

From *The Jumping Tree* by René Saldaña, Jr.

I was starting to feel an empty nervousness in my stomach. Not only was I about to start school at Nellie Schunior Junior High, but I hadn't done much to get the older kids' respect this summer.

My cousin Jorge, who was a full two years older, was visiting from Mier across the border. This didn't happen too often because we visited my family in Mexico two or three weekends out of the month, and my tío Jorge, Jorge's father, didn't own a car, so Jorge had to wait until my uncle could borrow some transportation. Jorge wouldn't start school for another two weeks, so he wanted to take a vacation in the States.

Odd how just across the border, only some forty-five minutes away, people still walked to work, there was still a milkman, a water truck brought drinking water to each house, and fruit and vegetable vendors drove or walked up and down streets selling their wares.

When I'd visit my cousin, he'd always make certain I had a good time. We'd spend hours on end in his father's carpentry shop sawing blocks of wood into rough imitations of cars and planes. We'd shave planks of wood until they felt smooth on the palms of our hands or our cheeks. We'd use the shavings later on for kindling or confetti, and we'd dig our fingers into the mountains of sawdust, sometimes as deep as our elbows.

So, when he came up to Peñitas, I wanted to make sure there was always something doing. Since he was older, I didn't want to do things that were for kids, but I didn't know exactly how to entertain him.

At the beginning of summer, Tío Nardo had hammered a few slats of wood to my granddad's mesquite tree in the middle of the backyard, called it a tree house, and we were set. It was just like in *The Brady Bunch*. Only their tree house actually resembled a house, with its walls, windows, roof, and floor. We had to imagine all that. All we had, really, were flat places to sit on. But it was enough for us.

One day after Jorge arrived, Ricky was over, and we came up with a jumping and gymnastics competition. Actually, Ricky came up with the idea because he was good at that stuff. He was always saying, "Look at this," and he'd tumble, pop a cartwheel, flip backward, or walk on his hands. Once he even walked across the top of a fence like a tightrope walker. Its sharp points didn't seem to bother him.

Ricky explained the rules as we stood under the mammoth mesquite: "Okay, we're going to climb the tree and start from there." He pointed to the slat where I normally sat. "Then jump down to that branch there and grab hold." His finger slid across the sky from the plank to a branch that stretched

out below it. Easy enough. “Then whoever can do the best trick is the winner and king of the world.”

“What do you mean by trick?” asked Jorge.

“You know, flips, swinging back and forth, then letting go, seeing who can land the fanciest.”

All this time I’m thinking, *Okay, jump, grab, let go, and pray I land standing. No fancy-schmancy stuff for me. Just do the thing .*

But Jorge was the oldest of us, and the strongest; Ricky was the gymnast; and I was the youngest and the smallest, the one who had something to prove to these guys. I had to go through with this deal. I had to prove that I could belong to this group, could be a man.

“*Orale pues,*” said Jorge. “Let’s climb up.”

And so we did, hand over hand, foot after foot, until we all reached the top and we sidled to the edge of the jumping place. When I saw how far the branch was from this spot, then how far the ground was from that branch, I decided to do the minimum, a jump and release. After all, I was only in the summer after my fifth-grade year. What could they expect?

Jorge went first. Ricky and I stood back, watching. My Mexican jumping bean heart was making it hard to concentrate on the task at hand. Even at this age I knew that people could learn a lot from their bodies’ reactions to a situation: hand over open fire burns: remove hand immediately; hunger pangs: eat; heart grasping at sides of throat fighting to get out alongside that morning’s breakfast: don’t jump!

But, I am Mexican. I could not—strike that—would not back down. I would do the deed. It was a question of manhood. *¿Macho o mujeringa? ¡Pues macho!*

Jorge screamed “*¡Aiee!*” and jumped. He swung like a trapeze artist at the Circus Vargas. I whistled. Then I was one step closer to having to jump.

Ricky stepped up. “We’ll see you down there, primo,” he said.

“Yeah—down there.” I forced a smile.

He jumped and it was like he and the branch were one. The rough bark of the mesquite melted into a smooth bar in his hands. He swung forward, let go, twisted, caught the bar again, swung toward me, flipped, all the while holding on to the branch, released, flipped in the air once, and stuck the landing. A perfect 10, even from the Russian judge.

I was next.

“*Orale, jump!*” It sounded like an echo, they were so far away. I glanced down at them. A big mistake. My stomach was a better jumper than I

because it was already flipping and turning. But I was at the edge of the board. I'd made a contract with myself, for my sake, signed in blood.

I began to rock back and forth, back and forth, back and forth, trying for courage.

The time had come. It was my destiny to fly, to live on the very edge of life, a life James Bond would be jealous of. So I dug my toes into my tennis shoes, took a deep breath, fought closing my eyes, stretched out my arms and did it.

I saw myself from below somehow. My body like Superman's flying over Metropolis. The branch growing bigger, closer. Within reach. All I had to do was to grab hold now. Just let the momentum carry me toward the branch. The bark, rough on my palms, would be my safe place. All I had to do was close my fingers around the branch. Then swing and . . .

But my chubby little soon-to-be-sixth-grade fingers failed me.

I felt the branch slipping from my fingers. And so, like Superman confronted by kryptonite, I fell.

As the ground came closer, I tried to remember my PE coach's exact advice on how to fall. Had he told his little bunch of munchkins to roll onto our backs, or to put out our arms and hands? I had only a split second to make up my mind.

I stretched out my arms to break my fall.

What broke was my left wrist. When I rolled over and looked at the sky, I knew I had failed.

Or so I thought. When I returned from the doctor's that evening, arm encased in a cast, my cousins couldn't stop talking about it. "*Y, que padre,*" they said, caressing my cast. "A cast, Rey. You know," said Jorge, "that's the best. It's better than a scar. I wish I had one. How does it feel?" It was my badge of courage. And it couldn't have come at a better time. I just knew that the guys at school would look at my cast and wonder how I had busted my arm. Had I fought a gang? Had I fallen from a motorbike? Or something else just as manly? The girls, too, would be impressed. It was just the break I needed.