

One Step at a Time

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Jimmy rubbed his sweaty hands on his jeans again. He turned in his chair and looked out the window, then he looked at the clock.

Carla and Steve would be here soon. They were his first visitors since he had returned home from the hospital. Jimmy looked imploringly at his mom. “Maybe you can call and tell them not to come.”

“They’re your best friends. They want to see that you’re okay,” Mom said soothingly. She squeezed Jimmy’s shoulder.

“But I’m not okay,” Jimmy muttered. The doorbell rang, which wasn’t at all how Carla and Steve usually visited. On a normal day, Steve would creep in stealthily and try to ambush Jimmy, but Carla’s giggling would usually give them away. Carla was a champion giggler.

Mom went downstairs to let them in, and soon a nervous giggle was heard from the stairs. Two heads poked around the door to Jimmy’s bedroom. Jimmy cleared his throat, “Come on in,” he said.

They tiptoed in.

“Uh, h-how are you?” Steve stammered.

“I’m okay.”

“Does it still hurt?”

Jimmy shrugged.



“At least, it isn’t your whole leg. I mean, at least you still have a knee. ...” Carla reddened, giggled, and looked around helplessly.

Steve rolled his eyes and poked Carla in the ribs, “Good going, Carla.”

Jimmy stared at his two best friends. Was everyone he knew going to be like this? Were they all going to stare at a patch of air over his right shoulder and stammer?

“Look,” he blurted, “I guess I’m not ready for visitors yet. ... I-I think I need to rest.”

Steve and Carla stared at him, hurt on their faces. “Sure,” Steve said. “We’ll see you later then.” He grabbed Carla’s arm and hustled her out as she didn’t show signs of leaving. The door closed softly, and Jimmy heard Steve say to Carla, “You shouldn’t have drawn attention to it.”

Jimmy eased himself out of his chair and lay down on his bed. *I'm miserable and tired*, he thought. The doctor had said it would take a while to adjust, but adjust to what? The accident had been over a month ago, but it was still a shock to look past his knees and see only one foot.

A moment of not looking where he was going and a car running a red light had turned the life of a normal, hyper eleven-year-old boy upside down.

He sighed; it wasn't fair to Steve and Carla to shut them out. They had sent him loads of cards and snacks and comic books when he was recovering in the hospital. He picked up the phone and dialed Steve's number.

"Steve..."

There was silence, then, "Yeah?"

"I'm sorry about earlier. It was weird, you know?"

"It was," agreed Steve. A pause. "Carla's here."

"Is she? Well, uh, I don't want this to happen again ... us all staring at the walls not knowing what to say. I've decided to talk about ... it ... my foot—er—stump. What do you think?"

"Then I get to ask you questions about it?"

Jimmy sighed, "Yes."

"Cool," grunted Steve.

"Anyway, I'm going to the hospital tomorrow to get a fitting for my new foot, so what if we meet up after that?"

There was a scuffle on the other side as Carla wrestled the phone from Steve. "I'll bring snacks and things. We can have a party!"

Jimmy smiled and heaved an internal sigh of relief as he put the phone down and braced himself for the trip to the hospital the next day.

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The next afternoon, Jimmy told Steve and Carla about his first fitting as they munched through a bowl of chips.

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"Hello. You must be Jimmy," the lady doctor had said. "And how are we feeling today?"

Jimmy had shrugged.

"Well, first of all, we are going to make a mold of your leg so that we can get the right shape for the top of your new foot."

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"She liked to say 'we' a lot," Jimmy said. "It's not like we *both* lost a foot."

Steve snickered and Carla giggled.

"She made a mold of my stump with some weird goo and said that the foot would be ready by next week."

"You'll be able to walk again!" Carla exclaimed. "That's great!"

"Well, first I need to go to a physiotherapist..."

"What?" said Steve, troubled. "Why do you need to go to a shrink?"

Carla rolled her eyes. "That's a psychiatrist."

"My physiotherapist is going to teach me to walk properly with my new foot. They're called *PT* for short," said Jimmy.

