

Stephen O'Connor

Powers and Principalities

“SUPERMAN WAS TRAPPED. He was like, stuck, and he couldn't move.”

“How could that happen if there was no green Kryptonite?”

Doug and Darin were sitting on the asphalt, leaning against the cement steps of St. Patrick's School. The grammar school cacophony of shouts, threats, howls, challenges, screams and cackles skirled through the sunlit air, while a few nuns stood like dark silent sentinels amid the throng. One of them, Sister Boniface, held in the folds of her black sleeve the brass bell with its long slim handle, which, when rung, cast a magical and death-like silence over the school yard. The students would freeze, reminding Doug of *The Twilight Zone* episode in which the man pushed down the button on his time-freezing stopwatch. The second ringing of the bell would bring the students back to life, and they would form lines by class in silence, the nuns indicating with rigid outstretched arms where each one should begin.

“You know what hydraulic power is Doug?”

“Uhm, it's wicked powerful, right?”

“Well, I don't know exactly how it works, but I think it's like when you put anything in a garbage truck and it just crunches it up...”

“But you couldn't crunch up Superman,” Doug said with quiet assurance.

“No, he's invulnerable,” Darin allowed. “But...”

“But what? He'd smash right out of a garbage truck.”

“Let me finish, for cryin' out loud. He wasn't in a garbage truck. Lex Luther got him like scrunched up, an' he was trapped inside this humungous thick steel ball...” Darin had Doug's full attention. He was imagining a ball of steel around the man of steel. He was skeptical. “*And...* there were these wicked huge *hydraulic power pistons* pushing in on every part of the circle around Superman, and he was in a tiny ball, squeezed like.”

“Hmmm.” Doug was thinking. He pushed the dark hair away from his forehead, narrowing his eyes. “What was the other end of the pistons connected to?” he asked.

“Ah, I don’t know. That was outside the little square.”

“I can’t believe he was really trapped. So what’d he do? Hurry up before bony face rings the bell.”

“O.K. Superman was stuck there and he was in a little ball, and he was pushing, but nothing happened. He tried to like vibrate at a high speed to shatter the steel ball with vibrations but...”

“He had no room?”

“Right. So he couldn’t really vibrate, so he was stuck, and then he started to think. And he thought and thought and he thought, really concentrating, an’ he said, ‘I’ve never really had to use all my super power—never really *all*...’”

“Because he never *needed* it all...”

“Yeah, right, not even half—so he said, he got a mental block against using it all, because it would just be too much, and he got a mental block.”

“Yeah?”

“So he concentrated *wicked* hard, and he said, ‘I’ve got to use it *all* now, all my power, and forget just using some of it, and really release it, and he started to push again and he was pushing and stretching out and the steel ball started to shake, and then crack, and the pistons started to crack...’”

A thin smile of vindication was spreading across Doug’s face as the solemn bell rang out through the tumult and then echoed across a suddenly silent schoolyard. And as they stood, Darin whispered, “And everything exploded apart.”

“Lex Luther musta crapped his pants.”

They joined the fourth grade line, and marched back into the classroom in silence under the austere gaze of the dark robed women.

Sister Bernard St. John glanced at the clock and said, “Someone remind me when it’s one o’clock.” Darin made a mental note of it. The class sat at rigid attention, hands folded on the desk. The

students sat not in the center of their chairs, but slightly to one side, because Sister Bernard had instructed the students on the first day to leave some room for their Guardian Angels, and all of her instructions were enforced with yardstick or ruler. It soon became automatic for the students, as was bowing their heads in unison whenever the sister mentioned the Holy Name of Jesus, and she mentioned the Holy Name of Jesus a lot.

“I was thinking during recess, class, that as we discussed the Act of Contrition this morning, and we talked about the line, ‘Because I dread the loss of heaven and the pain of hell,’ that we spent a lot of time talking about the pain of hell, which is horrible of course....” Darin remembered the open and veiled threats of the morning, that the part of the body with which one had sinned in life would be singled out for torture by the filthy fiends of hell, and they would know all, seeing into the depths of the sinner’s black soul. He swallowed and inhaled deeply at the thought.

Sister Bernard stood by the windows, gazing out over the brick housing projects and the expanse of the North Common beyond. “Yes,” she said, “the pain of hell is horrible, and to be feared....”

