

THE
AMAZING
SPENCER GRAY

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Spencer Gray reckoned the first few minutes were always the hardest. His legs hurt, his lungs hurt, his breath was thin and hot. Bones jarred as feet met the ground. He could so easily stop.

Then, after he'd gone a couple of hundred metres, Spencer would begin to find his rhythm, with his feet hitting the ground like the beat of a couple of drums. His breathing smoothed, and the air didn't rasp so drily over the back of his throat. His breaths would match with his feet — in, in, out. In, in, out. They began to fit one another: breath and feet. In, in, out. In, in, out.

Stay at the front, Spencer.

And his feet would push off the earth, rather than uncomfortably slapping down on it. He would feel his feet actively using the ground to make the next stride strong and long.

In, in, out.

In, in, out.

In, in, out.

In, in, out.

If Spencer was going to get a stitch, he'd begin to feel it around then, pulling in his side. Like a zip being yanked up and down, over and over, up and down, up and down. That was when he'd push his thumb right into the pain, deep into it, try to almost press it away. At the same time, he'd close his mouth and suck air in through his nose, and push it out the same way. It was much harder to get enough air that way, but it was the only way to kill a stitch. Spencer would want to open his gob and greedily suck in all the oxygen he needed, but he knew that if he did, the stitch would get him in the end.

It will pass, Spencer. Push through it, push through.

Give me a break, he'd want to shout; let me stop now!

But there was no stopping, Spencer knew that. You couldn't stop. You kept at it, and afterwards, after all the pain had gone and your body glowed with the effort of it, you realised what you'd done; how far you'd gone; how hard it had been, and how worth it.

1

‘Leon, where’s your board?’ Spencer called out across the skate park.

‘Don’t mention the war!’ Leon growled, looking dark.

‘His mum’s confiscated it,’ Charlie said, his sandy curls bobbing in the breeze.

‘Oh no, that’s not okay,’ Spencer said. ‘Parents shouldn’t be allowed to confiscate stuff once you’re over ten, I reckon.’

Leon sloped towards them, over the concrete humps and dips, and when he was close enough he muttered, ‘Yeah, and all because of a *library book*.’

‘A library book?’ said Spencer. ‘What about it?’

‘I can’t find it. It’s overdue. Very overdue.’

‘That’s still a bit harsh, to confiscate your deck. It’s not like you *tried* to lose it.’

‘Tell me about it,’ Leon grumbled.

‘And they’re never actually *lost*,’ Spencer said, ‘they’re

always somewhere — under the bed, or mixed in with your other books, or in your sister's room or whatever.'

'I've looked everywhere,' Leon said.

There was silence between the three boys.

'And I don't have a sister, Spence.'

'Right. Sorry.' Spencer looked down at his board. He'd bought it, second-hand, a couple of weeks ago and he was still making friends with it. 'You can have a ride of my board today, Leon,' he said. 'I can still barely stand up on it, anyway.'

It was like Leon had been born with a skateboard attached to his feet. Anyone trying to learn with him carving up next to them got a bruised ego as well as a bruised everything else. His body seemed to move like water.

Leon punched him on the arm. 'Onya Spence. You just gotta keep practising you know. I broke my wrist when I first started.'

'How reassuring.'

Leon cracked a smile. His olive complexion lit up cheekily. 'Pads help.'

'Pads for a spaz,' Spencer mumbled.

'So when do you get your deck back, Leon?' asked Charlie.

'When I find the book, or pay the fine.'

There was a double groan.

‘What’s the damage?’ asked Spencer.

‘Forty bucks,’ Leon croaked.

‘Forty bucks! What is it, the Harry Potter boxed set or something?’

‘I dunno — Mum did tell me but I can’t remember. Anyway, I don’t have forty bucks and I can’t find the book, so I’m stuffed.’

Charlie said, ‘You could put a sign up on the school noticeboard.’

‘That’s not a bad idea,’ said Spencer.

