

The Peculiar Resilience of the Refugee

by Squibstress

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Chapter 1 of 1

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Author's Note: Written for the 2012 [HP Friendship Fest](#) on LiveJournal.

Warning: Contains (non-explicit) mention of sexual abuse.

"This is where you'll sleep."

She doesn't fail to notice how The Barmaid has phrased it.

Not: *This is your room.* But: *This is where you'll sleep.*

Reminding Petunia that she owns nothing anymore, not even the bed she sleeps in. Which is clean enough, she supposes, looking at it.

"Where are the lights?" she asks.

"Lights?"

"Yes. Lamps. Overheads. *Lights.*"

"On the bedside table," The Barmaid says in a tone Petunia doesn't much like. It says, *You poor, daft thing. Your troubles have turned your mind.*

Of all the things Petunia has lost over the past year, her mind isn't among them. Not yet, anyway. It occurs to her that this place might finally do the job.

"That?" Petunia says, pointing at the old hurricane lamp that sits on the small oak table next to the brass bed.

"Yes, of course."

"You have no electricity here?" Petunia asks, although she's quite certain that the answer will be "no."

"Elec-*what?*"

"Never mind," says Petunia. "I'll need some matches."

The Barmaid raises her eyebrows, and Petunia reiterates, "Matches. To light the candle." She borrows the tone from The Barmaid.

Let's see how you like it.

Understanding flickers across The Barmaid's face. "Right. Sorry. I forgot you haven't got a wand."

And I couldn't do much with it if I did Petunia thinks. *Lily was so disappointed when I couldn't..*

But she cuts that thought off at the knees. That loss is so ancient, she has no business dredging it up again now, when she has so many fresh ones to mourn.

"I'll have to find some," The Barmaid says.

Each woman stares at the other as if peering through the glass at a particularly odd specimen in a museum of natural history.

"Well, I'll just leave you to settle in, then," The Barmaid says finally. When she draws her wand, Petunia turns away. The room is instantly bathed in the weak glow of candlelight.

"We have tea at six-thirty, before the rush," The Barmaid says, shutting the door behind her.

Tea, Petunia sniffs to herself. Of course. *It wouldn't be dinner here, would it?*

A memory assaults her: Dad barking a laugh at her the first time she'd called it "dinner."

"That Dursley chap's making you sound like a toff, Petunia. Mind you don't forget where you come from."

She hadn't forgotten. Vernon's family wouldn't let her.

Now another memory comes: Marge, blown up like a be-girdled dirigible, floating over Privet Drive, screaming her fat, red face off. Petunia almost wanted to hug Harry for that.

She opens her case and begins to unpack her few things, placing her nightclothes and underthings in the top drawer of the tacky dresser. As she hangs her three dresses in the wardrobe, it crosses her mind that they probably have no iron in a place like this. She'll have to see if she can get hold of one. Maybe she can ask Harry to bring one from London, much as she hates to ask him for anything.

Harry Potter. The hero.

You'd think the great hero of the wizarding world could find something better for his aunt than this tavern. Petunia doesn't want his charity, and she isn't averse to work...she took a business course at North East London Polytechnic, didn't she?...but cooking for a tavern? God knows what strange, unnatural kinds of food these people will want. At least Hestia served good, wholesome, *normal* food. Petunia would say that much for her.

She uses her handkerchief to polish a bit of dirt from one of her shoes before placing it carefully next to its mate at the bottom of the wardrobe.

It's rather funny, when she thinks of it. She'd wanted so desperately to escape the kind of life her mother led, so she ran first to dirty, frightening London and the polytechnic, then to clean, reassuring Vernon Dursley and Little Whinging. But the life she led with Vernon wasn't really all that different from her mother's, after all. Cooking, cleaning, seeing to her husband's and son's needs . . . the window dressing was different, that was all.

There was more between Cokeworth and Little Whinging than two hundred miles, though.

She places the two pictures of Dudley...one taken just before Harry came to live with them, the other taken just last May at Smeltings...on the dresser. After a moment's thought, she moves the more recent one to the bedside table.

So handsome.

He lost weight after that incident with Harry and those things; he no longer resembles his father so closely. And despite Petunia's misgivings (that ridiculous *stick!*), he did fairly well at Vernon's old school. She'd even begun to nourish a secret hope that he might muster an O-level or two.

Now it's all gone, those old dreams. Swept away as she sat there listening to that black wizard and the ginger one explaining about how she and Dudley and Vernon were in terrible danger from the same person who'd killed Lily.

"But I thought you'd killed him!" she wailed at Harry.

The ginger wizard said something about rebounded curses and disembodiment and possession before the other one interrupted him, telling Petunia, "Harry only stopped him temporarily. Now he has to finish the job."

How Petunia hated Harry for that!

