

The time that is given us

How love can change lives

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Kapitel 3: Third chapter

Brea reminded him a lot of Ginny. Not so much in being like his wife but in being like the girl she once was. She was self-sufficient, caring and had a inner strength that would one day make her fearsome. She helped the younger girls like an older sister, guiding them, answering their questions and being their spokesperson. Even Tom seemed under her wing somehow, only Richard was left out. Even though he was a boy, that one was a lot more timid than her, keeping to himself and being mostly silent. It could still be the strangeness of beginning a whole new life but Harry doubted it. To him, that one seemed shy and insecure. Even though that one was not his son, Harry vowed to help him along. Richard reminded him of Albus, even if this one seemed a bit slow in comparison. But everyone seemed slow in comparison to Albus, his son was a genius. If he had not looked exactly like Harry, he would have guessed that Ginny and Hermione exchanged babies at a family dinner and never gave them back.

Mary and Helen were more of a mystery. Both only spoke with Brea, later with Margret but were much too shy to address him directly. But his housekeeper told him they were working hard, so he was content to let them be. It took only a few days for his temporary guest and employees to settle in, so they did not seem to be unhappy. When buying their clothes, he had made an appointment with the local seamstress and a tailor she worked with. Both were enthusiastic about his idea and wanted to be part of his business, so he contacted the London military office with his request. They invited him to speak with an Officer Brighton a week later and he took Brea and Richard with him who wanted to meet some friends. All in all, things seemed to go the right way.

And then there was Tom. He certainly had not taken the wrong kid, Tom was unusually intelligent and quickly learned how to charm any kind of treat out of Margret. It did not help that he learned reading and writing a lot faster than her and was soon tutoring her when they worked on "Tom's homework". But Harry saw no harm with stuffing the boy with some pastries. He only warned Margret that she should not let a nearly six-year-old exploit or extort anything from her and found her relieved that he knew about her difficulties and accepted them without judgment. At this point Tom seemed not to be troublesome, even though Harry was glad he was the youngest. He would have brought any kid of the same age to tears. He certainly was a know-it-all but in comparison to Hermione who had already learned to hate and isolate herself at the age of eleven, Tom still seemed to think himself better than

everyone by being so smart. He sometimes looked down on Margret for not understanding something as fast as he did, so Harry sat him down one night and explained to him that every human had unique talents and intelligence was only one of them. Intelligence gave one a special talent but it did not make one better than others. Tom did not seem convinced, so Harry ordered him to follow Margret in her duties for a whole day and to ask himself if he could do what she did. At the end of the day, the boy stated that he might not be able to do it yet but he was able to learn it all. So Harry ordered him to learn cooking from Margret.

It seemed to do both a lot of good. Margret got back her respect – because she was a great cook and learning to cook was not exactly an easy task – and Tom seemed to gain at least a grain of humility. Furthermore he seemed to enjoy cooking, baking especially. Making something with his hands that he enjoyed brought incomparable joy to his face. It also gave him a special place in their little group because all kids enjoyed his cakes and cookies. Sugar wasn't exactly cheap but with how much they all enjoyed the confections, Harry was loath to cut the expenses.

All the while the other four had worked half a day for either the seamstress or the tailor, so they had learned all kinds of skills from measuring to embroidery. They would be able to sew two standard uniforms a day, most likely more with time. He had drawn up a contract after meeting Officer Brighton two times and had both his co-investors check it. All money would come from him but both invested their time into teaching the kids about their craft and him about the business side of things. Where to get buttons, drawing chalk, thread, needles ... he had not exactly thought about resources, being used to getting everything from a supermarket or mail order. It took two months to get his new business running.

Of course it was too good to be true. Harry had expected Tom to be the first one to act out but it was Richard. It had just turned October when Margret shouted early in the morning for everyone to wake. Panic laced her voice, so it did not take them long to come running. When Harry saw her pointing towards a mangled door latch, he sent Brea with the other girls and Tom to her quarters to stay safe. Margret and him took up a pan and a rolling pin as weapons to inspect the house. They came upon Richard in the guestroom he had occupied before the shack was repaired – snoring from being drunk. He even had the wine bottle still with him.

