

The Tribulations of Uncle Ned

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I got back in the car and banged my head against the steering wheel until I saw stars. *If I could just make myself pass out.* I always thought I'd be a bigger man during a time like this, whatever that means. I'd fancied myself the unexpected, hiding hero. Instead, I was sitting in the parking lot at the veterinarian's office, wondering how hard I'd have to slam into oncoming traffic to become nothing more than a skid mark on the four-lane highway.

When you become a parent, they say instinct kicks in, that you know what to do when it comes to your children.

That's why I never had kids.

I knew years ago, even as a teenager, that the paternal gene was missing. I should not, would not, be relied on by other humans, especially small, defenseless ones. I was happy to leave the offspring department to my older sister, Liz. She was a phenomenal mom until she died and left her son behind.

It was Liz and Peter's twelfth anniversary and first trip without the kid, driving through the Adirondacks, where the roads were a little too icy. They hadn't even made it to the hot tub and complimentary champagne in their cozy cabin before a semi ran head on into their SUV and sent them over the side of a mountain.

I often got pissed, wondering why one of them didn't somehow jump from the car or try harder to survive. Instead they'd left Jeremy orphaned—well, in my care, which was as good as orphaned. I'd managed to keep my nephew alive and functioning for the past eight months without any major mishaps.

Until this morning.

The morning had started like any other: I dropped Jeremy off at school, then went home to get ready for work. Thirty minutes later, I climbed into the Camry, threw my shitty brown-bagged

lunch on the passenger's seat, put the gear shift in reverse, backed out of the garage, and felt a sickening thud under my back tires.

I'd accidentally hit Jamie.

Jamie was the commemorative dog I'd bought Jeremy because I didn't know how to fill the void of his parents. He was a chocolate lab with big floppy ears and a tail that almost never stopped wagging. He slept at the foot of Jeremy's bed.

I'd racked my brain for things an eight-year-old boy cared about more than a chocolate lab he'd pretty much named after himself, but came up empty. Jeremy liked me all right, but I was a stain on his Batman underwear compared to that dog. I sighed now, thinking that Jamie had never quite mastered playing dead.

The dog was in the back seat of my car. I snuck a peek at him and willed him to breathe, my heart beating faster when he wouldn't. His limp tail turned my stomach. I looked away, called my accounting firm and told them I wouldn't be coming into work today.

Then I pulled out of the parking lot at the vet's office. I'd gone there to pay someone to confirm, yes, Jamie was dead, and no, he could not be brought back to life. Fuck.

You know who'd know what to do in this situation? My sister. That made me even angrier. The car crash I'd never seen played on repeat in my head, getting more gruesome with each take. I imagined Liz's last breath and wondered for the thousandth time if she'd been afraid. I thought about the pact we made as kids, after Mom and Dad died, that we'd never leave each other. Liz was my person. She kept me in one piece. Now bits of her were strewn all over a mountainside.

When I was a kid, I had a stutter. It was the kind of stutter where you could boil a pot of water, sip a leisurely cup of coffee, maybe even bust out some crumpets, before I'd squeak out the single sentence that was stuck in my mouth. Liz spotted the problem first, and she became my voice in some kind of unspoken agreement. I was happy to smile and nod while Liz spoke for both of us,

which is why it took our parents a while to realize I had a speech impediment that wasn't going away on its own.

If you're a kid with a stutter, you don't have to look far to find someone willing to make fun of you for it. I would have considered "kindergarten bully" an oxymoron until I found myself on the catcher's end of his vitriol. Bud Pobble was his name. He'd gather a crowd at recess and make a big show of lobbing questions at me. At first I tried to respond, not realizing a stutter was cause for embarrassment. After a few months, I quit answering him, and then stopped speaking altogether. When Liz got wind of what was going on, she showed up one day, answered Bud's question on my behalf, then socked him in the stomach and dragged me away. She wasn't the hiding hero type.

After leaving the vet, I drove to the first place that came to mind, the dental office of Steve Sands. I yanked open the glass door and stepped inside, itching to get out of the sunlight. There was something terrible about a dead dog in your backseat on a sunny day. I hoped he wouldn't start rotting out there.