Darin began to pick at a band-aid on his index finger as the sister recalled again the pains of hell. He had been terribly concerned about hell and had had a dream that Jesus Christ rode right down out of the sky on a donkey and landed in the narrow driveway between his house and the Poirier’s. Peace and purity bathed Him in yellow light, and he held the sacred palm, but his words were ominous: “Be good, Darin, or you’ll go to hell.” And as he watched, stupefied, in his dream, Christ rose again until he was a speck in the blue sky and disappeared. Darin fretted over the dream. He wondered if he could accidentally do something that at his death would send his soul sinking through earth to fire, never to see his father and mother again, while the souls of the evil barked and howled in his ears.

All that had ended when he received a simpler gospel according to his earthly father. “Dad, what do you have to do to go to hell?” he had asked him as his father sat back in the stuffed rocker looking at the *Sunday Sun*. Without taking his eyes off

the paper, he'd responded, "Oh, you have to rob a bank or kill somebody." Relief flowed like cascades of holy water over his trembling soul. His father didn't lie. He was a good Catholic, and everyone knew that. He sang in Charlie McGrail's church choir, and got down on his knees every night and every morning to pray. So it was safe to stop worrying, because Darin knew that he would never rob a bank or kill anyone.

Through the open windows of the classroom drifted the voice of a woman calling to a child somewhere in the maze of the brick projects. A name—he couldn't make it out, and words Strange words—must be a Greek lady because the stream of sounds reminded him of the Greek guys at Nick's Barber Shop. Darin noticed that the nun was looking at the class expectantly, and he realized that she must have put a question to them. He assumed a look of concentration, as if he were searching his memory for an answer, praying that she would not call on him. Sister Bernard surveyed the class.

"Dolores, stop picking your nose. Michael, do *you* know what is the worst torment of hell?" Sister Bernard asked hopefully.

"Is it that the souls in hell are denied the Beatific Vision, sister?"

She smiled. "You are absolutely correct, Michael. That's it. It is the loss of heaven, and not the pain of hell, that we should dread." Darin watched as Sister Bernard began to talk excitedly of God and God's love for us. She said that He was a loving God who wanted the best for his children in the same way that our parents wanted the best for us, and worried about us. Darin pictured his mother in all her deep-hearted concern, and his father coming home from work covered in paint and joint cement, working for the family. And she said that God would give you anything you wanted, all you had to do was ask and have faith. "Knock and the door shall be opened unto you. Ask and you shall receive. That is the word of the Lord." She was getting so excited that Darin could see that she had forgotten the time completely, and as the minute hand moved over the twelve, he raised his hand, certain that he would be rewarded for having remembered.

"Yes, Darin?"

“Sister, it’s one o’clock sister.”

He watched her bright face melt into dark anger. Sensing the approaching storm, Darin’s heart beat faster, and he began to explain. “Sister, you said to remind you....”

The ruler was already in her hand, and she slammed it on her desk, shouting, “I didn’t tell you to interrupt me in the middle of my talk, you rude boy!”

There was a sudden rustle of fabric. Her crucifix swayed and knocked against the long beaded chain, and she strode past the desks to stand before him, in manifold darkness. The phrase “rude boy” stung Darin. He wanted to say that he was not a rude boy, and that she was mean and a liar because she had asked him to remind her, but he was silent. She was a force of nature, a sea that had suddenly erupted in storm, and only Christ could calm a stormy sea, not a boy. His greatest fear now was that she would make him bend over the desk, adding humiliation to pain, and he was somehow relieved when she clutched at his hand, pulling him up from his seat. His desk was knocked forward to the floor. The lid swung open and thudded on the floor as his books spilled out over it.

