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In for It

by Catherine Bell

Ellie stood in the aisle with the baby on her hip. The seat belt sign was on, but she needed water, and the baby fussed if she sat down. Better fight with the stewardess than feel guilty about Sam.

"He's in the hospital," her mother had told her on the phone. "He's had a stroke, but he's coming home tomorrow."

"A stroke? He's not old enough. How old is he?"

"Only 42, but in some ways he's an old man. Because of the polio."

"I'm coming up. Why didn't you tell me?"

"I didn't want to worry you. I don't know that there's anything you can do."

"Well, I can come."

She called in sick at work. She wouldn't be monitoring the Paris peace talks until Monday. They were mired anyway. Her notes on the North Vietnamese participants were on the right end of her desk, if anyone cared to look. She called Bruce at the paper.

"I can take you to the shuttle in the morning," he said. "I'm tied up tonight. Nixon has scheduled a speech. We're going into Cambodia."

"Oh shit."

She phoned to say the baby wouldn't be coming to day care Friday. She packed and changed Mia's diaper, kissing her sweet, fat knees. The baby focused on the batik giraffe pinned to the wall, waved at it in just the same the way she was focusing now on the stewardess's face and reaching for her glasses.

"I'm sorry," Ellie said. "We're having a death in the family. My mom's brother."

"I'll bring you some water," the stewardess said. "Now you sit down and nurse that baby through the landing. If her ears pop, she won't cry."

Ellie sat, shaken. If Sam was really dying, what would she do? The last time she'd seen him was a year ago. His wife, Marilyn, had pushed the wheelchair out under the apple tree by the kitchen door of the red house, the house she'd lived in as a little girl. He'd found a drawing she'd made in kindergarten, showing the puppies born in the bathroom, three lumps of brown crayon, and the dead one, a flat brown line, smothered accidentally by the dam. He had his own kids now, and she was about to become a

mother. They had been polite. She and Sam never used to be polite.

At the airport, her parents met her in the Audi. They'd been listening to the news.

"I've never liked Nixon," her father said, "but he doesn't have a choice, with Viet Cong sanctuaries all along the Cambodian border."

"Just the excuse he wanted," Ellie said, perched on the edge of the back seat.

"He says he doesn't want a wider war."

"And you believe him?"

"There's such a thing as national pride," her mother said. "How will it look to the rest of the world if we lose a war?"

"This is a nationalist revolution," Ellie said, "not a communist takeover. We've lost already. Wouldn't it be realistic to pull out?"

Her father didn't bite. He took the long way, by the beach. The sea was flat, steel blue.

"Anyway," her mother said, "thank you for bringing the baby. It's wonderful to have young people around at a time like this."

What time was this? Ellie wondered. The end? Why weren't they talking about Sam?

He'd been in medical school when he got sick, and she was seven. She saw the picture in the paper of the glee club singing to him and him grinning, and it said how he kidded the nurses. Children weren't allowed in the hospital, but at last her mother smuggled her through the closed elevator air and smells of alcohol, between the loud walls. All she could see of Sam was his head sticking out of the iron lung. If she stood in the right place, a mirror on the end of the big enamel cylinder showed him dragging for air. He made a face at her in the mirror, a terrible face, a really bad one. If he could still make awful faces, he must still be Sam.

"How is he?" she asked now in the car.

"It'll give him a boost to see you," said her mother.

They had a hurried lunch at Grandmother and Grandfather's, salad and grilled cheese, though there was no hurry. Grandfather, a physician, had spoken to the attending doctor. The stroke had affected Sam's speech a little. Grandmother got up to talk to Marilyn on the phone.

"He's just back from the hospital. Let's leave them to themselves a while. She thinks he might be ready to see us about teatime."

What would she say? Ellie wondered. Why wasn't she close to Sam any more?

"He may do well," Grandfather said, but he looked sunk under his plaid shirt.

"Of course he will," said Grandmother. "He always has. Doctors like to be conservative. The less they say..."

