





AND NOW

On August 25, 2012, Patrick Downes and Jessica Kensky were united in love and hope before 100 wedding guests. Seven months later, they were united in tragedy, and with the world watching

By Zachary Jason

MONDAY, APRIL 15, 2013

Patrick Downes doesn't remember the bomb. He remembers the hours and seconds before. He remembers a "perfect" day with his new wife, Jessica Kensky.

The morning person of the two, Jessica, who goes by Jess, awoke Patrick in their one-bedroom fourth-floor walkup on Concord Avenue, just outside Harvard Square. No TV, shared internet with the neighbors, 600 square feet, it was a space in which "you had to really be in love to be living together" Jess later said. They took turns washing and drying dishes, side by side, as they listened to NPR or Red Sox games.

An oncology nurse for chemotherapy and bone-marrow transplant patients at Massachusetts General Hospital, Jess had worked a 12-and-a-half-hour shift the day before so she could take off Monday, Patriots' Day, to watch the Boston Marathon with Patrick. A student at William James College in Newton (formerly Massachusetts School of Professional Psychology), he took a break from writing the penultimate chapter of his doctoral dissertation, on the place of empathy

Patrick and Jess moments after Patrick finished the 2016 Boston Marathon, on April 18.

and emotional intelligence in the therapist-patient relationship. They drove to their local gym. Patrick lifted weights; Jess ran on a treadmill. Back home, Patrick

put on jeans, a plaid shirt, and a blue Sox cap; Jess dressed in jeans, a tank top, and a bright yellow windbreaker her father had just bought her.

They ate tuna sandwiches, took the Red Line to Park Street, and strolled through the Public Garden, over the stone footbridge on which Patrick had proposed one evening early in December 2011.

They had started dating some five years earlier, not long after they met in Washington, D.C. It was January 4, 2006. Patrick was grilling burgers at the apartment of his friend Tom Treacy, a fellow 2005 graduate of Boston College, when Jess, Tom's neighbor at the time, knocked on the door. She had just returned from the gym. Patrick noticed her runner's legs and expansive smile. Then her Californian effervescence, her sass, and her energy. She liked his cerebral charm, his calm, his blend of reflectiveness and chattiness. (Later, Jess would note how it took them an hour to leave parties because Patrick had to say goodbye to each guest.) They were both interns for U.S. representatives. But he soon turned to psychology, she to nursing. They ran together along the Potomac, then Baltimore's Patapsco when Jess was earning her nursing degree at Johns Hopkins, and then the Charles.

From the Public Garden, on April 15, Patrick and Jess walked up Newbury Street, window-shopping their way toward the finish line on Boylston. In 2005, before they knew each other, they had both run the marathon. Patrick was a senior philosophy and human development major, running to raise funds for Boston College's Campus School, which serves special-needs children. Jess sneaked into the corral at the starting line, a "bandit." She beat Patrick's time by more than an hour, a fact she rubs in to this day.

They found a spot close to the finish line. Jess stood behind Patrick with her arms wrapped around his shoulders, and on her toes so she could see the runners. The elites had run by hours earlier. "Patrick really likes rooting for the underdog," says Jess. "He likes being there for the ones that you can't believe are really running the marathon." They watched for about 10 minutes and were about to leave. It was 2:49 P.M.

"I felt like I was on a rocket," Jess later said when she testified in court. She could only hear her heavy breathing and thumping heart. "There was smoke, there was blood." Instinctively she switched into nurse mode, using her body to shield Patrick from seeing his severed leg. She ripped her purse straps to fashion a tourniquet.

A man yelled to Jess: "Ma'am, you're on fire." He pushed her to the ground to smother her flaming back. Two men started to cut off her jeans and windbreaker. She heard one say "critical."

As Jess was lifted onto a stretcher, Patrick reached his hand out and yelled something he was still getting used to

saying: "That's my wife." The men wheeled her away, and Patrick shouted, "We'll figure this out." She entered a medical tent full of "animalistic screams." Minutes passed. No sign of Patrick. She started to panic that he wouldn't think of himself. "When we would go to the movie theaters we would have to let everyone out before we could leave," says Jess. "I thought he was going to bleed to death on the sidewalk."