She pulled his hand out from his body and forced it open, palm up. From the corner of his eye, he saw Helen Toohey watching him with big eyes, as if she were about to cry, and he girded himself for the sister’s fury, knowing that he must not let Helen see tears, and for courage he searched his heroes, Batman, The Flash, Green Lantern, and then his mind cast out to *The Three Hundred Spartans*, the movie he’d seen the weekend before at the Strand with Doug and Dan Monahan. The ruler cracked down on his palm four times before her anger was spent, and Darin, his hand throbbing and stinging, blinked a mist away, thinking for all his life now of the Greek captain of those Spartans. The Persian messenger had said, “Surrender, or we’ll blot out the sun with our arrows.” And the Greek captain with his bold jaw replied calmly, “*Then we’ll fight in the shade.*” Darin tried to set his jaw in that way, and let his eyes assume the blank stare of quiet defiance, though his knees were shaking. *A Spartan captain. You are a Spartan captain.*

“Sit down, rude boy,” Sister Bernard said, and stalked away, and as he sat and thrust his hand between his knees, he sensed a growing power in him. His hand stung, but he had not cried out in pain or burst into tears. She blotted out the sun with her anger and her ruler. But the Spartan captain was defiant. The Green Lantern was recharging his ring, and if he looked at Helen, he knew that she would be watching him with new respect, with sympathy, maybe with love, because he had shown that he was strong. The furious power of the sister had not broken him. What she did was wrong; he knew it was wrong, and Jesus knew it was wrong, and he didn’t fear her anymore. In his mind, he saw himself laughing at her little ruler the way Superman would laugh at a rifle, and bend its barrel backward like a piece of black licorice.

Darin saw Helen’s mother waiting for her in the light blue Buick Wildcat. That was a cool car. There was a little silver wildcat on the side. When they emerged from the school, Helen spoke to him, “Darin, did it hurt?”

“Yeah, a little,” he admitted.

“I *hate* her,” Helen whispered, and she smiled at him with her dark eyes. Her braided ponytail swung in the air as she turned and ran to her mother’s car.

Doug and Darin walked up Broadway, stopping at Domiseck’s Drug Store to look at the comic books, but the new issues weren’t in yet. Well, the Marvel comics were in, but they only read DC comics.

The boys dropped their green book bags and hopped onto stools at the counter. Harry Domiseck peered over his glasses at them. “Can I get you fellas somethin’?” They ordered root beers, and pooled their change, pushing fifty cents across the marble countertop toward the thin, stooped man. He thanked them and went back to his prescriptions.

They were thirsty, and they drank for a moment in silence. Doug asked Darin if he would tell his parents what happened with Sister Bernard. He gazed at his hands and said, “Ah, I don’t think so.”

“All you did was remind her of the time like she asked.”

“But I still got in trouble, and they’ll think I musta done something. Besides, it’s embarrassing.”

“She can be mean sometimes.”

“Real mean. She wanted me to cry, but I didn’t.”

“Yeah, that was good.”

Doug cast a glance at the pharmacist and leaned closer to Darin. “I was thinking about what Sister Bernard said, before that. I was thinking a lot.”

“You mean about hell?”

“No, that the Bible says that if you ask and you have faith, you will receive.”

“You think that’s true?”

“The Bible says it’s true. But I don’t think it means like a new bike.” Doug’s eyes narrowed, and he whispered to Darin, “It’s got to be something that is good, an’ that helps people, an’ you have to really believe, an’ then God will give it to you.”

“Yeah,” said Darin. “That sounds right.” His straw made a rumbling sound as he sucked the last bit of root beer from among the ice cubes at the bottom of the glass. Bells jingled as a couple of sixth graders stormed in, shouting at Harry for two packs of Tops baseball cards. “Hold ya horses, hold ya horses,” the pharmacist growled. Darin and Doug slid off their seats, slung their book bags over their shoulder, and yelled goodbye to Harry.

Doug was thinking hard, and he continued to repeat that the sister had said ask and you shall receive, and that that was the sacred word of God and that God did not break his word. The boys left Broadway at the Francis Gate House, where the rushing water passed under the bridge, and ambled under the trees along the Pawtucket Canal. Doug explained his plan. “Ask and you shall receive, Darin. You know what that means?”

“O.K., yeah,” the other boy replied, unsure. “You wanna ask God for somethin’?”

“Yeah, but first you gotta swear. You gotta give me your word, an later we both gotta swear on the Bible that it’s just between you an’ me.”

“O.K.”

“I mean really swear on the Bible. Put your hand on it, an’ if

you swear—an' you break it..."

"I'm not gonna break it. That'd be real serious."

They saw a group of girls with cones coming from Burbeck's Ice Cream. They could tell they were public school girls because they had no uniforms. They were a little older than the boys, who pretended not to notice them. One of the girls stopped and leaned over, her dark hair like a curtain before her face, her slim body shaking with laughter as another whispered in her ear.

