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Haunted

by [LadyKarai](#)

Summary

Do you believe in ghosts?

Steve certainly didn't, but the woman from whom he bought his house had enough stories to make the worst skeptic believe. Stories and an old photograph of a handsome young man in an army uniform. He never expected ever to see the sad, gentle sergeant with his own eyes. He never expected to care so very much.

A sweet sixteen present for my daughter. **Updated 7/16/16**

Notes

Happy sweet sixteen to my beloved daughter! You amaze me more every day, and I am so happy and proud to call you my biggest fan. I love you.

Updated 7/16/16. The pacing of the second half is fixed, and I am now happy with the story as a whole. My thanks for everyone's patience.

See the end of the work for more [notes](#)

Steve had seen enough houses by then to know the drill. He had even seen a few Sell-By-Owner

properties and dealt with the kind of person who felt that they didn't need a trained real estate agent to get the best deal on their houses. Yet this Sell-By-Owner -- built in the 1910's, extension added in the 1970's, roof replaced twice, modern kitchen and bathroom, no known water damage in the unfinished basement -- was unlike any other he had seen.

It had a post-tour interview.

The petite woman who had shown him around had answered all of his questions about the utilities and the taxes and the structural quirks of the house like someone who had lived a lifetime within its walls should. But when he had declared himself satisfied and ready to go, she had insisted he sit down with her in the kitchen and talk. Not offered. Insisted. Because, she had said, she would not sell to simply anyone. She would only sell to the right person, and if he was interested in the house, which he was, he would need to prove to her that he deserved it.

Steve wrapped his large hands around a delicate floral teacup and swallowed his nervousness as Mrs. Carter lifted her cup to amused lips. Her eyes, so old but still so bright and intelligent, danced as she ordered him to tell her about himself. He began with his job, of course -- graphic design for marketing materials, convention booths, etc. -- but she quickly steered him away from money and towards his heart -- family, history, art. He talked about growing up in Brooklyn, his paintings, his dream of leaving the consulting firm and building his own business. As he opened up, surprisingly, she did as well, talking about her childhood in London, meeting her husband and moving to the US, her children, her grandchildren. Gradually, the interview became something closer to a conversation between new neighbors or old friends who hadn't seen each other in years. Somewhere along the line, she had insisted on Peggy and he had begged for Steve.

Somewhere along the line, she had started to flirt with him, making him smile and blush and flirt right back.

And then, the tea long drunk, the echoes of recent laughter still hanging about their eyes and mouths, Peggy gave him an appraising look and asked, "Do you believe in ghosts?"

Steve blinked at her and the odd question. No, he did not believe in ghosts and told her so.

Peggy gave him a secret, knowing smile and rose from her seat. Slowly, on ancient legs, she walked to a high-backed desk in the adjoining room, opened a drawer, and reached for something inside. When she returned to the table, she held something leather and rectangular: a photo album or scrapbook. She placed it gently in front of Steve and then resumed her seat, indicating with her head for him to open it.

Steve obeyed and found himself staring at a very old photograph of a handsome young man in a military uniform, dark hair tucked up into a brimmed hat with an eagle insignia. Light eyes sparkled and curved lips smiled with a youthful energy and exuberance that spoke of a soldier who had not yet seen combat. Steve knew enough about military history to place the uniform: army, World War II. He lifted his head and smiled at Peggy who was watching him with a quirked eyebrow of interest. The photo was almost certainly of her husband, but he wanted to compliment her, so he asked if it was her father instead.

Peggy threw her head back and laughed, and then shook her head at him, her eyes crinkled and twinkling.

"No, my dear. That is Sergeant Barnes. Our resident ghost."

At Steve's surprised expression, she began to explain that the Barnes family had owned the house from the 1920's to the 1950's when she and her husband had bought it. Sgt. Barnes had lived in the house in the late 1930's to the early 1940's. He had shipped out to fight for the Allies like so many of America's brave boys, but he had died in action in France and never returned. Or at least, his body had never returned. His spirit had found its way home and had never left again.

Steve knew intellectually that there was no such thing as ghosts, but Peggy's stories were so detailed and so very *fond* that he found his heart wanting to believe. She talked about the way the ghost would pace the upstairs hall at night, back and forth in front of one of the bedrooms. He never caused any harm, she assured Steve. No, quite the contrary. He seemed to love her children, and she had many stories from her son of waking up in the morning with blankets tucked firmly around him or of startling awake in the middle of the night from a nightmare or a fevered dream to feel a cool hand stroking his head and wordless comfort whispering in his ear until he fell back asleep.

"My daughter fell quite madly in love with him during her teenage years. I don't blame her, of course. He was a very handsome man."

The daughter had put together the scrapbook which consisted of photographs and old, yellowed articles, carefully preserved between neat sheets of clear plastic. One of the articles was Barnes's obituary, and Steve read testament after testament to the young soldier's bravery and loyalty. The photographs attached to the obituary spanned several years of the man's life, ranging from before the war, when he still had his innocence and laughter, to during, when the reality of man's cruelty had visibly steeled him but obviously not broken him. Steve found himself gazing at those clear eyes, that firmly set jaw, unable to look away.

