

Sketches of an Open Window

by Fanny T

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Chapter 1 of 1

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Luna was sixteen when Hogwarts closed down, with two years of schooling still to go. It wasn't how she had been expecting to enter adulthood, but she had since long learnt that life had turns impossible to predict. She had never given much thought to the future, which was probably all for the best. There were no plans to be changed and no dreams to be broken. There were just days to be filled.

London seemed like the place to go, so when autumn arrived and Hogwarts showed no sign of reopening, she packed two bags, kissed her father's cheek and left. She stayed in a small hostel by the riverside and spent her days seeking work and lodgings while her money ran away in a steady trickle of six Sickles a day, plus the little she spent on food. In her first week all of her best robes were stolen, in her second she realised someone else must be using her toothpaste, as it was rapidly dwindling, and in her third week she met Ronald Weasley in the street.

He looked past her at first, then straight at her, and his eyes widened with his smile.

"What are you doing here?" he asked, grasping her shoulders as if to make sure that she was real. "Why are you here, of all places?"

"There aren't many All Places I want to be," she answered him, solemnly. "There is here, and there is Mongolia, and there is the Goorgal-infested city of Bunta. But since I don't know how to speak Mongolian yet, and the Goorgal-infested city of Bunta has been made Unplottable by the Ministry in an attempt to make its existence forgotten, I settled for here. Or, if you mean the All Places of London, I'm here because I want to ask for a job in that bakery on the corner there, and it's easier to do that if I'm here than at some other All Place in London."

He looked at her with that vaguely perplexed expression she inspired in most people, but then he laughed, something most people didn't (unless it was nervously, and they followed it up with an only half whispered "Merlin, that girl is *cracked*"). And then he hugged her, which was something even fewer people did.

He had changed since the last time she'd seen him, becoming more honest and less flustered, and sadder.

"Heavens, I've missed you," he said.

He offered to buy her lunch and then blushed hotly and hastened to explain *just as friends, you understand, I didn't mean...* and she said she'd love to be bought lunch because she would never say no to a free meal which was, of course, the absolute truth. As a rule, she said what she meant it was simpler that way.

"It's always a relief to speak with you," said Ronald, which made her feel quite pleased in a quiet sort of way. "Sushi fine? It's a new obsession with me, as a matter of fact..."

"Sushi fine," she replied. "I have always wanted to try eating raw fish, but for some reason they get quite offended at most restaurants if you ask for it."

"It takes a Muggle to come up with the idea, certainly," said Ronald. "Personally I think they just couldn't manage the stove. If I'd have to deal with eckeltrick things every time I wanted to make lunch, I'd start eating all my meat raw, too."

He was just in for a visit, he told her as they waited for their meal to arrive. Luna sipping her miso soup with some delight while Ronald seemed strangely reluctant to touch his after she remarked on the white squishy bits' resemblance to Nargle eggs and would not be remaining long. He was staying with his brothers in Diagon Alley, and it was a bit cramped what with Fred and George and their shop assistant (whose home had been burnt to the ground some weeks previous by a random Death Eater attack, and who had been rooming with them ever since) and Bill in town for some Gringotts work and Fleur along for the ride and him, Ron...

"And Hermione," said Luna, and found it strange that he should blush so.

"Yes, she's here as well," he admitted. "And Ginny. So we're fairly squashed. And you? Where are you staying?"

She told him about the hostel, but not about the stolen robes or the constant petty thievery. She felt strangely reluctant to talk about it. She had told Harry, once, about having things stolen from her, and he had looked at her with sad eyes and then forgot about it, as his head was filled with more important things like war and Horcruxes and Ginny (especially Ginny). Of course, Ronald wouldn't forget like that, she thought, but he would worry, and quite probably fuss. Born the youngest of six boys quite a joke, that, when he was more cut out to be an elder brother than any of the others. He was a natural worrier and fusser, and if he worried and fussed (Luna's mind began to reel with all the times she had thought the words worry and fuss, but they were good words for him, all the same), she would start doubting the wisdom of staying at that hostel and she couldn't afford to do that because she had nowhere else to go.

Ronald was looking thoughtful. "Luna," he said, "do you think you could share a flat?"

"Yes," she answered promptly. "But I don't think many could share a flat with me."

This seemed to derail his train of thought, because he turned his head sharply and looked at her with honest puzzlement. "Why not?"

"Because I'm a little bit loopy. I do things like opening the window when it's raining, or sing weird old monk-songs when I cook, or stay up late until all the candles have burnt to the end because I can't bear to blow them out. I always imagine the flames as little dancers, you see," she explained, "and it feels cruel to end their life before they've even finished the last act."

"I don't think any clear-thinking person would have a problem sharing with you," said Ronald, grinning, and she thought that he probably meant it, which was nice of him. "The reason I'm asking is that Ginny will be moving into central London, too. She doesn't know what to do with herself at the Burrow, but here she could work, and attend those courses with McGonagall, and above all know what is happening. I think it'd be good for her, because otherwise I'm afraid she'd do stupid things... She just needs to *know*." He smiled. "Of course, Mum is having kittens about it. No, worse I'd say she's having cats."

"Mr Weasley must be surprised."

