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British Literature

September 16, 2016

Drop Off

I silently watched my son as he finished packing up the few belongings he was taking with him to college. He loaded them up in his car: an oversized duffel bag with clothes and toiletries, and a plastic bag with bedding that included a plain, solid colored comforter. I could not help but smile when I remembered a conversation I've had with one of my best friends just days ago. Her daughter had just started college, and it took a van full of artifacts, clothing and decorations to move her in to a dorm. Yes, boys were definitely simple creatures, and with four of them, I enjoyed listening to stories about mothering girls, with a patronizing smirk.

"Are you ready?" I asked Gilberto, my youngest.

"Yep" he nonchalantly responded.

I congratulated myself at how fine and well-adjusted I sounded. Sure, I had had my moments of sadness, as I had savored every moment with my son for the last year, knowing that soon I would not see him appear, sleepily and with ruffled curly hair, from his bedroom every morning. My husband and I silently accompanied him to the car, a white Ford Explorer. Gilberto tossed his belongings in the back. As we drove the two and a half hours to Riverside, my mind flooded with far away and recent memories. In my mind's eye, I saw Gilberto as a baby, with big brown, eerily aware eyes, and thick, black, glossy ringlets for hair. He had been the epitome of the angry twos. His dark eyes would flash indignantly at any perceived injustice, and the decibels his unusually deep voice could reach had the capacity to induce madness.

As he grew up, his rigid, controlling character led to multiple meltdowns. He could not understand how people could be so clueless sometimes, and his sense of inner justice made him exhaustingly irate. Fortunately, Gilberto was my fourth, so I took his ill temper and idiosyncrasies in stride, even amusement, when I saw a tiny person bursting with such adult sized emotions. I also recognized that he was unusually aware and sensitive to the world around him, and I felt deeply for him,

because frankly, our world was not easy for a few years. As a single mother, I had to struggle to put food on the table, and I went back to school, which limited my time with my children.

Fortunately, by the time Gilberto was ten or eleven years old, he found likeminded friends, and school and community he not only liked but thrived in. He began to flourish, and although he had always excelled academically, he started truly enjoying school and pushing himself, motivated by his group of close friends. He became friendly, and he shed his childish tantrums without a look back. In high school he took all the right classes, and applied to college. We were now in the process of transporting him to UC Riverside, where he would be pursuing an electrical engineering degree.

The past year had been tough. Gilberto had lost his father and broken up with his high school sweetheart, and somehow I felt that he was blaming me for the way he was feeling. I prudently kept my distance, giving him space to heal, but I wanted to cherish those last few months with him, and these were not the ideal conditions to become overly affectionate, so we rode in silence, occasionally chit chatting in an innocuous manner. We finally arrived to the campus. There was an air of palpable excitement, despite the one hundred and ten degree weather. Volunteers in neon orange directed traffic and answered questions. As Gilberto, my husband and I got out of the car we were hit in the face by a dry furnace blast. My husband took matters into his hand, and accompanied Gilberto to several stations manned by student volunteers. Eventually, my son triumphantly emerged with his student badge, keys to his dorm, and a folder full of information. As my spirits sank lower, these events had in Gilberto the opposite effect. Gilberto's demeanor was visibly altered, from a laconic, somber young man, into a college student bursting with excitement at this new adventure in life.

"Hold it together," I sternly reminded myself, "you do not want to ruin this for him." Gilberto impatiently waved us forward, towards the building that housed the dorms. Personally, I didn't see what the rush was. We entered the building, which was blessedly air conditioned, climbed two flight of stairs, and finally arrived at his dorm. My attitude deteriorated even more when I saw the tiny, enclosed space. "Is this where all my money is going to?" I wondered, annoyed. It hardly seemed worth it.

But it was obviously worth it to Gilberto. For at least a week prior, I had envisioned the moment when we said our goodbyes. My son and I had not spoken much to each other, consumed in the frenzied activity of preparing for this move. At least half a dozen times I had offered to buy him items that apparently he did not need. I now realized that he had been right all along, and the few dishes and utensils he had brought from home were more than enough. Exactly seven days ago, however, Gilberto

had given me a gift. It was a DVD of *Toy Story 3*. He had said I would appreciate the story, and it was better if I saw it after he left. I did not argue with that; first, I am not a fan of animated movies, and second, I frankly had no time to sit down and watch a movie, so I tossed it in with the rest of the DVDs.

This was it. As we helped Gilberto bring in the few possessions he had brought with him, we faced each other.

“Um, would you like me to help you set up your dorm?” I timidly inquired.

“No, don’t bother, I got this. Goodbye then.”

That was it then. I awkwardly embraced him; all the words of wisdom I had anticipated sharing with him never materialized. All my prayers, blessings and terms of endearment suddenly seemed inappropriate. My husband was a tad more effusive than I was, even throwing in a “love you, man,” that was met with a nod.

My husband and I walked silently to the car. I was quiet and pensive on the way home. The whole experience had been so unemotional that I did not know what to think. I suddenly felt weary, closed my eyes and slept the rest of the way home.

I had anticipated a long day of sharing maybe a last meal together close to campus, sight seeing, spending a last quality day with my youngest before he went on to the next stage in his life, but when we got home, the late afternoon still loomed emptily ahead. Something was nagging at me, and I could not pinpoint it. I felt frustrated and empty. In desperation, I dug through our DVD collection, and came across *Toy Story 3*. I inserted it in the player, and started watching.

I was instantly mesmerized. Gilberto had warned me I was going to cry, and it turns out he was right. By the time I reached the scene where Andy gives away his toys, a symbol of shedding his childhood, I was a blubbering mess. Then I realized what this child of mine had done. It was his way of saying goodbye, of letting me know that he understood the impact of this change in my life. The thought process that went into his decision to give me this gift illustrated how much he did care. I cried for a long time; for the baby, toddler and little boy that were gone forever, and over the fact that my son hardly needed me any more. But mostly, I cried because I was so proud of him it hurt.

