



## Stare at Me: How Being Blindsided Brings Life into Focus

**Joey Mullaney**

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Joey Mullaney learned how to rough up an opponent on the football field before he could do long division. From the beginning, his sharp reflexes and outrageous goals made him a star on the sports field. But he took on a much more challenging opponent when he was diagnosed with Friedreich's Ataxia—an incurable, degenerative neurological disease that required him to fight for his life.

Mullaney knew that something was wrong when performing in the sports he loved began to get harder and harder. Despite pushing himself through extra training, he went from a star athlete to a benchwarmer in two years. His parents leveled with him about his FA, which they'd known about since he was nine. They'd concealed it, wanting him to have the best life possible for as long as he could. With an older sister who was also diagnosed with FA, Mullaney knew what was coming. Google searches confirmed it: one day, FA would stop his heart.

Though with brutal honesty about what it's like to watch his body deteriorate, Mullaney reveals an unconquerable spirit, determination, and courage, honed by years on the sports field. Strong enough to laugh at himself, he shares his mishaps, too, and credits the love and encouragement of family, friends, and community for his achievements, including earning a master's degree with honors, and developing his skills as a motivational speaker and writer.

In the memoir *Stare at Me*, the boy who was horrified that he might be stared at with pity is seen growing into a young man who welcomes those stares, knowing that they carry an opportunity to help those who need to hear that life, even with FA, is worth living.

KRISTINE MORRIS (July / August 2021)

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