**A Place For Ethan**

Car…brakes…?

*Car…breaks…*

Car brakes…squealing…?

*Car…breaks…me…*

Car… panic stop…look up from dishes in the sink…who screamed?

*Car…breaks…me…Mommy…*

Ethan not in the driveway…?

*Mommy! car…hurts…have to tell Mommy…*

To the side door…yell his name…scream drowns me out…not Ethan…please?

*Try talk…can’t…*

No, it’s Ruth…neighbor…that’s who screamed…wait, who’s that?

**Damned phone never stops. Who’s that? How am I going to ever finish this schedule? Why does Kathleen look so…is she sick? What? Maggie said what?**

Bicycle broken in the street…Ethan there…cheek soft against the rough pavement…

*Sleepy now…Mommy…*

No time to blame myself…plenty of time for that later...again and again, until Jacob says if I don’t leave it be it’ll kill us both…

**What? Okay, okay. Calm down Maggie, I’ll be right there. I’ll meet you in the Emergency room. Jesus H…! How did this happen? Where are my keys?**

*Sleepy…nice…ladies in white so nice…*

So what if it did kill us, what difference would that make? Without Ethan what would we be? Two people. Empty house. Why would we want that? But he’s right, what happened is done. What’s done is done. Done, but somehow never over.

**Still in your jacket, you shithead. Go back and get it. Waste some more time, why don’t you! No, no, I can drive. Don’t worry, Kathleen. Really, I can drive myself. Be sure to tell her if she calls back that I’m on my way, just a little delayed.**

Things done are supposed to be in the past…things done are supposed to go away…but that sound, him lying there, those never go away. I thought he didn’t know how to ride that bike, Jacob! You said he couldn’t with the training wheels off, but he did. He got on and rode it down that driveway and I couldn’t stop him. I never thought…and now this thing that is supposed to be in the past won’t leave. How is it that some things that happen, happen forever? How can something that’s already happened never stop happening?

**Jesus! This can’t be happening. I refuse to believe it. I’ll get there and it will be a mistake. It’ll be some other kid but because of the confusion Maggie thought it was Ethan. Ah, who am I kidding? A mother knows her own child. Oh God, how can a day be nothing special, nothing different and then turn upside down just like that? How can your life turn on a fucking dime? God, let him still be alive when I get there. Don’t leave Maggie alone to bear that, God. Don’t you dare! If you do I’ll make you pay, God, do you hear me? I will make you pay! God, can you hear me?**

*Bed big…everything white…Bertie with me now, soft…can’t hold him, hands not working…no talk, no move, Mommy says…car breaks me lots of places Mommy says…*

Odd how the hospital stay turned out to be the good time when we looked back on it. A time with hope for more, a time with others in charge, taking care of him, giving us the calm of their confidence. We stood as they swirled around us talking in words we didn’t understand. The language of experts, the secret language of certainty, of knowing what comes next and how to deal with it, no matter what.

*Captain Kangaroo talking…I’ll be a GoodBee Cap’n…Don’t cry Mommy…it be alright…want to say…think words, can’t say...now Ethan sad too...lady wipes my face…lady crying too.*

**Head home to check on the house…a little breakfast and back, then Maggie can leave and get some rest…sleeping in that chair doesn’t count…have to spend time in your own bed. Approaching the house everything looks quiet, no one stirring at 5:30 in the morning. Don’t look at the spot! Can’t help it. It’s right in front of the driveway…look but don’t look as I turn in…nothing on the asphalt…someone hosed it off...or didn’t he bleed much? Impossible…back of his head split open…scalp wounds always bleed out…someone did it for me…bike gone too…bet it was Harry…kind, old Harry.**

*Mommy…always here…here when sleep…here when not sleep.*

Ethan in the bed so big with the rails up looks like a baby in his crib. Jacob is crying in a corner of the room. I don’t hear any sound, but I see his hand covering his face and his shoulders going up and down, so I know. Talking to my mother on the phone, “Mom, stop. Listen to me. I have to go now. Jacob needs me.” I say it twice and then go to sit on the arm of the chair to comfort him but have no words. There’s nothing the walls of this room haven’t heard ten times already in the past eight days. All I can do is put a hand on his shoulder and squeeze. I know that family conference upset him.