"A Bourdeux! Of course he had to take the expensive stuff!" Margret took up the bottle, completely ignoring the sleeping boy. "Now what shall we do with this one?"

"What would you do if this was one of your brothers?" Harry asked.

"I would get a bucket of water and put his head in. After that he would have to work until he paid back what he destroyed." She sighed deeply and studied the bottle again. "This one will keep him occupied for weeks."

"Well, it sounds fitting. You have my complete authority. He will work half a day in the factory and the other half for you until he ... no, for a week. You are right, this is too expensive. Tell him I was lenient because it was the first time it happened but I won't be if it happens again." Actually he did not know what the wine cost, he served it to dinner guests but that was it. They accepted it as their due, so he did not think too hard about it.

"Yes, Sir." Margret left the room to get a bucket.

Harry simply followed her downstairs but went to the servants' quarters instead. Brea had a broom in her hands when he entered. She lowered it with pink cheeks as soon as she recognized him.

"It was only Richard. He decided to break into the wine cellar to get himself drunk." The girls' eyes went big. "Please refrain from doing something so stupid."

"Will you sent him back to the orphanage?", Helen whispered. It was the first time she ever spoke to him aside from Hello and Good night.

"No, I won't. He will have to do extra chores to pay for what he stole. He is not allowed free afternoons for a week."

The three girls shared a look, some kind of silent communication, before they smiled at him. Tom looked from one to another before he stepped before Harry and asked: "May I go back to bed, please?"

"Yes, you may. I will accompany you, little one." The boy had copied his speech pattern from Margret, so Harry answered him in kind. It seemed distant but until now they had not shared something more intimate than reading bedtime stories. First Harry had read them but by now Tom read along, so they shared the story book. It was the only time of the day where Harry felt like Tom actually was the son he wanted him to become.

They climbed to stairs together and Harry settled the boy back into bed. Before Tom closed his eyes, a shriek from the room next to them signaled Richard's uncomfortable awakening.

"What was that?" Tom sat up straight in bed.

"Margret woke Richard by dipping his head into a bucket of cold water."

Tom's eyes turned as big as saucers. They both could hear the curses the boy hurled at Margret and her sharp reprimands in return. The nearly six-year-old asked fearfully: "Was it that bad what he did?"

"He broke into the house, stole from us and drank alcohol. All is forbidden and he knew that. Breaking into a house and stealing are serious crimes for which adults have to go to prison. Right now Richard is still a child in my eyes, so I decide what happens to him. If he had been older, I would have given his punishment over to the police." Harry hoped it was the right mix of instilling a bit but not too much fear.

"So if I do wrong, you punish me? Like the nuns did?" Tom seemed very serious.

"What did they do?" He asked instead of answering.

"They caned us."

"I am no friend of the cane. I give chores or extra homework or restrict playtime. I hope none of you kids will ever do something that warrants worse punishment." He could see the question in the other's eyes. He still waited until the boy asked what he meant by worse. "Intentionally hurting people or animals is a very bad thing."

The little one was deep in thought for a moment before he asked: "Will you punish the nuns? They hurt us a lot."

"They are adults. The police judges their actions. I only judge yours and only until you are of age. After that sterner people will decide about your actions." Well, if Tom turned out well. If not, Harry would be his final judge – again. But it was a long time until then.

"Okay. I'll go to sleep now." With that the boy flopped back unto the bed and closed his eyes.

The older one just smiled and stood. He stopped in the motion when a small hand on his sleeve held him back. Innocent blue eyes were turned on him, accompanied by the question: "Can I have a bedtime story?"

Well ... oh hell, he had enough of being stern. So Harry took out the book and sat down next to the boy to begin where they left off. Something about a rat and a cat becoming friends with a bird in it somewhere.

It was a few weeks later when Harry found his way into the kitchen to ask Margret: "I haven't seen any pumpkins yet. Are they out? Or do you need help with the preparations?"

"Prep... what do you mean?" Margret's voice trembled slightly.