And she had plenty of time to hate him once Hestia and that Dedalus Diggle...absurd names!...had taken them to the so-called safe house. Nothing to do there all day but sit and think. Think about her life and everything that had led her to that tiny, dingy cottage that never felt entirely clean or dry, no matter how many spells Hestia cast on it or how hard Petunia scrubbed.

At first, Vernon and Dudders were relatively content, and why not? It was like a long bank holiday for them, parked in front of the telly with no work or school to go to. But Petunia, for whom the wrestling shows and rugger matches her men liked to watch held no allure, had little to fill her days once she had given up scrubbing clean-but-shabby floors and dusting furniture that had already been cleaned by magic.

That first day, she said to Hestia, "I'll cook our meals, thank you very much," but there was little in the way of kitchen supplies. And once she watched Hestia prepare a meal, she understood why. A single knife and cutting board, a few pots, and a stirring spoon were apparently all a witch needed to whip up a three-course meal, complete with meat, starch, and two veg.

What I could have done with magic! she thought to herself for a moment before she remembered that she hated magic and the people who did it.

Hestia, who'd insisted the Dursleys call her by her Christian (though surely *not* Christian) name, came 'round twice a day to "take care of things," as she put it. On a few occasions, someone else came, but mostly, it was Hestia.

She tried to take up conversations with Petunia, who spent most of her days sitting at the table in the kitchen, staring out the window at the colourless sky, but eventually she gave up, and a good job, too. The last thing Petunia needed was another witch for a friend. She'd been down that road with Lily...for they'd surely been friends as well as sisters...and look where it had got them both.

Petunia had thought things could get no worse, but she was wrong. Five months into their stay, the electricity went. Dedalus Diggle explained that the "words" or something around the house had to be strengthened and that the magic interfered with the electricity.

After a month with no telly, Vernon had had enough.

He packed his bags and demanded his wife and son do the same. And Petunia was willing...anything had to be better than that bleak limbo...but Dudley refused.

"I'm not going," Dudders said. "Not if there's . . . things out there like what those two wi . . . wizards said."

Vernon tried to shout him down, but it didn't work. And if Dudders was staying, there was no question that Petunia would too.

She felt a queer sort of relief when the door slammed behind Vernon. She'd loved him for a long time, and he'd done right by her. But in the past few years, he and she had been more like roommates than man and wife, and she came to realise that the only thing they had in common was their son. They'd had Dudley so quickly after they'd been married; thinking about it on the long, grey afternoons in the safe-house, Petunia wondered if she'd forgotten a pill or two on purpose, knowing somehow that they were going to need something more to bind them than voting Tory and hating foreign travel.

So she and Dudley stayed, and when Hestia appeared after a frightening absence of two days in which they'd run out of fresh water and milk, and the cottage stank of waste that hadn't been Disappeared or whatever, and told them that the war was over and that they could leave the safe house, Petunia didn't give a single thought to Vernon.

And she didn't think of him again until she returned with Dudley (and Hestia, who tried to dissuade them, then insisted on accompanying them) to Privet Drive to find a moving van in front of number four and a couple, the woman heavily pregnant, standing on Vernon's overgrown lawn, the man's hand making soothing circles on the woman's swayed back, just as Vernon had done when Petunia was eight months gone with Dudley.

The couple had never heard of the Dursleys, they said. They'd bought the property direct from the Surrey Bank and Trust, who'd taken it from an elderly widow who'd defaulted on her payments. Petunia hated the way Hestia looked at her with pity, but she took up the witch's offer to stop with her just the same. She and Dudley had nowhere else to go except back to the safe house or to Harry's godfather's house, and Petunia thought she'd rather eat glass.

She was surprised to find that Hestia Jones lived in a large, elegant flat in Earl's Court. It had been her family's, Hestia said, but her family was all dead. "Killed for being blood-traitors," she said, and Petunia was relieved when she didn't elaborate.

Petunia and Dudley took advantage of their new freedom. Hestia insisted on casting a spell that altered their appearances before they left the flat, and Petunia was frightened when she told them that there were still supporters of You-Know-Who at large who might try to revenge themselves on Harry Potter's relatives. Petunia had thought that, once the war had ended, they'd be truly safe.

Nevertheless, she and Dudley went out and amused themselves among their own during the day. She found London comforting rather than frightening this time, its crowds so very *normal*. They walked and window-shopped and went to the park. Dudley liked to watch the cricket and, shocking to Petunia, the wildlife. Over the six summer weeks they spent in London, Petunia regained some of the colour in her cheeks, and Dudley slimmed down a little more.

They had no money, though, and when Petunia hesitantly brought up the subject of paying Hestia for their room and board, the witch asked, not unkindly, "How do you expect to do that?" And when Petunia said something about finding a job, Hestia sat her down and explained to her that she no longer had an identity in the Muggle world.

"It was the safest way," Hestia said. "The Death Eaters would have found you through the Muggle records."

So that was that. Sometimes Petunia wonders if she exists anywhere anymore.

