

The time that is given us

How love can change lives

Von Gepo

Kapitel 5: Fifth chapter

He came back home with two girls aged fourteen and thirteen. He had hoped for another boy but none had been any good with a needle. Harry had already ordered the rearrangement for one room to a servant's quarter so Richard would have a bed inside the house, but now it would be a room for the two girls. Hopefully he could also hire one or two locals to integrate all the London kids better. He should ask Margret for some recommendations, most potentials would be her age.

Margret just nodded the two new arrivals off, looking neither pleased nor displeased. So the kids were a strain on her. Maybe he should employ one or two older people, maybe older women. Yes, that was an even better idea. It would leave the poor woman with a bit more breathing space. After all, she wasn't even twenty herself.

Harry felt rather old with all these young ones. After finally settling them in and having Tom following him like a little duckling the whole time, he finally had some time for his son. The small boy looked pleased with that, even though Harry worried how a child so small could be so unobtrusive. James would have chewed his ear off for ignoring him for hours. They went to the library where Tom asked about all the new books and was halfway between annoyed and pleased to hear that there were some books meant for his birthday and Christmas and he was not allowed to see them yet.

"There is one present though that is meant for now." Harry patted the couch beside him to have the boy hop over.

"What is it?" Tom sat down beside him and looked up with eyes very similar to an intrigued cat.

"I was appalled when I heard that the nuns told you nothing about your mother. So I went back to find out more. It led me to this." He pulled out the locket and placed it in Tom's open palm. "It is a family heirloom, it belonged to Salazar Slytherin. You can see his initial in the stone."

Tom held it up and studied it intently.

"When your mom left her house, she took it with her. But because she did not have enough money, she sold it to a pawn shop. I was able to retrieve it. I fear it is the only thing left of her, I was unable to find photos, but maybe they'll have some at Hogwarts."

Those gray eyes seemed cloudy when Tom looked up. At the age of five, his features were still full of emotion, not smooth like that marble stature Tom had later been in life. It was gratifying and certainly worth the trouble. This little boy would learn what love was.

"Does she have a grave?" He asked in a small voice.

Harry sadly shook his head. This was still a time where poor people were thrown into mass graves.

"Her name was Merope Gaunt, right?" Tom climbed into his lap which Harry thought huge progress. It turned into a hug. "Are the Gaunts bad people for throwing her out?"

"Well ... I don't know them in person but I would never throw out my daughter because she got pregnant, even if I don't like her boyfriend."

"Boyfriend?"

"Well, the father of the child." It seemed like time for some sexual education. "To make a baby, you need a man and a woman. They make love and sometimes the woman gets pregnant, so a baby grows in her womb."

"So I have a father?" Tom blinked at him. "I mean, of course, I have you but- or are you my father?"

"I am your father by adoption. But yes, that means you have a biological father. I never knew your mother." Was it too early to tell Tom all this? "You were named after your father. His name was Tom as well."

"What happened to him?"

Hm ... tricky. He was alive, he may even have a family by now. Future Tom had killed him and his grandparents. Would it benefit Tom to know his father early? Or would it drive a wedge between them? Would Tom look down on his father for being Muggle? Would Tom senior be disgusted by his son for being a wizard?

"Sadly I don't know. I know that his name is Tom Riddle. But I don't know where he lives or why he left your mom. When you're a man and you make a girl pregnant, the honorable thing is to marry her. But your father did not do that which is why your mom had to fend for herself. I don't know what happened back then."

"So he is a bad man?" Tom looked sullen.

"Or maybe his parents forbid it. When you are eighteen, you can decide for yourself who you want to marry. But until then, your parents can veto your spouse. Maybe his parents were against the marriage. I don't know how old your parents were exactly. Or maybe something happened to him, I don't know. Sometimes sad things happen and we have no control over them. One should not pass judgment when one does not know the whole story."

The boy seemed to think about that for some time. "Say ... Margret is not your wife, right?"

