

Gathering Facts

by cflower

The sequel to *Understanding Apples*. How many facts does it take to find an answer?

Three

Chapter 1 of 1

The sequel to *Understanding Apples*. How many facts does it take to find an answer?

Disclaimer: I do not own anything that J.K. Rowling has written.

I need to thank Toffeeliz for her prompt. Without her, this amusing idea would've never existed. I also want to thank everyone for their inspirational reviews. The support helped complete this chapter.

~oOo~

This is part of human nature, the desire to change consciousness.

-Michael Pollan

~oOo~

It was so gray today that the sky seemed to be covered with one limitless cloud. The dark gray accentuated the shadows between the trees, while the light spots illuminated the surface of the Hogwart's lake.

It was a day of contrasts, Hermione thought, as she looked up at the sky with passive interest.

As she lay in the grass, the soothing sway of the flora filled her peripheral vision. It caused her to reflexively move her shoulder muscles to get a feel of the steady ground beneath her.

To her left, the water boisterously knocked into the soiled perimeter of the lake in direct reaction to the occasional, dark bird that flew in a loopy line overhead.

Languidly, Hermione counted how many times she had resided in the late afternoon grass.

Seven days it seemed. Oh, Hermione realized, every day this week then.

The simple fact was this:

She wanted to see what a certain man saw.

She didn't want to be a man (Hermione giggled at the playful thought), but she wanted to understand a certain man's entire mind... enough to see how the heart affected it.

So when he looked at his customary apple at lunch, she looked as well. And when he gazed up at the blue sky that class day, she now gazed as well.

Clearly there was a whole lot of looking and gazing going on, and the more she thought about it, the more complex that simple fact became.

Here was another fact:

Understanding someone was never easy.

Hermione knew this because even the most dull people were surprising. After just a few minutes in their presence, the question became this:

How the hell could anyone be so dull?

How amazing.

But she was digressing. Even if her desire wasn't straightforward, she did know three facts:

1) Snape determinedly looked at apples every lunch.

(Hermione heard a growl.)

2) Snape was entranced by blue skies.

(In embarrassment, Hermione's right hand flew to her stomach.)

3) Understanding people was never easy.

(Blast! She was hungry.)

Damn, Hermione thought as she glared up at the gray sky.

Clearly the rhythm of the day was making her unfocused.

But wait, she mustn't forget about fact number three.

If she craved knowing a man's mind with her heart, then she needed to utilize the random feelings that overcame her.

Perhaps they weren't so random after all. If she was going to take his looking and gazing seriously, then she needed to take her own form of looking and gazing seriously.

With that final thought, Hermione slowly picked herself off the ground to commence with the process of fulfilling her third fact.

Raising her arms in the air to stretch her stubborn muscles, Hermione twisted her body in the direction of the Herbology garden.

Little bits and pieces of thought ran through her head. The shoulda, woulda, coulda's, the maybe's and the perhaps' all crescendo into a clear, deliberate decision.

From her position, Hermione could see the lovely leaves of Snape's apple tree.

With a surreptitious smile, the girl eagerly began to follow the stream from the lake to the garden.

With each step, Hermione listened to her hunger and started to understand herself.

The frenetic energy of the water pooling into the lake caused Hermione to pause. In the foreboding corners of her brain where the dark clouds loved to prey, she thought of running back and following the water. But thin blades of grass gave into the wind's push, to dreamily bend and point in the direction of the garden.

The day was full of contrasts and she was hungry.

Taking a deep breath, Hermione persevered to the gate leading to the Herbology garden.

Her shadow waned as she walked through.

If anyone besides the birds and small animals was observing, he or she would have seen the light gray portion of sky highlighting the Potions master's apple tree and its new companion.

~oOo~

Five pale fingers hesitantly grazed the deep grooves and dips of the apple tree's trunk. Other fingers, from the second hand, joined the examination as if each finger was a companion that didn't want to miss out on the fun.

