

Living with one

By Lindsey Erdody | Inside | February 20, 2012

My 3-year-old cousin walks over and touches the scar at the end of my left arm. She stares, eyes wide, head tilted.

"Where's your hand?" she asks.

"I lost it in a car accident."

Her eyebrows scrunch as she tries to work out what that means.

"So it's in your car?" she says.

It takes more explaining before she starts to understand that my hand isn't coming back, that it's not out there somewhere, waiting for me to bring it home. Her uncensored curiosity is refreshing. Most adults, I've learned, avoid such blunt questions out of fear of being impolite.

My young cousin has asked me the same questions repeatedly for years, but she's still trying to make sense of it, just like I was at first. My accident happened three years ago, but it will always be with me every time I button my shirt or type an email.

This isn't the story of how I survived the crash.

It's the story of how I found my way through all the days since then.

A few more miles, I thought, as my eyes tried to focus on the empty highway.

A few more miles, and I'll stop for caffeine.

A few more miles, and I'll get a break.

A few more miles, and I'll be fine.

It was almost 8 a.m. on Sunday, Feb. 8, 2009, and I was driving south on Interstate 65, heading back to Bloomington after a conference in Michigan. I started driving at about 3 a.m. and slept at a rest stop earlier, but it wasn't enough. Blinking couldn't keep me awake, and soon I drifted off to sleep.

My eyes snapped open after I felt my car bumping across uneven pavement. My 1999 white Chevy Blazer was drifting into the median near the 215-mile marker, just before the Rensselaer, Ind., exit. In a panic, I threw my steering wheel to the right. Too hard. I tried to turn it back to the left, but my car started to slowly tip to the right, as if it was happening in slow motion. I felt my head scraping against the ceiling and my skin peeling away. I heard the metal of my car's roof sliding across the pavement and the driver's window bursting. I smelled burnt rubber and blood.

Then it all just stopped.

My car was upside down on the right shoulder of the highway, and my window was crushed, leaving only inches of space. I unsnapped my seat belt, fell onto the dashboard and tried to escape.

A semi rumbled past me as I screamed for help. I thought no one was coming.

My eyes wandered, and then I saw it — the end of my left coat sleeve with no hand lying outside it. A bloody piece of my thumb dangled, unattached to anything. I saw bits and pieces of other fingers scattered around me, but my mind couldn't comprehend it. I told my hand to move and could feel those

fingers wiggling.

As I continued screaming for help, a woman appeared at the side of my Blazer. She saw the SUV on the side of the road and had stopped to help. When she bent down to talk to me, her face was only inches from my bleeding head and arm.

"Can you hear me?" she asked.

"Yeah, get me out of here!"

She told me her name was Sarah and that she was driving to a bridal convention in Indianapolis. She had already called 911 and wanted to keep me awake until help arrived, so she kept asking questions.

"What are you studying?"

"Journalism."

"Where do you go to school?"

"IU."

Sarah asked for my mom's phone number, but I refused to give it to her. I didn't want to upset my family. She persisted, and I eventually caved.

We talked for what seemed like hours, even though it was only minutes until the ambulance pulled up. It took the Jaws of Life to open my passenger door, and I had to roll over onto my back before the EMTs could drag me out.

"Wait," I mumbled. "My hand ... You need to make sure my hand comes with me."

They didn't know what I was talking about.

"My hand ..."

I rolled to the left and dragged the remaining attached fragments of hand onto my stomach. The EMTs stopped talking. Ignoring their silence, I tried not to look at it.

Now that I was out in the open, the cold air stung. I was shivering. My teeth chattered.

"I think she's having a seizure," an EMT said.

"No ... I'm ... not ...," I tried to say. "I'm ... just ... cold."

They loaded me onto the ambulance and told me they were taking me to a helicopter to fly to Indianapolis.

The helicopter ride was peaceful.

Warm blankets were wrapped around me, and an oxygen mask helped me breathe. I felt safe and oddly comfortable. It still felt like my hand was there. I could move my muscles to open and close it, but I wasn't sure if it was working. I convinced myself that because I could feel it, my hand would be okay.

