

Jack the Extroverted Teddy Bear

by Alex Markley

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I - Jack:

The first thing I remember noticing about myself was that I knew English. There was none of this, “I think, therefore I am,” crap. I skipped all of that and went directly to trying to figure out why I knew English.

Of course, it might help for you to hear some background. See, I am a bear. And I don’t mean the kind that lumbers around, roars, and bats at the backpack that you were stupid enough to think you could tie up out of reach. No, I am a teddy bear.

Don’t give me that look. If I wanted your opinion, I would beat it out of you. If you don’t want to keep reading, that’s fine by me.

Of course you’re wondering how a teddy bear could possibly be writing, let alone writing perfect English. Well, if I told you that, I’d be getting ahead of the story, wouldn’t I? I mean, I didn’t know at the time, so why should you?

Anyway, you can imagine my confusion. Being conscious for the first time that I recall, I tried desperately to remember anything at all. Failing that, I took to surveying my situation.

I was sitting among a horrendous jumble of colorful boxes. Immediately above, a random distribution of small, bright, colorful lights blinded me enough to prevent me from seeing much beyond said boxes.

I don’t honestly remember how long I just sat there, but it was probably a while. Eventually, my self-absorption was interrupted by the voice of a little girl.

“Ooh! Look at all the presents Santa brought us!”

“Santa can’t exist, you dummy,” came the hushed retort from her slightly older brother. “If he tried to cover the whole earth in one night, that tub of lard would explode all over the map.”

“Bravo,” I thought. I liked that kid already.

“You’re mean!” whispered the girl harshly. “I bet Santa brought me more presents than you, ’cause you’re mean!”

“Yeah right!” the brother raised his voice slightly.

“I’m gonna count mine,” said the girl.

“Oh yeah?” the boy retorted. “Well I’m gonna count mine too!”

What a bright bunch. I was already feeling lucky - right in the pit of my stomach.

Several minutes of shuffling caused the already-chaotic assortment of boxes to become more and more like the aftermath of a cyclone.

“What’s going on here?” the mother asked, stumbling groggily out of another room. “You’re not arguing, are you?”

“Nope!” the two little tots smiled and chimed in unison.

“Well good,” The mother replied. “I’m going to make some coffee before I wake your father. Don’t open any presents until then.”

“We won’t!” Another synchronized response.

They continued sorting - making their way to the back of the pile. I was at the back of the pile, and it wasn’t long before the girl had claimed me.

Of course, I wasn’t always as bitter as I am now. At the time, I was something of an idealist. And as optimistic as I was, I had only one response.

“Hi! I’m Jack. Wanna be friends?”

The girl dropped me.

“I know,” I said, “let’s hug!”

The girl screamed for her mother as she and her brother hid in a corner.

“What’s the matter, sweetie?” asked the mother.

“I’m sorry, did I say something wrong?” I asked.

“George, GEORGE!” screamed the woman, dropping a perfectly good cup of coffee on the present-littered floor. “Get the shotgun!”

I said the first thing that came to my head. “Oh bother.”

II - Mulberry:

Agent Mulberry was a sad shell of a man. Officially, he was an agent with the FBI, but there was something of a problem with that.

Mulberry had an obsession with the paranormal.

They say that admitting the problem is the first step toward fixing it. In Mulberry's case, there was no 'fixing' - there was only medication and patience.

Over the years, the FBI put up with Mulberry's eccentricities as much as possible. Nonetheless, his rank and dignity had steadily degraded until he was working in the basement right next to the water pipes and air-conditioning. He had to replace the light bulb over his desk himself, he was allotted one pen a year, and his gun had been confiscated long, long ago.

He didn't mind, though. To him, the solitude was just an opportunity to investigate the paranormal more thoroughly.

As he went through his cattle mutilation file for the hundredth time, he was suddenly startled into alertness by a woman coming down the stairs. Always ready for action, Mulberry quickly readied his civilian tazer and called out, "Who's there?"

"Agent Mulberry?" asked the woman.

"No, I'm Mulberry," said Mulberry. "Who are you?"

"I'm Agent Dully. I don't normally associate with losers, but Assistant Director Tanner thought you might be able to lend some insight on a case that I'm working on."