With his eyes still on the photographs before him, Steve listened as Peggy revealed that the Sergeant was the Carter family secret. He appeared so regularly, so obviously, that any ghost-hunter would have considered him the find of the century. If she had wanted to do so, she could have sold him out and retired a millionaire while the camera crews and psychics and scientists all invaded his space and tried to contact him and study him, destroying his peace. But Peggy had known from the first time she had seen him pacing back and forth, back and forth, that she would never do that to her sweet, sad sergeant.

"And he is sad. You can see it in his face. He came back here for a reason. He's looking for something, and he hasn't found it yet."

Listening to her speak, watching her face, Steve understood why Peggy had not employed an agent to sell her house now that she was too old to maintain it herself. He understood the purpose of this interview and why it was so important to Peggy that the person who lived here after she did be worthy of this place and its responsibility. Peggy seemed to catch the line of his thoughts, for she smiled at him and asked if he wanted to buy the house. When he said that yes, he did, her smile softened, and Steve knew he had been accepted.

"Promise me that you will protect him. Always."

Steve promised.

xXx

At settlement, Peggy handed him the scrapbook and kissed him on the cheek. Steve held her like a beloved family member, and, his face pressed against her soft white hair, whispered his promise once again.

xXx

Two weeks later, he met Sergeant Barnes.

He was sitting in the front room, his favorite room, reading late into the night. The light from a single lamp shone on the pages in his hands, the giant picture windows in front of him dark as his neighbors had gone to sleep long ago. Steve could feel himself starting to drift, but he only had a

few pages of his chapter left and was determined to finish it. He wasn't usually up this late, but tomorrow was Sunday, and so, he told himself, he could sleep in to make up for the later bedtime.

When something creaked above his head, he barely noticed it, used to the way old houses moved and settled at all hours. But when the creaking continued in regular intervals, accompanied by soft thumps, Steve's tired mind gradually began to pay more and more attention. Slowly, the book lowered to his lap as his ears picked out the pattern and a cold sort of instinctual fear began to creep into his stomach.

A creak. Six thumps, evenly spread. Another creak. Another six.

Steve's breath caught in his throat. He was listening to *pacing*. Six steps, pivot, six more steps, pivot. Back and forth. Back and forth. Someone was pacing right above his head.

He knew instantly who it was.

Gently, Steve put the book aside and closed his eyes to focus on his breathing. His heart was pounding wildly against his chest, the beat of it echoing up into his throat. In spite of what Peggy had said, in spite of the sincerity in her eyes and the confidence in her voice, he hadn't truly believed. His mind knew without a doubt that ghosts didn't really exist. Life after death was a fairy tale for children, a means of comfort for the grief-stricken. Ghost stories were fiction, spirit encounters the product of imagination and aching hearts reaching for something just beyond their grasp.

Steve knew this, and yet someone was *still* walking back and forth up on the second floor.

He knew he had to go look. The knowledge sat heavy in his stomach, cold and insistent.

Theoretically, he could ignore the situation and crash on the couch for the night. He could even leave the house, find an all-night diner, and drink coffee until his bones were vibrating. But he knew that he wouldn't. He pressed shaking hands against the chair's armrests and pushed himself to standing, thinking of all the horror movies he had ever seen and how stupid he thought all of the leads were for walking *towards* the strange noises instead of running in the opposite direction.

Now, he understood. Fear thrummed through him as he approached the stairs, but his feet continued to move steadily. He needed to know. He needed to see.

Carefully, Steve climbed the stairs, wincing every time the old wood squealed beneath his weight.

The sounds of pacing had quieted when he left the place directly below the hallway, but they had not stopped, the even steps continuing without pause. As he climbed, Steve reminded himself of how Peggy had insisted that the ghost was not dangerous, that he was gentle and sad and careful of her children. It had little effect on the beating of his heart. He found himself holding his breath as he approached the top, and he forced himself to slowly let it out as he leaned forward and peeked around the wall towards the bedrooms.

A figure shimmered in the darkness, stepping in and out of the moonlight thrown by the window.

It was black and grey and white like an old photograph, slightly grainy like a silent movie, and absolutely, undoubtedly *real*. The figure, obviously a man, wore a simple white undershirt, light slacks, and dark suspenders. His feet were bare. He moved steadily back and forth in front of the door of the small, front bedroom, occasionally turning his head as he passed to glance inside.

Every so often, he would distractedly run one hand through his darkly-tinted hair, a gesture of disquiet. Six steps one way, turn. Six steps the other way, turn again.

Steve watched for several minutes, utterly entranced, his fear giving way to wonder almost instantly. A small, lingering doubt tried to convince him that he was dreaming or that this was some sort of trick, but the child-like amazement at seeing an actual ghost flooded his heart and drowned out all else. Carefully, he inched forward down the hall. The shape and coloring

matched that of the photographs he had seen, but Steve wanted to see more.

As he came closer, he was able to confirm that yes, the ghost was Sgt. Barnes and that Peggy had been right. The expression on the young man's face was one of overwhelming worry. Carefully, Steve sat himself down against the wall near the spot where Barnes would turn to head back down the hallway, his eyes fixed on that white figure and the emotions bleeding from him. The pacing, the glances inside the room, the hand running through his hair, all pointed to an extreme distress, and now that he was close, Steve could see the crease between the ghost's eyebrows, the frown that hovered over his entire expression, and the spike of anxiety that flashed in his eyes whenever he looked inside the bedroom. He was sad, yes, but he was also scared. And not for himself, Steve knew. Barnes was scared for someone else. Someone inside the room.

