

In Riddle's Shadow: The Autobiography of Persephone Starrett

by solidground

"An insightful coming of age story set against the tragedy of Tom Riddle's (or was it Stubby Boardman's?) rise to power."--Librus Legiblus, book editor, The Quibbler;
"Finally, something not by Rita Skeeter." --Kingsley Shacklebolt, Minister of Magic;
"An obvious cover up of unspeakable scandals. And everything she says about me is a lie."--Rita Skeeter, reporter, Daily Prophet.

Introduction

Chapter 1 of 2

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I didn't want to write this story. It is *my* story and it is none of your business. You have no *right* to know how the years of my youth were spent or whom I spent them with.

But that trash-writing, stupid, undeserving cow, Rita Skeeter, and her meddling, lying quill decided that you lot deserved the "truth" about my life. She took it upon herself to try to drag my personal affairs out into the spotlight so that all you good people with your newly safe, little lives could gape at the memories that have haunted me all these years.

I burned the letter from her first owl.

I ignored the next fourteen.

When she showed up at my doorstep, acid green quill and parchment floating behind her, I knew that this was inevitable.

I opened the door with my wand in hand and a hex on my lips, but that infuriating quill had already begun to write. A furious Finite was enough to knock it to the ground, and I snatched the parchment from Skeeter's mannish, but rather nicely manicured hands.

Persephone Starrett lives alone in a tiny glen in Scotland, the low-branched trees and slowly winding mist a shroud of guilt and shame to hide her from prying eyes. She's still beautiful at seventy-four, a small but regal figure with long, dark hair and dark blue eyes, but there's a sad emptiness to her that speaks of years of self-imposed suffering.

This compassionate reporter has come to relieve her of her shame, to free the vict—

She'd always had a flair for the dramatic. I remember running into Rita and her mother in Diagon Alley when she was a teenager—I would guess about fifteen years old. That brunette terror—she's not a natural blonde, not that she would admit it—was throwing the most spectacular tantrum I had ever seen over a stationery set at Flourish and Blotts. She spouted an array of nasty lies about her mother in an attempt to win over the gathering crowd, but the effect was ruined when, in all the excitement, Little Miss Skeeter forgot the pressing bodily function that had caused them to enter the shop in the first place.

I still chuckle every time I think of that snotty little girl in her suddenly damp robes. I bet she's never told *that* story to her Quick-Quotes Quill.

I burned that waste of a feather in Rita Skeeter's face and shut the door.

Then I grabbed my own parchment and my own Dictaquill.

If you're going to read my story, it is going to be in *my* words, not in the worthless drivel Rita Skeeter writes. It isn't an easy story to tell, and I certainly don't trust a reporter the *Daily Prophet* thinks is worthwhile to be skilled enough to tell it accurately.

I refuse to be painted as some tragic heroine suffering in silence for the foolishness of her youth. I live in isolation because I don't like most people. If I were trying to pay a penance, I would be living in Hogsmeade, surrounded by the inanity of you annoying people, not enjoying a profitable business and a cottage with a lovely view.

Don't get me wrong, I do have regrets about what happened. I hold no illusions about what I've done—I was no silly lovesick girl, no helpless victim. I've never tried to romanticize who Tom was, what we did, who we were.

It might have been easier on you to read Rita Skeeter's version of my life. But this is not about what is easy. This is about the truth, and the truth is always hard to swallow.

First Year

Chapter 2 of 2

"An insightful coming of age story set against the tragedy of Tom Riddle's (or was it Stubby Boardman's?) rise to power."--Librus Legibus, book editor, *The Quibbler*;

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In all honesty, I cannot tell you about the first time I saw him. Others seem to have these melodramatic memories of a cold, sinking feeling and an instinctual wariness. They claim that they *knew* exactly what he would become as soon as they shook his hand.

I would like to, as respectfully as possible, tell you that they are all sniveling, self-serving liars. If we had known what that little boy would grow up to be, we would have stopped him.

We didn't know. How could we have possibly known? He was just a boy then, and nothing in the world could have told us what he would become.