"Well?" Mulberry asked. "I'm all ears."

She recounted the horrific tale of the Christmas home invasion, ending with the father's attempt to shoot the invader and the invader's nimble escape.

"I must say..." she said. "I have no idea why the FBI cares."

"Well," Mulberry pondered thoughtfully, "it's probably because this is a short story - as opposed to a novel, film, or other comprehensive storytelling medium."

"Hey," she said, "you're good."

"I try," he said humbly. "Anyway, why did Tanner think that I'd care?"

"Oh," Dully said, "did I forget to mention the very most important detail about the case?"

"If your name is any indication, it's just possible."

Dully lowered her voice - adding to the suspense. "The suspect is the girl's teddy bear."

Mulberry narrowed his eyes and steepled his fingers - as if deep in thought.

"Can you shed any light on this enigma?" Dully asked.

"None at all," Mulberry answered decisively. "Have you ever noticed how different the right hand is from the left? It boggles my mind!"

III - Dejection:

Now, it's not every day that you struggle to come to terms with your own existence only to be chased about by a disheveled, shotgun-toting, obscenity-flinging fat man wearing ill-fitting pajamas. As a matter of fact, if that EVER happens, it's just going to set a negative tone for the rest of your life.

What? Will the stupid people stop asking stupid questions? Of course I escaped! How else could I be writing this now? Sheesh...

Where was I? Ah yes, the permanent scar of bitterness in my soul.

The encounter with the fat man shook me up pretty badly. I had escaped through the apartment window, scaled up the face of the building, and found myself on the roof of a very tall building indeed. And there I sat, observing the cityscape bathed in snowy pre-dawn.

Deep down, I knew my purpose - the reason I was made - was to be loved by a child and to bring a smile to that child's face. For the sake of irony, it should be mentioned that at that point, I also believed in the innate goodness of humanity. (At least now I can look back and laugh.)

Eventually, I decided to make my way down to find some more deserving humans.

After surveying my situation thoroughly, I decided that I simply couldn't descend the way I came. A little exploring revealed a skylight near the center of the roof. Peering inside, I could see a large ballroom filled with people. A party, perhaps?

After working on the skylight for several long minutes, I managed to accidentally break it and fall inside. This upset everybody, and is widely regarded as a bad move.

After the initial collective gasp, there was a moment of highly awkward silence. Then I got up and dusted the snow off of myself. "Gee, everybody," I announced to the group. "I'm sorry about that. I'm still just trying to get used to these paws."

Have you ever noticed that herds of people tend to roar just before they stampede? No? Well, they do.

After the insanity finally died down, I found myself in the clutches of a man who was even worse than the fat man I'd clashed with earlier.

"A stuffed bear that can talk, eh?" the rude man said.

"Is that what's got everyone upset?" I asked.

Ignoring my question, the rude man continued, "Where did you come from, bear? Who sent you?"

"If I pretend that I can't answer, will you let me go?"

"Let's call the police!" some random woman shouted.

"Or the FBI!" another interjected with glee.

This seemed to please the masses, so they threw me in a box, placed something heavy on top of it, and presumably called the FBI.

IV - Springing Into Action:

Mulberry may not have been terribly intelligent, but he was usually ready for action. All he needed was his trusty tazer and his random assortment of papers that just might contain information pertinent to the future. (A claim that nobody could ever effectively refute.)

Thusly prepared, Mulberry left with Dully to investigate the apartment where this story began.

During the drive there, Dully's phone rang.

"Hi, this is Agent Dully," she chimed as she answered it. "Sorry I can't come to the phone right now, but if you leave your name and a message, I'll get back to you right away. Beep."

She then listened for a few moments before closing the phone. "It's about the bear," she reported. "He's been captured at a Christmas party conveniently located three stories up from where we were already headed."

"It's entirely too convenient, if you ask me," Mulberry said thoughtfully.

"Good thing I know better than to ask you," Dully said matter-of-factly.

"Convenience? Or conspiracy..." Mulberry mused.

"Maybe the bear can't travel very fast on his stubby little legs?" Dully suggested.

