

# Forbidden Memories

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*A snippet of Chihiro's life after she returns to the human world. The spirits may have been cruel at one time but are humans any better*

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# 1 - Forbidden Memories

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Forbidden Memories

The bell, that governed the hours of school, screeched.

Bang!

Crash!

Doors slammed open. Corridors that had seconds before been deserted now swarmed with herds of students. The blonde popular femme fatales squawked and gaggled together. The boys swaggered like baboons trying to impress them. The wanabees sighed with desire. Such was at it had always been. No one noticed the little, brown haired girl disappear through the school doors with not even a sound to mark her passing.

At least she hoped no one had noticed. Sadly for Chihiro, she was mistaken. Heartless snickering and barely muffled guffaws accompanied by the hostile patter of feet were enough to inform her of that. Clutching her folder to her chest, Chihiro bowed her head and walked a little faster, mouth gritted into a grim line. Maybe they would go away? If she ignored them they would lose interest, wouldn't they? It was wishful thinking but at eleven years old Chihiro couldn't give up all hope; something had to keep her going.

There was nothing wrong with her. She was not ugly; many had called her pretty. But she was alone. There had once been a time when the door to popularity had been held-open to walk through. But she had turned it down. She didn't want friends she had to  
A particularly loud snort from behind jerked Chihiro rudely back to reality. They were getting closer. Should she run? They would only follow.

And then the real torture began. The mocking torment, the disdainful retorts.

So Chihiro, or would you rather I called you Sen today? sneered the voice, dripping scorn.

She didn't answer, just squeezed her fists tight, lengthened her stride and kept on walking. They wanted her to react. She wouldn't let them get to her. However instead of solitude, she gained only a roar of laughter.

Chihiro's lips trembled. She would not cry. It would only be worse if she did. Not far to go now. The little blue house where she and her parents lived, beckoned welcome from its perch on top of the hill. If she could only bare it a little longer, if they didn't push her over the edge.

Oh look, I'm hurt, drawled the voice. Does little Chihiro not want to talk to me? Maybe one of your friends will instead, hmm? Well why don't we call them and see. Spirits, oh little spirits. Are you ignoring me too? Don't you want to talk?

The crowd laughed again, each grunt rending at Chihiro's heart. They could think what they liked. It was all true. She was certain, no matter how much they ridiculed her for it. There were times of course, like this one, when she questioned her faith. The story did sound outrageous. But there was proof. Not enough for them. But enough for her faith. The hair tie.

Every time her conviction wavered she had but to look at it and memories flooded back, through the weave of love made by those she could call friends. They were real. Even if she might never see them again.

Lost in thought Chihiro hadn't noticed the falling silence. Now she did. And it was heavy. Not a snicker not a giggle yet the evening stretched taut. Had they gone? Had they left her? She should have known better than that. A small stirring of the wind was the only warning.

Boo! Directly beside her ear.

Chihiro shrieked. The folder she'd clutched so tenderly to her breast clattered to the ground, the contents spilling out.

She dropped to the ground, scrabbling to gather her belongings. She couldn't possibly let anyone see! But it was too late.

Well well. What have we here?

The precious papers were snatched from her clutches. Each page grew torn and ragged in the bully's claws. One by one, after they had been scrutinised and mocked, the sheets were flung into the air for the wind to do its will.

No, Chihiro moaned, though she didn't dare move. Tears welled again beyond the horizon of her eyes. How could they be so cruel? She never hurt them. But this was how they always treated people who were different. Those that refused to follow their trends. She was not the first to suffer under their whipping.

The papers scattered in the breeze. If she hurried she could catch them. But Chihiro knew it would be worse for her if she did. They would love that. To see her run and jump like a monkey in a cage. Better to pretend to submit. She bowed her head.

Tch tch tch. I should have known. What a pretty little dragon you've drawn again and again. Your friend Haku? Well where is he now.

Spit landed on Chihiro's clothes. She would not look up. Would not look her tormentor in the eye. She had made that mistake before. They didn't take kindly to those who stood up to them.

