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Tom Nash describes himself as a speaker, a storyteller and a vagabond. He's also a club DJ and he's given a TED talk on the perks of being a pirate. That's because Tom gets about on two prosthetic legs and Tom also has two arms with hooks at the ends of them. Tom Nash's life changed radically in his first year of uni and it took many years to adjust to the wrenching changes of living without his original arms and legs. When Tom left hospital he was walking unsteadily and learning to use his new arms and his new hooks. None of this seems to have really held him back. Tom has started a band, he does public speaking and he's travelled all around the world. In fact his new life seems to have taken him places he never expected to go. Hello Tom. How you doing? Well sir, nice to have you here. Thank you for the invitation. May I make the initial comment that you have a lovely radio voice. Oh yes, also it's been noted that I have a face for radio. I don't know why I fixed my hair so well this morning.

No you could come in trackie decks and it would have been fine I think. Tell me where you grew up Tom. Well I was actually born overseas in South Africa but only lived there for a couple of years and then I grew up in Dallas, Texas for about six or something like that and then I came to Australia around the age of nine I think. Did you have the Texan accent for a while? I did have the Texan accent. I think I lost it pretty quickly partly due to my age but I moved to the Southern Shire. It was my first port of call and a Southern Texan accent doesn't last long down there before it gets beaten out of you. So yeah that didn't take too long. What was expected of you growing up? Do you think if there were expectations of you? I don't think I had too many expectations growing up. I mean I had pretty good parents and they never pressured me too much into things. There was an expectation that I would go to university but I was always able to choose what I wanted to do within that and at that age you know I didn't really want know what I wanted to do with the rest of my life and so I think I just selected something that interested me vaguely which was psychology and philosophy and studied that without it being a means to an end but just a point of interest I guess. How much of uni did you did you manage to get through before things were bad? That's when I got sick with meningococcal. Did you know things went right? When did you

first start feeling unwell? I started feeling unwell only about 24 hours before I did anything about it. So it was like I think it was a Wednesday and I went to uni with the intention of going to all my lectures which was actually a rarity if I must say but I got there and I felt like I had flu like symptoms. I was really lethargic and head was full and had a headache and all sorts of stuff and so I actually sent myself home and I think I had the following night I was going to be going to a concert and I actually cancelled on that which was my first indication but cancelling uni is one thing right but cancelling a music concert it's like oh I must actually be sick but I went yeah I went home on the Wednesday night and hadn't gone to the doctor at this stage? No I had my 18 year old kid or 19 year old kid you don't need the doctor.

You just wait and get better it's the flu isn't it so what are you going to do?

Yeah you're invincible. I had spoken to my step sister about it and she said I can take you to doctor if you want and I just said no it's unnecessary but that night was pretty horrendous and I slept for maybe 15 hours and I woke up in cold sweats crawling to the bathroom vomiting having a fever passing out in the shower all sorts of stuff passing out like collapsing in the shower yeah yeah I think because I remember feeling really cold and I thought how can I warm myself up and so I went into the shower and I put the hot water on me

and then I must have passed out in the shower because I came to with cold water raining down upon me and blood in the shower so I thought oh this is not where I left my car case.

Are you very frightened at that point?

I think so but also I was a bit delusional so it was it was hard to get a read on it but I knew something was wrong and so when the morning came around I texted my step sister and I said look I think you got to take me to a doctor maybe and she yeah no I didn't want to see people and so she came over and by the time she'd gotten there I think it took her 20 minutes to get to my apartment and that's the exact amount of time it took for me to try and put my shoes on because my feet had swollen up and of course what meningococcal does is it's a blood infection and it gives you septicemia and one of the telltale signs is you get this purple rash all over your body and you know parts of you just expand and swell up and so she took one look at me and said I'm taking you to a hospital not a doctor and when she took one look at you were you standing or were you not standing yeah yeah I was able to stand by that point but it took me a while to get to the buzzer to let her in the apartment it was actually a bit of an ordeal and so she said I'm not taking to a doctor I'm taking to a hospital which I believed at that point to be an overcorrection but I was happy to concede because I was feeling pretty rubbish and I happened to live around the corner from a hospital Balmain Hospital they saw me pretty swiftly it wasn't one of those you know you go to the ER they like give us your name and you know everyone that you've ever slept with them wait there for eight hours they actually looked at me and said okay you know we're putting you straight in a wheelchair and then started sticking needles into me was there some sense of alarm because you would have you're presenting with all the symptoms of meningococcal by the sound

