



Background René Saldaña, Jr. was inspired to become a writer by his grandfather, who was a first-rate storyteller. Saldaña was also motivated by his students when he taught middle school and high school. He told them about the beginnings of his book *The Jumping Tree*, and as they wrote alongside him in class, he was inspired to continue his story.

from THE JUMPING TREE

Short Story by René Saldaña, Jr.

1. **READ** ▶ As you read lines 1–30, begin to collect and cite text evidence.

- Circle the phrase that tells how the narrator feels as the story begins.
- In the margin, explain why the narrator feels this way.
- Underline the names of the other characters introduced in these lines.

CLOSE READ
Notes

I was starting to feel an empty nervousness in my stomach. Not only was I about to start school at Nellie Schunior Junior High, but I hadn't done much to get the older kids' respect this summer.

My cousin Jorge, who was a full two years older, was visiting from Mier across the border. This didn't happen too often because we visited my family in Mexico two or three weekends out of the month, and my tío¹ Jorge, Jorge's father, didn't own a car, so Jorge had to wait until my uncle could borrow some transportation. Jorge wouldn't start school for another two weeks, so he wanted to take a vacation in

10 the States.

Odd how just across the border, only some forty-five minutes away, people still walked to work, there was still a milkman, a water truck brought drinking water to each house, and fruit and vegetable vendors drove or walked up and down streets selling their wares.

vendors:

¹ tío (tē'ō): Spanish for "uncle."

kindling:

When I'd visit my cousin, he'd always make certain I had a good time. We'd spend hours on end in his father's carpentry shop sawing blocks of wood into rough imitations of cars and planes. We'd shave planks of wood until they felt smooth on the palms of our hands or our cheeks. We'd use the shavings later on for **kindling** or confetti, and we'd dig our fingers into the mountains of sawdust, sometimes as deep as our elbows.

So, when he came up to Peñitas, I wanted to make sure there was always something doing. Since he was older, I didn't want to do things that were for kids, but I didn't know exactly how to entertain him.

At the beginning of summer, Tío Nardo had hammered a few slats of wood to my granddad's mesquite tree in the middle of the backyard, called it a tree house, and we were set. It was just like in *The Brady Bunch*.² Only their tree house actually resembled a house, with its walls, windows, roof, and floor. We had to imagine all that. All we had, really, were flat places to sit on. But it was enough for us.

One day after Jorge arrived, Ricky was over, and we came up with a jumping and gymnastics competition. Actually, Ricky came up with the idea because he was good at that stuff. He was always saying,

² **The Brady Bunch**: popular TV show of the 1960s and 1970s.

2. **◀ REREAD** Reread lines 15–24. What can you infer about the narrator's feelings toward his cousin? Underline text evidence that supports your inference.

3. **▶ READ** As you read lines 31–70, continue to cite textual evidence:

- Underline text that reveals the narrator's thoughts and feelings about jumping.
- Circle details that describe the setting.
- In the margin, explain the narrator's thoughts as his turn to jump approaches.

“I had to go through with this deal. I had to prove that I could belong.”

“Look at this,” and he’d tumble, pop a cartwheel, flip backward, or walk on his hands. Once he even walked across the top of a fence like a tightrope walker. Its sharp points didn’t seem to bother him.

Ricky explained the rules as we stood under the **mammoth** mesquite: “Okay, we’re going to climb the tree and start from there.” He pointed to the slat where I normally sat. “Then jump down to that
40 branch there and grab hold.” His finger slid across the sky from the plank to a branch that stretched out below it. Easy enough. “Then whoever can do the best trick is the winner and king of the world.”

“What do you mean by trick?” asked Jorge.

“You know, flips, swinging back and forth, then letting go, seeing who can land the fanciest.”

All this time I’m thinking, *Okay, jump, grab, let go, and pray I land standing. No fancy-schmancy stuff for me. Just do the thing.*

But Jorge was the oldest of us, and the strongest; Ricky was the gymnast, and I was the youngest and the smallest, the one who had
50 something to prove to these guys. I had to go through with this deal. I had to prove that I could belong to this group, could be a man.

“*Orale pues,*”³ said Jorge. “Let’s climb up.”

And so we did, hand over hand, foot after foot, until we all reached the top and we **sidled** to the edge of the jumping place. When I saw how far the branch was from this spot, then how far the ground was from that branch, I decided to do the minimum, a jump and release. After all, I was only in the summer after my fifth-grade year. What could they expect?

mammoth:

sidle:

³ *orale pues* (ō-rā’lā pwās): Spanish slang meaning “let’s go, then” or “all right, then.”

