

The Meaning of Life

Esquire

MAN AT HIS BEST

JANUARY 2007

WISDOM
& DAMN GOOD
ADVICE

FROM BRYAN
ANDERSON
WHO LOST

TWO
LEGS
& ONE

ARM IN
IRAQ

ONE MORE THING:
AN EXCLUSIVE
EXCERPT FROM
NORMAN
MAILER'S
NEW NOVEL

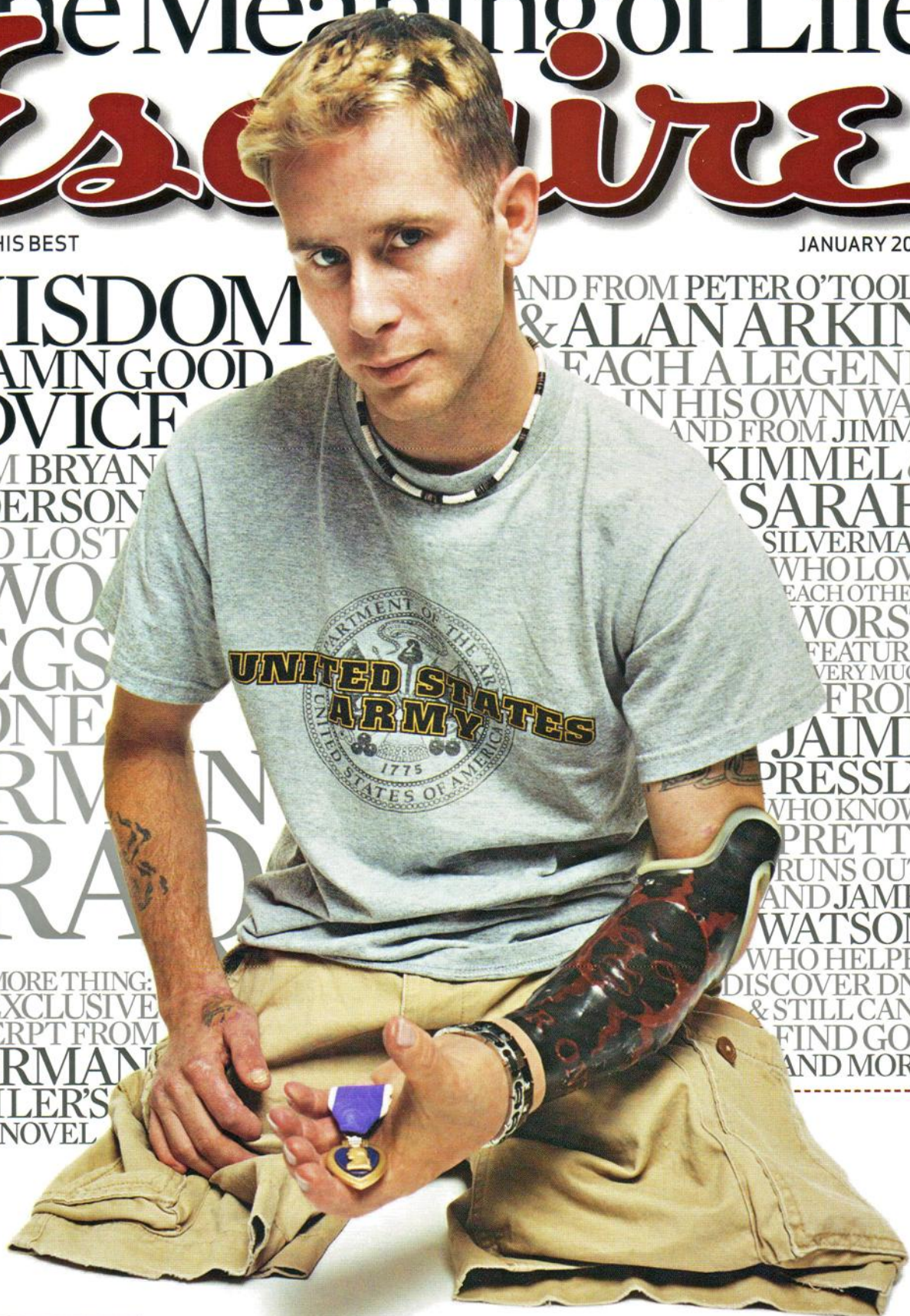
AND FROM PETER O'TOOLE
& ALAN ARKIN,
EACH A LEGEND
IN HIS OWN WAY.