‘That’s a totally *embarrassing* idea!’ said Leon. ‘I don’t want to talk about it anymore,’ he said, disappearing down the ramp, his words streaming back after him. ‘How can a book ruin your life?’

Spencer and Charlie looked at each other. Poor Leon. Stuff like this was always happening to him.

‘Maybe we could help him pay the fine,’ said Spencer, watching Leon get some air.

‘Yeah.’

‘If we could scrape some money together, maybe Mrs Wilkes would chip in the rest?’

Charlie nodded, and his curls nodded in sync. ‘Spence, no wonder you’re Petrich’s favourite: you’re a problem-solver!’

‘I am not his favourite.’

‘Are. Hey, Leon. Come here, mate, we’ve got a plan.’

‘Is it any good?’ Leon yelled, curving high in the quarter-pipe before letting the board slide away on its own. ‘This had better be good.’

2

‘Shouldn’t we just *look* for the book before we hand over our cash?’ Spencer said anxiously.

Leon groaned like a cow giving birth. ‘Not again. I’ve looked! What don’t you understand about that?’

Charlie said, ‘C’mon, Spence’s right. One last look. We’ll all go to yours after this and do a forensic search. Then, if we don’t find it, we’ll pool our money and try and get the rest from your mum.’

‘Let’s get going, okay?’ Spencer said. ‘Leon, spin a few moves and then let’s just go.’

Leon let them in with a key.

‘When will your mum be back?’ Spencer asked.

‘About 6.’

Leon’s dad didn’t live with them and he didn’t have any brothers or sisters, but to Spencer, it always felt weird walking into a completely empty house after

school. Sometimes Pippa drove Spencer crazy but it was kind of nice that she and Mum were always there when he got home. Sometimes he was greeted with a banana smoothie, or Mum would make them Vegemite sandwiches or a plate of crackers and cheese.

Leon rummaged around in a drawer and pulled out a box of Barbecue Shapes. He tore open the foil and passed the box around.

‘Right,’ said Charlie, the red crumbs already dotting his face, ‘I’ll start in Leon’s room. Spence, you check the living area. Leon, you ...’ He looked at Leon, hand deep in the box. ‘You just sit down and snack up, champ.’

It took about fifteen minutes. Charlie yelled down the corridor, ‘What do I get if I find it?’

‘What?! What do you *get*?’ Leon yelled back. ‘You get to keep your money, Charlie, that’s what.’

‘So,’ Charlie called, ‘your offer is?’

Leon talked sullenly through a mouthful of broken Barbecue Shapes. ‘Two bucks’ worth of sour straps.’

A nanosecond later, Charlie emerged, triumphant. ‘It’s the *Guinness World Records 2012*, in case you’re interested.’

‘Oh yeah, that’s right,’ Leon said vaguely.

Charlie held out his other hand, over which draped a huge dust ball. 'I found this with it. Under the bed.'

'Mum'll be stoked,' said Leon. 'That I found it, I mean. The book, I mean.'

Charlie raised his blond eyebrows.

'That *you* found it, I mean. Thanks Charlie. You're a legend.'

Spencer staggered into the room. 'I can't find it. It's impossible when you don't even know what book you're looking for.'

'It's okay, Spence, Charlie just found it,' Leon said, cramming in the last of the Shapes.

'Under his bed,' Charlie said.

'Oh, good work,' said Spencer.

Charlie shrugged. 'I just looked for any book with a library number on the spine.' He held up the heavy book with its silvery cover shimmering like a fish. 'Figured there wouldn't be too many of 'em on Leon's shelves.'

'That's awesome,' said Spencer, 'You just saved us money.'

'And having to put a poxy sign on the school noticeboard,' Leon said.

'*And* now you get your deck back.'

The three of them nodded in satisfaction.

‘Don’t forget my sour straps, now, will you, Leo.’

Leon’s grin was laced with irritation. ‘Maybe. But I’ll *kill* you if you call me that again.’