Steve gently bit down on his lip and continued watching. He understood now why it had only taken Peggy one sighting to vow to herself never to sell her ghost out. Steve's heart was making the same vow, even in spite of the fact that he had already made it. Yet it wasn't the same.

Before, he had promised to an old woman that he would protect something he didn't truly believe in. Now, he was promising himself that he would do whatever it took to protect that noble, half-desperate face, that sad, worried soul. That he would protect *his* ghost with everything he had.

Time passed, and Steve watched. Eventually, he noticed that Barnes was not in fact continuously pacing, like he had first thought. He kept walking, six steps up, six steps back, but only eight times. At the end of the eighth pass, Steve could see the slightest stutter in the man's rhythm, the tiniest flicker in his translucent body, indicating that he was in fact looping through the same few minutes in time, over and over and over. To Steve, it gave the impression that Barnes was trapped and made the whole thing that much sadder.

And then, at 2:10 in the morning, Barnes simply disappeared. Although Steve hadn't looked at the clock when he had first come upstairs, he estimated that he had been there for about twenty minutes. For several long breaths, he stayed seated in the hallway, mulling over all he had seen, but eventually he forced himself to stand up and head down the stairs to turn out the lights he had left on. He had intended it to be a quick in and out, yet the moment his eyes fell upon the easel he had set up for himself but not yet used, his mind ignited with the need to capture what he had seen on paper. Wildly, he dug through a box of random art supplies until he found an old, half-filled sketchbook and a pencil.

Settling once again in his chair, his hands shaking from excitement or exhaustion or both, Steve took a long breath to calm himself and began to draw.

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James Buchanan "Bucky" Barnes had grown up in Brooklyn, just like Steve had. A child of the Great Depression, he had a reputation for standing up to bullies and protecting those who couldn't protect themselves. During the war, he had earned a name for himself as an excellent sniper and a fine leader of men. He had died in 1944 from wounds received during a rescue mission, hiding his injuries until all of his men had reached safety. The men he had rescued went on to win battle after battle in his honor, dedicating each victory to his memory.

Steve shook his head fondly as he read the details of his ghost's final mission in the scrapbook that Peggy had given him. In the light of day, his encounter the previous night had seemed like nothing more than a dream, but the sketch he had done afterwards made it real. He had not dreamed that anxious face or those expressive eyes. Sipping coffee at his breakfast table, he slowly paged through the scrapbook, examining each article in detail, taking the time to read them fully.

It seemed that, to all who knew him, the young sergeant had been an uncommonly brave and

talented man, although Steve knew enough military history to know that acts of bravery like Barnes's were not as uncommon as they seemed. From the commander leading a doomed charge to the lowly infantry soldier holding his position when all others had fled, war brought out the best in some just as it brought out the worst in others. Some caught the eye of historians and ended up in a book or a documentary, their acts of heroism highlighted and celebrated. Others, like Sergeant Barnes, slipped through the cracks of time, remembered only by those who loved them.

The articles that Peggy's daughter had compiled had little information on Barnes's personal life before the war, although Steve doubted that was her fault. Without the war, Barnes would have been an ordinary kid, one of thousands who lived and died without leaving any significant mark on the world. The war, however, had made him a "local hero", and his early death had given him a two-page obituary where other soldiers, the ones who had lived, would get only a few paragraphs forty years later. The newspapers had all reported on the tragic sacrifices of the noble Sergeant Barnes. They hadn't cared very much for Bucky of Brooklyn.

Steve let his eyes fall on his sketch yet again and found himself thinking that they had all made a grave oversight.

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Over the next three months, Steve saw the ghost a handful of times. Every weekend, he stayed up until three in the morning, waiting, and he would have done so during the week as well if he hadn't had to hold down a job in order to keep the house. Sometimes Bucky would appear, sometimes he wouldn't -- and he was firmly "Bucky" in Steve's mind now; the ghost was clearly Barnes before he had become a soldier -- but whenever he did appear, it was always in the same spot and with the same actions. Always pacing the upstairs hallway, glancing through the door like a mother fretting over a sick child.

Steve had decided that that was the expression on Bucky's face: worry over the health of a friend or family member. He had spent enough time gazing at it, inching ever farther down the hall until he sat next to the door to the bedroom and could receive the full weight of that nervous side-glance one time per eight passes. Research as to who could have been in the room, however, so far had gone nowhere. Steve had found out that Bucky had had a younger sister, but she had lived with an aunt and uncle in the late 1930's. According to his obituary, he had had no other family, no wife, and no girlfriend steady enough to mention in the papers. While it was possible that the sister had come to visit and had fallen ill, that didn't seem like the correct solution to Steve. There was something in the tilt of Bucky's shoulders, the tiredness around his eyes, that hinted that whatever had been happening in that bedroom happened a lot. That Bucky was used to pacing in front of that door, worrying and nervous and afraid.

Steve didn't know why he thought it was important to find out who had been in the room, but for some reason, he couldn't let it go. It just seemed logical that understanding his ghost's pain would be the first step in finding a way to ease it.

Because he wanted to ease Bucky Barnes's pain.

