

The Summer of Our Discontent

by *Fairfield*

The summer after OoTP. AU.

Chapter 1 of 1

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The rain beat against the windows as the train pulled out of the station. Good. Anything to excuse the brooding about last summer. The season of schedules.

"Mum! He's using my chin-up bar."

As if he cared. He hadn't touched it since it was installed for their 'darling little boy.'

"I'm not hurting it, and no one is using it."

To Harry's surprise, it was agreed that he could use it if he washed it afterwards and didn't break it.

Harry's interest in the bar had been inspired by the BAM book that Dudley brought home from his school. "Be A Man," screamed the front cover. Inside were chapters on a wide variety of exercises, each chapter ending with "A Man is Clean In Mind and Clean In Body."

"Strange slogan," thought Harry, "for a book on how to get sweaty and dirty." Despite the idiosyncrasies, the book was solidly based with descriptions of the muscle groups and how to work them. There was a lot of advice on avoiding injury, charts that suggested good combinations for balanced workouts, and time tables that gradually increased the intensity. With all this information and the book's constant insistence on the benefits of exercise, the chin-up bar had become an irresistible object of desire.

After a while, Harry noticed that Dudley was using the bar. It was then that a plan to expand his athletic program took shape. Dudley was obviously not going to let Harry have exclusive use of anything, no matter what the cost to Dudley. Harry's real goal for some time had been the stationary bicycle. It sat in the corner positively gleaming and beckoning to him, but Harry realized that getting to use it would require some craft. As the second step in the campaign, Harry started using the mat for push-ups and set-ups. There were the expected complaints followed by permission if he cleaned it and didn't break it.

A few days later, Harry approached Petunia. "You know, Dudley started doing chin-ups after I started doing them."

"Yes. Yes," said Harry, "I've been keeping the bar clean."

"You know," continued Harry, "Dudley started doing push-ups and set-ups after I started using the mat."

Petunia gave Harry a puzzled look.

"Would you like Dudley to start using the stationary bicycle?"

Petunia gave Harry a sharp look.

This was a high risk venture. The bike could break unlike a bar or mat. Everyone knew where the blame would fall, but Harry was cooped up and desperate. The BAM

book, moreover, had made a very good case for aerobic activity. After a few days on the bike, Harry decided the book was right.

In his next letter to Ron, he raved enthusiastically about pedaling hard while staying in one place. Harry thought that when he got to the Weasleys he could get outside and go jogging, which he described as a long slow trot where the runner ended up in the same place he started.

"No! We cannot go and get him early. And no! I am not afraid he is 'going native,'" said Mrs. Weasley, for the umpteenth time, to her youngest son, who was obviously worried.

The BAM book also advocated a schedule. "Curious," thought Harry since the most scheduled person he knew was a girl. The book, however, advocated a schedule including both academics and exercise. That was different enough that Harry could try it without feeling nagged into it by Hermione. Harry tried a simple routine: academics in the first half of the morning, household chores in the second, academics in the first half of the afternoon, calisthenics and bicycling in the second. This, too, proved a good thing.

Part of the benefit was a schedule's ability to insulate an individual, to form a partial shield between him and his immediate environment.

He wrote a secret letter to Ron in the middle of the night explaining the schedule. The exercise was doing him some good, and it kept his aunt off his back. Ron thought it sounded good, especially the keeping someone off his back part, but he wanted calisthenics moved to the morning. As far as Ron was concerned, they counted as household chores. Thus began a conspiracy to take more adult control of their lives.

"Look, Mum," said Ron a few days later, showing her the latest letter from Harry.

"He's certainly organized his life," was the response.

"Hmm," said her son reflectively, "maybe I should think about that."

Ginny wanted to try what Harry and Ron were doing. Harry and Ron each wrote to Hermione saying they were trying to form a study schedule. They wondered if she would be willing to help them when she came to stay at the Weasleys.

Hermione arrived bringing some extra outfits for Ginny of the summer Muggle clothes she was wearing. Molly easily adjusted the sandals, shorts, and polo shirts to fit. Hermione easily fit into the schedule, which wasn't too different from hers.

By the time Harry appeared at the Weasleys, the program had adapted itself to a rural clock for long summer days: breakfast, early studies, elevenses, housework, calisthenics for Ron and Harry while Ginny and Hermione watched ("Nutters"), lunch, studies, tea time, free time, dinner.

"I've seen Muggles doing that," said Luna one day, as Ron and Harry began their calisthenics. She lived nearby and had wandered over during elevenses. She absolutely had to try them herself. She wanted to go jogging, too. As they rounded the big tree and headed back, both Ron and Harry were thinking, "Just like a boy only cuter." They raced each other into the pond.