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The first time Dudley comes to the Three Broomsticks, Petunia is as nervous as she was the night Burt and Enid Mason came to dinner at number four.

Rosmerta comes into the kitchen, Levitating (that's the name of the spell, Petunia remembers) a stack of dishes in front of her.

"Your son's here, Petunia," she says. "Why don't you leave off for a while? I can put a charm on the stew so it'll keep for a bit. Go sit with them, have a drink or two."

"I don't know . . ." says Petunia. "I've still got the tarts to see to . . ." In truth, the damson tarts are finished and nearly ready to pop into the oven, but she is suddenly terrified at the thought of Dudley seeing her in this new environment.

Too much, she thinks. It's too much change too fast. She's just begun to get her bearings in this strange corner of the world. The kitchen helps.

Rosmerta...Petunia stopped thinking of her as "The Barmaid" sometime mid-September...was surprisingly willing to equip the Broomsticks' kitchen according to Petunia's wishes. Petunia was astonished when Rosmerta put £750 on the table and told her to get whatever she needed. Thinking about it much later, she thought Harry had likely provided the money.

Her pleasure at the prospect of an afternoon's shopping among normal people was aborted when that dirty Aberforth chap cast the spell to change her appearance and put her on that horrible purple bus. Despite her terror as the bus lurched and careened all over God's creation, she wondered why Rosmerta hadn't cast the spell herself.

Petunia recognised the clerk in the Cook's Corner in Dorking. He'd sold her the convection oven just before they'd gone into hiding. But the young man gave no sign that he recognised Petunia, despite the fact that she'd spent several hours with him over several days as she deliberated between the Breville and the De'Longhi.

Clerks usually remembered Petunia Dursley. She had exacting standards that they, mostly, failed to live up to, and Petunia had never hesitated to inform them of it. But she was no longer that woman, in face (at least at that moment) or otherwise.

The day after giving the clerk the address Rosmerta had given her for deliveries, Petunia's purchases arrived at the rear door to the Three Broomsticks. Petunia had never got such good service in the normal world.

Rosmerta is looking at her expectantly, so she goes to the sink and washes her hands. Removing her light-blue apron, she smooths her hands over her dress several times, and a hand flitters up to her head to tuck any stray hair into place.

"You look fine," Rosmerta says kindly when Petunia hesitates before going through the door from the kitchen to the bar.

In an indication of just how much things have changed, Dudley stands when he sees her, perhaps taking a cue from the enormous man next to him.

After submitting to her hug, Dudley says, "Mum, you remember Hagrid?"

How could she not?

Her worries about Dudley's reaction to seeing his mother working in a tavern prove unfounded. Dudley does most of the talking, and Petunia thinks she's never seen him so animated. Rosmerta brings them three mugs...well, two mugs and one tankard...of Butterbeer, which they drink as Dudley tells her about his job as assistant groundskeeper at Hogwarts.

"Yeh should be right proud of Dudley, Missus Dursley," Hagrid says. "He's a deft hand with the Crups. Got a bunch jes' had their tails off, and Dudley's the oney one they'll

let near 'em to change the dressings. Got a real gentle manner with 'em, he does."

Hagrid's accent reminds her of everything she tried to leave behind in Cokeworth. Beyond hoping Dudley won't pick it up, she isn't certain how to feel about the friendship that has obviously cropped up between Hagrid and her son. Dudley seems to have forgotten all about the incident with the pig's tail...or he's suppressed it...but the enormous and unkempt man still frightens Petunia a little. She can only hope he'll keep her boy safe at that school.

When Hagrid excuses himself for a few minutes, Petunia asks, "How is it really up there? Are people . . . are people kind to you?"

"Oh, yeah, Mum. Most everyone is pretty nice. I've been showing a couple of blokes how to play footie...they think it's a real lark, kicking a ball around without magic and all. And the other staff is okay. The librarian's a little scary..."

"You've been visiting the library?"

"Yeah," Dudley says sheepishly. "There were some books the Headmistress recommended . . . about non-magical people...they call them Squibs...who live in the magical world. I mean, I'm not a Squib, obviously, but she thought they'd be helpful."

"And are they?"

Dudley shrugs. "They're okay, I guess. But I've really enjoyed the books Hagrid suggested." Dudley's voice speeds up as he warms to his topic. "He's having me read the books he assigns for his students about magical creatures. Man, if they'd had books like these at Smeltings, I might've actually read one or two. The pictures move! It's like having a little telly inside the book. And one of the books growls, and you have to stroke the cover to keep it from biting. It's wicked!"

Petunia assumes he doesn't mean it literally.

When Hagrid returns, Petunia says, "Well, I need to get back, I think."

"Sure, Mum," says Dudley, standing, and her eyes well up when he goes to hug her first. He's never done it before. "We'll be back next Saturday, I reckon. See you then?"

When she goes back into the kitchen, Rosmerta is there, doing some kind of spell on the dishes to clean them.