Steve's assistant ushered me to his office. My balding friend from high school was one of two dentists in our small New Hampshire town. I sat down in the chair opposite him. "I need some advice."

"Morning to you too, Ned." Steve put down the file he'd been reading.

"I hit my nephew's dog with my car this morning and he's dead and I don't know what to do."

"Jesus." Steve grimaced. "Where's the dog?"

"In the backseat of my car."

"Why the fuck would you leave a dead dog in the back of your car?"

"I don't know what to do with him!"

"What do you mean you don't know what to do with him? Go bury him! Do not leave a carcass in the back of your car in my parking lot."

“I thought Jeremy might want to see him before I bury him. I don’t know, is that bad for kids? Or would it give him closure?”

“I don’t know why the hell you’re sitting in my office talking about closure when there’s a dead animal in your car. What do I know about kids? I run a dental practice. Go ask his teacher.”

I stood up and gritted my teeth. “You’re a real pal, Steve.”

He waved me away. “Sorry about the dog, man.”

I snuck into Marion Elementary School during lunchtime when I knew Jeremy wouldn’t see me. I pictured him finding a table with his friends, holding a tray full of cafeteria food. Every day, I gave him money to buy lunch instead of making it for him. I had no idea what I was supposed to feed an eight-year-old boy.

I walked into the front office. “Hi, I need to speak with Miss Jarmul, please.”

The receptionist looked the part; she wore a pink cardigan, glasses perched low on her nose, and she was peering down at me—a feat, considering she was sitting. “She’s on her lunch break.”

“This is important. I’m Jeremy Anderson’s uncle. You know Jeremy? The boy whose parents died in the car crash last year?”

It was my go-to excuse when I wanted something, and it worked every time. I could tell by the look of resentment that I’d used this exact line on this very receptionist before, though I didn’t remember doing it. Desperate times.

Miss Jarmul came out and, saint that she was, smiled when she saw me. “Hi Ned, Jeremy’s at lunch. What’s up?”

Once we were far enough away from the receptionist, I told Miss Jarmul what happened. She did her best to maintain a neutral face, but the anguish in her eyes was all too familiar. It was the only way people looked at me these days. When I finished, she took my hand and said, “It was an accident, Ned. These things happen. I think you should be honest with Jeremy when you pick him up. Maybe take Jamie back to the vet, and let Jeremy decide later whether he wants to see him one more time.”

“Liz never would’ve done this.”

“Liz was human too, Ned. She made mistakes like the rest of us. You’re doing the best you can.”

If I had a dollar for every platitude vomited my way in the last six months, I could buy a whole pet store. I thanked Miss Jarmul for her time as she guided me out the school doors, leaving me alone on the tree-lined sidewalk.

I climbed into the car and headed back to the vet, where I’m pretty sure they thought I was losing my mind for bringing them the same dead dog twice in one day. They agreed to hang onto him, and I spent the next few hours driving up and down the main street, practicing diplomatic ways to tell my nephew I’d killed his dog. By 2:30, I was a mess.

I made my way back to the school and spotted Jeremy as soon as he walked out the door. He looked like Liz—tall and lanky, not yet fitting into his body, with a halo of corkscrew blond hair. He spotted me and lit up. For the millionth time that day, I wished someone would drive rusty nails through my eyes. *I am messing up this kid’s entire life.* I waved back.

He opened the passenger door. “Hi, Uncle Ned.”

“Hey, kiddo. How was school?”

“Pretty good. I got a hundred on my math test!”

I high-fived the kid and let him bask in his glory, wondering how long I should let him have his happy Tuesday.

I tried to remember when I was eight and lost my own parents. They’d been on their way to a celebratory dinner—my dad had been promoted earlier that day—when some drunk asshole T-boned their car. My grandparents took forever to tell us what happened, so I figured it out long before they said, “Your parents are dead.” At the time, I wished they had just come out and said it. I turned to Jeremy.

“I have some pretty bad news.”

“What?” Jeremy stared at me with wide eyes.

