

To Sever the Lining from a Cloud



by Textualsphinx

Fhis tale of the teacher whom everyone loathes
Explains how he came by his anger (and clothes)
It dripped through my head when, too scantily cloaked
I got caught in a rainstorm and thoroughly soaked.

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⋮⋮⋮ To Sever the Lining from a Cloud ⋮⋮⋮

“One must either be a work of Art
or wear a work of Art.” Oscar Wilde

(“Or make a work of Art.” Textualsphinx)





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This story is not a Romance.



F made her flesh creep

— AND HE KNEW IT. THE GANGLING BOY, BEING EASILY MISTAKEN FOR THE TWISTED TREES HE LURKED IN, HAD HEARD MANY THINGS HE SHOULDN'T HAVE MORE THAN ONCE. THE PECULIAR THING WAS, HE ONLY CAME BACK FOR MORE. IT WAS BETTER TO BE NEAR HER AND GET HURT THAN NOT TO BE NEAR HER AT ALL.

Only, it wasn't like being near her. He could be two feet away, and as well be watching a constellation of stars as a cluster of sixteen-year-old girls.

Two years before, he had heard them: the ranking game. You couldn't complain; it wasn't as if the *boys* didn't do it. Marks out of ten. If only he could make himself fall in love with a three, or a two, or a one-and-a-half (the boys were

chivalrous enough never to award one or nought, or mindful of being made fools of if they resorted to the lowest scorer.) It wasn't as if he expected a 10 to take him. Lily always got 8 when the votes were averaged out, which meant his secret grade for her was countered by a 6. That was as far as his realism went. The Girls were better at this: rapiers next to cudgels. The numbers were only a starting point. They could describe exactly, but exactly, what it was they didn't like.

He would never leave the earth and reach the stars. He was mud, he was slugs, he was worms, he was maggots: worse than maggots, in fact. In Lily's opinion, it would be better to lie in a coffin with maggots all over you than lie with that Slytherin slithering over you. Slobbering, salivating... Ugh. Yuk! *Get away from me.*

He forgave her. He was hurt and he was furious and unable to direct his anger at her, targeting instead the hapless mirror that was fool enough to tell him (in warm motherly tones) Never to Mind, dear, Looks Weren't Everything, especially not for *boy—smash!*

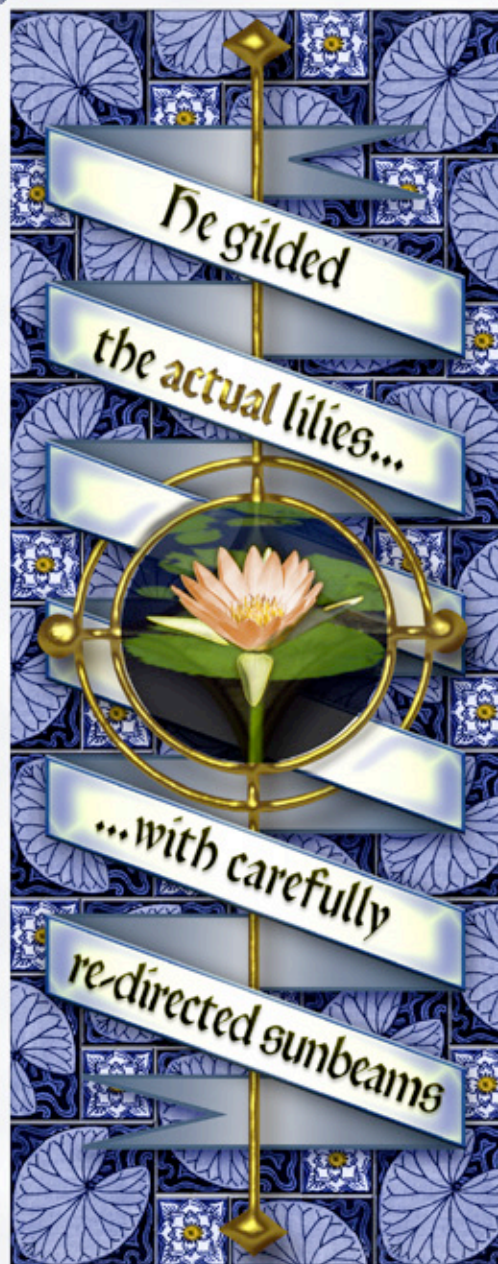
"Just 99 point 999 percent?" he snarled, as the shrieking fragments threatened him with seven years' bad luck. Well wouldn't that make a difference to his life.