Tom Riddle and I were in the same year, so I suppose I must have seen him at the Sorting. I might have even stood next to him in line; I don't recall much about the night. I was rather caught up in my own little world. I come from a long line of Ravenclaws, and in my anxiety over being Sorted properly, I could think of nothing else.

When the Hat rested upon my head, it hummed.

"*Well?*" I asked, quite annoyed that a hat would hum at me.

"*It has always been easy to place your family members, Miss Starrett. Rowena would have been proud of her sister's line.*

"*But you present quite the challenge. You would do well in the house of your forefathers, dear, but you would make a fine addition to this year's Slytherin class...I have a feeling that your presence would do them much good, and you have quite the desire for the spotlight, don't you? Besides, I've always wanted to place a Founder's family member in the wrong house, and the last one refused me.*"

"*Try it on the next one, then,*" I snapped. "*Slytherin's a fine house, but I have no wish to spend my school years in a den of snakes. And I look much better in blue.*"

"*As you wish, then.*"

I passed through the rest of the Feast in a daze. I was sorted into Ravenclaw, of course, but the conversation with the Hat had puzzled me.

Now, looking back, I might understand what the Hat had been trying to do. I don't think it would have worked, of course, but maybe we should be paying more attention to the wretched thing. What else has had the opportunity to view the minds and talents of so many wizards? No centaur, arithmancer, or Trelawney could ever possess the kind of insight that moldy fabric has.

Nevertheless, despite the Hat's trepidation, I was the consummate Ravenclaw first year...all high marks, brilliant essays, clever comments and cool attitudes. Like my roommates, my days revolved around lessons and work in the classrooms, my nights around the debates and laughter in the common room.

It was late October before I really noticed him.

My first thought upon knowing Tom Riddle was that he was tall. I have always been petite, but even when we were eleven I had to tilt my head back to peer into his dark eyes. It was all at once intimidating and impressive.

We were pulled aside in Charms one day as the class practiced the Softening Charm. We stood together in front of Professor Goshawk's desk, watching her make rounds through the room to check on our classmates. He didn't say anything and neither did I. We took turns eying each other and looking away politely. We pretended not to notice when our gazes met, but by the time the professor had returned to her desk, we had each thoroughly examined the other.

"You two have been introduced, I assume?"

"No, ma'am," he said. He turned to me, a handsome, if reserved, smile on his face. "Tom Riddle."

I smiled my best high society smile. Mother would have been proud. "Persephone Starrett."

I lifted my hand carefully, so as to not exclude the handshake that half-bloods and Muggleborns were so fond of. I found handshakes vulgar back then, to be honest, but knew from experience that expecting a proper greeting would often disappoint me.

Tradition-bound Slytherin that he was, he took my hand in his two, bowing slightly. "It is a pleasure to meet you, Miss Starrett."

"Charmed," I said, smiling. I was probably blushing, too; I have always been a bit of a sucker for old fashioned gestures.

Professor Goshawk had a peculiar look in her eye I've noticed quite a few teachers sporting from time to time. It usually means that they're up to no good. Albus Dumbledore was the master of that look, of course, but on a good day, Goshawk could match him. "Lovely. Now, Mister Riddle, Miss Starrett, I have a proposition to make."

She wanted us to partner together so we could work ahead of the class. Professor Goshawk always had a good eye for students needing an extra push and, really, the two of us working together was a brilliant idea.

We made a great team. I enjoyed the calculating way he approached a problem almost as much as he admired my openness and creativity. Not that we ever said anything about that, of course. Neither of us were comfortable with forcing compliments and flattery on the other at that point. I had enough of that silliness at home, and he wasn't nearly as well versed in proper social manners as he would become in later years.

We were rather distant as partners at first. I was wary of having a Slytherin friend, and he seemed wary of friends in general. So we didn't become friends in first year, but we did grow as close as the word "acquaintance" would allow.

He and I were very alike back then. Intelligent and driven, we pushed ourselves to excellence in class. I can't remember now whose marks were higher in which class, but we were always very close. We both hated Quidditch...to this day, I hate that stupid sport. Imbeciles getting paid to flit around on broomsticks? It's a waste of a Knut, let alone the obscene amount of Galleons they make.

