



Letting go of Fear

BY JENNIFER BRIDGMAN

Chris and I were 32, married for less than a year and putting the finishing touches on a baby nursery when life unraveled at the seams after a motocross crash crushed his spinal cord and left him a T10 para. He spent just one month in rehab following emergency spinal fusion surgery. At the end of his first week back home, I gave birth to our first child.

Today, a year later, Feb. 22, 2011, we're at the airport, beginning our trip to Maui to commemorate the first anniversary of his accident, our son's upcoming first birthday, and all the other blessings — big and small — that had come our way in the past 12 months.

"Can you believe this?" Chris cried out in mock distress. "He hasn't even offered to buy me a drink yet!"

Chuckles erupted around the terminal. I grinned back at Chris, shifted the baby on my hip and glanced at the man who knelt beside Chris' wheelchair — a TSA badge on his sleeve and blue latex gloves on his hands. Not even he could suppress a smile, but he did not hesitate in his quest, patting down Chris' abdomen, hips, lower back, thighs and calves. Then he swabbed his backpack and wheelchair to test for trace explosive residue.

The man cleared his throat but did not look up. "I appreciate your patience," he repeated. "We're juuust about done here."

My parents, the baby and I surveyed the scene from a distance, having already gone through the main security checkpoint ourselves. It was a good thing we'd arrived early — a full 10 minutes passed before the TSA officer granted Chris passage to our departure gate. "Thank you again, sir," he said, this time offering eye contact and a hand-

shake. "Have a nice trip."

"OK, party people," Chris called out. "Let's do this!" He slipped his boarding pass into his wallet, double-checked that both feet were back on his footrest and wheeled over to us. As usual, the public setting had shifted my overprotective nature into overdrive. After all, it had only been a year. I took a deep breath and let it out, releasing tension. The extra stares wouldn't be an issue today.

Facing Fear

On a mountainside below, the shadow from our helicopter's blades pulsed between cascading waterfalls. We had just circled over Haleakala Crater and were now heading northeast for a bird's-eye view of Hana's rainforest and the promise of breaching humpback whales off the rugged coastline.

I reached over and gave Chris' hand three quick squeezes, our secret code for I-love-you. "This is so cool, honey!"

Between the helicopter blades and the headsets, there was no way he could hear me. But he understood. His lips curved into a smile, and he nodded. "Get to da choppah!" he mouthed back. It didn't matter that I'd never seen the 1987 film *Predator*. Chris' Schwarzenegger impersonation, complete with fake Austrian accent, was a long-running joke between us. It killed me every time.

Our adventures hadn't started out this grand. In the aftermath of Chris' accident, when our world was shrouded in fear and uncertainty, just leaving the house was intimidating. Paralysis was tricky. At first it didn't just immobilize the body; it had the power to disable the mind, too.

Chris likened his accident to a bomb — everyone close to him was affected by the blast. While he received the direct impact, no one was immune to SCI's shrapnel. The nature of our injuries was different, but we all needed to recover in some way. Chris was taunted by every crack in the sidewalk, every product too high on the shelf, and all the reckless drivers who tore through the crosswalk with barely a glance in his direction. He battled physical barriers and psychological demons, while his loved ones lived in a near-constant state of anxiety. If I missed more than two calls in a row from the same person, I was certain they were calling with tragic news to report. Home-



Chris and son Christopher: Wheeling on a sunny day.

land Security would have upgraded my emotional state from orange to red.

Fear was a hard enemy to pinpoint. It wore many different masks. While our modified vehicle signaled freedom to Chris — "The road is one of the few places I feel like myself again," he confessed — it only imprisoned me more. I wasn't ready for my husband to venture back out into a world that now taunted and leered. The first time Chris drove off alone using hand controls, I stood on the curb long after he'd turned the corner and driven of sight. "It's OK," I whispered to the bundle in my arms. "Daddy's gonna be OK."