"Hey, blondie!" The whisperer and her teasing eyes faced Darin. "She likes you!"

Darin felt confused, and a little excited, but in the most casual voice he could summon, he said, "Hey, I think I hear ya mother callin' ya!"

Doug laughed and said, "Yeah, listen! 'Hey retard! Come home retard!'"

"You don't have mothers!" one of the girls yelled. "You were *hatched!*"

"You're so funny I forgot to laugh!" shouted Darin as the boys moved on toward the mouth of the canal and the Merrimack River. "And chickens have mothers too, dopey!" Doug added the parting insult. One of the girls yelled something back, but the boys couldn't make out the words, only their fading laughter.

When the girls were out of earshot, Darin asked Doug what he had to swear about, but Doug said they had to go sit down first by the river. They crossed the street and sat on the stone embankment of the Merrimack, looking out past the boats riding at anchor to where the broad flat sweep of the river spilled over the dam onto the rocks below—the Pawtucket Falls.

Doug grew serious. His face, under the thick black hair, was intent, as if he were about to dive off the high board at the YMCA. Doug was a good diver, and a good swimmer too. He'd always been on a Y team and had trophies in his room. "Well, it's simple, Darin. Ask and you shall receive. We're gonna ask God for super powers."

Darin was puzzled and uncertain. "You think you can ask God for that? I mean He never gave super powers to anyone, I mean other than Jesus."

“What about Moses?”

“Oh, yeah. I guess he had super powers alright.”

“And St. Patrick? You remember sister read us the thing about St. Patrick and he had a contest against the druids?”

“Oh, yeah....”

“An’ he walked in the fire, an’ everything. The druids had super powers too, but St. Patrick’s powers were stronger.”

“That’s true,” Darin said.

“And how about when St. Paul was in prison, and he was between all the guards, and his chains fell off him and he escaped right past all the guards. That was super powers—it was like he was invisible, ‘cause they never saw him.”

“Well,” Darin said, “God sent an angel, right?”

“However he did it—if you can call an angel to help you then you still have super power. And if you become a priest you are granted the special power-like a super power- to change bread and wine into the body and blood of Christ.”

Doug was convincing. And he had the word of God on his side: *Ask and you shall receive*. He always came back to that, with the warning that you had to believe it would happen or it wouldn’t happen. You had to have faith in God. He was sure about that, and Darin began to think that he was probably right, and that God might give them super powers, and he would have to think of what powers to ask for, and design a uniform, and choose a name. And he and Doug began to discuss names, but they agreed that they didn’t want to rush into that. That is something you would have to really think about, but a crowd of heroic names flashed across his mind, to be considered or rejected, *Thunder Man, Blue Sword, The Hurricane...* and he saw a figure roar along a foot above the river, a jet-like pass and a roiling wake, a blur of yellow and blue that vanished in a sonic boom as the people at Burbeck’s Ice Cream shouted, “Did you see that? It must be an emergency! *The Hurricane* just took off! Right over the river! If you weren’t looking, you missed it!”

Before heading home, Darin stopped at Doug’s house. Doug’s mongrel, Ginger, followed Darin to the base of a spreading maple tree behind the garage, where a stepladder leaned against

the back wall. He unfolded the ladder beside the tree, and when he had climbed to the top step, balancing himself with one hand against the trunk, he grasped a branch, hauled himself up, and began to climb. Soon he was standing in the tree house, which was really just a six foot square platform hammered onto two parallel four by eights. There were double railings on two sides to lean against, while the other two were open, and afforded a view of the neighborhood. Lila's house, and Mickey's, Duggan's yard, a stretch of the railroad tracks, and the top of Marginal Street—from the tree house their world ran on while they watched like winged angels from a cloud of leaves.

Darin heard the back door slam, and looked down to see Ginger far below wagging her short tail while Doug mounted the ladder. He was carrying his book bag, the strap across his breast like a Mexican's bandoleer. When Doug had pulled himself up to the edge of the platform, he tossed the green bag at Darin's feet. "Open it," he said, and clambered into the tree house.

"It's heavy," Darin said. He drew the bunched mouth of the bag apart, and hauled out a heavy black book bound in leather, and embossed with a golden cross.

