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opening extract from

Life Interrupted

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chapter one

It all starts in the spring, which is odd when you think that spring is meant to be about growth and renewal. Mum likes spring because she loves daffodils, and she says when the little yellow trumpets start poking their heads above ground it always reminds her that sunshine is on its way. Mum's been complaining that she hasn't felt well for a couple of days. It isn't like her, but everyone at school's had this cold that's been going round. Even when she has a bad cold though, or the flu, Mum still carries on, getting up for work, pulling her pink dressing gown on and yawning as she heads for the bathroom, knowing the toilet seat will be up because she says that's what you get with two boys in the house.

This morning, she's getting ready to leave – got her nurse's uniform on already – but she's complaining of a pain in her shoulder. I start to give it a bit of a rub but,

as soon as I touch it, she winces with pain.

'Ooh, careful, Luke, love,' she says. 'It's really tender there.'

'Call in sick,' I tell her. 'Say you're not well. You're not well.'

She gulps down a couple of paracetamol with a swig of tea.

'They're short-staffed as it is,' she says, fastening her watch. 'Half the hospital's got that nasty cold. Hope I'm not.'

'You want to go and see the doctor,' I tell her. 'The place should be crawling with them.'

'Doctors . . .' she scowls. Worked as a nurse for years, my mum. But she still doesn't trust doctors. Just the word is enough to set her teeth on edge.

'It's probably a bit of arthritis,' she says, as though a bit of arthritis is worth celebrating. We're sitting in the kitchen, drinking tea. I'll be off to school soon and she'll be off to work. Gospel Park hospital is a huge place, and Mum is a sister on the old people's wing, the 'geris', as she calls them, short for geriatrics. I've seen her at work with her patients. She teases them, has a joke with them, flirts a little with the old boys, has a laugh with the old girls. Their eyes burn brighter when she's around, and little lines crinkle up their faces as they smile. She makes time for them, she's good at her job.

‘Don’t go in today, Mum,’ I say, buttering a slice of toast. ‘I’ll call if you like.’

‘You’ve got school,’ she says. ‘I’m fine. I can’t let the girls down.’

She always calls the rest of the nurses ‘girls’ though they’re nearly all wives and mothers, and there are a couple of blokes, too. She rubs her shoulder with her right hand, but I can see her screwing up her eyes against the pain.

‘Have you done your homework?’

Typical Mum. Diversionary tactic. Still, I can see she isn’t going to stay off work today. I might just as well give up now.

‘Yes,’ I say. ‘Well, most of it . . .’

‘Right,’ she says, holding up Jesse’s lunchbox. ‘There’s his sandwiches. Make sure he doesn’t leave them behind, will you? You know what he’s like.’

Jesse’s my younger brother, and yes I do know what he’s like. He’s a prat most of the time. Football mad. He gets to school half an hour before everyone else so that he and a few of his Neanderthal mates can kick a ball round a yard. I wouldn’t mind but he’s not that good. He won’t eat school dinners (unlike me) because it’s a waste of his valuable footie time. It’s all he ever thinks of. It’s all he talks about. Who’s where in the league. Who’s playing who. Who’s been signed up by this or that club. Who’s past their sell-by date. Football. Who cares?

Jesse often rushes out the door and leaves his packed lunch behind. So, of course, it's usually up to yours truly to take it in for him. To be honest, I'd leave it where it is on the table to teach him a lesson. Serve him right. But Mum always asks me to take it in for him, and I can't say no to her. She knows he won't come back for his lunch if he leaves it behind. Once he's started playing, that's the only thing on his mind.

That's Jesse for you. He'd rather keel over from malnutrition than stop playing football for five minutes. You can see it when he plays. Pure concentration on his face, eyes focused on the game. There's nothing else in the world that matters – nothing, and no one.

