

Harry Potter

**George,
In First Person**

hgfan1111

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Fandom: Harry Potter.

Author: hgfan1111.

Characters: George Weasley.

Status: 17,600 words; One-Shot.

Summary: None Provided.

Fred and I talked about what it would be like if one of us died. We weren't trying to be morbid, you know, just realistic. Plus, we were cooped up in Auntie Muriel's attic during the war, stuffing envelopes and filling owl orders for Wheezes. There was a lot of time.

We included Ginny in the conversations sometimes, but she always got too worked up over our plans.

We agreed: move on if something happens. Don't mourn too long; an appropriate length of time wearing dull robes and long faces would be enough, and then it was time to blow something up.

But in all of those discussions, in the faint light of the flickering oil lamp in the attic, I never actually *believed* one of us might go.

And now here I am. Alone. Half of a whole. Missing the reflection of myself.

I still turn to make jokes with him, you know, even knowing he's gone. I still wake from dreams occasionally and think 'cor, I have to tell Fred about—' and then I remember I can't. Sometimes I tell him anyway. Maybe it's barmy, but talking it out helps.

Things weren't easy the first few months. I'd be lying if I said they were. Living at home helped because I didn't have to wait for him to not burn the toast, or bang on the wall when he was using all the hot water.

Mum was... wow. She was just... indescribable. I won't even pretend to imagine I can feel what she felt, just like she can't know what it's like to miss someone so very close to me. But even I reached a point when enough was enough.

"A blind wizard walks into a pub. He says to the barkeep, 'Want to hear a Hufflepuff joke?' The pub goes completely silent. The barkeep says, 'Sir, I am a Hufflepuff. I'm used to handling a rough crowd alone. I have my wand drawn. The wizard to your left is an Auror and his wand is drawn. He, too, is a Hufflepuff. The witch on your right has her wand drawn. She is a dueling champion, and also a Hufflepuff. Are you absolutely certain you want to tell that Hufflepuff joke?"

"And the blind wizard says, 'Merlin no! Not if I'm going to have to explain it three times!' "

Ginny was the first to break the aching silence. Her whole body jerked in amusement. And that set Harry off, although his laugh was more nervous than genuine.

"Now *that* was funny," I proclaimed and grinned at those around the table.

The corner of Bill's lips quirked up and then a building laugh rolled around the room. The tension, which had been building for days—weeks, maybe—eased the smallest bit.

Well done. Enough of this nonsense.

It was like Fred's voice spoke directly in my ear—the one that's still there—and I felt better than I

had in a long time.

From that moment on, things got better. It still hurts like hell at times, but then I remember our promises to move on. We called them Celebrations of Life.

Fred's plan was always to find some good-looking birds and spend a wild weekend in the countryside to celebrate my life if it was snuffed out. I never saw that sort of vision in my head, but I promised him that there would be very little in the way of funeral processions and week-long mental breakdowns. That's just not my style.

I haven't figured out what my Celebration will be, but one day I'll discover it. And I'll do it until it hurts.

People still watch me and it makes me sometimes feel as if I should rip my clothes off and run down Diagon Alley screaming periodically. It might make *them* feel better if I did. I suppose I could tattoo an advertisement for the shop on my... er... yeah. Nevermind.

It does get old, though, having everyone wonder if I'm going to be okay. Oddly, I found a bit of comfort in Luna Lovegood's approach to this. One day she strolled into the shop, eyes wide and staring directly at me. She didn't blink for forty-six seconds. I counted.

"I don't think you're crazy, you know."

"Er... thanks, I suppose." We continued to stare at each other, though, thankfully, she was blinking like a normal person. Or as normal as Luna ever gets.

"Everyone has to grieve in their own way," she said wisely. "Some people cry. Some people drink bundyroot juice until they can see purple ostriches racing around the room. And others just get on with the business of living."

I blinked enough to make up for her earlier lapse. "Well..."

"And since I don't smell bundyroot on your breath, I think you've decided to simply live enough for the both of you."

Her logic made me smile. "Luna, I think you may be the smartest person I've ever met."

She smiled serenely and asked for a box of WonderWitch lipgloss in Nargle Neon, for which I gave her a discount. She's family, after all.

Taking Luna Lovegood to the Ministry Gala was the best decision I had made in months. Or weeks. Definitely the best in days.

Just the look on everyone's faces as we walked into the ballroom, arm in arm, was worth Xeno's twenty minute interrogation about where I was taking his daughter, when we would return, and whether I had spotted the unusual midnight migration of the Fanged Crickets. He seemed so disappointed when I told him I must have missed the fanged ones—unless Hermione's dentist parents had already gotten to them by the time I noticed...

“What a lovely dress, Luna.”

Hermione sounded genuine about her compliment and Luna twirled on my finger, showing off the creation (hand made by her, no less) that was covered in feathers.

“Daddy traded some Nargle excrement for the feathers—it’s quite valuable, you know. He says they’ll bring me good luck.”

“What type of feathers?” Ginny asked pleasantly.

“Swallow.” Luna swayed and lifted the skirt of her dress, making it flare out. “A swallow is always good luck.”

Ron choked on his drink. “Pardon?”

I wanted to hit him for having a dirty mind, but knew that Hermione would take care of it for me. Once Ginny explained to her the insinuation. Harry must have gotten it because he was chortling behind his hand. Bill certainly got it as he bit his lip and distracted my parents.

I grinned, thoroughly pleased with my choice of companions. The whole family was seated around a large table showing amusement and various degrees of incredulity at Luna’s openness.

“Isn’t she great?” I nudged Harry who held up his drink in salute. He looked a little pale, but I suppose that’s probably because Kingsley had asked him to say a few words. He had Ginny with him, though, so I wasn’t worried about the bloke. She’d make sure he stayed on the right track.

Hermione and Luna were discussing various meanings of birds as we took out seats and waited for the dinner to be served.

“Are you sure you’ll be all right, George?”

My teeth ground together at Mum’s patronizing tone. Of course I was going to be fine. I mean, it’s not like I *wanted* to be there, at a Gala to honor those who fought in the war and accept some ruddy Order of Merlin. Not even the one for Fred. But I’d live. It’s not like they were asking me to stand up and make some stiff speech...

Harry made a choking sound and nearly bolted when I pointed this out. Ginny grabbed the back of his robes, however, and hauled him back. Strong girl.

The whole table went quiet and Luna stared at me with wide eyes. “Did you say something funny?”

“Er... I suppose I did.” I spoke out of the corner of my mouth, as if it were some great secret I was sharing with her. “You’d think everyone would laugh, though.”

“Not everyone has a sense of humor.” Luna gave my hand a pat and I grinned once more.

We survived the awards ceremony and even Harry’s speech—which Hermione wrote for him, but Harry abandoned part way through... once he relaxed and got over the Hiccupping Hot Pepper I slipped onto his plate. Mum will never forgive me. Or so she says.

Once the torture was over, the dancing began. Now, normally, I'm not a big dancer, but we'd been sitting for far too long and I was trying my best to live for both myself and Fred. And Luna was an enthusiastic partner.

"Did you slip her some Firewhisky?"

Ron elbowed me as Luna swayed around the dance floor, singing along with Celestina Warbeck only using words that I'd never heard before. It improved the song greatly.

"You'd think so, wouldn't you?"

We both laughed and turned back to watch.

"So... you and Luna. I have to say I didn't see that one coming."

I clapped Ron on the shoulder. "And you're the ultimate authority on love now, Ronnikins?"

His face heated and he watched as Harry and Hermione danced by. She was scolding him for tripping on her feet and he was arguing that he wouldn't have stepped on her if she hadn't been leading. They were both laughing, though, so I wasn't worried about seeing Hermione hex him. Now, if it had been Ron she was dancing with...

"Of course not. I just... I just want you to be happy. If Luna makes you happy..."

"For the moment." I sighed and looked around the room. It was only about half-full, as many of the guests had already gone home. Mum and Dad were dancing in the corner of the room, cheek to cheek, like they used to when we were little. It was sort of sweet, sort of sickening, but I'd seen it enough over the years that it didn't shock me. Bill and Fleur had disappeared and I didn't want to think about what they were getting up to in some dark corner of the Ministry. Ginny was dancing with Neville and they were laughing as they moved stiffly about the room, trying to avoid a dark-haired witch with a heavy American accent who had been stalking Neville for weeks. Luna bobbed and weaved through the rest of the dancers, lost in her own world.

"I'm not saying it's going to last, or anything, but for now it's fun."

Ron's expression turned from amusement to concern. "George, Luna's a nice girl—"

"Get over yourself, *Mum*," I snapped. "I'm not going to do anything to hurt her. I asked her as friends, we came as friends. I just... I just don't want to see anyone right now and Luna's great entertainment value."

His ire tempered and he nodded. "Did Harry ever tell you about how he took her to Slughorn's Christmas party?"

"Where do you think I got the idea for tonight?"

The song changed and Luna called from the center of the dance floor. "George, come dance with me! It's almost ten o'clock and we need to have danced five times by midnight."

"You heard the woman." I waggled my eyebrows at Ron. "You should go dance with Hermione."

Merlin only knows the calamity that will fall if you haven't gotten your five dances in."

He laughed and I joined Luna, spinning her around and around until we were both dizzy and laughing. I'd meant what I said to Ron about being happy with Luna for the moment. Neither of us expected anything to come of the date, we'd simply thought the idea of coming together sounded fun.

And perhaps it was the low light of the room, the ceiling sparkling with a charmed night sky, or the way the light shone on the feathers of Luna's dress, but something inside me went a little crazy.

I leaned in and kissed Luna.

She didn't resist. In fact, she kissed me back, holding me to her with surprising force. We broke apart and stared at each other for a long minute, both completely forgetting that we were supposed to be dancing.

"Er... Hadn't planned on that." I cursed the lighting, the damned romantic song that Mum had pounded into our heads from such a young age, and the helplessness of the entire situation. And the love potion that Ginny must have snuck into my drink in retaliation for the Hot Pepper Incident. Surely I wouldn't be doing something so desperate as to kiss a friend who I didn't feel anything but friendship for without the love potion.

"It's fine. It was a lovely kiss." Luna began dancing again, prompting me to move my feet. Her casual attitude eased my concern over the whole situation. Perhaps that love potion hadn't been strong at all; Ginny isn't known for her potion-making skills, after all.

