

## With Both Arms

By Miles Ryan Fisher

The moment I hit the ground and heard my right arm snap, I thought about how much time I'd lose from work. Then the scaffold slowly toppled backward, and when I held my right arm up to shield myself from it, I could see the fracture. And still, all I could think was *how much time is this gonna cost me*. That's the last thought I remembered before I passed out.

After I awoke in the hospital, my wife, Marianne, sat there in the room with our three-year-old daughter, Alexa, asleep in her arms. It took a little while for my vision to adjust and for my mind to catch up to what I was seeing. What I saw was a look of concern on her face rather than relief, maybe even gratefulness, that I'd come to. She didn't tell me why. Instead, she waited for the doctor to come in and let me know that my arm had been amputated.

"Amputated?" I asked, and part of me didn't believe the doctor right way. "But I only fell a few feet."

The doctor explained that the scaffold hadn't simply crushed my arm—it had caused the already fractured bone to sever important blood vessels. Without them, blood could no longer circulate. Without circulation, the tissue in my arm would die and gangrene would set in, and the doctor couldn't allow that to happen.

My thoughts went straight back to *how much is this gonna cost me*. Only now, it was *how is this gonna affect the rest of our lives*. Sure, I'd go on worker's comp, but that wouldn't pay off a house or a college education. And without my dominant arm, I was useless at the one kind of work I'd always done. I'd have to find something new—something *completely* new. As I recovered, all I could think was, *Who's going to hire me now? Probably someone out of pity*.

When I felt well enough to get out of bed, a different type of pain became acute. It happened the first time I picked up Alexa since the accident. She giggled and asked me to throw her in the air.

I couldn't.

But that wasn't what hurt most. What hurt most was the weight of her in my one arm. She was growing bigger by the day, weighing more by the hour, and I realized that with just one arm, the days of picking her up were much more limited than they'd have otherwise been. That led my mind to descend into all the ways I'd be more limited than natural. Swimming with her in the lake. Playing catch with her in the yard. Shooting a basketball with her in the park. I wanted her to be better than me at all of these things, but I wanted that to come about naturally—not because of some five-foot fall.

So I stayed in bed most of the day. At least, until Alexa was off to our mother-in-law's and Marianne was off to work. Then I'd wander out to the family room and watch the same episode of Sports Center over and over and even drink a few beers before taking a nap. A lot of times, I was sleeping when Marianne and Alexa arrived home, and Marianne started making dinner as Alexa watched episodes of Dora. Marianne would flip on the bedroom lights when dinner was almost ready and make me come out to eat.

"Get up. Dinner's ready," she'd say. "You haven't seen your daughter all day."

And I knew she was right. I knew that I wasn't worth much to my daughter, and probably much less than that to my wife. Marianne was doing everything, I was doing nothing, and Alexa was just kind of there, along for the ride. The only thing I would do, was that I wouldn't open a beer until after we put her to bed. That, of course, didn't leave much for Marianne.

“It’s time to brush your teeth, Alexa,” Marianne said.

Alexa walked over to me and held out her hand. “Will you come with me, daddy?”

I nodded and got out of my chair, taking her little right hand with my left.

“Want me to put the toothpaste on your toothbrush?” she asked me when we got to the bathroom.

“How about I do it for you,” I said. Toothpaste I could do. I could put her little panda bear toothbrush on the counter, unscrew the toothpaste, pick it up, and give it a little squeeze. Even when her toothbrush graduated from panda bears to solid colors, this was something I’d always be able to do for her, long past the time she’d want me to.

She picked up her toothbrush, opened her mouth with a cartoon-like smile, and began brushing back and forth, up and down. Toothpaste got all over her mouth, her coordination that of a tyke. But it was worse than usual.

“Alexa,” I said, “you’re making a mess.”

“But I’m practicing,” she said with a mouthful of toothpaste.

“I can see that,” I said. “But you’re making a mess.”

“I thought you’re happy that I’m practicing,” she said.

“I am happy,” I told her. “I’m very happy. But the toothpaste is all over your mouth and it’s dripping on your shirt.”

“It’s more hard with this hand,” she said.

“With what hand?” I asked. Then I realized, she was brushing her teeth with her right hand, even though she was left-handed. “Why are you using the wrong hand?”

“It’s not wrong,” she said. “It’s just more hard. Just like you.”

That’s when I realized that she really *was* along for the ride. She was along for *my* ride, learning to do things with her opposite hand just because her father had to do the same. She had a choice and chose to support me in her own way.

“If you keep doing this,” I said, “then you’ll become ambidextrous.”

“What’s am-bee … am-bee-dix-tris mean?” she asked.

“It means that you can do things equally with both arms,” I explained to her.

And I’ll never forget how she shrugged like it was no big deal and very matter-of-factly said, “Then I’ll do that.”

I looked at her, this tiny girl, and saw someone who had so much ahead of her without even knowing it. And I thought to myself, *what if she really does become ambidextrous? All because of some five-foot fall her father had.*

That night, after Marianne and I tucked Alexa into bed, I kissed her on the forehead and said, “Goodnight, my ambidextrous Alexa.”

“With both arms,” she said as she gave me a hug and giggled.

After we turned off her bedroom lights, I poured myself a glass of water and sat down at the computer. I was going to search and search until I found something new. Even if it meant checking the box that told them, yes, I am disabled.

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