

Hand-Me-Down

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A father's meditation on his life, his marriage and his son. Written for Snapecase 2012. Beta-read by the lovely Annie Talbot, Pyjamapants and Machshefa.

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Chapter 1 of 1

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I always wanted a son. Even when I were a young lad I knew I wanted a son to come after me, follow in me footsteps. Even before I knew where I wanted to point me footsteps.

Fat lot of good it did me when I did decide.

I lost me way, and now I'm hiding in here talking to you because I know the lad'll still follow me even when I'm on the 'path to perdition'. That's right. I still remember some of those Sunday school words.

Any road, he'll not come looking in here. He knows I'd never set foot in here. Too much family pride. Pride I got no right to. Because I ain't worth nothing.

You listening? *You listening?*

'Cause nobody else bloody listens to me.

I wasn't allus like this. Do you remember me when I got my apprenticeship? I used to come in here all polished up nice, shiny shoes, shiny hair, following me mam and dad and them pleased as Punch to 'ave me there. Me dad, he used to say I'd clever hands just like him and me granddad. I had a feel for the metal. I could make any machine sing to me. I used to fix half the cars round here before I were fourteen. Then me dad took me up t'mill and showed me all them big looms and I fell in love.

Bugger. Shouldn't spit in here. Sorry. Here, I'll clean it up.

Aye. I loved the looms and they loved me back. The bosses used to say I'd magic in me fingers 'cause I could make them looms work better'n anyone. I still used to do cars, mind, and muck about with some of the old bits and bobs of steam engines they had hanging about in the scrap rooms behind t'mill, but the looms were my girls.

Until she came along.

See this? *SEE* this? My hands are shaking! My hands never used to shake. And no booze to calm me nerves. No money for booze neither. Must ha' drunk it all. Our Eileen'll kill me.

Eileen.

Our Eileen.

Except she's not really. Not 'our' Eileen. Never has been. Too bloody good for us.

Oh, but she were something bonny when she came up here that first time. Not what you'd call pretty, mind, but she had such energy. She were fierce like sparks from a furnace, and she were built like a greyhound, all bones and nerves and power. Mam didn't like her much. I said I were sorry when Mam froze Eileen out the door without even a biscuit to go with her cup of tea.

"Don't worry about it, Tobias," she said. She allus called me Tobias, not Toby like everyone else. "Don't worry, Tobias. Nobody likes me much. It's not a novel experience." And behind all her brave face and big words she got this look like she wanted to cry but didn't know how.

And then she took me by the arm and pulled me onto a bus and we went up to the moors to look at the clouds.

We took to going up there on most o' me free days, and every evening that summer. Can't remember what we talked about, or if we talked at all, but I suppose we must have. I don't remember them days being full o' silence. Mam didn't like it much, but she couldn't do nowt about it. Eileen were like ... like ... I were going to say she were like air to me, but she weren't. Not really. More like booze. Couldn't get enough o' her. Couldn't think about anything but her when she weren't around.

Me gaffer got a bit narked, 'cause I weren't putting in all the extra hours he were used to getting out o' me.

But he got all them and more once Eileen went back to her fancy boarding school. "Only a year, Tobias," she said to me, like it were the blink of an eye. "And I'll try to come and see you before next July, if I can." And she got just that little hint of softness in her eyes, and that almost smile that she never knew how to let out proper.

No, she weren't bonny. But she were good to look at.

And then she weren't there. And all I had were them machines, as had no life and no spark. And I missed her so much I tried to put everything I knew of her into my machines, so I could talk to them and hear her voice in their hum and clack and whirr. Her anger in the grind of gears gone out of whack. Her clever words in the smooth run of shuttles. Toby "Magic" Snape were back, everyone said. They all thought I were over Eileen. But I weren't. I built her into everything I touched.

It's like all this stuff in here. All the work and ... passion, my da used to say, that me granddads and great granddads put in what they made. That's what I put in my machines.

Mam worried about me. Said I weren't eating enough. But she should have been glad I weren't down the pub or worse.

And then Eileen came back. Just a day. She snatched a day for me, she said. Because she couldn't stay where she weren't wanted a moment longer. And that's when I told her she were everything I wanted or ever would want.

I remember how her eyes went wide. Those great dark eyes, black like Gran's jet brooch, black but full o' light all of a sudden. And she very nearly smiled just for me. And then she asked me what I'd been doing all those months wi'out her. And she said, "Do you really have magic in your hands, Tobias? Real magic? Show me!"

She were four month gone when she came back, her face red from crying, and a bag in her hands. Mam took her in, because Mam's a decent sort, but she never forgave her. Our wedding were a day full o' shame and pretence and people whispering. But Eileen, she spoke low to me after the kiss. "I'm yours, now, Tobias. All that I am, my child, my whole life. I'm in your hands."

I were nineteen.

