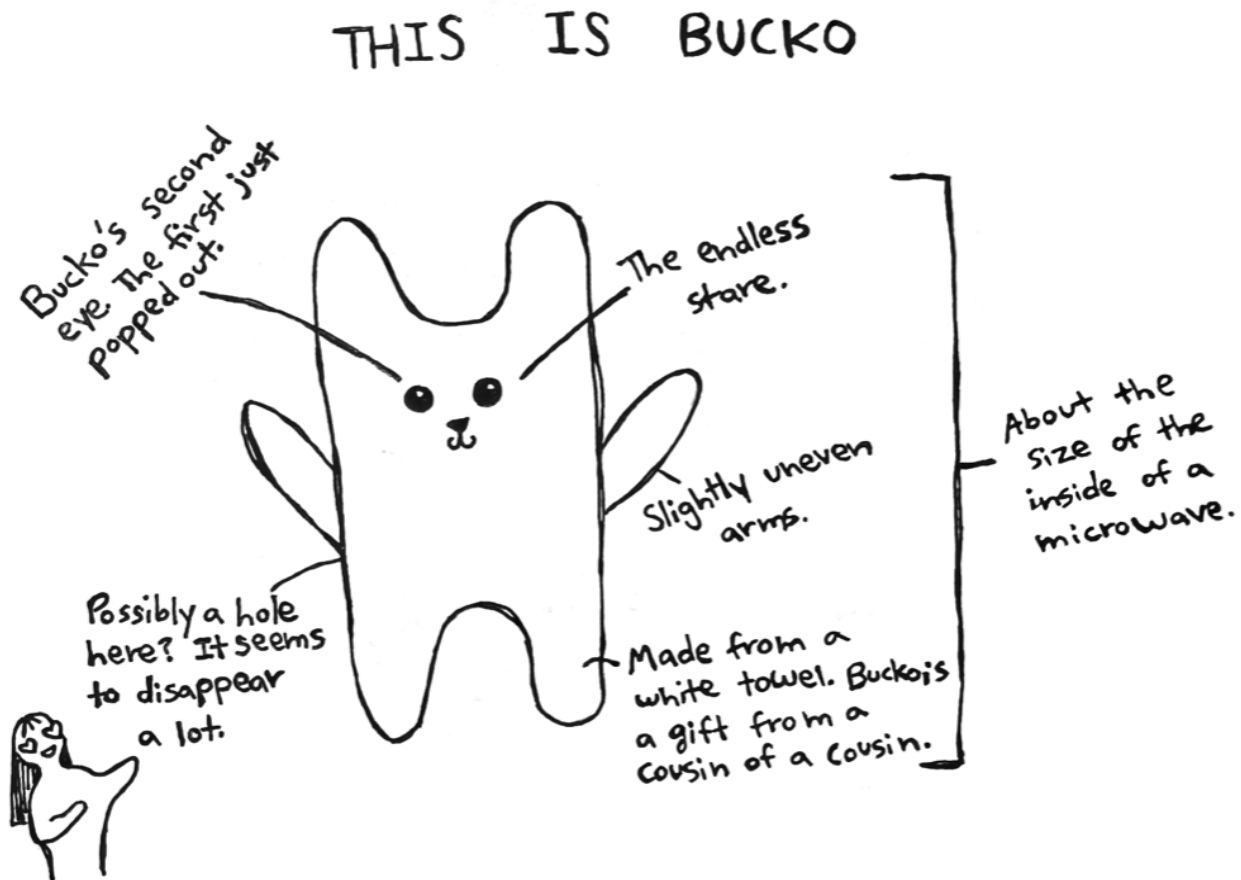
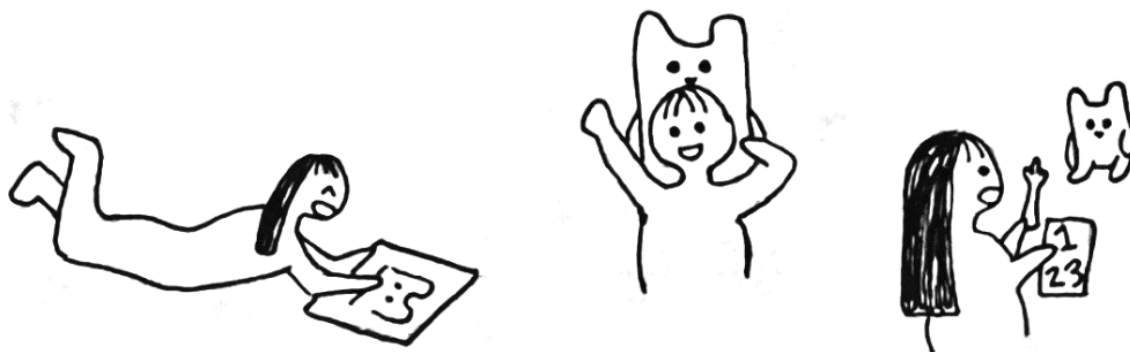


