

Our Cousin the Wizard

by dracontia

Life is easier when you can reconcile yourself to the peculiarities within your own family.

one shot

Chapter 1 of 1

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"You don't have to do this, you know," Ginny said as she did up Harry's tie.

"I know. It just feels... feels right." That wasn't quite what he meant, but Harry in no way felt equal to explaining the weird combination of reconciliation and need for closure that Dudley's letter had sparked in him.

She smiled thinly. "Well, that rules out Polyjuice. I'd know that some imposter was leaving dirty socks on the floor if you weren't haring off somewhere to do the right thing."

"Funny." He kissed her briefly to take the dry sting out of it. "Is Al ready?"

"He's dressed, just needed the loo. Are you sure he should go with you?"

Frankly, Harry wasn't sure. But he needed someone else there. James was immersed in his first year at Hogwarts, Ginny would rather eat Flobberworms than go, and something inside of him looked at Lily and whispered, forcefully, 'she's too young.' Taking Ron and Hermione would feel too much like bringing along backup, and that wasn't what he wanted to project. Polite, soft-spoken, Albus with his wide, observant eyes was the obvious choice. "The circumstances aren't ideal, but I'd like Albus to meet his cousins."

"After everything he..." the heat rose in Ginny's voice, and she clamped her teeth over the rest of what she was about to say at the sound of Albus' light, quick tread on the stairs.

"He's not the same man, and his children aren't their father. They're certainly not their grandfather," Harry said. He was proud of himself for keeping his tone even, despite the tightness in his jaw.

Ginny distracted herself by turning to embrace Albus Severus. "There's my handsome boy in his Muggle suit!"

"Mum!" Al managed not to whine it (entirely) but colored a bit, setting off his bright eyes and the somber color of his clothes. Still, he hugged her in return.

"Come on, Al. Remember, your cousins are Muggles, so no talking Quidditch."

"Or brooms, or potions, or asking about electrical plugs for Grandad." Al spoke soberly enough, but the corners of his mouth twitched. Harry couldn't help but respond in kind.

"Right, you. Well, goodbye, Lily," he continued without missing a beat, as his daughter bounced into the room, bestowed a quick hug on father and brother, and went skipping off on an obscure mission of her own making. Harry couldn't help but smile wider. Some days, his youngest was much more Luna than Lily.

"We'll be back before dinner, love." He hugged Ginny, surprised when she clung to him.

"You look handsome in your Muggle suit, too," she whispered in his ear. It was an apology of sorts, and it eased the tension from their almost-argument. Harry answered with a kiss, then took Al's hand to Apparate to the alley behind the church.

Harry managed to concentrate well enough to quell his twinge of shame at the fleeting thought that, even at his age, he was a little relieved to be attending his uncle's funeral.

Harry and Al met Dudley on the church steps. Should anyone ask, they'd had a ride from a friend. Harry didn't think that anyone would ask. He seemed to be almost as invisible to Vernon's hard-faced, loud-voiced business associates now as he had been as a spindly child.

"Harry. Thank you for coming." Dudley appeared as massive as always, especially squeezed into his black double-breasted suit. More of his bulk was muscle than fat, though, these days. Apparently marrying the farmer's daughter was as good for his health as it had been for his disposition.

"You're welcome," Harry answered automatically, and just as automatically felt lame for saying it. Still, he was glad for the perfunctory courtesy to fall back upon. It was harder than he had imagined to dredge up something to say about the man he never had quite managed to forgive, at least not in person. "How are you holding up?"

"Well enough. We kind of expected it, you know? He never would watch his diet." It was strange for Harry, seeing his cousin look so... human. His face was reddish and weather-beaten, and grief lent it a certain dignity. "Is this your son?"

"Albus Severus. Al, this is Cousin Dudley." Al shook hands politely, his tiny fingers lost in Dudley's big, weathered paw. It was also interesting to watch the same awkward thought processes run through Dudley's head as through his own; everything from their polar opposite feelings for the man who was the subject of the funeral to the utter lack of any happy memories in common. His relief was plain when the slow toll of the bell put an end to the need for conversation. "I...ride with us, okay? To the cemetery, I mean. I want you to meet Mina and the kids."

"Okay," Harry said without meaning to, and blinked in surprise.

"Good. There's space in the family section up front. Nice to meet you, Al." Compounding Harry's surprise, he gave them a watery smile before heading into the church.