**Doctors think they know it all, but they don’t. Maybe they’re right. Maybe Ethan will never walk or talk again. Maybe his brain is damaged beyond repair. But then again, maybe not. Doctors think they know it all, but one thing they don’t know is me. Us. They don’t know us. Maybe they’re right. Maybe Ethan will never be anything more than a body in a wheelchair, just a body and a vacant expression, but he’s family, and we don’t leave family behind, and no one’s going to put my boy in some institution. Not on my watch.**

*Now I sit in chair and people push me…the big wheels and the little wheels…hands work but wheels too big…can’t do like big people do…still no words come when I think won’t come out I get mad shake my head to say no or make a noise…once I laugh and Mommy strange…laugh cry same time…*

**Damn! This is the best chair they make and I can’t get it to fold down flat to fit in the trunk? Goddamn it how does it go? Son of a bitch cost 750 bucks and now it’s gonna fight me? Hell if it will. Ugghhh! Got it! What’s the chance I’ll remember how I did this the next time?! Why can’t they make these things simple!**

Goodness but that wheelchair is heavy! If Jacob can’t handle it how am I supposed to? Why didn’t he find one that I can use without him? I feel helpless enough as it is. When the visiting nurses come to check on Ethan, I stand around watching them change his bandages and check his range of motion. It makes me so nervous, waiting for them to tell me if he’s better or worse. He just flops there in that chair, can barely move his head back and forth and only makes those terrible grunting sounds and God if it really is hopeless then maybe they were right. Maybe there is a better place for him. God. I wish I knew the right thing.

- Jacob, the nurse said his range of motion was a little better today, and she said his hand strength is better too. She said if we keep taking him to rehab he may not be able to walk but he could become strong enough to handle his own wheelchair someday. I don’t believe that. I have enough trouble with it myself, and I’m a grown woman. How’s he ever supposed to be strong enough to do it?

- Maggie, be patient. He’s only eight years old. With the proper treatment he still has time to grow and he’ll be big enough to do it someday. Until then, it’s up to us, kiddo. Nobody but us. This is *our* problem now, nobody else gives a shit what happens to him.

- You have to calm yourself, Jacob. You’re going to screw up your heart rhythms again if you don’t calm down. Don’t you *dare* think about dying and leaving me alone to deal with this. Ethan and I would be lost without you, don’t you know that?

- For God’s sake let it be, Maggie, and let me be. I’m going out to the garage.

*Scared when they talk loud…it’s me…me why Daddy angry so much…*

**At least here I can get some peace. Turn the radio on to the Big Band station; keep it low in case Maggie needs help to move Ethan. Look at all this stuff. How the hell does it accumulate so fast? Won’t be able to park the car in here soon. Well, there’s one thing I can get rid of. Even if I could straighten the frame I know Ethan’s never going to ride it again. Look at this pathetic piece of crap! Does this brake even work? Is that why he ended up in the street? And what the fuck, Maggie, why weren’t you watching him more closely! Why, Maggie? Why?**

Jacob’s talking of moving. Again. Says this place has too many bad memories. We’ve only been here four years, but I know what he means. Does he think the memories will go away if we do? Maybe if we move then he will forgive me. I’m afraid to ask but I know he hasn’t forgiven me. How *can* he? I wouldn’t. I mean, I don’t. Won’t. Ever. Maybe we should move. Maybe that would help somehow. If we moved, and if we go someplace where no one knows us, where no one knows that I let it happen, where no one knows that we used to be happy? They’ll just think we’re a family that keeps to itself. That wouldn’t be so strange. Then we wouldn’t have to watch Ruth’s boys tearing around the neighborhood, or the Davis girls ride their bikes up and down the street. We wouldn’t be surrounded by all the things Ethan used to do. Maybe that would help. Anything better than this.

- I’ve got it all worked out on paper here, Maggie, take a look. If we take this much out of Ethan’s settlement and this from savings, we could afford a bigger house when we move up to Jamestown. It would be a ranch instead of a two-story, and it would be set up so that Ethan could move around inside in his chair, or in the scooter I’m going to buy him. I didn’t tell you about that. They have these scooters that can go around inside a house, and you only need one hand to steer ‘em. If his therapy works and he gets a little bit better he could do it. They cost a couple thousand, but that would come out of the settlement too.

- And what’ll you do for a job, Jacob? We can’t just go off willy-nilly and hope for the best.
 - Got that covered, Maggie. Bendex Supply is buying us out, and they have an office in Jamestown that has room for me. I won’t make quite as much, least not to start, but it’ll be enough to get us going. What do you say?

- And this house you say will be bigger and perfect for Ethan? How do we know we can find one like that in Jamestown?

- That’s the beauty of it, kiddo. We build it ourselves! We build it how *we* want it to be, and it’ll be perfect for him. It’ll have wide hallways and doors and ramps everywhere and a special bathroom. It’ll be perfect for him. For us.