Within weeks, the shift began. It wasn't Chris' or my style to sit on the sidelines, and in our new capacity as parents, it simply wasn't an option. We learned we could loosen the shackles of fear by testing our comfort zone. The milestones started out small — an afternoon at the ballpark cheering on the San Francisco Giants, firing guns at the shooting range, a bocce ball game with friends.

Three months later, in a sizeable leap of faith, we moved to Lake Tahoe for the summer so Chris could work with a spiri-

tual healer. While there, our rapidly emptying pockets were eventually replaced with skepticism, but we returned home with an invaluable lesson: The mind can be a powerful tool in recovery.

Along with the spiritual adventures we took in Lake Tahoe came the thrill-seeking ones: a cruise to Emerald Bay aboard the *Tahoe Gal* paddlewheeler, a catamaran sail around the North Shore, and a glider plane ride a mile above the treetops that involved zero-G wing tips and enough screams to nearly blow out the pilot's eardrums.

Some exploits were fused with so much anxiety, frustration and advance planning that we considered scrapping plans all together. Hours online and on the phone were required beforehand to ensure things went off without a hitch. Had they accommodated wheelchair users in the past? Were there stairs to contend with? Could we expect any jarring movements that might pose a risk to Chris' still-healing back? Could he use his own seat cushion to prevent pressure sores? For lengthier outings, was there a wheelchair-accessible bathroom for cathing?

The preparations helped, but they did not safeguard us completely. Doubts still found a way to creep in and hijack Chris' mind when it was go time, and setbacks arose we hadn't known to ask about: Chris wasn't overly concerned with having to ask two male employees to carry him aboard the catamaran. The standing room-only bar on the dock where we boarded, however, was another issue. "Hey — check out this guy in the wheelchair," we heard one well-served patron slur to his buddy. The faraway look in Chris' eyes during our cruise told me the man's too-loud voice continued to reverberate in his head. But when all was said and done, our hearts and cameras held proof that a spinal cord injury was not a death sentence.

Redefining Normal

As we approached the first anniversary of the accident, we'd reached a new plateau in our recovery. Chris had returned full time to his job as a mortgage loan officer with Bank of America, a milestone that brought added confidence along with a paycheck. His intermittent cathing and bowel management programs remained a



Traveling for the first time since his SCI was a piece of cake for Chris.

nuisance, but they had long-ago become routine. And then there was the big change: Courtesy of Lady Luck and countless sweaty hours in physical therapy, he'd regained 75 percent sensation and movement in his left leg, an anomaly that enabled him

to walk with the use of hand crutches and a KAFO brace on his right leg.

He could break down his wheelchair and transfer in and out of his car with such ease that he offered to resume our household's dry cleaning duty. And even after a full day at work, Chris occasionally pitched in to cook dinner, perhaps growing weary of the too-frequent cold dishes I would serve up. Our laughs were easier, our smiles deeper, and our bond was tighter than ever following regular sessions with a couples' counselor.

It wasn't all rainbows and butterflies, however. Nerve pain shot down Chris' right leg like an electrical current — a strange ailment that seemed immune to prescription drugs, massage, acupuncture, hypnosis, a TENS unit, an epidural and a medicinal marijuana card. The pain tormented Chris more than his inability to walk. "Well, it's official," I said, trying to lighten the mood at every dead end. "It can only be that darn wife of yours getting on your nerves again."

Right before a friend's bachelor party in Santa Cruz, Chris came down with a

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bladder infection, resulting in 10 days with an indwelling catheter in addition to the usual antibiotics. The predicament may have sidelined him from joining his friends in the hot tub that weekend, but he refused to let the frustration linger.

