

Harry Potter

and the
Chamber of Secrets



J.K. ROWLING

HARRY
POTTER
and the Chamber of Secrets



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*For Séan P.F. Harris,
getaway driver and foulweather friend*

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Dobby's Reward

The Worst Birthday

Not for the first time, an argument had broken out over breakfast at number four, Privet Drive. Mr Vernon Dursley had been woken in the early hours of the morning by a loud, hooting noise from his nephew Harry's room.

'Third time this week!' he roared across the table. 'If you can't control that owl, it'll have to go!'

Harry tried, yet again, to explain.

'She's *bored*,' he said. 'She's used to flying around outside. If I could just let her out at night ...'

'Do I look stupid?' snarled Uncle Vernon, a bit of fried egg dangling from his bushy moustache. 'I know what'll happen if that owl's let out.'

He exchanged dark looks with his wife, Petunia.

Harry tried to argue back but his words were drowned by a long, loud belch from the Dursleys' son, Dudley.

'I want more bacon.'

'There's more in the frying pan, sweetums,' said Aunt Petunia, turning misty eyes on her massive son. 'We must feed you up while we've got the chance ... I don't like the sound of that school food ...'

'Nonsense, Petunia, I never went hungry when I was at Smeltings,' said Uncle Vernon heartily. 'Dudley gets enough, don't you, son?'

Dudley, who was so large his bottom drooped over either side of the kitchen chair, grinned and turned to Harry.

'Pass the frying pan.'

'You've forgotten the magic word,' said Harry irritably.

The effect of this simple sentence on the rest of the family was incredible: Dudley gasped and fell off his chair with a crash that shook the whole kitchen; Mrs Dursley gave a small scream and clapped her hands to her mouth; Mr Dursley jumped to his feet, veins throbbing in his temples.

'I meant "please"!' said Harry quickly. 'I didn't mean —'

'WHAT HAVE I TOLD YOU,' thundered his uncle, spraying spit over the table, 'ABOUT SAYING THE M WORD IN OUR HOUSE?'

'But I —'

'HOW DARE YOU THREATEN DUDLEY!' roared Uncle Vernon, pounding the table with his fist.

'I just —'

'I WARNED YOU! I WILL NOT TOLERATE MENTION OF YOUR ABNORMALITY UNDER THIS ROOF!'

Harry stared from his purple-faced uncle to his pale aunt, who was trying to heave Dudley to his feet.

‘All right,’ said Harry, ‘*all right ...*’

Uncle Vernon sat back down, breathing like a winded rhinoceros and watching Harry closely out of the corners of his small, sharp eyes.

Ever since Harry had come home for the summer holidays, Uncle Vernon had been treating him like a bomb that might go off at any moment, because Harry *wasn't* a normal boy. As a matter of fact, he was as not normal as it is possible to be.

Harry Potter was a wizard – a wizard fresh from his first year at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. And if the Dursleys were unhappy to have him back for the holidays, it was nothing to how Harry felt.

He missed Hogwarts so much it was like having a constant stomach ache. He missed the castle, with its secret passageways and ghosts, his lessons (though perhaps not Snape, the Potions master), the porridge arriving by owl, eating banquets in the Great Hall, sleeping in his four-poster bed in the tower dormitory, visiting the gamekeeper, Hagrid, in his cabin in the grounds next to the Forbidden Forest, and, especially, Quidditch, the most popular sport in the wizarding world (six tall goalposts, four flying balls and fourteen players on broomsticks).

All Harry's spellbooks, his wand, robes, cauldron and top-of-the-range Nimbus Two Thousand broomstick had been locked in a cupboard under the stairs by Uncle Vernon the instant Harry had come home. What did the Dursleys care if Harry lost his place in the house Quidditch team because he hadn't practised all summer? What was it to the Dursleys if Harry went back to school without any of his homework done? The Dursleys were what wizards called Muggles (not a drop of magical blood in their veins) and as far as they were concerned, having a wizard in the family was a matter of deeper shame. Uncle Vernon had even padlocked Harry's owl, Hedwig, inside her cage, to stop her carrying messages to anyone in the wizarding world.

Harry looked nothing like the rest of the family. Uncle Vernon was large and neckless, with an enormous black moustache; Aunt Petunia was horse-faced and bony; Dudley was blond, pink and porky. Harry, on the other hand, was small and skinny, with brilliant green eyes and jet-black hair that was always untidy. He wore round glasses, and on his forehead was a thin, lightning-shaped scar.

It was this scar that made Harry so particularly unusual, even for a wizard. This scar was the only hint of Harry's very mysterious past, of the reason he had been left on the Dursleys' doorstep eleven years before.

At the age of one, Harry had somehow survived a curse from the greatest dark sorcerer of all time, Lord Voldemort, whose name most witches and wizards still feared to speak. Harry's parents had died in Voldemort's attack, but Harry had escaped with his lightning scar, and somehow – nobody understood why – Voldemort's powers had been destroyed the instant he had failed to kill Harry.

So Harry had been brought up by his dead mother's sister and her husband. He had spent ten years with the Dursleys, never understanding why he kept making odd things happen without meaning to, believing the Dursleys' story that he had got his scar in the car crash which had killed his parents.

And then, exactly a year ago, Hogwarts had written to Harry, and the whole story had come out. Harry had taken up his place at wizard school, where he and his scar were famous ... but now the school year was over, and he was back with the Dursleys for the summer, back to being treated like a dog that had rolled in something smelly.

The Dursleys hadn't even remembered that today happened to be Harry's twelfth birthday. Of course, his hopes hadn't been high; they'd never given him a proper present, let alone a cake – but

ignore it completely ...

At that moment, Uncle Vernon cleared his throat importantly and said, 'Now, as we all know, today is a very important day.'

Harry looked up, hardly daring to believe it.

'This could well be the day I make the biggest deal of my career,' said Uncle Vernon.

