

# The Observer Effect

*by Squibstress*

Minerva watches Severus. She sees through a glass, darkly.

Nominated for a 2012 HP Fanfic Fanpoll Award. A featured story on Mugglenet Fanfiction.

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*Chapter 1 of 1*

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**Author's Note:** Written for the wonderful 2012 [Minerva Fest](#) on LiveJournal.

The prompt was from Tetleythesecond: Minerva is a watcher. She watches out for her students. She watches her world collapse, unable to do more than pick up its pieces wherever she can. She also watches Severus Snape. Kinks: Questions of desire/obsession, the power and powerlessness of the watcher, moral integrity, the allure of the dark/forbidden, exploration of depths and darkneses of one's own.

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Consider, Reader, a boy.

He is young, he is foolish, both in the ordinary way of young boys and in other, more intriguing ways.

Intriguing, at least, to the woman. She is not young, not foolish. She is, in fact, six-and-thirty, and a scholar of some repute.

At first he does not stand out among the legions of boys she has taught, except perhaps by his singular lack of boyish appeal. At eleven, most boys still possess a glimmer of it, a late-summer moment of sweetness before they succumb to too-knowing adolescence.

But we change things by our observation. So perhaps what eventually becomes of the Snape boy can be laid, in some small measure, at Minerva McGonagall's door. Or perhaps not. She will ask herself the question later, when she is restless in the night, in the too-large bed that is the privilege of the Head of Hogwarts to occupy, alone.

But for now, let us regard him as he first appears to the professor when he trudges up to the dais and seats himself, skinny legs dangling, on the stool to be Sorted.

He is short for his age and too thin; we can see that, even under the patched black robe that ill fits him. The impression his face gives is of a bird...a raven, say, with a cruelly pointed beak, beady, black eyes, and shiny, ebony feathers. The feathers, to continue the metaphor, are a bit scraggly, and it would appear that the boy has not had

benefit of a skilled barber in some time. There is a smattering of pimples on his forehead, simultaneously announcing his approaching sexual maturity and dooming it to furtive, onanistic fumbblings for its gratification.

Turning from the unfortunate facts of his appearance, we move on to more subjective observations. He is afraid; oh, yes, there is as much fear in him as in any of the dozen-odd children who have accompanied him this far, but he makes a greater effort to conceal it. He is betrayed by the gripping of his hands around the rails of the stool...so tight that the teacher can see his knuckles turn from sallow-tinged pink to bloodless white. His legs do not kick excitedly in the way of many children who have been seated here, but hang lifelessly down, waiting for the judgement of a sentient head-covering to set him on the next steps toward his destiny.

His face is fixed, his lips pressed into a thin line so unmoving that one could use it to measure a few inches of parchment, were one so inclined.

None of this is particularly remarkable. The teacher has seen his ilk before. He is a fierce little thing, she thinks, much as she herself was at the same age, but such intense children do come along once in a while. What captures her interest, as she looks down at the child perched on the chair while the seconds tick inexorably by, is that he does not blink. When the Hat finally renders a verdict, he does not look at her when she congratulates him.

~~oOo~~

When he does turn his eyes on her, she feels as if he can see under her robes. The intensity of his glare...which seems to be the only expression in his eleven-year-old repertoire...is designed to make one shift uncomfortably in one's shoes, and she is not surprised later to learn that he has been beaten by his parents. Appalled, but not surprised. She cannot imagine living under the weight of those eyes day-in and day-out.

He is an excellent student, if not naturally gifted in her discipline. He works hard to overcome any academic shortcomings but feigns an indifference she recognises to his social standing among the other students, who do not like him. He is not a boy to tolerate being liked, in any event.

She is surprised, then, to see him with one of her own students one unseasonably warm afternoon in late autumn by the lake. She is in the habit of taking exercise in her feline form, alternately walking and trotting around the lake's perimeter, darting off on a whim to chase a mole or a bird, or to sniff at a bush that bears the unmistakable and enticing odour of tomcat urine.

She draws closer, intrigued by this unexpected pairing. Settling quietly in a cool patch of grass, she listens, flicking her tail in the pleasant breeze, unnoticed by the children, who are having an argument.

"It's not nothing, Sev," says Miss Evans, and the teacher files away the nickname as if on an index card. She will take it out later and examine it, even trying it out on her tongue, and she knows it will never work, no matter how hard the Evans girl tries to make him into a boy who could be "Sev", and she is right. After his fifth year, he will never be "Sev" again.

"Just let it go," he says. "There's nothing I can do about it."

"You can go to McGonagall. She'll make them stop."

"No, she won't. They're Gryffindors, and I'm just a Slytherin."

"It won't matter. She'll be fair."

