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Not Fade Away

Dace was not a sensitive man. Had he been more sensitive, perhaps his wife might have stayed with him, despite all the disputes and disappointments. Now his wife was gone. The house on the edge of town was sold, and he occupied a small apartment over an empty store, right in the middle of the business district. There were more than a few empty stores in the business district, and empty office space as well. Like all the other small cities, Ephesus was dying.

A more sensitive man would have noticed the boy within a few days, but it was nearly four months before the boy penetrated the man's defensive anesthesia and was seen. It was two more months before Dace grudgingly accepted the idea that the boy might be real, not just a byproduct of isolation. He tried to think of the boy as "the ghost," but it was impossible. The ghost was a boy, and refused to be understood as anything but a boy.

Death never canceled his youth or his gender or his boyish sensibilities. On the contrary, death ensured that he would remain a boy forever.

In the early days, Dace caught little glimpses at the edges of his visual field, a flickering shape that disappeared when he turned to look. Later, though, he saw the boy clearly, pushing phantom toys around the floor or eating insubstantial Cheerios at the kitchen table. It never was frightening, but it could be annoying. Dace supposed it was possible to sit in the armchair even while the boy seemed to occupy it, but he never did, nor did he try to shoo the boy elsewhere. Sometimes he would wake up late at night and find the boy apparently sleeping beside him in his bed, or step out of the shower and find the boy sitting on the toilet. He had no privacy at all because, clearly, the boy saw the man as well.

The boy invariably looked over the man's shoulder to see how an old lamp could be rewired or a leaky sink repaired. He watched through the window as Dace walked down the block to his bus stop in the morning, and smiled up from his ephemeral toys when Dace came in after a day's work. The man could not tell what, if anything, the boy wanted, nor even why the boy was present in his apartment. When the boy spoke, Dace heard a sound like the rustling of dry leaves.

Carmen tended bar at Walter's four nights a week, Monday through Thursday. Lucy, who was thirty pounds and fifteen years lighter than Carmen, worked the weekends. Those were the money shifts, but Carmen

didn't care. It was easier on weeknights, without all those young drunks pounding each other with the pool cues while their girlfriends ordered blender drinks with three kinds of booze and heavy cream. The weeknights mostly drew older men whose idea of a mixed drink was a shot and a beer.

Dace came in once or twice a week, always on weeknights. He would sit down, put a twenty on the counter, and nod for his Dewars on the rocks with a glass of water on the side. Carmen knew his drink, but not his name. He wasn't the talkative type.

That changed on a night with the kind of bad weather for which Ephesus was famous. The wind blew freezing rain so hard that it hurt to be outdoors. When he left the shelter of his bus after work, he chose the one-block walk to Walter's over the three-block walk to his apartment, even though it would mean a longer walk when he finally went home. Apart from Dace and Carmen, the only one at Walter's was old Jimmy, who sat on his usual stool at the back end of the bar. Jimmy was rambling endlessly to Carmen. Dace paid no attention.

Carmen handed Jimmy a dollar. "Do me a favor, Jimmy, go play us some music. Too damn quiet here tonight."

Jimmy wove his way to the jukebox, and Carmen went down to Dace's end of the bar.

"Shee-it, man, I heard all his damn stories a million times, and he's driving me nuts tonight. Lemme buy you a drink and hang out down here a while." Not waiting to hear a reply, she dumped what remained of his scotch into the sink, tossed in some fresh ice, and

free-poured until his glass was full.

"Y'know man, you been coming here for months and you never once said your name. I'm Carmen."

"Uh, Dace," he replied.

"Dace? That a first name or a last name?"

"Uh, it's just what people call me. Kind of a nickname."

Dace looked over at Jimmy, who was studying the playlist on the jukebox as if it were some rare, ancient scroll. Carmen followed his glance.

"Jimmy's gonna read every song, then play A7. Buddy Holly, Not Fade Away. I give him a dollar, so it gets played three times. You wanna bet?"

"Uh, no." His mouth was having a hard time forming words. "I guess you know your customers."