As they sat in the hospital waiting room, Jimmy noticed a man with gray hair that spiked out like a dandelion and squinty eyes. Although he tried not to, Jimmy couldn't help but notice that this man who was in a wheelchair had no legs at all. The man caught Jimmy staring and gave him a sort of grimace that could possibly have been a grin or a snarl. Embarrassed, Jimmy fixed his eyes to the neon light strips above until he was called in to the doctor's office.

On the way home, Jimmy mentioned the man he had seen. "There was an A-grade villain in the waiting room." It was a game the friends sometimes played of choosing a movie role for people they saw on the street. "A-grade villain" was reserved for those who looked particularly dastardly and likely to become "evil masterminds."

"I heard someone in the waiting room call him Mad Max."

"No kidding?" said Steve after Jimmy's description.

"Oh, that must be Mr. Horace," said Carla. "He lives at the end of my street; but he only uses a cane when he walks. I didn't know he had prosthetic feet ... you'd never be able to tell."

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Two days later, Jimmy's mom dropped him off at the school gates and, swinging along on his crutches, he made his way down the hall to his classroom. Sammy (classmate, fifth row, second desk) ran down the corridor at top speed and then slid the rest of the way. Tom (classmate, fourth row, third desk) swerved around the corner and leapfrogged over Sabine, who was kneeling down to pick up some dropped books.

I can't leapfrog. I can't run and slide, a voice in his head whined. Then another voice piped up, *Really? Well, when's the last time you actually leapfrogged? C'mon, how old are you? Six?*

This inner dialogue had only begun after his accident. Before, Jimmy had run around so much he never had more time for first thoughts, let alone second thoughts.

He reached his classroom and sat at his desk just as the bell rang.



Jimmy stared at the chalkboard where the teacher had begun writing out the day's lessons. He could feel the stares of at least half the class fixed on him. It was an itchy feeling—rather like a mosquito dancing a jig with a top hat and a cane.

The back of Jimmy's neck itched all morning and all afternoon. During lunch break, no one talked to him other than Carla and Steve.

"I've just become the invisible man."

"Try eating a chocolate bar in class and see how invisible you are," Carla said.

Jimmy frowned but Carla continued, "They don't know what to say to you. They don't know if you'll be mad at them for wanting to look at your leg, or if they should ignore it or what. Steve and I felt that way a few days ago. Right, Steve?"

Steve grunted.

"Once they get used to it, everything will be fine. Right, Steve?"

Steve grunted again.

Things were fine until Carla, Jimmy, and Steve began to make their way out of the school grounds. Jimmy stopped and stared miserably at the soccer practice that was beginning in the school yard. Jimmy had loved soccer and could practice for hours every day. He had posters of soccer players on his wall; he had a soccer goal in his backyard. He had boxes of cleats and shin pads by the boxful in his closet, and the socks you pulled over your knees that make your shins and calves look like badly stuffed Christmas stockings.

Carla tugged Jimmy away. "You'll be able to play again," she said, but she sounded uncertain. Jimmy was silent for the rest of the day.



At home, Jimmy's mother agreed. "You can start playing soccer again once you get used to your new foot."

Jimmy did his best Steve impersonation; he grunted.

"You should ask your physiotherapist about the possibility of your playing sports."

Jimmy looked out the car window. He didn't want to talk to anybody about his terrible fear that he'd never really be normal again—never be able to play soccer.

I wonder, Jimmy thought, if Mr. Horace ever felt like he wanted to pull all his hair out and scream because he couldn't play soccer?

Jimmy found, however, that concentrating on walking a straight line with his new foot was so difficult that sports of any kind seemed like a faraway dream.

On the day of Jimmy's training session with his therapist (aka PT, aka physiotherapist), he succeeded in walking a straight line unaided by his crutches—a very *short* straight line.

His therapist nodded for him to try again. “You have to take it slow. But you also have to practice a lot. And you won't be able to walk all day on your new foot till your muscles are more developed.”

“No kidding!” Jimmy was frustrated. “I didn't expect this to hurt so much. I've only been on my feet for fifteen minutes, and it already hurts.”

