



Lisa Klassen stands in front of the North Perimeter Bridge in Winnipeg, six months after her car plunged into the Red River.

As a pilot and as the sister of a speed skater, I love the thrill of moving fast. But after a terrifying accident, the doctors didn't think I'd live. Here's how I proved them wrong (slowly, but surely).

by Lisa Klassen, as told to Bryan Borzykowski

How I died— AND CAME BACK AGAIN

It was after 7 a.m. on a typical February morning in Winnipeg: dark and minus 30 degrees. I'd woken up early for my new job as a flight instructor. After checking the aviation weather – clear skies, but a bit cold for flying – I got into my mom's Jeep for the 20-minute drive to the airport. As I pulled out of the driveway, the sun was starting to rise.

Five minutes away from my parents' house is the North Perimeter Bridge, which heads north from Winnipeg. I was almost halfway across it when my tires must have hit a patch of ice. I don't remember the car skidding. Later, I found out that the Jeep spun sideways and drove up a buildup of plowed snow along the bridge's guardrails. Teetering for a few seconds, the car fell nose first off the

bridge, a 15-metre drop. The river was only partially frozen, so the car crashed through the ice. Chilly water rushed in, and my head was completely submerged. My heart stopped, and I drowned.

Up on the bridge, other drivers saw me fall and came running to help. One was an off-duty firefighter named Dale Kasper. Somehow, he broke the Jeep's window but couldn't get my body out because my seat belt was stuck. So he reached in and held my head above the water. Another driver had a fishing knife that they used to cut my seat belt. When the firefighter finally pulled me out, I wasn't breathing. He gave me CPR. By the time I was in the ambulance, I was slipping in and out of consciousness.

I don't remember anything from the >>

accident, nor do I remember waking up in the hospital. When I did become more aware of my surroundings, I saw someone a couple of beds over from me hooked up to a bunch of machines, so I knew I was in an intensive-care ward. My parents, brother and younger sister were there, and my mom told me that my other sister [the Olympic speed skater Cindy Klassen] was on her way. I remember thinking that didn't make sense. Cindy was supposed to be competing in Germany. Why was she coming home?

The grim prognosis

I couldn't speak because there was a thick tube down my throat, so I reached for a pen to ask, "What happened?" Someone – I don't remember who – told me I'd been in an accident. No one told me that the doctors hadn't given my family any hope that I would survive. During the accident, my head had been underwater for about five minutes. The doctors feared that I'd suffered brain damage.

When I woke up and was able to communicate, the doctors' concern shifted from my brain to my lungs. I couldn't

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breathe on my own because one of my lungs had collapsed. I had tubes down my nose and throat and another one sticking out of my chest to drain fluid from my lungs. There was a serious risk of infection because of the dirty river water in my body. I'd also fractured two vertebrae and my pelvis, and I had hypothermia.

Intensive care was a blur. I was there for six days, and I mostly just slept. Even days after the accident, I didn't really know how serious it had been, because my family wouldn't tell me. They feared that hearing about the accident would make me worse. Somewhere in the room, there was a TV, but I couldn't see it because my vision was blurry, probably due to trauma. I was groggy, and I had vertigo: When I moved my head, the room would spin.

The doctors gave me morphine for the pain in my back, left leg and face – especially my nose, which I had banged during the accident. At first, I used the morphine a lot, but I stopped when I felt nauseous.

Before I left intensive care, the doctors took out my breathing tube. One of the doctors said, "When I take out the tube, I want you to say, 'Eeee.'" After the tube was out, I could breathe on my own again, and I just started smiling. I felt so good, I forgot about saying, "Eeee." The doctor said, "I'm not leaving until you say it." I managed only a whisper. >>

I spent another week in the hospital as my condition improved. What might seem like small steps – I went from eating ice chips to slurping fruit smoothies – were actually huge moments in my recovery. I still had lots of tests; the doctors were still worried about my lungs. But I also started working with a physiotherapist every day to regain my ability to walk. We started out in my room, but soon I was using a walker in the hallway.

I knew I was getting better when I'd overhear the doctors talking about my oxygen and X-ray reports. I didn't always understand what they were saying, but their tone sounded positive. Still, the doctors didn't remove my chest tube until the day before I left the hospital, two weeks after the accident, because they wanted to make sure my lungs were clear. I was nervous about having the chest tube removed, but my neighbour in the hospital that day was watching the TV show *Corner Gas* with earphones on and laughing like crazy. Hearing her put me at ease.

At home, my tailbone still hurt when I sat down, and I had to use a cane and continue with physiotherapy. It can take a long time for muscles to rebuild. But being at home gave me a chance to spend time with Cindy. Her skating season had ended, so she stayed with me at my parents' place in Winnipeg for a couple of months. We watched movies and played Scrabble, and she drove me around; I still had vertigo. But I just took it slowly and let my body heal itself.

Getting my life back

It'll be a long time before I can drive my motorcycle again. I grew up loving speed: Cindy speed skates, my dad used to drag race – my family loves the rush of moving fast. If I go water-skiing, I don't want it to be a nice leisurely ride; I want to push myself hard. So, for now, I'm staying away from sports, because I don't want to hurt myself.

But I definitely want to fly again soon. While I was in the hospital, I'd think, When can I go back to work? Only after I'd gone back home and was still dizzy did I wonder if I'd still be able to pilot a plane. Recently, the doctors did some neurological tests – because my brain had been without oxygen for so long during the accident – and I passed. They sent me an official letter clearing me to fly.

I can't chalk up my recovery to coincidence. I do say it's a miracle – the firefighter being there, the other driver having a fishing knife in his car, my brain not being damaged. I grew up in a strong Mennonite family, and I believe I'm here because of God's intervention. I'm also thankful for the love of my family and friends, the doctors who took care of me and the strangers who sent letters and prayed for my recovery. Thanks to everyone, I'm still alive. ■