Steve kept that desire firmly in mind as he moved his bed from the master bedroom that had been built with the extension to the smaller bedroom that had been part of the original house. He hypothesized that this had been the reason why Bucky had only ever interacted with Peggy's children and never with Peggy or her husband. He only knew this section of the house; the only bedroom in his time had been this one. So if Steve wanted ever to do anything other than watch Bucky pace up and down his hall, he would need to sleep here, in this room.

It was risky, he knew. The previous occupants of this room had been children. The most likely occupant before that, other than Bucky himself, would also have been a child or at least someone

younger than Bucky. Steve wasn't sure what his ghost would do when he discovered someone his own relative age in this room, and a rather large someone at that. Scenes from horror movies, all involving vengeful spirits, tried to invade his mind, but Steve fought them all down with grim-lipped resolve. The man described in those articles had been kind; the spirit he had come to know was not violent. Steve knew he would be fine.

He believed in Bucky.

That first night, nothing happened. Steve was so excited that he couldn't fall asleep until nearly three in the morning anyway, but his ghost did not make an appearance, not even to pace. The second night, Steve fell asleep closer to one, but again, when he woke the next morning, everything seemed to be exactly as it had been the night before. During the week, he wasn't able to keep watch the way he would have liked, but twice, he woke up with his comforter tucked tightly around his body in a way that he never would have been able to do himself. Both times, it put a wide grin of happiness on Steve's face that lasted far into the day. He had to admit that it felt wonderful to know that his ghost had been trying to take care of him.

When the weekend came around again, Steve could hardly wait for the sun to set. He tried reading to pass the time but found himself unable to concentrate, so he defaulted to sketching yet another picture of his pacing ghost. He had several of them now, all from different angles and from different places within the loop. Some were full-body, some only head and shoulders. In each of them, he had tried to capture something different, some new aspect that he hadn't caught before. It helped to focus him and calm his nerves, something that he needed while waiting for the other side of midnight.

He retired to bed before one in the morning but continued to wait, eyes closed but mind fully alert. This time, perhaps forty minutes after he had turned out the lights, he was rewarded with the familiar sound of feet against the floorboards in the hallway. As always, they came up the hallway -- one, two, three, four, five, six -- and then went back down -- one, two, three, four, five, six. Steve counted them silently, his body relaxing with the comforting steadiness of it. One, two, three, four, five, six. Briefly, he considered opening his eyes a crack to catch a glimpse of Bucky as he passed by the door, but then decided against it. He wasn't sure what he would do if they actually made eye contact.

One, two, three, four --

Steve stopped breathing. The pacing had stopped. His eyelids screamed at him, begging him to open them, but he forced them to stay shut. Bucky was standing in the doorway; he didn't have to see to know. With extreme care, Steve made himself exhale and then inhale again, restarting his breathing as evenly as he could. He reminded himself that, of all the things he felt for Bucky, fear was not one of them. He trusted his sad, gentle ghost. He kept his eyes closed.

The sounds of feet began again, but this time they walked into the room and up to the bed. Steve continued to breathe as he listened to Bucky approach and then felt the bed dip slightly under phantom weight. For a long silent moment, nothing happened, and then Steve felt it: the barest touch of cool fingers against his forehead, smoothing his bangs to one side. The tenderness of it made his heart ache, and he found himself turning his head into the touch. Something breathless and wordless rustled above him, and the fingers left to be replaced by the back of a hand, pressing first against Steve's forehead and then against his cheek. The quiet half-sounds continued, offering comfort in a language that he didn't understand.

Steve sighed, relaxed and content, and then bit back a small whimper as the fingers returned, this time carding slowly through his hair. He hadn't felt this cared for, this *cherished*, since he had been very young. As he lay there, the late hour began to catch up to him, and he felt himself starting to drift. With those gentle fingers in his hair, that soft whispering above him, he knew he

wouldn't be able to stay awake for very long. He tried his best so as to drag the moment out as long as he could, but he was rapidly losing the battle.

And then, suddenly, Bucky was gone. Surprised and instantly awake again, Steve opened his eyes, blinking into the darkness. He turned his head to look at the spot where he estimated the ghost had been and lifted one hand to his face as if to catch the phantom touch before it disappeared. Disappointment began to build in him as he realized it was over. The encounter had been so wonderful yet so very brief. He cursed himself for fighting to stay awake instead of letting himself fall asleep before it had ended. Now he would have to find sleep on his own.

Steve closed his eyes and rolled onto his side, upset with himself. Grumbling internally, he flopped around a bit, trying to get comfortable. He told himself, as he punched and scrunched his pillow, that he was not pouting. He was simply tired. The destruction of his contentment had nothing to do with the fact that his ghost had only bothered to stay with him for a few minutes.

He nearly missed it when it came again, but his ears were so used to picking out that sound that they heard it even over his mental griping: one, two, three, four, five, six, the soft sounds of bare feet on the hallway floor. Steve's eyes flew open in shock but slammed shut almost immediately when he glimpsed the tail end of a shimmer as his ghost walked by. One, two, three, four, five, six. Pivot. One, two, three, four, five, six.

