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DeWitt Henry

BUNGEE

*She didn't like to do things where the
trick was not to die* —Lorrie Moore

HERE I AM. I've decided. Actually I decided before the ascent, before the free ticket, before the swaying, crowded cable car, before the tundra and alpine wind, the high camp resort, the skating rink, the open swimming pool, the bar and bloody mary, when, down below, I had only heard about the crazy bungee attraction on the edge of a cliff, and how wind or mishap, and you would do a Gloucester, five ship masts down, where thou wouldst shiverist like an egg.

I am at the Squaw Valley Writers' Community. I am here for one week in August, 1994, as the 53-year-old founding editor of *Ploughshares* literary magazine. I have come all this way, 2500 miles from Boston via Denver to Reno, then a limo with congenial others past and through burning forest fires until we get to Tahoe City, and then to Olympic Village at Squaw. I am housed in a well-appointed sky lodge, steeply up an opposing hillside from Olympic Village, and just downhill from where the genius and organizer of the conference, novelist Oakley Hall, and his family live. My lodge mates are novelist Sandra Scofield, whom I published early in her career, and with whom I have had some correspondence; and Paul Mandelbaum, representing *Story* magazine. Sandra is a workshop leader. Paul and I are "outside readers," asked to read for publication and to comment on a number of preselected manuscripts by conferees. The weather is clear. Mountain nights cold and crystalline with swarms of stars, dawns chill, days hot by noon.

I have enjoyed repeatedly John Frankenheimer's film, *To Live and Die in L.A.*, which opens with a treasury detective bungee jumping for recreation off of a bridge. The character's jump, of course, becomes a metaphor. He is addicted to risk. That is why he pursues a brilliant and vicious underworld Willam DeFoe, who is a counterfeiter. The detective survives

his bungee jump, but he is killed later in the line of duty. This happens to driven people, we opine, people attracted by danger and risk. "Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge" by Ambrose Bierce is probably another reference point. How could he have written this before bungees existed?

When, years and years ago, I trusted my older brother to catch me, as we sought to scare strangers with our act, I would simply fall forward, stiff, like a board, hands at my sides, and he would catch me, to others' gasps and thrills, inches from the swimming club's cement. I trusted him to catch me.

Forty-five dollars: that is the first dare, at least for Scottish/Irish me. If it were free, I tell myself, or if someone else sponsored me, but to sign away all liability on the one hand and to pay forty-five dollars for a thrill on the other, this causes pause. I sit with the conferees, two men, two women, witty, talented, sexy, young, with whom I have ridden in the cable car. We watch the jumping. A steady alpine gale blows in our faces and hair, not unpleasant. The surround is rocks and tundra. I think of Hemingway's epigraph to "Snows of Kilimanjaro": nobody could explain what a leopard was doing at this altitude. Here at some 8000 feet, over the valley base of 6000 feet, was a sports mall, a bar, a swimming pool, a skating rink, and as advertised, off one side, on a cliff edge, a girdered bungee scaffold (your basic erector set, two verticals and a bridge, perhaps eighty feet high, a ladder up one side, with guy wires for stability). The resort managers called it "upper camp," and during ski season, when all those time-share lodges were filled with vacationing and well-heeled skiers, no doubt it thrived. The whole Squaw Valley thrived.

To Eastern, marathoning me, in mid-summer, the upper camp seemed surreal, some capitalistic caprice worthy of Citizen Kane, with down at the base every day at noon, a Swiss costumed trio playing "Edelweiss" in the courtyard, and the big cable cars, right out of some movie, say *The Eiger Sanction* with Clint Eastwood, starting up. The cable car building, an edifice, had its own restaurants and shops, but especially, for a price, had a thirty foot facsimile of a rock face that visitors could climb. People, adults and children, lined up for their chance. College kids on summer jobs hooked them up to rock climbers' harnesses, ropes and pulleys

and monitored their climb up the plaster protrubences and hand and footholds that simulated a cliff face all the way to the sound-proofed ceiling, some thirty, all-weather feet.

I've heard, back East, of bungee disasters. In Portland, Maine, where I was on the staff of another writers' conference, there were fliers inviting takers. Apparently they used a crane in a parking lot, and there was some story of a jumper whose harness broke. Splat.

Something in me doesn't care if I die or not. I have lived my life. I have made my account. I'm insured. My wife and children are financially planned for. I trust, I guess, the "system." Hundreds of people take this risk, and surely the Squaw Valley corporation couldn't allow it if it really weren't safe. But something in me still is fatalistic, not caring at this point.