"Halloween?" As soon as he asked he wanted to hit himself. Halloween was an American tradition – it seemed it was still unknown in 1932. He should have thought of this beforehand! "Well, it is a custom I learned about in my military time. Have I never told you about it? I am deeply sorry, it is my mistake then."

"Oh, I see ... so what kind of custom is it? What do we do?" Her eyes lit up in excitement. "Is it a feast? Shall I prepare food? Something with pumpkins?"

Harry saw someone moving to his right and finally noticed that Mary and Brea were in the kitchen as well and had stepped nearer in interest. He straightened and answered: "Well, it is a ... a kind of ritual to scare off bad dreams and ghosts. The goal is to be more scary than they are. So you carve fearsome faces into pumpkins and dress as those that you fear."

Mary shrieked and hid behind Brea who laughed and said: "I don't think you have to dress as a spider."

"I have always been afraid of my grandmother", Margret mused, "It would not be hard to dress as her."

"Well, normally you dress as old hags, vampires or ghosts." Harry explained.

"Or Jack the Ripper." Brea had lowered her voice. "Remember the tales?"

Mary shrieked again and ran to Margret who said: "You are the scariest of us all, Brea."

"Well, anyway, I'll go buy some pumpkins. And you can think about your costumes." Harry smiled benevolently.

"Oh, what will you wear?" Brea looked up to him, her voice full of excitement.

"Hm ... how about a dementor?" Her confused eyes reminded him of his own stupidity. When would he ever learn that he was a Muggle in 1932 now? "It is a mythical creature of fear. Something like a nightmare in physical form."

"Wow." She smiled widely. "I am afraid of forgetting. Is there a mythical creature that makes one forget?"

"Well ... dementors take your good memories, so I guess they would be a good choice. I need something else if you go as a dementor. How about going as a wizard?"

"That's not scary." Brea crossed her arms. Well, so much for an easy costume. He thought mermaids were quite fearsome but explaining that would be suspicious.

"How about a dark wizard? One who commands beasts like dementors?" Hopefully he could pull off an off-putting one. He did not want to be an example for Tom.

"Then I will be your first in command! Your chief dementor!" Brea stepped from foot to foot. "What do they look like?"

"Erm ... they are dressed in washed out rags that completely cover them, so that you can't see a face. They also glide instead of walking and can fly." And how should a human girl do that? "You can work on your gliding."

Brea straightened and moved forward like she was gliding. She wasn't bad at all, it would look like gliding in baggy clothes. She was enthusiastic about the whole thing, immediately discussing how to cover herself in rags. He left them to their chatter to go into town.

"Hey, Tom." He saw the boy on the stairs. "Come with me, we are getting pumpkins for a feast."

"What feast?" The boy came down the stairs, putting on his shoes and jacket without

further requests.

"It is called Halloween and is a tradition from America. That is a country far across the ocean." He began to tell the boy more, like his favorite Halloween costume and what he had seen the other kids do when he was young. He itched to also explain the wizard stuff but he refrained from it. It was much too early, Tom had not yet shown any accidental magic.

Of course Tom wanted to know what a vampire was and where to read up on them but Harry decided that he was too young to read Bram Stoker and that was the only Muggle author that had ever written about them. So he just told him stories, one more scary than the next which the boy in turn told the other kids which led to ecstatic shouts from Brea to tears from Mary. Richard begged Margret to let him sleep in the house that night and she turned a reproachful look on Harry who simply shrugged and grinned. He ordered a copy of "Dracula" the next day to give it to her.

They had a great feast, eating pumpkin soup and scaring each other until Helen and Mary refused to leave Margret's side and Richard slept in Tom's bed. The younger one teased him mercilessly for that and for once, Harry let him. But he did accompany him to chop some wood the next day which the boy was eternally grateful for.

They actually bonded a bit over that, Richard telling him he'd rather be a girl. Well, that was tricky. Harry had known about transsexuals but they lived in the wrong time for that.

"Why do you want to be a girl?" Better to understand him first.

