SE Magazine

HD **'DON'T DWELL ON WHAT HAS HAPPENED. DWELL ON THE FACT THAT I'M HERE**

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WC 3,880 words
PD 28 June 2014
SN The Australian Magazine
SC AUSMAG
ED 1
PG 22
LA English

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SHE LOST HER HANDS AND FEET WHEN AN INFECTION STRUCK OUT OF THE BLUE. BUT MANDY MCCRACKEN KNOWS HOW TO LOOK

ON THE BRIGHT SIDE

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Mandy McCracken is figuring out how she might continue to paint since losing the hands that once controlled the fine strokes of a brush. The feet she used to occasionally stomp in the art shop have gone too, but right now she's missing her fingers more. Listening to her make light of this gross inconvenience, I pray her spirit rubs off on me. She's got three beautiful daughters, a kick-arse husband, and the sun has arrived at the outdoor cafe where she sits sipping coffee through a straw because her artificial arms could let the **china** mug slip.

"At least they're keeping Rod entertained," she says of the prosthetic hands she's brightened with fingernail polish and loom bracelets. She's named one "Alannah" and the other "Alan" after the technicians who made them. They almost look real. Her husband Rod has been posting wacky photos of them on a Facebook page tracking Mandy's white-knuckle ride to hell and back. He's propped Alan in the fridge with the beer, and shot both forearms hanging off the monkey bars near their home at Kilmore East, north of Melbourne. "Next I want to get them high up on the cyclone fence as if she's trying to make a break for it," Rod jokes, pointing to the wire mesh surrounding the Royal Melbourne rehabilitation centre. "Doing a runner," Mandy suggests. They're on a roll. No tip-toeing around the brutal turn their lives have taken; this couple would choose gags over dying any day.

A year ago life was as happy as it's possible to be. Rod had his dream job teaching Philosophy and English at Assumption College while Mandy revved up her community in between raising Tess, four, Isobel, seven, and Samantha, nine. They had no warning of calamity ahead. Bedridden for two days with gastro-like symptoms, the notoriously resilient Mandy was given four litres of saline and a bag of potassium at the local hospital and then sent home. As dawn broke the next day her condition deteriorated so scarily fast that Rod called an ambulance to take her to Melbourne's Northern Hospital. Twenty minutes out of Kilmore the paramedics switched her to a mobile intensive care ambulance in a touch-and-go race she came perilously close to losing.

Now these two are tighter than ever as they navigate a tomorrow-land they never expected to inhabit. It's not Comedy Central 24/7. Mandy cries often and openly. They have huge blow-ups. In March they celebrated their 40th birthdays at a big shindig with 160 people, a band and a jumping castle for the kids. "It was brilliant," Mandy says. The next day she was sitting in her wheelchair watching Rod and a friend clean up. "I lost the plot completely. I burst into tears. I was a mess. So Rod and I went for a walk down the street to get some fresh air and our neighbour drove past. He stopped to have a chat. I had tears streaming down my face and red eyes and he said to me, 'Have you got a cold Mandy?' And I said, 'No John, I'm just trying to learn to live my new life'. And he said, 'Just remember, you're not doing it alone'." Her blue eyes brim again at the memory of him reaching out to her. "That was big." Her voice wavers as she takes a deep breath to still the flood. "Just to have a neighbour say, 'You're not doing this by yourself'."

If penicillin had been administered as soon as Mandy was taken to emergency last August it is possible Rod would now be burying himself in school reports and she'd be painting canvases in the garage she'd been promising to turn into a studio. The gastro or flu-like symptoms that initially laid her low masked a killer bacterial infection called invasive **Group** A Streptococcal disease (GAS). Although GAS is as frightening and as prevalent as meningococcal was before a preventative vaccine became available, it has slunk beneath the radar of the general public and frontline medical professionals. Patients present with common complaints that stream in and out of emergency departments daily: sore throats, vomiting, dehydration, and in Mandy's case tingling fingers. Around 15 per cent of kids carry the bug in their throat. Mostly the infection is benign but in a small number of cases it gets into the bloodstream and releases toxins that poison the system with potentially fatal results.

Mandy had been vomiting up what looked like "coffee granules" but was old blood. She had been passing out with her head in the bucket. The tingling sensation in her fingers was an early sign of tissue dying. At The Northern Hospital the emergency confounded the registrars on duty. "I'**m** sure I mentioned to a few people that my fingers were numb. I should have screamed from the rooftops, 'My fingers are tingling!' - but who thinks?"