I laughed and tried to dismiss my social faux-pas as nothing but the insanity of the moment. "It was."

"And if I had any intentions toward you as a mate, George Weasley, I might be tempted to try it again."

My laughter filled the area around us and I breathed out a sigh of relief. Not because Luna was essentially dismissing me as a suitor, but because she wasn't going to let this ruin our friendship. She gave me a serious look (which is actually quite scary since it was *Luna* in my arms) and then kissed me. All the breath in my body fled and I froze, like a fish in headlights. Or however the saying goes.

"Lovely." She smiled placidly when she was finished devouring my face and went back to swaying. "But just like I feared, you're not the one for me."

"And you know that because of two kisses?" I asked. How I wished Fred was here to take the mickey about me being brushed aside by a bird. How I wished he was here to point out that wearing all feathers, Luna looked the true part of bird. I'd even forgive him for taking the piss about my lack of kissing skills.

"Oh, I've known for ages that you and I would never be compatible, George." She sounded so sure and I was teetering on the edge of being offended. Did my breath smell bad?

"You see, a female swallow chooses her mate on the length of their tail."

I had to bite my lip from dying with laughter. "Are you saying that my tail is... inadequate, Luna?"

She laughed softly and brushed her hand along my bottom, making me squeak in surprise. "I'm sure your tail is perfectly adequate, but, like the swallow, I'm looking for specific requirements in my mate. And I don't mean to be rude, but you simply don't have them, despite being a terrific kisser."

I laughed, somewhat mollified by her answer. My tail might be only adequate, but I was, apparently, a good kisser. Information to file away for a later date.

"Luna, if I haven't told you tonight, I'm thrilled to have brought you."

"And I'm happy to be your date, George."

"Despite the lack of tail?" I prompted.

Luna's cheeks flushed beautifully and she giggled. Luna. Giggling. It was the most hilarious sound in the world and I prided myself on being the one to coax it from her.

"Come on, we still have some time before midnight, and we need to get those dances in." I twirled her wide, enjoying how she clung to my arms and held her head back so that her long yellow hair flew out with abandon.

Celestina looked scandalized as Luna and I did an interpretive dance that had nothing to do with a cauldron boiling over with hot love, and everything to do with having as much fun as we could. She'd get over it.

"How're you holding up George?"

I smiled at Harry's half-serious question, images from the Ministry Gala playing like an out-of-joint Muggle film in my head.

"Brilliant," I said. "I'm horrifically crushed, devastated really, but brilliant all the same. After all, a good public brooming does any heart good."

Ron choked on his pumpkin juice but just managed to keep it in his trap, avoiding bathing the rest of the table with it. I was disappointed; there hadn't been a good table spraying around here in months. I'd have to work harder.

"I may be scarred for life."

Harry chuckled, seeing the humor in the situation.

"On the whole, though, I'd say it's the best Ministry event I've ever been to." I leaned in conspiratorially. Since we were the only three in the room—the Weasley Women and Granger had either already come and gone or were standing in line for the bathroom still (the Burrow only has one, and in an emergency us blokes tend to scarp outside to the woods, but the ladies are odd about standing in line to use the loo)—I decided to be frank with my blokes.

“And, between you and me, Luna kisses like a—”

“Ahem.”

Wrong about the line at the bathroom. Mum’s gimlet glare was enough to make the hairs on the back of my neck stand up.

“A, er... a proper young lady should kiss. On the cheek and all, you know.”

Mum wasn’t fooled at all so I turned my head slightly, hoping the pitiful sight of my missing ear would help my cause. The two gits across the table must have guessed what I was angling for because they were laughing behind their hands while pretending they found nothing amusing in the situation.

“I hope you treated her with respect, George Weasley. All young witches deserve a wizard who treats them like a lady.”

“Of course, Mum.” I smiled toothily and watched as she levitated a pile of laundry toward the scullery.

Three pairs of eyes watched her go and then Ron leaned in closer. “So... what happened between you two? All I saw was you kissing her.”

“She broke my heart,” I said, adding a fake tearful sniff at the end. “Said she had fun but that I just wasn’t what she was looking for. Apparently my tail just isn’t long enough, or my mating call is off somehow.” I sighed dramatically and watched Ron carefully for potential food-spraying opportunities.

I left breakfast disappointed, but vowed to return with better material. Perhaps Luna’s gentle ditching of me last night had really done something to throw me off my joke. It was something to think about, anyway.

It was weeks before I was able to get back to my goal of finding the joy in living. I had a million excuses: the shop was unusually busy during the summer (and it probably had nothing to do with Harry helping out by manning the counters a time or two), I moved back into the flat above the store (and occasionally still had nightmares where I woke to find Fred’s empty bedroom glaring at me), and life started to happen all around me again (sometimes I took part, but usually I watched).

Strangely, I didn’t feel depressed, even though Mum fretted about me and delivered all manner of food to the flat at odd hours of the day and night. Ron and Harry wore tight smiles and more than once I caught them whispering in the back room of the shop. Either they were talking about me or Ginny and Hermione are in for disappointment because their men are involved in a salacious, well-hidden, and completely sickening relationship.

Ergh. I think I may have made myself sick with that last thought. And I probably made you sick, as well.

But I’m not depressed. I’m not really even mourning—not in the traditional wear-all-black-for-months-and-drink-myself-into-a-stupor sort of way, anyway. I’m just... here.

You know how when you lose something—and I don't mean losing a person through death or breaking up with your girlfriend, or something—I'm talking about losing your favorite pair of boxers in one of the drawers, or maybe your beloved Martin Miggs the Mad Muggle toy when you were a kid goes missing from the shelf. There's a time when you don't think about it at all. It doesn't even cross your mind that you've lost it, until one day you notice. And then the absence is glaring. No other pants feel quite the same, and your eyes are drawn to the spot on the shelf where the childhood keepsake sat for so long, below your notice.

I missed Fred; that much is for sure. His death left a gaping hole in my heart and in my life. But it's not just his absence that makes me sad. It's hard to explain at times, but I think he took something with him—a part of my life, perhaps, that I'm not sure I knew it was possible to lose. That, and Percy chose the clothes from our flat when they buried him. So Fred not only took a part of my life with him, he's also wearing my best underpants.

Perfect.

It was during a family affair that I caught a glimpse of what my life might be missing, what I should be looking for. Maybe. And I don't mean 'maybe that's what I'm missing', I mean 'maybe that's what I should be looking for', because I'm not terribly sure I want or need it in my life right now, thus the *maybe* part of this whole thing.

Okay. I'm way off track now and you probably have no idea what I'm talking about. Let me start again.

Mum wanted a picnic for the whole family before Ginny and Hermione returned to Hogwarts. She and Fleur spent weeks going on about it until I even agreed to have Lee cover the shop for me on a busy Saturday.

I arrived at the Burrow to find her (Mum, not Fleur) all a dither, levitating twelve (yes, *twelve*) picnic baskets full of food onto the table. I was a good son, however, and didn't point out that she could have simply used a bottomless charm on one basket and saved us all the backbreaking work of levitating, or Apparating, everything to Stoatshead Hill.

I allowed her to boss me around and even enjoyed it a little before we all trooped out the door. Hermione thought it would be a good idea to have us all *walk* there. Crazy witch. She went on and on about wizards not getting enough exercise or something like that. I tried to convince her that I get plenty of exercise, but she was quick to point out that running my mouth didn't count. I bit my tongue rather than admit she had a quick wit to go along with her brilliant mind. Everyone gets lucky with the one-liners a time or two in their lives.

After taunting Hermione, I turned to see if Ginny was up for some gentle, well-intentioned needling, but discovered that she and Harry had fallen back several paces from the group. They were holding hands, speaking softly between them. Whatever they were saying wasn't horribly serious, I didn't think, because Harry was wearing a pleasant look.

You can read that bloke like a trashy novel, I swear. Not that Harry's trashy. Not at all. What I meant by the comparison is that trashy novels aren't altogether known for their challenging reading material. When you pick one up, and I do *not* know this from experience whatsoever, you generally

know what's between the covers. Some sighing, some unrequited love, a heroine in trouble, a dashing hero, some heaving bosoms, bodice tearing and such, and then you get the romantic, heroic ending. Harry's got the hero part down, but I don't even want to contemplate the bodice ripping or heaving bosoms thing. Ginny's far too tenacious to let that escape her exploration, I figure, and it's not something I want to spend time contemplating.

I've already spent too much time on it.

Where was I?

Oh, yes, the missing piece.

It was thrown into spectacular relief for me when I watched how Ginny leaned into Harry's shoulder when she was telling him something, or when I watched something humorous break over Harry's face and his smile lit him up like a Wild-Fire Whiz-Bang.

I missed *that*.

Not Harry, although I have to admit he *is* quite fit these days, although I suppose I'd have to lower my standards to slim, specky little gits, but there you have it.

What I was missing, if my addled mind can be believed, was the connection with another person. Not even the romantic stuff, although I could probably use a good snog and a grope. Any bloke could, and it's been *months*.

I miss being excited to tell someone else something that happened during the day, or plotting out my next joke and wondering how someone would react. I missed the rimshot to my jokes, the punchline to my gags, the yang to my yin.

"Bugger this." Unable to take it any more, and fearing that my realization might cause me to break down and curl into a fetal position on the dirt path, I snatched the picnic basket from Mum's hands and Apparated to the hill.

I forced the breath in and out of my lungs when I arrived and stared out over Ottery St. Catchpole. It hadn't hurt this bad in a long time, not since sitting next to Fred's side in the Great Hall at Hogwarts and praying he was playing the biggest joke of them all and would pop up at any minute, laughing at us.

By the time the family Apparated around me, I had my emotions in check once more. In fact, I was hungrily gnawing at a chicken leg when they arrived, all wearing concerned faces and talking in whispers.

"Brilliant chicken, Mum. I hope you brought enough for the rest. I'm so hungry I could eat a hippogriff."

No one pointed out my false cheer or the way I had just snapped on the path, thankfully. I honestly wasn't sure what I'd say about it if they did. 'Sorry, everyone, seem to have temporarily gone insane, but don't worry, it's passed now. Feel free to carry on with your lives.' Nope. Doesn't sound quite right.