Harry went back to his toast. Of course, he thought bitterly, Uncle Vernon was talking about the stupid dinner party. He'd been talking of nothing else for a fortnight. Some rich builder and his wife were coming to dinner and Uncle Vernon was hoping to get a huge order from him (Uncle Vernon's company made drills).

'I think we should run through the schedule one more time,' said Uncle Vernon. 'We should all be in position at eight o'clock. Petunia, you will be -?'

'In the lounge,' said Aunt Petunia promptly, 'waiting to welcome them graciously to our home.'

'Good, good. And Dudley?'

'I'll be waiting to open the door.' Dudley put on a fowl, simpering smile. 'May I take your coats, Mr Mason and Mrs Mason?'

'They'll love him!' cried Aunt Petunia rapturously.

'Excellent, Dudley,' said Uncle Vernon. Then he rounded on Harry. 'And *you?*'

'I'll be in my bedroom, making no noise and pretending I'm not there,' said Harry tonelessly.

'Exactly,' said Uncle Vernon nastily. 'I will lead them into the lounge, introduce you, Petunia, and pour them drinks. At eight fifteen -'

'I'll announce dinner,' said Aunt Petunia.

'And Dudley, you'll say -'

'May I take you through to the dining room, Mrs Mason?' said Dudley, offering his fat arm to an invisible woman.

'My perfect little gentleman!' sniffed Aunt Petunia.

'And *you?*' said Uncle Vernon viciously to Harry.

'I'll be in my room, making no noise and pretending I'm not there,' said Harry dully.

'Precisely. Now, we should aim to get in a few good compliments at dinner. Petunia, any ideas?'

'Vernon tells me you're a *wonderful* golfer, Mr Mason ... Do tell me where you bought your dress, Mrs Mason ...'

'Perfect ... Dudley?'

'How about: "We had to write an essay about our hero at school, Mr Mason, and I wrote about you."'

This was too much for both Aunt Petunia and Harry. Aunt Petunia burst into tears and hugged her son, while Harry ducked under the table so they wouldn't see him laughing.

'And you, boy?'

Harry fought to keep his face straight as he emerged.

'I'll be in my room, making no noise and pretending I'm not there,' he said.

'Too right you will,' said Uncle Vernon forcefully. 'The Masons don't know anything about you and it's going to stay that way. When dinner's over, you take Mrs Mason back to the lounge for

coffee, Petunia, and I'll bring the subject round to drills. With any luck, I'll have the deal signed and sealed before the *News at Ten*. We'll be shopping for a holiday home in Majorca this time tomorrow.

Harry couldn't feel too excited about this. He didn't think the Dursleys would like him any better in Majorca than they did in Privet Drive.

'Right – I'm off into town to pick up the dinner jackets for Dudley and me. And *you*,' he snarled at Harry, 'you stay out of your aunt's way while she's cleaning.'

Harry left through the back door. It was a brilliant, sunny day. He crossed the lawn, slumped down on the garden bench and sang under his breath, 'Happy birthday to me ... happy birthday to me ...'

No cards, no presents, and he would be spending the evening pretending not to exist. He gazed miserably into the hedge. He had never felt so lonely. More than anything else at Hogwarts, more even than playing Quidditch, Harry missed his best friends, Ron Weasley and Hermione Granger. They, however, didn't seem to be missing him at all. Neither of them had written to him all summer, even though Ron had said he was going to ask Harry to come and stay.

Countless times, Harry had been on the point of unlocking Hedwig's cage by magic and sending her to Ron and Hermione with a letter, but it wasn't worth the risk. Underage wizards weren't allowed to use magic outside school. Harry hadn't told the Dursleys this; he knew it was only their terror that he might turn them all into dung beetles that stopped them locking *him* in the cupboard under the stairs with his wand and broomstick. For the first couple of weeks back, Harry had enjoyed muttering nonsense words under his breath and watching Dudley tearing out of the room as fast as his fat legs would carry him. But the long silence from Ron and Hermione had made Harry feel so cut off from the magical world that even taunting Dudley had lost its appeal – and now Ron and Hermione had forgotten his birthday.

What wouldn't he give now for a message from Hogwarts? From any witch or wizard? He'd almost be glad of a sight of his arch-enemy, Draco Malfoy, just to be sure it hadn't all been a dream ...

Not that his whole year at Hogwarts had been fun. At the very end of last term, Harry had come face to face with none other than Lord Voldemort himself. Voldemort might be a ruin of his former self, but he was still terrifying, still cunning, still determined to regain power. Harry had slipped through Voldemort's clutches for a second time, but it had been a narrow escape, and even now, weeks later, Harry kept waking in the night, drenched in cold sweat, wondering where Voldemort was now, remembering his livid face, his wide, mad eyes ...

Harry suddenly sat bolt upright on the garden bench. He had been staring absent-mindedly into the hedge – *and the hedge was staring back*. Two enormous green eyes had appeared among the leaves.

Harry jumped to his feet just as a jeering voice floated across the lawn.

'I know what day it is,' sang Dudley, waddling towards him.

The huge eyes blinked and vanished.

'What?' said Harry, not taking his eyes off the spot where they had been.

'I know what day it is,' Dudley repeated, coming right up to him.

'Well done,' said Harry. 'So you've finally learned the days of the week.'

'Today's your *birthday*,' sneered Dudley. 'How come you haven't got any cards? Haven't you even got friends at that freak place?'

'Better not let your mum hear you talking about my school,' said Harry coolly.

Dudley hitched up his trousers, which were slipping down his fat bottom.

‘Why’re you staring at the hedge?’ he said suspiciously.

‘I’m trying to decide what would be the best spell to set it on fire,’ said Harry.

Dudley stumbled backwards at once, a look of panic on his fat face.

‘You c-can’t – Dad told you you’re not to do m-magic – he said he’ll chuck you out of the house and you haven’t got anywhere else to go – you haven’t got any *friends* to take you –’

‘*Jiggery pokery!*’ said Harry in a fierce voice. ‘Hocus pocus ... squiggly wiggly ...’

