

The Anniversary Present

by Raira

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This story was originally posted (in embryonic form) in response to a challenge from the 30minutefics LJ community. I don't own any of these characters, but then you knew that.

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Chapter 1 of 1

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I am the luckiest man in the world. She's so beautiful, lying there next to me, my Molly. Her hair frames her face more exquisitely than the purest gold. Lately, she has been complaining of the grey that encroaches on the auburn. I don't see it. To me, she looks just like she did the way we met.

The years we've had together have been wonderful. Our seven children reflect her best qualities, each in their own way. Charlie has her resourcefulness; Bill, her bravery; the twins have her love of life; Ron, her loyalty; Ginny, her sweetness; even Percy has her attention to detail.

Percy. Even thinking his name makes me die a little inside. He was such a beautiful baby. A little fussier than the others, certainly, and always easy to upset, but he'd toddle around on those fat little legs of his, arms held out, always wanting to be held, to be hugged, to be loved. He changed when he grew up, but even then Molly always understood him. He never noticed how she'd light up the moment he walked in the room, but I always did. He could make her smile even when she was furious with the rest of us. Her second Head Boy. Her tidy child. Percy was always her favourite.

Now he's gone. Molly writes to him every day, sealing every envelope with a kiss and enclosing a few Knuts inside. "Just in case he needs anything," she'll whisper. She still thinks he reads the letters. I'm so grateful that she hasn't yet caught me retrieving them from Errol when Percy sends them back unopened.

Molly tries to stay strong for us all. Most of the time she seems to be able to forget that one of our sons has cast us from his life, but occasionally I'll surprise her drying her cheeks. "The onions," she'll insist. That doesn't explain her reddened, puffy eyes when she comes out of the bathroom in the morning, nor how she'll lose her train of thought in the middle of conversations for no apparent reason at all.

She's been better this last week. Her smiles have been genuine, there's been real joy in her laughter, and last night when I took her in my arms, she didn't turn away. Making love to her was like it was the night we were married: warm, sweet and adventurous. For one golden hour there was nothing in the world but the two of us. We fell

asleep holding each other.

I've been awake this morning since before the sun came up. I haven't been able to get back to sleep; somehow, I don't really want to. It seems too important not to miss a single moment with Molly. I've been watching her breathe, waiting for the moment when it's time for her to wake up. This morning marks the beginning of another year of our marriage. I want to be the first thing she sees when she opens her eyes.

The alarm is just about to go off. How could I not kiss her awake? "Happy anniversary, love," I whisper. Her skin is so soft; I can't help stroking her cheek. The tenderness in her eyes as she looks at me is worth every moment of impatience and every scolding she's ever given me. Merlin, I love her.

"I love you, Arthur." Her voice, half-awake and husky is so sexy that I can't resist kissing her again. Her answering kiss is every bit as sweet as it was last night. I'd love to stay here with her. It's a shame reality has to intrude on us, but I have to be at work in an hour.

Watching her crawl out of bed naked almost makes it worthwhile to let her go. When I pull the blankets back from my body, she whispers, "Wait." Her smile is at once mysterious and excited. I'd wait an eternity for her when she looks at me like that.

"This is for you," she tells me when she returns. The package is large and heavy. "Well, it's really for both of us," she amends. She crawls back into bed with me, and it only takes a little coaxing to get her to help me open it. The mirror's frame is cold on my bare skin, and Molly's getting goosebumps as well, but she's smiling so widely at the glass that I snuggle closer to her and arch my neck over to see what she sees.

For a moment I can't speak. There's a hard lump in my throat, and my eyes are pricking with tears. "Oh, Molly," I whisper. She flings her arms around me and kisses me with so much warmth that, at this rate, I'm going to have to call in sick. I certainly wouldn't object to a day spent in bed with Molly, but I have to admit that the image of Percy staring up at us from the mirror does put a bit of a dampener on our passion.

How long has she spent enchanting this mirror? I don't remember her being this good at charms. "How did you...?" I whisper.

"Shh, Arthur," she replies. "I'm not going to tell you. You know that."

