

No Jumping: a Creative Memoir about Florida and my Father

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The sturdy concrete bridge prominently contrasted with the water below, which with a menacing silence, glided beneath where awaited the Gulf of Mexico's eager arms. Salty water oozed thick and it seemed to breathe with warm explosions of life. I could not determine the canal's depth. The narrow sides sloped steeply downwards until they were swallowed by dark slate blue. It was terrifying, yet perfect.

Next to the bridge, a newly planted sign read, "No Jumping". Naturally, my two younger sisters looked forward to making this hazardous plunge into the canal, their main attraction. Dad was pretty keen on the idea as well. I was twenty, Danielle sixteen, and Jaymie fourteen; so we all swam decently, yet I kept pushing the jump off and I told my siblings we needed to wait for a rare time when the current weakened and Dad was sober.

Thinking about the actual jump did not frighten me. I frequently acquainted myself with heights and fifteen feet down did not faze me in the slightest. I knew how to land pencil straight in order to avoid the sting of skin slapping the water, and how to subconsciously blow air out my nose to avoid water crawling up. No, I would enjoy the jump if I could get over the fear of the jump's aftermath.

"... so, I thought that we could use this Duck Key trip as a way to strengthen our relationship. I'm really really sorry about everything. I'm making some big changes though,"

Dad told me as we sat in the stationary car in a park by my house. I tried to explain to him that I had forgiven him seventy seven times, and that his promises to stop drinking meant nothing any more. I did it too nicely. I hated hurting his feelings, even if needed, even if he had hurt mine on countless occasions.

“Plus, you’ll get to see your grandpa.” Silence. No matter what I said, my dad trapped me into going to Duck Key, Florida, with my sisters next week. Even though he had recently gone through a month-long rehabilitation program, I did not believe him: The program had not helped the first time.

Two evenings prior to the jump, my sisters and I fished in the canal a quarter of a mile away from the bridge. The sun dripped like melted colored glass on the water as it set behind the palm trees signaling fishing time. Only in the cool evening can both fish and humans stand to seek an eager meal. However, on this particular evening, the fish did not bite. Not one. We reeled in our empty hooks time after time without even the slightest disturbance to our panicked shrimp bait.

I never even liked Duck Key. My family had visited the island several times throughout the years to see my grandpa, but each time disappointed me. Visually, it lacks. People get mad at me for calling Florida “ugly”, but just because the state provides warmth and color doesn’t pronounce it “pretty”. Florida is a splotchy Pollock painting: a canvas dubbed “art” but just not pleasing to the eye. In the keys, grey covers the sky even when clouds disappear. Islanders tell me the humidity causes the phenomenon. Twisting trees, broken logs, and fallen coconuts that rot on the ground plague the overgrown landscape. Yes, tropical flowers smell pretty, but

they don't outweigh the ugly thick spiky bushes they grow on. Rocks and salt covered logs dot the shores, not sand. There is no sand.

I do know my grandpa lives there, but although I consider my grandpa a very nice man, he raised four boys, and he acts uncomfortable around girls. Every attempt I try at conversation usually ends in awkward silence, yet, my grandpa carries on deep conversations with my cousins Gary, Michael, and Kyle. My grandpa was a stranger to me, and I'd accepted that. I had not accepted my father as a stranger yet.

Instead of fishing, my sister Jaymie walked along the concrete docks looking at the sun fish. She jumped back. I dropped my useless pole and rushed over to see a huge lobster, larger than any I'd seen in a lobster tank, crawl out the crevices of the canal wall. Absolutely sinister looking, the creature walked slow and harmlessly like an alien from a bad black and white horror film. With ancient brown and white markings adorning the stone-like body and the long antennas gently but confidently perusing over the jagged rocks and plant life, the lobster seemed to gesture to the other mini rock caves until he was joined by two other identical slow-moving aliens.