Patrick's memory closes just before the bomb, and opens the day after, in a hospital room, where his parents, in tears, told him that he and Jess had both lost their left legs.

The next day, they talked to each other—via cellphone—for the first time since the bombing, he at Beth Israel and she at Boston Medical Center. The blast had ruptured their eardrums; Sarah, Jessica's younger sister, relayed Patrick's words and Patrick's parents relayed Jess's.

Fifteen days later, Jess was stable enough to be transferred. Sarah washed her sister's hair and brought her clothes and lip gloss. An ambulance chauffeured Jess to what she and Patrick call their "first date" at Beth Israel. Five weeks after that, once Patrick's infections, fevers, and night-sweats subsided, they moved into a room in Spaulding Rehabilitation Hospital, in the Charlestown neighborhood of Boston, sleeping in two hospital beds pushed together. They called the joined beds their "Charlestown King."

They would return to their apartment more than two months later, when Patrick climbed the stairs on crutches and a Cambridge firefighter carried Jess. There were dishes and empty tuna cans in the sink, half-folded laundry on the bed, marked-up pages of Patrick's dissertation scattered across the living room floor. Their wedding album was on the coffee table. Patrick and Jess managed to thumb through a few pages. Photographs less than a year old "felt like a lifetime ago," says Patrick. The dinner they were going to cook after returning from the marathon was still in the fridge; the recipe Jess had cut from a magazine was still on the counter.

THURSDAY, OCTOBER 8, 2015

I first met Patrick two-and-a-half years later, at the Pacific Street Café, 75 yards from his and Jess's new handicapped-accessible condo in Cambridge. He walked with only the ghost of a limp. Jeans covered his prosthetic.

As we waited in line to order lunch, Patrick recounted how he and Jess were kicked out of the café the first time they visited. Jess had brought her service dog, Rescue, which she uses to steady herself as she walks, and the owner told them to leave. It wasn't the first time, nor would it be the last. They've been asked to leave hotels and restaurants, and have been rejected by cab drivers. But Patrick's father, who lives in Cambridge, called the café's owner. Now they're regulars, and the staff greet him as he walks through the door.

The only other time Patrick ran 26.2 miles, it took him five hours and 14 minutes. He was 11 years younger, and didn't have to pack socket moisturizer or an Allen wrench to tune a prosthetic during the race, or worry about how he'd react if and when he reached the spot where his life was upended.

When Patrick wears shorts, children think his prosthetic is a superhero gadget—a carbon-fiber foot, attached to a titanium pylon the length and width of a pocket telescope, connected to a skin-toned carbon-fiber socket that extends from the base of his real knee to his lower shin. A day earlier, at the dry cleaner, a toddler had stared raptly at his leg. Patrick invited him to touch it. How does it feel? Patrick asked. The boy rubbed the titanium with his stubby fingers and looked up at Patrick. *Feels all better.*

“With kids, it’s always genuine curiosity,” says Patrick. “With adults we’re always guessing whether they’re genuine or voyeuristic.”

On the sidewalk, at Dunkin’ Donuts, at the gym, people ask, *What happened?* Multiple times each day, strangers ask Patrick and Jess to relive the worst day of their lives. They want Patrick and Jess to seem recovered, heroic avatars for the wounded city. The *Boston Globe* has profiled the couple each year since the bombing. They will appear in an HBO documentary on bombing survivors this fall. Actors will play them in an upcoming action film starring Mark Wahlberg. “People look to us,” says Patrick, “and [think], *If Patrick and Jess are doing OK, so are we.* But our progress isn’t linear. It inches up, and goes backward, every day.”

Patrick endured his last major surgery eight months after the bombing. It was his 16th procedure. Surgeons grafted a flap of skin from his back to the base of what remained of his left leg. By the time I met him, two years afterward, he could run four miles on a good day.