AND FROM JIMMY
KIMMEL &
SARAH

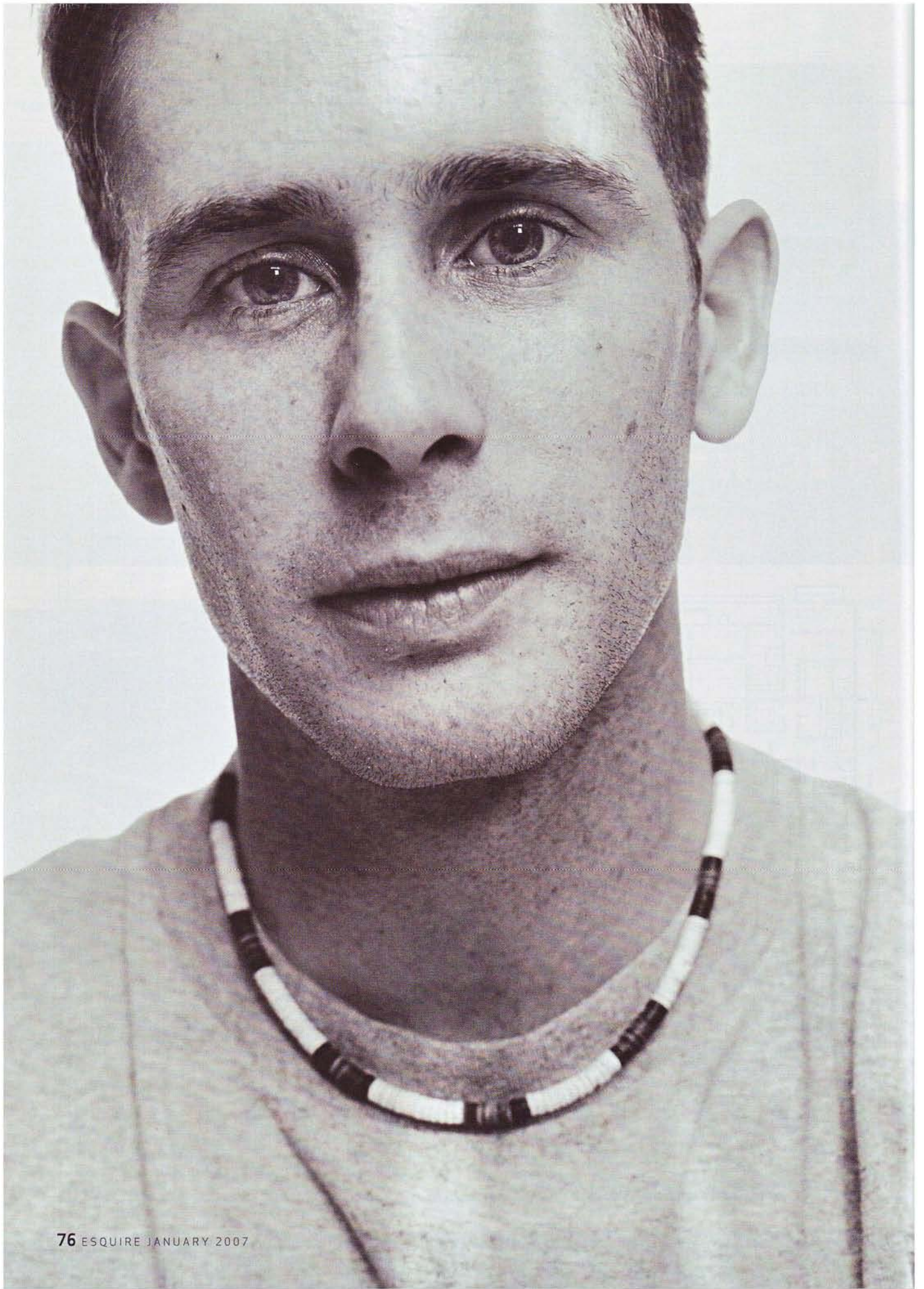
SILVERMAN,
WHO LOVE
EACH OTHER'S
WORST
FEATURES
VERY MUCH.

