

Toy story: lessons learned from the movie

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I never had a teddy bear as a kid. If I had, he wouldn't have had a name. But if his name had been Josh, I would have slept with him every night. And though Josh never comforted me in my sleep, I sometimes think of him and wonder if it would have been me who picked him out, who gave him a name, and who dressed him up like I wanted. I had these freedoms at that age; I could have made these choices, asked for Josh, conformed him to me, and played with him as if in a scene from Toy Story. One thing Toy Story never told me was that the more choices you have, the less you will make. I'm still learning that.

Although I've only now come to know what Josh represents in my life, I have decided to think of him often. Many times I imagine that I have memories of him; memories set to remind myself that the gift of my parents' open-mindedness, however great, hadn't challenged me to make choices. There was a time when just that happened. A choice came, a challenge was issued. My grandma took me out to a movie and I had to choose what to drink. Naturally, I was completely frozen with the stranger's question. It may seem simple and easy now but look at it with a shy kid's mind. My first thought was an almost angry question of why he wanted to know. My second was the realization that I didn't know any drink names at all. So what came next was a cool but drawn out " I'll have what she's having." A large mountain dew with no regrets and extra uncertainty. For two nights after I got three hours of sleep total and severe nightmares. Obviously her impression was that I had drunk caffeine before; but still, if she hadn't let me opt out and adopt

her choice, things would have ended up a whole lot better. All that is actually a pretty detailed description of my lifestyle those days. The most important thing for me to realize about myself at that age was that I was literally in the middle ground of choice making; I didn't let others control me but I had no control over myself. The control that Josh now gives me is the reminder that too much open-mindedness can make a mind empty.

For a long time I was just that: empty. With little imagination and no drive to become any more independent or free thinking, I was left without identity for many years. Since I never had to resist family and shape myself, I was more than eager to become whatever school wanted me to be. To this day I hear the same stories over and over. I hear about jumping in with the bad crowd. I hear about the people that were hurt. What I don't hear about is how I felt in those days. I see the images: the calm faces of teachers, swing sets flying just short of the white puffs above, maybe a bloody nose or two. I hear the sounds: the soft reasoning tones of adults, the bright and small laughter all around, and the occasional shrill cry of pain. I remember chunks, as if from a movie, but I didn't keep what it felt like to be there. I didn't learn anything about the main character. I was too busy going with the flow to know where it was taking me.

Now I know. I've arrived from the desert with bear in hand and I'm ready to dry off any bit of river still dripping from me. I'm ready to write. To become what I am. To put some clothes on Josh's back and make something out of him; maybe an outfit for myself if I feel like it. I need to make up for lost time. At least that's what I would do if I thought I was done traveling. But I'm

not. And even if I were, Josh doesn't need those green overalls with red stripes. I do. But they wouldn't be overalls. Maybe some jeans. And they would be black. And I wouldn't wear a dress shirt, I don't plan on looking too fancy. But if I had to look nice I might throw on a deep blue button up with a black tie. The truth is I don't feel like I have to get dressed in the morning any more than I feel like my imaginary bear needs a name. But I wake up at 5: 40 in the morning because I choose to get some extra time to shower, so I can take longer to pick out which clothes I will wear, because I value the opportunity to make choices. Right now, I choose to admit that writing scares me more than death. What has gotten me through these three pages is the idea that I'm not writing on paper, I'm writing on myself. We are the paper. Some are bipolar, easily flipped and equally themselves on each side, others are a love story within a poem that has a pretty border all around it. Some are a mess of scribbles, doodles, and onomatopoeia: completely filled in. And me? I'll continue to write what sounds good, dress for myself, and avoid soda. And until my story is wrapped up the way I choose, I will tuck Josh into bed, pack him away, and hope that I sleep well without him