But the bomb had done more damage to Jess, not only taking her left leg, but shattering her right Achilles’ tendon, ankle, and heel, and shredding the leg with bomb debris—shrapnel, BBs, bits of nails—that had lodged too close to blood vessels to be safely removed. Specialists whom the couple visited in six cities advised various procedures, including amputating Jess’s right leg. They saw one hope. Walter Reed National Military Medical Center in Bethesda, Maryland, was all-too-well-versed in the care of blast victims and was the preeminent hospital for treating the most severely injured. The Pentagon seldom granted “secretarial designee” status to civilians, but Patrick spent

two months lobbying on Jess’s behalf, and the Department of Defense granted Jess up to a year of treatment, which her health insurance would pay for. She and Patrick moved into a college-style dorm on the base on August 25, 2014, their second wedding anniversary.

“Walter Reed saved me,” Jess later told me. “It gave me my life back.” The prosthetics lab and 515,000-square-foot outpatient recovery center located yards from their residence was a motivator. She affectionately calls the base “amputee boarding school.” Her fellow patients were combat veterans who knew better than to ask what happened. They pushed one another and they pushed her in the state-of-the-art rehabilitation gym. And the Pentagon granted Patrick clearance to receive treatment two months after they arrived.

Ultimately, an eight-hour surgery to save Jess’s remaining leg failed.

In January 2015, Patrick and Jess visited a riverside beach in eastern Maryland, so Jess could press the toes of her right foot in the sand one last time. The leg was amputated the next day.

An hour into my conversation with Patrick in Cambridge, Jess entered the café, having just left a physical therapy session. Eight months after the second amputation, 30 months after the bombing, she was walking on her own—with a more pronounced wobble than Patrick, but able to cover up to a mile before pain stopped her.

“I’ll be staying just a few minutes,” says Jess. “My husband’s the more hyper-verbal one of us, anyway.”

“Oh really? At home it seems to be the opposite,” says Patrick.

“Well that’s to get stuff done. You talk just to shoot the shit,” she says, flashing a smile, her blue eyes widening.

“Ohhh, I see,” says Patrick.

Except when talking about their darkest thoughts, Patrick and Jess maintain the sprightly ping-pong rapport of gleeful newlyweds. They attend to each other. Each nods along when the other speaks.

Sleeping beneath Jess’s chair in the café was Rescue, Jess’s slender black Lab, wearing a small red canvas vest with a white patch stitched with the words in black, SERVICE DOG. Rescue opens doors for Jess, presses elevator buttons, and fetches blankets for her when she’s cold. “He’s my favorite subject,” says Jess.

“More so than her husband,” says Patrick.

“Well, our relationship is a little more complicated.”

The average couple, the pair had learned on Google, spends about four waking hours together a day. They quadruple that. During long recoveries, with Jess often laid up for months at a time, they are inseparable.

When they’re both struggling with their prosthetics, “those days are really combustible,” says Patrick. “We’ve become really good at being quiet with each other.” Many

car rides are silent. They stagger naps so they can have time to themselves.

They are also re-navigating relationships. Their parents had for a time looked after them as though they were young children. Some friends, Tom Treacy among them, have grown much closer. "There's no bullshitting anymore. We get right into a very sincere conversation," says Patrick. "Thankfully my best friends can still make fun of me and call me out and vice versa." Other friends have "fallen off." Some of Patrick's friends, seeing him for the first time since the bombing, cry and touch his face, as if to say, *You really are alive*. There are times, says Jess, when "I don't feel like a peer anymore."

Of the 264 people injured on Boylston Street, 17 lost limbs. Patrick and Jess were the only couple in that group. Strangers and friends alike have on occasion said, "At least you were both injured."

"It's nice that my husband knows what it's like when my [prosthesis] socket doesn't fit well or how discouraged I feel when I haven't been mobile for three days," says Jess. "He gets it. But at the same time I really would love to have one whole, healthy body in our house."

"I'm her husband," says Patrick. "I have an obligation to care for Jess no matter what the cost. Yet there are many times when Jess is in a lot of pain and I don't have the ability to complete the action required to comfort her. That's really hard. For me it's *the* most frustrating thing."

