

The Men Who Talked Between the Words

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The Men Who Talked Between the Words

by [Odamaki](#)

Summary

John expected to be a father some day; he expected to have the house, and the wife and the nice suburban job. Sherlock never expected to have children, in part because he never expected to make it past 30. As it turns out, you don't get a choice. Crammed into Baker Street with a baby, John struggles with single-parenthood and his own fears, while Sherlock treads the fine line between doing too little and saying too much.

COMPLETE.

Notes

**PLEASE BE AWARE THAT THE COMMENTS CONTAIN SPOILERS
THROUGHOUT**

I've been tremendously remiss by not mentioning my beta-reader, bouncer of head-cans, general enthusiast and all-round excellent egg, [CodenameLazarus](#), who is really to thank for the existence of this fic, because I was never going to write Parentlock and now look at us. :l Go and give her love and attention.

I can be found on Tumblr here: [Odamakilock](#)
[Spanish Translation- En Español](#)

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Part 1: The One Who Isn't Here Anymore

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Part One: The One Who Isn't Here Anymore.

She's less than an hour old, pink and helpless and half blind and perfect. She lies heavily in the crook of John's arm and he has to keep turning his head away because for the first time in his life, he can't quite keep himself from openly weeping. She yawns and John wants to lay the world at her tiny wrinkled feet, give her the sun and the moon and never ever put her down. It is rapture, this first hour of fatherhood, and terror.

He's never held something so simultaneously valuable and breakable in his life.

"God, take her. I can't..." John says, passing her back to Mary although it makes his whole being feel empty to let her go. He wipes firmly at his face, smearing the tears, his mouth wobbling.

"You were doing just fine, you old soppy," Mary says lovingly, cradling their daughter. She looks into his eyes, "You'll be fine, John." He kisses her head, then the baby's, and forces himself to breathe. It's just exhaustion and the stress of a 36-hour delivery and too much coffee he tells himself firmly. All new fathers feel like this.

"I'm going to call Sherlock," he tells her and Mary chuckles as he shuffles out the room looking haphazard but radiant.

"Look at the state of him. You'd think *he* was the one who just gave birth," she says to the nurse, who giggles.

"If I had a quid for every father who looked worse than the mother after birth, I'd be laughing all the way to the bank," she tells her, and then shows Mary how to go about breast-feeding for the first time.

His daughter is seventy-four minutes old when Sherlock finally picks up the phone.

"What?"

"It's me," John says eagerly, "She's here, Sherlock. Six pounds even."

"What?"

John stumbles over Sherlock's disinterest with his excitement, "Our baby, you clot!" he says, exasperated but too happy to be anything but fond of Sherlock. "About an hour ago. Did you seriously not see the text messages I've been sending you?"

"Oh, I was busy. Revenge killing made to look like mauling. Absolutely fascinating. Uh, Congratulations."

"You too," John says dryly. "Come and see her soon, won't you?"

“Mmm,” Sherlock says noncommittally. He leans back into the embrace of his chair, flicking his violin bow.

“I mean it; any time,” John replies. “Have you thought any more about-“

“Oh, not that again.”

“Yes, Sherlock,” John says, getting somewhat irked; he didn’t expect Sherlock to be flipping cartwheels over the birth of his daughter, but his attitude was sorely lacking. “Who else would we ask?”

“Mycroft?”

“Not my best friend. Please, Sherlock, you’d be a good Godfather, really.”

“Hmm,” Sherlock says again.

“Look, I’ll call you later. At least see her before you say no outright,” John sighs.

“Later, then,” he hesitates, “I’m sure the baby is...” What do people usually say? He gropes for something to try and mollify John’s hurt at his own hurt. “...very sweet.”

John’s too oblivious with joy to see through him, though really he should.

“She’s gorgeous, Sherlock. Tell Mrs. Hudson, please. She’ll be dying to know.”

“Yep,” Sherlock agrees, and hangs up. He stands, discarding the phone carelessly on the seat of his chair and reaches for his violin. For a moment he is still, by the window, watching the people pass and wondering how they can be so ignorant of the end of the world. Addiction itches in his veins. Savagely he thrusts the violin under his chin and proceeds to inform Mrs. Hudson of the birth for the next three hours by abusing the strings.

She’s one hundred and twenty seven days old when John is woken in the middle of the night, his hip damp and warm.

“Mary?”

He reaches for her in confusion and finds her shaking. She’s not breathing. He sits up, gropes for the light in sudden fear and blinds himself with the brightness.

“Mary! Mary!”

She’s white as a sheet and struggling for breath; the mattress is sodden with urine. John balls the rising fear in him into a single solid mass and forces it down, forces himself to pretend this is just some other patient and tries to do everything at once. It’s a matter of a second to dial 999 and clamp the phone against his ear. It’s a matter of two seconds to roll her into a recovery position and check her vitals.

“Ambulance,” he barks down the phone, Mary’s pulse fluttering under his fingertips. His head is swimming; this feels like a nightmare but his knees are cold and wet and Mary is looking at him in fear and pain and he has to just keep functioning. He rattles out details like bullets.

“- street, N1 9LU, 35 years old, female, woke with breathing difficulties, irregular heartbeat-“ words, the Greek and Latin register of medics he’s always been able to spit out with ease under pressure slip away from him this time. “It’s my wife,” he chokes, “She’s having a heart attack.”

She’s not even forty. This shouldn’t be happening. Their baby is asleep in the next room and needs her mother.

John needs them both.

The ambulance wails up the street less than ten minutes later; John’s neck aches from where he’s still holding the phone in the crook of his shoulder, his arms ache from one hundred beats per minute thumped against Mary’s sternum.

The paramedics take over, and all John can do is hover uselessly. The baby cries, reminding him with a jolt that she is there. Ten minutes of pure horror has been enough to somehow blot her tiny existence from his mind. They’re packing Mary up. John’s fingers feel numb as he bundles the baby up from the crib, blankets and all, nothing else and follows them to the ambulance.

Tugged abruptly from her sleep, hating the noise and the lights, she screams the whole way to the hospital.

John’s mind is a scream too.

He calls Sherlock and manages but a few garbled sentences.

“It’s Mary, we’re at the hospital. Please, come. I need you.”

Sherlock defies him at his own brevity. He only asks, “Where?”

They sit on the sofa in the relative’s room, John like he’s been dropped from a great height, slumped on the cushions; a sack of bones masquerading as a man. The baby has reduced herself to just whimpering, her howls not having the usual effect on the people around her. Sherlock fidgets. He gets up and down, strides around poking at things.

A doctor comes in just once to tell them Mary has slipped into unconsciousness, but that they are doing all that they can. John nods, asks him, professional to professional to do just that, and then when he leaves looks at Sherlock with heartache in his eyes.

“They’re losing her,” he says, flatly. He knows the face of the doctor, even if the man himself is a stranger. All doctors who have worked in hospital emergency rooms know that face. You grow your own in the course of the job. Slip in a different tongue and careful words when you need to go and break bad news.

Sherlock, veteran of emergency rooms, knows it too. He doesn’t offer John false comfort. Instead

he does what only makes logical sense to him when the world seems to be going to hell and there's nothing he can do about it.

He calls Mycroft.

It's 7am. Mycroft's offered them what resources are available to him at the time, and had more forethought than Sherlock had, as presently one of his suits turns up with a bag containing a change of clothes for John, the baby, and all the half-dozen little things John walked out of the house without.

It's 7:10, and the clock is crawling. The walls are crawling. John's skin is crawling. Sherlock takes the baby off of him carefully and makes him swallow lukewarm tea stiff with sugar until his vision clears a bit. A nurse comes in to look for someone or something, pauses at the sight of them and then, milk of human kindness, offers to bring in a cot and a bottle for the baby. Sherlock sits on the edge of his seat and watches John absently feed his daughter, clean her, put her in the cot. He's on autopilot. The baby sleeps at long last.

Then they wait.

It's 7:42. Sherlock wishes the room had a window; it's still and airless in the room, cloying with the smell of nerves and antiseptic. John is haggard. The doctor returns, quite solemn. His words wash over them as though from a very great distance.

Peripartum cardiomyopathy. Systolic dysfunction. Ventricular arrhythmias.

It's 7:44 A.M.

Digitalis was administered. Pulmonary embolis.

It's 7:45 A.M.

EF dropped to less than 20%

It's 7:46 A.M

Second myocardial infarction occurred.

It's 7:46 A.M

Sudden cardiac death, nothing more could be done.

It's 7:46 A.M

It's 7:46 A.M and the clock is moving weirdly. It spins on the wall in front of John's eyes. It's 10:00 for a moment and then it's 1:14.

The doctor and Sherlock catch him before his head hit the floor, one under each arm.

"John, John look at me," Sherlock says, softly and urgently. He holds John's head in his hands. John doesn't cry, but his whole body clenches. Through gritted teeth he makes a noise like the

scraping together of old wood.

The doctor quietly leaves them the papers that need to be signed.

She's one hundred and twenty-eight days old when she becomes half an orphan.

John is thirty-seven, and a widower.

She's four months, 23 days old and oblivious to how out of place Sherlock looks on John and Mary's couch, hulked there like a large, dark bird. She's starting to be able to see across the room, but unless it's brightly coloured and within three feet of her, she mostly ignores it.

Sherlock, in contrast, looks at everything around the living room, eyes skimming over all the little details of their married life; the flotsam and jetsam of domestic relations between two people. Mary's touch is everywhere. She haunts the whole house from the pattern of the wallpaper to how the chairs are arranged. She lingers in the scent of the laundry powder, her voice echoes in the telephone.

This is her home; where else would she be?

"What," Sherlock asks, "Do you intend to do?"

John tersely folds washing, shoulders hunched. "I don't know yet," he says curtly. He's stopped working; they've given him compassionate leave but it won't last forever, and neither will the money. Mary's assets are still in probate; it turns out, as the solicitors delicately put it, there are certain issues in her paperwork. John sat there in the meeting they'd had to discuss it, blankly staring at them politely, and internally laughing his head off in despair. "Of course there are issues," he'd wanted to say, "It's all fucking fake."

Back in the present, Sherlock purses his lips. "Will you stay here?"

"I don't know." He wants to. He wanted this all so much- a house, a family, a steady career and good friends. He wanted all the tawdry hallmarks of middle-aged success. To give it all up smacks of failure.

Sherlock whistles under his breath, rolling his gaze over the high white ceilings of their nice Victorian house, over the magnolia walls, which seem too far away and too cold in the evenings when John's slumped in front of the telly at night, wasting hours waiting for the baby to cry to be changed or fed or just picked up.

He sees Sherlock smooth his fingers over the sofa cushions, no doubt reading like Braille how John's been sleeping there all too often.

The bed is big and empty. He loathes it.

“Stop that,” John snaps. “Where else am I to go? We should stay here.” For the baby’s sake, he reasons. She should grow up in the place her mother chose for her, even if...

Sherlock gives a vague shrug, as though he doesn’t give a damn. If Mary taught John anything, though, it’s how to at least glimpse through Sherlock’s bullshit.

“Baker Street? With a baby?”

Before his eyes, Sherlock humbles. He gets up, picks a tiny sock off of the floor where it’s escaped from John’s angry sorting and lays it out in front of him with it’s twin like a peace offering. “Your room’s as you left it,” he offers.

John swallows and bundles up the washing imperfectly. Sherlock looks down his nose at him and gives a sigh of irritation. Turning his back, John marches to the baby’s room and dumps the washing in the drawer haphazardly. She idly swats at her dangling toys, merrily ignorant.

Sherlock’s still there when he comes back. “Why should I?” John demands.

The other man straightens, his expression a little arch as he rises to the challenge. “You cannot afford this house- the mortgage alone is going to cripple your savings, which aren’t as much as you believe they are. There is a 60% chance that a large portion of Mary’s finances will be exposed as fraudulent and while no doubt my brother will intervene to keep it quiet, you will not be legally allowed to claim much of her property, including the bulk of everything under this roof. You cling to your child’s needs out of a sense of loss and duty, eschewing help, but that is also because this location is isolated from any other potential caregiver. This leaves you exhausted and with a feeling of failure. You know your neighbours by sight but not by name and certainly not on causal speaking terms, which hinders your already minimal social life and leaves you cut off from the surrounding community; this makes you unhappy. You have emotional ties to the house, which are currently damaging your ability to focus on the practical measures that need to be taken. Finally the unexpected loss of your wife is making you irrationally paranoid about the security of the house and the health of your child.”

John is breathless with the kind of hurt and fury one gets from having a plaster unexpectedly ripped off by someone you thought was just going to soothe it. Sherlock curls his lip and goes on, his tone clipped and mechanic.

“There are no cafes, supermarkets or daycares within easy walking distance, you despise the bus, and you cannot drive. You have not the wherewithal to learn. Baker Street, meanwhile, has marginally better financial security, Mrs. Hudson, 24-hour street surveillance and a regular footfall of visitors. In short, come back, because you hate being alone.”

John’s voice, when he finds it, is wretched. “I’m not alone,” he pleads, fully aware that the sheer fact he isn’t in these particular circumstances that’s the exact problem. Sherlock looks at the baby in confirmation and raises his eyebrows as though to say *‘that’s company?’*. She whines to herself, dribbling on a baby-grow that was clean this morning but already needs changing.

Sherlock tugs open the front door, smoothing his collar flat. When he catches sight of it in the hall mirror, John’s face makes him pause. His expression is stony-flat; a Gorgoneion, and Sherlock regrets his callousness.

“You’re doing this for her?”

John is incredulous. “Of *course I am!* She needs me to be here, Sherlock. Here. By her side! Where I’m bloody supposed to be.” He’s balling his fists, angry.

Sherlock exhales. "Yes," he says, and there's a tinge of something in his voice; perhaps apology, "But Mary's gone now."

She's five months, 2 days old when they move back to Baker Street. John lumps the last of the boxes up the stairs and feels that rather than having finally scaled the mountain, he's standing merely at the foot of it.

He digs his heels into the carpet of the living room and looks around. Mrs. Hudson and Sherlock between them have done a respectable job of scouring out the place and cleaning it up for his arrival. The baby looks at it all, wagging chubby fists to show her interest. "New home for you, sweetheart," he murmurs against her scalp. "Old news for me."

"Oh John," Mrs. Hudson says behind him, fondly. She gives him a one armed cuddle, cooing over the baby. "Oh it is so nice having you here, though of course, under such sad circumstances." She smooths down the baby's wild tuft of fluffy blond hair. "I'll get you a cup of tea."

"Thank you," John replies. He toes his shoes off and feels the floor under his feet. It seems solid.

A fortnight after he moves in, things go wrong again.

"She won't sleep. Does she feel warm to you?"

Sherlock looks up from his phone, or rather, is made to as the baby's head is thrust before his nose.

"Oh, have we swapped? Are you the consulting detective today?" he asks laconically, but obligingly touches the baby's head with the back of his hand.

"Shut up," John says, distractedly, "and tell me, does she feel warm?" The baby hasn't slept well since John moved in, but tonight is unusually restless. Her face is wrinkled up with displeasure, and her cheeks are flushed and damp. She grizzles at Sherlock's light touch, but feebly.

"She does," Sherlock agrees, frowning. "She's ill."

"Shit."

John cossets her against his chest and heads for the bathroom where there's a thermometer somewhere if Sherlock hasn't half-hitched it for one of his bacteria experiments already. Sherlock watches him go, and then gets up from his chair to observe the drama. There's a tussle over the thermometer, which she doesn't like, but John is determined.

"Thirty-seven point four," John reports, concerned. "She's feverish. Can you hold her? Oh, never mind," He doesn't wait for a reply, just puts her down on the changing station beside him, leaving Sherlock stood there inelegantly in the doorway. John rummages around for baby medicine. She looks up at Sherlock from where she's lying, her face one long picture of unhappiness, and

whimpers. Sherlock doesn't know what to do.

John does, except he's working himself up into too much of a flap to get on with it effectively. They say that doctors make the worst patients, and from experience, Sherlock knows John adheres to the 'take two aspirin, go to bed, drink fluids and stop bloody fussing' school of sympathy when it comes to minor illness, so he's a little surprised at John's over-reaction to a simple cold.

But then babies have a tendency to make everyone a little stupid, Sherlock feels. Maybe if Mrs. Hudson were here making a palaver instead, John would be a little more composed, but she'll be halfway through a herbal soother at this time of night and no good to anyone.

"Calm down," Sherlock says instead, which earns him a fierce look. "It's just a cold."

"She's feverish," John repeats stubbornly, aggressively washing his hands. "Do you know how many pediatric illnesses are preceded by cold and flu like symptoms?" He holds out his arms for the hand towel Sherlock is stood in the way of, and Sherlock, irked, tosses it to him.

"Plenty, I'm sure," he says dryly. "And none of which she has." He steps aside as John scoops up his daughter and barrels back to the living room so he can sit and administer the medicine. It's a tiny dinky bottle of the stuff that Mary bought home from the clinic, 'just in case', and it's been partly used already, although not by John.

He holds it up to the light, squints at it and swears again. There's a dose or two left, but not much. He administers what he can, wipes her face and settles in with the thermometer on hand, anxiously waiting for her temperature to subside.

Sherlock sits at the desk, making himself an obvious presence, but John doesn't ask anything of him, nor does he seem to expect it, and time ticks by. The baby won't sleep or eat, she just hiccups and cries softly from time to time. Really, Sherlock reflects, she's not behaving too badly through the whole ordeal, but John flinches when he can't get her to rest easy.

"Shh, sweetheart, I know," he says to her gently, cradling her. After a couple of hours he gives her the last of the medicine, and drops the bottle in the bin with a pinched look on his face. Sherlock doesn't need to ask to know that although it's mediating her condition, it's not improving it significantly. John tries her on some water, which she rejects in favour of keening and kicking at her blanket.

It's getting late; already gone midnight and John makes himself coffee one-handed, grimly setting himself up for a long, sleepless night. He has some more luck with a bit of juice and an eyedropper, at least getting some fluids into her, but it's arduous work.

After another couple of hours, Sherlock closes his computer and reaches for his jacket. John gives him a dirty look, although he's not really any right to say Sherlock can't go if he wants to, but his annoyance melts away when Sherlock reaches into the bin and fishes out the bottle.

"This one?" he asks simply, and John, with a sudden flush of shame at his own behaviour, nods.

"Anything else?"

The semi-permanent shopping list in the back of John's mind comes springing to the front but he shakes his head 'no'.

"Just the medicine. Thank you." The words feel petty and too small in his mouth.

"Of course," Sherlock replies enigmatically. "I'll be back in thirty minutes. Less if there's a cab."

John looks at him, and Sherlock thinks John looks oddly small, sat in the middle of the sofa with the baby in his lap and the detritus of the last few hours spread around him. He looks scared and tired and alone.

“I’ll be back soon,” he repeats, more gently. John gives a fragment of a smile that is more sad than happy.

“I’ll be here.”

True to his word, John hasn’t budged from the sofa by the time he gets back. His face is washed with relief to see Sherlock coming through the door.

“She’s getting warm again,” he reports, his eyes on the carrier bag in Sherlock’s hand with a kind of intense desperation. Sherlock doesn’t waste any time in passing the medicine over. It’s not the same brand, but one that John recognizes, with similar ingredients. It’s not the only thing Sherlock’s squirreled up either; there’s infant rehydration solution and a packet of fig rolls. Sherlock lets him dose the baby while he mucks around with the microwave.

He comes back and squeezes in next to John on the sofa, pushing a mug into his hand and carelessly, a fig roll into his mouth.

“Eat,” Sherlock commands. With his hands full, John has a choice between spitting the biscuit out on the baby or complying. He chooses the latter. The cakey stuff it’s made of is dry and sweet on his tongue; the fig paste sticks to his teeth, but it suddenly makes him aware that he’s starving hungry, and that the headache he has might be from low blood sugar. Absently he gulps from the mug to wash it down.

It’s cocoa.

“That’s good,” he says, stifling a noise and going in for another hasty slug of chocolate. He hardly ever drinks the stuff; it’s usually too sweet for his taste; but right now it’s hitting the spot. “Is there whiskey in this? There’s something.”

“French brandy.”

John makes a noise that in some social circles could be deemed indecent, and then sags back against the sofa. Wearily, he feels for the thermometer again.

“Give it a minute to kick in,” Sherlock advises. He leans in to observe the baby; who coughs. Her breathing’s become a little congested, but she’s stopped crying so much, and the flushed look has improved a little. She looks exhausted. John looks worse.

The bags under his eyes are too prominent for Sherlock’s liking, and he’s become, if not actually skinny then washed out with stress. His hair is a touch thinner, his skin rougher.

“You look like hell,” he tells him.

“I feel...” John mumbles, too out of energy to fight, but still too tense to relax properly. “Flat,” he finishes.

Sherlock makes no move to take the baby from him, or relieve him of his duties, but when he looks at him next, there's an unspoken understanding that he is, at the very minimum, *here*. He's always been there to help, John realizes, he's just been too much of an arse to let him.

If he's honest, he hadn't been sure Sherlock had wanted to have much to do with the baby, but now the man's shoving fig rolls at him and running to Tesco at 3am, he wonders if he hasn't gotten it a bit wrong. Babies might not be a specialty of Sherlock Holmes, but he's earned his wings in friendship already.

"Thanks," John says again, humbly.

"I've hardly done anything," Sherlock points out. He leans in again and scrutinizes the baby.
"Drink your cocoa."

He takes the baby off of John's lap while he eats, and handles her like a science experiment; delicately but remotely. John swallows thickly. This is not the first time Sherlock has held his daughter; but it is the first time he's done so of his own volition. It's with a modicum of pride that Sherlock holds the thermometer up for John to read. Her temperature's dropped half a degree. John beams, his smile erasing some of the tiredness from his face for a brief moment.

"Not out of the woods yet, but give it another hour," Sherlock says, privately thinking that John might not make another hour, the way he's looking. Like as not, he's going to simply crash out right there on the sofa. Good. That's what he needs- he's been up and down most nights for the last two weeks like a yo-yo, either tending to the baby or else disturbed by unpleasant dreams.

"Fantastic," John says, through a yawn. "Thank God." He oozes into the corner of the sofa like someone's cut the strings that have been holding him up, and puts out his hands for the baby. Sherlock gives him his daughter, watches as she yawns too, gives a peevish wrinkle of her nose and goes back to sleep, watches as that makes John smile again. His eyes are already drooping. Sherlock waits, lets him fall asleep, and then shifts off of the sofa quietly.

John's cheek has fallen against his shoulder, his face lax and his right hand threatening to spill off the side of the sofa. Sherlock slides his own underneath it and checks his pulse. It's slow and steady, like John's breathing. Good. John's hand is cool in his own as he gently smooths the back of it with the ball of his thumb, and then, on a whim he can't repress, Sherlock brushes the palm of his other hand over John's hair.

After that it's the work of a few cautious minutes to ease John's legs out into the space where Sherlock had been sitting and inch a pillow from the bed under his head. The baby is easier to maneuver, and he sets her cosily in her carrier next to John, for ease of observation, before tossing a blanket over John. Sherlock stands back and looks at his handiwork, checks that John is comfortable. He notes the hollow exhaustion running through the line's of John's body, and makes a mental note to get Mrs. Hudson onto meals again. Good old stodgy English home cooking- good for the soul if not the linings of your arteries.

For now, sleep and the sugar hit from the fig rolls will have to suffice.

Sherlock picks up the mugs and goes to dump the dregs into the sink, washing away the fine, powdery remains of the cocoa. He frowns at the half-dissolved white lump at the bottom of John's.

"Should have crushed it more," he mutters to himself, and dashes the evidence down the drain.

John celebrates his daughter turning six months by pressing the heels of his hands to his forehead until his vision flashes white. She won't stop screaming.

He's tried everything; she's not hungry, she's not wet, she's no doubt tired but she won't sleep until she's finished screaming and she doesn't seem in any hurry to stop. He picks her up and it has no effect. He checks her temperature and it's normal though her face is flushed with the effort of informing him how displeased she is with the universe. He paces up and down the short living room of 221B pleading with her to please, please, quiet down.

Her cries, distressingly regular, become a pulse drilling at his skull.

"What's the matter?" He asks her helplessly. He's a doctor; he's supposed to be good at this. As a last resort he gives her a small dose of medicine again in case she has some pain he can't see, but all it does is make her cry a fraction more slowly.

They're alone in the flat- Sherlock has escaped to St Bart's, albeit with legitimate cold cases to work on. John puts her in her crib and stands under the shower for five minutes with water in his ears for a moment's relief. He can't imagine how awful this would be if he'd stuck it out in Mary's house. Mrs. Hudson had come up twice to check on them before she left to see her sister for the weekend, but she couldn't do anything to soothe the baby's crying either. Now she's gone, and John's on his own.

It started so abruptly, less than a week ago. He dressed her and then all at once this crying started. He's felt her gums on the off chance it's extraordinarily early teething, but nothing. She seems perfectly fine; she just won't stop crying.

He rocks her, unable to do anything else. There's nothing to do. If the television or the radio is on, he can't hear it. The howling is too penetrating to allow him to read or do crossword puzzles. He is simply beholden to her whim.

Awfully, guiltily, John finds himself feeling bored and resentful of it.

He takes her out and she screams her way down the street at the end of which he gives up and takes her home where the walls of 221B seem to close in on them.

"What's *wrong*?" He says, looking into her screwed up, pink little face. "God! What do you want?"

He sits at the kitchen table, biting the knuckles of his left hand, the right hand fisted tight against his hip- the one that made him limp, and still the screaming goes on.

Maybe if Mary were here, she'd have seen what he'd missed. John pulls at his forelock and feels, hopelessly, that the truth is that no matter how hard he tries and how much he loves her, he can't do this alone. He'd never planned to enter fatherhood alone- and as he suspected, here he is making a complete fuck-up of it. He can't even comfort a crying baby; how is he supposed to navigate her through the waters of the next eighteen years?

Did he cry like this when he was a baby? John has no idea, although he knows almost to the date when he stopped crying in front of his parents. It hadn't been allowed. Tantrums and screaming and loud ugly sobbing had been banished, especially when his father was home. Crying got you nothing. If you braved tears, you did it as quietly as possible, out of sight or took your lumps.

He paces again; short truncated marching, the knot of anxiety and mingled feelings inside of him developing like a cancer.

The flat seems airless, like the baby is sucking it all in with her sobbing and leaving him in a vacuum. He's barely stepped out unless it's to go to the supermarket or the park; John's stuck in a self-inflicted bubble of routine and nappy changing, bottle-feeding and cleaning.

God, she's still screaming. Sometimes she pauses, swallows, hiccups and then when he thinks she's finally simmered down she begins again, working up from a gripe through a wail to a full-bodied complaint. She's not even a year old and has more stamina than her father does.

He grips the edge of the crib, looking down at her.

"Stop," he says, hoarsely. "Please, just stop this now."

This isn't what parenthood was meant to be like. It was supposed to be him and Mary tag-teaming through these kinds of shitty times. She was meant to be here to be his rock in these turbulent waters, and instead she's taking it easy under a headstone. His daughter was meant to be rosy sweet and perfect, not this ragged banshee. He's supposed to be happy, and capable and loving, and all he can feel is a mounting fear.

"Stop! Stop it!"

He means to rock the cradle and instead jerks it, his arms too tense to obey him. The baby pitches to a screech at his insolence, and something in John just pings out of place, and before he can stop himself he shouts at her.

"Enough!"

The roar is louder than her scream and scares her out of it. In the moment's hush that follows, John feels his stomach drop like a stone to the centre of the earth. She looks at him, unfocussed, her fists raised in either defiance or defense and the tears spilling from the corner of her eyes. Gulping, he scoops her out of the crib, repeating over and over, 'I'm sorry, oh god, I'm so sorry, I didn't mean that, I love you', and then she starts to cry aloud again.

"John?"

Sherlock must have come up the stairs just a moment ago; he's still wearing his coat and scarf. He stands, looking at John, puzzled.

"Take her," John begs, sickened with himself. "I can't." Wordlessly he pushes her into Sherlock's arms; the taller man's mouth drops open, goldfish-like.

"John!"

John pushes past him, descends the stairs and pausing only to snatch his jacket off of the peg by the door, leaves.

It's a little short of midnight when he returns, almost ten hours later. The flat is quiet and the lights

are on, dim and orange through the windows as John approaches along Baker Street.

He climbs the steps slowly, heavily, hands shoved deep in his pockets. It was a rotten thing to do, to just abandon Sherlock with his daughter, and he's spent the day drifting around London feeling sick. He hasn't eaten, being unable to face either the crowd of a café or the smell of food, but he's never wanted a drink so badly in his life.

The door is ajar, waiting for him as he reaches 221B, and inside he can hear Sherlock picking at his violin. John enters quietly.

It's cozy inside; the windows open a crack to let in the warm summer air, the main lights off but the lamps lit. The mess and fuss he'd left during his fraught hours before have all been tidied away, and the whole place looks as spick and span as it ever has. Even more surprisingly, there are clean plates on the dish rack and one left on the table. What looks like spaghetti bolognese rests in a Tupperware on the counter.

A wash of feeling goes over John and his shoulders sag. There's so much he needs to apologize for and suddenly so much he needs to thank Sherlock for as well that in his exhaustion he hardly knows where to start. And to think, Sherlock is the one pulling everything together- Sherlock, who everyone supposes is a lousy human being at the best of times, and scarcely capable of acting like a responsible adult with other adults, never mind a small baby.

It's like a smack to the face, the realization of how bad John has let things get, and what his stress is doing to him. He opens his mouth, still not sure what he's even going to say, but instead Sherlock just slides the bow over his shoulder and gently taps the back of his head with the tip of it in admonishment.

"Don't," he advises, not unkindly, "I have it on good authority a number of new parents have these moments." Rather forward, for him, he lets his hand follow the path of the bow, rubbing John's shoulder. John can't help the cynical little laugh that slips out at that. Good parents, he is certain, don't bellow at little children. His actions are branded on his memory- an example of something he'd long ago promised himself he wouldn't do. That's what they say, isn't it; that the habits of broken homes become cycles, spiraling from one generation to the next?

"It's true," says a woman and John looks up to see Sherlock's mother. She's cradling the baby, now blessedly asleep. "Sherlock once cried for fourteen hours straight. I was so frustrated with him I gave his father a smack."

"Father had a fat lip for two days," Sherlock clarifies, holding up his fingers in case John has any doubt about the number. He gives an awkward, apologetic little shrug. "Mrs. Hudson was out." Between the lines, John hears 'and I panicked a bit.'

"Thanks for coming," is all John can say. It's nowhere near a sufficient enough phrase to express his gratitude, but Mummy brushes it off with typical aplomb anyway. "Any time," she says matter-of-factly. "After all, you babysit my boys all the time."

"Mother!"

"Oh don't pretend he doesn't. I should basically be running a crèche for Scotland Yard."

John rubs his face. Sherlock's hand is still on his shoulder, stabilizing him as Mummy approaches them with the bundle of fluffy blanket in her arm. Looking down at the small sleeping face, John feels another stab of worry.

“Ready?” Mummy asks.

He isn’t. John’s arms feel stiff and uncooperative and his face says it all. “Breathe,” she says gently, settling the baby into his grasp. She fits into the nook of his arms so simply. “It gets easier.”

John swallows, finally exhaling a long shaky breath. The baby’s hands lie as curled as little pink anemones on top of the blanket. Sherlock reaches out one finger and lets her grasp it. John is touched.

“Personally, I’d have swapped her for a dog,” Sherlock says, and for all it’s inappropriate offensiveness, it makes John laugh and feel a touch better. He bumps Sherlock with the side of his body by way of chastisement, and feels some of the tension in him ease.

“Never,” he says.

“Why not put her to bed now, and come have some dinner?” Mummy says, in that tone parents just somehow evolve, the one that’s advice on the surface and basic command at the root. “Sherlock made spaghetti, and I checked, there was nothing nasty in the saucepan.”

“I can cook quite well, thank you,” Sherlock replies peevishly, over John’s head. Mummy gives a good-natured ‘ha!’ of disbelief, and bustles off to stick John’s spaghetti in the microwave.

The baby is warm in his arms; the whole flat smells of bath-soap and fried onions, and Sherlock and his mother bicker on along the topic over whether what Sherlock does can be called ‘cooking’, if all he does is memorize other people’s recipes. It is heartrendingly domestic.

John swallows back the lump in his throat even as the one in his gut relaxes slightly, and goes to put the baby in her cot. She settles down neatly, rosy-cheeked; as though the whole day never even happened.

Sherlock joins him at his elbow, silent as John smooths his fingers through her stray curls.

“I shouted at her,” John tells him, brokenly.

Pragmatically, Sherlock replies, “She won’t remember.”

“I still did it.”

“And she won’t remember it. Not even a bit. Unless you wait until she’s old enough and tell her, and by that point she’ll be old enough to understand why.”

John stands there, leaden, his hands resting on the edge of the cot. His expression darkens and he is being painfully honest when he says,

“I hope not. I hope she never understands...that.”

Sherlock looks at him, brow creased with puzzlement and concern. “John?”

John gives nothing more than a minute shake of his head. Sherlock looks at him more deeply, takes in the bowing of his shoulders, the creases around his eyes and the faint, faint shaking of his hands.

“I did promise, you know,” Sherlock says presently. John glances at him questioningly.

“That one time,” Sherlock clarifies. He leans in a little closer. “When she turned up.”

John remembers. He's been holding his arms with such tension that pulling his left hand out from under his right only happens with an awkward jerking motion. He hesitates with the palm of his hand held flat, pats Sherlock's back once in a backwards parody of comfort-giving and then gives in and puts his arm around him like he wants to. He closes his eyes and hopes that Sherlock can at least *feel* his gratitude, because he has no words to express it with. Perhaps he does, for a moment later he reciprocates the gesture.

Out in the kitchen, the microwave beeps. Sherlock squeezes John briefly to make him look up and then makes him an old offer.

"Dinner?"

"Help me," John says. He's leaning his head on his knuckles, looking up at Sherlock, still ashamed of himself. He digs his fork around in his spaghetti. "Please. I didn't mean to make you get involved, but I need your help."

Sherlock plucks at the strings of his violin, then uncrosses his legs and sits up.

"Tell me everything you did up until she started crying."

John thinks and details the day as well as he can remember it, even the stuff that seems redundant and meaningless to him. Sherlock seems to have accepted the mysterious crying-fits as a stopgap case to solve between real ones. John goes over the shopping bought that day, the things thrown in the bin, the clothes worn and food eaten, the weather, the people who came and went. No obvious solution springs to mind, but Sherlock looks thoughtful, and sets to scraping at his violin in an abstract way, which suggests that something in his mind is ticking over on the problem.

John tries to ask, but both Holmes gang up on him once his plate is empty and he's sent off to bed. There's nothing he can do except leave it in Sherlock's hands.

Downstairs he hears Mummy puttering about and then going to bed in Sherlock's room; Sherlock is either spending the night on the sofa or foregoing sleep altogether, which would make John feel even guiltier if Sherlock didn't regularly do that anyway. The flat grows quiet.

John fiddles with the baby monitor, tucks it in with the pillows on his bed and lies there listening to the baby silently breathing for a moment. Through it he hears the tinny echo of Sherlock's footsteps as he moves about, the thud of him toeing off his shoes, and then the creak of the armchair as Sherlock sits. John can picture him, legs tucked up on the chair like a kid.

He mutters, his voice coming through the monitor incoherent he's speaking so low and so quietly, and at first John wonders if he's going over a case or the matter of the baby, when gradually Sherlock's voice picks up and he realizes he's reciting instead.

"-cries to the Posse, Follow me.

We will take this smuggling gang,

And those that fight shall hang

Dingle dangle from the execution tree,

Says the Gauger:

Dingle dangle with the weary moon to see."

It's nothing John's ever heard before, and not like anything he knows they have on the shelves of the flat, although he can't say he's been through Sherlock's entire collection of books.

He's still puzzling when the timbre and rhythm of Sherlock's voice changes, switching from poetry to prose.

"The village of Moonfleet lies half a mile from the sea on the right or west bank of the Fleet stream. This rivulet, which is so narrow as it passes the houses that I have known a good jumper clear it without a pole, broadens out into salt marshes below the village, and loses itself at last in a lake of brackish water. The lake is good for nothing except sea-fowl, herons, and oysters-"

And he goes on.

John lies back and tucks his arm behind his head, one ear inclined towards the monitor. It's a few minutes before he realizes that it's a book and not a case, and a few minutes more before, despite himself, he falls asleep.

Downstairs, Sherlock listens to John's breathing even out, closes his eyes and for the sake of the beauty of a story, continues to recite to himself alone.

"You should be sleeping in his room," Mummy announces at breakfast, brandishing a spoon at them both. "It's ridiculous you traipsing up and down those stairs when she's down here and all the things are in the kitchen and the bathroom, and the cot left out in that corner too. You should have it in the bedroom. What are you going to do when she starts crawling?"

John chokes back his scrambled eggs, takes a large swallow of tea and does his best to recover from what was nearly an awkward miscommunication.

"It's fine," he says. He's put Sherlock out enough by dragging his sorry self and his infant daughter back here. He can't start demanding more. Mummy patently doesn't agree.

"Nonsense, it's impractical. Stick him upstairs with all his clutter; you'll have a far easier time keeping everyone out of trouble."

"It's a smaller room upstairs," John counters, thinking of the sheer volume of stuff Sherlock has squirreled away in his bedroom, never mind the king-size bed.

"I could leave the book cases," Sherlock says, astounding him. He's sat at the table with his legs neatly tucked under him, eating toast and looking as well behaved as John's ever seen him.

"You can get some boxes after breakfast," Mummy says decisively, dunking the frying pan in the washing up bowl. Behind her back, John gives Sherlock an incredulous look. Mutely Sherlock shrugs back at him.

And that was that.

It takes Sherlock more than a fortnight to crack the problem of the baby's irrational crying. John can't discern any particular pattern to his method of figuring it out; mostly it seems to consist of hovering around when she starts crying, if he happens to be in, and then rushing off to tinker around with such a miscellany of items, John actually isn't convinced Sherlock knows what he's doing.

"Too many variables!" he snarls, when John broaches the topic after one failed attempt, but even with that, it does seem like Sherlock is slowly getting somewhere.

One afternoon, he vaults the sofa, sweeps her from John's arms just as she's working up a protracted howl and disappears up the stairs. "Five minutes!" he yells down.

John holds up his hands in surrender and lets him get on with it, curious, and not a small part relieved if Sherlock is on the verge of a breakthrough.

For four of the five minutes, all John can hear is Sherlock thumping around in sporadic bursts and the baby crying, and then all at once both settle down into silence. John listens intently, with bated breath; yet, there's no more crying. She's stopped. For the first time since she started the habit, she's simply stopped. John's not a religious man, per se, but he offers up a prayer of thanks for eccentric genius, to whatever symbol of cold rationality Sherlock prefers.

He stands up as Sherlock descends the stairs, looking unbelievably smug with himself.

"How did you do it?" John asks, looking at his daughter in disbelief. She's calmly sucking on her own fingers and looking up at Sherlock with big doe eyes.

"I deduced," Sherlock replies, gloating. John waits for him to clarify, but Sherlock just sniggers to himself and refuses to. As far as John can see, all Sherlock's done is ruffle up his hair and change his shirt and he can't see how that's got anything to do with anything.

"Yes, but how?" John presses.

"Quantum," Sherlock says facetiously, and swans off with the baby to poke at his laptop.

John folds his arms. "You can't gang up on me with my own baby," he objects, "I made that."

Sherlock gives him a look that is two parts him trying to grin and one part him wrinkling his nose at the mention of sex, and wholly dismissive.

John can but sigh.

It's like goddamn sorcery. The baby cries, John cycles through the obvious options- bottle, nappy,

cot, check for pain or illness- and then finally as a last resort, gives her to Sherlock. It never fails to work. John still can't figure it out.

"Hypnosis," John guesses.

Sherlock merely snorts.

John puts down the bottle of baby powder and points at Sherlock. "Pressure points?"

"Don't be absurd."

"Damn."

Orange 3G 2:43 PM

||Messages|| **Sherlock** ||Edit||

It had better not be
drugs.

John. No. -SH

Get more sugar. -SH

Are you giving her
sugar?

NO. -SH.

Damn.

“The washing powder?” John asks, as the cab sweeps around the corner of Hyde Park. “You threw out that whole new box.”

Sherlock looks at him sidelong, pauses tapping away at his phone and purses his lips.

“Getting warmer.”

John is pleased to hear that, but still mystified. “She doesn’t like Fairy non-bio? She can’t be allergic, can she?”

“And, cold again.”

“Damn!”

“A hint,” John asks, when he finally can’t bear not knowing any more. Over the last week or so, the baby’s apparently stopped irrationally crying altogether, and John is fed up with guessing. He wants the answer. Sherlock, with exaggerated annoyance rolls his eyes and sighs.

“Fine. A hint.” He extracts himself from the chair at the kitchen table, ambles upstairs to John’s old room and reappears a few moment’s later and flings out his arms in a grand gesture.

“Ta-dah,” he says dryly. John can’t see anything remotely different about him.

“Oh, come off it,” John protests, “You haven’t done anything.”

“I have.”

“You bloody haven’t.”

“It’s obvious.”

“You haven’t done anything!”

“As plain as the nose on your face.”

John glowers.

“Tea, John.” Sherlock says, wagging a finger at the kettle as it finishes boiling. Annoyed and still eyeballing him, John moves to find the teabags. There is *nothing* different about him. The first time he ran off and changed his shirt but he hasn’t since then, and John can’t spot anything about the shirts he does wear that indicates any kind of pattern. They’re all the same poncey, scream-at-the-price tag, tight-fitting nonsense he always wears, in the same old colours.

“Stop glaring at me,” Sherlock mutters, eyes glued back to his microscope. “Your face will stick.”

He looks up briefly. "Get more stuck," he amends.

"Ha, bloody, ha."

John clatters about, pours milk into the cups, adds sugar to Sherlock's and harasses the tea with a teaspoon as a way of venting some of his frustration, and then leans across Sherlock to dump it next to him. Then, somewhat abruptly, he grabs Sherlock by the collar and sniffs his neck.

"Are you wearing *perfume*?"

Sherlock gives him a coy look from under his curls. "Ariel, baby powder, magnolia hand cream, chamomile sore nipple ointment and, yes, perfume," he says, and doesn't object when John sniffs him again. "You should recognize it..."

John's expression softens from irked confusion to understanding, and he gives a little 'huh' of disbelief and wonder.

"Oh my God. That's Mary. That's how she smelt to the baby- that's-" He leans in, breathes in the smell and is transported back in time. The mug of tea in his hand wobbles and not for the first time, John Watson is completely floored by Sherlock's acuity. It's her. It's a little bit Sherlock too, but it's undeniably Mary.

"You changed the washing powder and then washed everything, including your dressing gown. She was just old enough to... notice the difference."

John sinks onto a chair at the table, his hand sliding from Sherlock's collar, and looks at him. "That's incredible." He smiles softly, impressed. "That's just, unbelievably clever."

"I deduced," Sherlock replies, but there's that fluttering emotion in his eyes which betrays just how pleased he is.

John is fascinated. "So, what is it, a spray or something? Can I use it?"

"Best not, and besides, it's not necessary for you any more."

"What do you mean?"

Sherlock gets up, goes upstairs and returns with another shirt in his hand that he tosses to John. Tentatively John sniffs it.

"It doesn't smell of anything," he says, missing the way Sherlock's eyes widen slightly.

"It will to her," he says, faintly amused. It does to him. He's carefully worked it out, tweaking the mix of scents gradually over time, adding a new element, or removing one, until the baby conditioned herself to the final mix. They can only keep so much magnolia hand-cream and chamomile nipple ointment lying around when neither of them uses it.

And the lack of crying means less stress for everyone all round.

"What does it smell of then?" John asks, still lost.

Later he recalls Sherlock looking a touch embarrassed when he replies.

"You."

She's a few days short of seven months old and Mycroft has never met her. He's seen pictures of course; the public one of her, wrinkle-faced and violently pink, which John posted on his blog the day she was born; and the other ones John is unaware of.

"You have a visitor," Anthea announces, leaning through his doorway.

"Remind McKee, politely," Mycroft says, not looking up from his work although he deigns to shift his expression to a sneer, "That our appointment is not for another twenty minutes." There's punctuality and then there's intrusion.

"Would but I could, Sir," Anthea quips smartly, and Mycroft looks up to find Sherlock looming in the background like bad news. Just what one wanted before lunch.

He sets down his pen, first signing off on a document with slightly more force and flair than is strictly needed and regards his younger brother with an entirely forced expression of delight. The speciousness of it the whole point.

"Brother, dear," he oils, shamming for all his worth. "How now?"

"Mycroft," Sherlock returns, flashing him one of his 'pretty' smiles; the one that's all teeth and bad-humour. Today however, he drops the act quickly.

So, it's something serious then. Mycroft eases back into his chair and folds his hands together.

"Something bothering you, or has the endless, 'Where's Daddy?' simply become too repetitive even for you?" Mycroft pries.

Mycroft doesn't believe for one second that Sherlock has actually stooped so low as to actually play 'peek-a-boo' with John's spawn, but the taunt was an easy open shot. He knows Sherlock's been handling the baby. He can see the spot on his trousers where he wiped oatmeal away only an hour or two before.

Sherlock looks down his nose at him, indignant, and scowls, "Don't gall me, brother mine."

He seats himself without waiting to be asked, picking critically at the fabric of Mycroft's armchair. "I want to see John's files."

Since the day he first abducted John Watson and held court with him in the underground car park, Mycroft has anticipated this question, and now that it has finally been asked, he is wary. Something, clearly, is afoot, and he cannot tell what that bodes for any of the people concerned. Sherlock included.

"What for?" he counters, raising an eyebrow. "Surely you've deduced the content." Oh. Mycroft narrows his eyes at Sherlock, suddenly connecting dots that were previously solitary. Oh, but he *hasn't*, has he.

Sherlock looks sour; he always hates to admit when he's missed something,

"I haven't got them," Mycroft lies, not even bothering to be subtle. He doesn't need to be; not when he has something Sherlock wants.

“Mycroft,” Sherlock retorts, but falls flat because for once he has nothing to come back with, and Mycroft could just hum with glee at that.

“I suppose I could procure them,” he offers, casually, dangling the possibility before Sherlock’s nose, all but biting his thumb at him.

It’s Sherlock’s turn to narrow his eyes in disgust, but there is no way on God’s green Earth that Mycroft will back down now. Not when Sherlock has caused him so much parlour room taunting. Sherlock grits his teeth and seethes.

“Fine. *If* you can attain them,” he says and then rolls his eyes like he’s swallowing acid, “I’d be....than-” He stalls on the word, practically biting the tip of his tongue. Mycroft mockingly closes his eyes as though harkening the sweetest aria and lifts one hand to cup his ear.

“Obliged,” Sherlock finally spits out.

Mycroft chuckles, as satisfied as a pig in butter, and inclines his head in agreement. Sherlock vibrates with a sigh of ill-disguised loathing, and stands up.

“When?” he demands, turning up the collar on his ridiculous coat.

“Mummy and Daddy’s Ruby Wedding,”

Sherlock turns back at once, riled, “That’s years away!”

“Yes,” Mycroft informs him happily, “And you will be there.” He smiles, a cherub with a goblin’s soul. “In a *nice* suit,” he adds. “And behaving pleasantly to the guests.”

For a split second he thinks he’s pushed it too far and Sherlock is going to erupt, but Sherlock manages to choke it down and settles for a single explosive utterance instead.

“Fine!”

In Sherlock’s tones it sounds like an expletive.

“Wonderful,” Mycroft replies, clapping his hands, his smile reaching truly ghastly proportions. “Anthea will sort you out.” He extends one finger towards the door, facetiously both pointing the way and making a little shooing gesture, just to make sure that Sherlock has no doubt whatsoever who has come out on top of their little meeting today.

Sherlock goes, although not without one last juvenile Parthian shot. He swings back before stepping through the door and pulls a gargoyle face at his brother.

“Cheery-bye,” Mycroft calls after him, waving.

Sherlock takes the folder away with him down the bank of the Thames, past the London Eye, to Whitehall. There’s no reason especially for him to go there, save that it’s a place to be alone in the middle of London. He wants solitude and the open air.

He eschews the Department of Energy and Climate Change, although their roof offers significantly

better views, and instead turns the corner to the pub. It's an easier roof to scale, and less likely to cause a civic disturbance. It's only once he's ensconced there, tucked by the grimy chimneys with the grand sprawl of Westminster laid out before him that Sherlock takes the folder out of his Belstaff.

It's slender, but he has no doubt that within its cardboard cover the information is complete. It's a little sad; the enormity of John Watson, doctor and veteran of Helmand condensed to this slim little wad of papers.

Once upon a time, he would have considered it enough. It's a deeply sobering thought.

He treats it reverently as a result, delicately running a finger down the open edge of the file and opening it without any outward sign of hesitation. Whilst unsure he wants to read what is in here, he has already resolved not to flinch.

The first sheet is John's birth certificate; identical to the one he has at the flat, the names printed out stark and flat. John and Hamish and Helen Elizabeth, and James.

Next, a copy of the photo page of his passport and an un-headed typed sheet containing his comings and goings from England's shores, and all the visas he's ever held. He's not travelled half as much as Sherlock had thought; the sex holiday, Ireland, New Zealand, and of course, Afghanistan. He's been through Iran and Iraq, even if he hasn't fought there. There is a long gap trailing back in time and then, when he's 19, Ibiza. It's such a crassly naïve location compared to what he knows John likes now, Sherlock smiles. John must have spent the whole week drunk, wasting all his summer earnings on cheap beer and meeting girls.

He skims the therapist's notes, the army records, the medicals and the tax sheets; there are P45 forms and copies of the addresses of John's previous residences.

The pages he's looking for are at the back; flimsy transfer papers in grey and pink, and creased hand-written forms. Unlike everything else in the folder they are both original copies and predate common use of computers. Mycroft must have had them fetched out of some archive God knows where, and no one had cared too much about them being taken. Old history now. Just another kid long vanished from the system.

The writing of the social services officer is scribbled and cramped; characteristic of an older woman with not enough time or energy left to pay much attention to her penmanship, and the first signs of arthritis. They are also brief. Sherlock finds the name Harriet Watson squeezed in as an afterthought next to John's, the pair of them huddled into a government box like chicks in a nest. He checks the dates. John's sister had been thirteen, John nine. Thirteen is on the brink of 'too late'; thirteen years old is angry and demanding and teenage- a point where one is old enough to get into trouble but too young to get out of it alone.

Nine years old...

And then another nine years of houses that weren't John's own. The calculation is simple; it comes out at a little over 24%, a little under a quarter of John's whole life.

John's never even mentioned it.

There are some brief notes from Chelmsford constabulary detailing the case, something vague about community service hours for assault on a police officer, and then nothing more on John's father. Regarding his mother, there's no suit for divorce, but the marriage is dissolved regardless. The death certificate stapled in at the back is marked the year following the separation; cause of

death- asphyxiation. Self-inflicted.

Sherlock exhales and looks up at the sky. The clouds have settled over the expanse of it in one broad sheet making it milk white and obscure. Somewhere behind it all is the sun, circling the Earth and spitting out light that becomes confused as it filters through the clouds, making glitter on his retinas. Gulls swoop with catlike cries, and below him London crawls.

The edge of the roof is lipped in shroud-white stone. No one is supposed to come up here and there's no safety rail between him and the drop to the pavement. Sherlock curls up away from it, the back of one hand pressed to his mouth.

He looks back at the notes. It can't all have been bad. Sherlock recognizes names from comments on John's blog; the older couple who left him a telegram for the wedding. It had never occurred to him to ask who they were. It had never even seemed relevant to anything.

Simply put, he hadn't cared enough to find out.

John makes fun of him sometimes, for knowing small ridiculous details such as the differences between the white marks left by various brands of deodorant, yet remaining purposefully ignorant of common big-picture knowledge. This is one of the few times Sherlock is inclined to agree with him. How is it that he's always known John's preferred brand of toothpaste, but never been aware the man grew up in a foster home?

And why.

He closes the folder and hides it back inside of his coat against his breast; this is not something to be carted about in public like a shopping list; this is not something for other people to see even the dull edges of. It is John's life, and he always vowed to keep it safe.

The details turn in his mind like yet another spinning plate that he needs to keep in the air. John; John's baby; not ruining John's career. The work. His need for the work. John's need for the work. Addiction. Domestic affairs. Britain. Legalities and keeping out of prison. Family.

And round it goes back to John again.

Sherlock drops the last few feet to the pavement.

By the time he gets back to Baker Street, John has boiled and mashed carrots and is trying to convince the baby to try them. She's bemused and prefers making spitting noises, and banging things on the plastic tray of her highchair.

Sherlock pauses in the doorway, watching John persevere.

How could he possibly imagine he was a bad father?

"You were gone a while. Find anything?" John asks, pulling a face as he sits up slightly, his back aching from where he's been hunched over.

"Something," Sherlock admits. He exhales and the folder is stiff against his chest. Discretely he puts a hand near it, protectively.

"Lestrade dropped by and left you some cold cases. I stuck them in your room," John tells him. "Oh, bugger it," he adds as the baby manages to tip up the whole portion of mashed carrots onto the floor. "That's that then."

"It's good," Sherlock blurts, "What you do. It's uh...good."

John looks at him like he's grown a second head. "Spoon-feeding?" he asks, doubtfully, holding up the neon green baby spoon.

Life, Sherlock thinks, would be far more convenient if people just knew what he meant without him actually having to say it. Exasperated, mostly with himself, he says, "She kicks out more with her left leg when she sees something she likes."

This does nothing but puzzle John further. "She's always kicking."

"Exactly!"

"Ok. Well. Good to know," John says, hesitantly, completely missing the point, and then rather ignobly fumbling around with the kitchen cloth, mopping up the mess on the floor.

The baby kicks and obligingly throws the spoon at him. John doesn't even bat an eyelid. Instead, good naturedly, he tickles her feet as he cleans, making her laugh. "Scamp," he tells her, and goes to rinse the cloth off in the sink. When he turns back, Sherlock is still there, with a peculiar expression on his face. John dries his hands, slowly growing concerned.

What? John asks, with his whole body.

Nothing.

You're staring. You haven't even taken your coat off.

John puts the tea towel down and asks outright, because there's a flash of something in Sherlock's face that worries him. "Everything ok?"

All Sherlock can do is think how utterly cosmically out of balance it is, the disparity between the short-comings and unfairness of John's life, and everything that is present and good about him. Sherlock doesn't dwell on his own childhood much, but he cannot deny it came with considerable love, money and a background of stability. All the issues in it were of his own making, and look what a train-wreck he made of it before meeting John.

John meanwhile has had everything denied him, and he's still asking other people if they are alright before considering himself.

"Fine. Nothing," Sherlock says, "I was just thinking."

"Oh," John nods, not entirely believing him, but backing off. If Sherlock doesn't want to talk about whatever this is, he isn't going to push the issue. Instead he jokes, "It looked painful."

"I saw Mycroft today."

"Ah," John replies, with sudden albeit wrong insight. "And how's he?"

"Insufferable as usual; lost another pound; revoltingly happy," Sherlock frowns, pulling up the conversation in his mind and flicking mentally through small details he'd previously dismissed. Warmish weather but extra high collar, mobile kept in front of him- expecting messages rather than a call. Sherlock curls his lip.

"Ugh, I think he's seeing someone."

At that John raises his eyebrows; now there was an idea no one had ever contemplated. "Blimey.

Two-timing the Queen; isn't that high treason?"

"Not if it's Phillip," Sherlock replies at once and the pair of them shudder with mixed mirth and revulsion.

"You could ask him if he likes Greek yoghurt, next time," John suggests salaciously, and laughs at Sherlock's look of utter scandal.

She's seven months old and her eyes have changed colour since birth. She's peeking at Sherlock through the bars of her cot, blinking. John is dead asleep, through natural means, and although she's awake she's not crying. Sherlock, wasting hours in the middle of the night, slips through past the foot of the bed and takes her back to the living room before she does decide to cry and disturb John.

"Picking up my bad habits," he whispers to her, and she babbles back at him in her own stunted approximation of English; nothing but little vowel and consonant clusters. Sherlock's had worse conversation. "It's a nice night," he agrees.

He sits with her in John's chair, partly because it seems more fitting, and partly so he can keep his back to the bedroom, and on the temptation to observe John sleeping, of which he feels John would not approve. He does a great many things that John doesn't approve of, with very little regard for that fact, but it seems a bit off to do it in front of the baby.

Then again, she might prove to be a useful partner in crime one day.

Well, not *crime*.

Annoying John.

There's a difference; one is a prolonged experiment on the limitations of man, the other results in bad food and bad-tempered bedfellows. He explains as much aloud to the baby. She plays with the buttons of his shirt and ignores his ramblings.

"Rather like your father in that respect. Well, not completely. The ignoring part, not the buttons."

Not even once the buttons.

He doesn't tell her that.

"What are your thoughts on Goethe?" he asks, sorting books one-handedly and she yawns hugely. "Yes, it's plaguey stuff; not for the small hours." He dandles her idly on his knee, and she seems happy enough with that. "Dylan Thomas, then? *—It is Spring, moonless night in the small town, starless and bible-black, the cobble streets silent and the hunched, courters'-and- rabbits' wood limping invisible down to the sloeblack, slow, black, crow-black, fishing-boat-bobbing sea.*

"Your mother liked it. It's about dull Welsh people who have predictably boring lives, but there's a woman with both OCD and auditory-visual hallucinations, who murdered both her husbands, and a sea captain who's in love with a dead whore, and poetry; and Polly who has many babies. You'd fit in there." He hums two bars of Polly Garter's song of lovers and feels like a complete, worthless

fool.

He can't seem to stop.

She gurgles and gives him a friendly bash when he stops humming so he goes on, this time trying out the words.

"I loved a man, whose name was...Tom." She likes the tune and is kindly ignorant of his hesitation. He's certain the lyrics go with Tom, no matter what his tongue is trying to do. *"He was strong as a bear and-* and no, I won't sing the rest, it's rude. How about the other one? Something about a snail- what was it? *-Oh it's my turn now, said Flossie snail, to take the baby from the milking pail, and it's my turn now, said John-* I've changed my mind, this whole play is an abomination."

She wiggles and flops forward on his chest. His hands are large enough to cover the full circumference of her chest when he puts them around her, and he is conscious of how fragile she is. Is that what John is thinking, those times when Sherlock sees him pick her up, and a look cross his face that has so far defied deduction?

Sherlock tightens his grip just a fraction, so that he can feel her little ribs pushing against his fingers when she breathes, and the pitter-patter of her heart. She gives him a surprised look.

"Sorry. I don't mean it."

He eases her by the armpits until the crown of her head is comfortably tucked in the crook of his neck; one hand supporting her; one hand covering her back. She yawns again, her fingers curling against his collarbone, her hair tickling his jaw-line. Sherlock exhales a long slow breath of his own.

Sometimes she looks like Mary, in the particular blue of her eyes, or how her hair goes off in flyaway curls. When she frowns she looks like John, and when she smiles. The back of her neck is impossibly soft and her hair smells like a mix of baby soap and John's aftershave and the whole of her is a solid, warm weight over the left side of Sherlock. He closes his eyes and rocks her gently.

"Don't ever fall in love," he tells her, quietly, to the tick of the clock and the middle of the night. His lips brush her scalp. "It ruins you."

