

The Edge Between Life and What Else

Through the kitchen window of Joseph Younger's house, the cliff was merely a sheet of grass that stopped about a hundred yards beyond his porch, where the green gave way abruptly to empty sky. There was usually a group of people out there, looking over the edge. Today Joseph could see a whole family, a mother and father and two children happily taking pictures of one another. Joseph wanted to be out there, too, because they might ask him to take a family picture. A lot of families asked Joseph to take their picture. Sometimes he took ten a day.

Though it was lunchtime, the aromas of cinnamon and oatmeal lingered in the kitchen. Joseph sat staring at the cliff, at the family walking away from the lookout point. As he knocked his foot against the leg of the chair, his sister Elaine began sloshing the tomato soup around the pot. Elaine always wrestled with the soup, but today there was something different about the way she stirred.

"The family left," said Joseph. He looked at Elaine. "There's no one out there now."

"That's good, Joseph," said Elaine. "Now eat your soup."

"I can't. You haven't given me any," replied Joseph. Elaine banged the spoon against the pot and glared at Joseph.

"You're right, sorry," she said as she shook her head. "Could you please stop knocking your leg on the chair?"

Joseph stopped knocking and turned back to the window. A couple had walked to the lookout point. "There's a man and woman out there now," he reported.

"Why do you keep telling me who's at the cliff?" Elaine's voice was tight and steady.

The Edge Between Life and What Else

Joseph hesitated because he knew that what he was going to say would anger Elaine. He was pretty sure that she already knew what he was going to say, but he had to say it anyway. In the sudden silence, Joseph listened to the hall clock ticking and his father splashing in the bathroom sink. Finally, Joseph shrugged. "Because somebody's going to jump today," he said.

Elaine slammed the spoon and glared at the wall. "I don't want to go through this again, Joseph," she said. Joseph said he knew someone was going to jump today, and Elaine spun on him and asked how, how did he know someone was going to jump today, of all days.

"Because today is when Mum jumped," said Joseph, staring through the window. "Right? Isn't today when Mum jumped?"

Elaine breathed deep and spooned soup into a bowl. "Every year we go through this, Joseph, and your talk about jumping doesn't make it any easier," she said. She walked to the table and slid the bowl to Joseph.

He slouched in his seat, sorry for making Elaine angry. But he felt that he should warn her. "I know it, Elaine. Someone is going to jump today." Elaine's hand flicked from the bowl to his chin. Not a hard slap, but it made a sharp sound in the little kitchen. Joseph touched his fingers to the spot, staring at his soup. He lifted a spoonful to his mouth and blew on the steam.

Elaine retreated. She stood, head bowed, fists resting on the stove. The clock echoed in the kitchen. As Elaine straightened, opening her mouth to speak, their father walked in.

"Afternoon," he said. Elaine smiled as he pecked her on the cheek. Their father took his bowl of soup to the table and kissed Joseph's

forehead. "Could you get a thermos, Elaine? I'll have to eat this in the truck. Big shipment of crabs arrived yesterday. There's all the overtime anybody wants." Elaine nodded and asked if he would be home late. He said he would and invited Joseph to come pitch in for a while.

"I can't," said Joseph. "I need to stay here today." Their father said he understood. He rocked back on his heels a moment. Together they listened to the clock strike one.

"That's me, late again. I'll be done with these weird work hours soon. Then maybe we can take a vacation," he said. Elaine said that would be nice, like she always did. Joseph just stared out the window. Their father glanced at Joseph. Then he waved and walked out to his truck. As the engine roared and the truck pulled out, Joseph turned back to the window. He couldn't see anybody out there but a few seagulls hunting for scraps. Joseph was glad to see just gulls by the cliff. He liked the gulls. Joseph watched one hop to toward the edge and carelessly jump over, spread its wings, float away. He asked to be excused.

"Where are you going?" asked Elaine, bringing her cup of coffee to the table.

"I want to walk around," said Joseph.

"You're not to leave the front yard," she replied. "And don't go too close to the edge." Joseph promised he wouldn't and dashed for the front door. Before leaving, he turned back to Elaine.

"You don't have to mother me, you know," he said, and was gone.

—

The cliff was a burden for the whole town, but people didn't like talking about that, since the cliff was a boon for the town, too. For all the

The Edge Between Life and What Else

trouble it caused, Joseph couldn't deny that the cliff was pretty. He liked resting on the soft grass, breathing the salty ocean air, listening to the gulls and the waves crashing.

