

Imagine being wide awake but barely able to speak, move or even cry. That was Allison Zopel's waking nightmare. Here she tells what it's like to spend two years...

“Trapped inside my body”

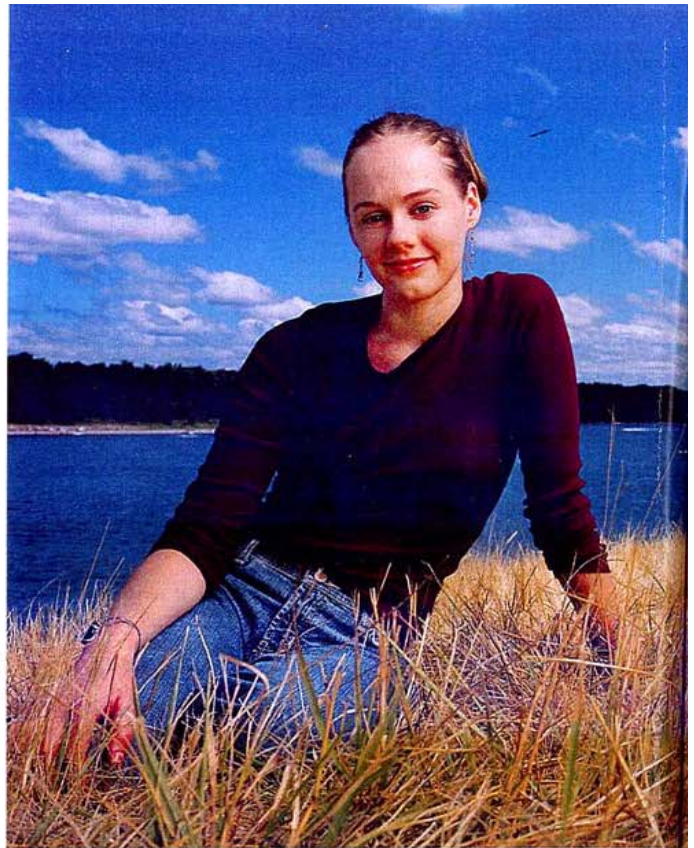
As told to Mary K. Moore

from the moment I woke up on December 23, 1999, I couldn't shake the feeling that something awful was about to happen. Such foreboding seemed irrational: Outside my parents' Wausau, Wisconsin, home, the snow formed picturesque drifts; our Christmas tree was lit and decorated, presents piled beneath it; holiday tunes played on the radio. It was the perfect culmination to an all-but-perfect year. At 20, I'd just finished training to be a massage therapist, my family and I were performing around the state with our jazz band and I'd even met a new guy, Jesse, while on a trip to British Columbia.

At 6 P.M. that night, I set out to pick up my older sister, Wendy, in Madison, two hours away. It was already dark, the snow was getting heavier, and by the time I was halfway to Wendy's house, I was completely spooked. I remember murmuring a prayer, just to calm myself down. No sooner had I finished than I hit black ice and spun around, ending up sideways across the road.



Christmas 2000: I'm propped up, barely awake, on my sister's shoulder.



The next thing I saw were the blinding headlights of an SUV barreling straight for my driver's door. I was certain I was going to die. Time slowed down. I hurled myself as far into the passenger seat as my seat belt would allow, kicking up my left leg so it wouldn't be crushed. My last thought before impact was, so, *this* is how I go?

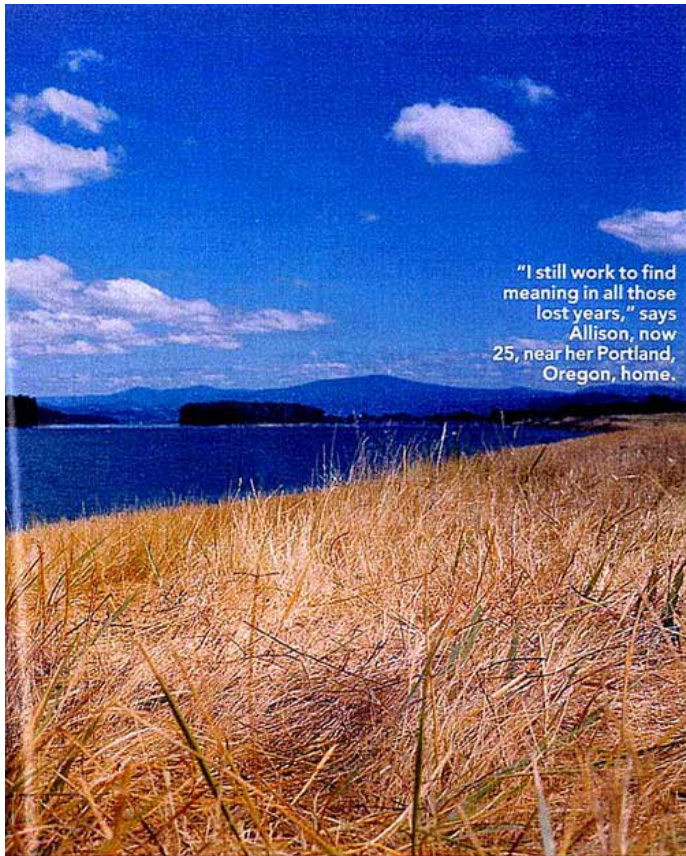
My car landed with the grill facing down into a ditch. By the time the police arrived to investigate the accident, a passerby had pulled me out of the front seat. I was trembling but appeared uninjured; even my car was battered but driveable. A police officer asked if I wanted to get checked out at the hospital, but I told him, no, I was fine. I was scared, and I just wanted the whole ordeal to be over. I seemed so OK that the officer on the scene didn't try to stop me from driving myself home.