"No, she is not. She is our maid and your nanny."

"If she got pregnant, would you throw her out?"

"Of course not. I'd congratulate her and find someone to help out for the months she would be unable to work. And if her boyfriend would try getting out of marrying her, I'd have a very stern talk with that man."

"If I got someone pregnant, you'd make me marry her?"

"Well ... I'd talk it through with you at least. If you didn't marry her, I would still give her and the child the possibility to live here. It would be my grandchild after all. If she didn't want to live here, I'd support her financially."

"So you would neither throw your daughter out nor make your son's pregnant girlfriend leave?"

"No, I wouldn't." Harry knew where this was going. He could not defend against the sadness welling up inside of him. Tom was sharp, he understood more than any other five-year-old.

Tom buried his face in Harry's coat. His shoulders shook and finally there was a sob. The boy understood completely. He had grandparents and a father somewhere out there and neither had wanted him or his mother. In a way it was worse than having no one at all.

Harry wrapped the boy into his arms and murmured: "I am here. I'll always be here. I like you lots, Tom. You are my son now."

The boy just continued crying.

Harry feared that was long overdue.

Tom was overwhelmed by his birthday and Christmas. One party at lunch, a family gathering in the evening, another party on the next day – he was running around shouting, crashed into things and couldn't sit still for a minute. In the middle of Christmas day, Harry decided to excuse them both, took Tom to his room and told him they would nap now.

That was greeted with curses, shouts, tears, Tom tearing at the closed door, throwing his little fists against Harry's legs and finally screaming at the top of his lungs before dropping on the bed, sobbing uncontrollably before falling into a dead sleep. Harry weathered it stoically. James had had such episodes often until he was seven or eight, it wasn't unusual. Albus had only had one or two in his life, so Harry looked forward to only a few from Tom. Him and Albus were quite similar in character.

Harry had decided to put a rocking chair into his son's room, so he sat down on that one and decided that a nap really was a splendid idea, even for him. He woke to Margret knocking at the door. She told them it was dinner time and Harry decided that waking Tom was beneficial if he wanted any sleep in the night.

"Hey, son. Wakie-wakie." He saw Tom scrunch his nose. "It's dinner time. Everyone's waiting. Margret made a lovely roast. Isn't it a wonderful smell?"

"I'm tired", the boy mumbled.

"You can go back to sleep after dinner. Come on now."

Tom sat up, his eyes still half-shut. He slipped out of the bed and asked: "Can I go like this?"

"Of course you can." Harry held out his hand for the boy. "Did you notice the wonderful smell?"

"I'm hungry."

"That's good, there are lots and lots of food. I think there will be gravy and coal slaw. Margret's been cooking for hours."

"I wanted to help." Tom pouted.

"You had too much energy to be helpful."

The raven-haired boy suddenly stopped and looked up at Harry with big, fearful eyes.

"What is it?" Harry knelt down in front of him.

"Did ... did I scream at you? And hit you?" Tom's voice trembled.

"You were a bit out of it, yeah. I stopped you too late. With growing up, you'll have to learn to notice before you reach the stage where you lose control over your emotions. It's best to take a breather then."

"I'm sorry." He looked close to tears, completely horrified by what he had done.

"It happens to the best of us." Harry patted his head. "You'll learn."

"I've never done something like that."

"I'm sure you have." He picked up the boy and brought him into the dining room.

"Good evening, everyone."

"Good evening!" Everyone chorused with big smiles.

"I smell a wonderful roast. Who made what today?" He sat Tom in his seat and took his own.

"Oh, Richard made the coal slaw and helped with the gravy. The girls made the filling and I prepared the goose. It was a team effort."

"Dorothea folded the napkins and Laurette polished the silver", Brea added.

"You all worked hard today. Let's enjoy your efforts. Thank you for being such a great team." He smiled at them all. "Tom, you say today's grace."

