

Ghost Returns Home

by Michael Parker

I stood at the open doors of my children's rooms in the darkness, listening. Time seemed full of daggers. I started into the darkness of Lucas' room when I heard Elle: "Mark? Is that you?"

I spun around, trying to find her in the hungry darkness. "Yes, it's me. I'm home. I finally found my way home."

"Don't turn on the lights." Elle said. "I don't want you waking the kids. They have school...."

I began walking to her. "Don't Mark," she exclaimed. "Don't come to me. It's too late."

"God, Elle, I'm sorry" I replied, pleading. "I don't know what happened. I don't know where I have been. I'll make it up to you...and to them."

"Lucas has grown into a young man," Elle said. "He looks just like you did when we first...."

"I'm sorry," I began to say, but Elle stopped me cold.

"Do you know how long they've waited for you?" Elle asked. "At first, it was every day after school, waiting at the windows. They wouldn't go play with friends because they wanted to be here, in case you returned. Then, they used to believe you would come home for one of their birthdays. 'Because he loves me, that's why he'll be here for my birthday'. But after the birthdays came and went, they focused on Christmas, because that was *your* favorite holiday. You would be the ultimate Christmas gift. After Christmas came and passed, all of the watching and all of the waiting grew less and less until it finally stopped. Thank God! And then, one day...it had been a few years, they forgot what you looked like and they stopped talking about you. It's been years since we've spoken your name."

"I'm so sorry," I cried, holding myself.

"I know," she replied. "I'm sure this is hard. But I want you to know where we have been and where we are now. Do you know how many times they broke down crying, believing they had angered you and caused you to leave? You may have this need to show up, run

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into their rooms and sweep them up in your arms and tell them you are home and that you love them. But what makes you think they will understand why you left and where *you* have been. Will they even want to see you? They've grown up without you. What makes you think they need you now?"

"You're right," I added. "I just thought...."

"Well, it is past the time for thinking now, don't you think Mark, after all these years?"

I peeled the air for any last sounds of my children, just one last sound. But my heart, beating and breaking, was much louder.

