





Erin Miller

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Girl in a Wheelchair



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By

Erin Miller

*This book is dedicated to my wonderful partner Jonathan, to my three amazing children, Catherine, Lois and Mark, and to Jennifer Brea for her inspiring film #UNREST*

*Any mention of alternative treatments is not intended to encourage or discourage. They are just treatments I have tried.*

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*“I have a special gift, Zoe,” my grandmother said, as she sifted through the faded black and white photos of long departed relatives that she was excavating from within an old wooden box. She was determined that I should know the names of these evanescent, elderly kinsfolk.*

*I was sitting in the alcove seat by the inglenook fireplace, clutching my favourite battered teddy. The photos fell through her thin white fingers onto her lap, like wayward Autumn leaves, as she stared vaguely into space.*

*“I can sometimes see the future,” she continued, retrieving her wayward attention, and suddenly looking fondly at the photo which had fallen on the top of the heap. Two young girls smiled out at the camera.*

*“Neither your mother, nor your Aunt Susan, have inherited that gift. But I am certain that you have.”*

*I gazed into the leaping flames, springing like serpents from the dry, crackling logs, occasionally spitting their venom onto the worn Chinese rug in front of the hearth. I tried to understand what she was saying, my eight-year old brain imagining myself dressed as a gypsy and gazing into a large crystal ball, like the lady at a fete I had gone to last year. Somewhere, though, there was a small resonance in what she was attempting to articulate. Things I thought I had dreamed but had then happened. A small chill descended my spine.*

*As I tried to make sense of my memories, my grandmother continued, now focussing all her attention on me. “When you are older, I will help you to discover how to use your powers.”*

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*It never happened. My parents moved away from the area shortly after, due to my father's work, and my grandmother developed Alzheimer's.*

## Chapter 1. My Life Ends

I made another determined effort to focus my erratic hearing. The rustles of Power Point printouts jostled for place with the drone of the presenter's voice. The smell of stale coffee and donuts mingled with the stuffy odours of heating and liberal sprinkles of cloying perfume and aftershave. The fog in my brain showed no signs of lifting. As usual. Like an English weather report. The words of the speaker drifted away into the distance. Students' work examples, pinned to the board beside me, blurred into undefinable inky shapes.

I hadn't realised I was laying my head on the table in front of me. My brain seemed to have abandoned trying to hear the woolly words and instead, I thought about what I would eat that night. I seemed to be getting a bit forgetful these days. Could I be bothered to stop and buy a microwave meal for one, or would I just get take-out as usual. Could it be early onset Dementia? (I'm always one to look on the bright side!). After all, it ran in the family.

*A girl sat in a wheelchair across the room. I couldn't fully make out her face. She was dressed in white. Her large, dark eyes bored into mine, as if she was desperately asking me to do something. But what? She raised her arms and reached out to me. She wanted my help. I tried to walk towards her, but my legs were so weak. It was like walking through mud. The closer I got to her, the more she seemed to recede into the distance .....*

“Sorry to keep you up, Zoe. What was your group’s conclusion on the exercise?” James Fletcher’s deep masculine voice had suddenly penetrated my dream.

I heard muffled laughter. I lifted my head, which felt like a concrete wasp’s nest. Heavy and buzzing. I realised I had fallen asleep! What could be more embarrassing? And what exercise was I supposed to conclude on?

Fragments of comments filtered through the mush that these days constituted my brain. “... must’ve been a good night out .... someone’s been hitting the bottle ... I know it’s boring but really, can’t she pretend to show some interest ... she can’t expect us to keep on carrying her ...” That last one sounded like Caroline White, the ultra-keen NQT (newly qualified teacher). Older than the usual recruits, she had defected to teaching from the stock market. Apparently, she needed to do something more ‘meaningful’ with her life.

Keep on carrying her. I had straightened as that barb pierced through the brain smog. But I truly couldn’t recall what I was supposed to have been doing. The dream of the girl in the wheelchair was still haunting me. It had made the hairs stand up on the back of my neck, seeming so real, somehow. And it was not the first time I had experienced this dream. But I had no idea why.

“Can anyone in Group C help Zoe out? Zoe, see me after,” James was straight to the point.” See me after? What was I, five years old?

Caroline, of course it would be her, shot into action and gave a fuller than required response. I stared into my empty coffee cup, my face red with shame and wishing the floor

would open up. I didn't dare raise my eyes to meet any of those that were no doubt focussed amusingly on me.

Whilst most of us had dressed comfortably in jeans, tee-shirts and trainers, Caroline was in her usual business-like suit, complete with enormously high heels. Some people are just so hard to like ...

Thankfully the day ground to a halt soon after that but I still had my inquisition to come. James Fletcher, new, young, dynamic Head of English, came over to me as the others filtered out. Another tedious Inset Day bit the dust.

