

Jumping For the Young and Rash

The car door makes a satisfying thump as I slam it. Some aquamarine paint chips off of the Jeep; it's old. I open the door again to softly flick the plastic hula girl on the dashboard, to make her sway. Cara does it also, from the passenger seat. We do it for luck; it's a cliff jumping tradition.

The other bright car pulls in blasting "Australia," by The Shins. Spilling out of it are Connor, Leilani, and Bex. They look, are, happy. I'm sure we all do.

We meet up at the bottom the path. We're all barefooted, our rough feet buried in the sand. Since it's early in the day, we'll have the path, the flat stone at the top, and the cool water below to ourselves. A great day for recklessness. We start up the trail.

It's a humid day, around 100 degrees Fahrenheit, perfect for cliff jumping because the water will be warmer than most days. The sky is a cool pale blue and the sun has most of us wearing our over-priced sunglasses. The day is like a tropical ad from a glossy magazine, one with models lounging around in bathing suits, wearing oversized sunglasses and drinking from crystal glasses full of exotic colors. Beautiful.

Anna would have loved this. The thought hits me, and I stop walking abruptly. There is no way that she could see this, but I know that she'd have the same passion for it as I do. Anna, who was the only person who would jump the cliff at dawn with me, despite the shocking temperature of the water. The girl who wasn't afraid to deep-water solo after the waves left the cliff slick and wet. The person who ultimately died doing the things that she loved.

When I heard about her death, it was pure agony. I heard it from my father, who stood there, clutching the plastic phone tightly, with both hands. I think it was Anna's mother on the other end. They had just found the body, and I didn't know it yet. I looked up at him curiously from where I was sprawled across our faded couch, filled with sand from when Anna and I watched movies after coming in from the beach. He mouthed, *Anna*. I knew something was wrong then. She was always a reckless person, but she had never imagined the consequences when it went wrong. I hadn't either.

As I look around with my blue eyes, I see Anna all around me. I see her in the way that Bex wears her sunglasses on top of her head. I see her when Connor pushes his sun-bleached hair away from his forehead as he walks along the edge of the path. I see her in the bright green of Cara's eyes. I sink down; wondering if I can continue going up the path, where in the end we all have to jump.

"Whoa, stop!" Connor, who is crouched beside me, looks at me intently. "Are you okay, Gabe?"

I raise my head to look at him. "Anna," I choke out.

The rest of our group, who are all clustered around Connor and me, nod and look down. We all were struck at the news of her death. It's been almost a year, and I still haven't gotten over it. She and I were the closest, though; since we were the most careless, wild, we tended to stick together, doing the things the others wouldn't.

"We couldn't have helped." It is Leilani who speaks up, looking around the unintentional circle we've made. "She went to the jump alone."

Her death action wasn't a suicide; it was one careless daredevil act. To jump the cliffs at night is one of the hardest things to survive, even if the cliffs aren't that high. The water is deeper, which is better for jumping, and it's a short distance from where you enter the water to land. The cold temperature is what killed her. Anna made it to the beach, but exhausted her energy. Made it to land, but did not survive.

Yet we still jump. The honorable reason would be to honor her memory; the truth is we do for the feelings. The feeling of adrenaline. The fear. The fun that comes with being rash.

"I know," I say. "Let's just go." I stand up and start walking, looking up into the hot sun and blinking the tears out of my eyes. With a bit of hesitation, they join me.

It's the first time I've jumped since her death. I thought, since it's been over a year, that I could cliff jump, and yet here I am. I've already had a breakdown. It's pathetic.

As I tentatively hike up the path, my bare feet pounding the dry sand, the chorus to Anna's favorite song is going through my head. *Just so you know/it's*

impossible/to die from an overdose/of anything that feels this good. It relates specifically to us cliff jumpers. While dangerous, it's the feeling that you could die at any moment that makes it perfect.

Thoughts are racing through my head as I walk. Maybe she wanted to die, which is irrational, I know. Or maybe, she just wasn't thinking. God. I'm trying to make excuses for my dead best friend for why she jumped off a cliff and died.

Suddenly I'm angry, my steps hard on the ground. Why didn't she think?!? Anna knew it was dangerous, and yet she did it. She wasn't thinking when she DIED and left all of us, her family, her best friend, sentenced to a world without her. I can't come up with reasons why she did it when she obviously didn't have any herself.

My head is hunched down, and I'm staring at my bare feet. Now I'm blaming Anna for leaving, for dying without a goodbye. It's stupid. I hate myself instantly. It wasn't her fault; it was a foolish act, but it didn't kill her. *It was not her fault.*

Bex sees me straighten up. "Let's sing, guys!" she says enthusiastically. "We're young, free, and it's summer!" We all laugh, but end up belting out the chorus to one of summer's hit songs, Connor's and my deep voices overpowering the girls'.

