CROSSING INTO UnNormal

POEMS FROM THE MIND OF A SHATTERED SKULL, AND THE STORIES BEHIND MY WORDS.



CHIEF CHUCK E CARROLL

Chief Chuck E Carroll

UnNormal Publishing

Copyright © 2026 Chuck E Carroll. All rights reserved.

UnNormal™ is a trademark of Chief Chuck E Carroll.

This book is not medical advice. I'm not a doctor. I'm a survivor. If something in here sounds like your life, take it to somebody with a license and tell them I sent you.

First Edition — MyUnNormalLife.com

Print ISBN: 979-8-952892-09-5

CONTENTS

ZERO SHIFT 5

BEFORE IT BROKE 9
IT DIDN'T LOOK LIKE A CRASH 11
WAITING ROOM MATH 14

FIRST SHIFT 17

MILD 22
PTS WHAT? 23

SECOND SHIFT 28

THE NEW NORMAL SPEECH 31
HOW ARE YOU DOING? 34
CEILING 35
THREE DOORS 38
WHEN DID THAT START? 40
TAKE THE COTTON OUT 45

THIRD SHIFT 48

ALL RISK 51
TEN STRANGERS 57
SAVE THE RESERVE 59

FOURTH SHIFT 61

WE STARTED IT OURSELVES 65

CLOSING THOUGHTS 69

ONE LAST THING 71

ABOUT ME 73

RESOURCES 75

BEFORE WE START

This book is about as cheap as I could make it. There's a reason for that.

Somewhere out there is a person sitting in a car in a parking lot, trying to remember why they drove there. There's a wife reading this over her husband's shoulder trying to figure out what happened to the man she married. There's a therapist who's real good at their job and has never once heard it from our side.

I'm not charging any of you twenty bucks to find out you're not crazy.

Here's what's in here. Some short stories about how I got from a normal life to this one. Fifteen poems. A section on the difference between the kinds of brain injuries, because nobody explains that right and it matters. And at the end, what we're building and what's coming.

Nothing in here is long. I know your tank. I've got one too.

Read it in pieces. Put it down. Come back. It'll wait.

— Chuck

ZERO SHIFT

Picture the person you were before any of this — before whatever it was that changed you. Doesn't matter what you did for a living or how long your shift ran. There was a version of you that got up, did the job, came home, and never once had to think about how to think. Words showed up when you called them. You trusted your own math without checking it twice.

Then picture the day that stopped being true. It doesn't have to be dramatic. No crash. No dent. No photograph anybody could point to and say *there, that's the spot.* Maybe it was a diagnosis. Maybe it was a bug that never fully left. Maybe it was twenty years finally catching up to you on a Tuesday that looked like every other Tuesday. The tests come back clean either way. Scan's fine. Bloodwork's fine. Everybody in a coat tells you that you're fine, and you sit there, still not fine, holding a piece of paper that says otherwise.

So you go looking for an answer. You get sent to a person, who sends you to another person, who orders a test that takes six weeks and comes back fine too. You sit in waiting rooms answering how you feel on a scale of one to ten, and you circle six, because six doesn't ask questions. Two hours for fifteen minutes. Twenty bucks to park. And you go back next month anyway, because the alternative is doing nothing, and doing nothing feels worse.

That gap — between the person you were sure you'd always be, and the person sitting in that chair with no answers — is where the next three poems live.

Normal Was Boring and I Miss It

I had a normal life and I didn't appreciate a single day of it.

I got up early. I went to work. I ran a fire department as a Chief. I made decisions all day long, big ones, fast ones, the kind where people are standing there waiting on you and there is no time to look anything up. I was good at it. That's not bragging. That was just the job and I could do the job.

The schedule was its own kind of normal. Seventy-two hours on, then three or four days off if you picked up the overtime — or got forced on duty. That part isn't a fire department thing either. It happens on any job. A personnel shortage hits, and you're the one told to come back, whether that means extra hours tacked onto your day or an extra day added to your week — a day you'd already planned to spend with your family. Three straight days at the station, then home. For those three days you didn't have your own family. You had your fire family instead. Nobody thought twice about that. It was just the job.

The fire family taught you one thing early, and it stuck: you don't show the crack. You promote up the ranks and it gets worse, not better, because now everybody's watching you instead of the other way around. A leader can't be weak. Nobody follows a guy crying in the corner into a burning building. So you didn't cry in the corner. You didn't cry anywhere anybody could see.

If somebody asked whether a bad call bothered you — a body, something ugly — you said it didn't. Your boss would nod. "Good. That's what you get paid for." And that was the end of it. Nobody was lying to you on purpose. The person telling you that had no idea either. It was just

the culture, handed down, everybody repeating what got repeated to them.

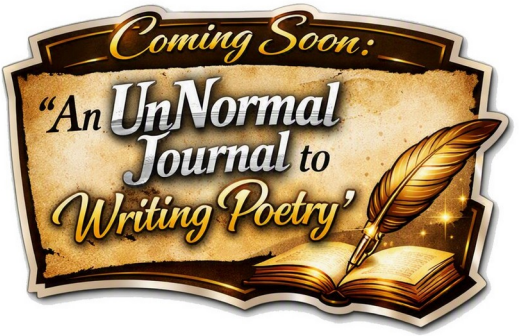
Words came out of my mouth in the right order. I never thought about that once. Not one time in fifty-some years did I stand in a room and hunt for a word like a set of keys.

I drove home late. I ate cold food. I complained about meetings. I had a wife and a kid and a mortgage and a truck and a calendar full of stuff I didn't want to do.

That's normal. Growing up, going to school, getting a job, getting married, having kids, paying for stuff, getting old. Boring. Regular. Normal.

I would give a lot to be bored like that again.

That's the part nobody tells you. You don't miss the big moments. You miss the Tuesdays.



BEFORE IT BROKE

(uplifting)

I had a job. I had a plan.
I was a busy, useful man.
The words came out the way I meant.
I never wondered where they went.

I worked long days and drove home late,
ate cold food off a paper plate.
I made the calls. I held the line.
I thought that made the whole thing mine.

Then something quiet took the wheel,
and nothing after that felt real.
The plan is gone. The job is too.
I lost the man I thought I knew.

He isn't gone. He's just delayed.
He takes the long road now, afraid
of noise and lights and crowded air.
Same heart. Same fight. Same stubborn stare.

So if you miss the one you were,
I miss him too. That's fair. That's fair.

He's still in here.
He's just in fear.
I'm not through.
Neither are you.

— Chief Chuck E Carroll

The Bug That Didn't Leave

December 2020. I got COVID.

Everybody got COVID. That's the thing. It wasn't special. There was no crash, no fall, no helmet cracked open, nothing anybody could point a finger at and say *there, that's the spot.*

I got sick. I laid in bed. I got up. And the guy who got up was not the guy who laid down.

At first you think it's just being tired. Then you think it's stress. Then a couple months go by and you're standing in your own kitchen and you cannot come up with the word for the thing you put bread in.

I went and got looked at. Everybody looks at you and says your numbers are fine. Scan's clean. Bloodwork's good. You look great.

Well, thanks. I feel like somebody rewired my house while I was asleep and didn't leave a diagram.

What I had was an acquired brain injury. An ABI. Nobody told me that word for a long stretch. When somebody finally said it out loud, it was the first thing that had made sense in a year.

There's a whole section on that coming up, because the words matter more than anybody thinks.

> **REMEMBER THIS**
> *You didn't lose him. You're just waiting on him.*

IT DIDN'T LOOK LIKE A CRASH

(angry)

No wreck. No fall. No stitched-up head.
No siren screaming. No trauma bed.
Just a bug that walked right in
and set up shop beneath my skin.

They want a dent. They want a date.
They want a story they can rate.
"So what happened?" Man, I don't know.
I got sick. My brain let go.

Nah — you need a picture, right?
Something bloody. Something bright.
If it doesn't show up on a scan
then I'm just a lazy man.