"Astonished." Ronald grinned. "But what I'm saying is, I think it'd be cheaper for both of you if you were to share an apartment, and it'd be safer for both of you as well. And if she was with you, I wouldn't have to wonder about how she's doing all the time if she lived on her own I know I would worry."

"And fuss," said Luna with a smile, but she said it quietly and to herself, and Ronald didn't listen.

"I do understand Mum," he said slowly. "It's all very scary and dangerous, right now, and not having any of her kids home... It's lonely and frightening. She cried for two weeks after I left, Dad told me. But I didn't really have a choice."

"You followed Harry."

"I will always follow Harry." He winced, and said apologetically, "I hate sounding all dramatic, but... I mean... that's how it is."

"I know exactly," said Luna, and she did, because she would have done the same if she thought she could. "Oh, look, our raw fish."

With combined efforts, she and Ginny found a flat not very nice, but not very expensive. And Ginny brought curtains and Luna brought a strange climbing plant Neville had given her, and in two weeks it grew to cover one wall and bloomed with green, sweet-smelling flowers. They filled the cupboards with jars and jars of Molly Weasley's jams and chutneys and pickles, and they filled the bookshelf with Weird Sisters records (Ginny's) and treatises on Atlantis and Heliopaths (Luna's). And then the apartment was a bit nicer, especially when they opened the window on stormy days to let in the smell of rain.

They found a strange comfort in their mutual agreement on how different they were, and they learned to compromise without second thought. They talked about Harry sometimes, but as a rule, they avoided the subject because it made them both frightened and uncomfortable.

Ginny lied about her age and took a job at a café not far from where they lived, and she spent her days smiling at her customers and flipping her long red ponytail over her shoulder as she turned to make coffee. In the evenings she and many other former Hogwarts kids (those between the age of fourteen and seventeen the younger were mostly taught at home) who lived in London or its suburbs went to Professor McGonagall where they received a rudimentary education in Transfiguration, Charms and Potions, or to Fred and George who had expanded the Defence section in their shop even more and were now holding evening courses in How To Protect Oneself From Those Creepy Guys in Black Hooded Capes. Luna didn't go, but she and Neville helped out at St Mungo's three to four nights a week and learnt how to stop bleeding, mend bones and reverse hexes and some heavier curses. There was no pay, however, and although Luna could live off her savings for a little time yet since the age of seven she had been putting money into an account to buy a Snorkack when she could afford it, but it didn't seem all that important anymore she needed a job. A month after she and Ginny moved in together, she had applied for every vacancy in every magical job she had heard of, and each time she had been turned down with some vague words about all the slots being filled already. That was when she strolled into a Muggle second-hand record store and was instantly employed.

The fact that she tended to answer "The Pixies a band that persists in electric-blue robes even while off-stage in order to resemble their namesake has my ten points for attitude any day" when customers asked her for recommendations, or that she didn't actually know how a CD-player even worked was no problem to her employers, both of whom had a certain measure of eccentricity themselves. The first looked like an anorectic Santa Claus and frequently made unwary customers jump by exploding into loud laughter at the corniest jokes, and he wore sandals all year round. The second was a tall, scrawny man with grey hair that surrounded his head like a somewhat dirty halo. He never said a word to her during her first week. She assumed he was mute until the day he asked her to pass the coffee, and she discovered that the poor man stuttered so much he could hardly get the words out.

She earned enough to keep her quite comfortable, and she got a discount on all CD's and LP records. She took some home and listened with Ginny after dinner, and they laughed at Muggle rhetoric and poked the obstinately unmoving pictures on the covers. Ginny sang Simon and Garfunkel (off-key) in the shower for three days afterwards, but Luna faithfully kept to her Gregorian chants while she cooked, sung in a deep voice somewhere between a bass and a low tenor.

They had visitors. Neville often picked her up en route to St Mungo's and sometimes stopped by for tea afterwards or stayed the night if it had become very late. He'd blush furiously when, in the morning, Ginny walked into the kitchen for breakfast yawning and stretching with her T-shirt slipping off one shoulder and after he'd left Ginny would dig her elbow into Luna's side and waggle her eyebrows and ask what was going on between her and him, anyway. (Luna reflected that although she didn't have a patch on her youngest brother, Ginny could certainly be very dim-witted about these things herself.) There was a steady stream of old school mates that Ginny brought home from her magical classes; and Luna, to the other girl's amusement, enjoyed the company of a sixty-year-old Healer from St Mungo's whenever opportunity presented itself.

Sometimes, Ginny came with a boy she had met in the café or someone she had sat next to during the twins' Defence course, and she retreated into her room after performing a thoughtful Silencing Charm. Luna, however, found the forced silence of the apartment worse than anything else she might have overheard, and if forewarned, she took to staying over at Neville's for those nights.

She went out on double dates at Ginny's insistence and chatted politely with whatever boy her flatmate had dug up until he without fail announced his intention of going home and turning in early.

She never cast Silencing Charms on her room, but it didn't bother her.

The weather was fierce one Monday, and although she made it to work, it was hardly worth it. All through morning the rain beat ceaselessly upon the windows; the few who were out were walking almost bent double, holding their umbrellas at strange angles in an effort to ward off both wind and water, and by lunch she had served a grand total of three customers.

Stutter emerged from the back room, grasping his customary enormous cup of coffee, and managed a sentence she correctly took to mean "You might as well go home".