**Thank goodness she trusts my judgment on this. I know it’s a big change for her, but we need to do this. For Ethan. For us. I think it’ll make a difference. Get us out of this place. People try to help, but sick of their kindness, of sympathetic looks. I don’t know what’s worse, those looks or the turning away as we approach. Nah, this place is no good anymore. Not with me pissed off all the time and Maggie so quiet. If we change it up maybe we’ll get through this. And he’ll get better. I know he will. The doctors say he’s stable now, going to live a long time. If we don’t figure out a way to have some kind of life, we’ll be in trouble. For a long time.**

*Daddy has new chair for Ethan…so big…big motor in back. Daddy says Ethan can drive when older. Soon, Daddy says. Have to work with the ladies, Daddy says, then Ethan can drive new chair. Makes Ethan laugh to think of it…Ethan laugh, Daddy laugh.*

- Daddy?

- Did you hear that, Maggie? He spoke and I could understand! He said “Daddy”. I swear he did. Come here and listen. Ethan, say it again, what you said!

- Jacob, are you sure? Were you just thinking it or did he really say it?

- Maggie, I’m telling you. I heard him. Go on, Ethan, say it again. Who am I? Who am I, Ethan?

- You…Daddy, Daddy…you Daddy…you Mommy!

- Oh Jacob, my god how did you do that? Ethan, how did you do that?

- You Mommy…Mommy Daddy!

- I don’t know, Maggie, but after I showed him how the chair worked and promised him he could drive it he started to laugh, and then all of a sudden he came out with it. I can’t believe it! Maybe he’s going to be all right after all! I mean, I know that’s what I’ve been saying all along but I’m not sure I believe it. Believed it, I mean. Maybe we *will* get our old Ethan back, Maggie.

**This house is exactly what we needed - a fresh start. New house, new neighbors. New place for Ethan to get better. The Jamestown rehab facility seems so much better. I’m sure they’ll make a difference. Now that Ethan is talking again I know he’ll make progress. Now he can tell us how we can help make him better. Now I know there’s a chance for him to be normal again. And those doctors wanted us to institutionalize him!**

Poor Jacob. He just won’t face it. Is he stupid or stubborn or what? How can a man who is so logical in everything he does not see the truth in front of his face? I thought men were supposed to be the practical ones, but he keeps thinking that if he does that one more thing it’ll be the magical answer. The new chair, the new town, the new house, the new rehab facility. He won’t face the truth. Nothing is going to make Ethan what he was. He’s never going to be the son we had, or the one he wants. Ethan’s never going to play catch with him in the backyard, or go swimming with him in the ocean, or help him fix something around the house, or stand up on stage to get his diploma, or bring a girl home from the prom, or…anything, I guess. Jacob can do all the figuring and planning and moving things around that he wants. It’s not going to change the reality of who Ethan is, and who he’ll never be. All we can do is our best to make Ethan safe and happy in the life left to him. We can’t make a miracle from nothing. We have to accept what is.

*Room… perfect…go in and out…can go everywhere now…Mommy happy new house…Daddy not happy…why?*

**Can’t believe it’s been three years here already. Neighborhood is great, but too many kids. They treat Ethan okay. Even let him join in whenever they can, in a limited sort of way. And the parents talk to him like he was a normal kid. Being kind, they think, but it hurts. Reminds me that he hasn’t made much progress. Talking more, but he’s plateaued. He is who he’ll always be. Never like these other kids. They’ll be going off on dates, driving cars, playing sports. Maybe we’re lucky—won’t have to sit up waiting for him to come home, hoping he hasn’t been drinking and driving, normal things that kids do.**

It’s obvious he’s depressed, but he’d deny it if I asked. Afraid to get near him with that look on his face. Doesn’t spend much time in that workshop downstairs. Once he put the last touches on this house he seemed to lose interest in it. In anything.

*Daddy bought me record player…for just me…nobody else…Daddy puts records on…Ethan can push the buttons to make them go…can listen anytime I want now…my record player…only for me.*

I did it. He didn’t blow up or say no, so it wasn’t as bad as I thought it would be. I don’t think he’ll do it. He said he’d think about it. I waited until I thought he was feeling better before I said it. We certainly have the room here. That can’t be an issue. He built this house big enough, that’s for sure. He said he’d think about it. We need to do it while we’re still young enough. There isn’t much time left.