Chapter End Notes

Sherlock quotes the opening lines of 'Moonfleet' by J. Meade Falkner, which isn't about pirates, but it IS about smuggling and diamonds and crime. He also quotes from 'Under Milk Wood' by Dylan Thomas, which is a radio play, and very good, and does indeed have rude bits. It's -poetically- rude though, so you can get away with it.

If you didn't get the joke about the Greek yoghurt, I direct you to google Prince Phillip, or else to your nearest British person, although I can't guarantee they'd

necessarily get it either. It's definitely rude; Mea Culpa.

Fig rolls are, in my opinion, awful, but they are the biscuit equivalent of a woolly jumper, so I reckoned John would like them.

Post-partum heart failure effects 1 in 4000 women, and can occur months after birth. Fatality is not common, but possible if there are other underlying health conditions or a hereditary predisposition.

The chapter title comes from 'Mr Ambulance Driver' by The Flaming Lips.

[Codenamelazarus](#) is my beta, I am [Odamakilock](#)

Part 2: September 6th

Chapter Summary

It's September; she's seven months old. Sherlock finally gets a case that ranks more than a six; John finally introduced the baby to some of their friends. Assumptions are made.

Chapter Notes

With thanks as always to the indomitable [CodenameLazarus](#), my beta-reader and favourite Egg, who doesn't mind that I never pull my punches.

I'm on Tumblr here: [Odamakilock](#)

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Part Two: September 6th

September comes in cold and damp; the weekend smell of barbeques slowly getting replaced by that of bonfires. John swaps cardigans for jumpers again, and wearily puts socks on the baby over and over as she, with equal weariness, pulls them off and discards them. He wouldn't mind except then she howls because her feet get cold.

She's seven months old now, and starting to get wary of strangers. John dithers over the phonebook and various notice boards in the clinic or around the places he ventures nowadays, and worries. His compassionate leave is all but up, and he's eating hard into his savings now- for everyone's sake he needs to get back to work and soon, only he's concerned about leaving her for some stranger to look after.

There's Mrs. Hudson, of course, who is a quite willing babysitter, but John feels it's too much to ask of her to have the baby all day every day- she does enough and she's not getting younger. Besides, children need other children to interact with.

It isn't like she's getting siblings any time soon.

He rings around half-heartedly, and then, with a sense of an impending deadline and the burden of duty, arranges to visit a few day cares. The costs alone leave him dry-mouthed. He'll manage a little more than to simply break even- thank God doctor's salaries are not inconsiderable- but nonetheless the outflow of cash it takes to live in London nowadays is staggering. Never has John been more utterly grateful for Mrs. Hudson's generous discount.

He wedges a fluffy hat over the baby's ears despite her complaints and clips her into the new pushchair. Thankfully she seems not to mind the graduation from infant carrier to buggy, and it makes getting from A to B easier too.

Mrs. Hudson, her improbable 6th sense for when to pop up and do a bit of sneaky tidying obviously

tingling, appears in the door as he gets the baby comfortable.

“Coo-ee! Ooh, are we off for a visit?”

“We’re going to go and check out a playschool, aren’t we?” John says, speaking mostly to the baby. She solemnly looks as he juggles the dangling toys across the bar in front of her, and then smiles coyly and reaches for them.

“How exciting,” Mrs. Hudson says, leaning down and getting a much sunnier smile than the Pack N Go Stroller Play Set by way of reward. “Is Sherlock in?”

“Still in bed, last I checked. He’ll probably come down if you rattle the tins and make fridge-cleaning noises.”

“I’m awake,” Sherlock announces grumpily behind them. He’s come down the stairs rather quietly and neither of them had noticed. “Leave the fridge alone.”

He flounces past them into the kitchen, hawk-like with his undone dressing gown flapping behind him, and investigates the contents of the teapot. It’s over-stewed but he carelessly slops some into a mug and has done with it.

“New,” he deduces, pointing at the pushchair.

“New-ish,” John corrects.

“Hmm. Lightweight for the buses.”

“Well, yes, but...also cheap.” It was the best he could get for the lowest cost. He tries to remind himself it’s not really being stingy if it’s actually practical when he has to lump it, kid and all, up and down seventeen stairs on a daily basis.

Sherlock notes the colour and the logo and smirks. “You thought it was the race car manufacturer.”

“I might have,” John says, “Or I might know my strollers, thank you very much.” Naturally, Sherlock is entirely accurate, but the lady in Toys R Us had assured him it was a fairly common error.

At least it wasn’t pink.

Sherlock flashes him a grin and fumbles through a box of microscope slides. He rumbles to himself thoughtfully as John flicks through his phone to double check the address of the playgroup and then says, “Mrs. Hudson; got any agar jelly?”

“Oh, I don’t know, dear. I’ve probably got some Bonjela somewhere. Is it your teeth?”

Sherlock silently raises his eyebrows at John. “No, Mrs. Hudson, it’s my *pseudomonas aeruginosa*.”

“Goodness.”

“On the bright side, at least it’s not his coccus, Mrs. Hudson,” John says, grinning.

“Oh, I should hope not! Not in the kitchen!”

“No, keep your bacteria upstairs please,” John agrees, clicking the break off of the pushchair. “See

you later.” He manoeuvres the kid to the door and is off, without another backwards look.

“Toodles,” Sherlock says dryly from over his mug and waves.

Every playgroup John visits smells faintly but noticeably of piss and oranges. The piss seems self-explanatory- a natural by-product of excited toddlers with small bladders and poor control, but he can’t figure out the oranges. Why not bananas?

He is vaguely puzzling this as he watches his daughter doggedly hoarding the foam blocks for her own enterprises in stacking and knocking them over again, when he’s approached by another parent.

“Hi,” she says brightly. John looks at her and then gives her a second look. She’s short and her cleavage is incredibly ample, despite the demure camisole doing its best to contain it.

“Hi,” he replies, forcing his eyes up. She either doesn’t notice or pretends not to.

“Thinking of joining Honeyfields?”

“Uh, yeah. Considering it.” She flashes him a friendly smile and he returns the favour. She’s blond but he can see the faint ashy brown line down either side of her parting where her roots are showing; a vanity Mary had never had to resort to. Mary had been pure blonde all the way down. His smile wavers a fraction and then he clears his throat.

“Do you work here?”

She taps her loose apron and the plastic flower badge clipped to the left-hand strap. “What do you think?” She teases, making John feel flushed and stupid.

“You could have just come from a cooking class.”

She laughs. “I could have. Actually, I just volunteer here. Trying to get a vocational in child-care,” she adds, as though to reassure him she’s got a life.

“Right, wow,” John nods, exaggerating how impressive he finds that, although only so he doesn’t seem rude. She appears to be a bit sensitive about it. “That’s got to be fairly rewarding.”

“Keeps me out of trouble.”

That gets John’s attention a little. “You? In trouble? I’m not sure I can believe that.” It feels weird to be flirting. It’s both oddly pleasing and enjoyable, yet it feels off somehow. A touch uncomfortable. John feels sweaty.

“A girl’s got to have some secrets,” she jokes, and John wonders if that’s true. He laughs aloud, but not so much at the joke as at the idea.

There’s no bloody chance this woman with her plastic sunflower and gnawed cuticles could have secrets of any magnitude; not compared to Mary. Even compared to him, she probably pales into complete ordinariness. Supposing if she somehow isn’t as average as she appears (tits aside) and supposing she has a secret to rival his wife’s insane life, then John feels he should probably apply to some committee somewhere and get a certificate for having the worst dumb luck in the country. That too makes him laugh.

The woman looks at him aside, perhaps wondering if he's taking the piss but ultimately seems to decide that he's just oddly jolly, or possibly just doesn't get out much. Not entirely unreasonable for a father with a small child.

"Not often we see the dads here," she says, making conversation, "Do you work from home?"

"Sometimes," John says, thinking of bashing through information with Sherlock at 221B for cases. He smiles faintly. "I'm actually a doctor. I've uh, been off work with that one," he gestures to his daughter who is cautiously allowing another little girl to share her blocks, or at least, not arguing when she helps herself to them.

"How old is she now?"

"Seven months," John says, which sounds incredibly short when he says it aloud. She understands implicitly, however, that what he means is a lifetime.

"Getting back to work then," she says sympathetically, gesturing to the day care. "It's a nice place; the manager's really good, and I'm not just saying that. You should come in for a proper trial day."

John looks around at the toy boxes and the Lilliputian tables and chairs in all the colours that easy-wipe plastic can come in. He'd been obliged to sit in one earlier, his knees creaking and hiked up practically to his ears. There are scribbly drawings and finger paintings on string washing lines down one wall, carefully marked with each child's name. He's been here twenty minutes and none of the kids has screamed. It's decent. He could do worse, and on his budget, he's not sure he can do better without having to ask Sherlock to pitch in and while the odd five quid here and there for baby-food is one thing, this is a different level of commitment.

The atmosphere in the room seems sweetly mundane. His daughter bangs soft bricks together and then holds them up, one in each fist, to show him. "Lovely," he tells her. "Put them in a line."

"What do you think?" The woman asks him.

"Yeah, I'll uh... sorry," He looks at her and smiles. He's running out of time to make his decisions and he can't keep putting things off. "Sorry," he says again, "What was your name?"

She tells him but he's distracted taking blocks from not just his daughter, but the other little girl too. John grins and receives them with a delight that isn't wholly feigned. The little stranger hides her giggles behind both dark little arms and admires him with huge brown eyes. His daughter seems to like her, or at least, is faintly awed by this other human so similar in size to herself. Seven month olds aren't generally that good at dealing with other children, especially at initial meetings- from John's experience with people at the clinic waiting room, it usually ends in crying, but so far, she's been a bit quiet and nervous, but tear-free.

"Have you made a friend, Sweetheart?"

She looks at him a little blankly, perhaps trying to translate his words to something she recognizes and then flings another block in his lap.

"That's good fun," says the woman. John had nearly forgotten she was there.

"Yeah," he agrees, distractedly. "Sorry, when did you say the trial days were?"

Some days later, there's a text message waiting on John's phone, so naturally Sherlock reads it first.

Orange 3G 1:54 PM

||Messages|| **Harry** ||Edit||

u should update ur
blog mor. Hows the
baby?

She's fine.

Starting to talk.

awesum! :D

Sherlock purses his lips and considers. Since John has been living back at 221B, he's been curiously cagey with his social circle. The baby has been to the park, the supermarket, day care and the clinic, but of their actual social circle, the only person John's voluntarily introduced the baby to so far is Mrs. Hudson, which considering she lives there, is hardly a consideration at all. In his defence, Lestrade hasn't called by personally with any cases in the last few months, and Sherlock hasn't annoyed Mycroft enough for him to do likewise either. Molly isn't in the habit of dropping in unannounced and by and large, excluding Anderson and his hoi polloi drug squad, who else would there be?

Whilst Sherlock himself is used to his small and insular little society, it strikes him as odd that John isn't yet itching to extend the circle a bit beyond the strictly necessary.

Harry on the other hand, is a wild card. In all the years Sherlock has known John, they've never once crossed paths; from what he knows, she didn't come to his fake funeral and he remembers distinctly her absence from the wedding. John had shrugged off both as par for the course. Harry was a bad sister and a poor excuse for an adult, and he wasn't going to waste time being bothered by it any more.

Not outwardly anyway.

He slips the phone behind his back as John comes down the stairs, fumbling around for his coat, his keys and his shoes. "Have you seen my phone?"

Sherlock discretely slides it into the back pocket of his trousers and gives an innocent shrug. John is too distracted to notice.

"Shit! Um. You have the surgery's number, right?"

"Yes," Sherlock drawls, slumping back into his chair and feigning boredom.

"Right, well Mrs. Hudson's picking her up from day care today anyway. It should be alright- It'll be fine. Keys, yes, um..." John looks around, grabs his bag. "I'm coming home via the shop later, want anything?"

"Nope."

"Alright then," John says, hovering by the door. He's halfway out but he's paused, one hand on the

doorframe, as though he's still forgotten something, which he has, of course, but it doesn't seem to be the loss of the phone that's bothering him.

"Alright, see you then," John repeats.

"Bye."

John looks at him briefly, licks his lips as though about to say something else but instead just gives the Belstaff hanging by the door a pat and leaves. Sherlock silently wonders what all that was in aid of.

He retrieves the phone once he's heard the front door shut and looks at the message again. Curious.

Harry seems interested, or at least invested in the pretence of seeming interested, even if she has zero intention of following through. How deep does that rabbit hole go?

John's file remains hidden away in his bedroom where John won't snoop to find it, not that he does snoop much nowadays, but it's reached the limits of what it can tell him and the facts itch in his skull like an unsolved case.

And here is a witness.

Using but one finger in homage to his flatmate, Sherlock deliberately taps out a message and hits send.

From behind she looks like John in a wig and a blouse, even the way she's hunched over her coffee is reminiscent of John hunkered over his laptop. Sherlock hangs back for a moment, regarding her. She's made an effort, he notes- hair washed this morning, peek of jewellery sticking out from under her hair, which is pulled into a short ponytail. It's a messy one, but by design more than mere sloppiness.

Yet, she's gnawing absently on her cuticle and the clothes are a little on the big side- nice, but old. Sized to fit her before alcohol abuse melted her curves away. The top is long-sleeved, but she shoves at the cuffs in a mindless, irritated way- she prefers short-sleeves but is self-conscious of the spider angiomas on her arms, the telltale broken blood vessels.

Harry is one of the few people Sherlock is uncertain of. There's an element of instability about her, something he's familiar enough with given his line of work, but her inherent closeness and knowledge of John that is in some ways superior to that of his own, disconcerts him.

He approaches her cautiously as a result. First he debates another message or not but he doesn't want to leave too obvious a history on John's phone and he figures Harry is a direct person, so the direct approach it is.

She looks up as he drops himself into the seat opposite her, seems taken aback and then responds bluntly. "John's not coming."

"No," Sherlock replies. No reason to lie.

Harry narrows her eyes at him; a reddened and diluted version of John's. "He didn't fucking text me. You did."

“Yes.”

“I thought he was a bit quick to reply.”

She regards him warily for a moment, waiting for everything to go balls up. “Did he send you?”

“No.”

“Does he know you’re here?”

“...No,” Sherlock admits.

“Well, you’re actually the mouthy bastard they all make you out to be, aren’t you,” she says sarcastically, swiftly fed up with his one word responses and still suspicious of the whole situation being a set up, with her as the butt of some unpleasant joke.

“So where is John?”

Sherlock shrugs. “He has one of those job things again. He’s jobbing.”

“Oh right, and you felt like being social today, did you? Bit of a chit-chat?”

“Yes,” Sherlock ventures and is rewarded by her being thrown off balance by that.

Disconcerted she frowns at him, puzzled. “Yeah, but what for?” she asks aloud, asking herself more than him and not appearing to expect an answer.

“Alright then, I’ve got bugger all to do today so it’s only your time getting wasted.”

Sherlock says nothing as she messes with her coffee cup, scraping the sugar out the bottom with the tip of her spoon and sucking it thoughtfully as she looks at him. He regards her in return and contemplates how different she appears in text to in the flesh. He wonders which one is more real; the suspicion and the bitterness or the easy-going slightly silly woman from her messages. Perhaps neither. Perhaps both are merely coping methods.

He can tell she’s thinking about him; what she’s gleaned from John’s blog and the papers and so on. She’s no Mary- she hasn’t done it as homework with any kind of focus, but instead picked up her information with the haphazardness of a curtain-twitching neighbour. It’s nosiness pure and simple, and to a certain degree, control. Despite herself, she wants in on John’s life.

Finally she puts down her cup and lights up a cigarette instead, the smoke wreathing up around her head in blatant disregard of the law. The girl behind the counter gives her a grey-eyed look, but doesn’t bother to come over and ask her to stop. There’s grubby yellow linoleum on the floor and the light in the display case of store-bought cakes flickers. It’s that kind of place.

“So what was yours?” She asks bluntly. She’s pissed off at being duped and combative. With John conveniently away, Sherlock gets the brunt of it. Still, he bristles at her question and then she rolls her eyes at him.

“Don’t give me that. I’ve been in rehab, so I know a fucking addict when I see one. What was it?”

“Coke,” Sherlock snips back, enunciating. Harry just snorts.

“Figures. Posh boy party drug. Get that at, what, Oxford?”

“Cambridge.”

“Figures,” she says again, resentfully. “Bad boys leading you astray?” Even she doesn’t believe that. She discards the notion with a toss of her head and sucks on her cigarette before wafting it under his nose. He can’t resist inhaling a little, even for a pathetic hit of second hand nicotine.

“See, it’s always a fucking tragedy when it’s illegal. But if you can’t say no to a pint and a fag? That’s your own fucking stupid fault.” She narrows her eyes, and smirks hollowly. “I bet he’s all over you.”

Sherlock pinches the cigarette out of her fingers and brutally stabs it out in the ashtray. He has to remind himself that Harry isn’t smart, just mean. The conversational zigzags she makes aren’t indicative of her insight; she’s simply jabbing in the dark, trying to find the soft spots in his armour.

“Maybe if you stopped blaming other people.”

She pulls back, slightly disarmed without her security blanket of smoke, but she recovers fast. *If she weren’t a mess*, Sherlock thinks, *she’d be very nearly remarkable*. Harry treats him to a slow clap.

“Oh bravo. Are we getting our dicks and rulers out next?”

Sherlock grits his teeth. *For John*.

“Mine’s at home. Promise it’s bigger.”

They flunk into a silence, Sherlock sulking, her considering her next line of assault. She’d wanted to see John, Sherlock thinks, genuinely, she looked forward to this, put a lot of effort into showing off how clean and sober she is, even though normality is still just a hazy idea. She wants to meet her niece.

There’d been a man he’d met in rehab, who’d talked incessantly about his girlfriend’s baby. The child hadn’t been his own; it had been some other man’s and yet he’d clung to the notion of having something new and wholesome in his life.

The only thing he’d managed to do between the sweats and the wheedling and the dodging answers in therapy- in short, the only step he’d managed to take towards a full recovery, other than the enforced lack of the drug, was to shave.

He’d get up every morning, rattle on about ‘his’ kid and all the pipe dreams he had for when he got out and was a new man and his life turned a corner into the sunny world of dreams, and he’d shave.

An hour later he’d be stalking about, talking about heroin in much the same tone of voice.

Sherlock thought he’d deleted him.

“How’s John?” Harry finally caves and asks. In the silence it’s occurred to her that perhaps something is wrong. That it’s not her on trial today, but something else.

“Fine,” Sherlock replies, automatically and then despite himself, he pauses a second to wonder if that were an appropriate response or not. “Yes. Fine.”

“Define ‘fine’,” Harry says, perturbed.

“Healthy. Not fat. Does things,” Sherlock’s lips purse and his eyes do a circuit from the ceiling to the wall to the table to the counter to the ceiling again as he pretends to think before adding, “has a

baby. I'm sure you're aware. She's very blonde now."

"Is she saying words yet?"

"She makes noises; I wouldn't call them words. She said 'a-wah-wha-ahh-a-a' this morning."

Harry looks at him sternly in case he's being facetious, but judging by the blankness of his expression, he's probably not. "Won't be long though," she says, fishing for information. "I suppose it'll be 'dad' or something like that."

"I don't doubt," Sherlock agrees. "He dotes on her enough, and Mrs. Hudson I'm quite certain, is on a mission to get her talking. She talks enough. Mrs. Hudson, that is."

Harry cracks slightly with a smile. "I bet. Probably a quiet baby though."

"What makes you say that?"

"Oh, you know, John was as a baby. I mean, screaming aside."

"And you?"

"Loud," Harry says with faint pride, "So I'm told." She shrugs, making her various rubbery charity bracelets squeak against the tabletop.

Loud and Proud indeed, Sherlock thinks dryly. "Mummy says I alternated."

"That sounds about right. Proper contrary. What was your first word?" Harry asks, warming up to the conversation.

"I didn't have one," Sherlock tells her, clarifying as she opens her mouth to point out that's impossible, "Technically 'I', but really I had a first sentence."

"Oh right. Yeah. Baby genius, I can picture it. What did you say?"

"'I want that'."

Harry actually laughs. "Mine was straight-up 'No!'."

"What about John?"

"I can't remember. 'Mummy' I think, or-" she shrugs, "something like that."

"Really? I would have thought it would have been 'daddy'," Sherlock tries but he plays his card too soon, gets the tone of voice wrong or something or perhaps simply underestimates how sore a topic it is, because Harry freezes up at once.

"Oh my God."

This time her anger is fierce and immediate.

"Wow. Wow, just, fucking no. Jesus!" She grips the edge of the table, rocking back in her chair. "You don't get to call me out here on some pretext, just to interrogate me about my *fucked-up family*." Harry's voice breaks on the last; the volume of her voice dropping.

Alarmed, Sherlock pushes her coffee towards her.

“Yeah, give me a fucking drink, that always works.” She takes the cup anyway, gripping it until her knuckles whiten.

“I don’t have to put up with this. I’m doing fine- it’s none of your business anyway. I don’t have to put up with this. I could just leave!”

“John likes tea,” Sherlock says by way of belated excuse for the coffee.

“I know! What are you telling me that for?” Mutinously, she slugs at her coffee, emptying the cup. Suddenly she asks, “Does he still drown the teabag with milk?”

Sherlock looks at her, and shakes his head. She nods, looking in the mess at the bottom of her cup as though she might find something left there. Placing it back on the saucer, she shoves it at Sherlock. He looks at it.

“Go on then, wonder boy.”

It’s a test of the most tedious sort. *For John*. He scowls so that there’s no uncertainty that he is entirely displeased by this, but takes the empties up to the counter and orders, a mug of coffee for himself, something else for her.

Something only very distantly related to a smile twitches at the corner of her mouth when he plonks it ungraciously in front of her. The upper third of the mug is clogged with a helter-skelter of whipped cream and sprinkles, and Sherlock doesn’t like to contemplate what the syrup is doing in the lower third. Harry pulls the spoon out slowly, inadvertently pulling up steam from the hot chocolate below, sending a gush of melted cream running down the side of the cup.

“I had a girlfriend once who did that.”

She looks up and catches Sherlock’s eye, and nearly laughs because he looks so horrified. Harry sucks the end of the spoon but doesn’t bother to tease him further; it’s too much effort. Instead she toys with the drink, and softens.

“Alright,” She says finally, with a tired sigh. “Not gonna be worse than therapy, I guess. But it’s tit-for-tat, right? You want to know my fuck-ups, well you have to share yours with the class too.”

Sherlock folds his hands on the table and considers.

“I shot a man in the head.”

“Jesus!”

“He was a very unpleasant man.” Sherlock amends.

“Are you serious?” Harry stares at him. “Well, Shit.” She says breathlessly. “I suddenly feel a lot better about myself. I’ve- uh, never done that!”

Sherlock neither apologises nor looks remotely ashamed of murder. He looks at her expectantly, but she holds up a finger. “Doesn’t count.”

“What do you mean, it ‘doesn’t count’.”

“Well, you want to hear about John, right? And...when we were kids. Our dad. Equal exchange of information- you shot someone, I-I fucked someone else’s wife. But that’s neither here nor there. Tell me something about when you were a kid.”

Sherlock steeples his hands and takes a deep breath. *For John.* He tells her about Redbeard.

She tells him about John's 6th birthday party- the one Dad 'forgot' through 'no fault of his own' and the point where she stopped inviting friends over because Mum started 'losing it'.

It becomes a morbid high-stakes poker game, each round playing coy enough to wheedle something out of the other, but with a strange need to up the ante as well. However, it can't last. Harry with her addict's self-obsession ends up talking more, dredging through her childhood so deeply that the relative pain of it- like picking at a scab- ultimately interests her more than Sherlock does.

Harry leans her puffy cheek on the knuckles of one hand and absently rearranges the sugar packets.

"It was layers and layers of bullshit, y'know? Like he'd say stuff about how I looked and my friends; take these harsh digs at me- the same as he'd do at Mum- and it was so clever because every single time, I always blamed *her* first. And then I'd come-to and realise she had nothing to fucking do with it and get mad, but then...I don't know, I'd go get my bike or something to go storm off, and, like, just looking at the bike'd make me waver again. It was always Dad who did presents, that was his thing. And he'd make a great big fuss, make it really special- you always felt amazing when Dad gave you something- so... could he really be that bad? Maybe I was just some ugly, slaggy, stupid little bitch with crap friends and an ingrate to boot. Y'know?"

She glances up briefly and Sherlock jerks his chin for her to continue. He has pressed his shoulder blades nearly flat against the high back of the booth they are in; his elbows digging pockmarks in the faux leather. She doesn't notice.

"Of course, *later*, you'd think about it again and realise the fantastic day at the water park with me n' John was just another way to spite Mum, cause she'd said we couldn't go. The bike was for her having dared suggest we spend money on fixing the kitchen sink- his rationale; it was too expensive. But he could cough up easy enough for a three hundred quid mountain bike. I think that's why she stuck with him- I reckon she just couldn't believe he was that much of a shit either. "

She trails off, running a fingernail back and forth across the tabletop and a silence grows. Eventually Sherlock asks,

"And John?"

"He didn't really get it 'till we moved house. Then it was phone calls, um, 'Yeah, Johnny, it'll be this weekend, you and me. We'll have a blast! Just us boys, right? I've got tickets for Alton Towers.' Just huge, stupid plans like no one but a nine-year-old would buy into. And he always fucking would, that's what got me. Just week after week of 'Aw, I'm sorry, Johnny, something came up and they wouldn't let me come see you. It's that bitch of a council worker you've got, Johnny-' and he'd fucking forgive him. I meant, it's transparent, isn't it? It's obvious; though to be honest by that point I don't think Dad was even trying anymore. Every fucking Sunday, though, he'd be sat on the stairs waiting, for hours. And he'd *talk* like him. God, he was such a little shit. Mini Dad."

"He was a child," Sherlock broke in between gritted teeth.

"So the fuck was I," Harry reminded him. "Don't put this on me- that's the thing with shit. When it drops, it goes in all directions. Don't worry about that- that was the one thing everyone got their fair share of." She shrugged, bitterness screwing up her face.

“Anyway, then Mum downed a bottle of her insomnia meds, and that put an end to it. He still sat on the steps, but he stopped talking Dad up after he didn’t even bother to turn up for the funeral. Stop that, you wanted to know,” she concludes with a snap. “It’s not nice, you should know that it’s not nice.”

Sherlock doesn’t know what was showing on his face as she was speaking and makes an extra effort to school himself.

“Did he hit?” He asks.

“Didn’t hit me. Not like you mean anyway- a couple of swipes if we were being naughty, but nothing excessive. If he smacked John about I never saw it.”

“Your mother.”

“Once, I guess,” she says, which Sherlock translates to ‘once that was proven’.

“So, what’s he doing?” Harry asks.

Sherlock frowns at her.

“With the kid,” she clarifies. “What’s got you so het up you’re here asking me stuff?”

“He worries.”

Harry seems nonplussed. “Sensible if you ask me,” she says callously, “Not like we ever had a good role-model for it.” She gives him an arch look when his expression clouds over.

“Oh, he’ll be fine. Johnnie’s always been the golden boy. He was the boy,” she corrected herself, “Straight. Survived the 1980’s care system, became a doctor and war hero and all that glory, glory Hallelujah. Worst comes to worst, he’ll just go and flash his baby blues around and find some woman to play mummy with.” She pauses and regards Sherlock and how bilious he looks.

“Bit shit on you, though,” she admits and then mimes dropping something.

‘Because when the shit drops, it goes in all directions,’ Sherlock thinks.

Harry heaves a sigh that seems to come right up from the soles of her feet and then slumps back in her seat. She looks at Sherlock and he realizes that somehow, without him expressly trying, they’ve reached a mutual kind of stalemate.

“Y’know, I thought you were going to be the worst arse in the world,” Harry tells him. Evidently she has come to the same conclusion. “But you seem alright.”

Sherlock isn’t sure what to say to that. It’s hardly a compliment to be judged as alright by a woman whose life is such a shambles, but on the other hand, he’s hardly made all the best choices in life either. In a strange way, he suddenly feels as though he owes her a debt of gratitude. If Harry hadn’t fucked up so royally; if she’d been closer to her brother then perhaps John would never have come limping into his life.

Of course, this didn’t happen and technically he owes her squat, but the feeling lodges in him like a barb and nags.

“Listen,” she says suddenly, “About John. Just... I hope you get it. That he’s not- I mean, he is- good, and he always manages to do the right thing, like he’s never fucked up like I have but he is.

Really,” She puffs out her cheeks in an effort to think of a way to phrase it and then gives up and just says it directly. “He’s fucked up. Everyone misses it cause he’s always lined up next to, well, me, you, his other fuck-up friends, so nobody notices. So...” She huffs out breath so hard that her fringe flops up and down. “Look after yourself.”

Sherlock frowns at her, puzzled. “I’m fine.” He doubts there is anything John could do to him that he couldn’t do to himself in substantially more disastrous ways. Or hasn’t already tried.

Harry flaps her hand at him across the table. “Gimmie your phone.”

“What for.”

“Gonna take a picture of my left tit so you can show all your mates that you’ve seen one. Because I want to give you a number, you berk,” she says, exasperated, when for a fraction of a second it looks like he’s believed her. “Give.”

He slides it across the table and she jabs the number in with her thumbs adroitly; evidently better with technology than John is. Curious.

“Here,” she says and pushes the phone back to him. “I’ve just saved it as ‘information’, but they’re really good. It’s anonymous. You just ring up and it’s... well, it’s someone you can ask about stuff freely. No dodgy Google searches, or fucking about. They don’t judge, they’ll just give you advice, or listen, or just talk.”

Sherlock peels his tongue off of the roof of his mouth and looks at her, lost. “What’s it for?”

“‘Cause...” she lifts her hands palms up in a ‘you tell me’ gesture, “‘cause it can be shit, if you’re working through stuff. About who you are. What you like. People.” She shrugs. “When it doesn’t...pan out...”

Sherlock inhales through his nose, and then, disarmed, takes a second hasty breath, leaning back away from the table. “I don’t need this,” he hisses at her, brandishing the phone.

“Then delete it, but, it’s there. Is all I’m saying; it’s just there if you need it. Sometimes people like us need it.”

The café feels small and cloying. The smell of coffee is making Sherlock nauseated. “I’m not like you.” He argues. He’s not. He’s not like this sad, bossy, ignorant waste of a life. He’s done better, and smarter. *For John.*

Harry isn’t offended. She seems past being offended now, and it frightens Sherlock to realize she has a wealth of insight and experience he desperately lacks. She’s done it after all; she’s turned the tables on him.

“Not a hundred percent no,” she agrees, giving him dry smile that reminds him horribly of John. She sounds like him when she speaks, in her intonation; she sounds like he does when he doles out medical advice on autopilot. “But we’re outliers, aren’t we? I don’t fit in, so I drink. You get high.”

‘*You’re the out, I’m the liar,*’ Sherlock thinks. He stands up and to his everlasting shame, tucks tail and walks out of the conversation, aghast and prickling all over.

She's seven months and three weeks old when Sherlock finally gets a case that ranks more than a six. As far as John is aware, it's the first real case that Sherlock's had since he moved back to Baker Street and frankly, it's a breath of fresh air.

Sherlock's been loitering around the flat tinkering with chemistry and getting crotchety and underfoot, doing nothing but cold cases, and John's sick to the back teeth of forever tripping over Sherlock in one state of sulk or another.

It's a Sunday, and John's refining the art of doing the crossword and gently boinging the baby up and down in her bouncer with one foot at the same time. She's plenty old enough to bounce herself, but sometimes when he's trying to encourage a nap, it works best if he takes over.

Sherlock, slumped on the sofa, is testing the limits of his patience with repetitive sighing, and John is starting to wish they made bouncers big enough for detectives, as after all, he has two feet and needs neither of them for the Telegraph.

"How do you spell 'Pyrenees'?" John asks, not really expecting an answer. He doesn't get one anyway; Sherlock just grunts and then there are footsteps on the stairs and John on instinct puts the paper to one side.

Lestrade looks harried as he enters, giving the door only a cursory knock.

"Got one," he says without pre-amble. "Will you come? And is your phone turned off or something? Hi John."

Sherlock imperiously holds up a hand. "It's upstairs. What's the case?"

"Oh right, well it's- Oh," Lestrade says, looking suddenly like he's swallowed a golf ball.

"What is it?" John asks.

"Uh, nothing. Just remembered something I meant to do- not important. It's a murder," he waggles the file he's holding under Sherlock's nose. "A poisoning; Edward Harris. Found this morning dead of atropine poisoning. Office was locked, and we can't find the hypodermic."

Sherlock sits up to rifle through the pictures, his nostrils flaring as if he could literally sniff out the suspects. Lestrade flashes John a smile and a nod, and glances at the baby. Wide awake now, she goggles up at him, apparently not sure if she's curious or just going to cry at this sudden intruder. John reaches out and gently tickles her stomach to get her attention. Greg says nothing at all to put him on the spot, but John feels the other man's curious gaze- he's a policeman; policemen are naturally nosey- and feels a little silly that he hasn't let Lestrade meet his kid until now, and now it's awkward.

"Where's the body now?" Sherlock demands.

"Still at the scene; we daren't muck about too much until we've got everything off the site."

"Good. Don't move anything, don't let anyone breathe in the room. These photographs are worthless. John." Sherlock is already up from the sofa, rising in a near perfect geometric curve and grabbing for his coat.

"I can't go, Sherlock," John protests, "Mrs. Hudson's out; there's no one to-" he breaks off with a sigh at Sherlock's face. "I'll wait till she gets back and catch you up after."

"But I need you at the crime scene," Sherlock retorts in tones only just shy of being a full on whine

of frustration. "Just bring her along."

"Sherlock, she's a baby."

"She can come," Lestrade says unexpectedly. "It's no problem as long as she doesn't actually enter the crime scene."

"So, I stand outside?"

"I'm sure one of my lot could baby sit for ten minutes. Sally'd do it."

John gives Lestrade a long hard look, which says far better than he could ever manage verbally that if Lestrade thinks Donovan is going to be fine about him rocking up to a murder investigation with a seven-month old child, who she will be responsible for during the time, however brief, it takes him to stand around watching Sherlock be Sherlock, then Lestrade has another bloody think coming. She'd have him strung up on the sexist assumption that of all his officers she's both the best equipped and the most interested in babies alone.

Lestrade gives a smile that attempts to be jolly. "Or, uh, one of the lads. Safe as houses."

John considers the number of houses he's seen dead bodies in, that have exploded, or otherwise harboured vicious killers and wonders who in their right mind came up with that idiom.

"Wiggins is coming," Sherlock announces. In the whole time John has been subjecting Lestrade to his best Paddington Bear Stare, Sherlock's been zipping back and forth fetching things and texting furiously. "Problem solved; shoes John, now please, let's go." He actually drops John's Oxfords at his feet, having fetched them, and then in an equally canine fashion, stands there practically vibrating, watching John and trying to hurry him out the door through sheer willpower alone.

Come on, come on, come on.

'Walkies,' thinks John, and as always, gives in with a lot less reluctance than outwardly shown.

"Alright, go and grab the pushchair and the red bag off the back of the bathroom door—" He's hardly finished the sentence and Sherlock's already in action. John stoops and crams his feet into his shoes, scoops the baby up, who squeaks, and like that, he's taking his daughter to her first murder.

Billy Wiggins is waiting for them dutifully on the outskirts of the police barriers, hovering by the yellow tape looking rather woebegone and goat-like as per usual. He was also attracting suspicious sidelong looks from the milling coppers.

"They wanted to look in my pockets," he complained as Sherlock came up, "But I ain't got nuffin' but Rolos, and that one took them." The incriminated policeman stared resolutely down the street on duty directing the public away, but coloured slightly under Lestrade's eye.

"It was a nearly full packet'n'all. Are you gonna let me come in and see the corpse?"

"I'll bring you a souvenir," Sherlock says carelessly.

"You won't," Lestrade says firmly.

"I'll text you," Sherlock amends, and this small offer appeases the easy-going Wiggins nicely,

although John suspected it didn't go the whole way to making up for the loss of his chocolate.

And this was the man he was going to let watch his daughter?

"If she starts crying, you ask one of the officers to come *straight in* and tell me," John says firmly, but she's started before he's even tried to hand her over. In a way it's both a frustration and a relief.

"Why's she crying now?" Sherlock asks in bafflement.

"Stranger anxiety," both John and Lestrade say in unison.

"Maybe she's tired," Wiggins suggests, feeling round his pockets, "I might have something to--"

Wiggins' collar is scratchy from cheap washing powder under John's palm when he drags the man's head down on a level with his own. "No," he says, dragging the word out to a full three syllables and needing to say nothing else when his look says it all. Wiggins mutely nods.

"I'm staying out here," John says, reaching into his pocket. "You can Skype me."

Sherlock twists his mouth to one side in protest, but sweeps off into the house without further argument on the subject. Presently John's phone buzzes.

The house is a nice detached in South Croydon; a pleasant enough suburban area backing onto the Riddlesdown common land. With a double garage and a wide corner garden and John wouldn't like to guess the asking price, although somewhat beyond the house where the road meets the common, there's an empty plot blowing with late swathes of weeds.

Inside is tastefully done up in old show-home style; mostly magnolia, overlaid with various personal clutter. Zoological prints, John notes. Sherlock exhales over his phone, making the audio crackle. John takes a seat on the garden wall and watches.

Anderson looms up, toggled up to the eyeballs in his blue suit and looking like an alien. He gives Sherlock a little wave and then squints at the screen and waves at John too.

Idiot, John thinks without venom.

'Idiot,' Sherlock says, out of habit and elbows him aside to get at the body.

The man is face down in his office, sprawled on the floor amongst incoherently organised papers. The computer is whirring to itself still, on its screensaver and there's a plate on the desk, which Sherlock picks up in one gloved hand, examines and discards.

The camera sweeps back for John's benefit as Anderson stoops to show Sherlock the puncture wound from the hypodermic, low and forceful near the man's left kidney. It had been visually obvious from where his shirt had been dishevelled and pulled loose in his death throes.

"A fit, followed by respiratory failure," Anderson says, "Probably some time in the early morning, between five and six A.M."

Sherlock grunts, and then turns the phone round to see John, who has nothing to add other than, "Any bruising?"

Together they watch as Sherlock pinpoints a bruise on the back of the man's head that corresponds with a smudge of hair wax on the leg of the desk. He examines the hands and the shoes of the

deceased, prods at the computer- it's porn- and then the carpet, the door and the window in swift succession, and explains nothing.

"He'd received death threats; something to do with his girlfriend's jealous ex; a chemist. We're getting him into custody now," Lestrade adds, passing over a note. Sherlock narrows his eyes at it.

"Who found the body?" John's voice comes out of the phone somewhat tinny. Outside he shifts his buttocks again on the cold hard top of the wall, and reminds Wiggin's not to loom over him by judicious application of his elbow.

"The girlfriend; unlocked the office in the morning because she was worried he'd come home too drunk and passed out. Turns out she wasn't entirely wrong."

"This is habit then," Sherlock says, waving a disinterested hand at the computer and the plate.

"All except the bit where he dropped dead, yeah."

"Where was he last night?" John asks.

Sherlock answers before Lestrade or Anderson can, literally putting a hand up in Lestrade's face as the man draws breath, and speaking earnestly into the phone.

"Relatively early return home, travelled by taxi as evidenced by receipt in trouser pocket so couldn't have been far- look at the fare, it's only £7.50; but why get a receipt at all? because someone else was going to reimburse the expenses. Not a friend, then, but a group or association. Zoological prints on the walls, map of UK well marked- regular hiker but more than that; fingers show callusing from woodwork but no wooden hobby-crafts around the house, so of a more pragmatic nature. Child's picture of camping on the shelf but no children here- not an old picture nor a niece or nephew because it's inscribed 'to Mr. Harris'. He's not a teacher so what's the connection. Scoutleader. Wouldn't have been drinking at a regular meeting, so, a reunion."

"I could have just said that," Lestrade says, ruefully impressed anyway.

"Yes, but that's all extraneous- the main question is, where's the sash."

"What sash?"

"His sash! The sash he was wearing to the dinner."

"There wasn't one in here," Lestrade protests, the conversation feeling horribly, eerily familiar.

"Scoutleaders don't wear sashes," Wiggins' chimes in over John's shoulder. "That's Girl Guides." The video feed joggles, showing nothing but the blurs of Sherlock's feet as he moves about, and then he stills.

"Never mind," Sherlock says curtly, shoving the phone in his pocket to quiet John and Wiggins burgeoning discussion on the difference between boy scouts and girl guides, and what Wiggins knew about either of them anyway. "I want to look at the shoes."

"Yeah, alright, just let Anderson bag them for St. Barts and--"

John taps at his phone and says 'oi!' a few times, but all he gets are Sherlock's muffled words; "No- not *those* ones!" and then the feed goes dead.

Miffed, he looks at the phone and wonders if it's even worth waiting outside or if Sherlock's going

to do one of his famous running-off-being-vaguely-mysterious stunts again.

Wiggins pats his shoulder. "He forgot my photos 'n' all," he says, sympathetically.

Some fifteen minutes later, Sherlock comes hurtling out the house, his face a picture of unholy glee, brandishing a tan Boy Scout sash and being swiftly followed by an irate Lestrade. Sherlock vaults the low wall and waves the sash at John, proclaiming with vast satisfaction, "American. Eagle. Scout!" before tossing it to Wiggins.

"Aw, great!"

"Sherlock, that is *evidence!*"

"Get them to test the pin for blood," Sherlock tells John, flipping his collar up. "And follow the body to Barts- I'll meet you there."

"Yeah, ok, but where are you going?" John asks, standing up. Sherlock twinkles at him.

"I am going to find the beautiful woman responsible for this death," he replies coyly and then bounces away in the direction of the common, leaving John and Wiggins standing outside the house. Lestrade snatches the sash back from Wiggins.

"Aw..."

"What 'beautiful woman'?" John demands of Lestrade, "Who's he talking about?"

"I haven't a bloody clue! One minute he's eyeballing the kitchen windowsill, the next he's laughing and pulling this out from behind the radiator. It's not the girlfriend, she's with Donovan."

John's brow lowers, and Lestrade wonders if he realises how thunderous he looks at the mere idea of Sherlock gallivanting off to meet a woman. He opens his mouth to make a platonic joke of it and then recalls 'it's upstairs' and decides whatever is going on behind the closed doors of 221B Baker Street he's better off keeping his nose well out of it.

"You know Sherlock," he says instead, "Always one bloody wind-up or another."

"Hm," says John.

"Anderson's shifting the body--"

"Can I watch?"

Lestrade gives Wiggins a look, not about to dignify that with a response, and continues. "- We can give you a lift over if you want? Better than waiting for the bus with the baby." He gives her a little smile and she owl-eyes him back, overwhelmed.

"Can I come?" Wiggins persists.

"No," Lestrade and John say simultaneously. Wiggins, fed up, mutinies.

"That's a nice tie pin," he says, to Lestrade in his usual damp sheep tone of voice, "Bought that yourself, did you?"

"It was a present," Lestrade says, touching it defensively.

“Oh, Happy Birthday.”

John looks between the two of them in surprise. “It’s your birthday?”

“No, that was months ago.”

“Oh, right,” Wiggins says, looking pleased. “I just thought it was, 'cause someone else pinned that for you, I reckon. Right tall bird, is she?”

Lestrade coloured. “Y- no! Well, tall-ish,” he croaks and then flustered, waves Wiggins off. “Look, take the baby’s stuff and go wait in the bloody car, will you?”

“Yes, Boss,” Wiggins drawls, giving John a smirk and sloping off with the red changing bag.

The two remaining men exchange a look which is not really a look so much as a method of checking how awkward the other finds the situation.

“So...” John says. “You’ve met someone.”

‘You’re one to talk,’ Lestrade thinks, and gives him a single curt little nod by way of reply.

“Right. That’s... good then.”

“It’s not public knowledge,” Lestrade says, “Because of our...jobs and things. Can you- I mean, he probably already knows if that one guessed,” Lestrade breaks off to bitterly jerk a thumb at the police car where Wiggins is sitting, “But, you know.”

And John should know, Lestrade hopes. He’s not disappointed; John nods seriously, and gives him his word.

“I won’t say anything,” John promises, and unspoken there’s also the promise that he won’t ask anything either, even though he’s terribly curious. It’s not so much that he wants the dirty nitty-gritty on Lestrade’s new squeeze, but in the last few years since Lestrade’s divorce he’s not mentioned even so much as a date, so the idea of someone apparently not only hanging around long enough in the morning to tidy Lestrade’s accessories for him, but to also be buying him said accessories, is news out from the blue to John.

“Uh, Congratulations though?” he offers.

Lestrade gives a half-shrug.

“Oh.”

“No, it’s good. It’s just... complicated.” The policeman sighs and twiddles his fingers vaguely in the absent-minded habit of an ex-smoker suddenly missing nicotine.

“Often is,” John says, rocking his daughter slightly as the cool air is seeping through all of their coats and she’s starting to object.

“Yeah,” Lestrade agrees, holding out an arm like a flagpole to usher John as he shifts the baby to his other arm and then the three of them amble to the police car. “I’ll wrap up here and follow you down; give Molly some heads up that you’re coming. Yeah?”

“Great, See you later then,” John ducks his head to get into the car.

“Hey,” Lestrade says. John looks back.

“She’s really cute.”

For a split second, John thinks Lestrade’s talking about his secret girlfriend, and then he realises what he means and flashes a grin. “Yeah, she’s not bad, is she?”

“Can we go now?” Wiggins appeals.

John and Lestrade exchange another look.

“Oh for crying out loud, yes, Billy, we can go and see the corpses now,” John says with sarcastic patronisation.

Billy looks him dead in the eye, in a way that makes a tiny part of John squirm with the feeling that he’s being read.

“Yay,” Wiggins says, deadpan.

The dead lie in shining metal trays inside the vaults that line the cool walls of the morgue, all orderly and all silent. For now. They wait, Wiggins likes to think. They wait there, in biological death yet in narrative sleep, and to open the little doors that keep them hidden is to open the book of their lives right here at the end of them.

Or it would, if only Molly would let him. Seemingly with eyes in the back of her head, she says, “That area’s off limits,” with surprising firmness as he sidles towards them while her back is turned.

Molly doesn’t ask to hold the baby, which surprises John somewhat bearing in mind the woman’s love of kitsch florals and cats. Instead she approaches the baby in her carrier in the same way she’d approach a strange dog, but ignoring her steadily, until the baby’s attention is quite held by the strange lady with the soft voice, and then she lets the baby examine her fingers while the conversation with John continues.

“I heard you’re getting well through your PHD now,” John says, watching in fascination as Molly effortlessly eases into his daughter’s good books.

“Yeah, it’s going quite well,” Molly replies. “I’ve been getting some really good data and my supervisor is really pleased.”

“Well done you,” John says, idly thinking it’s taken her a while to get this far, at thirty-something with a solid number of years of experience in her profession. Likewise, Molly idly wonders if she should mention it’s her second, but suspects that might be bragging and so says nothing. She likes John, but like many doctors approaching middle age he has a boorish streak, which he’d be dismayed and disbelieving over if anyone ever illuminated him to the fact.

The baby, now quite at ease, pushes Molly’s hand around in experimental movements, making concentrated little ‘am-mam-mam’ noises to herself. John watches and when Molly turns her head and gives one of her cherry-bud smiles; like she has a mouthful of sunshine she’s trying not to let slip out, he’s struck by how uniquely pretty she is sometimes.

“She likes you,” he comments.

“Quite a lot of children do,” Molly says, “It’s a bit odd really. Maybe it’s just because I’m quiet.”

“Do you want to hold her?”

Molly looks dubious. “I don’t know. Does she want to be held?”

The question gives John pause and makes Wiggins look over from where he’s been looking in the cupboards (glass fronted and with his hands in his pockets in case Molly accuses him of nicking stuff).

“That’s not what most people ask,” Wiggins says, a flicker of sudden curiosity in his eyes.

“Don’t they?” Molly seems surprised. “Oh.”

“Dead sens’ble though.”

“I’m sure she won’t mind, hmm, Sweetheart? Want to say hello to Molly?”

The baby smiles widely at his voice and John decides to give it a go. Molly’s a little nervous, but she takes the baby and rests her against her shoulder in the same way the cat likes to be held, and oddly enough it seems to work for babies too.

“Gosh, she’s quite heavy.”

“Eats like you wouldn’t believe,” John says proudly, “Though I won’t mention what happens at the other end.”

“I’ve seen worse, I’m sure,” Molly says. “And smelt worse. I had a man with the most enormous abscess the other week- I took photos for Sherlock if he wants them.”

“I bet he will,” John replies, casting a look at Wiggins who has just leant back on his elbows against the counter. The man is typically po-faced, and his hands are where John can see them. No sign of him falling into temptation with the miscellany of drugs around the place at any rate. John turns back, and so misses Wiggins giving Molly a rather contemplative look.

Lestrade and Anderson with corpse and crew arrive with a clatter at the doorway, and John takes the kid up to the canteen to be out of the way while the autopsy is done. Wiggins is permitted to stay provided he sits on his hands on a stool against the wall and doesn’t say anything throughout the proceedings, to which he readily agrees.

There’s neither hide nor hair of Sherlock.

Anderson hovers, and tries to speak to John, but either simply because it’s Anderson or she’s frightened by the blue suit and mask he’s forgotten to remove, or even because the baby has reached the limit of how many people she can tolerate in one day, she screams her head off at his approach and he beats a guilty retreat.

“Good pair of lungs,” Lestrade says over the racket. “Take it easy, pet.” He dabs his finger in the torn off end of a sugar packet and before John can protest, pops it in her open mouth. She stops at once with an expression of comical shock, partly from the unexpected invasion of something that’s not a nipple or a spoon, and secondly from the pleasantness of sugar, which she hasn’t had before.

“Oi! Don’t give her sweets; it’s not good for her!” John protests, in new-dad protectiveness.

“It’s just a dab,” Lestrade points out, “Hardly going to rot her teeth, is it? There, right as rain.”

John frowns at Lestrade, envisioning a future of pockets with penny sweets and ignored arguments

of ‘but I’m not allowing sweets between mealtimes’. Greg grins, perhaps envisioning the same.

“Relax. I washed my hands. Besides, kids need a peck of dirt.”

John can hardly argue when he’s caught her merrily licking the dishcloth before.

His phone bleeps with a message.

<Get Molly to test stomach contents for atropine levels compared to blood stream –SH>

John shows the screen for Lestrade, who goes down to pass the message on.

Molly is wrist-deep in bowels as he enters, Wiggins leaning forward as far as he can on his stool like he can record the whole gruesome show with his eyeballs. He’s vibrating with questions, but, on pain of not being kicked out the morgue, is somehow keeping them in check.

Molly is ignoring him, but Lestrade thinks there’s an odd twitch of amusement about her face, although it could possibly just be the cold slime of the guts making her expression wonky.

“Well, I guess I’m not having spaghetti for dinner now,” Lestrade comments and then tells her what Sherlock requested.

“Inspector Lestrade entered the room. It’ll take a bit of time, but I can do that. Does he want me to forward him the results?” she tells him, silently inclining her head towards her voice recorder, much to Lestrade’s chagrin.

“Give them to me,” Lestrade says, adopting an official tone for the sake of the recording, and Molly nods.

It’s another hour before Sherlock shows his face and Molly has washed her hands for the last time. News has come in about the ex-boyfriend chemist who sent the death threats and it’s a dead end. There aren’t many reasons Lestrade would let such a lead go, but the man’s been in hospital with a dodgy kidney for the last week and a half. Billy is released from his stool and they convene in the little lab next to the morgue to discuss.

Lestrade starts things off.

“What have you got?”

‘Where’s this woman?’ John wants to know, although he doesn’t say it aloud.

“Oh, it was the girlfriend,” Sherlock says dismissively. He doesn’t say the word ‘obvious’ but John can feel him thinking it.

“How? She has a solid alibi; six different people saw her at dinner at her mother’s house.”

“Showing off, Sherlock,” John reminds him, folding his arms. The baby is asleep in her carrier on the table. Sherlock sighs and points at the sash, “Well the atropine wasn’t injected, so the question that needed answering was how the poison got into his system. The only likely answer is that it was ingested.”

John picks up the baggie holding the sash and looks at it. It’s a single strip of fabric well covered in embroidered badges, the ends held together by a silver bar clasp, not dissimilar to a tie pin.

“He sat on his own pin.”

“Coming in drunk, he didn’t notice that it had come lose; you’ll notice the hook on the clasp comes undone if you wiggle it. Sat down heavily on the pew by the door to take his shoes off, and drove it right into his own back.”

“Pulled it off in frustration,” John says, continuing the scene.

“And left it on the hall radiator, where it slipped down the back.”

“Alright, so how’d he get the poison?” Lestrade asks, frowning. Sherlock rubs his hands together and touches his fingertips to his philtrum.

“How would you describe the girlfriend?”

Lestrade’s brow knots. “Angie Lewis? Nice, uh, she was very upset about finding the body, which seemed genuine,” he adds, not buying the idea of the woman as a cold-blooded killer.”

“Hair?” Sherlock prompts.

Lestrade puffs air out of his cheeks. “Blonde, shoulder-length. Uh, straight.”

“Nails?”

“Orange-ish?”

“Breasts?”

Lestrade lets out a minor choking noise. “Sherlock! How have her, her-” he makes a humping motion in front of himself, “-got anything to do with anything?”

“Really Lestrade, are you twelve?” Sherlock sneers, getting up to pace. “Hair chemically straightened, false extensions and no visible roots despite it not being her natural colour; eyebrows and eyelashes match but look at her arms; she shaves but the stubble is many shades darker. Nails-professional manicure, at least £50, no doubt pedicure at the same; *breasts*,” he turns on his heels, enunciating for Lestrade’s benefit, “admittedly tastefully done, but fake.”

“Alright, so she’s high maintenance. So what?”

“So she’s dating a scout master,” Wiggins opines, complacently. He’s at the answer already. John is lost.

There’s a general blank silence from most of the room. Sherlock mutters ‘well done, Wiggins,’ and then as the silence grows gets frustrated and snaps.

“So think! Vastly different backgrounds; his hobby is his *life*. She ‘loves’ him- What does she do?”

“Sh-she tries to impress him; tries to join in,” Molly stammers out. Sherlock clicks his fingers at her and smiles. “Yes. Exactly. She stupidly tries to impress him.”

“But she doesn’t know anything about... scouting,” Molly adds.

“Survival,” Sherlock agrees.

“And she poisons him?” Lestrade asks. “How?”

“With a beautiful woman.”

John sits up on his stool a little straighter. “Yeah, who is she?”

Sherlock pauses in his walk and meets his eye, and there’s a joke in his look that John can’t quite put his finger on, but he suddenly knows there’s no real woman and whatever Sherlock was doing on the common, he wasn’t meeting anyone.

You clever dick.

Got you. Your face.

You complete arse, you got me.

Jealousy’s funny on you.

Sherlock’s look skitters away again and he clears his throat. “Wiggins? Care to enlighten them?” He asks, making it sound like the answer is so stupidly transparent it’s not even worth his while to spell it out for them.

Wiggins gladly takes over. He leans back on his elbows on the table, and explains to them laconically. “Belladonna.”

“That’s deadly nightshade isn’t it?” Molly tilts her head, frowning. “That’s a rare plant.”

“Grows on calciferous soils as evident around Riddlesdown and Kenley Common, mostly in waste areas. Wasn’t on the victim’s shoes but I bet ‘e already found stuff on the shoes in the hall,” he jerks a thumb at Sherlock. “Girl goes out, finds these nice shiny black berries ‘n’ thinks ‘oh, lucky me, what nice cherries’ and takes ‘em all home with her.”

“Berries in the stomach, Mols?” Lestrade interjects. Molly shakes her head.

“Just, uh,” She fumbles for the file. “Starches indicating wholemeal bread and chips, protein, I’m going to say beef and chicken, cheese, tomato and some green matter, probably salad with some of that red lettuce.”

“Beefburgers at the reunion, side of chips,” Sherlock supplies.

“Chicken sarnie at home. Bit of lettuce.”

“Alright, great, how was he bloody poisoned?” Lestrade complains.

“Well,” Wiggins says, rolling his eyes to the ceiling “The intrestin’ thing ‘bout belladonna is the green leaves is just as pois’nous as the berries. Bloke comes home, stumbles about and pokes ‘imself with his sash. Bird’s not home yet, so what does he do? ‘E thinks ‘I’ll have a sarnie and a quick one off the wrist in the den. Nice and cosy’. Makes an *Italian* style sandwich, cause he’s a bit of a poncey type with his brown bread, and poor sod finds a leaf on the counter next to the herbs. Too drunk to give it a second look, shoves it in the sarnie- yum yum, nice bit of basil, and then he’s off for his snack and his spank. And then he’s dead.”

“Red lettuce is bitter,” Molly says half to herself, “He might not have even noticed...”

“He poisoned himself?”

“Here,” Sherlock drops a map on the table, marked with various crosses. “There’s a small but thriving colony of nightshade growing around the edges of the common. Check the freezer; I suspect that’s where the berries are.”

“Jesus,” Lestrade says, picking it up to inspect it. “He was a survival expert of some sort though.”

“He was an idiot,” Sherlock said succinctly. “Nothing kills more surely than stupidity.”

“His poor girlfriend,” Molly says, and Sherlock shuts his mouth abruptly on what he was about to say.

“Not totally her fault,” Wiggins points out, with rare sympathy, “Council’s ‘sposed to go round pulling it all up. She was a victim of the... wossname.”

Molly gives him a lukewarm smile of thanks and Sherlock shares with John a look of faint disgust. John shrugs.

Lestrade stares at the evidence bags. “Jesus,” he says again, “What a really stupid way to die.”

“It doesn’t always have to be clever,” Sherlock mutters, smoothing down the collar on his Bellstaff. “It’s the only remaining solution.”

Lestrade feels for his phone and calls it in for Anderson to check the freezer and swab the counters for traces of atropine, and John’s fingers itch to start a blog post on it right away. He can hear the title in his head already- ‘The Case of the Beautiful Woman’. It’s so simple that it’s writing itself.

“And you figured it out in the first minute or so,” he says, unceasingly amazed with Sherlock’s capabilities. As per usual, Sherlock says nothing to the compliment, but his pleasure is palpable.

Lestrade returns and pockets his evidence bags. “Alright. I need paperwork off of you two,” he says indicating Sherlock and Molly, “and uh, John, I can give you a lift home if you want on my way to the Yard.”

John agrees and the meeting breaks up, Sherlock slinking off to make his own way to NSY, still refusing to ride in a police car. Wiggins hangs around, seeming to hope that if he blends into the furniture long enough he won’t be made to leave. John clocks him with a look, but figures Molly can fend for herself quite well enough.

“Oh, before you go,” Molly says, oblivious to this exchange, “Um, could I still borrow that folding table, Greg?”

“Yeah, of course,” he readily agrees.

“What’s this about?” John asks.

“I’m planning a party,” Molly says with demure pleasure. “Nothing too crazy; just at my flat, um, at the end of October. It’s my birthday.”

“Oh right,” John is surprised. “I had no idea.”

“You’re both invited of course, and Mrs. Hudson. I haven’t started asking people yet because I wasn’t sure it was possible, but,” She gives a deep curve of a smile, like she’s holding onto a personal treasure. “It should be quite good, I reckon.”

“Sounds like, good,” John manages, trying to imagine both a party organised by Molly and dragging Sherlock to it, because he’d have to go. “Sounds good.”

“Bit of a Halloween theme, maybe, if people go for it.”