Well, hold my applause for that one, doc.
My brain got hit. There was no rock.
Same holes. Same fog. Same missing word.
Same "you look great." Same never heard.

But I quit waiting on your proof.
I've been in here. I know the truth.
It counts without a scan to show.
It counts because I'm here. I know.

You want a mechanism?
Fine. Here's mine.
I got sick.
And I never came back.
Write that down.

— Chief Chuck E Carroll

The Long Wait

Then comes the stretch nobody warns you about. Not the injury. The waiting.

You get sent to a person. That person sends you to another person. That person orders a test. The test takes six weeks. The test comes back fine. Fine! Great! Everybody's happy except you, because you're still standing in the kitchen not knowing the word for toaster.

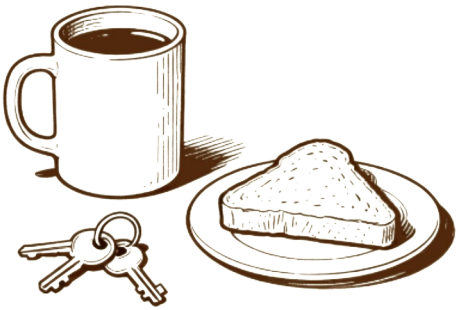
Two hours in the waiting room for fifteen minutes in the chair. Twenty bucks to park. A form that asks you to rate your life on a scale of one to ten.

One to ten. What is that. What is a six. I circle six because six sounds like a guy who isn't complaining but isn't lying either. Six is a coward's number and I circle it every single time.

And here's the part that made me start writing things down: I got real good at leaving those appointments with nothing. And then going back the next month anyway.

Because what else are you gonna do.





"I got sick. And I never came back."
— Chief Chuck E Carroll

REMEMBER THIS
An injury you can't photograph is still an injury.

WAITING ROOM MATH

(sarcastic)

Sign in. Sit down. Take a seat.
Fish tank humming. Ice-cold feet.
The clock up there is off by nine.
The magazines are from '09.

A form that asks me how I feel
on one to ten — like that is real.
I circle six. I don't know why.
Six sounds humble. Six won't lie.

They call a name. It isn't mine.
I stand up anyway. That's fine.
Two hours here for fifteen there,
plus twenty bucks to park somewhere.

He says my numbers all look good.
My scan is clean. It's understood.
He types. He nods. He checks the time.
"Let's see you back." Sure thing. That's fine.

So here's the math I finally learned:
three hours gone, no answers earned.

And I went back the next month too.
And I circled six again.

Ha.

— Chief Chuck E Carroll

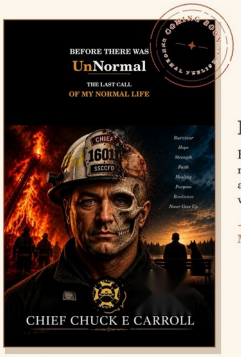
Three different poems, same argument, made three different ways: he's still in here, the injury still counts even without a scan to prove it, and nobody's coming with the answer — which isn't the end of the story, it's the start of it.

I wrote all three of these standing in the middle of missing my old self while also refusing to bury him, refusing to need somebody else's proof, and refusing to keep waiting on a stranger in a coat to hand me a diagnosis before I was allowed to trust my own life. Those aren't three separate lessons. They're the same lesson, said three times, because I needed to hear it three times before it stuck.

If none of my specific details match yours — wrong job, wrong virus, wrong kind of waiting room — that's fine. Swap them out. The shape of it holds. You had a before. Something changed it without asking your permission. And somewhere in the middle of the appointments and the forms and the six you keep circling, you're allowed to start trusting your own account of your own life again.

Here's the ask for this one: today, name one thing you know to be true about yourself that no test has ever confirmed. Write it down. That's not stubbornness. That's the start of you.

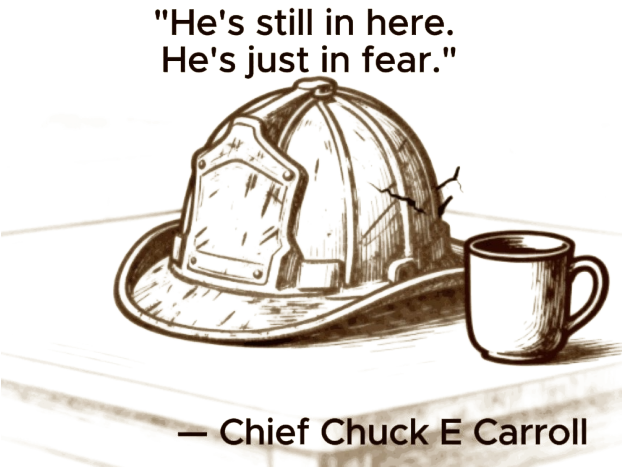
COMING FROM UNNORMAL PUBLISHING



Before the UnNormal

Before there was UnNormal, there was the last stretch of normal — the getting sick, the long wait, the year of no answers nobody could explain. This is the prequel. This is where the word UnNormal came from.

→ Coming to Amazon. Get on the list at MyUnNormalLife.com for the release date.



FIRST SHIFT

Think about the words other people hand you for what happened to you. Mild. Moderate. Disorder. TBI, when what you actually have is an ABI, and nobody bothered to tell you those are two different rooms in the same building. The words aren't usually meant as an insult. They're just the words the form has boxes for, picked in the first few minutes after whatever happened, based on how long you were out or how you scored on a hallway test — nothing about what your life actually looks like six months later.

Then you have to live on the other side of those words. "Mild" follows you into the conversation with your boss, who figures you'll be fine in a week. It follows you into your own head at two in the morning when you can't find a word you've used ten thousand times. "Disorder" follows you around too, suggesting you're the one who came in out of formation — until you look around the room at everybody else who lived through something just as hard, reacting just about the same way you are, and you start wondering whether the label was ever built to describe a person instead of a chart.

That gap — between what the paperwork says and what you're actually carrying — is where the next two poems live.

ABI, TBI, and Why the Words Matter

People throw the letters TBI around like it's the name of the whole club. It isn't. It's one room in the building. Here's the plain version.

ABI — Acquired Brain Injury

An acquired brain injury is damage that happens from something **inside** the body. Nothing hit you. Nothing has to show up as a dent.

Things that cause an ABI:

- Stroke
- Lack of oxygen (heart attack, drowning, choking, overdose)
- Infection or illness — including COVID, which is what got me
- Tumors
- Rhabdomyolysis and other things that poison the system
- Dementia and other diseases that eat away at the brain
- Seizures
- Some surgeries and some medicines

That's my lane. I have an ABI from COVID. There's no crash to point at. There's no date somebody hit me. There's just a before and an after, and I live on the after side.

TBI — Traumatic Brain Injury

A traumatic brain injury comes from a **mechanism**. Something outside the body did it. There's an event. Usually there's a story with a time and a place.

Things that cause a TBI:

- A fall
- A car, motorcycle, or bike crash
- Getting hit in the head — fists, bat, ball, helmet, doorframe
- Sports hits, including the small ones that add up
- Blasts and explosions
- Getting shot
- Shaking, especially in kids

If somebody asks how it happened and you can tell them a story, you're probably talking about a TBI.

Why anybody should care

Two reasons.

One. When everybody calls everything a TBI, the people with ABIs disappear. Stroke survivors. COVID survivors. Cardiac arrest survivors. Dementia families. They go looking for help, they see the letters T-B-I everywhere, and they figure the club isn't for them. So they go home and sit in it alone. That's not right and it's fixable with two extra letters.

Two. The words in your chart change how you get treated. Different door, different program, different waiting list, sometimes different insurance. If nobody ever says the right word out loud, you spend a year in the wrong line.

The other words they'll hand you

Mild. Moderate. Severe. These describe what happened in the first few minutes — how long you were knocked out, how you scored on a test in the ambulance. They do **not** describe your life. A "mild" injury can take your job, your friends, your driving, and your ability to finish a sentence in front of your own kid. Mild is a word for the paperwork. It is not a word for the person.

Concussion. That's a mild TBI. Same thing, softer word.