"Aren't many as would dare go out in this weather for mere shopping," Santa agreed. "We'll manage well enough here. You'll receive a whole day's pay anyway, of course, but there's no sense in you hanging around here when you must have better things to do."

She agreed, gathered her things and battled her way home again. The water-repelling charm on her coat and boots was wearing thin, and she made a mental note to renew it.

Once home, she found all three of Ginny's pairs of boots lined neatly next to the umbrella stand, as well as a very large pair of shoes with broken laces. So. A visitor. And a boy at that, or Millicent Bulstrode (an alternative she turned over with some interest, but dismissed). She set her own boots aside for charming and entered the living room where Dean was sitting in the sofa, and Ginny was curled up opposite him in the armchair. She was wearing no socks and her hair was dry while Dean's was plastered to his forehead they had not come home together. However, Ginny's T-shirt was one she only used for nights out or special occasions not an unannounced visit, then. She had known he was coming. And she was awkward about it, which Luna would probably be, too, in her situation.

Still. Harry was gone, and he would be for a long time.

"Hello, Dean," she said and deposited her bag on the table. "Has Ginny made you tea?"

Dean blinked. "Well, no, she hasn't."

"Ah. Coffee."

"Not that either, actually."

"She has no manners," said Luna serenely, and out of the corner of her eye, she saw them both grin as she turned towards the kitchen *could be a professional ice-breaker*, she thought.

"Tea or coffee?"

"Tea."

"Coffee."

"Hot chocolate it is." She closed the door behind her and heard them begin to laugh.

"Well," she said to herself, letting her wand stir the simmering milk while she measured out cocoa and sugar, "I suppose it wasn't entirely unexpected."

Ginny stopped bringing home boys from the café, but Luna still slept at Neville's now and then. She met Dean on his way out as she returned home.

And the war carried on and on, and worsened. Dean was only one of many hastily recruited Obliviators, their ever-growing numbers needed to cover the tracks of the Death Eaters he modified memories and came up with cover stories for Muggle attacks, and his hands shook as he told Ginny and Luna about the bloody scenes he witnessed day after day. Neville went from trainee Healer to part-time to overworked full-time employee in a matter of weeks, and Luna cut her amount of days at the record store to take on a paid half-time job with him. Ginny kept making coffee and smiling at customers, but she also started disappearing on her free days just about the same time as it became known that the Allies against the Death Eaters had stopped all communication by owls, as they were becoming too easy to intercept. There were rumours that they had started using cats instead, and Luna took to calling Ginny "Kitty", which made her smile.

No one knew where Voldemort was, any more than they knew where in all of England Harry, Hermione and Ron had got to.

Professor McGonagall had to give up on her classes. A Death Eater found out the location of her apartment by way of friendly chit-chat in the pub with hints about a seventeen-year-old daughter in need of company and subsequently levitated twenty-four snakes through the window in the middle of class. However, the previous four lessons had dealt with transfiguration into stone (the classic and most effective defence against trolls, which was becoming important to know when armies of forest trolls massed in Sweden and Norway) and after having the spell hammered into them by a very stern Professor McGonagall, the attending students were able to deal with the snakes quickly and effectively. The total amount of injury was two mildly venomous bites, easily counteracted with antidote, a brief spell of choking for one boy who hadn't got out of the way of a boa constrictor fast enough and some broken toes.

But the Death Eater reached his objective in one way at least the class was considered too dangerous and was promptly terminated. It didn't make a great change to Luna's life, except that Ginny started disappearing in the evenings, too... her bag filled with tied-up scrolls of parchments and envelopes sealed with complex wax stamps.

Shortly after, Fred and George officially gave out that they were stopping their classes as well. Ginny still went, though, along with a few other close friends, and she brought Dean when he was free from work and nagged at Luna until she went once, just to appease her. She left early and never returned there were too many memories, and it was all wrong. Secret meetings, lessons in defending oneself, a silly name (Ginny had told her how Fred had stood up on the first meeting of the newly incarnated Defence course and proclaimed "I'm with the Society for Toppling Useless, Piss-worthy, Idiotic Death Eaters in short, I'm with S.T.U.P.I.D.E.")... that was all there, but there was something missing.

Someone missing.

The first news she'd had since war broke out came on a Thursday just past noon a day she would never forget.

She had been working since six, only stopping at eleven to regain some strength through a coffee and a sandwich, and in those hours she had tended to a nasty leg wound caused by an enchanted bear trap outside the front door of an outspokenly pro-Muggle Ministry official, administered antidote to eight separate cases of inventive poisoning the Death Eaters were certainly getting sneakier and pronounced a Cruciatius case long past helping. She had jumped at that last one, knowing that Neville was on duty and not wanting him to handle the examination. It was almost too much for her, too the tortured man's pupils were pinpricks in eyes that shifted in terror when she approached him, and every time she made a sudden move he screamed.

It was after sending him off for calming draughts and restraints in the mental ward she turned her attention to the just-arrived, fresh batch of injured and almost dropped her needle of Painkilling Potion as her patient said, "Hello."

She looked down at his face, searching the swollen lips, blackened eyes and bruised cheeks shadowed with week-old stubble for familiarity, and realised that the blood in his hair didn't disguise its colour but matched it.

"Ronald?"