Heart sinking, Steve listened and waited. Just like before, Bucky eventually paused before the door, then walked to the bed and sat down. This time, since Steve had moved into a different position, the fingers brushed the hair just above his ear and the hand pressed against the side of his head and along the bridge of his nose. When cold fingers began sliding through his hair again, Steve felt the prickle of hot tears beginning behind his eyelids. Bucky hadn't really been taking care of him, then or now; he was just in another loop.

When his ghost disappeared again, Steve rolled onto his back once more, resigned. It hurt to know that Bucky wasn't really interacting with him, that he didn't really see him, but Steve supposed it made sense. He decided to stay awake and see how long this loop went, compare it with the one he already knew. The original pacing loop never seemed to last longer than twenty minutes. He had a gut feeling that this one would be the same.

In the end, he never found out. By the fourth repeat, Steve was struggling to stay awake, and by the sixth, he was barely hanging on to consciousness. When the fingers began to stroke his hair yet again, he finally admitted defeat, whispering an apology in his mind.

"I'm sorry, Bucky."

The fingers stilled for a heartbeat and Steve blearily wondered if he had spoken aloud, but a moment later, the fingers had resumed their tender paths as if they had never paused. As Steve finally drifted off to sleep, the last part of his mind to stay awake idly noted that his ghost seemed to be staying longer this time. Surely, it thought, Bucky should have disappeared by now and why, it wondered, did his hand, lying palm-up on the sheets, feel cold, almost as if phantom fingers had wrapped themselves loosely around his own.

xXx

The next night, Bucky scared Steve nearly half to death.

In Steve's defense, it wasn't even nine, and he certainly hadn't been expecting company when he went to use the restroom. So if he screamed rather loudly when a shimmering, black-and-white apparition came speeding through the closed door, he didn't think anyone could honestly blame him for it. It took him several long moments to recover, but once he had, Steve stared wide-eyed

at the ghostly intruder, one hand over his jack-rabbing heart, the other instinctively covering his more private areas.

Bucky, as usual, did not seem to notice his presence. He had gone straight to the sink and slammed his hands down, staring up at himself in the mirror with hunched shoulders and an expression of pain. He was wearing his army uniform: dark pants with a dark, collared coat and belt, collared shirt and light tie beneath. In one hand, he held his hat. Steve looked a bit closer at those hands and noticed that they were slightly higher than the actual sink, resting on a taller structure long since removed. They seemed to be gripping the invisible sides extremely tightly, the knuckles pronounced and straining.

As Steve watched, Bucky took several steeling breaths and then, slowly, began to force his face into a smile, watching his reflection in the mirror as he did so. He faltered several times, having to start over more than once, but eventually, he wore an expression that could have fooled someone who hadn't just watched him put it on. Satisfied, the ghost straightened, placed the hat firmly on his head, took one last look at himself in the mirror, and then turned and left, again passing straight through the door. Faintly, Steve heard the sounds of footsteps moving towards the stairs before they disappeared entirely.

Steve was so stunned by what he had seen that he had to sit and watch it again as Bucky looped and returned. Once his ghost had retreated a second time, however, Steve quickly finished himself up and managed to get out of the bathroom before the loop triggered for a third time. He left the door open so he could watch from the hall as once again Bucky forced himself to smile, put on his hat, and exited, this time making it to the first step of the stairs before flickering out of existence. Chewing slightly on his lip, Steve leaned back against the wall opposite the bathroom and wondered what had happened to cause this change.

It all seemed so out of character for the ghost that he knew so well. Bucky had never been active this early at night before, and he had never left his predefined space in front of and within the bedroom. To have him show up before midnight and this far down the hall, even if it still was on the second floor, was almost worrying. If Steve had understood Peggy correctly, Bucky had *never* appeared anywhere except in the hall or bedroom for the past fifty years. Almost frantically, Steve searched his brain for something that could explain this odd behavior.

The answer came to him gradually, the memory of the night before rising to the surface of his mind through layers of sleep-generated haziness. He had done something different last night, right at the end, right before he had given in to sleep. Something he had never done before, no matter how much he had thought about it. And when he had, the loop had changed. The loop had broken.

In the bathroom, Bucky was straightening up, lifting his hat to his head, preparing to turn and head for the stairs. Before Steve could change his mind or lose his nerve, he took several steps forward, blocking the door with his large body, and spoke the ghost's name.

"Bucky!"

Instantly, Bucky spun around, hat falling to the ground where it flickered and vanished. Clear, wide eyes stared directly into Steve's, the intensity in them making him shiver. The ghost's mouth had fallen open, his entire expression overflowing with surprise, but as the seconds passed, he closed it again and blinked. Steve had one heart-stopping moment where he looked upon the face of his suffering ghost and the ghost looked right back. Then, white lips moved and formed a single word as a hand lifted and reached out.

Steve?

Bucky vanished. Steve nearly had a heart attack.

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Over the next few weeks, Steve became used to Bucky showing up at random times without warning. Usually it was at night, although every so often he would appear at breakfast, looking grumpy and disheveled and like forcing him to get up so early was a capital crime. Each time he appeared, he would be stuck in another loop, sometimes only for a few seconds. Each time, Steve would watch him until he had memorized this new aspect of his ghost and then speak his name to break him out. Each time, Bucky would meet his eyes and smile before he disappeared.

Sometimes he would even say a few words, his lips moving in silent speech. He never stayed long, and, after that first time, he never acted surprised to see Steve gazing back at him.