of things yeah but I didn't know what meningococcal was and I'm not sure whether they diagnosed me on

the spot but they definitely knew that it was out of their capabilities and I had to be sent somewhere else so I was swiftly sent off to rpa as an inpatient what do you remember of being admitted

to rpa as you were of course getting more and more progressively ill yeah very little because when I was admitted to rpa I was induced into a coma and I think you lose a little bit of memory before that happens as well after the fact as you're saying this I'm just feeling this incredible fearfulness I think and because one thing I do know about meningococcal is that every minute counts yeah absolutely and this had been like what a day or something or nearly 24 hours since you'd been feeling bad yeah it's hard to say really because they do say the incubation period is like seven to ten days but once it gets to the point where you're presenting the rash then it becomes really like swift so if you're 10 minutes later you could probably die if you're 10 minutes earlier you might save a limb or two like it can be down to that so you have this kind of blurry memory then of being admitted to rpa yes so I my last official memory was being in the ambulance on the way to rpa from balmain hospital and I was trying to make the guy in the back of the ambulance laugh because he was why because he was so stoic I don't know what his problem is that's why I'm not sure whether he was maybe he was trying to put a brave face on for me or something but I said you're trying to make him laugh what are you saying oh I just I said you know how long until we I've been trying to make him laugh and he wasn't laughing and I remember cracking because it was like how long did until we get to rpa and he said 10 minutes and I said that's 10 minutes is what people say when they have no idea how long it's going to take people to

you know because if you know you're more specific and you say what seven or eight if you have a good idea or if it's longer you say 10 is so vague no nothing takes 10 minutes I like to take nine they take 11 nothing is 10 like like you're dying but your root problem is you can't make the the paramedic laugh yeah right because it would make me feel more comfortable if he was just it was purely for selfish reasons but then I lost I lost memory after that okay yeah so so you'll put in a medically induced coma yeah I was when I got there so apparently I was conscious and lucid when I arrived at rpa but I just don't have any recollection of it is there any theory on how you contracted it no not I mean theory they know how it's contracted but in my specific case no idea do you do you have any theory at all not really I mean I think 10 days before I contracted it it was my birthday so I went out I didn't really go out a hell of a lot because I didn't have that much money because I was a student but I did go out on my birthday night with a few people

you know they say that it contracts much like COVID does I guess you know like through saliva if someone coughs on you or sharing a drink with someone or something like that might have been as simple as that could have been as simple as that but at the end of the day it doesn't matter and like something to blame is probably the worst exercise you could indulge in like trying to make your paramedic laugh yeah so so you were in a coma for how long I was in a coma for about a couple of weeks give or take I think it might have been two and a half weeks or two weeks and given that you said there are memory issues do you remember coming out of it yeah so coming out of a coma is a very slow process or at least it was for me it's not like you see in those in the movies where the person's like bing and there's like what happened you know it was a very iterative process and you start to hear things before you see things and then there's a weird sort of crossover where you don't know what is a dream and you don't know what is reality there are indications that some things are reality and suggestions that other parts are dreams and they kind of cross over I remember hearing people talking around me and I could only tell by the intonation in their voice whether they were talking to me or about me but it was an important distinction to make because if someone's talking about you and you're not exactly conscious it's probably not good news I have friends of mine who have been through those comers well people I know anyway who have been through those comers where they have these whole alternate lives yeah right though while they've been under wow where there's something else that's happened entirely and when they come out of it yeah it sort of bleeds into the reality of the of their new situation and things that aren't happening are very powerful hallucinations for them they they think they are happening around them was there that kind of strange hallucinatory borderland you were were you occupying that for a little while yes that's kind of what I was trying to describe and didn't put as eloquently as you just did but basically that crossover of reality and dream or that that I think in a sense becomes a hallucination interestingly I actually had some proper hallucinations later on in hospital where they mixed up my medicines really right like what what did you see well because I was on ketamine and wow one point and you know ketamine can be a hallucinogen if you take enough and I think I was given like four times the regular dose of ketamine by accident at one point and I had proper hallucinations like I would see people sitting at the end of my bed that weren't there dogs and cats running into my hospital room

