



IT HAPPENS IN A SPLIT SECOND – BUT FOR THE SURVIVORS, THE DAMAGE LASTS A LIFETIME

AFTER SHOCK

By Ricky French



Mary Mourgelas stands under a modest shelter in a quiet suburban park beside a picnic table daubed with lousy graffiti. Her words float heavy and settle like snow, filling the autumn air with sadness. For 19 years he gave her everything. On this spot he gave her his last smile. “The Kane and Mary story is not a love story,” she whispers. “But it’s a story of love.”

January 31, 2015. Queensland schools are unusually busy for a Saturday. It’s election day. Anastacia Palaszczuk is about to become the state’s first woman to lead an opposition party into government. Winds of change are also sweeping in from the west. At 3.10pm, the Bureau of Meteorology issues a warning for the Gold Coast. Severe storms are detected near the inland regions of Laravale and Canungra, tracking towards the coast. Worongary, the Gold Coast hinterland suburb where Mary lives, lies right in the path, but outside her window there’s no sign of anything out of the ordinary, just a typical humid, grey afternoon.

At 3.30pm she wakes her husband, Kane Bennett, who’s napping on the couch. They bundle 21-month-old Max and his 12-week-old baby sister Bella into the pram – Bella in the main seat and Max in a smaller chair behind – and set off for the short walk to the school to vote. Whipper snippers whine and families stroll in the sticky heat. As they cross the park on their way to the school, a few drops of rain start to fall. Kane pushes the pram a bit faster.

They get to the school and vote. Mary wants to get home quickly before it really starts to rain, but they’re too late. It’s pelting down before they even reach the park – a sudden summer downpour, but this one has real sting. The wind changes direction and the temperature plummets. They dash instinctively into the little shelter they’ve passed a hundred times in the park and huddle under the corrugated tin roof. The rain doesn’t show any sign of easing. Kane offers to run home

and get the car, but Mary isn’t sure. “I say to him, ‘Yes, no, yes... I don’t know!’ and he says, ‘See, Mary, this is why we argue, because you can never make up your mind!’ But he says it with a smile – such a beautiful smile. Then he turns away.”

First smile. A Townsville pub, 1996, back when exchanging phone numbers meant leaning over to ask the barman for a pen. She was 18 and doing university exams, he was 20 and a soldier in the army. By the time Kane had his 21st birthday they were together and a life of adventure began. A young couple’s life summarised in four words: *Gosh, we had fun*. In 2000, Kane served in East Timor. “He would go away a lot,” says Mary, “but he would always come back.” In 2002, he discharged from the army and went to the United States to work at a summer camp for homeless kids. He realised his calling. “We were more than in love,” says Mary. “We were best friends.” They married in 2006. In 2012, Mary fell pregnant with Max; Kane was a youth worker, working with at-risk teens. In 2014, he took a job with Brisbane-based training provider Charlton Brown; in November that year, Bella was born. After 19 years together, a bright new summer had just begun.

BANG! I wake up and I am falling. My right hand hits the picnic table and I manage to stop myself. I open my eyes. It’s hot; I see a yellow haze. My ears are ringing and I smell sulphur. In one sweeping moment I take in the scene before me.

The lightning bolt strikes the shelter just before 4pm. Mary can picture the scene clearly. “Bella is in front of me in the pram, screaming. Max is still in his chair, his head back, mouth open, eyes rolled

High voltage: lightning over the Gold Coast

back and his face blue. Then I see Kane, face-down on the grass, lying on his left arm, with his right arm beside him, palm up. All this happens in an instant." With her family laid out before her, Mary faces the decision of her life: who to go to first?

For the Aztecs of Mexico, lightning was a god in the guise of a dog, and when it split the ground apart it opened the way to the underworld. For Native Americans it was a "thunderbird". For the ancient Finns it was a snake. Australia's indigenous Mowanjium people in the Kimberley believed lightning originated from a Wandjina sky spirit. In the Judeo-Christian religion it's a symbol of God's immediate presence, or the last judgment, but it took the invention of the lightning rod, not the ringing of church bells, to stem the once common sight of churches being blown apart from the heavens. But if God's ways are mysterious, the scientific explanation for lightning is only slightly less so.

Harald Richter, a meteorologist at the Bureau of Meteorology, gives a tour of a storm cloud. It's seriously crowded inside a rapidly growing cumulonimbus cloud. Millions of ice crystals, super-cooled water droplets (liquid water that refuses to freeze even at temperatures up to minus 40°C) and tiny, mushy snowballs called graupel are going berserk, engaging in a sort of freezing feeding frenzy, whizzing around chaotically, colliding, sticking together and pulling apart, biting chunks out of each other. The cloud grows so dense that light can't penetrate it. With every collision something vital happens: an electrical charge is exchanged. The heavier, negatively charged graupel make their way towards the bottom of the cloud, and the lighter, positively charged ice crystals wander up. This swarm of electrons at the bottom of the cloud repel the electrons on the ground, leaving the ground positively charged. Cloud negative, ground positive. Nature just wants equilibrium.

