Part One: The Letters of Summer, 75



Sirius Black to Remus Lupin
August Fifteenth, Summer of 1975

M—
Well we are having all kinds of fun here WITHOUT YOU of course. All the livelong day we do nothing but frolic in the sun and dance pastoral dances and sing merry drinking songs, you can imagine, we are sloshed ALL the time without your improving influence. You need to hurry up and get out here mate, else we shall be forced, FORCED I say to get you on the NEW MOTORBIKE and steal you away to our tropical paradise, if by "tropical" you mean "Devonshire" (and I do.) We fly it constantly, it frightens the shit out of birds which you can imagine is exactly what I look for in a mode of transportation.

James has got his head stuck in a window, what the hell

Everyone here needs help ALL THE TIME. James's family are off their collective nut, they eat the weirdest foods and his dad's a total madman. He's read every book in the world and goes absolutely blue in the face over Muggle saxophonists. He's a cool bloke, I think when you're old and mad you'll be very like him except less hairy and owning more sweater-vests.

I've got to go help James, speaking of which he says "hello moony! tell him I'm doing great and I want him to send back my jacket." This is of course not true. He is not doing great, he is stuck in a window. WEIRD BLOKE THAT JAMES POTTER.

don't send him the jacket, I bet its cold in Latvia. Stupid research, stupid Ministry, stupid everything, COME BACK OUR MOONY WE ARE DEVASTATED WITHOUT YOU but I hope the clinic is good and you are doing well.

Three more weeks till sixth year. o tempora o mores!!

—P&P

Remus Lupin to Sirius Black
August Seventeenth, Summer of 1975

Most Illustrious P(&P),
Cannot be leaving anyone out now can I. Must be sure not to ruffle very easily ruffled fur or get anyone's antlers in a joint. &c. &c. Will now attempt to coherently address your points as they were made in chronological order; will no doubt give self impressive headache trying.

Hopefully you are keeping your frolicsome natures decent and not entirely natural. Have images of you & Prongs over there leaping about like monkeys in the buff — an expression; by no means a compliment — and have lost half tonight's cocoa just imagining the scene. Do please try not to be arrested. Have no money to bail you lot out. Will just sit here in James' jacket (very comfortable by the by, and send another thankyouverymuch his way) and laugh arse off.

Oh look there it goes now.

Do not put me on motorbike or harbor misimpressions of putting me on motorbike. Motorbike is a grave menace to society. Am surprised you haven't broken something semi-useful in flying it about as you do. Frolicsome creature that you are. Poor birds. Don't envy them one bit, though I know well their woes. Send them my regards and assurances. I have to deal with you the rest of the year in any case and they've only a short vacation of it. Nonetheless: my deepest bird sympathies.

Latvia is very QUIET. The concept of which I am sure seems very foreign to you. Foreign Latvian custom, this QUIET. Something to do with No Sirius Black and No James Potter and No One Getting Stuck In Windows Through Own Ineptitude. Have read seventeen books already without anyone's chin on my shoulder. These Latvians could teach you a thing or two. I suggest next summer you vacation in Latvia. Where it is QUIET.

Sorry about smudge. (The cheese sandwich is very good though.)

Ask James' dad if he enjoys the Benny Goodman Orchestra. Please try to pronounce name properly. Name not even funny on its own. Name not even susceptible to funnification.

Get James out of the window & I miss you all naturally & the quiet will get to me & perhaps on that day I will be open to motorbike trips & perhaps pigs will roast my pork chops for dinner.

-Messr. M

PS get the signature right, Pads, because it really does count!

Sirius Black to Remus Lupin
August Twentieth, Summer of 1975

To:

The Right Hon. Remus J. Lupin
Bugger If I Know Where
Some Stupid Country Very Far Away

My MOST Esteemed Messr. M.,

DON'T give yourself a headache, who knows what's in those Latvian medicines?? HEATHENS. I shudder to think.

My fur is not easily ruffled. It is naturally disheveled and I'll have you know that there are those who find it quite sexy. Speaking of sexy (and of scaring the birds, haha) we have made a new friend! Sort of. She is one of James's very pretty neighbors who we ran into on one of our wild monkey-romps. (by the way try GREEK GODS instead, we are ever so manly and muscley from all the romping and becoming bronzeder by the second.) We were very polite to her, I don't know why she looked so panicked. I was wearing a top hat and was very chivalrous I think. Oh don't look so horrified (I can tell you're looking horrified!!) we were having a bathe and she just HAD to come out in her backyard at the wrong time. She is a bit of all right but obviously Prongs has eyes for no one but...someone who Shall Not Be Named and Has Got Red Hair but Really, REALLY Does Not Fancy Him. Poor old sausage, he'll never give up.

I would NEVER ask you to bail us out!! I think if you left James and I alone with the other inmates for ten minutes THEY would pay for us to leave so you won't ever have to worry. Anyway we only almost got arrested once, and that was a mistake, I'd never seen that goat before in my life.

REMUS J LUPIN I WILL GET YOU ON THAT MOTORBIKE IF IT'S THE LAST THING I DO. Moony you can't IMAGINE how wild it is, it just PURRS when you get it up there, James calls it the Vibrator because he is a foul-minded little hag, but honestly it is the best thing I have ever experienced, never was bribe money put to better use. You will be tied to the seat if necessary. Even PETER said he would go on, if PETER can do it you can bloody do it.

QUIET IS BORING. BOOOOOOOOORIIIIIIING. I AM GOING TO SEND YOU A BIG FAT HOWLER AND SEE HOW YOU LIKE IT. Who do you have to feel superior to without me around eh?? And if no one is reading over your shoulder who will TALK TO YOU about the interesting things that happen in your book?? Remembrance of Things Past would not have been NEARLY as good without my running commentary, remember when I acted out that bit about the fairy of names? I am a GENIUS.

I want to help you eat your sandwich. I am hungry now.

I asked Mr. Potter about Whosiface Google, and he looked at me like I had got four heads. Then he grabbed my shoulders and started babbling nonsense at me, he asked if I liked big bands and why hadn't I said something before and I said I thought so but I was a bit scared of giants. Then he started yelling names at me and I just had to parrot them and try to remember what you listen to so I wouldn't sound stupid which I did anyway. and THEN he made me sit down on the couch and listen to records for FIVE MILLION YEARS while he stared off into space with a euphoric expression. I HOPE YOU'RE HAPPY. He played that one I like though! The Glen Miller one. The dah-nah-nah dah! dah! dah! dah! da dunnah dunnah, doodle oodle doodley doo, doo doo doo! dah nahnuh doodle oodle doo doodle oodle doo, doot doodle oodle doo doodle oodle doo, and then the same three notes over and over. And then that dead cool guitarist I like, the one with three fingers. So not a total waste!

FUNNIFICATION IS NOT A WORD MOONY. Lack of structured education has made you go soft!! oh how the mighty have fallen!

the quiet will get to you soon and then we will get to you. how many mountaintop retreats can there possibly be in a titchy little country like Latvia. Fortunately it doesn't really matter whether or not youre up for it, you're coming anyway...BE PREPARED WE COULD BE THERE ANY DAY.

Until our meeting,
I remain,

In all things your most obedient servant,
&c., &c.,

Sirius Procyon Mirzam Aschere Black, esq.
The Backyard
Devonshire

P.S. Hey there Moony it's Prongs, you know I want to write you letters too but SOMEONE always has to go and write them in the backyard alone like he's having a wank or something, and then he's already said everything interesting and I feel useless. So this is a short note to let you know I miss you too! Though I miss my jacket more! You are supposed to be the responsible one. Bad show Moony, VERY bad. Anyway my mum's been in Switzerland and she brought back some real Swiss chocolate! It's massive!! Of course I thought of you so here is a bunch. One of em's got things in that explode in your mouth—that might be nice I thought to help with the quiet, just make sure you chew carefully. See you soon mate!!
James

Remus Lupin to Sirius Black
August Twenty-second, Summer of 1975

To:

The Generally Demented Sirius Black
Far Away From His Right Hon. Comrade
Supposedly, Devonshire;
Or Perhaps Scaring Birds Shitless
Elsewhere

My MOST Grammatically Challenged Messr. Black,

Just because we are not in school does not mean I cannot conjure with my indelible good senses some semblance of structure and stop making faces, that one you've got on right now is particularly unappealing. Yes. The tongue, too. Back in it goes. There, that's better.

I have copied the following from the Merriam-Webster Dictionary I have on hand in order to be one, most correct in my assumptions and two, most helpful from such a great distance.

com·ma
n.
1. Grammar. A punctuation mark (,) used to indicate a separation of ideas or of elements within the structure of a sentence.
2. A pause or separation; a caesura.

Repeat after me, Mr. Black: I do believe in commas. I do, I do.

Keep saying it until a fairy comes up and gives you a swift kick right between the eyes because honestly I don't know how you manage to talk so, even on paper. It's as if your quill just runs after your mouth and your fingers aren't even involved. I have no idea how it keeps up.

Are you still reading? Sirius? Sirius? I'm not talking about grammar anymore. (I do believe in commas. I do, I do.) No, really, I'm not, I've stopped. Look I'll even use an entire sentence without though O! how it pains me.

That poor girl. Does she have a name? Or is it just Blinded By Exhibitionist Boys Whom She Has The Misfortune Of Vacationing Alongside? I like that. It sounds very Native American. Perhaps you should encourage Prongs to reveal himself so indecently more often to her: who knows? Summer love. Ah, the romance. Ah, the black eyes. It will at least be a better technique than the one he tries out on poor Lily Evans because that routine he's got with his hair and his hand and that awkward position looks as though you've given him fleas.

Which reminds me, how are the fleas? Still nippy? I think I've worked out a potion that will work this time to keep them away. And this one doesn't smell awful, though it does smell a little bit like lilacs. Can't do anything about that. In any case it isn't going to do anything funny to your tail like last time, which I already apologized about seven hundred thousand times for and if you don't stop bringing it up and looking melodramatic I'm going to put it in your rolls at breakfast when you're not looking and see how you like a great big pink feather duster hanging off your rear for the rest of your life.

In response to your most delicate suggestion that I spend some time getting better acquainted with your Satanic motorbike, I must politely decline with the excuse that I would rather be ill upon a flock of hapless sheep from very high up in a jostly jangly great black beast of a machine charmed to fly but completely temperamental and — oh, dear, the answer would be no. The answer tomorrow is also going to be no. It doesn't like me, Sirius, and don't tell me I'm being stupid because it doesn't. And I don't like being high up. And it's going to try and throw me just like a broom only worse. And it isn't funny. Stop laughing, I mean it.

Honestly, some friends. They'd try to kill you and call it camaraderie! The spirit of great fun!

While I must admit your ... revolutionary additions to Remembrance of Things Past added their own certain je ne sais pourquoi to the tale, I will bring to your attention the Hamlet fiasco of '73.

To pee or not to pee is hardly the question.

That's another thing that's lovely about Latvia. I get to eat whole entire sandwiches all on my own. The first time I got entirely through turkey on rye I nearly had a fit, looking over my shoulder all the time, waiting for someone to snatch it up and finish it off for me. (It had just the right amount of lettuce; you know I'm not one for green things with my meat, it really does feel ridiculous but that's how it is. And the most exquisite mustard from France. There are so few perfect sandwiches in the world but I'd wager that was one of them.) Of course it's horrendously lonely to think that no one is going to come and tell me I've got mustard on my nose but now you're making that face again with the tongue, and that's even more horrendous. Right! Forget I said anything.

Does he really like Benny Goodman? Does he really have records? I can't believe you got to listen to James' father's big band records and I didn't and you're complaining! What records did he listen to? Do you remember any of the names? What were the songs? Sirius how can you spend an entire paragraph going dah-nah-nah dah! doo doo doo! doodle oodle doo! and not tell me the songs or the performers or anything?

Oh blazes I've spilled my cocoa again.

And on James' jacket but I'll fix it so don't tell him that.

I'll have you know that the Bard made words up all the time and he's the greatest literary legend the world has ever known. Which means I can say funnification if I want and one day, when our epistolary extravaganzas are published, the world will sit back and think What Brilliance! with starry glazes over their fond eyeballs.

In any case yesterday I finished my eighteenth book. It was called the Count of Monte Cristo and you would really like it. It's got adventure & swordfighting & duels & revenge & things, & very little kissing considering. I am also enclosing these little cinnamon candies but don't put too many in your mouth at one time as you will burn your tongue. They are very spicy.

Until I send you right back where you came from on that motorbike,
I remain,
In all things your most obedient Moony,
&c., &c.,

Remus John Lupin
The Study
Next To The Window
Latvia

PS: no motorbikes, charmed or otherwise.

PPS: I warned you about the cinnamon candies, that'll take at least a week to heal

PPPS: Stop looking at your tongue in the mirror it's unbecoming.

PPPPS: Messr. Prongs,

Tell Sirius that if he wants to have a wank over my letters he should most definitely do it in the bathroom and not in public because think of the neighbors, dear boy, think of the neighbors. The chocolates are amazing and thank you so much for them, though I almost lost my tongue to one. Keep Sirius away from all those cinnamon candies and I will think of something wonderful to send your mum. Also see what you can do, finding out about your dad's records, they sound really incredible.

And I have not spilled cocoa on your jacket. If I ever did I would get it all cleaned right away just so you know and no one would ever be the wiser.

This is why I don't do the lying. You and Padfoot wanking over there do it for me.

Keep his head out of the window. Can't trust him to look after yours.

Moony

Sirius Black to Remus Lupin
August Twenty-fourth, Summer of 1975

To:
The one and only Remus J. Lupin
Moping and Looking Consumptive and Tragic
Probably on the Floor
Deserted Hellhole
Siberia

My tongue is very weird. Moony do you think my tongue's weird? I keep looking at it in the mirror and it is WEIRD, it's sort of POINTY. Right now it's especially weird from your devil candy which, you should know, caused me all manner of torment and despair. Even without the magenta stains and the burn mark though it's just a FUNNY TONGUE. Have you ever noticed that? Do you think other people notice it? do first-years call me the Weird Tongue Man? oh bother.

Why didn't you tell me I had a weird tongue? then I could have done something about it like not gone about SHOVING IT at people all the time. What kind of a friend ARE you???

I KNEW MOST OF THAT LETTER WOULD BE GRAMMATICAL ADVICE. you are borderline compulsive, has anyone ever told you that? other than me? This obsession with punctuation marks signals, I think, a disturbing fixation on minutiae that can lead only to eventual madness and a solitary death surrounded by cats and a thousand folded pairs of socks.

Good advice though it may be, I am choosing to ignore all of it, since I have created a personal grammar that adheres to my needs both moral and punctuational. After all, with the world in its current lamentable state, I sincerely believe that rather than WASTING commas with the rest of my fat capitalist pig brothers on frivolous consumerist sentences like these, they should be donated to the more needy, such as the chinese, who as I understand it have NO COMMAS AT ALL.

That sentence had five of them. I WIN, MESSR. OBSESSED WITH SMALL DOTS.

Plus you would not recognize me if I wrote like a human being. You would get confused and I hate to think of you all confused, wandering around Latvia, wondering "what well-written demon has possessed my friend Sirius and drained him of all his natural charming spontaneity and vivacity? Who will I correct and look down upon? what is my purpose anymore? WHAT AM I TO DO? WHERE AM I TO GO??" I imagine you would weep like a child.

I BET YOU NOTICED I SHOULD HAVE SAID "WHOM" UP THERE.

I did that on purpose, you see, to give you something to do.

You should know I have only scared the birds within a very limited radius and not scared them shitless, more's the pity; I know this because they POOP ON THE BIKE. I almost had a coronary the first time it happened and had to be held for a long time as I shook and whimpered. To hell with the family corvidae and all its relations!! Since then I have made a greater effort to run over them, which you can imagine is difficult when airborne and results in some pretty spectacular swerving, you should be grateful I still have a spine.

Her name is Jillian, which I think is a very nice name though not so exotically American Indian. James has tried his patented Finger Comb of Lust in her direction, though so far it's not been very effective—she gets sort of glazed round the eyes, not in a good way. We've gone swimming a few times though and she's a good sort, kind of flaky.

I think she likes it when we expose ourselves. Dirty, dirty girl.

O THE FLEAS. where to begin? i WANT to trust your potion, Moony, but, you know, sometimes the old wound still aches. Betrayal is a bitter potion to swallow, you know. There are nights I awake in a cold sweat, clutching my pillow, convinced I have got a GREAT BLOODY PINK DUSTER STICKING OUT OF MY ARSE when ALL I TRIED TO DO WAS HELP MY FRIEND IN HIS HOUR OF NEED.

No, I tell you what, they are unbearable. It's murder every time I transform, I haven't chased birds (off the motorbike) in nearly a week because I can't stand it. It feels like my skin's going to crawl off. There are times I would rather have a

pink bum. I tell you what, I will try your bloody potion, because I am a big enough man to swallow my pride, although you have heaped coals upon my other cheek. And also I will smell springtime fresh and delicious! and very manly I am sure. HURRY UP AND GET BACK SO YOU CAN GIVE IT TO MEEEEEeeeee.

...what about the day after tomorrow, what will your answer be then?

I loved Hamlet!! So did the rest of the school, I was getting accolades for my magnificent thespian stylings for WEEKS. I thought my bit with the oddly-shaped potato was quite inspired and McG, though the love of my life and the only woman I could ever truly devote my heart to, should really loosen up on her definition of "obscene."

Though of course nothing compares to the Rime of the Ancient Mariner. THAT was what I call a performance and a half. Oh, now you've gone over all disapprove-y, haven't you? Stop it. None of us actually got any DISEASES, did we, and I don't think that bird was more than a couple of weeks old.

Oh the disapproval! It burns me straight through the paper, sort of like how your hell-candy burned me straight through the tongue.

Moonyyyyy. You'll grow old before your time if you keep that up you know, not that you aren't already, your face will freeze like that and you'll have to be a teacher. Don't say I didn't warn you.

You've got mustard on your nose, did you know that? Also I've been practicing and now I can touch my nose with my tongue, when I get mustard on I can just lick it off. Food will never be wasted on my face again!

WELL I DON'T BLOODY KNOW YOUR MUSICIANS DO I?? that's why I SANG it, so you'd know which one I was talking about!! and I told you two of the band people, Glenn Miller and the three-fingered Gypsy, Jangle or whatever. Django Reinhardt!! You see I remember what you tell me but I can't possibly remember EVERYTHING and I don't know the other ones so stop yelling at me.

Mr. Potter is MAD for me now, I wish I'd never asked him about your stupid boyfriend Benny Goodman. He keeps muttering at me about how if I like swing so much I'd like "bebop" and "hep cats" and "thelonious monk" which sounds like a fungal condition. Anyway he's got two boxes of duplicate records, he says people keep giving them to him as gifts and he already owns them, but he doesn't want to sell them because it would be like selling his grandmum. YOU JAZZ FANS. MADMEN ALL.

so I said I'd take them (me being this huge swing savant and all.)

so guess what I have for you.

You should get back now. I mean school is in a week and a half so we'll see you soon I suppose but you should get back NOW.

Hey I've read that book!! but really I liked the three musketeers better. All for one and one for all and everything. I liked Aramis best, he reminded me of someone though obviously more fluttery and annoying and less likely to whine at Athos about proper comma usage.

I will leave the motorbike thing alone...for now. You'll come around because if you don't I will TELL JAMES ABOUT HIS JACKET MOO HA HA HA HA HA.

How was yesterday? It was weird not to be there with you, we were thinking about you though. I was thinking. I hope you were okay. REST UP ALL RIGHT, don't do any calisthenics for a couple of days and no violent shagging!!

yrs. etc.
Padfoot
Altogether Too Unsophisticated To Deserve a Proper Postscript

Remus Lupin to Sirius Black
August Twenty-fifth, Summer of 1975

To:
His Pointy-Tongued Majesty
Pointy-Tongued Road
In Front Of The Mirror
Staring At His Pointy Tongue
Probably Looking Crosseyed
(Devonshire)

I regret to announce, Messr. Padfoot, that I have had in my time far, far better things to do than stare at your tongue whilst you, in moments of forgetfulness or perhaps simple lack of muscular coordination, let it dangle about for the world to see. I thought that, of all the points you have made mention of in your most recent and oh-so-most literate installation, you would wish it that I addressed this one first and foremost. Hell. My handwriting looks like death if it were reheated in last night's curry. Would you believe it's taken me half an hour to write this much? I suppose I'm still tired & what have you from, you know, but that's no excuse to let my writing look like the bird's got its quill back.

It always leaves me feeling weird when you aren't about for it.

Expect a longer letter soon when I am less, how did you put it, Probably On The Floor, and Looking Consumptive and Tragic. I am going to take a nap. Thanks to you there is no mustard on my nose. Or chocolate at the corner of my mouth.

Have checked.

-M

Remus Lupin to Sirius Black
August Twenty-ninth, Summer of 1975

To:

S. Black Esquire
No Doubt On Tenterhooks
Waiting For Moony's Letter
c/o The Potter Family
Vacationing in Devonshire

O! the pain. O! the horror. My sincerest apologies for taking so very long to write you. I suppose I should break it to you gently but have not the words nor the heart to delay the truth any longer: I am returned to England. No, no, that isn't the news. The news is that my delicate face, with its charming features and its tender expressiveness, is forever

ruined by two of the most impressive (but hardly brilliant, I assure you) scars any Sixth Year boy at Hogwarts has ever sported, I'm sure. I've enclosed a picture but before you look I must remind you that it is truly, truly tragic. They are very big and one runs all the way over my poor nose, which was, as you've remarked often enough before, hopeless to begin with. Mum says it isn't all that bad and Dad says some might even think it mysterious but all I know is I need to come up with an excuse. I don't suppose people will believe there are an unmanageable number of angry tigers in Latvia, do you? I wonder if anyone knows anything much about Latvian wildlife. Perhaps we can just have it be the best kept secret in Hogwarts ever and people can speculate, because speculation never so much as touches upon the truth. I hope that'll do.

All right, you can look at the picture now.

Now you won't have to worry too much about your mutant tongue, as everyone will be paying far more attention to my mutant face. "It came from Canterbury," they'll say when they see me, to which of course we must reply "Actually it came from Latvia," and have done with it.

But there's no need to keep the truth from me, my good man; I can take stark reality, and there's no need to cushion the blow.

It is very noticeable, isn't it. Bother.

In any case, should I know grow old & husky & alone, as you seem to believe my pleasure in honoring grammatical structures properly will lead me, I can at least assure that there will be no cats. You know how I can't tolerate cats. They're always licking themselves, all the time. Pretending to be clean, pretending to be fastidious, when in fact there they go, shoving their noses places no noses should ever be, and then thinking you want to be licked, as well. It's unsanitary — it's hypocritical! Besides, they shed and they yowl and they make the hair on the back of my neck stand on end. And you'd always have the hankering to run after them and bite them, wouldn't you, and you'd knock over tables and chairs and things and make a mess of my nice & clean & husky & alone flat. This is not a risk I am willing to take. (You will grow peevish if I whap you with a rolled up newspaper. I, unlike others, learn from past mistakes.)

Tell the birds good job for me, will you? Tell them to keep up the excellent work. Tell them that I want to see you drop to your knees and mourn your very shiny but otherwise very dangerous motorbike at least once. Can't see what's so precious about it, anyway. Do not understand your obsession with spending so much of your time so unnaturally high up. Do not understand your obsession with revving engines constantly.

While I am tempted to make great fun of your poor flea-infested condition that would be too, too cruel of me. There is nothing remotely funny about fleas. They always nip behind the ear, or just where you can't reach. Terribly smart little devils, fleas. I don't envy James the job of looking after you, running about yowling all the time. It must be a tremendous task. Does he spend all his time sleeping it off? The potion to cure at least this one of your ills works in theory — just like communism, that — but it needs someone who is actually decent at potions and won't melt the cauldron or burn his fingernails off or set the dungeons on fire to make it. You know how bad I am at potions, pink feather duster being case in point or point in case &c. You or James can do it, I suppose. I don't wish to kill anyone. Or discover any new colors of the "putrid" family.

As it is by now the day after tomorrow I have checked with your Moony and have found his answer remains the same. A Moony is a stubborn thing. However if you can still bear his face he would not be averse to a visit and would even have a cheese sandwich waiting. Just send him word. For some unfathomable reason he tells me he misses his friends very much, and absence makes the heart grow fonder, and ridiculous old sap your Moony is, just ridiculous.

In other news I have, of course, recognizing its pure theatrical genius, attempted to transcribe your version of Hamlet, having as much free time as you remind me often enough I do. I have managed only the following, embellished, of course, as is my right as editor.

HAMLET (played by S. Black Esquire hi'self)

To pee, or not to pee: that is the question
Whether tis nobler in the mind to suffer
The pangs and narrows of a murd'rous bladder
Or take arms against our dear McGoogles
And by opposing — detention! To die: to leave:
No more; and by 'a leave' to say we end
The heart-ache and the thousand natural shocks
This class is heir to, 'tis a bathroom break
Devoutly to be wish'd. To die: to leave:
To leave: perchance to pee: ay, there's the rub

(And here you went off about how rubbing in school bathrooms was just wrong, especially if someone caught you, especially especially if you were not alone. For historical accuracy I make good mention.)

What do you think? Have I done your improvisational genius justice?

Perhaps I would like to be a professor. Did you ever think of that? Perhaps I would like to be a old & husky & alone professor in cardigans wandering about transcribing past theatrics to page, wondering whether or not you actually ate that potato after you called him Your Dick — yes, I heard you, and so did McGonagall but I think she rather liked it — and what effect it has on modern day theatre.



And here I should expound upon your fantastic acquisition of the records. I should praise Padfoot well so that his head gets all puffy and swollen and I'll be sorry for it later. Oh, most wise and judicious Padfoot, I am forever in your debt. I'll see if I can bring the old gramophone with me to school this year because there won't be enough time to listen to them all beforehand, I don't think. Also I can teach you that Thelonius Monk is most assuredly not a fungus, nor a rash, nor a deadly disease, nor an exotic breed of Thestral.
Hope you are all having great fun with your Jillian and flashing her lots and feeling very proud of yourselves.

You can drop by even on the motorbike if you'd like.

Messr. Disfigured Moony

Sirius Black to Remus Lupin
August Thirtieth, Summer of 1975

M. R. J. Lupin
Somewhere Not With Me

NO NO PLEASE, BY ALL MEANS TAKE YOUR TIME, IT'S NOT LIKE I'VE BEEN SITTING AROUND WAITING FOR YOUR OWL FOR BLOODY EVER, YOU STUPID TIT.

She isn't MY Jillian you silly person you know. She is just A Jillian. She's always around and she smells nice so why not right? But she's not MINE. Anyway I have no need of her as I am surrounded on all sides by voluptuous female attention, in particular from James's charming houseguests, the National Swedish Belly-Dancing Team, who are all six foot tall goddesses with waves of shining amber hair, a poor grasp on the English language, and a terrible eagerness to please.

No, no, I can't keep this up. I sicken myself with all these fabrications. You have got me all excited with your false promises of England-returning and now all I can do is lie. You should never have taught me to emulate you, Moony, look what chaos you have wrought.

Your scars look quite sexy if you ask me. You on the other hand look pained and embarrassed and you keep shooting off behind your frame whenever I try to show you to Prongs—this is NOT the Gryffindor Way mate, not when you've got something so brilliant all over your mug! I wish I had bloody great scars like that! Tell you what when we get back to school you can take a stick and jab me one right in the face with it, then we'll be matching. Like how some girls give friendship bracelets, we can give Friendship Scars.

Anyway I like your nose. I don't know what you are on about.

If anyone asks you about them you should just look solemn and say "The samurai does not dishonour the dead enemy by acknowledging his defeat." Could you tell James and I have been going to the Muggle cinema? It's so fun and dead cheap too. The floors are sticky though. I got my hair stuck to the floor when I was crawling between the seats and had to be rescued by an usher with a pair of garden shears, so don't worry that you look hideous, I too am maimed and disfigured. My perfect face thank God was untouched but the hair! Garden shears, Moony, GARDEN SHEARS. James tried twisting it into spikes to make it sort of a punk thing but it's no good, then I just looked like I had a bunch of gnomes on my head. So now I more or less look like a normal (or I might say extremely dashing) young man from the neck down, and from the neck up more or less like a blowfish. It is horrifying.

Do I rev your engine Moony? Eh EH do I? nudge nudge wink wink etc ad nauseaum.

Well, I won't with this hair anyway. I might rev you right into hysterics or into puking all over the carpet but I am not revving anyone anywhere good. The fleas do not help with this problem either since I find that as soon as I am chatting up someone fit I start getting phantom itches right at between my shoulderblades and I have to start writhing and flailing like a lunatic. Even JAMES is pulling better than me right now and he is deep in the pangs of despised love.

Speaking of which now I feel I have to somehow justify my interpretation of Hamlet, there was something subtly disapproving about your commentary. I am sure you agree that my darling, my one, my only McGooglyface should have just let me excuse myself for the bathroom instead of intercepting me and acting like the Spanish Inquisition. You might recall that she said "Explain yourself!" and so I not only did so but also I think really educated some people in the hidden nuances of Muggle Literature. Really it was her fault if anyone's. AND HONESTLY, MOONY,

WHY WOULD I CALL POOR YORICK "MY DICK??" that doesn't even make sense. What a dirty little mind you do have. though it would be pretty funny if someone did say, "Alas for your dick! I knew it, Horatio" and oh, I don't know, Lucius Malfoy or someone thought that that someone were talking to HIM and got extremely red in the face and violently angry to cover up his lustful thoughts and sexual confusion. I think that would be funny anyway.

A Moony is a stubborn thing indeed but a Padfoot is a very persuasive one. It will be like the Irresistible Force meets the Object that Thinks It Is Immovable But Which In Fact Has Many Weaknesses, Including Swing Records Which The Irresistible Force Has The Power to Withhold At Its Whim. Anyway how can you resist a face like this? ...You can imagine the face I am making right now. It is utterly pathetic and woeful.

You might get a surprise in a couple of days. WATCH OUT THE WINDOW. and be prepared for...THE BIKE.

Sirius Black
The Birches
Madly Itching, Devonshire

Remus Lupin to Sirius Black
August Thirty-first, Summer of 1975

To:

Sirius Many Middle Names Black
Flying Through The Air With The Greatest Of Ease

Sorry.

Well, it was a long letter. I thought one short letter should be enough to hold you over for one longer letter. And then suddenly out of Latvia I was going, and had to get unpacked and settled down again and mum made this enormous fuss over my face like you wouldn't believe. She put some oddly colored gloop on it and bandaged it up and then I couldn't see, and then it got in my eyes, and then it didn't help much anyways, just made the scars look older and less red and angry. So I look like two years ago I was on the African desert battling mad stampeding elephants with very pointy tusks. Perhaps that's the story I'll hand about. It's so ridiculous it just might work.

I see you have gotten sunstroke from sitting out in the sun so long. Good work, Padfoot. Now what am I going to do with you? Use you as a doorstop perhaps, one that tells charming but no less demented stories about buxom blondes from Sweden whenever you look his way. In that case I'm sorry but you'll have to prop the back door open so you don't terrify the guests.

In any case I am back in England, as I said, and why you're using this as an excuse for your hopeless lies is beyond me. Has it really gotten that bad, Sirius? Has it really gotten so bad that you must besmirch the gentle and honest name of family Lupin? The blame lies on your shoulders and your shoulders alone. Generally I find your letters impossible to follow but this one read like a particularly addled dream. (The blondes of course lead me to believe it is certainly your dream, but the rest is up to a woeful lack of self-editing.)

You try reading a letter like this three times over and see where it leaves you.

My scars are definitely not sexy and you are definitely not in the position to try and pass them off as such. Or even to

remark upon them as an object of — oh, Merlin, I don't know. I appreciate the effort but there's no need to be brave in the face of such ruination.

They're very long and thin and sort of raised at the edges. It's hard not to touch them; they feel very weird. I'm not used to them being on my face, I suppose, though mum says the more I play at them the more attention I'm going to draw to them. She also says they'll be more deep with time. She also says that perhaps there's some makeup she can find that'll cover them over but I have to draw the line somewhere. I'm not having her come at me with a powder puff or any of that gluey flesh-colored liquid she's got in the drawer over the sink. (It looks like someone melted skin down into a bottle.) In any case, at least they don't feel anything. Anything at all. It's just this line of feeling-nothing down over my nose and my cheek. It's no wonder the poor picture of me keeps hiding from you, if you're so determined to keep flailing me about like a zoo attraction. Perhaps he's feeling a bit self-conscious.

And I'm not a samurai. I'll know the truth about the scars so it's hardly exciting or sexy or dangerous. You should wait to have your own scars, tempted as I'm sure you'll make me next year to take you up on that stick-poking-your-face offer, because then they won't seem as exciting either. I mean, maybe if it was something smaller. Does the picture really show you how big they are?

You said it first year, Sirius. (Your memory's going now, too — whatever shall we do with you? I'm not the only one steeped like prophetic tea leaves in tragedy.) You said my nose was really large and I was lucky Severus was around because no one would notice how large my nose was in the shadow of his. Perhaps I've just grown into my nose and that's why you can't remember your cutting words of yesteryear.

I knew I shouldn't have mentioned engines and revving because now look what I've done. I've created a monster. Perhaps you should save your revving for Jillian's engines. She might be more inclined. I hear tell girls are, often enough.

Vroom, vroom.

Sorry to hear about your hair but as I recall it grows abnormally fast. You'll be shaggy rather than spiky in time for Halloween the latest. Don't worry about it, I'm sure you're just as bronzed and muscley and nude with your hair in oddly pruned knots as you were before the Tragic Incident. And next time you'll learn better than to drop your popcorn all over the floor and think it's sanitary to get it all back. (That is what happened, I assume? Just get another popcorn, next time, or stop trying to poke James and keep better hold of the first one. That's all I'm saying. It's only practical advice.)

I'm bringing Macbeth with me to school this year, so instead of commenting further open whom you did or didn't shock out of their socks during your impromptu rendition of the Prince of Denmark's most touching soliloquy, we shall instead turn our eyes forward: to the future, to the new year, to what in Merlin's name you're going to do with all the perfumes of Arabia.

Stop making that face. Sirius. Sirius, really. Sirius.

Oh, bother and bother again.

I'll be sure to steady my nerves to those of steel. Or at least something less easily agitated by your vroom, vroom.

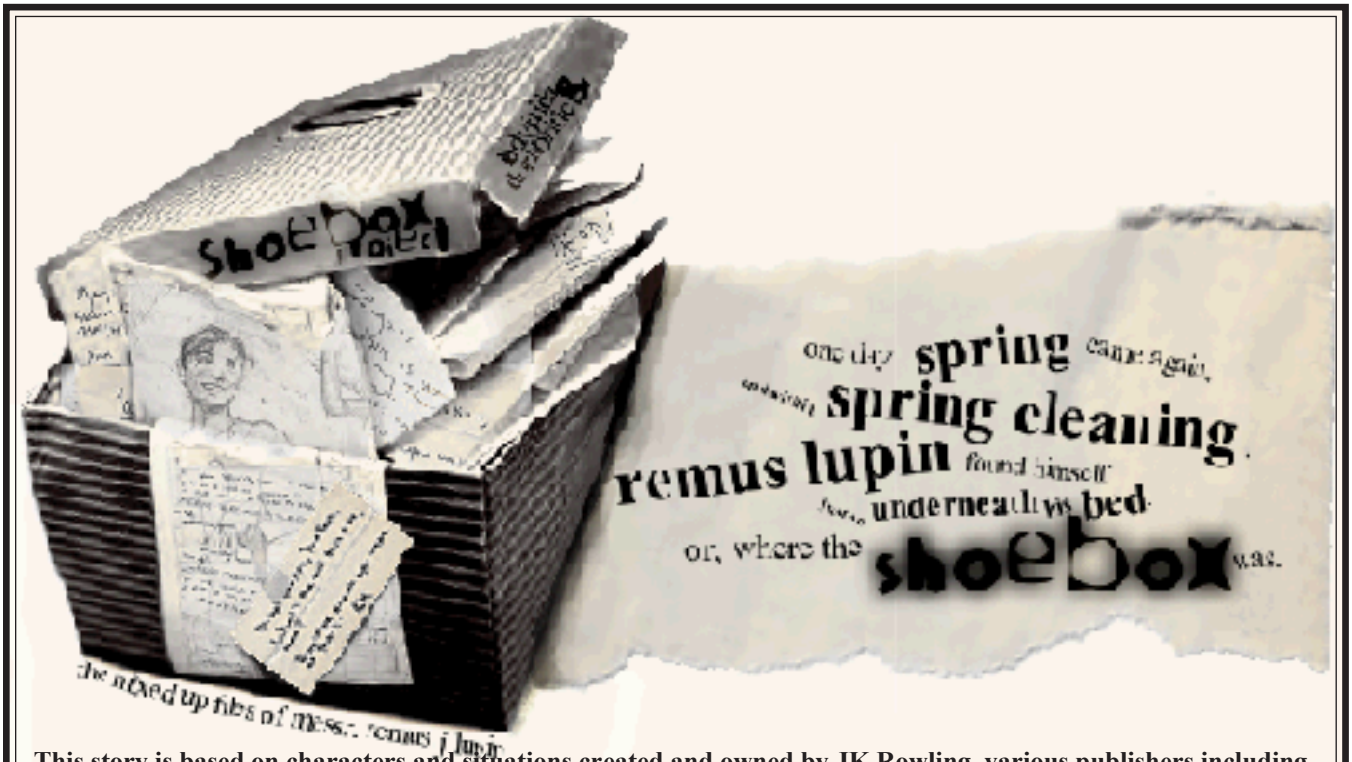
Remus J. Lupin
And His Cheese Sandwich
With The Good Mustard

Sirius Black to Remus Lupin
September First, Late Summer of 1975

I would NEVER have said that to you Moony.
I know I was an arrogant little shit in first year but I can't imagine I would say that to you.

VROOM VROOM WATCH OUT

—SB
professional yobbo



This story is based on characters and situations created and owned by JK Rowling, various publishers including but not limited to Bloomsbury Books, Scholastic Books and Raincoast Books, and Warner Bros., Inc. No money is being made and no copyright or trademark infringement is intended.

***The Shoebox Project* by LadyJaida and Dorkorific**
http://www.livejournal.com/community/shoebox_project

Part Two: Late Summer, 1975
Six Records, Three Photographs and Two memories;



Remus can tell when the clouds knit together that the storm is a Siriusbinger.

A Siriusbinger, for those unused to Remus' world, is like a harbinger, only far more dangerous, loud, and unsubtle. It's a shift in the weather, a change of humidity, a darkening or even brightening of the sky, or a new direction of the winds which bears with it a certain smell, imperceptible to most noses, but something Remus has long since trained himself to recognize. In his room, book propped open on his bent knees, hair uncombed, Remus pauses with a halfway bite into his sandwich. He strains to look out the window. Somewhere just beyond his reach is a rumble of

thunder, low beneath the thick clouds but rolling closer, louder. The wind is shaking through the trees. The end-of-summer heat has a chill edge to it that signals rain. Remus knows that any sensible young man in his position would roll down the window and lock the shutters, but the storm isn't a Siriusbinger for any one of those sensible young men.

Remus finishes his bite of the sandwich, chews exactly twenty-two times, and swallows.

The clouds break. He lifts his nose to the smell of rain, which he likes, and listens for the rumble of a motor — more distant than thunder, and harder to hear, but there, unless his instincts have failed him. It's only a simple matter of time.

***

Sirius leans in close over the handlebars, the rain-thick wind whipping his hair into ropes around his face. They were twenty miles from the Welsh coast when the rain started, at the time warm and gentle, drumming gently on Sirius's skull and making round, comical sounds on James's helmet; now the rain roars around them in glassy sheets, and thunder rips the sky out magnificently on all sides of them, and they are so bone-soaked they almost can't tell they're wet anymore.

He spits out water and grins ferociously into the mouth of the storm, gunning the bike into an even higher gear. James, behind him, lets out a tiny yip of muffled horror and tightens his grip on Sirius's stomach. If it were anyone else behind him Sirius might be more cautious, but it's a summer's end storm and this is James with his knees digging into Sirius's hips and they haven't seen Remus in months, and it would be pointless to wait five extra minutes and save their hypothetical necks. Ahead of him, gray through the wild lines of rain, he can almost make out the crooked little shadow of Remus' house, pinned against the edge of its little village like a fly on paper, and he thinks of how Remus will yell at them when he sees them. Well, he won't yell exactly; Remus never yells. But he'll get that look on his face like the two sides of his mouth are trying to squirm in opposite directions, that look he gets when he's trying to be serious and wanting to laugh, and he'll give them some very pointed words; and even so he will have to turn around, as he always does, as if to keep Sirius from seeing that warm, incongruous, goofy smile breaking out over his face.

As they draw closer Sirius squints through the lashes of rain and sees, suddenly, like a wink, the small gray figure lean up in the yellow window; and he whoops and waves and swoops in to him.

***

The easy answer is: Sirius Black is trying to kill him. But when, Remus admits, isn't Sirius Black trying to kill him? There was the time Sirius tricked him up onto a broomstick and then sent him whizzing off, utterly alone, into the afternoon, so that he lost all his lunch and half his breakfast when James finally rescued him. There was the time Sirius decided it would be a grand idea to jump out at Remus halfway through Remedial Potions, just as Remus was adding the key ingredient, causing the cauldron to explode, singing Remus' eyebrows off so he looked like some sort of albino rat waiting for them to grow back in. There was the time Remus doesn't think about, which was worse than killing, which doesn't factor in to any of his equations — a variable he calmly and methodically erases from each and every list his life has to offer. And now there's this time, Sirius swooping toward his small, hapless, helpless bedroom window, gutting motor oil and rain onto his mother's pristine curtains, and nearly smashing the window frame into the comic shape of a motorbike: big and brassy and made up of smooth circle lines, admittedly attractive, if you're into that sort of thing.

The easy answer is: Sirius Black is trying to kill him. There are more complicated elements, and the question is what really counts; the little thrill which laces Remus' blood like lightning and thunders in his belly, and the lurch of longing surging up within him just seeing his friends again. It isn't a reunion — and he feels bad Peter can't be here for it,

really — but Remus always imagines his friends are going to disappear over the summer, when James and Sirius vacation together and Remus is left inevitably behind to wonder at the laughter they're sharing. He insists he isn't jealous. It's envy. There's a difference. Even now, framed in his window, backlit by the occasional slash of lightning against the storm-dark sky, they have grown irretrievably closer to one another. They are the dark hair and wicked eyes in Remus' life. They are inseparable in the way only two boys, two best friends, can be. They share Quidditch and motorbikes and a penchant for wandering about naked without any shame at all, without the imposition of maturity forcing shame upon them.

Remus, feeling distracted by his own gladness despite, touches his right thumb to the left corner of his mouth. "Hullo," he says. "Still don't check the weekly weather forecast in the Prophet, I see. Some things never change."

***

"Still don't check the weekly weather forecast in the Prophet, I see. Some things never change."

For a moment Sirius, hanging in Remus's window, wet and bedraggled as a dog and grinning insanely, reflexively, has to steal a few seconds and take Remus in: the pale, contained seriousness of him against the warm amber of his bedroom lamp, his light hair uncombed and his skinny ankles jutting out sharply from the bottom of his trousers.

He says, nonchalantly, "I was in the mood for a shower anyway."

"Yeah," James agrees. He's grinning too, wet hand slick and freezing against Sirius's neck. "It's been a month and a half, you know, since last he set hand to washcloth. Vile."

"Won't you unwashed masses come in," Remus says with dark amusement, making an ushering gesture like sweeping air toward himself. "Unless you'd rather come in downstairs, like normal people."

"Oh no," Sirius says cheerfully, "we'll do from here, thanks—" and he plants a muddy, jingling boot on Remus's white windowsill, just to see the anguished, wrinkled, parental face that Remus makes, the one that Sirius thinks is rather wonderful.

"I think not," Remus says firmly. He pushes at the toe of Sirius' boot with ginger fingers. "You can come round the back." He looks up to them, his mouth twitching, and Sirius for the first time gets a glimpse of the two long, angry scars running the span of his quiet, sharp-boned face. Involuntarily, he hisses in a sharp breath and recoils — a little, enough. James straightens against him and says, startled, "Moony!"

Without thinking, Sirius reaches out and touches the pad of his thumb to the little, tapered place where the top scar stems, right below the vulnerable eye.

Remus jumps back ; quick as wires twanging, Sirius thinks, or like a potion sweeping in and popping when you add the last crucial ingredient. "Don't," Remus says. His voice is strange and a little high.

"Sorry," Sirius whispers. He pulls his fingers back carefully. "It just surprised me." Remus is looking up at him with the wariness of small wild things, and Sirius feels stupid, and wants to make things right. He forces a laugh. "It looks brilliant," he says, "really, Moony, just like you got it in a swordfight."

***

"It looks brilliant, really, Moony, just like you got it in a swordfight."

"You're getting wet," Remus says. He doesn't quite look up at his friends, still getting rained on, still without any

umbrella, still waiting for him to give up his inhibitions and let them muddy his entire room with wet footprints. There's a knot of something more heavy than fire in his stomach, regret perhaps, the true pain of a scar — remembering the scar — buried inside him. Outside, behind the clouds, he can almost feel the moon waning. It is now not quite a circle, not quite anything at all, one edge too straight as it shifts in its monthly rotations and pulls the ocean and pulls at Remus' bones, his achy, near-arthritic joints, all at once, even unseen. He watches for it in another flash of lightning, but sees nothing behind the roiling clouds. "Well, all right," he mutters. "Take your shoes off and get in. I'll find the towels."

James laughs. "Good man, Moony!" he says. The clamor of two boys clambering, bedraggled, off an equally bedraggled motorbike, is impressive. The squelch of their wet socks on the floorboards is as well, and makes Remus wince. He can't leave his friends sitting like two right idiots out in the rain. He can't leave them standing here dripping rainwater onto the floor, either.

"Stay where you are," he says, "just, stay, and I'll be right back with towels and some tea."

"Can I—" Sirius begins.

"The motorbike stays outside," Remus warns. There's a look in his eye, guarded, firm, the sort that channels something deeper down, but with carefully measured doses.

"Towels and some tea," Sirius echoes.

"Yes sir, very good sir, on your order sir," James quips. He salutes, grinning cheekily, but wetly.

"I'll only be a minute," Remus says, and ducks out of the doorway, more relieved to be alone for a time than he ever thought he could be. He listens to the house creak with the rain, the rain on the roof, the rain against the windowpanes, and eases the hammering of his heart as he eases down the stairs, rubbing the back of his hand over the bridge of his nose, his cheek, the length of his scar across the length of his face, feeling stupid, self-conscious and bare.

***

"I'll only be a minute," Remus says, and vanishes down the stairwell like lightning winking out. They follow him with their eyes for a moment.

"*Phwoar*," breathes James, raising his eyebrows at Sirius, and Sirius nods grimly. "That's something, innit? It didn't look that bad in the photo." He scrubs at his wet hair with one hand, thoughtfully.

Sirius watches the dark door where Remus has gone, absently shrugging off his jacket. He is not a particularly deep thinker when it comes to other people — their tics, their surprises, their strange animal needs, all seem to him something of a waste of time and much better communicated by straight talk or at least straightforward deceit — and so it unsettles him that he is so much aware of every part of Remus's existence. There are times when Remus's presence in a room makes him feel like the sun, and then there are times like this, when Remus makes him feel large and clumsy as a blind elephant. Sirius, who has been trained to move elegantly since he could barely move at all, cannot decide if this off-footedness that Remus inspires in him is horrible or fascinating.

On the other hand, he's never liked being bored — he can't even count sheep to get to sleep, because being *that boring* is harder work for his brain than just zoning out to thoughts of how to solve his Arithmancy problems. By unsettling him almost constantly Remus can't possibly bore him. There was a time maybe when he thought Remus was boring, was a wet blanket, was unwilling or unable to have any fun, and he looks back on that time and feels more or less an ass.

”You don’t think he minds that we came, do you?” James asks, his voice muffled by his arms over his head, peeling off his soaked t-shirt and hanging it gingerly off the windowsill.

”Oh yeah,” says Sirius with more certainty than he feels. “He’s glad. He just doesn’t know it yet.” James grins at him. Not for the first time Sirius is hugely, breathtakingly grateful for James, who understands him and laughs at him, and with whom he is always certain. They look each other up and down.

”You look a right berk,” James says, which is particularly ridiculous coming from gooseflesh-covered, drowned-cat James. He looks astigmatically about for a dry surface for a few moments, finally is forced to polish his glasses on the soaked waistband of his trousers.

Sirius regards him fondly, and then says, with utmost contempt, “Sod off, Potter,” and then yanks his own t-shirt over his head just in time to see, through the transparent cloth, the shadow of Remus, appearing in the doorway with a tea-tray in his hands.

”Well hello there,” he says, with as much dignity as he can possibly manage with his shirt wrapped clinging around his head like a boa constrictor. Yet again he’s on the wrong foot, confused and tangled up with everything in the wrong place and strangely, inexplicably happy about it. “Are you the house help?”

”Yeah,” James snickers, “and do you take hopeless cases?”

”I’m not stuck,” Sirius says, with all possible stateliness, and wriggles out of the shirt to prove it, dropping it in a sodden gray heap on the floor.

***

”I’m not stuck,” Sirius says. He flails around in his shirt for a moment longer and then manages to pull himself free, all boy-limbs with half-man definition, his elbows sharp from the smooth muscles of his upper arms, his hands the square lines of thumb from wrist. It pieces together a juvenile geometry that Remus thinks he can spend his life attempting to formulize with teenage theorem after teenage theorem. It must have something to do with playing Quidditch, he assumes, that ease with which Sirius and James can undress in front of people. They don’t have scars like Remus does, or gangly arms like Remus does, and they aren’t awkward angles like Remus is, and it’s habit for them like it isn’t for Remus.

As always, Sirius can state an untruth like it’s one of the main principles upon which life operates. His stubbornness or his conviction or that dark inner light that fuels him vibrantly makes it true. He’s out of his shirt and it’s a lump of wetness leaking more wetness over the wooden floor. Remus clears his throat, and tries to twist the smile off his face. Instead he feels his skin stretching, tugging, pulling, against the scars. He wonders if he looks like a harlequin as much as he feels like a harlequin, something dressed up behind a shoddy mask, with sections of him sewn hastily together.

”Towels,” he says. His words are easy and calm and just a little bit dour, with the wry twist from his quirked lips. He’s spent a lot of time measuring himself this way, giving enough humor so Sirius and James and Peter will always realize he isn’t quite as much of a stiff as he has to pretend he is, for his own sake, not theirs. “And tea,” he adds, towels over one arm, tea on a tray balanced neatly on the other. “And extra jumpers in that drawer, over there, because I’m not Jillian and you aren’t nearly as bronzed as you lead me to believe you were. Such deception.” Setting the tray down on a squat table by his bed, he can’t quite disguise his helpless comfort at their arrival — half naked as they are and shining with rain still, hair stuck down to their foreheads, dripping with water over their noses, into their eyes and ears.

”Good man, Moony,” James says again. He pushes wet hair out of his myopic eyes, which Remus can see are only somewhat focused on him. James, irrevocably nearsighted. Remus gives him his towel first, then dangles the second

from thumb and forefinger like a dead thing.

”If I didn’t take hopeless cases, Prongs, I’d’ve locked you out the second you got here, and I’d’ve kept all the tea for myself.” He’s had to train himself to wickedness, as well, a mischievousness that isn’t quite his own. It’s a refined job at patching James’ and Sirius’ habits together and adopting them, a third nature grafted over his second nature, which stands tall ever, cement and concrete and marble and so much stone, over the first. Those are instincts he wasn’t born with, but they’re entirely his own. He positions himself resolutely against them. It’s a constant struggle that can’t afford Sirius shaking water over him, touching him with wet fingers along marred skin, remnants of past moonlight.

***

“I’d’ve kept all the tea for myself,” Remus says with a grin. He is holding the remaining towel tantalizingly in one hand while his eyes flick over to Sirius, who heaves a long-suffering sigh and sticks out a hand. Remus’s cheeks are slightly pink, whether from the exertion of climbing the tottering stairs or maybe the steam of the tea, which mists around his face and curls the tips of his disheveled hair.

”Towel,” Sirius says sternly. He can feel water trickling down the back of his neck to pool on the floor around him. Remus gives him an insolent look that goes all the way down the length of his outstretched arm, and something shivers in his stomach. It makes Sirius want to snap his fingers, to act even more like a fool, to show he doesn’t feel it. “Smartish, if you please.”

”Sirius, what have we learned about manners?” Remus yanks the towel just a little bit out of reach. Remus can be utterly ridiculous about this sort of thing. As if Sirius hadn’t been learning manners, real manners, manners that require large textbooks to keep straight, a mother’s thin fingers on your shoulders and her breath at the back of your neck, when Remus was still toddling round his garden in dirty nappies.

There are things, though, that Remus has known since he was barely out of said nappies. They’re things that Sirius can’t imagine a toddler having to know, things that require an understanding that Sirius even now doesn’t think he has. It’s this about Remus that has made him grow up before his bones, so that now at sixteen he seems lost in his own body, moving with immense, thin care and precision, like a foal just off its first legs.

”Can I have a towel, please, o most patient and understanding of hosts, on whose territory I have done nothing but trespass and drip,” Sirius amends. Remus’s smile bursts over his face, awkward and lovely before he gets control of it. In this moment of distraction Sirius lunges for him, seizes the towel, and wraps it around his freezing shoulders.

***

”Can I have a towel, please, o most patient and understanding of hosts, on whose territory I have done nothing but trespass and drip.” Sirius is most politic. Remus sees it in the cunning slant of his eyes, the sudden twitch of his shoulders, the way his muscles tighten about his abdomen. He realizes, too late as ever, that he’s lost the upper hand. Sirius moves at him, snatches the towel away, and sets to rubbing his unfortunate hair dry, just as James has already done, set apart, suddenly, from their antics.

”Well,” Remus attempts, “since you were so very polite about it.” He tugs at a frizz of hair near his cheek. No longer laden with chores, with towels to hand out and tea to serve, his arms feel empty. No longer all business, he wants the un-boyish want to hug his friends, both of them, and get wet himself, and cast off the shirt with it’s little hole at the left wrist hem where he used to chew it. Instead, he pulls up three chairs in a semi-circle around the scuffed coffee table — which, until now, served as a bedside rest for his books. “Sirius is three sugars, and more cream than tea, in the blue cup; and James, you’re the red cup with two sugars.” Settling down into a chair is easier said than done. He folds himself up against the back and stares down at his right thumb. There’s some dirt up beneath the nail.

”Remus,” James says, incredulous. “You haven’t seen us for three whole months and—”

”Well,” Remus excuses himself, “someone has to pretend it isn’t twelve and you haven’t just ridden here in a thunderstorm on a great ugly motorbike.”

***

”Well,” Remus says, a little bit coldly, “someone has to pretend it isn’t twelve and you haven’t just ridden here in a thunderstorm on a great ugly motorbike.”

James shoots Sirius a Look.

”Bollocks to this!” Sirius is astonished and slightly, secretly hurt at Remus’s total lack of enthusiasm, after they flew here, in the pouring rain, for four hours just to see him. It’s stupid, and a peculiar kind of stupid that is utterly intolerable coming from your best friend, and Sirius is finished with it. He plants himself squarely between Remus and the tea-table, dripping and impassive.

Remus eyes him.

Gently, like offering your hand to a strange dog, Sirius removes the saucer from Remus’s hand and places it on the table.

”What are you—” Remus starts, but stops, as Sirius tackles him violently.

It’s a good tackle, a proper flying tackle as one might execute in a particularly nasty match if one didn’t mind being carded for the rest of one’s natural life, and Remus says “oof!” as Sirius smacks into his stomach and barrels him over. James, by the window, is laughing.

”What in the name of—” Remus struggles upright onto his elbows, but Sirius headbutts him as gently as possible and knocks him to the floor again.

”I *missed* you,” Sirius says, plaintively, nuzzling Remus’s neck like a dog. This is a way of loving someone that he knows: something physical, basic, at home in any form. The skin of Remus’s wrist grazes his bare, damp shoulder.

”Get off,” Remus yelps, “get *off* me, you’re all wet and *hey*! that was definitely Inappropriate Touching. Get *out* of there — *Sirius*! Help, James, get him off me!” He’s laughing nonetheless and despite, struggling, laughing, pushing against Sirius’s arms with his hands. He looks at last like the boy he is, instead of a butler in a bad Muggle picture.

”There are people who would give their eyeteeth to be groped by me, you know,” Sirius says, sounding as offended as he possibly can, when Remus is finally sparkling beneath him, reminding him why they drove all that way and got this damp and mildewed in the first place. He growls just a little, in the back of his throat, but comfortable, un-hungry, and scrapes his teeth along the delicate skin of Remus’s throat.

”James!” comes the frantic screech from under his arms, bubbling with laughter. “*James*! — haha — help!”

”Right,” James drawls, and saunters over to the pair of them and sits on Remus’s head.

”There,” Sirius says, immensely pleased with himself. “Aren’t you glad we came now?”

***

”Aren’t you glad we came now?” Sirius asks. It isn’t a question. Remus wriggles beneath Sirius at his chest and James on his head.

”Gnhghhf ganoof breefmh ungh,” he says. It doesn’t quite come out as he meant it to.

”What’s that, Moony?” Remus can just see James — cupping one hand around his ear, batting his lashes, as if butter wouldn’t melt in his angelic smirking mouth. “I’m afraid I can’t hear you through my trousers.”

Remus, left with no other options, has no choice but to do what any sensible boy in his position would do. It’s either bite James in the rear or suffocate.

”Disgusting.” Remus makes a great show of spitting out soggy trouser germs as James stands with a howl of indignant pain.

”He bit me!” James’s expression is glorious disbelief. “He bit me, Padfoot, he’s got sharp teeth and he *bit* me with them!”

”It was that or go all blue because I couldn’t breathe.” Remus folds his arms over his chest. His cheeks are flushed; he can feel them, hot and damp. His mouth tastes like wet corduroy. It isn’t a delicate flavor. In this instance, it also involves motor oil. “I can safely say,” he continues, licking his lips and wrinkling his nose, “that I got the shorter end of the stick.” Boyish delight comes over him then, catching sight of the laughter in Sirius’ eyes, and the fading, gleeful outrage in James’ mouth. “Now. Where were we? Ah yes. Revenge.”

It’s always been easy enough for Remus to give as good as he gets. Sirius is bigger than he is, and James as well, taller and broader in the shoulder and with muscles you can see in their postures, in their firmness of adolescent pride. He doesn’t have that, shorter and trimmer, with wrists that just look like wrists rather than teenage boy wrists, and shoulderblades that poke out rather than slip into a plane of tight muscle. Still, he can take Sirius three falls out of three (which never really ceases to surprise either of them) and with this in mind he twists forward and bludgeons Sirius back with his body, knocking them opposite, on top and yowling as James joins in the fray. The three of them roll about, elbows in eyes and someone’s finger up his nose and a knee precariously close to between his legs, curling and stretching and laughing until the nearly solemn cough in the doorway gets through to them.



Remus freezes. He has a mouthful of Sirius’ hair, and Sirius is breathing hard against his neck, and James’ arm is caught between their bellies, and James himself is struggling to get himself free, no doubt to leap upon, and therefore murder, them both. Remus thinks he might have a black eye in the morning.

”Uhm,” he says. “Hi, dad.”

”The basement’s flooded,” John Peter Lupin says. “And a motorbike is trying to break down our front door. Hello, Sirius. Hello, James. Are either of you very good at bailing water?”

One (1) pair glasses, formerly belonging to James Potter. An unfortunate casualty of the Battle of Flooded Basement.





This story is based on characters and situations created and owned by JK Rowling, various publishers including but not limited to Bloomsbury Books, Scholastic Books and Raincoast Books, and Warner Bros., Inc. No money is being made and no copyright or trademark infringement is intended.

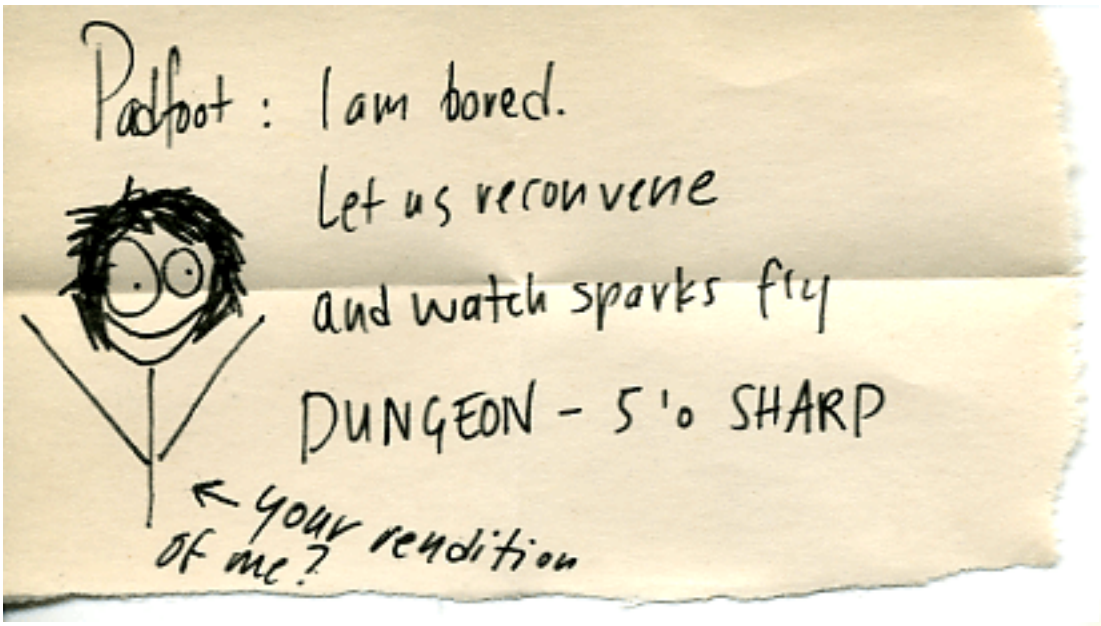
The Shoebox Project ***by LadyJaida and Dorkorific***

http://www.livejournal.com/community/shoebox_project

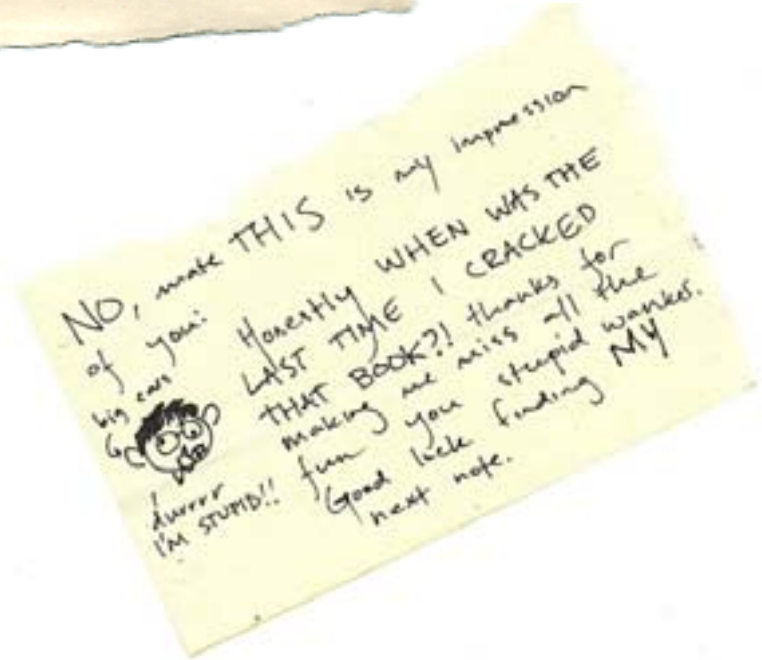
Part Three: Late September, 1975
Many Notes, One Photograph, One Confrontation.

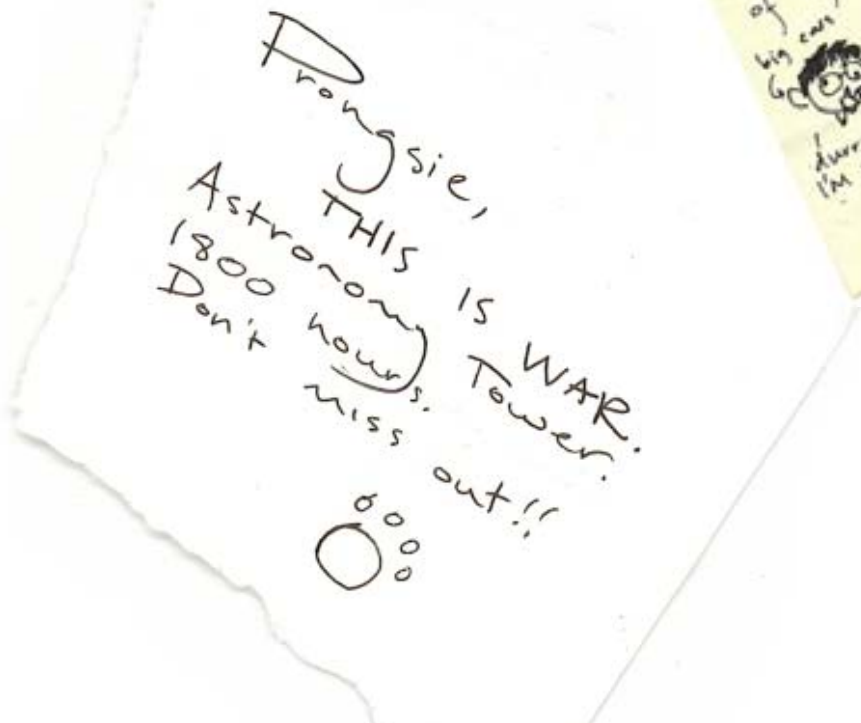
Late September. 1975. It begins with a perfectly innocent note — as perfectly innocent as notes ever are, in any case — and spirals out of control. Needless to say, it's over a week of fun.

From James Potter to Sirius Black; found in Sirius Black's History of Magic Textbook



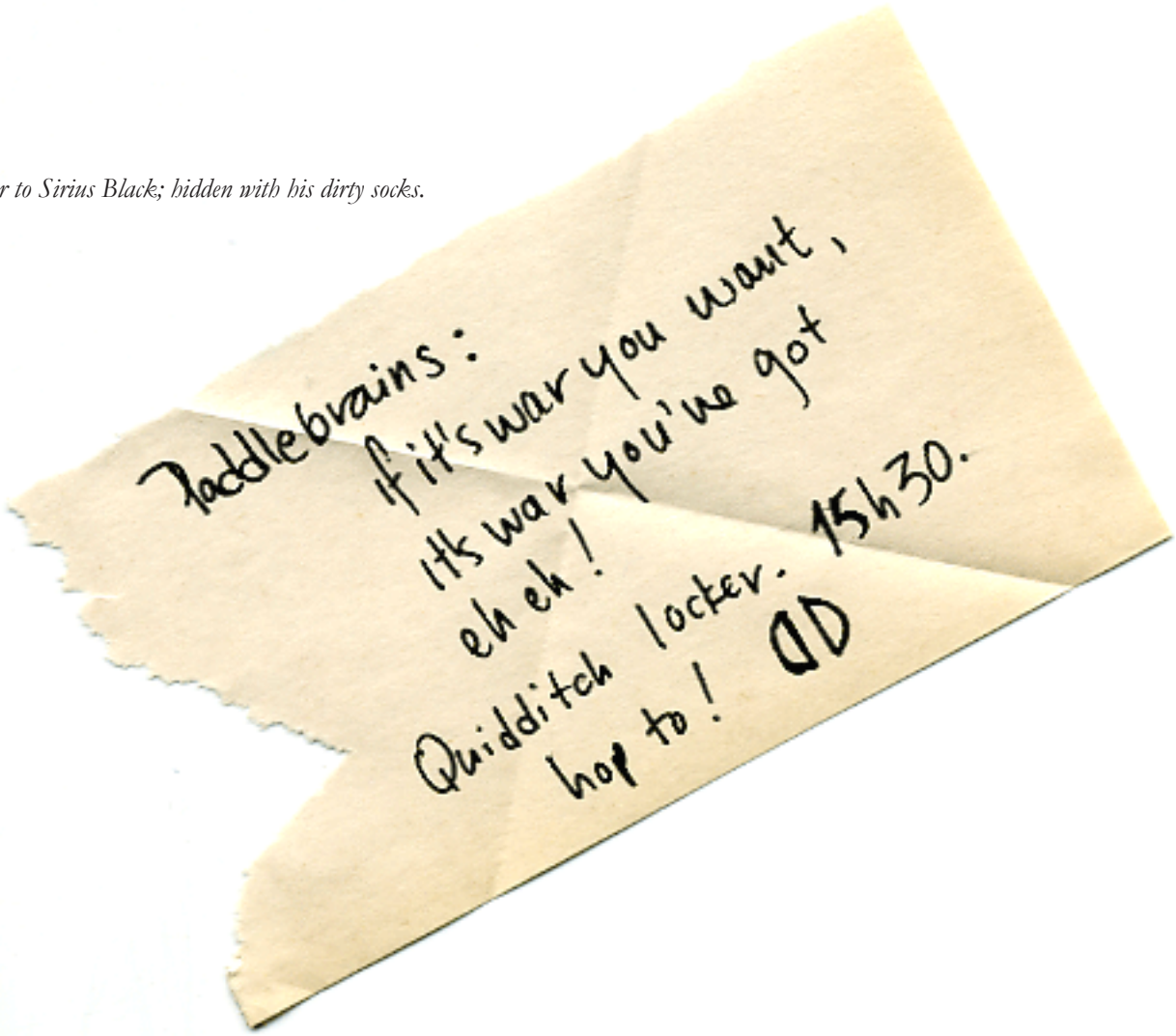
From Sirius Black to James Potter; hurled at his head during History of Magic.



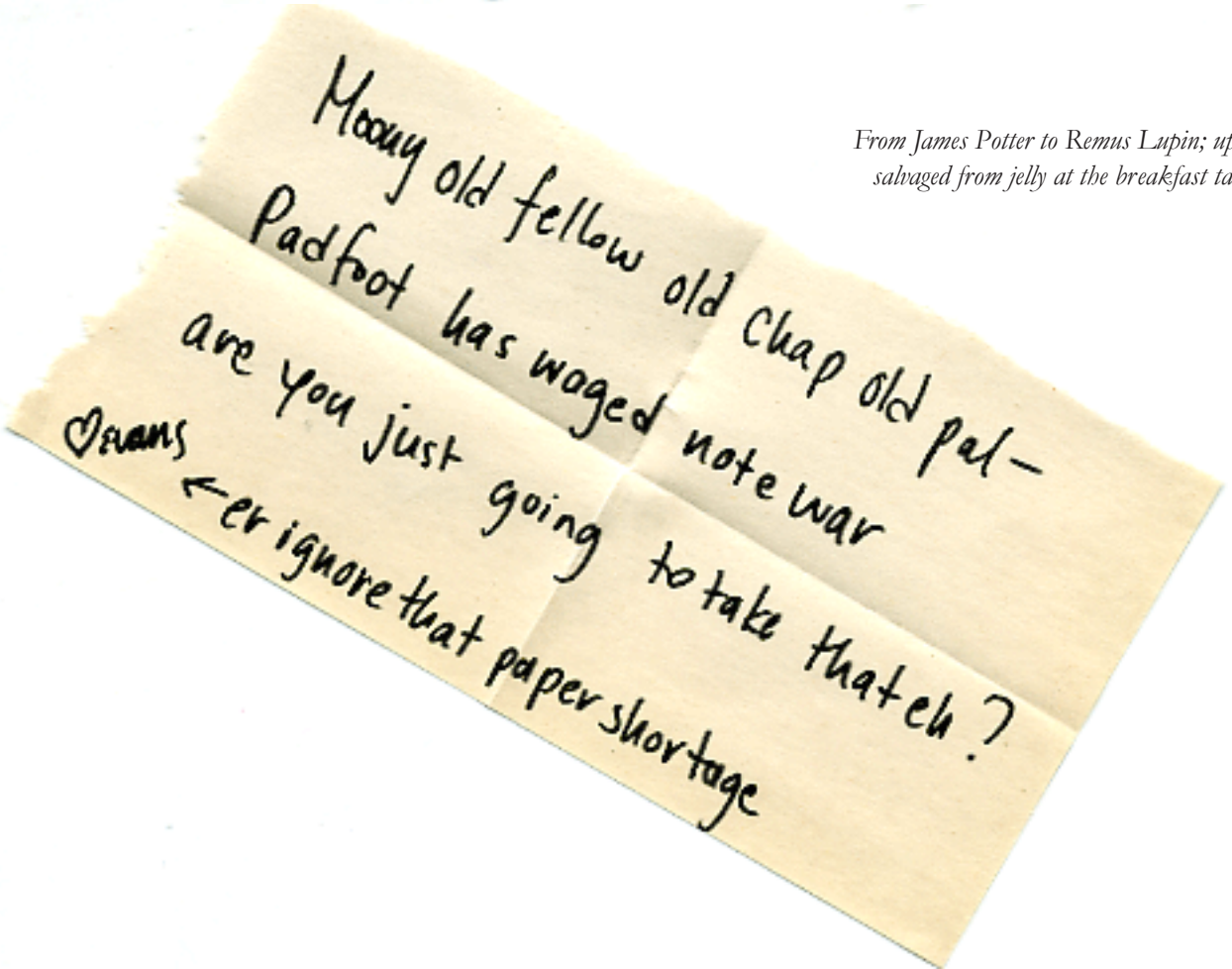


From Sirius Black to James Potter; stuck in the twigs of his broom.

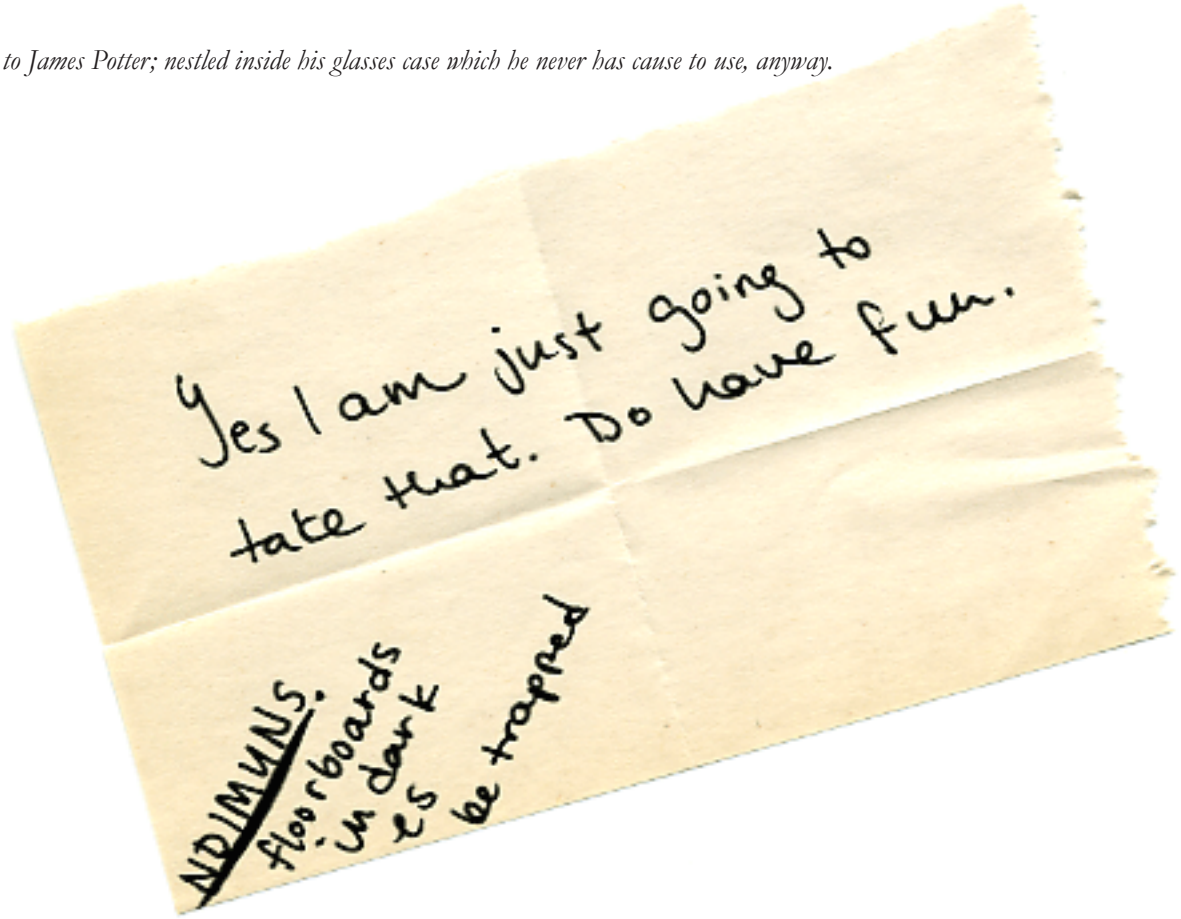
From James Potter to Sirius Black; hidden with his dirty socks.



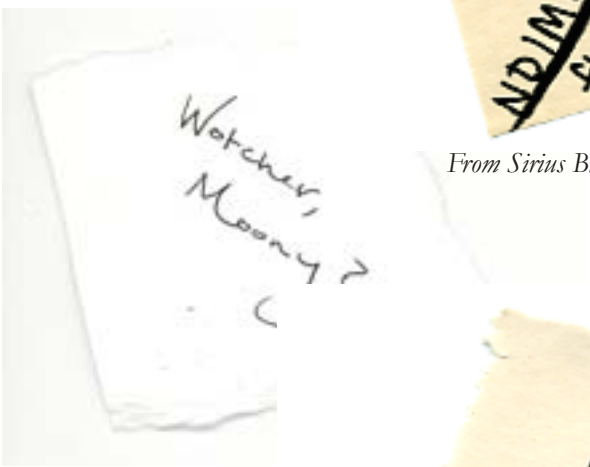
From James Potter to Remus Lupin; upon his plate & salvaged from jelly at the breakfast table.



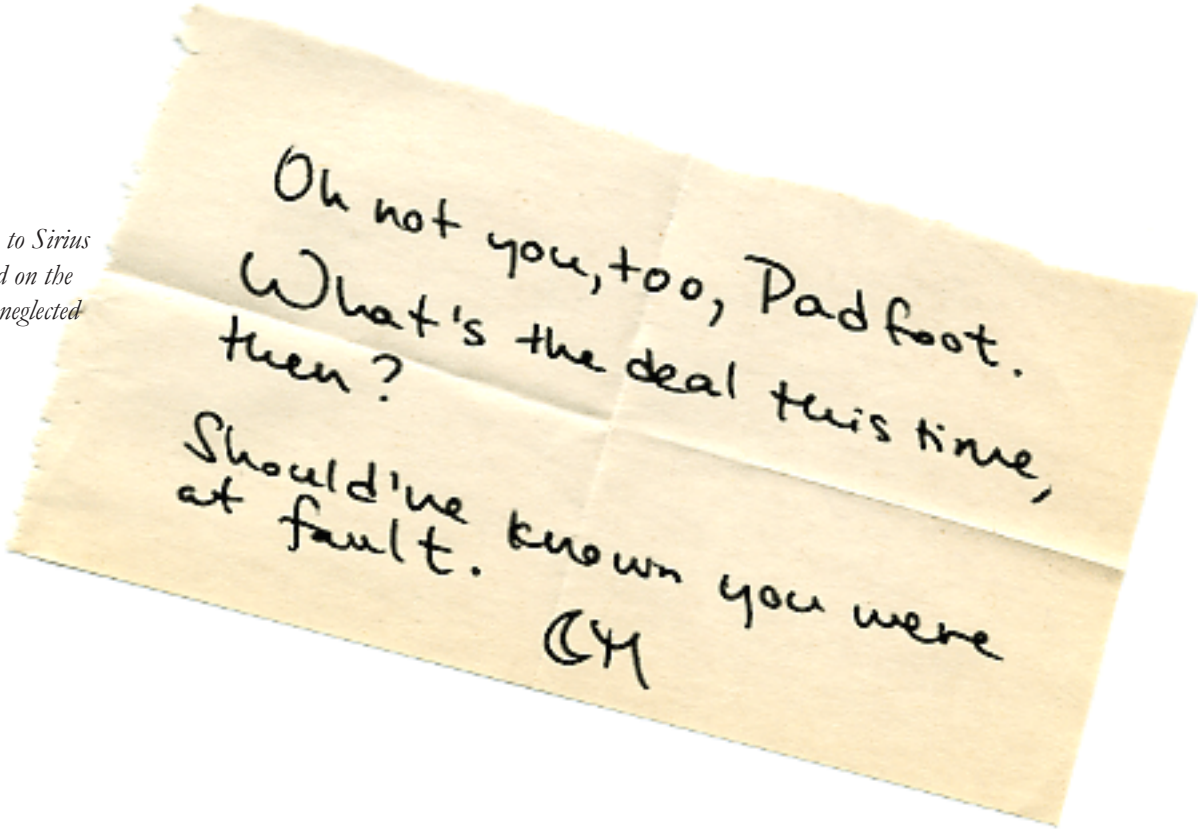
From Remus Lupin to James Potter; nestled inside his glasses case which he never has cause to use, anyway.



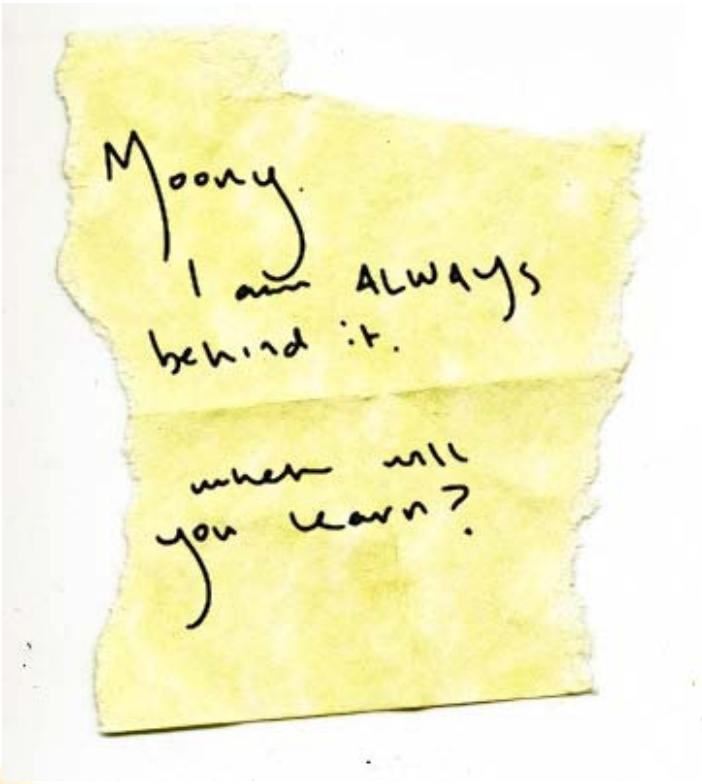
From Sirius Black to Remus Lupin; falling out of his underwear in the early morning.



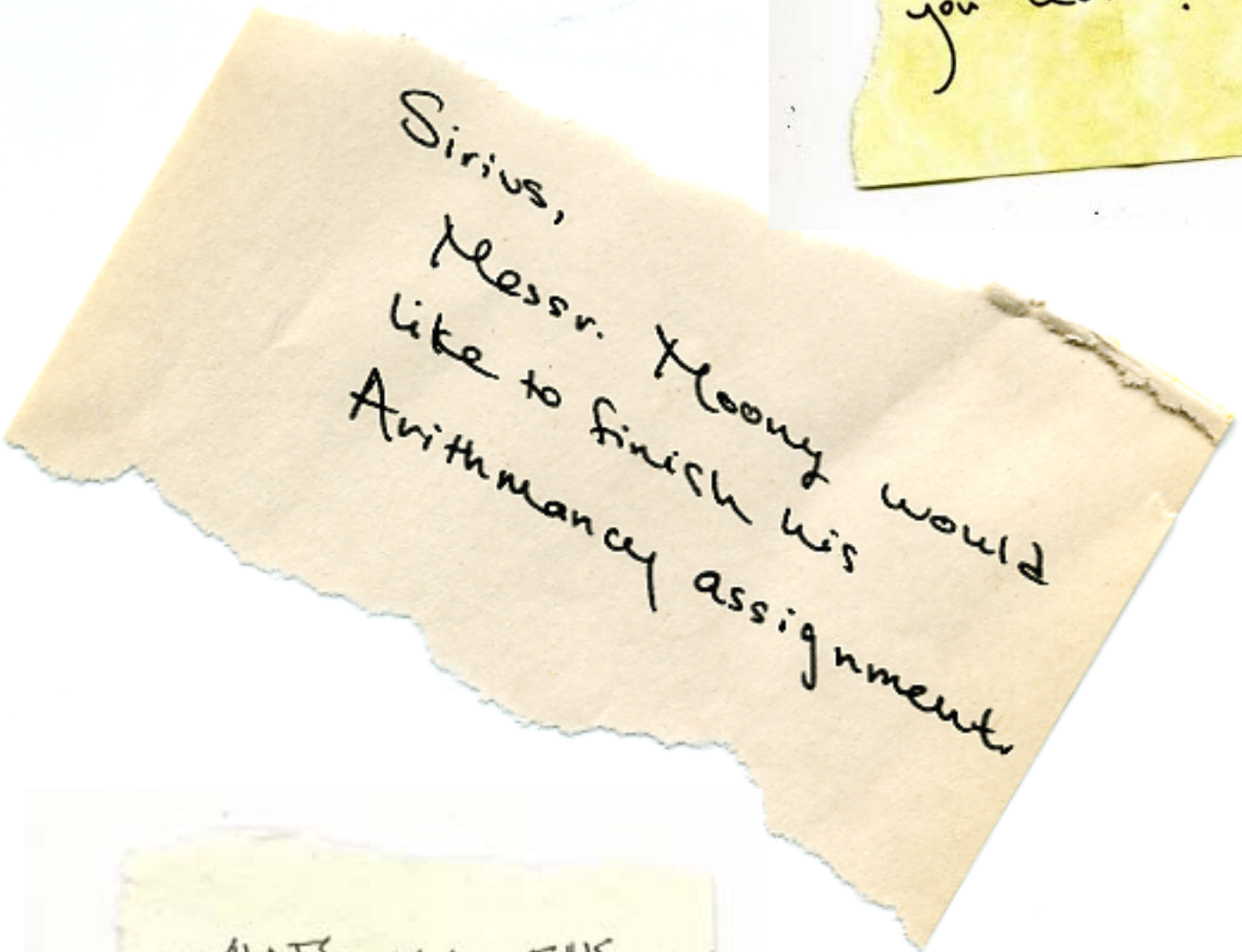
From Remus Lupin to Sirius Black; found perched on the bristles of his sadly neglected hairbrush.

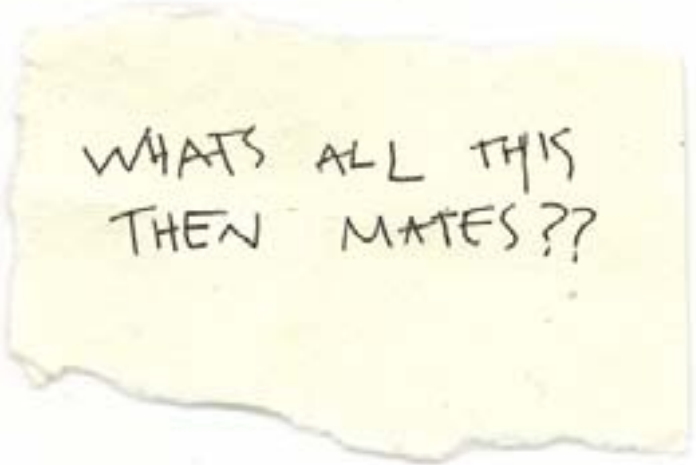


From Sirius Black to Remus Lupin; rolled up and stuffed into a stalk of celery at dinner.



From Remus Lupin to Sirius Black; sitting next to his also sadly neglected toothbrush.



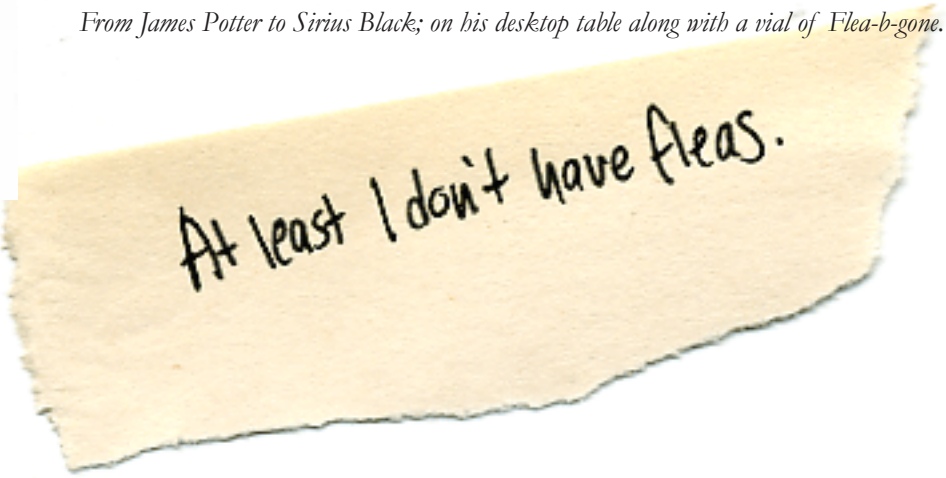


From Peter Pettigrew to James Potter; passed none-so-discreetly during Transfiguration and nearly resulting in a mass beheading executed by one Minerva McGonagal.



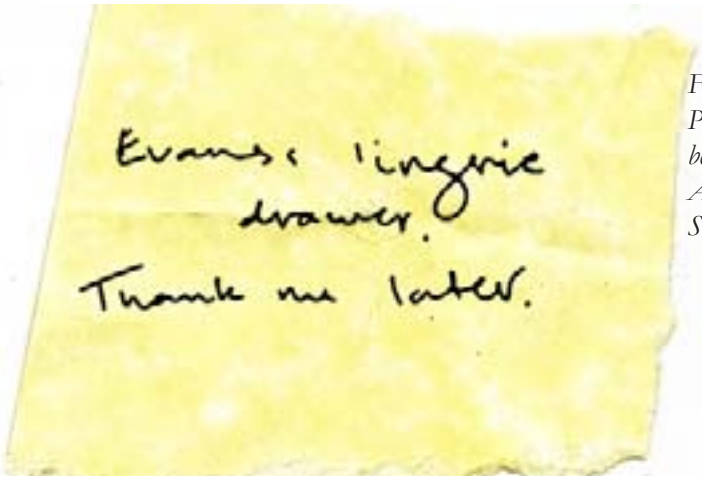
From Sirius Black to James Potter; most greasy inside his jar of hair gel.

From James Potter to Sirius Black; on his desktop table along with a vial of Flea-b-gone.

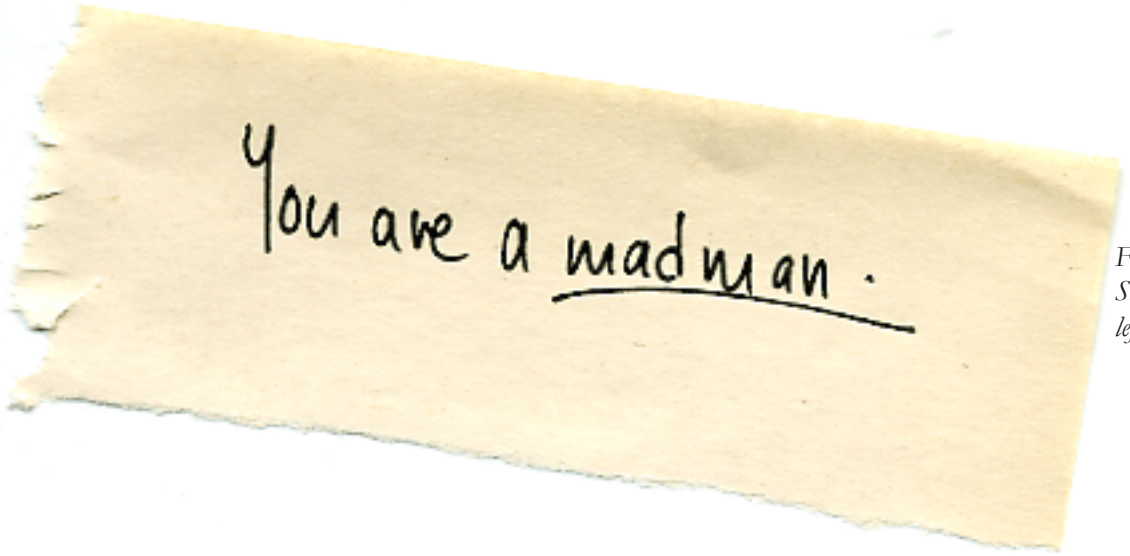




From Peter Pettigrew to James Potter; passed again none-so-discreetly during History of Magic and noticed by everyone save the Professor.



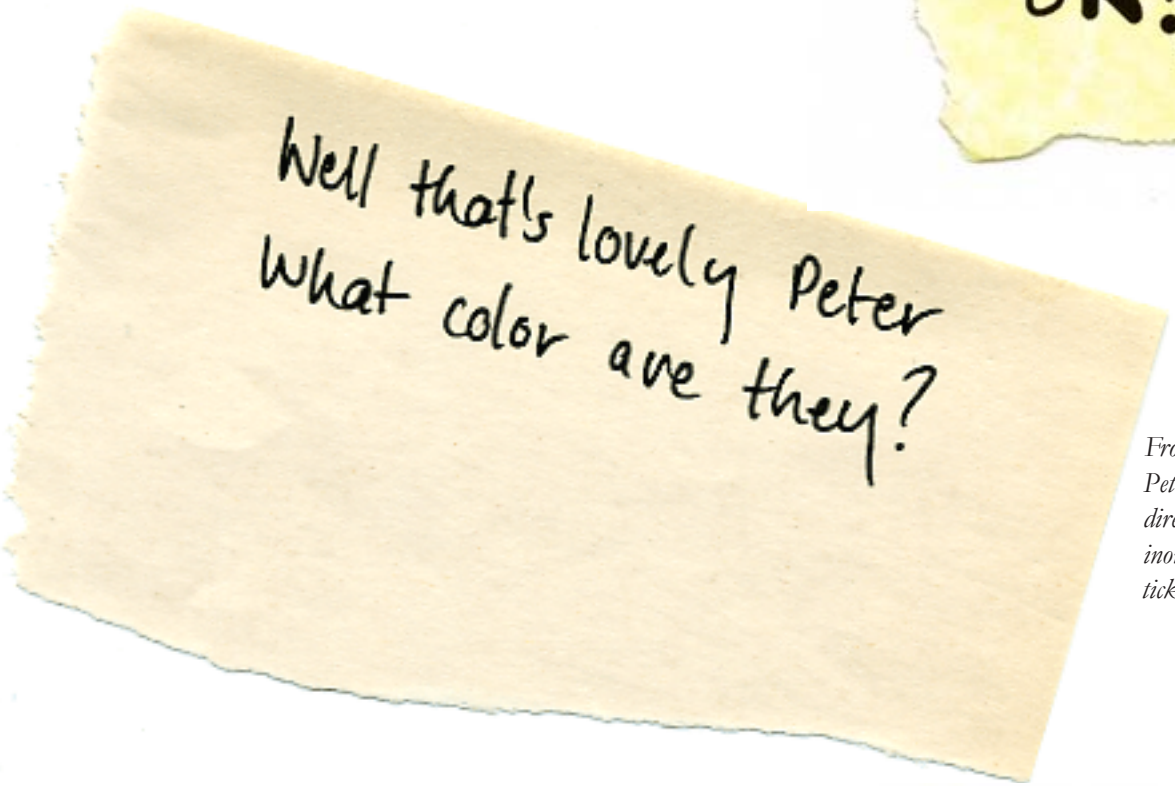
From Sirius Black to James Potter; in his bedside drawer beside his copy of BUSTY AND BEWITCHED, the September issue.



From James Potter to Sirius Black; stuck up his left nostril while sleeping.

From Peter Pettigrew to James Potter; yet again none-so-discreetly during Charms.

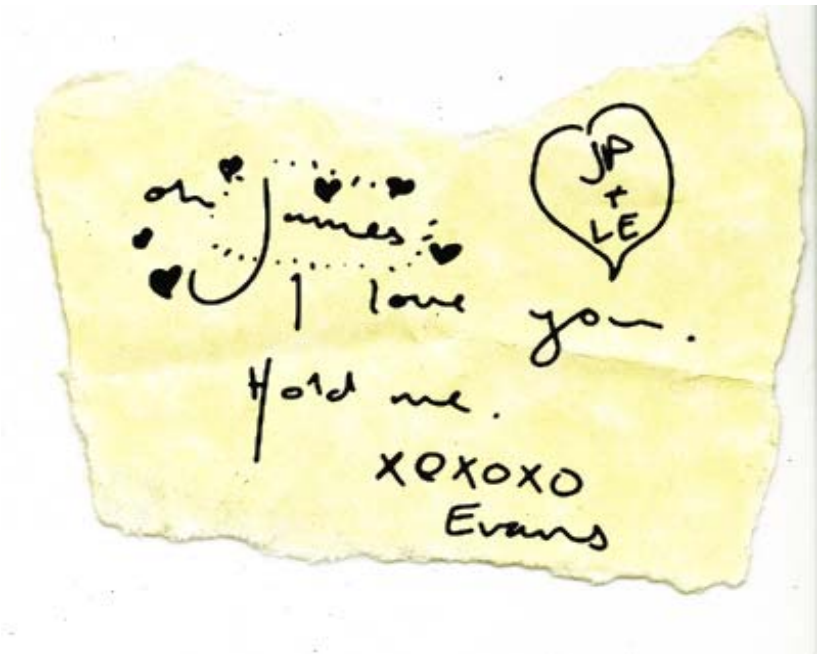




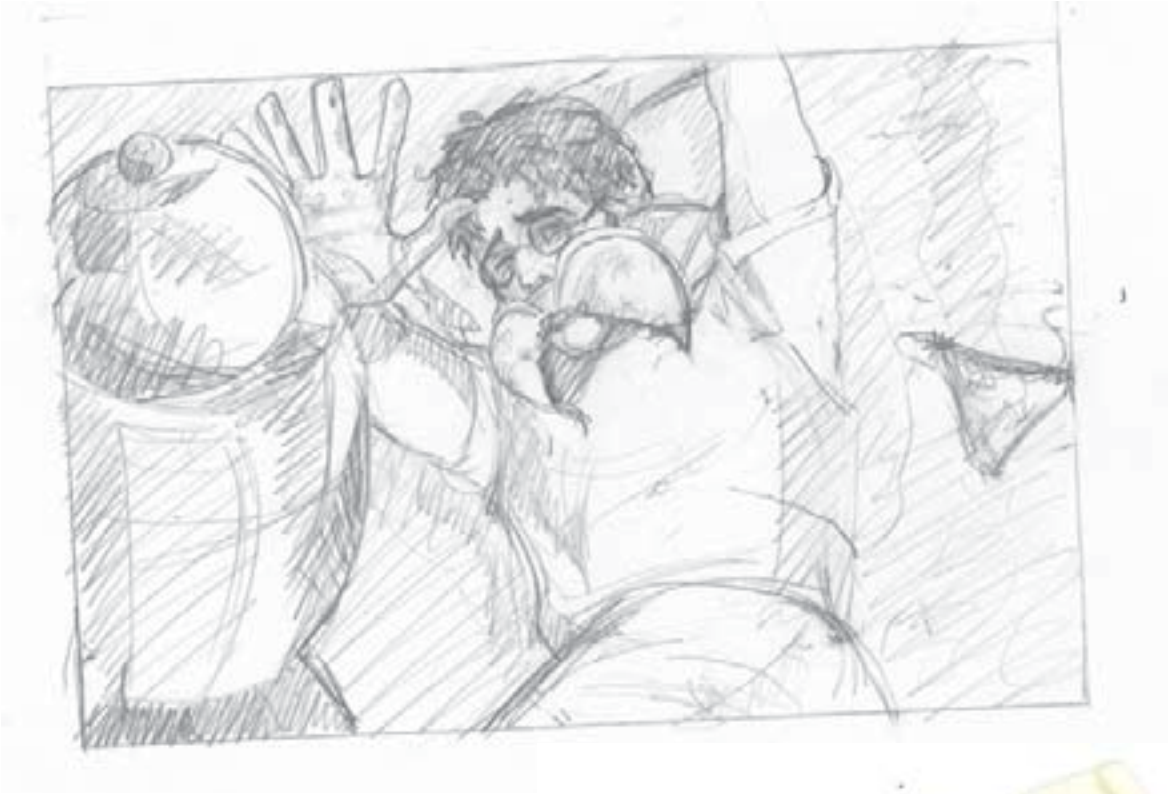
From James Potter to Peter Pettigrew; levitated in his direction and spending an inordinate amount of time tickling his nose.

From Peter Pettigrew to James Potter; more incompetent and public shoving.



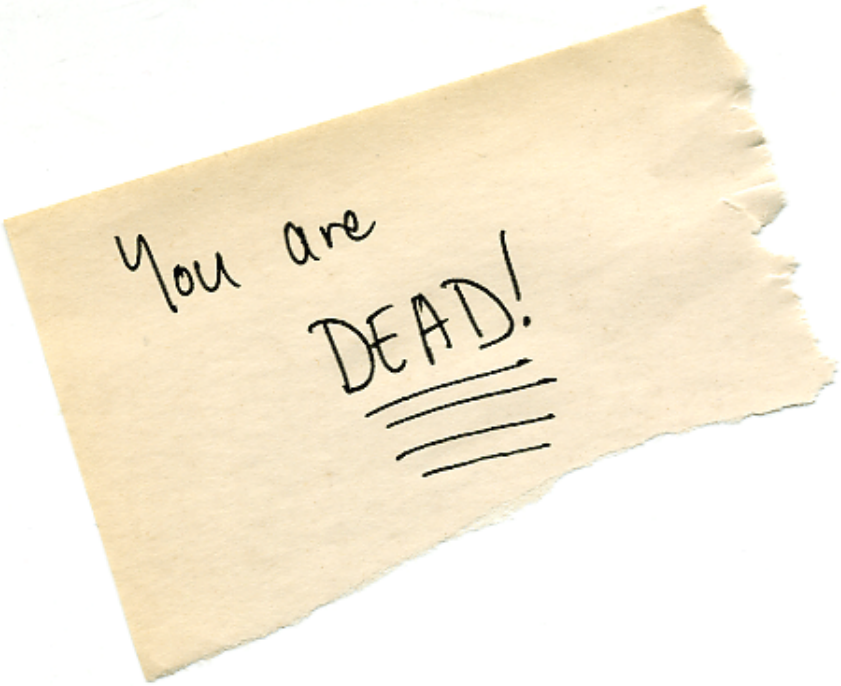


From Sirius Black to James Potter; clipped to the back of Lily Evan's beige bra.

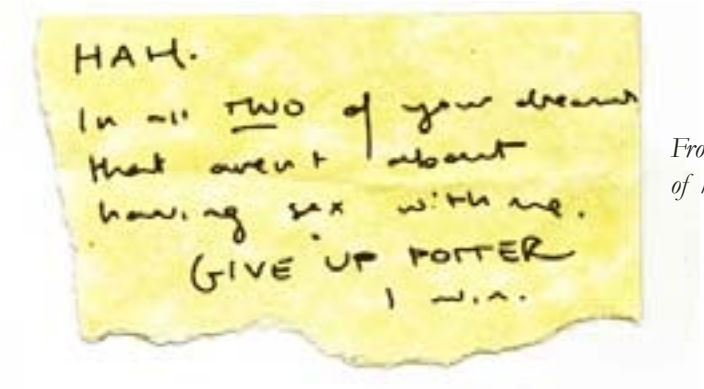




From Lily Evans to James Potter; handed coolly to James Potter over lunch.



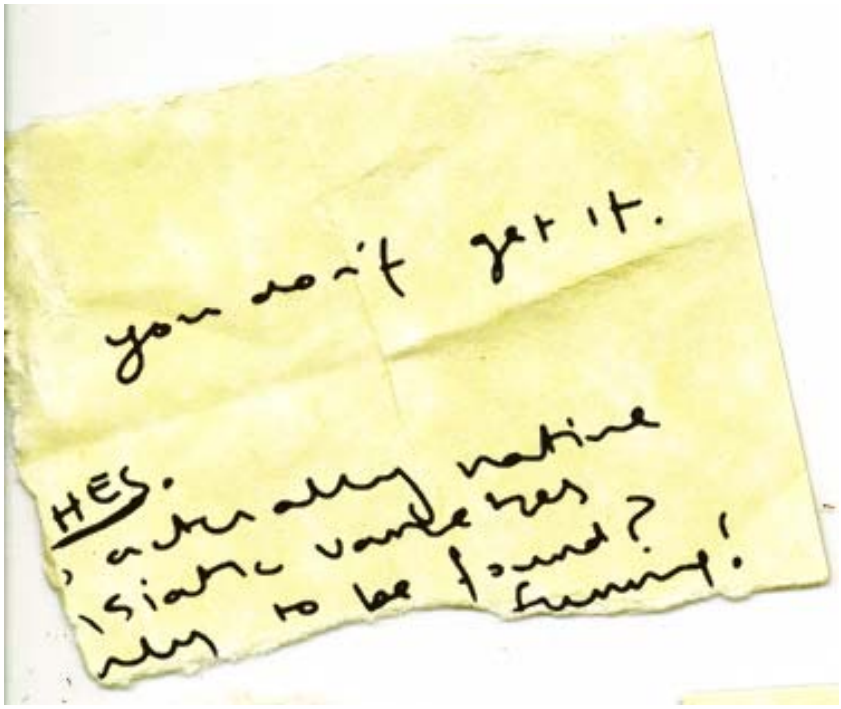
From James Potter to Sirius Black; in his muffin at breakfast, nearly causing a serious choking accident.



From Sirius Black to James Potter; taped to the bedpost at the foot of his bed so it is the first thing he sees when he awakens.

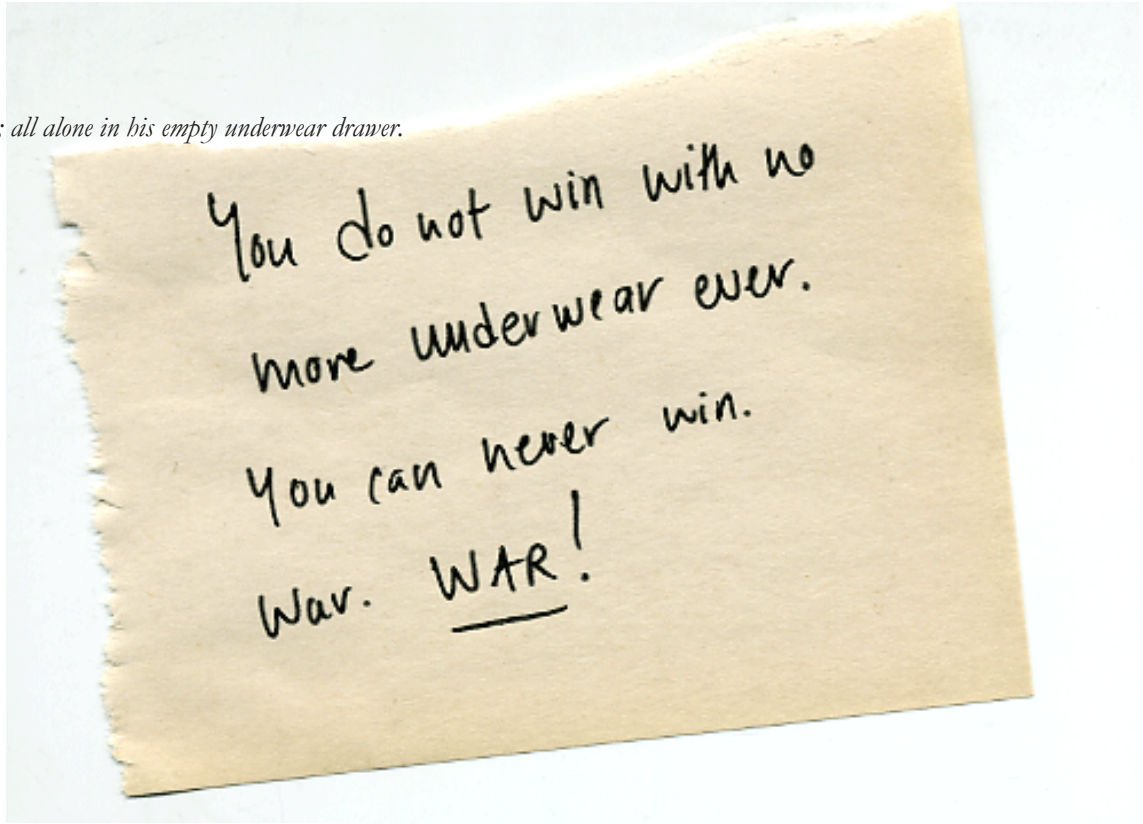


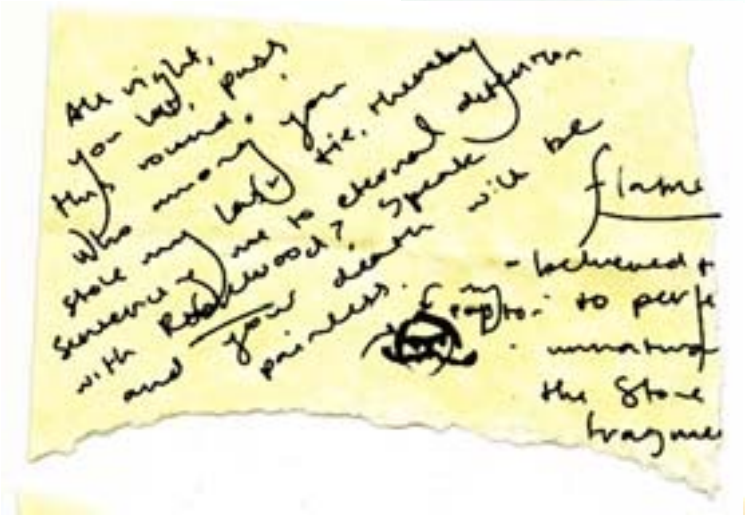
From Peter Pettigrew to James Potter; during Herbology, in reference to a very rare form of poison ivy, landing him in detention for general unsubtlety.



From Sirius Black to Peter Pettigrew; chucked at his head over dinner.

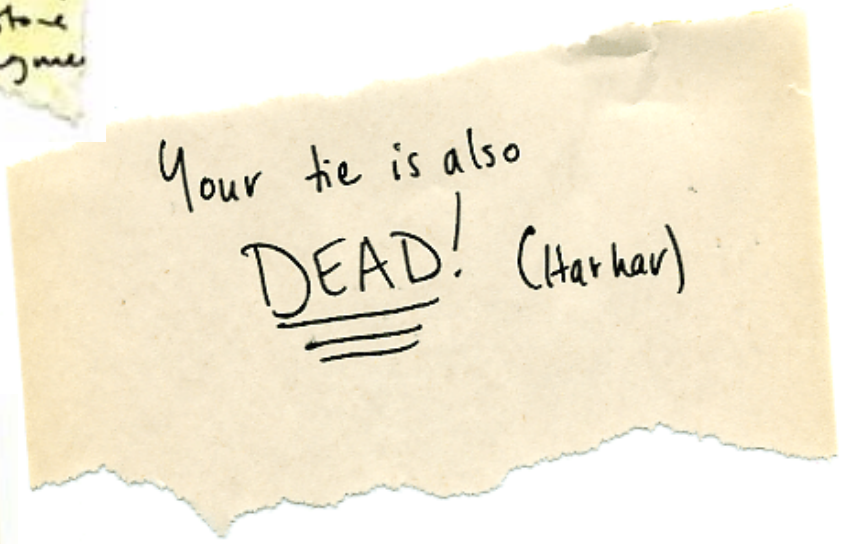
From James Potter to Sirius Black; all alone in his empty underwear drawer.



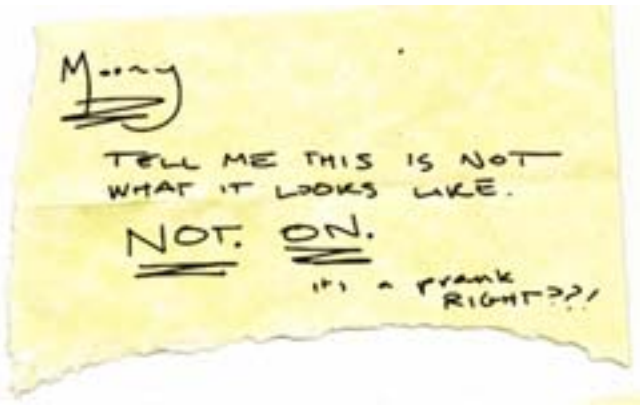


From Sirius Black to all; hung up on the door of the boys' dormitory as a general warning to all.

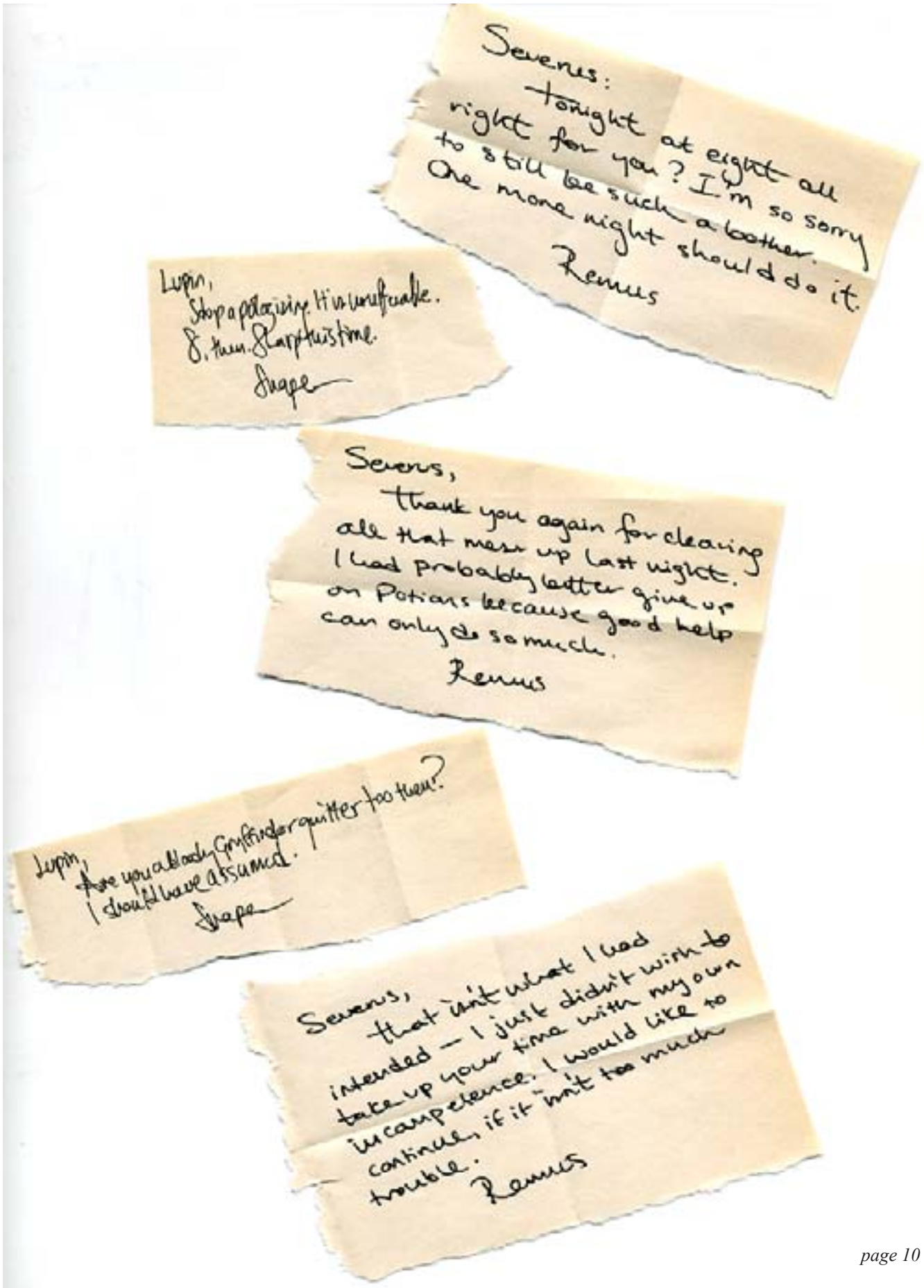
From James Potter to Sirius Black; pinned to the collar of his shirt to serve as a makeshift tie.



***



The following note from Sirius Black to Remus Lupin is passed in a very sneaky fashion during History of Magic, along with the following collection of notes.



Severus:
tonight at eight all right for you? I'm so sorry to still be such a bother. One more night should do it.
Remus

Lupin,
Stop apologizing. It is unfeasible. & turn. Stop this time.
Snape

Severus,
thank you again for clearing all that mess up last night. I had probably better give up on Potions because good help can only do so much.
Remus

Lupin,
Are you actually Gryffindor quitter too then?
I should have assumed.
Snape

Severus,
that isn't what I had intended – I just didn't wish to take up your time with my own incompetence. I would like to continue, if it isn't too much trouble.
Remus

Lupin,
You are again apologizing for yourself.
STOP IT.
8 tonight. You know where.
Snape

Severus,
We must be getting somewhere; I didn't poison you, myself, or light anything on fire last time. I think you are more patient than any professor, really.
8 tonight?
Remus

Lupin,
Yes yes 8 tonight. You're progressing. If only you weren't such an irascible Gryffindor.
Snape

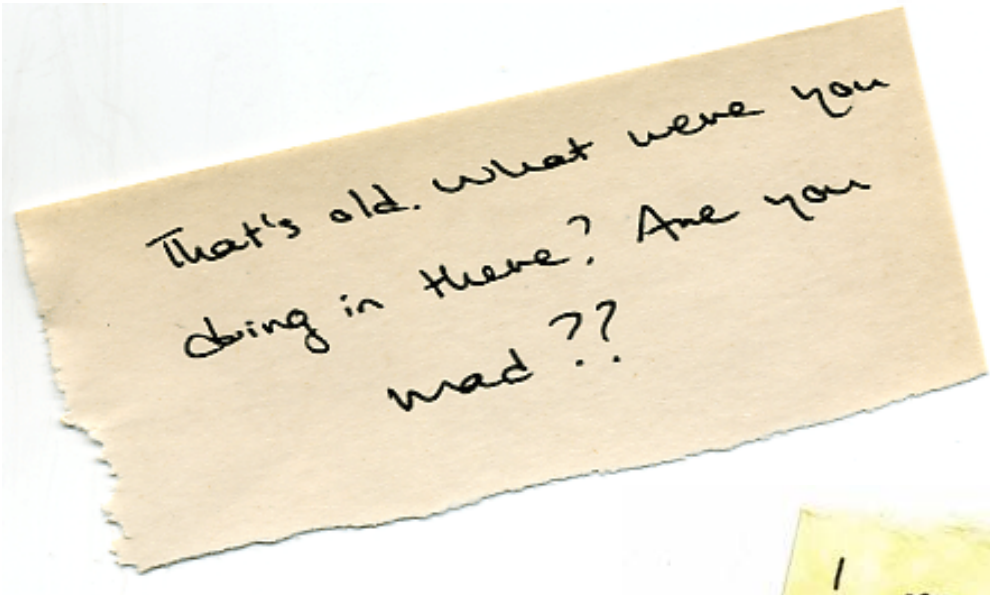
Severus,
I passed the exam. I passed the exam. I couldn't have done it without you.
thank you.
Remus

Lupin,
It's not as if you're completely hopeless.
Almost but not quite.
8 tonight?
Snape



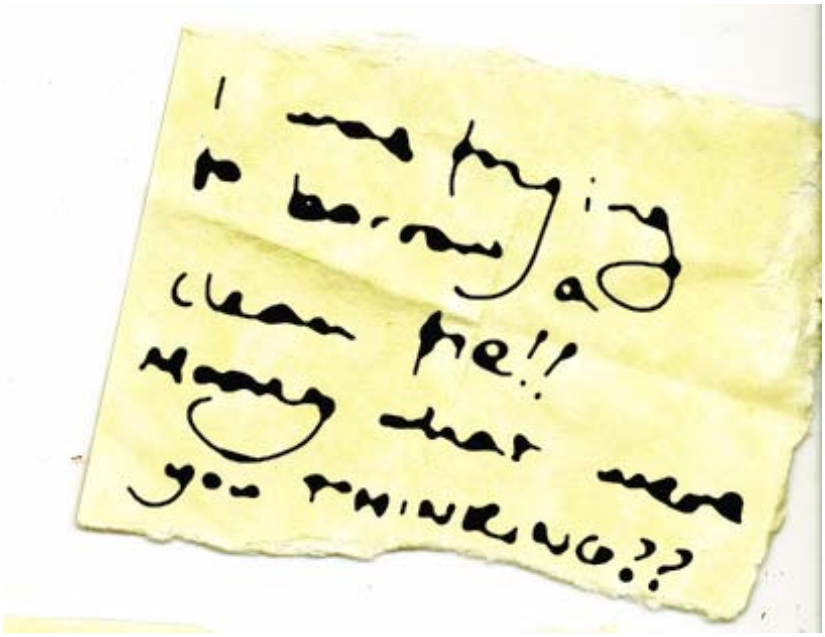
Receiving no answer beyond the sudden rigidity of the Moony back in front of him, Sirius Black is forced to write the following two notes. He passes them along as well, to keep the first note and the evidence in question company.





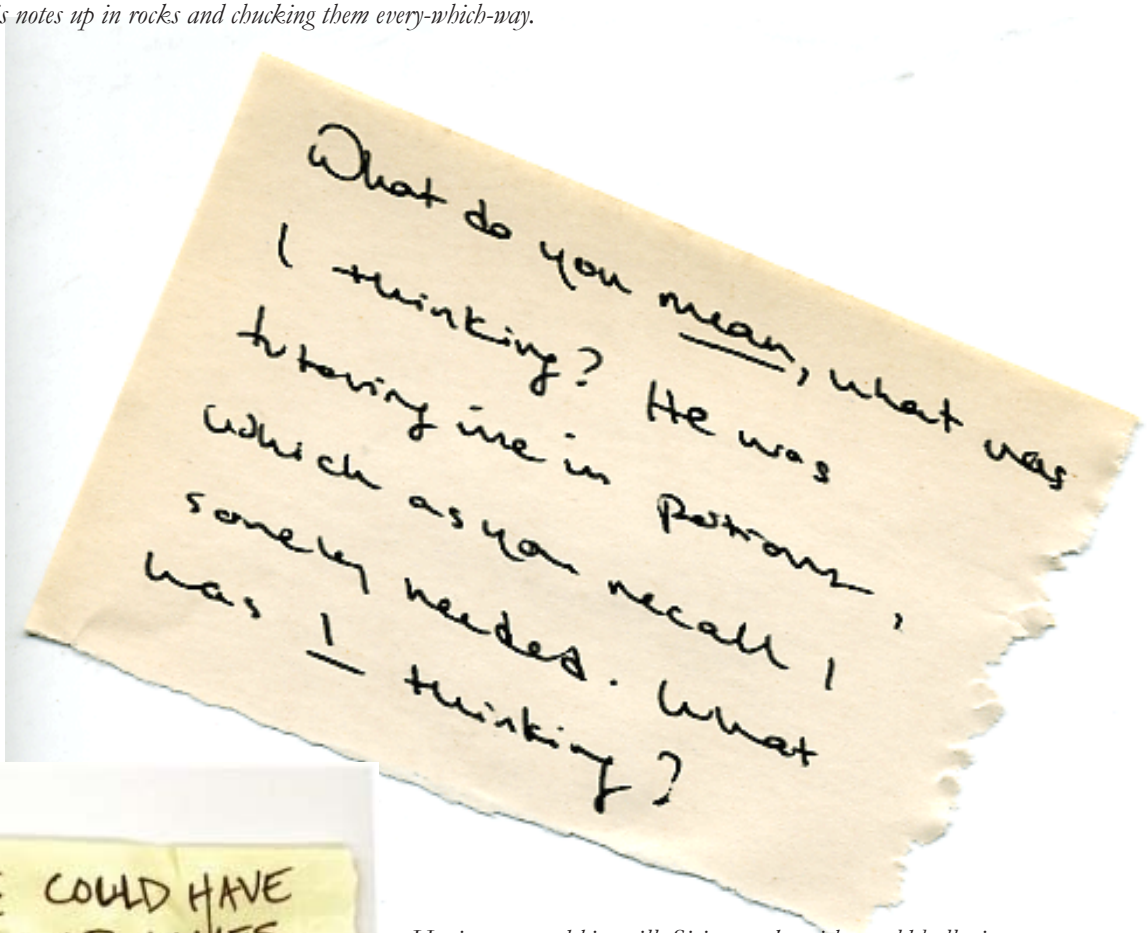
After a long time of watching the immobile, rigid Moony back, and squirming impressively in his seat, Sirius sees Remus' shoulders hunch and the tip of his quill can starts bobbing just over his right shoulder. Remus' response slides with paper-slick intent across the floor, nearly escaping the blockade of Sirius' toes.

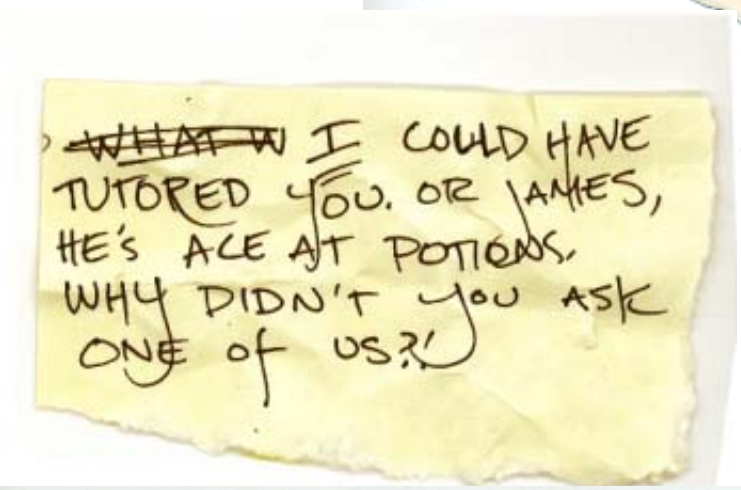
Sirius' handwriting becomes blotchily impassioned; or, rather, impassionedly blotchy.



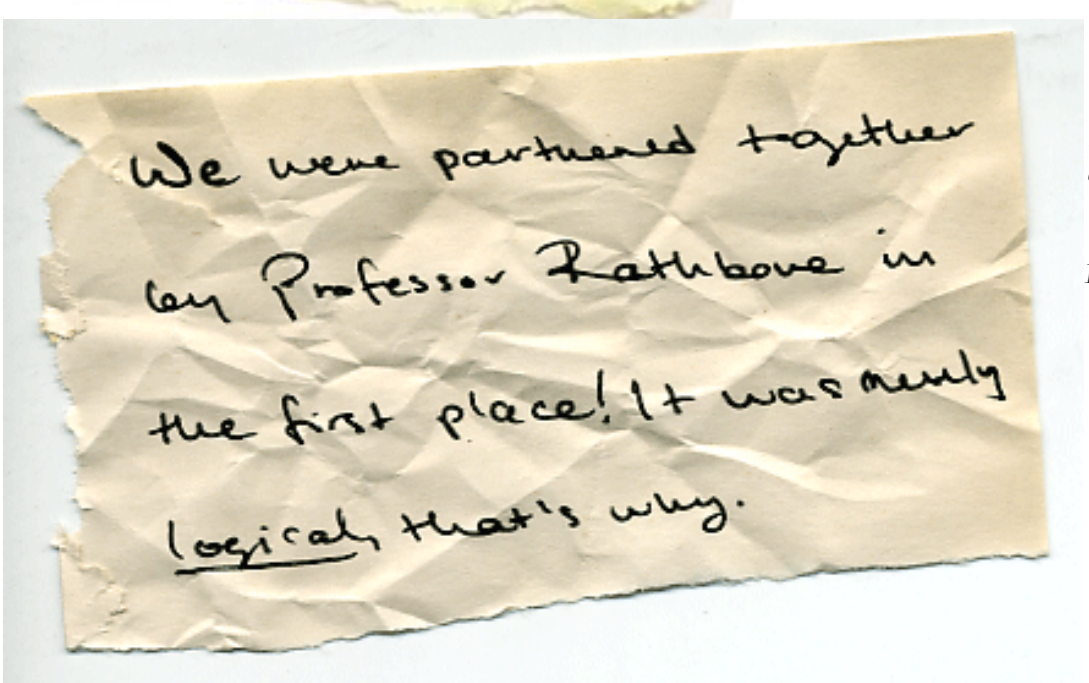
Before Remus writes the answering note he dares a glance backward. Sirius is slouched in his seat, his face a warning storm. Remus is lucky Sirius isn't wrapping his notes up in rocks and chucking them every-which-way.

Remus takes a deep breath and tries to keep his hand steady enough to write. He holds the note behind him, hand low, fingers cold.





Having snapped his quill, Sirius works with an old ballpoint pen found on the classroom floor. He scratches out his answer hurriedly and flings the crumpled up ball of scrap paper forward. The distinct lack of aim sends the note directly into Remus' neck, whereupon it rolls down beneath his collar and Remus spends the next five minutes trying to fish it out of his trousers.



Remus' valiant efforts to remain calm go unnoticed.

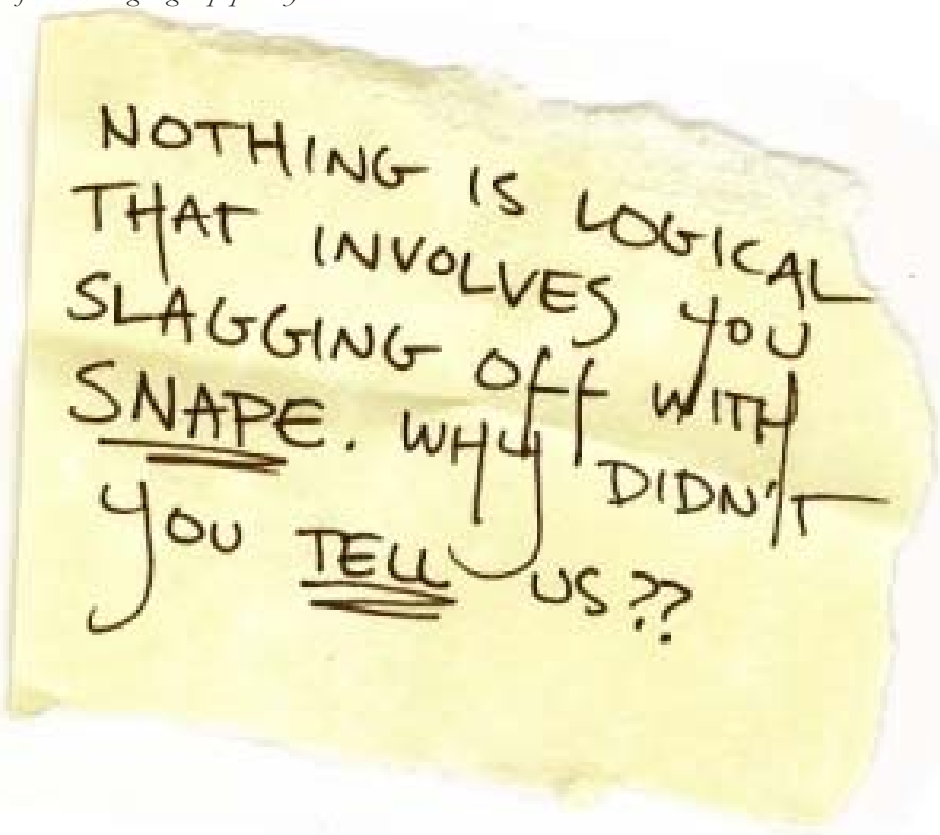
Figures.

Sirius' less-than-valiant efforts to turn purple do not go unnoticed.

James leans over and asks him if that vein in his forehead is going to pop out yet or what.

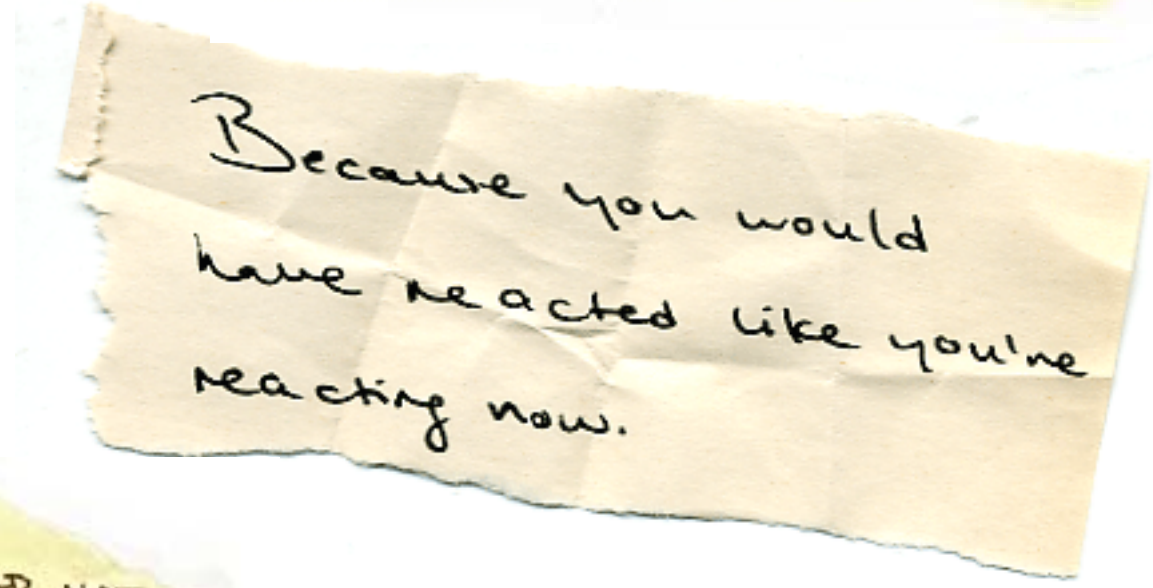
Sirius is not amused.

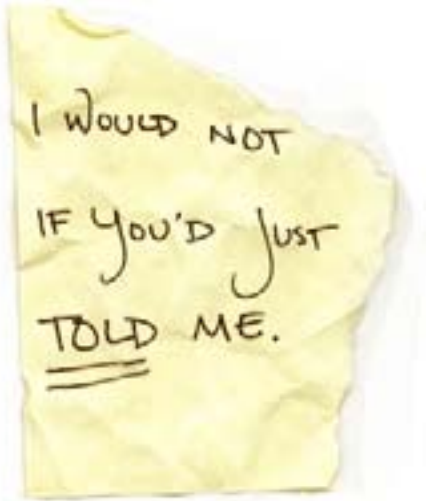
But Peter is.



Never before has Remus indulged in such blatant impertinence during class before. His class notes are lacking. He will never know the very important formative years of peace talks between the Goblins after their eight hundred and second war.

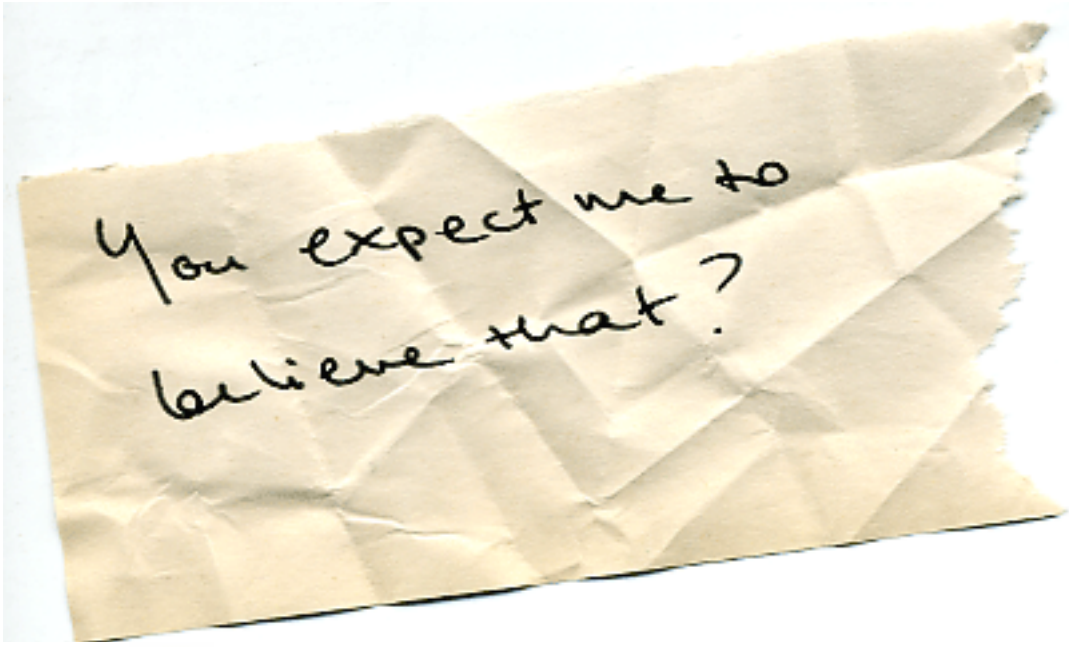
He writes his note to Sirius dutifully, though his left eye is twitching.

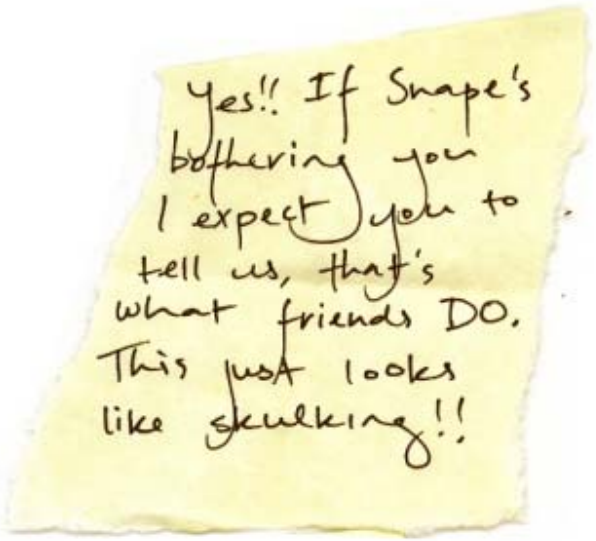




While Sirius is writing his next note the Professor kindly asks Remus if he is well. It's Remus' turn to go a violent shade of purple. Sirius uses the distraction that ensues to lean forward and shove the note onto Remus' desk.

Remus is not best pleased.



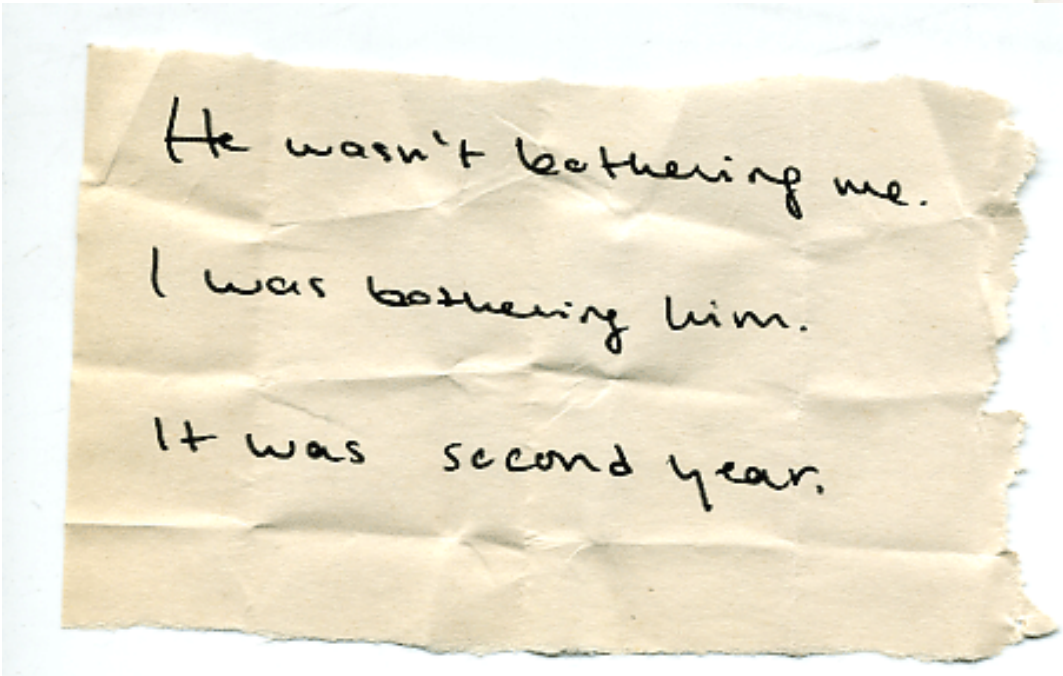


Sirius abuses exclamation marks without a second thought as to their well-being.

Remus fights off the desperate urge to comment on Sirius' over-punctuation.

Sirius is running out of paper.





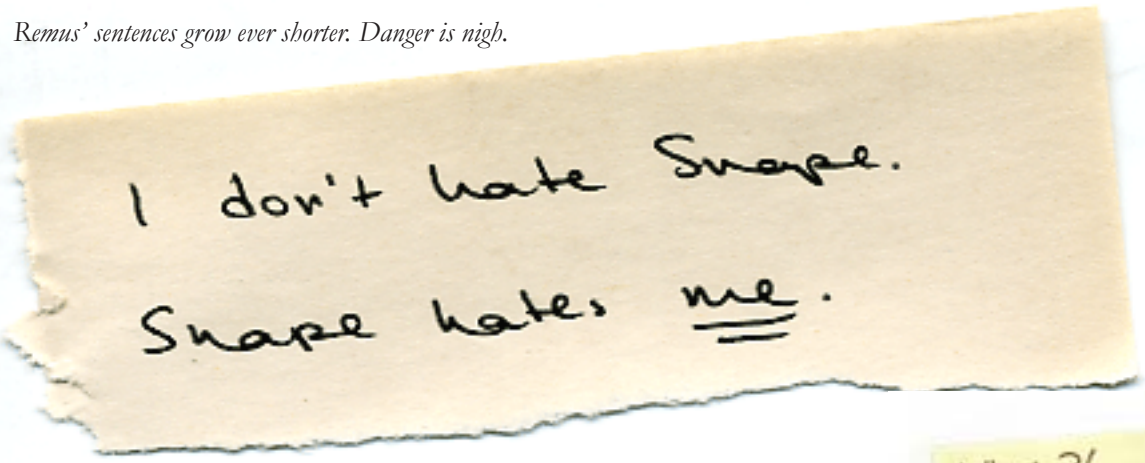
Remus' folds are growing messy, and his sentences terse. This is a grave warning sign that he is truly upset. Sirius is too busy attempting to get the ink stains from his snapped quill out of his nose to notice. (It is most unfortunate to be comically enraged.)

James once again asks Sirius if that vein should be checked up on by Madam Pomfrey and Sirius is once again emphatically not amused.

Peter still is, however, and James nearly falls out of his seat trying not to laugh.

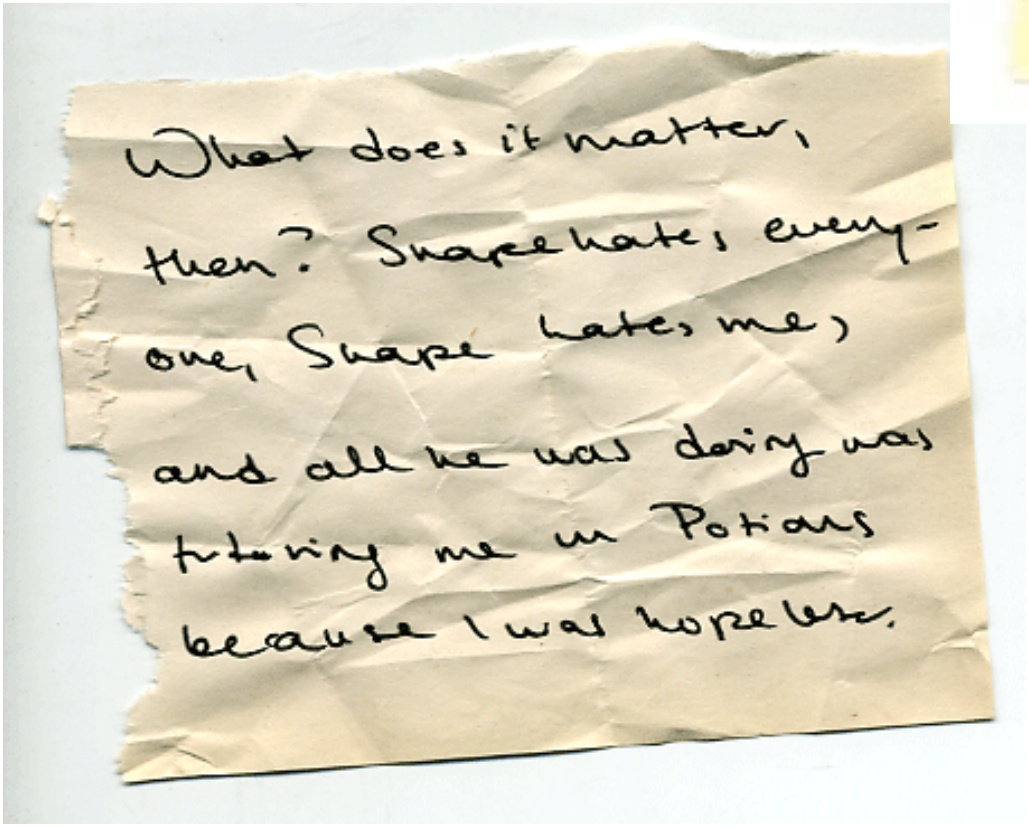


Remus' sentences grow ever shorter. Danger is nigh.



Remus is again tempted to comment on the questionable reasoning behind using both a question mark and an exclamation point together at the end of the same sentence.

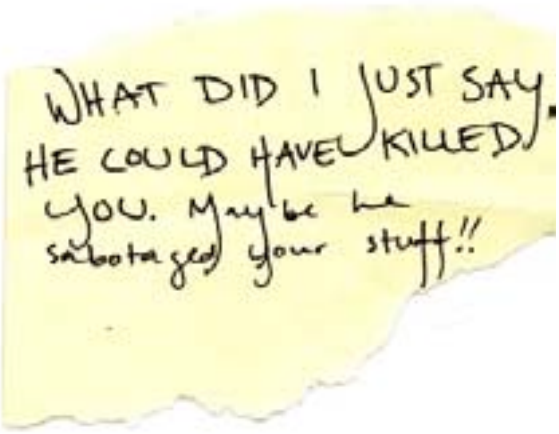




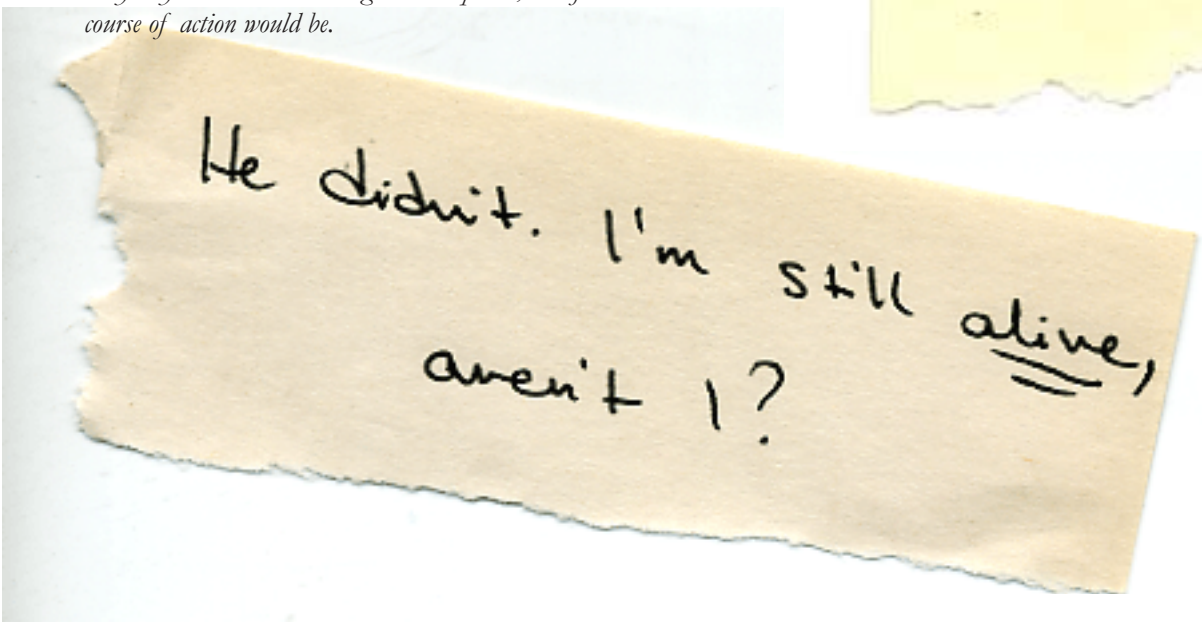
There is nearly a great tragedy with the following note, as a sneeze almost knocks it off course, into an innocent bystander's lap. Swift thinking on Sirius' part nearly impales his stomach on his desk, but he rescues the note from certain danger.

The lesson continues to the second round of peace talks between the goblins and more goblins and angry goblins and goblins that drool overly much.

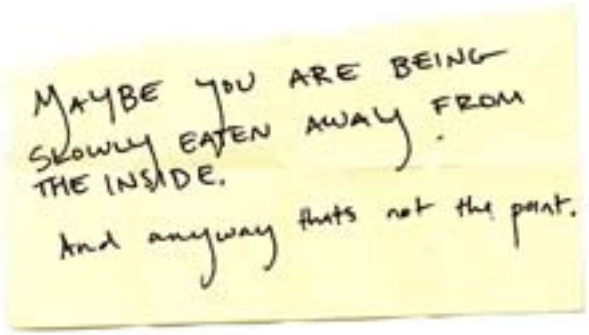
More exclamation points and capital letters. Remus ponders a career in editing.



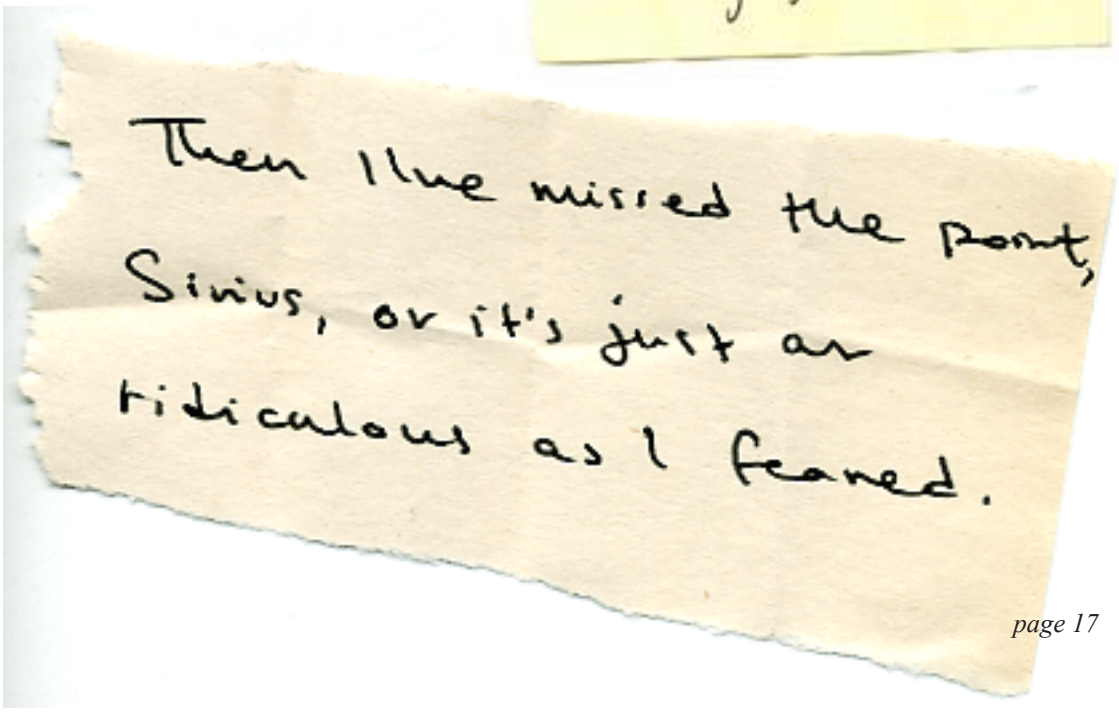
Sirius wonders if getting up right now and punching Severus Snape's nose into teeny-tiny smithereens would get him expelled, and just how worth it that unwise course of action would be.



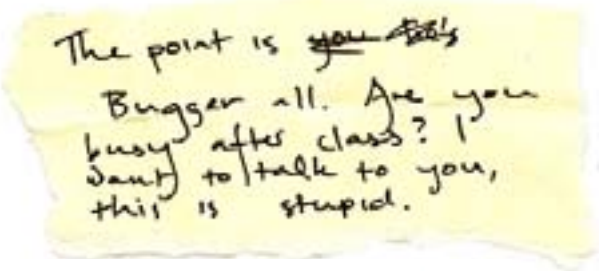
Conspiracy theories gnaw away at Sirius' insides.



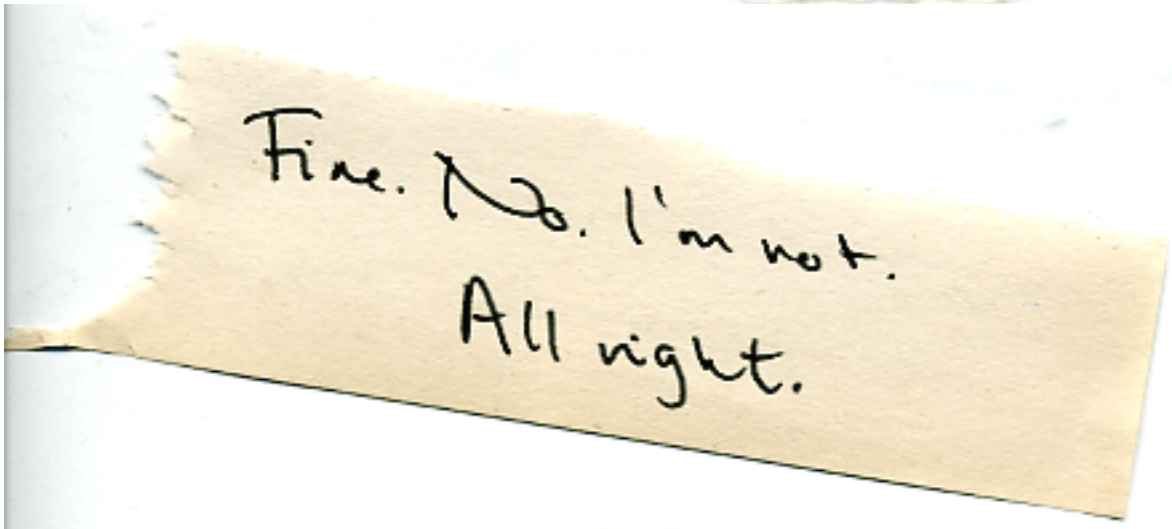
At last, the damning word ridiculous comes into play. James does fall out of his seat this time, leaning over to read the formidable collection of notes by Sirius' right elbow.



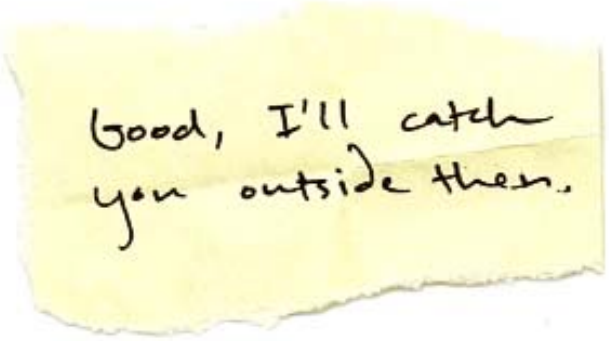
Sirius figures it's a tough job, but somebody's got to do it: the dread Meeting After Class is suggested.



The tables are turned. Doom impends. Remus quails.



But says yes anyway.



The class is full of fidgeting.

And the Goblins have seventeen more peace talks before they again go to war.

***

Sirius is waiting when he gets out of class, shifting twitchily from foot to foot with an expression of noble suffering in the face of terrible betrayal on his face. This is going to be hard for Remus. Everyone knows he can't stand up in the face of a confrontation, but his friends most of all. There's a pinched wrinkle furrowing the center of his brow.

"All right," Sirius says angrily, folding his arms tight across his chest. "The point is you should have just told us you had to study with him."

Remus' face tightens, self-chastisement unreadable across his features. "All right," he agrees. "All right."

"Well, why didn't you—" Sirius starts, and then blinks. "Say what?"

”All right.” Remus holds up his hands, pressing his books against his chest with his elbows. “I said all right. I should have told you I had to study with him, so you and James could have interrupted us every two minutes, and I could have blown the entire dungeon up.” A slight flicker of wickedness replaces the worry lines tugging his scars over the bridge of his nose and the angle of his chin.

”Yes!” Sirius says, with great vehemence that seems somehow misplaced. “Yes, you should have.” Some part of him suspects that he has been tricked, and he does not appreciate it.

Remus is watching him, injured innocence writ large across his features.

”And—and you shouldn’t have—thrown that last note so hard!” he adds, feeling stupider by the minute.

”I thought you looked rather dashing, nearly snorting it up into your nose like that.” Remus pauses, licking his lips. Relief shows in the backs of his eyes, dark, the color of murky mahogany. “At least, you and James aren’t the only ones with good aim, you know.”

Sirius twitches and glares, but without real feeling behind it. “You should have been a Beater.”

”Don’t be silly.” Remus fusses with his collar, scratches the back of his neck, and shifts his shoulders back to comfort, all while keeping an impressive number of books steady against himself. “I didn’t enjoy fishing that first one out of my underwear, either. Let’s just say we’re even.”

”Fine,” Sirius says, deflating. “I’m hungry anyway.”

Remus closes his eyes, fingers easing against bindings, relaxing against pages. “Then let’s go eat. If,” he adds, “Peter’s left anything over for us.”

”Doubtful,” Sirius says with a barking laugh. He slings an easy arm around Remus’ shoulders—and then freezes. “Hang on, aren’t we in a fight?”

Bugger. Remus nearly says it. His shoulders definitely say it.

Bugger.

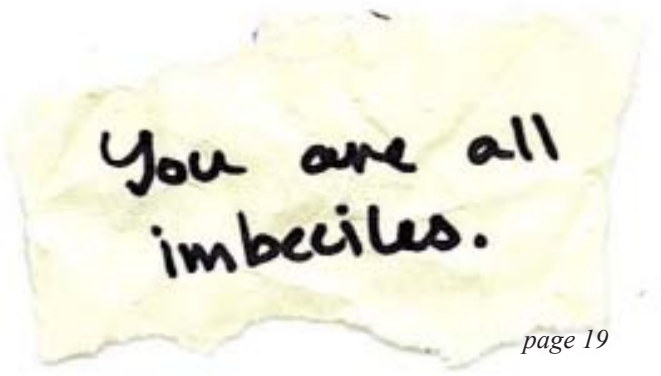
”Not anymore?” he ventures. “We’ve been very mature. We’ve definitely resolved the issue at hand.”

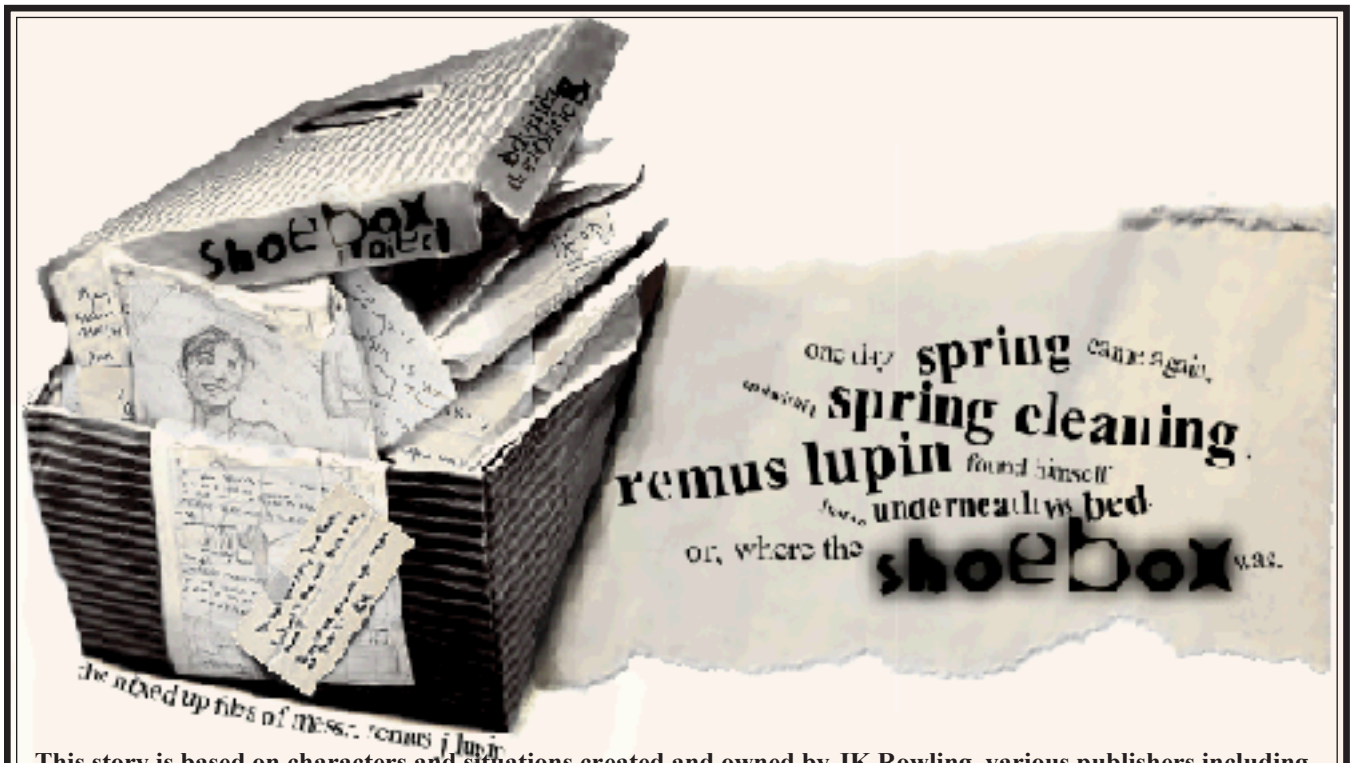
“Yes!” Sirius says, immensely relieved. “Maturity being our middle name. Our collective middle name. Sirius and Remus Maturity Black-Lupin. What’s for lunch I wonder?”

”Peter’s leftovers,” Remus replies, and nearly leaks relief all the way down the hallway.

***

From Lily Evans to All; wrapped up in James Potter’s invisibility cloak.





This story is based on characters and situations created and owned by JK Rowling, various publishers including but not limited to Bloomsbury Books, Scholastic Books and Raincoast Books, and Warner Bros., Inc. No money is being made and no copyright or trademark infringement is intended.

***The Shoebox Project* by LadyJaida and Dorkorific**

http://www.livejournal.com/community/shoebox_project

Part Four: Halloween, 1975
Four photographs. Two memories. Four stories.

An old chocolate frog trading card.



***

"D'you know," James says, tugging at the white curls sprouting from beneath his nostrils for the umpteenth time, "it's a marvel old Dumbledore gets anything done with all the itching and the tangling and the getting caught on things."

"Well, maybe he uses something other than spirit gum to keep his whiskers on," Sirius suggests. "Also, you know, he is Ageless and Wise. These may be obstacles he's learned to master. Hurry up, lad, we're going to be late for our own party."

"Well, whatever. I am trying, you know. This is — ah — *ah*—" James sneezes emphatically. He sniffs, wipes his nose on the elaborate sleeve of his costume, and regards it with disgust. "I think maybe I'm allergic — gnuhh."

"Well, if it makes you feel better, you look terribly handsome." Sirius favors his best friend with a winning smile, pulls down his immense hat and flutters his eyelashes. "I've always had a thing for older men."

"Oh my, Minerva," James says, in a passable imitation of Dumbledore's sparkling baritone, "I don't know that that's appropriate intra-staff conversation." Sirius cackles lecherously and slaps his bum, and then—

"On the contrary," says a faintly amused and much richer version from in front of them. "I encourage all forms of flattery from my underlings."

Albus Dumbledore has an uncanny habit of appearing for the tail ends of the bawdiest conversations, or manages to

be standing just behind you the minute you mention his name. Behind the half-moons of his glasses his eyes are very blue. James attempts to scoop his jaw up from the floor and hopes against hope that's another McGonagall costume and not actually McGonagall with her arm in the headmaster's.

The stern cough and well-concealed flicker of amusement signal the worst has, indeed, happened. "They do say," Professor McGonagall murmurs, "that imitation is the sincerest form of flattery."

James' eyes dart to Sirius. They've known each other for long enough to communicate wordlessly, eyebrow twitches, lip quirks, a flash of teeth, a nervous tug of the earlobe, a scratch to the side of the nose. To anyone else they're just fidgety boys. To James and Sirius they have just had a lengthy conversation extending far beyond their current dilemma.

James rubs underneath his nose, disturbing the silvery-white whiskers: *Don't do anything stupid, Sirius.*

Sirius scratches behind his ear: *What could possibly make things worse than right now?*

James presses his teeth to his lower lip, beard shifting ticklishly over his chest: *Just don't do anything stupid, Sirius, and don't say anything stupid, either.*

Sirius rearranges the spectacles on his nose, nudging them into a more severe resting place: *Sorry, it's as good as done already.*

James toys with the hem of his — Dumbledore's — robes: *Bugger.*

Sirius brushes his thumb against the corner of his mouth, back straightening to familiar, prim posture: *And how much firewhiskey d'you think we should sneak for later?*

James wrinkles his nose: *Better make it butterbeer.*

A cough from the motionless pair in front of them summons their attention forward again. Sirius flicks his fingers through the front of his hair: *Showtime.*

"Professor McGonagall!" he exclaims, bringing to bear all the warmth and suavity that his good breeding and fortunate genetics have given him, and trying to ignore the little edge of panic in his voice. "You know, I thought this night couldn't get any more beautiful, and then you stepped round that corner." There is an explosive little noise from James.

Minerva McGonagall regards him impassively over the top of her spectacles, but the side of her mouth twitches. "Mr. Black. This is — I hardly know what to say."

"Say *I do*, Professor! I shall never give up until you accept me," Sirius cries. He has quite the nature for dramatics, dropping onto one knee and sweeping the battered black hat off his head. He's always been good at this, at wild theatricals and mad improvisation, things that would be impertinent and stupid from anyone else but that from him — and he knows this, it isn't just conceit — are charming and often mesmerizing. It's all to do with confidence, he reminds himself. "You are the only woman who has ever managed to hold my complete attention. I can't stop thinking about you, I can't eat, I can't sleep, I do nothing but pine and steal your clothing—"

"I was under the impression that I had never even held your *partial* attention for more than a half an hour." McGonagall raises her chin slightly, the corner of her severe mouth twitching more energetically than ever.

"Oh, no," Sirius breathes, rapturously. On an insane whim, he grabs her hand. McGonagall shoots a glare at

Dumbledore, who shrugs. Always innocence beneath the faint smell of lemon. "Professor, if ever I seem distant in your class, I'm probably dreaming of our future life together: frolicking by the ocean in the sands of Tahiti, skiing hand-in-hand down the mighty Alps, feeding adorable orphans in the slums of Bombay—"

"The resemblance is absolutely breathtaking," says Dumbledore, and Sirius notices with a faint glow of triumph that his shoulders are shaking. "Really, Minerva, it's like watching you be propositioned by your own twin."

"Well, I'm hardly observing any kind of effort from your evil doppelganger," says McGonagall, who now — to Sirius's delight — has a pink blush staining the tops of her cheeks. "Really, it's like he doesn't even care."

"My counterpart," James sighs, most gravely, "has already used every poetic turn of phrase the book has to offer! How can I, choking upon my own beard, hope to compete with his protestations of love undying until the end of time?" Dumbledore makes a sound like choking. "But!" James continues, "the war is not over, even if the battle is done!" Falling to his knees, praying to whatever gods of mischief might actually give a Bundimun that he doesn't trip over the troublesome beard, his eyes focus, myopic and wildly passionate, upon Dumbledore's chuckling face. The reaction is one of surprise, shock, truly divine, from all witnesses. A crowd is gathering, which only fuels each action, the next more ludicrous than the one before. "I am all confused, Headmaster — it is like looking into a mirror —"

"Loves to do that, you know," Sirius explains in a stage whisper. "Does it all the time. Like heaven for him, heaven on earth—"

"— and seeing for the first time the truth!" James clasps his hands to his chest, nearly loses them in the tangle of white hair, but manages to extricate them with innate dignity. "We had no other way than to put all our eggs in one basket—"

"And aren't we handsome? What you said, about the sincerest form of flattery." Sirius bats his lashes.

"—and hope that our desperation would not go unnoticed!"

Professor McGonagall bites back a snort of laughter that threatens to shatter her calm like the glaze over a crème brulee. Dumbledore's cheeks are rosy with suppressed amusement. "I was not aware," he murmurs, the calmest poker face of them all despite the ever-present twinkle in his eye, "that we taught play-acting in our institution."

"Oh no, Professors," James protests. "We are in earnest!"

"We are so in earnest that it is very *painful*," Sirius agrees.

"*Painfully earnest,*" James confirms. "In fact we'd best have off from classes Monday to recover."

Sirius elbows him violently, eyes straight ahead: *Don't push it*. James pokes out his tongue as discreetly as possible.

The professors look at each other.

"How painful, exactly, would you classify your earnestness?" Dumbledore inquires archly. "I ask merely to ascertain whether we should release you without charges or have you locked up for your own good."

"Painful enough to merit euthanasia?" McGonagall mutters, and the Headmaster treads serenely on her foot. The onlookers cackle, and Sirius spares a moment to wish them dead before barreling on.

"Oh, terribly painful," he says, very sincerely. "Like — like having one's foot gnawed off by a flobberworm. But of course, no physical pain, no description I could conjure could possibly compare to the, er, the pangs of the love that I

know can never be—" He springs to his feet, still clutching McGonagall's hand, hoping that the movement will catapult him into inspiration. "For—painful though it is, to beg the favor of a woman who could never deign to love me in return, 'tis better to have loved and lost, er, and so on—" He fumbles, opens his mouth, closes it — James is eyeing him in slowly growing panic, *come on, Padfoot, do something*! — and finally thinks *to hell with it*.

Sirius launches himself forward, and kisses his Head of House full on the mouth.

McGonagall makes a strangled noise and flails at him. Their hats knock together. So do their spectacles. Sirius decides after a panic-filled moment that his point is made perhaps too well, yanks himself back, and gazes ardently at her. She looks, he thinks with great admiration, rather magnificent: bright red, helpless with confusion and probably rage, and yet altogether in possession of her dignity. "I'm sorry, Professor! I just — couldn't hold back any longer! I love you! And it tears me up inside!" Considering the Deed Done, Sirius grabs James's wrist and flees down the hall, pursued by roars of laughter and a shriek of "Mister Black! *Twelve million points* from Gryffindor!" floating down the corridor after them.

***

"I heard you and Professor McGonagall shared a most passionate embrace." Remus is wearing a towel. No. A sheet? And there are leaves in his hair. Or something. "I've heard all about your escapades — they're all over the school, you know; marriage proposals and histrionics and madcaps and the like — that you launched yourself at her like a lamprey and near on sucked her face off — well, sucked her face off her *face*." Remus adjusts the leaves curled against his ears. They're drooping.

"And you went down on one knee in front of Dumbledore, James," Peter chimes in. His voice is muffled behind another white sheet, draped lumpily over him, two eyeholes revealing Peter's blinking, awe-filled eyes. "How'd you do it? How'd you *do* it?"

"*Why* did you do it?" Remus revises. He's wearing sandals, as well, brown and strappy over his fidgeting feet.

"Elementary, my dear Moony," James replies. He smoothes his moustache casually.

"You just love doing that, don't you." Sirius shakes his head. "Dirty moustache-stroker. Don't get used to it. Facial hair isn't a good look for you."

"He says that because it hides my lovely face," James whispers loudly.

"You're such an idiot. Anyway." Sirius turns his attention to Peter and Remus, who are regarding him with a mix of admiration and horror, respectively. "Of course, there's a full and very reasonable explanation that mostly does not involve me being drunk. Don't look at me like that! She's really a terribly attractive woman, you know, for her age."

"I was so afraid I was going to have to do it to Dumbledore, just to keep up," James says. "Overachieving wanker."

"Well, it worked! We didn't get detention, did we?"

"No, we only got twelve million points!"

"That's ridiculous, we don't even have twelve million points. She's bluffing. To hide her love. Moony, are you meant to be cupid?"

"Don't be silly, he's a wood-nymph," James cuts in, smiling reasonably at Remus. "Aren't you?"

"Er," Remus says.

James frowns. "Guess you're not a wood-nymph, then?"

"No."

"Or cupid?" Sirius asks, hopeful.

"No."

"I already guessed cupid," Peter explains. "But he's not cupid. He's not Zeus, either, and he's not blanket-man — though I thought that one was a little farfetched to begin with." Somewhere beneath his own sheet, Peter is chewing his lower lip. "And he isn't Julius Caesar and he isn't about to flash any of us, either, so don't ask."

"Of course he's not about to flash us." Sirius grins. "It's *Moony*."

"To save you all the endless heartache," Remus begins, "I'm—"

"No, no, you absolutely *cannot* tell," Sirius insists. "I won't allow it."

"It's obviously hopeless." Remus folds scarred arms over his chest. One scar runs the length of his forearm from elbow to pinky; three short horizontal lines, old, cuff his wrist. "I should have just gone with Ghost Number Two."

"Uhm, hold on, what was that bloke's name?"

"Come on." James nudges Sirius with his elbow. "Or there won't be anything left at the feast. And *I* wasn't the one delayed by endangering McGonagall's reputation."

"This doesn't mean I give up!" Sirius grabs Remus by the hand and Peter by the ghost flap. "I'm still guessing!"

"Hm," Remus mutters.

***

"I've got it!" Sirius says around a mouthful of butterbeer. Remus ducks just in time. "Me last week after I ran out of towels!"

"No," Remus says.

"Good one, though," Peter encourages. "Don't give up now."

***

"No, really, Moony, *this* time, I've got it." Sirius blows a bubble the size of his head and green like the back of a luna moth. When it pops and sticks all over his neatly perched glasses he manages, "That bloke who said Eureka!"

"That was Euclid." Sirius gets the feeling the only reason Remus hasn't throttled him is all the chocolate is placating him. "Euclid did not wear a toga."

"Bugger," Sirius says.

***

"Me when I'm drunk? I've done some pretty arse—"

"No."

***

"I could swear I was like that one time when I—"

"No."

***

"I'm not giving up." Sirius tries to look nonchalant while glancing eagerly out the window. James is rearranging his beard somewhere and Peter has gone off to be sick in the bathroom and it's almost time to head off to the Shack for the night — a yearly ritual, and therefore Holy. Already the clouds are the spectral Hallow's Eve color, yellow and gray and silver and shifting across darkness into darkness.

"Of course not, no." Remus reaches up to settle his leaves more neatly behind his ears.

"It's on the tip of my tongue," Sirius insists.

"So's some of that gum from earlier." Remus motions with his thumb and Sirius sucks it off hurriedly.

"Just so long as you don't tell me."

"You have until morning." Remus smiles the grim smile of a much-beleaguered entity.

"Bugger," Sirius says.

***









***

The Shrieking Shack is always cold, but on this frigid October night Peter, wrapped only in a blanket and the sheet from his costume, feels somehow warmed, and it's only partly to do with the enormous quantities of sweets and butterbeer that the four of them have consumed. He's had a good day, and he's grateful to them for it. Stuffed with chocolate and various permutations thereof, it is hard to muster up the requisite All Souls' Day chill, but they are doing their best, and Peter wants to help them in thanks for their friendship.

***

"Ooh, I've got a good one!"

"Is it the one about the nearly-headless ghost, because that one *isn't good*, Wormtail."

"Shut up. This is a good one. It's about—"

"Don't tell us what it's about! Just tell us the story."

"Righto. So once upon a—a dark and stormy night—this little kid named, er, Mark. His Mum says to him, 'Mark, go down to the butchers' and get us a shrake's liver for our, um, our liver, that we're having for supper tonight."

"Eww, shrake's liver? What kind of a mother *is* this woman?"

"I *like* shrake's liver."

"Yes, well, you are a Dark, Inhuman Creature. Who knows what-all you like?"

"You know, I do find myself developing a strange craving for human flesh."

"Shut up and listen to the story! You two have no respect. Honestly, *canines*."

"So—so down she goes. He goes. He goes to the butcher's, and there's the liver. Oh wait, his mum's only given him seven sickles, I forgot that bit. So he goes up and he says, 'How much is the shrake's liver?' And the butcher says 'It's seven sickles, but we've also got all these pumpkin pastries on sale for seven sickles as well.'"

"Why is the butcher selling pumpkin pastries?"

"His wife makes them. Anyway so Mark goes, well, all right! Because he loves pastries. So he buys them with the money, and he starts home. Then just as he's leaving, he remembers that his mum asked him for a liver!"

"He *knew* that though, right? I mean, he was just *asking* about the price of shrake's liver, presumably he knew he was supposed to buy shrake's liver."

"He was forgetful, Sirius, do shut up."

"Yeah, shut up. Anyway, luckily at this point he passes an undertaker's. And—um—outside the undertaker's, there's an open coffin with an old witch inside."

"Eurgh!"

"In the sun and everything?"

"Is it kind of like a pub sign? Corpses Within, style of thing?"

"No! No, it's just, um, a sample."

"A sample? A sample *corpse*?"

"It's a Muggle undertaker! I don't know. Anyway just then Mark has a brilliant idea. So he gets out his wand and he cuts out the old lady's liver."

"*Ewww*."

"Wormtail, this is a vile story."

"But exciting! …In a cannibal kind of way. Stop looking at me like that!"

"Anyway, um, he cuts out the liver and takes it home, and his mum fries it up for dinner. And it's the most delicious thing they've ever eaten."

"And yet they don't suspect it's not shrake's liver?"

"He *knows* it's not shrake's liver, idiot, he just stole it."

"But you said he's forgetful!"

"You lot are the worst audience in the world. They eat it up and then the sun sets."

"Because they ate the liver?"

"No! Because it's *night time*! The sun goes down and Mark and his mum go to bed. And then they wake up. He wakes up. And he hears this thumping. Thump, thump, thump. Oh no wait! No he doesn't. He hears a voice from outside, and it says: 'Mark. Maaaaaaark! I'm outside! I want my liver baaaaaack!'"

"It's a *talking shrake*!"

"Sirius, you are not allowed to talk anymore."

"Please, you two—"

"—So! So Mark is terrified, obviously, so he runs and hides in the closet, yelling for his Mum, but there's no answer. So he's hiding there in the dark—*who's breathing like that?!*"

"*Moo ha ha ha ha ha ha.*"

"Fuck off, Sirius! You aren't funny at all. Anyway so as he's hiding there and he hears a creeeeeak and then the same voice says 'Mark, Maaaaark! I'm inside! I want my liver baaaack!' He totally freezes. Not even breathing. Not moving at all. And then, now's when he hears: Thump. Thump. Thump.

"And the voice goes 'Mark, Maaaark! I can see you! *I want my liver back! And the door to the cupboard is flung open!*"

"*Sweet Jesus augh*—!"

"What? *What?!* James??"

"I could swear I just felt something—claws—"

"*Moo ha ha ha ha ha ha.*"

"Sod off, Sirius! God. I almost had a coronary."

"What's outside the cupboard?"

"Well, *no one knows*, but when the neighbors came in the next day, they found the bodies of Mark and his mum, and they both had their *stomachs and livers torn out.*"

"Oooh."

"Lovely."

"That's a nice one, Wormtail."

"But so wait, actually we *do* know what it was, right? I mean, it was the old lady."

"Black, you are determined to ruin everything!"

"I think he should be beaten."

"Too right he should. Pillow, Mr. Prongs?"

"Thank you very much, Mr. Wormtail."

"No, no! Not the costume! My stockings'll get runs in—*oooh nooooo*—"

"*Moo ha ha ha ha ha*."

***

On the white folds of fabric tugging across Remus' lap the book rests, a permanent fixture of his life. The title is worn away with age and time and the binding cracked. He has his right pointer finger stuck into the center to keep the page. Just below where his thumb rests the rubbed away lettering is just legible. *Poe*. It is one of Remus' irrational life long dreams to read Poe to his friends while they are actually paying attention.

***

" Argh, get off, you've beaten me, all right? You win. Ow. All right, Remus. S'your turn."

"D'you have one of those Muggle stories again?"

"Those aren't scary 't all, Muggle stories are never as scary as Wizarding ones."

"I don't *have* to read it, you know."

"Well, you know, I was only saying."

"Go on, Moony, read it."

"Only if you're sure it won't *bore* you."

"C'mon, Remus, you know what I meant."

"Well. All right. *The Telltale Heart*, by Edgar Alan Poe."

"Didn't he write that Raven poem? Nevermore, and all."

"Shh."

"Right, sorry."

"True! — nervous — very, very dreadfully nervous I had been and am; but why will you say that I am mad? The disease had sharpened my senses — not destroyed — not dulled them. Above all was the sense of hearing acute. I heard all things in the heaven and in the earth. I heard many things in hell. How, then, am I mad? Hearken! and observe how healthily — how calmly I can tell you the whole story."

"Doesn't sound calm to me."

"Put a sock in it, Sirius."

"Sock. In. Put. Go on, Moony."

"It is impossible to say how first the idea entered my brain; but once conceived, it haunted me day and night. Object there was none. Passion there was none. I loved the old man. He had never wronged me. He had never given me

insult. For his gold I had no desire. I think it was his eye! yes, it was this! He had the eye of a vulture — a pale blue eye, with a film over it. Whenever it fell upon me, my blood ran cold; and so by degrees — very gradually — I made up my mind to take the life of the old man, and thus rid myself of the eye forever."

"Sounds like that — right, you remember, don't you Prongs — that Moody fello—mmph."

"Handy sock."

"Now this is the point. You fancy me mad. Madmen know nothing. But you should have seen me. You should have seen how wisely I proceeded — with what caution — with what foresight — with what dissimulation I went to work! I was never kinder to the old man than during the whole week before I killed him. And every night, about midnight, I turned the latch of his door and opened it — oh so gently! And then, when I had made an opening sufficient for my head, I put in a dark lantern, all closed, closed, that no light shone out, and then I thrust in my head. Oh, you would have laughed to see how cunningly I thrust it in! I moved it slowly — very, very slowly, so that I might not disturb the old man's sleep. It took me an hour to place my whole head within the opening so far that I could see him as he lay upon his bed. Ha! would a madman have been so wise as this? And then, when my head was well in the room, I undid the lantern cautiously — oh, so cautiously — cautiously (for the hinges creaked) — I undid it just so much that a single thin ray fell upon the vulture eye. And this I did for seven long nights — every night just at midnight — but I found the eye always closed; and so it was impossible to do the work; for it was not the old man who vexed me, but his Evil Eye. And every morning, when the day broke, I went boldly into the chamber, and spoke courageously to him, calling him by name in a hearty tone, and inquiring how he has passed the night. So you see he would have been a very profound old man, indeed, to suspect that every night, just at twelve, I looked in upon him while he slept."

"So what happened then?"

"Well he's *telling* us, isn't he, Peter?"

"He's telling us about a mad stalker is what he's telling us."

"What he's *trying* to tell us."

"Upon the eighth night I was more than usually cautious in opening the door. A watch's minute hand moves more quickly than did mine. Never before that night had I felt the extent of my own powers — of my sagacity. I could scarcely contain my feelings of triumph. To think that there I was, opening the door, little by little, and he not even to dream of my secret deeds or thoughts."

"You know what that means. — Ow! That hurt!"

"I fairly chuckled at the idea; and perhaps he heard me; for he moved on the bed suddenly, as if startled. Now you may think that I drew back — but no. His room was as black as pitch with the thick darkness, (for the shutters were close fastened, through fear of robbers,) and so I knew that he could not see the opening of the door, and I kept pushing it on steadily, steadily. I had my head in, and was about to open the lantern, when my thumb slipped upon the tin fastening, and the old man sprang up in bed, crying out — 'Who's there?' I kept quite still and said nothing. For a whole hour I did not move a muscle, and in the meantime I did not hear him lie down. He was still sitting up in the bed listening; — just as I have done, night after night, hearkening to the death watches in the wall."

"What's a death watch in the wall?"

"Shh!"

"You're one to talk, Sirius."

"Well, it's interesting now."