"We're in new territory," Grandfather said. "We just don't know. Most people who had polio as bad as Sam's have died by now."

Mother peeled her apple, proud of getting the skin off in one piece. "I feel badly for the children. But Marilyn wanted them, of course."

"I won't hear anything against her," Grandmother said. "Nobody could take better care of Sam than she does."

"Of course not. I didn't mean... But if he'd married that doctor..."

"He couldn't have. She wouldn't give up her career. How could he have brought himself to be Mr. Patricia Jones? He shouldn't even have considered..."

"For God's sake," Father said, "it was his decision."

Ellie left Mia in her highchair gumming toast and went into the hall to phone her husband.

"How is he?" Bruce asked.

"I haven't seen him yet."

"What are they saying?"

"It's what they're not saying. It's as if I've lost him already. The last time I saw him..."

"I'm sorry, I can't talk. Black Panther trial blowing up in New Haven. I may have to ..."

"Do you have two minutes? Grandmother's position seems to be that it can't happen, that he has to be okay, but It's awful. Can't you ...?"

"What?"

"Hit some kind of home run? I don't know. Remind me where I live."

"There's a whole world out here, baby. People aren't taking Cambodia lying down. It's the revolution Nixon complains the universities are being systematically destroyed, as if it has nothing to do with him. Paranoia! Oops, wire feed's going crazy, gotta go."

"Good luck."

"Love you. Hang in there."

Back in the dining room, Grandmother was cooing to the baby. "Aren't you

a darling? Aren't you perfect?"

Ellie pulled a chair up beside her grandfather "How is he, really?"

"He could have another stroke at any time, but there's good hope he's going to pull through. The longer he goes without another one, the better."

Ellie had been sure he would be Sam forever. None of them had ever talked about him in any other way.

"I don't suppose he'll ever walk again," Ellie's third grade teacher said.

Ellie looked down at her pencil sharpener, turning slower and slower.

"Are you fond of him? Is he nice?"

"Yes."

"Come here and tell me about it. What's he like?"

"He's funny. He makes faces."

"I hear he even goes to church, poor thing."

Grandfather took the back seat out of the big car, so Sam could go in with his feet sticking into the trunk. A nurse sat beside him on the jump-up seat. People at church helped get him out of the car and lift him up the steps.

"I guess you're all making the best of it," the teacher said. "How do you manage? I wonder how he goes to the bathroom."

Ellie concentrated on the workbooks scattered over the desk, the pitted blackboard, the Halloween cutouts of orange pumpkins and black witches on the windows, the yellow waxed floor. A nurse spread a blanket over his lap and put a bottle under it, but she wasn't telling.

"I bet you have a soft spot for him, because he's crippled."

That teacher didn't know anything. It wasn't that. It was that he was Sam.

The iron lung wheezed in the living room, and Sam was in it most of the time. The nurse brought him to the table in a wheelchair to be fed. When he choked, everyone had to leave while she worked on him. Then he went back in the iron lung to rest. It swallowed him to the neck, sighing and squeezing the breath out. He could mouth a couple of syllables onto the wind before it sucked in again.

"Been ... swimming?"

She nodded.

"Jo beach or ..."

"Curlew."

"Any ... crabs?"

When he could be in the wheelchair more of the time, Sam got leather harnesses that suspended his arms from a steel frame in springs. If he shrugged a shoulder, a fork strapped to his fingers trailed through the food on his plate and caught some. He could reach it with his lips. Someone had to help him drink, though, and he liked it to be Ellie.

"You only drowned me ... the first ... couple of times."

He told her that he dreamed of skiing mountain slopes in powder snow, turning in long curves down the clear winter light, knees loose and easy, frosted trees flashing by. He let her read to him out of the newspaper or turn the pages of his book or push the wheelchair to the porch, where he could see his brother stride down the field with the sailbag and watch the boats jockey at the starting line until the cannon loosed them to race for the far marks outside the harbor. He let the nurse float him in the pool, working his flat arms and legs that didn't fit his head any more. Ellie and her cousins weren't allowed in. They sat around the edge, and Sam teased them, calling them by each other's names till they cracked up and he ordered, "No laugh ... ing," stern as Grandfather, and they shrieked.

