

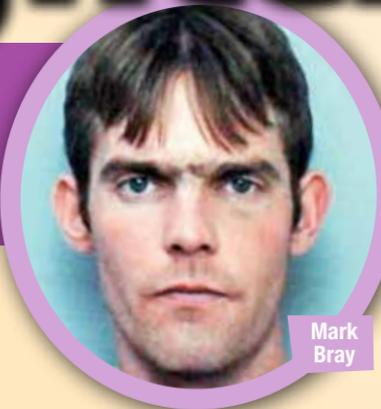
With one flick of his lighter



Coral's ex was about to inflict the sickest torture imaginable. Dying would have been easy...

When people see the devastating scars all over my body, I know what they're thinking. *What happened to burn her so badly? How on earth did she survive?* The answers, if they're brave enough to ask, are simple. My ex-boyfriend doused me in petrol, flicked a lighter and watched me burn alive. And I survived the only way I knew how — by joking through the pain. Because as surprising as it sounds, you *can* laugh at any situation. *Even mine.* When I first met Mark Bray I was 38, a school cook and single mum to Jack, 17, Charlie, 15, and George, 11. I was always a 'look on the bright side' woman, and I loved how kind, warm and funny Mark was. When he traced 'I love u' on my bare back, I felt the same. So he'd moved in, and though Mark, a scaffolder, was only 27, he was so mature. He did the housework, helped with the boys' homework and cooked dinners. When my sister Vivian, 39, heard rumours that Mark had an ugly temper, I was stunned. 'He's a pussycat,' I reassured her. And for two years Mark and I were always giggling together. But then his work dried up and he started drinking, became moody and snappy. And finding a wrap of cocaine in his pocket a

week on... 'How dare you?' I exploded. 'I've got kids!' 'I'm really sorry,' he replied. So I gave him another chance. But then he accused me of cheating. And weeks later, he stormed in from the pub drunk and dragged me round the house by my hair. 'You've got a man here, where is he?' he kept roaring. When he finally fled, I cried, horrified. *The rumours were true.* So I reported him to the police, and Mark was charged with assault, bailed and banned from contacting me. The police fitted a panic alarm inside my hallway, while I changed the locks. 'I'm glad you've left him,' Vivian said, hugging me. Yet Mark kept phoning, sometimes ranting, sometimes pleading for another chance. 'It's over,' I'd sigh, hanging up. I was sure he just needed time, so I didn't tell the police. 'Let's focus on having fun again,' I told the kids. So three months later, for Jack's 20th birthday, we had a wonderful family dinner at my parents' house. Afterwards, Jack and Charlie went out, while George stayed at my parents'. Back home alone, I watched telly, ate chocolate. But at 7pm... 'Let me in!' Mark bellowed through the letter box, drunk. Shocked, I hit the panic button and yelled: 'Go away!' But he punched through a door panel, grabbing the handle. Instantly, he was inside, hauling me into a corner of the lounge by my hair. 'You've had it,' Mark spat. His eyes glinted with hatred as he sloshed liquid over me from a green plastic container, drenching my jeans and top. I smelt petrol. *He was going to set me on fire!* 'Think of the kids,' I begged. 'Sod the kids,' Mark said, and



pulled out a red cigarette lighter. 'Don't do this,' I pleaded. But he just sparked the lighter. *Wumph!* 'If I can't have you, no one can,' he shouted as orange flames exploded over my legs and body. The force threw Mark back, igniting his hair, and he fled, patting out the flames. But I was a fireball. I stumbled and screamed. Huge flames were rippling up my chin and cheeks. As I breathed in, the burning air scalded my lungs and throat. I smelt the sickening stench of burning meat — my own skin. I ran to the downstairs loo. I felt no pain — just incredibly hot as I doused myself in water. It had little effect and I ran into the street, rolling on the tarmac, screeching like a wild animal. I heard someone shouting to get help and a wet blanket was thrown over me. Then the pain struck, searing hot, seizing my whole body. 'He's killed me,' I whispered. 'You won't die,' a voice said. It was my neighbour. 'Tell my kids I love them,' I pleaded before paramedics lifted me into an ambulance. Vivian appeared. Someone must have phoned her. Then it all went black... When I woke again I was in hospital, groggy and confused, and swathed in padding. I was so drugged up, there