The lobsters' opening act was immediately followed by a two foot long stingray hovering over the garbage green plants. The ray swam on stage, then off stage, then on again, as if a freak act in a circus-- too timid to have others point and stare at its pancake body. The long stinging tail trailed behind him like a kite ribbon. Eventually, the stingray decided leave the crowd. We desperately tried to glimpse the sand-colored disk in the darkening water, frustrated by the continuously dropping sun lower behind the trees.

Then we saw them, with lightning quickness, those looming shapes of horror we all know well: Two nurse sharks, one large one small, weaved in and out of the underwater canyons. Then everything became clear- Why we had not caught any fish, why the stingray cowered away. The dominating prima donna with her apprentice had staked her claim, and no one dared upstage her. We watched mesmerized by her confident dance around the proscenium looking for meals. Like every smart fish should, they steered clear from her, and she moved on.

We had seen everything. Danielle even said, “It was like we saw the entire ocean in five minutes!” Only five minutes? This proved one of those moments when you go fishing, never catching anything, but walk away fulfilled.

As we cleaned up the tackle box, a bolt of lime green flashed in the water, calling my sisters and me forward for an encore. A large green eel--greener than any of the lush trees that willowed over the water--danced before us. Coming up to the surface then down again, it mimicked a rhythmic gymnast twirling her ribbon. She mastered her art. She reminded me of the Phantom of the Opera with his hideous frowning face but with a beautiful art. She performed after the curtain closed, but with astounding expertise. Just when the sky darkened our sight to the point of invisibility, we turned to our grandpa’s house with the bright lantern on the balcony.

When I arrived on Duck Key, I surprised myself with how well I got along with my father. Yes, we were strangers, but in a good way. He had lived three months sober and walked like completely different person now. He resembled the man he probably was before the divorce, the one I do not remember. My sisters and I swam in the pool with him, yet kept our distance. I was not quite ready to dive right into one big happy family while forgetting the recent past, but

maybe he was right. I hoped he did not act on this trip again. Maybe I'd give him a chance. My sisters seemed to think the same thing. We swam on.

So you can understand how puzzled I was beyond rationality when Jaymie begged us to jump into the canal. Would you jump into the shark tank at the aquarium? By the way, this same sister also happens to fear ocean life. In Hawaii, six years ago, Jaymie and I had practiced snorkeling in an enclosed ocean lagoon at our hotel. We skimmed across the water's surface, breathing out of tubes, as we followed miniscule fish until we, quite literally, crashed into a large sea turtle. Underwater, I could hear her echoing scream through her snorkel as she turned and raced back to shore without a backward glance leaving me behind to be "eaten". A harmless sea turtle in a controlled environment swam there, not a wild stingray, eel, or shark.

And although the water flowed with gentle intentions from a loving curving trail of homes and private boats; on the bridge's other side the salt water plowed into the gnashing mouth of black rocks wave after wave while white water fizzed and stung the air like a swarm of angry hornets. I peered over the bridge's edge and found only one small stretch of walkway close enough to the surface for a swimmer to use to climb out. If someone missed that one chance for safety, The rocks would chew and vomit them out into the Gulf. I shivered. The sky even darkened on the side with the foreboding rocks reminding me of Morder from *Lord of the Rings*. The scene only lacked a volcano. The current looked strong and one would need to use all their strength to break from it and survive before the walkway ended... before the point of no return.

On the very first night, my sisters and I watched TV on my grandpa's couch with the subtitles on so he could read them and know what occurred , and my dad walked in from "taking out the garbage". At first we didn't notice anything. Then he started to speak and we picked up

on the slurs and the subtly slow responses. And we knew he drank again, and that he would get worse.

When I vent to my friends about my Dad's drinking, they initially think I know nothing of alcohol. "No one gets drunk in 5 minutes." They familiarize this with college drinking... the light hearted and fun party life—a completely different scenario than an alcoholic downing bottles by themselves. You see the drink course through them and they get worse and worse. You see the liquid poisoning them with every pump of the heart. My Dad was not a violent drunk, just a stupid drunk. In that regard, I suppose my sisters and I were lucky.