“The skin on your stump needs to get tougher. Right now, it's new; like baby skin. It will get better. Don't give up.”

Encouraging as the words were meant to be, they made Jimmy want to yell.

“I'll never be able to play soccer again!” Jimmy blurted.

The therapist's face softened. “You will play soccer again. Eventually.”

“Hah!” The exclamation sounded old and cracked and echoed eerily in the gym. Jimmy turned to see the dramatic figure of A-grade villain, Mad Ma—correction—Mr. Horace enter the gym.

“Well, boy,” Mr. Horace said, pinning Jimmy with a squinty stare, “join the club.”

Jimmy was quite sure he didn't want to join any club with Mr. Horace and nearly said so.

“Your good therapist is filling your head with rubbish,” Mr. Horace went on gleefully. “The truth is, you'll never be able to play soccer in quite the same way again.”

The therapist bristled. “What are you doing here, Mr. Horace?”

“I've reserved the climbing half of this gym. Go on with your baby stepping.”

Jimmy could feel his ears redden in anger and embarrassment. His therapist seemed at a loss for words as well. All the other grown-ups Jimmy had met since his accident had been patronizing or had exclaimed with pity about his new handicap, but Mr. Horace was entirely different. But Jimmy couldn't help his interest as Mr. Horace lurched to the far wall of the gym where there were ropes, bars, and a rock-climbing wall.

Mr. Horace began with the ropes; he swarmed up one and swung himself up the other so fast it reminded Jimmy of a movie played on high speed. He descended the rope upside down, and then walked on his hands to the bars. Mr. Horace had transformed from an A-grade villain into an Olympic gymnast. It was amazing. For the first time since his accident, Jimmy's inability to play soccer faded from his mind and was replaced with a growing interest in climbing. Sure he had climbed before—most boys did—but to be able to climb and swing like Mad Max? An idea was born.

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Carla and Steve were examining Jimmy's first prosthetic foot. It sat on the table next to the chips.

"How come you don't wear it at school?" asked Carla. "You're still hopping around on crutches."

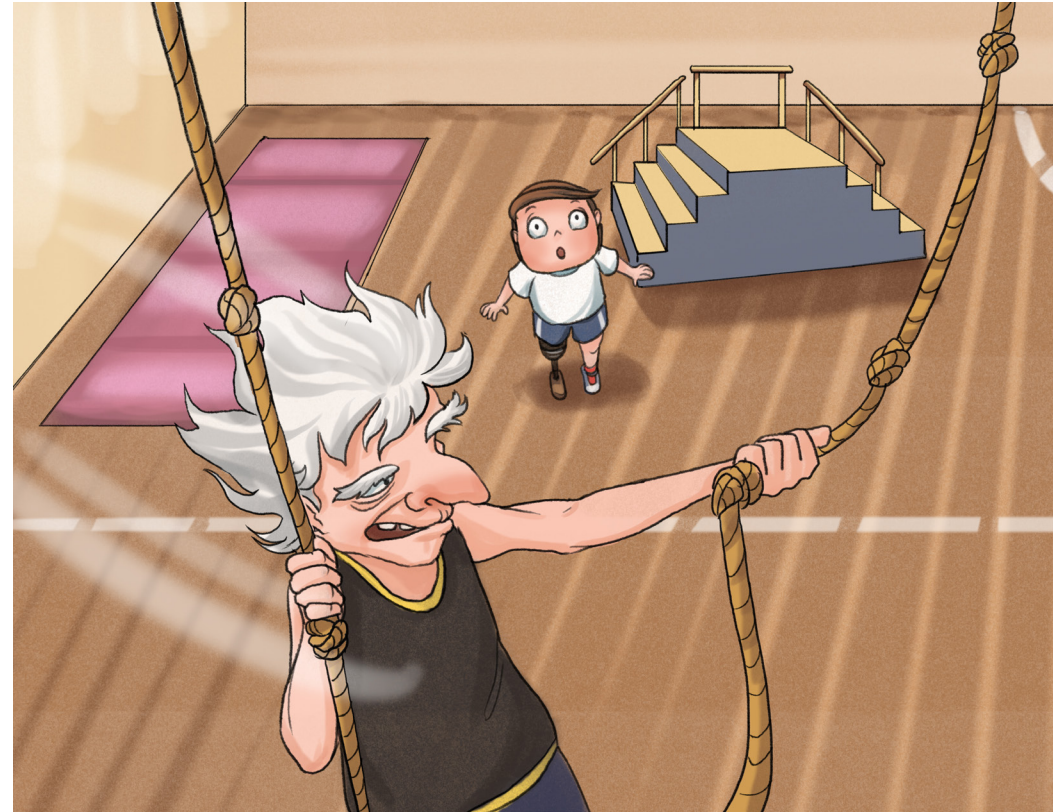
"I can't wear it that long yet. Besides, this new foot isn't permanent. It's a tryout. I'm going to get my permanent foot next month. Even then, I'll get it changed every six months or so, because I'm still growing."

