

Road Trip

by kellychambliss

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Chapter 1 of 1

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"McGonagall can drive?"

Ron Weasley accompanied this whispered question with an expression of bug-eyed incredulity, and his father was not surprised when the professor, overhearing, responded with some asperity.

"Yes, Weasley," she snapped. "McGonagall can drive. In fact..."

"Aye, she can drive, all right," grunted Alastor Moody from the infirmary bed near which the group of assorted Weasleys and others all stood. "Drive you mad."

Both Ron and Harry Potter let out strangled snorts, and McGonagall's eyes flashed dangerously. But before she could reduce the boys and Moody to size, either metaphorically or literally, Hermione Granger said hastily, "How did you learn to drive, Professor?"

McGonagall paused, and Arthur Weasley could tell that she was torn between sniping at Alastor and refusing him the dignity of a reply. In the end she took the high road...at least as a temporary detour.

"Unfortunately, I've been in more than one war, Miss Granger," she said. "And in wartime, one must do any number of unpleasant things." The pointed glance she shot Moody showed how quickly her detour had ended, and Arthur hid a smile.

At that point, Headmaster Dumbledore stepped forward, his customary benign expression unchanged. "That's settled, then," he said. "Minerva will drive you to Manchester in the morning, Alastor, after you get a good night's sleep."

Appearing not to notice the equally-martyred expressions on his staff members' faces, he twinkled at them all and went on, "And now, we shouldn't trespass on Madam Pomfrey's good will any further. We've tired her patient long enough. Ronald, if you and your friends would like to take your mother to the Gryffindor common room, I daresay you can all find a nice cup of tea there. "

He put a kind hand on Molly Weasley's shoulder. "My dear, I'm going to borrow your husband for a few minutes...that is, if you wouldn't mind stepping up to my office, Arthur? And you as well, if you please, Professor McGonagall."

Arthur tried not to act surprised, although he wasn't sure he succeeded. He'd been in Dumbledore's office a few times before, but never for a nearly-individual audience. It was probably something to do with this proposed transfer of Alastor Moody from Hogwarts to a safe-house in Manchester. Or with the newly-reactivated Order of the Phoenix...

"Arthur." Molly put her hand on his arm. She looked anxious and determined at the same time, and Arthur knew she was remembering her words from just two days before, on the night poor Cedric Diggory had died. She'd told him what Dumbledore had said to her: "There's work to be done. Molly...am I right in thinking that I can count on you and Arthur?" And how she'd been glad to answer, "Of course you can."

And of course he could. Arthur would have been disappointed had Molly said anything else. The Weasley family...well, the Weasley adults...would do their bit to fight the Dark Lord. Without question, they would.

But Molly was no fool, and however proud she might be to think that Dumbledore relied on them, she understood the very real dangers they would face in setting themselves so obviously and resolutely against the newly-returned Voldemort. Hadn't she already lost two brothers to the cause? And she probably hadn't expected so direct a call for Arthur's help quite so soon. So she was worried about him, and who could blame her?

"Excuse us just a moment," Arthur said to Dumbledore, and led Molly away from the crowd. She'd want to tell him to be careful, to remember that he had a family, not to take any foolish chances. He didn't mind. Let her fuss a bit if it made her feel better; he'd hug her and reassure her, and in doing that, he'd reassure himself.

"Arthur," she said again, and he smiled with what he hoped was sufficient preliminary reassurance. "I expect Dumbledore is going to ask you to do something more to help fight You-Know-Who. For my sake...and the children's and Gideon's and Fabian's...you give that Dark Lord hell. From the Weasleys."

She stretched up to kiss him quickly but fiercely and then was gone, saying briskly to Ron and his friends, "I could do with a cup of tea, then, loves. I'm parched."

Arthur stared after her, wondering, and not for the first time, why he ever thought he understood a single thing about her. He watched her link arms with Harry on one side and Ron on the other and head out of the infirmary.

At the door, she looked back. "And Arthur," she said. "You be careful. You have a family to think of. Don't take any foolish chances."