"Presently I heard a slight groan, and I knew it was the groan of mortal terror. It was not a groan of pain or of grief — oh, no! — it was the low stifled sound that arises from the bottom of the soul when overcharged with awe. I knew the sound well. Many a night, just at midnight, when all the world slept, it has welled up from my own bosom, deepening, with its dreadful echo, the terrors that distracted me."

"He's batty."

"You can say *that* again."

"I say I knew it well. I knew what the old man felt, and pitied him, although I chuckled at heart. I knew that he had been lying awake ever since the first slight noise, when he had turned in the bed. His fears had been ever since growing upon him. He had been trying to fancy them causeless, but could not. He had been saying to himself — 'It is nothing but the wind in the chimney — it is only a mouse crossing the floor,' or 'It is merely a cricket which has made a single chirp.'"

"I know how that feels — Ow! Stop throwing that!"

"Yes, he had been trying to comfort himself with these suppositions: but he had found all in vain. All in vain; because Death, in approaching him had stalked with his black shadow before him, and enveloped the victim. And it was the mournful influence of the unperceived shadow that caused him to feel —although he neither saw nor heard — to feel the presence of my head within the room."

"Ooh."

"When I had waited a long time, very patiently, without hearing him lie down, I resolved to open a little — a very, very little crevice in the lantern. So I opened it — you cannot imagine how stealthily, stealthily — until, at length a simple dim ray, like the thread of the spider, shot from out the crevice and fell full upon the vulture eye. It was open — wide, wide open — and I grew furious as I gazed upon it. I saw it with perfect distinctness — all a dull blue, with a hideous veil over it that chilled the very marrow in my bones; but I could see nothing else of the old man's face or person: for I had directed the ray as if by instinct, precisely upon the damned spot. And have I not told you that what you mistake for madness is but over-acuteness of the sense? — now, I say, there came to my ears a low, dull, quick sound, such as a watch makes when enveloped in cotton. I knew that sound well, too. It was the beating of the old man's heart. It increased my fury, as the beating of a drum stimulates the soldier into courage."

"Definitely Mad Old Moody; this Poe fellow must've known him."

"But even yet I refrained and kept still. I scarcely breathed. I held the lantern motionless. I tried how steadily I could maintain the ray upon the eve. Meantime the hellish tattoo of the heart increased. It grew quicker and quicker, and louder and louder every instant. The old man's terror must have been extreme! It grew louder, I say, louder every moment! — do you mark me well I have told you that I am nervous: so I am. And now at the dead hour of the night, amid the dreadful silence of that old house, so strange a noise as this excited me to uncontrollable terror. Yet, for some minutes longer I refrained and stood still. But the beating grew louder, louder! I thought the heart must burst. And now a new anxiety seized me — the sound would be heard by a neighbour! The old man's hour had come! With a loud yell, I threw open the lantern and leaped into the room. He shrieked once — once only. In an instant I dragged him to the floor, and pulled the heavy bed over him. I then smiled gaily, to find the deed so far done. But, for many minutes, the heart beat on with a muffled sound. This, however, did not vex me; it would not be heard through the wall. At length it ceased. The old man was dead. I removed the bed and examined the corpse. Yes, he was stone, stone dead. I placed my hand upon the heart and held it there many minutes. There was no pulsation. He was stone dead. His eye would trouble me no more."

"Couldn't do that to Moody though, could you."

"If still you think me mad, you will think so no longer when I describe the wise precautions I took for the concealment of the body. The night waned, and I worked hastily, but in silence. First of all I dismembered the corpse. I cut off the head and the arms and the legs. I then took up three planks from the flooring of the chamber, and deposited all between the scantlings. I then replaced the boards so cleverly, so cunningly, that no human eye — not even his — could have detected any thing wrong. There was nothing to wash out — no stain of any kind — no blood-spot whatever. I had been too wary for that. A tub had caught all — ha! ha! When I had made an end of these labors, it was four o'clock — still dark as midnight. As the bell sounded the hour, there came a knocking at the street door. I went down to open it with a light heart, — for what had I now to fear? There entered three men, who introduced themselves, with perfect suavity, as officers of the police. A shriek had been heard by a neighbour during the night; suspicion of foul play had been aroused; information had been lodged at the police office, and they (the officers) had been deputed to search the premises. I smiled, — for what had I to fear? I bade the gentlemen welcome. The shriek, I said, was my own in a dream. The old man, I mentioned, was absent in the country. I took my visitors all over the house. I bade them search — search well. I led them, at length, to his chamber. I showed them his treasures, secure, undisturbed. In the enthusiasm of my confidence, I brought chairs into the room, and desired them here to rest from their fatigues, while I myself, in the wild audacity of my perfect triumph, placed my own seat upon the very spot beneath which reposed the corpse of the victim.

"The officers were satisfied. My manner had convinced them. I was singularly at ease. They sat, and while I answered cheerily, they chatted of familiar things. But, ere long, I felt myself getting pale and wished them gone. My head ached, and I fancied a ringing in my ears: but still they sat and still chatted. The ringing became more distinct: — It continued and became more distinct: I talked more freely to get rid of the feeling: but it continued and gained definiteness — until, at length, I found that the noise was not within my ears. No doubt I now grew very pale; — but I talked more fluently, and with a heightened voice. Yet the sound increased — and what could I do? It was a low, dull, quick sound — much such a sound as a watch makes when enveloped in cotton. I gasped for breath — and yet the officers heard it not. I talked more quickly — more vehemently; but the noise steadily increased. I arose and argued about trifles, in a high key and with violent gesticulations; but the noise steadily increased. Why would they not be gone? I paced the floor to and fro with heavy strides, as if excited to fury by the observations of the men — but the noise steadily increased. Oh God! what could I do? I foamed — I raved — I swore! I swung the chair upon which I had been sitting, and grated it upon the boards, but the noise arose over all and continually increased. It grew louder — louder — louder! And still the men chatted pleasantly, and smiled. Was it possible they heard not? Almighty God! — no, no! They heard! — they suspected! — they knew! — they were making a mockery of my horror! — this I thought, and this I think. But anything was better than this agony! Anything was more tolerable than this derision! I could bear those hypocritical smiles no longer! I felt that I must scream or die! and now — again! — hark! louder! louder! louder! louder!

"'Villains!' I shrieked, 'dissemble no more! I admit the deed! — tear up the planks! here, here! — It is the beating of his hideous heart!'"

"Wow."

"Yeah."

"Better than the Raven poem."

"Oh, yes."

***

Sirius shivers happily and sprawls his legs carelessly apart, heedless of the skirt. This has got to be his favorite holiday that doesn't involve mistletoe. He and James have had a good run today, and if there's a way to finish it off with a bang, he's going to make sure it happens. There's a chill in the air, their little lanterns are flickering, and the wind skims the wires of the piano. He rubs his arms reflexively for warmth but grins widely, leaning in toward them so that the firelight glows menacingly in the hollows of his face.

***

"All right, it's me now. *Moo ha ha*—"

"Stop that."

"—Sorry."

"Oh, I suppose you can go, if you must."

"You won't regret it. —So there's this gorgeous girl, right. And she lives with her parents in oh, say, I don't know, let's say Surrey."

"Evans lives in Surrey!"

"I *know* that, idiot. So this girl, right, this lovely redhead, she lives in Surrey with her parents and her nasty little baby sister and her big black dog, who is her best and favorite companion and with whom she snuggles up to sleep every night, cuddling against him in flimsy nightwear and stroking his big old fuzzy head—"

"Fuck you, Black."

"What? Don't get shirty, Potter, it's only a story. What's the matter, are you *frightened*?"

"No, but *you* should be—"

"Oho! Someone's not getting into the Halloween spirit!"

"And someone else isn't getting into *anything* unless it's a *bruising*—"

"Honestly, the pair of you. I want to hear the story. Sirius?"

"Sorry."

"Thank you very much, Mr. Moony, it's nice to know that someone around here still has some respect for the lost art of storytelling. —Where was I? Right, so, this girl, and her dog—"

"You *said* that bit, about twelve separate times—"

"—so this one evening her parents decide to go out for the night, okay, and so they leave this helpless, beautiful girl, sixteen years old, alone in the house with her horrible little baby sister. They figure it's all right, because she's got this bloody great dog around to protect her from whatever, and so they just remind her to lock all the doors before she goes to sleep.

"So out they go, and the girl goes round the house to get all the doors and windows, and she locks them all up, except there's one in the cellar that won't shut. She's not too worried though, as it's in the cellar and all."

"Why doesn't she just charm it shut?"

"Must you ask stupid questions? She's not allowed to do magic outside of school! She's a *prefect*! It could be extremely damaging! The point is so she goes back upstairs, has a bit of supper, and changes into her nightie, which is very short and terribly flattering, and she curls up on the sofa to go to bed, her slender fingers lightly caressing the dog in its favorite place right between the ears—"

"Don't you even *dare* talk about Evans like that!"

"James, will you please have some dignity? Put that thing away, you'll have someone's eye out. This isn't *about* Evans. It's a Folklore."

"Prongs, you're ruining his story!"

"You are, you know, James. But Sirius, I don't think you can say something is 'a folklore,' and you have to admit you're being somewhat gratuitous."

"For God's sake, Moony, is anyone going to let me tell this story?"

"I haven't said *anything*!"

"And for that I am profoundly grateful, Wormtail. When the revolution comes, you will not be eaten. May I go on?"

"Fine, don't let me stop you, you great canine pervert."

"*Thank* you. All right. So she drifts off into a peaceful sleep, right. And then about two hours later, she wakes up to hear something coming from the bathroom: *drip. Drip. Drip.*"

"I know what *that* is!"

"You're a sick man, Peter Pettigrew."

"I meant the tap!"

"Will you lot shut *up*? So she hears this noise, right. But it's dark, it's about two on the morning, and she doesn't want to get up, she's a bit frightened—anyway she figures, as our clever Peter has, that it's just the tap leaking, as it does, because this imaginary redheaded girl is not as good in Domestic Charms as she is in all her other subjects. So she just kind of wants reassurance, so she sticks her hand over the side of the bed to pet her dog, and it gives her hand a nice, reassuring lick, because it is a Good Dog."

"Padfoot, you are foul and disgusting."

"This is *not about me*, James Potter, how many times do I have to tell you? Honestly, Moony, can we bury *him* in the floor?"

"No."

"Why can't you all be quiet? We'll never get to my story like this!"

"The rat has a point. Why *can't* you all be quiet? Except Moony, who has kindly refrained from correcting my grammar for at least thirty percent of this story and again, my gratitude is boundless."

"I've not said one *word* about your grammar."

"You said I was 'gratuitous.'"

"That has nothing to do with grammar! Do you even know what it means?"

"Shh!"

"Of course I do. Anyway! So. Reassured by her loyal pet, she goes back to sleep. She dozes for a while, and then suddenly she's awakened again: *drip. Drip. Drip.* And this time there's another noise: a sound like claws on wood. *Skritch. Skirrrrriiiiitch.* "

"She's a little bit more frightened now, so she kind of sits up, but it's so dark in the house and she's too scared and groggy to get out of bed, so again she puts her hand down for reassurance. And the dog licks it, all protective and sweet, and, comforted, she falls back asleep.

"Then suddenly she's awoken *again*. This time the dripping is insistent and the clawing noise is so loud it sounds like it's inside her head. She's terrified, man. So she reaches out her hand, but the dog isn't there. *Righto*, she thinks, I'll just go look at it, it's only a drippy tap."

"It's not a drippy tap, is it."

"Shh!"

"Shut up, Peter—"

"So she goes into the bathroom. It's too dark to see anything. Trembling, she reaches for the light, and she fumbles around and finally gets it on. The first thing she sees is her dog, tied up inside the towel cupboard, scratching frantically at the door. *Skritch. Skrrriiitch.*"

"How is it scratching if it's tied up?"

"Potter, I will *kill* you. It just *is*. Christ. So there's the dog, scratching and struggling, and the girl starts to panic. So she turns round. Slowly. And there, hanging from the curtain rod, is the mutilated body of her sister, dripping blood onto the floor. *Drip. Drip. Drip*. And on the wall of the shower, written in blood, she sees: *Humans can lick too, my lovely.*"

"Ugh."

"Phwoar, *brilliant!*"

"Thanks, Pete."

"Bloody disgusting."

"Nonce."

"You *would* think so, Prongs, just because it's about Evans getting licked—ugh, that's disgusting."

"Don't be such a nonce, Wormtail, and anyway, remember, it's not about Evans!"

"You know, Pads, at first I thought the dog was your little avatar in this story, but now I'm starting to think that maybe you're the murderer."

"I am not! Good God, Moony, what are you insinuating?"

"You're just—also inordinately fond of licking people. You *are*, you know!"

"Not helpless sixteen year old girls! — Well, actually. But not while pretending to be a dog! —Well, actually—"

"You know, in the version I know, the murderer *kills* the dog. Skins it alive actually. That's the dripping. And there isn't a sister."

"Look, Prongs, it's a little thing I like to call Artistic License. If you don't like it, tell your own bloody story."

"Fine! Maybe I will."

"Go on, then."

***

James toys with the end of his long white beard while managing to lounge in his heavy purple robes. Behind him the rickety bedframe creaks back and forth in the howling Hallowe'en wind. He and Sirius detonated seventeen dungbombs at breakfast alone, and thirteen of them — an aptly unlucky number — in Snape's socks. The last challenge of the evening is his story before, stuffed on Pumpkin Pie and too much candy to contemplate, their lanterns snuff out and their dreams divide them.

***

"Yeah, what've you got for us, James?"

"More beating hearts and Moody eyes and batty Poe-people?"

"**The Telltale Heart** is a *classic*, Sirius."

"Pfshh—Ow!"

"You're just scoffing 'cause you nearly wet down your leg. I saw you."

"I did not!"

"You did *too*."

"You're just as nutty as Poe."

"It's a *classic*!"

"You know what's also a classic? **The Clabbert's Paw.**"

"Ooh."

"Once upon a time—"

"No, that's not right. You can't start a ghost story with 'Once upon a time.'"

"All right then, once upon a stormy night, how's that for you?"

"Much better."

"Once upon a stormy night for Sirius' sake, when a family was just setting down to dinner, there came a knock upon the door. 'Will you get it mother?' the old man who was head of the house by the way asked his wife. 'I'll get it,' their only son said, light of their hearts, delight of their home, et cetera. He opened the door and there in the doorway stood a weary, grizzled old soldier, wet with the rain and tired with all the traveling he had been doing what with being a soldier and all."

"This isn't scary."

"Well not *yet* so just be quiet and let me tell the story."

"But you're telling it wrong."

"You've had your turn."

"Fine, fine, ruin a perfectly good Clabbert's Paw, go ahead."

"*So* the family invited the poor tired soldier in for dinner and a few drinks afterwards. The soldier was fond of his firewhiskey, just like you Sirius, ha, and after the third glass he warmed up a bit in eye and in story and on the fourth drink took from his pocket something wrapped up in a handkerchief. 'D'you see this?' he said, holding it up in the candlelight. 'What is it?' asked the son. The soldier unwrapped it and let fall to the table a grizzled mangy old Clabbert's paw mangled from where it had been cut off many many years ago, though the blood, it still looked *fresh*. The old woman gasped and the son was nat'rally fascinated because it was spiffing cool and the old man couldn't help but see the glint of its dangerous nails and leaned in a bit closer, as if drawn to it by its curling wicked fingers."

"Get on with it, the Clabbert's paw, ugly, bloody, right."

"*So* the soldier told them that it wasn't just any Clabbert's paw but one that had been charmed once, long ago, to give three people three wishes each. 'It was to test the nature of fate,' the soldier said, 'to see if man could change his own without sending him down the path to destruction.' 'But how do you know all this?' the old woman asked, having recovered valiantly. 'Because, madam,' the soldier replied, 'I am the second person to have had his three wishes.' 'And did it ruin your life, sir?' the old man asked. 'I will tell you honestly,' the soldier replied, 'that I wish I had never laid eyes upon this ugly, bloody Clabbert's paw.'"

"There it is, ugly and bloody agai— Ow!"

"*So* before the soldier left late that night he said to the old man, 'Thank you for your hospitality, good sir. I saw the way you were drawn to the paw over the table. It means, despite your kindness, I must give this Clabbert's paw, along with its last three wishes, to you.' The old man was surprised and nervous but secretly delighted; three whole wishes could help his little hut and his failing broomstick business and he wouldn't fall prey to his fate like the other two. Besides, he told himself, the soldier was still alive, wasn't he? And he looked fit as a Frisbee and all that. However he decided to ask his wife and his son what they thought about using the wish. 'We could use it for something very small,' the son suggested, 'just enough to clear us of our debts wouldn't be too much to ask for, and wouldn't we all be happy then?' The old man was delighted with his son's cleverness—"

"—what was he doing living with his parents still, eh, a fine strapping young lad like that?"

"—delighted with his son's cleverness and so he did exactly as his son suggested. 'I wish for three hundred galleons to clear us of our debts,' he told the Clabbert's paw. But nothing happened."

"Talking to a Clabbert's paw'll do that to a man."

"The next morning there was still no money. The old man shrugged, and wondered if perhaps the old soldier had been mistaken in how many people had used the paw before him. He put the paw in his bedside drawer and went down to breakfast."

"What was he having?"

"Porridge."

"Disgusting. Should've wished for some eggs and bacon."

"Later that day some grave looking wizards in dark robes showed up at the house. The old woman let them in, a sinking feeling deep in her stomach. 'It's your son,' the grave wizards said. 'There's been an accident. We claim no responsibility, but please accept this small sum of three hundred galleons and our condolences to keep the matter quiet.'"

"Oh-*ho*, now that's uncanny."

"*So* the old man and the old woman went into a long period of mourning, spending all the money on a grand funeral for their son which is really ridiculous to me because he's dead anyway, isn't he, what do they need a shiny coffin for if they're putting it in the ground?"

"Now you're talking sense, Prongs."

"The days passed into weeks and the weeks into months as weeks do and one night, after crying for hours upon her pillow, the old woman sat up straight in bed. 'Husband,' she said, 'Husband, I have an idea!' She scrabbled through the bedside drawer and pulled out the Clabbert's paw, which was uglier and fouler and more twisted than ever. 'I wish for our son back,' she said, 'I wish for our son to come back to us!' The old man was horrified. He knew immediately that, in her grief, his wife had been very non-specific and thought instantly of their son — rotted and falling to pieces and with bits of shiny coffin hanging off him too — walking up the lane and smashing the door in. Still, for a time, nothing happened and they could hear nothing in the darkness but the sound of their own breathing. Just as the old man was finally relaxing the wind shifted and the clouds ran over the moon and, as an owl began to hoot in a tree outside their window just like crying, they heard it: the sound of footsteps scraping down the road, lifted high in the stillness of the night. The old woman leaped out of bed and ran towards the door, struggling with the locks and the bolt. The old man could do nothing but sit in his bed and clutch at his covers and shudder and he saw just out the window a disfigured shape stumbling down the road, falling, reaching out, stumbling, grasping with bony fingers and getting closer and closer and closer."

"And closer and closer and closer."

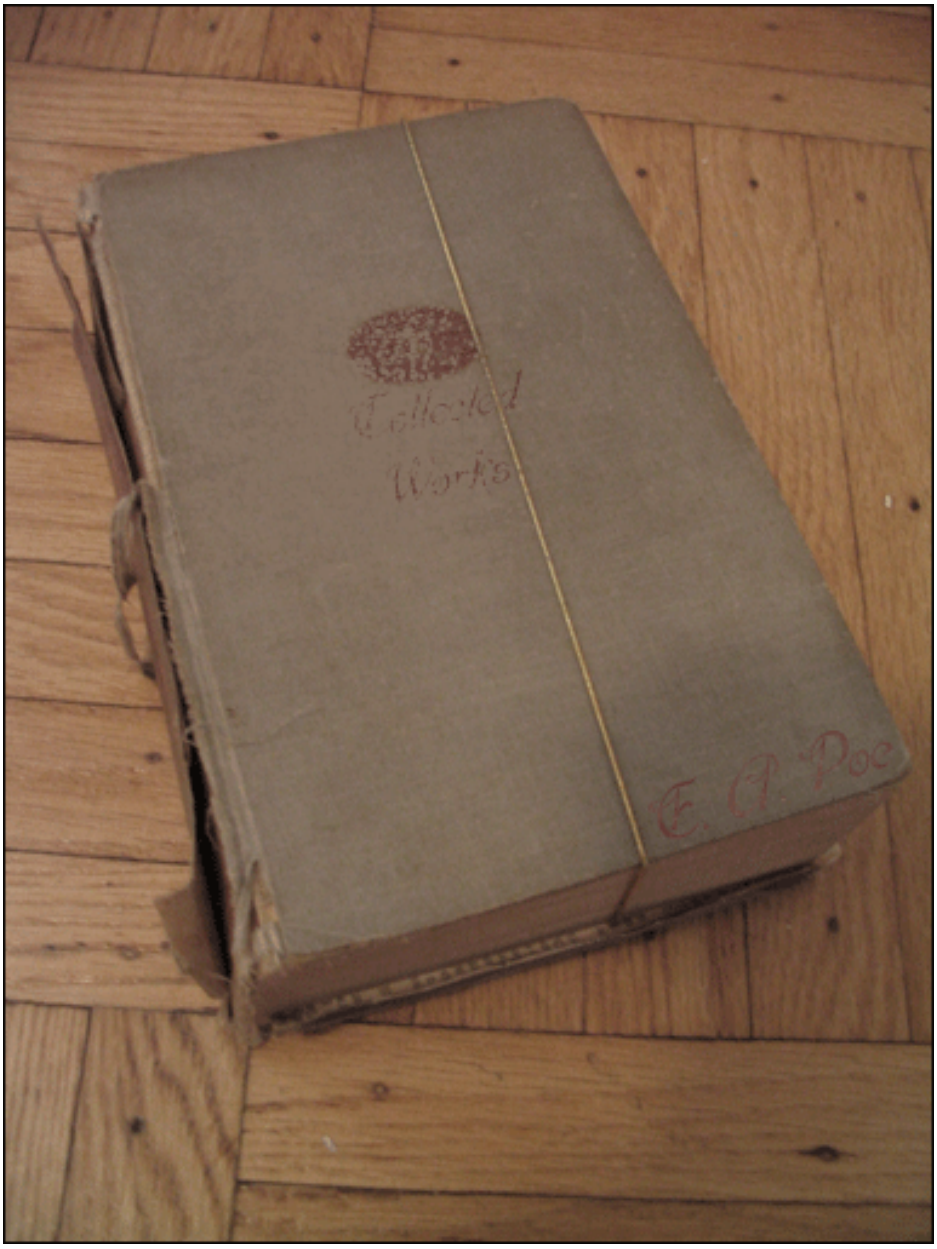
"*So* the old woman screamed from downstairs 'Husband, help me with the bolt! I can hardly reach it!' but the old man couldn't move, the Clabbert's paw clasped tightly in his hands. What was he to do? The rotted monster that was his son was about to be let in and his wife was downstairs lifting the bolt with all her might and there he was helpless in his bed, rigid with terror and so on, until he realized: *the paw had one more wish left.* Holding the paw high above his head he cried out, 'I wish my son were back in the grave!' just as the old woman threw up the bolt and pulled open the door and—"

"And?"

"*And?*"

"—and there was nothing outside but the falling leaves rattling at the door."

***



***

Sirius lies totally still, staring sightlessly into the dark, shadowy peak of the Shack's ceiling. He can't move. It's not an issue of comfort, it's an issue of Things that are Waiting in all the hidden corners, horrible hulking dead Things that are just drooling for him to expose a foot or a finger so that they can strip the flesh from his bones and—

Thump.

Sirius sits bolt upright, clutching his sheet. The wind whistles eerily through the cracks in the wooden wall. It's never been this dark ever, anywhere, in the history of the world, Sirius thinks.

Thump.

"Prongs!" hisses Sirius as quietly as possible, jabbing a thumb into the hulk of cloth that he hopes — *oh my God, oh my God* — is still James. "Oi, Prongs! Proooongs. Are you awake?"

James lets out a phenomenal snort and flops onto his back, breathing noisily through his nose like a death rattle. Snoring, at a time like this. Completely oblivious to Doom, which even now *thumps* closer. Sirius curses and crawls back into his defensive position, gnawing convulsively on his thumbnail. James sleeps like the dead (*oh my God oh my God*); there'll be no waking him at this particular stage. On other occasions, Sirius has tried everything, up to and including judicious application of saliva, but it's no use when James is snoring like that.

Thump.

"Christ!" Sirius launches himself frantically at his last hope, which is Remus, huddled comfortably against the far wall. "Moony! Moony! You awake? Moony?"

"nghf," says the bundle, muffledly. "Go 'way."

"No," says Sirius. "Something is Thumping. Wake up. Moony. Moony Moony Moony."

Thump.

Remus groans low and long and rolls over onto his side. His face comes out of the carnivorous shadows into a brief slant of moonlight. Sirius is relieved to see Remus' nose, mouth, cheekbones and chin are all still in tact. Nothing has eaten him. Nothing has eaten him *yet*. Remus rubs blearily at his eyes. "S'the matter?" he asks. "Time is it?"

"I don't know." Sirius grasps him by the shoulders. "Listen, Moony, you've got to just — shh! Be quiet! — and listen."

"But what's going—" Sirius clamps his hand over Remus' mouth.

"Wait for it," he mouths.

The silence stretches infuriatingly across the room. It's taunting him, Sirius knows, teasing him, prolonging the agony of just waiting for it. Clouds shift over the moon. The sound of the Shack creaking back and forth on unstable foundations is less frightening than the silence it obscures, the silence buried deeper, the silence which is more unbearable the more it lasts. Sirius can hear his own heart pounding, and the steadier beat of Remus' heart against his forearm, just speeding up from the sloth of slumber.

Thump.

Sirius nearly jumps, the floorboards shaking beneath him. "There," he hisses. "Did you hear it? It's closer now. Moony, it's getting closer." He almost expects Remus to laugh at him, but instead Remus' eyes turn keen and narrow, pupils dilated. He looks wild and uncertain and on edge, predatory, or instinctive. This is a late-at-night Moony with his senses still blurred, his intuition still confused. This is a scenting-the-air Moony, who reminds Sirius it isn't always a boy he's friends with, infuriatingly proper and often too reasonable to do anything at all with. This is a sharp-faced Moony, the color of his eyes more gold than brown and the hard line of his cheek and his jaw pressed forward, scythe-pale in the Witching Hour.

"I hear it," Remus says.

Thump.

It's somewhere near Sirius' left leg now, as if it knows the way to win is to divide and conquer. It's going to come

around from behind, Sirius realizes, and it's going to slip between Remus' leg and his own leg and it's going to get them both before they can warn one another. Outside a wolf howls. Remus' nose twitches.

Thump.

"I'm not frightened," Sirius insists, out loud, voice rough. "Are you?"

Thump.

"Remus, say something." It doesn't help to see Remus, stoic in his element, the brittle cut of his jaw to his ear, against his neck. Sirius wonders if Remus is afraid of anything but the moon and decides on *probably not.*

Thump.

"Is it the shrake's liver? Do shrake's livers thump?"

"I don't think so."

Thump.

"It can't be the Clabbert's Paw, that only had three people and the three wishes."

"Can't be."

Thump.

"Remus. Remus, it's the Telltale Heart. It's *your bloody Telltale Heart*, so *do* something!" Sirius clutches Remus' shoulder, almost feeling the brush of something nameless crawl up against his spine.

Thump.

It grabs the back of his robes with spindly fingers not a moment later. Sirius opens his mouth in a silent yowl, trying to leap free, but the hand is strong and holds firm, dragging him back to the floor. For a moment Sirius doesn't remember hearts don't have hands. "It's got me!" he groans. "Oh God, it's got me, with its fingers and — waitaminute."

"Thump," Remus says.

Sirius considers this new development for precisely seven seconds, which is how long it takes for his heart to start beating again, and then says with deadly calm, "Lupin, you are about to learn the meaning of a thumping."

Remus cackles, slightly hysterically, and tries to wriggle away on his elbows, which is tragically inefficient to someone fleeing the mighty wrath of a Black. Sirius grabs him by the ankle, snarls, and launches himself forward to belt Remus round the ear, making the whole shack creak and shudder under them.

"Aghn," Remus says, "you nutter, you'll wake up everyone!"

"Good, then they'll get to see you die," Sirius says. "I bite you!"

He does.

Remus makes a noise of indignation, struggles up, and smacks the heel of his hand into Sirius's cheek. It'll be a glorious shining bruise by morning. With a great heave of his shoulders, Remus flips Sirius head over heels and straight into the rickety door. It bursts open, rocking on ancient hinges, and suddenly they're rolling out onto the landing. Sirius's knee smashes into the banister; Remus yanks at Sirius's hair. Sirius yelps and flips himself away, and then he abruptly remembers that they are at the top of the stairs.

There is a little moment of dread. They glance at each other; and then gravity, as it inevitably does, kicks in.

Thump thump thump thump thump.

At the bottom of the stairs Remus groans at the starry burst of pain in the back of his head. Sirius, sprawled heavy beneath him, lets out all the air in his lungs in one long *Ungh*. For a full minute they lie where they fell, taking inventory of each and every twisted muscle and smashed joint and smarting bone, the little scrapes of skin peeled off their shins, the cracks in their knuckles, the splinters in their rears. Slowly the Shack calms, swaying back and forth with almost melodic rhythm, the lullaby of an ancient spell.

"Am I as heavy as I feel?" Remus winces.

"Heavier," Sirius says.

"Do you have a splinter in your—"

"A whomping great one *right* in my," Sirius says. He shifts, trying to pull his arm free from where Remus' chest has it trapped, against the bottom step. "Ungh," he says again. "Unnngh." Remus finds himself rolling, reaching out a shaking arm to steady himself, splayed vertical over Sirius, splayed vertical. The smell of wood and candy and the faint tinge of somewhere-blood dances through the air.

"Erm," Sirius ventures after a time, having ascertained that he still has most of his limbs, although some of them are either numb or should be numb. "How do you know if you're paralyzed?"

"Well, for one thing, you can't move." Remus' voice is inches away and miles off. Sirius forces himself to breathe, pushing down the shaking in his diaphragm, and tries to shift again, at which the whomping great splinter digs gleefully into the back of his thigh.

"Gnnaaa!" he says, with feeling, and twists to yank at it. The draft that lifts and scatters the leaves across the rough floorboard nips at his ears, but over him drapes Remus, warm, still, a pressing-down that is both strangely heavy and strangely comfortable. He looks up and catches Remus' eyes, and for no reason his stomach twists hotly and he has to blink and catch his breath.

"I think it's not a splinter, I think it's my wand," he says rather hoarsely, making his voice as light as possible. "Can you — er. Off?"

Remus pauses to contemplate. "Can I off?" he mutters, as if thinking aloud. "Think so," he decides finally, rolling to one side and hitting the floor with an *ooph* of breath and an *ooph* of dust. His face disappears into a cloud of shadow. Sirius can still hear him, breathing raspy and low, and remember the rise and fall of their chests unevenly together.

"One inch to the left," Sirius murmurs. His laugh is as half-hearted as the joke. There's little to laugh about when a chap can hardly move himself below the abdomen, he tells himself. That's why there's no laughter below the ache of pain and the other ache, intangible, elusive, nameless. He closes his fingers around his wand, pain tracing the lines of his veins all the way up his arm. "Broken anything?"

"Twisted my wrist, maybe."

"Let's have a look." Sirius drags himself forward, a dizzying moment of silence as he reorients his brain to new angle. Remus has his arm clasped against his chest, still lying flat, profile still in sharp relief of pale shadow against darker shadow. His fingers dangle unevenly against his elbow. He has the look of a wounded animal, something still and patient but ready to turn, wild and snapping. Sirius reaches out, slow, slow, and touches the back of Remus' hand. The back of Remus' hand has nothing to do with his wrist, starting to swell and fill out the skin around the bone.

"I'm fine," Remus says. "I'm fine."

"Bollocks," Sirius says sharply. "Can you even move your fingers?"

Remus manages a little gasp of laughter. "Er. To be honest, I don't really want to try. Maybe?"

Sirius hisses in sympathetic pain, catching his lower lip between his teeth. He splays out his fingers, soft against the papery skin of Remus' wrist, the small bones there and the delicate blue veins tracing out underneath. Remus feels the odd heat of his fingerprints, searing against the bruise. "It's twisted. We should get you back—"

"No," Remus says softly. "Wait."

Sirius pauses. Against Remus' throbbing wrist his heart beats through his hand. Remus closes his eyes. He can feel it, deep as the roots of trees uncoiling: his bones stretching and knitting together, twining, the crack and ache of healing. Sirius stares at him, uncomprehending.

"Werewolf thing," Remus says, trying to be easy, but his voice cracks a little in pain. "We don't — ahh! — we don't break very easily. And we heal fast." The last muffled crackle as the last small bone shunts itself into place. Remus breathes out, shaky and unsteady, and flexes his wrist, which is still angry red but hardly swollen at all.

Sirius blinks and shifts.

"Er," Remus says. "Fixed?"

"Whoa," Sirius says. His eyes are on Remus with strange, warm intensity; the lines of their bodies melt together like water. "I get it."

"What," Remus says, unnerved. "Get what?"

"You're Aristotle," Sirius explains. Remus' mouth works for a moment before Sirius starts laughing, low and rumbling and infectious, which means Remus starts laughing too, and then he's gasping for breath and Sirius is twitching like a beached fish, sobbing with laughter, and James and Peter appear at the top of the stairs, rubbing their eyes. With the sound of James yelling "What the hell are you two doing?" Remus, with Sirius's steadying hand and gulps of laughter against him, is glad, for once, that he isn't as good at pretending to snore as James is.

***

Remus was here.





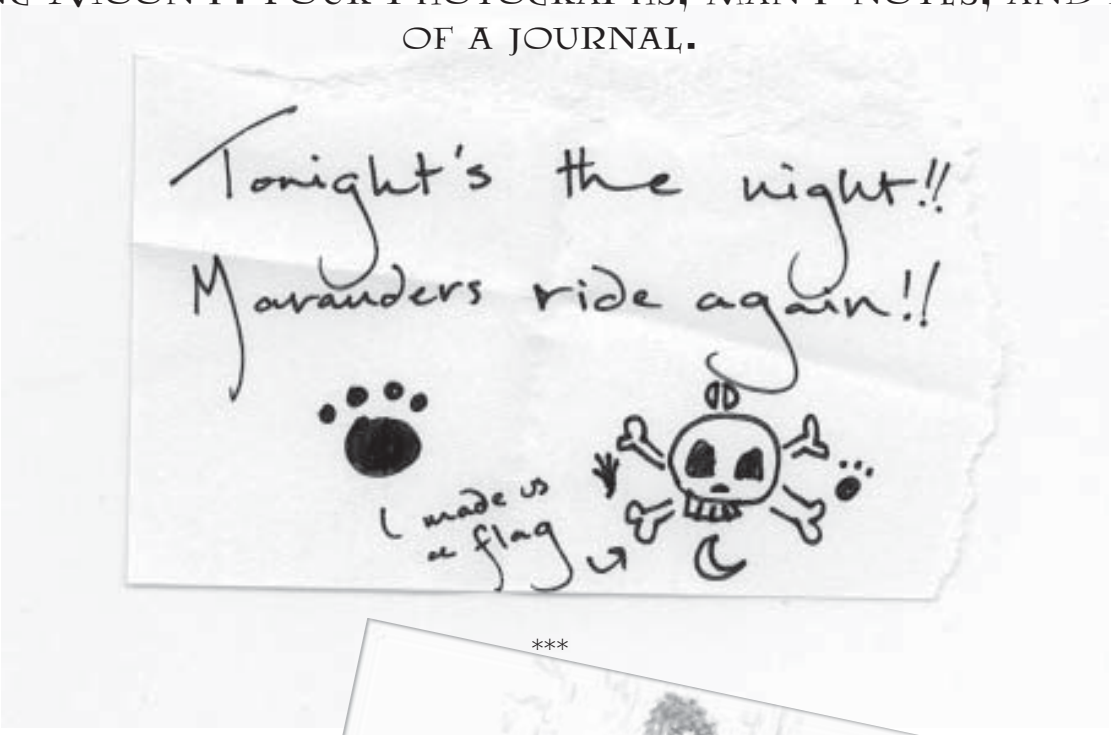
This story is based on characters and situations created and owned by JK Rowling, various publishers including but not limited to Bloomsbury Books, Scholastic Books and Raincoast Books, and Warner Bros., Inc. No money is being made and no copyright or trademark infringement is intended.

***The Shoebox Project* by LadyJaida and Dorkorific**

http://www.livejournal.com/community/shoebox_project

Part Five: November, 75

Losing Moony. Four photographs, many notes, and part of a journal.



***







***

The three boys gather under the shade of a low hanging tree and watch the limbs of the Whomping Willow shift of their own accord. The breeze stirred up by the sentient, mammoth creature makes the chill air yet more chill. The boys are purposeful in their actions; they do not allow the night to make them feel as if they are ant-sized shadows scurrying from one hiding place to another. They are themselves even in the warped truths of nighttime. They are independent of the moon. They are lucky.

The tallest boy adjusts his glasses, catching moonlight sharply along the glass. He flashes like an unexpected star. A shorter boy watches the aimless, searching motions of the willow branches thrashing against the sky. He is often afraid of the metal smell on the air. The third boy paces near them, counting silently to himself each step. He is impatient, an awkward jangle of energy.

The moon is consumed by the momentary clouds, which cast the grounds in shade after shade of darkness. "Now," the tallest boy says. The shift in the wind echoes his words over the bending grass. "Now," he says, a little sharper, the edge in his voice like the edge in the wind, and the two others glance at him and at each other, and the third boy, the restless dark boy, nods sharply.

And then their shadows, dark against deeper dark, twist. They change.

***

Padfoot shakes out. Wet, cold shivering down through his fur, ugh, like insects. The sharp smell of pack and winter. His ears throbbing with waiting. Coming, soon, coming, run, companions, pack: soon. Eager, the wind eager and the howl itching in his throat eager, and ears pricked for the coming of his pack mates. (*Sirius struggles for a moment: then floats into awareness atop the dog-mind, riding the wave of sensation and easy canine joy.*) Soon. Waiting. Tremble in the limbs. Itching to run. Itching to —

Fleas.

Bugger.

Head down to belly to bite deep into thick skin beneath thick fur, thick, teeth, hunting. Itch on his nose, itch on his haunches, nips and bites and torment down his spine. Legs bend up, lift up, scratching, searching, skin *fire*. Dog body arcs, lifting, rolling through the cooling dirt. *When I'm a famous wizard I'll rid the world of fleas*. Belly bared — howl on the wind, scent on the wind, wolf on the wind — sudden spasm, forward, onto paws, shunting in great gasps of air. Tongue lolls wet, warm in cold air to cool sudden blood hot as summer. No time to leave his stomach vulnerable, tender, open; no place to leave his stomach vulnerable, tender, open; wolf out there, smelling them change, smelling them now, through low roots and dirt indecisive.

(*Sirius loves being a dog, smelling everything at once from everywhere all around him.*)

***

Wormtail chirps rodent reminders. Cleans nose, cleans whiskers, feels trembling small near big animals. Little worms and big worms thrum beneath his paws through the earth. Dog thrashing nearby. Stag stomping hoof after hoof groundward. Jumping with each agitation. Little heart beating *rodent rodent rodent* so fast, so fast. (*Peter finds himself bigger, though confined within the tiny rat body, listening to himself think, remembering his task.*) Where are the tree roots waiting. The wood knot. The goal.

Whiskers stirred by wind. Whiskers stirred by grass stirred by wind. Whiskers run along familiar groundways. Highways through the grass. Roadways. Pathways. Bugs curl up. Little rat nails. Skitter back, forth, beneath readying hooves; nip dog tail, careful incisors; dirt from nose, dirt from whiskers.

A somewhere owl: *hoo hoo hoo oo.*

Dark rat eyes bead under moonlight, watching the trees. Remembers: *Beak. Talons. Blood smell. Enemy eyes.* Instincts interrupt purpose. Instincts keep him low to the grass. The grass keeps him safe. The stag prances impatience. Instincts, skewed. These bigger animals are safety.

(*Peter cannot help that he is small, trembling with the rhythms of his small life.*)

***

Prongs is large and feels large. Moves large. Hooves large and the world smaller. Rat dancing at his ankles, he wants to be leaping, kicking slim legs and chasing soft-nosed the soft-nosed deer deep in the woods. Tree leaves swaying with tree branches swaying. Night birds skimming from branch to branch. (*James sits somewhere between his own antlers, watching the world play back and forth in monochrome geometry.*) Dog beside him jumping energy, body heat, pulsing eagerness. He dips his long neck down and nudges dog belly, nose to the heat, teeth grinning.

(*James understands Wormtail needs encouraging, and he guides his hooves forward, shaking his head out in a challenge to the night owls unseen but predatory. They have tasks to fulfill, reasons to betray one instinct with another.*)

Through the close tunnel: trapped beneath the earth: closing in on antlers: long walls of dark dirt: where the wolf tears itself from itself, waiting.

***

He doesn't want to remember the change. It drives him into a frenzy of panic, residual ache throughout tight muscles.

The pain goads him into wild thrashings. He snaps the already snapped legs of chairs and tears the fabric on the bed in the corner to shreds of shreds and pulls down the canopy and gouges curls of wood from the floor. The shack won't stay still, patches of moonlight here then there, here then there, here. He skirts around the window, watching the moonlight splay over the floor. Each slice is a slash, each slash reaching for him. What the moonlight sees he sees.

He doesn't want to remember the change, still rippling through him. Little cloud fingers pass over the moon. Each brushes over him, his fur on end. His eyes move nervous back and forth. Sometimes they stop on the moon just outside the window. Hunger fills him like hunting, like blood spilled, like the sun setting.

He doesn't want to remember the change. He paws the glass, whines deep in his throat, launches his great spiny-furred body at the door. The locks hold firm though the hinges scream. He launches himself again and again against the straining frame until his broad shoulders are numb and he doesn't remember the change. (*Sinews stretching, snapping, shrinking, spreading. Muscles in constant miserable motion. The moon working nails of light deep down into his blood. Organs pushed and pushing, veins winding, re-winding, blood shunted into rearranged valves and the bones of his jaw cracking into muzzle, muzzle into great russet snout.*)

He doesn't want to remember the change. Soon, he remembers only the moon.

***

Wormtail skitters, dry sticks skitter, stops to check. Up, down, forwards, checkcheckcheck, and waits, listening for the trembling, the big tree trembling. (*Peter gets impatient, sometimes, with the rat-fear: maybe because it is too like the human-fear, but with a thousand years' physical instinct behind it instead of only sixteen.*) He jerks and scuttles forward, zigzag, the dog-body and the stag-body like a wall behind him, on his whiskers, in his nostrils. Wormtail puts his paw carefully on the secret knot. The movement of the buckling air, the thick air, the air that weighs on his nose, goes sideways and dissipates.

When the branches stop aching to move, something stills on Prongs' skin, and he knows. Up above the head, sensing the tree go quiet, sensing its sleep among the branches. He motions — hard sometimes, to force the stag-mind into the predatory pack — and the dog comes, eager, waves of readiness from flying paws and great glistening mouth.

Down the tunnel heaves Padfoot, heaves the pack. Where the smell waits.

***

The wolf is sprawled and panting, tired. He breathes heavy within himself. He is leaned back on his haunches by the door and watching the wood creak, feeling the wood creak, waiting for the catalyst to howling. It comes over him, time to time, the great rocking rending urge from his belly. Sometimes it is when the moon wavers from view. Sometimes it is when the moon is naked, an eye he challenges or a body he longs to curl around or a creature he aches to devour. The wolf makes heavy chuffing sounds, black lips pulled back over uneven teeth. He growls at intervals. Whines. Gnaws at the tendon beneath fur running into paw, something to sink his teeth around.

The sounds of stag, rat and dog traveling underground comes to him up through the floorboards. The footfalls are uneven, traveling skittish, circling, scratching behind at fleas, the scrape of antlers on the roof of the tunnel. The wolf's ears perk. They twitch. They flick away an invisible fly. His muscles tense, his shoulders rigid, the moonlight dancing over his folded forepaws. He brings himself upward and forward and stands at the doorway, growling, until the unwashed scent of dog and the jumping of fleas in between shoulder-blades is almost his own, until he becomes the rapid heartbeat and the tiny-nailed paws, until he is the heavy weight of antlers and the tromp of hooves on rickety steps. The snarl begins deep in his chest, echoing against his lungs, rising to short, deep barks. He hears the locks unhook, slide, slip away, and knows to throw himself at the door just as the dog turns and the whites of his eyes flash blindly.

***

Padfoot is bigger but the wolf is always stronger. The routine fight is no stranger. There is canine greed in both of them. Prongs and Wormtail wait, uneasy, on the edge. Padfoot bats and lunges, the slide of his gums slick against wet nose, but he is *pack*, he is not *leader*, and the wolf has him belly-up in moments, growling and huffing hot triumphant scent and threat. Padfoot whines his surrender, flicks back his head, vulnerable throat pulsing. The wolf noses it, huffs out hugely, and pads back on great feet.

Golden eyes, the smell of other victories. Prongs paces, one step forward and then a step back, his crown lowered in a wall, wary. Behind him Wormtail chitters, nervous. Prongs tosses his head proudly, tired of mad predator play, tired of the dogged indulgences. Outside whirls the moon, and the stretch to run under trees.

Eager, Padfoot flips up to stand, barks joyous, leaps towards tunnel, but the wolf crosses him, pausing to snarl — Padfoot shrinks back, deferring — and lopes for the cold and the whip of night air. His pack follows.

***

The three large figures move unseen into the forest. There are dark beasts in the forest. A dark beast leads them.

***

The wolf runs, muscles wound tight, pounding over the forest floor. He chases after little animals, diving into bushes, torn at by thorns, whirling on Padfoot when he loses his prey and tearing out little bellies. Out spills hot blood over the dirt to mix with the moss. Cold November leaves, freshly fallen, snap underneath his paws. He feels the blood steaming across his muzzle, dripping at the bared corners of his mouth. His pack is polite, dutiful, giving him free wheeling cruelties and wild lunges and each swift squirrel, every terrified rabbit, but he is flanked on either side, kept in check. He snaps at Prongs' heels and bites at Padfoot's paws, showing his displeasure, but allowing it.

Through the interstices of the branches high above, the moon illumines a lumbering, luckless badger. The wolf veers to the side, slams a shoulder past Padfoot, and pursues, snagged by bushes branching into crooked thorns. He has the creature by the tail when the howl comes — through the trees — arcing into the night — reaching the moon and echoing down through the thousand shafts of light.

When the pack reaches the struggling, bleeding badger, the wolf is long gone, leaving his scent as everywhere as the night.

***

"Bugger and disaster," Peter says frantically, for about the twelfth time. Pointlessly, he glances behind a tree, as if somehow the immense wolf has turned itself on its side and is hiding behind it. Sirius is whirling back and forth, running his hands through his hair, worrying the nail from his thumb with his teeth. They've done this before — they've gotten Moony in trouble, they've almost lost Moony — and it was Sirius' fault before. Even if it isn't his fault now, he feels achingly responsible. His nose feels clean and empty.

A stag plunges into the clearing and shakes itself into James, naked and serious. "I can't scent him. He's nowhere the forest can touch. This is a fucking *disaster*."

"Fuck!" Sirius whirls again, smoothing hair violently back from his face. "Shitting hell sod bugger *fuck*. Why didn't we put some kind of leash on him?"

"Oh, you mean on the *werewolf*," James says. "Gee, Sirius, I don't know. Why *didn't* we put a leash on him? You stupid berk. We'll just — no. We'll find him. He'll be all right."

"Can't we track him?" Peter wonders. "Do you know a spell that could find him?"

James shakes his head. "If I knew one, I'd've done it. There's nothing we can finish in a night — a good tracking spell's got to be tied to something physical, a touchstone." He shoots a glance at Sirius, who is nearly tying himself in knots, pulling at his hair with one hand and pounding at the wall with the other. The chill November air has raised gooseflesh up and down his bare arms.

"Agghhh," he says, unhelpfully.

"Well, thank you, Sirius, I'll keep that in mind." James slams himself against the shack, hands to his forehead. "Fuck! What are we going to *do*?"

"Bugger and disaster," Peter says again. "Sirius, you're going to be bald by morning if you keep—" Sirius turns, sharp on his heel, with a frenzied look in his eyes, still half-feral. The night is the pale gray shifting to pre-dawn, even the outskirts of the forest settling into dew-wet humidity. They aren't quite over their animal halves, the natures they relinquished themselves to and were so worryingly pulled from too soon thereafter. Peter swallows hard. "Never mind," he mutters. "Never mind. We've got to think."

"I'm trying," James says. He thumps his head lightly against the wall behind him, too preoccupied with saving the day — the night, the terrible sickening night — to note the goosebumps on his thighs or the scratching green grass stains encircling his ankles. All of Hogsmeade is asleep just down the long sloping hill, quiet and unsuspecting. They could find their clothes and prowl the streets; they could skirt along the edge of the town as animals hoping to scent the wolf amongst the smells of humans living, breathing, eating, creating too much waste to process; they could sit where they are and hold their breath until their faces turn blue and count on the luck that's carried them this far, always just enough. But none of the options are sufficiently brilliant. None of them solve the problem right away, and the problem must always be solved right away. James remembers another panic, the knotted pretzel of his stomach familiar to how it twists and winds now, and the simplicity of the rescue, the straightforward solution. "We've lost him," James says. "Buggering Merlin. We've lost him."

"No," Sirius says. The line of his shoulders, naked and pale, stiffens with defiance. "No. There's — there's what. There's two, three hours of night left? Before the sun comes up?" He checks the sky, scanning the stars, looking for reassurance. He finds nothing but the on and off glitter of a cloudy night, and shakes his head to clear himself of the spell. "Three, maybe," he corrects himself. "Three hours. He can't — well it's only three — bugger. We haven't lost him. He's *out there*, probably chasing squirrels or, or rabbits, that's what he does, and then he'll get tired, and..." Sirius trails off.

"He's not going to forgive himself if he hurts anyone," James says, quiet and foreboding.

"But it won't be his *fault!*" Sirius explodes. He slams a fist into the wall of the shack, feels his knuckles impacted against bone, and hisses out the pain, adrenaline released in a rush of a relief.

"Well, it's not yours either," James retorts, "so you can stop destroying yourself in revenge. You do look an idiot. Look, we knew something like this could happen—"

"It *is* mine!" Sirius roars. He is suddenly furious and scared and helpless and lost, a combination made all the more infuriating in the face of James' apparent relaxation. He smacks his fist again into the wall, so that the whole shack creaks and shudders against the bruise. "Aaaaah," he adds, and shakes his fist out, throbbing through his whole arm. "Christ."

"Stop it," James says, totally calm.

"Fuck you," Sirius hurls at him.

"Oh, *grow up*," James says, in one of his abrupt and powerful explosions that are all the more effective for their rarity, and Sirius, startled, stops. "We don't have time for this! We need to make sure no one gets hurt in the village — that's number one. We take up a patrol. Wormtail, you're stealth, I want you making sure no one's talking about a wolf in the houses. Padfoot, you take the streets. I'll go round the perimeter. If we haven't found anything we'll meet back here in one hour."

"No one of us is any good against him," Peter says quietly, carefully, a man on shaky ground.

"Then *don't take him on*," James barks, and goes to stag.

***

The streets of Hogsmeade are abandoned, the gray of ash. There is nothing left of the weekends, bustling with color and noise, in the lengthening streets, in the closed up shops, in the slumbering, eerie quiet. Where people live, the noises are different. The heavy rhythms of sleep breathing echo behind closed doors. A few men are snoring, rumbling and distracting. The big black dog pads silently through the shadows, unseen, a specter, a ghostly beast, grim as a Grim.

***

Almost everyone is in deep sleep. A young girl pours herself a glass of water in the bathroom. An old man shifts restlessly in his creaking bed. Two brothers, just in from a night shift, make themselves sandwiches in a chilly kitchen. A baby gurgles in his sleep; another baby, houses away, answers the call with a dreaming whimper. But Hogsmeade is empty of conversation. There are no words to be found anywhere.

The rat hopes there are also no cats.

***

The boundaries of a town will keep any forest at bay. Animals understand the dangerous civilization of man and its every manifestation and give the houses wide berth, even in the dead of night. Only a few lamps are still lit, flickering as unreachable as stars from the center of Hogsmeade. The stag disturbs only the leaves as he circles once, twice, three times, on quiet patrol of the village, letting the gravity of the night cool the anger of the boy within.

***

"Nothing," Peter says.

"Nothing," Sirius echoes.

"Nothing," James finishes.

Sirius is too tired to pace. His eyes scan the edge of the forest nervously, lips smudged with the dirt from beneath his bitten-down fingernails. James is still all energy, calm but steadying, and behind his half-unfocused eyes plans reel and pitch, forming, unforming, combining, recombining. Peter sits in a damp ball against hollow tree, swatting at the occasional persistent mosquito.

"We've missed something," Sirius says. "He's not in the forest. He's not in Hogsmeade. Where the hell else could he be? We can't have covered everything. We only think we have."

"Hogwarts," James says.

"What?" Peter watches the excitement lace his friend's posture, standing on wobbly feet.

"He's got to've doubled back on us," James explains. "Look, look, it's the only possible explanation — all this time we've been on *this* side of the forest looking because we know he's not *in* the forest — but he's got to've gone back the opposite way. He's got to be on Hogwarts' grounds."

"Oh God," Sirius says. "Brilliant."

"But what if he's hurt someone there?" Peter asks. "What if someone's seen him?"

"Oh God," Sirius says again.

"I think we should go," James says decisively, but Sirius is already loping down to four legs, out like a shot across the long grass.

He's not sure whom he's angriest at, now, the force of useless rage spurring his legs beneath him: if it's Remus, for listening to a howl that isn't from their pack; or if it's Peter, for not being big enough to help; or if it's James, for failing to do what he always does, which is solve the problem before any of them have to worry about it. He knows, of course, that he can't blame any of them really, but it's easier to think of the issue that way than to go on running his head into things, which is what he really feels like doing.

And then, the dog body takes over, and he can feel nothing but the scents on the wind.

***

"Time is it," Peter gasps, dragging himself upright, his small belly wobbling. Over his head the sky is rose-tinged and brightening to November gray. The wet grass drags around their ankles.

"Absurd," James says faintly. "Sunrise though, and no screaming."

"And no *smells*." Sirius straightens into standing, four legs returning to two. He's just hit his second wind; he can go another hour before the crash hits hardest. "God. No smells. We're in the clear, I hope. No blood out tonight, except rabbits and hedgehogs. It's a good thing we let him feed early. Where the hell is he, though? And I want my *pants*."

"Pants," Peter says longingly. "I *dream* of pants."

There is nothing left to do but wait as they've been waiting all night. They look to one another, uncertain, when Sirius's head snaps up, pointing, still as a dog. He puts a hand on James's sweat-thick shoulder. "Prongs."

"Ah," says James, as over the horizon a small figure wobbles, pale and shaky against the weak light.

The strength of Remus J. Lupin is an incalculable thing. There were times in the past when Sirius wondered at his silences, when James thought he might just be too quiet and too reserved a boy, when Peter could never understand his place with two of the rowdiest, wildest boys Gryffindor had to offer. There were times when it seemed he was made up of books and dust in the library and little fraying sweaters and clothes he didn't quite fit into, an uneven posture and the incline of his head as he worried at his right thumbnail. After they learned his secret, they began to translate these oddities into what they really meant, in Remus language, and discovered how strong his hands were: to know just how much to give, and just when to stop.

The sky is the faint, pale, speckled color of a robin's egg. Sirius starts forward and James catches him around the wrist. "The moon," James says. It's still there, but fading fast, devoured now by pre-dawn light. Sirius shakes free. "We've been careless enough tonight," James insists.

"He needs help," Sirius says. "Do you see, he needs us to *help* him!"

"It won't help him to startle him," James whispers. "Keep quiet, keep still. Wait until the moon's gone."

Sirius' eyes turn from the sky to Remus to the sky to Remus, between the two so fast his head begins to ache. Never has he wanted the sun to rise so much in his life. Never has it risen so slowly. Remus trips and stumbles his way closer, shadowy but somehow upright, shoulders slumped and, backlit, Sirius can only smell the blood on him.

"Sod off, James," Sirius says, wrenching himself free and moving too fast to be stopped.

"Fuck, Sirius, get back here!" James yelps from behind him, but Sirius can't help it: the strength of Remus Lupin is an incalculable thing, but the fragility of him is more immediate and more frightening, and Sirius is half-dog and half-boy, and all terrified.

"Moony—!"

Remus snarls, hitches back, every line of his body trembling. Closer now, and below the gray light, Sirius can see the welts and scratches all over him, his arms and his long bare chest skin-split, and his eyes wild and full of moonlight. The smell of hurt fills his lungs like smoke.

"Remus," Sirius says, very quietly, absolutely still, two feet away. If he wasn't afraid even the slightest movement could ruin everything he would lift his hand, palm up, in supplication. Remus' head is lowered, the red scars gleaming under the fresh blood. His nostrils are flared. "Hey, Remus."

Remus' upper lip raises, baring teeth that are strangely white against his dirt-streaked face.

"It's me," Sirius says, forcing down his wildly careening heart. The pulse of blood in his throat is strong as the moon. "I'm so glad you're all right. Are you all right?"

Hackles up, Remus stalks a little, backwards and then back, his eyes never leaving Sirius's. Boy he is now but his body is all wolf, coiled, wounded but still dangerous, maybe more dangerous, and Sirius doesn't dare move as his head raises and—

The first edge of gold hits over the trees.

Remus goes very still and even whiter, shakes for a paper-thin moment, and collapses forward, ungraceful, so hard and so quickly that Sirius almost doesn't catch him. "Sirius," Remus says, his voice cracked and brittle. "Sirius, you don't have any trousers on."

Sirius' laughter is wild and unhinged. "Moony," he says, "none of us have any trousers."

"Can't even keep your clothes on without me," Remus whispers, and promptly passes out.

***

"Orgy?" the fat lady says when they reach the tower door, surveying them with frank appraisal, and then, quickly "I mean, er, password?"

"Mallowsweet," Peter says wearily. He's hardly in the mood to take any lip from a painting. None of them are.

"Don't ask," James adds. His arm is looped under Remus', Sirius on his other side, keeping him from wobbling over. Remus is heavier than they are used to, taller too, and not helping.

"Who's asking?" the portrait says rather lecherously, but swings open nonetheless. The boys survey the hole. The three-foot rise to the floor has never seemed such a difficult height to scale as it does now.

"Hup," Sirius says. "One-two. Just lift him over, we'll be fine—"

"—Be *careful*," Remus hisses.

"—and don't bang off anything Important," James says with a broad wink.

"I wouldn't call that Important," Peter says disparagingly, "given that our Moony lives the wild life of a eunuch anyway."

"Hey, now," Remus protests, "I'm too weak to hit you, that's unfair."

"Don't hate me because I'm so Important," Peter says, and cackles.

"Everyone here is very Important," James says soothingly. "One of the many wonderful things about the Marauders is that we're all...hugely...Important."

"Except Sirius," Peter says, almost reflexively.

"That's not what your mother said last night," Sirius replies, and nods to James. They lift Remus up, swiftly, and deposit him with little ceremony on the other side of the door, and then clamber through themselves. The door creaks shut. Safe at last in the Common Room, they pause a moment to take stock of each other's mad hair, wild eyes and general pantslessness.

"I'm very cold," the muffled Remus voice states, from the heap of Remus on the floor. "Can someone get me — some clothes would be nice."

"I'll go," Sirius says. He feels like a puppy, eager to please but hesitant to leave. James makes a shooing motion with his hands, explaining wordlessly that he and Peter are perfectly capable of keeping watch now that Remus isn't going anywhere without at least two people holding him upright. Sirius watches Remus a moment more, prone and bundled into himself, around his stomach, on the floor. They have to get him to Madam Pomfrey's, but they need clothes first. His task is a most important one.

He bounds up the stairs to the boy's dormitory, taking the steps two at a time. A few of the boys are shifting in their beds with the sunlight, snores hitching, close to waking. Sirius tiptoes to Remus' bed, at the far corner, next to one of the three windows. Remus' writing things — quill, inkwell, clean parchment paper — are arranged neatly on the bedside table. Something is scrawled on one of the pages in handwriting that trails shakily off into a distinct lack of punctuation. He was writing here, earlier. Sirius pauses to peer at the words, which form uneven lines. It isn't prose. He leans closer, a few of the spidery words, blotched with ink, almost unreadable. If anything, Sirius can read Remus' agitation in the verse, more sensible English. "Moony," Sirius whispers, noting the small, open book nearby. "Copying poetry. Madman."

He moves away from Remus' desk and crawls beneath Remus' bed, hoping no one catches him now with his arse up for the world to see.

Not that anyone would be the worse off for seeing it.

Remus' old trunk is heavy and locked twice. Sirius uses Remus' own wand to unlock it, unable to start the search for keys now. Socks. Underwear. Trousers. Sweaters. All tidily folded. All threadbare in the knees or the toes or the

elbows. Nothing looks warm enough. Neat enough, certainly. Warm enough, certainly not. Sirius paws deeper into the trunk. It smells inside of old wool and older wood and leather bindings worn down with age.



Sirius digs through two layers of stripes and argyle, leaving as much havoc as possible within the confines of the modest chest, before his fingers graze something they recognize. This is his favorite jumper of Moony's, and he knows it because he's stolen it about twelve times. He's not the sort to wear a warm green jumper in public — he hasn't got the serenity for it, all reds and blues — but cold nights it's a good thing to have on, and the elbows aren't patched. He grabs it, and a pair of shorts with his other hand, while he's at it, and stands up to pull the sweater out.

The sleeve snags.

Sirius curses, silently, all people too careless to keep the insides of their trunks smooth. He happens to know that Remus loves this jumper; he happens to know that Remus actually takes care of it, and if there's now a hole in it (other than the small one near the wrist, which is perfect for wriggling your thumb through) Sirius is going to be *angry*.

He reaches in, cautiously, to slip the fabric free, and his thumb grazes the little splintered-out place where it's caught.

There is a small, wooden *snick!* and a drawer slides neatly out from the side of the chest.

Sirius' breath hisses between his teeth. He's always known Remus keeps small secrets tucked away, even though Sirius and James and Peter know the really big, really important one. There's an air of privacy to their Moony, intriguing and

hurtful at once. Sirius would barge into every last locked compartment of Remus' life if he knew that was the way to go about it, but he can't. Instead patience is the key, or the keys; an infuriating patience is necessary to understand each, and it's slow working.

Still, he tells himself, it doesn't count if he didn't mean to open the secret panel in the thick wood.

He runs his fingers over the warped surface and wrestles the sweater sleeve free, and manages to pull the drawer out fully in the process. A little cloud of dust rises. Remus must not have opened it for a while now, but there's something in there, hiding, still trying to pretend it can't be seen. Sirius sneaks his hand deep inside and runs his fingers over smooth leather, imprinted lettering. It's a book, but not just any book. A shaft of sunlight catches the lettering — gold — which states, simply, *Journal*.

"Bugger," Sirius says. James and Peter must be wondering if a monster under Remus' bed has eaten him, with all the time he's taking, but he'll never have a chance like this one again. Remus guards his things with the protective might of countless years of privacy. It's a force to be reckoned with, and Remus would clobber him one if he ever caught Sirius sneaking a very private journal out of a very hidden compartment in the depths of his very locked drawer. It isn't his fault, Sirius reminds himself again. It opened by accident. It must have been fate, or one of those stupid karmic things they're always reading about in Divination.

Without thinking, Sirius snatches the old, worn journal out of secret compartment and pushes it shut, then piles all Remus' socks and underwear and what-have-you's haphazardly over it. Sweater held tight to his dirt-streaked chest, he stops by his bed, locks the journal behind his collection of dungbombs and Bitey Things in the desk drawer beside it, and stumbles down the stairs, his fingers itching with the dilemma.

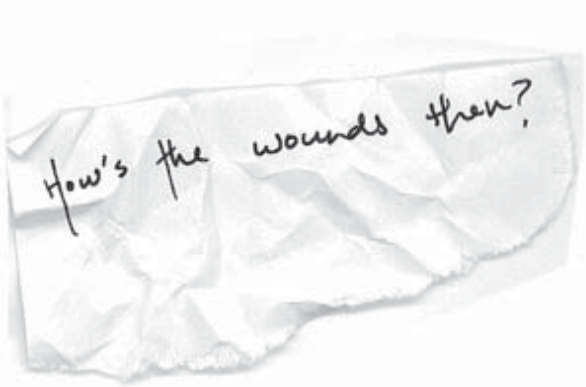
To read or not to read.

Now *that* is the question.

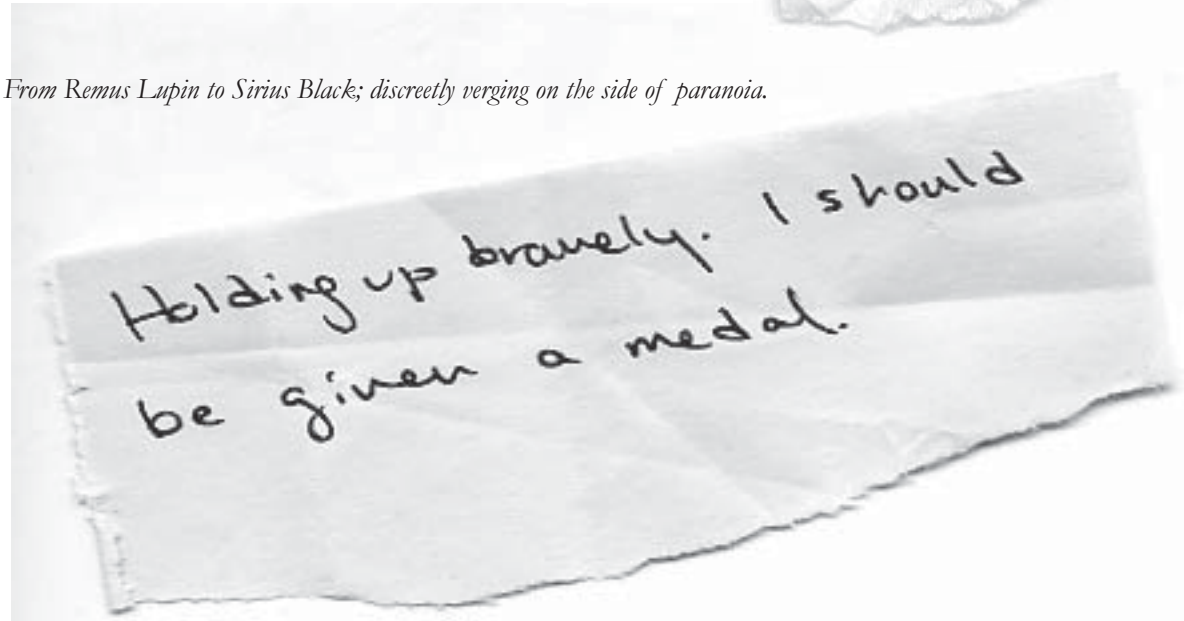


***

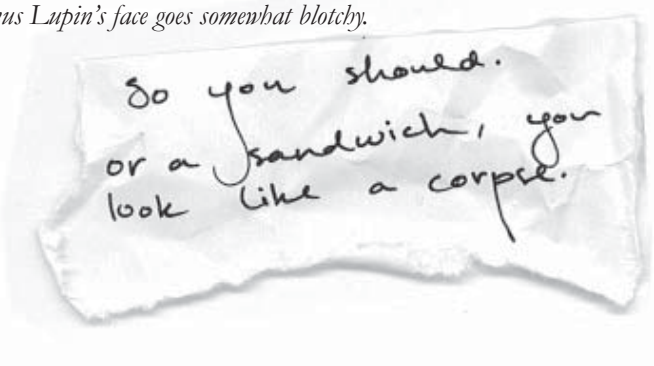
From Sirius Black to Remus Lupin; discreetly during History of Magic.



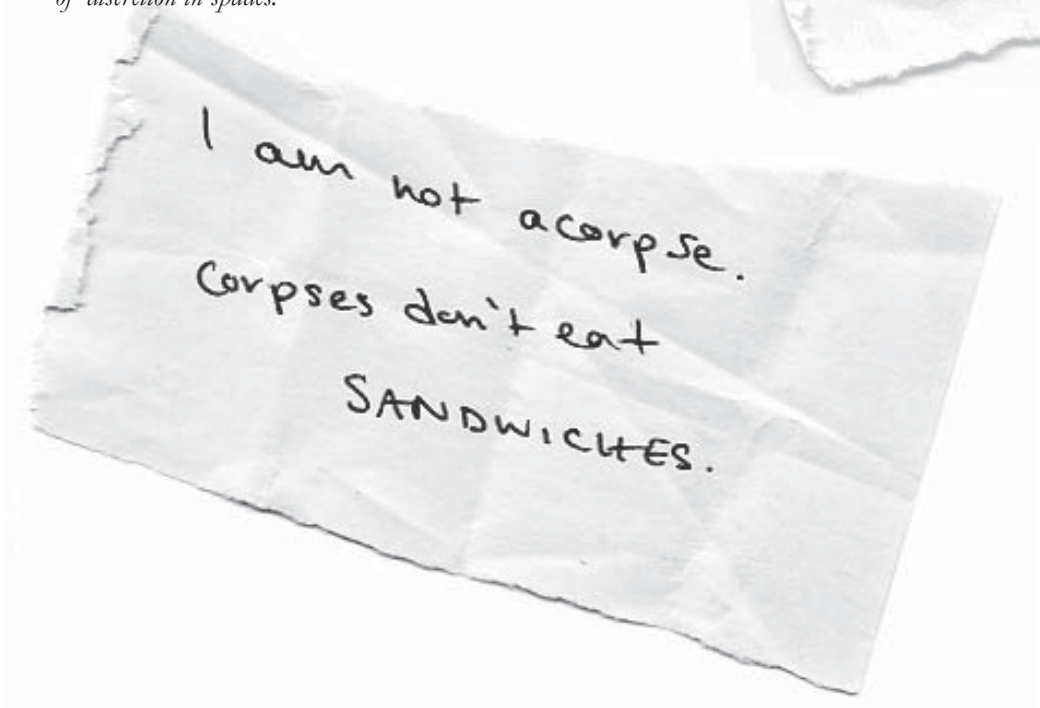
From Remus Lupin to Sirius Black; discreetly verging on the side of paranoia.



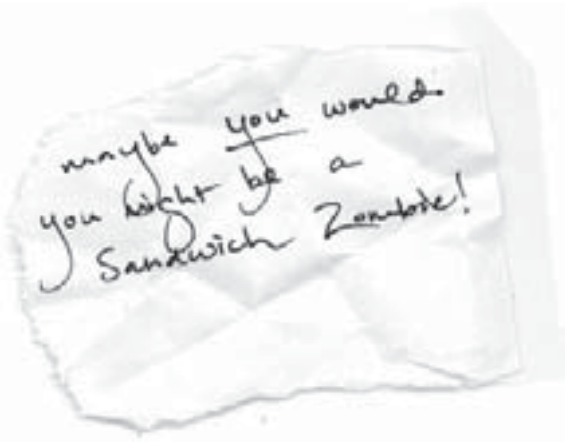
From Sirius Black to Remus Lupin; very non-discreet, whereupon Remus Lupin's face goes somewhat blotchy.



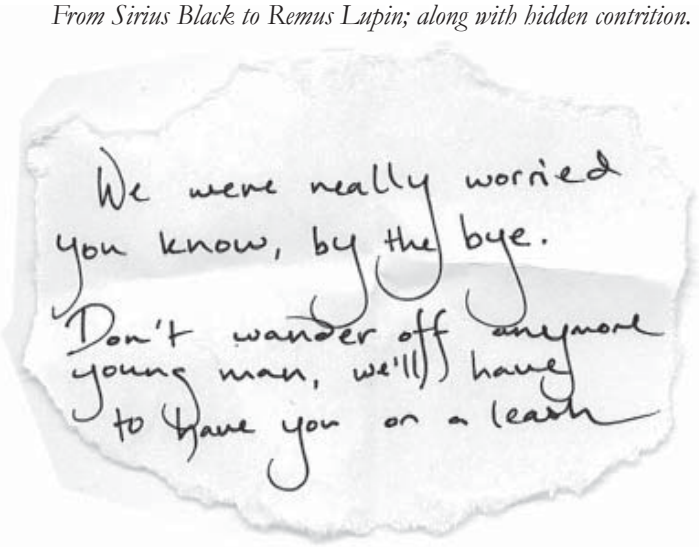
From Remus Lupin to Sirius Black; making up for Sirius' lack of discretion in spades.



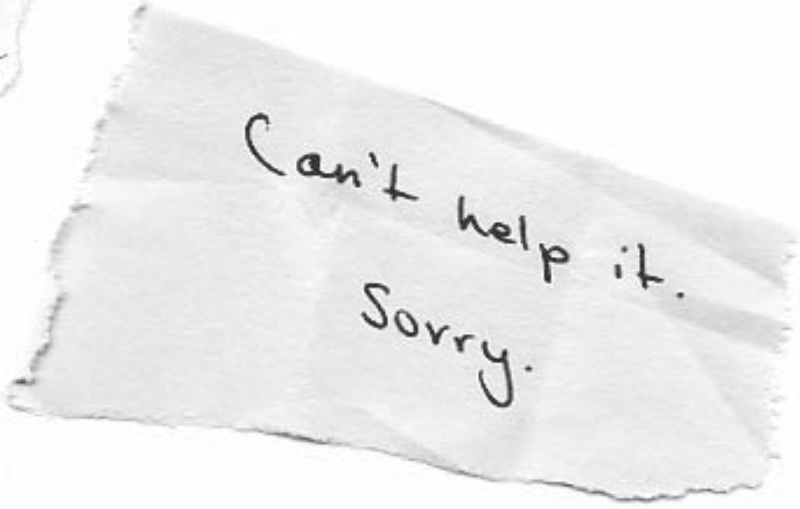
From Sirius Black to Remus Lupin; along with a patented "Zombie Face."



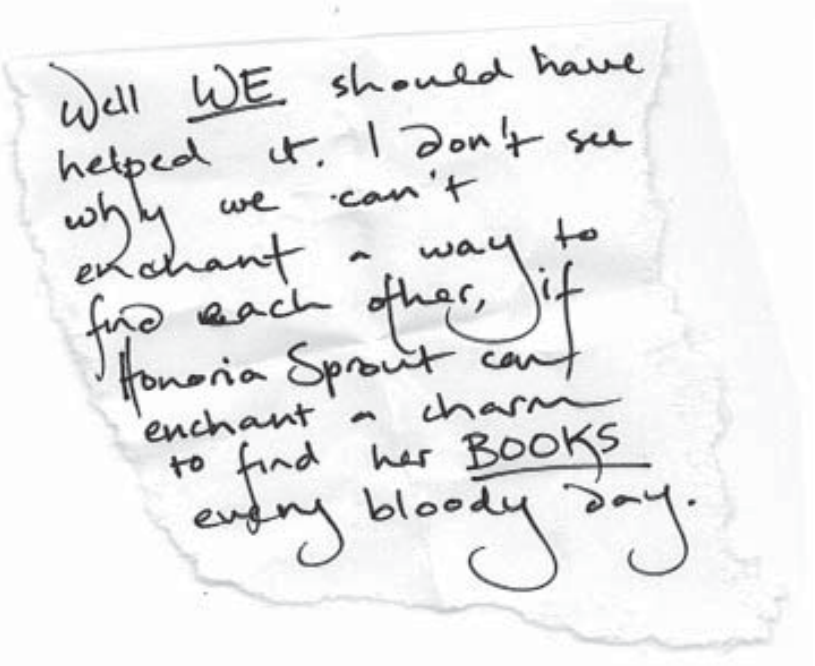
From Sirius Black to Remus Lupin; along with hidden contrition.



From Remus Lupin to Sirius Black; tossed over his shoulder in a moment of daring.



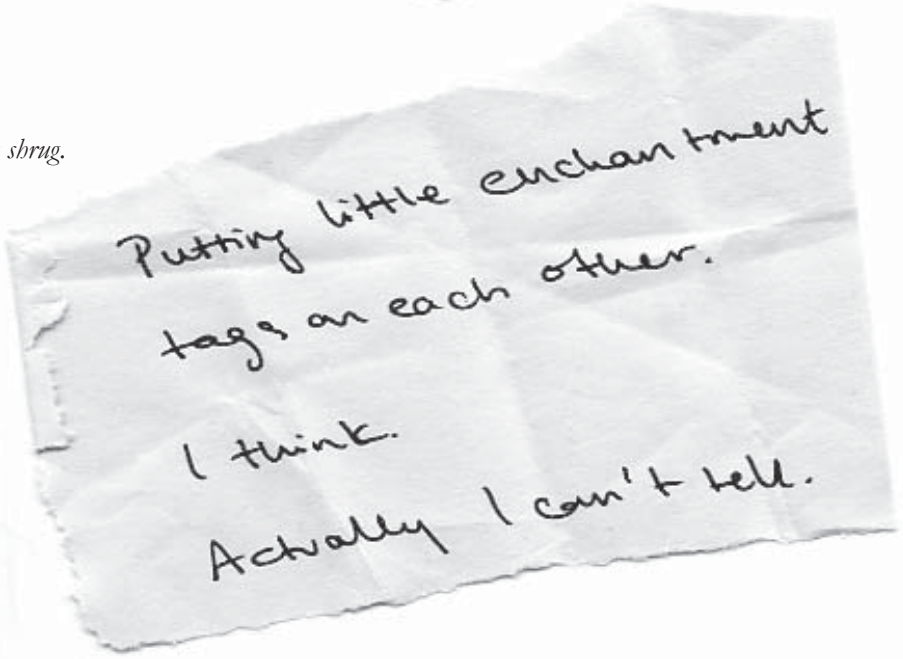
From Sirius Black to Remus Lupin; along with the faint flicker of an idea.



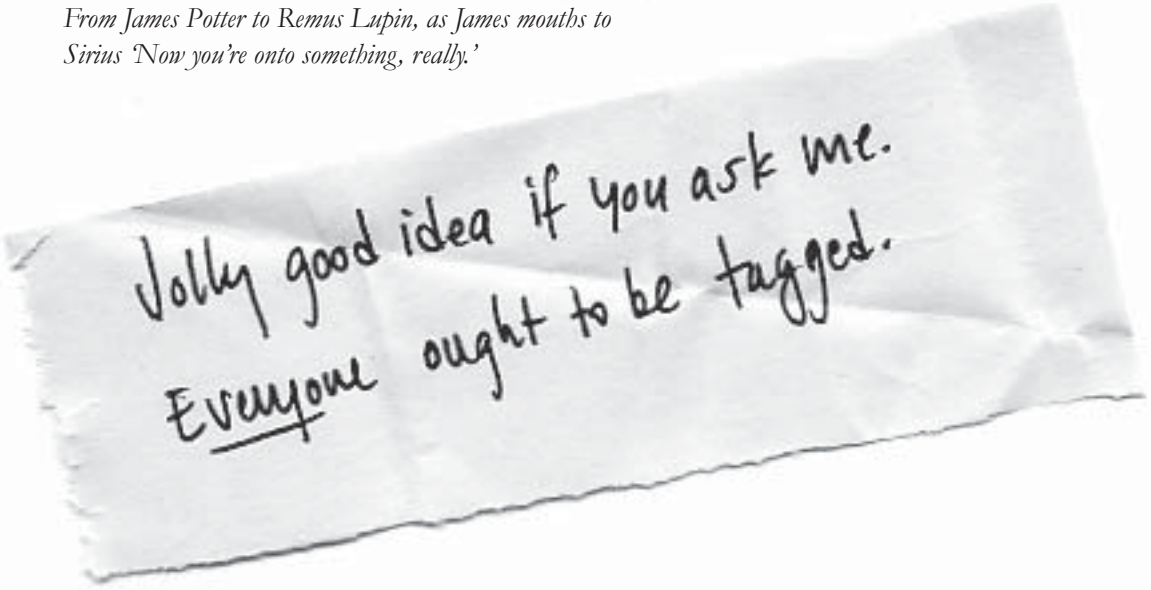
From James Potter to Sirius Black and Remus Lupin; followed by a face of Very Intense Reprimand.

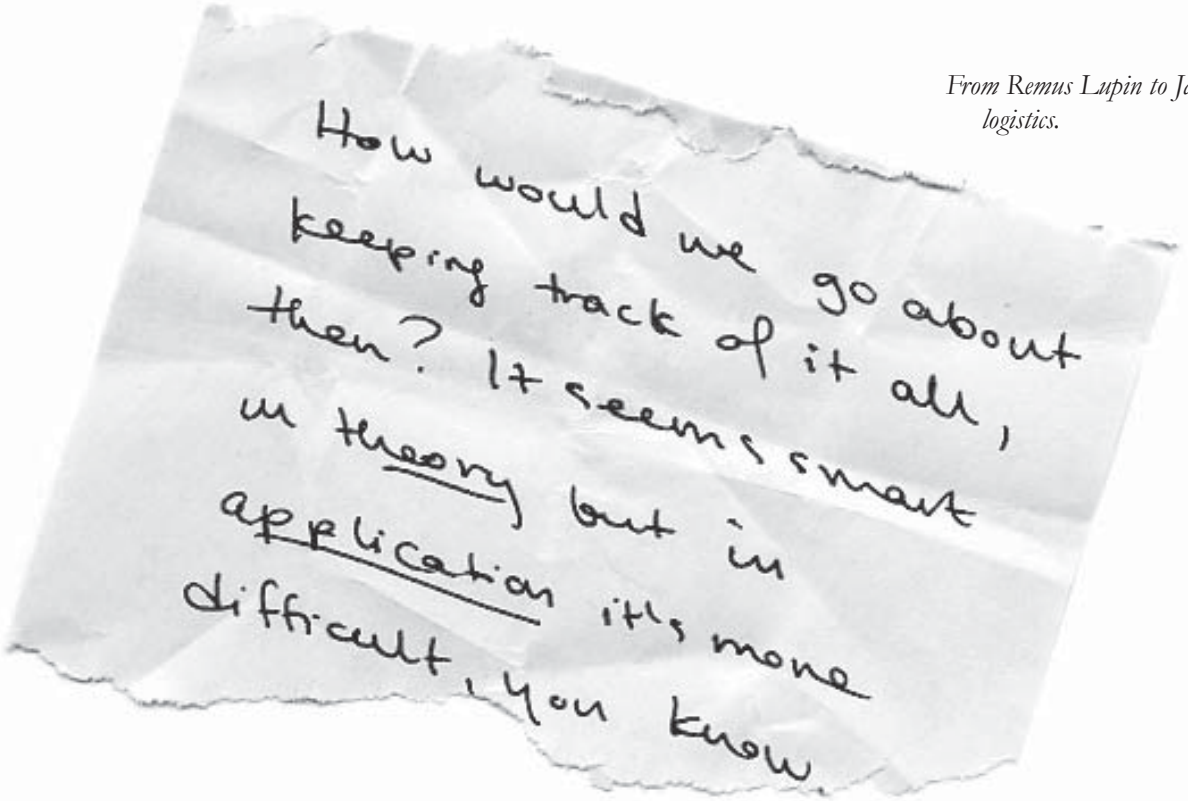


From Remus Lupin to James Potter; coupled with a shrug.

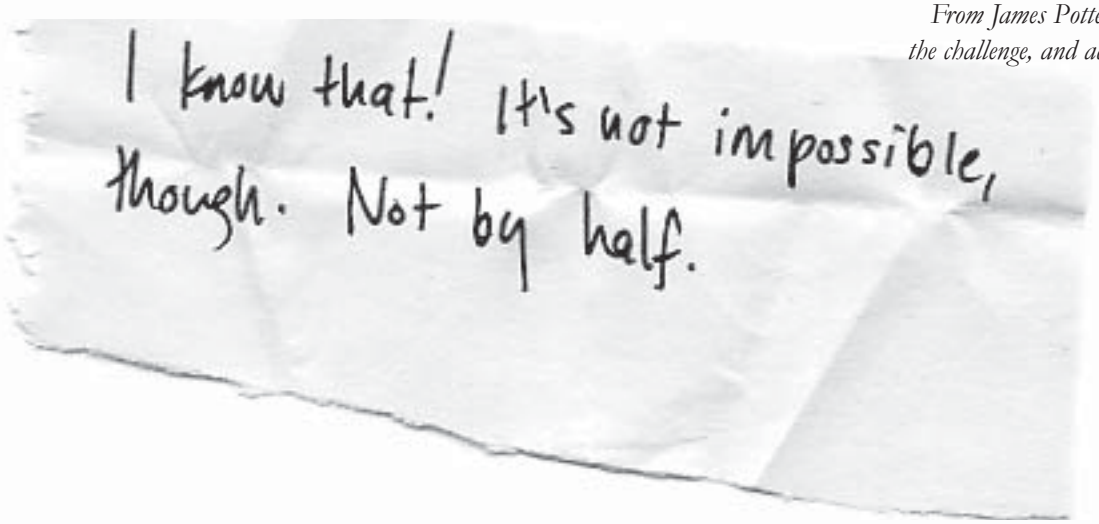


From James Potter to Remus Lupin, as James mouths to Sirius 'Now you're onto something, really.'

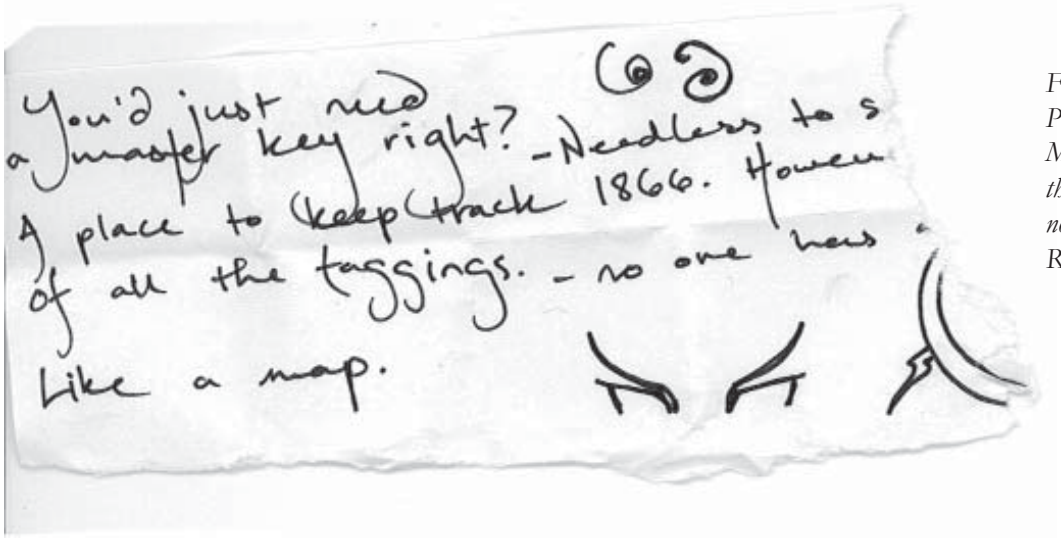



How would we go about keeping track of it all, then? It seems smart in theory but in application it's more difficult, you know.

From Remus Lupin to James Potter; considering the logistics.

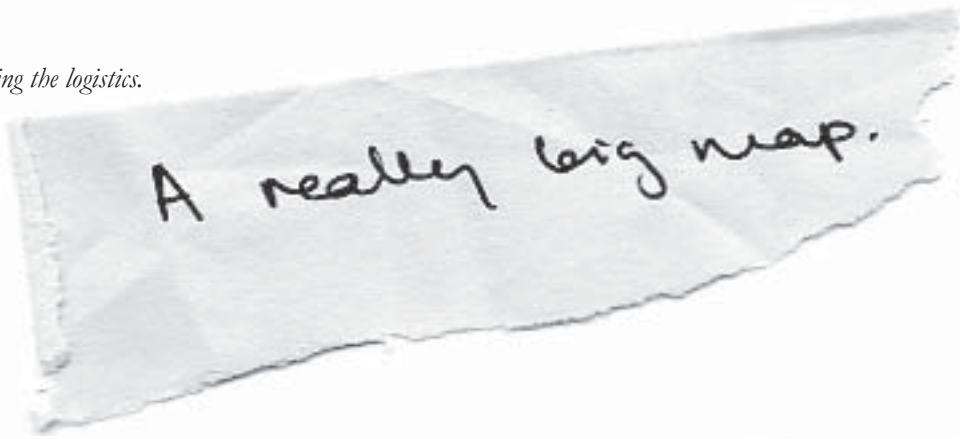

I know that! It's not impossible, though. Not by half.

From James Potter to Remus Lupin; smelling the challenge, and accepting it.

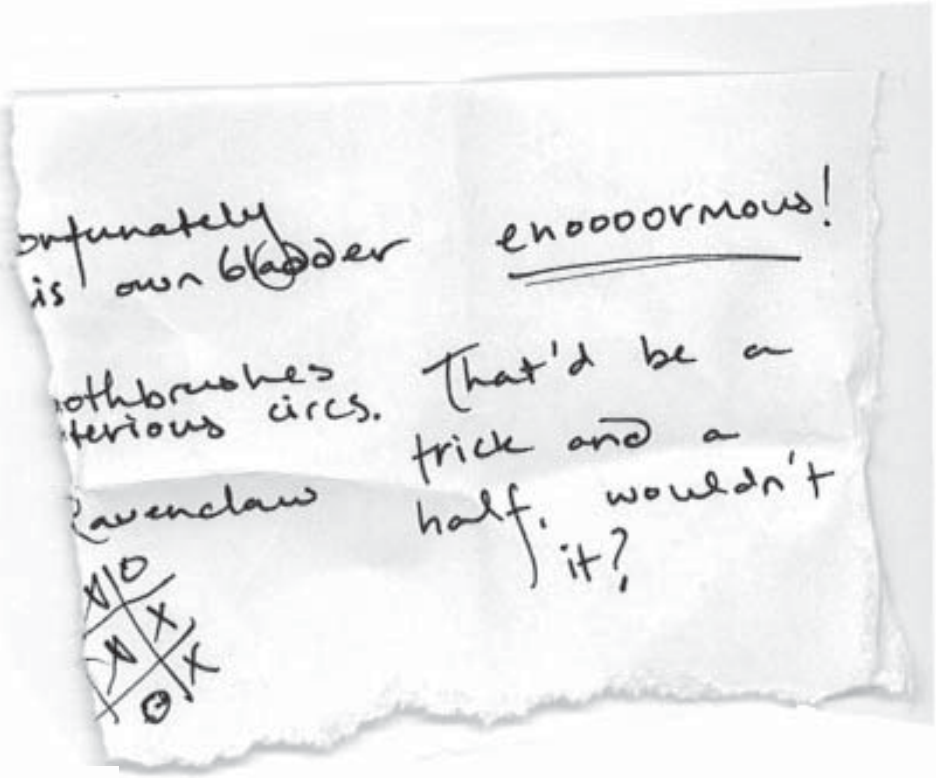

You'd just need a master key right? - Needless to s
A place to keep track 1866. Howeve
of all the taggings. - no one has
Like a map.

From Sirius Black to James Potter and Remus Lupin. Meanwhile Peter reads through the unconcealed collection of notes on Sirius desk and Remus turns blotchy again.

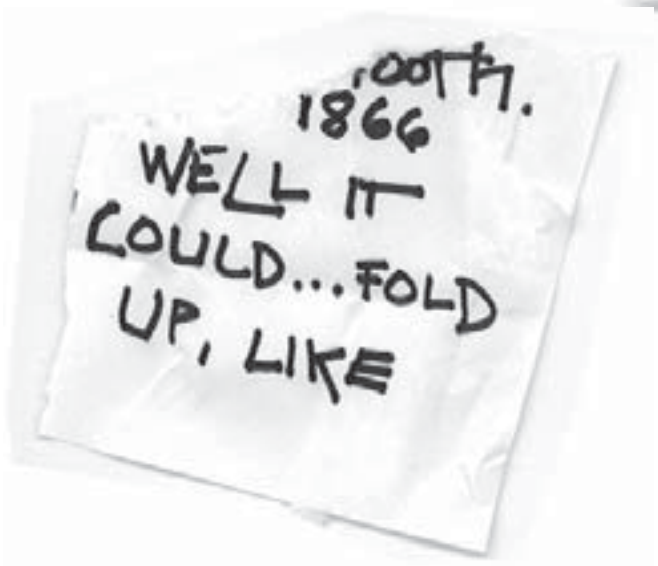
From Remus Lupin to All; still considering the logistics.



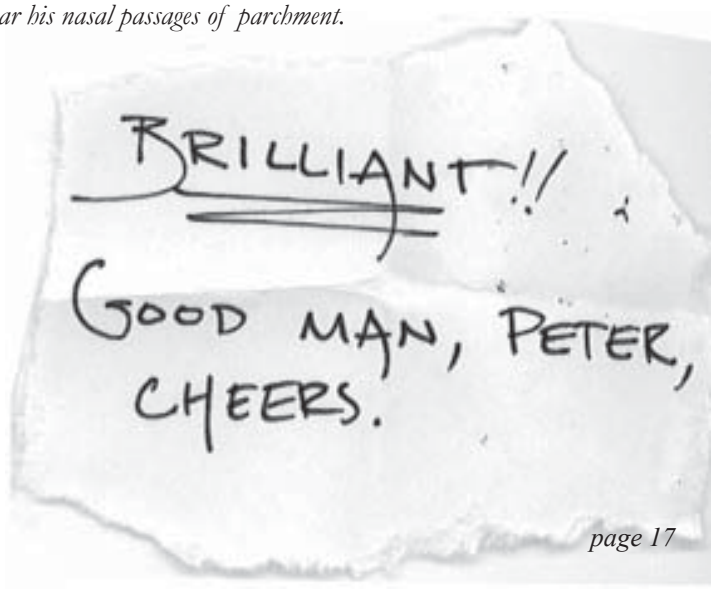
From Sirius Black to All; flicking bits of unused notepaper at Peter's nose.



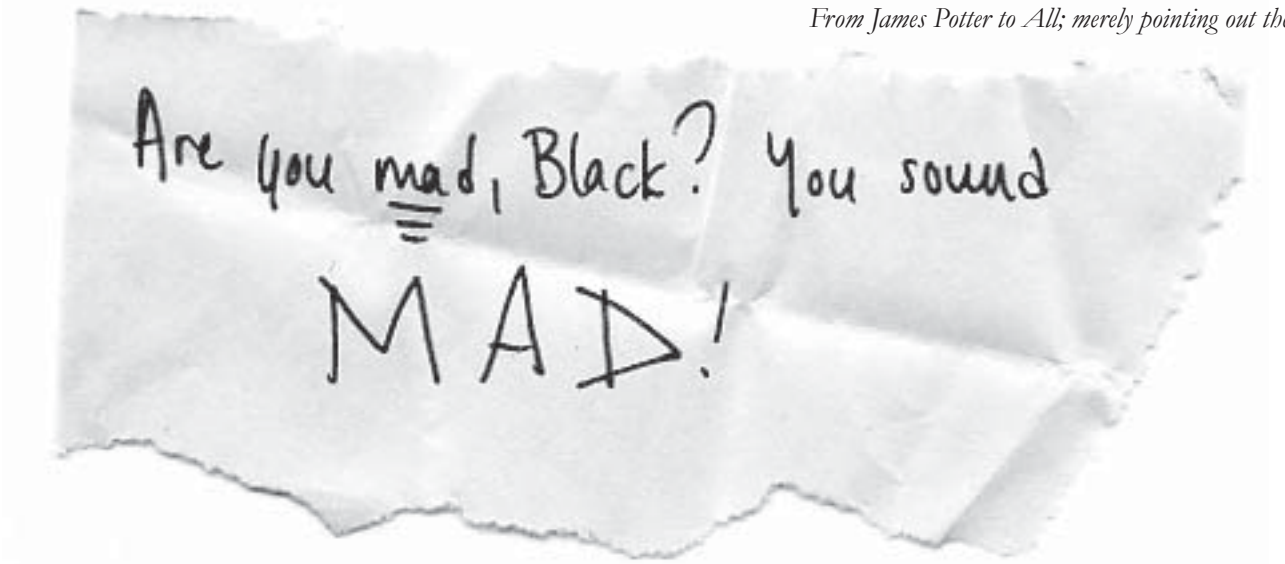
From Peter Pettigrew to All; nearly choking on a wad of notepaper.



From Sirius Black to All; followed by impressed thumping on Peter's back to clear his nasal passages of parchment.



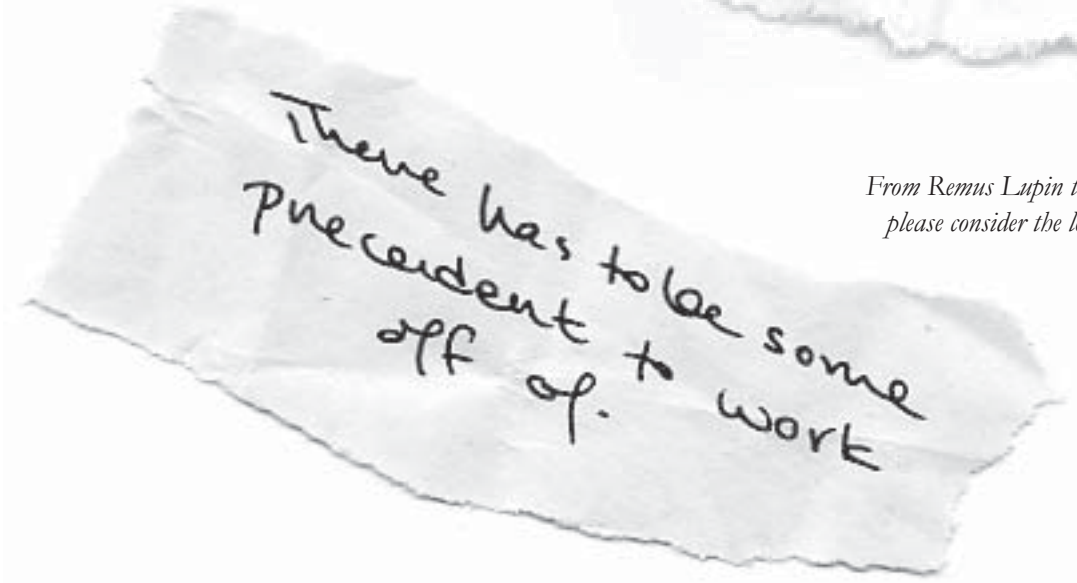
From James Potter to All; merely pointing out the truth.



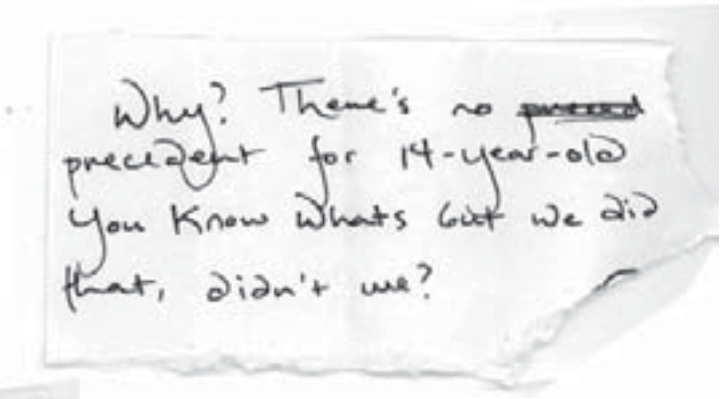
From Sirius Black to All; there's no turning back now.



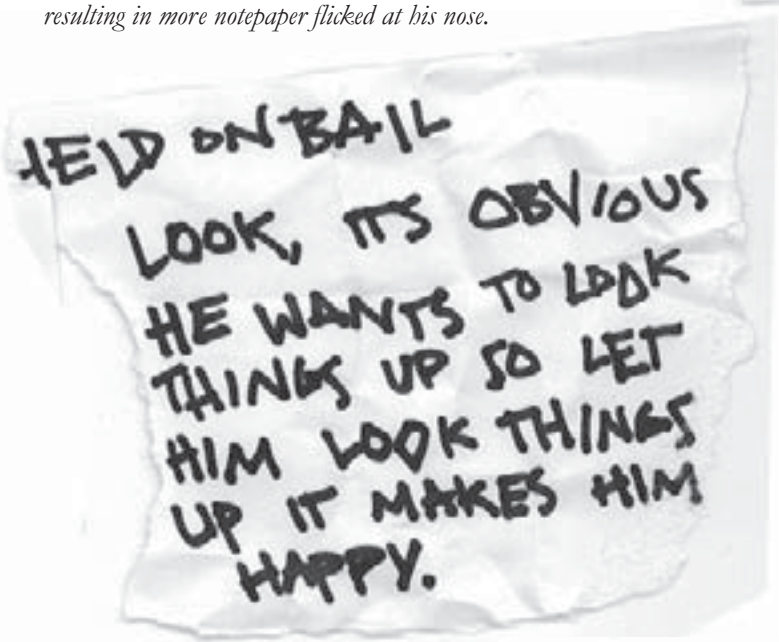
From Remus Lupin to All; reminding everyone to please consider the logistics.



From Sirius Black to All; an exercise in supreme subtlety.



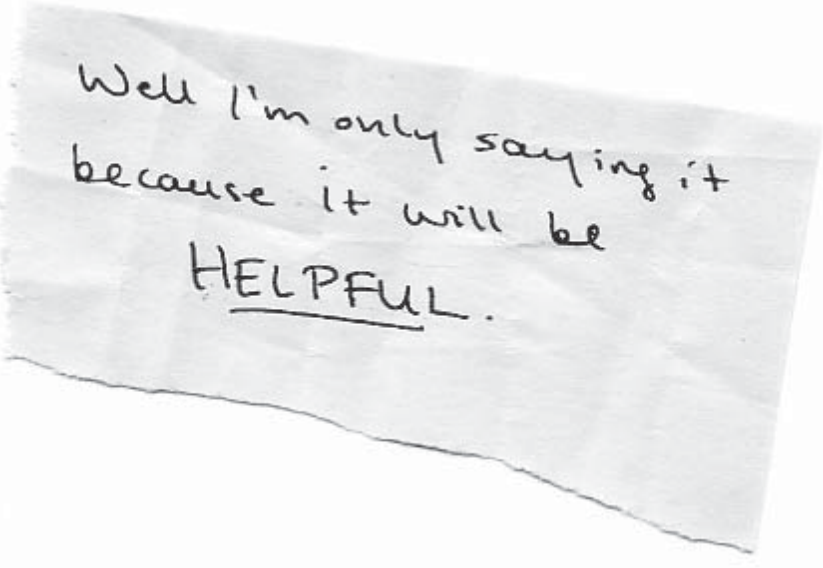
From Peter Pettigrew to All; an exercise in daring humor, resulting in more notepaper flicked at his nose.

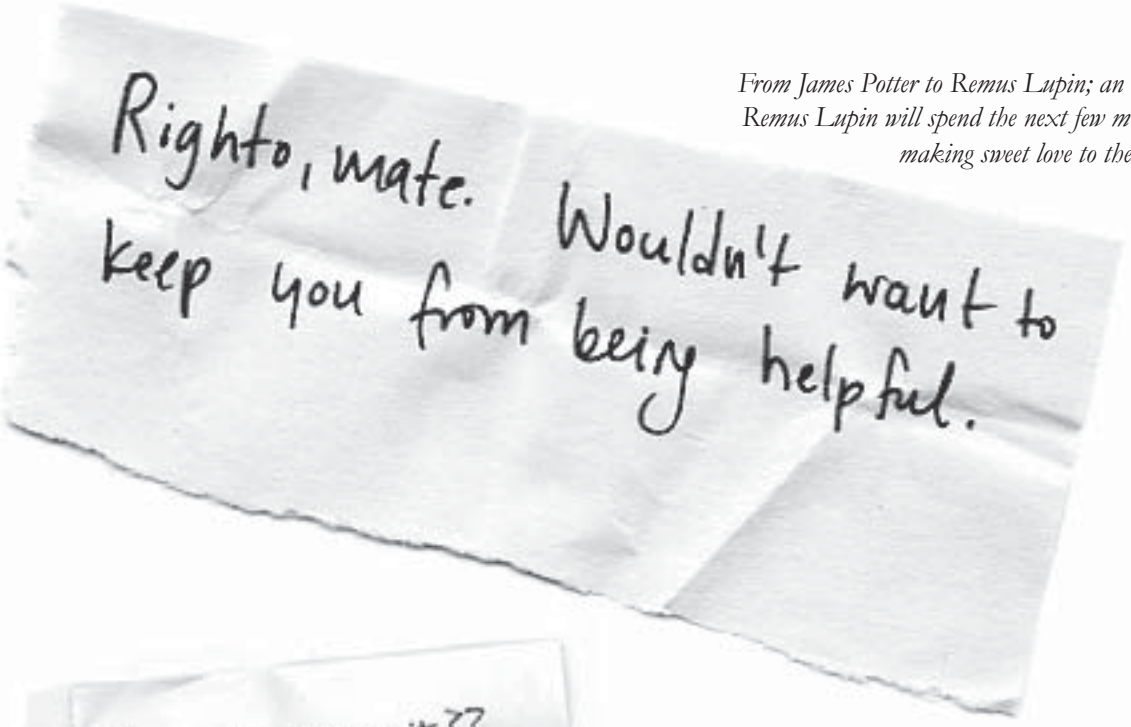


From James Potter to All; staunchly refusing the logistics for the time being, as it interrupts the brainstorming process.

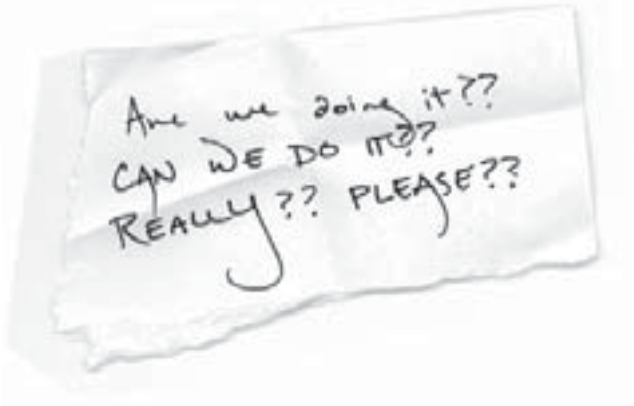


From Remus Lupin to All. But considering the logistics is helpful!



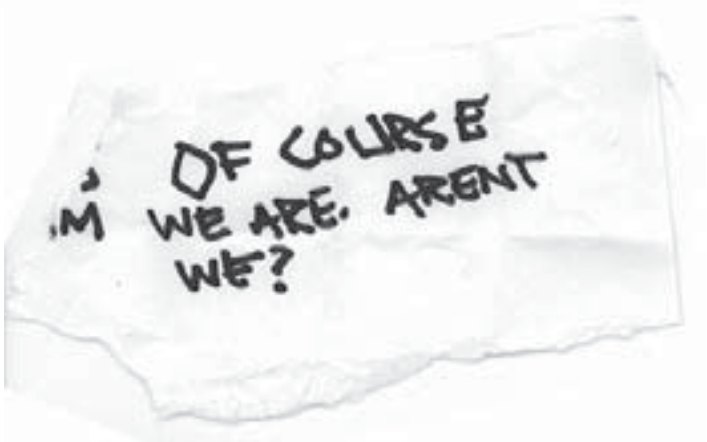


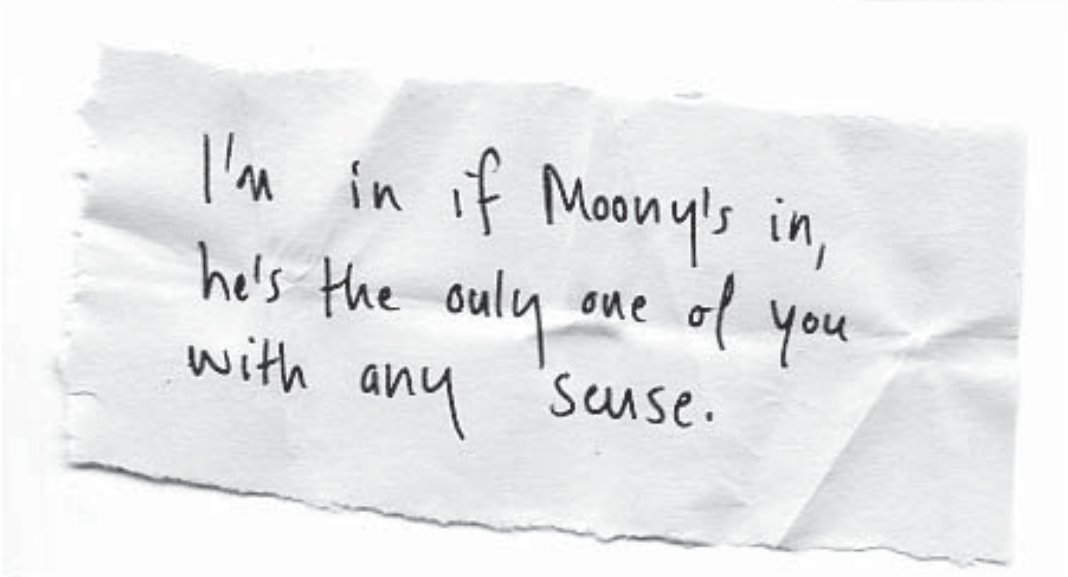
From James Potter to Remus Lupin; an understanding that Remus Lupin will spend the next few months in the library making sweet love to the logistics.



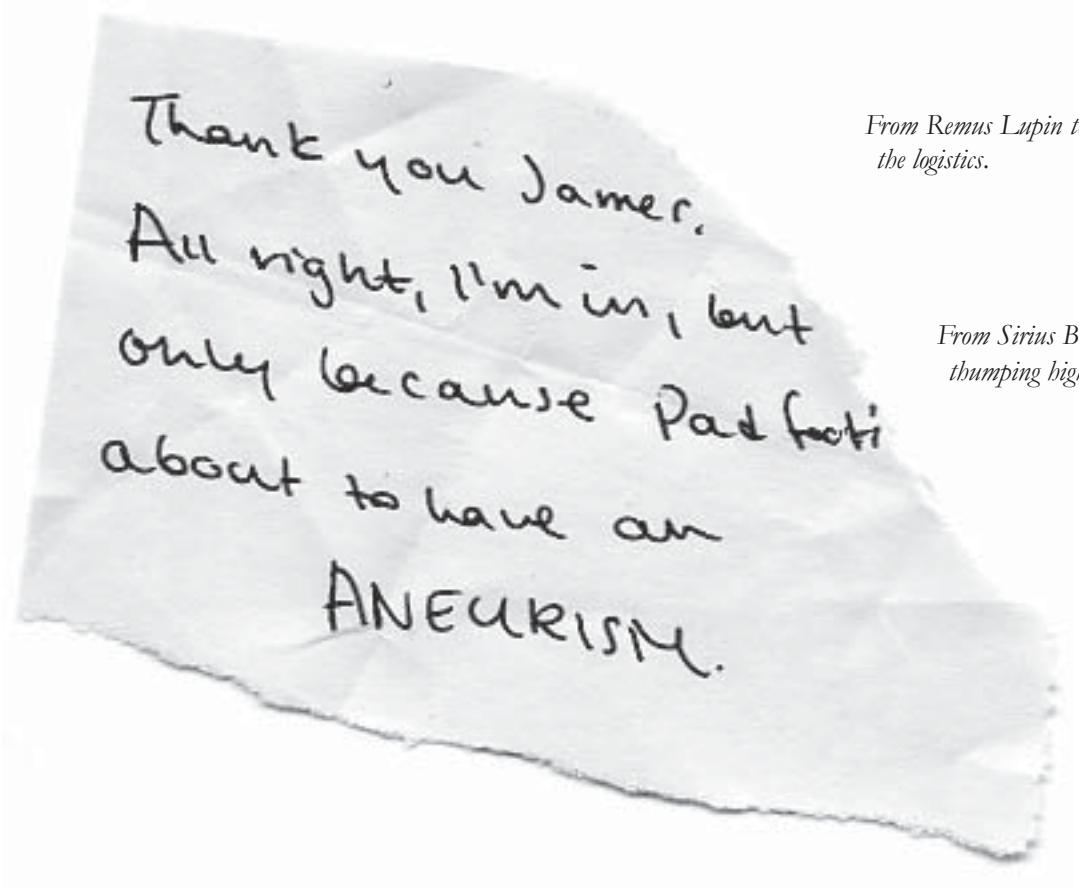
From Sirius Black to All. Pay attention to me!

From Peter Pettigrew to All. Well, if James says we can.





From James Potter to All; at last considering the logistics.



From Remus Lupin to All; acquiescing for the sake of the logistics.

From Sirius Black to All; followed by some fist-thumping high in the air.



"—um, er, sorry, Professor? Notes? Err, I don't...no, I was just lending James some, um, some blank parchment—yes, Professor. Next time it won't have notes on it, Professor."

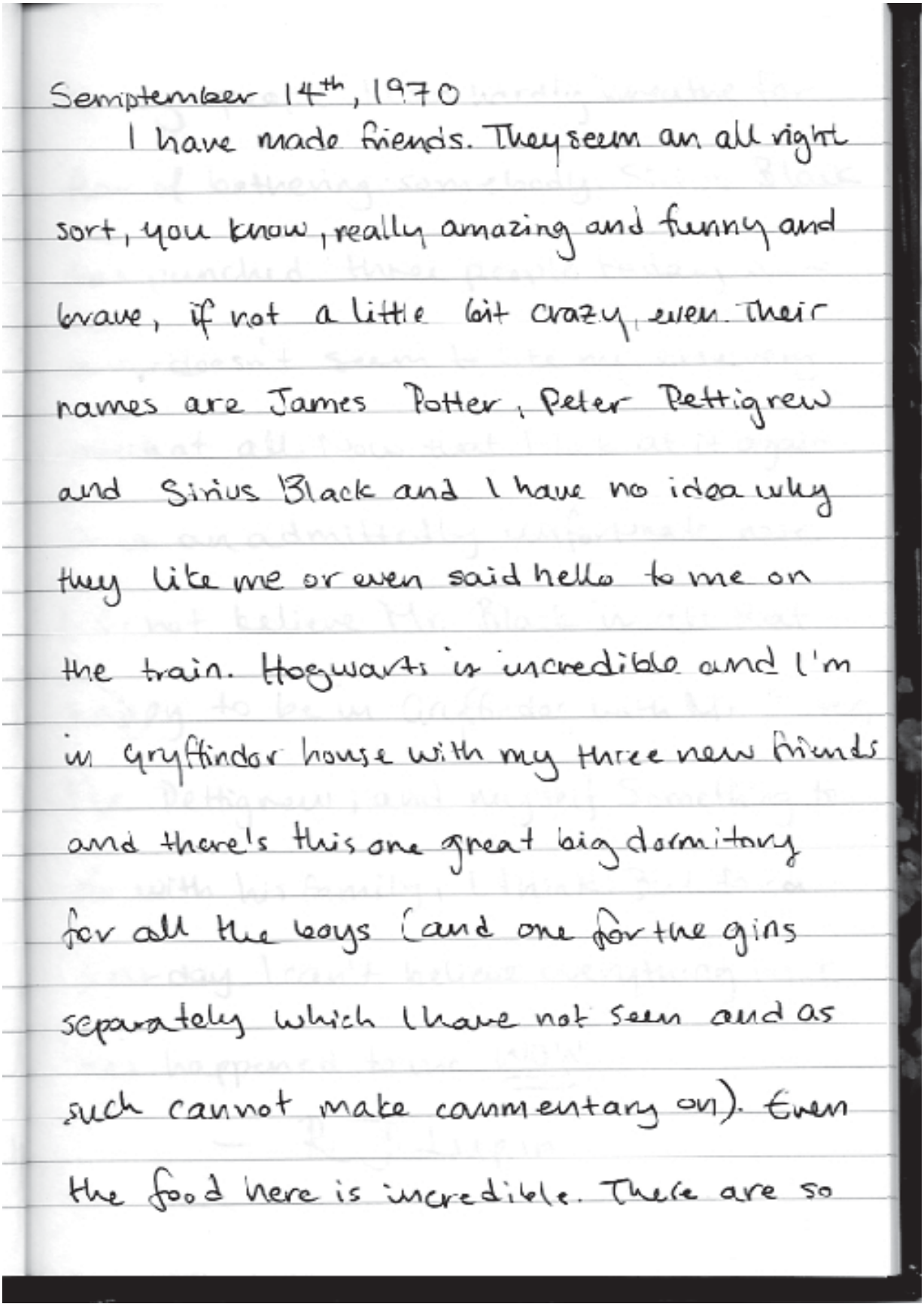
***

Sirius Black stares at the journal. The journal stares back at him. His fingers twitch on his thighs. How long, he wonders, can one boy and one journal engage in a staring match? He checks his watch. One hour and counting. He fidgets. Hours pass slowly. He runs his fingers along the binding and smoothes the dust off the cover. He sneezes. It isn't right to go looking at other people's private thoughts, but then again it feels as if these private thoughts came looking for him. Besides, he argues, they're Moony's private thoughts. Moony's *old* private thoughts. (A boy over eleven years keeping a journal. Will Remus ever learn what it means to be a normal male presence, or will he go on calling diaries "memoirs" or "autobiographies in the making" or any number of pleasant-sounding but fundamentally flimsy excuses?)



Sirius Black stares at the journal. The journal stares back at him. His fingers twitch on his thighs.

***



Semptemberr 14th, 1970

I have made friends. They seem an all right sort, you know, really amazing and funny and brave, if not a little bit crazy, even. Their names are James Potter, Peter Pettigrew and Sirius Black and I have no idea why they like me or even said hello to me on the train. Hogwarts is incredible and I'm in Gryffindor house with my three new friends and there's this one great big dormitory for all the boys (and one for the girls separately which I have not seen and as such cannot make commentary on). Even the food here is incredible. There are so

many people I can hardly breathe for fear of bothering somebody. Sirius Black has punched three people today alone and doesn't seem to like my nose very much at all. Now that I look at it again it is an admittedly unfortunate nose. I do not believe Mr. Black is all that happy to be in Gryffindor with Mr. Potter, Mr. Pettigrew, and myself. Something to do with his family, I think. But for a first day I can't believe everything that has happened to me. WOW.

– R. J. Lupin

September 15th, 1970

I am utterly doomed at Potions.

There is no one in the world so utterly doomed at Potions.

September 17th, 1970

Well it seemed that the cauldron, since I only half-melted it, was salvageable. That is a relief. I feel awfully bad for the boy partnered with me - Severus Snape, a first year Slytherin, who according to Sirius also has an unfortunate nose - because I think he's really quite talented but doomed if I keep melting cauldrons on him. He doesn't look all that pleased and I don't blame him. I'd murder me. At least, I'd want to murder me.

Things are so busy and it's time for lunch!

September 20th, 1970

Cauldrons burned: three. (3)

Remus Lupin: hopeless.

I think Sirius believes me to be not quite right in the head. I'm starting to wonder if I'm not a little less daft than I used to think. I've been assigned to bring in Potions and I've not been here a month.

DOOMED.

Luckily there are other classes, in which I am at least decent, though not half so brilliant as James and Sirius are. They're so used to everything. I'll never be half so confident in defense as they

are, or in any of the other classes –
of which there are many & oh how
I love them all.

I haven't even written Mum or
Dad once yet. Time doesn't pass the same
way here.

– R. J. Lupin

October 1st, 1970

Today Sirius said there might be some hope for me, after all.

I love it here.

October 8th, 1970

All right, the way I understand it is this: in life, in a boy's life, you must have known variables. You must have a group of brave & loyal companions (who will stick to you, no matter the right and wrong, always the thick and thin). You must have Sworn Enemies with whom you cannot exchange any pleasantries of any sort under ANY circumstances. You must have secret handshakes to detect imposters and intruders. You must never, ever question these finite rules.

It just seems a bit unfortunate, really, because I thought Severus Snape was a very bright sort, but for some reason Sirius doesn't like him at all.

Well.

That's that, then.

- R. J. Lupin

October 31st, 1970

Today is Halloween and we've been working on this prank for weeks and it's just brilliant. Well, that's what Sirius keeps saying, over and over, since last Friday. While I don't quite see the necessity for pranks I realize I am abnormal and therefore my perceptions are skewed, so I'd better take Sirius' & James' & Peter's word for it.

What else of note? We all have costumes and they match; we're the musketeers. It was my idea and they liked it.

Sirius has come up with a nickname for Severus which he uses all the time and I don't like thinking it's funny, but the other's do. My abnormal brain should stop chiming in uncalled for. It's "Snivellus". It's really caught on.

If he and James weren't so very clever I should think Sirius would find something unpleasant in his tea in the morning.

Oh blazes I'm late! There's a feast and then the prank, my first prank — I hope I'm not hopeless.

November 1st, 1970

Wow.

I'm not much for pranks but

I love secret passageways.

November 13th, 1970

- Cauldrons burned: ten. (10)
- People punched by Sirius: eleven. (11)
- Times Severus Snape punched by Sirius: seven. (7)
- Pranks effected successfully: three. (3)
- Pranks effected unsuccessfully: one (1)

Wrote a letter to Mum & Dad at last. I don't think any of it made any sense but I can't describe this.

November 25th, 1970

Sirius has detention.

I have an idea. I wonder if James will like it.

ADDED LATER

James liked it.

December 1st, 1970

Yesterday it snowed. Hogwarts is the most beautiful place in the world when it snows, white all over everything and everyone building snowmen and no one concentrating on classes, not even the Professors, not even McGonagall, and all everyone wants to do is play in the snow all the time. Yesterday we made a fort and tomorrow we're going to make an even bigger one, so when the Slytherin attack comes – and Sirius says it <u>will</u> come – we'll be ready for it. It doesn't feel like a snowball fight but rather a snowball <u>war</u>. It is a

necessity of utmost honor that we win.

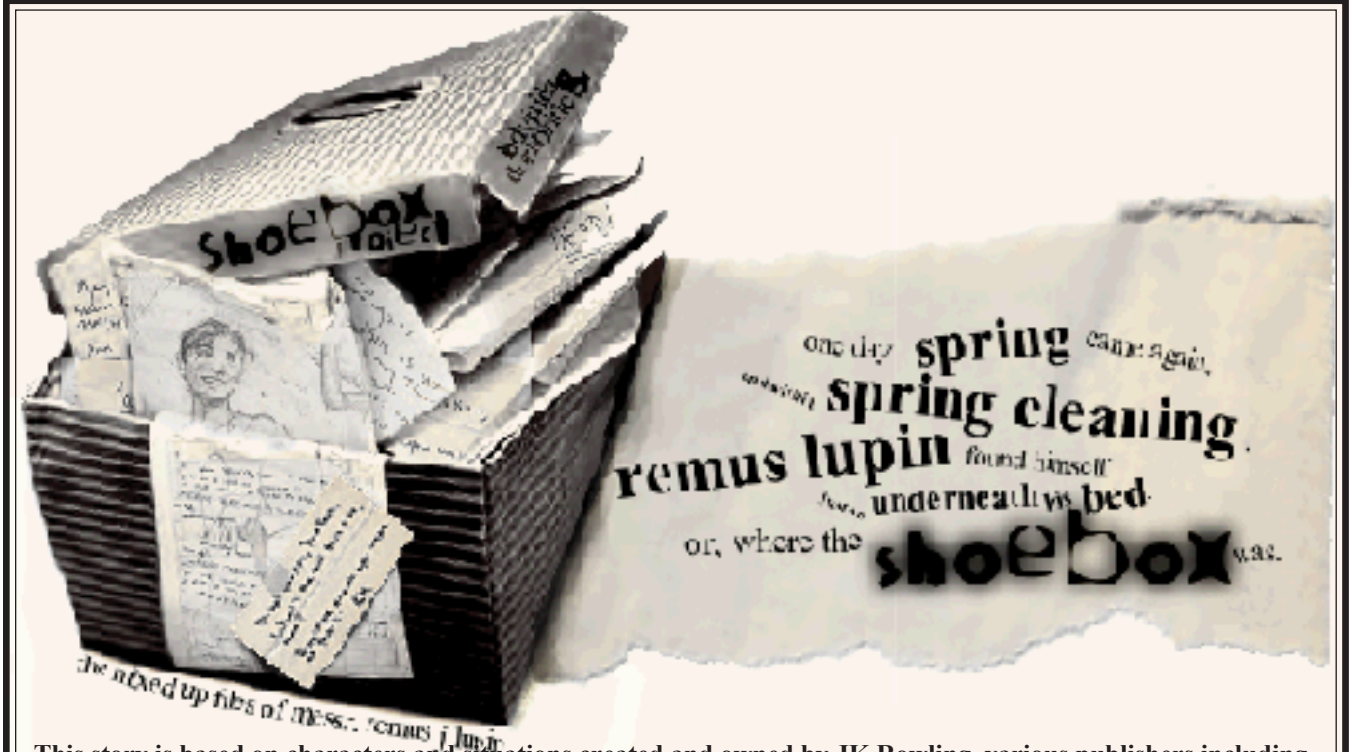
No one here knows. They don't know and they don't suspect. And the other day Sirius said we were like musketeers, all four of us, one for all and all for one. Dad wrote me wondering if maybe they should know, one day, but they can't. They won't. Sometimes I think they like me.

No one here knows.

I hope I get a new coat for Christmas. Sirius didn't mean to tear this one, and it's old and ripping anyway.

***





This story is based on characters and situations created and owned by JK Rowling, various publishers including but not limited to Bloomsbury Books, Scholastic Books and Raincoast Books, and Warner Bros., Inc. No money is being made and no copyright or trademark infringement is intended.

***The Shoebox Project* by LadyJaida and Dorkorific**

http://www.livejournal.com/community/shoebox_project

Part Six: Christmas, 1975
Four Photographs, a Collection of Letters, Four Christmas Puddings, and a Whole lot of Mistletoe.

"Whatever are you doing, Sirius?"

It is Christmas, and the school is full to the brim of it: full of the rich green smell of pine in the hallways and the dining room, of the sparkle of golden lights in the garden and flitting about the classrooms, of the echo of notes in the vast towers as those students too merry to hold in their mood burst spontaneously into carols. Sirius is no less affected, and this, in addition to end-of-term giddiness, has sent him skipping through the halls, brandishing a sprig of mistletoe and a set of jingle bells, and leaving a trail of dizzy, giggling, flushed underclassmen girls in his wake. Remus stumbles on him in the midst of a particularly passionate interlude with a fourth-year Ravenclaw named Tansy. When Sirius sees him over his partner's golden head, he gives the bells a final little shake and pulls away, dumping Tansy rather unceremoniously to the side. She gives a dazed, euphoric little hiccup and runs a shaking hand through her hair. Remus lifts an eyebrow.

"Oh, another victim," Sirius says happily, striding towards him and lifting up the mistletoe with a charming smile and an inviting shake of his bells. "Please? Just one little kiss? Jesus would want you to." *Jingle jingle jingle.*

"Blergh," says Remus with a shudder, and ducks out of range. "I won't let you tempt me into depravity and debauchery. Go away."

"Yes, all right," Sirius say, his cheer unflagging, and Remus could swear he actually skips away. Remus has never seen Sirius skip. He's never seen anyone in combat boots skip, come to think of it, and is vaguely impressed at the leg strength it probably requires.

Not one to feel like a grouchy Christmas stealer, Remus heads down soon after to the Great Hall, wary of the traps set in waylay. For anyone else, Christmastime means good cheer at every turn. For the students of Hogwarts, letting one's guard down means instant ambush by one of the many sprigs of mistletoe planted throughout the castle. Looking nervously above him, scanning the ceilings for any sign of the spiny green plant, Remus nearly falls over his feet three times on the stairs and twice more in the hallway before he reaches the Great Hall.

The room is full of light and laughter, smelling of pine and cakes and sugar dusted cookies. James and Peter are settled into their corner, and Remus heads in their direction, instead of allowing himself to watch Sirius' capers — three girls pressed into the fireplace, looking like deer in the headlights more than willing participants in Sirius' yearly ploy.

"At least he's enjoying himself," James says at the expression on Remus' face.

"Oh, yes. He has the Christmas spirit in him," Peter agrees.

"It can only end in tragedy," Remus points out, settling down. "Please tell me you're up to something that doesn't involve frolicsome revelries."

"Oh no," Peter says virtuously. "We've been doing schoolwork."

Remus steals a glance at James, who is gazing off into the middle distance with a glazed expression. He's seen that look before, a thousand times. It can only mean one thing. "By which, no doubt, you meant 'spying on Lily Evans?"'

Peter sighs. "Actually, I meant 'Watching people snog and laughing at them,' but only because she's been upstairs. Oops. Shouldn't have let that slip."

James starts up with a bang, a purposeful expression on his face, and Remus and Peter automatically put their hands on his arms and force him back down again.

"Let go!" James protests, struggling. "Where's your Christmas spirit?"

"You can't force the magic of Christmas on everyone, you know," Remus says grimly, not giving an inch. "There might not even be any mistletoe over there."

James pauses at this, brain working out a quick solution, then exclaims, "I'll borrow Padfoot's!" and redoubles his escape efforts.

"Stop!" Peter gasps, hanging on doggedly. "He won't lend it you, he's awfully busy — Remus, help, he's out of control!"

"She'll clobber you," Remus says logically. His steely grip around James' wrist helps. "She'll clobber you like she always clobbers you, and in front of people."

"But it's *Christmas*," James whines. He sits back down, sullen, and sets himself to cleaning his glasses. "Some friends you lot are."

"It's for your own health, James," Peter explains. "Really. The last time she knocked you on the side of your head and it turned all purple for *weeks*!"

"I remember." James' expression is dour, dark. "She's inexplicable, really. Everything she does — completely inexplicable."

If Remus knew his friend any less he would launch into an explanation of just how sensible Ms. Lily Evans is, given the evidence. But being sensible himself, he gives James an awkward pat on the back, instead. "Who knows," he says. "It's Christmas. She might be feeling charitable. No, no, that didn't come out right. What I mean is, there's mistletoe everywhere. And if you're caught underneath it — and there's a very good chance you might be — then, well, there's luck for you. Luck provides." Though James' expression brightens considerably, Remus feels as if he's just sentence Lily Evans to public humiliation.

"And what luck won't provide," James adds.

"You can't follow her around anymore," Remus warns. "Remember? She's on to you. I don't know how she's figured it — it could be a spell or something. But she'll know, if you trail her."

"I'm not going to *trail* her," James scoffs. Peter rolls his eyes behind James' back. "I'm just going to help luck along a little bit."

"Oh dear," Remus says.

James gets up, shrugging their hands off him. "I'm for the toilets — don't want to be all musty when Lady Luck gives me my due."

"Oh, dear," Remus says again, and sighs, getting to his feet. "I'm going with you. You simply cannot be trusted."

"I can too!" James says, properly affronted, and then, very loudly, "Oh no, *please*, Remus, go on in front of me! The stair can't possibly be wide enough for three people, and I would hate to barge inconsiderately ahead."

Remus glances up. This can't be James Potter in his right mind talking. There has to be a reason — ah. Lily Evans is coming down the stairs the other way, bathrobe-clad and looking resigned. She gives Remus a Look and rolls her eyes very expressively, which Remus feels deeply even from all the way across the room. Remus's head hurts with the effort of not nodding his emphatic agreement.

James makes an obsequious motion with his head and steps on Remus's foot. "Go," he hisses.

Remus sighs and starts up the stairs. Lily flattens herself against the wall to let him go by, offering him a Prefect's All-In-This-Together kind of smile, or at least informing him she doesn't blame him for the inanities of his inane friends. Remus indulges in a grateful smile until the loud, horrible, spiny-green voice above their heads squalls "WELL, SURPRISE, SURPRISE! SOMEONE'S ABOUT TO GET A HECK OF A CHRISTMAS PRESENT!"

"What?" Remus says, bewildered.

"What?" Evans gasps, shooting a panic-stricken look at Remus.

"WHAT?!" James yelps from behind them, sounding more horrified than the two of them put together.

Remus has never had to wonder what mistletoe is like outside of the wizarding world — a cheerful sprig or two of green flora, dangling harmlessly from above the doorway, a humorous, quaint tradition that no one ever *has* to follow. Not so with mistletoe in Hogwarts. Remus, part Muggle and more used to the Muggle world even now, wonders if the school mistletoe — complete with snapping sharp teeth and a voice grating as sandpaper — is one of Dumbledore's inventions, or simply a warped wizarding take on a Muggle convention.

"Oh, dear," Remus says for the third time.

"PUCKER UP," the mistletoe howls, with sadistic glee. "GIVE THE REDHEAD A GOOD SMOOCH FOR ME OR I'LL BITE OFF YOUR NOSE."

James' face is the color of nice, summer-ripe tomatoes. Lily has flushed in an attractive, nearly devious way. A small crowd has gathered and Remus can just make out Peter's head amongst the curious onlookers, a pained little knot furrowing his low brow.

"Well, now, Remus," Lily says. "Isn't this lucky?"

Remus has stopped looking at James, the expression worse than the color, which is gradually shifting towards fuschia. "Er," Remus says. It sounds like 'erk.'

"WHAT ARE YOU WAITING FOR?" the mistletoe demands. "TEN SECONDS. NINE. EIGHT. SIX. TWO."

Remus will be lucky if dungbombs are the only retaliatory tactic James employs. Heaving a great sigh, feeling more than a little nervous in the center of his stomach, he squeezes his eyes shut and leans forward. "Sorry," he murmurs through his puckered lips, "I've never—"

"Don't worry," Lily whispers against him, "I have. Make it a good one just for James, eh, Remus?"

"LESS TALK!" the plant shrieks. "MORE SALIVA! OR ELSE!"

Remus shrugs helplessly, at James, at Lily, at the enormous stormcloud rapidly gathering over James's beet-red brow.

"Shh," Lily says gently. "I like your nose; I'd hate for you to lose it." And she leans up, small terrycloth-wrapped body purposeful and languid, and presses her mouth gently to his.

Remus is paying too much attention to his own blood pressure to really analyze what kind of kiss it is in any fashion, but all in all, he thinks, it's probably kind of okay, as Lily makes a pleased little noise and moves against him, all curves and quiescence, and Remus is pretty sure he's about ten seconds away from being stabbed to death. It must *look* fantastic, at the very least. And Lily's attractive; Remus has often thought so, though clinically. One of her soft girl hands comes up to smooth over his cheekbone, tangling itself in his hair. There is a muffled screech from behind them and a laugh that is definitely Sirius's, and then Lily finally pulls off, gazing intently at him with wide, innocent green eyes.

"That was *lovely*," she says, with great depth of feeling. "Thank you."

"Erk," Remus says, chokes, and tries again. "Er. No. Thank you."

"Anytime," she whispers, throatily, pecks him on the cheek, and sashays off down the stairs.

Remus risks a glance at James, who is a violent shade of purple at this point: Sirius has him pinned with a hand over his mouth, and favors Remus with a huge wink and a mouthed Well done you.

"THERE NOW," the mistletoe blares. "THAT WASN'T SO BAD, WAS IT??"

"Right," Remus says. He swallows, hard, and nearly fills his throat with his own tongue. "These stairs are *definitely* hereby closed."

***

"You've got to give it a rest, mate." Sirius lounges with his feet propped up on the tea table, mistletoe dangling over one eye. "You've scared Remus off somewhere, he's nowhere to be found for all the mistletoe fun—"

"I should think he's had enough 'mistletoe fun'," James glowers.

"Yes, yes, but jealousy is so unbecoming." Sirius waves an idle hand. "Stop looking so sour. Your face is going to freeze that way."

"Or worse," Peter adds. "Slytherins could see you."

"*Snivellus* could see you." Sirius shudders. "Think of the little thrill, straight to his loins, if he saw you looking like the plague. No. No! I'll not have it." Sirius snaps his mistletoe in half, cringing at its howl of displeasure, and offers the smaller bit to James. "Have a go at it, what d'you say? Just for an hour or two. Excellent exercise in the chasing, excellent practice for the future, and excellent fun all around. And I'll tell you what, Peter," he continues, offering the bigger half, as well, "you can go carousing and having it on with the womenfolk whilst I appropriate for myself some sustenance for my next round this evening, and when I return James here won't look like he's from last night's takeaway."

"You've got lipstick on your nose," James says morosely.

Sirius frowns and goes cross-eyed searching out the culprit. "Have I? Spoils of war, I suppose. Go on, both of you! Go have yourselves a Merry Little, and so on. You make me want to retch!" With one last lecherous wink he skips out of the room, singing "God Rest Ye Merry Gryffindors" in disgustingly cheerful tones.

"I hate him," James says moodily, watching Sirius plant an unsolicited smack atop the head of Frank Longbottom as he departs. "I wish he would lose an arm, or something. He ruins Christmas for everyone. We should lock him up forever."

"Cheer up," Peter says, feeling rather helpless. "Look, do you want to get out of here? We could go under the cloak and throw things at Rabastan Lestrange, that always makes you feel better."

"It's no use, Wormtail," James says. He heaves an enormous sigh communicating all the world-weariness that has tumbled onto his sixteen-year-old shoulders. "I am crippled by Love!" He slumps backward into his chair with a dazed expression that presumably, in his head, passes for Romantically Tragic. Peter wonders if love is always supposed to look like it's been smashed over the head with a History of Magic textbook. Probably not. "And betrayed, as well," James adds. "Crippled *and* betrayed."

"I think we should go — James, we should go do something. Anything. You can't sit around here and sulk forever."

"I want to die, Petey. Why can't you just let me die?"

"Bother," Peter says. The situation is becoming desperate. "It isn't that awful. Hup, come on!" Instead of taking every no for an answer, he grabs James's limp hand and tries to tug him out of his chair. James resists with a tragic little moan. Peter pulls — James yanks back — when all of a sudden, as a result of the fray, their fists knock together, each one clutching half a sprig of mistletoe.

"OH HO HO HO HO!"

Peter freezes. James looks panicked.

"WHAT HAVE WE HERE?" the twin mistletoe voices cackle in unison.

"DECK THE HALLS WITH BOUGHS OF HOLLY," James' shrieks. "FA LA LA LA LA, KISS 'IM NOW."

"TIS THE SEASON TO BE JOLLY," Peter's continues. "TAKE YOUR TIME AND WE'LL TELL YOUR SUPERIORS."

"I don't have any luck," James says. "I don't have any luck at all."

"Let's get this over with," Peter whispers. "Before anyone sees."

James looks Peter up and down. He's a short boy, small, with funny blondish hair and average features, on the overweight side but that could be the remnants of childhood not yet fallen off him. James rarely ever gets any good looks at him at all, just knows him by his presence and takes him, as he sometimes takes all his friends, for granted — knowing he'll turn around and find one of them nearby, knowing they'll be there to eat every meal with him, knowing he can look down from the whip of wind during a Quidditch match and see their tiny faces rooting for him, but not ever needing to look at them for all he *knows* them. It's comforting, to feel them more than see them. It's disorienting to face Peter now, and wonder how the devil you go about kissing one of your mates. One of your male mates.

"One, two, three," James says. The kiss is quick and clumsy and a little wet.

"Blech," Peter says, making a big show of it. "Grgh. Gross."

James wipes his lips with the back of his hand. "Ugh," he agrees.

"FA LA LA LA LA LA," the mistletoes chorus. "LA LA HA HA."

***

Sirius careens down the hall in a jingling half-jog, filled to bursting with that peculiar overwhelming Christmas joy: some combination of cinnamon and pine-smells, and lights, and music with bells in, and the strains of choirs. He loves it. Sometimes he wakes up in October full of music thinking about it. The shrieks of the mistletoe echoing down the hallways — well, thinks Sirius, there's not enough love in this world; people should really just suck it up and do the deed. Kissing! How bad can it be? He winks at a passing third-year Hufflepuff, who cowers against the wall. Sweet girl, wossname.

The door to the kitchen is slightly open when he skids up to it, a pink house-elf just climbing out. She eyes him warily. "Mr. Black is hungry now?"

"Mr. Black," Sirius assures her, "is always hungry, Dinky. What've you got to spare?" Before she can answer he squeezes by her and into the rumbling kitchen, rubbing his hands together joyfully as the wash of smells hits. Christmas! Is its charm limitless?

The kitchens — and their host of tiny guardians — stand no chance against him. Thoroughly supplied with pastries, sweets, fruit and something under his cloak that, Sirius acknowledges to himself, may have been slightly overkill, he heads back out into the hallway, humming little carol-snatches to himself and watching the snow drift down by the huge windows.

He skips round a corner and, head fully immersed in the Holiday Spirit, directly into someone, says "oof!" and tumbles over. The clandestine turkey bounces down the hallway, and Sirius spares a moment to mourn its loss before leaping upright again, seizing his victim's hands, and yanking him to his feet. "Terribly sorry," he says, still jovial, "wasn't looking, you all right?" until he shakes out of his hair, realizes whose hands he is holding, and drops them with an indignant yowl, as if he's been burnt.

Severus Snape, who now has jam the length of his bent nose, has eyes like death and an equally disgusted expression on his face. "Well," he snaps, "it would seem Christmas has a *most* interesting effect on you, Black — I wasn't aware you could be any more *ludicrous*." Sirius recognizes in Snape's voice the pureblood bite, the wealthy sneer, the self-important erudition. It makes his heart hammer in his ears and his fists clench without thinking.

"Perhaps you couldn't see where you were going, *Snivellus*, what with your great big nose obscuring your vision, but *some* people have friends to meet up with and don't appreciate being knocked into."

"What a clever retort." Snape runs a long, thin thumb over the bridge of his nose, wiping sticky blackberry away. "You must spend hours dedicated to my nose, to have so many revelations at hand."

"I'll show you what I have at hand," Sirius says, rolling up one sleeve, forearm tightly muscled, his ample snacks forgotten.

"Ah, yes, of course. Just *like* a Gryffindor. " Snape's lips curl back, twisting his face into something old and brittle. Sirius watches for any flicker of fear in his expression, and is met with nothing. It infuriates him.

"Just you and me, Snivellus," Sirius grinds out. "Afraid?"

"Of you?" Snape snorts.

"Maybe," Sirius breathes with a tight little grin, rolling his head on his shoulders so that his spine cracks menacingly.

"Please," Snape sneers, heavy-lidded eyes flicking insolently over him. "Afraid of a boy who ran away from his own mother? What do you think I am?"

Too fast even to think, Sirius yanks Snape by the shoulder of his robes, whipping him round, and smacks him into a wall. "Don't you dare — you have no idea — "

"What," Snape says, lazy and mocking, "as if everyone who's anyone doesn't know what happened in your poor, dear family." He even smells Pureblood, all old, evil things and varnish and the assumption of a power he doesn't actually have, and there's nothing Sirius wants more than to just make him Purebleed all over the floor.

A bar of chocolate bounces ridiculously out of his robes and onto the flagstones.

Moony would let it go.

"You're pathetic," Sirius snaps scornfully. He pushes Snape against the wall again, for good measure, before contemptuously releasing him. "Go snog Lucius Malfoy somewhere, you seem to like that. The arse bit, anyway." He turns his back on Snape, determined to find another way through the castle.

"Right," comes the languorous, nasal drawl from behind him, "and since we're on the subject of snogging, I'll just let you go back to that pathetic little half-breed disgusting animal that you call a friend—" He cuts off as Sirius whirls and launches himself at him, fist raised, slamming them both around the corner with the force of his tackle.

As Sirius lifts one fist high a scratching, demanding voice from just above them screams, "JUST CAN'T CONTAIN YOURSELVES FOR A MINUTE, CAN YOU?! HONESTLY! YOUTHFUL HORMONES!"

"Oh god," Sirius whispers, feeling all the blood drain from his body.

"Oh god," Snape says, in a voice like the knell of doom. "This cannot be happening."

"It's not happening," Sirius says, very quietly. "This is not happening. Back away. Just back away from it, don't let it know you can hear it talking—"

"YOU MUST THINK I'M STUPID! HANDS WHERE I CAN SEE THEM, OR I'LL HAVE YOUR EYES OUT!"

"I would rather be sterilized," Snape says. "With a spoon."

"I'd rather sterilize *you*," Sirius says. "Without the spoon."

They lift their heads, in comic unison, craning their necks to see the mistletoe, glinting, hidden in the curve of the archway above them. It grins down at them, baring its teeth. "WHAT'S THE MATTER, BOYS?" it demands. "LOST YOUR APPETITE?"

"I'm going to be ill," Snape says. "This is unthinkable."

"It's *unsanitary*, is what it is." Sirius wavers, still wanting to punch Snape's lights out, still wanting to smash his head into the floor, but the anger is slowly eclipsed by the great, overwhelming disgust, welling up in little waves from the center of his belly. "I don't know where the Hell your lips have been, Snivellus, but I'm sure it's got something to do with eye of toad and tail of newt."

"Very funny, Black." Snape tries to struggle free but Sirius shoves him back onto the stone floor, hard, and pins him there with the flat of his palm. "I thought the plan was to flee?"

"NO ESCAPE, NO ESCAPE!" the mistletoe howls. "NONE, NONE! HEADMASTER! *HEADMASTER!*"

"I'm not kissing you," Sirius says. "I'm not. I refuse."

"Am I supposed to be disappointed?" Snape asks.

"*Shut* up," Sirius snaps. A few house elves from the kitchen, startled by all the noise, are peering at them from around the corner. He can hear steps coming down the stairs, too fast to be Dumbledore's, which means *people he has to sit in class with* are going to be privy to this. Sirius doesn't hate Christmas. Not even this dreadful turn can make Sirius hate Christmas. But he does hate mistletoe. His hate is boundless as the dawn.

"Maybe we could trick it," he says, feeling the desperation clawing at his throat. "Maybe I could punch you, right, and you could make a smacking noise — it hasn't got eyes, has it?"

"I KNOW EVERYTHING! FA LA LA LA LA! DO AS I SAY OR I'LL HAVE YOUR LEGS OFF!"

"I'm not doing this," Sirius says, closing his eyes and praying for a Christmas Miracle. "I would rather be killed."

"That could be arranged," Snape hisses, "if you don't do something!"

"Yeah," says a voice from the rapidly gathering crowd. It sounds suspiciously like Ted Tonks, a man Sirius once considered a friend and a brother, and now will, sadly, have to murder, along with everyone else in Hogwarts. "Do something. You know what I mean, eh?" The crowd — where did these people come from? Don't they have classes? Don't they have lives? — titters wildly, in one collective bout of tittering. Sirius' hate is still boundless.

"Right," Sirius says, hating a world that makes it appropriate for him to speak to Severus Snape in a conspiratorial whisper. "On three, right, we'll run for it. It can't get both of us, and you're slower, but you might keep one leg. Ready?"

"Well, well!" says a jolly voice, as sparkling and full of holiday cheer as St. Nick himself. "Are we organizing some inter-house reconciliation for the holidays? Marvelous instincts, boys, very mature."

Sirius considers, not for the first time, the option of death. He turns to look over his shoulder, to make sure it isn't just the fumes off Severus' body giving him hallucinations. No such luck. Albus Dumbledore, arms folded behind his back, eyes forever twinkling, stands over them, casting a pointy shadow across the threshold in which Sirius and Snape have sprawled.

"But what are you boys doing lying down? It's only a kiss," Dumbledore continues. Infuriating, insane old man, Sirius thinks, with his twinkling eyes and his sparkling voice, watching them, trapping them, and waiting for them to Do The Right Thing. Sirius wants to be ill. He wants to be ill all over Severus Snape's face. "I do so love mistletoe," Dumbledore is saying to the gathered students, all of whom are paying rapt, delighted attention to the humiliating display. "A quaint little custom, the origin of which is really quite interesting — but I do think it keeps us on our toes, doesn't it?" The crowd choruses *yes* unevenly. "Well?" Dumbledore turns back to them and gestures widely with a benevolent hand. "An exercise in tolerance, for the school to see. Ten points to each house." He pauses, tapping the side of his nose, rearranging his glasses. "Well, boys?"

"OH THE HOLLY AND THE IVY," the mistletoe howls.

Sirius drags himself to his feet, weighted from the center of him downward. He gulps. He watches Snape straighten, sunless face sharply angled away from Sirius' line of vision, dusting himself off. Sirius rubs the back of his head. *This is it, Black,* he thinks. *Time to make a break for it. Time to grab your trunk and your bike and head for the hills. You could be an outlaw or a pirate or tend a pub or something, and you'll never have to kiss Snivellus except in the nightmares you will still have of this day.*

"Go on!" someone shouts, from way back in the crowd.

"*James*?" Sirius blinks, incredulous.

"Damn. It. All," Severus snarls.

He doesn't even give Sirius the triumph of bravery. He doesn't even give Sirius the barest fragment of dignity left in initiating the kiss, the ultimate mortification. He grabs Sirius' face with his spindly, spidery fingers and jerks him close, lips tasting like lunch, kiss perfunctory and clinical in its intimacy, like a doctor's appointment.

Their enormous audience bursts into applause.

"Nnngh," Sirius says miserably, pawing at his mouth.

"I will never be clean again," Snape says. There's little triumph in his hollow, dead voice.

They accidentally lock eyes, accusatory, hateful, repulsed. Both twitch, shudder and stare determinedly in opposite directions.

"Very good, boys, very good," Dumbledore says blissfully, and Sirius entertains a brief fantasy in which he is strangled by his own beard. "Happy Christmas to all, and to all a good night! Ho ho ho!" His belly under his robes quivers like a bowl full of evil.

Sirius shuts his eyes and enters a brief, nightmarish trance; when he opens them again, Snape and Dumbledore are gone, though they will remain burned on his memory forever and ever and ever and ever until death claims him at last.

"Prongs," he croaks, "Memory charm. Please. I'll pay you good money. Please, please, make this have never happened."

"How was it, eh, Padfoot?" says James. "Did he push your buttons? Was it greasy?"

Sirius eyes him blearily.

"And we thought ours was bad," Peter says. James elbows him, hard, in the stomach.

"Your what?" Remus asks, peering out from behind them.

"Our nothing," James says.

"Nothing," Peter echoes, nodding emphatically. "Our nothing at all."

"Oh God." Sirius sinks to the floor. "Am I dying? Am I dead? The inside of my mouth feels like I'm dying. Moony — Moony, quick — take my temperature. Did he poison me? Do I have a fever? What's happening — where am I — I can't see!"

"Sirius," Remus says, "you're hysterical." He kneels down beside him anyway, obligingly, and touches the back of his hand to Sirius' forehead. "Well," he diagnoses, "I think you'll live."

"But who calls that living," Sirius groans. "Hold me."

"Get up, Sirius," Remus says. "Come on. Up, up. We'll get through this. There's Christmas Pudding with dinner, you know."

"You're trying to distract me." Sirius' eyes narrow. "You're trying to tempt me away from my dungeon of pain and Snivellus germs with talk of food I can never again enjoy because his lips are forever burned into mine."

"There's Christmas Pudding," Remus repeats.

"I do like Christmas Pudding," Sirius admits.

"That's right," James says, feeling very generous with his consolation now that Sirius has worse luck than he can ever claim. "There, there."

"How many people were there?" Sirius stares from one to the other to the next of his friends, head lolling weakly. "God dammit, men, just hit me with the truth."

"You can't handle the truth," James says with painful honesty.

"That bad?" Sirius whimpers.

"That bad," Remus says, and then, kindly, "chocolate?"

***

"He isn't still mad at me," Remus ventures, from behind his book, "is he?" James hasn't been around all evening, since dinner, and was terse all during their meal. Of course, the food had been spectacular and no one had been talking as much as they could, given the option of eating as much as they could, but the paranoia creeps in and out of Remus' awareness like a cold. He rubs idly beneath his nose, searching Sirius' distraction for some sign of recognition. "Sirius? Hello? *Sirius*?"

"What?" Sirius blinks, jumping nervously, and then relaxes with a long, pained sigh. "It was on the *lips*, Moony," he mutters. "D'you have any idea how *disgusting* — oh. You asked a question. Er. What was it again?"

"Never mind," Remus says. "It doesn't matter."

"No, no, don't do that." Sirius pulls a frown. "Tell me?"

It's Remus' turn to sigh. "I just wanted to know if James is *very* mad," he says quietly. "That's all."

"What? James? About — oh. About that. No. Well, he'll get over it, anyhow. He and Peter took my mistletoe, d'you know. They're off causing chaos amongst the masses, no doubt. Told them they could keep it. I *hate* mistletoe."

"Mm," Remus murmurs.

"It was horrible," Sirius insists. "It was like — no, it was *worse* — it was *worse* than kissing a dead rat, worse than kissing a dead *fish*. Touched me all over, the smelly, unclean git. I can still feel his hands on me, you know. I suppose that's what they mean, being touched by death."

"It sounds terrible," Remus says. They walk in silence for a minute, and then Sirius jumps again, more violently this time, and whips his head round. Remus jumps, as well, but out of startlement. For a long, trembling second Sirius stands in total stillness, forcing Remus to keep still as well. Finally, he relaxes. "Oh God, Moony, I thought I heard him."

"Snape?"

"Dumbledore," Sirius says. He shudders, all twitchy in the corner of his eye. "You don't understand, Moony, I'll never be able to look the man in the eye again."

"Right," Remus says.

"Oh, here." Sirius, rough as always but affectionate and sincere. "Look, don't worry about it. James, he's not really mad. Jealous, yeah, I'll grant you the man's jealous. But he's not really angry. It wasn't your fault — God, it wasn't any of our fault." He goes slightly bug-eyed, remembering again.

"I know," Remus says, and sighs. "It's just that I worry. He really does like her, you know. And I didn't exactly say no."

"You always worry," Sirius replies, and slopes his long arms around Remus's shoulders, knocking their foreheads together gently. "He still likes you. He's just going to ask you a lot of awkward questions about were her lips soft or chapped, that kind of thing, and you're going to have to figure out a way to put it out of your mind."

"Urgh," Remus says. "I shudder to think what he'll do with that knowledge."

"I suggest you don't think about it at all," Sirius offers. "You and I can do that together. We can both spend our time not thinking about things." His left eye twitches again. It's beginning to grow worrisome.

"Don't," Remus interrupts quickly, "la la la, think of elephants, sing a song of sixpence, how much wood could a woodchuck chuck et cetera—"

"You're a good friend, Moony, but it's too late," Sirius says. His voice echoes hollowly within his throat. "Still, it's a kind thought. But sixpence and woodchucks just aren't enough. Not all the — what was it — perfumes of Arabia can get his filth off me."

"Something like that, yes."

They turn to swing round a corner when suddenly Sirius slams a hand into Remus' chest and Remus stumbles backward, tripping over his own robes.

"Wh—" he starts. Sirius, holding him up by the sleeves, slowly, silently, points upward. Above them it dangles, teeth glinting in the candlelit hall. Remus has had enough unexpected kissing forced upon him for one day, for one month even, and for a boy so private as he strives to be it's all very invasive. He doesn't know how Sirius does it. "Oh," he says. "Right. Can't have that happen again."

"It's staring at me," Sirius whispers. "Do you see it? I bet you Dumbledore keeps track of each and every one and just *waits* to descend, like a spider or worse."

"Calm down, Sirius," Remus soothes. "We'll just go at it one after the other. It can't *get us* that way."

"Are you sure?" Sirius looks around nervously, up and down the walls, scanning the high ceilings. "There could be others. Waiting."

"Then we'll walk one behind another the rest of the way," Remus offers. "How does that sound? Perfectly safe. Perfectly mistletoe free."

"I'm never going to live it down, you know." Sirius' face twists with degradation. "I'm ruined. I'm *ruined*."

Remus pats him on the arm. "You first," he says.

"No, that's all right, you."

"But I—"

"Hm." Remus laughs, sheepish, and starts forward — just as Sirius does the same.

They stop short just in time and tumble over one another's feet. Sirius glances at Remus and laughs, a short, nervous bark. Remus pulls back immediately, sensing too well his own discomfort, understanding too well Sirius' sudden, stiff posture. They look away from one another pointedly.

"Hah — sorry, Moony." Sirius shakes his hair out over his eyes and glances up again, eyes glinting light through the dark strands. The mistletoe is still up there, evil and waiting.

"It's no bother," Remus says, intensely uncomfortable within himself. "I'll just — I'll just go first, shall I?"

"Righto, haha," Sirius says, sounding a little strangled. "I'll be, er, I'll be right behind you. Not too close behind you. At a safe distance."

"Right," Remus agrees. He coughs into his hand and walks out bravely under the mistletoe, head up. After a reasonable period of time he hears Sirius's shuffling footsteps start up again behind him. He wants to turn, to look back at him and glean some reassurance, but doesn't.

"This is weird," Remus calls over his shoulder, and then feels stupid.

From behind him Sirius's sharp, barking laugh suffers. It's uncomfortable, too. "But don't you feel safer?"

"I suppose," Remus



***



***

Sirius Black to Remus Lupin, Christmas Hols

Hellooo Moony McMoonykins,

Happy Christmas to you! Well not quite Christmas but getting there, anyway. You can imagine, the tower is a grim dank prison without all the Marauders in it but there are advantages. For example I am currently devouring a turkey breast with my bare hands, that's what all the smudges are round the corners. BARBARIC AND DELICIOUS, food never tastes so good as when you hunt it down yourself. Down with cutlery!!!

As you can tell I am having a perfectly BRILLIANT time here, thank you, I don't need ANY of you to be happy. I've mapped out all the passages we know on that big mock-up of James's and I spend most of my days going round tapping the walls to see if I can find any new ones. (No luck so far but there's loads of wall left, this is a great sodding CASTLE after all!)

This is a short letter because I am near out of parchment. Send me good presents or I will curse you and all your descendants.

—Paddlebrains

Remus Lupin to Sirius Black, Christmas Hols, Prompt Response

Padfoot, c/o the House Elves

It would seem you are holding up indefatigably, which is good to know. Hopefully you are not eating too much Christmas Pudding, and by too much I mean save some for Dumbledore or who knows, the mistletoe might eat you in your sleep. (He no doubt has an army of mistletoe at his very fingertips. Look out behind you.) Your letter was very smelly of grease & rosemary when it arrived but I have attempted a cleaning spell on it and it will serve for the records.

In any case, I have written up a list of suggestions for places to check & enclosed them in this letter. There are a few wrong turns in the dungeons, by the way, and a certain tunnel which forks into three separate and equally dank passageways. When your research brings you there, make sure you do not take the right one or the one in the middle one as, with the first, you will find yourself in an enormous storeroom full of eyeballs, whereas, with the second, you will find yourself falling into a pit of what I can only assume are eyeballs, as they are very round, have quite a good deal of slime, and certainly go squish when applied with pressure.

(You wonder how I am so well-acquainted with the dungeons, and I remind you, Remedial Potions. Most unpleasant, being a second year Moony and attempting to navigate the dungeons all by oneself.)

Christmas here is busy as it always is. A few of mum's aunts are coming over and they are all very disapproving of, well, everything, picking at the furniture and making comments behind their hands about the small upstairs and dad wanders around looking angry *all the time* so I really do wish Christmas were over already and we might get back to research.



Again: stop eating so much Christmas Pudding. It will ruin your figure.

Remus Lupin, c/o the Holiday Rush

Sirius Black to Remus Lupin, Christmas Hols, Prompter response

Mooooooooony, surrounded by great-aunts:

No wonder you are such a disaster, you were scarred as a child by pits full of Slytherin eyeballs!! If only you had warned me about The Pit day earlier but alas we are now linked by trauma. I thought they were skinned plums. If I hadn't had all that pudding in me I might have eaten one or several. SO YOU SEE AGAIN I AM SAVED BY PUDDING. I can't help it if it does ruin my figure, it has rescued me from eyeballs.

By the time you get back I will be pleasingly rotund, you can use me as a balloon or kick me around the common room for your twisted amusement. I can hardly stand to look at myself in the mirror. It's tragic to see such beauty fade really, all in all it's probably a good thing that I never want to kiss anyone ever again as no one will ever kiss me now that I am hideously fat.

Other than that the list has been very helpful. I've been asking the portraits too, they are really terribly solicitous if you butter them up and they'll talk to the statues for you. Apparently there's a trick to one behind Gregory the Smarmy but I don't like how he eyes me so I've not really explored it. I've found some weird weird rooms though, they're brilliant, I'd never have known they were here! One of them I went into and I swear it was the Moony Room,

there were all these books in there and records and jumpers and things. I've not been able to find it since though. And there's a horrible scary one up the Hufflepuff wing, it's all black and the walls are POINTY and as soon as you go in they start to CLOSE. That one is the Room of Doom and I've put it up with an X, I nearly lost my life. I can't think what good a smashy room does anyone, on the other hand if I'd known about it that time that Snape Well You Know, then I might have put it to good use.

That's the news from Hogwarts. I'm sorry you're having a busy Christmas, I know you like the quiet but you can put your head in a blanket. I remember your mum's aunts from third year! Is that one there who yelled at me, Prudence or something? You should give her a great big kiss from me.

Prongs's mum has sent me three tins of biscuits and a towel with my name on. What am I to do with all this opulence?

—Padfoot, surrounded by house-elves

Remus Lupin to Sirius Black, Christmas Hols, Same day

Padfoot, surrounded by opulence —

Such riches. What with those biscuits and the Christmas Puddings I will return to school to find you, bloated and beached as a whale, sprawled out in a hidden passageway, lost forever. It will be a great tragedy and I will write a novel about it, which will sell millions, and you will live on always in literature. It will be a most moving story. I can just see it now.

And there we found him, eyes still open, lips still smelling of brandy. His beloved Christmas Pudding lay half finished beside him, strewn across the dusty corridor. Behind him was all blackness, and his friends, laying down their pride, their masculinity, their self-respect, wept great tears for their fallen comrade, slain by Holiday Baking and Too Much Good Cheer. They bowed their heads over him in silence. He had not even unwrapped his presents before his arteries exploded within his chest.

What say you, Sirius? Up for being immortalized in hardback forever and ever? You shall be a sung hero. Rare that heroes get singing about.

Especially the sort who die of Christmas Pudding.

D'you know, your 'Moony Room' as you called it does intrigue. Do you remember where you found it? Did you go back and was it gone? I've had the same experience, in a manner of speaking, as once I found myself in a tight spot — up all night studying for Potions and Filch on the prowl while I tried to get back to Gryffindor house — and suddenly, there was this door, in a place I knew there was no door at all before. I ducked inside and there was just this small empty room with no windows, almost like a forgotten closet, and a slit in the door only I could see through. Perfect for hiding. I researched it later and there was nothing on it, even in the meager Hogwarts Floor Plan I found in the restricted section. Stop looking scandalized, I got permission.

If you had eaten the eyeballs I would never have spoken with you again.

The Aunts are here and I cannot bring myself to kiss them, even for your sake. Ask anything else of me and I will provide.

This time I've enclosed some sweets, not as though you need it with all the feasting you must be doing, and a picture of our tree, and if there's anything else that will keep you out of the kitchens I can provide.

Remus, surrounded by assassins.

Sirius Black to Remus Lupin, Christmas Hols, Scratchy writing

Moony, drowning in relations—

HOW CAN YOU GIVE ME MORE SWEETS, CARE YOU NOTHING FOR MY FRAGILE ARTERIES?! Honestly I think you care less about me than you do about your precious three-volume novel which by the way will be far more gruesome than you suggest, the scene will really be an explosion rather than a beaching. Anyway if you really loved me you would not write a novel about my death; no, it would be an epic poem and you would have to pass it down by the spoken word only. So perished Sirius of the shaggy hair, breaker of motorbikes. I would be the Achilles of gluttons and all would mourn me down through the generations of man.

You know I honestly can't remember where that room was? I was sort of wandering aimlessly about two days after you lot left, thinking dark thoughts, and then there was this door at the end of the hallway. I was in a bleak mood anyway as Peeves had just hit me with a currant and I wasn't paying attention I suppose. How do you suppose we map vanishing rooms? They won't map themselves. And what good is a room full of jumpers? It was all right for me since all I wanted was to sort of curl up and not be...I dunno, anyway it was all right for me but I can't think what most people would do with a room like that.

MOONY MOONY MOONY I AM SHOCKED AT YOU, SHOCKED. A prefect wandering into the Restricted Section. YOU'LL BE STRIPPED OF YOUR BADGE YOUNG MAN, paraded through the streets as a warning to all rebellious prefects. You didn't happen to steal their copy of The Garden of Golden Delights, did you, because SOMEONE did, I snuck in for my annual perusal only to find it missing. No one's allowed to check it out so either we have thieves and perverts in our midst or Madam Pince must truly have hidden depths. Oh God I cannot believe I just said that let alone had those thoughts GET OUT OF MY HEAD ARGH.

Well I must go eat more to forget. I'm sorry about your aunts. There's not much shopping to do around here, most of the shops are closed since everyone's home with their families, but I've got you something anyway. It's not much but I didn't know if you'd read him and it seemed like your sort of thing. Do you like Kipling? (Don't say I DON'T KNOW, I'VE NEVER KIPPLED because that would not be funny AT ALL. Har har har har.) I like him, he's all wild beasts and mad Englishmen. Anyway even if you don't like it DON'T DROP IT IN A LAKE, I SHALL BE DISPLEASED. Also there's chocolate of course, you glutton.



Sirius, smothered in lard

Remus Lupin to Sirius Black, Christmas Hols, Written while hidden in the bathroom

Padfoot, ruined by calories —

I only thought you might like them. It was all we had about. That's gratitude for you. Try to bring a friend into the Christmas festivities — well, Christmas nightmares hereabouts is more aptly phrased — and what does he do? He tells you it's your fault he's going to die young from some sort of heart explosion after all the stress he's put on the poor thing, not thinking about the future, only thinking about drowning his sorrows in soggy desserts. Never again will there be sweets for

you. They rot the teeth anyway, so my mum says, and constantly, just because I found where she keeps the chocolate and keep eating it so as not to have to listen to Aunt Prudence quote poetry incorrectly and having to stay quiet while mum glares at me not to correct her. It is torment. I am very polite though. They at least think I am the perfect picture of a little gentleman. I want to bite them, which is rude and very improper.

So was lost our great hero.
Not with a bang, but with a whimper —
but also with a bang, yes, daring to eat
too many puddings, and all alone was he
on the day the butter claimed him.

Or perhaps I'll do them in rhyming couplets. Iambic pentameter gives such excellent epic structure.

He paused to touch the pudding to his lips
(With all that pudding spread across his hips)

And smelled of brandy, through and through,
whilst all his innards felt like glue.

When we returned when Christmas Hols were over
We found him large and wide as Dover,

Yet stirred he not upon the floor
His Christmas Pudding days were o'er.

In any case, as I am bound to become poet laureate any day now, let me move on to other things, such as that room. I think I've developed a theory, so bear with me a moment: what if, just *what if*, the room is there only when you *need* it? Sort of a room of requirement, in a sense. That sort of magic is nearly impossible, I can't fathom how it's done, but certainly if you had a room when you were no doubt moping around looking for things to punch holes in, and I had a room when I was being chased down the hall by that ratty Mrs. Norris (you know how I hate cats), and neither of us could find it again, then it *must* be possible. I would ask Dumbledore, you see, but the circumstances are shady and I'm not quite sure how it would look on my record.

Oh, stop snickering, go back to your puddings.

Remus Lupin, THE POET.

Sirius Black to Remus Lupin, Christmas Hols, Christmas

M, embarrassingly brilliant composer of epics—

I have no words for the literature you have composed in honor of my incipient death, all of it is so masterful I can barely move for awe. Well either awe or pudding I cannot tell which.

Your theory is interesting but ridiculous. If YOU had found a room full of jumpers then I would say, well, surely it is the Room of Stuff You Need. But what am I supposed to do with such a room, you know as well as I do that when I wear a jumper I look more or less like a sock. Well, I don't know, I didn't mean for it to be such a big deal I just thought it was funny or something. If it is the Room of Needing Things then why hasn't it ever showed up full of green vegetables or fruit when I am on my prowlings? I swear I am this close to getting scurvy.

Christmas Eve Feast is just over, it was painful. Dumbledore leered at me constantly and McGonagall refused to return my ardent gazes, also Hagrid ate all the roasted apples and the only other sixth-year there was Lionel Lovegood who spent the whole time gazing at me in that cockeyed way and telling me bizarre statistics in a sheep's voice. The man is a holy terror and God only knows what he will do with his life.



I cannot thank you enough for the poetry, honestly, it has made me feel much better about the way I am fat and dying and alone.

Happy really Christmas!

Thus spake Sirius of the long tail, whose untimely death was writ down as legend, before he passed away into the halls of Hades.

Remus Lupin to Sirius Black, Christmas Hols, Christmas

Sirius —

I am writing not in reply but in the hopes that this will reach you Christmas morning. Happy Christmas Day Morning! (And soon Happy Christmas Day Afternoon and then Christmas Day Evening.)

I'm coming back early. My dad said I could because only one of us male influences need sacrifice himself to the Jowly Aunt Creatures — I want to be kinder, I do, but I'd like them more if my *mum* liked them, if they were *nice* to my mum, even, but they aren't and it makes me too mad when they ignore how hard she's trying — and so he gave me permission to pack up my things for tomorrow. He only told mum about it last night after dinner. There wasn't even any yelling. She seemed all right with it, just sad at the mouth.



In any case, if you manage to kill yourself on pudding before then, then there's nothing I could have done anyway to help you, and that's that. Rest In Peace, Padfoot.

I will see you probably late tomorrow.

R

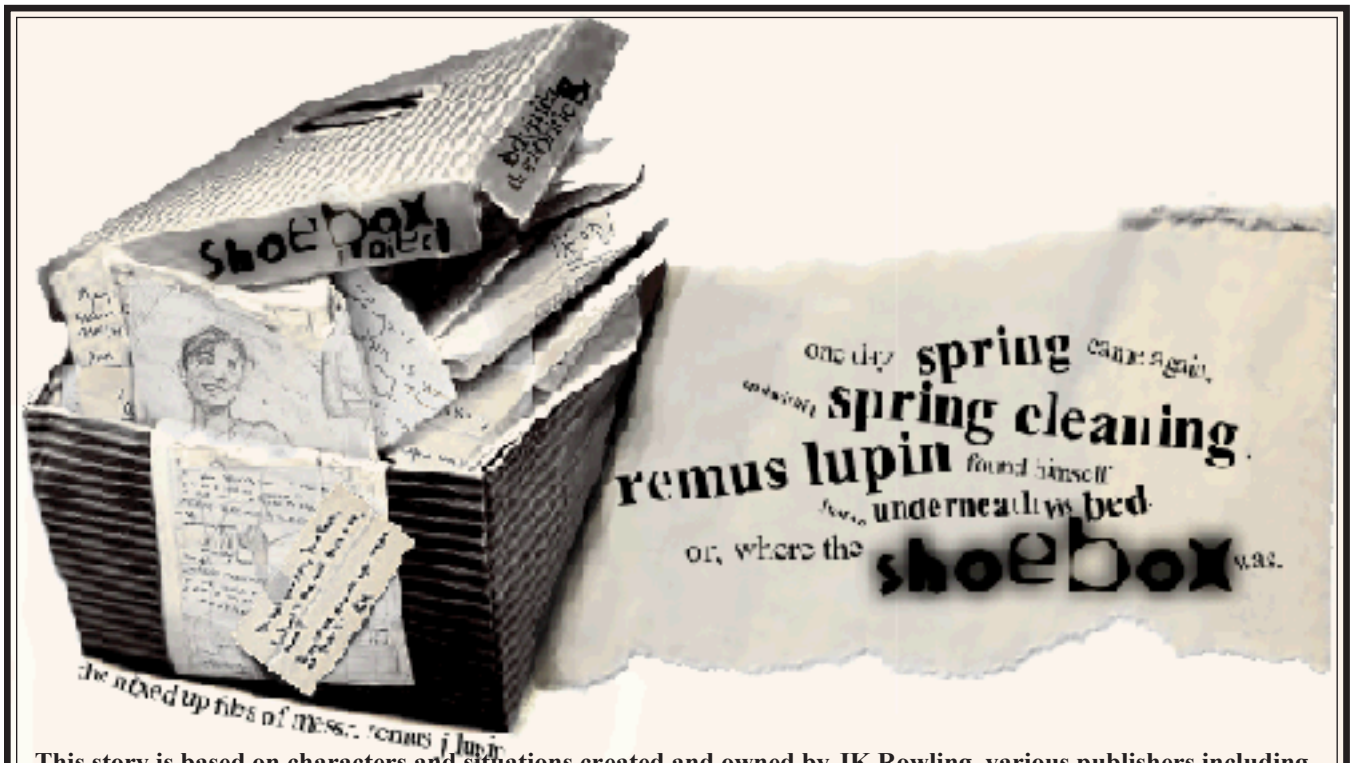
PS I don't suppose you would like any socks? I have countless pairs of new socks, which are warm and nice but don't all fit in my trunk.

Sirius Black to Remus Lupin, Christmas Hols, Immediately thereafter

R—

I DON'T WANT SOCKS. DO I REALLY HAVE A MOONY COMING?! AGHH YOU CANNOT LOOK AT ME I AM ASHAMED. HURRY UP IT IS ELEVEN O'CLOCK WHERE ARE YOU?!

—S



This story is based on characters and situations created and owned by JK Rowling, various publishers including but not limited to Bloomsbury Books, Scholastic Books and Raincoast Books, and Warner Bros., Inc. No money is being made and no copyright or trademark infringement is intended.

***The Shoebox Project* by LadyJaida and Dorkorific**

http://www.livejournal.com/community/shoebox_project

Part Seven: Through Early January, 76

Places to consider double-checking:

1. Dungeons (beware of the eye bubble)
2. Consider the statues (do not let Sirius feel them up when searching for secret passageways)
3. Be kind & flattering to the portraits (especially the very old ones for surely they must know a lot)
4. Make a basic map first
5. Keep on schedule (one floor per two weeks is most reasonable)

NOTES: day one – spoke with the portrait of a nice old man from the eighteenth century and had an excellent discussion with him about poetic form until Sirius got impatient & we started on the topic of mapmaking. He asked us if we were cartographers and, though we are amateurs of course, saying yes was very honest. He said he would look into it as I was such a fan of the sonnet. MOST PROMISING.

day two – never disturb sleeping portraits. let sleeping portraits snore. They are quite fantastically loud, when, as you consider it, their lungs are two dimensional. Better luck tomorrow them.

day three – Sirius an incorrigible flirt, but young female portraits very gossipy. Three new rooms today alone!

***

Remus reaches up to wipe ink off his cheek with an inkier thumb and succeeds only in doubling the size of the stain. He doesn't seem to notice, distracted little motions the only change in his posture as he dedicates himself to research. Sirius rubs at the ink smear on Remus' cheekbone without looking up from the reading in front of them. In the library, time passes strangely, minutes like hours and hours themselves like minutes. Sirius stifles a yawn and finishes the last paragraph before giving a lazy nod, a wordless 'go on.' Remus turns the heavy page in a cough of dust.

Who knew the architecture of Hogwarts was wound so inseparably in its history? *And then Godric did bequeath this, and then Salazar did order that, and then Rowena did instruct such-and-such, and then Helga did desire so-on and so-forth.* Centuries of history in two days and only one map — and that one a replica of an antique, the original floor plan obsolete before even the first stone was laid.

"Never knew that," Sirius remarks. The silence shifts around them uncomfortably at the first spoken interruption in a long while. Possibly years. Remus pauses in shorthand note taking, the scratching of his quill pausing as well. Sirius clears his throat sheepishly in the ensuing silence. "Never knew that," he repeats, pointing. He feels more than a little stupid. "Probably because it has *nothing* to do with secret passageways or hidden rooms or even well-known passageways and perfectly visible rooms. It reads like a History of Magic textbook, Moony. I want to *do* something."

"You *are* doing something," Remus replies, gnawing on the tip of his pen. "You're reading."

"Well, I want to do something besides sit here and think about stabbing myself in the head," Sirius says. "You know what I've been doing for fun? Watching that ink stain grow on your face. You have to stop chewing on that pen, every time you do the feathers go and it smears." Remus looks down at the quill and colors. "God, I've read this sentence about twelve million times."

"I only just turned the page," Remus reminds him.

"I *know* that, it's just that there's no bloody *difference* between this new sentence and the one on the last page that I read twelve million times! Look, I'm closing my eyes: I bet you a hundred Galleons it says something like 'This, too, was *another* crucial development in the ultimate building of the school that many had thought would never be built.'"

"It actually says 'a critical factor,' but that's uncanny," Remus says. After a moment, he sneezes. "Dusty."

"Bless you. Do you see what I mean? And the dust is giving me the black lung. Can we go run around the castle or something? Please? Do you want to do a hornpipe with me? I swear, lack of movement has driven me illiterate."

"But we can't possibly go at it head first," Remus reasons. "Look, we need to know what we're doing. We need to have something to work off of. We need to find our foundations before we can fling ourselves into exploration. We'll end up breaking something important or getting squished like little bugs. I mean, I don't know if you've been reading the same book I have, but this castle has the tendency to be *mean* a lot of the time, or at least moody."

"Let me tell you," Sirius grumbles, "I'd rather break a lot of important somethings and then get squished like a little bug than read one more sentence in this huge, evil book of yours. I don't even know how you lift it."

"But it really is uncanny," Remus murmurs. "That way you knew the line almost verbatim."

"Look," Sirius presses. "We need some fresh air. You remember that, don't you, Moony? Air? Wind? Sunlight? Lack of phosphorescence caused by countless hours crouched in the darkness? The occasional living, breathing creature dancing about?"

Remus heaves a sigh. "We went out for lunch, didn't we?"

"Moony. That was hours ago." Sirius scratches underneath his nose, regarding the book with such a look of disgruntled challenge that Remus turns his face away to hide the laughter that crosses over it. "Oh, come on," Sirius mutters. He flips through the thick, musty pages, letting them fall one against another in a dusty tumble. "There have to be a hundred chapters in this book."

"Seventy-five."

"Do you really expect us to read *all* of them?" Sirius' eyes are wide with horror. Remus wonders if maybe he hasn't pushed the glory of research on him too hard, too fast. Best make a joke of it, or face Sirius' wrath for weeks.

"And this is only the first book." Remus' eyes sparkle, almost wickedly. "But no, no, I won't subject you to the others. If you think 'This, too, was another critical factor in the ultimate building of the school that many had thought would never be built' is bad, you might try and murder the other books, I think. And then I would never forgive you."

"Don't be ridiculous, Moony," Sirius says haughtily. "You can't murder a book. Even I know that." He licks his lips and flashes a grin. "But you know what you *can* do with a book, what you *can* do is burn it, or throw it out a window, or draw, mm, big hairy moustaches on all the ancient illustrations, and blacken the teeth of the women and children, and—"

"Oh God, don't," Remus yelps. He eyes Sirius balefully. "It's like talking about drowning babies. You are a terrible person."

"I'm not the one imprisoning my best friend in the World of Dust for all eternity!" Sirius rolls over onto his back with a dramatic sigh, arms flopping onto the piles of unread tomes with which they have surrounded themselves. "This is unreasonable. Look, I like a good book as much as the next man. You saw me with Dumas, I didn't leave the tower for four days. These? These are not good books! These are evil, evil books, full of — well, evil — and on top of that, they're boring and totally irrelevant to what we're trying to do. They are! This castle's been under construction for a thousand bloody years! Be reasonable. Look, we'll compromise: twenty more minutes of this and then promise me, *promise me*, we can go out and see if the second ice age has come or not."

Remus gives him a lofty look. "You're just too lazy to do real work, aren't you? All talk and no delivery."

"I have plenty of delivery! I deliver things all the time!" Sirius rolls back onto his stomach, props his chin up on one hand, and glares, full of righteous indignation. Remus just sits there neatly before him and totally cheerful, still gnawing on that bloody pen, while scanning the lines as if they might actually contain useful information. It's *infuriating*. "I am full of delivery," Sirius presses on. "Delivery is my middle name. I deliver all kinds of things, too. And do you know what the wonderful thing about delivery is, Moony? It involves *some kind of activity* and *some kind of results*. Have *you* learned anything from this exercise in pedantic futility? Because I haven't."

"I've learned that you make me insane in small enclosed spaces," Remus says, reasonably.

"You knew that already," Sirius points out, triumphantly. "Hah!"

"I did indeed," Remus replies. "I just didn't know how much. But now, I think I can actually derive a formula." He bends over a fresh scrap of parchment, quill waving madly in the air to the little thin scratching sounds of writing, before he lifts his creation proudly in the air. "Do you see? With this equation — I call it The Close Proximity Factor — I could even graph my level of insanity as per time spent alone with you as well as size of the small enclosed space in which the time is spent."

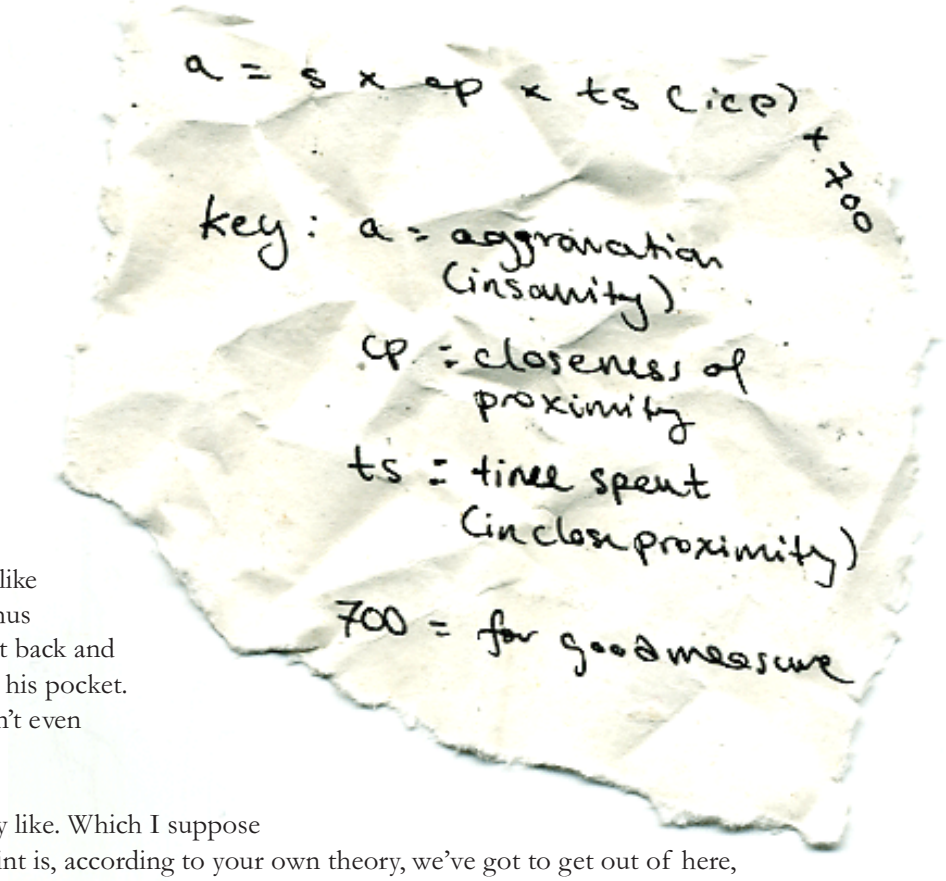
"How d'you like that. *You're* the one who forces me into your 'small enclosed space' and then I'm the one who suffers from it." Sirius leans forward, snatching the equation from Remus' hands. "Here, let me see that."

"It's hardly relevant to the work at hand." Remus tries to grab it back, but Sirius holds it just out of reaching, scanning the neat, slanting handwriting for any mistakes. Naturally, there are none.

"You're the one who wrote it." Sirius frowns. "What's that for?"

"The S is for Sirius, naturally, while the little a stands for aggravation, also referred to as insanity."

"You know, this is clever, for something on the spot." Sirius turns the paper around in a slow circle, following the formula's progression. "So if I plugged in 'library' and 'a zillion hours,' would we end up with your head exploding?"



"Can't you just let it go? You're like a puppy with an old steak." Remus manages to wrest the parchment back and sticks it, wet ink and all, deep in his pocket. "It was a throwaway gag. It wasn't even arithmetically sound."

"I am," says Sirius gravely. "Very like. Which I suppose makes you an old steak. The point is, according to your own theory, we've got to get out of here, and do that right speedily, before the aggravation hits and you explode. Bam! All over the books. Think of the books, Remus."

"No — no, not necessarily. The t, right there — that stands for talking. If you close your mouth, you notice, the aggravation declines almost to zero."

"That's like saying 'if the sun sets in the east.'" Sirius settles his shoulder-blades against the piles of books. "Try to be reasonable."

"I'm not listening to you anymore." Remus taps the quill against his teeth and turns back to the book. Sirius fidgets in the following silence, watching Remus' fingers toy with the part of his hair. Steeling himself to leave, Sirius prepares himself for every bit of guilt Remus will throw his way.

"Look, Moony, I think I'm going to—"

"Look, it's Rowena Ravenclaw naked!"

"Where?" Sirius yelps, flipping himself up with great alacrity. "In there? There's a picture of *that* in *there*?"

"Oh yes, right here — look at that, 'and then Rowena did touch Helga Moste Tenderly in a place where No Manne had ever Beene.' You'd better come over and see it straightaway." Sirius collapses in front of the book, whereupon Remus slams one leg over both of Sirius's, effectively trapping him.

"Noooo," Sirius mewls, wilting. "You lied to me! Lying werewolf. I should have known your kind was no good!"

"I am a dirty, filthy, tricky liar, like my ancestors before me. It is in my blood. In my nature. I cannot help it. I am only doing as my kind does and besides, would not have been able to last nearly so long in present company if I were not so dirty, so filthy, or even half so tricky." The strong muscles in Remus' legs hold firm. Soon enough, Sirius stills, all resistance clearly futile. He folds his arms over his chest and scowls, blaming the book with all his might and retribution. "If we give it a good go," Remus attempts to placate, "we can be done with the researching bit by morning. And then, promptly forgetting everything we've learned, we can go and break as many bones as we like. What d'you say?"

