

The Way We Were

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*Memories
Light the corners of my mind
Misty watercolor memories
Of the way we were*

"Happy Birthday!" Harry brought Hermione into the dining area of his living quarters, which was decorated with hovering streamers forming and reforming messages of congratulations, bluebell flames suspended above the dinner table spelling out 100! in foot-high characters, and a birthday cake with 100 miniature everburning sparklers, surrounded by an array of presents at one end of the table.

"Oh, Harry, you didn't have to go to all this trouble!" Hermione protested as she wrapped an arm around him for a hug of gratitude. The delight in her eyes betrayed her words, however, as she smiled up at him. Stepping forward, he pulled out a chair for her in front of the cake and gifts, then took his own seat next to her.

"Sure, I did," he countered with an impish grin. "You don't turn one hundred every day, you know." Hermione shook her head in affectionate amusement as she began to open the presents, while Harry cut them each a slice of cake.

"One hundred years," he teased. "That is seriously old! I reckon I'll have to start helping you make your way around the castle now, maybe get you a cane or something."

"Watch it Potter," she warned. "You have a birthday coming up in ten months too, you know."

Harry smirked and continued. "I mean, when I think one hundred I think of some ancient grayhair like Dumbledore, not an attractive young witch like yourself."

Hermione rolled her eyes. "Now, you know better than to try to turn my head with your flattery, Professor Potter," she smiled. "Besides, if we're making comparisons, you would be Dumbledore and I'd be McGonagall, given our positions here. You know, the great, world famous wizard who defeated the dark lord, and his capable assistant."

Harry opened his mouth to protest that she was far more than an assistant but Hermione's next comment brought him up short. "And you know that's not the only similarity," she asserted. "Every generation of students speculates on whether or not we're together, just like they used to with Dumbledore and McGonagall."

Harry cocked his head in surprise. "I never knew that," he claimed. "About Dumbledore and McGonagall, I mean." He was well aware of the conjecture about the nature of his and Hermione's relationship, which had been going on for years.

"That's because you never shared a dorm room with Lavender and Parvati," Hermione replied with a laugh. "Trust me, they had everyone in the castle paired up at one time or other."

The two friends continued to reminisce about their long lives and past friends, most of whom were now gone. Each felt that the happiest part of their lives had been during the past quarter century, since they'd been working together at Hogwarts. They both loved their children, but they were definitely enjoying their lives more now than they ever had. And that included their fifty-some years of marriage to the Weasley siblings.

*Memories
May be beautiful and yet
What's too painful to remember
We simply choose to forget*

"Looking back, although there were a lot of good times, getting married and having a family weren't the ultimate joy that I thought they'd be," Harry mused. This declaration, unfortunately, elicited a grimace from Hermione. "I'm sorry," Harry immediately apologized, taking her hand in his and giving it a compassionate squeeze. "I know that brings up bad memories for you." Hermione shrugged it off, motioning him to continue with his thought.

"Well, Ginny and I got along alright," he went on after a pause to confirm that she really was comfortable with the subject. "Nothing incredible, but we did okay together. But the price was too high."

Hermione nodded knowingly at this. Harry had needed to distance himself from her in order to keep peace in his home. Ginny had always been jealous of Hermione and her closeness to Harry. As a result the two friends could never spend any time alone together without raising her suspicions, especially once the story came out of how it had been just the two of them by themselves for all that time in the tent. After a while they'd ended up not even talking to each other when they encountered each other in public, or at family gatherings. It was just too painful to be reminded of what they'd once had. Harry would spend time with Ron, or with the children, but never with Hermione.

But whereas, except for this one point of contention, Harry and Ginny had lived together in a friendly, affectionate relationship, Hermione and Ron's marriage, by contrast, was a nightmare. Their life together was a constant battle – fighting, bickering, criticizing, tempers flaring. In hindsight, Harry wondered, how did either of them ever think that a relationship that had been built from the very beginning on irritating each other could possibly work?

Hermione sighed and shook her head at this point in the conversation. She had paid the price for her poor decision of long ago, over and over again, but that was in the past now. "I know it sounds terrible," she admitted, "but it was such a relief when he died. It felt like I'd been released from prison."

Harry gave her hand, which he'd been holding throughout the discussion, another squeeze of understanding. Both families had felt something similar, breathing a figurative sigh of released tension once that marriage had ended in the only way it could in a world where a couple 'bonded for life'. And the effect on Hermione had been dramatic, as she adjusted to her new life finally free from the years of stress that had taken such a terrible toll. Her old personality began to reemerge, but with more emphasis on the helpful, caring side and not so much of the bossy know-it-all. Within the year she had accepted a teaching position at Hogwarts, and her outlook on life quickly took a permanent turn for the better.

"Yes, I'm sure it goes without saying, if there was one thing I could change about my life it would be marrying Ron," she admitted. "On the other hand, it would mean giving up my two wonderful children."

"I don't know about that," Harry disagreed with a fond smile. "I think Rose would have turned out the same no matter who her father was. If I'd had to predict in advance what your daughter would be like it would have been a girl exactly like Rose."

"Okay, I'll grant you that," Hermione decided. "But what about Hugo?" Both of them had to smile at that question. Hugo was one of a kind.

"Yep, he's something special, all right," Harry agreed.