John’s visions of Sherlock at a party took on a new level of incredulity and then winked out all

together at the idea of Halloween costumes. Not that Sherlock didn't occasionally turn his coat, so to speak, but it was never so much a costume as it was whichever hat would make him less obvious and a reliance on the overall inobservance of the general public.

"I'll get you that table," Lestrade promises, "and I'll definitely come unless, you know," he shrugs, "we all end up here around a corpse again."

"It would fit the theme," Molly admits, and satisfied, lets them go.

They leave, inadvertently forgetting Wiggins for a full five minutes, before Lestrade remembers, goes back and kindly but firmly, shows him where the door is.

He waves to Molly on the way out.

Lestrade drives him back to Baker Street, pleased with the day's results.

"Not bad that, really," he concludes, to which John musingly agrees. Lestrade applies the hand break and kills the engine, although he leaves the key in the ignition.

"We should get drinks some time," he suggests. "It's been ages."

It's true, John thinks with a thump. The last time he went to the pub with Lestrade probably predates his daughter. "Yeah," he says, feeling a little guilty over that. He hadn't meant to brush Lestrade off, but the other man understands anyway.

"It was good today. Like the old days a bit," Lestrade muses. He looks over into the back seat of the car. "And she was a little champ too."

"I can't believe I took her to a crime scene."

"Welcome to fatherhood," Lestrade says, getting out the car. "It's about 90% thinking to yourself 'I can't believe I did that'." He flashes a grin. "Wait till you're on potty training. Barrels of fun."

"Yeah, you've got kids, haven't you?" John wonders aloud. How had he forgotten that?

"Just the one. A girl, same as you; her name's Georgie. Right little madam," he says, with the special, exasperated love unique to parents. John fetches the carrier out the back of the car, and is greeted with a yawn.

"Welcome back," John says.

Lestrade puts the red bag on the pavement and closes the boot, pausing to watch them both and then John suddenly feels like an idiot.

"You should hold her," he says, intending to actually make that a question, but blurting his words out too fast instead. "I mean, if you'd like."

Lestrade's response is warm and immediate. "Yeah, can I?" He waits long enough for John to nod and then picks her up from the carrier, handling her expertly.

"Hello, princess," he says, rocking her. "Aren't you fantastic?"

John sticks his gloveless hands in his pockets against the chill late-afternoon air, and feels warmed nonetheless. Maybe it's because Lestrade knows what he's doing, or that she's still half-asleep

from her nap, she doesn't complain about being held by a stranger.

He draws in close so she can see him, but she's more interested in the texture of Lestrade's jacket.

"Lucky lamb, you've got your dad running round after you, I can tell," Lestrade tells her. She yawns again. "Yeah you don't care," he jokes and then laughs.

"I used to think working full time was tough," John agrees.

"And you get training for work- Parenting's just fudging it as you go along."

"Yeah," John murmurs, and all at once there's a solid knot in his stomach again; a fist of longing for his wife and his child's mother. He remembers her voice, clear as a bell.

You were doing just fine, you old sippy.

Mary always seemed in control and she'd always known what to do in those early days, or had an idea of how she wanted things done. Parenting with Mary had been like being part of a well-oiled machine.

"I think you're doing great," Lestrade says, echoing Mary so closely that John starts. "Both of you, actually." He shrugs a little awkwardly, treading around a line in the conversation John can't see.

"He's been... yeah, pretty good about things," John admits, thinking of Sherlock's late night run for medicine and his complete acceptance of his scientific exile to the upper floor.

"Bit funny too, I bet," Lestrade says. "I mean he's hard to imagine with a baby."

"He's... he's not actually," John says, picturing Sherlock holding the baby in one hand, and the thermometer up with the other. He remembers the surprised softness of Sherlock's arms when he'd shoved the baby into them and just walked out. He remembers when he returned and Sherlock letting the baby reach out and hold his finger. Tiny little gestures; hardly what anyone would call 'involvement' but it's always been what's needed at the time. "He's awkward, and he does the other stuff mostly, but he's not... useless."

"Course he isn't," Lestrade says matter-of-factly, and there's a flicker of deep pride over his face. "Sherlock pulls through, whatever happens."

He misses the look on John's face. He's too besotted to notice, and John takes the opportunity to grab up the red bag and carrier and move to open the front door while his hands are mostly free.

"I'm just going to drop this upstairs," he calls back to Lestrade who waves him up distractedly, happy to snatch a few moments more to cuddle the baby.

"Let's make a deal," he tells the kid, leaning against his car. "No calling me 'gramps' or anything. I'm not that old. I'll be 'Uncle Greg' if they let me." He sees the lights go on in the flat upstairs and prepares to say goodbye.

She touches his chin, curious at his stubble and he smiles, remembering long ago when his own daughter did that.

"Keep 'em both good, won't you?" he tells her, as John's footsteps become audible on the stairs inside the house. "Especially that other stupid dad of yours."

She looks up at him winsomely with startlingly blue eyes, and he thinks, perhaps, she's already got

it in hand.

Chapter End Notes

There really is a pushchair manufacture with a name very similar to a race car manufacturer and it's entirely possible to sit on your own sash pin; I speak from regrettable experience.

and LOOOK: [FANART!!](#)
Vibrates with excitement

The chapter title comes from 'September 6th' by Secabed Bestabed

Part 3: I Remember

Chapter Summary

John continues to struggle with his loss, being a parent and juggling between the needs of his daughter and his best friend. The unsatisfactory situation starts to grate on them both, thanks to the added stress of Halloween parties and November 11th, and then finally, something is let slip.

Chapter Notes

Hi, this is the voice of Odamaki. I'm telepathically beaming this directly into your skull, but you probably don't notice anything different because I've changed my voice to sound exactly like your own in your head. A few quick chapter notes:

- 1) I have never attended a counselling session, so please take Ella's professional conduct with a little pinch of salt- If she seems sloppy or unrealistic in her work it's at least partially my fault.
- 2) In the UK, November 5th is of course, Bonfire Night (check for hedgehogs!), and 11/11 is Remembrance Sunday, also known as Poppy Day. At 11 o'clock in the morning there is a nation-wide minute's silence to commemorate the armistice of WW1 and to remember all those killed in war. Some communities also hold a sunset prayer at the end of the day, usually at a nearby war-memorial. Many people wear paper poppy badges, which are sold in aid of veteran's charities.
- 3) You actually really really can purchase body bags online. They make really good under-bed storage bags.

As always, huge credit and thanks to my beta, [Codenamelazarus](#), who continues to be eggcellent, and who is also responsible for some of the best bits in this.

Chapter Title comes from the Damien Rice song of the same name, from the album 'O', and is open to interpretation. Check it out.

Comments are candy, kudos are dandy, updates roughly once a month, so subscribing could be handy! Otherwise, I pop little updates on my profile for the curious and impatient. Love you all. <3 --[Odamakilock](#)

Part Three: I Remember

October comes in quietly, with no more heralding than the usual smatter of plastic tat and sanitised horror along the aisles of the supermarket. John picks up a multipack of cheap chocolate at Mrs. Hudson's request. She considers this the cheaper, easier option compared to scraping egg yolk and wads of wet toilet paper off of the door.

John doesn't point out that to date this has never happened, but he suspects she and Sherlock between them do justice to the chocolate and so makes no argument.

Besides. Cadbury's Caramel.

He wonders what the baby will make of it all, the new experience of sweet brown chocolate thus far alien to her comprehension, and he grins.

The nights grow shorter and darker, the days brisker and wetter. He stands at the window one afternoon regarding the light, steady drizzle and suddenly the air of the flat seems stale.

"Sherlock?"

"Hmm?"

John turns and rests his hands on the back of Sherlock's armchair, looking at him cautiously from across the room. Engrossed in his work, Sherlock doesn't appear to notice.

"Could you... babysit for an hour?" John asks.

Sherlock looks up momentarily from his microscope. John almost never asks this of him, and it's considered something of an unspoken rule of the house that Sherlock doesn't do childcare excepting short spurts when there's a lag between John getting home from the clinic and Mrs. Hudson needing to go out. "What for?"

"I just... wanted to pop out. It's raining."

"Ah. Yes. Alright." Sherlock gives a short nod of assent.

"Thanks, I won't be out long. She's down for her nap already so she'll be quiet for probably-"

"The next 36 minutes, give or take."

Right. Of course. Mr. Deduction. John blows his breath out over his teeth. "Right. Yeah, about that. Thanks," he adds, less caustically. He's troubled in a way he can't really put his finger on; maybe it's just the weather or just the background emotional radiation of his life, but he feels out of sorts. John drags on his coat and turns the collar up. The old zip snuggles under his chin where, if he's not careful, it'll nip at the soft skin of his throat. He feels around the coat rack and then swears.

"Can I borrow your scarf?"

"Where's yours?"

"It disappeared," John reminds him. Sherlock, back turned to him, shifts his arse on his stool, and begrudgingly through the guilt says, "Oh, go on then. If you must." John has an inkling what happened to his scarf- he's pretty sure he left it one day on the back of one of the kitchen chairs, where it became unfortunately too handy as a mop for some spillage of some illicit kitchen experiment. He'd come home to find Sherlock brushing coal dust from his hands, having lit the first fire of the year.

A fire that had smelt rather pungently of burning fibres.

Sherlock's scarf is altogether too long, and doubled it's too bulky for John's liking, but it keeps the zip at bay. John smooths it down under his collar, and checks that he has his keys. "See you later," he says and leaves, forgetting both his phone and his wallet on the coffee table.

The mist of rain across his scalp is oddly refreshing. John's never had much time for umbrellas- they seem more faff than they're worth and he's never had clothes that would be ruined by a spot of water so he generally bulldozes on through wet weather without. The rain speckles his vision, and makes soft all the noise of the city. The cars hush past him, kicking up glistening spray from the road that clings to his trouser-legs, but mercifully takes its sweet time in seeping through.

His winter boots creak slightly as he trudges, but they're warm and inside the thick hide of his coat, John feels oddly untouchable. He stops briefly at the corner shop before remembering that his wallet stayed at home today, and decides that the bouquets all look deplorably cheap and boring anyway. It seems a rather bizarre tradition anyway, whenever he thinks about it.

What do the dead need with the dying genitalia of plants? You could plant a tree- some people did that, and it made more sense. The tree would pick up off of the human remains and a small part of your existence would go on to nurture something else and the tree in turn would host it's own ecosystem and thus achieve a kind of intangible immortality. Maybe he'd put that in his will. Bury me under a tree.

There's enough coin in his pockets for the short bus ride, and when he arrives the church seems a little gloomy in the damp; like the whole building has slumped down towards the turf; an old man struggling to pull a green duvet over his head.

The graveyard is deserted.

Everyone John knows who has died, and he's not sure why, is tucked up outside a church somewhere now. None of them were even especially religious, to his knowledge, unless they'd kept that part of themselves so deeply private they only wanted to indulge in it publicly once they were beyond the reach of human reproach. He classifies himself as atheist, but the Church of England upbringing remains in him, lodged under his tongue like a familiar but foreign language.

It's Catholicism that springs to mind though as he nears the pale white stone under the yew trees.

"Hello, Mary." *Hail Mary, full of grace.*

And she had been, in some respects.

The dense leaves of the trees fully block the rain and he wipes the moisture from his face with the cuff of his shirt until his cheeks and chin are dry. He stoops and brushes some of the blown leaves from the grave site, running his fingers over the chiselled stone. The inscription still bothers him.

Here Lies

MARY WATSON

Died June 29th 2014

Loving Wife and Mother

He barely remembers choosing it; the funeral arrangements had passed through him like a cloud of choking smog, and he remembers best only being chivvied into a black suit and the sinking of the coffin. He remembers not making it fully through his Final Words, and Sherlock speaking for him instead.

He sort of recalls the list they'd given him of bible quotes and poems and standard sentimental phrases people liked to put on headstones. John had sat there looking down at them all in a swamp of misery, because none of them fitted. Mary hadn't been religious- unless it had been a secret. She

hadn't been saccharine either, and so he'd numbly scrawled down what was carved onto the form and only really thought about it later.

On a school trip to France, he'd seen them. The rows and rows of dainty white crosses over a tremendous swathe of field above the sea. And in some rows every other one read, 'Here lies a soldier, known unto God.' It must have stuck with him.

John pulls the withered flowers from the flower pot and tips out the stagnant water under the yew.

He hasn't put her date of birth or her age. The graves nearby have them, but not Mary's. Anyway, that omission seems sort of *dulce et decorum est* too. It's not even her plot. With the money wrapped up in fraud investigation and probate he hadn't been able to afford one, and it wasn't like he'd had one of his own on standby. Mycroft had made the suggestion, in that way he had that basically said 'I've looked at all the possibilities and this one is the best, so just do it and don't be tedious'.

It had been the easiest thing to organise. The black headstone had already been pulled up a year before. All they had to do was take out the empty coffin and slip in Mary's ashes in it's stead, then cap the thing off with a new stone. Simple.

John feels like he ought to apologise, but at the same time he suspects Mary might have seen the funny side of it.

He stands back, hands in his pockets and exhales, making his breath steam in the chilly air. Nothing to say. He says it to her photographs if he does; and that's *his* Mary. Well. Their Mary.

Here lies the other one, Mary Morstan. A.G.R.A, under white Taj Mahal stone. He should have done that, he realises. Instead of an inscription; just had the thing carved in something fantastic, exotic and indecipherable.

Like her.

The clock tower chimes and the rain grows a little more serious in its efforts to soak him. A stray drip escapes from the canopy of yew over him and slaps the back of his head, running to his collar. John shivers and pulls his chin into his collar. The scarf rises to brush the lobes of his ears softly, releasing the faint huff of another man's aftershave.

The rain patters.

John hikes the scarf up higher, over the jut of his chin to stop the water getting down the back of his neck, and with the cashmere just teasing his lower lip, turns and heads for home.

Sherlock's cleared away the microscope by the time the baby wakes up. He'd been more or less accurate with his estimate, although that's more thanks to John having her fairly well trained. Military scheduling, and all that.

She's pulled herself upright in the crib and is chewing on the bars when he goes in to fetch her, lifting her high in the air. She babbles a fountain of nonsense and beams at him.

"Good afternoon; how was that?"

Evidently good. She's raring to go, her arms and legs paddling in the air.

“Let’s have a walk,” Sherlock suggests. She grasps his fingers with intense focus and it takes her a few wobbly moments to get her feet flat on the floor, and then she’s standing, with Sherlock’s help.

“You’re doing it bow-legged,” Sherlock points out, bouncing her gently on her toes, though she doesn’t deign to take any actual steps. This is seemingly a good enough a game as it is. “Like someone else I know.”

She remains intellectually mute in the face of this, although she murmurs to herself, trying to grasp at Sherlock’s cuff buttons with her fingers. Sherlock watches her soberly. After a while, she eases down onto her bottom, tired of standing.

“Some days, I don’t fancy it much either,” Sherlock admits. He runs a hand through his hair. “Well, high time you and I got back to work.”

He takes her through to the living room and deposits her in her bouncer, stringing the inane brightly coloured animals across it for her to yank and gnaw on however she so pleases. As for himself? He drops into his armchair and pulls some of Lestrade’s cold cases into his lap; and like that, they’re both neatly staged for John’s return some 15 minutes later.

His ears and nose have turned red from the cold, and his hair is a slick of dark blonde over his forehead. He strikes Sherlock as looking more at ease, but no more happy than when he’d left.

“Did you get yoghurt?” Sherlock asks without looking up. John pauses, half-way through pulling his coat off.

“No,” he says after a moment’s thought. “No, I forgot my wallet.”

Sherlock grunts. “Careless.”

“Yeah, alright. Was she ok?” John moves over to greet the baby, and she bounces forcefully with a happy salutation. *If you ever want to feel missed*, Sherlock thinks, *look to your dog or your infant*.

“Fine.”

““Course you were, weren’t you? You’re always good.” John frees her from the bouncer and cuddles her. He turns and heads towards the kitchen. It’s nearly feeding time at Baker Street Zoo.

“John?”

He looks back over her blonde curls, surprised. “Yeah?”

“My scarf.”

“Oh right.” He manoeuvres the kid to one side and tugs it off. Eyes still glued to his folders, Sherlock mutely holds out a hand. A bit bemused, John drops the length of blue into his grasp. “Thanks,” he says. “It kept the rain off.”

“Yes.” Sherlock thumbs the fabric absent-mindedly. *It’s warm from the heat of his neck*. John gives him a puzzled look and then resumes his chores. When his back is turned, Sherlock quietly tucks it down the left side of his body, out of sight.

His.

By the end of October she's eight months old and has just about discovered creeping along on the carpet, though she prefers rolling if she can. She's getting surprisingly strong, John finds. It's not longer quite as cute when she kicks him.

"Look, look, look," Mrs. Hudson calls, coming into the flat in an excited clamour. "They were in the pound shop; isn't it just sweet?" She fumbles with the red and white plastic bag, and then breathlessly holds up her find for John and Sherlock to admire.

Sherlock arches both eyebrows and then in the next moment frowns and squints in puzzlement. John wipes marmalade off his hands and reaches out to take it.

It dangles on the cardboard hanger, a fat puff of black and yellow, with little dangling feet.

"Well?"

"It's cute," John admits. He turns it around and, yes, there are soft little white flaps for wings too.

"I just thought, y'know, for Friday what with it being her first and just the spirit of the thing, and it's so sweet. Isn't it sweet, Sherlock?" Mrs. Hudson appeals, and John blesses her silently because dear God, the woman never stops trying.

"Hmm," Sherlock says with disinterest from over the tuning pegs of his violin, presumably because he's not about to risk his obviously vast and superior masculinity over something as mundane as a child's bumblebee costume. John rolls his eyes.

"I think it's nice," John says, rather wishing he'd thought of it himself. Dressing up the baby had always been more Mary's thing. "What are we going to go as?" he asks himself aloud.

"We?" Sherlock echoes with derision. "I think not."

"The invitation did say, Sherlock," Mrs. Hudson reminds him.

"Yes, but we're going to ignore that. We always ignore it. We never even usually go. John, why are we going?" Sherlock appeals to him in what seems to be genuine consternation.

"We're going," John explains patiently and not for the first time, "because somebody got Molly into a spot of trouble at work by raiding too much out of the storage locker, and because Lestrade also asked us to come, and because someone, again mentioning no names, sort of owes him vis-à-vis a certain case involving someone else's BMW. Besides, it's good for the baby to meet people. She's getting clingy."

"By taking her to parties? In stupid costumes?"

"I wasn't going to go overboard," John admits. "My repertoire is limited."

"Well, I've got mine sorted," Mrs. Hudson reported, quite pleased with herself. "You two had better get a wiggle on and think of something."

Sherlock lolled back in his chair and subjected the violin to a scale of abuse. "I'll go as a serial killer. They look like anyone else. It's perfect."

"Sherlock."

"Fine. I'll think of something." He manages to make the promise sound like a threat.

John holds the costume out for the baby to inspect. "What do you think, sweetheart? Do you want

to be a bee?”

She looks at it minutely, none of her earlier myopic squinting now that her vision has improved. John wonders if that will change as she gets older. Mary had been slightly short-sighted. Gingerly, she shoves one of the bee’s feet into her mouth.

“Yep. Seal of approval there,” John confirms. He can almost hear Sherlock radiating disdain.

“Pointless.”

John gently tugs the costume from the baby’s grasp to her annoyance and straightens back into his chair. Nonplussed he reaches for another slice of toast. “Is that so? Because I have it on good authority that someone, and I’m mentioning no names again notice, wanted to be a pirate.”

“I’ve got an eyepatch,” Mrs. Hudson offers.

Sherlock makes a vitriolic noise. “I’m not eight years old, John. And no, thank you, Mrs. Hudson,” he adds sharply. “Besides, I can hardly be anything so exotic when John’s going to be so predictable. Which will it be? Doctor, or soldier?”

John shoves the end of his knife into the butter and leaves it there. A number of things to say start to rise in his gorge, starting with ‘how dare you,’ and ‘don’t’ and ‘my jobs- my time in a war, weren’t bloody play-acting!’ Instead he spits out, “What’s got into you?”

Pugnaciously, Sherlock throws his words back at him. “Nothing; what’s got into you? We don’t do this. We never do this.”

“No, I- alright, you know what. Don’t come,” John tugs his knife out, but abandons it on his plate instead. “You can bloody well stay at home.”

“Oh boys, don’t fight,” Mrs. Hudson says reproachfully. “It’s all just for a bit of fun. Come on now, Sherlock, it would be nice if you could come just for a bit. Hmm? It would make Molly happy, and we hardly ever do anything all together. I don’t think it’s going to be a big party.”

“Haven’t you got something to go and clean?” Sherlock quips, but John recognises the set of his face. Sherlock will no doubt blister over the ignominy of attending a costume party, but he’ll do it, because Mrs. Hudson’s clearly got her heart set on it. Still a touch annoyed, John removes himself to wash the plates.

“Old grouch,” Mrs. Hudson chides him, sweeping crumbs. “You play your violin and have a think about it.” She brightens suddenly. “Oh!”

“No, Mrs. Hudson; no,” Sherlock says firmly, but his tone’s lost some of his venom. “I’m not wearing the antlers.”

He scratches the bow over the strings and wonders, with a flutter, what the devil he *is* going to wear.

The evening of the party, John steps out into the living room last, still adjusting his cuffs. “Are we nearly ready?” he asks.

“Oh, John, look at you,” Mrs. Hudson says, in admiration. “Oh, you do look handsome.”

John adjusts his bowtie and tugs on the hem of his jacket to straighten it. It’s an old suit, so it’s a bit tight, but it looks decent enough. “Not bad,” he admits, “Though you should see-”

But Mrs. Hudson already has. John tilts slightly to the side as she gives a squeal of delight. The baby stops pulling on her fuzzy antennae and stares at her.

“Oh, she’s precious! Oh, I could eat you-“ Mrs. Hudson enthuses, picking her up. “Hello, little bee.”

The baby gives John a pleased but bemused look over Mrs. Hudson’s shoulder as though to say, ‘People are terribly odd, aren’t they? Still, she’s a nice old girl, this one’. John dabs a finger on the tip of her nose and makes her chortle.

“Where’s Sherlock?” John asks.

“Still getting ready, I think. He just went upstairs with a pair of scissors, but he did say he’d only be five minutes.”

“Right,” John crosses to the foot of the stairs and calls up, “Sherlock! We’re waiting on you.”

There is a shuffling from above and Sherlock slowly ascends, his feet appearing first on the staircase and then gradually the rest of him.

John stares at him. Sherlock, for more ambiguous reasons, stares back. They have not discussed their costumes and both is somewhat taken aback.

“You, you look- who are you supposed to be?” Sherlock asks.

“Sherlock, what the hell is that?” John says at the same time, and the black plastic crinkles as Sherlock draws up to his full height.

“You said I couldn’t be a serial killer,” he says and when John opens his mouth to argue, continues brusquely, “Therefore I am a serial killer’s victim.” Triumphant he sweeps past John into the sitting room, as best as the limits of his costume allows, and then is away down the stairs to the street.

“You look like a liquorice tampon,” John mutters under his breath and then exhales and goes to collect his bee. “Right, Mrs. Hudson, for better or worse, I believe we’re going to a party.”

It’s Lestrade who answers the door to Molly’s flat. He gives John a look up and down and says, “Blimey. Molly, the Kiss-o-gram’s here!”

“What? The what?” Molly calls, flustered, from inside the flat.

“Lestrade, you’ve been drinking,” Sherlock says with mild disgust.

“Yes, it helps me forget the dent in my BMW. Come in then.” He steps out of the way for them, greeting Mrs. Hudson with a kiss on the cheek.

“So let me guess,” Lestrade goes on, “James Bond; very nice, and er...”

“Bond Air,” Sherlock says drolly, from inside the bodybag he’s wearing. It and the dusting of grey

under his eyes are his only concession to the occasion.

“And a sting operation,” John adds, ignoring that and pointing at the baby. “And no one knows who Mrs. Hudson is meant to be.”

“I told you, I’m Aunt Sally!”

John looks at Greg to solve the mystery, but he merely shrugs. “You look lovely, Mrs. Hudson.”

“Where’s your costume then, Lestrade?” Sherlock quips.

“Back at my flat,” Lestrade admits, giving Mrs. Hudson a hand with her coat. “There was a last minute domestic, and no time to go home and change.”

“And you didn’t even call me,” Sherlock sneers with mock hurt.

“It was a domestic- you don’t like domestic murders. Look, bugger off and say hello to Molly, I want to hog the kid,” Lestrade says, good-naturedly. “Hallo, bee. Can I get a cuddle?”

“Mind, she likes pulling on things,” John warns, handing her cautiously over. As predicted she finds Lestrade’s tie in microseconds and yanks it like she’s taken up campanology.

“Be glad you don’t wear earrings,” Mrs. Hudson says.

“Easy, bee,” Lestrade wheezes, trying to disentangle her fingers. John whistles and hands her a toy, which she takes to mangling happily, even though it doesn’t make as many funny faces as Lestrade does. He takes the opportunity to shove his tie into his pocket out of harm’s way.

Molly is in the kitchen dishing up canapés and looking rather striking in a black gown. The kohl around her eyes makes her rather more panda-like than sultry, especially as in the course of the evening she’s already smudged it but that aside, John has suspicion as to why Lestrade’s been drinking.

“Creepy and Kooky. Should I do the theme music?” he asks. Molly looks up and flashes a smile, snapping her fingers twice.

“Should I?” she counters, indicating his suit.

“Maybe put the hot tray down first,” John suggests. “Can I help?” She looks around the kitchen a moment, slightly startled by the question.

“Um, yes! Crisps in bowls please; everyone’s turning up earlier than I thou- is that Sherlock?”

John turns and realises that she can see the black shape lurking around the living room, poking into the book shelves.

“Actually, yes. Bit of a surprise.”

“He’s wearing a bodybag.”

“Yes, yes, he is. I’d apologise, but you’ve met him.” John says, and there’s a tightness around his jaw that Molly both recognises and gives her a slightly sinking feeling. These useless boys.

“I haven’t had that many new body bags at St. Barts’ recently,” she says, as a second horrifying thought occurs to her. The vol-au-vents slide unimpeded off of her tray onto the counter. “Oh my god. Is that a *used* bag?”

John's brain shuts down in protest. Surely not even Sherlock would go that far. "Molly," he says eventually. "I think for the sake of everyone, let's pretend that question doesn't exist."

"Right. Good idea. Not before tuna puffs."

"No. Um. Drinks?"

"Side table, by the sofa. I'll have a glass of wine, please."

John nods, tapping his forefinger to his temple to show just how much he'd got the message. Definitely a large glass.

He moves back into the living room. Other than Lestrade, they really are amongst the first to arrive, but Molly seems to be expecting more people, given the number of snacks she's making. At least, John hopes so. He and Lestrade between them make for good eaters, but there's still a limit on how many Iceland Party Platters they could get through in one evening. John roots about the bottles, pours Molly a generous dose of Chardonnay and sticks it through the kitchen hatch for her.

Sherlock looms up behind him. "Whiskey, John. If I'm going to be forced to socialise, at least allow me to medicate for the inevitably dull conversation."

"You'll get a clip around the ear," John offers tartly. He pulls the bottles about and then adds, "And are you sure about the whiskey? I think it's Sainsbury's own. Look, we bought that Merlot you like, have some of that."

Sherlock gives him an odd look and then gives a little shrug of agreement.

Whatever.

John pours for them both in silence and takes a large swallow from his glass. He foresees something of a long evening ahead, and that goddamn bodybag is getting on his nerves. It creaks and rustles as Sherlock moves around. What on earth had he been thinking?

"Oi, grumpies, come and check this out," Lestrade says, beckoning them over. He taps something on the mantelpiece between the variety of silly birthday cards Molly's put up along it. They go to see, rather than resort to bickering.

"Novelty cat cards, yes, I see there's a rather comprehensive sample here. Lucky Molly," Sherlock says dryly, unimpressed.

"Not those, you berk. This one. It was leaning on the door when I came up; no idea who it's from. Came with the book."

Sherlock holds his hand out for the items, automatically passing his glass to John to hold, and not even looking back to check that John's got it before he lets go. John fumbles it, and scowls.

"Careful!"

The other pays him no attention. He turns the card over- a fairly standard example of, as he'd put it, of a novelty cat card. Glitter flutters off of it as he handles it, sticking to the front of his bodybag. "Unsigned," Sherlock notes. "No envelope?"

"They'd flattened it and used it to sort of wrap the book," Lestrade tells him. "Whole thing held together with an elastic band."

"What colour was the band?"

“Err, bluey-green I think. Is that important?”

“Hmm. Not *un*important. Telling.” Sherlock turns his attention to the book. It’s a slim volume of poetry, signs of an erased pencil mark in the top corner, the paper slightly rough and less than perfect white. He examines the spine and raises an eyebrow. “Oh, I see.”

“So, who’s it from?” Lestrade asked. “Molly couldn’t think of anyone.”

“Obviously, an admirer,” Sherlock drops it back onto the mantelpiece. “And one who’s either hell-bent on making a fool of himself, or is more manipulative than I gave credit for.”

“Well, Molly was kind of pleased.” Lestrade says, not really listening. “Wonder who it was.”

John side-eyes him, and has a little wonder about that too. Is Lestrade being simply nosey, or has he got some kind of ulterior motive? Wiggins seemed sure Lestrade’s mystery tie-pinner was tall though, and Molly’s not, even in her heels. Nor is she the sort to splash out on expensive jewellery.

Curious.

The doorbell rings and Molly trips passed to open it, drying her hands on a tea-towel and with the phone tucked in the crook of her neck. A small crowd pours in through the door in their motley; a rather predictable lot of skeletons and slightly slutty vampires and then behind them, Stamford and his wife, a wizard and a witch respectively.

“Allo, Stamford. I didn’t know you were coming.”

“Interesting mix of people,” Stamford agrees, and already the party is sort of automatically segregating itself according to those who know Sherlock and those who don’t. John casts Sherlock a quick look and the other man shrugs.

It’s hardly my fault.

Molly sticks the CD player on, and there’s a clatter of bottles and bags and coats are dumped on the sofa and the whole room gets warmer and louder. A group of smurfs arrive, and it is, as they say, a party. Mrs. Hudson gets stuck in; pleased as punch as Stamford’s wife recognises who she’s meant to be, and they strike up a pleasant conversation about television shows of yore.

One of the sexy vampires comes over to the drinks table and with bravery evidently sponsored by Bacardi, gives them a friendly hello. John smiles to be polite, but with Sherlock skulking behind him dressed as a corpse, it probably comes across rather lukewarm. Molly hurries over to make introductions.

“Jools, these are some of my other friends. Um, John, Greg and err.. Sherlock.”

“Yeah, I sort of recognise them from the papers.”

“Jools is one of the toxicologists at Barts, and um, that’s Herm, Ellen and Miranda; we used to live together. Tim’s Miranda’s boyfriend and the smurfs are all from Radiology. They’re all nice people,” she adds meaningfully, giving the trio an intense look, which Sherlock had expected but which ruffles both Lestrade and John a touch. Still, they take it to mean ‘please don’t let Sherlock embarrass anyone’, unaware that Sherlock translates it (with more accuracy) to mean ‘I’ve got your number Mister, but equally, don’t let Lestrade and John embarrass themselves either’.

There’s a number of short skirts in the room, after all.

“I’m sure they’re all delightful,” Sherlock says, his voice as funereal as his costume. John frowns.

Lestrade’s already trying not to tilt his head to one side as Smurfette wiggles past in her clumpy heels to get at the food. Molly’s phone trills again and she gives them an apologetic smile as she goes to answer it, glancing back, looking a bit worried.

Sherlock looks at the clock. They’ve only been there 20 minutes. How much longer? John catches him looking.

“One hour,” he suggests, a little more sharply than he means to sound, “Can you do that? Can you just, just once, mind yourself and pretend to be pleasant for an hour, and then you can go. We’ll pack you home in the taxi with the baby.”

Sherlock looks at him coldly, and John regrets his anger because there’s a hurt behind the offence and fury in his eyes.

“Fine.” Sherlock straightens up, and puts his glass down. An apology rises in John’s throat, but he’s eye to eye with the black plastic; so close he can see the texture of it, and instead he swallows the remains of his glass.

“Fine,” he agrees. “Completely bloody fine.”

Sherlock hides in the kitchen. The plastic is too warm for living flesh and when his shirt starts to stick to his back he irritably shoves it off. He perches on one of Molly’s breakfast bar stools, with only his legs in the bodybag. Molly spots him there, looking miserable and half-heartedly people watching through the hatch.

“Oh, Sherlock...” she sighs.

John’s deep in conversation with a mixed group of smurfs and nurses; holding court with the baby on his lap as they rabbit on about St. Barts and recent policy changes. Whenever he laughs, Sherlock looks over and then right after, looks out the kitchen window with a grim expression.

Were there ever men more hopeless, she wonders and feels awful because there’s so little she can do about it. Still, she must try.

“Hello,” she says, slipping into the kitchen and closing the door behind her. The hatch is still open but it gives them some small semblance of privacy.

“Hello,” Sherlock says flatly. “Having a nice time?”

“Not bad, actually. Though this wig’s horribly itchy.” She runs a glass under the tap and then fills it with water. “Want one?”

Sherlock mutely shakes his head. She drinks and then carefully comments, “John seems a bit... snippy tonight.” At once, his expression darkens.

“I’m sorry, it’s my fault really. I know this isn’t really your... thing,” Molly apologises. “I shouldn’t have pushed the invitation so much.”

Sherlock gives a sardonic little bark of laughter. “It’s not your fault that John is unreasonable.”

“Yes, but I told him about the stock incident, and it was sort of selfish of me. I just thought...” she

chews on her inner cheek and refills the glass. "I mean, he's been pretty locked up in Baker Street."

"Locked up?"

"Locking himself up, I mean. He hasn't come to Barts, except that one time. Hasn't called Stamford. Mrs. Hudson says he hardly goes anywhere."

Sherlock goes quiet. A sudden flurry is going on behind his face as previously irrelevant facts come together to some sort of idea that hasn't occurred to him before.

"Is it the bag?" he asks suddenly

It takes Molly a moment to realise what he means. "Ah. Well, it might be," she says gently. "It's a bit...well, it might be reminding him of... you know."

"Hm."

"He was very punchy when you got back."

"Mm."

"You being a...corpse might be making him feel a bit... punchy again."

Sherlock digests this. "Not my best move, then?"

Molly takes a breath. "No..." she agrees carefully. "Maybe take it off?"

Sherlock stands and kicks his feet free of the bag, crushing it into a bundle. "Do you want it?"

"You've put holes in it," Molly declines, apologetically. "It'd leak."

"It was new," Sherlock says, and shoves it into the bin. Without the Bellstaff or jacket he looks smaller than usual.

"Come and have a drink," Molly says, "We can steal the baby, and tell the others to bugger off for a bit so they don't disturb her." Sherlock looks at her askance, and she gives a sideways little smile.

"It *is* my birthday," she reminds him, looking pleased at the little trace of power that gives her. 'Come on' her eyes say, 'lets be bad and anti-social together'.

"I can do that today, if I want to."

"Yes, all right," Sherlock relents.

John falters in the middle of a sentence as they emerge from the kitchen, and has the grace to look a bit uncomfortable with himself.

"We're going to go and sit in the other room," Molly tells him brightly. "I wondered if the baby might like a bit more quiet."

John looks down. She's not doing too badly with all the noise and hustle, but she's getting drowsy and no longer smiling quite so much when people come over. "Uh, yeah, that's- thanks." Molly sticks her hands out, her smile a little forced but she manages to support the baby without too much trouble, taking her off of him.

"I can come over," John offers, making a move to get up.

"Nope," Molly says cheerfully, which catches him off-guard. "Nope. You don't need to do that." She gives him another one of those looks, and echoing back down the years John hears the voice of Stella and various teachers telling him *'you think about what you've done, young man.'*

It irritates him, thanks in part to the drink, and by way of tiny rebellion he says, "Took the bag off, then."

"It was hot." Sherlock says tersely. He reaches across one of the smurfs, prodding the man out the way and picks up one of the bottles off of the table. He seemingly doesn't care which. John's brows lower to a frown, and then he catches the cold corner of Sherlock's eye.

You're being an arse.

John licks his lips, and feels for his glass on the table. "Anyone else for a top-up?" *I know.*

The smurfs and the nurses chit-chat on, blind to the awkward silence between the two. Sherlock nudges Molly and indicates he's ready to move off, sparing one last glance at John. *Leave me alone.*

...I know. Ok. I don't mean it.

Molly looks down at the baby and thinks, 'I could give your dad a smack sometimes, I really could.' Then she flashes John a 'everything's fine' smile and follows Sherlock.

The party in the spare room (transformed temporarily into a second sitting space) consists solely of Mrs. Hudson and Stamford's wife and a slowly emptying bottle of wine. Molly gratefully hands the baby over to them and takes a seat on the sofa. Sherlock is not predisposed to talk much, and they sit in silence for a while, listening in on the conversation until inevitably, Molly's opinion is sought on something and she gets sucked in. Unable, and unwilling to share his views on Glee, Sherlock finishes his drink and then, discretely stands. Molly catches his eye over Mrs. Hudson's head, concerned.

"Bathroom," he mouths at her, and leaves.

Molly lets him go.

—

Back in the main room, John finds himself drifting from the crowd, back into Lestrade's company. The policeman points at his glass and they convene at the drinks table again.

"Sorry again about the car," John says presently, pouring for them both. Lestrade leans in and tells him *sotto voce*,

"Actually it was all insured; no harm done really, but don't tell Sherlock that." He flashes a grin. "Not till he's finished off my stack of cold cases. I kind of like him owing me one."

"Won't take long for him to finish them," John agrees, thinking Lestrade is something of a devil. "To be honest, I'd take his complaining with a pinch of salt. After so many slow crime months, I think he's glad to have something to work on."

“Sorry?”

“Well, you know what he’s like when he’s got nothing to do,” John continues, not noticing the crease of disbelief growing on Lestrade’s brow. “Bloody pain in the arse; hanging around the house all day complaining of being bored.”

“So... he’s not had anything from the website?”

“Not that I’ve seen. Or Mycroft.”

“Since...?”

John sips his wine and thinks. “Last three or four months, I suppose.”

“Right. Yeah. Summer months are often slow,” Lestrade says, smooth as sandpaper and it’s John’s turn to frown.

“What do you mean by that?”

“Nothing.”

“No, bollocks to that. Out with it.”

Lestrade shoves a hand in his pocket and sways away from John fractionally. “Welllll- Not sure I should really,” he says, playing it off as a joke. John doesn’t find it funny.

“Lestrade.”

“Alright, alright, no need to give me daggers. All I’m saying is, there’s been a bit of stuff, but he wasn’t interested. He told me he was busy, and I just, you know, assumed it was stuff from his website.”

“Well, no,” John replies, setting his drink down to attend to the conversation more seriously. “He’s had almost nothing. The nightshade death was the first in ages. Oh god, you don’t think he’s...?”

Lestrade sticks his own glass on the table next to John’s and plants his solid policeman’s paw on the man’s shoulder.

“No. I don’t. I really don’t.” He’s grinning lopsidedly, like he’s seen something or someone that tickles his sense of humour.

“I don’t-”

“John, you plonk,” Lestrade interrupts kindly. “Does this not strike you as a really Sherlock kind of excuse to hang about the flat, because he’s been a bit... worried?”

John’s expression goes strange, like he’d been eating something soft and unexpectedly bit down on something jagged.

“You know he gets dead odd sometimes, when he’s worked up.”

John expresses a sigh and kneads a hand across his forehead. “Oh, shit. It’s me being there with the baby- he’s had to give up using the kitchen as a second Barts and I’ve got the big room now. He hates it.”

“The big- you’ve got Sherlock’s room and Sherlock’s... Sherlock’s upstairs. You swapped rooms,”

Lestrade says, looking like he's suddenly had a revelation. "Oh." He adds, more prosaically. "Yeah, that might be pissing him off, then. Acting stropky, is he?"

"No, it's just..." John swills the wine in his glass and feels heavy again. "It's just different, isn't it. It's not like it was."

"It'll get better, John. He'll get used to it," Lestrade says patting his shoulder again and meaning to be kind. John can't help but feel like that's a result he doesn't actually want, however. He doesn't want his daughter to merely be an inconvenience that his best friend just eventually 'gets used to'.

"Sorry," Lestrade cuts through his thoughts as his phone rings. John eavesdrops. "Hello? What, now? Oh bloody hell, alright. Yeah. No. Thanks. I'm at Molly Hooper's; it's flat four. Yeah, on the crescent. Where? Oh, there. Turn left and then it's the second right. Alright, see you in a minute." He hangs up.

"That was Anderson."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah, he found my watch. Must have dropped it when apprehending Mr. Collins. The domestic," he clarifies. "Anyway, he's going to grace us with his presence for a few minutes."

"I don't think Molly will mind," John says, although he thinks the same could not be said to be true of Sherlock. The man was already sulking like a five-year-old. "Maybe we should wait by the door though."

Lestrade glances at the spare bedroom and agrees.

Anderson, competent at least at following directions, whatever Sherlock might say, turns up five minutes later. "A cowboy," John comments, "or is that meant to be Indiana Jones?"

"Worse," Lestrade mutters under his breath.

"Indiana Jones," Anderson scorns, "I'm Dr. Grant. Here."

Lestrade takes his watch and slaps it on his wrist. "Are you off to Sally's?"

"Yeah, and I should get going. I promised I'd bring beer. Nice suit, John. Suits you," Anderson adds with a laugh.

"Oh, thanks," John starts at the compliment and then suppresses the urge to sigh loudly.

"See you on Monday, sir."

"Bye, Phil."

John waits for Anderson to get out of earshot before asking, "How come he managed to get into costume and you didn't?"

Lestrade rolls his eyes, "Because Phillip, bless his soul, was keeping his in his locker. Besides, he wears the same damn thing every year, so don't get too impressed."

"Oh trust me, I wasn't," John replies and the pair of them snigger like playground jocks.

Molly finds them some time later, still talking shop and gossip. “I think little Bee’s had enough,” she says, rather amused. “And Mrs. Hudson is well past her bedtime too, I reckon.”

John follows her to the spare room, and finds Mrs. Hudson leaning a bit wonkily in her chair, giggling. She waves at him and then seems to find this funny as well. “Oh, John. I am having a lovely time.”

“Yes, you are,” John agrees, helping her find her handbag. “Best not to have too much of a good thing, though, ey? Can you take the baby home for me?”

“Of course, dear, of course. Where’s Sherlock?”

“I think he’s gone home already, Martha,” Molly says, stooping to help her up.

Mrs. Hudson clammers unsteadily to her feet and John questions the sanity of his decision until she swats his shoulder gently and tells him it’s the hip, not the Chardonnay. Once she’s upright she seems able to manage.

“We’ll help you down to the car.”

Lestrade’s scooped up the baby for a sneaky good-bye cuddle, jogging her up and down soothingly. John smiles and reaches for his phone. “Greg, say cheese,” he says, and takes a snap. Lestrade beams. “Molly, you too. Get in there.”

“Me? Oh, ok!” She shimmies her dress into place a bit more and fluffs the wig and then tucks in next to Lestrade for the picture. John shows it to them afterwards. The baby’s hood has slipped off, so all you can see of her costume is the black and yellow stripes. “You look like a really weird family,” John says, feeling odd about that.

“Da-da-de-da,” Molly chimes, and clicks her fingers again. “She could be Pugsley.”

“Does that make me Gomez?” Lestrade wonders.

“No, Lurch,” Molly corrects and then peals with laughter, putting her hand over her mouth at once. “Sorry,” she says, flapping her hand at Lestrade. “I’m a bit squiffy.” She composes herself momentarily and then loses it again when Mrs. Hudson announces she’s lost John’s nappy bag.

—

Molly and John together put a tipsy Mrs. Hudson into a taxi and send her home. The baby, conked out in her arms, doesn’t even stir when John kisses her goodnight. “I think she had a good time,” he comments as they wave off the taxi.

“She got through plenty of booze,” Molly agrees.

“What? Oh, yeah,” John works at his collar, which is feeling tight and then with a sigh of relief, undoes the bow-tie and pockets it as they climb the stairs back into Molly’s apartment.

“Still, Sherlock could have waited til-“

“Waited until what?” Sherlock interrupts, surprising the life out of both of them.

John swears. “We thought you’d gone!” he says, catching Sherlock’s arm. “Where’d you vanish to? You’ve missed a ride home with Mrs. Hudson.”

“Roof,” Sherlock says bluntly, looking annoyed. “They left? Damn.”

“But the door’s lock... oh, no, you picked it. I hope you locked it again,” Molly sighs and pushes the long black hair of her wig out of her eyes. “Gosh, this thing’s itchy.” She pulls it off and brushes her own hair out with a breath of relief. “Well, all in all, so far I’ve had worse birthdays.”

Sherlock looks down at her, thinking again. “Yes,” he says slowly, acceding. “Happy Birthday, Molly.”

“Thanks.”

“Oh God, yes, we didn’t even say- Happy Birthday, Molls.”

“That’s ok.”

The party starts to wind down after that. Midnight looms up and Stamford and his wife take their leave, followed by the skeleton and two of the sexy vampires together, who have plans to get to one of the nightclubs. A reduced group of guests are left, and even they dwindle down and grow quieter. John chats to one of the nurses again, and she’s quite pleasant as they help Molly collect up the remains of the buffet.

“Was that your friend in the body bag?” she asks.

“Oh, Yeah.”

She puts the lid on a tub of dip and bites her lip. “Bit weirdly morbid, but I suppose it is Halloween.”

“He’s got a dark sense of humour,” John says, slinging sausage rolls into tupperware boxes and frowning. “You work in medicine; quite a lot of doctors like dark humour.”

“Oh, yeah, yeah, of course.” She says. He hands her the remains of the breadstick boxes. “Ask Molly where the recycling boxes are,” he says and she blinks and then, used to it from the hospital, follows his order. John watches her from the corner of the eye as she stalks off.

“Not your type?” Sherlock asks. He leans against the wall, a tumbler of something in his hand.

“Not really,” John says shortly.

“Hm,” says Sherlock without passing comment. He surveys the room, which seems bigger now it’s half-empty. He finds that he doesn’t mind a party that’s devoid of people.

“What?”

“Nothing,” Sherlock says, looking at him down his nose, and then he pushes away from the wall and walks off.

Lestrade’s leaning out one of the kitchen windows, drunkenly smoking and contemplating the universe. Sherlock shifts Molly’s wilting coriander plant, opens the window, looks at the plant again and then does her a favour by pushing it out into the void. Lestrade looks down after it as it bounces off the wheelie-bins. “Bullseye!” he says, and laughs.

“Give me a cigarette,” Sherlock demands, sticking his head out through the second window. Lestrade fumbles one out and passes it across the expanse of brickwork, and Sherlock lights it using the kitchen lighter hanging on the wall. Together they inhale and breathe out plumes of noxious smoke into the night.

“You alright?” Lestrade says conversationally.

“Mm,” Sherlock studies the tobacco. “This is low tar.”

“Yeah, I changed brands. Trying to be a bit healthier. New years resolutions and all that,” Lestrade rather spoils his good intentions by coughing. Sherlock can hear the phlegm shift in his lungs.

“I thought you were quitting.”

“I thought you had,” Lestrade counters. “It’s been a bit of a fucking year.”

“Aren’t they all,” Sherlock muses, and puckers for another drag. “I see you got in Smurfette’s good graces,” he comments. He pauses and leans out to scrutinise Lestrade’s face in more detail. “Or one of them, anyway.”

Lestrade puts a thumb up and scrubs a bit self-consciously at the smear of blue body paint on the corner of his mouth. There’s a matching one on the other side and smudges down his jawline. Then he shrugs. “Yeah well, it’s a party,” he says, a little mutinous. He knocks his ash down to join the dead coriander.

So much for Mr. Tie-Pin. Sherlock thinks to himself and then pauses. Hm. One more deduction there than he’d expected.

It’s all dull anyway; Lestrade’s affairs always have been and always shall be and he has his own matters to consider. Lestrade agrees with this notion and changes the subject on him.

“So, what was with the body-bag then?”

Sherlock rolls sour smoke over his palate and pushes it out through his nose. “I thought it was funny. I wanted to come as a murderer, but John objected.”

“Thing is with costumes though, you’re not supposed to go as something you actually are,” Lestrade points out. The night air chills Sherlock’s fingers. He holds the cigarette out over the drop between the knuckles of his first and middle fingers, and then flicks the ash off of it, recalling the single blast of gunfire that had done for Charles Magnussen. It had been as easy.

“I thought it was fitting- serial killer’s victim. All Hallow’s Eve; the night the dead rise, and all of it fakery.”

“Wanker,” Lestrade says fondly. “You can be a right daft git.”

“Evidently.”

Lestrade stubs his cigarette out against the wall and ditches the dog-end in Molly’s sink. “Well, no harm done really,” he says, stretching to make the joints of his spine click. “And listen, it’s not my place to get involved and God knows, you’re both crap at it, but...talk to John would you?”

“Talk about what? We talk. He talks all the time.”

“You know what I mean. Having baby Bee around means compromise; that’s just what having a kid is, and sometimes it’s a bit of a shit deal. But, the thing is, if you don’t *say* when the deal’s getting too shit, then how’s anyone supposed to know?”

“It’s fine,” Sherlock says, obliterating the glowing end of his cigarette.

“Yeah? That was my ex’s favourite testimony too, and look how that ended up. Different situation,

I'll grant you, but," Lestrade adds hastily, "But the general thing still stands. Hash things out."

"Lestrade, you're drunk, divorced and you traded saliva with a smurf tonight. I hardly need advice from the likes of you."

"I know, look how fucking brilliant your life could be," Lestrade flashes a grin, not offended.

"Right, bugger it. As you said, I'm pissed. I'm going home." He gives Sherlock an uncoordinated but friendly slap in the middle of his back and wobbles off to say goodbye to the rest. Sherlock closes the windows. He hears Lestrade behind him, taking his leave.

"I'm off, Molls!" There's the smack of a kiss and Molly's laugh of surprise. "Greg!"

"See you, Greg."

"Yep, cheers John. Scrog the sprog for us!" And the door clicks.

"He's funny when he's drunk," John says. He passes Sherlock to stick a stack of plates in the sink and then wipes his hands.

"Ready to go home?" he asks, needlessly. As if there's anywhere Sherlock would rather be.

They're quiet in the taxi back to Baker Street.

John sits, as is customary, behind the driver. He sprawls a bit, knees apart and the elbow of his right arm propped against the frame of the door. His too-small suit is rumpled; the James Bond and military lines erased and softened into wrinkles that hint naughtily of hotel floors. For once he smells of tobacco smoke and alcohol rather than baby wipes. When he shifts about, Sherlock can pick out his deodorant, no longer so effective, and the dryer, rougher smell of John himself.

The shirt of the suit is undone at the collar, giving a rare peep of neck, and the rather less-than-stylish vest John put on underneath.

In short, Sherlock reflects, John looks different somehow.

Sherlock turns to the dark window of the cab and in his mind's eye, Harry is standing there on the dark pavement. She mouths at him a reminder. *Look after yourself.*

How? Sherlock mouths back and the taxi pulls off from the traffic lights, and then he goes still. John is watching him. The back of his neck prickles. He thinks of Lestrade's advice, but he's not sure where or how to start such a conversation. Everything's changed, Sherlock thinks morosely. He doesn't resent the child her existence, but how simpler it would be if they could go back to their hey days. Back before Moriarty and Mary and this awkward enforced foray into responsibility and adulthood.

Perhaps John and he were simply not the sort who suited growing older, and yet... His thoughts twist on themselves, playing both ends of the argument at the same time. If it hadn't been for Moriarty, John wouldn't have met Mary, and if it hadn't been for her, perhaps they'd never have realised the depths of their friendship. No wedding, no Best Man speech, no John informing him at the kitchen table of his worth.

Besides, there's no amount of wishing that can change what's done.

Into battle. Sherlock turns his head a fraction. John looks back at him, covertly, and his shoulders

slowly hunch up with apology.

I've been a total shit, haven't I?

Yes.

And you haven't deserved it.

Not really.

John purses his lips and folds his hands together on his lap, sucks on his back teeth and taps his thumbs together.

I'm sorry.

Sherlock looks out of the window, bearing still proud. He watches John in the reflection of the window as the man sniffs; exhales. John scratches at a tiny stain on his cuffs and then aloud says, "One of the radiology smurfs brought a bottle of reserve Johnny Walker with him."

A flicker passes over Sherlock's expression; John sees the muscles of his neck flex minutely. He's listening. "So, I uh.... reservedly...Johnny Walker'd it into the nappy bag." Sherlock looks at him and then down at the bag by John's feet. John makes a little 'whoops' gesture with his hands.

I'm really sorry?

"Crack it open later?"

You're still a colossal arse.

I think that's incurable at this stage, but yes, I acknowledge I am an arse to the first degree. Still friends?

"Fine," says Sherlock. He stretches his legs out. "But I get to be Professor Plum," he adds, and then cracks a smile at last when John groans.

He's not supposed to bring the baby to his sessions; Ella's told him this before. She'd frowned when she'd seen the pushchair in the waiting room. Hardly ideal when the counselling is supposed to be his own space, but men like John Watson won't be told.

As clients go, he can be evasive, stubborn and demanding; all completely fair for people who have experienced trauma, but there's something about John Watson that gets under her skin sometimes. Perhaps because deep down she has an odd feeling he doesn't consider her profession real medicine, and that makes her feel guilty, because she equally can't pinpoint anything that explains why she thinks that.

He's asked to see her, however, and well, if he needs the baby as a kind of emotional guard against therapy, then telling him no is only going to make him rebellious. She holds open the door for them both.

"Hello, John. And a little visitor too, I see." She flashes a professional smile at the baby who eyeballs her back, but doesn't inquire about her. It needs to be clear from the outset that this isn't going to dissolve into a forty-minute discussion on how the baby is eating these days.

“There was no one to sit,” John tells her, without hint of apology. Ella closes the door.

“That’s fine,” she lies, and professionally speaking, perhaps it is. Personally she disagrees, but what can you do? At any rate, she’s curious. There’s a noticeable change about him.

“How have you been?” she asks, starting off as per usual with some small talk, which usually in the case of John Watson is very small indeed.

“Alright. Busy.”

“Yes?”

“Well, y’know,” he gestures to the baby with his chin and then gives a sort of half-shrug. “I’m working. Things.”

“That’s good. Any other news?”

John looks up at the ceiling, apparently groping about mentally for something to report. He’s having a bit of a blank, but it’s not the first time Ella’s seen this. Sometimes she swears that the door to the counselling room wipes people’s minds clean. “We went to the library this morning.”

“Books, great. Anything interesting?”

“Just returning some stuff.”

Ella regards him. The last time she’d seen him had been in the middle of August, a little after he’d moved back to Baker Street; another double edged sword in John’s arsenal. Good for him to have a support network, possibly bad for it to be house that, to her knowledge, has blown up, and from which he’d been abducted twice.

Speaking of which. “How are you feeling about tonight?”

John settles in the chair, baby on his knee, and wrinkles his nose. “Alright.”

“Any excessive defensiveness with pedestrians outside the house?”

“Is it ‘excessive’ if one of them did actually stick a needle in you?” John quips back.

“Any excessive defensiveness with little old ladies and innocent bystanders outside the house?”

And there. In just over five minutes the bugger’s already got her delving into sarcasm. Fuck. There’s a tiny, tiny, hint of a smirk, even.

Still, she considers it a score in her favour when he admits, “A bit. If it’s getting dark.” Perhaps sarcasm is justified as a professional tool, if it works. “It’s alright.”

She considers a number of statements she could make on that but decides to let it go for now. “Any plans this evening?” Ella asks instead.

“Stay in,” John says, distracted trying to smooth a wild curl on the baby’s head. “Turn the telly up, I suppose. She’s a bit young for fireworks.”

“Probably a bit after her bedtime. The breathing exercises should also help, if you need them,” Ella makes a note. “How are you sleeping?”

John’s only half listening; messing about with the buttons or popper on the kid’s romper.

“Alright,” he says after a pause; more him processing what she actually said rather than trying to decide on his answer.

Ah, good old ‘Alright’; His favourite non-answer. Clearly it was going to be a popular response today as well. “Would you like to expand on that?”

The baby is grabbing at John’s fingers, making him smile. She wobbles and gurgles on his lap, inventing some game of her own alien logic.

“John?”

“Sorry?”

“You were telling me about how you are sleeping?”

“Flat. In a bed.”

She levels him with a look at his facetious tone of voice and then too late remembers that he’d been sleeping on the sofa just a scant few months ago. She’d assumed once he’d moved house that the habit was in the past, but if he were alluding to it, perhaps it carried more weight than that.

“That’s good,” she says, with a little cough, “and the quality of sleep?” John takes a moment to consider, and then blessedly gives her a straight, honest answer.

“Good, actually,” he says, “There’re still... some bad nights, but uh, well, it helps that she’s sleeping through till morning now. Just an early morning wakeup call, but I tend to get up early anyway, so...”

“Any reoccurring dreams?”

“Usual.”

“But the frequency and intensity...?”

“Frequency less, intensity... the same,” John tells her begrudgingly. He squeezes his daughter a little closer and she kicks.

She’s both pleased and concerned at his progress. It’s a better report than the last one, and she hadn’t had to pry it out of him word by hard-won word, but he’s still less than six months out from yet another traumatic incident that she’s not convinced he’s dealt with properly yet. Eye of the storm, Ella thinks. She writes that down with a question mark.

“Do you want to talk about the dreams today or try any more EMDR?”

“No, it’s fine. I’m not really having problems with that.”

Ella’s pen glides neatly as she notes his answer. It could be recovery, but she doubts it. John Watson isn’t the lump of unfeeling man-rock he would like to be, and there’s often no pretty way to grieve in cases of sudden loss.

On the other hand;

“You look better,” she comments. It’s true. He’d seemed grey and sunken the last time they’d met, and now there’s a more familiar robust health about him. It’s twinned with a sort of fidgety, frenetic energy that’s new; mainly directed at the baby.

She gives in. “And how is it, being a dad?”

“It’s good. It’s...” He puffs up his cheeks with a breath and then lets it out in one long huff, searching no doubt for a suitable superlative. “It’s really good.”

At that Ella’s mouth twitches into a smile.

“What makes it so good?”

John spares her a glance, as if to tell her she’s an oblivious idiot. She notes that these days the baby isn’t just clean and dressed but some thought has gone into the selection of clothes she’s sporting.

“Just, all of it.” He looks down at her and the baby reaches up, tapping her fingertips against his chin. “Hello, you.”

“She must be a lot of work.”

“She’s alright. I manage. I’m used to not...”

The baby fusses and John stops talking to tip out of his rucksack a number of foam blocks for her and then sits her on the floor. She crawls for them, seal flopping on her tummy and John hovers.

“How’s work?” Ella asks brightly, trying to bring his attention back to the conversation.

“Alright,” John says, leaning down to bring one blue block within the baby’s grasp and watching, dotingly, as she crams it into her mouth.

“Are you adjusting to having a regular routine again?”

“Yeah, it’s alright. Don’t eat it, sweetheart.”

He takes it from her mouth and she squalls in protest. Obediently, John drops down to one knee next to her, propping her into a sitting position and helping her put the blocks on top of each other. She bangs them together, appeased.

Ella says nothing, considering that she might as well take the opportunity to observe if John’s not going to talk. The room, as far as John is concerned, seems to fade away into oblivion. His focus is singular. Ella makes more notes; singular for now, but she hasn’t been John’s therapist for the last few years for nothing. He tends to go through bursts of intense focus, and then fatigues himself by overdoing it.