“I had an accident with Jamie today. He got loose from the yard and ran out behind the car when I was pulling down the driveway. I didn’t even see him.” My voice cracked. The unexpected hero thing was not going well.

Jeremy thought for a minute. I barely heard his next question. “Is he gonna be okay?”

By the time I turned eight, I’d been doing speech therapy, and my stutter was going away. This meant less bullying, so my dream of blending in with the other kids was not far from being realized.

Then my parents died.

You always remember where you were at the moment tragedy strikes. Liz and I were sitting on La-Z-Boys in our grandparents’ living room, each doing our homework on table trays in front of the TV. *Scooby Doo* was playing, one of the few shows we both liked. Grandpa came in the room and turned off the TV, which I remember being pissed about because Scooby and Shaggy were close to catching the bad guy. Grandma joined Grandpa’s side, tears streaming down her face. Neither of them spoke for minutes that felt like hours. Scooby and my childhood fled the scene.

After they told us, I stopped going to speech therapy. In my childish mind, this was how I’d get back at my parents, by not going to these classes that were their idea in the first place. My grandparents were fried and what you might call lax in the months that followed, so they didn’t protest when I said I was done. My stutter got worse. It was Liz who, four months after our parents died, said I had to go back. She didn’t put a rosy spin on the situation. She just looked me in the eye during dinner one night and said, “You’re going to get made fun of for the rest of your life if you don’t do these classes. I’ll do them with you.”

True to her word, Liz went with me to every session for the next year. While I practiced my *s*’s and *r*’s, she’d sit in the corner of the room, working on her own homework and smiling every time I mastered a new word. It took months, but my speech improved and I finished therapy. I can’t remember if I ever thanked her for making me go.

Jeremy looked at me for a while, then patted my hand. There were no screams or tears. He stared out the window. I kept trying to figure out what I should say, but nothing sounded right.

After a few minutes, Jeremy turned back to me. “Can I see him one more time?” I nodded and restarted the car, glad I hadn’t buried the dog and wouldn’t have to dig him up. We headed to the veterinarian’s office.

The woman at the front desk only saw me at first. She raised an eyebrow, probably ready to make a comment about visiting three times in one day. But then she saw Jeremy, looking small and brave, which was more than I could say for myself. He approached the counter. “Hi, I’m Jeremy. I’m here to say goodbye to my dog, Jamie.” The receptionist’s lip quivered, then she nodded and led us through the double doors.

When we reached the room, there was Jamie, looking small on the big table. His brown coat still glistened. He seemed peaceful to me, but maybe that was what all dog murderers said about their victims. Jeremy walked over to Jamie and whispered in his ear, stroking his soft fur. After a while, he kissed him on the nose. I forced myself to watch; *you did this*. Jeremy straightened up and looked at me. “I’m ready, Uncle Ned.”

I scratched Jamie behind the ears and whispered my own goodbye. My nephew grabbed my hand, and we left the vet’s office without another word. In the car, I willed Jeremy to say something, but he stayed quiet. I turned to him. “Jeremy, I’m sorry. I know how much you loved Jamie.”

“It’s okay, Uncle Ned. I’m not mad.”

“But I’m the one who hit him.”

“That’s okay. Yesterday when we were playing fetch, I wished Mom and Dad could’ve met Jamie and now they can. I bet they’re playing Frisbee right now.” Jeremy settled back in his seat and smiled. I thought about what he said until the sun slid from the sky, until Jeremy whispered that he was hungry.

At home, I tossed the keys on the counter and kicked off my shoes. I flipped through the mail as I poured a cup of dog food in Jamie’s bowl, not realizing my mistake until the jingle of his collar didn’t follow the sound of the kibble hitting the tin. I shot a quick look

at Jeremy, who pretended not to notice. I threw the bowl and food into the trash, like they were on fire.