He forgave Lily because he knew that, though she meant it, she'd only said it because that's what you did in groups. He'd done as much himself, pretending to be like the other boys. She was always polite to him, careful of him, even if she never quite managed a smile. Felt pity, probably.

He would *make* her smile. He would delight her senses. He would have her gasp with rapture. And she wouldn't even know it was he who'd done it.

Now, two years later, the brightest star in the constellation was showing off her engagement ring.

The girls made the usual sighs of approval, but Severus noticed that Lily looked faintly embarrassed. It wasn't a nice ring. It was pricey and gold and had a large ruby, but beauti-



ful it wasn't. It was vulgar — the kind of thing, Severus thought (with a disdain that ought to make us hate him) that a boy from a Family that Bought its Own Furniture *would* choose for his fiancée. What made him smirk, in a rare glow of self-satisfaction, was that Lily saw this because she knew what real beauty was. He had taught her. He had given her his appreciation of fineness and grace: an appreciation that only the Hopelessly Ugly could find by themselves.

He'd started with little things that she mistook for tricks of the light. A flurry of autumn leaves danced in the wind, but Severus' spell spun them to a neat minuet. In winter, the unclad tree-tops became skeletons' hands, but when Lily walked by (and Severus was near) she saw silhouettes of fine lace against the coppery sky. He gilded the *actual* lilies in the school lake with carefully re-directed sunbeams and thickened the summer haze on Hogsmeade Meadow to hide the seasonal creepy-crawlies from view. As he developed his skills (sneaking into the Charms section of the library when no-one was looking to research his next trick) Lily became convinced that her life was blessed. Later still,

James Potter was to agree. Nature, decidedly, worshipped her wherever she went, and so did he.

When Severus saw her lips turn upwards and her eyes start to sparkle, he would crouch behind the nasty tree-trunks, dig his nails in the bitter earth, and hiss: "She smiled because of *me*. She's smiling for *me* (and even, he could almost believe it) She smiled at me."

Best of all was that knowledge (well, he was to become a teacher) that she was outgrowing the need for prettifying spells and learning to look for herself. She saw things that most people didn't. She developed her own taste. She detected beauty where others observed nothing remarkable, and even found interest in the sparse and the bleak. The grotesque intrigued and impressed her, more than it repelled.

You could say she became an artist.

Severus thought it unlikely their paths would ever cross once they'd left school. She didn't need it, but he wanted to give her one last present, a wedding gift — 'for Life, as it were'.

He had noticed that many of the charms he'd learnt involved pain and darkness: some kind of risk or sacrifice. Magical Arts copied Nature's rule that the most luscious flowers



grew in the most rotten soil. That was the paradox of Beauty — it required Ugliness to exist. It was a strange consolation that this was why he was so good at these charms.

He found what he was looking for in book called "*Olde Enchantments — the Giftes of Iuvve*." He wouldn't have been seen dead reading it, and was forced to consult the heavy tome during a Quidditch match (Gryffindor versus Ravenclaw, luckily. He could plead indifference if anyone noticed his absence.)

It was the shred of his own name that caught his attention:

"To sever the lynige from a clowde."

The lining of a cloud had powerful, paradoxical properties. It would not stop terrible things happening to you (and terrible things were round the corner; he knew; his own family was planning them) but it would ensure that something good came out of the bad. There would be compensation, one wonderful thing to help you move on. There was no photograph of course, not even an illustration, but he could well believe that the stuff was "a most beauteous thynge." Silvery



grey, from the description, and like shot silk; but the highlights would change colour according to the time of day. Severus pictured this: steely, moon-blue at night, rose at sunset, greeny gold in the morning and white at noon.

He had to get one for her. He just *had* to.

“To sever the Lynige from a Clounde, thou must be heavie of hearte. Thou shalt give of thy hearte without hope it bee returned. Owlee he with that darknesse which equals the Clounde’s may repelle, with his force, the woe of the Clounde — as do Lodestones. In like manner shall his sorrowe drawe to him the Lynige, as doth the Lodestone. He that would have this beauteous thyng must peril himselfe in the lightning storm. Then owlee will he be force-full to drawe and repelle, and to fflye with his Treasure. But heedst thou: that Clounde will not pardonne the Thief. Thou shalt fear the Clounde’s wrath for a year and a daye.”