Every time Bucky appeared, Steve's heart broke a little more. He loved having the opportunity to see so many sides of his dear ghost: his smiles and his frowns, his joy and his sorrow. But the moments never lasted long enough. Steve couldn't bear to let his ghost stay trapped for long, but he couldn't bear to watch him leave either. If only Bucky would stay after he had been freed. If only Steve knew whether or not he even *could* stay.

And in his front room, Steve's collection of sketches continued to grow.

xXx

Steve wanted to believe that it was his artist's eye that finally noticed, although in reality it was probably just the amount of time he had spent staring at Bucky and learning the way his ghost looked and moved. Regardless of the reason, his heart broke for good the day he figured it out.

Bucky wasn't saying "Steve". He was saying "Stevie".

At least, Steve told himself as he poured out another scotch and drank it way too quickly, he knew who had been ill and in need of comforting inside that bedroom.

xXx

He resumed the search for the one his sad ghost was searching for, although with only a first name, he doubted he would ever find him. Everyone who could help him was long dead. The only thing he really had was the scrapbook that Peggy's daughter had put together all those years ago, and he had already scoured those articles time and again. There was nothing there that could help him.

He tried to fight it, but he was falling into a deep depression and even the almost daily sight of his ghost couldn't break him from it.

Almost two months after that night when he had seen Bucky for the first time, Steve sat in his chair in the front room, reading about the history of photography. A few minutes before nine, he heard the telltale sound of his ghost descending the stairs. Bucky burst into the room a moment later, wearing his uniform and a bright smile. He threw his arms out to the side so as to show off as much of himself as possible, and his lips moved in what Steve now knew were the words, *How do I look?* Five seconds later, he flickered and disappeared.

Carefully, Steve found his bookmark which had slipped off the table to the floor and marked his place before setting the volume aside. Upstairs, the feet had started descending again, but Steve didn't hurry. He knew this loop well. It only lasted half a minute and would restart almost immediately. By the time he had settled and could give his ghost his full attention, Bucky was already disappearing for the second time, but by the time he came rattling down the stairs for a

third time, Steve was ready with his elbow resting on an armrest and his chin in his hand.

This loop was the tail end of the one from the bathroom; Steve could tell by the slightly strained quality of that smile. At some point in his life, Bucky had psyched himself up in the bathroom upstairs before coming down to this room to present himself in uniform to someone else, most likely “Stevie”. This had probably been the first time Bucky had worn that uniform, quite possibly only a few days before he had left for Europe and the war that would claim his life.

Steve watched his ghost pretend to preen for a while, his eyes taking in long-memorized features and movements. Then, when he was ready to say goodbye, he shifted slightly in his seat and answered Bucky’s silent question before he could disappear and start again.

“You look great, Bucky. Really great.”

As always, Bucky grinned, genuinely pleased, and his lips moved again, saying something in response before disappearing, this time for good. Even though he had seen it many times, Steve hadn’t been able to figure out exactly what his ghost was saying every time he broke him from this loop. It looked like something along the lines of *You should go get your brownie*, but that made no sense.

The distraction now gone, Steve picked up his book again and resumed his reading. He would be alone now until tomorrow; Bucky only visited him once a day.

As an artist specializing in pencils and paint, Steve didn’t practice much photography himself, but he enjoyed learning about the artform. He had finished up the chapters on the late 1800’s, taking particular interest in the Civil War era photographs, and was now moving on to the turn of the century. It was all rather interesting, at least to him, the way cameras had suddenly become affordable and an activity that had once been limited to specialists and the very rich was suddenly mainstream and common. He found it rather fascinating and read the paragraphs with an intensity that completely engulfed him.

So engrossed as he was, his eyes ended up scanning right by the word at least three times before it registered in his brain. Once it had, however, he stopped, paged frantically backward to the beginning of the section, and read it again, very slowly. Connections fired in his mind, leaving him staring down at the page, open-mouthed.

In February 1900, Eastman Kodak had introduced a basic cardboard-box camera with a meniscus lens that sold for \$1. The cameras had been named after a popular set of characters from a comic by Palmer Cox: the Brownies.

You should go get your Brownie.

Steve shot from his chair, book discarded on the table next to him, bookmark forgotten. It took him a minute to remember where he had last left the scrapbook, but when he found it, he sat down on the ground with the book in his lap and opened the cover with shaking hands. Carefully, he examined each photograph, not for the content of the picture but for any indication of who had taken it. When he found the right one, he had to shove his fist in his mouth to prevent the tears, both from the relief at finally having his answer and from the shock at the amazing yet horribly unfair coincidence.

Because there, underneath a picture of Bucky as a younger man that had accompanied his obituary, was a single line proclaiming, “Photo credit: Steven Rogers.”

Steven Grant Rogers grew up in Brooklyn. He died in 1944 from a heart attack while attempting to enlist for the army. He had no surviving family.

That was pretty much all that the young man's obituary had said once Steve had managed to find it, although he was able to read a bit between the lines thanks to a few quotes from a family friend. Rogers had been sickly all his life, and while his passing was not unexpected, it was still a great tragedy. The man had had an excellent heart, in spirit if not in reality. Even more tragic, his death had occurred less than a week before Bucky's, not enough time for a letter to have reached the soldier on the front lines. Bucky had never known that Rogers had gone before him.