The boy looks at the girl with pity. He knows all about the ways the world wads "fair" into a ball and wings it into your face. Lily doesn't know, not yet, and the teacher can see that the boy called "Sev" hopes she never will. It's a vain hope, and Snape and the teacher both know it. Miss Evans doesn't yet understand that she is marked for special treatment just as surely as the ugly boy from the wrong side of their shared mill town.

In the event, Professor McGonagall does not intervene when the boys from her House torment him. She might do, if he were another sort of boy...a boy less like the plain, unpopular, half-Muggle girl she had been...but he is not. If she had seen appeal in his eyes, or any sign he might ask it of her, she might have done, but they are as black and soulless as murder. At least, this is what she tells herself, later.

~~oOo~~

His Transfiguration O.W.L. isn't quite what she'd hoped, but she admits him to her N.E.W.T. class just the same, telling Albus that she feels his potential has been overshadowed by his "unfortunate home life". In reality, she wants to observe. Potter and Black are in the class. It is a controlled experiment, she thinks. How much pressure can the boy take before his eyes stop looking through her? Before she acts?

He has friends now, or at least boys who don't shun him. Someone besides herself has evidently noticed his singularity; in his sixth year, he and Rosier are invited to spend the Christmas holidays at the home of Abraxas and Volumnia Malfoy. She wonders why Albus permits it; he is as aware as she of the rumours about their son. She does not ask him, however.

When Snape returns from the holidays, he is even quieter and more sullen, his eyes now lifeless, and she fears the worst. But just before she makes up her mind to send the boy to Madam Pomfrey, he changes. He begins to take an interest in the people around him...some of them...and his marks, his manners, his hygiene begin to improve. She is afraid when he spends the Easter holiday with the Malfoys again, but he returns apparently unharmed, and she notices that his accent is altered. The over-enunciated vowels and the glottal-stops of his Mancunian past are replaced by the rounder, diphthongised vowels and aspirated consonants of Received Pronunciation. When he returns from summer hols to begin his final year with her, there is no trace of his past in his voice or his clothes.

She is, and will always be, a Highlands girl, and he makes her feel dowdy and provincial when he draws an answer to her queries in his newfound silken syllables, the eyes not dead, not dead at all, but piercing and knowing once again.

When Albus remarks on how "fetching" she looks in her new green robes, she feels a pang of near-nostalgia for the tartan-trimmed dresses that have been shoved to a nearly inaccessible corner of her wardrobe. That night, she pulls them out and lays them on her bed, intending to *Scourgify* them of the dust that has surely coated them. But at the last moment, she immolates them instead.

~~oOo~~

He returns, not in triumph, but in the middle of the night, some three scant years from the day she thought she'd seen the last of him.

When Albus calls her to his office to introduce him as the apprentice Potions master, she finds him once again changed. He is neither the spindly, defiant boy he was, nor the smooth, arrogant young man he'd become; this Severus Snape is stoop-shouldered and defeated, and she is ashamed at the slight thrill it gives her to see him in this new guise. His eyes no longer bore through her but dart away, red-rimmed and dull as black buttons.

She makes some tentative attempts at kindness, as one shell-shocked spirit to another, but he rebuffs her, and one evening, after he has all but thrown her out of his sitting room, and she is striding through the corridors, the bottle of Ogden's finest single-malt tucked, unopened, under one arm, she is overcome by memory and has to stop for a moment.

She sees herself, twenty-two and unbent in body if not in spirit, fleeing Albus' quarters, unable to stomach for another moment the pity that her erstwhile mentor had probably seen as kindness. But she'd burnt all her bridges, in Caithness and in London, and Albus and Hogwarts were all that remained to her. Unlike Snape, she hadn't been looking at a lifetime in Azkaban when she'd fled from life outside, but it had seemed intolerable all the same, and so she'd swallowed what was left of her pride and settled down into a new life as Minerva McGonagall, spinster schoolteacher. Before September of 1971, she'd believed she'd made her peace with it.

Severus Snape will never be peaceful or settled, she thinks, and she wonders what sort of life he will make, here in this Petri dish, under Albus' scrutiny and hers.

He is a poor teacher. He browbeats and bullies his students, and half of them fail to achieve a passing O.W.L., but she doesn't intervene, nor does Albus ask her to. She could help him...she is a good teacher and a good Head of House...but he must come to her, as she did with Albus that first miserable year.

But he does not.

Not for seven years, and not for help with teaching.

~~oOo~~

She gets married.

The castle has become too small, she thinks, and anyway, everyone expects her to succumb to Elphinstone's persistence eventually, and if there is one thing Professor McGonagall can be said to be, it's dependable. She is gratified, however, at Albus' reaction when she tells him. It is perhaps the first time she has ever truly surprised him.

