



# “The fight of my life”

She's conquered the fashion world, curves and all. But this year, model and new mum Robyn Lawley faced her greatest battle – a harrowing health crisis that's robbed her of her dream of having more children. By Elaine Lipworth

PHOTOGRAPHED BY DAVID GUBERT. HAIR BY BRAD MULLINS FOR O&M. MAKE-UP BY VICTORIA BARON USING MECCA COSMETICA



Robyn wears dress, \$2218, by Hervé Léger at Net-a-porter.com; earrings, bracelet and necklace all by Cartier. Opposite page: dress, \$1166, by Balmain at Stylebop.com; earrings and necklace both by Cartier.



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ompletely captivated, Australian model Robyn Lawley is beaming at her 10-month-old daughter Ripley. The baby, all cheeks and wearing just a nappy and singlet, clutches a thick strand of her mother's glossy hair and tugs hard, her face breaking into a huge smile that flashes her first tooth. "You monkey," says Lawley, hugging her little girl. With Ripley's father, Everest Schmidt, a basketball player turned lawyer, plus the family's Boston terrier, Riley, along for the ride, Lawley is tucking into a pizza and tomato salad at Gjosta, a hip cafe in Venice, LA.

"I feel great, I've got my baby and I love looking after her," says Lawley, 26. "Today, I woke up and my partner was cuddling the baby, they were both sleeping, and it was so beautiful to see that."

Laughing and chatting, the model's happiness is palpable and, looking from the outside in, her life appears picture-perfect. There's her career fairytale: at 18, she left behind mother Janne, a food technologist, fireman dad Chris and two sisters in Sydney's western suburbs to model, and made it big internationally, fronting campaigns for Ralph Lauren and Chantelle lingerie. This year, Lawley - 1.88m of size 16 car-crash-inducing curves - was the world's first model above sample size to be cast in *Sports Illustrated's* prestigious swimsuit issue. She has designed her own swimwear line and has a cookbook and blog, *Robyn Lawley Eats*. And her personal life is blissful. But over lunch, the star reveals for the first time that she's recovering from a serious health crisis, which pushed her to the brink of despair and stole her dreams of more children. "To be able to play with my daughter this morning and not be in pain," she says, "was amazing."



PHOTOGRAPHED BY DAVID GILBERT. HAIR BY BRAD MULLINS FOR CLOUTIER. MAKE-UP BY VICTORIA PERON USING MECCA COSMETICA



Until now, Lawley, looking casually glam dressed in PACT leggings and a tank top, stripped bare of make-up or jewellery, hasn't felt ready to speak about the illness which nearly derailed her life and career at a time when she should have been on top of the world. She's kept smiling, kept working and kept going, but now wants to tell of her "bleak and terrifying" year, a story that starts when she was still in the confusing, wonderful fuzz of first-time motherhood.

A few weeks after giving birth to Ripley on February 26, things started a downward spiral. "I had vision loss, ocular spots, difficulty operating my hands. I felt terrible and I thought I had cancer or MS [multiple sclerosis]," says Lawley. "Everything hurt. It hurt to move. It hurt to walk ... I'd rather go through childbirth 10 times over than the pain I was experiencing. It was nonstop."

With hindsight, Lawley says the signs of trouble were there during pregnancy. She found out she was expecting a baby in June 2014, and while it wasn't

planned, "I was excited because I love my partner, we'd been together for a while and we'd always planned to have a kid or adopt," she recalls. Everything was "fine" until her beloved grandmother died in November, "and from that point on my stress levels escalated", she says. By the end of her pregnancy, "I would be at an airport and I'd feel faint and then I'd collapse or I'd be sick. I thought maybe I was just exhausted."

But after giving birth to Ripley - named after Sigourney Weaver's butt-kicking heroine in the 1979 movie *Alien* - the symptoms became more intense. She lost weight, and "I couldn't relax, I couldn't sleep. I felt like motherhood wasn't meant to be that hard!" says Lawley, who lost control of her right hand. "I'd be trying to change a nappy or cooking, and I'd drop things. It felt like the hand wasn't connected to my brain." But she didn't have time to figure out what was going on; back at work on a photo-shoot five weeks after having Ripley, "I thought the ground was falling beneath me. I was just spinning," she says. ▷

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Opposite page: Robyn wears blazer, \$169, by Balmain x H&M; corset, \$2500, by Alex Perry; briefs, \$70, by Nancy Ganz; pearl necklaces by Chanel; panther head necklace and bracelet both by Cartier. Above: Robyn wears pink dress, \$3900, by Maticcevski; Ripley wears white skirt, \$850 (for a set), by Miss Maticcevski; top her own.



Over an “intense” few weeks, things went further downhill. “I was slowly losing the ability to walk and communicate. I couldn’t talk because my tongue was so swollen – I used to chew it,” says Lawley, whose other symptoms – such as blurry vision and numb fingers – were so severe that she felt she was dying. “I thought I was done,” she says. “I didn’t want Ripley to grow up without a mum.”