Jorge went first. Ricky and I stood back, watching. My Mexican
 60 jumping bean heart was making it hard to concentrate on the task at
 hand. Even at this age I knew that people could learn a lot from their
 bodies' reactions to a situation: hand over open fire burns: remove
 hand immediately; hunger pangs: eat; heart grasping at sides of throat
 fighting to get out alongside that morning's breakfast: don't jump!

But, I am Mexican. I could not—strike that—would not back
 down. I would do the deed. It was a question of manhood. *¡Macho o
 mujeringa? ¡Pues macho!*⁴

Jorge screamed “*¡Aiee!*” and jumped. He swung like a trapeze
 artist at the Circus Vargas.⁵ I whistled. Then I was one step closer to
 70 having to jump.

Ricky stepped up. “We’ll see you down there, *primo*,”⁶ he said.
 “Yeah—down there.” I forced a smile.

He jumped and it was like he and the branch were one. The rough
 bark of the mesquite melted into a smooth bar in his hands. He

⁴ *¡Macho o mujeringa? ¡Pues macho!* (mä'chō ō mōō'hār'ē'ä): Spanish slang for “Manly or weak and cowardly? Manly!”

⁵ *Circus Vargas*: California-based traveling circus.

⁶ *primo* (prē'mō): Spanish for “cousin,” literally, but also used to mean “pal” or “close friend.”

4. **REREAD** Reread lines 48–67. Why does the narrator decide to go through with the jump? Make an inference about the narrator based on his reasoning. Support your answer with explicit textual evidence.

5. **READ** As you read lines 71–115, continue to cite textual evidence.

- Underline details that convey the narrator's fear as he jumps.
- Circle details that suggest the narrator has a sense of humor about the events.

swung forward, let go, twisted, caught the bar again, swung toward me, flipped, all the while holding on to the branch, released, flipped in the air once, and stuck the landing. A perfect 10, even from the Russian judge.

I was next.

80 “*Orale*,⁷ jump!” It sounded like an echo, they were so far away. I glanced down at them. A big mistake. My stomach was a better jumper than I because it was already flipping and turning. But I was at the edge of the board. I’d made a **contract** with myself, for my sake, signed in blood.

contract:

I began to rock back and forth, back and forth, back and forth, trying for courage.

The time had come. It was my destiny to fly, to live on the very edge of life, a life James Bond would be jealous of. So I dug my toes into my tennis shoes, took a deep breath, fought closing my eyes,
90 stretched out my arms and did it.

I saw myself from below somehow. My body like Superman’s flying over Metropolis. The branch growing bigger, closer. Within reach. All I had to do was to grab hold now. Just let the momentum⁸ carry me toward the branch. The bark, rough on my palms, would be my safe place. All I had to do was close my fingers around the branch. Then swing and . . .

But my chubby little soon-to-be-sixth-grade fingers failed me.

I felt the branch slipping from my fingers. And so, like Superman confronted by kryptonite, I fell.

100 As the ground came closer, I tried to remember my PE coach’s exact advice on how to fall. Had he told his little bunch of munchkins to roll onto our backs, or to put out our arms and hands? I had only a split second to make up my mind.

I stretched out my arms to break my fall.

What broke was my left wrist. When I rolled over and looked at the sky, I knew I had failed.

⁷ *orale*: Spanish slang meaning “let’s do it” or “let’s go.”

⁸ **momentum**: the characteristic of a moving body that is caused by its mass and its motion.

Or so I thought. When I returned from the doctor's that evening, arm encased in a cast, my cousins couldn't stop talking about it. "Y, *que padre*,"⁹ they said, caressing my cast. "A cast, Rey. You know," said
110 Jorge, "that's the best. It's better than a scar. I wish I had one. How does it feel?" It was my badge of courage. And it couldn't have come at a better time. I just knew that the guys at school would look at my cast and wonder how I had busted my arm. Had I fought a gang? Had I fallen from a motorbike? Or something else just as manly? The girls, too, would be impressed. It was just the break I needed.

⁹ Y, *que padre* (ē kā pā'drā): American Spanish for "And, how great."

6. **REREAD AND DISCUSS** Reread lines 107–115. With a small group, explain what Rey means when he says that the result of the jump "was just the break I needed."

SHORT RESPONSE

Cite Text Evidence Review your notes on Rey's thoughts and actions throughout the story. What words would you use to describe his character traits? For example, you might describe him as brave, anxious, or foolish. **Cite text evidence** from the story in your response.