‘MUUUUUUM!’ howled Dudley, tripping over his feet as he dashed back towards the house. ‘MUUUUM! He’s doing you know what!’

Harry paid dearly for his moment of fun. As neither Dudley nor the hedge was in any way hurt, Aunt Petunia knew he hadn’t really done magic, but he still had to duck as she aimed a heavy blow at his head with the soapy frying pan. Then she gave him work to do, with the promise he wouldn’t eat again until he’d finished.

While Dudley lolled around watching and eating ice-creams, Harry cleaned the windows, washed the car, mowed the lawn, trimmed the flowerbeds, pruned and watered the roses and re-painted the garden bench. The sun blazed overhead, burning the back of his neck. Harry knew he shouldn’t have risen to Dudley’s bait, but Dudley had said the very thing Harry had been thinking himself ... maybe he *didn’t* have any friends at Hogwarts ...

‘Wish they could see famous Harry Potter now,’ he thought savagely, as he spread manure on the flowerbeds, his back aching, sweat running down his face.

It was half past seven in the evening when at last, exhausted, he heard Aunt Petunia calling him.

‘Get in here! And walk on the newspaper!’

Harry moved gladly into the shade of the gleaming kitchen. On top of the fridge stood tonight’s pudding: a huge mound of whipped cream and sugared violets. A joint of roast pork was sizzling in the oven.

‘Eat quickly! The Masons will be here soon!’ snapped Aunt Petunia, pointing to two slices of bread and a lump of cheese on the kitchen table. She was already wearing a salmon-pink cocktail dress.

Harry washed his hands and bolted down his pitiful supper. The moment he had finished, Aunt Petunia whisked away his plate. ‘Upstairs! Hurry!’

As he passed the door to the living room, Harry caught a glimpse of Uncle Vernon and Dudley in bow-ties and dinner jackets. He had only just reached the upstairs landing when the doorbell rang and Uncle Vernon’s furious face appeared at the foot of the stairs.

‘Remember, boy – one sound ...’

Harry crossed to his bedroom on tiptoe, slipped inside, closed the door and turned to collapse on his bed.

The trouble was, there was already someone sitting on it.

Dobby's Warning

Harry managed not to shout out, but it was a close thing. The little creature on the bed had large, bat-like ears and bulging green eyes the size of tennis balls. Harry knew instantly that this was what had been watching him out of the garden hedge that morning.

As they stared at each other, Harry heard Dudley's voice from the hall.

'May I take your coats, Mr and Mrs Mason?'

The creature slipped off the bed and bowed so low that the end of its long thin nose touched the carpet. Harry noticed that it was wearing what looked like an old pillowcase, with rips for arm and leg holes.

'Er – hello,' said Harry nervously.

'Harry Potter!' said the creature, in a high-pitched voice Harry was sure would carry down the stairs. 'So long has Dobby wanted to meet you, sir ... Such an honour it is ...'

'Th-thank you,' said Harry, edging along the wall and sinking into his desk chair, next to Hedwig, who was asleep in her large cage. He wanted to ask, 'What are you?' but thought it would sound too rude, so instead he said, 'Who are you?'

'Dobby, sir. Just Dobby. Dobby the house-elf,' said the creature.

'Oh – really?' said Harry. 'Er – I don't want to be rude or anything, but – this isn't a great time for me to have a house-elf in my bedroom.'

Aunt Petunia's high, false laugh sounded from the living room. The elf hung his head.

'Not that I'm not pleased to meet you,' said Harry quickly, 'but, er, is there any particular reason you're here?'

'Oh, yes, sir,' said Dobby earnestly. 'Dobby has come to tell you, sir ... it is difficult, sir ... Dobby wonders where to begin ...'

'Sit down,' said Harry politely, pointing at the bed.

To his horror, the elf burst into tears – very noisy tears.

'*S-sit down!*' he wailed. '*Never ... never ever ...*'

Harry thought he heard the voices downstairs falter.

'I'm sorry,' he whispered, 'I didn't mean to offend you or anything.'

'Offend Dobby!' choked the elf. 'Dobby has never been asked to sit down by a wizard – like a wizard – *equal* –'

Harry, trying to say 'Shh!' and look comforting at the same time, ushered Dobby back onto the bed where he sat hiccupping, looking like a large and very ugly doll. At last he managed to control himself, and sat with his great eyes fixed on Harry in an expression of watery adoration.

'You can't have met many decent wizards,' said Harry, trying to cheer him up.

Dobby shook his head. Then, without warning, he leapt up and started banging his head furiously on the wall.

the window, shouting, ‘*Bad Dobby! Bad Dobby!*’

‘Don’t – what are you doing?’ Harry hissed, springing up and pulling Dobby back onto the bed. Hedwig had woken up with a particularly loud screech and was beating her wings wildly against the bars of her cage.

‘Dobby had to punish himself, sir,’ said the elf, who had gone slightly cross-eyed. ‘Dobby almost spoke ill of his family, sir ...’

‘Your family?’

‘The wizard family Dobby serves, sir ... Dobby is a house-elf – bound to serve one house and one family for ever ...’

‘Do they know you’re here?’ asked Harry curiously.

Dobby shuddered.

‘Oh no, sir, no ... Dobby will have to punish himself most grievously for coming to see you, sir. Dobby will have to shut his ears in the oven door for this. If they ever knew, sir –’

‘But won’t they notice if you shut your ears in the oven door?’

‘Dobby doubts it, sir. Dobby is always having to punish himself for something, sir. They lets Dobby get on with it, sir. Sometimes they reminds me to do extra punishments ...’

‘But why don’t you leave? Escape?’

‘A house-elf must be set free, sir. And the family will never set Dobby free ... Dobby will serve the family until he dies, sir ...’

Harry stared.