Why, Severus wondered idly, was it always a year ‘and a day’ with punish-



ments? Given that cloud formations broke up all the time, surely it should be, like, a day and an hour. He supposed the medieval spell-writers liked the sound of 'and a day', or that it was something to do with leap years.

Not that there was much of a spell to go on. That was the problem with using really old books. He remembered their House-elf, in her one moment of frustration, making the same complaint about recipes: modern ones did things properly, giving you lists of ingredients with exact quantities and cooking times. Their medieval antecedents just told you "To your rowste meate adde floure, almondes ande garlicke, see they bee pounded well." ("So is you mincing the meat or *not*, Missus Snape?" the Elf had cried, soundlessly stamping her bare little foot.)

The idea was pretty neat though: your heavy heart was a magnet, galvanised by an electrical storm (Severus' mother had shrewdly made him take Muggology — precursor of Muggle Studies — to disguise the extent of the family's allegiances). This separated the cloud and lining by attracting the opposite (the lining) and repulsing the same (the cloud). The reverse would not work of course. Someone

Someone light and
happy of heart,



like Potter,

light and happy of heart, like Potter, might perfectly well separate the elements, but they'd end up with the cloud, not the lining!

Severus really liked that bit — something *he* could get that Potter, precisely, couldn't.

So, how did you do it without getting yourself killed and defeating the object of your quest? Namely, to deliver the prize to the soul-mate who found you repulsive?

It took him weeks to work it all out. He found a spell that would take just a fragment of his heart and hold it at the tip of his wand (no hope that said fragment 'bee returned'). He made an unlicensed Apparation to London one Hogsmeade weekend to buy Muggle gloves, boots and raincoat of less-than-stylish (he thought disgustedly) rubber that would block his contact with earth, thus saving him from electrocution. He practised Summoning charms on all kinds of nebulous entities to encourage the lightning his way if it wouldn't oblige. It was a somewhat storm-free year, so he didn't get quite as much practice Summoning lightning itself as he could wish. (Plus he didn't want to be caught, dead, in the rubber outfit).



He knew he could pinpoint the lightning with the tip of his wand. He'd plenty of experience redirecting sunbeams, so it was merely a question of speeding up movements and reaction times.

He waited for the summer holidays, the last they'd all have before returning as a seventh years and then going out into the world.

First catch your cloud... Severus was the only person in Britain to welcome a more than usually rainy August, and he chose the bleakly beautiful Scottish Highlands as suitable hunting-ground. It was lucky he'd taught himself to Apparate. His parents wouldn't notice if he went off only for a day. He kept a watchful eye on the weather forecasts, and got himself up a mountain just before the promised storm.

The clouds lay low. He selected the darkest, most thunderous he could see and stepped right into it. Now he couldn't see: another reason to have practised the lightning Summons. He'd left transferring a fragment of his heart to his wand as late as possible. It hurt a little — a nagging needlepoint of pain — but that was only to be expected. No amount of

expectation could have prepared him for the agony of making contact with the lightning. A few words in Latin, a deft flick of his wand — and it was as if he'd been stabbed with the finest of rapiers. He had to hold on. He had to wait and be still a whole minute — and one second — whilst a bright grey layer (yes, paradoxically, bright and grey!) was teased from the vaporous swirls. By the time the whole lining had come free, and Severus, twirling it round his wand, began his mad scramble down the mountain, the bereft cloud was blacker-purple than a bruise.

Severus broke contact with the lightning. He couldn't hold it longer, but it meant he had no magnetic protection from the cloud. He ran and he ran, clutching his prize to his chest, and the furious cloud hurled after him. Fortunately for him it had to fight through a crowd of others, which held it up in enough time for the boy to hide in the hollow of a rock and transport himself home by less natural means than running. For a year and day after, this was not so. Severus' cloud would appear out of the blue sky: solitary as he was, and just as inexplicable.