“Who else is helping with her?” she asks after a while. She’s checked the clock; they’re already 20 minutes through the session and she’s barely got anything out of him.

“Oh, uh... Mrs. Hudson’s been great. She watches Bee if I need to nip out, and sometimes picks her up from nursery. Bee really likes her.”

“‘Bee’?” Ella inquires. It’s not the name she knows the child as.

“Just a nickname. Not sure who started it; it’s uh, just sort of stuck.”

“So, you’re taking her to meet people?”

“A few people. D’you want the red block, love?”

He rests himself down on one elbow, reaching for the elusive toy and passing it to the baby. She

adds it to what can only generously be called a 'tower' and makes pleased buzzing noises to herself. Ella resists another little smile. It's the most relaxed she's ever seen John during a session. Usually his shoulders are glued somewhere up near his ears and he can't wait to be gone. Bringing the baby perhaps wasn't such a bad idea after all.

He smiles too as she thrusts blocks at his chest; repetitive presents delivered with an enigmatic smile of her own, and then, pleased, he kisses her fingers.

"Tell me about that."

"Oh, nothing major. Sherlock had a case so Lestrade came over and she met him, and Wiggins, the ex-junkie Sherlock kind of...mentors? Not sure what it is they're doing, to be honest. And then Molly. You remember, the pathologist?"

"I remember," Ella says, noting on her clipboard that thus far, it's all been acquaintances via Sherlock and his work. Personally she questions the wisdom of the frankly alarming insinuation he's taking the child on cases, but it's not her place to raise that. It must have been a police case, and surely the DCI can't be lunatic enough to let them run around in a dangerous situation with a child. "You've known her for a while, haven't you?"

"Yeah. We met up last week actually. Drinks for her birthday."

"That's sounds like fun. Who else went?"

"Oh, I don't know. A few people she knows from the hospital, a few ex-flatmates of hers. No one I really knew."

"Still, you must have spoken to someone at the party."

"Lestrade was there, and Sherlock."

Now there was a surprise. Ella's ears pricked up at once. "A party together? It sounds like you enjoyed that."

"It was alright," John says, perhaps aware he's let something slip. Ella doesn't press- she couldn't coerce him into talking even if it were ethical or she were inclined to. Instead she gets up to look in her desk draw and fetches one of the red rubber balls she uses sometimes with patients. It should be safe enough.

"Here; looks like the blocks are losing their novelty," she suggests, holding it out. John seems surprised, and she supposes she hasn't really added such a personal touch to their meetings before.

"Thanks. Here, Bee, look. Look what Ella's got for you."

There's a high-pitched noise of interest and the ball is at once thoroughly investigated with both fingers and gums. John grins. "Thanks," he says again. She drops the ball and it bounces, making her scrabble for it comically.

Ella lets him drop a few more of his usual defenses before gently asking, "Do you want to talk about Mary?"

His face clouds almost at once, but he doesn't outright refuse immediately.

"Why?" he asks instead, sounding tired.

"I'm just asking, John. It's why we're here."

"I know," he says, defensively. "And it's alright. I mean, I don't know what's really left to say about it."

"Ok. That's fine. I just wanted to be sure."

"I'm sure."

"Is there anyone or anything else you'd like to talk about?"

She's rather hoping he might mention Sherlock again. The relationship they have is complex and she's wondering how living with the man again after the loss is affecting John's state and ability to cope. Instead he surprises her.

"She's started quite a nice nursery school, actually. Um. It's decent."

"Oh?"

"Yeah. Um, good staff, and the kids are nice for the most part. She doesn't come back over-tired or dirty or upset or anything. I think she enjoys it."

"Oh? That's good, then."

"Yeah. She seems to really like this one volunteer there."

"Oh?" Ella repeats, privately thinking *oh really?*. The baby tosses a block aside and as much as she'd like to poise her pen, in order to retain the thread of conversation, Ella slips from her chair to join them both on the carpet, retrieving the toy. "Here you are."

"Well, That's about it."

"What do you think of her?"

"She's alright."

'*Oho*', thinks Ella. '*Is she now?*'

Out loud she gives a hum of approval.

"It's not like that," John says hastily.

"Even so," Ella says gently, "It's good to hear that you're meeting people, John, especially other people who either work with children or who are parents also. Just like you might consult another doctor about a condition you've not encountered before, it can be helpful to hear other parent's ideas and opinions, even if you don't fully agree with them."

He makes an uncertain noise of concurrence and stacks blocks, clearly thinking. Ella doesn't interrupt him while he does so.

"What do you think?" John asks suddenly. He has one arm half crooked around the baby, keeping her close. Ella pauses.

"What do I think about what?" she asks cautiously.

"Is she... Does she look... alright?"

Ella looks at him briefly, and then at the child, feeling a sudden flush of warmth and a strange appreciation for her job. It's touching. She gives him another look, dropping some of her detached professionalism, right into his nervous new dad eyes. He winds an arm protectively around the kid.

"Yes, John. She looks perfectly healthy, and happy." She picks up one of the foam blocks and the baby takes it in a neat pincer grasp only to drop in front of John's face. "Perfectly normal. I can see she's very, very loved."

"She is. Of course she is," John returns. "Of course I love her. I love her incredibly."

And of course, anything you feel the need to iterate four times in one go must be uncomplicatedly the truth.

"Do you feel under any pressure to live up to some standard of parenting?" Ella inquires. Her knees ache where she's sitting on the carpet and demurely she slides them to one side from under her rump, placing her clipboard over the hem of her skirt in the unlikely case that it's providing anyone with a show.

John goes quiet.

Gently, Ella informs him, "You don't have to talk about it, if you're not feeling ready to, but I have read your file, John. These are issues we've never discussed and it might be worth, at some point, exploring if you have any assumptions we may want to challenge together."

The baby seems to sense his tension and trepidation, as her playing slows and then stops altogether while the silence grows. John gives her an insincere smile of reassurance and bounces the blocks up and down to get her interest again. Ella waits, used to having to be patient for responses.

"Not today," he manages at last.

"That's fine, John. However, I'd like you to consider it as a topic of discussion for us. Can you do that?"

"Alright." Not a promise then, but Ella knows she won't get much more than that. She checks the clock. Only eight minutes left.

"I think you've made some good steps, John," Ella tells him. "I can see you've found more sense of control; I remember you saying last time that you felt a loss of control. Would you still agree with that statement?"

John doesn't respond, fussing with the baby again. Ella waits and eventually he says, "I feel a bit... clearer. There's less-" he pauses to find the word. "Panic."

"That's natural. You were in a difficult place and, with time, you should regain all of your sense of control. It's just taking those little steps as they come."

It's nothing she hasn't said to him before, unfortunately, and it has almost no impact. "Alright."

Ella sets her clipboard down, face down, on the carpet and goes for one last question.

"What would you say has been the most helpful thing for you in the last few months?"

John smooths the baby's hair back with one hand, and actually considers. "You mean, other than her?"

“I mean, what’s been most helpful?”

He licks his lips and pauses. She can see an answer of some sort on his tongue, like he’s rolling it back and forth there like he’s sucking on a boiled sweet that he can’t quite determine the flavour of. “I suppose....Sherlock.”

Ella tilts her head, silently encouraging him to continue.

“I mean- I- He, he doesn’t really do much. He doesn’t really help like doing things. But he helps.”

“He helps by not helping?”

“No, he helps. But it’s not him doing things that helps.” John frowns. “Never mind.”

“No, no, I think that help can come in a number of guises,” Ella says, “Even if it’s not what the giver intends, or what we expect. An abstract kind of helping.”

“No that’s not what I mean at all,” John says flatly, which Ella interprets as meaning that John frankly has no idea what he means either. Interesting. She taps the tip of her pen against her teeth and checks the clock again. The minute hand swoops around and calls time, just about.

“Well, that’s about it for today,” Ella says, picking herself up off the floor and putting her pen in her pocket. “I think we’ve made a nice round check on how things are going, and made some good ideas for areas to explore next time. Suzanne can set you up with your next appointment.”

John doesn’t look up; stuffing blocks away, and trying not to upset his daughter in the process.

“Alright,” he says, absently.

He remembers Mary on Sunday morning with a kind of lethargy. There’s frost on the outside of the windows and the room is cool; John prefers a high tog duvet to drying himself out with the radiators all night; so the empty side of the bed next to him isn’t warm to his touch. He runs a hand over the mattress sleepily, as if by groping hopefully he might break the bounds of reality and somehow find her hand there. That’s all he wants right now; just a hand. He dreamt of Afghanistan again but not the awful jolting fire-fights of his past nightmares. Now it’s more about rushing through cracked buildings, looking for the wounded.

His fingers find nothing but the old divots in the mattress; the worn soft places where Sherlock used to dig his bony elbows in. There’s the slight phantom dip of the man still impressed into the foam. John exhales and gets up. The cloudy weather makes him feel slow and stupid, but the air in the kitchen has a sharp wintery tang from where one of them has left the window open all night and it wakes him up. John likes the early morning.

He makes tea and takes it back to bed with him, a luxury which he manages for a full minute and a half before the baby lets him know that she needs changing. That done he tucks a bib round her neck and gives her some grapes to mangle by way of first-breakfast while he makes porridge. “One for baby bear,” He says, cooling it off. “And one for Papa bear, eventually.” His own he leaves to reach near nuclear temperatures in the pan.

They breakfast, John alternating spoonfuls of porridge into the baby and gulps of strong tea into himself. Downstairs he hears the heavy thunk of the Sunday papers falling onto the doormat.

Someone else is running the media conglomerates now. John still buys all the main titles, if only because given Sherlock's line of work it's worth keeping on top of it, though left to his own devices he'd pick up one or two for the crossword and leave the rest for bad rubbish. John drains his tea and wrinkles his nose. Magnussen still leaves a sour taste in his mouth.

The worst thing, the thing he'd really resented- more than the blackmail, more even than having to stand there being flicked in the face, was the piss. The taunting, the out-and-out crimes; these John always felt fell into that James Bond Villain category of behaviour, which oddly made them more palatable. But the piss.

He and Mrs. Hudson had had to scrape the fireplace out between them, raking up the stinking coagulated ashes from the bottom of the grate and scouring the whole thing with bleach. Even now when he has to get down by it to lay a fire he swears he can smell it still. Not even the sterile slap of a watery piss, oh no. He can hear Mrs. Hudson's voice trembling as she complained tearfully, *'On a day he'd eaten asparagus!'*

There's still the slight tideline on the carpet by the hearth from the overspill, though they tend to keep it covered by a rug.

He scowls at the fireplace, feeling the usual peculiar creep along his hairline at the memory of the man's cold, dead stare. Well, he's dead now anyway. What does it matter?

The baby's drowsy with a full tummy. He gives her a wash and brush up and himself the same and then sits back on the bed. Mary's photos crowd the little dressing table, which he barely uses. Her blue eyes stare out at him over a smile, and he closes his eyes and breathes in the clean smell of baby soap. Sometimes he'd come home and the whole place had smelt of baking, and Mary herself of frangipani. He'd used to bury his face in the nape of her neck and come away feeling drunk off of it. Once they'd even made love over the kitchen counter, her hands still covered in flour.

John swallows, bone-heavy. Somehow it's become exhausting to be sad.

He wonders if he should go down and fetch the papers. He wonders if Sherlock's awake yet. Maybe not- he'd spent hours last night wandering the living room like a restless ghoul, muttering to himself. Sherlock had been a bit odd lately, he thinks. Sort of tense and over-energised. He kept starting projects and then abandoning them in disorder, which wasn't like him. Oh of course he did all manner of strange and frankly disgusting activities around the flat, but his science was usually methodical. Unbidden, John thinks of a desk covered in Sydney Opera Houses serviettes.

Probably needs a case, he concludes, mostly convincing himself. Something he can get his teeth into- a locked room mystery maybe. Hasn't had one of those since...The Bloody Guardsman. Or poor Sholto.

They've stayed in touch. The Major's as reclusive as ever, and as quiet and secretive, but from his short little letters, John gets the impression of a step taken forward. The words aren't clipped because they're social formula, but because that's Sholto's nature, and every now and then, John catches a touch of the warmth and dry wit that had made Sholto a good leader back in the day.

And he hasn't let anyone kill him, which John supposes counts for a lot. The man's too proud for suicide; John understands that, but when the world wants to eradicate you, he understands what it feels like when you start to ask yourself 'well, why not?'. He writes longer replies as a result; pen skimming cheap writing paper far more fluidly than he types- Sholto's not much up with

technology.

He'd asked John if he'd be attending today and if so to convey his regards to such fellow acquaintances as didn't still hold him grossly accountable for so many deaths. Not in so many words, but John knows what he meant. John can't remember his reply. He's still in two minds about the event anyway. Too many familiar faces who haven't seen him since he nearly died.

Well, one of the times he nearly died anyway.

John carts the kid through to the living room and sets her up with her toy animals; fat rubbery things that make noises when she gives them a friendly bash bash by way of greeting. She seems especially fond of the elephant, John's noticed. He sits and watches her play for a moment, thoughts running idle. He wonders what the differences are between Indian elephants and African elephants, and has a vague notion it has something to do with the teeth as well as the ears. He tries to recall a documentary he'd seen; after all, who knows if his daughter's not going to grow up to be some kind of foremost elephant scientist; but all that comes to mind is the word Sumatra.

Or maybe that was something to do with tigers; he can't remember. Natural history isn't really his area.

Mostly 'Sumatra' makes him think of trains and the cold, heady moment he'd been ready to die again. Not a thought for a grey November Sunday though, and he shakes his head and leaves her for thirty seconds while he fetches the papers.

The paper boy's shredded the plastic cover on the magazines as he's shoved it through the letter box, and they try to slide like wet fish from his grasp as he comes up the stairs. He nearly makes it; grabs at the Culture as it makes a break for freedom and drops the Style instead. It bounces on it's spine, giving him a risqué flash of fancy French knickers before falling open onto a spread of men's suits. He dumps the papers on the sofa and goes back to retrieve it.

Oh. Westwood.

John's not a fan, to say the least.

There's something on Shepherd and Woodward though, which seems up Sherlock's alley and he leaves the article open on the coffee table for him, for whenever he emerges. Besides, they tend to put some gossipy bits in the back and perfume samples in the middle and Sherlock, for his own mysterious reasons, likes those as well. The side of John's mouth twitches. The ridiculous man.

John stretches and looks at the clock. It's scraping nine o'clock and the day veers out ahead of him, long and devoid of purpose. Maybe he should do the ironing. It's not a chore John particularly enjoys but it's better than some. He can switch off and go on autopilot over his shirts; hospital and military training allowing him to make a bit of a swift art of it. John's watched Sherlock try and iron and the man is all fingers and thumbs; picking at the fabric and taking an age over getting it perfect because God forbid anyone see him looking rumpled on a day he's chosen to care about his appearance.

He dumps the basket within easy reach and opens one of the doors as a convenient place to hang the shirts once done and gets to work. It's busy work; keeping him occupied for an hour. With the radio on, it's almost a pleasant distraction until he gets to the dress shirts and wonders if he should bother.

He's not going today, that's basically already decided.

Sherlock makes some uncertain thumping noises upstairs, as though he's dropping books on the floor. He well might be. John chews on his inner cheek. A bit telling if he doesn't iron the shirts. And he'll only have to do them later. The white cotton seems stark across the dark grey ironing board cover. There's a splodge on the end of the board; dark reddish-brown, which is Sherlock's fault and as far as John can determined, not of human origin at least. Sherlock tended to keep his blood and gristle limited to kitchen table, sink and fridge in an unholy trinity.

When he's not splattering it on pavements.

John puts the iron down heavily and reaches for the starch. Flattening the collar and cuffs almost brutally he adds the dress shirt to the neat pile of finished shirts and switches off the iron. The baby crawls around the edge of the sofa, pursuing a jangling ball. At this stage she's almost half-puppy, he thinks, gently rolling it back towards the safe space in the middle of the carpet. She goes after it.

Radio 4 turns traitor and switches from sitcom to serious with the ten o'clock news and he kills the switch as the Westminster bells toll over the airwaves. One hour. Now what?

Shopping.

He gets out the pushchair and faffs around putting things in order; fetches kid and his coat with it's paper-bright poppy and makes her likewise in her little green coat in her little red chair. It's dry out, but the sky is dullard's grey, and she seems to glare out in contrast, luminous.

The city is busy with people purring around on Sunday morning, taking the air such as it is, and getting on with their lives. John sees a few people checking their watches, conscious of the time. 'Chill,' he thinks, 'at least fifty minutes left'. He ducks his head and barges past the charity muggers callously, loathing them and their day-glo vests. As bad as beggars, in his opinion. "Bah, humbug," he mutters down at the baby. She sucks on her thumb, happily ignorant.

Going to have to break that habit some day.

The thought of future battles makes John feel a bit gloomy.

They get to Tesco relatively unaccosted and John makes a quick and efficient sweep of the place. Not much to buy anyway; he'd been earlier in the week. There's another charity collection bagging on the end of the tills and another at the door, which John thinks is a bit much. He sticks a quid in for the air ambulance, but ignores the rest, which he doesn't recognise. He used to know most of them. A few years ago it'd all been famine aid charities, and before that... oh right, digging up landmines in Africa and Cambodia.

Were they still working on that? *'If so, they've missed a few spots in Dartmoor,'* John thinks, and smiles humourlessly.

Which would you prefer? Shot, savaged or shattered to smithereens from the legs up?

It's a morbid debate he has all the way to the corner. As a method, shooting is out; he's tried that and it's a shit way to go. Slower than you'd expect, possibly saving a head-shot. Beheading? No. He doesn't know much about that. Seems a bit too French Revolution; all those noble women in their silks. Elegant ladies waiting breathlessly on their knees for the chop, praying for a last minute rescue.

A bomb at least is fairly quick; he's always been able to be braver with bombs, he thinks. Click, bang and you're off for good, toodle-oo, adieu, good-bye-ee.

John breathes out through his teeth. Alright, that's quite enough of that, Watson. Get a grip. Think

of something happier. Sausages. Sunshine. Fucking bluebirds-

-oooover the white cliffs of Dooooover.

“God, I hate November,” he mutters aloud. Louder than he meant to. A random passing stranger says, “Yeah, mate,” in agreement, and startles him.

He stops outside the Chinese restaurant he and Sherlock frequent. A strong smell of sesame and garlic wafts forth on a cloud of grease and his stomach rumbles. Bit early for take out but he could do his own noodles for lunch back at the flat. Or wonton soup. He could go for that. There’s probably even some jasmine tea knocking around in the back of the cupboards somewhere- he’s forgotten to get beer, and he’s not sure he wants to drink today anyway. If he can find the spare teapot it might be a nice pick-me-up; a spot of tea. He daren’t make it in the usual pot, or everything will taste faintly floral for days after.

John wonders who looks after the teapots at the museum of antiquities now. God, some people died too young. All she’d bloody wanted was to be left alone to make tea in peace for the rest of her life. That wasn’t much to ask for was it? He feels a little bit culpable for her passing still, if he allows himself to think of it at all.

The air splits with the crack of a gun, upsetting pigeons, and he flinches on impulse and then the canons boom distantly from the other side of the Thames. Sonorously, the bells start doling out the hour and the people on the street peter off mid-conversation and turn quiet in contrast.

John stands, looking up at the clouds. His daughter burbles and he irrationally feels the need to hush her, even though she can’t possibly understand why. The cars shift past, and John wonders if the driver’s are silent inside or if they’ve forgotten. He used to forget all the time when he was younger, basically thoughtless and disrespectful.

It’s a weird thing though; this silence. Why *not* talk for the sake of the dead? Why did it always have to be carefully couched phrases on abstract stuff like verbalising someone’s *curriculum vitae*? Alright so silence was respectful, but what about the rest of it? The human bits scaffolded onto all the roles and achievements. If that bullet in Afghanistan had been a few inches further to the side, what would they have said at his memorial? Nice things, John supposes, but he doubts anyone would have recalled the stuff that he looked back upon fondly; laughing himself sick with Bill Murray after watching Lieutenant Brown thrusting a foot into a boot primed with a soft boiled egg and the look of sheer horror that subsequently dawned across the man’s face. His favourite passage from his favourite book.

Sherlock would know that one.

John feels something curl in the pit of his stomach. Well... that’s true enough. No doubt Sherlock would annoy everyone else who was trying to grieve in decorous military style by bringing up all the times John had been especially thick and the fact that he did ‘a thing with peas’ that ‘wasn’t bad’.

Another shot is fired. A spell broken. The baby yanks on her toys, making them jangle with fairy-bell chimes.

Speaking of people who enjoyed his cooking; better someone home for lunch. John sets his hand to the pushchair, and his face for home.

Sherlock is going out as he's coming in.

"Barts?" John asks, stand aside as Sherlock comes down the stairs, buttoning his coat.

"Mmm." A flash of a smile as he turns his collar up. "Colonic cancer."

"Oh right, enjoy that then. You've forgotten your scarf," John points out. Sherlock brushes past him, coat-tails sweeping.

"Don't need it- plenty warm enough, thank you!"

"Do you want dinner?" John calls after him as Sherlock hits the pavement, one arm stuck out to hail a taxi.

"Maybe," Sherlock replies, "That toast thing. The thing with cheese."

"You mean, 'cheese on toast'?" John asks, starting to smile.

"Yes," Sherlock tugs open the back door of the cab before it's even drawn to a halt and bounces inside. "Later!"

"Alright," John says, raising a hand as the cab pulls off. "Take care."

He puts his hand down, and sticks it in his pocket instead a moment, feeling at his keys. The fatal potential of black cabs sticks in his head, but it's not like they can either afford a car or find anywhere to even keep one, and it's generally speaking unfair on both Sherlock and the general public to inflict him regularly on the Transport for London network. Besides, he shot the worst cabbie, didn't he?

"Least he checks them now," John says to the baby conversationally. She's starting to make insistent noises and he has a strong suspicion he'll have more than groceries to unload when he gets inside.

He goes in, cleans her up and sticks the shopping away, pulls other food out and cooks lunch. He feeds the baby, cleans her again and eventually settles her for a nap. It's mindless activity and routine and it distracts him significantly enough that without thinking he puts the telly on as he picks up his lunch.

They're just wrapping up the parade.

The edge of the sofa sags beneath his weight as he sinks onto it. He remembers the crunch of the parade ground under the heels of his shiny boots some years ago, the rhythmic pacing of men at his every side as they'd crossed in front of the memorial. Not November though; summer, the sun winking off of a couple of thousand polished buttons and the heat across his shoulders under the jacket of his dress uniform like a friendly arm. He watches them, looking like ants as the camera zooms out. All the little soldiers trooping home.

Except for the ones who can't.

John folds his arms. The shirts are still on the back of the door. It's hours away still.

He turns off the TV and reaches for the papers instead, balancing the bowl of noodles on his lap.

Sherlock's been at the broadsheets and scattered them with abandon about the living room, evidently looking for something of interest and evidently not finding it. John straightens them, and

skips the front page. Out of habit he scans it with Sherlock in mind, wondering what didn't satisfy him. A smash-up on the M24; more drivel about the department of education; pithy political cartoons. News of the death of some pop singer, which he scans and then regrets it when his gaze lights on the statistics added to a neat little box. Suicides ranked by profession.

Somewhere near the top reads 'health care workers'. Then of course, the rest of the usual; finance workers, lawyers, farmers and so on. Further down he finds entertainers, soldiers and unemployed. Mentally John can't stop himself sticking a tick next to each of those he's crossed paths with. Bankers? Got two. Entertainer? Pink lady probably counted. Soliders? ...A few there, none personal. Mostly.

That handle never felt heavier than in London, though, back then.

Doctors? Surprisingly none, unless the man from H.O.U.N.D counted.

And one housewife.

John slowly folds the paper up and puts it in the recycling bin. He picks up a novel and then picks over his version of chow-mien for the better part of an hour until the egg noodles have gone cold and claggy and all he can taste is the salt of the soy sauce. Finally, with irritation, he closes the book.

Bollocks, he should go but he doesn't want to.

He baths the baby instead, which takes an age because she's used to it more before bedtime and the change in routine winds her up. She splashes water all over the place, but this at least serves to give him another way to waste time with cleaning the floor. Then he cleans the kitchen.

Then he swears and goes to stare in his wardrobe.

He's not wearing the dress uniform. It's only in the sodding park and he's sure other than the local scout troop, local MP or whoever's running the thing, everyone will be in civvies. He can go in bloody civvies too. Maybe the shirt though, seeing as he's gone to the trouble to iron it. He can change out of his damp jeans and put on his GP trousers. Sort of smart enough to be decorous, but not so smart it looks like he's trying.

The buttons seem irritatingly small and fiddly, and his fingers as huge and clumsy as carrots as he tries to fasten them. He combs his hair, makes tea and then pours three-quarters of it away undrunk.

Outside the daylight is starting to weaken. Sunset is going to be at about twenty past four and they're starting at quarter to. John looks at the clock. It's 3:15 already, and he still needs to ask Mrs. Hudson to babysit. He dithers another five minutes and then bites the bullet and goes down.

"Of course, dear, not a worry," she says, pleased enough. "I'm popping over to Mrs. Turner's; she won't mind if I bring the wee one. You know, that daughter of hers hardly ever remembers to stop over or bring the children; it's so sad. We'll have a nice time, won't we, Bee?"

"Thanks." He's about to leave when he realises he's forgotten his keys in his other trousers and has to double back and that one simple thing- reentering the flat and the sudden worry that he might be late now- makes him question his decision all over again. He shouldn't go if he's just going to be late. That's as bad as not turning up at all. But then he didn't go at all last year either and this year it makes him feel oddly guilty, and he's not sure why.

There might be people who'd recognise him there.

It might be all strangers, mourning strangers.

He can't decide which would be worse.

John leans down to adjust a stray shoelace and plants one hand on the little table by the door for support. His fingers disturb an ash-tray, half hidden under the Yellow Pages and he catches the whiff of stale tobacco. Bloody Sherlock smoking again.

The smoke reminds him of people.

There were a lot of lads who smoked in Afghanistan. His grandfather had smoked until he'd died and they'd stopped the clock, and John had started to dislike the children's song on that particular subject.

Shit, if he didn't go now, he'd really be late. Move it, Watson. *Straighten your back! Stick with your men! That's better!*

Mrs. Hudson's door is shut- she's already gone next door, and the stairs are long. Halfway down, John stops when his knee suddenly buckles. Then slowly, holding the bannister, he sits, shaken and surprised with himself. He pinches his lips to steady himself. What was he doing?

'John, the important thing with recovering from trauma is that you need to give yourself time and space.' How much bloody space? How much time? Just when I think I've got it, something else throws me down again.

'Adjusting to civilian life is never easy.' I was adjusted. I am adjusted. It's been fucking years. I've got a flat and a kid and a job, and it's mostly really normal. I cook with peas, and I'm trying. I keep bloody trying so why isn't it working. How can I not be adjusted? How can I still not be adjusted? I'm mostly boring.

'The stuff that you wanted to say, but didn't say it. Say it now.'

"I can't," John says to the hall. He digs his fingers into his knee. "I can't. I just can't."

There's something wrong with the door- Sherlock can tell as soon as he approaches. The knocker is to the side as he'd left it, but it's not that- it's not that someone has been inside. It's that someone hasn't come out.

John looks up from his phone as he pushes open the door. He's sat to one side against the bannisters, coat on. On his way out, except he's apparently decided to take a sabbatical on the stairs. Waiting? Waiting on the *stairs*? "Ah, good. There you are."

"I, uh- call from the clinic. I was on my way out," John explains, gesturing to his phone. "I just hung up."

John's a shit liar and this isn't really a lie, but Sherlock supposes John is hoping he'll make an assumption about which clinic he means. Sherlock obliges.

"Do they need you to go in now?" he asks.

"No, no, nothing like that. Just. Paperwork."

John closes the message he was typing to Ella and puts the phone in his pocket. Oblivious or

pretending, whichever it is that Sherlock is, John is grateful.

“Good,” Sherlock nods curtly, “Then hurry up, we have somewhere to be.”

“A case?”

“Are you coming or not?” Sherlock blusters, moving to leave the flat again. Like usual, he manages in a few moments to blow some of the cobwebs in John’s brain away.

“Yeah, I’m coming.” He gets up, feeling tired but his leg more or less solid again. “Where are we going?”

Orange 3G 4:45 PM

||Messages|| Mycroft ||Edit||

I need two tickets.

Tonight. Something

interesting. Now.

-SH

You will owe me.

Now, Mycroft.

-SH.

Ruby Wedding.

Someone has to

sit next to Aunt

Lydia.

Fine. -SH

Then I’ll see

what I can do.

Give John my

best.

Sherlock takes on other small cases throughout the month. One sees them bogged down in an all-nighter, working on a cold case that requires John to read out loud through endless internet forum posts while Sherlock lies on the sofa with his eyes shut. Sherlock is convinced there's something on there that will complete the puzzle ticking over in his brain and reveal the murderer.

John leans his head to one side, making his neck crack, and then yawns.

"BertyFrog is now complaining about the font colour on the forum and asking the mods to change it; GalaxyGurl doesn't think it's a problem and she likes the combination, because of... Steve's Underpants- in all caps- is that a reference to something? Uh... a second post from her saying 'party party party', Then there's a bunch of gifs of people dancing in nightclubs from Rollup, and a post from ShayD_Lite saying they can't see the previous post, errr, are you still listening?"

"Hm," Sherlock replies, not opening his eyes.

"Right, ok, well." John scrolls down, "Ok, May 13th, 7:15pm, here's BertyFrog back again, complaining about the last game they played- They don't like Rollup's character- I think that's what they're saying anyway. Lots of typos- hang on?" He leans back from the desk and yes... that is the baby crying.

John checks his watch. It's nearly 3 A.M.

"That's odd, she usually sleeps through. Maybe the light is bothering her..." he scrolls a bit more, reports a few more things to Sherlock who now has his eyes open. He's frowning somewhat, perhaps his train of thought is getting thrown off by the fussing of the baby. John pauses to listen again- she's not settling down.

"Sorry," he says, getting up and going to check on her. He feels Sherlock's eyes on the back of his neck as he goes.

It's a simple problem- her nappy is wet; John's surprised. He's not had to do a night-time change in weeks. He gets her cleaned up, but she's fairly awake now and in a stroppy mood, making it clear in no uncertain terms she doesn't want to go back in the cot just yet. Baffled, John takes her back to the living room.

"Sorry, she's uh... having a grump." He shrugs. On the other hand, it's the first time he's stayed up this late in quite a while too. Maybe she can sense that.

"It's fine." Sherlock gets up off of the sofa, treading on the coffee table to get at the computer John was using, pushing papers out of the way.

"I got to the bottom of page four," John says, trying to be helpful. He comes close and leans over Sherlock to look at the screen again.

Sherlock moves out the way, reaching to open another one of his many laptops and run through god-knows what, steadfastly ignoring them both. Not so the baby, who sticks out with both chubby arms, arching in John's hold and pushing with surprising strength. Her sounds of annoyance and frustration are palpable.

"Look at that, she's reaching for you," John says, amazed. He jogs her in his arms, trying to draw her attention back, but she's not remotely interested. Sherlock avoids John's gaze and shrugs as though to say it's either a mystery he has no interest in solving, or he straight up has no interest in the first place.

"Come on, now," John says, "Sherlock's busy, and you should be asleep. I'll go and..." he trails off, met by the blank wall of the back of Sherlock's head as he crouches over the laptop, typing.

"Yeah," John concludes, with a sigh, "You do that."

He carts the kid back to the bedroom and sits with her on the end of the bed, trying to rock her back into a doze at the very least. She quiets down a bit but *something* has clearly upset her expectations and she's not satisfied by whatever poor substitute John is providing. She has a very expressive scowl, John thinks; it makes them look alike.

He strokes his forefinger gently over the bridge of her nose, which she likes, and slowly the frown eases and her eyes droop.

Distantly, he can hear Sherlock talking to himself in the living room, then the sound of Sherlock's footsteps coming through the kitchen in a hurry. "Photosensitive epilepsy!" he announces loudly coming through the doorway. "The killer smashed all the lamps and mirrors because the electrical storm was making them flicker- a real and present danger to someone prone to seizures!" He strides back and forth, gesticulating with excitement.

"Shh!" John says, waving a hand to make Sherlock lower his tone. Too late, the baby is already awake and grizzling again.

"Oh for God's sake!"

"John, I solved it!" Sherlock protests, looking hurt.

"Yeah, and you woke the baby."

"Oh, she's always awake. I need you to confirm the type of epilepsy," Sherlock presses, "Come and look at the evidence."

John stands, fed up. "Fine," he snaps, irritably, "Then you get her to sleep, seeing as you bloody well woke her!" He holds her out to Sherlock and then his annoyance all at once drains away when, looking rather surprised, Sherlock obeys and the baby clings to him.

The way Sherlock's arms move to scoop her up is automatic and a far cry from the hesitant gesture of a man John has only seen holding the child a scant number of times- mostly either out of pure necessity or at John's insistence. She tucks herself up in Sherlock's hold, resting her face against his collar with a little noise like *'finally'*.

"...She's really into you," John says, staring, a touch weirded

Sherlock makes a vague shrugging gesture with his free shoulder, and John's suspicions narrow.

"Strange, cause you almost never pick her up or comfort her." John can't help the passive-

aggression that slips out in his tone. Sherlock's gaze crawls off to the side apologetically and John's sense of what's normal for them goes with it. Sherlock looks so awkwardly guilty that John's thoughts turn first to drugs, despite how irrational that is.

"What have you done?"

"Nothing!"

"No, don't lie to me," John shakes his head, refusing to hear this, "Don't you dare." He's tensing for an argument; his temper fraying and about to blow up as fast and catastrophic as a summer storm.

Sherlock blurts, "I pick her up." He swallows, shifting nervously, hanging onto the baby like a shield between him and John's anger.

"What? When?!"

"At night."

"What for?!" He doesn't want to doubt Sherlock- he can't, not after everything, but the old niggle is there in the back of his head. John would go to his grave insisting that Sherlock is the best and brightest man he has ever met, but there's still a faint question mark over Sherlock's morality.

He wouldn't harm her, he feels more than thinks, but does he understand the limits?

Sherlock still hasn't replied to his question, his expression defensive but underlined with apprehension. He didn't mean for things to be like this. John exhales, disappointed with him.

"Sherlock. Give her back."

"She cries," Sherlock says flatly, not budging, "She wakes up, and she cries, and then wakes you up and you never sleep again afterwards. So...I pick her up." Finally his eyes meet John.

Not good?

I don't even know any more.

John runs a hand over his face. "I thought she was sleeping through the night," he says, kicking himself for being so stupid.

"She mostly sleeps until three A. M., then solidly again from five with spates of light rest or dozing in between."

John can't formulate his thoughts into coherent questions quickly but Sherlock answers the next one anyway before he can put it into words.

"Yes. Wet. Once the other but that was the day you gave her oatmeal." John opens his mouth to speculate on the number of nappies that he hasn't noticed disappearing and Sherlock adds, "I bought another pack, it's under my bed," and then looks completely hangdog.

Looking at him, John breathes out and asks the question that Sherlock hasn't thought of yet instead.

"Why didn't you just tell me?"

Sherlock shrugs, screws up his mouth and tilts his head slightly, then looks briefly down at

himself, yet somehow he manages to speak volumes in these few simple gestures.

Look, I'm ridiculous.

You're possessive.

I was afraid you'd say no.

I didn't want this conversation.

You'd have hovered over everything to make sure I was doing it 'right' and then I never would have been able to do anything other than make errors.

Sentiment is embarrassing.

I don't want to be domesticated.

I didn't think it would matter.

I've been worried about you.

John swallows again, this time rather thickly. "So, is this every night? My God, it's every night, isn't it? She's not even a year old and you've got her leading a double life."

He's not even sure what he's more pissed off at; Sherlock for going behind his back, himself for never bloody noticing what was going on with his daughter or himself for the reason that he'd never realized that Sherlock, in his own messed up, weird way, wanted to help. That Sherlock cared. That he'd assumed Sherlock didn't.

'What the fuck is wrong with us?' John thinks, helplessly, 'Why can't we do anything with so much as a fucking teaspoon of sense?'

Sherlock is looking at him again, tense. His hands though, are consciously held soft over the baby's back. The skin around his eyes are tight, but his shoulders remain level where her head lies, her curls just brushing the stiff line of his jaw. As a result he appears awkwardly lopsided, a patchwork of carefully composed consideration and nervous wreck. John thinks he might not even realize he's doing it.

"You," John says finally, jabbing a finger at him, "Are a *complete* twat and a half! Stay there," he orders and turns about face, stomping back into the living room.

Sherlock watches him go and contrarily moves to sit on the end of the bed feeling hollowed out.

"Jig's up," he says quietly to the top of the baby's head. "I'm sorry. It wasn't bad while it lasted." Her fingers nudge the base of his throat, her weight in the crook of his arm warm and significant. "No more stories either." She wriggles slightly and he reminds her, in a whisper, it's not her fault.

John comes back and this time he's holding his phone. Sherlock's mind leaps- who has he called? No, he didn't? Text message? No, his grip's wrong- what's he doing?

John squints as he concentrates, poking at the screen. The camera lights up.

"What-?" Maybe it's for evidence.

"I'm taking a damn picture," John says, his face shifting with an emotion that Sherlock can't name, "of you with my baby. I've got pictures of Mrs. Hudson with her, and Lestrade, Molly and even,

even *people!* And you live here and she likes you, now shut up and say ‘cheese’.”

It’s a truly awful picture of Sherlock. He looks like a startled sheep with his mouth half open in amazement, and his curls flopping limply over his forehead after 42 hours straight casework. The baby is blurred and the lighting is bad from where John had his finger over part of the flash, but one look at it makes John burst out laughing.

“Perfect,” he says.

“I look like an idiot.”

“Accurate, then,” John says callously, and then, softening amends it to, “Alright, that’s not fair of me. But... she’s not to be mucked about with, Sherlock.”

“I wasn’t *mucking*,” Sherlock says, for the first time sounding actually offended. He reads in John’s body language as John looks back and forth between the picture and the reality before him: *Yeah, I can see that now.*

Slowly, John smiles. “You really like her.”

“Well,” Sherlock starts to bluster,

“No, you do. You’re smitten,” John’s smile blooms and his sudden pride is palpable. There’s a touch of relief in there too. “All this time I thought you were just... tolerating us.” He reaches out and brushes his fingers lightly down his daughter’s back tenderly.

“I promised,” Sherlock murmurs as John sits beside him on the bed.

It’s the last time Sherlock ever needs to mention it.

There’s nothing in the fridge left for breakfast except six jars of baby food and John doesn’t think he’s that desperate. There had been seven in the middle of the night and the kid is still flat asleep, which he finds suspicious but as long as Sherlock is eating something, he supposes he shouldn’t complain.

He checks his watch. It’s five-thirty in the morning but Mrs. Hudson tends to get up early and he has a feeling he could probably coax her into being generous with her bread and bacon if he invites her up. If he can hear the gregarious burbling of Radio 4 through her door, it’ll be a safe bet to knock for her.

“I’m going to pop downstairs,” he says. “I won’t be long.”

Sherlock wearily shifts a leg in his chair and makes a non-comment. He has the skull in his hand, drumming his fingers over it in contemplation. John can practically hear the mental filing system at work.

“Bring back some breakfast, yeah?”

“Case,” Sherlock points out. He balances the skull on the arm of the chair and leans forward to grab the laptop instead.

“Is as good as closed,” John counters and Sherlock sighs.

“Bacon butt?” John wheedles, and although Sherlock doesn’t reply, there’s a noticeable hunger to

his silence, which John interprets as agreement. “Thought so.” Bland mushy chicken wasn’t much of a meal, after all.

Sherlock grunts.

John leans past him to crack the curtains and peer out. The street is still fully dark and won’t be light for hours yet; the joys of the British wintertime.

“Bugger, I should put the bins out too...”

Sherlock glances down by his elbow and notes the gentle way John’s fingers smooth absent-mindedly over the warm yellow bone. The other man has seemingly no idea he’s even doing it, and Sherlock doubts if he’s aware even remotely of this odd new habit of his- the touching of things before he needs to step out of Baker Street even for a short moment. Admittedly, it’s the first time he’s given it serious thought himself, and something deep in his gut squirms at the realisation that John never touches any of his own belongings.

“Back in a bit then.” John gives Billy’s bonce a light, decisive tap before he goes to find his shoes. Sherlock stares at the screen of his laptop and tries, rather hopelessly, to regain his train of thought.

The skull’s teeth gleam in the light of the desk lamp, as good as a ding of a smile in some kind of old commercial.

Hey there, have I got a deal for you, gentlemen!

“Stop that,” Sherlock murmurs irritably, to the quiet flat. In the baby-carrier, she makes a noise in her sleep. Downstairs, Mrs. Hudson opens the door to John.

Buy one, get one free!

When John returns, the skull has been exiled to the mantelpiece, it’s face turned towards the wall, which strikes him as odd when he notices it some days later.

Unperturbed, Billy leers on at the reflection of the room, seemingly laughing at the greatest joke in the world.

Part 4: Not Perfect

Chapter Summary

The bedroom door is shut which strikes Sherlock as incredibly curious and he knocks before he thinks. "What are you doing in there?" Too late, the possibility that he doesn't want to know because John is doing ...things... springs to mind.

By great good fortune all he hears is the snap of Sellotape breaking.

"Secret plans and clever tricks," John replies, muffled by the door. "Don't come in."

Chapter Notes

There's a BONUS in this chapter- as a bit of seasonal fun, the gifts of the 12 days of Christmas as stated in the carol are all mentioned at some point during the story in one way or another! See if you can find them all!

Double BONUS- find the three kings too! Actually, that might be easier?

Huge thanks and loving smooshes to my beta reader [Codenamelazarus](#), as always, and MORE thanks to everyone who has commented and/or subscribed and/or sent kudos.

UwU I'm sorry it's taken so long to update. -- [Odamakilock](#)

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Part Four: Not Perfect

In the run-up to Christmas, Hamleys becomes a genie's horde of glittering plastic and wonder, and the window-displays are nothing short of art. John and Mrs. Hudson wander past it while out shopping and at the sight of the baby goggling, decide to take her in.

It's been years since John's set foot in an honest-to-God toy shop. Half the time he picks stuff up offline where it's cheaper or second-hand and he can get it delivered to the door for convenience. He's not even sure if he's ever been inside Hamleys, in fact, and even he feels the stirrings of long-lost childhood ambitions.

"This is fantastic," he says, wafting away the bubbles that are spraying merrily from some hidden corner. A giant lego sculpture of Tower Bridge dominates the lobby, complete with winking LED Christmas lights. Mrs. Hudson admires the detail until she's jostled aside by a group of French tourists. John takes her elbow and they try to find somewhere less crowded.

"There's baby stuff on the second floor," he says, reading off of a sign. "Let's take a look?"

It takes them a while to even reach the lifts; they amble about pleasantly distracted by the sheer variety and shine of the toys. "Not like my day," Mrs. Hudson comments, admiring a display.

"Not even like mine," John agrees.

“Oh, look, I had a bear like that!” Mrs. Hudson cries, moving over to a case of stiff-limbed teddies. John comes to see, wheeling the pushchair. They stand and discuss the poe-faced animals; John marvels at the prices. The baby frets and as the floor is clean and uncrowded, John undoes the buckle on the pushchair and lets her out.

“Of course, they’re a lot better made nowadays; my poor old Ted- his fur starting coming out in clumps- absolute clumps. My mother took him away and I cried and cried.”

“I was mostly into action figures, and Mechano. Loads of that,” John tells her, musing back in time on long lost once beloved pursuits. “Playmobile too. Our primary school had an island and a pirate ship. It was-“

“Oh, John! She’s grabbed something,” Mrs. Hudson interrupts, fluttering and catching at his elbow. John turns round and indeed, the baby’s managed to roll across the floor to one of the shelves and is making an attempt to wrestle something off of the one just above her head.

“That’s not yours, sweetheart,” he says trying to ease her vice-like grip off of the soft grey tail. “We have to leave that there.” She gives a shriek of protest that conveys ‘no’ better than words can and makes John wince. John pulls the thing off of the shelf to see what it is she’s got her heart set on. It’s a sad eyed looking animal with drooping ears and the long nose waggles as he holds it up.

“Oh, you like the elephant? Alright. There he is. Hello, elephant. Now say bye-bye. Bye-bye elephant.” He puts it on the shelf higher up, where she can’t reach it simply sitting on the floor. Her face crumples. “I’m sorry, love, but you drool on it, you buy it. She’s a bit too young for stuffed animals,” he adds to Mrs Hudson, seeking a second opinion.

“A flannel one might be alright, but she might choke on his fur- oh!” She breaks off, one hand going to her mouth in surprise, the other pointing at the baby. “Oh look!”

John looks. In an unprecedented display of Watson stubbornness, she’s grabbed the upper edge of the bottom shelf in both hands and with concentrated effort is hauling herself up. She gets one foot under herself and plants it on the carpet, then wobbles but before John even finishes his half-aborted reach to stabilise her, she gets the other foot down. Standing, she makes another grab for the elephant.

“John, John, look at that, she’s standing all by herself,” Mrs. Hudson grabs his shoulder and shakes him.

“She is,” he says, taken aback. “She’s hardly started crawling.” He grins hopelessly. She tugs on the tail to pull the toy loose from the shelf and then sits down plump on the carpet. It bounces off across the floor and she flops after it

“Um-wam!” she says pointedly, bashing the carpet in frustration. She looks at John and makes a swimming motion with her arms and crumples in annoyance that he’s not meeting her demands. “El-waahh!”

“Close enough!” John says, thrilled, picking the toy up. “You clever girl! Elephant!” He’s grinning like an idiot, sat on the carpet in the middle of a shop repeating ‘elephant’ and wiggling the toy’s ears until she’s helpless with longing and delight.

She groans, almost shoving the pushchair aside in her efforts to get at it. John carefully takes the label off of the toys ear and as she crawls closer, gives her what she wants. The elephant’s legs pop comically as at once it’s crushed in a suffocating hug and she buries her face in its ears, all the while making about the happiest noise John’s ever heard her make. The little cardboard tag tells

John it's going to set him back the princely sum of £15.99, which feels very cheap indeed for the way his heart is singing. He couldn't be prouder.

"First steps soon enough," Mrs. Hudson, says, squeezing his elbow in delight.

"She nearly did that without the shelf, too," John brags. That's one in the eye for Jack-from-playgroup's mother. She's been bragging about his attempts for weeks, but the kid can't pull himself upright yet. As far as John's concerned, his girl gets a gold star for effort, and all that. Double gold star for doing it sort of one-handed.

He looks down at her, and her eyes sparkle at him. She's got one thumb in her mouth and has pressed the soft inside of the elephants ear to her cheek like a blanket. Evidently cementing a friendship for life, right there. Even the toy sort of looks less glum. John fondly tickles her cheek. "Naughty Bee," he says and she giggles. Utterly unashamed, John leans down in the middle of the crowd and kisses her head. "Come on then, we'd better go pay for elephant."

Mrs. Hudson gives him a watery-eyed look. Warmed by her sincere delight, John puts an arm around her shoulders and offers her a tissue. Oddly, he feels like he wants to thank her. Why, he's not sure; perhaps just for being here to share this with him, but either way it makes a lump well up in his throat to unman him.

"Don't cry," he warns her gently instead, clearing his throat. "Soppy."

"I'm always soppy," Mrs. Hudson agrees, taking his hankie and dabbing. "But it's only because I care, so you let me be." It's hardly news to John. She protests she's not their housekeeper but the Hoovering always gets done weekly whether John does it or not, and she puts in hours of childcare free of charge, which John always feels a touch guilty about until he sees both their faces light up when Mrs. Hudson takes the baby in her arm.

"It's alright," John says generously, his own insides feeling like they've turned to marshmallow. He blinks back emotion that is entirely too powerful to let out in the middle of a children's toy store, where anyone could see. "I realise that she's disgustingly adorable."

She kicks out more with her left leg when she sees something she likes.

Mrs. Hudson tilts her head towards his shoulder, hands at her face, and he hastily jostles her into a laugh before she really does start crying. "Oh, John, dear.."

They look at the baby again, and as they do so a curiously focussed expression crosses her face and then she gives a grunt and a sigh.

John wrinkles his nose. "... Check outs, quite quickly I think," he says.

Mrs. Hudson nods. "I'll go and ask where the loos are."

She trots nimbly off to accost a member of staff. John watches her go as he stoops and collects his daughter and her new friend from the floor. "Lucky you, getting looked after," he murmurs to her curls.

Not your housekeeper!

'No,' John thinks, 'Somehow we've gone beyond that.'

Six months after Mary dies, John pulls a wedge of receipts out of his wallet, sorts through them and pauses. On the back of a card he has a phone number scribbled. Was that from the day-care centre he visited all that time ago? He looks at it thoughtfully for a moment and then with a jolt remembers the pleasant woman who had shyly slipped it to him at the playgroup. She'd been pretty. He hadn't expected her interest.

It's funny that- how little he expects women to be interested in him nowadays. He hasn't dated since Mary died, nor has he made any effort to. It's too much on top of looking after the baby and his job and the blog and the cases. For the first time though, there's nothing that nags at him with the sense that he should be out there meeting people.

He tosses away the old receipts and tucks back into place the few bits-and-pieces that he wants to keep, but remains toying with the card for a moment. He could ask her out for a coffee maybe, with the kids. She must have kids, he assumes; maybe all the rug-rats could be friends. He taps the card against the table, corner to corner.

It's been ages.

The idea follows him around the rest of the day; should he try dating again? It seems surreal to even contemplate. No one, he thinks, would judge him if he did want to give it a shot.

In the scenarios in his head, the dates are nice and causal. Just a bit of chitchat over a drink. A café or a bar somewhere, with finger food so it's not actually like having dinner, but not so non-committal as to be just drinks. He'd maybe put on some cologne, she'd put on makeup, and it'd be like a treat. Just a bit of fun.

A kiss at the end of it if things went well or maybe just a friendly hug if it hadn't warmed up to that level yet, but even that would be nice because it's been ages.

Yet, it hasn't felt like ages.

He wipes over the counters and the kitchen table for something to do, and chews on the inside of his cheek.

There are frequent nights where he misses Mary. There are days where the loss that he's figured out how to hold at arm's length gets under his skin and squats there. Worse still are the nights where the opposite side of the bed yawns like a void, and sleep stays very far off. Those are the nights that are broken up by disconcerting dreams of war and hopeless searching for something. He is never clear what he is looking for, even in the dreams. Inevitably those are the nights he gets up and trawls the apartment for a book or something to sit with, propped in one hand with the baby a loving heat over his torso as she sleeps.

Sherlock never comments, though he removes himself from company those nights, as though not to intrude. John supposes he knows, as Sherlock always seems to know, what the matter is.

Sometimes in the early morning, in that cruel half-sleep where the past can sneak in and reality blurs, he feels Mary against his shoulder, shoving her cool hand into his over his stomach, as was her habit, and then on waking, he feels lost and foolish and aching with lost affection.

Whatever wasn't perfect about their relationship gets forgotten in those moments; he still loved her, despite everything and in spite of himself. His experience of other people's relationships falls into a few broad categories; the unfaithful, the broken and the missing half. Stella and Ted, so

welded together at the hip that their names usually merged into one; 'Stella'n'ted'. Mr Holmes and Mummy- inconceivable to think of them apart or with another person. Then the likes of Anderson, Harry and Lestrade. One half cheating on the other and not necessarily with other people. Harry cheated on Clara as much with a bottle as she did with her casual fucking around.

His parents. Never divorced, his mother devoted, and yet it was always a marriage so irreparably wrong.

John toys with the card.

He likes the thought of a date; he doesn't like the idea of replacing Mary. He likes the idea of raising his daughter with another parent, but not the idea of a new mother for her. She has a mother.

There are photographs on the dresser- several from the wedding and a series from both before and afterwards. If no one's around, he talks to the frames, because at least he can look his wife in the eye with the photographs, unlike the smooth white of the headstone. He lets the baby touch them, and tells her stories. They are stories whose veracity, ultimately, he has no way to prove, but he tells them anyway because that's all he has. The construct.

Maybe that's why he can't see himself with anyone else yet. He was never really with a real woman in the first place; just the creation she decided to be and what he's decided that his daughter will inherit.

He believes in honesty, but sometimes there's a point where the story is just kinder. The rabbit ran away; the dog went to live on a farm and your mother was sweet and amazing in only the ordinary sense. She made good bread and was a competent nurse. She looked beautiful in a vintage gown and knew how to make people laugh.

When they'd cleared out the house, Mrs. Hudson had put together a suitcase that he keeps on top of his wardrobe unopened. He'd been baffled by it at first, the grief too raw for it to make sense; it had felt like boxing up her remains to keep them on hand, but now he can see the merit in it. It's not for him; it's a time capsule, and when she's old enough, he'll open it with his child, and they'll look through it together. She can touch; maybe even wear the things that her mother wore. Relearn the smell of her perfume, and love Mary's scant collection of fine pearls the same way Mary loved them. John's not even sure what else is in there.

At any rate, the appeal of a date palls a bit when he knows it will come with Mary's ghost stepping on his heels. Would she resent it? He would like to think that she wouldn't. It's not cheating if one of you is dead. That'd had been it, hadn't it? She'd loved him almost too much; wouldn't she want him to be happy now?

Marriage is like murder.

On paper his marriage is over and done with. Absolved, annulled and shoved into the archives of some registry office somewhere. John twists at his wedding ring, more worn now than during the time Mary was alive, though he doesn't like to think about that.

He'd have to mention her to a date; there's no denying that. His bedroom contains her photo and her baby, its unavoidable even if he's trying to keep things casual. She's not the only one either, he thinks, sinking onto the sofa and flicking on the TV. The news burbles at him incoherently about stock prices.

There's Sherlock, and God, if that's not the most gloriously complicated thing in the world, he'd

like to know what is.

Women had issues with Sherlock before, and they weren't muddling together to raise a child then. Nor would he cut Sherlock out of the picture now. Impossible. He couldn't even if he wanted to; it'd be too horrifically unfair, and how could he make that choice anyway? His daughter wakes up in the middle of the night and if Sherlock's in line of sight, she'll cry for him first. How could he take that away from her?

She has such precious little family as it is; it's just him and a dead-beat aunt, and some cousins who didn't like her mother and to whom John rarely ever speaks. Proximally, she has Stella and Ted, who aren't even blood relations and he hasn't seen face to face since before he went to Afghanistan.

God, that's going to be one hell of a negotiation, he thinks, if he ever meets a woman he seriously likes again. *Lets move in together. Great! You, me, your kids, my kid, and my flatmate and all his bacterium. Oh, and we can't leave London, so I hope you're rich enough to afford a six-bed house in Zone 1. Also the British government is watching me, and her honorary uncle is that sort-of disgraced DI you read about in the Mirror a few years back. All good?*

Or maybe, John thinks again, pulling himself together, I am thinking about this so stupidly because I'm not that into this woman.

He looks at the card. It's not like he even recalls her name properly, L-something Halliwell, which he only remembers because she'd joked 'like the Spice Girl'. John snorts at his own ridiculousness. Fancy worrying over a situation, which will probably never happen, and even if it does it's long off and not with this woman, nice as she is.

"Sorry, Baby Spice," He apologizes insincerely and drops the card into the pedal bin in the kitchen. "Always kind of preferred Scary Spice anyway."

"Sherlock! We're going out. Want anything- Oh, there you are," John stops shouting and drops his voice to normal tones. "Did you want anything?"

Sherlock is a hunched knot of dressing gown and malcontent on the sofa. He's sunk so low into it that John hadn't spotted him there at first. No case today then.

"An end to my misery."

"Hobnobs. Got it," John translates. He bundles the baby up in her woollens until she resembles a fat holiday bauble and then clips her into the pushchair. She blows a raspberry and then makes her now common non-verbal demands for her elephant. John has a hunch it's going to be a race between 'elephant' and 'papa' for her first word. He likes to think she loves him more, but is forced to admit, his ears aren't as snuggly.

"Here, Sweetheart, don't drop him," John tucks the elephant under the strap to help prevent what he can foresee being a catastrophic loss should Elephant decide to abandon ship, and she automatically grabs for the nearest ear and shoves her thumb in her mouth with a little huff of contentment.

"Ok, check the list..." He perches on the end of the sofa a few solid inches from Sherlock's knees to do so, panning the papers strewn across the coffee table until he finds what he's after. Sherlock

studiously examines the violin rosin caught under his fingernails. He should wash his hands.

“We’re ok to get Mrs. Hudson the Marks ‘n’ Sparks slippers then?” John asks, scanning down the Christmas shopping list.

Sherlock pulls himself from his thoughts with a grunt of acknowledgement, feels under the sofa and drops a baggie of something green in John’s lap.

“And a bag of pot, of course. You can wrap that one,” John says, removing it to the coffee table where he lets his hand rest a moment while he thinks. “Post office, wrapping paper, hobnobs...”

“Parsnips,” Sherlock reminds him. He doesn’t need to see John’s list to know what John has already remembered to put on it. His brain whirs, as a convenient form of mental distraction, adding to it. Bleach, tinned tomatoes, baby oil, something for Molly, something for Harry, bottle of wine, batteries, sodium chloride, flour, parmesan, stamps, plus; photo paper, sandpaper, woodglue but shh, and- ah, yes.

Sherlock digs beneath the sofa again and passes John his credit card before concluding, “Bottle of Jameson.”

“Who’s that for?” John asks, taking the card and adding it to his list anyway.

“Lestrade. He likes it.” Sherlock shrugs.

“Right.”

John taps the pen against his teeth for a moment, and then, without saying anything aloud, adds ‘clementines’ to the list.

“I don’t like clementines,” Sherlock says. His knees almost itch from the proximity of John, yet they do not touch.

“Yes, you do,” John replies, putting the pen down. “I just tell you they’re satsumas and you eat them.” Idly he lets his fingers stroke back and forth over the smooth surface of the table, Sherlock’s eyes following unseen, and then John frowns when he finds a sticky patch.

“Have a bit of a clear up, would you?” he asks and gets up, giving the sofa cushion next to Sherlock’s rear a pat. John shoves the list in his pocket. “We’ll be back in a couple of hours; might need a hand up with the shopping.”

“Text,” Sherlock suggests, but makes no promises. His spine is singing with electricity. He puts his hand over the tiny dent in the sofa cushion. John, as always, is oblivious.

“Say ‘bye’ to Sherlock.”

The kid flaps a hand up and down enthusiastically, although any attempt at ‘bye-bye’ is muffled by her thumb.

“Bye, Bee,” Sherlock says back, using his bare foot to salute her, which she finds funny. John grins at her delight. “Catch you later.”

Sherlock waits until her giggling has faded from hearing and he hears the door downstairs click shut. He breathes deep and then unfolds from the sofa, feels under the cushions for his safety goggles and hacksaw and then, feeling oddly elated, ascends the stairs to his bedroom.

There's work to be done.

By the middle of the month the first few cards start to arrive and John reluctantly pushes on with finishing the Christmas chores. They have a plastic tree with plastic decorations from the pound shop, put up high to keep them out of small hands. John sits testing lightbulbs on the fairy lights for twenty minutes then swears and abandons one string to darkness. The rest make enough of an effort, he feels. It doesn't need to be perfect, and knowing her, Mrs. Hudson will sneak up and tweak things a bit when he's out anyway.