Petunia puts her apron back on and goes to the cold cupboard to take out the tarts and prepare them for baking. As she cracks two eggs, depositing the yolks in one bowl and the whites in another, Rosmerta asks, "How's your son, then?"

"He's fine, I think." She begins to beat the whites, hoping the noise of the whisk against the side of the dish will discourage any further discussion.

But Rosmerta comes up beside her as she begins to paint the fat, doughy sides of the tarts with the egg whites, and says, "Hagrid's a good sort. He'll look out for him. So will Minerva."

Something in Rosmerta's voice makes Petunia look up from her tarts.

"Mmm-hmmm," she says before sliding the glistening tarts into the oven.

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It's Christmas when she realises she is no longer unhappy.

Queer, she thinks as she bastes the goose, which is turning a satisfying golden brown.

The conventional wisdom, as dispensed by *Woman's Weekly*, has it that the holidays are the hardest times of all for the "newly single," which Petunia supposes she is.

But the cooking and the baking and the decorating are pleasant in a way they haven't been for years. Back in Little Whinging, preparing for Christmas (or "hol-ops" as it was known in Petunia's circle) had taken on a rote, even vaguely sinister feeling, what with the expectations that had expanded as the Dursleys' social-standing improved and the competition that had grown up among the matrons of the WI and the neighbours on Privet Drive.

Here, in this strange place, it's almost fun.

Rosmerta was delighted with Petunia's suggestions for livening up the decor with a few Poinsettias on the tables and some garlands of greenery with holly sprigs around the doors and windows. And Petunia has to admit that placing them was much easier with the assistance of Rosmerta's magic. As was peeling the bloody chestnuts...a chore she had always despised...for the purée. After Petunia told her what needed to be done, Rosmerta managed it quickly after a very few false starts that resulted in shredding a few roasted chestnuts. Magic, it seems, is a bit more complicated than Petunia had imagined.

When Lily came home over summers and talked about how hard her classes were, Petunia used to scoff to herself. Lils was just showing off again. What was hard about pointing a wand and saying a few foreign words, and why did they need seven years to learn to do it? Later, when Lily had married that boy, and Petunia made that single, ill-advised trip to their home, Petunia wondered why Lily couldn't just magic herself some proper furniture instead of relying on tacky-tacky hand-me-downs from Mum and Dad (which she was welcome to, by the way; Petunia wouldn't have had them in her house.) And while she's on the subject, why in the name of Jesus God almighty couldn't Lily just have disappeared or something when that Voldemort showed up at the door? What good did all her magic do her then?

But Petunia is beginning to get the idea that magic is hard. Certainly, she's seen Rosmerta do a few spells...to light the candles, or clean the dishes, or launder their clothes and the bed linens, or to send large trays of drinks and food to tables...but she's never seen her do anything really impressive. Lily was able to produce flowers from thin air (they didn't last more than a day or so, but still . . .) and turn teacups into mice, but Rosmerta never does anything like that. She sent Petunia to a normal florist shop in Inverness to get the Christmas plants, and she made her go to Aberforth's again to get her face changed before she went.

But they're managing quite well together. When Petunia approached Rosmerta to show her how much *cleaner* the glassware got when washed by hand rather than magic, Rosmerta conceded.

"Aye," she said, turning a pint glass over and inspecting it. "It looks like new, Petunia. But we can't go cleaning each glass by hand. Not with you cooking and me out in front all night."

"We could buy more glasses," Petunia suggested. "That way we'd have enough to use a new one for each customer. And we can wash them up properly after closing."

Rosmerta didn't like that idea. "Despite what you might think, I don't have unlimited Galleons," she snapped. "And I'm not going to ask...well, I'm not going to ask anyone else for the money, either."

In the end, Petunia suggested a compromise: Rosmerta would clean the glasses with magic as she'd always done, but at the end of the evening, Petunia would wash them properly, so at least they'd be fresh and clean at the beginning of service the next day.

"Fine," Rosmerta said.

On the fourth night after Petunia implemented this scheme, Rosmerta joined her at the sink, silently taking a rag and drying each glass after Petunia had scrubbed and rinsed it. Over the next few nights, they started to talk as they worked. She told Rosmerta a little about her life in Little Whinging, and Rosmerta talked about Hogsmeade and the people she knew. She didn't speak about her life much, and Petunia didn't ask. Rosmerta seemed happy enough.

One evening, each was content enough in the conversation that they ended up sitting down at the small table near the back door to continue it after the dishes were put away, a glass of wine in front of Petunia and a glass of Firewhiskey (that's what it was called) in front of Rosmerta.

"So when did all this happen?" Petunia asked.

"Oh, about 1899 or 1900."

"That must mean Aberforth is . . . he's over a hundred!"

"Oh, aye. Well over. But Albus was older. If I remember rightly, the *Prophet* had him at 116 when he . . . when he died."