We ate with small conversations, but I stayed away from anything that would draw their attention toward me. Mum fussed a bit, but she always does. I think it's in the Mum Rule Guidebook that she has to achieve so many hours a day of nattering on about her children, otherwise her position in heaven is in jeopardy. Then again, any mother of a Weasley has surely secured their place simply by birthright. I'd have to remember to bring that up to Hermione when her mouth is full. A Granger Full-Mouth Spray has to be worth bonus points in the scheme of all things funny. And, if I timed it correctly, I could get a two-for-one special and nail Ron, as well.

YES! Not only did both of them spray, but Harry began to choke, and the dual fountains of pumpkin juice doused Percy. We all sat silent for a glorious moment while great orange drops of liquid dripped from his hair, ran behind his glasses and continued on down his face.

Ginny was the first to break, as usual. She sniggered and that set off both me and Bill. Mum fretted (more Mum Points there, obviously) and tried to wipe Percy's glasses, only making the mess worse. Harry finally tipped over and the remaining family burst into gut-clenching laughter.

It was all horribly therapeutic and Perce wasn't even mad. At the end of it all he gave a few chuckles himself.

Once she could breathe again, and was finished dislodging a big hunk of spring roll from Harry's throat, Ginny jumped up enthusiastically. "Let's play a game!"

We spent the afternoon playing various games that more often than not descended into some sort of wrestling match between us brothers. Sometimes we succeeded in pulling Harry in, as well. The skinny blighter can certainly hold his own, I'll tell you that. And Ginny's no slouch, either. Her elbows are sharp.

It was during one of these 'games' that I was watching (Ron and Bill were having a fundamental disagreement on the rules of Wizarding Croquet and whether you could magically move the hoops if your opponent wasn't paying attention) when Hermione approached me. (Just for the record, my vote was with Ron: anything is allowed in the Book of Weasley Sport and Game Etiquette when your opponent is distracted.)

"George, I'm sorry if I offended you by suggesting we walk up here—"

"No harm done, Hermione. I was just tired of walking." She seemed disappointed when I cut her lecture off, but I really wasn't in the mood for it. "Only so much exercise a bloke can take, you know? And if we're really so out of shape, wouldn't want us to collapse with a brain aneurysm or something, would you?"

She looked torn and I knew I was just seconds away from her whipping out some four inch thick manual that would have at least eight chapters on the proper way to deal with grief and death.

"Perhaps you should start some kind of movement," I suggested, trying to sound playful. "Society for the Promotion of Exercise by Wizards. You could call it S.P.E.W. Oops! Already in use. Well, you're the brilliant one; you come up with a name." I gave my little suggestion a wink at the end, to take the sting out of the comment, and dove in to pull Bill away from tweaking Ron's nose completely off his face.

"I'm thinking of taking up Muggle sky-diving."

My announcement was met with incredulous silence, just as I expected it would be. It was, after all, only Ron, Harry, and me in the back room of the shop. It's not like I expected my idea to bring about cheers of happiness and possibly a parade. Fine. I would have enjoyed the parade, but I'd gotten used to settling for less over the years.

Harry's eyes were wide behind his glasses. "Er..."

"Is this some sort of grieving thing?" Ron asked.

"Nope. It's more of a living thing, Ronnie." I held up a brochure that I'd stumbled upon one day while wandering Muggle London. "What do you think?"

"Well." Harry studied me for a long minute before smiling. "I think it'd be interesting."

"Sky driving. Sounds barmy to me."

"*Diving*, Ronald, not driving," I instructed. "You strap a parachute to your back and jump out of an airplane. I hear it's a rush that can't be beat."

Ron's incredulous stare grew even more disbelieving, if possible. He opened his mouth to protest my idea, but gave a jump and grumbled at Harry instead. I got the feeling that Harry might have kicked him under the table to get him to shut up.

"There are worse things you could do, I suppose."

"Want to come along with me? I promise not to tell Ginny until after we've survived." I used my best winning smile, but Harry still looked wary.

"Normally, I'd say I'm interested—who enjoys a good thrill more than me?—but I think I'll pass this time."

I coughed something that sounded like 'whipped' in his general direction, but he only responded with a raised eyebrow and a smirk. Damn. He's not even fun to tease anymore; Ginny's got him so wrapped around her finger it's ridiculous.

"How about you, Ronnie? Care to jump out of a perfectly good airplane alongside me? I hear they give first-timers the opportunity to have an instructor strapped to your back, in case you're too frightened." I waggled my eyebrows.

Ron let out a long sigh and stood, pacing in the narrow confines of the inventing room, careful not to get too close to the Pustule Potion cauldron simmering in the corner. "Let me get this straight. You want to go up in a Muggle airplane, with no broom, strap some Muggle bloke—who doesn't have a wand, or any idea about magic—to your back, and then jump out?"

"Sounds about right, although I'm not picky about the bloke thing. I'd be just as accepting if they strapped a bird to my back."

"Forget I called you barmy the other day. You're not barmy, you're certifiably insane! I think

breathing all these fumes has addled your brain!"

I laughed, perhaps a bit manically by the way Harry was backing away, and wiggled the brochure Ron's way. "Perhaps I am, Ronnie, but I'm alive."

Ron and Harry exchanged a heavy glance that I didn't want to interpret. I knew perfectly well what it meant, but I didn't want to acknowledge it. I'm not barmy, or insane, nor do I have a complex about being alive when Fred is gone. I just simply want to live life to its fullest. I want to feel the thrill of doing something slightly crazy and knowing that I'll more than likely live through it.

Happily, I went back to perusing the photographs in the brochure. If only they moved! Then I'd know the real thrill that the happy, cheek-flapping individuals on the front were experiencing.

"I think maybe you need to talk to someone, George."

"I think there's some sort of class I have to take before I go up," I informed Ron without even taking my eyes off the young lady in one of the photos. Her jumpsuit was rather tight and I, once more, wished that the pictures were magical so I could see if she popped—

"I don't mean for that," Ron said. "I meant... someone who can help you get through this."

"I'm not depressed. I'm not crazy." I stood and tucked the paperwork into the pocket of my robes. "I just want to live a little."

Ron sighed and his shoulders sank as he gave in to my argument.

Harry spoke from the far side of the room. "I get it." He stirred the boiling cauldron carefully and avoided looking up at either of us. "Fred wouldn't want you to forget how to live. He wouldn't want you to sit around here grieving his loss and let it change who you are."

"Exactly."

What a bright bloke Harry can be at times, despite the things that Hermione says about him being thick. He and I shared a smile while Ron just shook his head.

"Kill the flame and put a preserving charm on that," I told Harry. "It has to wait for twenty-nine and three-quarters of an hour before we pour it into the bottles. I need a pint."

The three of us locked up the shop and began to walk down Diagon Alley, discussing the upcoming Cannons/Puddlemere United game that we had tickets for.

"... I still say that Chudley will win by—"

"Excuse me, sirs?"

I turned to the young lady standing in front of me, clutching her clipboard and an overly-long purple feather quill. She peered at all three of us through thick glasses that magnified her eyes abnormally.

"I'm sorry, Harry's not giving autographs today, but I'd be happy to sign your book." I nudged Harry,

whose face was bright red, and he kicked me back.

The girl seemed to have realized just who was standing in front of her and shrank back in horror. "Oh, no... I mean... that's not..."

"Let's see it, then." I snatched her clipboard and paid little attention to the few names scrawled on lines, or the fine print above them, before scrawling my own name. She must be some sort of autograph collector. "There you go, love, all signed."

She blinked down at the paper and then up at us before breaking into a wide grin. "Thank you! Thank you so much, Mister..."

I stuck my hand out for her to shake. "Weasley. George Weasley. Stop by and see me anytime at number 93. Weasleys' Wizard Wheezes. Come in and I'll give you a free sample WonderWitch product."

She tittered and blushed spectacularly before tripping over herself to move past us.

"Any idea what you just signed?" Harry asked.

I grinned at him, content with life in that moment. "No idea."

Ron snorted and clapped me on the back. "Come on. I'll buy the first round."

I stumped toward the Burrow in a foul mood, warily scanning the sky for random owls that might attack.

"All right, George?"

Bill either heard me muttering from where he was inside Dad's shed or heard the 'pop' of my arrival.

"Fine." I changed direction and headed into the ramshackle building rather than into the house. Truth be told, I really wasn't in the mood for another of Mum's lectures today. As if the odd owl behavior—filling my work inbox with dozens of advertisements for potions that aid in, erm, well... *intimacy enhancement* and flyers for sales at Catherine's Covert Unmentionables—wasn't enough, Mum had sent three howlers when Ron opened his mouth about my plans to try extreme Muggle sports.

"How did the sky diving go?"

Surprisingly, Bill didn't sound like he disapproved of my idea. In fact, he seemed genuinely curious.

"Didn't go." I sighed and sank down onto one of Dad's old stools—the wobbly three-legged one—and began trying to balance it on the longest of the legs.

"Too intimidating? Too Muggle?"

"Complete misunderstanding," I corrected. "Apparently, and here's the real shocker, they *require* you to have the parachute." I shook my head sadly and Bill stifled his laughter. I admit I was very

disappointed when the man running the sky-diving school refused to let me bring my broom on the plane. The fact that he banned me from ever setting foot on his property again only added insult to injury.

“Well, who understands Muggles?”

“Yeah, no kidding.” I shook my head, dismissing the whole affair completely. I’d find something else, eventually.

“Any new ideas?”

“Nothing at all. I’m horribly bored.”

Bill chuckled and tossed a piece of wood onto Dad’s work bench. I noticed what he was working on—sanding down various bits of wood until they were smooth. Just as I was about to ask what on earth he was making, he sat down next to me.

“You’ll find something. After all, Muggles have all sorts of odd ideas. Dad’s been gathering pamphlets for you—he hides them out here—with all sorts of odd ideas.”

The idea made me smile. Dad would incur Mum’s wrath if she ever found out he was helping me in my quest to find a Celebration of Life, but he must have thought it was worth it.

“I think he had something about cliff diving, something called hang gliding, and something having to do with rockets to the moon.”

I tried to find one of those ideas that sparked something inside me, I really did, but nothing did the trick. The idea of Mum sending another howler again was inherent in any of the plans for something so dangerous, and I really didn’t want to deal with it.

“Er... what’s with the owls?”

