

• STORY FOUR •



Garrett Stuart

*"There are only two ways to live your life.
One is as though nothing is a miracle. The
other is as though everything is a miracle."*

*-Albert Einstein
(Garrett's philosophy on life)*

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Linda, left with her own thoughts, tormented by that doctor's words, watched as Garrett continued his life, despite his challenges. He remained hopeful and joined Vertical Dream's rock climbing team in third grade, practicing three times a week, and asked his parents to build a rock climbing wall in their garage during the summer before fourth grade. They worked as a family all summer, drilling thousands of holes into plywood, placing endless climbing routes along the walls and ceiling.

Garrett spent hours on that wall, climbing, rappelling, climbing again. He pushed himself, stretching from hold to hold, perfecting challenging angles, practicing perfect form. He gained strength with repetition, stability by climbing with a hacky sack balanced

on his head—an exercise learned from competing on the climbing team—and confidence to maneuver holds, quickly and efficiently, by playing games of tag on the wall with his friends.

Toward the end of fourth grade, Garrett competed in divisionals, hoping for a place in nationals. Climbers from all over New England gathered for the divisional competition with hopes of qualifying for nationals, and Garrett, competing against other kids his age, reached for the wall.

Mike and Linda watched from below as their son climbed with the technique of a professional, the devotion of an athlete. He stretched great distances to reach holds marked with colored tape of the courses he was following, gripped tightly to the most difficult holds—smooth and rounded “slopers”—and reached the tops of every course without falling. As he climbed, dedication dripping down the sides of his face, Linda wanted to scream, “Reach to the left! Twist to the right!”

They could see from below the exact route he should have been taking, the holds he should have been grabbing, the perfect placements for his feet. With every pause, every hesitation, Linda wanted to holler guidance, shout direction. Instead, she watched. She knew what Garrett wanted to do, knew that his body would not listen.

Mike also knew in that moment that his son was not the same climber he had always been, and that he may never be again. It was obvious that Garrett’s nimble mind, for some unknown reason, no longer belonged to the same body—this was no longer the body of an athlete, of a competitive climber.

He’s done, Mike thought.

Garrett qualified for nationals that day, but while his family and friends rejoiced, he knew deep down, in the depths of his intuition, that competing was not going to be an option. He knew that, while on the wall, his mind had told his body to twist left, and it

remained. He had told it to turn to the right, to reach for the next hold, and it did not listen. The twist that had started in his wrist, the involuntary way it turned away from his body, was just the start. He knew his body. He knew the way it should move, the way it should obey. And it no longer did.

In the midst of celebrating his feat, his placement in nationals, there was something unspoken between Garrett and his parents. They all knew that competing was not going to be an option.

That summer, an orthopedic doctor from Boston's Children's Hospital confirmed their concern and, in addition to advising Garrett not to compete, placed him on crutches.

"We need to keep him off his legs," the doctor said.

There was still no diagnosis, no explanation for the way Garrett's body was becoming a stranger to him. The way it moved, the small spasms in his back, the jutting of his legs, and the funny way he sometimes walked, remained mysteries.

The Stuarts had always defined themselves as a traveling family, an outdoorsy family, an adventurous family. Garrett was only ten years old and had already traveled to more places than most adults would see in a lifetime. He had canoed and eaten termites in Costa Rica and held koala bears and tasted green ants in Australia. From the time he was a toddler, they had traveled together, camped, hiked, rock climbed, mountain biked, skied.

It was time to reinvent themselves. Linda cheerfully bought games and set them up every evening. They couldn't play outdoors, so their adventures would continue indoors. They played Yahtzee, canasta, and backgammon. They made popcorn, cookies, signed up for Netflix, and watched endless movies. Garrett, lost in his mother's redefined world, her optimism, escaped to other worlds through books. He joined the adventures of Alex Rider, a fourteen-year-old spy in a series of books by Anthony Horowitz,

and followed teenage criminal mastermind Artemis Fowl in a series of science fiction by Eoin Colfer.

On the outside, Garrett maintained a smile, looked untouched by the reality of his situation—not being able to play sports in the street with his friends, ride his bike, live the life of a kid.

On the inside, he was lost. Confused. Anxiously awaiting the day for a diagnosis, a reason for his body's rejection of his mind's instruction.

By the end of the summer—three months of fumbling through the house, through life, on crutches—Garrett's condition worsened. Barely able to walk, Mike and Linda took him to see his primary doctor, Dr. Roger Wicksman, for yet another referral to another specialist. As Garrett lay on the long, cushioned table, Dr. Wicksman's hands digging deeply into his muscles, Garrett grabbed at its sides, tearing strips of thin, white paper lining the table.

As Dr. Wicksman massaged his legs and hips, hoping to loosen and separate the muscles, Garrett ripped big pieces of the paper into smaller pieces, smaller and smaller, until little piles of white formed on each side of the table. This massage, called Rolfing, took place at every appointment and was a painful technique Dr. Wicksman thought would slow the progress and intensity of Garrett's condition—whatever it was.