Harry sat three pews back from the front. He hadn't counted on his visceral reaction to seeing the huge coffin, or to watching Aunt Petunia's pikestaff form, swathed in black and shriveled in on itself and *veiled*, even, clinging to Dudley's arm like Dementor-induced fog. It was surreal and disturbing.

He noticed Al was studying the stained glass and welcomed the distraction. When Harry ran out of windows that he could see without craning his neck too obviously, he studied the people and pretended that this was a brush-up course in Behavior and Observation. Mercifully, the service was short, and he managed to tune out the eulogy.

Harry continued on in the same detached daze while everyone filed out to either make the trip to the cemetery or take their leave. Someone buttonholed Aunt Petunia; with a speed belying his size, Dudley extricated himself from her grasp and rushed in Harry and Al's direction with a tall, plain woman, a sullen, sturdy girl on the cusp of puberty, and a round-faced boy slightly younger than Albus, in tow.

"I'll need to look after Mum, but first..." He turned to indicate the tall woman. "Harry, this is my wife Wilhemina. Mina, this is my cousin," Harry almost fancied that there was a silent, 'my cousin, the wizard,' in the pause, "Harry, and his son, Al."

"Pleased to meet you," Harry said. Wilhemina had an impressive grip. Harry tried not to be surprised.

"Pleased to meet you," she answered. "Call me Mina. I don't know this other woman my husband just introduced." She gave a crooked little smile at her own joke. Harry found himself liking her just a bit.

Aunt Petunia's voice, reedy and tearful to the point of being nearly unrecognizable, pierced the air around them. Harry couldn't keep himself from twitching slightly. Dudley rushed the introductions of his daughter Dahlia and his son, Samford Vernon (thankfully shortened to Sam) before he excused himself to deal with her.

"Dudley's driving his mum. You can ride with the children and me," Mina said kindly. Dahlia gave Al and Sam a look that clearly indicated that she wanted nothing to do with small, grubby, boys, but asked politely enough to be allowed to ride with her dad and grandmum. Harry thought he detected a measure of relief in Mina's quick acceptance and spared an apprehensive thought for what James might be like circa age 13.

Al and Sam spent the brief trip deeply embroiled in some whispered conversation. Harry caught none of it thanks to Mina's small talk, but the tone was friendly and Harry was relieved. Sam seemed to take after his mum. The boys stayed together, off to one side, through the brief interment.

Words were spoken; the casket was lowered. Some machinery was brought up, the hole promptly filled, and neat sod rolled over the lot as if it had always grown there. And that was it. Harry stared pensively at the manicured, green patch, feeling rather as if he'd fallen asleep in front of a film on the telly and only just wakened in time for the end.

It took him a moment to realize that one of the figures in black wasn't just milling about idly, but actually approaching him. There was only one person at the funeral wearing a big, black, veil. He was surprised that she actually deigned to lift it and look him in the face.

"Hello." Harry noted bitterly that she couldn't even bring herself to say his name.

"Hello, Aunt Petunia." He even managed to unclench his teeth.

Mum would have been proud.

The thought stung Harry's eyes and squeezed his throat. He was saved by a warm, little presence at his side that could only be one person. Reflexively, Harry's hand found his son's shoulder. He was an adult now. He could do this.

"This is my son, Albus. James is in school, of course. Ginny and I thought that Lily was a bit too young to come."

He almost felt bad at the way he made his aunt blanch twice...first at the mention of school, then at the name Lily. Everyone was gone but Dudley, Mina, and the children. All seemed at a loss except Mina. "Will you come to dinner, Harry?" she asked, blithely ignoring the tension.

Harry appreciated the offer. It was even sincere, as far as he could tell, and his opinion of Mina went up another notch. "I promised my wife we'd be home for dinner, but thank you anyway."

"Maybe some other time, then...my mum always makes plenty for the holidays. You could bring the rest of your family."

"Thanks, Mina. I'll talk to Ginny about it."

"Well. Goodbye, Harry." Dudley shook hands with him and with Al again. It was, perhaps, a little less awkward this time. Dahlia followed suit politely enough. Only Mina and Sam actually attempted to smile. That left only Petunia, skinny and pinched, almost forlorn looking as she stood before them.

"Goodbye." To his shock, Petunia actually reached out and touched Al's cheek. "Goodbye, Al."