"I want this foot when you get a new one," announced Carla. "Think of all the April Fool's Day and Halloween tricks you could play with a bunch of feet!"

"I claim your next one," interjected Steve.

"The way you two weirdos go on, I could open a shop of secondhand left feet."

"When will you start to walk around more on this?" asked Carla, waving the foot in the air. The unspoken question was *When will you start playing soccer again?*



Everyone who saw Jimmy before The Accident knew of his love for soccer. It was visible in the soccer-patterned pencil case and the soccer ball key chain and the soccer jerseys.

"If I keep training hard, I may be able to walk with my new foot for hours at a time within a few months." Jimmy shrugged; walking didn't sound like much when you had run in the track team and played soccer just months before.

"But I'm getting interested in rock-climbing. ..."

"How interested are you? Have you started already? Can you climb with just your arms?" Carla shot the questions out like bullets.

“I’ve tried climbing the ropes in the gym when I go for physical therapy,” explained Jimmy. “And there’s a rock-climbing wall on the side of the gym too. Mad Max ... er, Mr. Horace goes there and does the most tremendous stuff.”

Jimmy told Steve and Carla in detail what he had seen Mr. Horace do.

“I’ve got to see this,” Carla announced. “When’s your next appointment with your PT? Steve will come too. Won’t you, Steve?”

Steve gave his usual reply.

“I hope you don’t mind,” Jimmy said to his PT when Carla and Steve joined them at the next training session. “They’re hoping for a Mad Max sighting.”

“Jimmy,” whispered Carla, “the PT has a perfect ‘ting’ smile!” A “ting” smile, the trio had decided, was the kind of smile Disney princes and toothpaste advertisements had. They went “ting” with little sparkles that gleamed from the corners of their mouths.

“Carla, you’re nuts.” Carla giggled.