Sarah sends a slightly official card from the clinic, and although she takes the trouble to sign it by hand, it's easily the most boring card John's seen with it's neat geometric Christmas Tree on the front in different shades of white. It makes a stark contrast to the one he receives from Bill Murray which is garish, cartoonish and rather rude. The message inside is ribald as well, but John likes it pretty much the best of the bunch. Others are more classy. Sholto's brief 4-word greeting is touching not for what it is, but for the shaky inelegant hand it is written in. John puts it in front of the bat on the mantelpiece, oddly proud of it. There's a short, typed letter accompanying it, wishing John and his kin more fully the pleasantries of the season.

Sherlock receives one from Angelo, which with Angelo's usual wisdom, also contains a booking form and menu for the New Year's dinner he's hosting at his restaurant. Sherlock snorts but sticks it under the skull, so he can't be entirely displeased. More sentimental is the card and letter from Henry Knight; still as shy and sensitive as ever, but according to his news, doing better and thanks to their intervention and with help from his therapist, is making his first embarkation into dog ownership. He includes a photograph of the hound; it's half a kilo of soft liver-coloured fur and doting brown eyes. Sherlock looks at it and says 'field spaniel' approvingly.

The rest John dots about the flat surfaces of the apartment; a cat in a christmas hat from Molly; a winter scene sent from Stamford (or, John thinks more accurately, Stamford's wife), a robin from Clara, and three wise men from Sherlock's parents.

The last one is from Stella and Ted, typically gushing with sentiment and made of some recycled material, with a label proudly telling him that if he plants it, it'll turn into a basil plant. John sticks it behind the clock, which is only slightly better than what Sherlock does with the sporadic pieces of fan-mail that turn up. John supposes it counts as recycling if they use it for kindling.

At any rate their Christmas greetings have run into the double figures and that's before counting the e-mails, which sort of surprises John. Guests from his wedding- people he hasn't spoken to since they were guests at the funeral- send him greetings and best wishes. It's peculiar to think that he's been in someone else's thoughts.

He remembers the Christmas shortly after he'd got back. Harry had given him her phone and broken up with Clara. They'd shared an Indian takeaway and that had been it. No drinks, of course. Neither of them were in any state of mind to cook or decorate. And then the following year, Irene Adler had happened. After that, he'd been alone again. Alone the following year too. Then Mary. Then Magnussen and here they were, going around again. It gives John an odd sense of misgiving.

No such thing as a good Christmas.

When he was younger, he'd gone back to Stella and Ted's house; before Ted hurt his leg and they'd given up fostering. A noisy house full of small children with rough edges, where dinner was

a weird triptych of something-and-chips, turkey crown and something-meatless because Stella was a vegan, and the love was well-intentioned but second-hand and spread thin so that everyone got a piece.

Perhaps that's why he feels he lacks imagination with presents. He traipses around Boots and picks up a 3 for 2 on scented hand lotion, which will do for Molly, Harry and Stella. Tesco provides much of the rest- A bottle of wine for Ted and a £5 football biography which doesn't look entirely shit for Lestrade. Budget Christmas this year, mostly. Though he does stop by Argos and makes one last, larger purchase for something he'd been saving for. John checks his list. He ought, he feels, to get something for Mummy at the very least, considering how kind she'd been that time he'd walked out on his kid, leaving Sherlock floundering. He knows Mycroft has been pestering Sherlock to go in on a garden water feature that they want, or at least sign the card. He convinces Sherlock of the former, but not the latter.

John suspects that Sherlock finds Christmas, with all its demands for status quo and relationships and doing the right thing, something of a rite of humiliation. He's less into it even than he'd been into Halloween. At any rate, he's sure that Mummy and Daddy will get exactly the water feature they wanted, and a card that is sent in spirit from both their sons, even if not in reality. John thinks about it, and then kow-tows along with the idea. He finds a reasonably priced garden thermometer and packs it off with a card from he and the baby, with Sherlock's name tagged on the end like insurance.

He stops by Marks and Spencer's for Mrs. Hudson's slippers, and then on a whim, tosses a pair of nice-ish socks in the basket too; from the baby to Sherlock. Then he pauses.

They've only had three Christmases where they'd both been around at the same time. The first year, they hadn't done gifts- not really. Sherlock had gotten him the beckoning cat as a gag gift and John had gifted him one of his old medical books, which had cost him nothing but which Sherlock had been pleased by. The second time, he'd opted out and stuck with Mary for the day. He'd sent a text, Sherlock had replied, and they'd both felt wounded but held no hard feelings over it.

And last year had been muddled; they'd swapped gifts because there couldn't be anything more awkward than sitting around the christmas tree at the cottage without either having brought anything or having anything to open- it would have said entirely too much. They'd instead circulated banal, predictable gifts, which John can barely remember and which he probably no longer even has. He's fairly sure Sherlock left all of his at the house and they're likely there still.

It's a shitty memory, and he resents it. And he owes Sherlock, he feels, enough to get him an real present- something he thinks he'd actually like. He has no idea if Sherlock intends to get him anything- they've not discussed it, but the thought's in his head now and if there's one thing he can do to perhaps redeem the season is to try and do something nice for Sherlock.

It's not like he's got much family to lavish his budget on.

It takes him a cornish pasty and a coffee stood on the corner outside Pret-A-Manger before he thinks of anything that might suit. Then he brushes his hands off and heads for the nearest library for a computer. Somewhere in London must sell one.

The bedroom door is shut which strikes Sherlock as incredibly curious and he knocks before he thinks. "What are you doing in there?" Too late, the possibility that he doesn't want to know because John is doing ...things... springs to mind.

By great good fortune all he hears is the snap of Sellotape breaking.

“Secret plans and clever tricks,” John replies, muffled by the door. “Don’t come in.”

Sherlock leans on the doorframe and listens. He hears the rustle of paper, the creak of the bed and the hush of scissors cutting free a new piece of wrapping. So, something largish but light, he deduces. What could it be? He hazards it must be no larger in width nor breadth than the seat of his armchair, but it sounds deeper, considering the size of paper John’s cut.

“Go away,” John says, finally sensing that he’s still lurking there. “It’s supposed to be a surprise.”

Sherlock smiles to the door. “You’re only going to hide it somewhere obvious,” he replies, taunting, “I’ll find it.”

There’s a rogue chuckle from the bedroom.

“Oh-ho, but you won’t. I’ve already thought of that- It’s going somewhere even you understand is completely off-limits.” John bites at the Sellotape, and then has trouble shaking it off of his fingers. “You’ll just have to wait.”

Sherlock frowns, mind whirring. Off-limits? There’s nowhere in the building that’s off-limits to him. It’s the unspoken rule that Sherlock has the run of the house regardless of whatever anyone else thinks; yet John sounds so deplorably confident. Where’s he going to put it?

“Shan’t,” he says, and wheels off to resume an experiment upstairs that is starting to look promising. He can scour the house once John’s gone to Tesco.

“Mrs. Hudson’s top drawer,” Sherlock says abruptly as soon as John comes home again. He smacks his magazine on the arm of his chair for emphasis, but John simply smirks, not at all bothered.

“Oh, you figured it out, then?”

“Her *top* drawer, John. That’s cheating.”

“I told you it was somewhere even you wouldn’t dare go looking.”

“She keeps her *underthings* in there!”

“Yep. We *conspired*.” John says, highly tickled. “And the present’s staying there until Christmas Day, so there.”

“Cheating! I’ll open it anyway.”

John scoffs. “No, you won’t,” he says knowingly. He doesn’t tell Sherlock that it’s on the vests side of the drawer, nor that it’s only part of his gift acting as a nice little decoy for the other one that he’s slipped away inside Mary’s suitcase.

“You’re getting clever; devious,” Sherlock praises begrudgingly. He gives John a long, hard look, slowly picking up his magazine again and leaning back in his chair. “I’m not sure I like it.”

“Yes, you do,” John says confidently, leaning on the kitchen table as he unpacks the shopping, “Here, have a ‘satsuma’, you grumpy bugger.”

Sherlock catches the clementine, and hides his smile behind his magazine.

Christmas Eve brings them a corpse and a client. The inspector shoves his badge in Mrs. Hudson's face and comes up the stairs shortly after breakfast, not waiting to be introduced.

"Mr. Holmes," he says, abruptly.

Sherlock, as ever, hasn't been caught off guard, although John has.

John puts down his book and stands up.

"Take a seat," Sherlock says to them both. He gestures to the man to take the sofa, John to his armchair. His brow in mind, John makes his own deductions of this stranger. He has a grim expression, no doubt in part due to the errand that's brought him here but also a natural disinclination towards mirth. Grizzle-haired and with a short neat moustache, he strikes John as being one of the old breed.

The man clears his throat. "Thank you. I'm sure you've already figured out why I'm here. My name's Inspector Casper Rey of the Sevenoaks District Police." He shows them his badge.

"Kent," John says, mildly surprised. It's not too often they get anyone from out of town calling on their services.

"Who is the victim?" Sherlock asks, "Someone important, I gather?"

"That depends on how you define important," the Inspector says coolly. He reaches into his coat and draws out a set of three photographs. John, nearer to him than Sherlock, takes them.

They're artistically done in black and white, with handwritten times printed on the bottom in cursive- not, as far as John is aware, standard police procedure. The first shows a winter scene of a park somewhere; a wide patch of ground, rather misty in the early morning and as bleak and cold as anywhere John has seen in England in December.

The second is zoomed in a little; enough to trim off the edges of the field and focus on a dark crumple in the middle of the grass. It must have been a good camera, John thinks, and taken from a height, given the angle. The third and final one reveals a change of lens. The camera is as zoomed in as far it could ever be, revealing a woman, blue with frost and quite dead, lying in the field.

"Emily Starr," The Inspector says. "She was a school teacher at St. Mary's Church Academy. Found her yesterday morning. Tell me, Mr. Holmes, do you see the conundrum?"

"Naturally; the question is, why don't you see the obvious conclusion?" Sherlock returns.

"Sorry, do you mind?" John objects. Sherlock leans over and taps his finger on the glossy print. "Note the footprints in the frost, John. What can you tell from them?"

John looks. "Well, one set from this side leading up to her- those must be her prints. And... in the opposite direction, another set leading up and then away again. I guess... those are the killers? Walked up to her, stabbed her? And then walked away."

"Except those must be the prints of whoever found the body," Sherlock corrects him, "Or else why

come to me?"

"Exactly."

"Her clothes..."

"Nightdress with a coat thrown over the top," the Inspector tells them. "Boots but no socks."

"And the boots were unlaced," Sherlock adds. "What was she stabbed with? The handle seems too bulbous for a knife."

"A chisel," The Inspector tells him. "Belonging to the janitor at the academy. We've got him in custody."

"Yet you aren't convinced."

The Inspector gives a bitter little laugh. "Oh no, I'm convinced. I just need proof *how* he did it, and I need it quickly or else I'll have to release the bastard to get clean away. That's where you come in. Will you come? And of course your...um, blogger; you're welcome as well, Dr. Watson. I follow your blog."

"Thanks," John says dryly.

"We'll come," Sherlock confirms, getting up. "Mrs. Hudson has no plans today; she'll watch Bee," he adds, for John's benefit. "Leave the photographs with me," he continues, reaching for his coat. "Go ahead and make arrangements, Inspector. We'll follow you down by train- meet us at the station. I'll need your number."

"Alright, here's my card. I'll see you there," the Inspector slides his card across to John and takes his leave. Sherlock smirks as the door closes.

"Interesting," he says. "Not clever, but interesting."

"The case?" John asks.

"The policeman," Sherlock replies.

"It's not suicide then," John says once they're on the train. Sherlock scoffs. "By chisel to the chest? Hardly likely, John."

"I wasn't asking, I was saying. It's murder."

"Yes. And the how is obvious, but the who..." Sherlock trails off, thinking. "Sentimentally motivated, of course."

"You think?"

"Stabbed through the heart; that's telling. I'd need a better look at the corpse, but from the initial images, I suspect the killer was left-handed."

"And you think the Inspector is involved?"

"Oh undoubtedly."

“The killer?”

“No, no, do try and think. And you *were* asking that time. No, not the killer; he’s right-handed for a start and too good of a policeman. Strong morality, but he *is* a liar. He knows the victim personally.”

John says nothing, and his patience wins out when Sherlock glances at him, dragging his gaze from the middle distance and obligingly shows off.

“No ring, nor mark where a ring would be; wallet devoid of pictures or other memorabilia- evident when he offered you his card. Came down to solicit our advice in a hurry because he wants this case solved, in his own words, quickly and with the blame on his chief suspect. The man in custody is some sort of enemy of his, or at least, he despises him- possibly a rival for the dead woman’s affections. Annoyed to have to ask for my assistance; he’s used to managing his own work, yet here he’s seeking justice, and swift justice at that. ”

“Maybe he just doesn’t want to work on Christmas day,” John suggests, dazzled.

“Unmarried, no children, no girlfriend, no real social life outside of his job- you saw his badge; old as his title is but still looking new. He cares for it- cleans it regularly. He lives for his work, John. He wouldn’t care about having overtime on Christmas day.”

“Of course,” John says, smiling and shaking his head in amazement.

“Stop that,” Sherlock says, not at all aggrieved, and trying not to smile in return.

“So, where does that leave us?”

Sherlock flips the photographs out on the table in front of them. “With three questions. Who found the body, who took the photographs and what is so special about Miss Emily Starr?”

Rey meets them at Swanley station and leads them on foot to the scene of the crime, barely a ten-minute walk from the station. They pass the Lord civic centre and the field in the photographs is revealed to in fact be the community recreation ground. John nudges Sherlock and points at the duckpond on the edge of it. “Look,” he says, indicating the birds there, “Seven swans a-swimming.”

“Focus, John.”

“Sorry.”

Sherlock holds the first of the pictures up as they cross the police tape, scrutinising it.

“So, who’s the suspect?” John asks the Inspector. He glances at Sherlock who waves at them distractedly. “Tell, John. He’s my spare ears.”

“Robert Czar,” Rey tells John reluctantly. “He works at the Academy- that’s the school she taught at. Well, set up, really. She worked hard with the community- church and the Academy and got it all running. Anyway, he’s the janitor there- and was seen having a blazing row with Emily two days before she was killed.”

“What were they fighting about?” John asked. He’d fallen into step beside Rey, hands clasped behind his back.

“If you ask me, I think he overstepped a line. Keen on her, if you know what I mean, and not in a respectful way.”

“He.. Tried it on, you mean?”

“Pushed his luck, I mean. And no doubt she told him she was an upstanding Christian woman and wasn’t having any of it if he weren’t serious. And I doubt he was.” The Inspector’s brow furrowed.

“So I take it the church was important to her as well,” John adds.

“There’s a strong community around here, though it might not look it. The school is Church of England, then the academy is also, and there’s the church and vicarage just up the road on the corner of Lord Street. Emily Starr joined the committee after she’d completed her mission work in Asia. In fact it was Reverend Weisz and his wife who found her.”

Sherlock turns on his heel. “I need to see the suspect, the post-mortem results, the victim’s office and house, the photographer and the Reverend in that order,” he says.

The Inspector stares at him. “You have a lead?”

Sherlock simply smiles.

“I’m afraid I can’t give you the post-mortem results yet,” Rey replies, still frowning.

“Why not?”

“It hasn’t been done yet- we’re waiting for a backlog to clear at the hospital.”

Now it’s Sherlock’s turn to frown.

“John, go down there and see the body and then have it forwarded to Barts. Call me when you’ve finished.” He whisks a card out of pocket and holds it out for the inspector. “My personal pathologist. She’ll see it all gets bumped to the top of the queue.” He gives Rey a disparaging look, as though to say ‘why haven’t *you* got a personal pathologist?’. “John?”

“Yes, I’ll go. Is there someone who’ll go with me?” John asks of Rey. He nods.

“I’ll send Sergeant Piper with you. He knows them down there.”

John nods at Sherlock and they go their separate ways.

—

Robert Czar is a stoic man in his mid-30’s, simmering with veiled anger. He keeps his hands folded together on the interview table and keeps a firm eye on Sherlock; suspicious but not intimidated. In his sensible chequered shirt and sweatshirt, he looks every bit the honest working man that Sherlock is sure that he isn’t, exactly. Working man, perhaps but his honesty is up for debate. Everyone lies; Sherlock’s curious to discover this man’s particular brand of deception. There’s a callous on the first finger of his right hand that equally doesn’t tally with the demands of his profession.

Sherlock lets the Inspector talk, his choice of questions just as revealing as the interview on the other side of the table. It goes round and round like a grindstone in tight semantic circles.

“Tell us why you killed Emily Starr.”

“I didn’t.”

“Your chisel was found stuck through her heart. You were seen arguing with her two days before her death- a ‘blazing row’, according to witnesses.”

“I didn’t kill her.”

“What were you fighting about?”

“Nothing.”

“People don’t row over nothing. Innocent people don’t die over nothing. Why did you stab her?”

“How long have you been moonlighting at the church?” Sherlock interrupts, bored with Rey’s line of questioning. Both of them look at him in surprise.

“About a month,” Czar replies, taken aback. Sherlock narrows his eyes. “You fell from a ladder?”

“Uh, yeah, last week; last Friday. The vicar helped me home.”

Sherlock doesn’t smile, not so that the two present men would recognise it, but there’s a light in his eyes. “And why were you worried about Emily Starr?”

Czar breathes deep, sitting back in his chair to regard Sherlock. “She seemed worried,” he admits after a long moment. “Something was troubling her- She was becoming reclusive. More than usual, I mean. She was always a quiet person. I said my sister was visiting this weekend and we were having lunch at the Pear Tree and she was welcome to join us, and, lord- she bit my head off.”

“Bollocks!” Rey explodes, abruptly losing his cool.

“Do you mind, Inspector?” Sherlock retorts sharply. “Sit down, Czar.” The man had half-risen from his seat, hampered by his cuffs but strong with anger. Reluctantly, he sits again, brooding.

“So, you considered her a friend,” Sherlock continues.

“She was clever, and brilliant at her job- she pulled this whole academy out of the ground in a year. Just a year. And she didn’t care where you came from or who you were; she wasn’t judgemental like that.” Czar says, frowning. “She was someone I could talk to. So yes, she was my friend.”

“You weren’t hers though, were you,” Rey chimes in again, and this time Czar makes no aversions.

“I suppose not,” he says, suddenly looking weary. “I suppose in the end I knew nothing about her.”

In him Sherlock sees something uncomfortably familiar; grief. He doesn’t share the Inspector’s belief that the man had any lewd designs on the woman- if anything he thinks he’s being unexpectedly honest after all, although he wonders what exactly Czar had that he needed to confide in with another person. Something that he feared judgement for.

He notes the mark on the back of the man’s neck where the clasp of a chain would have habitually rubbed. Small; not a statement piece, but with something on it to make it a little heavy.

Sherlock’s willing to bet it’s a cross. Interesting, but unfortunately more or less irrelevant to the events of the night of the murder. Sherlock unfolds his hands from the table.

“I think we’re done here, Inspector.”

They retire to Rey's office where Rey lights a cigarette and glares at him, disgruntled. "What the hell was that?" he demands.

Sherlock stands by the open window and lets the cold air nip over the back of his neck. He narrows his eyes. "You can let Czar go, Rey. He's not your killer and you're wasting your time hounding him."

Rey looks furious. "Oh, is that right? I've got some questions for you--"

"And I, you." Sherlock cuts him off sharply. "Why are you so angry about this?"

The other man spits out smoke, his cigarette slipping unnoticed from his shaking fingers. "Why shouldn't I be?"

The cigarette rolls on the floorboards; heavy worn parquet flooring from decades past; the furniture in the same place it's always been given the marks across the wood here and there. "This is personal to you, why?"

"Why not?" snaps the Inspector. "She was a good person and she died on *my* watch! Years! Years I've dedicated to this patch; neighbourhood watch, youth groups, Lord Street drum band, civic centre, St. Mary's, the school and the Academy; we built something good here. London's a shithole but it's good here. And she was one of us. And that's what I do, Holmes, I get justice. That's my job. Never turn a blind eye; Never let a crime slip through my fingers."

He glowers at Sherlock who instead takes in the state of the office; he's been no more mistaken in his reckoning of Rey than Rey has been dishonest. There's a toothbrush in a cup atop the filing cabinet in the corner; not for emergencies; the bristles are splayed from regular use and the cup is scrupulously clean. The seat of the chair is worn enough for the sponge to be peeking through the fraying leather; the cushion is large and the leaning mechanism of the chair is routinely used.

Conclusion: Rey sleeps in his office on at least a semi-regular basis.

"I see," Sherlock says. Delicately he steps on the gently smouldering cigarette and puts it out before reaching into his coat and offering him another. "My apologies, Inspector. I needed to know."

He lights the cigarette for him, and takes one of his own.

"I hope you understand it, Mr. Holmes. This is my life's work, this community, like your work is yours. And when something threatens it, I can't let it lie."

Sherlock inhales, exhales and isn't sure what to feel about that statement, so prefers to dismiss it.

"What will happen to the Academy now?" he asks, instead.

"Closed, I expect," the Inspector says gloomily. "Unless someone else steps in."

"Too bad," Sherlock offers, somewhat awkward. He's saved when his phone rings. "John. Results?"

John, used to his lack of preamble, doesn't waste breath. "*You were right- stabbed through the heart directly from in front without any glancing off of the sternum, causing an immediate death, and it's angled, so I'd say the killer was left-handed too. Um, there's more- They've managed to get hold of her medical records here and you're not going to believe this but uh... Her birth certificate's got a different name on it.*"

“It’s not Emily Starr?”

“No, that’s just it- She is Emily Starr; she was just born Emile Jacob Smith. She was post-operative transgender; a few years ago, I’d say. Maybe this is a hate crime- maybe someone found out.”

“No,” Sherlock says slowly. “I don’t think so... Get back here John. Send the body onto Molly, and head back as soon as you can.”

“Sure. See you soon.”

Sherlock hangs up and taps his phone against his teeth, considering things in a new light. “You said she did mission work in Asia. Where?”

“Thailand,” Rey tells him, frowning. “What was that about? What’s wrong with the body? Lord almighty, don’t tell me-”

“No, it’s nothing. Just the usual morgue incompetence with paperwork. Show me her office,” Sherlock says, keen to be out of Rey’s.

—

John catches up to them as they’re leaving Emily’s office, Sherlock disgruntled.

“What’s happening?” John asks.

“Nothing,” Sherlock says, irked. “Next to useless.”

John glances at the Inspector who shrugs. They have no insight into Sherlock’s mind, which is busy turning facts around like pieces of a jigsaw puzzle, trying to make them fit.

The office had been clean and tidy- regimentally so; worse than John when John starts cleaning up. Neat angles, signs of incredibly regular sorting and cleaning; no room for waste or excess. Very little by way of personal items either- a plain cross on the window and an embroidered Lord’s Prayer alongside a few children’s drawings which exhibited signs that she’d been a popular teacher; song sheets rearranged for a small children’s choir and aesthetically blank walls- she’d removed all the pictures. Another soul who lived for their occupation, it seemed. Even her e-mail inbox had been impersonal- correspondence with the vicar and the committee mostly, concerning school visits and church events. All things which told him a little of Emily Starr’s character but not her killer. Conclusion; not the scene of the murder.

“Her house-“ he says aloud, looking around and discovering that in his contemplations he’s lead them back to the recreation ground. He stands in the spot where she died and feels for the gaps.

“What if,” John ventures, broaching an idea he’d been considering in the car on the way back regarding the footprints. “What if she came into the field when it was just dewing up, so the grass was wet and she left footprints in the water, and then her killer met her here and stabbed her; then swept the dew as he left; like with snowfall. The cold would have turned her footprints quite clear in the frost, but maybe his would have been lost.”

It’s like watching a kid tie shoelaces, Sherlock thinks; trying so earnestly. “Her footprints would be fainter than that, and we’d still see the sweep-marks. She came through after the frost had settled; look at how the grass is bruised. Wet grass springs up again.”

“Ah,” John says, disappointed. “Right. Still...”

“Let’s leave the thinking to me, shall we?”

“Alright then, smart-arse. Where was she going?”

Sherlock freezes in the middle of the field. “What?”

“Middle of the night, it’s winter, she’s a school teacher with no social life. Where the hell’s she going?”

Of course, of course. He’d been so concerned with why she’d left the house and who she’d met and the silly non-illusion of the disappearing footprints that he’d forgotten to account something so basic that it’s actually embarrassing.

Sherlock turns his head back across the field and points, looking down his finger as a sighting line to the row of houses by the railway line. Her house on the corner. He turns 180 degrees and sights the other way.

“The church.”

And then.... He turns back 90 degrees and looks up at the block of flats. “Or the photographer...” he mutters to himself. Why didn’t she go by the road where it was safer and better lit?

Didn’t want to be seen. Interesting.

Decisions decisions. Close the roads on this case one at a time, or go for the kill on a good chance? Sherlock flexes his shoulders. It’s Christmas. He might as well enjoy this case to it’s fullest.

“Photographer,” he barks at Rey. “Name; relation to the victim?”

“Timothy Drummer,” Rey supplies.

“Let’s pay him a visit,” Sherlock says, rubbing his hands together in the cold.

—

The door is opened abruptly by a man John takes an immediate dislike to. He’s one of those Shoreditch artistic yuppy types (except evidently too poor to afford a real London lifestyle, and thus doubly snobbish); the sort that hordes organic guacamole and up-cycled furniture; two things which John has no beef with in principle, but in combination make his knuckles itch. It looks like someone’s beaten him to it though; he’s got a packet of frozen peas clasped to his face.

“Fuck, that was quick!” he says, startled, and then looks at John and Sherlock with suspicion. “Who the hell are they?”

“I’m a doctor,” John offers. “Do you want me to take a look at that?”

Drummer backs up and lets them in.

“What’s this ruckus about then?” Rey asks, looking around at the messy flat, puzzled.

“What do you mean, what’s the ruckus? What do you think the bloody ruckus is?” Drummer snaps, plumping down on his second-hand sofa. He lolls there, angry but evidently bohemian even through his petulant fury. ‘*All skinny jeans and crap haircut,*’ John thinks. The room is in an incredible state, with papers thrown around seemingly at random. Sherlock stoops and picks through some of them.

“He’s referring to the break-in he’s just reported,” Sherlock informs the Inspector. He leans over and feels at the fire-escape door. The lock is broken and usefully the burglar’s left the tip of the knife they’d used to jimmy it behind. Sherlock picks it out with his handkerchief and smiles before passing it to Rey. “Nothing was taken.”

John wondered how the hell Sherlock could tell; the place was a mess. The leg of the coffee table next to him was sloppily held together with duct-tape.

“I don’t know; I don’t think so-“ Drummer says, flustered, “Who fucking cares? Lord’s sake, I’ve been assaulted!”

“This wasn’t done by a fist,” John says, grabbing Drummer’s head so he can inspect the bruise without him wriggling around. For reasons he can’t quite put into words, he finds it even more annoying to note that the man’s plucked his eyebrows.

“They slammed the door into my face as I was coming in. I didn’t see who it was though- if I had- ow! Watch what you’re doing!”

“Sit still then,” John snaps. More gently he tilts Drummer’s head back so he can get a look at the contusion in the light. It’s already purpling beautifully and the white of the eye reddening.

“I can’t see out my eye...” Drummer whines.

“How tall would you say they were?” Sherlock asks, inspecting the door. He taps the Inspector on the shoulder and indicates a mark about three-quarters up the wood; a black smudge.

“I don’t fucking know- I just said I didn’t see them. Tall-ish, I suppose. Owww!”

‘*Oh man up,*’ John thinks irritably. Out loud he says, “It’s very bruised but I don’t see any bleeding in the eye. I think you’ll survive without a trip to hospital.”

“You took the photographs of Emily Starr,” Sherlock interrupts, wheeling around and focussing on Drummer.

“Yes,” Drummer replies, suddenly a bit pleased, “Good, aren’t they? ‘A Study in Frozen Death’. Could be the lynch pin to a new exhibition.”

“Down, Inspector!” Sherlock says curtly, as Rey riles up at once. John accidentally-on-purpose digs his finger into the bruise a little.

“Ow! Get off- some fucking doctor you are,” Drummer complains, pulling himself free. “Sorry, my finger slipped,” John says, not meaning it in the slightest.

Sherlock stares at John. Drummer, mistakenly thinking Sherlock’s gaze is on him, baulks.

“Me?! Oh you’re not accusing *me* of killing someone, are you? Don’t be fucking ridiculous. I’m vegan. Besides; I had nothing to do with her.”

Sherlock eyeballs him coldly. “Hit him, John.”

“What?!” Drummer yelps.

“What?” Rey echoes, taken aback.

“Yeah, alright,” John agrees, getting up.

“What are you hitting me for?!” Drummer scoots back as far as he can on the sofa, brandishing his peas like a shield,

“Hit him twice- one for each lie.”

John glances at Sherlock. *And once for being a little shit?*

Sherlock shrugs. *If you must.*

“Hang on, you can’t go punching witnesses,” Rey objects, starting forward. “Drummer, for God’s sake, start talking before I have to actually arrest you on suspicion of involvement with the murder.”

“Alright, Alright! God! I sold her some photographs for the school, that was all.”

“And,” Sherlock presses, recalling blank walls.

“And I *flattered* her, but she was a stone cold bitch about it. She *liked* my other work, the frigid little hypocrite.”

“‘Flattered’ her?” John echoed, faintly disgusted. “You mean-“

“Asked her to pose for him; nude, I suppose,” Sherlock clarifies. “No wonder she took the photographs down...”

“It was *art*,” Drummer snaps back, incensed. “Oh come on, it’s 2014 and she was an adult. What’s so shocking? She would have made an interesting subject.”

John gives him a sharp look, and now he knows why he doesn’t like the man. He’s a predator; like one of those pretty but venomous fish. There’s no question in his mind that if Emily had allowed herself to be cajoled into it, it would have ended very much to Drummer’s advantage and her disadvantage.

“And, irritating as it is, it’s not a crime,” Rey breaks into his thoughts to remind them, although he looks as disgusted with Drummer as John feels. “At any rate, Drummer’s got an alibi for the time of death. He was at the pub till late, making a nuisance of himself in the quiz.”

“This was a clever killing,” Sherlock agrees dismissively. “I think I’ve seen enough here.”

John stretches his fingers out. “You said two lies,” he reminds Sherlock, who lifts his eyebrows at once. “Oh, yes,” he says. He turns and walks to the kitchen, opens the fridge and then tosses a plastic sandwich bag at John. “Hey!” Drummer protests, flushing.

“I’m sure as a *vegan*, you have no use whatsoever for egg salad,” Sherlock says snidely, and then adds to John. “*Bon appetit.*”

“I’ll bloody sue,” Drummer mutters, cowed, but one of nature’s resolute whiners, “and I want my assault investigated! God, the sooner I can leave this backwater the better...”

That explained the state of the flat, John thought. Baker Street might be messy but they at least maintained it.

“Yeah, well here’s one of my boys for you,” Rey replies as a police car wheels up outside. “Where next, Holmes?”

Sherlock folds his hands under his nose.

“Her house,” he decides. “I need to pick something up before our final stop.”

Emily Starr had kept photographs on her stairs of her mission. Her, slim and smiling, with a group of children, their hands covered in paint. A group of nine ladies in traditional dance clothing, all smiling. The print is signed, but Sherlock is sure they are no one famous. Well wishes from friends then.

“The cottage was unlocked,” Rey tells them in quiet tones. None of them speak much as they move about the house. It’s neat as a pin, the same as the office, and clearly well cared for. The decor is all sweetly feminine and a little old-fashioned, John thinks; consciously so perhaps, with signs of her faith and occupation both obvious yet not screaming from every corner. It’s also so terribly empty. There’s a couple of built-in bookcases in the living room; a sofa and armchair, mirror and a pair of side-tables. John feels over the corner of one with his thumb. He can recognise second-hand furniture when he sees it.

“Did she have difficulty fitting in?” he asks Rey, presently.

“She was never what you’d call outgoing. She was respected, and liked, but yes, she had trouble fitting in, I think. Mostly she kept to herself.”

“She associated with the vicar though,” Sherlock comments. He holds up Emily’s bible from its place by the landline and her chair. There are two bookmarks in it; one a pretty sliver of lace, the other a post-it note with committee notes on it.

“Only business,” Rey says. “They were always polite and professional to one another as far as I could see.”

“Hm,” Sherlock replies, thoughtfully. He looks at John, who knows what he’s thinking. Emily Starr had been rather good at keeping secrets from the people potentially closest to her. Sherlock turns and goes upstairs, leaving John and Rey in the silence in the living room.

Czar, Rey and Weisz, John muses. Had any of them really known her? It strikes him as a strange and lonely way to live. No wonder she’d been so absorbed in her job and so exact about the state of her environment. Maybe she’d been just looking for some kind of control on her life. Maybe she hadn’t expected to stay? The furnishings didn’t really speak to John much of permanent plans. Maybe she’d been scared of being an outsider in the one place she felt she belonged, if they’d known more about her past, and her identity. John twists his mouth, finding himself on philosophically shaky ground.

“Did she seem depressed?” he asks, trying to recall past GP training on transgender issues.

Rey shrugs. “I think she was happy here- She’d enjoyed Thailand, but it wasn’t her home.”

“She was leaving,” Sherlock says quietly from the top of the stairs. “Come and look.” He’s holding a piece of paper. Rey takes it in silence and reads through it and then unnecessarily passes it to John. It’s written in the same hand as the post-it note in the bible; a gently worded letter of resignation.

“Good lord, where was this?” Rey asks.

“Inside her pillowcase. Don’t touch anything,” he adds to John who’d absent-mindedly reached to lift up the pillow. Sherlock holds up his hands to show that he’s slipped his gloves on. “Our tall friend has been here too. The window latch in the bathroom is broken and her suitcase unpacked.”

"The latch has been broken for a while," Rey counters. "She was going to ask Czar to fix it and then they argued. I remember her mentioning it."

"Nonetheless, it's how they got in."

"What suitcase?" John asks, and then can't help but smile. *Was it pink?*

Sherlock throws him a castigatory look, and points at the top of the wardrobe. "Up there. She took it down, and packed it. Someone else unpacked it and put it back."

"How can you tell?" Rey asks, confused.

"She moved it to the landing after she packed it, scuffing over the rug. You can see where the pile's been pushed in the direction of the motion- she wasn't strong enough to lift it properly. Yet it's back on the wardrobe with no further scuffing so whoever returned it was tall enough and strong enough to lift it with no trouble. Also note how her effects are laid out."

John looks around the room, at the dresser with its array of brushes and neutral cosmetics; the nightdress on the bed.

"It's not as neat," Rey says, seeing it now that it's been pointed out. The brushes are dropped on the dresser with none of the attention to angles of the downstairs rooms. John almost laughs. "She was *wearing* her nightdress, and they put the packed one on the bed anyway."

"He was panicking, because unfortunately his plan had fallen rather foul. Hm." Sherlock doesn't expound any further. Instead he begins tentatively moving around the bedside table, frowning. He flattens himself to the floor and feels around under the bed. His investigations unearth a gold hoop earring, evidently dropped down the side of the bed, but it tells him nothing. He returns it to the dish where it joins another three identical pieces of jewellery and a ring. Sherlock picks the latter up and puzzles at it. He crosses to the dressing table and deftly opens the jewellery case. There's a worn spot in the velvet where the ring fits and the tale takes a rather sad turn in his mind.

"Emily was orphaned?"

Rey looks up from where he's been dogging Sherlock's steps, making notes of his own. "Yes," he replies. "No family at all I believe; rather like myself in that respect."

"She must have been lonely," John says aloud without thinking. He can't help but pity her; dragging herself here and there across the world trying to find a life and a body that fitted her better than the lousy lot she'd been dealt with at birth. He looks around the room and takes in the bow-legged dresser with its lace runner and the Lladro china milkmaid with her downturned eyes. The old-fashioned ladylike air of the place suddenly takes on a rather tragically romantic kilter in his eyes; at least in her job she'd found a little love and respect, but how starved she must have been for affection.

"She was shy," Rey says, awkwardly. "She was very shy. I did...try."

"If she'd been a little shyer," Sherlock says, with a cough, "She might have not have let her visitor in. I need to look downstairs. It's not here," he adds gruffly, brushing past Rey to get to the stairs.

"What isn't?" John asks, wondering what the matter is.

Sherlock tuts. "Her glass."

They start to scour the house; Sherlock with his own strange method, John and Rey more at a loss.

John searches the kitchen, opening cupboards. Emily Starr owns but one of each item she'd needed, save for a tea set that hardly looks used. John stares in at them on the shelf, and how dwarfed they look in the empty space compared to the kitchen of 221B where putting away dishes requires a certain level of skill at Tetris. He has an uncomfortable flashback to his first bedsit and dragging his heels around Ikea with Harry; buying crockery in pairs because she insisted, even though at that time he'd leant more towards the idea of deterring visitors by point-blank not bothering to accommodate them.

There's one chipped wineglass on the draining board in the kitchen, but no second one. John's about to throw caution to the wind and say 'are you sure there's a second glass?' when Sherlock makes a soft noise. "Here."

It's tucked well into a dark corner on the floor by the bookcase, a tumbler with a finger's worth of red wine still in it. "Oh, lucky girl," Sherlock breathes. He beckons John over, and without warning, sticks his hand into John's pocket and retrieves the sandwich bag that John had done good work at emptying on the walk over. "Look in the recycling bin for the bottle; I suspect he drugged the whole lot and she continued drinking after he left. John, when was Rohypnol outlawed?"

John looks at him, taken aback. "I don't know, something like the mid-eighties."

"Found a bottle!" Rey calls. "It's been washed out. What the devil did she put it in the corner for?"

"She got paranoid and upset; agitated- the paradoxical effect of a drug that was meant to knock her out." Sherlock carefully decants the wine and the glass together into the sandwich bag and seals it up. "This is the only place in the room not overlooked by a cross. The sin of intemperance." He holds the bag out gingerly between finger and thumb.

"Run this back to St. Barts, John, and get Molly to test the dregs as soon as she can. Inspector, I hope you're ready to make an arrest."

Grimly, Rey feels in his pocket for his badge. "Oh, lord, I'm ready. Point me in the right direction, Holmes."

Sherlock's somewhat surprised when a woman his own age opens the door. She looks at them a little shyly, toying with her pendant. Sherlock notes the dark circles under her eyes; not recent but the product of many months of sleeplessness.

"Inspector Rey?" she says.

"Good evening, Mrs. Weisz. May we come in?"

"Yes, of course. You're here for Mel?"

'Apt but innocent words,' Sherlock thinks. He hangs back and lets Rey take the lead; following him into the vicarage. It's a charming old house, which speaks of money beyond that given by the church.

The Reverend is in the living room, a cup of tea balanced on his knee. He stands as they enter.

"Caspar, this is a surprise. How goes the investigation?"

"It goes," Rey says staunchly, playing his role to the letter of Sherlock's instruction. Sherlock's rather pleased with him if he's honest; it's too bad that there's very little chance he could convince him to transfer to Lestrade's division. "I'm afraid I need to ask you a few more questions; we've hit

something of a dead end.”

“By all means,” Weisz says smoothly. “Please, take a seat, Mr.-“

“Holmes.”

“My word. Rey, you are pulling out all the stops,” Weisz says after a moment’s, just a moment’s, hesitation. Satisfaction curls in Sherlock’s gut.

“Tea, dear,” Weisz says to his wife, “Make a fresh pot.”

“Oh yes, of course. Milk?”

“Please. Two sugars,” Sherlock replies.

Weisz waits for his wife to leave; her footsteps almost inaudible on the plush carpets. “She’s been dreadfully upset about the whole affair,” he says. Sherlock’s lips tighten against a smile. “It’s quite terrible.”

They all take seats in the cosy little living room. It’s all terribly domestic, Sherlock notes. Ornaments on the mantle-piece and cut flowers in vases. Wedding photos on corner shelves and plump cushions that match the decor perfectly. A fire flickers in the tasteful gas stove in the old fashioned fireplace. Even the art is carefully bland; a trio of chickens in watercolour and a two white Jesus doves with olive branches in their beaks above the sofa. Weisz himself fits right in with his carefully clean pink hands, rounded nails and soft, overall prim looks.

“Nice house,” Sherlock comments.

Weisz demurs. “Home is where the heart is.”

“I need to hear again about finding the body,” Rey says. He licks his fingers and opens his notebook to a fresh page. “In your own words.”

“Yes, yes. Rather a shock, I can assure you. Well, as you know it was Sunday, the lord’s day, so we were going early over to the church to check on the pipes after all this cold weather; and of course, I had morning service to prepare for- my wife does the flowers- and there she was poor thing, lying in the recreation ground.”

“Did you recognise her?” Rey asks.

“Not at first. I thought someone had collapsed at first, to be honest. I couldn’t see the chisel as the handle was covered by her coat. I didn’t realise it was Emily until I got closer.”

“And your wife?”

“She stayed on the road, as I told her to. A precaution, you see, as we had no idea who it was. I called back to her to fetch help and she ran down to the crossroads and stopped a passing car.”

“And you?”

“I came back to the road once I realised she was dead to wait and to comfort my wife.”

“You didn’t re-enter the field?”

“No, I thought it best not to.”

“Did you see anyone else?”

“No, not a soul.” Weisz smiles genially and apologetically. “I’m so sorry I can’t be any more help, Inspector.”

In the kitchen the kettle whistles musically, audible through the hatch, and cups rattle. Sherlock looks over and notes the layout of the kitchen; scrubbed counters and no doubt plenty of homemade treats in the pastel-coloured fridge. It’s all so sweetly suburban. He’s surprised they don’t seem to have any children, only pets- Sherlock counts no less than four photos of different coloured budgerigars- and other than that there are only pictures of the couple around the room. In a couple he can see an aged woman now evidently passed, who bears a strong resemblance to the wife, especially around the eyes. Presently, Mrs. Weisz reappears with a tray. She passes out the tea with a small smile.

“Mrs. Weisz-“

“Jenny, please,” she says taking a seat on the far end of the sofa and folding her hands in her lap. Soft hands with small scratches from the flowers she arranges. She’s a model vicar’s wife, Sherlock assumes, even if she doesn’t want to sit directly next to her husband.

“Jenny,” Rey corrects himself. “How well did you know Emily Starr?”

“Hardly at all. I saw her around the church and so on, of course, but hardly to speak to. She didn’t have much to do with the W.I. or the flowers, you see. Most of her work was concerned with the Academy and Sunday school.”

“Most of her association was with your husband?” Sherlock asks, watching Weisz out of the corner of his eye. The man perches on the sofa, legs delicately crossed, his gaze fixed on his wife.

“Yes.”

“How did you meet?”

“After the church was robbed; that was over a year ago. You remember, Inspector?”

Rey bows his head in acknowledgment. “Raising money for the church roof,” he informs Sherlock, “Someone cracked open the back door and made off with the lot from the safe.” He shakes his head in disgust and Sherlock takes it that was one case that slipped through the dedicated Rey’s fingers, although he has a sudden inkling about it.

“She was new here; she came up to say how sorry she was to hear about it,” Mrs. Weisz finishes. Sherlock drains his teacup in one go, and feigns a grimace. “One more, please. Any sweeteners?”

She blinks, taken aback. “Oh, yes. I’ll get some.” Taking his cup she leaves the room again.

“I’ve heard through the congregation, and I don’t like to bias your work, Inspector, but popular opinion is that Robert Czar...” Weisz trails off, pursing his lips. Sherlock can see the faint dew of sweat down the back of his neck. His own mouth has gone pale from anger.

“I like killers, on the whole,” he says bluntly, and is gratified to see Weisz wince. “But I loathe cowards.”

“I’m sorry-“ the vicar starts and Sherlock cuts across him.

“When did you remember your mother-in-law’s bottle of Rohypnol in the cupboard? Years out of

date but you assumed it would work well enough still; must have given you a nasty shock to see her there, on her way to you; her inert body pointing the way as good as a flag pole. And the chisel; that was a neat little bit of pre-meditation. How fortunate for you the ladder was unbalanced enough for Czar to fall right outside the church. Or was that pre-meditated too?"

"I hardly understand--"

"Stupid error, though, breaking into Drummer's flat. Unnecessary when the photographs were no longer there and there was nothing in them to tie you to the scene. Still, thank you, Reverend, for leaving your footprint at the scene. I'd add that next time you plan on breaking and entering you use something more substantial than a paring knife. No, don't get up. I can see the missing item in the knife block from here. I assume it's at the bottom of the duck pond. Additionally stupid to break into her house; next time you unpack someone else's' suitcase, do try and observe how they like to keep their things. How long were you sleeping with her?"

In the kitchen Mrs. Weisz drops the cup and it shatters across the floor. A dead silence falls and when she comes to the doorway, her face is as pink and white as coconut ice.

"Mel," she says, horrified.

"Jenny, it's all completely baseless accusation, don't get hysterical," Weisz says. "Go and clean up the mess."

"Sit down," Sherlock says, standing up and letting her sink into his chair. She wrings her hands, torn between her own anguish and the lingering shame of the broken teacup. Half of Sherlock wishes John were here because he's better at dealing with victims than Sherlock and the other half is glad that John is safely away to London for very nearly the same reasons. Quietly she begins to cry and it's this, more than anything, that makes Weisz appear as cold-hearted and as brute as he truly is under his soft-spoken exterior. He makes no move to comfort her.

"Pull yourself together, Jenny."

Sherlock folds his hands behind his back, feeling disappointed although he cannot rightly say why; it wasn't as though the case was without merit or interest.

"I should thank you," he says sardonically, "For mentioning the robbery at the church, I hadn't quite connected those dots. Very good of you, I'm sure to pay up for things on credit, but it made a tricky issue of what to tell your wife. Lucky there was all that cash just sat there. Popped it back in after a month or so; just enough to cover the exact outgoings of installing Emily here, and nobody's any the wiser."

"This is- Inspector, you can't seriously be allowing this man to make such accusati--"

"I suppose you enjoyed it. Fooling your wife and keeping a mistress under her very nose; under the nose of your parish and then lo and behold she starts becoming altogether too independent and annoyingly popular. Moral. You see, that's the problem when you deal with good people, Reverend, they'll always insist on you trying to be better than you are. Her ultimatum of course was marriage; no more no less for a man and a woman of the church, or else... yes, she'd have told you," Sherlock said, turning his head to look at the tear-stained Mrs. Weisz. "Oh, and you're not nearly as cowed as he'd like, are you?"

Sherlock curls his lip; the very idea that one man's reputation could be worth more than a life appals him deeply. He stands up. "A shameful betrayal." He adds, "She was going to use her mother's ring."

“Make your arrest, Inspector,” he says, and steps out of the way, closing the book on the matter in his mind.

It's fully dark by the time Robert Czar and Reverend Weisz have traded places. Sherlock sits in Rey's place in the office and smokes, waiting to finish giving his statement and leave. London is calling.

Rey is thankfully efficient and Mrs. Weisz is tearfully but resolutely compliant. She hands them the backdated bank statements that show, as Sherlock suspected, the trip to Thailand, the outgoing of money supposedly for a new air ticket due to an emergency cancellation, and the income that came later supposedly from the insurance company finally paying up; months later and months after both surgery and robbery. Starr, in Sherlock's opinion could not have known. If she'd seen anything suspicious, no doubt she dismissed it, so much was she in love.

Thus Weisz had brought her to his doorstep; souvenir and play thing, and then to his annoyance she'd flourished and become altogether too rooted, even as reserved as she was. Rash promises had been made; a new life, somewhere they were both unknown, where they could be a couple. He could hardly divorce his wife and take up with her; not a man to whom his reputation as vicar meant so much.

She must have worried and questioned over the morality of the affair, quarrelled with Czar over the matter and then given Weisz an ultimatum. Forced into a corner at last, without the opportunity to apply the chisel and frame Czar directly, he'd instead tried to stage a suicide. Still unclear, Sherlock ponders, if Weisz had something against Czar in person or if it were simply a natural clash of characters; the rough and pragmatic Czar inherently offensive to the genteel and self-serving Weisz.

The old woman's medicine for her chronic insomnia; a condition evidently inherited by his wife; dredged out of the back of the bathroom cabinet and slipped into the wine. He must have brought both to Emily's cottage; Sherlock doubts Emily had ever been much of a drinker. Coaxed her into drinking, perhaps to celebrate their 'new start', and then left her to sleep, anticipating that she'd slump before she even managed the stairs. Yet instead of killing Emily, it'd wound her up and sent her stumbling incoherently out into the night, seeking the one person she loved and trusted, where overcome at last, she'd collapsed and then he'd murdered her. Nothing like Plan A, after all.

And then he'd panicked when he wondered what she'd left in her house before she'd left it. Not without reason; she'd started packing and it wouldn't do him any favours if it looked like she'd been planning to leave. Suicides don't usually have contingency plans, after all. A second panic when news of the photographs had filtered through. The wife had confirmed his moderate proficiency in Thai kick-boxing. A swift boot to the door had caused Drummer his eye-trouble.

Rey concludes his notes, gives Sherlock his thanks and a nod and retires wearily to oversee Weisz's detainment; there's no room at the station for him there- he'll have to be shifted further into town.

In the lobby of the station, Sherlock runs into Czar retrieving his effects. The man tugs down his sweater and gives Sherlock a quiet greeting.

“Heard you cleared my name,” he says as Sherlock passes him by.

“Incidental,” he replies. He pauses on the steps of the station and sends John a text to update him on the arrest and with instructions for Molly to forward the results to Swanley. He wouldn't need

them, after all. Czar comes up to his shoulder and there's are grey smudges on both collar and sleeve. Sherlock looks at them.

"Thanks," Czar says. He hunches against the cold, and sticks his hands in his pockets. "I appreciate it."

"Rabbits or crows?" he asks, suddenly twigging the meaning of the callous and Czar's other dishonesty. The man looks at him, but he seems to understand that Sherlock doesn't give a shit if he takes himself off to pot bunnies now and then, illegally or not. A point of conflict with his morals, perhaps? Not the only one though; Sherlock feels that he's still missed something.

"Sometimes. Sometimes other stuff," he replies coolly enough.

"Tell Rey I'm leaving," Sherlock calls over his shoulder to the officer on duty and then puts his phone away. Before he leaves, the final thing occurs to him and he turns to Czar abruptly, looking him up and down. Of course. Obvious. The man wears a cross and a sense of guilt; what else would such a man have to fret about in this day and age?

"No boyfriend?"

Czar falters, looking at Sherlock warily. "That wouldn't be right," he says, carefully.

"Oh," Sherlock says, and then shakes his head. "Never mind, then."

"Even if it were," Czar calls after him. "I'm sorry, you're not my type."

"Not *me!*" Sherlock impatiently, already walking towards the station and already disinterested. Then he pauses, "If you have a change of philosophy, try the geography teacher. His car seems to imply...well..." Really, it's no concern of his if Czar believes in such a silly social construct as religion. Czar doesn't reply. Looking back, Sherlock sees him head off in the opposite direction towards his van, head bowed, his work boots scuffing the pavement. He's a tall enough man but the way he hunches makes him look shorter and broader across the shoulders. Almost without thinking, Sherlock looks down to see which leg he favours.

He turns away as the car door slams shut; texts John his ETA and a dinner order, and then wonders, not for the first time, why people care so much that even when no one gives a damn they invent figures in the sky to do the condemning for them.

Molly leans on the counter, nursing a cup of coffee so thick that John reckons it would full-on stick to the insides of the cup if you turned it upside down.

"Anyway, you can tell him it was definitely some sort of flunitrazepam in the wine, although I couldn't say for sure if it were Rohypnol, exactly. He was right, though. She was drugged and it was probably enough to be making her very ill even when she was leaving the house. Potentially enough to kill. What a bastard."

"Apparently he even told his wife he was going over there to discuss the Sunday school," John yawns. "Alright then. And you're ok with sending those on to Swanley?"

"I can do it," Lestrade says, picking up the packet of papers. "It'll give me something to do while you finish off my corpse."

Molly sighs, "I should ban the pair of you; bringing me *two* bodies on Christmas eve."

“Sorry, love,” Lestrade says with a shrug, “Can’t be helped.”

John stretches. “Well, sounds like ours is wrapped up anyway. I’ll shove off and let you get on with things.”

“Night then, John.”

“Night Molly. Have a good Christmas.”

“Yeah, I’ll do my best,” she says, a little glum, “I’ve got the short straw this year though.”

“Oh, you’re not working tomorrow too,” John says surprised. Molly gestures to Emily Starr in her steel tray and the dead accountant who has had much to do with Lestrade’s evening. “I’ve got some overtime,” she admits. “It’s alright, I was on call anyway and I’m heading to see my mum on Boxing Day, so, that’ll be nice.”

“Well, you’re in good company, Molls,” Lestrade says, squeezing her shoulder. She smiles at him. John looks at the pair of them and pauses, wheels clicking suddenly in his head.

“Why don’t you both come over tomorrow when you’re done?” he offers on a whim, zipping his coat up. Then he thinks about it, and adds, “Yeah, why not? We’ll have some drinks- sandwiches or something.”

To his annoyance, Lestrade and Molly both exchange doubtful glances.

Molly twists her fingers, and says, rather carefully, “Are you sure, I- well, we, I wouldn’t want to intrude.”

“Not at all; It’s just me and Sherlock and Mrs. Hudson. And the baby but she’ll probably be asleep by then; Yeah, come over. It’ll be nice. You can eat our leftovers,” he adds, only partially joking. He looks at them both and wonders. Molly might not be tall, but standing on a staircase maybe, or something like that...

And who’s to say she can’t afford gold tie-pins if she wants to?

“Alright, I’ll let you know when I’ve wrapped things up at the Yard,” Lestrade says, looking a bit bemused at John’s expression. Molly blinks between the pair of them awkwardly, feeling like she’s skipped a page somewhere and would rather like to turn back and double check.

“Any time’s fine,” John replies, turning his collar up. He checks his phone as it buzzes and smiles faintly to see Sherlock’s message. It’s neatly cryptic.

<Back 23.30. Get me 17/37/44 from I.G. Goose Lane. Extra sambal- SH>

“I’ll see you then,” John says, with a wave.

“Bye, John.”

“See you.”

He steps out of the morgue and heads for the exit, leaving them there. Molly turns to Lestrade once he’s gone and raises her eyebrows.

“Yeah, I know,” says Lestrade, and then he laughs until he’s gone half-stupid.

“Ridiculous man,” says Molly.

“Order for Watson?”

John claims the steaming carrier bags and leaves the restaurant, the blare of neon signage making him squint. He checks his watch and then gets the cab to chuck him out at the end of the road, leaving him to wander down to Baker Street station to wait for Sherlock. His breath steams in the air and he burrows his chin into his coat.

“Need to get a scarf,” he mutters to himself. It’s either that or start nicking Sherlock’s again. He leans thoughtlessly against the wall by the ATM and wonders what the full details of the case were. Sherlock’s filled him in with the basics; that the vicar of all people was the killer and something of a control-pervert to boot. He mulls over what to call the case on the blog; *The Frozen Woman*. *The Starr of Swanley*- no, *The Swanley Starr*? Too Hallmark?

He feels over the thread of the narrative, and how he’s going to tell it. What to omit and what to include. The rather sad, retiring figure of the woman, the accused who wanted more to befriend her, and the piece of shit who danced them all around on puppet strings and nearly got away with murder. John shivers and thinks that, counting the Inspector, there’s three people at least who are going to have a shitty, lonely Christmas.

Or none at all.

He swaps the heavy bag of curry to his other hand and scans his eyes over the crowd as more people spill out of the station. They come and go in waves every few minutes. Sherlock must be getting near now.

Finally he spots him, his head above the crowd as he jogs the stairs two at a time and he sees John in almost the same moment, with pleasant surprise.

“Thought you’d gone ahead,” he says, eyes skimming the bag with greedy anticipation. John lifts it a little for him to see. “I was passing and figured you couldn’t be much longer. Things all wrapped up?”

“Mm,” Sherlock says, turning his collar up against the drizzle and falling into easy step beside him. “All done up.”

The Christmas lights over the commercial end of Baker Street twinkle blue and white, flashing on and off with giddy carelessness and blurring in the rain. The street itself is quiet; most people are tucked up at home by now, and the usual blind eyes of the windows up and down the road are transformed into friendly, homey winks with the glitter of Christmas tree lights.

John stifles another yawn, glad to be heading back. If he knows Mrs. Hudson, their own window may still even be lit like a sign of welcome. All in all Baker Street seems gentle after the depressing self-regulated solitude of Emily Starr’s house and the chilly steel of the morgues.

“You’re quiet,” Sherlock comments. He at least has noticed how slow John is walking; not due to tiredness by his reckoning but from wanting to eke out the moment for some reason. Something on his mind, Sherlock guesses, that he doesn’t want to bring in the house.

“I was just thinking. She had a pretty sad life.”

“In some respects,” Sherlock agrees. “In the grand scheme of things, she got more or less exactly what she wanted.”

He feels John's look more than sees it, and is forced to clarify. "Ultimately she got the body she wanted, and lover who despite his horrendous flaws, had no issue with her sex. She found a house and community in which she could settle and a job she could dedicate herself to with a sense of purpose. No major vices or apparent mental health problems. Some people would count that as success."

"Yeah, but it all went to shit."

"She tried to get close and yet stay separate," Sherlock says and then, speaking more to himself adds, "Wasn't clever enough to trust the right people."

John toys with his words and then says, thinking out loud, "The Sad Betrayal of Emily Starr."

"The Blind, Idiotic Trust of Emily Starr," Sherlock replies, cynically. "She thought Weisz was a good man because he kept his hands clean and wore a dog collar, instead of the cur he was."

"That's harsh."

"It's accurate. If she hadn't allowed herself to get emotionally wrapped up with the vicar, she'd no doubt still be alive, fussing around with her little school and her church."

"She was unlucky," John argues. "And he took advantage. I don't think that was her fault- She wasn't a complete idiot. She told Drummer where he could stick it."

"True," Sherlock allows. "She should have stuck with Czar. He was a poacher and a liar, but the poor fool actually cared about her."

"Not Rey?"

"Rey's a shambolic mess. He liked the idea of her, but had no ability to connect with her as a person. The man has nothing but his occupation."

John lifts his chin a little, curious. He looks at Sherlock but makes no comment aloud. There's no need to; his expression speaks loudly enough for him.

Well, listen to you talk.

It's observation. It's nothing to do with me.

Sounds like you don't think much of Rey.

"He wasn't incompetent, as police officers go," Sherlock says aloud, and John lets the matter drop. That's about high compliment coming from Sherlock. "And whatever Emily Starr was or wanted or felt is all irrelevant now. She's dead; I'd rather not keep on dissecting her."

"No, alright. Fair enough," John says, dropping the subject. He supposes Sherlock has a point; awkwardly trying to cast assumptions over Starr wasn't really doing anyone any favours or answering any questions.

They're close to home when Sherlock's phone trills suddenly and he pulls it out to check the message. To John's surprise he stops dead in his tracks.

"What?" John asks, sensing something is wrong.

Sherlock looks up, his face blank with incredulity. "Weisz is dead."

“What?”

“Czar shot him.”

“What? How?”

Sherlock closes his eyes, annoyed at himself. “The rifle was in his car...I always miss something.” He shakes his head as though to say ‘It’s a strange old world’, and puts his phone away. He starts walking again. It takes John a beat or two to catch him up.

John persists, “Yeah, but how?”

“They moved Weisz after they’d charged him. As soon as he came out of the station, Czar potted him. Must have been a cool shot not to hit anyone else,” Sherlock says, with thoughtful respect. He recalled Czar’s face. The man had been calm and resigned; he’d assumed it was some silliness about Christmas alone.