Closing her eyes, Hermione pressed her forehead into the unwavering trunk; she could practically feel the thump of his heart beating within the tree.

Turning around, to lean her back against the tree, Hermione mentally wrestled with the logical part of her that wanted to dismiss what she had felt.

Fact three, she repeated in her head like a mantra.

Another thought was growing inside of her until it burst into beautiful pearls of knowledge.

4) Snape, the man, was his heart.

Swiftly Hermione's eyes lit up with satisfaction.

She had found fact number four!

And it complemented three so well.

With that motivation, the girl reached up with her right hand to pick an apple from the long branches that extended outward so wonderfully.

After weighing the apple in her hand, Hermione took her first bite.

It was delicious.

It was crisp with a perfect center.

It was... *pure*.

Stricken, Hermione let the heaviness of her observation lower her to her knees.

Absent mindedly, she wiped some sweet juice off her chin and then wiped her hand on her jeans. (That's what jeans were for, after all, the perfect thread-count for absorbing juice.)

Pureness.

The simplicity of the word was a juxtaposition to the complexity of the meaning.

The day was full of contrasts and Hermione understood her first answer.

Snape's proverbial plate was filled to the brim with ugly, difficult food. For one thing, there was Voldemort, and his other master, Dumbledore, to accommodate. Every time he met with Voldemort, it was like he had swallowed some bitter escarole, a constant reminder that he had betrayed the potential of his own life when he had received the Dark Mark. Equally distasteful, his discussions with Dumbledore reminded him of sweet pudding he had to wait for; the hope of a better life waiting for him after he finished all that was on his plate to begin with. A hope he feared he would never fulfill. Moreover, the children that permeated the home chosen for him were like mystery meat better without the mystery. The fact was that students were just as people-ish as adults and peoples' prejudices hurt.

Plates were not supposed to be so full of unsavory meals; it really put a damper on lunch.

And Snape's plate was piled high with requirements that he was never sure he would complete. What he needed was something simple. An activity that was not a requirement, but an act of curiosity... of pure desire.

Just pure.

Hermione sighed, because it really wasn't simple at all.

(She took a hearty bite into her apple.)

Something was bothering him though. The hobby that was supposed to be solely favored was turning out to be a maddening conundrum that he couldn't solve, just like his crowded plate.

He needed help. It was as simple as that... and as complicated as that.

(And another healthy bite was made.)

Just like before, down by the lake, a crystal clear decision formed in Hermione's busy mind. It was the logical thing to do; when someone needed help, they were helped... especially when they were doing so much already.

(And another bite... munch, munch.)

But more importantly, her heart was yearning for the chance.

And pure yearning was way more effective than just logic.

(Munch, munch... finished!)

~oOo~

"No, it was three feet of parchment, not four," a young boy whined.

"No! You have it wrong," his impatient companion said. "It's four feet of parchment on the differences between magical trees and their healing properties in potions, not three."

Turning his head in annoyance, the whiner repeated, "Three!"

A tall man, walking at a brisk pace, took the time to clarify.

"It's four feet of parchment, Mr. Collins. I suspect that if you spent more time listening in my class than arguing with your *friend*, you would be much better off. Most importantly, you would not be wasting my precious walking time."

Oh no, it was his soft, commanding voice.

The two boys stopped and nodded their heads vigorously at the back of their teacher.

~oOo~

Snape mentally smirked; even on his most cheerful days he reveled in how his students shook in fear every time he chose one of his classroom voices.

It was sheer euphoria.

The ability to cut somebody down before they cut you.

Never breaking his stride, the Potions master descended the spiral staircase that led to the dungeon floor. The minute he entered, he felt the familiar change of climate; the air became significantly cooler (this happened even on the hottest summer days), and the wind, that was supposed to play outside, made a very prominent appearance *inside*.

Picking up some third-year essays, Snape had a most annoying thought process:

Essays were written on parchment, which was as good as paper, which was what mail was written on. Mail. He had forgotten to check his mail box! Damn-it!