The drop is like a hangman's drop, an executioner's, but farther and longer, perhaps three or four seconds. It begins, once the harnessed jumper is in position on the scaffold, with the bungee master chanting over a loudspeaker, "One, two, three, BUNGEE!" At which point, the jumper, previously identified as Jennifer, say, is supposed to dive. The first woman we watched did so, on cue. Wheee! She fell, harnessed from the back to her thick umbilical, then hit the limit of its stretch and rebounded maybe two-thirds of her drop, down again, rebounded, two, three times maybe, before the resilience died, and then the bungee master lowered her into the big, inflated safety cushion underneath, and she thrashed and waded to terra firma, unbuckled and shouted again, Whee! And came staggering back towards the bungee office, or stopped to have friends take her picture.

Some parent or guardian pays and sends a ten- or twelve-year-old girl up. She has the harness on. She climbs, hand over hand, the high ladder of the scaffold. She walks the transverse platform and waits her turn, waits for the bungee master to beckon and call, and to attach her harness safely to the bungee cord (imagine the job description here; he himself seems college age, nineteen or twenty; he is undoubtedly a bungee fanatic, a proven veteran). Lets him position her, counsel and calm her.

Ready now? Stand there, I'm going to count, and then you jump, okay? She smiles wanly, swaying in that steady wind, trying not to look down except at the scaffolding itself and her feet, trying to feel the actual and rough and hard facts of her apparatus and of reason, avoiding the deep look below or the even deeper, vanishing look at the vistas of drop and sky and mountain ranges. Trying to be rational, be brave. But still her heart is thumping more loudly than ever in her life, her vagina and her rectum clenched. When here, this boy, not so much older than she, hair windswept, as casual as a high steel worker, as bored and ordinary as the bagboy at her supermarket, starts chanting, and the loud speaker echoing her name, Jeannie, and one, two, three, BUNGEE! Except she doesn't move. She can't. He doesn't push. He reassures, counsels, and tries twice more, before she says she can't, she wants to go back down, unbuckle, please, and climb back down. No refunds. Next?

Robert Stone is here. Richard Ford is here. Amy Tan, too. Al Young, authentic guru. Stone has bungeed into drugs and politics. I find myself worrying with the conferees about their tameness, their well-behavior. I want their skins on fire.

I think of sky divers and skiers. Of my Boston dentist, Ed Donle, an avid skier, who has, in fact skied at Squaw, as well as at Aspen, and someplace in Utah, where the skiers were flown in by helicopter, he told me (as he drilled my root canal), and were dropped on pristine mountain tops, with no way back but down, with no marked trails.

Fatalism is not the best of attitudes, but it is one I have increasingly acquired. My older sister and two older brothers as well. My mother too. Here I am tenured teacher of Shakespearian tragedy, thank you, at Emerson College in Boston; beyond stoicism, instance after instance, of accepting one's fate: "That's he that was Othello. Here am I." Or T.S. Eliot's favorite: "Ripeness is all." I feel that I am at that place in my life, not despairing, but not fearful either, not regretful or apologetic. I've given my account. "If it is not now, it will be later. If it is not later, it will be now." The chances of a safe jump, of something like a suicide, but not really, not literally, are high; the chances of an accident low: but still, they are, high or low, chances, risks. Why take

them? Why the fast-lane bimbo? Why the ten year old? I feel that I have nothing to lose, even though I do. All life is a surprise, I know.

Why not? We're all just—us—this paragon of animals, this quintessence of dust. Let me tell you. I gave them my Visa card. I read and signed the release. No heart problems, no. No medications. I was excited in a way comparable to buying magazines with nude pictures as a teenager, or condoms later. Hey, I am doing this. I am aware, thank you. I am showing off for you and for myself and for those here to witness and for those later I will tell about it, if there is a later. Stephen Crane stayed in a flophouse; Henry Miller went to Paris; Hemingway to war, to bulls, to fish, and to women. What am I doing here? What is this leopard doing at this altitude? I fit the harness on. The girl in the office checks it, adjusts and arranges it. They are used to “me” here, they know my type. There is a normative procedure here, just as there is, so boringly, on airline flights. Fasten seat belt like this. Oxygen masks will drop down. Lights will lead to exit. Here, we need to fasten this a little tighter. How's that. Raise your arms. Good.

