

Christmas Eve
Baška B

Well, I was dead so, technically I was a ghost, wasn't I? I felt solid, although I don't know where I had been in the interim: since last time. Then again, when I was alive, there were times like this when living was gone in a flash. Other times dragged on forever, usually the horrible parts. The flashes were all relative; sometimes they were more of a spark than an honest to goodness flash: where you could see clearly, are present in the moment, and know that you are having fun.

It was Christmas Eve, again, my fortieth since I died. I don't know how I knew; I just did. I could see people around me rushing around like headless chooks, with frantic expressions on their faces. Occasionally, someone looking smug; and carrying too many bags of 'stuff' - food and presents - stood waiting for their driverless cab to arrive at the mall entry. So, it wasn't a time-slip backwards this visit, as sometimes happened.

The more things change, the more things stay the same. It seems that unlike a decade or so ago, where most people still did their shopping electronically because of COVID19, putting in some personal effort was back in vogue. It had to happen: the breakdown of security and purging of bank accounts finally broke the system, and everyone now wanted hard currency. They tried numerous system repairs and even plastic tokens, but they were too easy to forge. There had been monetary chaos around the world as currencies were debased. For some reason, the moon colony was not as susceptible to losses, and the population up there became even richer. At last, a cure for COVID19 had been found, after it had decimated populations around the globe: people rediscovered the pleasure of shopping in person.

Now, where was she? Oh! It's my baby! No, no, this is the future; she must be the old lady with the little girl, who looks just like my girl when she was little. I looked at my daughter carefully; she was still carrying herself beautifully, bearing remarkably few wrinkles and allowing a little grey in her hair. Had she finally realised it looked wonderful au naturelle? As I moved into her line of sight, she relaxed and smiled at me. I thought we now appeared to be the same age: I was 97, the age I was at death, and she was 93. How can a ghost be vain? And what was that? The little one smiled at me too! We came together for a hug, and she joined in.

'She knows me?'

'Of course! Your dying wish, for your descendants to know you, not just a picture and an occasional anecdote.' She looked down at my great-great-granddaughter fondly, 'she says she sees you on special occasions too. She sees you more clearly than my twins did, and you felt her cuddle. Looks promising!'

'I don't remember; perhaps those visits haven't happened yet.'

'But they have happened to her; how can that be?'

'My memories seem to be linear, so I can only assume that now I know I have visited her, I will visit her.'

'Hmm.'

My daughter looked sceptical.

'Surely you remember Harry Potter, from when you were little?'

She frowned, then laughed, 'Expecto ...'

'Patronum!' I finished; as we had so long ago. 'I might not be a Patronus animal protector, but it's the notion, isn't it? That if you have done something before, you can do it again.'

‘Are you ready?’

‘Whenever you are. Unfortunately, I can’t shop, as nobody else can see me.’

‘But I can see you,’ piped up the little one.

‘Yes, you are special sweetie-pie, and you are family.’

‘But Daddy can see you too when you come and visit.’

‘He is a part of the family now, even though he is not my great-grandson. Maybe it’s catching.’

She giggled, ‘we have a new cat; I wonder if she will see you too?’

My daughter and I exchanged quizzical glances. The last time I had tried to stroke one of the animals, my hand had gone straight through it: the poor dog ran off in terror.

‘Maybe, but don’t be worried if kitty doesn’t want to come to me.’

My daughter called her car, which joined the pick-up queue with the hire cars.

‘My, you’re doing well.’

‘It’s quite common now. The other car cost too much to keep on the road, so we thought we would give it a go. As I’m still not sure I trust it, I drive when I’m in it, but it beats lugging all the shopping through the car park.’

‘You always did enjoy driving. Do you remember the trip down the volcano in Hawaii? In the rain, on the wrong side of the road, and in the dark. This car would have been perfect then.’

She laughed, ‘It certainly would have been; that was a white-knuckle drive.’

I accompanied them home and spent a wonderful day with generations of my family and the new cat who seemed to like me. I could even stroke her: I always was more of a cat person. One of my granddaughters had been interested in ancestral gene research and had discovered that her husband was also a descendant of my great grandmother. The one who rode horses in the circus. They were far ‘removed’ as cousins, and the combination of genes contributed to the ability to see me.

I could also eat and drink this time, which most ghosts can’t. Perhaps it was a reward for coming back for forty years. Whatever it was that allowed me to visit created a reality that all appreciated. I wasn’t famous or even notorious, but I was theirs and welcome: that was what mattered.

Close to midnight, I quickly had my last hugs with everyone before I faded and raised my hand in farewell as the chime of midnight came through the ether.