"Smart move. Don't never take a bet in a bar, baby, cause you gonna lose. Every time. Well, how d'ya like this stinking weather? I'm from Puerto Rico, you know, I can't never get used to this cold, and tonight? Tonight is Puerto Rican hell. I guess you really wanted a drink or you woulda stayed home."

Dace looked at his very large drink, lifted it carefully, and sucked down two large gulps. Exhaling heavily, he lowered the glass to the bar before he replied.

"Not really. Just got off the bus, and no reason to go home."

The sound of Buddy Holly's guitar sprang from the jukebox. Bop. Bop. Bop bop. Carmen winked. "Too bad you didn't bet me, 'cause I win."

"You don't find that song on too many jukeboxes

these days." The scotch was beginning to loosen the man's tongue, and words were coming more easily.

Carmen shrugged. "It's an old bar, an old jukebox, an old town. Probably in there since the place got built, just never got changed. I'm guessing you ain't married, right?"

Dace looked down into his glass and said, "Not any more." Then he drained the remainder of his drink.

Carmen laughed, and briefly squeezed his arm. "Don't worry, man, I won't come on to you. I bet you can't even dance."

It was true, he was no dancer, and it must have shown on his face because she laughed again and said, "I guess I win that bet too." Then she took his empty glass and refilled it as Not Fade Away played for the second time. He looked out the window. The freezing rain was turning to sleet. It would be all snow by morning.

"Turning to snow," Carmen commented. "They better get the plows out."

Dace nodded.

"I can't figure why Mama came here. Why not Miami, or even New York? You know why we left Puerto Rico?"

"Uh, why?"

"A ghost. A goddamn ghost, can you imagine? One day, Mama says we're getting out of there. Why? My pop. I say Mama, he's dead. She says, I know, and he still won't leave me the hell alone, that *cabrón*. So we have to get out of Puerto Rico, but why did it have to be this shithole? That's what I want to know."

Suddenly, Dace was interested. "Do you believe in

ghosts?"

Carmen frowned. "Maybe. Maybe I do. Now you think I'm some dumb spic, right?"

"No. No, not at all. It's just . . . how did your mother know your father's ghost was there? Could she see him?"

She looked at him, turning her head slightly to one side. He must have passed her inspection, because she answered. "Papa had big hands. Mama always had a black-and-blue here, a fat lip there. Then he gets his head busted open by some guy with a sister, and Mama's not too sorry. Me neither.

"So we bury him, but two weeks later, she's all beat up again. She hadda pee that night, and she gets up in the dark. Well, the furniture got moved, and she bangs the shit out of herself. Me and my brothers get smacked around good the next morning, but none of us did it. Happened again a couple weeks later, but that time she seen him, laughing his ass off."

"She actually saw him?" asked Dace.

"That's what she said. And I seen him too, I think, that same night. He was . . . well, he was being a pig. It was just a couple seconds, then he was gone."

"What else did he do?"

"Nothing. Mama was spitting mad. She took all the money and we was gone."

Jimmy wanted another shot and another beer. Carmen sighed, and went to take care of him. Buddy Holly sang love is love and not fade away.

Dace left a substantial tip, pulled on his wet

overcoat, and headed for the door. At the last minute, he remembered to wave goodbye.

Before he was halfway home, the sleet had filled his shoes, soaked straight through his clothing, and started him shivering uncontrollably. When he finally unlocked the street level door to his apartment and pulled it shut behind him, tears were tracking over his cheekbones, mixing with the ice water that dripped from his hair. He flicked the switch that worked the light at the top of the stairs, gripped the handrail, and looked up. The boy was on the landing, looking down. Light shone behind the semi-transparent shape, so Dace could not make out the expression on the boy's face, but he imagined a look of disapproval. Dace lowered his gaze to the stairs as he climbed them, leaving it to the boy to step out of the way.

The sodden overcoat found its way onto a hanger from which it could drip into the bathtub. The rest of his wet clothes soon were draped over the chairs in the kitchen. Dressed only in his underwear, Dace fell into his armchair and tucked an old Mexican blanket around his legs and torso . He turned on his television set with the remote, but did not bother to look through the channels. All he wanted was the noise, the distraction.