‘And I thought I was hard-done-by staying here for another four weeks,’ he said. ‘This makes the Dursleys sound almost human. Can’t anyone help you? Can’t I?’

Almost at once, Harry wished he hadn’t spoken. Dobby dissolved again into wails of gratitude.

‘Please,’ Harry whispered frantically, ‘please be quiet. If the Dursleys hear anything, if they know you’re here ...’

‘Harry Potter asks if he can help Dobby ... Dobby has heard of your greatness, sir, but of your goodness, Dobby never knew ...’

Harry, who was feeling distinctly hot in the face, said, ‘Whatever you’ve heard about my greatness is a load of rubbish. I’m not even top of my year at Hogwarts, that’s Hermione, she –’

But he stopped quickly, because thinking about Hermione was painful.

‘Harry Potter is humble and modest,’ said Dobby reverently, his orb-like eyes aglow. ‘Harry Potter speaks not of his triumph over He Who Must Not Be Named.’

‘Voldemort?’ said Harry.

Dobby clapped his hands over his bat ears and moaned, ‘Ah, speak not the name, sir! Speak not the name!’

‘Sorry,’ said Harry quickly. ‘I know lots of people don’t like it – my friend Ron ...’

He stopped again. Thinking about Ron was painful, too.

Dobby leaned towards Harry, his eyes wide as headlamps.

‘Dobby heard tell,’ he said hoarsely, ‘that Harry Potter met the Dark Lord for a second time, just weeks ago ... that Harry Potter escaped *yet again*.’

Harry nodded and Dobby’s eyes suddenly shone with tears.

‘Ah, sir,’ he gasped, dabbing his face with a corner of the grubby pillowcase he was wearing. ‘Harry Potter is valiant and bold! He has braved so many dangers already! But Dobby has come to protect Harry Potter, to warn him, even if he *does* have to shut his ears in the oven door later ... *Harry Potter must not go back to Hogwarts.*’

There was a silence broken only by the chink of knives and forks from downstairs and the distant rumble of Uncle Vernon’s voice.

‘W-what?’ Harry stammered. ‘But I’ve got to go back – term starts on September the first. It’s a school that’s keeping me going. You don’t know what it’s like here. I don’t *belong* here. I belong in your world – at Hogwarts.’

‘No, no, no,’ squeaked Dobby, shaking his head so hard his ears flapped. ‘Harry Potter must stay where he is safe. He is too great, too good, to lose. If Harry Potter goes back to Hogwarts, he will be in mortal danger.’

‘Why?’ said Harry in surprise.

‘There is a plot, Harry Potter. A plot to make most terrible things happen at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry this year,’ whispered Dobby, suddenly trembling all over. ‘Dobby has known it for months, sir. Harry Potter must not put himself in peril. He is too important, sir!’

‘What terrible things?’ said Harry at once. ‘Who’s plotting them?’

Dobby made a funny choking noise and then banged his head madly against the wall.

‘All right!’ cried Harry, grabbing the elf’s arm to stop him. ‘You can’t say, I understand. But what are you warning *me*?’ A sudden, unpleasant thought struck him. ‘Hang on – this hasn’t got anything to do with Vol – sorry – with You Know Who, has it? You could just shake or nod,’ he added hastily, as Dobby’s head tilted worryingly close to the wall again.

Slowly, Dobby shook his head.

‘Not – not *He Who Must Not Be Named*, sir.’

But Dobby’s eyes were wide and he seemed to be trying to give Harry a hint. Harry, however, was completely at sea.

‘He hasn’t got a brother, has he?’

Dobby shook his head, his eyes wider than ever.

‘Well then, I can’t think who else would have a chance of making horrible things happen at Hogwarts,’ said Harry. ‘I mean, there’s Dumbledore, for one thing – you know who Dumbledore is, don’t you?’

Dobby bowed his head.

‘Albus Dumbledore is the greatest Headmaster Hogwarts has ever had. Dobby knows it, sir. Dobby has heard Dumbledore’s powers rival those of He Who Must Not Be Named at the height of his strength. But sir,’ Dobby’s voice dropped to an urgent whisper, ‘there are powers Dumbledore doesn’t have ... powers no decent wizard ...’

And before Harry could stop him, Dobby bounded off the bed, seized Harry’s desk lamp and started beating himself around the head with ear-splitting yelps.

A sudden silence fell downstairs. Two seconds later Harry, heart thudding madly, heard Uncle Vernon coming into the hall, calling, ‘Dudley must have left his television on again, the little tyke!’

‘Quick! In the wardrobe!’ hissed Harry, stuffing Dobby in, shutting the door and flinging himself onto the bed just as the door handle turned.

‘What – the – *devil* – are – you – doing?’ said Uncle Vernon through gritted teeth, his face horribly close to Harry’s. ‘You’ve just ruined the punchline of my Japanese-golfer joke ... one more sound and you’ll wish you’d never been born, boy!’

He stomped flat-footed from the room.

Shaking, Harry let Dobby out of the wardrobe.

‘See what it’s like here?’ he said. ‘See why I’ve got to go back to Hogwarts? It’s the only place I’ve got – well, I *think* I’ve got friends.’

‘Friends who don’t even *write* to Harry Potter?’ said Dobby slyly.

‘I expect they’ve just been – hang on,’ said Harry, frowning. ‘How do *you* know my friends haven’t been writing to me?’

Dobby shuffled his feet.

‘Harry Potter mustn’t be angry with Dobby – Dobby did it for the best ...’

‘*Have you been stopping my letters?*’

‘Dobby has them here, sir,’ said the elf. Stepping nimbly out of Harry’s reach, he pulled a thick wad of envelopes from the inside of the pillowcase he was wearing. Harry could make out Hermione’s neat writing, Ron’s untidy scrawl and even a scribble that looked as though it was from the Hogwarts gamekeeper, Hagrid.

Dobby blinked anxiously up at Harry.