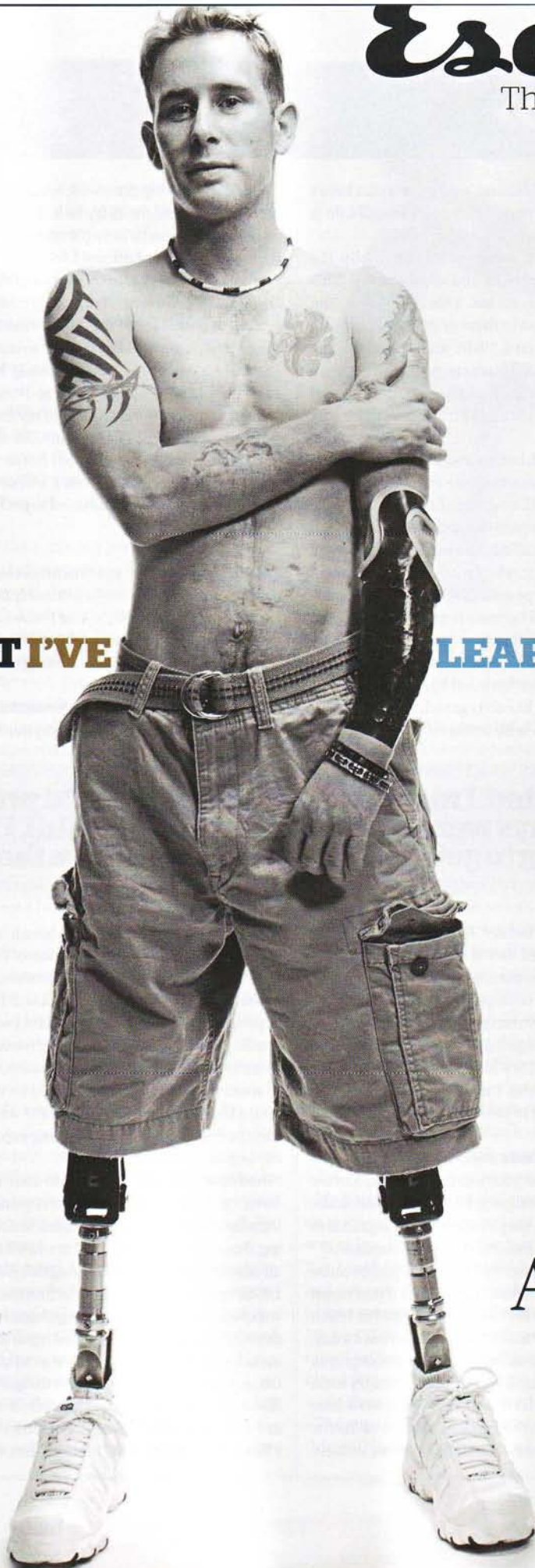
FROM
JAIMIE
OPRESSLY,
WHO KNOWS
PRETTY
"RUNS OUT."

AND JAMES
WATSON,
WHO HELPED
DISCOVER DNA
& STILL CAN'T
FIND GOD.
AND MORE.



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(**WHAT I'VE** **LEARNED**)

Bryan Anderson

**SOLDIER, 25,
ROLLING MEADOWS,
ILLINOIS**

INTERVIEWED BY
BRIAN MOCKENHAUPT
PHOTOGRAPHS BY
CHRISTOPHER GRIFFITH





► **This is the gripper.** It's like a robot hand, a stronger tool. There's a sensor on the inner and outer parts of my forearm. All I do is pretend my hand is still there and open and close it.

► **If I want it to close,** I make the close-muscle gradually. If I want it to spin inward, I make that close-muscle really fast. This is my baseball mitt, like a lacrosse racket. This is the hook. You can angle it in and out, put a spoon in there or whatever, pick up little stuff with it. My grandpa says, "Why aren't you wearing the hook? It's so much cooler." Well, it scares me. You see a hook and you think, Oh, my God, there's a hook there. I lost my hand! It scares me and other people, kids and stuff. You wear a hand, you look down, ah, it looks real.

