

The Places They Could Go

by **Rebecca Potter**

“You have brains in your head. You have feet in your shoes. You can steer yourself any direction you choose. You're on your own. And you know what you know. And YOU are the one who'll decide where to go...”

—Dr. Seuss, *Oh, The Places You'll Go*

I have a lump in my throat as soon as *Pomp and Circumstance* begins and the graduates file in. I sit with other robed teachers on one side of the graduating class, so close I can smell Ethan's too-strong cologne and read the glittery inscription painted on Olivia's mortar board: *I applied to Hogwarts but was accepted at UK. Go Wildcats!* . Family and friends of the graduates surround us in stadium seating. Some wear suits and ties and others wear plaid button-down shirts tucked into khaki shorts. Several parents carry bouquets and gift bags. Phones out and ready. Now and then someone yells something like “You go, girl!” or “We love you, Matt!” For a moment or two I put myself in the place of one of those parents watching a ceremony that officially says my child is grown and will be leaving me soon. I exhale deeply to prevent myself from crying.

The ceremony begins the way it does every year, with welcome addresses and speeches. Along with worn-out admonitions about always remembering the good times of high school and dreaming big and going far, the Valedictorian and Salutatorian both mention me in their speeches. They say kind words about the difference I have made in their lives. Colleagues sitting near me slap my back, graduates turn and smile and pump fists at me. These speeches are gifts. Teachers don't get bonuses or merit raises; this is it right here—public recognition from former students. I am honored and humbled. But it's not their

speeches or the mention of my name that causes the lump in my throat to finally dislodge and the tears to come.

It's the names. Nearly three hundred of them. With each name, a student crosses the stage, and so does a story. Mia went with the softball team to the state championship two years in a row. Alex has a 4.0 and scored well on several AP exams. Erin will be the first in her family to go to college. Ruby's parents emigrated from Uzbekistan; she is the oldest of eleven children. Jessica is a Mormon, the only one in our school. Chris is going to a college thousands of miles away on a wrestling scholarship. Josh shot a buck with a beautiful set of antlers last fall. Andre wants to be a musician; his mom wants him to be a doctor. Missy hates school. Jeremiah is gay and is concerned about people in our small town not liking him because of it. Troy entered my class with a second-grade reading level. Beth is pregnant; her belly is big enough to cause the graduation gown to billow out. Hannah lived with her aunt and uncle until they were divorced this year. Logan broke his foot in the first football game of his senior year. Crystal's parents spent their inheritance on drugs; she moved out. Ethan has a drug problem; he's been arrested several times. Kayla's boyfriend beat her up so her parents put a restraining order on him. Hailey's mother passed away just three years ago, and she is constantly searching for someone to be her mom.

And on and on they go. Some dream of becoming doctors or pilots or lawyers or teachers or business owners. Some are going to travel. Others will join the military. Some of them will become engineers, welders, cosmetologists, or mechanics. They will go on to pursue careers, start families, and generally do good things in their community.

But other names whisper failure. Some of them have no dreams. They don't know they are allowed to dream, or they can't. They are doomed before they have even really begun. They will jump from dead-end job to dead-end job, toxic relationship to toxic relationship, never settling down or finding contentment. They will abandon their kids, end up poor, lonely, and addicted to something. Or they will live in their parents' basement far too long. Maybe they'll end up in jail. Some will die too young.

As they graduate, their paths split and splinter. No matter what they do or where they go, they take part of me with them. They take what they have learned in my classroom and leave me behind to question if they will make it and to wonder what kinds of places they will go. It is this—having cared about these people so much and knowing only echoes of my voice go with them from this point—that makes me cry at graduation.

I think about this when Michael crosses the stage. There is no one there to clap for him. His celebration is his own. His dusty brown work boots and jeans peak from below his graduation gown. He towers over the principal as he heartily shakes his hand and receives his diploma, then gives a sideways smile for the camera. He lumbers off the stage, his tassel getting stuck on his lip.

