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Scarred for life in petrol attack but my ex will never defeat me



BURNED BEYOND RECOGNITION: Coral in hospital after the attack in her own home

EXCLUSIVE: One year after her drunken, drug-crazed ex poured petrol over mum-of-three Coral Newman and set her on fire, she describes her extraordinary struggle to get back to a normal life. **By Amanda Walton**

Mum-of-three Coral Newman spent last Christmas in a coma with 60% burns to her body.

Just two days earlier, her drunk, drug-crazed ex-boyfriend Mark Bray had soaked her in petrol and set her alight, shouting: "No one is having you." Coral was not expected to make it to the New Year, but against all odds she fought back. "Mark has disfigured me and totally changed my life," says Coral, 41. "But I'm determined he will not destroy me. I'm going to enjoy every second of this Christmas." Coral met Bray in her local pub shortly before Christmas 2006. "He was lovely," she recalls. "He'd do anything for me, and he was a laugh a minute." But over the months Bray, who was 12 years her junior, began to drink more and started taking cocaine. He became jealous and possessive. In September last year he punched Coral in the face. Police

charged him with assault and when Coral refused to take him back he started harassing her.

She got a restraining order but it didn't stop him. So the police installed a panic alarm. Two days before Christmas Coral's eldest, Jack, celebrated his 20th birthday at his grandparents' house.

Just before Coral left to go home, Bray - on bail from the assault charge - rang her mobile. "He said, 'Listen to this'" she remembers. "It sounded like water swishing around. I hung up."

Coral went home alone as her three boys were staying the night with her parents. Within minutes Bray was at the door, shouting. A court later heard he had drunk 10 cans of lager and taken cocaine.

She pressed her panic button, but he smashed his way in. As Coral tried to flee he grabbed her hair and dragged her back inside. It was then Coral noticed he was holding a plastic canister.

"I thought it was water - until I smelled it," she recalls. "I've never felt terror like it." Bray poured the petrol over her as she desperately struggled to free herself from his grip.

"When he pulled out the lighter I was hysterical. I pleaded with him, begged him to think about the children. "But he just said: 'God the kids. No one is having you, I love you!"



TOGETHER: With Bray

And with that he flicked the lighter and Coral was engulfed in flames.

"The whoosh of fire took my breath away," she recalls. "All I could feel was heat. I ran to the bathroom, splashed water on myself and ran outside and rolled on the ground, trying to put the flames out."

"My neighbours were gathered around me. I thought I was dying and told them to tell the kids I loved them."

Coral was first rushed to the John Radcliffe Hospital in Oxford and then transported to the burns unit within the Queen Victoria Hospital in East Grinstead, West Sussex.

With 60% burns to her face, neck, arms, chest and legs, she was in a critical condition and doctors put her into a medically induced coma for three weeks.



HAPPY: Before attack

"I remember dreaming I was in a big black tunnel," recalls Coral. "Someone was there with me, but I never got to the end of the tunnel."

By the time she came round, Bray had been charged with attempted murder.

Her youngest son George, then just 13, had been to visit his mum but was so shocked he refused to go back.

Instead, he wrote letters which the nurses read to Coral. Over the next month, she had six operations. The surgeons took skin grafts from her back and scalp and grafted them on to her legs, arms and chest.

"I remember looking down at my leg and seeing a tattoo which had previously been on my back!" she says.

At first it took six nurses to help Coral stand up, and she needed pain-relieving gas and air as the slightest movement was agony. But gradually, she started to improve.

And two months after the attack, she finally plucked up the courage to look at her reflection. Until then, all the mirrors near Coral had been covered up.

"I froze with shock," she recalls. "The face that looked back was not me."

"I didn't have a chin. My neck and face just seemed to merge into one. Stupidly I tugged at the little bit of hair I had left to try to cover my face."

"It was such a mess." A few weeks later, Coral heard that her ex had pleaded guilty to attempted murder. "It was the first time I accepted Mark had really tried to kill me, and it was the first time I cried," she recalls.

Two days later Coral left hospital to stay with her parents in Abingdon, Oxon.

"It was lovely being back in the home I grew up in, but the best bit was seeing my boys again," she says.

Bray was sentenced to life imprisonment at Oxford Crown Court in April and must spend a minimum of seven years behind bars. Bray's response to

his life sentence was to smirk and belch.

Coral went to the hearing. "I sat through the entire case unable to take my eyes off Mark," she says. "But he never once looked at me. I wanted to let him see what he had done."

Coral is waiting for another op on her neck. Later doctors will rebuild her ear.

And for the next couple of years Coral will have to wear a body brace.

"My body doesn't feel like my own any more. I doubt it ever will. People stare when I'm out, but I try not to let it bother me." Coral is moving into a new house just in time for Christmas, and her family are throwing a big 21st birthday party for son Jack.

"The day Mark attacked me was also Jack's birthday, so this year we're going to have a really good knees up."

"And we're going to continue partying all the way through Christmas and the New Year."

"I have no memory of last year, so I'm going to make up for it this year and enjoy every minute."

But Bray is always in her head. "After what he's done I think he always will be," she says.

"I'm finished with men now, so I guess he got what he wanted. But I'm determined that he's not going to defeat me and I'm going to survive."

People stare but I try not to let it bother me