

Bad Days Are Going Around

by cathedral carver

Finding your way there, and back again.

And not waving, but drowning

Chapter 1 of 1

Finding your way there, and back again.

Disclaimer: These characters do not belong to me.

*

Nobody heard him, the dead man,

But still he lay moaning:

I was much further out than you thought

And not waving but drowning.

~Stevie Smith

*

Yes, it was a bad day, but except for the deliberate gathering of the stones, he hadn't planned on killing himself. And yes, the water below the dock this afternoon looked especially conducive to a suicide attempt ... silent, beckoning, bottomless ... but he assured himself he had no definite *plans*.

Except for the stones.

And the water, he reminded himself; water that stretched out before him like an alternative ... an icy, numbing, heart-stopping alternative.

A very *dark* alternative.

Black Lake in late March was an altogether fitting moniker, and suicide rates, he'd once read, went up in the spring. So, his state of mind wasn't entirely his fault.

There were secrets to be found, and kept, beneath those fitful waves, and it would be oh so quiet down there.

Not that he would actually do it.

Except for the *stones*.

He tightened the muffler around his neck and tucked his chin down. The wool scratched his skin. He considered his motives, wondered what he was doing, wandering about the grounds on a horrid Sunday afternoon, all low grey clouds and cruel wind. He looked down at the water, searching, he supposed, for a clue. He wondered what it would feel like to just... keep walking. A simple action, one foot after another. Nothing drastic, nothing dramatic.

One small splash, one less Hogwarts Potions Professor.

And, years from now:

Whatever happened to old Snape, anyway?

Oh, he was just strolling around the lake one afternoon and, oops...

Really?

Long walks off short piers and all that.

No great loss, right?

Right!

(Much laughter ensues.)

It was the stuff of very small, boring legend, indeed.

He took one step, and another. The toes of his shoes dangled over the edge of the dock. The wind grabbed the end of his scarf and shook it wildly around his head. The water waited.

So many ways for a competent wizard to kill himself and here he was considering death by drowning. How utterly *Muggle* of him.

A small shuffle and now the balls of his feet hung precariously. He could actually feel himself swaying. From here, he could go either forward or back, arms pin wheeling, comic. The water was deep, he knew, and he would sink quickly if he expelled all the air from his lungs as he went under.

Plus, there were the stones.

And no one around to race to his rescue...

Except for *that* person, the one on the shore, staring in his direction. He squinted, then almost rolled his eyes. Hermione Bloody Granger, all but buried in mounds of clothing, bulky and almost unrecognizable in coat, hat, blasted Gryffindor scarf ... had she actually kept that thing all these years, or had McGonagall given her a new one when she was hired? She lifted one mittened hand and waved, shyly. Even from a distance, he was sure he could see the wariness in her eyes, as if she knew exactly what he was contemplating, even if he really wasn't at all. Contemplating, that is.

She was, after all, the Cleverest Witch.

With a barely audible sigh, he took a tiny step back from the edge.

Another day, perhaps.

On numb legs, he walked back along the dock and up the path to the Castle.

"Professor Snape," she said as he came closer.

"Madam Granger." He nodded and moved as if to walk past. For some reason he was starting to shake. She stepped in front of him.

"Enjoying the weather?" she asked.

"Invigorating."

"I agree. In fact, I was thinking of walking to Hogsmeade for some mulled mead. Would you like to join me?"

He stared at her. "Another day, perhaps." He moved. She moved to block him again.

"I'd very much like to see your collection," she said, smiling brightly.

"My... what?"

"Your collection. Of rocks." She reached a hand out then and placed it very deliberately over the bulge in his coat pocket. His heart slowed. Then she reached out her other hand and put it over his *other* pocket, also heavy with stones.

Now, how on earth did they get *there*?

And why?

"Are they for a new potion you're experimenting with?" Such wide, innocent eyes that seemed to cut right through him.

He smirked. "Quite."

"I'd like to hear about it." She hadn't blinked *inforever*.