I had Michael in class his sophomore and junior years. When he was a junior, he broke his ankle then caught his mother stealing his pain medicine. I can see his mom, dirty and small, short brown hair and sunken eyes. I imagine her rummaging through his drawers, under his bed, searching for parts of him to steal—his privacy, his trust, his love.

He confronted her about it. She denied it, accused him of lying, and called him ungrateful. She said he was a terrible son. And then she kicked him out with nothing but a duffel bag, a broken ankle, and memories of growing up with a mother who needed to be high more than she cared about her child and a father who was never there.

Eighteen and homeless, Michael went from one friend's house to another's, holding down a full-time job. He slept in most of his classes. When he was awake, his eyes were red and his attention somewhere else. But he was different in my class.

"Well, what do you think, Mrs. Potter?" His speech was slow and drawn out, very Southern and very kind. He constantly asked for approval, to make sure he was doing the work right, to know what he needed to do better.

"Michael, it's great." I returned to him the crumpled, scribbled-on notebook paper that was his rough draft. He had finished the assignment a full three days before anyone else and wanted feedback on the spot. Written expression was a

real struggle for him because of a learning disability. I knew he had worked hard on this assignment. "I would give it a B. Well done!"

"What do I need to do to get an A?" I knew he would ask that; he always did.

After a few more drafts, he did get the A. And he continued to work hard for me for all the time I had him in class. After one classroom observation, the principal expressed shock that Michael, whom he knew well, participated and worked so much. He wondered if he was always on task. Of course he was.

"You know why he works for you?" My principal didn't give me a chance to answer. "He knows you care about him, and he loves you for it."

Now Michael is graduating and will soon be starting community college. I think when Michael is in class this fall, he will hear my voice telling him he is capable. He will remember the story that Cheever wrote about a boy meeting his father at a train station. He will feel that anger again and vow to never be that person. He will be better than his father, better than his mother. He will hear me tell him how proud I am of him, as I have done dozens of times, because maybe no one else has done so. In class when he gets sleepy, he will hear me tell him, "Wake up, Michael. You got this, buddy."

I clap hard when Michael crosses the stage at graduation. I do not even follow directions and wait for all the graduates' names to be called before I do so.

When I first started teaching, when I cared about my job but before I knew how to really love my students, I wondered what the point really was, especially for the kids not going to college, those who will be working on a farm or in auto shop or on a factory line. Those kids will likely work hard and lead good lives, but they won't need to know how the final chapter of *The Great Gatsby* is soaked in rich irony or how point of view affects our understanding of poor Miss Emily and her rose. Why did it matter if they knew the plot of *The Crucible* or if they had read anything by Hawthorne? I wondered why I should teach them how to explicate a poem or write an academic essay. If they couldn't identify a preposition in a sentence, would it really make a difference in their quality of life? These questions in my early years came from a concern for efficiency and

effectiveness. I did not see the point of wasting time and resources on teaching skills and material students would never use.

Now that I know what it means to love my students, my concerns have changed. What skills and content do they need to be successful beyond the classroom, whether they are going to college or not? How can I be sure to reach all of them? Am I doing enough? Am I doing it right? More difficult, what do I do about the students who will go nowhere no matter what I teach them? Teaching these stories and skills won't save many of my students from failure. It's more than just a possibility that some of my students will fail. So many already have.

Like Justin. Justin should be at graduation tonight. He should casually stroll across the stage, the way he used to walk the hallways, nod his head as he accepts his diploma, then with a slight, shy smile leave the stage, diploma in hand—ready to go. But while his friends and classmates are celebrating and moving on, Justin is sitting in a jail cell writing me a letter, apologizing for letting me down, asking me to help him make his life matter.

Justin was never in trouble in school. He never caused problems. He came to class with his muddy shoes, Carhart jacket, and a back pocket with a faded circle where he kept his can of dip. His hair was unkempt and his voice quiet. He punctuated his sentences with “Ma’am” and always looked me in the eye when I spoke to him. He was quiet and uninterested, but he did his work and was respectful.