I turned at Bill’s question and peered into the dark corner of the shed, at two pairs of wide eyes staring back at me.

“Bugger. I’d hoped they wouldn’t find me.”

Bill shook his head and collected the scrolls before the owls disappeared into the bright October day.

“Madam Malkin’s invites you to a special Halloween Sale. Official Harry Potter dress robes now 40% off.” I groaned as Bill read the first one aloud. “Nice.”

“They won’t leave me alone!” I threw my hands in the air and teetered precariously on the stool. It nearly tipped me on my bum, but I just managed to correct it before my flesh hit the floor. “I have no idea why, but I’m being swamped at all hours of the day and night by owls!”

Bill snorted and read the second scroll. “Er... George, are you having issues with... *staying power*? Does your *pocket friend* need a little encouragement when it’s time to meet the ladies?”

“Bloody hell.” I sighed and rubbed my eyes until all I could see were bright dots in them.
“Absolutely not.”

“Is your *cucumber* a little wilting?”

I swore more violently and dove for Bill, wrestling the unsolicited mail from him. We ended up in a tangled heap of limbs on the floor. Unfortunately, Bill is several inches taller than me, so he was still able to keep the parchment from me.

“If you’re having issues, George—”

“I am NOT having issues!” I yelled. “I’ll have you know my willy is perfectly—”

“Ahem.”

For a moment I believed Mum had walked in and caught us acting like three year olds. Only something was wrong with her voice. I looked up, trying to recall just how much she might have overheard, only to see my father, upside down.

Bill cuffed me on the head and let me up from the floor. Dad righted himself—or, more accurately, I suppose, I looked at him correctly—and cleared his throat once more.

“Boys.”

“Dad.”

I felt my cheeks heat and used Bill’s moment of distraction to snatch the parchment from him, shredding it into tiny pieces.

“Anything you two need to talk about?”

Bill scoffed and moved back to the workbench. “I’m fine, thank you very much, but George might need *The Talk* again.”

I glared at the back of his head and secretly, silently hexed him to grow warts on his genitalia. Too bad my wand was tucked safely away in my pocket and I hadn’t actually spoken a spell. Intent was everything in magic, right?

“Just a bit of junk mail, Dad.” I cleared my throat and tossed the shredded paper into a rubbish bin in the corner.

He eyed me curiously, a smile twitching the corners of his lips, before moving to help Bill assemble some sort of box.

“I heard the sky-dropping fell through.” Dad chuckled at his own joke and I refrained, just barely, from rolling my eyes. Surely, Fred and I had gotten our sense of humor from somewhere other than our parents. Generations back, perhaps.

“Probably for the best,” I said with a sigh. “I heard you’re supposed to wear your best underpants when you do something like that.”

Both Dad and Bill laughed.

“Sadly, I only have my second-best pair left. Who knows, it might have ruined the whole thing. I’d have ended up splinched—or whatever Muggles call it when you end up with a foot sticking out your forehead—and Mum would have brought me back to life only to murder me again.”

“Er... Do I want to know the story behind the underpants?”

I sighed. There was nothing for it now. I hadn’t meant to say it aloud, but it had been on my mind lately. Every time I saw Percy, I wanted to scold him. “Fred is wearing my pants.”

I swear you could have heard the sound of crickets in Dad’s shed. Or maybe it was Nargles. Are they different sounding?

“When Percy went to get clothes for Fred... he didn’t check which drawer he pulled them from and ended up with my best pair.”

“So Fred is buried in—”

“My pants.” I nodded pathetically. It was rather sad that bits and pieces of the family are discovering the sordid story that I hoped would never come out. “The ones with rude sayings that glow in the dark.”

I think they wanted to laugh, but the whole idea was rather... morbid.

“It’s okay. Go ahead and laugh.”

Bill cleared his throat and concentrated on sticking two pieces of wood together with a permanent sticking charm. “I’m sure you can find another pair somewhere.”

“Not like those.” The more I thought about it, the more depressed about it I became. “The little finger was charmed to... er... nevermind.” I flushed and vowed to use one of Bill’s charms to glue my lips together. There are some things a parent shouldn’t know about, you know?

The hoot of another owl made me growl. It landed several feet away from me and took careful side-steps toward me, until it was close enough to drop the parchment at my feet.

Bill’s grin could only be described as evil. “Well?”

I gritted my teeth and unrolled it. “If anyone is interested in buying a solid gold watch, have them floo me.”

I trudged out, ignoring their laughter, and Apparated home.

I peered around the corner of Honeydukes, eyeing the Post Office carefully lest I set off a frenzy of owls chasing me down the center of the street. With my luck lately, it would happen. I didn’t like to say I was paranoid, but...

Okay. Fine. I’m paranoid. You would be too if you’d had the same last few weeks that I’ve had.

For some unknown reason—which was amusing the first few days—I am an owl magnet. If there is a feathered delivery bird within flying distance, they hunt me down and drown me in junk mail.

Laugh all you want, but I'm growing tired of shoos the beasts off at three in the morning. One of these days they'll get aggressive enough to peck my window right out of the frame; I know it!

So far I had been lucky. I was in Hogsmeade signing the final paperwork to purchase a small building across from The Hog's Head that will be the new Weasleys Wizard Wheezes, Too. Ginny had informed me, via an owl that I would have banished had I not noticed the distinctive parchment that my little sister uses for her notes, that it was a Hogsmeade weekend, as well. Harry was planning on coming up later in the afternoon, but Ginny's morning was free.

I read between the lines enough to know that she was requesting my presence to occupy her time until her paramour would arrive. And here I thought she actually enjoyed my company!

With one last glance at the Post Office, which I would have to pass on my mad dash to The Three Broomsticks, I struck out, bobbing and weaving between the groups of students. Twice I nearly fell in the slushy muck of the street, and once I got whacked over the head by a shopping bag as I used a young Ravenclaw witch to keep myself upright. Unfortunately, she'd just bought something frightfully heavy.

I cheered loudly when my favorite pub came into sight, ignoring the way the students skittered away from me with wide eyes. Just then, a familiar fluttering reached my ear.

"Holy..."

I stared with wide eyes as more than a dozen owls rounded the corner of Hogsmeade Station, headed right toward me. I eyed the pub. They eyed the pub. We each measured the distance. With a jump and a wild yell, I tore off, diving over a short Gryffindor boy to reach the door before being assaulted by the demonic delivery owls.

"YES!"

All eyes in the dark pub interior turned on me as I threw my fist into the air in triumph and did a victory dance at my success in escaping the flock. If I hadn't been used to odd looks from people for years, their speculative staring might have worried me.

Ginny waved from the left side of the room, in a booth she'd reserved just for the two of us. Yeah, okay, it was probably for her and Harry, but we'll pretend she put a tiny bit of thought into meeting me. It helps my fragile ego.

"All right?"

I flopped into the seat across from her and leaned down to rest my head on the table. "Fine."

"I'd ask what on earth you've been doing to put you in such a state, but I've been around you for far too long to fall into that." Ginny smirked and nudged a warm butterbeer my way. "Plausible deniability being what it is. I don't fancy explaining anything to Mum when she corners me about what you've been up to."

"Always the best policy." I drank slowly, savoring the warm foaming liquid as it seeped into my body and helped dispel the cold and gloom of the December morning. We chatted about Hogwarts and Quidditch—Ginny's being scouted by the Harpies, if you didn't know that—and about the upcoming holiday at home. Neither of us was particularly looking forward to it, being the first Christmas since Fred was gone, but we'd manage. Distraction would be the best technique, we thought, so we tentatively planned on ambushing Ron and Harry into a massive snowball fight that would put our past ones to shame.

We were discussing the probable reactions to our plans when I suddenly froze. The table Ginny had gotten was pressed right up to the wall, directly beneath a window. There, staring at me with haunting, wide eyes were more owls than I could count.

"Er..."

"What in the name of Merlin's left—"

My left eye twitched and I jumped up to slam the shutters closed. "No clue. Absolutely no idea what's going on with them. Barmy birds, those owls. Never know what they'll do next, you know?"

Ginny's eyes narrowed and I could tell she was trying to piece together some story that would explain both my nervous chattering and the way my eyes kept straying toward the shutter to make sure it stayed closed and no bird pecked its way through the glass. Madam Rosmerta should really think about putting an unbreakable charm on those. I'll mention it next time I'm in here.

"Are you having issues with owls?" Ginny asked. "I thought you'd discontinued owl ordering now that you have the shop open again?"

I twitched and tried to laugh it off, but the sound came out more like a squeak than a guffaw. "Er... just a glitch in the post, I think. Nothing to be concerned about." My hands fidgeted on the table and I nearly knocked over my butterbeer; some of it slopped onto the table and splashed Ginny in the eye.

After mopping the front of her jumper—apparently I underestimated how far the splash had gone—she sighed.

"What's really going on, George?"

I debated inventing some outrageous story, but my usually-quick mind was far too frazzled. Plus, Ginny's sharper than the average little sister; there would be no way to slip it past her.

"The owls. They follow me everywhere." I winced at sounding so pathetic. Since when did I whine like a four year old little girl? "I see them at night. I see them in the morning. One even followed me into the shower the other day."

From the way her jaw clenched, I could tell Ginny was holding in a laugh, and I seriously appreciated the effort. "Well..."

"All day long I deal with this! They bury me in advertisements—junk mail!—for things I have no desire to know about! Potions to increase my desirability, potions to add two to four inches to

things that are perfectly, adequately long, thank you very much. Replica watches, genuine chocolate frog cards signed by Harry Potter himself (which, I have to tell you, I was interested enough to check out. They're not real at all, unless Harry spells his name with one 'r' and two 'i's). If you vanish the parchments, they double in volume the next day. The flat is covered in them—that and owl droppings. I haven't slept for days now, Ginny. Days!"

My chest was heaving when I finished my rant and I stared pathetically down at my shaking hands.

"I think you should go and see Harry."

"Why would *Harry* know about possessed owls and how to stop them?"

Ginny's jaw clenched and I nearly slid out of my seat and slinked away to hide in some dark place where she couldn't find me. "No, Harry wouldn't know how to deal with that at all."

You know, she looks amazingly like Mum when she gets mad. Someone should warn Harry.

