ONLINE ONLY: VIDEO
A look at my everyday life without my hand, including how I use my new prosthetic one, and my battle with the insurance company to get it.
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.

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.
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 any- 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...
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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.

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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 roll- ing 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 taken, 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.

Regaining what I lost

Today, I use a myo electric prosthetic. It is the most realistic option in terms of physical appearance and functionality.

First I put a special lining on my arm. In order for the prosthetic to work, I have to make sure the magnetic pieces on the lining match up with the appropriate muscles on my arm. These magnetic washers pick up on the signal from my muscles and send it to the hand.

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 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.

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

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.

After leaving for IU, my family had a small birthday party for me.

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