There was no guarantee that Rogers's spirit was still around, but if it was, Steve knew he had to find it. He had no doubt in his mind anymore that the only reason Bucky had come home was to find Rogers. Without his friend, his sad ghost would never be able to move on.

Without any other lead, Steve tracked down the location of the old recruitment office where Rogers had suffered his heart attack. He found that it had been transformed into, of all things, a church. He wasn't sure of what he expected when he entered the building and began to wander the halls, but it certainly wasn't an elderly janitor who took one look at him and asked if he had come to see the ghosts. To Steve's immense surprise, the man launched into a long spiel about all the spirits that wandered the building and how he knew all their stories and the best ways to find them, nuts to the ghost tours that were always stopping there with annoying tourists. If Steve wanted to see ghosts, he said, wagging a finger in Steve's face, there weren't no one around who would be a better guide than him. Although, he said, working had made him mighty thirsty, and he didn't remember so well with a dry throat.

Truthfully, Steve didn't care that it was an obvious ploy; he immediately invited the man out for a drink.

At a bar down the street, while they ate fries and drank beer, Steve listened to ghost story after ghost story. Apparently, the building had acquired a rather large number of spirits over the years, although most of them, his companion told him, had appeared after the structure had been converted to a church. Steve bought him another drink and subtly guided the older man's stories to before that point in time, hoping that maybe luck would be on his side. When the man mentioned a ghost that would appear in a side room that had once been used heavily by the old recruitment office, Steve had to bite his tongue to keep from crying out in excitement. This ghost, he learned, appeared nearly every night. Unless there were tours, the old man told him, slurring his words slightly as he leaned into Steve like they were old friends. This particular ghost hated being on display and only ever showed up when there were fewer than three or four people around.

Steve ended up buying him three more beers, but it was worth every penny.

It was slightly after midnight when they returned to the church, his new best friend unsteadily unlocking doors while Steve held him upright. The old man led him into the side room, still muttering about the stupid tours, dropped into a chair, and promptly fell asleep. Amused, Steve pulled a chair of his own up against a wall for better back support and settled in to wait.

He lost track of time there in the dark, alone with only his thoughts and the soft breathing of his companion. It may have been twenty minutes, or it may have been forty. He wasn't sure. But just as he was beginning to lose hope, something in the air shifted. The temperature cooled, and he knew something had arrived.

It began as a gentle glow against an opposite wall. An indeterminate shape, starting out small and round and then growing and elongating into something that might have been human. The intensity of it increased as well although it never became particularly bright, almost like a

reflection rather than a being of light itself.

It started to move, and as Steve watched it, it glided along the length of the room, paused for a moment at the far end, and then glided back. Unlike his own ghost, this one barely looked human. If he squinted, he could just make out a torso and limbs, but there was no real way to discern the ghost's features or make sense of its actions. Based on its movement, it looked like it was in a loop, but Steve couldn't see enough to ascertain who it was or what it was doing.

For several minutes, Steve just sat and watched the ghost move back and forth across the room, unsure what to do. If this was the ghost he sought, however, and if it was in a loop, he at least knew one way that might get it to change.

Cautiously, Steve leaned forward in his seat and whispered the name that had broken his heart.

"Stevie."

Instantly, the glow solidified, and standing in front of him, lit up with that silent-movie aura, was a short, skinny young man in only a pair of trousers. His face was handsome, but his torso was frail and crooked along the spine. He looked like he might fall over at any minute, and yet Steve could see in the set of his jaw and the tilt of his chin that his resolve was far stronger than his body. He strode to the far end of the room, up a single invisible step, and held his head high as he appeared to listen to someone there. In the next moment, those thin shoulders slumped and the steel seemed to melt from his backbone. He held out a hand to take an invisible something and then trudged back to his initial place, sitting down and staring at the thing in his hands before flickering and disappearing. Barely a second passed before he reappeared and started the whole process again.

As he had done with Bucky, Steve simply watched for several iterations of the loop. Even knowing almost nothing about Rogers, he could make some assumptions based on the little he did know and the history of this place. Rogers had died while trying to enlist. His ghost was still trying. The object that he kept receiving must have been his rejection, the disappointment palpable every time he received it. There was a desperation in his face as well whenever he returned to his seat. That rejection was more than a pronouncement that he wasn't good enough; it was the destroyer of all his hopes.

Steve swallowed hard. He looked once more at the pain in that face, the loneliness and despair that he could see bleeding from it, and understood.

Rogers was trying to get to Bucky.

Steve got to his feet. His heart screamed at him. He knew what would happen if he did this, had known weeks ago, *months* ago, but he didn't care. His pain was nothing compared to the pain these two had endured. His dear ghost and the one trapped here. They had suffered for seventy years.

No more.

The loop was just about to end, so he walked over to Rogers's eventual destination and waited. The ghost reappeared as he knew it would and strode toward him, all fire and determination. Steve waited until the small figure had stopped in front of him and then spoke in a steady, gentle voice.

"Steve, go home. Bucky is waiting for you."

Rogers flickered, and for a moment, Steve was afraid he was about to vanish, but then bright, wide eyes were staring directly at him, that proud face awash in surprise and hope. Steve raised

his voice just slightly and, looking straight into those clear eyes, tried again.

