

Dances with the Daffodils

by Annie Talbot

Twenty years of contentment does not prepare a man for Luna Lovegood.

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Chapter 1 of 1

Twenty years of contentment does not prepare a man for Luna Lovegood.

Twenty years of contentment robs a man of his edge. Of his expectation that catastrophe will arrive with the dawn (or the noontime bell, or sunset). Twenty years of contentment breeds nothing but the expectation of more... more time, more contentment, more security.

Twenty years of contentment does not prepare a man for the knock on his door that will change his life. That will fling him into a cataclysm of panic and fear.

Twenty years of contentment does not prepare a man for Luna Lovegood.

~o0O0o~

When the knock came, I assumed it was the grocer's daughter, delivering my weekly order of milk, bread, and sundry other items. I opened the door, money in hand, ready to relieve her of the heavy box, exchange the sparest of small talk, and send her on her way.

Luna Lovegood stood on my doorstep, looking as harmless as she ever had as a student, smiling at me expectantly. "Good morning, Headmaster," she chirped, as if we stood in the Great Hall of Hogwarts during that last, terrible year, and stepped past me into my front hallway. I could hear her chattering as she made her way into the front sitting room and settled herself onto the comfortable couch while I stood frozen in the doorway, coins and paper money slipping from nerveless fingers onto the stoop where she had stood.

Found... found... found... pounded in my brain, drowning out the frantic urgings of my old self to *Run! Hex her! Surrender!*

Her babble ceased at the sound of the coins hitting the stone and she hurried back out into the hallway. She took my arm and gently pulled me away from the door, shutting it behind us before she led me into the room and steered me to my chair.

"It's all right, Headmaster. You're safe. I don't mean you any harm."

She disappeared into the hallway, still babbling in a reassuring tone, although I couldn't understand a word.

Found... found...

From the clattering sounds, it seemed that she had located the kitchen and was making tea...the Muggle way, the hissing kettle told me. She'd found the package of biscuits, too; I heard the wrapper crinkling as she pulled the box free and the clink of china on the tray.

Why could I decipher her movements when I couldn't untangle her words?

My breathing slowed, and with it, the pounding of my heartbeat...*found... found.....*in my ears.

I accepted the cup of tea she offered with a hand that trembled only slightly and sipped cautiously. She'd added nothing to the brew but sugar, it seemed. And I'd yet to see her wand.

Could I, perhaps, trust her not to harm me?

But why would she mean me anything *but* harm... her former professor and headmaster, a Death Eater who had sent her to be imprisoned, perhaps tortured... please, not tortured... but how could she have escaped torture in that wretched house... with that evil creature... with all of them... of *us*...

My breathing came faster again. As it wheezed in and out, she left her seat and knelt beside me, taking the cup from my wildly shaking hand and placing it in its saucer on the tray.

"Please, sir, don't be afraid. I'm not here to hurt you. I'm here to be your friend."

How long we remained there...I in my chair and my former student crouched beside me, stroking my hand...I don't know. But finally, when my wheezing had subsided and my trembling calmed, I believed her.

~o0O0o~

I make my living as a poet. During my final year of life as Severus Snape, I discovered Albus's stash of Muggle poetry and became enamoured of the Romantic poets of the late Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries. I planned my death and hoped-for resurrection carefully, laying the groundwork for John Grey's new life in the Lake District, home of Wordsworth, Coleridge, Wilson, and Southey. I withdrew funds from Severus Snape's Gringotts vault in Muggle currency and bought the cottage, opened accounts with merchants in Grasmere, and filled the bookshelves with Muggle books and the closets with Muggle clothing.

My cousin, Eugenie Prince, was a Healer in a Parisian wizarding hospital. I charmed a Portkey to take me to her if my heart rate dropped below forty beats per minute and risked sending her a package with potions phials and instructions on how and when to use them. Moments after Potter left me, the Portkey activated and I arrived, barely alive, in her clinic. She healed me to the extent possible and then willingly submitted to Obliviation. My final act as a wizard was to ensure that I was well and truly dead to everyone who might care otherwise. My broken wand went into a bin at the train station.