"Okay, we'll see you in a few weeks," Dr. Wicksman said when he was finished. As he left the room, Mike, Linda, and Garrett stood, and as Mike followed Linda out the door, they turned to see Garrett standing in place near the table.

"C'mon, sweetie, let's go," Linda said.

"Mom, I can't," Garrett said. "I can't move my legs."

He stood as still as an old tree, its roots deep in the ground.

"What do you mean you can't walk?" Mike asked, stepping to-

ward his son. He placed Garrett's arm around his shoulder for support as Linda held onto the other side of him.

"My legs won't move," Garrett said, panic creeping to the edge of his mind, pushed back by his parent's encouragement.

"You're okay," Linda said calmly. "I'm just gonna go get Dr. Wicksman."

She returned with the doctor, who took one good look at Garrett and said, "He's fine. Looks like he'll just need to use a walker for a short period of time until his body recovers from the intensity of the Roling session."

He's fine, Linda thought, mocking the doctor's words. *What do you mean, 'He's fine'? He can't move his body!*

With an arm draped over her shoulder, the other around Mike, the weight of her son was too much. Linda slowly ducked beneath, letting his arm fall, the burden becoming Mike's. She took one last look through tears before leaving the room. Hunched and frail like an old man, her ten-year-old son's feet scratched along the doctor's office floor, barely moving, as Mike guided him across the room toward the door.

There were two escapes from Dr. Wicksman's office, but none from Linda's mind. As she made her way down one of the hallways of the office, Mike and Garrett slowly making their way down the other, images of the way Garrett's wrist had twisted when this all began more than a year ago, the way his body had gradually become a stranger to him, to them all, raced through her head at a dizzying rate. Her tears, which had remained invisible in her imaginary world where everything was okay until now, fell, became real.

This was no magical adventure. There were no poisonous berries hanging from make-believe, human-eating trees in this world. Bilbo and Frodo did not exist. Linda could not laugh or pretend her way out of what was happening. Garrett's response of "fine"

when asked how he was feeling could no longer fake its way to “suitable answer” status in her mind. This was real. Her son could not walk.

As a family, they had lived as though the elephant in the room would stomp its feet, crushing them, if they acknowledged that anything was wrong, acknowledged its existence. Videos Linda had taken of her son, proof to doctors who heartlessly accused him of making it up, were sugarcoated with Garrett’s attempt to mask the severity of his condition by fighting against his body.

When his leg jutted outward, announcing to the world that something was terribly wrong, he would turn it in, painfully force it back to normal. If he didn’t look sick, he wasn’t. If he remained strong, it might go away. Mike, Garrett, and Linda had kept all their fears, all their worries, inside. Three souls, countless secrets.

If they made cookies and played games, life could remain normal until a diagnosis made its way into their lives. Until then, they were a happy, normal family.

But not on that day. When Linda saw Garrett’s body fail him, completely detach itself from his mind, she lost it. Everything became real in that moment and she could no longer pretend. She sobbed quietly, afraid of the long hallways echoing her cries. But it was too late. Garrett came around the corner, held up by his father, and saw her face.

“What’s the matter, Mom?” he said, terrified eyes.

Doesn’t he know? she thought.

“Well, I don’t know,” she said hesitantly, wiping away tears, evidence of weakness. “The fact that you can’t walk?”

She posed it as a question, a small part of her hoping that the answer could be changed. But she knew it couldn’t.

She reached for Garrett, hugging him tighter than she ever had before, as tears slid down his cheek. They both silently realized in

that moment how important her positive outlook, the “Pollyanna” world she had created, was in their lives. He needed her to pretend, and together, in their embrace, they re-entered that world.

Linda never broke down in front of him again.

Keep reading for a glimpse at Garrett’s wish!



Sand-colored dust circled in clouds through hot air as tires of a rustic, flat-bed truck tore through the dry, Cambodian earth. Garrett watched as it made its approach, and through those circles, swirling and climbing, disappearing toward blue sky, he could see the faces of those that reflected his past—the faces of ten people living the way he had once lived; the faces of people whose lives he was about to change.

Some of them, whose legs were nothing but heavy, numb, useless limbs, scooted with their arms, well-defined from years of carrying themselves through life, along metal to the back of the truck as it came to a dusty halt. Others, legs missing from the knee down, just sat waiting, as they had their whole lives—waiting for arms to lift them.

As Garrett helped them down from the truck, one by one, they looked at him with childlike eyes, much like his own that had once scanned the faces of doctors desperate to help. He smiled and they smiled back, a universal language. With the help of his parents and two others from their Globe Aware group, Garrett placed each person in his or her own wheelchair, and while some took off right away, using their arms to push the large bicycle tires on either side of their seat, others remained still, helpless, unable to grasp the idea that they could finally move freely, on their own.

Garrett watched as they circled, then pushed handles and let go, sending these people into freedom. It had been a year since surgery, a year of independence, a year without Dystonia. When he learned after his surgery that he could make a wish through the Make-A-Wish Foundation, Mike and Linda jokingly said, “We’re not going to Disney World.”

Garrett had never been, and they were not the Disney World kind of family. They were adventurers, seekers of the untraditional.

