

## Leap of Faith

The weather wasn't particularly pleasant, the sky, bland, and the trees bare as Garrett crossed 11th St. heading on foot down South Carolina Avenue towards the metro station. To a passing stranger he seemed like any other college student in the city. He wore slimming, mustard yellow pants tucked in at the bottom to a pair of worn boots. A snug, navy blue winter jacket hung from his shoulders. The knit hat and crocheted scarf shielding his face barely revealed a pair of ear buds, tucked amongst escaped tangles of chestnut hair, seeking refuge from the biting February wind. As usual, his music played on shuffle.

In many ways, Garrett was a normal college student, though he was not studying in Washington D.C. He was in the midst of his senior year at Vassar, in New York, and was subsequently experiencing the academic rigors of being a double major and the social stresses of being a fairly-popular, involved member of the student body. To help defray the cost of tuition, he had aspired to and became a resident advisor. He balanced his staff duties with a position on student government, a fellowship with one of the political science professors, a service fraternity he participated with twice a month, and four other student led organizations. And a college committee. And club wallyball.

Even though he was stretched thin, Garrett managed to juggle his crazy schedule. His mother was constantly telling him not to push himself to hard, not to take on so much responsibility, not to forget about his academics. But the thing is, Garrett never forgot about his academics. He didn't need his mother's reminding. He didn't need anyone's reminding. His schoolwork always came first. Always had. Perhaps this is why he was able to take on so much

in the extracurricular department; his scholarly foundation permitted him to excel in the college's vibrant student life. Being at a liberal art's institution like Vassar only lubricated the excessive complexity of his schedule.

In all actuality, Garrett's academics distinguished him from your regular run-of-the-mill undergrad. He was a probable Phi Beta Kappa inductee and his thesis was in the process, two and a half months before its due date, of generating a lot of talk amongst the English and Economics faculties. It was a blend of his near perfect GPA, his ambition, and his affability with the selection panel that had landed him two semesters at the University of Cambridge, in England, his junior year. Garrett had beat out nearly forty other qualified applicants to win acceptance of the school's most competitive study abroad program. A rather hefty feather in the hat of a twenty-one year old.

Garrett glanced left. There was that homeless man again. The same one who was camped out in front of the metro entrance the previous night when Garrett had arrived in D.C. He was slumped against a trashcan. His head, lowered. A Styrofoam cup extended out from underneath the heap of raggedy, gray blankets covering him. Every few seconds you could hear the slight jangle of mingling coins. "Quarters?" he asked the group of passing commuters. Barely pausing, Garrett reached into his back pocket and pulled out his wallet, placing the only bill in his possession into the man's trembling cup: a crumpled ten. Moving forward with the throngs of morning travelers, he was quickly swept into the depths of the drafty terminal.

Garrett hadn't necessarily wanted to come to Washington this weekend. Yes, one of his close friends from Cambridge had celebrated her birthday the night before and he had surprised everybody by showing up. It was a mini-reunion: seven Americans who had studied together for a year in the U.K. They spent the night reminiscing about those shared experiences abroad. How

Brandon had broken his collarbone in his first rugby practice, how, in ten months, Lucy had managed to date every member of the university men's four boat, and how Garrett had drunkenly stood in front of a crowded London pub and belted out the lyrics to Mumford and Sons' "Little Lion Man". Three and a half pints of dark ale were all it took for him to get up, on a non-karaoke night, and lead the lively patrons in what had grown into the defining song of his time in England.

“But it was not your fault, but mine  
And it was your heart on the line  
I really fucked it up this time  
Didn't I, my dear? Didn't I, my dear?”