He had to do everything with words. "Third shelf ... blue book .. right ... no ... back a little." He went stark, staring mad once, trying to make Ellie see something in plain sight, and there were terrible, black days when Grandmother's mouth was a straight line and the nurse sent Ellie away, or she had the sense to go.

"I'm a grown ... man," she heard behind a door "Do you think I ... want to be ... burped ... and wee-weed like a ... baby boy?"

One summer morning Sam asked Ellie to look in the attic for a model boat that might still be there. All that was left of it was the hull, with a tiller and tin rudder that still turned.

"We're going to ... fix her up," he said, "get her ... sailing again."

They settled in on the porch, Sam in shorts with a glass of iced tea, Ellie going back and forth to the shop. Working to Sam's instructions, she set a dowel in the vise with blocks to prevent marks, and sawed it off the right length for a mast. They tapered it with files, drilled it for halyards, sanded it, made shims and stepped it. It looked fine. They drilled a hole at the masthead for a screw-eye, very carefully, but in spite of their best efforts split that mast and had to start again, this time putting in the screw-eye before tapering. Grandfather went to the hardware store for cord for running gear. Grandmother made sails, sewing curtain rings along the luff. They whittled spreaders and strung stays, contriving turnbuckles to adjust the tension. They swung a boom and ran the main sheet to a cleat on deck improvised from brass tacks. They provided fairleads for the jib sheets. By the time they finished, you could raise and lower a yacht club burgee on the starboard stay. She did fine in the pool, but that was hardly a test, so they waited for a light breeze. The nurse held the binoculars for Sam while Ellie rowed out into the harbor, steadied the sailboat over the side, and let her

go. She filled away on the starboard tack, tossed off the little seas, and held her course, so fast Ellie had trouble catching her. They were ecstatic.

Now, at teatime, when they all walked into his living room, Sam was sitting in his wheelchair wearing a gray wool sweater pushed up to the elbows, arms balanced as always in the slings. Ellie leaned in and kissed his cheek.

"How are you?"

"All right."

His voice was shredded, stifled in the effort to draw breath, but he grinned. There was a lot of gray-blue carpet, otherwise no color in the room.

"They're promising sun for tomorrow," Grandmother said, and they all sat down.

"This is Mia Samantha," Ellie said. "Your namesake."

Sam shifted his shoulders, brightened, said something.

"What? Sorry, I ..."

He repeated it. Ellie felt a little panicky. She didn't get the words. Sam said it again. Ellie looked around. Marilyn leaned on the wheelchair, her ear close to his mouth.

"He says, She's prettier than I am."

Everyone laughed, very thoroughly, as though they were being watched and graded.

"Well," Grandmother said, "has everyone been following the news?"

"I'm sympathetic to the President," said Mother. "They give him such a hard time."

Father shook his head. "That was a stupid way to put it. 'Pitiful, helpless giant.'"

Sam said something. His eyes sought Ellie. Something about the country.

"Sorry?"

Marilyn listened again. "We're in for it, he says."

"You bet," Ellie said.

"It's about time the kids and the Negroes backed off and let the President do his job," Grandfather said. He strode to the window and jingled the

change in his pocket.

"The ghastly Black Panthers," said Mother. "Free speech is one thing, but.."

"He should listen to the protests," Ellie said. "He might learn something."

"We have to show a united front," Grandmother told her. "The President knows things we don't."

"Does he know he's on the wrong side of history?"

Sam seemed to have dropped back inside himself. What did he think, if he could think about this at all? He could be dying, while everyone carried on about politics. Me worst of all, Ellie thought.

"Well, I rely on Walter Cronkite," Grandmother said.

"I don't want to watch all that," Marilyn said. "I like the Tonight Show." She laughed. "We seem to have our hands full here."

