

Everyone gets replaced. It's the first lesson you learn on the Quidditch pitch, and the last one to sink in, if you're lucky. I just didn't expect it to happen twice in the same day. You go from being the youngest person on the team to being the last member of the "old guard" far too quickly. You get your name in the book for being the youngest Seeker on record in the World Cup, and before you know it, they're asking you how it feels to be the oldest one. It's not as though I didn't expect it soon enough. I had already told the coach that I would rather retire than be replaced. More than once. He simply nodded. It was a tacit agreement to warn me and let me step aside, rather than be pushed. So I can't say I was all that surprised when he called me into his office and asked me to sit down. It's hardly ever a good sign when someone wants you to sit down. Especially in Quidditch. When they want you to sit down, they mean they want you to sit down for good.

He asked me if I still felt the same way about it. I said that I did. He explained, very apologetically, that the matter was mostly out of his hands. The managers and the owners don't just look at who does the best job, anymore. They factor in things like how many posters you might sell. Who they can market. Fair enough. They have to make some money, too. They've got families to feed and houses to keep up, same as the players. And let's be honest. She will sell a lot more posters than I do, these days. Maybe more than I ever did. She might not be as young as I was, but she's definitely younger than I am, and that's what counts. And she's certainly easier on the eyes, at least to the male of the species. Don't get me wrong. She's a talent, for sure. She'll be truly great if she ever gets her head screwed on straight and comes to the startling realization that she's not the only player out there. But that comes with time. And being outnumbered six to one by the rest of the team. Oversized egos aren't tolerated long when you're the only player packing one.

Would I still like to play in the all-star matches? The players and the owners had little say over that. Besides, it wouldn't look good if they denied me a farewell match with both teams. He would remind them of that, if necessary. What the heck. I might as well. It wouldn't be the first public goodbye I was ever involved in. Plenty of those a few years back. More than I care to remember. It should be easier to put a career to bed than to put someone in the ground for good. This one should be downright pleasant by comparison. I supposed I would have to drag up a bit of graciousness and remember that everyone gets replaced. At least the coach respected me enough to tell me, I

reminded myself. To be honest. A few players I know elsewhere in the leagues found out they had been passed over when they showed up and discovered someone else's name on their locker. Heaven knows there are worse ways to be shunted aside than the coach apologizing for the nature of the business and asking that you stick around for one more match with the pro team and the national team. Especially when not a few players younger than you have come and gone, hankering for your spot. For that spot on the roster where they always filled in your name, the only concession being the little note to the side. "Unless injured or ill." I'm a far piece from old and tired, yet, but in my more generous moments, I'll admit I've been more privileged than most. I got to stick around a darned long time for a Seeker, and got to step out graciously before the aches and pains of dozens of half forgotten injuries, falls and collisions got to be the reason. I know that it could be worse, I've seen enough Beaters on the way out of the leagues icing their hands and knees after every match. It could have been the fans talking about getting me off the broom before my body fell apart, rather than the owners worrying I might not sell as much merchandise. Getting your nose bashed just the one time is hardly worth complaining about.

I handled it better than I would have ten, even five, years ago. One more thing to be grateful for, I suppose. That by the time they wanted to replace me, being replaced wasn't the most horrible thing I could imagine. I didn't even want to go kick the locker. Much. No matter. Hermione was supposed to meet me in five minutes. Not even enough time to work up a good snit. I never quite got the hang of being a pampered prima donna, thank goodness. I'm too old for prima donna snits, in any case. I told myself that Hermione and I would go to dinner, or maybe just eat in at the hotel so I could have a good old fashioned sulk in peace, and it would all look better in the morning. Or at least the wound would be a little less fresh. Problem is I didn't expect to get replaced twice in one day. Once is not so bad. Twice can knock you for a loop. When one of the people replacing you is your wife... well, someday maybe you'll understand why that can knock a man totally off balance.

She handled the news with no less aplomb than I would have expected. She always was good at putting her finger on what was going on in my head, even when I couldn't. She asked me what was wrong before I could even open my mouth. "Oh, it had to happen some day, and I expect it will be for the best, in the long run," she said. "You'll see it will. Maybe a lot sooner than you think," she told me. And somehow, when she

says it, I believe it. You can't help but believe it. I think you'll agree with me on that, soon enough.

