

# Safe

He could fly. He'd have to go out back, behind the garage, where the only ones to see him were the milkweeds and the scrap wood, but he could. He'd lift his arms, pump them once or twice, and there he was.

He had to hide it from his brother most. If George were home, not spending the day with his girlfriend, he couldn't do it, it wouldn't work, his flight would be confounded. But his mother, father, grandmother, or aunt? That was fine, as long as none of them had noticed he'd slipped out the back door.

He loved his brother, loved him most of all. "George," he'd say, "I made us some bread." "George," he'd ask, "Should we go hunting?"

"Sure," George would answer, as long as he wasn't on his way to his girlfriend's. "I love your bread," or, "Let's go get us a deer."

He liked to hover among the branches of the maple tree, the big one over the fence line from their yard. There was plenty of room between its warm, upward arms, 50 feet up. He floated among the leaves, brushed them softly with his feet and hands, surprised the birds with his silence. He wanted to rise above, into the unfettered blue, but he wasn't sure. What would happen should someone see him?

One day in the living room, George said, "Hey, bud, what's up? Getting your goof on?"

"No," he answered. "Just milling around, reading some books."

George nodded. "You're the serious one, nose forever at a book."

The two liked the living room the best, where they sat among the dim light and the old furniture. The father, grandmother, aunt, and mother were in the family room, watching TV.

"Hey, George," he said, "I have something to tell you."

"Oh?"

"Yes. I have a secret."

"Ah," George answered, "I see. But don't," he said, "don't tell me. Keep it to yourself, bud. It's safer that way."

He looked at his brother, lost in the shadows of the room. "What do you mean, George?"

"Nothing," George said. "Just don't, don't tell me."

"Ok," he said, "I won't." He wanted to ask him why, what he meant by it not being safe, but now George wouldn't look at him. He looked at his hands instead and at the lines of his palm. It was quiet too, in the dark and the shadows, so he said, "Ok, George, I'll keep it to myself."

The next day, and the day after, his brother spent his time at his girlfriend's. So for hours on end, he slipped out back. He floated over the milkweed and scrap wood, across the fence line, among the meadow and the maple tree. The flying was even easier, he barely had to move his arms. He rose amongst the warm branches and into the leaves without any effort at all. It was warm, sunny—but now...what was it? He felt uneasy. Why should it be a secret? What had his brother warned him about?

At the door, his mother caught him coming in. "What's up, baby?" she said, patting his face, a patch of beard he'd only recently been able to grow.

"Nothing, Mom," he said.

She brought him close, pressed him to her breast. "You miss your brother, baby?"

"No," he said. "I don't."

"Oh, baby, ok. Come down for dinner soon."

He went upstairs, into the bathroom, and locked the door. He turned the faucet on and washed his hands. The water was warm, and he felt ok when he washed his hands. He looked in the mirror, at his new beard, the curl of hair on his chin and neck. He didn't like it. He didn't like what he saw.

"Hey," he said, on the third day, when his brother returned.

“What’s up, bud? Getting your goof on?” They sat in the dim light with the fading furniture and piano, George a shadow in the room.

“No,” he said. “Not really.” He watched his brother watching him. “I can do something,” he said. “Out behind the garage.”

George looked away. “Buddy,” he answered. “Don’t tell me that.”

“Why?” he asked. “Why not, George?”

George shook his head. “It’s not safe.” He could hardly see him. “It’s not good to say.”

“But why? What’s up?”

He wouldn’t say. He wouldn’t tell him why he, George, the one he loved the most out of all of them, most confounded his flight.

He sat in the room, the dark room, with his brother. The others—the aunt, mother, father, grandmother—watched TV.

Now his brother was almost never home. He’d see him only in the hallway, leaving to go to his girlfriend’s. George would nod at him and open the door. He’d watch his brother leave.

He flew, like before, better than before. Without effort he sailed, surprising the birds with his silence. It was so easy, to lift among the butterflies and the leaves.

Late that day, he crept into the house, tiptoed toward the stairs.

“Boy,” said his aunt, “Come here.” She got out of her seat, went wobbling toward him. She put her hand on his chest, just above his heart. “Don’t be so sad,” she said.

“I’m not,” he answered.

She kissed his cheek. “You could never lie. We see it in your eyes. Our sad baby blue.”

The final day, when George had been gone so long he couldn’t remember when last he’d seen him, it rained. The roof dripped and the sky was an oyster shell. He was upstairs reading when he heard George come in. He heard his father’s voice and then his brother’s and then some shouting.

He went downstairs and into the living room. George sat amongst the old furniture, barely a shadow among the lack of light. “Hey, bud,” he said.

