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Medical miracle: Two-year coma survivor defies odds

Randy and Alan Hall were opposites until Randy's condition saved both their lives.

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LAGUNA NIGUEL Simply put, Randy Hall was a sinner and his older brother Alan was a saint.

Their mother, in fact, used to joke that if Randy were a little more like Alan, and Alan were a little more like Randy, they'd both be better.

But no such luck. As a teenager, Randy robbed neighbors' homes, grew pot in the attic and dropped out of high school. Later he schmoozed his way into business where he became rich and arrogant, snorting coke and treating women like so many playthings.

Alan, on the other hand, believed in service to others. By age 8, he was cooking the family dinner each night. He became an honor student who counseled his parents through tough times, married and became a search-and-rescue volunteer.

The brothers loathed each other.

And then one night their lives changed forever. Something would cause their mother's wish to come true – making Randy more like Alan and Alan more like Randy.

But oh, it started horribly. And bloody. In a fit of blind rage.

THE COMA

It remains a mystery who bashed in Randy Hall's skull the night of April 19, 2000 – possibly the jealous husband of his latest conquest or a jilted lover. No one was arrested and the Orange County Sheriff's Dept. has closed the case. What's not a mystery is who saved Randy's life as he lay in a coma for two years.

It was Alan – smart, articulate, stubborn Alan. With a background as a fraud investigator and an HMO director, he knew how to battle the system.



BROTHERS: Laguna Niguel resident Randy Hall, left, survived being in a two-year coma, and defied doctors' predictions that he'd never walk or talk again. He even drives his car. The experience has dramatically changed both him and his brother Alan, right, who took care of Randy. Randy has become less self-absorbed, and Alan has learned to let go and enjoy life.

Alan researched comas thoroughly. He doted over Randy endlessly. And he bullied doctors, nurses and anyone who got in his way.

"I'm a fighter," he says. "I fight for what's right."

Alan saved Randy's life four times in the first few months, shouting down a brain surgeon who insisted on moving him to another – cheaper – facility. As Alan delayed and fought the move, Randy suffered four seizures, each of which would've killed him elsewhere.

After six months, Randy stabilized and Alan agreed to move him. He found a respected coma facility, with sweeping ocean views and dozens of patients. One had survived 13 years. Finally, Alan thought, his brother would recover. Or would he?

Didn't your last doctor tell you? the new doctor asked.

"Tell us what?"

He only has 30 percent of his brain function left. He's never going to come out of the coma.

THE AWAKENING

It started with a muscle twitch here. An imperceptible tic there. Alan Hall, who'd been nicknamed "Mr. Encyclopedia" by 4th grade, had a very non-scientific feeling – contrary to the facts – that his brother could hear him.

"I just knew somehow," he says.

By now, Alan had subscribed to a medical journal called "The Brain." He'd read up on German sleep studies and sensory-deprivation chambers and skull-cap replacements. He'd hired a practitioner of the "Feldenkrais Method" of muscle training to keep Randy's body, and brain, active.

He'd even quit his job to care for his brother and – at the family's urging and against his will – had taken over Randy's three clothing stores. It was starting to pay off.

"I'd talk to him and I'd see a reaction in his face that no one else could," Alan says.

He'd bring Randy's favorite music – the Gypsy Kings. And favorite smells: Cuban cigars. And favorite people, though most couldn't take seeing an unresponsive Randy tethered to feeding and breathing machines, a softball-sized piece of his skull missing.

Eighteen months into the coma, Randy got pneumonia and was not expected to survive. As he lay in isolation for six weeks, Alan convinced a brain surgeon to replace the skullcap, typically left off but occasionally replaced.

In January, 2002, the surgery was performed and within months Randy began to emerge. All of Alan's efforts had paid off, but the recovery would take its toll on the good son and brother.

It's not like on TV. Coma patients don't suddenly awaken, alert and active. They emerge slowly, as if pulled from taffy. The real work, for both brothers, was just beginning.

It took Randy months of painful therapy and repetition to even sit up or say a few words.

At first, he didn't believe he'd been in a coma. Then he went through a typical brain-injured stage, known as "frontal lobe disinhibition," cursing everything and everyone.

"I was psychotic," he says. "I thought everyone hated me. I was cussing at them, even my mother."

Randy was improving, but inside he was feeling worse about his prospects.

"They told me I'd never walk again," he says. "I was injured, depressed, I wanted to kill myself."

Alan was also hitting bottom, but for entirely different reasons. His marriage had ended in divorce. His parents were getting divorced (and each sought his help). Randy's businesses required his time and Randy's recovery required his attention.

Meanwhile, family and friends continually scrutinized and criticized his every move.

"I was working my butt off and getting bitter," he says. "I couldn't do it. I physically could not do anymore. I had suicidal thoughts, big time. I wanted to kill myself."

He sought a therapist's help. And she helped him hear a voice that had been trying to speak to him.

THE AFTERMATH

Randy Hall believes that someday he'll find his attacker.

"When I meet that person," he says, "I'm going to say, 'Thank-you. You saved my life.' "

That's what love can do – and Randy now feels love for everyone.

"I entered a coma that almost killed me," he says. "But in reality, it saved my life – because I lived a false life. I finally realize that, and I'm so glad I did."

Along the way, doctors said he'd never wake from his coma. He did. They said he'd never talk again. He does. They said he'd never walk again. He is.

He's even driving his car again.

Such remarkable recovery, following a two-year coma, is practically unheard of.

"This is rare," says Dr. Mihai Dimancescu, of Long Island, NY, who's worked with more than 2,000 coma patients. "In 30 years, even I haven't seen it that often."

Dimancescu's advice for treating coma victims? It is practically verbatim the program that Alan Hall demanded and fought for and nearly killed himself carrying out.

On hearing this, Dimancescu says, "That's how I got involved in this 30 years ago, by hearing about people like this man's brother."

Alan Hall never has, and still does not, subscribe to a particular faith. In many ways, he is still "Mr. Encyclopedia," a believer in science, grounded in fact. But the coma changed him too.

"All I know is what happened to me opened me up to this feeling," he says. "There is a higher intelligence. A guiding hand. Call it fate, but there is meaning behind life."

He'll never forget the clear voice that told him his brother would recover when no hard evidence was there. Some might call it the voice of God. Others the voice of love. Whatever it is, he's learned to trust it. And to enjoy life more in the process.

The brothers still argue when they meet at "Randy," the Laguna Beach clothing store that Alan now runs as his brother recuperates. They argue and interrupt and reminisce.

As they do, it's clear that one is less self-centered and greedy than before; the other less rigid and judgmental. After all this time and trouble, the brothers have become a little more like each other – just as their mother always wanted.