"Goodbye, Aunt Petunia." Al reached for her bony, gloved hand and held it. He sensed the tension, too; he was too perceptive not to notice. But he was ignorant of the cause, and his eyes were guileless and sympathetic, if curious, as he gazed at her. Harry felt his own eyes widen in disbelief as she eked a half-smile out of her thin lips and squeezed Al's hand. Then she looked at Harry. Harry met her eyes for a few seconds...not long enough to trust what he read there...before she turned to Dudley and collapsed against him in sobs.

Harry couldn't think of anything else to say. He and Albus walked out of the cemetery together, Harry in a bit of a daze. It took Harry several minutes of sitting on a low wall by the road to center himself enough to Apparate. It was only his sudden overwhelming desire to go home to Ginny and Lily and to a nice, hot, bath that allowed him to focus enough to get them back safely.

It seemed that Ginny's arms were around him as soon as he landed in the foyer.

"Are you all right?" Her voice was muffled in his lapels. He could feel Lily's little arms wrapped around his leg, and finally relaxed completely.

"Yeah. It was the right thing to do," he said, because he couldn't think of anything better to say.

Still, as he soaked in the tub and listened to the faint sounds of Lily and Albus playing and dinner being prepared, the thought overwhelmed him again.

Had Aunt Petunia actually, in her own stilted, meager way, tried to apologize?

Harry couldn't be sure that all the moisture on his cheeks was bath water.

The following afternoon, Harry noticed Albus Severus running a toy car along the concentric rings of the rug, making a whirring sound in an attempt to impersonate the motor. Harry smiled indulgently. The sound was slightly off, but he supposed it was to be expected, since Al hadn't traveled in many cars.

Come to think of it, he didn't own very many toy cars.

"Al, where did you get that?"

"Cousin Sam gave it to me. He really liked my owl, so I gave it to him, and he wanted to give me something back. It's kind of cool, even if it doesn't do anything all by itself." Al picked up the little vehicle and gave the wheels a spin, gazing at them in a somewhat convincing imitation of his grandfather Arthur. Harry couldn't help but smile at the comparison.

Still, something bothered him...

"Dad? Are you upset?" Al's anxious voice broke through his thoughts.

"No... no, it's just that I'm surprised, I guess. Does he like owls?"

"I don't know that he likes owls so much as he thought it was cool, the way it flies," Al explained.

"What did I tell you about not showing anything magical to your Muggle cousins?" Harry couldn't help scolding. Had he really done such a poor job of impressing on Al the necessity of keeping their magic secret?

"But he knows...his Dad told him! Besides, we were careful not to let anyone else see."

The shock of knowing that Dudley had volunteered that bit of information...especially in such a way that Sam still wanted to play with Albus...left Harry feeling decidedly wrong-footed. "Still, he'll be disappointed when it won't fly for him."

"But... it did! I wasn't going to show him anything magic. But then he showed his car. The owl was in my pocket, so I thought it was only polite to let him see it. When he lifted the wings, it flew just like it should. I didn't mean to."

Harry didn't realize that he was staring blankly into space until Al touched his knee.

"Are you okay, Dad?"

Harry managed to pull his jaw back to 'closed' and favor his son with a weak smile. "I'm fine, Al. You didn't do anything wrong," he hastened to add, trying to wipe the worried look from Al's face. "I'm just having one of my funny moments, I expect. I'm glad you and your cousin got on well." He managed a slightly better smile, though he wasn't sure if there wasn't a touch of hysteria in it. It seemed to reassure Al, though. "I just remembered there's something I need to write, so I'll leave you to your car."

"Okay, Dad." He went back to racing the car along the rug. Harry ascended the stairs, one hand tangled in his hair as if attempting to steer his racing mind.

It shouldn't have been a problem for Al to share his owl. After all, magical toys were strictly regulated so that the charms only activated... when they were handled by a wizard.

Writing this letter was going to be interesting.

Dear Dudley,

I hope you are still holding up well. Thank you for inviting me. I'm glad I could finally meet Mina and the children. It was nice that Albus and Sam got along.

Speaking of Sam, Albus noticed something interesting while they were playing. You might want to brace yourself just a bit...

FIN

Author's note: The trick with titles, you see, is being appropriate without giving anything away... at least, it is if one is operating in O. Henry mode.

Thank you, Rose, for the beta read! :D