

Childhood Memories

Was he really that strange...?

Von Lluvia

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"So... I'm leaving now. Be a good kid, Shota, alright?"

Said boy looked with big, blue eyes at his mother, who was just dropping him off at kindergarten. He was four years old right now, but his fifth birthday would be soon, meaning he was almost a big boy now! But he nodded anyway, letting her muss up his short, blonde hair, before hearing something else.

"I hope he doesn't get in trouble with the kindergarten teacher again. They already think he's strange..."

This time, the woman directly above his mom's head spoke, looking worried, but his mother just gave him a peck on the cheek, as she always did, before saying her goodbyes and leaving.

He started after her, sighing a little bit. He was sad she left him here every day, but he understood and at least, he was never alone.

"I wonder why nobody can see them... They always float around their head!"

That sentence came from a boy his age, with long, white hair. That boy was floating next to *his* head, never really far away from him, even when he showered or slept! He did not know who exactly that was, but he had no legs and was able to float, like all these other people that could only be seen by Shota.

The little boy shrugged. "I don't know. But they, like you, seem to speak what the person they're floating around think, don't they?" His shadow – as he did not know what else to call him if no other person could see him and he was always keeping close – nodded.

"Shota! Are you talking to yourself again?", a young woman, who he knew as 'Miss Yuki' spoke with a slightly scolding voice. She had long, blonde hair that fell freely over her shoulders and kind, brown eyes. He knew she did not like it if he talked to the shadow, but...

"No, I am talking with my friend!"

His reply was completely honest – his shadow was his only friend anyway – but she shook her head.

"Please, sweetie, try talking to some of the other children, okay?", she said, smiling kindly. Shota almost nodded, as she seemed so friendly and even though most other children thought he was a bit creepy because he did not smile very often, he would try talking to them again. Until he saw what the woman above her head – white hair and red eyes, like most of these shadows, but with glasses and a ponytail – was saying.

"Really, he should stop talking about that imaginary friend of his. If that continues, no

one will want to play with him, who always speaks to thin air..."

His eyes widened. "But he is just there, I don't imagine him...!", he told her, looking sad. Why did no one believe him...?

Now Miss Yukis eyes went wide. "*How did he know...?*" "Look, just go playing with them, alright?" Her smile seemed a bit forced then, but he nodded anyway, one last, frowning glance to the woman above her before he went into the main room. He could at least try, once more, right?

A few hours later, Shota sat in the far corner of the room, playing with an old looking toy bus. Sure, it wasn't like those shiny new cars the kindergarten had bought only recently, but he liked it nonetheless. It was his favorite toy and no one else seems to want it, so it was free for him.

And, like always, he was alone. He had tried talking to the other kids, really, but the people over their heads just kept talking loudly and confused him once again. And no other kid had wanted to talk to him after he had accidentally answered some questions that one of their shadows had asked...

So he played here, just stopping sometimes to see how the others had just built a small fort and were now either trying to protect it or take it over, probably in teams... "*I wonder why they don't want to play with us... are we that strange...?*", his shadow asked quietly, hugging Shotas neck the way he did often when being sad. Or happy, but that happened less and less these days, mostly around his little sister Haruno who had only recently turned two.

By now, some strange words filled Shotas mind. Curious. Strange. *Abnormal*. But he denied it nonetheless.

"No, we aren't." He looked up again one more time, before shaking his head. "Let's play together, alright? I'll be the driver...!" The floating boy nodded and so they began to make up a funny story about a nice bus driver, who always stopped a bit too long at each station, to let everyone get on the bus and thus always being late for everything. It was the same almost every day, but he did not mind it as much as he did in the beginning anymore. He had a friend, so it was fine, wasn't it? Even if that friend always knew that the only thing they wanted was to play with the others... but he kept ignoring that just as often.

Though today, there seemed to be a change from this routine. It was a little bit too early for lunch, but suddenly, Miss Yuki came into the room – Shota didn't even notice that she had left, as she sat quietly somewhere most of the time, offering advice to children or scolding them if they were too wild – and cleared her throat loudly.

"Children? Could you please look at me for a moment?" She waited patiently as the noise stopped and everyone turned their attention to her. Shota too, of course, and he saw a small boy standing next to her, looking nervous but happy anyway. He had blue hair, which was cut short and his eyes were just as blue, shining with honesty and joy.

"*What a strange boy...*", Shotas shadow mumbled, before the boy suddenly noticed something. "*Shota, look! He has no one floating above him...!*"

He pointed at the boy and the blond nodded, dumbstruck, looking shortly at the empty space above the new boys head before fixing his eyes on him. Who was that...? Though, Miss Yuki answered that for him, just a few seconds later.

"This is Yuichi Mashita, he is four years old and will be joining us from today. Please be nice to him!"

Of course, everyone ran up to him at once, introducing themselves and asking the newcomer a bunch of stuff, who looked a bit overwhelmed, but relieved nonetheless. He had probably feared that no one would like him, everyone did.