‘Harry Potter mustn’t be angry ... Dobby hoped ... if Harry Potter thought his friends had forgotten him ... Harry Potter might not want to go back to school, sir ...’

Harry wasn’t listening. He made a grab for the letters, but Dobby jumped out of reach.

‘Harry Potter will have them, sir, if he gives Dobby his word that he will not return to Hogwarts! Ah, sir, this is a danger you must not face! Say you won’t go back, sir!’

‘No,’ said Harry angrily. ‘Give me my friends’ letters!’

‘Then Harry Potter leaves Dobby no choice,’ said the elf sadly.

Before Harry could move, Dobby had darted to the bedroom door, pulled it open – and sprinted down the stairs.

Mouth dry, stomach lurching, Harry sprang after him, trying not to make a sound. He jumped the last six stairs, landing cat-like on the hall carpet, looking around for Dobby. From the dining room he heard Uncle Vernon saying, ‘... tell Petunia that very funny story about those American plumbers, Mr. Mason, she’s been dying to hear ...’

Harry ran up the hall into the kitchen and felt his stomach disappear.

Aunt Petunia’s masterpiece of a pudding, the mountain of cream and sugared violets, was floating up near the ceiling. On top of a cupboard in the corner crouched Dobby.

‘No,’ croaked Harry. ‘Please ... they’ll kill me ...’

‘Harry Potter must say he’s not going back to school –’

‘Dobby ... please ...’

‘Say it, sir ...’

‘I can’t!’

Dobby gave him a tragic look.

‘Then Dobby must do it, sir, for Harry Potter’s own good.’

The pudding fell to the floor with a heart-stopping crash. Cream splattered the windows and walls as the dish shattered. With a crack like a whip, Dobby vanished.

There were screams from the dining room and Uncle Vernon burst into the kitchen to find Harry rigid with shock, covered from head to foot in Aunt Petunia’s pudding.

At first, it looked as though Uncle Vernon would manage to gloss the whole thing over (‘Just our nephew – very disturbed – meeting strangers upsets him, so we kept him upstairs ...’) He shoed the shocked Masons back into the dining room, promised Harry he would flay him to within an inch of his life when the Masons had left, and handed him a mop. Aunt Petunia dug some ice-cream out of the freezer and Harry, still shaking, started scrubbing the kitchen clean.

Uncle Vernon might still have been able to make his deal – if it hadn’t been for the owl.

Aunt Petunia was just handing round a box of after-dinner mints when a huge barn owl swooped through the dining room window, dropped a letter on Mrs Mason’s head and swooped out again. Mrs Mason screamed like a banshee and ran from the house, shouting about lunatics. Mr Mason stayed just long enough to tell the Dursleys that his wife was mortally afraid of birds of all shapes and sizes, and to ask whether this was their idea of a joke.

Harry stood in the kitchen, clutching the mop for support as Uncle Vernon advanced on him, demonic glint in his tiny eyes.

‘Read it!’ he hissed evilly, brandishing the letter the owl had delivered. ‘Go on – read it!’

Harry took it. It did not contain birthday greetings.

Dear Mr Potter,

We have received intelligence that a Hover Charm was used at your place of residence this evening at twelve minutes past nine.

As you know, underage wizards are not permitted to perform spells outside school, and further spellwork on your part may lead to expulsion from said school (Decree for the Reasonable Restriction of Underage sorcery, 1875, Paragraph C).

We would also ask you to remember that any magical activity which risks notice by members of the non-magical community (Muggles) is a serious offence, under section 13 of the International Confederation of Warlocks’ Statute of Secrecy.

Enjoy your holidays!

Yours sincerely,

Mafalda Hopkirk

Improper Use of Magic Office

Ministry of Magic

Harry looked up from the letter and gulped.

‘You didn’t tell us you weren’t allowed to use magic outside school,’ said Uncle Vernon, a maddening gleam dancing in his eyes. ‘Forgot to mention it ... slipped your mind, I dare say ...’

He was bearing down on Harry like a great bulldog, all his teeth bared. ‘Well, I’ve got news for you, boy ... I’m locking you up ... you’re never going back to that school ... never ... and if you try and

magic yourself out – they’ll expel you!’

And laughing like a maniac, he dragged Harry back upstairs.

Uncle Vernon was as bad as his word. The following morning, he paid a man to fit bars on Harry’s window. He himself fitted the cat-flap in the bedroom door, so that small amounts of food could be pushed inside three times a day. They let Harry out to use the bathroom morning and evening. Otherwise, he was locked in his room around the clock.

*

Three days later, the Dursleys were showing no sign of relenting and Harry couldn’t see any way out of his situation. He lay on his bed watching the sun sinking behind the bars on the window and wondered miserably what was going to happen to him.

What was the good of magicking himself out of his room if Hogwarts would expel him for doing it? Yet life at Privet Drive had reached an all-time low. Now the Dursleys knew they weren’t going to wake up as fruitbats, he had lost his only weapon. Dobby might have saved Harry from horrible happenings at Hogwarts, but the way things were going, he’d probably starve to death anyway.

The cat-flap rattled and Aunt Petunia’s hand appeared, pushing a bowl of tinned soup into the room. Harry, whose insides were aching with hunger, jumped off his bed and seized it. The soup was stone-cold, but he drank half of it in one gulp. Then he crossed the room to Hedwig’s cage and tipped the soggy vegetables at the bottom of the bowl into her empty food tray. She ruffled her feathers and gave him a look of deep disgust.

‘It’s no good turning your beak up at it, that’s all we’ve got,’ said Harry grimly.

He put the empty bowl back on the floor next to the cat-flap and lay back down on the bed, somehow even hungrier than he had been before the soup.

Supposing he was still alive in another four weeks, what would happen if he didn’t turn up at Hogwarts? Would someone be sent to see why he hadn’t come back? Would they be able to make the Dursleys let him go?

The room was growing dark. Exhausted, stomach rumbling, mind spinning over the same unanswerable questions, Harry fell into an uneasy sleep.

