

# Magic in my Tree

*by Grace has Victory*

How would you react if everything you had always believed impossible suddenly turned up in the centre of your family?

A series of one-shots narrated by Muggles whose sibling, lover or child turned out to be a wizard.

In the first episode, Lavender Brown's younger sister is completely delighted by the magical news that surprises their very ordinary family in July 1991.

## Rapture

*Chapter 1 of 11*

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**HPFreak7:** *How are Muggle parents convinced to let their kids go to Hogwarts, a strange place they never heard of before; and wouldn't they think it was a practical joke?*

**J. K. Rowling:** *In the case of Muggle parents, special messengers are sent to explain everything to them. But don't forget that they will have noticed that there's something strange about their child for the previous ten years, so it won't come as a complete bolt from the blue.*

*J. K. Rowling's World Book Day Chat 4 March 2004.*

by Jasmine Brown

"I really want to dance Swanhilda," I said, "but I don't want to wear autumn colours. Lavender, could you design me a pink Swanhilda-dress?"

"Jasmine, you're more likely to be cast as a toy rabbit," said Lavender with a giggle. "Open the rubbish bag wider..." She swept all the muck from the guinea pigs' hutch into the plastic bag and laid a fresh sheaf of newspapers down on the hutch floor. I turned away from the revolting smell while Lavender refilled the food dish.

"Do you think they'll produce *Coppelia* again when I'm old enough to dance her?" I persisted. "Lavender, don't you want to be Swanhilda?"

"No, I'd rather design the costumes." She closed and padlocked the hutch door. "All done." I lifted the barrier between the hutch entry and the outdoor run while Lavender poked parsley, spinach and carrot tops through the wire netting, asking, "Do you think it's true that guinea pigs can eat strawberries?"

"Look! Who's that stranger coming down our drive?" I pointed, nearly dropping the rubbish bag, but Lavender caught it off me before she looked.

"That's a Wizard-of-Oz hat... but her ankle-boots are cute. She must be collecting money for something."

I ran after Lavender, who shoved the disgusting bag into the dustbin and out of our lives. This brought us level with the stranger, whose long red dress and witch's hat did make her look like a stage character.

"Good morning," she said. "I'm Charity Burbage."

"We haven't any money," I said quickly.

"You won't need much; the basic costs are all Ministry-funded," she said. She was looking at Lavender, rather hesitantly, as if to check she had the right person. "You're Miss Brown, aren't you?"

"We both are," said Lavender. "And I love your ankle-boots!"

"Thank you," said Charity Burbage. "I did wonder whether I should have chosen a larger buckle."

"No, no!" exclaimed Lavender in horror. "There should be no buckles at all! Just plain black leather if you're going for that elves-and-the-shoemaker look!"

"Oh... right," said Charity Burbage. She clicked her fingers, and suddenly the little brassy buckles on her black leather boots just vanished!

"And the skirt," said Lavender briskly. "It's too full for its length. The length is wonderful exactly right to show off your boots but the pleats make it too cumbersome. It tells the audience that you have *really* fat legs. If you don't, your whole line should be slimmer."

"That is right!" exclaimed the visitor happily. "Like this, of course " The bright red skirt rippled, and suddenly it had reduced to a perfect A-line cut.

"I love the cuffs," said Lavender. "But you should play them up for the stage they need stars, I think." Lavender nodded at the stranger's cuffs, and they suddenly danced with live, star-shaped sequins.

"For the stage, yes, but I'm not on-stage I'm at work," agreed the stranger gravely.

"So that's why you keep the neckline so... severe," said Lavender. "For business. It's almost not a neck. In such warm weather, it's a pity you can't cut it a little."

Lavender giggled, and Charity Burbage's neckline dived a little, exposing her throat, but suddenly the dive stopped short and a button appeared. "You have style, Miss Brown," she said, "but you have to remember that I *am* at work. I can't cut my neckline like that!"

Lavender thought for a minute, then said, "If you can't cut down, at least cut *up*. Like this." Suddenly the red fabric grew up the stranger's neck all the way to her chin, and a huge bow adorned one side.

"Should I have more stars in my hair to match the cuffs?" she asked.

"Oh, yes!" we both replied.

And then there *were* stars in her glossy curls, winking silver and pink and green under the strong sunlight.

"But what about the hat?" asked Lavender. "Why do you have to wear that for work?"

"It's uniform and we can't change anything about the hat," Charity Burbage told us. "It would be unwise to try. Miss Brown, do you often make this kind of dress alteration?"

"Everyone should take a little care with her clothes," said Lavender.

"Of course," agreed the visitor. "But not everyone makes changes as easily as you do. Have dress alterations always been this easy for you, Miss Brown?"

"Yes, always," I interrupted. "It does scare people sometimes. A lady at the shops nearly died when Lavender changed her skirt." I tried not to laugh at the memory. "Since that time, we've been careful only to do it in private. It doesn't scare *me*, though. Lavender organises my clothes whenever we have to go out anywhere."

The stranger was starting to bother me. She was listening to me, including me in the conversation, but she was obviously more interested in Lavender. Yet Lavender had never met this person before and she hadn't expected a visitor. What was going on?

"Is that why you've come here?" I blurted out. "Because you and Lavender can both alter clothes in ways that other people can't?"

Her smile was dazzling. "Yes! You could say that's why I've come. Young lady, could you run and tell your parents that I'm here?"

I tried to explain that Dad was at work, but two things happened before I could speak. First, Charity Burbage turned straight back to Lavender and asked, "Miss Brown, did your letter arrive?" Second, our front gate swung open, and in walked Dad!

"Hello, girls, I'm off early for the day," he said. "Custom was light at the garage, and it seemed like a good day to spend at home. I see you have a visitor. Who's your friend?"

I pirouetted towards the house, deliberately zigzagging so that I could still hear Lavender's voice. "Miss Burbage, this is my father. His name's Geoffrey Brown and he's a mechanic. Dad, this is Charity Burbage. She's a fashion designer, I think. No, Miss Burbage, I don't have my ballet results yet; I'm still waiting for my letter."

"I don't know about ballet exams," said the stranger. "I meant a different letter, which we mailed out on Monday. Did you receive *any* letters last week?"

"Oh, yes!" said Lavender eagerly. "I had two party invitations, my school report, the *Cavy Quarterly*, a catalogue from my ballet supplies shop, some dress designs from my auntie..."

I couldn't hear any more so I sprinted to the kitchen, knowing I was missing out on the important news. Mum was putting a large crock of chicken Maryland into the oven. She runs a small bed-and-breakfast out of the three bedrooms on our top storey, and of course the busy season was in full swing, so she was reluctant to leave her cooking just to meet some eccentric saleswoman. By the time I could pull her into the lounge, Dad was already showing the strange lady to the sofa. They were talking about owls. Yes, really! Owls!

The visitor held her spangly red cuff out towards Mum. "Good morning, Mrs Brown. I'm Professor Charity Burbage. I'm pleased to tell you all that Miss Brown's unique talents have won her an invitation to study at Hogwarts."

"Is that a ballet school? It sounds lovely, but I'm afraid we can't afford it."

"Tuition is free," said the stranger. "But, no, it isn't a ballet school. It's a place where young people like Miss Brown, who can cut and sew without ever going near scissors and thread, develop their abilities in magic."

At the word "magic," like an electric shock, the room fell deathly silent. Dad's jaw dropped; Mum froze like a statue; Lavender's pink cheeks drained to the colour of snow; and every last giggle died in my throat. For a long half-minute, the birds did not sing, the clock did not tick and the only event in the whole house was the slow cooking of the chicken Maryland. When I remembered to breathe, I looked around cautiously at my family, and saw that they were all staring at Charity Burbage, waiting for her to explain the joke. She looked kindly back at us, waiting for one of us to speak first.

Nervously, not sounding at all like myself, I asked, "Is... Is this some kind of games club? Like Dungeons and Dragons?" Lavender had never shown any interest in boyish games of that kind.

Then Mum found her voice and asked, "Do you mean that you teach conjuring tricks? My girls already go to stage school three times a week, but they're more interested in dancing."

Dad's guess was different again. "Are you from some kind of neo-pagan wiccan circle? I don't agree with children joining religious groups; we've told Lavender to stay away from all of them until she's an adult."

Lavender shook her head and tried to smile. "I've always said that being well-dressed is the beginning of magic. Is this a dressmaking school?"

"No," said Charity Burbage. "This is not a joke or a metaphor or a game. Nor is it a stage-art or a religion. It's literally magic, of the kind you've read about in fairy-tales. Did you ever read the story in which a pumpkin was transfigured into a coach?" At these words, she waved a slim stick, and a peach from the fruit bowl jumped up into the air and bounced onto the coffee table. By the time it landed, it wasn't a peach any more: it had transformed into a tiny, golden model of an old-fashioned carriage.

As we stared at the toy carriage, Miss Burbage continued, "Do you know the story about the talking mirror? *Dice vera!*" When she pointed her stick at the mirror above the mantelpiece, Lavender and I both jumped up instinctively to look at the trick. All we saw was our own faces, but as we grinned at each other, a voice spoke *out* of the mirror.

"You're both pretty girls, to be sure, but you need to wash off the smell of the guinea-pigs and run combs through your hair. The older one needs to straighten her tee-shirt, and the little one should have chosen a more pastel shade of pink."

"That's not fair!" Lavender protested with a giggle. "We didn't know we would have a visitor!"

The reflection-Lavender didn't talk along with her. It just kept its mouth closed until the real Lavender straightened her tee-shirt, whereupon her reflection winked at her.

"What's going *on*?" asked Dad.

"Magic is going on," said Charity Burbage calmly. "I know you're surprised, Mr Brown. But this isn't a conjuring trick, and you must have noticed that Miss Brown is no ordinary girl. Mr and Mrs Brown, have you ever seen your daughter do anything unusual something that ordinary conjuring tricks or science couldn't possibly explain?"

"I have!" I suddenly interrupted. I whirled around from the mirror. "Mum, don't you remember that lady in the shop whose skirt was too long, when I was about five? I couldn't suppress my laughter and I was gurgling through my words. "Lavender sort of waved at her, and suddenly half her skirt vanished and it had turned into a mini. Everyone was staring, and the lady nearly fainted. Once her skirt was short, we saw she had great, big holes in her tights. Don't you remember?"

"I remember, all right!" said Mum. "It was the most extraordinary thing I ever saw! But Lavender didn't do it. She never touched that poor lady."

"Oh, yes, Lavender *did* do it!" My eyes were watering, but I tried to speak clearly. "I saw her, Mum. She *knew* she'd done it. After that, she said she would only ever do it for family members because doing it in public caused too much trouble. That's right, isn't it, Miss... Professor Burbage? Lavender does magic on clothes."

"And Hogwarts can train her to do other kinds of magic too," said Professor Burbage.

It was only then that it hit me. I had never really asked myself why Lavender had this knack with clothes; I told people that she had "clever fingers," but I had never thought of them as magical fingers. Yet I had lived with magic *real magic* of the fairy-tale kind for the whole of my life. My own sister was a witch!

"I want to go to magic school!" I said. "Am I a witch too?"

Now the stranger looked at me, really looked at me, and ran her eyes up and down me as if measuring my height. "You're not eleven yet, are you? If you have magical talent, Miss Jasmine, you'll be invited to Hogwarts when you're eleven. Can you alter clothes the way Miss Brown does?"

"No," I replied regretfully. "It never works for me. Only Lavender can do that kind of magic. It always seemed ordinary when she did it. Miss Burbage, can you do Sleeping Beauty a magic sleep or Rumpelstiltskin spinning straw into gold? What about Coppelia? Can you bring toys to life?"

She smiled gravely. "Brewing the magical sleep is a standard part of the syllabus, but spinning straw into gold would be extremely difficult. I believe the headmaster can do something along that line. But as for toys " She pointed her stick at a plush rag doll sitting decoratively on the window sill.

The doll immediately sprang to its feet, pirouetted across the carpet more gracefully than any marionette and landed on the coffee table in an arabesque. It perched on the tiny peach-carriage, which immediately neighed and wheeled away. It flew into the air and landed on the sideboard next to the fruit dish, where the doll waved at us.

Mum looked a little disconcerted until Professor Burbage reassured her: "The doll isn't alive, Mrs Brown. It stops moving as soon as I stop the spell."

Mum and Dad stared at one another helplessly. None of us had ever bargained for magic being real.

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My parents must have spent a long time discussing the situation, but I don't remember much about it. They sent Lavender and me outside to walk around the village.

"This is going to be such fun!" I said. "Do you think you'll learn to tell the future, Lav? Will you brew love-potions? Will you fly a broomstick? What do you think the uniform will be like?"

"Do you think Mum and Dad will even let me go?" asked Lavender. But her blue eyes were shining; she wasn't really worried about that. "I wonder if there are invisibility

spells? Will I need to buy a cat or could I use a guinea pig instead? How shall we *tell* people that I'm a witch?"

I tried to imagine Lavender in a black cloak and witch's hat, waving a magic wand and dropping newts into a cauldron, and I burst out laughing again.

Lavender was giggling too. "Jazz, you should see the look on your face!"

"Oh, dear..." I wiped my eyes. "Do you want to go to this magic school, Lav? Do you honestly think it's a real place?"

"It must be, because Professor Burbage is a real person. But will it mean giving up on doing ordinary things? Can I still be a vet or a dancer or a fashion designer if I go to this magic place?"

Suddenly I remembered everything I had ever heard about professional dancing, how it was a life of endless dedication and discipline, how you had to practise every day and plan your whole life around your dance routine. Then it wasn't funny any more. Some magic school that taught you to fix costumes would definitely interfere with that.

"I wouldn't go," I said. "You couldn't go to magic school *and* to a proper dancing academy. If you choose the magic school, you probably can't ever become a ballerina."

"But I don't want to be a ballerina," said Lavender.

"*What?* Would you really give up your chance of dancing just to learn conjuring tricks? But we've always wanted to dance!"

"No, Jazz, *you've* always wanted to dance. But I really only want to be a hobby dancer. I'd rather become a fashion designer, and it sounds as if this magic school could help me along."

I stared and stared at Lavender. Everyone said we looked so much alike, and we had always done everything together. But we weren't alike after all; Lavender wanted something entirely different. From now on we were going to have separate lives. I would never be invited to that magic school; and Lavender was somehow completely happy with a life that couldn't include ballet!

For a moment, the green hills towering over our village seemed vast and lonely.

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Our ballet exam results arrived, and I had passed Grade Four with distinction. Then the cat next door tortured one of our guinea pigs to death, and we were both broken-hearted. Then Lavender designed a new sun-dress, and we had to persuade Mum to buy the cottons and help us make them. Somewhere in the middle of all this activity, Mum and Dad had agreed that Lavender would go to Hogwarts.

Lavender received a couple of those owl-delivery letters from Professor Burbage. Yes, wizards really used owls to write to each other just like pigeon post.

*Dear Miss Brown,*

I truly appreciate your trouble in correcting my outfit, which is now ideal for my liaisons between Hogwarts School and Muggle families.

However, I have been advised that the new design still does not look correct in the street. People in London have been laughing at me and asking what sales gimmick my "singular outfit" represents. This is very bad, as I need to look as ordinary as possible in London. My goal is to be completely ignored because I look like any other Muggle.

Have you any suggestions?

Regards,

Charity Burbage

Lavender's reply was mainly in pictures, but her notes between the drawings read:

Dear Professor Burbage,

Oh, did you want to look ordinary? I never realised. Fancy wanting to look ordinary when you look so fabulous in costume!

People who go shopping in town in summer usually look like this [PICTURE]. But for winter it's more like this [PICTURE]. Businesswomen in offices try to look like this [PICTURE]. But teachers in schools are more like this [PICTURE]. My Mum looks like this [PICTURE] or this [PICTURE] because she works from home. Women who slop around at home at weekends look like this [PICTURE] but when they go out to parties, the dress is something like this [PICTURE].

I don't know why I drew all those pictures because I can't draw very well. I've enclosed a Marks & Spencer's catalogue. That's where ordinary women buy their clothes.

Lots of love,

Lavender Brown

Professor Burbage sent us a picture of herself in a Marks and Spencer's summer dress. It was a magical photograph: the picture-Professor waved at us and preened the dress, which was an unnaturally ordinary shade of blue. The note around the photograph said:

Dear Miss Brown,

I cannot thank you enough for your efforts! I visited Marks & Spencer's, where they were not entirely polite, for they laughed at my request to meet with Madam Mark or Madam Spencer. However, I bought three robes and I looked ordinary by the time I left the shop. I think it is all in order now.

Tell me when you intend to buy your school supplies, and I will meet you at the doorway of the Leaky Cauldron in Charing Cross Road.

Regards,

Charity Burbage

As Mum couldn't close the B&B over summer, Dad took a day off work. The drive from Keswick to Penrith was ordinary, for we did that three times a week for our dancing lessons, but we had never before made the three-hour train journey from Penrith to Euston. We had never thought we would visit London to buy magic supplies! When we arrived in Euston, we had to take the tube, which I'd always imagined as a kind of long escalator-tunnel that would squeeze us around London, but it turned out to be simply an underground train. When we climbed up to the surface, we were still in London, because London has more than one railway station.

Dad held each of us firmly by the hand as we marched along Charing Cross Road, but before I could properly notice where we were going, someone called out to Lavender, and Professor Burbage was standing in front of us! This time she was wearing a long robe and pointed hat, so she looked like a story-book witch, but she still had Lavender's spangles in her hair.

She seemed to be standing in front of a drain-pipe between a book shop and a record shop. Lavender ran up and then seemed to disappear into the drain-pipe, so Dad and I followed, and we saw that it wasn't quite a drain-pipe after all, but actually a doorway. Once we were through the door, we found we were inside some kind of café, but we couldn't explore because Professor Burbage was leading us to its back door and out to a plain brick wall. She could do more magic than just dress-alterations because when she knocked on the wall with a stick, a door opened from nowhere, and suddenly we were able to walk into a whole street!

I stared at Dad, who was more bewildered than I was, then at Lavender, who seemed completely at home. The magical street was cobbled, some of its buildings half-timbered, others bay-windowed in pale stone. The first shop was full of potions and powders. The second sold cauldrons and kettles. In the third, we could see a wizard channelling molten glass out of a cauldron full of sand. The fourth building was a lawyer's office.

"I suppose magic has to have its own places places you can only reach *with* magic," I hazarded.

"Of course," said Lavender. "Where do I go to buy my school clothes, Professor Burbage?"

"Madam Malkin's is this way," she said.

I glanced at Lavender, and we both giggled over the dressmaker's name. What kinds of people call themselves "Madam"?

Apparently working witches do. Madam Malkin was already measuring up one customer, a bored Indian teenager who was trying to keep his feet still on a small podium while his mother and sister guarded a pile of parcels by the window. Lavender ran straight up to the boy's sister.

"I love your *shalwar kameez!*" said Lavender.

"I love your sun-dress!" said the Indian girl.

"Where did you buy it?" they both asked together.

After that, they ignored everyone else. Even while the dressmaker was fitting them, they kept calling across to each other about clothes and giggling about hairstyles. The Indian mother was a jeweller, and Lavender wanted to know all about how wizards made jewellery. She was so absorbed in her new friend that she didn't even take much interest in the magical dressmaker, although I couldn't tear my eyes away. Madam Malkin wrapped magical measuring tapes around her customers without touching them, then draped them with black fabrics, which she could cut without scissors and sew without thread. She was like ten Lavenders. The new robes hung perfectly long before they were finished.

Dad wanted to finish the shopping quickly, but I wanted to explore all the wonderful shops in the magical street, and Lavender just wanted to follow her new friend. None of us had a choice, since we needed to follow Professor Burbage's directions. She was too fast for me and too slow for Dad, and she didn't care whether the Indian family came with us or not. The magical shops didn't accept normal money at all, so we also needed Professor Burbage to supply those heavy gold and silver coins; she managed the money exchange by tapping on Dad's credit card with her wand. She led us firmly from the wand shop to the astronomer's to the pharmacy, then back to the bookshop and cauldron supplier's ("best to buy the heavy stuff last"), so briskly that I could hardly remember what I had seen.

I remember that Lavender produced wonderful pink and mauve swirly clouds with her new wand, but the Indian girl made scarlet stars with hers.

I remember that the big telescope in the ceiling of the astronomer's shop could actually show us the surface of Mars, even though it was midday in summer, because the wizard knew how to charm his observatory into perpetual darkness.

I remember a toyshop full of wooden animals that moved around like mechanical toys, self-propelling frisbees and see-through babies' blocks with moving pictures in their centres... But we had to hurry past after only a glance, and there wasn't time to look at what other toys wizards made for their children.

I remember that Lavender nearly cried when the Indian family said they had now finished their shopping so they had to say goodbye to us.

I remember that the pharmacy smelled horrible, and the Winchester jars were full of squidgy things that we didn't want to touch. "You'll have to touch them at school, dearie," said the apothecary, and Lavender was nearly sick on the spot.

I remember a gadget shop full of boxes and buzzers and flashing lights, but there was no time to ask what the push-buttons did before we were whisked away down the street. We did pass a jeweller's, which at a glance looked just like an ordinary, non-magical jeweller's, but was it the same shop where the Indian mother worked?

The bookshop was full of musty old leather-bounds with no pictures. I don't like reading, so while Lavender searched through her school booklist, I pressed my face to the window, staring at the pet shop across the road. The furry animals in the large cages were neither cats nor dogs, but they were too large to be mice, so what kinds of pets did wizards own?

A shop assistant was helping Lavender, so Professor Burbage finally noticed me. "Muggles shouldn't visit the menagerie alone," she said. "Some of those animals are dangerous. Mr Brown, there isn't very much for Miss Jasmine to do in a bookshop. Shall we take her to the confectioner's?"

Choosing through the mountains of fudge, jelly slugs, mint humbugs and sherbets made me wish I could go to the magic school after all. But Dad was bored even with the sweet shop, so he hurried us away long before I had finished counting the lollipop flavours.

The cauldron shop was boring no better than an ironmonger's and Professor Burbage took forever to decide that the third cauldron met school regulations and the fifth scale-set wasn't faulty.

By the time Professor Burbage had helped us lug the heavy cauldron full of books onto the train and then mysteriously vanished into the underground crowds, I was glad that the shopping trip was over. Those wizards had made their fabulous, amazing shopping centre into something ordinary! As ordinary as Lavender herself!

The train had already pulled out of Euston before I remembered that we had actually come all the way to London, something we had talked about doing all our lives, and we hadn't visited Sadler's Wells I had so much wanted to look at the famous theatre, even if we couldn't afford to watch a performance there.

"Never mind," said Lavender. "They say it's quite an ordinary-looking building. Dad, can I go to Parvati's house next week? She says I can try on her saris."

"If you know how to fly there," said Dad. "I hope you realise that she lives in Birmingham."

"Dad, can we come back to Diagon Alley?" I asked. "I want to explore it properly. Today we didn't have time just to look at things."

"If you know how to open up that hole in the wall," said Dad. "Do you think it's the kind of place we Muggles can enter if we don't have a wizard with us?"

"Dad," I said suddenly, "what are we going to tell people when they ask why Lavender isn't going to Keswick School next term?"

We all stared at each other, trying to imagine how Grandma and Grandpa would react if we told them, "Lavender's gone to learn witchcraft at a school where they fly broomsticks and transform toads into toffee-apples." We kept staring, with none of us speaking, because it was a question that didn't have an answer, until in the end Lavender and I both started laughing again.

\* \* \* \* \*

On the first of September, we went to Grandma and Grandpa's for the Sunday roast.

"Grandma!" I shouted. "Grandma, you'll never guess what! Our concert is going to be *Coppelia*, and I have a solo!"

"What! Are you dancing Swanhilda herself?"

"No-o, but I am going to be one of the dolls. Grandma, it's the first time they've ever given a solo to a Grade Five student! And, Grandpa, that strawberry plant you gave us is growing, and I've found out that guinea pigs do eat strawberries."

It was ten minutes before I had calmed down enough for Grandma to bring the Yorkshire puddings out of the oven and for Grandpa to ask, "But where is Lavender today?"

I giggled and tried to give a calm, ordinary answer. "She's been spending a few days with her friend in Birmingham."

"That's quite a distance! Will she be home in time for school tomorrow?"

There was a fraction of silence before Mum replied, "Oh, didn't we tell you? Lavender isn't going to Keswick School after all. She won a scholarship to a boarding school in Scotland."

"Imagine that!" said Grandpa. "I didn't know our Lavender was so clever! When does she start out there?"

"Actually today. The family in Birmingham has three children at that school, so they've kindly offered to drop Lavender off too. It all seems to be working out really well."

"Imagine that!" repeated Grandpa. "But it must be hard for you, Jasmine, to watch your older sister have all the new clothes and adventures while you're left at home to feed the guinea pigs."

Hard for me? It wasn't like that at all! However would I explain to my grandparents how this extraordinary, fantastic magical world seemed so ordinary and natural for people like Lavender?

"Lavender seems very excited about it," I said, "but she's had to give up ballet. I hope she'll still feel right about that in a year or two. I wouldn't give up ballet for anything." No, not even for the amazing sweet shop and observatory in Diagon Alley; not even for the fascinating toy shop, pet shop and jeweller's that we hadn't quite had time to visit. Lavender would probably take me there next summer; and one visit each year should give me enough time to explore everything...

Grandma set the gravy boat on the table. "Dinner's ready. Will you carve, love? Jasmine, did you ever want to visit London? I was thinking I might take you down to Sadler's Wells at half-term to see *Swan Lake*."

# Revulsion

Chapter 2 of 11

Lisa Turpin's stepfather is rather like Uncle Vernon, only not quite so charming.

*The wizards represent all that the true "muggle" most fears: They are plainly outcasts and comfortable with being so. Nothing is more unnerving to the truly conventional than the unashamed misfit!*

J. K. Rowling to Margaret Weir: "Of magic and single motherhood," *Salon*, 1999.

## CHAPTER TWO

### Revulsion

by Trevor Middleton

If I'm honest, I knew about it after only six months. I married Carol in the summer, and by winter it was obvious. I didn't face up to it back then; it didn't seem important. Due to faulty wiring in our street, we had several evenings of black-outs, and by the third power cut, Carol and I were too busy groaning about the incompetent council to look at what was sitting in front of us.

What was sitting in front of us was Carol's daughter Lisa. "I don't like the dark," she complained. "Turn on the light, Mum!"

"Love, there inn't any light," Carol tried to explain. "We don't 'ave electricity."

There was a thud and a scrape as Lisa dragged a chair across the kitchen towards the light switch. She padded up on top of it, and *SNAP!*

There was light.

The light was dazzling, at least two hundred watts. We blinked and batted, and Lisa remarked, "Too much!" Before our eyes, the light slowly turned down to a comfortable brightness.

It was just luck that the power returned at the moment Lisa flicked the switch. But for the rest of the winter, we couldn't convince her that the electric company sometimes cut the power. She firmly believed that light was caused by light-switches, and no amount of scientific talk about electric currents would convince her otherwise. Whenever she'd had enough of the dark, she would go and play with a light-switch. She persevered for such long periods that in the end, she was always rewarded by the return of the power.

I should have known back then.

We're not very good at explaining science anyway. We're plain people: we left school after our C.S.E.s. I trained as a carpet-layer, selling folks the durable and laying it down firm so they'll walk on safe, smooth floors in their homes and offices. Later I branched out to hanging curtains and blinds, solid ones that keep out the noise and the light. I'm good at what I do and I don't cheat my customers; but trying to explain invisible stuff is all too fancy for me.

"Lisa's only four years old," Carol reminded me. "There's no point in trying to teach 'er difficult stuff like electricity."

I never knew what to say to kids. I didn't know any four-year-olds before I met Lisa, who had been part of the package when I married Carol. Lisa had wide, blue eyes in a long, pale face and she seemed like no trouble at all. Back then, I had no idea how one kid might be different from another. I agreed with Carol that Lisa was bound to learn how the world works sooner or later because everyone does.

That's what I told myself at the time.

\* \* \* \* \*

We Middletons have lived in Yorkshire for centuries, and all of us are plain. We say what we think with no beating around the bush. We don't believe in God. We don't believe in any superstitions at all. We're practical sorts: those who left farming have taken on skilled trades, plumbers and carpenters and the like. When I married Carol Southwick, we settled in a plain two-up-two-down terrace in Clifton, York. Tim was born a year later, and Jason two years after Tim. Carol worked a couple of shifts a week at Rowntree's, manufacturing the famous fruit pastilles, but mostly she was busy with the kids.

Jason collected matchbox cars. He saved his pocket money to pick them up at charity shops, and cars were all he ever wanted for Christmas. He said he was going to be a racing driver when he grew up, but more likely, he'd be an auto mechanic.

Tim was good at drawing. He drew plain things, dogs and cats, ships and trains, telephones and electric drills. His teacher gave him a gold star for his picture of a crane trolley, but then she asked him why he didn't draw anything creative, such as a dwarf or a dragon.

"Dragons don't exist," said Tim. "I don't draw stuff that inn't real."

Lisa is still known as Lisa Turpin. We could have easily pretended to the neighbours that Phil Turpin never existed because he never sent money and he never tried to see Lisa. But we didn't: we told the plain truth to anyone who asked. Carol used to be married to someone else; she walked out on him because his drinking made him violent; she got a quick divorce two years before she met me. There was no point in hiding those facts. One day Lisa might need to know about Phil for legal or medical reasons.

Carol and I treated all the children alike. There wasn't a lot of extra cash, but we forked out for school excursions and birthday parties, and I took them to football matches

weekends. Lisa didn't always want to come, but that's a female thing: I always offered to take her, no matter how tight the money was. We organised fair turns on who chose the video and we served out fair shares of the sweets. I didn't thump any of the kids without a good reason, not more than three or four times each in their whole childhoods. We did make Lisa do more chores than the boys, washing up and hanging laundry and so on; but she was older; and she didn't complain about it any more than another kid. I did right by Lisa Turpin.

It was Lisa who never caught on to how to act normal. No matter how plain we set the example, she had to do things a different way. One time I caught her spilling a tube of silver glitter. It swirled all around her, not just a few specks, but a huge cloud of dust, running dizzily round and round her, growing larger all the time.

"Stop that!" I barked, and all the glitter instantly vanished. It didn't drop to the lino for Lisa to sweep up; it just disappeared into thin air.

She had this thing about air. She never blew up a balloon in her mouth; she'd just wave it around, and it would catch a blast of air in one sweep, swelling up big and round. Once she even did it when Tim was in tears over a punctured football. Lisa picked up the ball and sort of pressed, and before you could say "soccer," the football hissed up tight and full.

I'm strictly the TV type myself, but Carol and Lisa both liked a good read. That's what made our boys so well-rounded: they grew up with the example of both sport and study, and they enjoyed both. Lisa, who took good care of her little brothers, would borrow picture books from the local library and spend hours reading to them. Tim liked a story about zoo animals. He sat spellbound when Lisa read:

*"The lion rushed out of 'is cage! Roar!*

*The tiger jumped out of 'is cage! Grrr!*

*The giraffe raced out of 'is cage! Maaaa!*

*The zebra sprinted out of 'is cage! Yap-yap!*

*The elephant marched out of 'is cage! Ta-ra-ra-aaa!*

I entered the room just as the animals were running across the open book. A lion, a tiger, a giraffe, a zebra and an elephant leapt off the page and ran across the paper and even onto the arm of the settee before vanishing! It must have been some kind of pop-up effect, but it was so realistic that it was repellent.

Later on, I looked through the book and saw that it had no three-dimensional pop-ups at all, only ordinary, two-dimensional drawings. So perhaps Lisa had found some coloured paper and cut out the little pop-ups herself.

I cringed to think on such deceit. I couldn't quite take to Lisa as a daughter, and the reason was her sneaky habits. She wouldn't do things the natural way; things around her were never quite normal.

That's what I told myself at the time.

\* \* \* \* \*

A couple of years later, when Jason was finally out of nappies, we took a camping holiday to Whitby. Carol wanted to stop off at Helmsley Castle, although it was only a heap of crumbling stone.

"It's 'istory," said Carol. "We can see 'ow people used to live."

"Yes, but they don't live there *now*, do they?" said Tim.

"We can imagine it," said Lisa, stopping on the drawbridge to leaf through the tourists' brochure. "It says that Walter t' Woodpecker built the first castle out of wood, but Sir Robert de Roos built the stone one that's there now."

Someone did race over the drawbridge at that moment, someone dressed up in a nose-guard helmet and chain-mail. Following him, a horseman cantered into the guard-house waving a sword. Tim and Jason suddenly became interested.

"They 'ave live actors," I said. "Let's go and look for 'em."

"... and the next baron married a Scottish princess," Lisa continued. By a strange coincidence, the next actor to trip into the gatehouse was a woman, a redhead with long, trailing sleeves and a coronet on her head. We followed her, with Lisa still reading the brochure out loud.

"In the sixteenth cent'ry, Sir Edward Manners modernised the chamber block..."

As if on cue, a man with a ruff and slashed doublet appeared out of the shadows.

"Excuse me," I said to him. He ignored me, so I spoke up. "Excuse me, we want to see the show. Where is it?"

The man gave an elaborate bow while his pointed beard nearly touched his knees, and then faded back into the shadows while he had gone. The only actor left in the gatehouse was wearing a periwig and holding an architect's plan.

"... 'oo, early in the eighteenth cent'ry, built a stately 'ome in the park, but left the ruins of the castle standing," Lisa finished.

Most horrifying of all, Tim shouted, "Do it again, Lisa! Make those pictures walk out of the page again!"

