

*Fading* by Zoe Grisez

That morning, nothing was out of the ordinary – at least, not that I noticed. I knocked on his bedroom door promptly at 8:05am, with a fresh Toaster Strudel and a glass of chocolate milk at the ready.

“Violet! Right on time, thanks for getting me breakfast!” he exclaimed, then immediately shoved half of the pastry in his mouth.

Pushing aside many discarded t-shirts and hoodies on his bed, I sat down. “What’s up with all of this? Why are all your clothes out?”

“I just wanna look good today! Paul says we’re at a point in our lives where what we wear is starting to matter, and I want to matter.”

“So? What does Paul matter? He’s *your* age,” I pointed out as I started tossing a baseball between my hands, antsy about the mention of Paul.

“Excuse you, Paul is a whole five *months* older than me. He is ten and a half, which makes him my elder, which means I have to trust what he says!”

“Okay, okay, I get it! So... What do you wanna do after school today? We could play space pirates, we haven’t done that one in a while,” I desperately tried to change the subject.

Before he could even debate, Mom yelled, “Charlie, hurry or you’ll be late!” He dashed out the door, I grabbed his math notebook, and then I ran hot on his tail.

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While we walked to the bus stop, he kept kicking a pinecone while I asked him questions: *What are you gonna do today in art class? At recess, do you wanna jump rope or shoot some hoops?* They all fell flat, as he ignored me completely.

He instantly perked up when he saw Paul round the corner to wait for the bus. Without a second thought, he ran ahead to catch up with *him*, leaving me behind in the dust. I maintained my pace, hoping to maintain my pride, and casually stood next to Charlie. He didn't even look at me, he was too invested in whatever Paul was saying.

"So, it's decided! After school, we'll ask our moms if you can come over to my house for pizza and video games tonight!" Paul said, clapping his hands together confidently.

*What?* What happened? This kid Paul was intruding on Charlie and I's plan to play space pirates! Well, I know he didn't *actually* agree, but Mom interrupted! He was probably going to say yes...

On the bus, Paul and Charlie sat together, talking about some new TV show, while I was stuck sitting in the back with all the other third-wheels. As soon as the bus parked, Charlie ran off with Paul, leaving me to deal with the traffic of kids with backpacks double their size.

By the time I caught up with Charlie in homeroom, every seat was taken. I was just glad Paul wasn't in that class, so I was okay squishing myself somewhere on the floor. I eventually found a beanbag chair stuffed between a kid with an eternally runny nose and another who constantly drums his pencils. Throughout the morning announcements, I kept looking over at Charlie. Even though he was being a jerk, I was still his Friend, and I needed to make sure he was okay – it's written in the code:

Rule #72: Stay true to your Friend, even if they are being a  
jerk and/or mean.

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The rest of the morning followed a similar pattern: I would follow Charlie to class, he wouldn't save me a seat, I would squirm around to find a spot and would watch him the entire period to make sure he was doing okay.

Lunch was a hectic time any day, but it felt amplified that day. The table was stuffed to the brim, some kids were even standing around the table since the benched were overflowed (I was with them). Charlie and Paul were running the conversation, as they vividly told a story of what just happened in art class.

“Well, Charlie, he –“

“I didn’t *know* you had to –“

“But who doesn’t know that?!”

Apparently, it was a *riveting* story, but it was too loud, and I was too far to hear the important details.

Overwhelmed by the growing cackle of kids’ laughter, I went outside to sit on a swing. Charlie would be okay for a few minutes, I told myself. Gently swaying, I considered the day so far. Charlie has *never* ignored me for this long, usually he at least looks over at me for some reassurance at some point during the day. Slowing my swing, I realized the inevitable was finally occurring. I was fading from Charlie.

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Imaginary Friends, Inc. Survival Guide, Section 199-Z:

Fading is a natural process in this agreement, every child will eventually “grow out” of their relationship with their Friend. The best thing you can do in this scenario is support your child, they likely are going through a transition in life, and need you to complete it before they can entirely move on. The most important thing to remember: THIS IS NOT PERSONAL. Your child is not consciously forgetting you, it is a natural part of growing up.

Once you notice you are fading, you likely have about 12 hours before you disappear from their life.

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I spent the rest of the day weighing out my options. In orientation they tell you fading will eventually happen, but they don't actually explain the process. How much time do I have left? Do I have time to pack – do I *need* to pack? Where am I going? Most importantly... Do I get to say goodbye?

While Charlie thrived as the captain of dodgeball in gym, I slipped away to an empty art room. I needed as much time as possible, and this was his longest class. Surrounding myself with happy things (glitter, markers, paint, the works), I began my farewell. Unsure of what the future held, I was sure I was going to say goodbye one way or another.

Dear Charlie,

Do you remember when you were six and we went to the carnival together? Mom and Dad were fighting a lot that week, but they made it up to you by taking us? I remember. I remember how determined you were to get a goldfish at the balloon popping station, but, to your dismay, you just couldn't get the dart to hit the balloon! So, instead, we went home and drew all kinds of fish and hung them around your room...

I have to leave, Charlie. I have to, even though I don't want to. You've grown up and I've had the pleasure of watching you for the past five years. I always thought I'd be with you throughout school, help you move into your college dorm, and help you get ready for your wedding! And, one day, I thought I'd hang out with your kids and draw fish and play Space Pirates with them. But our adventures together have been cut a little shorter than I imagined.