But, every time I looked into his half-closed eyes and saw the deep brown irises, I despised my likeness to him. I envied my sisters' Aryan blonde hair, blue eyes, and fair skin they inherited from Mom. Why did my physical features have to reflect his? My coffee brown eyes, my dishwater-blond hair, my tan skin tone, my muscular limbs...

My dad climbed onto the bridge's railing, then without any warning or fanfare, he jumped, and with a cracking splash, broke the translucent surface leaving white bubbles and baby whirlpools in his wake. I raced to the bridge's opposite side to see if he came up to the surface. I hate when he scares us by showing off how long he can hold his breath. He frustrated me again, and after a breath-stopping ten seconds he came up for air right at the walkway's end. He stayed there as a precaution to help my sisters if their jumps should prove more dangerous. Although good, they could not swim like he. And although I could not trust my dad with much, I could always count on his swimming expertise; plus he sobered up today, and that comforted me.

One after the other, my sisters climbed up to the railing like beautiful blonde suicidal ingénues, and with a youthful scream they stepped onto the invisible plank and dropped into the speeding water. They also took too long to surface and I even yelled to my dad to dive down after them. They did beat the current, immersed on their own, and reached the end of the walkway just in time. My dad had to help them back up onto the concrete walkway due to the slimy green edges.

What now? I was trapped on a vacation with a drunk father and my sisters. My sisters. Because of their persistent pleas to jump off the bridge, I finally put aside my issues with Dad and gave in; and on the vacation's very last day, when the current strengthened (not weakened) and the sun hung high, we all headed for the bridge.

Danielle and Jaymie called me to jump, and I took my place on top of the railing. I was the big sister. I am the one who followed the sea turtle in Hawaii, climbed the up the side the dusty cliff at the forest preserve, and who has been to ten different countries. I was the one who taught my sisters not to fear carnival rides and how to touch the bottom of a fifteen foot pool. I was not going to let my sisters jump off the bridge without me and use this as the one and only example of a time they did something and I did not. Sibling rivalry... you gotta love it.

Danielle yelled, "Are you going to jump or not?" I sighed and wondered why I was the one in this fearing position rather than my sisters? Suddenly, I pushed them out of my mind. This was not about them. This is about me: me making this plunge into a deep canal with sharks, currents, and jagged rocks to worry about.

Almost hearing the drum roll as I climbed up the side of the bridge, I wrapped the high arches of my feet around the railing's curve. My three person audience held a video camera and silently waited for my final free falling act. I breathed in the sweet humidity in the air and let it seep into my nostrils, then I squinted as I took one final look at the water. Still rushing. I let go of the railing and let gravity push me. The second of free falling drop exhilarated me more than I imagined. I worried too much about the water to even think about the whole point of *jumping* off the bridge. But before I could relish in the surprising sensation, my feet hit the water and dragged the rest of my body down into it. The water gulped me down further than I thought, and for one frozen moment in time I delighted in the dark blue surrounding me and the small circle of light above me. Once the moment unfroze, I felt the bridge's cool shadow over me; and I knew the current had taken me under the bridge and I felt suffocated. Although I had plenty of air, I frantically clawed at the water for the surface. I did not know how much time I had before the current carried me passed the walkway. The current tore at me and threw my legs in the opposite direction. The water tried to suck me through a siphon and I wouldn't let it succeed. My head finally broke the surface, and to my astonishment, I did so right next to the concrete walkway while still under the bridge.

I dripped wet with blood-like heaviness as I gripped the side, kicked myself up, locked my elbows, and pushed myself onto the walkway. I turned my head towards my dad triumphant. I did not need his help. I felt the cold concrete on my breast when I realized that the current had twisted my clothes like an umbilical cord around my body, leaving me partially exposed. I felt the overwhelming desire to apologize for my few seconds of indecency, yet at the same time, it did not feel awkward. In fact, it felt like the most natural thing in the world.