

My heart story

On the 18th of April 2016 I sat down to the dinner table with my husband, sister, brother and five day old baby daughter sleeping nearby in her basinet. My husband, Steve, had made moussaka for dinner and there was a bottle of my favourite red wine to share, which I figured I could enjoy if I timed it right in between breastfeeds. It's funny, the little details you remember.

I had take two bites and suddenly felt as if the knife had jumped off the table and stabbed me in the chest. I had enough time to look at Steve and say "chest pain, chest pain" before I was unresponsive. I don't think that I ever passed out but I was in so much pain that the effort to speak or move just seemed all too much. My family moved me to the lounge, called the ambulance and loosened my clothes. I remember telling Steve that I didn't want to die. His response was to slap me across the face and tell me to keep breathing. And so I did.

I kept breathing when the ambulance arrived seven minutes later, while the paramedics struggled to get my cold and clammy body off the lounge, while my siblings tried to answer questions and look after the baby and while Steve grabbed my purse and raced ahead to the hospital. I remember hearing my precious little girl crying in the distance and I yelled out, "don't feed her formula!"

I had a dream first pregnancy. I was one of those pregnant ladies that everyone else likes to hate, you know the kind that never gets sick or puffy or awkward and still fits into most of her clothes and works right up until the end. I started maternity leave with four weeks to go, expecting that our little one would follow the family trend and arrive early. She didn't. I walked around and around and around the block for three weeks and once I ticked past my due date I even tried running. Then finally in the early hours of the 12th of April my waters broke with a tiny little trickle. It was just enough to keep me in hospital, where I spent the remainder of the day on an exercise ball trying to get labour to start naturally. The next morning I was induced but I was still determined to do this with the least amount of intervention possible. It was not to be. By midday things were not progressing and the midwives dialled up the medication. The rest of the afternoon is a hazy blur of pain and heat waves before Steve finally had enough and called up the anaesthetist to administer an epidural. Everything sped up after that and soon enough it was time to push. Oh, how I pushed! Little Miss L was nearly there when she turned her head sideways at the last minute and got stuck. The room quickly filled with medical staff and Steve put his hand over my eyes while they made cuts and scooped her out with forceps. And then there she was. Her Apgar score was very poor and she was whisked away for oxygen and assistance. All I could see were her tiny fingers holding Steve's hand. I didn't even know if she was a he or she yet! Two hours later I was stitched back together, showered and flying high on adrenaline and Miss L was safely with her Dadda in special care and I had my first real cuddle. Absolute bliss.

The next few days consisted of pure joy, unbearable pain, sleeplessness, slow trips down the hall to the special care ward, awkward attempts at breastfeeding and the never-ending rhythm of expressing every three hours. Miss L was

hooked up to tubes for the first two days and fed by syringe so she got it into her head that all she had to do was open her mouth and squeak like a little baby bird to be fed. We came home from hospital on the afternoon of the 16th of April even though we still hadn't grasped breastfeeding. I had a great supply and had no trouble expressing so I knew she was getting fed but the midwife visits were stressful and of course, everyone wanted a glimpse of our girl. I was exhausted and everything hurt but I was so overwhelmingly happy that everything else ceased to matter.

Finally, that afternoon Miss L decided to latch and she fed for two hours straight. After that I was disoriented, dizzy, had trouble following any conversation and focussing on my surroundings too an enormous amount of effort. As we were sitting down to dinner I felt out of breath, as if I had run up a steep hill. When the pain hit my first thought was a blood clot, because that was one thing we had been warned about when leaving the hospital. Then, in the back of the ambulance I stared at the roof and thought to myself, "this is going to be really embarrassing when I get to the emergency room and they tell me I'm having a panic attack." I never, ever imagined it would be my heart.

I don't think anyone in the emergency room imagined that either. They had wires and tubes and needles everywhere. I even had one stitched into my shoulder. I was freezing cold and kept yelling at them to warm me up. Steve told me later that the doctor had said he's felt corpses warmer than me. Someone must have hooked up an ECG as a precaution because all of a sudden that became the focus. I had a heart attack right there on the monitor. No one could believe what they were seeing but a CT scan revealed the LAD artery in my heart was 90% blocked. I was whisked with lights and sirens to another hospital and rushed into theatre for an angiogram. By this stage they had filled me up with two full IV bags and I asked a nurse if I could pee. She barely looked at me. I asked again and the response was that I was about to be sedated. I lost it. With the last of my fading energy I told her that I had just had a baby five days ago, was full of stitches where no one should have stitches and had been given more fluids than I could drink in a day and if they didn't get me a bedpan right now I was going to pee all over the table. A bedpan magically arrived and I peed like I had never peed before.