Bucko

For a long time when I was growing up, I practiced equity, splitting my precious time evenly between legos, dinosaur figurines, and pillow pets. I was above picking favorites. That all changed in third grade when I opened up a box at Christmas and received the life form that would reshape my childhood: a white fuzzy being of enormous flatness, vaguely rabbit-shaped but truly beyond human comprehension of animality, Bucko.



I was instantly obsessed.



And this phenomenon didn't affect just me, but my whole family. Bucko sat with us while we watched tv. Sometimes it even sat at the dinner table while we ate. But on a day-to-day basis, my family saw Bucko as a potential troublemaker, lazy with no ambition.

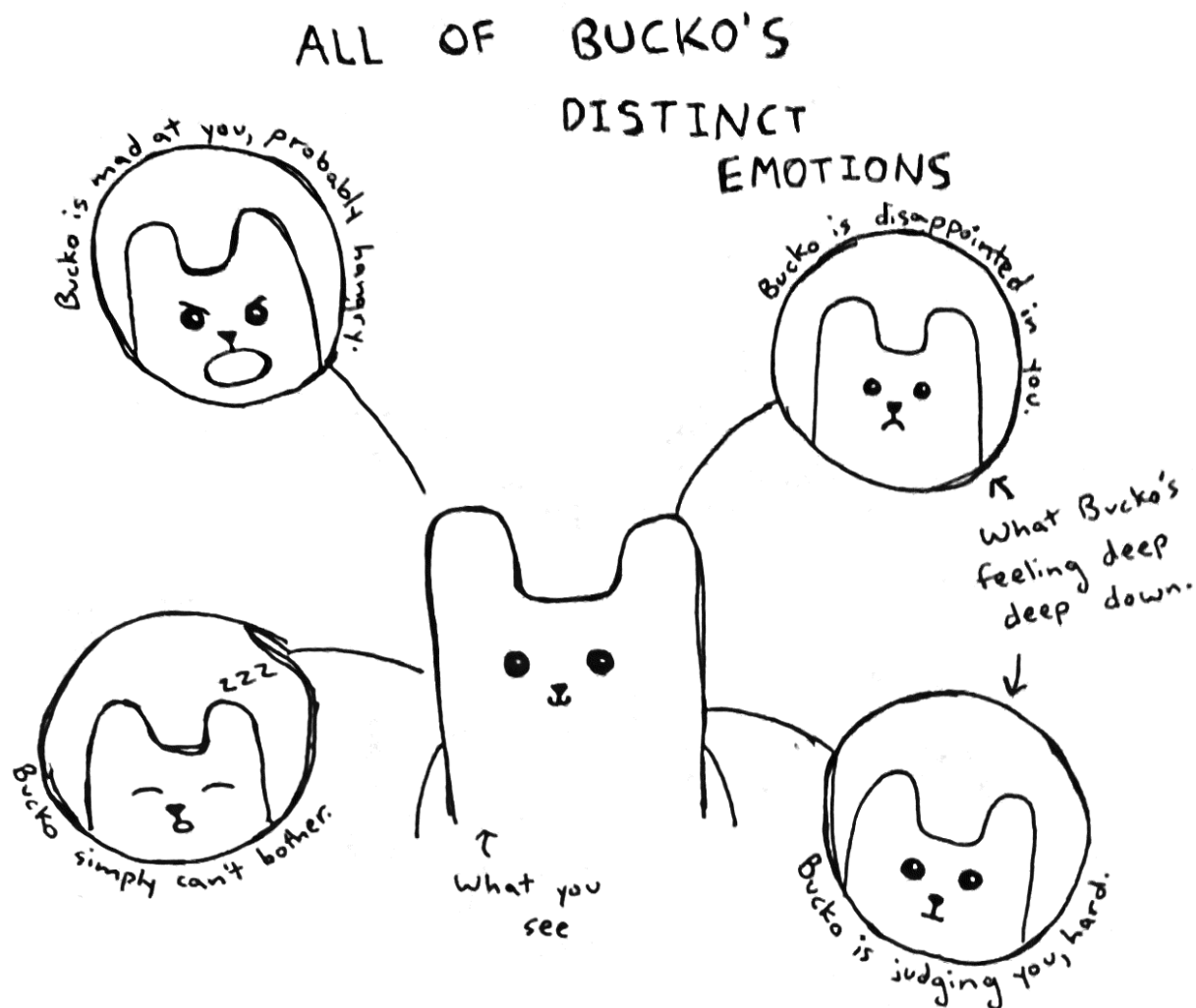
When my parents would leave my brother and I alone at home, they'd say things like: "Remember, the number one rule is no explosives in the house. Be good. I'm looking at you, Bucko!" Or, when it was tax season, someone would offhandedly remark that: "Bucko needs to pull its weight. All it does is eat and sleep."

