

February 18th was the first day of my worst year. I know this because it was President's Day, a holiday celebrated by government employees, bankers and teachers everywhere. It was the day I weighed in less than ten pounds from my goal weight, the day I ran eight miles on the elliptical without getting tired, the day we finally hung the hundred-pound shelf that I had been tripping over for the last eighteen months while we tried to figure out how to hang such a large piece on a wall with no studs. It was mild and sunny outside with a chance of snow overnight: a teacher's dream weather for a day off.

That night at around 10:30 I had a grand mal seizure. I know this because my husband told me so. That and the bloody mess that was my tongue after two minutes of convulsions and 100% contraction of every muscle in my body. He told me this as the EMTs arrived and stuck me in the back of the ambulance, disoriented and blind. I had lost a contact in the process. I asked the EMT if it was snowing yet. Snow would mean no calling the secretary in the morning and rushed sub plans.

My never-shaken husband paced around the cramped room in the ER. I tried to piece together the events of the night. The memory of the simple things I had done that night came slowly into focus.

*I asked why you called 911.*

*I thought you were dying.*

*Why would you think that?*

*You made a weird noise, and shook. You looked through me. No response.*

*I walked to the dresser to change. The light in our room was so bright.*

*I had to help you dress. It was like you didn't know how to put a shirt on.*

*I don't remember doing that.*

*Do you remember my name?*

*Don't be stupid.*

CT Scans, blood tests, and on my way home. Soon I'm sitting in the neurologist's office. He checks my reflexes, shuffles papers and finally thinks to talk to me.

Brain Doctor: So what happened?

Me: My husband said I had a seizure.

Brain Doctor: Did you have any sensations right before it happened?

Me: I was asleep.

Brain Doctor: I want you to see another doctor. One who specializes in seizure disorders.

Me: I waited for forty-five minutes watching Animal Planet in the waiting room for that?

Brain Doctor: Oh, and don't drive for six months.

Me:

Brain Doctor: Unless the other doctor clears you, of course.

Seizure-related driving laws are stupid. I know this because they are arbitrary. In my state it's six months. One state over the law is three. Idaho has no laws about this. I consider moving to Idaho, but realize I would be unable to get there without driving through other states illegally. And never mind that there is no evidence to suggest that remaining seizure free for any length of time makes you less likely to seize. I am angry at Brain Doctor for mentioning this. Had he never said anything I would be able to scoot my Mustang up and down I-65 with no worries. I decide to defy him and the law. It's not like anyone at the DMV knows. I inform my husband of my plans.

*But what if you have one and wreck?*

*What if the world ends tomorrow?*

*At least you can prevent the wreck.*

*Have you not noticed my need for independence?*

*But I don't want to lose you. I thought I had lost you.*

*You don't die from them.*

*You do if you're driving when you have one.*

*You're being dramatic.*

*You didn't see it.*

When one has a grand mal seizure, they make a low, almost guttural sound called an epileptic groan. They become rigid, often falling, and continue to convulse for one to two minutes, every muscle contracted as tight as it can be. They lose consciousness, but generally regain it a couple of minutes after the convulsions cease. The coming about is gradual, moving from a flight or fight reflex, to incoherent speech, to gradual regaining of short term memory. I know this because my husband made me watch a video of a grand mal on YouTube. He wanted me to understand why he woke me every time I twitched in my sleep, why he emailed me twelve times a day to make sure I was okay. He cried as he watched it. So did I.

Despite what my students may sometimes think, I do in fact have a brain. I know this because Brain Doctor #2 tells me so. I am uncomfortable being around the other patients in the waiting room--they speak loudly to complete strangers around them about very private matters and use profanity in a public place and yell at the receptionist for things way beyond her control. I understand why there is a glass window separating her from the waiting room. I wonder about the connection between neurological disorders and inappropriate social conduct and worry if I'll start acting that way. He shows us the pictures from the MRI. My brain is not as symmetrical as I had hoped. The EEG looks a little weird.

Me: What do you expect? You made me stay awake for 28 hours with no caffeine and then stuck electrodes to my head with KY Jelly of all things and made me go to sleep in a garage sale bed while strobe lights flashed in my face. It was a weird test.

Brain Doctor #2: There is only a slight instance of abnormal front lobe discharge, however.

Me: What does that mean?