We decided long ago that we'd keep secret the details of our presents to each other. I decide to ignore how pink her earlobes have suddenly gotten. After all, if I get the secret out of her now, she'll be well within her rights to ask me where I got the money for the locket I bought her... and I don't want to be anywhere nearby if she discovers I've been borrowing from the twins.

It's probably time I gave her present to her anyway. Somehow, I wish the package were bigger. It would make it look like it was more expensive. There's no shame in being poor, but I wish I could give her and the children everything. She doesn't seem to mind how small the packaging is, though. In fact, I doubt she even notices it. Once she sees the locket and the picture of our family that's inside, the issue of going into work becomes academic. Molly would normally never approve of me taking a day off, but today all of that is forgotten in a wave of passion that engulfs us both.

We spend the rest of the morning deciding where on the wall her mirror fits best. I haven't seen Molly so happy since Ginny was born. She feels good standing tucked into my arm as we look at it together. If we can't have Percy at home, this image of him the only one he doesn't seem to want to walk out of is as close as we're likely to get. It's intriguing; his likeness is a bit blurry, and there are some odd shadows, some half-formed shapes, moving in the background. No matter. Molly made it for me, and I love her for it.

I found Arthur's gift quite by accident. Our clock was broken, and I had to take it in to get it fixed. I was just about to pay for the repairs when I noticed the mirror sitting in the corner of the shop. I couldn't believe it! It seemed so bizarre that someone would create a mirror showing Percy's face! At first I thought it was some sort of device made to spy on him. He's doing so well at the Ministry these days. The Minister places so much trust in him. Whether it was created for good purposes or for ill, however, I knew I just had to have it.

At first I didn't know how I'd manage to afford it. The magical instruments shop wanted so much for it! But when I told the twins, they insisted on making a present of it to me. *They* thought it was ridiculous that anyone would think Percy could reveal anything useful. They said it was probably a spell gone wrong, that nobody had intended to create an image of Percy, and that it wasn't any wonder that whoever made it wanted to sell it. They said they were surprised that the shop wasn't paying people to take it! I wish they wouldn't be so rude about their brother. I don't care if it was a mistake. I get to look at our boy every day now. It's a little bit like having him home again.

Arthur was so excited when I gave it to him. We've put it on the wall in Percy's old room. That way we can go visit him once in a while, but we don't have to answer awkward questions about Percy when visitors call. I sit next to it when I do my knitting. Percy was always fascinated by the movement of the needles when he was a baby. I know the image isn't really him, but it makes me feel like he's nearby.

At first the image of Percy was very blurry and faraway, but now it's becoming clearer and clearer. I suppose the wizard who made it wasn't terribly talented; sometimes if you look really hard, it seems like there are other people in the background. It doesn't matter; I couldn't make a better image myself. It comforts me to feel like he's so close.

Bill isn't impressed at all. He says there's something familiar about this glass and that he wants someone at the Ministry to look at it. I think Arthur is beginning to agree with him, but I won't let them take it. It's all I have left of my son now, and I hate the thought of some stranger stripping his image down. They might ruin the spell that shows him in the glass, and I'll never have him back! No, the mirror stays just where it is.

It's been a while since we've seen Percy. I find it hard to picture his face in my mind, but his image in the glass has been very clear as of late. I can scarcely believe it when he lets himself into the house.

I wish I could say that he seems pleased to see us; that he's back to his old self. I admit that I have trouble remembering what his old self was like. He seems secretive and aloof. When Molly tries to embrace him, he shrugs her off. He hardly glances at our glass. When his mother tries to tell him all about it, he cuts her off rudely.

How pathetically happy my wife is to see him. I want to be happy too. I really do. It's been a long time since our family has felt whole, but I don't really know this stranger who barely conceals his sneer at the poverty we live in. We don't need the frequent hints he drops to know that he considers himself to have gone up in the world. He's so much better than the rest of us now, or so he seems to think.

Percy's return should be a happy occasion, but the atmosphere in the room has become more and more strained with each one of his veiled insults. Even Molly is finding it hard to smile. I thought that he'd be glad to be home again. I hoped he'd be contrite. I hoped that he might even be happy to see us. Instead, he's haughty and condescending and is acting like he's doing us a very great favour just by being here. I have to get out of this room!