"Bless us, o Lord, and these, thy gifts, which we are about to receive from thy bounty. Through Christ, our Lord ... and I am sorry I was a bad boy today. Amen."

„Amen.“ Everyone answered and more than one smiled.

"Thank you, Tom." Harry smiled at him.

"Now, let's have the man of the house cut the roast." Margret held out a two-pointed fork and a knife for him.

"Me? Oh, what honor." He stood up and began to carve the goose. "Please don't laugh at me, I'm not sure I ever did this before."

The youngsters grinned, especially when Margret had to come to his aid. They all laughed in the end and Harry was pretty sure he had ruined the table-cloth forever. But everyone got served a bit of goose with him and Margret getting one each of the legs and Tom and Brea getting the wings. Richard smiled like a loon to get a big piece of goose breast. Dorothea and Laurette who were still a bit new to being treated like family instead of dirt just stared at the big piece of meat they got each. Even though they had spent to whole day preparing a meal for everyone of them, they still looked as if they hadn't believed in actually getting to eat it.

But all in all, Harry had only heard good things about them. They had learned from Brea and were diligent workers. Harry only controlled their end product and seldom had to add changes. More and more, Brea seemed to become friends with both of them. It was only a matter of time before he expected them to head out to town and meet with the local boys. Richard had started going out which had done him a lot of good. Instead of a lanky, shy teenager, he was growing into his body. Margret also included him more which ensured his place in the family.

Life seemed well enough.

Dear Albus,

things are progressing well. I took charge of my little devil and it turns out he can be an angel. A cunning, rather ruthless angel sometimes, but it would not have expected otherwise. I write to you on his behalf. His mother was a witch by the name of Merope Gaunt. Did she visit Hogwarts? Are there any photos of her? Is there anything you can tell me about her?

Yours truly, Grenmore

Harry spent the next few days mostly indoors. The yule days were cold and harsh. Richard and him went out a few times to get more wood and Tom sometimes traveled along and ran back to the house with the wood they had hacked. The girls worked on their embroidery skills in the meantime. He asked them to think of an advertisement for getting new workers for their factory. Maybe an older woman and a man. The kids needed more role-models.

He also taught them a bit more about business as well as having some poem reading

circles in the evening. As he had only visited normal school for five years as well, it wasn't much that he could teach them. By now all were able to read and write, do calculations and were able to speak posh English instead of the street accent some had before. He thought about hiring a real teacher but all of them had jobs and he did not expect any of them to want to study. Even if – by the time they would be able to visit a university, this country would be at war. He might be drafted back into the army. Darn, Richard might be drafted. At least Tom was safe.

Maybe he should spend a few days learning more about the army in case this happened. He had been a general before – what did a general even do? Okay, he ordered people around, sure, but with what? And how? Harry did not want to be the reason WWII was suddenly lost instead of won. He should really look into that next year.

All in all, it was a quiet and peaceful time that they spent together. The years turned and they celebrated with a healthy soup. It did not sit well with Harry that some people were freezing and dying out there but what was he to do? He neither wanted to go into politics nor have people notice him by becoming a prominent figure in London. So no fundraising, no benefiz galas, simply laying low and giving Tom a nice home-life. So he was wholly unprepared for his son's request: "Can we go look for my father?"

He must have blinked owlshly because Tom averted his gaze and shrunk into himself in fear of rejection. "You mean Tom Riddle senior?"

"Yes ... is it bad that I want to meet him?"

"Everyone wants to meet and know their parents, that is quite normal." Harry remembered his own childhood in painstaking clarity. "I just fear you might be met with rejection."

"I am aware." Tom looked up, much too old eyes in a face too young to take on the world. "But, I mean ... I still have you, right? So if he does not like me, I can still stay with you?"

"Always, Tom." Harry picked up the boy and sat him on his lap. "When one is still young, the world seems so easy. Parents are loving people, the give you eternal happiness. Except if they are bad parents. But growing up means meeting a lot of parents and one learns that there are all kinds of parents. Loving their child is only one aspect. Some parents believe in punishment with beatings or starving."