Only, he was the kind of person you'd expect to bring a dark atmosphere to things, and it suited him somehow — was very much his style — to be seen with a great black cloud looming behind him. No doubt it inspired the cut of his cloaks, which throughout his teaching career struck fear of the heavens into his students.

When Severus landed on his parents' lawn, it was after sunset and the House-elf was calling him for supper. He had done it! He lay there a few moments, trying to find his breath, and lose the searing pain in his heart. That would go, eventually, leaving him with slightly less heart: a splinter of absence that people called Cruelty. He divested himself of the ridiculous protective gear as swiftly as possible, hid his treasure, carefully rolled, under his robe, and went into the house.

He was very, very pale. He had a dazed look that even his parents noticed, and that prompted them to ask, more in curiosity than concern, where on earth he had been all afternoon.

"Went for a hike. Thought I'd get a bit of exercise and fresh air; as you've told me to." he answered with perfect (if incomplete) candour.

"Not up to it, obviously" his father commented, and they ate their meal in silence. It was a few days before Severus could eat properly. Swallowing hurt.

The Owl from the Ministry came, happily when he was alone. "A spell, possibly Dark in nature, cast out of term-time." It demanded and took (smart snap of a beak) temporary custody of his wand.

He spent the rest of the holidays, wisely, indoors — lying in bed exhausted when he could get away with it. Fortunately this was what you expected of boys his age. He slept a lot. Perhaps the cloud-lining's magic was working on him, for it was one of the few times in his life when he did sleep a lot.

He would only get up to look at *Lily's Present*. It was every bit as wondrous as he had imagined. Thin as the material was, when you looked at it, it seemed to have infinite depth. It was slightly translucent, and its silver-grey hue was enlivened by an iridescent sheen that was indeed never the same colour from one hour to the next. Severus liked it best at sunrise. Sometimes — only on laundry day, when the sheets were fresh and his nightshirt newly washed — he would take it to bed with him,



holding it ever so tentatively. He didn't want it to get dirty, or heavens forbid, smell. (Contrary to popular myth, Severus was very picky about personal hygiene. The recalcitrant oil of his hair was actually aggravated into overproduction by frequent washing; shampoos, both natural and magical, have developed a lot since, but too late for him to benefit.) At Hogwarts' he would look up how to launder the fragile prize — rainwater, probably. He huddled up next to it, pretending it was Lily, not quite sure if he could feel it was there or not. It was exactly half-way between substance and shadow. It had a soothing coolness. You could feel it in the way you feel heavy mist, the surface tension of water — or the repulsion between two magnets when you hold them together.

There was one snag — literally; the result of a snag on a thistle when he was wrenching the lining to his wand. It had a rent, a tear that spoiled its perfection. He couldn't give it to Lily just as it was. He'd sort that out back at school, he thought tiredly, where he'd have his wand back, where you could find the right books.

He slept.



Autumn term came round again, and Severus hid his precious gift in the trunk under his dormitory bed. He decided the best thing to do was to make the material into a dress. The problem was, he knew nothing about dressmaking. That involved some more very surreptitious visits to sections of the library he wouldn't be caught dead in. He sought out the most accurate cutting spells for substances of that kind, and learned that you could only stitch it, by hand, with a sunbeam trapped in a hair. At least the recalcitrant oil was an advantage here — the sunbeams slipped from his wand-tip along each strand like a dream. Severus, hiding in one of the school attics at dawn, watched his horrible long black hairs turn to gold.

But they burned; you had to stitch with them while they were still hot, otherwise they lost their suppleness, became brittle, and broke. He spent many hours in that attic, trying to thread needles quickly and sew without letting the magical thread flick a nasty sting on his hands. The scars were with him for life, but so thinly etched into his flesh that you only saw them if you got very close — which no-body did.

A dress. That tipped the whole enterprise into a dangerous area. An anonymous cloth turning up beside items from the Diagon Alley wedding list was one thing. 'The card must have got lost, wonder what it is, well, whatever, it's ever so lovely...' but an oh-so-slightly translucent dress could only come from one in love with her. It was tinged with the *erotic*. He 'would be with them on their wedding night', so to speak.

Too late, the dress was cut.