"That's the family Bible. Has the births and deaths of the Sidewicks recorded inside the cover." He indicated a florid script, Daniel Sidewick. "That's my grandfather. 1892-1948. He died after my father got home from the war. And see? Here's me. Douglas Sidewick 1955."

"That's wicked cool," Darin said. "My grandparents were all born in Ireland. One of 'em is still alive, but he's kinda sick. Sometimes when he coughs, it doesn't sound good." Darin thought of Papa, his grandfather. He still managed to live alone on Wiggins Street, with his racing magazines and old books. He liked to recite poems like "Bengan on the Rhine" and sometimes sing. His favorite song was "Pal of Mine." He liked to feed the pigeons, too, and smoke his pipe at the North Common. Darin walked over to visit him a lot, especially after Nana died. She was nice too, but she couldn't remember things, only when she was a girl in a place called Sligo. Papa used to train boxers

when he was younger, and Finny Boyle was his man. He closed the book and looked at the gilded cross on the cover. “You want us to swear on that Bible? About the super powers?”

“We have to, ‘cause it has to be serious or we just won’t bother.”

“Yeah.”

“Now remember, when you swear on the Bible it’s an oath like in court, and the oath is like written down in heaven too. So we can’t break it.”

“Let me hear the oath before I get into a deal with heaven,” Darin said, a little nervous, but intrigued.

“You put your hand on the Bible and say, ‘I promise to, ah, I promise to dedicate myself in prayer and good actions to receive super powers from God, to use the powers always for good, and never to tell other people what we’re doing here, or how we got our powers.’”

“Would we wear masks and have alter egos?”

“I don’t know yet. We’ll just swear what I said first. Unless you don’t want to?”

Darin looked at the gold twist-o-flex watchband on Doug’s wrist. He always wore it with the crystal on the back of his wrist. That was cool. And his big silver garrison belt buckle was cool too. You could take it off and use it like brass knuckles if you were ever attacked.

“What time is it Doug?”

He glanced at the back of his wrist. “I forgot to wind my watch. It’s half past a freckle.”

All was silent in the little tree house. “Well, O.K. let’s swear and see if God will do it, and I have to get home.” Doug repeated the words, and they swore on the massive Bible, one at a time, and Darin imagined a wizard-bearded St. Peter making a copy of the oath in another great book in heaven, far above the gray edged clouds.

“God *will* do it,” Doug said. “That’s the thing. You have to have faith.”

Along with prayers to God, the boys prayed to the Virgin Mary, because the sisters at school always said that she had the

power to intercede for us, and just as Christ had performed his first miracle at Canaan for her, they felt that He would perform for her the miracle they requested. Darin also copied down a prayer in *The Treasury of Saint Anthony*, the one that his mother had always read to her father when he was dying. "Saint Anthony is a powerful saint for your intentions," his enfeebled grandfather had told him.

School was winding down for the year. Helen told Darin that she would be going out to her family's camp at Little Island Pond for most of the summer, and a burning jealousy stirred in his heart against the boys at the lake who would swim with her, and frolic in the water, and sit with her by campfires at night, or lounge on a wooden float set on empty drums, and anchored to the sandy bottom. He imagined all this from what he'd heard of summer camps. His favorite fantasy was that God would grant him super powers, and that he would be able to save Helen, darting from the sky to pluck her from a sinking vessel, or from among thugs bent on harming her. He would tear off through ether, holding her, silent and proud, while she sobbed gratefully, clutching his neck.

He always grew sad and thought of Helen when he heard The Happenings on the radio singing:

*Have a good time, but remember
There is danger in the summer moon above
Will I see you in September
Or lose you—to a summer love?*

The mission on which he had embarked with Doug distracted him from these troubling thoughts. He and Doug lit candles in the cool stillness of the downstairs church in the afternoon, and mumbled vivid prayers before the mystical intelligence of the tabernacle. Darin imagined the prayers rising; those that were half hearted or said without complete faith and attention broke apart and fell like spent fireworks earthward, while the true prayers rose all the way to heaven as fiery messengers bearing their request to God in the company of the glorious saints along with the words *Ask and ye shall receive*.

Often, the boys tested themselves, to see whether some trace of super power was penetrating their bodies. They jumped into the air, straining skyward, hoping to feel a sudden surge of power that would break the chains of gravity and allow them to hover, glide, or even levitate for an instant. And they could almost begin to imagine how it would be; they could almost feel it.

