

## TERR-BEAR LOVES JIMMY

Tim Jones-Yelvington

Terr-bear was stolen, but Jimmy didn't know it yet. Andrea was telling him, but he couldn't hear her. Or he heard her, but he didn't understand. The sun and the humidity buffeted him as he clutched his cell phone and stepped through the Homestore's employee exit. He tried to disentangle the stimuli that competed for his attention -- the traffic as he crossed the street without a walk-light, the pressing question of where to go for lunch, and his best friend's announcement, only now beginning to register.

"Terr-bear was stolen."

Terr-bear? Stolen?

He pictured Andrea on the other end -- tall, angular and flat-chested, trapped in gridlock on the Brooklyn-Queens Expressway or choosing a beverage at a corner grocery. She spoke with a hyper-literate precocity, casually superficial but never disingenuous, that he'd missed since moving to this more earnest city. For months, Terr-bear had lived in Andrea's basement, stuffed inside a battered white file box full of mementos from his relationship with Terry, items he could neither bear to look at nor part with when the end came. Andrea had agreed to store the box for Jimmy when he left New York.

Terr-bear was given to Jimmy by Terry on their second anniversary, brought to life at one of those shopping mall stores where customers design and build personalized teddy bears. Terr-bear donned the same pale blue t-shirt and loose overalls Terry wore the night Jimmy first met her at a mutual friend's cocktail party. When you squeezed Terr-bear's hand, she emitted a recording of Terry's voice that crisply enunciated, "Terr-Bear Loves Jimmy."

And Jimmy loved Terry. Not some moony, juvenile, idealistic love. He knew her intimately, knew her at her ugliest, and remained captivated. He loved her tangled, waist-length hair and her freckled face that never met makeup. He loved the smell of her underarms on a camping trip when she hadn't showered for three days. He loved her disorientation when she woke up in the morning and took several seconds to remember who he was. He loved how intently she argued her politics and her complete inability to take the joke when Jimmy goaded her. He believed he knew her more thoroughly than he'd ever known another human being, and yet could spend a lifetime trying to understand her. For nearly five years, she was his foundation and his companion.

Then, on a crisp fall morning, she left him.

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"Stolen?" Jimmy asked.

"Actually, my car got jacked," Andrea said. "Another joyride. We found it around the block a day after I filed the police report. They cleaned out the trunk."

For a moment, he wondered what might have brought Terr-bear to the trunk of Andrea's car. Then he remembered Andrea's father had asked her to remove Jimmy's white file box from their family basement, and the box had sat in Andrea's trunk for several months while she procrastinated shipping it to him.

"Listen—" Andrea said. "Gotta go. Driving. Cop. Call you back."

Jimmy pocketed his cell phone and jumped back from the curb as an SUV barreled around the corner, its front wheels narrowly missing his foot.

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Jimmy was halfway through high school before he figured out how to masturbate using his hand. Until then, he had humped teddy bears. He happened upon the practice by accident, his preteen erection pressing against whatever was nearby, straining for something it had yet to fully comprehend. He began with Jeremy, the large brown bear that had been his primary comfort object since childhood, grinding into the bear's forgiving softness until he experienced his first overpowering explosion. Over time, he experimented with others – Reginald, rigidly stuffed with Styrofoam pellets, won at an amusement park by Jimmy's father and passed down to Jimmy via his mother. Or Princess, not actually a teddy bear, but an orangutan, with thick, easily matted hair and arms that wrapped around Jimmy's back.

An especially self-conscious teenager, he had abandoned the practice rapidly once he learned better. He never told anyone about his history until Terry pried it out of him as they lay tangled one night in their bed sheets at their Williamsburg apartment, sharing stories about their first orgasms.

"I think that's fantastic! I'm convinced that fetishes are more common than they are uncommon. If you dig a little, almost everybody is hiding something freakish."

Jimmy had never thought about his pre-adolescent habit as anything more than random and convenient. And he certainly had never developed the amorous attachments to his toys internet research had taught him was felt by the fetishists labeled "plushies." Although he remembered how he'd felt clutching Jeremy as a younger child, the presexual eroticism of lying crushed by layers of plush fur and stuffing, how he'd imagine he'd been abducted by a benevolent kidnapper who pinned him to the bed. How nurtured he'd felt by such constraints!

"I wouldn't call it a fetish," he said. "Just something I used to do."

"Oh yeah? You never think about how it felt? Rubbing your hard little dick against those teddy bears, shooting your load all over their furry underbellies?"

She stroked him.

"You're getting hard."

"Not because of the teddy bears."

She clutched him tightly.

"You'd do it again, wouldn't you?"

He met her gaze, wide and encouraging. He realized what he'd mistaken for ridicule was in fact curiosity.