You little freak, sneered the voice.

Don't react.

When will you realise that *Haku* doesn't exist? It's all in your crazy little-

No!

The bully raised his eyebrows.

Chihiro clenched her fists at her sides, every muscle tense. She glared through a curtain of hair. You leave Haku alone. I won't let-

With more strength than she knew she possessed, Chihiro shoved the bully to the floor. Had she stayed long enough she would have been him land in a convenient puddle leaving him awash with brown scum. None deserved it more.

But it is never the good that have the last laugh. It was lucky for Chihiro that she didn't wait to see the consequences of her actions. Instead she ran. Ran as fast as she could.

After her! Pounding feet followed soon after. So many just to catch one little girl. Chihiro had the head start.

On and on, Chihiro let her feet carry her. The suburbs melted into woods. Trees whipped by on either side. Roots sprang up underfoot. Yet they did not impede her progress. Her pursuers cursed clearly not having as much luck.

Chihiro vaulted a statue. Its leering petrified features tattooed onto her mind as she streaked past. Its expression was all together too familiar. Foreboding began to bubble within.

For good reason. A colossal wall towered ahead, a narrow tunnel the only way through. She stopped. Dare she go through? She wanted to, oh how she wanted too. But&

Assailants sprang from the forest behind her in a shower of leaves. Chihiro squealed and propelled herself into the dark vortex of wishes and fairytales. Wind wrapped around her and sucked her in. She steadied herself on the wall. Vibrations crawled up her fingertips as though caused by something thundering far below.

On and on, on and on. No longer just to escape it was more than that. She had to know, had to see. Just one last time. The familiar landscape rushed by in a blur that Chihiro never once realised was caused by her own streaming tears. She was amongst the buildings now. She could hear no one following. The town's folk never came here.

The clatter of her feet on cobbles was replaced by the hollow thud of wood. Chihiro faltered, panting, almost brought to her knees. The wind blew gently now, caressing clothes and hair, leaving behind a deep silence. The sort of silence that makes you certain that there is something waiting just beyond your hearing. Watching. That makes you sure you are not alone.

Chihiro did not need to look to know where her feet had led her. The bathhouse of her dreams and nightmares. It fluffed its feathers like a brooding mother hen. The home of the one she longed for, all

living now in a memory.

A swish from behind. Chihiro wasn't sure whether she felt or heard it, but she was sure it was there. She whirled around, hopes born in a whisper.

Haku?

But there was no one there, except the murmurings of a train rattling by somewhere far away.

## 2 - Boy at the window

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The boy at the window

Dusk was falling. And as the sun fell from the sky, drifting down in a celebration of colour the barrier between two worlds, human and spirit, sapped to a thin veil. It wouldn't vanish completely until darkness claimed the landscape fully, like the smothering of a velvet blanket with distant lights for stars. Only then would the abandoned fairground earn the title *haunted*. Humans had created this eerie label. But very few who had experienced the reasons for it, and many wondered how it came about. That is another story for another time.

The focus of *this* tale was currently embedded deep in the once troubled town and immersed still deeper in the sea of her own thoughts. With head resting on bony arms, the girl gazed with glazed eyes at the glowing sunset so near, yet so far away. Mousy hair bobbed in time with the tapping of a scuffed trainer toe against the wooden bridge where she stood leaning against the railing. The breeze bore with it whispers of the night to come. It tugged at her hair, its anxious voice murmuring a half heard plea. Come or go. Choose now or not at all. Dusk held its breath.

Chihiro jerked out of her fantasy as though she'd been slapped. She spun wild-eyed staring at the darkening sky, the bridge that supported her, the looming darkness of the bathhouse that hovered above, filled, as it was, with memories. Hollow echoes of trainers on wood broke the silence. And if possible Chihiro's eyes widened still further and her jaw swung loose as a trail of pale grey smoke began to drift upwards through the night sky from one of the many chimneys of the decrepit building that squatted at the end of the bridge where she stood. The trail choked the air, faint now, but growing stronger by the second as the shroud of night dropped its thickening veil.