"You're going to force more of these books on me later, aren't you?" Sirius' eyes narrow. Remus gives him an unreadable smile, quirky at the corners of his mouth, and thoroughly evil. Should Dumbledore ever retire as Headmaster of Hogwarts, Sirius thinks, they should consider Remus for the position. He certainly has that twitchy, unfathomable smile. And, of course, the *evil*.

"'This, too, was another critical factor in the ultimate building of the school that many had thought would never be built.' Let's continue on from there, shall we?"

Heaving a great groan of unfettered pain, Sirius leans forward. "There had better some mention of places where No Manne Has Ever Beene or I'm going to defile some ancient books and you can't stop me."

"'This, too, was another critical factor in the ultimate building of the school that many had thought would never be built,'" Remus repeats. He pats Sirius' left foot.

They dedicate themselves again to work.

***

"...and then," Remus stifles an immense yawn, "then, they talk about the type of wood that they're going to use for twenty-six pages, after which Slytherin has this brilliant idea to build it in *stone*, so it won't *burn down*, and then they talk about what a genius he is for six pages and a half, and then Gryffindor has another feast at his castle to celebrate what a genius he is, and then there are a few ballads which are quite good but all the same when you get right down to it, and they talk about Rowena's dress for twelve pages here, and then there is a brief break to discuss the type of pie they made, and then it's back to the dress again. Apparently it was very shocking she didn't want ruffles. Or did want ruffles. I'm not entirely sure because they mentioned ruffles at the very beginning of it all, but then spent three pages on the shocking aspect. How's yours?"

"So tired," Sirius whimpers, prone, from the floor. There is a book slung over his face. His hands are thrown out to the side, and his feet are flopped exhaustedly in opposite directions. "So very, very tired. Eh? What's that? Oh. This one's mostly genealogy. Hufflepuff's great great grandson is staring at me right now. Hello there, old chap. Lovely whiskers. Looks like he's got Peter killed and stapled under his nose."

"I think," Remus says, with some difficulty, "it might be time to — er — adjourn, for now, and return to this extremely important task in the morning."

"It *is* morning," Sirius says, pathetically. "I can't feel my legs!" Remus nudges Sirius' foot with an experimental toe. "Ungh," Sirius moans.

"Oh dear," Remus says. "I've actually killed you, haven't I?"

"You're more dangerous than the puddings," Sirius accuses. He slides the book off his nose and lets it rest against his chest at one end and his chin at the other. "At least the puddings filled me with temporary joy. Ugh. If the senseless names and dates cluttering my head to bursting don't kill me, the dust will definitely destroy me from the inside." He flings one palm to his forehead. "Alas for Sirius of the Great Heart and Very Great Manhood, whose spirit slipped off into the house of Hades in a library, when he was bored to death by legions of dead men with horrible whiskers. Tragic."

"I had a very interesting chapter a few hours ago," Remus points out, "the one about the Chamber of Secrets, which I shouldn't have been reading.It wasn't very informative *anyway*, besides saying at *least* twenty times that it was a very secret chamber made with very malicious intent, but I doubt we can put that on the map as no one's been able to open it for years. And no one knows where it is. And it's not necessary to the map at *all*. But it *was* interesting, though."

"I wish there were just a book," Sirius says, "a book that actually had maps. A lot of maps. Hundreds of maps. I would prefer maps to these endless, endless faces."

"But there was one—"

"*Useful* maps," Sirius amends. "Ones of *use*. "

Remus yawns, hearing his jaw creak. "I'm sorry," he says. "This has been dull. Only — only think of what we could have missed!"

Sirius doesn't appear impressed. "I know we missed the bit about Helga and Rowena journeying into the Land of No Man. But I do know more than I ever thought possible about Salazar Slytherin's distant cousins and get the impression he might have been a little inbred and a little unhinged. They all looked alike, you know. That can't be healthy."

"Which might explain the moving staircases." Remus grins half-heartedly.

"And the fifty-seven uncharted secret passageways."

"And then twenty-two *known* hidden chambers, Chamber of Secrets which we're not supposed to know about and whatever others that have eaten brave exploring souls alive so they may never tell the tale notwithstanding." Sirius heaves himself up, book clattering uselessly to the floor. "They've made it bloody difficult. We know what we're dealing with, and it's the warped mind of an inbred pureblood who seemed to enjoy running around insulting people, if I've got the right impression of him."

"Like…oh, wait, *you*?" Remus inquires, tiredly.

"Shove off."

Bugger," Remus says, out of nowhere, and lets his head fall to the desk.

"It's all right," Sirius says consolingly, popping his neck. "You did your damnedest. It's just that your old friends the books have at last betrayed you, as I always said they would. D'you know, I think my spine's actually gone sideways?"

"They didn't betray me, I just didn't read the right ones." Remus drags his hands through his hair and buries his face deeper into his arms. "This library is full of books, and what if they're all like this? All we'd need is one good one, one really helpful one—"

"—With maps—"

"—With maps, right. Why is that so difficult?"

"The world is against you, Moony," Sirius says mournfully, and pats Remus' leg. "Forever you must struggle against an uncaring society, where even the libraries plot your downfall. It is a cruel existence you bear so cheerfully. One day they shall make you a martyr."

"You don't bear an existence," Remus says, "that's grammatical nonsense."

"Ah, that's the Moony we know and love. What a relief. At least, in my pain, I have you to correct me." Sirius shifts, gingerly. "I don't think I can move. Honestly. I am paralyzed. Would you mind too much if I went to sleep right here?"

"On my leg?" Remus isn't sure he *would* mind, too tired to move, too tired for much besides immediate pain or fire in the Restricted Section to matter. His joints ache, and if the immense weight of Sirius's head would just put his extremities to sleep, he would gladly bear the pain in the morning, or the amputation of both legs. "You smell of dog, you know."

"Well, you smell of book, and it's not dogs that have kept us in here dying all day," Sirius points out. "I think I have more to forgive when it comes to odor." He yawns hugely and digs his nose into Remus's thigh.

"Your nose is pointy." Remus snorts, but it lacks its usual energy. He stretches out boneless against the chair, head back, eyelids so heavy that it's actually painful to keep them open. He feels them, sagging downwards, and then jerking him back awake, and then downwards again. "I'm just — going to — put this down for a few moments, and just — come back when we..."

"Finish," Sirius finishes. He's asleep before the word forms properly, drooping with a puff of heavy breath onto his lips, and fading into the dust



***

"I think I've lost my camera." Remus settles himself back against the roof, trying not to think about how very high up he is. The air is chill with nighttime and expectant snow, not yet fallen. He searches the cloudy sky for some sign of the stars — here and there, the occasional bright flicker peeking through — and the moon, rimmed with the next day's snowfall. Somewhere in the distance, the fireworks are about to start. He can almost smell the sulfur on the air. "It wasn't even *my*

camera, it was my *dad's* camera. I don't know what to do. It had a fresh roll of film in it and everything. I think he'll murder me."

Sirius passes him a mug of hot chocolate, steaming warmth into the cold, heavy air. "It's almost midnight," he says. "Worry about it next year."

"Ha, ha." Remus sighs. "It was old and on its way out, I know, but it still *worked*, d'you see, and I could've sworn I left it on my desk — but when we came back from supper it was gone. Perhaps I'll ask the house elves if they've seen it."

"Remus," Sirius says, "if the house elves have seen your camera they've probably put it in a stew or in the wash or out a window. Or maybe they've built a little shrine to it in a dark corner of the kitchen and if you ever find it again it will smell of pies and onions."

"You've had bad experiences." Remus closes his eyes to breathe in the rich sweet warmth of the cocoa. "Most house elves are perfectly nice and frighteningly competent."

"Frightening, I'll grant you. No, I'm being unfair. I like the ones in the kitchen; they gave me all that pudding." Sirius grins in the dark, sideways flash of white teeth. "They give me the willies, though. All that good-natured servitude. I fear that someday they will revolt."

"Are you excited for new year?" Remus taps his shoes against the edge of the tower, trying to hit on a topic that will not make him think of falling to his death. "It's nearly our last year at Hogwarts. *That's* something to give you the willies."

"Eh, it's fine for you, you'll just go be a librarian," Sirius says airily, waving a hand. "Or one of those blokes who lurks in the back rooms at Flourish and Blotts and then gets angry whenever a customer appears and they have to exchange goods for money. You'll have to work very hard to look like you hate people without even knowing them. That will be the one obstacle you must surmount."

"I thought you always said I was going to be a professor." Remus purses his lips, waiting for the cocoa to cool so he doesn't burn his tongue. In the meantime, it warms his mittened hands. The steam rising from it eases the nip of winter wind at his nose. Cocoa. Hot chocolate. Whoever invented the mug full of cocoa with its bubble of cream in the center should be honored for all eternity.

"You'll be a professor after they fire you for reading the books instead of seeing to customers," Sirius continues, logically. "And all your students will love you but will know never to interrupt you for help during tea time because you like your privacy. And your scones."

"Not the blueberry ones." Remus ventures a small sip, and sighs in pleasure. "What about you?"

"I like the ones with cranberries, personally."

"I didn't mean the scones." Remus angles a sideways glance at Sirius beside him, pointedly not looking down. Sirius grins.

"I know. Well, I don't know. Something fantastic, I'll wager. Maybe I'll go around breaking curses. Or work for the Ministry in the field, solving crimes, fighting the good fight, looking dashing all the while. Me and my trusty steed. Motorbike, anyways. We're working in the future, you know. Very cutting edge."

"My," Remus agrees, "how the times have changed. That's very practical of you."

"You'll be the practical one," Sirius says. He chafes his hands together to warm his fingers, icy even in his gloves. "Leave the total lack of practicality to me, and we'll even one another out."

"You can't work in my bookshop," Remus objects. "You'll frighten the children."

"Children aren't allowed in your bookshop, anyway. They leave smudges."

"It doesn't matter. You'll frighten the adults."

"It's a fair cop, I suppose," Sirius says heavily, and sighs. "I'll be security, then, and when you get in undesirable customers I'll leap out from behind a shelf and hit them with my bat."

"You'd spend the whole time hitting yourself and probably sneaking puddings. It would be amusing, but I wouldn't pay you to do it." Remus threads his fingers through the handle of the mug, staring out over the forest. It seems less real from up above. His stomach twinges. He hates being high up.

"Two minutes," Sirius says.

"Do you think we'll see any fireworks from here?"

"Don't know," Sirius admits.

"I wish I knew where my camera was," Remus says. "I'd take a picture. Even if it would be all dark." He takes a deep swallow of his cocoa, feeling it warm him from the center. "Mm."

"Who knows," Sirius points out. "That cocoa could have your camera melted down into it."

"My cocoa doesn't taste like camera."

"Neither does mine. Although how would one know? One minute," Sirius says. He fiddles with his pocket watch, something he's always had instead of a wristwatch. Remus has never asked him about it. It glimmers in the coming midnight, looking sleek against Sirius' clumsy gloved fingers.

"Where'd you get that?" Remus asks now, over the rim of his mug.

"My dad's," Sirius says. He shifts uncomfortably. "It's timed to the exact second. Magic. Never have to wind it up again, or anything. Thirty seconds."

"I'm not going to count down with you, I think it's silly."

"Twenty."

"Besides, you're supposed to count down from ten. Isn't that the tradition?" Remus finds a handy ledge and sets his cup down, sensing from Sirius' jittery energy that, even if he cannot save himself, he can at least save his cocoa.

"Ten."

"Oh, bother." Remus curls in on himself. "Nine."

"Eight. And you're going to get snogged wildly in celebration, so mind you don't fall off the roof."

"Five. I don't want to!"

"Too bad. Four."

"I'll bite your tongue off if you do. Two. One."

"Happy New Year!" Sirius yells, throwing all his limbs up like a human firework himself, and then he grabs Remus's whole face with one hand, so his cheeks are squashed together, and shoves his tongue more or less into Remus's nose, making repulsive "Aaaahlghh" sounds.

"Rape!" Remus screeches, and shoves his hand into Sirius's forehead.

"SHOULD OOOOOOLD ACQUAINTANCE BEEEEE FORGOT," Sirius howls in an atrocious Scots accent, licking Remus's palm. "AND NEEEEEVER BROUGHT TO MIND!"

"You disgust me," Remus says with great dignity, wiping his face meticulously with his sleeve. "And you're off key."

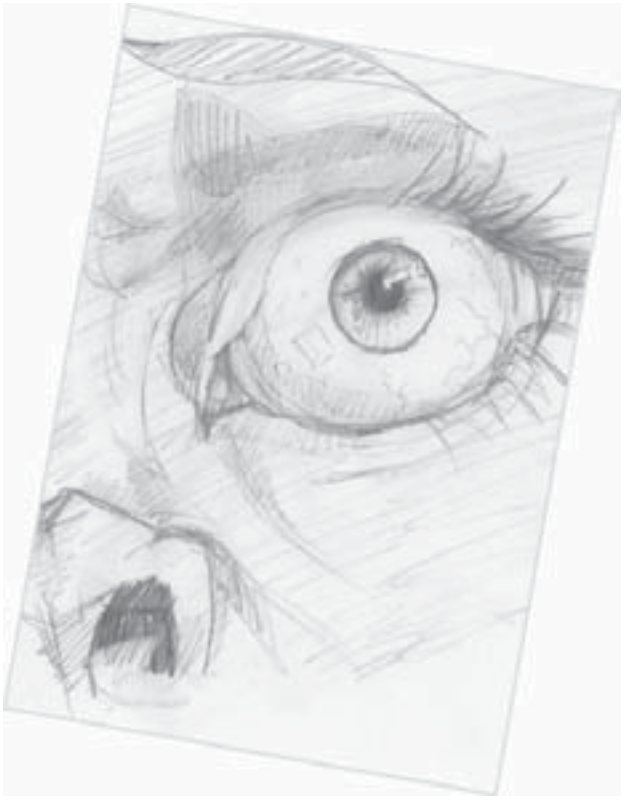
"And a Happy New Year to you too," Sirius says. "Look. Are those fireworks I espy in the distance?"

"I'm still trying to get your saliva out of my eyes." Remus gives his face one last desperate scrub, feeling oddly sticky, and then leans forward as much as his sense of self-preservation will allow. "I don't know," he says finally. "The clouds are a funny color."

"Huzzah!" Sirius shouts, standing and giving a great cheer. Something deep in the forest yowls in return, and a flock of brave birds rise from the treetops, trying to escape the madness surrounding them. Remus doesn't blame them, but has no wings with which to follow. Instead, he reaches out for Sirius' sleeve, trying to no avail to get him to sit down. "Another year to conquer! *Weee'll taaaaaak' a cup o' kiiiiiiindness yet, for the saaaaake of Auld Lang Syne.*"

"If you don't fall and break your head open first," Remus grumbles.

"Ah, Moony," Sirius says, patting him on the back, "isn't that just like you."



***



***

A most failed experiment. We begin with our heroes bathed in darkness and fallen into shadow.

"Ow. Buggering — *ow. Aaaah.* Moony? Fuck! Moony? I can't find my wand?"

"Er. I think I know where it is."

"Where?! Help! My arm's in something — yecch. Moony, turn on a fucking light, help a man out—"

"I can't. I can't find my wand. And. Uhm. The reason I know where yours is, is because I think I have broken it. Very intimately."

"WHAT?! — *oh.* Oh. Oh God. I want you to remove it, please, with utmost caution and, oh, *God.*"

"Just a minute. Just a minute. I think I've — ow! — got it."

"Oh, *God.* Just, uh, see can you use it. Oh Christ."

"Lumos. *Lumos.* ... Please Lumos? ... Well. I guess that answers that question."

"Well, hell and damnation. You're buying me another, assuming we make it out of here alive. Very well, we'll just, er, stand about in the dark. Or lie about, in my case. Christ. Are you, er, all right?"

"It wasn't that intimate, Sirius, you can stop making those noises. Yes. Yes, I'm all right. Sort of crunched against something, but I can feel all parts of my body which I think, I think, is a good sign."

"Yes! Yes. Good. All right. What do you mean, noises? I wasn't — well, you were very vague. Shit. This is one for the Map, anyway!"

"Yes. Note to map: do not fall down dark tunnel into darker pit. Do not land on and thus ruin Mssr. Padfoot's wand. *Do* watch your footing. *Do* consider all possibilities before entering uncharted secret passageway. *Do* use lumos spell before breaking one wand and losing the other. Et cetera. Does that sound good?"

"You're using sarcasm as a weapon and I'm already injured. Unfair tactics. I wish I could see you, because I'd punch you one."

"Look at us. We're trapped like rats and turning on one another already."

"Way of the world, mate. Don't worry, if we're in here long enough, I think we know who's eating who…dirty werewolf. Oh, God, I'm in something squirmy."

"No, no, that's my hand. That's you? Well. *You're* at a funny angle."

"Oh thank God. And stop that! My honour's definitely being impugned."

"... Oh. Perhaps you aren't at as funny an angle as I thought. Uhm. Sorry, about that."

"Eh. It's not like I ever had any honour anyway. That your foot?"

"Uhm. There. I'm wiggling my toes. Are my toes wiggling on you?"

"Oops — hello Moonytoes! Yes! Hahahaha. All right, you can — haha — you can stop now."

"What, the wiggling? Oh, right, that. Sorry again."

"You are using every excuse in the book, aren't you. Well, don't worry. My body is utterly irresistable, I understand. I'm going to grab your leg now, so don't panic."

"Agh! — right. Right. Not panicking. Though, you know, the general rule of thumb is, you're supposed to tell me not to panic *before* you do things that make me panic. For next time, you see."

"Thank you *very* much, Professor Lupin, I'll keep that in mind — oof. All right! There we are. That's you. Much better. Hallo."

"Is that your hand? Yes. That's your hand. And — hullo, that's my hand too. This is an excellent plan. Establishing where we are, physically. Though part of me, I think, is through this wall. Would you mind giving a bit of a -- a bit of a pull?"

"Oh — righto — let me just get *ow bloody fuck bugger shit* very low roof. Aaaah. Fuck. All right. Shall I pull this way? Like this? Or is that going to drive you deeper? *Ow*."

"No, I think just — well — here's my other hand, that's free now — and there's yours — right — let's try and lever me out? It's all or nothing, I believe, and I'm not really sure what the odds are, so let's do this before I terrify myself with the statistics. Ready? One — two — three — pull."

"HEAVE!"

"NGHAUGH!"

"OH GOD. Oh God, what did I do? Are you alive? Did I take your arms off? Christ, man, say something!"

"You were right. Ungh. Low ceiling."

"Oh God, Moony, don't. I thought you had died. Is that you? I'm putting you under my arm so you can't get in trouble."

"Well, the good news is, I've got all my limbs about me. And some of yours. No, no, I'm not laughing because it's funny. I think I'm laughing because I'm hysterical. I'm not entirely sure."

"Ha ha bloody ha, we're trapped here forever! I, for one, find that terribly amusing. You are insane."

"No, I'm calm. I swear, I'm calm. I'm just — is *that* your hand? It's moving, Sirius. Please God say it's your hand."

"Er, Moony, I want you to stay very calm, but my hand's over here, mate."

"That's right. And your hand doesn't have teeth, either."

"No. No, it does not. But we're not panicking, are we."

"If I panicked, I'd drive an elbow through your stomach and then I'd be all alone down here with this thing that has teeth nibbling my other elbow and my first elbow covered in your intestines, which is really a much less appealing situation than the one at hand, if you'll believe it. My, that was a long sentence."

"Don't move. Keep breathing. I'm going dog."

"That does feel odd. You changing, up against me. Hullo, Padfoot."

Something snuffles, reassuringly. At least, it could be snuffling, and it could be reassuring. It could also be something large and fanged, slavering in the dark. It's unclear.

"Padfoot? That's you. That's you, I can smell you. If you're going to eat whatever is trying to eat my elbow please do so without also eating my elbow. And you're drooling. Thank you."

A light nip, evidently meant to indicate that this drool is the drool of love, and then a sharp yank at the sleeve and some rather too enthusiastic growling.

"That's good. That's better. I'll try not to think about what you're doing or how much enjoyment you may or may not be getting from it. I'll just keep talking. Do you know, I think I can actually smell fresh air, which is reassuring. I've read about escapes from tunnels like these, they're perfectly plausible. Perhaps we won't have to eat one another after all."

One last noise, like a very self-satisfied lawnmower.

"Aah, that was disgusting. Moony, can you feel my togs? They should be down round your feet. For once in my life I really don't want to be naked right now."

"I've got them. I've got your clothes with my toes. That isn't helpful. Here, let me."

"R-right—thanks—"

"I'll burn my hands later. Sorry. Sorry. Oh God sorry."

"There are few in this world who've had this privilege, you know. Various of my governess until I was five, James Potter, and yourself. I should lock it away in my heart of hearts if I were you. DON'T Jesus be careful."

"James Potter? Really? I've joined the ranks of James Potter, if only for one shining moment in the dark with my hand accidentally down your pants? ... We must never tell anyone of these events. Ever."

"I was drunk and naked in the Great Hall. Someone had to help me. And don't be such a prude; *I'm* telling everyone. I'll be the envy of the whole school. You don't have to button it, I can get that, you know."

"Go ahead, button your trousers. I'm going to find my wand."

"Don't let go of me. I don't fancy eating any more of those...urgh."

"Urgh? AHA! No, no, that's not my — I have no idea what *that* — there we go. *There* we go."

"Is that it? IS THAT IT? Turn it on. I want to know if I've gone blind."

"*Lumos.* Ah. Hallo, Sirius."

"Oh thank God. Hallo, most wonderful sight in all the world, tree root, love of my life — oh, and hello to you, too. You *are* a mess. Look at your hair. Honestly."

"There's dog drool in it. That's why. Should I leave you and the tree root alone to your carnal, underground pleasures?"

"Don't be silly. *I* only drooled on your trousers. Maybe it was the...eurgh."

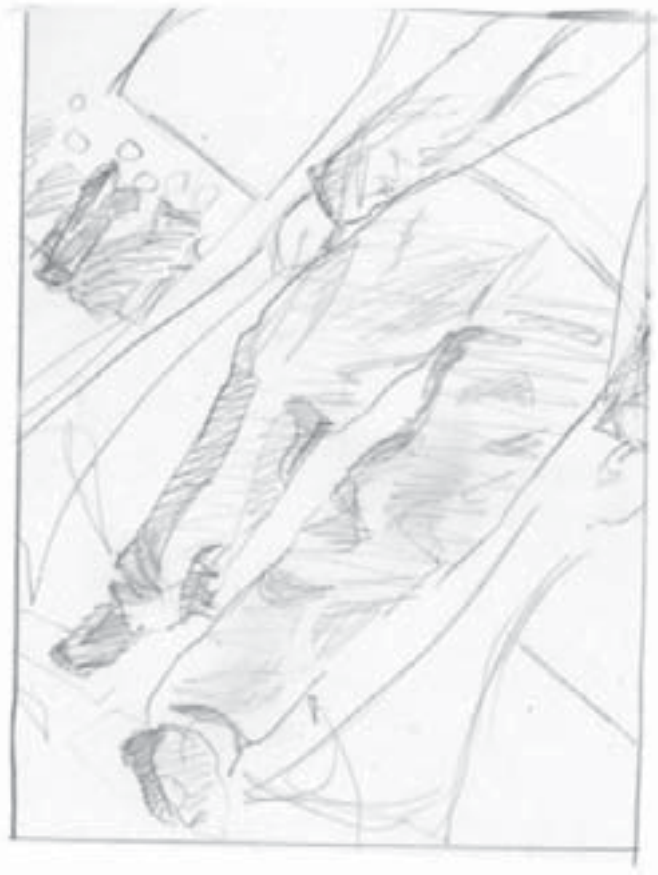
"Right. We have effectively discovered this secret passageway leads to…a hole. Very useful when one needs to carry out their tryst with their beloved tree root, but for now I want a bath. A long bath. Shall we?"

"We went through all that for a hole? It's got to go somewh...oh, no, maybe not anymore. Well, this is a stick in the eye. At least I got your hand down my pants. I am a lucky man and no mistake. D'you need a boost up?"

"Treasure the moment, Sirius. Yes, I do, thank you."

"On three, all right? One—two—up!— Get that root, are you blind?! Ow! Your foot's in my eye! —Don't forget you're buying me a new wand, you mad blind bastard."

And so ended the exploration of Secret Passageway Number Eighteen in the notes of one Remus J. Lupin, who spent days afterwards washing an uncanny amount of dirt from his left ear, whilst Sirius Black battled a Great Indigestion.



***

"You look very oddly." Lionel Lovegood has eyes no one has ever caught blinking. Sirius has always thought he must spend a lot of time in private, blinking like it's a sin. Now, eyes focused calmly on Sirius and Remus across the table, hands folded before him, a pen behind one ear and a clove of garlic hanging around his neck, Lionel Lovegood is still not blinking. Remus swallows. "For example Remus, you have dirt on your nose, and I know from careful surveillance you are the least dirty of your friends."

"Er," Remus says. "Didn't realize. Thank you, Lionel. I think." He rubs at the side of his nose with his napkin.

"And you, Sirius," Lionel continues, tilting his head to the side rather like an owl, "you look as if you are in the midst of some intestinal distress."

Sirius burps. "Not at all. Why do you think that?"

"Because in the past five minutes you have burped eight times. I have been *watching you*," Lionel explains. He whips out a notepad from his back pocket, tugs the pencil down from his ear, and flips open to an empty page. "I have come to the conclusion that you have just escaped the clutches of certain death. How did it feel? Did your entire lives flash before your eyes? Were there any distinguishable *smells*, do you know, or eyes, or the comforting scent of your mother's bosom?"

"Look, Lionel," Sirius says, "I'm trying to eat my lunch."

"Of course. Your sandwiches look delicious. Were there any sounds of merit? Howls? Cackles? Yawns?" Lionel has his pencil at the ready, and his eyes deep in their sockets are bugging out eagerly. He looks rather like a fish.

"Oh, yes," Sirius says. "All three. At once. Most terrifying. And there were eyes. Lots of them. Everywhere. Eyes of God, eyes of retribution, eyes of Merlin, eyes of my Great Aunt Fanny. Talk to you later, Lionel!"

"Most helpful. Yes, most helpful. This reporter is pleased." Lionel stands, tucking his pen behind his ear once more,

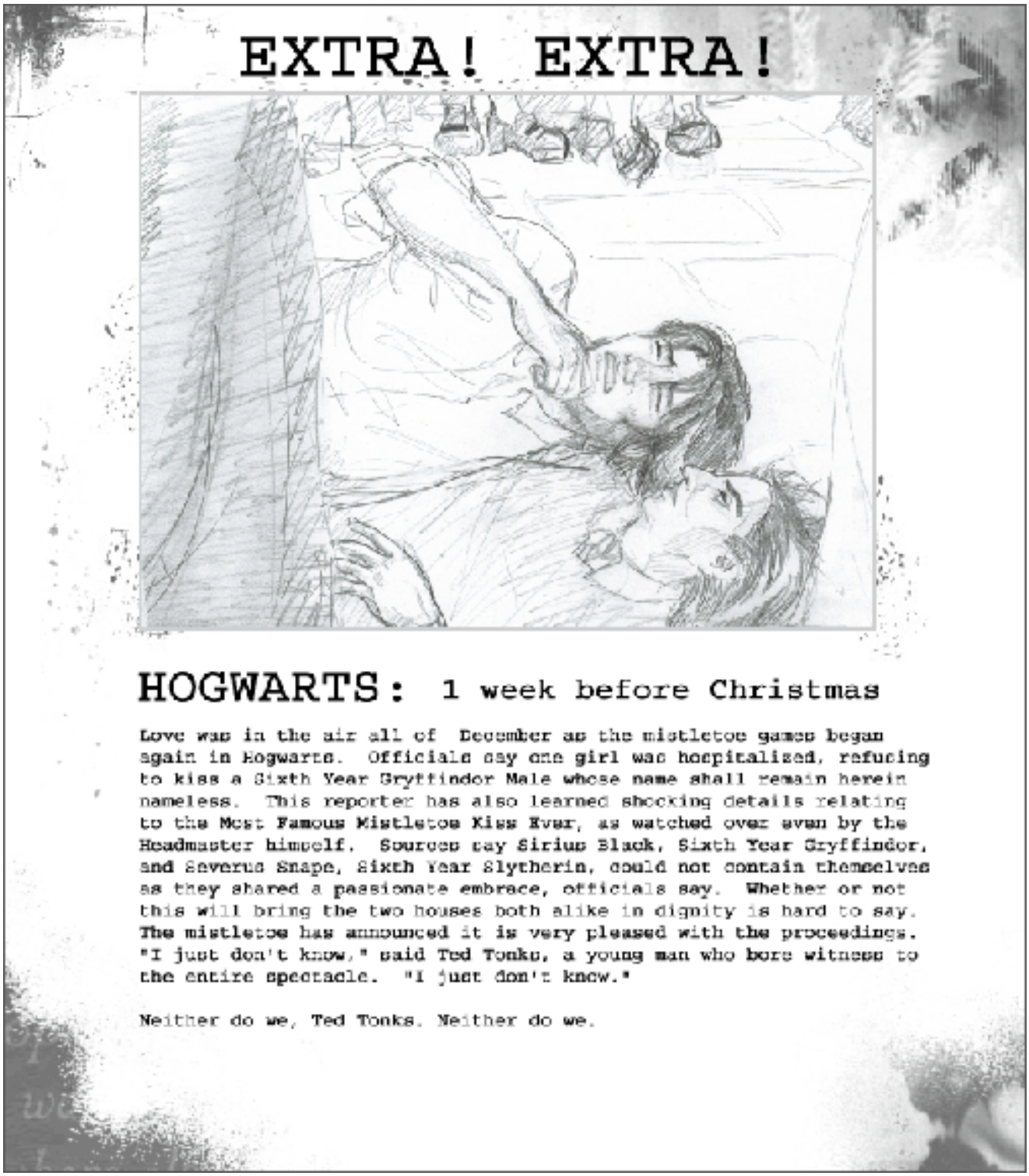
smudging graphite over his temple. “By the by,” he adds, “the first issue of Hogwarts Monthly Inquirer: What’s Happening Tomorrow! is out. You’re featured very prominently, Sirius. Here’s a copy — on the house.” He sets a loose flyer down between their lunches, salutes, and walks away in a wobbly line between tables, muttering, “Eyes of Your Great Aunt Fanny. Fascinating. Oh, fascinating.”

“Oh God,” Sirius says, holding up the flyer.

“It isn’t,” Remus says.

“Oh,” Sirius groans. “Oh, it is.”

***



***

"Doesn't the man ever leave his room?" Sirius hisses, breath hot against the back of Remus' neck. Remus squirms in response, nudging him back just slightly with his shoulder. "I mean you'd think he'd emerge once in a while — but it's been *hours*. What d'you suppose he does up there?"

"Perhaps he reads," Remus whispers. "Perhaps he takes naps. Perhaps he plans the demise of children who dare sneak into his room. I'm doing this because you thought it would be necessary, I'm about to throw up, please be quiet."

"Right," Sirius murmurs, chastened. "Right, sorry."

Silence again descends. Through the slight film of distortion James' invisibility cloak — "borrowed in the name of service" — Remus watches the corridor, fingers crossed. It was a foolish idea in the first place, to test out the tagging system with only a makeshift map and the barest understanding of how to track more than one human being at once. It still *is* a foolish idea, only it's being put into practice nonetheless. Sirius, drumming his fingers on Remus' spine, is hardly helping. Dumbledore, spending hours in his room with no sign of giving them an in, is also hardly helping. Remus' imagination, nervously coming up with various scenarios of expulsion, loss of Prefect's Badge, and General Disgrace, is only the icing on the cake. He rubs his left eye wearily, then tenses. The floor beneath them begins to vibrate.

"Look. A staircase," Sirius whispers.

"I can see that," Remus whispers back.

"Look. A Dumbledore."

"I can see that, too."

"Periwinkle Potion," Dumbledore says to the staircase, turning to face it. The steps groan, revolve around one another, and spiral upwards.

"Interesting," Remus breathes.

"Look, you're a natural at this," Sirius whispers. Remus doesn't have to see him to see his devious, crinkly little smile. "The prefect is only the thin veneer that hides the beast within. You're really enjoying yourself. I can tell."

"*Move!*" Remus hisses suddenly, and slams them both back against the wall. Sirius expels a hard, shocked little *oof!* against the top of Remus's spine as Remus's shoulders smash against his chest. Dumbledore brushes by them, hardly a foot away, whistling something that sounds suspiciously like "Jingle Bells" even though Christmas is over. Sirius's hand hovers over Remus's hip, frozen.

They wait in silence, not even breathing, quivering slightly against each other, until Dumbledore's footsteps echo away down the far staircase and the piercing whistle fades off. Remus lets out a long, shaking breath. The two of them concentrate on breathing for a while, their lungs demanding to be paid in full for lost air time.

"Whee!" Sirius says happily, if not a little breathlessly, and pokes Remus in the back. "Onwards and upwards, Prefect!"

"He knows," Remus groans. "I can tell he knows! He's got spies everywhere!"

"We're *invisible*," Sirius says, the soul of logic. "They can't see us! Once more into the breach — or the office, I suppose. Come on."

They scurry quietly out into the hallway, looking both ways before Sirius murmurs a hushed 'Periwinkle Potion.' Remus is sure the moaning and creaking of the staircase arranging itself will alert the entire castle to their illicit actions, but as the final step heaves into place there is silence up and down the long corridors. "C'mon," Sirius whoops, as quietly as possible, and nearly drags Remus up the winding staircase. "No time to look at the books," Sirius warns, "just get something that looks well used and get out."

"But he has so many books," Remus begins.

"Spies everywhere," Sirius reminds him.

"Point taken."

They shrug off the cloak, leaving it in a lump beside the desk, and look for a hair — a nail clipping — an eyelash — anything as integral a part of the body as possible. Nothing. "Not even a tassel from his robes or anything," Sirius mourns, flinging himself into Dumbledore's great desk chair. It squeaks, leathery and froglike.

"Get up, get up!" Remus urges. "He'll know someone's been sitting in his chair!"

"Perhaps a quill?" Sirius stands obligingly, but lingers behind the desk. "His inkwell? Er, a paperweight?"

"Something that's light," Remus says. "It's got to be something that's light, and something that smells of him. That's what the spell says."

Sirius sniffs the feather experimentally. "The quill smells of ink," he announces. "Damn."

Remus casts about for a solution, actually *feeling* his time running out. He looks around the room again, and a second time, then cautiously lifts up the draped cloth next to him — only to find himself face-to-face with a very puzzled-looking phoenix.

"Graa?" it says.

"Agh!" Remus yelps, dropping the cloth immediately and leaping backward to stumble over the desk. The paperweight lodges somewhere in his lumbar region, and croaks.

"Oh, that's Fawkes," Sirius says, not even looking up from his busy search of the carpet. "I might have told you. He's Dumbledore's."

Remus gives Sirius a look. Sirius has been in this office enough to know well as he knows the back of his hand. He's probably sat in that chair, right there, looking innocent and wronged, more times than Remus has eaten toast for breakfast. And yet he never thought to warn Remus about the phoenix behind curtain number one. "I guessed that," Remus says. He presses a hand to his chest, trying to make his heart beat at a normal pace again. *Spies! Avian spies!* "Thanks for all your help, by the way. I think this paperweight and I are one eternally because of—"

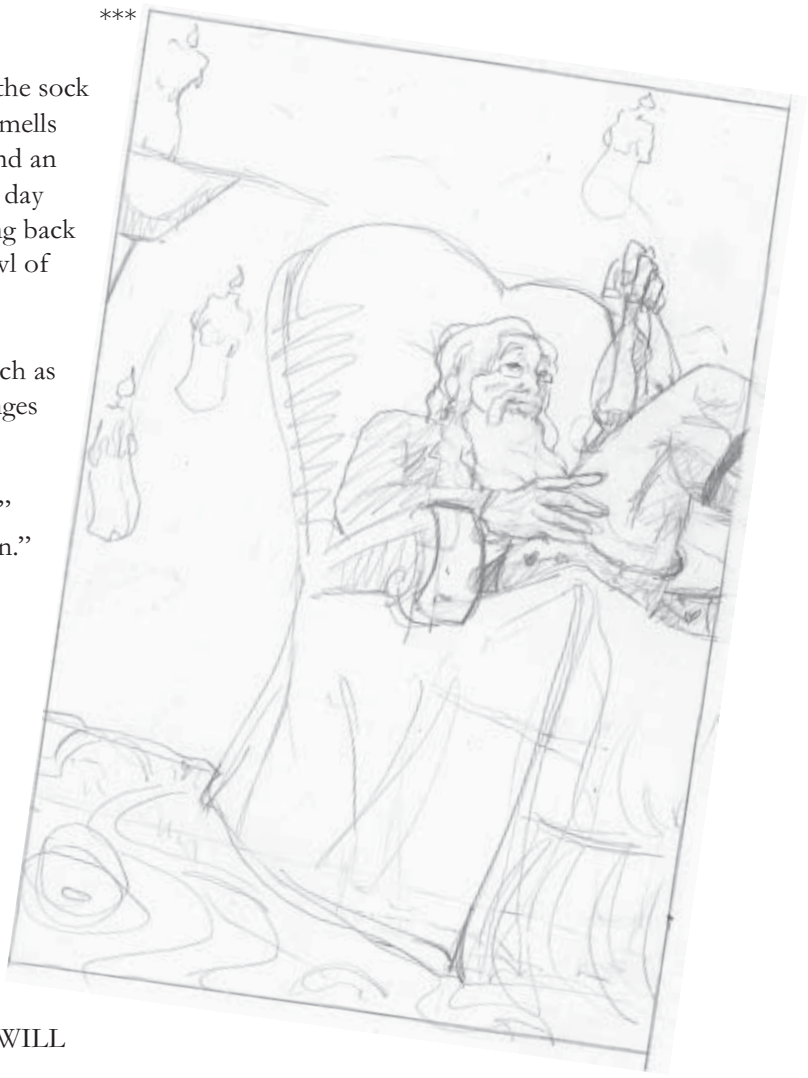
"Aha!" floats Sirius' muffled voice from beneath the cavernous desk. Moments later, Sirius crawls out backwards, face flushed with triumph and clutching something purple in one hand.

"Sirius, what have you done," Remus says dubiously.

"Sock," Sirius says, as if it is very obvious. "I've got us a sock. Am I a genius? It's a bit damp, but it'll do."

"I don't want to think about it," Remus says. "But it's perfect."

***



"So what's the plan this time?" Sirius is carrying the sock with two fingers before them, like a dead rat. It smells very much like foot. Why they couldn't have found an eyelash is no doubt some cosmic joke they'll one day understand without any bitterness. Remus, gritting back a twitch in his left eye, is setting down a nice bowl of cream from the kitchen.

"Let's just hope Mrs. Norris likes milk just as much as she likes James' shin," Remus says. "The plan hinges on that."

"You could try putting some blood in the cream," Sirius offers helpfully. "She'll definitely like it then."

"Fine, but I'm not donating any of *my* blood, so you should feel free." Remus steps back twice, tugging Sirius with him. He ventures a cautious glance up and down the hallway, and rubs his hands together. "Right. Shall we?"

"I consider it a privilege," Sirius says. Awkwardly beneath the cloak, he effects a little bow. Then, he puts both hands to his mouth and roars "MY GOODNESS, WHAT FUN IT IS TO BE OUT OF BED IN THE THIRD-FLOOR EAST CORRIDOR! I'M CERTAINLY VERY GLAD THAT NO ONE WILL EVER CATCH US!"

"Berk," Remus hisses. He tugs the cloak tighter over both of them, so that Sirius's sharp nose is jammed into his ear. "A stupid question to ask, I'm sure, but whatever happened to subtlety?"

"I don't think she likes cream," Sirius says. His bark of a laugh gusts into Remus's hair. "But I've now made us an irresistible target."

"It'll never work — you'll have Filch down here and he'll—"

"Shh! Is that the glow of feline skullduggery I see at that end of the hall?" Remus cranes his neck around Sirius' head to see. Against all odds, a yellow sheen glints in the shadows. Cat eyes. Malevolent, hateful, malicious cat eyes, the sort about which fully grown men have nightmares. Remus shudders involuntarily.

"God," he mutters, "I loathe cats."

"Don't see why. Serviceable animals. Fun to chase. Good memories. Promise you won't sneeze?"

"I make no such promises. Move away from the cream, can't have her smelling us first." They walk backwards in unison, ducking into a side corridor, and peer around the wall to watch Mrs. Norris wend her alert way towards the milk. She pauses a few centimeters before it, sniffs its surface lightly, and looks around, before darting her tongue out

against it. She pauses again. She waits. Remus and Sirius wait. Time drags by. Remus wonders if he shouldn't have offered some wounded, small, struggling animal instead of a harmless distraction such as milk, clearly not Mrs. Norris' style. At last, when it seems as if all hope is lost, the patch-furred cat meows contentedly and sets to her unexpected meal. Remus looks over his shoulder. Sirius nods.

They dart out into the light, shoes in their hands, socks muffling the sound of their footfalls. Pausing to catch their breaths at the other end of the hall, Remus looks back at Mrs. Norris' curled tail and vulnerable back. Still drinking. Remus feels triumphant.

"We're not in the clear yet," he whispers, for his own sake more than Sirius'.

"Filch wants to feed me to a troll," Sirius murmurs. "He went on about it in great detail not two weeks ago. Unpleasant. Goes on for hours. Let's not get caught, eh?" Remus nods in grim agreement. He produces his wand from the sleeve of his sweater, undoing the complicated locking spell on thick wooden door into Filch's chambers. The hinges are treated with a pat of butter from that night's dinner, home remedies sometimes more useful than any magic, before Remus eases the door open with his hip and hands. They slip in together, silent and unnoticed.

Remus has never been so illegal so much in one day. It's getting to his head.

"Quick," Remus says.

"Quicker," Sirius agrees.

They set to with rather more alacrity than they had in Dumbledore's office, looking over their shoulders too often to be useful. While his office was clearly forbidden territory, Dumbledore at least represents friendly — or, rather, not overtly hostile — ground. Knowing they've entered the Lair of the Filch, their steps are frightened into silence, yet every one they take rattles the rusting chains in the ceiling.

"Kinky lad, our Filch," Sirius says, thumbing through an extremely thick file. "My goodness, did I do that?"

"Stop wasting time," Remus reprimands, yanking the file out of his hands, though not before sneaking a quick glimpse. "And yes, you did, I remember it. There's still stains on the wall."

"Mm," Sirius says blissfully. "Surely one of my finest hours. Too bad others have eclipsed it. Do you want to see yours?" He holds up another sheaf, waggling his eyebrows invitingly.

"No." Remus dives under the desk, searching the hard, slimy stone and trying not to breathe through his nose.

"Huh, that's funny, there's only one sheet in here," comes Sirius's voice, amused and low.

Remus stops, struggles with his conscience for a moment, and then finally resigns himself. "Well? What does it say?"

"Well, it's very poor spelling — he needs an editor like you, you should offer your services — as far as I can make out it says 'KEEPS BAD COMPANY. WILL BE CAUGHT SOMEDAY. MRS. NORRIS IS WATCHING HIM.'" Papers rustle noisily as he tosses the file back into the cabinet. "Moony, do you think I'm bad company?" He sounds injured.

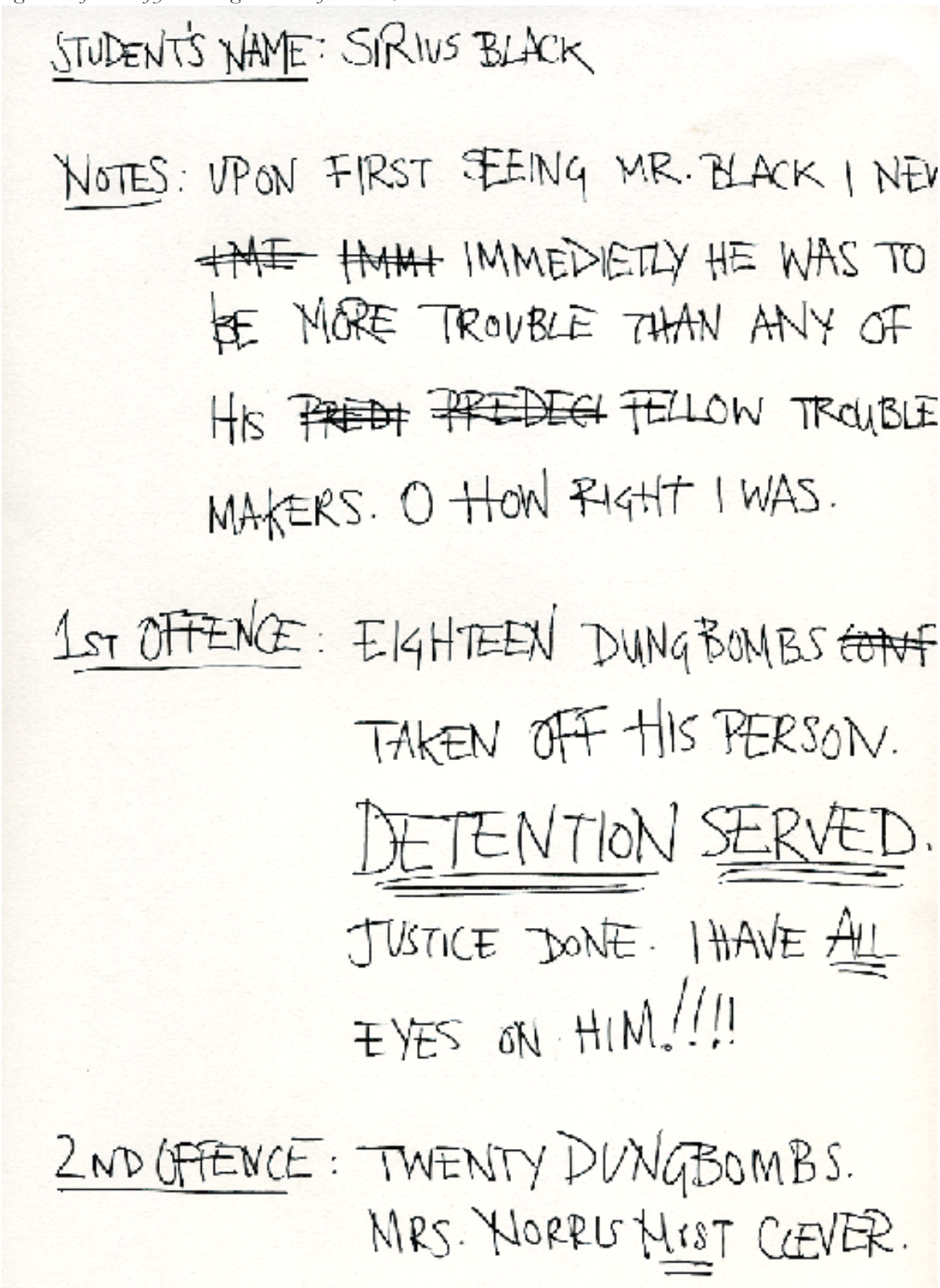
"Horrible," Remus grunts. "Look at me, down on my hands and knees in Filch's office, without permission, looking for personal items. Would I ever have thought of that on my own?" Giving up the search in this particular area, he adds, "Dreadful company. Painfully bad, even. And you can't make dinner conversation to save your life. What's this?" Scooting back onto his elbows to get a better look, he accidentally smashes his head into the bottom of the desk with. A resounding thunk echoes throughout the room. A few bottles of murky liquid threaten to fall off a rickety shelf.

"*Wow*," Sirius says. "Now *that* was a sound. Are you all right?" Remus merely groans. "Look — look, I've found a hair, a nice long one — will that make you feel better?"

"Books," Remus mumbles. "Next time, all I want are the books."

***

Page One of the Fifty-Two Pages on File for Black, Sirius.


STUDENT'S NAME: SIRIUS BLACK

NOTES: UPON FIRST SEEING MR. BLACK I NEW ~~HE~~ ~~HIM~~ IMMEDIETLY HE WAS TO BE MORE TROUBLE THAN ANY OF HIS ~~PREDI~~ ~~PREDECI~~ FELLOW TROUBLE MAKERS. O HOW RIGHT I WAS.

1ST OFFENCE: EIGHTEEN DUNGBOMBS ~~CONF~~ TAKEN OFF HIS PERSON. DETENTION SERVED. JUSTICE DONE. I HAVE ALL EYES ON HIM.!!!

2ND OFFENCE: TWENTY DUNGBOMBS. MRS. NORRIS MIST CLEVER.

STUDENT'S NAME: ~~REMUS~~ J. LUPIN

NOTES: ~~KEEPS~~ BAD COMP~~E~~A~~X~~NY.

WILL BE ~~CO~~ CAUGHT

SOMEDAY!! MRS. NORRIS

IS WATCHING HIM.



This story is based on characters and situations created and owned by JK Rowling, various publishers including but not limited to Bloomsbury Books, Scholastic Books and Raincoast Books, and Warner Bros., Inc. No money is being made and no copyright or trademark infringement is intended.

***The Shoebox Project* by LadyJaida and Dorkorific**

http://www.livejournal.com/community/shoebox_project

Part Eight: Mid-February, 1976

Six Pictures of Lily, Two Dates, Four Boxes of Chocolate, and Five Almost Valentine's Day Cards.

Taken and collected by one James Potter in the first half of his sixth year at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, and later referred to as The Stalking File.



***

“Potter, take your face out of that chair, you don’t know where it’s been.” Sirius flips a page in his book, rocking his chair back on two legs with both feet thunked on the table, a position which every professor in the world decries.

“Mmpsuh mmmph,” comes James’s muffled moan from within the cushions.

“Sorry, mate, I don’t speak pathetic bastard. Come again?” James, suffering from an obviously indescribable woe, has been in that bloody chair for about ten minutes, having stumbled in, given them a look of immense affliction, and finally having collapsed to his knees on the floor, face saved only by a brocade cushion. Sirius knows James well enough to know that he’s just waiting for someone to ask him what’s the matter, and that it will drive him mad not to be asked. Sirius crosses his legs, idly scratching the heel of his boot against the shining wood, and hears Remus make a small noise of pain from the next chair.

“I said ‘What’s the point?’“ James emerges from the cushions, hair more insane than usual and rather red in the face from shortness of breath. “I might just as well die here as anywhere.”

“I’m so glad you two came back from break. I’ve missed your incredible predictability.” Remus scribbles something down on a piece of parchment and gnaws on his quill.

“Don’t lump me in with him,” Peter protests. There is a definite smugness in his voice that Sirius catches immediately and is strangely intrigued by. “We’re in totally different categories, Prongs and me.”

“Oh, do go on, Wormtail, they all love to laugh at my pain,” James snorts bitterly. “Tell them why we’re in different categories. Please. I, for one, would love to hear it again.”

“Well.” Peter folds his arms, rising at least three inches in his seat. How didn’t Sirius notice before how pink his ears were, and how uncharacteristically fidgety and smiley he was? There is something suspicious about the whole thing. “Well, only *one* of us got turned down for a Valentine’s Day date today.”

Sirius looks between James, flung haphazardly over chair and floor, and Peter, arms across his chest, looking uncommonly like a Czar, and burst out laughing. “You’re not *serious*,” he says, not trying to be unkind. “*You’ve* got a date, Wormtail?”

“And James,” Peter reminds them unnecessarily, “hasn’t.”

“Redheads,” James whimpers. He stares dolefully up at the ceiling for a few moments before shutting out the vibrant colors of life with his arm over his eyes. “You didn’t ask a redhead on a date, *did* you. It’s different.”

“She’s a blonde,” Peter adds. “With blue eyes. And *dimples*.”

“The whole world’s gone upside down,” James says. “Topsy-turvy. I don’t know which way is up anyway.”

“That’s because of the position you’re in,” Sirius suggests. “Try sitting up like a man and I’m sure you’ll see that my feet are on the floor rather than my head is on the ceiling.”

“I think that’s nice, Peter,” Remus offers. Unbothered, apparently, by the carnal pleasures of Sixth Year Boys, St. Valentine’s Day, and This Earth, he returns to his work, bobbing neatly with each line of script over his curling parchment. “And I’m very sorry, James. Though Sirius is right. Sitting the right way will help with the dizziness.”

“Heartless,” James mutters, “cruel, unfeeling — the dizziness is *within my soul*, Moony. She’s given me a — a *disease*, or something.”

“Can’t give you a disease if she always says no to a date,” Sirius points out, pragmatically.

“You always look on the bright side, Pads, that’s what I like about you,” James says.

“Maybe you just don’t know how to go about it,” Remus suggests. “Romance, I mean.”

James looks up, indignant and going still redder in the face. “I know loads about romance, you know! I read books!”

“*Busty and Bewitched is not a book*,” Sirius feels compelled to mention.

“It’s a Gentleman’s Quarterly!” Peter says helpfully. “Not that that’s something I need anymore, since I now have a date. With a girl. Who is blonde.”

“Thanks for that over-share, Pettigrew, I’ll keep that in mind,” James grumbles, twitching slightly. “Forever. Look, Moony, if you know so bloody much about romance, why don’t you teach me?”

Remus goes pink from chin-tip to hairline, his lips twisting up in the way they have when he gets upset or bewildered. “I — I didn’t mean that *I* knew how to go about it, I just meant—”

“Actually, Moony.” Sirius tips the chair forward so he lands with a jingling crash, elbows on his thighs. “Now that you mention it, if anyone could get this idiot fixed up with Evans, it’d be you. I mean, Evans loves you. And you know what friends do? They help each other. It is the Gryffindor Way.”

“No,” Remus says, knowing what is coming. “No, no, no, a thousand times no, and no.”

“His mind says no, you see, but his body says yes,” Sirius translates for James, grinning wickedly.

“Yes, you’d know all about that, wouldn’t you,” Remus snaps. If it were possibly for one boy to creep into the binding of a book and disappear amongst the glue and the threads, Remus would be effecting that great escape currently. As it is, he manages only to shrink a good foot and a half, tipping the book upright so he is shielded behind it. “I don’t know what you want of me but I’ve far too many good guesses and the answer is, and always will be, no.”

“But look at him,” Sirius says, tipping Remus book over with one hand and bringing James face up to his with the other. “Look how he droops. Look how he withers. Look how he is wasting away.”

“I saw him at lunch,” Remus returns. “He had three helpings of pudding and, I think, stole part of your cake as well, so we’re in no danger of losing James, thank you very much.”

“You *stole* my *cake*?” Sirius asks. “I thought I ate it while I wasn’t paying attention.”

“It was the last slice,” James explains. “Remus, I’ll pay you.”

“That’s ridiculous.” Remus sniffs. “I won’t have my friends *paying* me for something I can’t even do. I don’t know anything about — about — *wooing* anyone.”

“That’s for certain,” Peter agrees. “I don’t think they call it ‘wooing’ anymore, Moony.”

“Well, no.” Remus colors. “As you can see: I am clearly unqualified. I suggest Shelley or Keats if you want a love poem that’s without complications, or even Byron if you feel she’s in the mood for something colorful and consumptive, but I *will* not — *can*not — *refuse* to — well, do what you’re going to ask me to do.”

“Help me,” James says. He clasps his hands together on the tabletop, kneeling across the way. “I don’t even know what a Shelley or a Keats is.”

The vein at Remus’ temple twitches.

“They’re ice cream flavours,” Sirius says, and is pleased when Moony gives him a sharp, burning glare. “Chocolatey. Delicious.”

“They’re poets, James.”

“Look at me! I am pathetic! Just teach me. I’ll do anything.”

“You should take him up on that, you know,” Sirius says meaningfully, and makes a very vulgar gesture and an even more vulgar face. “Primo.”

James flips him two fingers without sparing him a glance and keeps his full attention on Remus, his brown eyes melting and enormous. “I swear to you, Moony, I will do anything you want me to. Papers, assignments — oh wait, you like doing those — well, menial labor, two days without me saying one word about Evans, *anything*, I swear — I’m about ten seconds from weeping like a child. Please.”

“Oh, come on,” Peter says, looking pityingly at James. “He’s so sad.”

“You are a kind man, Peter Pettigrew. Let it go down in history that Peter Pettigrew is the only one of you useless lot to stand by a friend in need. Moony, just — all you have to do is — is give me something, anything, to give to her. Give me a poem. Give me some of this Shelley stuff. I’m not asking for much, and my soul will wilt away and *die* unless you do me this little titchy favor.” Remus wavers. James knows it. Sirius knows it. Even Peter knows it. They are far too used to what it means when Remus wavers. James leans in closer, knowing his case is already sold, searching for the right words to drive the final nail in the coffee. “It would be so *literary*,” he adds. “It would be like *Shakespeare*. Your words making my love speak through — er — me.”

Remus bows his head. What a dirty, irresistible trick. “All right,” he acquiesces, caving at last. “All right. I’ll help you. But on one condition.”

James gives him his most starry-eyed gaze of gratitude. “Anything,” he promises.

“You must do *exactly as I say*,” Remus instructs.

“Everything?” James asks.

“Everything,” Remus confirms.

“Tell him to put his underwear on his head and sing ‘I’m a wanker’ out the window of the Astronomy Tower,” Sirius suggests. “Or have him cluck like a chicken in Transfiguration.”

“And this,” Remus says grimly, “is why you’re glad I’m helping you, and not Sirius Black.”

“Ecstatic,” James agrees. “No underwear will be involved. Will it?”

“We’ll see,” Remus says.

***

“I should be getting ready for my date,” Peter whispers. He rubs under his nose, shifting, stepping on Remus’ toe, which Remus graciously doesn’t mention.

“Valentine’s Day isn’t for two days,” Remus says instead. “Will it really take you that long to get ready for *one date?*”

“He needs all the time he can get,” Sirius assures him. “And probably all the help he can get, but sorry, Wormtail, old friend — James is the worser off, the squeaky wheel, so you’ll have to muddle through on your own.” He claps Peter on the shoulder, offering him a good-natured grin. “We’re all proud of you, though, very proud. Go get ‘em, Hippogriff, and all that.”

“Er,” Peter says. “Thanks.”

“Shh!” Remus hisses. “Here she comes.”

Sirius flashes James a thumbs up, and although he can’t see it, there’s a certain doomed valor with which he squares his shoulders and raises his head. The light shades abruptly over his haggard, hunted-looking face; and Lily Evans appears through the garden gate, shivering in a gust of cold and pulling her winter cloak tighter around her. She really is a pretty girl, Remus thinks, and looks prettier even than usual, her cheeks nipped pink by the cold and her red hair peeking out from under her hood. She stops short at the sight of James.

“Er — wotcher, Evans,” James says gruffly, stuffing his little sheet of paper into his pocket.

“I might have known,” she says, disgustedly. “I expected a little better of Remus—” Sirius elbows him in the solar plexus, and Remus chokes and steps on his foot “—but I might have known you’d talk him into something like this.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” James protests, not at all convincingly. “I just — er — I happened to be, you know, about, and maybe I overheard Remus saying he wanted to meet you to study, and maybe—”

“Maybe you just showed up to stalk me, the way you always do?” Evans snaps. “Well, forget it, Potter, I’m—”

“Wait!” There is an edge of desperation in James’s voice. “Er — just — just wait, one minute—” Lily puts her head to the side and her hands on her hips, and glares. “I just wanted to — I wanted to say something—”

“I’m not going to Madam Puddifoot’s with you on Valentine’s, so you can save yourself the trouble—”

“She walks in beauty,” James interrupts, stumbling slightly on the words. Evans stops dead, her green eyes widening. “She walks in beauty, like the night, of cloudless — of starry skies and — cloudless climes; and all that’s best of dark and bright meet in her aspect and her eyes.” Evans stares at him, looking as if he’s just grown another head. “Thus mellowed,” James continues, rather breathlessly, “to that tender light, which heaven to — to gaudy day denies—”

“Potter—”

“One shade the more, one ray the less, which softly lightens o’er her face—”

“*Potter*—”

“Doth — doth — where thoughts, serenely sweet, express how pure, how — dear their dwelling place—”

“Potter.” Evans puts two hands on his shoulders and shakes him. He blinks.

“That’s the most physical contact they’ve ever had without someone getting slapped!” Sirius’s excited whisper puffs in Remus’s ear.

“You skipped two lines and messed up the rest and you totally destroyed that stanza,” Evans says. “How can I go to Hogsmeade with a boy who destroys stanzas?”

“I won’t do it again,” James promises. Even from across the garden, Remus can see his hands shaking. Poor chap.

“I didn’t know you knew Byron.” She cocks her head slightly to one side, eyeing him thoughtfully. “That’s — it’s a lovely poem, isn’t it?”

“Oh, yes,” James agrees fervently.

“It’s one of my favorites.”

“Mine, too — definitely, if not my top favorite—”

“Shut up,” Evans says. She returns to that contemplative perusal. Finally, she continues. “It’s too bad about that stanza. You’ve got hidden depths, Potter, but I’m not going with you.” She gives him a small, puzzled smile and sweeps out of the garden.

“Are you sure about that?” James yells, after a few moments of working his mouth in an apparent effort to get sound to come out of it.

“Positive!” The sound of the gate closing seals his doom.

“It was *Byron*,” Remus murmurs. He shakes his head. What could possibly have gone wrong? “Perhaps,” he wonders to himself, “perhaps she’s a fan of more modern works — but it was *Byron*.”

“Yes,” Sirius says, “see where poets’ll get you, eh? Especially the dead ones.”

“It must have been the choice of poetry,” Remus insists, still mumbling to himself for his own benefit. Puzzlement marks his brow. “If I knew more about her — perhaps it isn’t love poetry she *wants* — but she didn’t *hit* him, did she, so it’s a start, don’t you think?”

“If James doesn’t fling himself out a window before you ever get to step two,” Sirius agrees, “it was a fantastic start.” He points to their fallen comrade, arms and legs splayed into a bodily X, on the ground. “He’s got no stamina, that one, no sense of perseverance.”

“He gave it a good shot,” Peter insists. “She almost said yes, I think.”

“No,” Remus says, tossing off the cloak. “James! James! I think I’ve got it!”

“I don’t want anymore of your poetry,” James groans from afar. “I don’t want anymore of your Byron, but I’ll take some of your chocolate. It’s over! We’re done for. Doomed. Forever.” He lets out a terrible, fantastic sound, low and keening and amplified for dramatics, but Remus can see the humiliation in his prone form, and the disappointment. He crouches down by James’ side, hands clasped together.

“She doesn’t want you to quote at her,” Remus says. “*I’d* like to be quoted at, but of course it must be different with her. The quoting business.”

“Naturally,” Sirius interjects, “because you’re Moony and she’s some redhead bint who knows fuck-all.”

“In any case,” Remus continues, “James, I think she’s warming up to you.”

“Augnnhghhhh,” James whimpers. “I can’t take it anymore, Moony. Just bury me beneath the Willow when I go.”

“James,” Remus insists, “you’re being entirely too melodramatic.”

“You weren’t the one who just quoted *poetry* at a girl who has *probably put a spell on you because this can’t be normal*. You weren’t the one who stood before her while she dashed your heart to pieces on rosy thorns. You weren’t the one who used phrases like *cloudless climes* and *starry skies* while *she* called you a *stalker*.”

“You are, sort of,” Sirius says. “Tough luck, that. Should’ve played it cooler, I think.”

“You do have all those pictures,” Peter says.

“Aesthetic appreciation,” James mutters, “artistic shots—”

“Even the one from the baths?”

“She’s got a robe on, and shut up.”

“She didn’t hit you!” Sirius says, kicking James reassuringly in the shin with one foot. “That’s the place to focus right now. The not-hitting. She looked kind of intrigued, even. And she said you had hidden depths!”

“Of stalkerness,” James says, disconsolately.

“No,” Sirius says, shooting an inscrutable glance at Remus. “She was — she was impressed, Prongs. It was a good start. You can’t expect her to just fall all over you, after six years and that whole debacle with the wrong bed — it’s a long, hard path you have to travel, my lad, but you can do it.”

“I can’t. It can’t be done.”

“Shut up,” Sirius insists. “If Moony can get you this far, he can get you as far as he likes. If you stop complaining. Can’t you, Moony.”

“I don’t—” Remus starts, but then makes the mistake of looking down at James’s genuinely miserable face, and hasn’t the heart to go on. “I don’t — I — oh, bother. All right. I’ll try again. But next time, do try not to stammer so much.”

“It’s not like I did it on purpose,” says James irritably, and wipes his nose. “Now what do you propose, genius?”

***

“Did you send this to me?” Evans comes storming into the common room like a small, auburn-headed thundercloud, clutching a crumpled-up parchment and a single, rather pathetic-looking rose. She shakes the parchment under James’s nose, looking furious. Remus tries not to stare and manages only to watch very discretely over his newspaper, which is, unfortunately, upside down. Luckily, Lily Evans is paying attention to James Potter and James Potter alone. For the first time in probably ever. “*Did* you?” she demands again. Remus, Sirius and Peter simultaneously dive behind Remus’s copy of the Prophet.

“Er,” James says, carefully laying down his quill. “Er. Well. That depends, you see. Did you like it?”

“Did I—” Lily starts, looking bewildered, and then shakes her head. “That isn’t the point. I told you I wouldn’t go with you!”

“Well,” James says reasonably, “I didn’t ask you, so you needn’t be so presumptuous.

Although," he winks lasciviously at her, even though his fingers are drumming a panicked tarantella on the tabletop, "if you're that eager—"

"You didn't — how can you say you didn't ask me — you sent me *this!*"

"I thought you might like it. Where does it say in there, 'Lily Evans, be my Valentine'? It doesn't. It's just some old Muggle poetry and a flower I found in the bin, so don't get excited."

"You're cheating! How did you know I liked Yeats? It's unfair tactics!"

"Lucky guess?" James's foot encounters Remus's leg under the table.

"I'm not going with you, so you can just — just forget it," Evans huffs. She blushes magnificently and folds her arms. Remus catches sight of James and knows, somehow, exactly what he's thinking. Still, he can't help but agree: she *does* look lovely when she's mad.

"All right," James says, "you needn't be so — forceful. Tread softly, Evans, for you tread upon my dreams." In a magnificent feat of self-control, he returns to his books, whistling tunelessly through his teeth.

Evans hovers over him for a moment, looking utterly bewildered, as though she's trying to decide whether to box his ears or shove him out of his chair. Without warning she throws her arms up in the air and storms off, but still clutching both the rose and the poetry. James, without turning around, pumps his fist discreetly at the three of them and grins helplessly at his paper.

"Whence did all that fury come?" Remus says, slyly, as James collapses forward onto the table in hysterical laughter. "That's Yeats too, you know."

"I don't care what it is," James chokes, "just, let's have some more of it."

***

"This one's called **To a Young Girl**," Remus says. He hands the book over, battered cover and flimsy pages and dusty smell, and taps the poem with his forefinger. "That, that right there. I think it's appropriate."

"Shorter than the last one," James worries. "Do you think that's all right?"

"She likes Yeats," Remus assures him. "Don't worry. This one will be all right." He holds the book open as James begins copying the lines over, keeping his hand as steady as he can. It's shaking nonetheless. Remus isn't sure if it's stopped shaking once since they began.

"If she doesn't — well, you know — by tomorrow — well, then, that's it, isn't it." James pauses, looking up from the task laid out before him. "What'll we do then?"

“If you don’t trust me,” Remus replies, “trust Yeats.”

“But I don’t *know* Yeats,” James mutters.

“You will by tomorrow,” Remus says. “In fact, if we’re lucky, you will by tonight.”

***

“I was reading some Yeats earlier,” Sirius says. He leans against the sink, staring at Peter’s profile. The bathroom smells funny. In fact, Peter smells funny. “You know, the girl’s the one supposed to put perfume on. You smell like a great big confused flower, and I’m not sure if that’s attractive.”

“I think I should get a haircut,” Peter says. “Should I get a haircut?” Sirius moves to stand behind him, peering at his reflection in the mirror, then shrugs, grins, and messes his hair from the back forward. “Hey! Sirius — Sirius, I just *combed* that!”

“You’re going to sleep on it and muss it up again tonight, aren’t you? Here’s a novel idea — it’s just a *girl*. Here’s another — comb your hair right before the date, not the day before.”

“Thanks,” Peter scowls. “You’re being *very* helpful.”

“I’m full of helpful hints,” Sirius replies. “Anyway, like I said, I was reading some Yeats earlier, and it’s all right, I suppose, but it’s got this power over Evans that’s totally insane. I mean, you saw it. Is she mad? Is Yeats mad? Is it a combination of the two?”

“She is foremost of those that I would hear praised,” James says from in front of the stall furthest away. “Er. Wait — no — I knew it. I *did!* Stop looking so disapproving. Damn, Moony, do I really have to know all these poems?”

“It’s sad, really,” Sirius sighs. “What you lot are willing to do for women.”

“Oh, yes,” James says, scornfully. “Because no one else in this bathroom ever did anything insane to get a girl to notice him, especially no one whose name rhymes with Shmirius Shmack.”

“I did not,” Sirius says with dignity. “I went to Great Lengths, but I was not ‘insane.’“

“You made her walls sprout out in dog roses,” Remus reminds him, examining his nose from different angles in the mirror. “I don’t know what you think of as ‘insane,’ but—”

“I wasn’t to know she was allergic,” Sirius says mulishly, turning around and hoisting himself up to sit on the sink.

“Oi, Sirius,” Peter says suddenly, arranging the strands of lank blond hair around his broad forehead, “how come you haven’t got a bird, eh? It’s only a day away.”

“Not interested.” Sirius leans back with exaggerated casualness, swinging his legs. “I’d rather mess with other people’s. And even if I did want a date, I needn’t arrange them in advance.” He’d be met with disagreement, loud disagreement, except that it’s true, of course, which makes it all the more frustrating and irritating. Sirius has this thing, Remus thinks with remarkable eloquence. He has this *thing* that he does, where he smiles, or he crinkles his eyes at the corners, or he pushes his sleeves up over his elbows, or he brushes a girl’s waist with his fingers as he passes her in the halls, and things go right for him. It seems unfair and inexplicable that the mere act of getting Sirius’s attention is more or less like turning on the sun. But there it is, and so although Sirius is reckless and mercurial and arrogant and immature and remarkably stupid for someone so intelligent, he has the *Thing*, and even if not every girl fancies him, he really doesn’t need to get a date in advance. “What about you, Moony?”

Remus shrugs. “I’m busy winning the fair hand of Lily Evans for the less-fair-but-at-least-his-nails-are-scrubbed James Potter.”

“All the wooing but none of the mess afterwards, is that it?” Sirius asks. When Remus says nothing, merely peering more closely at his nose in the soap-streaked mirror, Sirius allows himself a triumphant laugh. “I’m right, aren’t I? You’re having the time of your life feeding your poetry into this parrot. It’s working *splendidly* and in the end you’re going to be up with a box of chocolates and some book that smells like the bowels of the library while James reaps all the reward.”

“I have gone about the house, gone up and down!” James exclaims. “That’s it, isn’t it? The next line?”

“Yes,” Remus says. “That’s it. On the — nose.” He pushes his hair out of his face, smiles when it falls forward again without even waiting, and steps back from the sink. “I don’t know, Sirius. I’m enjoying myself.”

“Course you are,” Sirius scoffs. “That’s just like you, isn’t it.”

“You’re the one who suggested I help him with it in the first place, if memory serves.” Remus passes by Peter on his way out, is hit with the smell of him, and winces. “Peter, that’s too much.”

“Isn’t more better?” Peter asks helplessly.

“If you want to *literally* knock her off her feet, yes,” Remus replies. “But I’m not sure that’s what you’re going for. Subtlety. Am I right?”

“When’d you get to be such an expert with girls?” Sirius calls after him. Remus shrugs off the usual injustices as another mood to welcome and weather. “Don’t see you with any dates, now do I?”

“As a man does who has published a new book!” James howls, spilling out into the hall. “That’s the next one! I’m right, aren’t I?”

“Surprisingly, yes,” Remus says. “Keep going.”

Sirius is mysteriously but persistently moody all day, and when Remus asks him what his problem is, he folds his arms and leans back deliberately in that way that means he’s looking for a fight. “I’m not having a problem.”

“Yes, you are. I’m sorry to say it, but it’s unbearable. James is mouthing the wrong lines of my favorite poetry and Peter is doing nothing but rearrange the straw on his head, and for some inexplicable reason I was looking to you to be a beacon of sanity, but you’ve been moping around all day, and I’m quite tired of—”

“Sod off, Moony. I’m not doing anything. You’re the one having a *problem.*” Sirius’s eyes meet his, insolent and blank. He holds Remus’ eyes with the promise of losing it at any moment, but instead wheels in his chair and gets up, brushing off his knees. “Whatever. Anyway, I think we should go find Pete and watch the show. Third time’s the charm, eh?” He saunters toward the door, hands shoved into his pockets.

Remus glares, but follows him out of the common room anyway, wondering whether it would be wrong to push Sirius down the stairs and then act like it was an accident. It would certainly get rid of one of the problems — the least noisy, perhaps, and the least nervous, but the least explicable. James and Peter have their reasons to be on edge. They’re dealing with girls. Girls are, to the best of Remus’ knowledge, something of a different species from boys. They store a lot of secrets in their curves that Remus doesn’t understand and doesn’t want to understand and never will understand. Naturally James and Peter are terrified and helpless. Sirius, who has all the charm in the world at his fingertips, has no reason whatsoever to be in such a foul mood.

Sometimes, Remus thinks, boys are just as confusing as girls, and quicker to hit things like great flailing gits.

Lily is grading some of McGonagall’s first-year homework in the Transfiguration classroom when James and his unseen escort come in. He coughs, discreetly. She looks up — sees him — and promptly looks back down again, directing an inordinate amount of focus towards the act of answer-checking. James is onto her, though, clever in making his ambling, seemingly distracted way over to her side. “So,” he says, standing beside her at last. “Yeats.”

“I don’t know how you’re doing it,” Lily snaps. “I don’t know why you’re doing it, either. Is this some sort of *joke* for you, Potter? Some sort of trick? Some — some sort of *prank?*”

James winces, but covers it up well. “No,” he says simply. “That’s not what it is.”

“Don’t tell me St. Valentine’s Day has shown you the error of your ways,” Lily grinds out.

“Not exactly,” James says. He grins. “You are foremost,” he begins, but Lily holds up one hand to stop him.

“I don’t want anymore poetry,” she explains. “It’s lovely and I never thought you were capable of it, and I’m not sure I want to know what talkative little bird gave you the Yeats idea to begin with, but I think I’d like to hear, *in your own words*, why you’re *persisting* so.”

Remus swallows. He hasn’t prepared James for this. He wouldn’t have known how to, in any case. He looks to Sirius, arms crossed over his chest, leaning in the doorway beside him. There’s a smug sort of expression chasing remorse off his features, a little bit of embarrassment for his friend confusing the hardened lines of his face. Remus doesn’t know if Sirius wants James to succeed or not. Remus doesn’t think Sirius knows what he wants, either. “Damn,” Remus mouths. Sirius shrugs.

“I fancy you,” James says. “Don’t ask me why. Couldn’t tell you. I fancy you and I want you to go with me to Madame Puddifoot’s for Valentine’s Day.”

Lily licks her lips. She looks around, not nervously, but thoughtfully, taking in the moment. “You’re going to tell all your friends,” she says. “If they’re not here, watching, already.”

“They’re my friends,” James protests. “I mean, if I don’t tell them, they’ll find out.”

“Hm.” Lily’s mouth goes tight. She taps her fingers on the table. She adjusts a flyaway strand of hair, tucking it behind her ear. She watches James for a half a minute, taking the time to study his squirming. And then, she makes an evident decision, back straightening, jaw relaxing. “You’re not going to leave me alone unless I say yes, are you?”

“I’ll probably beg,” James says. “It’ll be really embarrassing.”

“It’ll ruin the moment,” Lily agrees. “All right. Madame Puddifoot’s. Tomorrow. Eight o’clock. If you’re late or if you bring something from Zonko’s or if I find any roaches in my tea I will hang you out upside down from the Astronomy Tower by your *underwear*, is that clear?” James nods. “Good.”

“Good,” James echoes. A little smile pulls at the edge of his mouth, slow and sweet and totally unlike his usual confident, swaggering grin. “Great.”

“Fine,” Lily says firmly, redirecting her attention to the pile of papers.

James grins stupidly at the top of her head for a minute, then turns round and bounces down the

aisle between the desks. At the door — Sirius, Peter and Remus shuffle quickly and not very discreetly out of his way — he stops, turns back, his hand in his hair. “You won’t be sorry!”

“I already am,” Lily mutters, and slices a red x into someone’s paper with unnecessary ferocity.

***

“I cannot believe this,” Sirius says for about the twelfth time. He’s smiling, massaging James’s shoulders encouragingly if not enthusiastically, and Remus is grateful for the effort — if effort it is. It’s still hard to tell. “I cannot fucking *believe* this. You do realize this is a milestone in your personal history, don’t you? The entire school is going to be talking about it. You have to make this a good one and no mistake.”

“I know,” James says hoarsely. He looks completely stricken, and has ever since they left the classroom. This is why, Remus thinks to himself, he doesn’t go around quoting poetry at girls. The panic that comes afterwards must be absolute — overwhelming — debilitating. James is already buckling under the pressure. Remus imagines he’d spend the time leading up to the ultimate goal, the date, on his knees over a toilet, relieving himself of every enjoyable meal his life ever saw. “And it’s going to be a good one,” James adds.

“Course it is, mate,” Sirius says. “Gorgeous bird that she is, shouldn’t be any problem for the dashing, mischievous you. Even with her silken red hair and green eyes all shiny the way you like them.” He claps James a final hand on his shoulder, and pulls away. “No pressure at all, of course. You’ve been primed and ready for this day for years, after all.”

“Of course,” James agrees. “Oh Merlin. I’m still doomed.” He flops forward, brave expression nearly melting off his face. Remus looks to Sirius, who is examining the nails of his left hand with intense fascination. “I mean, what do I know about dating *Lily Evans*? What do I know about *Madame Puddifoot’s?*”

“Don’t know,” Sirius says. “You know a lot about roaches in tea cups, though.”

“Sirius,” Remus warns. “No roaches, James, remember that.”

“No roaches,” James repeats. “No roaches. Nothing from Zonko’s. Nothing that makes any sounds of certain bodily functions. Nothing resembling owl waste or hairballs or small, dead, fuzzy animals. Nothing which emits the smell of certain bodily functions. That’s easier than poetry, Remus. *That* I remember.”

“Dates are easy,” Sirius scoffs. “Bring her flowers or chocolates or a card or something, girls like that. Get all swoony in the knees.”

James eyes him. “She’s not just any girl, you know, she’s *Lily Evans.* I can’t just — show up and shove a daisy at her.”

“What about a lily?” Peter chimes in from the mirror, where he is alternating between holding up a garish pink shirt and a still more garish electric blue one against his chest. “Wouldn’t that be sweet?”

“Lilies mean *death*, Wormtail,” Sirius says, giving him a scornful look. “That’s a great message for a girl on a first date: Happy Valentine’s Day, I can’t wait for your funeral!”

“Well, fine. How do you even know that?”

“How about that’s none of your business?”

“Closet florist,” James says from the table, sounding slightly better. “If I ever get *you* a flower, I know what it’ll be: a pansy. Heh-heh.”

“You never bring me flowers anymore anyway,” Sirius says. “And now, this bint? The romance has gone completely out of our relationship. I decided long ago to leave you, Potter.”

“For who? No one’ll have you as you are now, all old and bitter and dried-up. And what about the children?”

“Pig.”

“Wanker.”

“Adulterous bastard.”

“Whiny trollop.”

“Children!” Remus stops them reprovingly. “James, I think you need to go get some sleep. Looking like a zombie is never considered attractive. And Sirius, you need to go—” *Find a hobby*, says a treacherous little voice in his mind. “—go somewhere and stop making James panic.”

“Hm.” Sirius goes back to the study of his nails, indifference settling in over his shoulders like a suit. “Think I will, Moony. Leave you lot here to muddle through your flowers and your poetry and Peter’s copious cologne on your own, but when Evans punches you in the nose I will be somewhere else and otherwise occupied with *not* sweeping your shattered ego into my arms.” He shoots a dark-eyed look around the room once, twice, and then turns on his heel with only a wave and a snort.

“Must be that time of the month for him,” Peter says. “D’you think I should wear a bow-tie?”

“Am I really going to get punched in the nose, Moony?” James whispers, lifting his head from the table and peering at Remus from the shadows of his elbow.

“No, and no,” Remus tells them both. “She likes you, James, or else I don’t think she would have said yes. Just remember the three golden rules.”

“One: don’t play with my hair like that,” James begins. Remus nods his encouragement. “Two: don’t talk about Quidditch or she will break my nose.” Remus nods again. “Three: no reference to, indulgence in, or acknowledgement of, pranks.” Remus pats his shoulder, none of the easy boyishness in his touch that Sirius had, but more comfort.

“The rest is up to you,” he says.

“We’ve faith in you, mate,” Peter adds.

James swallows thickly. “Right,” he says. “I won’t let you down.”

***



***

Sirius bounces into the common room, still stomping snow off his boots and shivering, looking windblown and terribly pleased with himself. Remus is already worried. Despite himself, he's really been enjoying the quiet day in the abandoned tower, all the time to himself, all the unaccustomed silence. From the look of things, he knows that Sirius Cannot Be Having with silence, and has the feeling this will inevitably lead to conflict.

"What have you done? You look like the cat that got at the canary."

"Oh, I did," Sirius says, and leers. "It has been a productive day indeed. So far I have stolen two dates, improved four by my constant presence, and ruined another, which is fine because it was Bellatrix's."

"What did you do to Bellatrix's date?" says Remus. He isn't sure he really wants to know.

"Leaned over him and thanked him for showing me such a good time last night in the Quidditch shed," Sirius says happily. "And then I said I hoped we could do it again someday when he wasn't busy and I put my tongue in his ear. You should have seen her, I thought she was going to explode. You could hear the yells all the way down the street."

"Why can't you just let people enjoy a harmless holiday?" Remus sighs. He unfolds his legs, carefully placing his book aside. "It might do you some good to just — I don't know — take a walk, or something, and let Valentine's Day get on with itself."

"Horror!" Sirius draws back, crossing himself quickly, or pretending to, rolling his eyes towards the heavens. "Have you any idea of what you blaspheme?" he demands.

"I don't think that's the proper," Remus begins, but Sirius cuts him off.

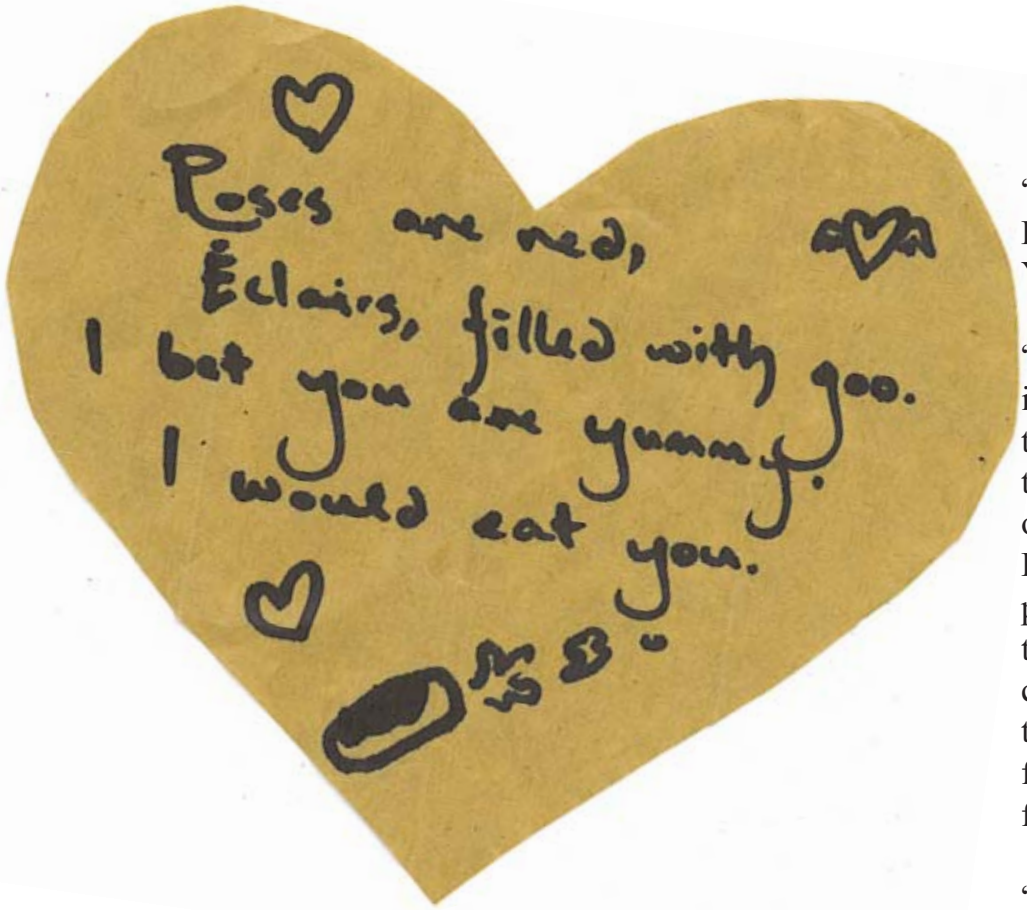
"To allow *Valentine's Day* to *get on with itself* is allowing disaster to happen! It's allowing evil to roam free! It's letting the greeting card corporations both Muggle and Wizarding to get that much closer to world domination — Moony, *someone* has to look after the good of boys and girls everywhere."

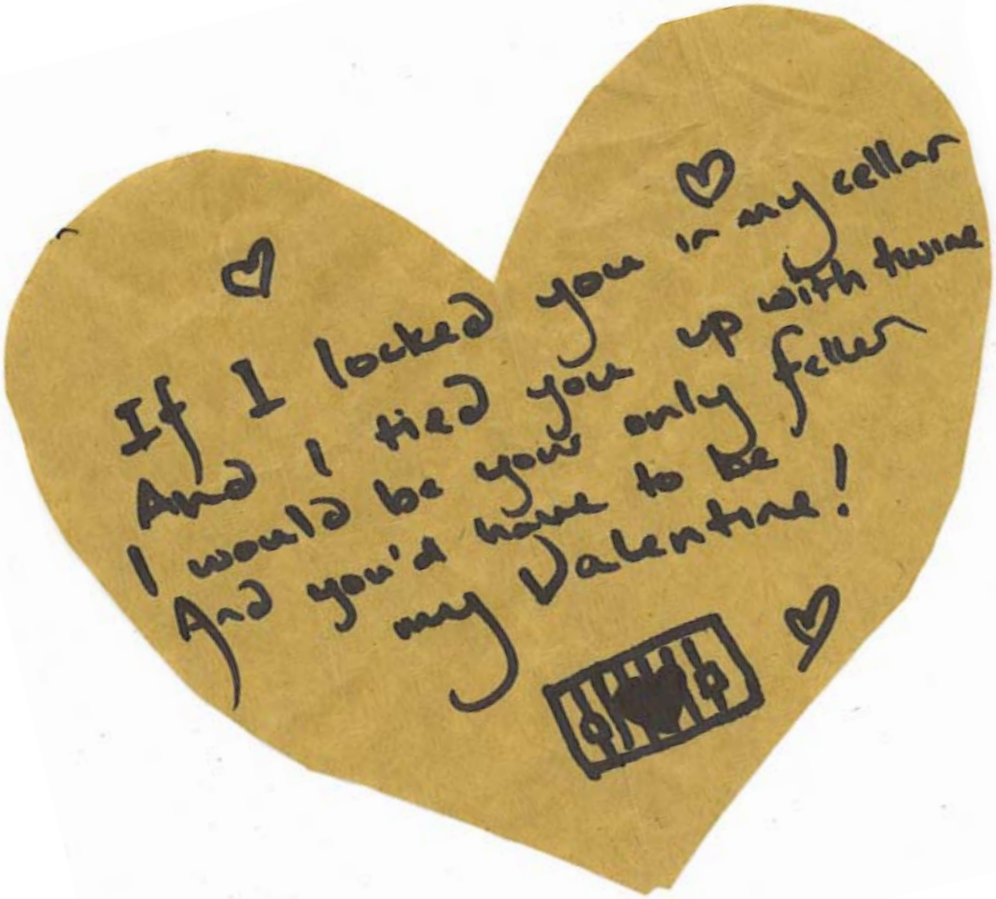
"In other words," Remus says dryly, "I'm to take it you're like Santa Claus."

"If Santa Claus were ever fit enough to run about starting his own card franchise," Sirius agrees. "Look — I made this one especially for you."

"Sirius," Remus says. "It's a scrap of parchment. It has notes on the back of it."

"Recyclable." Sirius lets the card fall into Remus' lap and flings himself down into a chair across from him. "Go on. Read it. It's genius in the making."





"How poetic of you," Remus says. "You're a Yeats in the making."

"I will leave express instructions when I die that no one is to use me to woo the underthings off anyone named Evans." Sirius pats his pocket. "I've loads of them. Perhaps I'll copyright them and sell them off to Zonko's, furthering the good fight."

"No," Remus says.

"Tell you what, as one of my favorite customers, I'll give you a dramatic reading." He fishes another out of his pockets, clears his throat, fixes Remus with a look, and puts his hand on his heart.

"That's horrifying," Remus says.

"I know! Ooh, and here's one of my personal favorites—"



“I think I need to go somewhere and be ill,” Remus says. “Truly, you know the way to a woman’s heart. I am shocked, shocked, that you are not off somewhere having a glass of wine with a truly classy woman right this instant.”

“No one is more shocked than I.” Sirius shrugs. “But that only leaves my schedule wide open for a sneak preview tonight of the honorable James Potter’s first date.” He shifts his eyes slyly to Remus’ face, and Remus knows immediately what’s coming. “What do you say, eh, Moony? Let’s make a night of it.”

“Sirius,” Remus protests. “If she finds out that we’re *there*—”

“She won’t,” Sirius insists. “She won’t. We’ll take James’ cloak and we’ll be very quiet. And we can even help him out if he looks too pathetic.”

“It’s his date,” Remus says. “Not yours. Not mine.”

“Correction,” Sirius replies, “it *is* your date. You, and your Yeats, and all the information you spoon-fed him about being a gentleman and sliding out chairs for girls and telling them their eyes are starry vortexes of infinity.”

“I never said that,” Remus mutters.

“Well you never said anything about slamming doors and mounting basses, that’s for sure. More’s the pity. Catch the *right* kind of girl, that way.”

“If you catch any at all.” Remus opens his book intently, flipping forward to his place. “I’m sorry, Sirius. I’m reading. I’ve been reading. I’m going to keep reading. I don’t believe in Valentine’s Day and going to Madame Puddifoot’s would be deeply hypocritical.”

“But,” Sirius says, grin pulling at his words, “if I go alone and you’re not there to keep an eye on me, think how James’ date might just be ruined.”

Remus pauses. “You wouldn’t.”

“Wouldn’t what?”

“You *would*.”

“*Would* I.”

“You would! I can see it in your eyes.”

“Starry vortexes of infinity that they are.” Sirius tosses back his head and laughs. “You’ve got ten minutes to get ready, Moony, or I am riding for doom and destruction without you.”

“Aahgh,” Remus says, drops the book on the table, and trails upstairs to get his cloak.

***

Madame Puddifoot’s is a deeply horrifying place. Remus has believed this ever since Mafalda Hopkirk dragged him here in the third year and tried to give him a lock of her hair while a cupid hovered overhead and strummed merrily on his lyre. It’s even worse than the fanged mistletoe. Luckily, the cupids appear to be as affected by the cloak as anyone else, and mercifully ignore him and Sirius as they stroll over and take a seat in one of the huge, squashy armchairs.

“Someone’s going to sit on us,” Remus hisses.

“You’re already sitting on me,” Sirius points out, sounding slightly short of breath. “And much heavier you are than you look. Mercy on my poor lungs, Moony. Don’t worry, no one’s going to sit over here, it’s much too public. Believe me, no respectable girl will sit in this chair with you; this is the chair of lonely, voyeuristic bastards. I’ve seen ‘em in here before. Severus Snape is extremely fond of this chair.”

“Has he got a date?” Remus wonders aloud.

“Not anymore!” Sirius says, rather too contentedly. “Can you see either of our targets?”

Remus casts about for an instant, and then spots a familiar fuchsia shirt and limp blond head, not five feet from where they are seated. “There’s Peter and what’s-her-name! Right there, just to your left—” Sirius shifts under him, digging his knee accidentally into Remus’s thigh, and Remus gives a muffled yowl of pain.

“Where?”

“Just there. Can’t you see the pink?”

“I’d rather I hadn’t.” Sirius pats Remus’ thigh, distracted but apologetic. “It’s blinding. Why’d you let him wear that?”

“The other options were worse,” Remus sighs. “Hard as I know that is to believe. Well. They look like they’re having a good time of it anyway, don’t they.” As if on cue, he and Sirius lean forward, heads tilted to catch snippets of inane date conversation.

“You look nice,” Peter is saying. “No, really, you do.”

The girl laughs, cheerful and empty. “So do you. I love that shirt.”

“Well,” Sirius whispers, “Peter’s found himself a complete nutter.”

“Shh,” Remus reprimands, “I can’t hear.”

“I didn’t know what sort of flowers you’d like,” Peter continues, shy but unflaggingly brave. “So I got one of each and sort of had it all wrapped up in one bouquet, like.”

“Oh, Peter,” Peter’s date says.

“Oh, my stomach,” Sirius groans.

“Oh, shut up,” Remus mutters.

“Oh, you’re welcome,” Peter replies.

“*Next*,” Sirius says, snagging Remus by the wrist and pulling him up through the rows of tiny, secluded, supposedly romantic tables. They pass by a few nameless third and fourth years being awkward at one another, almost playing a game of warring incompetence, and Remus is glad he missed all this. A little worried at the prospect of being capable in his future, but on the whole glad he missed all this. Sirius makes small noises of contempt in the back of his throat, muttering *beginners, all* at odd intervals, or *amateurs, I tell you,* or *he could do with one of my cards.* Remus doesn’t even try to make him quiet down. It’s a losing battle he no longer has the energy to fight. All the satin and shades of clashing pink and sparkle-toothed waitresses have sapped the life force out of him.

“This holiday is horrifying,” he whispers. “It’s the most depressing thing I’ve ever born witness to.”

“With you one hundred percent,” Sirius says grimly. “Where on earth is Prongs? I hope his body hasn’t been dumped in a gutter.”

“Oh God,” Remus says, amazed at Sirius’s ability to come up with new and horrible outcomes that had never even occurred to him. “No, Lily wouldn’t do that. She’d cover her tracks.”

“There!” Sirius yips, and drags him forward again, to one of the side tables less frequented by Cupids.

“…really do hate this place,” Evans is saying when they skid breathlessly up to the table. Sirius flattens them both against the wall, staring intently at the two of them.

“Me too,” James mutters. His hands are wound into his hair, and under the table Remus can see his leg jiggling frenetically. “It’s like — like being raped by a marshmallow, is what it’s like.”

“Oh God,” Remus clutches at Sirius’s arm in a blind rush of panic. “Oh God, he didn’t say that.”

“Oh God, he did,” Sirius says, sounding gleeful.

And then, to their immense shock, Evans laughs, abrupt and surprised. “That’s it exactly! What were you thinking, asking me here?”

“I don’t know,” James replies. “I thought you might be distracted by all the glitter and forget it was me you were here with.”

“Not working,” Lily says. She gives him an odd sideways look, light green eyes catching gold in the Romantic Atmosphere. “Did you try to comb your hair?”

“What is she doing?” Sirius hisses. “She’s — she’s undermining, is what she’s doing, and I won’t stand for it!”

“Quiet.” Remus elbows him.

“Er,” James says. “I am a big believer in making an effort? I did my best, you know.”

“How much Sleekeasy’s is in there?” There’s a laugh bubbling on the edge of Lily’s voice, sweet and surprising.

“Loads.” James gives her a mournful look. “If I bent it, I swear, it would snap off. Try knocking on it; it’s like a helmet.” He lowers his head towards her and Lily raps her knuckles against James’s head. She giggles. It crackles. James laughs.

“This is disgusting,” Sirius fumes. “We have to do something about it—”

“No we don’t!” Remus snaps, lunging at him and catching the back of his robes. “Agh. Come on. Let’s give them some privacy.”

“They don’t *need* privacy; they *need* someone to stop this madness before the two of them fancy themselves — well — *you* know.” Remus drags Sirius back, nearly tearing his sleeves, Sirius’ heels dragging on the carpeting.

“Look.” Remus brings their faces very close together, trying his best to be firm without being too harsh. “Do you see them? Having such a good time? I spent *hours* teaching James *Yeats*, while Yeats spent *hours* rolling around in his *grave*. This is something worth protecting. This is a triumph of will and perseverance. This is the fruit of all our labors. This is James *not getting punched in the nose*. Aren’t you in the least bit happy for him?”

“I don’t like her,” Sirius says tersely. “I don’t like her at *all*.”

“Well, James does,” Remus replies. “You’re just going to have to get used to it.” Sirius turns, looking back over his shoulder at the Lovely Couple Scene made a few feet behind them. James is loosening his tie and Lily is flicking pieces of her napkin at a cupid hovering too close to their

table. They look happy. Lily looks wicked, James looks relieved enough to wet himself, and they look happy.

“I hate this place,” Sirius snarls. “Let’s get out of here.”

***

Sometime in the night it begins to snow. The Gryffindor Common Room is quiet save for the crackling of the fire and the occasional snort of Sirius’ angry inner monologue bursting through to the surface. Remus spends a half hour studying him, a half hour analyzing the problem, and another half hour diagnosing it. From nine-thirty until eleven o’clock, he tries to read, and fails miserably. “Well,” he says finally, “I don’t suppose you want any chocolate?”

“Yes,” Sirius says miserably. “Give it here. This is the worst holiday in the world. Where is he? Why isn’t he back? What if he’s been run over by a coach? No one would ever know. He knows I get worried when he gets in late and he hasn’t even the consideration to owl me or Floo me or anything—”

“He’s always in late,” Remus reminds him. “And you always wake him up in the morning and give him a high-five and the Inquisition. Where’s he supposed to Floo you from, anyway?”

“He’s not always in late with Lily Evans,” Sirius mutters, and puts his face in his hands. “Ughh. Moony, I’m sorry. I don’t mean to be like this, I swear, I don’t. We all wanted it to work. I’m happy for him. Honestly, I am.” He gives Remus an immense, horrifying smile.

“That’s unnerving.” Remus cringes. “Please don’t do it anymore.”

Sirius slumps even further down into himself. “I hate this bloody holiday. Didn’t you offer chocolate?”

“I don’t see what you’re so depressed about,” Remus says, trying to be comforting, as he leans over the chair and rummages in his bag for his ever-present package of Honeydukes’ Finest. “You could have had a date, if you liked.”

“I didn’t like,” Sirius says gloomily. “I hate dating. It’s the romantic equivalent of making small talk about the weather with the man who’s about to give you your lottery winnings. Everyone knows what’s going to happen, but you have to go through some useless ritual with someone who isn’t even your friend, who doesn’t even really care about being your friend, just to get there. It’s pointless and degrading.” Wordlessly, Remus hands him a bar of dark — his favorite — and Sirius crams it into his mouth, looking black. “I hope he’s lost in the snow,” he adds, spewing bits of chocolate onto his shirt. “What about you?”

“What about me, what?” Remus leans over to peer beneath the chair, fishes one hand underneath

it, and tugs out a large heart full of chocolates. “Failed attempts,” he explains. “The rejected parties always leave their chocolate offerings of appeasement behind. Thwarted love ruins the appetite, I’ve heard. Do you want one?”

“Sure. One of the one’s with coconut.” Sirius drags himself up and across to personally fondle every one of the chocolates, before picking one which, by his expression, must be cherry-filled, or one of those gross melting nougat concoctions that taste like human waste. “What about you,” he continues, swallowing valiantly. “I mean, why aren’t you on a date?”

“Someone’s got to stay behind and make sure you don’t fling yourself into the fireplace in despair,” Remus points out.

“You could’ve had one,” Sirius presses. “What with your poetry and your gentleman’s guide to getting the girl and all your great advice. The girls would have been lining up for you — well, the one’s without dates already, anyway. And the one’s I didn’t sneak away with in the night. Why didn’t you?”

“Sirius,” Remus replies, “what would *I* know about what to *do* with a *girl?* Talk to her? About poetry? All night long? She’d fling her fork at my face to get me to shut up, if she didn’t fall asleep from boredom before she managed it. Or I’d just sit there staring at her not knowing what to say, my tongue some great sausage in my head, my body frozen to the spot, while she was left to wonder if I’d been bitten by a poisonous spider or if I was simply having a fit.” Remus shakes his head, licking chocolate politely from his fingers. “No. Thank you. I’ve enough trouble talking to *people*. I’d be a glutton for punishment, getting myself into talking to *girls*.”

“Girls like you,” Sirius insists.

“They’ll get over it,” Remus says firmly.

“You always give up on yourself. It’s irritating.” Sirius makes a horrible face at his chocolate selection. “Someday we’ll find you a girl worth your time. Oh, that’ll be in my teeth for the rest of the year.”

“Here,” Remus says. “This one’s coconut. I can smell it.”

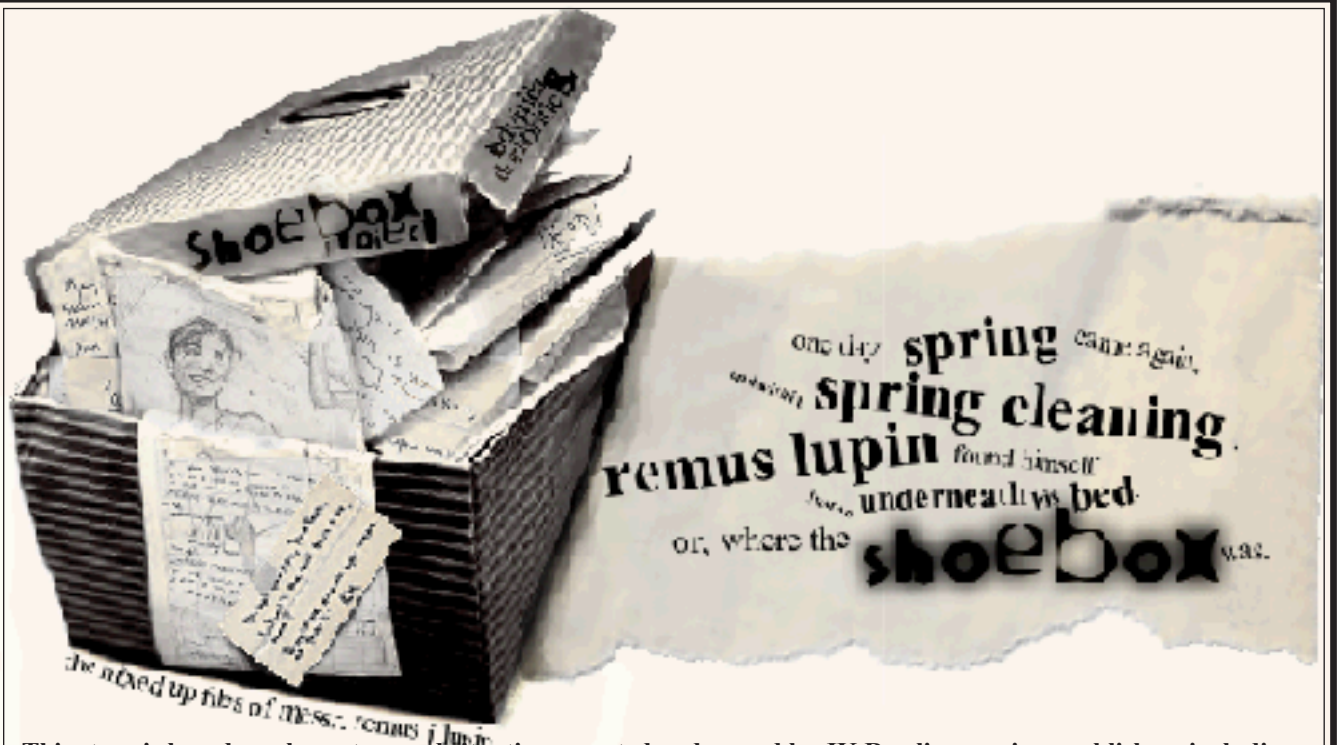
Sirius takes it gratefully. “You’re a good friend. Though all too well,” he adds, looking up and wrinkling his nose, “do I know the folly of being comforted.”

“That’s almost Yeats,” Remus says, taken aback.

“I know,” Sirius says, and grins a little.

***





This story is based on characters and situations created and owned by JK Rowling, various publishers including but not limited to Bloomsbury Books, Scholastic Books and Raincoast Books, and Warner Bros., Inc. No money is being made and no copyright or trademark infringement is intended.

***The Shoebox Project* by LadyJaida and Dorkorific**

http://www.livejournal.com/community/shoebox_project

Part Nine: March, 1976
Five Very Old Photographs, One Accidental Prank, One Torn Page, and Three Animagi.

On most days, Sirius Black consults James Potter before effecting an idea. On most days, great tragedies do no occur from simple lack of coordination, planning, or revision, or some arbitrary combination of both. On some days, however, Sirius Black skips the consultation step and moves directly into action. He often regrets it later. Most of Hogwarts often regrets it later. This is one such day.

"Where is he, Black?" Snape asks. The light in the hallway is most unflattering to his complexion, waxy, yellow, unclean. He runs his spindly yellow fingers through his hair, which separates greasily into individual, thick strands over his forehead. Sirius shudders. "Another night of debauchery for the two of you? Really, *really*. You *are* a bad influence."

"He's off shagging your mum, Snivellus, since I got sick of her fat saggy arse," Sirius says casually, rolling up his sleeves with great deliberation and care. "Why do you care? Just hoping he was in the showers so you could catch a quick peek?"

"You're one to talk," Snape drawls. "Trailing around after him like a little puppy, trying to control who he talks to, what he does, with whom he *makes nice*. It's pathetic."

"A state of being you know *all* about, after all." Sirius hopes, very much, that Snape will take just two steps closer and give him a good excuse to punch him right in the nose. It really does present an awfully tempting target, all shiny and out there. He does not, however, throw punches that require any kind of awkward setup, so he's willing to bide his time until Snape makes it easy for him which, as Snape learns quickly and well, might not happen without further provocation. "Do I detect a note of jealousy in your dulcet, *harmonious* whining?"

Snape snorts. "Don't worry, Black. Your *toys* are safe." He gathers his things up into his arms, eyes shifting to uncover the safest, most feasible escape route. Sirius is proud to note there isn't one, unless Snape is willing to venture just close enough to be in range.

"Don't know about you, Snivellus, but some of us have friends. We call them friends; they call us friends; it's a mutual relationship in which we are friendly. Very complicated. Tough for you, isn't it? Well, keep trying. You'll figure it out someday."

"Oh, I *will* figure it out," Snape says, very softly, while his black eyes flick up to Sirius's, cold and hateful. "I don't know yet, but I will figure it out. And when I do, this whole school will. I *promise* you that."

"Well, the student body will be itching to know when you unlock the mysteries of 'friendship,'" Sirius says easily, but a chill crawls down his spine.

“I think you know what I’m talking about,” Snape says.

“I think you’re a loony,” Sirius says, “and you need to find a hobby.” He saunters a little closer, cracking his knuckles. “A hobby other than getting the shit kicked out of you by me because you can’t shut up about things that are not your business.”

“Not my business, hmm.” Snape grins mirthlessly at him, spidery fingers closing around his books, and eyes the space between Sirius and the wall like he might try to break through it. Sirius is still trying to decide whether, when the inevitable happens, he will a) stick out a foot and let Snape go flying, or b) try the riskier but probably more rewarding method of lunging sideways and trapping Snape between himself and a wall, when Snape adds, “I’m going to follow him. I know where he goes, and I’m going to find out what he does. And then you’ll *all* be sorry.”

Sirius snorts and rolls his eyes. “Oh, right. Because you know so much. Why don’t you go jab your head into that big knot on the Whomping Willow, if you’re so bloody curious?” It would be wonderful, Sirius thinks, to watch an inanimate object like a tree share in the joy that is giving Snivellus a thumping.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Sirius can almost see the cogs whirring behind Snape’s narrow, dark eyes, the calculations, the speculations, spiraling to an unfortunate conclusion. Snape is already clinging to the tiny crumbs of information with the desperation of the starving. Pathetic. Hopeless. Morbidly fascinating. How strange the unsocialized are, eager and withdrawn at once, always unsure of how to stand or what, exactly, their faces are doing on the outside.

“It’s supposed to mean you should save me the trouble,” Sirius replies, “of bashing your pointy little head in for you.”

“No,” Snape says. “The Whomping Willow. That’s where he is, isn’t he. Right now.” His eyes dart to one of the slope-arched windows along the outer hallway, where the sun is dripping low on the horizon.

“And what if it is?” Sirius says slyly. “Think you’re man enough to handle him after hours, is that it?”

“You’re up to something,” Snape hisses, “you’ve been up to something for years. Just because no one else is smart enough to notice what’s happening right under their noses doesn’t mean I don’t see it. I do.”

“Surprising,” Sirius grins, “considering how hard it must be to see anything under *that* nose.”

“Very funny,” Snape snarls. “We’ll see who ends up laughing.”

“Oh, me,” Sirius says matter-of-factly. “I can say with great confidence that it will be me.”

“Well, if you like — *Rictusempra!*” Snape yells, suddenly yanking out his wand out of nowhere. Sirius ducks to the side and the curse fizzles harmlessly against the wall, but Snape takes advantage of the distraction to speed out of the hallway as fast as his little legs can carry him.

Sirius regards him in some surprise, ponders his parting words, and then howls after his retreating footsteps, “Look out for the stairs, they’ve just been mopped!” and is gratified to hear a series of painful-sounding crashes followed a torrent of very creative Pureblood curses.

Lovely evening, he thinks, and strolls out of the hallway, whistling.

***

“You said *what* to *who*?!” James shrieks, yanking himself up by his own hair. “And he did *what*?!”

“Poke the willow, Snape, fell down the stairs,” Sirius says, regarding him with innocent surprise. “And this was…bad?”

“Bad?! Fucking — fuck, Padfoot! Fucking fuck!” James’ face has turned a remarkable shade of purple. Sirius squints at it, intrigued.

“Oh, come on, it’s not like he’ll actually do it, I was just winding him up—”

“How can you be so stupid?! Were you always this stupid? Wormtail, back me up—”

“You’re stupid,” Peter says to Sirius, saucer-eyed. It was a look that was once oddly appealing, childish and round-cheeked, but now seems somehow disturbing. Naturally, Sirius might also be put off because of the statement coupled with it. No one likes to be called stupid by someone whose eyes look like they belong underneath the cups at high tea. “Wow,” Peter adds. Sirius cuffs him on the ear.

“Really,” he mutters, “I don’t see why you’re making such a big deal out of it. Calm down. Sit down. Nice underwear, by the way, is that new?” Sirius flops down into a chair, folding his arms behind his head and closing his eyes with a satisfied sigh. “Relax. Snivellus’ll go out there, get his face whacked in by the Willow, have his nose re-done, and everyone goes home happy. I don’t know why you’re inventing colors on your face.”

“Because what if he gets through?” James splutters.

“You think *Snivellus* can get *through*?” Sirius scoffs. “Not bloody likely. The Willow’ll knock him from here to Sunday. It’s a good tree. It knows what sort of people it wants crawling through it and what sort of people should get their honking great noses knocked off.”

“Sirius!” James snaps, flailing his arms in front of Sirius’ face. “Sirius, *he could get through.* You told him *how to get through*. You gave him *directions*.”

“He might just do what we did, the first time,” Peter adds. “Remember? Picked up a big stick and poked at it until we hit it right. Kept out of range of the branches and you even said it yourself, easiest break-in you ever managed.”

Sirius cracks one eye open, pondering this. “Well I didn’t tell him *which* knot to poke,” he rationalizes. “I just said he should hit it with his head. Clearly not a suggestion to take seriously.”

“*But what if he does*,” James insists. “Think, Sirius, *think*.”

“Do you really think that’s possible?” Sirius swings his legs onto the floor, scratching his chin. “Do you know, I think I’ve got hair on my chin. No, seriously. Go on. Feel it.” James looks, for a moment, as if he’s going to hall off and punch Sirius in the face. Sirius blanches at his expression, pulling back. “The hell’s gotten into you?” Sirius demands, an angry flush coming over his cheeks. “It’s like everyone’s gone mad here but me!”

“You’re the one who’s mad,” James snaps, still flailing. “You told Snape where Moony is, Sirius. It’s not a game, it’s not a joke, it isn’t clever or funny — you could get Snape killed!”

“Evans is rubbing off on you, mate,” Sirius mutters. “In a bad way.”

James puts his hands on Sirius’s shoulders, looking very serious. He might look more serious if he were wearing more than a pair of underwear and his hair wasn’t all sticky-out over one ear. “Padfoot, *think* for a second. What if Snape gets through? Let alone if he gets hurt? What happens to Moony if *Severus Snape* finds out what’s going on? Two seconds. Shut up and think about it.”

Sirius shuts up and thinks about it.

“I — he won’t get in,” he says, but uncertainly, and then, “oh, shit.”

“You’re bloody right, oh shit,” James says furiously. “Pads, there’s pranks, and there’s pranks.”

“It wasn’t a prank even!” Sirius protests weakly, feeling slightly lightheaded. “If it had been a prank I’d’ve put a bucket of water over the door or made the tree fart when he pushed it or something. Anything. This wasn’t even — it was just a *comment*!”

“What if they put Moony down?” Peter wonders aloud. “Like once, my old pet Kneazle bit my Aunt Esther right on the arm, and we had to—”

“Shut *up*, Peter!” Sirius and James yell in unison.

“Well I was just,” Peter begins. Sirius takes him by the top of his head and neatly sits him down into a chair, then flicks him right between the eyes. “That hurt!”

“Shut up,” Sirius says. “Shut up, sit down, and don’t move. We have to think, and the sound of your voice isn’t helping.”

“Well it’s not my fault,” Peter mutters. He crosses his arms over his chest, glowering at the far wall.

“So.” Sirius turns on James. “Think. *Think*, man, *think*!”

“I can’t think if you’re shouting at me!” James exclaims. “Just — all right. What, *exactly*, did you tell Snape?”

“Well,” Sirius says. “First we got into it about each other’s mothers, and then we got into it about sex with Remus, I think—”

“Not that part,” James explains. The tips of his ears have turned the same shade of mauve as his nose and cheeks.

“You’re all splotchy,” Peter mumbles. No one pays any attention.

“Oh, right, right.” Sirius pulls one sock off and holds it out to Peter. “For your mouth,” he instructs. He turns back to James, running his fingers distractedly through his hair. “You meant the relevant parts. I’m just. Uhm. No, I’ve got it. All right so then I said — ‘Why don’t you go jab your head into that big knot on the Whomping Willow, if you’re so bloody curious?’ And he said ‘What’s that supposed to mean’ and I said something about how it would save me the trouble of smashing his head in for him and then *he* figured that’s where Remus was, the Willow, and how he was going to figure out what we were up to once and for all with one of those expressions, like he’s so brilliant. Well, if he’s so brilliant, why can’t he figure out how to use shampoo, that’s what I want to know.”

“The relevant parts.” James holds Sirius tight by the shoulders, shaking him to punctuate each word. “The. Relevant. Parts. Please.”

“And then he stormed off and fell down the stairs and for all we know he could be with Madam Pomfrey right now!” Sirius finishes. “Completely incapacitated and posing no threat.”

“The stairs wouldn’t stop him,” James says grimly.

“No,” Sirius groans. “Stupid fucking sailboat-nosed Slytherin *bastard*.”

“We have to stop him,” Peter pipes up from the chair, and then quails and stuffs the sock into his mouth when Sirius whirls on him.

“Stop him? Stop him *how*? What do you want us to do?”

“Go after him,” James decides. “That’s how.”

“Oh, no, thanks very much,” Sirius says in shocked disgust. “Risk my neck so Snape may or may not be saved from a hypothetical beating?”

“Have you been paying any attention at *all*?! Risk your neck so Moony won’t hurt Snape and you won’t have caused the biggest disaster of our relatively short lives! Hand me my trousers, they’re over that chair.”

Sirius does, automatically, but something is nagging at his mind. “Prongs, how are we going to stop him?”

“I don’t know,” James admits. There’s a sort of still, tidal rage behind his words, that strange anger that he gets where he goes cold and very calm and very quiet. “You should have thought of that before you went running your mouth off about someone else’s secrets. I can’t believe you.”

“I didn’t,” Sirius protests. “You’re not being fair.”

“You *did*,” barks James, whipping around and shoving his face into Sirius’s. “You did, all right? You didn’t mean to, and who doesn’t like the thought of Snape getting destroyed by a tree, and I understand how it happened, but the point is you ran your mouth off and now *other people* are going to pay for it. So be quiet and *deal with it*.” There is a short, very silent pause, and then he adds, “and the fucking zipper is jammed on these fucking jeans.”

“They can’t be stuck.” Sirius stares down at James’ fly, or rather James’ fingers struggling with James’ fly, and shakes his head. James, indulging in his sometimes-painful penchant for heroics one second, and struggling to zip up his trousers the next. It’s almost funny. Sirius attempts a laugh that wilts immediately on his lips, and sticks for the next few minutes deep down in his throat.

“*Hell*.” James has developed that struggling, clumsy desperation that only comes about in moments of dire need, restless panic, and certain doom. He has the feeling that his fingers have suddenly turned into sausages, for all they’re listening to him. The zipper, stuck on itself, stuck on trouser fabric, stuck on his underwear, refuses to move until, at last, with Herculean effort, he rips the fly free completely. “Sirius,” James says, deadly quiet, “my trousers are in two pieces. Give me your trousers.”

“I’m not giving you my trousers!” Sirius objects. “*I’ll* go!”

“And do what?” Peter asks around his sock.

“I told him not to talk,” Sirius snaps, pointing an accusing finger first at Peter, then at James. “I *told* him not to *talk*!”

“And do what?” James repeats. His jaw is tight, hard at the edges, twisting the corners of his mouth.

“*You* don’t even know what you’re going to do!” Sirius explodes. “You just want to — you just want my pants so you can run out their first and play hero, clean up all the messes, be James Potter, the only one who can clean up the messes other people leave. Well I *won’t have it!* Wear *his* trousers!”

“As what,” James snaps, temper and frustration making him tactless, “a very short poncho?” Peter goes white, and then red, and then very small in his chair. “I’m going to the bloody Willow, I’m going to haul Snape back by the neck if I have to, and you can stand there like an idiot or you can help, because I’m going. In broken trousers.” James, considering these epic final words, spins around and hurtles out the door. Sirius gestures after him, mouth open, stares at Peter, stares at the door, and then his face goes tight.

“Fuck all!” Without waiting to confuse himself further, he breaks into a run after James, yanking his jacket over his shoulders.

“Bloody—” Peter says to no one, and sends a panicked glance out the window, at his own hands, at the abandoned sock. “What now?”

***

The moon has risen high in the sky as James makes it outside and finally kicks his useless pants away from down about his ankles. “Bloody hell,” he mutters to himself. “Stupid bloody pants, stupid bloody Sirius, stupid bloody Severus Snape.” He stops for a minute, running his fingers miserably through his hair, legs cold in the chill night air. “Bloody willow,” he adds, “bloody full moons, bloody werewolves, bloody hell.”

“You’re repeating yourself,” Sirius pants, running up behind him. “And wasting valuable time.”

“I don’t know what to do,” James mutters. He cranes his neck forward, peering off into the distance. “Is the Willow moving? Is it still moving? I can’t see.”

“Neither can I.” Sirius makes a low, desperate sound. “Closer,” he decides, “we have to get closer.”

“We can’t get caught,” James adds. “Stick to the trees. Stick to the shadows.”

“I’m not an idiot,” Sirius scoffs. “I can figure that out for myself.”

James's only reply is an arched brow directed at Sirius from just over his shoulder.

"Save it," Sirius snaps. "Just—save it. Should we — you know. Should we?"

"No," James says, a little distantly, already making a plan. Whether it's a good plan or not, Sirius can't imagine. It's terrible, not knowing. "Won't do any good without Wormtail, neither of us can get at the knot—"

"Where is he?" Sirius spins back to the door. "Isn't he coming?"

"You scared him."

"*You* went on about how short and fat he is!"

"We don't — have — time for this!" James yells, smacking Sirius on the side of the head. "Get it together! We need to just — just fucking *run*."

Sirius thinks for a second. As far as plans go, it's hardly a complicated one. It doesn't actually seem like a plan — not yet, though James is full of surprises. It's something Sirius could have thought of all on his own, but for some reason, he isn't resentful. He's grateful. He doesn't have to do the thinking, he doesn't have to come up with what happens *after* running, and, most importantly, he isn't the one who's going to make things any worse than he's already made them. He looks up to the moon, licking his lips nervously, and nods. "Right," he says. "Running. Running I can do."

James is already off, pale legs flashing through the shadows. Sirius lunges after him, one sock on, one sock off, something cutting the sole of his bare foot almost immediately. He bites back a sound of pain and, not even half a minute later, he's too numb to even feel it, the wind too rush to allow him most major thoughts. James in front of him to follow; Willow to get to; Snivellus to catch. It's a three-link chain of action. He feels more confident, blood pumping faster, heart beating out the quickened rhythm of necessity. This is going to be all right. This is going to be fine. This is going to be nothing at all. This is all going to resolve itself easily and without any lasting problems and with no fingers of blame pointing back to him and no one putting Remus down, as if he's some sort of animal. This is just another day in the wild and crazy lives of Sirius Black and James Potter, who mess things up and save the day anyway.

What a relief.

"Owfuck," Sirius says, and goes down, aided by a large, only somewhat visible, and certainly low branch.

James pauses only for an instant to take his trousers.

***

When James pounds up to the Willow, his throat aching with effort, the tree is thrashing its branches wildly against the air, signaling some recent disturbance. James unleashes a torrent of curses, distantly wishing Sirius were around to appreciate his fluency, and hurls himself, eyes squeezed shut, at the crucial knot. For his efforts, he gets smacked in the stomach with a particularly aggressive branch and goes flying, hitting the ground with an unforgiving thud.

There are no curses, at this point, to properly express his rage. His trousers are too tight across the thigh — this has never happened before, when borrowing Sirius's clothes, and he puts it down in the back of his head to increase stair-climbing to visit Lily — his best friend is a total careless wanker, and his second-best friend is about five minutes from being euthanized for relieving the world of one of its most prominent boils. The world is a cruel and horrible place, and James is, for a moment, paralyzed by the pure unfair *awfulness* of everything.

It won't work. It never works to just sit there and hate it. James knows this. Sometimes he feels like an idiot for knowing this, feels pretentious and wanky and over-mature and wishes he could just kick things and rage and yell and be a proper teenager; but he can't, because it just *doesn't work*. Driving deep breaths into his lungs, steadying himself against future impact, he dives in one more hopeless time, rolls under a side-swiping bough and smacks the knot with the side of his fist. The Willow quivers and goes still. The side of his hand goes numb. He stares at the entrance to the underground tunnel, a dark, wide, helpless mouth.

"Bugger all," James whispers. Winded, sprawled on one side, for a moment to dizzy to lift himself and head into the encircling dark, he realizes suddenly something he wishes adrenaline kept him from realizing. He's frightened. Terrified, in fact. A werewolf isn't Remus, though Remus is a werewolf. It's a great big creature with tight claws and powerful paws and crushing jaws, teeth like knives and a bite that changes everything. He's never been afraid of Remus and he hasn't ever been old enough to be afraid of the wolf before now, afraid of the consequences, afraid of the reality of it. It's not just an animal. It's not just a friend with a different shape and different instincts, like Padfoot, or Wormtail. It's a Dark Creature, capable of wrath, ruin and poison, and little else. James recalls the dead squirrels strewn about the forest floor after a night of gliding through the forest, feeling a little sick to his stomach at the messy blood. He draws in a deep, ragged breath. However bad it is for him, right now, he tells himself, it's worse for Severus Snape. And, that not being nearly enough incentive, it's more terrible still for Remus Lupin, changed and snarling and without his mates to calm the fever in his blood.

James presses one hand to his chest. His heart is moving so fast and so a-rhythmically he wonders that it hasn't leaped already, straight out of his ribcage. "What are you waiting for?" he asks himself out loud. The branches above him shiver against their spell. He dives forward, and into the tunnel, pants tight around his waist, face streaked with dirt and sweat, and precious time running out.

The first thing he does is slam into a wall, and nearly knock himself out.

The second thing he does is curse, again, mostly because it's good to hear some kind of comforting, familiar sound. He yanks his wand — Sirius's wand, rather — out of his back pocket to put a light on, so he can get running again. The light wavers insanely over the root-crawled walls. His heart hammers in his ears. James remembers having a nightmare like this, once, except in the nightmare he wasn't wearing pants and he was being chased by an army of rabbits. He silently thanks God for the existence of Sirius, if only as a pants-lender and a rabbit-chaser, and then remembers that if Sirius did not exist, this nightmarish little excursion would not be occurring at all.

Over the sound of his heaving breathing, he hears footsteps: slower footsteps, not too far off, echoing.

And then he hears the howl.

James runs like he's never run before. His glasses slip off his nose, from sweat or current lack of luck or a good combination of both, and are lost behind him. Everything fuzzes out of focus, but he can see enough to know he's going forward, and knows enough to realize if he turns back now, he's already too late. "Don't go up the stairs!" he screams into the shifting darkness in front of him. "Snape! *Stay where you are!*"

He comes out into the moonlight over the unsteady floorboards to see footprints, small, disturbing a month's dust. Nausea hits him in one powerful wave. He wants to throw up.

"Snape!" he screams. "Snape, where *are* you?" The staircase creaks and sways, and James leaps forward, operating on instinct only, taking the steps three at a time and tripping ungracefully twice. He takes the last five stairs on his hands, scrambling, and swerves onto the landing when his blood goes sluggish in his veins. There's a very small figure in black robes frozen on the floorboards, and a huge silence sawing through his ears. James freezes in the doorway; and then, almost luckily, there's the howl, immediate, enormous, smashing through the rational forebrain into the black, primordial pit of animal fear.

"Bollocks," James says, forcing it down. "Snape!" The dark figure whirls, paper-white, mouth a dark slash in its face. James lunges for him, grabs him by the neck of the robes and drags him away. Snape, he discovers, runs the way he does everything: like a total prat, his big stupid feet every which way. Something growls, ground-shaking, and smashes like a cannonball into the iron-barred door. The whole house shivers under the impact.

"Come on!" James howls, losing all patience, and literally pulls Snape down the stairs. They land in a splintered heap by the lone, awkward banister.

"Get off me, Potter!" the World's Biggest Idiot shrieks. James, finally doing something he wants to do, *has* wanted to do since first year, belts Snape a good one upside the ear and shoves him into the open trapdoor.

Snape hits the root-tangled ground with a loud *ooph*. The wolf howls out behind them, over and over, hitting the doorframe and the floor and shaking the shack deep into the earth beneath. James winces at the sounds, imagining wolf joints melting into boy-joints in the morning, compiling all his mistakes, crippled by the immensity of his fear.

"A werewolf," Snape says, and breaks James' terrified reverie. "You sent me to be *killed* by a..." He trails off, voice shaky and small, as realization hits at last. "*Lupin,*" he spits out. "That's *Lupin*."

James puts his head in his hands, which are shaking, and keeps his voice calm. "Shut up," he whispers. "Just shut up."

"You tried to kill me," Snape insists, voice rising, hysterical, "you tried to kill me with that monster."

"What the *fuck* do you know?" James demands. He moves before he can think, grabbing Snape by the collar and throwing him against the tunnel wall. "What the *fuck* do you know about *anything*? What the *fuck* do you know about tonight? What the *fuck* do you know about *werewolves*?"

"I know you tried to kill me!" Snape whines. "With — with *that!*"

James holds him by the collar for a moment and then lets go, disgusted and too tired to argue. Snape slides down the wall, boneless. "You ignorant little shit," James hisses. "Don't flatter yourself. You're not that fucking important."

"You're a murderer," Snape breathes. "Black — Black is worse than the rest of you put together. You'll be expelled, you'll be put in *jail*, they'll have to have that *thing* put down—"

"Snape," James says, very quietly. "Shut up. I just *saved your life.*" It has to be absolutely the worst thing he's ever done in his life, and it hurts to admit even to himself, but he makes himself grind it out anyway. "And I want you to know that I didn't do it for you, because your pathetic, snot-nosed little life isn't worth one tiny constipated turd, in my personal opinion. I did it for Remus, because he's worth a thousand of you and there's nothing I wouldn't do for him. Including this." He gives Snape a last, disgusted look. "Now *live with it,*" he finishes, as calmly as he can, before he turns on his heel and sets off down the tunnel, his heart still wild in his ears and Snape's breathing loud and ragged in the darkness.

Halfway through the tunnel, he hears Snape following him, keeping quiet and hanging back. A few steps further and he finds his glasses, beneath his left toe. He shoves them onto his nose, one lens cracked, the other smeared with dirt, but it's an improvement. Sirius' wand casts wavering light in front of him, the air close and stale and earth-bound. A few worms wriggle thick and pink above his head, dangling bodies struggling upwards. As much as he hates to

acknowledge it, they're both afraid, for different reasons. As much as it sickens him, it helps to know there's someone else with him struggling through the darkness. Even if it is Snape. Even if Snape is still going to ruin everything, after all James did to save his ungrateful rear end.

"I'm going to tell everyone," Snape says, unexpected in the prolonged silence. James feels his gut wrench.

"You're disgusting," he spits out. "You're *repulsive.*"

"He's a threat to everyone at this school," Snape snarls. "You must think you're all awfully clever, hiding it all this time, putting everyone's lives at risk. It's too bad your friend Black is such an imbecile — otherwise you would have *pulled it off*, isn't that right, Potter?"

"I told you before to shut up," James whispers. "I meant it. You don't know anything, Snape. You don't know anything about him."

"I know enough," Snape replies shakily. "I know he's a monster. I'll have you all expelled."

"That won't be necessary," Dumbledore says, from the mouth of the tunnel. James has never been so relieved to see anyone in his entire fifteen years of life. Dumbledore's eyes, James realizes, twinkle like stars. Uncanny, yes, but infinitely welcome. Dumbledore reaches a hand down to help James up and out, and does the same for Snape moments later. Snape turns on him, ready to explode, but Dumbledore holds up a hand to silence him. "Mr. Pettigrew told me what happened," he explains. Peter steps out nervously behind him, not quite meeting James' eyes.

"It's all right," James says. "I'm sorry, Peter. Thank you."

"And Mr. Black, though bleeding and lacking his trousers, filled me in on the rest." Dumbledore smiles benevolently, eyes crinkling at the corners.

"Where is he, sir?" James asks. It would be such a fucking relief to see Sirius right now, wearing that ridiculous hangdog *who, me?* expression that he adopts every time he does something stupid and gets caught, making faces at James behind Dumbledore's back.

"Mr. Black is indisposed at the present time," Dumbledore says serenely.

He's puking, Peter mouths from behind Dumbledore's back, followed by some impressive miming. *Puuuuukiiing.*

James feels mad, unhinged, and impossibly lonely, a combination of random emotions all fired at him at once. He wants Sirius to be here, not off being a prick on his own.

Snape has been trembling, fists screwed up, sallow face bulging like an over-pumped balloon,

and now it seems he loses all control and bursts out, “Sir, they tried to kill me!”

“I have been assured that it was an accident, Mr. Snape, resulting from the foolish action of one person, rather than a conspiracy.” Dumbledore takes off his glasses and polishes them on his sleeve. “Would you like to present an opposing case?”

“They sent me here,” Snape hisses. “They knew what would happen!”

“I believe,” Dumbledore begins, looking up at the sky as if greatly concerned with the actions of the stars, “I believe Mr. Black was of the impression that he had not given specific enough directions to put you in danger of anything worse than a beating.”

“It — took some effort,” Snape mutters. For the first time, James notices the enormous bruise blooming around his eye and the torn sleeve of his expensive robe, and is darkly pleased. “That doesn’t excuse,” Snape continues, but again Dumbledore stops him.

“I believe this conversation would be better continued inside, don’t you? Mr. Potter, you can find Mr. Black and return his trousers to him, and then meet Mr. Pettigrew, Mr. Snape and myself back in my office. And we can all of us discuss things together, shall we?” James nods, worrying at a belt loop. “And none of us will point any fingers,” Dumbledore adds, “nor will we raise our voices. Perhaps we can even have something to eat to calm our nerves — some tea would suit our purposes as well, wouldn’t it.” He turns on his heels, beckoning once with a quick old hand, and James trails after him, not looking up. He can still hear the wolf howling behind him. Even as Dumbledore shuts the great Hogwarts doors behind them, guilt is still thick in his throat.

***

“Now.” Dumbledore steeples his fingers just beneath his nose, and leans forward, peering at the four boys seated across his desk. “There will be no interruptions, no profanities, and no insults. This is a grave matter, and we will discuss it with the gravity it deserves.” He pauses, passing Peter, on the right end, sinking into a large-backed armchair, the sugar. “One lump or two, Mr. Pettigrew?”

“Er,” Peter says. “Three, actually.”

Snape gives him a repulsed look. Peter studiously ignores him.

“And Mr. Black, of course, I know all too well —”

“—I don’t want any tea,” Sirius says, in a rush. He looks very ill. “Sir, I’m sorry, but—”

“I understand,” Dumbledore says, gently but firmly. “However, I cannot imagine that we will

accomplish anything of use if we rush blindly ahead. What appears to be a useless and, dare I say, agonizingly time-consuming ritual may in fact be just what we need to clear our heads and — ah — begin to look at this incident objectively. Now, as I know from frequent experience, you prefer cream to tea, and proportionate amounts of sugar — there we are."

Sirius runs his hands desperately through his hair and slumps even further down into his seat. His eyes catch James's, and he blinks, twice: *I wish I were dead.*

James pushes his glasses up his nose. *I wish you were too.*

After what seems an eternity Dumbledore finally leans back and regards them impassively. "Now. I would like to hear first, if you please, from Mr. Black, who has decreed himself the instigator of tonight's chaos."

"I am," Sirius says. "I did. It was me. Well," he adds as an afterthought, "and, I mean, him." He jabs a thumb contemptuously at Snape. "But it was my fault. I wasn't thinking, sir."

"I cannot tell you how much that shocks me," Dumbledore says, sounding distinctly amused. "Would you mind recounting for us precisely what happened? With—" he amends hurriedly, as Sirius opens his mouth, "no personal attacks of any kind, if you please."

"I just told him — we were — having a bit of a — I was messing about a bit, sir, and I told him..." Sirius swallows, loudly. "He was being a right t — being very derogatory, sir, about Remus, and acting like — and *insinuating* that he knew — things he didn't. And so I told him to go poke the knot on the Willow. I didn't say which knot, sir. And I didn't think he'd really do it, I thought he'd think I was trying to set him up and he'd stay away—"

"Ridiculous," Snape mutters against his chest. "Absolutely ridiculous; it was murder, pre-meditated and cold-blooded and—"

"No interruptions, if you please," Dumbledore says. His eyes are stern over his glass, kind but steely, and his palms pressed tightly together. "Now, Mr. Black, as I have pieced together your evidence from prior to this discussion and what little more I have gleaned from your continued admission, it is my understanding — quiet, Mr. Snape, please, I trust my methods of discerning the truth, as should you — that you said what you did without the intentions to send anyone to his death or, perhaps, mauling." Sirius sinks down into his chair with a squeal of the cushions and a sigh of half-misery, half relief. "However," Dumbledore continues, "the recklessness, immaturity and thoughtlessness of your actions cannot be overlooked. Yes, Mr. Snape, it is your turn now."

"He sent me there," Snape says immediately, "knowing full well who — *what* lay in wait for

me, giving me clear directions as to how I should find it — without any warning, *any* warning whatsoever, knowing the harm that would come to me." Snape draws in a deep breath, narrow nostrils flaring. "And I would have died. I would have been killed, by a *monster*, a monster being harbored *in this school*, if it wasn't for—"

"Mr. Potter," Dumbledore murmurs. "Yes, that, too, I have come to understand, from Mr. Pettigrew, when he came to enlist my help in the matter." Dumbledore's eyes move from Snape to James, catching his gaze, holding it up. "Look at me, Mr. Potter — there we are. That's better. I intend to have your side of the story, as well, so speak up, as it is getting rather late, and I should have to reprimand myself for keeping students up at so egregious an hour."

"Well," James begins. "Sirius came to me and — he hadn't been thinking, Headmaster, that much was clear — he just sort of told me what happened, off-handed, like it was just some sort of a joke." Out of the corner of his eye, James sees Sirius wince. No time to think about that now. He deserves it, James tells himself, deserves to sit there and think about what he almost did, and what he *did*, and how close the two are. "But it was obvious, Headmaster, that he didn't mean it. It was by accident. I don't know what he *was* thinking, but it just — it must have just — Snape must have been acting like a real — *really* awfully. Sirius only ever loses his temper like that when Snape won't shut — when Snape says things, about his friends — it's not an excuse, but — I don't know what it is. Bu — Er. So I, uhm, tried to get my trousers on, and they ripped. At the zipper. The zipper got stuck and that's why."

"Ah," Dumbledore says. "Which is, I take it, somehow why Mr. Black ended up half-naked at the edge of the forest?"

"I took his trousers," James explains. "But that was later."

"I tried to go with him," Sirius adds, "that's why, but then I ran into a tree and — I couldn't," he finishes, rather lamely. Snape snickers aloud. Sirius's eyes roll back halfway, and James can see him cataloguing the items within reach, trying to determine which is discreet and pointy enough to inflict the requisite agony.

"I see," Dumbledore says. Sirius looks down, digging his fingers into his chair. "I think I have some idea of the, er, happenings of this evening. Mr. Snape, would you repeat, not in your own words, if you don't mind, precisely the conversation you had with Mr. Black?"

"I can't remember it," Snape says unpleasantly. "Exactly. Sir."

"I suggest you try." Dumbledore offers a very small smile that makes something shiver down James's spine.

"I — I said something about where Lupin was. I was — curious. And Black, he said 'Why don't you go poke the big knot on the Whomping Willow, then you'll find out—'"

“I did *not*!” Sirius roars, leaping to his feet. “Sir, it wasn’t anything like that! — you lying little—”

“Mr. Black, restrain yourself,” Dumbledore says sharply. He motions for Sirius to sit, which Sirius somehow manages, though his knees look too brittle to bend. “Mr. Snape. It is imperative that we get to the bottom of this matter. I hate to resort to the use of potions or spells in dragging out a student confession, but I am willing to stoop to the necessary depths. Is it true that you, offering an innocent inquiry after the health of a fellow student, were given explicit guidelines on how to access his — area of convalescence?” Sirius is breathing so hard it sounds like he’s being strangled.

“Well — not — exactly,” Snape mutters. “Maybe — explicit would not be — he told me how to get in, Sir, he’s admitted it! I don’t see what the point is in interrogating me.”

“The devil,” Dumbledore says, “is in the details, Mr. Snape.” Snape’s eyes turn with chilling hatred to Sirius and rest there, gathering a thin-lipped strength from his rage. When he speaks again, his voice has calmed, crackling with nasal intensity.

“I was right,” he says. “I knew, all this time, all those disappearances, this lot was up to no good. Every month, Headmaster. I saw them every month, sneaking around as if they’re better than the entire rest of the school, *beyond* your jurisdiction, *beyond* the rules and *beyond* reprimand or punishment.” Snape’s hands, in fists, shake on the arms of his chair. “A werewolf. They hid a werewolf.”

“Mr. Snape, *I* hid a werewolf,” Dumbledore says smoothly. “That was *my* decision, not theirs, and as you can see the decision for secrecy, even if judging by your reaction alone, was most necessary.” His smile is dangerous, patient but with a hint of anger. Snape searches it, shocked to find it isn’t only Sirius Black Dumbledore has angled his pale-blue disappointment at.

“He could kill someone,” Snape protests. He leans forward on his chair, a thin line of sweat stamping his brow, his shoulders shaking with the effort to remain as calm as possible. “The *irresponsibility* — the *danger* — the *repercussions* — Headmaster, the thing almost killed me!”

“The werewolf in the Shrieking Shack would not have almost killed you if — and here is my decision, boys — one, you were not looking into matters, Mr. Snape, that did not concern you towards a malicious end and *two*,” Dumbledore continues, noting Snape’s expression of abject horror, “which is perhaps a more important offense, if you, Mr. Black, had thought to avert what could have been a most grievous disaster, by pausing a moment to predict the possible impact of your words. An accident, it would seem, of a callous nature, one which we might have easily avoided if any of us were aware of the severity of punishment that could have been brought down on *all* of our heads. We are most fortunate that the crisis was prevented by your quick thinking, Mr. Potter, and Mr. Pettigrew’s sound presence of mind that, in all the panic, he should could looking for my aid in the matter. Thirty points to Gryffindor, Mr. Potter, and ten for you as

well, Mr. Pettigrew, and forty points from for your rash actions and your unthinking foolishness, Mr. Black." Dumbledore, keeping a mental tally in his head, turns back to Snape, smiling almost sadly. "It is a pity, Mr. Snape, though understandable, that your terror should give you such prejudice."

"A monster," Snape insists, "and one that should *not* be allowed freedom in an academic setting—"

"We will look into that, rest assured." Dumbledore's smile turns general, without focus and without any meaning but resolution to impart. "Now that I believe myself to have a comprehensive understanding of tonight's occurrences, we must look to the future by discussing our matters of recompense. Mr. Pettigrew, Mr. Potter, the two of you are dismissed. Mr. Black, Mr. Snape, and I have a little yet to talk about."

James pauses at the doorway to look back, seeing only the top of Sirius' head from where he stands. Even that manages to look miserable. He wants to send some sign of forgiveness, grudging and annoyed as it may be, his anger weakened by the late hour and Dumbledore's long offerings of kindness. He finds Dumbledore's eyes, but before he can ask anything more of him, a little twitch belies that *Dumbledore is winking*. James' relief surges up from his stomach and into his mouth, wresting a smile out of him. "C'mon, Peter," he whispers. He shuts the door behind them. "We'll wait for Remus."

Inside, Dumbledore leans back, folding his hands over his stomach. Sirius and Snape stare at each other in the deafening silence, burning holes into one another's foreheads. "It will do no good," Dumbledore says from his position of repose, "to hate each other so virulently within my offices. No good can come of it, and it shall only give the two of you a headache."

"Am I to be punished, then?" Snape spits out.

"You do not trust, at present, my judgment, do you, Mr. Snape." Snape remains silent. "Well! It is no matter. I am sure that, soon enough, I shall gain it back in spades. Let us first deal with Mr. Black, whose guilt is overwhelming and, I see, and in dire need of immediate punishment." Sirius bows his head. "I would, of course," Dumbledore goes on without pause, "ban you from the Quidditch team indefinitely, but this would, I think, be just as detrimental to your teammates as to yourself, and why, indeed, should I punish them in light of your transgressions?" Dumbledore drums his fingers neatly over the lip of his desk, buried in great thought. "However, I believe I have wracked my brain and devised an appropriate task for three month's worth of detention that should be suitable to your guilt's needs, and my own, while at the same time, we shall hope, teaching foresight, humility, and grace under pressure." Snape leans forward again in his chair, an eager glimmer in his face. Sirius grits his teeth, steels his jaw, and prepares for the blow. "Your Wednesday and Friday evenings," Dumbledore finishes, "shall be devoted to the tutoring of our Slytherin First Years in the art of Transfiguration, since it is one in which you so clearly excel. To miss an appointment, to shirk your duties for a lesson, or to do anything to

jeopardize your position as tutor, shall mean your immediate suspension from the Quidditch team, with no second chances whatsoever. Have I made myself clear, Mr. Black?" Sirius nods, swallowing down a groan at the assignment with a fresh reminder of his guilt. "Very well then." Dumbledore beams. "Dismissed. Go straight to Gryffindor House. Do not go after Mr. Potter and Mr. Pettigrew, as undoubtedly they are not within. Tomorrow is, if you recall, a Friday. I will find you with instructions. Good evening."

"Evening," Sirius mumbles. He gives Snape one last, withering look, and slinks out the door, letting it *snick* shut quietly at his back.

"Now," Dumbledore says, turning those bright, unreadable eyes on Snape, "you and I can speak privately."

***

Remus wakes up through a haze of muzzy pain and thick, cotton-mouthed bad taste. It's been a while since he woke like this, nauseated and disoriented, and he knows what it means. He's dimly shocked at first, and then a little scared with instinctive worry, and then hopes he's been dreaming and doesn't want to open his eyes, and then he rolls over to reach for the bucket that Pomfrey keeps always under his bed, and instead his hand encounters someone else's head.

"Gnagh!" yelps Remus. He sits up very straight, and regrets it immediately, cradling his pounding head with bandaged hands.

Sirius looks up at him, looking very much the way Remus feels. He's kneeling on the floor, arms and chin up on Remus's bed, and from the way his hair sticks up over his left ear, he's been sleeping there, if he's slept at all. He hasn't done this since third year. Remus feels the slow stirrings of panic in his belly kindled into something portentous and dreadful.

"You should move." His voice feels strange in his throat, rusty; the world lurches sickeningly and he clutches the bedsheets, closes his eyes. "I'm going to be sick in your hair if you don't, I think."

"I deserve it," Sirius says in a hollow, dead voice. "Please. I offer my head as a receptacle for your vomit."

"That would make a mess." Remus presses the place where his nose indents into his forehead with a thumb, warding off the headache to cope with the dizziness and nausea. "And then I'd keep throwing up because you'd smell awful."

"Here. Here," Sirius says. He holds out a lightweight porcelain bowl, which Remus takes in tingling arms and shoves his head into, waiting for the heavy sickness in his stomach to pass. It lurches unsteadily, rises, rises, and then fades with the cool shadows in the bowl. Remus gives

himself a minute more to collect himself, joints burning, temples throbbing, the side of his jaw bruised all the way to his ear, his skin and ribs stretching painfully with every breath.

"What happened?" he asks, voice echoing inside the bowl. He pulls his head out. "What happened?" he tries again. Better. No reverberations.

"It was all my fault," Sirius says. "And I'm not sorry because it was Snape, I'm sorry because it's you, and I'm going to feed him to a dragon first chance I get and he'll never tell anyone, Moony, because I'll break his mouth out of his head."

"I don't know if that's anatomically possible." A fresh wash of paleness comes over Remus' face, white around the lips, dark circles under his eyes the color of gray ash. "Snape knows?"

Sirius swallows. "Snape knows," he confirms. "I didn't mean to tell him — he was *saying* things — and I just thought, what if the Willow whomped him a few, isn't that what the Willow is *there* for, isn't that what the Willow is *called*, anyway — but he's stupid in all the right ways and smart in all the wrong ones — and he got in but James saved you and it's all right, Snape isn't going to tell anyone. I'll kill him if you want. I can do that. Please say you want me to, I want to." Remus presses his hands to his cheeks, trying to hold his head together. At any moment, he's sure it will burst apart, scattering pieces of his pounding brain all over the infirmary. He has to hold himself together. He doesn't want to make a mess. "You're not mad, are you?" Sirius ventures. "James said you'd be mad. Are you mad? You *should* be mad."

"I'm not mad," Remus says.

"You *should* be mad," Sirius repeats, then stops. "Wait. What?"

"I'm not mad," Remus says again. "Why should I be mad? You're my friend. I'm not mad." He takes a long, shuddering breath into his lungs. "Is Snape all right?"

"Unfortunately. I mean fortunately. I mean, you're not mad?"

"No," Remus says. He wishes Sirius would stop moving so much, talking so much, swinging the room wildly from side to side. "You're my friend. You didn't do it on purpose. I'm out of the school, aren't I?"

"Christ, Moony, of course not! Christ. No. *I* should be out. I should be *beheaded*. I just wasn't thinking. But Dumbledore—"

"How many points?" Remus asks, retreating behind the safety of the Prefect.

Sirius shrugs. "Forty. But James got back thirty and Pete got ten for telling."

"What did James—"

"—He went," Sirius starts, and swallows, and goes on. "He went after Snape. I tried to go with him, but I hit my head on a branch and then he took my pants."

Remus lowers his head to his shaking hands and tries to steady himself. "He got thirty points for taking your pants?"

"He went for Snape." Sirius runs his fingers through his hair. "From — he made sure he didn't get hurt."

"By me," Remus says. Every inch of his body throbs.

"Or by angry bears," Sirius says hopefully. "Or falling into a tar pit. I mean, there are lots of ways to get hurt. I'm just, Moony, I'm so—"

"Sirius." Remus presses the heel of his hand into his eye, so hard he can see dark red spots. "Look, it's done, isn't it? No one's hurt. Are you off the Quidditch team?"

"No, I'm tutoring Slytherins," Sirius says in a voice of utter disgust. Remus looks up, surprised at Dumbledore's creativity. "Without McGoogles at my side, either. I take them while she's doing private sessions with her NEWT-levels. Wednesdays and Fridays. And if I talk back, then I'm off the Quidditch team. I cannot tell you how full of dread I am."

"I'm sorry." Remus gives Sirius' hand a little pat. "For how long?"

"A few months." Sirius' eyes narrow. "Wait a minute. Why did *you* apologize?"

"You hate children."

"I know. I do. But that's not the point. Remus, you're being — you're being unreasonably reasonable."

"Snape isn't hurt?" Sirius nods. "James isn't hurt?" Sirius nods again. "And I'm not expelled." Sirius shakes his head. "And you're not expelled." Sirius shakes his head again. "All right. Well." Remus sinks back against his pillows, letting out a low sigh of relief. Sirius stares at him, unsure what god of forgiveness has crept into Remus' body while he was sleeping. "It could have gone worse. It could have been — there've been other pranks, and this isn't — is Dumbledore angry?"

"At me," Sirius assures him. "And at Snape a little, too."

"Snape." Remus cracks one eye open. "Who—"

"—hates you even more now, because he's a stupid, slimy shit who doesn't know the first thing

about *people* or *were*— sorry — or *you*. And by the way, James tells me he runs like a girl, which I always said he did, only now I *know*. You know. Are you sure you're not mad?"

"Sirius," Remus says, "shut up."

"Shutting," Sirius says. He puts his head down on the bedspread, gazing mournfully at Remus with eyes that brim with apology.

"You know what this reminds me of," Remus murmurs, a small, tired laugh grazing his throat. "Remember when you first — the three of you first finished — you know — and you hadn't got the bodies just yet but you got your minds all mixed up?"

"I wouldn't remember all too clearly," Sirius says dryly. "I do recall Peter shrieking and hurling himself under the bed a lot."

"You looked just like that right after you wet on the carpet," Remus continues mercilessly.

"Well, did it work? Did I get beat with a newspaper, or did you really forgive me?"

"Sirius?"

"What?"

"Shut up."

"I just thought you would be angry," Sirius explains, "and I would have to ply you with poetry, bon-bons and flowers to achieve your forgiveness."

Remus lets his eyes fall shut, normally busy, fidgety fingers still against his stomach and tangled in the pristine bedsheet. "When I was five," he says softly, "my father's business took us to France. I don't remember much of it, just — colors, and sound. Old memories, the sort that you can never really place and only *think* happened to you. Mum tells me we had a little house for the summer and she could never learn French so we ate the same meal every night for three weeks until she and dad went over a menu and figured things out. I don't remember that, either. There was a swing, I remember the swing, and birds in the morning, and a lot of trees. That's all. In any case, one night in June I left my room to sit on the front steps because I couldn't sleep, and there was a great big dog across the clearing, watching me. When you're little and your parents tell you never to touch strange animals you ought to listen to them, but I suppose I didn't. I moved, and I must have waved to it, and it ran over to me, and bit me. The funny thing is, I don't remember it. I know how it *must* have happened, I know what I *must* have done, I know what *it* must have done, and how it *must* have felt, being bitten, there, in the night, under the full moon. I know there must have been some reason for me to get up and unlock the door against express instructions, and sit there, and want to pet a wild animal I had never seen before,

but I don't remember any of it. It happened. That's all. It happened. I woke up later and my mother says I didn't even cry, just asked where the dog was, which seems silly, as I can't remember the wolf now, or asking for it later." Remus licks his lips. "My father blamed himself for taking us to France during what was, he found out later, roughly translatable to an epidemic of lycanthropy, and my mother blamed herself for putting me in a separate room when I was so young, not keeping a better eye on me, not having taught me to go to her when I couldn't sleep. But it wasn't their fault, was it? It was mine; it had to have been. I know what it *must* have been, though I don't remember what it was. And it all feels so silly and unimportant, because I can't remember it at all." With a little sound of relaxation, Remus opens his eyes, and looks up to the ceiling, tracing the patterns of shadow above him. "I'm not mad. I'm relieved. You should stop apologizing."

Sirius is silent for a long time. Remus stares fixedly at the ceiling. After an age of regret and awkward quiet, the bed creaks and rolls, shifting Remus sideways. Something hairy and enormous and smelling vaguely of kibble whuffles against his cheek and then settles, hot and sprawling, against his side, breathing its noisy, doggy comfort.

"Aghn," Remus says, looking down at it. It unsettles his instincts with its comfort, half-familiar, half-foreign. "You nutter. Pomfrey'll be in any minute." The furry heat shifts. Fur prickles against Remus and morphs to long, warm boy-limbs, and Sirius's face, very close, instead of a dog mouth and a dog tongue breathing hot dog breath, with hands, not paws, jammed uncomfortably against Remus's stomach. Sirius regards him in strange stillness for a minute.

"Don't say I'm sorry," Remus says, suddenly intensely uncomfortable, "unless you mean for drooling in my hair, and shedding on my pyjamas, and taking up most of my bed, in which case I have mustered all the kindness in my heart, and herewith accept your apology."

Sirius nods. He looks pale and set and deeply helpless.

"I don't mind," Remus insists. "Honestly, Sirius. I don't mind."

"I do," Sirius says. He pulls Remus in by the back of the neck to rest his chin atop his head. "It shouldn't. It isn't fair." His throat moves against Remus's forehead.

"You always smell like dog," Remus mumbles. It's not strictly true. At the moment Sirius smells of stale sick and old fear and relief, which Remus smells intimately from every last pore, but for some reason Remus feels it would be unkind to say this. Sirius's laugh vibrates low through his skull. "Madame Pomfrey's going to think we've been having it off," Remus informs him. The bed sags under their combined weight. Sirius's knee is in his stomach and their hands are touching on the pillow. Remus feels sick, and too tall, and too young, and too old also, and wonders why none of it is as easy for him as it seems to be for everyone else.

"She'll just have to contain her jealousy," Sirius says. "She knows I always come back to her, in

the end. I know it kills you, but you have to understand that what we have isn't love. It's just physical. What Pomfrey and I have, now, that's something lasting."

"What with the children," Remus says, only half of him playing along and the other half lingering in uncertainty.

"The puppies," Sirius reminds him. "Litters and litters of puppies."

"You're disgusting," Remus says.

"I'm sorry," Sirius says.

"I'm going to pass out now." Remus pats Sirius' chest with a few weak pawing motions. Sirius remembers the first time he saw Remus' hands bandaged like that, palms hidden beneath white gauze, fingers stiff from pain. With the dog nose he smelled him, a sort of defeat in scent, and the copper hint of blood, and the blue undertone of bruises, and tense muscles, and old wood. So much of the wolf remains in him the day after, where the moon, though hidden in orbit, reaches out moon fingers, trying always to claim him. Sirius tightens his hold, unthinking. "Augh," Remus grunts. "Ribs."



"Fuck that," Sirius says. "Sorry. Better now?"

"Uhm," Remus says, and droops.

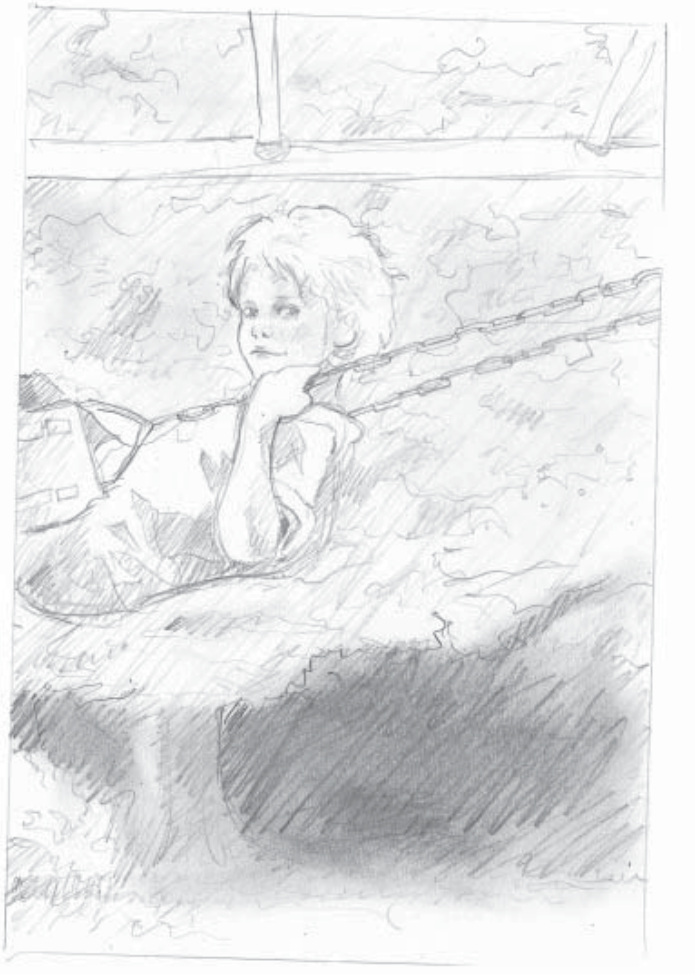
Sirius is glad for the empty infirmary, for the quiet early hour. Boys don't do this with other boys, don't even when they're young and tired and nervous and desperate for comfort. But Remus isn't another boy, not exactly, with his words like adulthood and his body at odd, limp angles. Nobody understands, Sirius thinks, and puts it aside.

***



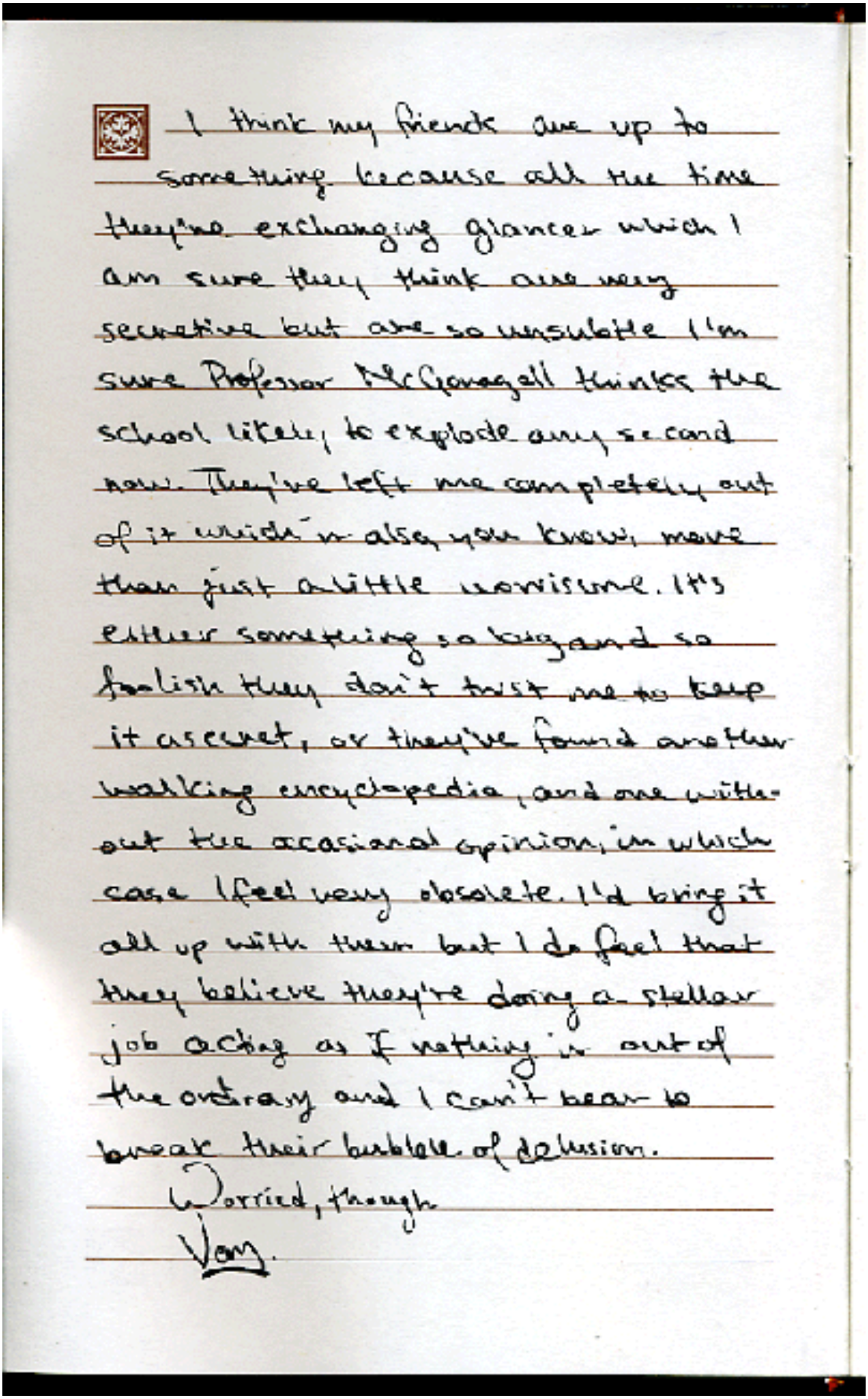






***

Early in the morning, or late at night, Sirius finds his fingers on the binding of the old journal.



I think my friends are up to something because all the time they're exchanging glances which I am sure they think are very secretive but are so unsubtle I'm sure Professor McGonagall thinks the school likely to explode any second now. They've left me completely out of it which is also, you know, more than just a little worrisome. It's either something so big and so foolish they don't trust me to keep it a secret, or they've found another walking encyclopedia, and one without the occasional opinion, in which case I feel very obsolete. I'd bring it all up with them but I do feel that they believe they're doing a stellar job acting as if nothing is out of the ordinary and I can't bear to break their bubble of delusion.

Worried, though.

Vom.

***

"Well," Sirius says happily, rubbing his hands together, "I think that went very well."

Peter sniffs the air uncertainly. "Are you sure? I didn't feel anything happen."

"You aren't meant to," James explains, "you just sort of — get it. I guess. That's what it says in here." He taps the grimoire at his side. "That you won't feel it, like, but you'll just know how to call the animal forward."

"I'm not sure—" Peter starts, but Sirius shoves a hand over his mouth.

"Peter," he says. "Concentrate. See what happens."

They concentrate.

For about half a minute.

And then something in the back of Sirius's head goes *putt.*

"What are you guys doing?" he inquires, abruptly extremely curious. "What are you doing, huh? What are you guys doing? Are you having fun? Can I help? Are you asleep? What's happening? Hey, Peter, hey, my favorite guy, Peter!" He throws himself forward at Peter, cool awesome Peter who he just likes so much because he's *Peter* and he's so great! Peter!

"GNAUGH!" Peter screams, and overturns a table scrambling under it.

Sirius watches him for an instant and then whirls around, bored, and sees: oh, his best friend. His best friend in the whole wide world. The best person ever. The *greatest* person ever. James. James James Jamesy James James.

"*James*!" he fairly shrieks, and hurls himself at his best friend in the whole wide world who is just so great and Sirius just wants to lick him all over and knock him flat on his back, which is what he does. "Hey, James, hey, James, hey! Guess what, James? Guess what? Peter's under the table and I can smell him. Guess what? Guess what you had for breakfast? I can tell you cos I can smell it. Eggs! You had eggs! You're my best friend, hey, James, let's go have fun! Are you having fun? I'm having fun but we could be having *more* fun!"

"Predators!" comes Peter's tiny, suspicious hiss from the darkness. "Predators *everywhere*."

James blinks, eyes focusing and unfocusing in brown confusion. Sirius pants into his face, mouth, up his nose, until James snorts and shakes his head and nudges him away with his cheek. "It's working," James says, in a slow, calm, deep voice. "Either that or we've gone insane. What

am I doing? It feels nice." He shakes his head again, pawing at the floor with one hand. Sirius stands, stretching, shaking, laughing, with his mouth open unattractively and his tongue hanging out.

"Hey how do we get it to stop? I don't get it what's going on! James? Jamesy James? How's that? How's that, huh? What's that? I'm me, right, but I'm not me. Do you get that? You too, and Peter, and me, we're all like — and that's not — and what's that, huh? What's that?" Peter's eyes, narrowed, watch Sirius as he darts from corner to corner after dust motes, his own hands, tongue bouncing cheerfully with every leap and bound.

James paws at the grimoire, using the side of his hand in long, sweeping motions to get at the appropriate page. The words shimmer and shake before him. He can only barely make them out as language he understands above the musky smell of everything, the strange and distracting lightness of his head.

Effect should take three or four hours to wear off.

A little boy's voice comes at him, making him turn, startled, and stamp the floor, until he realizes it's from within.

Bugger, James thinks.

***

"James," Remus says, voice muffled, wet, a little shaky. "James, what is Sirius doing to my face?"

"You — are — my — *best friend ever!*" Sirius barks very enthusiastically between slurps, and butts his head into Remus's jaw. Remus pats him distractedly atop the head, for which Sirius makes an ecstatic noise. "Do my ears, huh? Scratch my ears? Could you could you could you? You're the best. Rub my stomach. What's going on? James help James help James I'm going crazy!"

"His mind has a dog in it," James explains. He is still slower in his body than his mind moves, like a sharp wind that only shifts the trees. "We've...made a charm. An experiment."

"His mind has a *dog* in it," Remus repeats, only a little hysterically. "You mean the way you might go 'oh, don't eat that soup, it's got a fly in it?' Is that what you mean?"

"No," James says. His voice is careful and deep, reminding Remus of a slow-moving river. "Not exactly." He pauses for a while to collect himself.

"James," Remus says uncertainly.

“What’s he doing what’s he doing who wants to feed me? Hey, Remus, you know what we should do? You should throw something, and I should jump up and get it and bring it back! And then you could throw something *else* and I could jump up and get it and bring it back! Or you could throw the same thing and I could go get it *again!* It would *never stop being fun!* What’s he doing? I’m *hungry.*”

“Hmm,” James says, still thinking. He shakes his head out to remind himself what’s important.

“You’ve been sitting there for five minutes,” Remus says. “I’m going to panic very soon. I think you should know that. Where’s Peter?”

There is a sepulchral cackle from beneath the bed. “*You’ll never find me!*”

“All right,” Remus says. He feels he is being supremely reasonable, considering the circumstances. “We’ll never find Peter and Sirius has a dog in his mind. This is very good, James. We’re definitely getting somewhere. You can’t put more than three words together in the space of one minute, but this is good, James. This is a start. How about *I* start the sentences, and you finish them?”

“All right,” James says. Sirius bounds over to him, licks his face, then bounds back to Remus, sitting at his feet and bouncing up and down. Remus stares at him.

“Can I lick you again can I can I can I? Just a little lick just a small like just a — no I’m lying a lick *all over your face*, all over your face, can I lick you can I lick you now can I please?”

“Down,” Remus says.

“We haven’t...taught him to...heed, yet,” James warns.

Sirius leaps for Remus’ face. They struggle. “Down!” Remus yelps. “Down! *Down*, Sirius! All right — just — ooghk — James — finish this one — you and Sirius and Peter were?”

“Looking...in a grimoire,” James says.

“For the purpose of — Unfh — doing what?”

“Transfiguration,” James breathes out. “Animagi.”

“Hungry hungry hungry,” Sirius sings. “You know what I want I want meat. I want some meat. I want some raw meat just some pieces of raw meat. Cow meat. Mm cow meat. I like cow meat. All yum and slurpy and I’m hungry.” He licks Remus up the side of one cheek and settles, still vibrating, thrown half across Remus’ lap. He’s a big boy. Remus attempts to think over the sound of his insanity. “What do you say eh Remus what do you say to that let’s go we should go we should go *now* and get some *meat*.”

“So,” Remus says, “Sirius would be — a dog, is that it?”

“Yes,” James replies. “Yes...that’s it.”

“And Peter is some sort of small rodent,” Remus infers, “perhaps a mouse, or a weasel, or a rat?”

“Rat,” James sighs.

“And you are, apparently, suffering from old age and about to wheeze out and die?” Remus guesses.

“Stag,” James murmurs. The a trails out, dusty and sweet. *Sta-a-ag.*

“Aha,” Remus says. “And what, may I ask, inspired you?”

“You did that’s who you did because we thought you shouldn’t be alone, why should Remus be alone we thought, and it was James’ idea you know, with the book and the animals and the transfiguring so we did it in secret and you had no idea and what do you say Remus aren’t we brilliant aren’t we aren’t we?”

“I have your saliva in my left nostril,” Remus murmurs. “Other than that I have no idea *what* to say.”

“You could say Good job!” Sirius pants, regarding him pleadingly. “Because we worked so hard and we were so quiet and I didn’t chew *anything* important today. Can we throw something? Hey, let’s go get something to eat! Cows. Huh?” He abandons his post at Remus’s knee and hurls himself onto his bed, where he turns around three times and falls promptly, bone-meltingly asleep, letting out an enormous snore.

“You’re all madmen,” Remus says. He turns, wide-eyed, to James with whom, Remus has decided, is probably the best person to discuss this, despite the slowness and the look of majestic calm. He jams his head under the bed to test this theory. Peter, as predicted, snarls, bares his teeth, and attempts to burrow into the wall, muttering “big animals big animals never catch me predators! Heh heh heh heh.”

“We were trying to help you,” James intones with excruciating serenity. “We’d have done better if you’d been helping us. Couldn’t ask, of course.”

“Because I’d’ve talked some sense into you?” Remus drags his hand through his hair, trying to ignore Peter’s constant muttering and intermittent sniggers from beneath the bed. Sirius sighs, flops hugely onto his back and waves his arms vaguely in the air, kicking convulsively with one foot.

“You needn’t worry,” James says, after a contemplative few minutes. “It’s normal.”

“Oh, yes,” Remus says. “Completely normal! You’re all barking! Especially Sirius, ha ha ha, oh *God*. What if someone finds out? How are you going to keep people from finding out?”

“Everyone knows Sirius is barking,” James points out, very reasonably. “No surprise there. It’ll wear off. Book says. Four hours. Thereabouts,” he amends, after some consideration. “And then we’ll have the minds.”

The door slams abruptly open. Sirius flips onto his stomach, looking alertly in the wrong direction. “Who? What? Guard dog! *Rrrrr.*”

Lily Evans stands in the doorway, glaring furiously, her wet red hair jerked back into a ponytail and her arms folded. “All right. That’s it. *Which* one of you lot Transfigured my towel while I was in the bath? You can answer honestly, I’m going to kill you all anyway.”

“Oh God,” Remus whispers. “Lily, err. You should *really* not — um — be here, now.”

“Who was it, Remus?” Lily whirls on him, hair flying around her heated face, and slapping wetly against her shoulders. “Well? You know who it was. Tell me, for the sake of justice.”

“Er,” Remus says. He doesn’t, actually. She won’t believe that he doesn’t, but he doesn’t. “I don’t know?”

“Of course you know. And you’re going to tell me.” She descends on him like a goddess of retribution, eyes blazing, cheeks bright red. Sirius is creeping up behind her, sniffing dangerously. James has circled the other way around, stomping one hand against the ground with rhythmic insistence, making low, snuffing noises deep in his throat. Peter is nowhere to be found. Remus feels insane — or, rather, like the only sane person amongst the criminally bonkers. “Well? *Well?* Have out with it and you’ll die quickly and—” She stops. Goes stiff. Her green eyes widen in sudden shock, panic, disbelief. Her back is rigid, hands frozen in place, mouth half-open in distress. “*Oh my God*.”

“Yes,” Remus says. “Yes, that is Sirius’ nose between your legs.” Lily opens her mouth. Closes it. Takes a deep breath in, turning a fantastic shade of purple.

“I like her!” says Sirius happily. “She can stay. Do you want to play with me? Hey, how about you throw something? Do you want to scratch my ears? Hey, hey, hello!”

“What. The Hell. Is James doing?” Lily manages at last.

Remus barely dares to look back at James over his shoulder, but his curiosity, morbid and fatal, gets the better of him. James, on all fours, is giving Lily a look of such intensity Remus is

surprised her clothes haven't burned straight off her body. As the two of them watch, James lifts his head, tosses it, stamps one hand, and lowers his head again, and repeats the pattern with unwavering dedication. "You," James says, in that breathless, deep, wise voice. "Me. Yoooouuuu. Meeeee."

"Run for your life," Remus says. "Please. Save yourself."

Lily, never a girl who needs to be told the obvious twice, is gone.

"*Harooun*," James says, in tones that can only be called amorous, and starts after her. Remus, thinking fast, hurls himself in front of the door and yells "Lumos!" Light explodes, yellow and round, from his wand. James freezes, transfixed

"Hey," Sirius says, "where'd she go? We were going to play. She smelled nice. What's James doing? He's not moving. James? James? James? James? James? James?"

James does not move. His eyes dart, panicked, from side to side.

"Four hours," Remus whimpers.

"Four hours of fun!" Sirius yelps, gamboling around his legs. "Fun fun fun and nothing but fun! James? James? Jamesjamesjamesjamesjames. Make him move! Hey, Remus! Make him move. I want him to come play. Hey, Remus, let's play. I'm going to go run around and smell things! Guess how many things we could smell? We could smell trees and rocks and bits of grass and walls and cats and sticks and bugs and—"

"*No*," Remus says, firmly. James trembles and Remus shoves the light at him, gaining some confidence. "Bad dog."

"Bad—" Sirius goes pale all over, slumping as if all the air has gone out of his body, as if Remus has just stabbed him. "B—bad dog?"

"Yes," Remus says. He feels cruel, but not all that guilty about it. "Bad Dog. Lie down." Sirius does so immediately, staring up at him with eyes full of reproach and deep, deep sorrow. "All right." Remus thinks furiously. "Er. We — we're going to play a game. Yes. That's what we're going to do. We're going to play a game."

"A game?" Sirius says hopefully, rolling up onto his elbows. "A fun game?"

"A quiet game," Remus says. He rubs his temples, gathering all his self control. "A game called Go To Sleep For Four Hours. Doesn't that sound like fun?"

"No," Sirius says doubtfully. "But if you say so!" He spins around once, twice, testing the floor gingerly for springiness, and passes out.

“All right,” Remus says again, returning his attention to James. “Are you done?” The corner of James’ left eye twitches. “Right. Well that’s settled you.” Remus turns, locks the door, shuts all the windows, and secures the rest of the area with gratifying attention to detail. By the time he’s finished, he almost forgets he has a headache.

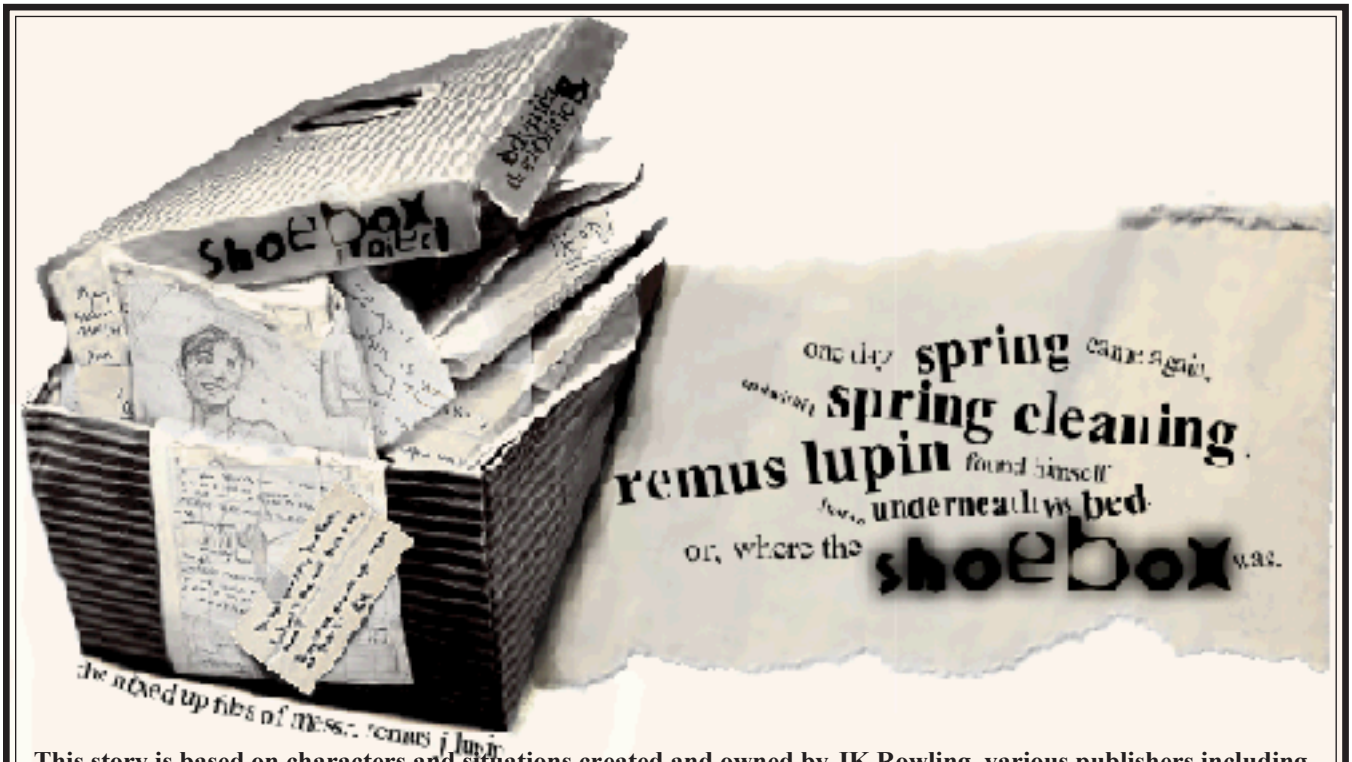
“Can’t—move,” James says, through gritted teeth.

Well, almost.

At least, Remus thinks, as he tries not to ponder his own role in all this madness, Sirius hasn’t put his nose anywhere other than into Remus’ mouth, and ignores blatantly the niggling voice telling him the day is yet young. “Oh, shut up,” Remus says to no one in particular.

“Can’t move,” James repeats.

“Excellent,” Remus says, and puts pieces of tissue in his ears. “Fantastic.”



This story is based on characters and situations created and owned by JK Rowling, various publishers including but not limited to Bloomsbury Books, Scholastic Books and Raincoast Books, and Warner Bros., Inc. No money is being made and no copyright or trademark infringement is intended.

***The Shoebox Project* by LadyJaida and Dorkorific**

http://www.livejournal.com/community/shoebox_project

Part Ten: April, 76

Fifty-seven dung-bombs, one great operative mission, and five documented pranks.

"Cheer up, mate," Sirius says, trying his best to be consoling. "It could be worse!"

James cracks one eye open, narrowed and bleary and, Sirius presumes, full of thwarted love. The little circles under his eyes, the dark twist to his lips, the wild tangle of his hair long uncultivated, gives him the air of a complete lunatic. Sirius supposes that's what love does to a bloke: fills him up with false promise, false hope, the occasional grope here and there, and leaves him with nothing at all in the end but the desperate need for a wash. Still, a good friend would never mention the smell.

"It's no use," James groans. "It's no *fair*. I didn't do anything *wrong*. I *saved* him, and this is the thanks I get?"

"You're the perfect hero," Sirius soothes. "With or without trousers. Not many can say that, I'll tell you, and if she doesn't recognize what she has when she has it—"

"Let's kill Snape," James interrupts. "We can hide the body. It doesn't matter anymore, she threw grapefruit juice in my face. I've no one left to please, nothing left to hide — let's just do it. We can cut his body into little pieces and no one will ever be the wiser. No one will ever know he's missing. People will *thank* us."

"Only one problem with that plan." Sirius grins. "Finding somewhere big enough to hide his nose."

"We could put it in my sorrow, which is as boundless as the ocean," James says.

"You've got to stop having firewhiskey for breakfast, mate," Sirius says. "Eventually that stuff'll kill you."

"Makes me stronger," James mumbles. "Besides, look: I've finally got real stubble. Now that it doesn't matter what I look like, since there is no one on this earth worth impressing anymore. You do realize *you* lost me my girlfriend?"

"Yeah, I suppose. It's lucky for me no one else is willing to sink low enough to be your best friend."

"Remus is my vice-best friend," James says. "If you were killed, he would be instated and probably do a better job."

"He'd never do it," Sirius points out. James hates to admit that this is probably the case. "He's not bloody-minded enough. Who would blow things up with you, I'd like to know? Who'd make the walls transparent in the prefects' bathroom? Who'd put hippogriff manure in people's shoes? Well, Peter," he admits as an afterthought, "but he wouldn't be nearly so good at it. Admit it, mate: you're stuck with me. Explosions and gratuitous nudity are all you have left. We're back to the good old days."

"My life has no meaning," James bemoans gloomily.

"Yes," Sirius insists, "yes, it does. I bet you don't *know* what tomorrow is."

"Tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow," James mumbles into his elbow. "I don't care what tomorrow is. It's just as bad as today only I get to dread it first."

"*No.*" Sirius is trying to be patient. On the one hand, Evans is a fool. If you believe any idle Slytherin gossip then by default, you are a fool. On the other hand, she's been a fool just in time. Damned if he's going to let James turn into a whining consumptive broken-hearted noodle-head just because it appears he wants to turn into a whining consumptive broken-hearted noodle-head. Sirius knows better. Sirius knows he can't possibly want to slip into unattractive misery for all time. "Tomorrow," he presses, "*tomorrow* is the first of April."

"So?" James mutters. Sirius waits for it. It could, he reasons, take anywhere between ten seconds and a full minute. When it happens, it will certainly start in James' shoulders. "*Oh*," James says. His shoulders get a little firmer around the edges. Exactly fifteen seconds. Not as hopeless as Sirius originally thought. "*Ohhhh.*"

"And we haven't done any planning or any re-stocking and we *certainly* haven't got any of the latest, newest and smelliest from Zonko's," Sirius adds, with a note of finality, of doom, of wicked improvisation.

"How many dungbombs do we have?" James sits up, a gleam of purpose behind his murky eyes. He runs his fingers through his hair, gets his fingers stuck, and gives up.

"Fifty-seven."

"Not nearly enough. *Damn.* What else *do* we have?"

Sirius pulls out The Inventory from behind his back. "I knew you'd wake up to it," he confides, grinning from ear to ear. "Chudley Cannons." He taps the long roll of parchment with his wand, whispering the password, and watches cheerfully as it unfurls before them, updating their current resources.

James surveys it with an air of professional purpose. "Right. So we've got...yes, yes — and that'll do for the mirrors...Sirius, you realize there's not one thing on here that sets things on fire?"

"We have been terribly remiss in our duties," Sirius agrees solemnly. "And I'm near cleaned out." He pats his pockets with a mournful air. "Another unforeseen consequence of renouncing the comforts of the familial hearth: loss of the endless resources at my disposal as the Young Master. I could bully Regulus, but I don't feel like listening to his whining. Of course, what this means is that 1976 will be a year of great improvisation. Requiring all our resources and no distractions whatsoever. But! There's always matches."

"So...in a way..." James begins, sounding slightly cheered.

"Blessing in disguise, really," Sirius finishes, patting him on the back. "Come on. Let's go get you cleaned up."

***

"I don't want to know," Remus insists, putting his hands over his ears. "Hear no evil. I'm a prefect, I'm a prefect, I'm a *prefect*—"

"All right," Sirius says. He settles at the edge of the bed, bouncing up and down so the bedframe creaks. "Can I just give you hints then? All right, I'll give you a hint: it rhymes with 'arting' and it's the answer to the question 'What noise will Rodolphus Lestrange make any time he says something threatening to anyone?'"

"I didn't hear you," Remus says. "I didn't hear that, I didn't hear you, I'm not listening. La la la la la—"

"And the next bit rhymes with bungdombs and has to do with—"

"*Oh, to be in England, now that April's there*—"

"—someone who rhymes with Great-Big-Slimy-Git-Drape—"

"*—and whoever wakes in England sees some morning unaware—*"

Sirius takes one of Remus' wrists and tugs his hand gently away, finger making a slight popping sound as its wrestled free of his ear. "We've figured out a way," Sirius explains, "to use fifty-seven all at once. It's like a *bomb* made out of *bombs*. We're going to put it in his lunch."

"It's a lucky thing I wasn't listening," Remus mutters, "or I would have to report your trespasses immediately." Sirius grins. "And it's an even luckier thing that I've no idea what you have fifty-seven of and that I'm assured your mention of bombs has nothing to do with *actual* bombs, or I would have to lock you in a closet and throw away the key. For the good of humanity, of course."

"*Really,* Moony," Sirius says, affronted. "As if we would really use bombs. Such triteness! Such gaucherie! You've no faith in me at all, have you."

"I have faith in your great appetite for destruction and mayhem," Remus says. "Really, yourself. Don't you think Severus Snape has suffered enough?"

"No," Sirius says bluntly. "And who said anything about Severus Snape? You'd think you had something against him, the way you project your little fantasies of pain and dungbombs onto his innocent head. Now, Great-Big-Slimy-Git-Drape, on the other hand, *there's* a man who deserves to suffer."

"Well, I'm not going to participate."