Lisa turned back to the first page and recited: "The first 'Elmsley Castle was built of wood by Walter t' Woodpecker." As soon as the words left her mouth, the first actor, the one in the nose-guard helmet, marched back into the gatehouse.

"That's enough!" I said sharply, snatching the guide off Lisa. It was a children's glossy, full of cartoon pictures of the historical persons. Walter the Woodpecker, Sir Robert de Roos, Princess Isobel and the poncy Sir Edward Manners were caricatured there, all dressed exactly like the live actors, just as if they really had escaped from the page and come to life.

It was freaky.

"Dad, they're not alive!" Lisa pleaded. "They're just moving pictures, like in a video. They won't *talk* to yer!"

"Stop calling me Dad!" I barked at her. Then I shook myself. Of course the castle-people had dressed their actors the same way they had drawn their cartoons. They were putting on a show; they wanted us to pay attention. "All right, let's look for that show."

Although we wandered around Helmsley Castle for the next two hours, admiring the kitchen, ramparts and grounds, we didn't find out where the show was and we didn't see any more dressed-up actors. A guide in normal clothes even tried to tell us that they never had actors, but it was a great idea, and they'd consider doing it if funds ever permitted. Lisa was subdued and did not try to read the brochure again.

We arrived in Whitby, pegged up the tent, bought fish and chips and strolled along the beach. By the time we put the children into their sleeping bags, Jason was already asleep, and Tim was excited; but Lisa was almost tearful.

"Stay with me, Mum. I don't like the dark!"

"Don't be silly, love. Settle down and go to sleep."

"But I'm afraid of the dark!"

Lisa clutched at her mother, but Carol, after telling her she was a big girl now, disengaged herself and came out to boil a kettle on the camping stove. Before the water was hot, something behind us lit up, as if a neighbour was shining a powerful torch. The light grew brighter, and Jason started to wail. I looked up and saw that the light was coming from inside our own tent. Did the kids have a torch?

I dashed inside, almost dazzled by the strong light, and grabbed for Jason, who was now screaming in pain.

"Turn off that bloody torch!" I snapped.

"It isn't a torch, Dad!" said Tim. "Lisa's making the light!"

The light, now at its maximum brightness, did seem to be surrounding Lisa, who was happily sitting up in her sleeping-bag.

"You've woken Jason," I said. "We were asleep while you started fooling around." Feeling sick, I lunged at Lisa's sleeping bag, unzipped it and threw back the corner to reveal Lisa's blue pyjamas.

There was nothing that looked like a torch. There was nothing else at all.

Carol came in and started to soothe Jason back to sleep. I forced down my nausea, lowered my voice and shook Lisa sternly.

"Where is the torch?"

Lisa started to cry, and the light faded away as she sobbed. "I haven't got a torch, Dad. I didn't do it on purpose!"

"Tim," I persisted, "what did Lisa do?"

"I didn't see, Dad. It was dark! The light came on, but I don't know how. Look, it's going out now."

I left Carol to settle them and went to investigate behind the tent, just in case the light had been caused by a camper with a lamp. We decided in the end that must have been it, as we never did find anything like a torch in our kids' possessions. But the weird light had been uncannily centred on Lisa.

A week of camping in cramped quarters pushed me far too close to Lisa far too often. She was moody; it seemed she couldn't behave naturally unless she was miserable. Why couldn't she dump her weirdness in the dustbin and play happily like everyone else's daughter?

After that holiday in Whitby, I stopped pretending that Lisa was normal. I didn't say anything to anyone, but I knew in my own mind that there was something weird about Lisa.

\* \* \* \* \*

Light was worse than air. It was no good telling Lisa to replace a broken light bulb; she'd only touch the broken one, and it would start shining again, so suddenly that she'd burn her fingers. She hadn't even got the sense to check that the switch was off before she started!

A year or so after Whitby, Lisa brought some glass prisms home from school. They were her science project, but she didn't do much writing because Tim and Jason were completely fascinated by the diffraction effect. ("Diffraction" was Lisa's new word for the day. We all learned it.)

"I want a great, big rainbow, all over the room!" said Jason.

Lisa tilted the prism, trying to maximise the image on the whitewash, and suddenly the rainbow seemed to jump right off the prism! That trick of the light was beyond tricky: there was a huge *whoosh* of colour, and it didn't land on the wall at all; a great band of red, orange, yellow, green, blue, indigo and violet, as large as a playground slide, was straddling the middle of our living room!

The live rainbow seemed to suck the stability out of my guts and leech the colour out of every object in the room. All the children ran into the middle of it, Lisa dropping the prism on the way, and suddenly they were wide bands of red, green, indigo all over the kids, because the live rainbow was the only visible colour in the room.

My head was spinning painfully but I managed to order, "Stop that!"

"But it's just light, Dad," said Lisa. "It isn't hurting you!"

"It's unnatural," I said, staring pointedly at the glass triangle on the now-colourless carpet.

Lisa stole a glance at my furious face, and the rainbow abruptly vanished.

"I want another one!" said Jason.

Lisa picked up the prism, still not scientific enough to acknowledge that there *shouldn't* have been any diffraction without any light-source, and positioned it between the window and the wall in ordinary scientific fashion.

I stopped thinking about it. I knew that unnatural, sickening things happened around Lisa; but I reckoned that if we never talked about them, they might go away.

\* \* \* \* \*

I was out at work when Lisa's letter arrived. I arrived home to find the whole family excited over a sheet of yellow parchment. Old-fashioned, lime-green writing announced that Lisa was a witch who had been invited to study at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry.

"Very funny," I sneered. "Throw it out. Those jokes are sick."

Lisa snatched at her letter and raced upstairs. Tim, still bursting with agitation, persisted: "But, Dad, an owl brought it! It flew right into our garden and stopped over Lisa and held out its claw. It won't go away while she's taken the letter. It was a magic owl!"

"Well-trained, more like. Haven't you ever heard of pigeon post? Carol, love, what's for dinner?"

A few days later, we were forced to think about it again. A posh lady rang our doorbell, saying she was a professor and she'd come to talk about Miss Turpin's letter.

"You must have been surprised," she said, "but I assure you, Miss Turpin is a genuine witch."

Before we had a chance to say we didn't believe in all that stuff, and the so-called professor would have to play her tricks on someone else, Lisa clattered down the stairs, calling a cheery, "Come in! I'm Lisa are yer the person 'oo sent me that letter?"

Carol didn't do a thing to stop the intruder, who swept through into our living room and declared that Hogwarts was a real school that really had invited Lisa to be a student. The professor made a display of conjuring tricks that would have fixed her a permanent job in York's Theatre Royal, or maybe even in *New York*. She made our china ornaments tap-dance and she changed the colours of all the cushions. She made a kitchen jug fly through the air and she made a bowl of oranges squeeze themselves out into the jug (no knife to cut them open; the juice simply squeezed through the peel) to make orangeade. I was too queasy to tell her to stop. She spoke to the carpet, and a cloud of dust rose up and flew out of the window, leaving the carpet perfectly clean and my head dizzy with suffocation.

But it wasn't conjuring. If you saw it on telly, you'd say it could only be done by trick photography. Seeing it live was like seeing the end of the natural universe; it was so disgustingly unnatural.

Swallowing my bile, I asked, "So do yer know 'ow to cure it?"

"Cure what? Magic?"

"It's against nature. It's wrong. Do yer know a way to set it right?"

"Magic doesn't go away," she said. "It isn't an illness. Miss Turpin needs to learn to channel her powers, and we can teach her that."

"Yer mean she's allus going to be sick-minded? Is ar Lisa allus going to do unnatural stuff forever?"

"Miss Turpin is always going to be a witch."

"Lisa can get the pictures out of books!" Jason told her.

"I expect you mean something like this," said the professor. She spoke weird words, and photographs suddenly hopped up out of the newspaper, dancing across the room and almost talking to one another, but vanishing when they reached the opposite wall.

I stared in horror. The boys looked as if they were playing a game. Carol looked as if she wanted to pay cash for a few easy-housework spells. Lisa looked as if she had the keys to Fairyland. We would never get this unnatural stuff out of Lisa, but we might be able to get it out of my house.

"Enough fooling," I said. "Lisa 'as to go that school."

"Dad!" She threw herself into my arms happily. "Ta so much! I "

Shuddering at her touch, I pushed her away. *I'm not her Dad. Thank goodness.* "Yer a freak," I told her. "Yer belong with the other freaks, out of ar sight. Yer need to go that school and keep yer dirty business away from the rest of us."

She stopped short as if I'd slapped her face. Then she burst into tears and buried her head in the professor's shoulder. She didn't do the natural thing and go to her mother; she immediately turned to the unnatural stranger.

After we'd pushed the unnatural stranger out of my house, Carol and I gave out to each other furiously.

"How could yer say that to Lisa?" she demanded. "She can't 'elp what she is! Yer din't 'ave to make it sound as if being a witch stops 'er being a family member!"

"Yer've been keeping secrets," I accused Carol. "Are *you* a witch? Is anyone else in yer family?"

"No! Nobody! The professor-person said it dun't allus run in families. Lisa'll remember for the rest of 'er life that 'er Dad called 'er a freak because of summat she can't 'elp!"

"I'm not 'er father! Nowt so disgusting ever 'appened to a Middleton! This unnatural stuff din't spring up out of nowhere, so if it din't come from the Southwicks, then it came from Lisa's father!"

I grabbed the telephone directory and thumbed through the Ts. "Where *are* the Turpins, then?"

As it happened, Phil's parents were still living at their old address. I made Carol ring them and ask where he was. Given she had spent the last ten years avoiding him, I was slightly surprised at how naïvely they told her his new address in Hull, but it was only ten minutes later that I was in the car with Phil Turpin's address in my pocket. I couldn't be there in less than an hour and a half, but there was no chance of cooling off on the journey. I wanted some answers and I was fuming even more furiously when I finally landed on his doorstep.

Phil Turpin was large-framed, ruddy-faced and shocking-blond; he reminded me of someone, yet it wasn't Lisa. He looked annoyed when he realised who I was, but he thought on his manners and invited me in.

"I've come about Lisa," I said. "There's been some trouble."

"So yer after money, is that right?"

"No!" I exclaimed, then cursed myself for not saying yes after all. "Not money. We need to know about 'er family. It dun't seem to be 'er mother, so I need to ask about the Turpins."

"Oh? Family illnesses, yer mean? Is Lisa sick?"

Lisa was sick-minded, all right! But if I said so to her father, he wouldn't admit to a family connection. "Yer could say so. 'As anyone in the Turpins ever done odd... wrong... be'aviour?"

Turpin frowned. "Was that a dig at *me*, Middleton? I know I din't always do right by Carol, but I'm off the drink now and I've never been in trouble since. I've 'eld a job in the oil refinery eight year; married again, two sons. Is Lisa turning out bad?"

"Not *that* way. No trouble at school. But she's... well... Did a Turpin ever act a bit... er... off-normal?"

"I certainly 'aven't!" he retorted. "But if yer mean mental troubles... 'Ad an aunt once 'oo was proper miserable for no reason. They shut 'er up in a loony 'ospital, but she offed 'erself anyway. Wait, though, she was only related by marriage. She passed nowt down to Lisa."

"That's more the sort of thing," I said. "But Lisa inn't loony. They've accused 'er of... doing *magic*. A witch."

"What?" Turpin burst out laughing. "Do yer believe in witches? Go on, pull the other one. My daughter inn't a witch because witches don't exist."

"Was anyone in yer family 'appen an ancestor ever accused of witchcraft?" I pressed.

He switched off the laugh and stood up, obviously meaning to show me to the door. "Apperyer the one wi' mental troubles, Middleton. The Turpins 'ave been farming in Yorkshire since the Dark Ages. We're plain folk 'oo say what we think wi' no beating around the bush and we don't 'ave superstitions. Yer can check the old records if yer've time to waste; look all yer like for TURPIN, sometimes written THORFINN. But yer'll see that no Turpin was ever accused of superstitious stuff, not even in the day when folk believed in witches. We're too plain; folks allus knew it can't be the Turpins."

As I was leaving the house, his second wife appeared on the stairs. She gave me a shock. Although she was a brunette, her face looked startlingly like Carol's. But it was only as I drove away from the Turpins' that I realised where I had seen Phil Turpin's face before.

Apart from the colouring, it was nearly identical to the face I saw every day in my shaving mirror.

\* \* \* \* \*

For the next five weeks, Lisa crept around the house quietly, giving me reproachful glances and not daring to speak a word. Carol kept close to Lisa, and I kept the boys away from both of them. I wondered how I could ever have tried to be a father to someone like Lisa. Anyone who *wanted* to be a witch didn't belong in our family.

Lisa went to the freaks' boarding school. I told the neighbours that she'd gone to live with her Dad. The family learned not to talk about Lisa in front of me but they never really accepted that she had gone, for I often heard them mention her when they thought I couldn't hear. Sometimes the natural postman brought Carol letters in Lisa's handwriting; and sometimes the letters were delivered by those unnatural trained owls. If the letter came by owl, I wouldn't let Carol read it to the boys.

It wasn't too bad as long as Lisa was out of sight, but she came home every summer.

"I'm not allowed to do magic out of school," she assured us.

But Lisa didn't need to perform actual magic. Even the sight of her face reminded me that she was one *of those* people, someone who *could* do magic, and I would break out into a cold sweat.

I suggested that we might send her to stay with the Turpins, but they didn't want her; I must have let on too much that she wasn't normal. So we sent her to Carol's family for the summer, or I made excuses to be out of town myself. That helped, but the problem didn't go away. However much I stepped around Lisa Turpin, she *was* my wife's daughter, and sooner or later, I always had to meet her face to face.

"We might not understand magic very well," said Carol, "but Lisa's still me daughter."

"And she's ar sister!" chimed in Tim.

"But she inn't normal," I argued.

"She can't 'elp that."

"And I can't 'elp 'ow I feel about abnormality!"

It was no good. Carol wouldn't see reason; she had far too much sympathy, and the boys were learning her softness. Quarrels broke out, even without anyone mentioning Lisa's name. Home became a mine-pit where one false word led to a pitched battle. I went to work for a rest and I began to work longer and longer hours. My workmates were all normal, and the new receptionist was gorgeous. She was childless, too.

Long story short, Carol threw me out. She screamed it was because of the receptionist, but it was probably because of Lisa. The divorce courts, with their usual injustice, gave Carol half the savings, all the furniture and all the kids. You'd think she'd be glad to keep Lisa and give me the boys, but the only question before the court psychologist was whether I'd even be allowed access rights. I've never been violent, so I did win that much. But access visits are still quite strained, and I don't know how much longer we'll be keeping them up. Tim and Jason still think of Carol's house as their real home and Lisa as a real sister.

Nevertheless, there's no returning. I've started again with my new woman. I want a normal family now.

**A/N 1.** *Phil Turpin never knew that his grandfather's grandfather had been the brother of Samuel Turpin, a Muggle-born wizard. Samuel changed his surname back to its original Viking form, Thorfinn, in order to impress the pure-blood witch whom he wished to marry. Their great-granddaughter, Brunhilda Thorfinn, married Reginald Rowle, and the only child of this union was the famous Death Eater, Thorfinn Rowle.*

*The magical gene was carried invisibly down five generations of Turpin Muggles. Only when Phil Turpin married Carol Southwick, who also happened to carry the magical gene, could magical offspring like Lisa be produced.*

*Lisa Turpin was good at etymology. Although she did not know exactly how she was related to Thorfinn Rowle, she correctly guessed that there must be some kind of connection, especially as they had similar colouring and bone-structure. During Lord Voldemort's brutal persecution of the Muggle-borns in autumn 1997, Lisa's claim to be kin to Thorfinn Rowle saved her life.*

**A/N 2.** Many thanks to **TDU** for the beta-read. Only a native speaker can work with this kind of precision.

## Recognition

*Chapter 3 of 11*

Justin Finch-Fletchley's older brother recognises that Justin's place in the world will be very different from his own. But can their mother accept how *extremely* different Justin is destined to be?

*My name was down for Eton, you know, I can't tell you how glad I am I came here instead. Of course, mother was slightly disappointed, but since I made her read Lockhart's books I think she's begun to see how useful it'll be to have a fully trained wizard in the family...*

## CHAPTER THREE

### Recognition

by Hon. Roland Finch-Fletchley

The young woman in unique costume was wandering around the East Wing of the Old Hall, apparently looking for a bridge across the moat.

"Good morning, madam," I said, averting my eyes from her conical hat. "Can I help you?"

"I'm looking for the front door," she replied. "I didn't realise there was more than one house at this address. I'm looking for Mr Justin Finch-Fletchley."

Justin held out his hand. "Pleased to meet you, madam. I am Justin, and this is my brother Roland. Nobody lives in the Old Hall any more, so there is only one house really."

She shook his hand. "I am Professor Charity Burbage. Thank you so much for answering our letter. No Muggle-born has done that for ten years."

"You're welcome," said Justin, who knows very well that one should answer letters promptly. "I'm a little surprised that my reply reached you. I didn't expect owls to be so... trustworthy."

I had no idea what was going on. Ignoring a swan that was squawking at her vast handbag, Professor Burbage gravely told Justin, "Our owls are extremely trustworthy and accurate; they can be sent anywhere in the world. So tell me about yourself, Mr Finch-Fletchley. Would you like to come to our school?"

"Yes, Professor," said Justin. "It sounds amazing."

"I shall need to discuss this with your parents. Are they home?"

"Mother should be in the house. I believe Father is in the stables." Justin pulled out his mobile phone and asked Father to come up to the house. "The real front door is on this side, Professor Burbage." He led the way along the moat, around behind the Old Hall, which is a National Trust treasure but uninhabitable, past the Elizabethan herb gardens and down the wide driveway to the double front door of the New Hall, where we have lived for the last three hundred years.

"By the way, how do I address your parents? Is it 'Lord and Lady Finch-Fletchley'?"

"Our mother is actually 'Lady Eleanor'," I said, although the Mater isn't at all the sort of person who takes offence when strangers address her as "Mrs".

We showed Professor Burbage into the drawing room, where Mother was busy at the Macintosh, converting old photograph albums to digital copy. A heavy footfall on the back-stairs told us that Father was on his way, so we retreated up to our sitting room on the second storey.

"So what was all that about?" I asked Justin. "How do you know that woman, and why does she want to meet our family?"

"I don't know her," said Justin. "Three days ago, an owl trained like a courier-pigeon brought me this. At the time I thought it was a joke."

He brought a letter out of his escritoire, the high-quality yellow parchment printed with a childish lime-green script. It did indeed look like a joke: an absurd coat of arms advertised an institution named "Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry," and the brief letter invited Justin to become a pupil there.

"Even jokes deserve an answer," he said, "and I also thought it might be some kind of charity drive. So I wrote a cordial request for more information. But I wonder why it was addressed to me? It's Mother who does the charity work around here."

"Perhaps they want you as a kind of mascot. Did you notice its motto?" Justin has only a basic level of Latin, so I translated for him. "'Never tickle a sleeping dragon.' That's certainly an odd motto for a charity. Perhaps we should not take this too seriously."

We began to wish we had been invited to remain in the drawing-room, simply to find out what this was all about! It was half an hour before Justin's phone rang again, asking us to go down to join our parents.

"This is very interesting," Father greeted us. "Professor Burbage says Justin is a wizard. Did you know that, Justin?"

"No, Father," said Justin, but I suddenly wondered if this was completely truthful.

"This is not a joke," said Father, "and we are not talking about conjuring-tricks or amateur dramatics. Professor Burbage has just demonstrated to your mother and me that she is a witch, and she tells us that Justin is a wizard. She asks if we have ever noticed any incidences of Justin's performing magic."

Suddenly I did remember something something so extraordinary that *it must* have been magic but I waited for Justin or Mother to say it first. Neither spoke. Justin was trying to hold his fidgeting; finally he looked up.

"Father, I do remember a very hot day, a few years ago, when an elderly tourist at the Old Hall was desperate for a glass of water, and there simply wasn't any to be had. I felt it would take far too long to trek back to the kitchen in all the heat, and while I was complaining to myself, I suddenly found I was holding a tumbler full of ice-cold water. It felt so natural that I just handed it over to the lady without thinking about it. But after the tourists had moved on, the tumbler melted away, as if it had never been there."

Professor Burbage and Father both nodded, as if they had been expecting a story like that, but Mother was sitting very still, not altogether happy.

Father stood up and shook Professor Burbage by the hand. "Professor, we'd like to purchase one of your trained owls. It would make a wonderful pet for Justin, and we'll use it to send you a final answer by next Wednesday. What is the most convenient way to pay you?"

She nodded. "I recommend a tawny. They blend with the natural landscape because their claws are large enough to hide the messages well. If you have a credit card, sir, a tap from my wand now will ensure the transfer of the money at the moment the owl reaches your window."

Mother looked horrified at this suggestion, but Father calmly brought out his gold card and allowed Professor Burbage to tap it. Then before we could even offer to show her out, she said, "Thank you for your time, Lord Finch-Fletchley and Lady Eleanor. It was lovely to meet you, Mr Finch-Fletchley and Mr Justin. I await your owl," and then vanished into thin air!

After a second of startled silence, Father's first words were, "Eleanor, are you not happy about this?"

"Am I happy about a threat to Justin's future on *this* scale? I should say not!"

Father, Justin and I all tried to interrupt at once. Father held up his hand and indicated that Mother should speak.

"Justin is to go to Eton in September," she said. "He has been down for Eton since the day he was born. Eton is a respectable school that will prepare him for anywhere he wishes to go and anything he wants to do. Bernard, we shouldn't change a solid plan like that without a really excellent reason. And we don't have an excellent reason. We have a stranger who has made a wild, left-of-centre, completely ludicrous suggestion. We can't visit Hogwarts or meet its headmaster in advance; we can't even read a prospectus or collect references. We have no absolute proof that Hogwarts even exists! The idea that we should take any of this seriously is the last word in absurd."

Put like that, Mother had a point. I met all kinds of people at Eton, and they all benefited from its first-rate education. Justin couldn't go wrong there. Why were we even thinking about sending him to a place that couldn't give him A levels, wasn't going to prepare him for University and might not even exist?

Yet the idea of sending Justin off to become a wizard had seemed so *natural*.

I asked: "Does Justin know where he wants to go? Justin, do you know what you want to do when you grow up?"

"I want to help people," he said, because Pater is very involved in charity-work. "And I want to do something for England." Pater used to be in the army, and both parents are now involved in local politics. "I'd also like to fly." He knows that I plan to join the R.A.F. "And I'm interested in science. But I've no idea how that all comes together." He was only eleven; how should he know?

"Justin," said Mother, "do you understand how Eton can help you? It's more than a school; it's a whole culture. It's said that Prince William will be going there a couple of years behind you. Do you understand what it means to be born to Finch Hall?"

"Oh, yes," said Justin calmly. "I understand that I'm a second son."

We were all shocked into utter silence. For the first time, our parents looked almost offended.

Our family has lived at Finch for around forty generations. In the days of King Alfred, our ancestors were technically thanes, as we owned seven hides of land on this estate. We survived the Norman Conquest by accepting our demotion; we swore fealty to our new overlords and served them as loyal franklins. When, soon after Magna Carta, the Norman baron fell upon hard times, it was a Finch who paid off his debts and married his daughter, and within twenty years, we had taken over the manor. The oldest part of the Hall dates from the time of King Henry III, who conferred the Finch arms and title. We survived the Black Death and made our wealth out of sheep. We built east and west wings out of stone. We survived the Wars of the Roses and built up our estate through purchase and marriage. We survived the Reformation, despite printing Coverdale Bibles in the attics and hiding a Jesuit priest in the wainscot. (We are not partisan; we favour justice.) Around 1600, when the Finch line was reduced to a single heiress, we survived the dearth of heirs male, for Baroness Finch married Sir Geoffrey Fletchley, who successfully applied to Charles I to appropriate the title, combine their names and quarter their arms. It was Sir Geoffrey who built the "new", classical-style buildings, placing them behind the Old Hall and leaving all the mediaeval buildings intact; so we even survived modern architecture. We have survived enclosures (but spawned a couple of abolitionists), the Industrial Revolution (we bred five suffragettes) and the Second World War (although the stables were bombed). Pater is the fourteenth Baron Finch-Fletchley. We have always been here.

"Justin!" exclaimed Mother in horror. "How can you say such a thing? Who taught you to care whether you were born first or second or seventeenth?"

"It was one of the tourists. When we were about nine and five, Roland and I were following Father around a guided tour. I heard one tourist say, 'Aren't those curly-haired brothers sweet?' and her friend replied, 'They are the Baron's own sons. He has an heir and a spare.' I think that's the time I realised that Roland would inherit Finch Hall and be landed, while I... would do something else. Whatever sorts of things the unlanded adults do to earn a living, I'd do too, because I'm only the spare."

Mother was close to tears. I could see her calculating whether we should close Finch Hall to tourists and let the National Trust restrictions go hang. "What a vulgar thing to say in your hearing! What a vulgar thing to *think!* Justin, you are not the spare; you are our son."

"I know," said Justin. "But that's about family. We're talking about one's place in the world and whether culture matters. Among our sorts of people, the firstborn is special, and his place in society is obvious. But it isn't so clear what a second son should do, is it? There's no obvious place for a second son."

Father patted him on the head. "You've no need to decide on your future today, Justin. You don't ever have to make a final decision, because you can make a career-change at any time in your life, and Finch Hall will always be your home, as long as you live. But your mother's right about one thing: Eton would prepare you for any of the career options you mentioned."

"Of course it would," said Justin. "But it won't prepare me to be a wizard. And magic doesn't go away. Since I'll always be a wizard, does this change our plans?"

I glanced at Mother and saw that she had no intention of denying the reality of magic. She had good reason to know better.

Father had less reason, yet he said, "Agreed. Since we now know that magic's real, it's a factor we have to take into account. As Justin is a wizard, we have to allow for that when we decide his future." Father is like that. He is easy-going and interested in everything. Magic now looked really interesting to him, so he wanted to know all about it. But he was never going to overrule Mother; maintaining harmony at home meant too much to him.

"Yes, magic is a factor in Justin's life," Mother conceded. "But so is Finch Hall. We can't escape that either. Would we send Justin to one of those rough London comprehensives where they throw their teachers out of windows and can't be bothered with the multiplication table?"

"No-one has suggested "

"Of course not. No-one *would* suggest sending him among people so different from himself. He'd be bullied for his accent and sponged off for his money; and a school like that couldn't prepare him for university, parliament, the armed forces, business or anything else he might want to do. But can't you see, Bernard, that it's even *more* ridiculous to send him to Hogwarts? Those magical people have a whole culture of their own, and it's a culture about which Justin knows nothing. He'd be even more of an outsider there than at the rough London comprehensive, and he'd finish Hogwarts even less prepared for the real world."

"There didn't seem to be anything *wrong* with the wizarding culture," Father temporised.

"Things need not be wrong because they are different," said Mother, "but it must be extraordinarily difficult for a person who wasn't born into a culture of magic to adapt to it. Justin doesn't need that kind of stress: he'll be happier with his own kind."

"But, Mother," said Justin, "those wizards *are* my kind, just as much as the Eton boys are my kind. Don't you see? I'm both. If I went to Eton, I'd always have to hide the magic part of me; but if I went to Hogwarts, I probably wouldn't have to hide Finch Hall."

I could see no end of reasons why it might not be as simple as Justin expected, but some of what he was saying made sense.

"I can see how this would be a difficult decision if it happened to Roland," Justin finished. "But it didn't, and *am* a second son. Since I have to choose something, why wouldn't it be a sound career choice and suitable to my station and useful to England for me to choose magic?"

It was the word *useful* that hit Mother between the eyes. She knew exactly why magic would be useful.

\* \* \* \* \*

Some six hundred years ago, Baron Finch tried to sneak a battlement into his renovations. His two towers, each joining a new wing to the original Old Hall, were *just* small enough that no-one had ever referred to Finch Hall as a castle. However, there were ramparts. When the Finches expected enemies, they were easily able to post a sentry and watched the army arriving.

Two years ago, the National Trust audit complained that the ramparts on the West Tower were unsafe under the mass of tourists who climbed them each year. The exact nature of their complaint whether they were worried that some random tourist might fall off the crumbling ramparts or worried that the valuable historic ramparts might be destroyed by some careless tourist was uncertain. However, one fine sunny day when there were no tourists, we followed Mother up the turret to inspect the problem for ourselves.

We found that the ramparts were crumbling at an alarming rate, as if someone had deliberately pushed a few of the ancient stones down to the moat below. Mother says she lost her footing because she simply wasn't *expecting* such blatant gaps in a historic barricade, so she suddenly had to grab Justin back from a dangerously unprotected ledge. She hadn't realised that the floor had also become fragile, and the combined weight of her court shoes and Justin's rugby trainers crashed right through the timbers. I grabbed Justin's arm, and Mother plunged right through the ceiling

Except that she didn't. She *should* have dropped like a stone to the first-storey floor, and perhaps even smashed through that (depending on the force, the angle and the health of the beams) to the ground floor below. But before her body was half-way through, she neatly *lifted* up from the wrecked floor and sailed in a graceful arc high up over the ramparts, then slowly down again. She didn't fall vertically, which would have landed her in the moat, but continued her diagonal arch downwards, far more slowly than any parachute would have allowed, until she was safely on the far side, squarely beside the kiosk in the tourists' car park.

There was no point in yelling down to ask if Mother was all right because she was already tripping towards the ancient stone bridge that would take her to the lancet front door. Justin was shaking, and we decided to hold hands down the stairs.

Here is the most curious thing of all. When Father took a workman up the West Tower to assess the damage, they did not find any. The floor was completely repaired, with no gaps or even scratches, and the beam nearest to where Mother nearly fell was the soundest, least rotted beam in the whole Tower. Father couldn't find any gap in the ramparts. All the stones were standing sharply in line, as geometrically perfect as they had been in the fourteenth century, as if there *hadn't* been six centuries of wind and rain to erode the edges. The magic had repaired more than one day's or one year's damage: everything was exactly as it had been in the time of Richard II.

That is the only time I ever remember Justin doing accidental magic, although he tells me there were a few little incidents that I never noticed.

"But I did the least under-age magic of any student in my class," he told me. "I suppose I didn't experience many childhood frustrations."

\* \* \* \* \*

Mother knew why magic would be useful, so she agreed to the shopping trip at Diagon Alley. Our day rubbing shoulders with wizards wonderfully eccentric as they seemed convinced Justin that he *had* to go to Hogwarts. So Father cancelled his enrolment at Eton, and Mother, very reluctantly, packed his trunk for Hogwarts.

Iris the tawny owl brought us regular letters. Of course Hogwarts was a different culture, yet I was impressed by how much of it *wasn't* any different from Eton. Whatever Mater had imagined, Hogwarts wasn't at all like her hypothetical "rough comprehensive".

Dear Mother and Father,

Hogwarts is a medieval castle with a jumble of towers and battlements. It would fall down if Muggle builders constructed anything to that plan, but magic holds it up.

I am so glad to have been allocated to Hufflepuff House, which has the best reputation for justice, loyalty, honesty and effort. In the extraordinary heraldry of wizards, our arms are a black badger on a yellow field (yes, yellow!).

My Head of House is Professor Pomona Sprout, the herbology teacher, and you can address any concerns to her at any time. So far I have no concerns. Professor Sprout is very solid in her field of expertise; she has already taught us about twenty species of fungi. However, my favourite subject is charms. The charms teacher was once a duelling expert and he is teaching us to make a banana dance.

Yes, the food is more than adequate. A few students have tuck-boxes from home, but really only for sweets; we can help ourselves to as much meat, veg and dessert as we like, and I never see what happens to the plentiful leftovers.

I am the only Englishman in my dormitory. My new friends are a Welshman named Wayne Hopkins and three Scots: Stephen Cornfoot, Zacharias Smith and Ernie Macmillan. So we all laugh at one another's accents. Ernie is from one of those old wizarding families who have been magical for hundreds of years. He has taught me several useful little spells to open charmed doors and avoid trick staircases.

The library is huge: it reminds me of the Bodleian. There are some books first-years are not allowed to touch because they are so full of dangerous magic. We younger students are simply assigned to ordinary encyclopaedias.

The favoured sport at Hogwarts is Quidditch, which is played on broomsticks. We begin flying lessons next week. There are regular inter-house matches, just as there would be for rugby or cricket. Art and music lessons are optional, and some students spend their spare time helping with the magical animals or assisting Professor Sprout in the greenhouse.

Must go now because Ernie wants to teach me a card game called Exploding Snap.

Warmest love to everyone at home,

Justin.

Of course the masters at Eton wanted to know why Finch-Fletchley minor had been struck from their enrolments. I discovered that the best answer was simply, "I don't know the precise reason, but our parents must have decided that Northside was a better option for my brother." I think every single master asked me once, but none of them bothered asking more than once. Justin told me that Hogwarts is charmed to repel Muggle inquiries; every time anyone who knows about "Northside" goes to a wizard's family member or to a data source for independent schools in Britain, he tends to forget what he's looking for.

Justin didn't come home for half-term; he wrote glowingly of his school's Hallowe'en party, but Hogwarts doesn't really have a half-term. I practised giving vague answers when friends asked what had happened to my brother.

"He might join us later, but he's busy with his own projects right now. He found his feet at that school up north; he's made a real place for himself with that crowd there..."

Mother seemed very relieved by this answer. It confirmed her own hopes that Justin *had* "made a place for himself" at Hogwarts, even if it wasn't at all the place she had once expected for him.

When Justin came home for the Christmas holidays, he told everyone that school was "super, thank you," and somehow the relatives never asked any more questions. He didn't come home for Easter because he was "swotting for exams". The relatives were very pleased to hear that his school "took exams seriously," and they didn't think to ask any more questions. By then, of course, I was busy with exams myself. I was putting myself through eight GCSEs, and I didn't intend to score lower than a B on any of them.

