

Putting Issues to Bed

by pokeystar

Is it a midlife crisis if you've died once already?

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Chapter 1 of 1

Is it a midlife crisis if you've died once already?

Hermione lay on her side, left arm tucked under her pillow, her right hand nestled in her husband's gentle grip. A vague thought stirred in her mind on the verge of sleep.

"Severus?"

His even breathing hitched, and his voice rumbled through his chest, making the skin on her back tingle.

"Hum?"

She shifted closer to his warmth, breathing in his familiar smoke-tinged herbal scent. "Was Harry here today?"

"No," he rumbled. A few moments passed in drowsy silence. His hand slipped from hers, and he traced small circles on her shoulder. "Why do you ask?"

"There's a copy of *Broom and Flyer* on the sofa table," she murmured, shrugging in dismissal. "It must be Reggie's..." Her voice trailed off as she relaxed into sleep. *"I'll Owl it to him in the morning."*

"It's mine," Severus replied absently as his breath evened out again.

Something in her chest pinged at that statement, but it wasn't strong enough to rouse her.

She woke the next morning with an obscure feeling of distress that she couldn't identify. It hovered over her, nebulous and brooding, through her ablutions, three cups of coffee, two pieces of buttered wheat toast and a quick perusal of the *Prophet*, which Severus had thoughtfully left open to the politics section. She grimaced as she scanned the headlines. The International Trade Alliance was arguing over the thickness of cauldron bottoms again. Percy would be a bear at brunch come Sunday.

A glance at her watch, and she was off, hurriedly gathering up her cloak and briefcase as she approached the fireplace in their lounge. Hermione had just thrown a fistful of powder into the cheery flames when she glimpsed Severus's copy of *Broom and Flyer*. The nebulous feeling of distress hovering above her relocated to her chest, resembling a pebble lodged behind her lungs.

All day long, it niggled at her while she drew up briefs and researched precedents. *You're being ridiculous*, she scoffed at herself. It was not an unusual thing for her husband to procure reading material. Much the opposite, in fact. It was a regular occurrence, accounted for in the monthly budget. Yet. The pebble remained. *Broom and Flyer*? That was odd. Especially with Reggie back at Hogwarts for his final year. And Severus had said that it was his... She grimaced, shaking off the distracting thought with determination, and went back to work. She couldn't afford the time to speculate about such nonsense...she had a trial to prepare for. It was just a strange mood, nothing more.

A few late nights later, she stumbled out of the Floo into their lounge, half blind with exhaustion and hunger. Her stomach growled, and she tossed her things in a haphazard heap on the sofa before proceeding to the kitchen. She stopped abruptly in the doorway, weaving on her feet at the heavenly smell of greasy cod and salty goodness that flooded her nostrils. *Fish and chips?* It had to be a mirage.

A chair scraped against the floor as it slid away from the table. She nodded her thanks to Severus and fell upon her meal as if it were the last bit of sustenance on earth.

"Be careful. It's hot."

And it was, gloriously so. Hermione looked at her spouse in confusion.

"You didn't have to run out and buy me dinner."

Warming charms tended to dry the fish out and leave the potatoes somewhat limp.

"I grabbed it on the way home." He shrugged. His voice was gritty. His breath smelt of beer. "I only just got back from the pub."

The pub?

"The pub?"

"Yes." He cocked his head and smirked at her. "You've heard of them? Small buildings that reek of fags and stale crisps? Where people go to drink pints at twice the price of a six pack?"

"But, you never go to..."

"We made arrests in the illegal potions case. Potter invited me along to celebrate. It's Friday. I went."

"Oh, Severus! That's wonderful. The last time you mentioned it, you hadn't had a break..." Hermione bit her lip. "It's Friday?"

"Hermione." He gazed at her, his brow furrowed with worry. "Can't you reduce your workload or hire some help?"

She swallowed a bite of vinegar-coated chip and sighed. They'd discussed this before. She thought he understood. "It's the trial. There's a lot of work to be done, and now that I'm on my own, I can't afford to hire an assistant yet. I hope that once I win the centaurs permanent rights to their ancestral lands, the publicity will bring in charitable donations."

"If you don't collapse from exhaustion first," he muttered, standing up to throw away the greasy newsprint and soiled napkins.

"I'll be fine," she replied through a muffled yawn. "I've done more all at once before."

"You're not fourteen anymore, and all of the Time-Turners were destroyed decades ago," he chastised in a mild tone.

She shot him an annoyed look nonetheless. "I am aware, *Professor*."

"Humpf," he snorted, pulling her to her feet and guiding her down the hall to their bedroom. "If you were less tired, I'd serve you a detention over that table, young lady."

