

A horse is a horse and a way to talk adoption, of course

A few weeks ago Leo got an invitation to a friend's birthday at a store where you make your own stuffed animal. There were a few long weeks, but finally, finally, finally it was the day of the party.

While his preschool classmates picked rainbow bears and rabbits and dogs, Leo settled on a horse.

He—and each of his classmates—put a small stuffed heart inside the limp animal skins and then helped blow the stuffing inside, all while singing “Happy Birthday to You.” Then they took turns grooming their new animals and picking out clothes for them to wear.



Leo, who believes you can never own too many stuffed “friends,” thoroughly enjoyed it. He told me the horse was a girl, and he chose a yellow dress for her.

At one point, though, when Leo came over to me, I heard him—or, as it turned out, the horse—whimpering.

“What’s wrong?” I asked.

“She’s crying,” Leo said, “because she just met me, and she doesn’t know me yet.”

Immediately I understood, and I remembered a conversation Leo and I had a few months ago while playing with his stuffed animals.

That night he announced that his cat and dog were going to China to adopt his stuffed train. The cat and dog—played by me—flew across the room to reach China and landed on Leo’s bed. The train—played by Leo—was cowering in the corner of the bed, whimpering.

“We’re your mama and baba, Choo-Choo,” I had the cat and dog say. “Why are you so sad?”

"I'm scared," said the train.

"Why are you scared?" the cat asked.

"Well," said the train in a squeaky voice, "I don't know you yet."

And, of course, the train was right. The train didn't know the cat and the dog—and this new horse didn't know Leo—any more than Leo knew us the day he met us. Sure, he had seen photos of us and our home. And yes, he had been told that his parents were coming and that he would be going to the United States. But he had just turned 2.

I like to think that we've talked about Leo's adoption story often enough—and shown him photos of that initial meeting—that he realizes that the sadness and grieving was real. The way he talks about it through his animals, however, makes me wonder whether he remembers those first days together. Whether he remembers or just recognizes the emotions from the photos of that day, he is almost certainly thinking and processing more than he is articulating.

The horse's whimpering didn't bother Leo. I think he actually liked that she was sad so he could comfort her. He held the horse up to show her how the stuffing machine worked. He was protective of the horse when a couple classmates got a little rough and accidentally almost knocked her out of his arms. And he sat her on a stool to show her the computer where her "birth certificate" was being made.



I am sure none of the other animals created at the party were crying because they didn't know their new owners. I suspect your average 4-year-old wouldn't think their new animal would be anything but overjoyed to meet them.

Still, for Leo—for better or for worse—it was a natural part of the process of meeting his new horse for the first time. And the horse? By the time we left the store, she was happily talking about how she had never ridden inside a car.