By the time we were both home for the summer, Justin's new school was no longer news; people were more interested in my exams and most interested in their own summer holidays. Our family spent three weeks in Mali, visiting a clinic, school and agrarian project that comprise one of Mother's pet charities, followed by three weeks cruising in the Greek islands. We came back to England in time to receive my exam results (I passed everything) and Justin's book list for his second year at Hogwarts. When Justin returned from Diagon Alley with a really huge pile of very leathery books, he had brought his friend Ernie with him.

"I met Ernie in Diagon Alley. Can he stay for a few days?"

Young Macmillan held out his hand to me and said, "I am very pleased to meet you, Mr Finch-Fletchley."

Macmillan stayed with us for ten days, and he was very much the right sort. He didn't always know which fork to use; he spoke thick Glaswegian; he was completely confused about why we allowed tourists to swarm all over our private property; and he had never heard of the Crick Balloon Festival (which didn't stop him enjoying it); but it was clear that his manners were the epitome of good breeding among his own people. He joined in with everything and took an interest in everyone. He learned to row around the lake and even had a go at riding a horse, which he claimed was much more difficult than riding a broomstick.

"Ernie really is a nice child," said Mother to me. "If all Hogwarts students are so well-bred, Justin really won't be very much disadvantaged by studying there. But I do hope the boys are fitting in some swotting this summer. There is a very long list of advance reading here."

"Apparently Macmillan has read most of them already," I told her. "He says his mother is a great admirer of what's his name? Gilderoy Lockhart, the author of most of their textbooks."

"Really? I wonder if non-magical people like us can understand them?" Mother picked up a tome entitled *Gadding with Ghouls*. "It sounds lurid, but if ghouls are real, I'd rather Justin faced up to them."

Despite the fine weather, the Mater spent the next several days indoors, doing nothing but reading Lockhart's books. I read a couple of them myself. They were a light, easy read, and the author seemed to be a particularly valiant adventurer who swashed and buckled his way through an extraordinary quantity and range of perils and was full of creative though dangerous ideas for combating the Dark Arts. Mother was almost exhausted from the effort of simply reading about Gilderoy Lockhart's heroics.

"Oh, my gracious!" she said. "I never knew there was so much danger in the world! But if it's out there, thank goodness for people like Gilderoy Lockhart, who keep the rest of us safe. So is *that* what Justin is going to study?"

"Only from the textbook, I understand," said Father. "They don't deal with beasts with a high danger rating before the sixth form."

Mother nodded. "That's sensible. But I've heard a great deal of sense from Ernie Macmillan. You know, it really could turn out to be very useful to have a fully-trained wizard in the family."

By the time we finally waved Justin off to Glasgow to spend the last few days of his holiday with Macmillan's family, he knew that Mother approved of Hogwarts. It wasn't what she had considered the "usual path" for her child, but what *is* the usual path for a second son? He can choose almost anything. I smirk now at the vulgar people who call Justin the "spare". He belongs with Ernie Macmillan and the others at Hogwarts, and in some ways that gives him more opportunities than I shall have. Hogwarts is certainly proving a great equaliser between the two of us.

In the first week of September, Iris the owl brought a heavy parcel for Mother. Justin's breathless letter began:

*Dear Mother,*

*I have wonderful news. Professor Lockhart is our teacher! We've actually met him, and he teaches us Defence Against the Dark Arts twice a week.*

*He wrote one book that isn't on our school syllabus, but I thought you'd like a copy, even though it refers mainly to items that can only be bought in Diagon Alley. It's called Gilderoy Lockhart's Guide to Household Pests, and the author has kindly signed it for you...*

**A/N.** Many thanks to **EilyM** for the beta-read. I am so lucky to be corrected by someone who understands this culture from the inside.

# Resignation

Chapter 4 of 11

Hermione Granger's mother wants her only child to be happy. But the price of happiness will be very, very high.

*Nobody in my family's magic at all, it was ever such a surprise when I got my letter, but I was ever so pleased, of course, I mean it's the very best school of witchcraft there is...*

Hermione Granger, *PS*, p. 79.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### Resignation

by Dr Helen Granger

I had always planned to have a large family. As a little girl, I fussed over dolls' prams and tea parties. As a teenager, I babysat for the neighbours, pushing swings in the park and building model railways. As a student, I spent money I couldn't spare on children's picture books. I had ridiculous daydreams of twenty children, although I knew, on my saner days, that six would be enough.

But my teachers urged me to choose a career, so while my friends were planning their wedding receptions, I was being interviewed for university. When they were buying their baby layettes, I was still sitting exams. I qualified as a dentist in 1963 and I married my classmate Gerald Granger two years later. We set up a practice together on the ground floor of an elderly Victorian redbrick in Whitesmile Road, Winchester.

The cost of home renovations and surgery equipment left us with a back-breaking mortgage, and of course we had to build up our professional standing too. But there was plenty of time. I liked being a dentist; I liked being married to Gerald; I liked living in Winchester; as the debts were slowly paid off and our professional reputations grew, I also liked the financial security, the domestic help, the holidays in Europe and the theatre subscriptions. But I never forgot my original dream of having children.

It wasn't until our tenth wedding anniversary that it occurred to me that time might be running out.

"Gerald," I said across the candles and roses on the restaurant table, "did you never want to have a baby?"

"Of course I did. Sometime."

"Gerald, we've been married ten years. In another ten years it will be too late!"

"So it will. Then I expect the time has now come."

I was surprised; for some reason, I had assumed that it would be difficult to persuade Gerald. But in fact he made no fuss at all. So we tossed the contraceptives into the dustbin and went out to buy a pram and a cot. I wondered what hours I would be able to work after we had our baby, but I decided to worry about that when it happened.

The one thing I definitely did not expect was that on our eleventh wedding anniversary, Gerald and I would once again face one another across a restaurant table, still childless.

"What went wrong?" I asked him. I knew that some people had fertility problems, but I had never expected it to happen to us. Gerald didn't know what had gone wrong either, but he knew it was time to consult a doctor.

First there were the rounds of tests on Gerald, which came out clear. Then there were tests on me: examinations, X-rays, laparoscopy, biopsy and endless measuring of bodily functions. I had surgery and I was took drugs. When nothing seemed to make any difference, we turned to alternative medicine: the vitamin supplements, Chinese herbs and acupuncture. We tried any superstition that seemed harmless cold showers and tampons, hypnotherapy and meditation.

Just when I resigned myself to the reality that nothing was going to work that I would never have a child I finally became pregnant. We don't know what finally went right, but I had a perfect pregnancy. I was thirty-nine years old when I finally held Hermione Jean Granger in my arms.

\* \* \* \* \*

Hermione was a remarkable baby. She slept through the night at six weeks, crawled at six months, took her first step on her first birthday and never had a day's illness. Her first sentence was, "The moon is a nearly circle," which made sense when I remembered the picture in her nursery-rhyme collection. She loved books; I had to read *Spot and Brown Bear* and *The Tiger who came to Tea* every single day. By her second birthday, she had begun to read for herself. At first I thought she was simply reciting as *Brown Bear* is a very memorisable book. But when she opened up a new copy of *Cops and Robbers* and spelled out, "The woort of the robbers as most of us cow is dirty Grabber Dan..." I had to believe she was reading it.

In Hermione's second year I had two miscarriages, and in the year after, a missed abortion. Then... nothing. As month after month ticked by, there were more visits to the doctor, more drugs and experiments and professional expressions of regret. But there was never another baby. By the time we left Hermione at the door of her nursery classroom, aged not quite four, we knew she was going to be an only child, the one in whom we were investing everything.

For the first six weeks, Hermione was very happy at nursery school. She came home reporting like a journalist on the books in the library corner, the posters on the walls even the state of the furniture.

"Some chairs are red and some are blue. I know someone swapped mine because my old one didn't have a scratch on the leg."

"Russell and Frances are the ones that miss their mothers the most. Frances always sits in the corner crying, but Russell stands for hours staring at the mice. There are six mice, black ones and brown ones, and the one called Thursday has a crooked back leg."

"Mike and David fought over the toy train. Miss White wouldn't let any of us play with it until they learned to share. That isn't fair, is it? Mike and David were the only ones

fighting, but nobody was allowed to use the train set all day."

"The cleaners couldn't have come last night because there were still biscuit crumbs on the library carpet this morning. Will they still be paid for the day they didn't come?"

"Nicola wears a different dress every day. She says it's shabby to wear the same one three times. She upset Amy and Charlotte, but I don't mind. Fancy counting what other people are wearing!"

Hermione didn't notice that she did plenty of her own counting. "We went to the library corner for an hour, and Toby read two books, and Lauren read three, but neither of them read the words properly. Rachel and Andrew and Matthew only read one each, but I read seven..." and of course she listed the seven titles, correcting herself if she recited them in the wrong order.

After six weeks, Hermione stumbled to the school gate sobbing. "Mummy!" she shouted. "Mummy, they... they..." Her words tumbled out in indignant incoherence, and finally she stamped her foot. "They did it, Mummy! Come and ask Miss White!" She took my hand and marched me back into the classroom, where the teacher was pinning a new alphabet poster to the wall.

Hermione planted her hands on her hips and demanded, "Tell her, Miss White! You let them do it!"

Miss White put down the drawing pins and reminded Hermione, "Manners, dear. How do we say it?"

"Oh." Hermione drew a very deep breath. "Please, Miss White, will you explain to my mother why you let Andrew destroy that book."

"We've had a few hiccups today," said Miss White. "Mrs Granger, I hope you can help, but... Hermione, why don't you go and read a book for a few minutes?"

Hermione frowned suspiciously, darting a glance from one to the other of us, before scuttling off to the library corner and grabbing a fat volume. Miss White drew me to the opposite end of the room and lowered her voice.

"It was all an accident," she told me, "but Hermione was very upset."

"What happened?"

"Toby walked into the library without looking where he put his feet, so he planted great mud-prints all over *The Very Hungry Caterpillar*. Hermione was furious, and the next thing we knew, the book was clonked over Toby's head. I'd say she hit him except that... This is odd, Mrs Granger... There are three other children who declare that Hermione never touched the book. Toby himself said so, once he had stopped crying. He said the book just 'jumped up at me and whacked my head.'"

I was alarmed. "I didn't think Hermione would be so aggressive! Did she really?"

"I don't think Hermione would hit anyone *with a book*," said Miss White, "because she has far too much respect for books. I didn't see exactly what happened next; I was more concerned with Toby. But the children I suppose they just wanted to tidy away two of them grabbed the book and began to tug it off each other. That's when Hermione *really* went berserk, screaming at them to put it down before they damaged it. They took no notice, and the pages ripped right out of the cover. Most of the children were awed into silence at that point, but little Andrew did have to make his point by tearing up a couple of the pages too. I stopped him, of course, but that's when Hermione began her sobbing fit. She cradled the book like a broken doll."

"Hermione never cared for dolls," I remarked, "but she does love her books."

"But the strangest thing of all..." Miss White hesitated. She walked over to her desk and picked up a shiny hardback edition of *The Very Hungry Caterpillar*.

"Is that your spare copy?"

"No! That's the same book." She passed it over, and I turned the pages. Nothing was torn; no page was even dirty or dog-eared; and the paper was precisely bound into the hard covers. It looked like the book-dealer's unsold copy, not like something that had been handled by five cohorts of twenty three-year-olds. "As I said, I didn't really see... I knew Hermione was a clever child, but however did she manage a repair job like that?"

After that, Hermione was very subdued at nursery school. The other children gave her a wide berth. Miss White tried to include her in the group activities, but the other children didn't want Hermione, and she didn't want them. When Gerald asked her about what she did with her "little friends," she replied, "I just read, Daddy."

"What is my daughter *doing*?" I asked Miss White. "Whatever tantrum she had over that book, she can't be the only four-year-old who once lost her temper at school. Why doesn't she have any friends? Has she become a bully? What is it that you're not telling me?"

"Mrs Granger, I don't *know!*" said Miss White. "Ever since she stuck that damaged book back together, the other children have been afraid of her. But there's no obvious reason why; she isn't at all aggressive. I promise you, I will keep working on all the children's social skills."

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I asked Hermione if she wanted to give up nursery school, but she said no, she liked the big children's library, from which Miss White let her borrow books every day. She made no friends in the nursery class and no friends in the reception class. By the middle of her reception year, when Hermione's status as an intimidating loner was firmly entrenched, it was too late to talk about giving up school, so we planned to move her.

"There aren't any other government schools in our consortium. You know we agreed to support state schools the poor man's rights," said Gerald.

"But we can't let a government system destroy our daughter!" I protested.

So we made enquiries, and a small independent girls' school accepted Hermione at the beginning of Year One. She looked very stiff and vulnerable in her purple blazer and boater, but she said that a private school would probably have more books.

For the first six weeks, Hermione was guarded about her new school. She would come home tight-lipped and sit down at the dining-room table, taking ten minutes to read whichever book her new teacher had given her today. She assured us that nobody at the new school was "cruel" and that the curriculum was "not stupid". Then one afternoon, she reached the school gates laughing.

She was talking to another little girl, a well-groomed child with dark plaits and heart-shaped ear-studs, and they barely glanced at me.

"Mummy, can I go to Natasha's house today? She invited me. You can go and have a cup of tea with her mother. Natasha wants to show me her shell collection. Can we go, Mummy?"

From that day, Hermione was inseparable from Natasha Hill. Natasha was bright, lively and a compulsive collector. She collected, categorised and displayed everything shells, stamps, coins, spoons, key rings, scented rubbers, glass bottles. Hermione helped her by researching the history of the items and teaching her how each kind of object *should* be categorised. Natasha re-wrote whole reams of display cards on Hermione's advice, and they spent hours rearranging the shelves in the Hills' spare bedroom.

Natasha was also a fluent reader. She came to our house with armloads of books to swap with Hermione and went home with an armload that Hermione had lent her. They discussed stories and they wrote their own. They studied up on minerals, planets, trees and ships in order to inform their categorising. They designed their own heraldry;

they grew crystals; they made cardboard cut-outs of the Platonic solids.

Best of all, Natasha was popular with the other children. Poised, tactful and interested in everything, she was always surrounded by a crowd of little girls who wanted to play with her, and she soon taught them that they needed to include Hermione. Natasha carved a spot for Hermione in every game. No matter what the artifice of the day, Natasha always re-wrote the game so that they all needed a "consultant" who would tell them "the rules in the book". Hermione could recite as many facts or regulations as she liked, and it was all part of the game.

At Christmas, Hermione was invited to five parties. She eventually enjoyed all of them, but she panicked an hour before the first.

"My hair, Mummy! It doesn't comb straight! It tangles all over the place, no matter where I tie the ribbon! That's all right for school, but how can I go to a party looking like Sleeping Beauty's hedge?"

Just as I was about to lose all plausibility as a mother, I found myself suggesting we should ring the Hills; and Mrs Hill said she would bring Natasha right over with a bottle of her home-remedy coconut oil. Hermione sat on a low stool draped around with an old sheet for half an hour while Natasha fussed over her hair, combing in the coconut (and who knew what other oils?) lotion. By the time Mrs Hill drove them away to the party, Hermione's head was as smooth and shiny as a chestnut. She tolerated the coconut-treatment every day of the holidays, and she went to every party feeling as pretty as Natasha.

Over the Whitsunday holidays, we went with the Hill family on a three-day break to Bournemouth. It was a perfectly normal holiday, with visits to the Pleasure Gardens and Russell-Cotes Museum, and a nature walk where the girls counted and categorised red squirrels. The only shadow was our foolish decision to walk from pier to pier in the wind. The children braced themselves steadily along the sea front until Hermione spotted a bright yellow ferry.

"Look! We haven't seen that kind before, have we? We need to list that ferry "

Natasha whirled around to look at the new specimen, and her hat, only half-tied, whirled off in the opposite direction. Her father grabbed for it, but the wind was already carrying it out into the bay.

"Oh, *no!*" wailed Natasha helplessly. "My hat! It was my favourite the only one that matched this dress! We can't let it..."

"Her *hat!*" muttered Hermione, white with determination as the hat swept over a wave.

Then, most extraordinarily, the hat bounced and soared up, curtsied high above the waves, then zoomed back towards us. We hardly had a moment to be surprised at what we were seeing before it settled precisely on Natasha's head. It wasn't even wet.

"What a freak!" exclaimed Mrs Hill.

Natasha was too delighted to ask any scientific questions, but Hermione murmured, "That couldn't have happened... The wind hasn't changed!"

We all agreed it was a freak, but between Gerald's noises about a cup of coffee and the girls' questions about when they could ride on the yellow ferry, we didn't spare the homing hat much more thought.

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Everything was calm for a couple of years. Hermione did well at school. She wasn't musical, but she could read a stave enough to turn the pages for Natasha, who played the violin. She wasn't artistic, but she planned out her drawings with a mathematical precision, even to calculating the colours, so the result always looked presentable. She definitely wasn't athletic, but she managed to cry off most P.E. lessons by volunteering to keep score. She was brilliant at everything else algebra, grammar, chemistry, history any concept that required any kind of analysis or synthesis.

Then the Hill family moved to Glasgow.

I was nearly as broken-hearted as Hermione. I told myself that Hermione would make new friends next year, but I never really believed it. I could no longer hide from the dreadful knowledge that Natasha had been Hermione's *only* friend. Hermione hadn't learned to fuss about clothes or listen to popular music or play *Maniac Mansion*. She didn't even read the pulpy boarding school stories and adventure fiction that some of her peers were now devouring. She was just "that Hermione" with the beech-hedge hair and buck teeth, her nose always in a small-print book, and the girls who had tolerated her as "Natasha's friend" had no time for Hermione on her own.

They didn't play with her but Hermione had no interest in their games anyway.

They stopped inviting her to even the largest parties.

They groaned when the teacher instructed them to partner Hermione in a group project, despite the fact that Hermione's group always extracted the highest marks.

Hermione always arrived home white and stiff-faced, refusing to talk about it, and she buried herself in a book as soon as she had greeted us.

Finally I went to see her teacher. "What's wrong?" I asked. "Does the school allow this kind of bullying? It never happened when Natasha Hill was here."

"We don't allow it and we do try to break it up," said Mrs Sage. "But Hermione needs to learn to get along too. There won't always be a Natasha to act as a bridge to the real world; Hermione has to build her own bridges."

"Has Hermione done anything to upset her classmates? Is it because she's clever?"

Mrs Sage sighed. "It's tempting to scapegoat Hermione's intelligence, but Natasha was almost as clever as Hermione. No, that isn't the main reason. It has more to do with the other children being afraid of her."

"Afraid? Of Hermione? But all she does is sit and read!"

"Not *all*," said Mrs Sage. "Worrying things have happened around Hermione."

Her mouth snapped shut until I prompted, "Such as?"

"A couple of them called her 'Bookworm'. I expect someone chose that moment to uncork a jar, but... The whole floor was suddenly crawling with worms! And then they were crawling all over the girls. We never found out who did it. Then a few days later, someone called her 'Bossy-Boots,' and before we knew where we were, half the class was joining the taunt. And then... It sounds so fantastic as I tell you about it... but suddenly half the class seemed to be wearing great clumpy mountaineering boots. The strange part was that those girls never found their school-uniform shoes again; they had to buy new ones. Their parents were furious, with everyone blaming someone else's child. So now the girls now have some superstitious fear that when they taunt Hermione, frightening coincidences will occur."

"That doesn't explain anything!" I exclaimed. "Why were they calling her 'bookworm' and 'bossy' to begin with? When did things *first* go wrong?"

"I don't know. There was another time when they called her 'Beaver-mouth'. I know it's a very unfortunate coincidence... but at that moment there happened to be a shower of sawdust from the ceiling, and one of those old beams cracked in two, just as if someone had sawn through it. The children were terrified and they decided 'beaver' was an unlucky word. Mrs Granger, I don't know how this name-calling first started. I only know that the other children have been afraid of Hermione all term, and that's why they sometimes taunt her."

Worms, boots and beam-sawing? When I asked Hermione about it, she said she didn't know anything about how it happened.

"One of the girls must have been pulling a prank."

"No, nobody did anything. Those things just *happened*. Mum, they happen when I'm upset. And being around the girls makes me upset. It would be better if I just... well... stayed away from them."

Hermione kept to herself for the rest of the year. She read all through break and lunchtime, and through most evenings too. There was at least one more odd incident (a classmate called her "too smart," and suddenly smarties pelted down from the ceiling, leaving real bruises) but most of her peers learned to leave her alone.

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"We need to find her a new school," I told Gerald, without much hope that a new school would be less fearsome for anyone. "But where else will we be allowed to send her?"

"We'll use the investor's lurk," said Gerald. "It's time we bought an investment property."

He bought a small flat in the next consortium and left the gas and electricity running for a month. After visiting to turn off the utilities, he collected the bills (conveniently addressed to us) and presented himself at the local junior school.

"We've moved into the area," he lied to the headmistress. "My daughter needs to go to your school."

So Hermione began Year Five with a new school uniform – a casual green sweatshirt over a straight black skirt – and a handful of bus tickets (she wasn't entitled to a pass as we were supposed to be living only in the next street). She sounded almost pleading as she vowed, "I *promise* I won't let them upset me. Nothing will happen at this school!"

It took just two weeks for Hermione to arrive home in tears. "The boys called me a show-off!" she sobbed. "*tried* not to let it upset me... I really did... But when they sang, 'pick your nose and blow off,' all their noses blew off!"

"What?"

"Their noses just... exploded... and there was snot dripping all over the place, and mess everywhere, and their noses were swollen up and crooked, and... It was all my fault for being upset about them!"

Nobody at the new school ever teased Hermione again. They just left her alone altogether, and she left them alone too. She spent every spare minute curled up beside a bookshelf, reading through the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*. But Hermione claimed she didn't care. Other people were boring; she liked books better. Even her new teacher seemed wary of her.

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"She can't stay at that school," I said. "How many more times will we have to move her?"

"Her sort of people must be out there somewhere," said Gerald. "We'll find some more Natashas eventually."

Hermione was only three weeks below the cut-off age for the next school cohort, so we approached the local comprehensive. Our daughter was very, very bright, we said, and completely bored with Year Five work. Her school reports showed that she was working at Year Eight level in all the core subjects, and her teacher (who wanted to get rid of her) had written an enthusiastic letter supporting her suitability for early admission to secondary school.

It worked. Hermione skipped Year Six and started Itchenbridge Comprehensive when she was not quite eleven.

But it didn't work. Hermione was highly enthusiastic about the secondary-school curriculum ("We have real chemistry labs, where we're going to make our own indicator, and I have to research a proper essay on the rainforest!") but she didn't speak about her classmates. One day I asked her if she had any friends.

"Oh, no," she replied. "I'm being careful. Perhaps one day I'll find a book that will explain why all these strange things happen. Then I might be able to risk being around people again."

We only found out about one incident that year, when Hermione came home with singed eyebrows, admitting there had been an "accident" in the chemistry lab.

"The teacher wouldn't believe I did it," she said, breathing carefully to control her words. "She said the accident was Brandon's own fault. But it wasn't. It happened as soon as he called me 'stinky'."

I wanted to ask why Brandon had called Hermione "stinky", but the question could only sound like an accusation. *Something* about my daughter terrified ordinary children even before anything extraordinary had happened. And that "something" was not her intelligence, which was simply an additional burden. Something that terrified Hermione herself set her apart from ordinary children the moment she entered a room.

"I'm happy at Itchenbridge Comprehensive," Hermione asserted. "There's lots to do. I can usually keep away from people. Next year I can start learning German, and then I'll be able to read Einstein."

That was all my eleven-year-old had to look forward to – the prospect of reading the original text of Einstein!

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But "next year" never came, not in that sense. Instead, Hermione received a mysterious letter from Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, telling us she needed a wand and a cauldron and who knew what else because she had been selected for an exclusive boarding school in the Highlands.

"Oh, dear!" I said. "Whatever will your father say?"

What Gerald said was, "That's *it!* That explains everything! Hermione does magic – that's why she's so different. She needs to learn to control it so she doesn't keep on exploding chemistry labs or cursing up earthworms."

"So do you think we ought to send her to this school?"

"Of course we ought to."

What did we have left to lose? Hermione hadn't fitted in anywhere else; if Hogwarts didn't work out, we would just have to send her back to Itchenbridge. So we packed her trunk and drove her to King's Cross Station. We took her to the portal of an invisible railway-platform, only to be kissed good-bye and told that we could never enter. When she disappeared through the brick wall, it was as if the earth had swallowed her up; if she still existed, her destination was a castle that we would never be able to see.

She was able to write to us; in fact, one of those courier-owls brought us a letter the next day. The first few letters sounded homesick, full of facts from her textbooks and the marks from her class tests. We didn't dare ask for the names of her friends. But after a couple of months, just as we thought we had made yet another mistake, Hermione's letters were all about two characters called Ron and Harry. Apparently they had "defeated a troll" together, which must have been a sporting expression, as

Harry played for the school team. Ron played chess and collected cards (he sounded just like Natasha!) and he kept a pet rat. The three of them seemed to spend their weekends together toasting crumpets over bright blue fire and nursing sick owls.

When Hermione came home for the Christmas holidays, she was full of chatter about Ron and Harry, who might not finish their holiday homework properly without her there to supervise them, and about Nicolas Flamel, who was apparently the subject of her research essay. She told us all about astronomy, goblin history, flying broomsticks and exotic studies that we could barely understand Potions, Transfiguration, Herbology and the like.

Hermione had found her own kind.

She didn't return home for the Easter holidays, or for the next four Christmases. She always spent a few weeks with us over summer, but most holidays she was invited over to Ron's house for increasingly longer visits. She wrote two or three times a week, but that became her standard contact with Gerald and me: we had a daughter who wrote letters. We knew there must be a great deal she wasn't committing to writing; for example, we never really understood why she spent five weeks of her second year unconscious in the school sanatorium. But she was happy. She passed all her exams, won prizes for rescuing a Philosopher's Stone and flying a Hippogriff, and eventually became a prefect. She even had a couple of boyfriends over the years, but in the end, it was Ron whom she married. We do like Ron.

Hermione is our only child, and we have invested a great deal in her happiness. But she was never really ours. In the end, the price of her happiness was that we should be forever separated from her. She doesn't belong in our world. She never really did.

## Rationalism

### Chapter 5 of 11

Kevin Entwhistle's parents do not believe in magic. Not at all. Not under any circumstances whatsoever.

*Well, their main job is to keep it from the Muggles that there's still witches an' wizards up an' down the country... Blimey, Harry, everyone'd be wantin' magic solutions to their problems. Nah, we're best left alone.*

Rubeus Hagrid, *PS*, p. 51.

### CHAPTER FIVE

#### Rationalism

by Callum Entwhistle

"I DON'T BELIEVE IT!"

Dad dumped a large brown box on the floor then loomed over the telly, completely blocking my view of Uri Geller thought-bending a spoon.

"Dad, it's only trick photography!" I pleaded. "Me and Kevin want to learn how they make films like that, when it looks as if psychic stuff is happening. We know it isn't real." Actually Kevin was too busy with a library book to glance at the telly, but Dad didn't notice this detail.

"It's bobbins, Cal," said Dad, looking as if he was about to punch the screen-Uri in the nose. "Why are they letting him rattle out all that stuff about being kidnapped by aliens unless they're trying to fool us? Bah. *Aliens don't exist.*"

He didn't punch the screen but he did flick the remote control. Ping! Uri Geller and his spoons vanished into a spot of white light. Before I had time to protest, Dad pointed to the brown box and said, "I've bought us something better than telly. Clear a space on the table, Cal let's set up our brand-new home computer!"

"But, Len, why do we want a computer?" asked Mum. "We're not going to fly a space-ship. Besides, it must have cost "

"It's keeping up with technology, Fiona!" Dad replied proudly as he took a carving knife to the packaging. "Put your book down, Kevin! Computers have changed. This one comes with software, so we don't have to program it ourselves. And we won't have to waste its memory space with piles of information because it can dial up the internet."

"What will we use it for?" asked Mum, still bewildered. She didn't say out loud that we couldn't afford a home computer. We couldn't, not really, but snowballing credit card bills never deter Dad as long as he has the latest and the greatest. Mum makes sure that in the end in the very end our bills get paid. She knits kids' jumpers on commission; and she's an ace cook, so she can sometimes cater a posh party. We had to sell our good sofa to pay off the giant telly and our rugs and curtains pay for the new stereo; but to be honest, I don't miss the sofa or the drapes. I've realised that losing the minor stuff is the price of owning the techno-gadgets.

"I've bought a few games for the boys Minesweeper, Tetris, Pacman," Dad continued. "And we'll be able to use it as a kind of typewriter. But the top thing is the internet. We'll be able to send e-mails and look up the news on the worldwide web. We'll be the first in the street to have a home computer but we won't be the last. Computers aren't just for big business and posh people any more: in about five years, every home will have one. Give us a hand, Kevin. Help us unravel this wire."

Kevin obediently closed his gardening book and held the end of the flex, but he was staring out of the window. "There's an owl trying to get into our house," he said.

"I don't believe it," said Dad, gathering the cardboard boxes into a pile for the dustbin. "Birds don't like to be near people."

I opened the window and let the owl in. Animals always flock around our kid. Kevin knows every stray dog in the neighbourhood and most of the cats too; and birds *don't* always fly away from Kevin.

This owl flew straight for Kevin, dropped a wad of paper on his shoulder and flew off. Kevin caught the paper with his free hand but couldn't unfurl it one-handed, so I helped him.

"Hogwar " I began, then decided I'd better not read it out loud. It was definitely some kind of letter, apparently from a headmaster named Albus Dumbledore, and it invited Kevin to be a pupil at a school for witchcraft and wizardry.

"Is this some kind of party invitation, Kev?" I asked. "Were you expecting this?"

He shook his head. "I don't know what it is. But that was a well-trained owl. Owls aren't like pigeons; they don't normally deliver messages."

"What's the fuss, lads?" asked Dad.

"Nowt, Dad!" we both replied.

Soon I was sitting in front of our new home computer, happily shooting down Space Invaders. It was a right buzz. I played for half an hour before I remembered I ought to share with my brother. When my game ended, I decked over my shoulder and saw that Kevin was busy reading, his mysterious letter neatly folded on the arm of his chair.

"Kev, come and give it a try!" I cajoled. "If Space Invaders is too violent for you, you could try Pacman."

"It's okay. Why don't you give Dad a turn? It's his computer."

The computer kept Dad and me happy all through the week. We played games, read on the web about the hole in the ozone layer (which Dad didn't believe until he saw how many scientists supported the theory) and used the word processor to write letters. Mum learned to use the drawing software so that she could illustrate the letters (we could send the same letter to an infinite number of people, just by changing the name before we hit the PRINT button). We even found out that one of Dad's workmates also had a computer, so we were able to send e-mails to his family. It was one of Dad's more brilliant buys.

Kevin played a couple of games of Tetris to please me, but the new computer really, truly didn't interest him. Kevin is like that. He doesn't watch motor-racing; he doesn't take radios apart; he doesn't even use the camera, which was once a joint Christmas present to both of us. He'd be perfectly happy in the Middle Ages because he doesn't care for anything electric or mechanical or radio. He's only interested in living things.

So while I was eagerly destroying Martians, Kevin spent the next couple of days outside. Kevin is mad for his garden. Mum and Dad have never had any time for the tiny patch of earth between our front door and front gate. It was Kevin who, four years ago, pulled up the dying lawn and replaced the grass with cuttings of pansies, nasturtiums, geraniums, delphiniums and sweet peas that he had begged from the neighbours or bought at jumble sales.

"He's doing it wrong," Mum confided to Dad. "He's damaged the roots and hasn't given a thought to planting seasons or soil type."

But Mum was wrong. Kevin's flowers *all* flourished, come drought, frost or flood, and our front garden became a riot of green leaves and rainbow petals. Sometimes, when a snowfall had melted or we returned from a week away from home, the flowers had begun to wilt, but Kevin could always make them grow again. He dug away the weeds, deposited a few worms and potato peelings and occasionally sprinkled on water; and within twenty-four hours, we had healthy flowers again, stalks taller and straighter, leaves darker green, petals larger and brighter than in any other garden in town.

"Kevin certainly has the green thumb," said Mum. "But isn't it rather odd how his flowers live all through the winter?"

"Flowers are much hardier than most people think," said Dad, who knows zilch about plants. "Most people just don't take enough care, and that's why their gardens die. Callum, you should take a photo of Kevin's flowers. Let's send it into a gardening magazine to show people how it *should* be done."

On Thursday evening I overheard Kevin talking to someone. A person in fancy dress was standing over our gate: a lady in an old-fashioned red gown and a witch's hat. Curious to know what she was promoting (the fancy dress was a sorted sales gimmick despite my better judgment), I paused my computer game and ran outside.

Kevin was beaming. "Professor Burbage, this is my brother Callum. Cal, this lady is from Hogwarts School. She knows *all* about that strange letter. You'll never guess what! Hogwarts is a real place, and they want to train me as a wizard!"

I laughed. "So what's it really about? Is this a role-playing game something like Dungeons and Dragons?"

"I know it sounds bonkers. But I'm a real wizard, and there's a real wizard's school for people like me!"

"Mr Kevin," said the visitor, taking no notice of me, "could you take me to meet your parents?"

"Dad's at work," said Kevin, recklessly letting the saleswoman through the gate. "He's a foreman at the steelworks factory. But Mum's at home. She sometimes works at Woolworth's, but not today. Wait here *is* Dad!"

Dad wasn't usually home this early, but there he was, strolling down the end of our street! He waved cheerily, and we waved back.