Chihiro turned to flee. She knew the consequences of lingering here and yet she did it all the same. But something made her pause. After all why should she run? She wanted to see her friends again, just one last time. And if she stayed there she could. At least she thought she could.

But then what of her parents? Next time she visited that other place she might not be so lucky as to escape its clutches again. But then again, to be trapped might not be so bad if she was with people that cared for her. What did she truly want? Friends or family? Humans or spirits? In all honesty Chihiro didn't seem to belong in either world. But did she dare stay here, in this place, on this bridge, until darkness claimed the sky and the barrier between two worlds was annulled? She hovered, hugging herself with bony arms that did nothing to stave off the chill wind, and looked back towards the place she had, for a short while, called home. Had she been better off there? At least no one had laughed at her.

Well by the end they hadn't. After she'd proved to them that to be human was no bad thing. Would she be better in a place where she was accepted? Or should she stay in the homeland of her own kind.

Spirits had grown to endure her, maybe people would in time too. And then maybe she could forget her sorrows and regrets and move on.

No.

She might be able to move on but she would never forget. A shudder rode up Chihiro's back. She clutched her arms to herself still tighter trapped on the edge of indecision.

Little did Chihiro know that as she hesitated, eyes bore into her from above matching her duel of head and heart. *He*, the one who watched, for one, wanted her to stay, oh how he longed for it! But it surely couldn't be, wasn't meant to be. They were too different. If nothing else, he would long outlive her with a life, though not immortal, many times hers in length. But would centuries of depression be worth the brief decades of joy? He could easily convince himself they would be though in his heart he knew it wasn't true.

The bitterness of those long years would overtake his heart once she left him for that other place where he would be unable to follow, and thereafter he would become as pitiless as Yu-Baba had been to so many poor souls. The witch had even held his own soul captive for a time and it had been Chihiro he had to thank for his freedom. After that magnanimous gift he could not as good as take her life, even if she consented to it. As she grew old, he would remain young. He would still care for her of course, with unwavering devotion, but she would end unhappy. The human and spirit realms were not meant to collide no wishing could change that, no matter how much the dragon child ached inside.

He had heard her call to him in the twilight hours before dusk. And though it had been faint, and the barrier between their worlds still at its peak, the air had gifted him her words. He had not been sleeping like the others in the household. Instead he had sat at the great oak desk that had once been Yu-Baba's, reliving waking dreams of the past. Her call had pulled him to his feet and to the window to see her standing there. From that moment he'd watched with unblinking eyes. The sight had not surprised him. She held the thread of his heart. And he answered her call, with silent, avid devotion, even if she would never know it. And he stood watching her still, through all her contemplation and now on through her indecision. And as the sky darkened, clouds ganging overhead, he watched her still. The starlights high in the emptiness of space winked out one by one.

There was a distant rumble and droplets of rain began to spit on to the window's glass. Still he didn't move, immobile and alone in the office, his silhouette cast against the wall and mutated by furnishings, the fire framing him in its orange glow. The rain plummeted harder and the light faded in earnest. Figures, that to Chihiro would appear as faint twists of smoke, but growing clearer, were beginning to make their way towards the bathhouse that was itself starting to extend its glowing arms.

Rain rattled the study's tall window pane. Chihiro's image became a hazy outline, hidden by the river of water on the glass, and still more by wavering, unspilled tears. The dragon smiled his last goodbye.

Go now Chihiro, Haku murmured to the silent room, his emerald eyes never straying from his china doll, It is not your place to be here. This is not your world.

Far below Chihiro turned and jumped in surprise as though expecting to see something that wasn't there. Then, coming to an unspoken decision and without further pause, the blur turned and ran into the

night, wet pony tail streaming behind her. Her shape was soon lost to the all-obscuring rain. She might never have been there at all, standing half way into a world where she didn't belong.