I live frugally as John Grey, writing poetry to sell to tourists, mining the short, tragic life of Severus Snape for my epics and the beautiful, ever-changing world around me for my simpler verses. I have a small stand outside my cottage, and the tourists flock to buy the poetry of a contemporary Lake District Poet.

It was a book of verses that gave me away. A Swedish tourist asked me to sign her purchase and I gladly did so; it was all part of the service. Unfortunately, the only pen that came to hand was filled with rich, red ink. And John Grey's writing deeply resembles that of Severus Snape.

Five years later, Luna Lovegood Scamander stayed at the Inn owned by that lovely Swedish lady and searched her bookshelves for books written in English. Her hand had fallen on *Lakeland Verses*, her eye had fallen on my dedication ("To Lily") and my signature ("Best wishes to Anneke, John Grey"), and she had sought out the Innkeeper to learn where she had met the poet and bought the book.

She kept the secret for ten years without acting on it. I believe she would have carried it to her grave, had her circumstances not changed so dramatically.

Her father died... a terrible blow, as they had been so tremendously close. Whatever else one might say about Xenophilius Lovegood (and one had said much), he had adored his daughter and she him. Even so, she carried on. She turned *The Quibbler* over to Hermione Weasley, who stripped it of its fanciful stories and positioned it as a voice crying against the status quo. Luna and her husband used the proceeds from the sale of the magazine and Luna's family home to fund their expeditions, searching the world for various magical creatures, real and mythical.

But then her marriage had foundered upon the rocky shoreline of lies and infidelity. She was childless, so she had less in common with her old school friends...the Potters, the Weasleys, and the Longbottoms...than before. She had nowhere to turn.

She found a job at the Ministry doing research for the Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures. She lived in a one-room flat near Diagon Alley and was as lonely and despairing as Luna Lovegood could ever be.

"People are *kind*," she explained earnestly, that first autumn afternoon. "But I'm interested in different things now. I loved exploring with Rolf, but I don't want to wander anymore. And my friends... Well, Hermione wants to help, which is wonderful, but she keeps trying to *fix* me. And I'm not broken, precisely." She twisted her fingers together, trying to explain. "Just out of place."

Indeed she was... Even more so than she'd always been. Was it any wonder that she had sought me out? It was a quest, such as she and her father...and later, she and Rolf...had undertaken. And now she had a mythical beast to tame...her former Death Eater of a headmaster.

~o0O0o~

She spent the early part of that day reassuring me of my safety. The Death Eaters were all gone, she said, and the wizarding world was peaceful. Severus Snape was revered as a hero, and the romantic tale of his love for Lily was sighed over by every schoolgirl at Hogwarts. Even if I were discovered, I would be safe.

My immediate fears assuaged, she went on to tell me far more than I wished to know about the Battle and its aftermath. I was glad to know that Lily's son had survived and was happy; I was less glad to learn that Lily's grandson bore her murderers' names. For so I judged us, still...I, the cause of her death, if not the agent of it, and Albus, who could have prevented it but had instead played the long game, choosing to allow the prophecy to work itself out.

Luna spent the day, talking, explaining, reading my poetry to me and telling me what it meant. Ironically, she was right most of the time, even if I hadn't realized that precise meaning until she interpreted the poems from her unique perspective.

There was something about her.... She was safe, and I had no friends... hadn't done since I was fifteen years old. She asked if she could visit again the next week end, perhaps stay until Sunday, reading my poetry and hiking across the fells. Surely it would not be disloyal to have a new friend, over forty years after losing Lily?

