

Conversations In the Aftermath An Enlightening Morning Conversation

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“Hey Hermione.”

“Oh, hi Harry. Good morning.”

“What are you doing up so early?”

“I ... I was just awake. You know how I like to get up early. How about you?”

“I couldn't sleep – I mean, I guess I woke up and couldn't get back to sleep.”

“Tea?”

“Love some, thanks.”

The two of them sat quietly sipping their tea for a few minutes.

“Now Harry, what's the real reason?”

“You're not going to let me get off with 'I'm fine' are you?”

“Have I ever?”

“No, not very often anyway.”

“So ...?”

“I have trouble sleeping sometimes.”

“Nightmares?”

“Occasionally. No, really Hermione, it's not every night if that's what you're thinking. I just have a lot on my mind these days.”

“I guess that's understandable.”

“What about you?”

“What do you mean?”

“If I have to be honest with you, I expect you to be honest with me too.”

“Oh. Well, I guess I have a lot on my mind too.”

“Nightmares?”

“Sometimes. But not that often.”

“That's a relief.”

Hermione rose to her feet and held out her hand, beckoning toward the door.

“Come for a walk with me.”

“What? You mean right now?”

“Yes. It's early. We can get in a nice long walk before breakfast.”

“Just the two of us?”

“Yes. I want to talk to you.”

The pair made their way to the top of a small rise and stood gazing out at the horizon.

“I’ve missed this.”

“What?”

“The two of us together. Talking. Watching the sun rise.”

“Yeah, it has been pretty hectic lately.”

“And I can’t remember the last time we had a chance to talk to each other, just us, one on one.”

“You’re right. Not much chance of that with a house full of Weasleys.”

“So, tell me what’s been on your mind lately.”

“Well, it’s not just one thing. I guess I’ve been feeling overwhelmed by everything.”

“That’s understandable. In fact, it would be surprising if you weren’t. After all, we were pretty isolated for most of the year and it’s an adjustment being around lots of people again.”

“It’s not just that. It just seems like I’m being hit by one thing after another. First it was the funerals, of course. And I don’t begrudge that at all, but it was such an emotional time and I ended up pretty drained.”

“I know what you mean. But I was so proud of the way you handled them. Those were some really nice things you said about Fred, and about Remus and Tonks. I don’t think I ever got the chance to tell you that. You were wonderful.”

“Um, gee thanks. They all hit me pretty hard, you know. It was tough with Fred because he always was so good at keeping things lighthearted, and because of the effect it had on the Weasleys. It hurt so much to see them mourning.”

Harry paused and struggled to go on.

“And ... and of course Remus was the last connection to my parents ... I’m sorry, I ...”

“Hush. Go ahead and let it out. That’s what friends are for.”

Hermione held him close as he buried his head into her shoulder.

“Sorry, I think I got your shirt wet.”

“You can cry on me anytime, Harry. I know you always feel like you have to hold it in, but you know you don’t have to do that with me, right?”

“I know. Thank you. But it’s not only that, I feel so bad about little Teddy, too. Growing up an orphan I mean.”

“I know, Harry. And I know you worry about the same thing happening to him as happened to you, but it’s not going to. You’ll make sure of that and I will too.”

“You will?”

“Of course. I’ll help you out with whatever you need.”

“I ... I guess I should have realized that you’d do that. You’ve always been there for me.”

“That’s right, and don’t you forget it. Now, go on.”

“Well, it didn’t stop with the funerals, did it? Next it was the ceremonies, and the speeches, and the medals, and the banquets ...”

“And you’ve always hated that sort of thing.”

“Exactly. But everyone expects me to play the part of the conquering hero. Even Ron and Ginny. They love that stuff. I mean, they know I don’t like it and I can see that they’re sympathetic to how I feel, but they eat it up. And that’s good, because it helps them move past their losses. But I don’t want to keep doing that. I’m tired of being a celebrity.”

“I know. You want to be just Harry. You’d like nothing better than to just get away from the hoopla and settle down and live a normal life with your friends.”

“I knew you’d understand. I should have talked to you about it sooner. You always understand what I’m going through.”

“That’s because I know you better than anyone, Harry. You can always come and talk to me.”

“I’ll try to do a better job of remembering that.”

By unspoken agreement, they sat down on the grass and Hermione leaned her head against Harry's shoulder while he put his arm around her waist.

"This is so nice. Being able to talk with you like this. And it's so calm and peaceful out here."

"Yeah. We should try to do this more often."

"So, how are things going with Ginny?"

"Great! We've been, uh ..."

"OK, by the look on your face I don't think I need to hear that kind of details."

"Oh, sure. I ... hmm."

"What?"

"Well, I guess I assumed that she talked about those things with you. Didn't you tell me once that Lavender and Parvati always shared the details of what they did with guys?"

"True. But ... well, Ginny and I haven't really been that close since ..."

"Since?"

"Well, since she and you started going out."

"Really?"

"Yeah. She's ... well, I think she feels threatened by me. She knows you share a lot of things with me that you don't with her and ... well, I think she'd prefer that you and I weren't so close. And we *were* together all year without her."

"I guess now that you mention it I can see how she'd feel that way. But I have no intention of giving up what I have with you. She's just going to have to learn to deal with it."

"I'm glad to hear that!"

"You, know, Ron worries about that, too. He ..."

Harry stopped abruptly.

"I'm very aware of that. But what were you about to say?"

"Well, let's just say that if he saw a boggart this year it would have turned into you and me kissing each other."

"Really! He told you that?"

"Well, not in so many words, but yes. That's essentially what happened right before he destroyed the locket."

"Oh ... So that's why ..."

"What?"

"I was just thinking of how things seemed to change between you and me when he came back that night. You seemed more distant. You were trying to reassure him, weren't you?"

"Well, yeah." Harry paused, then continued. "So, how are things going with you guys now?"

"Not so great."

"Oh. Well, I'm sorry to hear that. What's wrong?"

"Well, remember how Ron was with Lavender? All of a sudden they were all over each other and it seemed like they were trying to suck each other's face off? Well ..."

"Stop! I mean I ... uh, I try not to think of you and Ron ... uh, doing that."

"I'm sorry. I guess I made the same assumption you just did."

"What's that?"

"Well, I thought that you boys always bragged to each other about how far you got with your girlfriends."

Well, that's true in most cases, but I never talk to Ron about Ginny and he never talks to me about you. Since she's his sister, you understand, he doesn't want to think about her doing that sort of thing with any guy, and certainly doesn't want to hear about it. And, well, you know you're sort of like a sister to me as well so ..."

"Oh. I guess that makes sense. OK, I'll try to avoid the graphic details. But you know I kissed him at Hogwarts right before the battle started."

"It was pretty hard to miss."

"Yes. Ahem. Sorry about that. But that was my first time and ..."

"Wait a minute. I thought you snogged Krum."

"What? Viktor? I never kissed Viktor. Where did you get that idea?"

"Ginny told us."

"Why would she ...? Wait a minute, did you say 'us'? She told Ron too?"

"Yeah, during sixth year when we caught her and Dean snogging in the corridor."

"So ... hmm, well perhaps he thought I was more experienced than I really ... never mind. Anyway, my point is that he wants to move our relationship along much faster than I want to. I mean, we only just started dating and ..."

"And now he's already talking about making it permanent."

"Yes. How did you know?"

"I'm getting the same thing from Ginny."

"I see. Perhaps that's something peculiar about the wizarding world that I wasn't aware of. Getting married so quickly, I mean."

"That could be. I mean, I know my mum and dad weren't dating until their last year, and I think they got married right out of Hogwarts."

"Well, I'm certainly not ready for that yet. I'm not even to the point that I'd say that it's likely to be Ron."

"Well, that's a relief."

"Why? You don't think I should marry Ron?"

"No! Well, yes. I mean, at this point I agree that I don't think you and Ron are ready to get married. But what I meant to say was that it's a relief that I'm not the only one who feels that way. After all, Ginny and I have only been dating a couple of months, if you don't count the time we were apart last year. And ... well ... since you're being so honest ..."

"What?"

"Things aren't really going *that* great with Ginny."

"Oh?"

"Well, the ... OK, the snogging is great. But I'm not sure we ... well, for example, you and I have a lot closer connection than she and I do. I guess I'd thought that a husband and wife would be closer – you know, understand each other – sort of like, well sort of like you and I do."

"Oh my! What a nice thing to say! That deserves a hug. Thank you, that's really good to hear. I mean, that you think so much of our relationship. And ... well, I agree with you. When I get married I want to have the kind of closeness – understanding each other is the way I'd put it also – with my husband that you and I have too. And Ron and I ... well, we aren't there yet."