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And if Molly wasn't formidable enough, there was McGonagall. She stalked silently beside Arthur as the three of them, Dumbledore chatting amiably, made their way to the Headmaster's office, and once they got inside, she spoke her mind while Dumbledore arranged tea.

"Albus," she said, shaking her head "no" to his proffered cuppa. "I don't expect you to listen to me now any more than you ever listen to me, but I have some serious reservations about this plan, and I would be remiss if I didn't express them."

"You know I'm always happy to hear your opinion, Minerva," Dumbledore said politely as he collected his own tea and wanded a cup to Arthur.

She snorted. "Don't patronise me, Headmaster," she said, though her tone was not as sharp as her words. "Or at least, since you're going to patronise me anyway, do so in the service of clarity. I need you to tell me again why you think it makes any kind of sense for me to drive Alastor Moody from Scotland to Manchester in a Muggle motor car."

"Well, as a rule, it wouldn't make sense at all," said Dumbledore, sipping. "You're quite right about that, my dear. But you heard Poppy: Alastor is weak, after all those months of lying in Barty Crouch's trunk and barely moving. Apparition would be too hard on him, his muscles won't stand the strain of a Portkey, and he's nowhere near stable enough for a broom. And the Floo Network might be watched."

"The trains have stopped running, have they?" McGonagall said.

"The problem there is Voldemort and the Death Eaters. You know they'll be looking for Alastor, of course. They'll be worried about how much he might have overheard in all that time he spent with Mr Crouch the younger. I'm assuming they'll have a good idea of the physical state Moody is likely to be in, and they'll be expecting us to use some sort of non-magical transportation. A train is the most likely method, yet with their fixed schedules, they'll be too easily monitored."

"And Alastor is too weak to maintain a Disillusionment charm for long," McGonagall nodded. Her irritation seemed to have faded; her interest now was in the problem at hand, and she and Dumbledore strategised together with an ease that suggested long practice.

"Yes," Dumbledore was saying, "and I'd rather not trust an Invisibility Cloak on a train, either - so many people pushing about."

"Er," said Arthur. He wasn't sure if his input would be welcome, but Dumbledore turned to him and smiled encouragingly. Emboldened, Arthur continued, "Why can't he just stay at Hogwarts? He's safe here."

"There are a few things I'm hoping Alastor can do for me in Manchester," Dumbledore said. "I need his expertise. Now that we've reactivated the Order, there is much to be done. Minerva can fill you in on the details when you're on the road with Moody tomorrow."

"On the road? Tomorrow? Me?" Arthur gasped. "In a Muggle car?" It was too good to be true.

"If you'll be so kind," Dumbledore said. "I want Minerva and Alastor to have a lookout with them, and I'm certain you'll be no end of help to them in dealing with the Muggles." He turned to Professor McGonagall. "And you'd better take Filius with you, too, Minerva, in case you need to hex any moving targets."

"Excellent idea," McGonagall said. "I doubt there's a Muggle auto made that can move faster than one of Filius's duelling hexes."

"Indeed," Dumbledore agreed. "Not that I think you'll have need of his skills; I don't really expect any trouble. But one should always be prepared."

He set down his teacup and Summoned a dusty bottle and three glasses from a low corner cupboard. "And now I think we might all like something a little stronger than tea," he said. "Minerva? A wee dram?"

"Make it a double," McGonagall said. "And not so wee."

Arthur was glad he'd finished his tea, or he might have embarrassed himself by spitting it out. The universe had just shifted, and not merely because a dark and despotically maniac was on the loose. What had happened to Minerva McGonagall the teetotaler? Everyone knew she never touched anything stronger than gillywater.

Then he realised that he didn't really know anything of the sort. All he knew about McGonagall was what he'd seen in public...at Hogwarts, with students around. He had no idea about her private life. Or about Moody's or Flitwick's or any of them.

Why had it never occurred to him before that he didn't really know the Hogwarts professors at all?

Well, he supposed several hours spent in the close quarters of a car...with three experienced duellers, two of whom appeared to quite dislike each other...might change that. He might turn out to have more than Death Eaters to worry about.

He was looking forward to this.

When the drinks were poured, Dumbledore lifted his in a toast. "To a successful road trip among the Muggles," he said.