"Luna, do you want to help us fix lunch?"

Just-like-a-boy-only-cuter climbed out of the pond, in her thin wet summer dress. Ron and Harry could see all her skin colors. They could see every stitch in every garment. They could see every lovely shape. They could see Ginny and Hermione standing in front of them, hissing like a pair of Parselmouths.

"Honestly, haven't you ever seen a girl before?"

"Not quite like that," they thought.

"Mrs. Weasley."

"Mum!!"

"Did the boys push you in the pond, dear?"

"She did push-ups and calisthenics and running and jogging and jumped in with them," said the other two girls in one breath.

"Well, I can get you dry in a minute, sweetheart."

The other girls thought she could use a more rugged outfit with thicker material. They would be happy to donate some shorts and polo shirts. As Molly adjusted the clothes, she noticed Luna was slim but curvy. Athletic but still curvy. She noticed she looked kind of cute. She noticed the kind of looks she was getting from Hermione and her daughter. "Ah," thought Molly, thinking of the wet summer dress. Comprehension dawned.

Meanwhile, back at the pond, it dawned on them that they were in trouble. They splashed around a bit, cooling down. They hoped the girls were cooling down.

As they trudged back to the house, however, they saw the girls had set up a table under a tree and were waving at them. Seeing all the girls in a similar outfit and giddy from the turn of events, Ron asked if Muggle men wore clothes like that too.

"Oh, no, I'm in for it now," he thought, but the girls started gushing about polo shirts, khaki shorts, and little crocodiles. He was afraid he had said something silly. The girls thought he was interested in their knowledge of Muggle fashion and their sense of style. Lunch continued with the girls insisting on sitting between the boys and with the girls insisting on bringing them juice, dessert, and napkins. Still on the defensive, Ron and Harry looked into their earnest eyes, smiled, and thanked them most sincerely. The girls seemed to be having a good time.

The boys were completely baffled. The girls thought the boys had discovered girls. There was something to be said for both versions.

Ginny, wanting someone her own age, invited Luna over to study. Everyone started exercising.

For the first time in Ginny's life, the girls in the house outnumbered the boys. She was now a member of the majority. This majority, like most new majorities, assumed its version of reality was known and accepted. Everyone knew that the boys had discovered girls. Everyone knew that each of the girls longed to be the one in the wet summer dress, although they'd never do such a thing of course.

Ron, as a minority member, was willing to adopt a survival strategy. He worked on his social skills. Harry had always been a minority member. Together, they began to recognize when the girls wanted attention. They weren't perfect, or even very good, but any lapse was excused by, "What do you expect from boys?" Ron and Harry liked the results, but there was a price for feigned interest and empty comments -- a sort of inner melancholy. An occupational group unknown to them, airline stewardesses, had a name for it: charm depression.

Staring into space, he noticed a girl looking at him. "Um. Just admiring your head, er, hair," he said, remembering to say something silly.

"This mess," patting it, giving it a toss.

"Looks nice," retreating into his book, hoping he hadn't ruined everything.

She glowed. "He's a mature individual who had put together a study schedule. And he likes my hair."

Whenever one of the girls noticed that Ron and Harry had empty tea cups, she started the kettle. The other girls immediately joined in. Ron and Harry remembered to look into their eyes, smile, and thank them warmly.

The tea ceremony blossomed. It progressed from setting the cup down, to resting a hand on the chair while setting the cup down, to resting a hand on the boy's shoulder while setting the cup down. It progressed to gently running their fingers through a boy's hair. The girls, by the way, were letting their hair drape everywhere: books, ink, parchment. Several times, Ron and Harry sneezed.

Molly made a discovery one day when she requested some housework during the free period. It should have taken them minutes. It took more than an hour. To Molly, the schedule had revealed its tyrannical side, its willingness to penalize transgression.

One afternoon after tea, Luna insisted her friends come over to her place. She wanted to show them something from her trip to the Western United States. It had been an expedition to spot the Four Horned Cruscot, but her toy was from the big city. She took them to a section of the newspaper warehouse that had been rigged for electrical machinery, where Hermione immediately recognized a TV set and DVD player. Luna turned on the equipment, and they all stepped back. There was a lot of glitter and audience applause as a man took the stage and boomed into the microphone, "Live from the Wyatt Smith Lounge! Country and Western Line Dancing!"

The DVD collection contained six complete routines plus smaller sections that broke down the subroutines and offered advice for the moves. An instruction book repeated all the information. Ron and Harry preferred the two sad ballads among the six routines. The girls accepted this even though they didn't understand it. They were not aware of the boys' considerable, and still growing, inner melancholy.