Shota stayed in his corner, not knowing what he should have asked anyway. He was actually quite shy if it came to meeting new people and the fact, that that Yuichi-boy had no shadow above him made him feel a bit queasy somehow. Did that mean, he always told people what he thought...? But it was not as if he could simply walk up to him and ask, that would have sounded strange. And he did *not* want to sound strange! So he continued staring, mesmerized, at the blue haired boy.

As lunch came and went, Shota still hadn't talked to Yuichi. Though he did have a hushed conversation with his shadow about the boy. Who felt even queasier and had been terribly nervous since the arrival of the boy. It wasn't easy for Shota to not show his nervousness, really, but he thought he hid it quite well.

Now playing with the almost forgotten bus again, he did not notice as someone walked to him after a while. Which led to him almost squeaking in shock – but only almost, big boys did not squeak! ...his shadow did, though... – as he suddenly heard Yuichi's voice next to him.

"Hello. Who are you? I think you have not introduced yourself before, have you?"

It sounded friendly and honestly curious and Shota looked at him, his queasiness returning.

"Um... I... I'm Shota, nicetomeetyou!", he mumbled, jumbling his words together as he tried getting them out all together, before blushing slightly.

Yuichi just smiled. "Hey Shota. Nice to meet you too!" He looked at the bus next to the boy. "Say... can I join you?"

Shota quickly nodded, smiling slightly, as his shadow happily hugged him from behind. "*Look, he wants to play with us! Isn't that great? I like him already!*" Then, he suddenly remembered something. "*But... will he think we're strange, too...?*"

Shota wondered for a bit, but in the end, he didn't need to, as Yuichi and him got along very well – he didn't need to worry answering the wrong questions, as Yuichi had no shadow – and he found himself honestly happy in kindergarten for the first time since... probably forever.

His shadow had been right; Yuichi was really someone he instantly liked, being so nice and everything! And he wondered for the first time, if maybe he had made a friend.

But of course, he could not keep the shadows a secret forever.

For about a week, Yuichi had come to play with him every day, after talking a bit with the other children, and Shota had loved every minute of it. But naturally, they had also begun to talk a bit, about their families and stuff.

So maybe he should have predicted the question, but it had never crossed his mind while playing some game or another with Yuichi.

"Say, Shota... why are you always playing alone? Every day I see you in some far corner, away from the others kids... do you not like them? They are really nice, too!"

And he looked at the older boy – about half a year, actually – with these big, blue eyes, looking at him with so much curiosity and wonder, Shota could not help but being honest.

"It's their thoughts...", he mumbled in the end. "I can hear them..."

Now the other boy seemed confused. "Their thoughts? What do you mean...?"

"Well... um... it's like... a second person floating over their head. Everyone has one,

but they never seem to be able to see them..." He pointed up at his shadow, who now looked very nervous. "Like him. He's the one over my head. And these... shadow-thingys seem to say what the person below is thinking..."

Now Yuichi's eyes had gone very wide with surprise. "Really? That's so cool!" Shota had expected many words, but not the one he got to hear. Cool? Not... *strange*? "Can you tell me what I'm thinking right now?"

But Shota had to look down at the table, shaking his head. "I don't know... you seem to be the only person without that shadow..."

Yuichi seemed to think about it. But it was probably a lost cause, Shota could not even prove it to him, for all the other boy knew he could be lying to attract attention or - "Aw, how sad! But well, I guess that's something good, isn't it? Maybe it means that I tell people what I'm thinking...?"

Shota blinked, then thought about it. It was possible, but...

"You... believe me?" He was surprised, to say the least. Everyone else always told him he should stop making stuff up – or at least thought to. But not Yuichi. Was that really not a ploy or anything like that?

Said boy just smiled and nodded. "Sure!" He then looked up, his eyes resting somewhere above Shota's head. "Hello to you, too!"

"*H-Hello...!*", the shadow mumbled, surprised, but still somehow happy. Sure, Yuichi did not really look at him – it seemed that he wasn't able to see them either – but he tried to, which was enough for him to answer.

Shota felt the same – of course – but he managed a smile, probably the biggest he had given anyone except his sister for a while now.

"Thank you."

And thus, both boys began to grow incredibly close. Shota had made Yuichi swear not to tell anyone about his strange ability – mostly because he feared that the other people would think of Yuichi as weird then, too – and after a bit of 'research', as the blue haired boy called it, they had chosen to name the shadows 'Paradox'. Shota had no idea what that word meant, but Yuichi was sure it fit, so he had agreed.

His own Paradox even got an own name, as Yuichi always called him 'Para-chan' rather enthusiastically and even attempted to talk to him, even though he wasn't able to see him.

'Para-chan' always answered.

But because of that, Yuichi was with Shota almost every day – by now, he even visited the now five year old boy at home quite often – and did not talk to the other children as much. Who liked him a lot and weren't exactly happy to see he now always played with the 'weird boy'.