"On the other hand, it seemed like he spent more time at your house growing up than he did at his own," Hermione pointed out. "He idolized you."

"True, but he worshipped Lily," Harry added.

Hermione sighed. "It was the worst moment in his life when I had to tell him that cousins couldn't marry," she noted. "He was absolutely devastated."

"I remember that quite well," Harry added. "I think Lily refused to speak to us for a week. But still, it didn't stop them from forming the most incredible bond I've ever seen."

Hermione smiled and moved her free hand to where her other was still entwined with Harry's, raising them into view. "Except for one," she corrected softly.

The cake had been eaten, the 100 sparklers extinguished, and Harry and Hermione had moved into the sitting room onto the sofa, where she was leaning comfortably up against him admiring the diamond and sapphire pendant he'd given her. At least, she was admiring the pendant. Harry was paying more attention to its intended resting place. He'd begun kissing the back of her neck after he'd put it on her and fastened the clasp, then started working his way around to the front. Just as things were getting interesting a knock sounded at the door.

Sharing a quick look that promised that they'd continue this activity later, they sat up and Harry released the locking spell, after checking the charm that revealed the identity of their visitors.

"Hi Mum! Happy birthday!" Hugo called out as he and Lily entered. "We figured we'd find you in here," he teased with a grin. "Seeing as how you practically live here."

Hermione reacted with mock indignation, as she always did to her son's teasing on this issue, citing the fact that she did maintain her own quarters in the castle.

"True," Lily pointed out with an arched eyebrow. "But the two of you have almost as much stuff in each other's rooms as you do in your own." To prove her point she gestured around the room, which was indeed loaded with things which belonged to Hermione.

"I don't know why they don't just get married," Hugo joked to Lily as he casually wrapped an arm around her, unconsciously mimicking Harry's similar action with his mother. "Except for sleeping together they already spend more time with each other than most married couples do." Hugo was looking at his lifelong companion as he said this, so he didn't catch the quick glance Hermione shot to Harry at the 'sleeping together' comment, but Lily did. *Hmm, perhaps they do that too*, she mused to herself.

Lily Potter was widely acknowledged as the most remarkable witch of her generation. While she had recently turned 70, by all appearances she looked to be in her 30's or 40's. Resistance to aging was a common indication of how powerful a witch or wizard was – Harry and Hermione were among the few of their age group who were still alive. Among their close friends there remained only Luna and Neville. (Luna was an eccentric old crone who lived alone in the circular tower in Ottery St. Catchpole, essentially inhabiting a fantasy world of unusual creatures that only she believed existed. She had never really changed from the way she was in school, but her demeanor was now considered to be simply what might be expected from a batty old woman. Neville had converted his fame as a leader of the resistance against Voldemort into a position of influence in the Britain's wizarding government. He'd served a long term as Minister of Magic, and was now ensconced in the role of elder statesman of the Wizengamot.)

Lily had been the subject of teenage crushes from scores, perhaps hundreds, of young male Hogwarts students over the years she'd been teaching. Once his youngest had graduated, Harry had finally agreed to McGonagall's offer to join the staff as Defense Against the Dark Arts instructor, and Lily had followed him onto the Hogwarts faculty a few years later, replacing Flitwick in Charms. It had been almost fifty years now and she'd hardly seemed to age. She was the spitting image of her namesake, the former Lily Evans, and was likewise a genius at charms. Her experimental charms work was far more advanced than any other in the wizarding world at that time.

Hugo had been by her side throughout. The only Weasley without red hair, having inherited his mother's curly brown locks and brown eyes, his mischievous nature kept everyone around him on their toes. But foremost was his devotion to Lily Potter. When she'd been hired he'd simply come with her, taking up residence in Hogsmeade, and making use of tunnels into Hogwarts that even Fred and George Weasley hadn't known about.

Since he was always around, McGonagall, like Dumbledore had done with Hagrid years before, had given him a variety of odd jobs. Over the years he'd proven himself extraordinarily capable at whatever he attempted, performing every task with an innate cheerfulness that rubbed off on everyone who came into contact with him. He eventually became a substitute teacher at large, able to fill in for virtually every subject taught at the school, much to the students' delight. When Harry had assumed the role of headmaster, Hugo was the natural selection to replace him in the Defense position, and he was possibly even as popular and respected in that job as Harry had been. Shortly after that, Hermione came on board to teach Arithmency, and the four of them had been colleagues ever since.

Lily and Hugo weren't married, they were just – together. There was no question of having children; they'd taken seriously the admonition that they were cousins, and then simply dealt with it by what seemed to them to be the obvious solution. And, like their parents (his mother and her father), they never engaged in any public activities that couldn't be ascribed to their being the best of friends. All this inevitably resulted in the same sort of rumors, conjecture, and speculation among the student body that Harry and Hermione generated.

Hugo broke off his teasing of his mother and plopped down on the sofa beside her, throwing his arms around her for a big hug. After giving her father a quick kiss of greeting, Lily settled herself down on Hugo's other side, her hand automatically sliding into his. As soon as her son released her, Hermione leaned back into Harry as his arm came around her. After so many years together in the castle, the four of them were clearly comfortable with their respective situations.