"He's never had to deal with people owling him constantly, or witches chasing him down, trying to slip potions into his drink. He's never gotten packages full of knickers from slaggy girls who just want a piece of The Chosen One. He's never had to fend off dozens of reporters who misquote him when he does open his mouth.

"And he's certainly never lived for almost an entire year on the run, hiding from Voldemort and whoever else might have been searching for him. You're right, George, Harry is *definitely* the wrong wizard to ask about it."

I hate it when she's right. She smiles so smugly. Fred and I were very, very wrong to teach her that look when she was three. And the way she tipped her butterbeer up and drained it in that superior way... Urgh. The fact that she's completely right doesn't justify it at all.

"I er... I suppose I could drop by the Ministry and see if he has any suggestions."

The smug smile stretched even further and I glared at her.

"I knew you'd see things my way."

I sucked the last few drops of butterbeer from my tankard and stood. No sense putting this off forever. The owls had probably doubled during my time inside. No doubt the whole place was surrounded.

"Thanks, Gin."

She stood and gave me a quick hug. "Anything to help my favorite brother."

I froze, all thoughts of the feathered flying flock forgotten. "I'm your favorite? Really?"

Ginny grinned. "Yep. Just don't tell Bill or Ron."

I laughed. "Can I tell Charlie and Percy?"

She pretended to think about that for a minute before laughing. "Yes. I've never told them they were my favorite."

"Well, then I won't tell any of my other sisters that you're really my favorite, Gin."

She nudged me and we both turned as a blast of cold air hit us from the opening door. A few owls managed to slip through the opening and a gruff looking warlock snatched one of them from the air, pulling the parchment from its talons.

"Post here for Geporidge Wally?"

"Bugger."

The last thing I heard as I dove from The Three Broomsticks was Ginny's roaring laughter.

January calmed down considerably after Harry helped me add my name to the Do Not Owl List. Occasionally, a particularly tenacious bird might slip through, but I found the whole thing much more amusing in hindsight.

As the month faded, however, I felt myself disengaging once more. It wasn't like I'd planned to pull away from people; I just didn't feel like meeting Lee for a pint, or playing Snowball Quidditch with Harry and Ron. My inventing slowed down to a trickle. In fact, one day I spent an entire three hours doodling in a notebook rather than sketching out new ideas for a fantastic Self-Throwing Boomerang that Ron and I had been talking about ever since he and Hermione had returned from retrieving her parents in Australia. Something that sounded so brilliant before now just seemed... meh... uninspired and boring.

One day Ron jokingly suggested that I needed to put myself out there and meet some new witches. The whole concept was baffling to me. I know I'd dated in the past, but just the thought of sitting across from some girl and fumbling through the awkward first date question and answer period gave me the shakes. My courage took a dramatic hit when Neville Longbottom, of all people, came into the shop holding hands with Susan Bones. I don't think it was as serious as everyone thought it was, but if even *Neville* can get a date, I'm a sad sack of... Well, nevermind.

It was during my low period of time—which I haven't yet named adequately—that I started a short and ill-advised relationship with Verity, the witch that works the counter at the shop.

I say short, because it only lasted eight weeks from beginning glance to awkward we-can-still-be-friends-and-forget-that-we've-snogged-can't-we conversation. Eight weeks. Sadly, that's the most successful relationship I've had in more than a year. Alright, two. I don't think the year with the war should count, though, because dating opportunities were sort of non-existent when I was locked up with Auntie Muriel, Mum, and Ginny. Slim choices, indeed.

And the ill-advised part comes because the relationship was doomed from the start and didn't work out. If it had been successful this would be a far different story that you'd be hearing right now, and I would be off... er... Let's not get too far ahead of ourselves, shall we. I'd be *occupied*; we'll leave it at that.

I'd known that Verity fancied Fred, not me. Let's face it; while I'm charming in my own right, I'm

no Fred. The regular snogging partner was a release that we both needed, obviously, but it couldn't last.

Now when we see each other there's an uncomfortable tongue-tied feeling that has nothing to do with our trick sweets. I have a feeling she'll be looking for a new job soon and it makes me sad that I might have ruined a good friendship. But I just can't think of the right thing to say to fix it. 'Sorry I used you to help myself feel anything at all' probably won't win me points. So, instead, I paste a smile on my face and lie about how I feel when I see her standing behind the counter, tucking her blonde hair behind her ear and biting the corner of her lip while her eyes settle anywhere but on me.

Bugger.

You'd think that April First would be a hard day for me. Our birthday. I know Mum was worried over acknowledging it at all, since very likely any cake would be washed away by her hysterical crying. And who can blame the witch, really. On the other hand, she was worried about *not* doing something in case I felt like they're choosing to mourn Fred rather than celebrate me.

I'd assured them that whatever they came up with would be just fine. I didn't really want to acknowledge the date because it would feel horribly inadequate and incomplete without Fred next to me. And yet I could almost feel the slap upside my head that Fred would give me for thinking about it that way. I could hear his lecture now—and as much as he liked to have fun, no one could lecture better than Fred. Well, maybe Hermione, but she's not nearly as funny as he was.

'It's our birthday, you ninny! You should be out drinking until you can't stand up, standing up until you can't drink, snogging nameless witches, naming snogless witches, and all manner of vice-versa.'

The English language was never Fred's strong suit.

So I was left torn—wanting a raucous party, but knowing that I'd probably end up getting a quiet celebration at the Burrow.

Mum made a cake, but it wasn't up to her usual standards. Ron helped by sticking some of our Ever-Sparkle Blow-Until-You're-Blue-In-The-Face candles and we had a good laugh over those.

Harry gave me the best gift of all by showing up—an hour late, mind you—with Ginny and Hermione in tow. Somehow they'd talked McGonagall into releasing the girls a few days early for Easter hols and Harry made a special trip to Hogwarts to pick them up. Yeah, I can hear what you're thinking—Harry *really* had to think hard about that choice, I'm sure.

But their arrival seemed to break the grey mood that hovered in the kitchen and I was able to genuinely laugh and joke around. I even caught my left eyebrow on fire, just to hear Mum screech at me. It was almost like old times.

Until the end, when Dad shakily handed over a single present and the whole room seemed to freeze, waiting for Fred's name to be mentioned.

I took a deep breath and tore into the gift, relaxing when it was a leather-bound book that had seen better years. Mum explained that it was a spell book from Uncle Gideon, with hand-written notes

inside. Apparently, he was a great spell inventor in his time. A single book that was unique, one of a kind. It wasn't a set. Fred and I always got a *set* of things every year. And somehow the gift seemed not only fitting, but very final. It had been almost a year since Fred died and we'd all, in our own ways, accepted it.

"Haven't got Charlie's gift yet, mate." Bill nudged me and I woke from staring at the book.

"Well? I'm not getting any younger, ya know."

"Only older." Ron finished my thought with a smirk.

Bill reached into a cupboard and lifted out a glorious bottle of beautiful amber liquid. Through the thick glass you could see the pale flames dance in the Firewhisky; it was hypnotic.

"Cor, that's the good stuff." Ginny reached forward to trace her fingers along the bottle, but Mum summoned it straight into her hands. We all gaped at her, as if she'd stolen the most beloved toy from a horde of children. "Mum!"

"Not for you, young lady. It's not a proper gift, anyway." She grumbled about sons who should know better.

I slapped my hand down on the table and stood, drawing the full attention of the room. "Mum, you're not really going to take away my gift, are you?"

It was a low blow, phrasing it that way, and I knew she wouldn't be able to hold strong. I know I'm evil for doing it, but I couldn't resist for several reasons. First, my mouth was watering just for a taste of the glorious liquid in the fancy bottle. Honestly, Charlie must have either felt horribly bad about not being able to come home, or he'd just gotten some ridiculous bonus at work and hadn't found anything else to spend it on. Second, the idea of getting completely pissed was growing on me. And why not include the whole family? Who better to celebrate with me than the people that knew Fred best?

"Well..."

"Molly, perhaps..." Dad trailed off and I knew I'd won the battle. Dad normally doesn't contradict Mum, but when he does half the fight is won.

Bill gave me a covert thumbs-up and I bit my lip rather than crow with triumph.

"They're all of age."

Ginny made a sound like an angry cat, as if reminding us all that she was, indeed, seventeen. In truth, I was very curious to see my little sister handle her drink. I'd seen Harry pissed before, and while it's hilarious, seeing Ginny would be priceless. And Hermione.

The whole idea was filling me with glee.

"Just a few drinks, Mum," I promised, "nothing out of hand."

"Let them have a little celebration, Molly." Dad took the bottle from her and set it in front of Bill,

rather than me. (I was thinking about being offended, but, truthfully, Bill was the most responsible of the lot.)

“Actually, I need to get Fleur home.” Bill gave a pained look at the bottle and I knew he was regretting the whole marriage-followed-by-fatherhood-responsibility-route, if only for a moment. “But I can probably have a drink or two.”

Percy surprised us all by speaking up. “I’ll supervise, Mother.” He cleared his throat and I appreciated what this was costing him. Percy has never really fit in with our family, and that might be partly my fault. And Fred’s. But he’s trying again, and that counts for something.

His words were the finishing nail in Mum’s argument coffin. She gave a jerky nod and mumbled something about being careful, kissed the side of my head, and disappeared up the stairs.

Dad was quiet. I knew he was tempted to stay and join us all for a quick nip, but he sighed and turned towards the door. “There are rooms upstairs if anyone needs to stay tonight.”

I didn’t point out that all of us knew where the bedrooms were, unless he and Mum had secretly been rearranging the Burrow in our absence.

Once our parents were gone, an anticipatory feeling of thirst settled over the room.

“One of us should make a toast,” Hermione said. “I believe it’s customary.”

Percy summoned the glasses—a horribly mismatched set—and Bill poured. Fleur was the only one who abstained—which was a good idea considering she’s due to give birth soon.

“Did Fred have a favorite one?” Ginny asked. Her finger traced along the edge of the glass, chasing the golden flame that danced across the surface of the liquid. Harry slung his arm around her chair and leaned into her.

“An appropriate one, if possible.” Hermione grimaced, but she might have been contemplating the drink in front of her, rather than the toast I would make.

“Several of them,” I said. Dozens of memories swam to the surface of my brain and I managed to grasp on to one that would work.

Once everyone had their drinks (the level in the bottle hadn’t decreased at all, surprising me) I stood and cleared my throat.