He smiled, wan. He really wished his legs would *stoptrembling*.

"Good day, Madam Granger," he said at last and moved around her *again*. This time she let him.

When he reached the top of the incline, he dared a glance back. She was still there, still watching, Gryffindor scarf a scarlet beacon in the grey. She waved again.

I'd like to hear about it.

His head reeled. His legs positively shuddered. He turned and staggered away and almost made it to the gates before he vomited.

Another day, perhaps.

*

Right near the end, he thought about it almost constantly. There was so much pain and so much death. And the uncertainty! He couldn't sleep, couldn't eat for the screaming in his head, the never-ending anxiety, nights of cold sweats and days of sour stomach. Could he protect the students? Could he help Potter?

Could he save himself?

Back then, his alternatives were much darker, much quicker: hanging, perhaps. There were plenty of dark corners and sturdy overhead beams to be found in the dungeons. An endless combination of potion ingredients so deadly dangerous he didn't dare have them written down. A single blast from the gun that had once belonged to his father. And he didn't even want to ponder the thoughts that raced through his brain when he'd first laid hands on the Sword of Gryffindor.

And if he'd managed to succeed, what of it?

One more death, one less hated Headmaster.

What was going to happen would happen with or without him. Or, perhaps it wouldn't; perhaps his presence on the earth was actually *imperative*, which was the only notion that held his own dark desires at bay back then.

Bad days back then revolved around preventing every single person under his care from dying a horrible, bloody, painful death.

Bad days now were simply about planning his own.

*

When he awoke, he was in the Infirmary. Again.

Granger was there, of course, and her assistant, a round-faced girl named Pearl who was shaped rather like a Butternut squash.

The pain had abated, enough that he could turn his head fractionally and lift his arms more than an inch off the mattress. The voices had stilled to gentle buzzes, like faraway insects behind his ears. He was exhausted, though, as he always was after an Episode.

"Hello," Hermione said from the foot of his bed. The only other patient for the night was an unfortunate sixth-year named Joan or Jane, who had managed, somehow, to *Engorgio* her left nostril. She was blessedly asleep, making very strange snuffling sounds at the end of the ward.

Snape nodded and closed his eyes. The waves of pain were receding. He felt sleep approaching, the deepest kind of sleep, the best kind of dreamless sleep that always followed an Episode.

"One of the students found you," she said. "Ralph Keeler."

Gryffindor. Of course. Saviours of the modern world, all of them. He kept his eyes closed.

"Where?"

"In the hallway outside your classroom."

So. He'd only made it that far. He'd miscalculated this month and he cursed himself for that. Usually he was able to at least enter his chambers before all manner of hell broke loose.

"You were unconscious."

The noise in his head intensified as she spoke, years and years of agonies, screams of the dying and of those begging for death pushing against the inside of his skull.

"Again."

Please please please stop talking.

"Do you remember what happened?"

My head is going to explode. My body is going to implode...

What he remembered was intense, overwhelming pain, pain that shook his bones, twitched his skin, turned him inside out and back again.

"No."

"Ralph said he heard screaming shortly before."

"Indeed."

"Still don't remember anything?"

"I've said as much, have I not?" he ground out, squeezing his eyes even tighter against the swelling dissonance.

"Severus," she began. He heard the quiet rustle of her gown as she moved closer. "You really need to talk about what's going on, and if you refuse to talk ~~to me~~..."

The screams rose and expanded, threatening to engulf him entirely, and he turned his head to the side, away from her and her insufferable voice and prying questions.

"Shut up. Shut up shut up *shutupshutupshut...*"

Above the piercing screams (in his head or out of his mouth? He was no longer sure), he dimly heard Hermione call for Pearl and between the two of them managed to pour some horrid concoction down his throat (*somnus alcedonia?*) and the black waves receded gradually, leaving him with a great throbbing ache that rocked him in a small black boat on open water with no shore in sight.