Given the natural tendency toward retrospection on a day like this, the talk turned again to how things in their lives might have been different. Hugo and Lily repeated their question, more seriously this time, but altered it to inquire why Harry and Hermione hadn't married each other originally. After sharing one of those glances with each other involving silent communication, which they'd long ago perfected, Harry made the first response.

"Frankly, I didn't realize what love really was until too late," he revealed. "With your mother," he nodded to Lily, "I was attracted to her and I thought that was enough. Could I have fallen deeply in love with her? Perhaps. But by the time I got together with her my heart, or more accurately my soul, was already taken. I just didn't know it. The total caring for another person, the willingness to do anything to ensure their happiness, that I had with Hermione, which is actually the hallmark of real love, I thought was just close friendship." The other three nodded at these words, testing them against their own experiences, and acknowledging their fundamental truth.

"The other thing was, looking at Ron and Hermione's relationship – well, growing up with the Dursleys I didn't know that couples who loved each other did *not* argue, snipe, and belittle each other all the time," he admitted. "So I didn't see anything wrong with what they had. Since they 'argued like an old married couple' I thought it meant they were destined to be together. And because Ron was my best mate, I wouldn't let myself even think of Hermione that way. She was his and that was that." He frowned. "Unfortunately, I didn't learn how stupid that old saying was until later."

"Yes, your father and I certainly illustrated that cliché most painfully," Hermione followed up, addressing Hugo while shifting a bit as Harry pulled her closer to himself. "But I can't claim ignorance like Harry can. I knew Ron and I basically irritated each other. But I honestly thought I could change him into someone I *could* live with. Just like so many women do, unfortunately. I convinced myself that I could do anything if I really put my mind to it. But instead I finally ran up against a challenge I couldn't overcome." She closed her eyes and sighed, then added, "And I admit – I settled for Ron once I decided that it was clear Harry didn't want me." She turned her head to give him a resigned smile. "Now I know that I should have just been a little more forceful. Okay, maybe a lot more forceful. You really were emotionally stunted." Harry grimaced, but didn't disagree. Hermione shrugged and turned back to the others. "But Ron never did change. Just that one year, I thought ... well, he began being more considerate, acting nicer to me."

"When he was using that book," Harry clarified. "Twelve Failsafe Ways to Charm Witches."

"Really?" Lily broke in. "He used tips from a book to woo you? How ironic." This time it was Hermione's turn to grimace.

"I really wish you had told me that sooner," she chided the man she was snuggled up against, hitting him playfully on the arm. Harry winced. He'd berated himself on that point plenty of times over the years.

Lily and Hugo were leaning forward in rapt attention. They'd never before heard the pair being so open about this issue. And indeed, Harry and

Hermione hadn't really discussed it in detail either. While they both loved each other, the subject had been strictly verboten. And once they'd finally been free to join each other, they'd wanted to put it in the past and move forward.

"What I could never figure out," Hugo wondered. "Was with how much you both loved each other, why nothing ever happened during those months you spent alone in that tent together. That is," he added with a devilish grin. "If nothing really did happen."

Harry shook his head with a wry smile. "No, it went pretty much the way you've been told. Remember, Hermione was strictly off limits as far as I was concerned. Yeah, I knew by that time that I loved her. But I convinced myself that it was like a sister."

Hugo, who unlike Harry, actually had a sister, shook his head. "But it wasn't really," he commented in a non-judgmental tone. Harry sighed and shook his head. Hugo turned to his mother. "But you knew better," he suggested.

Hermione nodded. "But by that time I had given up. I had determined to play the martyr. I was the heroine in a romantic tragedy, fated to never be with the man she loved. I was completely dedicated to him, resolved to be whatever he needed me to be, do whatever needed to be done to ensure his success. Keep in mind, the odds were against us even surviving at that point, so romance wasn't exactly in the forefront of our thoughts."

"But you couldn't have been focused on the war *all* the time," Hugo persisted. "You'd have gone mad. Surely there must have been some moments where you might have let your guard down."

"And fallen into each other's arms," Lily finished with a wistful sigh.

"Whenever I felt that way I just curled up in my bed and cried," Hermione confessed. "I tried to keep it quiet so Harry wouldn't hear me, but I suspect that he did." Harry nodded that this was indeed the case.

"I used the map," Harry then confided. "Whenever that happened, or when I got urges I knew I shouldn't have, I got out the map and looked for Ginny's dot in the castle. By thinking of her I could drive everything else out of my mind."

"So your best friend was crying herself to sleep every night and you just ignored her?" Lily accused. "Pretty harsh, Dad." Harry winced, but accepted the criticism.

"You're right, of course," he admitted. "Of all the things I did that year, that's one of the ones I'm most ashamed of."

Hermione looked up at him quizzically. "So, even though you never acted on them, you occasionally felt some stirrings of affection for me?"

Harry smiled back at her. "Yeah, particularly on Christmas Eve when we visited my parents' graves. If we hadn't run into Nagini right after that ... who knows?"

"And if I'd asked you to hold me when I was feeling down, you would have?" she asked.

Harry nodded. "Probably."

"And what if I'd climbed into your bed one night?" she queried with a raised eyebrow.

"I might have lost my virginity earlier than I did," Harry quipped. That broke the tension and gave everyone a good laugh, which continued when Hermione muttered about her Gryffindor courage abandoning her when she'd needed it most. At that point Harry took the opportunity to summon butterbeers and pass them around. Once they'd all settled back down, he got a thoughtful expression on his face.