Brain Doctor #2: It could mean a lot of things. It could mean nothing.

Me: ???

Brain Doctor #2: Seizures are rarely flukes. Something causes them.

Me: Such as?

Brain Doctor #2: Head injuries, aneurysms, tumors.

Me: But I don't have any of those things.

Brain Doctor #2: Right. So we don't know what caused it. We usually don't.

Me: So what does that mean?

Brain Doctor #2: You will almost certainly have another seizure at some point in your life. Could be tomorrow, could be next year, could be next decade. There's no way to tell, so just don't do anything dangerous. Like shower when home alone, climb ladders. Or drive.

There are few things in life more humbling than having your father stand outside his pick-up in the bus lane, waiting to pick you up from your job. Or having your mother-in-law follow you around Kroger while you grocery shop. Or declining last minute plans for a girls' night because your husband isn't home yet and you can't take a shower if he's not there. Or seeing the flier asking for parents to bring cookies or brownies or cupcakes or something to the class party the next day and not filling in your name because you know you won't be able to find a ride to the store that evening.

Not driving for half a year may seem a small consequence considering how many people have disabilities that create even greater dependency. Or have "real" disorders that cause real pain or even the real threat of death. A part of me wishes that there had been some benign growth or injury or something so I would know what caused this, so they could just fix it and everything would go away. I feel guilty for this, and know that those feelings would most certainly change if that were indeed the case. I confide in a friend, a breast cancer survivor who seems to understand. "At least I knew what I was facing," she mused. "I could see the scans, read the blood reports. I knew more or less what was going to happen next, even if I had not experienced it yet myself. And any physical isolation I felt was largely my choice. I didn't go anywhere because I didn't feel like it, not because someone told me I couldn't." The funny thing is that I don't even like to drive, and never really have. It's not the driving, but the freedom that it represents. The being able to go anywhere I want, when I want, and not having to coordinate basic errands around everyone else's schedule.

Summer is a lonely time for a teacher who can't leave the house when she wants to. I ask my husband to come home for lunch my first day off from school, terrified of spending the entire day alone. There are plenty of days I have stayed home all day by myself in the past. But those times I chose it. He instead comes to get me and takes me out to lunch, realizing I need to get out of the house. The next is a faculty cookout. My best friend offers to take me home, inventing some excuse about needing to do some nearby shopping so I won't feel bad about it. Two days into summer, and so far I am okay. And then day three dawns. School friends have summer jobs. My husband has meetings. It's raining. I go the entire day without leaving the house. Homes are supposed to be sanctuaries, places to find comfort and protection from what scares us. Mine is a prison, suffocating me more and more each day. I cry a lot that first day, especially that night when my two year old asks me to take her to the zoo the next day. Summer is supposed to mean doing fun things with mommy. I end up sending her to daycare most days, feeling she will have more fun there than stuck inside with me. How do you explain to a toddler that Mommy can't take her swimming, when she can see the pool sparkling just outside the window?

In her memoir *Lying*, Lauren Slater describes her life with epilepsy. Except the title is *Lying*, and the first chapter reads simply, "I exaggerate." Many critics doubt that she has epilepsy at all, and feel she uses it instead as a metaphor for falling, for the feeling of spiraling out of control without any clue as to how to regain it. That is it exactly.

For those six months I fall. I should create schedules and routines to help me make the most of help with running errands. I should come up with creative things my daughter and I can do in the house. I should ask for help. But doing any of those things will make the sentence more permanent. Give it even more power. I will not let a little brain issue change how I live my life. Except that it does. I rarely go to the gym for lack of a ride, and settle for pizza delivery because the fridge becomes empty. I can't control much of what is going on, so I control nothing. If only knew *why*. If only I knew what I did that caused this, what I could do to keep it from happening again. I return to Brain Doctor #2, full of theories.

Me: Y'know, the day this happened my husband and I hung a heavy shelf with some of the Billy Mays Mighty Putty stuff that had really strong fumes.

Brain Doctor #2: Chemical reactions don't often cause seizures.

Me: Okay, well, my cycles were completely off track right before it happened. And it's the only time that has happened to me.

Brain Doctor #2: There is no connection between hormones and seizures.

Me: Losing weight?

Brain Doctor #2: No.

Me: Any other theories?

Brain Doctor #2: We'll never know, in all likelihood. We almost never know.

