as they darted around their yard registered like a faint memory. Yet from the confines of my detached mind, I sensed everything: the rustle of a gray squirrel jumping along branches; sunlight glinting off glass shards; butterflies fluttering up from flowers as I blew by. A car slowly backed from its driveway towards the sidewalk a few strides ahead, and then halted suddenly with red brake lights as the driver noticed me. I slightly altered my course, slipping casually past the rear bumper.

This triggered a memory, and my mind wandered. During my summer training, while running near home on remote backcountry gravel roads and logging trails, my dad told me I should carry a gun. His concern made sense; more than once I had seen some wolves, coyotes, and bears on my runs. But a gun was awkward to run with and nothing had ever come of these encounters. Not to say I was fearless, but I trusted my own judgment and knew I could either avoid trouble or deal with it when it did show up. My dad's warning still hung in my ears. Except now the wild animals were the cars and drivers that didn't pay attention. And now as I had told him then, my protection was my alertness and unstoppable momentum.

The approaching highway intersection and traffic light dragged me back to the present, but I was still riding a

high. My mind and soul remained settled in a peaceful, nearly disconnected awareness of my surroundings. At that time, all my being wanted to do was keep right on rolling across the highway, a mirage flashing before the eyes staring from vehicles bound in immobility by red brake lights. And yet in that moment I approached a similar fate at the mercy of the streetlight's heartless, tyrannical rule.

I unconsciously threw the words "Wait for the light" over my shoulder to Steve, a natural albeit unnecessary caution, the instinct of a runner to watch out for not only himself but also his fellow runners.

However, as fate would have it, as I approached the crossing the light changed colors. That's all that registered in my mind. My body and soul breathed a sigh of relief, and let my momentum continue to carry me forward. My legs continued to smoothly roll, arms rhythmically swing, heart pound, and reality struggled to keep up. But Steve did not.

Of course, I didn't realize this fact- that Steve had stopped- until shortly later. Until after I realized the light had changed to the wrong color. Until after my mind and soul flew from peace into chaos. Until after my perfect, peaceful, unstoppable dream-like state of being came crashing down around me. And suddenly I was in the middle of the highway, in an all too real moment. Time slowed to a crawl. Sound died away. Out of the corner of my right eye, my gaze still locked forward, a monstrous gray van sped towards me. As did other vehicles that I sensed to my left, right, ahead and behind me. And I say sped, even though time seemed to crawl, because I was slow and small and they were moving large, fast, and truly unstoppable.

In that moment a strange image came to my mind. It was not fully formed because the human mind can only think so fast, and this moment was instantaneous. It involved me another stride or two into the future. My right foot kicked up and back in perfect fluid running form as the gray van's front right fender nipped my shoe's black sole, a perfectly color-coordinated match. Then it gained a grip on the rest of my foot, then my leg. I spun, thrown off balance

like a rag in the wind. Then I toppled forwards, my unstoppable momentum brought to a halt by unforgiving blacktop. It warmly raked my arm and face, heated from the friction of rolling tires and beating sun. That same sun glinted off the shiny chrome bumper of an approaching truck, bearing down upon me amidst the smell of exhaust and roar of V-8's.

Still prisoner to this instantaneous moment, my mind jumped rails and snapped back to the present. It did not want to accept that fate. My soul and body were in perfect agreement. And yet realization came like a downpour- seemingly unavoidable surrender.

Suddenly a spark of hope sprang forth. The imagined was not yet reality. And in that bit of illumination my mind's image of the future gave up the ghost, replaced by a few quick thoughts. "There can be no turning back. No stopping. Just move forward, as fast as you can. Frogger. A mad dash across."

Like a flash my soul jumped and body strained for a burst of speed. That shattered the silent moment and time returned in a flood, fast and furious. As did everything around me. My mind blanked.

The next thing I knew I was reigning myself to a halt on the sidewalk to the cheer of honking car horns. The sun was bright, the sky was blue, sweat ran into my eyes, and I was breathing. Hard. My heart was jumping, skipping. I just turned around and looked back across the streaming highway to see Steve waiting for the light to change, to cross, with a look of shock on his face. Unconsciously I balanced myself against a light pole with one hand and bent my opposite foot up, gripped my ankle, and proceeded to strike a nonchalant stretching pose. In that moment of vulnerability I spoke some encouragement to myself and hoped to mirror the same by my pose. "Yeah, I meant to do that. Sometimes I just race across traffic for fun. I like to flirt with death. Dare-devil, you know."

In reality I was shattered inside, nerves completely scattered. The light changed, Steve crossed the highway,

and I just turned to stride in-sync with him. We jogged the half mile along the sidewalk back to our run's end in relative silence. Steve simply said something short that I vaguely remember, like "Boy, that was a close one," and I replied in equally inadequate terms with "Yeah, I guess I just wasn't thinking." Then I tried to make a lesson out of it and half-jokingly shared some advice; "That's why you always have to pay attention!" Neither of us laughed.

We finished our run, went home, and returned the next day for more miles. And I thanked God. But nothing more was ever said about that moment. I never told Steve about what really got me into that mess- my blindness.

A couple years ago, I was unstoppable. Or else I wouldn't be here to tell this story. I still run. I still fly. I still don't carry a gun along. What's changed then? Like I said, I *was* unstoppable. Now I know better.