

Step into Christmas — headfirst

THE MOTOR NEURONE DIARIES

GORDON AIKMAN



TUESDAY, DECEMBER 13

We are stuffed from our pastrami burgers. My carer Andrea wipes my face with a napkin. I chase the dregs of my beer with a straw. It is time to go. Having spotted us wrestling with my jacket the staff fetch the ramp and put it in place at the entrance. As I manoeuvre my wheelchair out of the tiny restaurant I thank the staff. Andrea pulls open the glass door. The cold Glasgow air nips my cheeks. I drive forward on to the ramp. Scrape! Bang! The ramp skids forward and collapses flat on the pavement with an almighty crash. My front wheels drop to the pavement. My rear wheels are left behind, one foot up on the step. The angle is too much — I am catapulted forward. Everything is in slow motion. The pavement is getting closer. First my knees, shoulder, then crack! My head meets the cold, hard concrete.

I am rolled over on to my back by I am not sure who. I look up. Within seconds I am surrounded by strangers looking down at me. Men and women desperate to help. “Are

you all right?” “Are you OK?” asks a chorus of unfamiliar voices. After the initial shock, and realisation of what has happened, I sigh and laugh to myself. What a ridiculous situation. I am lying spread-eagled in the middle of Glasgow’s St Vincent Street. A lady in red rushes out from the restaurant — she is a nurse. She slowly runs her hands through my hair, looking for cuts. Two burly men grab me. “One, two . . .” On three I am lifted up and deposited back in my chair. Relieved. Thankful. I shake their hands as best I can.

As I wiggle myself back on my chair, and Andrea dusts me off, a young guy sticks around. He is very apologetic. It turns out he is the manager of Bread Meats Bread. He admits his staff had been “sloppy” — they should have been holding the ramp in place.

“You should sue them,” suggests a friend. Frankly I don’t have the time or energy. I just want the restaurant to get the problem fixed so it doesn’t happen to anyone else. Imagine it happened to a frail older person, a child or somebody with a spinal injury? The consequences could have been dramatically worse. I have written to the chief executive to ask what action they have taken to improve disabled access throughout the chain. I await a response. The answer better be good.

MONDAY, DECEMBER 19

Fancy running a marathon? On a treadmill? On Christmas Day? Didn’t think so. I am up early for a photo opportunity with Scottish media at a local gym to publicise the

mad Merry Marathon endeavour of my friend Rob Shorthouse. After arriving accidentally using the service lift I clock a miniature, Lycra-clad version of the Rob I use to know. His gruelling training regime looks like it has paid off.

TUESDAY, DECEMBER 20

Christmas shopping is done. This year I did it 100% online which beats battling Edinburgh’s roadworks, cobbles, steps and packed pavements in a wheelchair. With my mum over visiting from Fife today her task is to wrap them all. My job: provide the wine.

SATURDAY, DECEMBER 24

“Hark the herald . . .”. Gasp. “. . . sing”. Gasp. “Glory to the . . .”. Gasp. “. . . king.” Running short of breath, my contribution to the gorgeous hymns that flood the majestic heights of St Giles’ Cathedral is limited. As my muscles weaken throughout my body, a few words at the start and end of each line are all I can muster. The choir and swollen festive congregation more than pick up my slack. Attending the Watchnight service at Edinburgh’s High Kirk over recent years has become a tradition. It never fails to get me into the spirit of Christmas.

SUNDAY, DECEMBER 25, MORNING

My phone rings, it is Rob. He has finished his marathon (on a treadmill in his garage) in three hours 28 minutes. He is understandably merry. As a pal, I am proud of what he has achieved. And as somebody dying from MND I

am delighted he has raised more than £5,000 for MND research. Thanks Rob.

AFTERNOON

Her cheeks are rosy from a busy day of exertion. Her hair is an adorable riot of blonde curls. Her purple party dress shimmers in the light of the tree. Her underskirt is half in, half out of her nappy. Her eyes are wide with excitement as she sits astride her new three-wheeled scooter. I line my wheels up with hers. At last a game I can play with her. Using the power from my wheelchair we whizz along together, picking up speed as we cross the living room. She giggles. A carefree smile lights up her face and every other face in the room. She is surrounded by those she loves. In those few seconds my one-year-old niece embodies what the festive season is all about: family, love and joy.

Suddenly reality bites. Out of nowhere an unwelcome thought: how many more Christmases will I see? My brain has an annoying habit of tempering the highs with a reminder of the lows to come. Determined to live in the moment I quickly discard the rogue thought — the answer to which nobody knows. What I do know is nothing can destroy the memories we create. This perfect moment will be one of my enduring memories of this Christmas and my beautiful niece Ailidh.

Gordon Aikman is a motor neurone disease patient and campaigner. To donate to his campaign, text MND\$85 £5 to 70070 or visit gordonsfightback.com