

Too Long Away

by h_vic

A man reflects on the dark memories that haunt him and have taken him away from his family.

A companion one-shot to 'A Forever Kind of Thing'.

This story can stand alone, but I would recommend reading 'A Forever Kind of Thing' first, as this story offers the alternate point of view on the broken relationship introduced in that story. As 'A Forever Kind of Thing' was written pre-DH, and this story is set in that world, DH canon is disregarded.

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Chapter 1 of 1

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A/N: Thanks go to solemnlyswear_x over on MNFF for beta-ing.

A man stands alone on the promenade, leaning on the railing. He stares out at the slate-grey sea, which mirrors not only the heavy clouds above it but also the man's mood. He can taste the heavy, salt-soaked air on his lips, and the spray stings his eyes, but the violent crashing of foamy waves against the beach soothes him, as it always does. The darkness haunting him pales briefly into insignificance against this merciless natural force.

But his reverie is abruptly broken by the sound of a child's laughter, carried to him on the wind. He glances further down the beach to where a group of children chase gleefully across the pebbles, revelling in their freedom, as their parents watch on. One boy has red hair. The man flinches; his son has red hair and would be about the boy's age. The boy on the beach is not his son of course, but it makes him realise that he would no longer recognise his own child – he has been gone too long. He wonders if the woman he loved has moved on, if someone else shares her life, if his son calls someone else 'Daddy'. He knows he should hope that she has; he knows that it would be better for both her and Charlie, but he finds that he can't wish that for them. He doesn't like the idea of being replaced, the thought that she may have finally given up on him, though she vowed she never would.

He wonders about the other people he cared about – how they are living their lives. He knows from the *Daily Prophet* (his only link now to the world he fled from) about Percy's rise through the Ministry and about Ginny's successes – she has managed to carry on living, unlike him, but then she was always stronger than him. But he wonders, as he so often has, about everybody else who he cared about in the world that he left behind him, about his other siblings. This leads him inexorably to the people who are gone, and any calm he had found lies shattered.

Thoughts of the brother for whom his son is named fill his mind. But that Charlie is dead; there can be no news to hear of him. He suppresses the memories of the boy who

chased him around the garden with a spider when he realised his little brother didn't share his love of animals, the boy who taught him to ride a broom and who once told him that he'd bloody well punch him if he didn't swallow his pride and just tell the girl he'd later marry that he loved her. Charlie had saved his life. And in doing so, he gave up his own. Only, the man knows now that he wasn't worth it; the half-life that he lives was not worth Charlie's sacrifice.

He turns away from the sea, knowing there is no more peace to be found here for him today, and becomes aware of the chill of the winter air seeping beneath his collar. He is glad to feel something – anything – that is not just the numbness of detachment as he heads back to the dingy bed-sit he inhabits (he can't think of it as where he lives because he doesn't live, not really – he simply exists). He has never properly unpacked or done anything to suggest permanency. He has never been able to think of it as a lasting arrangement, always intending to go back... soon – always soon, never now. He is always *almost* ready to go back (or so he tells himself). Tomorrow.

He becomes aware of the faint, distant chime of an ice-cream van and allows himself the luxury of an ironic smile – after all, who could want ice-cream on a day like today. But he knows the answer to that – the children back on the beach will. They will be pestering their parents the minute they hear the familiar, tinny peal, their innocence allowing them a belief in the world as they want it to be, not as it is. It will not matter to them that it is a cold, dull, winter's day. It will not diminish their enjoyment.

The man wishes he could still be capable of that simple, childish joy, but that innocence has gone forever. He has killed. There is no innocence after that. It is why he lives this way. How could he live a normal life, kiss his wife, play with his son with the darkest of memories still haunting him? How could the same lips which have shaped 'Avada Kedavra' form the words 'I love you', the same hands that held his shaking wand as he cast the worst of curses hold his infant son?

He remembers the way in which time seemed to stand still as the curse left his wand, the horror of realisation on Draco Malfoy's face before those callous, grey eyes glazed over. To kill would always leave its mark, but to kill a man that you knew as a boy? A man who was little more than a victim of circumstance, a puppet, who enjoyed his heinous acts no more than the man who killed him? That would destroy you.

The man realises that he has stopped walking, lost in the horror of the memory. His knees give way beneath him, and he sags against the window of a ratty, little corner-shop, shaking uncontrollably. The shop sums up the dilapidated area of town towards which he has gravitated. A woman walking past gives him a sideways glance of concern, which turns rapidly to disdain. She takes him for just another drunk, he assumes, and he almost wishes he were. If alcohol could ever have offered him a way out, he would have taken it, but it doesn't help. It can't take away the memories, nothing can. He wishes he could lose himself in something, anything, but nothing blocks the pain, the guilt. Malfoy's sightless eyes still hover in his mind, and he feels bile rise in his throat. It would not be the first time that the horror of the memories has left him retching, but he ruthlessly quashes the memories and forces himself to walk on – he is almost 'home'. A bitter laugh escapes him at the inapt epithet for his soulless flat.

But his determination is lost as a man with messy, black hair appears from a battered doorway, and the bile rises again, this time more persistently, as he is struck by the painful comparison. The passer-by reminds him all too vividly of someone who causes him more guilt even than Malfoy. He is haunted by memories. Lifeless green eyes replace the grey in his mind. He begins to run: away from the memories; away from the ghosts; away from the curious stares of passers-by and, hardest of all, away from himself.

He reaches the door of his grubby basement flat and, gasping a brief, faltering incantation to unlock it, staggers through, collapsing to the floor inside, unable to control the shuddering sobs which wrack his body.

There had been nothing the man could do, all those years ago. He could not save him. He could not save his best friend. He could not save Harry.

A/N: *I originally intended 'A Forever Kind of Thing' to be a stand-alone piece, but then this scene occurred to me. I'm not sure if I'll ever continue this story into redemption or not. I don't have any particular intention to at the moment, but then again I would like to see Ron find some peace, so perhaps, if inspiration strikes me, I might continue it. Bad things always seem to happen to Ron in my fics, and I'm feeling a little guilty...*