Joseph stood and walked toward the edge of the cliff. Whenever he looked over the edge, at the waves below, a chill went up Joseph. In general he liked swimming in the ocean as much as anyone else, but he would never swim down there. It was the rocks. Joseph didn't even like looking at them. They were lodged in the ocean floor where the cliff had dropped them, immovable despite the water spitting and thrashing around them. Joseph understood that beaches were the proper place for land and water to meet. Rocks were an imbalance, an invasion. They were the break of unspoken promises.

Joseph stopped walking just short of the edge. He turned and surveyed the scene. The gravel parking lot was empty, and he could not hear any cars on the access road that led to the highway. The tourists were slow today—Joseph hadn't seen anyone in the five hours since lunch. In trying to decide upon the best place from which to stand guard, Joseph had settled on pacing from the parking lot, to his front porch, to the lookout point, and back to the parking lot.

Though he'd had a lot of time to think, and a lot of time to enjoy the cool day, Joseph had tried to remain vigilant. The closer it got to night, the more nervous he became. Someone was going to jump before the day ended, and this time, if anyone died, it would be his fault. Joseph was a teenager now. He was old enough to know what was happening. He was old enough to stop it.

Joseph knew what to look for. Over the years he had watched plenty of people walk to the cliff's edge. Some had looked like jumpers. The way they approached the cliff with the sort of slow and steady reverence commonly reserved for churches, their eyes fixed on the line where solid ground met empty distance. The jumpers would stop in front of the waist high wooden fences the townspeople had built several feet from the edge. They would stand on tiptoes and lean over to see as far out as they could. Some would glance around furtively to make sure nobody watched. Others would not pause as they climbed the fence, keeping their eyes locked on the earth's vanishing line. All of them would stop there a moment, between the fence and the edge.

Joseph turned away from the cliff and continued his patrol toward the parking lot. The wind was gaining a chill as the sun sunk lower toward the ocean. Joseph huddled deeper into his coat and stuffed his hands in his pockets. The sun would set within the next hour or so.

If he closed his eyes Joseph could see what the jumpers always saw standing there on the edge, looking over—the ocean battering itself white on the dark, steady rocks. The jumpers stood there thinking the rocks were remarkable because of the way they did not move. But if the rocks were immune to the persistent tug of the ocean, the jumpers were not. As they stood there, a trickle of dirt would roll off the edge in one long drift down, down. A few jumpers had watched this dirt falling and actually turned back. But over the years, Joseph had heard of many who simply took one step forward, and fell.

When he reached the parking lot, Joseph turned and searched across the land. Grass swayed in the steady wind off the ocean. The chipmunks

The Edge Between Life and What Else

that always lingered to beg for tourists' food were chasing one another around the fenceposts. On either side of the fence, the signs which had been erected swayed in the breeze. Joseph didn't think the signs did much good, but several townsfolk had insisted on them. The volunteer firemen had been especially adamant.

Joseph liked the signs anyway because they didn't have any words. Only a stick figure tipping over the edge, carved bright red into the brown wood.

Since no noise of car engines came from the access road, Joseph continued toward his front porch. He was thinking about the volunteer firemen, just a group of villagers consisting of some out of work fishermen and their chief, Wallace Stetson. They ended up clearing away the bodies since nobody else would.

Whenever a body was discovered on the rocks, Elaine was always the first to notify the volunteer firemen. She would wait by the cliff for them to come. She set her legs wide, standing as unmovable as the cliff itself, and stopped tourists from approaching with the palm of her hand and a look.

Only when the volunteer firemen had arrived would Elaine unplant her feet. Chief Wallace was usually the one to look over the cliff and assess the situation. One or two of the fishermen would stand with him, debating whether they should call for the winch or the helicopter. They rarely had to call for the helicopter. Finally the men would trudge half a mile to the steel rungs bolted into the cliff and, one by one, climb down to the rocks.

Joseph could remember just one occasion when this ritual was abandoned. It was an early memory, among the earliest.

Joseph was running because he had heard crying, and because he suspected. He put out his arms like the seagulls as he ran, and he began yelling like the gulls. He didn't mean to yell like the gulls, it just came out that way because he was running so fast and the wind was pushing the hair off his forehead and he couldn't really feel his legs moving. So he was flying.