Not like me. Sport, I can take it or leave it, and I usually leave it unless it's the tennis or the wrestling. I don't mind football when it's a big match – the FA Cup final, the World Cup, that sort of thing – but I can't sit ogling Wycombe Wanderers against Berwick-upon-Tweed for a full ninety minutes as though my life depended upon it. Not like Jesse can. Me, I'd rather sit and listen to my music. Sometimes I do drawing, you know, sketching and that, though I can't say I've much talent. I've even been known to write the odd poem. I started when my dad left. It was horrible stuff really, but Mum encouraged me. She said it would help me cope with my feelings. We didn't hear from Dad for a few weeks. No cards, no letters, no calls, no nothing.

Well, that's not entirely true. The phone did ring a couple of times, and it was obvious there was someone there at the other end of the line, listening, not daring to speak, or maybe not able to. But I could hear him breathing. Not cranky or pervy. Just desperately trying to find the right words to say and desperately failing. That's when he'd hang up.

He's in Scotland now. We get a call at Christmas, a card for our birthdays, though it's usually a week late and he always writes 'sorry it's late' in his spidery scrawl on the back of the envelope. Sometimes there's even a call if he's been watching some family pap on the telly that's triggered an attack of the guilts.

'See you, love.' Mum pulls me towards her and pecks my forehead with a kiss. But I put my hand up against her shoulder, only lightly, and now she's screwing up her eyes again.

'Mum, you can't go in to work like this.'

'I told you, Luke, I'm fine.'

There's an edge to her voice, now. It's her no-nonsense, don't-tell-me-what-to-do voice.

'I may be late tonight, love,' she shouts. 'So many people off sick at the moment with this flu bug, I may have to cover if they need me. There's stuff in the freezer for you and Jesse. Don't forget to lock up.'

She's suddenly out of the door, and I can hear the car starting up. Jesse stomps into the kitchen. He's late.

‘Where’s Mum?’

‘Like you care.’

He gives me one of his filthy looks.

‘Gone to work. Just now.’

He kicks a chair.

‘She hasn’t washed my kit. Why hasn’t she washed my kit?’

He holds up his football stuff from Sunday’s game. It’s covered in caked-in, dried-on mud. The stuff that washing-powder advertisers dream of.

‘Tough. Maybe she forgot. She’s not feeling great.’

He rams it in his Adidas bag, grabs an apple and rushes out the door, slamming it behind him.

I hold up his sandwiches.

‘Don’t forget your lunch . . .’

chapter two

If there's one thing I really hate, it's being pulled out of class. It's so embarrassing, humiliating. Everyone always thinks someone's died, or your house has been burned down, or you've been out mugging little old ladies. And that you've been caught.

Anyway, it's Cheryl Monroe from 11M who comes to yank me out. I hate Cheryl Monroe. She has that sneery look on her pug-dog face like she's picking up on a really bad smell, and she knows it just came out of your arse.

'Luke Napier. Mrs Halloran's office. Now.'

The heads swivel as though this is some weird spectator sport, and I'm the one about to be fed to the lions. I can feel my cheeks blazing like beacons. Oh God, she means me.

It's history so we've got Mr Mayer. You can see him sitting there sniffing the nicotine off his fingers from

lunchtime and dreaming of his next fag.

'All right, Mr Napier. Off you go.'

Everyone's staring at me, fixing me with their 'what-have-you-been-up-to' eyes.

I get up from my desk and Cheryl Monroe is waiting by the door. She's trying to look nonchalant, pretending she's chewing gum. She isn't. We're not allowed to chew gum in class, and although Cheryl isn't actually in class at the moment, she's not silly enough to be caught out by a technicality like that.

'Put your books away, lad.'

Mayer has slipped a sympathetic, velvet-lined glove over his normally harsh tones, anticipating the mini earthquake that has demolished my home, or the sudden car crash that has deprived me of my nearest and dearest. Everyone is starting to look worried now. They're thinking something bad must have happened for Mayer to be so nice all of a sudden. I shove my books into my bag and move towards Cheryl Monroe. She's picking an imaginary fibre from her school cardigan now and flicking it on the floor. It's no more real than the gum she is chewing.

