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THE EVANGELICALS GO BUNGEE JUMPING

In midair, our assistant pastor Wally looks like a roll of Charmin squeezed too hard. But Big Jim, our pastor, could be the Passion incarnate. Arms extended and frame drawn to its full six-and-a-half feet, his body is a cruciform rising from the dry riverbed toward the bridge where we stand.

The bungee jumping was his idea. I'd suggested taking the kids to build houses in Kentucky or maybe to help the cleanup in Louisiana. But Jim had wanted a more lasting truth. "Let them know, even were they cast from the highest precipice, God's angels would bear them up."

Watching both pastors reach their apex, I feel guilty for doubting this plan. The two men glide into their second descent, and the thirty-odd children around me—our Glad Tidings Battalion of God's Royal Rangers—crowd the rail for a view. They laugh and shriek and wave at Big Jim, calling on him to testify midflight. Their voices are shrill to the edge of otherworldly, none older than fourteen, this trip a last fling for the eighth-graders who begin the slide to adulthood at high school in the fall.

It's on the second ascent that something goes wrong. Wally, per the laws of physics, recoils less than on his first spring upward. But Big Jim rebounds just as high the second time, maybe higher. The college student who strapped in both ministers seems more perplexed than alarmed. He shields his face from the sun with one hand, as if eyeballing a set of geometric reference points to explain what he saw.

The third time up is definitely higher. The fourth time brings Jim parallel with the platform from which he leapt. He would be eye to eye with us, the faithful, except his lids are closed, and it occurs to me that—never having bungeed before—he's unaware of a

problem. He's just letting his body absorb the rhythm: fall and rise, rise and fall. As if nothing could be more natural.

The fifth time he overshoots us by the height of a toll booth. The sixth time, a goal post. The seventh, a small office building. He's picking up steam too, springing faster. I try to remember some fact from high school that could help, maybe involving exponents.

Without warning one of the kids starts praying, and before I know it they're all on their knees, hands folded or palms stretched to the sky. They ask the Lord, in His infinite wisdom and mercy, to restore Jim to the platform, and though I can't be sure, I think a few of them say to take me or Wally instead. It's what they've been trained to do. When they fail a test, Big Jim tells them to pray. When a family pet dies, pray. When a father downs too much liquor or a mother cries behind a locked door or a sister goes to live with relatives out-of-town: pray, pray, pray. Sometimes it works, other times not. But whatever happens is God's plan. So that's an answer.

I envy them. When my wife's doctors found the cancer, Big Jim prayed at the hospital, then later in my living room. And after the requisite time, he asked for my help leading the youth group. He said he knew how Cindy and I had wanted children. His arm around my shoulder, his wooly beard grazing my cheek, he said that he, too, had been laid low before—troughs of desperation, nadirs of despair—but he thinks God showed him those places so he'd know how high he could be raised when the call came at last.

Jim rockets past the platform again while, down below, Wally sways like Wonder Bread on a string. Wally hollers that he feels faint, so the college kid starts winching him up. What else can he do? The kid's the only person on the platform not born again. I take my eyes off Big Jim long enough to consider him: gray cardigan over a concert tee, blue deck shoes, a chrome stud everywhere the Lord gave him extra skin. His far-off look says he's already thinking

about what comes next—media interviews, drug tests. Not that I blame him.

There is a sound like a rubber band breaking, and the bulk of Jim's line comes spiraling down, whacking the bridge like a snake-bite. The children stop praying, and even the college student's hand goes slack on the winch. We cock our heads to follow Big Jim shrinking skyward, a lost balloon.

Later, Wally will say Jim was called home. He'll say it's how the Pastor wanted to go—straight line, sure ascent. I can see the thought already brewing behind some of the kids' expressions. When Wally uses the word *lucky*, he'll be met with fervent nods, the occasional *Alleluia* or *Amen*.

But standing on the bridge, I'm glad not to be in Jim's shoes. I grab his bungee and hold the frayed end toward the kids. I shake it at them, though I don't know exactly why. I want to say something—about the meeting of horror and wonder, about faith—but my tongue refuses to snag the ideas, so I just stand there with the cord in my hand, kind of gurgling. The kids seem to take pity on me, and I think we might still find an answer if we look for it together. But then Wally lolls onto the platform, red-faced and winded. He flops onto his back like a fish in the boat's bottom and shouts Praise Jesus, mostly because I think he's shocked to be alive. The kids flock to him. Praise Jesus, they echo. God be praised. Even the college student mouths the words.

I fling the cord from my hand and watch it skitter over the bridge's edge. The kids are on a roll now—*Praise Jesus—Praise Jesus—Praise Jesus—Praise Jesus—Praise*—their voices less like a song than a single extended note. It occurs to me that Jim might come down eventually and that maybe I should call someone, but who? Fire department? Air Force? 700 Club? As the chanting subsides, Wally fumbles for

a prayer, his voice quavering at the high end of tenor. I imagine the long walk to the van for my phone—my halting account of events—offering all I know before the silence, awaiting a response I'll never get.