It's not hard to manufacture an excuse to slip out to the shed. To my surprise, he follows me. I thought that here, amongst the collection of Muggle artefacts that he loathes so much, I'd have a moment to collect myself. It seems, however, that they are the very reason he came.

Percy picks up one of my plugs, eyeing it with scorn and disgust. "You know everyone at the Ministry laughs behind your back, don't you, Father?"

"Not everybody laughs at me," I reply coldly. He has, after all, set the tone for this conversation. "And those who do are small-minded individuals whose opinions are not worthy of my concern."

"You don't even care how the Minister thinks of you?" His response flies at me as quickly as an arrow and every bit as sharp.

I almost said what I thought. I almost told him how little respect I have for the Minister, but suddenly it feels like I'm speaking to some stranger instead of my own son. For the first time ever, I feel I can't be honest with one of my children. The realisation hurts so badly that for a moment, I can't bring myself to frame a reply.

Percy seems to take my silence as a small victory. He smiles smugly as he continues, "You're making a fool of us both, you know. I'm never going to get anywhere in the Ministry whilst you continue to behave like a daft old man. The Minister says you're probably unhinged, but do you know what I think?"

At this point, I really don't care what he thinks. It's all I can do not to throw him out of our house. He turns the plug over and over in his hand. It's a special one, all the way from Australia. Two of the prongs are at an angle. It's not easy to fight the urge to snatch it out of his hands.

"I think," Percy continues, "that you play with this stuff on purpose to keep me back in the Ministry. You couldn't bear for me to do better than you, could you? So you continue your foolishness even when you know how it's damaging my career. Even after all that trouble with the car, you refused to stop it. Not even Mother has been able to make you see sense. Well, it's got to stop! If you don't care about your own career, you should at least consider mine!"

I'm very proud of how even I manage to keep my voice. "I think that if you really have the talent and ambition to succeed, you won't be held back by your father's hobby."

There's no sign that Percy has even heard me. "There's all that stupid business of Muggle rights too, though, isn't there?" His voice is bitter as he snaps at me. "You know how unpopular that is, especially among the families that matter! And even though you *know* how hard I've worked to get where I am, you continue to make things hard for me! The Minister often expresses doubts about whether he can truly trust me whilst he is in doubt of your loyalty."

His disdain of my life's work, his patent disregard of my feelings and my own wishes are more than I can stand. "How dare you speak to me like this?" I yell. "I am your *father*!"

If Percy is surprised at the volume of my shouting, if he can hear the ache in my voice, he doesn't show it. His voice becomes colder, more demanding. His words become more and more hurtful. He treats me like a recalcitrant child that needs to be put in their place. I don't think I've ever been so angry with one of my children, and with Fred and George as offspring, that's really saying something. I cannot believe one of my own children is ashamed of me!

Hard words are spoken. We scream terrible things at one another that can never be taken back. Our relationship as father and son is over. Finally, I turn away from him and yell, "Get out!"

Oh Merlin, the pain! It's sudden, hot, and overwhelming. The force Percy uses to drive the dagger into me is surprising for one so slightly built. I can feel blood spurting from the wound warm, wet, bathing my back in its stickiness. I can feel the knife pulling against me as he drags it out again. I can't stop the bleeding with my hand. The second thrust scrapes agonisingly along my ribs. Pain is my entire world. I feel so light-headed, I can't think. Even my knees betray me. They buckle beneath me, and as I fall, my head smacks with a dull thud against my new Muggle radio. Everything goes black.

"Oh Merlin, Dad!" Bill's voice is so distant. I don't know how much time has passed. He sounds as though his world is ending. Mine too. I don't think I'll be going to St Mungo's this time.

My entire life passes in front of me: my childhood, school years, marriage, and family life. Molly flavours everything. She is my hope, my happiness, my one true love. Molly, where are you when I need to tell you how much I love you?

I'm so cold.