“You should consider giving back,” Linda had said, and the only thing Garrett could think to give was the best gift he had ever been given—the gift of mobility.

Garrett and his parents had traveled all over the world, journeyed unbeaten paths, taught English and math to kids in impoverished countries, and gained a deep understanding of different ways of life. They had lived in home stays, met locals in different countries, been enriched with first-hand knowledge of other cultures, but they had never fully immersed themselves, connected themselves, to the lives of the people. This was their chance.

“I wish to go to Cambodia and build wheelchairs for people who can’t walk,” Garrett had announced, and the Make-A-Wish volunteers sat still, smiles plastered, confusion setting in. They had never heard such a wish. How would they go about building wheelchairs in Cambodia? Where would they start? They contacted Globe Aware, a nonprofit that organizes service projects, and Garrett and his parents were on a plane a few months later.

“Orkun,” cried one woman, grabbing the bottom of Linda’s shirt after she helped her from the back of the truck. The woman looked to the ground, tears landing in the soft dirt after running down the length of her hands, pressed together in prayer.

“Orkun,” she cried, over and over in her native tongue.

Linda smiled and looked at their translator, Dine.

“Thank you,” he said.

“You’re welcome, you’re welcome,” Linda said, over and over, but the woman would not let go.

Garrett watched, the woman’s intensity rushing through him. He wanted to hear her story, wanted to know what happened to her legs. He wanted to hear all of their stories. As a group, they eventually migrated to a nearby hut with a large, open floor, straw above, a table, and nothing else. They sat in a circle and exchanged

stories, speaking slowly, deliberately, as the rest sat in total silence, Dine's voice, his translations, echoes.

As they spoke, Garrett remembered pinning himself between a chair and his bed for hours in the middle of the night. He recalled stares in the halls of his school, disbelief from strangers, running clumsily before falling, learning to live inside his body, a perfect stranger. And then he looked at the faces surrounding him. The faces of people who had spent more than twenty years with broken legs or no legs at all, no means to get around, no "prison with wheels."

Their prisons were their homes; places they stayed, sitting still on dirty floors—for days, months, years at a time. Their prisons did not include occasional running, the ability to jump from a wheelchair and catch a football. Their prisons did not take away their outdoor adventures, forcing them into air-conditioned homes with TVs, games, and books. They had no books. They had no TVs. They had no air-conditioning, despite cruel, hot summers; no electricity; no light.

When each of the ten people finished telling their stories, Garrett and his parents, the only people from the group who asked to visit each home, each prison, bounced in the back of the old, metal truck as it crawled along dirt roads and into the villages where these people lived. One by one, they visited each home as the setting sun chased behind with fiery reds and magnificent orange. Its persistent push limited their visits to just a few minutes each, but it was long enough to see first-hand poverty that Garrett had only ever seen from a distance.

He had once witnessed the slums of Nairobi from a highway in Kenya, its cardboard homes with aluminum roofs. He had danced with the Hadza tribe—the poorest people he had ever met—admiring their content spirits, appreciating their genuine smiles inspired

by living from the land. He had watched the children teeter-totter on tree branches, play in the dirt as though it was sand in a sand-box. He remembered how they only showered when it rained and only ate after a successful hunt.

That was poverty, but this ... this was different. This was confinement in their own, dark homes, escape only possible through their minds. Leaving was not an option for them, not without the help of another. There were no cell phones to call for help, nobody to hear their shouts outside of earshot.

Garrett watched as each wheelchair recipient pushed himself or herself freely around the wooden floorboards of their stilted home, and for the first time, it didn't seem to matter that a box in the corner used as a bed was the only piece of furniture in the room. The dust and lack of windows went unnoticed. They could move, and that was all that mattered.

All these people could see was this newfound freedom, and that's when Garrett realized just how much he had—how much he always had. Nothing was taken from him. Without his experience, without Dystonia's firm grip on his life, he would never be standing in the homes of these people, realizing and appreciating every single thing in his life. It was time to start looking at what he had, not at what he did not have. What an invaluable lesson to learn at sixteen. It was his trip, his wish, that taught him that.

Standing in the home of the woman who would not let go of Linda, the woman who was still thanking them, still touching their arms and insisting for them to spend the night, Garrett drank milk from a coconut she had given him and made a decision.

He decided that every vacation in the future would not just serve as a good time, would not just involve exploring and expanding his view of the world. He was going to become part of it—part of the culture, part of the people. His Wish trip opened his eyes to all that

he was capable of giving, the difference he had the ability to make. Every vacation would be a “service vacation,” and after his trip to Cambodia, Garrett graduated from high school and his first “service vacation” before enrolling at the University of South Carolina to study international business was to teach English to children in Nicaragua. His second was helping at an after-school program for street children in Peru.

After Garrett’s Wish trip, he started speaking for Make-A-Wish Foundation functions and fundraisers, helping to raise money and spread awareness of the impact wishes make in children’s lives. He gives credit to his doctors for his gift of mobility, his miracle, and thanks Make-A-Wish for letting him pass it on.

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