The silhouette in the distance was nothing more than a blob of white in otherwise perfect darkness. Joseph ran toward the white even though it reminded him of a ghost, even though he was afraid of ghosts and ghosts wore white and they scared you because they were dead. He ran because he knew the white was Mum.

His bird calls must have reached her because she had turned and was facing him when Joseph barreled out of the night. He collided with the white and the two of them stumbled a step toward the cliff's edge, but he didn't worry about stumbling because he could smell the heat of inside, the special heat of Mum's bed when he crept into her room and woke her, asking if he could come into her bed, and that warmth pouring out of the covers, closing all around him with its dry adult smell. But the smell of inside was gone in a sudden wind off the ocean, and there was only salt and rain. Mum didn't put her hand on his head or run her fingers through his hair. When he looked up to see why, to ask what she was doing out here by the cliff in the cold at night, he saw that it wasn't his mum he was holding at all, but some other woman, her hair a white mass blowing in the wind, her white gown flapping against her body.

It couldn't be Mum because of the hair, but then he wasn't sure because the hair looked brown not white, and then her face was looking down at

The Edge Between Life and What Else

him and it was maybe a skull but he clenched shut his eyes and screamed and when he opened them it was just an old woman's face, his Mum's face with the soft wrinkles in the corners of her eyes and mouth. The face was blank, not smiling or sad or anything, the eyes just staring straight ahead but not looking.

Joseph wrung his hands and jumped up and down and realized he was screaming about the cold and his Mum but the wind blew too hard. He couldn't hear his own screams. Mum's mouth moved but he couldn't hear any sound except the roar of the wind. He closed his eyes. He felt the hum in his throat and he knew he was yelling but he couldn't hear.

When he opened his eyes there was nothing. The wind was blowing in his face and drying his tears and the cliff was empty. Mum was gone or it had been a dream.

Joseph didn't remember walking home, but somehow he'd made it back to his bed, was resting and telling himself it must have been a scary dream. Even if his feet were dirty and numb from the cold.

But no matter how long he lay in the darkness, he could not close his eyes against the image of the woman in white floating down through the darkness to the rocks below. He could not convince himself that it had been a dream or a vision until he saw the rocks, saw that they were bare and dark like always. Joseph pulled on his coat, slipped into his shoes. He tiptoed back into the night.

At the cliff, shivering in the wind and staring down into the darkness, Joseph could see white on the rocks. But he knew it might be the woman or it might just be the waves crashing. There was only one way to be sure.

The ladder. It was far away and climbing down would be dangerous in the dark.

The wind whipped and tried to pull Joseph from the ladder. Several times he almost fell, and several times the cage around the ladder saved him. He felt sick, and his head pounded with the wind and the waves. Not until he was nearly to the bottom of the ladder, hands numb and slow to move, did Joseph realize that he was exhausted. He wished he were back in his bed, for now he would sleep soundly. But he had come too far to turn around.

The wind was less fierce at the bottom. Joseph walked toward the rocks. He knew they were the rocks below the cliff by his house because he saw the white form crumpled on them, the ocean splashing over it and foaming against it, the particular white of her gown unmoving except in rhythm with the waves.

Joseph pressed himself against the cliff and looked away. He found a cave where the wind did not reach and collapsed.

In the morning, Chief Wallace Stetson gave out a holler. The volunteer firemen who accompanied him turned to see Joseph crouching in the cave. He had been watching the men work on getting the body out of the water and zipped into the big black bag. The body would not be identified until later that day.

“Jesus, boy, you scared me half to death,” Wallace said. “I thought you were another one.” Joseph only watched as the others crowded around. “What’re you doing down here?” asked Wallace.

The volunteer firemen waited as Joseph looked each man in the eye. His jeans were grimy and damp, and he was embarrassed to be in his

pyjama shirt. Joseph pulled his jacket closer, despite the hot sun, and said, "I was just watching."

"How come you're sitting in this cave, boy?" asked one of the firemen. Joseph stared at his feet, pushing them deeper into the sand, and shrugged. The men shared a glance among one another before turning back to their work. Wallace was the only one who didn't share that glance. He slogged through some tide pools with his big rubber boots.

"Come out of there, boy," said Wallace. He pulled off his yellow rubber glove and held out his naked hand to Joseph. "This ain't no place for a child."