“I once knew a girl who lived on a hill...”

Chuckles rippled around the table and I couldn’t help but grin.

“What she won’t do, her sister will. So here’s to her sister!”

I downed the entire amount in my glass, savoring the perfect burn as it warmed my whole body. The flames danced all across my tongue and I leaned my head back, belching a plume of fire into the kitchen. (I’m sure Mum won’t even notice the black smoke stain on the ceiling., but if she does, I’ll blame it on Percy.)

Hermione coughed and Ron clapped her on the back. "All right there, Hermione?"

Both Harry and Ginny sniggered and relaxed back into their seats; we all laughed at Hermione's red face. But she braved it well and kept sipping at her drink.

By the time Fleur dragged Bill out the door—after *three* drinks, mind you—the rest of us were well on our way to being pissed. Even stick-up-the-rear Percy seemed to be enjoying the moment. His ramblings are much more enjoyable when he has no idea what he's talking about and none of us really care. And he snorts when he laughs.

That thought will fuel many smiles for future years to come, let me tell you. I had no idea Percy was a snorter. Really, who could guess? It's something that Fred would have loved to figure out. I told him in my mind. He was just as pleased as I was.

Ginny had yet to entertain us, although she and Harry were rather giggly on their side of the table. I had a feeling she had a least one good table dance in her before Hermione's sensible nature forced her to sit back down. I couldn't wait.

"Charlie wins the prize for the best present," Ron slurred and lifted his glass in toast. "All Harry'n me bought you was underpants."

I laughed, both at the idea of the gift, which I had yet to open, and the picture of Ron and *Harry* shopping for underpants together. If they weren't careful, the whole world would know about their clandestine love affair.

Yep, still just as disgusting, even when I'm pissed.

"Thanks Ronarry!" I saluted them. "I need new underpants." Suddenly, the reminder of where my best pair were, and the person responsible, struck me. I was furious, but it was hard to focus on Percy's face. It didn't help that his prim little bowtie was now decorating his head, perched in his ginger curls like Umbridge's hair tie. I think Ginny was responsible for that, but I don't remember Percy protesting. Maybe he did and I was too busy counting the neon pink kneazles as they danced along the ceiling.

"Harry Potter!"

Harry, who was having the life sucked out of him by Ginny, disengaged with a loud sucking sound and peered at me through crooked glasses.

"Geporidge Wally!"

Damn Ginny. I'll get her for spreading that around.

"You're an Auror." Yes, I was stating the obvious, but my mind was taxed just to get that far, believe me. Pink kneazles, remember?

"Er... sort of." Harry scratched his head and looked thoughtful. Or constipated.

"I want him arrested!" I pointed at Percy. Well, really, I pointed at Ron, but then adjusted my

finger so that it was going the right direction.

The laughter and chatter died off and everyone looked constipated. Maybe it was catching.

“Er... why?”

I narrowed my eyes at Percy, who just hiccupped, pretending to be innocent. “He stole my underpants.” I said each word carefully and calmly, making sure there was no mix-up. “Percy stole my favorite underpants and put them on Fred. Fred doesn’t even *need* underpants! They’re gone! Ruined forever!”

Ginny sniggered and rolled off her chair toward the floor. Harry followed and I peered over the edge of the table, worrying that one of the kneazles might have dive-bombed them, thus explaining the leap to the floor. But, no, they were just laughing. At me.

“If you’re not going to take this seriously...” I glared at them and then turned to Percy. “You should really check, you know, when you go rummaging through a bloke’s drawers to steal his drawers.”

Percy spluttered and searched for someone to help, but no one offered a quick escape. Even Hermione, who would normally assist in his defense, was distracted by falling off her chair. It’s an epidemic! Almost as bad as the constipation!

“Er... I’m sorry?”

I glared at him and felt an angry, hysterical sob swell up my throat. It threatened to burst out and join the kneazles in their wild romp around the room.

“I’m never going to forget it, you know.”

Ron climbed back onto his chair but was still giggling like a little girl. “One day we’ll all look back on this and laugh.”

“If we remember it,” Harry pointed out.

“One day we’ll be sitting around with grey hair—”

“You’ll have a pot-belly,” Harry said with a guffaw.

Ron ignored him. “And our kids will laugh and say ‘remember when Uncle Percy stole Uncle George’s underpants to bury Uncle Fred in?’ ”

That set the traitors off again, laughing until they fell over. Honestly, I could find little humor in the situation.

“It’s not like it’s my fault,” Percy said. He straightened his glasses and then went cross-eyed, peering through them. “There were no labels! How was I to know they weren’t Fred’s?”

He had a point, but I was far from being reasonable right then.

“Perhaps if you had a labeling system...” Hermione’s voice came from under the table. She giggled

and I was tempted to use my wand to record this so I'd one day have proof for to blackmail her with, but the thought was swept aside by the brilliance of her idea.

A labeling system. I could do that. I could put my name on *everything* that was mine! And no one would ever take it again, thinking it was Fred's. I slammed my hand down on the table, determined that I'd get started the minute I got home. There were going to be no more mistakes like that; no siree.

The whole problem being solved, I found myself feeling much more genial toward the whole of my family. Other than the shadow of trepidation at their health crisis'. Constipation and tipping disorders aside, they were a pretty decent lot.

Even Percy, who was now snoring on the table, his nose and mouth twisted up to the side. I'd tell him about the labeling system tomorrow. He could write a report about it for the Ministry. Just think of all the underpants he can save from helpless boxer-napping incidents. The Aurors wouldn't know what to do with themselves with all that extra time on their hands. Harry'd be out of a job before he was even in one!

And he could spend his time snogging Ginny, like he was doing now, and sliding his hand under... Urgh. Even drunk that's not something a brother should witness.

I kicked my feet up onto the edge of the table and poured myself another drink. The level in the bottle was nearly down to the bottom. Apparently, the Firewhisky wasn't unlimited, after all. I'd miss it when it was gone. I cradled the bottle and whispered sweet regards to the liquid inside. It was the best relationship I'd had in a very long time, after all.

I woke with a pounding headache and an undeniable urge to salsa dance. I can explain the first—memories of last night's debauchery were still somewhat fresh—but the second... I suspect Ron had something to do with it. If it didn't give me a brilliant idea for a new sweet—Tap-dancing Tootsies—I would have planned to curse him.

Sadly, that was the high-point of my day.

I dragged myself downstairs nursing a cup of coffee so strong it was nearly mud, and blinking at the bright daylight that had the nerve to sneak in the windows. Verity, surprisingly, laughed at my predicament. It was a relief to see her seem so normal, so I didn't think much of the way she stared.

Several hours went by and I kept busy stocking the shelves and avoiding the curious gawking of the people who came into the shop. Verity kept giggling, but I just assumed she'd breathed the fumes in the back room too deeply.

When Ron slumped in well after noon, wearing all black, I tried to force a smile on my face.

"Lo."

"Not so loud," he whispered, the pain in his head evident in his expression. "Hermione's a cruel, cruel woman."

"I could have told you that," I said. "It's always the quiet ones you have to watch out for."

"Said we brought it on ourselves, so we ought to suffer the consequences. All of us; even her." He whimpered and adjusted his dark sunglasses. "And Mum agreed."

"Shameless." I offered him the dregs of what remained in my coffee cup, but he turned his nose up at it. He made to walk away, but then slowly retraced his steps until he was standing right in front of me.

"Er... George?"

I peered at him, wondering just how bad he must be feeling if he couldn't remember who I was. "Yes?"

"Why do you have Geporidge Wally written on your robes?"

The rest of April was bleak.

When Muggles say 'Magic Marker' they don't mean it in the same way wizards do.

The second of May—a date that will be stamped upon my memory for so many reasons. It wasn't just the day that Fred died; it was the day that changed *everything*.

Harry beat old Moldysorts, thus freeing us all. Oh, I know he doesn't like to take credit for that and can think up a million excuses why it was all just a string of good-luck, but you and I know the truth.

Mum proved once and for all that all Weasley Women are bad-ass. She refuses to talk about it, even though we're all still wary of her wand work. Respectful, but wary.

A small, rag-tag group of resistance fighters struck a blow against tyranny and oppression. Yes, a few of them made the ultimate sacrifice, but that's rather how things go, isn't it? Some sacrifice so others can go forward. At least that's what I tell myself.

And my first niece was born.

It was only this—the euphoric haze of joy and expectancy that kept us all glued to our chairs at St. Mungo's, waiting for Bill to pop his head through the doorway and give us the good news—that saved me from drowning myself in a bottle.

In truth, I was able to lose myself completely in the moment—something that I hadn't been able to do for a very long time—and I felt honestly whole.

Drinking probably wasn't the solution, anyway. All of my clothing and possessions were still sporting the evidence of the *last* go 'round with a bottle. Marco Polo, my delivery owl, still refuses to acknowledge my presence in the room, even though I've tried to convince him that none of the other owls even notice/i the writing on him.

"Galleon says it's a boy."

I turned to Ron and peered skeptically at him. "Show me your galleon first." He spluttered and I grinned. "You're on. I'll take it out of your pay."

His jaw clenched but he gave a nod. "What do you think?"

"Girl, all the way." Alright, I have no clue. Honestly, it hadn't occurred to me to even think of what gender the first Weasley of the next generation would be. Did it really matter? I disagreed with Ron simply for the entertainment value. If he'd said the baby would be a prize-winning krup and that he had proof, I would have found fault with his logic. He's fun to argue with because he rarely holds a grudge; chances are he won't even remember what we were talking about, let alone that I disagreed with him.

We asked Harry for his opinion, but he refused to get involved. He was too busy playing with Teddy to join in our banter.

Teddy Lupin. Now there's a kid I could really get to like. He's still a bit squelchy and odd smells emanate from him occasionally, but I think he could be a bloke I want to get to know, or at the very least, corrupt.

He's got Harry wrapped around his sticky little fingers; Ginny, as well. And the rest of the family, I suppose. We're all rather fond of the prog.

I tugged at my dress robes and finally took them off. Thankfully, I had on proper clothes underneath or Mum would have hexed me for sure.

We were all supposed to be at the Ministry's Day of Remembrance to commemorate... Oh, you already know what it was supposed to be about. Anyway, we'd all drug ourselves up to Hogwarts and were seated, all prim and proper on the grounds, when Bill's Patronus arrived, spreading the news that Fleur was in labor. The mass exodus of redheads probably drained the event attendance by half. Even Harry left, with a quick apology to Kingsley. Harry, the keynote speaker.