“Bucky is at home. Waiting for you. Go to him, Stevie. *Go home.*”

Instantly, Rogers broke out into a bright, happy smile, the joy taking over his entire face. The next moment, he was gone.

Steve stood still for a moment, simply breathing. Then, he replaced the chair he had been using and left the room, closing the door behind him.

xXx

Bucky didn't visit the following day or the day after that. A week later, Steve stopped looking for him.

Two weeks later, Steve gathered up all his sketches and Peggy's scrapbook. He considered throwing them away, but instead put them in a box and put the box at the back of his closet.

He didn't cry. He wouldn't let himself.

xXx

Five weeks after his ghost had disappeared without even a goodbye, Steve sat at his easel in the front room, staring at a barely-started painting and wallowing in a complete lack of inspiration. It was a beautiful day, the sunlight streaming into the room through the picture windows, but Steve hardly noticed. His eyes stayed fixed on a blank section of the canvas, his mind far away.

Suddenly, a cup of colored pencils on the table by the window toppled over, sending the little sticks scattering in all directions. Steve jumped from the unexpected noise and turned his head to watch the pencils roll around on the floor. Confused, he glared at the cup for a moment. There was no reason why it should have fallen like that. There was no breeze in the room, and the table was level. Feeling annoyed by the interruption to his brooding, Steve stood and moved closer to the window to clean up the mess.

He stopped once he noticed the man standing by the fence on the other end of his yard, near the street. The man had one arm up on the top rail of the fence, leaning against it and gazing up at the house. Steve lifted a hand to shade his eyes from the sun so he could see the stranger more clearly. The next instant, he was running for his front door, the pencils forgotten.

The man jumped a little as the front door flew open, and Steve saw him start to move as though he was considering trying to escape. But Steve wasn't about to let him.

“Hi there!” he called, moving down the front step and walking towards the fence. “Can I help you with something?”

“Um,” the stranger said, wincing slightly from the awkwardness of being caught. “No, sorry. I ... I didn't mean to ...”

“No, it's okay,” Steve assured him with a smile. He had finally reached the fence and leaned against it as well from the other side. This close up, he could see that the reason why his visitor only had had one arm on the rail was because he only *had* one. The other arm -- the left one -- was completely gone, the sleeve of his jacket empty. Steve could tell from the way the other man's eyes flicked to the side that he was used to people making a big deal out of it. But Steve didn't care; he was interested in something completely different. “You're not bothering me,” he assured him. “What were you doing out here?”

“Oh ... well ... um ...” The man hesitated for another moment before giving in and explaining, “My family used to own this house, and my grandma lives only a couple of blocks away, so when I visit her, I like to swing by and look at it. Because ...” He slowed again, looking a bit embarrassed as he finished, “Because I kind of like the thought of seeing where my great-uncle lived.”

Steve couldn't help his smile; it was taking over his entire face. “Sergeant Barnes, right?”

Bucky's great-nephew looked up at him in surprise. “Yeah,” he replied with a little smile of his own. “You know about him? He was my dad's mom's brother.” He paused before adding, “I was named after him, actually.”

The face was slightly different, the hair far longer and more modern, but Steve couldn't help but feel like he was finally looking at Bucky in the flesh. This man with his clear blue-gray eyes and his soft smile could have been his dear ghost reborn, the memories made real at last.

“Do you ... ?” Steve swallowed. Now *he* was the hesitant one, but he couldn't let this man simply walk away. Not now. Not ever. “Do you want to come inside? I can show you around.”

His visitor blinked, the happy surprise registering openly on his face. “Really? I mean, you wouldn't mind?”

Steve shook his head, smiling so hard that his cheeks hurt. “I'm Steve,” he said, sticking out his hand to shake. “Stephen Rodgers.”

“James Proctor,” the other man replied, taking Steve's hand. “My friends call me Jamie.”

“Glad to meet you. Now come on in. I'll make coffee or something.”

“I'd like that.”

Steve unlatched the gate and swung it open so Jamie could enter his yard. He held it as his guest came through, and then closed it behind him, turning to follow the other man to the door. He had barely taken three steps, however, when a movement caught his eye. Pausing on the front walk, he looked up to the window of the front bedroom.

Bucky stood there in his uniform, one arm wrapped around Rogers's neck. Rogers was grinning brightly, his eyes crinkled in happiness. As Steve watched, Bucky took off his hat and dropped it onto Rogers's head, and Rogers laughed and elbowed his friend in the side. Bucky shoved against the smaller ghost good-naturedly and turned his head back to Steve, meeting his gaze, eye to eye.

His dear ghost smiled fondly at him and nodded once. Steve, blinking back tears, nodded back, and in the next instant, both ghosts disappeared. Steve knew it was for the last time.

A gentle throat-clearing brought his attention back down and to the young man who stood by his front door, waiting. Jamie smiled at him, a little shyly, but Steve could plainly see the excitement in his eyes. Heart soaring, Steve smiled back and dashed up his front walk to the door.

Meeting Jamie's bright eyes, he opened his home and led the other man inside.

This story now has a companion piece, ["My Name Is ..."](#). If you liked this one, and I hope you did, you may want to check it out.

Thanks for reading.

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