"The air between the ground and the cloud insulates the charge difference," says Richter. "But only up to a certain point. When the voltages start to approach hundreds of thousands of volts, it becomes too much for the air to separate." A small channel of ionised gas, known as a leader, starts to work its way down from the cloud in stepped increments. The ground may at this point send up a positive streamer and if the two meet, a huge electrical discharge occurs. The heated air explodes and causes a shock wave we know as thunder. The whole process takes a few milliseconds.

It's estimated that five to 10 people are killed by lightning in Australia every year and another 100 are injured. A single strike discharges an average

30,000 amps and heats the air around it to 30,000°C, five times hotter than the surface of the sun. Around the world lightning strikes 100 times a second, eight million times a day. Richter has seen storms in Australia that produce 30,000 strikes an hour. He's seen storm clouds exhaust their charge difference with one strike; he's seen supercells flicker like a nervous light bulb, recharging almost instantly, a thunderstorm on steroids.

Richter says storms are among the hardest weather events to forecast, but we're getting better at it. "It's a bit like hurling a bowling ball down an alley. Some alleys are smooth and flat and the ball

travels where you'd expect it to. But sometimes it might start to drift right and disappear into the gutter very quickly." As for the effect of climate change on the frequency and severity of thunderstorms, he says he's seen no discernible trends. But he adds: "A warmer world means warmer air, which can accommodate more water vapour – the ultimate fuel for thunderstorms. I'd put a modest amount of money on [lightning] strikes going up."

Kevin Pearson and Gail Hannah are used to people knocking on their door. The lightning strike they somehow survived back in 1998 made them media darlings. These days their story is largely forgotten. I've come because I heard they've kept a suitcase of memorabilia from the occasion, and I wondered what on Earth could be in it.

The couple run a book publishing company, Black Pepper Publishing, from the house. The walls are cracked and the rooms close in with decades' worth of boxes, books, folders, yellowing paper, collections of writers' prose, poems, novels, half-finished scripts. We sit at the table and Hannah lights a cigarette. Can she tell me what happened that day on the beach? She pauses and coolly blows smoke across the table. "No," she says. "We never made it to the beach."

A friend had lent them her house in Jan Juc, at the start of the Great Ocean Road, where they were guaranteed peace and quiet for their annual reading of the submissions – 100 manuscripts to get through. When the time came to leave, the couple realised they hadn't walked to the famous beach yet, which lay three flights of stairs below the road. A few fat raindrops started to fall and grey clouds began stirring over the sea. Every journey starts with a single step. "We got to the first landing," says Hannah.

It was the first lightning bolt of the storm. "I saw it right in front of me," says Kevin. "It was light blue on the outside and dark blue in the centre. It hit me in the belt buckle, travelled down my foot, through my shoe, hit the wooden landing, bounced up and hit Hannah in the necklace." Kevin was knocked over and rolled down a flight of steps, grabbing a wooden upright to arrest his fall. He had taken a direct hit but was alive and already searching for his beloved. "I looked up and saw Hannah lying on her back. I called her name but got no response. I thought she was dead."

The couple were airlifted to hospital in Melbourne. Both suffered burns. Hannah's necklace had left a purple pattern across her neck where the links of the gold chain had been. The burns specialist christened it "the necklace of death".



Miracle: Kevin Pearson, Gail Hannah; her jacket



After an initial recovery, Hannah suddenly took a turn for the worse. "I started having this numbness in my fingertips and toes. Each day it would creep up higher. Soon, I couldn't hold a cup." She was diagnosed with myelin sheath damage to her upper spine and told that she wouldn't recover her feeling. "It was devastating news. I plunged into this blackness, but then came out of it and thought, 'No! I'm not accepting this. I'll find a way.'" The way, she says, was a Chinese chi healer.

Five weeks later, the feeling returned. "The whole thing was such a transformative experience. I went through a prelude of what it would be like to lose your faculties. I cried every day." The memory of her dwindling control, the power from the sky bringing such powerlessness in her own body, the thought of how Kevin nursed her...

She lights another smoke. "My parents couldn't stand Kevin. He's a poet, he's a bludger, he's got no money, all that stuff. It took until the lightning, when they saw how he looked after me, that they started to accept him." The words drift across the table with the smoke and dissolve into silence.

