

Bear Body, Bare Body

BellaBianca Lynn

The cotton balls held within the pink fabric show themselves like bones in an X-ray. I've held him once a few years back, wrote about our relationship; would there be anything new? Why bother?

My hand reaches deep in the corner of the drawer and retrieves the plastic bag. My palm immediately feels its holes and open air. I never sealed it back up after visiting it the first time. Crap. Meant to tape that!

The white top of my old teddy bear has faded to yellow in some areas, mostly on the left side. I inspect the left paw, the one I used to hold and rub against my top lip for comfort. It's still smooth. The end of one of the stitches still feels familiar against the top of my thumb.

This paw's material is different on this side than on the right. The right paw has the original fabric with the rest of the limbs. The white stitching runs up the middle of his body, showing the scars from his many surgeries performed by my mother at the sewing machine. Though the surgeries were due to my constant squeezing and holding, I only ever knew him this way— after the damage was done. When I later became an aunt, one of my nieces would carry around her stuffed animal, Angry Cat, reminding my parents and sister of me at that age with my portable buddy. Seeing as the word "Teddy" stood at one of the higher tiers of the English language for an infant, this bear would become known as "Zeh." On more than one occasion my family has jokingly pouted their lips and laughed, "Poor Zeh, he kept falling apart but you wouldn't want any other bear but him." He could easily be mocked as broken, but before I could even stand I loved him unconditionally.

Why?

Because being brand new to this Earth, I didn't know to see him differently from the rest of his family of bears. I just wanted the comfort of his left paw against my skin.

Three decades later, all I can see are the differences Poor Zeh has: the two sides of his body are in opposition with one another while one ear is nearly bald, one eye is nearly hidden from his fur, and for the first time I find myself being in two places at once; one foot is on the present line and the other leg stretches back in the past. I hold this bundle of cotton to my chest and after a few seconds feel my throat burn, only to bat away water under my eyes. Unconditional love.

Why?

Because of one similarity that all the differences create.

His body is asymmetrical.

His body is asymmetrical and so is mine.

His right paw is better than his left and my left is better than my right. He has one strong side like me.

As with Zeh, I may have had a few normal hours being whole in my body, but not hours that I remember. Each of my parents held me as a symmetrical eight-pound infant, and within forty-eight hours I started seizing and turning blue. After a variation of tests, these signs indicated that at some point I had had a stroke. The stroke occurred in the left side of my brain, leaving my right side with cerebral palsy. The doctors were not able to pinpoint when the stroke happened. As with my first bonding moments with Zeh, my parents may only have ever known me as being different from the beginning of our relationship.

When I was six years old, I too had an operation, though not under the sewing machine. This surgery was a bone graft on

my right leg to correct my walk. I had my companion with me in the hospital throughout the week to comfort me. From sewing machine to hospital bed, Zeh and I had become completely uncovered with physical differences from the rest of our families.

My index finger rolls up and down his triangular button nose. I bring him up to my face and inhale through my nose. His last home has been in the closet at my mother's, but when I take in his scent I smell the upstairs bedroom of my father's house. I breathe in the books never read, and a bed barely slept in.

Zeh proves to me that innocence can be touched. Held. Re-visited.

"You and your little button nose!" Dad laughed over the years.

I replay my Dad's voice in my head, the only place where his frequency can be recreated now.

This little bear, the size of two kittens, cautions me that while holding innocence can be simple, simple is not easy. Simple can drop the weight of sobbing onto a body or make one ruminate before entering the safety that innocence provides.

But I know it's okay. I'm okay. We're okay. There's nothing to be scared of when wrapping my fingers around that silver handle of the bottom drawer. I place Zeh back into his bag and settle it onto my lap. Through the plastic I still trace his nose. I look down at it. Golden brown.

My finger stops in mid pattern. I snap my head up in the direction of the framed picture on my desk. Dad's gaze holds steady. His eyes squint ever so slightly.

Golden brown.

I rub Zeh's nose again. Studying the picture.

Simple is knowing that I haven't truly lost either piece of golden brown.

And I am whole.

Different and whole.