They touched their glasses together and drank, and as the smooth old firewhisky warmed his throat, Arthur Weasley felt just the way he used to feel as a little boy on Christmas Eve.

He simply could not wait until tomorrow.

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They met the next morning in an empty Muggle car park not far from Hogsmeade; Arthur had had no idea that Hogwarts had hidden tunnels that stretched so far. The four of them had made a strange parade through the tunnel, dressed in what he thought were an odd assortment of garments, although Harry and Hermione had assured him that they would look normal to Muggles.

Arthur himself was wearing something called a "sports jacket," and he still couldn't quite get used to the sight of Flitwick in a fawn-coloured, v-necked jumper of some soft, fine knitted material. Arthur had always thought of jumpers as bulky, bright things, like the ones Molly made for him and the children.

Moody was wearing a plain eye-patch instead of his magical eye, and although McGonagall's black skirt and short green cape didn't look vastly different from her robes, the very fact that she wasn't wearing robes at all, that she was actually displaying a set of trim calves and ankles, neatly encased in black tights...well, as he'd said, it was all quite strange.

The automobile was waiting for them when they emerged into the car park...a sedate grey Vauxhall sedan, rather old, Arthur thought, although he couldn't be sure. But he thought it was beautiful.

Flitwick seemed to think so, too, judging from the beaming glances he sent toward it. "Of course, it will be much more spacious when we get inside," he informed Arthur. "Minerva's already transfigured the interior; we should be very comfortable."

For her part, McGonagall was standing next to the driver's door and looking in, frowning. "Where is the clutch?" she asked.

"Clutch?" Moody demanded. "Do we have to be clutched by something? What? How?"

He looked unhappy as he stood swaying slightly, leaning on a thick walking-stick. Arthur understood: if he'd just spent eight months being held prisoner in a trunk, he'd be nervous about being enclosed, too.

Moody didn't look good. Though he had refused any attempt to help him through the tunnel, the journey had obviously cost him some effort: there was a film of sweat on his forehead, and he seemed alarmingly pale. McGonagall looked at him sharply.

"Oh, do sit down, Alastor, before you fall over from stoicism. You'll be in the back with Arthur; I've made you a nice bed there, so you can rest."

"I'm not getting in the back," Moody said. "I can't be vigilant lying down like some sort of fainting maiden. You make me a perch in the front, up high, with a lot of windows. You'd better put a window in the roof, too, in case the damned DEs try a broom sortie. And what's this about being clutched?"

"I've already set up everything for Filius to sit in the front as a lookout. You..."

"No, that's fine, Minerva," Flitwick interposed. "Arthur and I can maintain vigilance in the back; you let Alastor sit up front with you."

McGonagall put a hand on her hip and glared at him. "Don't think I don't know what you're up to, Filius Flitwick," she said. But Flitwick simply smiled and raised uncomprehending eyebrows; as far as Arthur could tell, he had no more idea what Minerva meant than Arthur did.

"Damn it, Minerva!" Moody roared. "What the hell is going to be clutching us?"

"Calm down, Alastor! A clutch is part of the auto mechanism. Trust me, no one is going to be clutching you."

She turned back to the car. "But I don't see one here..."

Here, at least, was something Arthur knew about. You didn't work in the Misuse of Muggle Artefacts Office without learning a thing or two about Muggle automobiles.

"There is no clutch," he said. "You don't need it with this sort of car. I believe it has what's called an autocratic transfusion."

McGonagall looked sceptical. "Muggles," she said. "Always changing things and calling them 'improvements.'"

"Your wards could do with a little improvement," Moody said, pointing his wand at the auto. "Did you have first-years do these?"

Professor McGonagall's expression turned long-suffering. "Could we all just get in the car, please?"

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Flitwick had been right...the interior of the car was spacious and comfortable. Arthur could recline at his leisure, and Flitwick's seat was perfectly suited to his size, letting him look easily out of his window while still being able to keep his feet on the floor. Everything he needed was in convenient reach.

"Ah, this is the way to travel, my boy," Flitwick said, reclining his seat and angling a couple of mirrors so that he could see what was behind them. A flick of his wand brought him a cup of spicy tea from the small samovar steaming on a table nearby. "Do help yourself."