"We're so out of tune," Leilani remarks. She looks pointedly at Cara, who shrugs. "Yeah, I'm not in tune, but that's why I'm here with you guys. We're being reckless cliff jumpers who don't want to grow up." Cara throws her arm around Leilani.

I look up at the cloudless sky. It's a blue like the color of a balloon you get as a child, a tiny bit bright but still good in your little mind.

"Remember when we were in fifth grade, and we saw those high schoolers skipping class? You were fearless, Gabe, and walked up to them; you asked them where they were going." Bex laughs and looks at me.

I remember that. They answered, "jumping." I didn't know what it meant at the time, though that word means so much to me now; has so many emotions tangled with it. Fear. Grief. Yearning. Fascination. Belonging. Desire. Happiness. And infatuation, with a thing that could kill me, and everyone who did it.

I smile. "I only looked fearless. I was so scared that they'd laugh at me."

Connor glances at me. "You, scared? Please."

Yes. I haven't admitted it to anyone, but I'm mildly afraid of heights. I have a fear that my friends will abandon me after I jump. I just try to work around them. It's hard. But it gives me something to work for; a goal that someday I will overcome them.

The sun comes out from behind the one cloud in the sky and I pull my sunglasses out from the pocket of my swim trunks. The aviators have amber lenses and make everything look vintage. Anna got them for me for my 17th birthday last year. I grin, remembering. She was my best friend.

Our relationship was an abnormal one. We clicked when she moved from the sandy coast of Australia, being daredevils in the first year of high school. We thought too highly of ourselves, pondering how far we could go, what the human breaking point is. We were adrenaline junkies in every way.

There was this one conversation we had, a few months before her death. We were lying on a blanket on the beach, staring at the sky. I picked up a handful of sand, running it through my fingers, before I glanced at her and spoke.

"Do you think we could make it to the sky?" Anna was beside me, gazing up. She looked at me before answering.

"Maybe," she had said softly. "But Gabe, I wouldn't want to leave."

It is those things I remember most about her. Little facts, things she said. The way her chestnut hair curled after swimming in saltwater. How easily her tanned fingers made a peace sign. Her favorite song, which she listened to non-stop last summer; it was stuck in our heads and the lyrics were memorized. How when she tilted her head back to look at you, smiling, you felt like the most important person in the world.

I push my blond hair back, absentmindedly fingering the small tattoo of a bird in flight I have, usually covered by hair behind my ear. We, Anna and I, got them together on her 16th birthday. It wasn't legal, but I don't think the man giving us them cared. It reminds me that life is short. But so, so sweet.

The feeling of the wind that only feels like this when I'm high up, the hot sun, the saturated colors that surround me. It's like a dream that I never have to wake up from. Like a varied idea of perfect.

The path narrows, and then we're at the top of the cliff. "Look at the color!" Cara shouts. She's right. The sea is a vibrant, beautiful turquoise. I frown at first, remembering that she could never see it. But it is still exquisite; I grin.

I'm going first. I knew it as soon as I saw the top of the cliff, and the gorgeous color of the water. I pull off my shirt and toss it on the dry ground, along with my sunglasses. I'll get them later. "I'm jumping!" I say to the others. They nod and back away. I leap out over the water.

I scream with glee on the way down. The adrenaline and nerves combine with happiness to make a feeling that is the bright color of the ocean. Truly, this is my paradise.

The water is closer now. I hit it with a yell, entering it in a line. The water is cold and unforgiving. It is definitely a shock. I love it.

I start swimming toward the shore. A few younger people saw me enter the water and now look at me with a bit of awe. I've gotten this reaction before; cliff jumping is a widely acknowledged activity. I laugh to myself and get a mouthful of salty seawater.

As I reach the shallow water, where I can stand, I look across the ocean. You can see the silhouette of a girl, probably Cara, as she jumps, headed into the water where the white ripples I made haven't quite faded and washed away. I smile, then look up the beach.

There isn't a crowd yet; it's too early in the day for that. There are a few people, tan beings lying around on multicolored towels under bright beach umbrellas. A few of them are listening a scratched vintage-style boom box. I can hear the strong beats of her favorite song playing through it, ending of the second verse. "Little Voices," by Scott and Brendo.

I once saw this diagram, showing where you feel these different emotions. You feel happiness all over your body. I don't know where Anna is, I don't know how she got there, but I hope that wherever she is, she feels it all over, like I do.