Severus felt sick for eight days. It took that long to quell the fear that his sublime present might somehow be indecent. The material reassured him. It's beauty was so unearthly, and it had power to do good. The problem was how to get it to Lily without her ever, ever suspecting. The couple could probably cope with the idea of someone else in love with her — quite a few boys must be. He wasn't the only one to have given her a IO, he calculated. If she knew it was him though — he remembered how he was worse than maggots, that he made her flesh creep. The very softness and silkiness and subtlety of the lining-of-a-cloud would make her shudder all the more. *Slytherin slither-*

The couple could
probably cope
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ing. He would have to think very carefully about that. There was plenty of time. He would find a way. He always did. He tore the key pages out of the ancient book of charms, as a starter to covering his tracks.

It was the fashioning of the dress — what went into making it the right size and style for Lily — that was his undoing. The easiest way was to let magic do most of the work for you. You drew an idea of what you wanted on parchment. You got a hair from the person who was to wear the garment, wrapped it and the design in your material, and said the tailoring spell. Then you stitched up the seams. He tweaked the hair from her during a Potions class, when, oh joy, he was partnered with her half the lesson. Unfortunately she noticed something. She couldn't be sure, and wasn't prone to think the worst of him, but was worried enough to mention to James that Snape might have touched a hair of her head. James was always overprotective (and bored with their current truce). Though Lily chose to forget the whole thing, he decided to find out what the Slytherin was up to.

And he had his Invisibility Cloak to do it.

James also watched Severus' hair turn to gold. He followed him up to the attic at dawn and — though he disliked Snape — winced with him when he stung his hands stitching. He saw the dress take shape. He'd overslept and missed the session when Lily's hair was rolled up with the parchment. He also missed the hour when Severus took the red strand, sunbeamed it, and with uncharacteristic playfulness sewed a spare button (dewdrops trapped in sycamore seeds) into the hem. Clothes *always* came with a spare button; he knew that much.

Severus was exactly a hair's breadth from getting away with it. James' niceness, his innate sympathy, blew it. It did not take him long to realise that, whomever the dress was for (he couldn't prove it was Lily) the Slytherin boy was doing no harm. He couldn't work out what the material was, but he was certain it had something to do with rainbows, which are never evil. He kept spying on Severus because he was ... *fascinated*. When the dress was finally done, right down to the nonchalant rose sewn from the remnants, Severus still slipped up to the attic, with invisible James in tow. At midnight this time. James thought



it was a trick of the moonlight that the dress changed colour. Sometimes the Slytherin boy would just gaze at his artwork for hours. Once or twice he whispered to it, with an odd mixture of adoration and anger "Tell me I'm ugly now, why don't you? Say I make your flesh creep."

Then, on one fateful occasion, he thought of enchanting it further. Just for a night. Just until he had to give it away for life, as it were. He recalled the minuet danced by autumn leaves, and Animated the dress.

It filled out (with Lily's contours exactly). Severus almost laughed and clapped his hands when the dress started to dance (as did James, but he stopped himself just in time). He certainly smiled when the dress sidled up to him. It had Lily's persistence, and made him dance with her. Although he thought he was alone, Severus blushed, but the dress would not let him just watch. Surprisingly, he did know how to dance — at least, this sort of formal dancing — as he came from one those families that make you learn for the "season" however much you protest it's pointless. Ugly as Snape was, James thought, he moved gracefully enough; but it was horribly, horribly painful to watch him partner-

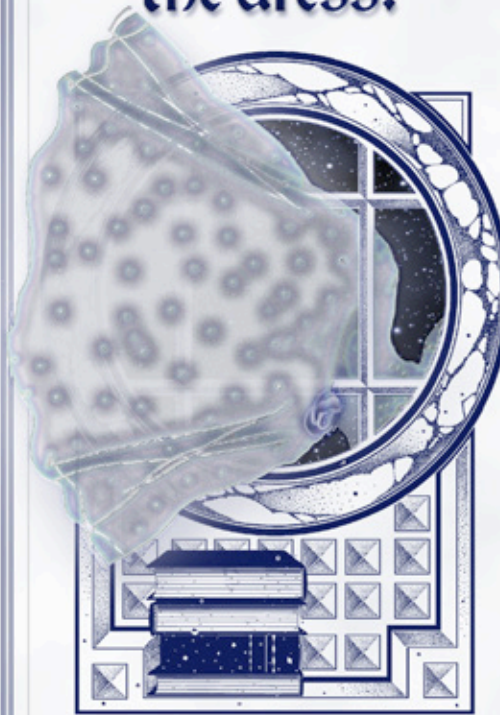
ing the empty dress. When the enchantment wore off and Severus stood forlorn — holding the shrunken garment that fairly hunched its shoulders in shame — a needlepoint of pity jabbed at James' throat; tears stung his eyes and he choked on the word *Lily*.

