

An Always Within a Never

by Anna Scathach

The wine tasted like ashes on her tongue. It was time, time to return to England. Closing her eyes, she wrapped her arms around herself and, goal firmly in mind, Apparated to the Hogwarts front gates. Written for the DG Forum Fic Exchange - Fall 2011 on Fanfiction.Net as a gift for TASHAx.

Oneshot

Chapter 1 of 1

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Carefully, she examined herself in the mirror. She'd grown skinny. Her arms were frail, her torso bony, her legs thin. The girl frowned. True, she'd always been slender, but this was something else entirely.

She'd lost a lot of weight, and not in a healthy way. Working in the vineyard had helped her put on some muscle; her arms and legs showed noticeable bulges in what would have been the right places if she hadn't looked so frail. Somehow being muscled made her look all the more fragile.

Delicate, she thought as she looked at her face. There was part of a spell scar on her left cheek where a stray hex had hit her. It hadn't healed properly. (Like everything, she thought. Nothing had healed the way it should have.) She wasn't pretty any more. Sure, she had red lips (though frail as well), and her eyes were still the same intense colour as before.

The expression in her eyes, however, had completely changed. Gone were the days when she'd been carefree laughing Ginny Weasley. Here was the new Ginevra Weasley.

Empty eyes stared back at her in the mirror. (Eyes like she sometimes drew when the dreams were vivid, bright and burning.) They looked haunted, she thought. She looked haunted. All cheekbones and empty eyes, and loss in the way her mouth curved downwards no, Ginny Weasley wasn't a pretty girl any more.

Shaking her head, she forcefully tore her eyes from her reflection. Ginny quickly spread lotion on the burnt parts of her body. As a redhead, she didn't tan, and working in the sun had left her skin paper dry and aggressively red, despite the best sunscreen charms. A rapid hard brush of the hand on her arms, on her back and legs. The lotion made her smell of almonds, deceptively sweet.

Vianne had given her the lotion, although Ginny hardly talked to her. She hardly talked to anyone. Some events left people speechless. But Vianne did like Ginny (although she didn't quite understand). Vianne had offered her the job in the vineyard when she had seen her in the town square of Lansquenet-sous-Tannes.

Ginny had travelled France, erring from village to village, led by nothing but her wish to escape from England and all the feelings that stuck to her hands. By chance (was there such a thing as fate, she sometimes wondered), she had arrived in that small village near Montpellier in the Languedoc region one day. She had met Vianne, had found work in her vineyard and discovered she really appreciated the peace and quiet between the vines. Sure, people had pointed fingers, whispered, asked hushed questions. However, when it seemed clear that she was there to stay with Vianne, people had moved on to other, more interesting things. Like Jean's pregnant wife and Christine's unfaithful husband, Ginny thought with a wry smile.

What she liked most about Vianne was that the older woman didn't seem to care what people thought. She made great wine, she lived in her domaine, and she was not really part of the village. Domaine du Lapin Pantoufle was a known name both among magical and Muggle connoisseurs. Wines that people said catered to your feelings and enhanced your moods. Wines like heaven. And Vianne was a Wine Master. Bonne sorcière du Languedoc they called her, good witch of the Languedoc. No one could imagine she was anything but a witch.

Ginny had not liked wine before the war. Too much of a bitter aftertaste, she had thought. Her sweet champagne days were over, though, and these days she found that she quite liked Vianne's dry red wine that chilled and tasted of longing, Mistral north wind and cold nights.

She refilled her glass and toasted her mirror self. "Here goes nothing," she murmured, and drank deeply. After she had licked the last drops of liquid from her now black-stained lips, she steeled herself and opened her closet.

None of her old clothes fit her any more. Frailty and loss had made her a shell of former Ginny Weasley whose robes had been form-fitting (though tattered sometimes), bright and gay with colours and vibrant in the spotlight. Now she simply pulled on the one simple black dress Vianne had insisted she purchase when they had last been to Toulouse to sell wine. It only served to accentuate her pallor. Somehow, even Ginny's hair seemed to have lost its vibrancy.

She didn't bother with make-up and carelessly brushed her hair, yanking and pulling out strands until she winced and the sink was covered in red (her hair, once her pride, was now nothing but an accessory that reminded her of her brother's lopsided smile). A simple braid would suffice, she decided after all, it was a memorial service.

The anniversary. The day she had dreaded ever since bolting from England right after the Final Battle had come. The anniversary. Memorial service to so many. Fred and Colin, Remus and Tonks, anyone, everyone (and her whole generation, dead inside from a war that hadn't been theirs to fight).

No. She wouldn't cry. She'd promised herself she wouldn't. Pulling on her practical black ballerina flats, she straightened and drank the last of Vianne's wine. The wine tasted like ashes on her tongue. Nothing at all. Hollow head. Ashes on her tongue.