"I wouldn't ask it of you. I knew you wouldn't, fine and upstanding young citizen that you are. As indicated by that shiny little badge on that clean and well-pressed sweater."

"It isn't pressed," Remus protests, "it's all wrinkly and it smells of chocolate—"

Sirius waves a hand airily. "The point remains that I would never ask you to do something so clearly, *rampantly* beyond your boundaries. Your participation in this Day of Days should be strictly on a voluntary basis."

"Now, wait," Remus objects, feeling insulted for reasons he cannot quite place, "beyond my boundaries? Aren't you even going to try? You try every year."

"You are a Good Person," Sirius says earnestly. "There's nothing you can do about it, I'm afraid, and nothing I can either. Six years I've been trying. No, I'm afraid this is quite beyond your grasp. I'm not going to recruit you, and I'm not going to ask for your blessing, and I'm certainly not going to request your considerable research skills in digging up some way to change the passwords in the various towers."

Remus trembles.

"That's unfair," he says. "You're using my research against me."

"Well," Sirius shrugs, "everyone has their little weaknesses, don't they? I mean, I *would* have done, but we're on such *tight schedule*, and my fieldwork requires me to be elsewhere, and as we all know *one* man cannot be in two places at the same time. And I'm sure it would require speed-reading of an almost *epic* proportion, in a book possibly three or four *times* the size of a Prefect, capable of eating any lesser researcher alive in the space of perhaps no more than *five minutes*." Sirius shakes his head. "No, no, it's far too much, and your upstanding nature wouldn't allow it, so I could hardly ask such a grueling but challenging task of you. My conscience sings clear in me: I could not allow it."

Remus lips are white around the edges.

"I know what you're doing," he says. "I see your tactics."

"I don't know what you're talking about." Sirius presses one hand to his chest, hurt stamped plainly across his features. "I am merely saying that the Book of All Books and the Research Project of All Research Projects is currently living beneath my bed, behind a large box wrapped in brown paper which, if you value your life and your eyebrows and the hair on the top of your head, you should certainly not open, and it is just waiting for someone to make great use of it. Never *once* did I say, 'Moony, lad, friend, Marauder, we need your help in this matter, desperately, achingly, inside our researchless bosoms—'"

"When do you need the information by?" Remus grinds out.

"Twelve o'clock tonight would be lovely." Sirius flings his arms around Remus' shoulders, kissing him wildly on the cheek. "Good man! Good man."

"Big idiot," Remus corrects him. "Big sopping idiot."

"And so squishy," Sirius adds, squeezing him around the ribs for good measure.

"I love it when you flatter me," Remus mutters. It's no surprise when he pats him absently atop the head anyway.

***

"All right," Sirius says around a mouthful of potatoes. "So. We've got stage one set for five hundred hours tomorrow. Stealth Operative Gamma, you will be positioned where?"

"In the passage under the humpbacked witch, sir! Having just pilfered as many tempting-looking edibles as possible, sir! But not without leaving the correct payment in a prominent place! Because there's honor among thieves, sir!" Peter yells, jerking to attention and knocking his knife off the table.

"Very good, soldier," Sirius says gravely, ripping off an immaculate salute. "At ease. At which time, Strike Force Alpha, you will be where?"

"Flipping the portrait and changing the password on the Slytherin tower so they can't get out to breakfast until someone says 'Severus Snape is a hideous pimple,'" James says. "Which was *my* idea in the first place. And I'm not calling you 'sir.'"

"That's insubordination," Sirius replies, looking superior. "I could have you demoted. Keelhauled. And you, Reconnaissance Unit Kappa?"

"I'll be in my bed, with my fingers in my ears, pretending I don't know what's happening," Remus recites dully.

"Precisely." Sirius nods. "And I—"

"What's your codename?" Peter hisses.

"I — what?"

"What's your codename? We've all got codenames. Did you forget to give yourself one?"

"I did not *forget!*" Sirius says, highly offended. "I don't think it's necessary. You can all address me as 'Commander.'"

"I think you should be 'Offensive Agent Pi,'" Peter suggests.

"Oh yes," Remus says innocently. "And we can call you 'Offensive Pie,' for short, which I think suits you."

"Right," Sirius says. "I see none of you are willing to take this mission as seriously as I am. I see that you're willing to see this day, this *great and glorious day*, as just another chance to go to class and make fun of Sirius. Very funny, men. Oh yes; you're very funny. But I hope you're thinking of the traditions you're dishonoring: of the generations before us and the generations to come, who will look back on April Fools' Day 1976 and shake their heads in disappointment and despair, crying: *if only they'd pulled through! If only they hadn't let the side down!* Because that's what you're doing, soldiers. You're *letting the side down*. You're a disappointment to your God and your country, and frankly, you're a disappointment to *me*. Your commander. Who has sweated with you, and toiled along side you, and bled and sweated and — and teared, and I know I said sweated twice so don't open your mouth Remus Lupin I'm looking at you. I just want you to think about what you're doing. I want you to examine your attitudes. Maybe you'll find they need to be readjusted. For *England*."

"You know," Remus says thoughtfully, "the generations before us would probably look forward to April Fools' Day 1976. Right?"

"Not necessarily," Peter points out, "if they were still alive in 1977 they could look back on it then."

"You're right, I suppose it depends on the generation—"

"Shut up!" Sirius yells. "Look, just — I don't have a codename and I'll be putting dungbombs under Snape's bed during Operation Dungbomb Number Three, which means James and I will have the cloak. So everyone else will need to exercise extreme caution."

"Even me?" Remus asks.

"Yes!" Sirius snaps. "Who knows what the enemy would do, if they caught you pretending not to know what was happening? They might wonder what we were up to! Just…go under the blankets or something."

"Am I allowed a light to read by sir, is that all right with you sir, sir?" Remus asks. Sirius brings their faces very close, exercising what he hopes is a militaristic air of unforgiving, hard-jawed promise.

"Only if you are prepared for all possibilities, soldier! Are you prepared, soldier? Do you think you can *handle* what lies in store for you at the first sign of dawn, six-zero-zero tomorrow, soldier?"

"Yes," Remus answers. "Can you pass the potatoes?"

Sirius sighs, slumping back in his chair. "Well, you're no fun," he mutters. "Here, there's your bloody potatoes, I hope they give you indigestion."

"We're with you, sir!" Peter exclaims, though he gives the potatoes a longing look as they pass him by.

"I'm with him but it worries me," James says. "We're low on resources. Every last hit *must* count. Every last minute *must* be exploited down to the second. And so on and so forth. Here, can I have those potatoes, Remus?"

"Am I working with men or monkeys?" Sirius asks the ceiling. "I ask you for brave souls, daring recruits, friends who'll never give up the secret of the final dungbomb, and you send me the soft, the weak, the potato-fiends."

"I haven't had any potatoes," Peter protests.

"Go on," Sirius sighs, "I know you want them."

"Can I really?" Peter falls to eagerly.

"Good man," Sirius says. "You tried your best. There are few who can resist the siren call of the potatoes with rosemary. Only the strongest survive."

"You had three helpings yourself," Remus points out.

"Well then." Sirius beams. "Let's have a fourth, shall we?"

***

April First, Nineteen Seventy Six. Dawn. The halls are quiet. The day is yet pale, the slim gray of sunrise. Those less dedicated to the cause are still asleep. Sirius Black has already gagged all the house elves in a hundred foot radius with kitchen utensils, although most of them, jaded by five years' experience, had already done so themselves by the time he entered the kitchen at four-thirty to keep them, as he always puts it, out of harm's way, or rather, as Remus would say, out of *his* way. The house elves make muffled soft sounds of understanding. They are bad house elves, they are meddlesome tripsy house elves, they should always have fork tongs in their gums, and knives too, many, many knives. Sirius leaves them with a warning finger to his lips, before rejoining James outside the kitchens and heading in a direction the professionals generally call 'down.'

The Slytherin common room is pitch-black. James is speaking in a low voice to the blank wall, which spits and rattles back at him.

"*You know the Mason's Word,*" it hisses. "*You can command me to change it.*"

"Oh, please do hush," James says rather desperately, sending a frantic glance toward the dormitories. "I'd rather you cooperated, to be perfectly honest, it's much funnier if you can report to me exactly what happens."

"*Just say the Word and I will be bound to your will. I will not participate in your carbon-based games.*"

"Look." It's a long shot, James knows, but it's worth a go. "Do you like Severus Snape?"

"*'Like' is a word for glands.*"

"Y...es. But does he, you know. I've seen him kick walls! Loads of times."

The wall remains silent. James thinks it might be mad, but isn't sure how he knows, and thinks later he might perhaps be thinking like a madman.

"And," James adds, after a moment's thought, "I once heard him say the password was stupid."

"*My passwords are never stupid.*"

"That's what I said at the time," James says, loyally. "'Muggles smell of jam,' I think that's brilliant, personally. Cracking social commentary. But Snape, he goes on these..."

"*Your voice is unfamiliar. What is your name, student or recently-hired professor?*"

"Lucius Malfoy," James says, thinking fast.

"*I know you. You were in the seventh year two years ago.*"

"Yes. And I my voice has finally changed. Didn't think those balls would ever drop. Look, I've, er, come back." James passes a shaking hand over his brow. "To learn more. You can never have too much learning, is what I always say. Listen, will you please just change it?"

"*He does not like my passwords?*"

"Hates 'em. Mr. Mock The Passwords, that's what we call him," James says. Silence. He wonders if this one might have been overkill, until he realizes the wall is frowning. It's a general frown lingering in the air that, later, James will never be able to explain. Right now it just makes him itchy.

"*He will not like this one.*"

"No," says James. "Not one bit."

"*I will do it. I will not do it for you, Lucius Malfoy, but rather because Severus Snape dishonors the House that I protect.*"

"Lovely." James finally allows himself to breathe out. "So...what's the password? Just to...confirm, like."

"*Severus Snape,*" the wall says, in its frozen, sibilant tones, "*is a hideous pimple.*"

"And they — er, we — can't get out till they — we — say that."

"*Yes. I will not be moved.*"

"Good man — er, wall," James mutters. He wonders if he should pat it or something, or if that's too personal. "Thanks for, er, restoring the honor of the, er, bloody brilliant house of Slytherin."

"*It is my duty,*" the wall grinds out.

"Righto. Finite Incantatem!" The stones crack and settle back into silence. Mission accomplished, thinks James, and feels a comforting glow of pride. The big boys are back in the game, and Lily Evans and her big, shining, beautiful green eyes, framed by those tumbling locks of wild copper hair, can go hang.

Well, he adds, as he leans against a different wall in what he hopes is not an intimate fashion, he doesn't really mean it. It's just, you know, a saying. That's all.

***

Sirius Black always thought Snape, being possessed of so great and arced a Cathedral for an echoing chamber, would snore with all the chaos and sound of a three ring circus. Sirius Black, crouched beneath Snape's bed, is glad to learn he was always right. He's surprised the bed isn't shaking with the force of it. He's surprised no one else in the Slytherin boys' dormitory has yet suffocated Snape in the night with a pillow to make the madness stop. He's surprised *he* hasn't yet suffocated Snape with a pillow to make the madness stop. And he would, oh, how eagerly he would, except that would ruin the first step in the Plan, and all the steps afterwards.

To the rumbling rhythms of Severus Snape and his nose-horn, Sirius sets the fifty-five dungbombs — two are left, lonely and sad, in the chest beneath his bed, in case of emergency — evenly amongst Snape's things for maximum

effect. He snatches a few books, as well, but then puts them back. *Stick to the plan, Black,* he tells himself. *Just stick to the plan. Don't give yourself away.*

In all the history of all the world, Self-Dissolving Dungbombs are, Sirius thinks, the most brilliant invention attributed to man. One day, when he is old and no longer capable of carousing on April Fools, his most prized holiday, he will sit down and attempt to achieve such greatness. He has many ideas, of course, for the beginning prankster, as well as the professional, and every class that lies in between, but none approach the sheer genius that is the Self-Dissolving Dungbomb. Such application of chemistry. Such precision timing. Such perfection in a tiny twist of darkly colored magic.

"Make daddy proud," Sirius says. He touches each with his thumb, a ritual, a prayer, an offering to the gods. "'Tis a far, far better thing you do than ever you have done—"

"Snrgoggnnnk," Snape snores.

"May the force be with you," Sirius says, and flees.

***

At breakfast, one table is conspicuously empty. The rest of the school sends curious glances at it, and there is much speculation, including a) the creation of a new, private room for Purebloods who don't want their food tainted by Muggle hands; b) an orgy gone out of hand; and c) a annihilating plague. No one seems to know which explanation is most likely, until the names "Black and Potter" come up in the context of "April Fools" and all of a sudden, everything makes perfect sense.

"I heard they let a dragon loose in the dungeons," a second-year Hufflepuff says, wide-eyed.

"Naw," scoffs his fifth-year prefect. "You wouldn't know, you've not been here long enough. I bet you they turned the whole dungeon into an enormous sewer."

"Must keep that one in mind," Sirius whispers to James across the table, who is vibrating with repressed laughter. "Genius."

"Heard some things about you two," Kingsley Shacklebolt says suddenly, in his voice like tectonic plates shifting, looming over them, as always giving the impression of a tree sprung unexpectedly from the earth. "Not going to get you kicked off the Team, is it? McCormack'll throw a wobbly." He jerks an enormous thumb at the captain of the Gryffindor Quidditch team, who is eyeing them with great suspicion from the other end of the table, looking quite frightening for someone so petite and blonde.

"Not likely," Sirius says. He flashes Kingsley a winning smile. "It's April Fools, Kingsley! Don't sit down there," he adds quickly, "we'll be smelling you for days. That's one of the Bad Chairs."

His fellow Beater gives him a long, dark look. "Black, you'd better hope I don't sit in anything I don't want to. You, too, Potter. Watch it. You can still Chase with two broken legs, you know, if you're strapped on."

"On my honor as a Gryffindor," James says. "I value my neck, thank you. And my legs. And all my other bits."

"Right," Kingsley says, granting them both with a short nod. "Carry on, then, with my blessing."

"That's a relief," Sirius mutters. "Could make a living cracking heads in with a Quaffle if he wanted to, that one." He grins after Kingsley and waves, until he slides into a seat at the far end of the table. "Arms like the mighty oaks. I think he's a little unhinged — do you see that look in his eye? That 'I don't like you, unworthy peon' look?"

"That's just for you," Peter says.

"Kingsley is my *soul brother*," says Sirius, looking rather offended. "I have smacked Bludgers alongside him for many a long year. Sometimes he waves at me."

"Don't let him hear you call him that, or he'll smack one of those brotherly Bludgers right into your skull," says Peter, and then frowns. "Brotherly Bludgers. Blutherly brudgers. Blurther—bother."

"Nothing you say can bring me down on this most glorious day," Sirius says loudly, leaning back. "There should be drinks, drinks all around the table, drinks on my dear friend James Potter to celebrate our triumph." James makes a face.

"Have any of you seen Remus?" he asks.

"Nothing you say," Sirius repeats emphatically, "can bring me down on this most glorious day. Drinks, Potter. *Drinks*."

"He wasn't around when I woke up," Peter says. "I just thought that was because I was late."

"How can he not be here?" Sirius demands. "How? How, at this hour of our victory?" He looks sullenly over his shoulder at the empty Slytherin table. "Right now, I bet you, the howls of our vanquished enemy are echoing amongst the rafters and he is no doubt taking a bath with bubbles in or something else that defeats our Grander Purpose."

"He might be in the bathroom," Peter points out.

"Not at breakfast, Petey, thank you." Sirius folds his arms over his chest. "How do you like that. How do you like that? I have two extra dungbombs, James, what do you say to—"

"You told him to lie low," James says. "Didn't you?"

"I didn't *mean* it," Sirius mutters.

"You didn't make that clear." James claps him on the shoulder. "Tough luck all around, isn't it?" His eyes glance nervously down the table, then flicker innocently to the ceiling, lips quirking into a tuneless whistle. "Do you see her?" he asks, out of the corner of his mouth. "Is she looking at me?"

"She's looking at Kingsley, actually," Sirius says. "Tough luck all around, just like you said."

"I hate you." James digs his thumbs into his eye sockets as if actually trying to make them explode. "You realize *you* lost me my girlfriend to the Human Oak Tree? I wish you would just go die."

"No you don't," Sirius says reasonably. "Let me remind you of all those things you would have to do alone—the explosions and nudity and so forth. Well, you could do them with Peter," again as an afterthought, "but he wouldn't be nearly so devious — would you, Wormtail."

"Not by half," Peter says helpfully.

"Anyway," Sirius continues, trying to ignore the scene behind James's left ear, in which a giggling Lily is caressing one of Kingsley's biceps, which happens to be about the size of her head, "this is but a passing fancy. A momentary phase. I give it two weeks before she comes crawling back and you can go have horrible little redheaded babies or whatever it is you two do for fun. Where in the hell is *Remus*?"

"Oh, go find him," James mutters.

"Can't." A grin like the sun spreads over Sirius' face and he fights it down valiantly, even twiddling his thumbs for innocence's sake. "Slytherins. Twelve o'clock. Phase one: complete. Enjoyment stage commencing: *now*."

"They look mad," Peter whispers.

"No sign of Snivellus, is there?" Sirius pretends to inspect a broken fingernail while peering out at the scene from underneath wild hair. "Do you think he's thrown himself out a window to end the shame and torment?" Sirius sighs blissfully. "Or perhaps he's flushed himself down a toilet. Or maybe — if we're lucky — he's found himself a dark and sooty corner to weep in until he shrivels up and *dies*. What do you think men, eh?"

"There he is," Peter says, and points.

"Down!" Sirius hisses. "Down! Utmost caution! Subtlety at all times! *Do not let the enemy know we know!*"

"We know what?" Peter asks.

"*Everything*," Sirius replies.

"Oh." Peter ponders this. "I understand."

"He's coming this way," James mutters from the corner of his mouth. "Quick. Look innocent. *Now.*"

Snape hurls himself at them, looking even more like a furious crow than usual and smelling like something unholy. Sirius makes a horrible face and pushes his plate away. "Urgh, mate. Stand over there, will you? What'd you do — fall in the toilet?"

"I did not fall in anything," Snape grinds out in deadly tones. "But I *know* that you are responsible — you — you—" The deep olive flush of rage suffuses his face, and he seems lost for words, capable only of trembling, fists clenched.

"Easy now, Snapey," James says. He holds up his hands amiably. "Can't exactly blame us for your personal odor problems, can you? Where *were* you lot, anyway? Oh, *urgh*, it's *all* of you!" Indeed, from the red-faced Slytherins clustered at their table is wafting an almost tangible miasma of stink. Sirius makes a *whoooof!* noise and waves at the air in front of his nose. "What happened? Peeves get into the sewage pipes?" If looks could kill, the Slytherins would not only have murdered James and Sirius in singularly nasty and imaginative ways, but also defaced their bodies and danced in the remains.

"I *told* you," hisses the Hufflepuff fifth-year prefect, "enormous sewer!"

Snape raises himself up to his full height, which isn't, Sirius thinks, all that impressive, with his skinny hands clenched into small, spiny-looking fists and his nostrils flared like the sails of a giant boat. "Baths," Sirius suggests. "An age-old custom. History tells us that it has been employed, in the past, to keep man from smelling like beast." Sirius sniffs, blanches, and waves a hand in front of his nose. "Some people," he finishes, "are trying to eat, Snivellus."

"You'd know all about *beasts*, wouldn't you," Snape returns. His lips are a tight, dark line, his face gaunt and angry, but eager. "You won't get away with this."

"Get away with what?" James blinks innocently.

"Don't know what you're talking about," Peter chimes in.

"You smell like an outhouse," Sirius finishes. "Begone with you, dung-boy."

"Beasts," Snape insists, then turns on his heel and stalks away.

"What a blight on the landscape," Sirius hisses. "Moony had nothing to do with it. I say we steal all Snivellus' underwear and put hot pepper in it—"

"Next year, maybe," James admonishes. "You're the one who wants to stick to the plan."

"How about next week?" Sirius attempts. "Maybe next month?" James' expression remains unconvinced. "A year is such a *long time*," Sirius groans. "I can't wait a *year*. I just had the idea *now*."

"There are only so many points we can lose, you know," Peter says. "Remember third year, when we actually went to negative thirty? I think we should try to avoid that."

"But that was so much fun," Sirius whines, regarding them piteously. "Oh, a pox on the selective memories of the depressingly law-abiding. Let us recall that part of that negative thirty was that one time, with the sausages—"

"Oh right," Peter says suddenly with his little cackle of a laugh, "yes! And the dwarves we painted blue—"

"Exactly," Sirius says. He settles back in his chair with a look of blissful reminiscence. "James. Jamie James. Don't say that doesn't bring a wistful smile of nostalgia to that long face of yours."

"All right, that was a good time," James admits, grudgingly. Sirius thinks he would probably consider it a surrender to show any trace of anything but the most heartrending misery, and wants to step on his foot. "But no peppers now. Points or not, it's a waste of energy. The Slytherins'll abuse him for us for at least the next month, until the smell fades."

"Wankers. Moving in on my favorite pastime." Sirius drums his fingers impatiently against the tabletop, whistling through his teeth, and then suddenly sits up like a hound at point and says "Moony! Where've you been at?"

"Oh," Remus replies vaguely, "about." He settles down at the table, leaning over for some milk, when he pauses, a look of pained intensity crossing his face. "What *is* that smell?"

"Success?" Sirius offers.

"Fifty-five dungbombs," James explains.

"Well." Sirius sniffs. "If you want to be literal about it."

"Slytherins?" Remus asks. He butters a roll, not seeming too surprised, perturbed, or even upset. "I take it the chairs are for later on in the day?"

"Festivities from dawn 'til dusk, that's me," Sirius coos. "Is this what you call lying low, eh?"

"There was a lot of noise in the hall. A Slytherin exodus, apparently." Remus snatches the jam from Sirius' teasing fingers and sets to with his knife. "Which I'm sure none of you had anything to do with."

"You missed Snivellus." Sirius frowns. "You could practically *see* the smell."

"It was brilliant," Peter agrees.

"Mmph." James flops forward into his plate. "She's *fondling* his *biceps*. She's *still* fondling his biceps. Isn't she?"

Sirius heaves a deep sigh and flings his arms around Peter's shoulders. "You and me, Pete," he says. "How's that sound? Two visionaries against the wet blanket of the *world*."

"You'd get me killed," Peter says flatly.

"Marauders!" Sirius stares around at them, frankly bewildered. "I feel like I hardly know you anymore! This is not Marauding behavior, this is — this is — we ought to be called The Wet Blankets! Well," he amends, "the Wet Blankets And One Very Lonely Marauder, which is not much better."

"Brilliant name for a band, though," Remus says thoughtfully.

"Pfah!" Sirius scoffs. "I am shocked at you, men; shocked and horrified. We've just pulled off a brilliant prank—and by 'we' I of course mean The Most Pathetic Person In The World and myself—Snape is about to be hung from the rafters by his own House, and Peter's got us stocked with enough snacks to last a lifetime. Why are there not celebrations? Why are we not drinking? Quaffing, even? Quaffing a celebratory ale?"

"I would like to be drunk," James says, confirming his status as Most Pathetic Person Ever. "We should go drink."

Remus is picking at his breakfast, looking slightly ill. "You haven't done anything to this, have you, Sirius?"

"Honor among thieves, Moony," Sirius reminds him, looking very wounded. "Honestly. What do you think of me?"

"It's just that it tastes — it tastes strange." Remus puts the roll down, contemplating it with red-rimmed eyes. "That's silly. It's just bread and butter and some jam, isn't it?"

"The man can't even hold his jam, and you're speaking of getting drunk. Bah." Sirius folds his arms over his chest and stares moodily off in front of him.

"You all right, Moony?" Peter asks, as James sulks and Sirius sulks and Remus turns green around the edges.

"Don't know, actually," Remus says. "Right. Bathroom. Glurk."

"He just said glurk," Peter reiterates, watching Remus flee. "Hello, is that Snape looking smug?"

Sirius' brows knit together. Peter opens his mouth to say something, but shuts it again, recognizing how necessary it is not to interrupt. "The jam," Sirius says suddenly. He slams his hand down on the table so that it shakes, and a few Gryffindors voice their protest as only Gryffindors can. "Gits," Sirius mutters. "It's the jam. That — that *rat!* He's put something in Moony's jam!"

"We did put fifty-five dungbombs beneath his bed," James points out. "Although they could have been in his lunch, so he should really be grateful."

"Stop being so reasonable!" Sirius explodes. "You're *no* fun anymore, James, no fun *at all!* Come on, Peter. Operation Pepper Pants begins as of *now*."

"Er," Peter says. He sits back down. He is rather too heavy to be dragged, so Sirius makes a noise of exasperation, abandons him as dead weight, and storms over to the Slytherin table. As he passes, he hears Rodolphus Lestrange hiss "Black, you'd better—" before he is cut off by an extremely vulgar *blatttt* which sets the entire room to giggling. Heartened by this development, he stalks down the table until he towers above Snape, arms crossed. Snape is, he is very pleased to note, sitting alone at a bench very far away from the rest of his house, who are giving off rays of singular hatred.

"Right," Sirius says. He twitches as the smell hits and switches to breathing through his mouth. "Thad's idd. Dake off your drousers."

"Take off my trousers," Snape repeats, looking at him askance. "Look, Black, I should have realized that all this idiocy and attempted murder was really just pulling my metaphorical *pigtails*, but I'd rather be slowly devoured by *carnivorous ants*."

"No," Sirius says. Anyone more attuned to his nature would understand the danger, however muffled with humor by a nose pinched tightly shut. "Off with 'ebb. I'b going to but pebber in a very bainful blace, and I'd rather do idd dow than wait dill you're asleep."

"Haven't you had enough fun with me for one day?" Snape turns around, pointedly ignoring him.

"This isn't about me," Sirius snarls, grabbing him by the neck of the robes and whipping him around, too upset to breathe only through his mouth. "What did you do to Remus?"

A horrible little smile curves the corner of Snape's mouth. "Whatever do you mean?"

"I think you know perfectly well what I mean."

"Hardly," Snape says, gazing at him blandly. "It's not my fault some people just can't hold their *silver*."

Sirius' molars grind together. "I'm going to kill you," he says.

"Ah," Snape sighs. "So it's not *my* pigtails you want to *pull*. Am I right?"

"You've tried to *poison* him," Sirius spits out. "You're disgusting. You're pathetic. You smell like a diseased *monkey*. I'm going to kill you."

"By all means, Black," Snape says. "Do it. Here. In front of the entire school. Enough witnesses to put you in Azkaban for life — I rather think my death will be heralded one day as a great sacrifice for so *noble* a cause." The corner of Sirius' eye twitches. He pulls his arm back, fist balled into impending, knuckly doom. "Do it," Snape challenges. His nasal voice sends spasms of disgust down Sirius' spine and deep into his belly.

"Wouldn't want to improve your face any," Sirius snaps. He pulls away, knocking Snape back down to the bench. Hard. "Watch out, Snivellus. Day's not over yet."

"I'm terrified," Snape says dryly. "I assure you. Your pathetic attempts at blustering masculinity aside, I'm sure there are a few *first year Hufflepuffs* who might be impressed by your bravado — not to mention a currently vomiting werewolf, naturally — but I am not so inclined."

"Like I said, Snivellus," Sirius repeats, "*watch out*."

"What happened?" Peter asks as Sirius returns to the Gryffindor table. "Did you beat him up? It didn't look like you were beating him up. It looked like you *didn't* beat him up."

"It was silver," James adds, looking animated for the first time in weeks. "Wasn't it?"

"You know what this means," Sirius says, twirling his silverware between his fingers.

James nods grimly. "Oh yes," he says. "*War*."

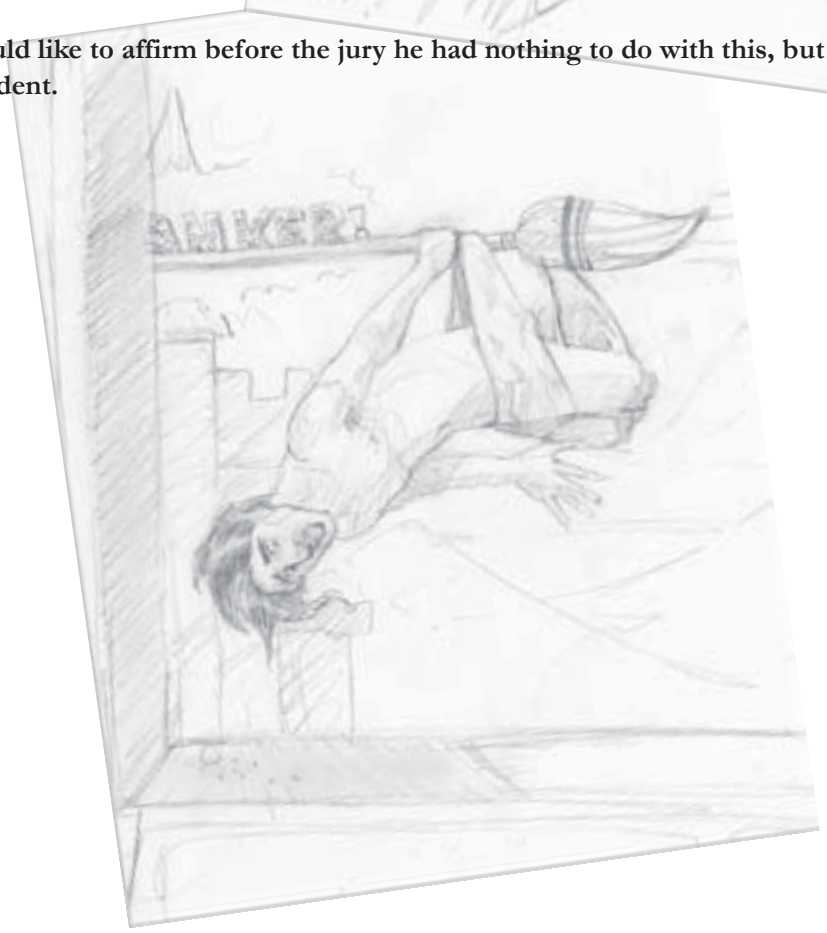
***

Thus began the famed Prank Week of '76, in which the following tasks were executed with so meticulous a hand that even Dumbledore, when at last the perpetrators were caught, was hard pressed to hide his admiration.

Day One, known as operation Hairy McHairyPants.



Day Two. Remus Lupin would like to affirm before the jury he had nothing to do with this, but was balling socks at the time of the incident.



Day Three. Rabastan was here.



Day Four. There are other fish in the sea. Thank God you didn't catch that one.



Day Five. It's more hygienic that way, trust me.





This story is based on characters and situations created and owned by JK Rowling, various publishers including but not limited to Bloomsbury Books, Scholastic Books and Raincoast Books, and Warner Bros., Inc. No money is being made and no copyright or trademark infringement is intended.

***The Shoebox Project* by LadyJaida and Dorkorific**

http://www.livejournal.com/community/shoebox_project

Part Eleven: May, 1976
One Birthday and Too Much Gillyweed.



***

James is awakened at seven twenty-two A.M. precisely on the morning of May 12th by Sirius Black leaping onto his head like a monkey.

"Mnghh!" he shrieks, and throws himself upright, which slams his skull into the bedpost and entangles him thoroughly in the sheets. Something is on his head. Something is *on his head* and he *cannot breathe* and he has a dim memory that Rumplestiltzkin is trying to teach him how to make bread pudding, and *oh God I'm drowning!* He flails wildly and then, suddenly, is released with a great whoosh of air into the early summer Friday light. Sirius' face, upside-down, manic, and rather too close, pops into view.

"Help!" James squeaks in terror.

"Good *morning*, birthday boy," Sirius coos, and kisses him soundly and very sloppily on the mouth. "Who's my all-grown-up little cabbage? Whosee den?"

"I am no one's cabbage before ten in the morning," James says, trying to decipher through the haze of sleep which way is up and which way is escape. "Get off my legs! Aghhh you weigh a ton."

"You are so ungrateful," Sirius pouts, sitting up and thereby putting all his weight on James's knees. "I got you a present!"

"Is it a kiss?" James asks warily.

"Do you want it to be?" Sirius flutters his eyelashes.

"How about we up the ante to a blowjob," James suggests, giving up, "as is actually customary? Have you already eaten breakfast? There's jam on your nose."

"Oh sweetheart, you always notice the little things about me," Sirius says. He runs his fingers over James's chest in a way that might be called seductive if it weren't so sticky. "That must be why this marriage has lasted so long. Six bloody years; kill me. Anyway, no, it isn't sexual favors. I'm not in the mood, with the new baby and all. It's this." He shoves a very messily wrapped parcel at James, then sits back on his heels — his extremely grubby boots still tangled in James's sheets — and regards him with those expectant, eager puppy-eyes: *open it open it open it*.

And it must be admitted that Sirius does always give the best presents.

"So *what do you say*," Sirius beams. "Who's your Keeper? Eh? *Eh?*" James begins to grin, pushing his hair out of his eyes and groping with his free hand for his glasses. "Are you speechless? You'd better be speechless. Give daddy a good fish-mouth — that's a good birthday boy."

"Gillyweed," James says. "Sirius. *Where* did you get *this much Gillyweed*?"

Sirius shrugs. "Grew it myself." He wiggles his fingers before him. "Green fingers, all of them. Not just the thumbs. Don't look so horrified." He brings his forehead to James', eyes dark and cheerful and oddly ominous. "You will never know my secrets, Mr. Potter. Simply rejoice in their results."

"No rejoicing until *after classes,*" James insists, but his heart isn't in it. "This must've cost a fortune!"

"Sixteenth birthdays only happen once." Sirius flings himself back against the bed. Even his eyes are grinning ear to ear which, James thinks, as he shoves his glasses onto his nose, is hard as hell to accomplish. "Celebrations are an important time in a young man's life that he will *never remember ever* the morning after." James stares down at the Gillyweed and the thin rolling paper on his lap and says nothing. "Oh, come *on*," Sirius groans. "Don't tell me all you wanted for Christmas was your two front teeth?"

"Lily," James sighs.

"Well I couldn't very well wrap *her* up and have you smoke her," Sirius mutters. "You're just going to have to make do with Gillyweed and Gillyweed-induced mistakes whether you like it or not. You will have fun." Sirius pulls himself upright to jab one pointy, meaningful finger into James' chest. "Whether you like or not. But," he adds, cheerful again, "you *will* like it. Trust me."

"That," says James, "is the most ridiculous demand you have ever made of me."

"You're going to have a fantastic birthday," and that wicked, shit-eating grin spreads all the way up to Sirius's sparkling eyes, and James doesn't know whether to be terrified or very, very excited.

***



Pass me my lighter, will you, Pettigrew?" mutters Sirius around the little white cylinder resting between his teeth. It looks so harmless, Remus muses; like the little bits of paper that Sirius sometimes gnaws on when his nails are too short or too dirty to bite. But Remus has actually listened in Herbology, and he's pretty sure that harmless is the last word for it.

Without looking away, Peter does. The lighter is a big, clunky, shiny Muggle monstrosity with a golden lion on it, which Sirius insists he got at a Muggle club from a pretty girl with pink hair but Remus thinks he had it custom-made, back when he had the money to make anything he wanted. "Where did you even get that much weed? Doesn't it cost a fortune?" Peter is wide-eyed, but leaning back against the crenellations of the Astronomy Tower with great, forced nonchalance.

"Bought it off my mum." Sirius looks up, eyes dark with amusement. "How do you think the Blacks got their money? Toujours Pur — you're bloody right. As the driven snow. And never laced with anything."

Peter gapes at him.

Sirius rolls his eyes. "I'm joking, you stupid tit." He flicks the lighter open, so that the flame flares orange over his face and the shadows of his cheekbones. The tip catches; Sirius closes his eyes, hollows his cheeks, and inhales. He holds it a moment, keeping the joint lazily between two fingers, and then exhales slowly with every evidence of satisfaction, ending in a small, surprised laugh. "Whoof! I've missed that."

"I should have gotten first hit," James sulks. "It's *my* birthday."

"And so you shall," Sirius says placidly. "I was only testing it for poisons and/or jinxes. God." He hiccups out a breathy laugh, a slow, small grin on his face. "I'm out of practice. Here." He transfers the joint neatly into James's waiting fingers, his other hand already busy with the packet, "This one's all yours. I'll roll another for the rest of us,

but seeing as how it's your birthday and all, you ought to have your own. Hey." He laughs again, as if the sound is spilling out of him, slow and heavy as the smoke trickling now from James's mouth. "Do you remember that time the summer after fourth, when we smoked up for the first time and you kept saying it wasn't doing anything, it wasn't doing anything and then you ate that *entire cake* and then your mum — hahaha—"

James cackles, blowing out a quick plume of smoke over the edge of the tower. "Ah, Jesus, yeah— she was just *lost,* and Sirius goes—"

"—'He's just had a growth spurt!' Genius—"

"—and we both thought it was just the funniest thing in the entire world, so there we are, reeking, and I've got cake in my hair, and we're just hysterical, on the floor, fourteen years old, and my mum goes — hahaha — she goes, 'Well, you ought to have more *vegetables* then, I'm growing fresh *plants* in the garden but I don't know if you can find them under all those *weeds*—'"

"—I thought I was going to choke. I've never laughed so hard. Here, Moony, you go first, I've been."

Here they are, Remus thinks, the Prefect in him slightly hysterical: four juvenile delinquents smoking something horribly illegal in what is officially a class space. He is a dead man.

In for a penny, he thinks, and reaches out to pluck the joint from Sirius's hand.

He's done this before when he wasn't a prefect, and learned he was the only person probably on the planet who could actually be more uptight with a roll of Gillyweed between his lips than not. The lazy and somewhat boneless relaxation of his friends, Peter like a sock full of suet and Sirius like a dog gotten at spilt firewhiskey and James reminiscent of a giant, beached fish, is something Remus supposes his metabolism doesn't allow or the basic, conflicting mechanisms of his mind simply can't comprehend. He always puts the joint between his lips anyway, and impressed Sirius the first time because he didn't even cough, just looked cross-eyed down at the joint between his lips at one end and his thumb and forefinger at the other and wondered why nothing at all was happening. Frankly, deep down, he *is* happy: happy to stay in control, happy to hide the sudden rigid lines of his backbone as the effect worked only backwards on him, and happy to look after his confused and babbling friends as the great profundities of the modern age are lost completely on him because he can't translate Gilly-head. The squat round table they circle with their legs crossed is anathema to the prefect inside him, but to the boy, it's simply confusing.

"Pass it here," Peter says. He nudges an elbow into Remus' side.

"Think about Gillyweed less," Sirius adds. "Smoke Gillyweed *more.*"

Remus takes two long drags in and watches with new, jittery contemplation as the light at the far end flares with the intake of breath. He breathes out two even lines of smoke through his nose, and passes the joint to Peter.

Perhaps it's a new sort of ritual, Remus thinks as he sits back, something that boys are actually supposed do. Being hidden and secret is part of its charm, which means it's yet another one of those things Remus will never understand.

"You're still thinking," Sirius says. He wags a finger under Remus' nose, admonishing. "Stop that. Here, have another."

"Er," Remus says. He gets the feeling Gillyweed etiquette is also lost on him, forever and ever and apace. "Thanks." Sirius rolls his eyes. James has started to laugh on Remus' right and Peter, on Remus' left, has a wide-eyed, glassy look of intense godliness. Across the table, Sirius has rolled a fourth and final joint. One for each of them, and Gillyweed to spare for the birthday boy, if he'll have another. Sirius blows smoke in a long stream across the table into Remus' eyes.

"That's right," Sirius says. He points at Remus with a lazy finger, direction cock-eyed. "*You*."

It's going to be a long night.

***



"Have you ever thought...like, if you looked really close up at someone's skin, you could, like, *see* their *molecules?* Buzzing around, you know? Cos there's...there's all that empty space, but it's not like you can see that. You'd have to be way close up, like. Can someone put that record on?"

"What record? Sirius, that makes no sense."

"The...muggle one, y'know. The...Bob wossface. Dickens. Scrooge. Marley. It's right there — just — oof. Hahaha. I can't reach it. No, man, you're not listening — I don't mean, like, their *literal molecules*. I mean, the things that, like, make you up. D'you see it? It's by your foot."

"Moony's literal molecules are by his foot?"

"I don't think he was saying that, Peter."

"No, no, I get it. I *get* it. I see your molecules, Sirius. You have a *lot* of molecules, mate. Whoa."

"Ta, Pete. See, the man knows what he's talking about. Look, if you can't find it just put on *another* one, I'm not that picky right now. There's that Indian bloke, and the four nancies Evans likes. What's the matter, birthday boy, *you're* awfully quiet. Do you need another?"

"I just keep thinking about her *hair*."

"You *said* you wanted 'the Bob wossface,' so I'm trying to find you the Bob wossface. Besides, I like the Beatles."

"Lily liked the Beatles. Said I looked like that — that Paul one. Funny hair, they had. I just keep thinking about her *hair*."

"It's just *hair*, mate. Look on the bright side. See how many stars there are? Go on. Look up."

"... Yeah. Oh. You're right."

"There's *loads*."

"It makes you feel a bit like...like your problems aren't that important, really? Compared to, like, a star's problems?"

"Got it in one. That's my boy."

"It's just that Lily...she's like...she's like a *star*, Sirius, all, twinkly, and—"

"Stars don't throw grapefruit juice in your face, Prongsie. Even metaphorically. Look up again. There. That's beauty, man."

"Well, they're pretty stars."

"Ahahaha. Ha. Ha. What? Oh, nothing, I just thought of a joke."

"I just keep thinking about her *hair*. Stars aren't all soft and orange and tickly when you touch 'em."

"How do you know?"

"Actually, they're burning balls of gas, so I doubt they'd be tickly—"

"Stars can be *anything you want 'em to be, mate*. They're like — they're *yours*. All yours. If you just *look* at 'em long enough."

"No they can't, Sirius, they're always going to be hydrogen...oh, never mind."

"It's metaphorical. You have no soul. Poetry or whatever. Prongs — ahaha—"

"Wha—"

"Your face, mate...your face...I just...I..."

"Stop laughing, you immature little tosser, it's...that's the *pangs* of...oh God. I can't believe myself. It is pretty funny, isn't...oh..."

"Stoppit — I can't breathe — oh Jesus, hahahaha—"

"What's so funny?"

"I don't know, it's — well, they're laughing. Ahahaha. Ha. There's that *joke* again."

"*I just keep thinking about her hair*. I mean. Do you — ahaha — do you listen to what you're — ow! That hurt."

"My love for her—"

"Is it like stars?"

"Is your love a burning ball of hydra — hydro—"

"Hydrogen."

"Hydrogen? Is your love gassy?"

"Is anything about James *not gassy?* — Ow. Fuck you."

"You know what I like about smoking, is how you feel all floaty, and like you're going up. Like…close your eyes. I feel like I'm going…up!"

"Pete."

"What?"

"Look. Just. Don't tell everyone how high you are. It's stupid."

"Because nothing *else* about this conversation has been stupid. Thank god you're here to keep our standards up."

"Oh God, listen to the Prefect. Why don't you go tell on us if you're just going to lord your metabolism over everyone? Shit, that's the funniest word. Metabolism. Metaaaaaaabolism. Metab. Olizmay."

"You know what I really liked about her, she had the cutest little bones under her wrists. Like little...very small bones."

"Did you like that more than — oh, wait, it's coming to me — right, there we go, got it — say — her *breasts?*"

"That's — well — *Sirius*—"

"Her nipples? Nipples. Haha! Nipples."

"I was talking about her wrists — she had such lovely little wrists, and *fingers*—"

"My God, man, you never saw her tits."

"That isn't—"

"You never *touched* 'em, did you. Ha! Haha!"

"My metabolism isn't something I can *control*, you know."

"Shut up about your metaboliz-iz-izm, we're talking about Evans' breasts. Did you ever see them? Were they wrong? Were they pointy? Did they have delicate bones?"

"Breasts don't have—"

"Were they like two twin stars winking at you from the great beyond?"

"What kind of fucked-up breasts have *you* been looking at?"

"I was being poetic."

"Wormtail's seen *loads* of tits. Not all at once, obviously."

"Oh, come on. We've all seen 'em. Who here has actually touched anyone's breasts?"

"I know all about *Sirius'*—"

"Sirius, have you got breasts?"

"No! Haha, sod off. No. He knows about every girl who I've been out with is what he means. He keeps track. Because he's jealous. Aren't you?"

"No, I know about them all because he tells me every bloody *day* like I haven't heard about him and Alice Prewett in the broom shed seven million bloody times."

"She's got *huge* ones."

"Is that your type, Petey?"

"You know what's funny about breasts? You get two kinds: water breasts and pudding breasts."

"Oh, Christ."

"Shh, Moony! Let the rat speak."

"No, I mean it! It makes sense. Like, tits basically feel like they've got water in, or like they've got pudding. I don't care how big they are, but I think pudding is better."

"That's...I don't even know what to say."

"So which was Evans, eh, Jamesie? Water or pudding?"

"Pudding made with water?"

"Shut up, all of you. We're not having this conversation. I didn't like her for her breasts. I mean, I liked them. Very much. But—"

"But you went and you had *feelings* for her, didn't you. Her and her wristbones and her hair you can't stop thinking about. What about her molecules? Did you ever get so close to her skin you could see her molecules?"

"She had *lovely* molecules."

"Sure she did. Nice shape, from what I've seen beyond those jumpers, and just a *little* excited to see me—"

"That's uncalled for."

"She wasn't your girlfriend, was she? Did you want her to be?"

"She kissed him! She kissed him! Underneath the mistletoe that time, just this Christmas. Ahahaha — listen, mates —

you have to listen to this joke, it's brilliant."

"Pete. Your molecules are moving."

"They are? Where?"

"If you just concentrate hard enough they'll stop."

"Oh God. My molecules. Oh God. They're *moving*. Remus. Remus, help me."

"Sorry, Peter. I think you can handle that on your own. It was the *mistletoe*, for Merlin's sake, are you ever going to let me live that down?"

"Well? What do you think about *her* molecules, Remus?"

"Are molecules being used here for some sort of oblique reference to Lily's—"

"Her tits, man. What do you think of them? Ow! Stop hitting me, have another hit yourself."

"I've never looked at them."

"Good man."

"*Prefect*."

"She used to play with my hair. I fucking love it when girls play with my hair. Get her nails right into my scalp."

"Why, does it save you the effort of playing with it yourself? Haha."

"I'll play with your hair if you like."

"Thanks, Pettigrew, I'll pass."

"Oho! You see, the mistletoe never lies. Remus, look, True Romance blooming right under our very noses. Two Marauders, kept apart by the forces of…force. What was I talking about?"

"James and Peter and their doomed love affair."

"You're both getting such a thumping once I remember how to move my arms. You know what, I'm just glad I got to kiss her."

"That's practically Tennyson, you know. Tis better to have loved and lost, and all that."

"I fucking love this song. Everyone shut up, listen to this song. *Is this love is this love is this love is this love that I'm feeling?*"

"No, I think that's Gillyweed, actually."

"I'll feel *you*."

"All right, who *said* that?"

***



***

Peter's brow furrows in concentration, following the shadows over the ceiling. Sometime earlier James decided he hated the stars but liked, very much, the ceiling, and flung himself onto his back. Peter, who understood that James was talented and had a nice head of a hair and was really funny and had good cheekbones and was the perfect role model, did the same.

"The ceiling," James sighs. "I like the ceiling. It doesn't *twinkle*. It's not *beautiful* or *far away*. It's not going to up and dump you one day because it thinks you pulled a prank on Severus Bloody Snape. Don't you like the ceiling, Pete? The ceiling is so lovely."

"Er," Peter says. "Wait, you're not talking about the sky anymore. Are you?"

"I hate this birthday," James confides. I love Gillyweed. I *hate* this birthday."

"You're sixteen," Peter says. "That's exciting, isn't it?"

"You've been sixteen for ages and you're not that exciting," James points out. Peter has to admit that this is true. "It's not that. It's — everyone's trying so hard. Sirius is trying but he's a total blot. He's my best friend but he's a blot, and he's never been in love with anything other than his own face in the mirror and my mum's cheesecake. And Remus — well, you know. Is *Remus*. D'you know what he did after Lily broke up with me?"

"No," Peter says loyally, even though he does, because he was *there*.

"He gave me a book," says James, and shakes his head. "A *book*. He didn't even *give* it to me, he lent it to me, and he said—" James adopts a near pitch-perfect imitation of Remus' careful, soft, posh tenor— "he said, '*Ahhh*, James, look, if you can avoid getting *treacle* on the pages I'd rather like to, errr, *lend* this to you, it's really very helpful sometimes to find solace in, errrr, literature.' Bollocks!"

"Have you tried reading it?"

James makes a disparaging noise. "Please, Wormtail. You know perfectly well I'm illiterate."

"You are not," Peter scoffs. "You're more literate than anyone I know! Well, that doesn't count Remus. Well, Remus doesn't count. Well, you know what I mean. Remus is a library with a head and two legs."

"And no one notices the head and two legs," James agrees. "I know. I mean, I suppose he was trying, what with giving me a book being like giving me a baby and lending me a book being like lending me a baby, in his world anyway, and even I wouldn't trust me with a baby."

"And you do like your treacle," Peter adds.

"I do, that." James sighs, flinging both arms up into the air. "It's just it seems so *stupid*, it must, to all of you, that I won't stop going *on* and *on*—"

"And *on* and *on*," Peter helps.

"—right, that, *on* and *on* about her. It's just that I fancy her, I *really* fancy her, not her *molecules* or anything silly like that. The whole of her. She's *wicked*. I mean, she's absolutely wicked. I don't think you know what it's like, to talk to a girl who's willing to kiss you afterward, who's just *wicked* when you're talking to her, like — like a *friend*."

"Girls can be friends?" Peter blinks.

"So it's like losing a friend, too. Over something *so incredibly stupid* — it makes me want to tear my hair out."

"You'll get a bald spot," Peter says. "That wouldn't be very attractive."

"No." James gnaws his bottom lip. "I don't want to get a bald spot, my hair's weird enough as it is. Though it looks like she *likes* the bald, what with Kingsley's great big shiny head letting her check her teeth after every meal. Bloody great bald shiny wanker."

"I thought you liked Kingsley."

"*Liked*. Past tense. *Now* I *don't*. *Now* I want to *turn him* into *noodles*."

"Good luck," Peter says. "He probably bites. Through *bone*. Anyway, she's not even dating him."

"They've kissed," James says colorlessly. "I've seen it. I saw it today, actually. Which is a major part of why this, through no fault of anyone's but my own, is the most terrible birthday ever. And I can't even be angry about it because I can't feel my *legs*. Where the hell is Sirius? He should be hearing about this."

"He didn't want to leave the stars," Peter says. "You remember, he got very forceful."

"Right," James breathes. For a moment he just lies there, one brown arm thrown over his chest looking limp and helpless. As Peter stares at him he gets the strange, almost protective urge to put his head on James's stomach. And so

he does. Because he's very high.

"Oof," James groans. "Pete, Christ. Your head's like a lead weight. That can't possibly be the brains. What're you wearing in your hair?"

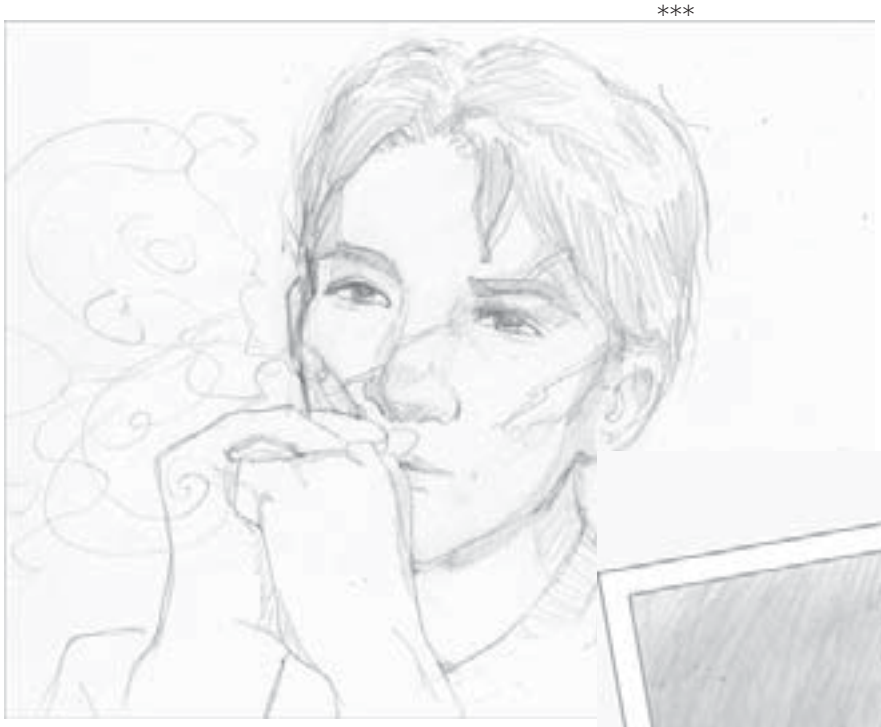
"I used, uh, some of your Sleekeasy. Why? I mean it was just lying around and I wanted to see what I'd look like. But — wait a minute. It's the brains, too!"

"Oof," James repeats. "You're high. That's why you're doing this. Yes?"

"Your stomach is soft like a pillow is soft," Peter sighs.

"Good man, Pete," James says, and pats his head. "Good, heavy-headed man."

***





***

"Have you ever thought...like, if you looked really close up at the sky, you could, like, *see* the stars' *molecules?* Buzzing around, you know? Cos there's...there's all that empty space, but it's not like you can see that. You'd have to stare for a really long time. And maybe you'd have to fly up there to get closer."

"You said that already," Remus says. "Only it was about skin and molecules, not stars. But I appreciate that you're still trying to converse."

"The Gillyweed is gone," Sirius moans. "Gone, gone, gooooone."

"It's better that way," says Remus. "You'd kill off what few brain cells you have left."

Sirius eyes him. "'S…you've…got a metabolism," he says, very astutely. "Dangerous. Unfair. Processes chemicals."

"I should hope so," Remus says. "Who would take care of you lot if I weren't around, being — being metabolistic? Oh God, look, you've got me talking like you."

"You," Sirius says, fixing him with a very serious look and a finger pointed decisively just beyond his right ear, "you are. You. You take care of people too much. No fun."

"I can't help it, it's a werewolf thing," Remus explains. "I mean, not the taking care of people bit, because that's really not a werewolf thing, if we're talking evolution and so on, but the — not being fun. Chemically, anyway."

"You coming," Sirius says vaguely, "to come see me over the summer? What record is this?"

"Beatles," Remus says. He doesn't look up. "Those nancies Evans likes? Those nancies I like, apparently. Well, mostly their later work."

"La la la la la la meaningless," Sirius hums under his breath. "Re-e-mus. Are you going to come? Peter might, and I'll be with James the whole time. You can teach me about grammar and metabolism instead of writing to me about it. What d'you say? Come on."

"I don't know," Remus answers finally. "I don't know, that's — it's hard to say, right now."

"You haven't even asked your parents." Sirius looks darkly at Remus from beneath mussed hair, brow knit in hurt confusion. "We don't just sit around and smoke Gillyweed all day, you know. James' mum is like — well, she makes incredible pies but she doesn't stand for messing about. And James' dad, you remember, with the records! I'd let you talk to him *some* of the time, anyway. Maybe for an hour every two days so we could all be spared the flailing about and the spit when you get excited and things. And I know you, I *know you*, you like pies. Right? She makes all these chocolate cakes. At least, she *will* because I'll give her recipes."

"Sirius," Remus says, "it's not that I don't want to go. I always want to go."

"La la la la la la meaningless," Sirius mutters again, half-tuneless. "I hate not liking the summer. It's the bloody summer. There's no work to do and no classes to be on time for and no Snivellus lurking around every corner — putting *silver* in your *jam*, I might add, and it's hard looking out for you all the time because he's sort of slimy and wriggly, like a snake — and I *hate* not liking it! It's not fair."

"Snakes aren't slimy," Remus says.

"And stars are balls of burning gas and werewolves have metabolisms that work so fast you're still always the smart one while the rest of us are drooling about molecules," Sirius snaps. "Fine. Fine. *Don't* come visit us."

"It's just that I might not be able to," Remus attempts. "It's not that I don't want to *try*."

"If you wanted to, you'd come."

"*You're* not being fair."

"I am always fair. I am justice itself. Scales and well-draped sheet and blindfold and everything."

"Sirius, I told you, I *want* to come—"

"Didn't think you would anyway." Sirius huffs breath out through his nose. "You have a three-month date with a dark room and a small lamp and all your summer books. I understand. I give you full permission. Wank all you like to proper grammar and iambs. Very sexy, iambs. I can understand where you're coming from. Ha! Get it? *Coming* from?"

"I don't have the *bloody* money," Remus hisses. "Would you *shut up* about it?"

"I'll give you the money," Sirius says, with elephantine gracelessness. "Don't be such an arse about it."

"I'm sorry," Remus mutters. "I didn't mean to be short. It's just — I'm not going to take your money. Anyway, even if I was, you don't have any. You're the dethroned heir. It's all very romantic, really."

"I won seven sickles," Sirius says dreamily, "from James, over the Hufflepuff match."

"I can't get to Devonshire on seven sickles," Remus says. "But I'm deeply touched. A sweeping gesture of generosity which, unfortunately—"

"Don't be like that." Sirius wriggles his shoulder-blades into the stones. "Mmf. Summer nights, you know, when it's warm but it's kind of cool so it's like there's no temperature at all? *That's* what I like."

"Be like what? What am I being like?"

"Like you get, right now, and when people do nice things for you, or say anything, you get all — well — you know." Sirius makes a vague, whispery hand gesture, so his arm winds up into the air and then collapses onto the stone. "Ow. All snarky and — smart. Which you are. Smart. Big words. But, d'you know, I don't think we've ever had a real conversation?"

"Sirius, you are so high you couldn't tell a conversation from a giraffe," Remus says. "Come on. I think you should go to bed."

"This is it, see." Sirius throws his arm backwards as if to point an accusing finger but it wobbles to Remus's left for a while and then collapses. "There we have it. Give the man a trophy. It's all witticisms until someone loses an eye."

"You are incoherent," Remus says sharply.

"*You* are like a cabbage," Sirius says. Remus gapes at him. "Like a cabbage, with...leaves on top of more leaves. Except you're like an endlessly regenerating cabbage. Every time someone eats a leaf you get another one. If you ever want to have a conversation with someone, they can't be cabbagey about it. Do you think if someone farted enough they could make their own *star?* It's all gasses, innit?"

"We've had conversations," Remus insists into his chest. "We've had many conversations."

"Name one you didn't correct my use of who and whom in." Remus winces. "Or one that didn't involve you piping up with a fact or a quote or a denial of your participation or any number of your *library* of admon— ammo— *admonishments*, it's bloody hard to talk with this much Gillyweed in you, but you wouldn't know that. You always know your admo from your ammo and you always will."

"We've had conversations," Remus repeats, "that haven't involved—"

"Two," Sirius says. "I counted. I count. Two. In first year. They went like this. 'Hallo, Remus, will you pass the bread.' 'Yes, Sirius, and would you like some milk?' 'Yes, thank you, I would.' That one's my favorite. The other one is a little more confusing because I think — I *think* — I was drunk. End of March. Went like this. 'Hallo, Sirius, are you drunk?' 'Why yes, Monsieur, I do believe I am.' 'Here, have some hot chocolate.' 'Fnrfhgh.'"

"I remember that second one," Remus says. "The 'Fnrfhgh' was where you collapsed in my lap."

"Your lap is soft like a pillow is soft," Sirius points out. "But let's not talk about that right now. We're talking about your inability to communicate."

"*My* inability to communicate?" Remus splutters. "*My* inability? Sirius, you're the one theorizing on the possibility of *farting a star into existence!*"

"Because I was thinking about the possibility of farting a star into existence." Sirius fixes Remus with a reasonable, if not somewhat dilated, look. "And I decided to share my thoughts with you. That's communication."

"That's babbling," Remus says, "actually."

"Nooooo," Sirius protests, "you *think* it's babbling, because you think thoughts are for *thinking*."

"Of course," Remus says. "Thoughts are *not* for thinking. My God, your insight is blinding."

"You think," Sirius struggles on, arching his back to stretch, "you think thoughts are for just *your* thinking. Very selfish really." Swimming into visibility somewhere around his pupils is Remus, but Remus keeps sort of drifting away every time he tries to focus in on him, and everything seems sort of soft and distant, and Sirius absently scratches the inside of his thigh and watches the stars whirl in circles overhead because it is much easier than watching Remus drift off.

"I don't feel the need to share every inane little detail that drifts into my fevered brain, if that's what you mean," Remus says eventually. Sirius rolls over to look at him. It is difficult to quite get him to stay in a reliable field of view so Sirius leans in to see better. His sweater is very green and Sirius tells him so.

"Thank you," Remus says. "Why is your nose in my stomach?"

"I like it. Your sweater, not your stomach. Green is my favorite color. Look, I'm cuddly. You've got your metabolism and I've got my need to be petted, we've all got our — friends should — scratch my back, I'll scratch yours, sort of thing."

"You called me a cabbage."

"In French that's a very common endearment," Sirius says knowledgeably. "*Mon p'tit chou* and all that."

"Did your governess call you a cabbage? Is this a sort of childhood trauma thing?"

"No, my governess called me *son enfant satanique*. It could have been a cabbagey kind of *satanique*, I suppose. Do you speak French?"

"Not very well." That short, self-deprecating laugh. "I tried to, so I could read Voltaire and that, but it got all mixed up with the German in my head and then I got..." Sirius has already forgotten what they were talking about and considers the thing closest to his eye: rocks. People build things out of rocks. Towers and that sort of thing. But a rock never says, 'I should like to be part of a tower,' does it? No. It's just a rock. Rocks can't talk. How many rocks would have liked to be something else, like a huge statue of Buddha, or a little...something else made of rock? Or nothing at all, maybe just a rock on a riverbank or something, gathering mud. Maybe it's no better than *slavery*.

He does not realize that he has said any of this aloud until Remus says, "Er. Maybe?"

"That might have been babbling," Sirius admits. "But it was also charming and endearing and you liked it."

"But I could never do it," Remus says. "That's not what I do."

"So." Sirius rolls against Remus' legs, shifting to peer up at him. "Were there any grammatical errors in my thoughts on rocks?"

"I wasn't paying attention to the grammar; I was too busy being horrified, in general, at the basic premise." Remus smiles fondly. "It was a very philosophical moment for you, Sirius. It's too bad you won't remember any of it."

"I'm trying to talk to you," Sirius insists.

"I could have sworn you were trying to chew my sweater." Remus pats his head. "Do you like behind your ears? Scratching? Or just sort of — you know. Slow motions."

"This is my happy place," Sirius sighs. Remus runs his fingers over his scalp, idle motions, feeling stupid and un-boy's-club inside. He's always felt stupid and un-boy's-club, especially in the face of Sirius Black, who might as well be a founding father of The Boy's Club dynamic, and James Potter, who might as well be the very first vice-president, and Peter Pettigrew, who might as well wear a Boy's Club sign around his Boy's Club neck. Remus doesn't always mean to correct Sirius' grammar — it's a losing battle, in any case — but sometimes it just comes out. Like frogs or pearls from a fairytale. Remus shakes his head. "You should think out loud," Sirius suggests. "Do you know that? Then maybe one day your brain won't explode, and I think you'd like that. Not making a mess for the house elves to clean up. Not getting your knickers dirty. Not getting any brain on your hair."

"I don't always *mean* to correct your grammar," Remus says, sheepishly. "Your grammar is actually very good. Better than you allow it to be, often, and so I'm always trying to bring out the little Lord Fauntleroy in you. It's silly, really."

Sirius looks serious for a moment. "Well, all right. That makes sense. But what are your thoughts on rocks?"

"They're rocks," Remus replies. "They don't feel anything. They are perhaps the most inert things on the planet. They don't care."

Sirius pets a rock next to his head. "It's all right, baby. He doesn't mean it. He's just got a Remembrall up his arse."

"I *do not!*" Remus protests.

"I'm sorry," Sirius says. "He hasn't. I didn't mean a word. Don't stop. My ears get lonely." He grabs Remus's wrist and tugs it back to his head, staring at Remus — or, at least, sort of at Remus — with huge, reproachful eyes. "You can't start and then stop. Do right at the back of my neck."

"Here?" Remus attempts, rather awkwardly skritching just at the place where Sirius's spine ends, just under the loose collar of his shirt. Sirius makes a low, pleased noise deep down in his throat and rolls his head back on his shoulders, digging his skin against Remus's fingers.

"Mmf. Yeah. It's not as good as a girl, because you haven't got nails, but just...put your back into it. Right...oh."

"This is alarming," Remus says, because it is. Sirius's eyes are lidded and dark, a little half-smile on his face and his body heavy with narcotic-induced relaxation. "I know you too well. We'll have tonight, and then you'll never Floo me."

"Just don't stop," Sirius moans in exasperation, and butts his head into Remus's diaphragm. "Look, just do it like giving someone a shampoo."

"I've never shampooed anyone," Remus mumbles, but gamely tries anyway. Sirius fairly melts.

"Oh God. You have the most enormous hands. Freakishly enormous. Does that ever...mm, yeah. You are a god, Moony, a god among men. Oh, I love drugs; I want to live in an opium den. An opium den with scalp massages. Mmm. Ohh, right there. Yes."

"I feel I ought to be wearing gloves," Remus says. "Who knows what other unprofessional skritchers you've gotten your head rubs from?"

"Nobody ever rubs my head," Sirius sighs. "Well, not this hea—"

"That's enough." Remus runs his thumb underneath the back of Sirius' ear. "Opium dens don't have scalp massages."

"I'll invent the one that does," Sirius groans. "Necessity being the father of head rubs."

"You were so close," Remus says. "*So* close."

"Is that what you're thinking right now? 'Oh, look at silly Schmirius Schmack, had too much Gillyweed and now all he wants in his schmilly little schmife is a head rub and he's happy?' Were you thinking it in that voice, too, because I thought that was a *stunning* imitation of your dulcet reprobation." Sirius makes a grumbly sound deep in his throat. "Well you can think it all you like — just don't stop."

"I'm not stopping. I'm not thinking that and I don't *sound* like that and don't mock the hand that skritches you. You *are* out of it."

"Stop looking so fond of me, then, I'll get the wrong idea." Sirius presses into Remus' leg, nosing his hip. "This is good. Oh, yes. This is *very* good."

"It's positively pornographic," Remus mumbles, "that's what it is."

"You're such a prude," Sirius murmurs. "We're both fully clothed and no one is going to wake up with a bun in the oven. Unless there are buns at breakfast in which case, the house elves will deal with it, not you."

"Don't think I won't eat the buns," Remus says. "Don't think I won't eat *your* buns, for this."

"Naughty," Sirius growls. "And God, your fingers. Do you have any idea how — how *long* your fingers are? And *agile?* The rocks forgive you. I forgive you. What are you thinking now?"

"Your hair feels nicer than it looks," Remus says.

"It's not the only part that does," Sirius leers, and then reconsiders. "Actually, I think I mostly look pretty nice, too. What do you mean, nicer than it looks? Does it look bad?"

"I refuse to discuss this with you," Remus says.

"No, we're practicing. You're saying what you think, as you think it. It's practice. So go on. To the left — oh. Yes."

"Do you mean," Remus starts, adjusting his fingers, "do you mean that you want me to go on one of those insane stream-of-consciousness monologues, like you do, where you completely refuse to filter out things that don't make sense, or are completely unrelated, or are deeply, deeply wrong—"

"Yes," Sirius says serenely. "That's exactly what I mean. So...*go*."

"I can't just...*go*."

"Why not? You're having thoughts, aren't you?" Sirius reaches up to curl Remus's tie around his fingers and tug absently on it. Remus makes a strangled noise and yanks it away.

"All right. I'm thinking...why did I leave my tie on, when a) it's very hot and very late, so it's either too late or too early to be dressed and b) I know Sirius Black cannot keep his hands off of brightly colored objects when he becomes affected by substances in any way, because he has no attention span and the self-control of a mad toddler?"

"...it's because you're a prefect, I suspect. Propriety at all times. Ties."

"And — all right. I'm thinking..I'm thinking about — I'm thinking about *how stupid this is*, Sirius, I'm sorry, I can't help it, it can't be done. I did try."

Sirius shrugs, so the points on his shoulderblades dig rather painfully into Remus's thigh. "You made an effort. It's no good. You're cabbage through and through."

Remus considers this. He considers Sirius, sprawled boneless across his lap, with his heather-wild hair tangled in Remus's fingers and that look of dopey contentment on his face; he considers Sirius' very poor analogies and his random grammar and his chronic verbal diarrhea and his tendency to trample mindlessly on delicate situations.

"I'm thinking about records," he says at length. Sirius stills for a moment under his fingers, and then relaxes again, arching like a cat into Remus's touch. "I'm thinking about...this song." The record, thoughtfully, has changed itself and is spinning back out the second disc: *Listen to the pretty sound of music as she flies*. "My dad got me this album for my...tenth, I guess. Sixty-eight, it came out? And it was used when he got it. It wasn't really for me. He knows all the lyrics. And it was the same year they got me the Victrola, so I'd already got my big present."

For Sirius's tenth birthday he got a purebred black Arabian and a three hundred-year-old sword with burning rubies set into the hilt; the fencing tutor was considered an accessory. He remembers these things — the horse was called Altair until Regulus rode it into madness and it had to be put down. He remembers his mother calling him in to breakfast on this day, and his governess buttoning him into his new suit. He remembers sitting at the head of the table for the first time as the Heir, kicking his too-short legs against the chair, and the cold press of his father's lips on his forehead.

"You got a record for your tenth birthday?" Sirius says. He hopes he hasn't said everything he was thinking out loud this time, as well, but Remus' tight-browed look, foreign and far-off, suggests he hasn't. Either that or he did, but Remus wasn't listening.

"Two records. The White Album — it's two records. In one. More expensive. I was glad, because dad loved it and mum thought it was all right, and it wasn't swing but it worked for all of us. It was useful. It was practical. It was put to good use. If you sat between the two speakers in the living room during Back in the USSR, it sounded like the airplane at the beginning was flying right over you, which is a sort of Muggle magic. What did you get for your tenth birthday, a house?"

"That's not fair again."

"I'm sorry. A third world country?"

"That was mum's first idea," Sirius mutters. "But then they decided on a sword which I *really liked* but I don't have it anymore because I went off to, you know, Hogwarts and got sorted into Gryffindor and ruined all their lives and oh, by the by, I hate them, pureblooded nutters."

"Sirius," Remus says. "*You're* a pureblooded nutter."

"But not by choice," Sirius replies. "They're pureblooded nutters by choice; I'm pureblooded nutter by accident. There's a great big difference."

"Have you ever sat between the speakers and listened to the plane fly overhead?" Remus asks, sensing the delicacy of the topic and knowing from the storm clouds in Sirius' eyes he's gone too far. "It's really nice. Especially if you're alone, and the record is just *slightly* scratchy from use. It sounds real, but then again it doesn't. But it does go overhead."

"I love Gillyweed," Sirius says. "I think your werewolf metabolism isn't all you promised me it would be, pudding."

"I'm not talking about farting out stars or rocks having feelings," Remus protests. "I'm talking about experiences in my life that meant something."

"That's what you think about?" Sirius reaches behind his head, picks Remus' hand up, and moves it to a lonelier spot. "That — that right there — *perfect*. Mmngh. What were you saying? Oh right. Moments. Life. Meaning. Most people don't think about that stuff, Remus."

"No, they don't. It's why I keep my mouth shut most of the time. That, and I enjoy your monologues on the cabbage, and your tangents about molecules, and your ability to speak for twelve minutes without pause about the virtues of a really good banana." Remus scrunches the hair beneath his fingers and smoothes it out, glad his nails are blunt and his fingers graceful under pressure.

"Do you play the piano?" Sirius asks. "The saxophone? The tuba? These are a musician's hands, my friend. You have *magic fingers*."

"I didn't mean to joke," Remus says. "About what you got, for your birthday. You got a pony though, didn't you."

"Regulus killed Altair," Sirius sniffs. "And this is why I *don't* relive my moments, life, meaning constantly. Because then I would kill my brother."

"Was it a nice pony?" Remus inquires, trying to be helpful. "Was it fluffy?"

"He was black." Sirius yawns hugely and nestles himself a little deeper against Remus's body. "He bit people. He was my best friend, which is depressing. When I first got him I tried to feed him an apple and he went for the jugular."

"He didn't like apples?"

"He liked *meat*," Sirius says, with some distant pride. "You should take up the tuba, is what you should do, if you don't play it now. Or the accordion. You can't spend your whole life making moments and saving them up for later, can you? You'd go mad. You have to just be in the moment and not be thinking about it. The cabbage, or the banana, that's the moment as it's going on. Meaningful experiences with record players and socioeconomic discrepancy — well, that's incipient madness. How many big words did I just use?"

"Do you count 'meaningful?"'

"Socioeconomic. Incipient. I can't use words like that when I'm *sober*." Sirius coughs. His voice sounds scratchy and dark and he's pretty sure that when he wakes up his throat will be in terrible pain. "Which is your favorite song?"

"I can't pick one," Remus says.

"Cabbagey answer," Sirius says. "Disqualified! Look, do I have to glue your hands to my head, or what? Can you make circles, like, with your thumbs? Right — sweet God. Right like that..."

"I can't pick one. Look, you go on about me trying to make moments, right? Well, I don't even like moments. I like the...thing as a whole, I suppose. I like these two records together. The songs are all right, all of them, by themselves. But I like the two records. I like playing them from both sides in my yard while my father sings 'Sexy Sadie' to my mum very off-key and there's an airplane overhead. That isn't a moment, that's...what it's like. The whole picture. If I picked one song I'd have to break it down, and then I'd miss the whole point." Sirius, for once, says nothing. "I played the violin for three years, if you want to know. Very poorly." There is a peaceful, though bizarre, silence from his lap. "Sirius?" Remus looks down in surprise, and Sirius lets out an enormous snore and flops onto his stomach, nuzzling his face into Remus' leg as he does so.

"Hroooooghnh," Sirius snores.

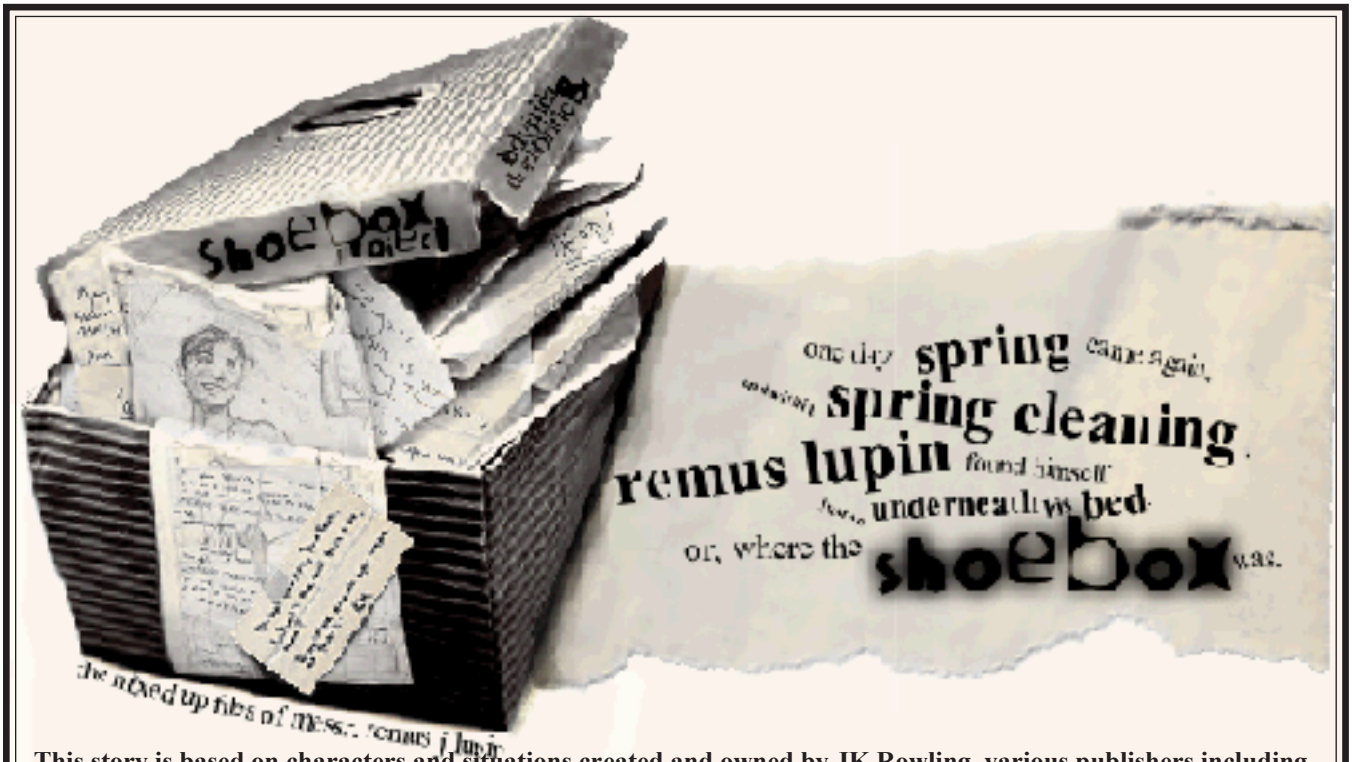
"I like to remember everything," Remus says, very quietly, so as not to wake him. "As it was. Because moments by themselves aren't enough; they're just — they're like photographs. They move a little, they wave, but they aren't everything. You can look back on a moment and say 'In that moment I was happy' or, more often than not, 'In that moment I was uncomfortable' or 'In that moment I was sad' or 'In that moment we were all berks' but you can look back on *everything* and you think, 'That was good.' Because when all the moments come together, when all the songs meet up with one another, you get something whole and complete and wonderful, people you loved and people you hated and a fondness for them you may not be able to recapture but everything you remember about them being somehow more than they really were, because that's what remembering everything does. When I'm old, I think, I'll look back on this and I won't remember 'That time Sirius thought, if he lit a fart on fire, he could make a star come out of his arse' but I'll probably remember the stars themselves. I won't think 'He nearly choked me when he grabbed onto my tie' but I will think about the stupid doggy noises you're making, even right now, even while you're sleeping. It probably means remembering *everything* and not jumping from moment to moment like life is a game of leap-frog and should be taken experience to experience like lily-pads is foolish, because I won't remember you're often a berk and James is often a berk and Peter can be impressively inane and I am such a wet-blanket with such a large nose it's a miracle you don't hate me. I'll just remember that I talked for five minutes to a friend who was already sleeping and I was happy anyway." Remus pauses, sighs, and thumbs the side of Sirius' jaw, not noticing the path of his fingers. "You're not going to remember any of this. Which is probably good since this, my friend, is definitely babble. I hate Gillyweed. It makes you think everything is profound when, in reality, you're talking to yourself and no one else can translate the language that is You."

"Huuuuroooooghnh," Sirius agrees.

"And you can fall asleep *anywhere*," Remus huffs. "That's *infuriating*."

A long, heavy-breathed, almost-silence.

"Goodnight," Remus says, and closes his eyes. The stars twinkle out — or, at least, out of the moment.



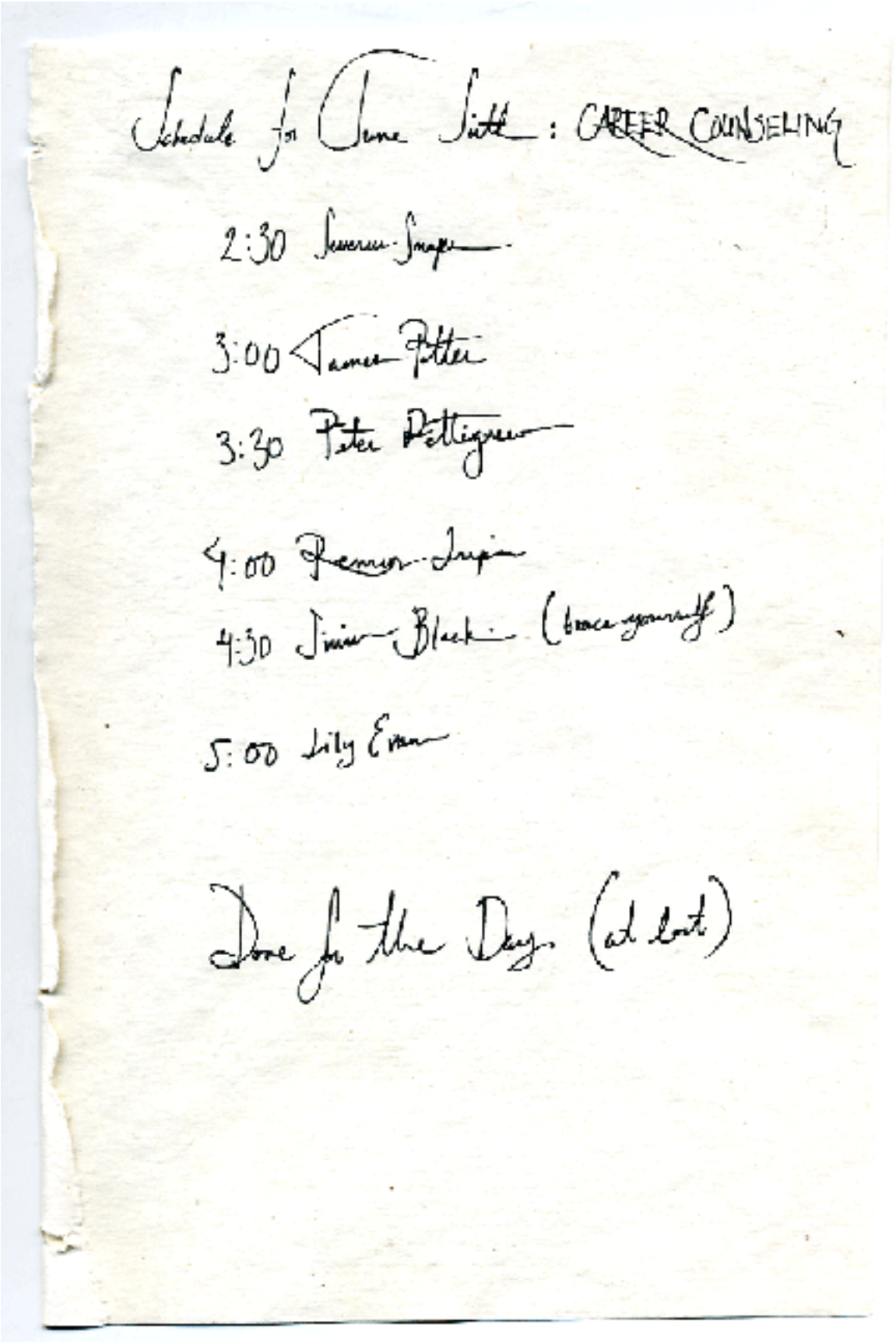
This story is based on characters and situations created and owned by JK Rowling, various publishers including but not limited to Bloomsbury Books, Scholastic Books and Raincoast Books, and Warner Bros., Inc. No money is being made and no copyright or trademark infringement is intended.

***The Shoebox Project* by LadyJaida and Dorkorific**

http://www.livejournal.com/community/shoebox_project

Part Twelve: June, 1976

Career Counselling, End of Year Photographs Both Official and Un-Official, One Game of Poker, and a Goodbye.


Schedule for June Sixth: CAREER COUNSELING

2:30 Severen Snape

3:00 James Potter

3:30 Peter Pettigrew

4:00 Remus Lupin

4:30 Sirius Black (trace yourself)

5:00 Lily Evans

Done for the Day (at last)

James lingers outside McGonagall's door, drumming his fingers nervously against the wall. He's been out here for fifteen minutes — he was five minutes late when he arrived, and every time he's knocked since it's been met with an infuriating "Just a moment, Mr. Potter, if you please!" He's starting to think that maybe he's somewhat resentful that someone is getting career counseling during his scheduled time, and not just because he'd really rather be back at the common room with Sirius, working on the universal tracking spell for their Map. As he's considering his options — "just leave" is starting to look like the best choice — the door suddenly flies open, revealing a very dark-looking Severus Snape. James twitches away automatically.

"Potions, indeed," he snarls under his breath, and barely even seems to notice James as he stalks away, muttering something about *stupid Gryffindor hags don't know what she's talking about better in Defense than those gits in* her *house but we'll see who gets advised to do that, huh…*

"You may come in, Mr. Potter," comes McGonagall's voice, sounding extremely weary.

James pokes his head around the door, feeling strangely as if he's entering a lion's den unarmed. This is the last month of his sixth year. In only four months' time, he's going to be top dog at Hogwarts, a promising Seventh Year with all the world at his feet and all the First Years there, too, giving his shoes a nice spit-shine. It doesn't serve that the very idea of meeting with McGonagall about his future — and really, what can old McGoogles know about *his* future, to begin with — makes him so nervous. Nothing should make him so nervous. He's James Potter. He's brilliant. "That looked like it was fun," he says. "Bet you he doesn't like to be told what to do or when to — right, no commentary on other students, closing my mouth now, sitting down." At McGonagall's tight-lipped expression of extreme disapproval James feels the little happy man inside his stomach roll over and die. "Sorry," he mumbles into his chest. "Snotmyplacewe'reclearonthat."

"Excellent, Mr. Potter," McGonagall says. "You *are* a fast learner. I'm almost proud."

James coughs.

McGonagall says nothing.

James coughs again.

McGonagall lifts one slim, murderous brow.

"So," James says. "How's the family?"

"Mr. Potter, I was hoping you of all people might have something to say for yourself." James blinks. "About what *you* see yourself doing in a year's time?" James stares. "Careers," McGonagall sighs. "Your preference of profession?"

"*Oh*," James says, "*oh*, that, *right*. Well. Wait. You want to know what *I* want?"

"Not particularly, Mr. Potter." McGonagall makes a bridge with her fingers and regards James over the square rims of her eyeglasses. "However, my profession demands that I ask you regardless. Have you any idea what you would like to spend the rest of your life doing? Other than committing minor criminal acts?"

"Er," James says. He takes off his glasses and polishes them quickly on his shirt, to take up time, because really he probably should have thought about this for at least two minutes beforehand and all of a sudden "I want to do stunt flying" sounds even stupider than usual. "Well. I dunno. Something — exciting, I suppose?"

McGonagall sighs. "Something…exciting. Thank you, Mr. Potter, that's very helpful."

Sometimes she really reminds him of Lily, in a weird, disturbing and kind of maybe a little bit sexy way. "I — I'd like

to do something...a bit athletic. That's what I'm good at."

"You are good at a great many things, Mr. Potter; which is no indication that you should choose any one of them as a future career. I have here your marks from the past six years — obviously the results of this year's examinations are yet to arrive — and they are really exceptionally high, as I know all too well you are aware. They clearly indicate weaknesses, however, in some fairly major areas: basic concentration, real hard work under pressure, and so on. Your Herbology, for example—"

"It's just that plants take so long to *do* anything," James mutters.

"Then nothing to do with 'plants,' I suppose," McGonagall says. She checks something off on a roll of parchment in front of her, which James leans forward to have a look at. "And this is nothing to do with *you*. Well — it is, of course, *everything* to do with you, but not for your eyes just yet. I have written down 'No plants' and 'Something exciting,' and I promise you, that *is* all. Your head," she explains, "looked as if it were about to burst. I felt it prudent to tell you exactly what was written here as my office has only just been cleaned."

James gives her a squinty look. It's possible, if Lily weren't so intrinsically a redhead, she would grow up to be this. Strangely appealing. He chokes. "Well, all right, so you want specifics."

"Desperately," McGonagall says. The wry note in her tone is far from hidden.

James feels like a promising radish: just as talented, just as useful, and just as coherent. "I hadn't actually thought about it, you know. Not really."

"This meeting is for preparation," McGonagall explains. "I am doing my best to be patient with all of you, because the vast majority of you haven't actually thought about it, you know, not really."

"It's just that a year's a really long time," James mumbles.

"Hm," McGonagall says. "A really long time that passes very quickly. Your future *is* something to consider, however hard that may be for all of you. I hate to be the harbinger of schedules and planning and adult comprehension, Mr. Potter, but someone must make you realize Hogwarts isn't all there is."

"Well," James scoffs, "I knew *that*." Under McGonagall's terrifying stare he blanches. "I just didn't *know* it," he adds, quieting. "You know."

"Unfortunately I do not," McGonagall says. "But perhaps you can enlighten me."

James shrugs uncomfortably. "It's just — I know it isn't, right? But I sort of thought I could — I could make it be. It's hard to think of the world being any other way. My parents talk about Hogwarts like their lives pretty much ended there, you know? I keep thinking — well, even if it doesn't last forever, it's been my life. Since I was eleven. I know it won't be forever, but I can't imagine what will happen afterwards." He's just talking and he can't make his mouth stop moving and it's horrible and in a panic he jabs a quill into his thigh just to make himself shut up *please*.

"Hmm," McGonagall says.

"Yes," James says.

"What NEWT-levels are you signed up for, next year?"

"Transfiguration, obviously," James answers quickly, relieved to be on less philosophical grounds. "Defense. Er. Potions. Charms. And, er, Arithmancy."

"And of those, which can you see pursuing to a productive end?"

"Er?" James says.

McGonagall sighs again. "I can see," she says, "that this is trying for you. For all of you. But Hogwarts is a *school*, Mr. Potter, and, unless you are planning on being a professor — which I do *not* suggest, for many reasons, the least of which being I cannot imagine considering you a coworker — it is *not* a way of life." There is a kindly glint in her tight, wise face. James figures she's offering him something in the way of advice, but the differences between them are making it hard to parse.

"So what you're saying is," James says, inadvertently, prompting her on.

"What I'm saying is soon enough, Mr. Potter, you are going to have to start thinking for yourself. You are very *good* at very *many* things, but the question here is not *at what do you excel* but rather *what do you wish to spend the rest of your life perfecting*? Not a matter of talent, but a matter of preference. Do you understand, or must I find another way of phrasing my request?"

"I like Transfiguration," James blurts out. "*And* I'm really good at it."

"Excellent," McGonagall says. "*Now*, I think, we might actually be getting somewhere."

"Well, you know," James says, comforted by his sudden success, "I've always fancied saving the world."

"Mr. Potter," McGonagall warns.

"Not even just a little bit?" James fixes her with his Potter Eyes and some extra Potter Charm. It's fool proof, no matter what Remus says about it looking as though he has a tic.

"I'm not buying it, Mr. Potter," McGonagall says. "You look as if you've a tic."

"Those are just my long lashes," James protests. "Fluttering charmingly at you."

"I hear saving the world doesn't pay very well these days." McGonagall rubs the bridge of her nose, beneath her spectacles, and then settles them back down neatly in place. "I do believe you aren't being serious."

"But I am," James insists. "And don't you think it's very kind of me? To offer the world my services?"

"And what," McGonagall asks, "might those be?"

"Charm," James says, very seriously, warming to his subject. "Good looks. My not-inconsiderable talent for just about everything. I should very much like to be a superhero."

"Why don't you start with honing your powers of sanity, and we'll go from there?" McGonagall murmurs, but she's smiling.

"I think you'd like me in a rubber costume," James says. He winks.

McGonagall twitches involuntarily and then says, loudly, "Have you ever considered working with the Ministry?"

James narrows his eyes. "That's one of those jobs you have to wear a suit for." He imagines himself, wild hair, thicker glasses, tweed dress robes, or something with pinstripes, and a tie, and a bit of a belly, years from now, in an office. He balks. He feels a little ill. He shakes his head, emphatic, resounding no's. "The *Ministry?* Do I look like a *Ministry* man, to you?"

"Well," McGonagall attempts, "there is always the ever-popular Cursebreaker. It is like being a superhero, I suppose, though I don't presume to understand the workings of the male mind when it is stuck so persistently in the first year. The only difference is that, I believe, instead of fighting supervillains you must put your mind and your skills to the test every day on the job. However, that *is* a Ministry funded job — so you see, Mr. Potter, the Ministry has a wealth of options available suitable to all lifestyles. Even that," she finishes, "of a superhero."

"Wow," James says. "*Cursebreaker*. It even *sounds* cool."

"And it requires no rubber whatsoever," McGonagall adds. "Though you will have to start paying attention in History of Magic."

"Well, these are the sacrifices every hero has to make," James says, trying to look noble. McGonagall twitches again. "Do you think I'd be suited to it, Professor? Despite the lack of form-fitting rubber?"

McGonagall's eyes say, clearer than words, that the only thing she thinks James is suited for is a prison cell. "Only time will tell, Mr. Potter, but you should certainly keep it in mind."

"Well." James shrugs. "All right." It is all right. It's pretty cool, cursebreaking, mummies and that, but James has something else in mind, and always has, secretly, beneath even the one about stunt flying; and if he's got the chance, then by God he's going to find out.

Or maybe he'll just sit here, trying to pretend not to be nervous. Either way.

"Very well," McGonagall says. She shuffles her papers meaningfully, no doubt, James thinks, taunting him with their secrets. They stare at each other for a few moments. "Is there something—" McGonagall starts, wearily, but James can't contain himself.

"Do you think I could be an Auror?" he bursts in. He's too excited to remember to look sheepish afterwards.

"Do you think you could handle arresting Mr. Black for petty larceny?" McGonagall counters.

James grins. "Only time will tell."

"Well." McGonagall smiles a thin smile and makes a few meaningful notes. "All right."

"Is that it?" James leads forward. "Aren't there any invasive tests? Aren't you going to slice my head open, look inside, discover the greatness within, nominate me as our future ruler of the universe?"

"I will tell the public of your penchant for form-fitting rubber," McGonagall says. "Next!"

***

"How is it, then?" Peter asks as James stumbles out into the light of midday, passing a hand over his bleary eyes.

"Imagine this," James says. "You're sitting in a room for a half an hour talking about life with McGonagall."

"But that's what it is," Peter whispers.

"Right," James says. "*Exactly.*"

Peter considers this for a moment, and then goes very white.

"I don't suppose Sirius would like to trade times—"

"Doubtful," James says dryly. "He's still got to shave, do his hair, and nick some cologne, and I don't think he's even got a proper bouquet together yet."

"Help!" Peter whimpers.

***

"What did James say?" is the first thing Peter asks. McGonagall stares at him. He is pretty sure McGonagall does not like him, and to tell the whole truth he is not fond of her; she is not only terrifying, but impatient and quick to tell him off, and whenever she sees him getting help from someone she gives him a look like he's cheating — which he *isn't!* — and anyway he is arse at Transfigurations. If only Professor Kettleburn were doing the counseling, he might not be so nervous.

"My conversation with Mr. Potter is really of no import to your future," McGonagall says coldly. "May I ask whether you have considered any future careers for *yourself?*"

Peter looks at her sideways. "Er," he says. "Is this a trick question?"

"No." McGonagall looks down at him over the length of her pointy McGonagall nose into the depths of his pointy Peter soul. He imagines her fingers reaching into him, prodding at his innermost thoughts like jelly, and pulling back out again with a look of extreme distaste. *Mr. Pettigrew, your innermost thoughts have left a mess on my nails.* He laughs. "Is this funny, Mr. Pettigrew? Do you find the reality of your future life *humorous?*"

"No," Peter says, very quickly. "No, I find that I am very serious about it." There are times when you have to contradict yourself, Peter figures, because there are no times when you *can* explain, to McGonagall of all people, that what you find funny is actually the look of displeasure on her face at fondling little boy souls. It even sounds bad in his head. "Very, very serious," he repeats, "very—"

"Very serious, yes," McGonagall says. "There's no need to repeat it so often. There's such a thing as protesting too much."

"Er," Peter says. "All right?"

"I take it," McGonagall continues, "you have given no thought to a future career."

"My dad paints houses," Peter says helpfully. "My mum is a homemaker."

"And which one of those," McGonagall says, "would *you* like to be?"

"Well, I can't really clean," Peter says.

McGonagall looks at him as if he is something nasty pinned on a page. "Mr. Pettigrew, I have here your schedule for next year, which indicates that you are taking only two NEWT-level classes. That will raise you, of course, to a grand total of...three NEWT-levels. Can you see yourself involved in any of those three fields in future?"

"I like...Charms," Peter says, carefully. "Not big ones, but...I like some charms."

McGonagall tightens her lips. She looks, Peter thinks, like she's just fondled someone's soul right into her mouth and found that it tastes like soap. "Your marks with Professor Flitwick are acceptable, at best."

Well, it's true, but most of Peter's marks are acceptable at best and he's still got to have a *job.* "Er, yes?"

"Usually we would attempt to concentrate on a subject in which you have shown proficiency." McGonagall's eyes over

her glasses burn right into Peter's skull. He flinches. "What I appear to have here is a list of subjects in which James Potter, Sirius Black and Remus Lupin have proficiency, and a record of the degree of success with which they have transferred their knowledge to you. Am I accurate in this, Mr. Pettigrew?"

"I'm not as arse in Charms," Peter says doggedly. "And...I like..." He searches frantically through his arsenal of Things That Are Fun: watching Quidditch, sleeping, mucking about with the Marauders. None of them, probably, would stop McGonagall from *devouring his soul*. "I like cooking," he says finally. "Mostly toast," he adds after a moment, honesty being the best policy.

"Well," McGonagall says. "Perhaps you will be an entrepreneur."

"Really?" Peter asks. "Do you think so? What does that entail?"

"Oh, certainly, Mr. Pettigrew," McGonagall assures him. "You can start a business based upon the fine art of toasting."

"I get it," Peter says. "You're having me on."

"Excellent deduction, yes," McGonagall murmurs. She purses her lips up so tight Peter thinks for a second they might disappear into her face. It has to mean something. Peter has never been good at reading people but he thinks, or rather knows but wishes he didn't, that McGonagall would rather be having this conversation with some form of lint. He feels like some form of lint. He's not James Potter or Sirius Black or Remus Lupin, and what does that leave in his world? That leaves lint. Drab, dull, gray-brown, wilting lint.

Peter sinks down in his chair. "I could cook in a chain restaurant," he suggests. "White Cauldron is very promising and they make excellent mince and the buns are really, uhm, fresh."

McGonagall scratches something onto the parchment in front of her. "You have high aspirations, Mr. Pettigrew. It is so refreshing to see a young man determined upon pushing himself to his farthest limits."

"I don't really know what I'm good at," Peter says. "Er. I don't really think I'm good at anything."

"Think, Mr. Pettigrew," McGonagall urges him. "*Think*."

Peter thinks. He closes his eyes and tries not to feel like a lump on McGonagall's uncomfortable chair. He gets distracted for a minute remembering her I-Smell-Something-Terrible face, and almost laughs again, but manages to stop himself. He gets distracted again by last weeks Quidditch match which was, of course, *amazing*, and Sirius and James in it were *amazing*, and even Remus got excited about it. Wow, that was a good match. He opens his left eye after a long pause, hoping McGonagall will have gotten bored and left, or at least that the scary burning sensation he feels when she looks straight into his eyeballs will have faded. No such luck. "Toast," he says finally.

"You're good at toast." McGonagall sighs. "I am *so* sorry. This must be painful."

Peter considers saying, *Only your eyes*. He doesn't. "Er," he says instead. "Well, we'll figure something out."

"Certainly," McGonagall agrees.

Your eyeballs are hurting my face. "Er," Peter says again. "So. What's the plan?"

McGonagall rubs at her temple with two fingers. When she looks up again, she looks slightly kinder, although that might also be that she is staring above Peter's head instead of inside it. "Mr. Pettigrew, I think your best plan of action is to make a greater effort to rely on your own resources, rather than the goodness and ability of others. Develop skills

that you have, rather than imitating skills you do not. I really believe that you have the capability, but I doubt you have ever even attempted to exercise it. Over the next year, I should like to see you try. Do you understand me?"

"Yes," says Peter, painfully relieved. "Yes! Righto. Can do. Well then, we're done! Shall I—"

"In terms of your classes," McGonagall continues, mercilessly, "I think, since you have said that you enjoy Charms, you should, as you have indicated, pursue advanced work in that field."

"Good. All right. What about the toast?" Peter says.

"Try, Mr. Pettigrew," McGonagall says, still staring fixedly at the ceiling. It is very difficult not to turn around and check whether there are holes in it. Peter fidgets and sits on his fingers. "Please: try."

I'm going to say yes now because I'm afraid of you. "Sounds like a good plan," Peter says. He gives her two thumbs up, very enthusiastically, and nearly trips over the chair trying to get out of it. He hopes his smile isn't as scary as it feels. "I like this plan, Professor McGonagall. Charms it is. No toast. Except on weekends with breakfast because that has nothing to do with career counseling and my future and just with my breakfast on weekends. I don't know what I'm talking about."

"That makes two of us," McGonagall says. "Good day."

***

"Are you all right?" Remus asks. How can he look so calm, Peter wonders, so calm and unperturbed? He's about to be fed, alive, to a giant McGonagall-faced beast of prey and he's brought *notes*?

"When she eats you she'll probably start with the feet," Peter says shakily, "so you'll have time to apologize for the taste as you're going down."

"I can't imagine it's that bad," Remus says. He doesn't look so sure.

"Next!" McGonagall's voice calls from within. "Mr. Lupin! Stop talking to Mr. Pettigrew about my frightening expressions or you *will be late!*"

"I think I put her in a bad mood," Peter says. "I'm really, really sorry. I'll miss you, mate."

"Thanks," Remus murmurs. He takes a deep breath, reminds himself that McGonagall is generally indifferent towards him, and gingerly enters.

McGonagall is at her desk, resting her head in her hands. She looks like a broken woman. At the sound of Remus carefully latching the door behind him, she looks up and raises her eyebrows expectantly.

"Er," Remus says, approaching the chair rather awkwardly, and then hesitating. "Should I...?"

"You may be seated, Mr. Lupin, unless you would prefer to hover nervously."

"No, thank you, I'll sit," Remus says, and does.

"Let me see." McGonagall regards a sheet in front of her, and then looks back up at Remus, quirking an eyebrow. "Your list, I am assuming, will have Librarian, Researcher, and Professor on it, in that order. And you are, yes, the only boy with a list. Congratulations."

Possible Career Choices

1. Librarian *
2. Researcher
3. Professor

*Alternate choice being historian – perhaps more challenging.

1. pros
- books
- all the time books

cons
- people
- money?
- Sirius will make fun of me

2. pros
- research
- books

cons
- money?
- Sirius will make fun of me

3. pros
- books
- study
- I like school

cons
- Sirius will spend his whole life making fun of me.

What about historian work? Is that financially stable? Ask Professor McGonagall!

Remus glances at his notes, goes beet-red, opens his mouth and then closes it again. "It's not so much a *list*," he starts, weakly. "More, er, a few notes on—"

"The pros and cons you have written out are no doubt more than sufficient for these purposes," says McGonagall, who is either trying very hard not to laugh or not to cry. "I must say, however, that the work of a librarian entails rather too little practical application of skill to truly play to your abilities."

"I like libraries," Remus says. He doesn't look up. "There was a fourth choice, a stand-in for librarian, actually; it was 'historian' because I rather liked the idea but it didn't seem fiscally productive or even stable, and really, who's hiring historians these days, it's more sensible to be a professor, and researcher was rather too close to historian in any case. If you'd like to see the pros and cons — well, just don't tell anyone I made a list?" He meets McGonagall's eyes at last, feeling ridiculously small. She has that effect on people. He feels his innards shrivel under her contemplative gaze. It's not that he thinks she's angry — it's more that he doesn't know what she thinks. There are worse things than angry. For example: there's scorn, which no doubt he deserves for being the only boy to come to her prepared. What was he thinking? It isn't normal. He's a Sixth Year, he's male, he's a *Gryffindor*, and he made a list? "I should have brought *crumpets* with me, too," he mumbles. "That would have been *lovely*, don't you think?"

Silence descends.

Remus' reproductive organs run for cover.

"Er," he says.

And then McGonagall does something truly terrifying.

She throws back her head, makes a strangled sound, and begins to laugh.

"Thank you, Mr. Lupin," she says, at last getting hold of herself. "For being a sorely needed breath of fresh air. I would regale you with the stories of eager, fresh-faced, adolescent boys descending upon me with dreams of the toast industry and a lifetime making socks smell quite foul for fun *and* profit but not only is it a breach of privacy and confidence it is rather too banal a topic for the two of us."

"Er," Remus says.

"I'm complimenting you, Mr. Lupin," McGonagall says. "Complimenting you, yes, and wondering why you spend your days and nights with Mr. Black, Mr. Potter, and Mr. Toast - Pettigrew. *Pettigrew*. Please, please, forget I said that." Remus nods, utterly lost for words. "I am immensely grateful to you for coming prepared." McGonagall replaces her glasses and shakes herself, blinking. "I cannot begin to tell you what a difficult morning this has been. Really, there is very little I can add to the no-doubt exhaustive research you have done on your chosen professions."

Remus feels, strongly, that he would like to sink into the floor and vanish. "Er. Thank you?"

"You're not marked down for a NEWT-level class in History of Magic, I see?"

"Um. I was going to mark it, and then I thought perhaps Astronomy, given that, er—"

"A recommendation from Professor Binns will serve you well at any leading research institutions here or on the continent, Mr. Lupin. You are one of the few students whose name he knows, which is to be considered a great victory. Hold on to it."

"Yes, Professor."

McGonagall regards him sharply. "Really, Mr. Lupin, you can stop looking at me like a fish. I am impressed with your forethought and clarity, and I am suggesting some changes to your schedule. That is all. I do rather wish, however," and her thin mouth quirks, as close as Remus has ever seen on her face to a real smile, "that you had brought those crumpets."

"I probably would have eaten them all on the way here had there been any, Professor." Remus attempts a smile. It holds steady like a real trooper. He's very proud of it. "It's just — do you think I might be able to take Astronomy, as well?"

"Your friends," McGonagall says. "Am I right?"

"They *are* also taking it, yes. The — all three of them." Remus finds his nails to be fascinating and spends a half-minute staring intently down at them. There's a bump on his right middle finger from quill writing, a stain of ink across it and on the underside of his thumb. His left forefinger has the nail he tends to chew when he's nervous. He wants to chew it very much right now, even though he's relatively sure there's nothing left to be nervous about. His mother's voice comes to him, over time, through memory. *If you chew a nail in front of one of your Professor's, I'll know.* Remus presses his left hand down into his lap with his right hand. *That's better.*

"Perhaps," McGonagall says, "and this is a revolutionary idea, I know, you might try to branch out, just a little. To work without your friends, to attend classes without your friends, to spend time without your friends, with perhaps *other* friends, as soon enough school *will* be over and you *will* find your separate ways. It seems wise to begin preparing yourself now so that it comes more easily, in the future."

Remus stares at her, horrified. "But," he says, "we'll—"

"Come now, Mr. Lupin," McGonagall chides. "I expected more from you."

"But we're not going to—"

"Mr. Lupin," McGonagall says quietly. "Put your incredible, logical mind to the task and reach a conclusion that is not swayed by any depth of great emotion or fondness, but rather by rational process of thought, and you will, I assure you, stop spluttering so."

"Professor," Remus says, trying to ignore the siren call of that damnable nail, "I don't think — I think it's — er. That is. I don't mean to be impertinent, it's only — I think maybe it's good for them, Professor. To be, er. Around a Prefect. Not that — I mean. It's good for all of us, I mean."

McGonagall regards him for a moment longer, and then finally sighs and shuffles the papers before her. "Mr. Lupin, there is only so much you — or anyone — can do."

"I know," Remus admits. "I don't mind, terribly."

"I strongly advise that you drop Astronomy," McGonagall says. She looks very adamant. "It has no real application to any of your choices, and it is a subject in which you have been well-versed from an early age. There is no real purpose to your pursuing it on an Advanced level, other than what we have just discussed."

"Thank you, Professor," Remus says softly.

"Other than that, I really have nothing to add. You are excused, Mr. Lupin."

"Thank you," Remus repeats, standing and rather stiffly smoothing out his robes. "I'm sorry about the crumpets."

"Next time," says McGonagall. "Oh — and Mr. Lupin?"

"Professor?"

"May I suggest that you move 'Professor' up a few places on your list?" She's giving him that totally unreadable look again. Remus fidgets. "Since I rather suspect you're going to save it for posterity, and I feel that in the long run you may want to give that path rather more consideration."

"Er," Remus says. "All right. Professor, then. Before librarian, do you think?"

McGonagall's lips twitch. She nods, solemnly, but only once, as if she can't quite keep her face in this one position for too much longer. "I think that would be *most* wise," she confirms. "Most wise and beneficial, indeed."

***

"So." Sirius is lounging against the wall, hips out, body relaxed, hair mussed carefully over only one eye, and smelling, Remus is sure of it, of lavender. "How is she? Is she in prime form? Is she snappy? Is she *feisty?*"

"I think Peter tormented her with talk of toast," Remus sighs, speaking very quietly. "I wouldn't test her limits today, Sirius, I think she's a bit — erhm — peaked."

"I am very peaked," McGonagall calls from within her lair. "But I am not deaf."

Remus cringes. Sirius beams. "Oh, my love," he yips, "I have arrived."

"I really don't think," Remus begins.

"Ta." Sirius silences him with one hand. "I have a fair lady whose fair hand I shall fairly commence to slave over with all my love."

"Sirius," Remus asks, "have you borrowed Peter's cologne?"

"You are cruel," Sirius says, before he disappears inside.

***

"Finally," Sirius says dramatically, slamming the door and vaguely registering Remus' muffled yelp. "We're alone. We can't keep meeting like this, Professor. People will *talk*."

"Good afternoon, Mr. Black," McGonagall says at length. "I suppose this could not be put off forever."

Sirius slides hip first into the chair, throwing one long leg up over the arm of it, and smiles seductively at her. "Our meeting has been inevitable since the beginning of time, Professor. Such is the nature of love."

"Indeed," McGonagall mutters.

"I would have brought flowers," Sirius goes on, "but I thought that what we have is greater than such trifles would indicate. And I forgot."

"Mr. Black, your inane babble never ceases to charm and enthrall. Shall we discuss your professional future? Such as it can be?"

"Always business," Sirius says mournfully. "Very well. You can deny your feelings all you like, Professor, but one day your passions will overpower that shell of intellect within which you hide."

"Do you know, Mr. Black," McGonagall says, "if you were not my student and as such lacking very much in the way of credibility and intimidation, I would be frightened for my life, as you are obviously unhinged?"

Sirius thumps his leg against the arm of the chair. "The way you talk," he sighs, "speaks volumes of untold passion. I burn inside that our love should be so unconsummated, but our desires so vast."

"These are lovely words," McGonagall admits. "Have you been studying?"

"Every second I was not tutoring those darling little nightmares, the Slytherin first years, in that which you first instructed me, those many moons ago." Sirius presses a fluttering hand to his chest. "Ah! Be still, my heart, in this final moment of seduction — you will have your home soon, safe within the bosom of your love—"

"Mr. Black," McGonagall cuts in, "I will allow your prattle for just as long as it can pretend to be within the boundaries of propriety, but once you step beyond the final line and into talk of my bosom, your bosom, someone else's poor, unrelated bosom, I am afraid I must bring you back to the topic at hand."

"Is that what funkies your monkey?" Sirius asks. He bats his lashes outrageously in her direction, hoping the meaning is not lost. "Is that what bloats your stoat?"

"I would prefer, Mr. Black," McGonagall insists, "that you leave my stoat out of this indecency."

"It likes it," Sirius breathes. "It *wants* to be indecent. It loathes its own innocence, your stoat. Oh, Professor, how you torment me with your honeyed promises and your cold, cold indifference."

"Mr. Black, I really must insist that—" She trails off, blinks, and sniffs the air, a frown creasing her brow. "Is that — do you smell something odd?"

"Perhaps it's the smell of *destiny,*" Sirius suggests, leaning forward and waggling his eyebrows suggestively.

"I would have said 'rotting lavender,'" McGonagall says.

Sirius shrugs. "A rose by any other name would smell of cheap aftershave."

"Have you ever had a *single* thought relating to the way you would like to spend the rest of your life?"

"Dozens," Sirius says in tones of aching melancholy. "I should like to shower you with jewels, to launder your robes, to tutor your incompetent first-years, to take you on opulent holidays in Timbuktu and Lithuania. I should like to spend a lifetime adoring you from afar, from up close, from the middle distance. I shall write odes to you that shall go down through a hundred generations. Oh," as an afterthought, "and I'd like to be a Cursebreaker."

McGonagall doesn't miss a beat, but takes a few notes. "Is Cursebreaker a career move to come before or after showering me with jewels, laundering my robes, tutoring my *very* incompetent first-years, and taking me on opulent holidays in Timbuktu and Lithuania? And let's not forget the all important adoring me from all angles and radii."

"The most important," Sirius agrees. "Think of all the angles."

"I will come when you least expect it," McGonagall adds, "and take away your moving copy of the Kama Sutra."

"Think of me when you casually flip its pages in your silky, flimsy nighttime wear." Sirius grins. "That way, we'll be even."

"I can only imagine *your* silky, flimsy nighttime wear."

"It gets very little use," Sirius mourns, "as I sleep in the nude."

"How shocking."

"I have often received looks of appreciation mingled with intense jealousy from my fellow housemates," Sirius adds. "If you wish for testimonials my good friend Mr. Lupin has often admired my rear end, and oh, that Potter bloke, he spends his days and nights extolling the virtues of both cheeks."

"Separately," McGonagall asks, her voice like ancient parchment, "or together?"

"Both!" Sirius replies cheerily. "*Pages* and *pages*, he's written."

"Which explains his History of Magic grades, certainly. Cursebreaker, you say?"

"Or love slave," Sirius says. "Or both!"

"Why, if I may ask, would you like to be a Cursebreaker? I feel I have already heard your motivations for...the other."

"The pay," Sirius says solemnly.

McGonagall arches her eyebrows. "Really, Mr. Black, I would never have thought you to be so mercenary."

"You can hardly be expected to support all the children on a teacher's salary," Sirius points out. "And I should never want you to lack anything your heart desires. If I must be mercenary to provide a comfortable lifestyle for you, so be it." He shifts a little in his chair and offers her a charming smile. "Really, it has everything I could ever want in a career. Adventure. Romance. Variety. Exotic locales. Certainly I imagine it would be difficult for you, at home, wringing your hands, constantly imagining me ripped apart by mummies or devoured by giant snakes—"

"Excruciating," McGonagall murmurs.

"—but I believe that the love we share could surmount any such obstacle. Honestly, Professor, it's the only thing I could *do*. Can you possibly imagine me doing anything else? Besides," he adds, leaning forward on the table and regarding her from under lowered lashes, "the obvious."

"Which, in your world, seems to involve stoats and monkeys." McGonagall taps her quill against her inkwell. "I believe Cursebreaker is, surprisingly, well suited to your abilities. Quick thinking. Improvisation. The propensity for scraping by trouble though all evidence indicates this time it is your rear end about to be lit on fire. I think you have, inadvertently, made a fantastic choice. Not to mention, it takes you very far away from England."

"You are a glutton for punishment, my dear." Sirius rests the back of one hand against his forehead. "I should have known that you would wish for ours to be a tragic love story, full of trials and tribulations. Besides, I thought about it last night, while a small child I was supposed to be teaching Transfiguration skills to was gnawing on my ear. I weighed the options and though Auror was very tempting I thought the pyramids and Egypt in general would just be *spiffing*, and in the end the locale tipped the scales. Plus, *mummies*. You can't argue with mummies."

"Your reasoning is quite the mechanism," McGonagall says. "I find it most unfortunate that I am beginning to comprehend it."

"It is only a matter of time, my sweet bundle of love dumplings," Sirius swoons. "Soon, you will not be able to resist the truth, which draws us constantly closer and closer, like two opposites, forever attracting."

"You are demented," McGonagall says, "but you would make a good Cursebreaker. I will give you that."

"I feel your longing," Sirius whispers. "Elope with me. We shall see the pyramids, together."

McGonagall leans close across the desk, setting her quill aside, with a look of dark intensity in her eyes. Sirius doesn't flinch, though internally he wonders what, exactly, he's done. The love of his life, naturally, McGoogles herself, at last admitting defeat? At last, letting his charm whittle her down into a McGoogles shaped love dumpling? At last, giving in to what can only be called natural? It's a little overwhelming. She crooks a finger at him to come closer, which he does, swimming in his triumph. "Sirius," she says, low and deep.

"Mm?" he murmurs. "Tell me, tell me, *tell* me."

"Our time," McGonagall tells him, "is up. We've been most productive, wouldn't you agree?"

Sirius groans enormously and collapses into his chair. "Cruel, heartless — my heart is even more broken than usual."

"I would never have thought it possible," McGonagall says expressionlessly. "Good day, Mr. Black."

Sirius stares at her with all the pain and agony he can muster, which is considerable. "La Belle Dame Sans Merci, is it? Very well, Professor." He throws himself from the chair and gives her one final, burning look. "I would have loved to see the Sphinx with you, my reluctant Aphrodite. But you can't deny your feelings forever, and I am a man of infinite patience."

"I shall do my best," McGonagall says. "Next!"

***

When Lily Evans enters after a short, polite knock, Minerva McGonagall is nearing the end of her rope. The light at the end of the tunnel is, of course, that tomorrow brings a majority of young females, and far less Gryffindor boys. The tunnel has, however, been very long, very windy, and full of Gryffindor boys. "Ah," she says, relaxing visibly. "Ms. Evans. What a pleasure."

"I can go after Sirius and hex him," Lily says, "if you want. May I sit?"

"Yes, please." McGonagall gestures with one hand to the chair across from her.

"What did he do?" Lily's nose wrinkles. "I think he's the worst."

"I am not at liberty to discuss the proceedings of interviews with other students," McGonagall murmurs. "However, I believe he propositioned me multiple times, and is, as well you know, very persistent with his propositions."

"He gets it from Potter," Lily says darkly, and gives McGonagall a meaningful look.

"My sympathies," McGonagall says dryly.

Lily shrugs, one-shouldered. "I don't think it's his fault. It's a bit like a puppy that can't stop messing the carpet. He just needs a good kicking from someone who's got the patience to give it to him."

"Indeed," McGonagall says. She smoothes her hair back into its tight knot. "Though how he will find such a saint I cannot possibly conceive."

"Mail-order, I suspect." Lily grins impishly at her.

McGonagall lets out a short bark of a laugh. "Hah! I should not be in the least surprised. Miss Evans, you have no doubt considered the materials I gave you Wednesday last?"

"Yes, Professor. Thanks. I think — I think I might really want to go into Healing." Lily taps her fingertips together in her lap. "That is, it's what seemed to suit me best."

"I see." McGonagall nods. "And why do you think that?"

"Well, I enjoy it, to begin with," Lily replies. "And I've gotten my best grades in the NEWT levels suggested for a career in Healing. And it's not as if I want some *stupid* career based on *excitement* without actually *thinking about it first*, like all the Gryffindor boys and their Cursebreaking and Auroring and Quidditching. *You* know."

"Only too well," McGonagall says, "indeed."

"So I did give it some real thought," Lily goes on, "and honestly Healing just seemed to fit."

McGonagall is again reminded of the vast difference between teenage boys and teenage girls. It is, she muses, like dealing with two different species entirely. "I think that's a lovely idea, Ms. Evans," she says, truthfully. "One of the most refreshing decisions I've heard all week."

"Oh, good," Lily says. "Was James an Auror-er or a Quidditch-er?"

"Pardon me?"

"You know," Lily explains, "it's just, sort of a toss-up, I thought, between the two. Childish enough to pursue a lifetime of speeding around on a broomstick like a thirteen year old idiot, but self-impressed enough to want to be a hero."

"Superhero," McGonagall murmurs, "actually."

"Did he talk about his rubber suit?" Lily asks.

"Extensively," McGonagall says, and winces.

Lily shakes her head pityingly. "*Men.*"

"You have no idea," McGonagall agrees.

"He once told me he wanted to 'fight things,'" Lily adds. "As a *career*."

"I am shocked that your relationship was not more lasting." A smile curls the edge of McGonagall's mouth. "If I may ask, Miss Evans, what were you *thinking?*"

Lily blinks, and looks at her hands, and then back at her Head of House, looking uncomfortable for the first time. "I — I don't know, really. He was just trying so hard. He learned Yeats. And he's not so awful, you know, when he's not trying to impress Sirius Black." She wrinkles her nose. "Which he always is."

"Ah, yes," McGonagall says faintly, staring at the ceiling. "But then again, the constant company of Mr. Black would be enough to drive anyone to madness."

"The one I don't understand is Remus." Lily sighs and shakes her head wonderingly. "I mean, why does he do it? How can he stand it? It's completely mystifying."

"I think it is safe to say that Mr. Lupin mystifies us all," McGonagall says.

"I kissed him once," Lily confides, lowering her voice. "It was the mistletoe, of course, and I was doing it because James—Potter—was being *incorrigible*, but, do you know, it was rather nice."

McGonagall makes a face like *this is hardly appropriate, Ms. Evans* but her smile only twitches up at the corners and her eyes hold deep, warm amusement. "I take it Mr. Potter's rage was infinite?" she asks.

"I thought his eyes were going to *pop out*." Lily grins, always glad to remember that day.

"Poor Mr. Lupin," McGonagall sighs.

"He actually seems to enjoy it." Lily shakes her head. "They're so — they're so — they're not from the same *planet!*"

"Mr. Black and Mr. Potter are aliens? Well, now, Ms. Evans, that does explain a good many things." McGonagall's small, dancing smile is wicked. "I always suspected — but confirmation is such an assurance."

"And just when you think they're *tolerable*," Lily mutters, then snorts. "It's not *men* who are the problem, is it? It's *boys*."

"An excellent distinction," McGonagall replies. "However, I must unfortunately inform you men are also problematic more often than not."

"Bugger," Lily says, then looks sheepish. "Er. Sorry."

McGonagall, however, appears too lost in thought to have noticed. "And the distinction is also frequently rather less clear than one might hope."

"Not at Hogwarts," Lily says definitely.

McGonagall shakes herself and regards Lily with some of her usual severity. "Hogwarts is not everything, as this meeting is actually supposed to emphasize. Thank you so much for your clarity, Miss Evans; I cannot tell you how much I appreciate it. Your schedule is, naturally, arranged already."

"Certainly, Professor." Lily rises, smoothing out her skirt. "Er — shall I jinx Sirius Black for you before supper, then?"

"I should hate to have to deduct points from my own house," McGonagall says distantly.

"I'll be discreet," Lily promises.

"I have no idea what you are talking about, as this conversation never took place," McGonagall says, and busies herself with straightening some stray papers on her desk. "Good day, Ms. Evans."

"Good day, Professor."

"Oh — and Ms. Evans? Tea as usual this Wednesday evening."

Lily nods, a smile creeping over her face, and tucks a stray lock of hair behind her ear. "Looking forward to it."

"Very good." McGonagall eyes her sharply. "I am counting on your discretion, you know."

"I won't let you down," Lily says, and leaves to administer justice.











The end of first year, when Remus let it slip he was feeling just slightly nostalgic about their departure, the retribution was great and all-powerful. It taught him something very valuable: that no boy in the history of the universe is ever allowed to so much as acknowledge nostalgia, and especially not when school is involved, or he is expelled forever from boyhood and all its privileges. It was good to learn so quickly. Being armed with this knowledge has kept him from making the same mistake more than once, and fortunately no one has talked about the incident since. He has good friends, kind and giving and understanding in their own right. Even if Sirius still gives him a wobbly left eyebrow from time to time, and mouths the words *girl girl girl, you are a girl*, Remus likes to think his friends forgive him his trespasses.

They have to. If they don't, who's to say he'll forgive them theirs?

The end of every year, Remus still feels slightly nostalgic about their departure. He just never mentions it anymore. His stomach gnaws away at itself as he listens to James and Sirius' plans, as he hears Peter talk about his mother's freshly sterilized new washroom, as he watches the countryside roll by with rickety track rhythm. He thinks of his room and his books and the long three months, and prays for some miracle to get him to Devonshire, and has three chocolate bars by the time they arrive at Platform Nine and Three-Quarters, so that he's a bit green in the cheek as Peter's mother arrives to whisk him away from his germ-infested peers.

James says, wisely, "That woman is a nutter."

"It goes beyond nuttery," Sirius agrees, watching Mrs. Pettigrew inflict a flurry of disinfecting spells on her red-faced son. "Imagine if she knew that every full moon her little boo-bear spends his leisure time crawling through garbage on his belly."

"He would have to be killed."

"Very probably. Hey, Prongs, is that your mum?" James whirls, a grin splitting his face, and Sirius waves, rather sheepishly. Remus turns, too, to find that it *is* James' mum: a small woman with a no-nonsense nose and wild gray hair, grinning joyfully at them all and waving very enthusiastically. James ventures toward her — his dad has appeared now, too, looking rumpled and disoriented among the crowds and very tall — and is engulfed immediately in an enormous hug, although her head hits somewhere around his chest.

"Erk," James says. "All *right*, mum."

"How's my *darling?*" James's mother yelps. She rumples his hair and straightens his collar as James cringes and squirms and tries to wriggle free. "And how are you, boys? Good year? My goodness, Sirius, your hair! You look like a street musician! Do your professors let you in class with that earring in? It's so wonderful to see you all! Remus, dear, are you coming up to see us this summer?"

"I'd love to try, thanks, Mrs. Potter," Remus says truthfully. Sirius steps on his foot and, when Remus glares at him, gives him an innocently injured look.

"We should give them some *alone time*," he leans over to Remus' ear to whisper. "You know, let the loving family catch up before we give them what they *really* want."

"What's that?" Remus lifts a skeptical brow.

"Me, of course," Sirius replies. He grabs Remus by the wrists and tugs him behind a stanchion, into its shadow, and sets his bags down. "Poor family, can't get enough of me, misses me all year round, so I've been told, but we can't tell James; he'd just be jealous. Where're your mum and dad?"

"Car probably broke down on the way here." Remus counts his bags for the third time since they got off the train. Two, and holding up well despite the fraying. "They always leave early just in case that happens. They should be here soon."

"Isn't that a touching sight?" Sirius points across the station, elbow resting against the marble behind him. "Mama and Papa Snivellus, come to take their precious bundle of ooze home for the summer. Doesn't he look happy? Where's the camera when you need it, eh? Truly a family moment."

"He looks miserable," Remus says. "It's not all that funny."

Sirius pauses to consider this. "Yes," he decides finally, "yes, actually, I think it is."

Remus shrugs. "Three months without him," he points out. "I hear that absence makes the heart grow fonder."

"Listen," Sirius says abruptly, angling an intense look that Remus balks under, "are you going to come this summer, or not?"

"Look," Remus says. He knows just how hopeless it is, but goes for it anyway. "I don't — I can't promise anything. I'll ask my parents."

"Will you?" Sirius asks skeptically.

Remus sighs, folds his arms, unfolds them, and finally sits down on his bags, staring out into the crowd. "I don't know, all right? I will if they have time and they're not too bothered."

Sirius sighs. Remus doesn't have to look up to know what he's doing: fiddling with his sleeves. He always fiddles with his sleeves when he feels upset or thwarted, and Remus is pretty sure he's doing it now. "Don't ask if you don't want to. It's just — you keep saying you will and then you don't. Peter's been three times. You've never even seen the house."

"Thanks," Remus mutters, "thanks very much for rubbing that in." He scrubs a hand over his face. "I'll try. Again."

"Well," Sirius says darkly. "I have no choice but to believe you. Don't make me come and drip on your carpet again, because I will if I have to but I think your Dad would rather I stayed away. Look, we can come get you on the bike, it needn't cost you a Knut."

"That's not the only problem," Remus explains. He knows he's trying his best to be patient, and he knows how much Sirius hates it. It's like being stuck between a rock and a Sirius, who is a very, *very* hard place, when he isn't getting his way. Relatively cheerful at all other times, but a madman about perfecting the art of sulking. "Mum gets upset, about the logistics, and if I told her I'd be riding to James' on a *flying motorcycle* driven by a *teenage boy* — and yes, Sirius, I know that you're trustworthy, but think, for a minute, how it sounds — she'd unhinge her jaw so the yelling was easier — and now, I'm not going to lie to her, I don't do that. I can't." Remus pauses, licking his lips nervously. "She *knows*," he adds. "She knows *everything*. It's as if she can just see right through my ear and into my brain and I've tried lying before, once, but all it took was a squinty look and somehow she *knew*."

"You're a terrible liar, that's why," Sirius says.

"No, actually," Remus replies, voice dry, "not all that bad."

The silence that follows is uncomfortable. Remus dares to look up, all the way up, at Sirius' face, backlit and somewhat murderous. He coughs into his palm.

"I'm sorry," he says. "I am. I *am*."

"If you were that sorry you'd *come*," Sirius mutters. Remus can almost see it coming, the wobble of the eyebrow and the quirk of the lips. *Girl girl girl, you are a girl.* He cringes, bracing himself for it. "Right, well," Sirius says instead, kneeling down, "trying to talk to you is like smashing my head against rocks."

"Have you been doing that lately, then?" Remus ventures.

"Feels like it." Sirius sighs.

"You could stop," Remus suggests.

"That's been—" Sirius coughs, and winds a hand into his hair, and looks nervously off to one side, "—surprisingly difficult, actually. I've been trying."

"Well," Remus says, "just walk away, then. Find yourself somewhere where there are no rocks against which to bang your poor suffering head."

Sirius gives him a strange, soft look.

"Oi, Sirius!" comes James' voice. "We're off!"

"Yeah!" Sirius calls back, flicking up his chin in a clear dismissal. "Go on out, I'll be there in a minute — Moony," his voice takes on an unfamiliar urgency, "there's rocks *everywhere*. We had this discussion, remember?"

"We weren't talking about their ubiquity," Remus reminds him, "we were talking about their free will, or lack thereof. I'm surprised you even remember that."

"I *do*," Sirius says.

Something niggles at the edge of Remus' mind. He looks down at Sirius, who is on his knees, with his hand on Remus' suitcase and his hair in his eyes, and says, "we aren't really talking about rocks, are we?"

"Er," Sirius begins. He puts his hand tentatively against Remus' jaw, two fingers resting against Remus' ear, and Remus wonders if maybe this is another part of the Boys' Club Dynamic that he will never in a million years understand, and if it isn't, what else it could even be. There are a few possibilities on mental file, which he runs through at lightning speed. One, Sirius is sick and dying and this is his somewhat inappropriate decision to explain everything here and now. Two, Sirius has decided he no longer wants his grammar scrutinized day in and day out and they've all decided to let Remus go. Three, Remus is asleep on the train and at any moment Sirius is going to wake him up by putting something cold and wet down the back of his shirt, and then summer will officially have started.

"Are you dying?" Remus asks.

"No," Sirius says. "What?"

"Do you hate me?"

"What? No! What are you *talking* about?"

Remus breathes in deeply. "Are you about to put something cold and wet down the back of my shirt?" It is, admittedly his favorite of the three options, because that, too, shall pass. Sirius merely stares at him.

"Nothing up my sleeves," he says finally. He's lost his odd thoughtful look and in its place is one of worrying determination. Remus knows that look. It tries to be grave but is fueled by impetuousness and caprice. It's the look that means Sirius has decided to take something he wants, having thought about taking it far more than the consequences of taking it. "No, look, just let me talk."

"I'm sorry, I didn't realize I'd interrupted."

"Moony," Sirius says. His cheeks have gotten puffy. "You give really, really excellent head massages."

"Oh," Remus says. "Well. Thank you?"

Sirius turns a funny color. Remus ponders its possible causes: sunburn, rash, gas. Anything to keep from thinking about Sirius' left hand, which is on his face, and Sirius' right hand, which is on his leg. He isn't used to being touched with purpose. Sometimes Sirius messes up his hair or James gives him a nice Boys' Club Punch In The Shoulder or Peter tries to leap over him to escape a nice Boys' Club Punch In The Shoulder and misses and lands on top of him and Remus has to go to the infirmary. None of this is being touched with purpose. Kissing Lily was being touched with purpose but even that was sort of a joke, and now he's thinking about kissing, and is *that* why Sirius has licked his lips twelve times in the past thirty seconds?

"Oh," Remus says suddenly. "I get it. I'm rocks."

Sirius makes a noise that's kind of a laugh and kind of a groan and then presses his lips against Remus' without any warning. Or with ample warning that Remus is only just now beginning to decode.

He hasn't shaved and his hands are sweaty and there are *teeth* in there, and it is not much at *all* like kissing Lily except that kisses, Remus has learned, are wet, nervous, compelling, terrifying things. He makes a sound. Sirius jerks away.

"Let's never mention this again," Sirius decides out loud, leaping to his feet, as if he's been electrocuted. "Shall we?"

"Uh," Remus says. His mouth is, ridiculously, wet. Wet! He licks his lips and then wonders whose saliva he is actually licking and says, again, even more frantically, "er." It's fine! It's just like getting licked by Padfoot. That's all it is.

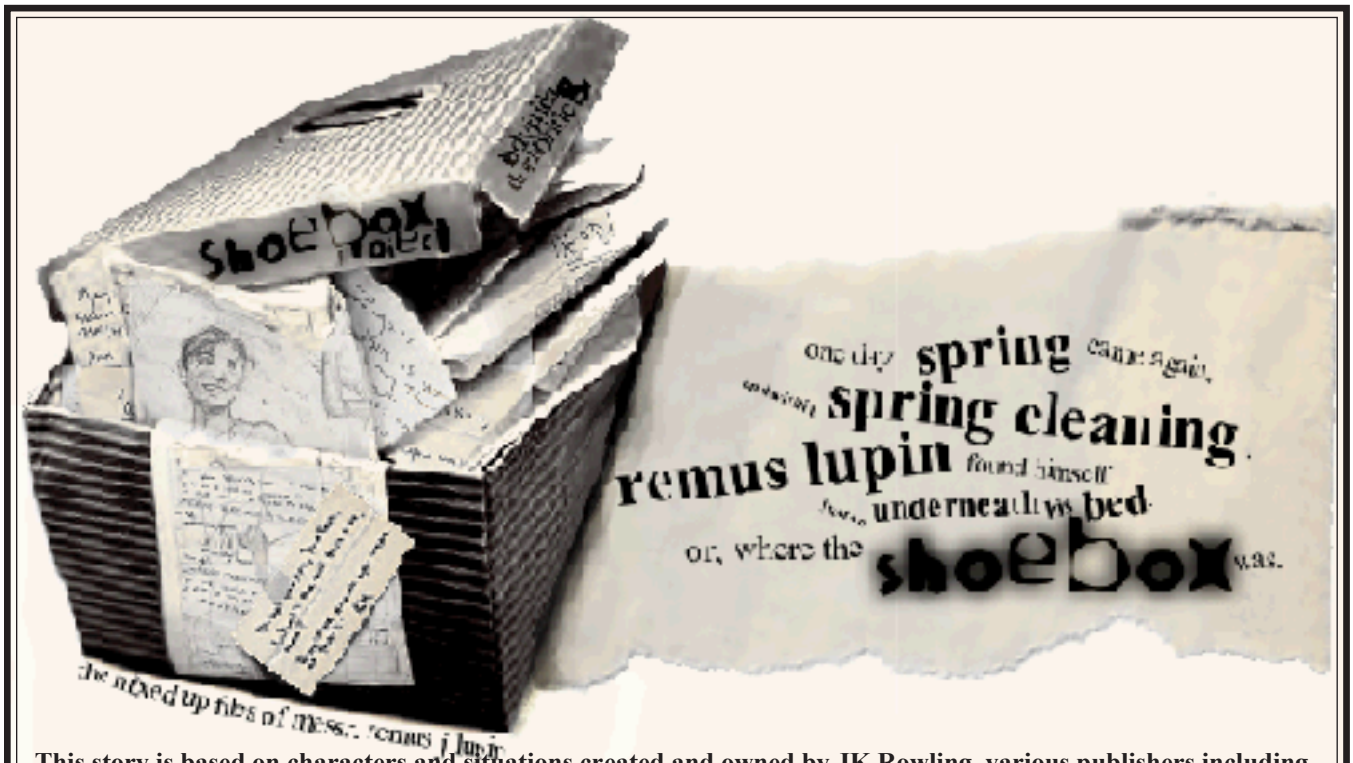
But with *purpose*.

"I think I agree," he says carefully.

"Right!" Sirius says, rather shrilly, swinging his bag over his shoulder and staring everywhere except at Remus. "Well, have a great summer!" He legs it for the exit.

"I have no idea," Remus says, "what just happened."

Unfortunately, he's lying to himself.



This story is based on characters and situations created and owned by JK Rowling, various publishers including but not limited to Bloomsbury Books, Scholastic Books and Raincoast Books, and Warner Bros., Inc. No money is being made and no copyright or trademark infringement is intended.

***The Shoebox Project* by LadyJaida and Dorkorific**

http://www.livejournal.com/community/shoebox_project

Part Thirteen: July, 1976

More Letters , a Dream Diary, and The Facts of Life.

Letters btwn. Monsieur Moony and Monsieur Padfoot throughout July of 1976

Dear Moony,

Hello! How are you? I hope you're having a lovely summer, the weather is very fine here and we are having fun. Not as much fun as last summer of course because we are both working which is why it's taken so long to write. James is repairing broomsticks and I am working at a Muggle pub in the village. It's great fun but Muggle drinks are wicked and I've started dressing like one of them which James thinks is hilarious. Apparently it is high fashion to wear dog collars!! Of course I have taken it up. I've met a fantastic girl too, her name is Sophie and she's visiting from France. She's gorgeous and loads of fun. You'd really like her, she reads scads of books and she's refreshing me on my French everything, ho ho.

Anyway, I hope you are having a great summer! Talk to you soon.

—Sirius

Padfoot,

Sounds like you all are having lots of fun. When is Peter coming to visit? I'm still surprised his mum is letting him go, seeing as how you and James are two of the filthiest boys on the planet. Still, it would seem he has all the luck.

I'm still trying to convince my mum and dad to let me come but the jury is still out on that one. Not so sure about the probability of a pleasant verdict, either.

Sophie sounds very nice.

M

Moony,

She is very nice.

Peter is coming around the 24th I think and probably armed with enough antibacterial charms to drop a Chimaera. I don't mind as it makes him smell always very fresh.

Tell your parents that if you don't come your friends will become illiterate, so we need your influence to avoid being expelled. Make sure you come at the same time Peter does, because then we could all knock about a bit together since it'll probably be our last chance to have a summer free with the lot of us.

I bet you've already done your summer reading. Is it interesting or should I put it off forever as usual?

—Sirius

Padfoot,

You know very well neither of you is illiterate. You procrastinate, yes, and therein lies the secret of your eventual doom.

I liked the books. I don't think you will. One of them is very long and if you want I can give you a summary. It's about the events leading up to a war rather than the war itself so I'm nearly sure you'll fall asleep on the first page and then it will have drool on it and what a waste of a good book.

Will Sophie be around for the knocking around a bit?

I suppose this is the sort of thing that gets asked so what does she look like?

M

M,

Of course you liked them, I should think that would be obvious. The one you have described sounds horrific but I will not ask you to sacrifice your precious time summarizing it for me as probably I will just drool on your summaries anyway. What are you DOING anyway other than school reading and avoiding a visit, you depress me.

She'll definitely be around! She's that sort of girl, always up for a bit of fun and she's dead sociable so she gets on with everyone. You two would get on like a house on fire though that expression is mystifying.

She's gorgeous, honestly, like a Muggle film star, so I can't figure out why she's picked up with someone like me (other than the obvious good looks, charm, overflowing bank vault, motorbike etc.) Big dark eyes and a sweet little mouth and silky brown hair, and she's the perfect height right up to my eyes, and curvy but not,

you know, too curvy, and she smells fantastic all the time. No McGoogles by a long shot but a bit of all right. Don't let me keep on I will start to sound like Prongs.

Any progress on the parental front?

—Sirius

Padfoot,

Yesterday I went to a Muggle film with my mum and the day before that we tried to make ice cream but came out with very cold milk flavored like chocolate and metal. That was a waste. We drank it anyway. I talked to mum over dinner earlier about coming to see you lot when Peter is there as well. She gave me a look that meant she'd say no again later. I'll bring it up with my father, if that's any consolation, and maybe he'll find some way to talk her into it. That is, if he's all for the idea, which I think he might be because he finds it odd I've finished my summer reading already.

Don't start agreeing; I already know you find it odd I've finished my summer reading. In any case when all you've got is pages sticky with drool I can tell you all about the ten important catalysts leading up the first battle and then I'll tell you about the battle, as well, as that's interesting, too. How does that sound?

The other books you'd like, though. One's entirely on Transfiguration and I know you'll eat it up, no drool involved. I found myself wishing while I was reading it that I was half so good as you and James and Peter at it so I could understand it all better.

Sophie still sounds nice. That is very nice.

M

Moony,

Hurrah for your virtuous weirdness, maybe it will save us all from another Moony-less summer! If it's still a money thing James and I can sell our bodies down the pub, we have already had several offers to do an auction for charity. Oh how I wish I was joking, the offerer was a very sweet old lady in a pink cardigan.

I have been to some Muggle films as well! Soph and I went to see one about Robin Hood with James Bond in it. That was all right, she cried at the end. But then James took us to see one called The Omen and THAT was what I call a film. I did not sleep all night but took up a defensive position in the corner of my room with a beater's bat clutched in my hand. Today some little kid rolled by me on a tricycle and I shrieked like a girl. You should see it, it's ace.

She is very nice. It's nice. I have sent you some photos in which I look, as usual, frightening. Keep up the shameless begging!

—Sirius






AUDIEY





Padfoot,

I think I will save all my screaming like a girl for the privacy of my own home, not, of course, that I do any of that ever. When I scream it is for Stella to come and get me a new shirt as I have ripped mine off in a bout of manly rage.

Now that you've choked on something laughing, I can move on. I read a review for the Omen and it seemed a bit on the silly side of moviemaking but if it comes with such high and enticing recommendation I'll see what I can do.

You look very happy in those photos. Sophie looks very nice.

I'm glad you're all having a good time. I spoke with my father this morning before he went to work and he said he'd see what he could do. On the one hand it's easier that it's just me but my mum seems to believe I will be kidnapped by doers of great evil the second I leave the house on my own and whisked away into the seedy dens of night of which, of course, Devonshire has so very many.

I believe he is on our side, however.

We shall see.

M

Moony,

You and the words "manly rage" go together like ketchup and pudding, not that I have ever tried that since it would obviously be disgusting. Clearly you need to stop going to the theatre if it puts these ridiculous ideas into your head.

It is a bit silly but it is also terrifying. If you wet yourself so over Poe I don't see how it can fail to hit the spot.

Your dad is a PEACH and you can tell him so from me.

Sorry this letter is too short, Sophie's Parents are here for the weekend and I'm to meet them and try to look presentable and not like a hooligan, in my opinion it is a lost cause.

—Me

Padfoot,

Hopefully you didn't sniff anyone's underthings or private areas or lick any parental units anywhere, much less places where there is no sun. However I have great faith in you. I am sure you did none of these things. I'm not sure why I'm sure, as past experience leads me to believe your nose was probably everywhere saying hello, but hopefully by the time this has reached you no charges have been filed against your person.

Did the meeting with her parents go well? I know how hard it is for you to look normal.

M

M—

I sniffed no one who did not want to be sniffed. Her parents were thoroughly charmed, or at least I think they were although my French is very rusty, but I'm fairly certain they were saying "We're so glad you've been so welcoming to our daughter" and not "I would like to beat you with this umbrella." Seriously though all it took was some well-placed pidgin French and they were as putty in my hands. I pretended I had learned it for Soph instead of from my Governess fourteen long long years ago. I am appalled by myself but it's not really lying if I'm not absolutely certain of what I actually said right? For all I know I could have admitted my guilt.

Sorry about the smears on this letter. James's mum has made pies as promised. Why are you and Peter not here to help us eat them? Oh well fatter and fatter I become just like at Christmas.

Seriously it is rather lonely and dejected up here. James and I work all the time because the pay is so poor so we've got to if we want to pay his dad back for the damage we did to the house. Actually the money is not so bad for me and I do enjoy it rather, but you know me, I've always been happy in the company of the substance impaired but I miss my Jamesikins of course.

Keep poking your dad, I will keep poking you until you do.

—Sirius

Padfoot,

I don't understand. How can it be lonely when you have James and Sophie? And you go to movies and entertain foreign guests who may or may not murder you in the night with French umbrellas, not to mention. Honestly, I don't know what to say to you, or how to entertain you, or how possibly to prevent you from pondering your everlasting loneliness, as you have all the world in Devonshire with you. Not to mention tending a pub and no doubt being illegal every chance you have.

Your French is excellent. Sometimes your lies are so extraordinary I'm not sure if you actually believe your own wild delusions. I am sure they were all adequately charmed by you, *mon enfant satanique*. Just remember to return their socks to them afterwards, should they lose them in their swells of adoration.

M

PS: Oh, right, and dad said I could come.

MOONY HE DID?!

Finally!! That's great I can't wait to see you and Peter of course and have you meet Sophie and all. That's

really really great. You're coming SOON right? You should come SOON. Are you taking the train?! Send us ALL DETAILS STAT THANK YOU

—Padfoot

***

The sun is down. Soft light from yonder window breaks. Sirius is Mercutio. Remus knows this as emphatically as he has never known anything so well before, the duality of Sirius' face and Mercutio's name. His own name is distant, somewhere beneath his fingernails, which he watches to protect the lovers' privacy. Mercutio is watching over the high wall, his eyes warm with longing.

"Look at the distance that lies between those two," he says. "Do you see? High above him she rests, and keeps he to himself, with hesitance all and silence forever."

Remus says nothing. It's not his place to watch. He feels as if he is a spy in enemy territory, the subtle indications that he is unwelcome gnawing at his skin. He crosses one leg over the other and switches every other minute, the rustle of his hose muted from the hum of angry energy Mercutio emits.

"Do you see, Benvolio?" Mercutio repeats. "There lie our lovers."

"Are you wearing a codpiece*?" Remus asks, without thinking.*

"It is the very height of fashion," Mercutio says, looking hurt, "not that you would know; for thy concerns have run ever to the dry and dusty, that thou should wear a codpiece on thy brain to display thy most important organ. Wilt not look even once?"

"What passes between lovers should not concern me," Remus says, "or you for that matter, so stop it."

"But nothing passes between them!" Mercutio flashes an urgent glance at him, and then stares back over the wall. "He gazes at her, and she gazes away, and neither can speak but to himself. Look but once, and understand."

"I think I need to have a word with you about leaving people space," Remus says, regarding his cuticles intently.

"And but one word with me?" A dark grin flickers over the mercurial face. "Couple it with something, Benvolio; make it a word and a blow."

Remus blinks. "Which first, then? The blow or the word?"

"Ah," Mercutio says, "for there cannot be both at once." He pulls back from the wall, a last, lingering look cast over it, but circles Remus to his other side, and stands with his arms folded and his shoulders back against the cold stone. "Be it then that you are better at blows, by all means, may the blow be last; but if your words are sweeter than your blows, then the word should follow the blow."

"Mercutio," Remus attempts, "I'm not quite sure you're making any—"

"But let your head lead not your heart, when words and blows are better suited lower."

"This is innuendo," Remus manages to get out. "Isn't it? Look, about the kiss; I really haven't thought about it. I read in a book that things like that happen sometimes. Misplaced affections, comes of living in a dormitory with boys all year round, hormones interacting with hormones, and the pack mentality can't help either, though that isn't it any book anywhere, unfortunately, and I suppose that's for the best."

Mercutio looks bewildered. "'Tis more than but a word you share with me; yet for all their volume I wish't had been one *blow!"*

"I could still hit you," Remus offers.

"Aye, but for so many words? Why, needs must you'd assault me within an inch of my life." Mercutio's eyes are distant now, back over the wall. Remus' head itches to look. "Nor would such attack be unwelcome, for all the blows in the world might be called a touch; where all the words at your command hardly graze the skin. I have come accustomed to it. Prick love for pricking, and you beat love down. So goes it with you, does it not?"

"Peace, peace," Remus digs the heel of a hand into his eyes. "Thou talk'st of nothing."

"True. I talk of dreams, which are the children of an idle brain, begot of nothing but vain fantasy."

"No," Remus says, suddenly quite bewildered by himself, "I mean you're talking nonsense."

"'Tis not my dream, nor then the nonsense mine," Mercutio points out. "Look."

Remus, without thinking, does. Juliet rests her cheek upon her bare hand, red hair pale in the moonlight. The moonlight, Remus tries to tell himself, something important about the moonlight. He can't for the life of him remember what. All the world is unfamiliar around him, as in a dream.

"You kissed me first," Remus protests.

Romeo steps out into view and lifts a hand to the vision of his love upon the balcony. It reminds Remus of people, or friends, who don't wear hose or codpieces or speak in the occasional iambs. He turns to watch Mercutio, whose anguish is stamped plainly across his features.

"Mercutio," Remus says. He rests a hand upon his shoulder. "What jealousy is this?"

"Jealousy it is not," Mercutio insists, shrugging Remus from him. "See the play carry on apace! See the lovers act their parts, pretty, petty, in the moonlight! What ho, Romeo! What ho, Juliet! What ho, Benvolio!*" He wheels upon Remus, determination unfriendly in his eyes. "Tell me, Benvolio: what is't you dream about? The capers of madmen beneath th'orb, her friendly winking counterparts alive in the heavens, and your heart fast yearning for blows?"*

"I don't," Remus begins.

"But soft," Mercutio says. "What light from yonder window breaks?"

"That's not your line," Remus protests.

But he left the curtains open; and it might as well be Sirius' line, as any.

"It's Romeo's!" Remus sits up. He's got it, now. Romeo is James; Juliet, Lily. Or is that the other way around? He isn't sure.

"That's nice, dear," his mother says. She stands at the foot of his bed, sorting laundry. "You're up early. What would you like for breakfast, mm?"

***

Remus and the Count are in front of the gilt mirror, and the Count is Sirius. He is in his shirt-sleeves. Downstairs the servants are making the house ready, Oriental, opulent, rich enough to belie the house's exterior, adding what they can to his already-lavish decoration. There is the acrid whiff of opium in the back of Remus' nostrils. The Count's eyes are black and heavy when they meet his in the mirror.

"Monsieur Bertuccio," he says, "my waistcoat and cravat. Where is your head?"

Remus ducks a surprised little bow of apology and reaches for the clothes. They are where he laid them on the back of the chair. The Count extends his arms and Remus pulls on the silk waistcoat, carefully, delicately. The Count has a habit of twitching at noise and ripping expensive clothing.

"They will come tonight," the Count says, with dark and heavy purpose. Remus is unsure whether he is being spoken to, or the mirror. "Danglars and Villefort, for you, and all the rest of them. And will we be ready?"

"As we can be, my lord," Remus says. "Lift your chin."

His fingers know the way. The pattern of dressing is almost comforting, and the sinew of the Count's body, coiled to snapping, reminds him of a purpose he knows too well: foreign to his own chest, but thrilling to know his blood now bears the burden of revenge. He wonders, still, at the hard edge of the Count's eyes. He thinks he knows them younger and less hateful, with laughter to each plan devised, and cunning born of delight rather than necessity.

"The plans, the plans," the Count says. He speaks to himself often, in sleep and in waking, voice echoing with his own voice through the corridors. Even in the bustle of preparation he can be heard alone or not at all. He is too well used to himself and his purpose. At times, Bertuccio is sure there can be no need of him, beyond buttoning the Count's cuffs and straightening his cravat. At times he knows there is more: a brotherhood, a bond, servant and master together, but both alike in intent.

Class distinguishes them, and will distinguish them always. But when they are wronged, they are wronged equally.

"The plans carry on," the Count whispers to himself. "The plans, the plans."

Again Remus finds his hand on this man's shoulder, though the cape there is dark, and the slash of white sleeves startles the mirror. The count covers his fingers.

"We will have it," the Count insists. "You know it well; yet at times your reflection denies it."

"Shall I speak plainly, my lord?" Remus busies his hands elsewhere, brushing out the sweep of the cloak and adjusting the heavy brooch where the Count's coiled shoulders cannot unnerve him. In the mirror he is barely present, his only manifestation the movement of the Count's clothing and the rustle of his cloak, hardly more than a ghost.

"Good Bertuccio, I would have you speak always plainly with me." The Count puts a hand on his cheek to still him, familiar and strange, his gloved palms soft. His eyes are bright with resolve, but dulled with drug and beneath that the deeper dullness of pain.

"I wish there were no need for these plans," Remus says softly. "I remember when I thought of other things."

"I do not," Monte Cristo replies shortly. "That place stole any part of me that remembered. What can this world do to pay its debt to me? You are a better man than I, if you take no dark joy in making the world atone as it can."

"Will you be healed when they are dead?"

"When they are dead," Sirius says quietly, never taking his eyes from Remus', "and their families ruined, and their names abhorred by all men, then perhaps I will be satisfied. Who can say? It is your wrong, too, to glory in, though you will not. What will heal you, *Bertuccio?"*

"I am afraid when I am healed, you yet will be in need of it." Remus cannot quite meet his eyes, cufflinks cupped in his palm. "And for all that I would give you, and all that I would sacrifice, never could my hands offer what it is you seek."

"They do," Sirius says. "Already, though you do not see it."

Remus twitches awake with the touch of Sirius' fingers on his lips. In the dazed mess between sleeping and waking he fights off a sudden surge of anger. This isn't fair. He loves these books, these characters. They are sacred. Sirius has no right to infiltrate these sanctuaries and touch him everywhere.

"Bugger bugger bugger," Remus chants over the sink, scrambled by his toothbrush. "Bugger bugger *bugger*."

***

The air is filled with the uncanny sense of exclamation points!

Remus wonders why he is wearing a dress. It feels uncomfortable at the shoulders and the chest, possibly because he is broad and still growing and has, he is sure of it, absolutely no bosom. He stares down in horror at a lace frill.

The wind wuthers!

It comes to him immediately what's happening. "I'm not Cathy," he says, emphatically. "I'm not, I'm not, I'm not. This is my dream. What's wrong with me? I can't be Cathy in my own dream!"

"Cathy!" Heathcliff sighs. He manages to do so with an exclamation point! Remus ponders suicide. Above the desolate and stony moors wheels an immensely tragic gray sky.

"I won't," Remus says. "I won't, I won't, I won't*."*

"O! Cathy," wails Heathcliff, who looks terribly familiar, "do you remember how, lo these many years, we would sport and play along these lonely stones? How innocent, how pure, the undiscovered love of children!" He seizes Remus' hand so tightly that Remus yelps, and addresses the foreboding skies. "Yet how cruel love becomes, that MY Cathy should be the one to cause me such pain!! O, shall I never be healed, shall these sins never be cleansed, shall our love go forever unconsummated?!"

"Yes!" Remus says desperately. At least he tries to say "yes" but somehow the words that come out of his mouth are "O, Heathcliff, can you ever forgive me!" in despairing tones.

"O, Cathy," Heathcliff breathes passionately, coming in very close.

"You said that before," Remus says. At least he tries to say "you said that before" but somehow the words that come out of his mouth are "O, Heathcliff!" which he has already said, and then "The sorrow in my bosom aches for you, for you, and only and ever for you!"

The wind wuthers pityingly.

Heathcliff, who has a dark and brooding Sirius face, has eyes deep and shadowed and full of torment. Remus realizes that this is all somehow his fault — not just the deep, not just the shadowed, not just the full of torment, but the situation itself. Sirius, wearing these clothes. Remus, with one hand of Heathcliff's clasped to his nonexistent bosom, in an uncomfortable dress. The sense of impending doom, rhythmic, like two lovers' heartbeats joined as one. The exclamation points! All of it, somehow, needs to have someone to blame, and that someone has to be himself. He wonders if those tears welling up in his long-lashed eyes are real or if they are caused by the dream or if he is crying for the lost innocence of reading, gone, gone, forever, banished by these ridiculous dreams he's never once asked to have.

"O, MY Cathy," Heathcliff murmurs. Remus can smell his breath. Breakfasty. "Tell me, then, that you love me, and for one brief moment before the clouds break and the Heavens rain down their misery upon ours there shall be happiness again between us!"

"I am going to throw up on your overcoat," Remus says. At least he tries to say "I am going to throw up on your overcoat" but instead he makes a long, pained sound, almost like a duck stepped on and squawking out all the air in its body at once.

They kiss with the passion of all the stars in one convulsive burst of hypnotic light!

Oddly enough, it feels incredibly good.

Naturally, this is the point when someone outside and down the street decides to crash their car, or almost crash their car, and the world explodes in a flash of horns honking and stupid Muggles shrieking at one another and tires squealing into chaos. Remus falls off the side of his bed with a low groan and curls in on himself, realizing that something Perfectly Natural is happening between his legs.

He brushes his teeth for twenty-one minutes and eighteen seconds until it goes away, mumbling "Oh, *Cathy* my rear end" all the way.

***

Remus sits at a desk.

This is fine. Oh, God. This is fine. He is a man, sitting at a desk, and that's terribly familiar and terribly comforting. The desk is enormous and dark, rich wood, and through the arched Gothic windows the sun filters dustily onto the wood. Remus is peeling an apple, very slowly; his hands are nicked and his left wrist has the red notch of a lifetime's archery etched across it.

Down the hall, suddenly, come echoing footsteps, heavy and jangling with metal, and an explosion of boisterous, familiar laughter amid the tumble of voices. The door of the study slams open and his brother stands before him, grinning, his dark hair wild and his face a sheen of sweat. "Brother! Have you been in here all this time?"

"I did not wish to be in the way," Remus demurs, rising.

His brother waves the comment away magnanimously. "I have been searching for you all afternoon! My men say there is no man that can take me drink for drink, and I have told them that only you can do it. They—" he throws an impatient but fond glare over his shoulder "—they do not believe me."

Remus sets the apple down on his desk, thumb along the lip of smooth wood, his fingers callused with distant memories. He sees the way the sun slants in through the high windows of the study and catches motes of dust on the air, and knows he loves it here more than anywhere else. His brother smells of sweat and drink and metal, which together mean long hours of practice and an early start to the day's end. "Does the sun set already?" he asks. "I had not meant to be so idle for so long!"

"You avoid the question, little brother." Boromir moves close behind him, quieter now in this quiet place. His men are gone, following the logic only a dream can lend, though Remus' literary core rebels against the inconsistency. "My men do not believe that Faramir, younger brother to Boromir of Gondor, can drink his elder beneath the table — and you stand for it!" The laughter in Boromir's eyes is a fond, fraternal thing. These are and are not Boromir of Gondor's eyes. Remus reaches out, touching the young man's cheek, with two sets of remembering. "Little brother," Boromir says. "Faramir."

"I have been at study all day," Remus says. Yes, that's right, isn't it? The sweet, musty smell of old scrolls and the sprawl of scribes' writing, poetry and history and song in one upon the crackling page. Every brown, torn corner, every minute devoted to the next word and the next and always the word that follows the one before, while Boromir, outside, clashes metal against metal, in the present always. What way is this to live his own life, Remus wonders, though he loves it still.

"You have been at study all day," Boromir repeats, "yes, I see it in you. Will you always lock yourself behind the page, brother? Does no hunt excite you, no battle make your blood eager? Does no brother's love make warm the rooms you live in, warmer than this cold corner where the days waste themselves to idleness and despair?"

"That is not what this is," Remus protests.

"Come down from your tower," Boromir insists. "If you will not drink with me, then speak with me."

"Remus," Mrs. Lupin says. "Remus, yesterday you promised you'd help Mr. Tilden mow his lawn this morning, don't you remember?"

"Madness," Remus mumbles into his pillow. "Madness madness madness."

Mrs. Lupin decides she doesn't entirely understand her son.

***

Remus paces back and forth in his box, fumbling nervously with the buttons on his pink jacket. It's a new jacket, just finished today by some new bespoke at Saville Row, and he thought it would make him feel better, but it doesn't, and now of course because the world is a cruel and unfair place he has to pretend not to be nervous because a man he only vaguely recognizes leans in through the red door and whispers, "Mr. Wilde, the Times critic to see you,"

"Of course, of course," Remus says impatiently. "Send him in, of course."

The man nods, and a moment later the theater critic for the Times, tastemaker for the entire mass of London upper-class twits, is standing in front of him with a supercilious little smile on his face. Remus smiles charmingly at him. "Good day, Mr. Fitzherbert. Dare I say you are breathless with anticipation? Another Valentine's Day snatched from the grasps of the St. James wives, ha ha?"

"All of London delights," Fitzherbert intones smoothly, all British, as if deliberately denouncing Remus' accent. Remus spares a moment to hate him, and to observe how stodgy his waistcoat is. "Can you see how many people have fought their way through the blizzard to see your fourth? I need hardly tell you I am most excited."

Remus nods, briefly. "May I offer you some champagne, Mr. Fitzherbert?"

The critic holds up an impassive, fleshy hand. "Thank you, Mr. Wilde, I do not take drink before I review."

"You might enjoy it more," Remus offers.

"Mnnh," Fitzherbert simpers. "I might, mightn't I. Would you enjoy that? Oh, no. I shan't have my senses in any way tampered with. I want to enjoy this to its fullest."

The corner of Remus' left eye twitches. Critics. Those who can't do... Still, he finds that he's smiling at Mr. Fitzherbert, almost pitying him as he waits like death, eager for a failure, desperate for the opportunity to be scathing.

Remus likes his play. Perhaps, as the voice of doubt always tells him, it isn't as good as his others: but he likes this play, and has full faith in it. Humor, he thinks, and hopes it isn't too sophisticated for the megalomaniac Mr. Fitzherbert to understand with one half of his brain, and, with the other, prays that it is.

"Well," he says, having nothing now that he can no longer pace, "allow me to just slip backstage for a moment and speak — speak to my actors, mm?"

"By all means," Mr. Fitzherbert says. "Mr. Wilde — this is, after all, your night." Remus makes a mental note of how the man looks in this one moment, fingers steepled, one leg crossed over the other, podgy but menacing nonetheless. Like a modern gargoyle, waiting to come alive and strike those who dare to be different with their intellects right in the jugular.

"Do enjoy," Remus says, and scurries out.

Backstage is a comforting, horrifying mess. A tiny, frightened-looking woman with her arms full of powderpuffs almost spills all over his jacket, but Remus whoops and trips out of her way just in time and slides round the corner into the dressing-room. Cecily is pouting into the mirror wearing nothing but a negligee and a bustle that matches her red hair; Lady Bracknell is in the corner, bellowing warm-ups against the wall. There's George, wonderful comforting George, practicing his Jack glare into the mirror as someone yanks on his untamable dark hair. And — ah — there, lounging against the wall, is his Algernon, all perfect grooming and lazy grace. "Oscar," he says with a brilliant smile, heaving himself upright, hands in his pockets. "Not in your box looking panicked? The world is on its head."

"You," Remus says dangerously, "had better give the best performance of your otherwise unremarkable young life."

Algernon rolls his eyes. "Honestly. Authors. Every performance I give is a masterpiece, as you know perfectly well." This time the smile is dark, sensual. Remus blinks.

The stage manager yelps out the five-minutes-to-curtain. George gets up from his chair, straightens his glasses, runs a hand rakishly through his hair and pauses to give Remus a salute and a brief grin before sauntering into the wings.

"Well?" Remus says. "Go on. Get out of my sight, you ridiculous wastrel. Don't let me be eviscerated by the London press, or I will have you hunted down."

"Mm," Algernon says darkly, "well, let's see if I remember any of my lines, shall we?"

Remus makes a strangled noise, and Algernon tips an invisible hat to him and slips by. His fingers brush against Remus' waist lightly as he goes, leaving a smear of makeup on the garish cloth, and Remus shivers and smiles idiotically after him for a moment; then shakes himself and jogs back through the corridors, up the theater stairs, to the comfort (and prodigious amounts of alcohol) that his box can provide. He looks down at the program, trying to still his shaking fingers, as the lights go down.

The Importance of Being Serious, *it says. A New Comedy by Oscar Wilde.*

"YAUGH," Remus says, waking up. "YAUGH!" he insists, when no one answers him. "It's 'The Importance of Being *Earnest*' for bloody — for Christ's — for Merlin's — YAUGH!"

And, he notes not moments later, he's being Perfectly Natural in his pyjama bottoms again.

This is horrendous.

***

Another desk. An ancient Victrola. A collection of apparatus that look almost as if they are devices for torture. A notepad, an expensive pen, a study filled with books. A large volume open on the importance of diction.

"Once again, Ms. Doolittle," Remus hears Pickering say, as if he has heard it a thousand times. He looks over his shoulder. Pickering is Peter. All right. That's new. "Please?"

"Mahbles im mah mouf," Eliza says. She looks like Sirius. In fact, upon closer, bleary inspection, she is *Sirius.*

Remus feels triumphant. This time, he thinks, his innermost thoughts aren't giving him frilly panties.

They're giving one of his best, male friends frilly panties.

Remus feels a little less triumphant.

"Try to make yourself heard*," he says, instinctively. "As if the marbles aren't there."*

"E-ee oh oo oo ay," Eliza snaps.

"There's no need for vulgarity," Remus says calmly. "I am merely attempting to teach you to speak like a person."

Eliza makes a retching motion and spits out the marbles, which skitter all over the floor, and says furiously "Wot kind of 'person' goes around with marbles in their bleedin' mouf*, I'd like to know? And what's more—" She — he — lifts up her skirt, showing a great quantity of hairy leg, and charges over to Remus, shaking with fury, "'buy a flower off a poor girl' don't*

mean 'turn a poor girl into a bleedin' monkey' do it? Nor it don't mean 'stuff a poor girl's mouf wif foriegn objecks,' do it? If you're a professor o' language why don't you work on your bloody comprehension *skills?! Didn't arsk you to meddle with me, did I? Can't keep your nose out! Always trying to improve! I were just fine selling flowers, didn't nobody ever put things in my mouth and natter on about my grammar! And what if I don't* want *to be a lady?"*

Given her exceedingly deep — although curiously piercing at the same time — tone of voice, Remus thinks rather hysterically, she may not really have the option.

"Oh my," whispers Pickering.

Remus takes off his glasses, polishes them on his sleeve, and tries not to scream. "Eliza, you must have some patience; some reliance on the program. Don't you want chocolate every day, and fine clothes, and a Guard officer with a fine moustache?"

Eliza eyes him with deep suspicion and curls her slightly stubbly lip. "It ain't worth it; and I don't know as how I believe you. I can't do it. You *don't even think I can do it. I'll be awful forever and all your* improving *can't fix a bloody thing."*

"I must insist," Remus says, with a clinical tone that frightens even himself, "you replace those marbles, or find new ones, and continue the lesson, or else we will never know your capabilities, and shall wonder forever and always. What do you say to that?"

"I want to throttle you, that's *wot I say to that!" Eliza howls. She charges Remus, and a for a moment he has the impression that this* is *it, the end come at last, charging him down like a yeti or some giant player of masculine but intellectually useless sports. His mind, at this moment of death, terrifies him, the slight, upper-crust balking, the shock which replaces horror, the offended sensibilities rather than anything deeper or more visceral.*

"Eliza," he hears himself say, "please reconsider."

"Perhaps," Pickering attempts, "perhaps, we might postpone the marbles to another time?"

"Why don't you *try talkin' with them marbles in your mouth,* you'll *see 'ow easy it ain't!"*

"How easy it isn't*," Remus says quietly.*

Eliza draws a deep breath in. However smart Eliza is or isn't, however capable, seems to have no place here. Remus supposes that her sensibilities, no matter how coarse, are still feminine. Which is hard to compromise, considering the young man towering above him, red in the face and determined to have some retribution.

"'Ow easy it isn't*," Eliza acquiesces.*

"Very good," Pickering begins.

*"*How*," Remus insists. He holds a hand up to silence his unfortunately kind friend. Eliza grinds her teeth together.*

""Ow*," she whispers.*

"With an h," Remus says firmly. "It's just like breathing out."

"Hhhhh," she says, still glowering at him. "Hhhhhh..ow."

"And the whole thing," Remus prompts.

"Hhhh....ow easy it ai...sn't," Eliza mumbles. Then she looks up, and says in a voice that is shockingly like Sirius's, "why is it I always do what you want?"

"Do you?" Remus says. He is perplexed by her sudden ability to articulate herself, but is trying, just like a true English gentleman, not to let any emotion show.

"Well it's obvious, innit," Eliza says patiently. Unfortunately she is back to the nails-on-chalkboard. "Look, I'll show you: say 'jump.'"

"Jump," Remus says dubiously.

"Hhh...ow hhhh....igh?" Eliza says, and smiles.

Remus bursts awake to find that he is upside-down on his bed with his head dangling out the window and his feet on his pillow and a taste in his mouth not unlike fur. "Agh," he says miserably, to no one, and then "why me?" After a few moments' contemplation, he gets up and very carefully hobbles to the shower, where he spends the next hour.

"Don't use up all the hot water!" Mrs. Lupin yells through the door twenty minutes in.

"Not possible," Remus returns, through gritted teeth, and shivers.

***

The first thing Remus thinks when he sees the snow falling is that there isn't any snow in the middle of summer. He taps the glass of the window, peering down onto the winding, cobbled street. It's early morning. Somewhere, a bell jingles. The air smells of slow fires and meat roasting, and pine, and cold humidity. Though the clouds have drawn tight together in the sky he feels something come over him, ridiculous and wild and full of good cheer. Christmas, he realizes. It can be no time other than Christmastime.

His hands are warm in fingerless gloves, and a scarf has been wound tight about his neck to keep out the winter chill. Across the long, unfamiliar room a fire crackles in an austere fireplace. He tries to place himself, in time and in space, noting the lines of his coat and the odd shape of the hat on the desk before him. Horse hooves clatter over stone, fading in and out of his world.

For the first time in years, he has no urge to grunt the usual Bah! Humbug.

This, however, is more than just mere lack of open hostility: this is downright joy, the wild delirium of realizing how wonderful it is to be alive, and he runs to the window and flings it open, so that the wind rushes in at him and snow swirls around his head. There is a small, dark-haired urchin outside his house, with a hat in one hand and a mournful expression.

"Ho, boy!" Remus calls. "What's to-day?"

"Eh?" the boy returns, in some surprise.

"What's to-day, my fine fellow?" Remus yells, feeling utterly giddy. There are bells in his head,

"Today? Why, it's Christmas day!" the boy exclaims, looking up at him with no little worry. Remus has never felt so happy in all his life to hear of Christmas, and the boy with the dark hair is staring at him as if he might pull out a knife, so Remus hurls a crown at him; it is Christmas, after all, and everyone should feel as wonderful as he does. He lets out a whoop and slams the window and spins madly around the room, and then stops short, suddenly remembering something: another boy, and a Christmas that may well be quite as joyless as his always have been, as downstairs the door jingles to signal the entrance of his clerk.

"But I hate *Dickens!" Remus tries to wail, and can make no noise at all.*

He takes the steps down two at a time. He knows what he must do, and assumes it will end when he's done it. Even the joy that wells up in him irrepressibly cannot erase the nag of purple prose behind his eyes; the two fight for control of his emotions and leave him dizzy, as if he has been written by a man paid by the word. In a way, he supposes, it's not all that far from the truth.

First: he must tell his clerk the day is his to enjoy. Second: he must send the urchin for a turkey larger than most young boys. Third: he must wait for the culmination, whatever twist of literature and his subconscious have planned for him this night. Fourth: when he wakes up, he must consult a book to make the madness stop. It's all very simple before he leaps off the bottom step.

His nose feels pink for the first time in years. It's very distracting.

Bob Cratchit, who has a round face and unkempt hair the color of sand, is waiting for him in the office. He looks like Peter when Sirius is in a bad mood, cringing and trying to hide himself behind chairs.

"Go home," Remus says. He doesn't remember the words, not exactly, and now that thought has overridden instinct, his mind can't grasp what comes next. He struggles for something appropriate. "And, er, be with your family!" It doesn't sound Victorian. It doesn't sound like Scrooge, either.

Cratchit stares at him.

Yes, *Remus* wants to say, I have lost my mind.

"Go on!" he says, in a way that he hopes will be construed as "desperately merry" rather than "frightening." "Go home and be with, er, wossface, and Tiny Tim," and then there he is: at a long wooden table, surrounded by glowing candles and pine and happy, round faces and mound upon mound of Christmas puddings. There is a turkey in there, somewhere, but the puddings command attention.

"I would like to propose a toast," Cratchit says, his good-natured face quite red, raising his glass, "to Mr. Scrooge: for finally giving in to the wonderful gaiety of Christmas, as we all knew he would: and for sharing his wealth with all of us gathered here to-night."

"Hear, hear!" cry the voices from around the table, and "hooray for old Scrooge!"

"A merry Christmas to all of us!" Cratchit roars, and there is much foot-stomping and approving noise.

Remus chances a look around. Everyone he has ever met is somewhere at that table, nodding at him, knowledgeable, cheerful, happy to see him. He tries to smile.

And a thin, childish warble comes up from the chair by his: "I am *glad you're at our Christmas, Mr. Scrooge!"*

Remus looks down. Sirius looks up at him and grins, a shining, gap-toothed face perched on a scrawny body and immense pair of crutches. "Isn't it lovely, Christmas? I did try to tell you."

"Er," Remus says.

"God bless us," Sirius lisps adorably, "every one!"

Remus wakes up screaming.

After his mother comes running in with a plank of wood raised high to defend her son from murderers and his father spills hot tea into his pants from the racket and Remus has apologized and explained and washed his father's pants, he knows there is only one thing that can possibly help him now.

Research.

The book is called, simply, "Dream Interpretation." Remus's mother bought it some time ago, when she was having a particularly exasperating recurring nightmare about the house being overrun by fleas; since then it has lain abandoned in the Lupins' downstairs study, all 1600 pages of it growing mustier by the month. Remus has always believed Somniomency to be somewhat wooly-headed, and it has, therefore, been one of the few books in the house that he has never touched. (The others, incidentally, are a vegetarian cookbook and a blue-bound monstrosity entitled 'Baby's First...' which he believes may contain pictures.) Now, however, he is willing to take back all the ill words he has ever said about the science if only it can make it all stop.

He flips to the index, and then to the Ls. "Literature, dreams involving" is, miraculously, an entry: it points him to page 783. Remus's heart speeds up a little, anticipating salvation.

First, there is a list of questions. Question one asks him if he has been reading too much. On a separate piece of paper, he writes *1. I don't believe in reading too much.* This means, he decides after a moment's pause, the by the book's standards he has indeed be reading too much. He makes note of it, and moves on to question two. *Is the nature of your dreams sexual?* Remus feels a flare of heat burst in his belly and burn his throat. *2. Yes* feels ridiculous, but necessary to get to the bottom of the whole mess. *If the nature of your dreams is sexual, please turn the page.* Remus turns the page. He wants an index of authors, something tangible, something reassuring.

Instead, the book says *Perhaps you should consider starting a dream diary.*

Remus stares at it.

"Is that *all* you have to offer?" he asks, after nothing happens.

The book says nothing in return, which Remus decides means Yes, as well.

"Well bugger you," he mutters. The book continues to say nothing, except *A proper dream log should be in an empty book, one which gives you Good Vibes and smells preferably of Old Leather.* Remus is half-expecting a

merchandise plug. There isn't one. It's cold comfort. *Take careful note of every scenario and recurring characters, recurring themes, and recurring sexual desires.* "I don't want to relive that," Remus tells the book. The book doesn't care. *We find that, often, Illustrations Help.* "I hate your capitals," Remus says. *Illustrations are Good Way to Solve The Puzzle.* "You're doing that on purpose," Remus accuses. *Even the Smallest Illustration just might help.* "I can't draw, but I suppose that doesn't matter, either," Remus mumbles. *Perhaps, by seeing your Dreams Visualized, you will be able to spot patterns heretofore unseen by any but the Inner Eye, which will aid in recognizing the implications of your dreams.* "Thanks," grumbles Remus, "that's very helpful. No wonder mum put you away." (*See also,*) the book adds, in what Remus considers to be rather smug type, (*Sexual Dreams, pp. 32-203.*)

Remus stares at the book. It offers no insight, no truth, no revelations, no answers to all his problems. It isn't going to cure him. It isn't going to keep the deranged workings of his innermost thoughts from pasting Sirius' head onto Tiny Tim, or ruining all good books forever and ever until Remus succumbs at last to madness and padded walls.

He can only do what the book wants him to do, and pray for a miracle.

It's time to find a smelly old leather diary which gives him Good Vibes.

Whatever that means.

***





Notes:
- Sirius as Mercutio
- myself as Benvolio
- James and Lily as Romeo and Juliet, respectively
- My apologies to Shakespeare
- I cannot draw
- This is stupid.

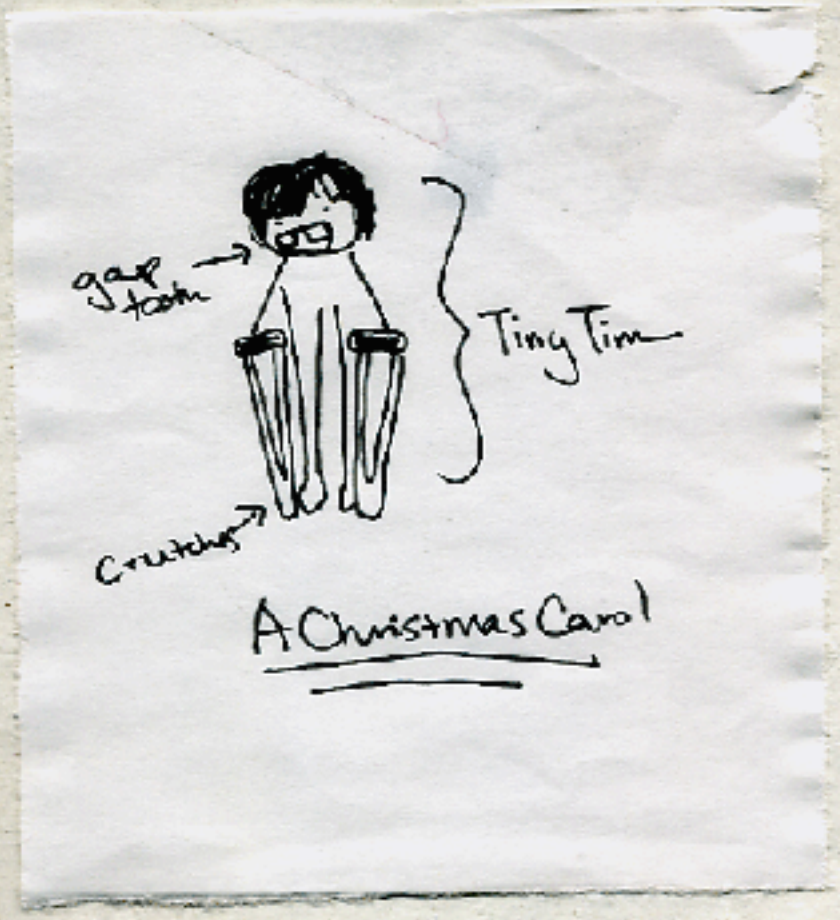


Notes: - Sirius as the count (Dante)
- myself as Bertuccio
- at least I am still a man in this one.
- no James, Lily or anyone else in this one → significance? (perhaps Sirius-centric. Bugger.)



Notes: (I also had a shawl.)

- Sirius as Heathcliff
- lots of Wuthering wind



Notes: I don't even like Dickens.

***

On reflection, Sirius thinks later, they probably should have left the house, or at least the living room.

He wasn't really thinking that far ahead, what with James and his family out visiting an aunt, work not starting until eight and him only half-dressed and Sophie wearing his favorite yellow sundress when she knocked on the door; but still, he might have at least considered the possibility that Something Too Horrible to Contemplate might happen.

But he didn't, and now it's too late.

"Er," he says, mind blank with panic.

"Er," Mr. Potter says, staring frantically at the wall. "Scuse me, terribly sorry, should have knocked—"

"No no, excuse *us*, Monsieur Potter," Sophie says apologetically, slipping out from under Sirius's arm and smoothing her dress with remarkable presence of mind. Sirius gapes at her, fishlike, feeling red heat suffuse his face right to the tips of his ears. "We did not mean to disturb you."

"No no!" Mr. Potter protests. He's a little hysterical, still trying to look anywhere but at his sofa. "Not disturbed a bit, Sophie, not at all, perfectly natural, everyone's got their pants on, ha ha, just came home a little early, going to go put my hat away," and bolts.
"Oh god," Sirius says. He buries his head in the pillows. "Oh God, oh God, oh God—"

"Oh, stop it," Sophie says. A little laugh bubbles at the edge of her sweet, dark voice. "You are like a little boy. It's only a kiss; or a few kisses." She is slipping her shoes on, entangling her fingers in his hair, and Sirius lets out a little moan, not comforted.

"He's James's *dad!* I'm living in their *house!*"

"And you are twenty-one years old," Sophie says gently. This is not strictly true, of course, but Sirius doesn't consider it a lie, exactly, since his French is terribly rusty and "vingt-et-un" *could* perfectly well mean seventeen. "He is an adult, cheri. You both are."

"Right," Sirius says. He gives her a wobbly grin. "Right! Adult! Yes! All of us! So *vignt-et-un!*" Sophie smiles at him, a little patient, a little kind, a little French and therefore a little wicked. Sirius thinks how very attractive she is, and is somewhat comforted.

Unfortunately, his reprieve is short-lived. That evening, after dinner, after Sophie has left and Sirius feels sure he's safe at last, he finds himself alone in James' room with Mr. Potter. Trapped. Lost at sea. *James*, he thinks, *ultimate betrayal, bathtime my arse, must kill him*, before Mr. Potter clears his throat awkwardly. "We thought," he begins, "we thought it would be a good idea to talk about — certain — to talk about — in light of your relationship with Sophie — and it being our pleasure but our duty also to have you under our roof — our roof — and so we thought it would be best to talk about — certain — to talk." Mr. Potter adjusts his collar and loosens his tie. Sirius stares at him. It can't be. "Do you see," Mr. Potter perseveres bravely, "when you come to a certain age, there are certain desires that certainly come to the forefront, I'm certain,

of any young man's mind."

"Urgk," Sirius says. All that comes to mind after is, "Certainly."

"I bought some — some literature," Mr. Potter continues, shuffling through a few pamphlets in his lap. *Pamphlets,* Sirius thinks. *I will never be able to look this man in the eye again.* He isn't even able to look this man in the eye now, staring down at his shoes and wanting, more than anything else, to have the simple life of a shoelace. He'd only ever have to worry about fraying at the edges, or getting chewed on by puppies. That would be the life, even if it didn't have any pudding. "Well," Mr. Potter says, "how does this one sound? *It's Perfectly Natural.*"

Sirius chokes. "What's, uhm. Sir. What's perfectly natural?"

"Well," Mr. Potter says. Sirius wonders who, of the two of them, is more uncomfortable. He imagines them, squared off in the ring, engaged in a competition of exploding heads. They'll be graded on shades, what color their faces turn, and how quickly their brains pop out their ears with embarrassment. "Well, *it* is."

"*It,*" Sirius repeats. *Oh my God, oh my God, oh my God.* There is no escape. All is black. "Sir, are you...er. Oh God."

"Yes," Mr. Potter says, going greenish. He stares at the wall just behind Sirius's left ear as he charges on in a ghastly, jovial sort of way, "Yes indeed, Sirius my boy. We just thought you should know that while...*it*...is of course a beautiful and natural part of the human experience and of course, er, a wonderful expression of love between two consenting adults or, ha ha, nearly adults, there are of course certain...precautions that need to be, er, taken — things that need to be taken into account. Er."

"Yes!" Sirius exclaims, through the haze of panic and degradation. "Yes, absolutely. Precautions. Already taken and...so on. Sophie and I, very precautious. Not that...they need to be...taken, because...not necessary! And it's all in the pamphlets!"

"Righto!" Mr. Potter says with gratitude so deep it is almost tangible. He catapults himself off Sirius's bed and claps Sirius heartily on the shoulder; so heartily, in fact, that Sirius lets out a surprised "oof!" and doubles over. "You're like a son to me, Sirius, lad."

"Thanks, Mr. Potter," Sirius mumbles, trying to breathe and weighing, in his head, all the various methods of suicide. "Really. Thanks."

"Let's keep it out of the house next time, shall we, ha ha?" Mr. Potter says, and then, "oh, don't forget, er, pamphlets." He drops them on Sirius's blanket like something dead and rotting and covered in carrion flies and then flees the room.

"I want to die," Sirius says, to no one, and, almost on reflex, opens a pamphlet.

They are all illustrated.

Sirius lets out a little noise of anguish and crawls under his bed to wait for death.

***

James' mother corners him on the way to the shower with a look that says Don't Think You're Safe. James makes a break for it, knowing that, if he times it right, he can leap out the bathroom window to his death and disfigurement just in time to avoid the inevitable. Unluckily, the inevitable has just finished washing the floors and manages to tackle him as he slips on a wet spot and falls headfirst into his own, lamentable, fate.

"Well," Mrs. Potter says, "how are you, then, son?"

"You're sitting on me," James groans. "I think you've perforated a lung."

Mrs. Potter pats him on the messy head. "I have pamphlets for you," she says. "They suggest speaking to your children about sexual intercourse—"

"AGH," James howls, trying to keep the sound of his mother saying *sexual intercourse* from reverberating endlessly through his brain, "AGH AGH AGH AGH AGH."

"—about *sexual intercourse* before they reach the age of eighteen," his mother insists, "and so here I am."

James knows now he will never, ever have sex. Some day, in the near future, once he has worn Lily down for the second time, and he finds himself locked with her in a passionate embrace, her lips sweet and her hair against his hands, he will remember suddenly and without warning this lone image of his mother, peering down at him from behind thick-rimmed spectacles, her gray hair wild from humidity and chores, saying *sexual intercourse!* triumphantly. And that will be the end of that.