"The very one," he said and spat blood.

"You look awful."

"You look rather nice in that uniform."

"What happened?"

"Guards."

"What?"

"Trolls."

"Where?"

"Trinket." (Which meant Horcrux, because the two Horcruxes so far destroyed – excepting Riddle's diary – had been in the form of jewellery, and it had been quite an amusing metaphor anyway, referring to Voldemort's soul in so light-hearted a manner. They all spoke in code these days, when you could never be sure of who was listening in.)

"How's Hermione?"

"Fine. She broke the trinket's spell, I was bodyguard. Worst deal, hah. She's with her parents – sent her home while I came here. Best split up – group easier to notice."

"I'm going to administer some Painkilling Potion now," said Luna in a calm detached nurse voice, because Ronald was starting to cut off his sentences, wincing with every second word. He grinned – or grimaced – and clenched his teeth as the needle went into his arm and the Potion spread into his blood. Luna watched him closely, seeking for any negative effects, and finding none she hesitated and said, her voice still very calm, "Harry?"

"No harm," said Ronald and fainted.

Later, when she had healed all his cuts and mended his bones and cleaned infected wounds and shaved him (she insisted), he told her how Harry had broken the enchantment on the Horcrux – some kind of Fidelus Charm, probably, since they had searched the area minutely for days without result until he somehow managed to break through – and how Hermione, who had made it her expertise to know how to actually destroy the Horcruxes, had broken the spell and cracked the cup (which was the Horcrux they had found) into two neat pieces.

"Typical Hermione," said Ronald, with an attempt at his old rancour which mostly came across as fondness, "she even destroys instruments of Evil symmetrically."

Luna wondered if he had told her he loved her yet but thought that he probably didn't need to. Still, it might be nice to hear sometimes, and she said as much to Ronald. He flushed adorably.

"You're always so direct," he said.

Then he told her about Harry. When he had destroyed the Fidelus on the cup, he had caught a glimpse, quickly, of the next Horcrux. It was possible, he had argued passionately, that this was because the Fidelus Charm had been meant to include the next Horcrux and that maybe he had unconsciously broken the enchantment on that one at the same time. He had gone off immediately, to search for it while he had it fixed in his mind.

"Alone?"

"I was in no condition to stop him."

She didn't say "You said you'd always follow him", because that would be accusing him, and he didn't need her to accuse him when he did it so very well on his own.

As soon as he was recovered, he and Hermione would be off again after their friend, which meant their new destination was to be Wales, he elaborated, nervously.

"Better get you fixed up quickly then," said Luna and sensed his relief that this was all she had to say.

She did have other things to say, like *how could you let him go off alone and what if you don't find him and what if someone else finds him?* But she was first and foremost a Healer, and she knew what her patients needed. Rest, and reassurance.

She cried into her pillow for the first time since her mother died that night.

There was work to take her mind off things, but she wondered and hoped and feared and listened eagerly for any news at all. There were none, of course, just as there hadn't been from the start, and she fretted quietly. *I'm turning into Ronald*, she thought, *worrier, fusser*.

And out of the blue, he was there. She came home, and Harry was in the living room, his hands on Ginny's face and Ginny's arms around his neck and they were happy, happy, happy.

"I'll be sleeping at Neville's tonight, then," she said, making them leap apart, and she knew that there were red-headed genes in Harry, too, but ought black-haired people really to be able to blush that hard?

"Luna," he said, "only him left. We killed Nagini today – she was out feeding – I slit her throat and Hermione burned her heart. She was the last. Now there is just him."

And he came towards her and hugged her tight, and she patted his arms awkwardly for an appropriate length of time before disentangling herself.

"I'll share the good news with Neville," she said and allowed them to draw whatever conclusions they found fitting.

But Neville was not alone, and Luna thought of course: Parvati had always been kind to him, and these days you took any excuse to hold someone.

She grinned at Neville, and he grinned back shyly and said sorry for not telling, and she said tell me tomorrow. I'll be off.

So she went where her feet took her and ended up at Dean's. Only after she had rung the doorbell did she realise that this was the worst course of action ever, because what excuse for sleeping over could she give him, of all people? Neville she could have told the truth, to anyone else she could have said Dean was coming over, but him?

Then he opened the door, and she realised she didn't have to say anything at all.

She wondered how it felt, knowing you were second best, always good enough but only until he came home.

I could settle for second best, she thought and found herself somewhat pathetic.

Afterwards, she would think of it like the poster for a film. HARRY POTTER, it would say, and there'd be a picture of him staring seriously through his glasses (or maybe he wouldn't have his glasses it might be more manly and cool without them). Opposite him would be the shaved, white skull of LORD VOLDEMORT and between them (smaller type) something like *The battle of the Century* no exclamation mark, that would be tacky. Then Ginny, her hair down possibly a little bit messy standing behind Harry's shoulder, or back to back with him: GINNY WEASLEY, not quite as big as Harry's name but still in co-actress size. And in several sizes smaller, maybe not even in capital letters: Hermione Granger and Ron Weasley, and the two of them standing somewhere in the background, looking worried but determined.

(Then, if you watched the film and saw it all the way till the end and watched the credits roll and roll, you would eventually see Luna Lovegood in very small print, under the heading *Crowd of vaguely intimate friends*.)