"Well ... they always stick together. Be a girl and you have friends. Girls are like a bird flock."

"They do that to be safe." Especially in this time and age. "Men are fearsome and strong. Some men are really dangerous for women. So they stick together. It's their strength." It did sound nice in theory. "But they also scratch each other's eyes out. Even as a group, they always compete and try to be better than the others. So while they flock together, they are also extremely mean to each other sometimes."

"Really?" Richard looked up with big eyes.

"They harp about the other's weight and skin and clothes and make-up and whatnot, it's tiresome. I like male friends a lot more. They don't judge, they just let you be." He chopped up some more wood. "Like this here. Just working out together. Not squabbling or gossiping or harping about one's neighbors or all that other stuff girls constantly talk about."

"I wouldn't know." He looked sad. "They grow silent when I'm around. There's no one to talk to."

"They don't talk while they work?" Harry looked up in surprise.

"The head seamstress forbid them from talking while they work." He shrugged his shoulder. "They haven't started again. We always work in silence."

"Sounds oppressing." Harry shuddered. "Know what? I'll buy you guys a radio. Music makes everything better."

"Really?" Richard looked delighted. "Thank you, Mister Horten!"

"And you should go to town in the evenings and find some friends your age. Just don't hang out with the wrong crowd." That would set the boy straight. Hopefully. At least in staying a boy, even if he would become a gay boy or something. It was a horrible era for that. At least, this was Britain and not Germany.

"Wrong crowd?" Again with that timid look. He did give off the vibe of a young girl instead of a boy.

"You know, criminals, thieves, drunks. Boys who'll only be with you if you pay for their

entertainment. Find some boys who spend their time with sports, books or adventures that don't cost limb and freedom. Maybe there'll be some boys playing soccer. You could ask Margret, she has some younger brothers, maybe they can tell you where the local boys meet."

"Do you think they'll accept me?" Oh, teenage angst. It was that age.

"Why shouldn't they? You can read and write, you have a job, you live in a good place, you have nice clothes. There's nothing wrong with you." He just sounded like a girl with all those insecurities. "Have some trust in yourself. You are already a man in your own right. You even earn your own money."

"They call us the rag-tag band. I heard some women talking in town. They called us no-goods. They say we live off your pity and would be out in the streets without you." Richard's voice broke.

"That's why you don't want to be a woman. Mean beasts, I tell you." He put a hand on the boy's shoulder. "Do you think they would dare to say that to my face?"

"Never." Richard looked up to him.

"See? When women say something to your face, you listen to them. Until then, you stay clear of their vicious tongue. Don't let it bother you. They are just jealous." That was a wisdom he learned over the years. Women were great, as long as they weren't too many in the same spot. Even Ginny tended to say mean things about him when the Weasley women flocked together. It was something women just did.

"Jealous? Of you?" Richard seemed to have completely given up on the wood, focusing on their conversation instead.

"Of you. All of you have a steady job, a nice house, food and clothes. You know that's not a given. But you have all earned it." How to make him feel more secure? "I haven't chosen you out of pity. You four impressed me with your skills. You were given a once-in-a-lifetime-opportunity and you seized it and made the best of it. That's nothing to be ashamed of."

"Hm." Richard took a new block of wood. "I still think we were just lucky."

"A bit of luck is always a part of being successful." Just thinking how often he had been lucky ... he had been close to death one time too many. "You know I survived a gun-shot to the hip? I could have been dead. That was nothing but luck. Sometimes good things just happen or you meet the right people at the right time. It happened to me frequently, so now I balance karma by helping others."

"Karma?" Richard's eyebrows scrunched up.

"Universal equilibrium. You do good, good will come back to you."

That got him one armful of angsty teenage power. He may be twenty-five years older but he remembered being that starved for acceptance. Hopefully Richard would not fall into the wrong arms.

"I'll always be here when you need me, Richard. You can come talk to me about anything. Just don't rob me again, alright?"

"I'm sorry, Mister Horten." The boy sounded close to tears.

"Don't sweat it. We all do dumb things as teenagers." Wouldn't he know?