So one day, one of the bigger kids, Ryo, who was also one of the oldest, walked up to Yuichi and Shota, who sat in one corner talking about anything and nothing, looking at a picture book about a hungry caterpillar.

He stood in front of both boys and looked down with a slight smile, as the boys stopped their talking.

"Hey, Yuichi, we wanna play cops and robbers, want to join us?", he asked, looking straight at the blue haired boy. His paradox though – actually resembling him with his short hair and bulky looks – was frowning, glancing at Shota once in a while. "*He's spending way too much time with that kid. Hopefully he will soon realize who the better friends are.*"

Now Shota frowned himself. He wasn't such a bad friend, was he...?

Yuichi, of course, remained oblivious to that.

"Well... can Shota come, too?"

It was downright cute, how much Yuichi tried to get him to play with the others – though Shota wasn't sure if Yuichi liked being cute. Sadly, said others didn't seem to want that.

Ryo looked... uncomfortable, somehow, while his Paradox looked disgruntled. "About that..." "*Dammit, why does he like that freak so much?!*"

"Hey, I'm not a freak!", Shota answered angrily, realizing too late, that he had – once again – answered to someone only he could see. He shrunk away under the enraged look of Ryo, as well as the confused one of Yuichi.

"*Oh no... not again...*" Para-chan waved his arms frantically, looking panicked and Shota knew the reason. He had tried not to listen to any other Paradox except for his own, even though Yuichi was quite curious what they had to say, but it hadn't felt right to listen in to something as personal as thoughts... and now he had just ruined it.

"Shota, why do you think you are a freak?" Of course, Yuichi was worried. He always worried about Shota and the boy loved his self-declared friend for it, but he wanted him to be *happy*, not worried! He still liked the feeling that bubbled up inside of him as the youngest boy hugged him.

"You aren't a freak!" He then let go and looked to the eldest of them. "Right, Ryo?"

If Shota had thought he had looked uncomfortable before, it was ten times worse now.

"Um... I mean... look, he said he can read minds, okay? And if that isn't strange enough, he's always talking to that imaginary friend of his, what else could he be? He's freaking *everyone* out, even Miss Yuki is worried, I've heard her talking to his mother about it! Why can't you just play with us *normal* kids?"

By now, Shota was looking at his feet, while Para-chan had begun to sniff slightly, probably holding back tears. He really was a little crybaby but Shota could relate so he never said anything about it. Especially, since it was probably the first time anyone had told him what he thought that directly. And it wasn't exactly the best feeling...

Standing like that, he had no idea how Yuichi was reacting until he saw him moving to stand between Ryo and him. The latter raised his head a bit, noticing how the boy had his hands on his hips.

"Ryo! That's not true! He's not freaking *me* out, anyway. Please do not judge Shota without knowing him, okay? He may not be the easiest person to be with, but what is 'easy' anyway. It's always fun playing with him." By now, Shota was looking at him again, positively surprised, but doubtful anyway.

Yuichi sighed. "You know, I like you guys too, but if you can't accept that Shota is my best friend, I cannot play with you..."

Ryo looked back and forth between the boys, before pouting. "Fine, then don't play with us! But if you change your mind, we're there!" With that, he left in a huff, leaving Shota to stare wide eyed at his friend.

"Um... are you sure you don't want to play with them...?" "*I hope he's not sad that he can't do that no because of me...*"

Yuichi turned around, looking surprised, before smiling slightly. "Well, I *am* a bit sad, because I'm sure it would have been fun, but I don't want to leave you alone. What kind of best friend would do that?" He scrunched up his nose as if to say how stupid that would be.

"Are... are we really best friends?" Of course, Shota hoped so, but even though Yuichi had already said that twice, he wanted a real confirmation...

And he did get it. "Of course! Or do you not want to?"

Now it was Yuichi's turn to look insecure, but Shota hurriedly shook his head.

"Of course I want to! It's just... I've never had a best friend before..."

"Oh... me neither, but I am sure that it will work out! Let's always stay best friends, okay?"

Yuichi smiled, taking his hand and squeezed it slightly. Now Shota was smiling too, nodding a bit.

"It's a promise!"

Today, more than twelve years later – both Shota and Yuichi were seventeen now – the former looked at a picture, which had been taken when both still had been in kindergarten and smiled fondly at the memories. Back then, they had promised to stay best friends forever.

"Quite a lot has happened since then, huh?", Para-chan wondered, a smile in his words and Shota nodded. "True..."

"Brother? Hurry up, the boys are waiting outside!" Harunos voice was heard from somewhere outside his room and after a quick "I'm coming!" he left the house, grinning at the waiting group of four boys, who looked almost too funny waiting impatiently for him to arrive so that they could go to that amusement park together. And as he looked at their faces – Kotaro, Satoshi, Keisuke and, of course, Yuichi – he was delighted that that one promise never broke, because if he knew one thing then it was that Yuichi had been the first person to convince him, even back when they were children, that he wasn't a freak. Yuichi was his best friend, and Shota still loved him dearly for it.