She thought about it that way, because then it was obvious that Harry would win (you couldn't make a film poster like that and then let the bad guy win), and she didn't have to think about the two days or years, hadn't it been years? between Voldemort's challenge when Harry left them, a lonely nineteen-year-old, and his emergence as winner and as alive. She didn't have to think about things like the blood covering his face and hands, the two missing fingers, the broken ribs or the half-hysterical laughter as he said "I owe it all to my wand, sure enough. I stuck it into his eye and right into his brain, and that's how the most feared wizard of all time met his end. Bloody magic bullshit crap-fuck."

Ginny had hugged him, then, tightly.

I do like her, she's very nice, said Luna to herself and repeated it over and over. *I do like her. I do like her. I do like her.*

There had been sobbing all around and people clinging to each other, and in the midst of all this Luna reached out for someone and met Dean.

Dean's flat was light and large, and he had an extra room (Obliviators made an obscene amount of money), which he mostly used for drawing but which fitted Luna very well. He refused to let her open the window to the rain, because there were watercolours on his walls, but he smiled when she sang and sometimes joined in. He had a lighter voice than she had, but that was after all not really his fault since her Gregorian voice was enchanted. Still, it was silly she told him so and he laughed.

Every horizontal surface in Dean's flat was covered with paper sketches and croquis and scraps of parchment covered in every shade of the colour green, or blue, or whatever colour he'd been trying to find for the moment. He drew many portraits, and sometimes when he had nothing better to do he'd pick up a brush and colour them in.

He used a lot of red.

She found a sketch of herself once, with her wand over her shoulder, Summoning some plates out of the cupboards behind her while she tossed a salad with her other hand. He had caught her well, but she told him off later for making her pretty. He looked at her, smiled, and said but I don't lie when I paint.

He taught her how to use a CD-player and explained why Muggle LP records didn't turn by themselves, and when she brought her Simon and Garfunkel records over, he pounced on them and played nothing else for days.

He still saw Ginny she was guilt-ridden and kept talking about staying friends anyway and looked equally sad every time. And he talked with Luna late into the night while the candles burnt down around them, and she listened (that was enough; she had no desire to talk) and held his hands between hers.

They never came closer than that. Neither wished to. He only saw the ghost of Ginny, and she had ghosts of her own.

"You and Dean?" said Ronald, knocking his crutch to the floor. They were eating lunch together at a restaurant close to Luna's record store, celebrating Ronald's recent release from St Mungo's.

"For now."

"How come?"

"Harry doesn't have anywhere to stay. He took my old room, and Dean has space enough for me."

"But you and Dean, are you..."

"No." She shook her head, seriously. "But it would be practical, wouldn't it?"

"Would it?"

"Of course it would. In the film we would realise we're meant for each other. Get rid of two loose ends at the same time, see? It would be a perfect ending."

"The film? What are you talking about?"

"How's Hermione?"

Ronald retrieved the crutch and smiled. "She's happy."

"And you?"

"I'm happy," and he knocked the crutch to the floor again, "despite some setbacks."

"How long..."

"You're the Healer, you tell me."

"Forever," she said, and he laughed.

"I would have liked you to tell me, direct like that, much better than that wet-eyed nurse who talked about how fun life could be, anyway, despite this small and she stifled a sob, or so it seemed to me handicap. By the time she managed to spit it out at last, that my leg hadn't healed quite properly and never would, I was half-crazed with worry. I thought I was going to be paralysed for the rest of my life. Finding out it was just a twisted leg was almost a relief."

"You'll limp, of course, but not badly... I think? Stretch out your leg... Good." She examined the twisted bone closely, prodding with careful Healer fingers. "A hasty resetting."

"I was bleeding to death."

"Nagini?"

"A good chomp, yes."

"Wasn't she venomous?"

"Oh yeah, that too."

"You really *did* get the worst part of the deal, didn't you?"

"In a manner of speaking." He laughed. "What am I talking about in every manner of speaking. I've been beaten and stabbed and bitten and slashed and just generally smashed around. Playing bodyguard sucks."

"I'm glad I wasn't there."

"So am I. It was scary. I won't wake screaming from a nightmare of spiders again. I have much fancier stuff for my dreams now." He pulled his leg back, knocking the crutch over again and only just managing to catch it by the tips of his fingers. "I'm getting the hang of this."

"You'll be the prime crutch-catcher in London in no time at all."

They ate their lunch and moved on to other topics of conversation, talking for a long time while the day moved on around them, and when they finally left the restaurant, they promised to make it a tradition to eat lunch together once every two weeks at the least.

They kept the tradition, and the next time they met for lunch, Harry and Ginny had broken up.

Luna moved back in without delay, and for two days she found socks in assorted strange places around the room. Apparently it didn't matter if you saved the world a nineteen-year-old boy was still a nineteen-year-old boy. Harry was staying with Fred and George, she knew. And Ginny had embarked on a furious cleaning raid, leaving everything spotless and gleaming angrily.

"Sometimes I want to kill him," she snapped at Luna's feet as their owner lifted them out of harm's way. Harm came today in the form of a skilfully conjured animal that had a vague resemblance to a hedgehog, only instead of a snout it had a long, tube-like nose (or possibly mouth) that widened at the bottom, and it was using this nose (or mouth) to happily suck all the dust off the floor while Ginny occasionally poked it with a stick to change its direction.