She accepts Severus' congratulations and the brusque peck on the cheek he provides at the reception Albus has arranged and compelled him, no doubt, to attend.

He gives them a gift...an odd one. It is a selection of antivenins and antidotes to common poisons, and Elphinstone later jokes that one would think the Potions master expects the newlyweds to poison one another during a marital spat. She tells him that in Severus' childhood experience, it was probably true, and Elphinstone says no more about it.

Is she happy in the cottage in Hogsmeade?

It isn't a question she asks herself, and if she did, she would likely say that happiness is relative. But she is less on edge knowing that she will not happen upon Severus pacing the halls late at night, not be filled with the urge to follow him on what she thinks of as his Stations of the Cross...his nightly pilgrimages to those locations in the castle that she knows hold special meaning for him. She doesn't know whether to envy or pity him, that his ghosts are so present and accessible. Hers are not, flung relatively far and wide as they are. Her father and her lover are safely buried in Caithness, and her child rests she knows not where...though not buried at all, of course.

When she finds Elphinstone's body in the small greenhouse, the Tentacula purring ominously at his feet, her first thought, God help her, is that Albus will expect her to come back to the castle.

~~oOo~~

She begins to follow Severus in her Animagus form, so she knows when he goes into Hogsmeade, knows what he's going to do when he puts on his glamour, trudges away from the castle, and slips into the seedy lane, nearly disappearing in shadows between The Hog's Head and the nameless apothecary.

She watches the first time. But she cannot see his face in the gloom of the alley, so the next time, she pads silently away when the woman gets to her knees. Nevertheless, it gives her a devilish little thrill to know this about him, that he has a need to be touched.

It is summer when he catches her at it.

She has lost him in the small corridors of the East Wing...he usually slips out the hidden door that gives onto the North Courtyard...when she is grabbed from behind and lifted by the scruff of her neck. She manages only a quick yowl before a Silencing Spell renders her mute and she is flung into the darkness of a bag.

When the bag is opened, she transforms and finds herself in his classroom. She is standing on the desk, alongside several jars of she cannot say what, and he is peering at her, his eyes having regained their peculiar intensity and lustre over the years of distance between his Great Tragedy and now.

He does not ask what she was doing, and she does not attempt to explain. He comes to her and puts his hands on her waist to lift her down, and she doesn't stop him when his fingers begin to fumble at the buttons to her summer dress.

She doesn't desire him...not in this way...but she lets him open her dress and bury his face between her breasts, and her hands float down to comb through his hair because she has always wanted to feel it, to know if it is as greasy and fine as it looks.

When he has gone, and she has righted her clothing, she brings her fingers to her nose and inhales his scent. It smells of sweat and cheap soap...nothing extraordinary after all...and she is somehow disappointed.

They do not speak, other than at the one daily communal meal Albus insists the summer residents take together in the staff room, but he comes to her rooms one night afterwards, and she admits him. He says nothing about why he has come; they talk about Quidditch and Transfiguration, and when a silence stretches out between them, he stands.

When he inclines his head toward her in a formal, unspoken "good night," she stands, too, and unfastens the clasps to her robe, letting it slide from her. It does not drop to the floor but folds itself and floats over to the table, where it comes to rest in a neat silk square. She stands shivering in her linen shift, wondering if she has mistaken the reason for his visit.

But he finally comes to her and unties the bow that holds the garment together at the top. He steps back and waits to see what she will do next, and it becomes a game of sorts: his move, her move, until each stands bared to the other, clothes discarded on the knotted pile carpet as if they couldn't be made to join her robe on the table with the mere flick of a wrist.

They are mirror images, or nearly so, each moon-pale and knobby of spine, with coal-black hair on head and on sex, both straight and tall and quiet on the surface.

No, she does not desire him, but she allows him to make love to her...that isn't the term he'd use, she's certain, but she is of a generation that lacks the casual comfort the young have with the more biological terms...because it seems to be something he needs from her, finally.

He is fast and almost rough...inexperienced, probably, although that's the pot and the kettle, she supposes. He is only her third lover, and she gets little pleasure from their coupling. When he finishes, he rolls off her and puts a tentative hand on her sex. After a minute or so, she pushes the hand away, telling him, "Thank you, but no." He stiffens but says nothing and gets up moments later.