"Sixth year," he decided. "That's when you gave up on me, wasn't it?"

Hermione sighed. "Yes. I'd given as many hints about my feelings as I could. We spent all that time together at the Burrow that summer prior, and nothing happened. I even played quidditch with you."

Hugo's eyes bugged out. "You played quidditch?" he asked his mother in astonishment. Her dislike of that sport was legendary in the Weasley family. Hermione nodded firmly, a self-satisfied smirk on her lips. "No doubt about it, that had to be true love," he quipped.

Harry cocked his head in surprise. "That's right, we did play a lot that summer. But it was with Ginny and Ron too. How was I supposed to know that it meant something?"

"What were the teams?" Hermione responded. "It was always you and I against Ron and Ginny. Do you think I would have been willing to play quidditch with Ron if you weren't there?"

Harry snorted – the thought of Hermione and Ron playing quidditch together was laughable. They'd have been screaming at each other within minutes. "Good point. And we actually played rather well together," he recalled. "Held our own against Ron and Ginny, which is amazing when you think about it. They should have mopped up the pitch with us. We made a pretty good team, didn't we?"

"We were always a good team, Harry," she pointed out softly. If they'd been alone, a comment with that depth of feeling would have led to a long, tender kiss. As it was, they settled for a quick smooch while their children smiled at them and Lily leaned back against Hugo, who wrapped his arms around her.

Harry pondered some more. "When I first smelled the Amortentia in Slughorn's class that fall, there was a scent that I associated with the Burrow. I couldn't place it, but it reminded me of those days we all spent together. It was only later at dinner that I decided it was the perfume Ginny was wearing – I didn't think of her at all initially.

Hermione shook her head ruefully. "That summer was the first time I'd ever worn perfume. I thought you didn't even notice. When we went back to Hogwarts I stopped, because I didn't want to get teased by Lavender and Parvati. I gave the rest to Ginny."

Harry smacked himself on the head and groaned. "If only ..." he began.

"No, it wasn't just that," Hermione disagreed. "I mean, that wasn't the main thing that attracted you to Ginny. It may have the little nudge you needed to notice her that way. But by that point she'd developed into a very pretty girl. That's what really caught your eye. Just like with Cho."

"I was an idiot," Harry mumbled. But Hermione just shook her head and patted his hand.

"No, you were a teenaged boy," she corrected softly.

Before they got the urge to kiss again, Hugo broke in with another question. "So, looking back, now that you recognize your feelings for what they were, when did they start? Or at least, when did you notice them?"

A fond smile grew across Hermione's face. "Oh my, I haven't thought about that in years. For me it was likely sooner than for Harry. I was nearly a year older and he was, after all, a boy." She shot her beloved a smirk and he rolled his eyes and let out a long-suffering sigh. "The first time I nearly kissed him was at the end of first year before he went off to face Quirrell."

"I remember that," Harry broke in. "You hugged me and said something about me being a great wizard. I was shocked because that was the first time that I could remember that anyone had ever given me a hug." The other three nodded sympathetically, and Lily got up, went over and sat on her father's lap, and hugged him.

"Then there was the time when I woke up from being petrified," Hermione continued. "When they told us what he'd done, I was so proud of him. If it hadn't been in the middle of the Great Hall when I finally tracked him down I'd likely have kissed him then." Harry nodded, recalling that incident as well, as Lily went back over to sit by Hugo.

"For me it would have been fourth year," Harry mused. "After my name came out of the Cup. I felt so relieved when you met me the next morning. You'd brought me something to eat so I wouldn't have to go into the Great Hall, and then we walked around the lake. That you believed me and supported me – that meant a lot. I really might have hugged you then. And then after the first task, when you came running up and I saw how worried you'd been. You had marks on your face from your fingernails. I would have hugged you for sure if Ron hadn't been standing right there."

"I wanted you to," Hermione pouted. "But you just looked at Ron and started talking to him. I was so upset – after I'd spent all that time helping you and he'd ignored you. I mean, I wanted you two to be friends again but I thought you could have paid a little attention to me." Harry sighed and pulled her in for another hug and apologized for the long ago slight, and she promptly forgave him.

He looked down at the woman in his arms and smiled. "Then there was the Yule Ball. You looked so amazing. But you were with Krum by then and it would have been too late – I'd lost my chance. On the other hand, at the end of the year you kissed me at King's Cross – also my first ever kiss by the way – and then I was really confused."

"If I'd followed up that summer the way I wanted to and spent some time with you," Hermione sighed, "instead of listening to Dumbledore and leaving you alone, hardly even writing anything to you at all ..."

Lily, who now had tears in her eyes, sniffed. "This is so sad!" She had always been a romantic at heart. "You guys should have been together all that time."

Hermione turned her attention to her niece. "You realize, don't you, that if that had happened you two wouldn't even be here?"

"Sure we would," Hugo joked. "We'd just have different hair colors." He shot a smirk at Lily, whose lustrous red hair had always been one of her signature attributes.

Lily huffed. "First, dear cousin, Mum wasn't the only one I could have inherited red hair from. As you are well aware, there is another rather famous redhead in my ancestry, and my coloring resembles hers more than the Weasleys. And second, we're only six months apart in age, which obviously wouldn't be possible. And that's not the only thing that would have to be different."