was no pain. Vivian leant over me, looking exhausted. 'You've been unconscious for three weeks,' she said. 'The kids are fine, staying with Mum and Dad. Mark's in jail, on remand.' Relieved, I drifted away again. For days, there were just those brief, painless pockets of consciousness. I knew I'd been hideously burnt, but I was just so grateful I'd survived. Jack, Charlie and my parents visited, smiling encouragingly. They hid their shock well. But George, now 13, couldn't face it. 'He came once but got too upset,' Mum said gently. 'Tell him I understand,' I said. I could only imagine how bad I looked. A cloth had even been draped over the mirror in case I caught a glimpse of myself. The doctors said 60 per cent of my body — all my front, both arms and legs, and the bottom of my face — was covered in third-degree burns. They'd had to cut huge slices into my skin to release the enormous blisters which had formed, and I'd had six skin grafts from my back. 'You were lucky to survive,' a doctor said. True. I felt *incredibly lucky.* Despite my horrific injuries, I was still here to raise my children. So I refused to feel bitterness, self-pity or anger at Mark. Instead, I turned to humour to get me through. When my bandages were changed... 'Just look where my tattoo ended up after the skin grafts!' I said, showing Vivian a distorted rose and butterfly on my left thigh. 'Wasn't that on your back?' she hooted. My family joined in, finding humour in the darkest moments. They teased me about the dreadful smell of burnt flesh in my room when I was first brought in. 'Lucky I had a tube up my nose so it didn't bother me,' I joked. The first times I tried to move were agonising. Yet with the help

of physiotherapists — or *physio-terrorists* as I cheekily nicknamed them — I could soon sit up, then hobble round the room. After two weeks, I finally dared look in the mirror. My long hair was now just tufts, half my right ear was missing. My face and neck were knotted and deformed by thick, red scars. It was awful — but what I'd expected. So there was no point weeping and wailing. 'What a ****ing mess,' I just sighed. But I vowed to stay upbeat. I would chat so much to the nurses, they'd jokingly threaten to put my tracheotomy back in just to shut me up! After another week of rehab, I was told I could be discharged the following day. But then the police phoned saying Mark had admitted attempted murder in court and was awaiting sentencing. I'd been so focused on recovering, I'd never actually stopped to think about his attack. Now it hit me — he'd really tried to *kill* me. For the first time, I broke down. It was shocking. *How could he?* But when my tears stopped, fresh determination surged from within. Mark couldn't keep me down for long. I was going to leave hospital! *That's* what really mattered. Next day, Vivian brought me a clean outfit to wear, lovingly washed by Mum. I found a spare pillowcase caught up among the clothes. 'What's this for?' I giggled. 'Does Mum want me to cut two eyeholes in

it and stick it over my head?' And though life was painful, I was absolutely thrilled to be back with my wonderful boys. A month on, I went to Oxford Crown Court for Mark's sentencing. I wanted him to see that I wasn't beaten. But he was too cowardly to look at me. The court heard he'd drunk 10 lagers and snorted cocaine that night. His solicitor said Mark had apologised and wished to 'turn back the clock'. But Mark smirked and even belched as he was jailed for life, to serve a minimum of seven years. *Disgusting.* 'But it's over now, time to move on,' I said matter-of-factly. And that's how, three months later, my glass is still half-full. My scars are still very tight. I struggle to smile and I'm often in pain, but I'm hoping more reconstructive surgery will help. And instead of wishing I could change the past, I relish *now.* So I'm always out. And when people stare at me... 'Want a closer look?' I say with a smile. One woman in the supermarket was so shocked at my burns she recoiled, saying: 'That looks awful!' 'You should have seen me a few months ago!' I replied. I've no reason to be ashamed. My scars remind me that I'm a survivor, a joker, a *beautiful* woman — who still wakes up every day delighted to be alive. Isn't that wonderful?

'He smirked and belched as he was jailed for life'

CORAL NEWMAN, 41, ABINGDON, OXFORDSHIRE



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I'm a survivor, a joker, a beautiful woman

As told to Lauren Gunning and Amanda Revell Walton. Photos: Tracey Griffin