"I'm sure you could make money with that," said Luna, who was rather fascinated.

"He's still going on about protecting me from evil and whatnot, so I wonder did he somehow *miss* that the war is *over*?"

"At a circus if nowhere else."

"I think he's just ashamed of me. Because I went back to Dean while he was gone. Hello, Harry, world calling, you bloody well disappeared for... what was it... oh, about *two fucking years*. And while I'm scared witless about what's happening to him, I'm not supposed to have anyone to hold on to, no, I'm supposed to be all chaste and *wait* for a guy who *broke up* with me."

Luna caught herself wondering, if she sang really loud in her head, might she be able to block out Ginny's voice?

She also caught herself wondering what would happen when the dust-eater caught sight of the dirt beneath the window, where she had knocked a potted plant to the floor two days earlier.

"I bloody well needed comfort. Dean is comforting."

The dust-eater did see the mound of earth and waddled towards it happily.

"And now Harry's so fucking jealous you wouldn't believe. He's being a completely unreasonable prat..."

The plant had been a cactus.

"... stupid fat idiot paranoid and doesn't trust me a fucking inch..."

There was a high-pitched scream from the dust-eater as it inhaled a mixture of earth and dust and sharp cactus thorns. Luna bit her lip to stop from smiling, and Ginny leapt a foot into the air, looking around frantically for first the source of the noise and then her wand. A quick swish sent the dust-eater back to wherever it had come from, and in the sudden stillness Luna stood up.

"I'm going over to Dean's," she said and waited for what she knew would come.

"Mind if I join?" said Ginny.

Luna walked home, wondering if she had done the right thing. Still, it wasn't her fault if Dean allowed his heart to be broken over and over. She hadn't done anything but bring Ginny over. And if Dean had wanted Ginny to leave at the same time she did, when Ginny asked "Can I stay just a little bit longer?" he could have just answered "I've got an early morning tomorrow, sorry" or something like that, he could probably come up with a good excuse. He came up with excuses for a *living*, for crying out loud.

But he had said "Yes".

Then again, could one help the things one did when in love?

Still, she didn't have time right now to feel guilty. When she got home, she would light a candle and watch it burn all the way to the end, and she would think about things and maybe even find room for a little guilt, although it would be overshadowed by pleasure at having secured the flat for herself so she could be all alone...

Or maybe not, she thought as she arrived home and saw someone waiting for her at the door. We'll see.

"So now Ginny is staying with Dean, and you what? You have the apartment to yourself?" asked Ronald, two days later when they met for lunch.

"Ginny is staying with Dean, yes," she said, which answer would have told him a lot had he been the kind to pick up on the significance of words said or unsaid.

"Merlin." Ronald shook his head in disbelief over his sister's folly. "Those three are turning into a soap opera. It can't be easy for you, being in the middle of that sick triangle. If I were you, I'd get as far away as possible."

"That's the last thing I want to do right now," she answered. "I couldn't be in any better spot." Ronald looked at her, puzzled.

"Oh!" he then said, forgetting to question her. "I almost forgot. Hermione asked to come along, is that OK?"

"Of course it is. She's the most important woman in your life."

"You know, I'm always equally unsure whether you mean it or not when you say those things."

(She always meant what she said.)

Hermione arrived ten minutes later, all smiles as she practically skipped up to them. Luna looked her up and down approvingly, thinking that with a smile like hers she ought to be smiling more often.

"I do hope," she said severely, "that when Ronald finally musters his courage and buys you a ring, you won't be practical and silly enough to say, *Ron, don't you think we should wait a little before we make that sort of commitment?*"

Hermione's mouth fell open, then she flushed to the roots of her hair (maybe it was something about having a red-haired lover, thought Luna, did they transfer their tendency to blush to you through kisses?) and finally laughed.

"There ought to be more of you, Luna," she said.

"Certainly not. Imagine the trouble it would cause. We'd have to start calling ourselves Luna1 and Luna2 and Luna3... or maybe A, B and C... which do you think sounds better?"

"Numbers, I think," said Hermione typical, girls like her were always about numbers.

"But if you used ABC and put them all in a row you could use them to teach kids the alphabet," suggested Ronald, removing his crutch from the chair beside him and motioning for her to sit down.

"That wouldn't be very educational if they all looked the same, would it?"

"No, you're right about that, of course."

"Luna3 and Luna4 will always fight over the last of the jam," said Luna thoughtfully, who was starting to become quite enamoured by the idea. "And number one will always demand the shower first and then the others will follow in the proper order, which means that Luna6 I don't think there should be more than six will always shower cold and she will be a most bitter young woman."

"I can see it was a bad idea of mine," conceded Hermione. "We can't have Luna6 growing up bitter, after all."

"Now you're making fun of me."

"Just a little." She smiled, then leaned forward and kissed Ronald on the lips which was rather sweet. "And what have you been gossiping about?"

"Ginny's love triangle," said Ronald with a certain amount of relish.

"Oh, yes, I heard. And now Harry is staying with Fred and George, or was until two days ago he hasn't slept there, at least, since then..."

"And where is that assistant of theirs, then?" asked Ronald. "That blonde thing... George made a pass at her yet?"

