

I Lost All Feeling Below My Chest— and Discovered My Heart

After photographer Marcy Maloy became disabled in a freak accident, she looked to her baby grandson for inspiration



Maloy and grandson Dylan travel at the same speed.

IN SEPTEMBER OF 2020, I went for a run in Golden Gate Park a few blocks from my house, same as I always did. Late to meet my husband, I took a shortcut, tried to jump over a wall and missed. The minute I hit the ground, I knew it was bad. I couldn't feel my body below my neck.

The doctor who first examined me didn't deliver the news to me himself. I overheard him telling my husband, "She'll never walk again." It was my

C3 vertebra. One inch higher and I'd have been on a breathing machine. As it was, I became a quadriplegic. After all the risky things I'd done in my life, something so simple changed everything at age 71. Jumping over that wall was the last time that I did anything fast.

I grew up as the daughter of a high-ranking Air Force general. We lived in Morocco, Paris, Korea and, eventually, Washington, D.C. Maybe that explains why I could never

stay in one place very long. I was a cheerleader, a hula-hooper, always moving. And there were trips and adventures. I got a job as a stewardess for American, and when I tired of that, I worked as an au pair in Paris. I always had my suitcase packed.

Somewhere along the line, I moved to Berkeley with a boyfriend. He lent me a camera and I started taking pictures. I was fast and took many, many pictures. The first time I picked up a contact sheet at the store, the woman

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said I had a good eye. So I signed up for photography school.

By the time I was 40, I was married with two little girls under 5, trying to make it as a freelance photographer. One day I walked into the studio of a designer in San Francisco and walked out with an assignment to do a full-page ad for *Vogue*. Plenty of jobs followed, as did a divorce that had me running faster than ever to keep a roof over our heads.

Of all the work I took on, my favorite jobs were the ones with babies. I got a reputation for being a photographer who could make even crying babies smile. I shot ads for Downy fabric softener. And if you were buying Pampers anytime from around the mid-'90s to the early 2000s, odds are the picture on the box was taken by me.

I think I relate to babies because they're all about instincts. Always moving, checking out their bodies, checking out the world. When I'd do a shoot with a baby, I'd get down on the floor with him and look into his eyes. In all the years of shooting catalogs and ads, I can't remember a single baby I couldn't connect with. Things with men would get complicated. With babies, it was easy.

I was 60 when I met Ron, through a Match.com ad, but I wasn't all that interested in dating him. I'd been on my own for over 20 years. No man was going to swoop in and take care of me. And anyway, he was too much of a straight arrow. I favored bad boys. But Ron was persistent. I told him if he shaved off his mustache, I'd go to bed with him. He said, "Where's the razor?"

We had great adventures together. Every spring we'd do a home exchange in Paris. We raced go-karts. The year after we met, we were chosen to be on the CBS



Maloy, Dylan and her husband, Ron Shalita, at home

reality show *The Amazing Race*. We did well on the first two legs, in the U.S. and Japan, before being eliminated from the game in Vietnam. But we had fun.

Ron and I were a great team. We finally tied the knot—after 12 years—in San Francisco, with my two daughters and his one attending. That was August of 2020. Three weeks later: the accident. The experts said I probably wouldn't regain the use of my hands. I wanted to prove them all wrong.

I went to rehab for six weeks, and shortly after I got home, my daughter Alexandra and her husband moved in with Ron and me. Their son, my first grandchild, was born two months later. On Dylan's first day home from the hospital, Alexandra put him on my lap and wrapped my arms around him. I couldn't feel his body, but I could look into his eyes and smell the top of his head. Every time he looked at me, his face lit up. All I had to do was hold him.

The doctors told me that most of whatever progress I'd make was

likely to take place in the first year, so I never let up on physical therapy, working to regain what function I could. My father had always said, "We all fall down in life, but what

matters is the steps we take to get back up," and I took that to heart. By the following spring, I could stand up with help. By summer I was using a walker to get around.

I still can't hold the body of a Nikon camera or change lenses, but I take iPhone pictures of my grandson. Ron lifts me out of my chair and sets me on the floor, at Dylan's level.

For a while, anyway, Dylan and I have a lot in common. Neither one of us can walk by ourselves. We both like it when someone helps us onto a swing in the park and pushes us. We both wear diapers.

I was never good at doing nothing—at just taking in the world around me. Now I move more slowly and I notice every small thing. In the old days I focused on my outer life. Now I look inside and find a peace and acceptance of who I am. I am not racing, and quietness serves me well.

And I spend time with my grandson. I wonder whether we would have been this close if I hadn't been injured. I wonder whether I would have paid as much attention to him as I do.

Now I have my eye on a brand of camera that's light enough that I could hold it on my own and operate the shutter. After 14 months of grueling therapy, I can make my way across the floor with a cane. Dylan often pushes his miniature walker alongside me.

When I watch him push his walker, I see my own determination reflected in his eyes. He takes a few steps, falls, then gets right back up.

He will be taking steps soon without his walker. When he does, I intend to hold his hand. And we will walk together. ■

Marcy Maloy, 73, is a photographer and writer in San Francisco.

1/3
VERTICAL
AD



Maloy and then-boyfriend Shalita on CBS' *The Amazing Race* in 2009

Monty Britton/CBS

1/2 HORIZONTAL AD