

The time that is given us

How love can change lives

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Kapitel 4: Forth chapter

Halloween was a success even though they had to stay home. Going around scaring people would have given them a strange reputation in town. But the kids enjoyed the mystery, doing something nobody else did. Maybe Harry should introduce some other Pagan festivities, he had quite enjoyed them himself. The Weasleys had been horrified when they learned that he had never heard of traditional Yule festivities except for eating a big meal and that all he knew about Easter was that Dudley got tons of chocolate.

Kids needed traditions. Seeing how his own kids grew up with all four year-markers, dancing with fairies and ghosts and lighting the fire of the new year, he had felt the pain of missing all those reminders of the witches and wizards that came before him. It was humbling to know how tiny a light he was in the thousands of years magic had enriched the life of people. He had read the legends and myths of great sorcerers before him to his kids, learned of the gods his ancestors had worshiped. It was nothing he could openly teach to Tom now but maybe he could do it in secret, once the boy was a bit older. Once he knew about magic. In just five years, he would already get his Hogwarts letter. Just five more years to teach compassion to the haughty little bookworm. Gods, how that boy thrived with full access to the city library.

It was Albus all over. He wished Hermione were here with him. He had been happy to leave those two to their discussion of books. At least Hermione had read Dickens and Twain and all those other authors Harry did not even know. He had not owned any children's books and later in life, he had not developed an interest. Now he wished he had read them but alas, they were still unable to hold his interest. He wasn't made for books after so many years where reading meant school-work. It made him loath the thought in an unwholesome way. He could hear his inner Hermione despair.

"Mister Horten?", asked Tom one evening where they sat together in the study.

"Grenmore, please. Or Gren. Or Dad. Whatever you like, just drop the formal speech, please." It wasn't the first time they had this discussion. Most evenings, he just let Tom, but he had just been thinking about Albus and how much he missed his little genius.

"I was wondering about something." As always, Tom just ignored that part of his speech.

"What is it?" Harry put aside his ledger, only too happy to leave the numbers for now. With the new order, he should think about hiring more people. Maybe he should get

more orphans? On the other hand, he thought it important they still had a personal connection to Margret and him and with too many kids, they would be spread too thin.

"This book I read ... it was about a boy that stole. A gentleman gave him a chance and he became a respectable young man. Then he was accused of stealing again, though he hadn't done it. He stayed good." Tom looked very serious about this.

Harry thought he could understand that well. The story was too close to home in his case.

"But what if he had done it? The gentleman believed in him. He would have gotten away with it. But what if he had done something bad?"

"Tom, have you done something bad and are afraid of the consequences?"

"No." That was a bit too quick. "It's just a question."

A disturbing question from the mouth of a nearly six-year-old. Very well. "It is not an easy question. There are two hearts beating in my chest. One is that of a father. As a father, you love your child and you believe in him as long as you can. Only when there is proof or your son has broken your trust again and again should one disbelieve him. So I think the gentleman in that story did the right thing, even if the boy was a criminal. A father always protects his son and stands by his side until proven wrong. I won't harbor a criminal but I'd want proof before I disbelieved my son. That is called trust and trust is an important part of love."

Tom nodded but it was obvious that some of that went over his head.

"On the other hand, I am a man of the law. I believe that punishing people for wrongdoing is the right thing. Sometimes people get punished who really haven't done wrong but were very suspicious. My godfather was such a man. He went to prison for twelve years for a crime he hadn't done. That was obviously wrong and he didn't deserve that, but I'd rather that happens sometimes than for bad people to go free. I had something like a school rival, a nasty boy with a bad attitude, and his father was a criminal. But he was very wealthy and he gave money to the judges to go free. I don't want such things to happen." He looked at Tom's scrunched up face. "I'm sorry, I think I made your problem a whole lot more complicated now."

"Huh ... well ... what do you think of the boy?"

"I think he did well by not going back to stealing. When you steal bread because you are starving, that's wrong but understandable. If you steal sweets because your dad won't buy them, that is just plain wrong. If he had continued stealing even though he had a good life now, I don't think he deserved that good life." He waited for Tom's reaction but did not really get one. The boy seemed to think fast. "Sometimes it's hard to stop with things you have done all your life. And sometimes you even have to learn things before you can stop bad behavior. For example, if you do not know how to make friends without bribing them, then you need to learn social skills first. So there is a time for adjustment in which people continue to do bad things and while that is bad, it is understandable. The right thing to do is to ask for help, to learn and to adjust, so one can stop the bad behavior."