“I think we need a word. You haven't got to rush off, have you?”

I didn't have the strength to rush anywhere these days. 35 years old, going on 80. All I would be 'rushing off' to was dinner for one and the Netflixes.

He ushered me into the English office and gently closed the door. I looked around at the neat room. Not a piece of paper out of place. I suspected what was coming next.

“You've had quite a lot of time off this term already, haven't you Zoe? I know you've had medical notes etc, but how long is this going to go on? The students are suffering as a result. You must realise that?”

And I'm not suffering? I grimaced and propped my weary body on the end of his desk, knocking his dish of paperclips flying onto the carpet. The clips spread out, unfettered by the daisy chains my own paperclips wore. How was I supposed to respond? I appeared to have a vague illness that no-one could yet identify.

“What can I say? I just haven’t been well enough to come in and I can’t get a proper diagnosis yet. I’m waiting for the result of some tests.” I smiled innocently but met his hard, blue eyes. Not an ounce of sympathy there.

James folded his arms and you could almost hear his neatly pressed shirt crackle. “Unfortunately, we are going to have to give you a formal warning, which will be followed up by lesson observations. Your Year 11 set’s pre-mock exam results were weak. Ofsted are due in next term, as you well know. Things can’t go on like this. You are letting the students down.”

And I’m somehow doing this deliberately? Well, here we go. First warning. My friend, Sarah Willings, who had suffered badly from stress when she worked at Bingley Academy, and most of it due to Fletcher in my opinion, had left last term before she was pushed. Better to leave through choice, than to be dismissed, she had said. She was now unemployed, living on tranquillizers and alcohol, at least she was when I last saw her, which, I realised guiltily, was not recently. Was that going to be my life soon? I mumbled my excuses and made a swift exit, leaving him to the errant paperclips. After all, he had much more energy than me. And by swift, I mean as fast as I can amble these days.

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I had to drive around the block twice before forcing my small Fiat into an even smaller place, two streets away. Naturally, heavy rain was now battering the windscreen and I was only wearing a thin cardigan. I couldn’t even run home as I can no longer run. I shuffled painfully down the street, getting drenched, while fantasising about the hot shower I would jump (I mean crawl) into when I got home. First

mistake. I remembered from this morning. No bloody hot water again. It had become a weekly routine of phoning the landlord, waiting for him to call the engineer, having it fixed, only for it to break again a few days later. And I had forgotten to phone him again. Another evening of boiling kettles.

As I opened the door to my minute, but expensive, rented flat, last night's washing up mocked me on the draining board. The wet washing still sat in the machine which frantically blinked to be turned off. My bed was unmade and long overdue clean sheets. Discarded clothes were strewn all over the floor. I felt exhausted just looking at the mess.

Ignoring the debris, I changed into my PJs, dialled for take-out and stuck the T.V. on. The news droned on. My eyes left the screen and trailed around the small room. Then I noticed it. A letter in a brown envelope on the door mat, now wet with my footprint. Forcing myself from the comfort of the sofa, I went and picked it up, and gingerly opened it. A medical letter. I held my breath. Was I slowly dying of some rare, tropical disease? Or were men in white suits coming to put me in a straightjacket?

It was neither of these. Apparently, my medical details had been assessed and it was thought (as had been obliquely hinted at by the waffling doctor and which I had instantly dismissed), that I had got M.E., also known as Chronic Fatigue Syndrome, and Fibromyalgia. This all seemed to have been triggered by the ghastly virus I had last winter (teacher's Christmas present). They wanted to see me the following week. I would be placed on a list for 'treatment'. This constituted a course on how to cope with the illness. Not how to recover from it then? It seemed like a death sentence to me.

I stepped over to my laptop, perched on the corner of the worktop. Removing two congealing coffee cups, I opened the sticky lid. As it sprung into life, I began to google my diagnosis.

*Chronic Fatigue Syndrome (CFS), also referred to as Myalgic Encephalomyelitis (M.E.), is a medical condition characterised by long-term fatigue and other long-term symptoms that limit a person's ability to carry out ordinary activities ...*

*Fibromyalgia, also called Fibromyalgia Syndrome (FMS), is a long-term condition that causes pain all over the body ... people with Fibromyalgia may have increased sensitivity to pain, fatigue and muscle stiffness ...*

I continued reading about symptoms which sounded all too familiar.

My mind, murky as it was, tried to deal with this. I had thought I was just going through a tired patch. Teachers do, all the time. Now it all fell into place. The muscle weakness and pain, (I had stopped going to the gym months ago); the constant exhaustion that wasn't satisfied by sleep. Falling asleep in front of the T.V. every night but being wide awake when I hit the bed. The brain-fog. Feeling like I was coming down with a virus all the time. The puffy glands. Avoiding social outings in the evening because I was just too damn tired. Believe it or not, I used to be quite a party animal!