"Like the nuns?" Tom's voice trembled.

"Yes, I think some of them believed that to be the right way. It does not mean they did not love you as well, just that they used different methods than me for example."

"I don't think any of them loved us. Except for Sister Henriette maybe. She sang songs with us and put us to bed."

"She believed in that way. People believe in all kinds of things. God or fate or magic. Some might exist, some may not. Believes shape feelings but some things may exist at the same time and that might not make sense to one so young as you."

"Like what?" Tom looked up curiously.

"Your father might not want to have anything to do with you. He might also want you as an heir but not care for you. He might want you to live with him and beat you because he thinks that it is the right way. He might want to get to know you and then grow tired of it because not everyone likes to interact with kids. All kind of things might happen."

"You don't want me hurt, right?" Tom upped his chin. "I can take it, I'm strong."

"I don't doubt it. As long as you can return to me, I am sure you can look after

yourself. You are a big boy after all." He tapped Tom's nose with his finger which made the boy giggle and scrunch up his face. "But that's the thing. I am your father by adoption. He is your father by blood. He has more rights than me if he decides to press his case. As long as you are this young, you would have no say in any of it. So if we went to find him now and he turns out to be someone that does not want the best for you, I might not be able to stop him. He could apply for custody of you, my adoption would be annulled and he would have every right. He could beat you or starve you and I would not be allowed to do anything about that."

"Oh." Tom looked at him with big eyes. "That's bad."

"Yes, it is ... so I am afraid of what would happen if we were to look for him now."

"I see." The boy hung his head. "I don't want to be away from you."

"I also want you here." Harry pet his head. "You are my precious son after all."

"When can we look for him? When am I old enough?"

"I'd have to ask a layer. Maybe twelve or fourteen, I don't know."

"But that's ages away!" Tom's pouty face was just too cute, Harry had to hug him for a minute. "Stop that, Dad!"

"Nope." Harry smiled into the black tresses. "I'll hug you until you remember how young you are."

"I am six years old already!"

"Yes, you are." Harry leaned back and looked Tom in the eyes. "This will be an exciting year. You'll start school and it will make you smarter and more knowledgeable than even me."

Tom just grinned like the tomboy that often hid behind the well-mannered facade.

Harry held his cheeks with both of his hands. "You are important to me, Tom. I don't want to lose you."

His face became serious and his eyes glistened with unshed tears.

"Ask me again when you are older. I don't want to keep your father from you. I just don't want to lose you or see you get hurt." He kissed the boy's forehead. "I hope you understand."

"Sure do, Dad." Still Tom's voice choked up. He looked away, so that Harry would not see his tears but the hands on the boy's cheeks got wet.

He gently pulled him back into a hug.

He direly hoped he had done the right thing.

Dear Grenmore,

I was happy to hear from you again. I had feared that you had met another accident. Thank you for trying your best for a better future. Now, back to your question. I started as a teacher at Hogwarts in 1921 at 30 years of age. I wanted to teach Care for Magical Creatures but alas, they made me a teachers for Charms and Transfiguration. Right now it's Transfiguration. I'd rather teach Ancient Runes by now, it's a fascinating subject really. Anyway, when I came to Hogwarts, Merope Gaunt was in her fifth year. She was a rather unremarkable Slytherin. Most of her peers mocked her for her run-down wardrobe and her unfortunate looks. She had one bad eye that squinted and crooked teeth. She did not speak much. I talked with her Head of House because she sometimes walked strangely when she came back after the holidays. I thought it might be domestical abuse but the teacher waved me off. She came from an old and noble lineage linked to Salazar Slytherin. She wore his locket proudly. I think her parents wanted her to be courted but being a sullen and plain girl, she was unable to draw attention to herself. She seems to

have been rather good at Potions but Charms wasn't her strength. I was her Charms professor at the time. I think I would have taught her some spells to make herself a bit prettier if I had taught Transfiguration at the time. I don't believe in beautifying oneself but she seemed to anguish a lot over her looks and thought herself a hopeless case. She could have done better with a slight boost in self-confidence. I am happy to hear she has found an husband and born a son. Though your words "taking charge" imply that you might have adopted the boy? Does this mean that Merope died already? What happened to the father?