I have to go now, Charlie. But there's a few things I want you to remember, even if you don't remember me after all this. Don't forget to imagine sometimes! I know playing Paul's video games is fun and all, but a little old-fashioned imagining is good for your health, trust me! Don't change who you are, I know you want people to think you're cool, but I think you're pretty cool as you are! And finally, it's gonna be okay. I won't be there for you whenever Mom and Dad fight, or whenever you fall and hurt yourself, so I *need* you to remember that everything will be okay in the end. Okay?

I love you beyond words, Charlie. And, even though you can't say it back, I know you love me too.

Love Always, Violet

I wrapped the letter in my hand-folded envelope and dusted it in glitter, hoping that even if he doesn't see the letter, he at least sees all the glitter I drowned it in. I slowly walked back to find Charlie, and reality finally settled in. I was *fading* from Charlie – my duties as an Imaginary Friend were ending, he had real friends and didn't need me anymore. I sat down at a bench near a water fountain, tightly holding the letter to my chest while I fought back the tears.

A tiny little girl, no more than a second grader, came skipping up to me. After she took a few generous gulps of water, she wiped her mouth and said, "What's wrong, why are you crying?"

Rule #43: Don't worry, no other children should see you. But if they do, ACT NATURAL!

All my training escaped my mind as I said, "Wait... You can *see* me? No one ever sees me!" After all, she was the first kid to *ever* see me other than Charlie.

"Well, duh! Who else around here has bright purple hair and is sitting here crying?"

I nervously tugged at my violet locks; Charlie wasn't very original when it came to naming me. "Sorry, you're right, I'm just used to being a bit more... imaginary.

Her eyes sparkled at that last word, and she immediately started digging in her pocket, clearly searching for something important. Out came a grubby hand holding nothing. She shot her hand out proudly, "For you! It will make you feel better!"

Enthusiastically, I played along, "Wow! I real *diamond*! Are you sure you cant part with this? It seems very valuable..."

"Yeah, it's a family heirloom! But, you deserve having it!" she shrugged and then skipped back to whatever class she should've been in.

I looked down at my outstretched palm with the invisible diamond, and smiled. It felt nice to play again, and I've never had a girl before.

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When I finally caught up to Charlie at the end of the day, he was getting on the bus with Paul. I managed to cut my way through the line to walk next to him, even if he couldn't see me anymore. I stood by him the whole bus ride home and walked in the grass while Paul and him took up the whole sidewalk.

"Alright, man, I'll see you in like two hours if my mom says yes!" Paul said as he rounded the corner towards his house.

Charlie walked home in a silent glee, I could tell he was really looking forward to hanging out with Paul that night. The whole way up the stairs to his room, I debated trying to talk to him. If what they said in orientation is true, he no longer can hear me, and he may not be able to hear me.

I sat on his bed while he spent the next thirty minutes cranking out his math homework. Looking down at my glittery letter, I knew this was the best time. He had plans, he wouldn't even miss me when I left. I went over to his overflowing bookshelf and gently tucked the letter in his favorite book from when he was younger, *The Monster at the End of this Book*. Even if he didn't see it immediately, I knew he'd see it eventually.

I wanted to see him one more time, so I crouched next to him at his desk. I took in every little detail I could; his sloppy blonde hair, the way he sticks his tongue out when he's really concentrating, the sparkle in his green eyes when he gets excited. Gosh, I am going to miss this kid.

I slowly backed away, taking in even the smell of his room, a combination of fish food and Mom's Febreze. It's time, it will be okay. I close my eyes, not sure what to expect.

There's no white light. There's no pain. I'm just simply... gone.

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Imaginary Friends, Inc. Survival Guide, Section 200-A  
(Starting New):

So, you've officially faded from your child. You didn't think this was the end, did you? No, no, no! It's time for a new assignment! Go out into your newly assigned community, and find a kid in need! Sections 200-B through 200-Z will appear as needed.

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I was standing in a brand new neighborhood, feeling different. I looked around, subconsciously searching for someone. In the distance, I heard a familiar high-pitched sound that made something inside me glow. My feet followed the direction before I could even think.

There were kids everywhere – swinging high into the sky, galloping away on plastic horses rooted in the sand, teeter-tottering as they bounced up and down... A grin spread on my face as I realized I have wandered my way to a playground.

I sat down on a bench just close enough to hear their infectious laughter, and simply enjoyed watching them at play. That didn't last long though, as I noticed a particularly small girl climbing her way to the top of the jungle gym. She swung herself around, and decided to hang there by her knees, viewing the world upside down.

While I watched her, I realized she was watching me too. Awkwardly, I went over to introduce myself, not wanting to be rude or creepy. Once I got closer, I realized why she was staring at me – it was the girl from the school!

“Well, hello there! I think I have something of yours...” I pretended to dig through my pockets to retrieve the diamond.

“My mother's diamond!” she exclaimed, and then jumped off the webbed metal. She gently took the jewel in her hands, and shoved it in her own pocket.

“Thank goodness I saw you again so I could return it!”

“Yeah! My name is Janey, by the way. What's yours?”

I hesitated. I don't know why, but I did. Maybe I was still waiting to find that somebody? Maybe I didn't have a name anymore...

“Um... What do you think my name should be? I'm in the market for a new one...”

“Ooh! I love giving people names! Maybe... Martha? No. Alice? No, you're not in Wonderland...” she went on for at least ten names before deciding, “I've got it! Louise!”

That glow inside me lit up again, and I watched the twinkle in Janey's eyes grow. Everything would be okay, I decided.