I was I kept asking for my wallet at one point I don't know what I thought I was going to do with it in hospital or how I was even going to hold it with no hands um so coming out of the coma like I said yeah as you were in this this kind of new world do you remember how the doctors put it to you what had happened to you yes bits and pieces were revealed to me at different times so obviously I'd I'd learned what I had and what the diagnosis was I also have to qualify this by saying that I was pumped full of quite a lot of pain medication and drugs at this point and so my ability to process reality wasn't at its peak let's say but then also I didn't lose everything at once it wasn't like I was in a coma they amputated all my limbs and then I came out I came out I was on life support while I was in a coma came out and I was still all in one piece but had gangrene on my feet and hands and then they were doing everything they could to save them so it was suggested at the really early stages that I might lose a few toes or fingers and then it would the the more it went on it was kind of like you know I remember a doctor just saying to me your legs are going to have to go that's it and I remember not being too bothered about I mean I was obviously upset but I I'd seen people with prosthetic legs I didn't really know how it worked very well or what kind of independence they had and I knew worst-case scenario I could I would be in a wheelchair and people in wheelchairs are everywhere right so they obviously live perfectly acceptable lives being in a wheelchair and so I wasn't too bothered about that but then when I had to lose my arms there was sort of a double prong negative effect such that A I had no idea of whether someone could really live independently or fruitfully even without arms the loss of independence was something that I had no blueprint for how to ameliorate that

and then on top of all of that you know I was an avid guitarist and musician and that was that was part of my life that I just took solace in it was my it was what I enjoyed doing uh it was really all I had in life that wasn't obligation I guess you know and so the the idea that I wouldn't be able to play guitar anymore was just the icing on that cake were you thinking well I'm not dead and so everything after that's just a bonus yeah okay that's an interesting question because whether being dead is the worst-case scenario is not like you would oscillate between what is the worst-case scenario here being dead or being in my current position so that's a question you have to answer for yourself and the guy who um talked to me about losing my arms uh he came into my room one time and I think he he said uh because there was a lot of talk about losing it would I have to and he said uh look you have two options we can amputate your arms and you can live with prosthetics and I said okay don't really like that option about what else if you got and he said well you can keep them and I said well what's the catch and he said well you'll die which I thought I mean I thought it was quite funny the way you put it because um I wasn't ready for it I was I was like oh okay but then when I thought about it in retrospect he was kind of giving me the choice that if I didn't want to live with no arms I could choose to keep them yeah I was over 18 I could make my own decisions uh and I can't ask them to legally kill me but I can ask them not to amputate my arms which would have killed me and how hard did you have to think about that I've been asked that question before and I can't give you an honest answer because my memory isn't that great of that time but it wasn't too long it wasn't too long having prosthetic legs but have to be a different consideration as you say to having artificial arms absolutely yeah I mean you use your hands for everything it's such a loss of independence when you lose arms and I think more than anything it's it's rarer that people lose arms I think and um and so as I said there's kind of no blueprint for it so it's

hard to sort of envisage how your life would be or how you would regain that independence or what you would do in many ways I've had to create my own blueprint for a lot of things how long was it before you could have some kind of set of prosthetics fitted I mean was there a while when you spent when you had a kind of new sense of yourself without those limbs yeah yeah so it was the 18 months that I spent in hospital was split quite distinctly into the first six months being very being more concerned with amputations and life support and things like that and then the latter year was all spent in a rehab hospital and that was designed to get you back up on prosthetic legs and walking again using arms blah blah blah and so there was a good period in between those two where I didn't have any prosthetics at all even for the first couple of months of the rehab I didn't have prosthetics fitted because I had so much skin damage that you can't put a prosthetic leg onto someone who has skin damage and then get like put all their weight onto it it makes the wound management go backwards which is what happened in many cases so it was