~o0O0o~

That next visit began a new rhythm in my life. She Apparated into my sitting room every Friday after work. After sharing a hearty dinner (prepared by me, as the woman's cooking skills were limited to Plimpies and Dirigible Plum puddings... no, thank you), I would read to her what I'd written that week while she sat by the fireside, sketching. She would rise early each morning before the tourists arrived in their noisy coaches to set up the stand from which I sold my books, plugging in the rattling electric heater and setting the slender volumes out attractively while I prepared our breakfast. She greeted the tourists courteously, smiling and laughing with them in a manner completely foreign to me, inviting them into the shade of the old oak tree that stood sentinel over the cottage. As autumn progressed, that shade disappeared, yet they still would sit with her beside the ancient trunk, listening to her stories and telling tales of their own.

My sales trebled, even though the high tourist season was long gone.

Mid-afternoon, regardless of the weather, we closed up the stand and roamed the fells, consuming meaty sandwiches on thick, nutty bread and drinking tea from our thermoses as if it were the nectar of the gods. As perhaps it was. I took my journals and pens and she her drawing paper and coloured pencils. We often didn't return to my cottage until after dark, at which point we'd eat hearty stew and huddle before the fireplace. Saturday nights, we'd retire to our bedrooms; Sunday night, she'd Apparate

back to London while I looked forward to five desolate days without her.

~o0O0o~

She made her own separate world, here with me in Grasmere. A world apart from...*between*...the magical and the Muggle. My tiny cottage became more than the Muggle dwelling it had been for its several hundred years of existence, including the two decades of my residence. It became a place where magic was possible. Hinted at, not made manifest by wandwork or spells, but by the deeper, richer understanding of the connections between people and their world.

She was enchanted by the trappings of Muggle Christmas and insisted that we decorate the house. For the first time since childhood, I had a tree... lights... gifts. And for the first time in my life, I felt part of the holiday... as if I were treasured for myself, rather than simply tolerated.

My gift to her was a Wordsworth poem... I'd laboured over it for days, using calligraphy pens and inks to inscribe it onto thick, pale yellow paper, matting it with a deeper yellow and securing it behind glass in a cheerful orange frame. She laughed joyously when she tore away the wrapping paper, holding it up to the light and reading the words aloud before demanding that I drive a nail in the wall of *her* room, so that she could hang it immediately.

That done, she dragged me into my own bedroom, across the landing from hers, and pointed to an empty space between the two windows. I obediently drove another nail where she indicated, then followed her downstairs to open my gift.

It was the sunrise over the fens, done in acrylics. The sky was still bordered in the deepest blues, but the sun was making inroads, sending tendrils of pink, green, and forget-me-not to chase the darkness away. I could almost see the shadows fleeing before the fingers of the dawn. On the midnight matting, in silver, she'd written: *For John Grey... A New Day*.

I looked up at her, speechless, my throat choked with tears of gratitude and joy.

She smiled as I carried it to my room, watching me hang it in the space between the windows through which I would see the night fall. I would always be reminded that, in the darkest hours, the dawn was drawing close.

I stepped back, gazing at it through blurred eyes, and felt her hand slip into mine.

In that moment I realised two things: I was healed, and I loved her.

Joy flooded me. She had brought unlooked-for wholeness. This *New Day* she had given me was, indeed, her *true* gift. The painting was merely a symbol of what she'd already accomplished.

And I loved her. I hadn't believed myself capable of such a thing, had thought that Lily had taken my heart with her to her grave. Perhaps she had. Perhaps Severus Snape's heart had indeed died with her. But John Grey's heart was beating strongly in my chest. John Grey could... *did* love.

But how did she feel about me?

Was I merely a substitute for her beloved father? Was I a friend to walk with, a kindred spirit with whom she could share art, poetry, and memories of a long-ago war the scars of which still remained engraved upon our hearts and bodies?

Would I destroy our friendship by confessing my feelings?

~o0O0o~

Boxing Day was disastrous.

I was tongue-tied around her, afraid to speak lest it all come tumbling out in a jumble of words and sloppy emotion. She tolerated my silence for most of the day, challenging me only when she had brought her case down from her room.