"Yes," he said, surprising himself. "I would do it again."

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As if to prove her point that fetishists were in the majority, Terry set out on a protracted quest to discover her own fetish.

"I've always been attracted to firemen," she'd say.

"Too vanilla."

"What about sex with men in suits?"

Once, while Terry speculated a string of latent fetishes, Jimmy looked at her, at her bright, earnest eyes and her open, eager face. He laughed out loud.

"What?" she said. "What?"

"Nothing. You. You're adorable."

They were riding together one night on the elevated train through Brooklyn when the internal lights flickered and died. Positive and negative space reversed. Where before, the train car had tunneled through the darkness, shoved aside its surroundings, the desolate industrial canyons that gaped outside the windows now seemed to engulf the train car, to devour Jimmy.

He remembered feeling intense vertigo, profound panic. Terry clutched him tightly as he burrowed into her shoulder. Pillowed by her breasts as they rose and fell with her breathing, he drooled into her polar fleece, shaking as she stroked his hair and kissed the top of his head.

The lights slowly flickered back on and Jimmy lifted his head, the whole incident lasting less than a minute. Still, he kept a firm grip on Terry until they reached their destination.

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Jimmy and Terry rarely fought. When they did, it was usually about finances. Terry refused to monitor her accounts. She would bounce checks, rack up debt, make purchases without checking her balance. What concerned Jimmy was not so much her irresponsibility as her refusal to believe she had a problem.

"It's not that big a deal," she'd proclaim in the middle of an argument. "It's my money. Can't I handle it my way?"

"It's not just about the money," he said, struggling to explain why his throat seized and his pulse escalated whenever a thin envelope from Terry's bank arrived in the mail. "If I can't trust you to take care of the things that affect you, how can I trust you to take care of the things that affect me?"

Terry's eyes widened and her jaw descended almost imperceptibly. She crossed the room and placed her palm on Jimmy's cheek.

"I'm not going to leave you," she said.

Then, on a crisp fall morning, she left him.

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On a crisp fall morning, Terry left him. A subway train struck her, threw her almost twenty feet. It was 5:00 AM. Terry had left early for work. Only an elderly woman waiting on the opposite platform witnessed the collision.

"It happens every 'coupla years," a police officer told Jimmy. "Coulda fallen. Coulda been pushed. Who knows?"

When Jimmy arrived at the morgue to identify Terry's body, it was mutilated and barely recognizable.

One month later, he carried a white file box into his best friend's basement and boarded an airplane for another city.

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Jimmy sprinted across the street, narrowly avoiding a rickety Toyota.

What, he wondered, should he have for lunch? Chinese? Too heavy. Pizza? He ate that yesterday. ...Terr-bear was stolen. She was just a stuffed animal. Jimmy often wished there were

more food options in the neighborhood. He nearly collided with a passenger pushing through a turnstile, and realized he was inside the transit station. His pocket vibrated. Burritos? It wasn't as if he'd given the bear a second thought during the past seven months. It wasn't as if he ever needed to see it again. No, burritos gave him heartburn. Maybe he should go back to the store and grab something from the vending machine.

He pulled his phone from his pocket and realized he'd missed a call from Andrea.

He collapsed against the wall beside a farecard vending machine. Turnstiles whirled. Passengers pushed through. Jimmy felt the station revolve. Somewhere nearby, a boom box blasted abrasive hip-hop.

He realized Terr-bear wasn't the only thing stolen. The entire file box had been in Andrea's trunk. Pictures of him and Terry on vacation in Costa Rica. Terry's law school diploma. Her backpack, salvaged from the train tracks, a blood stain on the middle pocket.

Trying to remember all of the box's contents, he instead remembered being five years old and losing the only thing that had ever been important to him. He'd left behind Jesse, the teddy bear that had preceded Jeremy, at an International House of Pancakes on a family vacation. He remembered wailing for hours, sitting on his mother's lap as she dabbed at his face with a dry washcloth and he plumbed depths of devastation only reachable by children who lack the knowledge life continues beyond loss.

He felt a wave of that child's emotion travel upward from his gut. He felt nauseous. He balled his hands into fists. He longed to find Terr-bear and tear her limb from limb. He wanted to squeeze and twist her stuffing, to scatter it across the train tracks. He wanted to kiss Terr-bear's head, to inhale his dried saliva where it caked in her fur. He wanted to hold her. He wanted to hump her. He wanted to explode.

Tim Jones-Yelvington lives and writes in Chicago. His work has appeared or is forthcoming in *Annalemma*, *Keyhole*, *Monkeybicycle*, *Pank*, *Smokelong Quarterly*, *elimae* and others. He edited a chapbook of fiction by women about menopause, forthcoming from Bannock Street Books.