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FOREWORD BY DONALD MILLER

I'LL

A JOURNEY OF 500 MILES,

PUSH

TWO BEST FRIENDS, AND ONE WHEELCHAIR

YOU

PATRICK GRAY AND JUSTIN SKEESUCK



This is an inspiring story of love and commitment. It's the kind of story Jesus would have told to his friends. You'll learn a little more about the power of love in these pages.

BOB GOFF

New York Times bestselling author of *Love Does*

When I met Justin and Patrick and heard their story, I cried, and I wanted everyone I knew to hear this important story. We live in a culture that values romantic love and to a certain extent familial love, but we have very few stories of brotherhood like this one: a story about lifelong friends who, when life became challenging, didn't back away, but instead became more committed to one another, more connected, more willing to sacrifice. This is an important, beautiful, inspiring story.

SHAUNA NIEQUIST

New York Times bestselling author of *Present over Perfect* and *Bread & Wine*

I'll Push You is not just the remarkable story of one able-bodied man pushing another man's wheelchair on a five-hundred-mile journey. It's the story of two friends who've spent their entire life's journey pushing each other to be better people. Through their courage, grace, and dignity, Justin and Patrick remind us that we are stronger together than separate. As it turns out, we all need a push.

MEREDITH VIEIRA

Journalist and talk show host

In our fast-paced world of shallow engagement, *I'll Push You* comes as a breath of fresh air, depicting a brotherly friendship that is refreshingly deep and authentic. Disarmingly vulnerable and dangerously challenging, Patrick and Justin offer us a glimpse of what true friendship can look like if we're willing to take the risks.

TIM FOREMAN

Bassist for Switchfoot

I'll Push You is a powerful story of friendship and faith, defining what it means to be a part of a community. The love that is so evident in Justin and Patrick's story is a brilliant reminder of how we should engage with one another, a reminder of what the church is meant to be.

JEREMY COWART

Photographer and founder of The Purpose Hotel

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PUSH

TWO BEST FRIENDS, *AND* ONE WHEELCHAIR

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PATRICK GRAY *AND* JUSTIN SKEESUCK

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EL CAMINO DE SANTIAGO

CAMINO FRANCÉS (THE "FRENCH WAY")





Our 500-mile journey

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I'll Push You: A Journey of 500 Miles, Two Best Friends, and One Wheelchair

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— TO OUR WIVES —

*Thank you for loving us,
for laughing with us (and often at us),
and for rolling your eyes at only half our jokes.*

— TO OUR CHILDREN —

*Remember, it's only impossible
because you haven't done it yet, so dream big!*

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FOREWORD

— Donald Miller —

AS A WRITER, I have spent much of my adult life studying stories—exploring the art of creating them, examining their structure, striving to perfect the practice of telling them. And through my years of studying, writing, and telling stories, I have fallen in love with many. Some of my favorites are stories of victims choosing to be heroes, of individuals redeeming their suffering, and of incredible shared journeys. Frequently these stories challenge me to look at myself differently; they change my perspective of the world around me. Too often, though, these stories are crafted by the imagination of man, engineered by longings of the heart, and designed by desires of the soul. Rarely have I encountered such a story lived out in the everyday, where the hero—or in this case, heroes—could easily be you and me, ordinary people choosing to embrace an extraordinary life.

When I first met Justin Skeesuck and Patrick Gray, I knew something was different about them. These two men were filled with a passion for life and a desire to share a remarkable hope with all they encounter. But it wasn't until I knew their story that I truly

appreciated their friendship and understood how much hope and power there can be in our relationships.

I came across the story recounted in *I'll Push You* in October 2015, a little over a year after these two men accomplished what many had said would be impossible. While their five-hundred-mile wheelchair journey through Spain is truly incredible, the most powerful part of their adventure is the undying and relentless nature of the love they possess for each other.