She giggled as she fell back onto the bed. "No pushing. One hundred points from Slytherin."

He loomed over her. "Shall I try for more, *Miss Granger*?"

Hermione snored delicately in response.

Saturday passed in a blur of French roast coffee, cheese butties and ponderous legalese. She even slept on the sofa, reading glasses still perched on her nose, a crocheted blanket pooled in her lap. She woke at half ten with a crick in her neck, feeling cranky as hell.

"Why didn't you wake me?" she whinged before rushing about, trying to make herself presentable. Her neck twanged with every brushstroke of her hair.

Severus glared at her and leaned against the doorjamb. "I tried. Several times. You would not budge."

She pulled a bright periwinkle sundress over her head and thrust her feet into the nearest pair of sandals. "Let's go get this over with."

He caught her about the waist as she tried to brush past him and murmured, "Isn't that my line?" before nipping her ear. Her squeal was lost in the rush of Side-Along Apparition.

They arrived at Grimmauld Place precisely on time. Hermione tried to catch her breath and set herself to rights while Severus enlarged their hostess gift...a fine bottle of Malfoy estate Bordeaux...and knocked on the door. It opened promptly, and Harry ushered them into the foyer, taking the proffered bottle with one hand, and giving Hermione a hearty hug with the other.

A low whistle broke the tableau.

"My dear sir, aren't you looking well today?" Mrs. Black's voice fairly dripped with pigment-enhanced hormones. She fluttered her eyelashes at Severus. "Is that a new ensemble?"

"Why, indeed, madam, it is," Severus replied, giving Mrs. Black a nod. "Thank you."

Hermione glanced at her husband and then stared at him again in shock. Severus was wearing the light grey cashmere sweater she'd given him the previous Christmas and dark navy jeans. *Jeans!*

"You must call me Walburga," Mrs. Black cooed. She fluttered her spider-like lashes again. And giggled...no, cackled...when Severus gave her a slow wink.

The pebble was back, only now it felt more solid like a small rock. She tore her eyes away from the almost hypnotic sight of her husband's bum in denim when Harry cleared his throat. Pointedly.

"Um. Is Ginny in the kitchen?" she asked, blushing at Harry's bemused gaze. He nodded without a word, though his lips quirked into a smirk. "I'll go help her then, shall I?"

She clattered down the stairs before Harry could make a remark.

Ginny turned at the commotion and gave her a cheeky smile before turning back to the stove.

"We're having eggs Benedict, and I have to watch the Hollandaise so it doesn't burn."

Hermione stood next to her at the stove and gave Ginny a quick hug. "What can I do to help?"

"Well, Fleur and Angelina have set the table. They've just taken the cold dishes and the beverages up to the dining room." Ginny and Hermione looked over the platters of hot food waiting under stasis charms. "Hmm... I know...you can toast and butter the crumpets."

"All of them?" Hermione eyed the pyramid of bread goods with some skepticism. "Will they really get eaten?"

"Ron's here."

"Ah." Hermione started toasting the pile of crumpets in front of her. "Ginny, can I ask you a personal question?"

"Of course," the red haired witch replied while charming the whisk to stir the lemony cream sauce a little faster. "Almost thick enough."

"Has Harry ever strayed?"

Ginny pulled the sauce off the burner and poured it into a soup tureen, covering it with the fine bone china lid. "When it comes to food and adolescence, all men believe they are entitled to second helpings."

"Even Severus?" Hermione bit her lip.

"Hermione," said Ginny. "You are his second helping."

Hermione sighed. "How do I know he won't go back for thirds, then?"

"Do you think he might?" Ginny asked, sitting next to her.

"No," Hermione replied, shaking her head. "Not yet. But he's... doing things... differently."

"What kind of things?" Ginny wagged her eyebrows for emphasis.

"Nothing like that," Hermione said, cutting her a look. "He bought a copy of *Broom and Flyer* when he's never been interested in 'souped up trick sticks' before. He went to the pub. He loathes crowds and smoke and 'nattering'. He's wearing jeans and that sweater you talked me into buying for him..."

Ginny gasped. "He's not all in black?"

"You can go see for yourself." Hermione gestured at the ceiling above them.

"I will, soon enough," Ginny murmured in disbelief. "This sounds a bit like a midlife crisis."

"It does, doesn't it?" Hermione bit her lip again. "What do I do?"

"Keep an eye on him," Ginny said, tapping her fingernails against the worn worktable's surface. "Encourage him to take up a hobby."