Even my latest relationship (if you can call it that) had hit the dust. Justin and I had met on an internet dating sight for teachers (where else?). I thought a fellow teacher would understand the strains of the job, whereas other boyfriends couldn't seem to.

But Justin was like James. Efficient. Athletic. Driven. All the things I'm not. I don't blame him. After I cancelled date after date because "I'm so tired", he wandered off to pastures new. Like Liam and Joe before him. That was three months ago. I hadn't bothered with relationships since then. Too exhausting, like everything else in my life now.

I glanced back at the letter and then tossed it onto the other post requiring action. This pile was growing rapidly. I stared blankly at the T.V. and thought about what I knew about M.E., which was very little, other than what I had just read.

My cousin Tamsin had it. She was now permanently in bed and never went out. A young life wasted. So, this was it. My life as I knew it, seemed to be officially over.

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## Chapter 2. Research, a Dangerous Thing

Maybe that was an exaggeration. But it was how I felt.

The first weekend of half term, I spent in bed, completely debilitated. No doubt many other teachers did the same, even if they weren't ill. It's the stress and exhaustion. (I'm not selling this well as a career, am I? I'm sure lots of people thrive on stress and exhaustion but I'm not one of them). I ran out of clean crockery. The post mounted on the doormat. I didn't care. I just wanted to sleep, sleep, sleep. Maybe I would wake up and this would all go away.

Monday, I awoke to a text from, of all people, Sarah Wilings. I guiltily remembered that I had said I would pop round a few weeks ago. But she had been in such a state the time before, that I had been putting it off .... I guess I'm a bad friend. And now my life was probably headed in the same direction as hers. Downhill. She wanted to meet for lunch. She must be feeling a bit better, then?

I threw on creased jeans and a jumper that was fashionable five years ago. It was months since I had managed the energy for make up or clothes shopping. I braced myself on how I could be a good supportive friend when I felt like shit myself.

Sarah was late, as usual. Ordering high calorie sugary food, hoping for a quick energy fix, I was lost in my foggy thoughts when she plonked herself down opposite me at the table, a designer handbag coming between us.

“Zoe! Great to see you! But .... You don't look so good? I heard you've been having a lot of time off – the school grapevine still reaches me.” Straight to the point. That's Sarah.

I looked up from my cream cake open mouthed. Sarah was hardly recognisable from when I saw her last. Her hair was stylishly cut, her outfit the latest fashion, her body slim. I cringed at the way I must look. Added weight – the comfort foods had taken their toll - sloppily dressed ....

Swallowing quickly, I smiled. “Great to see you too, Sarah. You look fantastic! Yes – I'm not popular at work just now – if I ever was – it seems I may have M.E. or Chronic Fatigue or whatever it is. James has given me a formal warning.”

Sarah nodded sympathetically. “You need to get out of there fast. Like I did. Jump before you’re pushed. Don’t let it get nasty.”

“Maybe.” I didn’t want to talk about myself at that moment. “But how are things going for you, these days?”

Sarah needed no prompting. She gushed about her new rich boyfriend who had got her this *amazing* job in his Daddy’s company and who regularly *whisked* her away for weekends abroad. But to give her due, she eventually returned to my problems.

“Seriously, Zoe. Don’t go down the victim route that I did. Show them you’re better than that. Their loss.”

We continued to chat, or mostly Sarah did. When I left, it was with a mixed feeling of depression and jealousy. Wrong, I know. Of course, I was pleased for Sarah. She had been a good mate and work colleague. But where would I find a rich boyfriend to get me a great job? I would need the energy to do that job in the first place anyway. Non-starter.

I spent the next two days on the laptop, researching M.E. and Fibromyalgia. Nothing seemed conclusive. Some people made quick and full recoveries. Some recovered and then relapsed. Many stayed ill for years. Some ended up in wheelchairs, or bedridden. My glass half empty persona told me I was bound to be one of the latter.

The concentration on the screen increased the pressure in my head. I gave up. I’m not much of a drinker but I needed some relief. I reluctantly opened an old bottle of cheap plonk, lurking at the back of a cupboard. Was I already heading down Sarah Willings’ old route? The wine was a present from a grateful student last year. At least I had made a diffe-

rence to one young life, I comforted myself, drinking myself into a haze, as I slumped on the sofa in front of a mindless reality show.

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My next plan was to go and see my cousin Tamsin, the one with M.E. She lived three hours' drive away, with my Auntie Susan, my mother's younger sister. I would have to take the train. I couldn't cope with more than short drives anymore.

I realised that, as well as being a bad friend, I had also been a bad relative, as I hadn't seen Tamsin for three years. The last time had been at a family wedding. I remembered her pale, gaunt face as she sat in a wheelchair, nodding off when no-one was looking.