All too often, men shy away from intimacy, or run from being vulnerable. However, these two have redefined what friendship means. They have challenged conventional views of what a relationship can be, and in doing so, challenge many traditional concepts. Their deep friendship has kept them from being victims, has given them the opportunity to redeem any suffering they have experienced, and has allowed a beautiful adventure of life to unfold.

The story within these pages reminds us that God didn't create us to live alone. He never meant us to be solitary creatures. *I'll Push You* demonstrates what it means to live in community with one another and reveals what can happen when we shoulder each other's burdens. Justin and Patrick demonstrate the beauty that exists when we choose to be the hands and feet we are called to be. They show us the redeeming power that exists in giving others the opportunity to love all of who we are, in spite of our flaws and imperfections.

Be careful! When you choose to read this incredible testament of life, friendship, and faith, you will be challenged and will begin to look for those adventures that are already part of your life, the ones you haven't embraced. Not the five-hundred-mile journeys through foreign countries, but the unbound nature of living we are all capable of experiencing when we let our relationships be all they are meant to be.

Welcome to *I'll Push You*.



PROLOGUE

A CLOUDLESS EXPANSE OF blue stretches as far as I can see. Distant hills are covered in grasses of green and gold. Several trees cast long shadows across the dirt and stones at their base, and the shrill notes of songbirds in the branches punctuate the silence. Their song brings me back to the voice inside my head.

So much beauty and yet so much pain.

My body is covered in sweat, and though my hands feel weak, they are the least of my worries.

How much more can my body take? . . . Is this it? . . . Have I reached the end of what I can do?

With every step, my legs feel heavier. The pain in my calves throbs. I just want it to stop . . . please make it stop.

More time. I thought I had more time.

I was afraid this would happen, but I thought it wouldn't catch up with me until the very end. Now, it's all I can do to take ten steps before I'm forced to rest.

Just steady yourself and push through the pain.

The ache spreads to my thighs, and my calves begin to quiver before I can take eight more steps.

Rest . . . just a few minutes of rest.

I decide to keep moving, but after five more steps, the pain is almost unbearable and the weakness is spreading. I extend my right leg back to stretch my calf muscles. This offers a momentary reprieve from the pain. The slight relief I feel as I stretch my left leg tells me I can keep going, but after three more steps, I find out how wrong I am. This is it—my legs won't carry me any farther.

Why is this happening now?

I find a place to sit, but the pain continues. My jaw clenches as I fight back the urge to scream out my frustration. My hands curl into fists as anger wells up within me. Fully spent, I want to release the exhaustion, the frustration, and the pain.

My body is failing me. Even worse, *I'm* failing—my wife, my kids, my friends.

All my life, I've been in control. Now . . . I feel it slipping away.

— PART I —

BEGINNINGS



ANSWERS AND QUESTIONS

– JUSTIN –

HOW MANY HOURS HAVE I spent in the waiting room of a doctor's office over the past thirteen years? I've lost count. During that time, I've endured an unending series of muscle biopsies, MRIs, blood tests, and various other forms of poking, probing, and prodding. And still no diagnosis I can depend on.

When I was in high school, my best friend, Patrick Gray, used to come with me to a lot of my appointments, but the distance between his home in Idaho and mine in Southern California makes that a little difficult now. Since moving to San Diego, I've often sat here alone, waiting for answers. Today, I'm grateful that my wife, Kirstin, is able to be with me.

The door leading back to the exam rooms opens, and Jennifer, my doctor's medical assistant, surveys the busy waiting room. We make eye contact, and even though she knows Kirstin and me well, she goes through the formality of calling my name.

"Justin Skeesuck, come on back."

By the time I get to my feet, with my leg braces and cane keeping me upright, Kirstin is already at the door. She knows I want to get

there on my own, even if it takes me a while. As we continue down the hall, Kirstin and Jennifer slow their gait to allow me to keep up.

“I like your cane, Justin,” Jennifer says as we approach the exam room. “Is it new?”

I look down at the dark purple wood. “Yeah, my best friend made it for me.”