Doug's mother made peanut butter and jelly sandwiches, and they brought them up to the tree house in the book bag with two Moxies and the transistor radio. Donovan sang: *Superman and Green Lantern ain't got nothing' on me*, and the boys smiled, feeling that Donovan was singing that song for them. "Sunshine Superman."

*Cause I've made my mind up,
You're going to be mine,
I'll tell you right now
Any trick in the book now baby
Well that I can find*

Darin thought of Helen out at the pond in golden sun, never suspecting the trouble portent in her future or how she would be saved by the boy that wouldn't cry for Sister Bernard, though she would not recognize him at first, or maybe even for a long time. I know a beach now baby, where it never ends....

"I saw Donovan on the Merv Griffin show," Darin said.

"Yeah, you told me," Doug responded. He looked up from his *Justice League of America* comic. "Who do you think would win a race," he asked, "between Superman and The Flash?"

"I think it would be The Flash, because that's his specialty. That's his only power."

"But if Superman was flying, and The Flash was running, Superman would win—obviously."

Darin was thinking how Superman was invulnerable and protected from the intense heat generated by super speeds, but The Flash was protected by the special material in his suit, which is why it had to cover his head too. Superman's suit was special too, because it was made from the material in which he had arrived from Krypton, a baby swaddled in blankets inside

the tiny rocket—fired toward earth by his desperate parents who were unable to escape with him from their erupting, crumbling planet. But if the material was impervious to blade or flame, how had it been cut and sewn on earth to make the Superman suit? Well, those heroes weren't real, but it should be logical, because it was all possible, and if he and Doug were granted super powers by God, they would have to find someone to make some special suits. When they had finished their sandwiches, Doug pulled two pieces of Bazooka from his pocket and tossed one over to Doug. The government probably had scientists who could do it because they would see that he and Doug could help America, and they would—only since their powers came from God they couldn't kill anyone, not even for America. Superman wouldn't either—that was his code of honor.

They passed the day in idle speculation and earnest fantasy. They painted a sign in Doug's garage for the tree house that read, "The Tree Fortress Keep Out," and nailed it up in the shade of maple boughs. Before Darin went home later in the afternoon, Doug said that they had to pray harder, and also they should give up candy as a sacrifice. He looked at Darin out of his dark eyes and confided, "It will be soon, if we believe, Darin."

The earth was only that small globe in the hand of Christ in the chapel, and it turned with all its people, and the summer moved along in the drone of cicadas and sometimes in the late afternoon the sky held its breath and the world grew dark, as they said it did after Christ was crucified, and then thunder cracked the sky and rolled along the Merrimack Valley, and they took refuge in Doug's garage, and Doug always said, "God is bowling." Sometimes Darin had to mow his lawn, or vacuum the stairs—scattered chores that provided the small, irregular allowance that came in loose change and the odd dollar from his father's pocket. With it he bought comic books and Black Raspberry cones at Burbeck's Ice Cream—the simple but delicious necessities of a ten-year-old boy—but as July wound out Doug said that they would have to give up ice cream too, and even say rosaries in the tree house. In the succeeding days, Darin pulled the smooth

black beads between his fingers, while he and Doug recited the sorrowful mysteries and the joyful mysteries and the glorious mysteries and still nothing happened, and Darin was beginning to suspect, to believe in one corner of his heart or mind that nothing ever would happen, that God would not give them super powers.

Sitting on the porch with his grandfather, Doug asked him if he'd read about superheroes when he was a boy. He chuckled and leaned forward on the bumpy black cane he carried and said, "My heroes were Robert Emmet, Wolf Tone, Thomas Davis. Did you read the book I gave you?"

"Some of it," Darin said.

"If you don't read, boy, you don't know," he said gravely, tapping the knob of his cane lightly on Darin's head. "This Superman you young people are wild about is no hero at all though, that I can tell you."

"What do you mean? He's the greatest hero ever!"

"That's a lot of codology, Darin, and I'll tell you why. He can't be killed and he can't even really be hurt. That means he can't be brave, because you don't need courage when you're safe, do you?" Darin looked into his blue, sunken eyes and heard his raspy voice. "Read the book I gave you."

The old man looked up into the trees around the porch and said:

We've heard your haughty summons and this is our reply

We are United Irishmen—we'll fight until we die.