Much of his life was a blank for me. His parents were divorced. I imagine his father wasn't there for much of his childhood. And when he was there, they were working together in the tobacco field or under a truck. His mom probably worked a shift job, so she couldn't help him with his homework or ask about his day or give him kisses which he would pretend annoyed him. I think he grew up in an empty house where he filled his loneliness with mischief. I think he was expected to be a man before he knew how.

Now this barely-man is alone in jail because he committed armed robbery. He and two other of my former students robbed a local convenience store. They stole beer and cash. Maybe Justin was the one holding the gun, sticking it in the

cashier's face. I hear his soft voice, the polite tones turned to quiet threats, "Give me the money." He wouldn't yell. He wouldn't even sound mean. That's not who Justin is, at least not in my classroom. It would be only the gun and the mask that would scare the cashier as he hurriedly and with shaking hands gathered the cash from the drawer for the boy who thought he was a man.

I reluctantly think about what kind of life Justin will have once he is out of jail—in a few months or possibly several years. The consequences of his mistakes will always be with him, defining who he is and limiting what he can become. And I wonder what parts of my voice Justin has taken with him to jail. Which of my words did he remember as he wrote his letter? I imagine him sitting on a bed in a gray jail cell, writing to me. He probably did not think about the O'Brien story when he wrote he was sorry. He was not considering the Longfellow poem when he scribbled about wanting to get his life straight. He didn't care about subject-verb agreement or parallel structure or comma splices.

It was my voice telling him he was worth so much more than he understood about himself when he told me he thought he might not pass my class. It was the times I told him he was preparing to be a husband and a father. As he wrote his letter, he remembered me smiling at the classroom door he used to enter every day, telling him how glad I was he was here today and meaning it. Oh, how I wish he were here tonight with his classmates.

While I know Justin hears me, even from behind bars, I can't help but wonder what I could have done differently, done better, to keep him out of jail. More stories, more lectures, more encouragement, more rebuke, more smiling, more pleading. Even as I wonder this, I know that no matter what I did or how strong and loud my voice was, Justin would have followed his own path. He is just like so many others who will fail no matter how much I beg them not to.

Even though many will not succeed, I still teach each one with all I have. Their lives matter, even the ones who go to jail, and there is always hope for redemption. My job is not solely to prepare students for college and careers. My job is also to care and show kindness.

Just like I care about Breanna. As she crosses the stage now, her make-up is thick, so much so that her face is lost behind it. She covers herself with fake eyelashes, thick penciled eyebrows, lipstick that extends above and below her lips. She has a septum piercing and an eyebrow piercing. Tattoos and other piercings are covered by her robe. Underneath all the make-up and piercings is a beautiful young woman with a sad story.

Last year, she shoplifted a purse. Just because she wanted to. Just because she was a rebellious teenager pushing the limits of what she could get away with. But she got caught. She told me this in the quiet of my classroom during my planning period. She sat in one of the small student desks, me at my teacher desk. The space between us was wide enough and narrow enough to make Breanna feel comfortable to share.

Her parents had separated years ago, her father absent for much of her childhood. Her mom always had money problems. This past summer she and her mom had been evicted. Breanna faced foster care or moving in with her dad. While living with her dad was probably the better option, it wasn't easy. He yelled and cursed a lot and loved and encouraged very little. When Breanna had been caught stealing the purse, her mom picked her up from the police station. They decided to keep it a secret from her dad. But he found out. Yesterday.

Breanna said he yelled and cursed and yelled some more. I imagine Breanna sitting on the couch with her father standing over her, his words falling on her head with a heaviness that told her she couldn't be any better than this, with a coldness that said no matter how good she was after today, he would never see her as valuable. I imagine her pushing against his angry words, struggling to leave the room and his condemnation sentencing her to a lifetime of thinking she was destined only to make mistakes and let people down. She crouched below his yelling and made it to the door. After she left, her dad called the police. The officers found Breanna, took her home, and told her to sit down and have a rational conversation with her father or face more serious consequences.