Cambridge was the highlight of Garrett's Vassar experience. The international flare, the merit of the education, the feeling of pride exuding from the historic buildings he frequented. Just being in the same classroom of some of his professors made him feel smarter. However serious he took his studies in America, he matched those efforts across the Atlantic. But something Garrett found himself doing more in England than he had in New York was, simply put, living. Away from the invisible pressures of home Garrett was able to pursue hobbies he had otherwise ignored. Fencing lessons? Absolutely – how very British. Poetry readings? All he had to do was write down the words that had been sitting patiently in his brain for years. And best of all, having been stifled away somewhere deep within him since grade school, Garrett's confidence, specifically relating to the female gender, came welling out of him like a natural Casanova. He had a date whenever he so desired one.

The old Garrett would have obsessed over his first term exams. The new Garrett

vacationed with his English friend's relatives in Dorchester, balancing a few hours of intense studying with baking "secret family recipe" scones with his gracious hosts. Old Garrett may have spent a solid week researching and writing 7,500 words highlighting the parallels between Britain's Age of Austerity and Clintonian America. New Garrett found it more enjoyable to punctuate one or two hours of potent focus with spirited doubles matches on the nearby indoor lawn courts. New Garrett took advantage of his proximity to the world's backpacking Mecca and bought a one-way ticket from London to Paris for winter break. He bent and twisted and warped the Compass Rose into an indiscernible configuration of youthful wandering, carving his way from Lisbon to Kiev, Rome to Helsinki.

His metro card wasn't working. A third time of slamming into the turnstile was enough for the guy behind Garrett to abrasively remind him to "hey, put some money on that thing." Weaving his way upstream to the only working machine, his index finger hovered momentarily before touching the single-fare option. Swiftly turning back, he rejoined the funnel of daily travelers pouring into the station. Looking up, he noted seven minutes before the next train arrival. "No rush," he thought.

Garrett hadn't thought it possible, but he found himself enjoying Cambridge even more when he returned from his travels than he had before he left. The rare, perfect sequel to a standalone classic. His courses, spectacular, his friends, unbelievable, his life, what every twenty-one year old should have: carefree yet focused. He found himself dreading July. Garrett was approaching the end of something he didn't want to end and was reminded of it each and every day as he completed the symbolic intersecting red lines that marked each day's completion on his calendar.

He researched ways to stay. He considered transferring. He even flirted with the idea of

taking a year off from school. He did manage to squeeze in a few weeks touring Ireland before the inevitable return. It was the rational-minded Garrett who convinced himself to board the trans-Atlantic flight leading him back to the States. He had grown more than comfortable leaving New York behind yet couldn't resist the feeling that he was now supposed to accept it back as familiarity. As home. He silently sobbed for the first two hours of the flight, the synthetic smelling airline blanket sandwiched between the window and his moist face.

Four minutes now. Out of all the waiting passengers, gripping their tablets and smart phones, caught up in their own worlds of emails and colorful games and iWhatever, Garrett stood closest to the tunnel where the train would soon emerge. The only things they had in common, he thought to himself, were being in the same place at the same time. With similar earphones. These people meant nothing to him. How could they? He didn't belong here. Garrett rocked back-and-forth to stay warm. And to silence his nerves. Three minutes.

Readjusting back into American life had been a miserable transition for Garrett. Sure there was the initial honeymoon phase of seeing family and some of his friends. Picnics and barbecues and swimming pools. However, it did not take long for his imitation emotions to fade out and his feelings of angst and detachment and nostalgia to crescendo to the fore. Luckily he was on his way back for his last year of school before his loved ones could feel the full wrath of his bitterness. But the dam of sentiments could only hold back the flood for so long.

Garrett threw himself into his studies with a vengeance. He maintained his extracurricular commitments with the same fervor. But within a month, his falseness flat lined and the energy vanished. Vassar was no longer the same to him; he felt like a plump turtle trying to squeeze into a much smaller, long forgotten shell. His surroundings, familiar, the feelings, foreign.

Losing touch with all but his closest friends while he was in England, most professors and

acquaintances and faux-friends acted like he never left and attempted to pickup relationships where they had left off. He fine-tuned his escape of these encounters, cordially excusing himself from the reoccurring, “I barely saw you last year”s and “Well, we’re just glad to have you back”s.