Post-concussion syndrome. That's what they call it when the symptoms won't quit on schedule. It means "still hurt, and we expected you to be done by now."

Here's my position on all of it: **I don't care what letters you put on mine.** Mild, severe, acquired, traumatic, whatever. It changed my life. The label is for your file. The life is mine.

The thing that shocked me

When I started talking to other survivors — and I do this every day now, multiple times a day — I expected us all to be different. Different injuries, different causes, different problems.

We're not.

The mechanisms are all over the map. The symptoms are damn near identical. The fatigue. The word that won't come. The noise. The lights. The friends who left. The people who say "but you look fine." The rage that shows up out of nowhere and then leaves you feeling like garbage. The list is the same whether a car did it or a virus did it or a blood clot did it.

That's the whole reason this company exists. The cause is different. The life is the same. So we might as well get in one room.

MILD

(angry)

Mild. That's the word they picked for me.
Mild, like weather. Mild, like tea.
Mild, like salsa in a jar.
Mild, like a scratch across a car.

Say mild to my wife at nine
when I've been staring at a line
of words I wrote an hour before
and can't remember anymore.

Say mild when the lights go on
and half my afternoon is gone.
Say mild when I lose the name
of someone that I love. Same shame.

Mild is a word for how it looks
from where you sit with all your books.
It isn't how it lands in here.
There's nothing mild about this. Clear?

But fine. Write mild. Go on and type it.
That word won't change how hard I fight it.

Call it mild.
Call it small.
I know what it took.
That's all.

— Chief Chuck E Carroll

PTS WHAT?

(curious)

They handed me some letters. Four.
P.T.S.D. And nothing more.
Post. Traumatic. Stress. All true.
It's that last letter I can't use.

Disorder. Huh. That's what they wrote.
Like something in me missed the boat.
Like everybody else stayed straight
and I'm the one who came in late.

Now count the chairs. Now count the men.
Now count the women. Count again.
We all react about the same.
So who's disordered? What's the name?

So try out illness. Does it fit?
I didn't catch a bit of it.
No fever, and no test to run.
No pill that says the thing is done.

Try injury. That's closer, though.
Something happened. That much I know.
A thing came through and knocked things loose.
So why's that word the one we lose?

Try syndrome. Best I understand,
it means a pile of things that land
together, time and time again,
and nobody knows how or when.

Condition sounds like weather does.
"His condition." Like a fog. A buzz.
Like something rolling through the state
that everybody's meant to wait.

At night we say it our own way
to one good friend who's up that late.
"I think I'm messed up in the head."
"I don't feel normal." That's what's said.

But underneath the words, one more.
The one I ask the ceiling for.
Not what's it called. Not what's the plan.
Just — why is this happening, man?

And it keeps changing. That's the part.
What worked last Monday falls apart.
Some new thing lands on me by May.
Nobody warned me. Not one day.

Or is it this — now stay with me —
the most normal thing there'll ever be?
You go through hell. Your body knows.
It flinches after. That's how it goes.

I've said this out loud. People nod.
They nod — and then they say the word
right back at me. Same four letters.
Like nobody even heard.

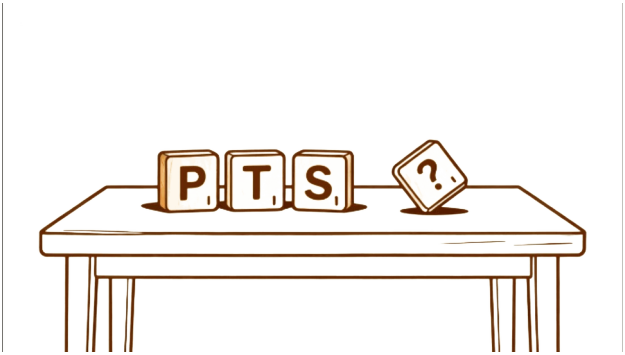
It's four letters.
Three of them are true.

Take the D off.
Or trade it for a better one.

UnNormal Stress.
I'd sign that.

Nobody's moving.
Fine.
I'll keep saying it.

— Chief Chuck E Carroll



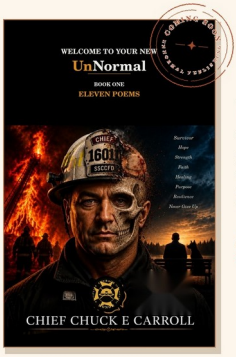
Two poems, one argument: the word on the chart never carried anybody's day — you did. Mild, moderate, disorder, whatever letters end up in your file, none of it settles anything about the actual life you're living. And if the same reaction shows up in basically everybody who goes through something hard enough, that's not nine people malfunctioning. That's nine nervous systems doing exactly the job they were built to do.

I'm not asking anybody to rewrite a medical manual. But next time somebody hands you a label that doesn't fit, keep your own version of the truth somewhere, even if it's just in your own head. Try swapping "reaction" in for "disorder" once, just for yourself, and see if it sits easier. Sometimes the only ground you get to control is the word you use with yourself.

REMEMBER THIS

Call it a disorder if you need it for the paperwork.
The rest of us just call it Tuesday.

COMING FROM UNNORMAL PUBLISHING



Welcome to Your New UnNormal — Book One

Eleven poems, and the full after-poem package for each one — the why, the shared thoughts, a line you can tear out and stick on your mirror. Illustrated the whole way through. Built to be read on a bad day.

→ The one to hand somebody who just joined the club they never signed up for. Get on the list at MyUnNormalLife.com.

SECOND SHIFT

Think about the phrase people reach for whenever somebody's life gets rearranged without their permission: *find your new normal.* It's meant kindly. It lands like a lid closing, because normal was never just a word — it was a whole life you built without ever having to think about the pieces. Losing that isn't a redecorating project. There is no version of normal that includes forgetting your own kid's name for four seconds in your own driveway.

And underneath the word fight is a body that already made its own decisions before your brain got a vote. Fight, flight, or freeze — nobody picks which door opens, and whichever one does, the rest of the package comes with it: the shaking hands, the flat insistence that this isn't happening, the mood that goes up and down for no reason you can point to, the face in the mirror that doesn't quite match who you remember being. None of it arrived with a date. It just showed up, the way weather changes, one degree at a time, until one day you look up and it's a different season.

Then add the rooms where you're supposed to explain all of this to somebody with a clipboard and forty-five minutes on the clock, who tells you what they heard you say instead of what you actually said, and sends you home with an appointment card that isn't a plan, it's a door closing.

That's the territory for the next six poems — the fight against the word "normal," the body doing what it does without asking, and the professionals who mean well and still get it wrong.

Quit Calling It My New Normal

Here's the speech. You've heard it. Everybody's heard it.

"*You just have to accept your new normal*."

I want to talk about that sentence, because it's said kindly, by good people, and it is one hundred percent wrong.

Normal is a real thing. Normal is growing up. Going to school. Getting a job. Getting married if that's your deal. Having kids if that's your deal. Buying a house you can't quite afford. Getting older. Complaining about your knees.

That's normal. That's the ride everybody signed up for.

What happened to me is not on that list. What happened to you is not on that list. There is no version of normal that includes forgetting your own kid's name for four seconds in your own driveway.

So calling it "your new normal" does two things, and both of them are bad.

It tells the survivor: *this is fine now, settle down.* And it tells everybody else: *he's all set, nothing to see here.*

I'm not settled down and it is not fine.

It's UnNormal. That's the honest word. UnNormal says something happened, it's still happening, and we're standing up in the middle of it anyway.

I'll take new. New is true. Everything is new.

I won't take normal. Not that word. Not for this.

THE NEW NORMAL SPEECH

(sarcastic)

Normal is a Tuesday shift.
Normal is a birthday gift.
Normal's kids and bills and grass,
a broken fridge, a driving class.

Normal's boring. Normal's cheap.
Normal's eight full hours of sleep.
Normal's knowing your own head
before you say the words you said.

This is not that. Not that thing.
This is losing everything
and finding half of it again
in places it has never been.