He comes to her infrequently, but when he does, she admits him to her rooms and her bed, and though she never really comes to enjoy the press of his flesh, she is glad that, as time goes on, he learns to go more slowly, because she can observe. It is almost like watching him unawares; he is far away, and she wonders where he goes when he pumps and sweats over her, his eyes closed and his face collapsing in on itself. She wonders if he finds his past a more welcoming place than his present, a question she takes care never to put to herself. Her choices are made, as are his, and there is no going back, she knows, despite the Time-Turner Albus showed her years ago. It sits in a locked and warded drawer in his office and sometimes appears on a chain around his neck...Albus's little reminder that the past is a gift he can bestow, if only one asks politely enough.

~~oOo~~

The liaison stops when Potter emerges from the Triwizard maze to deposit the body of that poor dead boy in the June muck. It's just as well. She has become bored with their trysts, although she never says so to him. But he is no fool, and he has surely known that she was merely tolerating for her own private reasons his use of her body. It was, she supposes, less expensive and less risky than the alley next to the Hog's Head. She has come no closer to sussing out his thoughts on this or any other subject, despite the time he has spent in her bed, and so, when he stops coming to her, she is not sorry.

The altered situation, as terrible as it is, affords her an opportunity to observe him under new pressures. He is all grim purpose now, and she almost envies him. She is relegated to organising Order meetings and keeping an eye on Potter. During the long, beastly hot summer days, she is required to sit in feline form, watching over the boy as he struggles in the clutches of his Muggle relatives, and she wonders whether it is intended as punishment. As she observes the lady of the house, thin and prim as a prayer book, she has a vision of herself in a Caithness farmhouse, caring for the husband she never married and the child she would not bear.

As she watches Harry Potter...young, careless, and out-of-place in this strange suburban Purgatory...she diverts herself by wondering: Does Severus see his past in the Potter boy's eyes? Yes, she thinks as she watches him with the boy that autumn. But is it the past he lived or the one he didn't that he sees reflected in Potter's face? Which fuels the clawing hatred?

He has the luxury of knowing what he would choose if Albus loosed the Time-Turner from around his neck and sent him back to 1976. He knows that his sins were sins, knows what he must do to atone, while she is not at all certain about hers. She does not know if the Minerva of 1996 would act differently when faced with the choices of 1956, and this lack of certainty drives her nearly mad.

By the time she ends up in St Mungo's, four painful, livid reminders of her failure to protect her charges marring the white skin of her chest, she is almost relieved to be there. Potions and pain keep her from thinking about things, about him and about what her...oh, let's call a spade a spade...obsession should tell her about herself. Yet when she returns, weak and unsteady on her legs, she is nearly overwhelmed with relief that he is the one to greet her. His eyes roam over her, and she can feel the heat rise in her cheeks, so she speaks brusquely to the students and turns away from him.

~~oOo~~

She is not surprised at what happens. Albus was clearly moribund, whatever reassurances he gave her, and Severus has been under increased scrutiny by his other master. How it happens catches her off-guard. She had not expected something as simple and direct as an *Aveda Kedavra* to end the charade, but rather something more in line with his Slytherin subtlety and Albus's penchant for inscrutability. She had expected to be named Headmistress and to take over giving the orders to a Severus still entrenched as the Order's spy...one made more valuable by his ostensibly stealthy killing of the only wizard Voldemort ever feared.

But no. Albus has apparently orchestrated a sort of *reverse deus ex machina*. All ties with Severus are irrevocably cut when the Headmaster falls, and she expects never to see Severus again, unless it's at the end of her wand. It will come to that in the end, of course, but she will have long, unanticipated days in which to contemplate the wonder that is Severus Snape before driving him before her and out the window to what should be his immediate death.

But that is months in the future, isn't it?

Now, she simply observes as the new Headmaster walks up to the dais, sullen and silent as he was at eleven, but this time tall and straight and terrifying rather than terrified. At thirty-seven, he moves with a choreographic elegance, and as he whirls around to face the assembled staff and students, an image comes to her of him as a dancer in some alternate universe, although she knows as well as anyone that there is none. There is only the past, layer upon layer like limestone, forming a hard present. Malleable, yes . . . but that way madness lies, and anyway, the Time-Turner is buried with Albus, so mostly she refuses to think about it.

The present Severus stands before her, clad in yards of inky muslin and dozens of black horn buttons, and she before him, also in unrelenting black, her greens and tartans discarded long ago. His eyes alight on her for a moment, and they are deep and searing as on the first day she ever laid hers on him. They pass over her, and she looks at his right hand, which barely peeks out from beneath the long sleeve of his frock-coat.

His fingers grip his wand so tightly that she believes she can see it bend, and she notices that his knuckles are white. A smile attempts to curl her lips, and she bites it back. The sun moves out from behind a cloud and pours through the windows that line the back wall of the Great Hall. She squares her shoulders and lifts her eyes to the blinding light streaming in from behind him, throwing him into shadow.

~FIN~