► **This one is my swimming hand,** but it's also my sports-activity arm. I have smiley faces on this one because I thought it would be funny. I can play baseball, golf, whatever I feel like. This is a pool-playing hand. You stick the pool cue through the hole and put that down on the table. It's called the Hustler. They have a catalog with all these hands in it. They made this one using a mold of my brother's hand. It has pores and veins and everything. They couldn't use my right hand because it was all fucked up. I just got a motorcycle hand today, too.

► **Those** are my hands.

► **I use my right hand** and the prosthetic left hand just fine. I get by. This system, with the hand, is like sixty grand. My wheelchair is twenty-five grand. I had the guy who works on the chairs tweak

I ended up ripping the glove, breaking the hand, breaking the whole socket. I might do it a little differently, but I'm still going to do it. I didn't actually get up water-skiing. I was up for a second, then my arm ripped off and I fell.

► **I went up to Alaska** for the National Wheelchair Games. I participated in two events, Ping-Pong and archery, and I won gold medals in both. I love Ping-Pong. Ping-Pong's the shit. Any real Ping-Pong player will say, No, it's table tennis, it's not Ping-Pong. But I don't care. Ping-Pong. Nobody knows it as table tennis. Most people are going to say Ping-Pong, right?

► **I used to be a gymnast.** I started my freshman year and went to state all three years. Parallel bars, floor, rings, vault, then pommel horse. I hated the pommel horse. I may not be able to do gymnastics like I used to, but I still do little stuff. When I fall out of my chair, I do a handstand to get back in. I lift up my body, push off, and snap up.

► **Hello?** I won a trial gym membership? How did you get my name? You pulled it out of a fishbowl? Do you have any idea who I am? I don't have any legs. And I have only one hand. I lost them over in Iraq. No, don't worry about it. I'm fine now. But I probably won't use it, so you might want to give it to someone else.

► **I've been here nearly thirteen months.** This isn't any way to live for a long period of time. I've had my mom with me the whole time,

I was disoriented. I made eye contact and I could pretty much see that my guys were freaked out. I said, "Oh, shit, I wonder if I'm ever going to get laid again" to kind of make them laugh.

it. I said, "You need to make it faster." He hooked it up to a computer, changed it around, and now it takes off.

► **When I don't have help,** it'll take me ten minutes to put my legs on. The first time I ever did it, it took me an hour.

► **Five, ten, fifteen years** from now, can you imagine the prosthetics they're going to have? They're going to have *Terminator* shit, stuff that's not going to come off. It's just going to be your limb. That's what I'm hoping for anyway. I'm doing fine right now. I can wait. I've always been taught in the Army: Expect the worst, hope for the best.

► **I'm not really going to wear pants** anymore unless it's a nice function. It's hard to pull pants over your legs because your feet are straight, and my legs aren't ever going to get cold. And if people see I'm walking with prosthetic legs, they're more likely to get out of my way than accidentally bump into me and knock me down.

► **I think I have the record** for falling in physical therapy, because I try to push myself to the max on these things, and if you're not falling, you're not trying. That's my motto. I don't fall as much anymore, but for a while I pretty much fell a couple times a day.

► **I've been wakeboarding,** water-skiing, jet-skiing, tubing, rock climbing, snow skiing, playing catch with my brother. I try to do the same things. I'm not going to let it stop me. We did a 110-mile bike ride from Gettysburg to Washington, D.C. Sixty miles the first day, fifty miles the second day. Hand cycle, three wheels.

and that's been great. But we've been in the same small room with just this little burner and microwave. You know each and every little thing that goes on with each other. So I'm ready to go.

► **Look at all the movies** I've collected. I didn't buy them all. A lot of people sent movies because I said I was bored, so they started sending boxes and boxes. I'm a big movie nut. Even before. I like comedies. I like the superhero movies.

► **I want to be a stuntman.** I could be on prosthetics, and they could blow my legs off. They have a harness attached to me, they pull me back, there's blasting caps on my legs, and boom! My legs are gone.

