

## The Fading

I first noticed it when Lexie was six. We were playing Dragon and Princess, as was our habit for warm afternoons, and Lexi thrust her “sword”, a long straight white stick she’d found a week earlier, in the air.

“Let’s take to the skies, Pudder!” She turned around and looked around me, but not at me. Almost as though she couldn’t see me standing right there, plain as day. “Pudder?”

“Lexie, I am standing *right* here. How can you not see me?” I asked, half incredulously. Surely, she was playing sly.

“Oh! There you are! I thought for a moment you’d gone!” Lexie’s thousand-watt smile was back. “Let’s take to the skies!”

I “flew” over to where my princess awaited and together we sailed the open skies the way you can when your child is six and full of imagination. But I couldn’t help the small wriggle of anxiety I felt when I realized that, for a brief second or two, Lexie really didn’t see me standing in front of her.

“Ahh yes. Well, Lexie is what, six? That’s about the age that it begins.” Cyrus nodded sagely as we sat across from each other later that night.

“What begins?” I asked, taking another sip of my drink. We tried to meet up once or twice a week to swap children stories and just be general company for each other. Being an imaginary friend was sometimes isolating because it required so much dedication and time. Having someone to connect with and unload as almost essential, especially for the scary moments, like when Lexie fell out of the tree and broke her arm. All I could do was murmur encouragement and love to her while her crying alerted her parents to what had happened. One of the downsides of the gig—no substance, no way to prevent the fall.

“Well, The Fading! Is this your first child?” Cyrus asked sympathetically.

I nodded. Of course, Lexie was my first child! Wasn't she my only child? Was I supposed to have more?

“What do you mean, first?” I asked, trepidation spreading from the middle of my chest outward. “What's going to happen to her?”

“Well, she's going to forget you, old pal. It'll be small at first, not being able to see you out of the corner of her eye or forgetting your name once or twice. But it will spread quickly, especially once she starts school this fall. School accelerates the process because she has so many new friends and experiences...”

“Wait a minute, but Lexie is excited about starting school! She says kindergarten is her next big adventure. How does she not realize how evil it is?” Full on panic was setting in. Lexie couldn't forget me. I was her Pudder. We were best friends. We did everything together and had planned to experience Kindergarten together much the same way. My world of sandcastles was tumbling down around me.

“Pudder, calm down. This is the natural process of things. Children are meant to forget their imaginary friends as they grow up. It makes way for newer and fuller experiences in their life and that’s a good thing for both you and her. Once she forgets you fully, you’ll have a week or so off before becoming someone else’s new Imaginary, with a new name. I’ve had ten children so far and I love and remember them all fondly. That’s how it’s supposed to be.” Cyrus touched my hand encouragingly. I know he meant to comfort me, but he was only making it worse.

“Isn’t there anything we can do?” I asked, half whispering with my head in my hands. I was afraid of his answer.

“No.” Cyrus said firmly. “Anyone who fights the natural order of The Fading is going against forces much stronger than they’re supposed to.

I looked up. “But imaginaries have done it before?”

Cyrus looked down at his hands, clearly considering his words. With a deep sigh, he leaned back, cross his arms and stared me down.

“Yes. And they’ve succeeded in halting The Fading. But at a price much greater than they realized they had to pay. You don’t want to do that, Pudder. I know one imaginary whose child never forgot him because he fought to make her remember. They’re both miserable. It turns something in the child’s mind and makes them...not right.” Cyrus shuddered at what imagery shot through his head. “But if you don’t believe me, feel free to see for yourself. His name is Andy and he lives a couple blocks that way. The house with the decaying door. You’ll know it when you see it.”

I didn't seek out Andy immediately. It was hard for me to comprehend that Lexie could ever forget about me. Imaginaries are created from the strongest imaginations in the world and Lexie had the best imagination of any kid around. I knew that I was probably a little biased, since she was the one who created me, but that's just how it works. Most kids end up with an imaginary friend but very few of them are creative enough to imagine one that had never been imagined before. I felt special and chosen.

Lexie created entire worlds in her head and had a firm understanding of how she wandered in and out of her own reality. Her ability to effortlessly jump from the real world to her own imagined adventures had me continuously in awe of her. I wasn't afraid that I was about to lose her anytime soon. So, the day she forgot my name hit like a ton of bricks. It was just two months later, and we were again in the backyard defending good and defeating villains.

"And I slash down with my sword and vanquish the evil goblins!" I roared as I waved my imaginary blade above my head. Lexie's triumphant peals of laughter warmed my heart. She clapped her hands together before jumping into a fencing stance.

"I challenge Doctor Mal, whose latest evil invention could wipe out all the happiness in the entire world! I change my sword into a lasso that can grab onto spaceships...Parker, quick! Do your super jump and grab him out of the cockpit!"

I went to do as she said before realizing what Lexie had called me.

"Parker?" I stood, staring at her. She blinked confused eyes at me.

“Parker? What do you mean?” She swung her hip to the side and crossed her arms, clearly agitated.

“You just called me Parker,” I insisted. She rolled her eyes and shook her head, dismissing what I said.

“Don’t be silly, Pudder. Why would I call you that? C’mon, let’s play before Doctor Mal gets away!” Lexie ran off, swinging her “magic lasso.” I wanted to continue what we were talking about, but it was clear she wouldn’t cooperate. Trying to control my shaking, I ran after her to perform my super jump and save the city. All the while, my mind raced. This was really happening. Lexie was really going to forget me, strong imagination or not. I needed to do something, and fast.

