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GEORGE

THE SUMMER BEFORE GEORGE WAS BORN, Katie and I lived in a house on a high hill. The hill sloped up gently on three sides, covered with thick grass kept short by the wind; but in the back, behind the house, it fell off sharply, down a high, rocky cliff, to the sea. The house was right at the top, about thirty yards from the edge of the cliff, and all we could see of the ocean from there was its top edge, where it tilted up against the sky. The cliff was so high and the wind from the sea was so noisy that usually we couldn't hear the surf, even from the edge of the cliff. I would go there sometimes and peer down; there was no sound except the wind; and the surf moved in and out like great wings, beating against the wind and rock that pinned them down.

On the other side of the house, at the bottom of the hill, there was a highway, and the house was turned inland toward it, away from the wind. Often Katie and I would sit here, on the porch steps, and watch the cars passing and the gulls riding over on the wind. It was nicest in the evening right before dark. Sometimes, just as the sun went down, the wind would quit all of a sudden; the gulls would catch and tremble in the air and wait; Katie and I would almost hold our breaths; and then, finally, the noise of the sea would come in, low, to fill the air.

It was at such a time that the baby first moved—the quickening, they call it. The noise of the surf was just breaking in on the quiet; the wings of the gulls began to stir, ever so slightly; Katie started, caught herself, and then turned to me. She said that the baby had moved—just a quick flutter, like a tiny bird beating against her womb.

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Then the summer was gone, and it was too cold for the house on the hill. We moved to a small town about thirty miles inland where I got a job and we settled down to wait. Katie had never made friends easily before, but now she had something in common with all of the ladies in the neighborhood; we were heaped with baby clothes, good wishes, and advice. The minister called on us several times and we joined the church. We were sure that the baby would be a boy; we decided to call him George.

Finally, in December, the time came. I couldn't stay in Katie's room at the hospital, so I sat out in the waiting room. It was a nice waiting room, with new leather chairs and lots of ashtrays and a gaily-colored picture on the wall of bathers at Donaldson Beach.

In the picture, it was summer again. The surf was gentle, and it must have been warm, for there were children playing in it. Their mothers were gathered in little groups up

on the beach, talking and sunbathing. Far off in the distance you could see the cliffs where the high land broke out into the sea, where we had lived during the summer. Here, though, in the picture, the land sloped down gently, and the beach was broad and even and covered with people.

I studied the picture for hours: Everyone was having a great time at the beach. I began to enjoy myself too. The nurse came in every so often and interrupted me, telling me that it would only be another three hours, or two, and that the pains were coming at such and such intervals. I hoped that it wasn't hurting Katie too much, but the nurse said she was doing very well. The pains, she told me, were sort of like waves—it was only a matter of relaxing and rolling with them.

After that, I began to see the pains as waves, each one bigger than the last. Where was Katie, though? I searched the beach, trying to complete this curious image. My son was in the water, struggling to reach the shore—or struggling against it? Or were the waves of pain the child himself, beating against his mother like the sea against the earth, like the mile-long wings of surf against the rock and air. I began to get seasick. The whole room was rocking and swaying. Then suddenly it stopped, and the nurse came in to congratulate me.

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I was the father of a boy, she said—George. He was perfectly healthy, and he weighed eleven pounds four ounces. Most of the weight was in his wings. "Yes," she said, "he has wings! But he's beautiful!"

Katie was back in her room, exhausted but still awake, when I ran in. "Oh yes!" she said. "He has little white wings, like an angel. When they held him up, he looked like an angel!"

I was surprised at this, and the doctor was too. "I've examined the boy," he said, "and he's strong and healthy. His arms and legs are perfectly formed—but these wings are very strange. Frankly, I've never seen anything like it."

Fathers aren't usually allowed in the nursery, but the doctor decided that this was a special case, so he took me with him. There was only one other baby in the nursery, and it was crying. George was very still. He was lying on his stomach, and the first thing I saw was his wings, folded carefully along his back. They weren't very big, but they were very bright. When we shut the door they trembled.

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When the word got around, the whole town was in an uproar. Everybody congratulated Katie and me and had a look at George. Reporters and doctors came from all over, and

we were famous for a little while. The doctor wrote a report for a medical journal, and I got two weeks off from work. We all answered a lot of questions, but there wasn't really very much that anyone could say. There weren't any explanations or theories, it was just a curious fact; George had wings.