No one said anything. The children had been playing quietly in the corner, but now the tiny boy banged some blocks together, and the little girl shushed him, looking at her mother. Sam watched them from his chair, more alone than ever. Ellie didn't know how to reach him. Something was in the way, some disagreement. Something stupid. Why had she let so much time go by?

"All right," Grandmother said, summoning her temperamental cheerfulness. "It's a great country. Everyone's doing their best. It will all come out in the wash."

"I don't think he can sit up too long," Marilyn said.

Father got up at once. "We'd better go."

Grandmother crossed her legs. "We'll just stay a minute. It's so good to be together. What do you all think of the new golf course?"

"Better than another shopping mall," Mother said.

It was impossible to know what Sam was thinking, faced with something no one else could see, slipping away like sadness carved in stone.

"I've got to change the baby," Ellie said, because abruptly she had to leave the room.

"Oh, I'll show you," said Marilyn.

Walking into the kitchen felt like shedding a straitjacket. Ellie laid the baby on the table. "I guess I can leave him for a minute while you're all here," Marilyn said, reaching Ellie a paper towel. "I don't know whether to vacuum. It's a lot of noise."

There were things a person ought to say to Marilyn, to help or comfort. Ellie

couldn't think of any of them.

"I usually vacuum on Fridays, but I'm wondering, can it matter?"

They changed Mia and went back to the living room and showed her to the children. The talk went on. Sam wasn't part of it. And then Marilyn got out the hoist and put him to bed. The little girl came in her pink dress and bunched her hands beside him and laid down her head, and he fought for breath. What was the thing Ellie was trying to remember, the thing that was in the way with Sam? Could it matter?

Father and Grandfather left to pick up groceries. Marilyn read to the children in Sam's room. Ellie made coffee for Mother and Grandmother in the kitchen.

"He's been working too hard," Mother said. "Hours every day, commenting on medical articles, pushing the damn typewriter keys one by one with a pencil strapped between his fingers. No wonder he's exhausted."

"Perhaps if he'd used the pool more," said Grandmother.

"I worried when they adopted. It's unfair to the children."

"Poor darlings."

"Wonderful as she is," Mother said, "Marilyn has taken him away from all his interests."

"You can't blame her really. She hasn't the background. He married her because..."

"... it's the resources of the mind that stand by you ..."

"... she made him comfortable. Otherwise..."

Marilyn came in then to the kitchen.

"We were just saying," Mother said, "that when Sam had all that trouble choking, you knew how to make him comfortable. You were wonderful."

They were at it again. Ellie looked out the window, where the apple tree bloomed pretty and pink, as it had last year and all the years of her life.

"For a long time I thought he didn't like me," Marilyn said. "But it was only because he felt so bad."

"We hope and pray he'll pull through," said Mother.

"Of course he will," Grandmother said. "He has to."

Ellie couldn't let herself think the things that she was thinking. She went into the bedroom, instinctively seeking Sam. He opened his eyes, but what he knew, he wasn't saying. He raised his eyebrows, though.

"Sorry," he mouthed, and gave out, sinking back inside.

As soon as she got back to her parents' house, Ellie telephoned her husband. He was out of the office but called in later, as she was tucking Mia in.

"What's up?"

"I'm staying," she said. Call Sunday night and tell them I'm still sick. The flu."

"Will do. How are you faring?"

"They all think it's statesmanship to go into Cambodia. Grandfather subscribes to the conspiracy theory, the kids and blacks and Communists want to wreck the world."

"I'm in New Haven," he said. "Bombs are going off. Rocks and bottles. Tear gas. Nixon's words were provocation. Suffocating protest won't work any more. The establishment doesn't understand that."

Ellie wanted to talk about Sam, but something was standing on her tongue, something worse than polio, or death.

"Dr. Spock is here," Bruce said. "Abbie Hoffman. The President of Yale has come out for the Panthers. You have to feel sorry for the old guard. They don't know they're losing."

Ellie couldn't listen any more, because she was losing too. She was losing Sam.