I vaguely remember the doctor showing me the before and after scans of my heart and seeing the spot where they had inserted a biodegradable stent. Then I was in a dark room with wires all over my chest, a monitor that beeped incessantly and a husband that looked more like death than I did. I could barely squeeze his hand and he could barely keep his eyes open, except he was too afraid to close them. I slept lightly, the memory of the pain in my chest was too fresh to breath deeply and the needles running up my arms were uncomfortable.

I spent a week in the CCU. I turned 32 and the nurses decorated my room with balloons and streamers. I was pushed all over the hospital for every test they could think of, and some of them twice. I had daily visits from Steve and Miss L and the nurses let them sneak in at all hours. They found me a breast pump from somewhere and Steve and the nurse worked it for me since my arms were still

full of needles and tubes. When I was finally allowed to have a shower, Steve held my heart monitor out of the way while I tried to wash around the sticky pads and wires and post birth blood. I remember apologising, saying that this was not what he had signed up for. He looked at me, naked and barely able to stand, and said, "this is exactly what I signed up for." We were just so glad I was still alive that nothing else seemed to register. At least, until the verdict came in. It took the doctors a few days but then they gave me a very long and rare condition. Postpartum Spontaneous Coronary Artery Dissection. All three layers of my artery had split open, the blood had clotted to plug the leak but then blocked the blood flow and triggered a heart attack. There were no warning signs, no family history, no risk factors, no reasons and no guarantees. I had very low blood pressure naturally and so starting me on medication designed to lower my heart rate and blood pressure even further was a hit and miss endeavour, more often miss than hit. Hardest of all was the news that the meds were essentially poisoning my breastmilk and Miss L would need formula after all. I hadn't cried until then. Truthfully, that broke my heart far worse than the heart attack.

I returned home to a house full of family, a dead tired husband and a baby that I didn't quite recognise. I returned home with deflated boobs and a hollow tummy and bone thin thighs. I returned home struggling to stand for more than a few minutes and unable to lift my little girl at all, not even to burp her. I was still feeling so blessed to be here at all but on the edges of that picture there was also the growing realisation that everything had changed. The mother I had dreamed of being ceased to exist. When my parents returned home, Steve quit his job in the mines to stay home and care for us and I had a roster of church friends who came to sit with me a couple of times a week so Steve could leave the house to get groceries or go to the gym or just sleep. We sold our home for a fraction of its worth, packed up our life in Perth, carted our seven week old baby girl across the country and moved in with Steve's parents in NSW. We tried to pick up the pieces but for a long time we both grieved and struggled to find our way through the debris. We blamed each other, because there wasn't anything else to blame and we railed against the unfairness of it all. If it hadn't been for an incredibly easy going baby who greeted us with a huge smile each morning I really don't know if we would have made it.

Now, as I sit writing my story, I am ten months on from my SCAD. Miss L is taking her first steps, cutting her ninth tooth, learning to sit on the potty, eating everything she can get her hands on and babbling a new word each day. And I am still so blessed to be here for each of these milestones. I struggle with my meds, I am black and blue all the time from the blood thinners and sometimes have to go back to bed after I take the heart rate tablets. I walk several kilometres every day and can lift my 12kg girl now with no trouble. I have about eight kilos to lose still and it is frustrating to see little children climbing the stairs at the beach easier than I can but I am trying to live within a new set of limits. My artery has completely healed and the stent has disappeared already. There is still damage to my heart but it is healing slowly. I do not know if I will be allowed to have any more children and I so badly want to give my little girl a sibling but I try not to worry about that just yet. We are still living with family and I long for a space of my own again but this chapter is not forever. Steve has struggled to find full time

work close to home but we have just started our own patisserie business operating at the local farmer's markets and we are hopeful that this will pay the bills and give us the kind of balanced life that Miss L deserves with both her parents by her side.

This condition has cost me my health, my security, my faith in my own body, my dearly beloved job, my confidence as a mother, my home, my friends, my independence and very nearly my husband and the life I dreamed that we would have as a family. I miss my old self sometimes and I grieve anew when I am reminded of some aspect of the life I used to live before. This new body is often difficult to recognise and I am yet to trust it again.

But for each thing my SCAD has taken away, it has given me a gift in return. I am more patient than I ever dreamed possible. I am more affectionate, understanding and much slower to judge. I take more time to enjoy the company of family and good friends. I treasure each moment with my baby girl and I thank God each day for my husband who saved my life and makes it worth living. I leave the dishes and the laundry on a regular basis and go sit on the swings at the park with my little family. While my heart may yet be weak, my spine is forged from steel. I have an inner core that is so much stronger than I ever knew and a faith in God that is unshakable. If He allowed my heart to break, and break almost it did, then surely He will be the one to mend it once more. I know beyond any doubt that I am still here for a reason and that each day is a miracle. My story is not done, in fact, it is really just beginning. And so is yours.

From one heart to another with love from Zannia xox