So things quieted down pretty quickly, especially after I took Katie and George home. A baby was born soon afterwards in Kansas which could whistle—no tunes or anything; it just whistled instead of crying. This became the big story, and we were quickly forgotten. A few more reporters and doctors came by; I told them I would call when George learned to fly.

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As might be expected, we had a few peculiar problems. One was with the down: After George had been home for a few days and had shed whatever coating had protected him in the womb, small bits of down began to come off his wings. We were afraid that he might choke on them at night, so Katie began brushing his wings with her hands after each feeding so that they wouldn't shed in his crib. It was also difficult to bathe him, because once his wings were wet it took them hours to dry. Soon, however, both these problems were solved as his wings became coated with a kind of oil. We kept them brushed and smoothed, and they became bright and water-repellent. We were also afraid of fire, so I reluctantly pulled one of his feathers and tried to light it. It didn't burn.

His big problem was sleeping. At first we were afraid to lay him on his back for fear that he might injure his wings. He grew tired of sleeping on his stomach, though, and we found that his wings were very tough. He began to prefer sleeping on his back with his wings folded under him like a pillow; I believe he could have slept on a stone floor. Perhaps this was what the wings were for; he never unfolded them, but kept them tight against his back as if they warmed and comforted him.

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The doctor told me one afternoon, in the most matter-of-fact way, that he wanted to cut off George's wings. He thought that in a few months George would be strong enough for the operation. I was shocked; I had never even thought of it. The doctor said, "Of course! We can't leave them on—the boy would be a freak. We must wait, however, until he is a little older before operating."

I began to look at my son with a more critical eye. He did look strange, unusual—but what father's first child doesn't? As for the wings, he seemed perfectly at home with them. They trembled slightly with pleasure, as toes curl up, when he was at his mother's breast; but otherwise, they just remained folded at his back, as though for decoration only. I tried to visualize how he would look without his shining wings: with

nothing between his arms and his behind except a naked, fatty back.

I was reluctant to tell Katie about the doctor's proposal. I knew that she would be against it for the same reason that I was—we both liked George just as he was. But on the other hand, his whole future was at stake; we couldn't get emotional about it. So I decided to talk to the doctor again. "Doctor," I said, "I like the boy just as he is."

"Of course," said the doctor, "but you must think of his future—of the way he will be. Right now he's just a baby; the wings are small and unobtrusive. But consider: If the wings are functional—as I'm sure they are—they will become much larger in proportion to his body. He will no longer look like a cherub, but like a bird; he will be a freak.

"He won't be a baby all his life," the doctor continued. "He will grow up, and what then? He won't be able to run or jump, dragging those ponderous wings like an albatross. He'll barely be able to walk. He won't be able to swim or take part in any sports; he'll hardly even be able to sit down. I tell you, we must cut off those wings!"

The doctor was right. I had visions of George standing on the sidelines, watching the others play football, his wings waving heavily in the breeze. Or I could see him walking slowly along the beach, past the children playing in the surf, past the curious groups of mothers, bent forward like a hunchback to counterbalance the weight of his wings dragging in the sand.

How could I be sure, though? The wings might be a handicap, but what if there were worse consequences in cutting them off? What if George had the soul of a bird? Perhaps, I thought, he was spiritually and emotionally formed for wings, and would be unhappy walking around anyway. Still, I couldn't talk to Katie; she would just get emotional about it. So I took my doubts to the minister.

"Absurd!" said the minister. "No one has the soul of a bird, except perhaps, a bird. But boys—boys are not born, but made. If George is brought up as a normal, healthy boy, he will be happy as a normal, healthy boy. What alternative do you have—to raise him as a bird in a family of people? A seagull in a city of men? If those wings are not removed he will be an outcast; everywhere he goes he will be stared at and tormented. He will not only be physically handicapped, but emotionally crippled as well. What kind of life could he have? Consider: All the normal courses of human life will be cut off from him. The most ordinary activity, like riding the bus, will become for him a nightmare of stares and whispers. If he goes to school, the other children will pull his wings and set them on fire . . ."

"They don't burn," I said.

"He will be unable to wear a suit or drive a car. How can he get married, make friends,

or run for office? I plead with you sir, for the child's sake, deliver him from those wings!"

"George is over a month old," I said. "If we remove his wings, won't he remember them? Even a normal, healthy boy sometimes longs for strange powers."