"I still can't believe it was both of us," says Jess, cupping Patrick's hand. "That has been the hardest thing of all." They make fraught decisions day after day—*Do I get back in the prosthetic now and risk breaking a blood vessel, or do I stay laid up another day?* Still they strive to maintain the playfulness they had as newlyweds, "to have emotion and energy for each other" says Patrick.

In July 2015, with Jess again stabilized, Patrick fell into a depression. For more than two years, helping his wife had consumed Patrick. Only when that work abated did he finally start to process the trauma, to consider how much of his life the bomb took away. He slept poorly and had little energy and little interest in leaving their apartment.

On the sidewalk, at Dunkin' Donuts, at the gym, people ask, *What happened?* Each day strangers ask Patrick and Jess to relive the worst day of their lives. "People look to us," says Patrick, "and [think], *If Patrick and Jess are doing OK, so are we*. But our progress isn't linear. It inches up, and goes backward, every day."

It took time, and many conversations with his therapist, his parents, his brother, and Jess, but he started to recover. By October 2015 he was jogging again, and driving again. In city traffic, "people would flip me off, just like anyone else. It felt great to be anonymous behind the wheel."

MONDAY, APRIL 18, 2016

The return to Cambridge was temporary, just a visit. Patrick and Jess were still in Maryland, at Walter Reed, and didn't know when they'd be able to come home. She'd suffered more complications and had endured two major surgeries in late October and November. It often takes months following surgeries for her to build up sufficient strength to walk. And months as well before she can return to using a prosthesis. In the three-and-a-half years following the bombing she endured some 40 surgeries (she's stopped counting).

Because Patrick has stayed out of work to care for Jess, he's had extended time to rehabilitate. Civilian hospitals discharge amputees once they can walk. But therapists and the wounded veterans at Walter Reed prod Patrick. They joke that his single amputation is a "paper cut." *You can walk? F—you. Let's see you run, jump, climb, box, ski, surf.*

In October 2015 Patrick ran a 5K road race. By January he had built his way up to a half marathon. Three months later, he would try to run Boston. He wanted to "reauthor that day."

He also wanted to raise funds. Supported by friends in the Class of 2005, Patrick and Jess started the Boston College Strong Scholarship, intended to benefit one undergraduate with a physical disability and financial need each year. NEADS (the National Education for Assistance Dog Services), which donated Rescue to Jess, has said it will provide at least one recipient with a service dog in the first five years. "We are harnessing all the goodwill that came to us and paying it forward," says Patrick. Running the marathon would help raise the \$250,000 required to endow the scholarship. [See sidebar page 31.]

The only other time Patrick ran 26.2 miles, it took him five hours and 14 minutes. He was 11 years younger, and didn't have to pack socket moisturizer or an Allen wrench to tune a prosthetic during the race, or worry about how he'd react if and when he reached the spot where his life was upended.

He crossed the starting line of the 2016 marathon at 9:00 A.M. wearing a light blue shirt and black running shorts and his black long-distance running blade—a slim metal scuba tank of a leg with a carbon-fiber boomerang foot. Attached to the sneaker of his right leg was a locket that contained a portrait of Jess.

Running by his side were Jess's sister, Sarah; Patrick's brother, civil rights lawyer Brendan Downes '07; U.S. Army veteran Stefan Leroy, a double amputee whom Patrick met



at Walter Reed; and Tom Treacy, now an equity trader in New York. A news camera mounted to the back of a pickup truck periodically broadcast their progress through Ashland, Framingham, Natick, and Wellesley. A tunnel of screaming Boston College undergraduates at the crest of Heartbreak Hill urged him toward Brookline. When he reached Boylston Street, some five hours and 50 minutes after he started, he grinned through his pain. ESPN trumpeted on the ticker: “First Boston Marathon Bombing Amputee to Finish the Race on Foot.” A local CBS anchor noted that he crossed the finish line at 2:49 P.M.