And he hadn't even been thinking about apples that much. How could he have forgotten?

Taking the dungeon stairs by twos (it wasn't particularly difficult because of his height; Dumbledore liked to call it his "vertical advantage"), Snape walked swiftly (he never raced) to the mail boxes right by the faculty room.

Every teacher at Hogwarts had a mailbox.

Basically, there was this huge square box that was attached to the stone wall to the left of the room. That box was broken up into smaller boxes that were used to place mail in. Of course, students didn't normally use the boxes because they could just go meet with their teachers.

Then again, Professor Snape's box was always full because the students did not want to meet with him.

Today, there was one unique piece of mail.

Snape's extended arm faltered for a second. It was a packet of something... It was a packet of (Snape read the label) dormant oil.

He couldn't help but raise his eyebrow in defense; when he was uneasy about life, he felt that the best step he could take was to use his eyebrow.

It wasn't that he didn't know what the oil was for. Dormant oil was rubbed on apples to enhance their fruitiness. In other words, to make the first bite a little bit juicier and the last bite a little bit more pleasing. But it was fall, and the oil was used in the spring normally.

Here was a fact about Snape:

He always read the fine-print.

Apparently, the oil was infused with magic so it would work any time of the year.

A small letter was attached to the packet, and the contents of it made Snape raise his other eyebrow (an action used only as a last resort).

Dear Professor Snape,

I was thinking about your apple tree, and I thought that the oil would help you preserve your fruit.

I'm positive that preservation is important to you.

Sincerely,

Hermione Granger

The sneer on Snape's face could melt ink.

Crumpling the letter in one elegant hand, he briskly walked back to his room, his robes billowing to catch up. Of course, he took the dormant oil with him. He didn't believe in wasting things.

His stack of third-year essays was a forgotten mess on the floor.

~oOo~

Slamming his bluish door shut, Snape threw the packet of oil onto his dark blue bed (the dark sheets made him sleepier at night) and growled.

What was Miss Granger thinking?

(His first question.)

What did she know?

(His relevant second.)

Why did she care?

(This one definitely showed his emotional issues.)

Where were the facts?

(The most important one.)

But they weren't easy facts... No, Snape thought, they were the kind he had been wrestling with for months. The facts he wanted to know required the same understanding he had been using with his apples.

So in order to understand her motives, he needed to understand her heart.

Sitting on the edge of his bed, Snape stared at one of his blue-enough walls.

He had never actually been a patient man. It was something he had acquired from all his years of spying, a necessity for survival.

The questions were simple, but the facts were difficult because they were of the soul.

He would have to wait.

He would have to be patient.

Now where had he put those damn third-year essays?

~oOo~

The flames flickered and crackled as the occasional spark was spit onto the charred wood. Hermione's heart was still beating fast from the day's events even as she focused on the ornate fire place.

The question she asked herself was this:

When had she gotten so bold?

But it was an obvious question. After all, only a few days ago, she had spent time under Snape's tree thinking about what she honestly *wanted* to do.

Turning, Hermione directed her smile and one of her best friends. She found it rather amusing how someone as tall as Ron could have such soft-sounding foot steps.

Perhaps it showed a different facet of him.

Neville was with him and followed his path to the plush, plum-red couch next to Hermione's chair.

For several minutes she just let herself observe their conversation; it was the sort of relaxed discussion that evolved between two people who had known each other for years.

After inquiring about their day (It has been most excellent since Neville had finished his Herbology essay early and had rewarded himself with going down to his own private garden Professor Sprout allowed him to cultivate. As for Ron, he had decided to reward himself after finishing half of his essay with playing a victorious game of chess against Seamus, while Harry watched adding narrative to the match.), she directed her question at both of them.

"So where's Harry?"

"Oh," Neville said, "he's flying around the Quidditch pitch right now."

"You know," Ron helped Neville with a quick shrug of his shoulders, "he likes to fly in the evenings."

