



Avril Lavigne's Secret Health Crisis

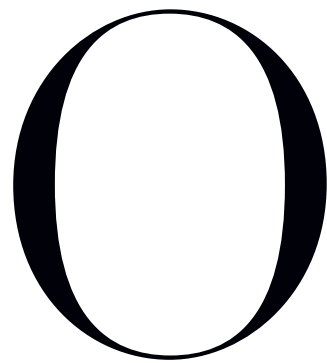
'I Was Scared for My Life'

BEDRIDDEN AT HOME FOR MONTHS, THE SINGER FINALLY REVEALS HOW A CRIPPLING CASE OF LYME DISEASE CHANGED HER FOREVER: 'I'VE REALLY LEARNED WHO I AM'

By **GILLIAN TELLING**

Photographs by **ERIC OGDEN**

HAIR & MAKEUP: GABRIEL PANDURO/HAIR FOR ICON PRODUCTS/
MAKEUP FOR MAC COSMETICS; STYLIST: KRISANA SCOTTE/THE WALL
GROUP; DRESS: JOSEPH; TOP: THE ROW; NECKLACE: AVRIL'S OWN



n a chilly March morning in the Canadian woods, **Avril Lavigne** tucks her legs underneath her and settles into the giant purple couch in her living room while the acres of pine and birch trees outside gather a light dusting

of snow. For the past five months, the pop star, 30, has hidden herself away in the secluded Ontario refuge she shares with husband Chad Kroeger, fighting to regain her health while speculation churned about the reasons for her disappearance. Now Lavigne is finally ready to explain why she vanished: Last spring a tick bite gave her a severe case of Lyme disease that left her bedridden and desperate for answers. At times, “I felt like I couldn’t breathe, I couldn’t talk, and I couldn’t move,” Lavigne tells PEOPLE of the ordeal. “I thought I was dying.”

Realizing Something Was Wrong

Last April, when she was on tour, Lavigne began to feel ill. “It was April 11, and I remember waking up drenched and felt so feverish,” she says. Assuming she had the flu, she took cold medicine, but her symptoms got worse. “I had complete weakness and fatigue. One night I tried to brush my teeth on the tour bus and couldn’t even stand.” She sought help from doctors, who chalked it up to dehydration and exhaustion

from touring. “I was like, *no*,” says the Canadian singer, who has worked non-stop since her debut album, *Let Go*, went platinum in 2002, when she was just 17. “I’ve been doing this for so long and never felt like this before.” After her last public appearance, in September, she tried to celebrate her 30th birthday in Las Vegas with friends. “It was terrible,”

ROCKING ON

“Knowing my fans were on standby helped me stay alive inside during some of my darkest times,” says Lavigne. From far left: with Kroeger in 2013, at the start of her career in 2002 and greeting the crowd during a concert last June.



A TIME TO HEAL

“Sometimes it takes instances like this to put things in perspective,” says the singer (at home on March 27) about being sick. “So in a way, I am grateful for all of this.”



‘I really just want to enjoy life from here on out’

she remembers. “I could barely eat, and when we went to the pool, I had to leave and go lie in bed. My friends asked, ‘What’s wrong?’ I didn’t know.”

Lavigne’s condition worsened—she couldn’t shake off feelings of lethargy and lightheadedness; her body ached more and more, and the once-energetic star soon found it a struggle simply to move. Eventually, two friends who were familiar with Lyme disease (see box) suggested she might have contracted the tick-borne disease. But getting a firm diagnosis wasn’t easy. “I had to fight,” says Lavigne. “Thad doctors tell me I was crazy and they didn’t want to test me. I had to learn about it completely on my own” by doing research on the Internet.

After several months—and a handful of emergency-room visits and consultations with multiple physicians—her suspicions were confirmed when she was evaluated by a Lyme specialist. “People don’t really talk about the disease, and help can be minuscule,” Lavigne says. “I have no idea where I got [the tick bite].... It changed my life completely.”

Finding a Refuge from the World

Since October, Lavigne has rarely left her home as she battled the disease. To keep her spirits up, she relied on family, watched movies and kept in touch with her fans through social media. “I never

had depression, but being sick and being so terrified, that in itself is depressing,”

says Lavigne. “I was scared for my life. There were definitely times I couldn’t shower for a full week because I could barely stand. It felt like having all your life sucked out of you.”

To heal, she endured several courses of antibiotics and overhauled her lifestyle. “[My diet is] sugar-free, dairy-free, gluten-free, all organic. I juice three times a day,” says Lavigne, who estimates that she’s about “80 percent” recovered now. “I do yoga, meditate and try to swim or walk every day. It’s really up and down—you get better, then you get worse, then better.”

FROM LEFT: NATHAN DENNETT/THE CANADIAN PRESS/AP; R. J. CAPAK/WIREIMAGE; ROBERT E. KLEIN/AP; SWEATER: ATM; TANK: TOP; ANITZA



'I've never been more clear about what I want in life'

I want in life—health, family, love, happiness.” While Lavigne and Kroeger are mum on plans to start a family of their own (“We both want [kids],” Kroeger told PEOPLE in 2013. “We just need to find a time we’re both at home to get around to it”), the singer has found a new cause: raising awareness about Lyme disease. She’s also looking forward to restarting her career, albeit at a saner pace. “This was a wake-up call,” she says. Her first project is the single “Fly,” to be released in April in support of the 2015 Special Olympics. Lavigne also hopes to one day record a Christmas album and is interested in shooting a movie. “I can’t wait to experience life again,” she says. “In my darkest of times I told myself, ‘You’re just in a cocoon right now. When spring comes, you’ll be ready to fly.’” ●

The experience brought her closer to her mom, who stayed at Lavigne’s home for months to care for her. Meanwhile Kroeger, 40, in the midst of a world tour with his band Nickleback, comes home as much as possible. “He’s been very supportive,” Lavigne says, shrugging off rumors of marital strife. Her fans were also there for her in low moments. “They were asking about me since I was MIA, so I mentioned to one fan directly that I wasn’t feeling good,” Lavigne says of a private Twitter message in Decem-

ber that went viral. “The get-well messages and videos they sent touched me so deeply. I lay in bed watching them and cried so much because I felt loved. It was so powerful and beautiful.”

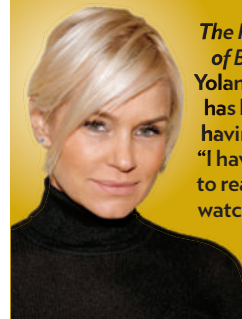


Getting Her Life Back

In the end, Lavigne says, she is “grateful” for “the worst thing” she’s ever gone through. “I’ve never had this much time off in my life,” she says. “And I’ve never been more clear about what

What You Need to Know About Lyme Disease

Contracted from a tick bite, Lyme disease is a bacterial infection that causes symptoms ranging from moderate fatigue and muscle pain to debilitating dementia. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, more than 25,000 Americans were diagnosed in 2013. But Dr. Erica Lehman, a tick-borne-disease specialist, says it is “the fastest-growing epidemic in the world” and that the number of cases is “significantly underestimated” because of factors including imperfect testing and symptoms similar to those of Parkinson’s, multiple sclerosis and lupus. For more information, go to cdc.gov/lyme. —NICOLE SANDS



The Real Housewives of Beverly Hills star Yolanda Foster, 51, also has been open about having Lyme disease: “I have lost the ability to read, write or even watch TV. It feels like someone came in and confiscated my brain.”