The last time Petunia saw Albus Dumbledore...the summer before he died, it must have been...he looked vigorous. She would have guessed him to be in his seventies or eighties, but spry.

She looked across at the woman sitting opposite her. Rosmerta was pretty, there was no denying it. She had almond-shaped, blue eyes, a wavy mane of strawberry-blonde hair, and peachy skin that the sallow-hued Petunia would have envied had she allowed herself that sin. But there were lines on her face; crow's feet marked time around her lovely eyes, and her brows were subtly seamed, with a vertical equals sign between them that deepened when she frowned. Petunia hadn't really thought about it, but if she had, she would have guessed Rosmerta to be about her own age, although Petunia knew she looked older than her forty years.

"And how old are you?" she blurted out, then nearly clapped an appalled hand over her mouth.

She was relieved when Rosmerta laughed rather than take offense at what would have been an unthinkable impertinent question to put to any decent woman back in Little Whinging.

"Fifty-five last February," Rosmerta answered. She added, "We age somewhat differently than you do."

"That means . . ." Petunia said, and burst into tears.

Alarmed, Rosmerta pulled a handkerchief from her pocket and handed it to Petunia. She tried to soothe her but mistook the reason for Petunia's sudden distress.

"Petunia, you look just fine. And nobody cares how old..."

"Lily . . ." Petunia sobbed.

"I'm . . . I'm sorry . . ." said Rosmerta, confused.

"Lily would have had a long life. She was only twenty-one when she died. It's such a bloody waste."

"Yes. Yes, it was," said Rosmerta. "I'm very sorry. You must have loved her very much."

"I did," said Petunia. "But I didn't tell her. We . . . we didn't really get on . . . after she went to that school."

Petunia calmed herself, swiping at her eyes and nose with Rosmerta's handkerchief.

"Did you know her?" she asked Rosmerta.

"Only a bit. She came in with Potter and Black and Remus sometimes."

"Will you tell me about her?"

"Well, I don't know much, really . . ."

"Just about how she was. When she was with . . . your sort."

So Rosmerta told her what little she remembered, and Petunia sat rapt through it. When Rosmerta was finished, Petunia simply said, "Thank you," and the two women went up to bed.

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Petunia opens the oven and slides the goose out. It is perfect, deep-gold and glistening with its light coating of fat from the juices Petunia has diligently basted it with.

Rosmerta is surprised at how little is left over. She takes a few slices over to Aberforth's and returns a few minutes later with the news that Aberforth has asked if there is any more.

"High praise indeed," says Rosmerta. "He usually just picks at whatever I send over."

"Doesn't he have food over at the Hog's Head?" Petunia enquires.

"Of course. But at Christmas, I think he should have better than week-old mutton stew, is all."

Petunia has been invited to attend the Christmas feast at the school with Dudley, but she declines in favour of a quiet Christmas dinner with Rosmerta and the two lodgers currently in residence. She's more comfortable in this world now, her small, circumscribed world, but the notion of going up to that school gives her the abtads. She doesn't want to see the place where Lily spent seven years shaking the dirt of Cokeworth from her heels.

So instead, she cooks another goose, and Rosmerta sends an entire leg and part of a breast over to Aberforth, who surprises them all by stopping in for a drink after closing.

"Come by for the party tomorrow, Aberforth," Rosmerta says.

"Maybe," is all he says after taking his leave.

To Petunia's great surprise, the party is pleasant.

Rosmerta introduces her to the first arrivals, a Miss Pince and Professor Slughorn, and Petunia is uncomfortable when the professor begins to leak around the eyes when he tells her how much he liked Lily. Miss Pince is mostly silent, and Petunia's unsurprised to discover that she's the school librarian. She certainly looks the part. As does Petunia herself, she realises.

Maybe I missed my calling.

Not that she could have managed a library. The typing course was hard enough.

People begin to trickle in in small groups, and Petunia's heart leaps a little when Dudley comes in with Hagrid, then it lurches wildly when Dudley laughs as the tall man

shakes the snow from his cloak, depositing the bulk of it right on top of Dudley's head.

He's happy, she thinks with wonder, and the relief is almost as great as it was when they'd finally decided to take her to theatre to deliver Dudley after twenty-six hours of agonising labour. She had been half-afraid that Dudders would miss the kind of Christmas they had at number four, with pressies piled high for him. But as she watches him among his new colleagues, it hits her that he misses it as little as she does.

She feels a ripple in the air when a tall witch in an absurd hat with a tartan ribbon and a sprig of holly around the brim comes in, and she realises after a few moments that this must be the Headmistress. She watches out of the corner of her eye as the woman makes the rounds of the other partygoers. The Headmistress works the room just as Vernon used to at the Grunnings Christmas party. But she doesn't ignore the "little people" as Vernon did. Petunia sees that she spends just as much time talking to Dudders as she does to anyone else.

