

Real-life Sleeping Beauty!



Up and about But I could nod off at any moment...



...but my life is no fairytale



I once snoozed through an entire holiday...

By Gemma Garfirth, 21, from Birmingham

One day, my mum Mandy, 45, said she'd noticed I was acting weird. 'You seem confused,' she frowned. I was adamant I'd sent her some texts, but she said I hadn't, that I kept asking the same questions. It was February 2010, I was 15 and recovering from a chest infection. 'I think I'm still under the weather,' told her. But, suddenly, I turned hyperactive. 'I don't want to leave you alone,' Mum fretted. Needing to pop to the shops, she took me with her. But, as Mum looked around, suddenly felt really tired. 'I'll just sit down here, I thought. Next minute, Mum was shaking me awake. 'What are you doing?' she cried. I'd fallen asleep on the shop

floor! Alarmed, Mum took me home, and, as I slept on the sofa, she called NHS Direct. They advised her to call an ambulance – but, when it arrived, I was totally out of it, convinced my arms and legs wouldn't move. Rushed to Kettering General Hospital, I fell into a deep sleep as doctors ran a raft of other tests. I was in there for a week, during which there were brief moments when I was awake, although I don't remember them. Mum said I'd talk in a baby voice, call her 'Mummy' and want to sit on her knee and read nursery rhymes. Bizarre. Then, just as suddenly as it'd started, I snapped out of it. Doctors were baffled – but one specialist suggested I could have Kleine-Levin syndrome, a rare

neurological disorder that causes sufferers to sleep excessively. So, when I had another episode three months later, I was referred for tests and, that August, I was diagnosed with KLS. Rare, affecting only about 40 people in the UK, it's nicknamed Sleeping Beauty syndrome, as sufferers can fall into deep sleeps for weeks – even months – at a time! While the condition's not life-threatening, it's incurable. Although there's no known

cause, doctors said I should eventually grow out of it. I could take sleeping tablets to regulate my sleeping patterns but, aside from that, all Mum could do was let me sleep. I'd have an episode every few months, and they were

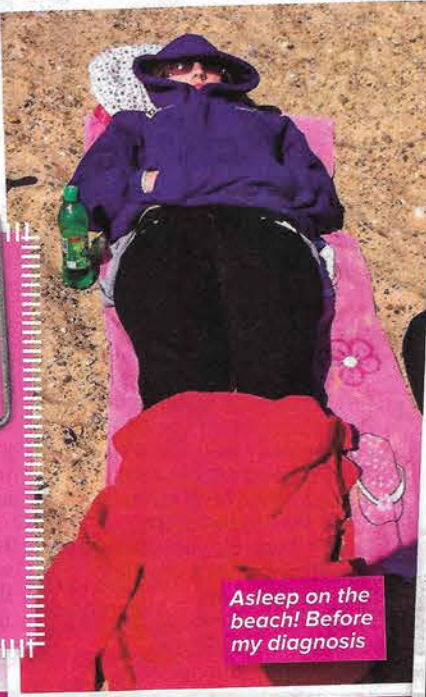
frightening. I once nodded off at school and had to be carried to the car. During episodes, I'd only wake briefly to eat or go to the toilet – not that I'd remember doing it. And, as I came out of my slumbers, I'd act bizarrely, could be aggressive or swear a lot. It was totally out of character. Mum would put the house on lockdown until I was better, and had to take a lot of time off work. Over time, I learned to recognise the signs of an episode starting. I'd awake feeling confused,

unable to make sense of all the thoughts racing through my head. I'd get very upset. 'I don't want to miss anything,' I'd sob to Mum. But I did. I slept through birthdays, parties, exams... In 2013, I snoozed through Christmas week, and I even slept through an entire camping holiday once. It was horrible missing out on so much, and really knocked my confidence. It affected my grades, too, and I had to re-sit exams. In September 2015, I went to Birmingham University to study Mental Health Nursing. On a night out, I met Greg, 24. We started dating, and I told him about my condition. Greg was understanding, supportive – and it didn't put him off me! 'I'm like Sleeping Beauty,' I joked. But, in reality, it's far from a fairytale. I've missed whole weeks of

placements for my uni course. Luckily, my tutors are very understanding about my condition, and I get extra time for exams and coursework. My little brother Liam turns 18 this year, and I'd hate to miss his big bash. I'm anxious about graduating next year, too. 'I hope I don't sleep through it,' I joked to Greg. Unfortunately, though, there's every chance I might. There are some triggers – including alcohol, so I barely touch it, except on special occasions. But, until just before a big sleep happens, I never know when I'm going to drop off. So far, I've had 31 sleeping episodes – none lasting longer than a week. Hopefully, I'll grow out of it before too long. But, all the time I'm awake, I make the most of every moment. I've already spent enough of my life fast asleep!

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PLUS About KLS This is a rare neurological disorder characterised by recurring periods of excessive sleep, altered behaviour, and a reduced understanding of the world. During episodes, affected people wake only to eat, drink or go to the loo, with no memory of doing so.



Asleep on the beach! Before my diagnosis



Up to a week – out of it...

All the time I'm awake, I make the most of every moment