Even when Bucko became the recurring hero of the stuffed animal adventures my brother and I embarked on, my brother always insisted that it save the day last minute.



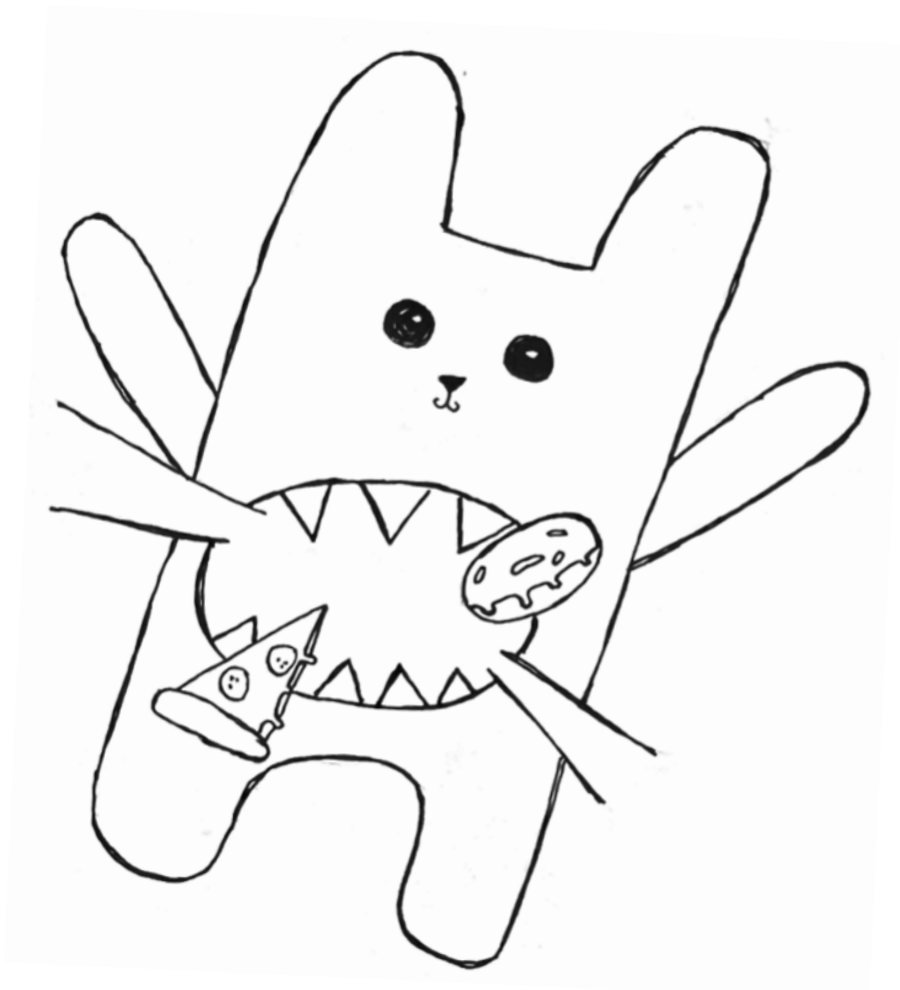
My brother would also do this voice for Bucko (I'd never dare speak for it) and he always made Bucko sound drunk. There were a lot of belches. And when my brother waved its arms around, he'd make Bucko pat its stomach like it had just eaten a huge meal and was having intestine trouble.