The Headmistress finally approaches Petunia and raves, as everyone else has done, about the food. Echoing what Hagrid said, she says, "You should be very proud of Dudley, Mrs Dursley. He's adjusting beautifully, and he's made some friends among the older boys. They seek him out because he's Harry's cousin, of course, but he seems to take his quasi-celebrity in stride."

"Thank you," Petunia says and means it.

When the Headmistress approaches Rosmerta, Petunia is surprised to see them embrace. The Headmistress hasn't embraced anyone else, and Petunia has never seen Rosmerta hug anyone.

After the Headmistress leaves, the party gets a little louder. The dwarf professor...Flitwick, she thinks Rosmerta said...pulls out a box that looks a bit like the music box she had as a girl and points his wand at it. Suddenly, the air is filled with music, familiar holiday standards alternating with things Petunia doesn't recognise.

Petunia is horribly embarrassed when she's caught under the mistletoe with Professor Slughorn, who seems delighted to be kissing her and even gives her bum a saucy pinch. She can't wait to be quit of him, however. He reminds her too much of Vernon, with his moustache and his girth, although that isn't his fault.

When the last guest has been poured out into the Hogsmeade night, Rosmerta turns to Petunia, saying, "That was the best Boxing Day party I can remember in ages."

"You've been through a war," Petunia remarks. She's overheard a lot of whispered talk about "You-Know-Who" this evening.

"Aye. But the food helped. Thank you."

"You're welcome."

Petunia goes to bed without thinking of Vernon or Little Whinging for the first time in months.

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In May, there's a memorial for those lost in the war, and Petunia surprises herself by deciding to go.

She and Rosmerta take the Knight Bus together. Petunia is used to it by now, or as used to it as one can get, but Rosmerta isn't, it turns out. Petunia talks to her to try to take her mind off the stomach-turning, hair-raising ride. As they talk about nothing in particular, Petunia realises that this is the first time Rosmerta's been out of Hogsmeade since she took Petunia in, at least that Petunia is aware of. To make conversation, she asks, "Have you been to your Ministry before?"

"Yes. Once." Rosmerta doesn't elaborate, and Petunia has the sense that she doesn't want to discuss it, so she changes the subject to her time living in London.

"It was exciting," she tells Rosmerta, "but frightening, too. I'd never been away from home. We'd go into Manchester with Mum or Dad occasionally, of course, but it wasn't the same. I was alone in London, except for my flat-mate, and we . . . well, we didn't get on. I left after a year. Vernon, my husband, seemed like a good alternative to another year of typing and accounting courses."

The bus gives a lurch just then, and Rosmerta grasps the back of the seat in a moment of white-knuckled panic. After a second, she asks, "And was he?"

"Was he what?"

"A good alternative."

Petunia thinks for a moment.

"Yes," she says. "He was."

"Do you miss him?"

"Sometimes." Then Petunia asks, "Were you ever married?"

"No."

That's the end of the conversation, for the bus comes to an abrupt stop that would have thrown everyone in it to the floor if the seats weren't packed so tightly together.

"Ministry of Magic!" the conductor announces. "Mind your step."

Petunia wonders what the people on the street think of the luridly purple bus that's now disgorging a preposterous number of oddly dressed people in front of a dilapidated storefront bearing a banner that says, "*Welcome, Bletchley Taxidermy Enthusiasts!*" A year ago, she thinks, she would have been mortified to be in such company. Now, she's only amused at the looks they're getting from passersby as the motley group of former passengers clump around the entryway waiting for someone to open the door. She wonders if it can be considered progress.

Eventually, a wizard wearing a top hat bearing the same greeting as the banner steps out and invites the assembled "enthusiasts" in. The room is empty, except for a set of three blue-green Border Loos that stand against the back wall.

"All right, now," the wizard says. "One at a time, no crowding."

When Petunia's turn comes, she wrinkles her nose but steps in gamely. She has only a moment to register that there's no odour before the bottom seems to drop out of the thing and she's falling...only not falling, just descending rapidly in pitch-blackness. When she feels herself come to a stop, a metal gate appears in front of her, and she opens it to step out into an enormous room flanked on all sides by large windows. The windows show a clear night sky full of twinkling stars, although Petunia knows it is only one o'clock in the afternoon.

She feels a hand on her shoulder, and it's Rosmerta, who says, "Shall we?" and gestures to the front of the room where there appears to be a dais.

It's a rather dull and maudlin affair, as it turns out, with too many speeches and tributes, and an embarrassing speech about Harry by an elderly wizard who stutters. When the speeches are finally over, Petunia and Rosmerta make their way to the monument that has been dedicated. It's a peculiar thing: a large, pearlescent orb that appears to float atop a marble pedestal upon which the names of those lost in the wars are inscribed. People are going up and touching their wands to the names, and as they do so, the orb's surface clears, and a face appears, captioned by a few words about the individual's life.