"Sexual intercourse," Mrs. Potter says cheerfully, settling herself on James's stomach, "is one of the most beautiful things that two people can share, assuming that of course those two people are both willing and enthusiastic."

"La la la la!" James shrieks, slamming his hands over his ears. "*Oh to be in England, now that April's there*—"

"—and," his mother continues, unperturbed, "both are fully aware of the risks and consequences that sexual intercourse brings with it. Of course, magical medicine has made great inroads into prevention and relief for many afflicted with Sexually Transmitted Diseases—"

"—*and whoever wakes in England sees some morning unaware*—"

"—but pregnancy," his mother barrels on mercilessly, gently removing his fingers from his ears and holding his flailing arms in her iron grip, "lasts forever, and the emotional consequences of an unplanned or unwilling sexual encounter can be lifelong."

"Did you get this out of a *book?!*" James screeches. "I am no longer your son. Why are you *doing* this? Did you catch Sirius out with Sophie and now *I* have to suffer?"

"You need to be informed." His mother beams at him. "Now, of course, I'm sure you're very curious about all these new feelings you're having, and I want you to know that you needn't be ashamed of any of them, and I want you to ask me some of those burning questions."

James gapes at her.

"Your parents," she says, "can be a fountain of knowledge about sex in all its many forms."

James's brain shuts down completely. After a moment he manages to croak out, "Mum?"

"Yes, dear? Don't be afraid to ask the tough questions."

"I have to go take a shower." Forever, he adds silently.

"You are a little ripe," she agrees. "New glands, of course. Puberty! What a beautiful thing!"

"I can never speak to you again," James moans hollowly. "I'm going to move to Siberia and become a nun. Thank you, mum, for shaping my life this way."

"Dear, I understand you're a little hesitant," his mother says placidly, and kisses him on the forehead before helping herself up to her feet. "But please understand that we — your father and I — know from personal experience that sex can and should be one of the world's most beautiful things, and you should never be ashamed of yourself sexually or—"

"*HOLY GOD IN HEAVEN*," James bellows, hurling himself into the bathroom and slamming the door.

For a few moments he just sits on the toilet, trying not to weep like a child.

Then, from behind the shower curtain, someone whispers, "Prongs?"

"Pads?"

"Is your dad out there?"

"I'm never going to have sex," James says. "Life no longer has any meaning. Neither do breasts. I'm becoming a nun. Do you want to help me research nunneries?"

"I am going to become a castrato," Sirius replies in a dead voice, "and sing at the opera. Why, Prongs? Why, why, *why?*"

"It's *your* fault," James hisses, "you and your French poodle."

"I am full of misery," Sirius says. "The end is nigh."

"I blame you," James insists, without any vigor to the accusation. "You and your uncontrolled urges."

Sirius' head thunks as it hits the tiled wall. "My pamphlets are illustrated."

"My mum is a madwoman."

"Your *dad* tried to tell me about the *facts of life*."

"My mum used the phrase *sexual intercourse*."

"He said the word *certainly* at least ten times in one sentence."

"She spoke about *her* and *my dad* and — *you* know."

"Oh God." Sirius peeks out from behind the curtain. "You win."

***

Remus realizes halfway through dinner that no one has spoken since they sat down to eat. A furtive glance up from his potatoes and he realizes his parents are staring at him, as if they're in the middle of the Sahara: his mum and dad two circling vultures, and himself a helpless gazelle on his last leg. He tries not to choke on his food, forcing it down his constricting throat. "Uhm," he says. "Good peas?"

"We have to talk," Mrs. Lupin says.

"What did I do?" Remus asks. "I didn't do anything."

"No, no, no, of course not," his father says kindly. "You didn't do anything at all."

"Is one of you dying?" Remus asks, fighting the urge to panic.

His mother laughs and exchanges a quick glance with his father. Remus flinches. "Of course not, darling. We just — well, we noticed that you've borrowed my book."

"Your...book," Remus repeats. Oh God, do they know? They couldn't know. Maybe literary dreams are some kind of Lupin family thing, and when they start then you're about to be initiated into the Lupin Family Secret. "I just — I wanted to look up some, er, dreams."

"We know," his father says. He leans across the table, putting a comforting hand on Remus' shoulder. "We just wanted you to know that these dreams happen to everyone."

Remus gapes at him, aware that his mouth is unattractively filled with half-chewed peas. "Wh — they do?"

"Of course they do, sweetheart." His mother smiles at him, fond and understanding. The panic rises in Remus's throat. "You see, when you reach a certain age, your body starts to have...certain urges."

"No," Remus says quickly. "No urges. There are no urges."

"Of course there are," his mother presses, "and they're perfectly normal. It's hormones, you know. A function of the body. Nothing to worry about."

"No urges," Remus insists. "No urges."

"There's no need to deny it," his mother soothes. "We understand that you must be feeling — confused, and alone, and possibly intimidated. It is, after all, a new phenomenon. You must be asking questions, like 'What's happening to me?' and 'Am I the only one?' But you aren't alone, dear."

"I went through it, myself," his father says, slicing a piece of roast.

"No urges," Remus says again. He's forgotten any other words exist.

"Now, Remus," Mrs. Lupin says patiently, "we thought that, since you enjoy reading so much, a few books on the subject would prove *very* useful."

"Am I still speaking English?" Remus babbles. "It sounds like English to me. Why aren't you listening? No urges. *No urges!*"

"Well," Mrs. Lupin attempts, "the man at the store suggested this cartoon version for young men. Do you want to take a look?"

"Not if it's about urges," Remus says, feeling hysterical.

"I get it," his father says, winking largely at him. "No urges. Right? We'll just leave these in the living room. *Just in case.*"

Remus stares down at his peas. From now on, he supposes he won't be able to eat peas. He'll forever associate them with this sick, desperate nausea, his mother's helpful expression, his father's demented, lewd wink of conspiratorial understanding. "Ack," Remus says.

"Remember: we're always here if you need us," says his mother comfortingly.

"Ack," says Remus again, and buries his face in his hands.

***

Peter knows he is in trouble when he hears his mother shrieking something from the living room. What he does not know is what he's in trouble for. It might be anything, except that he hasn't done anything, but that doesn't really narrow it down.

"Peter Wimsley Pettigrew, get your tail down to this room this *instant*!"

Peter scuttles downstairs, not really having any choice in the matter. His mother is glowering at him, holding up something in her hand that looks like...a sock. A very small, rubbery sock.

"Where do you suppose I found this?" she says, putting her hands on her hips.

Peter has no idea. It could be anywhere, really. He leaves socks everywhere. It might not even be his sock. It's probably one of his sister's socks.

"Er," he says. "I dunno."

His mother looks like she's going to explode. Peter imagines her exploding, and then imagines that if she did, it would probably smell like disinfectant. "In the *wash*," his mother booms. The floor beneath Peter's

feet shakes. It's almost like an earthquake, only his mother might make him eat soap again, and that's far worse than the world opening up to swallow him whole. "And where do you think it *came* from?"

"I don't understand," Peter says numbly. "Socks are supposed to go in the wash. Aren't they?"

His mother's lower lip quivers. Her eyes flash with flecks of red fire, demonic and accusatory. Peter shrinks back. "Intercourse!" his mother howls. "It is a *filthy* practice, riddled with *disease!* Into the bath, young man! *Two hours!*"

Peter turns tail and runs.

"Do you have any idea?" his mother's voice follows him. "The warts — *herpes* — untold infections — unsanitary — disgusting — *filthy* — no son of mine—!"

Peter slams the door to the bathroom behind him and locks it.

It didn't even look like one of his socks. It was too *small* to be one of his socks. It must have been one of his sister's, got mixed up in the wrong laundry. He's not entirely sure where all this talk of intercourse comes in, and how warts got thrown in the mix, but he doesn't often listen to his mum and secretly encourages dust bunnies as pets, until she takes them away. It isn't as if he *has* to listen to her.

Oh well, Peter thinks, and runs a nice, hot bath.



This story is based on characters and situations created and owned by JK Rowling, various publishers including but not limited to Bloomsbury Books, Scholastic Books and Raincoast Books, and Warner Bros., Inc. No money is being made and no copyright or trademark infringement is intended.

***The Shoebox Project* by LadyJaida and Dorkorific**
http://www.livejournal.com/community/shoebox_project

Part Fourteen: August, 1976
A Series of Unfortunately Awkward Events.

Remus wonders as the train pulls into the station why it is he's wearing a scarf in August. Ostensibly, he *knows* why he's wearing a scarf: his mother thought the train ride might be cold, or it might be unseasonably chilly in Devonshire, or he might need to strangle a serial killer on the train and a scarf would come in handy. However, now that the train is pulling into the station and his mother is no longer winding it seventeen times around his neck — rather more like trying to choke him than for protection against the elements and the unforeseen but no doubt tragic future — Remus wonders why it is he's still wearing the scarf. A sense of loyalty, perhaps, or duty, or the fact that it smells nice.

All right, Lupin, he tells himself. *Don't look too eager, the Potter family is nice but they're not that nice.* He slides a very subtle glance out the window at the slowing movement of the station, a few families here and there waiting for relatives they no doubt despise, a small fat man with a very large hat, a group of young wizards trying to look Muggle and failing. No Potters yet. Remus unwraps and rewraps and unwraps and rewraps his Train Chocolate. *Stop being nervous,* he repeats, mentally, for the thousandth time. *These are nice people who will not eat you. They will have put dungbombs in your bed but they are nice people who will not eat you.*

The train grinds to a halt, shaking awake the worn-looking old witch in the seat across from him, who stretches hugely and favors him with a toothless grin. "Up for the hols, me boy?" she says in a voice like ancient paper.

"Yes," Remus says. Trying to smile at her while simultaneously scanning the platform for the still-absent Potters is giving him eyestrain.

"Don't touch any of the sheep," the old witch warns. "I read about holidaymakers touching our sheep. Ain't never hurt anyone, a sheep." After giving him one long, narrow look, full of deep accusation, she falls promptly back asleep.

"Er. I won't," Remus says, speaking carefully, so as not to wake her. With one last befuddled look, he grabs his suitcase off the rack and scurries out.

The platform is shrouded in steam. Remus tries not to *look* as if he's looking, but his heart is beginning to sink or his stomach is beginning to rise. One of the very un-Muggle boys is giving him a withering look, and Remus doesn't blame him. His Train Chocolate is beginning to melt in his pocket and he supposes the large dark stain on his trousers and the fact that he is still wearing a large, prickly scarf, which has no doubt given him heat rash, is doing nothing to recommend him.

Your pants squelch but there is nothing to be nervous about. Remus chews his thumbnail. He removes his scarf. *Your face is covered in large, wool-induced boils but there is nothing to be nervous about.* Remus wonders if a napkin can help the mess in his pocket. He sticks a finger in. Chocolate is always good, no matter how gooey. *Now there is chocolate on your heat-boils and what is that man looking at anyway, has he never seen a madman before, but there is nothing to be nervous about.*

"Smile," Sirius says loudly from behind him.

The camera flash goes off.

"He wants to preserve these delicate, tender memories," James explains.

"I'm blind," Remus says.

"Well you *look* dashing," Sirius says. "Is that chocolate in your pocket or are you—"

"Well it's very *hot*," Remus mutters irritably.

"That explains the limpness," James says knowledgeably.

The camera flashes again; Remus twitches. "Is that really necessary, Sirius?"

"Yes," Sirius says. "I couldn't really see the stain in the last one. It's quite something. Do you want to borrow some trousers?"

"Are we going to be in public for much longer?" Remus mutters.





"I could walk in front of your arse," James offers. "Or behind it, I suppose. To shield it from view. Or have it all to myself."

"You'd look a right shirtlifter," Peter says, and sniggers.

"Right!" Sirius says officially. "Let's not waste any more time in this cultural wasteland, shall we? Who's on the motorbike clutching my manly shoulders adoringly and who's on the carpet with the Potters?"

"I'm for not with my mum," James says quickly, raising his hand.

"I don't know," Remus starts, but then subsides. It's just James' parents. He doesn't need James to be around James's parents. Parents are easy: they can talk about literature and what has Remus been doing for the summer and in half an hour it'll be over, which is more than he can say for this increasingly ill-advised visit.

"It's just my shoulders you want," Sirius preens, "given the moments when they are yours are fleeting and few."

"All right, yes, we know," James says, "you've a girl named Sophie who whispers sweet nothings in your ear in French all the night long. Good luck, old boy, but no one cares anymore."

Sirius cups one hand to his ear. "Is that jealousy, Mr. Potter? Do I detect its clang of discord in the otherwise harmonious summer air?"

"I am *not* jealous," James says. "I am merely perturbed she spends so much time *licking* parts of you I have *seen* during the winter which *drip* and get all *sneezy*."

The camera flashes. "Exhibit C: James Potter, jealous, on the station." Sirius beams.



"Carpet," Remus says decidedly, hefting his bag and starting off down the station.

"They've been like this for the past three days," Peter says, scurrying to catch up. "Don't blame them, though. Sophie's — I mean, she's — well, *you* know. Have you seen the pictures?"

"I *don't* know," Remus grinds out. It's the truth. He doesn't. "And yes. I have." He supposes that Sophie is, indeed, very attractive. He supposes that, after all the fuss his friends have been making about girls since they first hit puberty, and before that, pretending they already had, she is perhaps the pinnacle of Girl, the ultimate Bird, a triumph of the gods and the Singular Goal of the Adolescent Male. He wonders if James stutters in front of her and how often Sirius has tripped over his bootlaces to make her happy. He wonders if, when they're out on dates, people stare and Sirius puffs up like one of those blowfish, looking all spiny and unattractive. He wonders if Peter turns the color of good, bloody beets and starts spouting unfortunate pickup lines — a strange and somewhat distressing reflexive habit he's somehow developed. He wonders why it is that very attractive girls seem to send boys into such a flurry of distress and madness and inconsistency. Remus understands, aesthetically, that Sophie is no doubt the Venus de Milo of summer relationships. He understands that James becomes a flop-tongued idiot in front of girls and Peter becomes oily and repulsive and Sirius becomes disturbingly helpful, and understands that he, himself, cannot possibly understand why. They're just girls. They're people, only with breasts. They are often far nicer to talk to.

"That stain," Peter is saying, "is *really* unfortunate from behind."

***

James' parents are as unfailingly friendly and solicitous as Remus could hope for, although he still finds James' mum vaguely intimidating, and his dad offers a vision of Remus' own future that is simultaneously frightening and

comforting. They've set up a bed for him in the living room complete with teddy bear perched on the yellow pillowcase, the which inclusion leads to a screaming row between James and his mother over Mrs. Potter's penchant for revealing the darker parts of James's childhood.

"I feel bad," Remus says, holding the bear stupidly at arm's length.

"Don't," Sirius says, consolingly. "He's not really embarrassed. Honestly, I think he's just afraid you're going to spill something on Mr. Toodles." He fixes Remus with a sharp look. "You're not going to spill anything on Mr. Toodles, are you?"

"I couldn't possibly," Remus says. "Look at his dear little face."

An almost silence descends. Remus can still hear James and his mother going at it, throwing meaningless household objects such as pillows and clocks at one another. At least, that's what it sounds like. Remus imagines James' mother must have an *incredible* arm. *There goes a salad bowl,* Remus thinks as something crashes and James screeches and a dog two houses down begins to howl like mad.

It's nothing like home. Remus doesn't remember actually fighting with his parents, just skirting around arguments and everyone feeling guilty but quiet. His mum and dad stopped fighting long ago. He supposes they think it isn't good for him. Instead, they talk quietly about money while he eavesdrops and they give one another happy smiles over dinner and, while he feels sometimes as if they are all very fleshy ghosts, the happy smiles are happy. They all love each other, anyway.

"So," Sirius says, apparently addressing the ceiling.

"Ah," Remus agrees.

"Where's my underwear?" Peter calls from the guest bathroom.

"You'll never guess," Sirius whispers.

"With the dirty dishes," Remus replies.

"*Bugger*," Sirius says. "How do you *do* that?"

"Practice," Remus says. He's wondering what ridiculous piece of useless conversation he should fumble with next when from upstairs comes the unmistakable sound of something enormous crashing, cannonball-like, into the floorboards, followed by a stunned silence.

"Wardrobe?" Remus suggests.

"Truce," Sirius corrects him, nodding sagely.

***

Sophie is, as promised, the Venus DeMilo of the summer relationship: graceful, slim, and impossibly lovely, with impeccable manners and an accent like dark chocolate that makes Remus think of all the Parisian cafes where Fitzgerald wrote and which he will never visit. She even shakes hands well. Firm. Good eye contact, Remus thinks idiotically. James, who has on previous occasions scorned the female handshake as the only universal blight of the fairer sex, probably had a heart attack.

"Er," Remus says. "So you're Sophie. Lovely to meet you. Sirius talks about you all the time." Sirius, who is standing about two inches behind Sophie with his hand resting protectively at the small of her back, shifts a little and smirks at the floor.

"So you're Remus," Sophie says, with a mysterious little hint of a smile that never seems to leave her face. "I could say the same, hmm? Though," she leans her head back to look at Sirius, smiling now, "'e never said you were so 'andsome. Always," in a darker, more intimate whisper, only ostensibly to Sirius, "you leave out the most important things."

Sirius mumbles something about not wanting to build up the competition *too* much and kisses her on the tip of the nose for rather too long. Remus shifts from foot to foot for a moment and wonders what he is expected to do in this situation, finally settling on staring out the window as if something very interesting is happening in the birdbath. He is actually imagining birds being completely non-sexual with one another in the birdbath. Ah, the safety of birds. He doesn't particularly like birds, and sometimes gets an uncontrollable urge to chase them in circles around the curb, but birds have no snub French noses and Sirius would probably never kiss one on the beak, unless dared to, or very much under the influence.

"So," Sirius says, "uh, what are you looking at, Remus?"

"Birds," Remus replies without thinking.

"But there are not any birds," Sophie murmurs.

"They've flown away," Remus says. "I was thinking about — about birds that aren't there."

"That is very deep of you, Remus." Sophie says his name as if it has always been French — which is, Remus recalls, generally the way French people say everything: as if it has always been French. *Ray-moo.* He wants to remind her that he does, actually, have an S at the end of his name, and he likes it, but her eyes are so dark and round and surrounded by thick, long eyelashes and full of feminine shadow that it distracts him before the words form. "You did not tell me your friend watches birds that are not there."

"I watch birds that are not there," Sirius says quickly. "All the time."

"Mm," Sophie says, one eyebrow raised.

Remus realizes then that he likes her. He doesn't want to kiss her or suck on her nose like Sirius was doing before. Nor does he want to get clumsy around her like James or drool in his sleep about her like Peter. But, despite himself, and against the natural order of things, Remus likes this French girl who has come into his life and stolen his friends.

It is mind-boggling.

Something is *wrong* with him.

He wants her to tell him about *France.*

"So," Sirius says again.

"Birds," Remus says, which is not exactly what he meant to say. He can now, having already said "birds," think of *twenty thousand* things to say, including, in suave tones, 'So, Sophie, where in France did you say you were from?' because she *hasn't* said yet, and that would lead to a *conversation*, which is what normal people have with each other. But now he's said "birds," and she's smiling at him like he's insane, which he supposes is not too far off the mark. He wonders, for a brief, panicked moment, if this is what it feels like to be James, *all the time*.

"Remus," Sophie murmurs. She slips her arm into his and puts a small, cool hand on his shoulder. "Would you like to walk me to dinner?"

"Now hang on just a *tick*," Sirius indignantly yelps, but Sophie half-turns and puts her hand on his cheek and whispers something in his ear and he subsides, though still twitching a little.

"Er," Remus says, concerned and bewildered.

"No problem," Sirius mutters. He glowers at the air just beyond his ear. "I told you. House on fire."

***



***

"Well, she likes *you*," James leers in a voice heavy with suggestion, when he and Remus and Peter are playing Exploding Snap in his bedroom after dinner and Sirius and Sophie are saying their lengthy goodbyes downstairs. "Tell you what, Moony, you play your cards right and you could be in for a little canine threesome."

Remus' hand explodes at his head.

"Is my nose still on my face?" is the first thing he thinks to ask. Cards, when flying at his flesh, are apparently very sharp.

"Large as ever," James informs him. "Tough luck."

Remus winces and sets about picking up his cards, trying not to show the intensity of his wounds.

"If you listen hard enough," Peter whispers, "you can hear the sounds they make. They're very wet. The sounds. That they make. It's a wonder their lips are still, you know, on their own mouths."

"Peter," James says, "that's truly disgusting."

Remus opens his mouth to add something to that, equally horrified, but James holds a finger to his lips, the universal sign for Shut Up Because I Want To Listen. Tomorrow, Remus is going to buy earplugs. Today, Remus is going to hide in the bathroom.

"Bathroom," Remus mouths, and flees for sanctuary.

Unfortunately, the bathroom is filled with feminine products from Sophie, all neatly arranged and smelling attractive, and Peter's mess, and wet towels, and steam from someone's recent bath. Remus sits on the toilet with the seat down and dabs his nose delicately with a wad of tissue. The echo of kissing sounds, smacking and sucking and pulling and licking, bounce over the tiled walls. This is not how Remus ever expected his vacation in Devonshire to be. He thought it would be fun, full of the things James and Sirius did together which he will never understand but will always be fascinated by. He thought there would be pranks and James' mum's cooking and parading around naked all day long in the heat, scaring the neighbors. Even random acts of exhibition are preferable to hiding in the bathroom while his hair puffs in the humidity. Can it be possible to spend three weeks feeling always as if there is a melted chocolate bar staining the seat of his trousers?

***

Apparently, there are worse things, which Remus realizes when he stumbles yawningly into the bathroom on the morning of the fourth day to find Sirius climbing out of the shower in typical *après-shower* couture.

"GNAUGH," Sirius yelps, and promptly falls into the bathtub.

"SORRY," Remus chokes out, and then stands frozen to the spot like a complete arse for what feels like about an hour, hands uselessly at his sides, squinching his eyes closed. There are the wet, slippery sounds of someone climbing out of the tile, and then Sirius's voice, breathless, says, "Christ, I thought you were James' mum."

Remus feels like James' mum. "Right," he says, feeling leaden. "Sorry. I just didn't realize anyone was in here."

"It's kosher, Moony, it's just us, we've all seen each other in the altogether, no harm done." Sirius's words trip over each other, magnified by the tile walls and the steam that heats Remus' face and curls the tips of his hair. *In the altogether, in the altogether, in the altogether* becomes *I am naked, I am naked, I am so, so naked.* Remus cracks one eye open.

Sirius, in the absence of any towel within arms' reach, other than the one Remus has swung around his neck, has wrapped himself in the shower curtain. A little yellow ducky decal rests neatly between his thighs. Remus feels a bubble of hysteria clawing at his throat.

"Right, well, can I use the shower when you're done," Remus says, clawing behind himself for the doorknob.

"It's yours," Sirius whispers. "Ha...ha."

"Thanks," Remus says, and then suddenly falls backward as the door opens behind him apparently of its own accord.

"Oops!" James's mother exclaims cheerfully, raising her eyebrows. "Excuse me, boys! Didn't mean to disturb! It's eggs for breakfast, no one minds scrambled, do they?"

Remus gapes at her, willing his mouth to make words.

"I love eggs!" Sirius says from behind him. At least he sounds much like Remus feels. "I love all sorts of eggs. I love scrambled eggs. I love deviled eggs. I love fried eggs. Boiled. Scrambled. I already said scrambled. That's just the way I get about eggs. Wonderful eggs. Delicious. Can't wait!"

"Well, hurry down before they get cold," Mrs. Potter scolds, waggling her expressive eyebrows at them. Remus opens

and closes his mouth several times, and finally makes a noise like "'nks," but Mrs. Potter has already gone, closing the door behind her.

Remus reaches carefully for the doorknob, turns it, and pushes out. Nothing happens.

"It swells," Sirius says in a hollow voice, "the door, sometimes, with the water."

"Argh," Remus groans, and pushes again. There is a very long silence.

"Here," Sirius says at length, "let me." Still clutching the shower curtain across his legs, he edges across the bathroom. Remus flattens himself against the opposite wall, feeling very distant from his own body. If ever there was a time for an out of body experience, he thinks. He can imagine himself, watching himself, the expression on his face, Sirius about to pull the shower down, and James' mother skipping merrily down the steps not actually wondering why her son's two friends were in the bathroom together until she starts cracking the eggs, and her hand clenches spasmodically and one poor splurty egg explodes all over her face and she gets salmonella poisoning from somehow breathing in raw egg and has to be taken to the hospital and Remus uses the commotion to run away to the forest, wherever that is near Devonshire, to take it up with the birds who never take showers and are always comfortably clothed in feathers.

Sirius turns the knob in the other direction. That explains everything. The door gives an obliging little creak and swings open.

"There you are," Sirius says, regarding the ceiling fixedly. "Open."

"Thanks," Remus says. "Have a good shower! You should maybe lock the door next time! Your duck is slipping!"

Without waiting for any sort of response — it would probably kill them both — he runs and hides under the bed until James' mother, who hasn't had the decency to go to the hospital yet, calls up that it's time for breakfast and the smell of bacon manages to drag him away from the friendly, friendly dust-bunnies who love him no matter what dark stain is spreading over his rear end.

***

"So I think," James says, "we should go swimming."

I think, Remus' brain says, *I should have you stand over me to behead me moments after I gut myself with a ritual knife to bring honor back to my family.*

"Without Sophie," James adds.

"I didn't bring trunks," Remus says. "Nothing to swim it. Have to stay home. Sorry. Terrible. Have fun without me!"

"Marauders," James says firmly, "do not need trunks."

Marauders, Remus' brain says firmly, *are going to be one less after I drown myself.* "All right," Remus' mouth says.

"So," says Sirius, skipping into the room and rubbing his hands together eagerly, "what's on the menu for today? What kinds of daring exploits are we going to cook up? I have to work tomorrow night, so it can't involve mutilation or my hair, but other than that, I am hungry for adventure."

"Sophie busy tonight?" Peter asks innocently.

Sirius deflates slightly. "She's having a Girls' Night with her cousins. Which apparently is not at all in real life the way it

is in my imagination."

"Don't let that stop you," Peter says encouragingly, and Sirius gives him a look.

"We're going swimming," James says. "Stop being so pornographic. *Cousins*. What's wrong with you? In any case: we're going swimming."

"Fantastic!" Sirius says, with great enthusiasm. "Swimming! Finally. Tonight's the first time it hasn't rained in ages. I hate it when I can't go three hours without being soggy. Can we go to that place at the bottom of the pasture where we went last year? Oh, James, and can I nick a pair of trunks off you, I don't have any."

"Since when do you wear trunks?" James says, utterly bewildered. "Last year you said, and I quote, 'Trunks are for elephants and the unmanly.' Who are you? Where's the Padfoot I know, waving it about all over the place and scaring the birds?"

"Well, I've got a bird of a different sort now," Sirius says, going rather red. "Can't just run around sharing the wealth with everyone, willy-nilly."

"Well, I haven't got an extra pair," James snaps irritably, "so you're just going to have to go willy-nilly the way you always do, like normal people. Both of you," he adds, pointing an accusing finger at Remus. "Honestly! Clothes! What's next?"

"Never thought *you'd* lobby for clothing," Peter tsks at Sirius, reprovingly. "Everyone's gone mad, except for me."

"*And* me," James points out.

"You'll be mad once we get back to school," Peter explains.

"True," James says. "But at least *you'll* never betray me by wearing *trunks* to go swimming in."

"Naked all the way," Peter agrees.

Remus wilts like a squashed balloon.

"Looking forward to it," Sirius says. "Really."

***

Remus holds his towel strategically in place. James didn't let him bring a book — it would have been much more subtle, just as useful, and Peter wouldn't be giving him strange looks every two minutes — for which Remus will always harbor a quiet and powerful resentment. James and Peter look so comfortable, naked, carefree, frolicking. Well, perhaps not frolicking — more like eating sandwiches and waiting for the water not to shrivel their skin off with the cold — but if they *wanted* to frolic, they *would*. If Remus wanted to frolic, he would trip over his strategic towel and break his neck upon the rocks below. Luckily, if Sirius wanted to frolic, he would have to come out from behind that tree first, and it doesn't seem as if he'll be doing that any time soon.

"Come *on*, Pads!" James yells through a mouthful of turkey. "It's not like we've not seen Little Sirius before. What's *wrong* with you? Are you covered in boils?"

"No," Sirius says from behind the tree, very careful. He actually sounds as if he's considering his words, which is so un-Sirius that it's actually a little bit frightening. "No, no boils."

"Well then what *is* it?" James moans. He flops to the ground in exasperation. "I hate you right now. I'm eating your

sandwich."

"Unfair," Sirius says, voice followed by some mysterious rustling. "It's just that I've no particular desire to freeze my nadgers off in some icy Devonshire sludge, thanks loads."

"Last year," James mutters as he stuffs half of Sirius's sandwich into his mouth, "you were frolicking in the sludge without half a care for your precious nadgers."

"Last year I was the only one who would miss them if they were gone," Sirius says with dark, lecherous amusement.

"I hate the French," James confides in Remus. "What the hell are you doing with that towel?"

"I," Remus begins, but is cut short by an explosion of rustling behind Sirius' tree, followed immediately by Sirius' grand entrance.

"Tada," he says. He throws his arms out wide.

"Well," James says. "It does seem as if you've found the world's largest leaf for the world's smallest prick. Congratulations, Sirius. I disown you! *Disown.* You are dead to me. I am eating all your sandwiches, dead people don't need them."

Remus begins to classify the leaf. Some sort of bush leaf, perhaps, with an odd, spiny edge, and browning slightly. Or perhaps it's from some rare kind of fern, or another form of plant life that will cause Sirius' nadgers to break out into an uncontrollable rash. The thought is cruel, but heartening.

"What are you smiling at, Remus?" James mutters. "You've turned your towel into a skirt. Next thing I know you're going to wrap it around under your armpits and get shower shoes and one of those little head towels and start singing operettas."

"He does that already," Peter says, munching an apple. " Remus loves his operettas."

"You can *hear* those?" Remus asks, mildly horrified.

"Moony," Sirius says, pityingly, "we can *all* hear those." It's not at all fair, in Remus's opinion, to be condescended to by someone wearing a leaf of mysterious origin over his bits. "Give me those sandwiches."

"Oi, Peter, do you hear something?" James says, staring vacantly past Sirius's bare thigh. "I could have sworn I heard the wind rustling: 'Sandwiches!' it seemed to cry. It almost sounded like someone I knew, before he *died.* Tragic. Just tragic." Sirius, thoughtfully, kicks him. James does not respond at all, except to meditatively cram another half-sandwich into his mouth and shake his head sadly.

Peter sighs and rolls onto his back. "What's the matter with us?"

"*Uff?*" James demands indignantly, spewing crumbs. "Iff *im!* N iff femch grrfemd!" and he points an accusing thumb at Sirius.

"Maybe this is what happens when you leave behind childish things and enter the tangled forest of adulthood," Sirius says wisely.

Peter shakes his head. "Don't think so. Moony's mature, and he doesn't wear leaves over his bits."

"*Yet,*" Sirius points out. "You'll all be doing it come next season. It's all over Milan."

"If the wind is insinuating it knows more about the latest fashions because of his girlfriend, let us remind the wind how *smelly* it is in Paris, and see what the wind has to say to that as I eat his second sandwich which is, if that's even possible, better than the first," James says, and promptly stuffs in more sandwich than should be able to fit past his teeth.

"The wind is merely pointing out," Sirius mutters, "that when certain sandwich-stealers of ill-repute went about crying great, pearly tears of woe and misery that this redhead, what's her name again, didn't love him for all eternity, we were all *very* understanding of just how boring *he* was."

"No the wind was not," James replies. He doesn't turn around, now, focusing vaguely on the water. "In fact the wind once told me that if I didn't stop whining and turning splotchy I'd have to take it up with the bathroom ghosts and cry forever in a toilet bowl, as the wind didn't want to have anything to do with me now I'd become an unsavory, moping little girl."

"I remember that one," Peter says. "Hey, can I have the other half of his last sandwich?"

"He's dead; dead and gone," James sighs, "and the sandwiches he left to us, with his last shred of sanity."



Remus really, *really* wants his book. When Sirius found out he had brought books with him they went through the necessary motions, Sirius mocking him and Remus making a sly comment, but then silence again descended and they coughed a lot, until James' mother came in to tell them that French lass had shown up again. *Really,* James' mother had said, *I just don't understand it. None of us even speaks French!*

"I wish I had a book," says Peter after a few silent moments, and it suddenly strikes Remus that perhaps things are even more dire than he was aware.

***

On the seventh day, he wanders into the kitchen to find Sirius and James looking stunned at the kitchen table. James is holding a letter in his right hand and something glittering in his left; Sirius is staring at him as if he has sprouted tentacles out of his face. At Remus' entrance both pale faces turn to him.

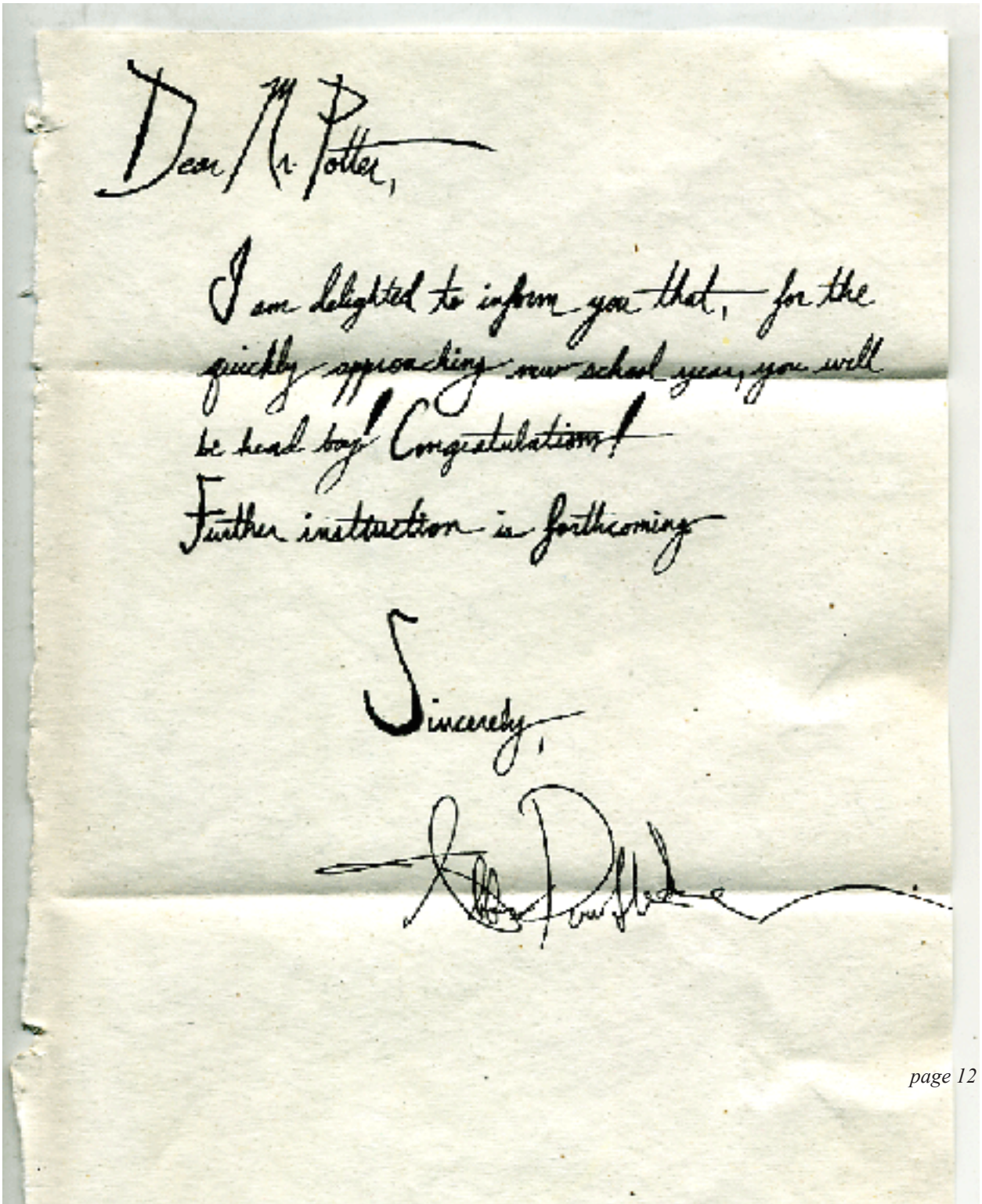
"Oh *God,*" James says.

Sirius's mouth opens and closes again. Remus stares from one to the other of them, growing increasingly panicked. "What? What's happened?"

"James," Sirius croaks, and makes a vague gesture towards the paper in James's shaking hand. "James — he — he's—"

"Are you dying?" Remus asks. "Sick? Joining the army? What's *happening?*"

"Head boy," James says suddenly, the words exploding out of him. "Dumbledore's just written me and told me *I'm head boy* which makes absolutely no sense whatsoever, we thought it was for you, so we opened it, sorry about that, but no, it's for me, see, right here, it says *James Potter* and that's my name, not yours."


Dear Mr. Potter,

I am delighted to inform you that, for the quickly approaching new school year, you will be head boy! Congratulations!

Further instruction is forthcoming.

Sincerely,

Remus stares between the two of them, not sure whether to be relieved or somewhat pained. He never actually wanted to be Prefect, to begin with — he had always assumed James would be — but keeping the badge shiny and well-polished did give him a sense of purpose. Upholding order because he had to was also of course much easier than upholding order because he wanted to. Being a Prefect gave him an excuse to practice lifting one brow just enough to let Sirius know *that* was a bad idea or *this* was something he couldn't in all good conscience allow. Being a Prefect, of course, also meant that one day Remus might very well be Head Boy, if precedent was anything to go by, and Remus *had* been wondering about that. The idea of it is very nice, of course; it would give him more of an opportunity to keep the natural order of things, to orchestrate just the right balance. However, with that responsibility would inevitably come power. Remus knows he doesn't have the people skills to wield such power. He would have to talk to *everyone,* probably *all the time*, about their problems, and tell people what to do, and when, and while he would know what to say, actually *saying it* would be a much more complicated proposition.

"Congratulations," Remus says, breaking out into a true smile. "Congratulations, James."

"Huhhhh," James says, a long exhalation of startled air.

"I'm not angry," Remus says quickly, to preempt the question.

"Head Boy," Sirius echoes. He looks, if possible, more shocked and terrified than James does. "*You're* meant to be Head Boy. What are we going to do with *him* as Head Boy? We can't have two of you being responsible at once. You're *Head Boy*?" He turns to address James at this last, in utter bewilderment.

"I don't *know*!" James wails.

"Who's Head Girl, does it say?" Remus asks. "James, this is really exciting! Stop looking like a fish and get excited about it!"

"It doesn't," James says robotically. "How am I meant to get excited? This is a mistake. This is the worst mistake ever made."

"I bet it's Mafalda Hopkirk," Sirius says. "Congratulations, Jamie!"

James makes a noise like a small animal dying and collapses to the table.

"I can't bloody believe this," Sirius mutters.

Remus sort of wants to hit him. No, actually, he really wants to hit him. A gigantic wooden mallet, perhaps, or a frying pan, or a dictionary. "James," he says, pushing this urge aside, "it's really fantastic, you being Head Boy."

"Nghr," James says.

"Just think of all the work you'll get to do with Dumbledore! Shaping the future of Hogwarts itself!"

"Ghnn," James says.

"And," Remus adds, triumphantly, "you'll be able to take points."

James's head flies up from the table like a shot. "Eh?"

"You will," Sirius breathes, straightening up. "At your discretion. Any points you like from anyone you like."

"Well," Remus attempts, "it's not really your discretion."

"Oh my," James says, a small, evil grin curling the corner of his mouth.

"Nonono," Remus says, backtracking. "No, it's not at your discretion. It has to be based on logic; it has to be *fair*; it has to be *sensible*—"

"Eight *billion* points from Slytherin," James says. "Yes. *That* sounds good."

"Nonono," Remus repeats, "that isn't how it works, James."

"All hail James Potter, Head Boy," Sirius whoops, leaping up and giving a low bow. "He's got the whole world in his hands!"

Remus makes a small, dying sound.

"Eight billion points from Slytherin because Snape's *nose* is *bothering me*," James amends. "How does that sound? *Lovely*, that's how. Merlin, it's like *heaven*."

Remus scrambles for the letter. "Look," he says helplessly, waving it around, "it says right here, this is power not to be abused. It's to be taken seriously, James; you're to *take it seriously* and with *utmost expression of maturity*."

"Eight billion points from Snivellus' nose!" James howls gleefully.

Remus wants to cry.

***

Dinners are the most awkward times of all. Dinners with someone else's family, even when the dinner itself isn't exactly awkward, always *feel* awkward. Remus can converse with parents, and he can converse with his friends, but parents and friends together and he goes rigid like a cranky clam until the food is eaten and its time to offer to help wash the dishes. James' mother is at least an excellent cook, and the food is always very easy to busy himself with. It doesn't block out the sound of stilted dinnertime conversation, James' mother soliciting information and James sliding lower and lower beneath the table and, on this their eighth night together, Sophie being very, very charming over her peas.

"...so now, all the chic Parisienne witches are wearing these pink 'ats, and no one knows it is because I am playing thees trick on my sister," Sophie finishes, grinning, and James's mother dissolves in whoops of laughter, rather more boisterous than the situation requires. James's father even gives his little cough of a laugh. Sirius shines a little grin on her, his hand creeping uncomfortably high on her brown thigh.

"Oh," James' mother says, wiping tears of mirth from her eyes, "my goodness, Sophie, having family in high fashion must be just *thrilling*. This household's idea of style is putting a shirt on the right way out," and she fixes James with a stony glare.

"*Mum*," James says, in tiny, murderous tones, slouching even deeper into his seat.

There is a short silence. Everyone picks at the food.

At last, Sophie again leaps in: "This chicken is *fantastique*, Mme. Potter," she says brightly. Everyone else chimes in hurriedly with "mmm!"s and "Oh yes" and "Just delicious, really," but eventually it dies down again and the only noise is the clinking of cutlery and china and the occasional, half-hearted "mmmm."

"Pass the bread please!" Peter says, much too loudly, and everyone jumps.

Remus passes the bread to Sophie. Their fingers touch. Sophie passes the bread to Peter. Sirius gives Remus a look. James slips beyond sight below the table, hits his head on the edge, and yelps from beneath the tablecloth.

"James!" James' mother admonishes. "James, *what* are you doing?"

"I think he's hiding, Mrs. Potter," Peter says. He butters his bread.

"So," James' father says, "Remus, I hear you like swing music."

"Yes," Remus says. "I do. Like swing music."

"Well," James' father says. "That's very good to hear. Taste in our youth. And all that."

"He does," James says from beneath the table. "Like swing music. Keeps playing it all the time when he thinks no one is listening. You're not the only one who gives me nightmares about Benny Goodman."

"Ah, Benny Goodman," James' father says fondly.

These conversations are not going as planned. Remus has been watching Sirius' hand creep up Sophie's thigh as slowly as possibly, so that he simply wants to take matters into his own hands. Well, not literally. What he wants to do is take Sirius' hand with his own hand and just put it on Sophie's rear already. Why beat around the bush? What is the matter with these people? How has he ever been able to stand them for prolonged periods of time? How can *one person* make eating *one pea* off a *stupid fork* seem *so attractive?*

Remus would hide in the bathroom again, but all he can think of is Sirius' yellow ducky when he goes in there. His personal hygiene is suffering because of it.

Next to him, Sophie suddenly makes a shocked, pleased little noise and slaps Sirius's hand. Everyone looks up. Sirius tries to look innocent and ends up looking evil. The tips of Mr. Potter's ears turn red.

"I've got to go the loo!" Peter announces, and does. All seated watch him go.

"Good peas," Remus says weakly. They are good peas, even if they do bring back painful memories.

"Mm," everyone agrees, and "delicious."

***

"What should we do now?" James asks, sounding miserable. Remus pokes the campfire morosely.

"We could tell ghost stories," Peter suggests, but not with any real conviction.

"No," Sirius says. "It wouldn't be the same outside the Shack. Moony, how are those tomatoes?"

Remus stares at them. They look, he thinks, like small dead livers; there is nothing remotely appealing or Boys Own Adventure about them. One of them pops, halfheartedly. "They're...coming."

"We could play Guess Who's Got No Trousers," James offers. "That game's always good for a laugh."

"It's always Sirius," Peter points out.

"It might...not be," Sirius says, rather lamely.

"Sirius hasn't got any trousers," Peter says.

"Damn." Sirius scowls. "Well, yes, you win. *That* was fun."

"You don't think anything's fun without Sophie, anyway," James mutters. "Especially Not Having Trousers."

"James is jealous that I am getting snogged within an inch of my life on a regular and *most* exhilarating basis," Sirius explains. "This is why, children, he is acting as if his underwear is too tight. It doesn't mean he doesn't love you; he *does*. And it doesn't mean *I* don't love you, either. You know I always will. It's just that sometimes, a man's eye wanders."

"I'll give you a wandering eye," James says, and launches himself over the fire at Sirius on the other side of it.

"Well," Remus says. He pokes the tomatoes sadly. "These look disgusting, don't they, Peter?"

"I hate it when mum and dad fight," Peter sighs. "D'you think they'll separate?"

"I think *we* should separate them," Remus replies. "*That* must hurt."

"Sirius is resilient," Peter points out. "Even if that stick *was* very pointy."

There is a sudden screech from the other side of the campfire, and Remus looks up in a panic to see that Sirius, in a particularly overenthusiastic shove, has just set James on fire.

"Oh God," Remus says, feeling the blood drain from his head.

"Fuck!" Sirius bellows. He throws himself on top of James, who lets out a few muffled yelps of protest and beats ineffectually at Sirius's head.

"It's all right!" Sirius yells. "James, Prongs, mate, it's all right! I've stifled it out."

"It was just my *sleeve*!" James roars, spitting out twigs and socking Sirius hard in the abdomen. "You utter epileptic, it was my *sleeve* and I don't *deserve* that and get *off* me."

"I thought I was saving your life!" Sirius snaps indignantly. "That's gratitude for you!"

"You *pushed me in*!" James spits. "I've had enough of this! Who's with me?"

"Oh oh," Peter says, raising his hand high. "Pick me!"

"Right," James says. "Peter. You. Me. That tent."

"What are we going to do?" Peter asks, wide-eyed.

"Sleep. Ignore the other half. Set Sirius on fire in the night. Yes," James adds, giving Sirius a warning look, "watch yourself. It'll happen when you *least expect it*." He grabs Peter by the collar and storms off to their tent, in a crunch of leaves and a flurry of burnt sleeve and the smell of ashy fabric.

"Just you and me now," Sirius mumbles. He brushes the twigs out of his hair, not quite looking up. "Just you and me and the tomatoes."

"I think I'm going to throw the tomatoes out," Remus says. "I mean they're really not coming along, and they smell

funny, and *I* can't imagine eating them, I don't even really like tomatoes all that much, so—"

"Now why," Sirius explodes, "*why* would you do something like that? I said it's you and me and the tomatoes and *why would you throw the tomatoes away?*"

"Uhm," Remus says. "I'm sorry?"

Sirius lets out a long huff of exasperated air, and says, "Never mind. God. Just — never bloody mind."

"I'm not minding," Remus says, increasingly bewildered.

"Fine," Sirius replies darkly. For a moment they sit in silence, Remus still holding the pan of humiliated tomatoes awkwardly away from the flames, unsure of what the next move should be.

"Just throw them out," Sirius says at length, apparently speaking to the fire. "They're no good. Not adding anything to the company."

"Good," Remus says, relieved. He flips the pan unceremoniously upside-down. The tomatoes flub pathetically to the ground.

"That was a wasted opportunity," Sirius says darkly. "You should have really flung them. Right into the trees. Used the pan like a catapult."

"The pan was hot," Remus explains. "If I'd used it like a catapult I'd probably have burnt myself."

"That's so boring," Sirius mutters. He says it like, *You're so boring*. Remus stares at the humiliated tomatoes, burnt around the edges, soggy in the middle, left to die in the grass. He feels, suddenly, irrationally bad for them. It's like throwing away an old toy. He puts the pan down.

"I am sorry I am boring," Remus says.

Sirius stares at him. "What?"

"I am sorry I am burnt around the edges and soggy in the middle like these tomatoes," Remus tries to explain. The words are coming out lunatic. The usual bubble of panic at his inability to communicate like a normal human being doesn't rise in him; he only feels worn and dejected, and the seat of his pants are covered in grass stains and chill, nighttime dirt. It's hard to feel wounded pride when your rear has been asleep for over three hours. "I tried to cook them," he says, "I *tried*, but I'm only good with cheese toasties and unwrapping chocolate."

"You are not *boring*," Sirius snaps. "You know who is boring, *James* is boring."

"You'd think *he* was the one you kissed," Remus says, without thinking, "from the way you're acting about it."

Mistake! Remus' brain howls not a moment later. *Abandon ship. Run for cover. He'll set you on fire next!*

Sirius looks as if he's forgotten how to use his face. It's more than a little frightening. After a moment, he says uncertainly, "Moony, about that."

"There isn't an about," Remus babbles. "There is no about to that happening. Because we weren't talking about it. It is That of Which We Do Not Speak. I'm sorry, I didn't mean to, it was just the tomatoes and you being in a sulk—"

"It's just," says Sirius in unnaturally high tones, talking over Remus' insane dribble, "I wanted to tell you, I didn't mean

for it to be a *thing*. It was just, you know. With seventh year, and I thought you weren't going to come for the summer, and I was — I didn't mean to, you know, make it a *kiss* kiss. I'm really, really sorry. I don't want you to take it like that. You're my best mate. I mean," as an obvious afterthought, "obviously James is my best mate, but you know, you're *Moony*. It would be weird. And *you* must think it's weird and also scary. And so I keep thinking you think it's weird and so I get weird about it. But it doesn't have to be. If we both decided it shouldn't be. Right?"

"Er," Remus says. One tomato gives a last, despairing pop beside his knee.

"That didn't make any sense," Sirius says miserably, "did it. Look, can we just stop being so twitchy about it? It's only a kiss. It's just Misplaced Something-or-other that I'm sure you've read about. I didn't mean to *say* anything by it."

"It's the dormitory situation," Remus says automatically, "that's what it is. I've read about it before. We spend so much time in close proximity to one another, and besides you're always calling me a girl, that hormones get confused. Well, that's not it entirely, but generally, that's the idea. Happens to a lot of people. All the time. Doesn't mean anything."

"Could have happened to anyone," Sirius agrees. He looks relieved. Remus is glad they don't have to think about it ever again. "Probably *has* happened to, I don't know, not *everyone,* but — a lot of people. Right?"

"All the time," Remus assures him. "That's what, uhm, the book said."

"Books never lie."

"Based on meticulous research."

"That's a relief to know. Good job, Moony." Sirius leans over and pats him on the shoulder. Remus wonders if now they can do a better job of just forgetting it ever happened. Does this mean he'll be able to close his eyes and go to sleep without being sure of the torture that awaits him, lurking in his innermost psyche?

"I'm glad," Remus says. "I am so glad. This has been so awkward."

Sirius laughs nervously. "*Awful.* Just, you know, really awful."

"And, you see, you have a girlfriend, and she's very nice, and that means that the kiss — you know — it was — just"

"Friendly," Sirius says. "A friendly kiss. Girls do it all the time, Sophie says, but she might be just, haha, having me on, getting me all revved up. I'm her little engine. You know. That — that sort of thing."

"I'm glad," Remus says again.

A few crickets actually chirp.

"Ahaha," Sirius says. "I should probably apologize to James for lighting him on fire."

"That would be good," Remus agrees. "Yes. Why don't you do that."

"All right," Sirius says, sounding like a man reprieved from the gallows. "Look, thanks, mate. And no harm done, right? So now I can go starkers in front of you without you thinking I'm going to rape you?"

"Haha," Remus says. "Absolutely. Naked as you please."

Sirius gives him a roguish wink and then slips off into the darkness beyond the light of the campfire. Remus, feeling rather lightheaded, collapses backward onto the spiky ground and has only time to hope that no one else catches on

fire because he's far too tired to do anything about it and then:

He is in an enormous goldfish bowl. Dumbledore is ice-skating above him, singing an obscene song about sugar bowls and turning various shades of purple.

—Hello, says a huge squirrel that has suddenly appeared before him. Remus breathes out bubbles. —Would you like some birthday cake?

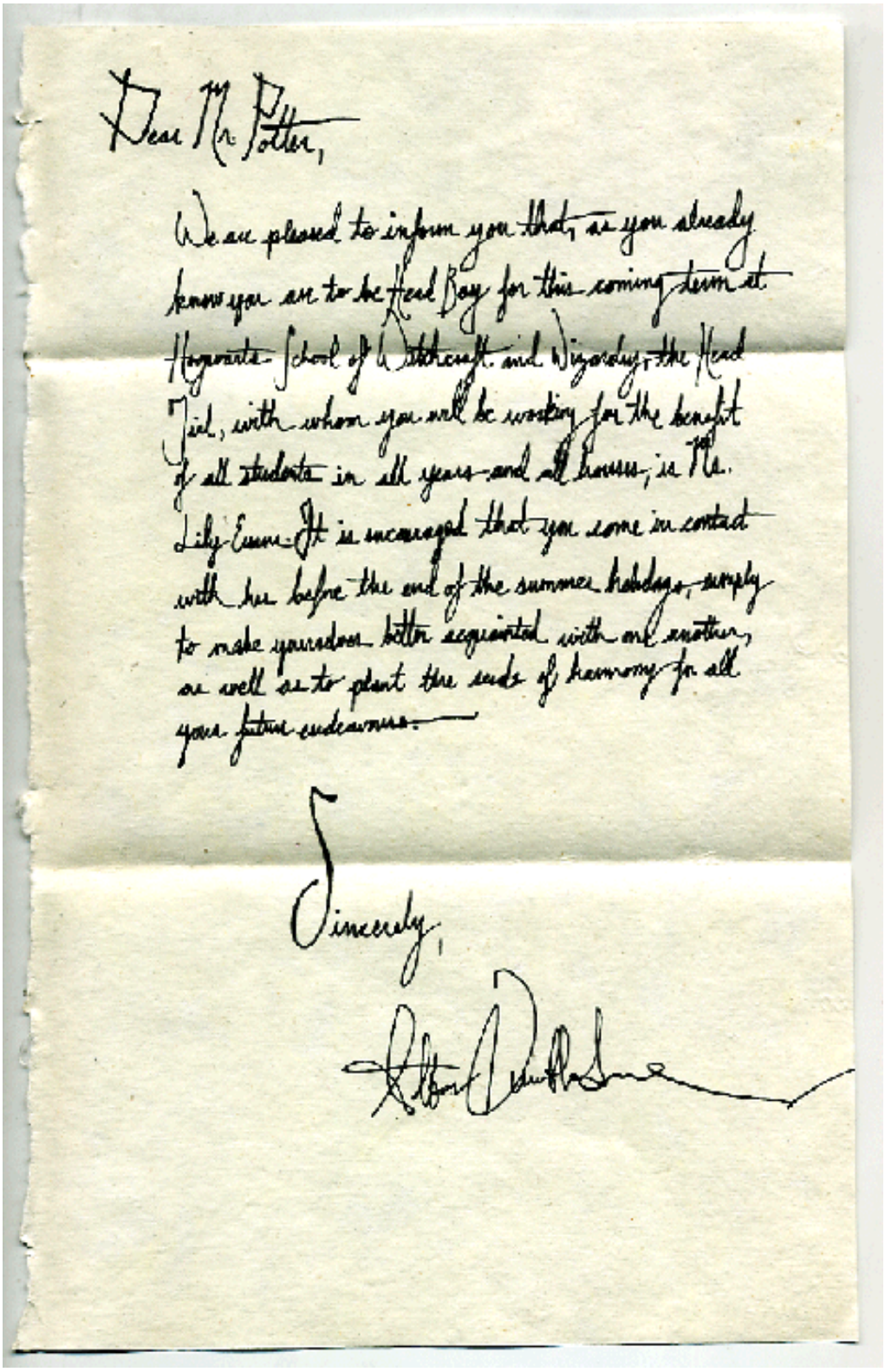
"Thank you, God," Remus says, overwhelmed with joy. "Thank you, God, for squirrels."

***

"It's Lily Evans," James says. "Lily Evans is Head Girl." He stares down at the piece of paper in his hand with Dumbledore's spindly handwriting squeezed in neatly across it. "That's what it's trying to tell me, that I'm Head Boy and *Lily* is Head Girl and *we* are Head Boy and Girl and we are doing it *together*. That is what it's trying to say, Remus. Isn't it? Have I gone blind? Have I gone mad? Is this the end?"

"Dear Mr. Potter," Remus reads, "we are pleased to inform you that, as you already know you are to be Head Boy for this coming term at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, the Head Girl, with whom you will be working for the benefit of all students in all years and all houses, is Ms. Lily Evans. It is encouraged that you come in contact with her before the end of the summer holidays, simply to make yourselves better acquainted with one another, as well as to plant the seeds of harmony for all your future endeavors."

"Well," Sirius says. "It's going to start in three—"


Dear Mr. Potter,

We are pleased to inform you that, as you already know you are to be Head Boy for this coming term at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, the Head Girl, with whom you will be working for the benefit of all students in all years and all houses, is Ms. Lily Evans. It is encouraged that you come in contact with her before the end of the summer holidays, simply to make yourselves better acquainted with one another, as well as to plant the seeds of harmony for all your future endeavours.

Sincerely,

"What's going on?" Peter asks as he comes in, looking rumpled.

"Two—"

"Any toast left for me, then?" Peter says, when no one answers him.

"One—"

"*Lily,*" James moans, and moves to fling himself out the window.

"Won't do you any good," Sirius says, physically restraining him. "It's about a three-foot drop."

"Then just let me try," James groans, straining toward the window-ledge. "I can't do it, Pads. I can't subject myself to the torture, the humiliation, the citrus-y hair product smell, I *can't.* Not again. Not after last time."

"Maybe things will be different!" Remus suggests, feeling that optimism is probably the best policy to keep James from throwing himself into his mother's lovingly-tended primroses.

"Maybe she's had a lobotomy!" Sirius says, helpfully.

"Are we talking about Lily Evans?" Peter asks, rummaging through the refrigerator. "She really, really hates you now, right? I heard she went to Bath with Kingsley Shacklebolt this summer."

James makes a sound like the end of the world. "Sirius, if you were a good friend, you would just let death take me."

"Your mum would have my head," Sirius points out. "Those primroses are like her children. AGH no biting, you tricky little bugger, don't make me gag you."

"Think of it as an opportunity," Remus adds. "Think of it as a way to spend more time with her — a way to show her what you're really made of — a way *not* to abuse the privileges of head boy!" Secretly, Remus is thrilled. He hopes he's doing a decent job of keeping it from showing.

"Look how happy Moony looks," James howls. "My pain is his bliss, I know it."

"Now, James," Sirius says, tugging him back to the table. "Why don't you sit down, let Peter make you some toast, and think rationally about this for about two minutes. We can't have you getting a primrose rash—"

"I don't think those are—" Remus begins.

"A *primrose rash,*" Sirius presses, shooting Remus a Look, "right before you have to go back and prove your worth as a man to one Ms. Evans, Hogwarts Head Girl, now can we? That wouldn't do anything for our cause."

"You can woo her with rules," Remus adds. "You can show her how *seriously* you're taking this."

"No one," James points out, "*no one* is as serious as Kingsley Shacklebolt. He doesn't know what a joke is! It's always 'I have a shiny bald head and *no* it is *not* funny' or 'Look how humorous my rippling abdominals are *not*.' Do you catch my meaning? I cannot compete!"

"It's true," Sirius points out. "He has no abdominals. They don't ripple. They sort of droop."

"Some women find abdominals intimidating," Peter says sagely, pushing two slices of toast onto James's plate.

James regards them disconsolately. "I'm not hungry. And oh yes," he adds, resentfully, "many's the time I've heard a girl say to her mates, 'Now, you know what I hate, is stomach muscles. Why can't I find a weedy Quidditch bloke to love?' And, oh, do you remember how she *already dumped me*? There is no light here. All is blackness and despair."

"Rules," Remus presses. "Dignity. The not-taking of seven billion points from Slytherin for imaginary offenses. Did I steer you wrong last time?"

"Last time!" James says bitterly. "What, you mean, the time I got *dumped*?"

"That was so *incredibly* far from being my fault that it is almost painful to explain," Remus says.

"He has a point," Sirius volunteers.

"Yes," James says. He lifts his head. He fixes his scary, weedy Quidditch bloke eyes on Sirius. "I remember whose fault that was, actually."

"Blame Snivellus!" Sirius protests.

"Oh," James says, "I blame him, *too*."

James' muscles coil. He presses his palms against the tabletop. Sirius begins to back away, slowly, unsteadily, trying not to make any sudden movements. "Now, James," he attempts to placate, "we've been over this. You'll get her back! Pip pip, the good ship James Potter sails on, just a bit of a leak down below, but that's easily stopped up with some cork and soon enough she'll be ready for stormy weather and all — that — yow!"

Sirius flees, James hot on his heels. Somewhere in the living room, they are about to break a lamp.

"Well," Peter says. "That's lucky. More toast for us, eh?"

***

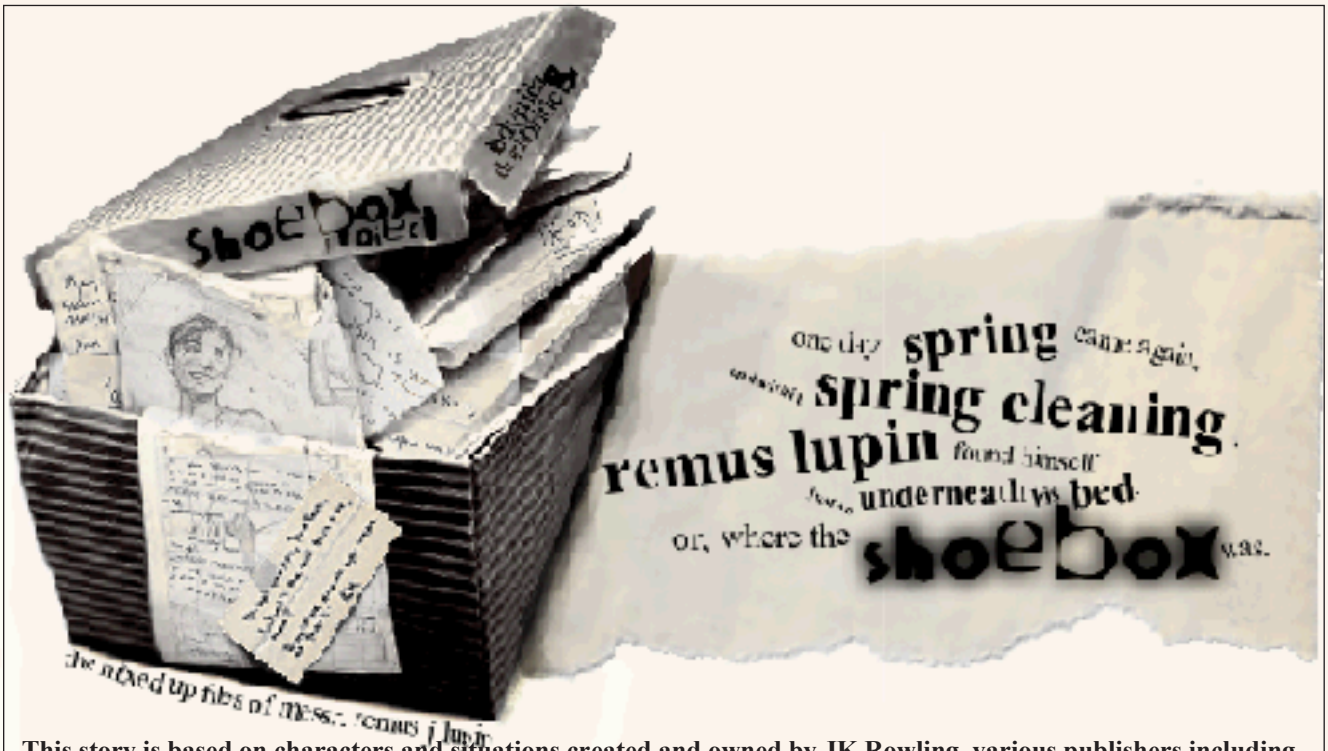
It is really, really nice kissing Sophie on the mouth.

Sirius often thinks, during a lazy, sun-drenched afternoon like this one, that he could really spend days like this: just kissing people. Groping is nice, too, obviously, and getting off, and he loves it when Sophie puts her hands at the small of his back or runs her fingers up through his hair, but really, he loves kissing pretty much more than anything else. And he loves kissing Sophie in particular. Her mouth is soft, a little sticky or slippery with lip gloss, and she makes pleased little sighing noises when he nudges up against her or runs his fingers over her hip or slides his mouth in sideways over her chin and cheek — a habit which some girls, to his bewilderment, seem to find sloppy; Alice Prewett once informed him that it made her skin feel like cardboard after. He pushes his knee in between her legs, steadying himself just so against the warm grass, and she presses up into him, hitching her skirt up a little farther over her thighs.

Sirius can let himself drift away, lulled with sun and Sophie's warm mouth and warm body and the drone of insects in the hedges. He can think of how nice it is the way her hair curls up around his fingers in the sweaty heat, and the way her long, slim hands smooth over his shoulders and back and move to skritch the back of his neck, and how sharp her nose is when she turns to catch his lips again and it digs into his cheek. He can think how lovely the Potters' backyard is, and how empty at noon, and how the sun feels against them, and doesn't have to listen to himself after, when he murmurs something into her mouth without even really paying attention to what it is.

Until the word, caught between their lips, starts with a *Re* and ends with a *mus* and Sophie pulls back, cheeks flushed, tan from all the summer sun, her hair forming a canopy over their faces.

"That is so funny," she says, as cold heavy rocks settle in the bottom of Sirius' stomach. "I was thinking the same thing."



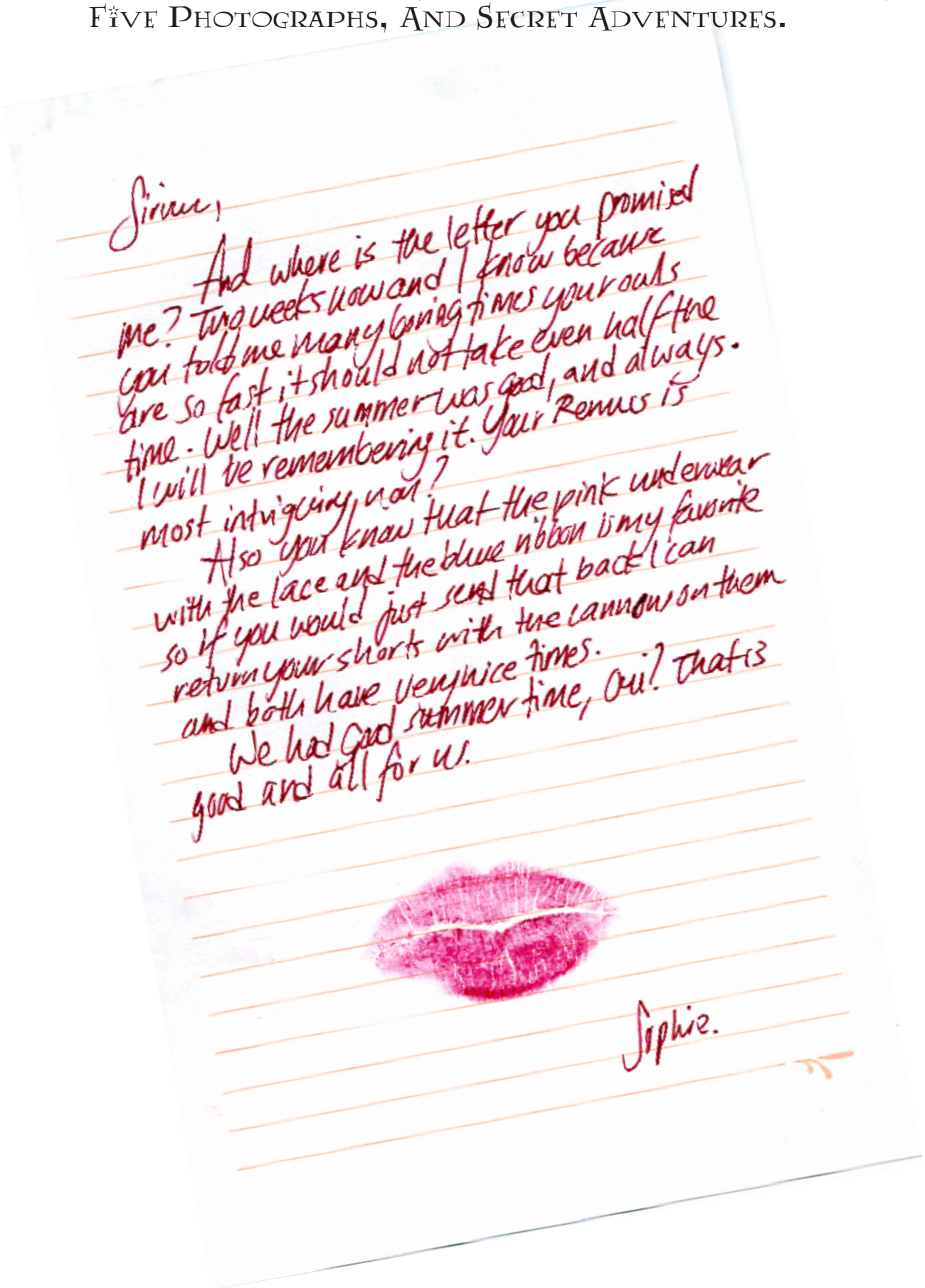
This story is based on characters and situations created and owned by JK Rowling, various publishers including but not limited to Bloomsbury Books, Scholastic Books and Raincoast Books, and Warner Bros., Inc. No money is being made and no copyright or trademark infringement is intended.

***The Shoebox Project* by LadyJaida and Dorkorific**

http://www.livejournal.com/community/shoebox_project

Part Fifteen: September, 1976

Two Letters From France, Two Newspaper Clippings, Five Photographs, And Secret Adventures.



Sirius,

And where is the letter you promised me? Two weeks now and I know because you told me many boring times your owls are so fast; it should not take even half the time. Well the summer was good, and always. I will be remembering it. Your Remus is most intriguing, n'est ce pas?

Also you know that the pink underwear with the lace and the blue ribbon is my favorite so if you would just send that back I can return your shorts with the cannons on them and both have very nice times.

We had good summer time, oui? That is good and all for us.

Sophie.

***

LONDON *September 18*

A startling rash of murders that have been terrorizing the English countryside are, officials from the Ministry say, not linked together. Minister of Magic Cornelius Fudge told reporters this afternoon the murders "Are in no way linked to one perpetrator" and, later, "there is absolutely nothing to be worried about." Fudge also says he and his men at the Ministry are working hard to uncover the truths behind these terrible murders.

"The perpetrators have no consistent MO," said Mr. Fudge during a press conference early this morning, which was designed to dispell fears and rumors in wide circulation since the killings began. "That is how we are sure there is no ringleader, no 'head honcho,' no mastermind killer on the loose. I can assure you, you are all very safe in your beds tonight."

Not so for a few Muggles and one Muggle-born wizard, who have all died under mysterious, yet definitely magical circumstances, in the past month. Further commentary by the ministry was not forthcoming.

MURDERERS!

LUNATIC KILLER ON THE LOOSE

MUGGLES AND MUGGLE-BORNS MADE TARGETS

ARE ANY OF YOU REALLY GOING TO BE SAFE IN YOUR BEDS TONIGHT?

THAT IS THE QUESTION on all of our minds tonight after the speech by Minister of Magic Cornelius Fudge regarding the rash of deranged murders in and around London!!!! Mr. Fudge has assured us we are all 'safe in our beds' but how can we be so sure of this??? When will the Ministry officials start telling us the real truth behind this madman???????? Who is really killing the Muggles and Muggle-born witches and wizards in the night????? Our most brave reporter, Eva Snitch, has the inside scoop no one wants you to know!!!!!!!! Will we ever be safe again? Who IS that masked man? Is a cult of lunatics behind all this? The answers will shock you in next week's edition! Found on stands September 30th!!!!!!!!

***

The answer to the question 'Is Lily still mad at me,' James has discovered, is a resounding 'Yes.' Girls have this astonishing power, James will later relate to Remus and Peter and Sirius and anyone who makes the mistake of saying hello to him, to ignore all logic, reason, sense both common and uncommon, and simple human kindness, and to hold onto one tiny little mistake, milking it like a gigantic cow. James spends most of his meeting with Dumbledore and Lily boggling at her, mouth hanging open, like a dead fish. She, on the other hand, keeps her eyes coolly in front of her. It's as if he's not even there. It's as if he's not even alive. He might as well *be* a dead fish, and she's doing a fantastic job of not even acknowledging the smell. At one point, while Dumbledore is going on and on and *on* and *on* about their duties, James wants to get up and make faces directly in front of her. That'll show her, he thinks. She won't be able to ignore him *then*.

However, it may not further his assertion that he really isn't a madman.

"And as I was saying, Mr. Potter," Dumbledore continues, "the reason I have chosen you for Head Boy is for the incredible qualities of leadership exhibited earlier, when, under circumstances that cannot of course be here divulged, you saved Severus Snape's life."

Lily's eyes almost pop out of her head.

James ponders proposing to Dumbledore right here, right now, ring be damned.

"He did *what*," Lily says, in a shrill tone of voice that on anyone else would have been extremely unattractive.

"Miss Evans, I believe I made it clear that the circumstances of Mr. Potter's actions are not — Mr. Potter, pray at least *pretend* to pay attention — are not for public consumption. For various reasons—" he slides a glance at James over the top of his glasses, sharp but benign "of which I'm certain you are aware, Mr. Potter, it would probably be best not to divulge them. Even, perhaps, to assuage the no-doubt considerable qualms of your co-head."

Lily is staring at him now, wearing an expression that is probably quite similar to the one he's had on for the last half an hour. Good, thinks James. They make such a lovely, fishy pair. "I understand, Professor."

"Now," Dumbledore concludes, rising, "if you will both excuse me, I have some business to attend to. I trust you can see yourselves out and you, Ms. Evans, can let Mr. Potter in on all that he missed while his mind was noticeably elsewhere?"

Lily opens her mouth, then closes it, then opens it again. "Do you mean to say he *saved* Severus Snape's—"

"And have a *wonderful* day," Dumbledore says cheerfully. "Ta!"

James stands to go. He's wracked with hard choices. Should he look smug? Should he do a little dance? Should he suck it all in, be mature, and not get his arse kicked up between his shoulderblades by Lily's impeccably polished but no less lethal left shoe? Should he give up on his arse and just let it be known that he, James Potter, is king of the world, not to mention head boy, not to mention a hero, not to mention totally, completely, one hundred percent right?

"Come on," Lily mutters, grabbing him by the wrist. "Stop standing there with your mouth hanging open, you look daft."

They aren't halfway to the door before it slides open. On his perch, Fawkes — who is looking a little ratty around the edges, and no doubt nearing spontaneous combustion — gives a half-hearted squawk and falls silent.

"Oh my God," James says, his eyes going wide as frying pans. "Oh my God oh my God oh my God oh my God."

"Uhm," Lily says. "What *is* the matter with you?"

"*The Prewetts,*" James whispers. He grabs Lily's sleeve. "Pinch me."

"All right." She does so.

"Ow! Oh my God," James says again. "I am *awake* and it's the *Prewetts*."

Lily directs her attention to the door. Two young men — handsome, yes, but from James' sense of humor and lack of color-coordination that can't possibly be the source of his reaction — have stepped kindly out of the way for them to leave. "Uhm," Lily says again. "What is the matter with you?"

Of course she wouldn't understand. For the first time in James Potter's entire life, he wishes that he could discreetly swap Lily with Sirius, just for this specific moment in time. In the door, looking taller and browner and brasher than ever, are the Prewett brothers. They are wearing dragonhide trousers. James is suddenly in third year again: awkward, pimply, and breathless with awe.

"That's never little Potter?" Gideon booms, ruffling a hand through his tousle of golden hair. "Why, you look just like a person! In trouble already, are we? School not even started?"

"Jolly good," Fabian adds. "Grand old Gryffindor house tradition. Carry on!" He makes a little pumped *Pride!* fist in the air.

James feels as if he may faint. "You know my *name*!" he squeaks, fortunately in a voice so tiny that only Lily hears him, and, mercifully, does nothing worse than roll her eyes.

The motion, however, is enough to attract Fabian's attention; he lifts his eyebrows and bows a little, dropping his voice several octaves. "I don't believe we've met." His hair is all shiny and swingy. James goes from feeling as if he's walking on a cloud to as if a little angel has sauntered along and punched him right in the neck. No one, James remembers, can resist Fabian Prewett's hair.

"Oh," Lily says, giggling quietly and tucking her hair behind her ears, "yes, we have, I was in third when you were in seventh, it's Lily, Lily Evans, and you're the Prewetts, aren't you?"

"Not Lily Evans?!" Gideon says, frankly astonished. "Carrotty Evans?"

"Well," Fabian says, drawing back, "I feel quite dirty and ancient. Beg your pardon, Evans. You *are* looking lovely. Though I'm surprised to find you knocking about with a troublemaker like this one." He favors James with a lazy, approving grin. Never have James's emotions been so toyed with. Any minute, he thinks. The fainting. It's going to happen. He'll wake up with Fabian Prewett splashing water in his face and Gideon Prewett checking his pulse and it will, actually, be like dying and going to heaven, if only for a minute while he's still disoriented.

"As a matter of fact, Mr. Potter and Miss Evans are in my office for their first meeting as Head Boy and Girl," Dumbledore says mildly. "So good to see you, Gideon, Fabian. I had thought you were arriving earlier."

"Held up, weren't we," Gideon murmurs darkly, striding to the desk and straddling a chair backwards. "Bit of a do-up near Oxford."

"You have *never* seen *anything* — well, no, I suppose you *have* seen a lot of things like it, but the point remains, it was just — the *scale* — positively astronomic," Fabian explains, also sitting backwards. The seat of his dragonhide trousers

is so shiny, but James really isn't trying to look.

"What he means to say is," Gideon clarifies, "*is*, we saw stars."

"And it was a cloudy night," Fabian finishes.

Dumbledore casts a significant look across the room at James and Lily, both frozen in place, for various, awestruck reasons of their own devising. "While I have, indeed, seen such occurrences as you are so poetically describing, I can assure you Mr. Potter and Ms. Evans have not. Thank you, Mr. Potter and Ms. Evans. That *will* be all."

James stumbles out into the hall feeling dizzy. "They are *amazing*," he mumbles. "The way they sit on their chairs, did you see that, they always used to do that, and in *dragonhide trousers*, sitting backwards on a chair in *dragonhide trousers*, they are *brilliant*—"

"And probably sterile," Lily finishes for him. "You'd think they were from Busty and Bewitched, the way you carry on about them."

"My heroes," James squeaks.

"I don't," Lily says, "I can't — believe — what are — how — argh!" She turns on her heel and storms off, leaving James to sit in the middle of the hall and recuperate.

***

"Padfoot!" James screeches, hurtling up the stairs completely out of breath and bursting into the dormitory, where Sirius is methodically unpacking. Of course he had to come up when James did, and of course James went up early to do Mysterious Head Boy Things, and so Sirius is now bored and alone and the best solution to this is to make the unpacking last as long as humanly possible. It reminds him of Remus, the way he separates his socks into 'nighttime socks' and 'daytime socks' which aren't actual sock categories; they just involve a higher level of organization. Sirius folds a pair of shorts and carefully color-codes them before looking up with calculated disinterest.

"Pads," James pants, "you'll never — never guess — who's here — right here, in Dumbledore's office, not one hundred feet away, *right now*—"

"Edgar Allen Poe?" Sirius guesses caustically.

"The *Prewetts*," James breathes in hushed reverence. Sirius drops the shorts.

"*The* Prewetts?" he whispers tremblingly, after a few worshipful moments.

"Gideon and Fabian and they're wearing dragonhide trousers and they said 'That's never little Potter' and Fabian hit on Lily only not really because he felt unclean after but Gideon called me 'Potter' and Fabian smiled at me and he said 'carry on,'" says James in a rush. "I was going to ask them to sign my head but I hadn't got a quill."

Sirius dives into his trunk. It takes a few moments of frantic rummaging and then he emerges, a pair of snitch-imprinted pants on his head and a small, crumpled book clutched in his hand.

"I saved it," he whispers. "Remember how we used to use it to swear on? And then after fourth year we said it was silly and a bit creepy? I didn't really throw it out."

"Did you sleep with it under your pillow?"

Sirius looks shifty.

"I would have," James says frankly.

"Good," Sirius says, breathing a deep sigh of relief. "I did. Well, only on odd days." He clasps the book close, petting it reverently. "They're here? Where are they? What are they doing? How is Fabian's hair?"

"Yes, Dumbledore's office, top secret business I think to do with stars, *incredible*," James answers.

"Dragonhide pants?" Sirius asks.

"*Dragonhide pants*," James affirms.

"We've got to see them. We've got to — I know. Loiter. Casually. In the halls. Do you think we should take the book? Where do you think they'd sign me? Do you think they'd sign the book? This is creepy, isn't it, this is the sort of behavior you would endorse and everyone knows *you're* a stalker. I'm not a stalker," Sirius adds, for good luck. "These are just, you know, the Prewetts."

"I can't even hate you for saying that," James says. "You saved the book."

Sirius pets the cover again, running his fingers over the gold title. *The Secret Adventures of Gideon and Fabian Prewett, Pranksters Extraordinaire.* The Holy Grail of their childhood. Their guidebook. Their Bible. A piece of religious paraphernalia, something holy, something to swear by, something that may never, ever be profaned. "The book," Sirius echoes.

They share a necessary book moment.

"Right," Sirius says, after the silence has gone on long enough. "We're getting autographs. Don't say anything, it only makes you look like a madman when you talk to people you stalk."

"You're right," James says, starry eyes very far away. "They'll think we're scary. What should we do? Should we go back to the office? Do you think they'll be here tomorrow? Should we wait? I don't know what to *do.*"

"I have to wash my hair, I look a total fright," Sirius says, and scurries into the bathroom.

***

The Very Secret Adventures of Gideon and Fabian Prewett

Being an Account of the Exploits of Hogwarts' Most Daring (and Handsome!) Duo

If you've found this book and you're not a Prewett you can bugger off!!

Unless you're an acolyte hoping to learn the Prewett Way, in which case, read on and be enlightened, youngster.

DAY ONE: We arrive in Hogwarts!

We arrive in Hogwarts to the cheering of the crowd and are of course immediately heralded into Gryffindor, our Home Away From

Home, for the next seven years. While Fabian insists we make much ado about our arrival for posterity's sake I, GIDEON PREWETT, have the quill which means we will skip to all the good parts because I, GIDEON PREWETT, will be your favorite Prewett brother.



DAY TWO: Our first prank.

Our first prank is as all first pranks must be to any young male blazing his way in the world of mischief: held dear and close through long and prank-less nights, as the memory of your first kiss, your first woman, your first ho-ho and delicious all that, or possibly your first slice of chocolate cake. IT IS SACRED. No matter how terrible. However ours was fantastic. SINCE these are the Very Secret Adventures of the Brothers Prewett, not A Full Disclosure of All the Secrets of the Brothers Prewett, the details need not be revealed here; no doubt you have already heard them anyway, seeing as how they've probably gone down in modern myth.

A word to the wise: the stairs to the back entrance of the Hufflepuff wing are dead slippery, and should not be part of your escape route.

DAYS THREE THROUGH FORTY-SEVEN: We grow steadily more and more popular and handsomer by the day. Soon we have a cadre of swooning young ladies everywhere we set foot. It is a difficult life, being a PREWETT BROTHER, but someone's got to do it. Also, we torment many, many a Slytherin, most notably our odious archenemy, Luscious Lucius "I'm a Wanker" Malfoy. All the school supports our heroic efforts, mainly because Malfoy is a ratty little bastard and he goes orange when he gets upset. (Discovered by FABIAN PREWETT in an incident most illustriously referred to as BIG PUREBLOODED CARROT FACE. Treasure the memories. They are a man's life in reverse, and his legend while living.)

DAYS FORTY-SEVEN THROUGH END OF FIRST YEAR: We learn that our arch-nemesis, the spitty cobra to our sleek and adorable mongoose, is no match for our wit, our brilliance, our insurmountable magical prowess. We learn also that inbreeding among purebloods has at last produced a genetic horror show known as one Monsieur Crabbe (herein known as Monsieur Meat-Fist) and one Monsieur Goyle (herein known as Monsieur Hammer-Hand) who, like all mentally deficient but hulking great Slytherins, have been put to work as human pit bulls for His Holy Highness, the Emperor of Slytherin House, Goldie Locks. THUS we have introduced our friends, Messrs. Meat-Fist and Hammer-Hand, to the stairs at the back entrance of the Hufflepuff wing.

WE ARE BRILLIANT.

OUR FIRST SUMMER: We get a job in Hogsmeade. Fabian works hard. I have TWENTY-SEVEN GIRLFRIENDS. They all fight in the streets for my hand. I am in love with about twelve of them.

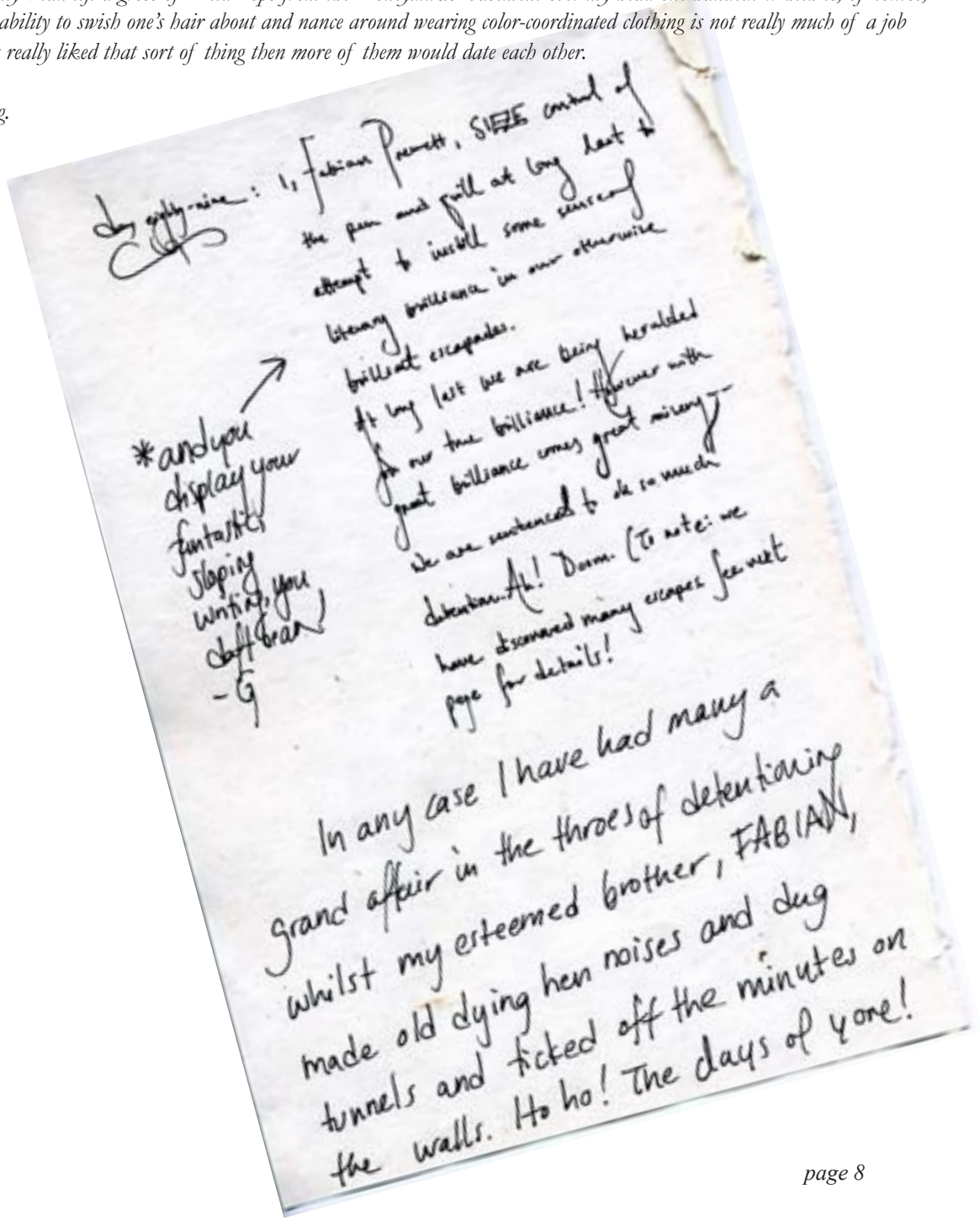
HAH! My brother has been crippled by a fortuitous hand cramp (even heroes are sometimes struck low by the capricious hand, haha, of fate) and so I, FABIAN PREWETT, otherwise known as The Sexy One (Gideon is, needless to say, The Overpoweringly Large One) will now proceed to set the record straight on the topic of our many unbelievably thrilling adventures.

What Gideon does not realize about his twenty-seven girlfriends was that twenty-three (23) of them were only dating him in order to see me in my underwear by wandering by the loo early in the morning; that three (3) of those remaining had severe mental deficiencies and/or physical disabilities; and that the last one (1) was actually a large, hairy man cursed with the unfortunate name of Amelia. This is the trouble with having a pen-friend girlfriend, as my brother has learned to his cost.

Anyway, the summer flies by in a whirlwind of excitement and romance, as do second year and third year and fourth year because honestly, it's really fairly formulaic: adventures, wine, women and song, and I think we should just skip straight to the daily log that we have started this year. What say you, Gideon?

I say you will never be The Sexy One. Give up! THE POWER OF THE GIDEON COMPELS YOU, dear reader. Keep in mind that of the two of us, only I can lift a gross of Acid Pops from the Honeydukes' basement over my head one-handed. Which is, of course, why they hired me. The ability to swish one's hair about and nance around wearing color-coordinated clothing is not really much of a job requirement and if girls really liked that sort of thing then more of them would date each other.

But I agree about the log.



A List for All Future Pranksters

(A must-have guide to driving people bonkers!!)

1. DUNGBOMBS: the dungbomb is a beautiful invention, + proves great fun for the whole family. Don't know what to bring to a big party? DUNGBOMBS are the answer, mates + matelettes. good for all ages, and oh-so-smelly.

2. NOSE-BITING TEA CUPS: no one will ever ask you to tea again. You will have all the scones to yourself. A true triumph!

3. FROGSPAWN: oh how the lasses (and the lads) do scream at a fresh batch of frogspawn in their clotted cream (or underwear drawer). A clever and unique way to spice up a boring Sunday!

4. Spontaneously Combusting Quills: for the goody-two-shoes in your life. The perfect yuletide gift: brings instant cheer to your friends' and enemies' faces. The stains will last for at least a month; and oh what a glorious month that will be.

5. Bilious Belt Buckles: the gift that keeps on giving. Steer clear of the lucky recipient; effects last 24 – 48 hours, and longer when it is humid.

6. Bag o' Boils: never be without this handy bag. We Prewetts recall many a day when at a loss for new and innovative pranking but in dire need of some old-fashioned fun, were thrilled deep down to our britches to remember our handy Bag o' Boils. Buy as many as possible. These go fast, naturally.

7. Carnivorous Cauldrons: they are always, always, always HUNGRY.

8. Howler Hatchery: if you sing them lullabies, they will be yours forever. No authenticity required! Go wild.

*

Composed by Gideon and Fabian Prewett, Being Helpful.

Gideon Prewett is having a fag. It's the fag that undoes him. It's the fag that keeps him for a minute, on school grounds, reveling in the minor triumph having a fag on school grounds brings. "You and your disgusting habits," Fabian is telling him. "One day they will be the death of us! You first-hand, and me, second."

"Do you even understand?" Gideon replies. "Look at me. I am *smoking* on school grounds." Fabian pauses to consider it. "It's a triumph," Gideon presses, with a hint of their old exclamation points. "I keep thinking Dumbledore's going to show up out of nowhere and put it out in one of those *ways*."

"I remember the buckets," Fabian sighs. "He had all these *shapes*."

"Just big enough for your head to fit in," Gideon recalls. "And yet you could never get your head *out*."

"Old bucket-head, they used to call you." Fabian grins. "All the birds. Fondly, of course, but with an air of sadness."

"I almost stifled myself," Gideon says, taking a long, sweet drag. "Mad old coot."

"So you should have done," Fabian returns. "That was the point. It was a *lesson*. You and your cancer sticks."

"Look," Gideon begins, irritably, raising the fag in warning, "we've *had* this discussion, and you said—"

Something in the bushes rattles.

Fabian tenses, almost imperceptibly, the sudden clutch of his muscles giving the lie to his casual expression. Gideon's hand flies instinctively to his inside pocket, curling in on the reassurance of his wand.

"It can't," Fabian whispers, so softly and with so little movement of his mouth that it's almost as if the voice is coming from somewhere else, "not on the grounds, not here—"

"On three," Gideon mouths. Fabian nods grimly, slowly uncrossing his leg, carefully measured movements. "One — two—"

"Ow," the bush says, and then, "bugger fuck," and then two boys fall out of it with leaves in their hair. Fabian lifts a brow, relaxing. Gideon taps his chest in a way that means *I am not too old for this but it is never too early to wet yourself for no reason*. "Uhm." The boy on the bottom looks up and gives a winning grin. "Hello. How are you. Lovely weather. We do so like bushes." The boy on top nods, unable, apparently, to close his mouth. "How are you lot, then?"

"You're familiar," Gideon says.

"Put out your cigarette," Fabian hisses to him. "These are young people and you are a terrible influence."

"Oh," the boy on the bottom scoffs, "I smoke all the time. Fags. Fabulous. Smoke. All the time. You know."

"I don't," the boy on top says. "I don't smoke ever. You're my favorite," he adds, to Fabian. "Just so you know."

"Well." Fabian tosses his hair, puzzled but pleased. "Of course I am. Er. *Who* are you?"

"It's me," says the boy on top, who has now rolled off and is the boy on the left. "Little Potter? From today, earlier? You said." He is gazing up at Fabian with a calf-like expression, eyes wide behind his glasses, and suddenly Gideon does remember.

"Right," he says, vaguely, "Head Boy, yeah? With the redhead. What are you doing in those bushes?"

"Illegal things," says the boy on the right, who does look strangely, even painfully, familiar. Gideon strains his memory; all those third-years running around — who was this one? Had any third-year — any third year in the history of time — worn a dog collar? "Extremely illegal. Go-down-among-the-heroes-of-legend sort of thing. Not sex-illegal, either, haha, we're just mates, not mating, but, you know, dungbombs. Slytherins and so on. Has either of you got a pen?"

"I know you!" Fabian exclaims suddenly, in tones that waver between horrified and amused. "Gideon, remember?"

"He *knows me*," the boy says, rapturously, to Potter. "Write that down."

"It's *Sirius Black*," Fabian hisses in his brother's ear — *oh*! — and then, turning his stony-eyed attention to the boy, who is swaggering back upright, says "You made our little sister *cry*."

Sirius Black freezes for a moment, his eyes darting back and forth in panic, and then says, very carefully, "To be fair, she punched me in the nose first."

"I punch him all the time," Potter says. "Loads."

"I don't care what she did," Gideon says, his voice like iron. "These are petty excuses. Unworthy excuses. The excuses not of a man but of a *worm*."

"Er," Sirius says. "This is really not how this part of meeting you is supposed to go."

"We know our little sister's left hook," Fabian continues. His eyes narrow into dark slits. Sirius takes a step backwards. "We taught it to her ourselves. It's really something, isn't it?"

"I had tissue up my nose for days," Sirius mumbles. "Just punishment, after all, eh?"

"Not enough," Gideon decides firmly.

"No," Fabian agrees. "Hardly enough."

"I will punch him for you," James offers. "*Loads*. Really. From dawn until dusk. If you will sign my arm. Will you sign my arm?"

"James," Sirius says out of the corner of his mouth, "they are going to sign your arm in *my blood*."

"Damn," James mutters. "That'll wash off."

"You know," Sirius attempts desperately, "your little sister was an absolutely amazing girl. Woman. Person of substance. And I was in fourth year and very stupid. Even stupider than now, I mean. Look, we play on the same Quidditch team! We're teammates! We're on fantastic terms. She's a great Seeker. I'm really, really *sorry*."

"Gideon," Fabian says , tapping a fingertip thoughtfully against his chin, "does 'sorry' cut it with us? As a matter of principle?"

"No," Gideon says shortly, rolling up his sleeves.

"I'm not just sorry, you know!" Sirius protests. He backpedals wildly into James, who has his arm stretched out and an expression of ecstasy on his face. "I am so far beyond sorry. I am a miserable worm. I am worm lint. I am toe dirt. I

deserve to be eaten by hyenas. As much as it would be an honor to have the shit beaten out of me by you, at least let me try to redeem myself."

"Can't be done," Gideon says. "Come here, if you please, and take your beating like a man."

Sirius shuffles forward, staring up at Gideon with mournful, puppyish eyes. "All right," he whimpers. "But, listen, before you knock all the teeth from my mouth, there's something you should know."

"If it's about Alice—"

"—and her incredible right hook—"

"—and her equally incredible powers of deduction—"

"—we already know," Fabian finishes. "Stand up straight, old boy, stiff upper lip, et cetera. Can't face the firing squad looking like a drunken boxer on his last legs. For Hogwarts and Country."

"It isn't about Alice's right hook," Sirius says, whose eyes, dark and trembling, now appear to take up at least half of his head. "Although those are all magnificent traits which comprise an equally, if not more, magnificent young woman. It's about — well, it's silly, but — you know, your — your book."

Fabian, who has delicate hands that look no less threatening, pauses in the middle of rolling up his left sleeve. He blinks. Gideon, who has hands the size of Sirius' head — they look like mallets with fingers — stops aiming his knuckles below the belt and presses a suddenly more gentle thumb against his lower lip. "Our book?" Fabian says quietly. "You don't mean—"

"The Secret Adventures of Gideon and Fabian Prewett," Sirius says, all in one go. "Written by Gideon and Fabian Prewett, complete with lists for the apt pupil and those who would one day in the near future carry the banner, fight the good fight, keep up the same old, same old, the core, the very backbone, for the imaginations of the next generation!" Sirius pauses, feeling embarrassed. He is, after all, almost seventeen years old. Seventeen year olds aren't supposed to be excited about anything; it's against the law. However, this is a very special circumstance and he hopes against all hope that Gideon and Fabian Prewett will break his nose but keep his excitement a secret. "It is our bible," he finishes at last. "It is that upon which we swear."

"We live by it," James agrees. "Sirius here sleeps with it under his pillow."

"That is because I am the one who found it," Sirius mutters. "And only on odd days. I *told* you."

"You found the book," Fabian says. He lets out a fluttery small sigh and closes his eyes, youth and bliss chasing one another across his face.

"Oh, the memories," Gideon murmurs. The resemblance between them now is unmistakable. Something about the eyelashes. Sirius feels weak in the knees.

"The question is," Fabian continues, one eye opening, "are you worthy?"

"I am worthy," Sirius says. "I am worthy. I am so, so worthy."

Fabian takes his own chin between thumb and forefinger. "A test!" he proposes. "To see if you are, indeed, worthy as you say."

"And not toe lint," Sirius says. "Though I will always be toe lint inside for my horrendous behavior. I weep at night to make up for it."

"You've had probably ten girlfriends since," Gideon grins. "I know your type."

"You *are* his type," Fabian points out.

"Will you test me too?" James pleads, arm still bare and ready.

"This isn't merely a test, you know," Fabian says impatiently. "This is an assessment. An analysis. A scorching examination of your merits that tests the depths of your very soul." He regards them very meaningfully for a moment, and then says, "What happens on day forty-five of fifth year?"

"You eat two pounds of marshmallows and throw up in pink on Fabian's Divination homework," James says in a rush. "I did that too in third year but it wasn't marshmallows it was candy floss and it was really more purple and Sirius's head not his homework but I was *trying*."

"That was my question!" Sirius yelps. "Did he ask *you* that question? Sir, I *knew* that question, I can quote the whole entry, 'When in the course of human events it becomes necessary to consume a good portion of one's own weight in garishly colored sweets—' He's cheating!"

"Silence!" Fabian commands. Both boys shrink back, ashamed, and regard their feet. "A moment, if you please, I must confer with my esteemed associate." He turns his back on them, with great dignity, beckons Gideon closer, and whispers "What should we do now? Shall we have them do jumping-jacks? Send us money? Bring us our clothing and newspapers in the morning?"

"This is sick," Gideon says in an amused undertone. "You are a sick man."

"Shh," Fabian scolds. "They're rather adorable, aren't they? In a horrifying way."

"You could just carve it right in to my skin if you don't have a pen," James says helpfully, from behind them.

"We have never had minions before," Fabian adds. "Think of the possibilities. We could have whatever we wanted for breakfast in the morning. We could make them wear unitards or skirts or rollerskates or togas. We could dress them up, braid their hair. We could have *them* braid *our* hair."

"I do like sausages, but you always burn them and I never have time," Gideon muses. "Do you reckon they are any good at all at sausages?"

"They could learn," Fabian says. "They are young and supple and easily influenced."

"We can hear you whispering," Sirius calls out to them. "You know, not that we mind, just — thought you might like to know. I am the Sausage King."

"We are hardly so slick as we once believed," Fabian murmurs. "This much is clear."

"Your proposition is that we take them in, teach them Prewett fashion, and in return have two small manslaves until the authorities catch on. Is that it?" Gideon says. "Is that what I am to take away from all this?"

"Do you think they are house trained?" Fabian thinks out loud. "What? Yes. That is indeed what I am proposing."

"It is so tempting," Gideon sighs. "I have always wanted a manslave."

"I would lick your boots clean every morning," Sirius offers. "Or if you are not one for spit on your shoes or, you know, wear sandals or something, I could always lick your feet clean."

"Oh Merlin," Gideon says. "It is going to be so hard, being mature about this."

"Now you know how it feels to be me," Fabian mutters.

They turn together, as if choreographed.

"We would willingly give up school," James whispers fervently.

"And our futures," Sirius adds. "Teach us. *We are yours.*"

"Oh, please," Fabian says, breaking. "Can't we have them? I won't let them wet in the house and I'll feed them every day. We can dress them in little aprons."

"I look fantastic in an apron," Sirius agrees. "And James in those little pink numbers with shoulder frills."

"Unmb," James says, nodding hysterically.

"And," Fabian adds in a whisper so low only Gideon can hear it, "it might not be all bad, you know, having someone you knew you could trust in the student body. There's Alice, obviously, but it'd be all right to have the Head Boy in tow. Might come in handy for something other than sausages."

"Oh, we know we can trust them, do we?" Gideon repeats with quiet incredulity.

Fabian gives the duo a significant look. James, sleeve still rolled up, is practically drooling, hands clenched in a praying position; Sirius is making demonstrative smoothing and posing movements as if to illustrate his fitness to wear an apron. Both of them are wearing wet, pleading expressions of the sort normally seen on swooning nineteenth-century heroines on book jackets.

"Oh," Fabian says, "I think they'll do whatever we say."

"Righto," Gideon says. He nods once, decisively. "Listen up then, you young horrors, you are now Prewett apprentices. As such, we expect you to make the Prewett Lifestyle your number one priority. It is not easy or simple, being a Prewett, and we can't have other things — girlfriends, schoolwork, so on — mucking about with our Operation. Are we crystal?"

"No girlfriends!" James says quickly and joyfully, aglow with promise. "I've been dumped and his was only for the summer!"

"And we never spend *any* time on schoolwork anyway," Sirius adds, "so that's one off!"

"In addition to which," Fabian drawls, "you are to be available whenever we visit the school to spit-polish various items of our clothing, cook us sumptuous breakfasts, and dance about for our twisted amusement."

"Do you want us to choreograph our dances," Sirius asks, very seriously, "or do you prefer spontaneity and wild improvisation?"

"Both," Gideon says. He likes to think, later, that he doesn't mean it to sound so sadistic as it comes out.

"Yessir," James breathes. "Honor to serve, sir."

"This is the most wonderful thing that has ever happened to me," Sirius says. He looks as if he might cry.

"It's adorable," Fabian gushes. "Look at its little face. Oh Gideon, I am so happy. Can we play with them *now*?"

"We've got an appointment," Gideon reminds him. "I think this little acquisition meeting may have gone on long enough."

"What about my arm?" James mewls.

"Do you want to, like, brand us?" Sirius suggests. "Just so everyone would know and no one else would try to enlist us as manslaves. We are, after all, very much in demand. As you can imagine."

"I have no doubt," Gideon says, managing to make, with some effort, a Serious Face. "We're unfortunately in something of a rush—"

"Liar," Fabian hisses.

"—we're in a rush now," Gideon amends smoothly, "because of the thing, that we have to do, that isn't here. Right, Fabian?"

"Oh," Fabian says. He droops visibly, rather dispirited. "The thing. Yes, I suppose."

"You're leaving?" James moans.

"Only temporarily," Gideon consoles him, patting him manfully on the shoulder. "Stiff upper lip and keeping it, and all that. In the meantime, commit yourself to study of the Prewett Way."

"Our entire *lives* are committed to study of the Prewett Way," Sirius assures him.

"Good boy," Fabian beams. "As it should be. And he's been punched by Alice, so it's just like he's part of the family."

"Except smaller," Gideon reminds him, "and more enslaved."

"Can we get some photos?" Sirius asks perkily, producing, from nowhere, a camera.

"Can I have some of your hair?" James adds, in a very small voice.

"Yes," Fabian says.

"No," Gideon says, at the same time.

"My life is so beautiful," James murmurs, looking as if he might weep.

***



***

Remus has already eaten all his train chocolate. It isn't that his mother didn't give him breakfast in the morning; she did. It isn't that his mother didn't give him too much breakfast in the morning; she did. It's more that something about sitting, alone, on Platform Nine and Three Quarters, for a half hour because he is some mixture of early and late, requires as much chocolate to repair as possible. Also, Remus feels ill.

Two nights ago, the moon was full and unclouded in the sky. Riding back with the others on the appropriate day was out of the question; it would be him and Peter alone in the car, and if Remus passed out or started bleeding or turned around to be ill, Peter would probably faint dead away all over Remus' feet, which was hardly helpful. Mrs. Lupin was having none of it. She meant well, but staying behind for an extra day shattered Remus' careful conception of normality, scattering all the pieces to the proverbial four winds, leaving him here, on the Platform, alone, with only a dustpan and a bar of train chocolate to mend the wreckage.

It is, of course, better than the last week with the Potters. Being torn asunder by wild warthogs in the parched and barren desert is, of course, better than the last week with the Potters. Something must have gone wrong with James' mum — too much unresolved tension floating free in the air at last breaking her — and she baked seventeen pies in one day. That wouldn't have been terrible at all, as her pies were delicious, except Sirius had disappeared, and James was holed up somewhere reading something for Head Boy preparation, and Sophie had left earlier with a wink and a fluttering kiss to the air, which left Mr. Potter, Peter and Remus to eat seventeen pies in one evening to Mrs. Potter's repetitions of *Are they good, boys? How are they? Eat up! Have another slice.*

Again, Remus feels sick.

A slow whistle of steam signals the arrival of the Hogwarts Express on its way back from school, ready for a half-hour break before departure. Remus watches it dolefully as it slides into the station, all sleek and black and probably never ill on seventeen pies and one foolish bar of chocolate. For the first time in his life, he misses the chaos of people his age, loud and stepping on his feet and giving him awkward bruises.

"Top shape, top shape, ship-shape if you will. Excellent. Excellent. Most pleased, aren't we?"

The sound of another human voice at first confuses Remus. Perhaps he is dreaming the two men strolling casually down the platform towards him. Perhaps they are angels. Perhaps they signal the not unexpected explosion of his intestines, giving in at last to the pressure on all sides.

"Well, *hallo*," the lanky one with impressively shiny brown hair says. "What have we here?"

Remus' good manners kick in immediately. Harbingers of death or no, they are adults, and he ought to be polite to them or somehow, his mother will know. "Hallo," he says, standing and brushing chocolate off his thighs. *Are you here to kill me?* his brain adds. He doesn't give voice to it.

"You have chocolate on your nose," shiny-hair says. "No, no, I think it is a fantastic statement. Is it a freckle? Is it a food product? You are charming. I am Fabian Prewett, and this is my idiot Gideon, and why, exactly, are you here?"

"School," Remus manages, "going, late, to, sorry." He is bowled over by a strangely comforting, strangely frightening aura of total confidence, impossible charm, and slight interrogation. He doesn't blame them; he certainly looks suspicious, all bloated and ratty and smudged and alone.

"Hogwarts?" shiny-hair — *Fabian* — asks. "Are you a Ravenclaw?"

"Almost, actually," Remus finds himself blurting out. "But then the hat said, 'Well, where would you like to go?' and I thought, 'The nice boys I sat with on the train up who spoke to me, well, one of them is in Gryffindor, anyway, and he looks awfully angry about it, and it isn't entirely that I read *all the time*, you know, just a lot of it, but I do like books about adventure,' and I think it just said Gryffindor to make me shut up."

"My God," Fabian Prewett says, looking delighted. "Gideon, I love it. It's better than our dancing manslaves. We were in Gryffindor ourselves, not four years hence. I don't suppose we've met, Chocolate Face?"

"Er," Remus says, cursing himself for his terrible memory and inexcusable manners. "I don't know? Maybe. Remus Lupin, sorry." He sticks out a hand, which impulsive motion makes him drop the jumper rolled up under his arm. Clumsy, clumsy, *always* clumsy. He bends down to pick it up, but shiny hair waves him aside with a gallant "Allow me!" and smoothly retrieves it with the toe of his boot, tossing it up into one gloved hand.

"Thanks very much," Remus says, taking it. Fabian winks at him.

"Remus Lupin," rumbles the other man—Gideon?—who is approximately the size of a young tree and has masses of shining blond hair that make him look rather like an enormous, tattooed Apollo. "He was in third year, too, I believe."

"Good Lord, it's an invasion," Fabian says, amused. "They are everywhere. Like rabbits. And O! how tall they are, and strapping, and so on. Gone the carefree days of boyhood. Sunrise, sunset. We've just met a few of your comrades; you realize that your class is apparently completely off its collective nut?"

"I know," Remus mutters. "Did you say 'manslaves?'"

"We are not at liberty to divulge their names of yet," Fabian murmurs, "for their identities are secret and safe with us; never shall we betray them."

"Sirius Black and James Potter," Remus says, "right?"

Fabian looks to his brother. "How did he do that? I say, this chap is a good sort, what do you say we buy him a drink, Gid?"

Gideon raises a very blonde eyebrow. "If you're paying." He pauses. He grins. He has very white teeth. Remus is momentarily blinded. "*Fay.*"

"Don't call me that," Fabian snaps. "Especially not in front of company. Well?" He turns on Remus, looking expectant. "Are you coming?"

"Er," Remus says.

Great hairy nancing flower-arsed poofter, Gideon mouths in Remus' direction.

"Where am I coming?" Remus clarifies, hoping he is not being addressed.

"For a nice spot of tea," Fabian explains, as if it is rather clear and Remus is rather simple. "The station shop is lacking in refreshments but it does make an excellent cup of tea, or three in our case, and you look as if you need it. That, and a napkin. Also, I believe I must put arsenic in my brother's drink, terrible affair, really, and he was so young, too, and all that. Shall we?"

Remus gets the impression of being swept under a gigantic wave of personality, drowning, like he did the first time he met Sirius. Only these people are, if only marginally, more mature, and far kinder. "Er," Remus repeats. "I can't miss my train."

"We will fly you to Hogwarts by motorbike if necessary," Fabian promises. "Though it won't be, as we are nothing if not punctual."

Great hairy nancing flower-arsed poofter, Gideon mouths again. *That's what* he *is.*

"But punctual," Fabian says, not batting an eye. "You seem an Earl Grey sort, am I right?"

"Er, yes, actually," Remus says, feeling the tips of his ears go red. Is this different from accepting candy from strangers? Tea from strangers is something his mother has never warned him about, and either way they aren't really strangers, they've enslaved James and Sirius. Which somehow makes them…*more* trustworthy? It's unclear, but by the time Remus has puzzled this out, he has already been seized by the elbows and is being charmingly but determinedly steered towards the teashop by the Goateed Mountain on his left and the Shiny-Haired Wonder on his right.

"Don't worry," Gideon whispers in his ear, patting him on the shoulder. "I won't let him drug you."

"Er," Remus says. "Haha."

***

"I don't like this one," James says, frowning.

"Why not?" Sirius holds the shirt against his own chest, looks down at it, and looks back up at James, rather accusingly. "I think it's nice."

"It lacks something," James says. "Subtlety, I think. The shredded remainders of our dignity. Anything."

It is, Sirius has to admit, bright pink. It does say "Mrs. Fabian Prewett" across the chest in enormous black letters. On the other hand, it doesn't beat around the bush. "Well, look," he begins. "I mean, what it lacks for in subtlety it makes up for in clarity. There's no mistaking it. Besides. *I* won't have to wear it."

"I just think we're going to get," James explains, "you know. Hexed underthings. Deservedly, too."

Sirius has to admit, James does have a point. "What have we become, man," Sirius groans, flopping down against the bed. "Even Peter's left us for manlier things, like puff pastries and house elves."

"We have to snap out of it," James suggests. "We have to just — we have to move on."

"It was their teeth," Sirius agrees. "Their teeth are so white. There must be — hypnotic powers! That has to be the reason."

James looks at the shirt. Sirius looks at the shirt.

"Well," James says. "You might as well just fold it up and hide it. In case they, you know, ever do come back and want to see us in it."

"I really liked mine," Sirius mourns, folding. "It was clever."

"'Gideon Prewett Lets ME Touch His Biceps' isn't clever." James polishes his glasses on the edge of a sleeve. "It's sort of sad."

"You'd know all about that, wouldn't you?" Sirius begins. "I'm surprised you never made Lily Evans t-shirts and accessories."

"Hang on a minute," James protests, and then, "Hallo, it's Moony!"

Remus sets his old suitcase down by his bed and offers a wan smile over his shoulder. Something wicked flashes in his eyes. Sirius quickly sits on the pink t-shirt. "Hullo," Remus says. "*Manslaves.*"

He doesn't know. He *cannot* know. "Haha!" Sirius says airily. "Manslaves. What a creative nickname that is. Manslaves indeed. How are you? You're late."

"I'm very sorry," Remus says, sounding genuinely contrite. "I missed my train, you see, and I had to get a ride back."

"With strangers?" James exclaims, outraged. "Moony! What if they'd put you in a sack and dropped you in a river?"

"Oh, it was all right," Remus says. He carefully unlatches his suitcase and doesn't look up. "I sort of knew them, you see. Sirius, what *is* that color?"

"Fuchsia," Sirius says. "It's for my cousin. What kind of perverts gave you a ride from London to Hogwarts?"

"They graduated a few years ago," Remus says blithely. "I didn't know them all that well, but they were very friendly. They got me a cup of tea. Have you lot been making t-shirts?"

"They're for his cousin," James says. "Moony, did you say manslaves?"

"Did I?" Remus murmurs innocently.

James and Sirius exchange a half-panicked look. James fumbles with getting his glasses back up onto his nose. "So, er," he mumbles. "Who gave you the lift, then? A friendly old witch with a roomy broomstick?"

"Moony, you old dog, you," Sirius says. "Always knew you had it in you. How was she? Was she warty?"

"Let's see," Remus says. He takes out his socks and sets them all in a neat pile on one side of his bed. His underwear, on the bottom, remains packed until no one is around to see him take them out. He starts unloading his jumpers, one by one, re-folding a few that have gotten rumpled. "What were their names again? Very handsome, very suave, knew their way around. Had two motorcycles, actually, matching. Their jackets were monogrammed — what *was* it?"

"Not," James says.

"It couldn't," Sirius agrees.

"Oh, *that's* right," Remus says. "Told me to call them Gid and Fay, you know, just like their friends do." Remus thinks back fondly to the tea shop and — "Just tell them," Fabian said, "that we said for you to call us Gid and Fay and if they piddle down their legs, won't that be a lovely sight?" — Gideon and Fabian Prewett, Gideon drinking from a tiny teacup in a massive hand and Fabian with his pinky finger curling and occasionally his impeccably white teeth flashing. Remus doesn't mean to be so very cruel. He promises himself he'll only let it last for a little while longer. But Fabian *had* said it was *well* within his right. And Fabian was a very convincing man. Those teeth alone...!

"Gid," Sirius says.

"And Fay?" James chokes.

"I like the t-shirts," Remus says. "Very lovely color. Very unique."

"A part of me just died," James says "and it was you, Moony."

"Urgnk," Sirius moans, and then, more urgently, "*urgnk*."

"Gid and Fay?" James whimpers.

"Oh, yes," Remus replies, utterly unmoved.

"Ten points from Gryffindor for destroying my soul," James says.

"That's the stuff," Sirius says miserably. "Do it again. Oh, how I hate you, Remus Lupin. Gid. Fay. You rode on their *motorbike*. Speaking of which, you won't get within three feet of *my* motorbike—"

"Your motorbike hasn't got cushions," Remus points out, enjoying himself immensely. "And Gid's hardly even makes a noise. It just sort of goes rrrrrr like a happy kitten. In fact I rather liked it. None of the ups and certainly none of the downs, and the cushions on Fay's were red velvet and had little tassels."

"Don't think I won't—" James warns, raising his head from his hands.

"We are betrayed," Sirius mourns. "I'm burning the t-shirts. I'm throwing that book out a window. How is it *everyone* likes *him* so bloody much?"

"I don't stalk people," Remus says. "In which characteristic I am beginning to feel very alone."

***

"Psst! Sirius. Wake up. Padfoot, hey, *wake up*."

"Mmf. Gzzzght. What."

"The book. Where's the book? You didn't really throw it out a window, did you?"

"Mmf?"

"Wake up! Padfoot! Helloooo! The book."

"I know. God! I know. Of course I didn't. Don't be ridiculous. God, it's early."

"Where is it?"

"...I'm not telling you."

"It's under your pillow, isn't it?"

"Maybe. No. Why do you want it, anyway? We were jilted. We were abandoned. We were cruelly treated."

"Moony wasn't wearing one of his jumpers. That's why. The button-downs. We'll just have to send them photographs."

"They'll never call. They'll never write. It will be one afternoon of bliss and off they purr on their motorbikes. You know how they are. Moony *insulted my motorbike*. You heard him. She purrs. She does. It's just more of a roar sometimes."

"Padfoot."

"What, then?"

"*Did you throw the book away.*"

"...no. Of course not."

***

Trying to get Sirius alone is like trying to catch a tadpole. Every time Remus thinks he's got him cornered, he disappears, or launches himself into fascinating conversation with whatever hapless student is standing close by, or puts his head down and pretends to be asleep.

"Sirius," Remus says. "Sirius, unless you are a narcoleptic with socks up your nose I really don't think you're asleep."

"Oh," Sirius says nonchalantly. "Hallo, Remus. Wonderful afternoon, isn't it? Have to be off now. Pressing engagement."

"I just wanted to apologize," Remus says, very fast, before Sirius can flee. "For all that about Gideon and Fabian Prewett. They, er — you see, they told me to say all those things. Said it would be funny. They also said they'd be in touch so keep your ears perky. I think that's what they said. That does sound like them, doesn't it? In any case, you can tell James, and you can stop avoiding me. Unless I smell. In which case, I don't know what to say, I bathe twice a day."

"Oh," Sirius says again. "Right. I'll tell James. And then we won't have to avoid you anymore! Haha. Jolly good. Lovely."

Remus gives him a furrowed look. "Do you have a fever? You look all flushed."

"Appointment," Sirius reminds him. "Rash. It's hot. Isn't it? Anyway, if you see James you should tell him yourself. He's been. You know. Busy with all his important Head Boy business which, by the way, is just fixing his hair for *hours* in front of the mirror so Lily will think he's strapping. Hair is all he's got, really, in the epic battle between James Potter and Kingsley Shacklebolt. We're taking bets, by the by. The odds are good on Kingsley. Everyone figures even if James *does* win, Shack's going to break both his kneecaps and stick him on top of the Astronomy Tower."

"I don't bet," Remus says, nose wrinkling familiarly.

"No," Sirius agrees. "No. Of course not. Soul of virtue."

There is a brief silence.

"Didn't you have—" Remus starts, feeling hopeless

"Appointment!" Sirius says brightly, "ta, Moony, I almost forgot!" He saunters out the door with great casualness.

Remus sighs and collapses into one of the armchairs.

Sirius pokes his head back into the doorway. "Er. Moony?"

"Are you back?" Remus asks.

"Did they really say for us to keep our ears perky?"

"Something like that. It was all very empire-builder — all *tiffin* and *memsahib* and *spiffing, old boy* but I think they said that. I don't know. Is it important?"

"The *Prewetts* are thinking of *my ears,*" Sirius breathes reverently. "My life is complete." He vanishes again, door clicking shut behind him. Remus has just reached for his parchment — there's a Potions essay due already and he doesn't want to waste any time failing it — when Sirius pops in again and says "Moony!" very loudly.

"Ngaugh!" Remus says, and drops his quill, and his inkwell, into his lap.

"D'you fancy a game of chess? You know, after...my appointment." Sirius looks innocent, quizzical, doglike, with a studied kind of nonchalance all over his face. "Andromeda's just got a new set and it's ace."

"I'll beat you," Remus reminds him. "I always beat you."

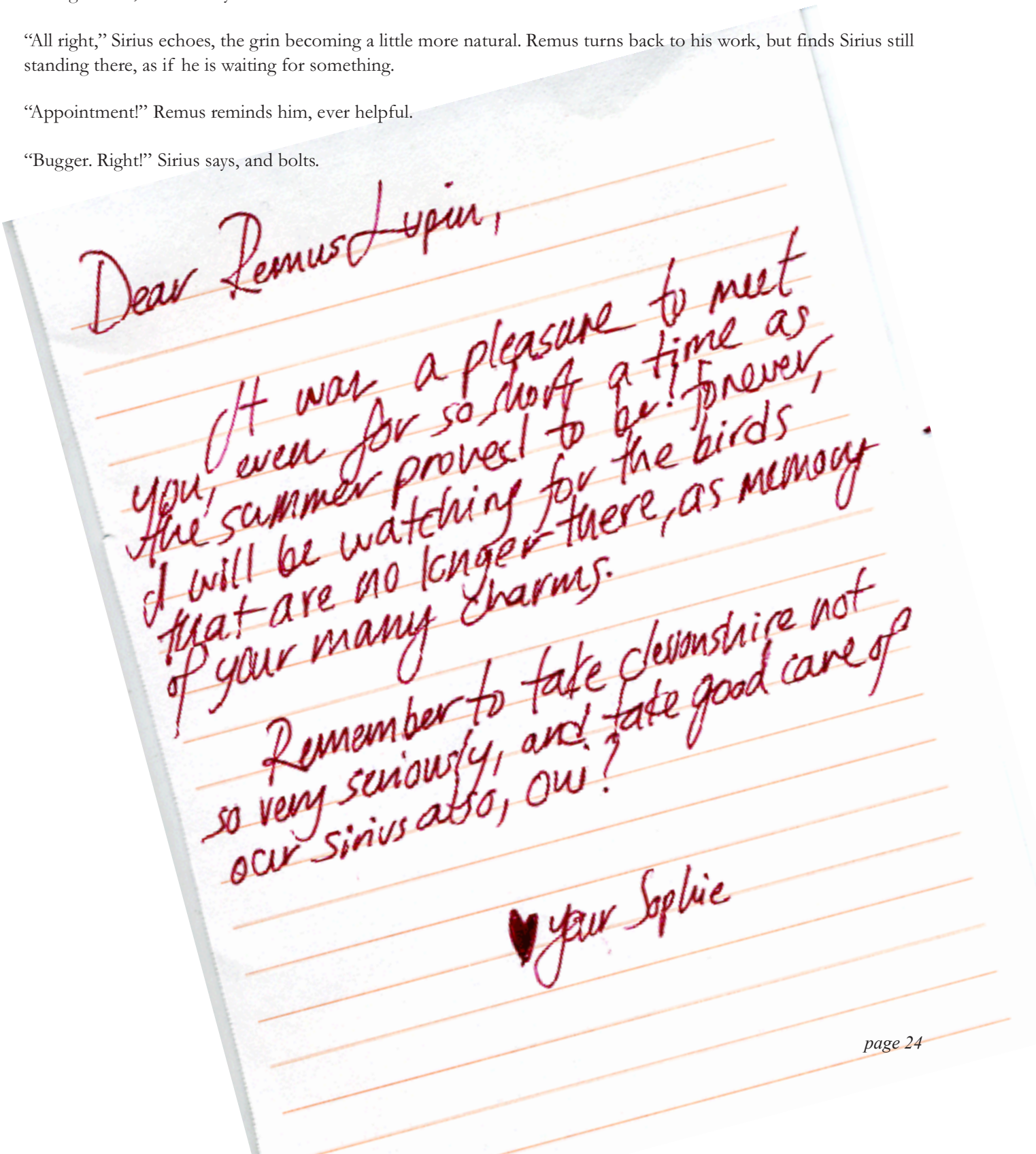
"But I'll take your Queen before you do," Sirius counters. "Which I always consider a victory."

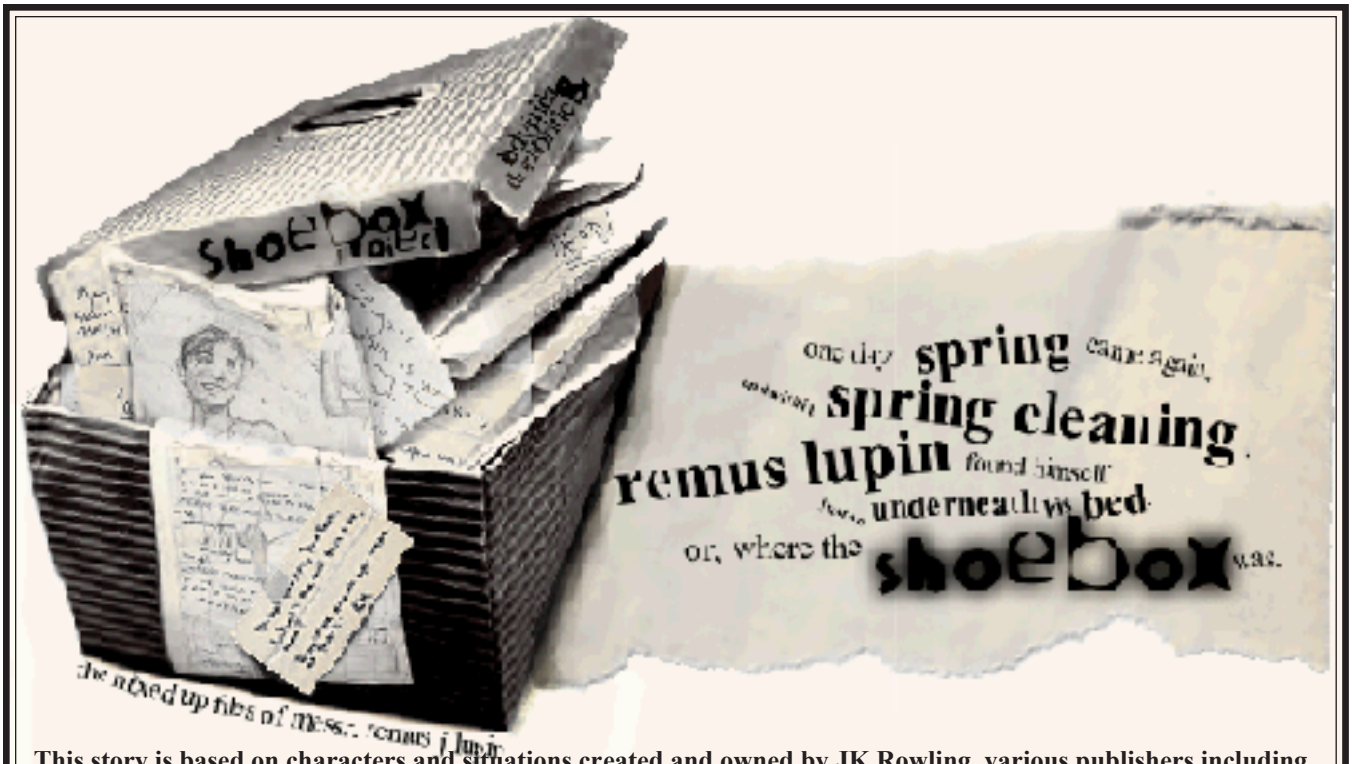
"All right then," Remus says.

"All right," Sirius echoes, the grin becoming a little more natural. Remus turns back to his work, but finds Sirius still standing there, as if he is waiting for something.

"Appointment!" Remus reminds him, ever helpful.

"Bugger. Right!" Sirius says, and bolts.





This story is based on characters and situations created and owned by JK Rowling, various publishers including but not limited to Bloomsbury Books, Scholastic Books and Raincoast Books, and Warner Bros., Inc. No money is being made and no copyright or trademark infringement is intended.

***The Shoebox Project* by LadyJaida and Dorkorific**

http://www.livejournal.com/community/shoebox_project

Part Sixteen: Halloween 1976



***

It is a dark and stormy teatime. Remus Lupin, halfway through a heavily buttered crumpet, drops his teacup as the sound of thunder shakes Hogwarts' foundations. The cup thunks against the carpet and oozes tea outward in a little brown splotch. "Bugger," Remus mutters. He bends down to mop up the stain, napkin in one hand, the other still clutching his crumpet possessively. To leave a heavily buttered crumpet unattended in the Gryffindor common room is to bid farewell to it forever. "Bugger," Remus says again, only it sounds more like *buh-fnrr* with crumpet in his mouth.

The door bangs open. "Hallo, what's this? Crumpets?" Sirius asks. Outside lightning flashes in the gloomy sky. "And there's extra! How kind of you to invite me to tea, Madame Lupin. I would be delighted to join you. I have even washed my fingers. Have you *seen* the rain?" Remus straightens to find Sirius sitting across from him, soaking wet and smelling faintly of dog. Remus tries not to look *too* disapproving. "Well I didn't go *out* when it was raining," Sirius mutters. "It sort of blew up all of a sudden. Pass the butter, will you?"

Remus sets his teacup down on the table and chances a quick glance at the sprawled tea-leaves. Better safe than sorry, he always says. "Hm," he murmurs. "That's funny."

"What is?" Sirius blinks. "The butter? Butter is never funny, Moony. Butter is extremely serious. The absence thereof in particular."

"The tea leaves, actually," Remus explains.

"What?" inquires Sirius, who, in the absence of the butter knife, has just started smearing his crumpet across the dish like a washcloth. "Is it a Grim? Maybe it's me. I am in your future, Moony. Whenever you pick up a crumpet or try to have a quiet Halloween tea, *there I will be lurking*."

"No," Remus says carefully. "It's not a Grim. Have a look?" He passes it over. Sirius peers in, cheerfully stuffing his mouth with half a crumpet.

You're going to DIE, say the tea leaves.

"Huh," says Sirius, intrigued, and takes another contemplative bite. "That's new and horrible."

He shakes the cup. The leaves skitter and fall again: *Blood. Blood and doom.*

"It seems very clear on the doom thing," Sirius says solemnly, passing the teacup back to Remus, who examines it worriedly. "I can see why. It knows we're both crap at Divination. You've got to be very definite if you want to get your message through to us."

"Oh yes," Remus murmurs, tapping the cup inquiringly with his wand. "That's probably it."

"I wouldn't drink it if I were you," Sirius adds. "With the, you know, blood and all."

Three more tries and all the tea leaves have to offer is a *LOOK OUT BEHIND YOU*, a *The end is NIGH* and a very cheerful *Say your goodbyes NOW*. "It tells me I ought to say my goodbyes now," Remus says. "Goodbye, Sirius. It was lovely knowing you. I'm even fond of the times you put chocolate in my hair while I was sleeping. And when you made my nose sprout whiskers. And when you stole all my underwear and hid it in the lake."

"I made a lot of tadpoles happy," Sirius says. "They loved your pants. They swam in and out of the leg-holes all day thinking what a kind soul Remus J. Lupin must have been to donate his monogrammed underwear to their habitat. Does it really say to make your goodbyes?"

"This has never happened before," Remus says. "Yes. It does."

Sirius pours himself a cup of tea, heavy on the leaves. He swirls his cup around, knocks back the liquid, makes a sobbing sound as he loses the inside of his throat, and turns the cup right-side up. Both he and Remus lean close. Remus smells like butter. "Yum," Sirius says.

The tea leaves say, *BEWARE THE CORRIDORS*.

"Well," Sirius mutters. "I knew *that*."

"Why is your tea so much less murderous than my tea?" Remus asks. He knows injustice when he sees it. Or drinks it. "*Beware the corridors* — that could mean anything. It could be perfectly harmless. Not like *You're going to die*. That one isn't really open to interpretation, is it."

"Piffle," Sirius says warmly. "That could mean 'You're going to die...of joy when you see what a great surprise the fates have in store for you!' It could be something wonderful. You simply refuse to see the positive in any situation. I'm sure it's nothing to worry about."

Thunder smacks into the castle like a fist. The windows burst open, flooding the room with the howl of wind and the squall of freezing rain. Remus, startled, entangles his foot in his chair and goes down hard on his nose; Sirius, cursing fluently in several languages, crosses the room in two strides and forces the iron windows shut.

"Ow," Remus says, struggling upright. That's going to swell in the morning.

"That's bizarre," Sirius says, frowing at the latch. "Did there used to be all these little ironwork demons around the window? I feel as if they were, you know, botanical patterns before. Flowers. Clover."

"That sofa is going to get moldy," Remus groans, with a heavy sigh. "I say, have you seen the rest of the House? Where *are* they?"



***

"Brilliant idea, Narcissa," Carmina Rosier says contentedly, blowing on her new, sparkling green nails. "All-girls' Slytherin sleepover in the haunted dungeons. How did you ever think of it? *Why* did you ever think of it?" She giggles nervously. "It's terribly naughty, isn't it? On Halloween? Ciss, I *do* love that nightie."

"It's from Paris," Narcissa drawls. She shakes back her mane of white-blond hair and crosses her elegantly manicured feet at the ankles. "Lucius bought it for me. Who's got the vodka?"

"We should play a game," Ermine Parkinson suggests from across the room. "Truth or dare?"

"Spin the bottle?" Bellatrix Black offers lazily, examining her teeth in a mirror, and then, at Ermine's sideways look, "Do you have a *problem*, Parkinson?"

"We're not playing Spin the Bottle," Narcissa says sharply, elbowing her younger sister in the ribs. Bellatrix glares at her and takes an enormous pull directly from the vodka bottle.

"Well," Bellatrix murmurs, "but we *could*."

Carmina giggles again, tugging at a shining brown curl. "We could talk about our *deepest, darkest secrets*. We could tell each other our *greatest fantasies*," she suggests. "*You* know. I don't know why I just said that!"

"My nightie is feeling so tight," Bellatrix informs everyone. "I think I may have to take it off."

"Something is wrong with this situation," Narcissa murmurs. She can't exactly put her finger on it, but it's there. Perhaps it's the way Bellatrix is licking the rim of the vodka bottle. Has she ever done that before? Or perhaps it's the

way Carmina is sitting, bosom charging ahead of her like the prow of a ship. Has her bosom ever been that omnipresent? Or perhaps it's the nighties, flimsy green chiffon all around with the faintest hint of lace. Have they ever actually worn nighties? Have they ever actually gotten along with one another for long enough to have a sleepover? And what in Merlin's name is that dripping sound?

"But Ciss," Carmina murmurs. "Everything feels so *right*."

"I know what we should do," Ermine says.

A moment later a large green pillow overstuffed with white, downy feathers hits Narcissa in the side of the head.

The dungeons erupt in an explosion of feathers, giggles, shrieks and the tearing of lace and chiffon, limbs flying, painted nails clutching at velvety linens. Narcissa promptly forgets what it was she was thinking — it couldn't have been very important, could it? — as she attempts to bludgeon Ermine's impeccably made-up face in with a satin pillowcase.

They are laughing as no sensible Slytherin girl has ever done when a clap of thunder is followed by a snapping sound, and all the torches go out.

"Ciss?" Carmina whispers.

"I can't see anything," Narcissa replies.

Ermine screams.

And then, silence.

"Lumos," Narcissa says, finding her wand by the side of the bed and trying to think clearly. A little yellow light circles outward from the tip of her wand. Carmina leaps to her, clutching her free arm, her lower lip trembling.

Bellatrix and Ermine are gone.



***

"And as you can see," James says, "the art of carving the pumpkin is not so 'sodding stupid' as you think." This is not, he decides as he sets his pumpkin seed scoop down and picks a pumpkin seed out of his left nostril, what being Head Boy is supposed to be like.

First of all, there was not so much orange goop involved in his limited authoritarian fantasies. Secondly, he was not, in these fantasies, accompanied by three tittering fifth-year prefects who think they know best. Thirdly, Lily was usually gazing at him adoringly, not carefully stringing pulp out of her hair and being generally unhelpful.

"It won't help," he informs her. "It sticks in there and your hair goes all stiff."

"I suppose you would know," she snaps. She looks, for the first time in James' entire experience of Lily Evans, rather red and unattractive. Also, there is pumpkin glop on her eyelashes. It is all extraordinarily disorienting.

"As a matter of fact," he begins, raising a finger, and they might have really gotten into a proper row, except that at this point some Ravenclaw prefect — whose name James has not yet bothered to learn — coughs politely and says, "I'm sorry, er, I don't mean to be rude, but we carve them to, er, introduce the first-years to the joys of the Halloween tradition and Hogwarts holidays in general, right?"

"Yes," James grunts, plunging his knife into the pumpkin's painted-on eye with rather too much enthusiasm. "Got it in one. Good man. Keep that up, you could be Head Boy someday."

"Er," the Ravenclaw says. "And it...provides them with shining memories and provides them with a sense of blithesome childlike wonder, does it?"

"It did me," James says wearily, looking up at him. "Look, it's a very important part of the Feast, and I know it seems stupid but it's jolly good fun really, and the kids like it. It's great effect."

"...Right," the Ravenclaw agrees, very slowly. James notices, for the first time, that the gazes of the assembled Prefects have turned from stifled amusement to glassy horror. Thunder rumbles ominously. "So, then...what's the blood for?"

James turns. From the handle of his suddenly extremely shiny carving knife, apparently flowing from the bruise-orange skin of the pumpkin itself, has dripped a huge puddle of something red and thick. It is on James' trousers. It smells disconcertingly of meat. As James stares at it, not comprehending, another roll of thunder rattles the window-panes and the lights go out.

The sketched-on face of the jack-o'-lantern, frozen blue in the flash of lightning, looks suddenly absolutely terrifying. There is a sound like a gasp — and he can feel Lily, in the midst of delicately shaking a string of pulp out of one ear, freeze behind him in the thick, silent darkness.

"Oh," James says, carefully, into the sudden silence. "That. Kids! You know. Bloody-minded. They love this. Er—"

The candles slowly flicker back to life. James looks around. The blood has pooled around his shoes now, and tipped the edge of Lily's skirt, and what's worse—

The three prefects are gone. He and Lily are alone in the room full of disemboweled pumpkins, which suddenly seems very large and very dark in the corners.

"What's happened?" Lily whispers.

"This is not right," James says, with great conviction. "Not right at all."

"What is inside that pumpkin?" Lily asks, edging closer to James in the gloom. Surprisingly, James is not excited that they are close; he is too busy wondering when his bladder will give out on him.

"A cow, apparently," James manages. "Er. All right. We shouldn't panic."

"I'm not panicking," Lily says. She grabs his hand. They stare at each other. "I am simply seeking comfort of a physical kind," Lily mutters. "It does not mean anything. We should not share this intimate moment as anything

passionate, revelatory or even interesting. The pumpkin is gushing blood and I am holding your hand. All right?"

"All right," James agrees. He has no idea what she's trying to tell him. "But we shouldn't panic."

"Well," Lily says. "What *should* we do?"

"Whatever's happening," James says, "we are not unarmed!" He grasps the handle of the pumpkin seed scoop and waves it above his head triumphantly.

"James Potter," Lily says, "you are indeed qualified to de-seed evil."

***

Peter is just sitting down to a nice hot mug of cider when the lights go out. Luckily, his hands are already on the mug of cider. He takes a deep swallow, wipes a cider moustache off his upper lip, and sighs happily.

***

"So, er," Sirius says. "This is sort of terrifying, isn't it?" Of course, he doesn't sound terrified. He looks a little wet still, though they've been sitting in front of the fire now for a good fifteen minutes. "It's sort of like being in the middle of a bad dream, only it makes more sense, eh?"

"I think the lightning is a little bit much, personally," Remus murmurs. He pokes the fire wearily. "If you count the seconds between them they're coming at an abnormally fast pace. It just isn't natural."

"Remus," Sirius says. "Moony. You are going to die and I have to beware the corridor and you are discussing how quickly the lightning should or should not be coming?"

"And the thunder," Remus adds. "Have you ever heard thunder like that?"

"We have offended the heavens," Sirius reasons. "Aren't you even the least bit excited?"

Remus eyes one of the windows. The rain slams against the glass, the clouds drawn so tight across the sky that no light shines through. Only the ghastly, ghostly flicker of flames in the fireplace lets Remus see his own fingers before him, and Sirius' face, sharply angular in the odd light. It is eerie, he has to admit, but it doesn't feel real. Not entirely. The tea leaves were the first clue, though Remus isn't even sure this is a mystery yet. "Well," he says, thinking out loud, "everyone else *is* missing. Unless we're the ones who've disappeared. Isn't that possible?"

"Can't be," Sirius says, looking manfully brave.

"Why not?"

"Well," Sirius explains, "well, because we're *us*!" And therefore, presumably, the heroes. In the enormous morality play that appears to be Sirius Black's life, it only makes sense for him to be the hero. Remus, however, knows better, and is more than well aware that he is the sidekick with the books who hangs about in the back being a good influence with a posh accent and then is killed tragically just before the climax. "Besides, we haven't disappeared, we're in the common room," Sirius points out. "I bet they're all at some big secret party. Wankers. Shall we go hunt them down?"

Remus eyes him balefully. Hunting down the missing persons is the best possible way to get them both devoured. Not to mention they'll have to go through the corridors. If Dr. Frankenstein, for example, had just stayed in his common room and eaten crumpets, he would probably have kept a good deal of people out of a good deal of mess. "I'm sure they'll come back."

"Moony!" Sirius scoffs. "I'd never have thought *you'd* be all superstitious. Like an old lady."

"I'm not," Remus protests. "It's just — this all feels a bit *weird*, doesn't it? I don't mean supernatural weird, I mean like a film. Like it's all just for effect. Don't you feel that?" As if on cue, a draft from the door stirs the filmy curtains around the window, which billow dramatically into Remus's head. Remus fights them for a while, wondering if he will be suffocated by curtains, if that will be his dramatic, tea-leaf-predicted death. At last, Sirius untangles him, taking his head in both hands and making a spooky face. "You look demented," Remus mutters. "You smell like butter and wet dog."

"So do you," Sirius says. "Well, the butter part. Come on! Nothing will get done if we just sit around the fire, fighting killer attack curtains. We have to be *off*. We have to be *brave*. We have to face our fates and triumph!"

"We have to fling ourselves head-first into doom," Remus corrects him. "That's what you want, is it? You read the tea leaves. You know what they've said. It just seems silly to court disaster like that."

"True," Sirius agrees, "I *did* read them. But they didn't tell *me* I'm going to die, now did they?" Sirius grins. "Come on, you didn't believe that, did you? Since when have tea leaves actually spelled it out for us? It's always 'this splodgey shape could either mean life-long happiness or dying of nasty boils or exploding without warning under the scythe moon.' It's never 'Hallo chaps, how's it going, enjoy your imminent death.'"

"Well," Remus admits, "I suppose."

"And like I said," Sirius repeats. "All *I* have to be afraid of is the corridor!"

"I hope there is a gigantic monster with smelly feet in the corridor," Remus mutters, "waiting for you. I hope you spend eternity between its toes."

"I can always leave you here and be right back," Sirius offers.

The thunder cackles ominously.

"No," Remus assures him. "No, that's all right. I'll come with."



***

"It's really amazing," Frank Longbottom says, "the way your head reflects the light like that." He holds his wand, glowing faintly, up against Kingsley Shacklebolt's shaved head and watches the light radiate outwards.

"That is annoying me," Kingsley says simply.

"Right," Frank says, and moves it away. "I was only making an observation. About your head. You know, I don't think you're feeling very friendly today."

"I don't like people shining things on my head," Kingsley says.

"I don't see why not," Frank says sadly. "What a waste. It's practically a mirror. I could see myself in it. Hi there, Frankie!"

"Go away, Longbottom," Kingsley says.

"Where?" Frank asks, reasonably. Only a moment ago, the two of them were in the Quidditch shed surrounded by all the other Captains and Deputy-Captains for a pre-season meeting; now, the shed is empty and very, very dark and the only things that remain of their meeting are many notes, all over the floor. Idly, Frank picks one up; *Make sure to cheat,* it says. *Cheat cheat cheat cheat.*

"I don't care where," Kingsley rumbles. "Go to that corner."

"Look at this," Frank says. "Must be Slytherin's."

Kingsley inclines his head regally, reads it, and then slowly gets to his feet. It is an impressive process, something like watching an avalanche in reverse. "I am going outside," he says.

"I wouldn't," Frank warns. "It's raining something terrible. And remember that six people just vanished before our very eyes. Doesn't that, you know, make you nervous?"

"No," Kingsley says.

Frank has to admit: he has a point. If he were Kingsley, he wouldn't be nervous either. There is something about Kingsley that suggests he will probably never be nervous. He makes other people nervous instead. All around him, they use up any available supply of nervous to be had, as he moves amongst them, perfectly un-nervous. "So." Frank swallows. "So you're leaving, then? What if you get struck by lightning? Knocked over by thunder? What if you disappear? What if *I* disappear? Where will I go? What will I do?"

"Frank, my dear," Kingsley says, "I don't give a damn."

He steps out into the rain, which *is* coming down hard, and immediately finds that he is wet. Holding one hand up to shield his eyes, he surveys the Quidditch pitch. Unbelievable lightning slashes the sky in the distance. The wind howls like a dying dog. He holds firm to the ground, feet planted wide apart, and looks down from his great height upon the world, which seems to have come to the edge of the apocalypse.

"Well," Kingsley decides out loud, "the whole world is going mad." But not him.

He turns to go back into the Quidditch shed and finds the door swinging loose on a hinge and Frank Longbottom gone.

"Well," Kingsley says to Severus Snape, who seems to have taken Frank's place. "You're not Frank."

"A fact for which I thank the Fates three times every day," the Slytherin snarls, climbing to his feet. Kingsley stares

down his nose at him. He, too, has frequently thanked whatever Supreme Power may exist that he is not Frank Longbottom; which doesn't mean he appreciates some snot-nosed little Slytherin whiner doing it.

"I don't appreciate some snot-nosed little Slytherin whiner insulting my good friend Frank," he says, impassively.

Snape seems to realize, for the first time, whom he is so rudely addressing. His gaze travels slowly up from Kingsley's feet to his eyes. It takes a while.

"Comprende?" Kingsley cocks his head to one side. He is nothing if not reasonable.

Snape nods wordlessly.

"Good," Kingsley says. "Come on. We're going outside."

"But—" Snape starts, and then says, in a very small voice, "outside, did you say?"

"It's only *raining*." People are such idiots. Kingsley is aware, in a distant way, that he is less a schoolboy than he is a force of nature, and therefore has, personally, nothing to fear from storm nor sleet nor rising flood. What he has more trouble understanding is that other people don't have his particular outlook on life. He peers out into the storm. Some dead trees, which he is fairly sure were not there this afternoon, creak threateningly in the high wind.

"Oh," Snape says. "I don't — I don't see why I should go with you."

"Because," Kingsley says, slowly, reasonably, as if talking to a child, "I *told you to*."

A flash of lightning curves outside the window. It probably bounces in a stunning arc off Kingsley's bald head. Frank would be amused.

"Oh," Snape mumbles again. "Very well, then. Under duress. Whatever you say."

"Good," Kingsley says.

The light glancing off his head leads the way back to the school.

***

"Sirius," Remus says. None of the torches in their sconces along the walls are lit. No one is laughing, crying, screaming in pain or delight or rage. The only sounds are those made by the storm, the wind throwing itself up against the walls, or the rain slamming into the windows, or the very foundations of the castle creaking with the ferocity of what cannot possibly be a natural phenomenon. "Sirius."

"Not scared, are you?" Sirius whispers. There is a certain reverence in his tone for the situation. They are defying the tea leaves. It is only now beginning to sink in. Darkness spreads before them and behind them, up and down the dread corridor. "*Owoooooooooo*."

"I am not," Remus scoffs. "You should be."

"Pff," Sirius snorts. "I fear nothing."

Remus, who can barely see Sirius' wand glowing up ahead, does something silly. Maybe it's the rain, or the lightning, or the faint smell of rotting pumpkins permeating the chilly, humid air. Maybe it's the threat of impending death. Maybe it's Sirius' cocky attitude. Later, he won't remember what blithe spirit possessed him, only that now, he quickens his silent pace, puts out his wand, and places both hands on Sirius' back.

"AUGH!" Sirius screams.

He goes down kicking.

Remus follows soon after, as Sirius' toes connect with his shin.

"Augh," Remus agrees.

"AGH — oh." Sirius, his fingers having encountered Remus's very distinctive nose, sits up, rumpled and recovered. "You are a bastard, Remus Lupin," he hisses, "a bastard and a stinker. I hope whatever lurks in this corridor eats your head."

"It won't," Remus says cheerfully, "the Corridor Monster tolls for thee and thee alone."

"You watch," Sirius grumbles. From the darkness come the sounds of a rumpled aristocrat picking himself up, shoes scuffing on the stone and the pat-pat-pat of someone energetically dusting off his sleeves. "I'll have my revenge when you least expect it. Oi, you've knocked my wand somewhere, you unbearable wanker. Light yours."

"I am," Remus mutters irritably, sitting up, and then realizes that his hand is empty. He stares at it, idiotically, for about a minute before accepting that he simply can't see it in the oppressive blackness. "Oh — *bugger*."

"Not again," Sirius moans. "All because you couldn't resist your childish impulses! Evil werewolf. Ruthless, vicious child of darkness."

"Shh," Remus hisses.

"There isn't even anyone around!" Sirius snaps, but he sounds sheepish.

Remus presses his face into his hands. *Think, Lupin, think*. "They can't have gotten far," he says, voice calmer. "We'll just look around and we're bound to come up with something."

"You look around," Sirius says. "My death is waiting for me here."

"I thought you 'fear nothing'," Remus recalls. "All right. I'll look." He's glad there aren't any lights on. No one looks attractive crawling around on his hands and knees with his rump up in the air and dust somewhere up his nose. Not that this is the sort of situation in which attractiveness is required; it is the situation in which blind luck and desperation must prevail. He gropes about in the darkness, wondering if, at any moment, a skeletal hand will grab his wrist. Death is waiting.

"Keep talking, Moony," Sirius' voice says, to his left, high up. "Say something. Anything. Recite poetry. I won't even mock you."

"I can't think of anything," Remus whispers.

"Oh my God," Sirius says. "We're going to die, aren't we? This is your way of telling me. *You don't remember anything*. Moony, listen, there's something I've got to tell you before we kick it."

"Disgusting," Remus mutters. "There's something *wet* — are you still dripping?"

"Remus, listen to me, this is very important—"

"Got it!" Remus grasps his wand triumphantly, holding it high above his head. "*Lumos!*" Weak light flutters from his fist which is, disturbingly, red and sticky. "Hallo, is that *blood* or cranberry juice?" He turns to face Sirius, wand wavering between them. "Well? What is it?"

Sirius falters, squinting. "I got chocolate on your sweater," he says, averting his eyes. "Your favorite one. That light in front of your face makes your nose look *enormous*. Like a great big dolphin sticking out of your head."

"My favorite sweater?" Remus repeats, stunned. "Not the green one? With the hole for your thumbs in the sleeve?"

"Oh," Sirius says weakly. "Did I say that? You know, I'm not sure we're really going to die, so I don't think that counts—"

"Counts?" Remus snaps. "As a confession? My favorite sweater!"

"All right, I'm a bastard," Sirius agrees. "Is it cranberry juice? Where would we have gotten cranberry juice fr...oh...God..."

Remus feels his stomach fill with something cold and heavy. Sirius is staring just over his shoulder, gray eyes wide in horror, the wavering light dancing insanely over his face. *Beware the corridors!* shrieks a voice in Remus's head. *Say your goodbyes NOW!*

Slowly, agonizingly slowly, Remus turns around.

Something immense launches itself into him and sinks its teeth into his throat. Remus opens his mouth like he's going to scream but the thing is on his *throat*, on his back, huge and heavy and *you're going to DIE* and—

"I vant to suck your blooood," Sirius hisses in sepulchral tones, very close to his ear.

"You are going to *die*," Remus says.

"Who says?" Sirius says. "No, *besides* the teacups. It's strawberry filling, by the way. I have a pie under my shirt. Or I did, before you decided to tackle me."

"I just threw up inside," Remus says, his voice shaking. "I'm about to throw up outside. Why did you have a pie under your shirt? I don't care. Oogh. Get off me."

Sirius pulls himself off, eyes dancing wickedly. Remus tries to keep his hands steady as he nurses an aching bottom. He supposes he deserved it — payback, after all — but it feels as if his heart is about to explode out his nose. There'd be room enough for it, not to mention.

"Come on," Sirius is soothing, patting him on the back. "At least you didn't wet yourself or cry like a girl or scream like James or something else embarrassing like that."

"You ruined my sweater and I think you've killed me," Remus says. He doesn't mean it. He doesn't ever exactly mean it, thrilled, secretly, by the sudden acceleration of his heart-rate and the heat of his blood at his temples. What matters is making a big show of protesting the cruel treatment. He is a prefect, after all. He has a reputation to uphold, future generations of large-nosed, anal-retentive werewolves to blaze the way for. Such injuries as a bruised bottom and an exploded heart are par for the course. His breath is already steadying, the light in his own eyes, an answering call to some far-off, hungry demon, dimming. "Such cruelty should be punished."

"Oogly oogly," Sirius says, waggling his fingers. "Spooky, innit."

"You are more terrifying when you aren't trying to be," Remus murmurs dryly. "*Much* more."

"Come on," Sirius says. "We're almost at the kitchens. You can take my arm, if you'd like. I can sling you over my shoulder and keep you safe from harm."

"Squish," Remus mutters, bringing one hand down like, he hopes, a big smelly monster foot.

"Well, I need a damsel," Sirius explains. "A damsel in distress. No doubt there are booby traps being set up by invisible hands of malevolence *as we speak*. We are wasting time! Heads could roll! I want a slice of pie or something, all this excitement is making me nippish."

"You don't need any more pie," Remus mutters. "You've got pie all down your shirtfront. It looks like you've been stabbed. Why do you always have to keep food in your clothes? You know, some people keep it in a cupboard, or a knapsack, or at least not in their armpit, for heaven's sake."

"Easy access," Sirius says cheerfully. "Whoops! It's a left here, Moony, don't go wandering off alone. Oogly boogly!" He makes a ridiculous cross-eyed face.

"Squish," Remus says. He draws his brows together in what he hopes is an evil and intimidating fashion. "Squish, squish."

***

Peter is tired of cider now. Which is why it's lucky that his attendant house-elves have started bringing him cocoa and exciting pumpkin drinks instead. Thrilled at the prospect of such an enthusiastic— and apparently bottomless — non-Sirius human being on which to test their latest recipes, they have done nothing but force interesting foods on him for the last hour. Force may be the wrong word. Peter takes a bite of something blue and nods appreciatively.

"I'm just going to go to the lavatory," he informs the head kitchen elf, who nods and bows so low that her little head scrapes the ground, ushering him in the right direction.

It is the best day *ever*.

***



***

"So," James says. Lily glares at him. "Well, this isn't *my* fault," he mutters. "I don't see how this can possibly be *my* fault."

"It isn't," Lily snaps. "I'm not angry at you. I am scared."
James stares at her. She doesn't look scared. She looks pink in the cheek and ready to punch some offensive pranksters. He's surprised he's still alive, quite frankly, and not because of the puddles of blood all over the floor or the fact

that, in the past five minutes, the pumpkins have actually started to move. "Uhm," James says. He tries to look away, but manages only to move his lips in an unattractive fashion. "You don't actually look scared, you know."

"I am terrified," Lily hisses. "Trust me."

"And you sound angry," James adds. "Are you sure you're not angry? You could be angry. That's better than being scared. Terrified." He pauses. "I'm not scared." He licks his lips. "Well, a bit, I think. Do you like sensitive men or the strong and noble type?"

"James," Lily says. "I think you are panicking. What I am doing is trying not to panic. Looking angry helps me."

"And it's easy, right?" James says. "Ha ha, because I'm here. Ha ha. Ha?"

"The pumpkin moved again," Lily informs him. She sounds weary. "The one to your left. Listen, I have pumpkin seeds in my hair and on my nose and in my ears, too, I think, and the way you're behaving is hardly manful or reassuring, and dating Kingsley Shacklebolt was like dating a giant oak — which is, actually, manful and reassuring, but hardly something a girl can warm up to — and right now, when I *need* someone manful and reassuring, I have you, which is the irony, isn't it, because a girl *can* warm up to you, but your voice has raised at least an octave in the past hour. So do you see, do you *see*, what I am going through?"

James has no idea. "Of course," James says. "I *can* be manful. I *can* be reassuring. I saved Snape's life!"

"No one is more shocked than I," Lily replies.

"Actually, Snape," James points out, "he was pretty shocked."

"Probably," Lily says with dark amusement. "Did you just feel something? I think the vines are moving now."

In the corner of James's vision, one long, green, tentacle of a vine slithers into a curious, upright position. The rain slams against the windows.

"So you were *dating*, you and Kingsley," James says, suddenly. "We would call that *dating*. But in the past tense?"

"Yes," Lily snaps. "It was, past tense, like *dating* Mount Kilimanjaro. I told you."

"Oh," James says, trying not to feel intensely pleased and failing.

"Are you ever going to tell me what you did?" Lily asks, in a voice that strives for unconcerned normalcy and lands somewhere around Poorly Repressed Terror.

"There is nothing I would rather do, but no," James says. "I could make up a story if you like."

"That's better than nothing," Lily admits faintly. One of her knees is pressing against James's knee, completely by accident; he can feel her heartbeat through his kneecap, which is bizarre and, even more bizarrely, comforting. "Make something up. We can always set the pumpkins on fire if they make a move."

"All right," James says, swallowing. The vines have curled together now, rustling, as if conferring. "Er. How would you like it to start?"

"It was a dark and stormy night," Lily prompts.

"All right," James says. Lightning flashes and Lily twitches a little against him, her sweet-smelling hair just inches from his nose. "Dark and stormy night. I was oiling my abdominal muscles in the Common Room, attracting the attention of many a passing female—"

"You haven't got any abdominal muscles," Lily reminds him, and pokes him in the stomach to prove her point. "See? Soft, like a pillow."

"I have," James insists. He squeezes. *Come on, team Potter*. "See? Can't you feel him? That, right there. That's Stanley." Lily just gives him a look. "In any case, this is my story, and *in it*, my abdominal muscles were being oiled. By myself. Not to say there wasn't a clamor of those who wished to assist me in it."

"Of course," Lily murmurs.

"Of course," James agrees. "In any case, with my abdominal muscles freshly oiled and myself looking bronzed and dashing—"

"Pale and pasty," Lily supplies.

"—it came to my attention that Severus Snape was in the throes of — drowning. Yes. That's it. Drowning. He was drowning. In any case, all you have to know is that it wasn't my fault, or Remus', or Peter's, and sort of Sirius', even though he didn't mean it. And Snape is a great big wanker anyway so he deserved being told off. Not dying. So I says to myself, says I, it is time to be the hero you have always known you are!"

"You struck a pose," Lily offers. "You flashed your teeth. You let the light sparkle in the corner of your eye."

"Seven buxom lasses swooned," James says. "As I sped out the door in nothing but my oiling garb — there was no time to change into a hero's outfit — I thought to myself, I cannot wait until Lily Evans knows of my heroics."

"Oh my," Lily says. "How romantic."

"Well, I saved his life," James says. "There were snakes and leeches and it was dark and stormy, so, you know, lightning." Lightning strikes a tree close by, or must, by the sound cracking sound just outside the window to their right, and a flash of light too bright to be anything but wood splintering with the force of its heat. "Uncanny, that," James murmurs. "Are you holding my hand?"

"I think so," Lily says.

Their eyes meet for an awkward moment. James doesn't know whether to stare soulfully into her emerald depths or look away and not seem overly eager. If this is what the rest of his life is going to be like then perhaps he'd just better give up now on ever learning how not to be infatuated or, at least, how not to show it. Why are girls so complicated, he mourns. Why does he want to be near this girl when all that happens while he's near her only compounds his apparent lunacy? Being crazy about someone isn't nice or passionate or deeply moving; it is, surprisingly enough, *crazy*. In any case, he can't see why it is he does this to himself.

Lily gives his hand a squeeze.

Oh, James thinks giddily. *That's why.*

***

"There's no one in the library," Remus whispers. The long, high bookshelves look menacing in the shadows, book bindings like an army lined up before them, waiting. He shrinks back, confused and disoriented. When all the world goes mad, the library is his haven. Now, it simply smells of old books and reeks of darkness, with a *plip plip plip* somewhere in its depths and who-knows-what lurking who-knows-where.

"Moony," Sirius says, "there is *never* anyone in the library. This is why *I* wanted to go to the *kitchens*."

"There are, sometimes," Remus protests. "How would you know, anyway?"

Sirius winks and taps the side of his nose. "Those are my natural powers of deduction at work. Anywhere you spend most of your life is bound to be mostly devoid of human interaction. Stands to reason. Also, honestly, Moony: *library*."

"Someday I will make you understand," Remus mutters. "Anyway, you have to admit it's strangely devoid of last-

minute studiers. And there are no couples in the stacks, or anything. And where's—"

He is about to say Madam Pince when someone all of a sudden someone looms up in front of him, bent and weathered as an old tree, eyes burning out of the darkness. Remus falls backward.

"Anghh!" Sirius yelps, and clutches his shoulders.

"Hello there, boys," the apparition whispers, in a voice brittle like dry leaves, rubbing against each other. "Not...afraid to be out after dark, are you?"

Remus takes a step backwards. "But it isn't after dark," he babbles, inanely. "It was only tea-time half an hour ago and just because the storm came along doesn't mean, technically, it's *after* dark just because it's dark outside. There *is* a distinction. Do you see that? Quite clearly, one signifies that it's past the hour for the sane and reasonable to be awake, while the other simply means it is dark outside because of a natural phenomenon like rain, or a tornado."

The apparition seems momentarily stunned.

Sirius takes the chance for all its worth. "YERAUGH!" he cries, apparently, Remus decides, going completely insane at last. Not a moment later, however, Sirius leaps forward, knocking Remus out of harm's way, and kicks the apparition in the shins. Its white face, with long, drooping black holes for its eyes and mouth, doesn't seem so much pained as it does confused.

"Not afraid to be out after dark, are you?" it repeats.

"Your face looks like melted wax!" Sirius yells. "And you are wearing a bedsheet!"

"Not afraid to be out after dark, are you?"

"Again," Remus says, "I really must insist that we find some other terminology for this time of day. We haven't even had supper yet. It can hardly be construed as late."

"Not afraid to be oogk achhk oooghk," the apparition splutters one final, failing time, and then disappears.

"Well," Sirius says, wiping his hands triumphantly. "We are an excellent team. Moony and Padfoot! Fighting apparitions one ghost at a time. You confuse them with long sentences, and while they are befuddled I slap them like a girl. What do you say? I think we've a career in it."

"I just tried to reason with something that wanted to kill us," Remus realizes. "Didn't I."

"I'm not sure it wanted to kill us," Sirius says doubtfully. "Unless it was going to — to repeat us to death. You know what? I don't like this Halloween as much as I have liked Halloweens in the past."

"It feels like one of those awful paperbacks," Remus agrees. "With the author's name written in shiny blood on the front cover. I think we should talk to Dumbledore."

"We don't need Dumbledore," Sirius cries dramatically, "for we are Moony and Padfoot, ghost fighters extraordinaire! What can Dumbledore do that we can't? Can he befuddle? Can he kick in the shins?"

"Oh," Remus says doubtfully. "I really do think maybe we should. I mean, this all smacks of an unauthorized prank to me."

Sirius's eyes widen. "Do you think? No one should be pranking this school but us! After all, who knows what they might be planning? This should not be allowed! It's — why, it's anti-union, and it should be stopped!"

"If you say so," Remus says.

"Onward!" Sirius cries, and charges ahead.

***

Spiced pumpkin, Peter thinks, is one of the best inventions ever. Spiced pumpkin juice is better. He downs the entire mug without breathing, and exhales in pumpkiny, spicy satisfaction. "Oh, Winky," he says, "you are amazing." The house elf turns a strange and stripy shade of pink.

"Winky is never knowing anyone who likes her Pumpkins as much as the headmaster is liking them," she says. "Winky is making you more!"

Peter pats his stomach. "Oh, no thank you, Winky," he says. "I've got to find my friends, and get into costume."

Winky watches him lovingly as he leaves. "I will be saving toast for you!" her voice echoes after him.

What a day, Peter thinks. What a spectacular day. Even if the halls *are* oddly dark.

***



***

"Well," Kingsley says, "it seems everyone is gone." The great hall is empty, and suspiciously quiet. No ghosts float past him; no idiot first year slams into his legs and goes down from the impact; no Frank is prodding at his biceps to assure a fifth year female that they are, indeed, more solid than rock. It feels odd. Nice, and quiet, but very odd.

"Impressive powers of deduction," Snape mutters. "However could you tell?"

Kingsley turns his dark, serious eyes to Snape's shrewd, sallow face. He cracks the knuckles of one hand against the

palm of the other. "It seems everyone is gone," he repeats, in a tone that intimates *so no one will hear you scream.*

"There is indeed no one here," Snape agrees. "There is no one, no one at all."

"Exactly," Kingsley says.

"You know," Snape says shrilly, "I was just thinking about how helpful I would like to be. What can I do to be helpful?"

"I don't think you're being sincere," Kingsley says.

"I can't imagine where you would get that impression," Snape says, eyes darting from side to side.

From down the hallway, something crashes. It sounds like a wardrobe falling over.

"Come on," Kingsley instructs.

"Oh," Snape says, "come now, Shacklebolt, are you sure? *Untrustworthy Slytherin!* Last person you want watching your back."

"I don't need you watching my back," Kingsley reminds him. Snape probably could not fit all of Kingsley's back into his field of view anyway. "I'm keeping an eye on your back. And the rest of you. Come on."

"Oh," Snape says again, miserably.

Kingsley strides forward as Snape trails behind, sending furtive, longing glances at the windows.

"Don't bother," Kingsley says. "Fifth floor."

***

"So," James says. "How long do you think it'll be?" The pumpkins aren't even trying to be subtle, now, bumping along the table tops and the floor with gaping wide mouths and very sharp teeth. James *gave* them those teeth. He supposes they should be *grateful*, not trying to kill him. "Before we're eaten and the rats get our remains, that is."

"That's not going to happen," Lily says. "I am not going to be killed by *pumpkins*. This is ridiculous. Where is everyone? What is happening? Why do I feel as if I'm trapped in a cheap novel?"

"I could rip off your bodice," James points out, "but I haven't, now have I."

"Yet," Lily mutters. "Who knows how desperate you'll get before we're through?"

"We could always jump out the window," James suggests. "I mean, I know it's a long way down and all, and we'll probably break every bone in our body, but the pumpkins have blocked off all possible exits and I'm really worried about those vine things. I swear they weren't here when we got in."

"The pumpkins weren't trying to kill us when we got in, either!" Lily adds, a tad hysterically. "I say we start — I don't know, start setting them on fire! Killing them! Chopping them into little pieces!"

A collective snarl goes up from the pumpkin warriors. "I think," James whispers, "I *think* you made them angrier."

"This is ridiculous," Lily snaps. "We have wands. We have pumpkin carving knives. We are — we are Seventh Years! To think, we are sitting here, cowering in a corner, when we could be — no, *should* be — taking action!" She stands up, cheeks flushed, hair wild, if not somewhat gloppy still, around her face. James feels weak in the knees. "Come on," she commands, grabbing firm hold of his hand and waving her wand in front of her.

"Right," James says. "Right! Solidarity! Strength! Damn the pumpkins! Full speed ahead!"

Something under his left foot goes squelch. It is one of the pumpkins a first year carved, with a lopsided face and uneven nostrils. A piece of its left eye stares reproachfully up at him.

"I killed it," James says, stunned. "I killed it with my foot."

"Kingsley," Lily says, "would have killed *twenty* with his *bare* feet without blinking an eye."

James looks at the pumpkin. He looks at his foot. Both are a pulpy, seedy, orange mess. He looks at the pumpkin again. Everything in the room feels suspended in time, on the verge of greatness, or total failure. Even the moving pumpkins are watching him with great hollow eyes, some even flickering with candlelight on the inside. "Well," James says finally, "I'm not stepping on any of the ones that can light me on fire."

"Stop talking," Lily says.

"Right," James agrees. "It's time to make some *pumpkin pie*."

***

"Ow," Sirius says. "Have there always been full suits of armor there? I swear, they were over by the wall, not in the middle of the *bloody* hallway!" Remus leans down to help him, picking a metal elbow off his head and digging through a pile of breastplate, broadsword, shield to find Sirius' hand and tug him up. "It hasn't always been there," Sirius insists. "It *hasn't*."

"Actually," Remus says, "I think it was moving. At us. You got in its way, of course. Heroic. Brilliant. We should get Dumbledore immediately. There is only so much blind luck can do to save us."

"Beware the corridors, my Aunt Agnes' arse," Sirius mutters. "Beware the bloody suits of armor coming at you with a broadsword. Could have spelled *that* one out for us, but *no*."

"Tea leaves," Remus recalls. "Never helpful, are they. I don't suppose there was enough space in the mug for all those words."

"They could have written it small," Sirius points out, "if they—you know, I think that's three more suits of armor, and I think they're coming this way, and if you could help me get my foot out of this helmet so I could run like a child I would be ever so grateful—"

"It's clanking," Remus whispers. "Ominously. Honestly, this is absurd. How long can this storm go on? Is it dinner yet? You're going to have to give up on that pie — if you'd just let go of it then you could use your hand to pull your foot out — come on, you have to help me!"

"*Axe*!" Sirius hisses. "It has a *great big axe*! Moony — yaugh!" With these painfully un-distinguished last words, he teeters and crashes magnificently down over the former suit of armor and goes head over heels — or, rather, heels over helmet — backwards down the hallway, dragging Remus with him.

***

"Narcissa, I'm frightened," Carmina whimpers, pressing herself against Narcissa's thigh. Their fingers are interlaced. Narcissa cannot help thinking that, in a situation like this, what she really needs is more vodka. "I am so frightened. What should we do?"

"I don't know," Narcissa says irritably. "How should I know?"

"You're a *prefect*," Carmina breathes while regarding her with trembling blue eyes. "You are so knowledgeable and — and I've always admired you, did you know that?"

"This is ridiculous," Narcissa snaps, jerking her hand away from Carmina's waist, where it has somehow wandered. "I

don't even like you. You don't even like me."

"Well, maybe that's why this has happened," Carmina points out, snuggling against Narcissa's side. "Two girls with nothing in common, who have engaged in at least two heavily-attended catfights involving water or mud, whose personalities—and body types—are different yet complimentary, placed in a situation where all they can do is work together. Maybe we can pull through!"

Narcissa eyes her. There is something bigger than Carmina at work here. Well, most things are bigger than Carmina, who, at an even five foot, relies on frightening spike heels simply to reach her bunk. But rather *metaphorically* bigger than Carmina. If Carmina were left to her own devices, Narcissa would be currently enduring some unbelievably nasty, low-class prattle, laced with uncreative insults and veiled threats, about every other girl in school. This — Carmina's trembling, and her nightgown strap slipping precariously off her shoulder, and Narcissa's hair coming down from its bun in little white-gold strands — this is *not normal*.

"I think we have to leave," Narcissa decides. "I think we have to get out of here."

"But what will happen to us?" Carmina's eyes are great big pools of trembling color, shaded by thick lashes, desperate for reassurance, guidance, perhaps even love. Narcissa feels a familiar twitch of revulsion in her stomach. She can conquer this. She *will* conquer this.

"We will be restored to normal," Narcissa says. "I think."

"What if someone sees us?" Carmina adds, almost pragmatically. "In our — our negligees?"

"Then we will perform obliviate," Narcissa replies. "Well, *I* will perform obliviate. You will find clothes."

"All right," Carmina says. Disturbing as it is, her bust leads the way.

***

Something funny might just be going on, Peter is beginning to realize. "Hallo?" he asks the empty hallway. "Halloooo?" No one answers. His voice echoes back to him, sounding lonely and hollow. "That's strange," he says. "That's very strange." He wonders if, at any moment, Sirius will appear out of nowhere to pull his underwear up over his head. Or if James will pop out of a corner with a mask on like he did second year, so that Peter wets himself in front of the whole school. Friends. You can always rely on them. "Halloooo?" Peter calls again, opening the door to the third floor boys' bathroom. "Nobody in here, either." It occurs to him that he is talking to himself — a cheerful narrative kept off to ward off the little shivers going down his spine — and that, if anyone were to hear him, they might think him mad. "Hallo?" He asks for a forth time. *Hallo, hallo, hallo,* echoes the bathroom walls. "Well," Peter decides, "there's no one around to hear me talking to myself so I might as well just say it. This *is* spooky! And all the lights are out!" He fumbles along the wall, reaching for a familiar stall. Too much pumpkin juice, he reprimands himself. Never do that again, Petey, and without your wand to light the way. "Aha," he says, triumphantly, and swings the door open. "There we have it. Whoops!"

Something on the floor is slippery. He goes flying, headfirst, at the wall, and steadies himself only by the handle of the toilet flush, yanking it down hard. The toilet bowl gurgles, and then sinks below the floor. "Huh?" Peter says, very eloquently. Then, the wall in front of him swings back like a door.

"Hello, Mr. Pettigrew," Albus Dumbledore says.

"Er," Peter says. "What?"

***



***

"Ow," Sirius says, not very eloquently. "Moony, you're on my head, are they still coming?"

Remus strains desperately to see over his shoulder. Not that he really needs to see to know the answer; the rhythmic clanking, getting closer and closer, tells him all he needs to know. He can see, without having to see it, the impassive metal faces; the moonlight catching and dripping down the blade of an enormous battle axe—

No. *No.* This is completely ridiculous. First of all, there is no moonlight. It's about six-thirty, and even if it were night-time, it's raining too hard for moonlight, and even if there were moonlight, it couldn't *drip*, that's metaphorically absurd, and—

"This needs to stop!" Remus insists, not sure who he's talking to.

"We need to *run*!" Sirius reminds him. "Get off my head!"

The clanking and creaking approaches, inexorable, unstoppable, *really stupid.*

"Well," Sirius says miserably, "if you're not going to move — *goodbye, old friend.* I shall miss your commas."

"No," Remus objects. "This is *too stupid to happen.*"

"Tell that to them!" Sirius yelps. Remus looks up.

The suits of armor descend.

***

"Hah!" James yells, lunging forward and trapping a pumpkin — one of the really small ones, the sort that James's parents bought for him on Muggle farms when he was five and six — under his heel. "Say goodbye, squishy!"

From across the room, a fluffy sort of noise and a flash of pink light remind him to glance over his shoulder. "How's it going, Evans?"

"Aren't they adorable?" Lily says happily, aiming her wand with deadly accuracy at a particularly menacing specimen halfway across the room and whispering something. The pumpkin gleeps, goes pink, and explodes — into a rabbit.

"Rabbits?" James says doubtfully, hurling himself sideways and landing with a satisfying splat on another tiny warrior.

Lily shrugs. "Basic transfiguration. I was exploding them, but I started to feel guilty."

"How do you know they won't turn evil, too?" James asks. "I mean — *die, die, die!* — they're transfigured from, obviously, evil pumpkins."

"They're rabbits," Lily says. "They're *bunnies*. How evil can they be?"

"How evil can *pumpkins* be? *Die!*" It is, he must admit, very manly to be flinging himself bodily at the pumpkins trying to kill his fair lady-love. He is, if nothing else, very heroic. Covered in pumpkin seeds, smelling disturbing, and no doubt deranged, but heroic. Being heroic is very different from what he had at first imagined, in his bed, very young, dreaming of brave deeds. Still — pumpkins or no pumpkins — his heroics shall not go unnoticed.

"There," Lily says, just as James lands on a pumpkin with a satisfying squelch, "that's the last of them." She wipes hair out of her eyes, pockets her wand, and looks, James thinks through a haze of pumpkin orange, quite lovely despite it all.

"What are we going to do with the bunnies?" James asks, somewhat deliriously.

"Well," Lily says. "Well, that — I hadn't thought — they're *adorable*," she finishes lamely. "I mean. I'm sure someone will want them."

"If the pumpkins ever take their revenge we can offer them up as fluffy sacrifices. Just kidding!" James adds hurriedly, seeing the look of alarm on Lily's face. "A joke and all that. You can laugh now. Really."

Lily says nothing. James cringes, drawing himself up to his feet. His best shirt, ruined, no doubt forever, by the smell of deceased pumpkins. He aches all over — he'll be the color of a smashed grape in the morning. It does all seem worth it, somehow. He will at least never forget this glorious day, impossible and nightmarish as it all was.

"Well," Lily says at last. "That's that, then. Isn't it."

James rubs his cheek awkwardly. "I suppose so."

"Listen," Lily murmurs dryly. "I've had a *lovely* time."

James laughs. Does he look as nervous as he feels? Does he have pumpkin dangling from his nose? Could his underwear *possibly* be any stickier? "I always know how to, ha ha, show a girl a time she'll, ha ha, never forget, ha. Ha."

"I mean it," Lily says.

She leans close.

***

"Didn't there used to be suits of armor along these walls?" Snape asks. He hates this school. He hates Kingsley Shacklebolt's bald head. He hates Kingsley Shacklebolt. He hates suits of armor. He hates James Potter and Sirius Black and Remus Lupin and Peter Pettigrew, just for good measure. He hates his life. He hates broccoli. He hates Hallowe'en. He hates this school. He hates being so full of hate that he repeats a hate in his mental list of things to hate.

Kingsley taps the side of his nose. "Follow the sound of armor," he says. "Smash, smash."

***

"AGH," Carmina screams. "AGH, AGH."

"What?" Narcissa demands, whirling on her.

"I broke a nail," Carmina whimpers.

Narcissa stares at her. "Now I remember," she says finally, "why I hate you."

***

"So," Peter says. "Do *you* know where everyone is? Because I just stopped in at the kitchens to preview the feast, you know, and now I can't find anyone! It's awfully strange."

"They're at my little party, I should think," Dumbledore says cheerfully. "Do have a seat. Would you like some candy?"

Peter edges into the hidden room and sits down across from Dumbledore's small desk in a tiny, tiny chair. He feels like a not-so-jolly giant, or an elephant riding a bicycle. "Er. All right?"

Dumbledore pushes something across the tiny desk to him. It is wrapped in yellow foil, and the flames from Dumbledore's tiny, tiny fireplace reflect off it onto the walls. "Congratulations, Mr. Pettigrew. You've solved the mystery."

"Was there a mystery?" Peter says, deeply confused.

Dumbledore sighs. "I admit, this was not how I was hoping this would end."

"What?" says Peter, eyes darting nervously around the room. "Who? Why are you in a toilet?"

Dumbledore sighs again. "Have you ever been to the muggle cinema, Mr. Pettigrew?"

"Oh, yes," Peter says, brightening. "I went with James and Sirius last summer but my mum doesn't like me going about with Muggles all the time so I've only seen a few."

"Well!" says Dumbledore cheerfully. "Then you might understand what I've done this year to celebrate the season. Have you had the opportunity to observe the way Muggle films are run? The formula upon which they operate?"

"Yes!" says Peter automatically. I have no idea what you're talking about.

"Very good. A film, like a book, is based upon a storyline—a very powerful sort of enchantment that controls everything that goes on. Are you following me?"

"Yes!" says Peter. I still have to pee.

"So this year, I thought it might be good fun to—er—put Hogwarts on a sort of storyline; to give the students some of the fun of experiencing the kind of Halloween that they've only read about or seen at the cinema. Well, half of

them. The other half have been transported to the Great Hall, where they are already enjoying one of the best feasts I have ever seen prepared in my many, many years of observation.".

"They're eating without us?" gasps Peter, outraged.

"Ah, yes," murmurs Dumbledore dryly. "At last, Mr. Pettigrew: a cause you can get behind."

***

"Say your goodbyes!" Sirius moans. "Say your goodbyes *now!*"

"I don't — see why — I should do anything of the sort," Remus pants, trying to untangle his trousers from the visor of the helmet. "This is — not going to — *oof*—"

Above them, the leading suit of armor creaks to a start. It slowly, slowly raises its axe. A beam of light catches the blade and twinkles across it.

Sirius makes a high-pitched keening noise.

"Oi!" says someone from down the hallway. "What's this?"

The suit of armor twists around.

***

Kingsley is not having a good afternoon. He's been denied first practice on the pitch. He's had to drag Severus Snape around for a good three-quarters of an hour. Frank Longbottom has shone light on his head. And now there is a walking suit of armor apparently threatening his only fellow Beater, and the Halloween fun has officially come to an end.

"Is that Lupin and Black?" Snape says, sounding delighted. "Are they *on each other*?"

"Bugger off, Snape," yells the shape on the floor, which is definitely Sirius. "Kingsley, a little help?"

"Right," Kingsley says, and lumbers in.

***

"You know I haven't got stomach muscles," James whispers. Lily's pulpy skirt sticks to the palm of his hand. There is a bunny nuzzling questioningly at his heel.

"I know," she says quietly.

"I have all the maturity of a seven-year-old in a toilet factory."

"I know."

"I'm frightened of *pumpkins*."

"James." Lily sounds relieved and fond and impatient, "*I* can't sing."

James goggles at her. She slips her hand over his hand, which is still stuck to her skirt.

"I wish you would shut up," she murmurs.

Their mouths are very close.

***

"You are so mean," Carmina sniffles, examining the injured finger.

"You are *insufferable*," Narcissa hisses. "Of all the people to be stuck in some ridiculous farce with — I'd rather be saddled with *Evans* than you!"

"Ooh!" Carmina shrieks, eyes going wide with outrage. "I cannot *believe* — you stuck-up, glossy-haired *bitch*!"

Narcissa gasps. No one calls her names. *No one*. Because the Black family has *dignity* which is to be upheld *above all things*—

"I'm going to scratch your *face* off!" she screams, and hurls herself at Carmina.

***



***

"I didn't notice anything," Peter says doubtfully, still holding the candy awkwardly between two fingers. "Are you sure it worked?"

"Oh, yes," says Dumbledore blithely. "However, I believe that your total lack of imagination has, er, preserved you from its effects. It is exceedingly interesting. I was not aware that there was such a thing as a resistance to storyline—I

was quite expecting to be cornered in here by a blood-drenched, wild-eyed fighter-type, as is to be expected—but you seem to have perfected it. Congratulations!"

"Oh," says Peter. I want to go home.

"Please do unwrap that sweet," Dumbledore says, and sighs.

"All right," Peter says.

***

"Be *careful*, Shacklebolt!"

"Maybe you should get out of the way, Black."

"I *can't*! I'm trapped in a *helmet*! Why do you think I'm not running away, shrieking like a *little girl*?"

"That is a *broadsword*, Kingsley, if you don't mind oh my *God* I was less frightened when it was only the armor—"

"Duck, Lupin."

"I hate you all."

***

"I can't shut up. It's like a compulsion. I get in the same room with you and all of a sudden it's just like I have to talk *all the time*, and sometimes it's like I come right out of my body and I'm looking down at me and I just want to yell *shut up! Shut up! Shut up!* but—"

"Potter."

"...what?"

"I don't...think you should worry so much."

"Oh."

"Yes."

"Oh..."

***

"Tart!"

"Slag!"

"Vicious, classless little — ow — pygmy!"

"Snotty, gold-digging tramp — *ooh* my hair!"

***

Peter unwraps it.

***

"I hate you all," Snape says again, emphatically. "I hate Black the most, actually, but it's a very close race and why don't we just round up and say you're *all* losers." He pauses. Blinks. Looks around him. Potions. Potions. More potions. A few empty vials, some tall-necked beakers, a bubbling cauldron. The sweet smell of wet stone and experiments in progress. He's back where he was before the entire evening exploded in some grand and disturbing social experiment. Snape flicks his hair over one shoulder, fingers twitching. "It *was* Black and Lupin," he mutters to himself. "On top of one another. *Poofters.*"

***

"Unnngh," Kingsley says, exerting great effort. The broadsword is heavy, of course, and unwieldy, and strangely poky at one end, but he's got everything under control. Leave it to him. Situation: manageable.

"Wow," Frank says. "When did I end up in your arms, Kings? Your stomach is like *steel.* It is *more* than steel. No one is going to believe me but you are more mountain than man, mate."

Kingsley looks down at Frank, cradled heavy and unwieldy and strangely poky at one end between his own massive biceps. Half of the Quidditch team is watching on in bemused horror.