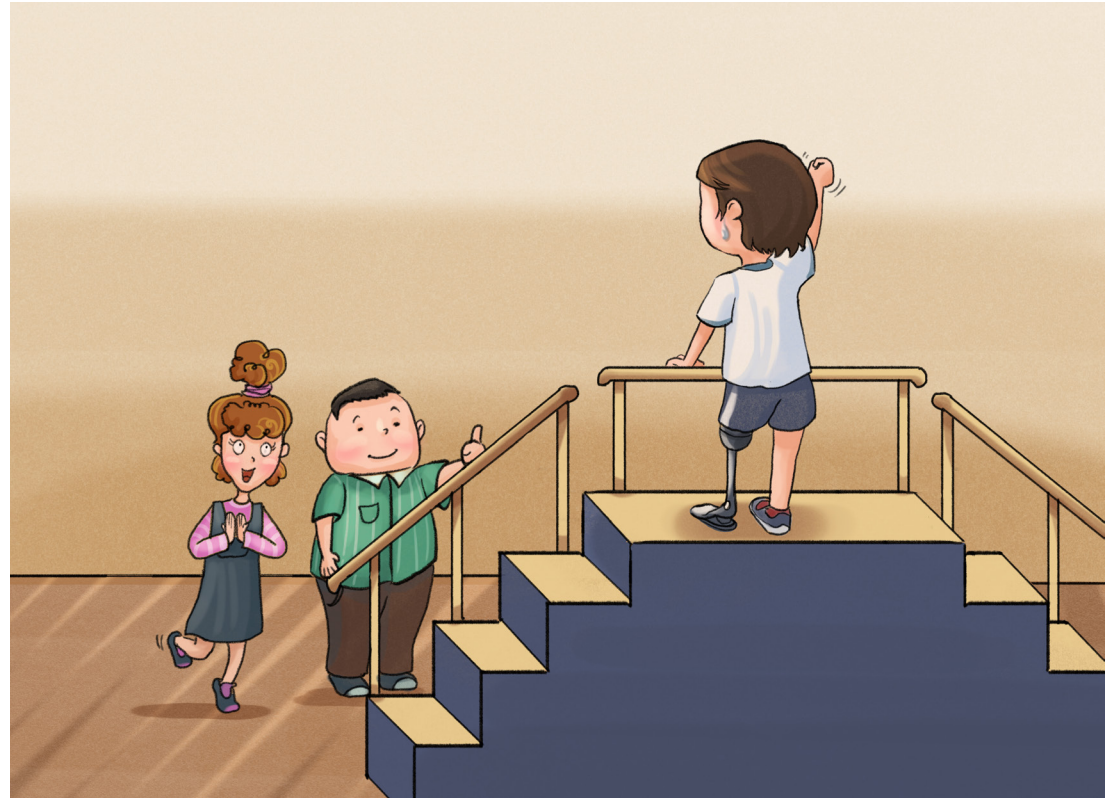
Steve and Carla cheered Jimmy on as he tackled the stairs with his new foot.

“Use both feet. Keep your balance centered,” the PT called out.

Jimmy made it to the top of a short flight of steps set up in the gym and pumped his fist in the air. Steve and Carla gave him a standing ovation.

There was a loud snort from the gym entrance. All eyes turned to Mr. Horace, aka Mad Max, A-grade villain, acrobat, and rope climber.

“Hello, Mr. Horace,” Jimmy said.



“I see you’ve brought moral support,” Mr. Horace said, waving his cane at Steve and Carla.

“Actually, they came to see you. They want to see your tricks,” Jimmy explained.

Mr. Horace was taken aback and almost looked pleased. Then he shook his head and glowered. “I’m not some carnival sideshow!” But he proceeded to the ropes anyway and gave Steve and Carla such an acrobatic performance that they clapped and whooped, and even the PT cheered.

“Jimmy here has a horrible disadvantage,” Mr. Horace told Carla and Steve after he had climbed down to the floor and picked up his cane.

“He only lost one foot. How does he expect to do anything if he’s not balanced like me?” Mr. Horace shook his head in pity.

“I’ve only just begun!” Jimmy said indignantly. “One day, Mr. Horace, I’ll race you up that rope, and I’ll win.”

Mr. Horace chuckled. “That’ll be the day, boy,” he said and left.

Over the next few weeks, Steve and Carla found new furniture in Jimmy’s room to stare at.

“A pull-up bar *and* a climbing rope?” Carla asked as she gave the rope an experimental tug. “You’re really serious about this, aren’t you?”

“Mom’s scared about me getting hurt climbing things. She said I need to practice before I try anything high off the ground,” Jimmy said. “I get really crazy in the afternoons and in the evenings ... I can only read comic books for an hour at a time, tops. Then what?”

Carla, being Carla, tried climbing the rope to the ceiling using only her hands and stopped about a meter off the ground. “It’s difficult with just arms,” she gasped and dropped, hitting the ground with a thud. Seconds later, Jimmy’s mom dashed into the room.

“It wasn’t me, Mom.”

Jimmy’s mom glared at the rope hanging from a hook in the ceiling. But all she said was, “You be careful with that rope.”

Steve tried his hand at the rope next, and, to everyone’s surprise, he was at the top in a blink.

“Just imagine,” said Carla, “you’re ten stories off the ground, swinging from a rope. The wind is pushing you back and forth and...” Steve dropped with a thud.

“It wasn’t me, Mom!” Jimmy yelled before his mother could burst into the room again.