I close the door behind me.

'Come on, tortoise,' says Cheryl in a really sarky voice. 'Hurry it up. I'm missing art, thanks to you. Only half-decent lesson in this dump.'

Cheryl obviously feels that, at the age of fourteen, I

cannot deliver myself to our head teacher's office without her assistance. It's all part of her plan to take over the world, starting with Joan of Arc Comprehensive. I'm not impressed. Her black trainers squeak on the polished floorboards as she bounces along, happy in the knowledge that some sort of poo is about to hit the fan. She pulls up suddenly outside Mrs Halloran's office and raps sharply on the door in a strange, mannered way, like a bored member of cabin crew demonstrating the emergency procedure. Only Cheryl's display is all for my benefit. There's a muffled 'Come!' from within, and after struggling with the knob briefly, she makes her entrance and announces, 'Luke Napier' rather unnecessarily.

'Thank you, Cheryl, you may go.' Mrs H doesn't even look up. Cheryl puts her lips against my ear.

'It's that divvy brother of yours, knocked himself out. Waste of bloody space.'

Mrs Halloran finishes whatever she's writing (notes for the governors? Memos for the staff? Shopping list?), caps her fountain pen and looks up. She knows the game: I'm in charge. You'll wait. I'm the queen, you're the pawn. And it's my move. There's also an overpowering smell of perfume. I don't know what it is she uses, but it smells sickly and floral, a bit like fabric conditioner.

'Ah, Luke,' she says finally. 'Seems your brother has had a little mishap on the games field.'

I count to three.

'Again.'

I knew that was coming. Jesse's so accident-prone, he's a card-carrying member of casualty these days. There was the broken nose at Christmas (it wasn't, it just bled like it was), the sprained ankle when he slipped during ten minutes of freak snow in February, and then he cut his knee open about a month ago. Those were all football injuries. Plus there are numerous other little mishaps along the way. Still, they've never yanked me out of class before.

'What's he done this time, Miss?'

'Seems he may have knocked himself out.'

Mrs Halloran removes her glasses and perches them on top of her concrete hair do. They won't come down without a struggle.

'Playing football,' she adds, as though I might be thinking he was shot-putting or tossing the caber.

'We've tried getting hold of your mother, but to no avail.'

Mrs Halloran speaks in that strange way that only head teachers and newsreaders adopt, as though their grammar is constantly being monitored.

'She might be working a double shift,' I explain. 'They're short-staffed at the moment. Her mobile will be switched off.'

'You'd better go with him. To hospital. I'm sorry

but I can't spare a member of my staff on one disaster-stricken twelve-year-old.' She extracts the glasses from her hair, pops them back on her nose, and returns to whatever it is she's writing.

'He's eleven,' I say. 'He's not twelve until August.'

'The ambulance is waiting by the gates.' She doesn't look up. 'Chop chop.'

An ambulance. At school. How unbelievably uncool is that? I can now feel dozens of pairs of eyes burning into the back of my head as I climb up the steps to get in the ambulance. The bell's just gone for afternoon break, and a small crowd has gathered, though God knows what for. Inside, there's a paramedic sitting with Jesse. She's holding his hand and, oh no, how deeply humiliating, it looks as if he's been crying.

'Ah, is this Luke?'

I'm tempted to say 'No', and run for it, but I'm thinking of Mrs Halloran's beady eyes glued to the back of the ambulance and imagining her unleashing her bloodhounds to track me down.

'Yes. I'm his brother.'

Jesse has that 'Oh God, this hurts so much' look on his face, and his footie shirt is wet through with snotty tears.

'I'm Sam,' says the paramedic. 'We're just going to get Jesse to Gospel Park for an X-ray to make sure he's all right. Okay?'

I nod and smile in what I hope is an intelligent way.

'He's been knocked out for a minute or two, so we don't want to take any chances now, do we?'