She had gone down with a nasty virus when she was 18 and had just started at university. It had developed into M.E. and Fibromyalgia. She had been in bed mostly, since then, occasionally going out in a wheelchair, or so my mother had told me. Depressing stuff, but I needed to face this head on.

Maybe Tamsin could give me some pointers. Help me to understand. Perhaps she was recovering now and would inspire me. Again, I felt a rush of guilt. I could have made more effort to go and see her over the past few years. How sad and boring her life must be, if she was still in the same condition. I vaguely remembered a note on Auntie Susan's Christmas card last year to the effect that Tamsin was, indeed, much the same. Still, this was 11 months later .....

Grabbing the bull by the horns, I went the following day. The train rattled through the West Sussex countryside and then on into Hampshire. I dozed, unable to concentrate on even the chick lit I had bought at the station. It had been months since I had been able to cope with a meaty novel.

Images of how my life might pan out trickled through my muddy whirlpool of a brain. At home on benefit. Housebound. No more career, no more dating, let alone relationships! No energy to travel. I liked to call myself travelled but compared to my friends' adventures in far flung places, mine was comparatively limited, just to Europe. Just like me, my inner critic reminded me, limited.

Aunty Susan met me at the station. She seemed to have aged a lot since I last saw her at the wedding. Her vivid chestnut hair was now streaked with grey, and lines had appeared around her eyes. She smiled weakly and hugged me.

“Tamsin was so pleased when she got your message. She doesn't get many visitors. I think her friends find it hard seeing her like she is now. It's so lovely to see you, Zoe.”

She pulled back from me and I could feel her taking in my unfashionable, ungroomed, podgy look.

“But – how are you? Your Mum told me you have had a lot of time off work. She's worried about you.”

I tried to brush her questions aside. I didn't want it to look like I had come here for myself or for sympathy. My mother was one of those highly irritating people who had never had or appeared to have had, a day's illness in their lives. She had no sympathy for illness unless you were on your deathbed.

You should ‘pull yourself together and get on with it’ according to her. I was never allowed time off school unless it was something contagious and the school insisted. No doubt she had been moaning to Aunty Susan about my current, in her eyes, hypochondria.

We had a cup of Earl Grey tea when we arrived at their large, period, detached cottage, complete with thatched roof, which was in a chocolate box rural village. At any minute, I expected to see Inspector Barnaby walk by, on his latest investigation in Midsomer Murders.

I felt tired from the journey and was finding it difficult to concentrate. Aunty Susan watched with poorly hidden dismay as I finished off the plate of superior chocolate biscuits she had provided, in an effort to gather some instant energy. Was greedy and fat being added to my list of failings?

After chatting about the latest alternative therapy Tamsin was trying, she walked me round the house, showing me the adaptations for the wheelchair and the aids in the bathroom. As we entered the dining room at the back of the house, my gaze wandered out of the large picture window, and towards the paddock which backed onto the garden. An over-weight horse nonchalantly raised its head for a moment, as it spotted movement in the window.

I recalled the jealous 15 years-old me, on attending Tamsin’s fifth birthday party, a family affair. Her present, from her doting parents, was a beautiful grey pony. I had managed to beg for a few riding lessons when I was 10, but this had soon been declared a much too expensive hobby. I was relegated to the swimming club at the local baths, my dreams of competing at the Horse of the Year Show shot to pieces.

Tamsin's latest equine acquisition, a stunning palomino mare, had been bought just before her illness. Seeing me looking at the horse, Aunty Susan explained, "Yes I know. We kept her. Because we wanted Tamsin to have the hope that she would one day ride again. But sometimes it seems cruel – dangling it in front of her when she can't even walk."

I didn't know what to say. Everything here seemed a premonition of my future. Wasted dreams.

Finally, after another half an hour of small talk, where I tried to avoid questions about my love life, or rather lack of it, Aunty Susan checked that Tamsin had woken from her afternoon rest. She warned that I shouldn't chat for too long.

I had learnt that Tamsin was no better than when I had last seen her and was, indeed, mainly bedridden. This was extremely worrying and depressing. Aunty Susan seemed at her wit's end. They appeared to have tried anything and everything to help her get better. This was not very encouraging either.

Nervously, I walked slowly upstairs, past the newly fitted stairlift. I crept in the bedroom door. Tamsin was laying, white-faced, flat on her back. My eye caught the rows of fading rosettes still pinned to a board, and the trophies lined up on a shelf in the corner.

The vibrant young girl I remembered from before the illness seemed to have gone. In her place was a thin, frail person with lank hair. She looked older than her 25 years. Tamsin heard me and turned her head, slowly. This simple action evidently caused her pain.