

JUMP

a novel

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And all those who love Him.

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THE FIRST JUMP:
THE TREE

1

The first place I looked for God was from the top of an oak tree.

When I was a boy, my parents made us jump off that tree in our backyard. This was to measure our faith. Other children we knew didn't do this. They never jumped off trees on their birthday. They stood with their backs against the kitchen wall, chins up, while their parents etched lines with a pencil, proudly: each mark declaring a new year. A new height.

On my birthdays, my parents measured my height not by my head, but by my jumps. Each year, a little higher.

On my eighth birthday, I told my mother we were the only ones who did this. Other parents were fools, she told me.

"Your height doesn't get you to Heaven," she said. "Faith does. Now climb up that tree and jump."

At age five I took my first leap of faith. I landed in my father's arms. It was only the first branch up, but my father ruffled my hair, held me against his chest and said I had the faith of a boy twice my age.

"You gonna be a great man of faith some day," he said. "God will honor you. Make you do great things for Him. He'll be so proud of what you accomplish."

I looked up at my father's face. His happiness was enough to satisfy me. I hugged his neck, swelling in his pride. I loved how his thick, umber-colored beard felt against my cheek. He kissed me on the forehead, and I could barely feel his lips through that beard.

Months later, my mother became pregnant, and soon her belly

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swelled and a baby came out of her. It was a girl. It was born in the spring. I didn't know how any of this worked back then. What I remember from the pregnancy is my father crouching low to my mother's belly, pressing his cheek and hands over it daily. That was the first time I had to share my father's pride. I thought he was inflating her stomach with his touch, the way he would inflate me with his bearded kisses.

When mother and father came home with baby Arminelle from the hospital, their faces glowing, their bodies hovering over her every gurgle, I told myself I would reach the top of our tree some day. They would forget all about Arminelle then.

Except, every year that tree seemed to grow. Taller and taller. Or maybe it was my fear growing bigger because I knew I had to jump from a branch higher than the year before. By the time I turned nine, the tree seemed twice as tall as it ever did.

I would never reach the top.

2

I looked down at my parents from five branches up. By then, I was too big for my father to catch. Instead, he held little Arminelle in one arm, joyous, looking up and awaiting my show of faith. At the bed of the tree we had piled a mound of soft dirt covered in leaves. That was my landing zone. It would break my fall.

I recited Psalm 91 aloud, trusting in God to keep me safe, calling to Him to reinforce my faith. My parents had me memorize the Psalm for just this occasion.

*... No evil shall befall you,
Nor shall any plague come near your dwelling;
For He shall give His angels charge over you,
To keep you in all your ways.
In their hands they shall bear you up,
Lest you dash your foot against a stone ...*

I pictured the promise of the Psalm. I pictured angels appointed by God reaching out for my arms, my body, slowing down my fall, so that not even my foot might scrape.

“Are you ready?” I shouted down.

Mother’s face gleamed with excitement, my father’s with a fervent glow.

“Jump!” they shouted back.

“Jump, Christopher!” little Arminelle joined. “The angels will float you.”

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Hearing her tiny voice brought a twitch to my face. I wasn't doing this for her. I felt an urge to land on top of my sister. Dropkick her right in her four-year-old face. Her eyes stared up at me with brightness.

They weren't so far down after all. I wasn't so high.

A thought came over me.

Maybe my father would catch me. If I overshot the dirt, he would have to catch me. I was his son. He would drop Arminelle and hold open his arms for me. They were testing my faith. Maybe I could test their love.

I leapt off the branch. The fall seemed to last so long. Like hanging. I hovered right overtop my father, and in mid-air, it felt I would never come down. My father was a strong man. I saw him below me. He would catch me ...

The crack of my leg breaking ran up my spine to my throat. The last image I remember before passing out from the pain was my mother crouching away, hands flailing to cover her head, my father turning to shield Arminelle.

My memory went black.

At the hospital, the doctor asked me what happened.

"I jumped off a tree," I said.

"Jumped?"

"What he means is he fell," mother said, both hands touching the doctor on the arm gently, her eyes looking up at him sweetly.

"You fell," my father said, his voice gruff.

I didn't want to look at my father's eyes.

I prayed to God for the doctor to say something.

But the doctor seemed baffled, lips open but no words coming out. He and my father were long-time buddies. People built their lives into this town. Lebanon was a tight-knit place where parents defended each other and children's stories were seen with a doubtful eye. The two men shared a glance, and there was such a tenderness in my father, that even I believed I had fallen off the tree when I finally looked at him.