My family celebrated Christmas, and everyone was all the more thankful since I'd survived the accident. But as time went on, I started to feel anything but healthy. My head felt like it was going to explode from pressure. My vision was fuzzy around the edges. And my hearing was strangely acute: Traffic noises and even the chirping of birds were nearly deafening. At first I hid my symptoms, afraid that if I leveled with my parents, they would insist I go to the hospital; I was terrified of having surgery or any other invasive procedure. But after six weeks, I couldn't hide my discomfort. Once I told my parents, we decided that I needed to go to the hospital for tests, including a CAT scan. They all came back clean. I would later learn that swelling in my brain had just begun, so it hadn't been picked up by the X-ray. Still, even without a clear medical diagnosis, I knew something was truly wrong with me. Finally, one night after dinner with my parents, I began to feel dizzy and intensely exhausted. I told them that I had to lie down.

When I woke up the next day, I couldn't move.

“Basic pleasures were

TOP: REK INSTEDT



"I still work to find meaning in all those lost years," says Allison, now 25, near her Portland, Oregon, home.

SUDDEN BODY SHUTDOWN

I remember opening my eyes. I was lying on the living room couch, and my mother was standing over me, begging me to tell her what was wrong. I wanted to scream for help, but I couldn't. I wanted to cry, but I couldn't remember how to. I wanted to point to my head, which felt like it might burst, but I couldn't move my arms. I'd never been so scared in all my life. It was like being at the bottom of my own grave and watching the dirt fall onto me.

Those first couple of days, I could only hear and see the world around me. I was a silent prisoner in my own body. What if I stay like this forever? I wondered. This was the most awful fate I could think of, even worse than dying. My parents never stopped talking to me, soothing me, saying everything was going to be OK, and after a few days of sheer terror, I did improve somewhat. I was gradually able to move my arms again. Soon I was able to say basic phrases, but mostly only things that reflected my inner confusion, like "I don't know."

One word I could say right away was "no," which I blurted whenever anyone brought up taking me to the hospital. My parents listened to me, although there were moments they wanted to scoop me up against my will and take me to the doctor: I was grateful that

they respected my wishes, but now we all realize how dangerous that was and how easily this whole story—and my life—could have ended in tragedy. We just believed that any day I would pull out of it.

My friends and family would come to visit and tell me about their day while I desperately tried to focus. My mind was like a file cabinet with all of its contents spilled onto the floor. Jesse would call long-distance, and my mother held the phone to my ear while he talked to me. Mostly, they all made awkward one-sided conversation. Not everyone was sympathetic to my circumstances: "Just make her get up and go back to work," I heard several relatives tell my parents. They thought I just needed to snap out of it. As if I could have! At the time, just breathing felt like a full-time job.

As the weeks passed, I functioned like a zombie. My mother would tell me it was time to shower, and I'd stagger into the bathroom while she stood nearby. Once, she noticed that I came out with bright red skin. I'd been standing under the water, utterly unaware that it was scalding hot. My brain didn't register hunger or taste, either, so my mother would have to tell me to eat. As a result my five-foot, three-inch, 125-pound body gradually withered to 100 pounds. I spent my days sleeping and being propped in front of the television. I couldn't understand the story lines, though; it was all just flickering images on the screen. The most basic pleasures were stolen from me—tasting food, talking to friends, driving a car or even laughing.

The cruelest part was that I understood everything I was missing out on. It would have been a blessing to have been unconscious instead of living like an apparition. The calls and visits from friends had slowed to a trickle, no one really knew what to say to me and all I could say to them were one-word answers or short phrases—yes, no, I don't care, I don't know. Jesse never forgot me, though. No matter where he was, he'd call to talk to me. He often asked to come visit. But I said no; I didn't want him to see me like that. After a year, stranded in my own world, I started to lose hope. I even wished sometimes that my life would end.