► **I had no idea** what I wanted to do with my life. Go back to school? But if I go back to school, what am I going to do? So I started making a list of everything I really liked to do: Roller coasters. Skydiving. Bungee jumping. All that I could tell from that list was that I'm an adrenaline junkie. I like going fast and doing all that stuff. But I didn't put it together until the first time I was in Iraq. We were watching *Titanic*, the ship was going straight up, and you saw the guys fall and hit the railing, and my friend said that a stuntman actually broke his leg. Then it was a lightbulb. Ding, ding, ding. Oh, my God. That is the perfect thing for me. And now that I'm like this, and I have an identical twin brother who's just as crazy as I am, I'm hoping we can make something happen of it.

► **When I'm a stuntman,** I'll tell them, Get as gory as you can if

that's what you're looking for. I don't have a problem with it. I don't have flashbacks. I'm just the same person. It doesn't bother me to see stuff like that—never really did.

➤ **For the most part**, I dream that I'm full-bodied. Last night I had a dream I was like this, walking around really good, keeping my head up, not even looking down.

➤ **The doctors say** some people have phantom feelings, like your legs and hands are still there. They wake up and they can feel their feet. They try to stand up and then they fall. Not me. I have pain, and the feeling sometimes, but not that much. Every once in a while, I'll have an itch on my knee. Mostly it's a tingling in my feet. It sucks.

➤ **You have two options** once this happens: Roll over and die or move on. I chose to move on. I'm still me. I'm just 75 percent off. Get a great deal on Bryan Andersons this week. You know who actually told me that the first time? My mom. We were in Vegas, talking about T-shirts we should make, and she said 75 percent off. She said, You should get a shirt showing off your personality.

➤ **This doesn't define me.** It may be how I look on the outside, but it's not who I am. I guess you could remember me easily as being a triple amputee, but it's not who I am, has nothing to do with who I am. I've always been the same person. A lot of my friends were scared with me going into the Army. They didn't think I'd be the same person when I came back. I may not be as immature, but I'll always be the same person. Which is true, I grew up. I make the same stupid-ass jokes, the same stuff to make someone laugh, but I'm just a little bit more responsible.

➤ **I was hit on October 23.** They call it your alive day. You celebrate it like your birthday. Well, except without the presents. I felt like it was celebrating the worst day of my life. That's just my mindset right now. Why would I want to celebrate the worst day of my life? And they're like, 'Cause you're alive. Okay, I kind of get it. But that still doesn't change the fact that that was the worst day of my life. But it's another excuse to have a party.

➤ **There's this other triple amputee** that I met here who was hit October 27, but a year before me. He helped me through my hardest times. There's four triple amputees. He was the third and I was the fourth. He's just like me. He has a little bit longer limbs than I do, and instead of him missing his left hand, he's missing his right hand. That's the only difference. I'm right-handed. He was right-handed too, though.

➤ **Smoking saved my right hand.** I'd be a quadruple amputee if I wasn't smoking. I'd normally have my hands on the steering wheel, but I was smoking, so I had just my left hand on the steering wheel. My hand still got messed up, but if I had my hand down there, I would have been done.

➤ **We were laughing** and then boom!

➤ **I was going really slow at the time.** Whoever it was looking out, who armed it, waited for all the civilian traffic to go by. They were aiming for the third truck, so when my front tires rolled over



the infrared laser, it exploded. They built it into the cement and painted it to look like the curb and sidewalk. It took most of my front end off instead of going into the cab. But I still had a little extra come at me. My gunner had some shrapnel in his ass. My team leader had shrapnel in his hip and his wrist. I didn't hear the blast. I saw the smoke and the fire come through the door, but I didn't hear it.

➤ **The concussion** of the blast collapsed my right lung, so it was hard to breathe. I was in so much pain, my body wouldn't even let me feel pain. It's like Icy Hot after the icy part, when it gets hot. That's what it felt like all over my body.

➤ **I was lying there.** Before I said anything, I wiped my face because I felt blood and the flies were all over, and the first thing I saw was my finger gone. Okay, not so bad. Then I turned my hand over, and the whole thing looked like ground beef. But it still looked all right, kind of. I could see bone. Anyway, while I'm looking at this, I went to wipe my face with my left hand and there was nothing there. Oh, fuck. After that I looked down at my legs, and right as I saw what had happened, my friend grabbed my forehead and pushed it down, hoping that I hadn't seen. But I did. I knew they were gone.