*

She was sweating and shaking when it was all over. She sent Pearl to bed, assuring the frightened girl all was under control at last. She stood above his still form, wishing she'd learned Legilimency, wishing, at the very least, that he'd bloody well talk to her.

It was like clockwork, these visits to the Infirmary: every three to four weeks, for the past two years since she'd replaced Poppy Pomfrey, and probably before that, though she didn't know for sure. She could find no information about Snape in the hospital records, making her wonder if he'd somehow managed to convince the former Healer to turn a blind eye to his...situation.

The first year and half was mild compared to the past few months. Whatever was wrong was getting worse. And while she didn't want to admit it, he was scaring her, from his strange behaviour at the lake to the screaming, thrashing fits he threw in the narrow, white beds.

But they passed, as they always did, and he refused to talk about them, as always, and for now he slept, so pale he was practically transparent but for the huge, heavy circles beneath his sunken eyes. She pulled out her small worn notebook, opened it and made a mark beside his name, one of many.

She slipped the notebook into her apron pocket and smoothed some damp hair away from his face, feeling his skin, cool and moist, and thought, for just a moment, that he was smiling under her touch.

*

He hadn't planned on killing himself today, he really hadn't.

Sometimes he just got tired. Just really, bloody tired. And the voices were so loud, and water, he thought, would bring silence, infinite, glorious *silence*.

He took a step, and another and...

"Severus!" someone yelled.

The voice startled him more than it should have ... his nerves really were horrible these days ... and while turning, he lost his balance and managed to step off the dock sideways, arms flailing, cloak fluttering behind. But later, much later, he convinced himself that hadn't tried to kill himself at all; he just hadn't stopped the downward motion in time.

The water was very cold, and it was filling his lungs because he'd been startled and caught off guard and about to yell at the Someone. He was swirling and kicking in a sea of black fabric and couldn't tell which way was up. But the Someone had screamed *Mobilicorpus*, and he was suddenly out of the lake like a shot and floating, wet and livid, to lie on the shore where the Someone was pressing on his chest, his face. Then the Someone was *kissing* him.

It was a singularly odd sensation and not at all unpleasant; he'd forgotten what it felt like to be kissed, and for a moment he simply lay there, letting the warm lips part his own, force air into his shivering body. He reached up and found his icy fingers entwined in masses of hair.

Hermione Granger, mouth still firmly on his, hands deftly patting his coat pockets, searching for...

"It was an *accident*," he gasped. "Get your hands off me."

She pulled away then and sat back on her heels, eyes narrowed.

"An accident. So what were you doing, exactly, hanging off the edge of the dock fully dressed?"

"Analyzing my alternatives," he said, not looking at her.

"You can be a real..." She didn't finish and for that he was grateful.

"You tend to show up at the most inopportune moments," he muttered as he struggled to sit up.

"Really?" she snapped as she gave his pockets one last slap and performed a warming charm. "I think I tend to show up just in time."

*

He spasmed, grasping her hand as he ground his teeth together so hard his gums ached. Sweat beaded along his hairline. Hermione held on, biting her lip until it bled but not uttering a sound. They'd been at it for hours and finally he relaxed, easing his grip. Her fingers were numb. She rubbed them absently and sucked on her lower lip. He was sweat soaked. He looked up at her, eyes glazed but burning. Somehow, he realized, her presence was making it all a little more bearable.

"What are you doing here?"

"I work here."

"No, I mean..."

"I know what you mean," she said gently. "I'm a Healer, Severus. I help people. Try to, at least. Even save them, from time to time. That's *what do*."

"Well," he panted as another spasm gripped him between its iron jaws, and she immediately leaned forward to take his hand, "you do have your work cut out for you with me."

A very bad day, this one.

*

The next time he awoke, she was sitting beside his bed, notebook on lap, imperturbable look on her face.

"You've been *Crucioed*," she said. It wasn't a question. "Many times."

"What of it?"

"That hurts. Horribly. And it can have lifelong repercussions on both your body and mind."

"What do you know of it?"

"I know," she said flatly.