Arthur. Oh Merlin, no! Who could have guessed his body contained so much blood? It's everywhere, pooled in dark sticky clots around him, all over the knife and the plug that lie discarded nearby. It's in footprints leading away from his body. How can he be gone? It's not true! Any second now his chest will begin to rise and fall as he breathes again, I know it. That blood, it's just some trick. It's got to be.

I can't stop screaming. Bill grabs me and pulls me against him. "I'm here, Mum," he says. He rocks me gently back and forth. I used to do that for him. When did I become the child?

"Bill," I plead. "Bring him back. Do something!"

"I wish I could, Mum." Does my voice sound as broken as his? "If only we'd gotten here earlier. If only we'd known why Percy came."

"It can't have been your brother!" I cling to that thought. "Percy loves your father!"

Believing anything else would bring madness.

The twins gave me a magnificent funeral. How they managed not to drop dungbombs, blow anything up or throw Fanged Frisbees for an entire day, I don't know. The turnout was huge. Even Molly's accountant cousin was there. A month ago, his appearance would have shocked me, but when Percy stabbed me, I lost my capacity for surprise.

We did solve one mystery. Mad-Eye was at the wake of course. He hadn't been in the house more than five minutes before he swivelled his magical eye up towards Percy's room. "About time you got a Foe Glass," he snorted.

Once he realised just what object Alastor was referring to, Bill looked devastated. "So that's what it is. I knew I should have gotten it checked. If only I'd shown you earlier. Maybe Dad would still be alive."

Alastor has his shortcomings, we all know that, but I've never been so glad of his friendship as I was at that moment. He clapped Bill on the shoulder and said, "Perhaps, son, perhaps. But you know, if he hadn't cornered him here, then maybe your brother would have attacked him somewhere else. Knowing your enemy doesn't always protect you from him. Constant vigilance, that's the key!" He paused, and added in a gentler voice, "Your mother needs your protection now."

That eye of his doesn't miss much. Before he left, Mad-Eye sought me out and said, "One day, Arthur, you're going to have to tell them you're here."

"One day," I agreed. "I'm not sure when that day will be, though. They need to let me go."

He looked at me. In his eyes I could see that he understood why I hadn't left my family. "One day, Arthur... one day when they're safe, you'll have to let them go too," he said.

"I don't know when *that* day will be, either," I told him, "But it won't be for a while yet."

Percy's just a distant, blurry figure in the mirror now. Other faces are more prominent Voldemort, Lucius, and the other Death Eaters. Bill often slips into Percy's room to check on the images in the glass, and I watch it constantly, ready to warn Molly if any face should come close.

I won't leave my Molly, not while times are so dangerous. If there's an attack, I can warn her and perhaps lead her to safety. As far as I know, Voldemort has no weapon effective against ghosts. Even if he does, I'd gladly stand between him and my beloved.

The Ministry hushed up my murder. Rufus Scrimgeour made up some nonsense about how the wizarding community didn't need to hear more bad news. Molly threw him out of the house when he told her that. The Order thinks he might have been behind the attack, although they're not sure why. They believe, although nobody knows for sure, that Percy might still be on Rufus's staff. Perhaps he's rising through the ranks of the Ministry as he wished. I can't find it in my heart to wish him well.

You find out how many friends you have when things go wrong for you. People have been in and out of the house since Percy killed me. Bill and Fleur have moved back in with Molly. It scares me how little spirit my wife has to fight with her new daughter in law. I hate the listlessness that has possessed her.

Bill and Molly often sit together of an evening and talk about me. Sometimes the things they remember startle me. You never really know the impact you have on those around you. Afterwards, Bill always walks her to her room, kisses her goodnight and asks "Are you okay, Mum?"

"Of course I am," she'll always answer. She manages a smile for him and reminds him that Fleur is waiting for him.

Molly doesn't know that after she heads into our room, Bill stands outside the door and listens to her sob. She doesn't see the tears run down his cheeks too. She doesn't see him agonise over whether to go in and comfort her. She doesn't hear him whisper, "I'll always be here for you, Mum." She thinks she cries in secret.

Ah, my Mollywobbles. How brave she is. How cruelly short our life was together. How deeply I love her still.