This is a stranger in my chair
who wears my shoes and combs my hair,
who knows my wife, who knows my street,
and can't remember what to eat.

So call it hard. Call it new.
Call it whatever gets you through.
But don't say normal to my face.
That word does not belong in this place.

New? Sure.
Normal? No.

There's a better word.
UnNormal.

Now we're talking.

— Chief Chuck E Carroll



REMEMBER THIS
Normal smiled and told you lies. New looks you straight in the eyes.

I Can't Explain It, Because I Don't Know

Everybody wants an update.

"How are you doing?" "What's going on with you?" "Any news?"

They mean well. They really do. And I stand there with my mouth open like a guy who forgot the answer after school, because here's the truth nobody prepared me for:

I can't explain what's going on in my head to you, because I don't know what's going on in my head.

That's it. That's the whole thing. It's not that I'm hiding it. It's not that I'm being tough or private or difficult. I have no idea. Some days the lights are on. Some days I'm reading the same sentence for the fourth time and getting mad at the paper.

You want an update? I want one too. We're both waiting on the same news.

So I say "good." I say "hangin' in there." I say the little lie, you nod, I nod, everybody gets to go on with their day. And then I get to my truck and every word I actually wanted to say shows up all at once.

If you're a family member reading this: that "good" is not a brush-off. That's the shortest true sentence we've got.



HOW ARE YOU DOING?

(sarcastic)

They mean it kind. They really do.
"So how you been? What's new with you?"
And I stand there, jaw half-cracked,
digging for a simple fact.

Because how do I explain a brain
that runs like traffic in the rain?
Some days it works. Some days it won't.
And which one's coming? I don't know. I don't.

You want an update. I want one too.
We're standing in the same long queue.
The doctor's guessing. So am I.
Nobody here can tell you why.

So I say "good." I say "hangin' in."
I say the lie and let you win.
You nod. I nod. We both move on.
And at the truck, the words come on.

All of them. All at once.
In the parking lot.
Perfect sentences.
Two hours late.

Ha.

Next time ask me something easy.
Like the weather.
I'll still get it wrong.

— Chief Chuck E Carroll

CEILING

(curious)

I used to sleep like it was free.
Head hit the pillow. That was me.
Eight hours gone. I don't know how.
I'd like to know who took it now.

Now it's two. Then it's three.
The clock light's small and green on me.
One thin line runs under the door.
I know this ceiling. Every board.

I close my eyes. That's when it starts.
The pictures come. They come in parts.
Things from years back I'd put away
show up in full and want to stay.

They're burned in there behind my eyes.
They don't ask first. They don't say why.
So now I just don't close them much.
I lie here. Open. Out of touch.

Here's what I really want to know:
why am I scared to let it go?
The dreams got mean. They weren't like that.
Something's down there. I don't know what.

Nobody warned me. Not one page.
No handout said "your nights will change."
So I stay up and watch the light
and ask the ceiling. Every night.

It's four again.
The ceiling doesn't know.

I'll ask somebody tomorrow.
They'll say try melatonin.

Sure.
I'll try that.

— Chief Chuck E Carroll

What Your Body Did Without Asking

Something happens. A crash, a fall, a stroke, a virus that doesn't leave. And before your brain has any idea what's going on, your body has already made a decision for you.

It dumps chemicals — stress hormones, adrenaline. Heart takes off. Breathing goes shallow and fast. Hands sweat. Stomach drops. That's not weakness. That's the oldest system you own doing exactly what it was built to do.

It's got three settings.

Fight. You get loud. You get mad at people who didn't do anything — the nurse, your wife, the guy in the next chair.

Flight. You want out. Keys, door, parking lot, road. Doesn't matter where. Out is the whole plan.

Freeze. Nothing moves. You stand there. From the outside you look calm, maybe even bored. Inside, your heart is running at a hundred and forty.

Nobody picks which one they get.

Along with it comes the rest of the package: shock, denial, flat-out disbelief. "This isn't happening." "I'll be fine in a week." That's not you being stubborn. That's the same system buying you time to catch up.

Here's what the books say: this stage lasts minutes, or days, or a few weeks.

Here's what nobody says out loud. Sometimes it doesn't stop. Sometimes it goes quiet for a month and comes right back. And a lot of us walk around with a low hum underneath everything — the feeling that something bad is coming and we can't tell you what it is or when it gets here.

There's a name people use for that. Impending doom. Ugly words for a real thing. Most survivors I talk to have it. Almost none of them say it out loud, because it sounds crazy.

It isn't crazy. It's a system that got switched on and never got the all-clear.

Does it end? For some people it fades out. For some it comes and goes. For some it's just part of the furniture now. I'm not going to promise you a date, because nobody ever promised me one and I got tired of being lied to nicely.

But knowing what it is helps. It's not your personality. It's not a character flaw. It's a switch that got thrown, and it's still on.

REMEMBER THIS

"Good" isn't a wall to keep you away. It's the truest word I've got today.

THREE DOORS

(curious)

Something hits you. Right away
your body moves. You get no say.
It opens up three doors. Just three.
And one swings wide. It picks. Not me.

Door one is fight. The jaw goes tight.
You're loud at people. You're not right.
You're mad at nurses. Mad at chairs.
Mad at the guy who's sitting there.

Door two is flight. You want the door.
You want the keys. You want the road.
You don't know where. You just know out.
Out is the only word you know.

Door three is freeze. And that's the worst.
Nothing moves. Not even words.
Inside, the heart is running hard.
Outside, you look like you're just bored.

They all come with the same stuff too:
the sweat, the breath you can't get through,
the hands that shake, the "I'm all right,"
the "no, this isn't happening" — the lie.

They told me minutes. Maybe days.
They told me weeks. They told me phase.
Nobody said it might not end.
Nobody said it comes again.

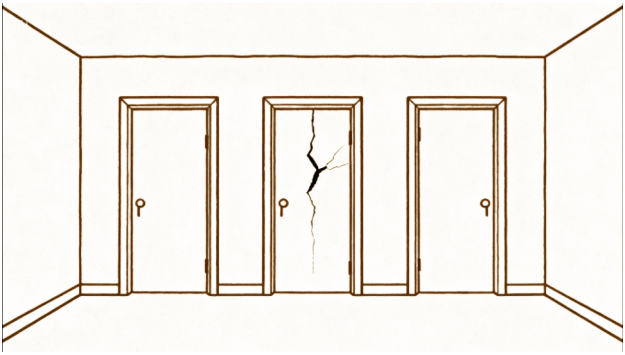
And under all of it, this thing:
the feeling something's coming still.
I can't point at it. Can't explain it.
It just sits there. It always will.

So which door did your body use?
Ask ten of us. You'll get all three.
Some got one. Some got the set.
And none of us picked. Not one. Not me.

Nobody chose this.
Not the fight.
Not the run.
Not the standing still.

The body picked.
We just live here.

— Chief Chuck E Carroll



REMEMBER THIS
Your body picked the door. You didn't. Quit apologizing for one you never opened.

WHEN DID THAT START?

(curious)

There's no date on this one. No bang.
No moment when the change began.
Just one day, looking in the glass,
somebody else was looking back.

The mood goes up. The mood goes down.
No reason either way. No sound.
Nobody said a word at all.
It comes. It goes. It's off the wall.

Then I go off at somebody
who didn't do a thing to me.
And two hours later there I sit,
ashamed, and shaking, over it.

Some days I can't tell mad from sad.
Some days I can't tell good from bad.
And some days there is nothing there.
Flat. Not sad. Just — I don't care.

Then comes the part that sticks around:
the feeling that I let them down.
I can't name one thing that I did.
It moved in anyway. It's loud.

Some days I look at my own face
and figure I don't earn a place
where good things go, where happy sits.
Like I got taken off the list.

And then there's this. It's hard to say.
Like I'm not driving anyway.
Like someone else has got the wheel
and I'm the one strapped in the back.

I watch my hands do what they do.
I hear my mouth get halfway through
a sentence I don't recognize.
I'm in the room. I'm not inside.