➤ **My hand was over** on the passenger's seat, and my legs were on the floorboard. It cauterized everything instantly because it was so hot. I bled a little bit, but I think that helped save my life. But I took 120 units of blood by the time I got to Walter Reed, and you only have 10 in your body.

➤ **I was awarded my Purple Heart** at the hospital in Baghdad. My battalion commander dipped the ribbon in my blood from one of my bandages. Actually, by that time I don't know whose blood was on it. I had so much blood going through me. But it went through my body. I inherited it.

➤ **The guy that opened** my door and was first to grab me was the driver of the truck in front of me. He didn't know how bad it was

because the window was all smoked over. So he opens the door and he's like, Ugh! He ended up saving my life. The doctors said those tourniquets were put on so perfectly, they didn't have to take any more off my legs.

► **They pulled me out** and I was a little disoriented. I made eye contact and I could pretty much see that my guys were freaked out. They all looked like ghosts. Their faces were white. In your squad, you're all best friends, and they were just freaking out. I said, "Oh, shit, I wonder if I'm ever going to get laid again" to kind of make them laugh and get back on track, just to let them know I was still Bryan. That's what I do; I try to make people laugh.

► **They thought I was going to die**, saying, "Hang on, hang on." In my head, I didn't ever have that feeling that I was going to die. And just in case, I kept telling myself, Keep breathing, do the motion, stay awake. It was when I got on the bird that I felt safe to pass out. I woke up at Walter Reed.

► **But I actually forgot** that I'd lost my left hand, because when I woke up in D. C., I went to scratch my face with my left hand. I looked up at the ceiling. "You couldn't have given me a break?"

► **My mom said** nobody's allowed to cry in front of me, and they didn't.

► **I kind of felt guilty**. I feel like I took the easy way out, which I know isn't true, but I wanted to be back there.

► **I've heard that** some of the people here are intimidated by me because I'm a triple amputee with a great attitude. They shouldn't feel that way. Everybody has their own problems. You could be a single amputee but have something else wrong with you. I'm missing my legs and a hand, but other than that, I'm perfect. I'm very healthy. I'm still athletic. You don't have to be intimidated because you think I have more problems than you. It's not true. I don't have many problems. Not anymore. I'm fine. It's just part of who I am, coming from good roots, good parents. I have good people around me. They instilled good values in me, and I grew out of that, manners, holding doors open for girls, being courteous to people, always trying to stay positive.

► **You know, everyone says** I don't know if I could handle that. You don't know until it happens to you. I ask myself, If I lost this hand, too, would I think it was worth living? I don't know. It would be a very, very tough decision. I just don't know.

► **There's kids at Walter Reed** who have had forty, fifty surgeries. I was lucky. I was out of the hospital six weeks after this happened. I say I'm lucky a lot. I'm lucky to be alive. Everybody at Walter Reed sits there and assesses everybody else's injuries and says, "Oh, my God, I wouldn't want to be that guy." I feel fortunate. I may have lost three limbs, but I'm not paralyzed. I can get up and walk. I have both my eyes. Nothing's wrong with my face. And I'm of sound mind. There are a lot of guys who say I'd have rather lost a limb than lost my mind, and I agree.

► **If you could see** all these amputees and the great attitudes most of them have, you'd be shocked. Everybody went through a dark time. Mine was very short, only two weeks, but, for me, it felt like forever. Mine, it really hit me after four months. That's after everything had settled. I was working with the prosthetics. I was having a hard time, even though they didn't think I was, I did. You're your own worst critic. They thought I was doing great for being four months and what I was able to do already. And



they're telling me this, and I said, What are you talking about? I'm not even walking for an hour a day. That's nothing.

► **One day I was in the shower** looking at myself, and I kind of lost it a little bit. That's when my self-consciousness really shot up. Dude, nobody wants me like this. It went bad from there. I couldn't sleep. My chest was getting tight, like I was going to have a panic attack. I didn't think I was thinking about it. I just started freaking. I didn't want to be inside. I didn't want to be outside. I didn't want to be anywhere. I didn't want to kill myself, but I just felt like I didn't want to be anywhere. I didn't want anybody to be around me.