"I thought of course his best man would push him," said her mother. She didn't understand. Sam wanted Ellie to handle the wheelchair at his wedding. It was the honor of her life. She should have had a green dress, simple and elegant, but she had to wear silly orange chiffon, like the bridesmaids, and for Sam, she did it. He wept quietly and with dignity through the readings. *And though I give my body to be burned and have not love, I shall be held in no account.* But when Marilyn gave her promise, he came out in a broad grin. As the Wedding March began, the bride turned and started forward, leaving Ellie trapped behind a corps of bridesmaids arranging the train. She hitched up her chiffon skirt, leaped the white froth of satin, spun Sam around, and caught up.

"Wasn't that little bridesmaid something?" said a stranger in the church porch.

"Frightful tomboy."

"Just what the situation called for."

"And now you have a nurse in the family," a neighbor cooed to Grandmother. "How wonderful."

"She hasn't much background, but we're so grateful."

"But children? My dear, is it possible?"

"Oh yes. That sort of thing isn't affected. It's only the voluntary muscles that are gone."

It was clear that Sam needed Ellie. He and Marilyn moved down the lane, to the red house with the apple tree where the puppies had been born. When she stopped by, Sam would be at his desk, making spidery marks on galleys with colored pencils. She adjusted the rubber bands that bound the pencils to his fingers, or spun the lazy susan where he kept reference books, and Marilyn brought tea. Ellie told them all her troubles. Her mother called her Madam Queen because she forgot to take out the garbage. Her father wanted her to wear awful heels to church, like the Lawrence girls. The worst of it was, she got invited to a stupid dance and had to refuse before she could be made to go.

"You regretted ... Miss Souther?" Sam said.

"Regret? Is that what you're supposed to say?"

"You're in for it." He laughed. "About time somebody ... stuck ... one in her eye. The old ... gargoyle."

But Ellie's mother was not amused.

"Do you want to spoil things for your cousins? They might not be invited now."

"It's mean. They don't invite you if you're Catholic."

"Nonsense. Mary Exeter goes. She's Catholic."

"Not Irish Catholic."

"Don't you want to know the children of our friends?" said her father.

Ellie fled down the lane and nursed her wounds with Sam, who had troubles of his own. He seldom went to dinner at the big house any more. He was backing out of church and figured he'd got all the good he was going to get out of the pool.

"Just half an hour," Grandmother said.

"It isn't going to make ... the difference ... Mother."

Everyone was thrilled when Marilyn got pregnant, but she lost that baby, and then she lost another one, and she and Sam got sad. They didn't go out much any more. They stopped reading the newspaper. They kept the house very warm. Ellie played a record of Tom Lehrer's songs to make them laugh, but they didn't think "The Old Dope Peddler" was funny. They told jokes from the *Reader's Digest*.

"How is a dud rocket like a civil servant?"

"You can't fire it and you can't make it work."

It was when Ellie was headed off to college that Sam turned serious one Sunday afternoon by the fire.

"After the war," he said, "there were all kinds of ... people on the ... GI Bill. Boys from farms ... factories ... that didn't go ... to prep schools ... didn't belong ... to clubs ... people you ... never would have ... met otherwise."

He leaned on his elbows in the harnesses, reaching for air. Ellie waited in the doorway, impatient to be off and striding in the autumn mist.

"Get out all you ... can," he said. "See what ... comes along. If you get a chance ... do something ... new. Try anything ... once."

What came along in college was the fight for civil rights. Ellie found herself tutoring and registering voters in neighborhoods she'd been brought up never to go near.

"You're not ... over there ... after dark ... are you?" Sam said.

"Not after six or seven."

"Look, this thing ... can't be fixed in a ... hurry. Let some ... time go by. People can't ... accept change ... overnight. This ... King ..."

"They can't wait any more," Ellie said.

In the summer of 1963, a march was planned for jobs and freedom. Mother was appalled at the idea of carrying banners in the street. According to Grandfather, education was the only legitimate form of direct action, and Father warned that intermarriage produced mongrels. When Ellie complained that the preacher at church said nothing about the great moral issue of the day, Grandmother claimed he didn't need to since we all knew perfectly well where he stood. But Ellie was still surprised when Sam said,

"I hope you're not ... mixed up in this ... March on ... Washington."