I let myself sleep.

My eyes opened to chaos in the emergency room at Methodist Hospital in Indianapolis. Doctors and nurses whipped back and forth around my gurney. People on both sides of me ran scissors across my body, cutting my clothes off. As an IV was hooked up to me, I was pushed and shoved to a bed.

The news from the surgeon confirmed the worst.

"I have to amputate your left hand," he said.

For the first time that day, I cried.

"Are you sure?" I asked.

He showed me the X-ray and asked if I wanted to see the photo he had taken on his phone. I said no, but he showed me anyway. I guess he felt I needed proof.

The surgeon was right. My hand wasn't a hand. It was crushed bones and looked like it had gone through a blender.

The bad news continued as he talked about my head injuries. Close to 40 percent of my scalp had been scraped away. He said they were going to try and stretch the remaining scalp to cover it, but additional surgery would be necessary.

He held the clipboard for me as I signed the consent forms. I cried as I agreed to the operations because I knew I didn't have any other choice.

After the surgery, I woke up and immediately looked at my arm. It was wrapped in a thick white bandage and rounded off where my hand used to be. Even seeing it, I didn't believe it. If I closed my eyes, I could still feel the muscles in my arm working as if I were moving my fingers.

Then I felt my head. It was wrapped in the same kind of bandage. All of my shoulder-length hair was gone.

By now, my parents and two older sisters had arrived. When my mom and dad saw me, they burst into tears.

"Stop crying," I said. They cried harder.

I slept for most of that day, randomly waking up and listening to my family's conversations. They wanted me to drop out of IU. I wanted to stay enrolled. They wanted me to come home to recover. I wanted to get back to Bloomington as soon as I could.

They thought my good attitude was a cover up. They were waiting for me to break down. Throughout the week they asked if I needed to speak with a therapist, but I always said no.

My accident had happened. My hand was gone. I needed to adjust. There was nothing I could do about it except deal with it, so I took the practical approach.

My sister Shannon, a physical therapist, had seen many amputees through the years. My attitude, she said, was unusual. After losing a limb, most people get mad, hate the world, and sink into depression.

I didn't want to waste time. I needed to learn to be independent and adjust to this new way of life, and the sooner I figured it out, the better. I wasn't always like this though. A cut or a bruise used to result in complaints for days. But this time, it wasn't a scar that was going to fade away. This was permanent, and the sooner I faced it, the sooner I could get back to my life.

An occupational therapist visited one afternoon to orient me to my new life. I wanted to sleep, but she had other plans.

We started with a diagram on tying shoes with one hand. I grabbed a tennis shoe and thought the technique was easy. Then she showed me how to button jeans and shirts and zip pants, practicing on clothes the therapist had brought with her.

It seemed simple enough, in theory. But on the morning I was getting ready to leave the hospital, I struggled with my jeans. The one-handed method I'd practiced was much harder when the clothes were actually on me.

My sister Nicole was responsible for driving me home to Bay City, Mich. She said she would only feel safe if she was the one driving me, and I trusted her.

Even so, I was nervous. The closer we got to the car, the more I started shaking. I wanted to leave the hospital, but I didn't want to get in a car. Thinking about being on a highway again was a nightmare.

As we drove away, I tried not to look out the windows. I laid down and fell asleep.

Months later, I learned the reason I'd passed out so quickly — my family had asked the hospital to give me something before we left. As irritated as I was when I found out, I understood the reasoning. I wasn't ready for that drive yet. Nicole and I weren't driving past where my accident was, but it was still a highway, and it was still scary.

That night, back home in Michigan, my dad told me he was determined to never let me get hurt again. He said he wanted to bubble wrap me and the house, so the family would be safe. I laughed, knowing he was kidding, mostly.

When he wasn't plotting how to keep me safe, my dad was worrying about my future. He called news outlets looking for someone to reassure me that I didn't need two hands to be a journalist.

I appreciated it, but knew I'd be fine. I was right handed so I knew I could still write, and that was all I needed.