On the screen, a woman was hanging impossibly white sheets on a line stretched across an impossibly blue sky, while two perfect children romped across the brilliant green grass. By the time the jug of detergent appeared, Dace was crying again. Something, he felt,

was irretrievably gone. Perhaps it was something that never existed, but it still was gone, and that was heartbreaking. Or perhaps it was just too much scotch.

He closed his eyes. When he opened them again, the boy was beside him, reaching one pale hand toward his face. Dace sat perfectly still, and felt the feathery touch of one finger following the trace of a tear down his cheek. It did not feel anything like he might have imagined the touch of a ghost would feel. There was something warm about it, something shining.

The snow was getting worse, so Carmen told Jimmy to go home and closed the bar early. She scraped the windshield of her ten-year-old Ford, and drove home carefully, very much aware that she needed new tires. That old guy at the bar, the guy who called himself Dace, he was probably a little screwy but a good tipper. She wondered about his interest in ghosts. He half-looked like a ghost himself, with that pale, stubbly face and the dark circles under his eyes.

She wondered what he did for a living. Whatever it was, it couldn't be anything where he was around people a lot. His voice sounded like it was out of practice, like it had not been used much for a long time. Clearly, he didn't have a wife at home, or she would have taken that old shirt he was wearing and made it into a dustrag. Probably he didn't have anybody, at least not nearby.

Well, he would be back to talk to her again, no doubt about it. She always could spot the guys who came to the bar to fight the loneliness, even though most of

them just sat there and didn't talk to anyone. Once you paid them a little attention, though, they kept coming back for more. Dace would be back, and eventually he would want to tell her his life story, and the more she listened the better the tips would be. And she would find out why he wanted to know about ghosts.

Sometime during the night, Dace woke up in his chair, drank two glasses of orange juice in the kitchen, and climbed into bed. His clock radio woke him, as usual, at seven. It was still snowing, and the local newscaster was reading a list of schools and businesses closed for the day. Nobody would be visiting his print shop on such a day. Even in good weather, scarcely anybody came in off the street. Almost all his business came from the newer style print shops, where it was all computers and copiers. When they had to fill a special order that called for hand-set type or special paper stock, they sent it to Dace. He could take the day off, and nobody would notice.

It was just as well. It wasn't the worst hangover in the world, but it still was a hangover. His head felt thick, he was dehydrated, and the taste in his mouth was disgusting. To make matters worse, he felt a cold coming on. The best thing would have been to go back to sleep for a few hours, but he was too thirsty. Was there any orange juice left?

The boy was sitting at the kitchen table, scribbling with unreal crayons on a sheet of unreal paper. He looked up as Dace entered. Dace looked back, doing his best to focus on the insubstantial little

figure. The boy appeared about nine or ten years old, with dark hair, delicate features, and sad eyes.

"Made a fool of myself last night," Dace announced, speaking to the boy for the first time. "Just because someone puts a drink in front of you doesn't mean you have to finish it."

The boy looked up wide eyed at the sound of the man's voice. For a fraction of a second, there was a throb of sunlight in the room. Then the boy flickered out of sight.

The snow continued well into the afternoon. Dace sat at the kitchen table with his checkbook, paying the bills for the rent, the electricity, the rarely used telephone. He looked at his life insurance statement. The beneficiary was his younger brother, killed by a heart attack eight years earlier. He supposed the death benefit would be paid to Ed's wife or daughter as next of kin. The wife's name was Debbie. He couldn't remember the daughter's name. If he cashed in the policy, he would have no use for the money.

The boy was visible a good part of the time Dace was home, playing on the carpet with his phantom toys. Often he was so close, Dace could have stretched out a hand and touched him. Several times, Dace almost tried, remembering the sensation of the night before, and wanting to experience it again. Nevertheless, he kept his hands to himself. What if he reached and found nothing there? Then what?

