

Flying from Memory

by drinkingcocoa

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Flight in HP

Chapter 1 of 1

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The first time we see joy in Harry Potter, he's dreaming of flying, the universal dream of freedom.

In contrast to his abusive home life, it's a happy dream. There's a flying motorcycle in it. The dream of flight is a recurring theme and a memory for him: "He had a funny feeling he'd had the same dream before" [SS 19]. When he mentions it, Uncle Vernon yells in all caps, "MOTORCYCLES DON'T FLY!" [SS 25].

The reader instantly unites with Harry against Uncle Vernon for this. Partly because we anticipate Harry learning something wonderful that we already know. But partly because Uncle Vernon's response is a blow against any dream. Everyone knows motorcycles don't fly; that's not the point of a dream.

You remember the thrill of Harry's first broom flight at Hogwarts. "[I]n a rush of fierce joy he realized he'd found something he could do without being taught this was easy, this was *wonderful*" [SS 148]. An innate gift often feels this way, a gift that belongs so integrally to the person that it cannot be abused or stamped out of them.

Harry's gift first manifests when he takes a fifty-foot dive triggered, significantly, by his empathy when a bully threatens a classmate's memory aid. Joy, rescue, spontaneity, protectiveness, memory all of these themes recur around flight.

You remember Professor McGonagall's rave. "The boy's a natural. I've never seen anything like it. Was that your first time on a broomstick, Potter?" [SS 151]. When she tells him his father had been a good flyer, we know this gift will be a fundamental source of identity for Harry throughout the whole series. Even Snape admits James was good; it must be true.

Book 7, though, gives us new stories about these characters and flight. It begins with the horror of learning that evil has powers in areas we had thought safe: "Voldemort was flying like smoke on the wind, without broomstick or thestrals to hold him [...]" [DH 60]. He's violating one of the magical rules of this universe, broadcasting his uniqueness and the hopelessness of trying to outwit or overpower him. He must have felt his own kind of fierce joy when mastering this skill.

The next new story comes in the powerfully sweet letter and photo from Lily that Harry finds in Grimmauld Place. He learns something new about himself, a profoundly healing piece of his own story returned to him: "A black-haired baby was zooming in and out of the picture on a tiny broom, roaring with laughter" [DH 182]. So the dive for the Remembrall hadn't been his first time on a broomstick, after all. The Firebolt wasn't the first broom he got from Sirius. His parents had meant to raise him as a boy who was born to fly. If they had lived, he would have come to Hogwarts knowing how, like the other pure-blood and half-blood kids.

When Snape reveals that he, too, can fly without a broom, McGonagall says bitterly, "[H]e seems to have learned a few tricks from his master" [DH 599]. But every clue tells

us that her assumption will prove incorrect, just as the first time she saw Harry on a broom was not, though he thought it was, Harry's first time on a broom. We know Snape has staked his life, and hers, on convincing McGonagall that he is a traitor; everything she thinks about him at this moment will prove to be wrong. We know that Voldemort develops his magic alone and never shares it; he would not have diluted his power by teaching an underling, nor would he have lowered himself to learn from one. Because of his isolation, we know that Voldemort mistakenly believes himself to be the only one to know magical secrets such as the Room of Requirement, not understanding that each generation invents and discovers the same things anew. But most of all: we know flying is joy. Snape's joy is as tightly Occluded as the purity we see from his Patronus and it's something he keeps secret from Voldemort.

In Snape's childhood memories, the first thing we see him witness as he spies on Lily, with "undisguised greed" [DH 663] is her ability to fly: "But the girl had let go of the swing at the very height of its arc and flown into the air, quite literally flown, launched herself skyward with a great shout of laughter, and instead of crumpling on the playground asphalt, she soared like a trapeze artist through the air, staying up far too long, landing far too lightly" [DH 663].

The full import of this sentence didn't hit me on first reading, although that might have had to do with being sleep-deprived by page 663 on release day, 2007. Wait...Lily could fly? Yes. It says so. Right here. "Quite literally flown." What could that mean?

And then the realizations tumble forth, one gasp after another.

It wasn't spontaneous magic; she could reproduce it at will through exhilaration; she really knew how. So Harry got his flying from both sides. So Lily taught Snape. No wonder they bonded; this was their childhood. So all that time James swaggered about flying, Lily and Snape could do something much more impressive. And they developed it from child's play.

Oh. Child's play.

Dumbledore explains this in the following chapter, "King's Cross": "That which Voldemort does not value, he takes no trouble to comprehend. Of house-elves and children's tales, of love, loyalty, and innocence, Voldemort knows and understands nothing. *Nothing*. That they all have a power beyond his own, a power beyond the reach of any magic, is a truth he has never grasped" [DH 709-10].