Had an accident? See a doctor!

Could a doctor have helped Allison recover faster? Most likely, yes—and that's why it's crucial to get medical help immediately after any blow to the head. "Each year there are up to 2 million cases of traumatic brain injury (TBI) and many go undiagnosed. Some sufferers assume if they have no outward injuries, they're OK," says Payal Fadia, M.D., brain injury and stroke rehabilitation specialist at Baylor College of Medicine in Houston, Texas. "Days or weeks later they may start having headaches, fatigue, mental confusion and anxiety, but by then, they may not connect the accident with their symptoms. Bottom line: Although there's no quick or certain cure for TBIs, the sooner you're diagnosed, the quicker you can begin medication or physical therapy—which greatly increase your chances of making a full recovery."

INCHING TOWARD RECOVERY

My family stood by my side the entire time. My mother patiently performed Reiki, a Japanese form of alternative healing, on me, and took me to an aquatic therapist who massaged my limbs. Wendy and my big brothers, Justin and Adam, were just as dedicated. I have vague memories of Christmas 2000, which I spent propped against Wendy's shoulder while she opened presents for me.

While trying to recover those two years, I had a lot of time to think about my life and what God wanted me to take from this experience. Desperate to sort my jumbled thoughts, I tried to write. It took me four months to simply be able to touch my pencil to a notepad, the paper felt so far away. Finally, I began to scrawl

and found I could write some words. They were so childlike at first, and I was embarrassed. But my writing did improve over time, and when I finally showed my parents months later, they were stunned and thrilled. I had been able to write (continued on page 163)

stolen from me—tasting food, driving, even laughing.))

what I could not say. "Please, come sit by my side and hold my hand...I need something to hold on to from this world to help pull me back into it. Please, tell me that you know I'm scared, and let me know that the world has not changed so much since I've left it." It wasn't just my writing that was coming back; I was starting to be able to *feel* again.

Over the next year I began to speak in full sentences rather than muttering short phrases. Encouraged, I made my way back to the piano. Music had been everything to me, and I'd missed it. First I played only basic chords. Within a month I could understand the notes again. I messed up constantly, but feeling the vibration of the music from the pedal to my foot to my fingertips was exhilarating.

In October 2001 I invited Jesse to come see me. He had dated someone else, but we always had maintained our friendship. He asked to stay with my family and help me while I recovered. Once he moved in with us, Jesse and I quickly became serious. Despite some of my obvious limitations—I still got disoriented and needed to spend most of my time at home—we felt like any other couple falling in love. He accompanied me to a retreat in Asheville, North Carolina, and then in October 2003, we decided to move in together near his family in Portland, Oregon. At first, it was difficult to be physically intimate. I was so tired all the time and focused on just getting well. But Jesse was willing to wait for me, and over time, being close has gotten easier.

Other challenges, however, have remained: Because any changes in elevation created a sense of unbearable pressure in my head, we couldn't fly anywhere. Sometimes we couldn't even drive to friends' houses if they were slightly uphill. Plus I'm not the same carefree girl he met back-packing. Then, I was easygoing and spontaneous. Now I'm much more serious and focused. I have to be, just to get through the day. I used to love to go hiking, but now

I usually don't have the energy. And there's always the danger that I might become disoriented and fall. One bump on the head, and I could very well disappear inside myself again. Sometimes I'm afraid to sleep because it reminds me of being trapped inside my body, yearning to escape.

Last year, I finally agreed to meet with a neuropsychologist and underwent hours of verbal reasoning and puzzle-solving tests. I was told what I had suspected all along: I had suffered a traumatic brain injury. As I described the last two years, the doctor assured me that my bizarre symptoms were perfectly normal for someone with my condition. Looking back, I know I was in no shape to make decisions about my medical care. And I realize I had no reason to fear going to the doctor; seeking help could have hastened my recovery.

Now, five years since the accident, I'm able to drive short distances and can work a part-time sales job. I can sing again, and my first CD, *Music From Within*, was released just a few months ago. I'm still trying to forge something positive out of those misplaced years. Recently, I called a nearby school that specializes in treating brain injury; after I spoke to one of the counselors, she asked me to give a presentation about my experience to the program's instructors. Giving the speech confirmed for me that I was no longer helpless, voiceless. Since then I've planned visits to other schools and hospitals, hoping to shed light on the uncertain place where I spent so many years. As for me and Jesse, we measure my recovery day to day, and we hope to get married.

Although I feel lucky in so many ways, I continue to mourn the loss of my early twenties. So much of my life is still trapped in that fog, but every now and then the haze lifts, and I get a glimpse of the person I was before the accident. Slowly but deliberately, I keep moving toward her. ©

Allison Zopel's CD is available from musicfromwithin.com. Mary K. Moore has written for Newsweek and Redbook.

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