He looked at her, really looked at her and he knew then, and he was suddenly, inexplicably furious.

"When?" he snapped, heart pounding.

"Malfoy Manor. During the war."

"For how long?"

"Not long. But, long enough," she shifted, uncomfortable. "Why?"

He ignored her. "Who?"

"Bellatrix."

Of course.

"Tell me," she said, professionally, "how many times do you think you've been *Crucioed*?"

"In my life?"

"Yes."

He shrugged, the perfect picture of unconcern. "Many."

"Give me a number."

"Why?"

"Humour me."

He looked at her.

"How many do you think?"

She studied him. "Fifty."

He snorted. "Triple that. No, quadruple it."

Her eyes widened only slightly, and he saw her swallow.

"Surprised?"

"Yes." She looked down quickly, scribbled something on her pad of paper, but he could have sworn he saw a sheen of tears in her eyes. "And you wonder why you're in so much pain."

"Actually," he said, staring in wonder at her downturned face, "I don't."

*

And three weeks later:

"Where is she?" he roared as he thrashed about in a bed too small to contain all his agony. "I don't want you, you imbecile, I want Her... Healer Granger."

"Calm yourself, Professor Snape, please," Pearl begged, trying not to weep. "I told you, she's not here."

"Where is she?" he roared again. He didn't care. He wanted everyone to hear.

Then, oddly, Minerva was there.

"Thank Merlin, Headmistress," he heard Pearl wail. "He can't be contained! I've tried everything..."

"Severus," Minerva said, using what he imagined to be her most soothing voice. "What can we do to help?"

"Granger knows! Get her!"

"She was called away this afternoon on urgent family business."

"What the hell does that mean?"

Minerva paused.

"Her father died, Severus. Very suddenly, I understand."

He stopped roaring. "Oh." He drew his arms and legs very close to his aching body.

"A heart attack, I believe," she added, as if he'd asked. "It's a Muggle affliction, brought on by..."

"I know what a heart attack is," he cut in, very quietly. He lay his head back and closed his eyes, pictured her, wherever she was, far away from here and from him. He wondered if she was crying, right at this moment, or else quite still and numb. Frozen in disbelief.

Any combination of the above.

"When is she coming back?"

"She didn't know. I told her to take as much time as she needed."

Severus tried not to weep.

"She did mention you before she left, sir," Pearl said timidly, moving forward, but not close enough that he could grab her if he wanted.

His eyes snapped open. "She did?"

"She seemed to think you'd be in tonight. She left this."

It was a book, he surmised, but just then the pain overtook him again, and Pearl dropped it on his bedside table as she and Minerva fetched the usual array of potions and restraints needed to get him through the night.

Later, when he could move of his own volition again, he picked it up:

Alternative Healing: Minimizing Pain Through the Powers of the Mind.

It was a heavy book and made a very satisfactory *thwack* when it hit the wall across from him.

*

And three weeks and two days after that:

"Make it stop, make it stop, please!"

There was a flurry of voices, and he recognized some, overlapping and verging on panic:

"This can't go on. It's torture!" (*Pearl*)

"I've been trying for years to convince him to seek help. He's a singularly stubborn man." (*Minerva, who knew him best*)

"We've noticed! Send him away before..." (*Pearl*)

"Before what? And send him where, exactly? This is the only home he knows!" (*Dear Minerva*)

"Send him to St. Mungo's! We're not equipped to deal with this!" (*Pearl, the bloody cow*)

"He'll die before he sets foot in that place." (*Minerva, again*)

"He's not going to die." (*Wait a moment*)

He felt a gentle, familiar weight on the edge of the bed and those sweet, sweet hands on his face. She was back. She'd come back. And because he was so happy about that, he yelled at her:

"Where were you?"

"I had to go home. I thought Pearl told you."

"But I needed you!"

"Well, I'm here now."

He twisted away from her.

"Not bloody good enough! I cannot believe you would cast aside your *duties* here so carelessly! What kind of Healer are you?"