**Think she’s crazy, but you can’t say that out loud. Told her I’d think it over. It’s not that I wouldn’t want another. It’s just that…well, how do we know the same thing won’t happen again? She knows I’m afraid of that. She is too, but she still wants to go ahead. God knows I’d love to have a (forgive me, Ethan) normal child, one I could watch run and play and learn and grow up to be (forgive me, Ethan) a normal adult. But really, Maggie? Is that a risk we want to take? After all we’ve been through? Hell, if I had to do it over again I’m not sure I would have had even one. Face facts. When you add it all up, if you take all the pain and all the happiness a child brings and compared them, what would you have? If they had weight and you laid them on a scale, which way would it tip? Can’t ever say this to Maggie, but a man has the ability to face facts. Women don’t like to do that.**

Jacob says no, we don’t need another child. Says we’ll *always* have a child, so why would we need another? Ethan is a lot to take care of, I know, and he’s come as far as he can. That’s what the doctors say. This is how he’ll always be. And that’s not so bad. He’s sweet and so thankful for whatever we do, so happy to be here with us. Sometimes he gets frustrated when he sees the other kids on the block going off to play at the park, but then he goes into his room and listens to his record player and seems happy again. Never sad. I think Jacob may be getting better too. He’s been spending more time in his workshop. Built Ethan a beautiful set of bookshelves for his room – a place to keep his records.

*Ethan gots new bike!...Daddy lift me on…push…LOOK OUT!..HERE COME ETHAN!..oh-oh…ride on grass… DON’T LET GO DADDY!..he say don’t be scared…say too many wheels to tip…Ethan can ride now…he says…legs strong…don’t have to push…try harder…try harder for Daddy…Ethan wants him laugh again…*

**Doctors say Ethan is done growing. 115 pounds isn’t very big for a boy of seventeen, but stuck in that chair, it’s hard for him to get any exercise and I think his appetite suffers as a result. Probably better if he didn’t gain any more weight. Then I’d have to worry about Maggie, about how she’d be able to handle him. Help him transfer in and out of his chair, into bed, things like that. Don’t want to bring in outsiders to help, but the day may come when we don’t have a choice.**

Wrenched my back last night putting Ethan to bed. Jacob’s told me a thousand times I have to be more careful, to let him handle this, but he was down in his workshop and I didn’t want to disturb him. Now he’ll have to do it all for a while. Wonder what Ethan and I would do if Jacob weren’t here.

**I’ve come to accept that Ethan is as good as he’ll ever be. Fact is, he seems as happy as any other kid child around here. Guess ignorance, for him, really is bliss. He doesn’t remember what he was like before the accident, and he doesn’t understand what might have been. Those are things that only Maggie and I know, that we think about less often now. Somehow we’ve gotten ourselves to a good place. Days in a comfortable pattern now, something I couldn’t have imagined a few years ago.**

When I hear ladies in the neighborhood talk about what their children are up to – who’s graduating, becoming engaged, moving to take a job, whatever – it doesn’t hurt like it used to do. For the longest time they would shy away from sharing their news in front of me. I finally had to force the issue, convince them I could handle it. Maybe doing that made it easier to convince myself?

**Retirement’s official now. Can’t believe it’s been twenty years in this town already. Seems like yesterday we built this house. All the kids Ethan’s age grown and moved away. They come back to the neighborhood to visit and bring their own children now. Where did the time go?**

*Daddy stays home now…walks with me when I ride my bike…says it’s good for him and me too…he always used to beat me but now I have to slow down to let him catch up...he stops and I wait for him to rest…*

- Maggie, you know it’s not a matter of if. It’s a matter of *when*. You have to understand that ignoring it won’t make it go away.
 - I do understand that, Jacob. I’m not stupid. It’s just…I don’t like to think about it..

- Maggie. No one is saying he has to go now, but we have to plan ahead, and he’ll have to go sometime. We can’t leave it to chance. Better he move while we’re still alive to make sure it’s done proper. When we’re gone he’ll have no one to look after him. We have to make arrangements now or he’ll be left to the care of strangers. Or worse, the whim of some bureaucrat.

- I…I understand that, Jacob. Make the call. I’ll go with you to check it out. I’ll support you in whatever you decide is best.

- We’re lucky we moved up to this state, Maggie, where they take care of people like Ethan. Sometimes these taxes are worth it. They pay for the right things. If we handle this now we won’t have to worry about him when we’re both gone. He’ll be taken care of, have someone to look after him.

- I know it’s the right thing, Jacob, but it will break my heart to see Ethan go. I don’t care how well he’ll be treated. It can’t be the same as his own home. You know how much he loves his room and his records and this place.

- I understand, Maggie, but it’s got to be.