► **I tried to get away** from here, just so I could clear my head. Me and my mom spent three days in Vegas. Craps and blackjack, that's what I like to play. The next week we went to Aspen. I was fortunate that my dark period was that brief. That weekend in Aspen really brought me up. That and Percocet. I wasn't really taking pain pills, so I took some Percocet and I felt great, lovely. The doctors put me on Zoloft for a little bit, and I was like, No, that's not the problem. I don't need this. It's not what's wrong with me.

► **I know people** are going to look at me differently. When you're looking for a girlfriend or a boyfriend, you have this mental picture of what you're looking for. And you can ask anybody, and nobody's going to say that they're looking for somebody who's missing three limbs. But then there's some people who get into that position and say that doesn't matter. They don't care about that.

► **But I'm still self-conscious**. I think I look ugly. There's friends that always tell me I look hot.

► **After so many people** saying that to you, some of it sticks. But I still have that self-conscious feeling inside because of the accident. If I had just lost a foot, or if it was both below the knees, I wouldn't think anything of it, but since I'm so high up and missing a hand, too, it's hard for me.

► **If I'm trying** to hook up with somebody, it's going to bother me. And I don't mean "hook up" like one-night stands. I mean get together.

► **I could be perfectly fine** without kids. If my wife wants kids, that's fine, too. It's not an issue because of this. But I plan on wearing my prosthetics most all the time. And if I have those on, I'm not going to be able to carry my kids. I can't really bend over because it'll throw my balance off. So I'm not going to be able to pick up my kids. So you're walking through the park and they don't want to walk, they want to be carried. Sorry, I can't do it. I've thought about that a lot. It's going to be hard.

► **I think it will be good** for my kid to see someone like me, so when they grow up and they see someone like me, they won't make a quick judgment on them.

► **I'd tell my kids not to join.** If they're anything like me, they're not going to like people telling them what to do. Yeah, it's kind of like a job. But in a job, your boss can't tell you when to eat and when to go to sleep. And if you say something wrong, you're not going to lose money, you're not going to get dropped to do push-ups. I didn't like that. You can quit a job. You can't quit the Army. And if they insist, I'm going to tell them to go into the Air Force. You can't put that in the magazine. Wait, I forgot, I'm going to be out by the time this comes out. Fuck it, balls to the wall.

won't listen to anybody. Then it might be worth it.

► **Even when I was home** after the first time, I didn't watch the news. I didn't want to know. You know it's bad over there. You know what's happening. I don't need to sit there and watch TV to be depressed. I watch TV to laugh or be intrigued. I think the news is depressing, so I don't watch it. It's not that I don't care about everybody over there—I do.

► **Iraqi police officers have** come a long way since I was there last. We couldn't get them to come to work. And when they did, they would come for two hours and leave. When we would ask them to patrol us, they'd do it for twenty minutes, then leave. "We've gotta go eat" or "We've gotta go home." Now they stay at work all day. They're patrolling. They're almost self-sustaining. Almost. If we did leave and pull out, they'd at least have an idea of what they need to do.

► **I was in a police station one day,** sitting at the top of the stairs. There were three Iraqi cops downstairs standing around a desk. I saw this guy walk in and didn't think anything of it. He walks up to them, says, "Allah akbar," and presses the button. He had a vest on under his long robe, but it didn't go off. Those three cops just started beating the shit out of him. Almost killed him. You should have seen his face when they were done. You couldn't tell it was the same guy who walked into the police station.

I'm not going to be able to carry my kids. So you're walking through the park and they don't want to walk, they want to be carried. Sorry, I can't do it. It's going to be hard.

► **My brother was a tank mechanic.** He joined after me. I told him not to join, but if he did, to make sure he got Fort Hood so we could be together. But we were only together for a little while because I went to Iraq the first time. We're twins. We know each other's likes and dislikes. He didn't like it.

► **The Army is a good thing.** It's for some people; it's not for some people. It wasn't for me. I wanted to get out after my first year. I was in the military police. I didn't like arresting people, didn't like giving people tickets, so I didn't. We pulled over fourteen people one night, didn't write one ticket.

► **Right before I went** into basic training, I dyed my hair white with green tips. I left the day after September 11. I was supposed to leave on September 11, but they didn't let us. The next morning we had to get on a bus; they wouldn't even fly us.