I stood in front of a door that looked like it had been a bright and cheery white, now a dull grey and beginning to cover with what looked like mold. I wasn’t even sure how this was possible. Every other part of our community looked pristine, almost new. But this door had clearly lived past this lifetime. I raised my fist to knock, hesitated, and then, shaking my head at myself, rapped firmly three times. At first I thought maybe he was out, with his child, but then I could hear shuffling and the locks being turned.

The door opened a crack and I saw one rheumy eye peeking out.

“Yes?” The voice croaked out, sounding out of use. “What is it?”

“Are you Andy? Cyrus sent me. My child forgot me the other day, and he told me that your child still remembered you...” I trailed off as he opened the door wider, revealing a body

made of little more than bones and mottled skin. He waved me in and turned to walk into the living room. I could see his tail dragging sadly behind him. Closing the door, I followed him in.

Inside was very well kept but run down. I could hear a drip in the kitchen sink and the furniture was very worn. Andy motioned for me to sit and I looked around at the dismal options before deciding the couch was probably the best choice. Sitting, I felt a spring dig into my lower back but didn't complain.

Andy slowly traversed his way to his mantle, where two pictures resided. One was a miniature painting of a dignified imaginary with an impressive top hat and polka-dot skin alongside a small blonde-haired boy. The other was a photo was in black and white and Andy picked that one up. Shuffling over to me, he handed it to me. The photo featured a reptilian imaginary with a long lion's mane of wild hair and a plump tail. The girl in the photo was smiling, her curls pulled up into pigtails and sporting a pinafore.

"Is this...you?" I looked up at Andy, his hair shorn short and white, his skin a dry light mint. He nodded.

"Back in my prime days when Cecilia was little. Before I...messed it all up. I'm assuming that's why Cyrus sent you, for me to warn you. That's why any new imaginaries darken my stoop anymore." Andy sighed and looked down at the photo in my hand. "My Cecilia forgot my name once. It was much sooner with her than it had been with William," He glanced at the miniature on his mantle. "William was almost eight before we parted ways and it nearly destroyed me. So, when Cecilia looked at me and couldn't utter my name, I knew I had to do

something. She wasn't even five yet! Every night, when she went to sleep, I would creep back into her room and whisper my name to her all night."

I caught my breath. We were expressly forbidden to enter the human domain without the express wish of our children. True, all they had to do was think of us, but dreaming didn't count. It had to be a conscious thought. Andy had broken a severe law.

He saw my expression and nodded.

"I knew what I did was wrong, but I couldn't have her forget me! And for a while, it worked. She was almost nine before she stopped seeing me. So, then I despaired. I didn't know how to make her see me. Soon, though, I wasn't leaving when she moved on to a different task. I just hung around so that she'd know I was always there for her. Even through dinner, and bed, and lessons. Always there. It thrilled her at first, but then it started to bug her. 'Why don't you go sleep Andy, you look tired.' But I had to remain vigilant and I did! For many years."

"What happened then?" I was mesmerized by the macabre story he was weaving. So many laws broken, I didn't know how he lasted as long as he did.

"She became a teenager and she never forgot me. Trouble was, I was now a nuisance and she would tell her parents, friends, anyone she could about me and how I wouldn't leave her alone. This wasn't a good time for women to appear anything less than sane, you know. They couldn't see me, I wasn't their imaginary friend. So...they put her away in a sanitarium. To help her, they said. The things they did to her..." Tears silently rolled down Andy's face as he remembered. I felt the warm path of tears streak my face as well but didn't dare wipe them

away. I was afraid any movement on my part would break the trance he was in, and he wouldn't tell me the ending.

"Now she needs me constantly. Her family is all gone, she has no friends...I'm all she has left in the world and I suffer with the curse of knowing I did this to her." He sighed deeply. It was evident that, beyond the few tears falling, he had cried himself out of tears over this long ago.

"But you couldn't have known..." I said and he raised a hand to stop me.

"Yes...but now you do." He said gently, looking me straight in the eye. I gulped and nodded, the unspoken message clear. If I were to do this to Lexie...I would have complete culpability.

I stood, handing him his photo back and thanked him for his time. I walked to the door and then hesitated, one more question running through my head.

"How old is Cecilia?" I asked the door, unable to turn and face the answer.

"89 years old in two weeks. She's completely bed bound. The doctors don't think she will last to see the new year."

"And then?" I whispered, knowing he heard.

"And then I get to right my wrongs. Cecilia gets her rest and her freedom. I get to fade out. The council already decided I am not fit for a new child. So, I will just...cease to be." I turned at these words, stricken at his misfortune. Seeing the expression, he smiled a sad little smile.

“It’s okay, Pudder. I’ve had an unnaturally long life as Andy. I’m ready to rest.”

“Good morning, Pudder! How did you sleep?” Lexie’s shining green eyes were a welcome sight after the night of tossing and turning.

“I slept great, Lexie. What are we playing today?” I threw on my biggest smile and inhaled a deep breath. *Every second with her counts. Every second.*

“I was thinking we could look at shapes in the clouds, then maybe a tea party followed by fighting the evil Doctor Mal! He’s trying to take over the city!” Lexie twirled in a circle with her arms outstretched, eyes wide with intensity.

“That sounds like the best plan!” I plopped down in the grass and stared up at the sky. Lexie followed suit, pointing a round white fluff of a cloud.

“That one looks like a kitten!” I nodded my agreement and pointed to another.

“And that one looks like a Lexie growing up!”

Lexie giggled in delight.

“You’re my best friend Pudder. I love you.”

“I love you too, Lexie.”