He dreamed that he was on show in a zoo, with a card reading ‘Underage Wizard’ attached to his cage. People goggled through the bars at him as he lay, starving and weak, on a bed of straw. He saw Dobby’s face in the crowd and shouted out, asking for help, but Dobby called, ‘Harry Potter is safe there, sir!’ and vanished. Then the Dursleys appeared and Dudley rattled the bars of the cage, laughing at him.

‘Stop it,’ Harry muttered, as the rattling pounded in his sore head. ‘Leave me alone ... cut it out ... I’m trying to sleep ...’

He opened his eyes. Moonlight was shining through the bars on the window. And someone was goggling through the bars at him: a freckle-faced, red-haired, long-nosed someone.

Ron Weasley was outside Harry’s window.

The Burrow

‘*Ron!*’ breathed Harry, creeping to the window and pushing it up so they could talk through the bars.
‘Ron, how did you – what the –?’

Harry’s mouth fell open as the full impact of what he was seeing hit him. Ron was leaning out of the back window of an old turquoise car, which was parked *in mid-air*. Grinning at Harry from the front seats were Fred and George, Ron’s elder twin brothers.

‘All right, Harry?’

‘What’s been going on?’ said Ron. ‘Why haven’t you been answering my letters? I’ve asked you to stay about twelve times, and then Dad came home and said you’d got an official warning for using magic in front of Muggles ...’

‘It wasn’t me – and how did he know?’

‘He works for the Ministry,’ said Ron. ‘You *know* we’re not supposed to do spells outside school –’

‘Bit rich coming from you,’ said Harry, staring at the floating car.

‘Oh, this doesn’t count,’ said Ron. ‘We’re only borrowing this, it’s Dad’s, we didn’t enchant it. But doing magic in front of those Muggles you live with ...’

‘I told you, I didn’t – but it’ll take too long to explain now. Look, can you explain to them at Hogwarts that the Dursleys have locked me up and won’t let me come back, and obviously I can’t magic myself out, because the Ministry’ll think that’s the second spell I’ve done in three days, so –’

‘Stop gibbering,’ said Ron, ‘we’ve come to take you home with us.’

‘But you can’t magic me out either –’

‘We don’t need to,’ said Ron, jerking his head towards the front seats and grinning. ‘You forget what I’ve got with me.’

‘Tie that round the bars,’ said Fred, throwing the end of a rope to Harry.

‘If the Dursleys wake up, I’m dead,’ said Harry, as he tied the rope tightly around a bar and Fred revved up the car.

‘Don’t worry,’ said Fred, ‘and stand back.’

Harry moved back into the shadows next to Hedwig, who seemed to have realised how important this was and kept still and silent. The car revved louder and louder and suddenly, with a crunching noise, the bars were pulled clean out of the window as Fred drove straight up in the air – Harry ran back to the window to see the bars dangling a few feet above the ground. Panting, Ron hoisted them up into the car. Harry listened anxiously, but there was no sound from the Dursleys’ bedroom.

When the bars were safely in the back seat with Ron, Fred reversed as close as possible to Harry’s window.

‘Get in,’ Ron said.

‘But all my Hogwarts stuff ... my wand ... my broomstick ...’

‘Where is it?’

‘Locked in the cupboard under the stairs, and I can’t get out of this room –’

‘No problem,’ said George from the front passenger seat. ‘Out of the way, Harry.’

Fred and George climbed carefully through the window into Harry’s room. You had to hand it to them, thought Harry, as George took an ordinary hairpin from his pocket and started to pick the lock.

‘A lot of wizards think it’s a waste of time, knowing this sort of Muggle trick,’ said Fred, ‘but we feel they’re skills worth learning, even if they are a bit slow.’

There was a small click and the door swung open.

‘So – we’ll get your trunk – you grab anything you need from your room and hand it out to Ron,’ whispered George.

‘Watch out for the bottom stair, it creaks,’ Harry whispered back, as the twins disappeared onto the dark landing.

Harry dashed around his room, collecting his things together and passing them out of the window to Ron. Then he went to help Fred and George heave his trunk up the stairs. Harry heard Uncle Vernon cough.

At last, panting, they reached the landing, then carried the trunk through Harry’s room to the open window. Fred climbed back into the car to pull with Ron, and Harry and George pushed from the bedroom side. Inch by inch, the trunk slid through the window.

Uncle Vernon coughed again.

‘A bit more,’ panted Fred, who was pulling from inside the car, ‘one good push ...’

Harry and George threw their shoulders against the trunk and it slid out of the window into the back seat of the car.

‘OK, let’s go,’ George whispered.

But as Harry climbed onto the window-sill there came a sudden loud screech from behind him, followed immediately by the thunder of Uncle Vernon’s voice.

‘THAT RUDDY OWL!’

‘I’ve forgotten Hedwig!’

Harry tore back across the room as the landing light clicked on. He snatched up Hedwig’s cage, dashed to the window and passed it out to Ron. He was scrambling back onto the chest of drawers when Uncle Vernon hammered on the unlocked door – and it crashed open.

For a split second, Uncle Vernon stood framed in the doorway; then he let out a bellow like an angry bull and dived at Harry, grabbing him by the ankle.

Ron, Fred and George seized Harry’s arms and pulled as hard as they could.

‘Petunia!’ roared Uncle Vernon. ‘He’s getting away! HE’S GETTING AWAY!’

The Weasleys gave a gigantic tug and Harry’s leg slid out of Uncle Vernon’s grasp. As soon as Harry was in the car and had slammed the door shut, Ron yelled, ‘Put your foot down, Fred!’ and the car shot suddenly towards the moon.

Harry couldn’t believe it – he was free. He wound down the window, the night air whipping his hair and looked back at the shrinking rooftops of Privet Drive. Uncle Vernon, Aunt Petunia and Dudley were all hanging, dumbstruck, out of Harry’s window.

‘See you next summer!’ Harry yelled.