“Shit,” John says, emphatically, amazed. “So much for Rey’s justice... Did you know he was planning to-?”

Sherlock shakes his head but says nothing more, perhaps privately considering Czar's brand rather more to his taste than Rey's, or perhaps implying the shooting wasn't planned at all. John opens his mouth to say ‘well, I suppose he was a bloody awful vicar,’ by way of compromise and then closes it again, not feeling up to the joke. Sherlock laughs anyway.

“What?”

“Czar. So moral. Wouldn’t dabble in ...sins of the flesh, but blew another man’s head off anyway. Are all moral men hypocrites?” Sherlock wonders aloud. John doesn’t know how to answer, nor how to read the odd look Sherlock’s giving him. “I’ll ask one,” John offers.

“Too little too late,” Sherlock mutters a moment or two later, and John can’t decide who or what he’s talking about. While John’s still trying to figure it out, Christmas Eve closes on them. Across the city, a distance bell chimes for midnight. John shivers again, his bare hand cold around the plastic. Sherlock reaches out without looking and takes it from him. John feels for his keys and lets them in, Sherlock absently shoving the knocker to the side, where it feels more right than wrong.

The hall of Baker Street is dim and empty, although Mrs. Hudson has left both the dimmer switch on for them and the heating. She emerges, sleepy-eyed as they trudge in, loosening coats and shaking the damp from their hair.

“Oh, you’re back.” She holds out the baby monitor to John and he bows his head to kiss her cheek. “Sorry we’re so late,” he says.

“I put her in her own bed; I thought that would be best? She dropped right off and hasn’t made a peep,” Mrs. Hudson whispers. The smell of the curry fills the hall. Sherlock spares her a smile over the bannisters.

“Yeah, that’s perfect,” John says, gratefully. “Sorry, I should have messaged you.”

“Not at all. Go on up with you now,” she says, gently shoos him towards the stairs. “Goodnight boys. Merry Christmas!”

She’s lit the fire and banked it, leaving it burning low in the grate and restocked the logs. The baby snuffles in her sleep as John heads straight in to check on her and Sherlock rattles cutlery, looking

for clean forks and the bottle opener.

“Here,” he says when John returns, passing him an open beer. John takes it and they clink the necks of the bottles together before squashing into their respective armchairs around the coffee table and digging into roti canai and nasi lemak.

John absently runs a foot over the carpet, feeling it’s lived-in idiosyncrasies; the threadbare patches and the dents where the armchairs get shunted about. He picks up his beer, nudging the bottle free from between letters and pens and bric-a-brac; they work where they live and visa versa. Sherlock catches him looking over the room and gives him a puzzled glance.

What?

“Just thinking...rooms say a lot about people.”

Sherlock gives the room a sweep with his eyes. “Hm,” he agrees around a mouthful of flatbread. “What does ours say?”

“Just the obvious, I suppose,” John replies. He puts his feet up. “I mean, two blokes, one kid-infant female,” he corrects himself, with a nod towards Sherlock’s usual tone. “Busy and messy; science oriented.” He the myriad changes the last few months have wrought; Christmas tree and cuddly toys, the whiteboard stuck on top of the fridge and the post-it notes all over the front that are no longer dedicated works on tobacco ash and blood splatters but nap times and shopping lists. He has a lot of stuff these days, John realises.

He wonders what other criteria would count as obvious to an outsider. He mulls into his bottle for a while and then adds, when he thinks of it. “Long-term occupants.”

Sherlock pauses chewing. John shifts the cushion behind his back and digs at his rice with a weary kind of contentment. The rain splats at the window but it and all the sad lonelinesses of the day are outside and they are home.

“Yes.” Sherlock raises his beer slightly. “Well, here’s to that then.”

“Cheers,” John says.

Chapter End Notes

Hamleys is a real toy store and is absolutely wicked around Christmas time.

Hobnobs are chocolate biscuits with crumbly bottoms and only the ones made by McVities are acceptable. Allow no substitutes. Caramel ones are the best. I could have gone with many a brand of biscuit in that scene, but well, crumbly bottoms.

**ifyouknowwhatimean*.*

Marks n Sparks/Marks and Spencers is a department store that people go to primarily for posh food and sensible knickers. They have an excellent returns policy which makes it a good place to buy presents for people you don't know that well.

Jameson is a brand of whiskey.

Argos is one of those shops designed to make large people feel ridiculous by giving them tiny catalog pencils, yet small people equally ridiculous given the size of said catalog. There is nothing else in the shop itself, you just walk in, get confused by tiny pencils and enormous books, give up and tell the assistant what you want and they magically teleport it from somewhere. I'm pretty sure it's run by wizards.

Pret-a-Manger is one of those cafes you go to when you're feeling too good for Costa Coffee but not brave enough for anything that isn't a chain store.

Swanley St Mary is a real place in Kent that I have taken many many liberties with. There are no largish blocks of flats or a duck pond near the church, and I'm sure the vicar there is actually very nice. If you think the names of the people there are odd, well, all I can say is that my parish was once served by the very Reverend Chicken.

Llandro are producers of expensive porcelain figures that are either very pretty and a bit twee, or terrifying clowns. It's the sort of thing your great-gran had, and that for some reason your mother insists on keeping.

Roti canai and nasi lemak are Malaysian/Indonesian dishes. Roti are flatbreaddy things that are delicious and nasi lemak is a rice dish.

The chapter title comes from the song 'Not Perfect' by Tim Minchen.

"This is my house

And it's fine

It's where I spend the vast majority of my time

It's not perfect

But it's mine. It's not perfect."

Part 5: It Came Upon The Midnight Clear

Chapter Summary

Sherlock hangs up and comes back to the kitchen long enough to announce, "Mycroft's 'dropping by' later and, John, you have to Skype my parents. And I want brandy butter on my mince pie," he adds, and then stalks off upstairs, presumably to put his trousers on.

John stands there with a plate in each hand wondering what's just happened. Wiggins wipes on at the coffee mug he's drying and shrugs at John's puzzlement.

"You heard the man's orders," he says, giving John the side-eye. "Butter him up."

Chapter Notes

My best egg [Codenamelazarus](#), as always, deserves huge thanks for her input and MORE and MORE thanks to everyone who has commented and/or subscribed and/or sent kudos. Merry Christmas, Happy Holidays and all the very best for 2015 -- [Odamakilock x](#)

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Part Five: It Came Upon the Midnight Clear

It's a cold wet night between Christmas Eve and Christmas morning, hardening by the very early hours to frost. They go to bed late; Sherlock not at all, and then at 3:45am, Billy joins them. Sherlock spots him from the window sidling up Baker Street and heads him off at the door before he can knock and disturb Mrs. Hudson. Baby in hand, he opens it, and gives the lank form a once over.

"You're sober."

"S-s-surprisin' is it?" Billy chatters, his nose dripping, "L-let us in, c-c-can't you?"

Sherlock steps aside and allows him to come in, eyes pin-pointing the contents of his pockets, bag and person in general, and whilst he's quite certain Billy is carting around a few rank articles, he at least has nothing illegal on him tonight. He makes him leave his damp coat and bin bag in the hall, and nearly obliges him to do the same with his battered trainers, before his nose gives him a timely reminder that he doesn't actually want Eau D'Billy tracked all over 221 Baker Street.

John rouses as they come in; blinking owlshly in the light. "Whossat?" he asks.

"Wiggins. Go back to bed."

"Woss he doing here?"

"M-merry Christmas to you too, m-mate," Billy retorts indignantly. Sherlock puts the baby into her

bouncer and stokes the fire.

“Bathroom, Wiggins. You smell,” Sherlock orders, and Billy goes. John scrubs a hand over his face. “I’ll uhh...” *Come on brain.* “Find him something to wear- is he ok?” he adds belatedly, as the bathroom door closes.

“Unhurt and not high,” Sherlock says. “Just cold and wet.”

“I thought he had somewhere to go this year,” John says, rummaging the laundry basket.

“Perhaps he thought he did,” Sherlock replies, giving something of an emphasis to the past tense.

It’s chilly in the living room, even with the fire; on the streets the homeless must be risking hypothermia. John feels a weird stab of culpability, though he’s not sure why. Doctor’s instinct maybe, or maybe the pitiable image of the woman dead in the frost still lingering in his mind. There’s a clean t-shirt of his that will have to do, and some of Sherlock’s pyjama trousers, oldish socks and a pair of pants John doesn’t mind never seeing again. He makes Sherlock shove them through the bathroom door.

The baby drops off in her bouncer before Billy’s finished with the shower- which Sherlock (fastidious despite his many flaws) sprays with bleach once it’s vacated, to which John (smelling the bleach but with better appreciation of exactly who is going to end up cleaning the plughole later) adds a generous dose of dedicated shower cleaner. Billy doesn’t appear offended.

John returns the baby to her bed and stifles a yawn.

“Alright, bunk on the sofa, you,” he says, passing Billy a stack of blankets. Billy himself is already drooping; the comparative warmth of the house doing him in after being in the cold. “Cheers.”

John gives Sherlock a prod as well. “And you. Go to bed,” he says, “It’s going to be Christmas morning in about-” He checks his watch “Now, but Mrs. Hudson will be up in three hours and-”

“Yes, yes,” Sherlock waves a hand at him dismissively. He picks up a biro and turns to the post-it notes on the fridge; the running record of the baby’s sleeping habits and bowel movements. “I know what she’s like, John.”

“Alright. Night,” John says over Billy’s first snore.

“Morning,” Sherlock replies, with a flash of a smile.

Mrs. Hudson presses a finger to her lips as John shuffles into the living room later on Christmas morning. It’s early; early enough that the frost on the windows is still streaked in crisp fronds of pure magic, and the first blackbird hasn’t sung, but despite John’s best efforts over the past few hours he can’t sleep for some reason. Mrs Hudson straightens the tea-tray she’s just set on the coffee table and points puzzled, at the sofa. John double-checks but it’s as he suspected.

Billy’s still huddled up there, slack-jawed, the blanket pulled around him like a burrito. His knees, looking boney even under layers of fleece, are tucked up nearly to his chin.

“Came in last night,” John mouths to Mrs. Hudson. And then, in the same way asks “Sherlock?”

Mrs. Hudson points at the ceiling. *Upstairs.* Then she points at Wiggins again and mouths back, ‘Is he...?’

John shrugs again, this time dismissively. *He's fine*. He pads over to the fridge and checks the post-it notes to see how much the baby slept. Mrs. Hudson follows him and they convene in the corner by the oven, speaking quietly.

"Sherlock stayed up with Bee, and then Wiggins turned up; couldn't chuck him back on the street, obviously, so he stayed."

"Some of them have very hard lives," Mrs. Hudson says sympathetically. "I did get a surprise though, I thought it was Sherlock again for a moment."

John looks at her, and realises she doesn't mean the relatively stable Sherlock currently upstairs, but the other one. "Oh, no, Mrs. Hudson, it's just Billy."

"Well, I did think; you know. Not at Christmas, not with the baby in the house. Do you think he eats sausages?"

It takes John a second to twig who she's talking about. "I reckon he'll eat anything you give him," he says, amused.

The chief downside of John's old room, in Sherlock's book, is not the comparable lack of space thanks to the sloping ceiling under the eaves, nor is it the slightly less convenient access to the living room; it's the skylight. It is naturally all well and fine for habitual early-risers like John to suffer a square of light invading over bedspread and pillow at dawn, but Sherlock finds it hard on his schedule. When he opts to sleep, it's later, and the smalls of morning can go to hell in hand-basket as far as he's concerned. Anything before 8 A.M. had better be damned interesting.

Yet here he is, at quarter past seven, and awake and peculiarly not resentful about it. The hideous light hasn't even begun encroaching his bedroom. He lies and listens, curious. Three sets of footsteps below; Bee's high trill at spotting something she likes- ah, breakfast.

Christmas morning no less; that dreaded feast of consumerism, socialising and arbitrarily enforced jollity, even discounting the idiocy of the underlying religious reasoning.

Sherlock sits up in bed and takes stock.

Stiffness in neck- shift it to the left and, ah, that was a satisfying crack. Back? He stretches and causes a series of pops down the length of his vertebrae that leave him feeling rather relaxed. He needs to piss; rubs at his cheek; needs to shave too, could stand a cup of tea. Simmering resentment for the holiday season, it's trappings, expectations and all manner of participants involved?

Curiously lacking.

Sherlock yawns, feels for the box under his bed, and with it under one arm, trundles downstairs.

They're half-cleaning the kitchen table, half starting the cooking when he gets down. There's no sign of the sausages- evidently it was decided that a cooked breakfast and a gargantuan lunch was overdoing things, but Billy's got egg around his chops, so he's done better than the usual toast and jam that John typically goes for. Mrs. Hudson's dressed and already hard at work trimming sprouts; Bee's in a festively red babygro and 'assisting' by contentedly rolling a whole carrot back and forth on the tray of her highchair. She babbles and holds it up to Sherlock in merry greeting.

He's hard pressed not to smile like a complete idiot there and then.

John turns, coffeepot in hand and gives Sherlock a half-sleepy smile of welcome. “Good timing,” he says. He detaches Sherlock’s mug from the rest, and ambles over with it in hand. “Was just coming to wake you.” Some tiny whirring part of Sherlock stutters for a half-second at that.

There’s a thought. It tells him. *Should have stayed in bed.*

John presses the ceramic warmly into Sherlock’s hand and then squeezes his elbow. “Happy Christmas,” he says, quietly.

It is, Sherlock thinks, taken aback. John flashes him a smile of laid-back contentment, and for a long, frozen second Sherlock is hit with all the little details of it; the dusty blonde highlights in the soft hair by John’s ear as they catch the light, some of them paling to white at the tips; the soft folds of early wrinkles at the corners of his eyes, and the way they lift and shape them with his smile. “Yes,” Sherlock manages to reply, almost without pause despite the hasty workings of his mind.

Later he reflects that it had likely been fortunate he’d had both hands full at the time, or else he would have touched him.

As it is, he leans his head down when he speaks; aligns his face to John’s cheek like he’s pulling up to the starting line, and remembers kissing Molly Hooper’s cheek four Christmases before as an apology for his cruelty. Only because he’d thought she’d wanted it.

Years of errors; but still. Lessons mostly learnt.

“Merry Christmas, John.”

Mrs. Hudson, unnoticed, pauses as she pares at the sprouts; a little flutter running through her core. Hastily, she drops her gaze back to the chopping board before either of them catch her looking, for the exact same reasons that one tries not to eavesdrop on another person at prayer.

“What’s in the box?” John asks, curious.

“Never you mind for now,” Sherlock says, recovering himself and goes to empty it out under the Christmas Tree.

Time passes slowly Christmas morning, in a syrupy haze of pleasantness. They wait for Sherlock to decide if he’s eating or not, and stick the dinner in the oven. They wait for John to dress and clean up the baby, and then dicker around making more coffee. They debate whether or not to open the tin of chocolate biscuits or hang onto them till after dinner, and then decide they want them after all. They wash up, and then John brings out the presents he’s been hoarding and adds them to the pile.

Sherlock looks at them closely but his in as much as he can tell is still missing. There’s a couple that seem questionable also. Curious.

Wiggins looks at the growing stack of things under the tree, one cheek squashed against the flat of his fist. “Sorry,” he says morosely. “I ain’t got nothing for nobody.”

“Never mind,” says John distractedly. “Where’d Mrs. Hudson go?”

“Downstairs.”

The baby romps across the floor, occasionally pulling herself onto her hind legs using the coffee table and the sofa, once nearly upsetting several cups of coffee. Sherlock hoists her out of harms way into his lap. She gnaws at his fingers lovingly, testing her gums.

“Trouble,” John calls her, and gives her the elephant to keep her distracted. He steps back, meaning to go and see what’s keeping Mrs. Hudson but can’t resist a quick moment to take in his handiwork. She’s dropped the elephant already and Sherlock’s bent to retrieve it, and she’s watching him, one small hand on the back of his neck. Their curls brush, blonde against black.

It’s a picture and he hasn’t got a camera.

“Let’s open presents,” he says decisively.

“Wait for me, don’t start without me!” Mrs. Hudson says, panting as she hurries into the room, a fat bag under each arm. “Sorry, I was getting the things.” She sags down onto the sofa next to Wiggins and beams.

“Isn’t this lovely?”

“Good grief, Mrs. Hudson, you’ve bought up half the house,” John says in amazement. He helps her disentangle herself from her load but she shoos him away. “I’m going first,” she tells them, “I can’t wait a minute more-“ and so saying she reaches into the bags and pulls out, with a flourish, three christmas stockings.

“Merry Christmas, boys, and Bee. Sherlock, you’ll have to help her.”

Sherlock takes the two socks, evidently surprised. A tin of biscuits or a bit off of some of the damage costs is Mrs. Hudson’s usual style. They’ve managed along quite nicely on that exchange rate for years. He eyes the felt sock, feeling a bit odd about the whole situation.

The three of them are uniformly a bit garish. John’s is decked out in a rather strong green tartan, Sherlock’s blue, and the last a rather more traditional red for the baby. Sherlock dangles his off of one finger, rather shell-shocked. It has his name sewn on it down the back in large, white felt letters; not William, but Sherlock. There’s no dog on the front of this one either, instead it’s the house; 221 Baker Street cleverly appliquéd on in bright scraps; fluffy snow on it’s roof. The baby reaches for it.

At the sight of Sherlock’s face, once again John longs for a camera.

“Sorry dear, I didn’t have time to sew anything, but I didn’t like to see you left out,” Mrs. Hudson says, as she presses into Wiggins a paper bag, much to his owlish surprise. “Aw, cheers, Mrs! That’s well nice of you.”

She looks up as John drops his stocking on his armchair and makes a line for the tree. “Oh, John, aren’t you going to look in it?”

“I am, I am, I just want- hold on.” He feels under the tree and pulls out a square package addressed to himself with lots and lots of love from the baby. He waggles it in the air. “This one.”

In about five seconds he’s got the wrapping off, although it takes him a few more minutes to get the Nikon out, the memory card and battery in. “Oh, don’t,” Sherlock complains. He’s unable to escape, stuck in his chair under his armload of baby, socks and memories, as he is. “Really?”

“Really,” John says firmly, and takes his picture. He looks at the screen and grins. Sherlock pulls a face.

“Aww, chocolate!” Billy says, suddenly, chuffed. “It’s a whole box of Maltesers, and a toothbrush.” He’s had his bag out already, literally tipping it into his lap. Sherlock notes a few items previously destined for Mrs. Hudson’s bridge club raffle. If Billy also deduces it, he doesn’t care.

There’s more than chocolate. John sits on the floor, back to his chair and pulls things out of his stocking. The baby is helped onto Mrs. Hudson’s lap when it becomes clear that a 10-month old, two socks and a coffee is actually too much even for Sherlock’s tremendous facilities to manage.

John feels like a kid again; he hasn’t had a christmas stocking for years and years- not since he was about twelve. He swaps Sherlock his satsuma for a miniature jar of jam, and then, feeling he has more bounty than he knows what to do with, donates his chocolate orange to Wiggins. Might as well give him a real use for the toothbrush.

“These must have taken ages, Mrs. Hudson,” John says, impressed. He sets his beer-brewing kit on the coffee table, gets up and kisses her affectionately on the cheek. “Thank you very much.”

“You’re quite welcome. Are those ok, Sherlock? I did ask the man in the shop.”

Sherlock runs one of the slim cigars up and down his knuckles. “Decent,” he agrees. “Thank you. And the taxidermy.”

“Friends for your bat- I don’t know what they are though; they were at a car-boot sale.”

“*Xylocopa violacea*,” Sherlock purrs.

“Oh, that’s nice then,” Mrs. Hudson smiles, clueless.

She’s pleased with the slippers and the box of chocolates, and more than thrilled with the bag of pot, which vanishes very quickly into her cardigan pocket. John questions the wisdom of handing it to her in front of Wiggins, but the man’s carefully removing the packaging from his new socks and to all appearances, not paying attention.

They work their way through the stack; Lestrade’s sent them a bottle of scotch to share between them, which makes John laugh, and the baby scores a number of toys to add to the christmas dress and toiletries Mrs. Hudson had put in her stocking. Sherlock smirks at the array of practical baby-wipes and talc. “I see Father Christmas went to Sainsbury’s this year,” he comments.

Mostly she sits on the blanket from Molly and cheerfully destroys paper until they give her Lestrade’s gift; a soft toy bee (John suspects it’s meant to be some sort of bath sponge actually) which very nearly ousts the elephant for her full affections at once.

There are mugs from Molly as well and, in a cool-box with some fairly strict instructions; a set of parasite samples that Sherlock has to take up at once to the mini-fridge in his bedroom.

John puts his camera on the coffee table and feels around at the remaining items.

“Who are these from?” he asks, indicating a few unlabelled boxes.

“Oh. My parents,” Sherlock says, wrinkling his nose. “That one’s for the baby. That’s ours.” He prods at them disdainfully with one bare toe. Puzzled, John pulls them out from where they’ve been shoved under the branches almost to the back and opens the first of them.

Inside is a wooden Noah’s arc, with sweet, chunky animals all smelling of beeswax polish.

“Look at this,” John says, amazed. He puts the giraffe on the blanket in front of the baby, where she dutifully ignores it, still absorbed in the joy of tearing paper into shreds. “This looks- this must have been really expensive.”

“One of the doves is missing.” Sherlock points out.

“Yeah, but.”

“And someone’s scratched up the lion’s mouth.”

“Was this *yours*?”

Sherlock makes a small, ambiguous noise, and ignores John. He picks up the other box and opens it. “Ah. Marks and Spencer’s hamper. Predictable.”

“It’s bloody nice of them,” John retorts. Sherlock picks up the wooden crocodile and tosses it idly in his hand. “Sentimental,” he sneers.

“Well, we’re keeping it. It’s lovely- Look, Bee, elephant!”

Both Baby and Sherlock treat him to a slow look of barely-repressed exasperation. John sighs. “Right, fine. Do you want your present?” he asks Sherlock.

“I’ve had it,” Sherlock replies. “200 pipettes, which, I have to say, was a little pointless- I can just get those at Barts.”

“Yes, but now you don’t have to steal them,” John points out. “And I meant the other one.”

“Oh. Yes, alright.”

John wags a hand at Mrs. Hudson who fetches it out of her bag. It’s lighter than Sherlock had anticipated. He takes it from John carefully, like it might either break or bite at any moment.

“I’m not sure if it’s got that much practical use,” John says, feeling a touch anxious and pre-empting Sherlock’s disinterest, “But-“ he trails off as Sherlock gets the paper off, his face an impassive mask.

It’s a complex bit of glass and metal; and at once the internal mechanism starts gliding round and round as it’s exposed to the light.

“A radiometer.” Sherlock says, quietly. He holds it up and intrudes the glass bulb into the stream of sunlight coming through the window and watches as the little vanes pick up speed as they meet the light, measuring it’s strength. Then he frowns.

“Cut that out.”

John turns his head and sees Wiggins poised with the new camera, looking as innocent as he can contrive to be. “Who me? I never done nuffin’ never,” Wiggins says flatly, and then as Sherlock looks away to set the glass down safely on his nick-nack shelf, smirks.

“Thank you, John,” Sherlock says, “I like it very much.”

Mrs. Hudson laughs, “Well there’s no need to be so formal about it, dear.” She shuffles to the edge of the sofa and starts collecting the empty coffee cups.

“There’s one more,” Sherlock says unexpectedly. He scoots the Noah’s Ark out of the way with

his foot and then finagles a box out from behind his chair and pushes it towards John across the floor. “Just a token.”

John moves onto the floor to receive it, turning the label. “It’s for Bee,” he says. “You got her something?”

“Oh, just bloody open it.”

Inside is another box, wooden and softly bevelled on every edge; stained in a variety of rainbow colours. It smells of sawn wood and newness, and as far as John can tell is professionally flawless. There are holes around it of different shapes and sizes, and inside a wealth of blocks to fit them. They spell her name.

“Oh, my God, Sherlock. You *made* this?”

“Weeeelll, more like adapted from the basic pattern,” Sherlock says, dismissively. John picks out the six-sided block with the first letter of her name on it and turns it over. There’s a ‘J’ on the other side. It’s probably because he’s looking at it so intently that the baby immediately wants it. She pulls his cuff down to take it from him, feeling it over with her fingers.

“It’s beautiful, thank you,” John says, feelingly, and then squints when the flash goes off in his face. “Billy! God’s sake!”

“Oops,” says Wiggins. “My bad.”

They wedge together around the table in the kitchen, bumping knees. It’s only a turkey crown but it’s enough to keep him and Mrs. Hudson in sandwiches for a couple of days. Sherlock will take only a token slice, for the spirit of the thing, and because Mrs. Hudson will insist, but John took advantage of the three for two offers on packets of mini sausages that Sherlock can Hoover down without seemingly even needing to pause for breath. At Sherlock’s other elbow, Billy gorges until John feels compelled to physically take his plate off of him before he makes himself sick.

“Nil by mouth for two hours,” he prescribes him firmly, “and you can have more if you’re still hungry, then.”

Billy sighs and watches a little jealously as the baby goes on dabbling with mashed up roast potatoes, peas and gravy, and hiccupping. John smears food off of her face with his paper napkin, and grins.

“Here, pull my cracker,” John says, cheerfully prodding Sherlock with the end of it. “Come on.” Sherlock rolls his eyes but obliges, and the resulting loud snaps startle the baby.

“It’s about snowmen,” Sherlock says before John’s even got his joke slip out of the cardboard innards. John tosses the paper crown at him. “Spoilers!” he chides, and then passes Mrs. Hudson his cracker gift as there is simply no space in his life for a black velvet lipstick holder.

“Mine’s got a fact; what’s that about?” Mrs. Hudson complains. Her placemat is now littered with all the gifts; she’s scored a miniature picture frame and a metal book mark, as well as all the shiny decorative ribbons from the crackers. “Can I have the screwdrivers?” Billy asks. He tinkers with them, satisfied.

“They put facts in them these days, probably because the jokes are always so crap,” John absently attempts to move the cracker detritus out of reach of the baby, who has ambitions to see how edible the glitter is. Sherlock helps by just tidying the whole lot onto the floor.

“Well, they’re meant to be awful,” Mrs. Hudson says. “Do you know they don’t have Christmas crackers in America? I had a friend in Florida, I mean, years ago now, but the first year we were over there Frank got hold of a box of crackers and the look on her face; oh it was a picture. She’d never even heard of them! Though to be honest, I think she just never really enjoyed Christmas much. She was a bit of a sad thing; poor old Cathy. Very lonely sort of woman, even in a crowd.”

“Well,” says John with a shrug, but he can’t think of anything appropriate to say in response and instead falls flat. “Is there any more gravy?”

“On the stove,” Sherlock says, leaning back in his chair, feeling full to bursting.

“It’s very good gravy, Sherlock,” Mrs. Hudson says. “You got a good brown colour- mine always turns out too pale.”

“Burn the flour,” Sherlock advises, satisfied. “John uses instant.” He adds, reprovingly.

“Instant’s faster,” John points out, returning to the table. Sherlock tilts his chair back and looks over to the TV where the news is burbling quietly to itself. Slow crime day today.

“Wait till Boxing Day,” John suggests, spotting Sherlock’s face. “Someone’s bound to get slaughtered in the DFS sales.” He chuckles to himself. “Could literally be something you can solve ‘from the sofa’.”

“Mrs. Turner’s going with her marrieds; they’re looking for a new bed or something; hiring a car even, which is a bit too much of an expedition if you ask me.”

Sherlock rolls his eyes, but is feeling too indolent to be actually offended. John settles in on the other side of the baby from him, picking at the scraps on his plate and taking it easy. He blinks with the kind of stupid sleepiness that comes from heavy eating, and contemplates. Mrs. Hudson carries the conversation single handed. The fairy lights on the lopsided Christmas tree wink and blur across the glossy fronts of the Christmas cards. So many this year, John notes again. It almost makes them look... sociable. Bee’s splodgy finger-paintings sit pride of place next to the skull, having ousted the usual stack of bills and pleas, below which hangs the new set of Christmas stockings. He catches Sherlock’s eye just briefly.

Good?

The rest of the presents are still scattered about the debris of wrapping paper all over the living room.

Sherlock stretches and emits a groan that starts off satisfied and finishes sour when his phone rings.

“It’s on your chair,” John tells him, slowly getting up to help Mrs. Hudson shift plates. He prods Wiggins in the shoulder. “You can dry up for us,” he tells him, and then both are distracted by Sherlock’s noise of disgust.

He’s picked up the phone and scowled at the screen and now answers it peevishly.

“I thought we didn’t *do* calls at Christmas,” he says, turning away towards the window. He tilts his head towards the ceiling and John doesn’t even need to see his face to know that Sherlock’s rolling

his eyes like a champion. He's still not dressed yet and his dressing gown makes him look rather vulture-ish as he hunches his shoulders and says, peevishly, "Oh no, please don't, we've all just eaten."

John frowns. *What does he want?*

It can't be a case, surely? Sherlock would look more begrudgingly pleased by it rather than just a bit pissed off.

"I don't want to- why do they have to?" Sherlock gripes, and then heaves an overly-dramatic sigh. "Yeeeeees, we got them all."

'Parents,' Wiggins mouths at John. John shoves the tea-towel at him, and points at the draining board.

"They're all pretending to be washing-up," Sherlock continues, throwing a pointed look in the direction of the kitchen. "No, you can't....Because we're having a *nice* time, that's why. No, brother mine, I'm going to hang up. Do enjoy all the pudding, although of course, not too much. Bye!"

He hangs up and comes back to the kitchen long enough to announce, "Mycroft's 'dropping by' later and, John, you have to Skype my parents. And I want brandy butter on my mince pie," he adds, and then stalks off upstairs, presumably to put his trousers on.

John stands there with a plate in each hand wondering what's just happened. Wiggins wipes on at the coffee mug he's drying and shrugs at John's puzzlement. "You heard the man's orders," he says, giving John the side-eye. "Butter him up."

Mrs. Hudson nearly drops a plate.

The screen blurs and wavers, the sound glitches and then Mummy's voice filters through. "Hello? Hello! Can you hear us? Oh, do get out of the way, Daddy, you're blocking it. Merry Christmas, darling!"

"Hm," says Sherlock, less than thrilled. John grins slightly.

"Have you had a nice day? It's been *very* quiet here," Mummy says, giving them both a hawkish look. "Uneventful one might say."

"I imagine it's been lovely," Sherlock quips.

"It's been very nice, thanks. And thank you for the gifts," John intercedes quickly. "It's too much of you really. Bee loves the ark." Which is sort of a lie- she hasn't really touched it yet, but he's sure she will love it, eventually. After they've recycled all the wrapping paper.

Mummy is blazé about it. "Oh piffle, it's nothing," she waves a hand to dismiss the sentiment. "We've been clearing out the old garage to make a sort of--"

"-Workshop--"

"-Come office for Father, and there's all this old stuff just lying around there anyway not--"

"-Not being used--"

“-And blocking everything up, so we thought why not just pass it along?”

“Jolly nice thermometer too, John. I’ll be using that for my cold frames.”

“No, you’re not! We’re going to put it on the wall by the patio- you said. You can have the old one for your rotten old frames.”

“Oh yes, so I did,” Mr. Holmes says amiably, giving John a shrug. “Mea culpa.”

John chuckles. He has to admit, he likes Sherlock’s parents. There’s something so warm and convivial about them both, although he can see how the clash of personalities drives Sherlock up the wall and no doubt causes anguish on the other side of the equation too. How they must struggle to relate; Sherlock with his cold-cut urban edges and gritty pursuits compared to these honest and jovial bumbleres, fussing over their garden.

“I take it Mycroft made good again this year?” Sherlock asks. He’s not looking at the screen, but instead slouches in the chair, running his thumbnail under each of his fingernails, flicking out the clogs of damp flour from when he’d made gravy.

“Yes; shan’t bore you with the details although it’s a rather splendid bit of kit- one of those marble balls that goes round when the water’s on. He’s getting very good at forging your autograph too,” Mummy tells them with a twinkle in her eye. John gets the impression that if asked, she’d never admit it, but that she rather enjoys the rascalion ways of her boys.

“I’ll have to ask him then, next time I’m nagging Sherlock to sign for the bills,” John says. Mummy hoots, and Sherlock scowls. “I sign,” he complains.

“Only after I’ve asked you six times.”

“Well, it’s never that important.”

“It’s fairly important.”

“There’s usually something *more* important.”

“Yeah? In the great ‘hot water vs flesh-eating beetle colony’ debate, I think I know which one I prefer having in my house,” John replies.

“You see what I have to live with,” Sherlock appeals to his parents and then gets up and leaves the conversation. Mummy laughs uproariously.

“Poor, poor boy,” she says, “Oh, he hardly changes. Do you remember Father, that Sunday we came back with- and he had the deer-“

“-Oh, lord, yes! And the bloody dog trying to eat it all, and just *heaving*-“

“-And it was all over the patio; oh, and the *smell*. And Julian said it was like something out of a-“

“Gerald Durrell story.”

“-*Gerald Durrell story!*”

“John, hang up,” Sherlock calls, exasperated, from his retreat in the kitchen. “Do everyone a favour and just pull the plug out. Bee, you’re talented at pulling on things. Go and shut them up.”

“Oh, don’t,” Mummy appeals. “I’d like to see the baby first.”

John obliges, even though she's in a wriggly mood and not at all interested in sitting still and having a conversation. On the other hand, John discovers he's becoming like one of those National Geographic lions, letting her chew on him and climb all over him with increasing levels of patience.

He sits there for fifteen minutes swapping small talk about Christmas and the kid, and naturally Mrs. Hudson gradually gravitates in on the conversation and by the time John's had enough he's virtually been edged out anyway and much to Sherlock's disgust the two women are getting on like a house on fire.

"You've done a terrible thing, John Watson," he accuses him darkly, dogging his steps when John finally escapes from the chatter to pee. John just grins and shuts the bathroom door on him. "I've been deliberately keeping them apart for years," Sherlock tells the door loudly. From the living room, Mrs. Hudson gives a laugh that sounds worryingly like it's approaching a cackle.

"You've created a foul and diabolical monster."

"Bugger off, I'm trying to have a wee," John replies, trying not to sound as close to laughter as he actually is.

Thus rejected, and with clearly no remorse forthcoming, Sherlock slopes off to his room, not sure he can handle this much Christmas.

John gives him a couple of hours respite and the house grows quiet as Wiggins zones out in front of the telly and Mrs. Hudson and the baby both drop off in their chairs for a post-lunch nap. Even John catches himself nodding. Upstairs, Sherlock watches the dust motes chase back and forth by the ceiling and contemplates that, without him noticing, how different everything's become.

'Such a pleasant day,' he thinks and scowls. It's not right. Or it is, but he doesn't want it to be. Dickensian charm doesn't usually get a look in at 221B Baker Street and the life of Sherlock Holmes. Christmas is somehow *meant* to be awful.

Christmas is when it's all so abominably clear how stupid people are and how little they understand anything. Or anyone.

If it's not disappointment and rows, then it's the 75cc of escape, or death in the wake of the sleigh bells. Sherlock picks lint from his cuffs- fluff from the baby's outfit, and wishes deeply that someone might turn up dead by the end of the day. No one he likes, obviously, but it would be useful by way of a diversion.

Except John would hate it (outwardly, at least) or worse still, he might not forgive it this time. Murder at Christmas is becoming something of a stale party trick.

It's not really fair, Sherlock contemplates. People expect him to muck up Christmas and in truth he can think of a good dozen methods off-hand to go about doing just that. Ruined is at least memorable. Ruined means next year, people expect a little less perfection. Because that's the trouble; a perfect day is impossible and mediocrity galls everyone, privately.

If it were just them, Sherlock thinks they wouldn't bother, but there's a baby now with cognitive functions so limited she will neither comprehend the motives for all this ritual and idiocy nor remember it, yet, for her sake, here they all are, soldiering on. And he himself getting sucked in.

For John.

So much pressure to perform. Weeks of adverts blaring the magic of Christmas but what, short of magic, could achieve it all?

He can't make it perfect. There's no bringing Mary back or the house in Hackney, or- well, stupid, not even that would make it perfect.

It would beat the pants off of mediocre though, would it not?

Sherlock sits up and moves over to his desk, plumping down in the seat and turning to one thing he can always count on to be ordered. The world when viewed through a microscope is disappointingly more simple, but it is at least easier to manage, arranged as it is in small slides. He flips open his notebooks and feels for his racks of slides with well-practiced ease.

Pen grasped between his teeth, Sherlock gently manoeuvres the slide into position beneath the microscope. It's just busy work; adding to his already prodigious notations on tobacco ash.

The light filters through the skylight. John gave him a radiometer.

Actual presents, this year, exchanged without even the usual wink and a smile to say 'I'm doing this, but really, we neither of us gives a rat's arse, do we?'

Sherlock taps his pen on the table, slightly discomfited. The box had been a bad idea; well, no, a good idea- it had made John smile, but perhaps it was a bit overboard. Too much; bit mushy. Bit... too much of an exposition of his weaknesses.

But it *had* made John smile.

Don't get involved.

John doesn't smile enough these days.

Caring is not-

Oh, fuck off.

Language, language.

Sherlock's pen stutters notes on Woodbine ash across his pad of paper in cryptic short-hand like spider-blottings. Chalky; grey-white ash, rather fine, the precise result of the particular combination of ingredients and biochemical bonds forged through fire.

I know what human ashes look like.

Thought I'd deleted that.

Sherlock knows what human ash looks like too. Cremation's a nice clean way of going, although slow decomposition is more interesting.

I'd yield about 2 kilos of ashes; John would come out nearer three due to his thicker bone structure. Both grey in colour, no one would be able to tell us apart. Mix my dust with that of his or throw me to the East wind.

Why am I thinking of this?

He slips the slide back into place amongst the rest and reaches for another. Biochemistry; biology. The baby's actually become a relatively interesting study in human development. It's strange how she's altered them all so much; a mere two foot and a quarter of squeaky, soft catalyst.

In terms of physicality between them and his involvement with John's biology, Sherlock's expectations have always been, he feels, quite straight-forward. His demands are thus; that John remains sound of mind, body and inoffensive in appearance for as long as can be reasonably maintained before the inevitable downward spiral into the 7th and final age of man. Despite having never discussed it, Sherlock would be surprised if John were not whole-heartedly on board with the first two criteria.

As for the latter, it has to be said that John self-manages that with very little interference on Sherlock's part, ill-advised lip wigs aside. Sherlock makes the occasional tasteful contribution to the Watson wardrobe now and then, generally around birthdays, should he remember the fact (or more accurately, should Mrs. Hudson's campaign of gentle nagging in the run-up to the day manage to not fall on deaf ears) but he has a feeling that in John's definition of the word, male friends do not habitually clothe one another, so he never goes too far with his gifts. Instead, he opts for sneaky culls of raggedy jeans and shirts that he's taken a disliking toward. If Mrs. Hudson finds a few unexpected checkered scraps in her ragbag now and then, she's learnt not to comment for the sake of domestic peace.

As for sound of mind and body, well there're caveats to that. He promised John intrigue and excitement; he can hardly provide that by keeping the man wrapped in cotton wool. On the other hand, Sherlock is forced to admit to himself that on this subject he has made a few (what he generously terms) slight miscalculations. There seems to be a vague sliding rule for health and well-being which for other people demands a higher set of standards than Sherlock typically finds himself anticipating. He defends himself in the courtroom in his head by pointing out that when he'd met John, he'd been a literal and figurative cripple on the verge of complete collapse; stoney broke, and keeping a gun to hand for no explicitly clear purpose, other than either a pathetic one or a potentially tragic one.

Regardless, Sherlock feels that he has done his bit; John's alive, despite everything, and he has never been more than temporarily incapacitated at any one time, and never in any fashion that required more than a short visit to A&E. On the whole, Sherlocks' usually taken on the brunt of injures himself; didn't that count for anything?

And above and beyond his own requirements, he'd bowed his head to John's wishes and given him over, lock stock and barrel to the Janian Mary. And though he is typically a skilled liar to himself and others, there's no denying it; that had hurt.

More than he'd been prepared for.

Annoyingly, he'd also *liked* Mary.

Sherlock switches slides on the microscope again and dully considers what would have happened had Mary truly been a bread-baking nurse and had Magnussen not slithered his way into the affair. In Sherlock's opinion, it would have ended eventually, and prior to that (because John would have hung on and on to the bitter end), wrought his personal self-destruction. It is a conclusion that annoys and frightens him all in one jumble of feeling, yet also serves as a confirmation of what he has long suspected and yet is loathe to voice aloud.

He needs John.

Not in the intellectual abstract (as would really be preferable), as a sounding-board for his

deductions, not as a loyal abiding friend-and-fellow who crosses his path only as and when conscience chance or convivial relations make it so; when wife and job and normality slacken their hold on John.

He needs John with him; physically; a presence in the house that gently muddles things about in Sherlock's absence and whose quiet breathing, through some arcane chemistry, transmutes the convenient walls and floors and roof and shabby tile of 221B into...home.

Too much to ask? Pathetically little? Or else is it a selfish demand precisely because it doesn't ask for more?

Downstairs the kettle whistles and the pipes rattle and the baby wakes up and hollers and Mrs. Hudson laughs at something John has said. Sherlock closes his eyes and tracks their footprints around the lower floors. The fridge opens and closes, someone changes the channel and the BBC interstitial advert plays with its seasonal jingle and Wiggins coughs. The baby gets quiet, and Sherlock doesn't need to be downstairs to see them; Mrs. Hudson stirring mugs and John feeding the baby and Wiggins muddling around the pair of them.

Upstairs, Sherlock hears Mrs. Hudson ask, "Has Sherlock gone to sleep?"

"Don't think so," John replies, muffled through the floorboards. "Might just be having a lie-down. Leave him a bit; he'll come back down when he's ready."

Sherlock folds his hands under his chin and exhales.

Somehow he's landed everything he wanted; John and a half.

"Should have asked for more," he mutters to wall.

John's rinsing out the bottles from lunch, Prosecco and Malbec, when the doorbell gives a feeble half-dead electric meep. It's never been right since Sherlock fiddled with it.

Himself appears from upstairs, looking a touch rumpled and a bit annoyed. "It's Molly," John tells him.

"Wiggins, door," is all Sherlock says as the doorbell bleats again. "I thought I broke that?"

"You did."

Sherlock casts an eye over the plastic box for it on the wall.

Evidently not enough.

Molly's pink-cheeked from the chill as she comes up the stairs on Billy's heels; Lestrade a pace behind her.

"Hello, Merry Christmas!" she says, exchanging a pleased little flutter with Mrs. Hudson. She lets John have her hand in welcome and Greg to take her coat. She gives Sherlock a twinkle and then side-steps Wiggins entirely to favour the baby, who paws curiously at her watch.

"Getting chatty," Molly comments over the burbling.

“No actual words yet though,” John says, “but we have our little conversations. You should hear her going when Sherlock’s off on one of his rambles.”

Molly can picture it. She bites her lips so as not to laugh. Sherlock wrinkles his nose.

“Go and take a pew; d’you want a drink?” John offers. “Glass of something?”

“Please,” Molly says, moving out the way to go and swap news with Mrs. Hudson. Lestrade leans on the door and gives a little whistle to get John’s attention.

“Just a token,” he says, holding up a bottle of wine. “Thanks for the whiskey, by the by.”

“You shouldn’t have.”

“Won it in the office raffle,” Lestrade says, with a shrug. Sherlock takes the bottle and turns it in his hand.

“Not bad, for a police raffle,” he comments and then feels about for the corkscrew in the detritus on the kitchen counter.

Lestrade shrugs again. “One of the boys is a bit of a collector or something.”

He stands back as John shoves the highchair out from under the table with one foot and then steps passed to collect up the baby. Sherlock pops the cork out from the wine and sniffs at it, frowning slightly. “Not bad,” he admits. It makes a satisfying noise as he distributes it along the line of empty glasses.

“What happened with that case?” John asks, toting the baby back and stopping briefly for Lestrade to wriggle his fingers at her and make her smile.

“Oh, y’know. Usual. Should go to court smoothly enough and be done and dusted pretty quickly. Open-close, move on to the next one.”

“That’s good then. Here, a sec,” John passes the baby to Sherlock who takes her without a second glance, balancing her on one hip. Wordlessly, Sherlock reaches onto the counter and passes across the cloth John’s looking for. Greg sips his drink and watches as John wipes the highchair, swaps Sherlock the cloth for the baby, and then takes the spoon that Sherlock rummages absent-mindedly out of the draining rack for him. They work together unconsciously like a well-oiled machine.

Greg’s hard-pressed not to grin.

“Have a seat,” John offers, distracted. He pushes a tupperware at the microwave without paying attention, and Sherlock sticks an arm out whilst poking about one of the cupboards and pops the door open for him. “I’m going to spoon some dinner down this one, and then we can get on with... whatever. Sherlock, there’s bowls in the doo-dah.”

“Under the thing.”

“Yeah, by the...y’know. Whatsit.”

“I know, I just said,” Sherlock slings back at John.

“Alright, alright, keep your pants on,” John says, casting his eyes to the ceiling.

“Take your time,” Greg says. He meets Molly’s eye as he ambles towards the rest of the group and she gives a little raise of her shoulders and a smile as though to say ‘get a load of those two.’

“All a bit nice, this,” Wiggins says, making himself comfortable and plumping cushions. “Didn’t think Shezza went in for the whole merry and bright thing, but here we all are.” Billy squints in the glare of the flashing Christmas tree lights.

“Don’t drug anyone,” Greg advises, darkly. “Or your arse will be toast.”

“Noted,” Wiggins says, with a frown. “Wasn’t *my* idea, y’know.”

Molly pretends to be occupied with her phone for a moment. Merry and bright are not quite the words she’d have picked to describe Sherlock. The flat is very nice, and what she’s seen of the party in the whole five minutes she’s been there, but she’s seen Sherlock in a true good mood and this isn’t it; the man’s going around the flat on tenterhooks.

She looks up and catches Sherlock’s eye as he hands her a glass. He gives a tiny, blink-and-you’d-miss-it shake of his head.

She tilts her glass his way ever so slightly and then he caves and touches the rim of his to hers.

“Cheers,” Sherlock says.

“Cheers,” Molly replies and gently bumps her fingers against his. *Cheer up.*

Sherlock exhales, turns his back and takes a drink. A moment later he clears his throat.

“Where’s my violin?”

They play Trivial Pursuit- nominally a bad idea, but it doesn’t end up half as bad as Cluedo or Monopoly could have done. Mrs. Hudson is a formidable fount of all things related to television, and Molly proves herself to be no slouch in geography. The baby conks out on the carpet, and John has to opt out of a round to put her properly to bed.

He tucks her in under the new blanket, Zub the bee and Elephant on the windowsill where she can see them, and spends a moment feeling a bit drunk and far too happy. Back in the living room there’s an outburst as Lestrade scores a slice of pie on a sheer guess.

John smiles and then suddenly chokes up, surprising himself. He puts a hand over his mouth and tells himself it’s the wine going to his head. With one hand he strokes the baby’s curls, slightly overwhelmed because the thought is stuck in his head that once, he’d had a family like this. When he’d been small, and things had been better or else he’d just been more innocent, and his grandparents were still alive. They’d had parties, and the relatives came and it had been as perfect as the hazy memories of his early childhood can recall. Middle-class late 1980’s boom-day Christmases almost by the book, with Dad showing off, and entertaining. And he’d been a good entertainer; genuinely funny and sociable and generous. No expense spared, all the stops pulled; John remembers the smell of nordic fir and his own wee glass of prawn cocktail.

He’d known Mary was an orphan; in some ways that made it easier because he’d not even considered claiming that element of family life. He’d thought that maybe, like that first Christmas they were engaged and it was just the pair of them, they’d jog along being a couple. Friends and associates; the free-wheeling lifestyle of the childless, until maybe at some undefined point in the future when they were ‘ready’ they’d have kids and maybe generate a family like that. Yet it would remain small and cloistered within the confines of their marriage for the most part; no

uncles or aunts for the kids except Harry, if she could ever manage it. No grandparents or nieces or nephews. Nothing like that.

John breathes carefully through his nose, fighting for his composure. He'd left 221B for that- for normality and family and a house and a job and to be a husband. Yet despite his best efforts, he'd come back here to this; a situation which on paper was very nearly the exact opposite of what he'd gone off looking for. He'd come back a father and a widower, panicking and with his life coming apart at the seams.

Except, here's Mrs. Hudson at every turn fussing over him and sneaking the baby treats or taking her for little socials with her bridge club, and John realises with a sudden rush of feeling that he's *perfectly fine* with that. He wouldn't let her out of his sight a few months ago, and now she's got a busier social life than he has. If it's not Mrs. Hudson then it's Wiggins tagging on Sherlock's heels whenever opportunity arises, turning up at the flat and casually insinuating himself into the household; being scolded by Mrs. Hudson or, John twigs, himself.

Jesus Christ, John thinks, *I really am a dad*. He props his mouth on the knuckles of one hand and lets the thought percolate for a while. Everything's changing. It's not just the big things, it's the small things too. It's the magnets on the fridge and Mummy's telephone number in his Skype address book like a lifeline.

And of course, where Mummy goes, Father must follow, which John doesn't mind because he likes the old boy. Or if it's not the whole of the Holmes' clan poking their oar in, it's Scotland Yard. Between Mummy and Lestrade, John's had more unsolicited advice on parenting than he's got in the entire time he's been paying Ella for therapy.

He thinks about the might-have-beens, if Mary had lived, and for the first time since she died there's a tiny counter-balance to the awful knot of loss in his stomach.

In a way, this is so much more than she and he, with her orphan anonymity and his general inclination to cut himself off from people, could have achieved, which he feels guilty for thinking but is true nonetheless.

Swallowing, John reaches into the crib and tucks the blanket in a little closer around the baby. *You've got one hell of a weird Frankenstein family, sweetheart, but there's at least a chance you won't be lonely*. He swallows thickly, sucks his lips together and shifts his weight to good leg.

"Come on, Watson," he breathes, dropping his chin against the collar of his jumper, but perhaps because there's that bit of gladness slipping through the cracks of his grief like a chisel, this time it doesn't work. He presses his cuffs against the bridge of his nose, and regrets the earlier champagne. Should have drunk less.

Felt less.

John stands over the sleeping baby, feeling foolish and wondering how he's managed to take so much for granted in his life. Relief escapes from him, shockingly hot in the corners of his eyes, until his cuffs feel rough and itchy with the damp.

A few minutes later his stomach gives a sick lurch of embarrassment when Lestrade innocently butts through the half-open door of the bedroom and catches him drying his face with his hands.

"John, it's your turn- oh," Lestrade pauses, surprised and concerned. "Hey now, what's all this?"

He glances back towards the living room and then conscious that this isn't for public consumption,

gently pulls the door to behind him.

Mortified, John waves his concern away. "I'm fine, I'm fine. Too much booze. Just-I'm alright. Don't fuss. I'm fine."

"You're soggy," Lestrade says pragmatically. He picks up the tub of baby wipes off the table and closes the distance to pass John one. "Here, stop scrubbing, or you'll come out looking like a bloated tomato. What happened?"

John presses the wipe to his face and gives a sigh of exasperation. "Nothing!" Nothing he can explain. "I just- I don't know." He chokes again, feeling like a class-A fool. "God, don't tell anyone."

"What, that you're human? Don't be a prat, John," Lestrade clicks his tongue and chaffs his hands over John's shoulders, warming them with a gesture that feels to John much more welcome than a hug would have been. They stand for a moment in silence until John finally sniffs back what feels like a whole vat of snot and gives one last gulp. "Sorry," he professes weakly.

"Nothing doing, mate, it's Christmas. If you can't be a bit whoopsy at Christmas, when can you, ey?"

"Fucking Christmas," John says, and half laughs. Lestrade grins.

"It's all good fun, right? I think I blubbed through my first Father's Day. They gave me a card with tiny footprints on it. I mean, what's a man to do?"

"Jesus, Greg."

Lestrade laughs and knuckles the side of John's head. "Better out than in they always say."

"Yeah, but they're usually talking about farts."

"Good old emotional farting," Greg concedes. "Better?" he adds, letting go of John and giving him an appraising look. John nods, still embarrassed, but the feeling of being overwhelmed has receded. "Good. And look, same rule applies to you as does Sherlock, right? If you're having a bad night of it, you tell us and we'll see you through. No man of steel acts."

Reluctantly, John agrees, though he thinks it's a tall order. "Alright, don't nag."

"Nagging's what I do best, sunshine. Come back and play a bit. Sherlock's going in circles over the sports questions and it's really fucking funny."

"In a minute. Um, tell them I'm on the phone or-" John pauses. "Well, actually, I should call my sister..."

Lestrade regards him in a way that makes John feel like he's subject to an uncharacteristically accurate sussing out by the inspector, but all he does in the end is shrug. "No problem. Really," he adds when John looks uncertain. "I'll cover you."

"Thanks."

Lestrade gives him a crooked little smile and then ducks out back to the kitchen. John hears him whistling, and then Sherlock asks, "Where's John."

"Getting rambled at by people on the phone," Lestrade answers easily. "So time out on the Pies. I

need a whizz and a smoke, anyway.”

“Who call?” Sherlock demands from where he’s lolling on the floor. He frowns.

“I dunno. His sister? I put the kiddo to bed for him.”

“Oh,” Sherlock says, still slightly suspicious, but he buys it at face value because genuinely, there’s no sign of an out and out lie. Greg squints at the board. “Hang on, how have we *lost* a wedge, Molls?”

Molly and Mrs. Hudson exchange glances. “Apparently the rules are stupid,” Molly informs him, “So we now have new rules, which involve pie forfeits.”

Sherlock looks pleased with himself. “It adds the element of surprise.”

“Nick any more of my wedges and I’ll add the element of boot to your arse,” Lestrade offers him. “Got a lighter? Mine’s run out.”

“Oh. Yes.” Sherlock unfurls lazily and picks up his wine glass to follow Lestrade down the stairs to the front door. They both shudder in the chill when they open the door, huddling in the doorway to keep a bit in the warm. Upstairs the doors shut abruptly against the draft.

Sherlock plucks one of his stocking smokes out of his pocket and lights it expertly, tossing the lighter to Lestrade after. He leans on the doorframe and puffs, the smoke mixing with the dragon’s fog of their breath in the cold air.

“Think I’ll try quitting again in the new year,” Lestrade comments. Sherlock hums, but doesn’t agree with him.

Odd, Greg thinks, John should’ve been on at him to quit by now, considering the baby. Distracted? Plenty of things to do that.

They stand in silence, Greg unable to tell what depths Sherlock is plumbing in his mind, and Sherlock uninterested in Lestrade’s thoughts.

For his part, Greg considers John Watson. *Tough*, he thinks, both in situation and in character. He’s not seen John wobble much over the years, despite the disproportionate amount of shit he’s gone through.

Other peoples’ weddings, funerals and Christmas; worst bloody events of the year, Greg reflects. Crap times to be alone. Doesn’t matter who else is around sometimes; you’re still in the shit. Bad enough when it’s just a divorce; Lestrade reflects that he might be stuck all on his lonesome on the day, but his daughter would be cropping up at some point on the holiday schedule and that meant he’d be speaking with the Ex as well. Not even like he’d ever particularly cared for the season, either.

He wonders if John does. Lestrade rolls the smoke in his mouth and spits it out slowly. Poor bastard. First year’s always the hardest.

Must be missing... stuff. Mary, do your best for them, love, wherever you are. The other Mary too, if you’re real. Supposed to be a patron of babies, or something, aren’t you?

Lestrade looks at his cigarette contemplatively. Maybe he’s had a bit much tonight too, to be making appeals to folk he doesn’t really believe in. *Guardian of virgins. Think we’re all a bit too hoary for that.* He glances at Sherlock. *Mostly?*

Who even knew what was going on there. Sherlock puffed on calmly; as cool and bored as he'd been all evening.

John would rather yank out his own teeth than tell him, the git.

I should...

Nah, don't meddle.

I'm hardly the paragon of relationships, am I, and there's no telling what kind of thing's going on with them.

Yeah, shouldn't dig my oar in.

"Stop that," Sherlock says, breaking into Greg's stream of thoughts.

"What? I wasn't doing anything," Lestrade says, a touch guiltily.

"You were thinking too loudly."

"Proves I can," Lestrade counters. Sherlock snorts out a cloud of smoke.

"Hardly." He drops the butt of his cigarillo to the paving and plants a shoe on it, snuffing the glowing end. "Are you done?"

"Nearly," Lestrade says, going for one last long drag. He narrows his eyes. He knows full well it's not his place to interfere and it will neither be welcomed nor thanked.

John was crying, though. Mourning.

"Sherlock," Lestrade says, slowly grinding his heel into his dog-end before Sherlock can turn to head up the stairs. "Just one thing."

Genuinely puzzled, Sherlock frowns, looking him up and down but unable to deduce anything particularly out of the ordinary. "What?"

Lestrade picks his words with as much care as he can. "John's a bit... out of sorts tonight, is all. And I'm not criticising anything you've done- far from it, but if you can maybe do anything to perk him up? Well... perk him up, yeah? Remind him what he's still got."

Sherlock stares at him blankly; first with incomprehension and then with the distracted expression of a man whose mind is working very, very fast indeed.

Greg waits politely for Sherlock to complete doing his impression of a clockwork rabbit, and tries not to laugh at the ridiculousness of Sherlock's eyes shifting from side to side as he trips over synapses trying to compute human relationships. Eventually, he prompts him with, "Know what I mean?"

Sherlock opens his mouth twice, thinks better of it (or, as Greg suspects, decides it's not worthy of an answer at all) and then jerkily turns his back, beating a retreat into the house.

"Blimey," mutters Lestrade, carefully closing the front door. "Worse than I thought."

He hopes he's done the right thing, because if not, he's just about gone and royally fudged things up.

John breathes out through his nose and pushes the dial-button, second-thoughts already crowding into his head before the number's even finished pinging through the system.

He listens to the burr of distant ringing and it occurs to him he's not even sure who Harry is with this Christmas. He'd meant to ask a couple of weeks ago and somehow never got around to it.

It rings on and on, and he's about to hang up when Harry picks up, breathless.

"Hello! Hello?"

"Hi, it's me."

"Who's 'me'?" Harry asks, blankly. "Which 'me'?"

"Me! Your brother," John leans his head back against the wall and looks at the ceiling. So far so typical.

He hears her shift the phone as she checks the caller ID and then brings it back to her ear.

"Are you dying?" She asks, puzzled.

"No, I'm not bloody dying, it's Christmas. This is a Christmas call."

"Oh. Well. Happy Christmas, then. Er... thanks for the....present." He can hear her shuffling through things. "Hand cream," she says eventually. "Thanks."

"Yeah," John says, feeling a bit bad. In his head, of the three-for-two deal, he's somehow always considered Harry's one the free one. Still, she hasn't given him anything.

"I've got you something," She says hastily, "It's in the post, 'cause I wasn't sure when I'd see you."

"Probably caught up somewhere in the system then," John says generously.

"Yeah, xmas post, and all that. No, I'm fine."

"What?"

"Not you, I was talking to Indre. I'm at hers, with Samia and Louise."

"Oh," John says, and they both know he hasn't a clue who she's talking to, and it feels weird. The line falls silent and he can hear the clatter and chatter of people in the background on her end; someone laughs and, supposedly responding to teasing, shrieks, "No, you cunt! Give me that!"

Harry moves away from the noise.

"Loud buggers," she says, fumbling for small talk. "Having a nice day?"

