

Real life: My baby suffered third-degree burns

'I couldn't give up on my brave little warrior.'

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Andrea King, 46, from Mohaka, New Zealand, tells her real life story

My son giggled as the pig greedily slurped grains from his hand, grunting with delight.

"He must be really hungry," I chuckled to little Dukie, 22 months.

He and his five brothers and sisters loved feeding the animals we had on our remote property in Mohaka, NZ.

The kids were always outside, picking vegies or gathering kindling.

This afternoon, their dad Nathan was patching up some holes in the driveway, so he'd moved the car out to the paddock. The older kids were helping him and Dukie wanted to join in.

My chores finished, I went inside.

I'd been inside for a couple of minutes when, suddenly, there was a scream. It was one of the kids.

I bolted to the door and gasped as I spotted an orange glow off in the distance.

There was a ball of flame inside the car. One of the kids was on fire!

My legs felt like lead with each and every stride.

When I got there, Nathan was leaning over a small figure on the ground. Dukie!



Our last family photo before the accident.

Through his singed clothes, I could see his skin was red raw. His face was puffy and blistered.

'Someone call an ambulance,' I yelled, scooping Dukie up and racing him inside for a cold shower.

He was staring at me in shock, gasping for breath.

'It's okay, little man,' I said and started singing to him, hoping to calm him down.

My own heart was thumping in my chest as I inspected his little body. Barely a single patch of skin had even been spared.

Eventually, the paramedics rushed in and I could tell from the look in their eyes that the situation was bad.

Firefighters were busy putting out the blaze as a rescue chopper touched down to race Dukie to Hawke's Bay Hospital.

We clambered in with him and I noticed Nathan was in a bad way, too.

He was shivering violently and hyperventilating, his hands were badly burnt from pulling Dukie from the burning car.

As the helicopter took off, it was the first time I had a moment to consider what had happened.

Nathan must have left the car unlocked when he'd moved it off the driveway.

Somehow, Dukie had climbed into the backseat and got his hands on some matches...The whole thing was a terrible accident.



My little Dukie in the hospital.

'You need to prepare yourselves,' the doctor said when we arrived.

'He may not make it.'

I swallowed a lump as he explained Dukie had third-degree burns covering 75 per cent of his body.

They were flying him to a special burns unit in Auckland to clean his wounds and dress them in special bandages.

Nathan broke down, but I tried to keep a clear head for both of us.

'We'll get through this,' I said.

When I saw Dukie later that night, he was in an induced coma and covered head to toe in bandages.

Seeing his tiny body on the bed, I finally let myself go.

Sobs shook my body for hours until, finally, I took a deep breath.

'I have to be strong for Dukie,' I decided, promising myself to never shed another tear.



The first time I could hold him.

Days passed and he was still in a critical condition.

There were countless moments we were sure he wouldn't make it, as various infections set in.

Doctors warned his little heart could give up at any moment. Nathan was sure that he wouldn't pull through.

'He's not dead yet,' I reminded him. 'Snap out of it.'

I talked to Dukie every moment, telling him what his brothers and sisters were up to, whether the pigs had babies or who'd chopped the wood that day.

Over the following days, I had a few moments of weakness myself.

'If it's too hard, you can let go, my darling,' I told Dukie. 'Mummy's here with you.'

Incredibly, my little warrior fought on.

Eight weeks after the accident, he was brought out of his coma and had his breathing tube removed.

He couldn't speak, but when he reached out to me, it was magical.

'Mummy's so proud of you,' I told him.

It felt like we were out of the woods.

Still, his entire body and face was covered in bandages.

I sang him his favourite songs and his brothers and sisters told him jokes.

When he let out a little giggle, I knew our cheeky boy was under there and he would fight to make it through.



Dukie's fifth birthday party.

He'd already made it so far, but we had a long road ahead.

Dukie started physio and speech therapy and underwent 30 operations to harvest skin, open up his mouth and release his neck, which had become stuck to his chest.

Thankfully, his mental capacity, eyesight and development hadn't been affected.

After six months in hospital, we were finally allowed to take Dukie home.

'He's a miracle,' the doctor said, explaining that he'd still need skin grafts until he turned 18, as his skin had lost the ability to stretch as he grew.

Thankfully, Dukie couldn't remember the awful accident, so he didn't suffer flashbacks or nightmares.

Still, we spoke to him openly and aside from lathering up his skin with cream to loosen his skin every few hours, we didn't treat him differently.

Life soon went back to normal. Dukie played outside and went fishing with his brothers and sisters. Nathan and I even added to our brood, having beautiful twins, Audine and Ema. Dukie adored them.

Sometimes he felt sad that he looked different to everyone else.

His kindergarten teacher told me once that he'd drawn his picture and said he didn't like it.

'I look like a monster,' he'd told her.

It broke my heart, so we started taking him to burn survivor's camp so he could meet other kids like him.



Me and Dukie.

When he was ready to start big school, we were quite worried that the other kids might be frightened of Dukie's appearance.

So beforehand, we showed them pictures of him as a baby and explained everything he'd been through. Thankfully, they accepted him and he made lots of friends.

But in public, some people stared, which made him feel anxious.

We got him some T-shirts to wear that read: *I'm a burns survivor, what's your excuse?*

They suit Dukie's cheeky personality perfectly!

Now, he's nine years old and just like any other little boy his age. He still loves the outdoors, jumping in the river with his siblings, riding the motorbike and skateboarding.

As a family, we just carry on and don't dwell on the past.

Nathan and I do worry about what the future holds for Dukie and the challenges he might face.

But given he's already cheated death, we know that whatever life throws at our brave little warrior, he'll handle it.