It goes without saying that Voldemort thinks Muggle-borns have nothing to teach anyone. But he also undervalues children; we know this from the boat in the cave that didn't even count a magical sixth-year as a person. He knows nothing of friendship, nor of the transmission of ideas and culture between loved ones, parent to child, friend to friend. When he killed Harry's parents, he destroyed Harry's inheritance of flying knowledge of joy -- passed from parent to child. Snape would have had no problem Occluding from Voldemort that he learned flying from Lily. Like remorse, like love, Voldemort wouldn't have been able to tolerate feeling it.

The kids who can fly before coming to Hogwarts have privilege. Pure-blood families like the Blacks and the Potters teach flying to their kids as a birthright. Half-bloods raised as magical, like Seamus Finnigan, learn flying, too. Ron's family can't afford fancy broomsticks, but they always have brooms around and he's learned from his brothers. The kids who don't yet know how to fly are those without access to cultural knowledge transmitted through intact families. Neville's grandmother hasn't let him on a broom because of the clumsiness that was probably related to the trauma of losing his parents. Muggle-born Hermione is desperate because flying cannot be learned from a book [SS 141]. Except for those who are innately gifted, it must be taught, transmitted.

What does it say about Lily and Snape that they could fly without brooms? Lily is innately gifted and she achieves the impossible because nobody's told her it's supposed to be. Snape's father opposed magic and the family couldn't afford magical toys even if he allowed them. Snape grew up learning to be covert about anything he valued. He had neither wand nor broom: already, at 10, he knew about wandless, wordless magic, magic that relied only on his own power, advanced skills that would be vital all his life. He didn't have many things, but he didn't need or even want things. Perhaps neither Snape nor Lily would have achieved such high magic if, like Harry, they'd been given brooms as small children. And perhaps this early achievement shows that one reason Snape's magic is so unfailing is that he has never forgotten how to root it in the inventive feeling of child's play.

Remember Harry's first time on the train?

"Go on, have a pasty," said Harry, who had never had anything to share before or, indeed, anyone to share it with. It was a nice feeling, sitting there with Ron, eating their way through all Harry's pasties, cakes, and candies [....] [SS 102]

Child's play. Children sharing something have more magic than each child playing alone; there's an extra glow from the companionship, the bond that says, "*I know how you feel*." Friendless Harry had never felt this before, but he had always *wanted* it. He knew to want it because he had a foundation of companionship from the 15 crucial first months that he had been loved, the ability to empathize and love that requires a physiological basis in an infant brain's initial experience of being nurtured. This early interactive care has a vital effect. This is why premature babies gain weight faster when a caregiver holds them skin to skin and why neglected babies fail to thrive even when properly fed.

We know Snape had some shared happiness, despite the tensions in his home; his mother shared her books with him, so he knew enough of the feeling to want more companionship as he looked at Lily. We can picture how she might have taught him to fly: "Want me to show you how?" We can imagine the shared excitement as she demonstrated and the triumphant cry of "Look at me!" when he achieved it. When they flew together, each child knew how the other felt, and it was greater joy than they would have had apart. *Empathy*.

Voldemort could have had playmates, but he didn't want them. He had been deprived of that vital person-to-person connection of nurturing in infancy, and he didn't dare let himself feel the unendurable lack of it; in his rage, he felt safer being alone, trying to prove that aloneness was a better choice. This is not *at all* to blame Merope Gaunt for being raised as worthless, having nothing to pass on to her child. It's just to say that lovelessness does stunt people; lack of empathy happens, and here's one way how. Voldemort wanted to kill Harry to kill the memory of the dying Lily displaying the mother's love that Voldemort never had, to prove that Voldemort was stronger than such love after all, even while he craved that protection for himself enough to take Harry's blood. Killing Harry, who'd felt a parent's love, would be the closest he could come to punishing Merope for dying on him. Voldemort's basic response is to be alone or to kill. When he learns to fly, it is not from feeling joy or empathy. It's to help him kill, as his name tells us: Voldemort, flight of death.

Rowling tucked Lily's gift of flight countless layers deep into her series, writing it subtly as an organic part of several views of a magical child playing around grass and sunlight and trees, a young boy's viewing of her from behind flowering bushes, seen through the distance of time and memory, a view of a long-dead woman passed on by a dying man. For Harry, when he follows this memory as deep as he can go, the treasure he finds there is the joy of the mother, flying.

I understood more about this when I read that the maiden name of Rowling's late mother was Volant, the French word for flying.