Hugo waved off this objection. "So, we'd be siblings instead of cousins. Hey, maybe we'd be twins. Then we could have that whole twin bond thing going. You know, reading each other's thoughts ..."

"... finishing each other's sentences?" Lily added smugly. Harry and Hermione chuckled – their two youngest children had been well known for those traits for most of their lives.

"At least that way we'd have understood the way things had to be before it was too late," Hugo declared in a more serious tone. I could have handled that, I think."

"What I want to know is when you two figured it out?" Hermione wondered. "I thought Harry and I hid our feelings for each other pretty well while you

were growing up.”

“Well, Uncle Harry was my role model, you know,” Hugo began. “So I spent a lot of time studying him. I wanted to be as much like him as I could. And when Lily and I were trying to work through our relationship toward the end of our time in school I gradually came to the conclusion that it was a lot like the way you two were – at least how you had been before you got married. And eventually I realized that this was one way I *didn’t* want to emulate you. I decided I couldn’t be that noble.”

Lily snorted. “You should have seen the way he acted any time I went out on a date with another guy. He made sure I never had a second date with any of them. Of course, I wasn’t much different whenever one of my roommates flirted with him.” She turned to give Hugo a mock glare. “You were much too charming for your own good.”

“Huh,” Hugo shot back. “This from the prettiest girl in the castle, who had all the boys drooling after her.”

Lily smiled and patted him on the arm, then turning back to Harry and Hermione she continued. “And I always wanted to be just like you,” she informed her aunt. “I envied Rose so much. I understood later that her home life wasn’t that great, with her parents at each other’s throats all the time, but I didn’t see that then. I only knew that she was the daughter of the witch I admired more than any other. And at school, I had to work so hard to be as good as her. It didn’t help that everything came so easily to this clown here while I studied my tail off.” Hugo winced at the jab that was delivered expertly to his ribs. “That’s why I eventually decided to specialize in charms, instead of trying to be the best at everything. I had to leave that for Rose and Hugo.”

Hermione nodded approvingly. She’d heard most of this before, albeit second or third hand, and was glad that her niece hadn’t burned herself out. She’d actually turned out more well-balanced than her daughter had, who, like herself, was never satisfied if she wasn’t perfect in all she attempted. Rose Weasley had a successful career as an Unspeakable in the Department of Mysteries, studying many esoteric forms of magic, but she still worked far too hard. And she’d never married, either consciously or subconsciously shying away from the possibility of the type of home life she’d grown up with.

“But I also wasn’t going to make the mistake you made,” Lily went on, perhaps suspecting the direction Hermione’s thoughts had taken. By that time everyone in the family knew you’d married the wrong person, and we could all see that you and Harry had drifted apart, whether intentionally or just in the course of things. So when Hugo and I decided we wanted to be together, we didn’t let what anyone else thought stop us.”

“Whereas Harry and I didn’t want anyone else we cared for to be hurt, so we sacrificed our relationship to keep the ones around us happy,” Hermione admitted with a long sigh. “The Weasley family had given so much and it seemed that by marrying into it we could help the healing process. We honestly thought we were doing the right thing at the time.”

“Mum knew what was going on,” Lily revealed. “She was aware of what you two were doing. She told me before she died how much she appreciated what you and Dad had given up. She said it was a sign of real love that he would do that for her.”

“I did love her, as much as I could,” Harry acknowledged. “But there was always something missing.” He tightened his arm around Hermione and she leaned her head against his shoulder.

Lily subtly changed the direction of the conversation by wondering what things they would go back and change about that time in their lives if they had the opportunity.

*Can it be that it was all so simple then?
Or has time rewritten every line?
If we had the chance to do it all again
Tell me - Would we? Could we?*

“Well, it could be dangerous to make a large change, because you never know what unforeseen and possibly unwanted effects it could have,” Harry responded after some thought. “So I might change something small. For example, send Hedwig to the Burrow that night we left Privet Drive instead of putting her in a cage and carrying her with me in the sidecar of the motorcycle.”

Hermione knew exactly what he was talking about before he’d got halfway through his description. That had been such a painful loss for him, and completely unnecessary. She responded by giving him a tight hug.

“I wish I’d thought about that before we flew off,” she commiserated. “But at the time my mind was too caught up in the strangeness of being male.” That got a smile from Harry.

“So, were you able to resist checking me out?” he teased.

Hermione rolled her eyes, but her pink cheeks gave her away. “Well, you’d have done the same thing if you were turned into a girl,” she protested. “I bet you wouldn’t have gone ten seconds without sneaking a look down your shirt or feeling yourself up.” After a round of chuckles and a shrug from Harry indicating that she was probably right, she returned to Lily’s question.

“I know what I’d change, and consequences be damned,” she insisted. “And with respect to what Harry said, things certainly couldn’t have been any worse if we’d been better prepared.” But she wouldn’t elaborate just yet on her preferred alteration, so Hugo pressed Harry further, asking what else he’d change if he could.

“For sure I’d do better at showing my appreciation for everything Hermione did on the Horcrux hunt,” Harry decided, giving her hand a squeeze.

“And ...?” Lily prompted with a small smile.

“And all her help fourth year with the tournament and fifth year with Umbridge and the DA,” Harry added with a grin.

“And ...?” Lily grinned more broadly.