"All right, everyone!" Dad said. "Who's our guest?"

"This is Professor Burbage from Hogwarts School," said Kevin. "She wants a quick word with you and Mum. It's really exciting, Dad!"

There was nothing for it but to usher the visitor in to our proper untidy lounge and to call Mum out of the kitchen. Professor Burbage had some difficulty explaining herself.

"Letter?" asked Dad. "We didn't get any letter!"

"Oh," said Kevin. "I left it inside my book because I didn't think it was serious. Here you are, Mum."

Mum scanned and frowned. "Is this a school holiday activity from the council? I expect Kevin would like to learn conjuring tricks, but we can't really afford it."

"Mr Kevin would be eligible for a part-scholarship," said Professor Burbage, "but, no, it isn't conjuring tricks. It's real magic."

She waved her wand, and suddenly all the flowers in the garden shot up at about a hundred times their natural size. *Gigantic* nasturtiums were waving at us through the window, and the scent was overpowering.

Mum gaped in disbelief, and Dad frowned, trying to work out how she was doing it.

"We can also conjure flowers out of nothing," said the visitor, "but that never lasts long." She waved her wand again, and lilies and roses floated across the room. I grabbed for a red lily. It was very solid in my hand and proper sweet, yet somehow fragile. In a matter of seconds, all the floating flowers had faded to nothing.

"I don't believe it," Dad announced.

"Mr and Mrs Entwhistle," said Professor Burbage, "has Mr Kevin ever done anything really extraordinary... something that left you wondering just how it could possibly have

happened?"

At that moment, I remembered Kevin's extraordinary talent with animals. He had so often rescued a sparrow from a cat, and somehow, after a couple of minutes in his hands, the broken legs and wings were mended, and the birds were able to fly away. Stray dogs loved Kevin: at his touch, thorns melted out of their paws and sores healed over. No cat had ever scratched him; in fact, he seemed to command obedience out of alley cats faster than most people can command domestic dogs. I suddenly realised that it was *obvious* that Kevin was a wizard.

Yet Dad said quite confidently, "Oh, no. Kevin is as ordinary as a boy can be."

"Let me explain a little more clearly," said Professor Burbage. She waved her wand at the new computer and *would you believe it*, in an eye-blink, it had turned into a typewriter and a slide-rule!

"Hey!" I couldn't help interrupting. "Stealing our computer is not fair game!"

"It's still a computer underneath," said Professor Burbage serenely. "But shall I transfigure it into something a little less modern?" She waved her wand again, and before I could say "Pacman," the typewriter and slide-rule had been replaced by a quill, ink-pot and abacus.

Dad stood up. "I DON'T BELIEVE IT," he repeated firmly. "Miss Burbage, or whatever title you call yourself, I'm sure you're a proper competent conjurer, but we don't want our kids performing tricks like that around our house. We'd be obliged if you tidied up the mess and left our family alone."

What? Mum and Dad had preached the value of education all our lives. They said passing exams was the only way to get high-paying jobs that would let us buy more stuff. Were they now throwing Kevin's education right into the dustbin? Did they still disbelieve in magic, despite seeing the evidence in front of their eyes?

Kevin, who can be right mardy, looked as if he was trying not to cry. Professor Burbage waved her wand, and our computer reappeared (my game was still saved at the same level), and the garden flowers shrank back to their normal size.

"Powers like Mr Kevin's are quite dangerous if he isn't trained to use them properly," said Professor Burbage. "He could benefit from attending Hogwarts."

"Kevin has no powers," said Mum firmly. "We don't believe in such superstitions. However you're doing those tricks, Miss Burbage, Kevin has never done any at all. We'll show you out."

I glanced wildly at Kevin and saw that tears were rolling down his cheeks.

"I'll show her out!" I interrupted. "Come along, Professor Burbage. Our parents really are proper busy today." I almost dragged her through our narrow hall to the front gate. Fortunately, Kevin was the only one who followed, so I was able to corner the witch.

"Listen, Professor," I urged. "Kevin *has* to go to your wizarding school. You can't withdraw that invitation just because Mum and Dad don't believe in magic."

"I'm afraid we can, young man. We can't admit Mr Kevin to Hogwarts without your parents' permission. If they really don't want him to go, that's the end of it."

Kevin's face fell to his knees. This time he didn't cry; he simply looked as if his world had come to an end.

"You need to have another try at convincing them," I said. "But a magic display is the wrong way. Get this: our Mum and Dad don't believe in ~~nowt~~ paranormal not ghosts, not horoscopes, not psychics nowt! So no amount of evidence is going to convince them. No matter how amazing your magic, they will never believe that you have powers only that you're a mint conjurer."

She nodded. "Most Muggles need to see magic in order to accept it. But are your parents the types who would respond better to a logical argument?"

"No!" I nearly shrieked. "That would be *worse*. Mum and Dad *say* they believe in science, but they left school with only a handful of C.S.E.s, so they don't really understand how stuff like physics and chemistry works. Using scientific words won't help them believe in magic. I mean, I can understand that something like electricity would have looked like magic back in the Middle Ages; but now we have the science to explain it. So I suppose your magic is just an area of science that scientists can't yet explain. But to Mum and Dad, if science can't explain it *right now*, then it can't be real."

"Mr Kevin," she said it was freaky how she almost ignored me when Kevin was in front of her, "do you have a suggestion?"

"Professor, you *can't* just take their word for it!" he begged. "Perhaps you could try a really big magic something that couldn't possibly be a conjuring trick? No, that's no good. A big magic would frighten them. There's no point in making them believe in magic if they're going to be frightened by it. It would still end up that they wouldn't let me go to your school."

I tried to pull my great idea to the front of my brain. "Professor Burbage," I said, "do you have a magic that will make my parents ~~forget~~ about this visit?"

"Of course we do. We always use it on Muggle parents who refuse a place at Hogwarts. By this time tomorrow, you and your parents won't know anything about the letter or my visit or anything."

"I won't know?" I yelled. "But I've believed you! I agree with you that Kevin needs to go to this school! Why should I ?"

"That's Ministry of Magic policy, Mr Entwhistle," she said. "It will be out of my hands."

"Well, I *really* don't want to lose my memory over this," I said. "Listen, Professor. Can't you give it one more try? Do your Forgettery Spell on Mum and Dad, and then come to visit us again? Dress like an ordinary teacher and *don't* say owt about magic, but tell them uh I know! You need to do it this way..."

I bumbled on for quite some time, not sure of what I was saying. Kevin began to chip in and become enthusiastic about my idea. Finally, when we wound down, Professor Burbage asked a question.

"Are you asking me to lie to your parents?"

"Not *lie*, exactly," said Kevin, "but to miss out parts of the truth. Only tell them the parts that won't worry them and won't upset their ideas."

"I'm not sure," said Professor Burbage. "It isn't good for people never to be told information that might upset them."

"It isn't good for Kevin to have his education taken away," I countered.

"I'll look into it..."

"And by the way," Kevin added, "it isn't good for Callum to have his memory taken away."

The Forgettery people arrived only *one hour* later. They waved their wands over Mum and Dad and they took away the letter from Hogwarts. But they took no notice of Kevin or me, so perhaps Professor Burbage was going to give our idea a try.

Nothing happened for several days, except that I switched from Space Invaders to Minesweeper, and Kevin managed to tame and cure a broken-legged fox. It wasn't until Tuesday afternoon that Professor Burbage came back. This time she was normally dressed in a grey business suit and she was carrying a black brief-case.

"Today is the absolute deadline," she whispered to Kevin. "If I can't persuade your parents this evening, I'm afraid it will be too late to do anything."

Dad wasn't usually home this early, but suddenly I spotted him strolling down the end of our street! He waved cheerily, and we waved back.

"All right, everyone!" Dad said. "Who's our guest?"

"I am Dr Burbage from Northside School," said Professor Burbage. "I wonder if I could have a quick word with Mr and Mrs Entwhistle? I have some exciting news for young Kevin."

"Is Northside a school in Manchester?" asked Dad as he led the way in.

Professor Burbage opened the black briefcase on our threadbare carpet. "I expect you know about the Northside scholarships " she began, blushing a little at her own blagging.

"No, never heard of them," said Dad. "Where *is* Northside?"

"It's a boarding school in the Grampians, and entry is highly selective. But we do offer scholarships to children all over Britain. Recently we had *his* drawn to our attention." She brought out the gardening magazine that had once published the photographs of Kevin's garden.

"We recognised at once that Kevin has quite an extraordinary talent for horticulture. I expect you know that he could make a very lucrative career out of it."

Dad's ears pricked up. Anything that might make money interested Dad, and it hadn't occurred to him that there was any money in gardens.

"So Kevin took our entry test..."

"Kev, you didn't tell us!" exclaimed Mum.

Kevin shrugged. "It was just school. I didn't expect to pass the exam."

"Kevin passed with flying colours," said Professor Burbage. There was no need to tell Mum and Dad that the "test" had simply been the ability to produce magic! "Kevin did so well that Northside School did not hesitate to offer him a scholarship."

She brought out a letter. This one was on plain white paper with ordinary black writing. The letterhead included a crest, but it was a very simple one, with a graduate's mortar-board atop a pile of books and the motto LEARNING BUILDS WEALTH.

## NORTHSIDE SECONDARY SCHOOL

Headmaster: Albus Dumbledore, M.A., M.Sc., Ph.D., Dip.Ed.

Dear Mr Entwhistle,

We are pleased to inform you that you have a place at Northside Secondary School. Your scholarship will cover full board, lodging and tuition and a partial grant for books, equipment and uniform.

Please find enclosed a list of all necessary books and equipment.

Term begins on 1 September. We await your letter of acceptance by no later than 31 July.

Yours sincerely,

Minerva McGonagall,

Deputy Headmistress.

"Wait," said Mum. "Is Northside an *expensive* school?"

"Oh, yes," said Professor Burbage. "Many of our pupils come from the purest blood in the land."

Dad's eyes began to shine. Kevin had a free place at an *expensive* school, the type attended by the toffs! "What about future prospects?" he asked.

Professor Burbage brought out a glossy brochure with a picture of thoroughly modern redbrick college. It looked proper hot off the press, as if someone had written it solely for Mum and Dad. "You can read about Northside's exam results," she said. "Our students can take up to twelve G.C.S.E. levels and up to seven A levels. You can read here about alumni who went on to Oxford and Cambridge, as well as the ones who became notable businesspersons."

Mum's eyes glazed over the exam lists. The names were probably all bogus, but of course she wouldn't know where to begin checking details like that. If it came to that, wouldn't know how to check that kind of information. I realised that I was already telling myself, "They wouldn't dare print it if it wasn't true." Except that it *wasn't* true, and they *had*.

"Do your students ever become plumbers and electricians and suchlike?" asked Dad. "Tradesmen often make more money than the university types."

"Oh, yes," blagged Professor Burbage, nodding significantly at the brochure. The next page Dad turned listed all the Northside students who had become plumbers, electricians, carpenters, builders, glaziers, carpet-layers and gasmen. Some of them had photographs and some even had e-mail addresses. Dad respected people who were modern enough to have an e-mail address. It was becoming difficult to believe that Northside School did not actually exist.

"To think of our Kevin mixing with all those posh people!" sighed Mum. "He'd never again be mithered about being poor. Let's have a deck at these businesses, then. Have we heard of any?"

Oddly enough, there were all kinds of familiar businesses listed. Who would have thought that Kipling's Cakes and Debenham's had been founded by ex-Northside students? According to this glossy brochure, Northside had even produced the BBC! I didn't dare think about what would happen when the scam was rumbled.

"We'll have to check your references, of course," said Dad, "but this does sound like the right kind of school for our Kevin. Can you give Callum a scholarship too?"

"Unfortunately," she told us, "we have no vacancies in third year. But Kevin tells me that Callum wants to work in television. I'm sure there are students at Northside who can connect Callum to the television people. He might even be able to become a what do you people call it? a film producer." That was the only time all evening that Professor Burbage stumbled. She was in our house for two hours, and for the whole of that time, she was able to talk normally about non-magical things.

By the end of the evening, Mum and Dad had signed their acceptance of the "scholarship", and Kevin was enrolled at Northside Secondary College.

"Of course, we should check that it isn't just a fraud," said Dad. "The world is full of conmen. Fiona, let's e-mail all those posh people."

Oh, no! Had Professor Burbage thought of that?

Dad e-mailed Mr Kipling, Mr Debenham and the BBC with messages like this.

Dear Sir,

I understand you were once a student at Northside Secondary College. My son Kevin has accepted a scholarship there, and we want to know your honest opinion of the establishment before we agree to send him.

Yours sincerely,

Leonard & Fiona Entwistle.

But apparently Professor Burbage had sorted out all those fake e-mail addresses, because they all returned answers.

Dear Mr & Mrs Entwistle,

Northside is an exceedingly good place! It has the finest caterers in the land, and pupils can eat (and cook) to their hearts' content.

Trades training is second to none, and my mentors at Northside selflessly sacrificed to help me build my business. Since your Kevin is to be one of us, let me send you some free cakes.

Yours sincerely,

Rudyard Kipling

Dear Sir,

We, the undersigned, are all equally alumni of Northside Secondary College. We can testify that Northside offers excellent facilities in soccer, rugby, cricket, rowing, swimming, choir, orchestra and private music tuition.

After passing five A levels apiece, we all proceeded to higher education (the Universities of London, Glasgow and Aston respectively) before applying our skills acquired at Northside to the business of the sumptuary industry.

We are now a hugely successful chain store and shall be glad to provide young Entwhistle with linen shirts and a hat.

Yours faithfully,

William Debenham, Clement Freebody & Clark Flint

Dear Len,

What a hoot! Imagine young Kev turning up at my old school! The old school network is strong: friends from Northside are always friends for life. Your son will meet all the right kinds to help him on his way.

Best wishes,

Sir Michael Lyons,

The BBC

It was lucky that Mum and Dad were both at work the next day, because a flurry of owls arrived at our house. They were carrying boxes of stuff addressed to Dad, and none of it looked the way real post office deliveries are meant to look. No dangerous goods labels, no stamps, nothing to sign just boxes!

Dad was too excited to notice how odd it was that strangers were sending him presents, but Professor Burbage must have called in all her connections with tradeswizards.

There was a huge crate of Kipling's Cakes. We actually had to invite all the neighbours to an impromptu party to get rid of them. There was a flat box of three linen shirts, all in Kevin's size and far finer than anything on sale at the real Debenham's. There was also a top hat, which made Kevin groan in horror, but convinced Dad like nothing else that Northside was a *really* posh school. And there was the latest and the greatest in photography, a real, true digital camera, which Dad gave to me "because we can't leave Cal out of the action completely."

"Don't feel bad, Callum," Mum chimed in. "Work hard at Halliwell Comprehensive, and I'm sure it will be almost as good." But her smug smile indicated that she didn't seriously believe it would be. Kevin had landed on the golden highway to fame and fortune, and after that digital camera, there was no more talk about whether sending him to "Northside" would be the right decision.

Late at night, Kevin confided to me, "We'll have to plan this carefully. How am I going to buy my clobber without Mum and Dad asking questions about the magic items?"

"And how are you going to be at that school for five no, seven years without them ever guessing that it's a magic school?"

It turned out that Professor Burbage would help Kevin with his school shopping. I took him on the train to Manchester, and while I hung around the city museums and cinemas (I saw *Terminator 2* the special effects were wicked!), Kevin learned how to take some kind of magical transport to London. I was supposed to meet him again at three o'clock at Piccadilly Station. I knew magic would be involved, but it was still a shock to see the way he burst through a window, which he later told me wasn't a real window at all, but a sheet of enchanted glass that led to something called a "public Floo".

He was *loaded* with stuff: two bags of new clothes; another bag containing glass phials, brass scales and a telescope; a pewter cauldron full of old-fashioned, hardback books; a starter-box of potions supplies; and, yes, a wand. Professor Burbage was nowhere in sight: she had gone back to Scotland!

"I'll take this cauldron," I said, and then regretted it, because it was a slow, heavy lug to the nearest trolley; and Kevin was still in some trouble balancing his potions box with his three bags. Several people stared at our luggage curiously.

"School play!" I explained cheerily. Then I realised that nobody would believe *that* story in the middle of the school holidays!

The journey to Bolton wasn't too bad, but once we had dragged our clobber out of Bolton Station, we realised we couldn't haul it all the way home to Halliwell on foot. So there was nothing for it: we had to hire a taxi.

"That's your money," said Kevin, worried.

I knew it was, but it would be mean to rub it in, so I consoled him with, "It's still cheaper than taking a train all the way to London, so we've made a saving really."

The taxi-driver did ask us about the cauldron and telescope, but accepted our brief excuse that we were giving a fancy dress party. I didn't have quite enough to pay him (I shouldn't have gone to see *Terminator 2!*) so I had to race in and take change out of Mum's purse. Then Kevin had to distract Mum with talk of his day out while I heaved the baggage upstairs to our gaff. To fit the cauldron in our wardrobe, I had to pull out our accumulation of football gear and camera equipment, so our room was soon a complete mess.

Bother. I'd have to tidy and vacuum it myself if I was to keep Mum at bay. But what else was I to do with the summer? I'd now spent the whole of my allowance!

When I came downstairs, Kevin was quietly describing the ice-cream he'd eaten for lunch, the "modern" equipment in the astronomer's shop, the furry animals in a pet-shop he'd passed and the "foreign" flowers in a nursery centre. Mum was worrying about money, since she knew that the equipment allowance was only supposed to pay for half (and then only for second-hand items). Kevin was saying not to worry because Professor Burbage had lent the money for now, and the expense of reimbursing her would be offset by the fact that Mum and Dad wouldn't need to feed him for nine months of the year.

Our kid was cleverer than I'd thought. All by himself, without help from me, he was managing to describe his day excluding the magic parts.

That was how we managed to keep it. Kevin went off to Hogwarts on the first of September. That evening, more wizards came round to our house to cast more forgetting spells on Mum and Dad, just gentle ones, they claimed, so that my parents would never quite remember Professor Burbage or how it was they had agreed to send Kevin to Hogwarts. They also took away the bogus Northside prospectus and wiped our computer memory of the bogus e-mails.

Yet as time went by, Mum and Dad never seemed to worry about the vagueness of their understanding of "Northside". They boasted to the neighbours that Kevin had won a scholarship to a really posh boarding school up north, and that, as far as they were concerned, was the whole story.

Kevin's first letter sounded happy.

Dear Cal,

Arrived safely, and I'm having a buzz! That brochure photo was wrong: the Hogwarts building is actually a CASTLE. My common room is at the top of a tower. I've been sorted into Ravenclaw house, where everyone wants to debate and study. There are ghosts floating through the corridors, and staircases that move around, and portraits that leave their picture frames to go and talk to one another.

My transfiguration teacher is fantastically clever: she can turn her desk into a pig! But I've only had to practise turning a match into a needle, which is hard enough. The charms teacher has started us on colour-changing spells by showing us how to make different-coloured lights out of our wands. Best of all is herbology, where we are growing our own fungi and learning to recognise toadstools.

There are wonderful animals here: giant toads, fluffy Puffskeins, cats that know when people are lying and rumours of unicorns in the forest. But I don't study them until third year. I can borrow a trained school owl any time I want to write a letter home. I tell the owl to drop the letter at the Muggle post office in Ballater, and it always knows not to let the Royal Mail people see it but just to add my letter to the piles. I'd love a trained owl of my own, but perhaps that would be too weird for Mum and Dad.

Love to all,

K

He wrote something completely different to Mum and Dad.

Dear Mum and Dad,

Arrived safely, and I'm having a buzz! The school building has all mod cons, with blue plush sofas in the common room. All the students are keen to study for top marks in the exams. My best friend is Robert Rivers, who is the funniest person in the world. The other boys in my dorm are Anthony Goldstein (nose always in a book), Terry Boot (religious type) and Michael Corner (forever taking gadgets to pieces).

My physics teacher is fantastically clever: she knows all about string theory and states of matter. But her lab pracs are proper hard work: I'm learning things I never dreamed existed. The maths teacher has started us on algebra by showing us how to substitute for different values of  $x$ . Best of all is botany, where we are growing our own fungi and learning to recognise poisoned mushrooms. We'll progress to zoology in our third year.

To sum up: Northside is so much better than primary school! I miss you all, but there's never a dull moment around here.

Love to all,

K

The letters always arrived with a real BALLATER frank, and Mum and Dad never thought to ask exactly where "Northside" was. Kevin has been at Hogwarts for six years now, and Mum and Dad still don't know that he is a wizard.

**A/N.** Many thanks to **TDU** for giving the Entwhistles an authentic Mancunian voice.

## Riddlement

*Chapter 6 of 11*

Sally-Anne Perks's new stepbrother is determined to sleuth out her family's secrets.

*I've been asked what would happen if a Muggle picked up a magic wand in my world, and the answer would probably be something accidental... possibly*

quite violent. Because wands ... [are] merely a vehicle, a vessel for what lies inside the person... [Y]ou need the ability, in other words, to make these things work properly.

J. K. Rowling at *An Evening with Harry, Carrie and Garp*, 1 August 2006, Radio City Music Hall, New York, U.S.A.

## CHAPTER SIX

Riddlement

by Jeremy Slater

The three bridesmaids in cherry-red taffeta were not ugly. And I knew at once that the bride my new stepmother was not wicked. She couldn't have been more ordinary. It felt odd to stand around watching, knowing I was meant to be the best man. A wedding, any wedding, ought to be more of a drama.

When the Vicar began the marrying part, my brother Christopher hissed to me, "Jeremy, lose the ring!" But it was a very weak, last-ditch rebellion. As I handed the ring over to Dad, it all felt decidedly anti-climactic. Nothing was going on here. Dad and this Julia woman were just signing some legal document, a contract that didn't bind anyone to anything nowadays; and for some reason, Christopher and I had to dress up in bright red waistcoats and rose-buttonholes in order to watch them sign it.

After the ceremony there was a small reception in the church hall. The eldest stepsister, Sally-Anne, spent the whole party behind the punch-bowl, serving out fruit punch to the guests. The middle stepsister, Ella-Jane, challenged Christopher to a tug-of-war, which resulted in a huge tear down the skirt of her hired bridesmaid-dress. The youngest stepsister, Molly-Rose, sat in a corner reading picture books to her teddy bear. The bride's mother now my step-grandmother wandered around taking photographs of everyone and everything. There was also an aged lady who sat in a rocking chair, draped in an old-fashioned lace shawl, pointing a thin stick at food crumbs on the floor. It must have been some kind of firecracker because every crumb burst into bright blue fire for a second and then auto-extinguished. The old lady said she was Domitilla Flourish, mother of the bride's father, and that she was ninety-two years old, so I suppose she was my step-great-grandmother.

Mum and her husband scooped us up from the church hall on the dot of seven o' clock, while I was still queuing for a second slice of the wedding cake. The floor was by now swept clean, and I was hoping to work out how Domitilla Flourish did her trick.

"So your father has changed his life," said Mum, hustling us out of the door before Dad could speak to her. "Is he planning to live happily ever after?"

Christopher shrugged. "The cake was good. I had four slices."

No fair!

"There was really no need for your father to remarry," said Mum. "He was settled in that nice little flat; he had a good job; he took you boys out every other weekend. The family was doing perfectly well until he met that woman. Why did he need to make any changes?"

I didn't know why Mum would still care what Dad did; they had been divorced for six years.

Christopher blurted it out loud. "You got married again, Mum. Why shouldn't Dad?"

"He was stupid to choose a woman with children," she said. "Those girls will make sure he never has any time alone with her, and she is her name Julia? she'll demand that he pay for *her* children instead of maintaining you."

"We don't yet know what she's like," I said. "She seems ordinary."

\* \* \* \* \*

A month later, Mum deposited Christopher and me at Dad's new front door for our first access weekend. He had sold the "nice little flat" and moved into Julia's house, which Mum thought an "absolute rip-off. I'll have no sympathy if that Julia dumps his money into her mortgage but leaves his name off the title deed."

Dad let us in and showed us to a blindingly clean kitchen. No kitchen could be that clean the floors and cabinets shone like glass. And it was too late to warn Christopher that this was a tidy house, because he had already planted his muddy football boots in a clear footprint-sequence straight across the white tiles!

"Oh, dear!" Sally-Anne, the eldest stepsister, had appeared; she was nine years old and was wearing an apron over her school uniform. She pulled a mop out of the cupboard and flicked it over Christopher's footprints. The mop-hairs barely touched the floor, yet somehow the mud completely vanished in a single sweep! "Did he print the hall carpet too?"

I nodded warily. Sally-Anne didn't seem angry, but she was obviously very serious about maintaining the house properly. She pulled a bottle and a clean rag out of the mop cupboard, tripped into the hall and sprayed a disinfectant-smelling liquid over Christopher's footprints. Then she swished the rag lightly over the spray, and suddenly there was no mud. Just nothing! The carpet was as pure and fluffy as a new lay.

"That's a powerful cleaner," I said, thinking of how long it took Mum to clean up after her toddlers. "What brand is it?"

Sally-Anne looked embarrassed. "It's... not for sale in the shops. Jeremy, I was going to make a pasta bake for dinner. Do you two have any allergies?"

Sally-Anne shooed us out of the kitchen to bake the pasta all by herself, so I wandered into the lounge, where little Molly-Rose was reading. She seemed to like dressing up, as she was wearing some kind of medieval princess gown. I picked up a book from her pile, one called *Beadle the Bard*, and read it out loud to her. It was a collection of very odd fairy tales, clearly set in some kind of fantasy universe that was never quite explained, but Molly-Rose listened in wide-eyed silence, so she must have been familiar with the concept. All the other books were picture books, so I worked through the pile and read her all of them. Not one was familiar. They had titles like *Nigel the Knight Bus*, *Seven Fat Puffskeins*, *The Tale of Madam Curlyknarl* and *The Dragon who Came to Dinner*, and they were all fantasies.

Julia didn't arrive home from work until the pasta bake was on the table. She seemed very tired. Her three daughters looked very like her: they were all slim with blue eyes and mousy hair. But we weren't going to have any trouble telling them apart. Only the prissy-neat Sally-Anne fussed about the house. Dreamy Molly-Rose had left an untidy trail of books all over the lounge furniture, and she never spoke unless someone spoke to her first. I didn't even meet Ella-Jane until Dad had called to her to dinner three times. Then she and Christopher both appeared, school uniforms torn and hands and faces covered in black dust.

"Dad, there's a great park around the corner!" enthused Christopher. "Ella-Jane was showing me which trees to climb."

"Did Ella-Jane mention that you're not allowed to go to the park without permission?"

"Oh..." Christopher glanced at Ella-Jane, who exploded in a fit of giggles.

"I did have permission," she said. "Christopher gave me permission. I gave him permission too."

I expect Dad and Julia frowned at them, but nobody noticed. Christopher had never cared what the adults thought of his behaviour, and it was clear that Ella-Jane didn't care either.

We had an ordinary Friday evening watching a video and an ordinary Saturday morning taking Christopher to his school football match. In the afternoon we visited the cider museum. It wasn't until we arrived back at Julia's house in the late afternoon that the really odd thing happened. Julia went into the kitchen to cook dinner; Sally-Anne started her piano practice; Dad shuffled snap cards and dealt them out to Molly-Rose and Christopher. I sat down in front of the old-fashioned hearth to set up draughts for a game against Ella-Jane. In front of us, the fireplace crackled and suddenly it was alive with bright green flames. Dad must have lit the gas by remote control, but *green*?

Before I could even ask about it, a face appeared in the middle of the flames, a face looking just like Domitilla Flourish, the old lady from the wedding.

"Hello," said the face. "Is Julia there?"

"I'll fetch her," said Ella-Jane. "Wait, though "

Sally-Anne crashed a chord and sprang to her feet in alarm. Dad put an arm around Christopher and tried to march him out of the door.

"Sally-Anne, are you doing that with a slide-projector?" I demanded. "Stop it's too freaky!"

Ella-Jane tugged my arm. "Come on, Jeremy, you need to..."

"What's going on?" I could tell they didn't want me or Christopher looking at their magic lantern show in the green fire, but what was the big deal?

Then a new voice spoke, one that seemed to be coming from *behind* the fireplace. "Mother, you need to come out of the flue!"

Ella-Jane tugged at me again, but nothing would have rooted me out of my spot. The Domitilla-photograph was speaking, exactly as if it was answering the strange man.

"I'm just having a chat with Julia, dear. We won't be long!"

"Don't you remember what I told you, Mother? We can't flue Julia this weekend because she has those Muggle stepsons staying with her. Imagine the trouble it would cause if they happened to see your face surrounded by green fire!"

Well, we *had* seen the face in the fire! Sally-Anne or Ella-Jane was evidently playing a nifty mechanical trick, and they were daring us to work out how they were doing it by pretending we weren't supposed to have noticed. But what on earth did they mean by calling us "Muggle"?

"The trouble has already started!" shouted Christopher. "I bet we'll have worked out how you're doing it by this time tomorrow!"

But at this point, the girls' imagination evidently ran dry, because Domitilla simply said, "Ohhh...." and then her face and the green fire vanished.

"You have to admit they put on a good show," I conceded to Christopher. "I bet Dad helped them."

"Dad should have helped us, too!" Christopher protested. "Dad, will you show us how to do that magic lantern stuff in Mum's hearth? I bet we give her a heart-attack!"

Dad and Ella-Jane were still standing in shocked silence. Finally Sally-Anne seemed to pull herself together and said, "Let's play snap."

"It isn't *real* snap," objected Molly-Rose. "Those cards don't explode properly. They don't move at all!"

Ella-Jane's mouth dropped open. It was the first time I had seen her look disconcerted by anything.

\* \* \* \* \*

"There's something around here that they're not telling us," said Christopher.

It was late at night. We were bundled up in sleeping-bags that only just fitted the tiny floor of what was usually Sally-Anne's room. All her personal property, including her bed, had been moved into her sisters' room before we arrived; I wondered how long it had taken those thin little girls to shift that heavy furniture and then set up the room for us so slickly.

"Divorced people always have things they don't tell you," I said through a yawn. "Our stepfather won't tell us his ex-wife's name. Mum won't tell us why she broke up with Dad. Dad didn't tell us about Julia until a month before the wedding. Julia won't tell us where her ex-husband lives."

"He lives in Liverpool," said Christopher. "Ella-Jane told me *all* about her Dad. She says her stepmother *stole* him she hates her stepmother. But Julia shut her up and wouldn't let her talk any more."

"As I said," I repeated, "divorced people never tell you stuff. Even if it's about your own life, they think they have the right not to tell you."

"But / think," Christopher persisted, "that there's something *else* they're not telling us here. Why did Dad teach those girls the face-in-the-fire trick but after all these years he's never taught *us*? We're his own sons!"

"Perhaps it was Julia who taught them."

"Yes... perhaps. But no matter who showed them how to do it... There was something *weird* about the way that green face just appeared and started talking."

"Do you remember the real Domitilla? She's..." I hunted for a polite word. "She's an *eccentric* old lady. Putting *her* face in the fire seemed like teasing; it was unkind. A kind person would have used a photo of someone more ordinary, like maybe Dad. But Dad wouldn't do an unkind thing, and Ella-Jane couldn't have done it without a grown-up's help. So does that mean Julia helped her? It would be *really* weird if she turned out to be the unkind one."

"No, it wouldn't." Christopher's voice sailed confidently through the darkness. "Everyone knows that stepmothers are wicked."

We agreed we would be careful of these people, however ordinary they seemed.

A shrill alarm woke me at six. Christopher was waving it in my ears.

"Christopher!" I expostulated. "It's *Sunday*! What's the big deal?"

"We're going to explore this house," he told me. "Come on! First stop fireplace."

We spent fifteen minutes raking through that fireplace. It was large. We could actually stand upright inside it and stare up the flue to the dawn sky above. But there was no soot or ashes or traces of anything that might have been used for fuel. Although it *looked* like an old-fashioned coal fire, it *wasn't* one. Yet at the same time, we couldn't find any buttons or switches or levers to turn on the gas.

"Was it even real fire?" asked Christopher. "I mean, was it hot?"

I hadn't thought of that. But I had been sitting right next to it and I hadn't felt the heat.

"Then it was fake fire just part of that video," Christopher concluded.

"But there's nothing like a projector screen here. The hearth wall is black. Come on, let's look for the projector itself."

We each took one end of the opposite wall and searched along it, floor to ceiling, ceiling to floor, for any sign of the hidden projector. There were no peep-holes and no ledges, just faded wallpaper of seventies-style giant poppies that I couldn't imagine Julia or Sally-Anne choosing. We met in the middle, admitting we hadn't found any sign of whatever-it-was.

"If we had a stepladder, we could do the ceiling," I said. "Perhaps it was hanging from the lights?"

Christopher peered up at the seventies-style hanging lamps. "That's funny. They have wax candles in their lampshades instead of bulbs. Don't they use electricity here?"

We agreed that, for safety reasons, they couldn't possibly use naked wax candles; but the candle-like lamps were a very convincing design.

"This is a very weird house," said Christopher. "Maybe Ella-Jane will tell us what's going on?"

"No, she was deliberately making a secret of the projector-trick," I said. "We should ask Molly-Rose because she's too young to keep a secret. Let's make some toast. Wait... Do you think Sally-Anne will let us wander around her kitchen for self-serve breakfast?"

"Stuff Sally-Anne," said Christopher. "This is our *Dad's* house, and we are jolly well going to make ourselves at home here."

Sally Anne came downstairs fully dressed, even to her shoes and her hair-ribbon while we were making the toast. She didn't say anything except "Good morning" before she started to boil the kettle, so self-service must have been all right. The younger girls both came down in their dressing-gowns and helped themselves to cornflakes, but Sally-Anne didn't eat anything before she took a tray of tea up to Dad and Julia.