Mandy was admitted to intensive care. Exploratory surgery recovered two and a half litres of septic fluid from her pelvic cavity. "Black gunk," she calls it. She was put into an induced coma. Her organs shut down. Her blood pressure barely registered. Her temperature soared. Doctors gave her a one per cent chance of surviving. Rod was told she was as sick as a person could get without dying. When he first saw her after surgery, he collapsed. "I hit the deck," he says. "I had no capacity to hold my body weight. It took me five minutes before I could force myself to look at her in bed with all those machines."

The next day he returned with their girls. "I didn't tell them how close Mandy was to death but they needed to see their Mum," he recalls. "The kids didn't go within a metre of the bed. They wouldn't hold her hand." Seeing their mother swaddled in tubes, drips and monitors, with an oxygen mask over her mouth, they were numbed into silence. Several young nurses on duty wept. Mandy's parents arrived. They took the children home. Rod began his vigil.

Pathology tests confirmed GAS three days later. With penicillin in her system, Mandy's vital signs slowly improved. But the feet that carried her through life at a hectic pace and the hands that scratched an itch or dried her children's tears would not survive. Toxic shock from the infection caused necrosis that turned her extremities gangrenous. "They looked like dates," Rod says. "We kept them hidden from the kids." Mandy nods. "That was a very conscious thing." Rod took photographs over the next few weeks as the stain progressed up her limbs. "It was as if I'd dipped my hand into a purple black paint pot. The same thing happened to my feet. We both found it fascinating," she says.

Rod's closest colleague at Assumption College, Elisa Altamore, says: "The only time I saw Rod scared was in that first week when he thought he might lose her." Amputation was a graze by comparison. "When the doctors told him she might lose her hands I asked him, 'Are you going to be OK with that?' And he said, 'I'**m** going to have her. I don't care how much of her I'**m** going to have'. He wanted his wife, the mother of his children, and anything else, well, he was going to make it OK."

Mandy fights back tears as she recalls her response to the amputation. "I had to say, 'It doesn't matter. I'**m** still here.'?" Profound moments rear up to rattle her composure. She contemplated death. One day at the Northern the nurses wheeled her into the courtyard. "I remember blue skies. If I wanted to die I could. All I had to do was make that decision. But it was too nice. The sky was blue and I thought, 'This really sucks but I'd rather be alive.' That was the point I decided to enjoy this experience, really consciously laugh through it, because I could have cried ... " And she did. "I had a lot of tears in hospital."

We are in the grounds of the rehabilitation centre, where people who have lost limbs through diabetes or accidents learn to live without them. The wind is up. Autumn leaves scatter. Mandy's tired after a gruelling hour of physiotherapy. "Alannah" and "Alan", her prosthetic hands, lie across her lap; the prosthetic legs that strap on to her knees are back in the physio department. Saving her joints was a rare bit of luck since they increase her command and dexterity.

The stumps are puckered in different shades of pink from the skin grafts. Mandy's intense blue eyes captivate me as she tells how the words of a counsellor, when she was barely conscious, still keep her sane. "It was a Friday afternoon and I was having a bad day. I couldn't speak. I couldn't move. The nurses were rolling me over hourly. It killed me. I was miserable. I felt so sad. I was thinking, 'How the hell am I going to walk again?' I must have mouthed to someone, 'Can you please get me a counsellor'. It was 5pm and the woman was on her way out the door for the weekend but she came up to see me and I was able to mouth the words, 'I can't do this'." Her eyes fill with tears and she pauses to regain control. "She said to me, 'Just do one day at a time, no more than that'."

She still hears that voice. "You have to talk yourself through it. You have to say, 'This is fine, this will be finished, breathe in, breathe out, it's OK'. That is the mentality I've learnt to adopt. Even now when I pick up a sandwich and immediately drop it. I take a deep breath, wait 20 seconds and try again. That is the way I am dealing with what is going on."

Breathe in, breathe out. Endurance forges enough strength for hope. Her tightly coiled orange hair is growing back. Once shoulder-length, it fell out in clumps from the shock of physical trauma. Her mother says Mandy was born with a ginger afro. Red is her favourite colour. Everyone in Kilmore recognised Mandy because her hair, shoes and car always matched.

Her mobile rings and she swipes the screen with her left stump to answer Rod's call. He's picked up their kids from school for the drive to Melbourne to collect her for the weekend. Now a full-time carer, Rod is learning how to juggle a timetable that is crazier than a school-day schedule. She worries that she's hogged the limelight. "I'm really conscious of the sacrifices he's having to make. Everyone's always asking him, 'How's Mandy?' Very few times do they ask, 'How's Rod?' I have to be very aware of that. I'm the one with the physical change but his life has turned upside down too."