The next week at home was my trial and error period. I couldn't open the "get well soon" cards easily; I couldn't cut chicken with a knife; I couldn't tie things; I couldn't put eyeliner on the same way. Getting in and out of the car felt different, opening bottles or jars wasn't the same, putting in my contacts took longer than usual, holding my purse became

an annoyance.

I also had trouble taking care of my injuries. I had to work hard to wrap my arm, and my mom had to wrap my head.

The first time I looked in the bathroom mirror at my head without the bandages, I thought I was an extra in a zombie movie. I didn't cry. I just stared. Stitches crisscrossed everywhere, and blood oozed from areas that hadn't formed scabs yet. Almost all of my hair was gone. It was a bloody, gushy mess, and I still wasn't ready to try wrapping it myself.

I wasn't used to doing things slowly or asking for help. I didn't like it.

After one week at home, I was ready for IU. I needed to go back and prove to myself and my family that I could survive.

The first class I went back to was a lab for my introduction to computing class. I sat down and faced my first problem. To log in to IU computers I needed to press control, alt, and delete at the same time on the keyboard, but those three keys are relatively far from each other. I tried once, didn't get it. I tried twice, still nothing. I tried again, getting frustrated.

Just before I asked for help, I gave myself a short pep talk. I could figure this out. I couldn't give up now. I tried again, slowly making sure I had a finger on each key. I felt a short burst of happiness that faded when I had to peck my five-word passphrase. The single finger approach was way too slow, so I knew I needed to learn a new method.

The University offered me help for taking notes and typing homework, but I shrugged it off. I didn't see the point in not learning to do it myself. I wasn't going to be dependent for the rest of my life.

I learned the best way to take notes in class was on a big notebook that didn't move easily. For typing, the easiest approach was to keep my hand centered on the keyboard and to use all five fingers. After a couple months, I was back at what felt like full speed.

My classes were the least of my worries. I still had to carry my meals through the Read dining halls and find some way to pick off the pepperonis from my pizza. I hate pepperoni.

The therapist had offered me things that could help, like curved knives that rolled back and forth so having the fork to steady the food wasn't needed, or sticky material that kept jars and bottles in place so unscrewing caps was easy. But I declined.

I went to an IU basketball game, and when the Hoosiers scored I raised my arms to clap.

The next few seconds were confusing. I learned to clap in my own way by hitting my leg with my right hand, or when appropriate, just cheering.

This new life required more adjustments than I had realized. It was months before I began to feel comfortable again, or as comfortable as I could be doing everything differently.

The first anniversary of the crash, February 8, 2010, crept up on me. It was like a time machine had taken me back to that morning on the highway. It was the one day of the year I gave myself permission to feel sorry for myself. I didn't want to see anyone or be social. I didn't want to drive.

The next anniversary was the same. I didn't want to be positive. For 24 hours, I dropped the can-do attitude.

But then February 9th came, and I was back in the present where I was focused on moving forward.

When I started thinking about getting my left hand back, I never imagined I would have to drive past the place I lost it. But if I wanted the best prosthetic, I needed to be at the Rehabilitation Institute of Chicago, and to get there, I didn't have a choice. Mile marker 215 stood in my way.

I've driven past it more than 20 times.

Almost every time, I think about how this must be some cruel karma — in order to get my new prosthetic I have to drive past the exact spot where it all began.

Sometimes when I drive past it I remember that day and cry. Sometimes I'm on the phone or singing to the radio, and it goes by without my notice. Sometimes I wonder what it was like to see my car rolling across the highway.

Two months before the three-year anniversary, I'm driving past it again on my way to Chicago. As I go through this part of Indiana and see the exit I could have stopped at, I get angry. It was only a few hundred yards away. If I had only kept my eyes open for a few more seconds, it could have made all the difference.

On this day, I'm mad, but after I drive past it, I shake the negative thoughts out of my head and keep my eyes on the road. No matter where I'm driving or how long I'm driving for, this will always keep me awake. It might not always be on my mind, but I can always feel it. I can feel the tingles up and down my arm when I think about moving it. I lost my left hand, but it will always be with me.

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