"Yeah," John exhales. "Just at home with Sherlock and got a few people round. Usual suspects. It's all pretty normal, actually."

"Oh. You like it?"

John's curt 'yes' trips on a 'well' before it's even out of his mouth. He settles for, "Yeah, it's fine," and frowns slightly. He does like it. It's all... nice.

"You sure about that?"

"Harry," John says, annoyed. "It's a nice day. Nothing's happened."

Harry hums and then changes the subject. "Hows the bubs?" she asks, slightly reaching to sound casual, the unspoken fact lurking between them that he's never let her meet the baby.

"She's good. Just gone to bed actually."

"Send us a pic," Harry says, her voice softening. "Sometime, y'know."

John rubs his fingertips over his thumb. "I will," he promises. He knows that he should. "How are you keeping?"

"Good! I'm doing great," Harry says, picking up a touch of positivity and pride. "Eight weeks now. That's not bad, right? Good start, anyway."

"Yeah," John manages. "Eight weeks?"

"I'm going to do it this time, John."

John licks his lips and shifts his weight from one to the other. "Alright, let's not... get into that over the phone," he says.

"I'm doing well," Harry says irritably. "You could at least be pleased."

"Ok, ok. Well done."

"Arsehole."

John bites his tongue. "It's a start, as you said. So, keep it up."

"Right, thanks," Harry says, and he can virtually hear her rolling her eyes. "Besides, how many days have *you* been murder-free?"

"I don't kill people, Harry."

Harry snorts. "Now," she reminds him.

"Yeah, ok, I don't kill people *now*, Harry." Though exceptions were occasionally tempting. "No; quiet Christmas this year. We finished a case yesterday, and I'm swearing off any more till the New Year."

"How's, y'know..."

"What?"

John frowns and then realises and then is further baffled. "He's fine. Sulking a bit because he hates Christmas, but that's nothing new. Um, yeah, he's the same as always, putting up with us lot. Eating today; we had a gargantuan lunch. He made the gravy."

"And no one was ill?"

"I know; miracles abound," John says, the corner of his mouth lifting. "You should see the box he's made Bee; it's incredible. He must have spent hours sneaking about working on it when I was out the flat. It's got like, five or six different colours of blocks and loads of different shaped holes she can push them through."

"We had one of those," Harry says, "when we were at the first house; do you remember?"

"Barely," John says.

"You were really small then," Harry replies, "Well, smaller."

"Rude," John says.

"Always, *little* brother."

"I'll hang up," John threatens. Harry laughs. "Sounds better than what Indre gave me anyway," she goes on.

John leans back against the wall, and for the first time in years, tries to actually listen.

—

—

Sherlock climbs the stairs straight to his bedroom, ignoring Mrs. Hudson's noise of surprise and inquiry. John's not there-still on the phone. He stands on the brink of his bedroom, breathing harder than the smoke and brief exertion should be making him breathe.

The first thing that strikes him is the tremendous unfairness. How can all this, the outpouring of personal effort over the weeks and months to date, still fail to be enough?

Sherlock goes still, the colours of the room feeling rather flat and dulled in the gloomy light of spilling in from the stairwell.

He fits into the flat more perfectly than he's ever fitted in anywhere else, but John's always seemed bigger than it somehow; John's always been tempted to outgrow it, whereas Sherlock finds himself deliberately clipping his roots just to bonsai himself into the space and stay.

John and a half.

One half too extra in a two-bed flat, maybe.

People don't like halves; people like wholes, and sooner or later, John's going to find some other half to fill the gap and then-

Sherlock had an apartment,

The apartment had a bell

John went off to live elsewhere

And Sherlock went to Hell-

The hand comes up on automatic reflex and the blow it delivers to his cheek stings but clears the ringing fog from his head.

Not. You. Not today.

Sherlock breathes, clenches his fists and hisses air between his teeth. He turns on his heel, surveying the room.

Think! Think! What have you missed?

Remind John of what he still has. He has the information; he simply needs to corral it into order and make sense of this interminable web of emotions. What's missing? What reason could John possibly be affected by?

Remind him what he's still got.

John bought a camera.

There are books around the room, of course. More than Sherlock could reasonably need in one space, but somehow none of them are extraneous enough to dispose of. He sinks to his belly on the carpet and wriggles to pry under the bed. They're here somewhere; he knows he's stored some in one of the boxes. He pushes aside the dross; old experiments and case notes and papers. Not here. He gets up, paces the room, trying to remember and then in one swift movement, plants the ball of one foot on the wooden frame of the bed and uses it as a stepping stone to reach the top of the wardrobe. He tosses aside garment bags of costumery and evidence; occasionally one and the same, and then finds the briefcase.

Dust trickles off it as he pulls it down, thumping it to dislodge the worst of the grime and then he flips the catch and upends it onto the bed, spreading the contents out.

Not this, not that, not that one; this one? No, the spine is broken- this one. He turns it over in his hands, inspecting the volume and it seems sound; dark red leather binding with black pages; he can't remember where it came from. Nowhere special, it's probably something he grabbed at the last minute on the high street.

He flips it open. His own writing stands out back at him in untidy spider sprawl on the labels that thankfully aren't glued in.

Sherlock takes a moment to regard his old work. Endless small polythene bags are tucked inside each and every pocket of the album, dated, named and numbered. He remembers trawling the university union bar for dog-ends, and arranging erroneous meetings with certain professors who still valued the art of pipe smoking and their more exotic tarry tobaccos. One by one he slides them loose and piles them into disorder on the bedspread.

The album smells a bit of aged paper, but the ash is so old now that the smell of cigarettes has faded into something of a strange background note that, with luck, no one will notice.

He has nothing to put in it, he realises with a lurch.

John's the one who hordes the clippings and mementoes; Sherlock always relies on his memory, or failing that, John. It's a perfect system excepting annoying situations such as this.

"Dammit!"

There must be something. He grabs his phone, scrolls furiously, and grinds the heel of his hand into his temple.

Think think think!

Oh!

He cloud's over to John's laptop, rummages for the file he's after and then sends it to print. The HP behind him whirrs feebly into life and slowly spits out an A4 print. Sherlock wrinkles his nose at it. It looks terrible. He has no photographic paper and it was never a great picture to start with, but to his sinking acceptance, it's the best shot he's got to offer.

He finds a scalpel on his desk and trims the edges and then slides it into the first page of the album.

For a gift, it looks plain and a bit abused.

It's a bit late in the day to be wrapping things however, and he can't help but feel that to do so might belie the effort that's gone into it, and make it all seem somehow all too serious and ostentatious.

"Sherlock? Everything alright?" Sherlock straightens and in one swift motion, pulls down a spare blanket and tosses it over the frankly horrendous mess he's made over his bed.

"Fine," he says, cutting John off at the door.

John stops on the stairs, glancing past him into the room, his expression one of concern. "Alright; Just you shot up here and started banging around..."

"I just forgot something."

John cocks his head, robin-like, warming up to a bit of banter. "You? Forget something?"

"I forget unimportant things all the time."

"Names," John points out, leaning on the doorframe. He misses the fact that Sherlock's never once made a mistake with John's name.

"Here," Sherlock says irritably, and thrusts the book at him.

John's taken aback. His hands close automatically but only loosely on the album, and he looks at it, puzzled. "What's this?"

"It's just a- well, Christm-um, you know. Just take it."

John does so, looking bemused. Sherlock wishes he'd wrapped it after all. John hefts the volume in his arm and opens the cover.

"Oh," he says, quietly.

Sherlock scrutinises him in the way that only he can, and although he can tell John's got a smear of flour under his left ear and deodorant stains on the insides of the sleeves of his jumper, he can't tell what he's feeling, exactly.

"Something I forgot to say," Sherlock says, almost too quickly. John looks up, his expression odd and questioning.

What?

Well, it's a little...

I'm listening.

“It’s only for....” Sherlock reaches out and taps a finger on the first photograph in the album, smudging his own surprised face, “Shockingly crap pictures.”

John’s surprised into a laugh.

Jesus, Sherlock...

Sherlock rocks on his heels slightly.

...Gotcha.

“Well, no shortage of those,” John says, rubbing his thumbs gently over the thick card-stock. With the cuff of his jumper he wipes away the smudges on the picture. He presses his lips together. “God,” he splutters, suddenly, and puts the book down. In the next moment he’s got his arms up reaching for Sherlock’s neck.

It catches Sherlock by surprise.

John’s thumb touches against the soft part of his face right next to his ear, his fingers in Sherlock’s hair as he pulls him down. The floor seems to fall out from under Sherlock’s feet, or perhaps it’s Sherlock’s body that’s lurched upwards beyond the bounds of physics with a single full-body thrill. He sees John’s eyes flick closed and notes the dryness of the other man’s lips, the angle of his face moving inexorably towards his own in a motion that corresponds directly to the lump of sudden intense heat moving down Sherlock’s gullet into the pit of his belly.

And then John’s cheek bumps sandpapery against his own, knocking the air out of him. The hand on his neck is heavy and warm, the contact clumsy but soft where their chests touch in a weirdly repeating collision because John’s breathing hard and the rise of his lungs pushes him against Sherlock tight at every inhalation.

Sherlock grabs his shoulders out of sheer instinct and a need to stay upright. He feels the wool of John’s jumper; cool at first but turning to heat under his palms; he feels the dryness of his own mouth and the roar of his pulse in his ears as John finishes pulling him into a bungled hug.

He hadn’t expected that. His head is singing; John’s mumbling something over his shoulder, his face turned slightly away from Sherlock so that the short hair at the back of his head tickles Sherlock’s cheek.

“Thank you.”

It takes Sherlock a few seconds to respond. “What?”

“Thank you. I mean it,” John’s throat shifts against Sherlock’s shoulder as he swallows. “For... you know.”

I don’t, Sherlock thinks helplessly, What’s happening?

“Oh,” he manages out loud.

“Thank you, just. Thanks.”

Sherlock closes his eyes, swallows to clear his throat, feels for a quip and instead what comes out is “You’re welcome.”

“No,” John says muffled. “You’ve done so much.”

“It’s nothing,” Sherlock manages. He doesn’t close his eyes but he allows himself one long slow blink, and to tighten his grip ever so slightly on John’s shoulders. They wobble slightly and Sherlock’s elbow clips the doorframe, making his entire arm hum. The discomfort is not enough to dislodge the sensation winging around his core. He hopes John can’t discern the beating of his heart.

A moment later John steps back, disentangles and clears his throat. “Thank you,” he says finally, with a neat little nod, pulling himself together. “I... haven’t said it much, recently. I owe you that.”

“Ah, well. Busy.” Sherlock says. He tucks his unsteady hands behind his back, prim as clergy, and clasps them there until they can behave again.

John fumbles for the album again, picking fluff off of the edges. “This is... it’s really nice.” He smiles one of his long slow smiles that lights him up from the inside out, making him altogether younger and more beautiful.

“How...” Sherlock says, the word slipping free and intruding on John’s smile. The other man looks up. The rest of the question won’t come, but wit supplies a feeble substitute that suits them better.

“How much have you had to drink, John?”

John shakes his head and snorts, and then claps him on the arm. “There’s still another bottle of yours, you know. Come on, let’s crack it open?” He looks up at Sherlock, inviting.

Sherlock pulls the muscles of his face upwards. “I’m just looking for some rosin; you go ahead. Two minutes.” Enough to sweep some of the dross of his tobacco project into the bin and readjust himself.

“Don’t wait too long,” John says, tucking the album preciously under his arm. “Or Lestrade’ll have it.”

“Tell George to get his own,” Sherlock says and John goes chuckling down the steps.

He breathes out once he’s gone and rubs a hand over his face. It went better than expected, he thinks; for once he’s put every foot right and yet his head feels like a roar of confusion. He shoves polythene bags into the rubbish and shakes his head against the dim, sing-song nagging in the back of his mind.

Ask me no questions,

I’ll tell-a you no lies,

Sherlock’s in the bedroom

Sorting out his-

Greg’s hogging Sherlock’s chair, arms behind his head and legs stretched out. The Trivial Pursuit board lies abandoned on the coffee table and there’s evidently been a round of fresh nibbles in their absence. John’s fairly aware he’s not the best host in the world, and is thankful for Mrs. Hudson keeping things ticking along, and the fact that Lestrade and Molly are both used to their

idiosyncrasies.

“Everything alright, dear?” Mrs. Hudson asks. John pats her shoulder as he passes her, heading for the kitchen.

“Yeah, just sorting some stuff out. We’re having a top up. Anyone else?”

“We’ve just done it,” Mrs. Hudson says with a smile. It’s nice, having her boys back. She watches, leaning back in her chair as John haphazardly slugs wine into a couple of clean glasses and grazes straight from the fridge.

Sherlock emerges from his den, ruffles his curls with a frown and then without missing a beat begins posturing for dominance with Lestrade over the armchair.

“You buggered off upstairs,” Greg complains, grunting as Sherlock digs at his shins with his toes. “Besides, who’s the guest here?”

“You can sit on the poof if you want,” Molly offers, gesturing to the ottoman. “I was going to move to the sofa anyway.”

“Oh don’t call it a ‘poof’.”

“Might offend it,” Lestrade says, and laughs at his own joke.

“Lestrade’s ready to go home now,” Sherlock tells John, who just shakes his head and sticks the glass in Sherlock’s hands. Mrs. Hudson catches the little flick-flick-flick of the glances not exchanged between them but across one another when each is sure the other’s not looking, and puts her fingertips to her lips.

There’s been a lot of tension between them of late, but this feels different. She can’t quite put her finger on why, however, and then Wiggins is asking her another question about Bridge and she loses her train of thought.

Sherlock collapses onto the ottoman, tucking his legs around the side as though built to fit, and regards the game board.

“Right, we got to John’s turn, and I was going to explain the new rules-“

At once the ladies give a sigh of exasperation. He looks up, perplexed. “What?”

“Do we have to, Sherlock?” Mrs. Hudson pleads.

“What do you mean?”

“Well...”

“But we haven’t even done the speed stakes round yet- Molly, you’ll play?”

“Oh no, bugger that,” Molly says, through her glass. “I want us all to go home still friends.”

The evening wears on and some of the odd emotion of the day wears away. If Sherlock is a little more subdued than usual, no one comments. He eases into his armchair as soon as Lestrade vacates

it to answer a call of nature, and sticks there, tinkering with his violin.

John drags in one of the kitchen chairs and plonks it by the fireplace, his feet joining Sherlock's under the coffee table. The drink flows, especially once they put Bill on mixing, and they wind up getting a word game going.

"What was the question again? Sherlock, stop deducing the papers," John says, scribbling

"I'm not. I can't help it, you all make it so easy to cheat."

"It's 'what's the funniest film you've ever seen?' Ok, notepads? Pass them over." They toss them towards Molly's lap who flicks through and reads the answers aloud for Lestrade to guess.

"Two of you wrote 'Schindler's List'," Molly says, miffed, prompting sniggering from certain elements of the room, "'Carry on Matron', 'Hot Fuzz', and 'Lestrade's Home Movies'."

"You buggers. To be fair, they're fucking funny," Lestrade says, in good humour, and then the door downstairs opens and shuts. Doggedly, Lestrade continues with his turn.

"I think John put 'Schindler's List', because he's an arse and Sherlock copied him--"

They all sort of go a bit still as Mycroft enters the room; except for Sherlock who becomes a study in careful, nonchalant movement.

Mycroft clears his throat, giving the gathering an appraisal in a look. "Apologies for interrupting."

"Not accepted," Sherlock replies. He rolls his eyes and swishes his biro in Mycroft's direction. "Oh, get out of the doorway at least, you're as awkward as a pig at parliament."

Mycroft narrows his eyes but deigns to loosen his scarf and move inside a little. As he does so, Anthea emerges from his silhouette, tapping away on her phone as ever.

"Oh no," Sherlock says, derisively, "Don't start bringing your minions on social calls."

"Not a social call, brother mine," Mycroft says softly. The two brothers regard one another and then reluctantly Sherlock gestures to John's room with his pen "In there. I've been drinking," he adds warningly. "Try not to be too tempting to assault."

"Rest assured," Mycroft says, acidic to the core, "I'm off the punch this year."

"There's always cocktails," Sherlock offers, unfolding from his seat, stalking after him. "I'm sure Billy could mix you Death in the Afternoon. Gareth, stay out of my armchair."

"You hate Pernod," Mycroft says and it's the last thing they hear before the door is shut. Wiggins raises his eyebrows.

"Well, that's interestin'," he comments to Lestrade. "Very interestin'."

"Not really," Lestrade says, eyeballing the door. "Look, get us another drink, will you?"

Wiggins takes his empty glass. "Yeah, alright. I feel suddenly inspired."

"What do you suppose that's all in aid of?" John moves over to join Lestrade, taking up Wiggins's empty space.

"Not sure," Lestrade says, somewhat moodily. "No good, that's for sure. Unless- oh. Hm."

“What?”

“Nothing, I thought I thought of something but, nah.” He sniffs and shifts himself on the sofa.

“Probably just calling in more of Sherlock’s debt with HMSS.”

“They haven’t been giving him jobs,” John points out, concerned. He doesn’t like it when they do—he’s usually cut out of the picture and radio silence where Sherlock is concerned makes him uneasy.

“Maybe they changed their mind.”

“Mycroft changed it for them,” John says darkly. “He’s up to something. Furtive. I don’t like it.”

“You don’t have to like it,” Lestrade reminds him. “You’re not involved.” He looks at John and then adds. “I doubt Mycroft would see him out and out harmed.”

“Mycroft doesn’t know where the lines are. Or he does and he tramples all over them when it suits him anyway.”

Lestrade has no argument for that. “For the greater good, I suppose.”

“What about ou-his good? Sherlock’s good?”

Very carefully, Lestrade shrugs. “If you want to know, you’ll have to just badger Mycroft to tell you.”

“I bloody might,” John says, frowning. Lestrade gets up after a moment and retreats into the kitchen to relieve Wiggins of the drink he’s mixed. Behind him he hears Molly say quietly to John, “Is everything ok?”

Wiggins holds up a glass to Lestrade. “Fink that’s about the right balance. Taste it,” he offers. Lestrade takes a sip.

“That’s not bad,” he agrees, “What’s in it?”

“Vodka, Kahlua, Baileys, that orangey stuff and whiskey. Little dash of Goldschläger for specials.”

“Where the hell did you find all that?” Lestrade asks, baffled. He looks at his glass.

Wiggins shrugs. “Mrs. H is s’prisingly well-stocked.”

“Is this what you call a B-52?”

“Nah, mate. B-52’s a shooter; that’s basic. That’s just your Baileys, orange stuff and Kahlua stacked up. You’ve got my own invention there.” Wiggins mulls over for a bit before dropping his bombshell. “I’m calling it a ‘Tie Pin’.”

Lestrade has trouble swallowing. “Yeah?” he manages.

“Based it off of a mixed version of the B-52. That’s where the whiskey comes in,” Wiggins goes on, nonchalantly. “S’called an Umbrella Man.” Quickly he holds his hands up as Lestrade gives him a look of absolute outrage, the back of his neck going red.

“Just a drink, a’ight?” Wiggins says, and sensibly puts himself out of arms reach.

Molly gives it a minute before she encroaches into Lestrade’s general vicinity. “Um,” she ventures.

“What was that?”

“Nothing, Molls,” Lestrade says gruffly. “He was just being a rude little shite, as per the norm. Here, do you want this? Too bloody sweet for my taste.”

“I’ll swap,” Molly offers, unsure what was going on, but quite certain it’s more than just drinks that’s giving Lestrade the line between his brows. She holds out her glass of wine, mostly full, and they exchange.

“Thanks.”

“No,” Molly says, “That’s ok.” She nudges her glass against his, and despite himself, he cheers up a touch. Not for the first time, he wonders what the likes of Molly Hooper is doing, being friends with this bunch of arseholes. He slugs the wine and changes the conversation.

“So, visiting your mum tomorrow, then? Long drive?”

The lights bring out the warm notes in Molly’s hair, and the wine’s bought up a flush of life to her cheeks. She nods exuberantly along to what Lestrade is saying, and it’s like a low kick to the stomach when Wiggins realises he’s not the only person watching her with some appreciation.

“That’s Molly,” Wiggins informs the phone with a woman attached.

She smiles and pauses tapping. “I know. She’s *very* nice.” She gives Wiggins a look that’s all dark chocolate and promise of things he might enjoy if he weren’t so intimidated by her, and that he’s never ever, ever getting anyway.

“I bought her poems,” he complains, brows lowering.

Anthea’s lips twitch with amusement. “Good for you, William.”

“Yeah, an she *liked* ‘em.”

“Well done.”

“Right,” Billy says, disconcerted, but it seems he’s managed to lay down his stakes and when Anthea’s phone pings next, she wanders off, tapping at it again. “Right,” he says to himself again, wondering how that just happened.

“A bit out of your league, that one,” John says near his ear, startling him. “Besides, that’s not her real name anyway.”

“How do you know?”

“She told me.”

“And you believed her?” Wiggins points out, glad that despite his very many failings, he’s at least not as obtuse as John Watson. “Not my type anyway.”

“Oh? Oh,” says John. “Right.” He looks in his glass needlessly, clears his throat and then moves away over to the conversation with Lestrade, tempted to eavesdrop at the bedroom door. Wiggins snorts.

Eventually the bedroom door clicks open again and John steps back a bit guiltily in the bathroom where he's been trying to listen in. Obviously it's not entirely state secrets as he's been rather obvious about his endeavours and no one emerged to tell him to stop it. As far as he could make out, it's something about files of codes that Mycroft wants going over, to which Sherlock is peeved as it's dull work.

Sherlock comes out first, looking mildly irritated, but not in an all-out temper. Mycroft glides after him, looking weary. Up close, John suddenly thinks the man looks thinner, and less healthy. Too many long hours maybe.

"I was washing my hands. Is Bee still sleeping?"

"Like a baby," Mycroft points out.

John scowls.

"Mycroft will be leaving now," Sherlock says flatly, pushing passed John into the living room.

"Shortly, at any rate," Mycroft concurs. "Perhaps you won't begrudge me a glass of water before I go."

John brings him one; Sherlock slinks back to his chair and the conversation stutters back into action. Mycroft sips his water.

Sherlock eyes him, and then glances over the rest of the room. He frowns briefly at Lestrade, and then is distracted by John sidling up to him. He says nothing except with his eyes, checking on Sherlock. He shakes his head.

It's nothing.

Sure?

Mrs. Hudson notices and Mycroft tries hard not to as Sherlock discretely softens and bends his head towards John to murmur something that makes John chuckle at Mycroft's expense. Sherlock flashes a hidden smile meant for no one else and all at once there's the suspicion of something wonderful. Mrs. Hudson alone recognises it. Molly senses it only peripherally, Lestrade dimly remembers it but not clearly, not so much that he isn't still with the rest of the men in their dumb puzzlement before the subtle quickening in the room.

Softly, softly now, Mrs. Hudson thinks.

It's a delicate amorphous thing to raise; easy to hurt. But once the life stirs, it'll find a way.

Mycroft drains half his glass uneasily, and then makes a little noise to draw attention to himself.

"Anthea?" He swishes an imperative hand in her direction, which she drops an envelope into from her coat pocket and otherwise ignores. "John," Mycroft says, a little stiffly, holding it out. John takes it, flap side up.

"Open it later," Mycroft says, rather quickly. John raises an eyebrow and, contrary to the core, flips it over to look at it.

It's addressed to 'Miss Watson'. John looks up. Mycroft looks awkward.

"What's this?" John asks, bluntly.

“Just a card.”

“You know she can’t read,” John says, digging a thumb under the flap.

“It’s just a gesture,” Mycroft says, sounding annoyed now. “And Google before you throw it out at New Year,” he adds giving the ceiling a look as though to say ‘Lord preserve me from idiots’.

Inside is a blank white square like a business card, which merely reads: ‘The first of many. Seasons Greetings, with kind regards,’ and there follows a scribble that John assumes is Mycroft’s signature.

The other item is a Christmas card, carefully wrapped in semitransparent paper. It looks old. Very old. John squints at it. “Is this Victorian or something?”

“I suppose Sir Henry Cole is just a name to you?”

“You know only bad kids get coal at Christmas, don’t you?”

“Oh, how droll.”

“Well, I’m sure by the time she’s fifty, she’ll love it,” John says, putting it back in the envelope. He’s honestly trying not to laugh. Mycroft Holmes, purveyor of Christmas greetings; who’d have guessed?

“Do try not to- oh, I forget who I’m speaking to,” Mycroft sighs. “Sherlock, I trust you’ll bear in mind our conversation?”

“Yes, yes,” Sherlock waves away the sentiment, disinterested.

“Don’t trust him, he’s a wedge-nicker,” Lestrade calls across the room.

“I- that is, what?” Mycroft says, thoroughly taken aback.

“Not to worry!” Molly trills, gently leaning against Lestrade and nudging him back into the kitchen. Lestrade, swaying, is dislodged. Evidently the wine is starting to reach adverse levels in Lestrade’s bloodstream.

John puts the card on the mantelpiece above the stockings, still thinking about it. Before he gets to any kind of conclusion the baby monitor flares into life and then, in stereo, he catches the baby starting to cry through the closed bedroom door.

By the time he’s collected her and changed her, Mycroft and Sherlock have somehow worked themselves up into logger-heads. Pink-cheeked and irked, Mycroft is pulling on his scarf. Anthea’s already at the doorway, looking bored.

As a way of diffusing Sherlock down from an actual fight, John sticks the baby in his hands. “Sit down,” he tells him, firmly. Turning back, he moves to nudge Anthea’s phone and gestures for her to do her job and start lion-taming the other Holmes, if possible, now please.

“I’ll fetch the car, Sir,” she says loudly, and gives John a wink.

“Anthea,” John says suddenly. “The card- it said ‘the first of many’.”

“Yes?”

“So it’s... is it the first?”

Anthea thinks for a second. “Yes.”

“Like *the* first?”

“Um, yeah.”

John’s brain has a brief stutter over things. “Oh. Is that... worth anything?”

“Oh yeah,” she nods and flashes him a brief smile. “Bye now!”

“Wait,” John says, getting in a muddle, “Are you talking literally, or-“ but she’s gone.

John processes his next row of thoughts regrettably slowly. Not that this can really be helped given the quantity of booze he’s sunk in the past few hours, but also because it’s such an alien idea for Mycroft, of all people, to be doing such a thing.

He wonders what the catch is and then wonders if that’s not a rather uncharitable thought. In Sherlock’s arms the baby yawns and it occurs to John that having Mycroft on her side might not be a bad thing at all.

Belatedly he turns to address the man, but he’s slipped out the door without saying goodbye.

“Fucking Holmes’,” John swears under his breath, and leaving the living room, goes after him.

He catches him by the front door.

“Mycroft.”

The other man turns back and regards him with his usual expression of bland inquiry.

John gives him a nod. “Don’t mind whatever it was Sherlock said.” He glosses over the fact that privately he considers Mycroft to have earned Sherlock’s jabs more often than not.

“I never have,” Mycroft rallies back at once, a touch defensively. John puffs air and shakes his head.

“You know what I mean. Anyway, um, I forgot to say thank you.”

Mycroft tightens his brow and looks to the side questioningly.

“For the card?” John prompts.

“Oh, that,” Mycroft shrugs it off breezily, as though he knocks out Christmas cards for infants by the dozen every year. Sherlock’s voice drifts down through the floorboards, muffled but audibly frustrated.

“Oh for heaven’s sake, Lestrade, give her here. You’re making a spectacle of yourself.”

Maybe it’s the mulled wine, but John can’t hold back the fond grin that wells up from the inside and swamps him.

“Do you know,” Mycroft says quietly, distracting John back to the conversation. The older man breathes in and lets the air in his lungs out again in something that is so much more than a sigh, “I think, however fleeting it might turn out to be, for now, I’m not worried about him.”

He looks to John, asking him to please understand what he means, for he isn’t sure he himself does.

“It’s strange,” Mycroft adds before John can reply. “I didn’t think it would ever happen.” John knows what he means, in the abstract. He can see the oddity of it; the burden off of Mycroft’s shoulders for once in it’s entirety, and the gladness that comes with discomfort from not only the unfamiliarity of the feeling of ease, but also the anticipation of it’s end.

John holds out a hand, and perhaps to both of their surprise, Mycroft takes it. The handshake is warm. “Merry Christmas, Mycroft,” John says, and perhaps it’s the mulled wine at him again, because he claps his other hand against the back of Mycroft’s like he would a comrade’s.

“Yes,” Mycroft agrees. “It just might be, this year.”

The ceiling above them thumps, impatiently. “John!” The violin purrs.

Mycroft slips his hand free and gives John a weary look as though to say, ‘well, some things will never change’. John simply shrugs with amusement; he doesn’t mind.

The other man plucks his hat from the stand by the door and sets it on meticulously, giving his ensemble one last deft tweak against the cold, which blasts as he opens the door. Outside the night is crisp, sharp with the tang of frost already starting to gleam on the pavements.

“Good night,” he says with a nod and steps out. John raises a hand. “Night.”

Alone on the doorstep, John breathes in the smell of winter deeply. A rough night to be homeless, he thinks, the warmth of his body seeping through the wool of jumper and releasing slowly the mingling smells of goose fat and orange from dinner, and the faint whiff of baby powder. Smells of home.

He closes the door on the cold and turns back, taking the steps lightly two at a time, back through the sparkling loop of fairy lights decking the hall and into the first sweet strains of an old, old carol.

Chapter End Notes

The working title for this chapter was 'A Very Billy Christmas and a Disappointingly - -----' three words of which are redacted here because... spoilers?

Gerald Durrell's books are hilarious, and benefit from being true, and the story of Widdle and Puke still makes me laugh.

The cocktails, excepting the 'Tie Pin' are all real.

As Mycroft says, you should Google Sir Henry Cole's Christmas card.

Interlude 1: A Station on Your Way

Chapter Summary

A short interlude with Molly Hooper and Billy Wiggins, in which certain people are discussed, and a few questions raised.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

A Station On Your Way

January is a dismal month in the British isles. The short days and long nights and shit weather make Molly seasonally gloomy. Getting up when it's dark and spending all day in a chilly basement morgue, then going home after sunset makes her feel like she's turning into some sort of slow prehistoric creature; blind and weirdly naked.

Frost nips at the tips of her ears, or at least at what part of them she hasn't muffled up under her scarf. The air on the streets is sharp and as clean as city air gets, unlike the humid sweat of the London Underground. The train pulls away with an electric whine, leaving her to join the shuffling masses going up the stairs. Through the frost, the numbered wheelie-bins lining the road count off the steps to her door.

She crosses the road at the lollipop and fails to notice the bundle of humanity on the corner. His blanket covers his scarecrow legs and it makes him look like just another bin-bag, dumped there for someone else to deal with.

"Alright, 'ooper?"

She jerks in alarm, looks around and then down into the pale face of Billy Wiggins. He gives a little jerk of his chin in greeting and winds his fingers closer under the blanket.

"Oh for- Billy! You frightened me," Molly says, half-annoyed, half relieved. "What are you doing there?"

"Shelter's full, innit." Billy says, matter of fact. "I'm waiting for them BMX lot to bugger off out the park. Nice dry patch under the climbing frame. You going home?"

"Ah, uh, yes. I was," Molly stumbles.

"Couldn't spare a bit of change, could you?"

"Oh," she feels with surprise at her handbag. "Yeah. Um... I've got a fiver?" She fumbles with the clasp, and rummages through the bric-a-brac she always seems to be carting around with her; scoots aside lipgloss and tampons and eventually ferrets out a note from her purse. "Have ten," she says, on a whim, holding it out to him.

"Aw, bangin'! Thanks, love."

He accepts it delicately between fingers poking white from the ragged ends of gloves which are

fingerless now but weren't designed to be. "Cheers. That'll tide me over," Molly tucks her hands back under the straps of her bag and hesitates.

"Billy, you're not really going to sleep outside tonight, are you? It's freezing."

He shrugs, nonplussed, "Only kinda outside. Climbing frame's got a roof. I'd go to the old 'ouse but there's this cun- this bloke there I don't agree with, an' who don't agree with me."

"What bloke?" Molly asks. She's only been stood there for a while and already her toes inside her neat ankle boots are starting to feel pinched and uncomfortable with the seeping cold. From the looks of Billy's trainers, he's tripled-socked.

"Dealer."

Molly bites on her lip and wavers. "Oh. Why don't you go to Baker Street? I'm sure Sherlock and John would let you sleep on their sofa."

"Ain't in," Billy tells her. "They've gone and buggered off somewhere."

"Oh," Molly says again, perturbed. "Oh, Billy, you *need* to sort out some real accommodation... Sherlock paid you, didn't he?"

Billy gives a hoarse little laugh. "Yeah, but this is so much more fun. Can't keep myself away from it, somehow." He lowers his head slightly without lowering his eyes in a kind of cringe of shame. "You get away and then it catches you up, 'ventually."

Molly bites her lip. "Sorry, that was ignorant of me..." she says and feels worse when he just shrugs again. "S'nothing." She leans from side to side, shifting her weight from one foot to the other with indecision until eventually he gives a little cough of irritation and lists a finger at her figure from head to toe.

"You're shivering. Bugger off 'ome and get warm, 'ooper." And he has every right to be cutting, Molly thinks; his words are certainly edged, but his tone is oddly kindly. She twists her mouth to one side and then breathes out.

'Oh, shit it all,' she thinks, because John and Sherlock are probably going to be out all night on God knows what case, and if she can be the sort of woman who gets up to shadowy government-level semi-illegal hijinks with cadavers, she can do this. She says; "I've probably got a mushroom quiche in the freezer, but the spare bed isn't made up, so you'd have to use the lilo."

Now it's Billy's turn to look at her with cautiousness and faint disbelief. "You'd let me in your 'ouse?"

Molly waits till he's looking her in the eye before she replies. "Yes, I would," she said.

"Ooh, I dunno. Could be dangerous doing that," Billy says, although there's a twinkle in his eyes that belies that he's only playing. "'Orrible street rat, me. Wild with drugs and god knows what nasty 'abits. Sticky fingers."

Molly laughs slightly. "Well," she says twisting her cold fingers around the strap of her bag, "*I'm* more dangerous."

"Oh, you are?"

"I know how to gut a man," she points out. Technically true if he conveniently holds still for her

and preferably takes his shirt off first. "And I have some powerful friends."

Wiggins considers this and then gives a begrudging sort of nod. "A'ight, true that. Who's these friends then?"

Molly purses her lips. "Well, there's a detective, and then there's a better, but much less moral detective,"

"Dead dangerous," Wiggins says, stretching a leg out with the first trace of a grin pulling at the side of his mouth.

"And an ex-soldier, if he's not changing nappies. Not to mention the British Government, if he remembers I exist."

Wiggin's grin threatens to bisect his ears. "Fearsome," he drawls.

"And..." Molly thinks, enjoying this back and forth with him to a degree that surprises her. She thinks she's found her ace. "And an old lady who would be *very* disappointed in you, Billy Wiggins, if you upset me."

The grin falls off at once in genuine concern. "Aww, no, you wouldn't."

"I *would*." Molly says firmly, "One word from me about any funny business and she'd...she'd stop washing your unmentionables."

Wiggins folds his arms, disconcerted because she's got him bang to order with that. "Right. Well. Aww, fuck." He shakes his head, huffs and then gets up, feeling a bit mixed. On the surface it's still all bluster and joke, but Molly's put her finger on the nerve and he knows she means it. He does too when he says, "Guess that's the full cop then. Best fucking behaviour from me here on out, 'ooper, 'cusing my French."

He gets up stiffly, kicking a bit to ease the cold in his knees and while doing so, gives her a little salute of respect. No hard feelings.

Molly rubs the end of her chilled nose and hides a smile. "Besides," she says more gently, "it's dark. You should walk me home."

Wiggins chucks his chin at her and there's another pull of a wry smile at his lips. "Dead right."

He hangs back from the door as she opens it, toeing the steps that lead up to her flat. Like Baker Street it's one of those old, tall Industrial Revolution era houses in part of a terrace, only decidedly less posh. Someone in the 80's someone got the smart idea to renovate it into a series of private apartments, all connected by one interior stair well.

"Bloke lives downstairs? Foreign," Wiggins says, wobbling to and fro on the exterior steps and nodding to the rickety iron stairs leading down to the basement flat. Molly nods.

Wiggins gives a disapproving sort of grunt, which makes her look round.

"It's just Didier. He's French," she adds, somehow inadvertently making that sound apologetic. "He does something in the city with... Well, actually I don't know. IT, maybe."

"Hm, don't trust him with parcels," is all Wiggins chooses to share, though Molly can't tell if that's

from some kind of observation he's managed to make from the man's wheelie-bins or just some vague but evidently deep-seated mistrust of the French, men in the vicinity of Molly Hooper or IT staff.

"All my parcels go up to Louise anyway; she hangs on to them for me until I get home," Molly says, with a tone and a look that says whatever Wiggins may think of French computer-engineers, he'd better keep his opinions about the nice lady who feeds the cat to himself.

They tromp up the stairs where Molly shoulders open her front door, flicking on the lights and tossing her bag on the sofa. There's a wowl from the back of the kitchen and a soft thunk as Toby flollops off of the draining board to greet them.

"To-beeee," Molly cooes, scooping three kilos of spoilt tabby-cat from the floor into her arms and kissing his head. "How's my Tobles? Are you starving and dying?" Toby puddles in her arms, and then when she puts him down again, rolls on his back pathetically in an act that is generally a disgrace to all sense of feline dignity. "Saggy old baggy-puss, Old Fat Furry Catpuss." Molly mis-quotes, scrubbing his stomach. "I'll just feed him his tea, Billy, and then we'll get the kettle on and see if I can find that lilo..."

Wiggins observes the scene poe-faced. If it at all bothers him that his ranking in the hierarchy of the three living things currently in the flat is below that of the cat, he doesn't show it. Molly hauls Toby off of the floor again and he blinks inscrutably at Wiggins over her shoulder as she trots off to the kitchen.

Billy follows.

He's curious about Molly's flat. It's quite nice, he decides; homey and as much as Molly subscribes to all things twee and fluffy, like flints under chalk, her more eccentric, hard-nosed edge sneaks through in places.

Toby grunts into his dish on the kitchen counter as Molly gets out some mugs and ties her hair up, leaving the empty cat-food container by the sink. It's one of those fancy little single-serving gold sachets with a fluffy Persian pictured on the front, and which Billy knows from experience and sheer bloody willpower, if put on a jacket potato is actually passable eating. He picks it up and scrutinises it.

"You ain't got a lot of family, do you?" he comments, before it occurs to him how axe-murderer that sounds, given the situation.

Molly pauses and then, possibly from years of exposure to Sherlock, takes it in her stride.

"Not much," she agrees, "But enough." She pauses, chewing on a nail in thought and he catches her glance at an old tea tin on the windowsill and then away again.

There's paperwork stuck with flower magnets to the fridge; student loans and gas meter notes and an invoice for the boiler; Wiggins hasn't got much imagination but it doesn't require any to make a guess as to what's in the tin. He sticks his hands behind his back and makes a show of politely toeing off his shoes and lining them up by the washing machine, out of the way.

"Where should I put me other stuff?" he asks.

"Oh, spare room, it's the one with the- yes, that door." Molly waves him to it and then drops her hand when he's opened it before she's even managed to get her sentence out. Billy pauses and shrugs, glancing at his hand on the door handle apologetically.

"I 'ad an 'unch," he says, pulling such an odd face that Molly has to press her lips together to stop herself laughing.

"Go and put your stuff down," she says, fingers absent-mindedly toying with the end of her plait. "I'll... find some dinner."

On a normal work night it's just Molly and the TV, with Toby doing waddled laps between either arm of the sofa, but tonight they end up with Radio 4 on, burbling quietly through the news in the background, though no one is listening to it.

Molly sits in her usual place, legs tucked up and plate balanced on the arm and cup of tea on her thigh. Toby hogs the remainder of the couch from the heels of Molly's fluffy slippers to the other arm, and digs his claws in whenever she tries to move him.

"Sorry, he's territorial, I think," Molly apologises again. From the carpet, one knee up, one knee down and concentratedly demolishing quiche and tinned tomatoes, Wiggins shrugs. "S'alright. It's his house," he says graciously. Toby purrs and keeps one slitted eye fixed on Billy's fork as it goes up from his plate to his mouth and back again.

He's less hassle than Sherlock, Molly thinks guiltily, although he has some of the same habits. Namely looking hard at things around her flat- the photos, the books, the decor and so on- and then back at her like he's slotting puzzle pieces together, which makes her a little uncomfortable, like he's pulling secrets from her head without permission. *God knows though*, Molly thinks, *I haven't got that much to hide*.

Unlike Sherlock he keeps his mouth shut on whatever it is he thinks he's worked out. In fact, he doesn't say a lot of anything, minds his P's and Q's, seemingly intent on making himself as unobtrusive as possible.

"The lilo's ok, isn't it?" Molly asks for the fifth time, anxious about the quiet, "I really don't think there's a puncture in it- if it's anything the valve is a bit leaky but I probably have some blankets you could put underneath it for a bit of extra padding..."

"Air bed's fine. Better'n asphalt."

"I- yes. I suppose." Molly picks at her quiche, sticks to eating for a while and then looks at him again. He's doggedly working at his meal, loading his fork consistently with layers of beans, quiche and tomato and then hurriedly downing the mouthful. Once in a while he pulls a grimace that reminds her distinctly of Toby when she's slipped him a worming tablet.

"You don't have to eat the mushrooms if you don't like them," she says, in a rush, "I'm afraid it was a bit of a cheap quiche, but they were three for two in Iceland and you can just bung them in the freezer so they're there when I come in late and it's just easy to cook--"

"It's fine," Wiggins interrupts, looking at her, taken-aback. "Got plenty of ketchup."

"Oh."

"I mean, I 'ate mushrooms, but it's food. Shouldn't waste it."

Molly puts her fork down. "What do you like?"

"Like meals n' such?"

“Yes.”

Billy smudges tomato sauce from the corner of his mouth with his thumb and considers.

“Breakfast,” he says eventually. “Doesn’t matter the time of day or what the weather’s like, breakfast can put you right. I like scrambled eggs or porridge. Something hot and something filling and something, I don’t know... homey.”

“Full English,” Molly suggests but Billy wrinkles his nose.

“Lotta meat. I’m not... keen.”

“Well... skip the bacon then. I usually do, to be honest...” She toys with her fork for a while and wonders if Wiggins knows that every now and then he drops some of his street talk and a slightly different sort of person slips in. She’d like to know where he came from, but doesn’t dare pry.

She leans over the arm of the sofa to pick up her mug and while she’s carefully manoeuvring around her plate, Toby plops down from his throne. Billy holds a hand out like he’s going for a fist bump and Toby unexpectedly obliges, purring and butting his head against the man’s fingers.

“Figured out I’m alright, have you?” Wiggins asks the cat. He gives the tabby a gentle push and it rolls over to show a wad of creamy belly. “Daft moggy.”

“Toby, you tart,” Molly says, pleased. “He’s only doing it for food, I’m afraid.”

“He’s alright,” Billy replies and rather more bravely than he actually feels, casually rubs his knuckles the length of Toby’s stomach. Somehow he comes away with his hand intact. More sensibly he tickles at Toby’s chin and ears, turning him jellied across the carpet.

“I like animals,” Billy volunteers. “I had a dog for a while. Good looking bitch, brown, like, with white socks on her- some sort of retriever cross. Found her in the park. She was nice and gentle.”

“What happened to her?”

“Ah, I got myself in a shelter and they couldn’t have her, so I gave her over. Dogs Protection League, or something like that. I guess she found a home. Like I said, she was a nice dog. They stick with you dogs; on the street, I mean; cats come and go.”

Molly sips her drink and thinks about that. “I suppose... cats are just more independent. I like that. Then, I’m a cat person through and through. Maybe you’re more of a dog person.”

“Lizards, more.”

“Or... lizard person,” Molly says, stalling on how to say she can actually see that exactly without it sounding rude. Billy looks up from the cat and although there’s nothing in his expression to give it away, she suspects she’s being had. “Well, there’s all sorts of pets and all sorts of people. I honestly can’t imagine some people with any kind of animal.”

“Watson,” Billy says, lining his knife and fork up on his plate first at six and three and then at five and eight like he’s doing some sort of semaphore with the cutlery.

“I don’t know...” Molly replies. “I can sort of see him with some sort of dog. Something middle-sized and a bit bolshy.” She laughs. “A Johnny bull dog!” When she gets no response other than a blank look, she adds, weakly, “Err... It’s a, you know, an English bull terrier. John Bull?”

“Oh. Them. Nah.”

“What then?”

“Robodog,” Billy returns, just for the cheek. “Low maintenance.”

Molly laughs again through the hand she puts to her face to stop herself.. “Billy, you have seen him type, haven’t you?”

Wiggins pulls a face, and Molly leans forward. “You haven’t? He’s sort of...” She mimes with her hands and then tries not to laugh aloud at John’s expense again. “I shouldn’t really; some people aren’t very technologically... gifted? I’m not, either, really. I mean, not like Sherlock. I can give him almost anything in the lab and he not only uses it, he comes up with uses for it I don’t think the designer ever imagined or thought feasible. Are you like that?”

“Er...” Wiggins manages, but before he replies, Molly’s talking again.

“Not that he breaks things. Now. He did a couple of times, but he did fix them again. Mostly. I mean, the old digital hotplate does sometimes flash boil, but we mostly just use that for...coffee.”

She breaks off and bites on her thumbnail uncomfortably. “He hasn’t really been in since November. Maybe once, but I wasn’t there that day.”

“Do you miss ‘im?”

Molly doesn’t look at him but she widens her eyes slightly, looking seemingly at nothing more than the cushions on the sofa.

“Molly?”

“I get so much more work done, but it worries me a bit.” She flashes him a tiny smile as though to apologise. “I can’t help but think where he is and what he’s up to if he’s not getting under my feet, making messes.”

“He’s been at home,” Wiggins says levelly.

“I know, but, it’s not like him, is it? I don’t want to...get involved or anything- don’t think that, but at the same time, I’d like to know if he were alright.”

She leans down and pats the side of the sofa, scratching the fabric. Toby pulls himself upright with a chirrup and heads for her, tail up, whiskers twitching. She grunts slightly with the effort of pulling him at that awkward angle into her lap and then cuddles him up under her chin. Wiggins watches her do so impassively. Molly meets his gaze, her expression concerned.

“He is ok with...everything, isn’t he? John and the baby? You’ve seen him more than me.” She digs her fingers into Toby’s fur. “It seemed a bit mixed at Christmas, but then it was Christmas... No one’s ever really themselves at Christmas.”

Wiggins drops his knee to the floor and tucks his hands under his ankles, with a contemplative series of snuffling noises. “Dunno,” he says eventually, then confesses, “I ain’t that good with telling about that.” He rubs at the scruff on his lower jaw. “What are you asking in particular?”

“Sherlock’s ok with Bee, isn’t he?”

Billy shrugs. “I reckon so,” he says at length. “I mean, basically. He’s adaptin’.”

"I wish he'd talk to someone."

"He's Sherlock Holmes. He don't talk even to Watson."

"Billy," Molly says, dropping her feet to the floor and uncurling in one fluid motion. Toby slithers onto her lap, tail switching back and forth with irritation through his purrs. Molly ignores him. "Is he using?"

Wiggins sucks in air through his teeth sharply. "Couldn't say."

"Billy," she presses, but he shakes his head.

"No."

It's not a denial of Sherlock's drug habit or lack thereof, and seeing that Billy's digging his heels in on the other side of the coffee table, looking cornered, Molly knots her fingers together and leans back into the sofa silently.

"I'm sorry," she says. "I just...wish I was sure he was happy."

"E's 'appy enough. What's 'appy when it's at 'ome anyway?"

"I don't know," Molly looks miserably at the ceiling. "I thought with John moving back... John's happy."

"Watson's more simple. 'E ain't."

Molly heaves a sigh that comes right from the soles of her feet. "Sometimes, I think it would be nice if, for his own good, Sherlock were a little less... Sherlock."

"Or the other one more Sherlock," Billy suggests, making Molly give a sudden huff of bittersweet amusement.

"I don't think the world could cope with two of them. Mycroft's enough."

Molly goes quiet again and he sits and watches her in silence for a long, long moment. Molly blinks slowly and hard, her gaze still turned self-consciously upwards so that the fine lines of her eyelashes cast shadows in the gentle curve of the hollows under her eyes. She works her fingers absentmindedly in the tabby fur and he can see the redness of her knuckles- no doubt she scoured them before leaving work.

Wiggins shifts and then rests his hands on the coffee table like he's in court and just been shoved ignobly into the witness stand.

"Listen, Doc," he says, which gets her attention at once. He gives her an awkward, uncomfortable look, venturing into unknown and potentially dangerous territory, "Whatever's going on or- or not going on, whichever it is, he knows where to find you, don't 'e? And you're not... irrelevant in everything. You'd *know*- at least, I reckon you'd know- if something were really wrong. You don't need to do what I do or he does; all our fancy looking and putting two and two together, you'd just know. In your bones, like. So, maybe it's not all perfect over on Baker Street, but it's not awful either. Not dangerous anyway- can't be, because if it were, you'd be over there, askin' him outright, cause that's what you do. You... help make things better for broken people."

And then all at once he gets flustered, colours and finishes hastily. "Or, I dunno, some kind of soft old shit like that."

Molly looks at him, faintly stunned and then her whole body twitches like she's got an itch she can't bring herself to scratch and it takes Wiggins and all his intellect a minute to realise that she's laughing.

"Oh, come on, I tried. Don't laugh!"

"I'm sorry, I'm not laughing at you, it's just..." She breathes out and he sees the tension drop from her shoulders. "You're right. I'm worrying too much." She softens further. "Thank you, Billy. That was kind of you."

Billy squirms in place, "Aw, shit. Don't," he says, abashed and rubs at the back of his neck, but when he glances at her next he knows that she knows that he's a little pleased with her praise.

Molly kisses Toby between the ears, over which she gives another restrained little smile before her eye happens across the clock and she notes the time. "Gosh, it's getting late..."

"Go and kip," Billy says, slightly gruff but only because he's trying to retain some of his dignity. "S'alright. I know where the bathroom is, and I've got a toothbrush and stuff."

"Alright," Molly says, gently. "Though if you need anything, just look in the bathroom cupboard. The mirrored cupboard," she amends hastily. "Don't look in the other one."

She gets up, just a touch embarrassed, taking the cat with her and gives the apartment a once-over. "Oh, leave the plates. I'll do them tomorrow," Molly adds through a yawn. She pauses by the door to her room, and looks at him. "Sure you'll be alright?"

"Yeah, Doc," Billy returns with a faint grin. "Nothin' wrong with me."

One by one the lights turn out. Molly slips in between cold sheets, while Toby stretches out on the foot of the bed and between them they make the springs in the mattress creak. Next door, Wiggins sits cross-legged on the air bed, gently tugging the sleeves of his hoodie over his hands. The radiator clicks and thumps to itself- air in the pipes- and they both lie back and listen to it moving over the house like so many restless ghosts, long into the night.

The flat is empty when Molly gets up, even though it's early. Billy's straightened up the sofa and left it almost glossy-magazine neat; certainly neater than it's been in months in Molly's care. The old blue towel is dry; folded up and left on the arm of the chair for her.

The plates from the coffee table are gone, the table itself wiped, and she finds both dishes and cloth put away in the kitchen in their proper places. Her cat mug, the chipped one that she can't bring herself to throw away, is sat by the kettle, which contains the right amount of water and there's a teabag waiting right there for her to start breakfast.

Molly folds her arms across her chest and pulls her dressing gown a bit tighter and can only feel rather helplessly sad. He's not made any pretence about his actions while she was sleeping. If she rang the police they'd easily find his fingerprints. Perhaps that's his way of apologising for... how did he put it?

Not being able to keep away from it.

Quietly she clicks the kettle down to boil and turns the radio on for some cheerful burble to ease the sting of putting the lid back on the empty gas-money tin.

Chapter End Notes

This is an English bull terrier [or 'Johnny dog'](#) although I admit, that particular nickname, which refers to [John Bull](#) probably isn't very well known. I'm not making any kind of odd political statement there though, it was just so fitting with the word play, I couldn't really resist.

Chapter title comes from the song '[Winter Lady](#)' by Leonard Cohen. My [egg](#) wouldn't let me call it 'Winterlude' because I'm supposed to be giving up puns for 2015. Hope you all enjoyed this snippet; if you did, consider stopping by and letting us know, that would be awesome. Next time, we find out what Sherlock and John were doing out of the house, and there's a small run of birthdays. See you soon!-- [Odamakilock x](#)

Part 6: Worst Old Habit

Chapter Summary

Sherlock returns, his face marble and Molly twists her fingers in her lap. He sits down again but makes no attempt to touch the microscope. No doubt he's embarrassed at having made such a juvenile mistake with lab equipment he could probably build if he had half a mind to. Molly worries.

"Say it," he says, breaking into her concern. "Spit it out."

"John's worried you're... dabbling again."

Chapter Notes

With thanks as always to my Eggly-weggly, [CodenameLazarus](#) who spent a lot of time this chapter putting up with my hack editing and throwing her curve balls and generally making her want to slay my lemon-ass. Go and give her love and attention. Also she's a really effective egg-bully who makes me write more, so go encourage her to do that.

I can be found on Tumblr as [Odamakilock](#). Y'know. If you ever fancy stopping by and talking Johnlock to me. *Waffles eyebrows* or other ships. I'm down with that.

Formatting for some reason gets all jerked up in the hop from scrivener to A03 so if you spot any typos or places where text might have been chewed by the AO3 gremlins, leave me a comment and let me know!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Part Six: Worst Old Habit

It's January 6th and she's just under 11 months old and John is determined to get both her and Sherlock out of the house for the sake of everyone's sanity, yet Sherlock is equally certain that it isn't worth the effort.

"It's a Tuesday, like any other day," he intones, crouched in the middle of the floor, picking through a stack of files.

"It's your birthday."

"And many happy returns to me- do sit down, you're making the place look untidy."

"I am?" John protests, gesturing. The flat is awash with a blizzard of papers of such startling variety John can hardly begin to categorise them all. Whatever the hell it was that Mycroft dumped on Sherlock at Christmas, it's evidently spiralled out of tedious code-breaking into some kind of labyrinthine series of deductions. John ducks under a washing line of still-damp photographs- the

bathroom turned into a darkroom at some point around three o'clock in the morning, and John and the baby have been segregated off into the back of the flat for their own safety. Sherlock seems pleased to be busy again.

John scrubs with mild frustration at his scalp. "Are you going to be doing this all day?" he asks. Not that he begrudges Sherlock his occupational respite, but there are practicalities to consider.

"Yep."

"Tomorrow?"

"Maybe."

"Bee doesn't have nursery. I can't keep her shut up in the bedroom for two days running."

Sherlock looks up and blinkingly surveys the chaos, apparently taking in the extent of it for the first time. "Ah," he says, thoughtfully. "I'll move it upstairs this evening."

John fixes him with a look to check if he really means that or if 'this evening' is Sherlock for 'at some point significantly later than now, probably when it's dark, and probably not as soon as you'd like.' Sherlock gives him an arch look back.

John changes topic. "What are you working on?"

The other waves his hands distractedly in the air. "Collations; cross-references; codes. No time to explain the system. I'm chasing..."

Reassured, John finally appeases some of his curiosity and opens one of the files. The title reads, 'Homicide associated with ventromedial prefrontal cortex lesions,' under which in Sherlock's hand, the note 'concerning early-onset dementia and geriatric psychopathy' is printed starkly on fading paper. John gives it a hard, curious look and then carefully closes the file again.

"Please, tell me this isn't some kind of panic over turning 34." He jokes. Half-jokes. He can't think why that particular age would be so terrible- it's hardly a landmark but there's no telling with Sherlock sometimes and he has rather launched himself into this big time.

Big time by recent standards anyway, John thinks. It's not quite blood and harpoons on the Bakerloo line.

"Don't be ridiculous," Sherlock mutters, distracted, "I'm only thirty-" he cuts off, frowns and then looks deeply annoyed. "Oh no, I am thirty-four. Ugh."

John chuckles, leans back to briefly check that the baby is alright in her pen, and then sighs when he remembers that the kitchen table is playing host to stack upon stack of business cards.

"Sherlock," he says, only to be ignored. "Sherlock?"

"Mm?"

"I'm going to- ...Sherlock. Sherlock. Sherlock!"

The other man is reaming off zigzag computer printouts from a box and muttering a derisive series of 'no's under his breath. John might as well be a sadly deflating balloon buffering against the window for the amount of impact he's making.

Even Sherlock however, can't tune him out when John's got his chin squashed between his fingers.

“What?!” he finally splutters, half interrogative, half exclamation.

“I’m going out,” John says, patiently. “With Bee, so you can have the run of the place. Go mad-well, not too mad.” He adds hastily. “Nothing biological.”

“What are you wittering about?”

“Nothing,” John admits, letting go of Sherlock’s face. “Have fun.”

“Where are you going?”

“Probably just around town and get some food. I’m going to... take Bee to her first pub- we’ll have a drink for you, and then the usual round of dancing girls and high-stakes poker, finishing with a pistols-at-dawn shoot out in the middle of Edgware Road and you’ve definitely already stopped listening.”

“We want more toilet paper,” Sherlock says promptly, “if you’re going to Edgware Road.”

“I bought toilet paper.”

“We will need more toilet paper,” Sherlock amends.

“Right,” John sighs, gently heaving books aside to get at the coat rack. “I’ll be back at around six, so be ready.”

The rustle of paper behind him stops. He turns to see Sherlock looking at him with poorly disguised interest over his shoulder. He glances John up and down in that sharp flickering way of his.

Ready for what?

“Dinner,” John replies out loud. “We’ll go out.”

“Hm,” says Sherlock, but unless John’s mistaken, he seems pleased with the idea.

—

Solid to his word, John returns at six and over the course of half an hour manages to gently pry Sherlock in stages from his work. This is done by a combination of careful judgement and timing; he’s learnt to spot when Sherlock is progressively working and when he’s just diddling back and forth over a problem with no real route left to follow, just for the distraction.

John puts the ready-meals he bought in the fridge (just in case his dinner plans fall through) makes tea and sits himself at the kitchen table to do a bit of Sherlock watching. With his free hand he spoons half a jar of baby food into his daughter and then waits.

He waits until he’s fairly confident that Sherlock’s reached a stage where he won’t be ratty if he stops picking at the case, and then waits a little longer for the baby to start wriggling. He promptly puts her in Sherlock’s lap and then goes upstairs to change his shirt.

Slowly he hears the baby start to squawk and then a few moments later, he hears Sherlock calling his name urgently.

“What’s the matter?” John asks, innocently, as though he hasn’t the faintest idea.

“She’s...done a fart and follow-through,” Sherlock says, holding her up under the arms. “Help.”

“Yeah, she had creamed cauliflower. Ready for dinner?”

“Dinner?”

“Yeah, we’ll go out.”

He sees Sherlock mentally detach himself from his papers, take in John’s shirt, the time and contemplate the empty feeling in his middle, glance back at the work and then shuffle his thoughts off in a more culinary direction.

“Thai?”

“I booked a table at the tapas place,” John says, taking the baby off of him. “And you’ve got muck in your hair.”

“Oh.”

“Ten minutes,” John says, hiking the baby off towards the bathroom, feeling pleased with himself. Behind him he hears Sherlock dislodge something onto the floor and then clatter up the stairs. “Well played,” he tells his small conspirator in a whisper. She gurgles to herself contentedly and then, just to remind John who’s boss, pees on his hand.