"And that," Kingsley says, "is how a Beater can save a Chaser's life midair."

Everyone bursts into applause.

***

"My money's on Narcissa," Bellatrix says calmly, sliding her bet across the bed to Ermine.

"I'm for Carmina all the way," Ermine replies. "Though she be but little, she kicks like a donkey."

***

James closes his eyes. This is the first kiss he's ever attempted that won't have involved far too much nervous lip-licking beforehand. Perhaps it won't be as wet as his others have been, few and far between as they were. Even when they were dating: few and far between. He takes a deep breath in. *Savor the moment, Potter. It's what your life has always led to! Never again doubt! Never again give up hope!* Lily smells like girl. Like tired, sweaty, pumpkin-flavored girl, but girl nonetheless, and all girl secrets, and all delightful, soft, curved, girl things. He presses one hand against her cheek and the other against her waist and presses his lips forward in a blind and half-angled fashion. Determination, he has decided, must make up for lack of skill. The moment is too perfect. There are even bunnies.

"Wow," a cheerful first year says, awed. "They're going to *kiss*, aren't they."

"I think so," one of the prefects says. "This is definitely *not* how *I* learned to carve a pumpkin."

Lily pulls back to the right; James, to the left. They knock heads so hard that James sees pumpkins. "Onghh," he groans. "Oh, my head."

"Well," Lily says, smoothing down the front of her skirt and bravely recalling a strange and foreign concept known as composure. "I'm going to take a bath. Remember, children: when carving pumpkins, always wear a pumpkin bib."

***

Remus has his eyes squeezed shut, curled around Sirius in the fetal position, waiting for the axe — not even proverbial; the reality of it is that horrible to contemplate — to fall. It doesn't. He tenses, feels Sirius clutch at his sweater. Seconds limp by. Nothing happens.

Remus cracks one eye open.

"Oh God," he says. "Sirius. Sirius. We're *not going to die.*"

"Denial," Sirius moans miserably, "denial to the end. This is the Lupin way." Then he cracks one eye open and glances around. Very carefully, he untangles his arm from Remus's neck. "Oh," he says.

"Yes," Remus says. "Unless we die of embarrassment, which let me just say is not out of the question, we're not going to die."

"Hallo," Peter says cheerfully. The tower is full of Gryffindors, looking slightly dazed but extremely curious, and either Remus is hallucinating or Albus Dumbledore is standing over them. "Happy Halloween! I was in the bathrooms and I found a secret door. It's been Dumbledore! He made half the school disappear. Well, they didn't disappear. They've been at a party. But it was meant to scare everyone. And I solved the mystery and I've got us thirty points!"

"Well, boys?" Dumbledore says. "Happy Halloween!"

"It was a prank!" Peter says happily. "Haha!"

"Aha," Sirius says. Remus knows that voice. It is murderous. "Aha, ha ha ha."

"I do so love Halloween," Dumbledore murmurs blissfully. "Now, the festivities can *really* begin!"

Remus looks all around him. There are eyes everywhere: the burning, judging eyes of his peers. He remembers his first Halloween — his first *real* Halloween, with Sirius and James and Peter in Hogwarts — and James and Sirius wearing matching costumes, and Peter eating so much candy he was ill all over the floor, and having to clean up the mess while Sirius and James went stealing down the halls putting melted candy in front of every doorway so that there were far too many sticky-shoed students in the morning. This is just another one of those fond, fond, agonizing memories, to remind him, when he is an adult, and presumably past all this, that there were times when he felt very small and very red, like a prize winning tomato. Humility, he thinks, and the ability to take all things in stride.

However — and he thinks Sirius will agree with him on this one — right now, at this very instant, he would like the axe to fall.



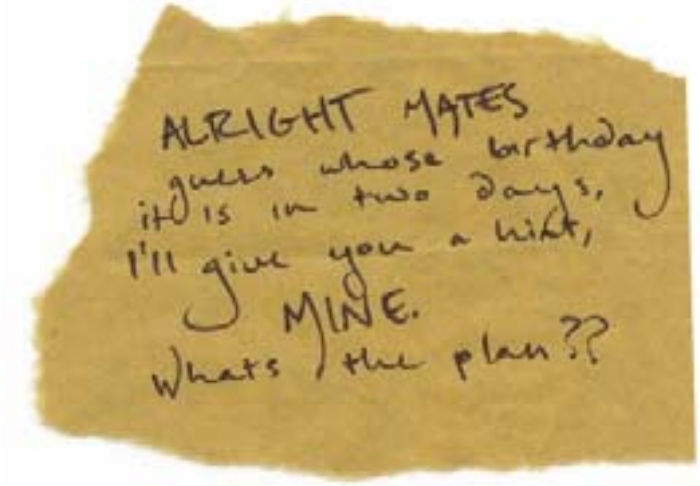
This story is based on characters and situations created and owned by JK Rowling, various publishers including but not limited to Bloomsbury Books, Scholastic Books and Raincoast Books, and Warner Bros., Inc. No money is being made and no copyright or trademark infringement is intended.

***The Shoebox Project* by LadyJaida and Dorkorific**

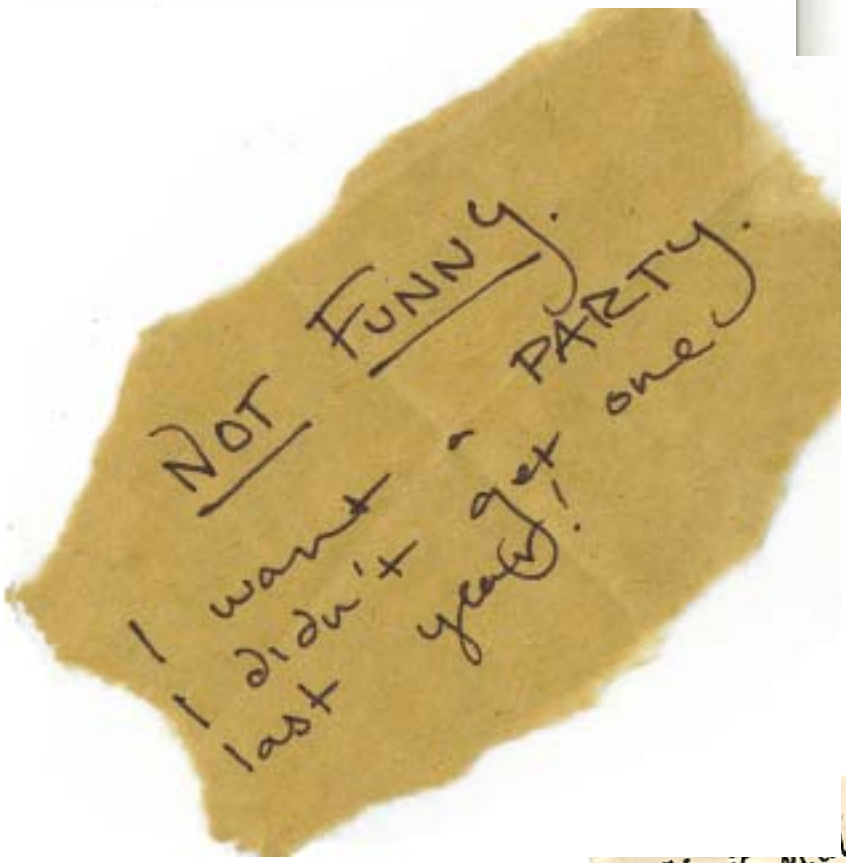
http://www.livejournal.com/community/shoebox_project

Part Seventeen: November, 1976

In History of Magic, after lunch. Continued in Potions, after History of Magic.





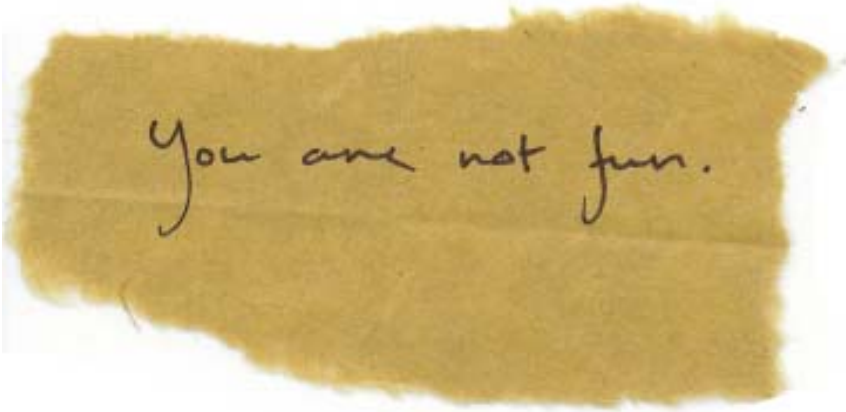


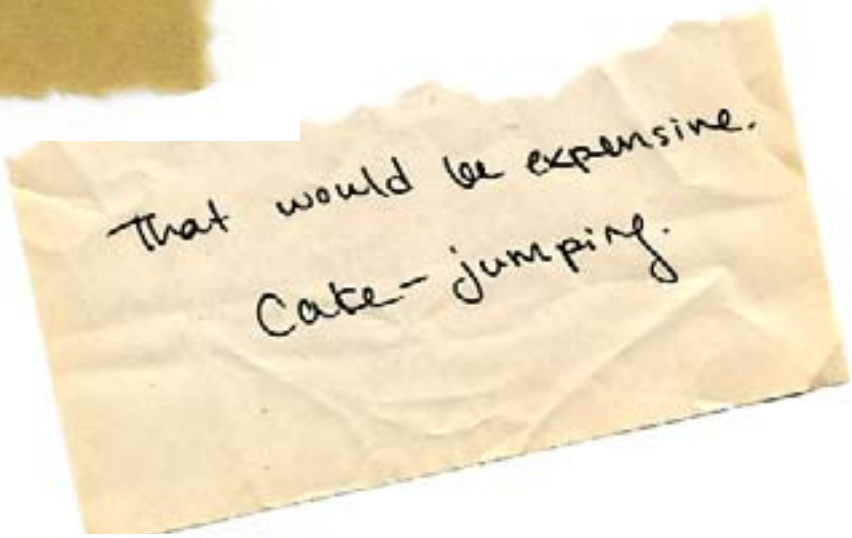


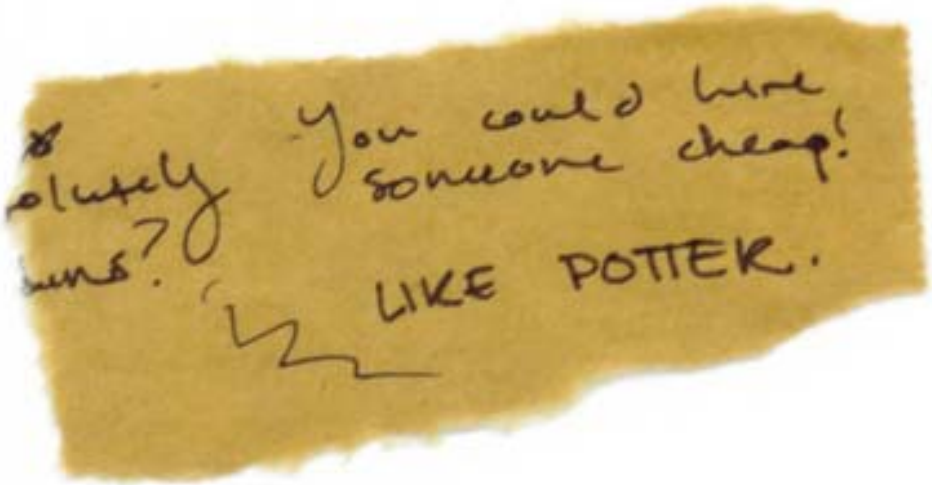
ALSO YOU WERE JUST DISOWNED RIGHT, I DONT THINK YOU WERE FEELING VERY PARTY-Y

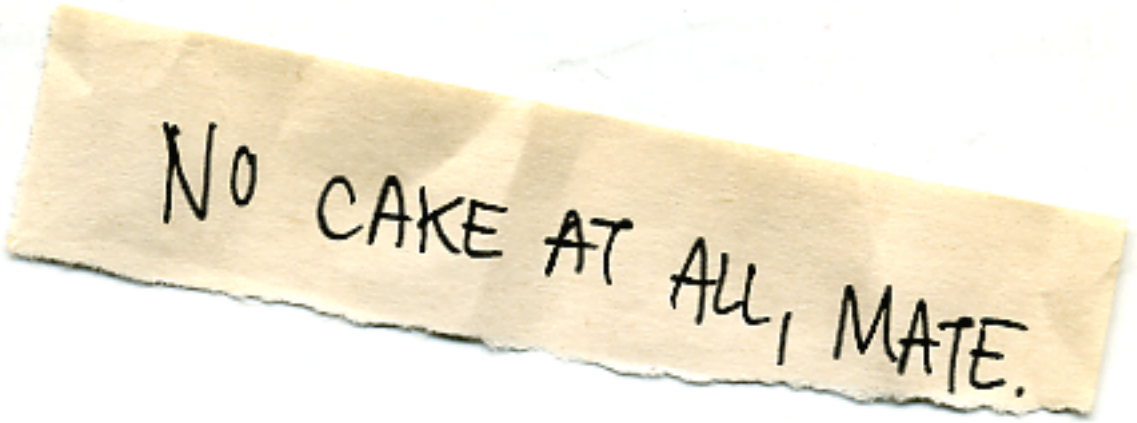
Thanks Pete, I'd forgotten that charming incident. NOT THE POINT. Sirius Black's Very Sexy and Exciting Party for His Eighteenth Birthday is coming up and I need ideas, otherwise you lot are SO not invited.

No one is jumping out of a cake naked for you, by the by.


You are not fun.


That would be expensive.
Cake-jumping.


You could hire someone cheap!
LIKE POTTER.


NO CAKE AT ALL, MATE.



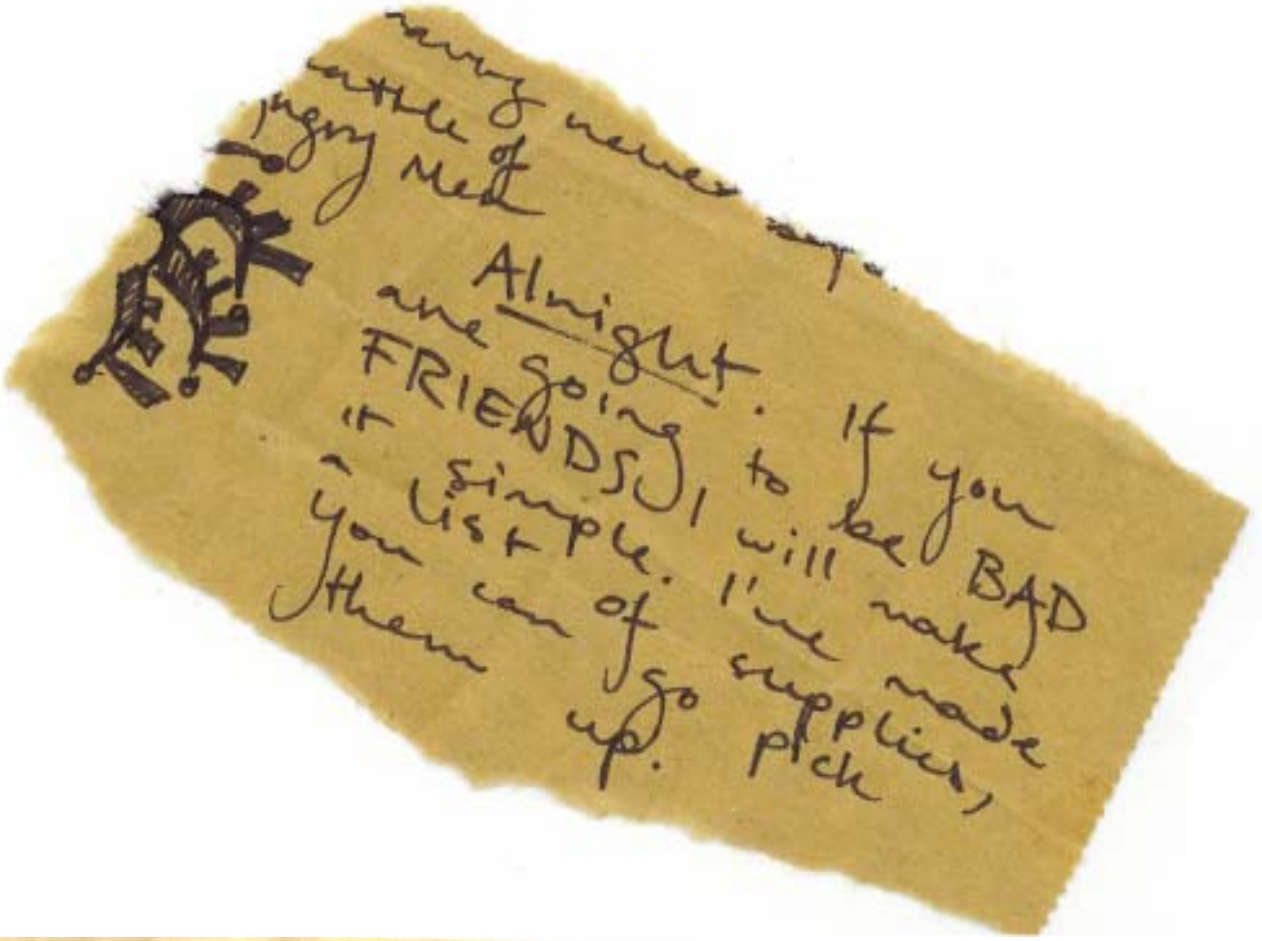
But you would be ever so alluring all covered in icing. Maybe it would make Evans love you again!

NO FUN POTTER

Myself in icing is not for the consumption of the general public.

The general public wishes to thank you.

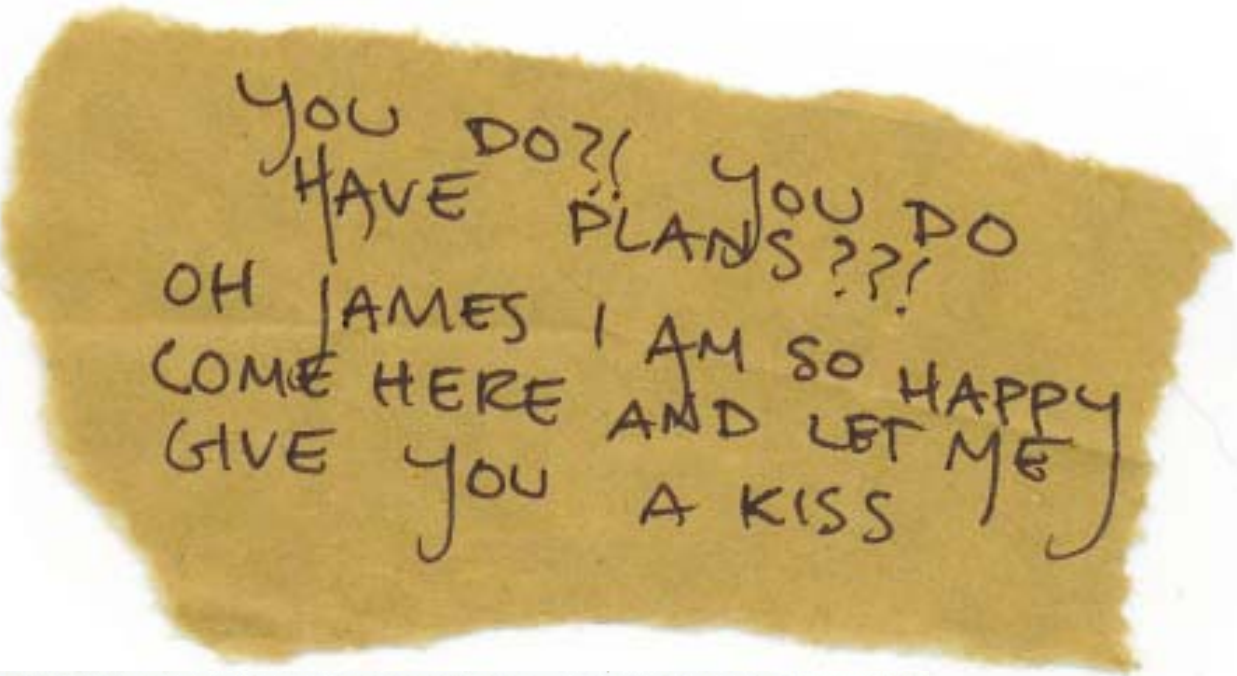
I am heartbroken.

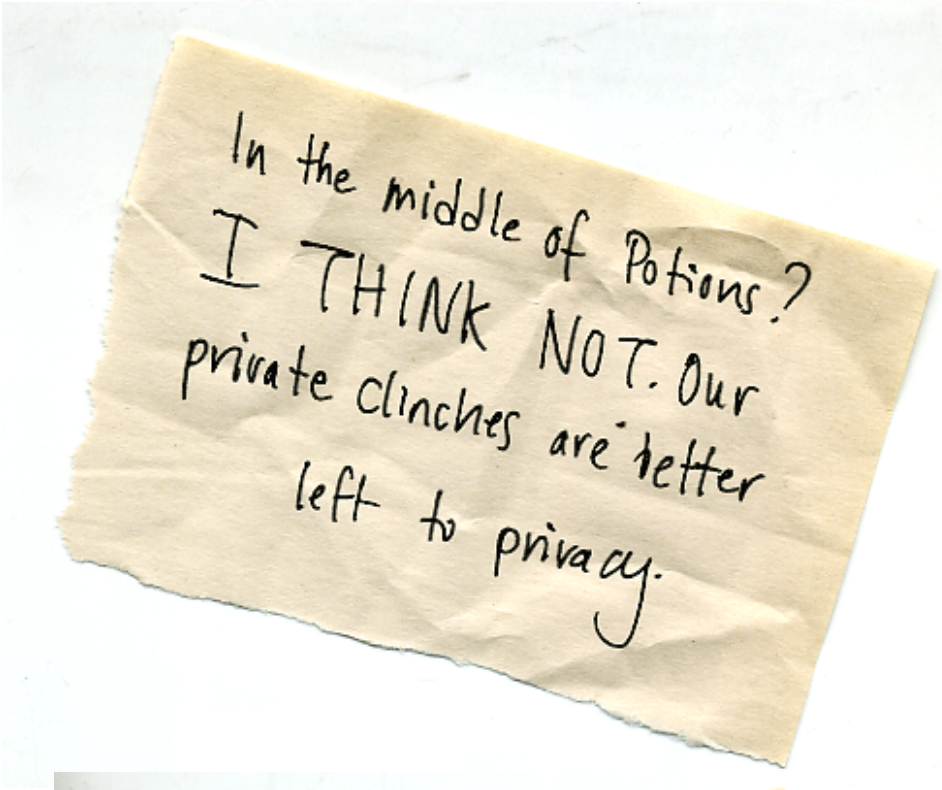


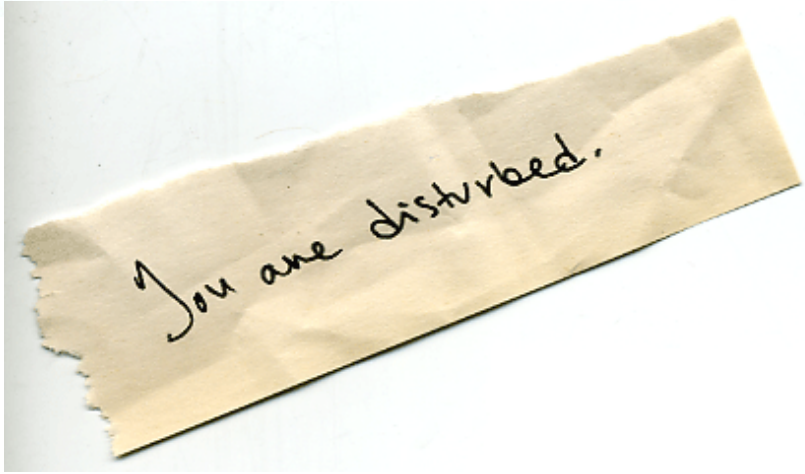
Alright. If you are going to be BAD FRIENDS I will make it simple. I've made a list of supplies, you can go pick them up.

How very thoughtful of you.

YOU ARSE as if we don't have plans already. (arse!!)


YOU DO?! YOU DO
HAVE PLANS???
OH JAMES I AM SO HAPPY
COME HERE AND LET ME
GIVE YOU A KISS


In the middle of Potions?
I THINK NOT. Our
private clinches are better
left to privacy.


You are disturbed.


WHAT PRIVATE
CLINCHES?!?!

Don't get jealous darling, it's unbecoming.

Yes look how pink he is.

Pete's head → 

He's always pink.

WHO'S PINK??!
I AM NOT PINK.

He has always looked...
well it's more like
"healthy" to me.

Yes, I would have said
FUSCHIA.

It's definitely
more infuriating

ITS DEFINITELY
I HATE YOU ALL.

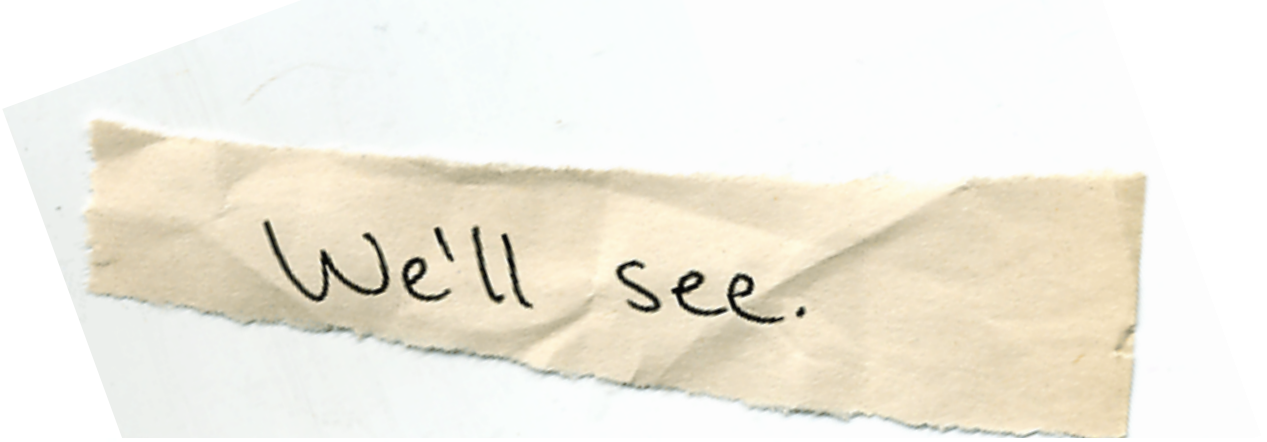
Has anyone noticed that we are not talking about ME anymore??

PROBLEM.

So what are these plans???

They are SURPRISES.

I don't like surprises unless it involves Jamie and a cake.





***

Remus has learned long ago that Marauder birthdays are not like other birthdays. This important lesson was brought home to him when Sirius shoved him, face first, into his first Marauder birthday cake — which was, coincidentally, not a real cake, but rather a pan full of melted chocolate with icing on top of it. This is the way a Marauder has to learn how to say Happy Birthday. It always makes Remus feel squeamish, even after seven years of practice. He simply doesn't like shoving people's faces into anything, so James often charges him with procuring the refreshments and putting up the decorations.

Well, Remus is *bad* at putting up the decorations. He has no eye for it, and often gets tangled in streamers, which results in a lot of torn crepe paper and an incredibly bad mood. "Remus," James said to him finally, earlier that afternoon, "we are Seventh Year Gryffindor males. We have no need of crepe."

"Thank God," Remus replied, and went off to get the Firewhiskey.

It is, he supposes, some sort of reaffirming action — showing that he isn't *all* Prefect, *all* the way down. To begin with, he can drink any one of his friends and probably any one of his teachers under the table, even though he doesn't much like the taste of Firewhiskey. He supposes it's his metabolism, which does odd things he isn't sure of. The first time he realized this was with Sirius, who stopped speaking to him for weeks afterwards, with a parting "Honestly,

Moony, keeping this from us for *all this time?*" and an agreeable "Not on!" from James.

"Do we have music?" James yells from the common room. "What's the music?"

"I don't know," Remus yells back, tearing through his trunk. "All my music's too pretty. Shall we just take his?"

"Righto," comes James's voice a moment later, in a strangled grunt, "just — ah — pick that up, while you're up there, eh?"

Remus straightens. His arms are full of clanking bottles of Firewhiskey; it'll take another two trips to bring all of it down, not to mention the two enormous tankards of rum and the frightening pepper-infused vodka that he brought back from Lithuania and which everyone is too afraid to try. If he tries loading up his arms with Sirius' enormous, dog-eared collection of punk records, both Wizarding and Muggle, he will probably fall down the stairs and spill all the alcohol, which — though an excellent way to christen a ship — is not the way of a Marauder birthday party.

Well, he thinks sympathetically, James must be extremely busy. Because he'd certainly come upstairs and help if he weren't extremely busy.

When he steps down the last stair into the common room, James is, in fact, on the floor, ankles and one wrist tangled in crepe paper and a look of bewildered disgust on his face.

"Crepe paper," he mutters, not looking Remus in the eye. "I couldn't let well enough alone. Tricky."

"I know," Remus replies. "It gets you where you're weakest and then there's no hope." Kindly, he helps James untangle himself, though he eyes the crepe paper warily all the while. He doesn't know of what, exactly, it's capable. "Don't know what sadist invented it. Someone with fingers I don't trust. Shall we just magic it up?"

"I love wands," James says, tugging his from his back pocket. "D'you know, it's a wonder Muggles aren't stumbling about with underwear on their heads *all the time*, not knowing right from left?"

"Oh, impressive," Remus says dryly, "those Muggles. And that they've managed it for so long."

Wands flicking in unison, they get the trailing curls, somewhat knotted but still passable, of crepe paper up into the air and thrown here and there over the rafters. They're boys, Remus supposes, so it doesn't have to be *symmetrical* — though the utter carelessness of some of the criss-crosses still makes him cringe. "It'll do," he says finally, stepping back and brushing hair out of his eyes. "Well, it'll have to, as I've no idea how to get it down and start all over."

“Come on,” James says, though dubiously. “It’s not all that bad.”

“Hello,” Peter says, coming in with Remus’ victrola. “Did all the crepe paper in the world come here to die?”

“It will be this way for all time,” James mutters defensively. “As a reminder of our great triumph over the paper that is crepe.”

“I wouldn’t really call it a triumph,” Peter says hesitantly.

“He’s right, you know,” Remus admits. “It’s really more of a Pyrrhic victory.”

“I think everyone who sees this room loses,” Peter adds.

“How about we get them too drunk to notice?” James suggests. “Good God, Moony, that’s a lot of Firewhiskey. What are we doing for people who like their drinks less painful?”

“I’ve got some Muggle stuff from my sister upstairs!” Peter volunteers. “Pads was a bartender, right? He can make it taste good.”

“We don’t want him stuck behind a bar all night,” James objects with, Remus thinks appreciatively, uncharacteristic consideration. “He’ll have to test all his creations and we’ll find him with his head in a toilet a week later. We’ll just...make some kind of...punch. It can’t be that hard, right? We’ll get...juice. Peter, did you make that banner?”

“I started it,” Peter says doubtfully. “I can’t really draw portraits though. I don’t know how it’s going to turn out.”

“And I have the camera,” Remus says. “You know. For pictures. To document the chaos.” He attempts a shifty look.

“Remus, have you got something in your eye?” Peter asks. “Like lint? Do you need help with it?”

“No,” Remus mutters. “I was trying to imply I will blackmail you all and move to a sunny Caribbean isle with the hush money, whereupon I will be fed chocolate all day by the buxom natives.”

James stares at him. “You make even that sound stodgy,” he says. “Good job mate, really. It’s impressive.”

***



***

A glorious documentation of the eighteenth birthday of one Sirius Black, Gryffindor and Marauder, with captions added for posterity by Mr. Moony, Esquire.



Peter, Sirius and James.



Poor Lily.



And we never saw these girls again...



Nor did we see her, either. Fancy that!



Shall we pretend the angle is "artistic" ?



Indeed, the birthday boy.



I call this "passed out with no trousers."

***

"Moo-ooh-ooh-ny," Sirius howls. "Where is Moo-ooh-ooh-ny, I want to *commend* him for this *excellent* Latvian purchase of his. Such foresight! Such intuition! Such Moo-ooh-ooh-ny!"

Remus, however, is in hiding. This is, after all, a party, and a rather good one at that, with Peter's banner hung high above the goings on where — James whispered — no one would be able to see it. It was supposed to be them, all four of them, but looks, Remus thinks, like a very large pen vomited on a very large piece of parchment and was then tortured into spasms of despair and agony for a very long time. With faces. There are, definitely, faces. The one with three splashes of ink across and a gigantic blob in the center is Remus, Remus guesses, and the one with uneven circles somewhere amidst a mess of black is James. Peter hasn't given himself any hair. Sirius is the one that's left, looking wild and squinty and definitely lopsided. There is a certain something compelling about it, sad, mournful little characters, that, somewhere, hit home.

"We are none of us artists," James had told Peter earlier. "You are a brave, good man."

"Pepper!" Sirius is yelling now. "It's pepper *and* alcohol *together*! Genius! Northern Europe! Hey, hello, where'd you come from? What's your name? Ashley? Hahaha *whoa* okay then *mff*—"

"Hey," comes a call, and all of a sudden the door of the closet jerks open. Remus looks up guiltily to see James staring fuzzily down at him, swaying slightly. "What are you doing in here? Come on. What the hell. Reading in a closet. It's a party! It's Sirius' party! Come up — you've missed him doing the Sexy Dance on a table!"

"Argh," Remus protests. "Look, James, I know it's a party, and I'm really glad you're all having a good time, but I've got loads of reading to do and you know me, this isn't really my — parties, you know—"

"Up," James insists mercilessly, and jerks him upright, dragging him out of the closet.

There aren't, actually, as many people as there had been when Remus had first crept into the closet to hide. There is, apparently, a Ravenclaw girl named Ashley, and Frank, and Kingsley with his arms folded across his chest downing Firewhiskey after Firewhiskey without batting an eye, and someone asleep face down on the floor who looks from behind like a fifth year Remus only recognizes by hairstyle. Peter is eyeing his own Firewhiskey nervously and Sirius is the life of the small, dwindling party.

"Evans left," James confides in Remus's ear, much louder than he probably intends. "I feel horrible. I was soooo drunk. So drunk. All I could say to her was 'I'm sorry I'm so drunk.' 'Sorry!' I said but she was so nice. She's the best girl. I forgot the entire conversation we were having while we were still having it."

“I’m sure it will be fine,” Remus says, eyeing Frank nervously.

“An encore!” James demands, apparently having lost interest in the everpresent Evans Problem. “An encore of Sirius Black’s specialty, the Sexy Dance! Up with you, mate! Onto the table! Where’s your lampshade hat?”

Remus Lupin hates parties. He hates the drunk — happy drunks and sad drunks alike, but for different reasons — and he hates knowing at some point some Gryffindor is going to take a piss on something important (maybe, in fact, it has already happened) and only he will be sober enough to clean it up. He can’t wait for the smaller half, the faint, dim hours just before sunup, when it’s only the four of them left in the aftermath exchanging cards and presents like decent, respectable Englishmen, not bloody wild Gryffindor hooligans.

Hooligans, Remus’ mind repeats.

“Good God,” he says, out loud. “I am a forty year old in a boy suit.”

“Thanks for the Daily Obvious, Moony.” James rolls his eyes, stepping neatly over the prostrate body of someone Remus has never seen before. Some Muggles are destroying a guitar through the scratchy trumpet of the Victrola. Remus feels tired and irritated and very old.

“Moony!” Sirius says happily, surfacing. Ashley giggles and wipes her mouth. Remus really, really hates the drunk. Sirius is wearing a pink hat with sparkly tassels; he has chocolate and crepe paper in his hair and his face is covered in lipstick. Around eight o’clock he started demanding kisses for the birthday boy, and very few people had the sense or the fortitude to refuse. Even Kingsley condescended to duck his face into Sirius’s hair, an act which only he could make stately and dignified. “Mooooooony I wanted to thank you for the deliciously fantastic pepper vodka. I love the pepper vodka. I feel like I’ve found a soulmate. We’re going to go have pepper vodka babies. Named *Alexei*. *Sturginoff.* Sturginoffski. Hey,” this last to Ashley, with a troubled look, “how old are you, anyway? How did you get in here?”

“Sixteen,” Ashley says, and giggles again, revoltingly. “I’m Meg’s cousin.”

“Sixteen! I think maybe that’s illegal now, you know, you old pervert,” James says knowledgeably, collapsing onto the nearest sofa.

“That’s illegal,” Sirius informs Ashley genially, patting her consolingly on the bottom. “This is possibly illegal. Or not. We don’t know. Terribly sorry. You’re a very,” this in a low voice that is really closer to a growl, “*very*...sweet...girl *mmf.*”

“I don’t know what to say,” Remus murmurs.

“Youuuu should get back to your House,” Sirius informs her woozily, pulling back and pointing at her meaningfully. “Can’t be out too late. Had a wonderful evening.”

“I could stay here,” Ashley purrs.

Remus *hates* girls who purr.

“No,” Sirius says cheerfully, “not really, it’s a Gryffindor kind of, yes, after this so, no. But Happy Birthday to me, I’m glad to meet you, yes, good-night,” and hustles her out the door with a rather unnecessary amount of groping.

“You are cruel to them,” Remus says, though fondly.

“I am not cruel,” Sirius says, shocked. “Moony, the nerve! The insinuations! And on my birthday! How am I cruel!” He dusts off his hands with some relish.

“Well, they love you,” Remus says. “You have that sort of — personality. And then you pat their odd firm female bottoms and send them on their way. No doubt they pine.”

“Of course they pine.” Sirius beams. “That’s part of the fun. You ought to try it sometime — making people pine.”

“I wouldn’t now how,” Remus says airily. “All right. Out! Out.” He toes the two prone forms on the floor, rolling them kindly to the door.

“Here,” Kingsley says, suddenly behind him. “I’ll help.” He leans down, taking the two by their collars, and tugging them out. “I will leave you alone,” he adds, raising one brow in salute.

“You are a good man,” Remus says. “You are a good man, Kingsley Shacklebolt.”

“See that Sirius has a good birthday and that he does not have any more pepper vodka,” Kingsley says. Commands, really. “See also that he does not vomit on himself.”

“I will be a human shield if necessary,” Remus says.

The rest of the guests filter out. Remus shuts the door behind them with a neat *snick*, locks it, and heads to sit by Peter, who is, blissfully, not drunk. Remus is suddenly overwhelmed with gratitude that he is here. “Thank you, Peter,” he says, and Peter looks at him as if he’s lost his mind.

“Encore,” James mumbles. “Encore, Sirius, old boy, old gal, encore!”

“No more dance,” Sirius says blissfully, draping himself across James’s lap and kissing him wetly on the ear. “No more dancing for you.” He exhales hugely and flops backward, wiggling comfortably into James’s open arms. “I am too tired to dance. This has been a fantastically wonderful and amazing birthday. Happy birthday to me,” in a light, dizzy, off-key tenor, “happy birthday to me, happy birthday dear Sirius, happy birthday tooo….me.”

“Your neck smells like tequila,” James informs him

“Good,” Sirius says. “So does my mouth, see?” and he huffs in James’s face to prove it.

“Yagh!” James protests, nose wrinkling in disgusted horror. “It’s like the inside of an overcoat.”

“Happy birthday to me,” Sirius hums.

Peter turns his Firewhiskey bottle upside-down and regards it with interest. Remus settles onto his elbows. The record has come, finally, to an end, and the air is filled with the empty crackling of the Victrola in the silence.

How is it possible, Remus wonders, to feel so solitary amongst his three best friends? He is struck with the oddity of it — how different they are from one another, and how miraculous it is they ever got along in the first place, and how odd they manage to get along. Whatever glue binds them together so well cannot be classified or named or analyzed; it works without the properties of logic and common sense. Well, Remus supposes, that *is* friendship. That which comes from necessity or impulse or luck, but never from anything understandable. He licks his lips unconsciously.

“So-oooo,” Sirius says brightly from his limp position on James’s knee, waving a hand regally in the air and staring at the ceiling, “who’s got presents for me?”

“I burned mine in protest,” Remus murmurs, too quietly for anyone to hear him.

“I made you the birthday banner!” Peter says, pointing upwards. “That one, on the left, that one’s you. I worked for hours on it. While James and Remus got tangled in crepe paper.”

“I see it now,” Sirius says blissfully. “I’m the one with all the hair. Pete, my lad, that is the best rendition of Moony’s nose I have ever seen in my life.” He turns his gaze to Remus’s nose, focuses, and grins. “It’s an exact likeness!” he exclaims. “That is the best birthday present ever. Pete. Peter. Petey. That is *fantastic.* Who is next? Your king awaits your offerings.”

“I have gotten you,” James says, not to be outdone, “a box full of many goodies. It is over there in the corner and I cannot reach it because something is on my lap. Oh, hello. It’s you. Hello!”

“Hello,” Sirius says. “Here, Moony, be a sport, would you, and fetch us James’ box of many goodies?”

“I am afraid to touch it,” Remus says, but obliges.

Sirius tears into the present with the same gusto he always has and always will have for only two things in his life actually worth the energy: presents and puddings. “James,” Sirius says,

moments later, his face falling. “James, it’s a book. It’s only one goodie and it’s a book.”

“It is not just any book,” James chides. “Have some faith, man! *Open it.*”

Sirius opens the book.

“Merlin’s spotted socks,” Sirius breathes. “James, this is brilliant.”

“What,” Peter asks, “what is it?”

Sirius’s eyes are wider than Remus has ever seen them. They look like they’ve been propped open by invisible toothpicks. He flips a page and shoves the book sideways at James, grinning so widely and with such sheer joy it looks like his face will split in two. “Look — oh my God hahaha *look* at it!”

“Gotten great use from that one myself,” James agrees solemnly.

“My legs don’t do that,” Sirius whispers, clearly awed. “I don’t think my legs do that. Wow, they’re really into it, aren’t they?”

“That’s right,” James says, apparently to the book. “Keep it up. Lie back and think of England.”

“James,” Remus says uncertainly.

“What *is* it?”

Sirius flips through a few more pages, face glowing with delight. “James, it is so incredible. It is so marvelous.”

“Let me *see* it!” Peter demands.

“Fine, whinge whinge whinge, don’t let the birthday boy have his present for more than a second before you snatch it away,” Sirius says irritably, dropping it into his outstretched hands. “But for God’s sake do be careful and don’t bend anything. Oh, James, I have never been so happy. You’re the best friend a boy could ask for.”

Remus, with an awful feeling that he already knows what he is going to see, leans over Peter’s shoulder.

“Whoa,” Peter breathes, long and low and reverent.

“‘A Wizard’s Kama Sutra,’“ Remus reads. “Well, James. How mature of you.”

“They are moving, Moony,” Sirius says. “It is *brilliant*.”

“They are moving,” Remus agrees. “It is *pornographic.*”

“He’s not right,” Sirius murmurs sadly. “He’s just not right. He was broken when he was little, but he’s just not right.” He gives Remus a disapproving look. “Just — turn to the first page. Tell me that doesn’t make you all warm inside.”

Peter quickly turns the page to accommodate. Remus peers over his shoulder at the strange and foreign tangle of limbs that looks animal and desperate and somewhat comedic. Remus takes the book from Peter, ignoring Peter’s pained sound, and turns the book upside down. “Well,” he says. “I’ve found a head.” There is a woman, he *thinks*, from the hips, and a man’s entire rear end, and their legs are flapping about wildly. Remus ponders this. And then, he begins to laugh.

“He’s not right,” Sirius repeats. “He is all wrong.”

“It’s *funny*,” Remus protests. “They look like insects flipped onto their backs!”

“Ugh,” James says. “I’m glad I’ll forget that one in the morning. Try page seventy-six. That one’s my favorite.”

Remus does so, amused and feeling somewhat superior, if not somewhat disappointed. How unromantic, he thinks, stopping on the appropriate page. “She’s upside down,” Remus says. “She looks as if she’s about to choke. I feel sorry for her.”

“That is *bliss*,” James mutters. “Must you ruin all that is sacred?”

“I want my present back,” Sirius mumbles, holding out his arms. “I will never part with it. I will be an apt pupil, James Potter. Hang on a tick, don’t I get another present?”

Remus sighs. He’s never been any good with presents. He knows Sirius, impossibly well, all the things that make him angry and all the things that, inexplicably, make him laugh, and what sends him round the bend with gratitude. But James is good with presents, and Peter is always blithely trying, and Remus never manages to hit the mark. “Er,” Remus says.

“I doooo,” Sirius says softly. “I know I do. Come on. Give it up.”

“I don’t have it,” Remus objects, flailing mentally for excuses. “I’ve, er, I’ve lost it.”

“Bollocks,” Sirius says rudely. “You are withholding my present. I can see it in your eyes.”

“Pads,” James reminds him, “you’re looking at the ceiling.”

“I don’t have to see them to know!” Sirius retorts.

“You don’t want it,” Remus says desperately.

“I would like to concretely know I don’t want it, if you please,” Sirius commands, sticking out a hand. “Out with it.”

Remus sighs and reaches behind the Victrola for the small square package, which Sirius seizes upon eagerly and rips apart with great gusto.

“It’s…another old book,” he says at length. “How...surprising!”

“I know,” Remus says. “I failed. I tried, and then I gave up. I am a failure. Feel free to steal my chocolate.”

“I steal your chocolate anyway.” Sirius gives the book a peremptory once-over and then drops it unceremoniously onto the sofa. James picks it up, flips through it momentarily, and then drops it as well. It’s almost a ritual: Remus spends weeks, sometimes even months, in advance, desperately trying to think of something new, and yet always falls back on *old, smelly book* in the end, panicking at all the possibilities, much to the expectations of his friends who no longer display even any pretense of humoring his lack of imagination. Of course, it isn’t his lack of imagination that does it — he imagines all sorts of presents, perfect presents, presents that would put anyone else’s presents to shame. Unfortunately, most of them don’t exist, and the rest of them are too expensive.

“I’ll get extra,” Remus mumbles. “You can have all of it. I did try.”

“You always do,” Sirius sighs. He pats him on the back, gives his shoulder a squeeze. “It’s never your fault, really. One day, who knows. You’ll get there. I like the stuff with caramel in the center.”

“Your chocolate is impure,” Remus says. “But noted.”

“And that’s it then, is it?” Sirius flings himself backwards, sprawled with his legs and his arms wide apart, on the thick carpet. “Another birthday, come and gone. Have we caroused, men? Have we drunk our fill? Are we absolutely full of good drink and good company? I’m tired,” he concludes, and closes his eyes. James is already snoring, and Peter, with his head on his folded arms, fell asleep when Sirius opened Remus’ book.

“It’s not that I don’t try,” Remus says again, into the quiet, still air. “I do try. Giving presents is hard, you know. I always think, this year, I’m going to make it, and then I don’t.”

“Endearing,” Sirius mumbles. “A bit pathetic but that’s, you know, understandable. Keep your chin up, there’s a lad.”

“It’s just books are — well, *everyone* likes books,” Remus presses. He toys at the frayed hem of one sweater sleeve. “It’s just so few people really love them, I suppose. Except James managed to find the one incredible book the whole world had to offer.”

“People going at it like they’re made of clay,” Sirius says agreeably. “Fan-*tas*tic.”

“Really,” Remus says. “I don’t understand how you can not think it’s even a little funny.”

“It *is* funny, you arse,” Sirius says fondly, “it is intensely funny. But you don’t think it’s anything other than funny which is,” an immense, face-devouring yawn, “...completely...ridiculous. You know what I think, I bet you bud.”

“What?” Remus says, blinking. “I...is that a word? I mean, of course it is, but in this context.”

“Yes,” Sirius says solemnly. “One day you will get a growth at the end of one of your fingers, and it will grow and grow and then all of a sudden out will pop a little miniature Moony. Or maybe you will divide, like an amoeba.”

“You are drunk,” Remus says. “You are drunker than drunk. A moment ago you had a lampshade on your head.”

“I am saying you are the most asexual person I have ever met,” Sirius explains, opening James’s book and dangling it upside-down. “I can’t imagine you doing any of this! Not that I have ever tried, but, you know? I can’t. No one could. It is like trying to hammer a square hole into a...peg. You know? So...you’ll probably bud.”

“I don’t plan on reproducing,” Remus huffs. He is *not* asexual. He could tell Sirius a thing or two about nagging, persistent dreams and trying very, very hard in the shower to *be* asexual. But he is not asexual. His organs would very much like to disagree with that misinformed assessment. “I just don’t show it,” he adds. “Just because I don’t go around whipping out my respective, you know, doesn’t mean it is not all there.”

“I didn’t say it wasn’t *there*,” Sirius reasons. “I just said it isn’t the sort to stand up and take notice.”

“Well that’s not true either,” Remus snaps.

“But what have you *done* about it, eh?” Sirius asks.

Silence.

This, Remus thinks, is rather uncomfortable. What can anyone say to that? Suddenly the conversation has taken a drastic, uncomfortable, and sexual turn. Remus wasn’t expecting anything of the sort. He supposes Sirius will remember none of this in the head-clutching, moan-

and-groaning morning, but for now Remus is very aware that one of Sirius' bleary eyes has focused on him and that any uncomfortable shifting or turning any strange colors to alleviate the bubble of embarrassment in his belly is completely out of the question.

"Do you want me to write you a list?" he replies irritably. "Or shall I have a pantomime?"

"Oh ho ho!" Sirius says delightedly. "He has a pantomime. An informative puppet show. Look, just because I — you know — you don't have to get all skittery all the time. It's in the past! It never happened! Stop *thinking* about it! *I'm* not thinking about it! Can you even say the word 'sex' without going all British? Can you? I've kissed James and he doesn't go all wonky-eyed every time we mention it. I've done *shots* off James's *nipples*. I could whisper dirty talk in James's ear all bloody night. *Kiss me, you fool*," he whispers throatily into James's unconscious ear. "*Caress me, you wild stallion, yes, right there!*"

James lets out a colossal snore. Sirius gives Remus a triumphant look.

Remus feels slightly dazed. This has just gone in a new, equally uncomfortable direction, and Sirius is staring frankly at him, and there does not seem to be any way of safely defusing the conversation. He doesn't want to think about it. He *hasn't* thought about it — for *months* he hasn't. Sirius keeps making it harder and harder to avoid, seeming completely unperturbed once they've decided to be completely unperturbed about it, but there are always these moments, when they relax, when they let their guard down, that it comes back to haunt them, a ghost too frightened to disappear, or with unfinished business, lingering in the deep corners of their minds. Remus wants to cover his ears with his hands, squeeze his eyes shut, and wait until the flutter in his stomach passes.

"I—" he starts, and then there is a rhythmic tap on the window; the unmistakable sound of an owl on a mission.

"You can go," Sirius says loftily, "I don't have any lower legs."

"A convenient excuse, I say," Remus mumbles. Thank God for owls in the middle of the night. Morning. Whatever bloody hour it is. Remus' internal clock says somewhere in the wee hours of the morning, whatever those are — around three or four, the latest, when everything seems gray and chill and quiet. He hurries to the window, undoing the latch and stepping back from a shock of cold air in the stifling room. "Not an owl," he says, as a black, sleek bird swoops into the room. "Raven."

When has a raven ever bought the post? Remus tries to remember. It does seem familiar, this bird, glossy black streak of confidence in the air.

"Did you say a raven?" Sirius mumbles. He rubs at one eye and sits up, swaying dizzyingly, before steadying himself, both hands pressed firmly against the floor. "Whossit?"

The raven caws, twice, and drops a crisp letter directly in his lap. It shoots up for the rafters a moment later, precise movements very unlike the fluffy good cheer of a nice owl, and lurks above them, casting dark shadows over the room while it preens.

"For you, I think," Remus replies dryly.

Sirius frowns and lurches upright, flipping the envelope over.

"Oh," he says suddenly, with a sharp, bitter bark of laughter. "That's nice. The old seal of home." He sits up straight, with a swift brusqueness that Remus would have thought was completely impossible, and makes as if to hurl it into the fire.

"Now," Remus says sharply, grabbing his wrist. "Don't."

"Oh, *don't*?" Sirius demands, incredulously, his mouth curling into something that's half mirthless smile and half contemptuous sneer. His eyes are dark with alcohol and tiredness and anger. "You stupid — you don't know what you're talking about. Anything that comes with this seal on it—" he jabs a finger scornfully at the silver wax seal— "goes in the fire at minute one, and even that only rarely takes care of the problem. Get off my arm."

"It could be something important," Remus attempts helplessly. "You don't know what's in it. It's — well, you can throw it away after you've opened it. Can't you?"

Sirius gives him an incredulous look, as if he understands absolutely nothing about the way the universe works. "Are you *joking*?" he snaps.

"No," Remus says. "Look, if you want, *I'll* open it—"

"Don't!" Sirius snaps, exerting sudden force and flinging Remus off him. "Just let *go* of me, Remus. *Don't.*"

Remus worries at his lower lip, stumbling backwards and sitting down hard. He remembers this Sirius — first year Sirius, wild and unpredictable and nearly vibrating with anger, livid at the smallest things, easily sparked to unexpected rages, dark in the eyes and tense in the mouth. Even when he was happy, this Sirius lurked beneath his laughter, ready to be unleashed at the slightest provocation. Remus has never met Sirius' family — beyond Slytherin cousins, sisters and brothers in the halls of Hogwarts — but he gets the feeling, deep and hard in his center, that he hates them. It's an animal reaction, going for the throat; sometimes, he dreams about it, faceless, porcelain pale parents before him, and instinct, before he can force it down, barreling against them, ripping belly from belly and spilling blood all over a white floor. Remus shakes his head, passing a hand over his eyes. "I," he begins.

"Shut up," Sirius says harshly. "You're so — *God*, Merlin, *bugger*, you're so *ignorant.* Look, I'll show you why you don't open it."

He sinks his thumb into the crinkled parchment and rips it forward; the ball catches on the jagged edge of the letter within and rips, blossoming red over the yellow paper.

“Paper cuts?” Remus attempts.

Sirius’s eyes flick up to his, black and furious and silent. Remus looks away first, but listens to the crackle of paper being unfolded, ripped open. “Well, this is *charming*,” Sirius says derisively. “Cordial greetings, etc., eighteenth birthday, *would* have become the man of the Black family, if not for your disinheritance — God, she’s such a cunt, such a fucking — *man of the Black family*! As if I wanted to — those fucking — oh, but it goes on, *fantastic*. Unfortunate death of your Uncle Alphard when you were fourteen, thanks, Mum, I’d forgotten. Whether or not I agree with Alphard’s decisions it is my unpleasant duty to inform you, you may not have been aware — oh, isn’t that *nice*? Isn’t that such a fucking favor she’s done me, those fucking — I *hate* them, Moony, I *wish* — God!” He moves so fast it’s a blur, arm flinging out in front of him, hurling the letter into the flames, which roar up to consume it; the raven shakes out its wings in the rafters. “I don’t want their *fucking* money,” he snaps at it, breathing heavily.

“How much?” Remus asks quietly. Sirius rounds on him, and he cringes.

“How *much*?” Sirius snarls. “How *bloody* much? That’s all you can think about? How *much*? Do you want me to give it to you? It’s yours. I don’t want it. Give it to your *bloody* parents, you can go to Devon for the entire *stupid* summer.”

“I said ‘how much’ because I don’t know what else to say,” Remus murmurs.

“Get out of here,” Sirius yells, and it’s a moment before Remus realizes Sirius isn’t talking to him. The raven caws down at him, angry, reprimanding. Sirius shakes his arms up at it, futilely, then grabs for his wand. “Out. Out! *Go back and scratch their eyes out.*” At last, the raven takes flight, circling once, twice, three times around the room, so that shivers creep down Remus’ spine, and then streaks out the half-open window, disappearing against the bruised sky.

“Sirius,” Remus says, stupidly trying to reason with him. “Perhaps you ought to—”

“You don’t know anything.” Sirius rounds on him again, the air around him brittle. “Perhaps *you* ought to *shut up.*”

“You’re acting like a child,” Remus bites out, trying to shock him out of it, which usually works.

Instead, Sirius suddenly flings his arms down and snaps, “You know what, Moony? Every time anyone does anything to stir up your fucking *composure* you treat them like they’re *two*! Have you ever noticed that? I don’t want to hear your *stupid* lecture about Dealing With It! I don’t want to hear your *stupid* Mature Voice! And I don’t need you to tell me I’m the problem here because for once in my entire *stupid* life I’m *not*. And frankly if that *is* what you think, then you

can sod off and leave me alone, because I don't need *another* person telling me what a shit I am, especially not you — you're one to talk about acting like a kid! Jesus. You can talk all you want about how you're forty years old to cover it up and you can — give lectures and books and wear patchy jumpers but I'm not sure you actually know a goddamn *thing* about being a grownup." He totters unsteadily upright, passing a shaking hand over his face. "I'm going to bed. I'll come down and get the presents in the morning."

"Sirius," Remus attempts. "I didn't mean—"

"Listen," Sirius says wearily, "whatever. I don't care. I had a great party until now, all right? Thanks for *not coming.* Goodnight."

Remus stares after him as he storms up the steps, and wonders at how James and Peter can sleep through anything. He presses his palms together and watches his hands for a while, and then goes to gather Sirius' presents into a pile. The fire is calming down again, spitting green ink up into sharp flashes of emerald fire earlier. Remus stares at the fire for a while, and then fishes out the charred, twisted remains of the letter with a poker.

"Oh God," Remus says. "It's a *lot* of money."

***

Remus can't sleep. Unlike his friends, who can sleep on any surface and despite any noise — diadems drop, and doges surrender, Remus thinks wryly — he upsets easily and over-analyzes situations and worries far too much over this and that. Replaying the situation in his head, he realizes how garbled it is — like most situations where anger is involved, the result is a definite inability to express oneself that will, at some point, be humorous. Not now. It's six o'clock and the sun is close to casting pale dawn light over everything when Remus finally gives up on sleep and heads off to the bathroom to fling cold water on his face and brush his teeth because his mouth smells and feels like something his mother sweeps out from under the bed, all fuzzy and gray.

The hall is quiet and still, torchlight flickering dimly to light his way, and all the paintings sleeping, one or two of them letting out great huffs of air. An old man with a frizzy white beard lets out a snore so loud Remus thinks a cannon has gone off and pirates are attacking. It takes a full minute for his heart to calm down.

He likes, surprisingly, the way Hogwarts is at night. Empty but full, quiet but peaceful. Everyone is sleeping except for him, which makes him feel secretive and delighted with the sound of his own footsteps echoing over stone. Besides, the bathroom will be all his, no half-naked boys flying around, all elbows and knees and someone else's soap up his nose.

Except the bathroom isn't empty.

“Er,” Remus says. A man, with a pointy, kind face and enormous spectacles is washing his hands, back to Remus, face reflected over his shoulder in the mirror. He startles, jumping backwards and pulling his wand. “Eek,” Remus chokes out, and is immediately glad no one is around to save him. This way, no one is around to share the knowledge that he just went *eek.* No one goes *eek* anymore. No one has *ever* gone *eek.*

“Eek!” says the man. “Who — what in the *world*—”

“Er, so sorry,” Remus says quickly. “I was just — just going to wash my face and — I’m sorry, are you a new professor?”

“No, no, not at all,” the man says hurriedly, smoothing back the few remaining strands of his hair. “Not really, ahahah, not a professor *here*, naturally, something of an, ah, independent inquirer paying a visit. Do you know, when I attended this school students weren’t allowed out of their dormitories after midnight, can you imagine, how unenlightened times were, ahaha, I say.” He has a brief, nervous laugh which sounds more like words than laughter, as if he has actually consciously said “Ha ha ha!” which is unnerving.

“Oh, seventh years are now,” Remus says.

“Fenwick,” the man says automatically, jabbing out a hand. “Benjy Fenwick at your service. Strange way to meet, in a washroom, ahaha. Least you know my hands are clean! Just — you know — paying a visit, as I say. Nothing to worry about. I say, you don’t know how to get to the headmaster’s office, do you? I was in Ravenclaw and I’ve never been much good with those moving staircases and do you know, I’ve misplaced myself.”

Remus finds him shaking a cool, still slightly wet hand, his arm being flailed eagerly up and down. He waits until Mr. Fenwick has released him to respond, feeling strangely breathless and confused. “Er,” he says. “I can take you? If you’d like. Your hands are wet, you might want to dry them first. I’m sorry, that wasn’t very friendly — I haven’t slept yet. Er,” he repeats. “I’d be glad to,” he says finally. “Pleased to meet you. I’m Remus Lupin.”

“A hero,” Benjy says. “A hero, a hero. Lupin, eh? A hero. In your debt. Naturally. Oh right! Right, hand towels.” He dries himself off, polishes one side of his enormous, round spectacles on his sleeve, and then blinks owlish pale eyes in Remus’ direction. “Ravenclaw, are you? Or no, no — Gryffindor, I think, you’ve that air about you.”

Remus, already forgetting why it was he came to the bathroom in the first place, steps out into the hallway, holding the door politely open. “Well, I — Gryffindor, yes.”

“You’ve that air about you,” Benjy repeats distractedly. “Yes, yes, you do. Though I thought at first — do you play chess?”

“Er,” Remus says. “Sometimes.”

“You’re very good, I think,” Benjy muses out loud. “You’ve *that* air about you, as well.”

Remus tries very hard not to stare. “It’s not that far,” he murmurs, at a loss. “Dumbledore’s office. You got very close.”

“It’s the stairs,” Benjy mourns. “They keep — moving — like to have the plan of a place in my mind, you know, only sometimes the staircase leads up and sometimes down, and I never know which way I’ve gone this time. Ha ha! I’m sure you’re much more competent than that, it’s all about remembering they want to trick you.”

Remus doesn’t say he’s never had trouble after the first day, when he found himself somewhere off limits and Sirius thought it was on purpose and told him jolly good job and perhaps you can take the bed next to mine, Lupin. Remus doesn’t say anything at all.

“They do want to trick you, must make a note,” Benjy adds, half to himself, and then says breathlessly, “well, jolly good to meet you, Lupin, we must have a game of chess sometime, eh, if I’m back in the country, shall we, and thanks ever so for the directions, goodnight now,” and he ducks out the door and is swallowed by the darkness of the hallway.

“I didn’t give you directions!” Remus calls after him, concerned.

“It’s all right, haha, just needed the encouragement really, toodle pip...” The voice fades away into nothing, around a corner, gone.

“Madness,” Remus says wonderingly, staring into the empty hallway. “Madness.”

***

Sirius is still awake when Remus creeps back up into the dormitory, arms full of presents. There is a stale, frozen atmosphere around his bed that means he’s still awake, staring at the canopy or carving rude words into the bedpost. Remus tries to be as quiet as possible, depositing the gifts in a pile beside the bed — that book, left unattended, would definitely be stolen — but it’s no use. From behind the curtains comes a deliberate, signaling cough, as if challenging Remus to say anything. Remus gives the canopy a glare that softens almost instantly, sitting down on the edge of his own bed. He knows, in this second, that he will forgive Sirius anything, just as he will forgive any of his friends anything. He cannot imagine a circumstance in which he won’t be able to, knowing them as he does, trusting them so. He can even forgive Sirius kissing him, the wealth of confusion that followed, the questions that nag him still and which he cannot answer — and the way Sirius pretends to simply shrug it off, the way Sirius mentions kissing James as if it’s the same, the way Sirius acts determinedly as if nothing’s happened while Remus is struggling so hard to do the same.

Remus doesn’t mind it. He’s too tired to mind it, too fond, too grateful.

“I’m sorry,” he says. “Happy birthday.”

Sirius’ bed creaks. Remus holds his breath.

“Good, because I’m still pretty sure that was totally your fault,” Sirius mutters finally, poking his head out from behind the red-and-gold brocade. “Anyway I’m no good at apologizing.”

Remus smiles faintly. “I know. That’s why I did it.” He licks his lips, and puts everything behind him. It’s what he’s best at. “The strangest thing just happened to me, d’you know?”



This story is based on characters and situations created and owned by JK Rowling, various publishers including but not limited to Bloomsbury Books, Scholastic Books and Raincoast Books, and Warner Bros., Inc. No money is being made and no copyright or trademark infringement is intended.

***The Shoebox Project* by LadyJaida and Dorkorific**

http://www.livejournal.com/community/shoebox_project

Part Seventeen and a half: undated

One Picture and One Page of One Essay



Remus J. Lupin
December 2, 1973
Care of Magical Creatures
Assignment no. 3 : Werewolves

The Werewolf

Classified by the Ministry of Magic : XXXXX[1]

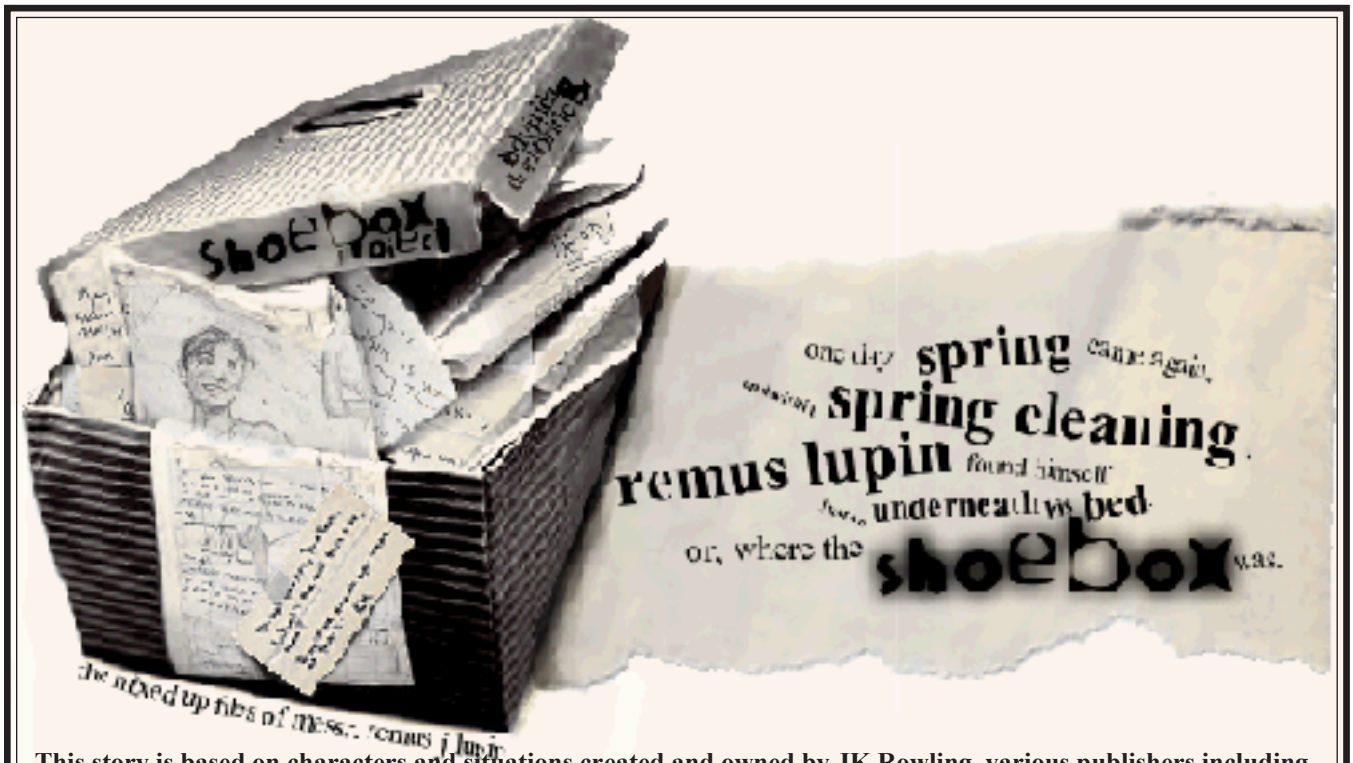
One of the hardest beasts to classify, the Werewolf is subject to much fear and speculation worldwide. How or where lycanthropy began is a mystery of the beast that may never be solved. It is true that one can only become a Werewolf when bitten. (Theories on the origins of lycanthropy can be found in such popular Publications as Man and Myth by Aloisius, second century A.D., as well as more recent texts, such as Scamander's best-seller Man and Myth : Redefined.)

However, one thing about the nature of the Werewolf is clear. Despite the duality of man and beast, the werewolf is a dangerous creature – perhaps not all month, but, during the full moon, there is no humanity in it. Thus the Ministry of Magic, after much debate, has classified the werewolf as beast[2], and has rightfully labeled it as one of the most dangerous Dark Beasts the world over.

Currently, there is no cure for the disease – which has only recently been defined in this manner. (Earlier – before the 18th Century A.D. – there was no distinction between the werewolf as a man and the Werewolf in its full throes of transformation. Some of this remains to this day, for the werewolf is a deadly creature, without any human instinct at all.)

---

1 found in Fantastic Beasts and Where to find them, first edition: Scamander
2 A History of the Ministry's Conundrums



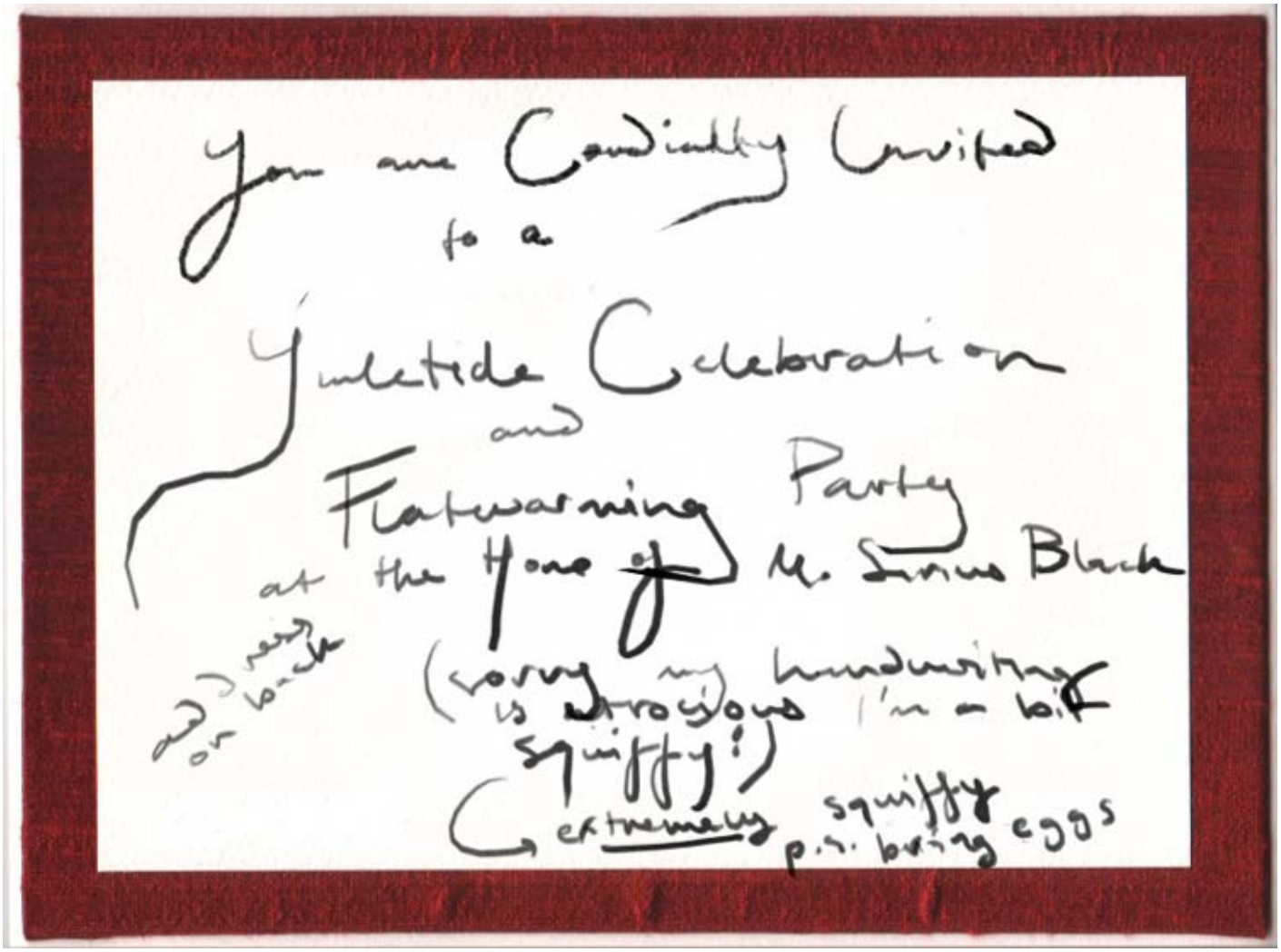
This story is based on characters and situations created and owned by JK Rowling, various publishers including but not limited to Bloomsbury Books, Scholastic Books and Raincoast Books, and Warner Bros., Inc. No money is being made and no copyright or trademark infringement is intended.

***The Shoebox Project* by LadyJaida and Dorkorific**

http://www.livejournal.com/community/shoebox_project

Part Fifteen: December, 1976

More Letters , a Dream Diary, and The Facts of Life.



***

"Sirius," Remus says, "the mistletoe in your bathroom is trying to kill me." He pauses for a moment, to reflect on the oddity of the sentence, and then shrugs it off as part and parcel of displaying Christmas Spirit. It doesn't dismiss the fact that the mistletoe — growing wild between the few forlorn tiles in Sirius' bathroom — went for the ankles and, after formulating a better battle tactic, attempted instead to gnaw off his toes.

Sirius, who has donned a rakishly angled red hat with an enormous, shedding white pom-pom, waves his hand dismissively. "You know mistletoe," he says. Remus gives him a look. "Well, there was an accident," he admits. "I wanted them fresh, more feisty that way, but then a pot spilled, didn't get to it right away — anyway, it doesn't matter. It's Christmas! Have some pudding."

"How you can think of pudding," Remus mumbles, "when I was nearly killed–"

"Oh, it won't kill you," Sirius says cheerfully. "It just holds you there for hours waiting for someone else to come along so it can have its perverted way with the both of you. I was on the toilet for half a day before the landlord heard my

screaming."

"That must have been perfectly earth-shattering experience for both of you," Remus says, rather shaken. He recalls Sirius' landlord: a man with the general shape, coloration and demeanor of an angry lemon. The idea of his force-kissing Sirius in a toilet is simultaneously horrifying and intriguing and one which he will spend many hours mentally scrubbing from his subconscious for years to come, while the sight of mistletoe only revives it in the very back of his mind, resulting in a perpetual holiday agitation.

"We do not speak of the outcome," Sirius says. "It is That of Which We Do Not Speak. Oh come on, have a pudding, you've been looking even more like a weed than usual lately. Peter's already had three!"

"Ungh," Peter agrees from the couch. The couch is the only piece of furniture in the living room, unless one considers the enormous Yule log humming away merrily in the fireplace. As Peter shifts and makes sounds reminiscent of large, blubbery, dying creatures, the cushions let out an equal groan: of pain, of turmoil, of desperation to escape. Remus touches his fingers to his forehead in a silent salute. The poor couch never had a chance. Springs collapsed, frame shattered, cushions carved forever into the shape of Peter's backside, insult will later be added to injury when at least three pints of eggnog will be spilled on it in what Sirius labels "general festivities" and the police more appropriately title "indecent exposure."

"What are you doing, Moony, man?" Sirius asks. "You look mad. Here: take this. Pudding!"

"If I'm mad, it's because your mistletoe is diseased," Remus mutters, but takes the offered pudding as a sign of peace on earth and good will to men.

"And don't go after me about how there's no furniture," Sirius adds. "There is a couch for sitting. There are blankets. On the ground. If you roll them up they're actually quite comfortable. You know, to sit on, as well. And isn't the floor God's given flat surface? Stop giving me that look."

Remus hides a smile behind his pudding. "Your eye for décor is impeccable," he murmurs. "You should make a business for it."

"It's minimalist," Sirius says. "Don't be a twat."

"Well, I think it's ace," James proclaims from the floor, where he is sprawled comfortably atop a pile of rolled-up blankets. Remus supposes it makes sense James feels right at home in this mess, and that he's the odd one for wanting to fold everything. Blankets aren't as soft folded as they are wadded into little balls, hiding dust and spilt pudding and great mistletoe demons in their many folds. "It's your own place," James continues. "What else do you want? Furniture will come and go, but independence is forever."

"Yes!" Sirius says triumphantly, hurling himself onto the sofa. It groans; so does Peter. "Symbolically, this is the most beautiful flat in all the world. Don't sit by that wall, Prongs, that's roach country." He folds himself up into a comfortable slouch, all long legs and arms draped over the couch, every inch the master of his peeling-walled, piss-smelling domain. Remus has to smile, seeing him like this. He must revel in it, the antithesis of familial duty and pureblood upbringing, even though family money and pureblood upbringing technically pay for it.

"Hah!" James scoffs. "Roaches. Mate, I've faced giant pumpkins and lived to tell the tale, do you think I'm afraid of a few insects?"

Sirius shrugs lopsidedly. "Don't say I didn't warn you. They've got mandibles on 'em."

"All roaches have mandibles," Remus says. "Don't they?"

"You'll see what I mean," Sirius replies mysteriously. "But it doesn't matter now. Compliment me on my haven of domesticity."

"This place is ace," James says, for the eighteen hundredth time. "Isn't it ace, Moony?"

"Yes," Remus agrees, also for the eighteen hundredth time. "Though really, something ought to be done about the mistletoe in the bathroom. There are people you can call — there are *charms* you can use—"

"Now why would I want to do that? I've named them," Sirius sighs. "The patch by the toilet, those are Humbert and Ophelia. The one that hangs just above the window, he's a feisty lad. I named him Jack. And the girl by the mirror — the one with the pointy teeth — she owns the key to my heart. I call her McGoogles."

"Until you call an exterminator," Remus adds hopefully.

"I am wounded," Sirius says, patting his chest. "If you love me, you will love my pestilence."

"Everything we love about you is pestilent," James says, and then suddenly leaps upright and shrieks, "what in the name of God is that?!"

"It's Hector!" Sirius explains, sounding very pleased. "Wotcher, Hector?"

Remus looks down. Hector is not a cockroach; Hector is something like a small dog, or a large rodent, but clearly cockroachian in shape. Hector does have extremely sizeable mandibles. Hector might also have horns, and a small country of vile diseases living peaceably on his shiny, cockroachian back. Hector surveys them all very impassively from a dark corner, chewing on what could be a sock, or a small, dead rodent. James flees without dignity to the couch and huddles into the pillows, staring at it in undisguised horror.

"You're hurting his feelings," Sirius says. "They're not always like this, Hector. Don't worry about it. They'll get used to you."

"It's enormous," James whispers, trembling. Hector swivels its head to regard him coolly and click-trundles from one far corner to the next, and then plods back under the couch. "Sirius, you have to get rid of it."

"No!" Sirius says, genuinely shocked. "He's like my own personal guard dog. I think he scares the fleas off."

"He makes the fleas flee," Peter says, mostly to himself, and cackles.

"Besides," Sirius adds, "Ophelia would pine."

"This flat should be condemned," Remus says. "Sirius, you are friendly with cockroaches."

"An attitude like that and you won't be," Sirius points out. He pats a bundle of blankets on the cushion next to him. "Have a seat, Moony. Do flat-ly things."

"He always does things flatly," Peter murmurs into his chest.

"Save me," James says, crawling up onto the arm of the couch, at Peter's back.

"Wotcher, Sirius," Hector says, in a crunchy voice, which echoes beneath the couch and sounds, Remus is sure of it, like death must when the end comes nigh.

"Never a dull moment," Remus sighs, and gets more pudding.

***

"And there we have it," Sirius says, hanging the last of the ornaments. "Our very own tree. Doesn't it smell fresh and — pinelike?" The few candles he has arranged wink on and off, hovering around the tree, casting a dull glow over a few silver globes and the occasional warped, lopsided decorations that were lovingly handcrafted out of depressed clay during Sirius' formative — and obviously impressionist — years. Childhood memories, Remus thinks, are often very hideous, and have strange sequins and bobble-eyes glued on in unfortunate places.

Sirius sets the top piece — it looks, Remus thinks, like a confused hippogriff mating with a swan — in its place and gives the tree a gentle, loving sort of kick at the base. It shudders, wobbles, threatens to pitch backwards, and instead leans just slightly to the left. There is something more than a bit pathetic about the droop of its tip, the spindly crookedness of its branches, the patchy insecurity of its brown-green color, but Sirius appears to be enchanted.

"Fa la la la la," he sighs, pushing its star back square atop it, "la la la *la*. So how shall we celebrate?"

"No more eating," Peter moans, twitching. "Please, Sirius. No more eating."

"There is always more eating!" Sirius rounds on him, eyes alight with fanatic devotion. "This is what Marauders do. We eat and eat and eat."

"And are sick all over the decorations," Remus murmurs. No one hears him.

"Nnghhf," Peter says. Remus watches him disappear into the sofa. No doubt Hector is waiting just beneath a tear in the base, mandibles spread wide.

"We could do presents," James suggests. "Or not," he adds, as Remus cringes inwardly.

"Or," Sirius interjects, a wicked little gleam appearing in his eye, "we could talk about presents. Like, say, the presents for a certain redheaded someone that a certain shortsighted someone tried to put discreetly in the post the other day."

"You didn't," James says. This, Remus thinks, is the perfect picture of holiday cheer. James' eyes bugging out of his head, and abject horror in the round O of his mouth. All he needs are pointier ears, green hose and shoes with curled toes and he's the spitting image of a chipper elf, ready to bring socks, hand-knit sweaters and lumps of coal to all the bad little boys and girls at Christmastime. "You didn't," James says again, which is of course ridiculous, as it's painfully clear Sirius *did*.

"James, lad," Sirius says, clapping him on the shoulder, "it was the sort of present even *Moony* wouldn't dream of giving."

"I know what *not* to give *girls*," Remus agrees, then adds, "sorry."

"But it was cute?" James murmurs helplessly.

"Atrocious," Sirius informs him.

"Terrible," Remus echoes.

"Bleurgh," Peter finishes.

"But it *was*," James groans. "Oh God. And now it's gone off to her and she's going to open it and send me owl post right away. 'James Potter,' it will say, 'I want nothing to do with your teddy bear sentiments!'"

"James," Sirius says, with fond exasperation, "what kind of friend do you think I am? It hasn't gone in the post. It's in the tank of the toilet. I swear, sometimes trying to save you from yourself is an exhausting exercise in futility. My question is, why were you sending her a present anyway? If you want to be humiliated, we could just string you up naked outside the window with a Christmas wreath on your bits."

"Yeah," Peter agrees. "I mean, doesn't she just hate you?"

"She," James starts, and his eyes go sideways a little and then slide back. He looks, for once in his entire Boys Club life, a little uncertain. "It's a bit…well. I thought...teddy bear?"

"Yeats was better," Remus says. He shakes his head — *it's too late now.*. "Yeats was much to be preferred."

"He's right, you know," Sirius sighs. "For once."

"It's different," James attempts, staring at the ceiling with, apparently, great interest. "Now, I mean. It's different. She knows me a little. I know her a little. I'd feel an arse, trying to pretend I'm a -- I don't know — *Yeats* bloke. You're a Yeats bloke, Moony. Kingsley was an abdominal bloke. I'm not a Yeats bloke *or* an abdominal bloke."

"And yet you think you are a pink teddy bear bloke?" Sirius protests. "It said 'I Think You're Beary Wonderful' on its little satin pillow. There was lace. It had button eyes. I don't understand you anymore."

"It didn't," Remus says, looking horrified.

"It *did*," Sirius assures him.

"It didn't!" James protests, turning a shade of red that can only signify how very much it did indeed.

"Oh, James," Remus sighs.

"It isn't like you're any better," James mutters. "*Books.* Pah! Besides — it was private! It didn't say 'To Sirius Black' on the package, now did it?"

Sirius shrugs. "You put it in the post. You left it unattended. It might as well've said *To Old Dumbles* for all you let it fall into dangerous hands."

"*Your* dangerous hands!" James explodes, quivering like a fervent pudding. Sirius wiggles his fingers. "That was private," James insists. "From — from — well, d'you see, I think we're — Lily and me — well it's not like we *aren't*—"

Sirius darkens suddenly, a brief flash of something hard and angry in his eyes, then tosses his head back with a deep laugh. "Oh, James," he says, "oh, *James* — she's left Kingsley for you, has she? He'll squash you like a rodent — whoops, sorry about that, Pete, mate — like a bug, then. Like a teeny, tiny, very-squashy bug. Not like one of *my* bugs. Like a bug that goes squish and has no mandibles at all." He elaborates with one shoe and an unappealing squelching noise out of the corner of his mouth.

"She hasn't left him for me," James says, shoving his hands into his pockets. "She's done a runner a while ago. She's not with me. Or him. I just — sometimes, it's almost — almost *better* than last time, I mean—"

"James!" Sirius wheels on him, derisive and sharp, all edges. "It's *never going to happen*. It's humiliating, watching you! I'm tired of it! They're tired of it!—aren't you?"

"Oh," Peter says nervously, "I don't know–"

"Of course you don't," Sirius says, dismissing him. "Look, Prongs, I don't see why you can't just stop it. There's other birds! There's birds who might actually not punch you in the face! Every time you get around her or you get in one of your mopes about her you stop being any fun at all. It's embarrassing, mate."

"Hey," James says, a little bit too sharply, "all right, okay? I didn't ask you."

"Of course you didn't," Sirius says bitterly. "I should have just let you send the bloody bear."

"Here, now," Remus says quietly, abandoning the instinct to *stay out of it* for the instinct to *have one Christmas without suffering any major casualties.*

"Keep out of it, Moony," Sirius bites out.

"Don't bother," James snaps.

Peter gives Remus a look that says, *Come, join me on the couch of impartiality.* Or perhaps it says *I have had too much pudding.* There's a fine line between the two sentiments. Remus shrugs. "All right," he says.

"It's got nothing to do with you," Sirius mutters.

"It's got nothing to do with *you*," James flings at him.

"It's got *everything* to do with me!" Sirius says. "Don't look at me like that — I'm your best bloody mate, *that's* why it does!"

"This is ridiculous," James says.

Inwardly, Remus agrees, but inspects the cuticle of his right forefinger and gnaws just slightly at a loose piece of skin. The cockroaches — Remus imagines the great, tusky beasts deep within the walls — are clearly growing agitated, as the windows are rattling. *Do something,* Remus thinks to himself. *Fix things.* And then: *it isn't your place, you keep your big nose out of it.* He chews on his nail. He shifts uncomfortably. He looks at Peter, who has closed his eyes and is whistling a happy tune. He ponders Christmas at home — his perfumed aunts, their quiet disapproval, having to hide in the bathroom to escape the madness of family. This is almost like the madness of family, he supposes. They've all been living together long enough. In the boys' dormitory it was different. Now, Sirius has a flat. Now, they feel drunk on age and their own pudding. Now, they have their own tree.

Now, they are *bickering*.

Only Remus can't very well go hide in the bathroom, because he'll be eaten alive by untrained mistletoe with a jovial, wicked glint in their ruby-red eyes.

"D'you know what I think?" Remus says, interrupting one of Sirius' tirades on how he never wants to hear another word on the virtues of the redheaded female contingent of the planet.

Sirius quiets immediately. James simply boggles.

Peter salutes him, but pityingly, as if to say his last goodbye.

"I think," Remus says, taking a deep breath, "that a teddy bear is an absolutely *awful* present, especially one that attempts a pun, but it's *James'* absolutely awful present, isn't it? In any case, let's have at me for a while, shall we, because I bought everyone books again. And I wrapped them neatly. And they've Cards with Kind Sentiments."

There is a very long, very silent moment.

"I think he's trying to distract us," Sirius says, nudging James's elbow. "Go on. Don't let him. Where were we?"

"You were up to 'I don't care'," Peter says helpfully. "That's what you were saying. Again."

"Do any of them have moving pictures?" James inquires of Remus, ignoring him.

"No," Remus says. "No, there are no pictures and they smell of wet bread and have words like 'zeitgeist' in them. They ask you to consider the social constructs of a pre-Merlin society versus the post-Merlin times we live in today. They compare Muggle history with Wizarding history. They have dates and footnotes."

"You never learn." James shakes his head sadly and makes a face. "I tried to teach you, but you'll never learn."

"Look," Sirius suggests tangling his hand into his hair, "why don't I just haul off and punch you one, like the good old days? This is silly. Then we can have my eggnog."

"You made eggnog?" Remus asks.

"Wellll," Sirius says carefully, "eggs, anyway. With brandy in them. I couldn't find a recipe and I don't have any nutmeg or rum. Or cinnamon? Or what-have-you. Besides, you know how I am with *recipes*. James, stop hopping, I never get you in the face."

"You're the one who should be punched," James says. He pauses, then sighs, toeing the rolled-up carpet and the dusty, scuffed wood beneath. "All right. It was a bad present. I'm sorry I don't have anything else to talk about. I am toenail dirt. What-have-you. Can we just get drunk and put ice down Pete's trousers and wake up in the morning with headaches and presents and Pete here with wet trousers?"

Sorry, Remus' eyes try to convey, across the room, to where Peter is sprawled. Peter shrugs listlessly. They do it at least once a year, anyway. To let them quarrel would simply postpone the inevitable.

"All right," Sirius says, after only a moment's deliberation. "Eggnog, then. Noggy eggs. Eggs that are somewhat nogged."

"We will have food poisoning," Remus murmurs.

"We will have egg noggining," Sirius corrects.

"Pardon," Remus says. "We will be nogged by your eggs."

"I've no idea what either of you are talking about," James pipes in gamely. "Let's all be sick on Sirius' terrifying homemaking skills, shall we?"

"*Jolly* good," Sirius says. "When you're throwing up, think fondly of me." And then, he clocks James a good one on his

shoulder. It's affectionate, Remus thinks, but not without aggression. "All in the name of Christmas Spirit," Sirius adds, "eh?"

Well, Remus thinks, something like that, anyway.

***

Sirius has made four mugs of hot chocolate by five-thirty in the morning. On any other day it would be odd for Remus to walk into the kitchen before sunrise and see Sirius, already at the stove, burning things — eggs, Remus *thinks* — but this is Christmas morning. This is where all the magic happens. This is the only day of any vacation where Sirius wakes up before it's already the afternoon. "Ow, fuck," Sirius says, trying to kill his eggs with a spatula. "Bugger all this — here, Moony, give me a hand, my eggs are dying twice."

"I've had enough of your eggs for one lifetime," Remus groans. After a night of being ill from Sirius' eggnog, the idea of eggs, the smell of eggs, even the possibility of murdering eggs, make him queasy all over again.

"Get over here," Sirius brushes him off, motioning him over. "I am *fantastic* with sandwiches," he adds, poking sadly at the black-and-yellow mess in front of him, a hissing, quivering ball in the very center of his frying pan. "I make the world's most fantastic sandwich and you know it. Yum. Let's have sandwiches for breakfast instead."

Remus shuffles over, peers into the pan, and makes a pained face. "That looks dreadful," he says. He helps Sirius scrape the egg glop into the trash. "Was there butter in the pan?"

"Oh," Sirius scoffs, "Moony! 'Was there butter?' says he. 'Ha!' says I. *Was there butter*. There was enough butter in there for all the merry Hippogriffs and the four of us." As if to illustrate his point, he goes at the butter with a knife. Remus leaps at his arm, holding him back.

"Wash the pan," Remus instructs. "Are you sure you want eggs?" Sirius makes his dog eyes, the ones that wobble, the ones that look impossibly ridiculous, the ones that Remus can't resist. "All right! All right. Eggs. Happy Christmas. Your stomach must be made of pewter."

"Like a cauldron," Sirius says proudly, patting his belly. "Ding, ding!"

With a shrug, Remus satisfies himself with the knowledge that, one day, when Sirius' intestines have shut down completely, and he has to eat lettuce and grains that taste like carpeting for all eternity, he'll realize the error of his ways. "Eggs, then," Remus murmurs. He doles out the butter, watching it sizzle across the surface of the frying pan while he pokes at it with Sirius' spatula.

"Well it's not a *slug*, Moony," Sirius says, watching. "Stop poking at it."

"It melts faster," Remus points out. "In any case, you're the one who asked for *my* help."

"I didn't exactly *ask*," Sirius says, but quiets.

Remus turns to the eggs, aware that Sirius is breathing down the back of his neck. *Don't over-think it,* Remus tries to tell himself. *You know how to crack an egg.*

"No pressure," Sirius says. "Remember that, Moony, old chap."

"Oh, be quiet," Remus mutters. He knocks the egg against the side of the pan and the egg slides neatly in. "There."

"You look so *smug* when you look so smug." Sirius grins. "Makes your lips go all lopsided."

"Do you want eggs or not?" Remus asks, trying to remain reasonable.

"I'm getting to you, aren't I? Aren't I, Moony?" Sirius grins. "You'll forgive me when you see what I've got you for Christmas. You'll lavish me with eggs and forgiveness." Remus sighs, but knows that this is probably very true. Sirius, despite his loud bouts of selfishness and many thoughtless accidents, is the sort of person who knows exactly what to get everyone. It's a gift, something you can't learn, something you have to be born with. Sirius can look at a person, male or female or undecided, and know within an instant the perfect gift, the right flowers, the exact brand of chocolate. It's uncanny. Remus has often harbored secret plans to divine the root of this power, but has in the long run settled for being awkward and jealous about it. "Oh, how you will beat your chest, weeping at the cruelty of your callous actions — oh, how you will mourn these unkind words!"

"Hm," Remus says, dubiously.

"No, you've no idea," Sirius insists. "In fact I think you should open it now."

"I'm making eggs," Remus reminds him.

"Bugger the eggs," Sirius says. "Come see your present."

"James and Peter are still sleeping off the effects of your noggy eggs," Remus says. "We ought to wait."

"You're not right," Sirius exclaims in disbelief. "*Early Christmas presents,* man! What's wrong with you? For the sake of all that is wrapped in shiny paper, for your undying soul, forget about the eggs and come see what's under the tree?"

Remus sighs the deep sigh of a man who knew from the beginning he could not hope to win, and turns off the flame. Poor eggs, he thinks. Never had a chance.

"All right," he says. "But I'm telling you right now my presents are awful. I think Peter threw up on his last night, in any case."

"We gave up on you long ago," Sirius informs him. "We all had a meeting without you and decided that, even though you give the most awful presents in the history of the world, we'd keep you around because your face is funny. Hah! Look, there it goes now. Being funny. All right, this one is yours." Sirius roots around underneath the tree and comes up with pine needles in his hair and a huge box in his arms, which he thrusts outward at Remus' chest. Remus staggers back under the unexpected weight of it.

"Oooph," he says.

"Open it open it open it," Sirius insists, before flinging himself on the couch to watch. "Go on! Tear at it! You don't have to save the paper, Moony, it's *paper*, it was born to be ripped apart. Stop that, it's depressing how neat you're being!"

"I can't help it," Remus says, rather nervously. It's heavy, the paper, golden and glossed and looks like it could have been used to cover the walls in someone's grand ballroom. He lifts it up neatly, untucks it from the box, and sets it carefully on the pillow beside him, whereupon Sirius promptly puts his feet on it. *Crunch*, goes the paper. *Crunch,* goes something beneath Remus' spleen. He tries to ignore it.

Underneath, the box is heavy, ornate, dark-threaded wood, carved in an intricate spiral pattern. Sirius is looking

particularly gleeful; Remus eyes him. "Is this evil, Sirius?"

"Evil?" Sirius asks innocently.

"Did it come from your family's basement?" Remus turns it over, weighs it between his hands; there's a certain geometric gravitas about it that makes him suspect it would probably sell for more than his family's house would. It is the perfect size in which to store all the extra books that don't fit on the expandable shelf he has by his bed at school. Remus feels awkward and jealous and irritated.

Sirius rolls his eyes. "For the sake of the holiday, Moony, would you please try not to be so distrustful? It's hurtful. Christmas is about giving."

"Yes," Remus mutters, "giving me some kind of full-body rash," but sighs and flips the heavy lock anyway, inevitably, and creaks the lid open.

Side to side, back to front, the box is packed with every imaginable variety of chocolate. Dark, sweet, dangerously rich ones that leave your tongue feeling drenched and coated with velvet, and the light, creamy buttery milk-chocolate ones bursting with almonds or cashews, and the honeyed smell of caramel from a gold-swirled stack in the left corner; frothy, delicate mallow-filled bars on which the thin shell hasn't even been cracked, and fresh, dark minty chocolates striped cleanly with green, and dark, luscious things that Remus cannot begin to identify; and none of the horrifying space-fillers that mar even the most sublime assortments — no tongue-coating strawberry horrors or the vile misnomer that is white chocolate. Remus wants to cry.

"Do you like it," Sirius presses, "do you do you do you huh?" Remus' face pinches inward to the center, a deep concentration that Sirius must recognize all too well as The Way Moony Gets When Moony Finds Himself At A Loss. Sirius lets out a low sound of triumph, pumping the air with his fist. "Where is it?" Sirius asks, grinning like a madman. "Where is it, eh? It's been ten seconds, Moony — where's it gone to, the *thank you kindly* and the *it's so good of you, you shouldn't have* and the *please sir, may I have some more*?"

"Don't ruin it," Remus mumbles. "Just be quiet." He runs his fingers helplessly over the edge of the box, and breathes in deep the jumbled scents. There's something fruity, and something like layers upon layers of cocoa, something cold and crisp like mint but just the right balance, and something like cream, and something like coffee, and something that has the soft inner curl of caramel. There's pistachio, and almond, and a variety of nutty delight that comes one from every corner and then the simple delicacy of chocolate so pure his heart constricts and his stomach lurches in pleasure. Where does it come from, he pauses to wonder, this love of chocolate, this veritable obsession? Everyone has a favorite food, he supposes, something that tickles an untraceable fingerprint of personality somewhere deep inside their bellies. Chocolate is a comfort. Chocolate is the essence of luxury; silks and satins for the tongue. *But why chocolate?* he asks himself. *The way you are about it — it's lunatic, you know.*

"It's lunatic, you know," Sirius says.

Remus startles.

When he was a little boy — when he woke up after a week of denying himself pain and confusion — when the wolf bit him and for the first time he saw his father's face with a thousand other instincts behind the sight, none of which he recognized as his own — his mother handed him a bar of chocolate and gave him a sad look, her face also pinched inwards, as if words could never give voice to what it was she felt, and what it was she was trying so fervently to hide. Eating it for breakfast, he thought the entire world was about to end, and this was his mother's way of telling him. He got to eat *chocolate* for *breakfast*. And still, the oddity wasn't enough to drown out the flood of sensation: tasting with a new tongue, a world of sense unfolding, and the beginning traced back to that moment.

"Go on," Sirius says, with a new tone now. Remus looks over to find his head is bowed — he isn't looking, not quite, but the curiosity in his posture is as real and as tangible as they are, as if it is another person, sitting between them on the couch. "You can have it. For breakfast. I know it goes against all you hold dear but it's bloody Christmas and you're practically *drooling*."

"What about the eggs," Remus attempts, but he can feel himself giving in.

"Bugger the eggs," Sirius says. "Not literally. Go on. Pick one."

It feels like a psychological test of some kind; like caramel will reveal to Sirius that Remus is a closet hairdresser, or the thick, lumpy, alluring drizzle that may contain raisins will be an indicator of a deep-seated Oedipal context. It's too unnerving. There are too many.

"What do you think?" he appeals.

Sirius winks at him. "You know me. One of the dark ones."

Remus takes one, gingerly, like he's holding a precious artifact. It's cool and smooth and has the slight slick-powder sheen of really incredible chocolate under his thumbs. It's also *heavy*. He almost groans aloud. "Sirius, how much did this cost?"

Sirius shrugs a little uncomfortably, his hair swinging forward over his eyes. "Who cares? It's not my money."

"Sirius, if you spent half the money on rent that you spend on presents—"

Sirius sits up, very suddenly, and slams his palm over Remus's mouth, touching his forehead against Remus's in a kind of irritated benediction. "Moony. Just. Leave it, all right? Just eat the candy."

Remus' breath hitches.

It isn't particularly pleasant, to have one's breath hitch. It isn't like they make it out to be in writing. Later, Remus realizes it was a hiccup. He nods, slowly, tasting the egg on Sirius' palm, breathing in the hundred scents of his fingers. It's an assault on his senses.

"I'd eat the chocolate if you'd get your hand off my mouth," he says.

It comes out like: *Ah ee uh oh-eh ih oo eh oh ah oh ah owwh*.

"Right," Sirius says, wheeling back. "Go on."

"You're *watching* me," Remus protests.

"I know," Sirius replies. "It's lunatic, you know."

Remus sighs, straightens, pauses for a moment of mediation to clear his mind, licks his lips nervously, and bites in. Deep. Hard. Cool. This isn't the sort of chocolate you sit on for a train ride to soften and get all over your fingertips. It's the sort of chocolate you dedicate yourself to — it's the sort of chocolate you dream about. It shaves off around his teeth and he gets half of it into his mouth, poised on his tongue, resting just against his upper gums. Just chocolate. One of the dark ones. It tastes like the renaissance. He sucks it, drawing it meltingly against his tongue and back into his throat.

"Aghk," Sirius says.

Remus doesn't notice.

This isn't the sort of chocolate that allows interruptions of any kind. This is the sort of chocolate that demands your full attention. It requires complete and absolute concentration. It melts all the way down the back of his throat and into a soft spot, thick and warm in the middle of his belly.

Remus presses his thumb against the corner of his mouth and sighs a chocolate breath outward. He can feel it in his pores, huffed out through his nose, a religious experience, an epiphany.

"*God,*" he whispers.

"Lunatic," Sirius mumbles.

"Silky," Remus says, idiotically. "It's silky." He runs his tongue along the backs of his teeth, richness on richness.

"You've been nogged," Sirius says knowledgeably. "Chocolate-nogged. I can see it in your eyes. All right, Moony, stop…licking yourself. It's distracting. Did I do all right?"

"All right?" Remus stares at him incredulously, smearing his thumb across his cheek to get the last streak he can feel there. "It's...Sirius, you know. It's just...I mean...it's *always* — you know."

"All right, I do," Sirius rumbles peacefully, flopping backward. "I know because I ate about fifty of them when I bought them. For your own safety, don't. I know it's tempting, but just — don't."

"And I got you a book," Remus mumbles, lowering his head to breathe in that excrutiatingly delicious miasma of smells. "A book. I don't understand how you can possibly be around me without wanting to punch me."

"You're not fun to punch," Sirius explains. "You don't make amusing noises. I think you'd just deflate. James, on the other hand — oh, the screaming! Fantastic. So how about it, then? Happy Christmas? In spite of Hector and the mistletoe and the no furniture and the nogging? All of which you should get used to, by the way, because that way lie the Christmases of the future."

"I like it," Remus says quietly. "Don't tell Sirius, I'll never live it down."

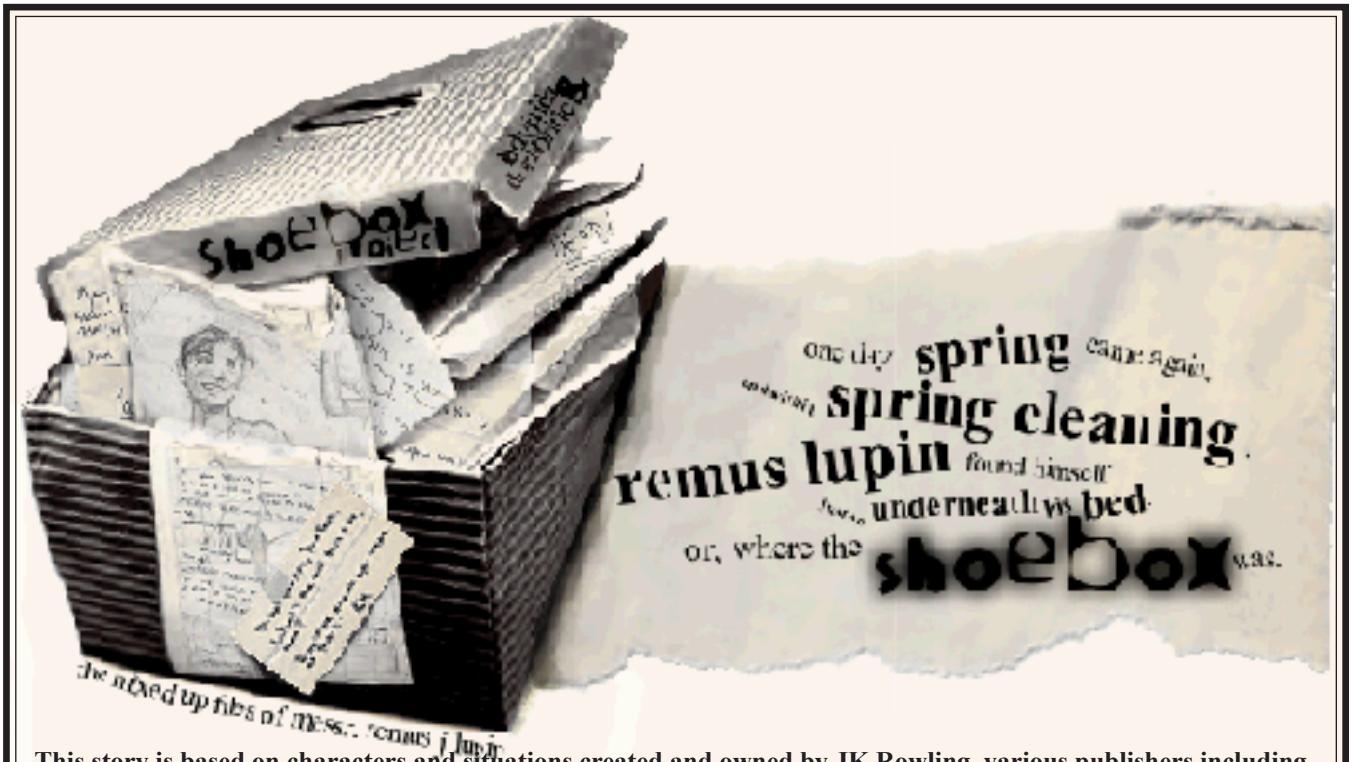
"This Sirius bloke," Sirius says, shaking his head. "What an arse."

"Excellent with presents, though," Remus points out.

"*Spectacular,*" Sirius agrees.

"Uncanny," Remus finishes.

"You lunatic," Sirius says, and grins, and ruffles Remus' hair. From somewhere beneath the couch, Hector's mandibles creek something merry. It is, Remus thinks, and then amends — well, it *was* a good night.



This story is based on characters and situations created and owned by JK Rowling, various publishers including but not limited to Bloomsbury Books, Scholastic Books and Raincoast Books, and Warner Bros., Inc. No money is being made and no copyright or trademark infringement is intended.

***The Shoebox Project* by LadyJaida and Dorkorific**

http://www.livejournal.com/community/shoebox_project

Part Eighteen and a half: Decembers
Five Christmases, Six Christmas Memories.

Remus, December 1967
It's the quietest Christmas Remus can remember. All the necessary Christmas accessories are there, the tree and a few winking lights and the ornaments from earlier childhood, and his mother is cooking a goose, and the few presents have drawn close about the scent of pine. He surveys the morning, finding that even the biggest ornaments are somehow dwarfed and chipped by his own perspective, and they no longer hold the mystery of bright colors and globed immodesty.

His parents, standing in the doorway, watch him eagerly. For the first time he is aware of an obligation to perform, a duty, no longer an instinct.

It isn't because he's a werewolf.

***

James, December 1970
James is enveloped in perfumed embrace. A bosom is trying to suffocate him. The pillow of fabric over mounds of relative flesh surround him, until he is drowning in his Aunt Eunice. These are the staples of the holidays: self-warming socks from his grandparents, strange pudding creations from Uncle Barry, now in the midst of attending an experimental Parisian Wizarding Culinary School, and Aunt Eunice's tremendous quaking bosom, as well as Aunt Eunice's charmed lipstick marks all over his nose for the next three weeks.

James can't wait until he has Christmases of his own. For one thing, there won't be any socks. "Socks" isn't at all what Christmas is about.

***

Peter, December 1968
The Pettigrew Tree is made of plastic, and smells like lemons. Peter looks at it warily from across the sparkling sitting room, eating a cinnamon cookie over his cupped palm, very careful not to make a single crumb. In the kitchen it smells of a hundred spices, while everywhere else is a foreign and hostile territory for a boy of eight, offering no excuses for muddy feet or careless fingerprints.

Certainly not for cinnamon crumbs.

What Peter really wants for Christmas, he thinks idly as he licks his fingers immaculately clean, if not a bit sticky, is a whole herd of reindeer. With mud in their hooves.

And ticks on *everything*.

***

Sirius, December 1963
Mrs. Black is holding an earring the color of the sea up to her cheek, dark hair swept away from her tight face. Sirius lingers in the doorway, watching this process. He sees only his father's back, and the front of his best holiday robes in the mirror, an uncertain reflection as distant and clouded as the jewels that dance around his mother's neck.

Downstairs, the house elves have set the dining room table to perfection. It smells of hot ciders and the Black family's best silver, of three nesting spoons, and of a tradition Sirius cannot trace to its origin in his life, much less the lives of his ancestors.

***

Photographic evidence best left to memory from Christmas, 1976.





This story is based on characters and situations created and owned by JK Rowling, various publishers including but not limited to Bloomsbury Books, Scholastic Books and Raincoast Books, and Warner Bros., Inc. No money is being made and no copyright or trademark infringement is intended.

***The Shoebox Project* by LadyJaida and Dorkorific**

http://www.livejournal.com/community/shoebox_project

Have decided to keep certain bits & bats (for posterity, not, as Sirius put it, frilly-namby-pamby nostalgia that only girls and Remuses ever indulge in) from various Hogwarts adventures, just in case. I would have preferred some manner of leather suitcase of mysterious quality but there was only a shoebox to be had. One must make do.

Who knows? Perhaps, some day, someone will thank me.

(Though it won't be Sirius OR James, ungrateful bastards.)

Now I just have to make sure no one ever finds out about it. I'll never live it down, you know. "What were you thinking?" the lads will demand, and "A bloody shoebox?" Well. I am not frilly, namby or pamby, despite rumours to the contrary, and if you believe everything one Sirius Black tells you, you'll find yourself in the third floor girl's lavatory with underwear on your head.

Cowritten by dorkorific and ladyjaida.

dorkorific specializes in **Sirius**; ladyjaida specializes in **Remus**.

dorkorific is **Mlle. Artiste**; ladyjaida is **Mlle. Bits-n-bats**.

The handwriting of Remus J. Lupin, Severus Snape and James Potter is done by ladyjaida.

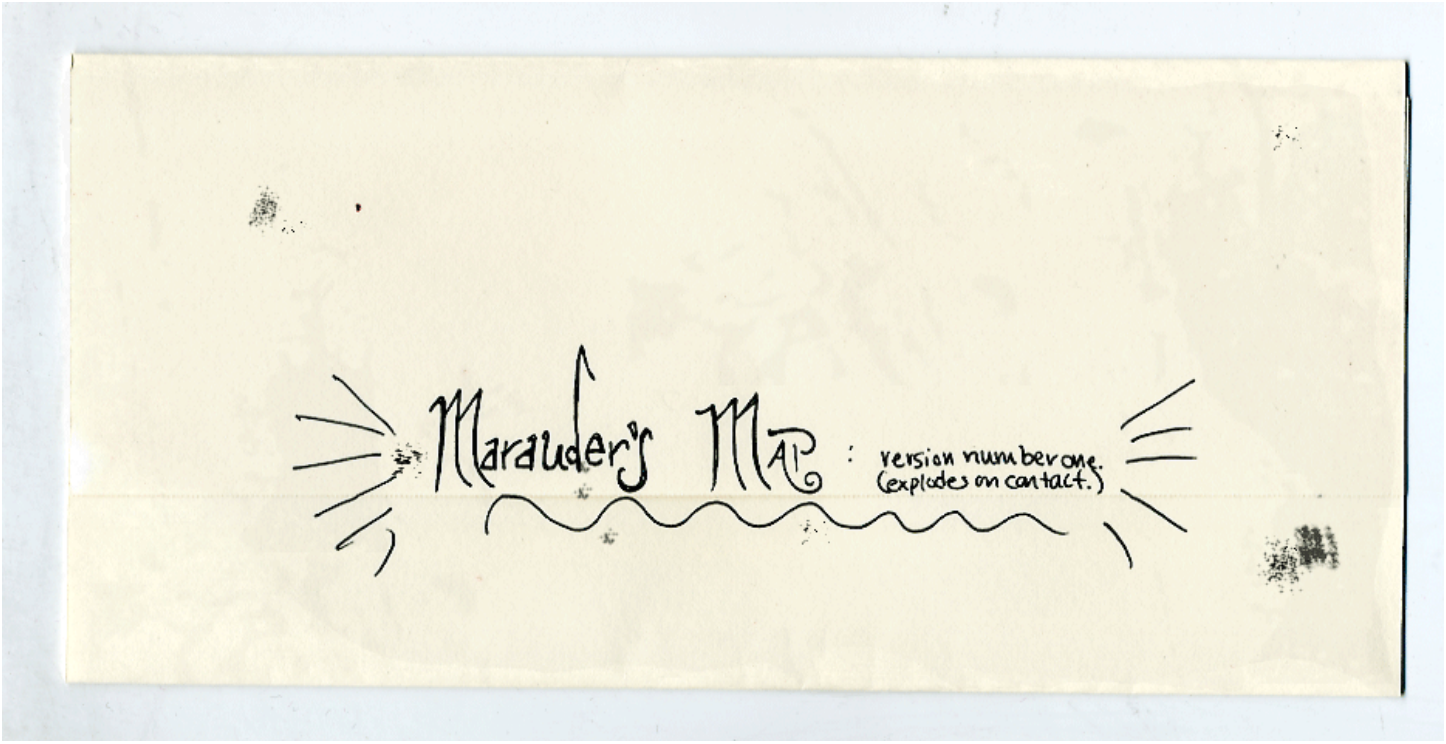
The handwriting of Sirius Black, Peter Pettigrew and Lily Evans is done by dorkorific.
Don't worry; Peter won't be stupidified. **Trust us** on that one.

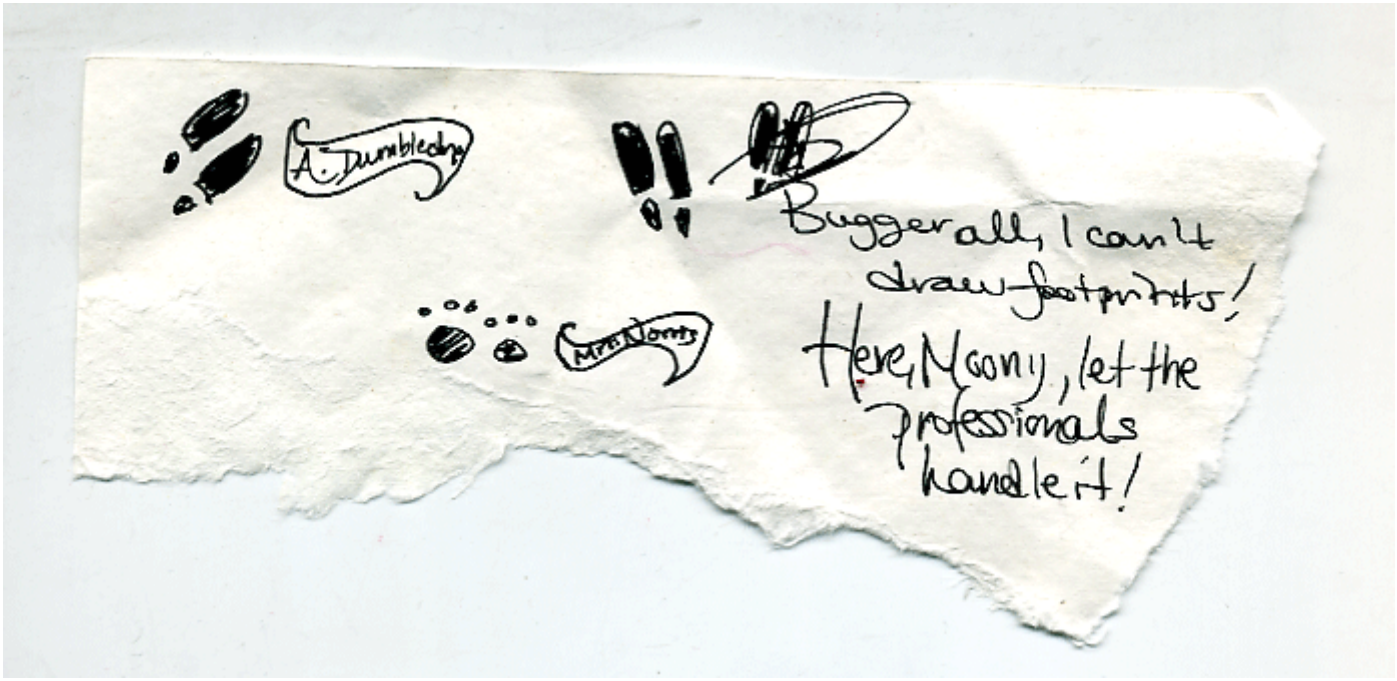
We would like to take a moment to thank windjinn for leaping down the stairs with ladyjaida's bra on his head.

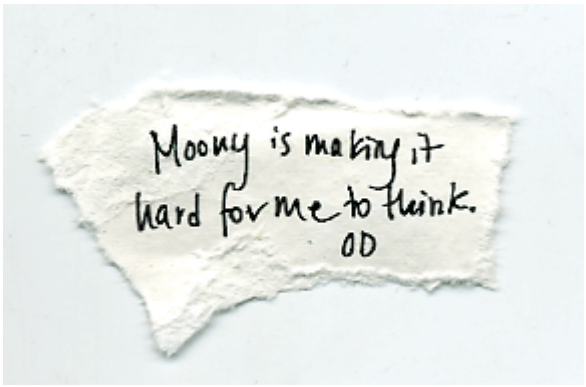
all characters herein are the intellectual property of j.k. rowling, scholastic and warner brothers.

http://www.livejournal.com/community/shoebox_project

Part Nineteen
January 1977







***

Except for the occasional sneeze -- while the rare histories section is optimal for total privacy, it is also unfortunately optimal for total dust -- the library is quiet. The only light flickers from the tip of James' wand, held trembling with excitement over the folds of old parchment. The Map, forever associated with capital letters, does nothing. The four boys crowded around it hold their breath until Remus feels dizzy and Sirius sneezes for the fifth time. At last, a blotch of ink takes form in the area labeled, in impeccable script, LIBRARY. Hours of research, practice, trial, error, refinement, and countless failed attempts and wasted paper, draw together in precise concentration and form four pairs of footprints, eight little shoed feet in total, mounded together in what Remus realizes is the rare histories section. The names bloom like a stain, two on each side. JAMES POTTER and SIRIUS BLACK; REMUS LUPIN and PETER PETTIGREW. James makes a noise like he's just had the best wank of his life. Sirius sneezes a sixth time. Peter's mouth is hanging open like he's a fish and Remus thinks dizzily that they are geniuses, that they should be endowed with magical research grants, and it's a bloody shame no one can ever know about Their Map because One, it is A Secret, and Two, it's against so many Hogwarts rules and regulations that the very prospect of it had at the onset made Remus' head hurt for days. No one will ever know the tale of their creativity, their inspiration, their dedication to the cause. It seems a pity, really, Remus thinks, that so much hard work should be known only amongst the four of them. Then again, that's his Boys' Club Wet Blanket spirit talking. He keeps the regret to himself.

"We did it," James whispers. His wand shakes erratically. "Look at us. There we are. Right there. *Right there.* It's fantastic. We're brilliant. We are the best pranksters ever. Future generations will sing our names to the heavens. *Look at us.* We did it!"

"Well," Remus cautions. "We've only got us to work. And we still have half the map to finish."

"Be quiet, Moony," Sirius cautions. "Let Prongsie have his moment. They're so rare for him; he deserves his happiness."

"They are not rare," James protests, "I have moments all the time. Loads of them. Moments all over the shop. It's just -- it's just that this one is -- Moony, be quiet for a moment and just think about what we *did*!"

"I *am* thinking," Remus objects. "I am. It's wonderful. It's just there's so much more we could *do*. I'm just thinking ahead!"

"How's it doing it?" Peter whispers. With the tip of his wand, he prods gingerly at the banner bearing his name.

Sirius gives him a withering look. "Have you been paying any attention for the last *year*, Wormtail? Honestly?"

"It's just -- I think it's -- well, it always surprises me when it works," Peter mutters, and coughs into his sleeve. Sirius rolls his eyes exaggeratedly and buries his face in the map again. Remus eyes them. "Anyway," Peter says, with unexpected clarity, "I don't like this. I mean -- it's that -- there are *rules* now."

"And these *rules*, as you call them," Sirius drawls, "they apply to us since...when?"

"He has a point," Remus says carefully. Sirius has been strange lately -- well, *not* strange, actually, Remus thinks ruefully. Strange might be preferable. What Sirius has been is painfully familiar: dark and mercurial, unpredictably and stunningly cruel between moments of intense
affection and generosity. It's first year all over again, and Remus doesn't know if it's the flat or the family or the increasingly divided

attention of James Potter, but he does know that he doesn't like it. "There are different rules."

"Prongs," Peter appeals, "*you* know. The rules. They can find out about stuff like this now. You've been dragging people into Dumbledore's office for them since first term! Rosier got *expelled* for less. I mean, he had a tattoo! And that's nothing like this."

"Oh," James say distantly, "did he? That's nice. Padfoot, we're going to have to do something about this, look, see how it sort of smears when I move?" He kicks a foot back and forth to demonstrate. "Messy."

"I like the smeariness," Sirius protests. "It makes it all livelier."

Remus looks helplessly between them, James and Sirius, dark heads buried in the crinkling swaths of paper and Peter, looking rounder and fairer and more trembly than ever, doing his slouching best to mount a protest. He's gotten three increasingly frantic Howlers over the past month from his mother, screaming at him about running with a dangerous crowd and how he'd
better be prepared to be yanked off home at any moment. There's something gray in his face, something wary and terrified in the slope of his spine, and Remus wants to help him. Carefully he says, "There is more monitoring now. It's all this business with -- what Peter's saying, that is -- what *I'm* saying, as well -- I just think we ought to be, you know, discreet."

"Silence, jellyfish-men," Sirius commands, fixing them with a regal stare and pushing his hair out of his eyes. "Honestly! Both of you! This is not a time for monkeying around and talk of discreetness and tattoos."

"I thought we agreed that it is always time for talk of tattoos," James says in some surprise.

"Well," Sirius amends, "yes. But *can* we focus please? This is one of the greatest magical tools ever constructed by man or beast," with a wicked glance at Remus, which Remus cannot wholly appreciate, "and it needs to be completed. Which means we need to focus. But first, we need to drink this peach concoction that Prongsie found in the Potions closet--" James gives a grand, if distracted, bow-- "and do some sort of pastoral dance. Who knows a hornpipe?" He drops the sticky, ancient-looking bottle into Remus's lap and returns his attention once more to the Holy Boy's Club Grail: the map. Remus stares down at the bottle, which may contain some kind of schnapps concoction. Or some kind of rat poison. Whatever it is, it smells like rotten fruit and vomit. Remus prods it warily.

"Dances," James says absently, "always your lookout, Pads. What's missing, d'you think? From the tracker? It can get us, and who's that off in the corner -- all blurry -- is that your brother?" Sirius bends in close, narrow, sharp, and nods curtly. "Well, that's rum, isn't it? Do you think it's a
sort of -- I don't know, a family thing?"

"Can't be," Sirius replies shortly, "we're not in the same family, are we?"

"A scent sort of, thing, I mean, maybe," James says. His knee is pressed up against Sirius's leg, arm casually over Sirius's shoulder, their knuckles grazing with the boyish closeness of twelve-year-olds, not seventh-years engaged in unbelievably illegal activity. Remus bites down the urge to tsk. "Like -- all right, dogs can smell if something's a bird, you know, or if it's a...stoat. You know what I mean? D'you think it's doing something like that? Might be how we could get everyone on there."

"Mm," Sirius murmurs. His eyes scan the page, dark and quick with thought. "Like a -- *oh*. You mean..."

"Yeah! You know."

"--but if that's it, then couldn't we--"

"Right, with..."

"But would it work, you know, because—"

"I don't know, that's the thing, isn't it? It's--" James makes an indecipherable, though clearly deeply meaningful, gesture. It's as if they're speaking another language, one that requires no verbiage at all. "--*You* know. We can't do that. I've got three essays due, for one thing."

"What are you talking about?" Peter says loudly. His face is very pink.

"Fixing it," James answers. "Pads, do you think we--"

"No, it's much...we'd have to, and all that, and that's impossible--"

"I don't see what you're talking about!" Peter yells, suddenly leaping to his feet. "I don't! I don't see what you're talking about and I don't see how this works on its own like that! We're going to be in so much trouble. I want to go down to breakfast and forget this whole stupid thing! What's
the point anyway? We'll only be here five more months and then what? It'll just be lying around? I don't like it! I want to leave!"

Remus thinks he has never seen anything so brave in his entire life.

Or anything so quivery.

"All right," James says impatiently, giving Peter a severe look over his glasses, "keep your shirt on, Pettigrew." Sirius doesn't even glance up. "Look," James continues, "it's for posterity, and all that. We've been over it a thousand times before, what's died in *your* pants this morning?"

"Besides the ob-vi-ous," Sirius sing-songs."

Peter draws in a deep breath, and then deflates. The voice of James Potter, while not the voice of reason, has always held this power over him. James' convictions are Peter's convictions; it's a joke amongst the other Gryffindor boys and it's a weapon amongst the Slytherins and it's something of a cause for consternation amongst their professors, but there it is. There it always has been. Peter just sags like a balloon lost all its air, darting narrow looks to either side, and then shrugging.

"That's it." James pats him on the shoulder. "There's the spirit."

"Reasons," Sirius mutters, and shoots Peter a scornful look. "Don't know what you're on about, Pete. S'like he's talking Egyptian."

"Er," Remus begins.

"*Idea!*" James exclaims suddenly, so loudly that Peter jumps and Sirius whips around and Remus almost chokes on the three vital organs that attempt to abandon ship by leaping out through his throat. James gives little time for recovery, but beckons all three of them close. "You see," he explains, "what we're missing -- what we've been missing this whole time -- *is*--" He gestures wildly, feverishly, to the map before him. The mass of feet and names wobble as all four of them lean close. In the hallway just outside Filch's feet stalk back and forth and back again, with lurching footprints. James points frantically at them, their names, mouth working with little sounds like "Bibble!" and "Werghk!" but incapable of forming words in English.

"*Brilliant*!" Sirius replies suddenly, as if somehow the inspiration has undergone some osmosis through James' skin to his own. "James, mate, *James*, you are the most *brilliant* wizard in the *world* -- except for me, of course -- but that's to be expected, everyone falls short eventually -- *God*, how'd you think of it?"

"What are they talking about?" Peter hisses violently.

"I'm not," Remus replies, "well, I don't -- well, *they* know what they're doing. I think."

"We haven't put any of *us* in it," James explains. The unspoken finish -- *obviously* -- lingers in the air between them.

"Yes we *have*," Peter replies, sounding exasperated. "Look, we're right there. Everyone's there. Our feet, see, and Sirius' are the ones that are sort of bleeding ink at the ends, like they've been shot."

"No," Remus whispers, understanding. "No -- no -- *of course*, that's it, it's the simplest *bloody* trick in the book!"

"Exactly," James says.

"Exactly," Sirius echoes.

"Huh?" Peter demands.

"We haven't put any of ourselves in," Remus repeats. "Not replications. *Us.*"

"It hasn't got the Marauder Mentality," James finally bursts out. "It doesn't know what to look for -- it doesn't know what a Marauder

wants!"

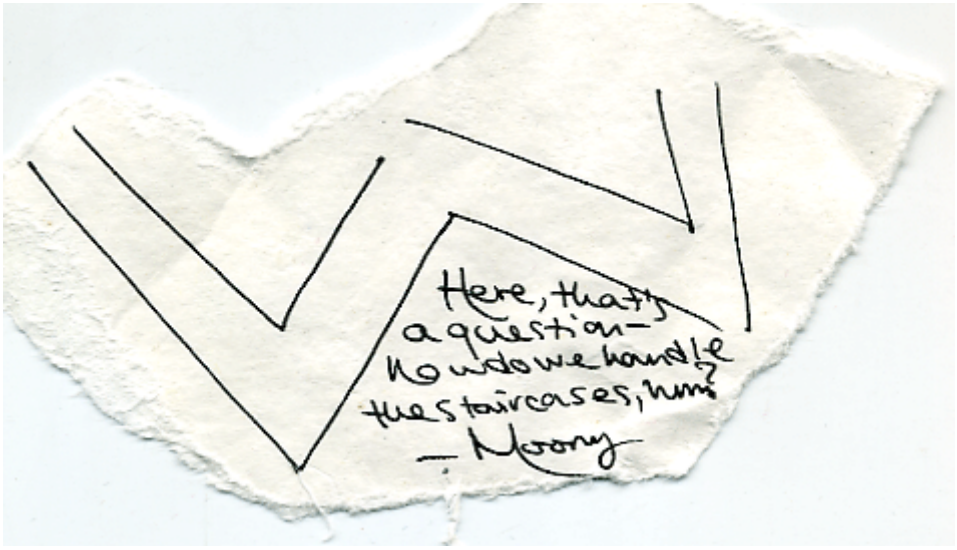
"And how can it be a Marauder's Map," Sirius finishes, "without a Marauder's wit -- humor -- cleverness!"

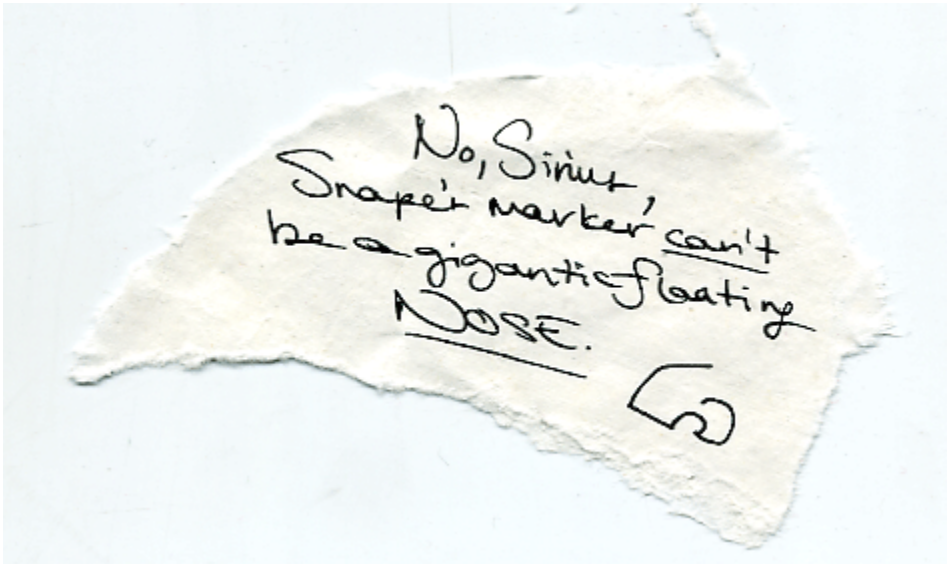
Remus refrains from making any comments.

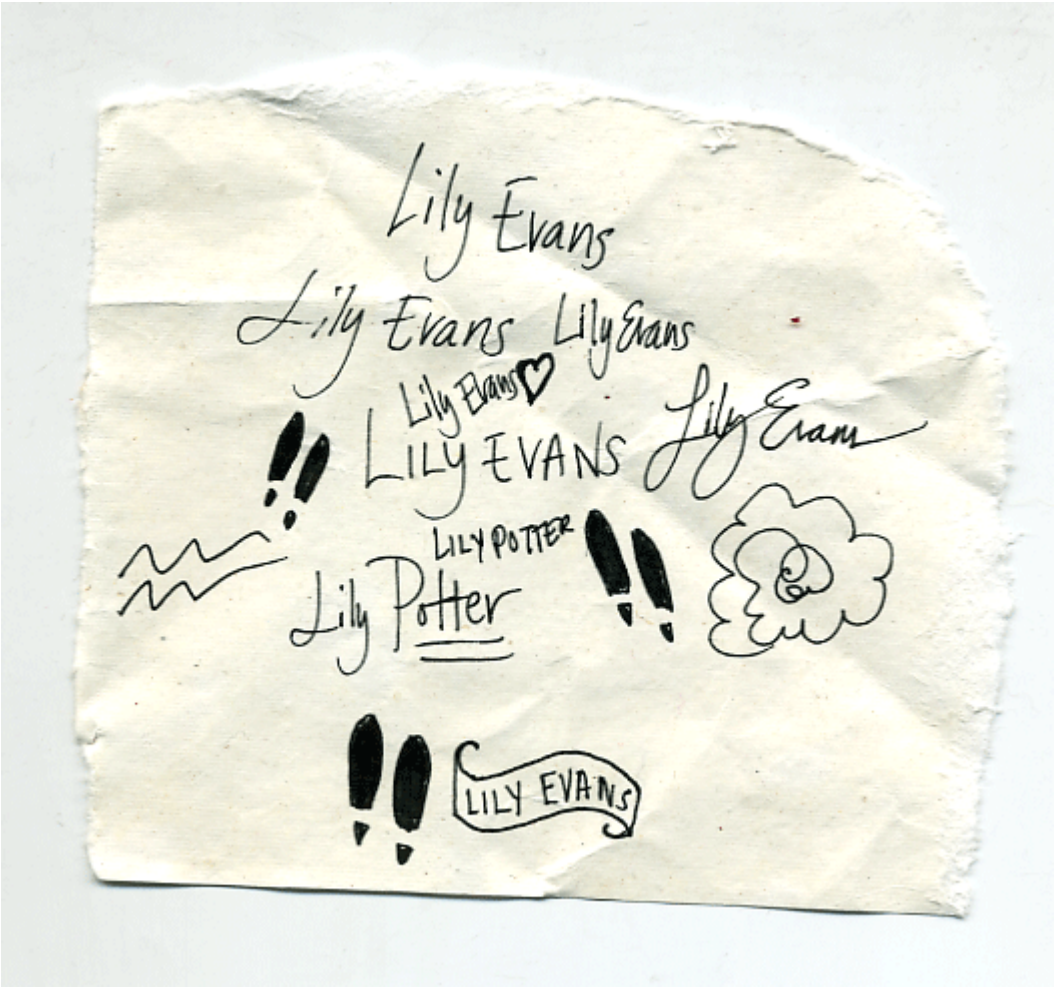
"Does this mean Wormtail is going to have to go inside the walls again?" Peter moans.

"Good man, Pete," Sirius says, clapping him on the shoulder. "He is ready for anything, should it come in the line of duty!"

***







***

They are beneath the floorboards when they hear the ominous creak. "It's here," Sirius is insisting, "this is where I found the tunnel, d'you see, and *no* I am *very* sure, so you *don't* have to look so dubious."

Remus doesn't ask how it is Sirius knows how he looks at the moment at all -- it's very dark, and for all Sirius knows Remus could look sympathetic, or deranged, or like he's just suffered a stroke. Dubious is hardly high up there on the list; deranged is well near the top, though, and stroke is gradually gaining steam. "I didn't say it's not here," Remus tries to say patiently. "All I said was there's a spider in my trousers."

"I think there is always a spider in your trousers," Sirius replies.

Remus is just about to ask him to explain himself when they hear the creak.

It goes: *creeeeaaak.* Remus forgets the spider and peers up through the slats, watching the light shift in a terrible, dreadful, foreboding way. He nudges Sirius in the side. "Someone's up there," he hisses, feeling loud and echoing through every swelling, hollow space inside him.

"Well, yes, I know," Sirius whispers back. "I bet it's James, having us on."

"It's not James having you on," a female voice booms from above. "But it is someone with incredibly good hearing, so you'd best come on up from there."

"Women have magic powers unbeknownst to man," Sirius hisses.

"I have noticed," Remus replies.

"Do please consider complying now," the female voice booms again. "I have magic powers all over the place that I'm sure you've never dreamed of."

"Shows what she knows," Sirius says, almost wickedly. "Well," he adds, louder, "we're on our way up. With our hands in the air, shall we, or can we count on your magic powers to chance keeping our hands hidden?" The floorboards shift again. *Creeeeeak, creeeeaaaaaaaaaaaaaak.* Remus wriggles. The spider wriggles.

"Do as you please, Black," the voice booms.

"Hello," Sirius says. "Death knows my name."

"Just let's do as she says," Remus whispers. "Here -- the game's up."

"Oh, Moony," Sirius mourns, "the game is never up. I, however, am up." He reaches up, grabs the loose plank, and shoves. Not more than a minute later he's already kicked Remus in the nose twice, given himself three splinters, and fallen backwards onto Remus' head. Remus makes a mental note for posterity: nothing good will ever come of exploring the castle with Sirius Black.

"Well." A face appears, and a lit wand. "It would seem you *are* incapable."

"Sorry, do I know you?" Sirius says airily, shaking sawdust and what may very well be several immense termites out of his hair.

"Black, don't dissemble with me." The woman crosses one skinny, striped leg over the other and peers forward at them, folding her jangling arms over her knee. Remus helplessly attempts to extract himself from Sirius's armpit. "I practically taught you to dress, you little wart. Aren't those boots mine?"

Sirius's mouth falls open. A termite may or may not have fallen into it. Remus doesn't really want to think about it. "McKinnon?"

"In the flesh. Never thought you'd see me again, did you? Never thought I'd visit vengeance upon your head for all those dungbombs you kept exploding in the changing-room? *As if I didn't know.* Oh." Her green eyes slant sideways for a moment, coolly disinterested. "And that's Lupin, I suppose."

"Er," Remus says. "Yes?" And now that he's heard the name, he does remember Marlene McKinnon -- surely she was about seven feet tall, before, all pink hair and immense lungpower and an air of intolerance for all things stammering and named Remus Lupin? He shrinks back a little into the hole. He longs, idly, for Sirius' armpit, despite the smell.

"He looks exactly the same," Marlene says to Sirius, thankfully ignoring him again. "Do you still knock about with James Potter, I suppose?"

"Do we knock about," Sirius says. "Do we knock? Do we ever. And about." He grins. It's remarkable how he is so capable of making the most incomprehensible collection of sentences seem valid with such a grin. Well, what you lose in coherency you make up for with charm. Or else you're that unfortunate Hufflepuff boy. What's his name -- something Doogle. "What, Remus? Remus doesn't change. He just sort of gets bigger when no one's looking."

Remus stares at his feet. He can feel McKinnon's eyes on him, the intense gaze boring into the very depths of his soul. That wouldn't be so bad, but he can almost smell her disapproval. She's not just looking into the very depths of his soul -- oh, no. That would be preferable. Rather, she's looking into the very depths of his soul and failing them. She is calling them a wading pool of mediocrity, a watering hole for the unworthy. The toes of Remus' shoes point together. He feels eleven years old.

"Hm," Marlene says. "No, I suppose not. What have you been knocking about, then?"

"Can't tell you," Sirius replies cheerfully. "We'd have to kill you if we did."

"I'd like to see you try." Marlene buffs her black nails on her shirt and regards them idly. "I scratch like a tiger."

Sirius winks roguishly at her. "I always thought you were a tiger."

"Eurgh," Marlene says, wincing. "You know you were *eleven* once. Don't start with me."

"Well, what are *you* knocking about for then, if not for the chance of seeing how your little protégé has grown into handsome and virile manhood?" Sirius hoists himself neatly out of the floorboards and is just absently sticking a hand back for Remus when Marlene quirks her very red lips up to the side and makes a noise

"He's not an idiot, Black," she says impatiently. "Let him climb out himself."

Sirius blinks. Remus blinks. Marlene doesn't.

"All right then," Sirius says casually, and shoves his hand into his pocket. "You're avoiding the question."

"I didn't feel like answering it," Marlene shrugs. "Got a smoke?"

Remus sets determinedly about for a boost. There don't seem to be any. It was fine for Sirius, who could pretty much claw his way out using Remus as a sort of human stepladder. For those who have not had the breadth of experience that Remus has in serving as a human stepladder for Sirius Black, the smell of his foot as it is coming down over Remus' nose -- the particular, disturbing, grip-like action -- it is a combination of sensations which haunt him on dark and stormy nights. Remus sneezes, and inhales a good deal of antique dust, and gets a splinter in underneath the soft flesh of his palm that feels a little bit like medieval torture. By the time he's gotten a good grip and hoisted himself up and out, panting, and with more bugs crawling in his hair than are left gnawing away at the floor, Sirius and Marlene are smoking a particularly pungent wizarding grass that serves also as cinnamon in some seedier bakeries in Hogsmeade. Remus coughs -- he can't help it, there's something alive in his throat -- but tries to do so quietly, so as not to disturb them. At least it smells nice, now. Less like foot, and more like a hot bun. A hot bun held tenderly between the toes of a foot.

"Oh, don't," Marlene mutters irritably. "You with your coughing. It's ridiculous, you realize. We see you. We *see* you," she repeats, and snorts in the back of her throat. "No need to have it be a production number."

"Er," Remus says. He thinks: *But I have bugs in my esophagus.* "Sorry," he finishes.

"Here," says Marlene, and stands up with a great deal of noise -- all boots and chains and rustling. Sirius' eyes follow the back of her head. She sticks out one hand and makes a dismissive little motion with her chin. "Come on. Have a boost-up."

Remus takes her hand gingerly. Marlene yanks upward, simultaneously dislocating his arm and flinging him out of the pit. It is a very similar sensation, Remus thinks dazedly, to being a boulder in some sort of medieval catapult. Sirius cackles unhelpfully as he lands.

Oof.

"Gnaa," Remus says in a small voice.

"Next time," Marlene whispers, crouching next to him, "don't let other people get you into any holes you can't climb out of on your own."

"Aiee," Remus agrees.

"Now where were we," Marlene continues. She turns back to Sirius, wiping her hands -- the implications of which are not lost on Remus. He rolls his shoulder about in its socket, listening to it go pop. "Ah yes. I was going to explain to you that it's absolutely none of my business and here's the bargain: if you don't tell anyone you saw me about, I won't tell anyone that you're the little gophers digging holes around here. How's that sound?"

"McKinnon," Sirius says, "you are a man among women."

"And don't you forget it," Marlene finishes. "Remember, Black: always have a bargaining piece."

Remus' shoulder snaps back into its proper place.

"And you, too, I suppose," Marlene adds, jerking her head back at him. "Though what you'll do with it, I don't know."

"He's not very good at bargaining," Sirius says. "Which is funny, because you'd think he would be -- he's a cheap little bastard."

"They all are," Marelene murmurs. "They *all* are."

Who? Remus thinks. *People whose shoulders you've broken?*

"So how about it, gophers? Do we have a deal?"

While it has never been a question he directly asked himself, Remus has always liked to believe that he has enough pride not to make any deals with anyone who called him "gopher" and rampantly, openly disliked him.

"Of course," he says, a little breathlessly, mourning the loss of what little dignity he ever had.

"We'll see," Sirius says. "Seems to me you've got more to lose. How about another smoke and then we'll talk?"

"How about I don't prevent you from having grandchildren?" Marlene suggests.

"Ooghk," Remus says, which means, *you are singularly convincing*

***





***

"She's something else, isn't she?" Sirius whistles, that long, drawn-out note of admiration and awe that serves as his universal judgment call, and Remus says, before he can stop himself,

"She doesn't like me!" It's horrible -- pleading and whiny and wet-blankety and all the things Remus struggles so hard not to be, and has made great strides against, but is, deep down, at the core, something sopping and needy and strong enough in its own way to be one half of his equation. And he can't help it; it's as if someone else is operating his mouth and he's just vomiting out these vile little helpless burps. "I just–"

"She likes you all right," Sirius says, a little bewildered. "It's just -- I mean, you were never close, right?"

Neither were you! Remus wants to shriek. *Why doesn't she like me? How can I fix it? What did I do?* "I don't," he begins. "Do you think I should get her flowers?"

"Not really a flower kind of girl, McKinnon," Sirius says, full of awe. "No -- no, definitely not."

"Should I write her a card? An apology? Send her one of those plants they've bred to bite people like pitbulls and hang on like lampreys?"

"Does it have flowers?" Sirius asks. Remus nods. "Not quite up her alley. You're awful with gifts. She wouldn't like books, either, so don't ask her."

"Boots?" Remus asks. "With spikes on the toes for, I don't know, ripping lads' souls out and stacking them, like soul-skewers?"

Sirius ponders that. "No," he says, "but you're getting warmer. It's got to have teeth."

It's no good, Remus realizes. *No matter what I do, she isn't going to like me.* And it's not that she doesn't like him -- well, all right, that *is* a necessary part of it -- that really gets him, that really makes him feel sick. It's that there's no reason -- the decision is so arbitrary -- there's nothing he can *do* about it -- he's so futile, so helpless, against this great injustice. He *is* likeable. He tries so *hard* to be. Perhaps he isn't charming like Sirius or confident like James or even blithely unaware like Peter, but he does have his certain appeal. *You grovel,* a tiny voice in the back of his head says. *You bow, you scrape, you plead, and when all else fails, you beg. You beg emotionally. You emotional beggar.* "Shut up," Remus says irritably.

"I didn't say anything," Sirius replies, blinking. "Unless the voices are back. They're not telling you to burn anything?"

"No," Remus says. "You're the only one who ever tells me to burn things."

"Why do you even care if she likes you?" Sirius asks, fairly reasonably. "Do I even need to point out that she's insane? Spiffing lass, but completely mental. Say, I'm hungry. Have you, I don't know, an apple or something?"

The worst thing, Remus thinks furiously, is that he actually pats around his midriff before he can think about it. Of course he knows there's nothing there -- Sirius is the one who can produce food magically from any wrinkle in his clothing, no matter how small -- it's just so he can look as if he's looking. "I don't. Never mind. I'm -- bother. It's nothing. We should go back. We flagged this floor, can we move on?"

"To food?" Sirius suggests hopefully. "I think to food. How about that?"

"You are boring," Remus says. "Boring and predictable." He hopes that he is talking to Sirius, except Sirius isn't listening, distracted by the possibilities of crumbs and cheerful digestion.

***

This is the problem with being a bloke, James thinks: constant distraction. If it isn't one thing, it's another. Lately, it's been one thing -- one really big category thing, he should say -- which gives way to a lot of other littler category things. And this, James adds, is why he is not a poet, a writer, or a reader, but rather someone whose sparkling brilliance lies within action!

Or something like that.

"Concentrate, James, my man," he mutters to himself. He screws up his brow, tries to imagine sticking his attention to the map before him with tape or glue or other fun sticky things. No luck. It's very clear that what he's supposed to do, what he's trying to do, has no relevance to what his mind wants to be doing.

Example: right now, he's working on the map. He's adding bits and bats of Marauder memorabilia, the very first balloon that ever made Snape fart, the very first insult Remus ever dared to use ("You're -- you're being -- you're being *typically unreasonable!*"), the very first banana peel Peter accidentally left on the floor in first year that sent Lucius Malfoy flying out the window -- and so on and so forth. However, halfway between adding fake moustache to parchment paper his brain has decided that a much better use of its time would be: recalling the words to every advertisement jingle from every radio program he listened to as a child.

Zonko's has your favorite toys
Loads of fun for girls and boys
Zonko's is a magic place
Wait until you see Mum's face!
Memories she can't erase…

"*Oh Zonkooo's,*" James mutters tunelessly, "*is a maaa-giiiic place*. Bugger this!" He throws the map down. "I *am* useless!"

"You are useless," Lily says, appearing behind him. James makes a strangled noise, all high-pitched and unbecoming. "Oh, there there." Lily sits and pats him on the ruffled head. "Your mind was elsewhere. I won't tell anyone. It is impressive, though, the tone that you get." James looks at her sheepishly, and folds the map neatly into his lap. "Why, Mr. Potter," Lily tsks. "Secrets, is it?"

"Not secrets," James blurts out. "A map." *Double your leisure, double your fun with Dolly Drooble's cloning gum!*

"Well, I saw that," Lily sighs. "Unless your lap is having a camping trip I doubt it needs a tent."

"Er," James says.

"Let's forget I said that," Lily mutters. "You know, I -- I meant the map."

"Oh!" James laughs nervously, loudly. It is almost impossible to concentrate over the noise of his brain, which is shrieking *Chocolate Frogs! You'll hop till you drop with Chocolate Frogs!* at about a million silent decibels. "Oh, yes, the map. Quite. Right. The map. Not the -- but the map. Ha, ha! Ha -- hold on a minute -- how'd you know it was a map?"

Lily stares at him. "You just told me yourself."

"Bugger," James says. "It's supposed to be a secret."

"We're going about in circles," Lily says. "You do realize that?"

James looks at her. All fifty-seven inches of her. All fifty-seven red-head inches of her. Little sparks want to shoot out from his fingertips. To his credit, he doesn't make the pained, wounded noise he wants to. "Lily Evans," he says, "you and I, we are always going about in circles." Lily coughs into her palm. "But that's not what you meant, either."

"No," Lily agrees, "I rather meant the conversation."

That's the problem with being a bloke, James thinks: constant distraction. *Gringotts, good as gooooold*. He folds the map into less of a tent and more of a pamphlet in his lap and then sets it on the table.

"You were working," Lily says. "I've distracted you."

"That's all right," James says. "I've been working for a while and I'm not, er, getting anywhere."

"More circles?"

If your tile needs a shower, call on Mrs. Skower! "Constant. Can we have supper."

Lily considers it. *Shut up,* James commands his brain. *You have to shut up now.*

"You don't have to look so thoughtful," James mumbles. "It's not like I've asked you to have all my Potter babies."

"All right," Lily says, and takes his arms. "Yes. Let's."

James really, *really* hopes she isn't talking about the babies.

***



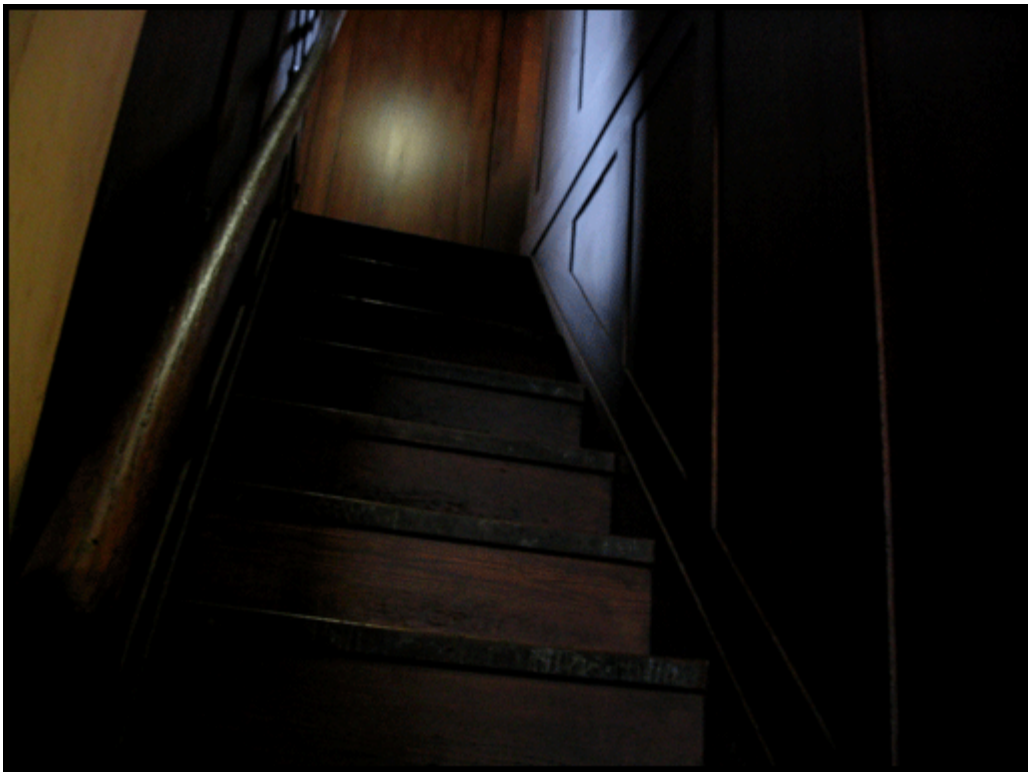
Hidden Staircase. Exhibit One.



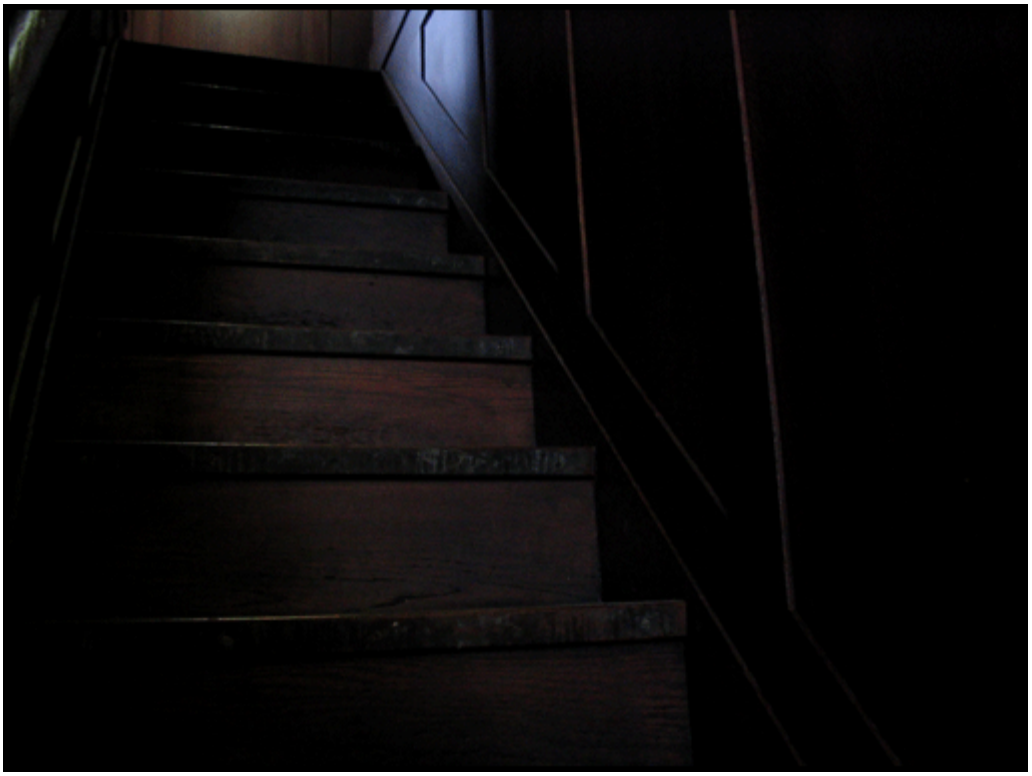
Hidden Staircase. Exhibit Two.



Hidden Staircase. Exhibit Seven Hundred and Seventy Seven, or So It Feels Like.



Hidden Staircase. Exhibit Are We Done Yet?



*Hidden Staircase. Exhibit Down Which Mssr. Padfoot **Will Indeed** Push You Given the Chance If You Are Documenting Most Seriously.*



Hidden Staircase. Exhibit Apparently Used For Certain After-Dark Activities And Therefore Very Much Not Useful To Our Endeavours.



Secret Hole What We Fell Through. Twice. BEWARE THE TERMITES. They Are Dedicated Little Buggers.

***

When making a map with your three best friends, it's easiest not to be the rat of the group. Small, silent and useful, that's what Wormtail is. With a twitch of his whiskers and a vehement shake of one small pink paw, he disappears behind a statue, and into the network of hollow walls and secret, miniature passageways, ready as he ever is for sudden death. He'd like to feel invaluable. Mostly, he just feels terrified.

***

"That's the good thing about *our* brand of modern magic," Sirius says, munching on something crunchy and sweet-smelling. "It doesn't have anything to do with eye of newt and toe of snail. Snails don't even *have* toes -- do you know, I think our books are making it all up. A network of lies, that's what it is -- mass-production of fake snail toes, sold for ten times the cost to make them, and the rich get richer while the gullible poor make snail toe potions. Give me a good charm any day, a good old swish and flick; now that's what magic is all about." He stops for a minute to chew and swallow. Remus nods.

"Keep talking," he encourages, as the pause draws out into a veritable silence. "Give us some more of that Marauder mentality."

"And it's not to say I'm not good at Potions," Sirius continues, around another mouthful. "D'you remember that time -- of course you do. Ah, the golden years. Well, year. How many socks turned purple? How many good Slytherin lads had whiskers everywhere the eye could see?" Sirius sighs, and flutters his lashes. "Truly one of my better moments. Not even a Potter Plan, but one hundred per cent Black. Pure. Undiluted. They'll be singing about that one for years. Where was I?"

"I'm not sure," Remus admits. "I think it had something to do with eye of newt, toe of snail, and your uncharted prowess in everything from javelin throwing to professional bum scratching."

"Don't flatter me, Lupin, I've never so much as touched a javelin." Sirius wiggles a dangerous brow. "I was talking about Potions. I would never dismiss the honorable profession if it were honorable but I, a miserable failure. It's just that it isn't honorable, you see. Where's the spontaneity? Where's the vision? Where's the tried and true history of it all -- I ask you, where *are* the explosions?"

"Potions go 'poof' sometimes," Remus says helpfully.

"Isn't that like *you*," Sirius says. "There's no boom. I like boom."

The paper in front of Remus gives a little fizzle, the sound parchment makes just as it's being tossed onto a fire, and a little puff of dark smoke billows up and out from its center.

"Oh!" Remus says, startling backwards.

"What did you do?" Sirius yelps, hurling himself forward.

"I think your enormous ego broke it," Remus murmurs. He pokes at his handwriting with the tip of his quill. "I really do think you've overloaded something. You wanted booming!"

"You're not one to talk," Sirius replies, easing himself back into his chair. "Everything started smelling like chocolate and then the paper almost melted. I blame *you*."

"That is a new and exciting development," Remus sniffs. "Anyway, at least it didn't smell like squirrel. *Yours* smelled like squirrel."

"I would have said singed dog, actually," Sirius says, with some dignity. "Do you think that did it? Now all we need is Peter's -- I think Mrs. Norris ate him, actually, that's going to be a bit of a problem -- and James. James, James, oh, our dear fallen comrade -- did you see him at dinner? It's a tragedy, you know, to love a woman."

"I'll keep that in mind," Remus replies dryly.

"It's all right for *you*," Sirius continues, "you've a heart like iron. Like stone. All crumply, like a sweet wrapper."

"A crumply iron stone wrapper?" Remus attempts.

"But with chocolate inside," Sirius clarifies. "Where most men have blood you've got cocoa -- but for those of us who feel the pangs of first love--"

"Come now, that's indigestion, I told you that much mustard would only bring heartache."

"--it is a tragedy indeed." Sirius snags the roll of parchment from Remus and sniffs it. "Why is it that yours smells like chocolates and mine smells like a singed dog? Or possibly squirrel?"

"I think it's telling," Remus says. "Don't crumple it. It's essence of Padfoot. It's vital."

"Let me tell you something, Moony, my crumply wrapper chum," Sirius explains, "I have seen the essence of Padfoot, and it has nothing to do with parchment."

"Erhgm," Remus says.

"Oh," Sirius tuts, "you and your Victorian constitution. I would say it is endearing but unfortunately it is *highly disturbing* and James and I make fun of it behind your back. And I won't lie to you: there it stands. You are what they call a freak. I figured I should be the one to tell you. It might hurt less. Seek help! Steal a *Busty & Bewitched* from under James' pillow! It's going to be all right in the end, I think, only you've got to *work with us* or else we can't win." Sirius tosses himself backward into the armchair next to Remus'. It lets out a gasping groan. "That's the sound of a well-fed man breaking furniture," Sirius concludes. "What's next on the agenda for tonight?"

"That's all we can do, until James comes back with the map." Remus pushes his hair out of his eyes and yawns. It's been a long day and an even longer evening. They had run into Marlene McKinnon once more, right before dinner, and she gave him the sort of look one person gives another when they are determined no hair should grow in a certain spot on their body *ever again.* It was all right that time, because she was looking at Remus' nose, and the last thing Remus' nose needs is any hair, so perhaps she was, however inadvertently, doing him a favor. But his luck might not hold out, next time. There's no question that, for the next few days, she's going to haunt Remus' dreams, stomping, disapproving, judgmental.

"You're thinking about McKinnon," Sirius says unexpectedly, grinning lewdly. "If I didn't know you better I'd say there's a bit of chocolate left in the old crumply wrapper yet."

"Sirius," Remus retorts, feeling agitated, "that's ridiculous."

"You're girly enough for her," Sirius points out. "Marlene and Moony, sitting in a tree-eee--"

"All right then," Remus says, "I think the ink's dried."

"One day you are going to explode," Sirius says. "It's all just going to build up inside you. You won't be able to help it. You'll go mad, your brain will blow, you'll just make this satisfying *pop* sound, *pop*," he demonstrates with his hands, "and then we'll mourn old Moony's passing, but secretly, we'll have seen it coming all along." Remus gives him a look. "*Pop*," he repeats. "Trust me. You'll see. Pop goes the we -- the -- well, you know."

"If I do I will secure for you ringside seats." Remus busies himself with looking busy. "Perhaps your future lies in the fine art of divination."

"Now that," Sirius says, "is a flat-out ridiculous waste of time."

"You're only saying that," Remus replies vaguely, "because you only ever see drapery in your crystal ball."

"The professor says they're *veils*," Sirius mutters. "There's no need to bring that rubbish up again, now *is* there."

"Your future in bridal couture is not really the issue at hand," Remus agrees. "What should be the issue at hand is that your soul seems to smell like burnt puppy."

"Endearing," Sirius says. "Lovably flawed. Enthusiastic. Now knows better, needless to say. I think it fits."

"I think you are entirely too proud of yourself." Remus busies himself with tidying his rolled-up parchment, pushing it against the table so its edges align. If you don’t do that, sometimes one layer will get all crumply, and the consequences of crumpliness under these circumstances are -- well, they are not to be pondered.

"I deserve it," Sirius protests. "Come on, man. Objectively. As a scientist. Don’t you think I deserve it?"

As a scientist, Remus rather thinks they all deserve statues made. As a person, he thinks their heads are already dangerously close to inflating and floating away, with their little bodies dangling below. "No."

"Where's Jaaaaames?" Sirius moans, heaving an enormous sigh and collapsing even deeper into the furniture. "The charms of Lily Evans -- pfah! is what I say to that. We have work to get done. It’s not your fault she doesn’t like you, you know."

"Lily likes me," Remus says with rare certainty. "You should say as much."

"I’m not talking about *her*," Sirius says, rolling his eyes, "as you know perfectly well. I’m talking about, you know. Dagger-eyes. Mad stockings. You can’t win ’em all, Moony. Sometimes you just don’t like people. No fault of their own. Look at Midge Madsen."

"You don’t like her because she’s got spots," Remus mutters. "I don’t want to talk about this."

"Wrong! I notice her spots because I don’t like her. They’re not spots, anyway, they’re craters. What has she ever done to me, though? Not a thing. I just can’t stand the way she chews. It makes me all squirmy."

"Pfah," Remus quotes, waving the bit of parchment in warning. "Drapery and spots. Your head is entirely too puffy."

"Veils," Sirius insists, and gives Remus dark looks only for the rest of the night.

***

"Well, I don't know," James says. He looks dubiously at the aged parchment before him, but Remus can almost hear his quickened heartbeat. It does look rather uninspiring -- blank and bare, folded up like someone's old homework they forgot even to start. Yet the

four of them are gathered about it as if it is the Holy Grail of boyhood. It very well may be. Remus doesn't even dare touch it, James looking unusually flushed, Sirius nearly vibrating beside him, and Peter gnawing his lip with a mousy twitchiness. "I mean what if it doesn't -- but then what if it does--" James breaks off, shakes his head and touches the parchment reverently. This is it. This is the moment of reckoning. They've always been very good at making these things up, the four of them, almost prodigal. There are hitches here and there, now and then, but that's to be expected. The idea that they might not succeed is always lurking, waiting, but they've always beaten it. Most of the time they just don't acknowledge it's there. But this is the ultimate test. Remus doesn't like to think about it, but it is -- it really is -- their last huzzah.

Huzzah, Remus mouths to himself.

"We should," Sirius says.

"I know," James agrees.

"Savor the moment," Peter whispers.

"We ought to have music," Sirius points out. "Moony -- a record. Something -- dramatic."

"No, no," James says, "no, we must have silence." He licks his lips. "This, men, is the day we have prepared for since the very beginning. We are on the verge of greatness."

"Even though no one can ever know," Sirius adds.

"Even though no one can *ever* know," James repeats.

"Well, maybe we can hide it. Make another map. Buried map treasure. Only the worthy shall pass, et cetera et cetera," Sirius murmurs, as an afterthought. "That ought to be fun, too. I mean, the year isn't even over. We still have time to--"

"The suspense is driving me mad," Remus says dryly. "Music, no music, Sirius is bouncing and Peter is twitching and James looks like he's about to have an aneurysm so *can we*--"

"Shh," James says, clapping a hand over Remus' mouth. "You are ruining the moment for everybody."

All eyes turn once more to the map on the table in front of them. It is the sixth map; the first was to test the mechanism, the second to improve the mechanism, the third to refine the mechanism, the fourth to develop the map itself, the fifth to add all possible players. It is the sixth map, and it has a little something extra in it. Mischief, perhaps. Passwords. A sense of humor. It has notes and plans and secret passageways, favorite foods and four distinct personalities. According to James, it enjoys insulting Remus' nose second only to insulting Snape's. It is, Remus must admit, the perfect specimen (if not a bit moody). All they have left to do is decide on a password, the key, the finalization. But greatness is so close Remus can almost feel it.

Or perhaps that's Peter, twitching.

But even more omnipresent than the rhythm of Sirius' jiggling thigh is the knowledge that they are bound to each other in creation. Without even one of the four of them, maps and animagi and legacies disappear. It's the four of them, Remus thinks, the four of them together. It is at once a delight and a sobering thought. It is a wonderful thing to be a part of something larger than oneself, and a terrible thing to be inadequate in the face of it.

"You heard what Prongs said. Enjoy the moment," Sirius hisses in Remus' ear. "Stop thinking deep thoughts."

"Well now I can't," Remus replies. "You've spat on them."

James brings a finger to his lips and whispers, *shhh.* They draw in a deep breath all at once.

James taps the parchment with his wand.

"I do solemnly swear," he breathes, a tremble on his lips, "that I am up to no good."

The map unfurls.

"Oh, beautiful," Sirius murmurs.

"Oh, *yes*," James breathes.

Remus has to admit, it is pretty spectacular. He feels like a proud father, absolutely insane and somewhat giddy in the center of himself. There's a little glow of golden light before them, and painstakingly drawn footprints wind their separate ways down two-dimensional corridors, a microcosm of reality. James' meticulous scrollwork spells out the names.

"We're brilliant," Sirius says.

"*I* did that," Peter points, delighted. "And that, as well. You lot were too big."

"We are *brilliant*," Sirius says again.

"All right, men," James says. He steels himself. "Here in the year one-thousand-nine-hundred-seventy-six of our lord, anno domini, we are witness to the very first -- the very first --"

"All purpose tool and guide to ultimate mischief," Remus supplies.

"Right," Sirius agrees. "The Marauder's Map."

"Well," Remus says, into the faint glow and the dry ink and the wrinkly fruit of over a year's hard labor. "I'd say it's mischief managed, eh?"

shoebox_project (http://www.livejournal.com/community/shoebox_project/)
Cowritten by **dorkorific** and **ladyjaida**.
dorkorific specializes in **Sirius**; **ladyjaida** specializes in **Remus**.
dorkorific is **Mlle. Artiste**; **ladyjaida** is **Mlle. Bits-n-bats**.
The handwriting of Remus J. Lupin, Severus Snape and James Potter is done by **ladyjaida**.
The handwriting of Sirius Black, Peter Pettigrew and Lily Evans is done by **dorkorific**.
Don't worry; Peter won't be stupidified. **Trust us** on that one.
We would like to take a moment to thank **windjinn** for leaping down the stairs with **ladyjaida**'s bra on his head.

all characters herein are the intellectual property of j.k. rowling, scholastic and warner brothers.

Christmas Memories



'76, Christmas. Something off about Bellatrix.
Sirius says she was dropped on her head.



'76, Christmas. Well, alright, the idea of Trelawney bagging Snape is funny.



'76, Christmas. Perhaps Mr. Prewett can convince Ms. McKinnon not to kill me



'76, Christmas. The angle is appropriate.



'76, Christmas. My friends have simply got to stop stalking professors. It is most embarrassing.



'76, Christmas. I do suspect Sirius took this one.



Cowritten by **dorkorific** and **ladyjaida**.

dorkorific specializes in **Sirius**; **ladyjaida** specializes in **Remus**.

dorkorific is **Mlle. Artiste**; **ladyjaida** is **Mlle. Bits-n-bats**.

The handwriting of Remus J. Lupin, Severus Snape and James Potter is done by **ladyjaida**.

The handwriting of Sirius Black, Peter Pettigrew and Lily Evans is done by **dorkorific**.
Don't worry; Peter won't be stupidified. **Trust us** on that one.

We would like to take a moment to thank **windjinn** for leaping down the stairs with **ladyjaida**'s bra on his head.

all characters herein are the intellectual property of j.k. rowling, scholastic and warner brothers.

http://www.livejournal.com/community/shoebox_project

Part Twenty
February 1977

It is February; it is a Thursday; it is a crisp, cool day with a clear sky and the occasional brisk gust of wind. Later there will be a ring around the near-full moon signaling tomorrow's snow. Now there is only the sunlight unfiltered by clouds, though it is no less chill for the afternoon. It is February; it is a Thursday; and Sirius Black has every intention of breaking Severus Snape's nose.

There's little reason for it; or rather, there's as much reason as ever, depending on which side you're on. What matters most is that Remus is feeling peevish, that Snape is stubborn and refuses to call for help, and that Sirius has good aim, powerful fists and little self-control. Some combination of the elements -- some synergy of mood, emotions, scenery -- some twist of fate's humor -- all arrive at this conclusion. Sirius launches himself at Snape to avenge, for revenge, just as Snape recoils and hurls a fresh insult and Remus rounds the corner with a brand new quill and freshly-filled inkwell and what happens next involves three brilliant curse inventions, some staple but no less effective swears, and a great deal of exploding ink.

"What were you *doing*?" Sirius explodes, flapping a wet sleeve at Remus, who is by turns going pink, green, and now a sort of gratifying purply-red. With black speckles. It looks to Sirius as if he might actually throw a punch, which might be the only bright spot in this utterly crap day in this utterly crap month of the utterly crap existence of Sirius Black. "Running an egg-and-spoon race with an inkwell?"

"What was *I* doing?!" Remus snaps, yanking the straps of his bag shut as if he can retroactively protect his precious books from the rain of ink that has already slightly destroyed them. "I was *rounding a corner*, you ridiculous -- what were *you* doing?!"

"Working out some *tension*," Snape puts in, blotting delicately at the bleeding corner of his mouth with a dirty sleeve. "Getting his feelies in where he can," he adds, at which point Sirius, who is in the mood to let his elbows do the talking, steps on his foot and knees him in the neck when he goes down, which effectively ends a conversation that was most likely heading to a dead end anyway. "Gurghk," Snape says, though he no doubt means to say something else.

Remus' fingers tremble. Swinging heavy book-bags (now ruined by an overabundance of ink anyway) into the side of Sirius' head has never solved anything. But perhaps it has never solved anything because Remus has never actually tried it before. Torn between two instincts -- the pacifism to which he reverts whenever Sirius makes him livid and the little twitching in all his muscles that *lets* him know *just* how livid he is -- Remus grasps at a random third option and hopes for the best.

"Bugger -- bloody -- gerroff!" Sirius yelps. By the sheer power of Remus' forearms -- which have always pretended to be noodley by looking noodley but have never been anything less than unflinching man-steel -- he finds himself lifted three inches into the air and yoinked unceremoniously backwards. And away, he notes with the utmost regret, from Snape's *face* which it is his *supreme duty* to *kick at least ten times.*

"Gurghk," Snape says again. Remus is quite sure he does *not* mean to say thank you kindly, Mr. Lupin.

"Sit," he bites out at Sirius, who, conditioned by four years of being a dog, does so automatically before leaping upright again, crimson with rage and embarrassment. Snape recovers just enough to wheeze out a "good puppy," which requires Remus to launch himself at Sirius again and employ the Forearms of Iron. In fact he nearly has to employ the Tackle of Iron to stop Sirius' furious flailing, and Snape takes advantage of the temporary lull to Faff Off, though not before treading judiciously on Sirius' fingers. By the time the dust and ink settle, Sirius is slouched against the wall of the hallway, seething with wronged innocence and sucking fiercely at his knuckles, and Remus has even more ink up his nose and is feeling even more homicidal than the swell of the moon requires.

For a moment they both just sit there, breathing and nursing their various wounds, and then Remus says hoarsely, "What is your problem? Do you *want* to go to detention for a thousand years?"

"Oh, bugger off," Sirius snaps, "you insufferable do-gooder. Snape never tells anyone, I always beat his arse up between his shoulder-blades and who'd go about advertising that! Why don't you go practice your vegetarianism, or whatever it is you do for fun?"

They cannot get into a fight, Remus reminds himself. They cannot get into a fight because if Sirius died, James would be very upset. It might even negatively affect his elaborate Valentine's Day plans, and then Remus would be Persona Non Grata in the Potter-Evans household forever and ever, and would never meet their adorable redheaded babies with enormous glasses and questionable diapers. They cannot get into a fight because Remus does not get into fights; Remus does not get into fights because the idea of fights makes his stomach gymnastic; Remus does not get into fights because he does not have the constitution; though sometimes adrenaline takes over and he forgets that. That's what worries him. But they cannot get into a fight, Remus reminds himself. He has ink up his nose, his heart is beating too fast, the moon somewhere beyond the sky is pulling at his joints, and they cannot get into a fight. They can't even have a bit of a row. They can't even have words. What Remus must do is Bugger Off and Go Practice His Vegetarianism Or Whatever It Is He Does -- more along the lines of Sneeze Out Ink For A Month, perhaps -- because they cannot get into a fight. In all their years -- even when Sirius flushed all of Remus' underthings down the toilet, even when Sirius told Snape about everything he'd promised never to tell *anyone* about, even when Sirius was at his most miserable and therefore at his most insufferable -- they have not gotten into a fight. It's been an unspoken rule, an accepted constant of life. Remus Lupin does not get into fights. Other people get into fights. Remus Lupin is a no-fight zone. Remus Lupin is neutral ground. Remus Lupin is Switzerland. Remus Lupin buggers off.

Except Remus Lupin feels suddenly the explosive, maddening pressure of reversion, of turning back in on himself, of crumpling like a wrapper, of being kissed and doing nothing, of watching a thousand and one fights between James and Sirius and seeing them be all right because of it and resenting how easy it is for them to do anything, everything. *Fight. Kiss.* It is easy for other people to fight. Even in this moment, with his stomach doing handstands and triple backflips and upside-down splits, Remus Lupin wants to fight about not being able to fight.

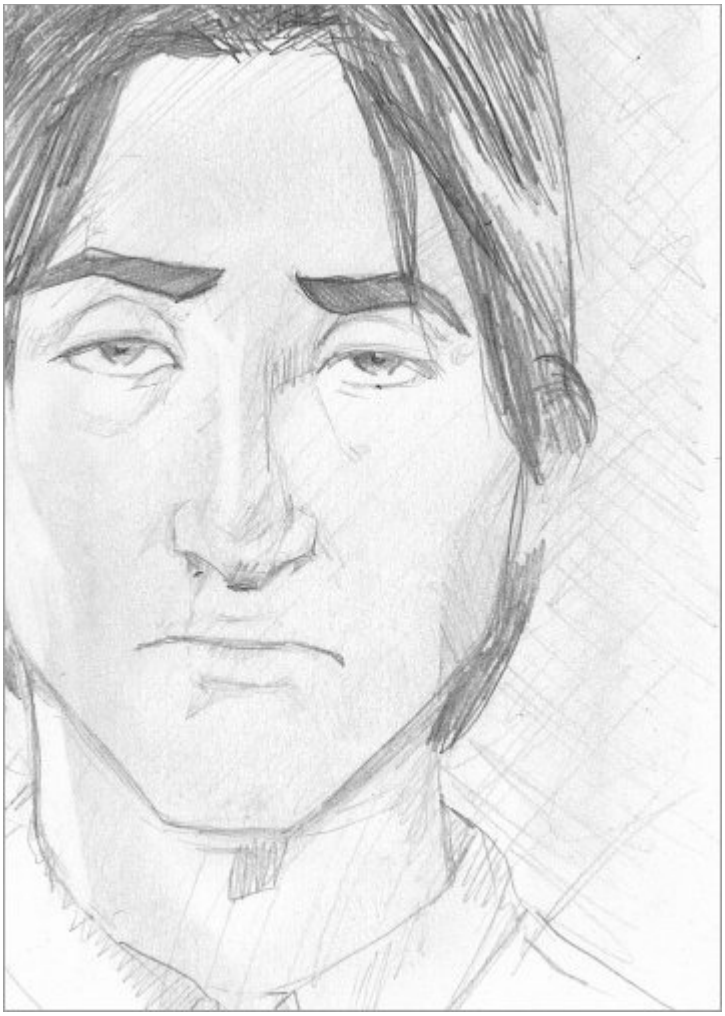
His lower lip quivers independently from his upper lip.

"You look like a two-year-old girl," Sirius says, unhelpfully.

"All right," Remus says, with remarkable calm. "That is *it*. We're done now. You can go beat up whomever you'd like, and I hope you go to detention for the rest of your *life*, and I hope Snape steps on your fingers until

they point in the wrong direction. Have a nice day." He pushes himself upright, flings his bag over his back, and storms off down the hallway.

"Fine!" Sirius yells after him. "And I hope you never get that ink out of your nostrils and everything you eat tastes like exams!"



All of which goes a long way to explain the curious *frisson* that runs through the Gryffindor common room some two hours later, when Remus goes downstairs to find Sirius already settled there, head buried -- curiously enough -- in a book. Sirius looks up and then pointedly looks down again.

Remus is Not Going To Let It Bother Him.

He puts his things down on the chair as far away from Sirius's as possible. Which is where he would have sat anyway, regardless. Because it is not bothering him. He just likes this chair best, that's all. It's comfortable, and he really likes being poked in the left buttock repeatedly by that one spring that pokes out.

"Stop squeaking," Sirius says shortly.

I'm not, Remus wants to yell. I'm *shifting*. I'm escaping this stupid spring. I'm *leaping over this sofa and punching you right in the eye*. Remus grits his teeth and clenches his jaw and reminds himself that what boys like Sirius want is a reaction. That is what they crave. That is what they're groping for. If they don't get it, they go away. They become bored. They are easily distracted. They go off to torture kittens or slugs or ants or babies or other small defenseless things that writhe and die but do not punch. Remus wonders how it would be -- to just punch. To just give in. He would probably break Sirius' face. In half. He is stronger than that, he knows; he can resist the urge, he knows. He just doesn't know if he wants to. He *does* know he *does* want to punch him. It is like fire in his veins. Perhaps this is how Sirius feels all the time, only for much less compelling reasons.

"Squeak, squeak, squeak," Sirius says. He is fishing. He sounds almost desperate for a response, incapable of differentiating between the good sort of attention and the broken face sort of attention. Remus wonders if he knows what he's trying to elicit. Remus wonders if he knows and desires it, some terrible behemoth of anger, some hurricane of werewolf rage, some explosion of all of Remus' arteries, the big vein in his temple at last going, softly, *pop*. "*Squeeeeeeeeeak,*" Sirius says, very quietly.

Remus makes a sound in his throat like nuclear weaponry. He has never been decent with insults. He has never practiced insults. He has always been somewhat in awe of Sirius' creativity, of James' seemingly infinite wealth of imagery. He has only ever wielded *insufferable* and *ridiculous* and then, in a corner compartment of his mind, thought of countless snide, subtle asides that no one would ever catch but would taste delicious. And just as he is about to maybe, just maybe, open that box and let one of them wing its poisonous way out, the portrait hole opens and Hell climbs through it.

"No, sweetheart, I'll lift you down," James says, with a dripping, horrible simper. "You know I love doing it."

"You are a real man," Lily says--*Lily*, for whom Remus at one time had some respect. She kisses him on the forehead. Remus cannot look away. "I doubt anyone has ever told you that. Oops! Be careful--"

"It's under control," James says gallantly, despite being now bent into a very painful-looking contortion in which his spine pops disturbingly in and out of alignment. "Just got a little overeager on the lifting. Oh, God. Would you rub my shoulders back into place, valentine?"

"That depends," Lily whispers, in the kind of whisper that carries all the way across the room -- across the school, across the country. There is no escape. "What are you going to do for me?" Her hands crawl disturbingly down his back.

"Well," James begins, perking up, and Sirius throws his quill down and yells, "Will you lot just get in the room please? Some of us are trying to study." In spite of himself, Remus is terribly grateful.

Lily shoots him a disdainful look. "Studying? And for what class, do tell, is Reading Upside-Down a requirement?"

"It's for Murdering Every Single One Of You Studies," Sirius mutters, flipping his book the right way up with enough force to rip it in half. "Whatever. Close the bloody door, there's a draft."

Remus' focus shifts almost immediately, and imperceptibly, until he realizes he is no longer watching James and Lily -- and frankly, who can, except the serially deranged and the desperately sado-masochistic -- but Sirius' hunched shoulders instead. Remus is at once angry and sorry, at once too willing to fight and too willing to understand where Sirius is coming from. Or he thinks. Or he hopes. Not fighting with Sirius for so long has required a depth of understanding Remus has not until this moment realized exists. Infuriating, obnoxious, childish, brilliant, angry, destructive, compelling Sirius Black, who has from the very beginning been a bit too brash and a bit too charming and a bit too immature -- Remus has always known he understood him, but he did not know how well. It is terrifying. And still, the fight does not go out of him; the fight is only encouraged, fanned into a blaze, something eager to cover up its motivations. Yes, Remus realizes, this is how Sirius feels *all the time.* It is horrifying.

"Did you mean it when you said I am a real man?" James asks, with a flourish. A real, live flourish. The sort that is ridiculous even reading about. The sort that makes Remus cringe. Sirius' shoulders twitch.

"Why," Lily replies, disappearing temptingly up the stairs, "why don't you ask me again *later?* When we're *alone?*"

James hurls himself after her, fairly close to tumbling back down again and breaking his neck.

"Disgusting," Sirius mutters, "who the hell is this person? Not the James Potter I know, no, I think not, it's like a -- like a -- like a great big oozing thing with horrible hair and -- bugger!" He flings the book across the room.

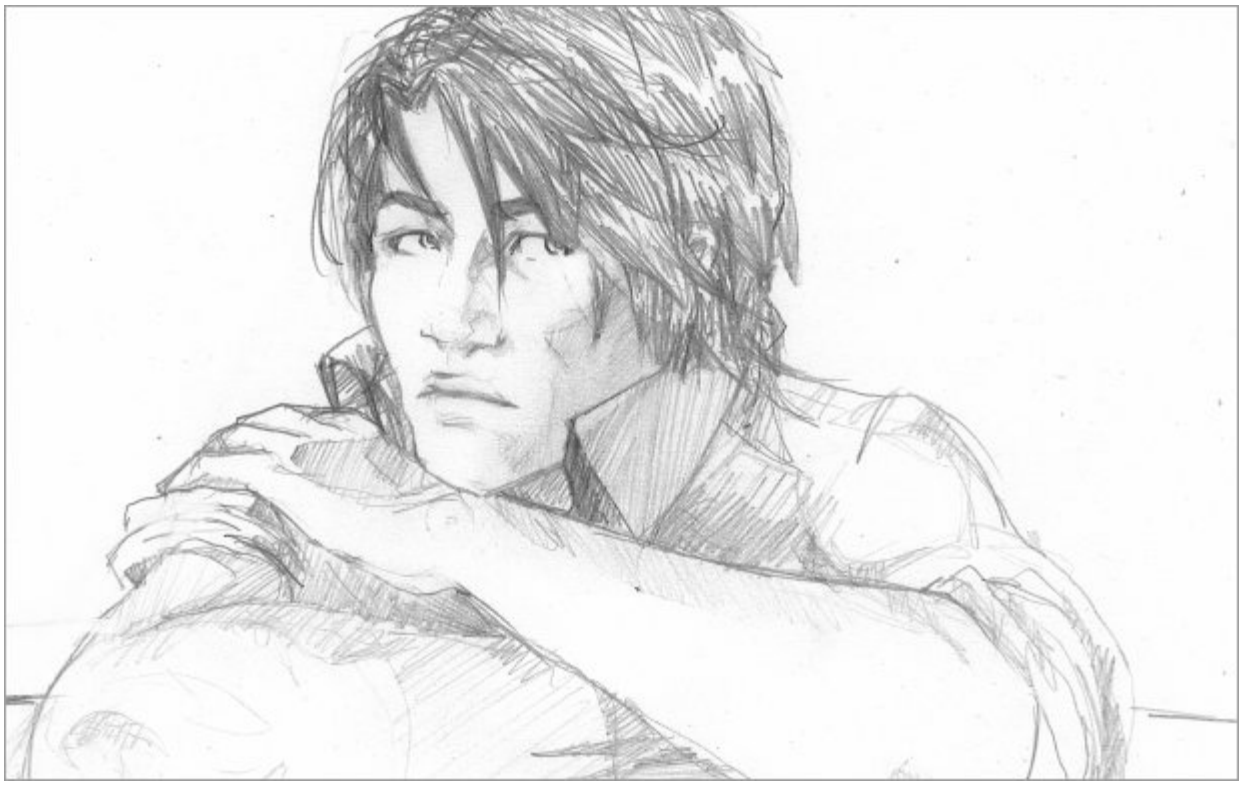
And Remus has at last had enough. Something about the sickening crunch of the pages, the smush of the binding, the thud as it hits the floor -- it is wholly ridiculous, that it should be the catalyst. It isn't that Remus cares about the book. He simply *wants* to care about it.