Christopher nudged me. "Let's do their room while they're busy with breakfast and things."

"We can't do that! Bedrooms are private!"

"Exactly. So bedrooms are where they'll hide their private stuff, aren't they?"

We still had no idea what we were looking for, but Christopher's sense of adventure is not easily deterred, so as soon as Sally-Anne was back in the kitchen, I followed him upstairs. Three beds were crammed into the girls' room. Two of them had white padded headboards and mauve sheets, but the one in the middle didn't belong because it was pinewood. Sally-Anne had already plumped up the pillow and neatly arranged the quilt, both with a green patchwork pattern, as if nobody had slept there for a month. Christopher and I dived down to look for whatever was hidden underneath.

Nothing! Not even a speck of dust! Certainly not a gadget or a machine. Sally-Anne had obviously vacuumed before she dragged her bed into her sisters' room.

The bed by the window had a rumpled sheet; the quilt had been shoved onto the floor and the pillow was flat.

"Don't move that quilt," I reminded Christopher. "She'll know we've been here."

"I have to. We're investigating." He thrust the quilt back onto Ella-Jane's bed (its pattern showed happy dinosaurs in all shades of purple) to reveal her yesterday's-clothes and a half-finished lego ship. But they were ordinary clothes and ordinary lego.

Molly-Rose's quilt was decorated with lilac butterflies that would make any boy sick on sight. I lifted it up and saw a couple of books that had apparently shared her night. Then I looked under the bed, where she had stowed more books. On the shelf above her bed were a family of dolls, a piggy bank and yet more books.

"Plenty of mess here," reported Christopher as he crawled out from under Ella-Jane's bed. "But it's just lego that she couldn't be bothered tidying away properly and a teddy bear with one eye missing. Sally-Anne would have a fit if she saw it all. You know, they don't seem to have a lot of toys. Girls normally have dress-ups and craft kits and a whole lot of junk."

"Perhaps they're poor," I said. "Divorced families never have much money."

"Or perhaps they've hidden their toys, the same as they've hidden that projector thing. But the only other hiding place here is their wardrobe. Look "

He pulled open the door and something crashed down on his head. It was only a broom, so we carried on snooping.

The wardrobe was crammed with school uniform (two sets each), weekend casuals (two sets each) and several more of those princess-robos that Molly-Rose liked. I was surprised that they would waste their money on dress-up garments like that, and even more surprised that two of them were in Ella-Jane's size and three were large enough for Sally-Anne. She had left her everyday clothes in her usual room, so why would she move her party dresses out here? We opened and closed the underwear drawers very rapidly, just to make sure they contained *only* underwear, and then turned our attention to a wooden box on the wardrobe floor.

It was a perfect cube, about half a metre square, with marquetry birds and flowers inlaid on all sides. We couldn't see any latch or lock, but when we tried to prise the lid open, we found it was jammed shut.

"Must have one of those secret catches," said Christopher. "Perhaps down one side? I *bet* this is where they keep their projector thingy."

"Don't rattle it! That projector is probably delicate."

"I'm just trying to work out whether there's one object or lots in there. It sounds like lots. No, I am *not* shaking it any more I'm being careful!"

He wasn't, but it was the wrong time to argue.

"Let's put it away," I said. "We can't open it without breaking it and we don't want to be caught snooping. Just leave it exactly where you found it. Oh and why on earth would they keep a *broom* up here?"

"Let's put it in the mop cupboard downstairs."

I examined it. It was one of those old-fashioned twiggy affairs, and several of the twigs were dropping off, so it didn't look as if it would actually sweep a floor clean. The handle was printed with the brand-name COMET, and scrawled underneath in felt-tip was the claim ELEANOR-JANE IGNATIA PERKS. "Let's not. She probably needs it for a school play or something. Let's get out of here before they miss us."

We nearly collided with Dad in the corridor. He only said, "Church in half an hour, boys."

What? We had never gone to church before he remarried!

Julia came out of their room a moment later, and Christopher hissed, *'Now!'*

Before I could speak a word of protest, Christopher had already dived into Dad's bedroom. It was an ordinary, boring adults' room, with a double wardrobe and a double bed and no toys or personal property at all. But going there made me cold all over. It wasn't like going into my own parents' room at all; that woman shared it, and it was like invading a stranger's space.

Christopher was prying in their wardrobe. I was about to look underneath the bed when I finally saw something not-ordinary. I stopped in my tracks, checking I had really seen it. And there was no mistake! There, on Julia's bedside table, was a *cane*.

A real, genuine beating-stick of the kind that old-fashioned headmasters used to punish disruptive pupils!

Did Julia *cane* her daughters?

She was evil after all!

Sally-Anne was tidy, hard-working, obedient and generally goody-goody. Molly-Rose was very quiet. But surely nobody would describe Ella-Jane as good, obedient, polite, tidy or quiet? In a beating-family, she ought to be black and blue with bruises by now!

I pointed calmly, though my heart was beating wildly. Christopher looked, and his eyes bulged like golf-balls.

"Let's get out," he said. "She'll cane us for being here! Jeremy, don't touch it she'll *kill* you!"

"Never mind if she punishes us," I said, picking up the cane. "We have to save those girls! Let's break it first and look for a chance to tell the police afterwards."

I took one end in each hand, wondering how hard I would have to press in order to snap it. I smashed it down into my knee, and

Suddenly the cane was boiling hot, and there were huge explosions of purple light, and cannon-balls were erupting around me, and the wood was too stiff to bend and too strong to snap, and some gigantic electric force blasted out and zapped me so that I lifted a metre in the air before being hurled flat on my back. The cane slammed against the ceiling before dropping onto the floor, and Christopher, losing all his usual instinct for keeping out of trouble, was screaming. I had no voice at all and I couldn't even tell him to shut up. Clouds of turquoise smoke were puffing all around us, and I hardly noticed the footsteps pounding on the stairs, because I was certain I was going to die.

"It's too late, Mum," Ella-Jane shouted over Christopher's din. "They've found your wand!"

\* \* \* \* \*

Christopher and I were hustled off to church in a state of dire confusion. By the time Dad had checked we were all right, which we were, there was no time left for explanations, so we were dumped in our very first Sunday school session with no idea how we had created the explosion. Ella-Jane kept nudging us and whispering, "You didn't guess, did you? You had no idea at all, had you? We hid it really well!"

"Keep quiet, Ella-Jane," hissed Sally-Anne. "Don't you know how to behave in Sunday school?"

"Of course not," said Ella-Jane. "I've never been before, have I? The boys must be really, really surprised! They must be bursting to have us tell them everything!"

"But does your Mum actually cane you?" asked Christopher.

Ella-Jane looked genuinely surprised. "Mum? Why would a mother do that? The only person who ever smacks me is my stepmother. And she's the Hag of Deadmarsh "

"Ella-Jane, shut *up*. You know we're not allowed to complain about our stepmother!"

Once we were finally home, the explanations took all afternoon and all evening. Dad explained that Julia and her daughters were real, live witches, but they hadn't planned to tell us about magic until we knew them better. Magic wands only worked properly for their correct owner, so it would be best if we didn't touch Julia's wand again; but magic in general wouldn't hurt us if we left it to the experts. We must be careful of all magical objects, but the girls would show us how to use them safely.

Yes, Ella-Jane's broom did fly, but it probably wouldn't work for non-magical people and it would be better for Christopher *not* to take the risk. Besides, she wasn't allowed to let the neighbours see her flying, so she couldn't give us a demonstration until we were out in the Malverns, away from prying eyes. Yes, the girls had locked away their magical possessions in the mysterious wooden box, and of course nobody could unseal the magical lock without a spell. And, no, there had been no projector trick last night: Julia's grandmother really had spoken to her through the cold green fire in much the same way ordinary people spoke on the telephone.

"So we've won the bet!" said Christopher. *'Now* we know how you were doing your tricks."

Dad and Ella-Jane exchanged glances. "Ella-Jane has won the bet," he said. "She bet me five sugar mice that it would be impossible for the ladies to hide their magic for as long as a whole weekend. I told her that they *could* hide it if they tried... But I imagine there was simply too much going on that they scarcely even knew about." He brought his hand out of his pocket and displayed the five sugar mice.

All five of us pounced on them before any of the others had time to take unfair shares.

After that, Julia brought down the wooden storage box, tapped it with her wand and announced, *'Alohomora!*' The lid sprang open, and Molly-Rose started to take their toys out of the box. There were puppets that danced without being wound up; vehicles that ran without batteries; painted animals that talked without any need to pull a string; jigsaws that created a different picture every time they were solved; a lego-like toy called Connect-a-Hex that sparked when pieces were connected and squeezed together in geometry-defying matrices; board games that played music or emitted stinks at every move; and Exploding Snap cards that exploded in your face if you didn't pay attention. There were far more objects than should have fitted into that half-metre cube, but most of them had a battered, fragile look, as if they had been picked up second-hand or from junk shops. Being a witch evidently didn't mean that Julia could conjure up money.

The girls relaxed once they didn't have to keep their secret. They explained that they couldn't do much magic yet because they needed to be trained at a magical school after they were eleven, but they were allowed to have magical objects, such as the amazing cleaning fluids, the impossible toys and Ella-Jane's poor old hand-me-down broomstick. Magic was not supposed to be discussed or displayed outside the family, so Great-Grandmother Domitilla should *not* have used the Floo network yesterday; but Christopher and I were family now, so perhaps no harm was done.

The chatter lasted long into the evening. Even after we were supposed to be settled for the night, we lay awake for hours, shouting questions across to the girls' room, until in the end Dad came charging up the stairs to remind us that we all had school tomorrow. Dad is definitely not a magical person, but somehow he had a force of personality that intimidated even Ella-Jane.

But the next morning, when Dad drove us to school, we didn't speak a word in the car. The girls went to an ordinary Muggle primary school, and we barely said goodbye to them at their school gates. When Dad dropped Christopher and me off at our school on the other side of town, we looked at each other and knew we wouldn't speak a word about our weekend to anyone at school.

I didn't pay much attention to my physics project that day. I couldn't even answer a basic history question about who had led Germany in the 1930s.

"Jeremy Slater," accused the teacher, "you stayed up too late last night!"

I couldn't deny it; but that wasn't the real problem, for I wasn't at all sleepy. My head was whirling around with questions, of which the most urgent was *What on earth will I tell Mum?*

Long before I had closed my maths book, long before I had handed in my physics project, long before I had started my history essay, I knew that I would never tell Mum or her husband a single word about Dad's new life.

\* \* \* \* \*

"So what *is* that Julia like?" asked Mum on Monday afternoon. "Is it strange to live with all those girls?"

"Not really," I told her. "They're all pretty ordinary."

**A/N.** *This story is an outtake from Hearlinks, which explains the blending of the Slater and Perks families from Sally-Anne's point of view. Jeremy's future wife, Mary Fenwick, is featured in The Banebrewer.*

## Rejection

Chapter 7 of 11

Seamus Finnigan's father suffers a nasty shock on his honeymoon.

*I'm half and half. Me Dad's a Muggle. Mam didn't tell him she was a witch 'til after they were married. Bit of a nasty shock for him ...*

Seamus Finnigan, *PS*, p. 93.

### CHAPTER SEVEN

Rejection

by Niall Finnigan

She was sitting in the corner of The Stag's Head, sipping a lager and laughing at something her sister had said. She was wearing a classy red dress that clung to her in interesting ways, and her curls glinted red-gold in the firelight. She looked such a nice, *natural* girl, not like the screeching show-offs from Dublin city. After I had edged into the seat next to her, it only took me ten minutes to establish that her name was Maeve O'Brien, to find out that she loved old castles and folk music and to ask for her telephone number.

"I don't have a telephone," she said. "Give me your number instead."

Surprised, I wrote it out on a beer mat, promising to pick her up from where she lived. "I don't think so, Niall!" she replied. "I live in County Roscommon. Let's just meet at the cinema."

"What?" I must have heard wrongly. "If you live that far away in Roscommon, how do you plan to get to Dublin?"

"Sure, it'll be easier for me than for you, so it will now," she said cryptically.

When a stunning woman is sending out the come-hither, a man can ignore the obvious. I realise now that she was keeping secrets from me for months, but Maeve was such an entrancing girl that I completely overlooked it. When she shook her head and closed her mouth and laughed, I decided that she would probably tell me later. Or else there was nothing to tell; women sometimes pretend to have a secret on them just to tease men.

Two nights later, we went to see *The Medusa Touch*. Maeve stared and gasped at the screen, and after only fifteen minutes whispered, "I've never seen photographs that *move* so much!" It was indeed a fast-paced thriller, so I didn't really notice what she said.

After the film, we bought fish and chips, and I asked what had brought her to the The Stag's Head in Dublin the other day.

"I was meeting my sister for a quiet drink after work."

"What! Do you work in Dublin?"

"Sure, why not? *You* do." She smiled that entrancing smile again.

"So do you stay with your sister while you're working? Is that where you're going tonight?"

"I do not; I'll be going home. My grandparents are expecting me home tonight."

"Do your grandparents live in Dublin?"

"They don't. Didn't I just tell you now, we live in Tusk that's a village in Roscommon. I'll take the bus home."

Was she taking a bus all the way to County Roscommon? She let me accompany her to a bus stop an ordinary stop, not the Busarus terminal and asked me all about my

job and my family while we waited. When the number 46A rolled up, she commented, "It's a rather *low* bus, isn't it? And I never thought it would be yellow!" That was odd, since the bus was a double-decker, and what other colour would it be?

Before I had time to ponder it, Maeve grinned, waved, darted through the queue and vanished! She couldn't have literally vanished, of course; she must have boarded the bus; but in the dusk, it certainly looked like a vanishing.

\* \* \* \* \*

That was how the next six months progressed. Maeve let me write to her, or she would telephone from a public call box, and she always seemed to appear out of nowhere. Sometimes she seemed to be hiding great secrets, yet she shared other private information quite freely.

One time we were walking through a park, we overheard someone's transistor radio blasting out the news of the latest Loyalist atrocity. Maeve listened with interest, almost as if she didn't know about the Troubles and how the terrorists were making a mess of the country, then casually told me, "My cousin Gordius works for the Death Eaters. That's a terrorist group like the Loyalists; sort of Hell's Angels thing. We all stopped talking to him when my parents found out about it. How do Mug I mean, how do you think they managed make that wireless so small?"

Maeve could spend hours asking me about my family what they did for a living, how we amused ourselves on the weekends, what it was like in Cork but she was selective about what she would say about her own relations.

"My grandparents have a farm out near the peat bog. I help them with it because they're on the elderly side. My da is a kind of plumber and my mam oh, does it matter what she does? My sister married a Dublin man. She stays at home with her babies, and her husband is in... you could say he works for the drinks business."

"What is it you do in Dublin? Is that part of your work for your grandparents?"

"It's not, for I've my own job here. I'm a shop assistant. So tell me again about the school you went to. Why did you hate your numbering teacher so much?"

We'd been going out together for weeks before Maeve told me that the shop where she worked was a bakery. I couldn't imagine why that was a secret or why a girl from County Roscommon would commute all the way to Dublin for such an ordinary job. I had moved to Dublin to look for work and I would have returned to Cork if the large ironmonger's in Grafton Street hadn't hired me when it did. But commuting all that distance between counties? No shop assistant did that!

School was another touchy subject. Maeve would tell me all about teachers and classmates, detentions and library books, without a care in the world. But certain topics an owl that hooted in the middle of the night or the vandalism of a school flower bed brought her close to panic.

"Niall, I shouldn't have said that!"

"All right, I won't ask why you don't like owls or flowers now. Why were you at school in the middle of the night anyway?"

She blushed guiltily and admitted, "It was a boarding school way up north." Her arm fluttered, as if to show how far away up north her school had been.

I was surprised that a plumber's children had been to boarding school; Maeve had always seemed such a solidly working-class person, just like me. But I didn't understand why she was *embarrassed* about having gone there.

Maeve came to Cork to meet my family three times, but somehow put off taking me to Tusk to meet hers. "My grandparents are too old to cope with much excitement, and my parents are busy looking after my nephew. You can come round to my sister's if you like, but you met her that time at The Stag's Head anyway."

"Why does your nephew live with your parents?"

"My brother was killed in some sort of accident caused by the Death Eater gang," she said, with no emotion at all. "His wife was... rather like you, so the terrorists came after them."

Like me? But I'd never fallen foul of the Loyalists or any similar group. If it came to that, I'd never heard of a group that called themselves Death Eaters. However, it seemed tactful not to ask about a dead brother, so I pestered her to arrange dinner with her sister.

"It'll take Brigit a week to tidy up the house enough to have us to dinner. But if I Floo ummm, I mean, speak to her tonight, it should be all right for next Saturday."

Brigit's house, when we entered, was fair tidy. I was impressed by how a mother with two babies had such sparkling windows and such fluffy carpets. But the house was tidy because it was bare not a toy or a loose paper in sight. It was also rather old-fashioned: there was no central heating or gas fire, just a roaring open peat-hearth. They didn't even seem to have electricity, for the lighting was entirely by a mass of candles, and there was no sign of a television or telephone. Oddly, the candlelight was glancing off shiny-clean paint, for there were no photographs or pictures on the walls, and there was no clock of any kind.

Brigit had taken trouble with the dinner, too: salmon mousse, beef and bacon roll with potato cakes, and a caramel-apple cake with Irish coffee to follow.

"That's a class coffee now, Patrick," I commented to the brother-in-law. "Was the whiskey from your workplace? Maeve said you were in the drinks business, but I forget whether she said it was whiskey or beer."

Patrick hesitated for a moment before admitting that he was in beer and offering to brew everyone another glass of coffee.

That was odd, too. Why did it matter what kind of drink he brewed?

And why on earth didn't they have a clock in the house?

\* \* \* \* \*

A week later, Maeve agreed to marry me, and before I knew where I was, her relatives had decreed that the wedding would be on 23 June at their home parish church of Saints Eithne and Fidelma. They had it all worked out: a local hotel where we could hold the reception, a friend who would take the photographs, another who would make us a present of the flowers, and of course Maeve's bakery would donate the cake. There was almost nothing for me to do, which was grand.

On my day off, I took Maeve to the jeweller's to buy the rings. She soon picked out a pair of gold bands with shamrocks engraved around the edges.

"Try it, Niall. Oh... it's too loose. We need a smaller size, please."

"Sorry, madam," said the shop assistant. "That's the last one in stock. We can have one made up for you, but it will take ten days."

"No good!" wailed Maeve. "The wedding is next week."

"Let's choose something else now," I said, helplessly rolling the outsized ring around my fourth finger. "Look, that one is nice..."

"Wait," interrupted Maeve, pinching the ring between her thumb and forefinger. "I was wrong. This ring *does* fit my fiancé. It's all right. We'll take these, sure they'll do nicely!"

It was odd how Maeve *pinched* that ring. She just touched it, and it suddenly closed in around my finger as softly as wax. I saw and felt for myself the ring fitted perfectly, and I didn't understand how I could possibly have rattled it around.

Maeve seemed nervous after that. We had drop in at a china boutique to collect a glass unicorn for the top of the cake, and Maeve's hand was shaking so much that she dropped it on the floor. For a second, I thought I saw shattered pieces, but Maeve swiftly cupped her hand around the unicorn and picked it up. It was whole, not even scratched, so the "glass" that I had seen on the floor must have been dust.

The wedding was quite surreal: the church was decorated with exotic hothouse flowers that I couldn't name, and the white stones were almost singing along with the organ. The O'Briens had invited the whole village to the reception, and most of the guests seemed ordinary enough. But Maeve's own family was decidedly eccentric. A middle-aged man with a shock of sandy hair pumped my hand until I thought my arm would drop off while he kept repeating his name: "Clancy O'Brien, lad. Clancy O'Brien."

"Are you Maeve's uncle?"

"Sure I am not, me lad. I don't like me son-in-law! Amn't I her grandda?"

Yet Maeve had told me that her grandparents were "elderly"! Clancy didn't look a day over sixty, and Maeve was already twenty-three.

A huge man with a trollish face pushed Clancy aside and planted his hands on his hips. He scowled as he informed me, "I'm their son-in-law Garvan Goyle of Goyle's Greyhounds. I expect you'll want bring our Maeve to the greyhound races soon. Today's your lucky day, because I can get yez some half-price tickets."

"Daa-aa-aa!" wailed a fat teen girl. "D'ya have to talk about the dogs at a wedding?"

"Shut your gob or ye'll feel the back o' me hand," Garvan told his daughter.

Brigit and Patrick looked embarrassed by this exchange, so perhaps *not all* of the family was weird.

But finally the toasts were drunk, the cake was eaten down to a pile of crumbs, the fiddles were played out, and Maeve and I were climbing into the horse-drawn carriage that would bring us on our honeymoon. That carriage was a romantic touch it looked just like Cinderella's coach. I never thought to ask where it came from.

\* \* \* \* \*

The first day of our honeymoon was a fairy-tale. Maeve's blue eyes were sparkling as we made a leisurely drive down to Killarney in a hired car.

"It's much smoother than a train," she commented, as if she had never been in a car before. "No matter how fast you go, it purrs like a cat and never rattles at all."

We ate soda bread, farmhouse cheeses and grapes on the banks of Lough Leane before wandering hand-in-hand around the ruins of Muckross Abbey. The brush of Maeve's arm sent electric shivers up my spine, and everything she said sounded profound.

"You're magic now."

"Of course I am. How did you know?" Her blue eyes stared into mine as if she were trying to second-guess me. Then she shrugged mysteriously again. "It's the abbey that's magic, sure. You must be catching the vibes."

Even at that moment, I wasn't suspicious. I was just looking forward to an early night. We played a handy round of golf before eating a pub dinner while Celtic fiddles played under the rafters. It couldn't have been a more normal day.

On the second day we caught a tour bus to Torc Waterfall. I hadn't actually booked the Ring of Kerry tour, but Maeve wanted to see the waterfall, and when she waved something in front of the driver's face, he gave her a kind of dazzled look and let us on the bus anyway. We were sandwiched between crowds of European tourists all shouting at one another in foreign languages, so under the cover of their babble, I asked Maeve if she'd paid the driver.

"Paid? He had not one of those bus-collection-box yokes. There was nowhere to put money."

"I mean, did you have a ticket on you?"

"Sure, don't I have this now." She pulled a strip of card from her bag, and it *looked* like two adult tickets for the Ring of Kerry tour, yet I was sure she *hadn't* had it a minute before she stepped onto the bus. "Niall, when we were at the bus stop, I could have sworn I saw... Oh, never mind..."

"Who did you think you saw?"

"My cousin Gordius the one who joined the Death Eaters. But it couldn't have been. His gang are mostly in Great Britain."

When we first reached Torc Waterfall, we had a fair view of the other tourists, who were all shoving one another around as they flashed cameras and noisily exclaimed. We hung back, tacitly agreeing not to follow them back to the bus; and when they left, we had the scenery to ourselves. It was a grand cataract, and I wondered if we could climb up the rocks to the source.

"Let's do so," said Maeve, and made a daringly long jump from the bank across to a rock in the middle of the pool. She held out her arm, so I leapt after her, and then began to scramble across to the wet cliff-face.

"It's probably illegal," I said.

"Who'd be watching us?" asked Maeve, now drenched and clutching at the moss.

"We are!" announced a voice above us. "We've caught you now, Maeve, y'blood traitor!"

All the colour drained from her cheeks as she lifted her eyes to a laughing Goon looming ten feet above us on the cliff. He had a flat, pasty face with tiny eyes and stubby hair, and the bullet-shaped head was stuck on the wide, oversized shoulders without any neck at all.

"Gordius," she whispered.

"You are trapped, Mrs Finnigan." A different voice was speaking this time, an Englishman.

I couldn't see the second man, but his voice was so unpleasantly cold that I grabbed Maeve's arm, looking for an opportunity to draw her back to the dry bank.

"So tragic," continued the cold voice. "Poor Maeve, so happy on her honeymoon with the man of her choice. The wrong man, of course, but her family was polite enough not to say so. Her bridegroom tried to climb a cataract, but it's so easy to lose one's footing on these boulders. Maeve tried to save him, but she only ended up falling down with him. And of course they both dashed their brains out before they even had time to drown. It's an accident that could happen to anyone. *Poor* Maeve."

"You're going die, Maeve," said Gordius, laughing childishly.

Maeve clutched at me painfully, and suddenly all the breath was sucked out of me. I staggered and fell off the rock, except that the rock wasn't there any more; I didn't seem to be standing on anything. It was like being turned inside out, and the whole world was black as I was squashed into nothingness. I hadn't expected dying to feel like

this, but I had time to conclude that Gordius must have used a gun before I found myself on solid ground after all.

\* \* \* \* \*

We were not at Torc Waterfall. Warm air and light shimmered around us, and then I saw clearly. There were copper kettles hanging from the hearth, bread baking in a warm peat oven, and old Clancy O'Brien drinking whiskey at the kitchen table. We were in the kitchen of the Tusk cottage that Maeve shared with her grandparents. Was I dreaming?

"Back from the honeymoon already, *Asthore*?" Clancy asked Maeve. He was wearing an outlandish, tent-like robe, which I mistook for a kind of dressing-gown until I saw that there were no buttons. "Did the two of ye quarrel now?"

"Niall, are you all right? Sure this must have been a shock. We did not quarrel, Grandda." She drew a painful breath, very obviously still shocked herself, and forced out the words. "Gordius stalked us all the way to Killarney him and his disgusting friend Lucius and they tried kill us."

Clancy clicked his fingers, and a goblet of whiskey sailed through the air into my hand. I drank without comprehending what I had just seen. He asked Maeve if she wanted to report the incident.

"Maybe. I managed to do a Side-Along before they could throw a spell, so nothing actually happened. But sure they'll try again another day. We need get Niall dried up before we do anything else now. Niall, are you really all right?"

"What just happened?" I asked. "How long was I unconscious? How did we travel a hundred miles from the middle of nowhere?"

"You haven't been unconscious," she said. "We travelled a hundred miles by Apparition."

"Wha... what's Apparition?"

"It makes you feel sick because you get squeezed inside out to fit into an atom and then reappear somewhere else. But you haven't been splinched, so you should be all right."

"She used magic," said Clancy, as if that explained everything. "Niall, a *vick*, you've married into a family of wizards."

"*What?*"

"Magical people," said Maeve helplessly. "People who do magic. We're not supposed tell outsiders about it, but you're allowed know now we're married. Today I used magic to save our lives!"

There was one thing in this barmy sequence of events that made sense hostile Gordius and his threatening friend. I could believe that Maeve had saved us from a real danger. "Who is Gordius? Why does he want kill us?"

"Gordius Goyle is my cousin," she said. "He joined the Death Eaters they're a kind of wizarding terrorist gang. They're trying take over the world and they despise Muggles that is, ordinary people without magic."

I was too stunned to ask any more questions. After a moment of silence, Maeve began to explain. She was a witch. She had been born with magical abilities, as had every O'Brien for hundreds of years. Yes, of course I had been told that magic did not exist, but that was because the magical community had a policy of hiding itself. Magic was still there, and wizards had a whole society hidden away from prying eyes their own school, hospital, shops and politicians.

"And we also have our own criminals," added Clancy. "There's a very bad wizard who's trying to control the whole world. His henchmen are called Death Eaters, and they kill anyone who stands in their master's way."

"A few years ago," Maeve continued, "I was working in the resistance against the Death Eaters. So was my brother, but they killed him. I gave up on the resistance at that point; it seemed we were losing, and there was nothing I could do. But Gordius warned me that if I wanted to be safe, I'd have to marry one of his despicable Death Eater friends; otherwise they'd keep me on their list of people to eliminate. I've lived very quietly since then. But when I married a Muggle that's you, Niall Gordius must have decided I was an enemy of the Death Eaters, so it was time to kill me after all."

"To be fair," said Clancy, "poor Gordius is a howling eejit. He hasn't the brains God gave a mushroom. So it had to be his friend Lucius who was behind the whole plot."

"So what do we *do*?" I asked. "If you have wizard shopkeepers and wizard politicians, do you have wizard policemen who can use magic to stop the wizard terrorists?"

The look on both their faces told me that I couldn't expect any guarantees there.

Then something else struck me. "Maeve, you said your brother's son lives with your parents. So what happened to the boy's mother?"

"Didn't the Death Eaters kill her too? Muggle life means nothing to them. She was standing next to her husband, so they took her out in the same blast."

"Does that mean they'd kill *me*?"

"For sure. Didn't that Lucius say so? Niall, I told you, Death Eaters are dangerous people, and that's why I was fighting against them! So we need lie low and keep out of their way now."

Grand. So I had just married into a family who could travel a hundred miles in a second and pull a glass of whiskey out of thin air. And I hadn't even noticed that in a space of minutes, they had made me believe in fairy tales, because they were also related to a family of killers.

That was the end of our honeymoon. I skulked at the O'Briens' cottage for a few days, not knowing what to do with myself, but feeling I was probably safer around friendly wizards than around non-magical people. Maeve tried to behave calmly, but she hardly knew what to say to me.

One day I heard her grandmother telling her: "Be gentle with your husband, *mavourneen*. He's had a thundering shock. That was the worst possible way a Muggle could find out about magic."

That was it! I wasn't going to lie around having fairy-tale people feel sorry for me! I announced I was returning to work at the ironmonger's.

"I'll bring you there," said Maeve, reaching out for my arm.

"That you won't, my girl! No more of that sickening hundred-miles-a-second business. Save that one for *thereal* emergencies!"

"Then I'll show you how the Floo works. You need a wizard to call the address, but anyone can travel through the network." She threw some green stuff into the kitchen hearth and commanded, "*Bruidne Atha Cliath!*"

Suddenly there was green fire in the hearth, and Maeve pushed me right into it! But it was cold, and I found myself whirling through mazes of brickwork, like an old-fashioned box-lift gone wrong, not knowing whether she was there or not. After a moment or two, the whirling stopped, and we were both standing in what was very obviously a different hearth. It felt strange, but not as sickening as her other method of magical transport, so I conceded it was as efficient a way as any to reach Dublin.

We stepped out into what seemed to be a small pub. Maeve waved at the barman but pressed right on to the door, which brought us out into a narrow, cobbled street of a dozen shops. The pub, it seemed, was called The Burned Elephant. Next to it was an old-fashioned bakery, the bay windows piled high with cobs, baguettes, rolls, buns and muffins. Maeve didn't need to tell me that this was *her* bakery a home business with an exclusive clientèle of wizards only.

"There's a larger shopping centre in London," she told me, "but wizards who can't Apparate don't have efficient ways of crossing the Irish Sea, so they use *Buidne Atha Cliath* for everyday things." We passed a tailor's shop that seemed to sell only those fantasy robes that Maeve's grandparents wore at home, then a perfectly ordinary greengrocer's, and then a tiny boutique with a row of owls perched in the window, which Maeve told me was the post office. I was beyond surprise by the time she told me this.

"And this is where I let you out!" she concluded. "*Alohamora!*"

A door that hadn't even been visible swung open, and suddenly I was in Adam Court off Grafton Street, just as if I'd never been away! I could walk to work from here. I didn't know if the terrifying Cousin Gordius could track me down at a Muggle ironmonger's, but I was going to give my day's work a try.

\* \* \* \* \*

So we settled down for a while. I reasoned that Gordius would probably stalk his prey in isolated places, so a big city like Dublin was as safe as anywhere. Work at the ironmonger's proceeded as usual. I told my normal friends that married life was grand.

In some ways, it really was. There was nothing wrong with Maeve herself, who was beautiful, classy company and interested in everything around us. The O'Brien family seemed ordinary once I allowed for their being wizards: kindly, accepting, full of fascinating stories and enthusiastic about weekend excursions. Sometimes we went to the greyhound races together, and I even had some friendly chats there with Garvan Goyle, whom we didn't blame for the way his son had turned out. Tulsk was a welcoming community with a normal pub that had a normal dartboard and television. Only three of the Tulsk families were wizards; nine folk out of ten knew nothing about magic. Seamus was born after nine months, and by the time he was a year old, I was almost comfortable with my extraordinary new life.

Then the Death Eaters came back.

Like vultures on their broomsticks, they swooped down on the local handball alley. Gordius Goyle was laughing his head off as he shot sparks of red light that shattered its stone walls into a cloud of dust. The noise pulled half the village out of our houses, and suddenly, with a ghastly flapping of the black capes, we found the coloured lights were being fired at *us*. Neighbours screamed with terror as rocks from the damaged handball alley ricocheted towards our heads.

"Get those Muggles!" shrieked Gordius, and as he waved his arm, I saw the postmistress upended and suspended, dangling upside down in thin air.

"*Stupefy!*" Maeve's parents were both hurling themselves into the chaos, followed by members of the other two wizarding families and then by Maeve herself. *Stupefy! Stupefy! Finite Incantatem!*

There were more screams, then suddenly the chaos stopped. The black-caped Death Eaters were all lying unconscious on the ground. Maeve was trying to repair the handball alley while her grandmother sent out an emergency message to the Mediowizards and magical police.

"It's all right now," said Maeve's father. "It was just a baiting raid. They've landed three Muggles in hospital, but there hasn't been any murder." He entered on a debate with his own father about whether they should modify anyone's memory now or leave it all to the experts. The experts took about five minutes to arrive, and they set to work casting forgetfulness spells on every Muggle in Tulsk.

That part was almost more horrible than the baiting raid itself. There were magical hooligans in their community, people who could have destroyed our whole village, and all those wizards cared about was covering up the evidence!

"It's all right now," Maeve repeated as the postmistress was loaded onto the last magical stretcher and sent off to be subjected to the jiggery and jinxes of the wizarding hospital.