He oscillated between good days and bad days, good hours and bad hours. He either felt ignored or like a spectacle, and he bristled most when people treated him like he had a mental handicap. It was irrelevant whether or not strangers were actually staring at him in his wheelchair — it was his reality. He discovered a simple coping mechanism for the unwanted public attention: eye contact. While it went against his natural impulse (a middle finger, perhaps?), eye contact empowered him. It allowed him to regain some control over the situation. He was no longer a hapless victim of other people's curiosity, avoidance, rudeness or prejudice. Chris was injured, not some societal outcast, and nothing conveyed that message better than returning stares with a steady, self-assured gaze.

While a near-death experience was a great reminder to not sweat the small stuff, Chris and I were not immune to the stress and exhaustion of new parenthood. We squabbled and continued to discover new flaws about ourselves and each other, but more than ever, we were dedicated to our partnership. If we argued before bed, it wasn't long until his hand found mine under the duvet. "Who were those idiots a few minutes ago?" he'd ask.

"I'm not sure," I'd respond, scooting in closer. "But let's not invite them back for a while. Deal?"

We were newly married, newly injured and new to parenthood. But in a peculiar way, these unique circumstances made us lucky. The challenges and rewards of each day reminded us that life was a gift. It didn't always come wrapped in glossy paper and a bow, but it was still a gift. Our son mesmerized us with his growing arsenal of tricks, and every time we didn't think we could love him more, our hearts found a way. Our comfort zone expanded, and we breathed easier as we continued to let go of fear.

And our pursuit of adventure continued.

The weekend before Valentine's Day, I surprised Chris with a pilot-guided Cessna tour of the San Francisco Bay



It has been nearly two years since Chris' injury, and he and his family are doing fine.

Area. It was the sort of blue-skied, sun-drenched February day that filled Californians with pride, and the sight of Chris taking over the plane's controls rivaled the one out the window. Familiar crinkles appeared around his eyes, the ones that only emerged when his smile was genuine. We scanned the ground until we spotted the tiny speck below that was our home in Mountain View, and we hovered above the cliffs of Highway 1 where Chris had pulled our motorcycle over to propose on bended knee. The rust-colored arches of the Golden Gate Bridge welcomed us, and sailboats appeared frozen in place among the whitecaps below. As we drove home exhausted and fulfilled, we began to brainstorm our next activity. With every taste of adventure we sampled, we hungered for more.

The Importance of Acceptance

By the time we returned home from Maui in early March, Chris and I were rested, reconnected and reinvigorated about our future. But within hours of our plane touching down, we learned of the unexpected death of a dear friend.

If our experience with the healer in Lake Tahoe had cracked the spiritual door for us, this loss opened it wider. In the past, neither Chris nor I spent time cultivating a relationship with a higher power, and we were quick to dismiss that idea when catastrophe struck. What we desired most was to fix what hurt, so we struggled with the notion that we are not in control of our life's plan.

Now, mourning helped us realize the importance of faith and acceptance. We learned it was possible to accept our situation without relinquishing our dreams for a full recovery. Our next destination would not be a geographical one, but it was one we could map out just the same.

Over 1,300 people gathered to honor and remember our friend. When Chris donned his leg brace and crutches and shuffled to the front of the church to offer his eulogy, even the more stoic men in the congregation dabbed their eyes. They weren't just reacting to the death of a friend or another man's struggle to overcome physical obstacles. Death reminds us all that life is short, and it has an uncanny way of reminding us to make the most of the time we have.

An unforeseen accident had veered my husband and me off course, but it forced us to seek out new frontiers. Some we could see with our eyes; others were best viewed behind closed lids. We redefined "adventure" but refused to let a physical disability redefine our marriage. We were just an ordinary couple, who like millions in the SCI community, had learned to let go of fear and grab hold of life again.

Next on our itinerary? Kayaking lessons and an outdoor country music concert. Chris has plans to skydive with a C6-7 quad he met in rehab, and he'll take to the skies in a Super Decathlon for an aerobatics flight lesson. This time around I'll be happy to cheer him on with my feet planted firmly on the ground, but as always, my spirit will be soaring right alongside his. And who knows? With a little luck, maybe I'll find time for a cooking class or two.

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