Breanna and her dad sat at the kitchen table in silence.

She was telling me all of this because she just needed someone to listen, she said. And I was there. But then it struck me that she needed something else, too. “Breanna, do you need me to talk to you the way a mom talks to her daughter?” She nodded and let out a quiet yes. So I began. I spoke to Breanna the same way I would had it been my child who stole the purse, the same inflection I use when one of my sons has really, really messed up and I am beyond yelling, with the same intensity of motherly affection.

“You are worth too much, you are far too valuable, you are way too important to be making such bad decisions.” My words were quiet and solid, slow and separated. I looked her in the eyes when I spoke, watching to be sure she heard the love behind my rebuke. “I love you too much to allow you to ruin your life by making stupid mistakes. You are better than this.”

Head dropped and shoulders hunched over, this tough girl in front of me sobbed. I thought maybe I’d said too much. Maybe I had overstepped my place as a teacher. Through her crying she muttered, “I wish my own mom would talk to me like that.”

I left the separation provided by my big teacher desk and went to this child. How I ached for her in that moment. How I wished I could do more and be more for her. Just like any mother, I wanted so much to take her hurt away and protect her from ever getting hurt again. Just like any mother, I wanted this child to be happy and good and safe, and I felt the desperation that came from knowing she was none of those things right then. I held her while she continued to sob. I knew she was not crying because she had stolen a purse.

Now at graduation, she winks at me after she is off the stage and returning to her seat. I study her as she walks by. I am concerned about her future, about her getting hurt, about how hard her life will be. She has no plans for college or work. I doubt her parents will offer much guidance. She is stepping forth into the grown-up world equipped with so many strengths and abilities but also with so much against her.

I wonder where she will go. Maybe she will end up working in a salon in a big city making people look and feel beautiful. Or in the post-partum unit of a hospital. Perhaps in a real estate agency or a bank here in town.

But I know she could just as easily end up homeless. Or in jail. Or on drugs. Or worse.

Wherever she goes, I hope she will recall me telling her how beautiful she is, how valuable she is. Years from now when she is hurting because someone's ugly words are pouring down on her, I pray my voice will rise above the other and it will give her strength. While I might never see her again, I will tell her in remembered conversations that she is better than her mistakes, that grace is thick and all-covering, that it is never too late to do good things in this world. I don't know what kind of story she is going to write with her life after today, but I am so glad to be a part of it.

I love graduation because it represents the exciting edge of adulthood. These now-adults can do whatever they want, go wherever they want. Become whoever they want. So at graduation, I dream of the places they could go. And even though I will miss them and worry about them, I am satisfied in the hope that maybe one day, weeks or years from now, in some moment of their life when they need me they will hear my voice and, though faded with time, it will be clear and full of love.

A colleague of mine once talked about the lie that graduation is. All these graduates, smiling as they wait for their happy future to be handed to them. A huge stadium filled with family and friends cheering and clapping as these teenagers file one-by-one quickly crossing a stage to receive a flimsy, nearly meaningless piece of paper. We tease the kids with promises of the good things that await them and the amazing things they will do because they have graduated. But for many of these students, this graduation marks the highest achievement they will earn for the entirety of their lives. This is it. The pinnacle of their greatness: walking across a stage that millions of other people walk across every year while their family is asked to hold their applause until all the graduates' names have been called.

I see graduation differently than my colleague. Yes, for many, this is it. Yes, this might be the best thing they ever accomplish. And, yes, it hurts that so many will amount to so little. But they are here. They have accomplished something, even if it seems small to us. So let's clap. Let's celebrate. It might be our only chance. I clap for the many who will continue to rise to new levels of success. But I cheer just as mightily for the ones for whom this is it. Because *this is it*. Why not cheer? These people have value beyond their destiny.

So I cheer and clap and cry.



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