"It is *not* all right!" I gave out to her. "How can you say it's all right when your own cousin might swoop down and kill us at any moment? If that was just a 'baiting raid', what happens when Gordius remembers his old plan to murder you?"

"Gordius has been arrested now and he's an idiot. Most of them don't attack where they can be so easily caught. Sure we still have a police force with us, Niall! Even the Death Eaters don't kill without some reason, and they will lose the war eventually. We'll be all right if we keep close to our community now."

"After *how* many murders?" I demanded. "You know you're on their hit list, Maeve. Sure they'll come back for you another day. Maeve, *can you promise me that Seamus is safe?*"

Her blue eyes glittered with tears as she slowly turned her face away.

I went home, sat Seamus on my lap and thought hard. I didn't believe the wizarding war was going to end any time soon, any more than the Muggle police could stop the Loyalists dropping bombs. The Death Eaters would return for Maeve another day for sure, and they would probably wipe out every Muggle in Tulsk when they did. They could slaughter Maeve's husband with a wave of the wand; but they probably wouldn't bother with hunting me down if I happened not to be there. Maeve herself would be safer without me; after I had left, she could pretend to Gordius that she hated Muggles after all. She probably *would* hate me if I left, but I might begin to hate her whole family if I stayed.

Even before the evening news on the Wizarding Wireless Network announced that Gordius had never reached the wizarding prison because his Death Eater friends had rescued him on the journey, I had finalised my decision to leave.

I packed by night while the household slept, and all my necessary possessions fitted into one bag. I thought about writing a farewell letter, but I soon realised I had nothing to say, so I just kissed Maeve, who stirred but did not awaken, and tiptoed past the cot. I did not dare look at Seamus for fear that sight of him would have made me change my mind. I found my way to Tulsk Cross by dark and I hitched a lift with a passing lorry before dawn.

I'm back in Cork now. I don't really know where Maeve is; when she tried to send a couple of those owl messages, I just sent the birds away empty. I didn't completely abandon her; I arranged to make a monthly deposit to her magical bank vault so that she and Seamus wouldn't be destitute, and my bank manager says the money is still transferring. It doesn't keep them in luxury, but I expect Maeve still works in Dublin. I'm well out of it. I'm living with another woman now, whom I'd marry if the Church allowed it, and I have responsibilities to my new family.

I wonder about Seamus sometimes. Is he alive? Does he look like Maeve? Did he turn out well or is he a junior Death Eater? The horrific images aroused by that last question are enough to keep me away from the Roscommon road forever.

**A/N.** Thanks to **Rory O'Farrell** for a very intensive beta-read and for sharing his huge store of background information about Ireland and the Irish. He even knew the name of Niall's ironmongery.

# Rumination

Chapter 8 of 11

Can a Muggle who marries a witch ever bridge the cultural gap between them?

*The feature-student in this episode is the one named Rivers, whose name does appear on Harry's classlist, but about whom we have no further canon information. In this story, young Rivers is a nephew of Emmeline Vance, and the Muggle narrator is his father.*

*Harry entered this world that a lot of us would fantasise would be wonderful: "I've got a magic wand and everything will be fabulous" ... and he immediately encounters all the problems you think he would have left behind...*

J. K. Rowling on *The Richard and Judy Show*, 26 June 2006, Channel Four Corporation (UK).

## CHAPTER EIGHT

Rumination

by Derek Rivers

*Sit down, Mr Rivers. I am Psyche Howard. You write here that you are forty years old and a Muggle. How did you find out about my clinic?*

That wasn't hard. I walk right past it every time I'm in Diagon Alley. I never took much notice because I always thought you psycho-healers were only for really crazy people, for loonies and weaklings and so forth.

*Not true at all: I leave those serious maladies to the Healers at St Mungo's. I only deal with ordinary problems careers guidance, disputes with neighbours, marital conflict, a touch of the nerves or the blues and the like.*

Well, I have conflict all right. I'm married to Linda. She's giving me nerves and blues and disputes with every neighbour on the Floo network. I am just about on the point of going crazy. But career's all right. I'm in customer services for Jewel Motors that's a vehicle company like your Cleansweep and I'm good at my job. Linda wishes I earned more, but the truth is, we're up to date with the mortgage and we dine out at the local pubs every fortnight. I'm hoping to buy a handy little video camera soon, and we'll take the grand tour of Europe before the kids leave home.

*Tell me about your family.*

Do you mean my Muggle family? There's nothing much to tell there. Mum and Dad are newly retired and live in Canterbury. I have an older brother who installs gas heaters; he's married and has two sons. They're ordinary. I don't see much of them because they don't mix well with Linda.

Linda and I have three children. Yvonne is in fifth year, studying for her O levels you call them owls, don't you? She's going through a Goth stage, always dressing up emo, and she supports the Holyhead Harpies. Then Robert plays the trumpet. He's in Harry Potter's year at Hogwarts. I'm actually not sure who this Harry Potter person is, but wizards are always impressed when Linda tells them that he's our son's friend. Robert gets embarrassed about the name-dropping: he says he scarcely knows this Harry because Ravenclaws don't share any classes with Gryffindors. All my kids are in Ravenclaw. Belinda Bella is our baby; she just started out at Hogwarts last month. She collects insects moths, beetles, wasps, all kinds. So now there's only Linda and me at home for most of the year.

*How did you meet Linda?*

It was about eighteen years ago. She was working in here in Diagon Alley, just up the road in Plumpton's Pots, which her grandparents then owned. Anyway, on this day she was bored at work, so she slipped out to explore Muggle London. She was fascinated by Muggles at that stage that's why she was wearing Muggle clothes and trying to strike up conversation with a real Muggle man. We met in a café. She was stirring a latte and commenting, apparently to me, "It tastes like mud and looks like mould on milk. Is it worth the risk?"

The waiter had given her bad service, and she complained with style. "He was as polite as a starving bulldog and as informative as an empty bucket. He's so stupid he could lose his shadow. Look, there he is the one whose red shirt matches his eyes. He's probably ripping off that old lady with so much hair on her lip she should plait it and so many teeth missing her mouth looks like a piano."

I laughed at her cheek, and I laughed again when she admitted that she'd read the insults in a book and had been looking for an excuse to try them out. I was ready to settle down, I suppose; Linda soon seemed the ideal person. I'm just concerned...

Yes?

No, it's better left unsaid. We spent our courtship going out to bands and touring London. We had fun, but I realise now I didn't know her very well when I proposed. I remember being surprised when I saw that her full name was Ethelinda Matilda Vance. I ask you, who calls their child "Ethelinda Matilda"? But it wasn't Linda's fault, and her parents were dead anyway. She said they had been killed "in the war," and I never asked which war. Linda went to live with her grandparents after that. I didn't realise that this was in Sheffield because I knew they had a shop in London. She wouldn't take me to visit the shop: she said it wasn't interesting.

But was I supposed to understand that my girlfriend came from a completely different culture just because her parents had given her an outlandish name, because I didn't understand exactly how they had died and because her grandparents owned a boring shop? Nothing struck me as at all out of the ordinary until the day she actually told me about magic.

*How did that happen?*

\* \* \* \* \*

She said, "Before we get engaged, Derek, there's something you need to know."

She looked so serious that I stopped the ruby ring an inch away from her finger. "Is this some true confession about a previous boyfriend?" I asked. "Darling, whatever you've done, it won't make any difference to me!"

"Oh, no," she replied, still very serious. "I've already told you everything about my previous boyfriends, and you know it isn't much. This is much more significant."

Every possibility went through my mind except the right one. I imagined she would say she had a record with the Juvenile Courts, or she was broke and I was marrying debt, or she was a Catholic and her family disapproved, or she was carrying a hereditary disease, or that she couldn't have children at all...

"It isn't whatever you're thinking," she interrupted. "You'll never guess, so I'll just tell you. I'm a witch."

"What," I said, "you're one of those neo-Pagan types?"

She shook her head firmly. "It's nothing to do with any religion. I'm not at all religious. It means I can do magic."

"Oh. You mean... you're an entertainer? You do conjuring tricks at children's parties?" That hardly seemed worth the drama Linda was making, so I wasn't surprised when she shook her head again.

"Derek, I know you've been told that magic isn't real, but... it is. Look..." A long twig slid into her hand, and muttered some incantation. Suddenly her red dress was blue, and the blue table-cloth was yellow! "You didn't order dessert, did you?"

We were eating at my flat; I had ordered in curry but I had to admit that I hadn't thought about dessert.

"Let's have Eve's pudding." She waved her wand again, and my flatmate's apples jumped off the sideboard. Flour and sugar soared out of the larder into a glass dish; the fridge door swung open to make way for flying butter and eggs; a wooden spoon raced around the dish of its own accord while a peeler attacked the apples; and within two minutes, the dish was sailing into the oven, which Linda lit with a separate spell. "There! Should be ready in about half an hour. Let's do a washing-up spell while we wait."

An hour later, after I had swallowed my astonishment and the Eve's pudding, and Linda was wearing the ruby ring, I said, "So you can do magic, but it's supposed to be a secret. What happens if *I'm* the one who tells an outsider about magic?"

"Derek, do you really think you will tell anyone? Whom did you have in mind?"

I thought about my parents, my workmates and the old crowd from school, and I realised at once that I would never, ever tell anyone that I was marrying a witch. They would think I was off my rocker.

That's why I'm here, Madam Howard. I thought about going to the Muggle marriage counsellors, but I'd have to leave the magic parts out of the story. If I did that, there wouldn't be anything left to tell.

*So do you think magic is the cause of your conflicts with your wife?*

She thought she had explained to me about magic, but all she had really told me was that she had some kind of secret supernatural powers. I never thought to ask how the wizards would have enforced secrecy if I had broken off the engagement *after* I knew about magic. If I'd known about the Obliviators, I'd... Anyway. I'm not the first Muggle to marry a witch, and yet no-one ever warned either of us what we could expect.

We put a deposit on a three-bedroom semi in Canterbury and got married. I asked Linda if she minded being so far from Sheffield, but she said it wouldn't matter once we were on the Floo network. That was a drama! Our new house had central heating only, so the Floocom office sent some wizards over to build us a fireplace. They took three seconds to explode the lounge wall and the next-door lounge wall too! To be fair, once they'd laid the hearth, it only took them another three seconds to clean up the mess. By that time, the neighbours had seen too much, so they had to call in the Obliviators. Ugh, that was a shock... the appalling way those wizards waved their wands over the poor neighbours, and suddenly the day's memories were *gone*.

Anyway, once we had a Floo connection, Linda took me into Diagon Alley. Some of your shops here, Madam Howard, are designed to scare us Muggles. The mediaeval cobbler and greengrocer are quaint, but I shivered at the beasts in the pet shop window. I try to be broad-minded, but do you know what your fwoopers and fire crabs look like to a first-time Muggle visitor? A crup tried to attack me because it could smell that I was a Muggle. Then the clock-shop is full of machines designed to spy, jump out, forecast the weather, recite a diary to do anything but tell the time; and the fangs and claws surrounding the apothecary's pills and potions seemed to be lying in wait to poison someone.

So I was already on edge before I entered Plumpton's Pots. I knew a kitchen supplies shop would sell kettles and knives, but I wasn't prepared for kettles that sang *theOde to Joy* when they boiled or for auto-slicing knives that hopped up over the onions at a word. If they attack onions, why not stray fingers? Then there were the tea-towels that changed to a different pattern for every day of the week, the self-updating shopping lists, the never-stain aprons... I realise now that those objects weren't alive and wouldn't have hurt me, but for my first few visits, I was really spooked.

*Diagon Alley can be terrifying for Muggles. It sounds as if you made a real effort to come to terms with our culture.*

Well, I thought I did. I told myself that the people mattered more than the objects, and old Mr and Madam Plumpton were very decent sorts. I never knew what to say to Linda's young sister because she behaved all superior and bookish. In the end I realised that Emmeline wasn't really unfriendly; it was just that she didn't know what to say to me either. But it upset Linda that I didn't take to Emmeline sooner. Then there was Bertha Jorkins. She kept Flooding in and out of our house at all hours. That woman never shuts up, and she talks such rubbish!

"It was raining this morning not what you'd call really big raindrops, but certainly heavier than drizzle."

"Minister Fudge went to St Mungo's on Wednesday no, it was Tuesday to be tested, and he has green gallstones the size of pigeon-eggs and red ones the size of peas."

"Have you seen Andromeda's new hairstyle? She's cut it shoulder-length, with loose curls, but curlier than waves, and a fluffed-up fringe."

I said, "It would be nice if she didn't drop in quite so often. How could we gently discourage her?"

I wasn't prepared for the way Linda flared up. "*Howdare* you talk about my friend like that?" She was screaming. "You ought to feel sorry for people like Bertha. She has no marriage prospects and she's stuck in a dead-end job. Her friends are all she has. Don't you have any sense of hospitality? You ought to be *glad* to open up our home to someone like Bertha! If you're so selfish you can't appreciate good conversation, you could always go off and play golluf when Bertha's here."

I don't play golf, Madam Howard; Linda never understood the difference between golf and cricket. For the next ten years, Bertha Flooed into our house four or five times a week and stayed for *hours*. Then she quarrelled with Linda; I don't know what about. So we didn't see her for a long time, and it was a relief. Lately she's started coming back only once or twice a week, thank goodness but she hasn't become any quieter.

Andromeda Tonks was another friend of Linda's. She used to invite herself to our house every week or so, and she was mad about tidying up. She poked her wand around everywhere, scrubbing the bath, scouring a week's worth of dirty pots, washing down the walls, shampooing the carpets, even dry-cleaning the curtains... I could tell if she'd

visited because the house was *attacking* me with smells of disinfectant! After all, this was *our* home, and I didn't like to see an outsider sniffing out our dirt and disorganisation. Linda didn't want me to stop it because, she said, it saved *her* the trouble. And, frankly, Linda never does take much trouble over the housework, even though magic should make it easy.

But Linda broke friends with Andromeda about the time Robert was born. Andromeda took about ten seconds to deal with the nappy bucket and she always had effective magical teething gels and croup steamers to hand. Linda felt inept in comparison; she accused Andromeda of interfering and told her not to come back.

The friend who irked me most was Gilderoy Lockhart... Oh, have you heard of him?

*He's quite a famous writer. Go on.*

He would prance into our living room, his hair all curled and his teeth flossed, and talk for hours about how he'd staked vampires, slain dragons or exorcised ghouls. I thought at first he was making it all up, but Linda said no, those monsters really exist, and it's people like Gilderoy who keep us safe from them. She and Bertha thought he was wonderful. But after a while, we'd heard all the stories, and Gilderoy would tell us the same ones, over and over again, always with himself as hero. Even little Yvonne was fascinated.

"Let's talk about something else," I said one evening. "What do you think of the Prime Minister?"

Emmeline started to make a polite remark about newspaper reports; Gilderoy and Bertha both stared at me as if I'd gone mad; and I foolishly remembered that wizards don't know anything about the Muggle Prime Minister. But Linda was furious.

"Derek, how rude!" she exclaimed, "Gilderoy was telling us about his adventures in Wagga Wagga. Are you too boring to want to hear about travel? Apologise at once!"

"Alas," said Gilderoy, "it was too much for your husband's manhood to hear that another man could be braver! Derek, I would not blame a Muggle like you for running away from a werewolf. Many a wizard would be so inexperienced in combating the Dark Forces that he would flee with the Muggles!"

Linda was still waiting for the apology, so I said, "I'm sorry I became bored with Gilderoy's showing off."

Linda whipped out her wand and blasted my armchair to smithereens. She hurled mini-hexes at the windows, smashing every pane of glass, and she exploded my television set and gramophone. Yvonne wailed when Linda shattered our china ornaments, and even Gilderoy looked upset when she blew up the wireless and cracked open a table. She screamed at me the whole time how I'd improve if I went to the goblins to learn manners and to the trolls to buy brains, but I'd never be as brave or principled as real men like Gilderoy, and was I going to petrify and fossilise in suburbia for the rest of my life? After Gilderoy and Bertha had excused themselves, she went on and on about how I didn't appreciate how important it was to maintain friendly connections with prominent wizards who could help our children to the top echelons of wizarding society.

Meanwhile, Emmeline was quietly reversing Linda's spells, re-constructing the windows, furniture and china, and reassembling the wireless and gramophone to the point where a handywizard could repair them. Yes, I do still find Linda's little rampages of destruction unnerving. But I've learned that it isn't as serious as it looks, not among wizards. Most damage-spells can be reversed.

No, Linda hasn't ever tried to blast people only objects. And Gilderoy Lockhart never came back.

*May I say that you seem to have adapted very well to living with magic. It sounds as if the real clash between you and Linda is not so much culture as values.*

We thought we had the same values when we talked about how we'd bring up the children. "We need to teach them to be honest and considerate," I said, "but we should let them make up their own minds about things like politics and religion."

"We can't let them run off with cults or terrorists," corrected Linda, "but I don't mind whether they vote Conservative or Labour, or whether or not they go to church. And we're definitely not choosing their careers for them."

I shuddered. "Of course not, so long as they finish their homework. I do want them to eat their vegetables and go to bed on time, and we must try to keep smokers out of our house."

"I'd encourage them to take up sport," said Linda. "And music, too. We'll need to save to pay for those extras."

"But let's not make it too serious," we both said. "Children need their playtime."

Yet by the time Bella was born, we had disagreed on issues I'd never even considered. Take punishments, for example. We'd agreed on no smacking, so I thought we'd use punishments like sending them to their rooms or taking away their pocket money. It never crossed my mind that Linda would use magic.

When the tots had tantrums, she would cast some Petrification jinx on them, and they were frozen to the spot just couldn't move. Or when the older ones wouldn't do their chores, she drew some kind of magic circle around them. That meant they could move enough to peel potatoes or lay a table, but they were *forced* to stay inside the magic barrier until the chore was finished. She had silencing spells, too. Once Robert cheeked her, and she took away his voice for three days... What's the matter? Why are you looking at me like that?

*Were you frightened to see this happening to your children?*

No! You're going to report it, aren't you? You're going to arrest my wife for child abuse.

*I assure you, this interview is confidential.*

Look, she isn't exactly cruel. She claims that some witches use enchanted whips or pain jinxes on their children. Linda never did anything like that. She just uses magical barriers that make misbehaviour difficult or impossible. It sounds severe, but the truth is, she doesn't punish often because her standards are quite permissive. She tolerates a lot of mess around the house, and as soon as the kids were old enough to walk out of the gate, she allowed them come and go at all hours. Yvonne says that *I'm* the strict parent because I demand a bit of order and advance planning... So is it true about the enchanted whips?

*That it certainly wouldn't be legal. But let's talk about you.*

Imagine this, Madam Howard: Linda didn't even want the kids to go to school! She thought she could teach them at home. Well, she couldn't. She doesn't even know the multiplication table. Once even she realised that, she wanted them to go to a small private school run by some witch up in Scotland.

"We're not wasting our money on that!" I told her. "You give me one reason why they'll get a better education with this witch-lady than they'd get for free at our local primary!"

"They'd learn Latin," she said. "You need Latin for spell-work. And there would be wizarding literature and history, and a magic-compatible view of Muggle science, and they'd get a head start on broomstick-riding. Derek, our children are wizards. I don't want them at a school where they have to hide what they are."

I laughed out loud. "Linda, you don't remember a word of Latin! I don't want our kids learning mumbo-jumbo about how magic replaces science yet knowing so little about the Muggle world that they can't talk to their own grandparents. It's happening, you know. Yvonne tried to discuss Quidditch with my father, and I had to make up excuses about some cartoon she'd seen on the telly. I want the children to know how to live among their Muggle neighbours!"

Linda smiled sweetly and then Flooed up to Scotland to enrol Yvonne at the dame-school behind my back. However, the teacher wanted a term's fees in advance, and Linda had spent all her savings. She came home furious.

"Why don't we have a joint bank account?" she demanded. "I slave away at home, bringing up your children, while you gad off advancing your career, and all our money ends up in your account! That gives you all the power to make the decisions. Don't you *trust* me?"

"We'll have a joint account when you can show me that you don't waste money," I said.

Linda screamed her head off all evening, but in the end she didn't have the money to pay for the private school, so she was forced to accept a compromise. We agreed to send the children to the Muggle primary school on condition I promised they would be going to Hogwarts later and that I bought them broomsticks for now.

So I bought three second-hand Cleansweeps, and there was our next quarrel waiting to happen! First Linda told me that Cleansweeps weren't good brooms and I should have bought Nimbuses. When she worked out that there *weren't* any second-hand Nimbuses, she said I should at least have bought a proper broomstick maintenance kit, and didn't I care about safety? Then we had to find a place for the kids to practise, wide enough to let them fly but sheltered enough to be invisible to Muggles. That was usually an apple orchard or hop field, although I wasn't happy about trespassing on private property.

"If they fly lower than the trees, who will know?" asked Linda. "The whole point is not to be seen, so you'd better make sure we're not caught!"

At first the tots only flew at waist-height. But they did fall off. We took many trips to St Mungo's for broken ankles and concussed heads. By the time they were five or six, they were soaring up to the height of the trees. Irate farmers did sometimes catch us between their bushes they thought we'd come to steal the fruit.

"It's *your* fault we were caught, Derek!" Linda would complain. "I'm busy teaching them to fly you were supposed to be the look-out!"

Bella was the boldest of the three, and she would shoot up above the tree-tops, clearly visible for miles around. I'd shout at her to come down, but she would laugh and fly off. Then it was my fault for not stopping her.

"How was I supposed to reach her?" I asked. "By jumping? If learning to fly is causing us so much trouble, perhaps we shouldn't bother."

"Derek, how can you talk such rubbish? *They need to fly!* Now face up to your responsibilities and keep them out of the Muggle view while they're practising."

"But Dad can't control us!" Yvonne objected. "We can fly away from him any time we don't want to listen."

"He feels left out," said Bella, hugging my arm. "We shouldn't spend every weekend doing something Dad can't share."

It wasn't every weekend, of course, but it was nearly every fine-weather weekend. If I suggested we do something different, Linda complained that I wasn't committed to giving our children a proper magical education. I always felt there wasn't a fair balance of Muggle activities: they were too busy with flying to have time to play cricket or go to football matches.

The lack of Muggle-ness shows in all sorts of small ways, Madam Howard. They don't watch telly, for example; if I'm watching a documentary, and Yvonne wants to listen to the wireless, she'll just switch off the telly without asking leave. Robert says the flashing on the screen distracts him, so he won't stay in the room if the telly's on. Bella will sit down next to me and take an interest, but she asks so many questions that it becomes impossible to keep watching. They do listen to the wireless, but only to the wizarding network, so they don't hear the Muggle news at all. It means they don't know what to say to their grandparents.

*Have your parents guessed about magic?*

Nah, they'd never believe it, even if we told them. If we expect them at our house, we run around hiding the magical potions kits and animated photographs. But trying to cover up every detail of our home life is quite stressful for Linda, so usually we visit, not host. The children tell my parents all about school quite happily, but after that they clam up. Nearly everything else in their lives is something they can't discuss with Muggles. They don't play monopoly and they don't watch videos. They even worry about taking a country walk in case they say the wrong thing about the local plants or the farmers' machinery.

The time came to send Yvonne to Hogwarts. Do you know, it wasn't until I read her enrolment letter that I realised Hogwarts was a boarding school? Linda had never once mentioned that detail.

"I thought it was obvious!" she protested. "Don't Muggles ever go to boarding school?"

"Not unless they're millionaires," I said. "I don't like the idea of our kids being so far away from home for months on end. Isn't this the end of family life?"

"Of course not!" snapped Linda.

Emmeline was more sympathetic. "In some ways it is," she said. "Wizards *expect* that kind of 'family life' to end at age eleven. But the children will be all right. They won't miss you nearly as much as you'll miss them, and Hogwarts is the safest place in Britain."

I'd always thought of boarding schools as filing cabinets for parents who couldn't be bothered taking care of their children themselves. If I'd known all those years earlier that Hogwarts was a boarding school, I *wouldn't* have agreed to send our kids there. But it's too late now...

*Perhaps you feel cheated?*

I do! Yes, cheated. The wizards *ought* to have told me a big thing like "Hogwarts will end your family life." But I don't have a leg to stand on, because the kids are happy there. They really enjoy the independence. I can't even complain about the expense, because the cost of books and uniforms is far less than what we save by not having to feed them.

But money's always a bit of an issue between us. Linda doesn't understand about mortgages or superannuation or life insurance: she expects to spend everything we earn. And she knows plenty of ways to spend! She's bought garden tools for a garden she never bothered to plant; a gym subscription that she only used twice; trashy novels that she could have borrowed from the library; some luxury brand of Floo powder that gives a better connection; Madam Primpernelle's beauty baskets for soft skin and shiny hair; "special offer" theatre and theme park tickets that we never quite use up before the expiry date; new robes with the Twilfitt and Tatting label; confectionary, flowers, alcohol... It all adds up.

Yes, we do bicker about money. Linda asks why I can't give her more "housekeeping," and I ask why she doesn't magic up more money. But apparently you can't do that.

*Correct: money is the second exception to Gamp's Law. You can conjure up Leprechaun Gold something that looks like money but it disappears after only a few hours. You can also transfigure a solid object into fake coins that you could use as a theatre prop, but you couldn't spend them in a shop because the forgery would be obvious. That's just a magical principle built into the fabric of the universe: you can't use magic to make real money.*

Linda doesn't really understand magical principles. She has A levels... newts... in charms, astronomy and evil-defence, but she's forgotten all the theory and she didn't do any further studies after Hogwarts. But she does know that even wizards can't make money unless they earn it, and she found it very frustrating to stay at home with the children, depending on me to hand out the cash. Three years ago she went back to Plumpton's Pots, which now belongs to her cousin. I don't know what they pay her, because she never brings the money home: she spends it all in Diagon Alley as fast as she earns it.

*Does that worry you?*

Not much. It keeps her happy, and she often buys things for all of us. Last week it was a magic tent that hides a whole hotel suite inside. We'll take that with us when we tour Europe. I just wish she wouldn't ask to spend all *my* money as well as all hers! And of course she has even less time to tidy up the house... Madam Howard, have you noticed how magic isn't very good at solving problems but it's very good at creating extra ones? It's very obvious to us Muggles.

Anyway, that's me and Linda. I wish we had a happier home-life, and I think magic is the reason we don't.

\* \* \* \* \*

*So you have a fiery-tempered, disorganised wife who spends too much money.*

It doesn't sound such a big deal when you put it like that, does it? I've put most of our money where she can't reach it; I close my eyes to the mess and I close my ears to the nagging. It isn't a huge problem, is it?

*Except that it matters to you.*

That's it! It matters to me! I want to know the big secret in your culture that I just don't understand. I've lived among wizards for eighteen years, and I still don't understand them. What's the magic key to getting along with you people?

*What about your children? Is it so hard to get along with them?*

My ? Oh, the kids are quite ordinary. I get along fine with my kids. They shout at their mother, but they're always normal with me. I hardly notice that they're wizards. I'm just a normal Dad with them.

*It doesn't seem to me that you have much trouble getting on with wizards.*

But I've been telling you

*that you get along perfectly well with most wizards. The only person with whom you keep on quarrelling is Linda.*

What?

Oh.

Linda.

Yes. Linda.

*Take away the magical parts, and it's about you and Linda and about the two of you having to live together.*

Do you think so? No, it's more than that. It's definitely the magic. If Linda weren't a witch... If she weren't so ready to break rules and use magic... She... I don't know how to say this.

*Are you afraid she'll use magic on you?*

YES!

Well, she hasn't so far... At least, I haven't *caught* her at it... But can I be certain she hasn't? Madam Howard, how easily could Linda Obliviate *me*?

*Oh, is that why you're here, Mr Rivers? Are you afraid of being the victim of a magical crime? If Linda had deliberately interfered with your mind, I'd have noticed by now. Obliviation is very difficult magic. A low-qualified witch like Linda couldn't possibly modify your memory properly. More likely she'd blow out half your brain in the attempt. No, we can safely say that no-one has tried anything like that on you.*

Then what about... Could she have fed me... a love-potion?

*Well, not recently! You are definitely not suffering from infatuation today.*

True! So you admit that love-potions exist, Madam Howard. What about during our courtship? Could Linda have used a potion to trick me into marrying her?

*Hmmm... Do you think you ever woke up from a love-potion? Did you suddenly find that the passion had sharply vanished and left you feeling disgusted or indifferent?*

No, it's more that it faded away. Sometimes it fades back, too... It comes and goes.

*Love potions don't work that way, Mr Rivers. They are abrupt and brutal and they don't produce real love. I don't see any abrupt changes in you, Mr Rivers; I see the symptoms of ordinary love. Linda has her little habits and perhaps she'd say that you have yours and so your love has taken a battering.*

Do you know, that's *it*! It's taken a battering because there's still something left to batter! So you're certain that Linda couldn't possibly have interfered magically?

*Certain. No love potions, no memory charms, no persuasion spells.*

Then I've been battered with ordinary things and not with magic! Thank you so much for your time, Madam Howard. You're very, very good at your job. That settles it. I'm not under a spell; I still actually love Ethelinda.

## Redemption

Chapter 9 of 11

A simplistic-thinking pastor requires Terry Boot's older sister to explain the relationship between magic and Christianity.

*This is the most important Harry Potter story I have ever written. It is not the world's (or even my) greatest piece of*

*literature, and it is not the Potterdom's most profound or humorous or exciting or enticing unit of fanfiction. But if you only ever read one story written by me, you must unquestionably make it this one.*

*You won't be able to kill any of them, ever again. Don't you get it? I was ready to die to stop you hurting these people... They're protected from you. Haven't you noticed how none of the spells you put on them are binding? You can't torture them. You can't touch them.*

Harry Potter, *DH*, p. 591

*Terry Boot got beaten up by Carrow for yelling about it in the Great Hall at dinner!*

Neville Longbottom, *DH*, p. 461

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

### Redemption

by Lucy Boot

I don't know who breached the Statute of Secrecy to Pastor Evald. It might have been a disaffected wizard, but more likely it was a Muggle a witch's resentful ex-husband or a Muggle-born's alienated brother. Someone who knew about magic but who had no loyalty to the magical community betrayed the Statute; and of course Evald completely misunderstood the story.

Evald rang my father in the first week of summer term. Dad deliberately flipped on the loudspeaker as soon as he knew it was my new pastor.

"Mr Boot, I'm curious about Terry," said Evald. "Did he go back to boarding school this week?"

"Yes."

"Oh. I have some concerns, that's all. Terry and I had an interesting little chat over Easter, and I made a few enquiries. Are you aware, Mr Boot, what kind of a school your son attends?"

Dad winked at Mum and me and said, "I'm very well aware. I personally consented to his enrolment."

"This will come as a shock to you, Mr Boot. I'm afraid I have to tell you that Hogwarts is a school for witchcraft and wizardry!"

We jolted. We don't name Terry's school outside the family; we simply refer to "a boarding school up north". An outsider like Evald Harvey should not know about Hogwarts.

"So which of your relatives has a connection with Hogwarts?" asked Dad.

"None, praise the Lord! But I hope you understand what they mean by 'witchcraft and wizardry'. It's a training-ground for the Dark Arts and the occult! It is nothing less than the place where Satan has his throne."

Dad laughed too loudly for kindness and stated, "We have no concerns about that. My wife and I don't believe in Satan."

"Perhaps you didn't hear me," said Evald patiently. "I'm sorry; we haven't met at church yet. It's a pity that this should be our first conversation, and I realise you might not have been aware of the dark secrets of Hogwarts. I'm calling to tell you that I have researched the school, and a friend who knows many of its former students has told me that it's a place of ritual abuse and Satan-worship. Your son is in grave spiritual danger and quite likely in physical danger too."

For a moment I imagined Terry as the star of a trashy horror-movie, his face gagged and his limbs bound up, surrounded by knife-wielding priests in flowing robes who demanded that he sacrifice a newborn baby if he didn't want to become the sacrifice himself. The image was too sick to be taken seriously; I couldn't help laughing.

Dad was apparently enjoying similar thoughts, but Mum was gesturing to him to finish the ridiculous conversation.

"Thank you, Pastor," said Dad. "When they send us Terry's skull filled with goat's blood and dead newts, we'll remember that you warned us. Until then there's no law against running around in black cloaks and shouting, 'Hail, Satan,' so I expect we'll just have to put up with it." He slammed down the receiver.

"Lucy, was that really your new pastor?" asked Mum.

I nodded. "We're still... getting used to him. He's not at all like Pastor David."

"I should say not," said Dad. "I liked old David. This new one sounds like a crackpot. If he's running the show, Lucy, perhaps it's time you looked for a new church!"

I don't know how to explain to my parents about how churches work. Of course I can't walk out on my whole community just because I don't like the new pastor.

There, I said it. I don't like him. Nor does half the youth group. *We don't have to like him; we only have to love him.* We've said that to one another far too often over the last six weeks.

My parents are not Christians. They sent Terry and me to Sunday school years ago because they thought it would teach us to tidy away our toys and stop complaining about bedtime. But because of the witness of Anna Godwin, my dear first Sunday school teacher, I accepted Jesus Christ as my saviour after only a few weeks. Terry's

conversion followed about a year later. Mum and Dad don't really understand that Jesus is a *live* person and that we've met Him, but they've been very tolerant about allowing us to keep going to church, even though that means church people (mainly the youth group) hang around our house nearly every day of the week.

However, when a church *leader* rings to inform them that their son's school is full of Satanists who are training him up as a child-abuser... Well, that must be hard to take! I was very grateful that Dad was taking it as a joke and Mum was nothing worse than bewildered.

