

Published in the UK by Scholastic, 2024  
1 London Bridge, London, SE1 9BG  
Scholastic Ireland, 89E Lagan Road, Dublin Industrial Estate,  
Glasnevin, Dublin, D11 HP5F

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ISBN 978 07023 3136 7

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1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

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# ONE

You know it's going to be a bad day when you wake and feel pavement against your face.

My first thought: *Oh, no, not again.*

Then, context: Hi, I'm Kyle. I'm seventeen. I have epilepsy. This happens to me a lot.

I'm lying face down, twisted like a fifty-storey splat, the pavement wet and cold and gritty beneath me, the dampness of this morning's rain shower spreading through the leg of my jeans. There's a moment when I think I must have fallen asleep, because why else would I be lying down with my eyes closed? But then the world settles into place around me and I realize it's happened again.

I'm on the high street in town. Grey concrete, leaden sky. Shoes and legs crossing indifferently across my field of vision. In the spaces behind them, I catch glimpses of

familiar shop fronts, built like nuclear fallout shelters: Poundland, Specsavers, Boots, Timpson.

I hate this bit.

Coming back from a seizure makes you feel a special kind of rubbish. Hot and cold at the same time; my throat tastes like burnt pennies; my eyes feel like somebody took them out and put them in the wrong way round. I wait for the rest of my memory to come back. It always takes a few minutes, it's the familiarity of the routine that keeps me from panicking. They call it postictal confusion. I call it sulky-brain-syndrome. Epilepsy is like a loose wire fritzing in your skull. You get a spark and that spark sets off other sparks and then the whole thing blows a fuse. All I can do now is sit tight and wait for the BIOS to reboot.

I roll on to my back and haul myself up until I'm sitting against the wall of the WHSmith. Pins and needles start up immediately in the arm that's been crushed beneath me so I know I was out for a few minutes at least. I feel a tiny pinch of indignation that nobody checked in on me in all that time. They just went right on with their shopping.

I groan, maybe a little theatrically, maybe for effect. Is it wrong that I pretend I'm the action hero in an old war movie when I'm coming back from a seizure?

*Go on without me. I'll hold them off as long as I can.*

It's been a couple of months since my last seizure and I'd

started to think I might actually have things under control this time. But I guess not.

I do my checks.

*Have I wet myself?*

*No.*

*Have I messed myself?*

*Er ... no.*

*Have I vomited?*

*No. Not yet anyway.*

*Hey, maybe today's not going to be such a bad day after all!*

You have to take the little wins with epilepsy. I had a fit in a public toilet once and woke up to find the whole world and my mother bundled into the gents, my trousers around my ankles and the remains of somebody's damp cigarette lodged under my tongue.

*That was a bad day. This is nothing.*

But still ... no context.

The first fingers of panic flicker in my chest. Usually it's come back by now, the memory of what I was doing right before my brain decided this would be a perfect time for a lie down. But not this time. There's just a hole. No, not even a hole: an absence, like somebody forgot to hit the record button and whatever I was doing before didn't get saved.

I try to push the thought away. My brain is in brownout, bits of it are offline. The memories always come back in the end.

*But what if they don't?*

This sort of thing bothers me sometimes. If I forget everything I ever was does that mean I'm still me?

Let's not go there.

Epilepsy does weird things to your brain. It makes you feel like your thoughts aren't entirely your own. My post-seizure brain is like an overeager puppy trying to sniff every urine stain in the park at the same time. Images flicker against the inside of my eyes: a storm that will swallow me whole if I'm not careful.

I look outwards instead. The street, the shops.

This is my town and I hate it; I remember that much.

It's one of those grey little ex-mining towns in the Midlands. A kind of cross between an open prison and a theme park, where all the rides are rubbish but you can't find the exit so you queue up anyway to pass the time. It's the kind of town where anyone in their right mind packs their bags and gets out as soon as they can.

I'm working on that.

I try to think through the journey that would have brought me here, hoping it'll jog some memories. Over the bypass, under the railway bridge. There's a jacket potato truck just round the corner where I used to go for lunch when I was still at school. It's only twenty minutes from home. I could have walked here or Mum could have dropped me off before work.

There's just one problem with that theory.

I haven't left the house on my own for over a year.

Not since my GCSEs went so horribly wrong and I gave up on ... life. Being outside, like this, is a big deal. It's not something I'd have forgotten.

I groan again. This is more of a lost-my-keys-down-the-drain kind of groan than a war-hero groan. The nausea has kicked in. The thing about epilepsy that everyone knows about – the seizures – aren't so bad because you're not there for that bit. It's the way it feels before and the way it feels after that really sucks. It's like I'm about to throw up and fall asleep and dismantle myself all at the same time. I'm guessing it's about mid-morning, which means I may as well write off the rest of the day.