"Like taking apart Muggle appliances?" Hermione asked and giggled when Ginny rolled her eyes. "Or coaching youth Quidditch league teams?"

"Now you know my secret. I keep Harry too busy to stray." Ginny picked up a knife and buttered the crumpets Hermione had toasted.

"Like mother, like daughter?" Hermione teased.

"Damn straight."

"Severus is fairly busy already between his personal research projects and consulting on special cases for the MLE."

They stood and filled a platter with the crumpets.

"Harry told me they made arrests in that potions death case," Ginny said. "Here's another secret, then. Failing all else, naughty lingerie and a blow job or two can inspire new heights in loyalty. Let's get this stuff upstairs before it goes cold."

Brunch was slightly awkward, at least for Hermione. She was seated near the middle of the table between Severus and Percy. Molly and Arthur sat directly across the table. She couldn't look them in the eye without blushing. And Harry, oblivious to her discomfort, kept asking her questions about the centaurs or Reggie and Eileen. Ginny looked fit to burst out in laughter at any moment.

Bloody cow.

"Are Eileen and Lorcan back from their honeymoon yet?" Harry asked Severus, having given up on Hermione.

Severus swallowed a bit of egg and said, "Not yet. They're still tracking Snorkacks through the wilds of Iceland."

"It was a beautiful wedding," commented Molly. "It's wonderful when two people find love together."

"I had my doubts about Eileen marrying so young," replied Severus. "But Hermione pointed out she was the same age when she married me."

"And we're still happy together," Hermione added, squeezing his denim clad thigh with her free hand.

"Yes, we are." His hand covered hers under the table.

Maybe she needn't worry after all.

The rock in her chest shrank back to its pebble form.

The meal continued...each person contributing to the pleasant conversational flow, only one small hiccup occurring when Severus baited Percy about the Ministry's plan to standardize the manufacture of cauldrons...until at last, afters were served.

Harry stood up and clinked his glass. "I'd like to propose a toast," he said, lifting the glass up high. "To friends and family. To making our dreams come true." He sipped some champagne, then continued. "I've decided to donate ten thousand galleons in Dobby's name to the Centre for Legal Aid to Magical Creatures. May it help usher in a new era of justice for all."

Hermione stared at him in astonishment, completely forgetting her embarrassment at Ginny's earlier comments. Severus nudged her hand to her glass, and she drank without thinking. The bubbles tickled her throat, filling her stomach with giddy effervescence. She tried to thank Harry, but the words wouldn't form in her mouth. He knew anyway.

The next week was a busy one, but she was floating on air, thanks to Harry's generous donation. It enabled her to hire a secretary who was already well-trained, thank Merlin. Jacinda Hopkirk had worked for the Wizengamot for several years before deciding that she preferred a more flexible schedule and a boss she could respect without reservation; luckily, Hermione could provide both. Additionally, Hugo approached her to ask for an internship at the Centre...he was due to start at Cambridge's magical

college in the Fall and was trying to determine if law appealed to him more than just theoretically. Her godson had a good head on his shoulders, having received Os in several N.E.W.T.s, so she put him to work straight away.

Hugo and Jacinda proved their worth by freeing up Hermione's evenings. Trial preparation was much more manageable with three competent people working together instead of one alone. Hermione even made it home for dinner on Friday...it was a pleasant surprise for her husband, who had begun to feel a little lonely, as solitary as he normally was.

After eating their fill of roast chicken and root vegetables, they drank wine in the lounge while watching the fire dance in the hearth. Then, they roused themselves enough to go to bed. Hermione brushed her teeth while Severus changed into his pyjamas...just the bottoms, as he couldn't be arsed to find the tops, he was that tired. She idly counted the circles applied to her left rear wisdom tooth, letting her eyes slide up her husband's body from his finely formed feet to his distinctly smooth, pale chest. Where had his fur gone? And were those *highlights* in his hair?

Just like that, the rock was back in her chest, bigger than ever.

It rolled like a drunken bull in a china shop, crushing her lungs and her heart, while her busy mind put together disparate flashes of thought.

The copy of *Broom and Flyer*.

A trip to the pub.

She put on her nightshirt and slipped under the covers, turning on her side. Severus was close behind her, easing his arm over her torso to find her hand and grasp it in a gentle hold. He kissed her hair, said goodnight and fell asleep, his breath deep, even.

Jeans. The sweater. New grooming habits.

Her husband had turned sixty in January. Maybe sixty-one, depending on the source. Severus could calculate, in his head, with exacting precision, the amount necessary for a particular potion ingredient down to the microgram, but he had a blind spot concerning his own age.

