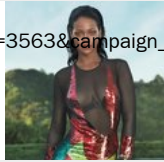




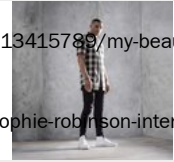
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My Beautiful Broken Brain Reveals the Traumatic, Triumphant Aftermath of a Brain Hemorrhage



(http://www.vogue.com/contributor/julia-felsenthal/)

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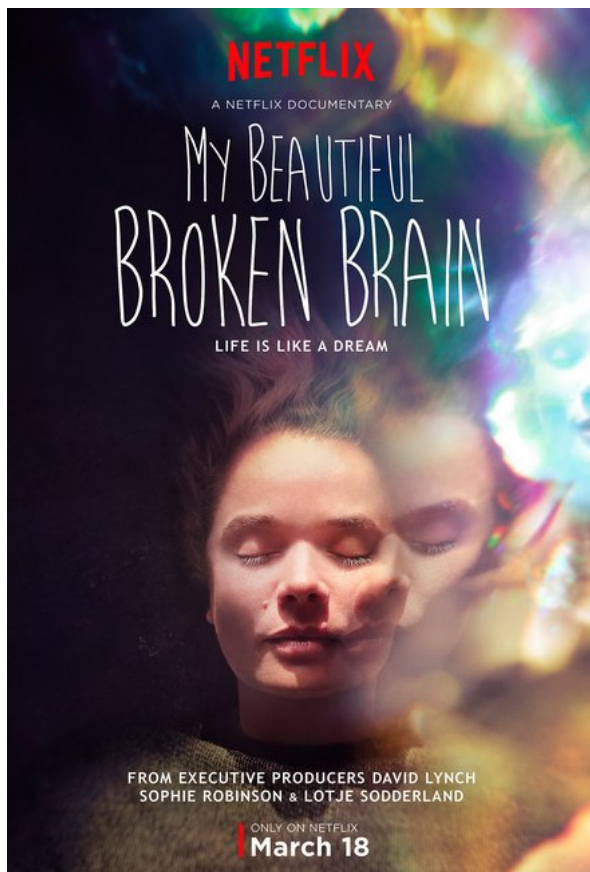


Photo: Courtesy of Netflix



In 2011, Lotje Sodderland was a 34-year-old Londoner living a life familiar to many: She worked a demanding 24/7 job at an advertising agency, traveled the world, and spent time with her wide circle of friends. Then one night she woke up with a pounding headache; stumbled out of her apartment, where she lived alone; and came to days later in the hospital. She'd had a brain hemorrhage, the result she would eventually find out, of a vascular abnormality that developed before birth. She'd been put into an induced coma, endured emergency surgery to her parietal and temporal lobes. And in the aftermath, she was transformed.

When we first see Sodderland in the riveting new [Netflix](http://www.vogue.com/tag/misc/netflix) (<http://www.vogue.com/tag/misc/netflix>) documentary *My Beautiful Broken Brain* (premiering Friday after a run at SXSW), she's recording herself on her iPhone in the hospital shortly after regaining consciousness. With a black hood pulled up to hide her surgery scar, she haltingly says, "Okay, I'm alive," then smiles and gives the camera a thumbs-up. "I'm not dead. That's a start."

Sodderland's stroke left her with significant cognitive problems: impaired speech and memory; trouble with sequencing events; distorted, sometimes psychedelic vision; and an inability to read or write that persists to this day. *My Beautiful Broken Brain* combines her many iPhone recordings—capturing her experience became an obsession in the face of faulty short-term memory—interviews shot by the documentarian Sophie Robinson beginning just weeks after the hemorrhage, and special effects footage that re-creates the terrifying fever-dream experience of being inside Sodderland's malfunctioning brain, a world she compares to the Red Room in David Lynch's *Twin Peaks* (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DF4UFQZ3qK8>).

Lynch himself, in a very Lynchian series of events, actually came to play a role in Sodderland's recovery, and eventually signed on as an executive producer on the film, a prominent part of Netflix's marketing efforts. But mostly *My Beautiful Broken Brain* is about Sodderland's inner journey from confusion, trauma, and sometimes despair to remarkably sunny acceptance of her new life and her new mind.

"The challenge is to rebuild your identity," Sodderland told me when I spoke with her and Robinson by phone from Austin, Texas, earlier this week. "When you're in hospital and you're being constantly assessed and measured by how you're limited, what you can no longer do, who you no longer are, it's very painful." The turning point came when she began to discover what she calls her "core identity": a deep-rooted sense of self that persists even when all external markers—career, romance, friendships—are under siege.