Moody, meanwhile, was busy adjusting a variety of spy devices and covering the Vauxhall with complex enchantments. "I want to do a six-layer alarm, Min," he said, "so I'll need about twenty-five minutes to..."

But the car was already moving out of the little lay-by.

"Damn it, I said wait!" Moody shouted.

"And I say it's time we were on our way," McGonagall said firmly, gathering speed. "The wards are fine; Albus set them himself, and you've already added enough armour to protect the entire county."

Moody seemed about to protest further, but then sank back into his seat. "I just want us to be safe," he said, and if it had been anyone other than "Mad-Eye" Moody speaking, Arthur would have thought he sounded rather plaintive.

Then to Arthur's surprise, McGonagall reached over to squeeze Moody's hand. "I know you do," she said. "And if we aren't, it won't be your fault."

"No, indeed," said Flitwick. "Your protections are excellent, Alastor. I couldn't feel any safer if I were still at Hogwarts."

Moody seemed to feel that he'd shown enough vulnerability, for he growled, "I just hope we won't need any protection from Minerva's driving."

"It's my wand you'll need protection from, my friend," McGonagall retorted, "if you don't mind your manners."

Their animosity would have made Arthur uncomfortable, except that they further disconcerted him by exchanging wry half-smiles.

Flitwick, too, was grinning. "They were even more fun when they were married," he whispered to Arthur.

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Several miles went by while Arthur tried to wrap his mind around this revelation: Minerva McGonagall and Alastor Moody had been married? To each other? Maybe even during the years when he and Molly had been students, and the Gryffindors had all been certain that Professor McGonagall was so repressed that she probably never took her robes off even to bathe: just *scourified* herself clean while still clothed. (Not that he was proud of such silly speculations, but after all, they'd been just children.)

Arthur shook his head. Ever since yesterday in the infirmary, when Dumbledore had first broached the idea of this road trip, it had been just one unexpected thing after another. Probably next he'd be told that Flitwick was involved with Severus Snape.

And yet, there was no reason why any of the professors shouldn't be married or cohabiting. It was just...

It was just not something he was prepared to think about while riding in a car with them, Arthur decided.

And in any case, his attention was soon distracted when they reached a dual carriageway, and Moody leant over to mutter something to McGonagall.

"Really, Alastor," she said. "You didn't think to go before we left Hogwarts?"

"Of course I did. But that was over an hour ago. And you know how small my..."

"Oh, all right! Check the map, then. It should tell us where to find a petrol station somewhere along here."

Privately, Arthur thought she might be too hopeful. They hadn't seen many signs of civilisation for quite a while, and the single-track roads on which they'd been travelling had been in some disrepair and largely deserted. Their ride had been smooth enough, though; it occurred to him now that McGonagall must have charmed the car's dispensation, or whatever it was called.

"Petrol station? I don't need a petrol station," Moody said. "Just pull over to the side of the road, woman! I'll step off into the gorse or something."

"Whatever happened to Constant Vigilance? The roadside is far too open."

"I'll Disillusion myself. It's safer than going into some strange Muggle place. I..."

"I'd like to see a Muggle petrol station," Flitwick said. "Wouldn't you, Arthur?"

"Yes!" Arthur felt quite keen. It would be an adventure, yet not even Molly could think it qualified as taking "foolish chances."

Sighing heavily, Moody picked up a blank parchment lying next to McGonagall and tapped it with his wand. "Petrol," he said, and an image of their road came into focus with the words "next exit turn right" scrolling across it.

"Get off here, Min," Moody said.

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The petrol station wasn't large...two fuel dispensers and a small, rather run-down shop that sold beverages and snacks.

"I'll be quick," Moody said, but Flitwick interrupted.

"Let's all go in, shall we?" he said with enthusiasm, and Arthur was nothing loath.

McGonagall nodded, too. "Since we're here, we should probably all use the facilities."

Moody didn't seem happy about this plan, but he didn't object. "Hands on your wands at all times, then," he said, and strode off into the shop.