At Eileen's wedding, all the bridesmaids had eyed him up. Devoured him, really. Shameless little twits.

This sounds a bit like a midlife crisis.

The boulder in her chest agreed.

She crept out of bed as silently as possible, thankful that twenty-two years of peace had served to dull the edge of her husband's spy instincts. Throwing on a pair of flannels, she tip-toed down the hall. Once in the living room, she paced in front of the fireplace, debating her options briefly before throwing a fistful of powder into the flames.

"Ginny," she called softly, crouching on the hearth, "I need to talk."

"Come on through," Ginny replied in a hushed voice.

Hermione bit her lip. "It's not too late?"

"Of course not." Ginny looked her over as Hermione stepped out onto the hearth. Then she conjured another glass and filled it to the brim, gesturing to the space beside her on the sofa. "Have some wine."

Hermione drank half the glass and set it carefully on the low table in front of her. "Thanks."

"Want to tell me what's going on?" Ginny asked, quirked an eyebrow at the half-empty glass.

"You were right. So right." Hermione fidgeted with the edge of her nightshirt. "And now he's shaved his chest and has highlights in his hair."

"Really?" Ginny looked bemused.

"They're burgundy."

The redhead snorted a laugh, transforming it into a cough when Hermione turned bewildered eyes on her. *Broom and Flyer*, the pub...which Harry says was lads only and that Severus plays a mean game of darts...new clothes, new hair, or lack thereof." Ginny tittered. "Are you sure he's not gay?"

"Well, he is uncomfortable talking about his history with Lucius, and he has remarked that your husband's eyes are rather pretty in a certain light." Hermione watched as Ginny's eyes grew round and barked with laughter. "I'm fairly certain he's not."

Ginny laughed with her. "It does sound ridiculous, doesn't it? A magazine, a pint with co-workers, new clothes and a much needed makeover..." Hermione frowned. She missed Severus's treasure trail, dammit. "Why has this got you in such a strop? I think you were less worried about Voldemort's resurrection."

Hermione winced. "Remember when Severus and I went to Australia to find my parents and restore their memories?" Ginny nodded. Hermione paused to take a sip of wine. "Only nothing worked. We tried everything."

"And more, as I remember," replied Ginny, reaching over to clasp hands with her friend.

"In the end, I was glad we couldn't lift the charms. I might have wanted them to be permanent, all along. Severus suspects that's why they were irreversible." A tear slid down Hermione's cheek.

Ginny squeezed her hand. "Why?"

"Because my father had an affair during my sixth year and my mother had just found out before I went home that summer. She was devastated. They were getting a divorce. I only wanted them to be safe. And happy. Together. I needed to know they were happy together."

"Understandable, given..."

Hermione made a slashing motion with her free hand. "Irrational. Severus is not my father. I am not my mother."

"You need to talk to him about it," urged Ginny. "Getting your fears out into the open with the person who counts will dissipate them."

"I hope."

"Like you said, Severus is not your father." Ginny hugged her close. "Now go home and talk to your wizard."

Hermione eased into their bed and lay on her side, left arm tucked under her pillow. She listened to her husband's deep, even breaths, willing her mind to empty of thought.

"I'm not young enough for you," he rumbled, making the skin on her back tingle.

She turned over and met his eyes, soft with sleep and insecurity. "I married you *because* you're older. I was certain you'd gone through your midlife crisis already."

"I died."

"Exactly. And what does that make this? A second life crisis?" She thumped his chest lightly for emphasis.

He caught her fingers with his and raised her hand to his lips for a kiss. "Now that the children are grown, what reason do you have to stay with an old lag like me?"

She snorted. "*Broom and Flyer?*"

"You like Quidditch players."

She trailed her hands down his chest. "I miss your fur."

"It was turning grey." He kissed her chin.

"*Burgundy* highlights?"

He smirked. "I hexed the stylist for that. I think he enjoyed it."

She rolled her eyes at him. "I'm not nineteen anymore."

"Aren't you?" he murmured, easing his arms around her and drawing her flush against his body. He radiated heat. "I see that bright, passionate girl whenever I look at you."

And with that, the pebble shrank into nothingness.

~fin~

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A/N: Originally written as a gift for Tinytexans, for the 2010 ss/hg fic exchange. TT's prompt: *Post-Voldy, AU, EWE... Snape, still teaching at Hogwarts, experiences a radical midlife crisis.*

I felt guilty about the lack of "Hogwarts" and "radical," so I threw in a bit of "Hermione thinks Snape is gay" and "Mrs. Black has a crush on Snape," too.

Huge hugs to Pyjama Pants for beta skills par excellence.