“I want to join a climbing club once I get my permanent foot, seeing that climbing is more about arms than legs. Take a look at what I found online!” Jimmy showed his friends a picture of a prosthetic foot on his computer. “It’s the ultimate climbing foot. It can grasp surfaces and squeeze itself into cracks that a normal foot could never fit into. I’m going to ask Mom if I can have one for Christmas.”

“Jimmy,” said Steve solemnly, “that is soooo cool.”



The following weeks of school and therapy seemed to go by in a blur. One by one, Jimmy's posters of soccer players were carefully rolled up and packed away to be replaced by posters of champion rock-climbers. Week in and week out, Jimmy continued to walk on his new foot and climb on the climbing wall. There were good days and very bad days. But nothing spurred Jimmy on like Mad Max. They met at least once a week at the gym, and Mr. Horace's sneer (or was it a grin?) at Jimmy's attempts at walking and now running, fueled Jimmy's determination.

"It is a dark and stormy night..." whispered Carla.

"Carla, it's four in the afternoon. And it's sunny."

Carla waved her hand in the air, "Little details. Anyway, today is the day of the challenge ... if Mr. Horace shows up."

"It's Friday, and he's usually here on Friday," said Steve. Jimmy nodded and rubbed his hands together.

"We can start climbing, though, just to warm up," suggested Carla. The three friends clambered around the bars and ropes. Jimmy had gotten his first permanent foot at last, but was not using it on the climbing wall yet. Carla was trying to beat Steve at monkey bars. Before they knew it, the gym began to get dark.

"I guess he's not coming today," sighed Jimmy.

"Then he'll be here next Friday," said Carla. "In the meantime, you can try to improve your climbing." Jimmy nodded, and over the next few days, what with school, homework, and friends, he nearly forgot about his impending climbing match with Mr. Horace—until the next Friday came along, and Mr. Horace still did not show up at the gym. Steve, Carla, and now several other of Jimmy's classmates had started a climbing club, called "King Kong." Soon, they no longer reserved the climbing section of the small gym where Jimmy trained. Instead, they had found an indoor rock-climbing facility where they met and trained twice a week.

It was nearly two months later that Jimmy found out what had become of Mr. Horace. It was the day of the county-wide, Junior Speed Climbing Competition. All the members of club King Kong had signed up to compete. A new climbing wall had been erected for the event.

Jimmy had arisen early, too nervous and excited to sleep any longer. He had gone over the new climbing course in his mind over and over again. No one had been allowed to climb it, but he had watched men setting it up. Jimmy was deep in his own thoughts. He didn't hear a car driving up to his house, or the door bell ringing, or the voices in the hall.

He did, finally, hear his mother calling him down to meet a visitor. In a hurry, Jimmy opted for hopping down the stairs on one leg and hanging on to the railing, and was surprised to see a lady standing just in the doorway.