Severus heard and spun round. He recognised the voice. Everyone knew James had an invisibility cloak — it was the only explanation behind his pranks. It didn't matter how many times the disembodied voice said "I'm sorry, I'm sorry", Severus lunged at it, clawed at it and pulled off the disguise.

They stood there looking at each other, each clutching their magical clothes. James couldn't help noticing that, next to the Slytherin's, his once-lovely cape seemed, well, cheap. It suddenly reminded him of that tinselly 'silver lamé' stuff that his ghastly future sister-in-law wore to nightclubs with her equally ghastly husband. James would find out just how costly was the lining of a cloud — but that was some years away yet.

"You've ruined — everything! All that work — lightning — pierced me — running — my hands — she'll know — won't want it now — never want it now — she'll KNOW —"

He Banished the dress.



... through the window into the night sky.

James tried saying he would never, ever tell, but Severus was incoherent with rage, and, to James' horror, started to tear at the dress. He was going to destroy it, rip it to shreds. "No, no please! Don't!"

Luckily — thank the stars — the seams were strong as sunshine, and it was not the kind of stuff you *could* destroy with bare, un-magnetised hands. You may as well try to tear water. James was relieved, but Severus' frustration brooked no limit. His rage swelled like a thunderstorm. He Banished the dress. He told it to get back to its lousy cloud. The dress slunk away, scraping the floor, then flew through the window into the night sky.

James went too, when Severus told him to go.

Professor Severus Snape never found out what happened to his cloud's silver lining. He surmised that it never rejoined its origins (fashioning it into a dress put paid to that — the cloud couldn't adapt) since he found it necessary to live indoors for the full year-and-a-day, dodging from one building to another when he had to. At least he hit on the idea of hiding the protective rubber as soles within a perfectly

elegant pair of shoes, thus avoiding embarrassment added to disgust. Or Pity. He never knew, then, that when he saved the life of James' son Harry in the brat's first year at Hogwarts' (to settle a quite separate score with the late Potter) it was for the second time.

Lily died wearing that lining-of-a-cloud. She was buried in it too (and it held off the maggots, could Severus but have known, but of course he never could, for this was deep in the bitter earth.) She and James had been fooling around in the Forbidden Forest late one Sunday afternoon when a silver and faintly golden dress, that danced waveringly in the wind, drifted towards her and clung for dear life. Lily accepted this without surprise. She was used to her life being blessed, and to Nature and heaven knows everything else worshipping her. She was wise enough to go to Professor Flitwick, though, to check it wasn't cursed, and that's



when they found out about the linings of clouds, and wondered (she genuinely, James falsely) who could have plucked it from the thundering skies. Then they lit a solemn candle; for no-one, they were told, had ever survived such a quest. They were always found struck by lightning, under their silver shroud.