"So ... if the boy had continued to steal, even though he had a good life now, his father might have been understanding and helped him?" Tom sounded like he couldn't really get his head around that.

"If the boy came to him and told him about his problem and asked for help, yes. Asking for help takes a lot of courage. But that courage is what you ask of someone when giving them your time, your possessions and your love."

"Being a parent sounds pretty hard." What a strange line from a nearly six-year-old

boy.

"Being a good son isn't easy either. But we all try our most to become the best version of ourselves that we can."

Tom nodded and opened his book again. It did not seem like he was reading though. He seemed to continue to ponder his problem. Harry just smiled and went back to his ledgers. Thank Merlin he had brought up Albus before having this one on his hands. Without his experience of raising three completely different kids, he would have panicked over this conversation. Tom wasn't dissimilar to his middle son. He would ponder the problem and come back with more questions. In the mean time, Harry would investigate what brought this on.

He was vaguely sure it wasn't stealing.

Margret wasn't helpful in this because she had no idea what bad behavior Tom could have been up to. She said he was perfect. Too perfect actually. She was concerned that often he sounded like an adult. She found it cute how Tom tried his best to imitate Harry but was concerned that except for playing with Helen and Mary in the afternoon, there were few child-like things he did. She said he needed peers his age. Harry was concerned what public school would do to a boy that got by with stealing, biting and setting others against each other for years. Maybe he could get to know some boys and make friends before they would begin school with them. Who in this town had a kid of five or six years of age? The major, as far as he remembered. Maybe he should make a big party and invite all wealthy families of the town. That way he would know who had kids at what age. Maybe a lunch party. Yeah, that would work. Margret loved the idea and roped Brea, Helen and Mary into helping with the planning and preparations. Harry suggested to include Richard as well. It gave Margret big eyes and the comment "But he's a young man!".

"And?"

"I cannot order around a man now, can I?" The idea seemed to frighten her.

"You are head maid, Margret. Every one of these kids is under your supervision. It's not that the house is yours and the garden is his. He needs you to evaluate his work, to praise or criticize him. Just like you need feedback from me sometimes. We are all social creatures, we need one another. If you plan something, please include him. Even if he just arranges the tables or gets some flowers for decoration. He's lonely out there."

"Really?" Brea looked at the other girls for a moment. "He never talks to us. He doesn't even play with us."

"He's very shy." Harry smiled with a bit of nostalgia. He remembered how long Ron had felt like a third wheel, acting like a prick as a consequence. Richard seemed to tend to muteness instead, similar to Neville maybe. "Please give him a chance."

Brea looked to Margret and they seemed to have one of those silent communications where women exchanged whole epilogues without saying a word. Why they needed so many when they could just do something like that eye thing was beyond Harry. The only eye conversation that men exchanged was either "Look, she's hot" or "Man, she's a bitch". He finally got a nod from Margret and Brea both. Wonderful.

Tom played hide-and-seek, tag and some other games with the children. Just looking at that filled Harry with pride and relief. This would work out, he was sure of it. He would arrange more play-dates and get Tom ready to face school-life. One where he wasn't abused and shunned and where he had to become the meanest of them all.

Maybe he should adopt another small child, so that Tom could learn empathy by being a big brother. On the other hand, that might be too much for him or it might make him nervous about his position. Being Harry's sole heir did elevate him above others. Also, Harry wanted to focus his free time on bringing up Tom. A small child would take up a lot of that free time.

No, no other child. Teaching Tom and Margret first class stuff, sometimes playing with the children in the afternoon, talking books and sometimes politics with Tom after dinner and reading him bedtime stories, that was enough to fill his time and hopefully give the boy a sense of family and belonging. By now, Harry was even able to give hugs at night and when he left the house or came back. Sometimes when he sat on the sofa, both of them reading something, Tom would touch him with his feet or even lean against him. Harry wished they had television, so that cuddling on a couch became normal. But they were just building the first cinemas in the country, none of them in Bath to his knowledge and sound had only been introduced for a few years now.

So he resorted to tickling Tom, hugging him and ruining his perfectly combed hair. Whenever he heard the boy squeak or laugh or saw him run around with a big smile, he knew this was working. Raising a child took love, dedication, empathy and a whole lot of nerves to burn through. Harry thought this wasn't too shabby. Tom looked happy and there weren't any complaints about him.