The very idea made me grin all the way to my glow-in-the-dark boxers. They're not just like The Ones, but close enough for me. I'm learning to let go, little bit by little bit. I haven't even needed Percy about The Theft for days now.

Hermione and Ginny, who weren't, strictly speaking, supposed to be away from the school, were seated in the corner. Hermione was forcing them to revise during the down-time, but I could tell from Ginny's expression that a revolt was soon coming. She kept eying Harry in that way that made me feel like I should protest knowing anything about it.

Their relationship makes me just the tiniest bit uncomfortable. It's not because I don't like seeing them together—quite the opposite, in fact. I'm thrilled that they've found each other and are so obviously in love. I think any discomfort—and, mind you, it's very, very slight—comes more from the fact that I'm probably supposed to object on a purely brotherly level. And, really, it's only the details I could even find objectionable. Harry loves Ginny, Ginny loves Harry. I don't need the gritty minutiae. They're together, and it makes me happy.

I have about the same reaction to Ron and Hermione, although they're usually more entertaining to watch when together. You can tell there are deep feelings there, buried under all the nitpicking,

correcting, and whining. I suppose everyone has their match.

Even Percy is seeing someone, which made Mum flutter about the room when he announced it. I haven't met her yet, but he seems happy.

Good for him.

It was just last week, after Percy's grand announcement, that I realized... I'm the only one left. I don't really count Charlie because... well, just because. He's always been his own special category, anyway. When they change the laws, he'll marry one of his dragons.

The realization wasn't painful in itself. It was more... hollow. If Fred had been there, I could have pointed a finger at him and directed Mum's concerned eyes his way. If Fred had been there, I could have more easily pretended that the silent flat doesn't bother me. Well, Fred would never have let it get silent, so it's a moot point, I suppose.

At some point I might dwell on the idea, but it's so new that it's still easy to dismiss.

One day I'll find someone to talk with. One day I'll be ready to pursue something that fulfills a soul-deep need, rather than just a temporary physical one.

Now it's easy to pass off as just a slump.

So there I sat, awaiting the birth of my niece or nephew, in a slump. But I'm okay with it.

Ginny abandoned Hermione and moved to the floor to play with Teddy and Harry. Mum was pacing and wringing her hands. Percy and Dad were talking quietly, and Ron had his head tipped back, snoring loud enough to wake people peacefully recuperating from spattergroit three floors above us.

And then it happened. You know how they say some things in life happen in slow motion? One minute everything is running at normal speed, and then the bubble bursts and you can literally watch something happen one breath at a time.

I'd always discounted that as fallacy. It didn't happen; I'd never seen it. Percy swears it happened when the wall collapsed on Fred, but I wasn't there. Harry says it happened when the curse came at him, but, again, I didn't witness it.

I would never guess that the moment Bill burst in the door and announced the birth of his daughter would have been the moment for me. But it was.

Everything froze and I watched the reactions unfold, completely separate from me: Mum screamed and threw herself at Dad; Ginny and Harry kissed; Hermione gasped and dumped her revision off her lap; horribly scattering her organizational system; Ron jerked in his chair and fell off onto the floor; Percy jumped forward and shook Bill's hand, pumping it up and down vigorously.

And I sat, just as frozen as the moment. Something inside me... slid into place. Nothing had changed, really. I was still George—or Geporidge Wally, as my clothing declares me to the world—but I was more, as well. I wasn't simply George—half of Fred and George fame, but a whole person inside myself.

Time resumed at normal speed as Bill pulled me out of my chair and clapped me soundly on the back.

“Come see her.”

I wasn't sure why he asked me first, even before Mum, but I nodded dumbly and followed him into the room.

Fleur was sitting in the bed, a pink bundle of blankets in her arms. I'd always heard that women were supposed to be a wreck after giving birth, but Fleur looked as serene and beautiful as ever. Knowing how the universe has a sense of humor, I'd bet that Veela can just concentrate hard and the baby appears out of thin air, perfectly clean and healthy. None of all that pushing, screaming, and painful business involved.

Bill was talking extremely fast, telling me all the details, but I couldn't do anything except lean forward to see the newest Weasley.

Don't tell Bill, but his daughter was... well... I don't like to use the word *ugly*... She was purple, which I hoped wasn't some weird French baby fashion trend, and completely bald. As in—no hair, shiny bald. And her face was all wrinkly and scrunched up.

“You can hold her.” Fleur actually smiled when she offered the baby into my hesitant arms.

Bill chuckled and helped adjust the bundle in my arms. “Remember holding Ginny?”

I clasped the baby as if my life depended on it, which with two brand new parents in the room, it almost certainly did. “Probably dropped her on her head,” I muttered. “It would explain a few things.”

He laughed, even though Fleur looked like she might snatch the baby back from me.

“She's...” My words were stolen when her squinty eyes opened and stared blearily up at me.

That slow-motion thing happened again. I was starting to get used to it, oddly enough.

“Beautiful, I know,” Bill said proudly. “I'm going to have to beat the blokes off with a Beater's bat when she gets older.”

I nodded absently, even though that's not what I had meant. I would never tell Bill, or anyone else, that their daughter isn't pretty. I may be funny, but I'm not cruel. But looking into those small, perfectly blue eyes, I realized I'd been completely wrong with my first impression. She *was* beautiful.

“She looks like Fred.”

The thought slipped from my mouth, as my thoughts are wont to do, and made me smile.

Fleur gasped and jabbered away in French, cursing my name, I'm sure, and swearing that her baby did *not* look like Fred. My French isn't so good, but I caught enough of the words to get the gist.

But when I looked at the baby, I saw it plainly. She had the same Weasley chin as he did—stubborn and square. She had the same short, stubby nose as Fred had, and her eyes were the same.

“It’s a barmy idea,” Bill said, “but we want you to be her godfather.”

I couldn’t have been more startled if Bill had said he was willing to sell her to me for anything I had in my pocket—which was only a galleon, two knuts, one slightly melted chocolate frog, and enough lint to weave into a scarf.

“Yeah?”

Fleur didn’t look completely thrilled with the idea, but she gave a short nod.

I looked back down at the baby in my arms and knew this was right. This, right here, was my Celebration of Life.

Things were going to be all right again.

“I’d be honored.”

“There may be a few stipulations,” Bill said. “Limits on pranking supplies and the like. We’ll have Percy draw up a contract.”

I nodded, not caring what I’d have to sign. Nothing mattered but the baby in my arms, and my plans to corrupt her horribly. After all, who else could tell her the best stories about her Uncle Fred?

So things aren’t great, but they’re pretty good. There were no grand emotional break-downs on Victory Day. The whole first-Weasley-granddaughter-arriving thing might have helped with that. So much so that Dad joked that there should be a birth around this time every year.

“We’ll get right on that, Dad,” Ron answered sarcastically.

I nudged Percy with my elbow, almost knocking him to the floor. “You’re up next, Romeo. You’re the one in a serious relationship.”

Percy flushed twenty-one shades of red (I counted) and gaped at me. “Well, I... Er, that is to say...” He adjusted his glasses while he struggled for a response. “Harry and Ginny—”

“Are far too young to be thinking about that, Percy,” Ginny said, her eyes narrowing into that glare that could melt stone. Harry only smirked. “Besides, I have a career with the Harpies waiting before Harry and I even consider children.”

I grinned at her. I’d known this, of course. The announcement that Ginny had signed a rookie contract with her beloved Harpies came several weeks ago by owl, but it’s still exciting to think about.

Harry kissed her forehead and winked, and I wondered if the two of them were secretly engaged. I’d make it a point to corner Ron soon and flush the truth out of him.

Old Perce never did find a rebuttal to my teasing. And, it turns out, he just might produce the next

Weasley sprog. He and Audrey, the girl he was seeing, are pretty serious. There's talk of a late fall wedding running around.

Spring melted into summer faster than I expected. My days were filled with purposeful inventing, odd sales at strange times of the month (Buy two Punching Telescopes and receive half-off your purchase of Bruise-Removing Paste, Midnight Only!) and trips to Shell Cottage to dote on my god-daughter.

I'm sure I was there far more than Fleur expected. I heard her muttering to Bill one day that I needed to find a nice witch and settle down with. I completely agree, even if the method of finding said witch escapes me.

I'd been out several times, but nothing too serious had come of any of the dates. Met some nice witches, got a snog or two, and one case of serious indigestion from a highly questionable chicken kebab. All in all, not a horrid way to pass the time, but nothing to tell Mum about in the relationship department.

Lee Jordan showed up in the shop one July afternoon, demanding that I arrive at his place at precisely eight o'clock that evening, and he wasn't taking 'no' for an answer.

Which was fine; I hadn't planned on using that particular phrase. In fact, the idea of a party sounded great. Have a few drinks, laugh with some friends, and remember some good times—all perfectly acceptable ways to spend a Wednesday night.

Little did I know. Wednesdays would become my favorite day of the week, and it had nothing to do with Eeylops Emporium's special on owl tonic that they run weekly.

When I arrived, Lee's awkward little flat was bursting at the seams with people. Lee knows everyone; everyone knows Lee. It makes mingling a bit hard when you have to turn sideways to fit through the masses of people, but party games are always an adventure.

After several conversations with people I passed and even more apologies to people I stepped on, I parked myself into a corner with my bottle of butterbeer and watched the ebb and flow of the room.

Old friends wandered by and offered hugs, as well as a few stories that made me laugh. I marveled at how much some people had changed, how much others stayed the same. Katie Bell came by, rubbing her largely pregnant belly. That little announcement came a few months ago, with her rushed elopement to Carbry O'Carnahan, Keeper for the Kenmare Kestrels. He's a massive bloke and you need a translation spell to even understand what he's saying, his accent is so heavy. Their courtship was whirlwind with a little 'whoops' at the end, but Katie seems thrilled with the whole situation, so I'm happy for her.

Alicia Spinnet is off living in Canada, teaching at one of the Wizarding children's schools over there, I've heard. Oliver Wood breezed in, drank half a butterbeer, gave his excuses to the rest of us, and dashed back out the door; he's a busy bloke these days.

