

Whose Toy

On his third birthday, among empty boxes and primly folded wrapping paper placed neatly to the side by his parents, Bradley Wayne pulled the last concealed toy from its box, which his mother quickly collected. His powers of discernment were weak, even for a child of Bradley's age—a fact that neither escaped nor much slipped the minds of Bradley's parents, sustaining their general addiction to alarm through times otherwise discomfotingly serene. Nevertheless, Bradley could tell what the toy was, what it was supposed to be; and this was no small feat, but rather an act of extrapolation, seeing how the toy was also all wrong.

The toy had too many edges. That blunt fact of its misconstruction was too obvious to overlook. To see further into its flaws, however, precisely on account of the shadow cast by its paramount flaw, was therefore incisive at the very least. Bradley turned the toy over and frowned. He lifted the exposed underbelly to his mouth and unleashed upon the toy a powerful raspberry. Thick strands of saliva oozed across the finished wood, cascading slowly to the floor, where a viscous puddle did not draw the otherwise constant correction of Bradley's parents.

"He likes it," Bradley's father concluded, patting Bradley on the head a bit too hard for a child. Bradley's father was a surgeon, a man upon whom too much forced precision and bedside manner had acted as a sinister scalpel, neatly slicing his personality into two contradictory halves, the insensitive one living at

home. Bearing a few yellow teeth, Mr. Wayne flicked his boy's ear with waning gusto and sank back into the couch, careful to swirl, but not spill, his bulbous brandy snifter.

Mrs. Wayne, Cindy, was a schoolteacher by trade. Following a path more obscure to herself than to her reticent colleagues, she seemed somehow, each year, to end up in front of classes whose average age was the same as her dead son Travis, and always to favor one arbitrary boy in the bunch as a prodigal student regardless of merit exhibited, conformity to favoritism, or, in a few extreme cases, where the symbolism dissolved into a darker equivalence, dismal attendance.

Of course, Mrs. Wayne had her perpetual favorites, and how could she not, faithfully trailing the same age group across time? Was she likely to forget the growing faces annually separated from her for periods only as long as a summer? If anything, new freckles and sun tans, not the workings of age, were the greater obstacle to immediate recognition for Mrs. Wayne, as additionally was her habit, unconscious to all but the empathizing women of her ongoing support group, of looking for Travis until the very last student was present and sitting, the classroom door poignantly untrafficked, the hallways empty, the echo of the homeroom bell a bit too faint for continued silence, and the academic summer irrevocably over.

It was hardly Bradley's fault that his birthday took place at this time every year, when the hopes and inspirations of another deprived summer reached

their crescendo and dove terribly into disappointment. He was only three years old, and had about as much choice regarding his calendar date as a snake picking its body type. Bradley knew only the one essential thing: the toy was not right. He lifted it over his head with both hands, dropped it onto his broad scalp attempting to throw it, and burst out crying when it hit the floor. There it lay in Bradley's spittle, unperturbed.

"He doesn't love it," Cindy disagreed sharply. "Br-radley doesn't love anything." It was difficult for her to pronounce the boy's name. "He has no idea it was his brother's and he wouldn't care anyway." Mrs. Wayne crossed her arms and looked at the abandoned toy with fury, biting her lip. She had long since retired from pronouncing Travis's name in front of anyone.

"It's a train," Mr. Wayne almost yawned, pushing the toy with his foot into Bradley's immediate reach.

"A trame," Bradley babbled, flailing his arms. He did not believe it was a train. He did not see any evidence of a train, except the ridiculous wooden axles and wheels and the forward smokestack, which was more of a horn. It was probably a rhinoceros or a building, but definitely not a train. Bradley pulled the toy toward him and methodically stuffed it under his rear end.

"Jeffrey Wright is in my class again," Mrs. Wayne mentioned.

"The athletic boy?"

"Oh, he's not just athletic. He's an actor. He's very good, too. You should come to the fall production this year. It's Neil Simon."

"I like Neil Simon," admitted Mr. Wayne, sipping brandy.

"Jeffrey Wright will be wonderful, too."

"Have they already cast it?" Mr. Wayne asked, the school year having just begun that week.

Mrs. Wayne blushed at this question. She seemed to come to her senses about carrying on. "I'm just excited," she explained, suddenly gloomy. "It's not that much to ask," she reviled her husband, "that you come to a show, that you spend one interested moment with what's left of your family."

"Now Cindy," began Mr. Wayne, as if to console her. Then the falseness of her argument struck him and he succumbed to a fit of logic. "How is Jeffrey Wright's show an interested moment with my family?"

"With your wife," Cindy said, adjusting her position. It was no use. She would not win an argument with this man. Her impotence against his stranglehold on rational thinking was the clearest means for her to identify him in the first place, and over the years there were fewer and fewer salient features. She bowed her head in defeat and began weeping out of all proportion to the argument.

Mr. Wayne finished off his brandy uneasily in one giant gulp. He leapt to his feet and headed for the liquor cabinet, looking over his shoulder at his wife with a tenderness in his eyes that only being unobserved made possible for him. He unscrewed the brandy bottle and watched a thick stream fill his glass.

Mr. Wayne did not know that Bradley was looking at him, extending the train in his padded hands, as if to say, "No! This is not a train after all. This is something other than a train. It's not even a toy, not for children. For adults." But Mr. Wayne did not hear this objection, or perceive its mute presence as he turned from the liquor cabinet and looked down at Bradley. He did not understand that Bradley was giving the train back, not requesting its animation.

"You want to play, you nut?" Mr. Wayne mistakenly responded, glancing self-consciously at his wife. "I could just as easily have been talking to her," he thought to himself. He decided to lower himself to the floor, placing his brandy at a safe distance on the carpet.

Mr. Wayne took the train from his son and for a moment the boy's face lit up with glee. Bradley's eyes widened; he cooed; with his hands free, he grabbed hold of his ears and began tugging them rapturously. He patted his palms against his face and let himself drool rather wildly.

Mr. Wayne could not fail to notice. He was not that drunk or indifferent that so lively a reaction from his son was completely lost to him. It made him wonder what was therefore so special about the train to elicit such excitement from Bradley, who was normally unreadable. Was it the prospect of having his father animate the train, of being played with? Was it somehow the train's aesthetic wonder itself, the rawness and grain of the wood, the paradoxical delicateness of the tin reinforcement? Mr. Wayne looked the train over a few times and found nothing exceptional about its craftsmanship. On the other

hand, he became totally engrossed by every detail and did not take his eyes away for some time.