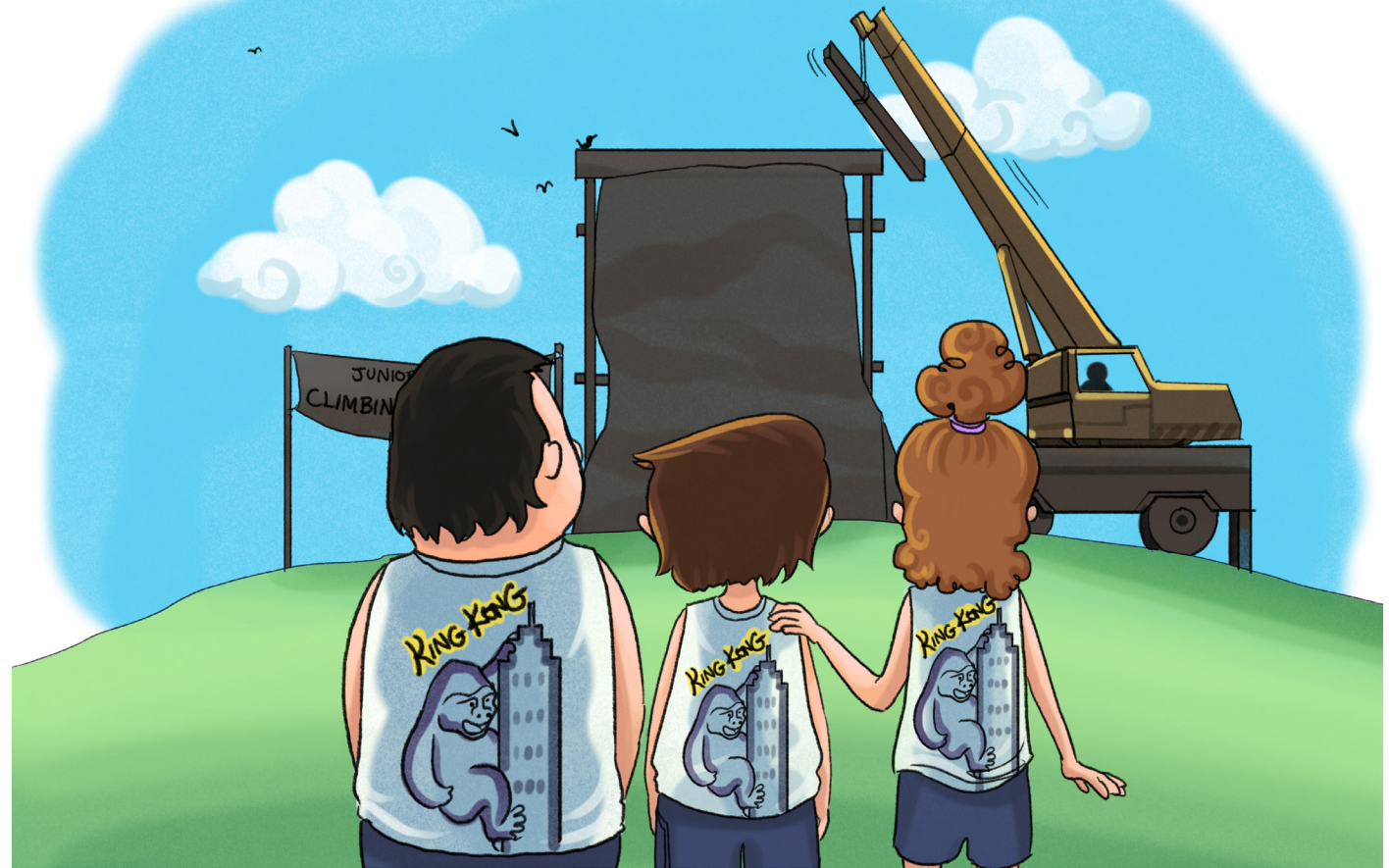
"Jimmy," said his mother, "this is Mr. Horace's sister."

The lady in question didn't look a thing like Mad Max.

"Hello..." said Jimmy nervously, remembering that he still had his PJs on.

"Please, call me Samantha," said the lady kindly. "I've come here to deliver a letter from my brother. You see, he passed away last month."

"But ... how?" Jimmy stammered.



"He had been ill for quite some time. But knowing my brother, he probably didn't let it show."

Jimmy swallowed a lump in his throat. "No," Jimmy agreed, "he didn't."

"I'm sorry I wasn't able to give you this letter earlier. All he told me was that I was to give it to a 'Jimmy who lives nearby.'"

"We ... we only saw each other at the gym when I was learning to use my new foot."

"I believe this is for you then," said Samantha.

Jimmy opened the letter.

Jimmy,

A boy who won't give up deserves everything. So I've enclosed a little something for you to get some "climbing gear." I suggest the Z-Axis Climbing Foot.

Sorry I won't be there to race you up a rope; but that's something we both can look forward to when we meet again.

Your well-balanced competitor,

Mr. Horace (otherwise known as Mad Max)

Jimmy put the letter away and gulped back a sob, all the while telling himself that he was *not* really crying. Today, Jimmy vowed, he would race as if it were Max he was racing against.

And on that day scaling the new course in the Junior Speed Climbing Event, much to everyone's astonishment (besides Carla and Steve's, of course), Jimmy won.