Joseph took the man's hand and allowed himself to be pulled up. He watched as the volunteer firemen attached the black bag to a chain and then motioned to someone far above. The chain was dragged gradually up the cliff, the bag bumping and swaying. Wallace put a hand on Joseph's shoulder and turned him away from the sight.

The men made their way to the steel ladder. "Is this how you got down here, boy?" asked Wallace. Joseph nodded and stared at a tiny crab clawing through the sand. Wallace pulled Joseph around and shook him. "Don't you climb down here anymore, you hear me? You are not to climb down here."

The wind over the ocean was blowing salty and cool. The sun was nearly gone into the water, and the day's warmth was leaving with it. Maybe when the darkness was nearly complete, and only a thin ribbon of gray remained on the horizon, was when someone would jump. Joseph sat on his front

porch and rested his head in his hands, huddling deeper into his coat. He rubbed his tired eyes. He would stay here all night if he had to.

When Joseph opened his eyes, a man was walking toward the cliff. The man's pace was slow and determined. The man stopped a few feet back from the cliff and leaned over the fence to see as far out as he could. The man hopped the fence and stood facing the edge. Before the man landed on the ground between the fence and the edge, Joseph was up off his porch and running.

Joseph made harsh and breathless noises as he ran, the wind roaring in his ears, and he could not feel his legs moving even as his thighs began to burn. His legs carried him so quickly he felt like he was flying. The man was standing with his back to Joseph, hands deep within his pockets, shoulders slouched against the wind. The blood suddenly went cold in Joseph's arms and shoulders as the man kicked a foot along the dirt and took a step toward the edge. Joseph was trying to scream around great gulps of breath.

The man glanced over his shoulder and finally saw Joseph. He turned away from the cliff and frowned.

"What," breathed Joseph as he stomped to a halt. He swallowed hard. "What are you doing here, mister?"

"The view," said the man. He nodded at the ocean and said, "I came to enjoy the view."

"It's nearly dark," Joseph pointed out. "There isn't much to see in the dark."

The man agreed that there wasn't much to see in the dark. They stood in silence then, watching the sun's reflection recede along the water. Joseph

shifted from foot to foot, recovering his breath and eyeing the man.

Joseph noticed a pair of gulls floating gradual circles over the waves. Others settled onto the rolling ocean, dipping hooked beaks into the water and calling proudly at one another.

“Sea gulls don’t actually live on the sea, you know,” the man said. “Gulls live inland, mostly. Or on the coast.”

Joseph wished rain would come, torrents of hard, fast, cold rain to drive them away from the cliff. He continued shuffling, his fingers clenching into tighter and tighter fists.

The man said, “Gulls go wherever the food is.”

“You’re going to jump,” blurted Joseph. He had hoped saying it would loosen his nerves and relieve the tension in his fists. He had hoped the man would turn to him and break down, would put his hand in Joseph’s and come away from the cliff, or at least nod. But the man only watched the ocean and pretended not to have heard.

“From up here the ocean makes people crazy. It doesn’t seem real down there, like death doesn’t seem real,” said Joseph. The man blinked into the wind. “People think things are too complicated so they want to make it simple. They come here where they think it’s always simple. They think it’s just jump or don’t jump.”

The man had turned and was looking at Joseph. “But it isn’t simple here,” said Joseph. “I know that because I live here. The cliff only makes it worse because you think the choice is so simple. You don’t realize that it isn’t simple at all.”

“What isn’t simple?” asked the man.

“Jumping. Everything,” said Joseph. “People come here to jump off, but it’s like they’re trying to build a bridge across the ocean by dumping sand into the water. I tried it,” said Joseph. “It doesn’t work.”

“You been living up here your whole life, watching folks jump off this cliff,” said the man. “I never thought about it like that before. Must make you kind of angry to have people in your front yard all the time.”

Joseph shrugged. Something about the man was bothering him. Joseph gripped the fence post and stared at the dirt. “You’re that man, aren’t you?” he asked. “You’re the fireman, from that morning.”

Wallace nodded. “You were a lot younger then. Only this tall,” he said, putting his hand at his waist. He raised the hand a little, then lowered it. “This tall,” said Wallace.

“You let me play with the fire truck,” said Joseph. “You let me turn on the lights.”

Wallace nodded. “You had fun with the lights. You laughed for the first time that whole morning.” Wallace leaned against the rail, looking over his shoulder at Joseph. “How have you been?” he asked.