constantly a trade-off of you know you have to start the rehab early otherwise you'll never be able to walk but the earlier you start it the worse the wounds will get and you won't be able to walk it's kind of like a catch-22 in a way yeah so that was a it was a touch-and-go period this is suffering there's no doubt about it I mean yeah yeah wounds and prosthetics being fitted and that's a lot of a lot of frustration and hardship there did you feel like you were being tested uh not necessarily because I would have to ask by whom by the world by life not not really I don't know I think I just had to get up and get on with it though I didn't feel like I was being tested by anyone in particular it was just a struggle that I had to go through myself and I had to be able to communicate when that balance was off for me that you know today I can't do the walking because my legs are hurting too much or the opposite of that you know what was the rehab hospital like the rehab hospital the rehab hospital was called Prince Henry it was out in Little Bay it used to be an infectious diseases hospital back in the day it's quite large and when I got there it kind of looked a bit more like Shutter Island so most of it was abandoned they got up to some like messed up stuff in that hospital I'm telling you I don't have evidence of this but I'm pretty sure um and there were only two wards left and and they were the spinal injuries rehab ward that's where all the cool kids hung out because they were like the young people that broke their back jumping off into sand dunes and stuff and then there was the normal rehab ward which is where I was but it was predominantly populated by you know geriatrics and some people who had lost

limbs due to diabetes and so as a 19 year old boy I didn't find too many comrades in the rehab ward but it was a good motivation to get up on my feet and and try and spend time with the guys from the spinal ward was it as eerie as Shutter Island oh absolutely yeah so if you can imagine these sort of like really long nightingale ward style things with verandah balconies and the doors would be like almost like the double french doors that would would open and there would be a lot of nature that would kind of visit birds and things like that that would fly into the ward there were some stray cats that were residents uh that lived underneath the wards we used to try and feed them some of the hospital food and they wouldn't eat it which was a it's a pretty good indication that the food was shit right like if you give them a Swedish meatball and they smell it and look at you and they're like that's not food I'm not sure the patients should be eating it either I have never seen in my life a cat knocked back a Swedish meatball oh absolutely she said Jo because that hospital was like over the road from Long Bay Jail and we thought the experience

of inmates at Long Bay Jail and Prince Henry were pretty similar except they probably got better food than we did but yeah it was it it was an interesting uh place to rehabilitate it was actually quite nice because it's right near the coast and there was like a golf course that was just adjacent so you know if you were able bodied enough to get up and have a walk around it's a beautiful place to walk around in but for the first few months of my tenure there that was not a case and there's a golf course out the window yeah yeah they're just too exaggerate how little you can do I just didn't laugh this is too funny though how intricate is the process of getting prosthetic legs do you start out on these kind of crude prototypes before they can fit something a bit more bespoke for your specific situation they start you out on like a temporary leg and it's not for any other reason than your leg shape changes the more you start walking again so your stump or the bit at the end of your leg will shrink and so they're not going to make a whole prosthetic if one month later they're going to have to make a new one so they just make you this sort of temporary one in the meantime until such time as your leg has taken the shape that it will for at least a few years and then they make you a proper one but I think before you even get those fitted I remember being on this thing called a tilt table what's a tilt table it's like it looks like a medieval torture device I'm not convinced that it wasn't right but if you can imagine like a gurney sort of thing and they have the big leather straps that go over you they fit the prosthetic legs onto you and then the tilt table goes from 90 degrees like slowly like up tilts you up yeah it tilts you up onto you onto these legs yeah that's right and you don't do it completely up from the start you might do you know 15 degrees so it puts a little bit of pressure on your legs and then when you can't take that anymore you go back down and then you did 20 degrees what's the theory behind that well because your legs aren't used to taking the pressure of the prosthetics especially with someone like me who had skin damage it's just not used to taking the weight of a human and what about balance as well is that part of the that's what I strap you in because otherwise you probably topple like a wine glass was there any doubt in your mind that you would walk again in those things did you ever doubt that uh no I didn't I was pretty confident that I was going to walk again um just because I know that I'm quite stubborn and I know that it's possible so I was confident that I was going to do it I think the thing I feared the most was the pain involved in doing it because you know physical pain has a has a two-prong negative effect obviously it hurts you but it also makes it more difficult for you to get over mentally because you can't concentrate on overcoming problems as much did your pain threshold shoot right up then yeah I mean I think I've always had a pretty good pain threshold but um it's weird I when I was doing my um when I was having dressing changes back in Concord that was a level of pain that I never knew existed so it's very difficult to say you know someone would say what are your pain levels on a scale of one to ten I've been like well I'm not sure what you're going to do with that information because like if I say my seven might be your two and obviously they want to know relative to you but they don't know relative to them or to anyone else it's it's difficult and that scale changes once you've experienced more pain or let's pay whatever it is did it take a long while before it became comfortable in any way to walk in these new devices yeah it took me a while to walk more than it takes a normal amputee and that was mainly because of the skin damage that I had on my legs how did you learn to walk again with your new legs and arms what was that process like