A couple of days later, Terry's purple-eyed wood-owl brought me this letter.

*Hi, Lucy,*

How are you getting along with Pastor Evald? He struck me as rather young in his faith, but perhaps I still expect all pastors to be like David. I have to grow out of that.

Evald has just sent me a very long and rambling letter. The main points (I think) come to something like this.

1. I must stand firm in my faith and not be afraid of Satan because the blood of Jesus is more powerful.
2. I must resist all temptations to worship the Evil One, no matter how severely the Satanists abuse me.
3. Evald promises to get me rescued soon and will then bring all my persecutors to justice.
4. But should I not want to be rescued, I must bear in mind that I'm likely to go to Hell and therefore need to turn back to Christ immediately.

Very odd.

Have you any idea why he should think I've been abused by Satanists? If it comes to that, how does he know about Hogwarts? Michael says that perhaps he heard a rumour that Professor Snape was a Satanist. If so, the school's standard counter-rumour is that Snape is actually a vampire.

In His love,

T

P.S. I definitely do not feel any temptation to worship Snape.

Evald apparently didn't like whatever answer Terry sent him, because on Monday he telephoned me.

"Are you sure your parents can't hear us? Good. Lucy, we need to talk. Come to the church office at four o'clock tomorrow."

"Tuesdays are busy. Can we discuss it over the telephone?"

"This is an emergency," he told me sternly. "No price is too high when your brother's eternal life is at risk. A friend of mine spent the whole weekend in Scotland trying to locate Terry. Surely you can help him by doing such a little thing as travelling to the church office?"

Weakly, I agreed to go. *I don't have to like him; I only have to love him.* I repeated the words to myself. I scribbled a note to Terry so he could pray for me; he might just have it by breakfast tomorrow.

There were several reasons why I didn't want to spend Tuesday afternoon at the church office. The first was that the bike-ride from school to church, and then from church to home, would cut nearly an hour out of my day. When Pastor David wanted to talk to us, he used to save us the travelling time by visiting us in our homes. But Evald always summoned us to meetings in the church office. *He isn't necessarily bossy*, I reminded myself. *He's just used to doing things differently.* David had told us that we must be open-minded about adopting new customs for a new leader.

The second reason was that Tuesday always dealt me the heaviest load of homework. It was the April of my Year Eleven, and I was working towards a career in nursing, so my struggles with biology and chemistry were a serious matter. I didn't expect to finish that night's homework in less than five hours, and I wished Pastor Evald had chosen a different day for our meeting.

The third and most important reason was that I knew the interview would be a waste of time. Evald was worried about some rumour that Terry was dabbling in Satanism, and this simply wasn't true. I knew I ought to relieve Evald's fears, but why couldn't I reassure him by telephone? By turning up at church, I was practically admitting that the problem actually existed.

Finally, I just didn't like Evald. *But that is not a reason*, I told myself as I locked my bike to the church railings. *I need to try harder with the people I don't like. And what if something really has gone wrong with Terry?* I hoped I could make this conversation short and return to my homework quickly.

Anna Godwin, who is now the church secretary, opened the door. Her smiles always make me braver; I wished I had time to tell her something about the problem, even though I would have to leave out all the parts about Hogwarts and magic. But Evald was already waiting for me, so Anna ushered me straight into his office. I felt like a disruptive pupil who had been condemned to the headmaster; Evald didn't smile as he instructed me to sit down.

"Good afternoon, Lucy. First I must apologise for troubling your parents last week. I didn't realise that they weren't Christians. If I'd known that, I wouldn't have called them to the spiritual battle."

"Pastor," I managed to say, "two-thirds of the teenagers at this church are from non-Christian families! But if you have a concern, I think you're right to consult our parents first."

"They couldn't possibly understand," he said, dismissing my parents with a wave of his arm. "I want you to know, Lucy, that you are not alone in this diabolical battle. I expect you didn't know very much about Hogwarts when Terry was first sent there. If you found out afterwards... well, what a dreadful secret for a young girl like you to have to keep! And if you're still not sure about what's going on, I am now in a position to explain everything clearly. I've invited you here so you can be certain that we both know all about young Terry and that we will be waging this warfare together."

*Live at peace with all men*, I reminded myself, *including Pastor Evald. Before I start an argument, I must try to understand his point of view* I drew a steady breath and said, "Pastor, please explain your concern more specifically. Someone has told you that there is some kind of Satanism going on at Hogwarts. What exactly have you heard?"

"Your own father gave me plenty of information," he said. "He openly admitted that Terry participates in rituals that involve bowing down to Satan, slaying goats and drinking blood out of human skulls. I wonder what else *you* know."

"My father was joking! He made it up on the spot!"

"Did he? Well, perhaps that's what he wants you to think. But it does rather corroborate what I heard from... Obviously, I can't tell you my informant's name; but he's a very trustworthy friend who has had dealings with Hogwarts for nearly ten years. He tells me that the school exists exclusively to train up young witches and wizards. It does not confer Scottish Highers or any other accredited qualification; it has no legitimate educational goals at all."

I couldn't comment on that without mentioning magic, so I hummed.

"The curriculum requires the young acolytes to brew poisons, study the stars, speak to the spirits of the departed, practise levitation on symbolic broomsticks, breed abominable hybrid animals and sleep in communal dormitories. Hogwarts is ruled by fear, Lucy; there's a dangerous mass-murderer who lurks on the edge of the school grounds, and any student who disobeys the Master Wizards is handed over to him for elimination. My friend says that a few teachers have thought better of their actions and rebelled against the Dark Arts; every year, without exception, one of these courageous teachers has been put to death."

Oh. This was obviously *not* going to be a short conversation. Evald was so determined to misinterpret anything that anyone said about Hogwarts that I might well communicate better by saying nothing at all. But he was my pastor, and I had to work with him for several years to come, so I couldn't just walk out and I couldn't say anything that might upset him.

I tried to look earnest. "Pastor, I'm quite, quite certain that your informant has misinterpreted the situation. Hogwarts is a school of witchcraft, but I don't think any of this adds up to Satanism."

"Perhaps Terry personally hasn't yet bowed down to Satan," he conceded. "But that is of minimal comfort: he won't have many alternatives if we leave him at Hogwarts. Witchcraft begins with nature-worship, but it always ends in open Satanism, complete with human sacrifice and the power to cast real curses on your neighbours. I know you're a young person without much knowledge of the Bible, but it's time to inform yourself. I'd like you to read a couple of books." He handed over two dog-eared paperbacks.

I took them quietly, noting that he *hadn't* suggested that I read the Bible itself. (In fact I already have. But Evald is always assuming that I haven't.)

"So now it's your turn to give information to me." He leaned towards me, trying to look friendly, yet somehow he made me nervous. "Lucy, do you think your brother is at Hogwarts voluntarily? He could be a prisoner there. Evil magicians could easily trap and abuse a defenceless boy until they had forced him into submission. When you've read those two books, you'll understand more about the evil supernatural powers that the Devil awards to those perverted souls who sell themselves to him. I promise you, if Terry is a captive, we will stop at nothing to break open the stronghold and rescue him by force!"

I tried to imagine Pastor Evald charging up to the invisible castle, breaking an entry through the magical barriers and fighting off three hundred wizards to rescue a magically-confined prisoner. Now, that was delusional! But Evald was not laughing, so I remembered my manners.

"You said your friend went to Scotland to look for Hogwarts," I said. "He didn't find it, did he?"

"You guess correctly. My friend was intent on locating Terry and persuading the poor boy to return home. But those wizards were so stubbornly hiding their dark deeds that they had lied about their address: Hogwarts wasn't anywhere within a ten-mile radius of their claims. We shall never find Terry that way. That's why I ask whether he's a prisoner or whether he has some freedom to leave."

"He was home for the Easter holidays," I pointed out. "But it's all right. Terry is definitely at Hogwarts voluntarily. He's very happy there."

"Do you think this is because he has accepted the magical philosophy and become a nature-worshipper? Or is it because he hasn't discerned that the nature-worship

exists at all?"

"Neither," I said. "Terry is a Christian. He has been a Christian for seven years. If there were really any occult or nature-worship at Hogwarts, I know for a fact that he would have run away in his first week."

"Young people are not always well-informed," he said. "Your brother might be sincere, but does he really have the discernment to recognise such a structural evil?"

"If attending Hogwarts meant a life of sin if there was something wrong with the whole system something that *by its nature* a Christian shouldn't do," I said, "then Terry would have recognised it by now and he wouldn't have stayed there. There have been two occasions already when he nearly came home because he was asked to compromise."

"Indeed?"

"The first time was because the teachers seemed to be supporting a case of bullying. More recently he was pressured to tell a lie. Both times he decided to stay because a senior teacher supported him a Mr Flitwick, who said Hogwarts needed students who would choose what was right over what was easy. Even though Mr Flitwick isn't a Christian, he can see that Terry makes right choices and he supports him. Pastor, if anyone at the school were *really* involved with nature-worship, Terry wouldn't agree to join in, and Mr Flitwick would support his right to refuse."

"Lucy, I can hear that your brother means well and that *he thinks* he is a Christian. Perhaps he is. But the whole Hogwarts philosophy is nature-worship and paganism, and your brother is being contaminated by it every day he can't possibly avoid it. From what you say, he doesn't even realise it's happening. A girl like you can't have read much of the Bible, but I'd like you to look up something in Deuteronomy it's in chapter eighteen."

"I know what's in chapter eighteen," I said. "It forbids fortune-telling, necromancy and sorcery."

"Exactly! Sorcery! Isn't sorcery the same thing as witchcraft?"

I shook my head firmly. "No, certainly not." He frowned, but I ploughed on. "What the Bible means by 'sorcery' is a pantheistic religion maybe something a bit like the New Age movement? There's no pantheism at Hogwarts. One of Terry's friends is a Hindu and she complains that the teachers don't treat the forces of nature with *enough* respect. She believes that stars and flowers are divine, but that wouldn't occur to most of the teachers. And Terry is definitely not going to convert to Hinduism."

"There is witchcraft at Hogwarts," he repeated.

"They use the *word* 'witchcraft,' but it isn't a religious concept. It's just a word they use for their " What was a good synonym? "For their technology. Pastor, surely you know that one word can have several meanings. 'Witchcraft' *can* mean a kind of religion, but at Hogwarts it just means technology. Terry has had to ditch the traditional understanding of chemistry and physics and mechanics but he hasn't changed on the crucial issue."

Evald's grimace actually made me shiver.

"Terry has always been very repentant and very certain of God's forgiveness. Going to boarding school hasn't weakened his faith at all: when his family couldn't be there, he saw it as a challenge to rely all the more on God. There are only seven or eight Christians at Hogwarts, but they meet together for prayers nearly every day, and Terry often leads the Bible study. He says that he keeps on discovering that coincidence is proportional to prayer."

"So Terry fancies himself as a leader."

"Terry is a proclaimer. They all know he's a Christian. He often has philosophical discussions with his classmates. One of his best friends is Jewish, and they're always talking about God together. They read quite a lot of apologetics too. I know that because another friend, an Agnostic, has admitted he can't find a flaw in their arguments."

"Terry is certainly an intelligent boy," said Evald, "but head-knowledge isn't everything. Knowing *about* God can be a trap that prevents you from *knowing* Him. Has anyone explained to you, Lucy, that knowing God requires repentance?"

It was going to be uphill work convincing Evald that I was a Christian, let alone that my brother was! I prayed quickly for wisdom.

*You don't have to convince him.*

The thought burst into my head like a thunder-clap. No, I didn't have to convince Evald. I only had to state my case. If I couldn't convince him, that wasn't my problem.

Suddenly Evald's friendly mask slipped, and he spoke sternly. "Lucy, let's cut the waffle. The basic fact is this: your brother Terry has gained some kind of supernatural power at Hogwarts. Therefore he has made some kind of bargain with the Devil even if he didn't realise at the time what he was doing. So we need a three-point plan. First, get him out of Hogwarts. Second, put him in a safe place where he can be de-programmed. Third, bring him back to Christ. Surely a good Christian sister like you wants to cooperate with that plan!"

Evald hadn't listened to a word I'd said! Since Terry was *born* a wizard, his powers are natural, not supernatural; they were not "conferred" by Hogwarts, and he definitely did not "buy" them in any kind of diabolical transaction! He did not need to come "back to Christ" because his discipleship had never deviated, and I had no interest in extracting him from his education at Hogwarts.

But Evald was the pastor, and I mustn't cause divisions in the church. The issue at hand was how to remove myself from Evald's office this afternoon before I caused permanent resentment by refusing whatever he wanted from me.

I sent up a prayer for help.

"I hope you realise the urgency of your brother's peril," he was saying. "You are the only person in this church who has contact with Terry, so you'll be acting as the direct link for all of us. What we have to do is bring him home. Write him some excuse about why he is needed here, and "

He broke off as the office door flew open. Two strangers in bowler hats and pinstripe marched in and raised their wands.

*"Obliviate!"*

White lights flashed, and Evald looked dazed. One of the wizards kept him at wand-point while the other turned his wand to me. I gave a silent shriek to the Holy Spirit.

"Your name, young lady?"

"Lucy Caroline Boot."

The wizard dropped his wand abruptly, and I found myself shaking with relief. "Miss Boot, since it was your brother who sent us here, you must help us. Do you know who told Evald Harvey about magic?"

"I'm afraid I don't. I only wish I did."

He glanced resignedly at his fellow, then threw another white light at Evald as both wizards vanished into thin air.

Evald looked confused but he tried to pull himself together and save face. "So, Lucy... er... Thank you for your input about our youth group. I must be going now, but come back tomorrow. We'll finish our little chat around four-thirty."

I thanked God fervently. If Evald's memory had been wiped of all mention of Hogwarts and magic, he would have forgotten our conversation too. He was embarrassed to have forgotten why I was there because he almost shooed me out of his office.

As soon as I was out in the foyer, I handed his paperbacks to Anna. "Can you take these away? I've already read them." One was Audrey Irvine's lurid fantasy *Dancing with Witches*, which describes how a conspiracy of Satanists is taking over Europe. The other was Lorena Stafford's debunked autobiography *The Devil's Underground*, which describes how a conspiracy of Satanists is taking over America.

"Goodness, what rubbish!" Anna giggled. "Surely Evald didn't give you those!"

"I'm afraid he did. Do you remember how the whole youth group was reading them a few years back? I was terrified because I thought they were true stories! It was Pastor David who taught us all how to read critically, and he spent weeks helping us research the claims in these two novels."

We learned from Pastor David that Audrey Irvine probably doesn't exist. She writes that she is a famous Christian speaker, but she has never spoken at any major conference, and the Evangelical Alliance has never heard of her. She claims she used to witness ritual murders at the Coven of Satan, but there is no record of any police investigation and surely an honest penitent would have reported murder? David pointed out that this story was probably never *intended* as anything more than a novel. On the other hand, Lorena Stafford is a real person. She has a long psychiatric record that ingloriously concluded when she married her psychiatrist. Her "autobiography" includes times, places and real names that can be checked, and because most of them have turned out to be false, her publishers have long since withdrawn her book. I wish we'd known all that before we first read it!

I had planned to go straight home, but when Anna started making me a cup of tea, I realised I needed it. I sat down in her office after all and told her, "I'm really bothered that an adult with a university degree can believe those tall tales about Satanic conspiracies are literally true. I think our church is heading for trouble."

"Churches are always in trouble," said Anna wisely. "They are full of sinners like you and me."

"Anna, Evald wants me to return here tomorrow, but I *really* don't want to come. I'm only a few weeks from my G.C.S.E.s, and I don't think the conversation will achieve anything productive."

Anna nodded and handed me the tea. "I'll make your excuses. You're not the first to learn that it isn't at all wise to discuss books with Evald. He's already taken the chronicles of Narnia off the church bookshelf."

"What!"

"That's no secret. He says that the magic wardrobe and resurrecting lion will lead children astray, and Christians shouldn't read fantasy anyway."

"But there's fantasy in the Book of Revelation!"

"Sweetie, I didn't want to get into an argument," said Anna. "We have better things to do at church than argue about what anyone reads. For the record, Evald doesn't like stories where the Christ-figure is associated with magic. So *Lord of the Flies* is all right because Simon just dies; but *Lord of the Rings* is taboo because Gandalf resurrects."

"Gandalf resurrects," I recalled, "but he doesn't make much of an atonement. Nor does King Arthur; he's simply... expected to return one day. That's what I loved about Narnia. Aslan pays the price of evil and he resurrects and brings hope. The salvation story was so clear to children who'd never otherwise hear it."

"It'll be a long time before any children's writer produces another book like Narnia," Anna agreed. "I'm still waiting for a fantasy where the hero's death saves his friends, but *only* his friends, and then he resurrects and defeats evil without using violence. If the author could write it all so it wasn't too obviously an allegory *that* would be a story worth reading. People would be talking about it for years."

I didn't bother remarking that if a story like that ever was written, people like Evald would probably want to burn it.

**A/N 1.** There is more about Terry Boot's childhood in *The Werewolf's Bride* and *The Banebrewer*. There is more about his Hogwarts years in *Turning the Corner* and *Hearthlinks*.

**A/N 2.** There is no more about *Dancing with Witches* or *The Devil's Underground*. These books do not exist.

## Resources

### Chapter 10 of 11

Sophie Roper and her younger sister learn the practical applications of Gamp's Law the hard way.

*Food is the first of the five Principal Exceptions to Gamp's Law of Elemental Transfigur[ation]... It's impossible to make good food out of nothing! You can Summon it if you know where it is, you can transform it, you can increase the quantity if you've already got some*

Hermione Granger, *DH*, p. 241.

*Yeah, well, food's one of the five exceptions to Gamp's Law of Elemental Transfiguration.*

## CHAPTER TWELVE

### Resources

by Louise Roper

Sophie says she was four and a half when the miners started their strike, so I must have been not quite three. At first we only noticed that Dad had a clean face; he no longer came home covered in coal-dust. Then we noticed the potatoes. It was potatoes every day for dinner. Mam boiled them, baked them, mashed them, fried them... but it was always potatoes. I begged for beefburgers or sausages, but Mam told me, "Sorry, duck, we can't afford meat."

I remember folding up my outgrown dress, cardigan, slacks and T-shirt to give to a neighbour's child, but then being told there was nowt new for me. I had to share Sophie's clothes, although they were too small for her and still too large for me. She only had three outfits, so Mam did the laundry *every* day. Now I come to think of it, she washed by hand, although I know we had a washing machine at one time. Sophie says that we probably couldn't afford the electricity to run it, so Dad would have sold it to pay the rent.

One dreadful day, Sophie dumped her shoes in the dustbin because they hurt her feet. When she confessed, Mam slapped her and shouted, "Yer should've known to pass 'em on to Louise, then!" I didn't want Sophie's old shoes, which had holes in the soles, but we both had to spend half an hour grubbing through the stinking dustbin to retrieve them. Sophie was supposed to be starting school at that time, but she didn't go because she had nothing to put on her feet.

The day came after months and months of the miners' strike when we were crying out to eat potatoes. By that time, there was no money even for vegetables. We couldn't cook anything anyway, as the gas had been cut, so we had been living off day-old bread and withered apples for days. The electricity must have been cut too, because we lit candles in the evenings. Our parents had sold everything they could sell car, fridge, television, spare bed and the family allowance wasn't enough to pay the rent.

When Mam walked out of the house that morning, probably to look for work, I burst into tears, certain she would never come back. She disappeared up the street, her shoes soaked in the autumn puddles, and I was convinced that we would be alone forever. The radiators were cold. The cupboard was bare.

"Ah want Mam!" I wailed. "Ah want food!"

Sophie, huddled in her coat, said, "Blubbing won't bring yer nowt."

"It's cold!" I moaned. I was shivering from being shunted from a cold sponge-bath (we had no hot water) to being dressed in Sophie's threadbare jumper, which hung on me like a too-short dress.

"Yer can 'ave me coat," said Sophie, stripping it off with a sigh. She only had her vest and pants on underneath, and goosebumps were sticking up all over her arms and legs.

As soon as I had buttoned it up, I began to feel guilty for leaving her in the cold. I asked, "What *you* wear, then?"

"I'm going to find Dad's spare jumper. But what we need round 'ere is fire!"

As soon as the words were out of her mouth, there was a flash of light, and suddenly the grate was full of fire!

We both gaped. I was too young to understand that the modern gas-fire wasn't supposed to be *beside* the flames as if it were coal, but I knew very well that fire didn't just appear from nowhere.

But it was real fire! We both ran towards it, and it was *hot* fire. We sat there for ten minutes before Sophie's legs began to turn red and she warned me, "'Appen we shan't sit so close."

"Ah'm 'ungry."

"Let's look for food," she said desperately. "There must be *some* crumbs in larder."

We found two tins of baked beans, a bag of flour and a few pathetic crumbs from yesterday's bread. Sophie swept these into her hands, saying, "I told yer there were *some* crumbs!" and when she turned around again, she was holding a huge basket full of bread!

I stared, trying to think on whether there had been a basket of bread that I simply hadn't noticed. I knew that bread couldn't appear out of nowhere, but how could hungry people go looking for bread and simply not notice a whole basketful?

"It just... grew... in me 'ands," Sophie explained helplessly. "It grew out of t' crumbs."

I spared a glance for the larder shelf, which was now swept clean, not a crumb in sight, and then rushed back to the fire. Sophie followed, carrying the glorious basket full of bridge rolls, currant buns, baps and jam doughnuts, all oven-fresh and piping hot. We breathed in those bakery-smells for a single second before sitting down to eat.

I don't remember the rest of the day. Mam must have said something about the fire but I don't remember it. I only remember that we had bread all that winter.

"T' bread din't turn up every day," Sophie reminds me. She was five when it all happened and she remembers it quite clearly. "It only 'appened if we were desperate famished. And once I just can't make t' bread come because Mam 'ad cleaned larder and there were no crumbs. After that I used to save a crust every day and 'ide it under me pillow for t' next 'ungry day. Did yer notice that we was allus 'ungry again by tea time? Them tiny crumbs din't make the kind of food that lasts long."

I don't remember that. I only remember the full-up feeling as we finished eating.

The fire didn't come every day either. We had to be blue with chilblains before Sophie could make the hearth flare up. She seemed not to have much control over her fires. The flames were a different colour each time, and once, when the snow was thick over the window-sills and I couldn't force my icy legs to walk, the fire was so violent that our house caught alight.

I screamed and clutched at Sophie, who grabbed my hand and raced out of the house. We screamed for anyone who might happen to pass by in the miserable, driving rain, too young to reckon that nobody would be able to call the fire brigade because no family in the street still had a working telephone connection.

But before we had time to learn the hard way, our rescuer appeared. He was wearing a purple suit and purple bowler hat, and he took us by the shoulder, one in each hand, and shook us into silence.

"Arnold Peasegood," he introduced himself, "from the Accidental Magic Reversal Squad at the Office for the Improper Use of Magic. Where have you been doing magic?"

Sophie pointed at the house, where the flames were now licking the upper storey, although nothing was actually being burnt up.

Arnold Peasegood pointed a long thin stick at the house and commanded, "*Finite Incantatem!*"

The fire instantly vanished.

"You kids want to be careful," he admonished us. We followed him indoors, and Sophie showed him where she had started the fire. "We've been very tolerant of the accidental magic in this house because our Squad has seen how you stick to the small and the necessary. But we've already had to Obliviate your mother twice, and I think you need to know that we're watching your house very carefully. You are *not* allowed to set self-sustaining fires onto the whole street! Well, there doesn't seem to be any actual damage. Don't let there be another fire that escapes this grate."

Mr Peasegood was a good sort; he tapped the gas fire with his wand before abruptly disappearing. The fire lit up in a perfectly ordinary way, just as if North Sea gas had been ignited. It didn't look like magic at all unless you knew that our gas had been cut.

"But I can't 'e/p it!" Sophie protested to the empty room. "I never know whether I'm going to make any fire!"

\* \* \* \* \*

"Did Dad ever play wi' us?" I asked Sophie. "Were 'e ever a 'appy bloke?"

Dad had yelled at me yet again for standing between him and the television. But the space between the settee and the telly was the only thoroughfare in the living room. Dad had only two topics of conversation: what he had seen on telly (usually football) and shouting at the family for destroying his limited comfort.

"Of course 'e were once," said Sophie sensibly. "I never 'eard him speak a cross word before 'is accident. 'E played wi' us every day after work: don't yer remember that 'e taught us cricket wi' a broken-up packing case as bats? It were Mam 'oo worried about stuff."

The miners' strike had long since ended, but our troubles had not. Dad's wages hadn't been enough to pay all our debts, so the landlord had thrown us out of the house. We had moved into a tiny Housing Commission flat, where Mam still worried about things. Then Dad had an accident at work: he twisted his back and couldn't go down the mine any more. So he was laid up at home while Mam tried to manage the family on unemployment benefits. The money put food on the table but it didn't service our debts. Mam kept worrying, and Dad was always down in the dumps.

Dad groaned with pain every time he tried to walk. He spent months and months in bed, flat on his injured back, and then years and years lying on the settee. We usually kept the blinds down, because he complained that the light gave him a headache, and Dad just lay there. Sometimes he attempted the crossword but usually he watched television. Sophie and I became used to sitting on the floor; even if Dad wasn't there, we forgot to use the settee. We never asked to watch *Play School* or *Blue Peter* on the telly; we knew that only Dad had the right to decide which channel was on.

Doing no work and always getting his own way seemed to make Dad's moods worse. He barked at us to belt up and then chuntered that we never told him nowt. If we ran out of aspirin or cigarettes, he yelled at Mam for not managing the money properly.

Sophie and I started school as soon as Mam could afford two pairs of shoes. I was only in the reception class, which was technically optional, but Sophie had missed several weeks of Year One, which made the teacher frown.

"Didn't your mother *know* to send you to school in September?"

"Me Mam's a good mother!" Sophie protested hotly.

The teacher didn't say anything else except, "Ouch!" because, probably by coincidence, her hand landed on a drawing-pin.

On my first day, Steven Carter pushed me down to the hard asphalt ground because I was standing in the way of his football. On my second day, he kicked me because he recognised me from the day before. On my third day, he threw a stone at me because he liked throwing stones. I wasn't the only child who was terrified of Steven Carter, who was a gigantic Year Two lad with a barrel-chest and a single bushy eyebrow stretched meanly across his forehead. He thumped me because he *could*. He had a variety of verbal insults too.

"Yer pudgy face is a midden!" (*Smack.*)

"Yer gormless cloth-'ed, yer as daft as a brush." (*Thump.*)

"Yer a mardy cow that stinks like t' bog!" (*Kick.*)

But finally he made the mistake of twisting my arms like barley-sugar right in front of Sophie.

"Give over!" she screamed. "Lay off me sister!" Head down, she charged towards him and head-butted his stomach. My arms were suddenly free as Steven Carter shoved back at Sophie, and I shoved him too, even though he was far too solid to give way to two small girls. With no apparent effort, Sophie's feeble push created a *zing!* and a shower of zips, buttons and elastic fell to the tarmac.

We sprang back in three directions, only to see that Steven's anorak had lost its zip, his school jumper was completely un-knitted and hanging in long, curly threads, his shirt was hanging open with no buttons, and his trousers, divested of belt, zip and button, were hanging down by his knees. Children around us screamed in terrified mirth: they hadn't often the chance to strike back at Steven Carter.

Steven squealed in outrage, lurched forward with a clenched fist and fell flat on his face again.

"Let's get us out of 'ere," said Sophie, taking me firmly by the hand and pulling me into the crowds.

I didn't say a word. I knew my safest course of action was to keep close to Sophie.

\* \* \* \* \*

During our first couple of years at school, Mam tried to go to work to support us. The problem was, half the town was unemployed. There was no house-cleaning work because nobody could afford to pay a cleaner. There were no shop-assistant jobs because, if a shop could afford an assistant, it was cheaper to employ a teenager. There were no permanent jobs in the wire and glass factories because it was easier for the employers to hire casual hands, who could be fired pretty well at random. Mam bravely queued for those factory-hand jobs, and sometimes they awarded her a couple of shifts. But it never lasted long, and she never earned much more than the unemployment benefit.

"It's cheaper not to work," she complained. "When I don't get a wage, an 'ole lot of stuff's 'alf price. We'd be less poor if I stayed on the dole and dinnt try to work."

"Are we poor, then?" I asked.

I hadn't noticed we were poor because every family in the street had the same problems. I knew that no adult expected a permanent job and that every child was on free school dinners. Some of them had Dads who drank or no Dad at all, and that seemed worse than a having Dad who lay on the sofa being mardy all day.

"If we're poor," said Sophie, "why do we waste money on cigarettes for Dad?"

"Belt up," said Dad, reaching for his packet again.

"Yer wasting us money!" Sophie repeated. Mam slapped her, but it was only a little swat, so Sophie ignored that. "Smoking's just paying to get lung cancer. Yer've no right to complain about not 'aving enough for t' rent or for me school trips or to take Louise on bus to dentist if yer've wasted t' money on smoking."

Dad lit up fretfully, inhaled and nearly choked. "What t' bloody 'eck's going on around here?"

"What's wrong, love?" asked Mam.

"They've replaced t' tobacco in this lot wi'... muck!"

We gathered around the cigarette, which certainly didn't smell of tobacco. Dad stubbed it and split it open. The disgusting brown flakes that dropped to the floor were not tobacco but mud... ordinary garden mud.

"Give us another one," said Dad. Mam passed one over.

Dad sniffed it, then ripped it open, displaying yet more mud inside. I grabbed the packet and took out the "cigarettes" one by one, but each one smelled of mud.

This was the first time I remember asking Sophie, "How did yer *do* that trick?"

"I don't know! I were thinking about muck... and worse, but then I thought that were too nasty; it should just be mud... but I din't~~o~~ owt. I don't know 'ow it 'appened!"

Dad sent us straight out to waste more money buying more cigarettes, but every single cigarette in the new packet also turned into mud. Dad thought Sophie had done it on purpose, perhaps by buying the papers at a joke shop and rolling the fake-cigarettes herself, so he sent Mam out to buy yet more. Mam handed the packet directly to Dad, and the first couple of smokes were fine. But then Sophie touched the packet, and suddenly all the tobacco turned into mud again.

If Dad had had the energy to lift himself off the settee, he would have skelped Sophie to a pulp, but he was in too much pain to bother. He yelled at Mam to belt her, and Mam's blow was so half-hearted that Dad screamed at them both. Sophie wept and raged and accused Dad of starving the family because he was a "tobackerholic," while I cowered in a corner, waiting for them all to finish with each other.

Finally, Mam thrust her purse into my hands and sent us off to buy yet more cigarettes.

"Do it again, Sophie!" I urged. "Appen yer can do it every time, Dad might give up smokes, and then we'll 'ave more money for real food."

But our courage sank down to our scuffed shoes when we reached the corner-shop and found there was only fifty pence left in Mam's purse. All thoughts of reforming Dad fled our minds when we saw he had smoked us out of our budget!

My heart thumped. "Dad'll *kill* us if we go 'ome wi' nowt," I said.

"Nah." Sophie was trying to be brave. "E'll only *kill* me. 'E won't believe there weren't any money." She squeezed the spiky coin in her fist, rigid with determination. When she opened her fingers again, there were three fifty pence coins sitting on her palm.

"Get away! Did yer do *that* on purpose?"

"I don't *know* 'ow it 'appened," Sophie told me yet again. "Let's buy t' poison before t' money disappears on us."

On the way home, I asked, "Can yer *make* money, Sophie? Can yer make as much we want, any time we want?"

"Not *any* time. But 'appen if we're desperate enough?"

By the time we handed the cigarettes over to Dad, the tobacco had once again changed to mud. And that was the way it stayed. Only Mam ever bought cigarettes, but if Sophie so much as touched them, the tobacco always became mud. With a grim defiance, Sophie made sure she did touch every packet that entered our house, preferably before it was opened. At first Dad could manage a few smokes while we were at school, but tobacco soon became an unstable compound in our house whenever Sophie was home. Soon she hadn't even to touch a packet; hadn't even to think about it. Tobacco was automatically destroyed as soon as it crossed our threshold.

There was no choice. Dad had to give up smoking.

\*\*\*\*\*

For the next six months, Sophie did seem to find quite a lot of spare money lying around the house. She would open a kitchen drawer or run her hand down a shopping bag and suddenly she would be holding any number of pound coins (it was never a paper bank note). It only happened when we were desperate if we had to pay a bill or buy milk but it often turned into far more money than we needed. Once she even managed to find a stamp when Mam had to mail off an application. But in the end, Sophie was rumbled.

It was at school, when the teacher was collecting money for an excursion to the Leeds Armouries Museum. Actually everyone knew that museum entry was free, but the school was collecting for the coach hire, and rumours were flying that most of the money would end up in the school funds. Sophie and I *really* wanted to go because we had never been to Leeds before, and I was furious when I was told that I couldn't go to this free museum because my parents couldn't cough up five pounds.

I found Sophie during the break, and of course she was furious too, so furious that she very quickly found a pound coin in the pocket of her school bag. We marched up to the school office, where Sophie announced:

"What's all this about ripping off kids from benefits families, then? Me and Louise are going on this excursion, and yer can find someone else to fuggle!"

She slammed down a coin, then another and another, until she had piled the full ten pounds onto the reception desk.

Annoyed by Sophie's defiant tone, the receptionist announced, "Sophie Roper, I want to be very sure that's yer *own* money there!" She picked up a coin, almost as if she expected to see a "thief" engraving, and then she picked up another. "'Ere! 'Oo forged this, then?"