The only one missing tonight from our old Quidditch team was Angelina Johnson. I could have sworn Lee said she was coming, but Lee says a lot of things in his excited moments.

And then, she was there. She slid into the empty seat at my side and we drank our butterbeers in silence, sharing a few smiles now and again, before making small talk.

I wish I'd had some epiphany, some bright moment that signaled that this was it, that my life was skewing off course once more and taking me to a place I'd only imagined in my best daydreams. But it didn't come. Neither did that frozen moment thing. Damn. When you really needed it...

Angie and I talked for hours about everything and nothing. We laughed and nudged each other, and even shared a shot or two of Firewhisky before going our separate ways.

It wasn't until later that night, lying alone in my bed, staring up at the ceiling that something inside me made the connection. I had completely enjoyed the party, and not because of Lee's demonstrative table dancing, or catching Neville and Hannah Abbott snogging by the front door (first Susan, now Hannah—Neville is quite the ladies' man), or watching a dozen unsuspecting people instantly turn into porlocks after I'd walked by their appetizer plates and liberally sprinkled sweets around. It was because, for the first time in a very long time, I'd been able to fully relax around someone who knew me so very well.

Angie and I had always been great friends.

Now, I know what you're thinking: George, you need to be careful with your heart, after all, Angie and Fred were an item, and you should really find someone who you can be happy with and who won't end up an ill-advised friendship-ruining moment in your life.

But you'd be wrong. Yes, Fred had taken Angie to the Tri-Wizard Tournament Christmas Ball (try saying that three times fast) but they'd gone as friends and had honestly only dated that one time. They didn't even kiss. I should know; I had to put up with Fred's griping for days afterwards when he found out Simonette Mitchell and I had spent almost twenty minutes down a dark corridor together.

Angie and Fred got along great, were real mates, but there wasn't ever anything truly romantic between them.

Score one for my fragile, if courageous, heart.

And it's not like I was planning on dropping to one knee in front of Angie anytime soon, anyway. It was possible nothing romantic would come of wanting to see her again. I'd be more than happy to just have someone I can talk to that knows my past, knows which sensitive subjects to avoid—such as no bringing up the time Peeves nicked my clothes when I snuck into the Prefect's bathroom in fourth year and had to scarp back to Gryffindor tower wearing nothing but a strategically placed shield that I'd wrestled from one of the suits of armor and an embarrassed smile—and who I could truly be myself around.

I wrote to her that night. Yes, at three o'clock in the morning.

After charming Marco Polo with almost an entire bag of owl treats—gitty little feather-duster—I felt much better.

And she wrote back, although at a more reasonable hour of the morning, accepting my invitation for

coffee the next day.

Once again, we hit it off well. I can't remember there being a lull in conversation once, and we spent almost three hours at Fortescue's. I very nearly had to roll myself home, sloshing the whole way, afterwards.

The little impromptu meetings continued all through July and August, increasing in frequency and duration. I knew it was headed somewhere serious, just as I knew that our new Bubblicious Wands (Now Available! Wands that blow square bubbles! And they're tasty, too!) would be selling faster than we could produce them.

We were sitting at my flat, curled up together on the sofa one evening when I turned to her and smiled.

"You think this is going somewhere?"

She took a thoughtful moment before answering. "I think I've never felt this way about anyone before."

"Not even Fred?" I asked.

She laughed and shook her head. "Not even Fred."

"Just checking." I laid my head back down and adjusted her so that her head was on my shoulder. "Because I'm really comfortable—and not just right now—but always. With you."

Angie's soft laugh made me feel all squishy inside. "You're a bit of alright, as well. And I think I can stand your sense of humor, but it'd be a challenge."

My heart pounded away in my chest as the realization that we were on the cusp of something huge settled on me. "So... you want to make it official? Be my girlfriend?"

Angie sat up, propping herself on her elbow and eyed me dangerously. Ginny's apparently been teaching classes for that look—one eyebrow cocked, pursed lips, intense glare.

"Are we fifteen?"

I swallowed the laugh that almost burst out of me. Never good to laugh at a witch who gives you that look.

"Er..."

"No, George, I won't be your girlfriend, but I'll be something more."

In that one phrase I went from horribly low to euphorically high. She was going to be my... "Something more works," I told her. We'd figure out the semantics later.

And that was it. Our transition from friends who rarely saw each other, to better friends who spent more time together, to *Something More* was so smooth I hardly noticed it.

"I suppose I should take you home with me now."

"As if I'm some stray animal you picked up on the side of the road."

I laughed at her joke—another very attractive thing about her—and shook my head. "It's sort of this thing we do in our family. When it's serious, when it's *Something More*, we bring the person home with us. Then Mum can fuss about them, Dad can question us about our intentions, the rest of the flock can make you horribly uncomfortable, and you get to hear embarrassing stories about me running around in nappies."

Angie rolled so that she could prop her arms on my chest and her chin on her arms. "So... how will that work when I've known your family for ages?"

I smiled down at her and shrugged a shoulder. "Why don't we just fly in and see how things work out?"

"I am *not* riding a broom into your mother's kitchen, George Weasley."

How did she guess...?

"Okay, we'll walk, but you're taking all the fun out of this, I hope you know."

Mum was unbearable. She fluttered and fretted and was completely chuffed when Angie and I arrived for dinner. I was obviously more nervous than Angie was, a fact that Ginny seized early on and tormented me with. At least I didn't put my elbow in the butter; that will always be Ginny's claim to fame around the Burrow.

"I can't imagine coming to something like this not having met you all," Angie whispered when she passed the boiled potatoes. "How intimidating."

I looked around the table and saw what she meant. The Weasleys in themselves are a frightening lot, but then you add in the extras—Harry Potter, no less—and it's a motley crew. We're loud and obnoxious: we throw food, we make rude gestures across the table, we fight over the last helping of whatever it is we want most, and we laugh most of the meal away.

It was perfect, in my opinion.

"You're not planning to scarper during pudding?" I asked with a grin.

She seemed to weigh that decision before giving a small shrug. "I think I can hold my own."

I wanted to kiss her right then and there, but Ginny was hovering. Revenge for dozens of jokes at her and Harry's expense shone in her eyes. It's against my nature to simply hand someone prime pranking material, but I chanced it anyway. Angie looked pleased.

In the middle of the ruckus, I had another of those frozen moments. I looked around and saw everyone laughing and smiling. The future spread out before me and I could picture dozens of Weasley sprogs filling the few spaces left at the garden table, or perhaps Mum would add a whole other table just for them. Genetics might strike a few blows, via the in-laws, to produce a few non-

ginger heads, but we'd have to see.

Victoire, now seated on my lap and slobbering all over my spoon handle, babbled away happily. I didn't even care that there was a wet spot on my robes. From her drool, people! Sheesh!

And that's when it hit me that there doesn't have to be just one Celebration of Life. I didn't necessarily need to spend the last year searching for one thing I had to do to make Fred proud of me. He'd be mighty chuffed if he could look around and see that we're all smiling and none of us is wearing black as a statement of anything but fashion. I can imagine him now, slipping something devious onto plates around the table, teaching Teddy to curse when Harry's not looking, tugging on Ginny's plait and congratulating her on the Harpies' first win of the season, making comments to bring a blush to both Percy and Audrey's cheeks, making rude jokes and nudging Bill's elbow to get him to laugh, thereby getting him in trouble with Fleur, and generally making a commotion.

Damn but I miss him.

So this is it, my Celebration of Life. And it didn't even require me to jump out of a perfectly good airplane.

I'll consider that for another time, perhaps, when the sky-diving bloke's memory gets a little spotty and he doesn't chase me out again.

"So that's it, Fred. That's my story."

I leaned on the side of Fred's tombstone and looked up at the last few remaining leaves still clinging to the trees.

"Perce and Audrey got married last week. You'd have been proud of me—there were fireworks with suggestive comments, and four people sprouted feathers. Mum chased me around the tent for three laps until Angie Confunded her. Did I mention how much I love that woman? Angie, not Mum. Well, I love Mum, too, but in a far different way."

The quiet of the afternoon crept around me and I soaked it in, reveling in the fact that I had nowhere to go and nothing pressing that needed to be done. If Mum caught me out here no doubt she'd find some chore around the Burrow that needed to be done. That's why I'm sitting on the far side of the tombstone, scrunched down below it.

"I'm going to ask Angie to marry me. I know what you're thinking—it's too sudden—but it's really not. We're good together and she puts up with me better than even you did. And she's much prettier to wake up to in the morning, let me tell you."

The very idea made my stomach flip nervously, but it felt right at the same time.

"Everyone else is good. Ginny and Harry will be together forever. He'll get around to proposing soon, I think, but they're determined to take the world on their own terms first. Hermione will probably propose to Ron before he ever even thinks about it, but I don't see that happening for years. They're happy how they are right now. Mum and Dad are good. And Charlie, well, you know how he is, still barmy about his dragons, although he does have fine taste in liquor."

“So we’re all good and settled.” I trailed off and ran my fingers along the cold stone of the grave marker.

“And I decided that moving on doesn’t mean I have to forget you. You’re still a git, though. An ugly one.” The old insult rolled off my tongue, leaving a pleasant taste, rather than simply guilt. It was a term of endearment, after all.

“I hope you’re happy wherever you are. I can picture you now, a bird on each arm, slipping Canary Creams onto God’s dinner plate, and making plans for when I finally get my sorry arse over there. Make some good ones, will ya? But don’t count on me too soon; I’ve got some living to do yet.”

I stood slowly and looked at the name etched on the stone, and I knew that he’d be happy for me. There was only one more thing I needed to say to Fred to complete my visit: the same thing I say to him every time I come to this peaceful place.

“Mischief managed, for now.”

Author’s Note:

George’s line about Charlie marrying a dragon when the laws change is reminiscent of a line in the movie *Notting Hill*.

George’s joke about the Hufflepuff was found online, eons ago, and I can’t even remember where I found it anymore. I meant no offence to Hufflepuffs, blind people, Aurors, or anyone else that might be tetchy about it. It’s not the funniest joke out there, but George was stretching to find *anything* funny right then.

The messed up name on George’s unsolicited mail is inspired by *Friends*, where the TV Guide comes under another name.

George’s toast was found at an online source and I chose the most borderline inappropriate one I thought he could get away with under the circumstances.