Garrett retreated into himself. In those early months back, he had grown to hate himself: his excessive emotions, his discomfort with his surroundings, his isolation in a sea of friendly faces. He detested how America closed around him like shackles. How his newly freed nomadic mind had been cemented in place. How, at Vassar, he sensed a disconnectedness to the greater world every second of every day. Loneliness grew in Garrett like a dark cancer, speckled with polyps of dangerous thoughts.

A tumultuous first semester back, to say the least. But with the commencement of his final semester at Vassar, Garrett discovered a companion who could empathize. He found solace in the company of a previous acquaintance, somebody who had worked on a group project with him first year, second semester, who had recently returned from six months abroad in South Africa. Emma seemed, though to a lesser degree than Garrett, lost in her reintegration into their alma mater. She sat next to him in an introductory gardening class they were taking to fulfill their science credits. It didn’t take the two of them long to discover their mirrored emotions. They began grabbing coffee before class, got lunch once or twice a week, and genuinely enjoyed bonding over their predicament: venting over America-this or America-that, retelling stories from their international escapades, and exchanging their most up-to-date heart’s struggles.

After a short-lived month of intense camaraderie, Emma began distancing herself from Garrett. Perhaps he was draining her. Maybe she was more resilient than him and couldn’t afford to be dragged down by his dead weight. Or the possibility exists that she received no

reciprocated vibes of romantic interest and thus moved on towards more promising prospects. Whatever her reasoning being, it left Garrett miserable and feeling alone all over again. “Why am I even trying?” he’d ask himself.

Just two minutes.

Garrett had made up his mind to come to Washington D.C. around that time. Actually, one of his last meaningful conversations with Emma had been about the possibility. His friends had just gotten in touch with him to say that they were planning to have a birthday party and hoped that Garrett would be able to come down from New York. It was the first thing he had told Emma at lunch that day, standing in line to swipe their student ID cards. He was hesitant. His thesis was beginning to get to him. But she was adamant about the whole thing.

“It will be good for you, Garrett, go,” she had said.

Deep down he agreed. He had known what he was going to do a long time ago. He just didn’t know how he was going to do it or even if he’d be able to go through with it. Suicide itself was a beaconing escape. The logistics were an unwanted burden.

One minute. Garrett’s eyes caught the distant glow of the train’s lights coming around a bend: a candle at the end of a long, inky tunnel. A gust of wind swept past his face, sending chills down his already shivering body. A quick leap into the tracks and it’d all be over. This is how he was going to go. This is how he had to go. Because it was growing more and more apparent that he couldn’t stay here. He didn’t belong here. This wasn’t him. He didn’t know who he was anymore. Not this. He despised this – himself.

The electronic sign above the platform now read that the train was arriving. Garrett could see, still a ways off, the illuminated cabin of the metro, an attendant seated at the consoles. His knees tensed to jump. He was ready.

The acoustic ambling of a guitar melody, one so engrained in Garrett's body and soul, began on his iPod, voiding him motionless. He became aware of the pounding in his chest, the sweat pouring down his face and back and seeping from his armpits, his teeth chattering, the shivers, the pounding in his head, the approaching train and now...now?

Garrett took a step back. The train flew inches in front of him like a stray arrow. As it slowed, Garrett, eyes closed and feet planted firmly, returned to that crowded pub in London. The distinct smell of Benson & Hedges smoke flirting with his nose. His fingers smeared with the pint of Fuller's sloshing about in his hand. The white Christmas lights hanging from the rafters. A distant glass shattering. The hubbub of yelling Britons. A spattering of rhythmic applause.

“Weep for yourself, my man

You'll never be what is in your heart.

Weep, little lion man

You're not as brave as you were at the start.

Rate yourself and rake yourself

Take all the courage you have left

Waste it on fixing all the problems

That you made in your own head.”

A sliding door opened in front of Garrett. His feet stood rooted to the concrete beneath him. For the first time in six months, he wept.

And with those tears, the realization that the next train was due to arrive in five minutes.