They took turns using the single loo, Moody insisting that Minerva be first. Then while they waited for Moody himself, they stared...Arthur entranced, McGonagall horrified...at some packaged Muggle cakes tinted with colours so loud that they made Fred and George's concoctions look like the blandest of baby food.

"Muggles actually eat these things?" McGonagall asked in awe.

"Not just Muggles, my dear," said Flitwick, scooping up several different packages and heading toward the till. "Wait till you taste them."

With a tentative finger, McGonagall prodded a bright pink and purple fairy cake. "Taste them? I think not," she said. "Although I suppose Muggles might feel the same about chocolate frogs."

"Or cockroach clusters," agreed Arthur, and McGonagall laughed.

It was a sound that brought home to Arthur just how far his life had come from his schooldays, when Professor McGonagall had been one of the most terrifying people he'd ever known. Not that she couldn't still reduce him to jelly, of course. But she seemed so different to him now. As did so many things.

"Weasley. You're up," said a gruff voice behind him, and Arthur turned to see Moody holding open the door of the tiny loo.

When he was done, and Flitwick had bustled in for his turn, Arthur stepped outside for a bit of air. Moody and McGonagall were nowhere to be seen; he supposed they must have gone back to the car.

He decided to take a stroll around the outside of the little shop, but as he came to the far corner of it, he heard the others talking in low, intense voices just out of his sight.

"It's wrong, Alastor," McGonagall was saying. "Albus should never have asked this of you. It's too soon, you can barely stand...oh, don't look at me like that, you're weak and you know it. It's nothing to be ashamed of. You've been locked away for months. You must feel..."

"I feel like I need to do something, Minerva! Damn it, I let myself be overpowered by two little puppies. I've got to redeem myself, don't you understand? And don't try to tell me it wasn't my fault...not unless you can also tell me you've finally forgiven yourself for letting Marlene McKinnon go home alone that night she died. Can you? I didn't think so. Now don't argue with me. This is something I want to do."

"Yes...yes, all right. I..." She broke off. "What's wrong? You look..."

"Minerva. There's something else I have to say. It's not the right time or place, maybe, but...this business with Barty Crouch. You should have known he wasn't me. All those months you were in that castle with that damned imposter, and you couldn't tell? You of all people."

"Oh, Alastor, I'm so sorry." Minerva sounded distraught, and Arthur realised belatedly that he had no business eavesdropping like this. Still, he didn't move.

"When you first..." McGonagall was saying. "No, when the *imposter* first arrived, I went to his rooms, and he...well, I'll merely say that he made it very, very clear that he didn't want to see me. He said it would be better for both of us if I just kept my distance, so I said fine. The only actual conversation we had after that was one time when he

needed to send information to Harry Potter indirectly."

"So he was rude and you were stubborn, and it was enough like us to be convincing. Is that it?"

"Yes, I suppose so. I'm sorry..."

"No, it's all right, Min. Or it will be. I understand better now. I shouldn't have brought it up out here, anyway."

"We'd better get back," she said, her voice sounding a bit thick. "Or they'll think You-Know-Who has got us..."

Arthur sneaked away as quickly and quietly as he could. Flitwick was standing near the car, gazing out at the road, but he looked at Arthur with knowing brightness, as if he had a fairly shrewd idea of what Arthur had been doing.

If he did, though, he didn't refer to it; he merely tilted his head toward Alastor and Minerva, now coming slowly around the side of the building, and said, "I've always been sorry they had to split up, but I suppose they're just too much alike. It was a real love match, though, you know. Very romantic."

"And you think they should try again?" Arthur asked, remembering Flitwick's insistence that McGonagall and Moody should share the front seat.

Flitwick burst out laughing. "No, not at all," he said. "They'd hex each other silly. Or else curse each other dead. But they're very entertaining to listen to."

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More than three hours later, Arthur awoke from a cake-induced nap to realise that the car had stopped. They seemed to be on a motorway now, and motionless traffic stretched endlessly in front of and behind them.

"The map says there's been a wreck ahead," Flitwick informed him.

Arthur was interested. "How long have we been here?" he asked. Leaning forward to look through Moody's distance-measuring spyglass, he saw that more than a mile of cars stood between them and the Muggle emergency vehicles.