The Weasleys roared with laughter and Harry settled back in his seat, grinning from ear to ear.

‘Let Hedwig out,’ he told Ron, ‘she can fly behind us. She hasn’t had a chance to stretch her wings for ages.’

George handed the hairpin to Ron and a moment later, Hedwig had soared joyfully out of the window to glide alongside them like a ghost.

‘So – what’s the story, Harry?’ said Ron impatiently. ‘What’s been happening?’

Harry told them all about Dobby, the warning he’d given Harry and the fiasco of the violet pudding. There was a long shocked silence when he had finished.

‘Very fishy,’ said Fred finally.

‘Definitely dodgy,’ agreed George. ‘So he wouldn’t even tell you who’s supposed to be plotting all this stuff?’

‘I don’t think he could,’ said Harry. ‘I told you, every time he got close to letting something slip, he started banging his head against the wall.’

He saw Fred and George look at each other.

‘What, you think he was lying to me?’ said Harry.

‘Well,’ said Fred, ‘put it this way – house-elves have got powerful magic of their own, but they can’t usually use it without their masters’ permission. I reckon old Dobby was sent to stop you coming back to Hogwarts. Someone’s idea of a joke. Can you think of anyone at school with a grudge against you?’

‘Yes,’ said Harry and Ron together, instantly.

‘Draco Malfoy,’ Harry explained. ‘He hates me.’

‘Draco Malfoy?’ said George, turning round. ‘Not Lucius Malfoy’s son?’

‘Must be, it’s not a very common name, is it?’ said Harry. ‘Why?’

‘I’ve heard Dad talking about him,’ said George. ‘He was a big supporter of You Know Who.’

‘And when You Know Who disappeared,’ said Fred, craning around to look at Harry, ‘Lucius Malfoy came back saying he’d never meant any of it. Load of dung – Dad reckons he was right in You Know Who’s inner circle.’

Harry had heard these rumours about Malfoy’s family before, and they didn’t surprise him at all. Draco Malfoy made Dudley Dursley look like a kind, thoughtful and sensitive boy.

‘I don’t know whether the Malfoys own a house-elf ...’ said Harry.

‘Well, whoever owns him will be an old wizarding family, and they’ll be rich,’ said Fred.

‘Yeah, Mum’s always wishing we had a house-elf to do the ironing,’ said George. ‘But all we’ve got is a lousy old ghoul in the attic and gnomes all over the garden. House-elves come with big old manors and castles and places like that, you wouldn’t catch one in our house ...’

Harry was silent. Judging by the fact that Draco Malfoy usually had the best of everything, his family was rolling in wizard gold; he could just see Malfoy strutting around a large manor house. Sending the family servant to stop Harry going back to Hogwarts also sounded exactly like the sort of thing Malfoy would do. Had Harry been stupid to take Dobby seriously?

‘I’m glad we came to get you, anyway,’ said Ron. ‘I was getting really worried when you didn’t answer any of my letters. I thought it was Errol’s fault at first –’

‘Who’s Errol?’

‘Our owl. He’s ancient. It wouldn’t be the first time he’d collapsed on a delivery. So then I tried to

borrow Hermes –'

'Who?'

'The owl Mum and Dad bought Percy when he was made a prefect,' said Fred from the front.

'But Percy wouldn't lend him to me,' said Ron. 'Said he needed him.'

'Percy's been acting very oddly this summer,' said George, frowning. 'And he *has* been sending a lot of letters and spending a load of time shut up in his room ... I mean, there's only so many times you can polish a prefect badge ... You're driving too far west, Fred,' he added, pointing at a compass on the dashboard. Fred twiddled the steering wheel.

'So, does your dad know you've got the car?' said Harry, guessing the answer.

'Er, no,' said Ron, 'he had to work tonight. Hopefully we'll be able to get it back in the garage without Mum noticing we flew it.'

'What does your dad do at the Ministry of Magic, anyway?'

'He works in the most boring department,' said Ron. 'The Misuse of Muggle Artefacts Office.'

'The *what*?'

'It's all to do with bewitching things that are Muggle-made, you know, in case they end up back in a Muggle shop or house. Like, last year, some old witch died and her tea set was sold to an antique shop. This Muggle woman bought it, took it home and tried to serve her friends tea in it. It was a nightmare – Dad was working overtime for weeks.'

'What happened?'

'The teapot went berserk and squirted boiling tea all over the place and one man ended up in hospital with the sugar tongs clamped to his nose. Dad was going frantic, it's only him and an old warlock called Perkins in the office, and they had to do Memory Charms and all sorts to cover it up ...'

'But your dad ... this car ...'

Fred laughed. 'Yeah, Dad's mad about everything to do with Muggles, our shed's full of Muggle stuff. He takes it apart, puts spells on it and puts it back together again. If he raided our house he'd have to put himself straight under arrest. It drives Mum mad.'

'That's the main road,' said George, peering down through the windscreen. 'We'll be there in ten minutes ... just as well, it's getting light ...'

A faint pinkish glow was visible along the horizon to the east.

Fred brought the car lower and Harry saw a dark patchwork of fields and clumps of trees.

'We're a little way outside the village,' said George. 'Ottery St Catchpole ...'

Lower and lower went the flying car. The edge of a brilliant red sun was now gleaming through the trees.

'Touchdown!' said Fred as, with a slight bump, they hit the ground. They had landed next to a tumbledown garage in a small yard and Harry looked out for the first time at Ron's house.

It looked as though it had once been a large stone pigsty, but extra rooms had been added here and there until it was several storeys high and so crooked it looked as though it was held up by magic (which, Harry reminded himself, it probably was). Four or five chimneys were perched on top of the red roof. A lop-sided sign stuck in the ground near the entrance read 'The Burrow'. Round the front door lay a jumble of wellington boots and a very rusty cauldron. Several fat brown chickens were

pecking their way around the yard.

‘It’s not much,’ said Ron.