From there back to the hotel, it was all married people small talk, the kind you start having when you've been married so long that people have come to think of you as a unit, so much that they hardly ever refer to just one of you at a time. You get mentioned in the same breath, the two of you, because you've spent so long coexisting in the same bed, same house, the same space, the same life. You ask the same questions you've asked on a hundred other trips. How was your day, what did you do, where did you go, find anything interesting, hear any news, would you mind if we ate in tonight? And you're not much disappointed when the answers don't vary much from the other times you asked. It's familiar. Comfortable. Comforting.

Only, that evening, they weren't the usual answers. Not quite. "Well... I spent most of the morning at the Ministry, taking care of some last minute business. I took an unplanned detour during the lunch hour, so I had to cancel lunch with my new Bulgarian counterpart. Shame. I was looking forward to meeting him. We'll have to reschedule if he's going to be in Britain sometime soon. I think I'm going to have to finish up my projects a lot sooner than I expected. The next few months are going to be busy beyond belief. I'll need to make some new arrangements when we get back to Britain... You're not the only one with news. I'll tell you over dinner. I don't want to do this on the street." I suspected it was just one of those ploys wives engage in when they think you're being a sulky idiot over something that doesn't matter and they don't have the heart to call you on it directly. Instead, they make the fact that the living room needs painting into an international crisis, or the addition of someone new at work into an exciting bit of news. All in the hopes that you will either be sufficiently distracted by the mundane as to forget to feel sorry for yourself like some overgrown infant, or better yet, you will realize what she's doing and kick your own rear before she has to do it for you. It's a subtle art, and I'm afraid I may have forced her to practice it a bit more over the years than I care to admit.

I wish I could say I saw it coming. In retrospect, I had to be virtually blind not to see it coming. Not to notice all the subtle signs along the way that something had changed. That there was someone else. It certainly explained the unexpected detour at lunch.

The change in business arrangements. The look only a woman who is keeping a secret from you can have. All explained by a new relationship with someone you haven't met. But sometimes, you get so caught up in what you think is important, day to day, that you miss what's right in front of you. I'd be lying if I said that it was anything less than a shock. We sat down to eat Shopska salad, beef kebapcheta, and in my case, to innocently have a good old-fashioned wallow in some self-pity. Hermione wasn't having any of it. She never did care for feeling sorry for yourself. You had better get used to that. I also wish I could say I had something to say when I found out about you. Some fabulously witty retort, a snappy answer, or just something suitably weighty and pithy for the occasion. Instead, I'm ashamed to say, my brilliant comment upon learning of your existence was "What?" or something equally idiotic. She had to repeat herself and I probably stared at her for a solid minute, gaping like a fish. Or maybe I should say like a man who had just gotten the rug yanked out from under him. It's unsettling for a man to get his whole world turned upside down twice in one day. But everyone gets replaced. It's the way of the world.

Forgive me if my first reaction was less than charitable. When you're getting replaced on a team, that's not so hard to take. When you're getting replaced as the most important person in your wife's heart, it's impossible not to feel a bit offended. A touch hurt. And I admit it, royally jealous. You can't have a wife all to yourself for years and years, and not fancy yourself the center of her world. It's only fair. After all, she's the center of yours. So, when the center of her world shifts, it can't help but shift your own. And the last thing I needed that day was another shift. You'll find that men are fairly simple creatures, and too much change all at once can incapacitate them. For some of us, it doesn't take much. It took a little while to get used to the idea, to even figure out how to react. I think I spent most of the rest of the evening just replaying her words in my head, her expression when she said it, the quivering lip, shaking voice, even a few tears. She was kind enough to let me alone to process it. And to have a bit of a sulk over that, too.

You're lucky, and don't you ever forget it. I don't intend to let you. Not just anyone can merit being the center of Hermione's world. It took an event of epic proportions to go knocking the two of us out of that coveted position in each other's hearts. It took you. You took me by complete surprise. My reaction to you took me by complete surprise. It's not every day your wife says that to you. Grabs you by the collar, shakes you and

snaps you out of your comfortable little niche. It's not every day your wife lets you in on a secret that blows you right out of the water. It's not every day that your wife tells you she's pregnant. It's not every day you find out you're about to become a father.

