

THE JUMP

The last twelve miles to Southpoint were on a ragged single lane road cutting through lava fields that looked like enormous chunks of burnt chocolate. My grandson, Jack, got a text from an old girlfriend. She claimed Southpoint was the southernmost place in the United States and dared him to jump fifteen feet into the Pacific's bluest water—a 'must do' when on the big island of Hawaii. We had covered a lot of ground, done touristy things like Kilauea, an octopus farm, a coffee plantation. Jack was thrilled that I wanted to do this too. My wife, Thea, didn't see it that way. Neither did my sister, Elizabeth. They made it clear—they weren't jumping into unknown waters on the dare of an ex-girlfriend's text message, but in the end, they came along anyway.

Southpoint was nothing more than a pot-holed parking lot. A dozen people mulled about looking over the cliff. Seagulls squawked, skimming the silvery ocean, snatching fish like magicians. A narrow cement walkway cantilevered a couple of feet over the vertical drop into ocean. By the time I parked, Jack was at the end of the ramp, staring down, holding on to a low railing.

"Whoa." He slowly backed off. "Maybe you should go first Gramps." I stepped up, walked to the end. The ocean was below, way below—this was no fifteen-foot jump. My stomach floated from instant vertigo.

"Go for it!" a young woman shouted from the side. She was in a bikini toweeling her long brown hair. Eyes watched me from the sidelines. Everyone there had done the same thing I did—except her.

I backed slowly off the walkway. "You jumped?"

“Ya,” she said. “It’s amazing. Do it.” She was thin, muscular arms, curvy, bright eyes. I wondered how she kept that bikini on when she hit the water.

“That’s got to be twenty-five feet.” I said.

She laughed. “Try forty, at least.”

Jack came up to my side. His body is not six-pack but packed and smooth, a runner’s body. “Hey,” he said.

She gave him the once over and smiled. “You jumpin’?”

“Ya. You dive in?” Jack asked.

“Dive? No way. You should jump. I mean, unless you’re a pro.” She wrapped the towel around her waist, tossed her long hair over her shoulder.

“What’s your name?” she asked.

“Jack.” He sat on a lava rock. Everything around there was chunked lava. “You got any pointers?”

“Keep your arms to your side, go in as straight as possible.” She demoed. “Otherwise you’ll break your arms when you hit.” She put on a hat that read, ‘Jersey Pushers’.

“Baseball?” Jack asked.

“Ya, Prison Baseball. I coach.”

“Sounds tough.” I said, doubting she coached prisoners or anyone for that matter.

“If you’re not preachy, they listen.” She adjusted her hat, “A good coach doesn’t say much, anyway.”

Jack laughed. “You jump cliffs in Jersey?”

“It’s flatter than my stomach.” She gave it a slap.

The Jersey flats never looked that good.

“Come here Jack.” She waved him over, put her hand on his shoulder, her mouth close to his ear, and whispered.

Jack laughed, then turned. Their lips were inches apart. “No way,” he said.

“I’m not kidding.” Their eyes were all over each other.

I was standing right there. “Hey, Jersey,” I interrupted. “Any coaching for me?”

Her teeth were gleaming white, a smile that pulled you in.

“Yeah. If you go flatfooted you’ll break your feet. So, point your toes and stay straight.

Hitting the water at that speed can snap your back.”

My wife and sister crawled to the edge. “If you do this I’m divorcing you,” my sister said.

“You can’t. You’re my sister.”

“I don’t care.” She was steamed. Thea wasn’t happy either.

“Has anyone else here gone in?” I asked.

“That’s one crazy jump,” a man answered.

Jersey and Jack stood cliffside, gazing out at the ocean, laughing. That was Jack—easy going, easy to like. I wandered back onto the walkway, the ocean below was calm, hardly a wave. I didn’t think about the possibility of sharks or undertow like I should’ve been. I was thinking about Jack, who would one day tell a story to his children about his grandfather at the southernmost edge of the United States, a man who stood on a ramp above the deep blue Pacific and who did not jump into it. I thought of my father and I sitting on the roof cleaning the gutters one cold autumn afternoon, we were three stories up. He reached for the plugged drain and began to fall forward. I watched as he plunged to the ground with a thump, and lay there splayed, like a corpse at a crime scene. My mother ran out the back door and got him to his feet,

brought him into the house. A few minutes later I heard sirens. They took him to a hospital in an ambulance. She had to call the fire department to get me off the roof. The ocean below rocked against the cliff wall. Forty feet is higher than three stories. Jack watched as I backed off.

Jersey put her hand on Jack's shoulder. "Don't over think it," she said.

"You jumping?" I asked him

"Ya, I'm jumping." Jack walked out to the end of the ramp put his toes over the edge.

The small crowd gathered. Everyone held their breath. We had become collaborators in a daredevil scheme. I watched from the side, maybe ten feet away. He glanced at me with a slanted smile. "See ya later, Gramps." With a yell, he leapt off.

He shot like an arrow into the blue. When he hit the water, everyone clapped and whistled. There was barely a splash. Five seconds danced by—the next five were like molasses. The next ten like molten lava. Jack's head did not pop to the surface. There was this terrible silence. A frozen silence, broken by the pounding heartbeats of a dozen people and screaming seagulls in the distance. A horrifying emptiness filled my belly. Jersey looked around at the others, her eyes like a laser, pointed and piercing. Without a word, she threw her towel on the ground, ran at full speed off the ramp and into the salty air. I followed. Like a child jumping into a kids swimming pool I launched off the ramp. To this day I have no memory of the next five seconds. When I hit the water, salt stung my nose, the impact set my body on fire. I remember going deep, then clawing upwards for air. There were splashes all around me. Four others jumped with us.

When we surfaced, Jack was standing in the mouth of an enormous cave under the bluffs. He waved his arms. "Jersey," he yelled. "You were right. There's an underwater entrance."

Jack extended his hand, pulled Jersey on to the rocks. “I knew you’d find it.” She kissed him on the cheek.

“Is he there?” Thea shouted nervously from above.

“He’s OK.” I shouted back. Cheers rang from overhead. The other jumpers howled in delight—not only from seeing Jack safe. They did something they never would have done. Myself included.

Jack slapped me on the back, high-fived with the other men. We’d remember that day for the rest of our lives.

I followed Jack up the forty-foot iron rung ladder to the top of the bluff. Music was blaring—people clapped. Elizabeth and Thea threw their arms around Jack.

Jersey came over, put her hand on my shoulder. “You did it!”

I threw her a side-glance and shook my head. “You’re a Pusher.”

“We all have something to overcome.” She smiled. “Your grandson’s a fine man. You’ve done some pushin’ yourself.”

“Well, how about some Jersey Pushin’,” I said.

“Are you saying now?” Her eyes were ablaze.

“Yeah, I’m saying now.”

She threw her towel on the ground and I kicked off my shoes. We reached the ramp at the same time. “After you,” she said. I walked to end. Jack watched from the side. Jersey stood a few feet behind me. With my toes curled over the edge...I stepped off into open air...arms to my side and toes pointed.