When Petunia gets close to the pedestal, she looks for Lily's name and is at first incensed not to find it, until she remembers that it will be under "P" for "Potter" rather than "E" for "Evans". She touches her fingers to the name, but nothing happens.

"May I?" says Rosmerta, drawing her wand.

"Thank you," says Petunia.

When Rosmerta's wand touches Lily's name, Petunia draws in a sharp breath. Her sister's face immediately appears in the orb, smiling and waving. The photo looks as if it was taken on her wedding day. Below it are the words: *"Fought Voldemort in the First Wizarding War. Mother of Harry Potter. Gave her life to save his. She is missed."*

Petunia can't speak, and when Rosmerta asks after a few moments, "All right?" she can only nod.

As they step away, the ginger-haired wizard she remembers from his visit to number four silently hands her a handkerchief. She takes it and wipes her eyes and nose. When she makes to give it back with a nod of thanks, the wizard says, "You keep it, Mrs Dursley," and moves off arm-in-arm with a short, auburn-haired woman, who is clutching a similar handkerchief to her nose.

Petunia turns to Rosmerta. She's never asked about Rosmerta's war, so she does so now: "Did you lose anyone? In the war?"

"Yes."

"I'm sorry. I didn't see..."

"He's not on the monument."

They leave when it is announced that the Knight Bus will return anyone who needs transportation back to their homes.

When they get back to the Broomsticks, Rosmerta doesn't turn over the "closed" sign when they get inside. Petunia looks at her in surprise, and Rosmerta says, "We deserve a night off for a change. Come on. Let's have a drink."

They do, sitting by the fire in the bar for once; it's late spring but still cold in the Highlands of an evening.

The Firewhiskey...she's decided she likes it better than the plonk Rosmerta gets in...feels good, and it loosens her tongue. She asks, "Who was he?"

"Who was who?"

"The person you lost in the war."

A frown furrows Rosmerta's brows, and the double line appears between them to show she's annoyed.

Petunia says, "I'm sorry. It's none of my business."

Rosmerta's face relaxes, and she swallows the little bit of drink left in her glass. She gets up, goes to the bar, and brings the bottle back, setting it down between them with a thump. Pouring a bit more into her glass, she says, "Sláinte!" and downs it.

Petunia is about to excuse herself and leave Rosmerta to her thoughts when the other woman says, "He was my brother."

"I'm sorry," Petunia repeats.

"An Auror killed him during the first war."

"An Auror...that's the magical police, isn't it?"

"Yes," says Rosmerta. "The Auror was killed in the second war." After a moment, she adds: "He was a decent man," and Petunia isn't sure if she's referring to the Auror or her brother.

"I hadn't seen him in years, but it was a shock," Rosmerta says.

Yes, thinks Petunia. *A shock*

There's a lull in the conversation...or is it an awkward silence?...and Petunia gets up to stoke the fire. When she sits back down, her glass has two more fingers of whiskey in it.

"Rosmerta," she says, "I know I've never said it. But I'm grateful. For you taking me in."

Rosmerta gives her a queer look. "I didn't 'take you in,' Petunia. I needed the help, and you earn your keep."

"Yes, but you could have taken on a witch. Or a house-elf." It's a mark of how much has changed that she can say those words without feeling ridiculous.

"Maybe," says Rosmerta. "But Minerva asked, and it was no skin off my nose, so I agreed."

"Minerva . . . that's the Headmistress of the school?"

"Mmm. I think Harry approached her about finding a place for you and Dudley. Or maybe she did it on her own, I don't know."

"Why would she..."

"She likes strays."

"What do you mean?"

"She takes care of . . . of refugees. Like you. And like me."

Petunia sits back in her chair, contemplating this new information. Rosmerta has never spoken of her family or her past, and Petunia doesn't know what to make of it. She's vaguely uncomfortable, but she stays quiet, half hoping Rosmerta will continue, half hoping she won't.

"She was a refugee herself, you know," Rosmerta says. "From her father. He was a Muggle, a sort of religious fanatic, I guess, if what I've heard is accurate. She'd never say, of course. So when I needed somewhere, she set me up here, just like she did for you. Old Mrs Abercrombie was getting on and needed someone to see to the cleaning and to help at the bar, and I knew enough magic to manage that much, at least."

She gives Petunia a wry smile. She says, "I hated it here at first, same as you."

Petunia begins to protest, "I didn't...oh, all right, yes, I did. But I don't now."

"I'm glad," says Rosmerta. "Still, it must be hard."

Petunia sighs. "Sometimes. It's a little like being in a foreign country that's just enough like your own to really bollux you up." She adds, "I always hated travel."

She laughs then, and Rosmerta joins her for a moment.

There's a moment of silence again, and Rosmerta looks at her with what seems like expectation.

Petunia asks, "What were you a refugee from?"

"My family."

"They were with him. With Voldemort."