when I first got up onto legs after the tilt table experience I would have a walking frame and then I would have two people holding me under each arm and then I would have one person on one

leg one person on another and then I had like a person at the front of the walking frame sort of pulling it forward so it was a six person exercise or you know five person exercise plus me to get me walking and my only motivation was to lose one of them at a time so it was you know again small steps so to speak my first motivation was to get rid of the person holding the frame because they're walking in front of me and that irritated me and then the second was to be able to lift my own legs and so I would get rid of one person there and then one person under the arm and then I'd get rid of the frame and so this would take like a couple of months and then for a while I was walking just with a crutch that fit on my forearm and one person just keeping me for balance under the other arm and so every day I would have like a wardsman type person would come and be like okay

let's go for a walk you'd get up go for a walk come back and you'd do that for a few weeks and then I remember one day just being feeling confident enough in my balance and Muhammad was a guy who was actually a wardsman and I became good friends with him he's a really nice guy and he would take me for walks every day and I remember walking quite briskly down one of the pathways of the hospital and I remember just saying to him let go of me just let go and he looked at me and normally he wouldn't take that kind of direction if it wasn't from a physiotherapist but he just knew that I was ready to go so he just let go and then that was it I was walking by myself and then the moment that that happened everything started to progress

this is conversations with Richard Fidler

so Tom how quickly did things progress for you then once you'd learnt to walk unaided on your new legs the progress increased exponentially at that point because there's a sense of autonomy in it as well so then I was walking with a crutch and it was very quick after that that I would lose the crutch and then it was very quick after that that I learned how to walk up steps so I think as soon as I lost everybody helping me that's when it started to really progress yeah does that mean that in walking with prosthetics that the muscles of your upper leg that the remnants of your leg have to do a lot more work than they normally would and do you have like these you know rock hard I do yeah yeah muscular you're talking about my legs right I am talking about your legs just be very clear about that sir this is a family show that's right you so your legs upper legs must be incredibly strong and not be able to prepare yourself forward and also just maintaining balance maintaining balance I think takes a lot of different muscles that you would use in your thighs than a normal person would you know with legs then came the decision about what kind of arms you were going to have why do you think you chose to have hooks rather than say fake hands yeah I get asked that question a lot and there's a few reasons one because

the hands aren't very useful like they're quite cumbersome and like you can't really get fine motor skills with the fingers but if I was going to be honest I would say that the hands kind of annoy me a bit because they just it's like they're trying to convince someone yeah they're a hand and I always think like who you trying to fool and it by the way like if you can pick any hand you want pick something cool and I saw the hooks I was like the first time I didn't really like them that much and then I sort of got used to them and I was like actually these things look pretty

badass like I could I could get around these do they have anything opposable like a thumb type thing on it that you have no the opposability is the way that they work is on resistance and so the rubber bands hold the hooks together and then the cable goes all the way around my back