Suddenly, the secretive little smiles and the clandestine lunch appointment don't seem so mysterious. You see why it's best in the long run to get replaced. Even twice in one day. Even in the center of your wife's world. Priorities shift when you have a child. What was once a far off possibility becomes an all-consuming thing. The center of your world. The center of your worlds. You have to learn to share that coveted spot, for a change. You find it's not so bad, being replaced. It gives you the luxury of a view from somewhere new.

I'll give you this. You've moved into our lives, so far, at least, with a low key subtlety and grace that not many replacement prima donnas have. It's been a slow progress from vague, faraway notion to the minor inconvenience of trousers that won't zip and blouses that won't button all of a sudden, to the impossible to ignore tenant that's moving in soon. Or possibly, that should be moving out. Out into the world. We've rearranged a few things. For instance, the house, Heaven help us. I hope you're happy that we shuffled half the furniture we own what must be a dozen times, by now, just to make things more to your liking. Work schedules... although mine, mercifully, got modified for me well before it was necessary. Right out of existence. Perhaps I should say she's modified her work schedule. I've just looked forward to getting a completely new job any day now. Whenever it is you finally decide to make your debut. I hear the boss can be a right tyrant, the hours are sketchy, and the pay isn't much in the eyes of the Gringott's cashiers, but not many people are willing to trade it in for something else once they've tried it. Someone I know was mad enough to try it with seven different bosses, and lived to tell the tale. I expect we'll manage.

Your mother, to be frank, has gotten downright fat. She needs prying out of all the furniture, can't bend over to tie her own shoes, and her belly has that overly inflated balloon look. Or at least, that's what she thinks. I think she's never looked more beautiful. The expectant glow is not a myth. I keep telling her that it's you that's done the most of the growing involved, so if anyone's at fault, it's you. Or me, for getting her pregnant in the first place, but she's having none of it. I evidently need some practice in

the subtle art of rear kicking. Perhaps she'll train me a bit before we have to start practicing it on you. Or maybe you can train me, as you seem to have the kicking part down quite well. I have the bruises on my kidneys to prove it, never mind what you've done to your mother these last few months. And to think, when you were all of a few inches long and there was nothing but a small bulge and a little bit of barely detectable fluttering below her navel every few hours to prove to us that you were really in there, we went around saying we could hardly wait until she really looked pregnant and we could really feel you kick! Lesson number two, right after 'everyone gets replaced' is 'be careful what you wish for, or you just might get it'. In spades.

But I'm sure I'll preach that, like so many other things, and you'll roll your eyes at how hopelessly clueless I am about everything and don't know what I'm talking about. And maybe I don't. Because life never seems to stand still quite long enough for you to get a handle on it. Just when you think you know all the rules, they change. There are so many things that have happened to me that I never could have imagined. Chief among them, meeting your mother, who couldn't possibly have been more foreign, in the library, of all places. So don't roll your eyes too much when I tell you how important reading is. You never know what you might find in a book. I found the love of my life with her nose buried in one. The woman who was once the sole center of my world. Now she shares that space with you. Consider yourself privileged beyond measure for that honor.

Heaven knows the next few years weren't easy, but they were worth it. Oh, you'll read about the Second Wizarding War, and you'll hear about it in class, but your mother and I lived it. Up close and out loud. When so many people didn't live through it. I imagine some of your professors will be able to make the same claim. Those names in your history book won't just be names to us. They'll be our friends. Our family. Faces we know. In some cases, those names were the center of someone else's world, just like you are ours. I'm sure we'll tell you about them all, some day. Don't roll your eyes too hard at the stories and the lessons of that war. Too much blood was spilled over them to make them anything but priceless.

But all of that can wait a while. Until you're older. At present, I just want to set down, for the record, how much I loved you even before I met you. You don't expect to go mad

over a complete and total stranger. An unknown quantity. I'm afraid I'll forget just how fiercely I needed you, before I ever even held you or laid eyes on you. Sometimes, parents focus so much on how much their children need them, that they forget how much they need their children. This letter is supposed to remind me of that, someday. To remind you of that, someday, should either of us ever need reminding. For now, though, it's enough to know that sometimes, getting replaced isn't all bad. You'll see, someday, I hope, when it happens to you. Sometimes, the last thing you think you need is the best gift you can possibly receive. Everyone needs the rug yanked out from under them every once in a while. It keeps you on your toes. I thank Heaven your mother happened to find out you were coming, that particular day. I thank Heaven I got replaced when I did. I thank Heaven for you.