And people. That one's the worst yet.
I'm waiting on them to forget,
or leave, or turn, or not call back.
So I stop calling. Cut the slack.

It's easier to keep them out
than sit around and wait for doubt.
That's not who I was. Not at all.
I used to be the guy who called.

So when did all this start? What day?
What Tuesday did it come my way?
No note. No date. No warning shot.
Just this, and me, and what I've got.

I keep hunting for the day it changed.
There isn't one.

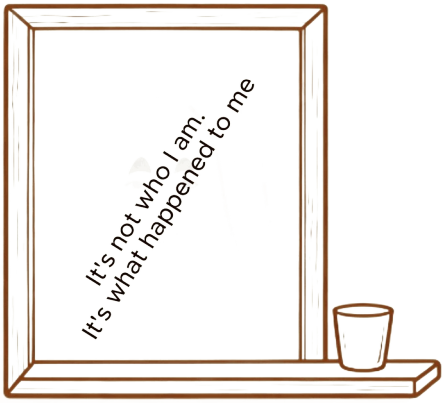
None of it was a decision.
Not the mood.
Not the numb.
Not the door I quit answering.

It's not who I am.
It's what happened to me.

I'd take the old one back.
But I'm still in here.

And I'm still calling.
Just slower now.

— Chief Chuck E Carroll



REMEMBER THIS
You didn't choose this. It just came. That won't fix it. It's not your blame.

The Clipboard

I want to talk to the professionals for a minute. Doctors, therapists, case managers, all of you. This is the angry chapter. Skip it if you want. But you probably shouldn't.

You went to school for ten years or more. You know the anatomy. You know the research. You know more about the brain than I will ever know.

You have never had a brain injury survivor sit down and tell you what it's actually like from the inside.

That's not an insult. That's a gap. And it's the whole reason I'm writing books.

Here's what it looks like from our chair:

We see you looking at your watch. We see you looking at the clock over the door. We see the clipboard. We see you writing while we're still talking, which means you already picked your lane.

We tell you something, and you say **"so what I'm hearing is..."** and then you say a thing that is the opposite of what came out of our mouth. And we don't correct you, because correcting you costs energy we don't have, and because we're not sure we said it right in the first place.

Take the cotton out of your ears and put it in your mouth.

We do not care about the scale of one to ten. We are not worried about the forty-five minutes. We are worried about the next hour — walking out that door, into the parking lot, into a store, into a conversation with somebody who's going to ask us a question we can't answer. We're worried about getting home and having the whole family look at us the same way.

"You're going to be okay. See you in a month." That is not a plan. That's a door closing.

Here's what actually helps, and it's free: Put the pen down. Let the silence sit there while we find the word. Don't finish our sentence. Ask us what the next hour looks like, not the last month. And if you don't know something, say so — we can handle honest a whole lot better than we can handle polished.

We're not your hardest patients. We're your best teachers. You just have to stop talking long enough to get the lesson.

TAKE THE COTTON OUT

(angry)

You went to school for ten straight years.
You've got the wall. You've got careers.
You've got the words. You've got the chart.
You just have never lived this part.

You ask. I answer. Then you say,
"So what I'm hearing is..." No way.
That's not it. That's not one bit.
That's your version. I don't fit.

You watch the clock at forty-five.
I watch you watch. I'm still alive
in here, and doing math on you —
how many minutes left? Like two?

I'm not worried about the scale.
I'm worried I'm about to fail
the parking lot, the store, the guy
who says hello and wants a why.

Take the cotton from your ears
and put it in your mouth. Ten years
of school can't teach you what I know.
Put the pen down. Sit. Go slow.

I'm not mad you never learned it.
Nobody taught it. Nobody earned it.

So here I am.
Ask me again.
I'll talk slow.
You take notes then.

— Chief Chuck E Carroll

Six poems, and they all land on some version of the same thing: none of this was a decision you made, and none of it is up for a vote from anybody who didn't live it.

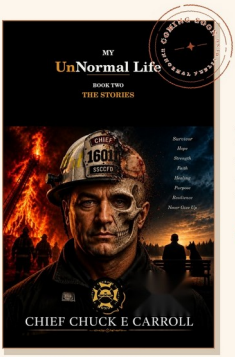


New, I'll take. Normal, I won't — not for this. "Good" isn't a brush-off, it's the shortest true sentence I've got most days. The nights changed too, and nobody puts that part on any paperwork. My body picked which door it ran through — fight, flight, freeze — and I didn't get a say, so I quit apologizing for a reaction I never chose. Same with the moods, the numbness, the door I stopped answering. None of it was a decision. That doesn't fix any of it. It does move the blame off me, and it should move it off you too.

And to anybody with a clipboard reading this: you've got the training. We've got the experience living inside it. One of those isn't worth much without the other.

Here's the ask. Pick one thing on this list you've been quietly blaming yourself for — a mood, a door you stopped answering, a night you couldn't explain — and cross it off the list of things that are your fault. It never was.

COMING FROM UNNORMAL PUBLISHING



My UnNormal Life — Book Two

The stories. The funny ones, the ugly ones, and the ones that only land if you've lived it. This is the one where I stop being careful.

→ Coming to Amazon. MyUnNormalLife.com has the details.

REMEMBER THIS

They have the training. We have the experience. Neither one works alone.

THIRD SHIFT

For four years I carried the word "all risk" like a badge — trained for anything, ready for whatever came through the door. Nobody ever told me the risk ran both directions, that my own body and my own mind were part of the risk column the whole system never quite built to protect.

Turns out the injury didn't start on the day everybody assumes it did. It started with a backpack nobody told you you were filling — every hard call, every bad day, every time you said "it doesn't bother me" and meant it, loaded in anyway. You carry that pack for years without knowing it's getting heavier, until the straps give, usually on a day that looks like every other day.

And here's the part that turned all of it into something bigger than my own story: put ten strangers who've never met in a room with coffee and folding chairs, ten completely different causes behind what happened to them, and within a few hours they're telling each other things they've never told their own families. Nobody diagnoses anybody in that room. Nobody scores anything one to ten. And everybody walks out lighter than they walked in — which raises an honest question about how much of what actually helps has nothing to do with a chart at all.

The next four poems are about carrying the weight, finding out you weren't the only one carrying it, and learning to ration what's left in the tank once you know how heavy it's always been.

All Risk

In the fire service they call it "all risk." It means you train for anything — fire, medical calls, car wrecks, hazmat, whatever comes in that day. Doesn't matter what it is. You're ready for it. A lot of jobs that answer emergencies work the same way — police, ambulance crews, ER staff. All risk. You carry that word like a badge, because it means you can handle whatever gets thrown at you.

I carried it that way for over fifty years. Proud of it. It was who I was.

Nobody ever told me all risk ran both directions.

I thought all risk meant I was ready for whatever happened out there. I didn't know it also meant my own body and my own mind were part of the risk column — and that when that risk came due, the same system that trained me to expect anything wasn't built to expect this.

So I started asking a different question. Not "what call is next," but what part of "all risk" am I? Am I the one who runs toward it? Or am I just one more thing the department budgeted for in case it broke?

Because here's what I didn't see for a long time. The mission was never just the call. Part of the mission was us. Some of us were always going to end up as the cost of doing business — casualties of decisions made so the department, the agency, the hospital, whoever, could keep wearing that all-risk reputation in front of the public. Strong. Ready. Dependable.

"Nothing personal," they'd say, if you ever asked. "Just the cost of doing business."

Sure feels personal when it's my brain. My thoughts. My life. The one I signed up to give, on a promise that when I was done giving it, somebody would still be there for me too.

ALL RISK

(curious)

They trained me for the all-risk call.
Fire, medical, wreck — I'd answer all.
Didn't matter what the day would bring.
I was built to go. Built for anything.

All risk meant ready. All risk meant true.
Whatever came in, we'd see it through.
I wore that word and stood up tall.
Proud of the badge. Proud of it all.