All of this was a gross mischaracterization and I knew better. After all, there had been something about Bucko that had drawn us all from the beginning, an undeniable magnetic force. Over time, as I made it my goal to flesh out its personality, I began to understand the essence of "Bucko." For example, part of my responsibility became accurately interpreting how it was feeling. Bucko's a pretty private being.



It took a lot of practice to validate these.

Another aspect that took a long time to understand was Bucko's eating habits (it ate a lot for its size). These habits weren't born out of laziness, but necessity. You see, its stomach was bigger on the inside, possibly infinite like Hermione's bag or the Tardis. Bucko had to constantly consume, directly into its stomach, to be satisfied.



The more I learned, the more I fueled my obsession. I drew comics with Bucko, planned novels. I snuck Bucko into dinner parties hosted by my parents' friends (so essentially strangers) underneath my coat. Most importantly, I brought Bucko along every single family trip, a permanent fixture in my backpack or in between my brother and I in the car.

But like everything about childhood, it eventually had to end. Bucko started to lose dimension, becoming even flatter as its stuffing compressed. Over time, it became more of a limp pillow slumped over my bedspread than the vibrant figure of its youth. And in turn, as I also grew older, I lost interest. The only thing I stuck with, perhaps out of habit or some vestige of connection, was that I still took Bucko with me on all my trips.

Then I hit a period of turmoil, of hard strife, the summer after eighth grade when I wasn't a middle schooler anymore but still less than a freshman. It was a period of braces, cutting my hair short, and convincing my parents to let me drop private cello lessons. I needed to figure out my identity, who I was going to be for my entire high school career. That summer between eighth grade and high school, for the first time, challenged my last link to Bucko.

My family had planned a big three-week vacation to Paris, Greece, and Istanbul, our first trip overseas. Everyone in my family was allowed one carry-on suitcase and a backpack. My parents told me repeatedly to be a minimalist packer, smart. My fourteen-year-old self decided this meant leaving Bucko behind. But secretly, what I wouldn't tell my family was that I knew I could find a way to bring it along if I wanted; I was deliberately choosing not to.



My family actually objected.