"Exactly. I mean, Ginny and I aren't there yet either. And now that you mention it, I'd have to agree that Ron doesn't understand you as well as I do. I've always assumed that it was because you and I were both raised as muggles and had that in common."

"Harry, I am so glad we had this conversation. I think both of us are to some extent in the same place. You need to realize, and I do as well, that there's no reason we have to necessarily end up marrying the first person we dated. Well, the first person we were serious about, I mean. Neither Cho nor Viktor counted as real relationships. We need to take it as slow as we need to and not let them rush us into anything we don't want to do. And if it turns out that either of us marries someone else, that's fine."

"You're right. I feel so much better. And I'm also really happy we talked about this. Like I said, we need to do this more often."

"Absolutely."

The two smiled and sat together for a while in a comfortable silence, then got up and continued walking.

"OK, what else is on your mind?"

"What do you mean?"

I mean that I know you pretty well too. And I can tell by the way you just got on your face that you're thinking about something, but are worried about whether to bring it up."

"Harry Potter, that's ... well, I had no idea you noticed things like that. And I appreciate it but ..."

"Come on, out with it."

"Well, it's just that you already have so much else on your mind and I don't ..."

"Hermione Granger! Don't you dare suggest that your concerns aren't as important as mine. You've given up so much for me this past year. I don't mean to say that I didn't appreciate it, but now that's over and it's time I started worrying about you as much as you worry about me. Now, tell me what's bothering you."

"OK. I was thinking about my parents."

"Oh Hermione, I'm so sorry. What a horrible friend I'm being."

"Harry, you ..."

"No, don't say it. I can't believe that didn't already occur to me. What do you want to do about them? And how can I help?"

"Well, I was thinking it was time that I go to Australia and look for them."

"And bring them back?"

"Well, that depends. They might not want to come back."

"OK, now who needs a hug? Come here."

This time Hermione buried her head into Harry's shoulder.

"OK? Better? Now, I'm going to tell you the same thing you're always telling me. Don't keep stuff like that to yourself. Share it with us, just like you want me to share important stuff like that with you."

"You're right. I'll try."

"So, tell me what the problem is."

"I'm worried about how they'll react. Remember, I memory charmed them to think they were different people, and removed all knowledge about me from them. They don't even know they have a daughter. How are they going to react to a strange girl showing up and telling them that, and wanting to cast a spell on them to make them remember? They don't even know magic exists."

"Wow. I never thought about that. You're right, that's going to be a problem. We should all go together."

"Oh no, I'm not saying that. You and Ron have too much else on your minds."

"Hermione ..."

"And besides, I don't think Ron can pass as a muggle well enough. I mean, can you see him flying on an airplane for twenty-four hours? He'd go spare. He'd be complaining about everything muggle before the first hour was out. By the time we were half way there we wouldn't be speaking to each other, and by the time we arrived I'd be ready to kill him."

"OK, I'll grant you that. But I can still come."

"Harry, I couldn't ask you to do that."

"You don't need to. It's my choice."

"Harry ..."

"No, Hermione. It's just like you told me last year. You don't have a choice. You need me and I'm coming with you."

"Oh Harry. OK, you're right. Thank you. And ..."

"Go on."

"Well, I think I need to get away from here for a while. And from what you've been telling me, which actually confirms what I'd already suspected ..."

"I need to get away too."

"Yes. However ..."

"And you were thinking of asking me all along, because you wanted me to come with you, and you also thought it would be good for me to get away from all this madness, but you were feeling guilty about asking me, and worried about what I'd say. Does that about cover it?"

“I’m impressed! You really do know me pretty well. But ...”

“But ...?”

“What about Ginny?”

“I could ask you the same thing. What about Ron? And what exactly are you asking? What will I feel about going off without Ginny, or what will Ginny feel about me going off without her? And the same questions apply to you and Ron.”

“You left one out. How will they both react to us going off together?”

“Well, as to the first question, from what we just said, I’m thinking it might be good to get away from them for a while. Sort of a chance to cool things off a bit. And let them know that things aren’t as set in stone as they seem to think. As to how they’ll react, I think I can guess, but there’s only one sure way to find out. Are you willing to risk the potential unpleasantness?”

“Well, I’m not thrilled about the prospect, but on the other hand I’m not going to stop doing things with you just because one or both of them will get jealous. I told you before, I have no intention of giving up what you and I have together.”

“Neither do I. Oof! You need to give a guy more warning with those hugs.”

“Shut up and hug me back. That’s better.”

“So, it’s settled then? You and I are going to Australia and see what the situation is.”

“Yes. Oh Harry, you have no idea how much better I feel. Thank you so much!”

“Well, let’s wait until after we face the Weasley temper before you decide how much better you feel. I think it’s time we were getting back.”

“Oh. Can’t we stay out here longer?”

“Come on, show that Gryffindor courage.”

Harry took her hand and coaxed her back in the direction of the house.

“It’s times like this I wish I’d let the Hat put me in Ravenclaw.”

“How can you say that? Just think of all the trouble you wouldn’t have got into if you hadn’t hung around with me all those years.”

“Don’t push your luck, Potter.”

The laughter of two best friends echoed through the clear morning air of Ottery St. Catchpole as they embarked on another adventure together.

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Conversations In the Aftermath Conversations On a Plane

“All set?”

“Yep, I just barely got that suitcase to fit. And thanks again for giving me that luggage set as a late birthday present.”

“Well, we could hardly fly to Australia with our only baggage being my little beaded handbag, now could we?”

“No, I suppose we’d get some funny looks wouldn’t we? Anyway, I can’t believe this happened so fast. Kingsley really worked some miracles didn’t he?”

“Nope. Magic.”

“Hah. That was a good one. But it was really great of him to get the paperwork done so fast, and especially to smooth things over with the goblins. For a while I thought they weren’t going to allow me any access to my vault.”

“Well, he as well as the entire wizarding world *do* owe you a pretty big favor. And you are still banned from Gringotts. I still can’t believe Griphook betrayed us like that.”

“Don’t worry about it. Just as long as they allow someone else to withdraw money for me, I don’t care if I ever set foot in that place again.”

“I suppose.”

“So, now what do we do?”

“You buckle your seatbelt and listen to the flight attendant tell you about the emergency exits. No, that one’s mine. See, it works just like in a car.”

“Got it. Emergency exits?”

“Yes, in case the plane crashes. Oh, don’t look at me like that, it’s not going to happen. They just have to say all of that just in case. It’s actually a very low probability.”

“But still ...”

“Relax, everything will be fine. And if anything does happen I’ll just side-along apparate you to safety, just like I always do.”

“OK.”

“Look, would you like to sit by the window so you can see what’s happening?”

“No, I don’t think so.”

“You’re really nervous about this aren’t you?”

“Yeah.”

“I don’t understand how a boy who routinely performs death defying moves on a broomstick can be nervous about flying in a large, well-quipped jet.”

“I guess it’s because on my broom I’m in control, but here I can’t do anything about it.”

“I suppose I can understand that. Just try to relax.”

“Harry, when my mum and dad fly my mum always holds my dad’s hand when the plane takes off. Would you like to hold my hand?”

“No, that’s all right. I’ll be OK.”

“Harry, would it be all right if I held *your* hand?”

“Sure.”

“There, that wasn’t so bad, was it?”

“Well, except for when it sounded like they shut the engines off just after we got into the air.”

“Oh, that’s normal. Once they get off the ground they can throttle back. It’s also for noise reduction for the people who live near the airport.”

“Oh, I guess that makes sense.”

“Harry?”

“Hmm?”

“You can let go of my hand now.”

“Whoops.”

“What’s so funny?”

“Oh, I was just thinking of the last time I held your hand. It was that morning when we decided to do this. Ginny asked me about it later.”

“Oh? What happened? You never did tell me about your conversation with her.”

“Well, if I remember right, it went something like this.”

-ooOoo-

“Harry?”

“Hmm?”

“Why were you holding hands with Hermione this morning?”

“Wh-what?”

“This morning before breakfast, you were outside with Hermione. I saw you walking back from my window and you were holding hands.”

“Oh, well, force of habit, I guess. We spent a lot of time under the invisibility cloak while we were moving around this past year, and had to stay close together, so we just got used to holding hands to keep in contact with each other.”

“I see. And Ron?”

“What about Ron?”

“Did you hold hands with him too?”

“No, but I imagine Hermione did.”

“Hmmpf”

“Ginny, you don’t need to worry about Hermione.”

“Oh, of course I’m not worried. Hermione’s not exactly any competition for me. I mean, she’s not really your type. But ...”