Turned out she couldn't do nothing. For all her posh education that she'd never talk about, she didn't have a clue about running a house. Mam tried to teach her, and Eileen tried to learn, but they were like two cats in a bag, packed into our little house, each one more miserable than t'other.

I'm cold. Why's it so cold in here? Not exactly welcoming, is it? Not like the pub. But I can't go to the pub. The little lad'll follow me in there. "Da, come home! Da, Mam's cooked summat! Da, *please!*"

Looking at me with his eyes like his mam's.

And just like her, he won't give in. Not ever. Tough little bugger.

Got my nose, he has. I knew it were going to be like mine the minute he were born. Little button nose with promise, like a dagger between them black eyes. Black eyes, black brows, black hair not much of a Snape, really, barring the nose. And them clever bloody hands, always taking stuff apart and putting it together again in ways it shouldn't go but does.

He's probably trying not to cry, wondering where I am.

I had to take a house for the three of us. Mam made such a fuss o' the boy and all but blocked Eileen out. Even I could see that weren't right. So I got us a miserable little house down by the canal, 'cause that's all I could afford, horrible little box, it is, but Eileen were so happy to have a place o' her own, like. I felt almost like a man, looking after me little family.

Except I couldn't cut it could I?

And neither could she.

When you've got barely enough to make ends meet, you don't want to come home to find the food spoiled and the laundry half done. And Eileen, raging in the middle of it in that silent way o' hers, 'cause she won't let herself cry.

Hard as nails is Eileen. Hard as bloody nails. There's times I wish I were as hard as her, but most of the time it drives me round the bloody twist. I 'ave to get out o' there right quick sometimes, I get so angry. I never used to get angry.

She won't ask for help she's too proud for that, oh yes. And she won't help herself, though she could.

Damn this bloody shaking. I need a drink.

Where were I?

Oh. Oh yes. I don't know if I should be telling *you* this. I can't imagine you approving, though I dare say you know all about it anyway. Mam says you know everything. Yeah you may know everything, but you *do* sod all about it.

Well.

It were Mam as told me. If it'd been down to Eileen I reckon I could have gone to me grave none the wiser, but Mam she's sharper'n me. And she were there in the room, helping, when my Severus were born. So she knew, like. She'd seen Eileen at the end of her tether, beyond control. And then she watched us struggle on my wages they don't pay a skinny nineteen-year-old all that much, especially when he's stupid enough to do the work for the love of it. She watched us, and now and again she stepped in to lend a hand. Eileen didn't like it much, but she didn't say no. She were young, too, and had a baby to manage along wi' everything else.

Oh, he were a jolly little chap at times, our baby, when he weren't screaming. Pair of lungs like the factory whistle. And a laugh like Christmas.

But he got the whooping cough and Eileen couldn't nurse him and do everything else.

Mam came in most days. She cooked and cleaned, and Eileen never left our Severus' side. But Mam were angry. I didn't know why, so I asked.

"Why?" She nearly screamed at me. I suppose she were that frightened for the baby, she weren't her usual self, all buttoned up and glaring. "I'll tell you why, Toby! She's up there nursing that baby like any normal woman, when she could just get one of her people to come and make him better like *that!* And she lives in this hovel with you, making all your lives miserable with her cack-handed attempts at playing housewife when she could do it all ten times better than me without hardly raising a finger!"

Oh, Christ. I had no idea what she were on about. I must have looked like a right idiot.

Then she came right out and told me what Eileen was.

Is, I suppose.

I didn't believe her, not at first. But she were so sure. And she told me her gran 'd been one o' them, too. Apparently, it's more common than you'd think.

Well, not you. 'Cause you know everything, you indifferent bugger.

So I went upstairs and took the baby out of her arms. I didn't even look at her. I couldn't bear to. I just looked at our Severus, fighting for his life like the little scrapper he is, and I told her to get help.

He were so tiny.

She were gone and back in about ten minutes with some woman who took one look, did some kind of funny voodoo, and dosed my boy. "He'll be right as rain in a day or so," she said and then went down to talk to Mam. And it were true, too. The pink were coming back to his cheeks and the shine to his eyes and he were breathing normal. He put out his little hand and wrapped it round me thumb like he were trying to say, "It's all right, Da, I'm back now."

Crap. I got nothing to wipe me face on. Just have to be me sleeves, then.

Sorry 'bout that.

Eileen were stood in the corner by the bedroom door. She didn't come over to me and the baby. She just stood there with that whipped look on her face and for a moment I hated her, I really did.

"I'm sorry, Tobias."

She said it eventually.

It were like a kick in the teeth. She were sorry. She *lied* to me. She said everything about her were mine when we married, but she kept everything from me and she nearly killed my son.

That were the first time I got drunk.

I put the baby in his cot and tucked him in nice and neat. Then I went out and drank enough to puke. It didn't take much back then.