Around four, he pulled on boots and a parka. Maybe that barmaid -- yes, her name was Carmen -- would be there again. Before going down the stairs, he turned

back to an apparently empty apartment.

"Uh, okay," he said, "I'll see you later."

When Carmen arrived at three, Walter's was busier than she thought it would be. Some of her afternoon regulars hadn't made it, but there were some faces that usually didn't appear until much later. Day off from work, she figured, so they decided to get an early start. It looked like a good day for tips.

There was a flurry of drink orders when Walter left for home and Carmen took over the bar. Walter never free-poured, and house drinks were rare when he was behind the counter. It could cost these guys a week's pay to get buzzed while Walter was serving. Except for Jimmy, everybody was drinking beer until Carmen arrived. Then the drink orders began, and she was busy for a while. Most of these guys drank their first one down in a gulp or two, and they wanted more right away. It was a good half-hour before things began to settle down, and it was four o'clock before Carmen could start spending time with individual customers. She was listening to one of Ralphie's bad jokes when she saw Dace come in. She knew he'd be back, and there he was.

She scooped ice into a rocks glass while she groaned at Ralphie's punchline, and grabbed the Dewars on her way down the bar to where Dace was shedding his parka. "Usual?"

"Please," he replied. "It's god-awful out there."

"You get the day off?"

"I didn't go in today. Wouldn't have been worth it."

"Well, it's funny, the bar business does good when the rest of the business is bad. So what'd you do all day?"

"Nothing much. Picked up a hell of a cold somewhere, so don't get too close." He hesitated. "Do you remember what we were talking about last night?"

"Yeah, I remember."

He hesitated again. "I just wanted to ask you -- are ghosts always, uh, bad? I mean can they ever be, well, friendly?"

"You mean like Casper? Not in Puerto Rico, honey. Least none I ever heard of."

"Do you think it's possible, though?"

Carmen stopped to consider. "Maybe. But if someone ain't mean and nasty, why don't they go straight to heaven? I mean, what they gonna stick around for?"

"I don't know. Just wondering."

"Well, they gotta have some reason if they do."

A customer a few seats away was waving his empty glass in the air. With a quick "'Scuse me," Carmen went off to fill it. Some others seemed to have run dry at the same time, so it was several minutes before she got back to Dace's end of the bar. His seat and his glass were empty, but he'd left a pretty good tip behind.

The wind was gone, but snow was falling again, big white flakes shining in the light of the street lamps. A plow rattled by on its chains, and then everything was quiet except for the crunch of his boots as he walked, and the heavy cough that made his lungs ache. It was not even half past five, but the street was deserted.

Dace remembered a night fifty years earlier, a night when the glint of snowflakes and the crunch of his feet held a pure and almost painfully beautiful magic. For a few seconds he was a boy again, marveling at how perfect the world could be, and at the intense joy he found in being a part of it.

Another boy looked down from his window, watching with dark, sad eyes. Dace willed the child beside him, alive in the white snow and the perfect world. He willed it with all his soul and with all his might, with all the strength and intensity of his suddenly young heart.

Children often wish for things that cannot happen. Life would be sweeter if just one or two of those wishes, every so often, would come true.

Dace sat in his armchair for hours, looking at the television screen but not watching it. Memories drifted in and out of focus, shining for a moment like snowflakes drifting through the light of a street lamp, then falling into darkness. Crayons in an old cookie tin. Breath crystallized on a windowpane. Snow sliding down an evergreen and hitting the ground with a soft thud. There had to be a reason to remain -- otherwise, why not just go?

Except for his brief appearance at the window, the boy did not show himself all evening. What if he was gone? What if his reason to remain had vanished, and Dace never would see him again? What then?

Light from the television glinted off a small object on the floor, wedged up against a table leg a few inches from the wall. Dace looked at it for several

minutes, trying to make out what it was. Eventually he rose from his chair, crossed the room, and bent to retrieve it. It was a toy, a little toy automobile with chipped yellow paint. Although it was made of metal, it was warm to the touch.

"Ya know, honey, you don't look so good."

Dace nodded. "I don't feel so good. Just a cold, though."