“What?”

“Well, don’t you think she’s interfering somewhat with our relationship? It’s obvious, isn’t it? Any time you spend with her means less time you can spend with me. I think you should, you know, keep your distance. It would probably help her and Ron’s relationship too, if you weren’t hanging around with her so much.”

“Ginny, that’s not going to happen. Hermione’s one of my best friends. I like spending time with her, and I’m going to keep doing it. If you can’t handle that ...”

“No, no, I’m not saying that you can’t still be friends. It’s just, well maybe you could cut back on the time you spend alone with her.”

“Ginny, this morning was the first I’ve spent any significant amount of time alone with her in ages. And we both realized we’d missed it.”

“Come on Harry, you’re not living with her in a tent any more. You’re with me now and you just have to get used to ...”

“Actually, I need to tell you something along those lines that you’re probably not going to like.”

“Wh ... what?”

“Hermione and I are going to go to Australia to bring her parents back.”

“WHAT!”

“We talked about it this morning and we decided it was time for her to go to Australia. And I offered to go with her.”

"Harry! You can't do that! You need to stay here with me. We're together now. I didn't wait for you for a whole year just to have you go running off again. And besides, Ron's her boyfriend now. That's his job."

"We'll be traveling and living as muggles the whole time. We don't think Ron can manage that."

"But that doesn't mean you have to go. She can just go by herself. She managed to get them over there by herself, didn't she? Harry, you don't need to do this."

"Maybe I don't! And she didn't need to give up a whole year of her life to help me either, but she did! And her parents wouldn't even be over there if it hadn't been for her connection to me. So as far as I'm concerned, yes I do need to do this. I owe her, more than anyone on earth. She's always been there for me when I needed her and I'm bloody well going to be there for her!"

"Well, don't you think you owe me something? What about what I gave up for you?"

Harry bit back the reply he wanted to make, pointing out that she hadn't really given up anything compared to what Hermione had. Instead he tried to bring the argument to a conclusion.

"I'm just going to do this Ginny. It won't be for that long, and besides you'll be going back to Hogwarts in a few weeks."

Ginny stared at him a long while, then responded in a cool voice. "You need to learn to consult with me about these decisions, Harry. After we're married you won't be able to just go running off whenever you want."

"Who says we're getting married?"

"What! Harry, are you saying you're breaking up with me?"

"No, I'm not breaking up. But we're just dating. That doesn't mean we're necessarily going to get married."

-ooOoo-

"Well, you don't really want to know what she said after that. It got kinda personal. It mostly came down to it being your fault. You have too much influence on me. So as you've probably noticed, Ginny and I haven't talked much since."

"Well yes, but in truth you've been very busy the past week getting ready to go. And she was quite affectionate last night."

"Yeah, giving me something to remember her by. But now you've heard what happened with Ginny and me. How did it go when you broke the news to Ron?"

"Pretty much the same, but with more yelling and less understanding."

"Didn't think that was possible. Surprised I didn't hear it then."

"That's because I had the foresight to put up silencing charms."

"Oh. I wondered why I didn't hear the explosion."

"You see, unlike your conversation with Ginny, where you mostly kept your cool, my arguments with Ron tend to end up with shouting on both our parts."

"I have noticed that, yes."

"I know. But I'd hoped that things would be different now."

"Why? The two of you have always argued. I figured that meant ..."

"Please don't give me that 'you argue like an old married couple, so you should be together' rubbish."

"Well ..."

"Honestly Harry, how many married couples do you know who really do argue that much? My parents don't. Mr. and Mrs. Weasley don't. What about your aunt and uncle?"

"No, not really. They yelled at me a lot but not at each other."

"That's just one of those stupid myths that make no sense. Any couple that argues with each other all the time does *not* have a healthy marriage. And I have no intention of having a marriage like that either."

"So, why are you and Ron together then?"

"Gee, I don't know, maybe because I'm not with you?"

"Huh?"

“OK, that was partly a joke. But I spent all of my time during school with two boys. It only stands to reason that I’d end up getting together with one of them. It’s not like I’m going to start going out with someone I don’t know.”

“What about Krum?”

“Harry, that was one date. It was never going to be a long-term relationship.”

“I think he wanted it to be.”

“And that’s exactly why I turned him down. I didn’t really know him, and with us living in two different countries there wasn’t going to be much chance to change that.”

“OK. I guess I sorta see your point.”

“Here’s another example. Why was your relationship with Cho such a disaster, but with Ginny it wasn’t?”

“Um ... because I didn’t know Cho very well?”

“Right. You were initially attracted to both of them for the same reason. They’re both very pretty, have beautiful long straight hair, and they’re both athletic, and have similar figures. That’s clearly the type of girl that catches your eye. But when you were with Cho you had no idea what to talk about other than quidditch, because you didn’t really know her and she didn’t really know you. You and Ginny both knew each other really well before you started dating, and had even lived in the same house quite a bit. So you were comfortable together.”

“Guess I’ve never thought about it that way before.”

“No, I didn’t think you had.”

“OK, back to what happened during your and Ron’s argument.”

“I suppose I should tell you the details, since you shared your little chat with Ginny. Well, the surprising thing was that he didn’t really argue that much that he should go. I don’t think the idea of flying halfway around the world appeals to him at all. He mostly argued that I shouldn’t. And after I made it clear that leaving them in Australia and never seeing them again was not an option, he argued that you shouldn’t go with me. You know, the same old jealous thing we talked about last week.”

“You mean where he’s afraid you’re going to leave him and get together with me?”

“That’s the one.”

“That’s getting so tiresome. Hermione, have we ever done anything together that would give him that idea?”

“You mean besides all that wild, passionate sex we had with each other while we were alone in the tent for all those weeks last winter?”

Harry made some choking noises, which caused a few heads of nearby passengers to turn his way. It was a few seconds before he noticed the evil grin on Hermione’s face. “Wha...! Oh, I get it. Ha, ha. Yeah, besides that.”

“Well, we spend a lot of time together. We like to go off alone to talk. We hold hands sometimes.”

“So?”

“So, if you saw, say, Dean and Ginny doing those things would you worry?”

“Well, yeah, but ... I mean ... you know ... OK, I see your point. So why is it different when you and I do it?”

“Because we’ve been friends like, forever, and we just enjoy being together. And he should know and trust us enough by now.”

“OK, I’ll buy that. Too bad he can’t see it that way.”

“Oh, I’m sure he does, most of the time. It’s only when he gets upset that it comes out.”

“I guess. So, was that about it?”

“Yes, if you don’t count the door slamming.”

Hermione sighed dejectedly and Harry wrapped an arm around her.

“So all the quarreling is getting to you?”

“Yes, Harry. Contrary to what you seem to think, I do not, and never have, enjoyed arguing with Ron. As I was saying before, I’d hoped that we were getting past that. Didn’t it seem like that to you?”

“Yeah, as a matter of fact, I did notice that you seemed to be getting along better. That’s what made me think that things were starting to work out for you guys.”

“Me too.”

At this Hermione fell silent and leaned her head against Harry's shoulder, and they sat quietly together thinking about all the things that were on their minds.

-ooOoo-

“Harry, are you awake?”

“Hmm? Yeah, I guess. How did the movie turn out?”

“She finally wised up and left the rich guy who was a jerk and married the wedding singer.”

“Good. I always like stories where the nice guy gets the girl. What's so funny?”

“Oh, it's just that to so many people you're the rich and famous Harry Potter, but really you think of yourself as just Harry, a simple quiet boy who just tries to do what's right.”

“Well, yeah.”

“And there's nothing wrong with that. I just wish everyone could know you like I do and see that you're just a nice guy.”

“Thanks. I appreciate that.”

“Anyway, I had a reason for waking you up. Can I talk to you about Ron?”

“Er, I suppose.”

“You see, one of the reasons I wanted to get away was to spend some time thinking about our relationship. And I was hoping you could help me.”

“Well, I'm not exactly the smartest person about relationships.”

“I know, but since you know Ron so well I thought you could help me figure him out.”

“Um, OK. I can try.”

Hermione shifted in her seat and leaned closer to him, and he moved his head closer to hers to make for a more intimate conversation.

“Earlier you asked why Ron and I were together and I gave you a flippant answer. But it is something that I've thought a lot about. Unlike you, Ron occasionally made me think that he was interested in me like that, particularly when he'd get all protective of me. And I really do care for him, and I know he cares for me. But I just don't understand why he does some of the things he does.”

“Like what?”

“Well, the whole Yule Ball thing was so frustrating. Initially, he made it very clear that he had no intention of asking me. Remember that conversation you two had about finding the best looking girl you could?”