"Well, I apologize if my father's unplanned death interfered with your regularly scheduled collapses!"

"You think I'm doing this on purpose, you nitwit? I can't help it!"

"There are things you can do, things you can *try*. I've brought some books on meditation, on yoga..."

"Yoga!" he howled.

He was reaching for her, meaning only to take her hand, but she was gone and several other people were there instead, people he didn't want, but it was too late and everything cracked wide open and disappeared at the same time.

*

It was amazing how easily he could avoid her when he chose to. Until he chose not to any longer and actively sought her out before breakfast several days later.

"Madam Granger," he nodded. He was trembling.

"Professor Snape," she nodded in passing, her eyes carefully neutral. She looked, he realized suddenly, very thin and very pale, and his heart twisted a little. He paused, and she did, too, politely waiting. He grasped his robes tightly so as not to grasp at her.

"I wanted... about your father. I offer my... deepest condolences."

"Thank you."

"And... I must apologize," he began, "about the... other night. I was... not myself."

"I noticed," she said. Then, "You must be in a great deal of pain."

"At times," he agreed. "I've managed to brew a variation of a calming draught that I'm convinced will help ease the spasms."

She nodded. "I didn't mean just physically," she said, then walked into the Great Hall.

*

"I've been researching the long-term effects of extreme *Crucio* abuse."

He said nothing. He simply lay in the narrow, white bed, spent and drained. He stared at nothing, stared at the ceiling, then stared at his hands, which seemed not quite attached to his arms.

"Unfortunately, there hasn't been much written on the subject."

"You don't say."

"Articles mention severe cramping... and auditory hallucinations."

He smirked.

"There's a practice, in the Muggle world, called pain management. I've been reading everything I can find related to it, and I have several colleagues who are considered experts in the field. I could put you in touch..."

"Pain management." He laughed.

"Yes, Severus. For those forced to live with horrible pain, every single day. People who have been in car accidents, those suffering from any number of debilitating diseases..."

"And you honestly think these *colleagues* of yours would know what to do *with me*?"

"It wouldn't hurt to try, would it?"

He slapped the sides of the bed with both hands, palms flat. Hermione barely flinched.

"You have no bloody idea how much pain I've endured, how much pain I'm in now."

She stared at him, hands clenched in her lap as if to keep from striking him, or holding him.

"Actually," she said, "I'm getting a pretty good idea."

*

A bad day. He could feel it building, as it did, and damned if he'd collapse in the hallway again or spend a night in the Infirmary without her.

Thursday being her night off.

"Severus," she said, stepping back in surprise. She was dressed in Muggle clothes, he noticed, jeans and a T-shirt instead of her usual robes. She looked unaccountably young. She looked like the student Hermione and for a moment he was frightened. He swayed in the doorway, wondering if he'd made a horrible mistake coming here. "What is it?"

"I... needed something..."

"I'm not working tonight."

"I know." He paused. "It's... coming."

She nodded then and opened the door. He stepped inside and looked around, unsure of how to proceed. He looked at her and she nodded once more, took his hand and led him down the short hallway to another room. He followed without a word, and when she eased him down on her own bed that smelled like *her*, he closed his eyes and began to weep.

Now it would be all right. Now he wouldn't have to wait alone.

She lay down beside him on the bed, on her side, facing him. When he began to shake, she wrapped her arms around him and held on, crooning nonsensical words, stroking his tensed muscles, pressing her mouth to his cheek, his ear as he bit back howls, riding out the black waves.

"Show me where it hurts," she said when he had calmed and they were waiting for the next attack. She lifted her hand. He took it, placed it on his chest, his arms, hips, thighs, head, and after she touched each spot with her hands, she touched it with her lips, and so the night passed.

Somehow it became habit after that, as regular as his trips to the Infirmary. Nights she wasn't working he came to her in her chambers, candles burning low, books scattered across the table, blankets turned down on the bed. If she was studying, he'd climb in before her, bone weary, warming the sheets until she was ready. They'd turn and shift and accommodate until both were comfortable, removing shirts, pants, undergarments, pressing skin to skin and learning to banish all thoughts of death and stones from the lake.