"Convenience..." Mulberry continued, oblivious to all aspects of reality. "What do those little convenience stores have to hide anyway? They've all got 'Employees Only' doors!"

"Boy, I'm glad I'm not a main character in this franchise," Dully said, "or I'd just commit suicide right here."

"And how about the fact that they all look alike?" Mulberry was now on a roll. "You go from state to state, and everything's the same! Oh, they change things around a bit to confuse you, but it's really all the same."

"I want to hurt you so badly," Dully said, losing her cool. "Why won't the author let me hurt you? WHY?!"

V - Meeting:

It was dark and peaceful in the box, although I didn't really feel at peace. How could all of humanity be so disappointingly - even dangerously - dense? At the time I thought it a wonder that they didn't just go around killing each other. Now I know that some of them do.

After an indeterminate time, I was suddenly blinded by the light that flooded in as the box was lifted - revealing Agents Mulberry and Dully.

This time I knew to keep my mouth shut, so instead, I just looked up at them.

"Hi!" Mulberry began. "I'm Agent Mulberry from the Paranormal Division of the FBI. This is Agent Dully, and I don't really know what she does, but by golly it can't be much." I tried to sum up the man as he spoke, but was forced to reserve judgement for the time being.

Ignoring all reason and context, Dully spoke. "Are you the bear that's been terrorizing this building all day?" My opinion of her was cemented in stone instantly.

"No," I shook my head sadly, "but he wanted me to tell you that you'll never find him, as he's escaped to Canada."

"Say," Mulberry began, "you seem awfully paranormal."

"That's funny," I said. "I feel normal."

"Oh well," Mulberry shrugged. "The truth is out there somewhere."

"Wait a minute," I said, coming to a sudden realization. "That was the first time that anyone has ever responded to me as if I were an equal!" I was moved. This was the first person who I felt I could interact with on a meaningful level - even if he was bafflingly unintelligent.

“Well,” Dully interjected, “since this case is insoluble, I might as well go home. Why am I working on Christmas anyway?”

“You’re probably just workaholic scum who never pays enough attention to her family,” I observed dryly.

“Yeah,” she nodded her head solemnly, “you’re probably right.”

“I should probably go home too,” Mulberry mused.

“May I go with you?” I asked.

“Sure!” Mulberry exclaimed. “Why not?”

“He’s a stupid talking bear!” Dully interjected. “That’s why not!”

“Why haven’t you left yet?” I asked.

“Well,” Dully said, “it just occurred to me that I’m a fictional character.”

“So?” Mulberry wanted to know.

“What if I stop existing once I leave?!” Dully started to lose her cool again.

“That sounds like a personal problem to me,” Mulberry said.

“But it’s already been established that I’m not a main character!” Dully whined. “What if I’m never seen again?!”

Then, suddenly, Agent Dully vanished in a puff of narrative intervention, and was never seen again.

VI - Home:

“So Jack,” Mulberry began as he hot-wired Dully’s abandoned car, “you’re a bear, but not of the ordinary variety - correct?”

“I don’t really know,” I admitted as I buckled the passenger seat belt around myself. “I suppose that would explain the negative reactions people keep having around me, although I find it difficult to believe that I’m the only talking bear in existence.”

“I’ve never heard of one before,” Mulberry said simply. Once he got the car started, Mulberry put it in gear and began the trek back to his apartment. “Don’t you remember anything of your origin? Where you came from? Who made you?”

“Do you?” I asked.

“Not really,” Mulberry said.

“What about this paranormal investigation business?” I asked. “What do you hope to accomplish?”

“I hope to uncover the truth about things like aliens, ghosts, and the value of the US Dollar!” he announced proudly. “It’s my whole life.”

“What makes you feel so strongly about finding this truth?” I asked. “Was your sister abducted? Was your family brutally murdered?”

“No, not really,” Mulberry mused. “Like my father always said, ‘Son, you will never amount to anything.’”

“You know, that was probably a prediction - not an order,” I said.

“Well it’s too late to fix it now,” Mulberry said cheerfully.

The idea of investigating paranormal phenomenon intrigued me at the time. Perhaps it was a desire to know more about my own origins. Perhaps I was just delusional.

