



It's a girl thing: Feminine touches, sunny tones and all shades of pink sprout up in spring fashions.

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Woman who survived coma was 'screaming from the inside'

It's not like in the movies.

In the movies, a young woman lies peacefully in a hospital bed. Her eyes are closed. She's breathing deeply. "She's in a coma," someone says softly. "Everyone hopes she'll wake up someday."

And then, if the movie has a happy ending, the day comes when the young girl opens her eyes and smiles. She recognizes her loved ones and speaks to them. She's out of the coma. She's awake. The sun streams through the window.

It's not always like that in real life.

Allison Zopel can tell you about being in a



MARGIE BOULÉ

coma. She can tell you slowly, carefully. Sometimes she repeats herself. But she's determined to explain what it's like to be in a coma and then begin to return to a conscious state.

Allison is 24 and living in Portland. For the last four years she's missed out on the college classes and career

beginnings, parties and hikes and adventures other people enjoy in their 20s. For most of those years she's been minimally conscious, barely able (sometimes unable) to respond to people around her.

But today she's much better than she was.

It was snowing. Allison was driving from her parents' home in Wausau, Wis., to Madison to bring her sister home from college for the holidays. It was Dec. 23, 1999.

Her car hit black ice and began to spin. When it stopped, Allison says, "I was sideways across the fast lane. I looked out my window and saw an SUV coming at me at 70 miles per hour. I literally looked up and said, 'See you later. I'm out of here.' I didn't think I would make it."

Allison was wearing a seat belt, so when the crash occurred "my body was kept stationary, and my brain took the force of the blow within my skull."

Allison's car was wrecked, but miraculously

there was no blood. Allison was in shock. "Because I didn't see any blood, I thought I was fine."

Tests soon after showed no internal bleeding in the brain. Unlike most brain-injured patients, who typically fall into a coma soon after injury, Allison's brain had begun swelling very slowly.

Allison knew something was wrong, but she was afraid to tell her family. Her mother, Sherry Zopel, says one day Allison said, "I'm losing touch with who I am." Sherry thought her daughter was speaking philosophically. "I said, 'You're 21.' I didn't think that was abnormal." Was this an identity crisis, Sherry wondered? "She appeared fine, but I could sense everything wasn't fine."

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Boulé: Friend offers to help through recovery process

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Allison says her body began shutting down. "By the sixth week, I was losing vision and my breathing became more and more shallow." Allison quit working, saying she couldn't handle the stimulation of the workplace. But she refused to see a doctor. "I was over 18. They couldn't force me."

Finally, in early February 2000, "I distinctly remember having dinner with my parents at their house. I got up from the table and said, 'Something's terribly wrong. I need to go lie down.' ... I didn't get up for a year and a half."

Allison fell into a state of minimal consciousness. "It was very frustrating. Lying there I could hear

everyone speaking to me, but I wasn't able to respond and tell them what was happening."

It took a while for Allison's family and the medical community to understand what was wrong with Allison; brain injuries are often hard to diagnose. Family friends suggested it might be depression. Finally, it became clear she was dealing with a brain injury caused by the auto accident.

Allison spent her days sleeping or lying with open eyes, unaware of most of what was going on around her. With assistance, she could shuffle away from the bed. But she could not respond to conversation except to say "I don't know," or "It doesn't matter."

"That's all I mumbled for the first year," Allison says.

She was not sound asleep, she says. "It felt as if my soul had retracted into the back of my body. ... Everything and everyone appeared to be very far away. I could see because I was in an open-eye coma. I knew who everyone was. I could hear everyone around me. But they couldn't hear me screaming from the inside, asking them to help pull me out."

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ALLISON ZOPPEL

Allison may have looked at rest, but inside, she says, she was working very hard to heal. "It felt like in the accident all the information I had picked up from birth was tossed out of order. I was lying there trying to put a lifetime's worth of information back in order. I was extremely busy."

And the loving, well-meaning efforts of people sometimes interfered with her recovery, Allison says. "Many people will come in and talk about their day, or open the blinds, turn on music, turn on the TV." While Allison emphasizes every person's brain injury is different, for her those distractions "were horrific."

She wanted to focus on the recovery work she was doing in her head, she says. "I couldn't reach into their world. All I could do was be in my world."

Slowly, as months passed, Allison began to be more aware of her surroundings. Before she could speak, she began to write. "I felt this insatiable need to describe this experience." She wrote, she says, to express frustration. "The first thing

I wrote was a poem. It starts out, 'On the inside I feel like a Picasso painting.'"

As she recovered more and began to move slowly around her parents' home, Allison began to play the piano again. The first time she sat at the keyboard, "I closed my eyes and cringed. The sound was so hard on my head." But she kept playing and began to compose what she calls "healing music."

Two years after her injury, a friend of Allison's from Alaska, Jesse Syverson, came to visit in Wisconsin. He offered to help her through her recovery process, not realizing how difficult it would be.

"I really cared about her as a friend," Jesse says. "To be honest, it's been the hardest thing I've ever been part of, based on the severity of her injury." The friends, who are now a couple, "had to really get serious. Some great lessons have been learned."

Jesse made sacrifices in the last two years to care for Allison as she continued to recover. He postponed college; he'll go back in the fall. A few months ago he and Allison moved to Portland to be near Jesse's family.

Allison continues to recover. She'll apply for part-time work soon. She wants to release a CD of her healing music. She wants to speak to brain-injury groups. "And I'm now in the process of writing a book... so I can help others."

Allison lost several years of her life to a brain injury, but her anger has dissipated. Now she's grateful for what she's learned. "The miraculous part of it is our body can heal itself," she says. "Some miracles just take time."

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