It's informative to look at all the names in her family of origin. Her estranged father's name is Peter James Rowling. One feels a bleak pang for them all, wondering what it says that this author, for whom names are never accidents, named the most despicable character in the series and the longed-for but nebulous dead father after her father's first and middle names. Her mother's name was Anne Volant Rowling; she and her sister are Joanne and Dianne, called Jo and Di, both carrying their mother with them in their very identities.

Her mother worked as a lab technician for the late John Nettleship, a chemistry teacher who was one of Rowling's inspirations for Snape. In a 2003 interview, four years before *Deathly Hallows* was published, he recalled Anne Rowling as "absolutely brilliant, a sparkling character, totally reliable, very interested in words and stories and things like that. Although her job was on the technical side, she was also very imaginative" [endnote 1]. Anne Rowling reportedly loved working for him in her first job outside the home after raising children for 12 years. Whatever J.K. Rowling's issues with Nettleship as a teacher, perhaps in showing Snape seeing Lily fly off the swing, Rowling was thanking him for remembering her mother's joy, sharing his memories of a part of her mother that knew how to fly.

Rowling's first husband physically abused her; her father revealed that in a 2003 interview he sold to a tabloid [endnote 2], one of the factors in their estrangement. In a 2010 interview with Oprah Winfrey, Rowling hinted that her mother had suffered abuse as well: "I think I repeated patterns from my first family, as we often do, in my selection of my first husband" [endnote 3].

Famously, Rowling and her infant daughter, then living in Portugal, escaped into hiding from her abusive first marriage and flew back to Britain. The following year, her husband tracked them down; fearing his violence, which was exacerbated by a drug addiction, Rowling took out a restraining order against him and filed for divorce [endnote 4]. Thinking about this is terrifying and horrendously sad for all of them. Thinking about it also showed me that escape from domestic violence is a real-world equivalent to the times in the series when endangered people escaped to caves or relocated, protected by a Fidelius Charm. Knowing when to leave: this is another kind of flight. Flight not as flying, but as fleeing.

This kind of mortal flight can be misunderstood. Is fleeing the right response to aggression? In her Oprah interview, we get confirmation that Rowling believes that sometimes, it is: "I'm proud [...] that I had a strong survival instinct. Because when I knew that it was time to go, I left."

Think about the chapter title "The Flight of the Prince." There's a double matronymic in the title: "flight" for Rowling's mother and "Prince" for Snape's. The title is about the hidden, almost unnamed strength from the mother that enables a person to flee from conflict, no matter how shamed, when the safety of a dependent child is at stake. You remember the anguish in Snape's face as he screams, like a trapped beast, "DON'T [...] CALL ME COWARD!" [HBP 604]. He cannot explain. He just has to get Draco away; he has promised to protect Draco with his life, agreed voluntarily when he saw Draco's mother's love.

Think again about the moment that Snape, rapidly running out of defenses, having said "It is I" and stepped out from behind a suit of armor [DH 597], realizes he must reveal one of his deepest secrets, his ability to fly. He has to call upon this legacy of Lily's friendship now because there is no option left but to fly, to flee, rather than to hurt the people he wants to protect. He may well be able to hold his own when outnumbered -- he's had lots of practice, and he's gotten better since then -- but he would have to hurt the colleagues who don't know he still cares for them.

When Snape takes shelter behind another suit of armor, Flitwick enchants it and Harry has to dive to avoid it when it goes flying. "When Harry looked up again, Snape was in full flight, McGonagall, Flitwick, and Sprout all thundering after him: He hurtled through a classroom door and, moments later, he heard McGonagall cry, "Coward! COWARD!" [DH 599].

It has been decades since Snape has flown with Lily, perhaps since he has flown at all. Maybe he isn't even sure he can still do it. What does he call upon to create this magic? Joy is probably scarce for him at the moment. It's the protectiveness that keeps him airborne, the overriding urge to protect them all that is based upon empathy, the bond with others that comes from the happiness of human interaction. Snape remembers flying with Lily, the joy of magical play together: *Look at me. I know how you feel*. He remembers how she looked when she took flight. He has to stay alive to reach Harry. This is a memory he ought to share.

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Endnotes:

1. <http://www.accio-quote.org/articles/2003/0616-scotsman-mcginty.html>
2. <http://www.mult-sclerosis.org/news/Jun2003/JKRowlingandHerMother.html>
3. <http://www.the-leaky-cauldron.org/2010/10/1/video-of-j-k-rowling-video-on-oprah-winfrey-show-available>
4. <http://www.scotsman.com/lifestyle/books/features/the-jk-rowling-story-1-652114>