

Tea-towels and Donkeys

by apisa_b

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Chapter 1 of 1

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"No, sorry, we're full up," a round-faced, rather stout boy wearing a brown nightshirt and having draped a white and red striped tea-towel over his head shouted.

"Haven't you got any rooms at all?" the tall and very thin woman, who also wore a tea-towel on her head and had a pillow stuffed under her dress, pleaded.

The boy turned and walked a few steps, then, looking over his shoulder, said with a dismissive gesture, "Not unless you want to sleep in the cowshed."

Now another tea-towel wearer, a big, beefy man with a very large mustache, answered, "Okay, we'll take that then. It's better than sleeping on the streets."

"Oh, all right then. This way."

The boy turned and indicated that the cowshed was somewhere behind the sofa in a red and green very Christmassy decorated room. He ushered the man and the woman in said direction and managed to secretly boot a scrawny little boy wearing a grey, fluffy hood with ears, clearly intended to mask the boy as a donkey.

The scrawny one wanted to kick back, but was hindered considerably in this task by the tea-towel wearer with the moustache, who held him on a short leash, just like a donkey would be led. Being on the receiving end of a very nasty glare from the man leading him, the boy decided he'd better not insist on kicking back right now.

"Oh, Diddykins, that was just perfect," Mrs Dursley, being the tall and thin woman under the tea-towel, exclaimed and applauded the performance of her son.

Her husband apparently agreed, for he applauded as well before he cleared his throat and asked, "Petunia, when will dinner be ready?"

"In mere minutes, Vernon. I just have to set the table and ..."

She was interrupted by Dudley stomping his right foot and starting to cry.

"I want to play it again! Again! Again!" Each "again" was accompanied by a stomping of Dudley's foot. He even managed to screw up his face in a way that looked as if he really was about to shed tears.

'He's really good at this,' Harry, the scrawny boy in the donkey costume, thought and watched, slightly bemused, how his aunt at once cuddled her "little" boy and even his uncle, although tired and surely hungry after a long day at work, tried to appease his son.

It was agreed upon that Harry was to be exempt from having to play the donkey again and should set the table and warm the precooked dinner instead. Harry had a hard time not to look relieved when he pulled his costume over his head, for he didn't want to give his uncle and aunt a hint that he was not really unhappy to be exempted from his role. It had been uncomfortably hot under the hood, and he really was glad to be rid of it for now.

"Now, Dudley, we will rehearse the scene one more time, but you should better behave, for Father Christmas is making his rounds, you know. You wouldn't risk getting no presents now, would you?"

Harry was hardly able to stifle a snort when he heard his aunt uttering such idle threats. He already knew they were idle. He might literally be kept in the dark by his relatives, for the space they had offered him as his room was the small closet under the stairs, but he was no fool. And a fool he must have been not to add two and two together when he saw the same glittering packages his aunt had previously hidden in his closet lying under the Christmas tree tagged with Dudley's name last Christmas. Even if Father Christmas was coming down the chimneys, shouting "Ho, Ho, Ho" which Harry highly doubted he seemed to be relying on the parents regarding the presents. Or, in Harry's case, on the relatives he was living with, for he was an orphan. And said relatives never could bring themselves to gift him with a proper present. At least it were his aunt and uncle who didn't have it in them to be kind to him and not Father Christmas who found him lacking in some way or the other, as Harry had been bound to believe the years before.

While setting the table, Harry fantasized about breaking the news about the non-existence of Father Christmas to Dudley. Was at least a week of getting the bare minimum of food to prevent him from starving worth it? He decided against it, not that being sent to bed without any food would bother him not anymore. It was more the thought about how much more unbearable Dudley would be without the last means of reining him in that let Harry decide against it.

When Harry was done setting the table and had started warming the stew, Dudley had lost the fun in rehearsing the same lines over and over again and was pompously strutting through the living room in his costume. With a sigh Mrs Dursley took out the pillow from under her dress and stripped the tea-towel from her head.

"Thank God, tomorrow this will be over and done with," Harry heard her mutter when she took the wooden spoon he used for stirring from his hands.

"Don't stand in my way," she instantly barked at Harry, who darted out of the kitchen, grabbing his ass costume, and retreated into his closet.