Next day, Eileen were timid and quiet and apologetic, being all nice to me when me mam would'a whacked me round the ear and told me to get to work, thick head or no. Eileen, no, she made breakfast and got aspirin out o' the cupboard. And then she told me about how she'd turned her back on her world that's what she called it, a whole different *world* away from this here grind because they were all so mean to her, or summat, and she'd made her decision to stay here with me and live like "one of you". Meaning us. Meaning summat different, summat *less*.

In Sunday school, they used to tell us about forgiveness and how good people follow God's example and forgive.

I reckon that makes me rotten to the core, 'cause I couldn't never forgive Eileen. She betrayed me that badly that I couldn't get past the anger, no matter how I could see she needed me to. It just ate at me. Why couldn't she *bend*? Why couldn't she put all of herself into our family, like I'd done?

I drink to quiet the rage, you know. It doesn't work, or not for long. But I still do it because ... I don't know why I do it. Mebbe because she hates it so much. Mebbe I want her to *do* something, show how powerful she is.

So, when I weren't drunk, I put me heart into me boy and me machines.

Ha you'd have thought they'd fire me, wouldn't you? But no. I still had that passion in me hands, though it were full of fury, like me. Nobody can fix one o' Toby's machines now without getting bloodied, they snarl so badly when they break. But when they run, they run like demons, no stopping them. Their voice ain't Eileen's any more it's mine. Poor sods who have to listen to that all day.

But Severus, well, him I tried me best with when I were sober. He's a clever little blighter. Bit too bloody clever, if you ask me. His tongue's always getting him into trouble with the other lads round here, and he's so weedy he can't fight back. Well, not yet. Mam says I were like him to begin with, but I made six foot by fifteen, so I've not given up. Trouble is with Severus, sooner or later he'll always turn round with his fists flailing when he should be running, and then he comes home needing to be patched up. It's not like he goes looking for fights the other boys just know he's a bit of an odd one and go hunting for him.

If you want to know the truth, and I suppose *you* do, I'm proud of him. He never expects anyone to stand up for him. He won't hide how clever he is so the other kids'll stop picking on him. And ...

Christ.

He's ... He's like Eileen. He's one o' them.

First I knew of it were one day I caught her telling him not to show anyone what he could do. He were about five. He'd been brewing up some mess o' grass and mud in an old pot on the back step, the way kids do, and all of a sudden Eileen, who were hanging out the laundry, she grabs him by the arm and hauls him back inside and starts yelling at him to never do it again. He were so confused.

"Not do what, Mam? What did I do wrong?"

He were only about five. Turned out he'd been stirring his pot wi' magic.

Part o' me were terrified at that. He'd be something alien. But then ... He'd be able to be so much more'n me.

"Show me," I said. Eileen tried to stop him, but I didn't let her, so Severus, he took the little bike I'd picked up cheap and were fixing for him, and he spun the pedals just by telling them to. Eileen went nearly crazy at that and we had such a row as we'd never had before. I wish we hadn't done it when Severus were there he were so scared,

especially when I nearly hit her. She wanted him stunted. Her own son. She wanted him growing up without using any magic, when he had such an *advantage*, when he had something that'd take him so far away from this scummy mill town that's dying round us.

There was some sense in hiding what he could do. I had to give her that.

Severus and me had a long talk down on the tow path about it.

But I were proud o' what he could do. I told him that. And after I tucked him in, I wrote me one and only letter to Eileen's parents. I made her send it. Two days later there were a huge box of books waiting in the yard. Severus were like a pig in muck. He'd just learned to read and were already bored with "Peter and Jane". I don't know what's in them books it's beyond me but I know he loves having them.

"You wait, Tobias," Eileen says. "You just wait and see what getting *anything* from my family gives your son."

She were closed to me after that. Not that it made much difference.

She weren't right friendly to him, either, which were just wrong. He makes her clever little knick-knacks out of twisted wire or other bits of junk that he turns into such pretty things, and he's always careful not to do it the special way, 'cause he says she can tell. But she just puts them away in a drawer after a day or two.

When she does that, he hides away with his old books. He never cries any more. But I can usually coax him out to help me with some old car that needs fixing. He's clever with them, too. Clever all round.

I ...

I'm going to miss him. I don't understand him, but I'm going to miss having him around.

I reckon that's why I'm here, after another bloody row with Eileen, instead of at home eating the cake he baked for his last evening. He's a better cook by far than her. Huh.

He's a part o' all this, you know, though he's barely set foot in here unless Mam's dragged him in for Christmas. I've got my arse on a pew carved by me granddad. The light's coming through windows made by me great-granddad. All the ironwork in here were done by me other granddad. I brought nothing to all of this. Nothing. Mebbe I could have, if things had been different. But they aren't.

All I've made is my son and I'm sitting here hiding from him because I'm too much of a coward to tell him how much I'll miss him when he goes away to that fancy school and all I'll have is Eileen, shaking hands, and a bunch of machines that try to kill anyone as comes near 'em.

God help me, I need a drink.