Harry sighed. “Pretty much all her help, period,” he finally conceded with a loving smile at his companion.

“But not sixth year,” Hermione noted with a scowl. She’d never forgiven herself for the damage her attitude that year had done to their relationship, and the larger struggle against Voldemort.

Harry immediately responded with a hug. “Hey, nobody’s perfect.”

Hermione nodded, then revealed what she’d hinted at before – her first thought was that she’d be bolder and get Harry to take her to the Yule Ball. And after that, be more aggressive about getting themselves better prepared for the challenges that they had to know were coming, once Voldemort returned to bodily form. Harry sat back and pondered this, recalling many times where he’d have benefited from better foresight and planning.

Lily now dropped her bombshell. “Okay, there’s a reason for asking you these questions,” she revealed. “I’ve developed a charm that would do exactly that. Let you go back to a point in your life and change things. Call it my birthday present to you.”

As she’d expected, there was a stunned silence from the older couple. Then Hermione instantly had a host of questions, beginning with how they’d circumvent the paradox – if you changed it so things worked out better, then when you got back to this point in time you wouldn’t feel compelled to go back, so things would return to the way they were, etc. Lily explained that her charm wouldn’t change their current timeline, it would cause the individual going back to travel on a different branch of time, in effect creating an alternate future. Nothing would change for the people who stayed behind. Hermione also wanted to know how much, if any, of their memory would return with them.

“None of it,” Lily responded. “Having two sets of memories for the same time in your life would drive you insane. The only effect would be subconscious – you’d get a feeling that something was a good idea or a bad idea. We would decide which decisions you wanted to change and work them into the spell. The term I’d use is ‘inclinations’. They’d be more than suggestions, but less than compulsions.”

Hermione sat back and thought about this, while Lily and Hugo waited patiently. Harry began to factor this new information into his previous musing, trying to figure out at which point in his life the branching would be most effective. If he went back too far, there was a risk of changing too much.

“So you’re offering to send me back to try again, and hopefully make choices that would lead to happier outcomes,” Hermione stated in summation. “Not just for me personally, but for the whole war against Voldemort.” Lily nodded.

Hermione glanced over to Harry. “But I can’t leave Harry behind,” she declared fervently, taking up his hand in hers again. “I would never do that. It took us a long time to get here, and a lot of pain, but we’re happy now. I won’t take that away from you,” she vowed. Harry was about to tell her she should do it for herself, and that he’d manage, when he was cut off by Lily’s laugh.

“I told you that would be the response,” she gloated to Hugo. “No matter which one we asked. I’m sure Dad would say exactly the same thing.” She turned back to the older couple. “Not a problem,” she assured them. “We have no intention of breaking you up now. I can send you both back together.”

The discussion then turned to the question of when. When would be the optimal time to return to? Harry’s first priority was to prevent as many deaths as possible. Hermione noted that Cedric was the first that they could reasonably hope to affect, since there was nothing a one-year-old child could do for James and Lily, or Frank and Alice Longbottom. They also agreed that Voldemort was at his most vulnerable before he regained a body.

“That settles it then,” Harry declared. “Fourth year, when he was in that weird baby-like form. And you could get your date,” he added to Hermione with a smirk.

Hermione merely rolled her eyes, but couldn’t stop the smile that followed. “But how could we change how that year ended, even if we did a better job of preparing you for the Second and Third Tasks?” she wondered.

“I know!” Harry blurted out suddenly, sitting up straighter. “The clue! The clue in the egg. If you and I were together, you know, as a couple after the ball, you’d have got me to go to the prefects’ bath sooner.”

“Most likely, yes,” Hermione acknowledged, trying to work out how that would help prevent what happened after the Third Task.

“And I wouldn’t have run into Moody/Crouch and lost the Map,” Harry concluded triumphantly.

“So you would have been more likely to figure out he was an imposter!” Hermione broke in excitedly, having figured out where he was going with this thought.

“Right, the day he killed his father I’d have noticed for sure,” Harry added.

“So, either the cup wouldn’t have been a portkey, or better yet Dumbledore would interrogate him, find out his plan, and take the portkey himself, possibly with some backup, and capture Pettigrew and Voldemort,” Hermione continued in a rush. “Then he could hold him captive, maybe use Draught of Living Death, and have time to hunt down all the Horcruxes and destroy them, then Voldemort could be killed!” She was practically bouncing with delight, and threw her arms around Harry’s neck in a massive hug. Lily and Hugo grinned at each other, having witnessed this passionate reasoning process from his mother before.

“That would be perfect,” Harry responded eagerly while returning the hug. “All those deaths – Cedric, Sirius, Dumbledore, Fred, Remus, Tonks – we could stop them all. This is fantastic!”

Hermione suddenly pulled back, her enthusiasm dampened. “But what about you?” she demanded.

Harry frowned for a moment before he realized her concern. “Oh, you mean the Horcrux in my scar. I’d still have to die, wouldn’t I?” There was an uncomfortable pause before he shrugged, and resumed in a more subdued tone. “But that would be better ... “

Hermione wouldn’t let him finish the thought. “Don’t you dare say that!”

Before she could get too worked up about the idea of Harry sacrificing himself, Lily broke in. “Actually, I think we could help there,” she explained. “I’m certain there are other ways to extract the soul fragment from Dad that could have been used. We can find some before you go.”