"Uhm ... Grenmore?", asked the boy after the story reading one night.

"Yes, Tom?" Grenmore! Harry felt like doing a little victory dance.

"Why did you invite all those people?"

"It was a party. You meet new people at parties. I wanted to know our neighbors better and I wanted you to make some friends your age."

"Friends?" Tom blinked owlshly. "Why?"

"You'll turn six next month. That means that you can go to school next summer. I want you to learn to make friends and nurture your friendships and even learn how to quarrel and make up again with friends before you go to school. That is because I want you able to have friends in school. People without friends are often bullied or they become bullies themselves. I want neither for you."

"What's a bully?"

For once, Harry understood his mother-in-law completely when she pinched small children's cheeks. They were just too cute sometimes, it was unbearable.

"A bully is someone that intimidates or hurts others to feel powerful. Often because they feel very insecure themselves. I want you to become someone that does not need to look down on others to feel good about himself. I want you to become someone that stands up to bullies." He stopped talking for a second to give Tom the possibility to think this through. "When we started the lessons with you and Margret, you taunted her for not learning as fast as you. That is bullying. It is enough that you know you are smart. You should not need to lord it over anyone."

"So ... I should not tell people they are bad at something?"

"You should help them. Or just leave them alone when you don't have time to help in that moment."

"But I like being better than others."

"Everyone likes being good at some things. But would you like to be accused of every thing you can't do well?"

Tom's face scrunched up.

"If you don't want that done to you, don't do it to others. Everyone has strengths,

everyone has weaknesses. Be proud of the things you can do. You do not need to point out weaknesses to others. That is inner strength, inner greatness."

"But ... how do others see how good I am if I don't point it out?" What a smart question!

"By simply doing it or by helping others. Leading by example. Why would you tell others what you can do when you can just show them?"

"People refuse to see." Tom folded his arms and got a slight pout.

"Do they?" Harry leaned forwards to be on his eye-level. "Did I refuse to see the true you?"

The gray eyed gaze dropped to the floor before Tom slowly looked up again. Stubborn as they come he said: "You're different from other people."

"True." One day Tom would find out that he was a wizard and Harry would tell him that he had known. "But there are a lot of people like me."

"Never met them before." It was no more than a mumble. "The nuns didn't like us at all."

"I think some might have liked you." Harry ruffled the black hair. "But there were too many children for too few nuns, they were poor and overworked. When survival is your top priority, love takes a backseat sometimes."

There was silence for a while but Tom sat tight as a bow-string, so Harry was sure he wasn't done.

"Do you ... do you think ..."

"Do I think what?" Harry took Tom in a half-hug against his side.

"My mum ... maybe she left me because she was poor?"

"They haven't told you anything?" He couldn't help the appalled look. Did this boy really know nothing?

"Never asked." Tom looked up at him. "Do you know?"

"Your mum died in childbirth. She came to the orphanage because she was about to have you and needed help. She gave birth to you there but died because of blood loss." Harry put the blanket around the boy at his side. "Sadly that still happens to a lot of women. Having a child can be lethal, especially when you don't live in the best conditions." Should he say more? Tom's story wasn't exactly heartwarming. But maybe it was better than having no story at all.

"So she's dead." The boy snuggled into the blanket and seemed to be in thought for a moment. "Did they know where she came from?"

"Her name was Merope Gaunt. The Gaunts were an old family but very poor. The last in the line of Salazar Slytherin, a founder of a school called Hogwarts. It's a secret school for gifted students and I hope to send you there when you are eleven." He kissed Tom's hair. "But that is our secret, alright? It's a secret school after all."

"Really?" Big gray eyes looked up at him. "I can go to a school that one of my great-ancestors founded?"

"That's the plan. But first you have to finish elementary school and learn to make friends."

"Do you think they can tell me about my mom?"

"I hope so. Some professors might have taught when she visited the school."

"She went there too?" Tom's face showed a bright grin.

"Yes, she did." But Grenmore didn't. He should keep his stories straight. Grenmore was a Muggle that knew about the magical world.

"Do you know if my father went there too?"

"He didn't go there. I also didn't go there, I just know about the school. Guess we

weren't gifted enough." He smiled to show that was alright. "I think your mom sounded pretty cool. She went to that secret school and she loved you so much that she had you even though her family didn't want her to. If she had lived, she would have loved you, I'm sure."