“Can I help you with your paranormal investigations?” I asked.

Mulberry laughed. “No, I don’t think the FBI would take too kindly to that.”

We arrived at Mulberry’s apartment building, and he led the way to the apartment.

“It’s not much,” Mulberry said as he dropped his coat on some random furniture, “but it’s home. You’re welcome to stay until you can get back on your feet. Er, paws...”

“Thank you,” I said. He sure wasn’t kidding when he said it wasn’t much. Everything about the decor screamed ‘college dropout’, ‘single without prospects’, ‘no eye for art’, etc. After the last 18 hours, however, I wasn’t about to complain.

VII - Conflict:

Mulberry had already left for work by the time I awakened. However, he never made it to his desk.

“Mulberry,” an agent caught him just inside the building. “Assistant Director Tanner wants to see you. I guess it’s pretty urgent.”

“Thanks,” Mulberry called and made his way up to Tanner’s office.

“So, I hear Dully is gone,” Tanner said.

“Yeah,” Mulberry said. “The author intervened directly.”

“Gosh I hate it when that happens,” Tanner shivered. “It’s just so unnerving.”

“Did you want to speak with me about something sir?” Mulberry asked.

“What about that case Dully was working on?” Tanner got right to business. “Did you nab that bear?”

“Well, not exactly ‘nab’, sir. We found him, but he really hadn’t committed any crime, so we didn’t detain him.”

“What?!” Tanner screamed. “That bear is evidence! It should be in our custody!”

“You’re kidding, right?” Mulberry laughed. “Evidence of what?”

“Mulberry,” Tanner started menacingly, “if you know where that bear is, you’d better turn it over to me.”

“You sure are acting weird, sir,” Mulberry said. “Are you ok?”

“Do you think that there aren’t any more ways I can humiliate you, Mulberry?” Tanner sneered.

“You’d have to be awfully creative to get me lower than the basement, sir.”

“What if I fire you?”

“You can’t do that.”

“Why not?”

“You already fired me months ago,” Mulberry explained. “You even stopped paying me. You just forgot to revoke my building access.”

“Oh yeah, I remember now...” Tanner nodded to himself. “Well, your building access is revoked. Get out.”

“Sir,” Mulberry asked, “why are you doing this? He’s just a bear, and he’s never done anyone any harm.”

“I’m secretly evil. Now get out.”

VIII - Resolution:

When Mulberry got home, he found me tidying up. I noticed the concern in his face, and asked what was wrong.

He explained the whole situation, and I patted him on the back. “There there, that’s alright. You don’t need them anyway.”

“How do you figure?” he asked.

“You could start your own paranormal investigative unit!” I suggested, getting excited. “I could even help!”

Mulberry laughed bitterly. “I don’t think so. You’re only a bear - how could you possibly help?”

Just then, the door burst open, revealing two FBI agents. Guns drawn, they ran into the room shouting. “Alright Mulberry, we’re here for the bear. Where is he?”

“Here I am!” I saw my chance and took it - taking a flying leap onto the nearest agent’s face. “You need a hug!”

I hugged the agent’s face as affectionately as I possibly could, causing him to drop his gun and scream. “Get it off! Get it off!” The resulting pandemonium was quite satisfying, and gave Mulberry more than enough time to retrieve his tazer, which he quickly used to zap the agents silly.

Once they were both down, I extracted myself and dusted myself off. “See, I’m not entirely useless!” I said. “You really should start a private paranormal investigation business. We can be partners!”

“You know,” Mulberry said thoughtfully, “I think you’ve got something there.”

“We can even start today!” I was undeniably excited. “I wonder what our first case will be?”

Then I remembered the two unconscious agents on the floor. “Uh, what are we going to do with these guys?”

“Well,” Mulberry said thoughtfully, “I always pictured the dumpster as a good place for that sort of thing, so I figure we can just chuck ‘em in there.”

“Neat,” I said. “May I keep one of these guns?”

“Sure,” Mulberry said. “I think I’m sticking with my tazer though.”

“Awesome!” I hefted my new toy. “Let’s go find something paranormal and investigate it!”

END