"I'm volunteering at the NAACP, filling buses."

"There could be ... violence."

"It's going to be nonviolent."

"I'm ... surprised ... you've been so ... taken in," Sam said, his hair still slick from the shower Marilyn had just wheeled him out of. "Extremists ... take advantage of ... well-meaning ... idealists like you. You don't know what you're ... in for."

He had always been on Ellie's side. Always. Now he looked like a stranger. A cripple.

"You're just like the rest of them," Ellie said.

In her old bedroom with the sloping eaves and the rickety bookcase crammed with cast-off books, Ellie struggled through the weekend, through the hail of regret, the fog of false cheer, the pointless hovering at Sam's bedside. It was the same as always, the same portrait of the shovel-bonneted ancestor in the hall, the same getting together with the grandparents after dinner, Grandmother's strenuous denial, Grandfather's grating, predictable authority. He clearly had his private view, which he wasn't sharing. Mother made disgusting, runny eggs for breakfast and thought Ellie should want them. Mia wouldn't go to sleep at night. Grandmother felt it was foolish of Ellie to try so hard to comfort her, since babies ought to be allowed to cry. Ellie slipped back into moods of childhood, irritated, arguing. How could she undo what she'd said to Sam? How could she make up for it? He continued weak and stoic. How could she broach any question without bringing down the whole house of cards?

Her husband was no use. He was living at the paper, glued to the AP ticker and writing copy as fast as he could. A storm was brewing at Kent State in Ohio, kids burning draft cards, screaming "pigs" and throwing rocks. The governor labeled the protesters "un-American" and called out the National Guard. Going about it the same wrong way as Nixon, Ellie's husband wrote. The University was attempting to cancel a protest scheduled for noon Monday.

In the airless living room, Grandmother kept the news on all the time. "There's a strong feeling in the country," she said.

"I don't like it," Grandfather warned. "It has to be stopped."

Mother bent over her crewelwork.

"How do you stop it?" Father said. "I don't think you can do the impossible."

Ellie couldn't take any more days off work. She packed. She would see Sam one more time before leaving for the airport. They were eating a quick lunch, celery and tuna fish and cucumber, when the news came in. Four students shot dead at Kent State.

"Oh no," said Mother.

"See what happens," Grandfather said, "when you thumb your nose at law and order?"

"Don't you draw the line at shooting your own kids?" Ellie said.

In outrage and dismay, she arrived at Sam's. He lay in bed under a blue comforter, watching slides projected on the ceiling. The air in his room smelled of foam rubber and spilled urine and respirator oil. Marilyn clicked the carousel ahead, reached for a bowl of oatmeal, spooned some into his

mouth, and brought up another picture. Boat races, green summers, picnics, the wedding. He was having a bit of trouble swallowing. The children rolled on the floor like puppies and tumbled on the ceiling in the Kodachrome grass. Shadows washed Sam's face, little waves lapping and falling back. His voice was nearly gone. Ellie stood beside the bed, clinging to her baby, straining to hear, failing, pretending. For something to say, she babbled about a little cut she had on one finger.

"Better ..." he said, and then she didn't get it. "Better ... a ..."

He had to try half a dozen times. Perhaps he would say it all, say everything, and then she could say it too, what she couldn't even think. How sorry she was, how long ago she'd forgiven him, how much she'd loved him all her life.

"Better ..." he tried again, brave and precarious. "Better ... get a ..." He gestured with his eyes. "A ... bandaid ... over ... the sink."

She couldn't think why she was crying. They had no words, who had words for everything. All spilled, all spoiled. She groped through the bathroom where the warm, wriggling puppies had been born when she was small and got a bandage for her little, little hurt, and left Sam under his blue comforter that seemed to be covered with stars, and the next week he died, choking on something Marilyn was making him eat because they were all saying he was going to pull through.

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