I feel good, and foolish, at the same time. Good, as if I am braving superstition, whistling in my dark; stupid in that I am showing off, for myself, and for the conferees. Anyhow my money is spent, my border crossed. Fool, philosopher or what, there is no return for me as there was for the ten or twelve year old, whose retreat I wanted to cheer and to applaud. I feel exposed. I start my climb, hand over hand. Real weight. Real metal cold under my hands. Real distance, higher and higher. The wind feels stronger and I am more fragile, clinging to my ladder, climbing, not so far, and yet it feels forever, heart-pounding rung after rung. (Maybe this is suicide: maybe that is the power and pleasure, as I look down at my perspective-dwindled witnesses, my distant admirers, as I gaze off into the inhuman vastness and beauty of geology, the mountain rangings. Why not? Cleopatra: “There is left ourselves to end ourselves.”) I reach the top, where College Boy is waiting. Climb up shakily, holding guard rails, to the catwalk, open like a sidewalk grate. I feel the scaffold tremble, vibrate and sway, yet here is this twenty year old, up here all day (“Yo! Lunchbreak, huh? Johnbreak?”), adept in cowardice, in folly, in measures.

As knowing and solicitous in his obsessions as a bartender, mortician, or prostitute, and god help us, a writing teacher, in his/hers.

Where is my wife? Where my two children? Where my students? Where my dentist; my friends? Where my life back in Boston? They are no more part of this experience than Bunyan's Pilgrim's domestic and social lives are part of his Spiritual Progress. Except that all of my commitments have been plunges into faith.

Jonathan Edwards: "The God that holds you over the pit of hell, much as one holds a spider, or some loathsome insect over the fire, abhors you, and is dreadfully provoked. . . . You hang by a slender thread, with the flames of divine wrath flashing about it, and ready every moment to singe it and burn it asunder. . . . your most lamentable and dolorous cries and shrieks will be in vain."

I am performing for him now, Mr. Bungee Master. Eye contact. Sizings up. I am brave, savvy, stalwart, myself in his eyes. No fool, no problem. Me in my Carpe Diem 10K T-shirt, baggy shorts, and running shoes. Him round-faced, blond, shorter than me and hefty, a mountain climber, trail boots, yellow windbreaker. No philosopher, I'm sure, no reader, no wit; not accustomed to writers, so much as to affluent fast laners; a business major, maybe a geologist. Hang glides. Surfs. "Ready? All set?" He waits at the platform, a railed box center girder, where the bungee is attached overhead and gathered in coils to the side and he holds the heavy clasp ready. He is my judge, my junior boss, smugly teaching the simplicities. "Face forwards," he instructs. "Relax, go with it. Just do a swan dive." He hooks me up. "That's it, right to the edge. When you get to the bottom, I'll give you slack. Just reach around, undo the clasp. Okay?" I feel him check my harness, the bungee clasp. He pats my shoulder, like a parachutist's sergeant. "Let's do it!" He wants a good fall.

One! Two! Three!. . .Bungee! Your voice joins the amplified, big noise of his, as fuck it, the choice, you surrender: fall forward, as if to dive, pulling coils of the bungee after, so all becomes resistless drop, weight seeking earth like love, weight weightless, plummeting, dropping, noth-

ing to catch, to grab, all loss and empty, wild, let be, let, plummeting, faster, instants and evers, like some years ago the slow motion of my bicycle as the motorcycle having seen me, pulled out anyway through the stop sign, that awareness past avoiding, happening, coming, coming, then the hit, the fact, and then the consequence, the hurtle, feeling rider and his cycle caving, feeling myself in mid-air and tumbling, feeling the drop and impact of the street, this is happening, bang, bang, my head bouncing on the pavement, here in middle of the road where cars are coming, bouncing like a basketball, and then stillness, lying still, the happening finished, consequence unknown, waiting to discover, am I hurt, how badly am I hurt, bungee like that, the plunge, the rush and surge of ground beneath, against the elastic tug, then pulled up, jerk, hard, and the reverse energy heaving me up, up, uncontrollable, and dropping again to the limit, the surge, the jerk, and up again, but not as far, writhing in mid air, shouting, and down, and jerk, and up not as far, not as far, and the elastic slowing, the up, down dying, fading, until I am lowered into the hardness of the inflated pillow beneath, my feet sinking into moonwalk, wading through the rubbery, chafing canvasy give of it, to the edge, where I reach around to unbuckle, and slide off the side to solid earth, wind blowing, normal sounds, and somewhere off there normal people watching, unexhilarated, inexperienced, pygmies as I stagger towards them. Done. I've done it.

Did I jump or didn't I? Who cares? I have decided to start a new magazine called Bungee. Aside from attracting sports fanatics, I hope to attract those who understand the metaphor: isn't this life? isn't this art? We live and trust in our safe suicides. We yield to sleep at night, or to sexual climax, like death, that unresilient and forever drop, but then, surprise, like the skydiver's opening chute, we have had the experience without the consequence. We are saved, as promised, this time. Or maybe not. Falling.