► **When I rolled over** the line from Kuwait to Iraq the first time, and those people were cheering and screaming, that's when I knew we need to help these people. Whether I agree with being there or not, I don't know, but if we pulled out now it would make me raise the questions, Okay, so all those guys who lost their lives and lost limbs, was it for a reason? Did we change anything? Was it worth it? If it is, then great, pull out. If it isn't, then they all just died in vain. I don't know. I can't be the one to sit there looking at the overview and say he lost his life for no good reason.

► **I think the only time** I would agree with war is if there's a childish country that wants to do something really, really stupid and

► **I wasn't scared** the first time. But the second time, after the first three weeks, then we were all scared. Not scared like shivering-in-your-boots scared, but there was always the tickle in your throat that you knew you were in real danger, that it was just luck. At any moment, anything could happen. We were lucky for ten months. We knew we would get hit. It was always a question of how bad it would be. I never thought it would be this bad.

► **Whenever I travel** and I'm not wearing my legs, they say, "Would you like an aisle chair?" And that's one of those small chairs where they drag you down the aisle and put you in straps like you're Hannibal Lecter. I'd always say, Don't strap me, don't strap me. But they would anyway. So now I just get down and hop to my seat. If I have to go to the bathroom, I'll hop down, open the door, and lift myself up onto the seat.

► **Some people** don't even say, Hey, were you in the war? They just come up and say thank you. I'm sure once I get older, people won't say that. Once the war's over, people won't even think twice about it. They'll just think I have diabetes.

► **Did it hurt?** I'm sure it did, but I didn't really feel it, except for the burning. They say pain is your friend because you know you're still alive. If you can feel it, it's not that bad. If you don't feel it, that's when it's bad.

► **With all the people** that I've met, to be able to see how nice people really are, it's almost worth it. And if I could help anybody, inspire anybody, one person would make it [continued on page 133]

Bryan Anderson

[continued from page 81] worth it.

I'm being built a house by the Wounded Heroes Foundation. They've already donated me a van. This thing comes off the side of the steering wheel: down for gas, push for brake. Simple as that. I lock my prosthetic onto it and that's it. Now they're going to donate me a house. I told this girl, So you're going to build me this house, can I have some things I want? She said, Like what? Well, I want a basement with a bar. That's going to be like my entertainment area. She said, Yeah, and we'll put an elevator in for you, too. Really? Cool.

Everything that has happened to me since I've been hurt has happened to me because I've been hurt. I got to go to the Pentagon. There's this quarter-mile-long hallway that is just filled with people, and I mean filled with people. There's a little space to go through and everyone is clapping and crying and coming up and hugging you. Okay, that's great. But what about all the people who did the same exact thing that I did that didn't get hurt? They should get the same recognition we do. We all did the same thing. Some people just got the shit end of the stick, that's all. It's all luck.

I've been getting tats since I was eighteen. I had nine tattoos. After the explosion, I had six and a half. They cut half of one out and put the skin on my hand. I had one on each leg. I have a tribal piece on my right shoulder, intermixed with a barbed-wire band on my

right bicep. I have a chain on my left bicep and a bulldog on my left shoulder. On my left chest I have a purple-and-yellow fireball-type thing, and on my back I have a tribal-type thing. On my right forearm I used to have a black widow, but now it's only half a black widow. On my left inner forearm I have the Chinese symbol for life. Go figure.

I'm the type of person who would put my life in front of somebody else's in a heartbeat. I don't know how I got that way. I have great friends—true friends—and they help me to be a better person. And I help them as much as I can. I would do anything for them. Anything.

I believe in God, but I wasn't brought up on going to church. I'm not going to say your whole life is planned out for you, but I think there are certain things that are supposed to happen to you, and however you handle that defines you. So this happened to me. I'm not like, "God saved my life" or "Why did God do this to me?" God did this to me for a reason, and I'm still alive, so God knew I was going to be alive.

From every decision you make, you learn something, whether it was the right decision or the wrong decision. I believe everything happens to you for a reason, and it's going to happen to you regardless. So whether I was in Iraq fighting or I was walking across the street and got hit by a bus, it was going to happen to me regardless.

I don't regret anything. 🍻