Harry nodded guiltily.

“And then he did ask me after it was too late, but even then it didn't seem like it was because he wanted to, but because he was desperate. So all of a sudden at the ball itself, he has a fit because I'm with Viktor. Like he was jealous. Do you agree?”

“Well, I have to confess that on that one I was just as stupid as Ron. When I saw you with Viktor I couldn't believe my eyes. You looked so beautiful that night. It was the first time I ever thought of you that way, and I'd guess that was true for Ron as well. At the time I was all hung up on Cho, or I might have had the same reaction that Ron did – namely, why haven't I ever noticed Hermione before? But he spent the whole night glaring at Krum the same way I was glaring at Cedric. I think he suddenly realized what he'd been overlooking.”

“Oh Harry, don't exaggerate.”

“Hermione, everyone there that night thought so. You should have seen the look on Parvati's face. And I noticed that Malfoy was stunned speechless.”

“So ... you thought I looked pretty too?”

Um ... yeah, that's what I've been saying. But we're talking about Ron, remember?”

“Right. So you think that was an eye-opening experience for him?”

“I really do. And remember, before that night he idolized Krum, but for the rest of the year he couldn't stand him.”

“Because of me. And he almost had a fit when I let slip that Viktor had asked me to go to Bulgaria to visit him. See, that's what I thought. But a whole year went by and he never did anything but sulk whenever Viktor's name came up. So finally, in sixth year, I decided to ask him to Slughorn's party. Remember?”

“Yeah, but that didn't turn out very well because of Lavender.”

Exactly. If he really was interested in getting together with me, why didn't he jump at the chance? Instead, as soon as I asked him out he started snogging her and saying he thought my invitation was only intended to be as friends. Do you realize just how embarrassing that was? I was so angry with him ..."

"That you asked McClaggen to the party just to spite him."

"OK, so that was not the brightest idea I've ever had, but can you blame me? What on earth happened?"

"Oh, well I actually know the answer to that one. Remember when I told you what Ginny said about you snogging Krum?"

"Yeah. So?"

"That was when she told us. It really shook Ron up. He kept asking me if I thought it was true. Then he got all sulky and gave you the cold shoulder until after that game, and ... well, you know what happened."

"I don't believe it! That was why he did it? Because he was getting even with me for something he *thought* I'd done nearly two years before? How immature can you get?"

"Well, he's gotten better since then."

"I suppose. Most of the time anyway. But he still seems to revert every once in awhile. And that's the other thing I don't understand. All of a sudden last summer he was the nicest, most considerate person I could imagine. It even got annoying at times, like when I would be talking to you and got upset and all of a sudden he was hugging me."

"I remember that. I was about to do something to try to calm you down when he beat me to it. I thought it was pretty odd behavior ... for him I mean. Then he explained it later, on my birthday."

"What? He explained to you why he was being so nice all of a sudden?"

"Not exactly. But for my birthday he gave me a book called *Twelve Failsafe Ways to Charm Witches*. He'd gotten it from Fred and George and pretty much admitted he was using it to ... how did he put it? ... get things going with you."

"You're kidding me. That's what started all the concern, compliments, and so on? Well, I don't know whether I should laugh or cry."

"Why?"

"Don't you see how ironic that is? Ron Weasley, the boy who hates books, turns to a book to figure out how to woo Hermione Granger, the girl who loves books. It sounds so sweet when you think about it that way. On the other hand, it's pretty sad that he had to find out from a book that he should be nice to me instead of arguing with me if he wanted to impress me."

"I think you should go with the first interpretation."

"Perhaps. But what I have to figure out is if it's permanent."

"What do you mean?"

"Is he just going to be like that until he's 'won' me? What happens then? Will he keep treating me nicely or will he revert back to the way he was?"

"I don't know how to answer that."

"No, I don't expect you to. That's something I have to figure out for myself. But I'd appreciate any insight you have as things move forward."

"Sure. I'll do whatever I can to help. More than anything, I want you to be happy, Hermione."

"I know you do, and I really appreciate it, Harry. And thank you so much for all the help you've given me already. Let's see what they're offering us for supper."

-ooOoo-

"Hermione?" Hermione put down the book she was reading and looked over at Harry.

"Yes?"

"I've been thinking."

"OK, I just thought of so many smart aleck responses I could make to that statement that I can't pick one, so assume I just made a witty comment."

"Right. Let's go with 'you've been rubbing off on me'."

"Works for me. So what's on your mind?"

"I've been thinking about what you said about me being attracted to Ginny."

"OK."

"Well, the thing is, even though you said she was a lot like Cho, it wasn't like that. With Cho, the first time I saw her I was bowled over by how pretty she was, and I couldn't think of anything else for a bit. That never happened with Ginny. She was always Ron's little sister, and I just thought of her as a kid sister too."

"Well, that's because you knew her before she matured and became really attractive. I'm sure that you gradually noticed how beautiful she was becoming and how her figure was filling out."

"No, not really. Even the summer before sixth year, when we spent a month and a half at the Burrow, I never thought of her that way. Fleur was the one there who really took my breath away."

"Hmmp. You and Ron both. Practically drooling over her."

"Hey, I wasn't as bad as Ron. I just noticed her, I didn't go all slack-jawed like he did."

"I suppose you're right."

"So anyway, I never really thought of Ginny that way until I heard Pansy mention to Zabini how good-looking she was and he agreed. Even then, I never really noticed her until that day after we learned about Amortentia in Potions."

"What!"

"When we smelled the Amortentia, I smelled treacle tart, a broomstick, and a flowery smell that reminded me of the Burrow. When we got to lunch, I realized it was Ginny's perfume."

"Oh no! She couldn't have!"

"Hermione, I know what you're thinking and I don't think it was that. I didn't suddenly wake up one day in love with her like Ron was when he ate that chocolate cauldron that Romilda Vane had given me. He couldn't stop talking about how much he wanted her until we got the antidote from Slughorn."

"So what *did* you feel for her then?"

"Well, nothing really, until I saw her kissing Dean in that corridor. Then it felt as if a monster was attacking my insides, and I wanted to hex Dean into a pile of goo. That night all I could think about was that I wished it was me kissing her. After that I kept getting that feeling every time I saw them together, and just gradually started thinking more and more about how much I wanted her."

"I don't understand. That's not love, that's jealousy, infatuation, and lust. And that's exactly what Professor Slughorn said the Amortentia would do. But you're right, I'm not aware of any love potion that's as slow acting as that."

"That's what I thought too."

"On the other hand, you *were* a hormone-crazed sixteen year old boy so perhaps that behavior is typical of them as well."

"Hey!"

Once again, they attracted the attention of the nearby passengers, this time wondering what the laughing young couple found so funny.

"So, how long did this 'monster inside you' continue? I noticed a few of the looks you were giving Ginny that year."

"All the way until the day I kissed her after the quidditch match. I'd been fretting for months before that what Ron would do to me if I got involved with his sister, but on that day I just gave in."

"Well, that was a silly thing to worry about. He wanted you to get together with Ginny. He even hinted about it after she broke up with Michael Corner."

"He did? I guess I missed that completely."

"So after that?"

"Well, after that I just felt good inside being with her. It was great pretending to be a normal guy with a girlfriend."

"And after you broke up with her?"

"Well, I missed her, and thought about her at times, wondering what she was doing."

"I remember you used to sit there staring at the Marauder's Map while we were in the tent."

"Yeah. It was sort of comforting, seeing her go into her dorm at night and figuring that she was OK, even if things weren't going that well for us."

"But no more 'monster inside'?"

"Not really. That seems to be gone now."

Do you think you love her?"

"I'm not sure. I like being with her and all, but it's not like I can't stand to be away from her."

"Perhaps now that you're not in life-threatening danger anymore you're not so desperate for the sense of normalcy she represented."

"I think I followed that. Maybe you're right. What about you? Do you love Ron?"

"Well, I know I love him in the same way I love you, as a friend, but I'm not sure if it goes beyond that – if I'm in love with him. I'm certainly not to the point where I can't imagine spending my life with anyone but him."

There was a long pause, then Hermone sighed and whispered, "I thought I was moving in that direction, but then ..."

"He walked out on us."

"I thought my heart had broken. I was so hurt, so angry. I thought we ... I don't know what I thought."

"You cried and cried. I didn't know what to do. I wanted to comfort you but all I could think of to say was that he would come back, which I wasn't sure was true, or that you should go to him. But I couldn't bear to say that because I didn't want you to leave."

"I would never leave you Harry."