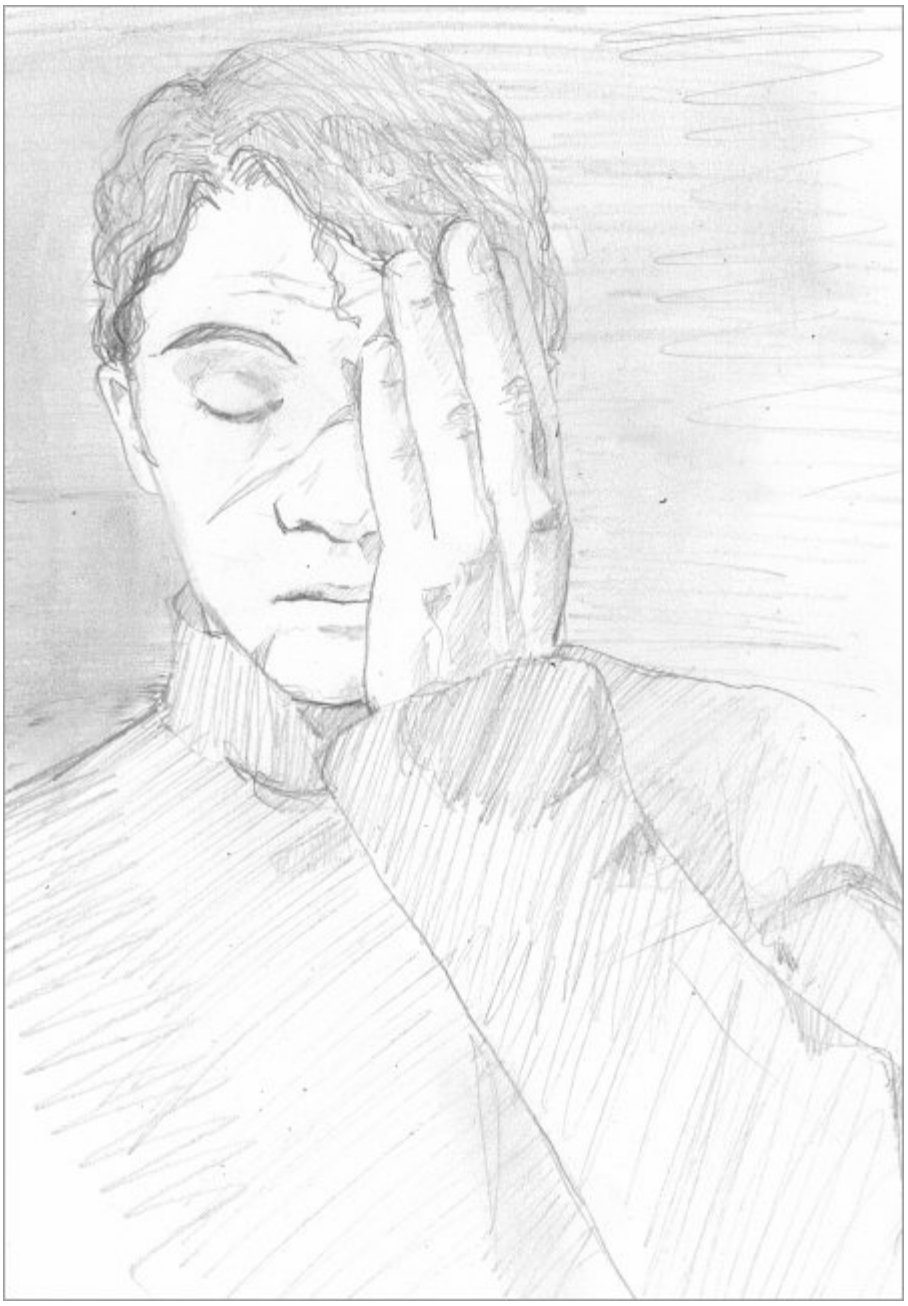
"Only *children* throw books, Sirius," he manages to say coolly, before he crosses to the door.

"Where are *you* going?" Sirius' voice drifts after him.

Remus closes the door very quietly, but he would rather slam it. He knows what kind of boys slam doors -- Sirius -- and what animals break them -- wolves, wolves and their hard shoulders, wolves and their nighttime, full-moon despair. It's a terrible day for making Remus Lupin mad. It's going to be an even more terrible night.

***





***

"We can't keep this up forever, you know," Lily says mildly, stretching out across James's bed. One of her socks has collapsed around her ankle. *I love you so much I spend all day wanting to flush myself down the toilet*, James tries very hard not to say. "They are so very miserable. I hate to do it to Remus."

You make me feel like my insides are in the wrong place. "I know," James says, a little sadly. "But I love it so. I

love what it does to their faces. The little noises they make! And it isn't," he adds, glancing quickly at her and deciding she's complacent enough that he can risk it, "as if I completely don't mean it. I *do* like when you think I'm manly."

Lily shifts so that she is lying on her side and props her head up. "Well, I shall keep that in mind for all three seconds out of every month when it's true. I'm sorry, you just aren't very good at it." She yawns; when her eyes close James can see the freckles on her eyelids. James thinks that he has spent his entire life waiting to be profoundly moved by the freckles on someone's eyelids.

"Listen," he says, "do you think I'm revolting?"

"Sometimes," Lily says.

Your freckles make me useless. "I got you a valentine," says James. "I'm trusting you to tell me if it's revolting. I need guidance. I need to be trained."

"You do," Lily agrees. "But I am fond of you. Cheer up. Valentines are hard, and you do try your best. It's rather endearing, actually. Though it isn't manly."

"It's hard to be manly with hearts and cherubs," James sighs. "I try my best but everything is pink and trimmed with lace."

"James," Lily says. "Did you get me something pink and trimmed with lace?"

"Uh." James makes a mental note that part two of his valentine should definitely be scrapped and later burned so no one will ever have evidence it existed. "Not anymore."

"Then I'll do my best with you," Lily replies. "Training, that is. I've always wanted to train a boy. Perhaps I can even teach you to be manly."

If anyone could, it would be you. The terrible thing is, it's true. Lily Evans is more manly than James could ever hope to be. He knows he ought probably to hate her for it, or at least be terrified of her, but he's neither. He's just a confusing pile of awe and worship, which shakes down to feeling like a pudding person. It's as if he came half-formed and half-baked out of a mold. He melts against Lily's side. "It's an awful valentine," he admits. "I ought to scrap it all."

Lily slips her fingers into his hair and pulls his head back with affectionate irritation. "Well, give it to me first, and let me decide if it ought to be scrapped. You are perfectly rotten at this entire thing. It's like trying to teach a monkey not to fling its dung."

"Agh," says James. "I know. All right." He rolls off the bed and onto the floor, which is worth it, because if he had sat up that would have been three extra nanoseconds during which he and Lily would not have been touching. "It's, um. Right." He gropes around under the bed, hoping against hope that it has been eaten by one of the more aggressive dust creatures; but alas, there it is, hopelessly inadequate and wrapped in a pink ribbon that flutters a Morse code of incompetence against his fingertips.

"Here. Don't you dare laugh, because it cost loads, you should know. I wanted to get you some kind of fluttery little nightie thing but I thought you'd have my eyes out, and I know chocolates are so -- chocolates, you know, so -- I don't know. I sort of gave up. Here is your valentine." *In time, you may forgive me.*

"Give it here," Lily says imperiously, and tears into the wrapping more like a hungry two-year-old than a vision of red-headed perfection. James screws up his courage, closes his eyes, and waits for the clip round the ear.

It doesn't come. He opens one eye, cautiously. Lily has gone pink -- pinker than usual -- and she is looking into the little box with a Beater's-bat-between-the-eyes kind of expression. It is over. All of it is over. Their brief, confusing and pudding-like love; the only Valentine's day ever which has not been a disturbing and horrific farce; James's pathetic and, until the appearance of Lily Evans, utterly useless life.

"Don't," James says, in despair. "Don't say anything. I'm sorry. They're awful, aren't they. You don't even wear earrings. It's worse than that place we went on that awful date, with the cherub rapists. Oh God, it's not my fault."

"Oh," Lily says. She sounds rather frantic. "Oh. You can't have. But you *did*, James, it's -- I mean I'd like to make fun of you, you know I would, but--"

"Oh, my lord," James whispers, comprehension breaking like the sun upon the wobbling jelly landscape of his brain. "You like them! I can't believe you!"

"They're *beautiful.*" Lily looks at him as if he has sprouted goggle eyes or tentacles. "How could you do this to me? This was supposed to be terrible, and then I'd box you around the ears, but it's *lovely.* They match my *eyes*, James."

"You *are* a girl!" James yelps, torn between delight and paralyzing shock. "Under it all, you like girly things! Look at you! I got you right in the girl parts! I am a marvelous boyfriend. I am a champion. I am the king of the world!"

"You are looking for a punch in the mouth, is what you are," Lily says, but her cheekbones and her eyes are bright.

"Come on," James says, "admit it. I'm manly."

"No," Lily replies. "I have my pride." She holds up an earring. It dangles, bright and winking in the light, next to her cheek, her jaw. It makes her freckles look more vibrant and alluring, which James swears should not be possible. Certainly these aren't the contemplations of a sane young man who has his priorities in order. *I would die for those freckles. One day I probably will. And all it means is, this bird's been spending too much time in the sun.* "But you got it right, James. I mean, you really did. Do you have any idea how troublesome this is?"

James blinks. "How -- wait, what? I don't understand. I thought they -- they match your eyes!"

"They *match* my *eyes*," Lily agrees. When she kisses him, James doesn't have time to ask for any further explanation. And then, he understands. Like falling off a broom and catching the golden snitch, then hitting the ground hard from too high up. Like being flushed down a toilet and coming out, soggy and disgusting, in the

middle of Filch's private files. It's like all that to the extent that it's all James knows -- and at the same time James knows it's more than his puny sensibilities can ever explain. James understands and *troublesome* is exactly the right word.

***



Taken by accident before Prongs had full control of where he stepped. Result: One picture. One crunched camera.

***

Padfoot paces, forth and back, feeling the strange absence of Pack. There is nothing unsafe here, nothing he can't fight off, but the aloneness under the wide, wild smell of night is unfamiliar, unsettling. There is a sharpness, an imbalance that he doesn't like, and when the first howl comes his feet don't fly naturally to meet it the way they usually do. He has to turn, hesitant, force himself around, layer an odd human conscientiousness over instinct, just to pace toward the old hut and the steel tang of the wolf.

And it is, of course, the human layer that makes him hesitate. One part of it is a very basic warning, little snippets of old tales and of whispers in a youthful dark. *Little by little a fear invaded him, a strange fear which he had never felt before, the fear of the dark, the fear of solitude, the fear of the deserted wood, and the fear also of the fantastic wolf who...* And another part is personal, a slight hitching wince between the ribs, where the flesh and the body and the heart converge, and everything is terribly weak. Padfoot listens to the grass worn down beneath his paws. Then, when the second howl comes, he goes to it.

Sirius, riding low under Padfoot's mind like currents drifting underwater, is still angry. That's the worst bit. You can't afford to be angry; it makes your mind too loud. Things get confused. Dogs don't understand angry, any more than they understand jealous or betrayed or wronged or any one of the numerous loud, human emotions that Sirius can't seem to stop himself feeling. It makes things bumpy, makes his feet get mixed up and his nose feel itchy and out of sync with the rest of his brain and makes it hard to follow familiar scents; he has to share instinct with his eyes and his ears, and Padfoot doesn't like doing that, and neither does Sirius, and it's all a jumble and he's so busy being angry at the fact that he's angry that he runs straight into the trapdoor and bruises his nose.

This only makes him more angry. That's the thing about angry; more often than not it just leads to more angry, and more angry after that, until the whole day's ruined. He gets angry when he realizes he's getting angry -- not that he knows how that works, but it does, and it makes a right mess of things. Sneezing and growling at the trap door, whose fault that certainly was, Padfoot shakes dust off his muzzle and pads into the shack. Beneath him the floor is creaky -- creakier than usual? Or is that just because he's the only one about to hear it creaking; and that always makes things seem louder?

Creeeeeeeaaaaaaaaak. Padfoot trots up to the stairs and sniffs and tries to savor the combination of scents, of wood and age and spooky and wolf up above, earth beneath, trees rustling, little small animals hiding, but there's too much of Sirius in him to be anything but revolted. He sneezes again. What a waste of a night. For Padfoot, there never is. For dogs, nights are really never wasted. For people? Nights are wasted all the time. Padfoot huffs hot breath into the chill air. He tries. He tries hard. He even thinks about fleas.

It's no use. All he can think about is being angry, and wasting a night, and hating the moon for waxing at the most inconvenient time. Upstairs comes the howl again, pure wolf, never anything but wolf; and Sirius takes a moment to hate him for that, too, for always being wholly one thing or wholly the other. Sharp comes the smell and Padfoot drags toward it, feeling heavy, leashed.

The wolf hurls itself against the door, once, twice, shaking the wood under Padfoot's feet. For an insane, spiteful moment, not really Sirius, not really Padfoot, he considers leaving, letting it dash itself around the walls all night. Leave danger and strange smells and run back, dropping the mind that confuses him and just letting himself be a sulking boy again, which is all he really wants.

But Remus' face -- all boy, all disapproving -- looms above him, like some comical conscience. Or perhaps not even that, just a large nose and pursed lips and a furrow in his brow and that streak of sadness across his mouth, nose, cheek. Remus doesn't do it on purpose. That's just it. Remus doesn't even know he does it, and Sirius doesn't even know what it is, and so between them both, you see, they're knocking about in the dark getting angrier and angrier and nowhere at all. Sirius growls again, low but louder, and the sound of the wolf shaking the foundations of the shack stops. The howls stop. There is only silence and the sensation of heavy breaths across a spit-soaked muzzle.

Padfoot doesn't leave. Padfoot hears the breathing across the door and down the windy, rickety staircase. He takes a few steps up, and a few more, stopping and sniffing the air. It smells different. Angry. Or he could be thinking angrily and translating everything as angry. Or he could be pretending, as he always pretends, that the world writhes in Sirius Black's every twinge and turmoil. There could be no anger at all. There could be only that half memory, lurking.

From a distant country had come, in the very nick of time, a message that took me out of the danger of the snow sleep and the jaws of the wolf.

When the door snaps upon its hinges and the wolf leaps down upon him, Padfoot is only half prepared.

Half is still better than none. Padfoot rolls, flips up onto his feet, surprised now and angrier and warier, pain bunched and dull on his shoulder. The wolf rises up slowly, hackles raised, long teeth bared, and its eyes gold in the moonlight. This is not what Pack does, this is not how things work, the marks of the wolf's claws in his shoulder and its yellow fangs glinting, and Sirius hates him suddenly and violently more than he can remember ever hating anyone.

There's too much to reconcile, boy and werewolf, friend and Remus, all of the time. It isn't just on nights when the moon confuses madness; it isn't just during arguments or pointed not arguments. It's all the bloody time. Something -- surprise, pain, a growing hurt, balance shifted to imbalance -- ignites between them.

They fight like animals, like boys can't, so that the shack shakes and they are forced to pull away at times to pant and lick their wounds and judge the distance between. When they leap to be together again it is with growls and the low whining snaps of wolf teeth, the sharp battle of forepaws and hind-legs, a flipping and twisting battle not for something so simple as dominance. It's to win. It's too complicated, too complicated. Padfoot's back hits the floorboards over and over; the wolf is too big and too terrible and too strong. And he feels his nails dig into the wolf's belly even as he feels the wolf pin him; and then kicks the wolf off; and then it begins again and anew. They can't do this forever; but they are going to do this forever. Or until the two of them tire. Or until the night dwindles into morning.

Sirius wakes up naked and aching, which is not exactly a new experience, but he's also on the floor, splinters driven into his elbows and dust in his hair and no visible excuses nearby. He pushes himself slowly up onto his elbows and coughs, painfully.

"Ow," he says, to no one, and then, a little stronger, "fucking ow! -- *ahhh* --" as he accidentally puts weight on the wrong thigh, the one that, he has just discovered, is covered in a carpet of yellowish-purple bruises and three long tracks dragged down to the knee.

"Christ," he says, slightly awed. It's pretty alarming, this injury. It looks, frankly, like he was caught in an enormous cheese-press. That's the thing about such injuries -- they always look a little bit queer, like someone in the night tried to turn you into sausage or pastry. It takes half the danger out of scars. The other half disappears when you know the real story behind them -- it's never "That's the time I fought the giant rats" and more often than not "That's the time the bookcase fell on me because I dropped my underwear behind it." And of course the one time you get in a fight with a werewolf, it's a story you can't ever tell. He thumbs one of the dark, dark bruise edges gingerly, hissing. They're the shape of -- distorted, stretched, but -- a giant paw.

Sirius shakes his head, remembering the night like a bad dream, a bad exam, a bad dinner party with his relatives. It all feels too real for too long after. This time, he has the war wounds to prove it *was* real.

"Nnaugh," someone moans from the corner, sounding much like Sirius feels. Then, there's a creak and a series of small crashes followed by another, even more pathetic "nnaugh."

Sirius pushes himself up, feeling the tremble and strain in his arms, and stumbles upright. "Oi, Moony, you all right?"

"Don't," says the someone, in tones of unbearable agony, "please don't. You talk like an air siren, it's honestly unbelievable. Augh."

Sirius picks his way across the floor, across new gouges in the floorboards and walls and splintered furniture. The sun trickles weakly through the disjointed boards, striping the room in bars of pale yellow like a cage, and then a pile of rubble somewhere near Sirius's feet stirs and says, faintly, "I want to die."

Sirius ponders the possible responses -- all witty, eloquent, incredibly pithy -- to Remus' statement which is, frankly, not up to par. *Guess you've met the cheese press* is one, and *You look like a sausage* is another. Beyond that, though, bubbles a surge of awe: *I did that to you?* and *You did that to me?* Remus -- the great groaning motionless Remus lump -- has deep gouges up the length of his forearms and thighs and blood in his hair along with the dust, and a splinter in the back of one knee, and bruises everywhere. He does look like a sausage, all spotted and untrustworthy. Sirius looks down at his palms to the faint gray memory of paws.

"You look dead already," Sirius says, crumpling down beside him.

"I do not feel dead," Remus replies. "I want to feel dead so that I don't feel almost dead."

"You have a splinter the size of a pony in your leg," Sirius points out.

"So that's what that is," Remus murmurs. "I wasn't quite sure."

"What did you think were the possibilities," Sirius inquires, giving up on the effort of staying upright and collapsing stretched-out on the floor, "an actual pony? A tree? Part of the house?"

"Your teeth," Remus says, "permanently attached to my fibia, like a clamp -- oh God." He sits up suddenly, face washed free of color. "Oh God, I didn't--" He looks strange, asymmetrical, his bare chest and stomach sickly pale and blooming purple and his wild hair matted down over one eye. For a moment Sirius feels ill and weightless, a distant terror filling up the back of his throat.

"I didn't," Remus insists, his hands hanging uselessly in midair. "We. Have you -- but how could I not?"

"I don't know," Sirius says hoarsely, after a moment. "How would one...know?"

Remus grabs him by the shoulders with hands still surprisingly strong, fingers rough and freezing and dry, but doesn't shake him. His fingers tighten like ten small vices. "Because you were a dog," Remus says, "please, because you were Padfoot -- because it doesn't work that way -- does it?"

"I don't feel any different," Sirius tries to assure him.

"Neither did I, at first," Remus says. His fingers drop; he pats Sirius down, trying to avoid bruises. Of course he fails, because Sirius is one enormous bruise, but Sirius grits his teeth and tries not to make pathetic mewling noises. "You feel like a boy," Remus whispers. "That's all, you -- you feel like a boy."

"So do you," Sirius points out, and wishes immediately after that he hadn't. "No, that's not what I meant. I mean -- well, I'm not going to say *How bad can it be*, that would be -- well I'm *not* -- but I don't think I *am*. Do you see? I mean the first time -- the first time I was Padfoot -- I think you bit me then and it was all right." Relief floods him, warm and wonderful. "I even had a mark for weeks, Moony, and everyone kept making comments about how I was a sly dog and then you said 'Not sly enough' and we all had a laugh about it. You see, it's all right. It's all right." He flicks wood out of Remus' hair, unsure of what to do with his hands. "You see," he repeats, "Remus, Moony, it's all right."

"*All right*," Remus echoes, sounding stunned and furious and altogether entirely fourteen years old and before nature made him a man, "*all right* you daft stupid idiot?"

"Your voice just broke," Sirius feels compelled to point out. "Look, I had a bit of a panic too, but it's all right, I said it's all right, let's just..." His knuckles graze Remus's shoulder, which is freezing; Sirius yelps and grabs his hand away.

"What," Remus asks, growing even tenser around the edges, "what?"

"Nothing," Sirius placates. "You gave me the cold shoulder -- get it? -- ha ha. Do you realize we just got in a fight?"

"I doubt I will forget it within the next month," Remus says, relaxing slightly and wincing as a tender part of his palm grazes the floor.

"Untrue," Sirius says. "Werewolf. I can see those bruises fading already. Whereas I, oh God,*I* will be hopping about on one leg until I am well into my twenties. The point is, we got in a *fight*!" He's always sort of wondered what it would be like, Remus in a fight, and imagined it would start with all coolness and sort of crazy kung-fu style movements and then at the end a great deal of stumbling and tripping over oneself. He didn't really think he wouldn't remember it after it happened. "We don't get in fights."

"I am as mystified as you are," Remus mumbles, examining his raw-scraped palms and carefully not looking at Sirius.

"You're not going to be all dodgy about it, are you?" Sirius asks. "You're not going to be embarrassed about it or upset about it or write about it in your diary and wonder what it *means* and what I'm *feeling*, are you?"

"Don't be stupid," Remus mutters. "I'm going to heal and you're going to be hopping about on one leg until you are well into your twenties. There's a difference. I could have -- we thought for a minute that I *had* -- it's not a fight, Sirius, it was trying to bite each other's eyes out."

"You never actually went for the eyes," Sirius says. "You bite below the belt, apparently. Who knew?"

"*Sirius*," Remus warns, before pausing to really think about it. It's not their first fight; it can't be. And Sirius is always getting into fights with everyone, because there is something wrong with everything in his brain. But this isn't a fight -- there were human reasons for it, and animal reactions. Remus doesn't work that way. It's too dangerous. "We did have a fight," he concedes, finally. "I don't remember it. Did I win?"

"Yes, you won, you're like seven hundred pounds of steel and snarly, of course you won. You're not looking at me, Lupin." Sirius frowns. "You *are* going to write about it in your diary and wonder what it *means* and why you're so *confused*! You *are*!"

"I most certainly am *not*," Remus replies, sniffing. "I'll write in my diary about what I please and perhaps it will focus more on why you are so often naked when you don't have to be." That is something that on second thought maybe he should not have said, but Sirius in his blessed oblivion steams right over it.

"We had a fight, Moony," Sirius says. "We ought to get cake, and celebrate. It feels -- it feels -- do you know how I feel about it? I feel *good* about it. I was this close to knocking your head between two books, you know. If I had had opposable thumbs, I mean, and could have held a book."

"I wouldn't have wasted the books on you," Remus admits, "but I think I know what you mean."

"You didn't need the books," Sirius says, "you were knocking my head between your two enormous paws like -- like a bloody great wolf fighting a tiny puppy, which is exactly what that was. The point is, I did fairly well under the circumstances. I mean, for heaven's sake, I'm still alive!"

"It is shocking," Remus agrees. "Look, for all our sakes, would you mind terribly putting on some trousers? Or some upholstery or something?"

"You kick, is the thing," Sirius says, warming to his topic. "It's utterly unnecessary, because you have claws like steak knives, but you kick. Keep that in mind. It was all I could do to keep you from ending the House of Black forever and ever." With some effort, he yanks a small carpet out from under the upended table and wraps it grandly about his waist. "What do you think? Appropriate scion-wear?" He turns, preens a little, smoothes it down. It's purple. Purple is a good color for him. It matches the bruises.

"What about Regulus?" Remus asks.

Sirius snorts. "Gay as a maypole. No grandkids from that direction, I shouldn't think. Do you want cake? I think I want cake."

"Has there ever been a time in your life when you didn't want cake?" Remus grumbles, steadying himself against the wall. "Agh. Pass me that tablecloth."

"What a pair we'll make," Sirius says, tossing it over. Remus, gingerly, pulls it up over his shoulders and swaddles himself in it "Their Supreme Majesties, King Hearthrug and his consort, Lady Linen Closet--"

"I don't see why I should be the consort," Remus interrupts, carefully folding the ripped lace into a sort of toga. "You have more consort-y hair. You're practically Lady Godiva."

"You know I get shaggy around midyear," says Sirius, sounding injured. "I'd ask you to cut it, but I don't trust you with the scissors. You *kicked* me."

"You deserved it."

"Oh, did I? How did I deserve it, exactly? Bloody great claws!"

"You've been insufferable for months."

"That's—as if I—it's you! *You've* been insufferable for months!"

"That's because you were insufferable first." Remus shifts, trying to catch sight of the splinter gradually working on giving him gangrene. "Like this splinter. Just -- wiggle wiggle, poke poke, only -- you know, you."

"I knocked the English language out of your head," Sirius wonders. "I can't believe it. I must be stronger than I thought."

"And more insufferable than you thought," Remus reminds him. "You are a very poor judge of yourself."

"Hang on a tick," Sirius protests, "I haven't been all that bad. Not worse than usual."

"I have contemplated murder. It's always," Remus makes vague, forceful motions, hating his lack of aptitude for physical expression, "you know, you being—sulk sulk, and awkward, and even when it's not awkward it's awkward, and now with Lily and you not being James's best girl anymore, it's awful, Sirius, it's unbearable."

Sirius frowns again. "So that's what this is all about, then? You could have just *said* something, you know."

Remus groans. "Sirius, you would have laughed me from here until the toilet and you wouldn't have stopped until graduation. It's unfair. If I were James I'd put frogs in your underwear but though that solves things for James it just means I'll have frogs in *my* underwear the next night and that's the last thing I need; it's no solution at all." Remus purses his lips. His shoulders tremble.

"Go on," Sirius says darkly. "Say it."

"You've just been insufferable for months," Remus repeats.

"Your reaction was worse," Sirius mutters. "It was like dealing with Remus Lupin, age twelve, all over again. Like I said, head, books, temptation, so hard to resist." He pauses. "But I'm not mad with you anymore. Funny, isn't it."

"Funny," Remus says.

"Perfectly explicable, in my opinion," Sirius says knowledgeably. "You know. Bash the daylights out of someone, all of a sudden their presence becomes much easier to tolerate. On this is based my entire relationship with Severus Snape. Look, I'm a twit. I thought you knew that when we started being friends."

"I knew," Remus admits. "I just had no idea of the extent -- the point is, I'm sorry."

"No you're not," says Sirius unexpectedly. Remus looks up. Sirius is watching him very carefully, dark eyes unreadable. "You're really not. It's marvelous. You've been wanting to do that for ages. So have I," as an afterthought, "but then I'm always beating people up. So. That's not an apology, by the bye, in case you want it to be."

"One of us has to be sorry," says Remus, mildly perplexed.

"I'm not sure that's true," says Sirius, offering a hand. "Come on. You can't lean against that wall forever. Heave-ho."

"No, I am sorry," Remus insists, taking the hand and pulling himself up. Wobbly. He's very wobbly. "I'm sorry I didn't beat you bloody sooner, to save us all the aggravation of waiting for it to happen."

"That's a little more sincere," Sirius says. "I'll accept it. But I'm not telling you *I'm* sorry because apologizing for being my charming self is sort of pointless, isn't it?"

"It might be more necessary than you realize," Remus mutters, but good-naturedly.

"I never apologize to James, you see," Sirius explains. "This isn't really how fighting works."

"I'm not James," Remus points out.

"True. James hits like a girl. You don't. Always thought it'd be the other way 'round, though. We both have hidden depths." Sirius slings an arm around Remus' shoulders and leans heavily against him. "I'd say our lesson is learned, wouldn't you? Always hit each other before we explode. Point made; we'll never make that mistake again."

"Don't you think we ought to consider *why* we wanted to hit each other so badly?" Remus asks wryly. "That might, you know, solve future problems before they ever even start."

"Boring," Sirius says. "What shall we conquer next?"

"The infirmary," Remus suggests. "You can always have a first year bring you celebratory cake."

"I think," Sirius says rather shakily, "upon moving I have determined that cake is perhaps not the best idea. What with my intestines being, you know, in knots. I think I'm going to pass out."

"Don't," Remus pleads, slipping another arm under his shoulder. "Oh God. You'll take me down with you, and who knows if I'll ever get up again?"

"Shut up," Sirius says, "you crippled me. You crippler. Mind the carpet, there, it's a little precarious."

"God forbid we revisit the ducky situation," Remus mutters, obligingly rearranging his arm. "It's been a very odd year."

"And promises only to get odder," Sirius agrees. "Do you think if we're convalescing we don't have to watch Evans and James exchanging revolting tokens and drooling onto each other's faces?"

"Doubtful," Remus says. "The drooling is fairly omnipresent."

"Hnggh," Sirius grunts expressively.

"I know," Remus says, feeling black. "However we too are quite the pair."

"At least I do not hold doors open for you or spend every minute of my life caressing your tender cheek and your fiery hair. Or slurping about your face as if you are ice cream." Sirius tries to laugh and winces. "Or perhaps that wasn't all that funny, considering -- never mind, let's be off. To the infirmary. And blessed medication."

Remus never tells Sirius afterwards how much of the way he mostly carries him there.

***

Madam Pomfrey is used to the very strange comings and goings of Sirius Black, Remus Lupin, James Potter and Peter Pettigrew; weekly there is some combination from or of the four arriving with terrifying boils that have teeth or whiskers in unspeakable places or with extra arms and the like. Gryffindors will be Gryffindors, she tells herself, and makes up the appropriate number of cots, and dreams of the good old days when boils only had eyes. Today it's two beds, and it's surprisingly early, and she was supposed to go out and get Remus herself -- all of which is more than a little unsettling.

"Now tell me again," she says, doing her best to sound comforting and reassuring, "you did what?"

"He threw me off a building," Black answers smoothly. "Terrible, terrible. I don't want to get him in trouble or anything but, you know, there it is."

"Those look like clawmarks," says Madame Pomfrey. They don't *look* like claw marks; they *are* clawmarks. Poppy Pomfrey was not born yesterday. She fixes Remus with a stern, tell-me-the-truth-or-else look, but he's gone slightly pink and is examining the ceiling with great interest.

"Those would be from the dogs," Black goes on, not missing a beat. "Huge horrible creatures, probably

Grubbly-Plank's breeding them, you ought to look into it, someone could get killed."

"The two of *you* got into a fight," Poppy repeats. She feels a little silly, but these boys are enough to make Helga herself go gray around the edges, and that's when they don't fight. It would try anyone's patience. She can practically feel her hair turning white. "Remus Black and -- Remus Lupin and Sirius Black." Remus Lupin doesn't fight. Especially not with his friends. It's practically the only way he *hasn't* injured himself. "Are you quite sure it was the two of you?"

"Oh yes," says Black with a little too much enjoyment. "Huge fight. I went to go find him this morning and he was all naked, for some reason, and just went off on me. Ashamed, I expect. You should have seen it. Hair and blood all over and no trousers to be found. Confidentially, I think he's been drinking."

Poppy changes tactics. "Remus, you've barely a scratch on you." It's usually safer to address yourself to Lupin, who at least has the sense God gave little green apples. "You're telling me you two got in the same fight?" He heals fast, needless to say, obviously, poor boy, what with the condition, but surely not that fast. They'd had to have finished a good six hours ago, which would be during the night, and if they'd fought during the night... Remus mumbles something into his infirmary-grade pillowcase-gown. "Speak up, dear," Poppy soothes, "whatever it is, just say it so we all can hear it, there's a lad."

"Sirius Black fights like a girl," Remus mumbles, but audibly. He lifts his head. "It was all running and screaming and tripping over his own toes the second I went after him." Sirius boggles. So does Madam Pomfrey. There is an awkward sort of silence. "He fell right out of his trousers," Remus plows on, getting a little braver. "I'm not quite sure what his strategy was, exactly -- blind me with nudity or turn me to stone or what-have-you -- but, well, there you have it. Er. That's how it happened, I mean."

"Fights like a girl, eh?" Sirius hisses, but looks unexpectedly proud.

"Well," Poppy says, then, "well, well," a few more times, trying to get a hold on the situation. "Well. If you're sure nothing..." She pauses. "Nothing *dangerous* occurred?"

"I wouldn't lie about something like that," Remus assures her gravely.

"He attacked me," Sirius blusters, puffing. "He ought to be locked up. Throw away the key. Take away his library privileges. You know, the usual. Maximum security, too."

"We'll look into it," Madam Pomfrey assures him, brow lifted. "Now drink up, there you go, and be sure *not* to go wandering about -- wandering about -- *looking* for people at such a time again, have I made myself clear? Dangerous things could happen! Very dangerous."

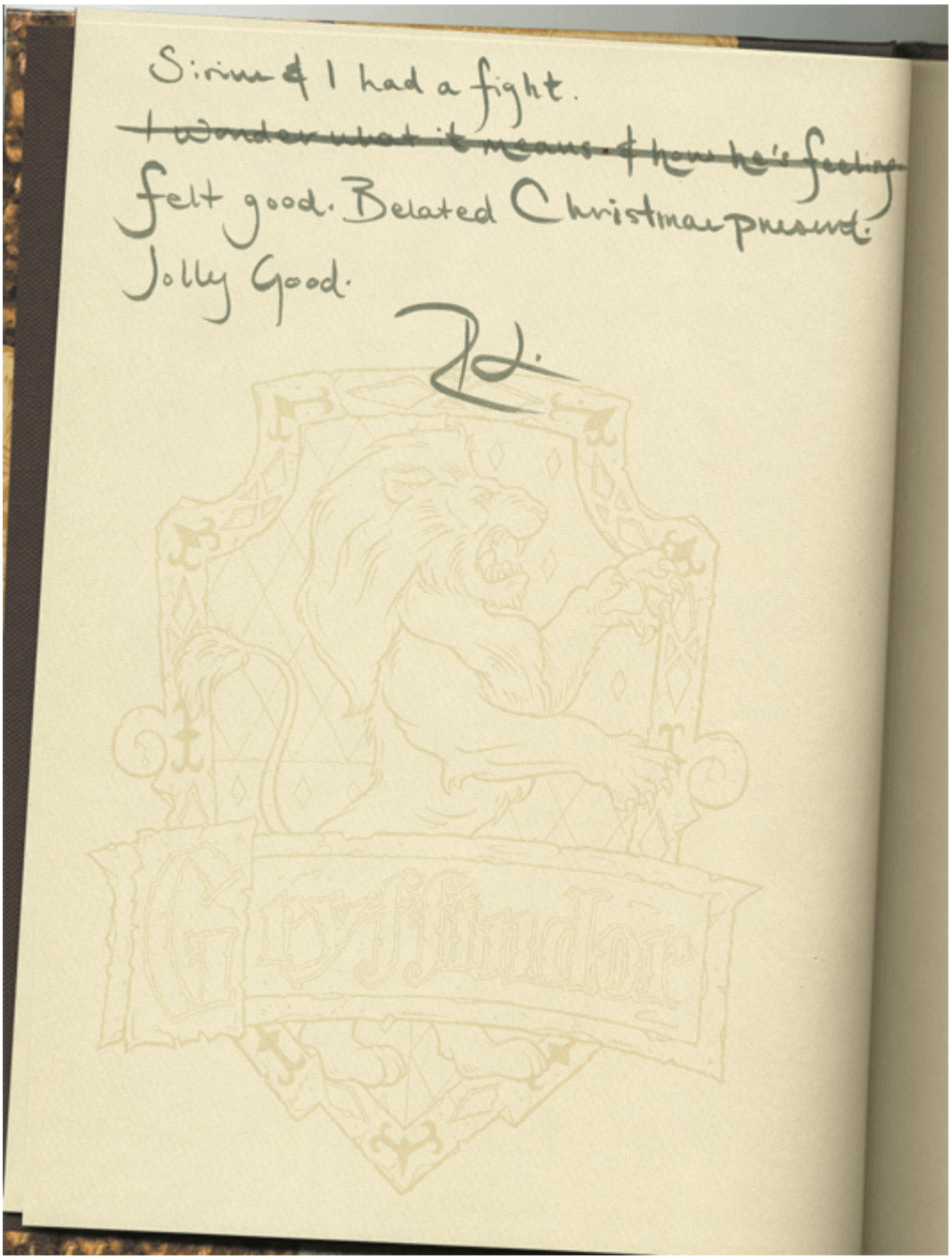
"Very dangerous," Sirius repeats, as if butter wouldn't melt.

Poppy gives them a long, hard, searching look as they drink beakers of her home-brewed Gryffindor Cure -- heals cuts, scrapes, bruises and especially black eyes in no more than twenty-four hours. They aren't telling the truth, that much is for certain. But it's hardly something to be concerned with if what they're trying to cover up isn't -- well, something dreadful. And Remus Lupin wouldn't lie about that, poor dear; oh, no. He's a good lad. Poor thing.

"Thank you, Madam Pomfrey," Sirius says, offering back his glass. "Yum. You've put pumpkin spice in it, haven't you."

"Mm," Poppy says, before she bustles out. "I suppose I have."

***



shoebox_project(http://www.livejournal.com/community/shoebox_project)

Cowritten by **dorkorific** and **ladyjaida**.

dorkorific specializes in **Sirius**; **ladyjaida** specializes in **Remus**.

dorkorific is **Mlle. Artiste**; **ladyjaida** is **Mlle. Bits-n-bats**.

The handwriting of Remus J. Lupin, Severus Snape and James Potter is done by **ladyjaida**.

The handwriting of Sirius Black, Peter Pettigrew and Lily Evans is done by **dorkorific**.
Don't worry; Peter won't be stupidified. **Trust us** on that one.

We would like to take a moment to thank **windjinn** for leaping down the stairs with **ladyjaida**'s bra on his head.

all characters herein are the intellectual property of j.k. rowling, scholastic and warner brothers.

Part Twenty-One A
March, 1977



"Next time," Remus says, "I'm choosing the vacation spot. And there is going to be no sand. Do you hear me? *No sand.*" Remus is certain he has sand in every hole, even the holes people don't think about and the holes people don't want to think about and the holes people don't even know they have. This is the magical property of sand. Sand, no matter how old he becomes, still manages to bunch up at Remus' rear, launching an assault from behind that will never be pleasant. If there is sand, haunting vistas and stunning seascapes cease to be beautiful and begin to chafe. There is nothing less awe-inspiring than sand down your pants. "No shower will ever make me clean again," he adds, without any spite or accusation or even grumpiness. It is almost impossible to be grumpy while on vacation, even with the sand.

"I think," Peter says, "that some people don't get sand everywhere."

"It's not true," Remus assures him. "Everyone gets sand everywhere. However, some people are too completely off their nut to care."

"You mean like James and Sirius."

"It's a sickness," Remus confirms. "But I think they might even enjoy it."

There is really no "might" about it. James and Sirius do enjoy it. They are That Kind of Boy. They like sunshine, and excessive movement, and being buried in scratchy substances on purpose. Right now they are in the water, diving and leaping about idiotically, like otters, and yelling, and risking jellyfish and probably sharks, and other more dangerous things, which Remus would contemplate except the sunshine has drained the life from his brain and body. He feels like he weighs about six hundred drowsy pounds. It is, he has to admit, sort of glorious. When they first got down to the seashore he tried to read a book, but ten minutes of attempted literacy left him feeling dizzy and rubbery and like a drying curl of seaweed, and now he is using the book as a sunshade, where it is doing vastly more good. Idly, he picks sand from his teeth.

"I think Sirius is coming," Peter says confidentially, after what might be about five minutes or might be about three hours.

"Oh dear," Remus sighs, trying to care.

"He's going to drip on you," Peter says. "He has that look."

"I can't move my legs, so that's too bad for me," Remus says. "Oh, bother, Sirius, you're blocking the sunshine. Do go away."

Sirius is dripping on purpose. One has to give him credit; he achieves very good dripping angles. No one else can drip like Sirius Black, with such stunning accuracy, with such frightening determination. "Haha!" Sirius says. "I am dripping on you. What are you going to do about *that?*"

"Get wet," Remus replies amiably. "Oh look. I already have. Your move."

"And he doesn't even swim," Sirius laments. He flings himself down into the sand, wet and gleaming, and rolls around until he looks like a breaded cutlet. "Sand, sand, sand. It is glorious. It is prickly and invasive. Like freedom."

"Where's James?" Peter asks.

"Getting attacked by a jellyfish, I think. But if any man of mine dies by jellyfish, it's my right to leave him behind; it's simply too ridiculous." Sirius flops over onto his back. Now he resembles a breaded cutlet ready for the frying. Remus thinks it may be time for lunch. "I've decided," Sirius continues, "that after I graduate I'm going to be a pirate. I'm going to buckle a thousand swashes a day while the rest of you are, I don't know, crying in the lavatory during your lunches. If you can rescue James from the jellyfish, Remus, I'll let you come along with me."

"If I move," Remus says, "the sand does unpleasant things."

"I understand," Sirius says. The way he says it is almost violating, but very wise nonetheless.

"You look like a cutlet," Remus replies. "It makes me hungry. Can we eat?"

"Can we eat," Sirius snorts derisively. "Can we! Listen, you -- *you* -- this is a Beach Community! Do you know what that means? It means we never do anything ever. We don't even have to eat if we don't want to. We can get other people to eat for us, and then spit the pre-chewed food into our drooling mouths!"

"I just want a sandwich," Remus says, feeling pathetic. "If you take away the chewing you take away my exercise for the entire week."

"You know," Sirius exhales with great contentedness. "You know, would you believe I have always thought March is the most useless time of the year? It isn't March that's the problem, though. It's only March in certain soggy, bookish-smelling places. Why didn't we do this years ago?"

"Because we don't have any money," Peter answers, ever pragmatic.

"Well, really, we might have remedied that sooner." Sirius shakes his head, now encrusted with sand and seawater. "We might have held someone hostage. Or married Remus off to a wealthy dowager, then staged a broom accident. Robbed Gringotts..." Sirius trails off, looking happier than he has in months. It is the euphoria which settles over him whenever he is pondering the intricacies of mayhem. Remus recognizes the expression all too well, and, though he is used to running as quickly as he can away from it, finds that he is too drugged by vacation to care.

"Yes," he agrees. "Wealthy dowager. Broom accident. Sandwich?"

"I know what he wants," Sirius tells Peter. "He wants me to eat for him, and then spit the pre-chewed food into his drooling mouth."

"Like birds," Peter adds helpfully.

"Like lazy, lazy Lupins," Sirius finishes.

Somewhere down the beach, James is engaged in an epic battle with a jellyfish. Remus shades his eyes with his book, trying to make out who's winning. "Round two," he says, "goes to the jellyfish. I think it's actually dead. I'm not sure what James is doing."

"He's going to stuff it and mount it and bring it back to Evans and say he caught it. Like Moby Dick, only I told him that sounded a bit fruity. He wouldn't listen. Would you look at that water, both of you? It's really, really… *blue*."

"Yes," Remus agrees. "I…yes. Food?"

"It is more than blue," Sirius goes on, lost in a dream of color, the sort of bliss which only comes to people who spend much of their lives being a dog. "Aquamarine. Azure. Cer...*ooooo*...lee an."

"You sound like an idiot," Peter informs him, but without any real malice.

"Well, you look like an explosion in a tomato cannery, but I haven't said anything," Sirius points out. It's true, as Peter doesn't so much tan as he goes directly from the color of dough to the color of stewed strawberries.

"It isn't my fault I have a delicate complexion," Peter protests, as James comes panting up the beach, flushed and limping and looking depressingly triumphant.

"I am a subduer of mighty beasts!" he says, flopping down in the sand, a cloud of which settles in Remus's ear. "Although I cannot feel my left leg, and my right one feels like mince. Do they look swollen?"

"Don't say mince to me," Remus says forlornly. "Do you still have it? The jellyfish, I mean. I'll eat it if you still have it."

"I couldn't hold on to it," James says. "Jellyfish are slippery. And they sting. They are evolutionarily quite sound. Nonetheless, I drink from the keg of glory."

"You should probably be drinking from a keg of antiseptic," Peter says wisely.

"One day, I'll catch him," James vows. "Or perhaps another unfortunate jellyfish that looks just like him. Or perhaps just another jellyfish."

"Careful there, Ahab," Sirius says. "You're getting ahead of yourself. You'll forget all about jellyfish by tomorrow. You'll be collecting seashells for Evans instead. 'Do you hear that? It's the sound of my heart. Beating only for you. Like the waves of the vast ocean, wherein swims my jellyfish.' I can just see it now."

"Well," Remus says. "At least I'm not hungry anymore."

"I was going to chew some cake into your mouth." Sirius grins. "Really, Remus, your stomach is too sensitive."

"I am *not* going to collect shells," James mutters. "I would *never* collect shells. Not for Lily, not for *anyone.*"

"But what were the ones you picked up yesterday for?" Peter asks. It almost succeeds in 'innocently' but veers off suddenly into the realm of 'absolutely wicked.'

"Hello," Remus says, blinking, "is that McGonagall?"

"Don't toy with my heart so when I haven’t had time to become bronzed and godlike," says Sirius. "It’s not McGoogles. She lives at school."

"No," Remus assures him, blinking. "No, I’m, er, fairly certain it's McGonagall."

Sirius rolls up onto his elbows, squinting. "It's the sun. You've got to be -- it's the sun. Isn't it?"

It is not the sun, but Remus really does understand where Sirius is coming from. There is a certain haze that surrounds a teacher out of context, a kind of surreal blur, compounded in this case by a) the sun, which seems to bleach all the reality out of everything; b) her red-and-gold swimming costume, which seems to include some kind of corset and apparently dates from 1896; and c) the young, extraordinarily handsome man lounging by

McGonagall's side in royal-blue swimming trunks and whispering into her ear.

"Oh, my sainted aunt," James breathes

Sirius dives with shocking alacrity under his beach towel. “Are you -- is that a -- I can't believe it, when -- how could she?! How could he?! I--!”

"It's her *boyfriend*!" Peter yelps, too loud, and the objects of their scrutiny look up and directly at them.

There is a moment of horrified recognition on all sides. However, McGonagall is far better versed than they are in matters requiring composure, maturity, and being slick. She smoothes the hair at her left temple idly, giving them all a long, measured look. It says, quite clearly, *Now I have seen you all in the equivalent of your underwear. You are lucky there is so little time left between us as professor and student. It's going to be hell.* It doesn't seem to mention that now they've seen her in the equivalent of her underwear, probably because it's a far more pleasant sight.

"I knew she'd never love me for long," Sirius attempts. It falls short. They continue to stare in horror.

"What's she doing here?" James asks. "Doesn't she have papers to grade?"

"Oh God," Sirius says. "She's *coming over here*."

"She looks good in that swimsuit," Peter points out. "I mean, did you ever think that--"

Sirius shoves his head into the sand. The rest of his words come out like he's speaking through a jellyfish. *Hoodle wurhdle hurhk.* Remus, surprisingly, agrees. Hoodle wurhdle hurhk, indeed. And she does look all right in that swimsuit.

"Hello, Potter, Lupin, Pettigrew," McGonagall says, with a nod for each. She's wearing wire-rimmed sunglasses. She makes being old look cool, Remus thinks, and wonders how it is that he cannot manage to do the same thing when he has the added advantage of not really being old. "And I assume that lump under there is Black?"

"Tell her I'm asleep," comes a frantic hiss from beneath the towel, pitched so only Remus can hear. "I can't bear it."

"I think he's asleep," Remus says dutifully. "He has tired himself out with being a nuisance. Are you, ah, enjoying your term break, Professor?"

"Gurhgk," James says, and spits up sand.

"Quite, thank you, Lupin," McGonagall replies, ignoring him. "What a, er, fascinating coincidence to find you boys here as well."

"FASCINATING!" shouts Peter, who, Remus has noticed, has sometimes at times of stress trouble controlling the volume of his voice. "COINCIDENCE!"

"I, er," Remus says. There are a thousand questions he can think to ask, perfectly normal, socially acceptable, even charming questions, but the ones that are clamoring horrifically around his mouth all have to do with a very golden young man in rather brief blue swimming trunks, lounging like a sultan on McGonagall's lion-embroidered beach towel. With great effort, he bats aside *How old is your escort?* and comes out with "Have you -- are you taking a room up the hotel, as well?"

"I have my own accommodations," McGonagall replies faintly.

Remus cannot stop staring at her friend, whose abdominal muscles are glistening in a way that is perhaps unhealthy. They are at least mercilessly bright. It is possible that McGonagall oiled him this way -- but such thinking leads Remus down a dark and dangerous path into the forest of uncertainty and from there the swamp of Take My Eyes, I No Longer Want Or Need Them. That McGonagall should have a life outside of Hogwarts is perfectly understandable and Remus isn't surprised at all. That she should be oiling a man panther is another matter entirely. Remus is no longer hungry.

"*What's happening now?*" Sirius hisses through the sand.

"Er," Remus says.

"Hello." The sprawled abdominal man panther shifts and grins and offers a hand. "It really is a coincidence. You must be some of Minerva's students. I've heard so much about you. Is one of you by any chance the one who exploded the toilet?"

"TWICE," Peter booms, pointing at James. "IT WAS HIM."

"So you're *those* students. I'm Caradoc, by the way."

"Nice to meet you," Remus says. It's a reflex. If one banged his knee, chances are he'd probably come out with a "how many sugars do you take in your tea?" before a kick.

"The pleasure's mine," Caradoc says. "You're sort of famous. I feel as if I know you already. Really, the one who exploded the toilet."

"TWICE," Peter repeats.

"*What's happening* now?" Sirius asks. Remus kicks him.

"Well," McGonagall begins, sending a brief, slightly desperate glance over her shoulder, "er, conveniently, we must be off."

"Oh yes," Caradoc the manslave agrees. He flashes his teeth, which are nearly as shiny as his pectorals. He is gathering up the towels. Probably that is what he does; he is the Towel Boy. How can McGonagall pay for a towel boy on a professor's salary? Oh God, oh God, oh God. "Important, you know, swimming. Can't miss the sun, can we?"

"Arfgh," James mewls, almost inaudibly. Remus would kick him, too, but he is far away and despite the urgency of the situation he is still weak and limp with sunshine, like a washed up jellyfish draped around a little lump of panic and morbid curiosity.

"Indeed," McGonagall says dryly. "Well, enjoy your holiday, boys. I do hope we won't run into each other any more than is strictly unavoidable. Give my regards to Mister Black, when and if he awakens."

"Pleasure's all ours, I'm sure," Remus replies, still on autopilot. Surely most humans do not have that many muscles. Remus knows for a fact that he himself does not have that many muscles. In fact, if he, James, Sirius and Peter were to somehow absorb each other into one huge blob of boy, altogether they still would not have as many muscles as Caradoc.

Caradoc drapes the towels over his left arm and salutes. Remus is horrified to note that when McGonagall crooks her finger he follows, cheerfully, all down the length of the beach. Glistening. How can that be possible? His conclusions are more than Remus can bear to draw. He is never going to be able to learn transfiguration from Professor McGonagall again and will live his life as an unformed, unfinished wizard, all because of Caradoc the Towel Boy's abdominals.

Very slowly, Sirius pulls his head out of the sand.

"It doesn't work that way, you know," Remus murmurs. "Even if you hide your head in the sand McGonagall still has a Towel Boy."

"With her," Sirius whispers hoarsely. "At the beach."

"He was very shiny," Remus says.

"D'you think, McGoo-- McGah-- Do you think *she* rubbed him up and down all shiny like that?" James asks, then makes a sound like dying and rolls into a fetal kind of ball. "Let's all forget I said that."

"I AM BLIND," Peter whimpers, though somehow his voice still maintains stentorian tones.

"I have never seen muscles like that on a human being before," Remus continues. "How do you even *get* muscles like that? I wonder if he can wear shirts."

"Obviously," Sirius mutters, "he doesn't have to."

"I ALSO WANT TO BE DEAF," Peter adds. "RIGHT NOW."

"You're making *me* deaf," James snaps suddenly. "Get a hold of yourself, Pete! Be a man!"

"You're one to talk," Remus says, rather shocked. "You just made noises the whole time."

"I know," James says, deflating. "It's just…you know I have a thing. With abdominals. And me not having them. It makes me cranky."

"I don't like what just happened," Sirius informs them all. He sounds like Remus feels, which is, roughly, as if he just died.

"I guess it's only reasonable," Remus attempts. "Her having a...life, and everything. I mean, surely she did all along. Right?"

"A life!" Sirius yips. "Not a manslave!"

"OR A BATHING SUIT," Peter adds, but claps a hand immediately over his mouth.

"Good morning, gentlemen!" someone says, cheerfully, from just above and just behind them. Against the sun, Lily is a golden vision in white-rimmed sunglasses; when she moves out of it, James observes that the sweet little sunburn she acquired yesterday has evolved, inevitably, into a tomato-like allover body peel. It is a relief; he is not really in a mental place which can accommodate golden visions of sun-hazed beauty. "Don't you all look like breaded chickens. You'll never guess who I just saw up at the cabana."

"If it was McGonagall and she was dancing with the human muscle we really don't want to hear about it," Remus says happily.

"Abdominal muscles like the Greeks had," Lily says. "It's like he jumped off an amphora. How did you know?"

"They passed this way," Remus replies. "As you can see from the carnage and emotional wreckage."

"Poor boys." Lily eases back into the sand, flipping off her beach shoes and gingerly avoiding any of the really raw burns. James frowns down the length of his chest to his own abdominals, or lack thereof.

"You don't really *go* for that sort of thing," James says. "Do you?"

"Of course not. *Obviously* I don't." Lily's grin is wicked. "Don't worry. I don't like a male specimen who is chiseled like a statue and carries my beach towels and dances like it's actually fun. I don't like any of those things. I like white string beans with fourteen left feet. Sometimes I worry that I must have been dropped on my head."

"She's insulting you, James, old boy," Sirius explains, as if it were truly necessary.

"I don't *need* abdominals," James sniffs. "I have many other charms."

"Lunch," Remus decides, standing and brushing sand as discreetly as he can manage out of his privates. Twelve showers later and he'll still be feeling it, gritty and granular and everywhere it is the most embarrassing. He still holds that they should have gone somewhere completely lacking in sand. That way, they would never have had to face a professor in the midst of her apparently very active and very disturbing personal life and Remus would be able to have a sandwich without swallowing equal parts lunchmeat and sand. "Ptooey," he adds.

***

It is night; it is night on holiday, which is vastly more dark and warm and long than any other night; and it is night on holiday in an incredibly posh hotel, which means that, despite James's best efforts, the night is dark, warm, long, and conducted in an extremely tiny room.

"I can touch the sink with my feet," Lily informs him drowsily. "Look at that." She flicks the faucet on and off with her toes. "Convenient. Cozy."

"That's very sexy," James says. The weird, horrible thing is that it sort of really is. With some effort, he readjusts himself so that he can get an arm around her waist; she sighs and drops a kiss atop his head, one leg curled around his own. There is a curious divide in James's brain, between the part of him that is utterly helpless and like pudding and the part of him that is jangling and twitching insanely, like bells on a shop-door at Christmas eve. "How's that burn coming along?"

"I am unbelievably good at charms," Lily says with dignity, "as you know."

"So you are soothed," James says. "You are not hurting. This is a step forward! At some point in your life maybe you will stop looking like a raw steak."

"And at some point in your life maybe you will stop looking like a broomstick," Lily counters. "Oh wait, no you won't. Don't get cute with me."

"I am always cute." James would bristle, but in the end they both know who has the upper hand. Really, James has never felt so helpless in all his life as he feels when he is with Lily. She is one hundred percent, probably two hundred percent, in charge. He doesn't know how she manages it, but she never looks panicked and never feels nervous and hardly ever says anything stupid. Even when she is pink and shiny with sunburn she can still turn faucets on with her toes and make James realizes the futility of his protestations. Terribly enough, it's a wonderful feeling -- in the moment. Later, when they're apart, James catalogues the million and twenty ways he has embarrassed himself and wants to sprawl out on the beach like a jellyfish and be shriveled up, juiceless, by the sun. James supposes this means he really is in love. It started out fun enough, thrilling enough, but now he knows that it is humiliating and terrifying and leaves him feeling stupider and stupider each time, so it must be love after all. It wasn't what he was expecting. He thought there would be a lot more exciting and a lot less nervous. Then again, being nervous is almost the same as being excited. Maybe, it's even better. It means there's something to lose. So in fact, James revises, he thought there would be a lot more nervous and a lot less wanting to throw up. Being in love is like having a prolonged stomach flu and, perversely, obstinately, insanely, never wanting to recover. Most of the time James isn't even in control of his basic bodily functions. For example: he has wanted to take a piss for the past twenty-five minutes, and cannot bring himself to comply with the demands of his bladder. That is either madness or true love, James realizes; not allowing yourself to take a piss when it's clear your very life depends on it.

"You are sometimes cute," Lily amends. "And cute enough so that the other times are worth it."

"Cute enough that I don't need abdominals, eh? *Eh?*" James revels in the compliment. It makes him wonderfully squirmy. Lily is good with compliments; they never seem ridiculous but they always manage to make him feel good, like he knows what she's really saying underneath all that. James, at his age, is two parts microscopic ego and twenty parts continuously turned on. It's hard to reconcile those two. The two parts

microscopic ego always seem larger than the rest, but the rest are more immediately noisy. James moves to put an awkward hand on Lily's shoulder.

He misses.

"Oh, I see," Lily murmurs. "We're getting fresh, are we?"

"We are," James says. He could have said something else, something cute, something like, *Your shoulders are awfully soft today*, or *Nearly as fresh as that burn of yours, Sunshine*, but something about Lily's breasts, the warmth of Lily's skin under her damp green polka-dot bikini, put him in a mental state where rearranging words passes for repartee. It is pathetic. He is pathetic. And then Lily climbs up over him and her hair is all dangly in his face, and she breathes warmly around his ear region and her fingers start doing things to his scalp and all of a sudden his entire brain is sort of going nghhh*hashhfaaagkhl?!* and word-inversion starts to look pretty witty. He holds on to her thighs for dear life.

"You know, I've been thinking," Lily whispers. "You know, I'm -- we're both -- anyway, I like you. You're not a terrible kisser. And this is a very nice holiday you've taken me on."

"It is," James agrees, struggling to breathe.

"So. You know. I was thinking, maybe..." With difficulty, James brings his eyes up to her face. It's hard to tell, with the burn and the low light, but she certainly seems to be blushing. "I don't know. There isn't any way to ask it that isn't stupid. Well -- you know. I thought...if you wanted to...try...*it*...we could do that."

"'It,'" says James idiotically.

"Believe me, I'd love to be more grown up about this," Lily mumbles, who is definitely blushing -- he can practically feel the heat radiating off her face -- "but I worry I'd sound like, I don't know, a doctor. And, you know, if you go too far in the other direction, you sound like some horrible film or something. You know. Anyway -- what do you think?"

The problem with the question is that it implies that James *is* thinking something. He is, of course, but if directly translated, it would come out something like "HAGHFUFKGH HAHH NNNNNN," which is not helpful or sexy.

"We don't have to," Lily says, almost immediately. "I was just -- it was silly of me, but I thought, you know, it seemed like -- well, let's face it, you're *never* alone, there's always Sirius or Remus or Peter or someone, or I'm not alone, but we're alone *now* and it seemed like this was the right sort of *moment.* Only what do I know about the right sort of, of *moment.* I *don't*, you know," she adds. "Know anything. About the right sort of. *Moment.*"

"Neither do I," James manages. Somehow. It requires Herculean effort. "Look, no, I think we should."

"You do?" Lily sounds breathless. James is trying not to think about how naked he feels already, not even naked yet. He has the sinking feeling this could either be incredible, wonderful, all the wows in the world, or absolutely disastrous. With his track record -- James is excellent at getting everything right the second time around, once he's had a trial run -- the sinking feeling starts sinking a little lower. All of his organs are jumbling

around in the very bottom of his stomach. He wants to get up on the bed, start jumping around, and scream yes until everyone, even his mother, can hear him. James Potter, king of the world, only he has the feeling that the crown isn't going to fit and he's going to look like a right arse.

"I do," James says. Instinctive. He can't take it back. He doesn't want to take it back. He wants to know what he's doing. "I, uh. Neither do I. I said that already, but I just, you know, want to make that clear."

"Nothing at all," Lily agrees.

"Just making sure we're both. Uh." James swallows. "Well, that's all right then."

"Maybe," Lily suggests, "maybe we should try being quiet." She starts to pull away, and all of James' organs start to go with her, until he realizes she's just getting enough space between them to tug the top of her bathing suit off and for a moment James thinks *It's time to look away or she's going to punch me so hard my jaw goes through the back of my head.* He doesn't look away; thinks, *These are Lily's breasts* and *Oh my God* and *nghhhhashhfaaagkhl?!* Lily naked never seems to lose its brain-melting novelty.

"I am," James says hoarsely. "I can be quiet."

"Shut up," Lily tells him, slamming a hand over his mouth. "Let's just. You know. It's not like people stupider than us haven't managed this before." She tucks her hair back behind her ears and bites her lip, which he's seen her do at the beginning of particularly difficult exams: it's a gesture that says, I am going to get this done, and get this done well, if it kills me. "So."

"Okay," James agrees, and Lily kisses him, and everything becomes a little unclear.

***

The ceiling of their room is very interesting. There are entire constellations in the plaster; there are long cracks which could have been caused by any number of things, and James is trying as hard as he can to imagine what those things could have been, because if he does not imagine them he will have to face where he is and what he has done. Out of the corner of his eye he can see Lily doing the exact same thing. She has managed to put about ten inches of space between them, which is about as good as anyone can manage in this particular room, and the sheet is yanked up to her chin. James wants to die. The silence roars around them.

"Well!" he says, too loudly, in an absurdly chipper voice.

"I'm going to go clean up," Lily informs him, and rolls off the bed.

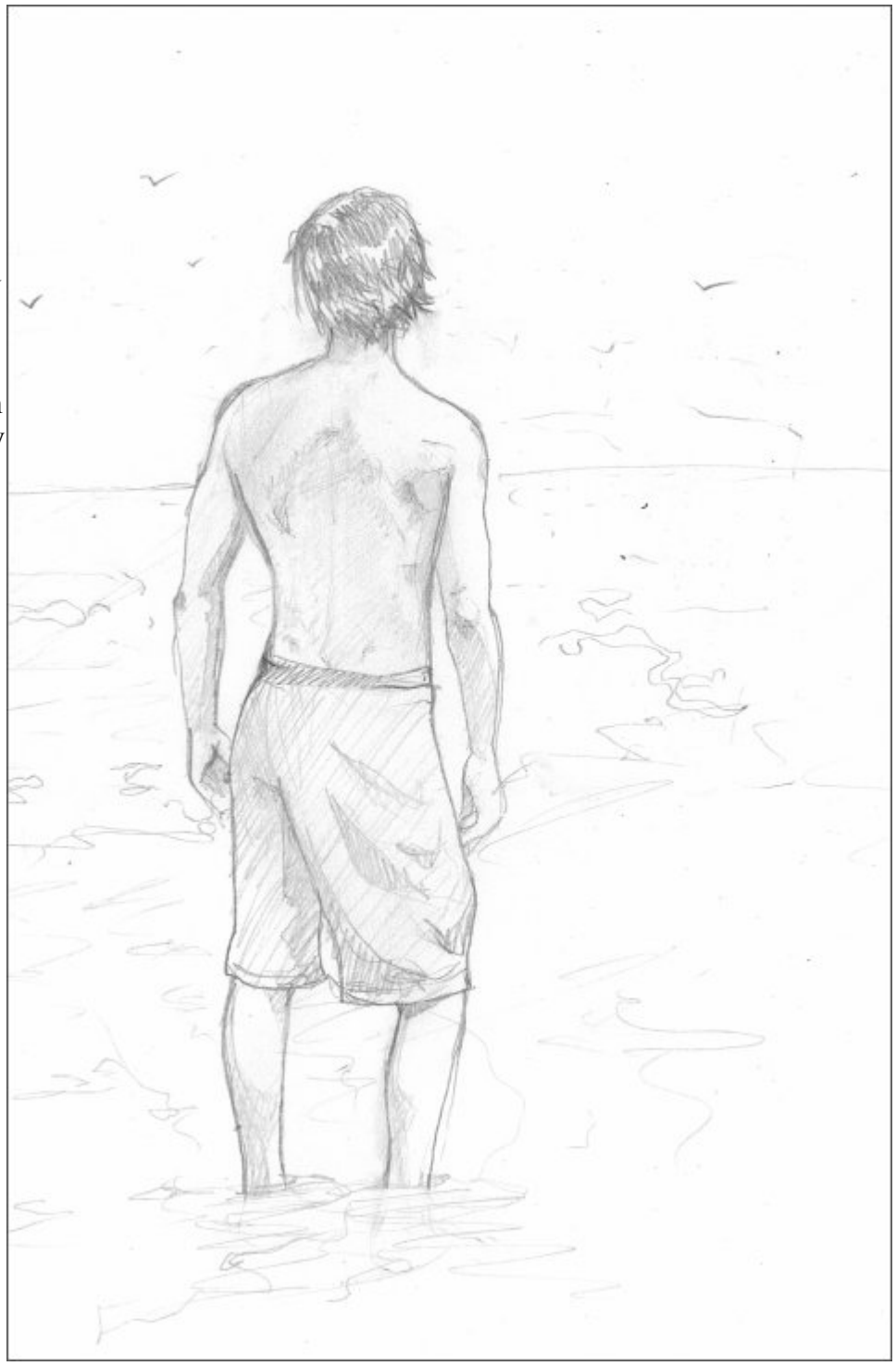
James is left, for the moment, blissfully and terribly alone. It wasn't, he tries to tell himself, exactly that it was an epic failure. There were parts of it that were less of a failure. There were even parts of it where it seemed like things would take a turn for the better, veering into the land of all right. But then there was -- and then there was -- and everything got worse again -- and didn't get better even once before the end. Sometimes it didn't seem as if James knew what better was. It isn't exactly his fault. It's both their faults, James figures reasonably. It's both their faults and the only sensible reaction now is to move to different parts of the globe, perhaps the solar system, splitting their friends and family up and never once again mentioning each other's

names.

Perhaps he's overreacting. James tries to calm the little hysterical swell of panic until he can breathe and see straight and then, after a few deep swallows, get control of his thoughts. It's going to be all right. It's possible that it's supposed to be an epic failure and everyone else since the dawn of time has been too embarrassed to admit the truth. It's possible that sex is just an enormous fabrication brought on by the human condition, by a silent agreement amongst people not to humiliate one another publicly.

They do it privately instead, James imagines. In the claustrophobic comfort of their own beds.

James makes a small noise of despair and burrows deep into the slightly sticky darkness of the pillow.



shoebox_project(http://www.livejournal.com/community/shoebox_project)

Cowritten by **dorkorific** and **ladyjaida**.

dorkorific specializes in **Sirius**; **ladyjaida** specializes in **Remus**.

dorkorific is **Mlle. Artiste**; **ladyjaida** is **Mlle. Bits-n-bats**.

The handwriting of Remus J. Lupin, Severus Snape and James Potter is done by **ladyjaida**.

The handwriting of Sirius Black, Peter Pettigrew and Lily Evans is done by **dorkorific**.
Don't worry; Peter won't be stupidified. **Trust us** on that one.

We would like to take a moment to thank **windjinn** for leaping down the stairs with **ladyjaida**'s bra on his head.

all characters herein are the intellectual property of j.k. rowling, scholastic and warner brothers.

Part Twenty-One B
March, 1977

***

"Pads," James hisses next morning, grabbing Sirius' elbow as they meander out to the beach after breakfast. "I need to talk to you."

"Talk away, my friend," Sirius says, slinging an arm generously around James's shoulders. He is too full of muffins to be in a bad mood, and James' drawn pallor and general air of frightened rabbit make him feel even more cheerful by comparison. "Where's your auburn-tressed love pastry?"

"I don't know," James mutters. "I think she slept in the bathtub. Look, I need you to promise me you won't be an idiot."

"Can't help it," Sirius says cheerfully. "It's part of my charm." On second glance, James really does look unhealthy: all drippy and sunken and not at all like his usual blithesome self. If it were in Sirius's nature to be concerned, he would be; fortunately for him, it isn't. "Do you want a banana or something? You look like a wilted cabbage. It's hols, for God's sake, please try to perk up. I want you in top form today, it's been ages since we had a good game of Sand In Your Bits."

"About my bits," James says. "But Sirius, you *have* to promise me." He grabs Sirius by the arm and pulls him in the direction of abandonment and drowning, a rocky unpleasant cove no vacationers are attempting at this hour of the day. "You have to *promise* you won't tell anyone. It's the biggest secret of my *life* and if you tell *anyone*--"

Sirius holds up a hand, suddenly grave. "James," he says. "I try not to be an idiot when it counts."

"You're going to have to do better than try," James tells him. "You're going to have to do better than succeed. You can't tell anyone. Not Peter, not Remus--"

"Not even the love pastry?"

James makes a dark face. "Especially not the love pastry. The love pastry *cannot know you know*. Do you understand?"

Sirius nods. "I do solemnly swear," he says, but he isn't joking. James sighs in relief, slipping into a shadowy corner and looking all around before he begins.

"We sort of," he whispers. "We sort of. You know."

Comprehension dawns very slowly on Sirius' face, blooming like a shadow. He turns, looks away, scuffs his foot against sand and dried up bits of seaweed. For a long time he says nothing, tickling the seaweed with his toes. It takes him an eternal kind of moment, but finally, he grins. "Well, you know, it was only a matter of time, wasn't it? The course of true love leads to the bedroom after all. Well done, mate. Well done." He claps

James' shoulder with one hand. James is impressed. He's doing an admirable job. All of a sudden James is delighted and happy and grateful that Sirius Black is his best friend in the world, and always will be, and isn't an idiot when it really counts. All of a sudden he is hanging from Sirius' arm, relieved beyond imagining but shaking like a jellyfish.

"It was terrible," he says. "It was awful. I was awful. She was awful. We were awful. It was the most awful thing I've ever kept doing of my own free will. And do you remember that time, with the toaster? It was like that only a hundred times worse and a hundred times longer and less burning and more squeezing. Sirius, it was *spectacularly* bad."

"Oh," Sirius says, rather stunned. "Er. Well." It is somewhat difficult to picture how bad bad sex could possibly be. You sort of do or you don't, as far as Sirius can imagine, and if you do, then that's quite nice, and if you don't, it doesn't really count, does it? "I mean, was it just -- you know, I mean, she hasn't got scales or something, right?"

"No!" James yelps. "No. Jesus." He winds his hand deep into his hair, as if attempting to yank off his own scalp. "God, I don't -- I had no idea what was going on! It was like -- I was trying so hard, but it was just -- and I was, like, watching myself, and it was just, I mean, oh God. I make noises, Pads. Like little -- oh, God, little gerbil noises. And I just sort of thought something would happen with her, but it was -- I don't know! I didn't know what to do!"

"It's all right," Sirius says, trying not to look as stumped as he is. "I mean, er. Right? I imagine it takes practice."

"I think it's a big joke," James says grimly. "And no one talks about how awful it is because everyone's too embarrassed to admit they're crap at it." He shoots Sirius a sideways glance. "You didn't, right? I mean, with Sophie. Because you'd've told me. You couldn't have shut up about it for three seconds."

"I didn't," Sirius says, not looking at him. *You are being a pillock*, he tells himself, firmly. *You need to stop being a pillock.* But he can't stop it if he can't tell where it's coming from, and he just wants to shut up and be helpful but everything in his head is childish and competitive and unbelievably stupid. "Look, maybe she doesn't know how bad it was."

"She slept in the bath," James says darkly.

"Well, all right, maybe she knows it was bad. But maybe she doesn't know *how* bad."

"If anything," James says, "she's the one who knows how bad it was, and I'm the one who's in the dark about it all. *I* should have slept in the bath."

"A gentleman would have," Sirius agrees, but he sounds rather affectionate. "Look, James. Maybe you're right. Maybe everyone's awful at it. Maybe she'll go off and find that out and come back to you after she's learned the truth and everything will work out all right in the end."

"But the way some people talk about it," James moans. "Not *everyone* can be *that* good at lying." His eyes spark up in hope. "Can they be?"

"Er," Sirius says. "Look, I'm really *trying*. But you know," he adds, feeling particularly generous, "it's possible that it's all going to work out anyway. Did you think of that? Maybe she's not all *that* bad and realizes that you work best second time around. You always have, you know. That's quicker than most."

"Some people get it the first try," James mumbles, sinking down onto the sand. He puts his forehead against his knees, speaking into the dark secret places of his blushing soul. "I mean, you know. I was *actually looking forward to it.*"

"That's rough." Sirius sits beside him, slinging a companionable arm around his shoulder and giving him a good shake. "Come on. Have you talked to *her* about it, then?"

"Not yet." James groans. "I can't even look at her. She can't even look at me. She's probably moved to Africa already. She's quicker than I am, you know."

"Or," Sirius says, "*or*, and this might seem crazy, but *it is possible*, James, that she's willing to give it another go because she feels all those love pastry gooey filling-things for you. If not, and she is in Africa, then she certainly isn't going to get any better sex *there* so you can cheer up about it all. Can't you?" James groans again. "All right. Look. Either you're going to snap out of it or we're just going to have to drown ourselves together. But I know you don't really like being wet that much for that long and that one time I held you under in the bath you got *pretty* mad, so I think you're going to be all right and -- you know. Not drowned. What d'you say, James old boy? Breakfast? Brunch? Those little juicy drinks in coconuts? Celebratory sex meal?"

"Celebratory awful sex meal," James mutters. "Something damp and sticky and oddly unsatisfying."

"Well," Sirius reminds him, "at least it can't get worse!" It could, but he thinks that James may not want to hear the many imaginable ways this could happen. "Look, just...don't go back to the hotel. Stay away from your place of shame for a bit. Wander by the sea. Consider, I don't know, the majesty of nature. And then bring her a jellyfish to show that you care."

"A jellyfish may hit a little too close to home," James says, disconsolately.

"Well, I don't know," Sirius says. He finds himself struggling, oddly, surprisingly, with his temper. There is no reason for him to be upset. *He* has not spent the last night engaged in unpleasant jellyfish sex. "What do you want to do? Mope?"

"I'm going to go sit somewhere," James says. "Hey, er. "He passes a hand over his face and exhales, a little shakily. "Thanks, mate. Sorry. I just needed to -- anyway. You're a friend and an Englishman."

"No worries," Sirius says. James doesn't look any more mature. He doesn't look transformed, or anything. He looks like old James, but distinctly less sure of himself. "Do you want me to romp along behind? You could throw sticks."

"Thanks for the offer. It's very noble of you. But I think I'd better be alone for a little while. And, you know. The majesty of nature. Ask God for a sign. Burning bush. Parted sea. Remind myself how much I hate the idea of drowning. The usual. You know. And I know," James adds, "I know you won't tell anyone. Just -- don't tell

anyone. That's all. Thanks." He moves, for a moment, as if he is going to hug Sirius, and then something embarrassed and ridiculous comes over his whole body and he shies back, shrugging. "I don't want to be touched. By anyone. Ever again. Or at least for the week. Sorry. Thanks." He backs away, slowly, distractedly. "Really, Sirius. You're -- you know. Thank you. *Thanks.*"

After he has disappeared Sirius counts the number of times James has thanked him before he considers drowning *himself*. In the end, he thinks better of it for all the same reasons as James did. It would be unpleasant, though it would suit his soggy mood entirely.

This, Sirius realizes, is the worst vacation. It started out all right, only then Lily had come along, and now James and Lily had *actually had sex*, which leaves the frightening taste of permanence in Sirius' mouth. It isn't that he's old fashioned. It isn't that he thinks they're going to run out and get married and make lots of sexually awkward babies together. It's that now there's some deep chasm between James and himself and even though James thought to come to him first -- cold comfort in a time of simple tragedy and humiliation -- even that trust won't bridge it. They're going off in separate directions. They're two different people. They are, to put it simply, separable.

Sirius wants to punch someone.

However, the beach is empty. He jams his hands into his pockets, instead, and starts morosely down the shoreline. It's a warm, colorless morning, the kind where once the sun really comes up the whole landscape will be bleached with heat, and Sirius will be incapable of doing anything but lie around, feeling his brain dribble out his ears. That being so, it's important, he supposes, that he get all this -- whatever it is -- out of his system while he can still muster up the motivation to move.

Try flinging rocks into the ocean, suggests a helpful voice in his mind. *You can pretend they are at someone's head.* But he doesn't want to fling rocks at someone's head, not really; he doesn't want to hurt people or run around in circles or put things down Peter's trousers or construct dungbombs with James or any of the things he usually does when he's uselessly angry. He doesn't have any idea what he wants to do, what will make him better, what will make all the dark, muddled, pointless stupidity that has been brewing in his head stop, just *stop*, and he yells, finally, helplessly, "*Fuck!*" and does an idiotic little hopskip of frustration into the water.

And then, "What's the matter?" a familiar voice says from slightly behind him, warm and amused. "Sand in your bits, I suppose?"

Sirius turns. Remus looks ridiculous. He has a layer of white zinc oxide over his nose, which makes it look even more enormous than usual, and he is carrying what appears to be an entire encyclopedia volume.

"You look like a plonker," Sirius informs him.

"You look like you've gone mad," Remus counters.

"Maybe I have. What would you do then? Plonk me?" Sirius scowls down at Remus until the sight of him becomes too blurry and too ridiculous and Sirius has to blink. That just ruins it. Letting out a defeated sigh, Sirius deflates next to him. He wraps his arms around his legs and pulls his knees in close to his chest. "What do *you* do when you're angry for *no reason*? And it isn't even really angry, that's not the right word. Bad mood.

That's it -- bad mood. When you *are* a bad mood, what do you do?"

"Look like a plonker, I think," Remus says, but he puts down his enormous volume and wipes at the white zinc oxide on his nose and leans forward, looking appropriately concerned. At least, Sirius thinks, there is always Remus Lupin, plonker or no, taking him seriously when he needs to be taken seriously. Remus will have the answer, Sirius tells himself, and if not then Sirius will take him very far out to sea in a little paddle boat and leave him there.

"You always look like a plonker." Sirius stares out over the water. The sunlight glittering over its surface hurts his eyes when he stares too hard at it.

"I don't know," Remus answers honestly. "It depends on what kind of a bad mood I am. What kind of a bad mood am I, Sirius?"

Sirius thinks about it. "Now *I'm* going to sound like a plonker," he mutters finally. "I don't know. Sad, maybe? I don't know."

"I'm a sad maybe bad mood," Remus thinks out loud. "Hm. That's the hardest one, actually. If I'm a sad maybe bad mood, reading doesn't get rid of it and I certainly can't talk to my friends about it, because they'll call me a plonker and tell me to write it down in my girly diary until my vagina finally blooms." Remus smiles, trying to be helpful. It is helpful. Only, Sirius realizes, it's not exactly helpful for the right reasons. It's helpful by accident. If James Potter is completely awkward at sex, Sirius wants to say, then Remus Lupin, you are doomed. He doesn't. That would break the confidence he's promised, and he isn't going to do that. When the secret counts, Sirius keeps it. "Well, if you want an honest answer," Remus says.

"An honest answer. And I won't say anything about vaginas. *Believe me.* As far as I'm concerned the world has no more vaginas. I wash my hands of them."

Remus gives him an odd look. He deserves it. "It's not a very good answer," Remus begins. "But normally I just wait for it to go away. After all, most of the time I'm around very distracting people. And they help. They're distracting."

"Distract me," Sirius says dryly. He looks halfway over to Remus, who now has white zinc oxide smeared all over one cheek and one half of his nose, so that his entire face looks lopsided and comical. There is even some white zinc oxide in the ridge of one uneven scar. You are doomed, Remus Lupin, he tries to think, but he can't even muster it. Of all of them, it's likely that Remus is the least doomed. He will probably outlive all of them and chuckle wisely to himself at the very end, hoarding all his secret werewolf wisdom.

"I could read to you," Remus offers. "I could read to you from this large book, which I carry about with me everywhere I go, because I am a plonker."

The thing about Remus, Sirius thinks -- or at least one of many things -- is that he thinks that the best way of making other people feel good is talking himself down. Sometimes it works -- it's working now, if for no other reason than that it means Sirius isn't thinking about James and sex and families and other stupid things -- but sometimes it's sort of sad and irritating, and there's no way to make him stop that won't simply exacerbate the problem. "What would you say is the average syllable count in that book?"

"Couldn't tell you," Remus says. "I can't speak German. I only read."

"Sometimes I want to throw you in a vat of something," Sirius says, but it's better, somehow. He thumbs Remus's face. "You have stuff on you."

"Well, you know, the Nose. It's so--" Remus makes vague, uncomfortable gestures "--*out there*. It's like the Equator; it just gets more sun. I like to be careful."

"What if your bad mood doesn't go away," Sirius says, looking carefully over Remus' head, "what do you do then? Like, if it's months and months? And if you've tried, hypothetically, alienating all your best friends, and nearly getting expelled, and associating with really fit French girls, and all kinds of things that usually make you feel better -- hypothetically -- what then?"

"I don't know," Remus admits after a short pause. "Go on holiday, I suppose."

"What if it only gets worse on holiday?" Sirius frowns down into his knees. "What if it gets so much worse on holiday you contemplate striking out to sea as a pirate and never coming back?"

"If it gets that bad, the bad mood," Remus says, "then, when you strike out to sea as a pirate you really should take your giant-nosed friend with you because you know nothing about piracy and he cannot buckle any swashes and only together can you rule the high seas."

"The giant-nosed friend cannot help rule the high seas with that glop on his nose," Sirius says. "He will have to settle for a burnt nose or he cannot come."

"The giant-nosed friend figured as much. He also figured he could wear one of those very large-brimmed hats, which would solve his problem."

"He'd still look an enormous plonker," Sirius says. He grins, however, feeling comforted. Remus rubs his nose, a little self-consciously, but being rather good about it, all things considered. In fact, with all things considered, Remus is the best sport Sirius knows -- perhaps even better than James, because no one ever makes fun of James that much, and James is a different kind of boy. It's all very confusing. "And I'd still be an enormous bad mood."

"Even indulging in random acts of piracy?" Remus looks sympathetic. "Well, perhaps. Which is probably why it's better to talk about it than run off to pillage and plunder and rape and what-have-you."

"It's hard to say," Sirius mutters. "Some of it I *can't* say. You know. Top secret, hush-hush, not important really."

"Has it really been that long?" If Remus is upset by the secrecy, he doesn't show it. He's still all ears and all concern, leaning close and getting his nose everywhere. He smells a little funny, like seawater and something smeared all over to avoid sunburn. "You should have said something. I mean. I wouldn't have been so--"

"Don't apologize. It isn't your fault. If it's anyone's fault it's James' fault, but actually I think it's *my* fault, so I'm

going to blame my bloody parents and have done with it. Do you want to go exploring? I think we should. Distraction, you said. Distract away! I dub thee Remus, Distractor of the Mood."

"I'm not much of an explorer," Remus attempts, "you should get James," but something in Sirius's face sort of twists sideways and Remus is sharply, remorsefully aware that this is a mistake. "I could try, I suppose."

"There's coves," Sirius tells him. "Buried treasure, and that. I don't know." He laughs mirthlessly and digs the heel of his hand into his eye. "Treasure! Moony -- am I eight forever?"

"In every way that counts," Remus assures him, trying to help. "Look, come on. Let's go find interesting shellfish. I can tell you everything I know about mollusks."

"There is a lot, I suppose," Sirius says.

"The most colorful sort is the Nudibranch," Remus says. "It's a member of the sea slug family."

"You're joking," Sirius says. Remus can see the smile twitching in the corner of his mouth. He doesn't have Sirius' talent for pulling those incipient smiles out of people once he senses them; he can only notice them in time to appreciate them, to file their possibility away in his own mind. "The Nudibranch?"

"There's also a thing called the Flamingo Tongue Cowrie. We should go in here," Remus says decisively, pointing to the dark mouth of a handy cove. He's not much of an explorer, but it seems clear that Sirius needs him to try. Besides, it isn't every day there's the dark mouth of a handy cove nearby. The cove is just going to have to cover him. "This one. It's pleasantly dark. It's swashbuckling. I have no doubt we will step in something disgusting. And that's the point, isn't it?"

"I am going to call you Flamingo Tongue Cowrie," Sirius says. "Agent Flamingo Tongue Cowrie. And I shall be Agent Nudie Pants."

"Nudibranch," Remus attempts, without much hope.

"Forward!" Sirius declares. "Forward into blessed, distracting darkness!"

Three coves later and Remus has been attacked by something that looks like a squid, moves like a butterfly and stings like a bee. He has also got a scarf made out of seaweed and keeps getting sand crabs in between his toes, while Sirius has been shocked by coral, twice, jumped by an angry seagull, and is currently wearing an unhappy looking fish. There is sand everywhere. At the very least, Remus is certain Sirius has forgotten all about being a bad mood and is in full explorer mode, sweating and smelling quite unsavory. Or perhaps the smell has something to do with his current fish. In any case, it is tremendously hot and very late in the afternoon by the time they arrive at the fourth cove, far away from the regular and actually safe part of the beach. It looks foreboding. "This looks foreboding," Remus whispers. "We should definitely go in."

"Let's see if we can find another one of those killer attack squid," Sirius replies. "I want to capture one, and train him. Or perhaps he will capture *me*, and take me to his leader."

"The sea is a very strange and unfathomable place," Remus says. "And it is not friendly, either."

He follows Sirius inside, where the echoes of far off dripping sounds reverberate over the dank jagged walls. Remus is half-expecting a crocodile with a clock inside to cross in front of them at any moment. It has all been a wonderful exercise in Sirius' idea of fun. Think like Sirius and you end up with sand in your pants and bits of shell in your ear, but at least the day is half over before you know it.

Something squirms and flubs in the darkness. Remus cringes instinctively, but Sirius has already started forward, with great purpose and eagerness. His eyes are practically glowing.

"It won't be your pet, you know," Remus calls after him, scrambling over an unpleasantly slimy rock. "If anything it will enslave you and mate you with its squid women to ensure the survival of the species."

"You're just jealous because you lack my natural affinity with animals," Sirius says, rather sniffily. This is true. Animals are afraid of Remus. He is sometimes, to be honest, a little afraid of them. "I'm going to name it Monkey, and keep it in a bowl, and--" He stops -- freezes, actually -- head cocked to one side, alertness in every line of his body.

"What," Remus pants, catching up to him, "what are you--"

Sirius throws out a hand into his chest, universal sign for Stop talking you great big idiot. His eyes are flicking from side to side, his mouth tight, and he says, "There's something -- I can't get a hold of it."

Sirius has magic in his blood. Literally. So does Remus, he supposes, but he doesn't have it like Sirius has it; there's a reason the Blacks are wizarding aristocracy. Sirius doesn't need books or paraphernalia or any of it. In the presence of interesting magic, magic that really absorbs him, something happens to him. It's as if he breathes it in, as if he's tangled it around his body and his every movement is a careful measurement, an almost imperceptible manipulation. He seems to get tighter, darker, more sharply delineated, as if the air is getting smaller around him or he has grown to fill a lot more air.

"Don't move," Sirius whispers, scarcely more than a breath. He is a little dangerous like this, alight with fascination. It's the reason, Remus supposes, that he has to be so scatterbrained most of the time; the full focus of his attention borders on frightening. "It's just on the edge -- I can get it."

"Are you sure," whispers Remus uncertainly, "are you sure we shouldn't just leave it alone? I mean, what's it doing in a squid-cave anyway? I mean -- it's not really our business--"

Sirius spares a moment to regard him with scorn. "Don't be a prat, Moony. You'll like this. It's -- like, a curtain, or something -- all thick, and--" His wand is already in his hand, sketching a faint, white circle in the air in front of them. It scorches Remus's eyes for a moment and then sort of collapses into itself, and the cave seems to shift underneath him--

And then, where the burning circle was, as if through a window, Remus can see something. It's unclear, voices like static, figures like light on water, but then as the enchantment weakens they grow stronger, clearer. Sirius hisses, "I--!" but Remus, who can sense a victory dance coming, throws a desperate arm over his face and Sirius goes down kicking.

When they look up, it is through a haze of sand and a small circular opening like a hidden porthole, a large knot in wood, only it is a hidden porthole or a large knot in nothing, in the air, just in front of their noses. It's small enough that Remus realizes immediately they can't be seen, hidden just beside a large rock, and large enough for both of them, faces pressed together, sticky and sweaty and prickling with sand, to see through. Remus presses one finger to Sirius' lips. Sirius nods against them. They are both so quiet Remus can hear, before anything else, the sound of Sirius' agitated heartbeat, thumping in triumph and curiosity against his forearm. Then, sound from in front of them, muffled through the canopy of magic, passes through their spy-hole.

"It isn't anything -- just a scratch -- stop *pacing*, you're going to -- *aungh*--"

"Be quiet. Don't move. You'll make it worse. Hold on, Minerva's got you."

"Well, I'm not a *healer*, you know. Not my specialty. Hold still, Fabian, or I'll *make* you still, and you'll like that much less."

"Tell him to stop pacing, it's making me *nervous*--"

Remus suddenly feels ill. There's the smell of blood, always recognizable, and saltwater and magic all mixed together, and urgency crackles like fire and electricity and thunderstorms in the air. He recognizes the voices all too well; at first, his brain refuses to recognize them, until Sirius has turned to face him, eyes wide. They stare at one another. Just in front of them, cloaked by magic made too quickly to be quite impenetrable, are McGonagall, and the Prewetts, and that Caradoc fellow they met the day before. And others, shadows, not speaking, lurking around the periphery. None of them seems particularly happy.

"Hold *still*," McGonagall says, "Fabian, if you don't hold *still*--"

"I think you're making it worse," Fabian says, laughing nervously. Something is off about the color of his voice. There's too much breath, maybe, or too little, and the words are running over each other. Remus pushes a little closer to the keyhole, the tear in the cloak, whatever, and for a moment he thinks, idiotically, that is the strangest tattoo I've ever seen, and then he realizes it isn't a tattoo, bright unreal red spiderwebbed across Fabian's stomach. It's blood, loads of blood, unreasonable, cartoonish amounts of blood. Sirius' hand fists in his shirt. Remus wants to throw up.

"It can't be made worse," McGonagall says sharply, "it *is* worse. Caradoc, for God's sake, sit down. Alistair, will you hold his arms, please?"

"Minerva, give me some credit, please, I can hold still, I am not seven," and then Fabian makes a sharp, hissing noise, like a cry cut off. Caradoc the man-panther turns back to him briefly, and then turns away again, and then back, running his hands through his hair helplessly. He looks less shiny. Even Fabian's hair looks limp and defeated.

"It was a trap," Gideon speaks up, blurry at the edge of the porthole. He's holding his arm a little oddly. "They were...in and out so fast I could barely get a lock on them. The house was a trap. We went in to find the bodies and they were everywhere."

"Like rabbits," Fabian puts in. "Like aphids -- *ahh*--"

"Stop talking," McGonagall says. "You are clearly delirious."

"They *were* like aphids," Gideon says. He moves out of view. Remus catches a last glimpse of his oddly-held arm, sees that it, too, is swathed in red. It's possible it's from Fabian. It's possible it isn't. Remus wants, suddenly, to look away, but he can't bear to. It's sickening. It's frightening. He doesn't know what could possibly have happened, but whatever it is must be something more important than he can imagine. He can feel Sirius feel it, too. He lets out the slowest, quietest breath of his life, wondering if his heart is as loud as he thinks it is. At any moment, they could be caught. They shouldn't be watching. They know, now, that they have to.

"I'm not all that delirious," Fabian is saying. "For example, I am not delirious enough to miss the enormous hole in my stomach. Someone really ought to -- do something--"

"Gideon," Minerva says. "What am I *fighting*, here?"

"It happened," Gideon replies, "it happened very quickly. Too quickly. They knew we were coming and they were waiting for us and I didn't even know Fabian was *hit* until they were gone -- thought we were dead -- ha, ha." He makes a sound -- at least Remus thinks he's making the sound -- like too much breath being squeezed through a very thin reed. It sounds rough and wet and on the edge of crying. Remus has only heard the sound of a grown man crying once before, in the deep recesses of his child's memory. It was his father. Something cold grips at his belly. The gravity of the situation punches him just above the bathing trunks and settles in like a lump of ice.

"I am not dead," Fabian says.

He doesn't sound very sure.

"And I am, frankly, shocked," McGonagall says. She sounds competent and controlled and as firm as she is when dealing with a student who has accidentally Transfigured himself into a teacup. Her wand hand is weaving complicated shapes in the air over Fabian's body, her other hand hovering lightly above the damaged skin. Over the long tracks of blood blue light is coalescing in loops, like thread. Remus is suddenly unspeakably grateful for the mere fact of her existence, her solid, thin, capable presence in this place. "You went in without backup. You practically went in blindfolded. I can count on *one hand* the number of brain cells it requires to do a basic check before charging headlong into the scene of a fatal attack!"

"Not exactly our most textbook hour, you know," Gideon snaps. "They were *parents*. It's not like they went down fighting! They were at the *dinner table* when -- it's a miracle the boy wasn't in the house!"

"I don't care if it was a playground full of three year olds," McGonagall snaps back. "This isn't children's hour. You've done this before, and *you have more sense*. Fabian, are you doing all right?"

"I have a hole through myself," Fabian says faintly. "But no, no, I am fine. I imagine it is quite sexy, actually. I hear stomach piercings are very fashionable."

"If you live through this, I'm going to kill you," says Caradoc, who is still pacing.

"Don't bother," McGonagall says. "I'll do it for you."

"Don't," Gideon says abruptly, "it was my fault. Don't joke about it now."

"If not now, when?" Fabian points out.

"All right," McGonagall says, raising her wand. "I'm going to pull the stitches in. It's going to hurt rather a lot, I'm afraid. Alistair?"

"Got 'em," growls the large, hulking figure behind Fabian.

"You're breaking my elbows," Fabian protests. "I am going to be bent all funny--"

"On your count, Minerva."

"Right," McGonagall says, colorlessly. "One -- two -- *three*--"

Fabian's body arches and he makes a sound. It's not a sound that Remus has ever heard before, but he's felt it before, in his bones, his teeth, the back of his throat when the moon shifts him. It's bitten off, forced down, and that makes it worse. It grabs Remus by the intestines and yanks him sideways.

But it isn't the sound that's holding him, it's Sirius, of course, grabbing his arm, pulling him away from the window, the blood, the blue light. Not knowing what else to do, Remus lets himself be pulled.

They stumble out into the air and run, slipping over slick stones and wet kelp and sand until they come pounding to a stop, so far away they can't see the cove anymore. Sirius looks white and ill. He's sliced his hand on something in their flight, and it's bleeding quietly on the sand. Above them the sky is absurdly blue, the sun absurdly bright; the seagulls wheel and cry as if nothing is happening. Remus feels lightheaded.

"I," Remus starts, and doesn't know where to go.

"I don't understand," Sirius says. "I don't. What is--" He takes a deep breath. "I can't. I mean. That was."

"Please don't say 'cool,'" Remus says quietly.

"I wasn't going to." A pause. "Important."

Remus tries to nod. His neck feels stiff. He wipes the sand and the sweat off his cheek and looks away, out over the water. It was more important than anything they've seen before, something more important than he can quantify, something so important he has no name for it at all, only a jumble of words out of order, jingling their wrongness in his joints and turning sour in his mouth. His lips are dry and cracked; the rest of him is cold beneath the sweat. A breeze comes in from the sea, rippling the tide that laps their toes. Remus nods at last. He feels as if his life is in danger, residual from the sense of urgency they have just witnessed, but something more than that, too. Despite McGonagall's firm unwavering voice, her face was the color of seashell, too white. He's never seen it look that drained of blood before. He presses one hand to his mouth and turns away.

Sirius' hand on his back breaks him out of it. "You all right?" Sirius asks. His voice sounds distant, tight, a little too high. Remus swallows down the bile and turns back.

"It's the smell," he says. "It was a little -- much."

Sirius' face is drawn into a pinched frown. His eyes are nervous. Remus pats him on the shoulder awkwardly. "What do we do?" Sirius asks. "We can't -- they can't know we know -- but it isn't safe there. For them. The spell they've used, it's -- well, I just -- I poked right through. Anyone could--"

"I don't think anyone's going to be looking for them in the middle of a tourist attraction," Remus says slowly. The lingering unknown *anyone* is electric in the air. He shakes his head, wards off a shiver, and suddenly feels all right again. Strong. Competent. Sirius' lips have been drained of all color and Remus' stomach is somewhere down by his ankles, but there's something to be said in the face of life and death about not being in the face of it alone.

"I'm going to sit down," he says, and is surprised to find that he has already done so.

"Yeah," Sirius says unnecessarily, and sits beside him. His bare arm against Remus' is cold in the sunlight, but it's there, present, physical, simple, Sirius, and Remus is stupidly glad.

"You still have a fish," he observes suddenly. It is unbelievable and oddly comforting, but there it is: the floppy, pathetic tail sticking out of Sirius's pocket, adding its distinctive touch to the bouquet of pungency that accompanies Sirius everywhere. There he is at the forefront of Remus' brain, in the face of blood and shadowy figures and mysterious death: Sirius, dirty and smelling of fish.

"You still have--" Sirius makes a vaguely insulting gesture "--on your face."

"Does that make you feel better?" Remus inquires.

"Yes," Sirius says, examining his hands. Remus understands, and says nothing. What comes will come. They'll figure it out.

***

James stares across the bed at Lily, who is busy staring across the bed at something fascinating just over James' left shoulder. If they continue like this for any longer without blinking someone's going to lose an eye. James clears his throat nervously. Lily blinks, but doesn't refocus her attention. This is almost the hardest thing James has done in his life. The hardest, if he manages to wipe all of last night from his memory, and Lily's, too. They could do that, James considers. If they forgot completely, it would solve everything. But, James admits, it would also be cheating. He clears his throat again.

"So, uh," James says, "glad we're talking about this."

"Yes," Lily agrees. "Me too."

They are quiet again. James realizes they aren't talking about anything at all. He'd gladly give a limb or an important organ to listen in on Lily's thoughts right now, but that isn't an option. It really is impressive how things that couldn't possibly get any worse are in the process of doing so quite rapidly. James slumps tiredly. "We're not actually talking," he points out. "Though, of course, you know that, being in full control of your -- mouth and -- things."

"I think it was a good experience," Lily says suddenly. "I think we can learn from it. Or we can die quietly together in a corner of our own shame and misery. So far we have been going with option number two and I think it's rather unpleasant as options go." Her voice sounds shrill and she still isn't looking at him. It's making James incredibly nervous. "But," Lily continues, "I don't really know what we're supposed to *learn* except that I never want children and should consider becoming a nun."

"I have often considered that option myself," James says. "Who doesn't like nuns? With their -- you know. The habits." He takes a deep breath. Clearly there is nothing to be done. The situation is what it is -- what's regrettably taken place has regrettably taken place -- and, if he were being completely honest, he's not sure a convent is the place for him. It's certainly a waste of Lily. "No, look. It's -- maybe it was the room? It's a very small room."

"It wasn't the room," Lily says in a dead voice.

"No," James says, painfully. "No, you're right. It was the Us. It can't be that awful all the time. Can it?"

"Did you think it was awful?" Lily says, rather shocked. "I mean, I know you did. But I suppose I thought -- I don't know. I thought boys had it sort of all right regardless."

"Sort of," James says. "But there are ways to make it awful, and we succeeded in finding all of them."

"I don't understand," Lily moans, collapsing on the bed. "We were doing so well!"

"It's mechanics," James says. "Apparently we are pants at mechanics. I have pamphlets at home," he adds with dark humor, "if that would help."

"No," Lily says firmly.

"I didn't think so," James agrees. "I mean, you know, what can pamphlets know that people can't? Well, obviously -- well, no -- well, I'd like to think that I know more than a pamphlet does about -- well, I guess I don't, though." James looks down at his hands. He maybe wants to use them to throttle himself, or at least cut off all air into his lungs so he'll stop talking. Barring that, they would make an excellent gag. "But, you know, admitting it by succumbing to the pamphlets, that's..."

"James," Lily says. "I don't think this is the end of the world. We were terrible at, you know, having sex, but I think that means we might be able to improve, once the wounds heal. Metaphorical wounds," she adds quickly. "Bad, uhm, choice of words there. Wasn't it."

"The emotional scars will last lifetimes," James offers, "but we are a resilient people?"

"I still like you," Lily says. "And if I still like you after *that* then I probably like you an *insane* amount." She fixes him with a direct green gaze and he remembers all the things he loves about her, more overwhelming in the face of all their failures.

"Uh," James says. "Wow."

"I know," Lily agrees. "I am as perplexed as you are."

"Tell you what," James says. "I am a bit leery of being touched. But we could stick to what we know." He sits beside her on the bed and slips his fingers between hers.

"For now," Lily decides, and yanks him backwards rather forcefully. When he kisses her he remembers that there are some mechanics at which he is all right, there are some mechanics which more or less make his world go round, and if there are freckles and green eyes involved then he is willing to keep trying the others until the end of time, even if he never gets them right.

And then someone knocks on the door.

"Go away, Sirius!" James yells, with some difficulty, "bit busy," at which Lily smacks him with a pillow.

"Er, Mister Potter," says someone who is decidedly not Sirius- - who sounds, in fact, horrifyingly like Professor Minerva McGonagall. "This is rather -- urgent, I'm afraid. If I could speak to you--"

"*Nghaa,*" James whimpers. Lily hits him again, hisses "Go!" and pushes him the three feet to the door. He opens it, straightens his glasses, and says, in as responsible a voice as possible, "Hello there, professor! Just, you know, taking a break! From the sunshine! To do...Head Boy things!"

"Yes," McGonagall says. She looks tired and sad and entirely unlike yesterday's trim, beachy incarnation. "Could you step into the hall for a moment, please?"

"Er, okay," James says. He closes the door behind him.

***

It is not unusual for Peter not to know where everyone else is and what they're doing. Of the four friends he has often enough this sneaking suspicion he is somehow expendable. When he is with his friends this feeling is banished completely; but when he is alone it returns, nagging and gnawing and it makes him cranky. Now, for instance, he can only guess where Sirius and Remus are, whether or not they're together or alone. James is easier. James is with Lily because James is with Lily more often than not, and when Peter is left alone it's usually because James is with Lily. James is like their glue. James holds them all together. Without James, Sirius goes flying off like an unanchored kite and Remus, who has always struck Peter as more of a loner than a people-person, disappears often enough that Peter doesn't think twice about it. However that leaves Peter, Pete Old Man, on his own and a little bored and susceptible to the suspicion that haunts him like a shadow or a particularly devoted ghost. He can't shake it. It seems unfair to him, that he should be on vacation, presumably

with his friends, and come under the suspicion's attack. *They just keep you around,* it whispers in his ear. *You're a little bit boring, you know,* it hums in his blood. *They're all much better looking and much smarter and much better friends and they've probably left you alone because you do embarrassing things,* it sing-songs in his gut.

"James is with Lily," Peter says stubbornly. "Sirius is off doing something I don't want to do and Remus is off doing something I *really* don't want to do."

Ah. The suspicion is too clever. *Well, it could be...*

Peter decides he will collect seashells, at least to distract himself. He is halfway down the beach and has bathing trunk pockets full of heavy lumpy things when he spots the glistening young man who was with McGonagall the other day. He barely recognizes him, as the young man is no longer glistening.

"Hallo," Peter says, because if he didn't then surely that would be further evidence that he is a hopelessly embarrassing person. There are only the two of them on the beach, and this way he pre-empts being ignored.

"Oh, hallo," the young man says. "I know you, don't I? The exploding toilet."

"That was James," Peter feels compelled to point out. *It was James and Sirius and Remus*, whispers the suspicion. *It was Sirius's idea and James really did it and Remus let them steal his prefect's key. You were asleep.*

"James Potter?" the young man says, straightening. "That was him? From yesterday?"

"Er," Peter says, "yes." *And I'm Peter Pettigrew. Nice to meet you.*

The young man seems to lose shine right before his eyes. Even his abdominals seem to have wilted. "Oh. Well. Hard luck, old man. He's a friend of yours?"

"He's my best friend," Peter says, a little sharper than he meant. *But you're not his.*

"Well. Well." The young man looks away for a long minute. He seems to be at a loss for words. Peter wonders if this is sort of embarrassing behavior, but there's a grave set to the man's hard jaw that tells him it isn't. It strikes Peter as being distinctly noble, something which Peter has not yet been able to achieve. *And you never will, what's more.* "Well," the young man says, for a third time. "That's -- you ought to be getting back. To the -- to your friends."

"I don't know where they are," Peter says, without thinking. "Er, I mean -- all right." *You don't know where your friends are. Some friend you are. Some friends they are.*

The young man, unexpectedly, claps a hand on his shoulder. "Don't worry about it," he says, distractedly. Peter stares up at him.

Don't take it to heart, the suspicion murmurs, but as Peter trots back to the hotel to find James it's already fading into silence.

***

James closes the door behind him. At first Lily thinks he's gotten into trouble; he has a slump to his shoulders and a queer silence about him, which are the usual markers of *I've been caught, hang it all.* She's about to open her mouth and make a joke about it, *Can you get your broom privileges revoked for being awful in bed, then?* but all of a sudden her better judgment and her impeccable instincts advise against it, and all that passes her lips is a somber "James?"

James says nothing, but presses himself against the door as if he is envious of the flat strong mindlessness of being wood.

Lily doesn't say *Are you all right?* because she is not stupid, and she's learned from years of being top in her class never to ask a question to which you already know the answer. She gets up and moves to him, puts her body between James and whatever it is in the air around him that presses him down and backwards. This is something about being a girl that Lily has understood, without really understanding, for some time: her way of protecting him, in the absence of an ability to overpower him with idiotic love the way he does with her. He makes a soft sound, the breath pressed out of him, and turns his face into her throat. She waits.

"It's my mum and dad." His voice, finally, is almost unrecognizable, harsh and wondering against her skin. Lily understands, with cold, horrible force: she pulls him against her as if she could take all that knowledge into herself. She is, as she knows perfectly well, very emotionally mature and extremely competent and rarely at a loss for action or words, but this makes her realize with frozen immediacy the helplessness of being seventeen, and the strange, paradoxical futility of loving people.

"They're dead," he says, "they died." Lily doesn't know anything to say.

She will always remember that he doesn't cry.



shoebox_project(http://www.livejournal.com/community/shoebox_project)

Cowritten by dorkorific and ladyjaida.

dorkorific specializes in **Sirius**; ladyjaida specializes in **Remus**.

dorkorific is **Mlle. Artiste**; ladyjaida is **Mlle. Bits-n-bats**.

The handwriting of Remus J. Lupin, Severus Snape and James Potter is done by ladyjaida.

The handwriting of Sirius Black, Peter Pettigrew and Lily Evans is done by dorkorific.
Don't worry; Peter won't be stupidified. **Trust us** on that one.

We would like to take a moment to thank windjinn for leaping down the stairs with ladyjaida's bra on his head.

all characters herein are the intellectual property of j.k. rowling, scholastic and warner brothers.

Part Twenty Two
April, 1977



James can't find his trousers.

It is, it seems to him, pretty absurd to be looking for your trousers in the middle of a funeral, but Great-Aunt Aramina is drunk (when *isn't* she drunk?) and, in a wine-soaked tender moment, has poured half a tray of canapés on the ones he was wearing. He knows he brought another pair, because he tried them on before the service, and they were too short. His mother, he thinks in a flash of irritation, has probably picked them up, the way she is *always doing*, and put them somewhere no human would think of looking, like the closet.

He almost yells, "Mu-um!" and then he doesn't. He says, "oh," to his socks, and sits down on the bed. It is lower than he remembers for some reason, or else he feels bigger.

That's it exactly, the subtle wrongness, the strange sensation of not quite fitting his own space in the world anymore. What he feels is not grief (he thinks, distantly, analytically) but confusion, as if walking down a familiar staircase to find that it has suddenly lost its bottom step. He's grown suddenly, and what used to fit into the air around him isn't there at all anymore. Now it's up to him, just him, to fill that emptiness. It would be much worse if it felt real, but he still harbors a human disbelief that traps him in moments such as these: where he opens his mouth to say something familiar, and finds that the natural words are no longer relevant.

James Potter doesn't want to rebuild what is natural around what is relevant. He doesn't want to fill in the strange cold space of air that presses around him. He wants his mum to get him trousers that fit and don't have canapés smudged down the left leg.

James stands up and pulls the covers off the bed. Maybe he threw them under--but he didn't. He rips off the sheets, and then the undersheets, and then he hurls the mattress off the bedframe. It knocks over a lamp, which splinters. James wonders at the fact that he has been sleeping on a flowered mattress, all this time, and no one has told him. No wonder he has such trouble with girls. It seems like the sort of thing a bloke ought to be told.

Someone knocks on his door, and a tentative voice says, "James?"

"Um, yes," says James, and Lily opens the door. Her hair is pulled sharply back and she looks whiter than usual. She looks at the mattress and then at James, and then says "You realize you're not wearing any trousers, don't you?"

"I was looking for them," James says.

"Some people," says Lily, tapping the side of her nose, "would call that inappropriate." She walks past him, tangles her fingers briefly in his hair, and then leans down to drag the mattress up off the floor.

"Aunt Aramina spilled," James attempts, "she spilled on them. I thought walking about with, you know, all over my knee would be more inappropriate. But I can't find my other pants, and I know I brought them with me, because I tried them on earlier and they were too short and I was glad I'd two pairs, else I couldn't sit down without showing too much ankle and that, that," he fumbles for the words, "that is also inappropriate, that."

"Sit down," Lily says. She takes him by the shoulders and presses him into a chair and he allows her to do it. Perhaps, he thinks, all he wants is someone to tell him what to do. He can't stand to have to think it up on his own. Soon there won't be any professors to do it either, and it will all be on his own after that. The loneliness of it gapes wide before him. He stares after Lily, who is setting about making his bed again, and longs for her to tell him what to do next. "Just sit still," she continues, speaking over her shoulder. "We'll find them, and if not, there are spells for it. I'll help."

There is something funny about her voice, James realizes, but he doesn't know what. At least she hasn't asked him how he's doing, or what he's feeling. At least she hasn't told him she is sorry. Nor has a single one of his friends, when he thinks about it; they walk around him, looking the other way, hesitantly almost-touching him, but acknowledging that space all around him and keeping clear of it, presumably until he figures out how to occupy it.

"I'm sorry," James says. There is something funny about his voice, too. "This isn't about the trousers. I should help you with that. I've made something of a mess, haven't I?"

"Well, yes," says Lily. "That lamp probably cost a good fifteen Galleons. Not to mention your mattress was on the floor. Did you pick it out because of the flowers?"

"I love you," James says.

Lily straightens, holding something in one hand. "Trousers. They were tangled in your comforter."

"I am a prat," says James. "Sorry." He takes them and sits down again. He has never really considered the

matter, but it occurs to him that trousers are actually made up of thousands of tiny threads, and he can actually *see* them, crosshatched and obvious.

"Put them on," Lily says gently, kneeling beside him, one hand soft at the back of his neck.

Almost overwhelmed with gratitude, James does. He gives Lily a smile that is meant to be charming and capable and serious and reassuring all at once, but his mouth doesn't appear to be precisely under his control, and it emerges a kind of distressing wiggle.

"There." Lily touches his knee. "They're a little short, but I don't think anyone's going to notice, not if you're standing."

"Thank you," James says. He wants to add that she has an uncanny ability to do the right thing, just what he needs, and that he is pretty certain he can never let himself be without her, but he can't put the right words to it. He doesn't want it to sound soppy or anything. His lips press together. "Thank you," he says again.

"Do you think you can go down now?" Lily asks.

"I don't know," James says, all at once. "I was so grateful to Aunt Aramina I almost kissed her."

"Don't make me jealous," Lily says, and winces. "It's just, people are going to worry about you. Down there."

"I think," James says, "that they're probably, aren't they, worried about me anyway. What with the, you know, whole thing," and laughs, horribly.

"James," Lily says. "Come downstairs. This isn't for you. I wish it were, but it isn't. People need to see you being all right to be all right themselves."

"I am so very not all right," James says, with a fragmented sound that doesn't quite make it all the way to a laugh, "that it's kind of amusing."

"Not all that amusing," says Lily. She touches the side of his wrist, traces his jaw with the palm of one hand and turns his face so he has to look at her. It's not an unpleasant obligation. "James, listen to me: I promise you I'm not going anywhere. All right? This isn't going to be for long, and then we're going somewhere else and you can set things on fire, or go to sleep."

"I don't know what to do," James tells her helplessly.

"I'm telling you," says Lily. "Be as strong as you can be."

"That's, really, I'm sorry, this sounds pretty girly, but--but what if that's not enough?"

"The rest," Lily says, "you leave to me." She stands. James is amazed momentarily by the slender strength of her, the way she is unbowed by the desperate muddle that threatens to engulf him. It is fantastically, agonizingly comforting to know that there is a part of him it cannot touch.

They are at the door when he stops her. He just wants a moment. He takes her around the waist and presses his wet nose into her shoulder, and feels, even then, her body soften to make room for him. "Look," he says, "just, because I need to say it." His words come back hot to his own lips from where they ricochet off her skin. It is uncomfortable to breathe this way, but at least there is no dividing unfilled space between him and someone else. It is a closeness that has to be physical in order to be understood; it is perhaps the only thing in his brain that he can bring whole into the world of tangible things. "Look," he says again. "I know that I sleep on, on a mattress that has flowers on it, and I'm pissing myself, just *pissing* myself, over--over everything, but Lily--Lily--I am so, so--grateful to be in love with you, I--"

"I know," Lily says. She grabs the back of his shirt.

"I'm not done," he pleads, "please, I'm not done, just let me--I want you to know that I--I don't ever want to--"

"No one else, James Potter," Lily says, eyes bright, "is ever, ever going to leave you. All right? No one." He feels her nails against his back. "We'll talk about it when we can talk about it, but right now you have aunts and uncles and cousins and professors and friends and they all know where you aren't, but they don't know where you are, and I think that will help, I think it can, if you just think about them instead. Can you? It might. It might."

James wipes his nose with the back of his hand. His mother, he thinks blindly, always told him never to do that; it is uncouth and uncivil and immature and that's what tissues and handkerchiefs are for and, barring that, the corners of tablecloths. James, at the moment, has none of these. He stares down at his snotty thumb.

"Right," he says. "Let's go downstairs."

"Should we go after him?" says Peter, a little nervously. He pushes his hair, combed limply at the side, off of his damp forehead. "Should we have gone, you know, before?"

It occurs to Remus that they should probably not huddle in a shell-shocked little circle at the side of the room, but he cannot readily come up with any alternatives. There is little he hates more than funeral receptions. Funerals are bad enough, but then forcing the bereaved to stand around and not cry for an hour while eating tiny quiches seems to him downright sadistic. "He probably wants to be left alone."

"No," says Sirius, speaking for the first time. His hands are in his pockets, and he isn't looking at any of them. "Prongs hates being alone. He only says he wants to be so people can prove how much they care by going after him." There is a funny edge to his voice. "It's all right, though. Lily's gone already."

Remus stares very hard at the carpet. It is nice, probably expensive, worn in this corner by perhaps lifetimes of shufflers shuffling over it during receptions, because they are awkward or because they are avoiding someone or because they don't know the proper thing to do or say at a funeral reception. *If only it weren't so obviously a funeral. If only it hadn't been parents. If only it hadn't been James's parents.* It is a selfish series of thoughts. But funerals, Remus knows, are the one place where everyone can be selfish all at once. The relatives who weren't close are selfishly glad they were never closer or, conversely, selfishly wish they had been. The relatives who were close are selfish in their grief. Friends are selfish, either by hiding, as Remus has done, or offering themselves forward too much, as Remus is trying not to do by hiding. Loved ones, that small exclusive

circle only defined at such times of crisis, all wander around with boiled expressions trying to sort their own heads and hearts out. No one is really thinking about the person who died, partly out of fear and partly out of a sick terrible shame that they are left around to think at all. It seems vulgar, somehow, to be alive during a funeral. It seems insulting.

Remus stares very, very hard at the carpet. He wishes the same thing they're all wishing; to be nine again and have done with it. He feels unfairly thrust into the precarious place between being adult and being a child, where at one side is offered the presumed competence of the former, and at the other -- and this is their true desire, and possibly the true desire of adults everywhere -- the particular blindness of childhood, the ability to trust in sleep and the mornings that follow.

"I wish," Peter says, surprising everyone, "I wish there was something we could do. But there bloody well isn't, is there, and that's bollocks."

Sirius barks a laugh. "Well said." It is hard to tell if he is being sarcastic. Remus thinks he probably isn't.

"It's all right," Remus reasons. "We're helping by--by being here for him," he finishes lamely, and Sirius gives him a look which says everything he's already thought. It boils down to, *Don't make excuses.*

"Hey," Peter says suddenly, "he's come down," for there James is again, face white and thin below his subdued hair. His arm is tight and strained around Lily's waist, as if she is the only force making him move at all.

Sirius breaks off from them, a determined set to his face and shoulders. Remus and Peter follow at a more cautious distance.

"Hey," says Sirius, shoving his hands deep into his pockets and regarding James as if he's a challenge. A muscle in his jaw works slightly.

"Hey," says James. He appears to have grown several inches very fast; at first Remus thinks it is the abrupt age bestowed by grief, and then he realizes, with a hysterical, silent bubble of grotesque laughter, that it is because his trousers are too short.

"This is complete crap," says Sirius forcefully.

"More or less," James agrees.

"I'm leaving," says Sirius, "in exactly fifteen minutes. You can come if you like." His anger is a blaze of sudden fire in the room, not comforting but illumining. It is, Remus thinks, in a long career of strange and perfect gifts, the strangest and most perfect gift he has ever seen Sirius give anyone.

James begins to untangle himself from Lily. For a moment it seems impossible, as if they really are inextricable, but then he shifts and his arm bends the right way, and he makes it after all. "Thanks, mate," he says. "But I've -- I've got to stay here. I think it's -- best."

"Right," Sirius says. He fixes his eyes on the far wall and keeps his hands in his pockets. "All right, then."

"If you want to go," James adds, drawing suddenly close to him, "then you should. I don't want you to--"

"Well, I'm staying if you are, you stupid girl," Sirius says fiercely. "Don't be daft, I'm --you have to know where to find me, in case you need--"

"Right," James says. "No."

Remus thinks sometimes that James and Sirius speak in a special code, and what is actually communicated can only be understood in the words they omit, the syllables they lose before they're said. There's always been something incomprehensible about Sirius and James. They've known each other too long, long enough that they've started to forget who draws what breath or bleeds what blood. And still, in the sharp line of Sirius's jaw above his neck, and the way he works the tense muscles around his mouth, and the way he keeps moving his chin forward just to keep moving, they are keeping a curious distance now. Remus wonders if James sees it the same way Sirius does. James might think it is just the mundane, stupid way they are all cautious with him now, as if they might say something careless and break him. With Sirius it is more than that. It has something to do with death and with Lily and the course friendship charts unpredictably. Mostly, it has to do with Sirius and James.

*They aren't certain how to grow up with one another,*Remus realizes. He knows how that is. He isn't certain how to grow up with simply himself.

James looks at Sirius for a long, silent moment.

Finally he says, "Thanks. I mean. Thanks for coming, Pads."

"Only for you," Sirius says bitterly, "would I ever, *ever*--" He looks as if he is about to say something else, but swallows it, crosses his arms, and stares darkly at the ceiling.

James's throat moves. He looks at Peter and Remus then, and says, with a rueful, twisted smile, "You too, lads. Thanks--it's good to see you here, with all these...it honestly is. Sorry about this."

It is so like James, and yet so unlike the James Remus knew--to stand in the middle of his parents' funeral and say *Sorry about this*--that Remus, for one of the only times in his entire life, has no idea what to say. Usually, when he thinks he has no idea what to say, it is because there is such a wealth of inappropriate possibilities clamoring to be chosen. This time there is nothing but a hideous, yawning blankness. He nods, forcing himself to meet James's eyes.

"What do you want?" asks Peter, with all the horrible, naked desperation that Remus feels but knows better than to express. "I mean. Do you want anything? Can we do anything?"

"Er," James says. He strokes back his hair uncertainly. "It's all right, Pete. I mean, not all right, obviously, but you know. You're all right."

What would I want? Remus thinks hopelessly. *If it were me--if it were my--and my friends were all around me, what would I want them to say?*

But of course the answer is simple and impossible: *It was a mistake, you idiot, they're not dead, they're right upstairs. Go put on proper clothes and stop whinging into the canapés.*

He says, "I've--I've just seen Professor Slughorn. Just in case you want a heads-up. That you might have to talk to him."

James groans, and Lily makes a strangled noise. "Oh Remus, not him."

"You oughtn't be so nice and go to all his dinners all the time, if that's how you feel," says James, in a voice that tries too hard to be like his own. "You are a perfectly dreadful tease." He looks at her, and there is a soft question in his eyes which Remus cannot exactly identify.

"It's not--well, he's a harmless old man, and he's terribly friendly, and I don't like to hurt his feelings," Lily says, sighing. Her knuckles caress James's shoulder almost imperceptibly. "Anyway, sometimes we have really interesting conversations. He knows loads about potions. Sirius, I don't know how you get out of it. He's positively frantic to collect you, too."

"Quidditch practice," Sirius says, and flashes her a brief, strained smile. "Terribly busy all the time. You know how it is." They all laugh too loudly, the relief of being able to pretend to converse overwhelming them, and then collapse limply back into silence.

None of them knows what to do. Not James, certainly; but no one expects him to. Lily is pretending -- Remus is amazed at her, the competent line of her neck, the firm way she touches things -- but he saw her, when they realized James was missing, and the flash of panic she stored as a secret in her own eyes. It's like acting. Sirius, too, the way he shuffles in his stiff black suit and doesn't look at anyone, as if by exaggerating the normal language of his body he can somehow consume them all with normalness. Peter looks as lost as Remus feels. Remus wants to touch someone, any one of them, to offer companionship in being adrift.

He wants to say something to James, the right something. He wants to offer him a gift or whisper him a sentence or take him aside and even, maybe, embrace him. When he opens his mouth his tongue sticks like a great gluey glob to the roof of his mouth. Awkward people shouldn't be allowed into funerals. They should be told to write letters and not bother to attend.

"I guess it's," James says. "Slughorn, unavoidable, I suppose."

"We can go with you," Sirius offers gruffly. "If you'd like. Scope things out beforehand. I might be able to distract him with my aristocratic charm, and, you know, things." His anger seems to have melted in the odd way of Sirius's angers, but Remus can still sense it, transmuted and troubling.

James takes Lily by the hand. "Right," he says. "Thanks. I've got it. You know. It's the sort of thing -- I mean I'm going to have to, to figure out how to do these things. Alone. Thanks mate," he repeats. There's a dark fervor to his tone. "You're, you know."

Sirius nods. He does. Everything about him is magnified. It's as if he thinks no one will notice the details of him that way, the pinch beneath his lower lip and the tight dark quickness in his eyes. Remus wants to say, *Let's none of us do anything alone* and *But that isn't the way we're meant to be,* only now it is, and they all

know.

"Hey, Potter," says a deep, rock-ribbed voice behind him. Remus turns.

He shouldn't be surprised, he supposes. After all, it was the Head Boy's family. It was even in the papers. *Everyone* is here.

"Gideon," James says. He smiles uncertainly, and it looks strange on his face. "You're -- you came. I mean. I didn't...I didn't know you knew them. Fabian -- are you all right?"

"Don't be ridiculous, little Potter," says Fabian, with the ghost of a smile. He is incredibly pale and painfully thin; there are wide bandages around his head and his fabulous Fabian hair has been cut short and ragged. Remus remembers, like a punch in the stomach, Fabian shaking and bloody in the sea-cave at Brighton, the crimson slash on Gideon's arm, the blue light. He doesn't dare look at Sirius. "*You* don't get to ask that question."

"It's Gid and Fay to you, anyway," Gideon rumbles, and puts a massive hand on James's shoulder. "You needn't stand on ceremony."

"My parents never told me," James starts, and then stops again. "How did you -- I mean -- did you study with my Dad, or something?"

Gid and Fay don't exchange glances, but the way they don't do it is almost more obvious than if they had. "Hogwarts Alumni Association," says Fabian, "style of thing." Talking appears to require great effort from him. He pauses for a moment to rest, and in that pause seems to take in Remus, Sirius and Peter for the first time. "Well, if it isn't, you know, the rest of you. Keeping well? All things considered?"

Remus doesn't trust himself to respond. He's certain Fabian is looking at him, and what's more that he must sense, somehow, in his eyes, what he knows. Fortunately, Sirius says roughly, "Good to see you lot -- don't suppose Marlene's around," and Gideon says, "Oh, she's somewhere, probably smoking a fag round the back," and Sirius says, "Well, don't let her leave, I want a chat with her," and Fabian says with gray lasciviousness, "Oo-er," and Remus is free to think about other things, like why Marlene McKinnon doesn't like him and whether he will have to talk to her. He is just wrapping these warm, familiar worries around him like a comforter when Fabian, mythic, untouchable Fabian Prewett, shaking his head too enthusiastically at something James or Sirius said, makes a sharp noise and stumbles: and Remus can't deny anymore that the old worries are irrelevant.

Gideon catches him.

It's a relief to see. A faltering like that can be caught so easily by an arm and a firm grip and instinct. It has nothing to do with thinking or over-thinking, with feeling or not feeling, with the funereal, numb pall they all harbor now in their blood. It has nothing to do with mourning. It has everything to do with bodies and with families, and Remus wishes it were that simple for all of them. He's always had particularly strong arms. It would be something he could do, if things were like that. Although, admittedly, he'd probably grab the wrong part of someone and it'd all go to hell from there.

Remus feels, for a moment, Sirius' hand on his. Sirius' fingers and palm are sweaty. In fact it's an uncomfortable grip, crushing and slippery at once. It makes all the difference. Remus clings to his hand until Sirius lets go, and sticks both hands back into his trousers. Everything's gone to hell at once, but Fabian isn't alone, Remus thinks; and neither are they. There's a certain closeness in sweating on someone else in fear and comfort and unhappiness.

"A bit of a," Fabian is trying to explain. "It's nothing, really, you wouldn't believe it but -- a bookshelf, you know, can you imagine, mucking about like that--"

Gideon's face is drawn, but he laughs, too loudly, and fumbles for a joke. "Pity your, you know, Mr. Muscles isn't around to, haha, give you a strong arm 'round your slim and girlish waist, eh?"

"*Gideon*," Fabian hisses. His ears go pink. "Shut up."

At the word *muscles* Remus's mind immediately flashes to Caradoc the Towel Boy -- as would anyone's -- and goes from there with frightening linearity back to the sea-cave and the dark and *If you live through this, I'm going to kill you*, and he knows somewhere in his stomach that Gideon's joke isn't completely a joke. He glances up at Fabian, unable to stop himself, and Fabian looks back at him, his eyes narrowing.

"Albus's looking for you," says Gideon to James, over their heads. "I mean, most people are. But you'll want to find him. Besides," and he smiles a little, "it'll give you an excuse not to talk to anyone you don't want to. I remember when our Da died -- can't tell you how many people were there that I just hated the hell out of."

Remus is distantly surprised, not by the idea that the Prewetts' parents are dead, but that they had parents at all. He has always sort of imagined that they sprang full-formed out of the imaginations of Boys' Clubs everywhere.

Except for the whole--Caradoc Dearborn--thing. Or perhaps that's a part of Boys' Clubs everywhere. Remus touches the corner of his mouth, where something not entirely forgotten still lurks.

"I had to shut him in a closet," says Fabian, still watching Remus sharply. "He almost bit an old woman."

"She spilled something on me," Gideon snaps. "And I didn't have another shirt that would be proper. She deserved it. I wanted to give her rabies."

"You would have," Fabian says. "If I hadn't locked you up first. In fact I think I ought to do that more often. Lock you up." He is still watching Remus, a strange furrow in his brow. Remus wants to explain to him it's not what he thinks. The expression makes him want to crawl into a closet, himself. He tries to meet Fabian's eyes and excuse himself but a hard shutter draws quick over
Fabian's face the instant Remus tries. "Right," he says, clipped and unforgiving. "Let's have something to drink. Old bookshelf wounds, and all."

He leans on Gideon heavily as they leave.

"That was funny," James says. "It was nice of them."

"You'd best," Sirius says, "see Dumbledore. Innit? What they said?"

"Right," James agrees. "Right."

"Alone," Lily murmurs. She gives him a quick kiss on the cheek and pulls him close and he goes a little pink and a little too satisfied, and a little straighter, as well. "Go on. He'll probably -- he probably wants to tell you the secret to life and initiate you into all the hidden wisdoms of the world."

"At least, he'll know the right thing to say," Peter says firmly.

"For he is Dumbledore, master of all hidden knowledge," says James, a little mocking but kindly too. "Sirius--"

Sirius says, looking past him, "I probably won't leave."

"Thanks," James says quietly.

"I might set something on fire though," Sirius goes on. They smile the same rough way at each other, crooked, raw and hurting: and then James says, "right then," and goes.

"I'm going," says Sirius as soon as he's gone, "to, you know," and makes vague motions, sticks his hands back into his pockets as deep as they can go, and turns on his heel, leaving Remus, Lily and Peter alone in their little cluster. Peter gnaws at the ball of his thumb.

"Lily," Remus says. "He's -- I mean, is he--"

"He's James," says Lily, and there's something soft and wonderful in the curve of her lips when she says his name. "He surprises people."

Remus trusts her. For a moment he harbors the irrational impulse to grasp her by the hands and ask her how she does it. If it's a secret, he wants to learn. Perhaps it has something to do with being a girl, perhaps it has something to do with not being a werewolf. Perhaps it's just luck. Perhaps it's because of James. "You don't," he says instead. "We all -- you know. Every one of us, we trust you. Don't we. Peter."

Peter nods emphatically. "We never really thought you'd -- James was kind of awful," he explains. He looks guilty, and adds quickly, "But we always trust *him* -- we just didn't know if *you'd* -- I mean--"

"I know what you mean," Lily assures him. "You're going to hurt something. Trying like that."

"I'll go get something to drink," Peter says. His earlobes are the same peculiar lobster shade as his nose, the former embarrassment and the latter sunburn. "Do either of you, uhm, want anything?"

"I'm all right," Remus says, "thanks."

"I'm fine as well," Lily says.

Peter trundles off. *And then there were two,* Remus thinks.

"This is horrible," Lily says. She draws close to Remus and suddenly her cool is going, in its place something burning and frantic. "Remus, I *love* him -- I haven't told anyone, you know, not even, not even my mum, and -- it's -- do you know what it's like? Loving someone? It's, it's," she trips over the wrong words, "it's worrying, it's worrying *all the time* and never feeling safe. That's what it is. Well," she adds, coloring, two bright spots of heat on her cheeks, "it's other things too, but it's worrying *all the time* underneath that."

"He gives everyone a lot to worry about," Remus says measuredly. "James."

"And there's absolutely *nothing* I can do," Lily adds. She frowns. "Except, you know, not let on."

"About the worrying?"

"I can barely sleep," Lily admits.

"You're not letting on," Remus says. "I think -- you know, that's what's important. For him. Right now."

Lily watches James's dark head vanish into the sea of people, her eyes on him and yet far away. "He was," she starts, and stops, and rubs her cheekbone absently. "How long do you think until it's one of us?"

"What?" says Remus, startling.

"Until it's a student, I mean," Lily says quietly. "This--I mean--it's not going to stop. It's just going to get worse."

Remus has never seen Lily like this before, and he's pretty sure he prefers it that way. "We don't -- I mean, we can't think that way."

"I know," she says. "But I can't help it. I can't stop thinking like that. I can't -- it hurts enough as it is, and I just -- I'm sorry, this is stupid. It doesn't help anything. Do you think Sirius is all right, speaking of people who need more help than any human being can possibly provide?"

"Sometimes," Remus starts, "when I go after him, and ask if he's all right, he punches me and tells me I worry too much." He rubs at his eye, tired and feeling a headache somewhere deep in the socket. "I'm going to go see if he's all right anyway. If he punches me, then at least I don't--" He cuts off before he says 'worry.' "At least I know he's all right," he amends.

"I'm going to go, I don't know, skulk around in corners and spy on James," Lily says. "Remus?"

"Yes?"

"Don't," Lily says. "Worry, I mean. I shouldn't, either. We can all -- we'll look after each other. We can take care of ourselves."

"While we're not punching each other, you mean," Remus says. "I think so. I think we ought."

"Is it a promise, then?" Lily asks.

"Yes," Remus agrees. "Do you think we should shake on it?"

Lily gives Remus a look that says if they shake then there's no turning back, no being afraid, no talking about worrying with one another. It's just full speed ahead. It feels silly, Remus admits, like they're signing away their childhood in the most childish way possible. He offers his hand.

"It's a deal," Lily says. She has the firmest handshake Remus has ever encountered.

"Deal," he echoes.

***

At first, Dumbledore doesn't say anything. His eyes are keen and bright behind the scythe-moon curves of his spectacles. He looks at James as James has been terrified this whole time of being looked at, and is grateful, now, to be getting it over with. Dumbledore, like Hogwarts, is the last bastion of their safety -- the parent no one can kill, perhaps; the one man for whom disappearance or abandonment seems a faded unreality, like a bedtime story or a half-forgotten myth. In the middle of James's empty dining room he looks a little ridiculous and a little frightening.

"I am pleased to see that you appear to be standing upright," Dumbledore says at last. "Is that becoming easier?"

"Yes," James says. He's surprised how strong it sounds, and how he suddenly means it.

"I suppose you have spoken to everyone you need to speak to," says Dumbledore. "You will find -- though I have no doubt that you have absolutely no desire to speak to anyone at the moment -- you will find that having done so will, in the long run, quiet you. Don't be afraid to mourn for yourself, James; don't shut out your betrayal and your anger. You need that comfort far more than the dead do. Your parents, I daresay, are very used to your being cross with them."

"Thank you, Sir," James says quietly.

"Very well." Dumbledore sighs. It occurs to James, sudden and strange, that Dumbledore has seen more of these than he can count. He has an odd urge to say *It's all right,* Professor, but he doesn't, because of course it isn't, and saying it won't make it so. "I suppose you have been told the relevant details about your parents' deaths."

He's been told that they were killed by an Unforgivable, that they were killed by an organization that calls itself by a variety of names: the Death Eaters, the Brotherhood of Salazar, the Partnership for Pureblood Pride. This, James thinks, is the biggest load of crap of all. They weren't killed by an *organization*, they were killed by people. There is a stain on the carpet in the dining room where his mother knocked over her teacup in her fall. It will not come out. "No, sir," he says. "Not really."

Dumbledore's lips press together. James knows something's up; he isn't stupid. Just because his parents are dead

doesn't mean he doesn't know how to put two and two together, read the signs, understand that something bigger than even his parents is happening and his parents just happened to be a part of it -- that's all. It has something to do with the world James knows, not just on the microcosmic level of the people who raised him and embarrassed him beyond belief and loved him tremendously, and whom he loved in return. The mum and dad he thought he'd be returning to this summer, and now never will. It has something to do with everyone. Everyone who's come to the funeral is a part of it, and Fabian who looks like he swallowed a bomb is a part of it, and Gideon who is Fabian's brother is a part of it. Dumbledore is a part of it. Dumbledore is at the great swirling incomprehensible core of it, perhaps trying to hold the pieces together even as they fly apart, and parents and brothers and friends and people who oughtn't die *ever* are *murdered*, killed.

"There is much to tell you, Mr. Potter," Dumbledore says, "and none of it is pleasant. I wish there was no need to say it at all -- but if you wish me to be honest with you, and I dare say by the look of things you wish it indeed, then I *will* be. But there is no going back once I have said the things I have to say, told you what you wish to know. There is only going forward. No, no -- don't tell me. You think you want to, and I understand. We have lost many. We will lose many more. There may be time for you to take a bigger part in it. A year. Something so little as a few months, even, if you wish it." James sees something in his eyes that is terrifying.

It is terrifying to know the person you have always trusted to protect you is afraid, himself.

"Tell me," James says. "I want to know. I want to make sure it doesn't happen to -- to anyone else. What happened to my -- what happened to us. I'm Head Boy." It sounds stupid, until he thinks of the night he got the letter, how when everyone else was asleep his mother came to where he was in bed not sleeping, and touched his hair and said with shining eyes, *Jamie, we're just, we're just so proud.* How his father said nothing, but looked at him over his paper and nodded a little, and spent a sentimental day looking at James's baby pictures and showing them off to anyone who would pay attention, mainly Sirius. "I'm head boy," he goes on, "and it's -- this is something that's affecting the school, and my job is to do something. That's my job." He wants to go on, to say something about how it isn't about revenge and it isn't about anger -- or it is, of course, enormously so, but that's not nearly all of it -- but it seems to him that Dumbledore gets it already.

"That is, of course, why you got the job in the first place," says Dumbledore quietly.

James forces himself to hold Dumbledore's eyes. His hand hurts where he bloodied a finger hoisting his father's coffin and probably, he has to admit to himself, overturning his mattress didn't help either.

"Know this, Mr. Potter," Dumbledore says, before he begins. "There are things, great things, terrible things, happening even now. I worry about a time when there will be no rest to honor the fallen, no safety to bury our comrades, but it is when I speak to my students that I am reminded--" He pauses. "That I am reminded of hope," he concludes. "The most important thing in grave times is to believe that we may all live to see the end of them, together. And towards that end we must always work our hardest." Dumbledore motions for James to sit. James does. "And on those principles," Dumbledore says at last, moving to stand at the far end of the dining room table, "I have begun *The Order of the Phoenix.*"

***

Sirius is sitting outside beneath the shade of an oak tree. The first thing Remus thinks when he sees him is how at home he looks, and then how lost. That's the thing about Sirius: the curious ability to combine as many

contradictions possible into one form of angular boy-flesh at once, and then some. After all, Remus reasons, this was Sirius' home as well for a time, and now it isn't.

"Mind if I join you?" Remus asks.

Sirius shrugs, but waves him over. "Just -- take a look at this," he says. "Stand back, anyway, I'm not sure how it interacts with -- people." His wand sticks out of his back pocket; he grabs it, and waves it once, and whispers something, and then they're surrounded, encircled, by a flock of dancing white lilies. "I was going to do it for James," Sirius says. "But then I thought, you know, he already has lilies. Lily. Not to mention it seemed incredibly bent."

"It's not the manliest possible gesture," agrees Remus, only because he thinks if he says something kind Sirius might hit him.

Sirius looks up at him. "Sit down. You're giving me a crick."

Remus does. It is an absurdly beautiful day, the sky pale blue with lazy clouds drifting through it, and a soft spring breeze that whispers through the new-blown flowers. If he closes his eyes, he could be nine, and it could be almost tomorrow.

"So there's that," Sirius says with a harsh little cough of laughter, "that happened."

Of course there isn't anything to be said. Remus sighs internally, because in a way this is just what he came out here to avoid: but in another way he knew what he was getting himself in for, knew that this would be another awkward episode in the awkward life of Remus "Awkward" Lupin. "I think he would like it," he attempts. "The thought, I mean. With the flowers. They are lovely and you wrote the spell yourself and you know how James gets about spells when people invent them, all -- like me with very old books, spittle, you know, and twitching. But you probably shouldn't do it. I mean, you should do it, but not in front of him, or, you know, while he's around, because it's pretty girly and if you are girly then there's already one girl in the group and you can all get rid of me, which I wouldn't want." Remus has gone, in the space of thirty seconds, from painful verbal constipations to explosions of hideous, nonsensical linguistic diarrhea. He pinches his mouth shut and waits to be punched.

It is worse when Sirius says softly, "I hate this."

"Of course you do," Remus says lamely. "Look, I mean, we all--"

"No," says Sirius quietly. The sharp lines of his profile seem to quiver. "You don't. It's not just all the reasons I ought to hate it. It's not just because of James and the war coming and not knowing what to say and those stupid flowers, you know, and all that. I mean, it's horrible stuff, and we don't *all*. It's just me."

"James's parents--"

"They were *my* parents," Sirius says. He rubs his hand tiredly over the side of his face. "I can't, I can't say that, I can't even think it, because it isn't my grief to have. It's not. I know. But--but it isn't fair, Moony!" A fierce, wild sorrow flames in Sirius's face. "They were my parents, and I'm not even allowed to be sad about it because

James needs me not to be, and I understand that, I do, I'm doing my best, but it isn't *fair*."

Remus has the same question Remus always has around Sirius. *Who's been looking after you, then?* He just has the sense not to ask it most of the time.

The terrible thing about loss and grief, the really terrible thing, is that there is no unlimited store of it in the universe. No one person can exhaust it for any one reason on any one day. But the occasion for grief only ever calls for a few bereaved, while the rest of the world -- lost, miserable, hurting themselves -- have to pretend they're all right for the sake of those who really aren't.

"It was parents," Remus says blankly. He is careful. He wants, more than anything, to help someone. He wants, more than anything, to help *Sirius*, as James has Lily but Sirius is alone putting spells on funeral flowers. "It doesn't seem -- well. Like that's ever supposed to happen, really. We don't think of it, don't think it's possible."

"They were amazing," Sirius says. "You know that. *Fucking* -- top notch. Best there are. Model yourselves after the Potters, and if you come half as close, you're, you're all right."

"I know," Remus says.

"And they were always -- they just *took me in*, Remus!" Sirius slams his fist sideways into his palm, and his head goes hopelessly back, his shoulders falling. "When I had nowhere else to go, they were just there, and didn't say anything about it, and didn't even make me pay for dinner, and always knew what I liked to eat best. It was -- they made me -- feel at home, and that's, that's--" Sirius works it out in his lower jaw. Remus feels the sharp hollowness of his tone and begins to lift his hand. There is an eternity of slow motion still between his fingers and Sirius' shoulder. "The hardest thing anyone can do," Sirius finishes. He drops his chin to his chest. "If even your own, your *own* parents, can't make you -- it was a home, their home, James's home and my home too and I--I *loved them!*"

Remus' hand finds Sirius' shirt at last and grasps its sleeve. Sirius looks up, but still away. He laughs, rough and moist.

"I loved them and they're dead," Sirius says. "I want to kill -- I want to *kill* the people who did it. I don't just want to kill them. I want to hurt them. I want to hurt them so fucking badly for a long time and *then* I want to kill them after that."

"Oh," Remus says inadequately. It isn't really a word, just a noise, somewhere in the back of his throat. "Oh, Sirius. Look. Don't." He isn't sure what he's asking Sirius not to do. Hurt people, possibly. Hurt, himself. It isn't helpful.

And he thinks, *what the hell*, and because he couldn't do it with James and because his hand is already fisted in Sirius's sleeve, he draws his arms around Sirius's back and just holds on to him. Sirius says, muffled by sleeve and shirt, "Fuck, Moony, stop it, get off me, fuck, fuck," and his hands flex and twist and won't touch Remus. There is a growing wet patch on Remus's shoulder and under his hands Sirius's back shakes like the end of the world.

Remus has thought about it often enough before. Not holding Sirius, not that, but rather the awkwardness of

holding anyone, the way he doesn't know when to tighten his grip or let go. The possibility of bumping heads. The odds of catching someone else's hair on his buttons. The chances someone will smell something on him, last night's dinner or toothpaste or old sweater, that's somehow disagreeable or even loathsome. How easy it is to miscalculate someone's height. How easy it is to knock chins, elbows, noses. Remus has thought about it a lot of the time. He cringes at the idea of physical proximity and the heightened awareness it brings of his own physical ineptitude. He even thinks about it now in a vague and almost funny way as he realizes that when someone needs that closeness as much as you do it doesn't matter for shite if he can do it or if he can't. It's just the holding that counts. It's just the holding they'll remember.

"Sirius," he says.

Suddenly his own hands are everywhere, and because he's stopped thinking, and can't stop feeling, he knows exactly what to do. Like instinct. Like lifting up his head and howling at the full moon. Like tearing his tendons into taffy. It's all pain and nature: like *that.*

He gets his fingers in Sirius' hair, and holds him at the base of his skull with the curve of his palm. He's known but not known exactly for some time now that he's *bigger* than Sirius is, though Sirius isn't small. It's funny to him to hold that difference in his arms. Really, truly ridiculous.

Sirius is crying, which is also ridiculous, because he's not crying like a boy-almost-man, he's crying like a six year old, all snot and gasping; he's laughing, too, sort of, and trying to say something, like "I am an idiot" or "Your arms are too long," but Remus summons all his courage and all his instinct and says "Shut up. Shut up. It's all right."

Sirius's fingers dig hard into his shoulderblades. His mouth against Remus's collarbone is slightly open and his ragged breath is hot. Remus tightens his arms and winds his hand deeper into Sirius's hair and whispers helplessly, "Shut up, please, you're all right, it's all right," until he feels Sirius quieting against him, his chest hitching in hiccupping sobs. Remus has a memory of crying, the way a kid cries: the way the end of it leaves you lightheaded and empty-feeling and better but worse too.

"If anyone sees us right now," Sirius says, "I'm going to say you were choking and I was trying to, to save your life." His voice is the odd uneven staccato of someone who can't quite breathe over the force of his own crying, gulping sounds in between words and all. Remus touches him where he can reach, his hair and shoulders mostly.

"What was I choking on?" he asks.

"A canapé," Sirius says, "what else?"

Remus bows his head over Sirius' head and whispers, like a vow, like an oath of fealty, "Best to have our stories straight." Sirius barks a laugh. Remus can feel his tears and probably his snot against his own neck. He doesn't care. He buries his face in Sirius' hair and holds him with arms unflinching as iron. Sirius smells like soap. Most people smell like soap. He smells a little like sweat beneath the soap, and the faintest hint of dog. Remus is overwhelmed by the smell of it, all so close. "Should I stop?" Remus asks. It comes out a jumble, with Sirius' hair in his mouth.

"Don't even," Sirius says, "don't *bloody* even. All I said was that I want an alibi." He sounds a little more like himself, but only a little, still gulping in air. Somehow his elbow is in Remus's ribcage.

It seems like this would be the kind of thing to bother Remus and it troubles Sirius a little that it doesn't bother him, not at all. He's all right with it. He's good with it. He's good *at* it.

For what feels like a long time, Remus holds Sirius up. The only sound is the wind in the trees and the flowers, and the occasional catch of Sirius's breath.

Finally Sirius says thickly, "All right. Enough. All right," in that tone that means he is speaking more to himself than to Remus, and drags a hand up Remus's arm to press it hard against his own nose and mouth. For a moment he shudders again, and then he slowly disentangles himself from Remus's body. Without the weight of him Remus feels strange and suddenly pointless.

"All right," Remus echoes. He passes his free hand between them, touches his own neck, and lets it drop a dead weight in his lap.

Sirius stares at him, a keen, sharp gaze.

It's the kind of expression that suggests something heavy and important could happen, or might instead be lost in the distances that exist, naturally, between even the closest of people.

Remus licks his lips.

"Have you been *practicing* this sort of thing?" Sirius asks. "Oi, I've got -- I've drooled on your shirt and things."

Remus looks down. There is, indeed, a growing translucent patch on his shoulder, and it's damp and stiff around the edges. "I've got a jacket," he says. "It's all right."

"You have been practicing," Sirius says. His voice is sort of wobbly. "I don't know whose funerals you've been going to, but it's paid off for you."

"I've been talking to Lily," says Remus, "and we were thinking. She was thinking. That -- you know, things are...well, you know. All this," he gestures vaguely, "it isn't…out of the question. You know? Beyond the realm of possibility. Anyway," feeling stupid, "she says, we have to take care of each other. We can't pretend we can do it for ourselves, like normal teenagers get to do, and then sit around and mope about how we can't. There's no point lying to ourselves like that--not when--not when we could just -- well, like I said. Take care of each other." He regards his hands intently. He's pulled out a few of Sirius's long, dark hairs and they are tangled around his fingers, which is pretty disgusting.

Sirius is silent. Then he says, "Well. You're doing all right at that."

"So are you," Remus says, very seriously. "James -- he needs you to get angry. I think."

"I know." Sirius chews his lower lip. "I just have to figure out the right way." He rubs his cheek with his

sleeve, then rubs Remus' throat. "Jacket or not," he mutters. "It's still not on to leave your snot on a mate."

"No," Remus says faintly.

"Anyway," Sirius says. "We'll look after each other. That's what we *do*, innit? Look after each other? I don't know how *not* to. I think you have one of, of my hairs in your mouth." He reaches over without thinking and takes it out, fingertips on Remus' lips tickling soft to pull it away. "There," he says. He flicks it into the grass.

Remus' lower lip itches. He moves to rub it, and then doesn't, leaving it like a scab or an eyelash, a curious splatter of ink.

"We just," Sirius continues, "we just have to find out who to get angry *at*." His hands clench into fists in his lap. "And then I can get angry. All of us. We won't get hurt," he says firmly. "We'll get *angry*, properly. We'll look after each other. And you," he points at Remus, gray gaze fond and serious, "you can learn how to be angry, you know, as a skill."

"I get angry!" Remus protests. "We had a fight, and everything--"

"You didn't get angry," Sirius corrects him, "you got very cold and distant, and then you turned into a werewolf, which I think even you would agree is cheating."

"You're only saying that because you're bitter that I beat the tar out of you," says Remus, giving him an awkward, sideways smile.

"That's as may be," says Sirius. His eyes are pink and his nose and mouth are swollen. He always looks kind of like a girl, only his too-sharp edges and broad shoulders saving him from embarrassing femininity, and he ought to look even more like one now, but he doesn't. If anything he looks more boy than usual, and it probably has something to do with being angry and something to do with being unexpectedly grown-up and something to do with Remus Lupin never ever understanding anything no matter how hard he tries.

Remus rubs his mouth at last. The itch has already faded.

"All right," Sirius says. "Come on. Let's go back. One for all and all for finishing this properly, right?"

It's a little quiet thing, Remus thinks, growing up. It can happen in a garden or while someone blows his nose in your neck, and you might prefer that it would happen some other way, but then it's come and it's never going to go and there's nothing anyone can do about it. He stands and offers Sirius his hand which, to his surprise, Sirius actually takes.

"Once more into the breach, dear friend, once more," says Sirius, smiling lopsidedly at him and thrusting his hands back into his pockets. "Or close the wall up with my English snot."

"Right," Remus says, "show-off."

And they go.



shoebox_project(http://www.livejournal.com/community/shoebox_project)

Cowritten by dorkorific and ladyjaida.

dorkorific specializes in **Sirius**; ladyjaida specializes in **Remus**.

dorkorific is **Mlle. Artiste**; ladyjaida is **Mlle. Bits-n-bats**.

The handwriting of Remus J. Lupin, Severus Snape and James Potter is done by ladyjaida.

The handwriting of Sirius Black, Peter Pettigrew and Lily Evans is done by dorkorific.
Don't worry; Peter won't be stupidified. **Trust us** on that one.

We would like to take a moment to thank windjinn for leaping down the stairs with ladyjaida's bra on his head.

all characters herein are the intellectual property of j.k. rowling, scholastic and warner brothers.

Part Twenty-Three
May, 1977

"What's happening, soul brother?" Sirius says, perching rather unsteadily atop a pile of books on Remus's desk.

Remus gazes up at him without much hope. "I'm trying to read," he explains. "I mean, I was, until you sat on my reading material."

"Right," says Sirius, clearly not interested. "So, are you going to swing by our pre-exam shindig this afternoon? Going to frolic with us in the beautiful May night under a warm and balmy moon?"

"That doesn't make any sense." Remus heaves a sigh and attempts to tug one of his books out from under Sirius' rear. "And no. I think I'm going to the library, actually, because I'll panic if I don't look this over regularly, as you knew perfectly well when you asked me that question."

Sirius regards him mournfully. "Baby, that is not a righteous groove."

"What in the name of all that is holy are you talking about?" asks Remus faintly.

"Moony," says Sirius rather severely, "I am getting the distinct impression that you are not hip to my jive. Are you or are you not hip to my jive?"

"Something is wrong in your brain," Remus says.

"I'm not the one going to the library to celebrate my last few precious hours before I am squeezed between the iron thighs of NEWT-cramming hell," Sirius points out. "You dig, daddy-o?"

"I'm not the one who's going to have to be squeezed between those thighs," Remus returns. "You're just going to have to be squeezed between those thighs without me." He doesn't look up from an enormous dusty tome, but does add, quietly, in between the flip of the musty crackling pages, "Hep cat."

"No," Sirius says. "It's only funny when I do it."

"Perhaps it's not funny when either of us does it," Remus offers.

"Well then." Sirius swings down from the desk and dusts himself off. "At least we will be unfunny together. But only for a brief and shining moment, before I leave you to your insanity for my own more preferable madness." He ruffles Remus's hair. "You're not honestly worried about it, are you? You'll be fine. You'll just recite things at the professors until they're forced to give you top marks because all they want is lunch."

"Right," Remus says. "Well, we can't all be natural geniuses like Sirius Black and James Potter. Some of us must work at it."

"Careful about all that dust," Sirius suggests. "Ta. *Hep cat.* I do not know where you come up with this."

Remus glares at his vanishing shoulders as he saunters off. It is irritating, really, the way he and James can spend the next three days engaged in the most egregious kind of hedonism and then, with only a week left, will still be able to pull outstanding marks on their exams. It is irritating. It has been irritating for seven years. Remus suddenly realizes that it will never be irritating again. That's good, surely.

He sighs and closes the book. In about ten minutes, his peaceful, twilit common room will be full of clumped seventh years from all four houses, chattering and drinking and making insecure small talk and doing other things for which Remus has no time. It's nice, he supposes, that they've cohered enough to have a party like this. Just because he doesn't want to be a part of it doesn't mean he doesn't appreciate it.

It's mostly due to James. Since the funeral, he has been different. It doesn't seem sufficient to say he's been more grown-up, but that's exactly what he has been. He watches out for people (and now more than ever people need to be watched out for: James isn't the only one to lose family members, friends, neighbors.) He's a little bit thinner. The observations are equally stupid, but what's changed in James is too quiet to put into words.

Against his brittleness, the slight cold in him, Sirius has warmed as if to compensate. He is more affectionate than ever, more laughing, louder, his worried eyes more bright, his arm around James' shoulder lingering there a little longer. Remus has tried to be a relief for him, a friend who's easy to be around, who doesn't require the effort.

It's harder than anything. Remus doesn't know how to press himself into an empty place and swell to brighten it. He doesn't have the easy arms Sirius has and so the burden falls on Sirius' easy shoulders. Maybe Sirius doesn't show it all the time, a tenseness that lingers now in the corners of his mouth, but now and then Remus catches sight of it by accident. He only sees it when he's not trying to. That's the kind of expression it is.

How are they supposed to take the final exams of their teenagerhood, Remus wonders, when so much of that teenagerhood has already been sundered? The sudden maturity doesn't make him feel any more competent, only sobered. There is more in life to worry about than NEWTs, and, knowing that, Remus doesn't actually feel comforted. If he studies all this time, it's less time spent on what comes after. Less time spent on wishing he'd been taught when he was younger how to hug someone properly. Less time spent catching the hard new quirk of Sirius' mouth out of the corner of his eye.

Lily worries about James, Remus reasons. No one else worries about Sirius.

Someone has to. It is a full time job.

There is a thick layer of sticky dust on one of his books. Remus wipes at it absently, flicking all his fingers to get the dust off, but the sticky feeling remains. The simple truth of the matter is, he isn't thinking about his studies. That's the problem with studying. Clear out a time, clear out a place, get all the right books, but it doesn't necessarily mean you're going to study; just that you want to.

Remus sighs. The library, he thinks. In the library he won't be able to think about Sirius and James because there is no place less Sirius and James than the library. It will be the solution. It has to be. He gathers the books together and hoists them lovingly in his arms and then he flees.

***

The library, which should be full of people -- at least a few panicked fifth years, Remus thinks morosely -- is completely empty. Except for the comforting shuffle of pages as air weaves against the volumes, there is no sound. Madam Pince gives him one of her Looks as he comes in, but mounts no real objection. Remus moves aimlessly through the stacks to his favorite carrel, the little rejected one alone in the very back between linguistics and classical history. He likes that it's a little crooked, as if its deformity has led to its being banished from the ranks of orderly carrels up front.

Remus is also aware that it is thoughts like these that make it unlikely that he will ever be able to form a meaningful relationship with anybody.

Setting the books down softly, he flicks on the dim green lamp and starts to settle down into the slightly splintery chair, and then the sound of voices away behind him, somewhere off in the restricted section, arrests his attention. They sound oddly familiar.

It is none of my business, he says to himself firmly. *It is none of my business and what's more I really don't care.*

"This is just like when I was a student," one of the familiar voices says. Remus finds he can't *not* listen. He could stuff tissues or bits of his sleeve in his ears and hold his hands firm over them and still somehow his fingers would wander and the tissues or bits of sleeve wouldn't cut it and the voices would come through. He clenches his jaw. If he just leans a bit back in his seat he can peer around the corner into an oblique slant of light cast against two distorted shadows -- and then he can see them, but they can't see him. "Used to sneak in here all the time."

"Who'd you sneak in here with?" says the other familiar voice.

"Sometimes Gid," says Fabian Prewett. "Sometimes, without him."

"You were attached," Caradoc Dearborn replies. "You were attached at the hip. You were like Siamese Twins, is what. Why were you in here without him?"

A silence. Remus feels something funny in his throat, like that time Sirius made him eat a sock, or tried to, anyway. It doesn't go away when he swallows. He shouldn't be doing this, but now he's afraid to move, afraid to be caught.

"Like I said," Fabian says, voice a little strange and dark. "*This* is just like when I was a student."

"Hell," Caradoc replies. He shifts and his shadow shifts, growing long strange angles. For a moment he disappears behind a shelf and then comes back into view once more. His face is backlit by their lamp. Remus can't see it. "Look," Caradoc continues. "Not that I want to keep going over, you know, old stories and that. But I -- "

"I'm as careful as I can be," Fabian interrupts. "It's not like I don't piss myself silly all the time about you."

"I'm trying to say something," Caradoc says. "Just let me -- I mean -- it's not easy."

"You don't," Fabian attempts.

"Shut up, shut up, Fabian Prewett," Caradoc insists. "I really sort of love you."

"Do you say that to everyone you get up against -- " Fabian reaches with some difficulty behind himself, flicks out a book, and examines it -- "up against A Brief Treatise Upon the History and Practice of the Spyglass Charm?"

"That's not fair," says Caradoc. "In March, I thought -- "

"Stop it," Fabian says sharply. "It's not March anymore. There's nowhere safer than where we are, and I don't know if you've noticed but everyone is just fine. Besides -- " his voice drops a little -- "I think you like the scar."

"I don't," says Caradoc hoarsely.

Fabian murmurs, "Well, you shouldn't be so nice to it then."

"Listen," Caradoc says. "Shut up for a second. I can't go around thinking things like...what I thought in March...when I'm not sure you know. About the thing where I sort of am in love with you."

Fabian is quiet for a moment. The only sound Remus can hear is his own tortured, eavesdropping breath roaring all around him. Then Fabian says quietly, "I don't think it's going to surprise you that, you know, I love you to a degree that is truly stupid."

"Don't," Caradoc whispers. Remus has to strain to hear. No he doesn't, because he's not trying to hear, he just happens to be here at this time when they are also here and it is not his fault. They should be more careful. They should put up charms, wards; they should look around them once in a while. Only now they shouldn't, because if they find him and he's watching by accident it's going to look like he's doing it on purpose. At the very center of his stomach something untouched for a long time is warm and desperate and shattered. How it can be melted and shattered at once, Remus doesn't know. Perhaps it shattered and then melted. Perhaps his mind is babbling. The silence is insane -- how are they doing this? -- isn't it awkward? "Don't be such a poofter," Caradoc says finally. Fabian laughs and the sound is rough. Then there is another silence but it's a silence of a different character, and when Remus strains back again to see, Caradoc is cradling Fabian's face in his hands with strange, intent gentleness, and against the lamp their bodies cast one shadow. The most detail Remus can see is that Fabian's eyes are closed and Caradoc's hair has taken on a strange lamplight-warm glow.

Fabian touches his shoulder, the nape of his neck, the back of his head, his hand moving in fluttering useless graceful caresses. Remus thinks, *I will never be able to touch anyone like that.* Remus thinks, *I want to.* It comes from nowhere, an unbidden hunger, something like under a full moon but completely horribly wonderfully human. It's wanting to howl from the depths of his boyhood, his teenagerhood, his incipient manhood. It has everything to do with the workings of his human body. This howl is another kind of madness.

"I thought," Caradoc says. "I thought I was going to have to kill your brother. That's what I thought. Because how could he, how could he let you -- I just -- it wasn't his fault, of course, but it's -- "

"It's the risk we take," Fabian hisses. "It's the risk we want to take. We can't live with ourselves, without it. Caradoc."

Caradoc kisses him, leaning into him, almost poured into him and Fabian whimpers and Remus can see him shudder forward. The shelf trembles. The books might fall. Remus can hear his heartbeat like historical gunfire. His knuckles are white.

"We're stupid," Caradoc breathes, "this is, we are so, so stupid." His hand and Fabian's are caught up in each other. Something in Remus's heart cries out. He's always thought that was just an expression, just a metaphor, not your actual heart, but something about it must be true, because his chest actually aches.

"Well, that's why it's fun," says Fabian, so softly Remus almost doesn't hear, and he leans up again. Remus cranes to see -- and feels, too late, the sick lurch of the chair tipping just a little too far back.

"Hell," whispers Remus, and then crashes to earth.

"Bugger!" Caradoc shouts, and then Remus is grabbed by the collar and a wand is pressed against his cheek and he realizes, *My God, they're going to kill me, they must think I'm --*

"No no no!" Remus yelps. This is, without a question, the single most embarrassing thing that has ever happened to him. And it is pitted against some truly intense contenders. "Studying -- student -- Remus Lupin -- how do you -- please please, don't kill me, I'm not -- "

"I know you," Fabian says coldly. "God, put that away, Caradoc, you can't kill a boy for -- oh, Hell." If it's possible for a voice to lose all its color, Fabian's voice does. Remus can't see his face -- he's being held at an extremely unhelpful angle by one of Caradoc's steely arms -- but he can imagine Fabian's face has lost all its color, too. "How's it going, Chocolate Face?"

"I am so, so sorry," whispers Remus, "just, I'm so sorry. I didn't mean -- I mean, I wasn't, oh, God."

"It's all right," Fabian says wearily. He puts a hand on Caradoc's shoulder. "Put him down."

"Put him down?" Caradoc echoes, his eyes burning into Remus's. Remus wants to shrivel up and die a thousand times. He thinks about shriveling up and dying because then he doesn't have to think about their faces and his own. "You mean, like a sick dog, or -- "

"Put him," Fabian murmurs, "on the floor, please."

Remus is lowered slowly which, he must admit, takes more strength than to be lowered quickly. There is no way to save face in this situation. Nothing to say. He wants to open his mouth and explain that watching them was the one time he has ever felt completely like a person, like his body is his true home and he is not a poorly stuffed envelope. He opens his mouth. He makes a pathetic squawking bird-like sound and shuffles quickly clear of Caradoc's wrath. "I didn't -- mean to be -- I was studying and then -- well, if I left you might -- you'd

see and I -- I didn't want to -- but oh, this is much more embarrassing. I am sorry. So, so sorry. Please," he finishes lamely, and looks away. "I didn't mean it. I was just trying to learn potions. I am terrible at potions. You can ask anyone."

"Yes," Fabian says. "NEWTs are soon, aren't they." His cheeks are suddenly bright, very bright. Caradoc still looks murderous. "Put the wand away, Caradoc. It's -- he's just an idiot, I think. I'm not sure."

"I am," Remus agrees frantically. "I am a complete idiot. You can ask anyone about that too. This is so awful. I am awful. I just -- I mean really I just now put down my books. And I heard voices so I -- I leaned back to see who it was. That's all. I didn't mean to -- to get in the way."

"For heaven's sake," Fabian says wearily. "All right. I don't care."

"You can Obliviate me," offers Remus. "I mean. If you want."

Caradoc regards him scornfully. He does sinewy scorn particularly well, like an allegorical statue. "A little blemish like you isn't worth the effort."

"Besides," Fabian adds, watching him with hard eyes, "it's not as if you saw anything I don't want people knowing."

"I wouldn't," Remus says, "if you didn't want me to, I would never -- "

"Save it," Fabian says. "You saw it, you didn't see it, you're telling all your friends, you'll take it to your grave -- I don't care. I am in love with this man for very good reasons and we were having a bit of a feel in the restricted section. Next time we'll, I don't know, check around first, but only because it was lovely and then you quite literally *fell in on it.* All right? Have a nice night. Good luck with potions. Carry on." He breezes out.

"He is," Caradoc says, "the man is -- he is bloody *amazing*." He runs out after him.

Remus is inclined to agree with this assessment.

He slides bonelessly down the bookshelf and sits there for a second, feeling lost. The way Fabian said it was lovely, like, it was lovely but it is always lovely, and Remus thinks, Why don't I know that?

He says out loud, "Remus Lupin, you need to grow a pair."

It is the sort of thing Sirius would say (and if Sirius were here he would probably say something like "Of breasts to go with your lovely womanly flower,") but just because it's the sort of thing Sirius would say doesn't necessarily mean it's wrong. Sirius can actually be unexpectedly right sometimes.

Remus climbs to his feet. His heart thumps wildly against his chest. *There is a little thing called initiative,* he thinks, *and I am taking it. I am taking it right now. I am picking it up and walking out of the shop, because I have just grown a pair and I am not talking about boobs either.*

For a moment, he thinks longingly of the books.

They are dusty and some of the pages of the older books are brittle -- delicate -- something like old thin bone. They suggest at the touch they might crumble. Sometimes he studies just for the sake of being with the books: as if pressing his fingers to the page, some persuasive evasive power of edited words might osmose through the whorls of his fingerprints. But these particular books have no bollocks and perhaps that is why Remus spends so much time with them, too. Misery and the bollocks-less like company. Remus draws in a deep agonized breath. There is a deep agonized hum in his belly to meet it. He is too much in between, like a slim volume no one ever notices, unmarked on the binding and letting himself be embraced by all that bloody dust.

"Right," he says.

He turns to leave.

"No, wait," he adds. He runs back and closes all his books and returns to their alphabetical places the ones for which someone else might come looking.

"*Now* right," he says.

***

The hallway outside the double doors to the library is empty. There's no sign of Fabian, Caradoc or the initiative which has suddenly possessed him. "Hell," says Remus, and then, struck, "Yes!"

He hurries back toward Gryffindor tower. Desperately he hopes that somehow he can avoid seeing any of his friends -- or, more importantly, avoid being seen by them. It will kill the Initiative, which right now flutters nervously somewhere around his liver.

Getting past them, however, is shockingly un-difficult once he gets into the common room. It is horrifically crowded, sweaty and dark, and by keeping to the walls and taking the stairs two at a time he manages to avoid making eye contact with anyone he knows. Upstairs, he knocks at the door -- lately it is safest to do so -- but there is, mercifully, no answer and he slips inside.

Remus kneels by James' bed, fortunately completely unmade as usual. He pokes gingerly at the sheets, checking for mysterious stains, oh God, but none is visible.

He knows that this does not mean none exist.

Carefully, wincing, Remus peels back the undersheet and gropes around until his fingers find rustling parchment.

The Map.

He fumbles for his wand and nearly drops it but manages to keep his fingers obedient. With the tip of his wand he taps the map and hisses, "I do solemnly swear I am up to no good."

The Map.

James had said early on he wanted it to unfurl and it does, blooming outward like a confused and Escher-esque flower, all angles and corners and complicated stairways of parchment. It isn't quite finished yet -- there are a few considerable problems with how it functions and, if it's feeling snippy, it makes the most horrendously loud farting sounds, no doubt something Sirius did when no one was looking -- but it works all right. That is, if you can parse its confusion with names. The Map has the four of them down all right; it's just everyone else it has a problem spelling.

"Fabian," he hisses at it, scanning the inky hallways and the blotchy doors. "Fabian, Fabian, Fabian."

Fabaloc Dearfellow? the Map says suddenly. Little inksplatter footprints appear and disappear and then appear again, walking away from Dumbledore's office and down a narrow hallway. *Fabblian Prewiweather? Fabiola Doomilett?*

"What the," Remus says, "for God's," but shoves the map up one sleeve, followed by the wand, and leaps to his feet while his adrenaline is still allowing him to act like a total idiot.

Down the stairs again, through the dim-lit common room with his head down like an incompetent spy, and back out the portrait hole, surreptitiously scanning the Map for any signs of the people who might try to intercept him. James and Lily, unsurprisingly, are both missing from the immediate area: Peter is on a sofa apparently alone in the opposite corner of the room and Sirius is at the makeshift card table with two people called "Frankly Klinglebolt" and "Shackalack Largebottom."

Back in the hallway he breaks into a run again. Fabaloo Prioress's footsteps head briskly toward the Potions dungeon but Remus, thanks to Sirius and to the rather confused but ultimately well-meaning piece of paper in his hands, knows a shortcut. He ducks down a side corridor, slips into a classroom and through the sliding panel in the janitor's closet, down a rank and dripping tunnel that smells unpleasantly of organs, and pops out directly in front of Slughorn's classroom just as Fabian steps into a pool of candlelight in front of him.

"Good lord," says Fabian. "We haven't seen enough of each other?"

"I need to talk to you," Remus says, breathless and heaving. "I've decided to grow a pair. Not breasts. Not *of* breasts. I need to talk to you," he repeats. Already he understands that this is not going as well as it ought or might or really should. He presses a hand to his chest -- he isn't used to doing this sort of thing on his own, and while it is a wonderful euphoric sort of insanity a small voice in the back of his head shouts *FILCH WILL FIND YOU. DANGER, DANGER, REMUS ROBINSON!* He doesn't have time to wonder why that little voice has confused his real name. He leans against a statue and looks up at Fabbleboot Wettlebrow and says, "please, I really need -- to talk."

"Well, then perhaps you should breathe first. Do you lie in wait for everyone this way, or is it just your curious way of expressing preference and affection?" Fabylon Prewtanks folds his arms over his chest. In this light, Remus can see he's lost weight. Understandable, when recovering from a giant hole in one's belly.

Remus pauses to catch his breath. "I'm not normally like this," he tries to explain. "I'm usually the, you know,

the one everyone likes because I don't -- pop out -- of places. Ambush. Waylay. That's not -- I have terrible, terrible friends."

"Are you in the market for new ones?" asks Fabian. "Is that what this is about? I warn you, my fee is high."

"No," says Remus, running a hand frantically through his hair, "no, sorry. I'm actually -- usually actually sort of the articulate one, as well, so this is very strange for me."

"We have something in common," Fabian agrees gravely.

"It's just," he makes a helpless gesture, uncertain of what it is supposed to communicate, "I wanted -- I needed to ask you -- how did you know? I mean. About the -- when you found out that," he swallows, "you were, you know, in love, I mean, how did you know? How did he know? How did that happen?"

"Let me clarify the question," Fabian says dryly, but he registers a momentarily curious expression. "Are you asking me 'How did I know I was in love' or 'How did I know I was an enormous kind of poofter'? The two are not exactly mutually exclusive, but of course I wouldn't want to answer the wrong question and prolong this agony."

"No, no, no -- I mean -- both. I think. I think that's what I mean." Remus has been like an over-stuffed pocket, he realizes, for almost a year now. He has just wanted to tell someone and he has told no one at all. "I think I may be an enormous kind of poofter," he says suddenly and without any warning. It all comes out of him. Like vomit. Like one of those exploding goodies at Yule where you pull on the ends and -- well, it doesn't matter. "I mean -- what I mean is -- last summer a good and very male friend of mine kissed me on the lips in a way that could hardly be misconstrued as, as friendly, and then right after he went and found himself a very beautiful French girl and I, we, he, well -- never spoke of it again." *And then we got into an enormous fight and I could have turned him into a werewolf and we were naked together but still it wasn't solved.* "So I just -- I'm not quite sure -- what to do."

"Well," Fabian says, after a long silence. "I think, I think this friend of yours -- I think *he* may be an enormous kind of poofter. Have you considered that?"

"Well, no, actually," says Remus in some surprise. "Not really. I mean, I've thought about -- but he's just -- who he is."

"Sometimes," says Fabian, "who someone is is an enormous poofter. Look, it's not something you -- hell. It's not like having a pimple, you know, where you look in the mirror and you go, 'Ah, right, there that is.'" He gives Remus a narrow look. "I expect I don't have to tell you that somewhere in your teens you start having Urges."

"Yes, no, I know," says Remus, waving his hands. "Urges! I know. That's not what I meant. I mean, yes, it is a...but I already knew about that. I meant more, I mean, so you didn't *know* know, it wasn't a...flash of...revelation or anything? It was just -- you just sort of found out by accident?"

"I don't want to be one of those people who tells you 'I just knew' because those people are idiots," Fabian says. "But I'm afraid it's all a balance of what you find yourself questioning and what you find yourself unable to

question."

"That made no discernable sense," Remus says.

"Life and being kissed by enormous poofters rarely does," Fabian replies. "I can't make this easy for you or say something eloquent and on the mark and illuminating. I'm just, you know. Here, apparently, and -- I'm sorry." He smiles wryly. "Or maybe part of me's just bitter I'd no one to talk to and I'm torturing you by being completely unhelpful. You can believe that, if you'd like, but as I don't know you and I don't know your enormous poofter, there's nothing much I can do."

Remus feels more desperate than ever. "I didn't have time to know if it felt right or if it felt wrong," he pleads. "He just -- all of a sudden -- he just stopped. I hated him so, *so* much, only I didn't, only I -- a French girl! A *French* girl! Do you have any idea -- ?"

"I have some idea," Fabian assures him. "This may sound a novel concept, but have you tried, you know, speaking with him about it?"

"Speaking with -- what?" Remus draws back, horrified. "Oh God. Oh no. I couldn't. I mean, he's already -- there's this joke, d'you see, about how I keep a diary and I've girl bits and -- breasts and -- things, but -- if I tried to talk to him about *feelings* he'd, he'd stick apples down my shirt and call me Mary-Ann."

Fabian blinks. "And you'd let him?" he asks.

"Probably," Remus admits.

"You're probably incredibly bent then," Fabian says decisively. "At the very least you are incredibly bent for this extremely male person of yours. Does that help?"

Remus lets out a huff of air and blinks several times. "Yes, I -- actually, yes."

"Well, that's good," says Fabian, patting him on the shoulder. "I never really thought of myself as a mentor to troubled youth. To tell you the truth, I much prefer corruption and leading down dark paths."

"I will never ask it of you again," Remus promises. "Although, you know, this is sort of a dark path, in a way."

Fabian lifts his eyebrows thoughtfully. "You may have a point."

"Also I think you should know," Remus adds, "that your, uhm -- well, Mr. -- er -- Caradoc Dearborn, that is, he -- well you'd stormed out already, so sorry about that again, but he did add to your most illuminating -- he thinks you're amazing," Remus manages to spit out. He has decided it ought to be known, since it does seem rather true. "Right," he concludes. "Thank you. Very much."

"You're probably insane, you know," Fabian tells him. Then, he adds, "Good luck, my loony fellow! Drop me an owl or something. Not that I'm invested, I'm just sort of boggled."

"This will probably end in tragedy," Remus admits.

"Or apples," Fabian says. "Down the shirt and all. Mary-Ann. Really? Hm. Well, you're no Ginger, that's for certain."

"This has been very," Remus says, "well, thank you for it. Cleared up a -- a few things."

"My advice," Fabian leans close to whisper, "my real advice, is don't let it fester. If you never know, it's worse. Perhaps only marginally, but the lesser of two evils is making a fool out of yourself and the comfort is knowing you'd the bollocks to do it."

"I want to hug you," Remus says. "But I think that would be awkward, so I'd best be on my way."

"Good lad," says Fabian, ruffling Remus's hair absently. "Good instincts. Well, cheerio," and, shaking his head, he is gone.

Remus straightens his shirtfront. He loosens his tie. He tries to swallow, but his throat is extremely dry and this supposedly simple maneuver becomes rather difficult.

He checks the map again. There's the name, on its floating banner, headed as if guided by an angel of convenience out on its own down the long staircase. Remus knows that there's a patch of tramped down earth out behind the broom shed where you can drop a cigarette without lighting the grounds on fire.

"Oh hell, oh hell, I am a woman," Remus says, and hurries toward it.

It is somewhat like running through a dream. If he stops the illusion will be shattered and the whole great unhindered heedless strength of his conviction will fall out from underneath him like that one time in the shack when the floor broke beneath one mighty Prongsian hoof and sent them all crashing into pain and rubble and the bottom floor. Remus is breathless again, and sweating a bit, but speed is the important thing. Reaching Sirius Black, *Padfoot* and his dissolving pacing steps, before the internal clock of Remus's bollocks runs out of time and he turns back into a pumpkin.

He bursts out into the cool night air and nearly trips over his shoelaces. Across a short stretch of grass, behind a few trees, zig-zagging as if through an obstacle course -- which he was never very good at; which is why he hasn't pursued any fantastic career atop a broom -- and then: the broom shed, hit by a shaft of moonlight.

An owl hoots.

Remus draws up to the broomshed like a conquering army and rounds one of its corners to *behind the broomshed*, which is where Sirius is, live and flesh and whole and a matter of what Remus has only ever questioned because he was too frightened until now to discover he never had to question it at all.

"Moony," Sirius says, surprised.

"Shut up, Sirius," Remus says, and grabs him by the collar, and kisses him violently on the mouth.

It feels like a very long time. The only movement Remus feels is the sudden thrill of tension in Sirius' long

wiry body and the lingering ragged swell of his own lungs.

Then against his mouth Sirius hisses, "Fuck! Ow," and his arm jumps. Remus jumps back with it. The dropped cigarette rolls against his feet. Sirius flexes the burnt fingers painfully but his eyes are on Remus.

He opens his mouth to say something. Remus says, "Don't, just, listen, all right?" He winds both hands desperately into his own hair. *Maybe,* he thinks, *maybe if I just yank my entire scalp off, we can all be distracted by the pain and the oozing and I won't have to say anything else,* but he does, he has to, because this is the lesser of two evils. He says, "All right, okay? That is it. I have just done all I can, Sirius Black, are we clear?"

"But I," Sirius says.

"That's all I have to say on the matter," Remus interrupts him, even though it isn't. "I just -- there is nothing more I can -- well, *I'm* not going to go off after and find myself a French girl. All right? That's, that's, that's all there is." He waves one hand frantically back and forth between them. "That. But now it's all up to you. You! I can't, I can't do anymore. That was a kiss. There. That's -- all there is to it. From me."

"That *was* a kiss," Sirius agrees. His lips work wordlessly. "You, uh. That was."

"A kiss," Remus supplies.

"No, I," Sirius says.

"I don't care. I'm not a girl. I may have a diary. I may keep all the notes we passed. I may *want* to talk about how I feel when you kiss me on the platform and then head off and find yourself the most beautiful incoherent female you can find. Sometimes I want to knock your head against walls and sometimes, sometimes, fine, I want to kiss you. And now I have. You're lucky I didn't--didn't pick the first one."

"The head knocking?"

"Yes," Remus says. "That."

"You have strong arms," Sirius whispers. "That would hurt." He touches his mouth. He looks at Remus with eyes Remus hasn't ever seen before, eyes pale and stunned and long-lashed and looking, suddenly, so much younger than Remus can ever remember him looking. "You," Sirius says, "that."

"Yes," Remus says again. "That. What's that, you know, quaffle's in your court, do what you will with it, I'm going to -- *God* that feels -- I've got to -- oh, bloody -- You see? We're taking too long with this part, I'm starting to." His knees buckle dangerously.

He looks up at Sirius, summons all the dignity he can possibly muster, says, "I have to go throw up now, excuse me," and leaves.

He doesn't quite make it to the Prefects' bath. In fact, he only makes it to the Charms corridor washroom on the second floor before his intestines twist very unpleasantly to the left and the back of his throat fills with sick-

tasting air and then, yes, he actually does retch twice into the toilet, leaving him breathing hard and sweating unreasonably. It feels nice to rest his forehead against the cool clean porcelain and so this is what he does.

A toilet flushes. A seventh-year Hufflepuff whose name Remus really ought to know stumbles out of the stall next to his, regards him blearily, and says, "You too, man, huh?" and then sways away without waiting for an answer.

"Worse," Remus mumbles, "so very much worse," and rests his cheek on the toilet again.

After a minute he hears the door swing open. Quick footsteps echo against the tiles -- a pause -- and then the old stall door rattles open too. Cloth rustles close to Remus as someone kneels by him, rough breath, the smell of earth and smoke and dirt and dog: long, cool fingers on his forehead smoothing back his hair.

"This is disgusting," whispers Sirius, voice hovering on the edge of hysterical laughter. "Seriously, I cannot believe that I am so rotten a kisser that my touch makes you vomit."

"This is not the time or the place," Remus says, "for me to tell you exactly what it means that I have just thrown up -- Sirius, I *hate* throwing up, I *never* throw up -- "

"And you never *shut* up, either," Sirius says. "Except for that time, when you kissed me just now, do you remember that? That was nice," he adds, and then his voice cracks as he says, "I'm going to kiss you, vomit-mouth."

He does.

"I have vomit in my mouth," Remus tries to say into the kiss, the hot sort of wet and slippery junction of their mouths. "I am, I am a vomit mouth, this isn't representative, or fair, or right." It comes out as a series of staccato *mmphs* and Sirius accidentally bites his tongue and they slip and Sirius bangs his elbow on the toilet seat.

"Jesus bloody fuck, Moony," Sirius says. "I thought you were. I thought you were rocks."

"Sometimes," Remus gasps, "sometimes rocks have urges, too."

"With whom have you been kissing?" Sirius demands. "I want to know. You're really -- very -- more than decent, but I would have thought you'd be all wiggling lips and -- maybe it's just because you're -- well, you -- "

"You just said 'with whom,'" Remus babbles inanely. "That's really, that's very -- especially because actually 'to kiss' is a transitive verb so you don't even need the preposition, you might have just said, whom, either way, I haven't, so it's -- "

"Remus," Sirius says, breathlessly. "Remus, you taste like puke, but the thing is, I want to kiss you anyway. I have to actively, you know, stop myself, because it is nice but you do taste like stomach acid and I can't, I can't, you know, really, no matter how nice it is, that is completely vile, you know." His hands are in Remus's hair and then on his shoulders and grazing his throat, as if reassuring themselves of the fact of Remus's tangibility. Then his fingers curl around Remus's wrist, just under the starched cloth of his shirt. "Why did you -- for fuck's

sake, Moony, I haven't even, in a year, I've tried to be, you know -- Will you fucking brush your fucking teeth, please, this is unbearable." He takes a deep breath. "I just, I really want to kiss you again, properly, when everyone involved is paying attention and I can't taste the mutton pie you ate two hours ago, so, please, I -- I have to go get a drink of water, I have to go upstairs and let you, you know, seriously, Moony, brush your fucking, *fucking* teeth!" and he kisses Remus once, fiercely, at the corner of his mouth, fingertips hard against his cheekbone. Then he lets go of Remus with an odd, forceful motion, like ripping off a bandage, and pelts away.

"But where are we," Remus begins. Sirius is already gone. And anyway, Remus realizes, the question is unnecessary. Already he knows Sirius, really knows him, and sometimes he can just find him by sniffing him out, and sometimes he doesn't even need to sniff. Remus struggles to sit up.

A Ravenclaw -- Seventh Year, Remus thinks, very tall -- stumbles in. "You too?" he asks, which makes Remus want to heave again.

"I am," Remus says, "no, not really, but good luck with the regurgitation." He leaps to his feet. His mouth tastes very horrendous. The fact that Sirius was willing and even wished to kiss it makes something explode -- fireworks, a chorus line, spells gone haywire, every single one of his own potions -- inside his chest. Sirius wanted to kiss him *even though his mouth tastes like seven day old dead person feet.* That has to mean something. "Right, well," he says, and runs out of the room.

***

Sirius says, "Shit shit shit shit shit."

He has actually managed to tie his hair into a knot. His left hand is stuck in it. His tie is askew, he is walking in frantic, convulsive circles, and, in general, he looks like an insane person. But then, he reasons, he always looks like an insane person and Remus for some reason apparently has decided to kiss him anyway.

And yet, he realizes, with a panicked heave of his innards. And yet! It's all been so sudden and dark and strange that it is really subject to change at any time. He has to do something, anything, to ensure that the idea of kissing him will not stop being appealing.

Then he has a brilliant idea.

***

Remus has brushed his teeth so hard that his gums are bleeding. That won't do. He has mouthwash and he uses that but his throat still tastes like vomit. He wonders if swallowing mouthwash is detrimental to his health and then he decides that not kissing Sirius is more detrimental to his health -- considering it will probably make him throw up again -- and he screws his eyes up tight and knocks back a mouthful.