Kevin speaks first. "Shall we look in the suitcase, then?" The battered old object is plonked on the table. Stacks of old newspaper clippings, yellow with age, are pulled out. Like in an old-fashioned detective story, the lightning bolt had stopped Kevin's watch. He cradles it in his palm – a lifeless trinket holding his memory to a split second in time. It stopped at two minutes past two on February 2. He pulls out the remains of a sock. The black leather shoes still shine proudly, but they don't match. The right shoe is in perfect condition, but the top of the left shoe is blown apart, its buckle torn, a huge chunk of leather missing. Finally, Hannah lifts out what's left of her old suit jacket and models it against her body. It looks like it has been mauled by a pit bull. It's nothing more than a prop in a slasher film. How anyone wearing that jacket could survive what the lightning did to it requires a giant leap of suspended disbelief.

Mary Mourgelas looks around and knows what she has to do. "I figure Kane has just been knocked off his feet like I was. I had the table to stop me falling and he didn't. I know Bella is OK because she's screaming. Max needs me." A man in a red shirt rushes over to help. Mary hands him a phone. "Call an ambulance and go to my husband!" She reaches down to undo Max's lap-strap but her hands are shaking so much it takes three attempts. Two teenage girls who were sheltering nearby run over. "Girls! Stay with my baby, make sure she's OK," she tells them, pointing at Bella.

"I pick Max up and shake him, calling out, 'Max! Max! Max!' and slapping him on the back. I realise I'm going to have to resuscitate him." She lies his tiny body down on the table and places her mouth over his mouth and nose. "I give him two quick breaths then place one hand on his chest and give compressions. I try to count but I can't."

Between breaths she looks over to Kane, expecting to see him sitting up, looking dazed, but he's still motionless. She needs him to help. *Why aren't you getting up?* His shirt has ridden up and she sees a burn mark on his stomach above the waistband of his shorts. She turns back to Max.



Tragic: Kane, Mary and Bella; the strike scene



He's still not breathing. The girls are trying their best but are flustered as they talk on the phone to the 000 operator. They don't know where they are. Mary yells, "We are at the park opposite Worongary State School. *Worongary State School!*"

Mary keeps breathing for Max. Finally, mercifully, he starts to cry. She picks him off the table and cradles his tiny body in her arms. The relief is incredible, but there's more work to be done. Kane still hasn't moved. She passes Max to a bystander and rushes to his side. "I tilt his head back, open his jaw and breath two quick breaths. I start chest compressions, but again I can't count. Bella is still screaming in her pram. I breathe again and hit my lip on his tooth. I can taste blood."

Kane vomits. Mary takes it as a good sign. With the help of another man they roll him over, clear his mouth and roll him back. Mary continues compressions but she's getting exhausted. A woman arrives and takes over while Mary breathes into Kane's mouth. Nine minutes after the 000 call is made, an ambulance arrives. But it turns away from the park and heads off towards the school. Two men rush off to chase it down and wave it back. As the paramedics approach, Mary yells: "*Hurry, he's not breathing! He's not breathing!*"

Mary watches as they place the defibrillator pads on Kane's chest. "The shock hits him, his body jerks. A stream of paper comes out of the machine but it's only a flat, black line." She crouches down again to her husband and talks to him. "Come on, Kane, don't go! We need you. Don't leave us. Kane! They're just babies..."

Just as the ambulances pull up, Max again loses consciousness in the arms of the bystander. The man rushes him to an ambulance where he's revived for a second time. Mary and Bella join Max and the ambulance leaves for hospital. On the way, Bella goes blue. The paramedics work on her, cutting her onesie off, giving her oxygen, until she stabilises and Mary takes her baby back into her arms.

They reach the hospital. The back doors open and there are people everywhere. The ambulance carrying Kane arrives a short time later and doctors continue working on him. At 6pm, Mary is told she can see her husband. Walking along the hospital corridor, she looks out the window. The clouds have cleared. Everywhere is sunshine and blue sky. "I walk into the room and it's noisy. People are crying. Kane is on a bed with a machine on his chest and a doctor squeezing an oxygen bag. I plead with him, 'Wake up. Wake up!'"

"A doctor introduced herself. She was crying. They had worked on Kane for 40 minutes at the

park and another hour at the hospital. She said, 'We've tried. We've done all we can. You need to tell us when to stop.'

Mary is left in the room with Kane. "I went and spoke to him. I kissed his forehead and I kissed his eyes. The doctor eventually said, 'It's time to go.'"

In an incident eerily similar to the one that killed Kane Bennett, a 39-year-old woman and her 42-year-old husband were standing under a rotunda in a Geelong park in January 1997 when lightning hit the roof. The woman was killed instantly and her husband died later in hospital. It raises questions about whether earthing wire going from the roof to the ground could have saved their lives, and that of Kane Bennett.