“It’s beautiful.”

When the weakness spread from my left leg to my right, Patrick purchased a four-foot slab of purpleheart wood and spent hours in his garage with a jigsaw and hand sanding tools, fashioning a beautiful cane. It has become a cherished symbol of our lifelong friendship.

“The doctor will be with you in a few minutes,” Jennifer says as my wife and I take our seats. Smiling, she closes the door softly.

Kirstin has come prepared for the wait. She pulls a magazine out of her purse and begins to thumb through the pages to pass the time. I settle into my chair, lean my head back against the wall, and close my eyes as time seems to stand still.

“It’s taking longer than normal,” Kirstin says after a while, as she replaces the magazine in her purse.

“There were a lot of people in the waiting room today,” I reply. “I’m just hoping that when he gets here he has some answers this time.”

For years, my team of neurologists has struggled to identify what exactly is going on in my body. Though my symptoms are similar to those of some well-known diseases—such as ALS—they don’t perfectly align with any of them. We’re hoping this latest round of tests, blood work, and muscle biopsies will bring a breakthrough—anything that will give me some insight into what the future might hold.

I would be satisfied at this point just to have a name for what I have. My team of physicians has gone through four diagnoses so far, and all have proved to be incorrect. Whatever I have is so rare, they aren't sure it even *has* a name.

The doctor finally walks in and takes a seat on the rolling stool. His white lab coat hangs loosely over a tweed sport coat, and his salt-and-pepper hair is combed neatly. He glances at my chart in his hands and looks at Kirstin and me through his large, metal-rimmed glasses.

"Hey, guys, how are you doing today?" he says with a faint hint of a smile.

"Hoping for some answers," I reply with a chuckle, "but expecting more questions."

"Fair enough. Well, today we have a little bit of both."

Never one for chitchat, he quickly begins his exam. Working his way from head to toe, he checks my eyes, listens to my heart and lungs, checks my blood pressure, tests my reflexes, and probes for any pain in my joints. He finishes the exam by testing my hand strength to make sure the weakness hasn't spread.

Seemingly satisfied, he says, "Let's head down the hall."

We follow him, as we have dozens of times before, to finish my appointment in the quiet of his office, a surprisingly small space filled with a large desk in the center surrounded by walls of bookshelves full of medical journals and books with names I can't pronounce. His diploma from Harvard and several framed awards have a prominent place on the wall.

"We've never been more certain of a diagnosis than we are now," he says as he settles into his desk chair and we sit down across from him.

"All right," I say. "Does it have a name?"

The doctor's face tightens almost imperceptibly. "We're pretty certain you have what is called multifocal acquired motor axonopathy. Or MAMA for short."

"What exactly is it?" Kirstin asks.

"It's similar in many respects to ALS. Which is why Justin was misdiagnosed the first time around."

Turning to me, he continues, "Your immune system is attacking your nervous system, and your motor nerves are shutting down. This disease doesn't affect your sensory nerves, just your ability to move. Normally, it hinders limited portions of a person's body, but in your case, it has attacked everything from your waist down. That's one of the reasons you've been so difficult to diagnose. MAMA typically starts in the hands. To see it affect such a large portion of the body is quite rare."

My wife leans forward and grabs my hand. "Will it get worse? Do we know how long we have?"

"Like I said, we have both answers *and* questions today . . ."

He pauses for a moment before continuing.

"It will get worse over time. To what degree, we still aren't sure."

"So, what's the deal?" I ask.

"It's likely this disease will result in complications that will lead to your death."

Kirstin takes a slow, deep breath as her eyes well up with tears.

This isn't the first time I've been told I'm going to die. When I was originally diagnosed with ALS, the doctor told me I had four years to live. That was nearly nine years ago. This time there's no known life expectancy, but the prognosis feels different; it feels more real.

“Do we know what causes it?” I ask.

“Well, we don’t know precise cause and effect, but sometimes traumatic events can trigger certain diseases.”