- Funny, Jacob, but I remember when my biggest fear was that Ethan wouldn’t survive the accident. Now it’s his outliving us, being alone in the world. Who’ll know enough to put fresh blueberries on his cornflakes? Who’ll clean Bertie up, or stitch him when he tears? He’s already falling apart. And who’ll tuck him in at night and turn off the light?

**I’m glad Maggie has seen the light. The group home looks very nice – new building, people friendly – and only a five-minute drive. Visiting back and forth will be easy. Now that she’s accepted the inevitability of this I have to find a way to tell her about the other.**

Did he really think he was fooling me? That I couldn’t see what was happening to him in front of my own eyes? He’s tried to hide it by wearing extra clothes, but I can see he’s losing weight. I can hear that cough in the night when he thinks I’m asleep. And *still* he smokes! Maybe if I quit he’ll get the hint. I don’t know why he just doesn’t come out and say it. I know why he was so anxious to get Ethan set up in that group home. It wasn’t about some long-term plan. It was about now. Why does he think he can fool *me*, of all people?

*Mommy says Daddy sick and I should be quiet in the house. Mommy quiet all the time and Daddy stays in bed even when not night.*

Sometimes I think Jacob was the lucky one. I *know* Jacob was the lucky one. It wasn’t him had to tell Ethan his father was gone. Wasn’t him left alone here to care for this child hiding in the body of a man. I don’t know how I’m going to manage all this, even with the aides coming in. It’s been a struggle these past few months. I’m going to have to follow up on that group home placement sooner than I thought. I put it off as long as I could. Oh Jacob, Jacob, Jacob. I don’t blame you, honey. You did the right thing. It was a hard thing, no doubt, but it was the right thing. We made a home for Ethan here as long as we could.

*Mommy says Ethan has to move to new house. There will be new friends to play with but no Mommy. She says I can take my record player. I have to take my bike too, Mommy. Can I take my bike, too?*

It was hard to tell Ethan that he had to go, that I could no longer care for him here. It was a relief the way he accepted it, was even excited about it at first. The fun of having a new room in that group home over on Angle Road. The fun of being around young people like himself, people who are…challenged, I guess is the polite term. Made him feel grown up, I think. And like I told him, I’ll come visit and he can come here to visit, and he could take Bertie with him. But then reality set in. After a week or so it hit him. This wasn’t for a little while, like a vacation. This was f*orever*. When that sank in he began to argue – with me, with the counselors, with anyone who would listen. The stories the staff told me…Ethan asking the parents of other residents to take him with them when they left, to bring him home. Home. Back to his Mommy. If only Jacob were here to help. He would know what to say to Ethan. What to say to me to make it better. He was the strongest man I ever knew, and now he’s gone, and there’s no one here but me. The counselor said not to worry, that with time Ethan will settle in. Says he sees it all the time. Just have to be patient.

- Ethan! Come in, sweetie. Come on, you remember how to drive up the ramp. You used to do it all the time. That’s okay, Gerald. He can do it. Can’t you, Ethan?

- I can do it, Mommy. Just watch me!

- No, really Gerald, he’s fine now. You can go on about your business. We’ll see you back here at two, after lunch. Unless you want to join us. You’re always welcome to join us for lunch. It’s nothing special. Grilled cheese on rye – Ethan’s favorite, don’t you know. One of the few things this tired old body can still make! No? Well, maybe next time then. See you at two. Don’t be late.

*Mommy says can’t come anymore after this time…says too big now…last time she fall down helping Ethan. Too heavy now, she says Ethan, Mommy can’t move you. Too big. Sorry so big, Mommy. Try to eat less now. Maybe then I can go home again?*

It isn’t the dying I mind so much, God, you know that by now. It’s the leaving behind. That’s hard. Leaving him behind. Like Jacob left me. He’ll always be alone now, surrounded by strangers. That was decided long ago and there’s nothing you or I can do about it now. I know that. I know what’s done is done, even if it never stopped happening inside my head. Those god-awful sounds of brakes and metal and Ruth screaming. But those will go away when I do, won’t they? A memory that doesn’t have anyplace to be, it disappears, right God? At least tell me that much is true.

*Gerald says Mommy gone now, like Daddy, and can’t visit any more…but he say she came last night when Ethan sleeping to kiss me goodbye. Gerald says Ethan doesn’t remember because sleeping. Gerald says Ethan still has family even though Mommy had to go away. Says Ethan has BIG family - Gerald family…and Terry family and Dave and Jackie and Choo-choo and even Bertie. Bertie always family. Bertie never leave me, Gerald says...Ethan never be alone...he says always a place here for Ethan and Bertie…can I play my records now Gerald?.*