“But the problem would be to convince Dumbledore to change his plan,” Hermione stated hotly. “I will *not* let him turn you into a martyr again!”

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After quite a bit more back and forth discussion, weighing different scenarios and options, Harry and Hermione accepted Lily’s offer. They decided that they would take some time to settle their affairs, announce their retirements, find replacements for their positions at Hogwarts, and go back in time the day after Harry’s 100th birthday. That also gave Lily time to fine tune her charm, customizing it for each of them according to the specific actions they wanted to be nudged toward.

Ultimately Lily accepted the position of Headmistress, with Hugo as Assistant Headmaster, because Hugo didn’t want to give up teaching. In the meantime Lily and Hermione thoroughly researched soul binding rituals and their counters, find two and possibly a third that they decided would work. Lily added a strong inclination to her charm for Hermione to do a similar search when she went back in time.

Since Harry and Hermione would disappear from the current timestream, they needed an explanation, and the word was quietly spread among their close associates that they had decided it was time to pass on. To the world at large they would fade into obscurity upon their retirements, eventually becoming the subject of ‘whatever happened to ...?’ questions.

They did inform their other children of what they were undertaking. Rose was skeptical, but ultimately gave them her support when she realized that this was one of those times where her mother decided on something and could not be swayed from it. She’d had plenty of experience with that aspect of her character, especially since she was the same way herself. James and Al, having long since accepted the relationship between their father and aunt, accepted this as well, focusing on how to help their families deal with the loss of their patriarch. At Harry’s 100th birthday there were plenty of tears, but ultimately the children were happy that their parents would have this opportunity.

Finally it was time to go, and Harry, Hermione, and their five offspring met in a well-hidden room deep in Hogwarts castle, where Lily, with Hugo’s and Rose’s assistance, would cast the charm. After another round of tearful hugs, Hermione turned to Harry with a smile.

“This time *you’re* going to rescue *me* from that lake!”

That got a round of chuckles, at which point James added, “And if you have five kids, whatever you do, please don’t name one Albus Severus.” This got a sour look from his brother, while the other three roared with laughter, as the poor guy had suffered all his life from that unfortunate appellation.

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Hermione was speechless. Viktor Krum had just asked her to be his date to the Yule Ball! Viktor Krum!! While she stood there, mouth agape, he explained how he admired her, how she wasn’t like the empty-headed fangirls who followed him around. Part of her mind wanted to accept his offer, to show her two oblivious male friends, not to mention the rest of the school, that she was desirable enough to be asked to a ball. She had originally expected that either Harry or Ron would have escorted her; but now that she thought about it she realized that she’d greatly prefer that it be Harry. The other part of her mind now grew more dominant – the part that was urging her to hold off just in case she had a chance at going with Harry.

Finally regaining her voice, she graciously thanked Viktor for the offer, but told him she wanted to think about it. Blushing, she turned and hurried

from the library before he could respond.

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Harry was feeling a growing sense of unease. For one thing, he was beginning to feel guilty for goofing off while his classmates were studying for their exams. He knew that the exemption the champions had been given was for a reason – they were expected to need the extra time to prepare for the Tasks. But he hadn't even looked at his egg since the party after the First Task. The other thing bothering him was that he still needed a partner for the Yule Ball.

Putting aside the quidditch magazine he'd been reading, he stood up, pondering what he should do first. He considered going to the library, but then decided that his most immediate concern was finding a date. Just as he was leaving the common room, he met Hermione coming in.

"Harry," she greeted him, somewhat breathless. "Where are you going?"

"Well ... erm ... nowhere, really," he responded awkwardly as she stepped back and allowed him to exit the portrait hole. "That is, I've been thinking about the ball and ..."

"You still haven't decided whom to ask?" she finished for him, trying to keep from sounding too eager.

"I ... ah ... I do have an idea," he stammered, deciding to confide to her as they walked along the corridor.

"Oh?" she prompted encouragingly.

"Yeah, I was ... um ... thinking of asking Cho," he mumbled. Hermione stopped, taking a second to work out what he'd said, and he came to a halt beside her. She frowned for a moment, but he didn't see it as he was staring at the floor in embarrassment. She was pretty sure she'd overheard Parvati telling Lavender that her sister Padma had told her that Cho was going to the ball with Cedric Diggory. The frown vanished as she realized that this could be the opportunity she needed.

"Do you want some help?" she asked. Harry's head snapped up at this offer.

"You mean ... help in asking Cho?" he clarified.

"Yes. I imagine it would be difficult for you to just walk up to a group of girls you don't know and interrupt them to ask one of them to the ball, right?" she suggested with a knowing grin. Harry nodded, feeling a bit silly, but also smiling at this evidence that she knew him so well.

"Come on," she prompted, taking his hand and pulling him towards the nearest stairway. "Let's go find where she is, then you hang back while I get her away from her friends." Harry followed without complaint, amazed at how helpful she was being. But as he considered that thought, he decided that it shouldn't really surprise him since she was always trying to help him – with pretty much every task or difficulty in his life, particularly this year. She truly was the best of friends.

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Hermione watched while Harry's shoulders slumped and he turned away from the pretty Chinese girl and walked back to her.

"She said no," he informed her glumly. Carefully she put her arm around his waist and guided him down an empty hallway in the general direction of Gryffindor Tower.