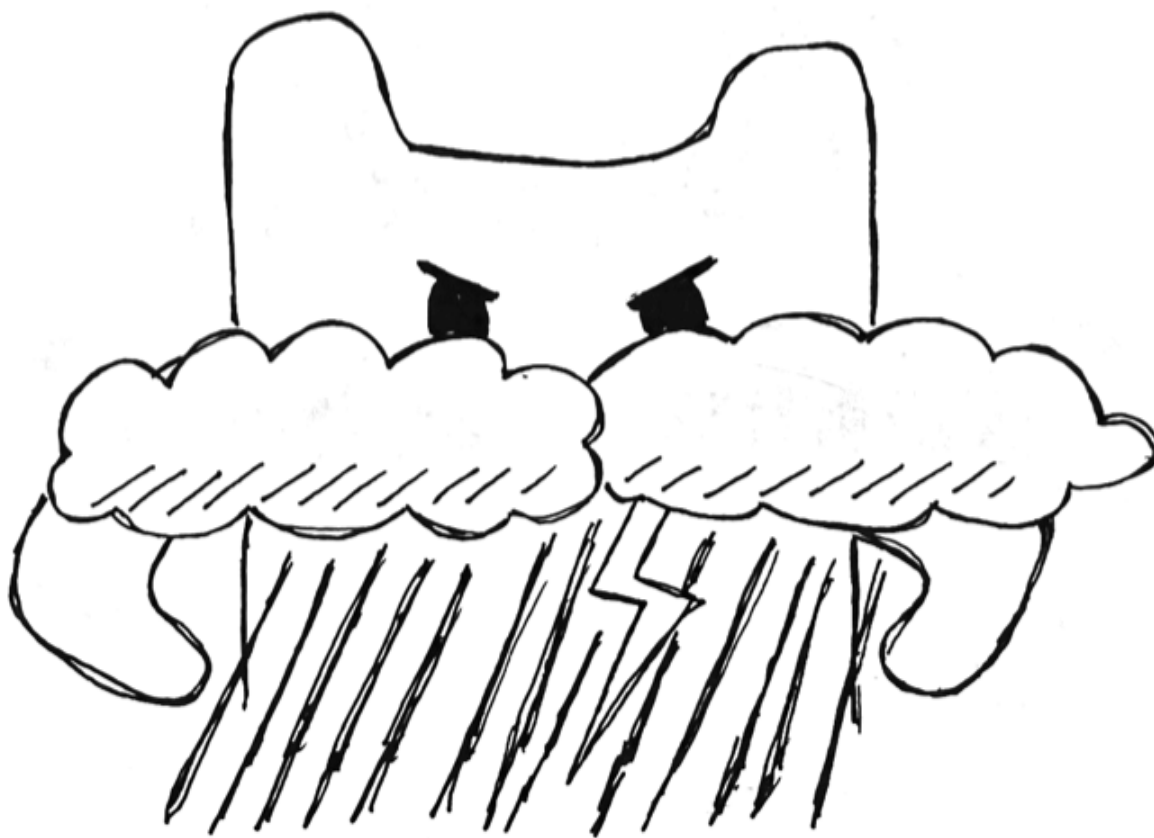
“We can’t leave Bucko behind,” my mother said.

“We’re leaving Bucko behind?” my brother jumped in.

They mimed how sad Bucko would feel, trying to get me to change my mind. But although I felt guilty, I remained steadfast even as we loaded our suitcases into the car to drive to the airport. I told myself that I was being preemptive, giving myself distance before the day came that Bucko would fall apart or worse, lose the last of its meaning. When I took my seat in the car, buckling myself in uneasily, I tried to shove my betrayal to the back of my mind.

We never made it onto our flight. A rainstorm swept through the area so strong it knocked out the power, rendering traffic lights obsolete. At first we persisted, crossing several intersections... probably illegally. But when we made it to the airport, we learned another thing: the rainstorm wasn’t just affecting our area, there was a bad weather system all along the East Coast including the airport where we were supposed to make our first connection. Our plane was grounded. There was nothing we could do but switch our tickets to another flight that would leave the next day.

Historically, in all my years, I had never missed a flight before, much less had one canceled so dramatically. As we drove back home, silent, I had a suspicion I knew the cause of our misfortune.



The next day, as we rushed out the door, I took a moment to zip Bucko into my backpack. When I sat down on the plane, clear sky out the window, a very important fact was confirmed. As my younger self used to recognize, Bucko was not just some quirky stuffed organism of mysterious depths, but **POWERFUL**. And Bucko had reminded me of something important: some things are worth holding onto and taking with you, even if you think you've outgrown them.





THE
END