Nobody said the risk cuts both ways.
Nobody said what all risk pays.
I thought it meant the fire, the wreck.
I didn't know it meant my neck.

So what part of all risk am I?
The one they send, or the one they buy?
Just one more cog on one more wheel,
turning for a cause I can't feel.

I started feeling like the cost —
not the hero. Just what got lost.
The mission wasn't only the call.
Some of the mission was our fall.

They needed us to be the name.
All risk. Steady. Always the same.
That's the picture they sold the town.
Strong and ready. Never down.

"Nothing personal," they said. "Just cost.
Just a line item. Just what's lost
to keep the department looking right."
Sure feels personal some nights.

I signed up young. I gave my all.
They promised, when I took the fall,
they'd be the ones to catch me too.
Why didn't they? I'm asking you.

I'm still all risk.
Just not the way they meant.

— Chief Chuck E Carroll



REMEMBER THIS
All risk,
all the time.
Now some of the time.
Still all risk —
Just part time.

The Backpack

Here's something I didn't understand until years after I got sick. The injury didn't start with COVID. COVID was just the day the bill came due.

I heard a story a long time ago about a backpack. Every hard thing you go through, you don't just walk away from it — you put it in the pack and keep walking. Nobody tells you that's what's happening. You just keep working, keep answering calls, keep saying you're fine, and the pack keeps getting heavier. I used to hear that story and laugh. Cute idea. Didn't think it applied to me.

It applied to me.

Every bad call, every wreck, every one that didn't end right — I told everybody it didn't bother me, because that's what you're supposed to say. But saying it doesn't bother you doesn't mean it doesn't go in the pack. It just means nobody sees you loading it.

I carried that pack for over fifty years. Command presence the whole time, making sure everybody in the room knew I was steady, because that's what I was taught leadership looks like. And I took it home whether I meant to or not. My wife noticed I was agitated over nothing. My kid noticed. My friends noticed. I didn't know why. I know now. It was the calls. It had been building the whole time, and I never put it together, because nobody ever told me that's how it works.

Then COVID hit, and the brain injury on top of it, and the straps finally gave. Fifty years of "fine" came out at once. I started remembering details I never wanted back — the worst calls, in the smallest, sharpest focus, showing up whenever they felt like it. Driving. Trying to sleep. A street I passed a thousand times. A name on the radio. Twenty years gone, and it's right there like it happened this morning.

I used to think that was a brain injury thing. Some of it is. But I've talked to enough people now to know most of it isn't just mine, and it isn't just a fire department thing either. Police. Corrections officers. ER nurses. Doctors. Dispatchers. Hospital interns. Therapists who hear this all day and have nowhere to put their own pack. Anybody whose job is showing up for somebody else's worst day is carrying one of these. Different profession, different calls, same pack, same straps, same tipping point waiting somewhere down the road.

So if none of my specific story fits your life — wrong uniform, wrong calls, wrong world entirely — that's fine. Swap it out. The backpack's still yours. The straps still give the same way.

Here's the other thing I had to sort out. Everybody keeps telling survivors to work toward acceptance. I'm not sure I buy that, not for this. Acceptance sounds like being okay with it. I don't think I'll ever be okay with what this took. But awareness — knowing what's happening, being able to name it, seeing the pack for what it is — that I can do. That I have done. Awareness, yes. Acceptance, maybe never. I don't think you need the second one to do the work.

And the work is the whole point of this chapter. Don't wait on it. I waited years, because I didn't know there was anything to do besides wait for it to pass. It doesn't pass on its own. You have to write your own way out — I mean that literally, if writing is what works for you, or find whatever your version of it is. Nobody's coming to unpack that bag for you. That part's on you. This book is just me doing mine, out loud, so you know it's possible to do yours.

CHIEF'S HINT

Write it, say it, start somewhere today — the pack won't lighten if you let it stay.

Ten Strangers in a Room

This is the thing that turned all of this from a rough few years into a company.

Take ten brain injury survivors who have never met. Ten completely different stories. A stroke. A wreck. A fall off a ladder. A virus. A tumor. Ten people from ten different lives who have nothing in common on paper.

Put them in one room with coffee and folding chairs.

Eight hours later they walk out best friends.

Not friendly. **Best friends.** They've told each other things they've never told their own families. They've cried. They've laughed at stuff that would horrify a normal person. Somebody lost a word in the middle of a sentence and nine people just waited, and nobody rushed him, and nobody finished it for him, and when it finally came out the room cheered.

And here's the kicker: half of them won't remember the other half's names tomorrow.

And nobody cares. They'll show up again next week and do the whole thing over. That's not a failure. That's the deal.

I've done this every day for years now, multiple times a day. Different mechanisms, same symptoms, same outcomes, and it is scary how close the stories run to each other.

You know what nobody in that room did? Nobody diagnosed anybody. Nobody pulled out a clipboard. Nobody asked anybody to rate anything from one to ten. Nobody said "what I'm hearing is."

And every single person walked out lighter than they walked in.

Why does everything have to be diagnosed and scored and documented until we feel worse than when we came in? Ten folding chairs did more in eight hours than a year of appointments did for me.

That's not me knocking medicine. Medicine kept me here. That's me saying: connection is a treatment, and nobody's billing for it, and nobody's prescribing it, so we're just going to go ahead and hand it out ourselves.

Everything I do is about connection. Everything.

REMEMBER THIS

Only a survivor really understands a survivor.
That's not sad. That's the answer.



TEN STRANGERS

(uplifting)

Ten strangers. Coffee. Folding chairs.
Ten different ways we all got here.
Nobody knows a single name.
No two of us got hurt the same.

But give it one hour. Maybe two.
Watch what a room like that can do.
One guy starts. He loses it.
Nobody rushes him one bit.

A woman laughs and starts to cry.
Nobody asks her to say why.
Somebody's word won't come at all.
Nine people wait. That's all. That's all.

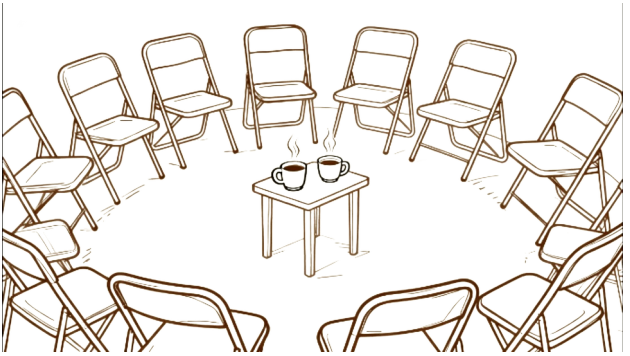
By eight o'clock we're friends for life.
We've covered work. We've covered wife.
The doctor and the awful year.
Tomorrow, half won't know we're here.

And nobody cares.
Nobody cares.

We'll do it again.
We'll still be there.

That's the whole cure.
Ten folding chairs.

— Chief Chuck E Carroll



Save the Reserve

Quick word about how this book is written, because it's on purpose.

Simple words. Short lines. Nothing fancy. Nothing you'd need to look up.

Here's why. Survivors do not like hearing words we don't understand. When somebody drops a ten-dollar medical term on us, we don't feel educated, we feel small, and then we spend the rest of the conversation working on that one word instead of listening to the rest of it.

I'm the same way. I've got a tank and it's smaller than it used to be. Every big word costs a sip. Every loud room costs a sip. Every "so what I'm hearing is" costs about a third of the tank right there.

So I'm not spending your reserve and I'm not spending mine. If you have to ask me what a sentence means, I wrote it wrong.

That's a rule for everything we make. Books, handouts, worksheets, games, all of it. Plain words, every time.

SAVE THE RESERVE

(uplifting)

I get a tank. That's all I get.
Not a big one. Don't forget.
It doesn't fill back up by noon.
It takes all night. And that's not soon.

So I don't spend it at the mall.
I don't spend it on a call
I don't want. I don't spend a drop
on rooms too loud. I let them stop.

Big words cost me. So does noise.
So does keeping up with boys
who talk fast and never land.
Small words work. They understand.