SpaghettiOs bubbled on the stove. Jeremy did his homework while I stewed in the guilt of pumping preservatives through his miniature veins. This kid was destined for the honor roll, and the closest to cooking I could manage was a PB&J. As I set the table, I played the “just me” game. What would I be doing tonight if it were just me? Drinking my dinner, for one. I’d been so busy caring for Jeremy this year, I hadn’t even gotten to mourn Liz, though I’d mastered a few parts of grief—suppressed appetite, suppressed sex drive, suppressed sense of purpose. He was a good kid, but I didn’t want him here. I wanted to be left alone. He looked up from the table, like I’d said it out loud. Sometimes I worried I did.

As the night dwindled, it came time for my least favorite part of the day, what I privately referred to as bedtime interrogation. I’m pretty sure it was Jeremy’s stall tactic, and it worked every time.

“Uncle Ned, do you like living with me?”

“Of course, buddy.” *No. Every time I look at you, Liz dies all over again.*

“Cause I could live somewhere else.”

“Don’t be silly.” *We don’t have any other relatives. I checked.*

“What was your favorite thing about my mom?”

“She always knew what to do. She took care of me.”

“What about Dad?”

“That he loved your mom so much.” *And his whiskey collection.*

“Do you miss them?”

“Every day.” *Even in the moments between breathing in and out.*

I tossed one at him. “How come you named your dog Jamie?”

“Mom and Dad said they would name my new brother or sister Jamie, and I thought my puppy could be like a little brother.”

A chill clenched my spine. “Was your mom pregnant when they went on vacation?”

Jeremy shrugged. “I don’t know. She just kept saying she liked the name Jamie.”

He trudged to the bathroom to get ready for bed while I gripped the seat of my chair, afraid to let go.

When I heard him finish brushing his teeth, I followed Jeremy into the guest-room-turned-little-boy's-bedroom, complete with cartoon sheets and posters of dogs. I hated it in here. I felt so grown up when I could finally afford a place with two bedrooms. I had friends over all the time, just to invite them to sleep in my *guest room*. Today the room served as a reminder of how stuck I was.

When Jeremy moved in, I wasn't sure if he was too old for bedtime stories. The first night I asked if he wanted me to read him something. He looked at me like I'd escaped the loony bin, so I took that as a no. These days I gave him awkward high-fives, not wanting to overdo it with a dramatic hug, but feeling that I needed to give each night some sort of closure, some victory cheer that we'd survived another day. He climbed into bed, and I teased him with the high-five/low-five bit, which got a smile out of him. I turned off his light with a "night, bud" and was about to close the door when he said, "Uncle Ned?" I paused. "You're a good uncle."

You're wrong, I thought. I turned off his light and closed the door.

Hours later I was sitting on the couch, watching episode after episode of *Orange Is the New Black*, still thinking about what Jeremy said. Had my sister been pregnant when she died? It didn't make a difference now, but I couldn't let it go. There was no room in my head for another ghost.

Liz would've told me. She told me everything. Still, did people choose names for babies that were just dreams? I had no idea.

There was an ever-growing list of things I didn't know about kids. How often did they need shots? When did they switch from baths to showers? How many hours of sleep? Who was I to choose how this kid was disciplined, what his moral compass should be? What had his parents taught him about religion? Did he believe in God? I was afraid to ask.

I tried to shake my head clear and focus on the show. It didn't matter whether Baby Jamie was real or imagined; Jeremy had gotten

his little brother anyway. I whistled and patted the couch cushion next to me, looking around the room for my late night companion.

Reality struck. It was like killing Jamie all over again. I took a nice long soak in self-pity.

I wrapped myself around a pillow, letting it be my new little spoon. I missed that twitchy tail and even his terrible dog breath. I'd brought Jamie home for me as much as my nephew, though I was just recognizing it now.

The dog was Liz's idea, of course. Her coworker had a pregnant chocolate lab and was eager to get rid of the future litter. Liz said it was the right time for a dog, that Jeremy was old enough to learn the responsibilities involved in caring for a pet. A month later, Liz died. The puppies were born the next day.

I carried out my sister's plan, like I always had. I never told Jeremy the dog was his mom's idea, although he probably figured it out. Jamie made me feel less alone in a home that was too crowded. Now he was gone, too. ∞