

## When Toys Grow Old

Joffery and Yvelin turned twelve last August. I met Yvette's twin boys when they were five. At that time they were inseparable from their two twin teddy bears. They slept with them, traveled with them, and fiercely protected them. Once I tossed Yvelin's bear unceremoniously onto his bed and he broke into tears. I was surprised to learn that they had never named their bears so I started calling them Buster Bear 1 and Buster Bear 2. Those bears became the impetus for a several year tradition of stories told at bedtime and while driving them to school in kindergarten and first grade. The Buster Bear mantra was "I'm Buster Bear and I don't care." Their adventures included encounters with aliens, ghosts, vampires and school bullies. The bears were fixtures in their beds, but suddenly, at age eleven I saw that their bears were gone.

"Where is your bear?" I asked Joffery.

"He's in the closet, I put him there."

"So you're done with him?"

"I guess so,"

"Where's your bear?" I asked Yvelin.

"Here," he said pointing at a dark corner of the bed covered with blankets – the bear no longer center stage. Buster was in exile. Off to St. Helena, like Napoleon, I thought.

The retirement of those teddy bears brought me back to my own childhood. I had two bears – one large and brown with glossy black eyes and the other a small white one that I had liberated from my nursery school at the age of five. I thought he wasn't being treated well there and I took him home (I assumed it was a he). My mother scolded me for my theft but let me keep him. I don't remember the day that it went into exile. Today he is in a plastic bin in my garage.

At age twelve I once again experienced the death of toys, and much more. My boyhood friend, Tommy Achacoso, and I attended Riverside Elementary School. Every day after school, I would go straight to his house. My mother was at work and there was no reason to go straight home. Tommy had the best toys: Model planes, art supplies, and my favorite; a Mattel machine gun that when you pulled the lever it fired a satisfying rat-tat-tat-tat. Tommy used it in our war games where we would stalk each through his yard and the neighbor's yard that abutted Tommy's apartment building. It was all about stealth as we stalked each other. Whoever got the first shot was the winner. It was my lucky day because Tommy let me use the machine gun. I was under the stairwell waiting for him. I took careful aim at the narrow opening. Suddenly, Tommy appeared. I fired away, but he did not fall or launch a counterattack. In fact, he had no weapon at all. He walked up to me ignoring all our rules. He grabbed the machine gun from my hands.

"We're done playing this game," he announced, "We're too old to be playing with toys."

I was shocked as I watched him disappear into his apartment with his machine gun in hand, I felt somehow betrayed and diminished by his announcement. My boyhood was over and it shook me to my core.

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