and then when I pull on it it pulls the cable and the rubber band provides the resistance and so the hooks come together the hooks are opening and closing and I can't tell how you did that so if you can see the rubber bands there that's what holds the two together and then that cable that's connected to what I like to call the thumb that cable goes all the way around my back and straps up around the opposing arm which means when I when I push my arm out it kind of pulls on that cable so if I'm if I'm holding something in this left hook and then I go to grab something in that right it actually opens the left hook a little bit so I've got to be quite careful and I've had many problems holding you know a glass of wine or something I go and grab a cigarette or something and so that takes a while to get used to then yeah yeah and one thing that I noticed a lot early on was that I was getting really good at using hooks much faster than most people do simply because I had both most people would lose one limb and therefore they would use their good arm for everything oh and they would rarely use the hook for anything unless they absolutely needed to but because I'd been put in a situation where I'm forced to use them for everything I progressed really quickly does it make any difference being left-handed or right-handed once you have prosthetics good question uh apparently not I thought it would I was always right-handed and what I discovered was when I started getting prosthetics I actually got my left arm before I got my right arm because I had too many wounds on my right arm and I started becoming ambidextrous I started being able to write with my left hand and do all sorts of stuff with my left hand and then as soon as I got my right I became right-handed again now when I write which is

you know rarely with a pen I deal with my right hand in some ways we're all cyborgs these days to one degree or another I mean we use computers all the time and we use them as extensions of ourselves is it like that for you with your with your arms and hooks now can you sort of operate them without having to really concentrate too much on yeah I operate them without having to

concentrate too much unless it's something new that I have to do so the interesting thing about operating in the world with prosthetics is that the world is designed for people with hands and so I have to work out a way of doing things that is not the way everyone else does things and so once I work out what that is for a particular like for a task like if I'm pouring a kettle or you know something like that I know that usually I have to grab something around the base so that the center of gravity is at a particular level and I have to provide resistance with my other hook and tip it now I know I can use any kettle right but if there was something completely different that I've never done before it takes me a while to work out how I'm going to do that with hooks it must keep you sharp really sharp if you're constantly looking around you having to figure out how to negotiate things which other people might take for granted I think it's it's it's more a case of I think it changes neural pathways or something that it makes you a really good problem solver because you can sort of map that like learning process onto any part of your life it doesn't have to be in the physical world are you in touch with other people who've got hook type prosthetics like you not with hooks I was introduced to someone who had lost his hands

Jeff he used the myoelectric hands but very few people with hooks I mean nowadays I kind of see them more because the connectivity of the world I mean a few have reached out to me people in Brazil who have lost arms and there's a guy over there that uses hooks and people I see on the internet and certainly when I lost my arms we didn't really have that interconnected world as such would just be who you would meet on the street it might be a really stupid question but do the hooks attach and can they be replaced by like a knife and fork for example or do you use do you hold the knife and fork yeah okay so that that is actually a common question I get because the first thing people think is like oh inspect the gadget right and that would be awesome however for me to take them out and change them with different endings I guess would be more trouble than just learning how to hold things with hooks like prosthetic arms aren't designed for people who have lost arms they're designed for people who have lost an arm as most people don't lose both arms they might lose one but yeah I mean you can change them out for different things if I had another hand I could probably do that I would much rather travel with less hardware I already travel with a ridiculous amount of hardware and I'm trying to reduce that as I go but these are very lightweight and they're really easy to repair so they're actually the best kind of technology for me because I can use them easier because they're light if the cable breaks I've got a cable with me that I can just wire up a new one if I've got an electric hand and I have to plug it into a laptop and download firmware from Germany I mean you know I don't need something that has batteries you know I don't need another thing in my life that needs charging right I don't want to have a really heavy arm that I can't pull up properly so you know all of that technology is too much for me I need something that's lightweight that works that's durable and that's the thing I like about them the most so the whole big challenge of course you know you learn to walk as you say and then you could walk unaided then there comes the day when you leave the rehab hospital and go and live in the world how was that process for you that was an interesting process because I wasn't yet able to live completely independently and so I had to spend a few months living with someone and that person was my mother and she lived at the time up in the blue mountains and she had quite a small house up there and the driveway was a sort of pebbly driveway that was at like a 45 degree angle very difficult to traverse and some wooden stairs that went up and there was quite a small little pokey house but I thought to myself I mean there was kind of the perfect place to rehabilitate right because if I can live in that house I can live anywhere if I can do those stairs if I can walk down that driveway if I can live in a small space and up in the mountains where I would walk all the way up from wherever our small street was to the local post office or shop or pub or whatever so I was in the blue mountains for I think maybe five to six months or somewhere in that order and then I moved out on my own got my own place and as soon as I was left to my own devices I started to progress exponentially once again so the thing about living on my own was I mean I had a flatmate but at the time she was a uni student so she wouldn't be there all the time so I was now left at home for extended periods of time without anyone around so if I needed to fix a problem if I needed something if I needed a glass of water if I needed you know coffee if I needed a cigarette I need to work out ways I can do that and so I was put under pressure and I was forced to just come up with ideas I have to ask how do you smoke a cigarette with a hook these hooks were developed in around World War one for people who lost their arms in the trenches and everyone used to smoke back then right so it's got that little hole there for