And they did, Darin, they did. Heroes risk death, like your own father did in the last war. And Doug Sidewick's father was on the beach at a place called Iwo Jima—look it up if you want to know about heroes. A lot of those young men, some who came around here when they were your age—they never came back from France and Holland, or the Pacific. They died there, Darin. Not when they were old like me, but when they were young and had life before them. They stood in the gap with their poor mortal bodies, see. And now they're sending the boys off to Indochina."

His grandfather's voice was sad and serious, and the words sunk into his soul, as he imagined the young boys and their poor mortal bodies tossed on stretchers and thrown in graves so far from Lowell. A bird landed on the railing. They always came when Papa was out because he fed them every day. "A robin," Darin said.

"A robin you say? I'd call that a thrush." Darin listened to the way he said that word: therrush. They watched the bird for a moment hopping along the railing, cocking its head at them, but Papa started to cough, and the bird flew.

Later, in the stillness of his room, Doug lay on his bed rereading an old *Batman* until his mother came in to kiss him good night, and he threw the comic book on the floor and turned the light off. He was surprised at the speed with which his doubts had grown to conviction. And then Papa had even made him wonder if a superhero could be a hero at all. There really wasn't much room between a small doubt and complete disbelief. The phosphorescent statue of the Virgin Mary on his bureau glowed in silent tenderness, but he did not pray to Mary to intercede with his request, only to help him to make Doug see that it was no use, and that he should stop begging God to do what He would not do. God performed miracles in the old days, but not much anymore, and not this kind of miracle.

The night was humid, and Darin drifted off along the hum of the window fan, which seemed in his sleep to become the roaring flight of a dozen superheroes charging in a blur of color above him. But a light from above shattered the sky like glass and a voice that was the voice of all power filled the heavens. "There can be only God!" Darin stood in some high place, watching the heroes, Superman, Hawk Man, Wonder Woman and all the Justice League, tumbling toward the trembling earth, their power broken, their faces drawn in comic book frames, terror stricken, mouths gaping -screaming in the shock of an encounter with a power so far beyond all theirs combined. And he saw them crash around him, dead and crumpled, their bodies charred and smoking. When he awoke he saw the luminous

statue of Mary, a pale dot in the darkness, and he buried his head in the pillow.

Ginger whined a greeting as Darin ambled into Doug's back yard. "Up here," his friend called from The Tree Fortress. Darin hopped on the wobbly ladder and pulled himself into the tree, ascending through its branches to the green sanctuary.

"Where were you, Darin? It's almost three o'clock."

"My parents brought us all over to my cousin's house. They got a new baby, and everyone had to say how cute he is an' all that." He noticed Doug's book bag on the floor, and the massy Bible on top of it.

"Listen, Darin. I gotta show you something." He picked up the Bible, put it on his knees, and began to search through it. "I asked God for a sign, an' I said 'I'm going to open up to any page at random, and give me a sign on that page,' and look, ah shoot, I marked it off somewhere... anyway, it said, the page I turned to said *The spirit of the Lord shall come upon thee, something, and thou shalt be turned into another man.* And also I found in John's Gospel..."

Doug said, "Darin I don't know if you're supposed to be usin' the Bible that way... I don't know..."

"What do you mean? I'm only reading what it says. It's supposed to talk to you about your intentions and God's will."

"But—I don't know." He had to say it, but he didn't know how to say it to Doug. "I don't think—I don't know—I wonder if it's gonna be God's will, really, to turn us into superheroes. I've been thinking. I don't really believe it anymore."

Doug put the Bible down carefully and stood up. He turned away from Darin and looked out over the neighborhood. A pulsating clatter gathered in the distance. A B&M train was approaching along the tracks below, heading west. "More powerful than a locomotive," Darin thought to himself. Doug was quiet, and Darin hoped that he too would admit that he had doubted the power of their prayers or the willingness of God, and they could go back to the way they had been before all this, and enter fifth grade with it all behind them, and get Sister

Francis St. Michael for a teacher because everyone said she was nice, and maybe Helen would like him anyway if he was strong and good, even if he weren't a hero.

But when Doug turned to Darin his face was not calm and accepting, but red and twisted. "You promised to pray with faith," he said. "You swore on the Bible! And now you say..."

"I'm sorry, Doug, really. I just don't think it will happen, and... I'm tired of it."