"No. I mean, yes, eventually, but I left long before that bastard came around. I left because of my father, specifically. When I was a girl, he used to . . . to bother me in bed."

Petunia can feel the flush begin in her face, but she forces herself not to look away from Rosmerta.

"That's terrible," she says.

"Mmm. Anyway, I became sort of a mess when it started. My studies suffered, my magic . . . I was never a stellar student to begin with. I ended up blurting it all out to Minerva when she had me on the carpet for failing her class. She's the one who helped me leave. I was sixteen, so I had to apply to the Ministry for special permission to be emancipated from my father...my mother died when I was seven. I had to go to testify to them. It was terrifying."

Petunia now realises that Rosmerta's nervousness earlier in the evening wasn't down to the Knight Bus at all. She says, "That must have taken great courage."

"I don't know about that," says Rosmerta, "but it was that, or go back to my father for a year until I turned seventeen. Minerva was livid when I told her I was leaving school too. You know what she's like...well, you don't, but take it from me, she's a force of nature when she's got her knickers in a twist about something. But there was no point in my continuing at Hogwarts. I'm pretty rotten at magic, as you may have guessed. That was true even before my dad did what he did. After that, I couldn't even do a simple *Lumos* for a long time. It came back some, eventually, but really, I'm not much more than a Squib."

This time, it's Petunia who reaches over and takes the bottle to fill both their glasses.

"I shouldn't," she says as she takes up her glass. "I'll have an awful head in the morning."

Rosmerta raises her glass. "Ta, Petunia."

"I used to wonder if I was magic," Petunia says. "If Lily was, why shouldn't I be too, right? Lily spent hours in our room with me, trying to teach me to do spells." She gives a rueful laugh. "The only thing that ever happened was I managed to knock over a little bud vase. I was excited until Lils pointed out that I had hit it with her wand."

"Sometimes I wished my parents had never told me about Lily. At first, I was constantly afraid that I might blurt it out accidentally . . . get us all arrested or something. Later, I just pretended I didn't have sister. I used to have a fantasy that she was dead. And then when she was, it was a relief."

She's never said it out loud before, never even really said it to herself. She looks at Rosmerta, expecting to see . . . she doesn't know what. Horror, maybe. But Rosmerta's expression is as it always is, soft, and a little far-away.

"Then there was Harry," Petunia says, and she can feel her own expression hardening, although she doesn't intend it. "He was a reminder. A constant reminder of my failure to mourn my sister."

"But at the memorial..." Rosmerta says.

"At some point, my regret . . . resentment . . . whatever you want to call it, turned into a kind of grief. I think . . . I think this, being here, has helped. It's made me think of what might have been, if I'd been less angry."

Rosmerta shifts in her chair, and Petunia says, "It's good, I think. It's good to mourn. Finally."

It's one in the morning when they go upstairs to bed. They reach Rosmerta's door first, and Petunia has a momentary impulse to hug Rosmerta, but she checks it in favour of a cordial "Good night."

She gets to her room, changes into her night dress, and cleans her teeth. She climbs between her clean sheets and has the best sleep she's had in ages, despite the liquor. She doesn't hear Rosmerta get up in the night.

In the morning, Petunia wakes early. When her eyes open, she feels the first stab of pain in her head and knows that when she sits up, her belly will turn over, which it dutifully does. For once, she doesn't dress first but puts on a dressing gown and slippers and pads down to the kitchen.

There's a note on the table next to a small, dark-green bottle and a teaspoon. The note reads:

Hangover Potion...Take two spoonfuls on an empty stomach.

It tastes horrid. Don't vomit it up, though, or you'll regret it.

~R

Petunia swallows the potion as directed, and Rosmerta is quite right, it's awful. But a few seconds after, blessed relief ensues. Her head stops its sickening pounding, and her stomach no longer threatens to empty itself every time she moves.

I love magic, she thinks for the first time in her life.

Twenty minutes later, Rosmerta shuffles into the kitchen, looking as Petunia imagines she herself did before the potion did its work.

Rosmerta says nothing but retrieves another spoon from the drawer and takes some of the Potion.

She grimaces, then says, "Morning, Petunia."

"Morning."

Petunia is scrambling some eggs, and when they're done, she puts a plate in front of Rosmerta and gets another for herself.

"Thanks," Rosmerta says as Petunia sits and scoots her chair in towards the table.

They don't talk about anything from the night before.

Their day progresses as usual: the two of them spend the morning cleaning and tidying, then Petunia repairs to the kitchen to do the day's cooking, while Rosmerta girds her loins to do battle out in the bar. They have short break for lunch at noon, then another for tea at 6:30. The bar closes at midnight, and they do the washing up together.

Rosmerta doesn't ask if Petunia wants a drink; she just gets a new bottle from the bar, and Petunia follows her out to sit by the fire again.

Rosmerta pours the drinks.

Petunia raises her glass and says, "To refugees."

"To refugees."

~FIN~