There is a burning in his esophagus as of a thousand fiery suns. Remus yelps wetly and clutches his throat, coughing blue into the sink.

"Oh Jesus," he chokes. "I am never, I am *never*, doing that again. Oh, *disgusting maggoty hell*!" It does make his throat taste better, though.

He pulls back his upper lip and checks his gums, which still sting a little but have, fortunately, stopped bleeding. He breathes a hot warm breath onto his palm. He sniffs. It's going to have to do. Then he takes a look at himself in the mirror.

His face is the color of a well boiled beet.

"For Merlin's sake and a bucket of billywigs," he snaps, turns on the sink faucet, and sticks his head under it.

***

"I've got a lovely bunch of coconuts," hums Sirius tunelessly, through the bar of chocolate in his mouth. "Here they are a-standing in a row, bum, bum, bum." He digs maniacally through his trunk, pausing momentarily to sniff a shirt and then drop it on the floor, cursing himself for his inability to do laundry and his inability to maintain a wardrobe that doesn't smell like puppy dander. He curses aloud, swallows about half the chocolate, takes a shaky drag of his cigarette. "Singing, roll a bowl a ball a penny a pitch," he adds, and hurries to James' wardrobe in search of cleaner pastures.

***

Now Remus's head is wet, but it's cooled down significantly. "Lesser of two evils," he mutters to himself. "Lesser of two -- heavens, I smell." He wonders if he should shower. It's a possibility. Now that his mouth no longer smells like exploded wildebeest -- which apparently bears striking resemblance to rejected mutton pie -- he ought to smell less like exploded wildebeest, himself.

But that, of course, will take too much time.

Remus turns to the door. He pauses. He makes a grab for the soap. He pauses. Door or soap? His mind aches.

"I need someone to tell me what to do," he whispers. "Hell!"

***

"Big ones, small ones, some as big as your head," Sirius mumbles, taking another unrealistically enormous bite of chocolate and spraying little bits all over. He examines himself in the mirror of the wardrobe door. He arranges his hair artistically in his eyes and turns to one side and then the other.

He says, aloud, "Fuck this, I am not on a date," and scrubs his hands enthusiastically against his scalp.

He checks the mirror again. "There," he says, more pleased with this rakish dishevelment, and as he is giving

himself the Sexy Look in the mirror the door opens and James and Lily tumble through.

"Christ!" says Sirius, spraying more chocolate.

***

In fleeing from the toilet to the common room with his toothbrush in one hand and soap in the other, Remus has made a grievous miscalculation. His trajectory has left no room for a terrible factor of normal sensible human life: other people. It would be all right, except he has come up against it and it has been most unforgiving.

"Ow," Remus says from the floor. He stares up blearily. "Oh. It's Shackalack -- Franksley -- er. Kingsley. Hullo. So sorry. Your chest is really, it is like a wall."

"Remus Lupin," Kingsley Shacklebolt says. "You look distressed."

"Sorry, no time, kill me later," Remus says, leaping to his feet and speeding off.

***

"Christ!" echoes James, and then, "I thought you were smoking in the back! Go away."

"Oh God," says Lily, going pink.

"Great googly, I just saw your bra, Evans," says Sirius, a little hysterically. "And, you know, usually that would be really a wonderful moment for me, but just now, it's actually, really, sort of, can't you two go somewhere else? It's very," he adds, feeling that more is needed, "nice color, blue, really suits you -- "

"No," growls James. "Are you eating alone in the dark? Is that normal?"

"Fine!" Sirius yelps, throwing his hands in the air and snatching his chocolate from the dresser. "Fine! I don't care!"

He gives his hair a last helpless swipe and thumps out of the room and down the back staircase.

***

Remus runs up the front staircase into the dorm. All the lights are out.

Someone is making indecent sounds from James' bed and Remus can guess who and Remus doesn't give a flying croquet-playing piglet.

"Jumper, jumper, jump-buggering-er. Cardigan? Jumper!" Remus fumbles amongst his things for a new shirt, tossing aside what he doesn't need. Jumper. Jumper. Cardigan. Jumper. The entirety of his life up until now can

be summed up by the contents of his trunk which is truly depressing, isn't it, since it all smells of mothballs and is itchy in the warmer weather.

"A bloody white shirt," he mourns, to no one in particular. "My kingdom for a *bloody* white shirt."

"What's that?" comes a voice, and then Peter sticks his head out from the drawn canopy over his bed. "Remus. You all right? Your hair is, it's sort of -- " He makes a vague and somewhat curly gesture with one hand. " -- all over."

"Er," Remus says. He thinks, *This is actually not who I need to be telling me what to do.* "I -- I slipped. In the -- bath."

"Ah," Peter says sagely. "Know how that is."

"Do you, actually, do you have," Remus asks, "just a, you know, a shirt?"

"Christ!" James shouts from his bed. "Is *everyone* in this bloody room now? Is that what's happening?"

"Not anymore!" says Remus with great relief, snatching Peter's offered clothing, and flees.

***

Sirius charges into the common room feeling more insane than ever.

Someone is at the table, silhouetted by the reading lamp, surrounded by empty bottles and crumpled paper but apparently absorbed in a book.

"Moony?" Sirius hisses, displeased at this show of tranquility, but his stomach does a pleasant little flip at the name.

The someone unfolds itself. It is not Remus. It is Kingsley Shacklebolt. Or else, Sirius reconsiders, it might be an enormous oak tree with moving arms and legs and a big shiny head full of brains.

"No," says Kingsley. "I'm not. I don't suppose you went upstairs to get those five Sickles you owe me."

"Kingsley, mate, old buddy, old pal," Sirius stammers, "look, this is really not the, you know, I only lost because James distracted me, I'll get you your money."

"That's good, because I will hunt you down if you don't," Kingsley informs him. "I will make it my life's work to find out where you are and I will get my money from you."

"Why don’t you trust me, my brother?” asks Sirius, hurt. “Why do you just assume I’m not going to give it to you?”

"Because, my brother, you forget things," says Kingsley, and Sirius has to admit he has a point.

"Look," he says desperately, "have you, I mean, have you seen Remus?"

"I ran into him," Kingsley says. "He went upstairs."

"He can't go upstairs!" hisses Sirius, yanking at his hair. "I'm -- oh, bugger, this is -- Shacklebolt, friend, if you see him, if you see him tell him I went, er, tell him, tell him I'm right outside. Okay? Okay." For about the sixth time that night, he flees.

***

The Portrait hole is closing as Remus hurries down the steps and slams into something again.

"Ow," says the something. "Again. Good Lord, Lupin."

Remus is going to die. He is cast in the enormous unwavering monolithic shadow of death. He can feel it breathing on him. Its name is Kingsley Shacklebolt and suddenly Remus thinks of the map, *Kibibble Shackingup*, and he starts laughing hysterically in between his pleas for his life. It doesn't sound very sincere. "Please, please, please," he gasps. He screws his eyes up tight. If he is going to die then he isn't going to be brave about it. "Please don't kill me, Kingsley. I'll -- I'll pay you. I'll kidnap babies, I'll polish your broomstick, I'll by you a new broomstick, I will *carve* you a new broomstick, I will -- anything, sell you my soul, sell you the souls of -- just I really, I really have -- somewhere I need to be." He cringes and braces himself.

"You and Sirius are acting very odd," Kingsley says slowly. "I am not going to kill you. Not right now, anyway. Mistake. You were in a hurry. Clearly something is happening and who am I to interfere, eh?" His voice is like a rumbly mountain of rumbling, Remus thinks.

"You don't," Remus says. "Er, yes! Thank you."

"Sirius said to tell you, if I saw you, that he's outside. If you're killing Snape tonight, tell him Kingsley said hello."

"I don't know why you'd say hello," Remus babbles. "I'd say, I'd say goodbye."

"Please go," Kingsley suggests.

"Oh, yes," Remus agrees. "Going. Fantastic! Right."

He plunges out of the portrait hole at the exact same time that Sirius, who has been pacing wildly and muttering to himself, starts to charge back in.

They stop.

They stare at each other for a moment.

Remus says, "You have, you know, chocolate on your -- "

Sirius says, "I'm going to kiss you now."

Remus says, a little too high, "Fair enough."

And Sirius kisses him.

It's impossible to describe why this is so good, why this is so addictive, the slide of their mouths and the hardness and softness and the feel of Sirius's breath. For Remus, who always maintains a chronicler's several-foot distance from his own life, this sudden incoherency is extremely disconcerting.

Then he thinks, very serenely, *Shut up right now.*

His arms fall over Sirius's shoulders. Sirius runs his palm wildly over the back of Remus's hand and arm to grip his wrist. They stumble back against the wall and the fat lady says "Oh my!" which reminds them, suddenly, that there are other people in the universe. Remus tries very hard to make that important, and fails. Sirius has him at the hips; Sirius has him by the mouth. Sirius touches him very gently at the belly because his shirt, which is Peter's shirt, is mostly unbuttoned and a little too small. It stretches hard at the elbows.

"Is this," Sirius says, "is this Pete's shirt?"

"Did you," Remus says, "you have chocolate in your, did you eat chocolate?"

"Took yours," Sirius replies. "Figured it wouldn't matter, though, since."

"Right," Remus agrees. "Yes, this is Peter's shirt."

They kiss again. The fat lady has vanished into some other portrait. Remus is grateful, but even if she hadn't, he wouldn't mind. He's lost his mind. Something has misfired or exploded or simply shut down. Something has been connected that wasn't connected before, the rough and raw and raging part of him and the cartographer's concise conceptualization, the two halves of himself he has kept separate all this time like the dark side of the moon from the white, a normal kind of gravity, he'd always thought. He'd always thought wrong. He grabs Sirius at the hair and kisses him and kisses him and has no idea what he's doing and kisses him anyway.

Suddenly Sirius pulls back. He stares at Remus with strange, serious eyes, the dark, dilated pupil rimmed in pale light. His thumb runs over Remus's knuckles, which are all scabby, and Remus shivers.

"I'm," says Sirius raggedly, "this is, is this okay?"

"Well," Remus says, as honestly as possible, "no, it's pretty brilliant, don't you think?"

Sirius grins like the sunrise and whispers, "yeah." When he uncurls his fingers against the juncture of Remus's neck and jaw and kisses Remus again, laughing into his mouth, curving against his body, Remus is finally, finally ready to stop thinking about it.

***



shoebox_project(http://www.livejournal.com/community/shoebox_project)

Cowritten by dorkorific and ladyjaida.

dorkorific specializes in **Sirius**; ladyjaida specializes in **Remus**.

dorkorific is **Mlle. Artiste**; ladyjaida is **Mlle. Bits-n-bats**.

The handwriting of Remus J. Lupin, Severus Snape and James Potter is done by ladyjaida.

The handwriting of Sirius Black, Peter Pettigrew and Lily Evans is done by dorkorific.
Don't worry; Peter won't be stupidified. **Trust us** on that one.

We would like to take a moment to thank windjinn for leaping down the stairs with ladyjaida's bra on his head.

all characters herein are the intellectual property of j.k. rowling, scholastic and warner brothers.

Part Twenty-Four

June, 1977



Thursday Afternoon.

It is like slugs. It is like slugs in his nose. Or perhaps only one slug, and it alternates nostrils. That is the worst part, the alternation of the slug-nostril. Remus has taken to writing his paper with his head leaning all the way to one side. It has, not surprisingly, given him a truly awful crick, but the slug-nostril is on the verge of shifting to the other side. He can feel it. At present it is about to slosh into a position that will allow him at last to gingerly lean his head to the other side, and begin the entire process once more. The whole procedure tempts him sorely to switch paper topics and write instead a convincing and impassioned screed as to why in hell wizards can turn people into ferrets or make them dance like spiders with a single swish and flick but cannot, it seems, actually develop something to cure the bloody common cold. Someone had his priorities on backwards

and the tag was showing.

Of course, none of this would be troublesome had Remus written his seven inches of parchment (his final seven inches! The last inches of his academic career!) as he was wont to write it: seven days early. That left him time to get sick and still edit the ridiculous thing, make sure all the sentences followed one another sensibly and didn't trail off into a morass of odd punctuation or, horror of all the horrors, become a fragment or a run-on. Normally Remus would have gotten this over with, not to mention with days and days to spare. But he hasn't. There is a reason why, a solid reason. It smells like dog and it has a name. That name is, also not surprisingly, Sirius Black.

It isn't that they spend any more time together than usual; it is just that somehow the time they spend together is less conducive to writing essays than it was before. There are fewer exchanges of the "Sirius, *please* stop putting jam in my hair and let me write this," variety, and more of the "Sirius, *please* stop..." and then a sort of vague trailing-off and loss of all motivation.

The whole thing is stupid. It is so very, very stupid that Remus has to consciously force himself not to think about it, which is hard, since apparently some part of him -- a part of which he firmly does not approve -- wants to think about it *all the time.* He can be sitting in class, genuinely fascinated by a lecture on techniques for the production of sentient publications, and then all of a sudden the professor will use some randomly unfortunate word, something like "hedgerow" and for no reason Remus goes all lightheaded and is completely unable to focus until he has somehow got Sirius into a stairwell and kissed him for a while, at which point he is able to get on with his day. It is utterly illogical. Kissing! Alien tongues! Spit and undignified noises and dog-smell! Diseases! What about these things can possibly be appealing? Spending so much time so close to Sirius's face makes him uncomfortably aware of Sirius's pores and smacky saliva noises and the spots on his chin, not to mention terrifyingly conscious of his own spots and noises and unwanted hairs. And yet they *continue to have at it.* They should both be arrested for gross corporeality.

If Sirius were here right now, Remus would have to kiss him just to stop thinking about how disgusting he is.

The mucus gathered in his nostril shows, in fact, no signs of making the crucial switch. Remus makes a defeated noise -- it sounds like "snork" -- and rests his forehead tenderly on the table.

Someone says, "Working hard?"

Remus's stomach flies into the region of his eyeballs. When he has recovered, he says, as calmly as possible, "You have made me completely brain-dead."

"That's the nicest thing anyone's ever said to me."

"It's not meant to be. Go away. I am a vile, mucous-leaking corpse."

Sirius doesn't seem to grasp the implications of 'vile, mucous-leaking corpse' and swings into the seat at Remus' side. Remus' nose goes *wheet, wheet* with every breath. Sirius' every breath goes *hoomf, hoomf* against Remus' neck. Remus is torn between vomiting everywhere and being quite pleased. If this is what being romantically involved with someone is about, then Remus is terrified. Somehow, despite all the wheet-wheeting and the hoomf-hoomfing and the nose slugs and the transfer of germs, people continue to love one another and

reproduce and populate the earth and so on. The thought is staggering. Impossible. A little horrific.

Warm and tingly.

Romantically involved. *Romantically involved.* Romantically involved for lack of a better phrase, as the Wizarding World, so busy with swish and flick and dancing spiders, hasn't managed to cure colds or find a decent phrase for 'romantically involved.' These are vital issues left unaddressed. Unbeknownst to Sirius, Remus has taken to calling it A Mutual Slurping. After all, he can't call it any of the things James and Lily call it when they're at home. Most of this is simply because the things James and Lily call it when they're at home are things that make Sirius' stomach turn and his eyes roll. Remus, not just because he's involved with Sirius in A Mutual Slurping and therefore owes him some unspoken loyalty, is inclined to agree.

At the very beginning, after the first blind haze of groping and indecent noises and new pleasant feelings had left them and they were capable of human vocal patterns once more, Sirius said "Promise me we won't get like James and Evans," and Remus said "I promise you we won't get like James and Evans," and Sirius laughed and answered of course not there were no bosoms involved or har har *hoomf.*

"You don't seem to be paying attention," says Sirius rather breathlessly, surfacing. "I would say your full focus is not with me at this moment. You're having *thoughts*, aren't you? You're thinking about what am I feeling and do I only like you because apparently you're an enormous tart, who knew, and whether or not you can really call me your *boyfriend* when you and the girls meet up for drinks. Aren't you?"

"No," says Remus. It comes out doh. "I was thinking why is it that I let you kiss me when you are so unbelievably irritating?"

"Because you can't get enough of my love, baby," says Sirius, lidding his eyes revoltingly.

Remus would like to think of a witty, intelligent and interesting response that would put Sirius properly in his place, but the combination of hormonal brain-death and illness makes him say, instead, "Well, you...you're a...shut up."

"Whatever you say," says Sirius. "There's snot on your lip, by the by, so don't expect my tongue anywhere near there. Believe it or not, there are some lines I will not cross."

Remus is about to protest, to say something about vomit, maybe, or Mildred Wilkins in third year, but then Sirius moves his mouth against the place where Remus's jaw meets his ear and Remus goes sort of wobbly and winded. "I have snot *everywhere*," he says, trying to control the pitch of his voice. "I told you that."

"I know you do," Sirius says. "I am well acquainted with that fact."

"Snot is not particularly," Remus manages, "ah, uhm, good to eat."

"I know that, too," Sirius says.

Remus is somewhat baffled. If he were Sirius, and Sirius were he, and Sirius was the one with Remus' cold, and his hand was the one probably losing feeling right this very moment on Sirius' thigh, instead of all the other

ways around, then he would be outraged. Disgusted. Not here. Wouldn't he?

"At one point in my life," Remus points out, "I had standards, you know."

"Come on," Sirius says. "I'm special. Admit it. You wouldn't just drip mucus on anyone, now would you?"

"I think I'm going to be ill."

"No," Sirius says. "That's the flu talking."

This really isn't the way it was supposed to be, Remus thinks hazily. It was supposed to be pleasant all the time, to begin with. It was supposed to be beautiful, intelligent day and night, clever and witty and possibly something like Elizabeth and Mr. Darcy with all the sharp dialogue and unending passion beneath their words. They were supposed to meet in closets, in unlit corridors, in the shack all alone, and touch each other again and again -- but always like the first time. There weren't supposed to be colds, spots, bad breath in the mornings, awkward hands, pins and needles in uncomfortable places, and Sirius' apparent willingness to eat *anything* so long as kissing was involved.

"Haven't *you*ever had standards?" Remus asks. "No. No -- that's a -- silly question."

"Don't ask me questions to which you don't want to know the answer," says Sirius, wiping his mouth indelicately. Remus thinks, dimly, *That is my snot or my saliva, and why is it that one of these things is acceptable and the other is not when they are both so vile?* "If I say yes, then you know I'm lying. And if I say no, that's a bit of a blow to your fragile ego, isn't it?"

"My ego is very sturdy," protests Remus. "You're thinking of my immune system."

"Cupcake," says Sirius, throatily, "that's not the only bit of you I'm thinking about."

"Oh, *God*," yelps Remus in disgust, recoiling, but then Sirius burrows his cold doggy nose into the place between his neck and shoulder and Remus doesn't push him off, even when he starts making weird snuffling noises, and then his mouth sort of trails back over Remus' jaw and to his mouth and there is a long, breathing silence.

After a while Remus thinks Sirius is probably getting bored. Remus can only move his head in so many directions; there is only such a narrow spectrum of things he can do with his mouth. Sirius has probably been expecting him to say something for a while now.

"Your day," he says, but it comes out a bit garbled. He steadies himself on Sirius's lapels. "How. Your day's been. It's been good?"

"Er," says Sirius, still idly thumbing Remus' ribcage. "It's been fine."

"What did you do?" says Remus, insanely. "Who did you talk to? Did you turn in any interesting work or how were your classes, I suppose most of them we were in together, but, you know, you could tell me about what you thought and then I could compare it to what I thought and we could see, you know, where we differ."

Sirius looks at him. Remus looks back. At least, Remus thinks, there is no commingling snot involved in this look, though there is a curious puzzlement wrinkling up Sirius' brow. It was probably the wrong thing to say, Remus thinks, but prolonged kissing is at worst confusing and at best very nice and confusing. Most of the time it's the latter. When it's done, though -- that's the problem. When it's done and Remus can hear Sirius snoring in his bed late at night, Remus wonders when Sirius is going to realize -- high tolerance for incredibly foul things entering and leaving his mouth notwithstanding -- that he has been sucking werewolf snot as often as possible all day long.

If it doesn't start to bother Sirius, Remus wonders idly if it will start to bother *him*.

"Moony," Sirius says finally, "we were there. Together. The whole day. I spilled ink on your trousers before class. Then you went and cleaned it up and I came with you. Then, you know, bathroom, very nice. And after that we had Potions and something exploded in your cauldron and you went and cleaned *it* up and I came with you again. Different bathroom, still very nice. And then after *that* there was lunch when I ate part of your chicken and you said 'Sirius, I have a cold, that's disgusting,' and I said 'I think I'll get it anyway, har har,' and Pete said 'What, why?' and I said 'What with all the time we spend together, germs, germs, can't be helped really, Remus has such a large nose to breathe them out of,' and you choked on your water and went to clean that up and I went with you again. Third bathroom, same story, you're *insatiable*."

"And yet," Remus says, "you cannot remember the apparent motion of the stars. Did you call me 'cupcake' before?"

"I was trying it out," Sirius explains. "Just, you know. There should be nicknames."

"'Remus' is fine," Remus suggests.

"*Remus* isn't very three bathrooms in one day." Sirius grins fondly.

"Apparently he is now," says Remus, a little ruefully.

"So much for your vaunted Prefectly virtue," says Sirius, palming his jaw. "You weren't really using it for anything, were you?"

"I -- no." High marks, Remus thinks, and getting Sirius out of trouble. Clearly the one is going to be thwarted by this cold, and the other Remus seems to be thwarting all by himself.

"All right then," says Sirius, "shut up."

"I didn't -- you're babbling too," Remus starts to argue, and then Sirius slides two cold fingers under his shirt. Remus makes a small noise. His head goes slightly wobbly. Sirius trails a sticky kiss across his mouth. It is nothing like Remus ever imagined it would be, partly because he never imagined any of it would be with Sirius at all. The rest is because Remus never knew kissing could be so pleasant while still being no less unpleasant. Even as a concept it is lacking in any basic practicality. Sirius' fingers, on the other hand, are far more sensible.

"I think you have a fever," Sirius says. "How interesting."

Disgusting, Remus thinks, but rather blissfully.

*

Friday Morning.

"I think I found your hairbrush," James says, swinging the door to the bathroom open and stepping cheerfully inside. "You'll never guess where it was. My underwear drawer. Why was *your* brush in *my* underwear? Anyway, here it is. Aren't I wonderful? I go digging through my old underwear just for you."

"I was using your mirror," says Lily. "I don't think you get to act like you *don't* use your underwear drawer as an all-purpose storage facility. I think I saw a potato in there." She flexes her toes absently. "And your underwear's not such a Herculean task to go through. I did wash it and fold it and it was sorted by color, though probably not anymore."

"That's not just any potato," says James, regarding himself at several angles in the mirror. "It's a potato which looks exactly like Peter, I don't know if you noticed. I was saving it for his birthday. Should I grow a beard, d'you think?"

"By all means, if you never want me to speak to you ever again," says Lily, reaching for the toilet paper. "It would certainly make my life easier, inasmuch as I could finally go off and snog Remus, as I have so long dreamed of."

"Well," James says, a little snippily, "I don't much fancy shaving, you know, ever since I found your leg detritus in my kit." But he leans in to the sink, fills it, splashes his face.

"Oh yes, because I certainly enjoyed finding your old food on my toothbrush," says Lily. She stands, flushes the toilet, and elbows him. "Shove over."

"Wash your hands," James says. "There's a vile cold about. Pass me my razor?"

"Who do you think I am?" Lily demands, mildly disgusted. "As if I wouldn't wash my hands. You must be confusing me with everyone else at this school." She passes the razor.

"Unlikely," says James, and kisses her wetly, where her hair parts.

They move comfortably, in silence. Lily wipes her hands dry and fetches her toothbrush. James lathers and squints at himself. Lily regards him.

After a moment she says, through a mouthful of toothpaste, "You know, you're quite handsome when you shave."

"I am quite handsome all the time," says James, and then winces. "Ow. Why? It's just making stupid faces and injuring myself."

Lily shrugs. "It's -- there's something sort of manly and grown up about it. And your shoulders go all lovely."

"I am always manly. Don't spit in my basin," James warns, restraining her. "The last time you did that I got paste in my eye. You could have blinded me."

"I need to spit. I'm foaming."

"So spit in the toilet."

"Selfish," Lily says, pulling a face, but she leans over the toilet and spits.

James watches her in the mirror as she smoothes her hair back and straightens. She's wearing one of his ancient Chudley tee-shirts; under it her legs are slim and freckledy and very pale.

"I'm in love with you," James says, a little sadly. "I realize I say that rather a lot."

"One day you're going to say it so much it won't mean anything anymore, like *how do you do* and *pass the mustard, please.*" Lily leans in close to the mirror and inspects her chin from two angles and with three completely different mouths. Miraculous, James thinks. He finds her lovely all the time, even when she has just woken up and her breath smells like Sirius' sock drawer. Not that he usually notices. One of the strangest things about love, James has discovered, is that when two people with breath like a sock drawer breathe on each other, you can't tell how bad the situation is. Everything seems fine until one of you brushes your teeth.

"A man can dream," he agrees.

"Not today, though," Lily adds. "Today I still like it. Can I borrow your razor?"

"It's got my skin in it, at the moment," James points out. "I'm using it to be manly. Are my shoulders really lovely? That's not a very manly word, you know."

"Can I use your extra one then?" Lily asks.

James shrugs and grunts. "I *am* exponentially more manly than when first we met," he says. "Aren't I?"

"Exponentially," Lily agrees. "You no longer resemble cooked noodle."

"I suppose now it's more like uncooked noodle?" James snags the difficult place right under his lip on his razor and winces. Lily pats him on the shoulder.

"You are even more manly than an uncooked noodle," she says, kindly. "Though not by much."

It smells of soap and Lily's washed hair and the general scent of bathroom in the bathroom. James washes his

face and pinches the bleeding skin ineffectually until he gives up and lets it crust over. Lily uses his extra razor to shave a hairy patch on her ankle and James supposes they're going to have to get married one day, otherwise they'll kill each other to keep the world from knowing what it is they do in the privacy of their own bathroom.

Except that it isn't actually their own bathroom and it isn't actually private, which James realizes when someone knocks and they both yell, "What?"

There's a little pause, and then Kingsley says, "Morning, Evans."

Lily catches James's eye briefly in the mirror. "Sorry, Kingsley," she calls back. "Out in two shakes, I promise."

"Sorry, mate," adds James.

"This is a little disturbing," says Kingsley.

"I know," says Lily.

"Right," rumbles Kingsley, after a long moment. "I'll come back." His feet make dull booming noises as he goes.

"Arms like the mighty oaks," mumbles James, when he's gone. He regards his own and flaps them vaguely in the mirror. The whole thing resembles raw chicken and he stops.

Lily kisses his ear, and sighs.

"Are you awkward with him?" James asks rather shocked. "Were those Awkward Eyes you were giving me? Are there feelings? I didn't know Shacklebolt had feelings. I didn't know he had room for them, with all those muscles."

"Don't say that," says Lily, shoving her hair behind her ears. "They were awkward eyes, but it's not because of Kingsley. Well, sort of. I don't know. This is sort of -- odd and scary, isn't it?"

"What," says James, unnerved, "my arms?"

"No," says Lily. "Us. Sharing a bathroom. Sharing a bathroom while one of us is actually on the toilet. Old people do that, you know, and inmates in prison."

"My mum and dad do that," James admits. "Did that. I saw them once when I was five and I locked myself in a closet and refused to come out again until they promised they wouldn't do it anymore."

"This explains a good deal about you," Lily says. "Perhaps we should -- not. Do this, I mean. I mean -- it's -- I think I want to lock myself in a closet and refuse to come out until you've put something in Kingsley's tea and he forgets this ever happened."

"You *are* awkward!" James says. "You *are* awkward with him!"

"Well, we did -- we were -- you know." Lily doesn't meet James' eyes, even in the mirror, and busies herself suddenly with washing her hands. James stares at her fingers and wonders how she hasn't taken half the skin off them yet, at the rate she's going. "I'm sure you have -- *someone*, you know, where you see them and maybe food is hanging out of your mouth or you're rearranging your, I don't know, your trousers which are about to fall down, or you're in the bathroom with your -- anyway, and it's awkward."

"No," James says honestly. "The only person it's ever been awkward with is Sirius." Lily gives James a narrow sort of pointed look. "No, no no no, that's not what I'm -- we're talking about you! About you being awkward. This is a new development." James swallows. "He's not -- *Kingsley's* not -- he doesn't get awkward, does he? I think he'd punch awkward in the face and take his name and never let him come around anymore. Right? Right, Lily?"

Lily sighs. "You can be remarkably obtuse," she says. "Kingsley may be a certain amount of, of, well, of imperturbable--"

"--and with a certain amount of shiny head," James adds.

"--and, shut up James, what I'm saying is, it doesn't mean he's made of rock or anything."

"Isn't he?" James stares. "He's not -- he's not *sensitive*, is he? Tender? What did he do to you? I'll kill him!"

"He'll crush you," Lily says. "Like a very small and very pale bug."

"When I said 'kill him,'" says James, deflating, "I obviously meant 'stare coldly at him from across the room.'" He watches her in the mirror for a moment. "So there were feelings. I don't like to think of you having feelings."

"I'm not going to tell you I like you better, because that's ridiculous and plays right into your stupid insecurities," says Lily sharply.

"You do though," says James, leering at her. "Like me better. Don't you?"

"I can't talk to you now, I'm flossing," says Lily with some dignity.

"I love you," James tells her, again. He can't help it. Sometimes it just comes out, like a sneeze. He's not sure if it's just his need for reassurance, to hear her say *Me, too*, or if it's nothing if the kind, something less selfish or more.

"Shut up," says Lily, and James is so grateful that he has to touch her, softly, at the waist. She leans into him, her wild morning hair foaming in his eyes, her body very warm.

"Spitting," she says after a moment, "move over," and throws her used floss in the bin.

The back of her neck is pale and has two freckles, near the boniest spot where the hair is soft and so light-orange it's more yellow than anything else. There are times when James can't really bring himself to touch it because it makes him feel incredibly unworthy of any of the good things his life has given him, and of all those

good things James would be hard pressed to say Lily isn't the best. She isn't the most beautiful female ever created and her nose is kind of silly at the tip, and she has freckles in odd places. James is simply pleased she doesn't punch him anymore. She has particularly strong fists.

"Did you floss with Kingsley?" James asks finally, tensing to hear the answer.

"Don't be a complete idiot," Lily says. "Of course not."

*



Friday Afternoon.

Remus is packing. He is rolling socks. Now and then he cannot find the matching sock for a sock he already has and it clearly annoys him, as he normally keeps his socks in good order. Now and then he pauses to blow his nose; he never wipes it on the scratchy sleeve of his scratchy shirt that Sirius wishes he wouldn't wear so often.

He has other shirts. He has other shirts that are less scratchy. Sirius would give him all the not-scratchy shirts in the world if Sirius had money anymore, but in any case Remus wouldn't wear them. As terrible as Remus is at giving gifts he is perhaps even more terrible at receiving them.

Remus can't find another sock.

"Remus," Sirius says.

Remus blows his nose. It is red and angry looking. "Yes?"

"I don't know," Sirius admits. "I don't really have anything to say."

"You could roll your own socks," Remus suggests. "Or I suppose you could just do what you're going to do anyway and put them in that bottomless trunk of yours in no order at all."

He isn't all that bad looking, Remus. He's not, Sirius admits, good looking like, say, he is or James is, but not everyone can be blessed with such classic features, such handsome jaws, and all the other things that make Sirius and James a natural and dashing duo. Remus has an unremarkable jaw and his nose is, all jokes aside, sort of a remarkable phenomenon, but his hair falls over his forehead in a pleasant way and his smile is often crooked and beautiful. Also, Remus folds socks. But that's all right. Sirius does still want to kiss him, or come up behind him and take him by surprise and get all his sorted socks mixed up in his hair until he's forced to laugh and, possibly, get snot all over.

"It's June," Remus is saying. "Imagine having a cold in June. It's ridiculous. How did I get a cold in June? Sirius, have you seen my green sock?"

"Remus," Sirius says. "You're not, I don't know, avoiding me, are you? By rolling your socks up in little sock balls like your mother? I've heard you say that colored socks are for hapless old men and that once you reach that point there is no hope for you."

"Don't be silly," Remus says faintly. "Why would I be avoiding you? I haven't been avoiding you. I've been around. I've been around rather a lot."

"I think you're thinking," says Sirius, wisely. You can tell when Remus is thinking -- well, he's always thinking, of course. But when he has really serious thinking to do he balls socks, or alphabetizes things, and he chews on his lip until it gets chapped and painful-looking. Sirius kind of wants to bite Remus's lip, just to see what the attraction is. "You should stop. You're getting all distracted, and you're wearing the scratchy shirt."

"I'm not," Remus protests. "Well, maybe the shirt. I don't know. It's just -- well, how could I not think at all? I have to think. I don't understand how you don't think."

"Urgh," says Sirius. "Let's not discuss this. It's vulgar." Almost without thinking about it, he reaches for the back of Remus's shirt and tugs him down onto the bed.

"Don't," says Remus, and sneezes violently into his hair. "God! I'm sorry."

"Stop," says Sirius. He splays his fingers across Remus's mouth. "Stop saying that."

Kissing a boy is not like kissing a girl. It's not like he's never done it before -- a dim memory of tequila and James's nipples comes to mind -- but he's never done it sober, and he's never remembered it significantly enough for the sake of comparison, and he's certainly never done it and meant it. There's something combative about it, like neither one is sure which of them should be pushing and which of them should be yielding, so nobody yields. The sounds Remus makes aren't soft, melting girl sounds. Their elbows are always knocking together. And Sirius's mouth and chin itch afterwards. It's not exactly what Sirius imagined when he imagined certain things necessary for the imagining, during those inevitable times when all he really needed was a good wank. It's not exactly what Sirius ever imagined should feel good. Still, when something feels good Sirius doesn't really see the need -- like Remus *always* sees the need -- to question it until it gives up on making him feel good because he's just not paying attention and slips out the back way, never to be seen again.

Kissing a boy involves a lot of accidental teeth scraping and sometimes, with Remus, it's like fighting. Make all the jokes you like about Remus Lupin and the questionable veracity of his man parts, but he's strong and he bites. Sometimes Sirius catches himself in the mirror and wonders how no one notices what he's noticing, swollen lips and dark little bruises around his neck, just low enough to hide with a messy collar. Surely James should notice, though James is busy making his own bruises and probably wouldn't notice if Sirius were carrying on a conversation over breakfast dressed in a cow suit and ermine cloak. James is lost to them all forever, Sirius thinks wistfully.

Remus pulls away to sneeze again.

"Bless you," Sirius says.

Remus kisses him hard and scratchy on the mouth. The full line of Remus' chest is hard and scratchy because of his boy-body and scratchy shirt. Sirius feels strange, though it's his own fault, to be pressed beneath Remus' weight. It's not like kissing a girl at all. It is, Sirius admits, a lot better. Not that he has anything against girls. Not that he's going to make a habit of kissing boys all over the school. Not that this means anything; it just feels good.

When something feels good Sirius thinks *oh, that feels good* and doesn't get distracted from it for too much thinking.

Remus pushes him down. "Oof," says Sirius. He likes that Remus pushes him, Remus who so infrequently pushes anybody. He thinks probably very few people have seen this look of odd, aggressive concentration on Remus' face, the sudden tight wires of the muscles around his wrists. Maybe his test papers have seen it, if test papers could see anything, which they can't, so obviously he's thinking nonsense.

Then Remus' fingers slide into his hair and Sirius's brain fractures a little. Remus' thumb smoothes against the pads of his palm in a way that sends full, dizzy warmth floating wildly about in his stomach. He thinks suddenly that his body is brimming at Remus' touch like hot water, an embarrassing, maudlin image which for some reason is pretty accurate.

He thinks, *This feels good.*

"I should finish packing," says Remus raggedly. His mouth moves against Sirius' mouth when he talks and his breath is too hot and too close. He smells like cold. There is a particular cold smell which, strangely enough, only Remus would understand, the brotherhood of canine senses having something to do with it.

"Why are you so eager to leave?" Sirius asks.

"I'm not," Remus says. "I like to think if I concentrate on packing I won't be thinking about why."

"You're completely insane," Sirius tells him. "Nothing you say ever makes sense. You're packing so you won't have to think about packing? If you go back to socks now I'll -- do -- something. To your socks. It will be terrible. Oh, the weeping you will -- weep." Mostly, Sirius threatens because he knows Remus *can* go back to socks now, whereas Sirius probably cannot even sit up. There's one thing he's been doing a lot more of since Remus went even more completely insane than always and kissed him completely out of nowhere and threw up and then kissed him again, and that's having a private wank and necessary imagination. Remus is all hands but he's not all hands down there; he's never all hands down there. Sirius honestly thought it would be the other way around. Remus *is* of the male persuasion, after all. Of all the boys in the world to kiss, Sirius chose Remus, the one boy who has probably never had a wank at all. If it were James, well, that would be a different story. James would understand a man has needs.

Remus shifts. "My socks," he says.

"This does not bode well," Sirius warns.

Remus sneezes on him and pushes himself upright again. "I don't think it bodes anything. I wouldn't know how to bode if I wanted to."

"You don't bode," Sirius clarifies. "Your behavior -- your behavior bodes. Stop." He wrenches a pair of socks from Remus's hand, unballs them and drapes them over Remus's head, like huge droopy dog ears.

Remus gives him the bleary, helpless look of the very ill. "I know perfectly well how boding works," he says.

"Ridiculous," says Sirius, glaring at him. "You're ridiculous. Have you ever even had a wank?"

"What?" Remus goes pinkish in the ear area. "For heaven's sake, Sirius."

"Is that a For heaven's sake of course I have or a For heaven's sake how dreadful, fetch me some smelling salts or I shall swoon?" He hooks two fingers into one of Remus's belt loops and pulls him forward by the hip.

"For heaven's sake," Remus repeats. "I'm sorry, that didn't exactly -- it didn't clarify."

"You let me lick snot out of your nose," Sirius says. "But you won't tell me what you do when the curtains are drawn."

"Boding badly," Remus says. "Yes, I can see your point." His nose wrinkles, which Sirius watches from up close with some strange combination of delight and amusement. It's a big nose. Sirius wonders what Remus would do if he bit it. "I suppose," Remus says finally, "once or twice -- I mean, I'm not James -- James does it

all the time, I'm sure you know that as well as I do, or he used in any case to before Lily -- what I'm trying to say, though, we could hear him clear as anything and I always thought if everyone else could hear *me* go at myself like that I'd have to move to Argentina and live in a hole with a bag over my head and then I'd probably die from lack of oxygen, but that would be all right since my life would be over by that point anyway. Honor of my family," he adds. "That sort of thing."

"James once tried to do that," Sirius admits. "I convinced him not to. Now he's all right. He's even snagged himself a feisty redhead. Just think of all you could be if you only tried."

Remus eyes him narrowly. "Were those sentences even -- you know, I don't think you make any sense either."

"I'm not even paying any attention to what I'm saying," Sirius admits, worrying vaguely at Remus' lower lip. "I'm just trying to make you drop the socks. Is it working?"

Remus smiles.

"This is nice, now," says Sirius. This is important. He's not sure how to communicate that it's important; he rests his forehead against Remus'. "It feels good. Doesn't it? So forget the socks. Eat, drink, and be merry, for tomorrow we have to buy our own food."

"Doesn't that," Remus begins.

"I don't care yet," Sirius says, grinning like a dog. "It's just tomorrow."



*

Saturday Afternoon.

The common room is quiet. Sirius and Remus have been missing in action for days and days. Perhaps, James thinks idly, they've run away to join the circus. He's seen Peter around, here and there and about and very Peterish, so that's all right; no one's flushed him down anything or turned him into a cauldron or anything. James finds now that he doesn't want to pack. Lily's already more than half done with her things, lacey undergarments James hates and loves at once and gets tangled in sometimes. Even the one he got caught on his fingernail and had to explain to Madam Pomfrey it was all a prank gone dreadfully wrong when he realized he couldn't get it uncaught from his fingernail.

Now and then Lily appears in the common room, looks around for something, and disappears. The fourth time James says, "Well, have you found it yet? This is getting very exciting. I'm on the edge of my seat. I just *have* to know how this one works out."

"You could be packing," Lily points out. She's holding her potions book. She's carried it back and forth from the common room every single time. James smiles involuntarily seeing it again. Lily Evans: odd duck.

He flutters his hands cheerfully. "A trifle," he says. "C'mon, tell me."

"It's Snape," Lily says guiltily, weighing the heavy book in one hand. "I should -- get him his book back. I haven't had the nerve."

"You have Snape's *book*?" says James, horrified. He has, it must be admitted, noticed her and Snape partner off in Potions before, because he notices everything Lily does, ever; but he's always just assumed it was Lily's natural, irrational kindness. "Why? Did you steal it?"

Lily hits him, with less affection than usual. "We were friends." She flips through the pages of the book, and then laughs, startled and a little sad. "Look -- see, we couldn't figure out how to counteract a potion--"

James checks it. *Just shove a bezoar down their throats*, it says. And then below, in Lily's neat script, the pencil so smeared and faint it is almost illegible: *Agreed. Bugger this*.

"He used to make me laugh," Lily says. "And he wasn't, you know, awful. Unlike some people I could mention, Quidditch-playing people with stupid hair."

"What happened?" asks James, curiosity momentarily overcoming revulsion.

"I left his book in the common room by accident," says Lily, and sighs. "Frank Longbottom found it. You know *Levicorpus*?"

"Ah, an old and loyal friend," James says nostalgically. "Frank taught me that, actually. Snape knows it particularly well."

"Well, so he ought," snaps Lily, whipping around and turning her back on him. "He wrote it." She begins forcefully throwing the piles of clothes into her trunk.

James opens and shuts his mouth several times, and then says, "He who now?"

"He made it up," Lily flares. The back of her neck is extremely pink. "Maybe if you'd spent less time being rotten to everyone who wasn't as popular as you, and more time paying attention to people, you would have noticed that he's one of the cleverest students at this school."

"He *made it up*?" repeats James. This strikes him as showing a distinct lack of foresight. Surely, if you are Severus Snape -- a man whose very appearance engenders a great longing to do bad things to you -- you do not invent a spell which gives people the ability to do those bad things with grace and ease, while simultaneously showing everyone your underwear.

"Yes, he did," Lily says. "It's in the book. Go on."

James turns the pages, uncomprehending. He can't find Levicorpus, but there are a great many other scrawled notes and spells and what appears to be one side of a conversation. It occurs to him that Lily probably has the other side in her book. The thought is distasteful and yet, oddly, makes him feel terribly ashamed. He flips to

the front cover.

"The Half-Blood Prince?" he scoffs, almost without thinking. "Who does he think--"

"It was to make me feel better," says Lily quietly and dangerously, turning to face him. "Because Lucius Malfoy and those awful Black sisters used to get on me, and call me Mudblood, and say the most horrible things about my parents. Second year I thought if I wasn't a pureblood, I didn't even deserve to be at the school. And that was sort of your fault, you know," she adds sharply, "you and Sirius -- always being tops over me even though you never ever studied and I was studying *all the time*." Lily takes a deep, determined breath. "And then once Severus and I were working on something, and I couldn't get a problem and it was so frustrating that I started crying. I told him I was practically a Muggle and I ought to just give up and go home."

"You never told me you felt that," James breathes, feeling unbelievably rotten. "I mean, we were tops over Remus, as well, weren't we? And he studied every waking minute -- he studied more than he ever *breathed.* I didn't -- I never would have thought in a million years."

"He said it was rubbish. It was the nicest he's ever been. I mean, you know, he's Snape, and everything, so it wasn't what you would call nice by normal human standards. But he said I was an idiot, and he was a half-blood and if anyone thought that made a difference then they were as stupid as I was. After that he used to joke that he was first among the half-bloods and I was first among Muggleborns. Prince was his mother's name. We thought it was awfully clever."

"But Snape--" James stumbles. "He calls you -- I mean, he's called you -- Mudblood. I've seen him do it. "

"Well, yes," Lily says. "He hates me, doesn't he? You used his own spell on him. For all he knows, I gave it to you. I mean, I practically did."

James looks at the book. Then he looks at Lily. Finally he says, "I've been a real kid about Snape, haven't I."

"It is true that you've demonstrated more maturity in other arenas," Lily says quietly.

"I should -- before we go, I should apologize to him." James realizes, sort of, that he doesn't really owe Snape anything; that in the great karmic balance of the universe, saving him from a giant werewolf pretty much cancels out hanging him upside-down and putting mashed potatoes down his neck. But in the smaller karmic balance, the balance between people, the big things matter less than you might think. "If you like, I'll take it back to him. The book, I mean."

"I hardly think he's going to be any more eager to talk to you than he is to me," says Lily, quirking up her mouth, but her eyes are soft.

James shrugs, one-shouldered. "Doesn't matter."

"I should do it," Lily says.

"We could leave it around," James suggests.

"That was rather the problem in the first place."

"I'll take it to him, then," James offers a second time. It feels strange to want to apologize, to Snape of all people, *Snivellus*, but what happens in school, James supposes, should stay there. It should be ended. They're all going home and they're not coming back. Snape won't accept it. He hasn't any reason to. James realizes he's probably even more of an idiot for thinking this will help instead of make things worse. It strikes him suddenly as dreadful that the things they've done, all the stupid little things that meant nothing, have bled over into their real lives and are a part of whatever they do next. They can't escape any of that, not with all the magic in the world. "I won't read it," James offers. "You should let me do this."

Let me, with *You should.* Lily knows what that is: kind selfishness, selfish kindness, James all grown up but not quite at all. She touches the side of his jaw with her free hand and he turns his face into her palm, breathes in.

"You'll be all right," she says. "Maybe not with Snape, but, you know. Overall."

"I'm taking care of it," says James, and smiles lopsided. She hands him the book. He kisses her wrist.

"When I get back, you owe me a shag," he adds, turning to give her a significant look.

Lily lifts an eyebrow, and also the hem of her skirt.

"Nnaugh," says James, and leaves.

The anticipation is worse than the action, James tells himself. The agonizing period in which he has to imagine himself apologizing to Severus Snape -- this is where the pain is. The actual apology can't possibly be as bad as the idiot yammering he pictures himself engaged in, he thinks hopefully, and he holds this view until he sees Snape coming down the hallway he's headed determinedly through, and all of a sudden he is not sure.

About twenty feet away, Snape sees him too and stops. His eyes lid expressively; one side of his nose lifts. James seriously hates him.

"Look, Potter, as dreadful as it will obviously be never to set eyes on each other again, I was hoping we could skip the tender goodbyes. I have things to do."

"God, you're irritating," James says, in some wonder. "No wonder I always want to punch you."

"This is touching," Snape says. "You always soar high above my expectations. I did imagine there'd be flowers, but I suppose your heartbreaking words of affection shall *have* to suffice."

"Look," James says, "I'm actually not here to punch you."

"Miraculous," Snape replies.

James fingers twitch. He's tempted to add *But the best laid plans* and punch Snape anyway, until he thinks of Lily and manages to stop himself just in time. "I am here," he manages, "to say perhaps it is best if we let -- we let all that, you know, *all that*, just -- just let it go, considering now we're, you know, we're leaving the school

and that means we're more mature now. And adults. Hence the maturity. That we now have more of. And all those good things that involve me not punching you even though I want to, and you not being all snide and poisonous even though you obviously want to."

Snape's nostrils flare. For a moment, he even appears speechless. James supposes it's not in the spirit of reconciliation. "You are impressive even to me," Snape finally says, flinging each word forth like venom. "You expect I should be grateful for--" He waves a twitchy-fingered, oddly delicate hand. "For *this*? The great James Potter deigns to let bygones be bygones. How very *big* of him."

"I'm a big man," says James. "So come on. Let's all be adults, difficult though it is for everybody. What d'you say?"

"What do I say?" Snape repeats, voice hard and incredulous. "What do I -- you made my life a living hell for seven years, Potter, and I long for the opportunity to visit the same courtesy on you. Good day."

He slams past James's shoulder. James says, "Oh for fuck's sake, at least take your bloody Potions book, anyway," and grabs his wrist.

Snape makes a noise like he's been burned and wrenches his arm away. James, surprised, steps back, and Snape suddenly looks up from under his hair, his face pale and agonized. He grips his forearm, bunching up the sleeve like James hit a bruise.

"If you ever touch me again," he says, very quietly, "I will kill you."

James doesn't falter or step backwards, though he wants to. "Here," he says, shoving the book in Snape's direction. "You're mad, d'you know that? D'you hear yourself? *Kill me?* Over a few stupid pranks when we were thirteen?"

Snape's mouth twists, thin and unsmiling and sharp-lined, and makes James feel a little sick. When Snape reaches out to take the book he knocks it hard and quick from James' hands instead; it thuds dully to the ground to lie shut between them. "It's a promise, Potter," Snape says. "A rather different world has begun for us. I only hope you learn what sort of a world it is in the way you deserve to learn it. I only hope I am there to see it."

"Right, well," James snaps back. *My only regret is there were too few dungbombs* would be a nice finishing touch, a voice worryingly like Sirius' whispers in the back of his brain. He kicks it. It whimpers. " Can't say as you'll have too many friends our there but can't say as you had too many in here, either, so carry on blaming other people, eh? It suits you. You must bloody *love* it."

Snape's threat still lingers, and even thought it's Snape James feels curiously disheartened. For a moment longer, neither of them says anything at all, until James turns heel and saunters off. It's a jaunty stride, he thinks; a stride that says *I win!* but he can hear Snape stalk off after a few long moments, like he's been waiting for the last word.

So that's that, then, James thinks. Apologizing to Snivellus -- he should have known.

The potions notebook in question is gone the next day, though neither James nor Snape returns to find it. James

wonders only once what happened to it. No doubt, he supposes, it suffered the fate of all lost books: found by idle hands, or passed unnoticed to the back of a professor's bookshelf.

*

Sunday Night.

"I must say I won't be sorry to say goodbye to this place," Remus says thoughtfully, kicking one desiccated piano leg.

"I am certain we shall meet here again one day," says Sirius. "It has a siren call which is irresistible. These squeaky floorboards. These tattered curtains. These clawmarks in the floor, filled with shiny memories."

"And dust," adds Peter.

"Also dust," agrees Sirius.

"We could have had a picnic farewell ceremony," Remus said, with a sigh. "I thought we should have done that instead."

"Which just goes to show what you know about farewell ceremonies, mate," says James, patting his head. "Leave this to Pads and me."

"I would have brought pie," Remus says. "You like pie. Don't make it out as if I'm the mad one. We *all* like pie."

"Everyone likes pie," Peter agrees.

"All right, look, no pie, no picnic baskets -- this is a manly and important ceremony," James says. "Like the Prewett brothers before us, we shall leave behind our glorious names -- our glorious legacy -- forever. We have to do it right or not at all. Moony, Wormtail, Padfoot and Prongs -- the greatest gang in all of Hogwarts history. I present to you: The Marauder's Map." Sirius trumpets through his hands and James unfurls the map with an enormous flourish. Remus wonders how they are allowed to make fun of his practical pie when they are trumpeting and flourishing. But it is true that the map is a glorious thing, dark ink and thick pages and footprints.

"I hate to do it," says Sirius, with a sigh. "I feel we've had so little time together."

"Well, the beautiful thing about love is its transience, really," says Remus, surreptitiously pressing his fingers against the back of Sirius's neck.

"Think of what joy it has brought us," says James. "Think of the generations to come who will build on the grand tradition of wreaking havoc that we have established here."

"It does seem likely to be the only worthwhile legacy any of us is likely to leave," says Sirius gloomily.

"Serving ice cream is a very sacred duty, pal of my heart," says James. "There are squalling children who will remember you forever. At least you're not alphabetizing inventory forms in the Department of Mind-Numbingly Boring."

"I thought it was Agricultural and Husbandry Supervision?" says Peter.

"That is its slave name," James says. "By night it tears off its dress robes and spectacles and saves lives. Babies, puppies, that sort of thing."

"At least you're not having more school. Like our dear friend Mr. Schooly-Face over here," Sirius says, surreptitiously pressing his fingers against the small of Remus's back in return.

"It's not school," Remus protests, swallowing. "I've told you all a thousand times, it's a *research institute*."

"It was all right when I thought you were making waffles," Sirius says. "But then when you told me absolutely no waffles were involved in this so-called Waffling Cultural Institute I was shocked. Horrified. Deeply disappointed. One might even say my heart was broken."

"It's for *research*," Remus repeats darkly.

"At least it's not taking inseams," Peter points out. "I'm going to be taking inseams."

"Ouch," Sirius says. "I sympathize, my poor comrade. At least you've the opportunity to make those inseams too tight. Chaos may yet reign."

"My dad will skin me and make ties out of me," Peter says, resigned. "No tight inseams, he told me, and no loose ones either. An inseam is the most delicate balance of a tailor's talent and precision, and anyway my dad says--"

"This is already the Department of Mind-Numbingly Boring," James groans. "Come on, lads, let's have a wonderful last go of it, eh? We can do it. I've faith in us. Let the ritual begin."

Peter blinks. "Er," he says. "What ritual is that, then?"

"We're burning it," James says, eyes aglow. "We're going to sing a song and burn it."

"I thought we'd sing 'Auld Lang Syne,'" adds Sirius.

Remus suddenly finds there is dust in his throat and chokes. "We're doing -- I'm sorry, I fail to see how that is in the grand tradition of the Prewett brothers and have you forgotten how much work we spent on that? How much the paper cost? Just -- just feel the paper again and tell me you're burning it. Months of -- *months* -- this is ridiculous."

"It is in the grand tradition of Viking warriors, in whose horned footsteps walked the Prewetts," James explains.

"It doesn't leave our names behind at all!" protests Remus. "Not that I am particularly concerned about our names being left behind, it seems to me that anyone who has to read the property damage reports of this place will be made aware of our glorious names, but you have to realize this is a truly pointless thing to do. What in God's name is a horned footstep?"

"Metaphor," James says.

"That's not metaphor," Remus replies.

"You're just prickled up because we're burning your beautiful paper." James strokes it fondly. "It's what the ancients would want us to do, you know. It's a celebration of honor, of valor, of glory, et cetera."

"There's no glory in burning your work," Remus says, then quiets. It's a true shame. The footprints are perfectly shaped and the map no longer makes farting noises when you try to open it -- every possible name spoken against its hallowed pages corresponds to an appropriate, biting insult of which even Wilde would be proud -- even the staircases shift and reconnect with fluid accuracy. It's like their baby, Remus thinks. You can't just go around lighting babies on fire.

"Padfoot," James says solemnly. "Have you the matches?"

"I have the matches," Sirius says. He fishes them out of his trousers and lights one with steady hands.

"We have made history, mates," James says. "We are handsome. We are brilliant. We have marauded with the best of them."

There is silence.

Remus squeezes his eyes shut. He can't watch.

Nothing happens.

Remus opens his eyes again.

"Ouch," Sirius says suddenly, and shakes the match out. "Burnt my fingers!"

"That's because you were supposed to light the bloody thing," James points out. "Are you with me, horned footsteps and dungbombs, to the last?"

"Well," Sirius begins, looking torn. "I mean, I just -- we can't -- my *best* insults are in there, James."

"Et tu, Sirius?" James moans. "Such betrayal -- from my best friend! Oh, I am wounded. Wounded to the very core."

"Did you really want to burn it?" says Remus, incredulously.

"Of course he did!" says Peter.

"Well, I just--" James looks at them helplessly, and then sighs. "I don't think it's something that we ought to leave lying about. Times being what they are."

"You're telling me this whole thing stems from a sense of maturation and responsibility?" yelps Sirius, the shocked betrayal on his face mirroring James's own. "I thought it was Vikings and Prewetts!" He flings the matches to the earth. "Crafty, lying Potter that you are. I should have known better."

"Lily--" James starts, and everyone groans.

"No mention of such things tonight," Sirius says, waving a hand. "Come on. Moony's right. This is silly, and it doesn't do us any good to take it with us, so why don't we hide it? Then, one day, brave young entrepreneurs such as ourselves find it, they will carry on in *our* blazing, horned path of glory without actually setting incredibly brilliant pieces of enchantment on fire. Unless Filch finds it," he adds, thoughtfully, "in which case it may be lost to the ages."

"Let's hope some kind of heir finds it," Peter says. "With all those games of Catch It In Your Lap, and that one year we were all, d'you remember, test subjects for all Sirius's summer spells -- I don't think any of us is having any children of our own, really."

"Bah, we are virile," James says. He eyes the map, then grabs it quickly and folds it, holding it tight to his chest. "To think," he murmurs absently, "I was going to burn you, my darling."

"The level of schizophrenia in this room," Remus begins.

"No Lily," Sirius repeats, "and no schizophrenia. Just us." He grins, eyes wild and flashing. Remus feels something terrible and weak happen to his stomach, like it's made a desperate, denied bid for freedom through his throat. "Let's hide it. C'mon. Like buried treasure. Maybe one of *our* good-looking and incredibly intelligent progeny will find it in the distant future, and then we'll know they're worthy of our loins. We'll tell them all our secrets, all our tricks, all our trades."

"Most people are not worthy of your personal loins, Sirius," says James lovingly. "I wouldn't hold out."

Sirius makes an odd "huh" sound and glances involuntarily at Remus, who finds himself coughing wildly again.

"Where are we going to hide it?" asks Peter. "I mean, if we're not to leave it lying around."

"We will leave it in the one place only the worthy will look," says Sirius, and James says knowingly, "Kitchen cupboards."

"I am not sure I will ever be able to visit your flat," says Remus. "Who knows what odd things you will keep in what odd places."

"What if we have pie?" Sirius offers. "And picnic baskets? Though I cannot assure you they'll be together. There might be underthings in the picnic baskets."

"So long as they aren't in the pie," Remus replies.

"Cupboards it is, then," James says. "It seems sort of -- sort of unworthy, doesn't it?"

"James," Sirius says. "James, James, you were about to have me *set it on fire*. And I was going to do it!"

"Like a warrior of old," James protests. "Burnt to dwell with his ancestors the gods. In Valhalla."

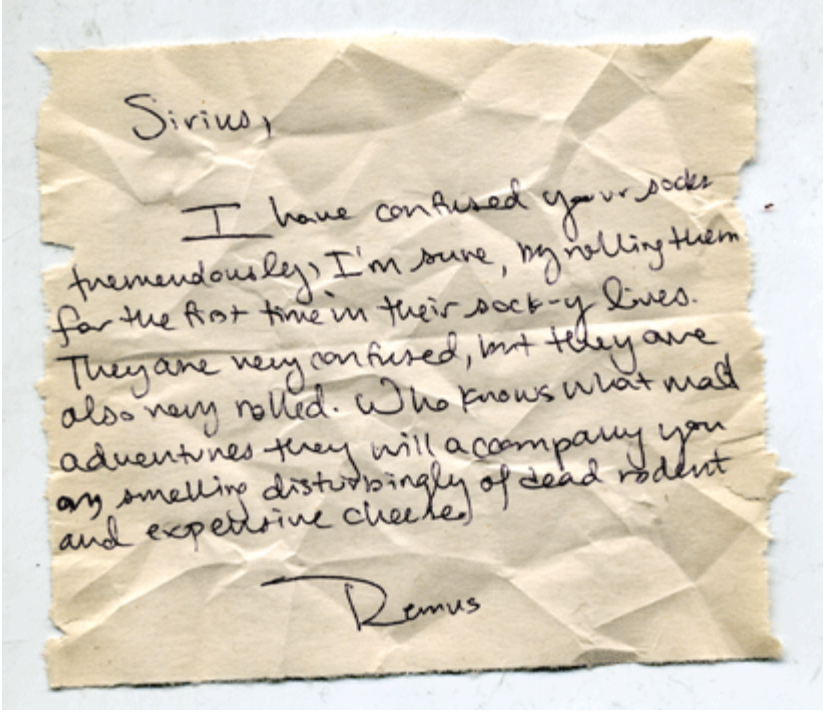
"Lily's having him read all sorts of Viking mythology," Peter explains. "He's showing off."

"Right, well," Sirius says. "I suppose we should get on with it. 'It' being our last hurrah, our final frolic, and so on."

"Don't say that," protests Peter. "We'll still see each other. Won't we? Grown ups still see each other. I mean, I won't be half a mile from any of you."

"But it's different," says James. "Never mind. Last hurrah. Come on."

Huddled under the cloak, it smells of boy and armpit and incipient adulthood, which also smells of boy and armpit, and Sirius' socks and Peter's dinner and the weird goo James puts in his hair. Remus doesn't mind if their song is sung to the rafters or if only they know it in the end. They shuffle out into the warm night together, and Remus thinks if they could just keep it all as some secret amongst four good friends they'll be just fine until they're impossibly old and the seven years they spent at Hogwarts School for Witchcraft and Wizardry has shrunk into a short sweet memory, distant as a good dream.



Tucked into Sirius' suitcase. With the socks.



Kept pristine, later burned, later salvaged.

shoebox_project(http://www.livejournal.com/community/shoebox_project)

Cowritten by dorkorific and ladyjaida.

dorkorific specializes in **Sirius**; ladyjaida specializes in **Remus**.

dorkorific is **Mlle. Artiste**; ladyjaida is **Mlle. Bits-n-bats**.

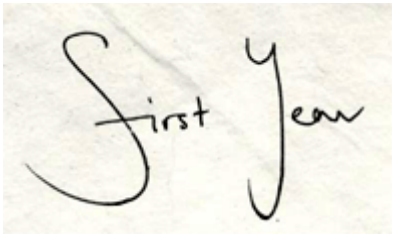
The handwriting of Remus J. Lupin, Severus Snape and James Potter is done by ladyjaida.

The handwriting of Sirius Black, Peter Pettigrew and Lily Evans is done by dorkorific.
Don't worry; Peter won't be stupidified. **Trust us** on that one.

We would like to take a moment to thank windjinn for leaping down the stairs with ladyjaida's bra on his head.

all characters herein are the intellectual property of j.k. rowling, scholastic and warner brothers.

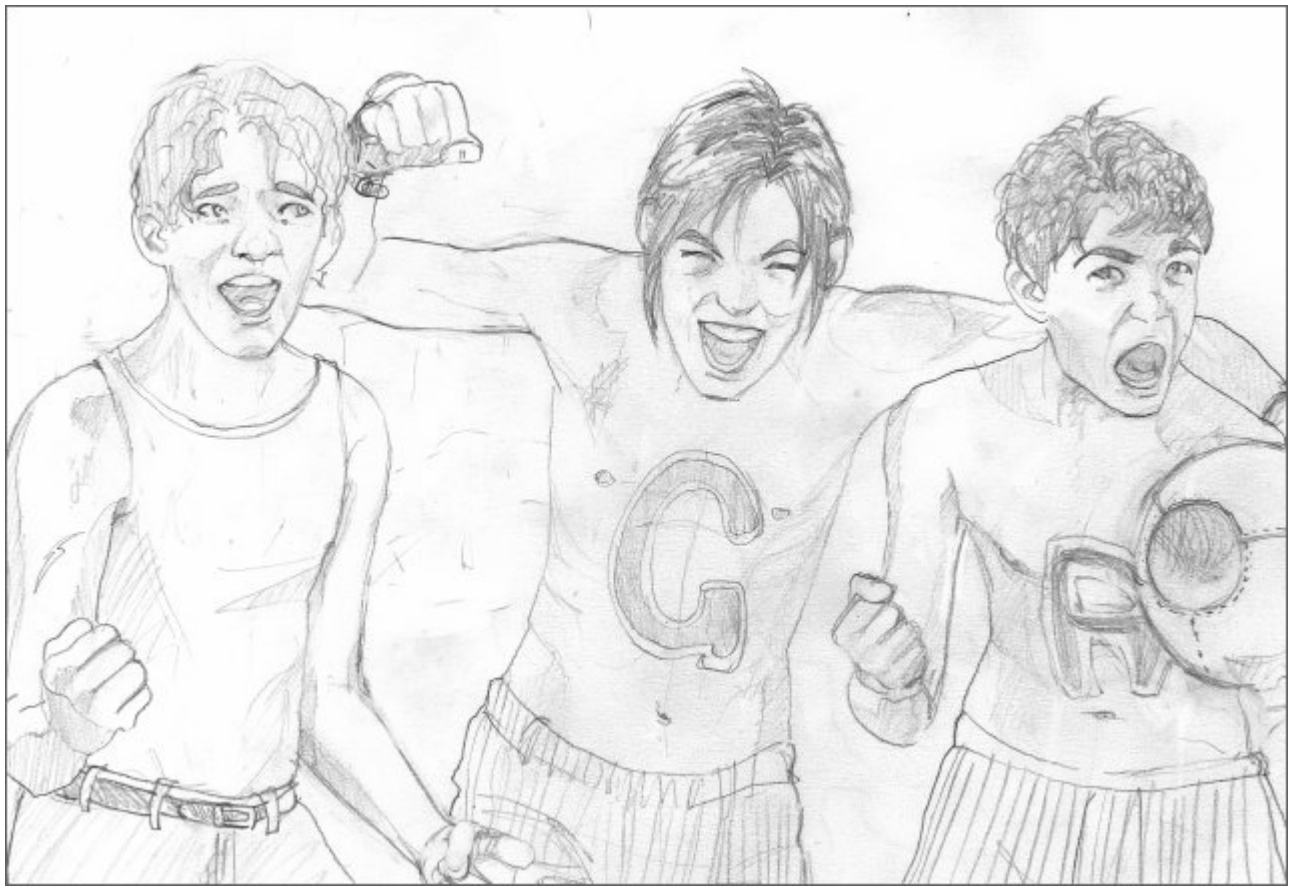
Hogwarts Retrospective



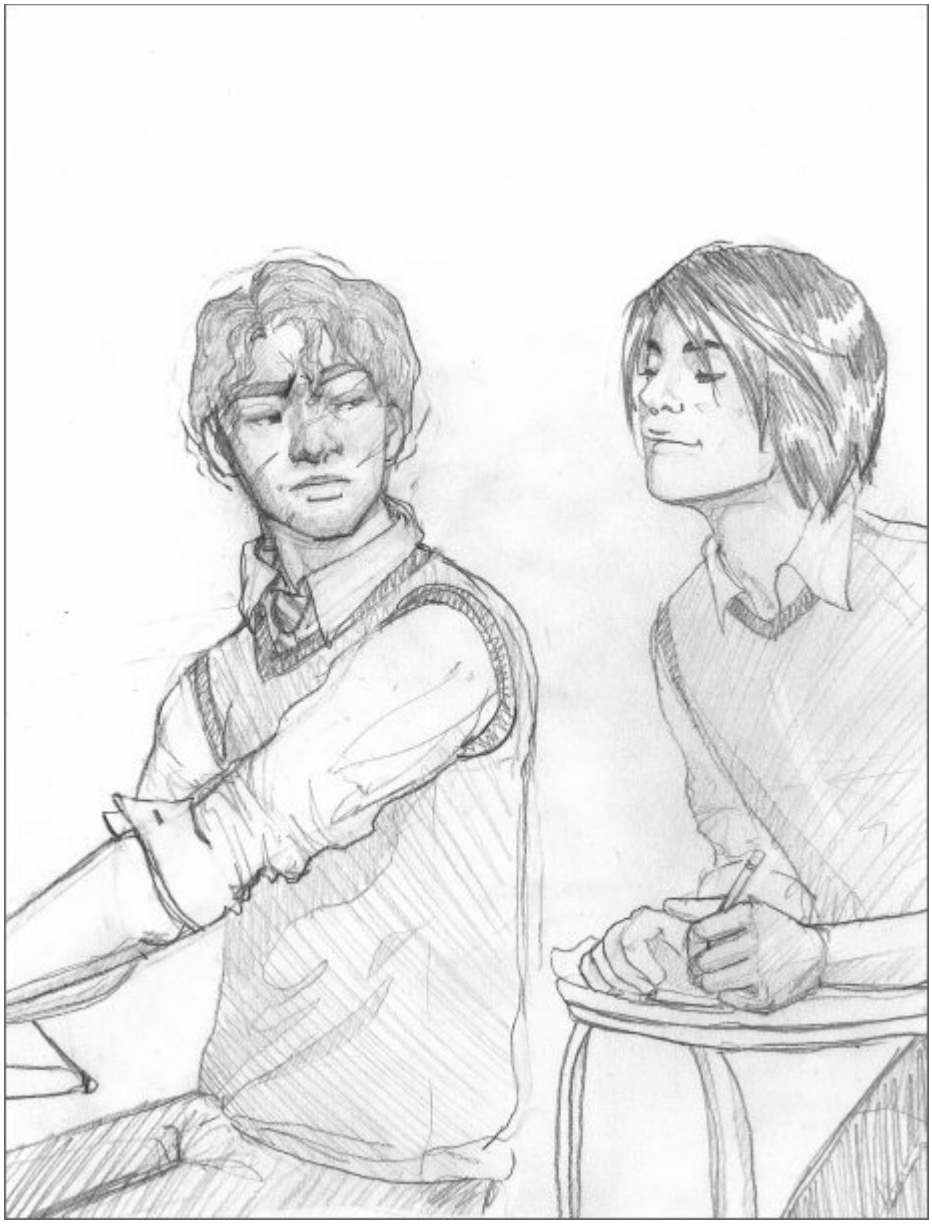




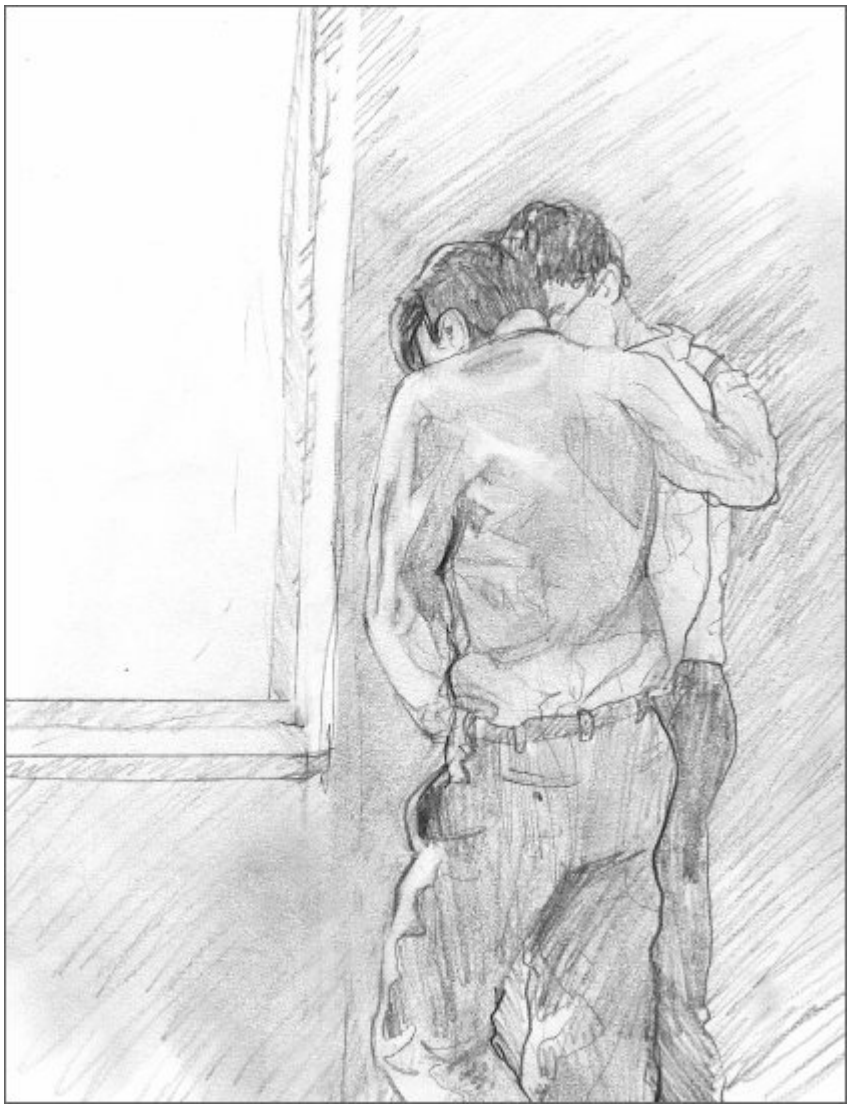
Second Year



Fifth Year



Seventh Year



shoebox_project(http://www.livejournal.com/community/shoebox_project)

Cowritten by **dorkorific** and **ladyjaida**.

dorkorific specializes in **Sirius**; **ladyjaida** specializes in **Remus**.

dorkorific is **Mlle. Artiste**; **ladyjaida** is **Mlle. Bits-n-bats**.

The handwriting of Remus J. Lupin, Severus Snape and James Potter is done by **ladyjaida**.

The handwriting of Sirius Black, Peter Pettigrew and Lily Evans is done by **dorkorific**.
Don't worry; Peter won't be stupidified. **Trust us** on that one.

We would like to take a moment to thank **windjinn** for leaping down the stairs with **ladyjaida**'s bra on his head.

all characters herein are the intellectual property of j.k. rowling, scholastic and warner brothers.

Part Twenty-Five

August, 1977

TO M. M.
Keeper of my dungbombs among other things

I've got something in my teeth, if you were here I could make you tell me what it is (WITH YOUR TONGUE HAR HAR) but as it stands I just poke at it with my nails and pester James or I did before he said "Shut up shut up shut up you horrible man" and went to sleep. Actually I ought to be trying to sleep too only its impossible with this massive thing between my teeth, I am like the Princess and the Pea, only the Sirius and the Possibly A Bit of Dried Beef, or Then Again, Perhaps a Hair.

My point of course is a little analogy for your textbook: SIRIUS is to PRINCESS as TEETH is to _____? (The answer is MATTRESS by the way.) Do you even get to write bits of this fabled textbook or do you just monkey about making sure nobody has misspelled anything? Not that it
matters as I'm sure you'd enjoy either, that's just your twisted sense of fun at work. I miss your twisted sense of fun. I think you probably have some idea what I'm talking about. THAT'S RIGHT. I MEAN YOU.

I haven't been not thinking about you for awhile now, it's really quite pathetic. I don't want to talk about it anymore. Let's talk more about my dashing adventures. Actually I haven't exactly had any what you might call adventures, however yesterday we came across some extremely aggressive squirrels. I would tell you more but Dumbledore would have to kill me with his beard. No in all seriousness you know I would but I can't, I'm not even meant to be writing you at all actually.

Also the ground is damp, I have no clean things, and James is drooling in my hair, not necessarily the bedfellow I would have chosen in cramped circumstances and I'm sure he feels the same about me given his inane letters which unlike his more discreet tentmate he leaves festering all over the place. "I miss your splendiferous scent which is like beautiful honeyed azaleas blooming in a field of cinnamon buns" etc. etc.

Oh forget it I hate writing this stupid nonsense to you when honestly I just want you to be around. I'm too tired even to amuse you, soon you'll have to throw me off for a Prewett brother. By the way if you throw me off for someone and it isn't a Prewett brother I will punch you in the nose which is a difficult target to miss. If it is a Prewett brother I will not only understand but endeavor to follow your excellent example.

AZALEAS is to PRONGS as SOAP AND OLD BOOKS is to

padfoot

To: Sirius Black
Thankfully Not Cinnamon or Splendiferously Scented

I figure it's only fair, considering how I demand constant and illegal updates on your glamorous lifestyle writing by candlelight with foodstuffs hanging on a string from your teeth, that I in turn educate you in the fascinating details of the editorial process. I have been charged with proper care of commas and, should I be feeling particularly daring, I am also given full control of my clandestine lover, the semi-colon. But that appears only to happen Fridays, when everyone gets a little drunk on the weekend and on power, laughing hysterically and flinging punctuation about every which way.

By which I mean to say, my life is spectacularly boring without you in it to play the starring role, though I'm assuming that by this point you have already read the first paragraph aloud to your esteemed traveling companion and you have both promptly fallen asleep. Allow me to remedy the situation and tell you a little something I've learned about the delicate intestinal system of the magically enhanced aardvark.

Ha, ha. Just kidding, of course.

The way I consider the copy-editor position, or "Grand High Yet Still Somehow Subordinate Manager of Footly Bits" as you so cleverly renamed it, is as follows. (And please, if you mock this you shall burst the bubble of my zen, and I shall end my life curled in a foetal death-ball, tragically zen-less.) There are, by my count, approximately one thousand magnificently boring jobs in this world, both magical and muggle, without the completion of which there would in fact be no magically enhanced aardvarks or properly placed commas. No one would go mad with despair over this, yet I like to believe they would notice. (One morning, your layperson number one should arrive at the breakfast table and say to his or her spouse, layperson number two, 'You know, I wonder, are there magically enhanced aardvarks frolicking about or no?' and of course the latter would have no way of answering the question, no compendium to reference, at which point they should of course divorce one another and be miserable in separate countries like, for example, Istanbul and Mozambique. Or something along those lines.)

My point being: there are men made for gallivanting and poking the beef out of their gleaming white hero teeth as they plunge head-long into adventure, and then there are men who are in fact in charge of the universe's myriad footly bits, and no I did not mean that in a naughty way. You may now stop your lewd chuckle, it is not so attractive as you think. In any case, both types of men are equally important in their own ways, are they not, and I am resigned at present to being the latter kind, or a "footly bits" man, if you will, footling his way towards an unsung but grammatically pristine existence.

It does however cheer the cockles of my heart (once again not meaning what you think it does) greatly to

learn that the life of a hero is not all reckless charging and dangerous intrigue (for what other sort of intrigue is there, I ask you) but occasionally involves food stuck in our hero's teeth. This of course would drive me even more insane than reading the same five pages every day to discover once again that no one has implemented my vital copy-edits.

Yes, I am satisfied I have chosen the proper field, though I have been known to gallivant (in my way) with the best of them. I have even been known to enjoy it, though please don't tell one Monsieur Padfoot, since the knowledge would make him insufferable *and* smelly, and then I should have to leave him for Caradoc Dearborn.

Hopefully that is an acceptable choice and you would come to forgive me, in time, for the betrayal.

You've probably fallen asleep again. How to salvage this letter from your drool as you rest your weary head upon my fond pages, saying things like "Moony! Ruination! Old fool! I knew he should come to this abject mediocrity without my guidance in the fine art of being a hooligan! But no, Mr. Potter, he has fallen behind! We must keep to the code! &c. &c. Exclamation Mark!" Or, alternately, just snoring.

Which you do and of course I miss it and all that, though there was a time I actually put a sock inside your mouth and you snored on, monstrous undeterred.

Bugger this. I have nothing at all to say. What have you and James done today? I demand that you continue the saga of **Beef Or, Possibly, A Hair** as I must know the stunning conclusion or surely perish.

Yours &c.
M.M. of The Good Ship Honking Great Honknose

M. Moony, checker-up-on of my flat, I hope?

Your letter makes absolutely no sense, I use the term in the sense of none or zero. Perhaps you are so fixated on making sure to write in complete sentences that you have forgotten a little matter I like to call content, not that I am a master of this problematic issue myself but I at least have the excuse of the fate of the world being at stake, whereas since you are a professional writing type of person I would have thought you'd have a bit more of a handle on it, extremely disappointed in you really. I had to read it seven or eight times before I had the least sense of that bit about aardvarks, I presume this is what your book is on?

Also Istanbul is a city not a country you ridiculous young idiot. Really one month without school and its as if all that eddicashun never was, were, or shall to have been.

Footly bits. That is delightful. You are a master of footly bits, and really you do not deserve the abuse I heap upon your head like coals. It was a bug by the way, at least so I presume from the delicate gossamer wing I extracted after much rooting about.

Today James and I did what we are doing. I do wish you would stop asking that in every single bloody letter when you know I can't answer you. I can tell you some things we did not do:

1. eat peppermints
2. construct an igloo
3. masquerade as a Bulgarian duke and duchess
4. form a harmonizing folk-musical duo and go on tour
5. go for five minutes at a time without somebody bringing up Lily Bloody Shut Up Evans
6. keep ourselves from making snide remarks about dominant females and the unsavory fates of the men who love them
7. manfully refrain from punching each other in the solar plexus.

No wonder we are entrusted with this extremely sensitive and important mission, obviously we are incredibly reliable mature and responsible etc. Hopefully they will give up on us soon and we can go home. At this point I think even James will welcome with open arms the desk that awaits him, and as for me the striped apron of a Fortescue's employee glows in my dreams like a sparkly emblem of nirvana, or something. I miss you rather a lot actually. Pads.

J.

I do wish you would send me an actual letter, since I know that last one was meant at least as much for Sirius as for me. Honestly, the "shining waterfall of coppery ringlets" aside, you might as well have addressed it to him. I hope it irritated him as much as you hoped it would. He is so dreadfully predictable, poor dear.

London is much as it ever was, which is to say it is raining and today I was nearly run down by a cab. My work isn't bad -- only it is tiring. I don't know how it can be, since I do so little -- only answering the Floo

really, taking down dictations and composing the occasional form letter, I'm not permitted to do any actual Healing of course -- but I get home and can do nothing but lie in bed with my arms thrown over my face.

(Alone in bed. All dreadfully alone, with my clothes all in disarray and my buttons undone and hair cascading across the sheets in a waterfall of coppery ringlets, of course.)

I'll be so glad when Minerva places me with one of the active units so I can actually do some useful work. I see the injured being brought in every day. Some of the wounds are completely horrifying, and it's understaffing as much as anything else that has caused the uptick in fatalities. I've practically begged them to let me get my hands on a wand, but they won't. The most I've been allowed to do is talk to some poor sobbing Muggles and get them to calm down a bit so some hulking man with jowls can interrogate them about the deaths of their parents or destruction of their homes. On second thought, perhaps it is rather understandable how tired I am.

If you let yourself get the least bit hurt I will unhesitatingly strangle you with my bare hands, having not technically taken the Hippocratic Oath yet.

I think of you most of the time, both when my shirt is buttoned and when it is not.

All my love (and I mean it)
L.

M. Padfoot

You left a sandwich in your flat before you left. It was half eaten. When I arrived to make sure the plants were not dead—I bought plants and hope you don't mind, or kill them when you return, either; I named them Rupert Brooke and Sylvia Plath—I discovered a new plant, which you have somehow managed to breed from a complicated substratum of cheese, another kind of cheese, a third kind of cheese, four (I think) distinct layers of meat, and the first kind of cheese again, followed by a tomato (this is only a wild guess) and then as far as I can tell a nest made entirely out of bacon. It has grown its very own forest, colonized by sandwich pixies. I hope you're happy. I'm throwing it out, I don't care how the pixies beg.

My book is not on aardvarks. I told you what it's on, it's a new edition of Magical Creatures: A Complete Encyclopedic Compendium, and if I make sense none or zero it is because no one will implement my

aardvark changes.

A funny thing happened last night, and by "funny thing" I mean "tragicomedy of the highest order," and by "tragicomedy of the highest order" I mean "one of my fellow editors asked me if I would like to get some dinner after I finished beating my head with the section on aardvarks." As well you already know, my stock answer is 'yes' at all times, and so I only realized much later, after the aardvarkian daze had cleared, that I had just agreed to accompany her to a restaurant in a sort of datelike fashion where food would be bought and consumed, conversation would be made, and she would no doubt realize halfway through how large my nose really is and run screaming in terror for the hills. I couldn't exactly get out of it, either, as I'd already said yes, and saying no is impossible, as we proved that one time with the prefect's bathroom. And by "one time" I mean "seven."

Anyway I thought I should tell you because I really didn't mean it and no footling went on, even when I panicked and threw quiche in her face.

I'm sorry I keep asking. I shouldn't keep asking. I know this is important business you're on and we're adults now, it's not Guess Which Seat The Dungbomb's Underneath.

As I was helping the poor girl clean quiche out of her nose and hair and suchforth I realized how much I wished it were you there, covered in quiche, in the middle of the restaurant, staring at me in horror. I know this seems ridiculous, especially as we both know I can never resist quiche. You'd never let me live it down.

Doesn't it feel odd to be writing? It does. It feels odd to be writing. I don't know why. We are epistolary geniuses, as we have proved many a time before. And I've always preferred writing, especially since lately I open my mouth and you close it with your mouth and then we don't really talk much at all. I just hope you're staying safe, keeping your socks clean, all those delightful sundries, and thinking about me as someone other than your maiden aunt who inquires as to the state of your footwear rather than how occasionally I have dreams. That dream. You know the one.

Basically this: I wish you were around so I could throw quiche on you.

Yours and all that, Moony

DEAREST LILYBEAN,

You are driving me insane stop I think about you day and night stop I love myself, I want you to love me stop all dreadfully alone with your clothes in disarray and your buttons undone and your hair cascading EXPLOSIVE AMOUNTS OF PUNCTUATION don't ever stop my pudding stop I added that one in there for himself you know how he gets when I call you all those adjectives

Scrumptious
Delectable
Irresistible
Pudding-like in the tasty way not in texture I assure you
Both creamy and dreamy

I recognize now that I should have some lunch!

This letter is a letter without any substance in it, which I think you've already noticed, being so clever and discerning and other things, such as unbuttoned. Lately Sirius and I do things we cannot under penalty of beard death—don't ask—talk about, but I'm sure you can guess considering what you've seen there whilst diligently not doing your desk-work.

I'm fine, look, I am writing with my usual unflagging good cheer and not, I assure you, because of that thing we talked about Very Seriously wherein I promised never again to become "ebullient" and "avoidant" and all the other ents in the forest whenever topics become serious and I say hideously inappropriate things that embarrass you in front of your parentals.

You should think of me more with an unbuttoned shirt and provide pictures. I promise I won't give them to Sirius unless he gives me a unicorn. But then I will give the unicorn to you, my darling, and you'll forgive me in time. No one can resist a unicorn, it is a horse with a big white horn, how about THAT eh?

Lily I love you full stop

J

Moony (you don't get a Monsieur, I'm too grateful to make you French)

THANK YOU FOR SAYING HOW THIS IS WEIRD. This is so very very weird. I thought it was just me and everything in my existence is a bit peculiar, you know, since we haven't slept or eaten or done anything properly really since we left, and I thought Don't be ridiculous Sirius, you are only a bit lightheaded and delirious, this is all perfectly normal because it's Moony and how many times have you written fatuous letters to Moony, dozens, hundreds, thousands? But it was weird all the same! and then I thought, well, perhaps we've forgotten how to actually talk to each other, as you say, because of all the Well You Know that happens whenever we try. Which was perfectly terrifying because you know that talking to you (or talking at you I suppose) is one of my favorite things in the world, second only to daydreaming of Minerva McGonagall, and to sand.

So anyway it's an awful relief to hear that I am not the only one who is rather unnerved. I suppose we will get over it? Or if we don't, I will just have to get home as quickly as possible so I can do things to your mouth that aren't talking. (YES.) Does it ever strike you that we are in an extremely odd situation? Not that I don't like it, because I do as I think I've made pretty clear, but it is odd and not normal. I don't know if I want to tell everybody, I mean grabbing strangers by their collars and painting big words in the sky and that, or shut it in a corner and never tell anybody. That's not fair to tell you but it's not really fair to not tell you I guess. Oh agh this is far too thoughtful a paragraph for me, blame it on the sobering influence of the woods if you like.

I TELL YOU ONE PERSON WHO OUGHT TO KNOW THOUGH, THIS QUICHE-COVERED TROLLOP OF YOURS. WHAT DO YOU MEAN YOU COULDN'T SAY NO. A TWO YEAR OLD CAN SAY NO. AND DOES. Do you mean that all this slobbery nonsense of the past few months is merely a result of the fact that you have no standards?? I feel so betrayed.

You could even have said "I am ill," or "I am busy," or "I don't own any trousers." Anything would do! I absolutely cannot believe you. Did she try to kiss you? Did you let her? I bet you did, she was all quichey and you CANNOT RESIST QUICHE. You are abominable and should be chaperoned at all times.

You know what though it isn't even that I mind, I think you ought to go and spill things on people as much as possible if only to eliminate the pool of those who like you so you will come to need me more. But I do wish I could have seen it and taken pictures.

Evidently I should be a Herbologist. Have you tested my sandwich for medicinal properties?

Here's something I can tell you. We're meant to be looking for something, so we've been doing a lot of anti-cloaking work, finding traces of hiding spells and similar, and the other day James's (NOT MY) revelation

ritual went awry and left us both transparent. We couldn't fix it for half a day so we were hopping about, panicking, our viscera jiggling about in the open for anyone to goggle at. I can still see my kidneys dimly through my abdomen. IF THAT DOESN'T GET YOU ALL STEAMY I DON'T KNOW WHAT WILL.

You know what I miss, my motorbike, HAVE YOU CHECKED ON MY MOTORBIKE I know Kingsley is a very dependable young man but I worry all the time, poor thing all alone and trembly in the dark without me please just go and stroke it and tell it it is loved. You can be bereft together, the two of you.

You can throw quiche on me any time.

together in a great strangeness,
Pads.

J.

You ranting lunatic, I hate it when I really, really want to kiss you and you're not here.

Don't ever stop being ebullient, please don't. In fact I insist upon your continued ebullience under all reasonable circumstances.

I've been to see Remus a few times -- I didn't know how much I could tell him, but I thought he'd want to know you were all right, so I've tried to obliquely communicate my access to Private Sources. You know how he is, though: the very definition of a stiff upper lip. I say things like "Don't worry about them," and he says, "Oh, er, no, of course," and gives me that wobbly smile of his. He's not eating properly, though. I spoke to Peter several times as well, but I don't think he's comfortable with me when you're not about to protect him. Something about me suggests dirty intentions, I suppose.

I've actually got to run. I'm so sorry this is such an inadequate letter, but I include two pictures, with the caveat that if we ever have a child, you are required to burn them, for reasons that should be obvious unless we want the poor thing to grow up with a complex. (Before you ask, I took them myself, and a painstaking operation it was, too, but Remus refused to get involved.) I feel sort of deliciously War Bride-y -- without the Bride, I mean. Oh dear, that didn't come out right. "War Mistress." I'm not trying to express any discontent with the situation -- the Mistress situation, I mean, of course I’m discontented with the War one. Bother! Well, you probably know what I mean, as usual.

I love you, in defiance of common sense. Come back as soon as you can, please.

L.





Padfoot, c/o “the wild”

I’m not really sure how to reply to your letter since it runs all over the place like the pixies, and shall I mention hideous diseases, from your sandwich rainforest. (I took a picture, by the way, as knowing you it would make you so very depressed not to be able to see the fruit of your looms. Your poisonous children, as

it were. I have named all the pixies, as well as all the diseases, only I believe I got them mixed up seeing as how there is a pixie who answers to “Salmonella” and an airborne virus who hops to whenever I say the name “Bob.”)

Her name was Amelia and she seemed very nice, even covered in quiche. Despite all the pastry upon her person she still endeavored to kiss me—and I tell you this because apparently I have decided to make you wildly jealous, yet remain incapable of hiding my motives from you; it seems too cruel—and as her face bore down upon mine I let out a strangled cry of “TULIPS!”

“What?” Amelia inquired, having been thoroughly distracted by my deranged outburst. (And so you see my plan was successful after all.)

“OXFORD,” I added. “MONKEYWRENCH. AARDVARK. CHECK PLEASE.”

Then, I promptly paid for my quiche as well as for hers—being a gentleman and a quiche destroyer both—and fled the scene. I’m very glad we have never gone on a “date” together. Which is a funny detail that hadn’t crossed my mind until now.

Except, of course, that is a terrible lie.

In any case, I thought you should know all the sordid details of my ignominy in order to judge me and despise me at will. Amelia has since refused to work with me on aardvarks, which means I continue to struggle on with my footly bits all alone. That sentence came out differently that I imagined it would. Please don’t share it with Prongs, though I know of course you will not, considering all the implications.

As to your other thing: well. I don’t know, Sirius, I don’t. Does it really need to be flung about all over the place, skywriting, clowns, cakes, announcements, parades? If you grabbed strangers and told them about how you and Moony and footly bits and the sandwich rainforests, you would be committed to an asylum, to Azkaban perhaps, for being a danger to society, and then there should be no footly bits at all in your future. I would naturally throw quiche on Caradoc Dearborn in my desperation and loneliness.

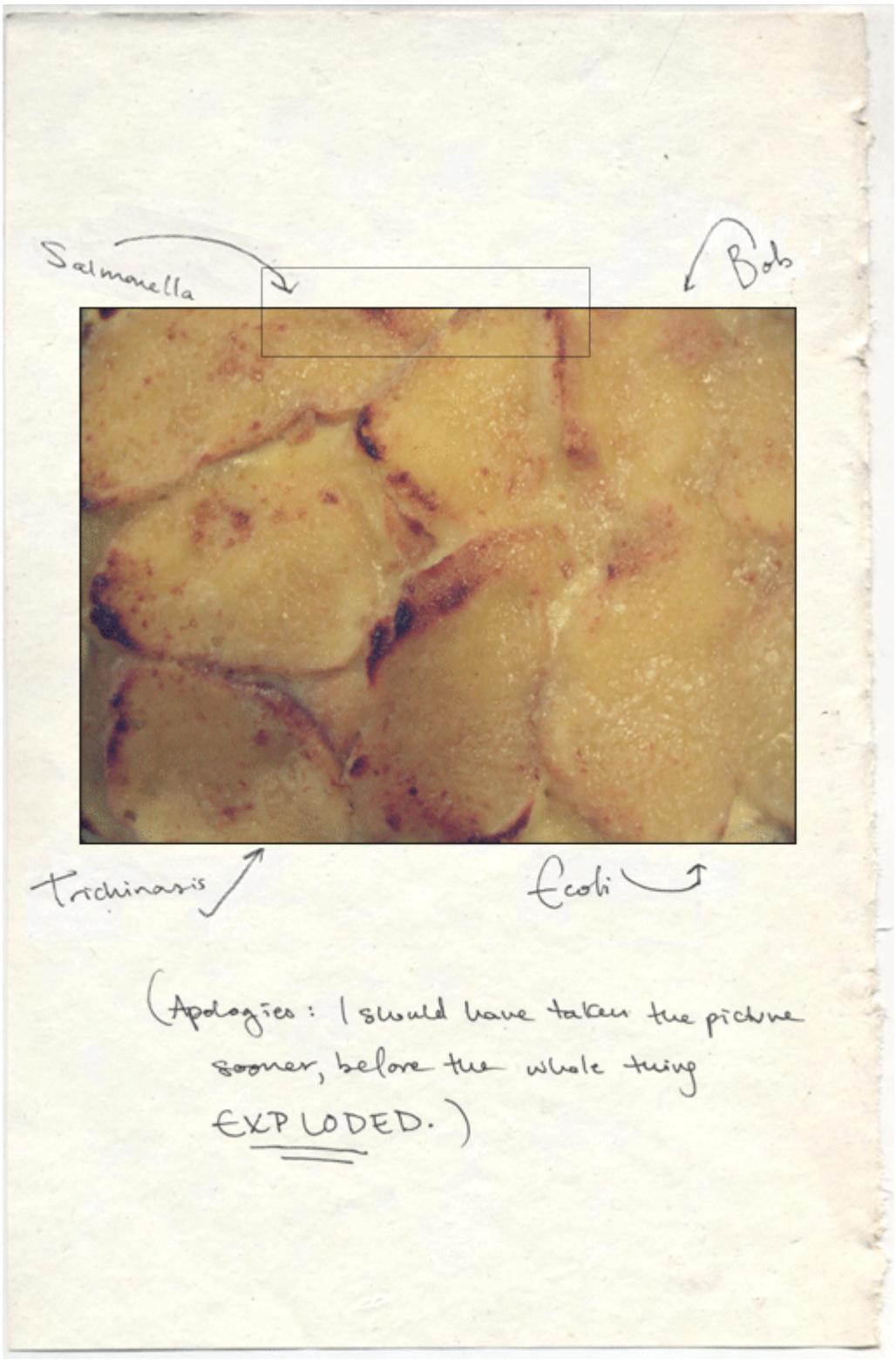
Only now and then, don’t you think—don’t you wonder—that if it didn’t matter, skywriting or not skywriting—that would be very nice? That made no sense at all. I’m an editor, not a writer, and this is very blatantly why. Forget it all; it’s not important. I hope you’re safe and no longer see-through and that I shall be able to see (through) you soon. Just remember: we don’t have to, you know. We don’t have to tell anyone. Anything. When in conversation would it come up, that’s what I want to know. It would be like when James and Lily first came together with all the fireworks and the rejoicing in the streets and the improperly quoted Byron and

the never being apart even when they went to the toilets. It would be like that horrible time of which we do not ever speak except with bowed head and signs against the devil, that time when you'd say "Good morning, James" and James would say "Do you know who else uses the word 'good?' My girlfriend!" Or you would come to dinner and say, "Is that a new jumper, James," and James would say "Do you know who else wears the occasional jumper? My girlfriend!" And so on and so forth, including, I believe, the sentence "Do you know who else has hands? My girlfriend!" at which point I think I threw a book at his head. The poor book. I'll never be so cruel to literature again.

Anyway, I know it's hard and you've never kept secrets from James before, but it's just us, that's all. I don't really know. Tulips?

Your Monsieur Footly Bits

P.S. Yes, I tried to check on your motorbike, and it tried to run me over, and my trousers are ruined, as is my favorite not-already-ruined shirt. It hates me. What have you been telling it? Because I didn't really mean that thing I said that time. About the junkyard. Or I did but not very seriously.



(Apologies: I should have taken the picture sooner, before the whole thing EXPLODED.)

Lily “The Legs” Evans

You should take this show on the road that’s what. And then when we walk down the streets men will stop and stare and say Isn’t that Lily “The Legs” Evans from Busty and Bewitched, the centerfold what ruined me for all other women in the world, and then other men would say Why yes it is and there’s no other woman in the world for me, so busty and bewitched is Lily “The Legs.” And then I would break all their noses and carry you away whereupon I would ravish you in our boudoir of leggy love.

You know funny thing about Remus, I have a picture of him where it looks like his lower lip is launching a mounted attack against the upper one. Mysterious man that Remus Lupin. Tell him and Pete we are all in excellent form, except of course that we are BESEIGED BY BUGS, and so long as the mosquito lives in this world ours is a life plagued by injustice and scratching inappropriately in public. So in other words Ha Ha What Else Is New.

Lily, speaking of pictures, these pictures will never be burnt. You are the loveliest female-shaped person on the planet and in the future when you have born children and you complain of all the imperfections which I of course will be completely blind to I shall take out these photographs and hand them to you with a flourish and then we shall have more INCREDIBLE SEX. Old person sex but SEX nonetheless. It’ll be a good day, then. You’ll see. And do I know how to sweet-talk a woman or what?!

I turned myself transparent the other day. I asked Sirius if he could see your name written upon the ventricles of my heart and he hit me with a large piece of firewood. Then he spent the rest of the day as we slowly regained our opaque…hood with an oven mitt in front of his chest, though where he got that oven mitt I have no idea.

Love is the defiance of common sense, commonly, and et cetty rah. Feeling’s mutual. Legs, PHWOAR, have I mentioned?

Yours daily and nightly and ever so rightly, James Potter

Pumpkin stuffing*,

Children?! Good God Moony you know I am very young and irresponsible to be suddenly saddled with offspring, not to mention delinquent blue offspring, and right after you tell me that some--some editor is competing with me for your affections. The strain is considerable. A lesser man would cry aloud.

You know also they might not be poisonous. Perhaps the viruses are benign and the pixies are friendly little shoemaking creatures who only wish to lead you to their pots of fairy gold. You seem positively determined to see the worst in me.

We have never been on a date because the concept is repulsive, as it appears you have learned to your sorrow. However if you wish to be spirited off to some romantic countryside retreat where a man with a creative moustache plays you Italian love songs upon a violin, I exist merely to serve your whims and fancies. "Ah, my darling Footly," I will say to you as we row about in our quaint little wooden boat through a pond abloom with floating lilypads**, "you are like a red, red rose that walks in beauty like the night of a summer's day, but more temperate." (Or something equally romantic.) Is that what you want from me?

I know. About the thing. Of course I wish it didn't matter, and it's one of those things where if you convince yourself it doesn't matter, and act like it doesn't matter, the rest of the universe will play along for fear of embarrassing itself. Only I can't do that because it does matter, of course--I mean that the thing matters, the you and me thing, not that whether we talk about it matters. You know. Oh, I only get less and less helpful the more I bring it up, I never will again.

You should know that I cried with laughter at your reaction to poor Quiche Tart's attempts to molest you. As a previous offender myself, I take some delight in seeing my fellows fail. (I note that you did not yell "BLUEBERRY! PIGLET! CHECK PLEASE!" when I called you rocks on the platform that time.) The only problem here of course is that she is sure to find you even more irresistible in your strangeness than she did before, only now she thinks you don't like her, which only fuels the fire. I ought to know.

I expect we'll be sent home in disgrace a few days after you receive this, having been entirely unsuccessful in everything we ever set out to do. My hair is too long. I have actually had to resort to yanking it back in an extremely womanly fashion and securing it with a piece of vine to keep it out of my sweat and eyeballs. It's disgusting. Or perhaps very manly in the model of the Last of the Mohicans? Unlikely.

soon soon soon don't go anywhere
Pads

*James and I are in a competition to see who can come up with the most nauseating nickname, only he doesn't know it or at least for him it is a competition of one.

**This word suddenly suggests disturbing, yet not altogether unpleasant, ideas -- pleasant because of how miserable it would make You Know Who, not because of any aspiration on my part. My affection could never be swayed by a mere woman. UNLIKE SOME PEOPLE.

 **shoebox_project**(http://www.livejournal.com/community/shoebox_project)

Cowritten by  **dorkorific** and  **ladyjaida**.

 **dorkorific** specializes in **Sirius**;  **ladyjaida** specializes in **Remus**.

 **dorkorific** is **Mlle. Artiste**;  **ladyjaida** is **Mlle. Bits-n-bats**.

The handwriting of Remus J. Lupin, Severus Snape and James Potter is done by  **ladyjaida**.

The handwriting of Sirius Black, Peter Pettigrew and Lily Evans is done by  **dorkorific**.
Don't worry; Peter won't be stupidified. **Trust us** on that one.

We would like to take a moment to thank  **windjinn** for leaping down the stairs with  **ladyjaida**'s bra on his head.

all characters herein are the intellectual property of j.k. rowling, scholastic and warner brothers.

Part Twenty-Five B: August 1977

*

It's not that Sirius minds the outdoors. Sirius actually quite enjoys the outdoors. He likes the smell of decaying woody things, the bright clarity of the air, the echo of small animal sounds and leaves shifting and it's all very pleasant, under normal circumstances. But the circumstances aren't normal, and today the woods are making him antsy. "I don't like it," he says again. He has said "I don't like it" at least seven thousand times since this morning, but he can't seem to stop himself. The forest here is odd. The echoes are strange, like they're bouncing off a boundary that isn't there. He doesn't like it! James should know!

"I know," says James.

"I'm right about this," Sirius says. "Don't you think I'm right about this?"

"I think you're tired," says James. "In fact I know you're tired, because you were flopping all over the tent like an eel for most of the night. I think you're half-delirious and I think I want to slap you. I think a lot of things."

"You did slap me," Sirius points out.

"Oh yes," James agrees. "That's right. I did. It felt so good I may have to do it again."

Sirius frowns and scratches at his eight hundredth mosquito bite. Apparently he is a very tasty mosquito delicacy. "Do you think I'm a very tasty mosquito delicacy?" he asks.

"Slapped Sirius," James says. "It sounds French. Doesn't it sound French?"

"Fine," says Sirius, not really paying attention. He still doesn't like it, whatever *it* is, floating and mysterious, coming hither and thither unbidden, suspiciously like the common mosquito and making Sirius even more edgy than usual. Of course, it's possible it's only the mosquito bites that are bothering him, the occasional warning drone in his ear. Who wouldn't be hopping up and down when one is half naked in the forest, like a giant buffet table for the bugs?
The mosquitoes have probably set up signs all throughout the forest, neon signs that read *Sirius Black! Extra Raw & Juicy for Your Enjoyment.*

That isn't it.

"I have an excellent sense of dangerous," Sirius hisses. "Fine-tuned antennae for it, if you will. I have Filch to thank for it. Plus, I *smell* something. I *smell* something not right."

"That was our breakfast," James says sadly. "This should be a lesson to us never to eat anything you find under a—"

Sirius tackles him. He's not quite sure, for a moment, why he did it; but no, James is annoying, probably Sirius did this in order to belt him round the head. James isn't fighting back, and that's unusual, and then Sirius feels heat on his back--is it heat? Maybe it's just a strong pressure, like leaning his shoulders against a rope? and then it doesn't matter what it is just that it *hurts*, pain so strong it is twisting, flaring, alive. Bright streaks slam across his vision. He makes a noise.

James, under his body, says "Fucking! Fuck!" His hands are on Sirius's shoulders, trying to push him off. Sirius wills himself heavier, just to be annoying.

God, his back hurts! His back really fucking hurts! Sirius hates himself. He should be working through the pain, like any competent person. Is he delirious or something? When was the last time they ate? He gets low blood sugar, this is Remus's theory on why he spends so much his time not making sense or falling asleep. Remus has a crooked sort of mouth, a mouth that always goes two ways at once, a mouth that seems always surprised by itself, as if it's constantly trying to thwart its own intentions. *For Christ's sake!*

"You stupid ass!" says James. His breathing is harsh, uneven. "What did you do?" Something whistles past them. A tree is on fire.

"*I* didn't," says Sirius indignantly, and then a powerful shove on James's part sends him sprawling into the leaves and hot white pain splinters into him again. "Fuck! Don't!" he says, or thinks he says.

James is gabbling something, *Sorry sorry Sirius are you hurt you're hurt oh Jesus you're bleeding,* James you idiot will you look out because something is happening and you need to pay attention, are you paying attention? James has his wand in his hand. That's good. That's a step in the right direction. He's muttering something, sketching letters in the air. There's a good sound, a clear, blue sound: a shield. It would have been easier with the two of them working together, Sirius thinks regretfully.

"I told you," Sirius says, through the fog in his head. "I told you I didn't like it! You never listen." He tries to reach for his wand, stuck into his waistband, biting his lip so hard as the raw skin on his shoulderblades scrapes the ground. Manly! he thinks insanely. Tough!

He swats at James's ankle and James, who when it's important doesn't need to be told anything, pulls him to his feet. He doesn't ask if Sirius is all right and Sirius is so grateful for this he could kiss James on the mouth.

"I could kiss you on the mouth," says Sirius. "Ow."

"Okay," says James. His fingers are tight on Sirius's arm: and it's that fierce contained contact that focuses Sirius at last, narrows pain and confusion and hunger and sleeplessness into a tight, fiery point, something to be set aside and dealt with later.

James is looking at him, pale, his astigmatic eyes huge, his hair ridiculous. Sirius nods tightly. James says, "Right then."

There are no more spells coming at them, only the trees burning and the ringing in Sirius's ears. Maybe they just triggered a defense system, something automatic and short-lived. Maybe they could--

But no, there's a smell coming. The dog knows how to read a smell: it's dry, like fingernails or hair, and yet it's somehow also a wet smell, a putrid smell. It makes the hairs on Sirius's neck stand up.

"*Fuck*," says James, with real feeling.

The pain between Sirius's shoulders almost itches; the hairs on the back of his neck prickle. His senses are sharp, fine points, focused in the muggy forest air. What's funny is how often people curse but don't mean it properly. It makes the moments when cursing really means something, when 'fuck' really means 'Sirius is bleeding and James is frightened and there's a smell like acid and matches and sulfur and dying in the air,' seem smaller, like the trivial adventures of an ant circus. That's a strange thought to think, especially strange at a time like this, but no stranger really than the curious nature of Remus Lupin's mouth.

There are shadows moving beyond James's protective seal. They catch moments of light as it filters down from the canopy of leaves above, speckled, dappled, poetical light, but they're no more than cruel shadows, creeping and menacing and closing in. Those shadows are real people, real people who want to kill them. Sirius thinks he can see one of them smile, a lean, hollow smile beneath the hood of its cloak.

Dying happens to other people, or so Sirius always assumed. It's tragic and when it happens to the people you love you feel scooped out like—Sirius's mind stumbles—like a melon. And you hate it, you fight against it, sometimes you cry, but it isn't you. Dying happens to other people and Sirius has no idea what it means if dying happens to *him*.

James's hand clutches hard at Sirius's elbow. Sirius is glad it isn't clutching so hard at his back, though the sting is nearly gone now as a curious numbness seeps in. Sirius can barely feel his own thoughts anymore. He finds James's hand and grasps it briefly, probably a little too hard. Then, he draws his wand.

"I didn't say goodbye to anyone," James says. "I didn't, I mean, I just never—I know people are dying. But I didn't think."

"I know," Sirius says.

"Lily told me to be *careful*," James says. “She’s going to kill me.”

"I know." Sirius wonders what Remus will do, a silly, fickle wondering. Will Remus sit down or will he stand up or will he even cry? Sirius has never actually seen Remus cry. He probably doesn't have the ability to make tears happen with his eyes. Sirius doesn't want Remus to cry, anyway, except he does. Except he doesn't. There are all sorts of things he should say now, heroic statements with James, last stands, that sort of thing, words men and women will teach to their children and say 'That, my sons and daughters, that was the last thing Sirius Black and James Potter ever spoke before they died and became heroes of the people, before we built those seventy seven statues to them and in their honor, the poses they struck, their chiseled chins!' but the thought isn't funny because they haven’t even had time to do anything heroic yet. Sirius feels cold.

"Right," James says, stepping forward. James Potter, Sirius Black's best friend in the world, is the bravest person in the universe, and it’s horrible. "Are you ready? We'll, we'll throw down the barrier, and then—we'll have to distract them, just to get the warning out to Dumbledore—"

"Right," Sirius echoes. "On, uhm. On three."

"One," James says. "Two—"

"Get down!" The voice tears through to them, booming and surreal, slicing into the dirty, hot stench in the air; the shadows whip around to face it, and so does James, and Sirius grabs him. They hit the ground. Light, light everywhere. Sirius's back hurts again, he can barely see for how much it hurts. Someone grabs his wrist and pulls him up, pulls James up.

"Get out of here," Caradoc Dearborn hisses. They're face to face and Sirius can see the whites of his eyes, his singed eyelashes. There are other people behind him, moving fast; Sirius doesn’t recognize them, though maybe he would if they would just stop moving. If everyone could just stand *still* for ten seconds, please.

"Don’t Apparate. Run as fast as you can, due west. Go."

"We can do something," James protests breathlessly. "We can, you need us—"

"This *isn’t the time*," Caradoc says. Something in his eyes makes Sirius want to throw up.

Sirius grabs James by the arm and runs. James is yelling something, Sirius can’t hear it, blood in his ears and hurting and rage deafening him --

“--the other way!” James yells, twisting out of his grasp and seizing his shoulders. “West! *Other* west!”

“Oh,” says Sirius, “right,” and they wheel around.

*

They don't die. It's almost embarrassing, which is probably the wrong reaction to have. Sirius should be relieved, should be grateful; he should be promising all his ancestors that he'll never steal cake again, but all he can manage to think of is how mortifying it is not to die and to have been so certain. To have been so young.

At St. Mungo's, a nurse Sirius fondly calls the H.M.S. Greta puts all sorts of foul-smelling cream on Sirius's back, and then he can go home.

When he leaves the hospital room, still gingerly buttoning his shirt -- it's a long, long process -- James is leaning against the wall, hands in his pockets. He's wearing new glasses. They're rather…square.

"Nice glasses, you wonk," says Sirius. "Did you get a line-of-duty discount?"

"About that kiss," says James, with a twisted sort of smile.

"Sorry, mate, that was a special one-time offer," Sirius says, wincing as the cloth grazes a bad spot. His back feels better -- a little -- but it smells like charcoal and motor oil and, bizarrely, tuna, and the smell makes him remember hurting, which is almost as bad as when it actually did. "Only at the moment of death. Or if you get me a bit liquored up first."

James opens his mouth. His face, Sirius notes in alarm, has come over all sincere and brow-wrinkly. Sirius flinches away from him. "Don't," he says, waving James away. "You're welcome. You know. Just – it

happens. Well, hopefully it doesn't happen that often. But you know what I mean."

He's relieved, he thinks. Alive and well enough to be embarrassed. He should be grateful, but he doesn't know what to think. James looks away. They're quiet for a moment.

“Give us a lift home, then," Sirius prompts. Why is everything always so strange? You finally get a handle on things, you say to yourself firmly *Let's not do that ever again, thank you, it was not worth our time,* and then all of a sudden there are whole new ways to do *that* that never occurred to you before. It's hopeless.

James says, "I don't have any money. But I'll walk you."

Sirius says, "All right. Fine. I save your life, and you can't spot me a fiver to sit down in a cab for fifteen minutes."

James looks straight through him and pushes his glasses up the bridge of his nose, both done the same way he's done since they were eleven. "I don't care if you make this a joke," he says quietly. "I mean, you should, since you can. But it isn't a joke to me, all right?"

"You are much, much less fun since you grew up," says Sirius. His head aches. Everything aches. "Tell you what. Let's go downstairs, I'll throw myself in front of a bus and you can grab my arm. Then hooray, I'm saved, Sirius Black lives to brighten the universe another day, we'll be even, and it'll be funny for everybody."

James considers a moment. Then he says, "Fine."

"Fine," says Sirius.

James shakes himself like a wet dog, like he could shake off everything that's happened to them -- not only now but always. He says, "Good," and slings an arm around Sirius's shoulders. Sirius howls in exaggerated agony, James manages a little coughing laugh, and it's a little better.

Next time, Sirius thinks vaguely, we'll do this whole dying thing properly.

*

Remus,

I wanted to tell you that Sirius came through the hospital today. Don't worry, he's all right -- at least, he'll be all right until I get my hands on him. Dumbledore says James is back and isn't hurt but he hasn't come home. They're being debriefed now, apparently. D. informs me that they were involved in "reconnaissance" and that they "stumbled" on an "unexpected number" of Death Eaters, and were then plucked out of danger by Caradoc Dearborn, who's been watching them for all these months -- apparently this was a practice run.

I'm so furious I can barely hold a pen. I'm sure this is mostly their own fault. You know how they are, and they feed off each other. God, I could kill them. Anyway, I wanted you to have the facts, at least those I could gather, so you wouldn't worry, not that you would ever admit that you do. I'm dropping a note to Peter as well. I'll take care of James, but I expect you to put the fear of God into S. as soon as you see him. All right? All right.

Lily

*

"I said ham and cheese," says Susan-the-assistant, giving Peter an impatient look. "This doesn't have cheese. I mean, it's only two ingredients, Pete."

"Right," says Peter, casting a longing glance at the clock. "Well. Sorry."

"I don't mean to hurt your feelings," says Susan. "It's only, you know, if I knew you'd get it wrong, I'd've gotten my own sandwich."

Peter's getting the sneaking suspicion that his brain automatically switches around Susan-the-assistant's order out of spite, or perhaps out of stupidity. Maybe it's just that Susan-the-assistant has actually been put on this earth to make him dread lunch hour. "Sorry," Peter says again. That usually helps, saying sorry a lot and acting like an idiot. "I must've given someone else the ham and cheese. I know I ordered it."

"Mm," says Susan. She gives him the look that means, 'You're here because your father is my boss,' and then goes back to picking at her sandwich. "And there's mustard," she says. "I hate mustard."

Peter wishes James were around. Back at school, when the Susans and Jerry-the-tailors and Magda-the-

counter-girls of the world were making Peter feel stupid, there was always James, who would say something like "Mustard never killed a man" or "No one needs cheese that badly," and they would go away. Peter could never duplicate exactly the kind of things he'd say, and even if he could, the effect was all in the tone.

"Sorry," he says.

"It's all right," says Susan. "I said it's all right. It's just, you know, don't offer, if you can't do it properly. All right, I've got to count up for yesterday."

Peter waits. Susan lifts her eyebrows at him.

"That means you can *go*," she says.

"Right," says Peter.

He hates working. He hates being away from school. Lily came to see him the other day, which made him very uncomfortable but also sort of glad, since she wouldn't have come unless James had asked her to; it's obvious she doesn't like him, and they have nothing to talk about, except James, and whatever she knows she won't tell him.

As for Remus, he is a fortress of solitude.

Being on his own feels strange and wrong somehow, more strange and more wrong than taking inseams, which is what his father said he'd be doing but does not, in fact, trust him to do. And why should he, Peter thinks, when he can't actually bring back the right lunch for everyone. Cheese! Mustard! Inseams! It's all so ridiculous, but Peter can't be caught by Magda-the-counter-girl while hiding in the closet again -- or by anyone else, for that matter.

Peter hates being alone. Being alone reminds him of what it's like not being alone, which is worse, sometimes, than loneliness. Being alone reminds him that what he does when he *isn't* alone is in fact just watch all his friends say funny things -- like "Mustard never killed a man," for example -- while he laughs and contributes nothing.

Peter closes the door behind him.

"Mustard never killed *anyone*," he mutters, but of course it's too late, and not as funny as if James had said it. James would have said something else, probably. Sirius would have put a napkin in the sandwich and hid

under the counter to watch the sparks fly. Remus would have brought the right sandwich.

*

"You're going to kill me," James says. He leans against the door of their little flat. There is no part of him that wants to talk about anything. All he wants to do is put his head in Lily's lap and feel her fingers, soothing in his hair.

His head is spinning. It's worse than in the woods. There's the terror of what she'll do to him, because she's most dangerous when she's like this, all white and still and completely without expression; and, worse, the terror of what she won't do. What if she doesn't say anything, doesn't punch him, doesn't put her arms around him, doesn't yell or cry or do any of the things he imagined? What if she just gets up and walks into the bedroom and closes the door? And then, under that fear, he feels relief so immense it almost chokes him. Home. He's *home*. It's strange to think of this crowded little place, which smells so strongly of nothing except paint, as anything so important.

"I've been considering it," Lily says evenly. She's sitting in a tiny circle of light in the far corner of the dark room, her feet curled under her. James realizes that she's clasping her hands together because they're shaking, are still shaking even though the knuckles are white from holding on. No, this is worse; this is the worst.

"I'm sorry," James says. "I was stupid, God, I was really stupid and I'm so sorry, Lil." The doorknob is digging into his back. The alternative here would be to move towards her, but he feels strongly that this is an extremely not good idea.

"Tell me what happened," she says, "and—" A weirdly comforting pinkness begins to kindle in her cheeks and the tips of her ears. "And if you leave anything out, one single thing, I will -- I will do something extremely rash. I don't care what Dumbledore said he'd do to you. I don't care. You're going to tell me what you were doing there and what idiotic thing you did wrong, and I know it was something, because they rushed Sirius past my desk on a stretcher. That's how I had to find out. And he had the nerve -- he *waved* at me! Which is also your fault, because you encouraged him when he was young and now he's grown up *completely impossible.* So you're going to stand right there and talk until I know exactly what happened."

James always thought the expression "eyes blazing" was stupid and, if you thought about it too much, grisly, until one day Lily Evans got angry at him and he suddenly understood.

"Can I sit down?" he asks, carefully.

"No," says Lily.

"But I'm tired," says James.

"You're in trouble," says Lily. "You can hold on to the door frame if you like. Now talk."

The fact that Lily is in love with him, the fact that she is so completely magnificent and is sitting in front of him with her legs folded, white and shaking and furious because James might have gotten hurt, is amazing. He is even more glad than usual not to be dead.

"We were meant to be looking for a camp," he says, pushing hair out of his eyes. "We'd traced a lot of the recent attacks back to this one area -- a lot of energy moving around, a lot of -- presences, you know. That's what Sirius does -- he has that affinity, sort of. You've seen it. He can tell what kind of magic something is and where it's been and where it's coming from; it's partly his blood and partly the dog thing, I think."

"Dog thing?" says Lily.

Shit! "You know, he's like a dog," gabbles James, stomach dropping to somewhere around his toes. "Because he's, you know, loyal and -- sniffs things and sometimes he tries to urinate on hydrants or put his face between your – I mean not like that but, anyway -- he's like a dog. That's not the point. We were trying to track it, and -- "

"Then why did they need you?" Lily's face is hard and set again. "Why not just send Sirius?"

James gapes at her. "Alone?"

Lily doesn't say anything.

"No," says James. "I mean -- no, Lil. Don't be ridiculous. Anyway, he can't work a defensive spell if his life depended on it, which it would. You know how he gets when his blood's up, all laughing and insane and hopping about talking nonsense and all of a sudden someone would hit him in the chest with a hex before the possibility even occurred to him."

"Or the shoulders?" says Lily.

"No," says James. "That was different. I'm getting to that. We were looking, and we'd been looking for weeks. There was a camp, that was clear -- everything was concentrated in one place -- a hotspot, sort of. But it kept

moving about, and there were some extremely complex location and cloaking defenses on it, and -- "

"Two kids," says Lily. "You're eighteen, for God's sake! You're my age! You're barely out of school -- neither of you has ever faced a single Death Eater, let alone a whole camp of them!"

"We weren't exactly supposed to face them, you know. This wasn't some two-man military operation. It was just to find out where they were and get a fix on them, so we could bring in more people later. And," James adds, a little bitterly, "apparently they had Caradoc Dearborn, Baby Monitor, spying on us all along, so it really shouldn't have been an issue."

"I don't care. They should have sent -- "

"We had to go because we're better than other people," says James, simply. "And we have to learn how to be the best. Do you want to hear what happened or not?"

She crosses her arms across her chest and looks away.

"Well, we did," says James. "I mean, we found them. Well, we didn't know we had, we were just walking. Sirius found them, I think, he just didn't know. He kept saying he was hearing things funny, that something was wrong, but I thought -- it's not that I disbelieved him, you understand, only he'd been saying that all along, and we hadn't really been sleeping, and anyway, it doesn't matter."

"I'm angry," Lily says. "I'm so, *so* angry."

"At *me?*" James demands. "Because it's not as if I could have said, Why, yes, sir, please take my best friend in the whole world, who's no good at all with defensive spells by the way, into immediate danger without me, while I just stay at home sipping tea and buffing my nails and staying safe and, and keeping up on the *Quidditch* scores!"

"Yes!" Lily snaps. "At you, of course I'm angry at you! And at Dumbledore, for thinking it's all right to ask either of you – and at Sirius, *oh*, at Sirius," she continues, jaw tightening, "at Sirius for being no good at defensive spells and not getting *better*--"

"It was just supposed to be a, a reconnaissance kind of thing," James says, angry and weary at once. He doesn't want to fight or yell or do anything that reminds him of where he was, of what almost happened. He wants his parents. He wants someone to tell him it's all right and he can go to sleep without dreaming about it, that it wasn't real, some fiction of the forest. He wants Lily to stop shouting, to stop reminding him of how

real it *was*. "So that people who really – who really know what they're doing wouldn't have to be wasted on the unimportant things. Lily, I *wanted* to go!"

"But you were attacked," Lily says. Her mouth trembles.

"Sirius pushed me out of the way," James says. "That's how he got hurt. I'd go again. If he goes, I'll go again: Dumbledore needs us."

"You *idiot*," says Lily, viciously. "You stupid – stupid—"

"Lily," James attempts, "please, can't we just—"

"No," Lily snaps. "We can't *just*, we can't just *anything*. I know I only have a stupid desk job, James, but I've seen what the Death Eaters can do – what they have done already! – to people. I don't want you brought in there like that. James, I *love* you, do you have any idea what it means?"

"Yes," James tells her. "Actually, yes, I know exactly—"

"You do not!" Lily's voice tears off, sudden and awful to hear. "It means that I'm terrified, I'm terrified all the time, and then when they brought Sirius in and you weren't there, what was I supposed to think?"

"That I was making my report," James says, mouth dry. "That I was telling Dumbledore what happened."

"That you were in seven hundred pieces somewhere. Gone. Forever." Lily stares at the ceiling, clenching her own forearm so tightly that James wants to take her hands before her nails reach bone.

"Sirius should have told you that I was all right," James says.

"Oh, I assumed," says Lily. "What with all the waving and the idiot grinning, unless he'd *lost his mind from the blast*, which is also quite possible, *isn't it*."

"I'm sorry," James says.

"I know you are," says Lily.

"I love you," James says, and:

"We should get married," says Lily.

"I'm sorry," James says. "What?"

*

Remus can smell Sirius before he even knocks, though it's hard—there's something distinctly piscine masking the heavy canine scent, the normal combination of Sirius's soap and his hair and his skin—but Remus is waiting to smell him just, fingers digging into the arm of the couch and the back of his neck prickling with anxiety as he waits, and waits.

Sirius has been in the hospital: he also smells of that, complicated salves, sheets kept sterilized with precise magic. He smells a little of petroleum, too, which is an odd detail Remus saves to analyze later.

Remus is at the door immediately, flinging it open, grabbing Sirius by the shirt and dragging him inside.

"Ow. Hi," Sirius says. "Watch the back, it's sort of—ow! Christ, Moony, careful, I'm a veteran of the war, you know—"

"Shut up," Remus says. He should be gentler, kinder, but suddenly he doesn't know how to be. He presses Sirius back against the door, face against his neck, a blind helpless connection of mouths and teeth and their noses banging together. Sirius makes a sound. Remus swallows it.

*

"You heard me," Lily says.

James touches her elbow, her shoulder. He leans close and kisses her.

*

"Uhm," Sirius says.

There's the asymmetrical waxing-moon shape of a bite-mark on his chest, beneath his collarbone, over his heart. Remus touches it wonderingly, brow furrowed. He put that there.

Before.
"You *bit* me," Sirius rumbles, sounding inordinately pleased. "Not just there, either. *Everywhere.*"

"How's your back?" Remus asks. He doesn't want to think about it. "I didn't – did I hurt it?"

"Of course you did, you nonce," says Sirius wonderingly. His eyes are this incredible color Remus has never seen before and he doesn't exactly want to look at them, nor does he exactly want to look away. "You practically threw me across your bed like I was Lady Diana Mayo and you were wossname, the fellow with the camels. Except then it was the other way around. Thanks for that, by the way." He threads his fingers through the hair at the nape of Remus's neck and Remus's skin -- he seems to have more than the usual amount of skin tonight -- prickles at the firm, presumptuous touch. "And, it's a great big burn a foot long. Of course it hurts."

"What," Remus mumbles, against Sirius's throat. He can't seem to stop smiling. His body feels loosened and slow and sweet, like everything's been shaken out and put rather lackadaisically back together. He must look like an idiot. "I never have any idea what you're talking about. Lady Diana Mayo?"

"*The Sheik*," says Sirius. "Of course. It's a great Muggle film, you philistine. Yet another item on the to-do list of your cultural education."

There doesn’t seem to be anywhere they aren't touching. There are many places on Remus's body of which he is not fond, places he’s careful to avoid looking at or accidentally brushing against, even in the bath or when he gets dressed, but even these places are warm, as if forgiven, where Sirius's body presses against them. The sheets are damp. Remus's legs are sticky. It's all extremely disgusting, so it's fortunate that Remus is the exact opposite of concerned about it.

"James’s first time with Lily was, it was *awful*," Sirius blurts out abruptly. His fingers are ranging across the skin over Remus's spine, skin which feels extremely hot and unusually thin. "I’m not supposed to talk about it but he said it was like being attacked by a jellyfish. It was at the beach, probably why he brought up jellyfish at all I'm sure – but can you imagine? Jellyfish. Jellyfish sex, Remus, they had jellyfish sex together and it was so bad I had to talk him down from a ledge."

"I'd guessed as much," Remus admits. “Since there was no confetti or skywriting, I figured it must have been dreadful.”

"That's because you're very very clever, Moony," Sirius says. He touches Remus's lower back, which is very naked, and then his thigh, which is also very naked. They are both very naked. Remus has never been so very naked in his life; he wasn't even this very naked on the
day he was born.

"That – didn't feel like jellyfish," Remus says carefully. "There were some times in the middle where I wasn't exactly positive that things were -- but not jellyfish, I think."

"Electric jellyfish, maybe," Sirius says. His hand stops moving, his thumb pressed against the inside of Remus's knee. Remus is so tangled up he may never be untangled again. "How about: White Hot Smoking Electric Fireworks jellyfish."
"But not just regular squashy jellyfish," Remus says, a little bit pathetically. He has to be sure. There was a moment, somewhere in the slightly-less-hazy-than-one-might-wish center of things, when they were fumbling about and there was something disgusting and, indeed, squashy on parts of Remus that were not used to that kind of thing, and for a terrifying second Remus had to stop and wonder if he was going to become hysterical in the middle of having sex, or right before having sex, or whatever it was that was feeling so odd and slick and unpleasant. He believes he might have actually said something like "for God's sake Sirius will you just *do* something already," at which point Sirius burst out laughing, and then Remus did too, but only sort of helplessly – and then they were kissing and not talking and things were all right again.

And then, somewhat to his own shock, it had been *much* better than all right -- but still, there had been the laughing, too, and it’s hard to tell if this was a good thing or not.

Sirius makes an impatient noise and shoves his face into the pillow for a moment. The bed is all shadows and sweat and hair and strange new smells. Remus lifts himself up onto one elbow, touches Sirius's jaw uncertainly.

"Not any jellyfish," Sirius says, sliding his eyes back to meet Remus's. "Don't be stupid."

Remus has never seen Sirius look shy before. Something curious and unnamed unfurls through his chest, warming his belly. He swallows. "Oh," he says. "All right. Not any fish of the sea."
"Nor fish of any other place. However," says Sirius, "let us not pretend that the mechanics of the whole operation have a lot of dignity. In fact, it is my opinion that this -- the overall goodness of things in the world

of us -- is beginner's luck of the worst kind. And where did you -- where did you get the – you know?" His ears have gone pink, and his cheeks, too. Remus can see another bite mark, smaller and less red, on Sirius's throat. This is insane, Remus thinks. Sex is insane, it's the craziest, dumbest thing anyone's ever thought of, and God, he is unforgivably, unremittingly naked.

"Oh, God," he says, rolling away and putting his hands over his eyes. He is blushing in places that he never even knew existed. "I -- look, Sirius, I know it might appear to the uninformed that I never think about these things at all, but that's just because -- oh, hell – I know that I have a certain -- er--"

"Uptight propriety?" suggests Sirius innocently, taking Remus's wrist and nipping at his fingertips. Remus squints at him. "Hello, that's better. A certain tightly-corseted good breeding? Beneath which, I need hardly say, there strains and snarls a fangy and bestial beast of -- mm -- insatiable carnality, desperate to break loose, and apparently only my magic touch can set him free."

"Not -- those, no," says Remus, sliding his fingers almost absently into Sirius's mouth. "I just -- happen to have something resembling a sense of decorum, all right? Which is more than I can say for most of the people I know. And I did the research, because that's what I do when I'm confronted with a problem I don't understand, and I like to be prepared – not that I thought we were going to, I didn't know, I had absolutely no idea, but what if we did and I had *absolutely no idea* -- so, you know, I -- I prepared. You can buy -- things – in, in shops, you know. And it paid off pretty well for you, I might add, so--"

"No complaints," Sirius agrees cheerfully.

"I -- oh God, I stole a book. I stole a book from the library! It was -- I needed two dictionaries just to understand it, and I couldn't check it out, I couldn't. Can you imagine? The librarian, she's a million years old, and she has this look about her, this I Will Have Your Skull on a Plate look -- so I put it inside the dictionaries and I walked out! I'm going to hell."

"Probably," Sirius says. The dark wine-sound in his voice is his smile. "Oh, probably, straight to hell." Then there are his hands again, his lazy, elegant fingers trailing over Remus's hip. His mouth curves over Remus's, both of them breathing hot and close.

So this is what bodies are for, Remus thinks, though it's such a ridiculous thing to think, because bodies are for all kinds of things, like eating and, and building pyramids, and keeping your brain out of the mud.

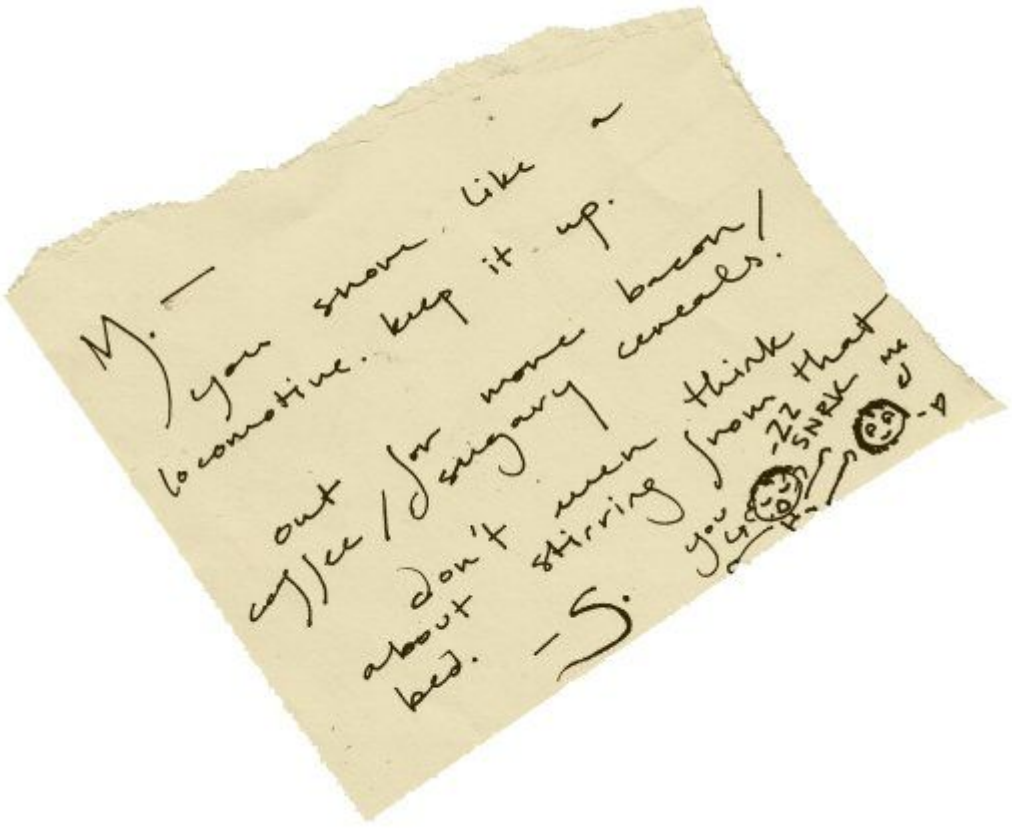
But no, all of those are things they can *do*. This, *this* is what they're *for.*

For perhaps the first time in Remus Lupin's conscious life, he actually understands himself.

Maybe he doesn't understand all the tangles and strange dark movements and curled-in places, but in his bones and skin and shifting muscle he feels a sudden, breathtaking sympathy that's never been there before. It has to do with the solid heat of Sirius's body against his, the intense clarity of Sirius's eyes, the primal flash of Sirius's teeth when he smiles the way he's smiling now. Sirius pushes up on his arms and kisses Remus again, thrillingly hard. Remus, arching and slamming his hands back to clutch the bedstead, knocks over the lamp.

"Bugger," Remus gasps.

"Wish, command," says Sirius, grinning wickedly, and doesn't stop cackling until Remus socks him in the face with a pillow and yanks him down by the nape of the neck.





shoebox_project(http://www.livejournal.com/community/shoebox_project)

Cowritten by dorkorific and ladyjaida.

dorkorific specializes in **Sirius**; ladyjaida specializes in **Remus**.

dorkorific is **Mlle. Artiste**; ladyjaida is **Mlle. Bits-n-bats**.

The handwriting of Remus J. Lupin, Severus Snape and James Potter is done by ladyjaida.

The handwriting of Sirius Black, Peter Pettigrew and Lily Evans is done by dorkorific.
Don't worry; Peter won't be stupidified. **Trust us** on that one.

We would like to take a moment to thank windjinn for leaping down the stairs with ladyjaida's bra on his head.

all characters herein are the intellectual property of j.k. rowling, scholastic and warner brothers.

Part Twenty-Six: Five Photographs of Peter Pettigrew.
April, 1978

It all begins that morning, when Peter burns his toast.

A burnt toast day never bodes well. The last time it happened, an irate lady came into the shop and tried to strangle him with a pair of poorly tailored trousers. He'd tried to explain things to her rationally—he didn't really do anything in the shop, to be honest, and he certainly didn't ruin her trousers, which were ugly anyway—but she hadn't been willing to listen. He'd been turning blue when his father discovered him, tangled in trousers and choking while the irate lady beat him about the head with her handbag.

Somehow, *he'd* been the one to blame.

Peter stares at his toast. Peter's toast stares at Peter. He thinks he can see a face burnt into the surface. It's frowning at him with a little mouth that says, "I hate you."

He throws the toast in the trash bin and wishes he could remember Sirius' famed Charm-All For Good Hair Days, but it isn't as though he could ever perform it properly, anyway. It always made his hair stick straight up or start growing out of his ears, and once, it spilled and stained his private parts an unmentionable color (bright pink).

Not unexpectedly, the day goes downhill from breakfast.

*

The downside to having months of regular and almost uniformly spectacular sex, Sirius thinks resentfully as he finishes his eleventh lap round the St. Mark's football pitch, is that then *not* having it becomes surprisingly unbearable. He lived through eighteen perfectly satisfying years without knowing anything beyond the wobbly obvious about Remus Lupin's mouth, not to mention the pale scatter of freckles across Remus Lupin's shoulders and long, narrow back, let alone Remus Lupin's freakishly large and unexpectedly capable hands, God *forbid* the other bits of Remus Lupin with which he has become intimately and magnificently acquainted.

And yet *now* trying to go a week without them, while Remus is off in the Ministry library on some kind of Dumbledore-related orgy of book-learning, is roughly as enjoyable as removing his own appendix with a ladle.

He pauses to yank viciously at his trailing bootlaces and then starts up again, neatly dodging one of the too-slow Muggle children involved in its incomprehensible ball game. Other Muggles yell and gesticulate, but Sirius is not much interested in whatever they have to say.

It's not as if he doesn't have things to do. He has plenty of things to do. He is, in fact, currently *doing something*. Soon enough he'll be at some hideous Auror boot camp devised by Mad-Eye Moody, who sent him a long letter of the many things he is supposed to be doing: all kinds of running and lifting and jumping and target-cursing and other sweaty, diverting activities, not unlike Maureen McCormack's preseason Quidditch regimen but slightly less demanding. And yet somehow, no matter how many push-ups he does, they only leave him feeling *more* twitchy and alone.

Cold showers are unpleasant.

The necessary wank (or three) is wholly unsatisfying.

There is, in short, no solution and it is only a matter of time before Sirius goes completely insane and has to be put in some kind of institution for the criminally undershagged.

Worst of all, the situation is making him *think*. He's spending all his time *thinking about things*. Like right now!

It is unspeakably horrible.

There must be *something* that could make this stop. There must be some kind of activity which would distract him from the constant heat and slide and shiver in his brain. He is practically minutes away from pinning some (extremely fortunate) Muggle against a tree.

And then it occurs to him to wonder, with a pleasant shock that makes him aware of how long it's been, what Prongs is up to.

*

Work is awful, but then, work is always awful. "It's a thankless job, and there's always somebody who needs to do it," Peter's father likes to say. That someone has probably always been one of the Pettigrews, from a long line of thankless Pettigrews, not being thanked since the Middle Ages, cleaning up after the plague or popping boils or testing torture devices or working in tailor shops. One day, Peter Pettigrew will pass that piece of wisdom on to his own, uninspiring, tailor-shop children, taking inseam measurements and being bashed round the head with handbags full of rocks, or cans of tuna for the cat. One day, Peter Pettigrew will grow so used to being plain, dull and ordinary that he won't notice how awful it is to be nobody anymore.

That's what really gets him.

At lunch, there's too much mustard in his sandwich and it dribbles all the way down the front of his shirt.

"It's a thankless job," Peter's father begins, "and you've got to look presentable for it—"

But then someone's coming into the shop. Peter hopes she doesn't have a handbag with her.

*

Five minutes ago—probably less—the flat was quiet. Almost blissful. That piece of music that always plays when everything is quiet and blissful was playing on the imaginary speakers in James' head, the ones that, for example, switch tracks for whenever Kingsley Shacklebolt walks into the room. (They play that muggle song. What is it? Shaftington? With all the doot doots and the doo wahs and the ladies going *Ohhhh yeah.*) It also plays mood music whenever Lily is doing something particularly delicious, like brushing her teeth or combing her hair or taking forever in the loo when they're late.

Five minutes ago, James had no idea that Sirius was actually *there*, in the flat, asleep on the couch and covered in James' mail.

It's only halfway through James' Lily's Having A Nap, I'm Taking Off My Trousers and Making a Meal dance that he notices the intruder.

"AGH!" James says, dropping the spatula.

"AGH!" Sirius says.

The mail goes everywhere.

"This says it's ‘overdue,'" Sirius says some minutes later, holding up a letter that looks official; the kind of mail that James usually lets Lily take care of. "You're going to have to pay extra, you know."

"What are you doing here?" James demands, rescuing it before it becomes soggy. It so often does when Sirius is around. "How did you get in? What do you want?'

"The door doesn't lock," Sirius says reasonably, "which is a thing you should remedy, by the by. He Who Must Not Even Be Thought About aside, who knows what kind of disreputable characters lurk about these parts? They might steal your," he casts about briefly, "your only chair, or your collection of potless pot-lids, or your toaster."

"The toaster's broken," James says. "What do you want?"

"Only the pleasure of your company, my little peanut," says Sirius, dropping the rest of the mail on the floor. "I haven't seen you in *yonks*."

"I noticed," James says. "Absence making the heart grow fonder."

"Yonks," Sirius repeats. He peers interestedly over James's shoulder, at the stove. Up close he smells like petrol and wet puppy. "What is this? Is this food?"

"It's tagliatelle and mushrooms in a mascarpone-parmesan sauce," James says, pointing haughtily at the cookbook. Actually, it is whatever noodles were in the pantry in whatever kind of cheese was in the freezer. He did at least scrape the green bits off it, which Lily always appreciated, though Sirius *never* did.

"It looks like something that came from under a log," Sirius says, clearly intrigued. "Can I have it?"

James remembers, almost fondly, the last time Sirius ate something that looked like it came from under a log. It was, in fact, something that came from under a log. Afterwards, Sirius vomited in James's pillow. Those were the days.

They were so young then, and so foolish. The people they were are distant and almost pitiable, like tag-along kids; you *want* to help, but it's just so embarrassing. And yet, there was a certain something about eating something you knew would hurt the next day. Sirius would probably still do it, James thinks, and he smiles, fondly.

But if Sirius threw up in James' pillow now, Lily would kill them both with it.

"Consider your life, mate," Sirius says now, pityingly. He sticks a blackened finger in it to taste, ignoring James's little mewl of protest. "'Mascarpone-parmesan sauce?' What's next? Eau de Truffle Ears? It needs pepper, too."

"It's…*like* cheese," James points out. "I mean, they're both…cheeses. I think. What the hell is a Truffle Ear?"

"I believe mascarpone is actually a kind of pastry," Sirius says, rattling through drawers. "Or am I thinking of marzipan? Or marmalade? It doesn't matter, because this doesn't taste like cheese; it tastes like domesticity. It tastes like Fat Babies On The Way. Where's your pepper?"

"Who's having fat babies?" says Lily, emerging from the bedroom in one of James's t-shirts. There are dark circles under her eyes and her hair is all sticky-up from napping: she arrived home a couple of hours ago, moaned, "This *day*," and before James could say so much as "Ah yes and how was it?" collapsed on the mattress which is their only bed, snoring like a champion. "Evening, Sirius, haven't seen you in ages. Oh dear, James, are you cooking? I wish you wouldn't."

"I told him," Sirius says virtuously. "Well, I said 'more pepper,' which will mask the taste of whatever vile stew he produces." He holds up a little bottle. "Or curry powder? What do you think?"

"We could get a takeaway," Lily coaxes, trying to pry the spatula out of James's hand. "We could make toast!"

"Except your toaster's broken," Sirius points out, sliding one of James's battered tin forks into his pocket. "I need cutlery," he explains.

"Please," Lily implores, clutching James's lapels and gazing up into his face. "*Please* don't put yourself through this again. Don't put *us* through this again. Are your pants undone?"

How sharper than a serpent's tooth, James thinks darkly, is a woman who does not trust you with noodles.

"Don't you live somewhere that isn't here?" he demands of Sirius, because clearly this is all Sirius's fault.

The mascarpone bubbles.

"It's very hot there," Sirius says, mournfully. "And Moony's off *reading* things. And I would have gone to bother Peter but apparently I'm not allowed in the shop. His dad gets all pinky around the neck; says I get the trousers wrinkly just by looking at them."

"You need a hobby," James snaps. "I've said so before."

"I need more friends," Sirius sighs. "Friends who would share their mascara tally-ho with me."

"Mascarpone," says James. "Tagliatelle."

"It's not that we don't want to invite you," Lily says kindly. "I mean, *I* obviously don't, but really all *I* want to do is put my head in an oven, so my wishes are not really relevant here." She yawns.

"You have a kind soul, Evans, but don't bother," says Sirius, with the pathetic eyes at which he excels. "I can take a hint, you know. I can twig a lay. I can tagliatelle a mascarpone."

"It wouldn't be so bad, would it," Lily says thoughtfully, "if he made, I don't know, soup in a can. But he opens *cookbooks*. He tries to make *recipes*." Lily and Sirius exchange a look of deep, pained understanding. James truly hates it when they are getting along. "Why is our mail on the floor?"

"Convenience," Sirius says, examining jars. He seems, if such a thing were possible, even twitchier than usual. "Easy to reach. Covers up the stains on your linoleum, too."

"How thoughtful you are," Lily says, picking it up, dusting off one of Sirius' footprints, and putting it atop the refrigerator.

"Anyway, I have faith in you," Sirius says, patting James on the back and opening up a bottle of something. "Well, no I don't. But I have faith in your iron constitution, so I'm sure no lasting damage will be done. What's

this? It's red and exciting-smelling—in it goes!"

"Leave my mushrooms alone!" James bellows. "I'm making delicacies! Delicacies for my redheaded tagliatelle!"

Sirius hesitates, bottle in hand, poised over the pan. "It *smells* like it came from under a log," he says. "I'm only trying to help." He looks like a dog, the friendly sort that keeps relieving himself in your slippers. All I want, James thinks, is to put my slippers on. But then you always feel so guilty when his lower lip wobbles and his ears get all droopy, until you remember that your slippers are full of urine and all charitable thought is out the window.

That animagus thing was the worst idea in the world. Anything that makes James feel guilty about hurting the feelings of Sirius "Blithesome Oblivion" Black is the worst idea in the world.

"Look," Lily says, "I'm going to order takeaway. All right?"

James pokes his tagliatelle sadly. It bubbles and spits, burning him on the arm. Then, it tries to eat his spoon.

"It lives!" says Sirius. "How marvelous. We should introduce it to Hector. All right, all right, I'm leaving—don't brandish that mess at me. It looks aggressive."

"Say hello to Remus for us," Lily says, delicately dropping one of the pot-lids atop the seething tagliatelle.

"Assuming he ever emerges," Sirius says. "Assuming I don't go back to the flat and die alone." He slumps out, shoulders all saggy. James feels a wave of instinctive pity and stomps on it.

"Get a hobby!" he yells at the door. "And a shower!"

*

As Peter is walking back to the shop, a pigeon relieves itself on his shoulder.

It's only after he's served four customers that he realizes the pigeon also relieved itself in his hair.

There's a shipment of plaid that hasn't come in. The utter ridiculousness of being yelled at over a shipment of plaid, a giant shipment of hideous, hideous plaid, is the sort of thing Sirius and James and even Remus and maybe *even Lily* could turn into something hilarious, but Peter can't think of something funny, and when he thinks of Sirius and James and Remus and even Lily—or maybe especially Lily because she's ruined everything—the mustard makes his stomach hurt.

He hasn't seen James in three weeks and two days. No one's written him. No one's inquired to see how he's

doing or if he wants to spend time together or if he's dead in a gutter somewhere or crushed under mountains of plaid.

He tried to floo Sirius a week and a half ago, but nobody answered, and there was a chair in front of his face, and he heard weird noises coming from the bathroom, and that only made him feel worse.

It wouldn't be so awful, only he's sure that James has seen Sirius, and that Sirius has seen Remus. Even now they might be off somewhere celebrating, clinking champagne glasses together to toast the day they were finally able to rid themselves of the boring Peter Pettigrew.

Why *were* they even friends with him in the first place? Peter wonders. Did he just—stick around all that time for no reason? Did they just let him, out of habit? How did he even manage to have such interesting and funny friends, who are right now drinking champagne with raspberries in and having tea cakes to celebrate Peter Pettigrew, out of their lives at last.

It makes sense, Peter thinks. Who was he? What did he ever do? He got in the way and he was awkward and he said ridiculously stupid things that everyone laughed at, and it was different from the way everyone laughed at what James said or what Sirius said, different because James and Sirius were trying to be funny the right way while Peter stumbled across it by accident and from the wrong direction and wound up having friends by accident too.

How had they even managed to put up with him for so long? *Why* had they bothered to, only to ignore him now?

Peter takes inseam measurements and wonders what brilliant job James is doing, perfect, fantastic, charismatic, hilarious, James-Pottery James, James who got the girl, James who got the looks, James who got the *special*. And what about Sirius? Sirius is the sort of bloke who rides a motorbike. Peter is the sort of bloke who gets hit by them.

He should stop feeling sorry for himself, he thinks suddenly. He should be a man. He should do what James would do, which is: go see James. Well, wait, that doesn't make sense. If he were James, he would go see *Peter.* (Or, actually, he probably wouldn't; after all, he *hasn't*.) But that's not the point. He'll just go to the flat this afternoon. He'll stop by. Then they'll *have* to talk to him.

"Are you *listening* to me, Peter Pettigrew?" Peter's father roars, and Peter nearly leaps out of his skin.

*

When James turns back to the stove, Lily has removed the offending pasta and tossed it, pot and all, into the bin. "What do you think," she says, kissing his ear, "Chinese? Curry? Something fried?"

"We have to *do something* about Sirius," James says, moodily. "I hate it when he mopes. He makes everything around him a world of moping. And Moony's probably just hunching behind a book to avoid him." Remus is a good person, on the whole, but no good in a crisis of this kind. Crises involving literary figures, brilliant: those involving actual human feelings, about as competent as a giant potato.

"I expect he's lonely," Lily says gently. "You've got me, and I love you and I love being with you, but anyone with a modicum of self-awareness would have to admit we're very—well—*us*. And Remus has the books, and Peter has…whatever Peter has," she finishes, lamely. "The shop? Things? I'm sure they're very…things. Peter's things."

"Can we stop talking about Peter's things?" James asks.

"Please," Lily says, shuddering a little. "But Sirius—"

"Is the situation perchance…*serious*" James asks. Lily has so far managed to avoid saying anything about Sirius is serious. It's not as though the joke's even funny. It's the worst joke ever, which is why Sirius makes it himself so often. No, this is merely a matter of seeing when Lily will crack.

Lily does not crack. "There hasn't, you know, been anyone since Sophie, I don't think. Wasn't she the last?"

"Perhaps he pines for her," James says. "She was—you know—well, she was just *very.*"

Lily gives him a look.

"Aha!" James says, and makes his voice very adult and helpful, so Lily will forget Sophie ever existed. What Sophie? Who Sophie? Where? "I haven't really asked. I sent him all my old magazines, though. Seeing as how I didn't need them anymore, with us doing the backwards tagliatelle together all night long, et cetera et cetera." Well, he amends virtuously just for himself, he did send *most* of the magazines. Some of them had sentimental value.

"As emotionally fulfilling as seven years' back issues of Busty and Bewitched can be," Lily begins, "a) I don't want to hear about it, and b) I'm not entirely sure that Sirius is—well—*happy*."

"How can anyone *not* be happy," James begins, "with Miss May, 1972—"

"No," Lily says, folding her arms over her chest.

She's just so gorgeous, standing there in that t-shirt, with the stain on it, and the pants that are actually James' pants, and the look in her eye that means *Carry on about your Busty and Bewitched, James Potter, but realize this: there is no busty like the one right in front of you,* and James relents.

"I didn't realize you were concerned," he says, perhaps a little grumpily. "I thought you thought he was ‘completely impossible.'"

"I can't help it," Lily sighs. "You think you don't give a monkey's what happens to him, and then he gets under your skin. Like a fungus. And then there's the world of moping. Besides, it'll only be worse, once we tell him about us."

James leans close to Lily, breathing warmly in her ear. "I think he knows we're together already, my little baguette," he says, in an exaggerated whisper. "He's a little bit thick, but he does cotton on eventually."

"I mean about *us*," Lily says. She gives James her meaningful look.

"Ah," James says. His voice cracks. "The whole M-word. The…Marriage…word."

"It's good to say it aloud," says Lily, her mouth quirking a little. "Fear of a name increases fear of the thing itself."

"I'm not afraid of the M-word," James protests. And it's true. He's not afraid of marrying Lily. He's not even afraid of *being married* to Lily. The other night he was awake at stupid o'clock in the morning, thinking about it, asking himself rationally whether he had thought about this enough, and was it really the right thing to do, and also was he *insane?* and then she made a little sound in her sleep, a kind of mumbled sigh, and reached over to entwine his fingers in hers, pulling his hand around her waist.

So that had settled that.

It was just force of habit now, to panic about it; to pretend to panic about it. The phrase *We're practically married already* was very old and very tired but it was stock response for a reason, and they were, weren't they. If marriage meant 'being in love' as well as 'tolerating each other's ill humors and bad cooking.'

"I know you're not," Lily says—but her cheekbones go a little pink. "Of course. I was only joking." *Definitely* pink. She busies herself with the Floo directory and says, a little too high, "What did we decide? Sandwiches?"

"I'm *not* afraid," James says again. "What is it?" He touches her wrist.

Lily sighs and looks at him, and then looks away. "I know," she says. She pushes her hair back behind her ears, which is what she does when she doesn't know what else to do with her hands. The earrings James bought her catch the light for an instant. "It's just—I *asked*, and it was *months* ago, and—well—we *haven't.* You might have noticed."

"You can't honestly think I don't want to," James starts, and then gapes at her. The idea that Lily might not realize how completely she is in control of the situation—and by "the situation" James of course means "his

life"—has actually never occurred to him before.

"Well," Lily says, apparently to the ceiling, "it's just, if you *did*, we *would have*. I know you probably don't think you're scared, I know you *care* about me and—whatever it is—but there's still something stopping us, isn't there. Because if there weren't something we could have done it ages ago, or at least decided when we were going to do it, or—or talked about why we *haven't* decided when we were going to do it. And I hate that it bothers me, but it does. It *does*."

"Lily," James says.

"I asked you for a *reason*," Lily goes on, finally looking at him. "And it wasn't just because you happened to be the only other person in the room, you know. It wasn't so I could tell people I was engaged, or I was angry and wanted to punish you, or because getting married is just something people *do*."

"I know," James says, idiotically, and swallows. "I'm only—I'm trying to—"

Then there's a knock on the door.

*

James and Lily are in the middle of a serious conversation when Peter arrives.

"Pete," James says, looking surprised. Then, as a clear afterthought, "Mate. What're you doing here?"

"I thought," Peter began.

"Look," James goes on, casting a nervous glance back over his shoulder and into the sitting room, where Peter can see Lily is standing; she looks a little red around the eyes. Peter's bungled things up again, he realizes, and wants to hide in the lift and never come out again. "We're not exactly," James continues. "I mean, we're in the middle of—and it's definitely—we just can't—"

"I thought maybe we could all get together," Peter says, all at once. He doesn't know why. What he should be saying is, ‘Oh, right, sorry, mate, I didn't realize; guess I'll drop by another day, then.' But here he is, saying something else, his tongue flapping, making noises like a monkey trying to communicate with higher life forms just beyond the bars. *Ook, ook, ook,* Peter hears. He might as well be saying that, for all James is listening to him. "It's only, we haven't all been together since—well, since before summer, really, and *I* thought—"

"Look, Pete," James says, his voice changing; he's exasperated, and Peter's only brought it on himself, and here it comes, "this isn't Hogwarts anymore, all right? And some of us are busy."

"Oh," Peter says.

Momentary apology passes over James's face. "Sorry," he amends. "Pete, look, we'll get together sometime, I promise. But this isn't a good time."

Then, he closes the door.

Peter stares at the number for a while. When was the last time somebody called him ‘Pete?' Only James does it, and he used to like it. At least, he thinks he did. Sirius called him Pete, too, since that's what James called him, and Peter thought: *Oh, these people are my friends*. They were. He's almost sure of it.

But he's never been anything more than almost. And that's the entire problem, really.

*

"Do you think I should have," James says, looking towards the door.

"I don't want to talk about that," Lily says sharply, and her face is pink and her hands are all fisted up in the t-shirt. "Forget about him. I want to talk about this."

"I'm trying," James says, gently. "Hey." He tips her chin up, holds her gaze.

After a long moment, Lily is the first to look away. "I'm sorry," she says, offering him a shaky kind of smile. "I really, *really* hate being like this. I think I want Indian. Should we just order?"

"It's just," James tries. He swallows. "It's."

He thinks about it.

"It's not the food, is it?" Lily asks. "Because I like Indian, and we can never get married if you don't like Indian, James."

"Shush," James says.

"Because I *like* Indian, and I'm going to want to eat it all the time," Lily says.

"I like Indian too, but it's not like I want to marry it," James says, and claps a hand over her mouth. "Shut up for a second. I've got to restructure my thoughts. Or structure them at all."

They look at each other for a minute. James tries to work out all the objections that have been rattling around inside him. They're in a war, that's the big one. If they died, if they couldn't save each other, what if they had

(why not just come right out and say it?) a kid, which they could, because they would be married? James feels the old blow at his throat. His parents are gone and they are never coming back and that will never feel all right. That will never get better. What if they did that to someone? To a baby?

And anyway, they're so *young*. And just because he'd never get sick of her doesn't mean she'd never get sick of him, and he can't stand the thought of her being stuck with him and his tagliatelle forever, just being nice, because she *would*, because she is so kind; it's one of the things he loves so much about her. Then he starts to list all the things he loves about her and then he gets distracted, chasing one ridiculous detail after another until he is completely lost. Of course she *would* leave him over Indian, only of course she *wouldn't*, and that's what makes it so simple when he drops his hand and says, "All right, let's do it."

The smile on her mouth is warm and curious. "I'll order," is all she says.

"We should probably tell Sirius," James adds.

"We should probably decide what we want," Lily says.

"Wait," James says, and frowns, feeling his skin get tight between his eyes. "We're, we're still talking about Indian food? Because I thought we had actually managed to have a conversation. I mean, I think I want some kind of cucumber salad thing for an appetizer, and chicken korma is my *way*, as you know, but we can also, we can have Indian at the wedding, you know."

"Oh, well, then obviously, I'm in," Lily says. "As long as there's samosas."

"You don't think I'm serious!" James realizes. "You think I'm just putting it off again. You think I'm just saying this to make you happy. You suspicious little--"

"I don't think anything," says Lily. "I certainly don't suspect you of trying to make me happy. One order of naan, do you think? Or are you going to need four?"

"Cut it out," James says. "All right, Lily Evans. "

He falls to one knee, onto the hideous linoleum. He takes Lily's hand in both of his and gazes into her eyes, which are merry and sad and hopeful all at once, and so green. "What," he says deliberately, "are you doing Friday?"

Lily smiles, and this time it's bright and true.

"Changing my name, I guess," she says.

*

Sirius trudges up the steps to the flat, feeling deflated and resentful. It was stupid to think it would help to see James; the last thing he needed was to see the two of them all *touching* on each other, knowing they are so far from having the problem he has. They're probably naked right now. Naked and eating horrible pasta off each other's bodies. Traitors, Sirius thinks sourly.

He barely gets the key in the lock before the door opens and Remus is standing there, looking rumpled and insane.

Sirius's stomach flies up to the ceiling; his brain plummets directly downward.

"Well hello," he manages to say, feeling a big, stupid smile break out on his face. "Déjà vu all over again. Good thing my back's better." He leans against the doorframe, affecting nonchalance, and is pleased to see how Remus twitches impatiently towards him. "I thought you were at the library.

"Well, I'm not," Remus says.

"I can see that," Sirius says. "Since you're here, where I am. With me. And I wouldn't be caught dead in the library now that I no longer need to have knowledge."

"No more libraries, hm?" Remus asks. He looks distracted. When he turns away, Sirius can see the soft hairs on the back of his neck, a few of them damp—it's a warm day—and Sirius gets dizzy; he locks the door behind him and leans against it.

"When you say that," Sirius says, "it sounds...*sexual.*"

"*Does* it," Remus says.

"I am telling you that it does," Sirius replies.

"But perhaps you're just reading into things," Remus suggests. "Have you ever thought of that?"

"Come on, Moony," Sirius says. "You know I can't read anymore."

"Except for when you're in the loo," Remus says. "I don't know if I can ever love a man who only reads the parts in the paper with illustrations in."

"I have learned many deep truths from illustrations." Sirius wonders who will move first; which magnet will give in and rocket forward. It's like a science experiment. "They are worth one thousand words, and I have seen *at least* one thousand illustrations. Math is not my strong suit, but that's a lot of words."

"A lot of words," Remus repeats. "I've noticed." He moves closer. His shirt is undone at the throat and there's

a sheen of sweat there, collecting at his collarbones. Sirius is absolutely, totally going to win. Remus leans in very close, his mouth just at the place where Sirius's jaw meets his ear. His breath is warm and a little fast.

Then he murmurs, "I'm going to take a nap."

"The hell you are," Sirius says, trying to breathe.

"I am going to take a *nap* in the *bed*," Remus says.

Bed, Sirius thinks fondly. He's so traditional. As if you need a bed when there are so many other surfaces that are closer than the bed.

"The *hell* you are," Sirius says, and magnetizes.

*

Sirius is naked. Well, except for the pillow. But it's a small pillow, and it doesn't leave much to the imagination. Also, it has "Home, sweet home" embroidered onto it.

"Er, hello there, Petey Pete," he says, scratching the back of his neck and looking like Peter's just caught him in the middle of something really, really embarrassing. There's silence from the rest of the flat, so Peter can only assume he's been walking around naked again. "Anything, ah, anything amiss?"

"No-oo," Peter says, somewhat nervously. "Er. No. Sirius. Is anything, uhm, amiss with you?"

It sounds stupid, and besides which, Peter doesn't know how to talk to Sirius without James there. It was all right with James there. James always did all the talking anyway, and Peter could just listen, and pretend like he was in the middle of a fascinating conversation, when in reality he was more like the lone member of the audience, watching a play about three very close friends.

"Everything's peachy keen and hunky dory around here, except there's decidedly too little hunk and too much dory. Sorry, Pete, mate, have to flash. I mean flee. I mean—talk to you soon, right?"

Then Sirius closes the door. It almost hits Peter in the nose. He should have expected that, really.

There are some noises from within, stage directions really, hustle and bustle and then something falling. Peter wonders if Hector ate anything, like a stray rat or someone's pet pitbull, or if Sirius has tripped over anything, or if Remus is in there, *or if James is.* He doesn't even know why he came.

Probably, a mean voice inside him says, *because you have no other friends.*

Then, the mean voice says, *And you don't even really have these.*

*

"Do you think that might have been important?" Remus asks, coming out from underneath the coffee table, where he was hiding. There's a dust bunny in his hair. Sirius thinks it's wonderful.

"But you just came home," Sirius says, and makes a half-hearted grab for—well—

"It could have been important," Remus attempts. The chase makes it wonderful; and did he ever think he would be here, like this, skin and scars and all, completely relaxed and *completely* naked with someone else? With Sirius? It's all so easy. He doesn't even know why he over-thought anything, back when he was so wound-up and stupid and didn't know where to put his hands or how to let instinct connect with knowledge. "He might have been—well, he looked very—excuse me," and he's starting to laugh, helplessly, a wild warm sound he never heard himself make before all this, "that's a sensitive area—"

"But we couldn't talk to him *now*," Sirius says. "You're naked?"

Remus looks down at himself, and then at Sirius, and the shy, sly smile he's learned to wear—the one Sirius likes so much, the one that suggests he's more than just a chocolate-eating, book-reading, lazy werewolf with dust in his hair and sweaters worn through at the elbows—comes over his face.

"Why, Mister Black," he says, as if it's only just occurred to him, as if he hasn't been thinking about it this entire time, "so are you."

*

Remus—who's smarter than Peter is, but whom Peter always almost thought he could understand, as if they were in the same little dinghy somewhere floating off upon an awkward sea—isn't even home.

Maybe he is with Sirius. These days, he's always with Sirius. And James is with Lily; or they're all out without him, laughing and not even meaning to have a good time. Just having it. And Peter is out on the street in front of a store where some little muggle child is buying ice cream, and the ice cream isn't even falling out of the cone.

He thinks of Honeydukes, of Butterbeer, of the Shrieking Shack, of the good old days when they were all a part of the same something. Everything fuzzy with the dark, with the animal side of them, connecting them; each of them scenting one another on the wind, and able, somehow, to be more than just students. By sheer dint of association Peter had been somebody, and he had liked it. In fact, he was able to accept it. He'd accept it right now.

I don't even have to be somebody, he tells himself. *I can just know somebodies. That's all right, too.*

But.

I'm a rat, Peter thinks. *Sirius is a fearsome canine, James is a mighty stag. Even Remus gets to be a werewolf.* Which can't be all that fun, but at least it's a something.

Then he thinks, *Lily's not even one of us, but she's there all the time.* It's the mean, dark side of him he can't ignore, the side of him that chose *rat* in the first place, instinct and fear and twitching loneliness.

Peter jams his hands into his pockets, rolling lint between his fingers. A real man doesn't have linty pockets, but Peter has never been a real man. He hasn't done anything at all since those days, when he was part of a small family of friends and they *had* to see him every day because—well, they *had* to.

Peter Pettigrew. Good old Petey Pete. Our friend, the rat.

If Peter Pettigrew were James Potter, he would do many things, like take over the world and marry Lily Evans and have statues erected of himself all over the place. But one thing's for certain—he would never, ever hang out with the Peter Pettigrews of this world, because they'd be a real blight on everything.

"Watch where you're going," a familiar voice says, and everything immediately gets worse. It's Snape, and forever and ever until the end of time, it's Peter's duty to remember who they were when they were younger, when the lines were drawn, when everyone knew where he stood and kept to their own sides.

But even Severus Snape, Snivellus who doesn't bathe and doesn't let people say stupid things even when it would be easier to just let them, is out on the street.

With *friends.*

"I see you are without the usual Potter entourage," Snape says, lip curling. "They finally cut you loose, then?"

And as if it doesn't mean anything, Snape rolls his eyes and pushes past, and the two others follow. They don't even laugh. It's as if Peter weren't there. Peter feels the chill of the truth creeping down his spine, the same way ice cream trickles down from the bottom of a cone and over the skin.

Peter just stands there like an idiot, staring after Snape's retreating back. He feels completely lost, his arms hanging uselessly, his ears roaring.

One of Snape's friends glances back at him. Then he says something to Snape. Snape sniffs and pushes on, but the young man breaks away and jogs back towards Peter, hands in his pockets.

"You all right, mate?" he asks, slowing to a walk a few feet away.

"Fine," says Peter, waiting for the inevitable mockery. But the young man just stands there, regarding him sympathetically. He has a lot of curly hair and a long, friendly sort of face, with inquisitive eyebrows.

"You don't *look* fine," he says. Then he frowns. "Hang on, don't I know you? Hogwarts, right?"

"Well, yes," says Peter, a little nastily. "Obviously."

The young man only smiles and glances sheepishly at his feet. "Sorry," he says. "You're Peter Pettigrew."

"You noticed me?" Peter says, stupidly.

"You'd've been a couple of years below me, I think. I was in Ravenclaw. You won't remember." He says his name. Peter doesn't quite catch it. He can't bring himself to ask, to look stupid *again.*

"Oh," he says. "Yes. Of course."

"Yes," the young man agrees. He says, kindly, "Snape was a right bastard to get on you like that. It's obvious you weren't having a good run." He leans in a little, lowers his voice. "Tell you the truth, we all think he's a bit of a tit."

"And he's got a nose like a *sailboat*," Peter says.

Snape's friend gives a bark of surprised laughter. "Well said!"

Peter can feel himself cheering up a little. He smiles, awkwardly.

The young man eyes him sideways for a moment. Then he says, "Look, Pettigrew, tell you what. I can't change your day, but if you want to talk about it—well, can I buy you a pint? I know a place. It's just round the corner. You look like the nice sort; I can tell you need it tonight, hey?"

Peter thinks about it. Ravenclaws are all right. A little bit snooty, but they've put their cards on the table. A mutual dislike of Snape is a good starting point. Peter shrugs. "All right," he says. "Sounds great."

*

The bar Snape's friend takes him to is dingy and ill-lit, with indistinct, wheezing music playing and a broom sweeping itself around in circles in one corner. The looming figure behind the bar doesn't seem to communicate in actual human language. Snape's friend just holds up two fingers and it nods, and after a few seconds a bottle of something dull orange and dusty slides across the bar to them, followed by two shot

glasses. The young man carries them over to a corner table and Peter follows him.

"Sorry," says the young man with a deprecating little laugh, as they sit down. "I know it's a bit of a catacomb. But this is where my tab is."

"I don't mind," Peter says.

"That's what I like to hear." He pours them two shots and holds his up, raising his chin in salute. "Cheers. To bad days bettered."

"Cheers," echoes Peter, and drains his glass. It tastes like boiling disinfectant. His eyes bulge and he chokes, then tries to pretend he didn't.

The young man doesn't seem to have noticed. "Right then," he says cheerfully. "Tell us about it."

"About what?"

"The day," says the young man patiently. "Whatever all happened to you that made you such a picture of misery. Go on. Get it out. I've got nothing but time."

"You don't mind?" Peter says.

The young man waves a hand good-naturedly. "Not in the least," he says.

So Peter tells him.

It takes a long time.

When he finally pauses for breath, the young man lets out a low whistle. "Merlin's teat," he says. "You weren't kidding, were you?"

"It was a bad day," Peter says, staring determinedly at the table. He hears the glug of another drink being poured, and then the young man slides his glass over. Peter drinks it and winces. "Gluargh," he adds, involuntarily.

"That's unbelievable," the young man says, shaking his head. "It's ridiculous, is what it is. I'm impressed you're being so philosophical about it. I think I'd've gone stark raving mad." He laughs a little. "I don't suppose it'll help to tell you things'll look better tomorrow?"

"No," Peter says, drawing a pattern in the sticky beer on the tabletop.

"Look," says the young man, gently. He touches Peter's shoulder and Peter startles. "You had a crap day. You

did. But on the bright side, you got a free drink." His face is suddenly very grave. "Anyway," he says, half to himself, "things are bad all over, aren't they."

"They are," Peter says, uncertainly. Maybe. James hasn't said anything about it—but James hasn't said much of anything. He's probably told Lily; things are bad all over. Terrible. Serious. Let's round up the old gang and do something about it, except don't tell Pete, he'd just get underfoot.

The young man shakes himself a little and smiles, rather wanly. "No good talking about all that," he says. "You didn't come here to discuss politics."

"No," Peter says. He's not quite certain what they *are* discussing.

The young man says, "Peter Pettigrew." He's staring off into the middle distance, as if trying to remember something. "Peter Pettigrew," he says again, drumming his fingers thoughtfully on the table. "Oh, that's it—I remember now. You're friends with James Potter and that gang, aren't you?"

Peter doesn't know what to say. He makes a vague gesture with his hands, sort of yes and sort of neutral, and hopes this isn't an enemy. He hopes it's not a friend, either. Neutrality, he thinks; he hopes for neutrality.

The young man is still talking. "Yes, I remember—you lot were always together. Terrorized the school a bit, didn't you?" He grins conspiratorially across the table. "Those were the days, eh?"

"Oh," Peter says, stupidly. "Right."

The young man tucks a piece of dark hair behind his ear; his face is sharp but appealing. He seems a decent sort, even if Peter wishes they weren't talking about James. "Do you still knock about with him?" he asks.

"Oh," says Peter again. He swallows. "Yes. I mean. Well. Not as much as we used to, but like you said, things are bad all over, and they..."

"Ah," says the young man, knowingly tapping the side of his narrow nose. "Got himself a girlfriend, has he? That's the way it is, you know. I had a best friend like that—inseparable, we were—until he found himself a bird. Then it was no more; like being friends with a ghost, except worse." The young man grins and sighs. "At least ghosts show up to haunt you once in a while, you know?"

"Lily Evans," Peter says, and is a little surprised at how venomous it comes out. "That's his— Lily Evans."

"Lily Evans," repeats the young man, frowning thoughtfully. "She was a Mud—she was Muggle-born, wasn't she?"

"What's that got to do with anything?" Peter asks, anxiously. He knows *Muggle-born* is a loaded phrase lately, the sort that gets you looked at when you say it too loudly in restaurants, but maybe he's being oversensitive.

The young man doesn't seem very evil. For one thing, he's got ink on his nose, from where he tapped it earlier. He's a little like if Remus and Snape had a baby, though obviously without the truly magnificent Nose that would result.

The room wobbles a little and Peter realizes that it's actually his vision doing the wobbling. Is it the shots, or has he gone cross-eyed from staring? And has Snape's friend noticed?

Apparently he has, because he says hastily "Oh, I don't mean anything by it," smiling and pouring Peter another glass. "Goodness knows not *all* Muggle-Borns…well…there are some all right ones. Certainly some very clever ones. They do well enough with what they have."

"Some all right ones," Peter echoes. He drinks the shot. This time it goes down a little more easily, like hand soap instead of industrial scrub.

"Of course, as I say, not all Muggle-borns *are*," the young man says, in considering tones. "It's just interesting that so many of them *are* Muggle-born."

"Not all Muggle-borns are what?" says Peter. The drink burns unpleasantly in his throat now, making his breath shallow. "Who's 'them?'"

"Oh, you know," the young man says, waving a hand. "What they *say.* Witch-burners, anti-magic radicals, Squib-breeders, anarchists. It's not their fault, really," he adds thoughtfully. "They were just brought up differently. Their whole culture teaches them to hate us, you see. So no matter how much time they spend here, among us, there's always a part of them that…" He trails off. "But it isn't all of them, as I say."

Peter doesn't say anything.

What could he say? He doesn't *know* anything.

"You've heard about the restrictive legislation they want the Ministry to introduce, I daresay. All just jealousy and ignorance, of course, but there it is. They want to take away our right to perform certain spells," he says, and there's real wonder and anger in his voice. "Just because they don't understand how to use them themselves. Just because they're *afraid*…it's enough to make you ill."

"I thought that was just…you know, extremists," Peter says. He really doesn't know anything about pro-Muggle extremists, except that they tend to be sort of dirty and have exciting hair and wear robes made of hemp and throw red paint on things. One of them threw red paint on Peter, once. It was never really explained. "Look," he starts to say, soon to be followed by *You've got the wrong bloke, I don't even read the paper, and you have to know right away I don't have any real opinions—*

"Well." The young man shrugs. It could mean anything. "You're right, of course. But there are more and more of them all the time, do you notice? And more and more Muggle-borns among proper wizards. The whole

society suffers for it. Why, we barely *are* a society anymore. We're stuck in the Dark Ages, Pettigrew. We used to be the greatest civilization in the world, and now we're stuck underground like rats—Don't you wonder why we haven't progressed?"

Peter can't look at him. His ears are roaring again.

The young man relaxes, lets go of the table and leans back in his chair. "I sound a bit extreme myself, don't I?" he says, laughing a little ruefully. He pours out another drink. "Sorry about that. I guess I can get a little carried away. It's just important—and so many don't even think about it. I would ask what the world is coming to, but sometimes I wonder if I can take the answer. If I've made you uncomfortable..."

"It's all right," Peter says, lost again. He feels ill. He drinks anyway. This time it doesn't taste like anything.

"Well, what do *you* think?" the young man says. "You must talk about this with your friends. Does James Potter have anything to say about the situation? He had plenty of opinions back at school, I recall." There is nothing in his face but bland, open curiosity.

And through the haze of drink Peter hears his own voice say, "What does it matter what *he* says? He's *fucking* one of them."

There's a little silence. "Ah," the young man breathes. Finally.

Peter feels like he's detached from his own body, like he's floating away into space, flailing around and clinging to nothing at all. He bites down hard on the inside of his cheek and thinks of the soft, fuzzy lint in his pocket.

But he meant it, he thinks. He did. From that same little place, a dark shadow spreading warmly through him. It feels like the very edge of strength, the slip of a knife, cutting quick and deep. Blood pounds at his temples, burns through his veins.

"Mudblood women," says the young man, and then he bites off whatever he was going to say and shakes his head.

Unbidden, Peter remembers Winifred Vance, who went out with him on Valentine's—was it fifth year?—and laughed in her stupid, empty way at all his jokes, and then ducked out of his way when he tried to kiss her. How she and her disgusting friends always burst into laughter when they passed him in the hallways. Winifred Vance and her sister, who always thinks she's so clever: they're both Muggle-born, and they were never...nice.

What is he *thinking?* What has he been saying? He shakes his head uselessly, trying to clear it. He shouldn't have had all those drinks. He should have just gone home and knocked around the house uselessly. He could have flooed James and apologized for something—something he hasn't done yet, something he's about to say;

something he wouldn't have done if he *had* gone home, something that's coming anyway.

But then again.

The young man is saying, "But Potter's best friend was Muggle-born, as I remember. So it can't be just this girlfriend of his. He must have always—"

"No," says Peter, distantly. "That was Sirius Black. His best friend. I mean."

After a pause, the young man says carefully, "Of *the* Blacks? You know, *the*—them?"

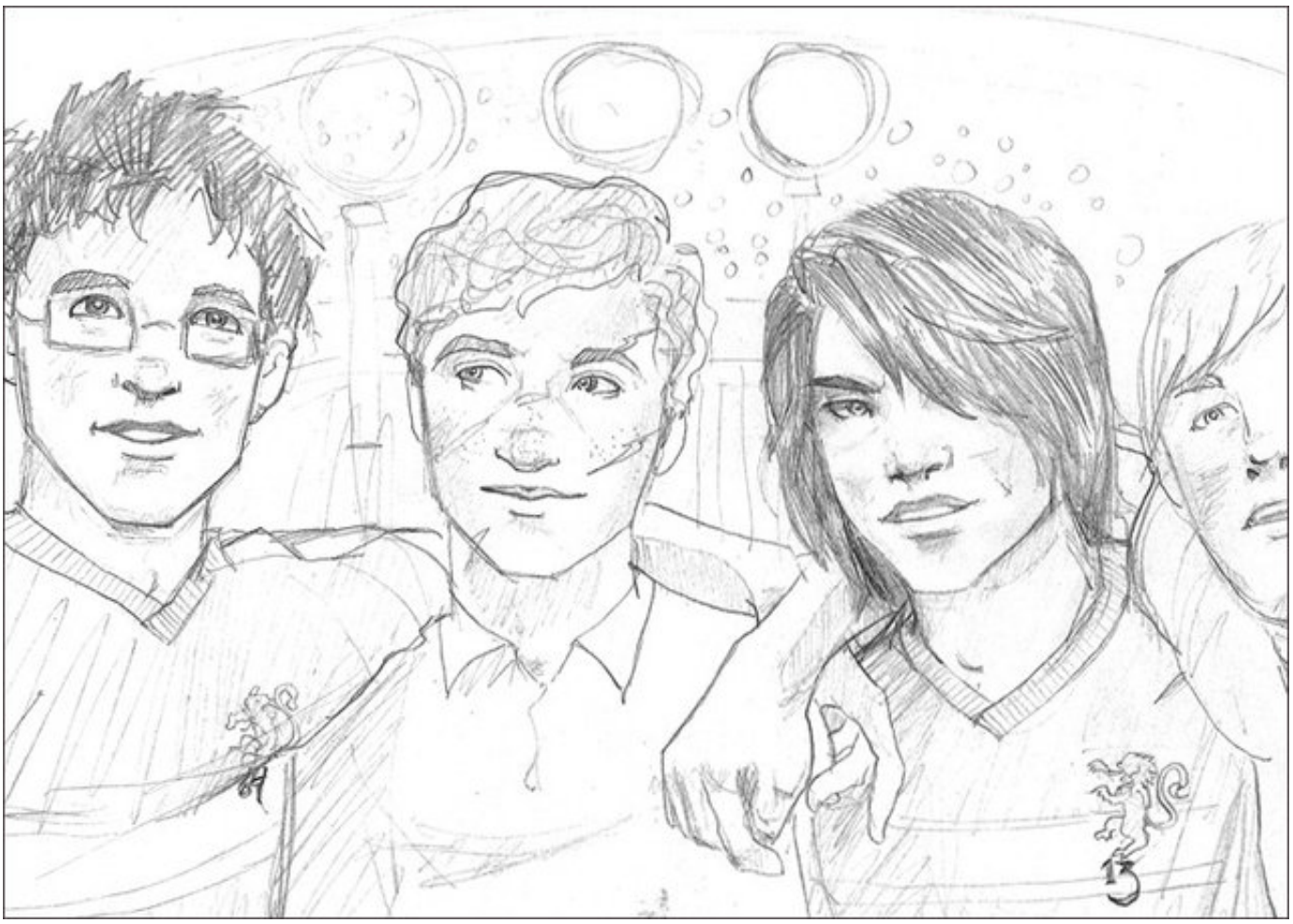
Peter says, "Yes."

"I see," the young man says, with no expression at all. "Would you like to talk about it?"

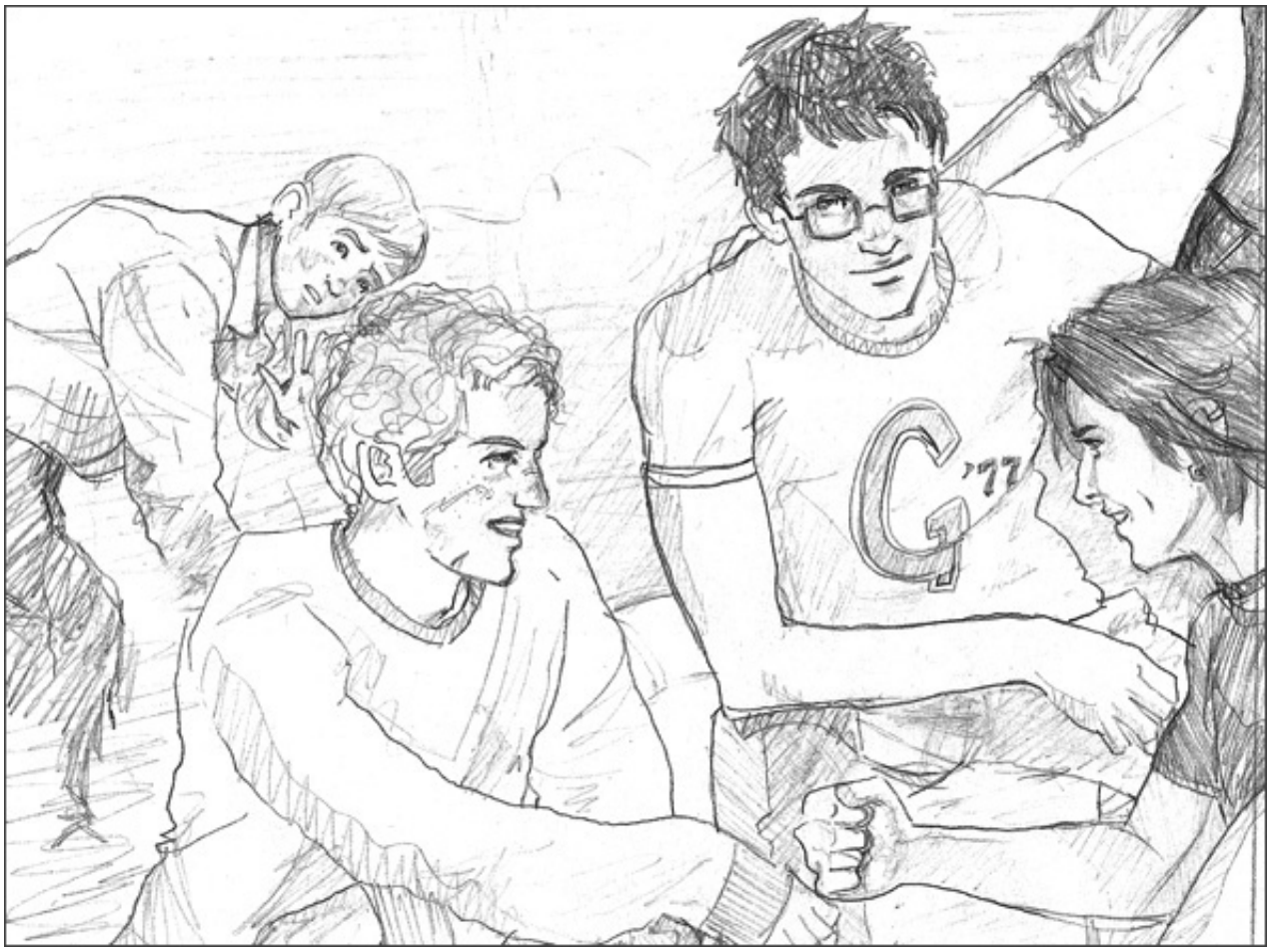
Yes, Peter thinks, and opens his mouth.

*








G '77



shoebox_project(http://www.livejournal.com/community/shoebox_project)

Cowritten by dorkorific and ladyjaida.

dorkorific specializes in **Sirius**; ladyjaida specializes in **Remus**.

dorkorific is **Mlle. Artiste**; ladyjaida is **Mlle. Bits-n-bats**.

The handwriting of Remus J. Lupin, Severus Snape and James Potter is done by ladyjaida.

The handwriting of Sirius Black, Peter Pettigrew and Lily Evans is done by dorkorific.
Don't worry; Peter won't be stupidified. **Trust us** on that one.

We would like to take a moment to thank windjinn for leaping down the stairs with ladyjaida's bra on his head.

all characters herein are the intellectual property of j.k. rowling, scholastic and warner brothers.