"Stinking weather," Carmen reasoned. "Usual?"

"Maybe a cognac instead. That's supposed to be good for a cold."

"I think we got some someplace. You gotta have it in a rocks glass, though."

Carmen bent to examine the labels of several dusty bottles on a low shelf. When she emerged with an especially dusty bottle of Courvoisier, Dace was rolling a little toy car back and forth on the bar.

"You want ice?"

"No. You have time to listen to a story?"

"A ghost story, right? Just a minute, I'll take care of my other customers and come back."

When Carmen returned, Dace told his story in a terse, economical style which Carmen found very unappealing. Had it been her story, it would have lasted half an hour longer. Maybe it was because he was a man, but he left out what Carmen would have found most interesting. He told her everything he had seen, but never said anything about how he felt about his household ghost. The way he told her about the boy, it could have been someone else's story.

"So what you wanna do?" she asked. "I can't tell if you wanna send him on his way or keep him around."

"You believe me, then. You think it's really happening."

"Why shouldn't I believe you? What reason would you have to lie?"

"Not that. You don't think I'm crazy."

"No." Carmen grinned. "But that don't mean you ain't, man."

"What would you do if you were me?"

"Me, I'd move out of that place last week."

"But he's not hostile. He doesn't break dishes, or make the room freezing cold, or anything like that. I need to know if he's real, though. I need to know I'm not hallucinating."

"Well, I ain't goin' home with you to find out, but maybe I know someone who could help. Write down your phone number."

On his way home, Dace stopped into a drug store to buy decongestant, cough syrup, and aspirin. Like most drug stores, it sold many other items as well, and he noticed a rack of children's books. On an impulse, he selected one and paid for it along with his cold medications.

Back in his apartment, there was no sign of the boy. Dace changed into an old sweat suit he sometimes wore around the house, and swallowed doses of medication. Then he sat in his chair with the newly purchased book, a collection of animal stories.

"I bought you a storybook," he announced to the

empty room. "Would you like me to read you one?"

There was no response. Undeterred, he opened the book to the first story and began. "The Cat Who Went to Sea. Harrison was an alley cat who lived in a city by the sea. It was a good place to live, because there always was plenty of fish to eat. There was leftover baitfish that fishermen threw away at the end of the day, and the heads and tails of fish cleaned near the dockside. Harrison loved fish, so he was very happy."

Dace looked up, looked around, and saw nothing. Nevertheless, he continued to read aloud. The story took him back to his childhood, to similar stories he remembered from snowy nights fifty years past. He read on, describing how the alley cat was taken on board a ship, and the crew's adventures with fearsome pirates. When the story was over, he looked up again. Again he saw nothing, and he was surprised as his eyes began to fill with tears.

Then there was a sound like the rustling of dry leaves, very close to his ear. From somewhere in that rustling he heard a small voice that could have been impossibly distant or just next to his ear. It seemed to say, "More."

Dace reopened the book and began to read the second story to the apparently empty room. As he turned the final page, though, he saw the boy sitting on the carpet, knees pulled up against his chest, listening.

The roads were still a mess the following morning, and Dace was trying to decide whether or not to go to his shop when the telephone rang. Answering, he heard

the voice of a woman.

"Carmen said to call you. My name is Teresa."

Dace was not sure how to answer. "Uh, about my, uh, problem?"

"Your ghost. Tell me where you live and I'll come there."

Dace hesitated. "But what can you do?"

"Don't worry, it don't cost you nothing, so what you gonna lose? Now tell me where you live."

Dace gave the woman his address. She told him to expect her around noon, and she arrived ten minutes early.

Teresa was nearly invisible beneath layers of outerwear when she came up the stairs. As she dropped her hat and scarves and coat and gloves onto his armchair, Dace saw a dark skinned woman about his own age, short and stocky, with henna red hair and very sharp eyes. She asked no questions, just looked around the living room and then closed her eyes.

"He is here," she said.

"Can you see him?" asked Dace. "I haven't seen him yet this morning."