"We never wanted this to be seen as just a film about recovery, because it's so much more than that," Robinson adds. "At one stage before the film was called *My Beautiful Broken Brain*, it was called *Life Interrupted*. It's about having to rethink your life halfway through, and that can happen to any of us. You don't have to have had a brain hemorrhage."

Read on for more from my conversation with the filmmakers, about their collaboration, how they got David Lynch on board, and what Sodderland's life looks like these days.



Lotje Sodderland in *My Beautiful Broken Brain*

Photo: Courtesy of Netflix



Can you tell me a bit about how you guys know each other, and how you decided to work together on *My Beautiful Broken Brain*?

LOTJE SODDERLAND: We'd only met once before the stroke, about two months before at a work meeting. I worked at an advertising agency that was doing some documentary content, and Sophie was a well-established documentary

director who had done several science-based programs and series for the BBC. We'd had one meeting, and she really stuck in my mind. She's quite a memorable person for lots of different reasons, including being a science-based filmmaker who's a woman doing really well. And she's an engaging, lovely, warm person.

Our relationship professionally really developed once I'd had the stroke. I was in hospital, unable to speak or communicate. But I had this desire to document everything—a sense of wanting to make a documentary, but not in a very logical, coherent way. At some point I was able to communicate with my brother that I really needed to get in touch with this woman. I'd forgotten her name, and I couldn't really explain what I wanted. But I used diagrams and drawings and eventually he understood.

When you were filming yourself on your phone, did you think of that footage as something you might eventually make use of?

LS: No. I used my phone to really help me. I used it to record what was going on in my new world. I was fascinated and enthralled and terrified by [that new world]. But also I used it just on a practical level, to remember things, like meetings with doctors, and to communicate with friends, because I couldn't read or write. The first ability I regained was speech. I would record messages for friends, and they would record messages and send them back to me.

Apple should pay you guys some money! It's such a testament to the power of these phones.

LS: Definitely. And it still is. Because I still can't read. I use Siri all the time. We definitely thought about contacting Apple when we needed money. We just didn't know how to. *[laughs]*

Sophie, when Lotje got in touch, what did you think?

SOPHIE ROBINSON: I was in the middle of an edit of another film. I got this phone call from a colleague of Lotje's who had been in that meeting. He said, "Do you remember me? Do you remember Lotje? Do you remember this meeting? First of all, something terrible has happened." He started explaining that Lotje had started filming herself and would I come and meet her? When you hear someone's just had a brain hemorrhage, you're not going to say no. And I had fond memories as well. I think it was the day after Lotje came out of hospital that we met. I did something that I normally never do, which is: I took a camera with me.

The whole of this film has always been quite serendipitous, and sort of reacting to instinct rather than logic. We met. We talked about filming. You're also faced with that dilemma, as a filmmaker, of knowing this is someone who needs to go through recovery. But Lotje, as you can hear on the phone and see in the film, is massively articulate and knows exactly what she wants. I was just blown away. I had the camera with me, and there and then we said, "Should we just try to do a bit of filming now and see what it feels like for both of us? If it feels weird and uncomfortable, we'll hold off a bit or maybe we just won't do it."

As I was filming that first interview, I remember the hairs on my arms sticking on ends, thinking there's something really extraordinary about this woman and everything that's happening. I was really moved.

David Lynch plays an interesting role in this narrative. Lotje, what did David Lynch mean to you before your stroke?

LS: I got into *Twin Peaks* when I was a teenager—really, really into *Twin Peaks*. After that I just became really interested in his films. I was a fan of his magical, frightening, beautiful aesthetic, his mysterious narrative. But no more than the average Lynch fan. When the stroke happened, I forgot his name. But I felt like I was in the world he created in his films. Nothing made any sense, everything was beautiful but it was frightening, it was backward, there was no kind of linear logic to it. He has this connection with deconstructed language. I was just really reminded of his work. I felt that he would understand my situation. I thought, "I wonder if he's had a brain hemorrhage? How does he know all this stuff?"



Sophie Robinson and Lotje Sodderland

Photo: Eric Charbonneau / Courtesy of Netflix



In the first three or four months, I was recording everything that was happening through the day, because I was so fascinated by it and because I had problems with short-term memory. I didn't want the experience to pass through me. As part of that documentation, I was having this imaginary conversation with him. I definitely never thought I would actually send those messages to him, especially early on.

When did you decide to send him a message?