"Never," said the minister. "Does the child remember the womb or the kingdom of Heaven? Better yet, tell him about them. Save the clippings and photographs from his birth and show them to him when he is older. Let him have the pleasure and amusement of a famous birth, but not the bitterness of an estranged life."

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All this made sense. I could make George's birth only a curious incident in a happy, normal life. I had only one more hesitation—the operation itself. Would it be difficult or dangerous?

"Nothing to it," said the doctor. "Nothing to it. The wings can be removed as simply as any other growth. We must only wait another month until the child is old enough to take anesthesia."

"It may take me longer than that to convince Katie," I said.

"We can't wait too long. The wings must be removed as soon as possible, before the cartilage and muscle begin to harden. As it is now, the boy will be barely scarred. He will be left with only two small stumps, like handles, for a remembrance."

"Okay!" I thought. "Fine!" All that was left now was to persuade Katie; I must be firm. I went home decided, full of resolution, but it was soon gone. Katie was quiet and surly; she seemed to know that I was up to something. And I couldn't take my eyes off George's wings. They lit up the whole room, like a snowbank at night.

The next morning I went back to see the minister again. "It all boils down to this," I said. "Why did God give George wings only to have them cut off?"

The minister told me that the ways of God were strange. "Why does He give man life," he said, "only to take it away again? Why did he create the sky and not allow the fish to see it?" He continued in this vein for several minutes, and then concluded: "You know in your heart that the doctor and I are right—the child's wings must be removed."

"Maybe he's right," I thought. "Maybe they're both right." I was dizzy from thinking. It was time to tell Katie; I left the minister and started for home, determined to go ahead, to do something, Katie and I would have to sit down and talk this thing out.

I tried to get my arguments straight. It was just a simple choice: was George to have a normal, happy life, or was he to be a strange, lonely boy with wings? I saw George as a real boy, with a crowd of others, playing; there he was with his wife and his own children; then a boy again running unencumbered across a short grass field. But there were two Georges: the other was thin, delicate, dark in color. His slight body was all but hidden by huge wings; his fingers were so thin that I could see the blood run through them. His great, dark eyes were marked with the light from his shining wings . . . Suddenly, I stopped and walked back to the doctor's office. This was no good; my thoughts were clouded with vision.

"Doctor," I said, "what will happen to the wings after they are removed? Will you take them off separately, or together? Will they stay bright and clean, or will they shrivel up and die?"

"Why," said the doctor, "we can do whatever you like with them. They will come off separately, and can easily be preserved. I had thought that you might want to give them to a museum or something. Or perhaps you might want to keep them; George could hang them on the wall of his room as a sort of trophy."

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Well, I had beat around the bush too long. I went home. "Katie," I said, "the doctor says we should cut off George's wings—have them removed." She didn't say anything. "The minister says so too, and so do I." I told her about how he would be an outcast, an emotional cripple. "He won't always be a baby," I said. "Look at the future."

She was holding him and watching me curiously as I spoke. I was watching him, older, still running in the field of short grass. But there was the other, the thin boy with dark eyes and great white wings. "Don't you see, Katie, he is alone!" It was hard for me to think; he was looking back at me, out of his dream. "He is a cripple. He can't run, can't dance, can't even sit down!" He was on a high hill, I could see that now, with the sea behind him. Katie looked toward the ocean, then back at me. As she began to speak, George began to turn into the wind, his wings trembling as he lifted them over his head . . .

"Oh no," said Katie. "He's not a cripple—he can fly!" We watched him fall forward and then up; as his feet lifted off the thick grass, his wings, held out, began to stir. Katie laughed: "Why should he want to ride a bus? Why should he walk when he can ride and float on the air?" Katie and I watched him all the way out of sight. Another watched him too: The boy running in the field suddenly stopped and looked up. The last light of the sun caught a flash of white, way up, and then the boy on the ground was lost in the great shadow of wings that covered half the hill.

The wind was suddenly quiet; the low sound of the water came in. Katie and I looked up as the gulls' wings stirred and they fell back toward the sea. Then it was dark; the wind came up again and George started to cry. Katie began to rock him and smiled at me across the room.

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When spring came, we went back to the house on the hill. We stayed on through the next winter, and the next. George learned to walk before I tried to teach him to fly; then, during the third summer, I would take him out on the side of the hill and toss him into the air. At first he would fall with a wild flutter and thump, laughing. By the time cold weather came, he could rise off the ground by himself and stay up for a few seconds. By that time, he had a baby sister. Her wings were red, like fire.