She felt delicate, fragile, breakable, as she looked in the mirror one last time. As an artist, she could see the beauty in her hollow cheeks, empty eyes and wine-stained lips. She doubted her mother would think the same way, but what did it matter?

Grabbing her bag (like Hermione's, endlessly extending, ever useful), she heard her belongings clutter inside. The books she had grown to love over the past few months, Primo Levi's *If This Is A Man* and Muriel Barbery's *The Elegance of the Hedgehog*. Photographs of home, her sketchbook, a few pencils, some drawings. Her keys, a Clos Syrah Léone vine leaf, her wand. Her coat.

Ginny stood rooted to the spot, firmly clutching her bag. It was time, time to return to England. Cloaking her eyes, she wrapped her arms around herself, and, goal firmly in mind, Apparated to the Hogwarts front gates.

Before she opened her eyes, she could already hear the people, smell the grass, feel the magic. Bitter. Sweet. Alive. Hogwarts.

Then she opened her eyes and took in the sight. The castle, still standing proud and strong in the green Scottish hills, the Groundskeeper's Hut, the Forbidden Forest. In front of the castle, she saw a tent standing by the Black Lake.

Dumbledore's memorial was there, too (although she couldn't see it, she knew it was there). Emptiness burned in her heart, white and cold. All those people who should be there, she thought, and swallowed drily. Then she felt a comforting hand on her shoulder.

She turned, her face white, and pointed her wand at the intruder.

"Hello, Ginny," said a smiling Harry Potter.

Ginny sighed. "Hello."

"Good to see you're back at home," he enthused. "Have you seen your parents yet? Although you do look thin..."

She turned around and ran; his voice was too much to bear. Ginny recalled being in love with him once. Once she'd admired him, adored him like there was no other. But today, no, it simply hurt too much to even look him in the eye (it felt unreal to know that she had kissed him, to know that she had lain in his arms and cried when he had broken up with her).

Ginny Weasley knew tears very well. And she'd thought she knew love when she had been with him. But the year in France had put things into perspective. She was a solitary person. Grief needed to be dealt with in some other way (she could never be Ron and Hermione who had fallen into each other's embraces and beds right after the Battle and never quite emerged).

Her steps slowed gradually, her breathing laboured. Despite being in good physical condition due to her work with Vianne's vines, she was out of breath. Surely, the lack of food and excess of wine were to blame, but Ginny couldn't bring herself to care. What did it matter, after all?

Shifting to a more leisurely stride, she walked over to the tent. Seating herself in the back, she decided to cast a Notice Me Not spell, just for good measure.

People were far too cheerful for her taste, and she didn't want to repeat encounters like the one with Harry. Everyone around her was dressed in their best robes (they looked amazing, she mused without envy, although it seemed out of place to flaunt one's assets on a day such as this). People were chatting happily, smiles on their faces, champagne in their hands and cake smears around their mouths.

Disgusting, Ginny thought as minute after minute ticked away. Finally, after what seemed like an eternity, Kingsley stepped up to the front and pointed a Sonorus at his throat.

"Dear ladies and gentlemen.

"A year has come to a close. One year since we defeated Voldemort and his Death Eaters, since the last of that scum was finally conquered. We in the Ministry have since worked to clear the English Wizarding World from this evil. We worked relentlessly, day and night, to ensure continued public safety from Voldemort's terrorists. I am proud to announce that we have succeeded. Mostly thanks to Honorary Head Auror Harry James Potter..."

Thunderous applause started in the tent, growing louder and louder.

"...Honorary Head Auror Harry James Potter, assisted by his loyal friends Ronald Bilius Weasley and Hermione Jean Weasley née Granger, we have succeeded so far"

While the audience continued to clap and cheer, Ginny gathered her dress around her and silently left, her face an impenetrable white mask.

And what of the dead, what of the fallen? What of all those she was grieving for, all those who'd lost their lives? No, it was just sunshine and brightness and propaganda.

"Why did I even bother to come?" Ginny almost shouted but dropped her voice to a whisper when she realized that the festive people inside the tent would hear her cry of anguish.

"Yes, I wondered that too. You look like a Kneazle dragged you from your deathbed," someone drawled.

"Malfoy," Ginny stated tonelessly and without turning. "Why are you here? Haven't you done enough already?"

"I was invited. And now that it seems we have both escaped the festivities," his tone became ironic, "I can at least torment you."

"Malfoy, for once in your life, act like an adult and leave me alone."

This was just what she had needed to make this day even more miserable. People had died, nobody seemed to pay attention to that fact, and there was Draco Malfoy present.

"I'll have you know, Ginevra," he sneered, "that I have been officially pardoned by Kingsley and your precious Potter."

"He's not my precious anything," she hissed, bitter tears started to sting in the corners of her eyes.

"Trouble in paradise?" His voice was mocking and sharp.