He pauses again to gather his thoughts and then continues. “Our best guess is that the disease was dormant throughout your childhood, and that it may have been awakened by your car accident.”

“What?”

That accident was thirteen years ago.



It was a crisp, clear spring morning in April 1991, but I remember it like it was yesterday. The brilliant blue sky over my hometown of Ontario, Oregon, was devoid of clouds, and the rising sun sat low, just above the horizon to the east, making silhouettes of the mountains as I stepped outside my front door to wait for my friend Jason to pick me up for a basketball tournament that was scheduled to start in less than an hour.

“Where is he?” I wondered aloud. “We’re going to be late.”

As if on cue, Jason rounded the corner in his small, dark red 1987 Toyota pickup. I poked my head back inside the house to say good-bye to my parents before walking out to the driveway, where Jason was now waiting.

A few months shy of my sixteenth birthday, I was still too young to drive, but Jason had recently gotten his license, and he was eager to get his well-traveled truck out on the freeway. As I fastened my seatbelt across my chest and lap, I looked over at Jason. His lap belt was secure, but the shoulder strap was hanging loose.

“You should probably get that fixed,” I said with a raised eyebrow. Jason just smiled and put the truck in gear.

In a matter of minutes, we were on I-84, headed east toward Northwest Nazarene College in nearby Nampa, Idaho. Even with our sunglasses on, the rising sun made us squint as it filled the gap between the pickup’s sun visors and the mountains in the distance. Because we were running late, Jason put some extra weight to the gas pedal.

As the sun climbed a little higher in the sky, the glare from the east intensified. At 80 mph, Jason was doing his best to get us to the gymnasium on time. But the faster he went, the more noticeable the poor alignment of his truck became.

As I leaned forward to find some good music on the radio, the twist of the dial was interrupted by a loud *thump, thump, thump* from under my feet.

Looking up, I saw we had drifted hard to the right and both passenger-side tires were off the edge of the asphalt, bouncing through the dirt, gravel, and tufts of grass on the poorly maintained shoulder. As Jason struggled for control, I could see we were rapidly approaching a concrete support pillar of an overpass.

“Jason, look out!”

He jerked the wheel hard to the left, trying to get us back onto the roadway, but overcorrected, sending the truck into a 180-degree spin. For a split second, we were facing west, with traffic speeding toward us—until we slid onto the median and began to roll. The explosive sound of metal on gravel filled my ears as the truck slammed against the ground. Everything happened so fast, I soon lost my bearings as we rolled across the median and caught some air.

It was a brief moment, but time stood still.

So many thoughts rushed through my head as the ground outside my window came at me in slow motion. When the passenger side of the truck collided with the ground one last time, the sound was deafening, and the impact reverberated throughout my body.

Is this how my life will end?

What will the paramedics tell my family?

What will my parents say to Patrick?

When the truck finally came to rest, I was suspended from my seat by my seatbelt and Jason was below me, with his upper body partially out the window of the driver side door, the door frame across his back. A small depression in the ground was all that kept the truck from crushing him.

Looking out through the fractured windshield, I could see multiple vehicles stopped in the distance and many people running toward us to help.

“Jason, are you alive?”

“Yes,” came his muffled reply, as his upper body was trapped between the truck and the ground below.

“I have to get out of here!” I yelled as I kicked at the windshield, but it wouldn’t budge.

Desperate to help my friend, I unbuckled my seatbelt and tumbled down on top of him. I heard him moan in pain.

“Get off me!” he said through gritted teeth.

I shifted my feet and straddled his body while pushing against the passenger door above me. It didn’t move. Somehow, though, I was able to wiggle my way out through the slider in the rear window.

As my feet touched the ground, several people approached me. I shouted, “My friend is still trapped! He needs help!”

Someone yelled, "Let's see if we can get the truck back on its wheels."

With a collective effort, the assembled onlookers were able to heave the truck up high enough for Jason to pull himself back into the cab and release his seatbelt. As they continued to hold the truck off the ground, Jason was able to crawl out the driver's side window.