"I don't see him right now," she replied, "I just feel. Sometimes they let me see them, mostly not."

"Can you tell me why he's here? Did something happen to him in this apartment."

Teresa closed her eyes and put her fingers to her lips. Then she opened her eyes to address Dace. "Look, it's like this. I don't see him, he ain't talking to me, I just get these feelings, see? So all I know is what I'm feeling."

Dace was beginning to think the woman knew nothing at all, but still he waited. Teresa closed her eyes again and pursed her lips, accentuating the wrinkles at the corners of her mouth.

"Nothing happened here," she said. "He ain't from around here, least I don't think so. Something pulled him here." She hesitated. "I think maybe it's you."

"Me?" Dace shook his head. "It doesn't make sense. Why should he be drawn to me? And why doesn't he just move on to wherever people are supposed to go when they die?"

Teresa shook her head. "Well, it's tough to say. There's ghosts all over, man. I feel maybe hundreds all 'round every day. Prob'ly lots of 'em just don't want to admit they's dead. This little one, though, he feel like... like he's scared. He's just a little kid, so maybe it's too scary for him to go on all by hisself. Maybe when we push him out of your house, though, he'll do it. You ready?"

"Ready for what?"

"To push him outa here."

"No!" Dace surprised himself with the vehemence of his refusal. "I . . . I never meant to chase him away. Can't he just stay here, with me?"

Teresa regarded him with new interest. "Oh, now I get it. He got pulled to you because you was the one who pulled him. I guess I come out in the snow for no good reason."

"But wait," Dace insisted. "What should I do?"

Teresa shrugged. "You do what you do, man, and you hope it all turn out okay." She began to pull on her

discarded layers of clothing.

Dace felt dizzy. He sat at his kitchen table and dropped his head into his hands. When he heard his downstairs door slam, he belatedly looked up and said, "Thank you." Then he let his head sink back into his hands and mumbled, "Thank you for all your help."

It was only a few minutes past noon, and he was dressed to go out, so Dace decided to go into the shop for a few hours and see if there was any new work. The snow was over, but the temperature had dropped into the single digits, and the wind was strong enough to make it feel much colder. At the shop, he found an order for wedding invitations, a pricey job that called for hand set type, custom embossing, and heavy rag stock. He started the job, expertly sliding leaden letters and punctuation marks into a well-worn oak frame. After only a few minutes, though, he had to stop, coughing too hard to continue. The thermostat was set to sixty-eight degrees. He pushed it up to seventy, and went back to work.

When the type was set, he inked it and printed a few proofs with a small hand press. The proofs would go back to the customer for approval. He should have sent a sample of the embossing at the same time, but his cold felt much worse, so he locked up and set out for home. His bus came quickly, and was nearly empty as it rumbled down the potholed street, tossing him back and forth in his seat. He closed his eyes.

Instinct pulled his eyes open as he neared his stop. As he made his way to the back door, the bus appeared roughly half-full. Looking back as he climbed

down the stairs, though, the bus once again was empty except for the driver. For a moment he considered going to Walter's to see Carmen, but a bout of coughing left him feeling especially weak, and he decided he would be better off at home.

The boy was watching from the window as he came up the street, and from the landing as Dace climbed the stairs. The man said hello, pulled off his clothes, and climbed into bed. He was too tired to prepare or eat any dinner. All he wanted was sleep.

A severe bout of coughing woke him sometime during the night. Opening his eyes, he saw the boy sitting on the edge of his bed.

"I wish I knew your name."

The boy smiled. "Aaron," he replied in his voice of dried leaves. "I'm Aaron."

Dace saw the boy's fingertips come toward his face, felt the remembered sensation of warmth and light as they touched his cheek. Then, once again, he slept.

The sun rose extraordinarily bright that morning, glinting off the perfectly white snow that lay in little drifts on the window sills. For a time, Dace just lay in bed and watched it sparkle, enjoying the play of prismatic colors and the sweet smell of the child cradled in his arms. After a while, he kissed the boy's forehead, and said, "Wake up, Aaron. We have a long way to go."