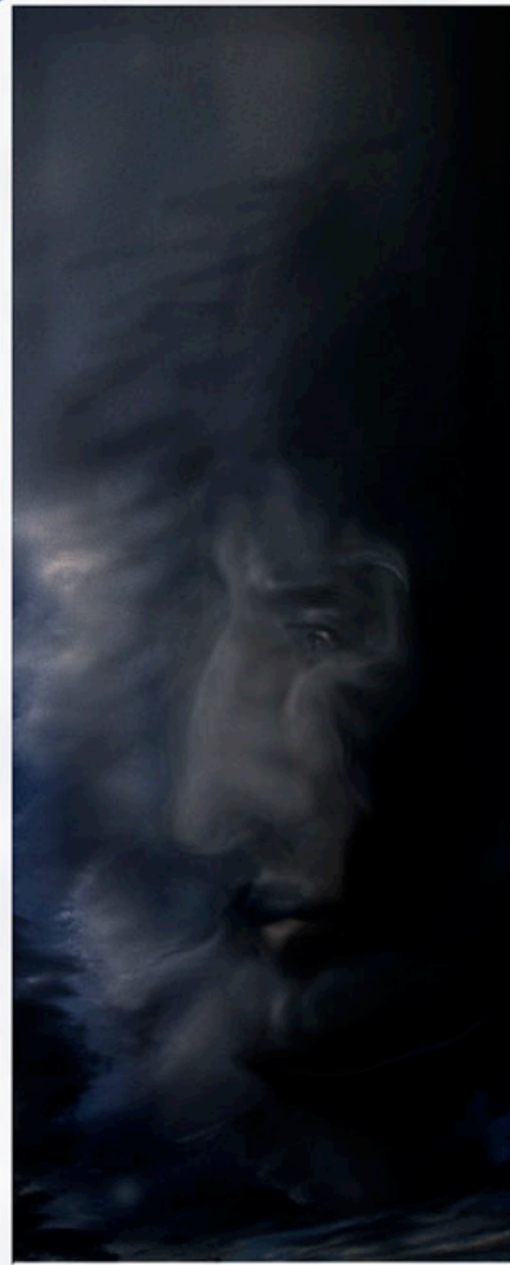
It was with some difficulty that Lily was persuaded not to wear it to the summer ball — someone might steal it after, James argued. Heeding the school motto about sleeping dragons, he knew better than to show Severus that his gift had found its receiver as perfectly and anonymously as it should. He thought better of breaking his midnight vow never, ever to tell. A nagging needlepoint of anxiety punctured his courage for the only time in his life. Spiritual, sharp-eyed Lily saw beauty lurking in the strangest places. Would she not be drawn like a magnet to the one who'd worked hardest for her love? Lily never knew.



Severus Snape never knew. Of that golden summer of graduation, he only remembered how, for all that he gained the highest grades of every House, Lily and James and Remus and Sirius and even little Peter Pettigrew — those stout-hearted Gryffindors — marched out of school trailing Clouds of Glory, whilst he, Severus, left under one.

His own, very personal,
cloud of Vengeance.

FINIS



NOTES

1. "A family that Bought Their Own Furnit̄ure". A notorious phrase during would-be classless John Major's administration. Cabinet minister and diarist Alan Clarke described a fellow Tory, Michael Heseltine as 'the kind of man who bought his own furnit̄ure.'
2. "For Life, as it were" is the last phrase in Henry James' *WASHINGTON SQUARE*.
3. "First catch Your cloud" follows Mrs Beeton's *BOOK OF HOUSEHOLD MANAGEMENT*: *First, catch your hare*.
4. Technical points about cloud-linings and sewing: it is tearable (by the thistle) only when in flux – ie magnetised by the lightning. Once 'free', it is eternally strong. Severus does not thread the needle at leisure *before* trapping the sunbeams because it would make the needle even hotter than the thread and burn his fingers right off.
5. "He would be with them on their wedding night" echoes Mary Shelley's *FRANKENSTEIN* – the Creature's threat to his creator, Dr Frankenstein.
6. "When he saved the life of James' son Harry..." I'm assuming that Snape's Countercurse during the Quidditch match was critical in restraining Quirrel's attempt to kill Harry, buying Hermione enough time to stop the curse completely.

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Colophon

The layout and formatting of this document was created in Adobe InDesign. Interior decorations are commercial clip art from Dover Publications, and from Dynamic Graphics of Peoria, Illinois. In all fairness I ought to credit one of the Dynamic Graphics artists as the true illustrator of this book. Unfortunately this artist's name is unknown to me. Covers were created in Adobe Photoshop. Stock photography from PhotoGear was also used in the project as were digital photographs shot locally by myself.

Fonts used are: the Mrs. Eaves family, from Emigré foundry for body text, and for captions, Morris Troy from P22 foundry. Also from P22 are DaVinci Forward, used for the ancient manuscript of the Giftes of Luvve, Arts & Crafts Ornaments and Terra Cotta Extras, used for decorations. Also used in the project were Cassady & Greene's Black Knight and Fletcher Gothic which was used for titling. The Fontcraft Scriptorium's Goodfellow and Arts & Crafts Dingbats demo fonts were also used in the project, as well as David Rakowsky's Eileen Caps .

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Winner of:

The Golden Quill Award

2001

And The

Bloody Brilliant Award

2002