Three weeks earlier, Jess had required another surgery. It appeared she wasn’t going to be able to leave Walter Reed to be with Patrick. Even when it turned out she could travel, the idea of being at the finish line panicked her. She planned to watch Patrick on TV from their hotel room in downtown Boston. But she was on Boylston Street in front of the bleachers designated for special guests when Patrick came into view, and as he drew near, race officials opened a metal gate and let her wheel out onto the street, Rescue at her side. Patrick ran right past her, focused on the finish line. Treacy got his attention and pointed.

Patrick, Jess, and Rescue walk around Cambridge’s Fresh Pond on October 6, 2015.

Engulfed in cameras and microphones, Patrick bent over to embrace her. They were directly across the street from where they’d been standing when the bomb exploded. For a full minute they whispered to each other, Patrick stroking her hair. As he stood up, the CBS anchor held a microphone to his face. *How does it feel?*

Still breathing hard, his voice breaking, Patrick replied “I ran with the city in my heart, and Martin, Lingzi, Krystle, Sean,” referring to eight-year-old Martin Richard, 23-year-old Boston University student Lu Lingzi, and 29-year-old restaurant manager Krystle Campbell, who died in the bombing; and 27-year-old MIT police officer Sean Collier, whom the bombing’s perpetrators later murdered. “And while I think marathons are an incredible thing, it’s nothing compared to what Jess has been through over the last three years. I’m so proud of the way she’s pushed through all the setbacks that she’s had.” He paused to stanch tears, still holding Jess’s hand. “No one should be dealt that hand. But she’s pushed through. All I did was exercise for a few hours.”



Patrick pushed Jess off down Boylston Street. The next day they headed back to Walter Reed, to “get back to work.”

THURSDAY, AUGUST 25, 2016

Patrick and Jess have spent more than 85 percent of their marriage recovering from the bombing, and more than half that time at Walter Reed, where, at this writing, they remain. The director of a marathon bombing documentary in which they’ll be featured wanted to stage a scene of their return home, but Patrick and Jess refused. “I said, ‘Listen . . . we’re not going to pretend,’” Patrick told me. “And even our eventual arrival back home doesn’t mean our recovery and search for a new way of living is over.”

Each morning they climb into their wheelchairs on either side of the bed. If they’re traveling and their chairs aren’t handy, they begin the day crawling. “We feel like infants,” says Patrick. “But that’s just the reality.”

When Patrick sees himself in the mirror with half a leg missing, he still asks, “*What is that?* I’m still computing it into my sense of self.” He chooses between the half-do-

Jess and Patrick, in Bethesda, Maryland, on October 13, 2016.

en prosthetic legs aligned in the closet—including the daily walking leg; the golf leg, with spikes; the Combat Cheetah, with a sleek black-and-yellow scythe-shaped blade built for speed; the shorter marathon blade; and the rusty leg with the weak socket, for when he and Jess make it to the beach.

Patrick joins Jess most mornings in the Walter Reed gym, where she repeats physical therapy exercises for hours. Most afternoons she spends with rehabilitation doctors or in the prosthetist’s office, where experts adjust her two prostheses millimeters at a time. An amputated leg stabilizes about a year after all medical procedures are completed. Family members visit weekly. And the couple hosts “family dinners” with amputee veterans about once a week. They spend most evenings in their apartment on the base, watching *The West Wing*, washing dishes, and listening to NPR.

“In a very real sense, we’ve learned to live day-to-day,” says Patrick. They have paused their career plans. Fellow employees at Massachusetts General Hospital have donated vacation and sick days to ensure Jess stays on the payroll

through 2017. She won't ever be able to be on her feet 14 hours a day again, but she has begun a graduate program in nursing, hoping to become a nursing teacher. Patrick is writing the final chapter of his dissertation, but he's no longer interested in becoming a therapist. "I now have a seat at the table to discuss new ways to address disability," he says. He has considered developing a comprehensive national database of handicapped-accommodating hotels, restaurants, and attractions. The idea came to him when he and Jess stayed at the Four Seasons in Baltimore for their second wedding anniversary, and a manager told them they couldn't have a dog in their room and needed to leave. His voice is tight with fury when he tells the story.