I had been right.

As soon as I began to speak, all the ease and confidence that I had gained over the recent months fled and I became a stammering fourteen-year-old boy. I don't even recall my exact words, only their effect as she sank, trembling, into the nearest chair...*my* chair.

I knelt beside her, holding her hand, soothing her in unconscious imitation of that early fall afternoon months before. Eventually, she calmed and rose to her feet, grasping her case firmly in one hand, preparing to leave without uttering a sound.

I caught her other hand in both of mine, delaying her Apparation.

"Will I see you on Friday?" I fought to keep my voice even, to prevent even the slightest hint of my fear, my loss, to leak through.

"I don't know," she whispered. She drew her fingers from my grasp, leaned up, and kissed me gently on the cheek. "I don't know when I'll be back."

She stepped away, turned, and Disapparated.

~o0O0o~

Spring arrived, and with it, the tourists. I spent my days at the little stand under the oak tree, selling books of poetry that told stories of love and loss and glorious sacrifice alongside art that revealed the exquisite beauty of nature. I spent my evenings writing and my nights gazing at the promise of dawn glowing between the night-dark windows.

Sometimes people asked about Luna. I told them that she'd returned to her life in London, but that I'd relay their messages. Their warm smiles embraced me as their connection to her.

I had no idea whether she would return. Every few weeks she sent a package filled with drawings for me to sell, and I sent the proceeds to her with short notes containing the greetings of our customers. I sent no messages of my own.

Her poem hung on her bedroom wall, patiently awaiting her to return.

One early spring day, I saw a flash of blue crossing the road, the colour of the dawn's tendrils, chasing away the night. My heart skipped a beat as the dress approached, its wearer hidden from my view by a burly man in a mud-brown business suit. Soon enough, though, the man passed and Luna stood before me, resplendent in a sundress of forget-me-not blue, with sunflower earrings and bright orange sandals. She looked perfect.

"I have something to show you," she said, as if it hadn't been months.

I couldn't breathe. Suddenly, my heart was pounding in my ears and the litany *Run! Hex her! Surrender!* was replaying its endless song of panic.

I stood, frozen, as she boxed our unsold items, carrying them back into the cottage and locking the door.

She took my hand and led me through the town, down the bank, and along the stream to a place where hundreds of daffodils waved in the breeze beside the water. It was the poem come to life.

She led me into the centre of the mass of dancing daffodils and turned to me, placing her hand upon my shoulder and leaning against my chest, rocking gently with breeze.

"May I stay?"

With one hand, I pressed her against me, while with the other, I held her hand close to my heart, and together, amidst the daffodils, we danced the day away.

~oOOo~

I Wandered Lonely As A Cloud

By William Wordsworth

I WANDERED lonely as a cloud

That floats on high o'er vales and hills,

When all at once I saw a crowd,

A host, of golden daffodils;

Beside the lake, beneath the trees,

Fluttering and dancing in the breeze.

Continuous as the stars that shine

And twinkle on the milky way,

They stretched in never-ending line

Along the margin of a bay:

Ten thousand saw I at a glance,

Tossing their heads in sprightly dance.

The waves beside them danced; but they

Out-did the sparkling waves in glee:

A poet could not but be gay,

In such a jocund company:

I gazed--and gazed--but little thought

What wealth the show to me had brought:

For oft, when on my couch I lie

In vacant or in pensive mood,

They flash upon that inward eye

Which is the bliss of solitude;

And then my heart with pleasure fills,

And dances with the daffodils.

Author's Note: This story was written for Gypsy Morph in the 2009 Snuna Exchange. I must thank my valiant beta readers, Subversa, ferporcel, Mia Madwyn, and Babs, for an amazing amount of hand-holding as I attempted to produce a credible Snape and Luna. Any remaining weakness to the story and characterizations is all mine. They were awesome! *blows kisses to the ladies