While he was saying this, Ron playfully glared at her. He was still smarting from the spider scare that had happened a little over a week ago.

Nodding in thanks, Hermione smiled at Ron.

"So, see any bothersome spiders of late?"

From the glint in his eyes, she could tell that he was ready to play their usual game.

"Nope. But I have seen, several times, a bothersome friend."

The two friends stared at each other (while Neville looked on with wary amusement) until they both burst out with laughter.

Not every game had to be long.

It was perfect harmony, Hermione's higher giggle, intertwining with Ron's deeper chuckle.

And the fire flickered on, casting shadows on the stone walls.

~oOo~

Once Harry had finished trailing dirt around the common room floor, the Golden Trio had said their goodnights to each other, and Hermione and Neville were left to sit alone together.

They sat in amiable silence listening to the occasional murmur of fellow Gryffindor conversations around them.

Curly hair bouncing as she turned to look at Neville, Hermione tentatively asked, "What gave you the courage to answer Professor Snape's question the other day in the garden?"

The question was rather blunt, she thought, discomfited.

It took Neville a little while to answer, like he was trying to string the correct words together, "I was scared... of being put down, but it was also something I felt I needed to do. That I wanted to do. It was a fact, not of logic... but..."

"Of the heart?" Hermione offered.

"Yeah! That's it. Not to sound all mushy," Neville added quickly, "but I know Herbology well, and I wasn't about to hide what I knew. I wasn't going to wear a mask I didn't need."

There was a certain strength in the boy's voice. The sheer power of it was stunning, but it had been building for awhile. Putting a comforting hand on Neville's shoulder, Hermione sunk into her musings.

Sometimes Neville surprised Hermione. He was quiet by nature, but he had a certain patience about him that allowed him to understand certain things. She figured it was an innate trait. After all, cultivating wildlife required patience.

Masks... everyone had them. For Snape, the apples, that represented such pureness in his life, were the crack in his mask. Like Neville answering that question, the apples were Snape's way of doing what he needed to do for his heart.

It all went back to fact four.

Hermione was scared of being disappointed, of being cut down by Snape's biting insults.

But what if Snape ended up being the crack in her mask that was molded by logic?

What if... Snape was what she needed to do.

A snigger escaped Hermione's lips and Neville smiled at her merriment.

Inwardly Hermione thought, not that kind of *doing*.

~oOo~

Three days later, Snape found another gift in his mail box.

He didn't even take the time to raise both eyebrows. Instead, he just snatched the item and walked quickly (never raced!) to his room.

Desperate times called for desperate measures.

Getting into his bed, Snape pulled the dark blue covers over his entire body and head.

Now not only did his black hair act as a curtain around his face but also the bedding could be used as a second defense.

He looked at the object skeptically...

and then in disbelief...

and then in curiosity...

and for the grand finale...

amusement.

It was an apple peeler, perfect for peeling the skin off fruit.

Was the girl really so daft as to think that he didn't have one of these?

Oh, wait, Snape thought, he didn't have one of... "these."

Scowling, Snape could feel that the peeler also contained magic. It had an anti-harm charm on it to keep the user from cutting his or her self.

His eyes narrowed as he thought intensely about the meaning. So far he hadn't even given Miss Granger a second glance. He had vowed to never acknowledge the first gift she had given him.

He figured that it really wasn't all that rude since he had never asked for the item in the first place.

But a peeler...

... peeled the skin off the apples...

... and he had already said that.

But he knew it was important. Logically, it sounded ridiculous that something so obvious would have deeper meaning, but it wasn't about logic... needless to say.

Skin was protection against the elements: the harsh winds, the torrents of rain, hail, and blustering snow.

Skin was like a mask that a peeler could efface.

And, it was his apple tree, his apples, his...

(Snape's scowl was so astonished that it forgot to scowl and came off looking awkward.)

... mask.