I am not unhappy--not even depressed, though there are moments where I know I will go there if I don't make a conscious decision not to. I am angry. I am mad that no one has any answers for me and that doctors with multiple degrees keep shrugging this off like it's no big deal. Medically, it's not, but it plays on my independence issues. I know that there is some lesson I'm supposed to learn here. To slow down, not take so much on, rely on others more. I want to ignore it. I am simply in survival mode, counting down days until my freedom returns.

And it does. The first day of a new school year. A fresh start. I drop my daughter off at daycare, drive to school and park my car in my usual parking space. It seems to be waiting for

me. I run an errand during my free period *because I can*. I stay a little later than I have to at school to prepare for the next day. No one is waiting on me. I'm not inconveniencing anyone. I even go back out after dinner. An hour on the elliptical rejuvenates me, makes me feel normal somehow.

Four days later around 5:30 a.m. I have a second grand mal seizure. I know this because my husband told me so. That and the bloody mess that was my tongue after two minutes of convulsions and 100% contraction of every muscle in my body. This time there is no ambulance, no ER. This time it seems normal. My husband moved out of my way, let me seize, and then let me sleep for a few more minutes to allow my senses to return. I call my mother. "Can you ask dad if he can pick me up after school today?" My voice breaks as I say the words. She knows why before I tell her. I want to scream, but there is no time. I have a daughter to get up and ready, classes to teach. This, apparently, is going to be my normal.

*Look, this is going to be okay. It will be fine.*

*No, it won't be. I can't start this over.*

*You're not going to go six months again.*

*Yeah, so I'll just drive anyway and have another one--this time on the interstate and have a wreck that hurts someone who will sue us and the insurance will refuse to pay anything because I wasn't supposed to be driving in the first place and we'll lose everything we've worked so hard to save.*

*It will be okay.*

*How do you know?*

*I don't know.*

*I'm getting really tired of that answer. No one knows anything.*

I can't help but laugh at the fact that I am at work and teaching less than an hour after a pretty severe electrical misfire in my brain. Others call for a sub when they have a hangnail. But soon I am back in Brain Doctor #2's waiting room, and there is no laughing. People are cussing each other out, over what I'm not sure. Animal Planet blares from the TV. What is it with Animal Planet? I try not to be embarrassed that my father sits next to me. Had it been my husband I would not have given it a second thought, but Dad's schedule is more flexible, and so it is he that drives me around town. I should be grateful so many people are willing to rearrange their days to help me, but I am once again overwhelmed by the chaos of this condition. I feel like a child who must wait for approval or permission before doing anything. I bite my mangled tongue

when dad asks if I want him to go back with me, trying hard not to snap back that I am an adult thank you very much. I can do this myself. The anger and frustration that had magically disappeared when I slipped behind the wheel of my sports car for the first time in half a year tries hard to reemerge. What was the point of not driving for six months only to have another seizure *after* my sentence was over? But I know what my stubbornness led to last time, and I do not want to go through that again. I can be strong for six more months. Maybe.

Brain Doctor #2: I told you these things are rarely a fluke. What happened?

Me: Same as last time. Exactly the same.

Brain Doctor #2: Did you have any warning of what was to come? See lights? Taste metal?

Me: I was asleep, remember? Just like last time.

Brain Doctor #2: Ah...yes...well, I guess it's time to medicate. Just so you understand, you will have to take this medicine for the rest of your life.

Me: What do you think is causing this?

Brain Doctor #2: (shrugs) Could be anything. Could be nothing. It doesn't really matter. This will stop it. For now at least.

The anti-convulsant I now take to control my epilepsy (they give it a name after the second one) is working. I know this because I have not had a seizure in just over a year. It may stop working at some point. I will know this when I have another seizure. The medicine I take is also used to treat bipolar disorder, depression, and a couple of other serious mental health disorders. This worries me. What worries me more, though, is the not knowing. Show me a scan so I know what's coming. Tell me what to do, what not to do. But there is nothing save the shrug of the shoulders and the advice to quit looking for answers. I am a fixer by nature, and I can't fix this. I'm learning to accept that, but it isn't easy. It is easier to accept while I am independent, when I can feel in control of at least most of my life. And epilepsy won't kill me. I know this because I read it in a medical journal during a commercial on the Animal Planet, but also because I will no longer allow this sneak of a disorder to control my life.