cigarettes

and they've just retained that design element but yeah that that served me really well but it wasn't the getting of a cigarette or the smoking of a cigarette it was the lighting of a cigarette right so I I would be left at home and I was like often I would get someone in the morning to put a candle on and so I'd always have the candle there and then the candle would blow out and it was a stupid idea I can't it's a completely untenable so then I would start lighting cigarettes on the toaster that was pretty dangerous and then there was the stove and then I think that my stove broke or something and I had the brilliant idea of wrap like rolling up an A4 sheet of paper putting it under the grill setting fire to it running out into my backyard lighting the cigarette and then stamping it out what am I gonna get burns or you can just give up smoking no I'm too stubborn right and so and then I remember doing that once and I passed a box of matches near the barbecue you know the big ones and I was like I could do that I could definitely light a match and so I sat there all day just striking matches with my hooks just practicing getting better at striking matches and then that's how I overcome that problem so you know there's little things that would come up all the time that you know I didn't think how am I gonna do this I didn't think how am I gonna do that you know how about traveling overseas was that an ambition for you yeah it was I mean I've always loved traveling in particular the first time I went overseas I had wanted to visit my grandparents because they were told when I was on life support to come over and pretty much to say they're goodbyes and they live in England and I think my grandfather at the time had been on you know very much he had heart problems and wasn't really supposed to be traveling and they made it over anyway for a short stint and and I remember speaking to him in hospital and I said to him I was like you know next I'll come visit you after I get out of here and I remember him looking at me and saying yeah of course you will but I knew that he didn't really believe that and he thought I was gonna die so being the stubborn individual that I was I'm like no I'll show him I'll I'll get over there and so it was only about six months after I was living alone on my own that I decided to take the plunge and and go traveling and I thought I'll do Europe and with a friend a friend of mine Craig who I only known Craig for about six months before that as well and we just decided to go overseas together for like six weeks I would visit my grandparents over there on my family I've got auntie and cousin and everything like that and then I would we'd also just hire a car and drive around Europe and with no plan because this is like 2003 it wasn't like oh Airbnb like you know you got nothing planned right we just hired a car and just drove around and I figured like if I can do that holiday I can do pretty much anything and I was really curious I mean I probably was biting off a bit more than I could chew at the time I had a few disasters I think my leg fell off once when I was in Germany and I smashed my knee and Craig was didn't know what to do because he's just like he's not a doctor he's not a prosthetist he's not anything I'm just like we have to just go back to the hotel room I take my leg off and you get a whole bunch of booze and we just sit here and get hammered for two days like so yeah we and we drove around so we did the the UK thing I think we went up to Scotland and then around to like Netherlands Germany Austria Italy France and how about your grandparents we visited them of course and it was a really good feeling like just pulling up to that house and having him sort of just he's just standing at the doorway and you know he just looked really