Harry sat down on the mattress on the floor that was called his bed and let his fingers run through the fake fur of his donkey hood, as if he were caressing a real animal. He was glad to play the donkey. Of course not here, in the Dursleys' living room, being kicked by Dudley and pulled around on a leash by Uncle Vernon as Joseph, but to be part of his school's nativity play, even as nothing more than the donkey. It was something he never even dared to dream of, for he had been quite sure that the Dursleys never would allow him to participate. Therefore, he did not volunteer for any part in the play and pretended not to be interested at all. But Miss Stevens, the young trainee teacher observing in his class, insisted on Harry taking a part in the play, and by the time she had persuaded Harry, only the donkey was left to cast, which was just well, because with Harry as a donkey, the Dursleys probably could live, as long as they didn't have to pay a penny for the costume.

Harry as an angel or even a one of those sweet sheep would have been unthinkable, even if the costume had been for free. Well, the donkey hood had been found in the school's costume fund by Miss Stevens, and it even covered that untidy mop of hair Uncle Vernon so despised, so Harry was allowed to be a part of the nativity play on the same stage with Dudley. Of course he didn't have any lines to say unlike Dudley, which he made sure Harry did not forget. He simply was there trudging behind Mary and Joseph, standing behind the crib in the shed, swaying his head in rhythm to the chorals the angels sang. The mere thought of him, Harry, being part of *something* made his breast swell and made him put up with the kicks he got from the tea-towel wearer in the brown nightshirt during dinner.

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The next day seemed to pass in a blur of excitement. At school, of course, all they did was rehearse the play and make last minute changes due to illnesses of some participating children. At home Aunt Petunia made sure Dudley would look as good as possible in his costume by sewing ornaments on the brown gown and pressing it, ignoring Dudley's rants about him wanting to wear it for once. Harry tried to stay out of the way as much as possible and desperately tried not to draw any attention to himself, lest anybody get any ideas about his appearance on stage. No matter that the hood would cover his hair anyway, better not give the Dursleys reason to notice the length of his unruly hair, or they would surely start an attempt to trim it, once again ignoring its natural tendency to stick up, regardless of its length.

He managed to be invisible for the whole afternoon so well that the Dursleys nearly forgot to take him with them when they wanted to depart. In fact, they would have left him behind had he not already been waiting at the car, clutching the donkey hood to his breast, when they left the house.

Dudley was a bundle of nerves, and he was compensating his fears by hitting Harry and sending taunts Harry's way.

"My, what long ears you have! I-ah, I-ah!"

He apparently found it rather funny, for he was shaking with laughter. Harry noticed that his reaction was being watched by Uncle Vernon in the rear mirror, so he just shrugged his shoulders and turned his head to admire the Christmas lights on the houses of Little Whinging as they drove by. As he usually was at home after dark and nobody ever had bothered to take him for a walk to have a look at the pretty lights, they were a novelty to Harry and effectively kept his mind off the play, so the general buzz of excitement that swept over him as soon as they entered the town hall took him by surprise.

Aunt Petunia did not pay any notice to him as she wound her way through the many children and their parents, carefully balancing Dudley's costume in one hand and dragging Dudley behind her with the other. Harry quickly got separated from them, for he had stopped to wipe his steamed up glasses.

Standing on tiptoe Harry tried to discern where he was supposed to go to when Miss Stevens touched his shoulder.

"Harry, here you are! I've been searching for you."

Harry thankfully looked up into her warm brown eyes, greeted her shyly and wondered why anybody would bother to go searching for him.

"Well, you know, the donkey is a very important role," she said, as if having understood Harry's thoughts. "You are the only actor on stage during the whole play, besides Joseph and Mary. And ..."

Miss Stevens now was bending down to Harry and whispering conspiratorially, "... I do know that you actually know all the lines that have to be spoken by heart and am relying on you to help those standing within ear shot to you."

She smiled and winked at Harry before standing up again, taking Harry's hand and leading him behind the curtain through the mass of overexcited children and proud parents dressing their children or taking pictures of their offspring in costumes.

"I will go and fetch *Mary* and *Joseph*," she said as she took the donkey hood from his hands and helped him put it on. "Keep them close to you and help calm them down, please. Last time I saw *Mary*, she was crying because she couldn't remember her opening line."

She affectionately ruffled through Harry's fur hood and went away searching for the *holy couple*.

Harry looked after her and wished she could stay longer at their school than just until the Christmas holidays. He liked her a lot and no matter what Aunt Petunia had to say thought her to be prettiest young woman on earth.

