

Coping

'I'm Lucky— I Survived a Shark Attack'

How Krishna Thompson freed himself from the jaws of death, lost a leg—and put his life back together

The day before Krishna Thompson and his wife, Ave-Maria, left for the Bahamas to mark their 10th anniversary, he was joking with pals in his Wall Street office about what would happen if a shark attacked him. "They were teasing me, saying, 'If Krishna ever came upon a shark, he'd die,'" says Thompson, 40. "I was like, 'No way, man. I'll beat that shark up.'" Banter became terrifying reality on the first morning of his trip, Aug. 4, 2001, when the banker went for an early swim at the Our Lucaya resort beach on Grand Bahama Island. He fought off the shark, but not before it ripped his left leg to shreds, forcing doctors to amputate. Still, after the recent shark attacks off the Florida coast, Thompson considers himself lucky and is eager to help other amputees. Now walking with a state-of-the-art prosthesis, he recounted his ordeal to contributor Tom Duffy.

I had swum out about 20 feet and was treading water looking out toward the ocean. That's when I saw the shark fin speeding straight for me. I tried throwing my body toward the shore. I thought I'd get out of his way—I'm a quick guy. But the shark hit my right leg. Then he caught my left leg and I heard his teeth go into the bone—like in a cartoon. He towed me out into the ocean; he just kept going, and I was thinking, "I can't believe there's a shark on my leg." The water was

"I'm the same person I was before the attack," says Thompson (near his Lake Grove, N.Y., home). "If you think you can take me on the basketball court, challenge me."

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FLORIDA VICTIM CRAIG HUTTO'S SLOW RECOVERY

On June 27 Craig Hutto, 17, a high school baseball and basketball player from Lebanon, Tenn., was attacked by a shark off the Florida coast. He lost the bottom of his right leg but survived, thanks largely to his brother Brian, 25, who fought off the shark and helped him to shore. In stable condition at a Panama City hospital, Hutto stood up for the first time over Independence Day weekend. Said his father, Roger: "He sees a light at the end of the tunnel."



Hutto fights for life after the attack.

frigid. I think that's why I felt pressure but no pain. I thought about my wife and how we didn't even have children yet. I thought, "I'm going to die." I remember saying aloud, "Oh God, get me out of this." I tried to get free by throwing my body around. But the grip was awesome—later, you could see teeth marks in my bones. I was going out to sea.

Then, suddenly, he took me under. I remember the swirling, like when water goes down a drain; the daylight disappeared into that little hole. That's when he began violently shaking me like a rag doll. Time was running out.

It was dark. I just tried to imagine where its mouth was, felt around and pulled it open. I got free—I couldn't believe it. Then I gave the shark two quick blows to the nose—one-two—and it just swam away. All around me the water was red. As soon as I was clear of that shark, the first thing I did was look at my leg. All I saw was bone, no skin, no arteries. I thought, "Oh man, they're going to amputate."

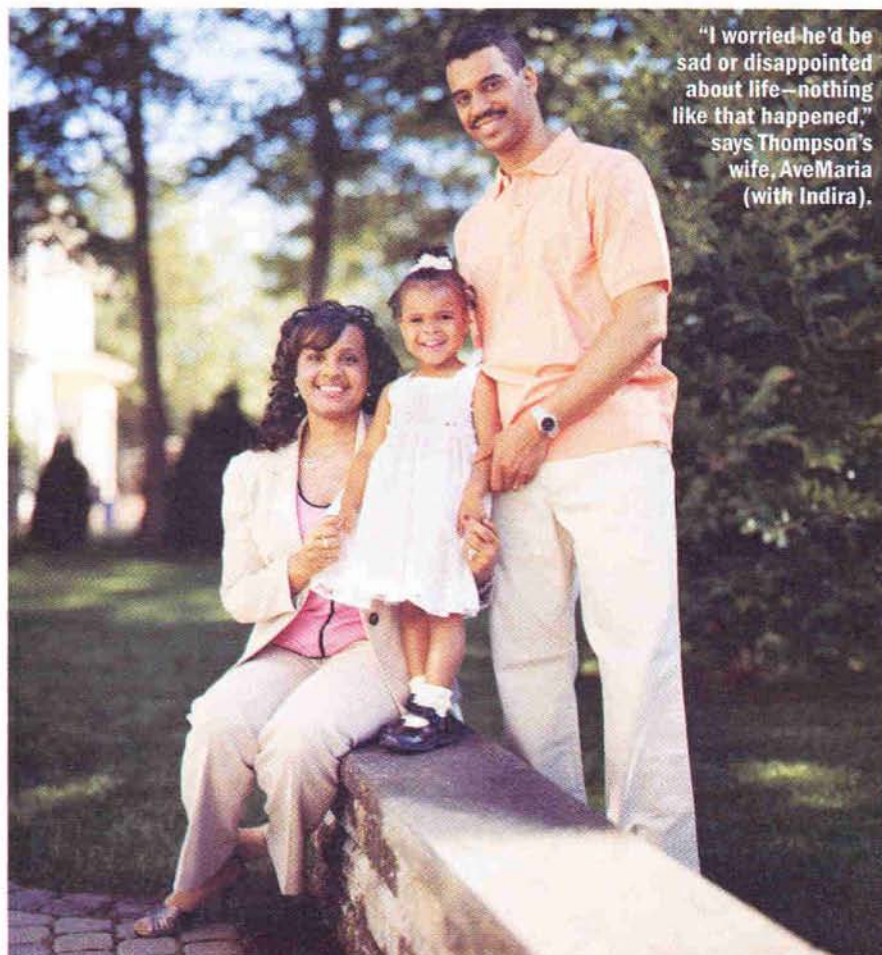
I just started to swim. I have no idea of how far it was to shore. Once I reached shallow water I started hopping toward the beach. I tried to yell but it wouldn't come out. Finally I

reached deep down and screamed. That's when people came running. I wasn't feeling pain in the leg; I think all my nerves were gone. I couldn't move my good leg, arms or tongue. I kept fading, thinking it's a dream, and then I'd be like, "No, it's real. I can hear them working on me." My heart was pounding. Then it slowed, and I thought my body was shutting down. The next thing I remember I woke up in a Miami hospital, happy because I was alive. I didn't look to see the leg was amputated. I just knew. You sense it. Someone asked if there was anything they could get me. I said, "How about a leg?"

Well, I got one a month later—a computerized limb called a C-leg with a microprocessor in the knee that adjusts the way the leg flexes. But it hasn't been easy getting used to it. At first putting weight on my residual limb hurt like hell—sharp pain, ripping your skin apart, like the sutures were stretching. The pain was so bad, I went to my first rehab class and left my leg in my room. They were like, "Go back and get your leg." They were saying, "You're favoring it too much." I was like, "It hurts." But they just pushed.

The C-leg is the closest you can get to a real leg. It has a "skin"; if I wore shorts, you wouldn't really know it's a prosthesis. But I don't need to cover it up. I want people to see this is my leg, this is who I am. The company that makes the leg asks me to speak once in a while. I feel pleasure in helping someone else. They had me speak to this young guy. He lost his right leg above the knee. He was pretty down. I told him, don't try to run a marathon tomorrow. Try to do a little more in small intervals. You can't even imagine what you can do if you take baby steps.

My daughter Indira was born on Sept. 26, 2002. To go from thinking you're going to die and not have children to watching your child born in front of you, it's the greatest thing on earth. When you've been in the jaws of a shark and then you think about your worst day—there's no comparison. I thank my lucky stars I'm alive. ●



"I worried he'd be sad or disappointed about life—nothing like that happened," says Thompson's wife, AveMaria (with Indira).