

## The Jump

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As I nervously climbed up to the platform, I had plenty of time to think. Plenty of time to chicken out...

*I don't have to prove myself to them*, I thought. I could quite easily just turn around and not go through with it. I could carry on living with the sneers and put downs, just like I always had. *No, you don't have to prove yourself to them*, argued my other self, *but you have to prove yourself to you*.

Put simply, my choices were: do the bungee jump, or don't do the bungee jump.

"Whatever you do, don't look down." Their words rang in my ears, impossible to ignore. So of course I looked down, and immediately felt light-headed. Suddenly, my legs seemed to have a mind of their own, and for a moment I was frozen; rooted to the spot. I looked down once again at the thin blue strip of river – it looked so far away. If all went to plan, my head would be briefly immersed in it before the bungee cord yanked me back up. A dark cloud of impending doom seemed to hover above me as unwelcome thoughts entered my mind.

I couldn't help thinking back to the time when I first came to live in this town. In an effort to fit in with the kids at school, I'd accompanied several of them on my bike to a place called Jawbreaker Hill, after the school day had ended. I should have guessed that my invitation wasn't an act of kindness. The clue was in the name: Jawbreaker Hill. Not the kind of place where you form lasting friendships!

"You'll NEVER do it, you chicken," one of them had taunted, watching me from the bottom of the hill. I couldn't bring myself to nudge my bike towards the edge and plummet down. The chant of, "Chicken! Chicken! Chicken!" rang in my ears. "Whatever you do, don't look down," the same cruel boy yelled up to me, and those were the last words I could bear to hear. I came to a conclusion there and then: this wasn't what friends did. I turned my bike around and rode home so they wouldn't see the stinging tears streaming down my face.

I would like to say that nothing came of my crisis of confidence in that moment; that I had gone on to make friends with those who would support rather than tease me, but that would be lying. Years of brutal bullying would follow as I was hounded relentlessly by those who had witnessed my weakness. I was easy prey.

But today I would do something which none of them had done, which none of them had even dared to think about. At 14 years old, I was the youngest person to have signed up to bungee jump off the bridge above the town's narrow gorge. Impossibly high and ridiculously dare-devilish, this would make them see my full potential!

I had made sure that everyone in the school knew about this death-defying leap. There was no backing out now...

Under the weight of these thoughts, I struggled to regain my composure. Although I was breathing heavily and could taste fear in my mouth, I continued my climb up to the platform. I was sick of being ridiculed and laughed at on a daily basis. It was they who had clipped my wings. Well, no more. They were going to watch me leap from the nest as a fledgling then fly as a confident adult bird.

As I finally clambered onto the platform, the sun glared defiantly at me. It felt like the world was watching. After a few moments, a bungee instructor helped me into my harness, securing each strap into place.

"Alright?" she asked.

"No," I replied with a smile. The woman laughed, but not a sneering, mocking laugh, which was the kind I was used to, but a warm, supportive laugh which gave me the self-assurance I needed.

"Okay," she said, "You're all set. I'll count down from three to one and when I shout, 'Jump,' you just have to let yourself fall forwards. You got that?"

Before my mind could persuade me otherwise, I quickly replied, "Got it."

"Good. You really will be fine," she added, to calm my fears. "Ready?"

"Ready."

It was nearing the moment of truth. I smiled.

"Three-two-one... JUMP!"

Without hesitation, I let my body fall forward as instructed. I felt the wind and the sun kissing my face. Soaring... Free falling... Heart-rushing... Diving... Perfection!

Strangely, despite the speed, I couldn't remember ever feeling so calm. So this was what living felt like! *Real* living. Even before the rope had reached the end of its journey, so much had changed. It was an odd realisation. It no longer mattered what they thought of me. What was more important was what I thought of myself. Now, I wasn't just calm, I was positively relaxed. I started to really enjoy the fall, knowing full well that it marked the beginning of my ascent back up.

This fledgling had become an eagle.