Somehow, I walked away from the accident with only a few scrapes and bruises. Jason wasn't as lucky. He ruptured some discs in his back. But considering the severity of the accident, his injuries could have been much worse.

Four months later, at the beginning of my junior year, I was running down the soccer field during a game when I noticed that my left foot wasn't moving normally. I could plant and push off to make a cut, but I couldn't raise my foot back up. No matter how hard I tried to control it, my foot would flop around. Sometimes the toe of my cleats caught the ground as I ran, causing me to stumble.

When I brought this to my parents' attention, we began looking for answers. The problem seemed to be isolated to my foot, so we went to a podiatrist. He was completely stumped and referred us to a neurologist. The neurologist had no real answers, but he had a plaster cast molding made of my left foot, which resulted in a custom-fitted white orthotic brace made of lightweight plastic. This new support was a foot bed insert for my shoes that curved around my heel and snugly supported my calf. This brace provided the support needed to maintain a relatively normal level of activity.

For one of my fitting appointments, Patrick went with me.

As I stood up and took a few steps with the brace securely

fastened across the front of my lower leg with a Velcro strap, the aluminum hinges on each side of my ankle squeaked.

“Dude! You can totally play the sympathy card with the ladies!” Patrick said with a laugh.

Raising my eyebrows, I replied, “Not a bad idea!”

“How does it feel?” he asked as I walked around the doctor’s office.

“Better than dragging my foot.”

“I kind of like you dragging your foot,” he said, chuckling to himself. “Makes me look better!”

“You’re an idiot,” I said, laughing out loud.

“Seriously though, you’re moving pretty well. I can barely see a limp.”

Running a few steps, I felt my confidence rising. “Yeah! It feels great. I think I can still play tennis with no problem.”

With this new support system, I took up my racket and played both my junior and senior years. I kept close tabs on the weakness in my foot, and it seemed the worst was over. But not long after graduation, I could feel it spreading to more muscles in my lower leg.



I’d never made the connection between the weakness in my legs and the accident—until now. Kirstin is still sitting quietly next to me, holding my hand tightly. I’m squeezing hers so hard I can feel her pulse against my palm. So many thoughts are racing through my mind.

Turning to me, my wife says, “You need to call Patrick.”

PHONE CALLS

— PATRICK —

IT'S A GORGEOUS DAY IN MAY, with crystal clear skies, but I'm stuck at home studying for an exam. The warm rays of light pouring through my office window make it difficult to focus. When the phone rings, I welcome the distraction. I could use a break from reading about "nursing management in the hospital setting."

A quick glance at the caller ID lifts my spirits. It's my best friend, Justin, calling from San Diego. He and I have known each other our entire lives, and even though we live a thousand miles apart, rarely a week or two goes by without one of us calling to keep in touch.

"Hello?"

"PAA-DDY!"

I can't help but laugh. I've heard Justin call out that name a thousand times in his usual singsong way, and every time it makes me smile.

"What's going on, Skeez? It's only been a few days since we talked. Is everything okay?"

As we continue to talk, I get up from my desk and head into

the kitchen. With the phone wedged between my shoulder and my ear, I pour myself a glass of water as I wait for him to reply.

In a calm voice, he says, "Yes and no."

"Is your family okay?"

"Yeah, yeah. Kirstin and Jaden are fine . . ."

He pauses and I grab the phone with my free hand, pressing it harder against my ear so I don't miss anything.

"I had an appointment with my neurologist this morning," Justin continues. "I have a diagnosis, and I think this one is going to stick."

"What is it?"

"They're saying it's multifocal acquired motor axonopathy."

"Whoa, that's a mouthful!"

"They call it MAMA for short."

As Justin recounts the details of his visit to the doctor, I return to my office. I'm surprised at how easy it is for him to talk about his illness, but then Justin has always been a glass-half-full kind of guy.