"I was terrified that you would, though. I don't think I could have gone on without you. I was so scared."

Somewhere along the way the two of them had taken each other's hands, and by now they were squeezing them so tightly that it became painful. When Hermone winced, Harry loosened his grip. Neither let go, though.

"I felt like that when Hagrid brought your body back from the Forbidden Forest and we all thought you were dead. It was like I didn't want to go on living. I wanted to lie down right there and die. But I had to force myself to keep fighting. And when I realized you were still alive ... I was so giddy I almost passed out."

"That sounds just like what I felt at the Department of Mysteries when I thought you'd been killed. I couldn't even move until Neville told me you were still alive."

They both fell silent as they just stared into each other's eyes, searching out and finding the truth in those statements, and accepting just how much each needed the other. Finally Hermone spoke again.

"See, that's the problem. I couldn't leave you, and I know you wouldn't leave me, but Ron left us. And life went on without him and we managed just fine. I just don't know what to think now."

Harry managed to snake an arm around Hermone's shoulder and pull her close. The two of them sat there pondering what they had shared while the jet aircraft streaked on into the night.

-xox-XOX-XOX-xox-

Conversations In the Aftermath Conversations in Australia

There are three separate time periods represented in this chapter. The first is after they'd been in Australia for a while, on the day they finally found Hermione's parents. The second is about a week later, and the third is about a week after that.

The exhausted young couple staggered into their hotel room at the end of a long day, and Harry wrapped Hermione up in a comforting hug.

"Finally! I can't believe it took so long to find them. I'm exhausted."

"I knew you could do it. You're the most persistent person I know. It was just a matter of time."

"Thank you Harry. For everything. I don't think I could have done it without you."

"I'm just glad I could help."

"Harry?"

"Hmm?"

"How is it that you always know what I need? You never used to be this way."

"What do you mean?"

"Lately you've encouraged me when I needed encouraging, comforted me when I needed comforting, held my hand to let me know you were there to support me, and hugged me when I needed a hug. Those are things you were never able to do. I could always tell you wanted to comfort me and so forth, but you were always so uneasy and uncertain about what you should do."

"You're right. It took me a long time before I stopped feeling awkward in situations like this. No one ever showed me affection before I went to Hogwarts, or comfort, or love, or anything like that. I think you were the first one who ever hugged me, and it shocked me at first."

"Oh Harry ..."

"No, I don't want to go over that again. But even after I got used to it, it was still difficult for me to initiate it. And of course I was often so wrapped up in my own problems that I didn't always pick up on yours."

"Well, to be fair, you usually did have some pretty pressing problems of your own."

"I know, but I still should have done better. But at any rate, I don't have those things to worry about now and I decided that I was going to take care of you for a change."

"I must say you've done a splendid job of it. But how did you manage to pick it up so quickly?"

"Easy. I had a good teacher."

"Harry ..."

"No, really. I just tried to focus on what you were going through, and try to put myself in your position and figure out how you were feeling, and then I thought about what you would do for me in that situation. You were always taking hold of my hand when I needed your support, and you always said the right thing when I needed encouragement, and you always gave me a hug when I needed comforting. So I try to do those same things for you."

"Oh Harry."

"Hey, I didn't mean to make you cry."

"I guess that's the one thing you haven't quite mastered yet. What to do about crying girls."

"You're right. The only thing I know how to do is hug them."

"I take it back. You *have* mastered what to do with crying girls."

"So, you tired enough that you want to go straight to bed?"

"Yeah, I think so."

-ooOoo-

(a short time later, after they'd gone to bed)

"Harry?"

"Yeah?"

"I'm scared."

"Of what's going to happen tomorrow when we talk to your parents?"

"Yes. What if they hate me? What if they don't want anything to do with me?"

"Don't worry. Just remember that they love you. As soon as they get their memories back they're going to remember what an incredible daughter they have."

"Do you really think so?"

"I really do."

"Harry? Could you do one more thing for me?"

"Sure."

"Could you hold me tonight?"

"You mean come over into your bed and hold you while you fall asleep."

"Y..Yes. But you don't have to if ..."

"No, that's fine. I'd be glad to."

"Here, just scoot up behind me and put your arms ... yes, like that. Perfect. Are you sure you're OK with this?"

"No problem. As long as I can keep your hair out of my face."

"Prat."

"I love you too."

"I know you do. And Harry?"

"Yeah?"

"Thank you."

-ooOoo-

(the next morning)

"Harry?"

"Mmmm."

"Harry, good morning."

"Morning Hermione ... huh? Wait, what am I ... where? Oh Hermione ... I'm sorry I ..."

"Relax, Harry, everything's fine."

"I'm sorry. I only meant to hold you until you fell asleep, then I was going to go back to my own bed. I swear."

"Harry, it's OK. Nothing improper happened."

"Are you sure? I mean, what if I touched something during the night that I wasn't supposed to?"

"Harry, anything you might have done didn't bother me, so don't worry about it."

"Uh ... OK. So ... how did we get like this?"

"I guess my sleeping self decided your chest made a good pillow. And I do like having your arm wrapped around me like that."

Well, it is pretty comfortable I guess.

"Did you sleep all right?"

"I think so. I didn't wake up at all until just now. I'd say that was the best night's sleep I've had since ..."

"Since?"

"I'm not sure. Sometime during sixth year I suppose."

"Well, that's good to hear!"

"Yeah, we should sleep together more often."

"Really?"

"Oh no! I didn't ... I didn't mean it like that!"

"That's OK, I know exactly what you meant. I was thinking the same thing but I couldn't figure out any way to say it that didn't sound suggestive. I think you just proved that there isn't one."

"So, no more sleeping together? Sleeping in the same bed, I mean."

"I don't think so. No matter how we try to explain it, it will seem wrong."

"So, are you ready to get up now?"

"Not really."

"Trying to stall a while to get up your courage?"

"Yes."

"Well, it's still early. I guess we can wait a bit longer."

"Good. Since this is the last time we'll be able to do this, I want to enjoy every minute."

The two of them contented themselves in each other's embrace in silence for a few minutes.

"Hermione?"

"Yes?"

"This isn't the first time we've done this is it?"

"What ... what do you mean?"

"Last year? When you and I were alone in the tent together?"

"I ... I don't ..."

"Sometimes you would crawl into bed with me and hold me."

"I didn't think you knew."

"At first I wasn't sure if I was dreaming. But then I didn't know why you were doing it, if you were just lonely, or missing Ron, or what. And you never said anything about it so I thought you were too embarrassed to bring it up. So I didn't say anything about it either because I didn't want to make you uncomfortable. Things were stressful enough as it was."

"Well, the reason was that you'd start shaking and crying out in your sleep. I was sure you were having a nightmare, and thought Voldemort might be sending you visions. So I crawled in behind you one night and just held you until you calmed down. It seemed to help so I kept doing it whenever it happened. I always tried to get back to my own bed before you woke up though. I guess it didn't always work."

"I guess not. I never slept for very long without waking up. But it definitely helped. It always seemed that I'd fall back asleep more easily when you were there."

"I'm glad."

"That's the other reason I never said anything. I wanted you to keep doing it."

"I think you're going to make me cry again."

"Go ahead. But the reason I brought it up is to explain why I agreed so readily last night when you asked me to come over here and hold you. Since it was something you had done for me, I reckoned it was something I should do for you."

“Harry, you are the absolute best friend a person could ever have.”

“You are too, Hermione, you are too.”

-oooOOOooo-

Hermione’s parents were overjoyed to have her back in their lives. After the emotional reunion, they decided to stay in Australia a bit longer while the Grangers prepared to move back to England, and to do some sightseeing.

-ooOoo-

Hermione walked into Harry’s room, tying the strings of a bikini top at the back of her neck.

“My goodness, Harry, can you believe we’re about to go see the Great Barrier Reef?”

“Wow!”

“Harry?”

“Wow!”

“Harry stop it. You’re making me even more self-conscious than I already am.”

“I’m sorry. It’s just that ... Wow.”

“Auughh! I never should have let my mother talk me into wearing this string bikini. I feel like I’m practically naked.”

“Remind me to thank your mother.”

“Oh Harry, stop!”

“OK, OK. It’s just that I’m having a Yule Ball moment here.”

“What?”

“I’ve just been hit over the head again with the fact that not only is my best friend a girl, but an incredibly attractive one as well.”

“That’s ... well that’s a very nice thing for you to say. Thank you. But could you please stop staring at my chest?”

“I’ll try, but ... maybe I should stand behind you.”

“Oh honestly! How am I supposed to talk to you then?”

“Never mind. It didn’t help. The rear view is pretty distracting too.”