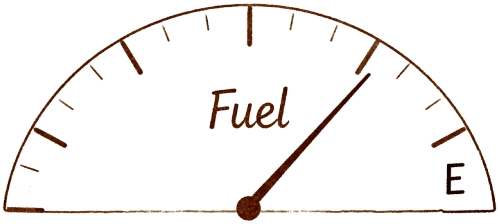
I save it for my family's day.
I save it for the words I say
to somebody who needs them said.
That's the good stuff. That's the thread.

So no, I can't.
Not today.

That's not rude.
That's my tank.

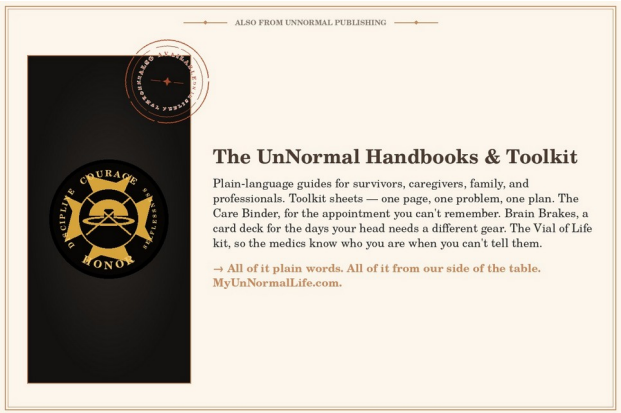
And I want some left
for you.

— Chief Chuck E Carroll



REMEMBER THIS

Saying no isn't giving up the fight.
It's aiming your reserve just right.



FOURTH SHIFT

Think about waiting for something you need that doesn't exist yet — a resource, a community, a book that actually gets it right. You look for it the normal way first. You wait for somebody more qualified, more funded, more official to build it. And sometimes nobody does, not because nobody cares, but because building the real thing takes somebody who's actually lived it, and the people who've actually lived it are usually too busy surviving it to also go build the resource.

That's where this last stretch starts — not with an injury, but with a decision. The decision to stop waiting on somebody smarter to show up, and to build the thing yourself instead, out of folding chairs and hard nights and a whole lot of comparing notes with people who turned out to have more in common with you than anybody expected.

Everything From Our Side of the Table

It took me years to see it this way, but I don't think what happened to me was just something that happened to me. I think I got reassigned. Not off the roster — repositioned. I spent over fifty years leading from the front of a fire truck, running toward the smoke, making calls with people's lives in my hands. I always figured that's where leadership lived — out front, in the heat, first through the door. I don't believe that anymore.

There's a whole group of people out there who got hurt the way I got hurt, and they're not looking for somebody to run into a burning building for them. They're looking for somebody to sit down across from them and say *I know. I've been there too.* Somebody to lead them out of the fog the same way I used to lead a crew out of a fire — steady, calm, not panicking, knowing the way even when they can't see it yet themselves. That's a different kind of leading. It doesn't come with a helmet or a rank. But I'm

ready for it. I've been training for it my whole life without knowing that was what the training was for.

So here's where I've landed. I'm not leading from the battleground anymore, and I'm not leading from the front of the fire. I'm leading people who are waiting to be led — survivors who don't know yet that somebody's coming. I'm building this for them. For us. That's what matters to me now, more than anything else in this book.

Here's the vision, plain as I can put it.

Everything we make is built from the **survivor's** point of view. Not from a textbook. Not from a study. From the chair.

That's the gap. There's a mountain of material out there written by people who studied the brain, and almost nothing written by people who are living inside a broken one. Both are needed. Only one of them exists in any real amount.

So we're making the other one.

For the brand-new survivor. The person who's on day one and doesn't know it yet. What's happening, what to expect, what to say to people, what to do when the lights are too bright and you can't tell anybody why. Every day is a day one. Some people have been living day one for eleven years and never had a name for it. Now you do. And now you're connected to us.

For the caregiver. The husband, the wife, the mom, the kid who became the adult. You're doing a job nobody trained you for, and most of the material aimed at you talks about us like a condition instead of a person. Ours will tell you what we actually need, in our words.

For the family and friends. Including the ones who left. Especially the ones who left. Every survivor I've ever talked to has that story. You should know what it looked like from our side.

For the professionals. The doctors, the therapists, the teachers, the case managers. Ten years of school and never one hour of us telling you straight. That's what we're for.

And here's the part that matters most to me. We're starting this as a for-profit business, not a nonprofit — not yet, and I'm not going to promise you paperwork we don't have. But whatever this earns goes back into the one thing I actually care about: getting survivors into a room with each other, in person or online. Not a pamphlet. Not a hotline. Rooms with folding chairs, and the online version of the same thing. If this ever grows into an actual foundation down the road, that's fine by me — but the structure can catch up to the mission. It doesn't get to come first.

Because here's the mission, plain and simple: we have to find each other. If you're out there alone right now, find us. Everything we do is for the greater good. Everything is about connection.

> *We're not a study. Not a chart. We're just the folks who lived this part.*
>
> CHIEF CHUCK E CARROLL

WE STARTED IT OURSELVES

(uplifting)

We waited for somebody smart
to come along and do this part.
A book. A room. A guide. A friend.
We waited, waited, waited. Then —

nobody came. So there it was.
The whole thing sitting on us. Us.
The broken ones. The slow. The tired.
The ones that nobody would've hired.

So we wrote it down the way we talk,
in words that let a slow brain walk.
No fancy terms. No fifty-page
report to prove we're not a case.

We're not a study. Not a chart.
We're just the folks who lived this part.
And what we learned, we'll hand to you
the day you need it. Cheap. That's true.

Nobody came.
So we came.

Pull up a chair.
Say your name.

Or don't.
We'll wait.

— Chief Chuck E Carroll

REMEMBER THIS

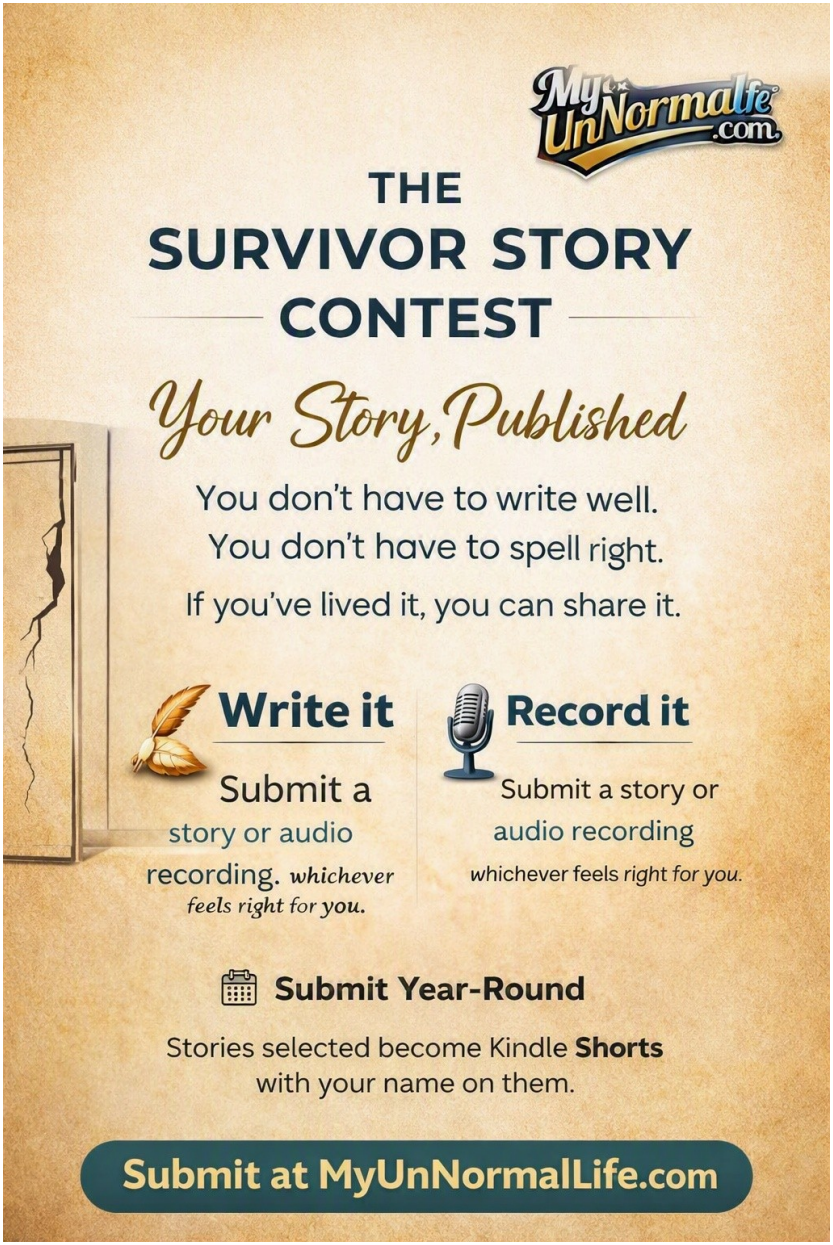
Nobody came, so we rose instead. We're the ones who come — we lead ahead.