"Ron, don't you *know?*" asked Hermione. Trust her to know everything.

"Know what?"

"She left two weeks ago going up to work on the restoring of Hogsmeade. And besides, she already has her beau, doesn't she? There's a man who comes to the shop all the time... curly hair..."

"Sammie Fortesque? He's only in there for the Muggle magic tricks."

"Ron, there's a limit to the number of marked decks a man can own..."

Luna leaned back in her chair and let the words wash over her. She closed her eyes, and relaxed...

"Luna?"

"No?"

"I was just ask wait, what do you mean 'no'?"

"I find 'yes' too conventional. I've decided to say no every time I mean yes and yes every time I mean no from now on."

Ronald snorted and Hermione raised her eyebrows. "Really?"

"No."

She watched them think about that one for a while, but Hermione eventually shrugged it off and returned to her original question. "I was saying, and who holds your heart's desire?"

Luna smiled. "Don't you *know?*" she asked, doing a rather good imitation of Hermione's voice, she thought. And then Hermione was watching her, and she thought *Merlin, perhaps she does know.*

Hermione stopped her scrutiny, looked away.

"No," said Hermione, very clearly.

It wasn't until much later that Luna started wondering if maybe Hermione meant yes when she said no, too.

A week passed, and one day Ginny came home to find Harry in the living room. Luna had just made him tea, and he was sitting in the sofa, in the very same spot Dean had been sitting when he came to visit for the first time.

"What are you doing here," Ginny asked, and her voice was soft and angry.

Harry appeared no longer the hard creature he had become during the war and the chase and the fear. He was acting once again like a schoolboy, flustered, clumsy.

"I. Er," he said, and spilt scalding tea on his trousers. "Fuck! Sorry. I. Yes. Thank you, Luna." This about a freezing charm and a towel. "I. Um. I." And then he gave up, and he dropped the towel and set down the tea cup and spread his hands. "I mean, I'm sorry."

And Ginny's heart melted at his bluster, and Luna stayed that night at Dean's place.

A month passed in relative peace. Luna had had time to bring most of her stuff over to Dean's by the time Harry and Ginny split up again.

Two more years went by like that, backwards forwards, Luna playing shuttle service between the two flats; until the day when she said enough, and she packed her things and left for a little hostel by the riverside, and she didn't come back.

"I never thought you'd stand so long," said Ronald, at lunch. "Why you put up with it... And why should you be the one to move every time they changed their mind? Merlin alive, the twists and turns of those three... What?" For Hermione, who had joined them for the day, had just given him a look that said *are you stupid?*

"What Hermione means is there weren't ever any three. There were four," said Luna and sipped her drink serenely.

"You look like a fish, Ronald," she said disapprovingly, after a while.

"That's just the way he looks every time I ask him to wash the dishes without magic," confided Hermione, and explained, "You always get some spell residue and I don't want to know what that would do to my food."

"But," said Ronald, and frowned to himself for a while.

"I have always loved Harry," said Luna, as a sort of starting point. "Well, no, not always. Pretty strange, wouldn't it be, if I'd loved Harry before I'd ever met him? But ever since that year, with the DA and everything, I've just loved him. A bit silly, I suppose, but he was very nice to me. You were nice, too, of course," she told Ronald as an afterthought, "but in a different way. Harry seemed a bit sorry for me, and unlikely as it seems I actually liked that because that hadn't happened to me often, either... And he also felt a little bit like me in some ways."

"And me?" said Hermione, but she smiled as she said it, and Luna grinned back.

"You weren't nice at all. You thought I was a fluffy silly bint."

"You thought I was a stiff boring prude."

"I know, doesn't it even out nicely?"

"But," said Ronald and fell silent again.

"Oh yes, Harry fell bad for Ginny, and she happily gave up her relationship with Dean who had after all only been a kind of pastime and you know the rest," Luna continued.

"We do indeed," said Hermione darkly she had been very upset by the disgusting way in which it was handled.

"And then he told her he couldn't keep seeing her and went off on a Horcrux treasure hunt. So Ginny wanted someone to comfort her, and she went through a string of boys until Dean resurfaced Dean, you see, is a very comforting person. It wasn't very nice to Dean, perhaps, but it was partly his own fault for letting it happen."

Hermione snorted. She had thought that had been handled in a rather disgusting way, too.

"And Harry came back and Ginny left Dean, and Harry went off to fight Voldemort Ginny clung to Dean during those two days, too, but that was only to be expected and Harry came back again and Ginny left Dean again, and she fought with Harry and clung to Dean again, and it is here I enter the scene, when Harry is upset and confused and needs someone to talk to." She beamed, as if all was made clear.

"But," said Ronald, who seemed to have lost all of his vocabulary save this one word. Luna sighed.

"There are things," she said slowly, "that he's never been able to speak with Ginny about. Because Ginny is very much alive, and a lot of Harry's life has been about death. I know a little about death and about being very alone. He could talk to me about those things."

"Oh." Ronald's brow cleared. "So you've been *talking*."

"Well, I slept with him quite a lot, too."

Ron winced. "There are times when I regret that otherwise fantastic directness of yours," he said, and his face was a little greenish.

"I'm inclined to think Ginny never knew, which is a truly impressive feat of ignorance. She takes after you," Luna told him thoughtfully. "*Buyou*... you've known for a while, haven't you?" She aimed the question at Hermione, who inclined her head.