"Thank you." Tom threw his arms around him before completely disappearing under his blanket. "Good night, Grenmore."

"Good night, son." Harry stood with a smile and left.

Christmas was coming and with it came Tom's birthday. Margret and Harry planned for an opulent party on Christmas eve's lunch time. Harry had planned for a Christmas break for all the kids, wanting them inside on the cold days following the darkest night of the year. They stocked up on food, planning for a filled goose, some ducks and finally some beef right around New Years. They would spend most days in the kitchen baking and cooking or in front of their fireplace roasting apples. They had bought about a ton of eggs for Tom to make cookies with. He would be their head baker, instructing all the other kids on the art of dough sculpting.

Harry also took Tom to the library to look for some books about Yule. He wished he could still apparate and get some from Diagon Alley about wizard traditions. They always had some at the Burrow but Harry wasn't sure what to do exactly. Maybe he could bring one of their deliveries in person and visit the Leaky Cauldron.

Maybe he should bring Tom. On the other hand, wasn't he too young to keep such a secret? He was only five. Six soon, sure, but still a small boy. Wasn't that too big a secret? If Tom told someone, Harry was unable to obliviate them. Maybe he should see how well Tom would do without the gloating. If he was able to be sure in himself without belittling others or holding knowledge over them he might be able to keep such a secret.

Said and done. He took his car with their order to the London headquarters – and what a good idea that was! They were happy to see him in person to discuss business. They had a rather large order and were still looking for contractors. Could he double his production? Well, yes, he could hire more workers but they needed to be taught, it would not be double right away. That seemed to be alright. In this way it was decided that he would take more children with him.

By now he had read up on their current law. A child labor act was in hot discussion and they proposed an age of 14 as the minimum age for employment. So he should look for some boys and girls of 13 or 14 years of age. Before he visited some of the orphanages, he should go to Diagon Alley though. The amulet that his great-grandfather had given him worked well. He was able to find the Leaky Cauldron and even entered the shopping district by tapping the stones with his hand. For some time he just wandered the streets in remembrance. He missed flying. He missed the little household charms, the simplicity of Lumos instead of candles, the squishy feeling of robes. He missed the afternoons eating ice-cream with Lily- no, not going there. He had a new life and purpose now. No sense in crying for things that were lost to him.

He entered the book shop and began browsing the shelves. He packed an edition of The Bard and the Beetle for Tom, some books about paganism and folklore, a book called Rituals through the seasons. He asked the bookshop owner for some recommendations for children's books and packed all that weren't too obviously magical. In the end, he came out with full bags and missed the shrinking charm most of all.

His gaze was drawn to Knockturn Alley. As an auror, he had visited the place more

times than he could count. Over time it had even developed a bit more popularity, changing from a dank, dark alley to a hidden gem. Right now it looked even worse than the first time he had seen it – it was hidden in shadow, filthy and some eyes seemed to stare from the dark.

Was it suicidal to go there as a Muggle? Might be. On the other hand, some things looked worse than they were. Maybe he should just try. With a nod to himself, he entered the foul-smelling place. A man leaning against the wall and watching everyone entering was the first he encountered. Harry just nodded and smiled at him which made the man lower his head. The next was an older witch who had bought some semi-illegal potions ingredients which she tried to hide under her cloak. He already saw Borgin and Burkes when he was stopped by a young witch that seemed fresh out of Hogwarts.

“Looking for company?”, she drawled.

“No, thank you. I am here for some shopping.” He tried to sidestep her.

“After you’re done?”

“Not interested.” He passed her but turned back again. “Except if you knew a woman by the name of Merope Gaunt.”

“What’s it to you?” She folded her arms.

So he had been right. Tom’s mother had worked as a prostitute to earn food.

“I adopted her son. If she left anything, he would be glad to have it.”

“Ah.” The women lowered her gaze. “I thought you might be his real father. In that case, I’d have liked to chew you out.”

“You liked Merope?”

“Not at all, she was a bitch.” The women shrugged her shoulders. “But she was one of us and we stick together. Her dandiprat should bleed.”

Harry just nodded, not wanting to aggravate the witch. She was mostly likely armed, he wasn’t.

“She left nothing though.” Another shrug. “Poor as dirt, she was.”

“Were you there when she sold her locket to Burke?”

“How do you know that?” Her eyes narrowed in suspicion.