“Harry! Oh, what am I going to do with you?”

“Are you kids about ready? The snorkeling boat leaves in half an hour.”

“Hi Mum, yes, we just finished changing into our swim suits.”

“Oh good. I see that new suit I got you fits perfectly. It looks great on you.”

“I agree Mrs. Granger. She looks incredible. I can hardly take my eyes off her.”

“Harry ...”

“Of course, that’s why I bought it for her. And what about you? How do you like your suit?”

“Well, it’s a little snug.”

“But it looks fantastic on you. Don’t you agree Hermione? He’s quite a hunk isn’t he?”

“Mum!”

“Well?”

“Well, yes, but ...”

“Really? You think I look good?”

“Of course Harry. I’ve always thought you were good looking. And now that your body’s filled out and you aren’t so skinny anymore ...”

“Like I said, a real hunk.”

Mum!"

-oooOOOooo-

"Harry, can I talk with you for a bit?"

"Sure, Mr. Granger."

"I want you to know that I've really enjoyed getting to know you these past few weeks. But I have to admit I'm curious about your relationship with Hermione."

"We're friends, sir, best friends. She's sorta like my sister."

"I see. You know, the two of you seem closer than just about anyone I know, certainly closer than I am to my sister. Are you sure it's not more?"

"Well, we are very close. We have been for years. And I know we've grown even closer this past year. As a matter of fact, you're not the first person to think that there might be more between us. But we're both dating other people."

"And how's that going?"

"Pretty good ... well ... OK at least."

"Any problems related to how close you and Hermione are?"

"Well, yeah actually."

"So you're saying that the ones you are currently dating would also be among those who think that there might be more between the two of you?"

"Yeah, I suppose you could put it that way. I know for sure that Ron's big fear is that Hermione and I will get together. And I imagine that Ginny's worried about it as well."

"Does that tell you something?"

"Er ... maybe."

"Here's something for you to think about. How would you feel if you both married other people and didn't see each other every day, or even very often, and weren't a part of each others lives any more?"

"I'd ... that would be I don't even want to think about that. I can't imagine what my life would be without Hermione in it." There was a pause while Harry looked down, shaking his head. "I'm sorry I can't give you a better answer. Every time I try to think about it, my stomach tightens up ... a feeling of panic. The thought scares me to death."

"So what do you think you could do to make sure that doesn't happen?"

There was a longer pause while Harry stared at Hermione's father, who could almost see the opposing thoughts battling in the boy's head.

"Look, I know what you're suggesting. But she's with Ron."

"And is he better for her than you?"

"Ron's a great guy. He's my best mate."

"But is he good for Hermione?"

Harry fell silent once more with an expression of discomfort and uncertainty on his face. Dan patted him on the back as he ended the conversation, and left him with one last suggestion.

"At least let her know she has a choice."

-ooOoo-

"Hermione? Do you have a minute to talk?"

"Sure Mum. What did you want to talk about?"

"Well, as you might expect, I've been watching you and Harry for the past two weeks."

"I would have been surprised if you hadn't. I'm well aware of where I get my inquisitive nature from. Not to mention I've noticed the thoughtful look on your face at times. What's on your mind?"

"I can't help but notice how much the two of you love each other."

"Oh ... I suppose you could put it that way. I mean, with all the things we've been through together, we'd have to be very close. So of course we love each other. He's my best friend."

“But it could be more.”

“No Mum, it isn’t like that. Sure, I used to think about that possibility, but I’m just not his type. He’s never looked at me that way.”

“Trust me, he’s looking that way at you now.”

“Mother, just because he likes the way I look in a bikini doesn’t mean ...”

“Do you think your friend Ron would look at his sister Ginny like that?”

Hermione gave her mother a skeptical look, then just shook her head.

“How would you feel if he married someone else?”

“I’d be happy for him.”

“And what about you? How would you feel if some other woman were the center of his life - did all the things for him that you do?”

Hermione studied her shoes in silence.

“Hermione, at least give it a chance.”

“What if it doesn’t work out? I might lose him as a friend.”

“Hermione, you and I both know that won’t happen – you’d be at least as close to him as if you didn’t try and he married someone else without knowing how you feel.”

“But he’s with Ginny now.”

“And is she better for him than you are?”

“Yes. Probably. I mean, she’s perfect for him.”

“Is she as close to him as you are?”

Hermione thought back to some of her recent conversations with Harry. “No, not really.”

“Does she know him as well as you do? Can she read his moods like you can? Does she always know what he needs like you do? Has she been there for him, right by his side, for seven years like you have?”

“Of course not.”

“Does she really, truly care for him as much as you do?”

“She ... I ... Probably. Maybe. Maybe not.”

“So is she really better for Harry than you?”

“I don’t know!”

-ooOoo-

“Daniel Granger, have you ever met anyone as stubborn as our daughter?”

Dan looked at her and smirked. “Yes.”

Emma scowled and hit him on the arm. “With answers like that, you’ll be sleeping on the couch!”

Dan rubbed his arm and gave her a look of wounded innocence. “I was talking about Harry.”

“Sure you were.”

“Trust me, that young man is every bit as stubborn as Hermione.”

“What are we going to do about them?”

“We’ve done all we can – the rest is up to them. If it’s meant to happen it will.”

“I just want them to be happy.”

-ooOoo-

“Hermione?”

"Yes Harry? My goodness, you look so serious. What is it?"

"I've been wondering what was going to happen when we go back."

"Actually, I have too."

"Are you going back to the Weasleys or are you going to live with your parents?"

"Well, I might stay with my parents for a while. I haven't seen them in so long, and even before last year I hardly ever spent any time with them. Even if I don't live with them I'd want to make them a bigger part of my life. But ... it also depends on ... well, what do you want to do? Are you going back to the Weasleys?"

"That's part of what's worrying me. I think they'll expect me to, but ... well I think I've imposed on them enough and I want to be able to make my own decisions. Like what to do with my life, where to work ... where to live. And I don't see that happening very easily if I go back there. There will be the same pressures that I needed to get away from, if you know what I mean."

"I know exactly what you mean. In that house, Mrs. Weasley is in charge, and she expects everyone to do as she says. It wouldn't be easy for us to make our own decisions without getting a piece of her mind. That's why Fred and George moved out, and the older boys as well, when they left Hogwarts. And it's not only that. I ... I've realized something the past few weeks. I'm afraid that the Weasleys have certain 'expectations' that I don't think we can meet. At least I can't, and from what you've said it doesn't sound like you can either."

Harry nodded his agreement. "So ... where else might we live?"

"Where ... you said 'we'. Does that mean you and me? Together? As in, we'd be living in the same place?"

"Maybe. At least that's what I've been wondering. You see I ... well we've been living together ... you know, in the same house or in the tent ... for so long that ..."

"I know what you're saying. I've been thinking the same thing. It's to the point where it would feel strange to not be with you every day."

"You know that musical soundtrack we listened to with your parents the other day?"

"Which one? I swear that's the only type of music they like."

"The one from 'My Fair Lady'. The song I'm thinking of was *I've Grown Accustomed to Her Face*."

"Oh Harry, that's so sweet. That really made you think of me?"

"Those words really hit me. *She almost makes the day begin*. That's so true. Every day I wake up and you're the first person I see. And I'd really like it to stay that way. And the way the song ended just described what I'm feeling perfectly. *But I'm so used to hear her say, 'Good morning' every day. Her joys, her woes, her highs, her lows, are second nature to me now. Like breathing out and breathing in*. That's it. Being with you is like breathing. I just ... I think it would kill me if I stopped."

"Harry, you're making me cry again!"

"I'm sorry. I ... that's just the way I feel."

"Don't be sorry. That's probably the most wonderful thing I've ever heard. And as a matter of fact I've been thinking exactly the same thing. That's what I was dreading most about going back."

"What a relief! You have no idea how much better I feel now. That's the biggest thing I've been worrying about."

"Actually, I do have a pretty good idea because I'm as relieved as you are. You know, there's another song from that musical, that's probably my favorite one. It's *On the Street Where You Live*. He sings about how happy he is just being near her. That's sort of how I feel. Wherever you are, that's where I want to be."

"So, do you think we can work something out? I mean, find someplace? It doesn't have to be anything fancy. I mean, I'd rather live in a tent with you than in a palace by myself."

"Oh Harry!"

The conversation paused for a short period while Hermione wrapped Harry in what was quite possibly the strongest hug she had ever given him, and which he returned with equal fervor. When they broke apart his hands still remained on her waist and hers kept hold of his upper arms, although neither of them seemed to notice.