LS: Toward the end of the first year, Sophie was encouraging me to try. I spent a long time constructing a message, and recording what I felt. I put it on Vimeo with a password. We

sent that link through his agent, and other means of contact. To our great surprise he wrote an email a few days later back. It was a lovely email. It didn't really make that much sense: It was all in capitals, and there were no full stops. He basically said how excited he was by my brain. He invited us to this strange, magical event in London a few days later, where they were going to beam him in. You see what happens in the film.

And then we stayed in touch. He genuinely seemed really interested in my experience. He would always say, "Send me more of those video messages!" When I was in California, I said, "Do you want to have coffee?" And he said, "Sure, come round!" He's been a very central figure in the positive transformation and understanding of all that darkness. And then he came on board as our executive producer, which was obviously brilliant.

When did that happen?

SR: Netflix had come on board, and suddenly we were in a very real situation, where the film was actually going to go out globally to 190 different countries. David's always been a massive supporter of the film. When he agreed to put his name to it, he insisted that Lotje and I share the executive producer credit with him. He knows putting his name on it would help us in terms of getting the film recognized. But he did it in a very collaborative way. That meant something, because the relationship that he had with Lotje was very genuine. He really helped us massively.

Lotje, there's a turning point in the film, when you decide to stop seeing yourself as limited and instead start focusing on the possibilities. What does your life look like now?

LS: My life is really good now. It's very different. You talked about acceptance. That was really that transformative moment. It's like, Okay, I'm never going to be the same as I was before, but then nobody is. Things change constantly for everybody. This was a very dramatic change and it happened very suddenly, but

you have to accept that change is part of life. I started working with the abilities that I regained and that I retained. Now I still tell stories, but I tell visual stories. I've got a really nice camera, and I make documentaries. I earn a living that way, but I no longer read and write. I don't use words in the same way that I did before. The world is much more visual and much less cognitive.

You wrote a beautiful piece for *The Guardian*

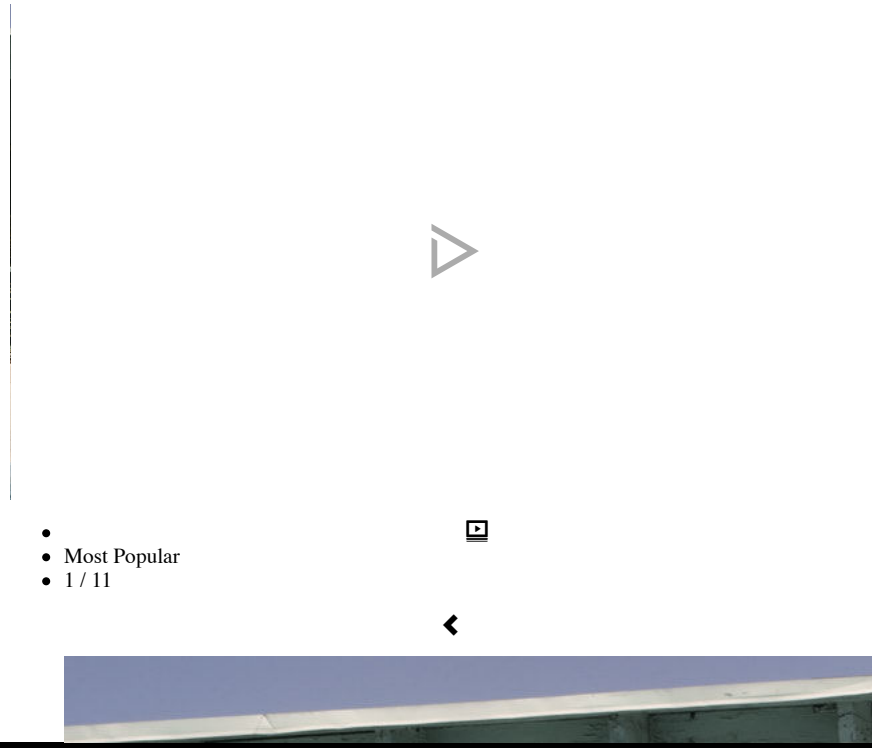
(<http://www.theguardian.com/society/2014/nov/22/it-felt-as-if-i-had-become-fear-itself-life-after-a-stroke-at-34>) about a year ago about what happened to you

...

LS: I did. It was very painful for my ears. There was a lot of Siri action involved there. I really enjoy words, and I always loved writing. So it was sad. It was a big moment of acceptance. At the same time, I've learned to look at the world in a really different way. I had to. And it's beautiful.

This interview has been condensed and edited.

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