

Film STUNTS are safe. Usually

Hollywood stuntwoman Olivia Jackson, 34, was a kick-ass go-to for stars like Charlize Theron. Then the unthinkable happened. As told to Julie McCaffrey

Everything about the lead-up to the stunt, I remember. The director calling: "Action!" Twisting the throttle of the motorbike and feeling its power as it shot straight towards the camera. Then my memories cut. The pictures in my head stop. And I'm grateful my mind is protecting me from the moment of impact. I have enough reminders of what happened. The scar that curves from my brow, around my eye to my left ear. My left arm, which hangs paralysed.

The simple stunt for *Resident Evil: The Final Chapter* had gone so wrong. It was the first day on set, so I was

excited about filming, but other than that it was a normal day at the office. As Milla Jovovich's stunt double, I had my long, blonde hair dyed dark and chopped to a blunt bob just like hers. Wearing a vest top, torn jacket and khaki jeans, I had to drive the bike in a straight line while an oncoming camera on the arm of a mechanical crane would lift up and sweep over me.

I did exactly that, but the camera did not. The mechanical arm failed to clear and collided with my upper body and head. The shot required me to wear no helmet.

My face was degloved (when skin is torn from the underlying structures) and the artery in my neck

severed. I was aware of nothing except a glimpse of the ambulance ceiling, then seeing my husband David when I woke from a coma two weeks later.

When my sister visited me in hospital, she saw my teeth where my cheeks used to be. Morphine numbed the pain of my shattered shoulder blade, severed crown, collapsed lung, brain bleed and broken clavicle, ribs and vertebrae. But it gave me such horrific hallucinations about motorbike crashes that it was a relief to wake up to reality.

David's face showed only compassion in the sterile white surroundings of intensive care. He hid his desperate worry, knowing I needed him to be strong. But I still cried when



From top
Olivia enjoying motocross in her free time eight months ago; learning to balance her body with a paralysed arm, with osteopath Stephen Makinde of Perfect Balance Clinic



From top
Olivia driving a 'War Rig' in the Namib Desert in November 2013, while doubling for Charlize Theron in *Mad Max: Fury Road*; filming a TV ad in Cape Town a year ago; practising a stunt on the set of *Mad Max: Fury Road*



I saw him. They were tears of gratitude because I knew, even while woozy with morphine, that he loved me.

He flew straight from a film set in Malta, where he was stunt-doubling for Michael Fassbender, to Johannesburg. Nurses said he was at the doors of intensive care every day at 7am, even though visiting hours were strictly from 11am. When he reluctantly left my bedside each night, I sobbed into the hospital pillow. All my life I was used to being pretty and strong and able to do whatever I wanted. I felt scared David would be embarrassed of me. Now the kickboxing model-turned-stuntwoman he married was ugly from scars.

Surgeons spent five hours operating on my face while I was still in a coma. A plate was made that mirrored my remaining cheekbone and a surgeon used tweezers to put all the tiny pieces of my eye socket back together like a puzzle.

I hadn't asked to see my face, so when I saw it for the first time four weeks later, I was stunned. I was learning to walk and as the physios helped me up, I caught my reflection in a mirror. There were no bandages, just hundreds of stitches and staples like Frankenstein's monster. Lacerations criss-crossed my face, my entire right cheek was scraped away, the left-hand side was very swollen and my whole face looked askew. I felt devastated. And scared I would never look normal again. I didn't say anything, just carried on concentrating on trying to take a step. I *had* to believe it would get better, and it did.

It was strange learning to walk again because it was as if my body had completely forgotten how to do it. It was difficult to keep upright and my neck was pushed

over to one side. David had to hold me up on my wobbly legs, and just shuffling to my hospital room door and back was painful and left me breathless. It felt so alien – I was used to martial arts and running half marathons. Training taught me to push through pain, so each day I tried to take two more steps.

The weight of my arm weighs me down. It won't get better. David said that even when I was still comatose with pipes down my throat, I pointed to my left arm as if to tell him it wasn't working. That really upset him.

My family knew my arm was paralysed too, but didn't have the heart to tell me. So I had no bombshell ▶

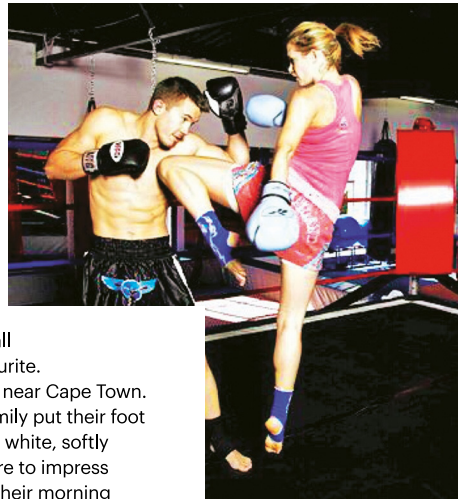
news, just a gradual realisation. Throughout all the specialists' tests, there hadn't been a single movement. My optimism ebbed away, so by the time doctors gently confirmed the paralysis, I'd already come to terms with it. I thought of the amazing Paralympians, and of Bethany Hamilton – the awesome surfer who had her arm bitten off by a shark but relearned to surf. They became my new role models.