She showed us, plain as day, that the head-side of the pound bore the date 1987, yet the tail-side showed the flax-in-a-coronet that had been the previous year's mint! The second 1987 coin had the thistle-imprint of 1984. Sophie hadn't been careful enough; she didn't really know what a pound-coin should look like, so only one coin in our forged collection happened to be correct. All it took was one amateur coin-collector who knew the minting-design rules, and Sophie's infinite supply of magical money was exposed as a fraud.

We weren't in trouble, because of course the school assumed that we had been the victims of some grown-up forger, but we weren't allowed to go to Leeds either. After that, Sophie was never again able to produce fake money.

More than a year later, we had another strange event with money. We had been evicted twice for unpaid rent, and Mam was in despair. "That's us second bad reference. If

we're evicted again, we'll be on t' streets."

Unfortunately, we were still in arrears. When our arrears reached the twelve-week mark, we received a Housing Association notice. I was so upset that I ripped it up before Mam ever saw it, despite Sophie's dark warnings that "t' problem dun't go away just because yer kill t' evidence."

Three weeks later, we received a court order to vacate the flat, together with a bill for the Housing Association's court costs.

"Mam 'as to know eventually, love," Sophie warned me when I tossed the order in the dustbin.

Three weeks after that, we received the dreaded N54 from the bailiffs' office, advising us that the bailiffs would be at our house at eleven o'clock next Wednesday. I shoved it tearfully into Sophie's hands, hoping that she could take care of the family if only the grown-ups didn't interfere, and the notice burst into flames as soon as she touched it.

Next Wednesday came. Mam had gone off to one of her casual jobs, and Dad was staring at football on the telly, not even noticing that Sophie and I hadn't gone to school. We sat at the kitchen table, knowing what was going to happen, counting the moments until eleven o'clock... Yet the thundering at the door still stopped my heartbeat, and I was frozen to my chair.

Sophie, however, sprang to her feet and flung herself at the door the same moment it opened. Three enormous men were standing on our doorstep, and the first one began to say, "Come along, then..."

"Naff off!" Sophie was even more furious than she had been with Steven Carter. She gave the first bailiff a feeble punch on the beltline as she declared, "Yer not coming in. *Get lost!*"

The man laughed patronisingly and tried to grab her arm. That made me so furious that I forgot all about leaving it all to Sophie and jumped up to "help" her. But before I had crossed the kitchen, all three men collapsed backwards, just as if someone stronger had punched them to the ground, and the door slammed in their faces. Then... silence.

I stared at Sophie, not knowing whether she had fixed them or not. We didn't dare open the front door and look.

It was a couple of hours before we heard an elderly neighbour shrieking about dead men in the corridor. At that point, we ventured to open the door a crack and saw that the three men were still lying there, flat on their backs! It was far worse than Steven Carter; the bailiffs actually looked damaged. The neighbour was banging hysterically on every door on our floor, and eventually she found someone with the sense to call an ambulance.

We didn't hear any more about it. Perhaps the Housing Association didn't find out that the eviction had failed, because we never had bailiffs round again.

Sophie told me firmly that it was better not to destroy any more bills, but after that, she did make a point of opening our parents' mail for them. Strange, though small, things happened to our bills as Sophie read them: numbers mysteriously rearranged themselves, and red squares faded to grey.

\* \* \* \* \*

I was ten years old, and Sophie was nearly twelve, when her Hogwarts letter arrived. My biggest surprise was learning that other people like Sophie existed; I wasn't at all surprised to hear that she was a witch.

Mam didn't seem to notice that Hogwarts was a *magical* school; she was completely focused on the fact that it was *boarding* school. She said that only posh people went to boarding schools; they were out of the question for the likes of us. But when Professor Burbage visited our flat to explain that board and tuition were free, and that a family like ours would be entitled to a complete books, equipment and uniform scholarship, Mam became interested.

"That could work out cheaper than Kirk Balk," she calculated. "Oo'd've thought our Sophie would end up in a joint like Mallory Towers?"

Dad took no interest at all. So Sophie went to Hogwarts.

I missed her terribly. She wrote often, describing her new friends, the quirks of her teachers, her magical lessons and the wonderful food. I wasn't surprised that she was happy without us: Hogwarts sounded so much better than Kirk Balk would be.

Home was very quiet without Sophie to take care of the family. Now that she wasn't there to speak out for us, I didn't know what to say to my parents, to my teachers or even to shop assistants. When Mam lost her latest job, I wondered if we'd survive. Sophie had been able to deal with the Housing Association bailiffs, but what chance did Mam or I have? I started saving the crust-end of each loaf and hiding it under my pillow, just to remind myself of what Sophie would have done if ever we had another real emergency.

Once, when I had outgrown and outworn all my warm clothes, I opened Sophie's underwear drawer, nostalgically pretending that one of her fake coins would turn up. Oddly enough, a couple of pounds did fall out of a holey sock. Could Mam and I *both* have overlooked available money in our own home? Not likely! I checked the mint-date against the reverse, and sure enough, both coins were a shining 1992 mint and both bore the leek-reverse of 1990. So they were more of that useless counterfeit money. Why had Sophie left them lying in her drawer for all this time?

However, desperate people will do desperate things. I raced to Tesco's and bought a red hoodie with a screen-print gold lion, shivering too much against the March gales to worry about how I was stealing from the multinational giant.

\* \* \* \* \*

Sophie's first year at Hogwarts ended early in July. For some reason, those mad wizards sent her from the Highlands to London, which took all day, and then left her to make her own way north in the evening! But she managed to arrive home before dark, and I flew into her arms.

"Sophie, yer've grown fat!" I meant that she had filled out to a normal weight, including rounder cheeks, while I could feel my own bones sticking out of my clothes in all the wrong places. "Yer tall, too!"

"I know! There's *loads* of food at 'Ogwarts, and yer can eat all yer want, even second and third 'elpings!"

"Yummm..." Dad hadn't looked up from the telly, but Mam wanted to say hello, so I stood aside. That's when I noticed the boy standing in the doorway. "Ayup, Sophie, 'oo's yer friend?"

"This is Ernie. 'E's in me class at school and tonight 'e taught me 'ow to get 'ome. First we took tube in London, then we took Floo to Sheffield, then we took train to Barnsley, and we did t' last bit by bus."

"Oh, 'eck, duck!" said Mam. "Did yer *fly* to Sheffield?"

"Nah, t' Floo's like a magic chimney. It were t' shortest bit of t' journey; it only took two minute."

"So 'ow's Ernie getting 'ome again?"

Ernie lifted Sophie's trunk over the threshold and stepped into our living room. "Good evening, Mrs Roper and Miss Louise. I shall take the bus and train back to the public Floo, which is directly connected to my parents' house. Good evening, Mr Roper."

Dad did not stir from the settee, and Sophie shifted uncomfortably.

"I told yer, Ernie. Dad dun't say much."

"Good evening, Mr Roper," Ernie repeated. "Sophie has informed me of your misfortune. If I may take the liberty of saying so, my sister is a Healer and can treat slipped-disc conditions."

Dad did move this time; he raised his voice over the football commentary. "Doctors can't do owt for me."

"Dad!" Sophie protested. "We don't mean a National 'Ealth doctor! Wizard-doctors are different."

"Huh."

"I reckon yer should bring yer sister around anyway," Sophie whispered to Ernie. "Nowt could make 'imworse than 'e is now."

Ernie wouldn't stay for a cup of tea; he charged straight downstairs to catch the next bus to Barnsley Station.

"I 'ope 'e's home before dark!" said Mam. "'E seems a good lad, and it's a long way to Glasgow."

"Mam!" remonstrated Sophie. "Once 'e's reached Sheffield, it'll take 'im *one minute* to Floo to Glasgow!"

Ernie knocked on our door again at ten o' clock the next morning. He brought with him a young woman in long, lime-green robes who looked absurdly like him and definitely not like any doctor in the National Health Service.

"Good morning, Mr Roper. I am Mercy Wiggleswade, a Healer from St Mungo's. I understand that you're having a little trouble with some slipped discs. Can I examine your spine?"

"Pack it in! Don't touch us!"

"I'm not needing to touch you. If you'll lie on your other side, I can make the diagnosis..."

Dad complained loudly, but Mam persuaded him to roll over. Healer Wiggleswade did not even need him to lift his shirt. She simply spoke some kind of spell, ran her wand an inch above the length of his spine and noted some silver sparks that jumped out.

"It's here," she concluded. "*Curo!* And here. *Curo!* And *this*, perhaps, is what your Muggle X-rays could not discern... *Curo!*"

At the third *Curo*, there was a great snap and a puff of red energy, then all was silent.

It was *Dad* who had fallen silent.

He twitched cautiously, then slowly stood up.

"'Ell fire!" he exclaimed. "'T' pain's gone!"

"Of course it has," said Ernie's sister. "Everything is in the right place and there is no more pinching or swelling. I'm not expecting any complications..." She reached into her bag and pulled out a bottle of golden potion. "Take this mood-lifter if you're feeling not quite right over the next week. If the pain returns, owl me at once. But you should be fine now. Ernie, I'll Apparate you home."

She picked up her bag and held onto Ernie. The two of them solemnly vanished before we had time to explain that we had no way of sending owls from this house.

Fortunately, there was never any need, for Dad was suddenly well. He had no back-pain and no stiffness, and he never relapsed. After only two days, he said it was time to look for a new job. The mines had long since closed, but it took him only one more day to secure a post as a lorry driver. He has been driving lorries ever since.

But the really amazing difference for us was the change in Dad's mood. He stopped barking at us. He almost gave over watching television. He began to laugh. I finally remembered that he *had* played cricket with us, once when we were very small. It was only the next Saturday when he took us down to the park and organised all the local children into a game of cricket.

To be honest, cricket isn't my favourite thing. I played because it was so fantastic to have my Dad back. I was a butter-fingered bowler, but my bat always managed to send the ball in the right direction.

"We'll get a football team up and running next term," said Dad, "and since Sophie's going back to that fancy boarding school, Louise can be t' captain."

I wondered how I could tell Dad that he'd be better off choosing one of the lads as captain. He was becoming very popular with the local boys.

Mam was less worried that summer. Having Dad well again, and knowing that we would one day pay off our debts, meant that she fussed less about handing down shoes and wasting hot water. "It's jammy Sophie 'as that scholarship," she kept saying. "But Louise'll need a uniform when she starts at Kirk Balk, and there are no uniform grants in this town. I wonder if we can buy t' stuff on credit?"

"Mam, don't bother raking up another debt," I told her. "Let's wait while Sophie's 'Ogwarts letter comes. After we know 'ow much scholarship she's getting and what stuff she needs, we'll know 'ow much cash we've got left for me. We don't need owt while September, and we might 'ave savings by then."

Mam didn't believe this, but she didn't argue the point the way she would have in the old days. We all knew that something might turn up.

The Muggle school holidays began, and July passed away. On a brilliant August day, just three weeks before Sophie was due back at Hogwarts, we followed Dad into the park and set up old tree branches as cricket stumps. I hoped he would assign me to deep fielding because the sun was rising high, and I wanted to laze around doing nothing; there were already plenty of lads queuing up and demanding to bat.

"See there!" Sophie nudged me and pointed to a large bird in the sky. "It's coming this way it's yer-know-what."

I did know what. "We can't let all them Muggle lads watch yer talking to owls," I said. "We'd better run off be'ind of t' trees. We can send t' owls off again before Dad misses us."

We pelted away while Dad was assigning fielders. Sure enough, a tawny owl swooped down through the green leaves and hovered just in front of Sophie, holding out the yellow Hogwarts parchment.

"Flipping 'eck!" exclaimed Sophie in surprise. "Did they send us two this year?"

She was right. A second tawny swooped down beside the first and held out its talons to me.

"They did an' all," I said, taking the letter. "Weren't yer expecting it? I was. This extra bird's brought an 'Ogwarts letter *forme*."

**A/N 1.** *Sophie's Hogwarts career features in Hearthlinks, the final chapter of which also explains the fate of Louise and their parents. Healer Wiggleswade (née Mercy Macmillan) is a character in The Moon-Cursers.*

**A/N 2.** I apologise for cheating over the narrator's identity in this chapter. She thought of herself as a Muggle for a very long time, and I did try to plant the clues carefully.

**A/N 3.** Many thanks to **TDU** for yet again stepping up to the plate and giving the Yorkshire girls an authentic voice. I can't write this stuff without you!

## Refutation

Chapter 11 of 11

Marcus Flint's younger brother suffers a hereditary misfortune and makes a contribution to world knowledge of genetics.

*A Squib is someone who was born into a wizarding family but hasn't got any magic powers. Kind of the opposite of Muggle-born wizards, but Squibs are quite unusual.*

Ron Weasley, *CoS*, pp. 110-111

### CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Refutation

by Miles Flint

Marcus and I sat over the Quidditch simulator, but neither of us made a move. Twice I noticed that a miniature broomstick had dropped down to the table, and each time, I half-heartedly re-suspended it. But it didn't really matter. We weren't planning a game today.

"Miles, do you think your owl will come?" asked Marcus for the tenth time.

"Yes," I said, because I didn't know what else to say. I considered asking, "Do you think *your* owl will bring good news?" because I knew Marcus didn't do well on written exams. I had surprised Madam Podmore, the teacher at the village school, by doing well on her tests; she hadn't expected it from Marcus Flint's brother. But Marcus had large feet and fists, so it wasn't a good idea to antagonise him.

Something did seem to be flickering in the sky. Perhaps a cloud or a trick of the light? We stared with every muscle tensed. Yes! Something *was* moving; some dark spot was coming closer. I held my breath, not daring to scare it out of existence until I could see for certain that the dark spot was an owl.

It was an owl and it was flying towards our house. I began to breathe again. I pushed at the drawing-room window, although it was already open, to give the owl an easy passage towards one of us. The large tawny flew straight past me and dropped a scroll with the Hogwarts seal next to Marcus.

A Hogwarts letter for Marcus! Now that was not what we had expected! I held out a Knut to the owl, who clawed it up and flew off without waiting for a reply. Marcus broke the seal and scanned his letter.

"It's from Hooch," he said. "I'm Quidditch captain."

I pulled myself together and said, "Congratulations." Marcus grinned, then crumpled the parchment. This was not the letter he had been expecting.

Soon we were staring at the sky again. It was a warm, bright summer day, but we did not dare go outside. We felt pinned to our watch-posts, silently pleading with the empty sky to open up and speak to us.

"You'll be in Harry Potter's class," said Marcus, also for the tenth time.

"If they put him in Slytherin," I said.

Marcus snorted. "Of course he'll be in Slytherin. You must be careful to befriend him, Miles. Don't waste your Hogwarts time on the likes of Longbottom or Cornfoot. Help Potter with his homework and share your sweets with him. If he's at all sporty, I'll try to bend the rules and put him on the Quidditch team immediately. And we must bring him to stay with us for the Christmas holidays."

I thought Harry Potter might prefer to spend Christmas with his own family, but it was wiser to reply, "Perhaps."

There was more silence. Marcus broke it with his old question: "Miles, are you expecting *anything* to come for you?"

I wanted to shout back, "Are you expecting any good news in the one that's coming for you?" But today was a day when Marcus would care about his academic progress; if I humiliated him, he would repay me in bruises and hexes.

"You're not!" crowed Marcus. "You don't expect a letter at all!"

I wondered what he would say when my letter did come.

*If it came.*

Suddenly a startling on the horizon wasn't a startling at all, but had morphed into a barn owl that was standing on our window sill, holding out a scroll in its talons. I recognised the Ministry of Magic seal even before Marcus snatched the letter away. This owl did not wait to be paid; it soared off again, leaving Marcus to unfurl his destiny.

His fingers were trembling. I reminded myself not to say anything, not even to look interested, until we both knew what was inside the letter. I held my breath again, hoping Marcus wasn't in trouble. But after only two seconds, he grinned and passed the parchment to me.

#### ORDINARY WIZARDING LEVELS

MARCUS SALAZAR FLINT HAS ACHIEVED:

*Ancient Runes Dreadful*

*Astronomy Poor*

*Care of Magical Creatures Acceptable*

*Charms Acceptable*

*Defence against the Dark Arts Poor*

*Herbology Acceptable*

*History of Magic Acceptable*

*Potions Dreadful*

*Transfiguration Poor*

*Signed on behalf of the Board*

G. R. Marchbanks, *Head of Board*

Sapiens Tofty, *Secretary to the Board*

"So where's your letter, then?" he sneered. He walked to the door and shouted, "Father! Mother! My O.W.L.s are here!"

It took both parents about thirty seconds to appear from wherever they had been and read Marcus's letter.

"Congratulations, son!" said Father. "You're qualified!"

Mother simpered and nodded. Nobody seemed at all upset that Marcus's results were so ordinary. He had only passed four subjects, and Father and Mother were delighted anyway.

Perhaps they were much more reasonable than I'd assumed. Perhaps they really didn't care about results so long as we did our best. After all, we all knew what Marcus's future career would be. He would play a little professional Quidditch, then he would join Father in Flint & Sons, settling financial security on every solvent wizard in the British Isles.

"Mephisto," said Mother, "I think this well and truly justifies all our hard work and sacrifice in putting a child through Hogwarts!"

It was odd to think of our parents as "sacrificing" for us. Father's life-insurance business was quite successful; by working thirty or forty hours a week in a respectable Diagon Alley office, he had been able to pay off our comfortable house in Cambridge, subscribe to Quidditch and take us touring in Europe each summer. And Hogwarts tuition was free. Mother's work consisted of organising the house-elf, fussing over our school supplies and bustling off to the Witches' Institute for mysterious projects that "assisted the less fortunate of our community." She kept busy, but I had never thought of her activities as a sacrifice.

However, they did like Marcus to have good-quality supplies, so his books and uniform were always brand new, and he owned a Nimbus 1700. And while Madam Podmore's school in Hogsmeade wasn't expensive, it wasn't free either. I expect my parents did have to sacrifice some superannuation funds to make all that happen.

"I'm Quidditch captain too," said Marcus.

"That's *wonderful*, Marcus!" exclaimed Mother.

"It will give you a marvellously well-rounded résumé," said Father. "So you've decided to proceed to N.E.W.T.s. Have you chosen your subjects yet?"

"Herbology, Charms and Care of Magical Creatures," he replied, as promptly as if he'd spent all summer considering it. "Possibly History of Magic too but that depends on the demands of Quidditch."

"I'm going to invite all the relatives for a special celebration dinner," said Mother. She peered at the sky. "But perhaps not tonight; we'll wait until Miles's letter has arrived too. I suppose it hasn't come yet, Miles?"

I shook my head and tried to quieten the churning in my stomach. My letter might not come today; today was only Tuesday. Yesterday, when Father had asked, "Shouldn't we expect the boys' letters around now?" had been the first day that the subject had even been mentioned. Mother had replied, "I'll be surprised if anything comes on a Monday. The so-called workers don't usually work all through the weekend."

But the workers could easily work all through Monday. It was not at all surprising that Marcus's letter had arrived today. If mine didn't, it was almost certainly due tomorrow. If it still hadn't arrived by the end of Thursday

My stomach turned over again at the thought. *I must not be sick in the drawing room* I reminded myself. *My letter might arrive at any minute.*

"I'm bored with hanging around indoors," said Marcus. "I'm going to practise my feinting moves. Coming, Miles?"

"Not right now," I said, choking bile back into my throat. I had a broom, a Comet Two-Sixty, but it usually stood untended in a lonely corner of my room because I had never managed to make it fly. A couple of times, it had lurched into the air with me holding onto it, but both times it had nearly thrown me off, and it had never responded to any of my coaxings or commands. I didn't want to try it again without the assistance of a qualified instructor.

After Marcus had banged the drawing-room door behind him, I leaned against the architrave, staring up at the sky and wondering how much longer I would bother to stare. We were the only wizarding family on this side of Cambridge, so now that Marcus had his letter, any other owl that appeared in the sky would certainly be for me. And it was still possible, just barely possible, that my owl would come. But the real reason I was watching was that my family expected me to watch. There was no point in disillusioning them a minute before I had to. On this, the very last day of my childhood, I would be the son whom my parents expected me to be.

Mother had finished fussing with the centrepiece in the dining room and had moved off to the conservatory. I wished she would come and sit in the drawing room. She need not speak to me; if only she would bring her sewing, her flower-pressing, a book, anything that would give me one last hour of sitting near a normal mother.

A soft thump on the ceiling told me that Father was in the room above me, his study. I don't know what he "studied" in there, since he didn't bring work home with him and he never read for pleasure. Perhaps he organised his photographs or speculated on the Quidditch; but whatever it was, he didn't think to do it in front of his family. So the last kind words I had ever heard my father speak had been addressed to Marcus.

I was on my own, my eyes turned towards the sky but my mind not noticing how empty it was, when I heard a sharp crackle behind me. I jumped away from the window to see that the hearth was full of green flames, and Draco Malfoy was grinning at me.

"I've got my letter!" he exclaimed triumphantly. "Is yours here yet?"

I managed to say, "Not yet."

He waved a Hogwarts letter proudly. "I expect they sent mine out first. They wouldn't want to annoy the Malfoys, would they? I don't think Nott's has arrived either; he went all snooty on me when I tried to Floo him. Listen, Flint, I want to know what you think of this. It's here, at the bottom of the second page 'First-years are not allowed their own broomsticks.' D'you think they *mean* it?"

"Umm... Well, there is a custom that first-years don't play on the Quidditch team."

"Are they *serious* about that?"

"Don't know. My brother is the new Quidditch captain, so perhaps he'll make some changes."

"Ah!" Malfoy relaxed again. "Thanks, Flint, you've been a great help to me. I'll be in Diagon Alley next Tuesday perhaps I'll see you there? Bye!"

So that settled it. Today was the day when the Hogwarts letters were arriving. I wouldn't watch the sky any more. I would watch the fire and wait for some owl to swoop past and address me. I watched for perhaps five minutes before the fire once again flared green, this time displaying the rabbit face of Theodore Nott. I knew him quite well because Theo also attended Madam Podmore's school (unlike Malfoy, who had a private tutor).

"Good afternoon, Miles," he said. "Your Floo-line has been busy today. Draco Malfoy hasn't been Flooing you, has he?"

"Why do you ask that?"

"He's been Flooing *everyone*. He told me he was busy 'calling in favours' so that he could have a good start at Hogwarts. His parents have been talking to that Potions teacher is it Snap? Snipe? about getting him special treatment in lessons, and he says he'll 'pull a few strings' to put himself on the Quidditch team. I wondered if *your brother* was the string he was trying to pull there."

"Does it matter?"

"No, I was just wondering why your Floo-line was busy. Malfoy was a real pain today. He talked on and on about connections and blood-influence and how he's going to keep himself on the crest of events by becoming Harry Potter's best friend. It never crossed his mind that all his fawning and flattery might make Potter vomit. Anyway, I acted stupid and pretended my letter hadn't come yet. I wonder how long I can play that one out? The laugh would be on Malfoy if I could make him believe I was a Squib."

Only after Theo had disappeared in a swirl of green flame did I realise that he hadn't actually asked after my Hogwarts letter. He had simply assumed that I had one. He saw me every day and he was clever hadn't he *noticed* anything about me?

But Theo's letter had come. If everyone else had a letter and I didn't, there was only one possible explanation.

Another ten minutes passed, and there were more green flames in the hearth. This time I saw the round, comforting face of Neville Longbottom, who was my best friend at Madam Podmore's.

"Hi, Miles!" Neville was bursting with excitement. "Has yours come yet? I've had mine for half an hour, but I've only just escaped from Gran. She's *exploding* with pride because I've finally done something right. I say, Miles, which house do you think we'll be in? Do you think we're good enough for Gryffindor?"

"You are, Neville," I said earnestly. "You're the most Gryffindor-ish person I've ever met. But I..."

"I expect you'll be in Ravenclaw because you're so clever. Or perhaps in Hufflepuff because you're so hard-working and fair. Or... Miles, surely they wouldn't put you in Slytherin just because your brother is? *That* wouldn't be right at all. You could ask for Gryffindor... You never know..."

I took a deep breath. If I could practise saying this to Neville, perhaps it wouldn't be quite so bad when I had to tell all my aunts, uncles and grandparents.

"Neville," I said, "I'm not going to be in any Hogwarts house. They didn't send me a Hogwarts letter."

"What?" Neville's face crumpled. "That can't mean anything, Miles. They must have used a slow owl for yours. Or perhaps..."

"No." I drew another steadying breath, waiting for my heart to slow down. "Neville, I'm a Squib. There isn't going to be any Hogwarts letter for me."

Neville's smile faded. "But, Miles! You're so clever!"

"Plenty of Muggles are clever. It isn't the same thing as magical power. Neville, I don't *have* any magical power. I can't even use the Floo network!"

"Then how do you manage to arrive at school every morning?"

"I ask the house-elf to call directions for me, the same as adults do for little children. Muggles *caruse* the Floo but they can't *command* it. I couldn't call you today; I had to wait for you to call me."

Now Neville was worried. "Magical power can be very deeply buried, Miles. I didn't show *any* until three years ago. I still don't show much. I'm sure someone like you "

The door was flung open behind me, and Mother's coldest voice cut in. "Oh. It's that Longbottom boy." She did not approve of Neville, whose family, although pure-blooded, was penniless and had some unfortunate political opinions. Neville took the hint and disappeared out of the fireplace.

Father strode into the centre of the drawing room while Mother shrank back onto the sofa.

"So explain yourself, Miles!" Father announced. "*What* is going on down here?"

"Er... Neville just..."

"To Godric with the Longbottom brat! I'm not talking about him. I'm talking about Hogwarts. I've been speaking to Lucius on the private Floo line in my study, and he says that the Hogwarts letters arrived this morning. I didn't say anything to his face. But I have yet to see any post for Miles. Your letter didn't come, did it?"

"No, Father," I whispered.

"No, it didn't. I questioned the house-elf, thinking he might have put it aside for you. Then I Flooed Minerva to find out if there had been any trouble with delayed owls. Do you know what Minerva said, Miles?"

If "Minerva" was the person who dealt with Hogwarts admissions, I could imagine what she had had to say about me.

"Minerva said that there was no Miles Flint on the Hogwarts waiting list! She said there had never been a Flint on this year's register. She had the *audacity* to say that the charmed register doesn't usually make a mistake, but we could always bring Miles in for testing if we were quite certain he was magical!"

I already knew what the tests would prove, but there was no point in saying so out loud.

"This is the boy who has never kept a broom in the air! The boy who has trouble maintaining suspension even with the Quidditch simulation toy! The boy who has never caused a magical accident even when his brother's gang used him as a punching bag for half the day! Not even Madam Podmore had a good word for his magical talents she was always on about his logic and his memory and how Miles would make a wonderful *accountant!*"

Madam Podmore had never spoken a bad word of me. She hadn't spoken about my magical abilities at all. She must have *known*.

"Miles," Father finished, "have you anything to say for yourself?"

I slowly raised my head, but long before I met his furious glower, I knew there was nothing to say.

He whipped out his wand and pointed it at me, but he did not cast a spell. "You are a Squib," he stated, "and Squibs have no place in a pure-blood home. The Flints are an ancient and honourable line of wizards, and no more Flint money can be wasted on feeding a Squib. So you need to leave this house."

I felt my mouth drop open.

"You are not sleeping another night under this roof. Make sure you are gone by bedtime."

He turned on his heel and stalked out, without another word about where I should go or what he expected me to do. I stared at Mother, who stared helplessly back.

"Mother?" I couldn't believe that *she* would turn me out of the house, just like that, with nowhere to go. "Do I really have to leave? Don't *you* want me?"

Mother wiped her eyes, tried to look stern, then threw her arms around me and sobbed again. "Miles, don't you see that *dan't* keep you? If I say another word, your father will throw me out too! And he has control of all my money, so I couldn't provide for you once we were both on the streets. It won't help you or anyone else if I end up divorced, penniless and branded as the mother who passed the bad Squib blood down the Flint line. I'd lose Marcus and my place in society and..." The rest was incoherent.

I didn't dare ask her again if she wanted me. Perhaps she did, in a way, but it wasn't a way that counted. She had no plans to make a home for me, or even to find me a home elsewhere.

Nobody wanted a Squib.

I asked, "Where shall I go, then?" but I wasn't surprised when Mother simply shook her head and fled from the room. She had no idea where I could go, and she didn't want to add to her own problems by trying to think of a place.

I wasn't able to feel angry or afraid or even sad. The vast emptiness spreading through the pit of my stomach was so strong that I couldn't think clearly. The sight of the grate in the hearth reminded me that I should probably go to Neville's house. Neville lived in a tiny two-up-and-two-down in Halifax, so I couldn't stay there permanently; but his Gran might know where to send me next. I told myself I should look for the house-elf and ask him to call Neville's address into the Floo. But it somehow felt like too much effort even to pick myself up and walk down to the kitchen.

While I was staring at the grate, it rattled again. There was more green fire, and this time the caller was a middle-aged, bespectacled lady in an old-fashioned mob cap. It was my teacher, Madam Podmore herself.

"There you are, Miles!" she said. "Can you let me into your house?"

"I'm afraid I can't, Madam Podmore. The Floo network never obeys me."

She peered at me through her spectacles and remarked, "So your parents took the news badly, did they? My granddaughter Mandy had her Hogwarts letter this morning, so I thought it was time for me to check that you were all right."

"I'm fine," I lied automatically; then I realised what I'd said. "No. I'm not. My parents have thrown me out. I'm supposed to leave their house immediately, but I don't know where to go."

"Then you'd better come through the Floo," she replied briskly. "I'll authorise you to enter my house *Licentio Milu*, reverse charges!"

I stepped into the green fire and began to whirl around in the Floo network without another glance at my ancestral home.

I never said goodbye to Marcus at all.

The grate at which I landed was not the school in Hogsmeade, but Madam Podmore's private residence, which was actually in Staffordshire. She helped me out into her kitchen, remarking that it was usually quite safe to reverse charges on the Floo network, but of course I must be suffering from some very unstable magical vibes.

I don't remember what else she said. At that point I finally broke down and started crying. It was really true. I was a Squib. I was never going to have any magical powers or any place in the magical world. My own father and mother did not want me. I was eleven years old and I had no right to exist.

I cried through the next several days at Madam Podmore's house, and she made no attempt to stop me crying. She was very kind, but I didn't have the energy to notice it properly. I vaguely knew that I couldn't stay at her house forever, but it was more than a week before I finally asked, "What is going to *happen* to me?"

"It's all under control," she said. "You see, my father was a Squib, the son of a family even more ancient and pure-blooded than yours. Perhaps you've heard of the Blacks? His parents threw him out when he was eleven, and I later heard rumours that his niece even burned his name off the family tapestry."

"So they wanted to pretend that he had never existed?" I was in despair. "Then that's what my parents will do too. They'll never have me back, will they?"

"We don't know, but we have to plan for the worst. Papa discovered that there is a rescue-network, and of course I grew up knowing everyone involved with it. It was very easy for us to arrange a new home for you. We've found a family who will take you in. They're in Surrey, a long way from where the... more difficult wizards will think of looking for you."

"What? Are there really people who'll take in a stranger, just like that? Are they a magical family?"

"They are Muggles, but they understand about magic quite well because their grown-up son is a wizard. They have agreed to look after you and help you adjust to the Muggle world. I've told you, Miles, this isn't the first time that we've had to make an arrangement like this. The Cresswells have already enrolled you in a Muggle school, and I think you'll find you're very well prepared in most subjects."

It was only then that I foresaw a glimmer of hope. Madam Podmore *had* taught me maths, English, geography and the rest, and I saw that I really *could* go to a Muggle school and learn a Muggle trade. If these new people were kind to me, perhaps I really would be all right, more or less.

"It's lucky," I commented, "that this Muggle school just happened to have a vacancy as late as August. What's the school called?"

"Stonewall Comprehensive."

\* \* \* \* \*

Mr and Mrs Cresswell in Little Whinging, Surrey, were indeed kind people; they told curious strangers that I was their grandson and they kept the Muggle officials away by signing legal adoption papers.

It took me a long, long time to accept that it was all right to make a new family for myself. Year after year, I never gave up hope that my natural family would change their minds and take me back, but of course they never did.

I did well at Stonewall Comprehensive. While Neville and his new friends struggled over their O.W.L.s, I was sitting G.C.S.E.s, and I earned A (outstanding) or B (exceeds expectations) in ten subjects. Two years later, I passed five A levels, which are the Muggle version of N.E.W.T.s, and I was able to go to the Muggle university at Cambridge.

After seven years away, I didn't recognise my home city. My parents had both been killed in the final war against Lord Voldemort, and our house had been blasted by Death Eaters. So I never had the chance to tell Father and Mother that I was all right and that the Muggle world wasn't so terrifying if one knew how to handle it. Marcus had survived; I once passed him in the street, but I don't think he recognised me, for he walked straight past. So the Cresswells are my only family now.

I read science at Cambridge and became interested in genetics. My postgraduate work is all about hereditary blindness, but I have a couple of unofficial projects on the side. I've discovered that heredity doesn't work in the way wizards believe. It isn't in the blood at all, but in the genes. I wish I could have reassured Mother that she wasn't solely responsible for producing a Squib child. Since the bad gene is recessive, a Squib is only born if *both* parents carry it. I suspect that bad gene runs rampant through many of the old pure-blood families; they shouldn't marry each other if they are serious about breeding magical offspring. Mother and Father, as a combination, always did have a one-in-four chance of producing a Squib.

Interestingly enough, the same principle is true of Muggle-born wizards: they inherit their magical talent from *both* parents. If two Muggles each happen to carry that recessive magical gene, then they too have that one-in-four chance of producing a wizard. A Muggle-born, by definition, inherits only healthy magical genes. Therefore a Muggle-born wizard can never, ever become the parent of a Squib.

Take that, Lucius Malfoy!

THE END