We were different, too, in the little ways that always seem to matter most in hindsight. I was far more forgiving and trusting than Tom ever was and had none of his reservations about sharing my possessions. He was more confident than I, a natural leader.

And, perhaps most importantly, I was a pureblood from a well-known and respected family. He was a half-blood orphan with a Muggle's last name. It might not be too polite to point that out now, considering this "heritage equality" crusade the Ministry's been pushing recently, but it's true. I had support and influence as soon as I walked into Hogwarts; he had to fight to prove himself worthy with every step.

His questions about my family were innocent curiosities at first, the wonderings of a child who had no family. It must have sounded so wonderful to him in those early days, hearing about my family and our pureblood traditions and long history. I've seen the orphanage where he grew up. It looked like a miserable place for a child to live.

Tom first asked me about my home in January, after we returned from the winter holiday. It was a polite, expected sort of query in class, something like "Did you have a pleasant break, Persephone?"

I had, of course, and I soon began to offer tale after tale of all the ways the Starrett line celebrated the winter season. He was enthralled by them, taking in the stories like they were a potion edifying him against the stark reality of the orphanage he'd lived in. He asked about details I had never considered, reveled in the pageantry that had bored me for years.

He and I started talking outside of class after that. Not a whole lot of conversation, but on Saturday afternoons, we occasionally met in the library to work through essays and enjoy another round of interrogation about Pureblood life.

It's funny, which conversations I remember best.

In mid-February, Tom asked me about the hair barrette I've always worn.

He pulled out a chair for me in the library...between my instruction and that of the Slytherins, he had picked up on a lot of the basic niceties of old families...and sat beside me with a smile.

"Do you always wear that barrette?"

"Yes. It was my mother's. And her mother's."

"It's beautiful, Persephone."

"I wish you would stop using my name all the time, Tom," I complained, rolling my eyes. "I hate my name."

He smiled. "I hate mine, too, you know."

"I like the name Tom. It's nice and simple...a strong, normal name. Persephone is such a mouthful." I sighed dramatically as I pulled parchment out of my bag. "And who would name their daughter for an empty-headed ninny like Persephone?"

"A mother who loved her daughter enough to brave Hades and death." His eyes were so serious and intense that I almost knocked the inkwell off of the table. "It's a name you should be grateful for."

He could twist anything to his advantage.

Just before the Easter holiday, he bent down to pick up some parchment I had dropped in the corridor.

"Here," he said. "You've dropped your notes."

It was the first time he had spoken to me outside of class or our study sessions. I remember the colored sunlight across his face, the blues and greens of the stained glass painting his cheekbones and eyes with unexpected brightness. Tom looked so happy in that moment, so at peace.

"Thank you, Tom."

"My pleasure, Persephone." Blue and green flashed across his face as he smiled at me.

A few of his Slytherin friends must have come in his sight, because the smile became polite and he stiffened out of the sunlight. He handed me my parchment, gave the slightest inclination of a bow, and, with a tiny grin over his shoulder, left me standing in the hallway.

Sometimes, when I let myself drift through memory, I see him as he was then. A young, happy, and undeniably charming twelve-year-old boy with nothing in the world but talent and good manners. If I'm not mistaken, a few of Mister Potter's acquaintances can remember him that way. It's difficult not to think of Tom like that when that was how I knew him first.

He and I had several study sessions after the holiday, but, dedicated to the work as we were, few of those conversations stick with me now. They melt together into such a haze of books and ink and wand movements that I'll never be able to untangle those memories. It's been so long now that it feels like a whole other world.

We both passed the exams with ease. We didn't officially find out until we had parted ways for the summer, of course, but being Professor Goshawk's favorite students had advantages.

I didn't see him after our exams that year. We went home to our separate worlds. It was fairly easy for me to forget him that summer. I had a family to go home to, friends who were able to visit.

Tom returned to an empty, cold building and a summer with absolutely no magic. It must have been nearly impossible to bear, being cut off from the world that had finally given meaning and sense to his life. He lived with the constant reminder that he was an outsider no matter where he went, while I and the rest of his House spent summers in magical homes and vacation houses in the south of Spain.

I say it was easy to forget him that summer, but really, it was just easier than facing the guilt that burned me when I remembered the cards Fate had dealt us.