"Harry, are you thinking ... this place where we might live together. Would it be just the two of us?" Both of them knew exactly what she was asking. No Weasleys would be invited to share these lodgings.

"Yes, if that's OK with you."

Their eyes met, and communicated an understanding, one that neither of them would consciously admit or acknowledge, much less vocalize.

"OK."

In the next room, an older couple paused in their preparations for their move back to England, and shared a smile.

-xox-XOX-XOX-xox-

Conversations In the Aftermath Retrospective Conversations

25 Years Later

"All right, it's time to get on board now, Rosie."

"Muum, I keep telling you, it's Rose, not Rosie!"

"Now, sweetheart, I know you're all grown up now, but it's your parents' prerogative to keep calling you that. That's just the way parents are. You can be Rose to all your friends at school."

"Mum?"

"Yes dear?"

"What if I get sorted somewhere else besides Gryffindor?"

"Now Rosie ... I mean Rose, we've discussed this. There's nothing wrong with being in another house. You would be very well suited for Ravenclaw, for example."

"Then why did you ask the Hat to put you in Gryffindor instead of Ravenclaw?"

"That was an entirely different situation."

"Yeah, it was because you wanted to be in the same house as Dad and you knew that's where he would go."

"Hush! That's a secret."

"Mum, you've told that story to every one of us girls. I think Dad probably knows it by now!"

"Well, you just keep it to yourself. At any rate, you should listen to what the Hat has to say, and if you still think you have to be in Gryffindor, then you can ask. But I really don't think you're going to meet a Harry Potter on the Hogwarts Express, so my situation simply doesn't apply to you."

"Yes, Mother."

"Now you just wipe that smirk off your face young lady, and give me a hug."

"There you are! Is my baby girl ready to get on the train?"

"Yes Daddy, I'm all set. My trunk's all stowed and everything."

"So what were you two lovely ladies conspiring about just now?"

"Oh, just about how Mum asked the Sorting Hat to put her in Gryffindor instead of Ravenclaw."

"Rose Potter, now you remember what I told you!"

"That's right, you never did tell me why you wanted to be in Gryffindor so badly."

"You just never mind about that. Today is about Rosie, not me."

"I suppose ... oh there's the whistle. One last hug for Daddy, OK?"

"Bye Daddy. I love you. You too, Mum."

"Bye Rosie. Don't forget to write."

Harry and Hermione stood and waved until the train was out of sight, bearing their final child away to begin her Hogwarts experience. When they finished Hermione leaned back into Harry as he wrapped his arms around her.

"I can't believe it ... how did the time go by so quickly? Our last daughter is on her way to Hogwarts."

"I know what you mean. It seems like only yesterday that we sent off the first one."

And scarcely any time at all since we were breaking up childhood squabbles and trying to control outbursts of accidental magic.”

“You know, we have the house all to ourselves now. Just like when we first moved in together.”

“Oh, and what did you have in mind Mr. Potter? Don’t you have to go to work today?”

“You know very well that I don’t; I told you I was taking today off.”

“Well, imagine that, I’m taking the day off too.”

Sharing a pair of knowing looks, they turned and walked slowly back down the platform holding hands. Several of their friends and acquaintances noticed and nudged each other. *They’re doing it again*. Whenever the two of them were together (without their children) they tended to go off into their own world where each one was the only person who existed for the other.

“You know, it’s not *exactly* like when we first moved in together.”

“No?”

“If you’ll recall, we had separate bedrooms for the first year.”

“That’s true – and when we finally decided to move into the same bedroom you were so nervous about telling your mother. But when you did she was surprised we hadn’t done it sooner.”

“I can’t believe it took us so long to figure it out.”

“Yeah, it seems like everyone knew before we did.”

“Ron and Ginny did for certain. We spent so much time worrying about what their reaction would be when we came back and announced that we were going to share a flat. But instead of the explosion we were expecting it was more like resigned acceptance.”

“I think Molly actually took it harder than either of them did.”

“Oh my, yes. I’m just glad she finally came around by the time we started having children. I think when I got pregnant she finally accepted that she was never going to have her dream matchups. But it wasn’t long after that she was begging us to bring the girls over to visit.”

“Still, it was awkward breaking up with them.”

“You should talk. You had it easy, since Ginny was away at Hogwarts until Christmas. By the time she came home she’d pretty much sussed it out. She told me later that she knew it was going to happen when you decided to go to Australia with me. It was more awkward for me because Ron was over at our flat almost every day. But after just a week he could tell it was coming.”

“You’re right. But it wasn’t easy for me watching you two together. How many times did I make excuses to leave the room when it looked like you were going to start snogging?”

“Oh Harry, it wasn’t that bad! If you’d stayed around you would have noticed that I hardly ever kissed him at all after we came back from Australia. I certainly wouldn’t call it snogging. That was probably one of his biggest clues. Actually, that was one factor that made breaking up with both of them a lot easier. Neither of us had really gone past heavy snogging, so there wasn’t the kind of uneasiness there would have been if we’d been more intimate.”

“That’s true. It would have been a lot more difficult to be comfortable around Ginny if I’d gone farther with her. Or to stay close friends with Ron if he and you had. But even when you’d broken up with Ron and I finally ended it with Ginny, we still didn’t admit to each other that we were in love for months afterward.”

“Yes, we were both quite stubborn about it.”

“I was thinking more clueless. Perhaps even incredibly thick.”

“Hey, don’t blame me. I knew how I felt about you for years. You were the one who didn’t realize ...”

“I know. I’m sorry ...”

“Don’t start that again. I’ve told you plenty of times – it wasn’t your fault you’d never experienced any love while you were growing up.”

“Not until I met you.” Harry stopped in the middle of the station and turned to face her with a smile. Taking her hands in his, he began to sing softly to her.

“There were bells, on the hill, but I never heard them ringing. No I never heard them at all, till there was you.”

“Oh Harry, you don’t have to start this again.” But she smiled and took out her wand to cast a *Muffliato* charm to ensure that this love ballad was for her ears only.

“There were birds, in the sky, but I never saw them winging. No I never saw them at all, till there was you.”

“Honestly, I don’t know why I ever let my parents introduce you to show tunes.” But her sparkling eyes belied her scolding. She loved it when he

sang this song to her, and he knew it.

"And there was music, and there were wonderful roses, they tell me, in sweet fragrant meadows, of dawn and dew."

"You don't have to do the whole thing you know. Let's just jump to the big finish."

"There was love, all around, but I never heard it singing. No I never heard it at all ..." Here Hermione joined him in the two part harmony of the last line, her soprano voice rising into the descant while his bass one took the descending scale. "Till there was you."

"I love you."

"I love you too. Let's go home and let me show you just how much."

-ooOoo-

Some time later Harry lay back and caught his breath, cradling Hermione in his arms as she snuggled against his chest, their naked bodies intertwining after an expression of their love that left them both extremely satisfied.

"You know, today makes me think back to our first trip on the Hogwarts Express."

"Me too. This annoying girl came into our compartment. *'Has anyone seen a toad? Neville's lost his.'*"

"Hey, I wasn't that bad ... OK, so I was. But ... you do know why I did that, right?"

"You mean other than to help Neville find his toad?"

"Well, that too, but mostly I wanted to meet you."

"Really? I had no idea. Actually, I was pretty clueless about everything that day."

"That's for certain. I couldn't believe that scrawny boy with the broken glasses was Harry Potter. You weren't anything like what I was expecting. There was nothing impressive about you at all."

"Hey, I wasn't that bad ... erm, well, I suppose I was, actually. But what about you? *'Are you sure that's a real spell? Well, it's not very good is it?'*"

"Merlin, I was a bossy little know it all."

"What do you mean – was?"

Hermione raised herself up enough to hit her smirking husband on the arm, then snuggled into his side again.

"We sure were naive back then. Neither of us had any idea what we getting into. Evil professors, giant three headed dogs, a troll – well that one turned out pretty good ..." She paused to lean up and give him a kiss.

"So many crazy things. I must say I hope that Rosie's time at Hogwarts won't be quite as exciting as ours was."

"I'm sure she'll be OK. The others have all done just fine."

A period of comfortable silence passed while they simply enjoyed lying in each other's arms.

"I was thinking about what we were talking about earlier. About not realizing how much you meant to me. Fourth year is when it should have happened. I should have asked you to the Yule Ball."

"You really think so?"

"Yeah. Remember, for a long time right before that I wasn't talking to Ron, so it was just the two of us, with you working so hard to help me prepare for the First Task. I'd really grown closer to you. If I'd been just a little bit smarter I'd have figured out I could avoid all the anxiety of asking a girl to the ball by going with you."