And because Miss Stevens always had been so kind to him, he vowed to give his best to not disappoint her, although her words about her faith in him had resulted in a very queasy feeling in the pit of his stomach.

He watched through the curtains how the seats in the auditorium filled up and the noise slowly died down. He managed to make out Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia in the second row and watched them talking animatedly to the couple next to them. When he turned around, he noticed that the children had been grouped on both sides of the stage, according to their appearances. Dudley was on the opposite end of the stage and was very interested in something he could not see. Harry shrugged and smiled at the girl who was playing Mary, who still looked rather frightened.

"Don't worry," Harry said tentatively. He was not quite used to talking to the other kids, for they normally avoided interaction with him out of fear of Dudley and his gang.

The girl smiled shyly and answered, "I'm so afraid I won't remember my lines."

"I think I can help you there. I know most of them. Just give me a sign, and I will try to whisper them to you."

"Really, you would do that?"

Harry nodded and was rewarded with a radiant smile. Radiant smiles from girls who were playing lead roles didn't come his way all that often he couldn't really recall the last time this had happened, but it felt good.

Faintly, a bell rang, the curtain opened and the murmuring voices in the auditorium fell silent. Mrs. Jones, the primary teacher, spoke a few opening words, and then the play commenced. All went well: the angel was giving Mary the message, and she responded with the appropriate lines; Joseph and Mary started their journey to Bethlehem, and Harry the donkey trudged along behind them. Then they knocked on the door of the inn in Bethlehem to ask for a room. The door opened, Dudley stepped out, but did not answer the request for a room. Dudley apparently had found the cookies Miss Stevens (Harry was believing that only Miss Stevens could have provided them) had placed behind the stage to give to the children after the play. His mouth was too full to speak, his face smeared with chocolate. He was standing there, chewing hard and gulping. First giggles already were to be heard.

"No, sorry, we're full up," the innkeeper finally answered, but it was not Dudley's voice. Apparently, someone standing behind Dudley had lost patience and simply delivered the lines.

Dudley had managed to swallow the cookies in the meantime and was clearly not amused about the situation. He spun on the spot and punched the boy who had said his line in the face with a right hook Lennox Lewis would have been proud of. The auditorium erupted in a roar of laughter, Miss Stevens and Mrs. Jones came rushing on stage to divide the boys, and all the while flashes of photos being taken illuminated the scene.

After the initial shock, Harry had started to laugh so hard that tears were streaming down his face. He knew that he probably would have to pay for laughing about Dudley later at home, but he didn't care. He noticed Aunt Petunia being frozen in mid movement she probably had just been proudly pointing out her precious son to the person sitting next to her with an expression of shock in her face. Uncle Vernon, on the other hand, seemed to be rather satisfied with Dudley's reaction; after all, nobody stole anything from a Dursley and got away with it, not even a line in a play.

When the laughter had died away and Dudley's face had been sufficiently cleaned, the play commenced again, starting with the knocking on the inn's door. This time Dudley delivered his line, albeit not accompanied by the grand gestures he had rehearsed at home, but with a hanging head.

Harry desperately tried to imprint every detail of this evening in his memory, to never forget it again: this special evening, on which he had been part of something; this evening, on which he had been smiled at; this evening, on which Dudley was brought down publicly a peg or two, not that it would last for long. He wanted to conserve this wonderful, warm feeling, to draw hope from it whenever he was lying awake in his closet.

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Harry Potter never forgot that evening, although the memory had faded somewhat and was hidden behind memories of happier and more exciting times in his life.

The memory of the warm feeling he'd felt back then made itself known as Harry watched his sons rehearse for Godric's Hollow's annual Yule charity play performed by children. This year Beedle the Bard's "The Wizard and the Hopping Pot" was scheduled, and his sons were cast as persons seeking help from the owner of the hopping pot. Over and over again, Harry had to play the part of the bitter man refusing help so James and Albus could rehearse their lines.

Looking into their glowing eyes and flushed faces, he remembered. He remembered how important it had been for him to be a part of something and was glad his children could experience the same, but he also was glad he didn't have to wear tea-towels or donkey hoods for it.

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A/N: This was written for the Potter Place Yule Challenge 2008.

Prompt: Use a child to show us how some of our favorite characters celebrate Yule.

Many thanks to Southernwitch69 for betaing this on such a short notice. You rock!