A little before school started, Molly, Ginny, Hermione, and Luna went clothes shopping, leaving the boys to study and exercise without being disturbed. After an hour of studying without being disturbed, they found themselves reading the same page over and over again. Their plan to do more exercises than they normally did collapsed when the regular set proved harder than usual. They struggled through the afternoon study session by jumping in the pond every fifteen minutes and then reading a few pages under a nearby tree.

"You know, I thought we'd do better than this today."

"Do you reckon we've been working too hard, mate?"

"Yeah, we must have needed a rest."

Ron and Harry were surprised by how enthusiastically they welcomed the returning shoppers. Molly assumed they were greeted enthusiastically because the boys were starving after a day of uninterrupted study and exercise. Well, yes, that's one way of putting it.

Non-romantics, reading the above, would say that the boys could have been equally well conditioned by requiring that they study and exercise with some combination of music and cats. Perhaps.

Monday, the first day of rugs. On Saturday the owl had delivered permission, and all Sunday the scroll allowing underage magic for housekeeping hung in the kitchen. All their signatures were on it, agreeing to strictly confine all magic to household chores.

After early studies, after elevenses, they polished their wands and read "Heloise's Helpful Hexes for Harried Homemakers." The first target was the runner by the front door. Cooperative magic opened whole new vistas.

"Don't raise your corner so high."

"Don't be so bossy. Just raise your corner higher."

"Honestly."

One rug and much later, five weary, dusty enchanters splashed into the pond.

Tuesday, the second day of rugs. The other two runners were levitated outside. A little later, Molly peeked out. It was push-of-war. A runner, suspended like a banner between two groups, was pelted by dust-buster spells. The boys had pushed the rug almost to the girls' end of the lawn, but three against two was beginning to tell. The group was moving back across the lawn with the rug, and the boys, getting a thorough dusting.

"Aim for the bottom, mate." The rug started to roll instead of moving forward. "Hit the middle." The rug folded.

"Unfair cheaters. Unfair cheaters," sang the witches, smug in their moral victory.

Wednesday, the third day of rugs. The team began by gathering all the throw rugs and stacking them neatly outside. "This is much better than Fred and George or even Bill and Charlie," thought Molly as she pulled out the table polish. Out of the corner of her eye she saw the pretty oriental rug Arthur had given her before they married shoot straight into the air and begin evasive maneuvers.

Two of them stood in the middle, alternately sending the rug in random directions. They were surrounded by the other three shooting dust-busters. There was a bird, an explosion of feathers, and a plummet into the woods.

"Oops," said Hermione.

Molly dashed upstairs. Yes, Pigwidgeon was safely in his cage.

Thursday, the fourth day of rugs. The big valuable oriental carpets. Molly walked outside hearing a low rumble and occasional snap from the side yard. It looked like a flying carpet was suspended between the five, except the carpet was roiling with waves and snapping when several waves met. She could hear partial phrases from Luna and Hermione, "... standing waves ... amplitude ... in Arithmancy ... natural frequencies ..."

The wand quintet performed its small exact movements.

Friday, the fifth day of rugs. No more rugs. They took on the rags and towels from Arthur's workshop. Not all of them came willingly.

"Pull." "Mark." Pop, a miss. Pop, a miss. Bang, a hit. Snap went the rag..

A rag was prepped. The sky scanned for birds.

"Pull." "Mark." Pop. Bang! Snap!

"Good one."

They were quick-drawing their wands. The first objective was speed, precision, and power. Clean the rag. The second was control. Change immediately from power-blasting to gently levitating and folding the cleaned rag.

Another rag was prepped. The sky scanned for birds.

"Pull." "Mark." CRACK!SNAP!

"Wow, Ginny!"

"On the rag!"

One old towel. Degreased, delinted, dewrinkled, dedirted. Compared to the others in the stack, it looked a whiter shade of pale. Molly ran back upstairs to double check on Pigwidgeon.

Eventually, they were ready to show Mrs. Weasley their line dancing. Not having electricity, they sang the memorized song as they went through the moves. She couldn't quite figure the song out. Was it an unrequited lover singing to his secret sweetheart as she left, not knowing that he cared? Or were they just good friends? Was it a rite of passage song about losing part of one's life? Dividing music into ballads versus martial and recalling the drill team precision, she said, "Isn't that a rather sad little song to march to?"

"Pain past all grief into formal cadence," chirped a bright-eyed Luna.

"What?" Molly thought.

"How'd you learn all that?" she asked.

"There're instructions," bubbled Hermione. "They're written down in a book."