Nobody was coming. So we became the people who come.

That's as close to a mission statement as this book gets. We didn't build any of this from a textbook or a study. We built it from folding chairs and hard nights and people comparing notes until the shape of it became obvious.

If you're waiting on somebody to build the thing you need, consider the possibility that you might be exactly the person who's supposed to build it — not because nobody else could, just because nobody else has yet. You don't have to do it alone, and you don't have to do it perfectly. Pull up a chair. That's genuinely how this whole thing started.


My UnNormalfe .com
THE
SURVIVOR STORY
CONTEST
Your Story, Published
You don't have to write well.
You don't have to spell right.
If you've lived it, you can share it.
Write it
Submit a story or audio recording. whichever feels right for you.
Record it
Submit a story or audio recording whichever feels right for you.
Submit Year-Round
Stories selected become Kindle Shorts with your name on them.
Submit at MyUnNormalLife.com

CLOSING THOUGHTS

You just read the practically-free one. Here's the rest of the line, in the order it happened and the order it's coming out.

Before the UnNormal — The Last Call of My Normal Life

The prequel. The last stretch of a normal life, before anybody knew it was ending. Getting sick, the long wait, and the year of no answers. This is where the word UnNormal came from. Twelve to fifteen poems with the full companion package after each one. Coming to Amazon.

Welcome to Your New UnNormal — Book One

The flagship. Eleven poems and the full after-poem package for each: the synopsis, our why, shared thoughts, and a "remember this" line you can tear out and stick on a mirror. Illustrated the whole way through. Built to be read on a bad day. Every picture in it is yours to tear out, copy, and hang up. This is the one to hand somebody who just joined the club they never signed up for.

My UnNormal Life — Book Two

The stories. The funny ones, the ugly ones, and the ones that only land if you've lived it. This is the one where I stop being careful.

An UnNormal Journal to Writing Poetry

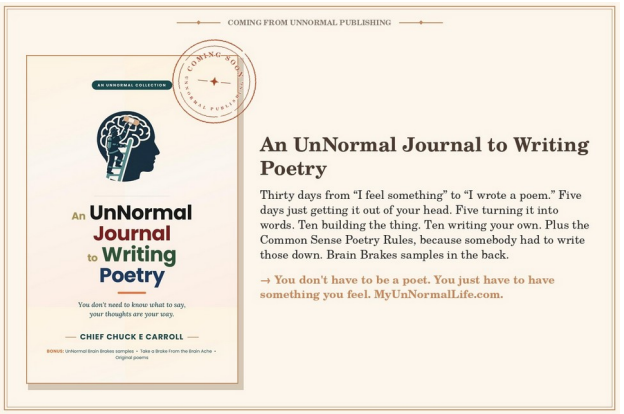
The workbook. Thirty days that go from "I feel something" to "I wrote a poem," in plain steps, no degree

required. Five days getting it out of your head, five turning it into words, ten building the thing, ten writing your own. Brain Brakes samples and original poems in the back. You don't have to be a poet. You just have to have something you feel.

And the rest of the line

- **The UnNormal Handbooks** — plain-language guides for survivors, caregivers, family, and professionals
- **Toolkit sheets** — one page, one problem, one plan
- **The Care Binder** — everything in one place for the appointment you can't remember
- **Brain Brakes** — games and a card deck for the days your head needs a different gear
- **The Vial of Life kit** — so the medics know who you are when you can't tell them
- **The Survivor Story Contest** — your story, published

All of it plain words. All of it from our side of the table.



ONE LAST THING

Two asks, and then I'll let you go.

• • •

1. Get on the list

Go to **MyUnNormalLife.com** and put your email in.

That's how you find out when the next book lands, when something practically free goes up, and when there's a room to be in. No spam. I've got a tank too — I'm not going to waste yours.

• • •

2. Send me your story

There's a story contest running on the site. Survivors, caregivers, family — anybody who's living in this.

You don't have to write well. You don't have to spell right. You don't need a beginning, middle, and end. Send it in pieces if that's what you've got. Selected stories get built into published Kindle Shorts, with your name on them.

Somebody out there is going to read your story on the worst day of their life and figure out they're not crazy and they're not alone.

That's the whole business. That's why we exist.

You are not broken.

You are not lazy.

You are not making it up.

You are not going back to normal, and I'm done pretending that's the goal.

You're UnNormal now. So are we.

We have to find each other. If you're out there alone right now — find us.

Pull up a chair.

— Chief Chuck E Carroll

MyUnNormalLife.com

ABOUT ME



I'll keep this part short. I've never been great at talking about myself — ask anybody who's tried to get a straight answer out of me at a family barbecue.

I'm Chuck. Chief Chuck E Carroll, if you want the whole title, though I mostly go by whichever one the room needs. I ran a fire department as a Chief — CAL FIRE, decades of it, the kind of job where you make big calls fast and people are standing there waiting on you. I was good at it. I miss it some days and I don't miss it on others, and both of those things are true at once, which is a very UnNormal way to feel about your own life.

Then I got sick. COVID took a piece of me I didn't know could be taken — my words. And somewhere in trying to find them again, poetry showed up instead. I didn't ask for it. I'm not sure I would have picked it. But I think it happened for a reason, and the reason is this: I spent my whole career leading people through fire. Turns out I wasn't done leading. I just got reassigned.

Now I lead a different kind of crew — survivors, the people standing next to them, and everybody in between trying to figure out what "normal" even means anymore. I started UnNormal Publishing to do that on purpose, on paper, one plain word at a time.

Here's the thing I believe more than anything else in this book: only a brain injury survivor truly understands another survivor. That's not a slogan I picked for a T-shirt. That's the whole reason any of this exists.

If you want to find me, or find the rest of us, go to **MyUnNormalLife.com**.

— Chuck

RESOURCES

One more thing before I let you go. This book isn't medical advice — I'm not a doctor, I'm a survivor, and I said that back on the copyright page because I meant it. But if you're standing where I used to stand, not knowing which way to turn, here's where to turn.

• • •

If it's an emergency

Call **911**. Every time. No exceptions, no toughing it out.

• • •

If you need to talk to somebody right now

Call or text **988** — the Suicide & Crisis Lifeline. Free. Confidential. Open all night, because that's usually when this stuff shows up anyway.

• • •

If you need real answers about brain injury

Call the Brain Injury Association of America at **1-800-444-6443**, or go to **biausa.org**. That's the National Brain Injury Information Center — actual people, actual answers, no sales pitch at the end of it.

• • •

If you need us

Go to **MyUnNormalLife.com**. Get on the list. Read what's coming next. Send us your story if you've got one. That's where the rest of the folding chairs are.

You don't have to figure this out alone. Nobody does. That's the whole point of this book.

— Chief Chuck E Carroll

MyUnNormalLife.com