He stared down at me. That look made my body shrivel as I sat on the hospital bed.

The doctor stepped out briefly.

"You fell," father told me. "You dropped, and you were alone."

By that I knew what he meant. I fell without faith.

"Yes, father," I said, each word held in obedience.

"Liars lose their tongue, you know."

"Yes." A whisper.

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On the way home, we rode in the car with the radio knob turned a notch away from blowing the speakers. A man spoke of Hell's fire. He said his audience should give up the luxuries of life to earn the riches of Heaven. "Give up the luxuries *now!*" He screamed this as a fact. "*Make your wallets empty and your spirits full,*" the man shouted.

Father turned down the volume and turned to me as he drove.

"Do you know why I was mad at you just then?"

"Because I broke my leg and the medical bills will make you broke, Mother said."

"No, that ain't why."

I didn't offer a second guess.

"Because your faith broke in mid-air, and that's what broke your leg, which will make my bank account broke. But last part don't matter. Can't go to Heaven rich."

Then he knocked on my cast with one knuckle.

"That's all right, though. Faith will heal, and so will your leg."

I prayed for my leg to never heal again. I didn't want to jump off trees anymore. At school, kids called me the Jumping Jesus Freak. Some called me Broken Hip Bible Boy. My leg healed in a few months because the break was clean, but that didn't put an end to either one of my nicknames. It didn't put an end to my jumps, either.

A week before my tenth birthday, Father asked what I wanted for a present.

"Present?" I asked. This was the first time my parents had ever mentioned birthday gifts. I knew other boys received toys. They showed off slingshots and G.I. Joes every day at school. To my parents, toys were no better than worldly attachments: objects that satisfied the flesh but did nothing for the soul.

"Ask and you shall receive," Father said.

"Anything?"

"Anything."

"A toy gun?"

Father thought this over, pinching his beard at his chin. His eyes darted away, and then came back to me.

"How 'bout a sword instead?"

"A sword?"

"A sword." His eyes widened as he said this.

"Can it shoot flames?"

"Even better. It burns the wicked."

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“Yeah?”

He nodded.

Every day that week I thought of the boys at school who called me a freak and broken hipped. I pictured running around school with my new sword, smiting bullies and burning their demon flesh. Chopping heads and bursting clothes into flames. I would judge the wicked and spare the good. I would have the coolest birthday present among all the boys. If anyone tried to show off anything cooler, I'd burn that too.

“You have to earn it of course,” my father said, chin up now, amused by seeing me getting lost in my thoughts.

“Anything. I'll do anything. Tear the weeds, clean the shed, mow the lawn —”

My father crouched low and took my tiny hands in his massive own. He pressed his lips to my forehead. He smiled wanly, then fixed his face still.

“Jump,” he said. “That's all. Show faith and you've got your sword.”

I jumped. Another birthday, another branch. No broken leg this time.

When I picked myself off the ground, brushed off the dirt and bits of leaves, father urged little Arminelle to come to me. She held a large package in her tiny arms. It was a box wrapped in brown paper with straps tied around it as a ribbon.

“What's this?”

“Happy birthday, Christopher.”

“What is it?”

“Your own sword,” she whispered, passing on a secret she wasn't supposed to reveal.

I took the weight of the gift in my hands. I looked at father. He made a gesture with his hand. *Go on*. He held mother in one arm, a hidden smile behind his beard.

I looked at the gift, up again, then back down at the package. It was big enough that I needed both hands to hold it. It couldn't be a sword. Unless this was a box, and the sword was tiny. But this was dense. I shook the present. Nothing rattled. It was solid all the way through.

I pulled the ribbon and unwrapped the package. Opened the box.

“Happy birthday son,” father said.

“What is this?”

“It's your sword.”

He stepped closer.

“It's not a sword.”

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"Course it is."

"It's not even a toy gun."

"That's the one you wanted."

"I didn't want this."

"Sure you did, son."

"No. No I didn't. It's not what I asked for."

"It cuts the wicked, son," an edge to his tone. He stepped closer still.

"Nothing but a damn book."

I muttered this last part, but I knew my father heard me well when he asked, "What did you say?"

It was a question he asked even if he already knew. I don't remember many beatings from my childhood. But I do remember that one.

The Bible fell to the ground when Father snatched me up and took me inside. The beating made me wish I had broken my leg again that year. I remember it was the first time his hand ever came down as a fist instead of a slap.