Yours truly, Albus

P.S.: I looked for a graduation photograph and attached a copy. It's the only one I could find. She did not win any awards or otherwise made a name of herself.

Well, Merope was one ugly witch. Harry looked at the photograph and completely understood what Dumbledore meant about beauty charms. Hermione had had those ugly front teeth and corrected them somewhere during their school career. He could not remember when but one day they were simply gone. She had also had frizzy hair with unruly curls that changed into a beautiful mane somewhere along the line. He had seen the same happen to other girls and even some boys. Merope had teeth so crooked she did not seem able to close her lips over them. A long lower jaw, an underdeveloped middle face with a pudgy nose and her cross-eyed gaze would not win her any beauty contests. It reminded him of some pictures of old Lords and Ladys and he asked himself for a moment if there might have been incest in her family. It seemed likely with those pure-blooded fanatics. He poked his brain for information about Merope's mother but could not find any. From the memories he had gotten from Dumbledore, he knew Merope's brother and father weren't exactly smart people. There was hardly a thing to say in her favor. How should he tell Tom about that?

The little imp was having a snow-ball fight with the others. He observed them for a minute before deciding that tonight was soon enough. First he had to thank Dumbledore for his help. He hoped it had not been a bad idea to tell the man which boy to watch out for. On the other hand, the man would most likely have been the one to tell Tom that he was a wizard at the age of eleven and he would have recognized Grenmore Horton's name. Certainly, he would have drawn a connection. This way Tom might gain some support instead of suspicion thrown his way. For all his strengths, Albus Dumbledore was obviously discriminating against Slytherins.

And Tom would be one without doubt. The little charmer still got everything he wanted out of Margret. Sometimes just by smiling, asking nicely, coyly, sometimes demanding in an imitation of a haughty voice. Sometimes Harry thought that must have been what Draco Malfoy sounded like as a child. Tom loved the fact that he was a rich man's son while all others were people working for his father. Harry still did his best to temper his arrogance into acknowledging the responsibility that came with it. Teaching him business seemed to do the trick for now. He let Tom help with when he did the books, receiving orders, organizing their shipment and writing diplomatic correspondence. He tried teaching his son that being a boss just meant doing another job – not a better one, just a different one and one that required overview and good decision-making skills. He often asked the boy for his opinion to see how much of the concept he had already grasped.

Still, most days he just wanted to look at a laughing, playing child. A few times a day, it was a whiny, sulky or angry version of said child but even the most stubborn mind could learn. James had been a lot harder to teach compassion to. Just like his namesake he had been a bully at heart and it had taken rather a lot to curb those tendencies. Hateful loudmouths only lasted in people's grace for a small amount of time. People grew bored with it rather fast once they grew up.

He missed Ginny. Good, how much he missed her. She was the fierce presence by his side, the one to scold and order everyone around and grow so incredibly shy when he looked at her with adoring eyes once she went into fury-mode. She was a completely different mother than her own. She cooked and stuffed them all with food left and right but she wasn't all hugs and smiles. Having a smile from her was a high praise and they all tried to make her proud, Harry included. She was fierceness and fire, only seldom mellowing down to smoldering embers. Harry was the one who hugged and cuddled, who read stories and sang. He did not like the role as disciplinarian but sometimes she had him make the decision on tricky matters.

He missed her flaming soul, her witty input, her loyalty and love. He missed her presence at his side. He missed the joy she had brought into his life, he missed their children most of all. Would he really never see her again? With his eyes closed, he let out a wary sigh. One day he would see her again, he was sure. Somewhere on the other side.