Elisa Altamore visited Mandy after she emerged from an induced coma. "She couldn't talk so you had to lip-read," Altamore says. "Her first question to me was, 'How is Rod?' That gives you a sense of them as a couple.

Of all the partners I know, they are probably the most solid, the best placed to go through this together."

Married for 15 years, they met in the book trade. She was a sales rep; he worked in a retail chain. He bought so much stock from her the store had to return it. After their first date they saw each other every day for three months. The attraction was instant. Humour bound them together and helps now as they cope with everything life has thrown their way, including the weirdness of media exposure. "Nothing like the story of the town freak," Mandy jabs.

Rod is over the hero worship. He bans me from using the word "journey" to describe their travails. Down to earth, they don't feel comfortable on a pedestal. Headlines such as "An Inspirational Mum" sit uncomfortably on shoulders built to cope. "We're just doing what we do," he says. "People want us to be inspiring. Well, here's an idea, inspire yourself!" He is not ungrateful, nor does he deny Mandy's grit. But the attention has been overwhelming. "I had to wear a hoodie and dark glasses to go and buy a loaf of bread," Rod jokes of being mobbed in the supermarket by locals concerned for Mandy's welfare.

His refusal to play the victim complements her gutsy resolve. They fit together. He cracks her up with home truths that help them get the better of a catastrophe likely to crush less resilient souls. Sometimes she uses him as a cover to express opinions she hasn't the heart to own. She told the orthopaedic surgeon who tried to sell her pricey bolt-on prosthetics: "My husband Rod would say you're funding your next holiday." He comes in handy, which is just as well given she's lost her fingers and thumbs.

"I can't shower by myself at the moment. I can pull clothes out of the washing machine but I can't put them in. I can't put soap into the dispenser but I can push the buttons. I can't turn a key or a door handle. I can go to the toilet but I can't pull my pants up. Everything has a niggly edge. I can't make myself a cup of tea. I can open the fridge. The other day I made us a bacon and egg sandwich but Rod cracked the egg." She can manage on her own at home for two to three hours maximum. "He's not allowed to divorce me or I'm screwed," she teases.

He's learning to multi-task, she's learning to cede control. "Friends at home look at us and say, 'Could I go through what these two are doing? Could I cope? Could my husband take a year off and look after the kids, be a full-time carer, wipe my arse, would they do that?' A lot of people say, 'No, they couldn't'," Mandy says.

"It's what I signed up for," shrugs Rod of his marriage vows. "Unless you're prepared to do what I'm doing right now you've got no

business starting families."

Over lunch they banter gaily, answering the most intimate of questions. "I got told by a 63-year-old amputee that yes, we will have sex again," Mandy says. Rod rolls his eyes: "It's not as if her vagina's been amputated. It takes a lot more work on my part but there's a lot less to get in the way." They laugh.

When it's time for Mandy to head back to physiotherapy and strap on her legs she asks Rod to help her through the door. "Why don't you see if you can get through the door?" he encourages, before jumping up to usher her through. As a teacher he believed in empowering students to learn, even if it meant occasionally letting them learn how to fail. "My rule is nobody does anything for Mandy until she asks.

That's what she needs. That's what every person trying to rehabilitate needs. Otherwise you create a victim."

At times she's exploded with frustration when she can't open a drawer or perform a task she once did easily. The arms have gone flying. Who wouldn't rage and cry? In her previous life she drew strength from a weekly craft **group**, friendship circles and membership of five local committees. Now she's a convert to regular counselling that has healed her emotionally. Rod's refusal to consult a psychologist is a sore point. He sometimes gatecrashes her sessions, but is mostly content to sort himself out by talking with his closest mates.

She's encouraged every adult in the family to seek help. Her parents Margaret and Gerald King obliged. Margaret has not cried once in Mandy's presence. Her coping mechanisms depend on outward calm. Gerald weeps often. When we meet for coffee they say their daughter - the youngest of four children - always exhibited traits that now win her awestruck admiration. The family has grown closer throughout. So too has the Kilmore community, where neighbours and friends have rallied to provide meals, working bees, fundraising walkathons, deliveries of vegetables, dog food, even an entire butchered sheep on their doorstep. The wider public response in the wake of media coverage has buoyed them both. New carpet was donated and laid through their house; a stranger in a bistro thrust a $50 note upon them. The Friends of Mandy Facebook page has more than 4000 likes from around the world.