I turn to Jesse.

'How d'you do it this time?'

Jesse grimaces, then takes a deep breath.

'Well, Ryan passed to Dan, and Dan started running up the wing . . .'

'The short version, Jesse.'

'I scored. Then I ran into the goalpost.'

I can't believe this. He's got a great smirk plastered right across his gob now.

'You prat.'

'Where's Mum?' He suddenly looks at me in desperation, like a heat-seeking missile in search of sympathy.

'Don't know. They tried to get her on the mobile. Maybe she's having a late lunch.'

It's unusual for Mum. Normally when she gets back from work she complains that she hasn't had time for lunch. 'Just snatched a cup of tea and some toast,' she says, standing in front of the fridge, scanning it for something to eat.

'I forgot my lunch,' moans Jesse, and I feel a small pang of guilt as I think of the sandwiches that I left on the side, thinking, that'll teach him a lesson.

Jesse looks like he's getting ready to snivel again. The

driver starts to put a bit of a spurt on, as if he can tell.

'Are you all right?' Sam asks, holding Jesse's hand as a tear manages to escape and starts rolling down his cheek. 'You'll be fine, big boy like you. Bet you've scored a few goals, haven't you?'

She's distracting the patient, excellent tactic. This girl's a pro. While Jesse starts explaining, yeah, he's scored a few but he's usually in defence, I have a good look around. It's like something out of some hospital drama: oxygen canisters, first-aid boxes, red blankets. The real McCoy.

'Have you ever had any dead people in here?' Jesse's big brown eyes have dried up and are wide open now. The paramedic looks slightly flustered.

'Jesse,' I say in a hoarse kind of whisper. I'm tempted to give him a sharp dig in the ribs, but I'm scared he might start up again with the waterworks.

'I was only asking . . .'

'Nearly there,' says Sam. 'Not far now.'

I suddenly realise it's quite small and cramped and warm in here, and we're going pretty fast and I don't like the speeding motion much. For some reason known only to my digestive system (and possibly my brain), I start remembering that nasty greasy lasagne and chips I bolted down at lunchtime. Not only can I remember it, I can almost taste it. And that's when I know I'm going to throw up.

* * *

By the time they're wheeling Jesse in, I'm looking worse than he is.

Sam says, 'Don't you worry. I've got a clean uniform here at the hospital.' She's sponging sick off her jacket. I'd been aiming at Jesse, but I missed by a mile.

As we head through the scratched, grey double doors that swish like big rubber mats, I spot Mum's best friend, Mia. She's another nurse. As she sees me, she does a double take.

'Luke? Luke? What are you doing here?'

She looks puzzled, her hand goes to her head. I think, I could ask the same of you. She should be on the geriatric wing with Mum.

'It's Jesse,' I say, nodding my head towards his wheelchair. 'He knocked himself out playing football.'

Mia sighs. 'Not again. Is he all right?'

'He looks fine,' I say. The paramedics have propped Jesse up in a corner with a bag of cheese and onion, a can of Fanta and a copy of some crappety football magazine. He's got a big smirk on now, an I've-got-the-afternoon-off-school kind of look as he happily swigs his fizz and practically inhales the crisps.

'Can you tell Mum we're here?' I ask.

Mia looks embarrassed.

'She'll want to see Jesse,' I add, while I think, actually, does anyone really want to see Jesse? Surely not. 'She

always looks in on him,' I say. Mia knows this. She must have been through Jesse's injury stories a hundred times with Mum.

'Your mum's not on the geri ward, Luke,' says Mia. She takes my hand in hers. I know there's something up now. Nobody over thirty ever holds the hand of a teenager unless something really awful has happened. Or they're a bit dodgy, and Mia's not.

'She's been brought over here,' says Mia. 'I just looked in on her.' I can see the worry on her face. She's stroking my hand now. Oh God, I knew it was bad news.

'She's not very well, Luke. You mum collapsed on the ward this morning.'