“I know things.” He held up a bookbag. “That is my job. So I know what the locket was and that Burke screwed her over. I want it back for Tom.”

“You know an awful lot.” She nodded and stepped up to him. “I thought it was fishy when he said it was nothing much.”

“He’ll try to sell it to me for more money any sane person would give him. It would help tremendously if you chewed him out.”

She just nodded, a small smile on her lips. Dirt poor still ... but if she knew Merope, she must be in her twenties. What was she doing working the streets? Was she a squib? They entered the shop together and the women shouted for Burke in an instant.

Burke looked like a sour man about to bin a dead mouse. In this case, he seemed to regard her in the same venue. For him she seemed to be trash to be disposed of. He was as unsympathic as they got to Harry. “What is it, cunt?”

“I have a name, asshole! It’s Babette. You remember me?”

“Are you drunk again?” Burke looked at Harry. “Is she with you?”

“He’s with me!” Babette walked up to the man and put an accusing finger against him.

“You bought Merope’s locket. We want it back.”

“Merope?” The man sighed in annoyance but thankfully they were no other costumers around. “Which girl was she?”

"Oh come on, you remember all the girls you ripped off. You even slept with her!"

"I sleep with a lot of you scum."

Harry put down his bags and rolled a shoulder. He kept in shape – always. Right now he really wanted to throw a punch. He held back and said: "It's a hexagonal locket with a pale orange stone. I am sure to recognize it."

"How do you know such stuff?" Babette looked over her shoulder but seemed to decide to let it rest.

"I see you know the artifact." Burke smiled like a cat that got cream.

"I do. I also know you gave Merope ten galleons for it. I am here to get it back for her son."

The smile turned sour. Distaste, a frown, a sneer. "You don't expect me to give it to you?"

"I do." He threw a handful of galleons on the floor. Working undercover had taught him some things about dealing around Knockturn Alley. "She sold it to you when she was unable to make more money due to her pregnancy. It was winter, she was starving. She died not a month later."

"Do you expect pity?" Burke snorted.

"I expect you to know when you have sinned." Harry widened his eyes. "Fate shall always haunt us for our wrongdoings."

"You are a seer ... no wonder he knows such stuff." Burke looked at Babette. "He came onto you?"

"He seemed to recognize me. He knew that I knew Merope. He knew I was with her when she sold the locket."

"Damn." Burke made a gesture to ward off evil. "You say you have her son?"

"He shall be great." Harry left it at that. He was sure he would not be able to pull off a fake prophecy. "And he will come for his birthright."

"Fuck you." Burke went to a closed cabinet and opened a drawer with a key.

"Sometimes I hate magic. Should have been more Muggle, really. They're a lot easier to rip off." He took out a locket and trust it at Harry.

He studied it in the faint light shining in from outside and decreed: "The real one if you please."

"It's the real one."

"You should not lie to someone that knows the truth." Harry just looked at Burke steadily. He was not a 100% sure but doubtful enough to suspect Burke of trying to get him out of his hair without losing profit. "The initial is missing."

Burke rolled his eyes but grabbed another locket and forged it over.

Harry tried to reach for his lost magic and said "Open" to the locket. His gaze turned to Babette who simply looked curious, not revolted. So it had been English rather than Parseltongue. That way seemed closed to him. He studied the stone, the initial, the mechanism. The locket opened to reveal a lock of raven hair.

"This is the original", Harry decided. Burke might have faked some lockets but he would not have put a lock of Tom Riddle senior's hair inside of it.

The things Merope might have done with that. She really had been stupidly in love.

"Then go!" Burke snarled.

"Pleasure doing business with you." Harry pocketed the locket and took his bags.

"Have a good day."

Burke pushed Babette out right after him. She stumbled a few steps after him before she seemed to decide to talk to him again: "That was amazing."

"Burke and I speak the same language."

"So you are some kind of ... con artist?"

"Well, I made him think I was a seer, didn't I?" He smiled but continued to walk. He wanted out of this alley now his business was done.

"You aren't?" She blinked and stopped at the alley treshold.

"I am many things." He nodded at her. "All the best to you, Babette."

Somehow it was hard to leave her there. He felt like offering her a job but she was a liability. He could not save every being in this world. He could not take a witch to the Muggle world. It would not do to draw attention to himself. This had been a bit much for his reputation.

"Say hi to Tom for me?", she asked with a lost voice.

"I will." He wouldn't. It was a part of his mother's life the boy should never learn about.