"Oh, just a few minutes. And we won't wait; Minerva's going to slide us through."

"Can't sit here too long," Moody barked. "Anything could happen. You'll have to be fast, though, Min. We'll leave traces otherwise."

"Well, it won't be as exhilarating as a trip on the Knight Bus," McGonagall said dryly, "but I think I can manage."

One hand on the steering wheel and the other on her wand, she narrowed the auto until they could squeeze through the middle of the two lanes of traffic. With subtle flicks of her wand, she edged cars out of her way on the right side, and Moody did the same on the left.

In a surprisingly short time, they had reached the scene of the accident...two impossibly-crumpled cars and a tipped-over lorry...and were on their way once more.

"Oh, well done! Capital!" cried Flitwick, applauding. "You're a fine driver, Minerva, even if you don't like the autocratic transfusion."

"Thank you, Filius," McGonagall replied. "But I do think I'd prefer a clutch."

Moody snickered and reached a groping hand toward her. "Well, *if that's* what you'd prefer," he said, leering, "I could..."

"You could stop right there," McGonagall snapped, freezing his movement with barely a twist of the wand she still held. "Or else// stop right here, and you'll be out on your half-arse."

Moody shouted with laughter. "You slay me, Min."

"Don't tempt me." But again they exchanged their wry smiles, and Flitwick glanced at Arthur with delight.

"Told you," he mouthed.

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They reached the safe-house without further incident, and while Arthur was glad that they'd completed the mission so easily, he hated to lose the camaraderie of the road trip. For these few hours, the car had been its own small world and its occupants like his family. He doubted he'd have a chance for this sort of closeness with them again, and he was sorry.

But as Molly always told the children, all good things must end. And in truth, it wasn't a bad ending at all: everyone safe, everyone more or less happy.

They stowed the car within the safe-house wards, and then Flitwick waved a cheerful goodbye as he Apparated away to visit a friend before returning to Hogwarts.

Professor McGonagall (he really should start thinking of her as Minerva) turned to Arthur. "I'm staying to tea with Alastor, if you'd like to join us."

"Thank you, but I should get home," Arthur said. He knew that she and Alastor had things to discuss, and he'd already imposed upon them enough, however unaware of that imposition they might be.

"Very well," Mc...Minerva said, smiling, and Arthur thought how nice she looked in her Muggle coat and skirt. "Give Molly my best, and tell her we're glad that you could come with us."

"I will," said Arthur. "I'm glad, too."

"Don't think you weren't useful," said Moody unexpectedly. "Just because we had no trouble. There's no substitute for vigilance."

"No, indeed," Arthur replied.

And he left them standing there at the safe-house door, Alastor with his hand on Minerva's shoulder, while he Apparated to home and Molly.

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High above the M6 motorway, two dark figures hovered on swift brooms.

"Still no sign of them," said one. "I don't understand it. There's no way they could have got past that wreck; we made sure it lasted for miles."

"You'd better not have fucked this up," declared the other. "You said this plan was foolproof."

"It is! If they'd sat there for any length of time, we'd have found them. And if they'd tried to use magic to move through that much traffic, you know we'd have spotted their signature."

"Unless they were quick."

"Not likely. I told you, they're not good enough. They just haven't got here yet. But they will, don't worry."

The second one wheeled his broom around in some annoyance. "Oh, right, 'don't worry.' You're the one who said none of them would be able to drive a car in the first place. Even though the Master said he was sure McGonagall could..."

The first one laughed. "McGonagall," he said scornfully. "Dumbledore's losing his grip, entrusting Moody to a dried-up old schoolteacher and the likes of Flitwick and Weasley! Don't worry, I said. We'll get them."

"We'd better. I don't want to have to tell our Master that we've lost them."

"Neither do I," agreed his companion. "But even if we do lose them this time, it won't matter in the long run. Not now our lord is back."

"True. There's no stopping us now."

"Still," muttered the first. "I wish we could get this job finished. We've been on the move up here for hours. If there's one thing I hate..."

"What?"

"It's sodding road trips."

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