They just had to do the whole thing again. They sang the sweet refrain.

"From this valley they say you are going,

I will miss your bright eyes and sweet smile,

For they say you are taking the sunshine,

That brightens our pathway a while."

The second time it was seen, more details of the line dance came out. Hermione and Luna were doing okay, but where did Ginny get such snakehips. All five of them shimmied forward. All five. Ron. All five shimmied back. There were instructions. Right. It must be okay because there are instructions written in a book. What instructions. Shake your booty. There were the big innocent arm movements. That raised and lowered the bosoms. That stretched the fabric across their breasts. Luckily, Ron and Harry seemed lost in the reverie of the song. All five sashayed to the left, apparently propelled by hip movements. How did they do that. They sashayed back to the right They did high kicks in unison. Graceful. Scandalous. Hadn't noticed before how much leg the Muggle costume revealed. More scandalously graceful kicks. A slow twirl with arm movements and it was over. It was still a sad little song to march to.

Ron and Harry had made every effort to keep up with the girls. Harry's tendons hurt from the high kicks. Ron's muscles ached from the low shimmies. Both could feel their lower backs. Luna hopped skipped forward and embraced her two friends. After she squeezed the air out of them, they inhaled a lungful of healthy girl -- freshly scrubbed, mildly perfumed, and slightly sweaty. They slightly swooned. No longer being of sound mind, they hugged her back. Simultaneously, her delectable muscles, her damp fragrant hair, and her delighted squeal shot through them. They jumped back and then wished they hadn't.

"Maybe we can spice up the next one," piped Ginny.

"Let's get down," said Luna in agreement.

"What?" thought the others at the Americanism.

All five, convinced that the routine was a success, worked enthusiastically on the next one. The other ballad favored by Ron and Harry. One that made Molly shudder and secretly dub "Ode to the Dark Lord."

"No one knows what it's like,

To be the bad man,

To be the sad man,

Behind blue eyes."

Thinking about line dancing, Mrs. Weasley was afraid Ron and Harry would start obsessing about legs and bosoms, but she needn't have worried. Their thoughts were much, much more mundane: sweet demanding embraces, soft sweaty skin, fragrant cascades of hair, preferably damp, maybe more squeals, yeah, definitely more of those. The problem was ... how did one go about getting these things.

As the school work assignments were completed and the Weasley house and grounds became sparkling clean, the inner tension floated closer and closer to the surface.

For the last two days, the boys wandered down to the pond to pull weeds, while the girls stayed inside to polish.

Harry and Ron noticed that no one refilled their teacups -- a small early rumbling of the coming avalanche.

Luna started looking dreamy-eyed again, to everyone's dismay. They didn't want her to withdraw. They wanted their bright-eyed friend.

Ginny was beginning to think that the girls outnumbering the boys was not always a good thing.

"Is it going to explode or unravel?" mused Hermione.

With great good fortune, everything disintegrated instead.

Charm struck first. Enchanted by having a schedule prepared for them and sustained by constant attention, Hermione, Ginny, and Luna had sailed through their school work. Luna's father, catching a rumor about the Doublebacked Ickle, could go investigate since his indispensable daughter was available. Devastated by Luna's departure, Hermione and Ginny arranged to visit Hermione's parents for one last summer fling. Having used responsibility and cooperativeness as weapons in their arsenal, Ron and Harry had completed their school work and had brought the Weasley premises to a new state. Observing this, Fred and George arranged to have them and the Permit-For-Underage-Magic-For-Household-Tasks transferred to their shop for the remainder of the summer.

The charm part of charm depression was certainly working.

The depression part worked, too. With off-handed melancholy, Ron and Harry ignored the jibes and pranks of Ron's brothers while revamping the store. Since little interested them, they worked prodigious hours. With equal melancholic skill, Luna organized her Father's expedition and planned it well enough that he almost spotted the Doublebacked Ickle twice. His best trip ever. Luna could occasionally be heard singing to herself at the evening campfire while performing a solo line dance.

"From my dear friends they say I am leaving,

I remember their art and sweet pride,

As the Night comes to call on the Evening,

They will all come and be by my side."

In an equal and opposite reaction, Ginny and Hermione became both serene and bouyant. They immersed themselves in Muggle culture. They gave Hermione's parents a blow-by-blow account of the summer's housekeeping. The Grangers were charmed by a glimpse of the wizard world as normal and rational and magical.

* * *

The rain beat against the windows of the last compartment of the last coach as the train sped through the countryside.

END

(1) "Red River Valley" traditional, from the Red River region of Manitoba

(2) "Behind Blue Eyes" by P. Townsend

(3) Luna Filk to "Red River Valley"