"So, what's the prognosis?" I ask.

"My doctor says the details of progression are unknown . . . but it will probably cut my life short."

"When?" I ask, my stomach tightening.

"No one knows."

Shaking slightly, I set the glass on my desk and sit down. Suddenly, the rays of sunshine streaming through my window seem less bright . . . less warm.

We talk for almost an hour before hanging up, and despite the fear and frustration, Justin's optimism never wavers.

When my wife, Donna, comes home from work, I tell her about my conversation with Justin.

“How long do they say he has?”

“They’re not sure. It could be five years . . . could be twenty. No one really knows.”

“How are you doing?” she asks as she puts her arms around my waist, pulling me close.

“I don’t know.” With Donna’s head against my chest, my words come slowly. “I just keep wondering how much longer he’ll be able to do his graphic design work . . . how he and Kirstin will make ends meet . . . how long he’ll be able to drive. And if he dies, what will Kirstin do? What will happen to Jaden?”

Donna whispers, “I’m so sorry.”

“I just wish I could spend more time with him.”



Justin and I have known each other literally our entire lives. Born two days apart in the same hospital in July 1975, we grew up within a mile and a half of each other in the small eastern Oregon town of Ontario—an arid farming community where the only trees are those intentionally planted in yards or parks, or ones growing along the banks of the Snake River. When the summer winds blow, dust devils create spiraling brown clouds that rise into the air from nearby fields or vacant lots. But even though our surroundings weren’t the most lush, verdant place on God’s green earth, small-town life provided an ample supply of freedom and open space for two imaginative boys to create worlds where anything was possible.

My childhood home was on a dead-end street that backed up to an empty field with acres of dirt and weeds. Directly south, on the other side of the street, sat the white brick Nazarene church our families attended, surrounded by more acres of empty fields.

Along with our friends Greg and Bryan, and my younger brother, Michael, Justin and I spent hours digging holes, building forts, and imagining life-threatening scenarios of rescues behind enemy lines. Sticks became guns, folded blades of cheatgrass became knives, rocks were grenades, and outstretched hands made for a great force field.

Behind Justin's house, across town, sat the Deep Dirt Hills, a collection of trees, dirt mounds, and tufts of grass straight out of a *Calvin and Hobbes* comic strip. During the winter, when a blanket of snow covered the dormant grass and barren soil, we put on our winter coats, snow pants, boots, and gloves, and with stocking caps pulled low, down to our eyes, we headed out for adventure.

With round red saucers and inner tubes at the ready, we dove down the steep embankment into the canyon below. Trees rushed past—streaks of green and brown—as we leaned first to the left and then to the right, dodging rocks and bare patches that littered our path, until we finally made it to the bottom. But as we gathered our sleds and tubes and began the climb back to the top, it sure seemed as if we'd traveled much farther than we had.

Though the canyon was a fabrication, and the villains we fought with our makeshift weapons were figments of our imagination, the muscles of creativity grew strong and the adventures we shared cemented us together. Whether our exploits were real or imaginary, it didn't matter. Together we lived for the next adventure.

As we grew older, our adventures shifted from open fields to athletic fields. Though we were unspectacular athletes, to say the least, we both loved being active, and we shared a competitive streak that often exceeded our abilities. In high school, I ran

track and played baseball, and we both played football. Justin played soccer, but tennis was really his game. He had been playing it since fifth grade and absolutely loved it. When he started having problems with his foot during our junior and senior years, he never gave up. He just tried harder.

During his freshman year of college, he tried out for the tennis team. Though he couldn't keep up with the other players, he still played recreationally. But right before Christmas break, he called to tell me he had given up tennis altogether.

"I'm giving my racket to my sister."

"You really can't play anymore?"

"I can still run, but the stepping from side to side is just too much for my left leg. When I shuffle laterally, I stumble and fall."

"How are you handling it?"

"I have my moments, but I'm okay. At least I can still run."