"Hardly. I haven't seen him in three hundred and sixty-four days. And you, Malfoy, why don't you go have fun with dear Pansy Parkinson behind the greenhouses?"

He scoffed. "If you paid any attention at all, you'd know that she and Dean Thomas are currently in that blasted tent listening to those inane speeches."

"Bother," Ginny murmured. "Dean and Parkinson?"

"Yes, indeed. Surprised, Weasley?"

She shrugged.

"You are such a Gryffindor still. I find this a fascinating phenomenon: the ability we have to manipulate ourselves so that the foundation of our beliefs is never shaken. Grow up, Weasley girl."

She sat down heavily on the damp grass and put her head in her hands.

"I left England for that reason, you know?"

Not knowing what to answer, he cautiously settled down next to her. For a while, they both listened to the wind rolling over the green countryside, afraid to break the fragile silent armistice.

"I left England a year ago, the day after the Battle of Hogwarts," Ginny finally explained. "I didn't know where to go. Drifted around for a while. Never stayed long. Until I found myself in southern France working in a vineyard."

The man next to her hummed tunelessly.

"At day, I worked, at night I cried and drank wine," she continued. "It was a silent life, what I needed. I feel serene there. Here, it still feels like an empty wasteland. I couldn't take it the burials, the people I would never see again, the forlorn faces. It was all too much, and I felt hollow inside, an empty black hole that was completely disconnected from them all." She gestured towards the tent. "When someone that you love dies, it's like fireworks suddenly burning out in the sky and everything going black."

Ginny wasn't sure whether she was talking to Malfoy beside her or to herself.

Until he suddenly nodded. "To be closed from everything, and yet to feel, to think. This is the truth of hell, stripped of its gaudy medievalisms. This loss of contact. Remember, it's the winners who write the history books, and the losers get the leavings."

Ginny pursed her lips.

"So why don't you go and enjoy your hour of newly pardoned fame while it lasts, if you're that eager to be accepted again?"

"Oh," he sneered, his ardent eyes in stark contrast to his milky skin (how strange that she should notice it now), "I'm still the misfit. The odd one out. The Malfoy. We're misfits, all of us, both of us here. Anomalies. Living proof of how grotesque the system is."

She wrapped her arms around her chest. "It hurts," she whispered. "Don't they see?"

Without a word, Draco Malfoy pulled a bottle of wine from his robes. Opening it, he inclined his head in her direction. She accepted his invitation and took the bottle. When she put it down again, a single drop of almost violet liquid rested on her lips.

"Isn't that being grown-up? We're adults. War veterans, and not even twenty yet. We're rebuilding our adult identities, again and again, because the way it's grown after the War is wobbly, ephemeral and fragile, it cloaks despair and, when we're alone in front of the mirror, it tells us the lies you need to believe. Sometimes."

He shrugged, took a drink from the bottle and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.

"I don't mind. We're all broken and tattered. You're no better than I am."

"Sometimes," she murmured, swallowing the last of her wine, "sometimes I hear their shouts in the night. I wake and I see their faces, their eyes. Always their eyes, back to haunt me."

Taking a swig of wine, she continued. "If I hadn't had my sketchpad, I would have turned to the bottle. I wouldn't have stayed sane and sober, I don't think. Even now, I find comfort in wine during those long sleepless nights. The French call them nuits blanches, white nights, did you know that?"

She laughed. "Irony, when I see their eyes burning white hot in the night, when I see them in the black and white of winter nights and mild spring evenings filled with sorrow."

He shook his head. "I..."

"No need to say anything, Malfoy." She grinned suddenly. "You think I am crazy."

"I sometimes think about the wind and the wine, too. And I know there are towns yet to be visited, friends in need yet to be discovered, battles yet to be fought," he coughed, "not by me. By someone else, next time. I can't."

Hours later, Ginny stretched, long since lying down fully on the ground. "I wonder what it is that we can expect from life after all this. It makes us lonely, I think."

"And desperate," he added wryly.

Night had fallen around them. They had watched the sun set, the red and gold filling the Hogwarts hills with an ineffable sadness. That was when he had gathered her in his arms and held her close.

They both trembled, with exhaustion and suppressed tears, frustration and feelings. She grabbed his hand and pressed it to her cheek.

"Maybe that's what life is all about: There's a lot of despair, but also the odd moments of beauty, where time is no longer the same, something suspended, an elsewhere. An always within a never."

Story notes: Many thanks to my alpha readers as well as hannah_askance for beta-reading. The vineyard and Vianne are inspired by the Domaine Peyre Rose and its owner Marlène, both in the way they are described and in the choice of wine. Attentive readers may also find references to Joanne Harris' 1999 novel *Chocolat* and the eponymous 2000 film with Juliette Binoche and Johnny Depp, as well as to Muriel Barbery's 2006 novel *The Elegance of the Hedgehog*.