Franco D'Alessandro is chief technology officer for Lightning Protection International, a company that supplies lightning protection and consulting. He's also a member of the committee that develops lightning standards for structures in Australia. The standards are not mandatory. "The problem is where to draw the line," he says. "You might say the rotunda at the park needs to be protected, but what about the changing room next to it? Or the pergola you tack on to your house? Would we have to protect every structure that goes up? It sounds harsh, but you're dealing with probability. The chance of a certain structure being hit by lightning and people being killed is so small. But of course that comes as no comfort to the families of someone who does get hit."

D'Alessandro adds that even if a rotunda had two earthing copper wires running down from the roof and buried half a metre in the ground – as the standards require – it wouldn't guarantee safety. The mechanism of the strike plays a big part in patient outcome. Kane Bennett likely experienced what is called side-flash, when the lightning jumped from the roof to his body. A direct strike is considered most lethal, yet Kevin Pearson survived. In the same way that you can't predict what lightning will do to a human body, you can't predict where it will strike.

Contrary to popular myth, lightning doesn't fry or vaporise people. Most burns are superficial. Lightning kills by disrupting the involuntary electrical pulses that regulate our heart beat. Astin Lee, director of cardiology at Wollongong Hospital, says: "The heart has its own pacemaker cells that coordinate the beating of the heart; these cells have charges measured in the millivolts. Lightning – which carries charges of millions of volts – travelling through the heart can have deleterious effects by disrupting the natural

pacemaker cells' function and creating a chaotic heart rhythm that is incompatible with life – for example, ventricular fibrillation. This results in cardiac arrest." Dr Lee stresses that CPR from bystanders is still the most important factor influencing recovery.

For lightning strike survivors, the long-term damage – especially to the central nervous system – can be debilitating. As with the strike itself, the severity of the damage is painfully unpredictable.

Mary is adamant that Kane saved their lives by bearing the brunt of the strike, just as the doctors are adamant Mary saved Max's when she placed him on that table and put her mouth over his. After Kane died, messages flooded in from around the world. Lives he had touched. One woman remembered Kane as her instructor when she was 14. She wrote to Mary, "I was bullied and very depressed. He taught me to believe in myself. If it wasn't for Kane I'm not sure I'd still be around."

Missing Kane is not just dealing with death; it's coping with life. Missing Kane is bundling two



Saviour: Kane and Mary; Bella and Max



kids into the car to drive to the shops when you suddenly realise you're out of milk, because Kane can't just nip down. It's getting them both out of their car seats and into the service station to pay for fuel, because you can't just leave them there. Missing Kane is lugging the bins up the steep driveway every week. It's cooking for three every night. It's knowing there is still a mortgage to pay, bills, groceries, two children to educate, without the major breadwinner. It is knowing he's never coming back, and nothing will ever change that.

"I got 19 years with Kane," Mary says. "But I live this every day with two very small children who need to know who their daddy was, who need to know his stories. He's not just missing from a Sunday afternoon phone call, or from the pool every Saturday. He's missing from every moment of every day. It's not just the difficulty of changing nappies or dealing with tantrums. The most difficult part is having no one to share the love with."

Mary knows there's no way she could send the kids to the local school, no way she could send the kids twice a day to walk past the shelter with the mysterious, otherworldly burn marks in the tin roof and the gouged-out concrete. Just like she'll never be able to bring the kids into her bed on a stormy night, wrap them tight and mean it when she says, *There's nothing to be afraid of.*

Max and Bella will never remember seeing their dad's face. So every night before bedtime Mary takes out the photo albums. "He's still their dad, he will always be their dad. Bella looks at pictures and points and says, 'Daddy'. It's beautiful. But it's heartbreaking."

Grief stalks the house like a curse that won't lift. No home with two small children in it has ever felt this empty. "I'm carrying this for four people. I'm grieving for my husband and what he misses out on. I'm grieving for the kids and what they miss out on. And I'm grieving me for me, for the life we had planned together. Everything Kane did – everything – he did for me and our babies. He was our world. And we were his."

Grandad brings Max down to the park to play on the swings. Max has just turned three. He likes the park. It's pretty. It's ringed by tall gum trees where lorikeets cackle. There are tall goal posts pointing bony fingers to the sky, a large rotunda and high-roofed children's play area. And in the corner there's a little structure with a green roof and a silver table. It looks like a good spot for a picnic. It looks like the perfect shelter. ●

A family trust has been set up for Mary Mourgelas and her children: Bennettfamilytrust.com