Humour has always helped in every situation and David and I have had lots of lighter moments throughout my recovery. If I think too far into the future I get upset, so I try to just enjoy each day as much as I can. The left side of my forehead is paralysed, so my left eyebrow doesn't lift. It really cracks him up if I pretend to be surprised and suddenly pull only my right eyebrow up high. It's silly, but making him laugh makes me laugh too.

When we met on the set of *Guardians Of The Galaxy* four years ago, he says the attraction was instant, although I took a little longer. Our work often meant we were in different continents, but it is one of the reasons we gel. We understand the constant travel and strange pressures of the industry. We are used to seeing big stars wander around our workplace.

In December 2014, we drove off-road motorbikes from my native Cape Town, through the mountains and beaches all the way to Namibia. David had a drone and we rode up to a huge sand dune, then climbed to the top. He asked me to stand on a specific spot so he could test the drone as it filmed us overhead. Then

Right Olivia training in Thai boxing in a gym in Cape Town three years ago;
Bottom Shooting an advert for South African clothing brand Totalsports six years ago



he walked up to me and proposed. Of all the films he's worked on, that's my favourite.

We married in May 2015 on a beach near Cape Town. I wanted to wear dungarees, but my family put their foot down. So instead I wore flip-flops and a white, softly flowing slip dress I'd bought years before to impress David on a date. Fishermen cooked us their morning catch – it was rustic and a dream for us. We settled in a beautiful house in the small, pretty village of Lane End, Buckinghamshire. David is British and we love living here.

So when the accident happened last October, I was a happy newlywed enjoying my thrilling job. I'd spent 15 years as a martial arts fighter in Thailand, and also modelled, before joining the stunt industry. A fellow professional cast me as an actress in one of his films. I had to do my own stunts, so a really good teacher trained me for weeks. It took off from there.

That's the hardest thing to cope with now. I pushed myself hard on little films, earned my way on to bigger ones and then the best films. Then boom. It's all gone.

I look so different now. I'm used to being muscular and strong, but all my muscle has atrophied. Later this year my arm will be amputated. Doctors want to first ensure I'm physically and mentally prepared, but I already am. Stunt colleagues put me in touch with people who make bionic arms. Maybe I'll get one. Maybe I'll just rock a stump. Every day David tells me I am beautiful.

My injuries might sound depressing, but I am not depressed. And I'm not bitter or angry. Learning to sit up and walk again was so hard, my mind was wholly focused on regaining strength – I don't have the time or headspace to feel down. At first I missed my old face and now I'm amazed by my new one. The scars have healed so well and even the big one is fading.

Doctors told my family I might not have any use of the left-hand side of my face, and it would hang down. They also said I was possibly brain damaged and wouldn't recognise anyone or know what was going on. So I'm very grateful for ►

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what I do have and try not to yearn for what I *don't*. If I'd moved an inch to the left on that bike, I'd have died.

Usually, doing stunts on film is so safe. There are so many protocols in place and a lot of rehearsal time, so although moves might look dangerous, they're not supposed to be.

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We are all stronger than we know. If we believe in ourselves, we can do anything we want

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 The support from the stunt and film community has given me a huge lift. Milla Jovovich wrote a caring message and asked to visit, but I hope she understands I just wanted to be with family. Charlize Theron, who I worked closely with on *Mad Max: Fury Road*, sent beautiful flowers. People who had similar accidents emailed me and it's inspiring to see how they came through it. I felt the whole world was willing me to get better.

☯☯
 Now I need something fresh to focus on. I've always liked working towards mammoth challenges, like mastering new stunt skills, learning new sports or practising motocross jumps. These days, I celebrate goals such as feeding, showering or dressing myself. They're baby steps, but still progress.

Mentally, I feel strong. I'm Buddhist and that's eased my recovery. I've learned to take things as they are.

I don't stress too much about my face, because I understand that if something can't be changed, there's no use in worrying about it. If it can be changed, then there's no use worrying because it *will* change.

If I was asked a year ago how I'd react if I lost my arm, I'd have answered, "Wail, scream, cry". But we are all stronger than we know. If we believe in ourselves, we can do anything we want.

I can't lie – I have shed loads of tears. Some in pain, some in fear, but many more of happiness because I realise how much I love David and my family and how lucky I am to have them. I haven't yet chosen a new path, but whatever I decide to do next, I know it'll be brilliant. I'm positive I will find new goals to work towards. I always do. ●

Right Milla Jovovich in *Resident Evil: The Final Chapter*; Olivia and husband David doing acrobatics on Lion's Head, Cape Town, two years ago



The United49 campaign

...has been set up to support Olivia's recovery:

"This was one of the first things I saw when I switched on my phone, weeks after the accident. It was flooded with pictures and really helped pick me up. They used my motocross number, 49, and it's united because it brings together the acting and stunt community."



Chris Hemsworth
 Olivia worked with Chris on *Avengers: Age of Ultron*



Elizabeth Olsen
 Also on *Avengers: Age of Ultron*, Olivia was Elizabeth's stunt double.



Jackie Chan
 Jackie and Olivia are connected through his stunt coordinator, Greg Powell.



Jason Statham
 Olivia doubled for Jason's fiancée, Rosie Huntington-Whiteley, on *Mad Max: Fury Road*.



The Star Wars Rogue One stunt team
 One of the first international stunt teams to post their picture of support.

gofundme.com/UNITED49

Photographs: Alex du Toit Photography, Rex Features