he was it was like a mixture of sadness happiness and pride all in one and I think he had a bit of a cry and gave me a hug and then turned back into his stoic self and said right well gin and tonic then I work broadcast podcast you're listening to conversations with Richard Feidler a lot of people I've had on the program who have disabilities are often quite charismatic people charming like you are as well is this the way you've always been or is it more like a side of yourself that's really had to come to the fore since your accident to help other people through their feelings of awkwardness I think it's a combination I mean there are things that I would say to make someone feel comfortable with my disability but I don't think that my personality has necessarily changed at its core but I think it's always good to be able to try to make someone feel comfortable with your disability because I would otherwise forget if I meet someone for the first time like the first thing they're thinking of is like dude's got no hands dude's got no hands like what do we say can I mention that and that must be awful even though I don't think about it it's just something that would plague them and we would be better if we're just on the same page and are comfortable to talk about things so it's just a preamble to get through you talked yourself to play guitar again how is that possible oh so I I went through many different designs of how I could possibly play a guitar again and they were all crap except for one so I was pretty determined that I was going to try and make this work and it was kind of strange because you kind of have to work backwards when solving problems like that you got to think to yourself well what outcome do I want you know I don't need to become Stevie Ray Vaughan what do I like about playing the guitar you know I like the process I like playing it I like playing with my friends I like writing music and you don't need the intricate abilities that a lead guitarist does to achieve those goals and so I started thinking more about how I could approximate guitar playing so playing like a kind of rhythm-y type thing such that I can still play with a band and I can still write music but I'm not playing like some fancy lead guitar and so then I started thinking about different ways that I could have a a chord formation of buttons that I could press then I thought well rather than doing a chord formation let's make the strings work for us and tune them in a way that if you are only able to press down one fret it's going to play one chord and then you can move that up fret by fret slide guitar there you go slide guitar proper open tuning tune the idea down to a D and and away you go and then I well I had to design something that would emulate like a slide something that I could hold with my hooks and I converted my Stratocaster and I raised the action on it and changed the pickups and put flat wound strings and and then I also made a little attachment that I could put my right hook into that would hold a pick it's like a pick holder it would screw in and then put it on my lap and sort of augment the position of the hooks and you know the learning to play it again was nothing because I had the theory behind me I already knew how to play the guitar it was just the physicality I needed to get over and the real pleasure of it anyways like you say is playing and singing with friends yeah that's right yeah and the funny thing was is after I did that I took the music and guitar playing further than I ever did because I feel like those old challenges of being self-conscious about starting a band and writing music and doing all those things kind of paled in comparison to the challenge that I just overcome so I was like well why don't we just do it let's start a band and write songs and we recorded them and played gigs around it well you know we went terribly good but the fact that we did it was more of an achievement than when I had hands now you're a DJ you've been doing gigs all over the world as a DJ yeah that's right yeah and I did sort of make some mention at the start that

[Transcript] Conversations / Stories of starting over: DJ Hookie

perhaps you're living the kind of life you're doing things that maybe you normally wouldn't have thought of doing you've got a different kind of mindset this problem-solving mindset might have led you to say yes a whole lot to things in the past you might not have said so often to it yeah quite possibly I mean you know what I was mentioning before about that sort of thinking differently to

overcome problems I guess plays a bit into the DJing because like Chris and I who I run the brand with and who we DJ together took a completely different approach to becoming DJs we completely

started from the end and worked backwards so we we made sure we identified some fairly false assumptions about what it takes to become a DJ which is that A you need to know how to DJ B that you need equipment or you need to invest in annoying clothes or that you need to hone your craft and send mixtapes out to people so we just sort of started from the end and we started our own club night and put ourselves on as the DJs even though we didn't know how to DJ really and two things happen there one if you're convincing enough you can convince people that you're supposed to be there so now you have a headline slot the second thing is you learn pretty quickly how to do it once you're thrown in the deep end which is kind of like losing both hands you know what I mean if you're in front of 500 people on your opening night as I was and you've just learned where the play button was you're going to learn pretty quickly how to DJ and we did and that kind of just that went really quickly and it was only a few months of running our own club night that we started getting asked to DJ at other places and we were kind of like I can't believe people want to pay us to do this but fine like we'll take it and we just got better and better and then we eventually we just had our brand that was intrinsically tied in with our party which had the same name as us as DJs and then we were playing gigs at other clubs then we got invited to play at music festivals and even host stages at music festivals and play internationally and all sorts of stuff and yeah we still DJ today it's like 15 years later or something it's been kind of silly it's brilliant and it's been brilliant speaking with you Tom I really love this conversation with you thank you so much it's been fantastic Tom Nash's book about his life story is called hook line and sinner and it's just been released you've been listening to a podcast of conversations with Richard Feidler for more conversations interviews please go to the website abc.net.au