Joseph shrugged and stared at the edge. In the deepening darkness he could barely make out the line where the land dropped away. “Shoot,” said Wallace, turning toward the ocean. “That must be about six years ago.”

Joseph nodded. The sky was a fan of grayish blue, the clouds spots of black. When the wind died, an eery calm settled between them. The cool day that Joseph had been enjoying was gone, replaced by a chilly night. Joseph shivered and asked, “Did you really just come to look at the view?”

“Why are you so worried, son?” asked Wallace. “You think I would jump off this cliff? I’ve spent too many hours scraping up the bones of pig-

headed, selfish folks who never cared about anyone but themselves to go jumping off this cliff myself.” Wallace was silent again. Minutes went by before he said, “People make an unholy mess of their lives and then come jump off this cliff. They don’t think for a minute about the people who have to clean up their messes.”

Joseph was shaking. Something in him pulled like the ocean making a big wave.

“Why did you say that, about people being selfish?” asked Joseph. Wallace considered Joseph for a minute before he shook his head and said to never mind, but Joseph stood up straight and stared at him. “Why did you say it?”

“Because I get sick of cleaning up folks’ messes,” said Wallace, slumping against the fence. “Some people think jumping off cliffs is romantic or something. But your mum wasn’t one of those people,” he said.

Joseph flinched when Wallace tried to reach for him. “My sister told me Mum was in pain,” said Joseph. “That’s why she had to jump.”

Wallace nodded and said Joseph was right, his mum had been in terrible pain. Cancer had hardened her lungs until she breathed as much pain as air. Joseph couldn’t remember much about the doctors, except their sour faces that never smiled. Your mother will be fine, they had told him. One had an ink stain under his pocket. Joseph had stared at the stain and hugged Elaine as the man said, just a few more treatments and we’ll be through this rough patch.

“I knew your mother,” said Wallace. “She wouldn’t have jumped unless she had to.”

Wallace knelt and scooped up a handful of stones. Joseph watched him toss a few of them far out over the water. Joseph tried to follow the stones' path as they fell, but he lost them in the darkness a few feet beyond the edge. He could hear the steady crash of the waves below, and he imagined the stones bouncing against the rocks below, plunking into the ocean.

"If we didn't live here, she wouldn't have jumped at all," Joseph said. He kicked at the dirt, digging the toe of his shoe into a patch of grass.

Wallace shook his head. "Then the pain would have killed her, son," he said. "No matter what, she was going to die. At least this way it was easier for her."

Joseph kicked harder at the grass, gouging his hole deeper. He imagined kicking hard enough to send the whole cliff crumbling into the ocean, dirt sliding over the rocks below, the house sinking into the waves. Elaine would escape. She would swim to safety. When his father got home from work, they would rebuild the house and live on the beach.

"I can't remember much about Mum," said Joseph. He stopped gouging at the dirt, left the shallow hole alone. He watched Wallace toss the last of the stones into the darkness. "My father never talks about her anymore. He has to work a lot. Elaine just talks about when Mom was sick."

Wallace nodded. "That's the way with a lot of folks," he said.

They stood together in silence, listening to the distant rush of the waves and the wind whistling among the rocks. There was no sign at all of the sun—beyond the cliff was only a sheet of blackness dusted with a haze of white stars.

The Edge Between Life and What Else

Joseph stopped and grabbed a stone. Just as he was pulling back to throw it, out of the quiet a great screeching suddenly rose. Sea gulls burst out of the darkness, flapping and squealing in an angry cloud. Wallace put a hand in front of his face and retreated around the fence, but Joseph just gripped the rail in front of him and shut his eyes as the cloud descended upon him. Gulls swirled around his head, their screeches filling his ears, their sharp beaks poking his cheeks and hands, and the whole world was suddenly nothing but the spiraling, fluttering bodies of sea gulls.

The cloud dispersed as suddenly as it had come, and as the noise subsided, Wallace dropped his hands to his sides and bellowed laughter. “Those stones I was throwing must have stirred them up good,” he said. “Did they get you, son?”

Joseph was watching a single bird that had remained on the cliff. He worried for a moment that it was hurt, that it couldn't fly with the rest. The gull's head darted from Joseph to Wallace to the fence. The bird strutted calmly toward the edge. It ruffled its feathers, slouched forward, and leapt off the cliff. Joseph followed the gull's free fall, watching as it spread its wings, leveled out, and glided into the night.