"You don't think so? You doubt - you think God made up this stuff He said? Why would the Bible say that if it's not true? Only people have no faith, that's the only reason miracles don't happen. That's the only reason. But I have faith."

"I'm sorry Doug. I just don't think it's gonna happen."

"Then quit. You're gonna be sorry. It'll be too late for you!" Darin was shocked at the violence of Doug's manner. He was getting scared because Doug was almost in tears, and he had never seen him cry before.

"What would you do," Doug cried, "if I leaped out of this tree house right now, and I flew?"

"Doug, that won't happen. Don't even think about that."

"That's why we never got the super powers, because you need to show you have faith, and then you shall be another man. That's why—that's why they say a leap of faith! You have to prove you have faith!" Doug turned and stood at the edge of the platform, where there was no railing. The train rumbling by behind the fence shook the tree itself, and Darin's voice was almost lost in its iron clanging as he shouted, "Doug! No! It's not true!"

He saw Doug's body in a diver's crouch, and lunged at him with outstretched arms as Doug launched himself into the air. Darin's hand touched the back of his shirt, but there was nothing to grip, and Doug flew out into the air and for an instant Darin thought he might really fly as his body shot straight out from the tree house, and then he disappeared. He didn't know whether Doug screamed, nor did he ever hear the heavy thud of his landing because it was all lost amid the clamor of the train and his own screaming cry.

“Mr. Liston is a Lieutenant in the police, and he has to write a report on this terrible incident. Can’t you tell him something?” his father asked, his mouth set in that way that made his jaw look square; his blue eyes looked into his own.

“Let me talk to him a minute,” said Lieutenant Liston. He was a big gray haired man. He had known his father from when they were kids. They played together as he and Doug had done. “Look, son. We know you two were real close, and this is very hard for you. You didn’t do anything wrong. We don’t think that. We just need you to tell us what you saw, or what the young man said, just to see if we can throw any light on the... the accident. That’s all.”

Darin was quiet. He seemed almost to be holding his breath, and his father clasped one of his hands in his and said, “Darin, answer Mr. Liston if you can.”

“Just out of curiosity,” the Lieutenant continued, “why did he have the Bible up there? Was he reading the Bible?”

“He showed me the names of his grandparents and everything—it’s in the front of the book. It’s old writing.” Darin wondered if Doug’s parents would fill in the date beside Doug’s name now. *Douglas Sidewick 1955-1966.*

“Oh, I see. Because we had a case about five years ago where some boys made a pact, and they swore on the Bible to keep it secret. You didn’t do anything like that?”

“No. I don’t know what happened. He just tried to jump to a higher branch I think. I wasn’t looking, and there was a train. And then I looked and he was gone. That’s all I know. I’m sorry.” He had sworn and he could never tell—never, never, never. And even if he could, what adult would understand? Tears rolled over his burning cheeks and he buried his head in his hands. His father and the Lieutenant walked to the door and spoke for a while there in low tones, and then his father called, “You can go to bed, Darin. Don’t forget to say your prayers, and I’ll be up to tuck you in.”

His mother had baked some cookies and brought them over to Doug’s parents’ house, with a mass card. Doug was dead and his mother had plates of cookies and mass cards with crosses and

angels. Darin thought about Doug's parents standing there with a plate of cookies and Doug gone, and a new date in the book beside his name, and his eyes burned with tears. He heard his father's steps on the stairs and a shaft of wan light cut across the room as he opened the door. He sat down on the edge of the bed, drawing his hand over his jaw, thinking, and said, "It's rough, Darin. You lost your best friend. But he's in heaven. Oh, Doug is all right, believe me. He's all right. He's in a better place. For us, though, it's hard. It's a test of our faith, Darin." His father kissed him and said, "Goodnight, son."

Darin choked out a good night and lay in the dark, shaking. God was always testing us, they said. Why? Couldn't God look into our souls and see what we were made of? Didn't He make us? Suddenly he threw back the covers and stumbled across his room. He took the luminescent Mary from his bureau and shook it, crying. He opened his drawer, stuffed the bright figure under some sweaters, and closed the drawer again. He looked toward the ceiling, and trembling with rage, he whispered, "Doug tested *your* word! He tested *you*! He tested you, and *you failed! You failed! You failed!*"

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