They also might have had a child by now. "It's the most upsetting thing for me, still. I don't know if it is for you," Jess said at the café back in October. "But I feel like my child-bearing years were stolen. I'm 34 now" (she's since turned 35). "I don't know. I don't know. And I just watch parents through such a different lens now. Why do they have so much gear? We travel with all this stuff we need: extra legs and wheelchairs and stuff for Rescue. How would a kid ever fit into this?"

"When you get married you have this idealistic, beautiful vision of what [it] is," Patrick says. "And then you're tested in all kinds of ways that you couldn't see coming." In addition to individual therapy, they sit together on the couch each week to Skype with their marriage counselor in Brookline.

By late August, Jess was making progress with her prosthetics, able to slowly scale ramps and walk short distances. On their fourth wedding anniversary, with Jess and Rescue in the back seat, Patrick drove back to the Maryland beach where Jess last spread the toes of her right foot in the sand.

EPILOGUE

In late September, Candlewick Press bought the rights to *Rescue and Jessica*, an autobiographical children's picture book Patrick and Jess cowrote to demystify physical disabilities and illustrate the benefits of service dogs (it is due out in spring 2018). And on September 22, U.S. Representative Tammy Duckworth (D-Ill.), a blast trauma survivor of Operation Iraqi Freedom, introduced the National Trauma Care System Bill to the House of Representatives. The proposed legislation, developed partly out of her many conversations with Patrick and Jess since 2013, would standardize trauma care and promote tighter collaboration between the nation's civilian and military hospitals, ensuring that many more civilian trauma victims would receive the quality of treatment Patrick and Jess have received at Walter Reed.

Patrick has finished his dissertation and plans to present it in late November. Jess is scheduled to undergo another surgery on her right leg in December. ■

BOSTON COLLEGE STRONG

In early 2015, Kevin Collins, Liz Stowe Fennell, Michael Hundgen, and Grace Simmons Zuncic approached their friend and fellow Class of 2005 graduate Patrick Downes with an idea. For their upcoming 10-year reunion, they wanted to start a Boston College scholarship in the name of Patrick and his wife, Jessica Kensky.

"Guys, we're not dead," Downes told them. "You can't name it after us." He and Kensky suggested they name the scholarship Boston College Strong, a nod to the popular "Boston Strong" slogan that emerged in the wake of the marathon bombing.

The couple recommended that the scholarship give first preference to a student with financial need and a physical disability, and second preference to an undergraduate who has shown compassion and service to his or her community.

Hundgen, Collins, Zuncic, and Fennell began the campaign for funds on March 1, 2015, reaching out to follow alumni via email, Facebook, and Twitter. After more than 200 of their classmates attended a fundraiser at Allston's White Horse Tavern during Reunion Weekend in June, the drive surpassed \$135,000.

To help raise more, Downes traveled to Orlando in January 2016 and ran the Disney Half Marathon with Hundgen, his former roommate, who directs the Walt Disney Company's online editorial content and who ran the 2005 Boston Marathon with Downes. In their junior year, the two men left their mark on the University, pitching what is now the annual tradition of First Flight—the freshman procession from Linden Lane to Conte Forum for Convocation—to University President William P. Leahy, SJ, and First Year Experience director Fr. Joseph Marchese. Each May, Downes and Hundgen also lit the O'Neill Plaza Christmas tree as a prank (Patrick showed his younger brother, Brendan '07, where the switches were to ensure the ritual lived on). "When you're talking with Patrick, you feel like you're the most important person in the room," says Hundgen. Boston College Strong "captures that spirit."

On September 13, with more than 900 individual donations (singer-songwriter James Taylor auctioned signed guitars and concert tickets that brought in nearly \$25,000), the fund surpassed the \$250,000 required to endow the Boston College Strong scholarship. The Office of University Advancement plans to announce the first recipient next year. For more information, visit bc.edu/bcstrong. —Zachary Jason