Shaking his head, he repeated the two key words: peeler and mask.

And he asked himself, what was the first gift?

Dormant oil for fruiter fruit.

Better fruit and no masks?

That was her message?

Snape pulled the covers away. He needed a break.

He was hungry and he needed an apple.

~oOo~

Crunch!

Taking another bite of his apple (that unfortunately wasn't blue), Snape went back to his previous thoughts.

He loved apples, and his question about blue apples was most important to him. It represented unadulterated hope, a better life.

Better fruit and no masks.

"Better life," Snape mumbled, "and no masks."

Oh.

Bugger.

This was what she wanted?

To help him?

That was the next fact?

Obviously, it was.

He was embarrassed to admit it, even to his room, but he felt his dark eyes burn with repressed emotion. He was starving for something that he couldn't seem to get.

The pureness he solicited in the apples was just becoming a bumbling question about the nonexistence of blue apples. But for once, just once, he wanted to get what he simply wanted.

And although it really wasn't all that simple, he just wanted to be able to ask a question he loved and get an answer in return.

He shouldn't trust her; he really didn't know her. It was logical. But... his life was about control, and he knew that if he wanted to answer his question about blue apples, he would have to let go of the control he had known for such a long time.

He might even be daring enough to admit that he had another profound question in addition to this one:

Why are there no blue apples?

The new one was:

Why did he dare hope Hermione Granger truly cared?

~oOo~

Wisps of cloud slowly strolled along the blue sky. There was no wind today and the grass stood erect at attention.

Lying in the grass, Hermione observed the different shades of the sky.

It was the same really, but right now she thought that the blue sky was inching closer to her. All the shadows and highlights seemed more vivid today.

Looking down at the tops of her feet, Hermione saw something different...

A tall, black man was making his way towards her.

Pensively, Hermione stood up to face him as he slowly made his way over to her. She even moved back several steps to make sure three feet was between them when he finally stopped to stare at her.

The Hogwarts lake was to the left of them, and both, man and woman, could hear the gentle flow of water.

Even though she had seen his pale face many times before, today it looked different. It looked almost touchable... reachable.

"You're here, sir," Hermione said dumbly.

"Yes," Snape's slim lips barely moved.

Hermione said the first question that came to her mind:

"Why?"

"I could ask the same of you," Snape answered tersely.

Hermione had thought that with the first piercing remark, his face would turn hard, like marble, once again.

But, it didn't.

That day in the garden flashed before her eyes...

... and all she could see was his inquisitive face shaded by his apple tree.

But before Hermione could respond, he spoke again in a gentler voice. A voice rather different from all of his classroom voices. A voice, she thought, of the same kin as the one in the garden.

"Your actions..." He stopped, the sides of his mouth set in a frown. It was hard to think around logic.

A wave of compassion and courage overcame Hermione in his floundering.

Whatever it took for that masculine face to remain tender.

"I'll tell you my latest fact if you'll tell me yours."

Ah, a game, Snape thought, smirking. He could work with this, since he was a Slytherin (who happened to love blue).

Taking a deep breath, Hermione spoke clearly...

"I want to understand you so well that I am able to understand your heart."

"My heart? Miss Granger, what makes you so sure I have one?"

"Sir, everyone has a heart. It's a scientific fact."

She dared to smile because his true face hadn't run to hide... yet.

"But what makes you think my heart is kind?"

"Not kind, sir, good," Hermione rushed on. "And don't ask me why I know it's good. You're terrible at hiding the good that you do."

He studied the shine of her curly hair, the curve of her jaw, and her warm eyes.

It had been so long since warm eyes had been fixed on him.

And it was magic to Snape. Pure magic.

He could've not finished the game. After all, he never did agree to tell her his fact.

It was the logical thing to do being a Slytherin.

But he loved the color blue... not green... and he had leeway...

"Very well, Miss Granger. Why are there no such things as blue apples?"

It was pure magic to Hermione.

And that was a fact.

~oOo~