I can't get over the fact that no one has stopped to help.

The last time I passed out in this part of town, I woke up to find an off-duty nurse moments away from giving me mouth-to-mouth resuscitation.

*If I'd only pretended to be unconscious a moment longer...*

Don't judge, I was fifteen – what did you expect?

Anyway, I threw up all over her instead.

But today: nothing. I suppose that was two years ago; I was a kid and nobody likes to see a kid passed out on the street. It's different now. I don't exactly look like an adult but maybe I look old enough for everyone to assume I've passed out from too much drink or drugs. That would explain why everyone's walking right past me like I don't exist.

I'm not sure whether I'm relieved or offended.

Then someone does stop and I wish instantly they hadn't. I don't see him coming; I notice him suddenly, standing right in front of me, staring at me. He looks a little surprised and a little worried and a little pleased all at the same time, like he's staring at an Amazon package on his front step that he wasn't expecting.

He's a small, grey, rusty rake of a man. The scar on his head cuts a knotted track from temporal lobe to frontal lobe: a gruesome, twisted stretch of pinkish scalp where the hair will never grow back. *It must be an injury*, I think. I reach up and touch the small ridge of bone on my own scalp where the surgeon corkscrewed a hole in my head and cut out the epileptogenic lesion in my temporal lobe.

"Keep moving," the man says, sounding kindlier than I'd expected.

"Wha—?"

"Keep moving or he'll sniff you out."

Fear rumbles inside me. His voice is so quiet I really shouldn't be able to hear him but somehow I do. The sound and the colour of the rest of the world pales.

"You're not where you think you are," the man continues, urgent now. "When you figure that out, all you'll want to do is close your eyes and wait it out. But you *can't*, do you hear me? You've got to *keep moving*."

*Keep moving?* I'm about to ask him what in seven-shades-of-hell he's talking about when a woman comes up behind him.

Thirties, quite well-dressed, a bit school-teachery. She doesn't see me, or she ignores me if she does. "Dad," she says, taking his arm. "Come on, we need to get going."

I watch them leave. For some reason I'm thinking about the time I was clearing out the garage with Grandad before he died. I upended an old armchair and a dead mouse hit the floor. I remember the shock, the cold drench. It wasn't a mouse anymore, not exactly. Its insides had turned to dust decades ago. It was a dried up, furry husk with milky, unseeing eyes fixed on mine.

That's what the man reminded me of: a husk, with nothing but dust and spiders inside him.

I pull myself up to standing and the world rocks around me like it's trying to shrug me off. I fish in my back pocket and I'm relieved to find my phone. I've never been robbed while I'm unconscious – I guess all the arm waving puts people off – but it's something I think about. Anything can happen while you're out. It's like leaving your front door wide open. Except it's not your house you leave unattended, it's *you*.

My phone is dead, the screen dark. I press the power button again anyway. Nothing. Maybe it broke when I fell.

I let my head fall back and stare hopelessly at the cloudless sky.

Nothing is easy after a seizure. My eyes don't work right, my fingers don't work right. I'm only a twenty-minute walk from home but I might as well be on Mars.



The smart move would be to beg a passer-by to borrow their phone and call Mum. She'll be working her shift at the local Waitrose right now and if I call her she'll be in the car and down here in about three minutes flat, Liquorice Allsorts in hand.

Mum's great in a crisis, I guess she's had a lot of practice.

Or I could just walk?

It sounds simple, but trust me, it's not. I might pass out again, or step into traffic. I'm scared. But I can't shake the old man's words.

*Keep moving.*

Something is off. Something about the weird old head-wound guy and the fact that nobody is even looking at me.

*Keep moving.*

I'm probably not thinking straight. I never make good decisions when I'm post-seizure, but all the same...

I need to *go*.

My blood feels like it's boiling, my arms and legs twitch with the urge to start walking. I slip my phone into my pocket and point myself towards home. *This is brave*, I think. *The first brave thing I've done in a long time.*

I used to have this idea that epilepsy was just one thing about me. It didn't have to define me; I could still have a life. I convinced myself it all came down to my GCSEs. They were the first great hurdle, I thought, the doorway to the rest of my life. I was going to nail my GCSEs and crush my A-levels and then I was going to get the hell

out of this place. London. New York. Tokyo. Somewhere *alive*. Somewhere where the universe was actually paying attention.

But then my GCSEs came around, epilepsy took its chance to give me the biggest kick in the teeth it could and all my grand plans got scrubbed.