"Known, first now. Guessed, since about three years back. But... Why leave now? What's happened?"

"Nothing. I'm only sick of being an 'until'. *Until* Ginny takes him back, or *until* he takes back Ginny, depending on the current reason for their break-up. It's quite horrible, actually."

"Merlin, Luna." Ronald looked at her in that very kind way only he could. Wouldn't it be nice, she thought, if she could have fallen for Ronald instead, who was kind and faithful and didn't see anyone as a good-enough, a second-best? If only she could have fallen for Ronald and Hermione could have... Well, she could have fallen for someone else, or something.

"Why didn't you ever tell me?" he asked, and she smiled at him.

"Do you think I could tell you about things like that? You're not very good advice when it comes to relationships. I mean this in a kind way, you understand."

"So now, you're..."

"Back at that hostel, where I stayed when I first came to London."

She thought it would be best not to mention the Chinese guy in the bunk above her, who spent the best part of his nights in a trance-like state of meditation and snarled every time she so much as touched his bed, or that someone had made off with all her books on Mongolia.

"You could always come stay with us," Hermione offered she was such a kind girl, really. "We only have the one room except for our bedroom, but there is a couch in it and if you don't mind being a little uncomfortable..."

"Thank you. You're nice. But I have money put by, and I'll manage. Besides, I think it'll be some time before I can find a new flat. I wouldn't want to keep you from being

snuggly," she said and looked on in bemusement as both of them blushed.

So every day after she finished at the music store, or during her lunch hour, or when Santa and Stutter smiled kindly at her and gave her an hour or two off, she ran around London and looked at flats and visited rental agencies. She bought an assortment of newspapers each morning Muggle as well as magical and skimmed through Muggle reports of earth quakes and magical reports of the same as giants stirring, flipping almost straight to the adverts for flats to rent or buy. And when she got annoyed or bored, she took one day off from the home-hunting and went to see the Pixies play at the Leaky Cauldron or to sing Simon and Garfunkel songs at a karaoke bar.

It was during one of these days she stumbled into a small art exhibition, and the first thing she saw was a huge painting of a red-haired girl. Her head was turned from the watcher and she seemed about to walk away, and there was a big NO written over the top of the painting in black, ragged letters. At the same time, however, one of her hands was flung out behind her, the fingers curling as if beckoning the watcher to follow. Intrigued, Luna walked further in.

There were pictures of dragons, in vivid reds or greens or blues, and a boy whose hands sprouted flowers. There were life-like portraits with small quirks in them in one a woman was smiling, and her tongue was like a snake's, and in another the eyes of a boy were full of shamrocks and music and gold. He was laughing, and Luna thought, we all pay tribute to our dead somehow. Seamus would never laugh again, but here he was caught, frozen in time, and remembered.

There was a picture of a window, open to a stormy sky with the rain blowing in, and one surprisingly silly of a figure cooking in a modern kitchen while wearing a Benedictine monk's robes.

She stopped for a long time before the largest painting in the room the same size as the introductory red-haired portrait. It was a picture of a wax candle, but in the flame one could discern a small figure, delicate, ethereal, beautiful, tragic.

There was a small plaque beside the painting. Luna bent to read it.

Candle flame she dances with burning feet on a melting floor.

Maybe, thought Luna, the perfect ending could sometimes be perfect.

Later that evening it knocked on Dean's door. When he opened it, Luna entered, shaking her umbrella dry.

"We'll have to get a new apartment," she said. "This one is full of old disappointments and hopes. Maybe Harry can buy it, and stay here for those times when he and Ginny break up."

"What... Sorry?" Dean stood aside for her, frowning in puzzlement. "What are you talking about, Luna?"

"Don't pretend you're not tired of it, too," she said, gazing at him sternly. "It's hateful. She loves you only when she needs to, and he doesn't love me at all, I suspect. I don't want to do it any longer and neither do you. They're the lucky ones they've never had to be alone. They've had us when they haven't had each other. Isn't it time for them to be alone sometimes? Maybe that would make them value the time when they have each other more."

"So what you mean is sorry, what are you saying?"

"I'm saying," said Luna, as if speaking to a child, "that you and I should find an apartment it's impossible to get a one-bedroom these days, but we could probably find one a bit larger easily enough one that doesn't have Ginny sitting at the kitchen table, like this one, or Harry leaning in the doorways, like the other one. I hate both these apartments now. And I don't hate you maybe it's just that you are like me: good-enough, second-best, until. But I think there's something else as well like how you can see candle flames."

He was shaking his head, bemused. "But mostly, it's practical?"

"Practical but you do like me, don't you? I hope so. I like you."

"You have a very unusual way of looking at the world."

"It's my best feature. And I'm not a boomerang, backwards forwards, which is pretty good, too." She grinned, briefly. "And I'll bring a plant and Simon and Garfunkel records, and you'll bring whatever you feel appropriate but leave Ginny."

He laughed at that and she was pleased, but she hoped that he realised she was being partly serious. And then she did come closer, and kissed him quickly.

"Bring that sketch of me you did once," she said, remembering, "from the kitchen. I like it."

He said nothing for a second or two, and she held her breath. Then he smiled and said,

"That wasn't the only one."