

**E**ven after all the messages, briefs and warnings, the meaning didn't hit home until it happened to me. I had to be at work Tuesday, so I left Sunday, with a long 16-hour drive ahead of me. At midnight, I stopped to sleep, then headed out again at 6 a.m. for the last stretch. With less than six hours left to go, I started thinking I was almost home. Then, it happened.

I felt a thump when my tire hit a hole. It was slight, but my car veered off the pavement and onto the edge of the shoulder. Rocks and dirt flew up around the tires and right door. As I pulled the wheel hard to the left to get back on the pavement, I saw a car coming directly toward me. My foot slammed the brake, with my heart beating so fast I began to shake uncontrollably. "This can't be happening," I thought.

Again, I pulled the wheel, this time to the right. I came back into my lane but went too far. The rear of my car started to spin, and the next thing I felt was the thump of a mailbox.

My car started to flip; I gripped the wheel, lowered my head, and closed my eyes. "Please take me, God...I belong in heaven, and please watch after my mother," I prayed.

I woke shortly after the car stopped moving and opened my eyes in shock and disbelief. There were no pearly gates or bright lights...I had survived.

As I sat in a state of confusion and fear, I slowly reached over and pushed in the button holding my seatbelt. I then reached over, opened the door, and, with slow and deliberate movements, I crawled out onto hard ground. I sat with my head down and eyes closed, thanking God I was alive.

"Is anyone alive over there? Can anybody hear me?" I heard. I slowly stood, hunched over, as two people came running through the trees. "Is there anyone else who made it?"

With their dreadful questions, I stepped back and looked at the dirty black object laying half on its

side. I stared in disbelief. Every angle of the car was crumpled. All but one window, including the sunroof, had burst out. Glass was everywhere. Exterior lights hung by their wires; tree limbs and dirt covered the car. Paint was scraped off in chunks.

I stepped back even farther to get the total view of what just had happened. Then it hit me.

The luggage from my trunk was strewn about the area. Pieces of clothing were hanging in nearby bushes. CDs, papers and food wrappers were scattered around the car, and a tire lay about 10 feet away.

I looked at the car; nothing remained. The dash was empty. I opened the console—all was gone. Sunglasses, cellphone, pens, and change all were missing.

Through my confusion and the sirens, I heard the policeman on the scene say, "Thank God you had your seatbelt on."

I started to cry—not from pain or grief over my crumpled car but from joy. Although my prized possession and belongings were destroyed, I had been spared.

I picked up the things I could find and let the truck tow away my mess. Then I walked away. With everything that had flown from the car, including the smashed out windows, I shuddered to think what could have happened to me.

Through all experiences I've had, I focus on the outcome and what could have changed it. There is nothing I could have done differently to alter my tragedy. However, there is one thing that could have made it considerably worse. Simply wearing my seatbelt allows me to be here to share my story.

I am a young Marine who thought she was invincible. I went to the safety briefs before the holidays and heard the same statistics as my fellow Marines. I'd hate to think something like this has to happen to each Marine to explain the consequences of not wearing a seatbelt. Had I not worn mine, I would have been just like my luggage—scattered along the road and hanging in the bushes. **GW**

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