A few months later, when I called Justin to check in, he greeted me with more bad news.

"I can't run anymore."

"What happened? Are your legs just too weak?"

"Yeah, I was down at the track for a run, and they just gave out on me."

"Oh man, first tennis, and now this. . . . I'm so sorry."

"It's okay, but I already miss the air rushing past my face and the freedom of controlling how fast I can go," he admitted. "But what can I do?"

"Man, you're handling this a lot better than I would. I'd be angry."

"I do get angry, but it never helps. And I can still get around. . . ."

The next year, Justin called to tell me his legs had grown so weak that walking long distances was a challenge. Though

he could still drive, walking to and from his car was wearing him down.

“Well, I finally got a handicap parking pass,” he said, sounding more upbeat than I would have expected. We had talked about how this might someday become necessary, but for a guy who used to run through the fields behind the church with me and race up and down hills on our sleds, to now be dependent on blue parking spaces because his legs had grown so weak, this seemed too much.

“You’ve had to give up a lot of independence. First your racket, then running, and now you need a handicap parking pass. . . . It never ceases to amaze me how well you’re handling all of it. Sometimes I think I’m having a harder time with this than you are.”

“It’s definitely hard,” he said, “but dwelling on the things I can’t do anymore just eats away at me. I can’t go there—at least not for long. There’s still plenty I *can* do, and that’s what I’m going to focus on.”

A few seconds of silence passed while I tried to take in everything Justin was telling me. I gripped the phone tighter and told him the only thing I could think to say.

“Skeez, whatever you need, I’m here.”

I'LL PUSH YOU

– JUSTIN –

IT'S A BEAUTIFUL, lazy San Diego Saturday in March 2012. I'm alone in my living room with the TV remote braced against my leg. Though I can no longer open doors, hold a cup to my lips, or button my shirt, I can still somehow manage to use the remote. Every bit of independence is precious. I take what I can get.

My boys, Jaden and Noah, are playing in the backyard, probably stirring up trouble. My daughter, Lauren, is in her bedroom singing, and Kirstin is tidying up in the kitchen. In the relative, and rare, quiet of the house, I turn on the television and begin flipping through the channels until I see European travel guru Rick Steves on PBS. Every time I've gone to Europe, his knowledge, wisdom, and travel advice has come in handy.

In 2001, Kirstin and I, along with Patrick and his wife, Donna, spent nearly a month traveling through Europe together. We flew into Paris, and then explored Switzerland, Austria, Germany, and Belgium by train. I had braces on both of my legs by that point, but I still had enough strength to walk shorter distances with my wife and friends. It's been almost eleven years since that trip, but

the memories are still vivid. Though finances were tight for both us and the Grays at the time, we knew we had to go, and we made it happen, even working extra jobs and extra shifts to cover the expenses.

So what does Rick have for the world of channel surfers and public broadcast junkies today? Northern Spain? Sure, I haven't been there yet.

I watch as Steves explores the city of Pamplona, where the Fiesta de San Fermín (known for the running of the bulls) is an annual event, and describes Ernest Hemingway's influence on the culture there, dating back to the publication of *The Sun Also Rises* in 1926.

It's all very familiar until he mentions the Camino de Santiago, or Way of Saint James, a nearly 800-kilometer pilgrimage route beginning in the picturesque Basque village of St. Jean Pied de Port, about five miles across the French border, and ending at the cathedral in Santiago de Compostela, where the apostle James's bones are said to be buried.

As Steves takes me over the Pyrenees Mountains, through the flat plains of northern Spain, and across two more mountain ranges to the region of Galicia in northwestern Spain, I am completely captivated. And as I watch the images of hundreds of pilgrims trekking along this ancient pathway, a thought occurs to me.

I wonder if I could do that in my wheelchair.