"I'm sorry," she replied, managing to sound like she meant it. "What are you going to do now?" Harry only shrugged. "You know," she commented, keeping her voice even. "You could always just go with a friend."

This brought Harry up short and he shot a sharp glance at her, noting her lips curling into a shy smile. "You mean ... go with you?" Hermione gave a hesitant nod, her smile faltering slightly.

Harry took a moment to gather his thoughts before responding. Luckily, he noticed Hermione's growing anxiety, and realized how she had put herself out on a limb with this suggestion, and knew he had to be careful with what he said to avoid hurting her feelings. But the more he thought about her idea, the more sense it made. He was certainly more comfortable with Hermione than any girl he knew. He also liked Hermione more than any girl he knew. And if he had to go to the ball with a girl, and potentially embarrass himself by dancing with her, Hermione was the one he was most confident that he could rely on not to laugh at him, but to support him in any way she could.

He returned her smile, noting that her own smile brightened as he did so. "Erm ... that'd be brilliant, actually," he agreed. Hermione beamed at him, then took his arm and resumed their trek back to the common room with a spring in her step. Harry could not fail to notice her excitement at the prospect.

"I didn't know you liked me that way," he commented with some trepidation.

"Oh," Hermione replied nervously. "Well, I am excited, but it's a bit of a relief too, isn't it?" Harry nodded his agreement with that sentiment. "And

we don't need to fancy each other to go to the ball together, do we? Lots of students will go as friends, just to have a dance partner." Harry thought for a moment, then nodded that he understood this as well. Then Hermione bit her lip and gathered up her courage.

"And besides, why wouldn't I like you that way?" she challenged as she stopped and turned to him (having first made certain they were alone). "I happen to think you're a pretty special guy."

Harry paused, nonplussed at this admission. "I ... I guess I thought you might fancy Ron, with the way you two fight so much." Hermione sighed, then led him into an empty classroom. There she patiently corrected Harry's view of what characteristics made people successful couples, contrasting it with her own opinion that the most solid relationships grew out of friendships, offering her parents as an example.

Eventually Harry conceded that her viewpoint made a lot of sense, which gave him food for thought over the next few days. He knew that he liked Hermione, but did he like Hermione *that way*? He had a difficult time picturing what a romantic relationship with her might be like. After all, she'd always been his buddy Hermione.

But for right now he had one more thing on his mind. "As long as we're here and it's pretty private and all, do you think we could spend some time talking about the egg?" he suggested. Hermione's eyes brightened and she nodded her head vigorously. She'd been hoping he'd ask about that!

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It wasn't until the night of the ball itself, when he saw her descending the stairs from the girls' dorm to the Gryffindor common room, that all of Harry's doubts were removed about whether he might be able to fancy Hermione. Seeing her in that spectacular pale blue gown, which revealed that she was unmistakably a woman, with her hair done up so elegantly, her eyes sparkling as a bright smile lit up her face, brought the same tightness to his chest that he'd previously felt when he looked at Cho. Hermione was a desirable woman! How had he not noticed before?

Harry spent the next few hours in a daze as his mind struggled to grapple with these new impressions of his best female friend. He barely followed Percy's self-important pronouncements during dinner, scarcely noticed what he was eating, and before he realized what was happening she was in his arms on the dance floor, guiding him through the steps she'd shown him the day before.

Hermione would have liked to keep dancing, but she knew Harry would prefer to get off the dance floor as quickly as possible, so she suggested they skip the next one and go for a walk through the rose garden that had been conjured in front of the castle entrance. As they walked along the paths, which were lit with hundreds of twinkling fairy lights, giving them a soft romantic glow, they were both aware of the building tension, an uncertain feeling which had never existed between the two of them.

"Hermione, I'm confused," Harry blurted out at last. "I'm feeling all sorts of things that I don't think I ought to be feeling, but I'm having trouble working out exactly why I shouldn't, because they feel pretty good."

Hermione smiled at this fumbling, but very 'Harryish', declaration. "Maybe this will help," she whispered as she put her hand behind his head, pulling it down as she leaned up and kissed him. An electric thrill shot through both of them, causing them to catch their breaths as they pulled away.

"Okay, now I'm *really* confused," Harry gasped.

"It doesn't have to be that complicated," Hermione suggested. "We're partners, you and I. We work together well; we complement each other – our strengths and weaknesses balance quite nicely. We care a great deal for each other. Why wouldn't we also make good partners on a different level?"

"I don't know," Harry confessed. "I never thought about it that way before."

"Well, that's what you have me around for," Hermione grinned, as she wrapped her arms around his neck. "To think about things like that." She kissed him again, this time with more confidence. And he kissed her back, this time with more enthusiasm.

She giggled at the look of wonder on his face when they finished, but neither spoke for a time, waiting for their hearts to stop pounding before attempting to put into words what they were feeling. They leaned back, his hands holding her waist while hers rested on his shoulders, and locked gazes, searching for and finding that special evidence of deeper affection.

Harry moved his arms up her back and pulled her close, and she sighed happily as she rested her head on his shoulder.

"You know, this is going to change everything," he murmured as his hands caressed her back.

Hermione shuddered at his touch, and moved her mouth near his ear to whisper her reply.

"I'm looking forward to it."

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