An MRI scan showed she had worrying symptoms, which could have indicated MS, but Lawley couldn’t get an appointment with a Los Angeles neurosurgeon for months. Compounding her distress were health insurance issues that would have made treatment in the US prohibitively expensive, so Lawley flew home to Sydney in June and checked in to Sydney’s Westmead Hospital where she spent a week facing a battery of tests: “Two MRIs, a CAT scan, a spinal tap, chest X-rays.” Her neurologist, Dr Neil Mahant, eventually diagnosed her with a rare autoimmune condition called antiphospholipid antibody syndrome, with SLE lupus. “They don’t know the cause of my condition or if it is genetic,” she says, “but basically the cells are attacking themselves.”

In a “heartbreaking” decision, she stopped breastfeeding Ripley, partly because of her medication and also because her supply was so low she had to source supplementary donor milk. “I felt terribly guilty,” says Lawley. “To not be able to feed my own daughter was difficult, but I had to put her wellbeing first.” The upside was that with medication, her symptoms gradually “faded”, says Lawley. While she could be in remission forever, she has a backup plan with doctors and drugs in case she relapses.

Right now, “I feel pretty good”, she says. “But once you get these kind of conditions, they’re for life.” That means she’s ruled out having more children. “I won’t get pregnant again out of pure fear,” she says. “If I had another attack

while I was pregnant, the medicine I would have to take is so hardcore it’d probably cause health problems for the baby. It’s too risky, so I am done.”

Also affected by Lawley’s illness was Schmidt, who had a front row seat to her private hell. Together for nearly five years, they met at a New York bar. “He was tall and handsome, and I just went up to him,” says Lawley. “I loved him immediately.” That foundation ensured that while she was sick, they worked as a team. “We tried to focus on looking after Ripley and did the best we could. We just wanted me to be me again. He handled it really well. He loves his girls and this has really strengthened our relationship.”

Given that, will they marry? “I find big extravagant weddings a ridiculous waste of money,” says Lawley. “What is important is we have committed to each other. I don’t need that ring. I’d probably lose it anyway, knowing me.” She laughs, then checks herself. “But ... after what we’ve been through, we are considering it. Our families would love us to get married.”

Speaking of families, she says her upbringing in suburban Sydney gave her the strength to deal with her illness. She started working aged 13 at a cinema, inspired by her clan’s female role models. “We had an amazing strong grandma, Dorothy, and my mum is an environmentalist.” Maybe it’s an inherited thing: Lawley is a formidable role model herself. A vocal campaigner against super-thin models, she says that despite some progress, the fashion world still wants the “youngest, skinniest” girls in their shows. “Women see models who are so thin and then they try to become someone they are not, dieting to the extreme,” she says. Her own health problems, she adds, “make you realise there are much bigger things to be concerned about. Starving yourself shouldn’t be one of them. We should be telling women that they need to eat nutrient-dense, good food and stop counting [kilojoules].”

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Lawley’s other campaign is against the use of the “plus size” label. It didn’t bother her at the start of her career, when she was simply glad to be working, “but now I don’t see the rationale of putting a tag on it”, she says. “If we continue to use that term, we are going to keep segregating a huge number of women.” She remembers that as a teenager, she couldn’t shop in “normal” fashion stores, which had a “disastrous effect” on her self-esteem. “It makes you follow this destructive cycle of body hate – and yet numbers-wise you’re the most common size. It makes no sense.” Her industry dream? “I think we should have every size on the catwalk.”

As for her own famous shape, she keeps fit and healthy with kickboxing, hiking and yoga, but admits a weakness for Nutella and meat pies. “I love my body. It gets me from A to B,” she says. “I still have to work out a lot if I have a shoot coming up. It’s not like I can just eat whatever I want.” She once wanted to be a chef, and now cooking healthy food is one of Lawley’s passions; she makes baby food – pumpkin soup – for Ripley, and “when I cook I go all out. I like making pastry from scratch, and ratatouille and French onion soup.” Having planted lemon trees, lavender and rosemary bushes at the family’s home in Los Angeles’s Topanga Canyon, she also aspires to have her own web series on organic gardening, but will need to find time to squash in her other career dream – turning actress to play a “really strong” role in an action movie: “They need more bad-ass women in Hollywood!”

In the meantime, Lawley – an amateur DJ who misses Tim Tams and clotheslines (“no-one has them in LA ... it blows my mind”) – is back to work, with global assignments stacked up for the year ahead. Still, her priorities are her daughter, family and ongoing health recovery. “Ripley, as you can see, is super easygoing and sweet,” she says, snuggling the wriggling little girl. And of her illness, Lawley has found the silver lining. “Of course, I wish I hadn’t had to go through it, as it put such a strain on everyone. But it happened and we’ve grown and learnt from it. And I’m so happy to feel like me again.” □

want more? Visit the official *marie claire* YouTube channel at [youtube.com/user/marieclaireau](https://youtube.com/user/marieclaireau) to watch our behind-the-scenes video with Robyn Lawley.



Robyn wears dress, \$3600, by Maticzevski; necklace, bracelet, and necklace (worn as a bracelet) all by Cartier; earrings by Tiffany & Co. Ripley wears dress, \$1100 (for a set), by Miss Maticzevski.

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