‘It’s *brilliant*,’ said Harry happily, thinking of Privet Drive.

They got out of the car.

‘Now, we’ll go upstairs really quietly,’ said Fred, ‘and wait for Mum to call us for breakfast. The Ron, you come bounding downstairs going, ‘Mum, look who turned up in the night!’ and she’ll be pleased to see Harry and no one need ever know we flew the car.’

‘Right,’ said Ron. ‘Come on, Harry, I sleep at the –’

Ron had gone a nasty greenish colour, his eyes fixed on the house. The other three wheeled around

Mrs Weasley was marching across the yard, scattering chickens, and for a short, plump, kind-faced woman, it was remarkable how much she looked like a sabre-toothed tiger.

‘Ah,’ said Fred.

‘Oh dear,’ said George.

Mrs Weasley came to a halt in front of them, her hands on her hips, staring from one guilty face to the next. She was wearing a flowered apron with a wand sticking out of the pocket.

‘So,’ she said.

‘Morning, Mum,’ said George, in what he clearly thought was a jaunty, winning voice.

‘Have you any idea how worried I’ve been?’ said Mrs Weasley in a deadly whisper.

‘Sorry, Mum, but see, we had to –’

All three of Mrs Weasley’s sons were taller than she was, but they cowered as her rage broke over them.

‘Beds empty! No note! Car gone ... could have crashed ... out of my mind with worry ... did you care? ... never, as long as I’ve lived ... you wait until your father gets home, we never had trouble like this from Bill or Charlie or Percy ...’

‘Perfect Percy,’ muttered Fred.

‘YOU COULD DO WITH TAKING A LEAF OUT OF PERCY’S BOOK!’ yelled Mrs Weasley prodding a finger in Fred’s chest. ‘You could have *died*, you could have been *seen*, you could have lost your father his *job* –’

It seemed to go on for hours. Mrs Weasley had shouted herself hoarse before she turned on Harry who backed away.

‘I’m very pleased to see you, Harry, dear,’ she said, ‘Come in and have some breakfast.’

She turned and walked back into the house and Harry, after a nervous glance at Ron, who nodded encouragingly, followed her.

The kitchen was small and rather cramped. There was a scrubbed wooden table and chairs in the middle and Harry sat down on the edge of his seat, looking around. He had never been in a wizard’s house before.

The clock on the wall opposite him had only one hand and no numbers at all. Written around the edge were things like ‘Time to make tea’, ‘Time to feed the chickens’ and ‘You’re late’. Books were stacked three deep on the mantelpiece, books with titles like *Charm Your Own Cheese*, *Enchantment Baking* and *One Minute Feasts – It’s Magic!* And unless Harry’s ears were deceiving him, the old radio next to the sink had just announced that coming up was ‘Witching Hour, with the popul

singing sorceress, Celestina Warbeck’.

Mrs Weasley was clattering around, cooking breakfast a little haphazardly, throwing dirty looks at her sons as she threw sausages into the frying pan. Every now and then she muttered things like ‘don’t know *what* you were thinking of’ and ‘*never* would have believed it’.

‘I don’t blame *you*, dear,’ she assured Harry, tipping eight or nine sausages onto his plate. ‘Arthur and I have been worried about you, too. Just last night we were saying we’d come and get you ourselves if you hadn’t written back to Ron by Friday. But really’ (she was now adding three fried eggs to his plate), ‘flying an illegal car halfway across the country – anyone could have seen you –’

She flicked her wand casually at the washing-up in the sink, which began to clean itself, clinking gently in the background.

‘It was *cloudy*, Mum!’ said Fred.

‘You keep your mouth closed while you’re eating!’ Mrs Weasley snapped.

‘They were starving him, Mum!’ said George.

‘And you!’ said Mrs Weasley, but it was with a slightly softened expression that she started cutting Harry bread and buttering it for him.

At that moment, there was a diversion in the form of a small, red-headed figure in a long nightdress who appeared in the kitchen, gave a small squeal, and ran out again.

‘Ginny,’ said Ron in an undertone to Harry. ‘My sister. She’s been talking about you all summer.’

‘Yeah, she’ll be wanting your autograph, Harry,’ grinned Fred, but he caught his mother’s eye and bent his face over his plate without another word. Nothing more was said until all four plates were clean, which took a surprisingly short time.

‘Blimey, I’m tired,’ yawned Fred, setting down his knife and fork at last. ‘I think I’ll go to bed and –’

‘You will not,’ snapped Mrs Weasley. ‘It’s your own fault you’ve been up all night. You’re going to de-gnome the garden for me, they’re getting completely out of hand again.’

‘Oh, Mum –’

‘And you two,’ she said, glaring at Ron and George. ‘You can go up to bed, dear,’ she added to Harry. ‘You didn’t ask them to fly that wretched car.’

But Harry, who felt wide awake, said quickly, ‘I’ll help Ron, I’ve never seen a de-gnoming –’

‘That’s very sweet of you, dear, but it’s dull work,’ said Mrs Weasley. ‘Now, let’s see what Lockhart’s got to say on the subject.’

And she pulled a heavy book from the stack on the mantelpiece. George groaned.

‘Mum, we know how to de-gnome a garden.’

Harry looked at the cover of Mrs Weasley’s book. Written across it in fancy gold letters were the words: *Gilderoy Lockhart’s Guide to Household Pests*. There was a big photograph on the front of a very good-looking wizard with wavy blond hair and bright blue eyes. As always in the wizarding world, the photograph was moving; the wizard, who Harry supposed was Gilderoy Lockhart, kept winking cheekily up at them all. Mrs Weasley beamed down at him.

‘Oh, he is marvellous,’ she said, ‘he knows his household pests, all right, it’s a wonderful book ...’

‘Mum fancies him,’ said Fred, in a very audible whisper.

‘Don’t be so ridiculous, Fred,’ said Mrs Weasley, her cheeks rather pink. ‘All right, if you think you

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