

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 ruffled 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. Ravensclaws 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 floored 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.

*











🎨 [shoebox_project](http://www.livejournal.com/community/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.