

## *Safe*

This is it—your tenth birthday. The single digits trail behind you. The one on your left and the zero on your right serve as a gateway into a world that stretches long before you. It goes past where I am all the way to Great Grandma’s upper stratum of triple digits. You are eager to step across that threshold.

I hope I’ve taught you that there are risks worth taking. The world opens up and yields its treasures to those who chip away at their fears. Sometimes, however, we stumble and fall. You might want to avoid the embarrassment and pain. But when you stand up again, the world suddenly looks different. And that is its own reward.

Ten years ago, I thought I was prepared for your arrival. I had 8 ½ months to get used to a swelling belly and inner jostling. When I turned left, you poked right. When I bent over, you, in protest, pushed out. When I needed rest, you danced a jig.

We were 2-in-1. I felt a safe belonging in our union. Adjusting meant running slower and choosing between two pairs of pants.

Then, coming down a road of dirt and snow, I fell, and your coming was made imminent. As I watched my water pour into the dirt and snow, I knew your home was drained, and you’d be clawing to escape. This singular flood carried us both on a current of cars and hospitals beds. The white, calm urgency of gowned strangers yielded you, tiny and bright. You were all head and torso, your arms and legs jerking in the unfamiliar space. Then, swaddled, you knew, somehow, you were safe.

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I was unprepared for your power over me, even in your innocence. We were now 1-in-2, connected through suckle and the closeness of our beating hearts.

You revealed yourself by signing all the important things in your world: light, milk, bird, fan, clock. I learned to look again and find the tiny clock on the shelf or the quiet fan in the corner. I wore holes in the knees of my jeans trying to see the world from your perspective.

Your muscles and bones grew to hold you up and support your wanderings. Together, we meandered on and off trails. We trudged up hills. Pointing downhill, you lifted your elbows for steering as you went, with legs churning, careening around turns. Occasionally, you crashed and sprawled. After a moment, you picked yourself up. I was there to dust the dirt off you.

Three weeks ago I was on a morning run. My legs have carried me up and over mountains; my feet have negotiated rocks and rubble. And yet, on the side of a road covered in a mere inch of snow, my ankle gave way, and I fell. This fall was without a flood; instead, a dry cracking of bone. I curled up small and pleaded for help. Strangers gently carried me. A car, a phone call, a medical team assembled, and I floated through it all.

I was shaking, lying on a bed. My foot was trying to secede from me and I had to look away. Drugs opened a gap in my mind. When I looked again I was swathed and blanketed and then, after surgery, swathed and blanketed again. I knew I was safe.

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The next day you came and sat close, hugging me without squeezing. You patted my splinted leg as if it could break again. Our heartbeats were close. I could relax and smell your wild boy hair. It was sharper and less sweet than the baby scent of ten years ago. I drank it in like medicine.

Now, on your birthday, you are dancing another jig for the whirlwind of boys about to descend on our house. And me, I'm walking slowly, like it's the first time, on my tripod of aluminum and blue plaster cast. A wrinkle in a rug or a mislaid toy could bring me down. You check on me, and, even in your humming, skipping anticipation, you go and fetch me pillows.

When the eight boys arrive, you rename yourself "Mr. Decade-O" and wear your jingling Christmas tree hat. Are you afraid the others might laugh? That has never tripped you up. Today and every day you show me more of your true self, stunning and strange.

I hover at the party's edge and help with details, but mostly I watch and listen. Like when you taught me to look again, the stillness of the last weeks has taught me to hear again. I can mute the internal dialogue and concentrate on you. You are at that ten-year-old intersection of growing knowledge, while still holding a belief in impossible things. The place where ridiculous and awesome mean the same thing. You and your friends take that journey, marked by dumb jokes and rough-and-tumble joy, together.

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In the next decade, we'll both have our assorted falls. I won't be able to catch you. You'll bruise your knees and your ego. Maybe even need a rescue. But rise up, we will. I have learned there is beauty in the scarred and imperfect. And, believe me, you'll see past fear when you realize that a stumble is just that. You are still safe in this world.