“Hi, George,” he answered. He took a breath. “I’m going to go,” he said. “I’m going to go do it.”

George sighed. “I wish you wouldn’t. I wish you’d stay inside and read your books.”

“Why?” he asked. “Do you know what I do? Have you always known?”

“No,” he said. “That’s not true, bud.”

“Why do you leave then? Do you do it?”

George shook his head. “No, brother.” In the dim light, he was barely there, a weak ghost in the dark. “It’s not safe,” he said.

He left the room and went behind the garage. The milkweed dripped with the rain, the pods cracked and the white fluff sodden. The old boards lay like always, gray and tired.

He raised his arms, held them in the air. The rain leaked down his wrists and into his coat, through his patch of beard and down his neck. “I don’t understand,” he said. “Why did you leave? Where did you go?” He jumped, palms open to the sky.

## Monks

A very tall monk sat on a mountain, eating a bowl of rice and looking at the valley below.

“They’re voting in record numbers,” said a shorter, fatter monk who took a seat beside him.

“I know. Look at the line.” He held out his wooden spoon and traced a zigzag from the door of the polling place, down and along the bank of the green river, into the pines, and out again across the hummocked pasture.

“Will you be voting?” asked the shorter monk, beads in his hands.

“Oh no. It’s against the rules of our order. We can’t become involved in the affairs of society.”

The fat monk sighed, smiling into the sun. “You’re so lucky then, sitting on your mountain and eating rice. Our order requires us to vote. Requires us to work in the town. To buy our own robes. Feed the poor.”

The tall monk watched as an ant traveled the strap of his sandal. He prayed that the ant would find its way to heaven, and then he laughed. “Yes, it is a nice life. It’s very pleasant here on our mountain, eating and praying for the ants and spiders and goats.”

At that, the short monk got to his feet. “I’d kick you,” he said, smiling again into the warm sunshine, “But it’s against our vows.”

“Then I am lucky,” said the other.

He sat and watched as the fat monk picked his way down the mountain, over the mossy boulders and across the streams. He prayed

## The Christmas Story

First thing, after I picked him up thumbing rides in the snow, he reached into the pockets of his worn blue Dickies. From one pocket he pulled three dollars and set it on the flat spot over the glovebox, and from the other a tin crucifix, setting it next door to the cash.

“Your choice,” he said. “Three bucks for gas, or you can take that cross. Get 10 for it in pawn—it’s real silver.”

I took a glance at him: knotted gray hair, tooth missing in his tired smile, greasy green parka.

“This a test?” I said. “You the Christ come back?”

He laughed. “Shit no. Just trying to help you along.” He shrugged, stuffed the crucifix back in his pants. “You’ll do better with the cash.”

We rode in quiet for 20 miles, until he pointed to a tiny white house set back from the road. It was a real heap—porch falling off, roof like a swayback horse.

“Home sweet,” he said, and got out. He trundled up the icy drive.

“Hey,” I said, rolling down my window. “Wanna sell that cross for three bucks?”

He turned on his heel. “Hell yeah!” he said, grin like a man redeemed.

## Red

He wondered what it was like for sociopaths. They didn't have consciences, right? Did that mean they didn't vote?

He wandered up the street. The sidewalk seemed like it was full of voters. Hey, Paul, one of them said to him. Going to vote?

He'd voted once, and then he went and got drunk. That's when he lived in the bad neighborhood and he was afraid to walk to the polling place. Kids sold him drugs and beat him with a pipe, or rather they wanted to. Or rather he thought they wanted to. He was so shaken that afterwards he headed to the bar, just around the corner. It was a dangerous bar and that made little sense.

Voting made little sense. That's what he thought. He walked up the street and saw all the voters. It was a nice day out. The sun was making its yellow rounds and the birds were making their feathered way. What did they care?

Hey, Paul, said a passing voter. Going to vote?

At the bar in the bad neighborhood some guys wanted to know why he was there. He pointed to the *I Voted!* sticker on his shirt. They asked who he voted for and they seemed happy with his choice.

Hey, Paul, what's up? Going to vote?

The sun was hot in its rounds. He felt it on his arms and neck, burning its way upon his skin—red, red. Was he going to vote? He hadn't yet decided. He was on his way, but wasn't sure he'd get there.

He'd drank some sweet, cheap liqueur that the bartender recommended. It tasted like lemon and cherry, or was supposed to. He had three of them and then he felt like he dangled on his barstool. After three, he felt like he might not be afraid.

Hey, friend. Headed to the polls?

I guess so, he answered.

There they were ahead—the polls—and it seemed like his feet were on their way.