Later, neither would remember exactly how it all began, only that it did, and for that they were forever grateful.

*

On the bad days, they both said things they didn't mean.

"You're the most insensitive, ungrateful bastard I've ever encountered!"

"You don't have a clue what you're doing, you wire-haired twit! I don't know how you ever got hired here!"

"I don't know what I'm doing with you!"

"Who else would have you?"

"Why don't you go *Avada Kedavra* yourself?" This from Hermione, and which, he realized later, when translated to Muggle-speak, roughly meant: "*Fuck off and die.*"

*

On other bad days, he did things he didn't mean to do. For instance, standing and staring at the lake for hours, or consuming a triple dose of Dreamless Sleep to ensure, well, a dreamless sleep, but instead rendering him limp and nearly comatose on her bathroom floor beside the tub and Hermione shaking him, face taut and white, eyes wild with worry.

"What have you taken?" she ordered, but he honestly couldn't recall. He could only move his head jerkily so that his hair fell across his slack face.

Let me go, just let me go, please...

"I will not. Don't you go. Don't you dare leave me!"

Oh. He *had* said it aloud.

Later, after a draught of a restorative potion, tears and apologies, they lay together, his hand curled around her breast, his face buried in her mounds of hair.

"I feel as though we're being punished," she said quietly.

"For what?"

She rolled over and looked at him.

"I wish I knew."

*

Sometimes when it hurt, it helped to smash things. A lot of things. Loudly. Wand or fist, it didn't matter.

Hermione would find him in his lab, or in his chambers, surrounded by glass and books, and she would merely sigh. "Bad day?"

"Of a sort."

"Anything I can do?"

"Kill me," he said one day without thinking and recoiled when he saw the look on her face.

Sometimes the good days seemed very few and far between.

*

Thursday night and sheets kicked to the foot of the bed, candles guttering on the dresser, a room of angled shadows and surprised gasps.

"This can only end badly," he said between kisses.

"Then we won't let it end."

*

Consider the lake:

He knew it well these days, its shape and smell, the way it undulated, its various shades, ranging, on a good day, from azure to sapphire. He also knew that though he thought of it as *bottomless*, the bottom was there, solidly sandy, and it would catch him, cradle him. He knew it was waiting.

And it would be oh so very quiet.

Consider the girl, then, and the woman she had become:

He knew her well these days, too. He knew her contours, her shape, the warmth of her, the width and span of her skin under his hands. He knew how tightly she clenched his hands when he writhed in pain. He knew how tightly she clutched his back as he moved inside her. He knew the taste of her. He knew her scent.

He knew she was waiting, too.

*

He found her at her desk in her cramped chambers, tears rolling down her face.

"What is it?" he asked, alarmed.

"Nothing," she said.

He moved closer.

"Something."

He moved closer still, peered over her shoulder. She had letters spread out before her, post cards, a photo album, images of her parents, of she and her father. Muggle photos, still and grainy, faces frozen in spot, smiling or not, eyes peering out, motionless in time. A man with Hermione's nose, the tilt of her head, her smile.

She looked up at him, utterly lost.

"I'm just..." She lay one hand across the images, spread her fingers of the other helplessly. "...having a bad day," she said. "You know?"

He knelt in front of her and wrapped his arms around her, hard as he could.

He knew.

*

On a good day, she met him at the door. She put her arms around him and kissed him, hard.

"It's our six-month anniversary," she said. Then, "It's okay if you didn't remember."

"I did." He kissed her back, harder, and handed her flowers and a basket. She looked into it: it was filled with stones.

"I won't be needing those anymore," he said.

And later:

"I didn't... I *don't* want to die," he said against the sweet sweat of her neck when he'd caught his breath. "Really."

"Good," she said, stroking his collarbone, his shoulder blades, hips. "I don't want you to die either. Really."

If only there could be more days like this.

*