For the past few years, Patrick and I have been looking for the perfect "guy trip" that we could do together. We've tossed around the idea of going to Germany for Oktoberfest, touring the East Coast, or even just hanging out on a tropical island somewhere; but for some reason the right trip hasn't revealed itself yet. Now

as Rick unveils the Camino de Santiago, it hits me: *This is the trip Patrick and I need to take.* I haven't felt this sure of anything since the day I realized I had met "the one."



Kirstin and I first met a week or two after I graduated from college. When people ask me, I always say we met at a liquor store across the street from my apartment. It was actually more like a mini-mart where you could buy groceries, but the sign on the building just said *Liquor*, and frankly, it makes for a more interesting story.

The first time we met, I was wearing shorts and my calf-high braces were clearly visible, so it was obvious there was something wrong with my legs.

"Don't we go to the same church?" I asked. I think she thought it was some sort of pickup line, but at least it got the conversation started. After we talked for a few minutes, I smiled and said, "Well, I'll see you around."

The next week, I saw her again—at church. And a few days after that, I was delivering an ad I had designed for a taco shop, and she jogged right past me.

That's the third time I've seen this girl in less than two weeks, I thought. *Maybe I should ask her out.*

So I did.

And she said yes!

On our first date, we went to Casa de Pico in Old Town San Diego. I started the evening by saying, "I have a progressive neuromuscular disease, and I don't know how much time I have left, but I thought you should know about it up front."

There. It's out there. Let's see how she responds.

She paused for a second. “Oh.”

I held my breath, bracing for the inevitable awkwardness. Instead, the corners of her mouth turned up into a warm smile, and she simply said, “Okay.”

That’s when I knew.

She was the one.



“Honey, could you come here please?”

“What’s up?” Kirstin asks as she walks in from the kitchen.

“I want to show you something,” I say, nodding my head toward the TV.

She sits on the sofa next to me. “What’s this?” she asks. “Rick Steves?”

“Just watch for a minute,” I say. Kirstin knows I’m always looking for new places we can explore together. It’s one of the ways we’ve learned to deal with my disease over the years—grabbing every opportunity to make the most of life while I’m still able.

“What do you think?” I ask when the episode ends.

“What do you mean?”

“I wonder if I could do that in my wheelchair?”

She looks at me and without the slightest pause, says, “Why not? If it’s something you want to do, then do it!”

This is one of the many things I love about my wife. No matter how crazy my ideas may be, no matter how unrealistic they seem, she never lets me shy away from pursuing them.

Now the only question is, *What will Patrick think?*



Two weeks later, Patrick, Donna, and their kids, Cambia, Joshua, and Olivia, arrive at our house for our annual get-together.

“They’re here!” my kids shout as the Grays pull into the driveway in their minivan. After hugs are distributed all around and the luggage is deposited in the bedrooms, the kids run off to the backyard to blow off some pent-up energy, and Donna and Kirstin retreat to the dining room to catch up on each other’s lives.

“Let’s head into the living room,” I say to Patrick. “There’s something I want to show you.”

He smiles and follows me into the other room. As he takes a seat on the chair next to me, he reaches over and places the television remote in my lap.

I click the power button and begin searching for the Rick Steves episode I recorded.

I’m wondering how Patrick will respond. We’ve both had some pretty wild ideas over the years, but going almost five hundred miles in a wheelchair through a foreign country is definitely at the top of the crazy scale.

I start the episode, and we watch in silence. I keep glancing over at Patrick, trying to get a feel for what’s going through his mind. I can tell he’s interested, but clearly he has no idea what I’m about to ask.

When the show finally ends, I turn off the TV and get right to the point.

“So, do you want to go across five hundred miles of northern Spain with me?”

Patrick just stares back at me. For all the years I’ve known

him, this is one of the few times in our lives when I haven't been able to read him.

Is he in or is he out?

Do I even know what I am asking of him?

We've had so many adventures in the past, but nothing like this.

I don't know if what I'm asking is even possible, but I do know this—I can't imagine attempting it with anyone else.

When he finally opens his mouth to speak, he utters the three words that will change the course of our lives.

"I'll push you."

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