"Because you didn't think of me as a girl."

"No, because you were my friend, and I knew I wouldn't have to worry about being embarrassed with you. You'd never laugh at me if I did something stupid. I could trust you."

"Thank you. I'm glad you thought of me that way. But I don't see how that would have brought us together sooner, since we would have just gone as friends."

"Because you looked so incredible that night. I think if I'd spent the whole evening with you, and danced with you, and maybe even gone outside for a walk ... well, maybe I'd have figured it out."

"Perhaps. I suppose Ron wouldn't have been as jealous of you as he was of Viktor."

"I'm not so sure about that. He was pretty jealous of me already that year. Once he saw how beautiful you were that night it probably would have started up all over again."

“Oh you. I’m sure I wasn’t that stunning.”

“I thought you were.”

“I love you too. But at least he wouldn’t have been able to call me a traitor for dating Viktor. Hmm. So, I suppose I’d still have ended up at the bottom of the lake during the Second Task then?”

“Definitely. Personally, I think you should have been my hostage anyway. You certainly meant more to me than you did to Krum. And even though I might not have admitted it at the time, I certainly would have sorely missed you, probably even more than Ron, that year at least.”

“That’s sweet. You really know the right things to say, don’t you?”

“I meant every word.”

Hermione tightened her grip on him in an extra strong hug. Then her forehead crinkled in thought.

“Well, I think I should have done something fifth year.”

“Really?”

“Yes. By then I knew I was interested in you but I was too afraid to say anything. And every time I came close to getting up my nerve something happened. The first time I was going to say something was as soon as you arrived at Grimmauld Place.”

“I still remember that hug.”

“Right, that was the idea. But you were in such a bad mood right then, and we were so concerned with your trial and the possibility that you’d get expelled from Hogwarts that anything else got pushed aside. Then when I thought we were going to be prefects together it seemed like the perfect time.”

“Yeah, you were so enthusiastic when you ran into the room. But it turned out it was Ron instead.”

“I was so embarrassed! I’d just about kissed you right then and there and then you said it was him and not you and I couldn’t think of anything to say.”

“I didn’t know what to say either. I felt like I had let you down. And everyone else seemed to think it should have been me, too.”

“Well, they were right. It should have been you. But as the year went on, with those detentions with Umbridge and your quidditch ban, you were so miserable and in such a bad mood that it just never seemed to be the right time.”

“You’re right, I was pretty hard to live with. But you never gave up on me. You stuck with me all year.” This time it was Harry who tightened his grip around Hermione for a hug, while she nodded firmly.

“And then there was Cho.” This drew a wince from Harry. “When you got together with her I saw what kind of girl you were interested in, and knew I could never be like that.”

“And thank Merlin for that. I got tired of her in a hurry. I’ll never get tired of you.”

“Oooh. Good answer Mr. Potter. Trying to get lucky again? I thought I’d worn you out pretty good.” Harry responded with a sly grin, and Hermione chuckled in return.

“So, what happened sixth year?”

“Oh. Well, I decided that I wanted a boyfriend and that it was going to be Ron, since by then I’d given up on you.”

“And when Hermione Granger makes up her mind about something everyone else get out of the way.”

“You’re right. I’m sorry you were caught in the crossfire.”

“Me? I think Ron still flinches when a flock of birds fly by.”

“Very funny. On the other hand, *you* were lusting after Ginny.”

“Um right, I guess that’s what you’d have to call it. But I think that was making us both act differently toward each other. With you going after Ron and me obsessing about Ginny we ended up being more distant toward each other, sort of trying to prove to ourselves that our relationship was different than that.”

“You’re right. And that’s the thing I regret most about that year. I’m really glad that finally ended or all that time in the tent would have been even more miserable than it was.”

“Me too. I never would have survived that if we hadn’t redeveloped our closeness.”

There was another pause while he pulled her up for a long heartfelt kiss.

Mmm. Now, how were we? What that year did too, though, was confirm for me what sort of girl you went for. Both Cho and Ginny were really pretty, with long shiny hair, athletic, and nice petite figures. I had none of those things.”

“I can see how you could conclude that, but I think that was more of a coincidence than anything. I mean, I love the way you look. I’m sure you remember my reaction to seeing you in a bikini the first time. And you look just as good now as you ever did.”

“Oh, another good one. You’re really on a roll today. I’m most definitely going to have to reward you. But I’m sure Ginny would be thrilled to learn that you broke up with her because I filled out the top of a bikini better than she did.”

“It wasn’t just that! I fell in love with everything about you.”

“I know, but I think that was the final step. We loved each other as friends, and when you add in the physical attraction, it was the complete package.”

“Maybe. But I think it was more a matter of finally allowing ourselves to think of each other that way.”

“You’re right. It was that too. And once those things happened …”

“Yeah. Lights out. We couldn’t get enough of each other. Remember the first time we kissed?”

“How could I forget? My heart was pounding so fast I thought I’d pass out. And when we started running our hands all over each other …”

“I wasn’t sure I’d be able to stop. I just wanted to carry you into your bedroom right then and there.”

“Hmm. Speaking of which, it feels like someone is ready for another round.”

“I’m all yours.”

After another exhilarating session the pair of lovers found themselves back in the same position, this time breathing somewhat more heavily.

“Pretty good for a couple in their forties, don’t you think?”

“I’m certainly not complaining. Quite the magic wand you have there.”

“Only because you inspire me. But if this is what the next fifty years is going to be like, bring it on!”

“Well, we will have to go to work most days, so it won’t be exactly like this, but that still leaves the evenings that we can enjoy any way we want to, now that we have the house all to ourselves. Except I’m thinking for the next *hundred* years, at least.”

“Works for me.”

“Of course, there will be summers when the kids are home, and then before you know it there could be grandchildren running around the place.”

“Oh no, I’m not ready for that yet. Jaime just graduated. I still can’t believe she’s going to be a potions master, of all things. But she isn’t even married!”

“That might happen sooner than you think.”

“I don’t care. I refuse to consider that possibility just yet. But it sounds like you have things all planned out.”

“Well, you know me.”

“And I wouldn’t have you any other way. So, what does my beautiful bookworm have scheduled for the rest of our lives in that master planner of yours?”

“Since you asked so nicely …” Hermione paused and smiled sweetly at Harry, and he responded by kissing her on the nose. “I was thinking that after all the girls are out of Hogwarts we might take those teaching positions they keep offering us.”

“That sounds good. We keep saying how tempting that is. What would we teach?”

“Defense Against the Dark Arts for you, of course, or possibly Flying. I was thinking of Arithmancy for me.”

“Or Transfiguration, or Charms, or Ancient Runes, or …”

“Oh stop.”

“You know very well you could teach all of those subjects, and more. I didn’t even mention Muggle Studies.”

“Oh … I suppose. It will just depend on what’s available and what they need I guess. But eventually I think it would be nice if you were Headmaster and I was Assistant Headmistress.”

“Why not the other way around? You’d make a great Headmistress.”

“Because the Headmaster may be the more impressive position, and get all the attention, but the Assistant Headmistress is the one who actually

does the day to day work.”

“Sound like the story of our lives. You do all the work and I get the credit.”

“Oh honestly, Harry, it’s not that bad. I’m certainly not complaining. I get plenty of recognition from the people who actually know, and I’m satisfied with that. I actually like working in the background, and you know how much I love doing things together with you.”

“Well, it’s certainly worked for us so far. We make quite a team. But maybe we could switch off and take turns being Headmaster and Headmistress.”

“Perhaps. We’ll worry about that when the time comes. The important thing, though, is that we’ll be together.”

“Always.”

They punctuated that declaration with one more tight hug, and then relaxed again, content in each other’s arms. As was often the case, their thoughts while they lay comfortably together mirrored each other’s quite closely.

They were more in love than ever, a love which grew with each passing year. They had four incredible daughters, each with a unique blend of their parents’ talents and abilities, but all of whom had been brought up in an atmosphere of love and concern for others. Harry and Hermione had no doubt that when the time came to make a tough decision, each would choose to do what was right rather than what was easy.

They had the admiration and respect of the wizarding world, not only for what they had done twenty-five years previously, but also for the way they lived their lives and the accomplishments they had achieved since. They had good and loyal friends who would always be there for them if needed, and for whom the reverse was also true.

No new dark lord had emerged in more than two decades, to a large extent because the two of them had helped select responsible leaders who were ever vigilant, rooting out dark movements before they took hold. Their world was at peace, and was making slow but steady progress toward eliminating at least some of the prejudices that divided the different magical beings and cultures.

Most importantly, they had each other. All was well.

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