So much about Mandy McCracken's case sucks. Susceptibility to invasive **Group** A Streptococcal (GAS) is the result of nothing more sinister than bad luck. Throat and blood swabs usually take two days to grow in culture and be identified for precise diagnosis. Mandy had been sick for three days and admitted to two different emergency wards before GAS was identified and then treated.

Rapid diagnostic tests being developed would not necessarily have helped, but a federal working party is drafting new guidelines for treatment. Infectious diseases specialist Professor Jonathan Carapetis expects they will recommend that doctors err on the side of caution by administering antibiotics and antibodies early in suspected cases of severe infection. "We need to get this message out strongly," argues Carapetis, a Perth-based expert heavily involved in researching vaccines and treatment for GAS infections. "If there are signs such as severe pain or shock in a patient we're urging doctors to start treatment as soon as possible."

Australian cases of GAS are in lockstep with a worldwide increase in severity and frequency that has occurred over the past 30 years since the emergence of new strains in the 1980s. Carapetis, who is director of the Telethon Kids Institute, estimates national prevalence rates of 630 nasty GAS infections every year leading to 50 deaths. "These figures are very similar to the increase in meningococcal disease before a vaccine was introduced," he says. "Meningococcal infections got a lot more attention and government funding. This disease is just as nasty and just as common."

Australian and Kiwi researchers have joined forces to fast-track a GAS vaccine that has long been in development. "For the last 20 years I've been telling people the GAS vaccine is at least five years away. For the first time I'**m** now confident we're on track," Carapetis says.

Rod McCracken hopes the publicity surrounding Mandy's case will help to promote awareness. Mandy has heard the Alfred Hospital recently acted swiftly to administer penicillin as a preventative strike in another, similar emergency. Rod has signed forms to release Mandy's medical records from The Northern Hospital so they could be discussed at a conference of intensive care specialists.

Insurance is another headache. "We were insured for everything except Mandy getting sick. I had income protection insurance but it doesn't pay because technically I can generate an income." He adds: "We're living off very generous donations from all and sundry."

Pursuing reforms and compensation may preoccupy them down the track. For now they are trying to stay positive. "We're having fun with the situation. We're not bitter or angry. When you have someone come in to visit and they burst into tears or become angry on your behalf ... To have that standing in front of you is really hard. You want to say, 'Stop crying and smile. Don't dwell on what has happened. Dwell on the fact that I'**m** here'."

They may shrink from the inspirational tag being pinned on Mandy but I have rarely met such fine individuals. A nurse at the rehab centre ran into her room the other day and slammed the door. Mandy takes up the story: "?'My God, what's wrong?' I asked him. He said, 'There's a fellow down the hallway and all I want to do is pick you up and plonk you down in front of him and say, 'Look at her. She's happy. You've got nothing to complain about.' I told him, 'Sure, I'll do it'."

"I do find people use us to absolve their own issues," Rod says.

"Yeah," Mandy says. "?'My life's good because look at Rod and Mandy's'."

"We become pinup people: 'I don't need to feel bad because I'm hero-worshipping someone in a far worse position.'?"

"But that's good," Mandy says.

"It's really unhealthy," he insists.

"But if we're creating a reality check for First World problems ... "

"To compare yourself to us is to ignore what's happening to you. Whatever you are dealing with is real for you." He's right, but since meeting them I've shelved any number of petty complaints.

Most amazing is Mandy's embrace of the good to come from such unfairness. "I'm almost actually glad this has happened. If it was a choice between it not happening I would almost rather take life as it's going to be. It's changed our lives for the better."

"God yes," Rod agrees.

"It's brought our little family of five closer together," Mandy continues. "It's brought my brothers and sisters closer together. It's made everybody reassess what's important in life. It's brought out the best in local communities ... "

"Insurance companies are making a killing," Rod adds teasingly of friends who've hurriedly signed up for disability cover, life insurance and income protection.

Late Friday afternoon Mandy starts packing for a weekend at home. She pricks her ears at the patter of footsteps running along the corridor. Her door swings open. Issie and Sam throw themselves on their Mum for a kiss and a hug. Rod brings in little Tess. They clamour for dinner at a pizza restaurant. Issie wants calamari. They wheel around the small room in high spirits. Last year Issie's teacher asked her, "How's Mum?" She didn't skip a beat: "Good. She's getting her legs chopped off today."

They are so glad to have her. Like Rod, they don't care how much of her they get to keep. Mandy's mother told her daughter: "I'll love whatever is left of you." Mandy has lost a few bits and pieces but she can't believe her luck. She's going to see her girls grow up. That's all that matters.

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AN Document AUSMAG0020140701ea6s0000b