The restaurant is a small place they’ve been to once before, when it was Before, and haven’t been back to since. It hasn’t changed. It’s still serving up the kind of food they both like. John likes the spice and the richness of the dishes, the easy-going atmosphere. Sherlock likes the authenticity, the layout of the window seating and the full licence to help himself to multiple dishes, and most importantly, to steal from John’s plate.

The baby is entranced by the fairy lights around the window, tilting her head back as far as she can and cooing, pointing at it with somewhat disorganised fingers. The waiter divvies out the fattest green olives John’s ever enjoyed and ciabatta, drops them a wine cooler on the window sill and than asks if they’re ready to order.

“He’ll have-“ Sherlock starts.

John clicks with irritation and interrupts. “I’m ordering! I’ll have the stroganoff, the scallops and it’s small dishes, right? Then...the bruchetta.”

Sherlock snorts. “Cross all that out except the scallops; we’ll have the meatballs, the catalan stew, patatas bravas, that chorizo thing and keep the olives and bread coming. Oh, and something a little choice in the white wines.”

The waiter goes still with a smile of pained indecision.

John grabs the menu back to look at it. “Where are you even-?”

“Specials board behind you.”

John turns in his chair and stares at it. He hadn’t even noticed it. “Oh. Oh, well... yeah, actually. That sounds good.” He smiles through the social awkwardness and the waiter smiles through his confusion and Sherlock offers them both his ‘best’ smile. “It’s my birthday,” he says.

“It’s his birthday,” John admits, “Go with what he said.” The waiter hesitates, then says ‘Ok’ cheerfully enough and departs. John gives the other side of the table a look.

Behave.

Nope.

I’ll kick you under the table.

On my birthday?

John shifts in his chair, rocking with energy born of amusement that he can’t show openly just yet because that would spoil half the fun of it.

Sherlock likewise leans back as John fidgets, picking up his cocktail stick for the olives and rapping a little tattoo with it on the table top.

For a while they don’t talk. The baby babbles enough to fill the conversational void, pattering her hands on the dish of her high chair in imitation, John thinks, of Sherlock, and her eyebrows go up and down as she ‘talks’, clearly putting some sort of train of thought to order. He sops some bread in olive oil for her and she gums at it, still discussing.

“Did you finish everything you wanted to?” John asks presently.

“Wanted to? No, but I reached an ideal point at which to leave off the cross-referencing. Mycroft, for once in his dull, stodgy existence has managed to give me something actually interesting to work on. No prizes for guessing why he hasn’t attempted it himself.”

“Too much paperwork.”

“Hm. Dust allegies.”

“Aw, Precious.”

John wipes the baby’s chin and wishes she’d hurry up with getting some teeth grown in. She’s grown enormously in the last few months and mashing everything is getting tedious.

“You’re enjoying it though?”

“Hm, it’s complex. Lots of theories, lots of possibilities. A lot of potential suspects to narrow down,” Sherlock muses, half to himself, but given that he looks like he’s practically purring it must be going well. “If anything I need more information.”

“More?” John is amazed; he’d thought the bad-old-days mess all over the living room should have been plenty.

“May have to bother Mycroft, what a pity.”

“I’m sure he’ll be thrilled.” John smiles slightly however. This seems to be what Sherlock has needed lately to perk him up a bit.

The food arrives on their table in steaming earthenware, and they eat, passing back and forth the spoons and such small comments as needed, but no more. It’s nice, John feels. It’s comfortable. He dribbles the tomatoey sauce from the stew onto scraps for the baby, which she accepts and licks from her fists, smearing them on her face but thankfully not making much of a mess on the floor.

The wine is tart and crisp on John's palate and the langoustine taste of the sea. The brine spills from the cracking shells as he digs his thumbs into them. He sucks the liquor from his thumbs after, and catches, just briefly, Sherlock's gaze as the man observes him from under his eyelashes, half engaged with winkling mussels from their shells and stacking the soft orange meats onto his bread.

The walls of the restaurant are a dark red, and Sherlock seems to both blend into the surroundings and stand out all at once. It's probably the shirt, John ponders, combined with the paleness of his hands and face. Sherlock works more deftly at his food; hands working with fine gesture to pick, turn, spear, drizzle, serve and season. The lights above are muted, their corner brightened up by the fairy lights, and between the alcove lamps and those pale sparkles, all of the man's highlights are picked out.

John is amongst the first to admit that he likes sensation in life. Not just the thrill of action necessarily, but things that appeal to his senses too. He used to like the tang of woodsmoke and cordite in the air; still does to an extent; when he can put memory at bay. He likes the feel of cold metal, the weird sun-smell of cotton shirts left out on the line, and frying garlic. He likes the baby softness of his daughter's neck and daubing her with baby-oil after a bath, her hands waving and brushing his forearms when it tickles her.

He doesn't think he's a snob; he doesn't demand the best in life. He'd be equally content with the zing of malt vinegar and chip grease in front of the telly as this, but he likes the feel of his good shirt's cuffs at his wrists and the gentle murmur of the restaurant.

Sherlock's stomach brushes the tablecloth as he leans over to spear chorizo from John's plate and the cotton of his shirt is noticeably superior. He eats the sausage and then with one long finger smears tapenade onto a soft piece of red pepper and sticks it in the baby's mouth. She sucks on it, looking comical at the unexpectedly salty taste. Sherlock's lips dart into a smile.

John's fingers gently slide from the bowl of his wineglass down the stem.

He's so undeniably handsome.

John clears his throat and chases rice around his dish with his fork, picking his peas up on the tines and taking his time conveying them one by one to his mouth. He's not self-conscious about his looks, per se, but he can't help feeling a Plain Jane sitting across from Sherlock. Who wouldn't?

Dunking his fingers into the bowl provided, Sherlock suddenly says, "I never told you the one about the ice-cream cone, did I?"

"No, sorry?" John says, shaken out of his thoughts.

"Ah, that was a good one. That was in India--"

It is a good one. John listens and Sherlock rambles, pausing only to allow John to prompt him as he so very clearly doesn't need doing, but which they both enjoy anyway.

"Incredible," John says, leaning back to look at Sherlock. The other waves off the sentiment, though as always relishes the praise and demurs by way of moving the guttering candle further from the baby.

John leans his face on his fist and looks at him. "I've missed this," he says. "Our dinners and bits."

Sherlock looks up at him from drying his fingers on his napkin. There's the most fleeting of hesitations as the words meet his lips and then he admits, "It's been a while."

John thinks about it. “November.”

“Ah,” Sherlock inhales with a little sigh of recollection. “Yes.”

“Did you ever get to the bottom of that one?”

“What one?”

“The theatre case. You came home and I was...going to work, and then we went down to that theatre in the west end. Come on, you must remember, we were there for two shows, then fetched up at that old restaurant.”

“Oysters and a brace of grouse,” Sherlock supplies. “Though I’m not taking you back there again, you wouldn’t shut up about it.”

John smiles. “The place was called ‘Rules’, Sherlock. You like Rules.” His smile becomes a grin.

“I would say that your lamentable attempts to make funny of that were a side-effect of fatherhood, but you’ve always been like this.”

“Are you saying I make Dad-jokes?”

“I’m not saying that you don’t.”

“Git. You never answered me. Did you solve it?”

Sherlock levels his gaze at him, taps his spoon from handle to bowl and back again by the side of his plate and then exhales. “No,” he says, somewhat superciliously. “The information proved too stale and the criminal was long gone.”

I’m not John, I can tell when you’re fibbing.

John leans back in his chair, disconcerted through he can’t quite put his finger on why. “Oh.” He frowns slightly, tasting salt on his lower lip and then in the next moment the feeling’s gone and he reaches for his glass again. “That’s a shame. Still, it was a good night out.”

Sherlock folds his hands up under his chin, resting his elbows on the table and makes a vague noise of agreement. He looks tired; distracted. John’s not sure why and it troubles him. It reminds him of that other winter, when everything had come apart.

Under the table, John extends a leg and taps his foot on the toe of Sherlock’s Oxford to get his attention.

Head home soon?

Sherlock lifts his chin in acceptance, making the long lines of his neck flex. John knows from experience how it’s a mugs game to try and gauge strength by outward appearance. Molly Hooper can shift a full grown man from one bench to another single-handed- he knows because he’s seen her do so, and she looks like a strong wind could blow her over. Contrarily, Mycroft Holmes has the height and broad shoulders of a rugby winger, but lacks the muscle to do anything with it.

My brother has the brain of a scientist of a philosopher, yet he elects to be a detective.

John smiles vaguely to his plate. That’s Sherlock. Neither one thing nor the other. The long fine fingers of an artist, but the scuffed knuckles of a fighter. Intellect and ignorance, independence and dependence, too many contrary notions all rolled into one bizarre mechanism of a man.

Sherlock can be bleak and harsh, but there are times it seems less like his innate nature and more like he's just hanging on for the sun to come out on him.

"I got you something," John says, feeling for his coat pocket. Sherlock pulls himself out of a knot of thought and looks at him.

"Oh, John, no. I don't do presents. If I start doing presents, I'll have to get presents for people and I'll never remember."

John holds up a hand to placate him. "I know, I know, but I just saw it today and thought, 'why not?'. It's nothing special."

It's a slim box, unwrapped, without markings; as unthreatening as John could make it. Sherlock runs a thumb down the side- probably he can tell that the item and box were bought separately. The most discernible effort John's gone to is to scrape the price label off of the bottom and put the lid on. John's teeth and tongue finds a little loose skin on his lip and worries at it, hoping Sherlock's not going to hate the gift.

"I hope you haven't gone off them entirely, but you're always faffing with your collar and I thought since you lost or ate the other one..."

John watches as Sherlock lifts the lid from the box and the soft folds of fabric spill out almost at once towards his lap. It's not cashmere, he couldn't afford the twin of the old scarf, but it is vintage and it is, to his eyes at least, a bit Sherlock. Similar size and weight, and it's got the tassels. Sherlock lifts it, laying the empty box down.

"Is it alright?"

Sherlock clears his throat, and his expression hard to read. "Yes. Um, fine." He lifts the scarf and drapes it around his neck, smoothing the cool folds of it against the sides of his throat. "Quite warm," he comments.

John thinks about how much of Sherlock's neck is habitually left bare when he's not in his coat, and gives a little chuckle. "Well, that's what they're designed for."

"Thank you."

"Colour ok?"

Sherlock shifts in his chair to regard himself in the mirror formed by the lights against the glass of the window and tweaks at the scarf. "Dramatic," he says, flicking John a look from the corner of his eye.

More you than me.

"It does look redder on you somehow..." John says doubtfully. On the rack it had seemed rather normal, although decent quality. On Sherlock, it comes across a touch piratical. He likes it. "Besides," he adds to try and lighten the odd look on Sherlock's face. "Red's a warning colour."

"Hm?"

"Give people a fair chance to get out of the way."

Sherlock gives a snort of both annoyance and amusement, then with a deft movement, fixes the scarf to lie exactly how he wants it. "There."

“Looks good,” John says, honestly. He reaches behind himself and puts a hand on the back of his chair, turning his head to scan the restaurant.

“At the back on the left,” Sherlock supplies and then sniggers when John complains.

“God, please stop deducing my bladder.”

“Go. Hurry up; I’ll get the bill.”

He watches John walk away and considers how much less bowed he is looking now, compared to when he first moved back. Sherlock rubs the balls of his thumbs over the muscles of his palms and is lost in a muddle of rumination when the waiter returns.

“Is it alright if I take the plates?”

Sherlock grunts an affirmative, not even looking up at the waiter. At some point in the interim the baby’s managed to get both hands in the remains of the stew and effectively washed them in it.

She kicks her legs and watches Sherlock as he tries to catch her messy hands and daub them clean on a napkin, although the wretched thing is coming apart with the sauce. It’s a good game to her, squirming her hands out of his grasp- one minute as high in the air as she can get them, the next flailing like tiny clubs around his face.

“We might have some wet wipes, if that’d help?” the waiter offers.

Sherlock jerks his head slightly in his direction. “Please.”

The waiter comes back with them a moment later and must have small kids of his own because he has the savviness to waggle the box at the baby enticingly, tugging a wet wipe slightly free. She knows what they are of course, and at this incitement grabs the wipe and pulls it free in triumph.

“There we go; what a girl,” cheers the waiter.

“Wipe hands, Bee,” Sherlock catches her elbow while she’s distracted and gets a good go at the sauce on the left hand. Helpfully she jams her other paw on his shirt cuff for him to wipe. Sherlock looks at the stain with pursed lips and wordlessly, the waiter hands him another wipe.

“How old is she?”

“Ten months and twelve days,” Sherlock supplies. Or by his other count, a mere four months and ten days since she moved into his life at a tangible level. One hundred and thirty-two days that he has known her- a tiny blip of existence compared to his own 12,410. Just about 1% of his entire life span. He calculates, not for the first time, that at his best push given how things stand, he may garner another 2.6% before things... go their natural way. He swallows.

“Wow, that’s precise,” the waiter says, oblivious to Sherlock’s train of thought and then withers slightly when Sherlock looks at him like he’s a complete idiot. “Um, she’s really well behaved.”

“Wakes a lot; restless sleeper,” Sherlock says, “Incremental improvements to between 90-95% of an 8 hour stint over the last three months. No teeth.”

The waiter takes this on philosophically. “Bit like my nan then.”

“ ‘At first the infant, mewling and puking in the nurse’s arms; last scene of all, is second childishness and mere oblivion, sans teeth, sans eyes, sans taste, sans everything’ .”

This, it seems, is too much even for the waiter's good nature. He inhales, pauses awkwardly and then suggests, "Can I get you any dessert menus?"

"Just the bill please," Sherlock says grimly.

John washes his hands and gives himself the once over in the bathroom mirror. 'I'm looking round', he thinks with a sudden shock, reaching up to feel along his cheeks and jaw. Not fat; he's in no immediate danger of a double chin or a chubby neck, but he's gained weight since Halloween. He feels around the collar, unable to get more than the tip of his fingers between the cotton and his neck, and wonders where some of that hollowness has gone.

He could still stand some sprucing up, he thinks. The suit's starting to look tired and he's overdue a haircut. He moves the tuft of his fringe around with a frown, unable to get it to look right to his soldier's eye and makes yet another mental note to see the barber. God knows when; every day seems so full these days with Bee and Sherlock and the little unpredictable circles the pair of them operate in.

Mary and I think seven.

It's nowhere near seven, John thinks. He's still thinner than he was back in June. He breathes, takes pleasure in seeing the smart lines of his suit jacket rise and fall and then adjusts his tie. He'll drop in the barber's tomorrow, after leaving Bee at nursery. He'll get some beer for the fridge and- no, he'll give Lestrade a ring and see if he's got an hour for a pint on Sunday, and catch up with the rugby. Hell, maybe he'll even stick around for one of those parent-child coffee mornings they're always doing over at the day care centre. Start doing a bit better. A bit more.

You were doing just fine, you old sappy.

'I'm trying to,' John thinks.

He wipes his hands on his handkerchief and treads back into the restaurant to be greeted with a merry gurgle from his daughter and a soft, pleading look from Sherlock. The waiter is hovering, and John presses his lips together against a smile.

"What's up?"

"Card machine," Sherlock says, irked, flicking a hand at it. He's forgotten his PIN, and the mere fact is making his skin itch because he never normally draws a blank on such details.

John glances at him, puzzled. "It's fine, I'll get it." He reaches for his own wallet and between the waiter and himself, swaps Sherlock's card for notes. "Probably the chips a bit knackered," he comments, painstakingly counting out enough bills to cover it. Sherlock looks at him to promise to split the costs later but doesn't even get as far as meeting John's eye before the other man waves it off. "It's on me."

Sherlock clears his throat, and to John's amazement, he's looking almost embarrassed.

"I'll be back with your receipt in just a moment," the waiter says, "I just need to change the roll in this..." He walks up. John reaches to get Bee's coat and his own off of the peg.

"What's the matter?" he asks.

"Nothing," Sherlock replies, getting up and fumbling into the Belstaff.

“It’s not nothing. You’re not upset that I paid, are you?”

“No, no. Not at all.”

“You are.” John looks at him, taken aback. “It bothers you.”

“It’s fine.”

“I just wanted to do something nice. You know, you are my best friend and it is your birthday.”

“Oh, *John*,” Sherlock says with such irritation that, wounded, John lets the matter drop.

“You bloody pay next time then,” he grumbles into his coat collar, zipping it with more force than necessary. They shuffle out of the window area towards the main doors, John hitching Bee from the highchair and tugging her hat on one-handedly. The waiter returns.

“Here we are then, sorry about the wait. One receipt, your change, two mints and if she’s allowed,” the waiter produces a little open plastic packet with a flourish which he offers to Sherlock. “A chocolate button for your daughter.”

John hears himself inhale, sees Sherlock do something quite similar and then seemingly without pause, Sherlock says, “Thank you,” rustles a button from the bag and turns towards John. “Here, Bee, choccy. Open up-“

She guppies at his fingers automatically and he posts the chocolate in.

“John, the door?”

“Right. Yes. Thanks then,” John manages, reaching for the door handle blindly and feeling the rush of cold air that comes in, snapping him back together. “You can keep the change.”

“Thanks! Come again!” The waiter waves them off as they tilt out into the night.

They’re quiet as they walk, Sherlock typing on his phone and hardly watching his feet and certainly not looking at John, who lets it slide until they’re halfway down the road before he says his name. “Sherlock?”

The other doesn’t respond other than to jerk his head slightly. John sighs.

“Don’t do this. Look, I’m sorry.”

At this Sherlock does lift his gaze, with a tightness around his eyes that speaks to John mostly of bewilderment.

“For... offending your ego- being too sentimental- whatever that was back there.”

“It’s fine. The meal was good,” Sherlock says, and looking at John, regrets the half-lie and the fact that both of them have worked so hard to keep John ignorant of the workings of his mind that it’s come to this at all. He opens his mouth to say something- he’s not sure what, but the baby yawns hugely, so what he says is simply, “I need to text Mycroft about this case.”

John smiles, not because he’s happy but because there’s nothing else he can do. “Alright,” he says, and like always, keeps his own council. Sherlock lapses into grateful silence and puts his energy into harassing Mycroft via text.

By the time they reach home, Sherlock's fired off a half dozen messages of increasing rudeness and received none in return. Irrked, he sends off one more as he climbs the stairs to their flat, absent-mindedly following John halfway through the kitchen before he realises that John's heading to the bedroom to start the baby's bedtime routine.

He looks at the screen and frowns. He's threatened to call Mycroft, and still, no reply. Usually by now he's had something; even if it's a proxy from Anthea telling him to try again later. He's spent a good number of years being too difficult and too unpredictable for Mycroft to go around ignoring his messages entirely.

Sherlock makes coffee, watching the pot and the phone and drumming his fingers on the countertop nervously. He tips grounds into the pot, scrapes an unknown stain off of the outside with a thumbnail and then drowns the coffee with nearly-boiled water.

The phone remains silent.

He pours out two mugs; John's usual and his own in the bone china, sugar in one and milk in neither.

John splashes the baby in the bath and then emerges to take the coffee en route to the bedroom, the kid in a towel over his shoulder like a sack of potatoes. She wails against being wrestled into pyjamas and then settles down as John tells her a rather bored and abridged version of Cinderella by turning two pages at a time.

Within half an hour she's asleep, and the phone is still silent.

Perturbed, Sherlock takes it upstairs with him and follows through on his threat to call.

It rings, clicks and then a smooth female voice answers. *"This is a voicemail messaging service. Your call cannot be taken at present. Please leave your name and number after the to-"*

Sherlock hangs up, stare at his phone in confusion and horror and dials the number again from memory. It rings. It clicks.

"This is a voicemail messaging service. Your call cannot be taken at pres-"

He slams his thumb into the screen to hang up again, swallowing hard. He dials a different number and listens. It rings. It clicks.

"You have reached the Economic Service office. For inquiries relating to accounts, press one. For-" Sherlock wishes he had a handset to justify slamming the phone down. With stiff fingers he dials a third number and presses to send the call, clapping the phone to his ear. It rings, it clicks; a different, more familiar female voice.

"Mycroft Holmes's Line is currently unavailable. Someone will return your call at the next available opportunity."

He rings it three times in total, listening each time to the same recording of Anthea's voice and each time his stomach folds in on itself a little more. Her tone is smooth and even, but he can hear how she refrains from breathing throughout the whole of the message, except in a little puff at the end.

Shell-shocked, he stumbles back into the sitting room, still clutching his phone. John twitches his

head to look at him from the sofa, notices his expression and mutes the TV at once. “What’s happened?”

“Mycroft isn’t answering his phone.”

John is slow to connect the distant dots and understand the cold throb of panic sinking into Sherlock’s bowels. “Well, maybe he’s in a–”

“No, he’s not answering his other phone either!”

“Alright, don’t- Just keep calm. What about–”

“Tried it. She’s diverted all calls to the office to a *directory service*,” Sherlock spits the last words out in contempt and poorly concealed concern. “Something’s happened. I’ve missed something. Shut up!”

John waits as Sherlock stands stock still in the middle of the room, hands at his temples. As the minute hand on the clock ticks on, John goes to put his socks back on and put his shoes by the door. He checks on the baby and then is about to go and rally Mrs. Hudson when Sherlock snaps to life with a cry.

“He’ll be at home. Gone to earth. Westminster.”

“Alright, let’s go.”

“No!”

Sherlock turns in a circle from the window back to his armchair, disoriented. “No, I need someone here.”

“Sherlock?”

It’s all going wrong. Backwards. He needs to see Mycroft if only to remind himself how necessary John is and how little he needs the rest of it and to do that John can’t be there. Only now it’s twisting on it’s head and he needs John more than ever because if something is as wrong with Mycroft as his every instinct is screaming that it is, he doesn’t know what he’ll do.

“Stay here,” Sherlock repeats. He does another circuit, blindly collects the toy elephant from where it’s fallen down the side of the sofa and thrusts it into John’s arms. John tucks it under his elbow and follows him to the coat rack.

“Are you sure?” John reaches and catches his elbow, mouth dry. “God, be careful. Actually no, bollocks to all that, I’m coming with you.”

“Bee needs someone to look after her.”

“Mrs. Hudson–”

“Soothe,” Sherlock interrupts. “She’s out.”

“Wi–”

“I don’t know where he is. John. Stay.”

John looks at him, his expression open and honest. Don’t leave us.

Sherlock stills. In memory he feels John's hand on the back of his neck at Christmas, and the heaving of their breath. In his mind, he puts a hand out in return to touch John's shoulder, to reassure and more basely, to connect. In reality, his fingers stay knotted on the plastic of the telephone. John hesitates half a pace forward.

Come back home again.

Sherlock reaches up and adjusts the scarf under the collar of his Belstaff.

"Keep in touch," John says, aloud. He standing there in the middle of the carpet. He's still got the elephant tucked in the crook of his arms and the light from the street-lamps on the dark road making both of them seem like they're in the midst of being beamed up to some distant place Sherlock knows not where. John adds, "If I can help... I've got my mobile on. Call."

Sherlock pauses in the doorway, the tips of the fingers on his free hand brushing the sleeve of John's jacket where it hangs on its peg.

He nods.

—
—

The building in Westminster is as quiet and as ordinary as it gets for a multi-million pound abode; a sweet and easy trot to both Whitehall and Pall Mall. Sherlock stalks the street before the blank faces of the houses. There's security, of course, there is always something by way of CCTV and alarms and on particularly prickly days there are staff. He lurks by fence and frowns.

Mycroft's apartment on the Birdcage is set on the upper storey; hard to make out through the leaves of the trees that line both park and Walk, but the lights are on.

A car sweeps by; just your average Volvo, and Sherlock ducks to cross the road from the park. He has Mycroft's key in his pocket and the security codes in his head. He scans the pavement and frontage for anything out of the ordinary.

There's nothing.

It's quiet.

He lets himself in; takes the stairs rather than the elevator for privacy and notes that the unblinking eyes of the security cameras are apparently functional and untampered with.

Sherlock sidles in the corridor. There's no one around. He leans back and down against the wall to catch the best angle of the light across it's surface, looking for snags. Signs of a scuffle.

He finds only the smudgey marks left by damp fingers on the wallpaper; a left hand, male, the ring and smallest finger slightly curled in, at about head height. Someone stumbled and put a hand up awkwardly to right themselves. Sweating, or they otherwise had wet hands. It hasn't rained today.

It's too well lit in the corridor for any light to seep out under the door. Sherlock rubs his fingers together, making the leather of his gloves creak, and then dials in the security code to open the door. He has no gun, but there are a few barely-legal surprises under his coat should anyone be waiting for him.

There's scuffing on the pile of the thick carpet by the door- two sets of feet, and a coat hung on the peg that Mycroft wouldn't be seen dead in. Sherlock sniffs the sleeve. Smoker. Low-tar. Benson &

Hedges Silver; Sherlock would put money on it.

Familiar.

“Come in, if you’re coming in.”

Sherlock looks up sharply. He pads forward, hands in his pockets, head lowered as though he can butt his way with sheer brute force through whatever situation awaits him in the living room, and finds himself growing angry.

Mycroft looks up as he enters and the sight of him makes Sherlock falter.

Disarmed, Sherlock sweeps the room with a look; there are books and a new bottle of water on the coffee table. The radio is on very low- something in the line of mid-19th century German opera. Glass and plate by the armchair; empty, residual scum indicative of beer, discarded plastic poppers from a packet of paracetamol in the wastepaper basket. Newer, clinically wrapped medication on the mantelpiece, the directions folded discretely next to them; they’ve been opened, read and refolded- not by Mycroft. Mycroft wouldn’t bother.

“You have the most horrendous timing,” Mycroft tells him wearily.

“Someone else is here.”

“Staff,” Mycroft replies. He drops his eyes and awkwardly shifts the blanket a little higher up his torso. Sherlock likewise drops his gaze from his brother’s face to his body.

“Let’s not,” Mycroft suggests, but a little too late.

He’s holding something to himself under the blanket with his left hand- damp fingers- icepack- and there’s the telltale combination of pockmark and plaster-mark on the back of his right. Loose-fitting clothing; not Mycroft’s staples. Something bought for the occasion.

“Surgery?” Sherlock stares at him. He can understand the facts but not the motive. “You’re not ill.”

“Fortunately, no,” Mycroft says, and although his tone is largely wry there’s a hint of honest relief in there also. He rolls his eyes up to regard Sherlock with closeted concern. He looks bloodless, Sherlock thinks; like something that’s been dunked in formaldehyde and the hollows of his eyes in the lamplight are stark. He looks weak.

He looks human.

“This was planned,” Sherlock says accusingly. “You’ve known about this for at least a week or- no, more. You’ve known since before *Christmas*.” He almost can’t believe his own words. “Does Mummy know?”

Mycroft looks appalled. “Of course she doesn’t. She’s the last person who needs to know.” He gives Sherlock a somewhat darker look.

They lapse into a silence that speaks volumes. Sherlock ranges back and forth in irritated laps before the sofa, rallying his words. Mycroft digs himself back into the cushions of the sofa like a toad under a stone and gives Sherlock a bilious look.

Sherlock untangles the sequence of events. “Before Christmas,” he repeats, “hence your ridiculous gift-giving and the case. Busy work, Mycroft, *really*?”

“You didn’t suspect,” Mycroft replies, lifting his chin and even in this reduced state, managing to look smug.

“Time to clear your schedule and divert resources to your minions; approximately a week- they’d have rushed you to the top of the clinic schedules. Then you deliberately waited; what? Three, four, days longer to have the surgery. Why?” Sherlock blurts, even as the answer occurs to him.

Mycroft shifts in his seat, eyes narrowing with a suppressed wince. “January the sixth. One of the few days of the year that I could almost guarantee that you wouldn’t try calling me,” he says with a sigh of weary exasperation. “So much for that.” He extends a hand and crossly, Sherlock thrusts the water bottle on the coffee table into his palm.

He watches as the his brother cracks the seal on the plastic cap and drinks slowly. Mycroft sets it down on his thigh after and his expression grows milder. “It was none of your business.”

This makes Sherlock snap at once. “Of course it’s my business. Everything’s my business.”

“Yes, little bother, how silly of me to think otherwise.” Mycroft lets his right leg slide off of the sofa and lolls there, uncharacteristically careless. Sherlock sweeps the room again, and adjusts his timeframe. They could only have returned to the house an hour or so ago.

“High blood pressure,” Sherlock mutters.

“Bravo, you’ve figured me out,” Mycroft throws back, rather tetchy. “Is there anything else? Haven’t you got-” he gives a sudden grunt of discomfort and breaks off to adjust how he’s sitting. “-Peek-a-boo and bedtime stories to be getting on with? Fluffy bunnies?”

He looks up and then away again at the fury of emotion on Sherlock’s face.

“No? Most of your stories are inappropriate anyway.”

“Well, I got them all from you,” Sherlock spits.

“Yes,” Mycroft concedes, “That’s no doubt true.”

Sherlock stands there bristling, angry with Mycroft and angry with himself for having rushed over like a worried fool and shown too much of his hand. Mycroft’s not going to let him hear the end of this. On the other hand, he’s not the one clutching a bag of ice to his crotch.

“Oh sit down,” Mycroft complains. He eases himself to the edge of the sofa and puts both feet on the floor. “I’m meant to be *relaxing*.” He gives the word as much scorn as Sherlock feels that it rightly deserves. “And text.”

“I did, you’ve turned your phone off. Your phone.”

“Not me,” Mycroft wipes his free hand across his face and looks like he’s been given a lemon to suck on. “Your ridiculous... friend. Before he rushes out with some illegal firearm and gives us all a headache.”

Sherlock opens his mouth to snap and then the smarter part of his mind reminds him of John’s face when he waltzed out. Mycroft is right. John’ll be turning circles, worrying. Going from previous experience, Sherlock wouldn’t put it past him to call up Molly even at his hour for some babysitting and come charging after him.

Wordlessly he reaches for his phone.

[False Alarm. I'll be back soon. -SH]

The reply is immediate.

[Good. See you at home.]

"There," Mycroft says, exhausted and irritable. "Have you had your fill now? Seen quite enough? Do you recall where the door is? Oh, don't look like that."

He looks at Sherlock, actually surprised at how wounded he appears. He opens his mouth- either to repent or put the other boot in as well, only then someone awkwardly clears their throat at the doorway.

They both turn to look.

"Do I need to break you two up, or... is this a 'come back later' kind of fight?" Lestrade asks, incredibly uncomfortable.

Familiar tobacco. It's been obvious since Sherlock stepped through the door and yet seeing it in the flesh takes him aback.

"Lestrade."

"Yeah. Hi." For something to do, Lestrade collects up the empty beer glass and plate and turns off the radio. He coughs, and then beats a retreat to the kitchen.

"Lestrade?" Sherlock repeats to Mycroft in disbelief. "You said 'staff'. Lestrade's not *staff*." He finds himself bristling suddenly on Lestrade's behalf.

"Desperate times," Mycroft replies, "Desperate measures." He holds Sherlock's gaze coolly enough, but Sherlock gets the gut impression that this callousness is a show for his benefit.

"Yes, he must be desperate," Sherlock throws back at him with equal coldness. "How very busy you are these days."

Mycroft prickles. "Sherlock Holmes, go home. There's nothing for you to do here. Nothing needed anyway."

Sherlock rears himself to his full height, haughty with pride and ego that suddenly feels rather flimsy and silly. "I need the remainder of all the files from 2006 regarding property transactions."

Mycroft closes his eyes and purses his lips. "I'll have them sent," he says shortly. He gropes for the water again and Sherlock wonders if the look on his face isn't actual nausea. He'd like to ask, if only because he's the closest to the waste paper basket and if Mycroft is going to be so gauche as to actually vomit, it's easily the most water-tight thing to stick in front of him.

"Fine," he says instead, and then throws in with false flippancy. "Get well soon."

His brother's fingers tighten slightly on his knee and Mycroft swallows back a hitch in his breath which might be pain or sickness again. Sherlock closes his mouth and, rattled, tries to button up a coat that he never unbuttoned.

"Goodnight," he says and turns his back. He keeps his shoulders straight until he gets to the hall and then out of the judgement of Mycroft's gaze, has to catch himself against the wall with one hand. His head's spinning.

“Sherlock?”

“What?” He snaps and stiffens up again, pulling himself together. Lestrade stands, a tea-towel slung forgetfully over one shoulder, looking at him cautiously.

Lestrade licks his lips and shifts his weight from leg to leg. “Just um...I’m sure Mycroft’s said a bit, but I’m just here because Anthea got snarled up in some...something. You know. Politics.”

“Lestrade, I don’t care what you do.”

“Alright,” Lestrade says, not believing him in the slightest. “Ok. That’s... good, I guess? Well, no, but-“

“What. Do you want?” Sherlock says, turning on his heel to face him. “Is there something?”

Lestrade recoils slightly. “Sure, take it out on me,” he grumbles half-heartedly. “I was just... checking in before you go. I mean, he’s probably said nothing but a load of posh twat faddle.” He jerks his head back towards the living room. “I wanted to ask if you had any, I dunno, questions?”

Sherlock’s whole head is ablaze with too many questions-it always is; that’s his whole damn problem.

“What was it?”

Lestrade blinks, contrarily stupid. “Oh-I thought you’d have figured that much out.”

Sherlock slams the flat of his palm into the wall. “I’m not a doctor! I can deduce a half dozen things that I’m certain that he hasn’t got- but- damn it, Lestrade- tell me!”

“Alright,” Lestrade holds his hands up to placate him. “Breathe, sunshine. Don’t bite my bloody hand off. He’s going to be fine.”

“Details!”

Lestrade huffs out a long breath. “He found a lump.”

Sherlock stares at him. He’s not prone to running with what-ifs when he knows the outcome of a given scenario, but for a moment his mind reels off into a version of events he has scarcely ever contemplated. “Lump?”

“The doctors couldn’t really say what it was at first; there was a number of possible reasons, but yeah, worst case possibilities were mentioned. As it turned out when they went in to biopsy it, it was just a case of torsion.”

“Torsion.”

“Yeah, they removed it without problem, although he wasn’t too clever off of the anaesthetic. Bit delicate, your brother.” Lestrade’s mouth flickers in an odd smile. “He’s got a course of antibiotics to go through, but all bar the prosthetic, that’s it.”

Sherlock hardly knows how to react to that. “Prosthetic.”

“Keeps... things balanced, or so I’m told,” Lestrade replies awkwardly. “And he’s alright now. Well, he’s got time off work so you can imagine how much that’s pissing him off. Hey,” Lestrade claps Sherlock’s shoulder. “He’s fine.”

"I know that. He's fine." Sherlock turns blindly to stare at Lestrade's hand like it's a revolting foreign object.

Lestrade squints at Sherlock's face. "Are you fine?"

"Fine."

"Only you're doing that thing where you repeat stuff."

Sherlock shrugs him off and employs his hands in adjusting his collar and scarf, pulling the scarlet more snugly around the back of his neck so that he can feel it press against his nape.

"Look, don't rush off like this," Lestrade says, concerned. "Stay and have tea first, or something."

"No, John's making dinner."

"I'll have tea," Mycroft says from the doorway. He shuffles forward, holding the frame like an old man. "Do go home, Sherlock," he adds more softly. "I'll call."

"Don't," Sherlock advises. He jerks up his collar and leaves.

The door shuts and Mycroft closes his eyes. "There go conversations for the future." He gives Lestrade a tired look. "None of which are really called for."

"Not true, and you know it," Lestrade replies, the shortness of his tone tempered by empathy for them both. Mycroft eases away from the wall and Lestrade lets him lean companionably on his arm. "You'll have to speak to him sooner or later."

"Later," Mycroft pleads. "I need to get back to work soon."

"Later then," Lestrade agrees. "Work soon, and for now, recovery for you."

"Oh, Matron."

"You should be so lucky." Lestrade smiles, turning him towards the bathroom and as he lets go of his arm, Mycroft chooses not to acknowledge that the smile doesn't quite reach his eyes.

Lestrade pulls shut the bathroom door on Mycroft and digs deep for a second. Then, with his usual steadiness, he goes on with things. He pats the bathroom door.

"Right, I'm going to put the dishes away." He softens a sigh against the sleeve of his sweater. "I'll be next door if you need me."

John wakes when Sherlock enters the room. He often does these days, now that Sherlock's not being sneaky about it, and now that he knows to expect it. He usually doesn't mention it or sit up, but this time Sherlock's been standing by the crib for a long while.

"What's the matter?" John asks, leaning up on one elbow to peer at the pair of them, tousled over the mound of his own body.

Sherlock, nothing more than a dim silhouette against the window, pauses a moment and then shakes his head. "Nothing, she's sleeping."

"Oh." John catches the pale flash of Sherlock's face as he quietly turns to leave. "Was everything

ok with Mycroft?"

Sherlock gives a little hum. "Broke his phone."

John chuffs with relief. "Idiot. 'Night, then."

"Goodnight."

Sherlock closes the door softly behind him, and John settles himself back down into his pillows. He hears the soft tread of Sherlock's feet as they pass a single circuit around the living room and the click of switches. The light that creeps in under the door vanishes, and then growing more distant he hears Sherlock's step upon the stairs. The boards creak as he reaches the top, and then there's the gentle thud of the bedroom door closing and silence.

The baby grunts in her sleep, shifts once and then drifts off back into a deeper slumber, and John, tugging the covers up against the cold, does likewise.

Sherlock sleeps late; John leaves him to it. After months of night-shifting with the baby, he's certainly earned it. John stands in front of the refrigerator, gently squashing porridge into his daughter with one hand, the other cupped around a mug of tea, and he stares at the blank white front of the machine.

The post-it notes have dwindled down to nothing.

The first few days John treats as happenstance, although by the end of the week he's starting to consider that this may, tentatively, be habit. By the end of two weeks, he can't deny it any longer. She sleeps through the night now. John puts her to bed at eight, John gets her up at six and Sherlock's inconsistent schedule has settled down to reflect that. He vanishes upstairs a couple of hours after John has put himself to bed, and is up half an hour later than him in the morning to avoid clashing for the shower.

It feels strange; this new routine. John notices he feels suddenly tired by mid-afternoon and although the days are growing longer, they're becoming fuller and so feel shorter. John finds himself blinking and missing a morning, and yet waking up that day could not feel further away. The baby demands constant attention and more entertainment than ever.

Sherlock's quiet, mostly. John's not altogether disused to that. He's long ago realised that despite the oddities of Sherlock, there's an often quiet man under all the loudness of his character. He's taken to picking at his violin rather than playing, and ghosts around between cases, tinkering with his more inoffensive gadgetry and perfecting his safe cracking skills. He rotates around the flat. When John enters a room, especially if he's got the kid on his arm, Sherlock politely vacates it. He's still working, in as much as John can tell, with whatever case it is that Mycroft has given him, but that bothers John as well. Usually by now, Sherlock's talked his ear off about what it is he's doing and yet so far, the man's kept schtum.

John's been so preoccupied, and Sherlock's manoeuvred so slyly that it's only when John actually stops to think about it that he notices something has gone a bit amiss.

Sherlock's so quiet that now and then John catches himself going still to listen to the flat; checking

that Sherlock is still there. All that happens is that the baby starts up with odd jags of crying again and flushes of temperature. John walks her up and down the living room, soothing her through her first experience with teething. It's a distraction that pushes John back into tiredness from lack of sleep, and his concerns about Sherlock to the place of second priority.

She's eleven months old when she finally cuts her first tooth. "Slow," Sherlock comments.

"It's genetic," John says defensively. "Sometimes babies don't get teeth until they're over a year. There's nothing wrong with her."

"I didn't say that," Sherlock replies. He watches as John rubs Bonjela into the baby's gums and her baffled expression; a mix of relief at the ease of her aches, and disgust at the flavour.

At any rate she is developing slowly but surely. More and more she's starting to look like a little girl, moving away from the amorphously-gendered blob of babyhood. Her noises have grown more concentrated; she's learnt to 'reply' and they have whole garbled conversations now, with such realistic stress and intonation that John frequently catches himself doing a double take and asking himself 'Is that a word?' but as with everything else, she seems to be taking her own time.

Her legs have grown stronger and he has to pick her up more than once from a bump after making an ambitious little launch from chair to coffee table. She wobbles around upright but it's not walking, in John's book, as she still hangs on like a monkey to something in order to manage it. It's a shift in the right direction.

John's been trying to bribe her. He lets her stand, hanging onto his armchair for support and then waves treats at her, trying to tempt her to walk towards him, which so far has only ended in her bewilderment and then tears. John huffs and picks her up, pushing the biscuit into her maw to stop the crying, and then spotting Sherlock raising an eyebrow, slopes off sheepishly to be a competitive father out of range of judgement. The fact of the matter is, his daughter's one of the last to hit stages compared to her nursery peers. Mrs. Hudson's opinion is that the baby is perhaps, now she's getting bigger, being a little bit 'too loved'.

"Bloody isn't," John mutters to Sherlock, brows knitted. "Not bloody possible. She's not spoiled."

"Of course not," Sherlock says, unthinkingly. John scowls and huffs.

"Do you think I'm spoiling her?"

Sherlock parts his hands from in front of his face and gives John a long-suffering look.

How can I possibly reply to that?

John stands there, troubled. It's a fair response; the question only put Sherlock on the spot and it's not as though he's got extensive personal knowledge of small children. Bar the ones that infrequently grace his clinic, before he became a father, John hadn't either.

"I don't do everything for her though..." John says, thinking out loud and as soon as he's said it, he realises it's not quite true. For the last fortnight, whenever he's been home, he has. Feeds, baths, bedtimes and getting up. He does it all. Sherlock interrupts his thoughts.

"Some research suggests that prior to the six-month mark, babies are virtually impossible to spoil, however from six-months onwards caution should be undertaken not to mistake all crying for distress signals, and with displaying anxiety when the infant explores a new situation and that sleeping routines should be enforced."

Sherlock looks away towards the window, idly scratching at his forearms as though he hasn't just dropped a line from Dr. Spock's Baby Manual on John.

"Jesus, you've read more than I have," John says. He props his arm against his ribcage, presses the back of his other hand to his mouth and watches the baby push blocks around. "Do I do that?"

Sherlock makes a variety of shoulder motions that John can't quite interpret. "Sherlock," John broaches, and the tone of his voice makes Sherlock look up.

"Look, I know I've mentioned this before and you weren't keen on it, but... that offer still stands. The one Mary and I made you, after, you know... that Christmas."

Sherlock seems calm, but John sees him retreat a step back into himself. They don't talk about what happened. They don't mention that particular mess, and how disgustingly, undeservingly fortunate they were to come out of the other end of it with liberty and livelihood intact. They work within the parameters set by it, but not talking about it makes it easier to pretend that they don't.

"I know you said no before, but..." John continues. "She still hasn't got a godfather."

He's known Sherlock too long and loved him too much not to recognise that Sherlock is touched by the offer. He also knows in that moment, that Sherlock will turn it down again.

"Lestrade," Sherlock says, at length. "He's agnostic and his background is cl- more... fatherly."

"I wouldn't ask Lestrade," John tells him without thinking.

The look Sherlock gives him is strange. There's a blink of something brittle in his face and then it's gone again with a wave of Sherlock's hand; all blaze humour. "Of course not. The man just needs giving a date and a time and he'll jump knives to be there. Excuse me," he pushes out of his armchair like it's been attached to the mains and the switch flipped and skirts around both baby and John, giving each a wide berth.

John can't argue, or press him to agree. He makes no move to stop him. Sherlock sweeps up the newspapers from the coffee table and heads for the stairs to John's old room, his nails digging at the skin of his forearm.

John dumps the pushchair in the downstairs hall and climbs the stairs, lumping the baby from one elbow to the other as he feels for the key to the flat. Below him; footsteps.

"John, dear? That you?"

"It's me, Mrs. Hudson," John replies, arresting his ascent of the stairs. "Is he home?"

"Who?"

"Sherlock, who else?" John traces his steps back down, flustered. "Has he come home?"

Mrs. Hudson shakes her head, owlish with sympathy. "No, dear. Haven't heard anyone all morning except the postman and he only stopped in at Mrs. Turners. Her marrieds are e-mail baying or something."

"Yes, yes, they're both completely howling," John says distractedly. "Shit."

"Language!" Mrs. Hudson swats him and then puts an arm around him, herding him towards her kitchen. "Come and have a cup of tea and tell me what's the matter. Molly's here. Look, Molly, it's John."

Molly gets up from the table. Her sleeves are rolled up to the elbow and there's the wreckage of most of a package of biscuits left on the counter. John infers that she and Mrs. Hudson have been having one of their 'girl talks'.

John eases the baby down to the floor where she sets off at a crawl to stick herself headfirst in Mrs. Hudson's handbag.

"Not to worry," Mrs. Hudson trills, seeing John's alarm. "Nothing in there she can do herself any harm with. There, see?"

John leans to check, and sure enough the baby's sat comfortably against the table leg, contentedly shaking out the pages of Mrs. Hudson planner.

"I thought Sherlock was with you?" Molly says, folding her hands in front of her. She sits again at Mrs. Hudson's gesture. "Wasn't he?"

"He went out earlier- again- I don't know where or what and I've messaged him but- bollocks!"

"John!"

"Sorry."

"He'll be somewhere, working on something. You know how he gets," Molly says anxiously.

"Maybe he's been to the yard. Their evidence vaults get hardly any signal. They're worse than the tube."

"I can't get hold of Lestrade either; he's in court today," John tells her, unthinkingly swigging his tea and then spluttering over his sleeve when he scalds his mouth. "Oh, fuck everything!"

Mrs. Hudson clips his ear with the corner of her tea towel. "Once more in my kitchen, you, and I'll have soap in your mouth before you can say 'knife'."

"Jesus almighty, alright, alright!" John rubs distractedly at his own cheek, feeling the first faint rasps of stubble. "Where would he have gone..."

"Martha said he had something he was doing with name cards. Uh, business cards," Molly rationalises. "Maybe he's gone out on the trail- finding houses or something."

"He'd have taken me along. He loves company on day trips," John replies, certain. "I don't trust this case, either. It's one of Mycroft's, and they always- They always end in trouble. Why's he not talking to me? Or you? Why don't we know?"

John puts down his tea un-drunk and stands for a moment, drumming his fingers on the tabletop. There's no answer to his questions; he doesn't expect one either. Eventually he says, resigned. "I think we should check the flat."

"Oh, John, no!" Mrs. Hudson says. "Surely not."

"I-I-I don't know," John throws his hands up. "He's being secretive. Going out without saying where- It could be that."

“Not with little Bee,” Mrs. Hudson stiffly leans down to brush the baby’s curls. “He wouldn’t.”

John feels his jaw tighten. “He would. Because, he wouldn’t be able to help himself, whatever he says about having it in check- that’s what relapse is. It doesn’t take much, and it doesn’t take long.”

Molly looks up at him head tilted slightly to one side. “He’s been in and out of Bart’s labs, though,” she argues. “I mean, not to stay and I haven’t seen him, but there’s notes and things on the equipment; he’s working, John; he doesn’t do that when he’s working.”

“Yeah, well,” John says, clipped, “He said it was for a case last time.”

“We’ll check, dear,” Mrs. Hudson says, touching his shoulder. Instinctively, John tries to force off some of the tension in his shoulders.

“I’ll help,” Molly stands, stepping around the baby, wary of the size of her feet in proportion to the girl’s. “Or- should I help?”

John says. “Yes,” he replies and then schools his tone to be nicer. “Yeah, please Molly.” He picks the baby up, returning the planner to Mrs. Hudson’s bag and upsetting the kid in the process. No doubt she’s feeding off his anxiety anyway. Mrs. Hudson takes her, and it makes him feel worse and guiltier and angrier to see her comforted by the old woman. He heads for the stairs so that neither woman can see it on his face.

Both of them read it in his back anyway, and exchange a glance.

“Oh dear,” Mrs. Hudson mouths. Molly lifts her shoulders slightly in a shrug.

They tail him up to the flat and between them undertake a systematic and thorough search of the place, from most obvious places to the unlikely.

They find nothing.

“Well, that is odd,” Mrs. Hudson declares, plopping onto the sofa.

“He must be doing it out of the house.” John shoves the drawer of the desk shut, feels half-heartedly at the underside of it and then sighs.

“No, dear, I mean,” Mrs. Hudson pauses to look around the flat. “It’s all very tidy. Very tidy.”

“What?”

“No, she’s right,” Molly says. She stands in the door of the kitchen, palms cupping her own elbows. “I’ve searched this whole kitchen and I haven’t put my hand into anything disgusting once.”

“He doesn’t work in there now.”

“The flour barrel was clean. It had flour in it.”

“Oh.” The three of them drop into a silence that echoes with one question- ‘what does that mean?’

“I looked all over his room,” John says. He leans on the back of Sherlock’s armchair absent-mindedly stroking the leather.

“I don’t think he’s using, John,” Molly ventures, watching him. “You know... I spoke to Billy

Wiggins the other week. He said- he implied Sherlock was clean.” John’s fingers have found the seam at the top of the cushion and slide back and forth there, his thumb out of sight around the back, kneading.

“Then what’s wrong with him?”

Molly glances at Mrs. Hudson again. “I’ve no idea,” she lies for them all.

—
—

Sherlock wanders London, checking in with his network.

Billy is strangely elusive, he finds, although he eventually tracks him down in Peckham, several miles from his usual stomping ground and certainly off-piste. Billy shrugs at him when Sherlock asks what he's doing there, and given the redness of his eyes, it's altogether too obvious. Disgusted, Sherlock leaves him with a flea in his ear and the threat that if he can't control himself, he will be getting neither pay nor tutelage in The Work until he can. Billy shrugs, carelessly sodden.

The meeting takes the edge off of wanting to deal with the homeless, and, feeling aggravatingly selfish, Sherlock takes himself off to St Bart's as frequently as he can whilst still avoiding detection. People make his skin itch. He can’t abide them. Crowds are beyond tolerable and even his usual favoured indoor haunts have become horridly claustrophobic.

The morgue is a usually his one reliable place of sanctitude yet somehow the nagging unsettled feeling in the pit of his stomach manages to stalk him even here. Sherlock avoids the laboratory crowd, such as it is. He steals in either early or late or for a single brief hour around lunch when the majority can be more or less guaranteed to be out of the way. He dithers with small scale stuff, which needs no second pair of hands to help him with or access to particular corpses. He sticks to the tests and the vials and the microscope, and tries to lose himself in the bizarrely beautiful world of mycology. It doesn't help.

More than a week of this elapses before Molly finally catches him, hulked over his slides and still wearing his coat like some kind of leggy bird of prey. She takes off her scarf and puts down her bag. She’s more than two hours early for her shift.

"I thought you'd been in recently," she says by way of greeting. "You didn't stop to say hello, though."

"Busy," Sherlock tells her flatly, keeping his eyes glued to the lens.

"Is it a case?"

Sherlock makes a noise of mere dissent and annoyance and Molly lets the topic slide. There's no point pressing for conversation with him when he's in a mood. Better to let him have his space. She goes off to the staff room to put down her stuff and put on her lab coat. As busy as he claims to be, she's got a full day booked in as well.

He sticks around for once though, hanging on to his workbench like grim death. She crosses his path throughout the morning as she processes her first order of business; old man, dodgy hip and blood clots; entirely plebeian and dull by Sherlock's standards. Molly purses her lips and considers Sherlock as she runs her blood samples. Something's definitely looking iffy and it's not just Mr. Wendell's thrombosis.

Molly looks at her test tube and sighs. ‘There's a similarity,’ she thinks shaking the fatal lump to

and fro, 'Thrombosis vs. Sherlock. Two big clots that go from place to place causing mayhem.' Then she feels bad for being so ungenerous.

It's strange that he's not been to Scotland Yard. She wonders if he's argued with Lestrade, which seems doubtful, or Mycroft, which seems more likely. She fights off her latex gloves and wrinkles her nose. Or John. Sherlock could be the only person in the world who could argue with John Watson without the doctor even knowing it, or in fact, without even an exchange of words. They squabble all the time, of course, but that's usually John having a go at Sherlock and it's usually all noise and testosterone and no meaning. Love nips, Molly thinks.

On the other hand, Lestrade's been in once or twice, looking as over-worked as ever and rather sheepish, and she hasn't been able to pin down the reason for that. Might be connected.

The lady sergeant, the one who gets up Sherlock's nose, came in with him once and wandered the lab, pitching in on the conversation she'd had with Greg and curious about the equipment. Molly had found her brusque but not exactly dislikable, though she could readily see how she and Sherlock could end up knocking heads within two seconds flat.

At any rate, Sergeant Donovan had been looking at Lestrade just as askew as Molly had been. Something going on there, Molly reflects, dumping her scalpels in the steriliser. She'd caught a glimpse of the pair of them as they'd left. Lestrade haranguing someone on his phone- or possibly *being* harangued- and Donovan frowning and trying to get him to some court case or other with his jacket on and his hair not stuck up like he'd sat on a live wire. The last Molly had seen, Donovan had forced Lestrade's elbow up and determinedly regimented his tie up from sloppy schoolboy to something a shade short of actually respectable.

Definitely something going on.

Sherlock's still there when she comes back from lunch, although he's taken his coat off at last. Not the scarf though, despite the fact it must be getting in his way. He's uncharacteristically got it untied and lying around his neck so that from the front it looks almost like a tremendous spill of blood down his chest.

"I'm going to need room C," Molly tells him, from across the bench. He grunts and then as she gets up to go, jerks his head up and barks a list of items he intends to use within the next hour and a second list of items that he intends to not be using and that she may, if she needs to, do her work with.

Molly bites her tongue and takes his attitude with grace. 'Thank you, your highness,' she thinks, mentally Igor-shuffling away. 'Marthter is so kind.' She says nothing though. At this point in knowing him, it would feel too mean and be counter-productive anyway.

She enters the room, sets down her tray and makes a mental note of what's in use and which job belongs to which technician. Sherlock's is obvious- a single post-it note is stuck to the top of the machine. It reads only one word- 'vital' in scrawled all caps and is underlined twice. Molly can't help smiling at the sight of it. Then her smile wavers.

In disbelief, she leans over to peer into the top of the machine at the whirring test tubes and her heart sinks. "Oh, Sherlock..."

She delays the inevitable and goes upstairs first to steel herself and find some kind of olive branch to sweeten the blow. She has no intriguing cases or even anything new in the lab that he might find interesting, so all that remains is the kettle and the kilner jars of instant coffee. Black, two sugars and enough stirring to waste a little more time.

Molly unearths the biscuit tin hopefully but finds nothing in it but despised rich teas and 'Nice' biscuits, which seem to always bloody be there and are never bloody eaten, because despite the optimistic word stamped on each one of them, no one in the lab thought they were nice at all.

Least of all Sherlock.

Disgruntled, Molly shoves the tin back on the shelf, picks up the mugs and takes them downstairs, trying not to slop scalding coffee over her fingers. While she walks, she thinks. Hard.

Sherlock's resting both hands on the bench when she reaches him, passively staring into the microcosm. He appears not to notice her when Molly puts the mug of coffee at his elbow, and then stands there hovering, the sentence in her mouth.

"No," Sherlock says facetiously, not looking up.

"Ostriches."

He looks up with a frown, puzzled.

"What?"

"I was just thinking about... ostriches."

She seats herself back on the tall stool at the lab bench and fiddles with the end of her plait, one hand cradling her own mug of coffee. "I mean," she goes on, taking Sherlock's silent, nettled attitude as licence to do so, "People have all kinds of funny ideas about them. People say they stick their heads in the sand."

Molly glances over to see if he's either listening or ignoring her, and seeing as he's listening, scrutinises him slightly to see if he's following her general tack. "Like... If something scares an ostrich, it will just stand there and bury its head in the sand and...ignore what's happening. Except... they don't do that."

"Molly have you fallen down any stairs recently? Hit your head? Started a dubious affair with a zoologist- no, I can tell you haven't done that." He gives the vague area of her waist a hard look and then blows air through his nose.

"I mean," Molly insists, "What they actually do is they'll flap their wings-" she demonstrates with the sides of her lab coat, "-and run off in any old direction, as a method of distraction, and hope whatever it is that wants to prey on them, chases them."

"What's the point of that," Sherlock asks, sucked in to the topic despite himself. "Seems a poor way to evade predation."

"No, you see, they do it- it's not to save themselves. They do it to protect the...babies. Or the mates. That's what mother ostriches do."

Sherlock stares at her. He puts a hand on her face and with the ball of his thumb, draws down her lower eyelid. ".... Sober," he mutters, squinting at her pupil.

"Oh, get off," Molly says, shaking her face free without rancour. Her stomach clenches at how near the knuckle Sherlock's just come. "I was just-that's what I was thinking about. That kind of approach to problem solving. When there's something that you can't fight. I mean. They can't, can they? Ostriches can't fight...big...whatevers. They're not built for it."

Sherlock clears his throat, suddenly sensing that in her roundabout way, Molly was inching near to something he wasn't keen to touch upon. "Yes. Fascinating. If we've finished with the bird life of the great African plains then, I'd like to collect my samples."

Molly looks down suddenly into her mug and chews her lip. Sherlock and coffee both grow a little colder.

"Molly," he presses, disquieted.

"...you put them in on the wrong setting," she says after a long moment, her voice small. "They're all...a bit... bugged."

She looks at him awkwardly, trying to gauge his reaction. Sherlock's face is blank. He considers a moment, and she's certain he's figuring out if she's lying or if she did something stupid to balls up his experiment, except that she's not lying and he can always tell when she's trying to. He stands up and wordlessly leaves to check the other laboratory. Molly feels awful. And she blithered at him about ostriches; what was she even thinking?

Too much time watching Big Cat Diary re-runs with Toby. It had sort of made sense when she'd thought of it.

Sherlock returns, his face marble and Molly twists her fingers in her lap. He sits down again but makes no attempt to touch the microscope. No doubt he's embarrassed at having made such a juvenile mistake with lab equipment he could probably build if he had half a mind to. Molly worries.

"Say it," he says, breaking into her concern. "Spit it out."

"John's worried you're... dabbling again."

Sherlock seems not to react, although his jaw tightens perceptibly. "I see." His tone is even.

"But you're completely clean," Molly says gently. "I know you are. Completely. It's all just..." she gives the wings of her lab coat a tiny flap. "Isn't it?"

His mouth has turned into a long hard line.

"What's wrong?" Molly asks, heart breaking for him. "What can I do? Please."

If it were anyone else she'd put her arms around him. She nearly does so anyway, when his fingers curl against the work surface and he tilts his head back towards the ceiling. It's a slick move; haughty and dismissive and sarcastic all in one; a full-cranium roll of the eyes, only Molly knows him too well. Molly knows not to look at the motion or listen to the tone of his voice but to look at the creases at the corners of his eyes; the ones that can't be consciously controlled. She can recognise the movement of a tongue as it instinctually tries to swallow against the workings of the lacrimal gland and is consciously held in check.

Molly says nothing.

Sherlock presses his eyes shut just for a moment and then seems to dig deep and find some fresh resource, and just like that, he's in control again. She opens her mouth to offer him anything- she'll do anything to help him if only he'll stop looking so sad, only he interrupts.

He twists on the stool and closes into her personal space and for a moment Molly thinks he's fainted or collapsed or god knows what, only then she feels the warmth of his hands on her upper

arms. "Thank you," he says, and brushes a dry kiss to the skin by her ear.

"What did I do?" Molly staggers slightly as he lets go. He brushes past her without meeting her eye and reaches for his coat.

"Observed," he says to the coat hooks. He tugs the Belstaff on with almost ruthless efficiency and turns the collar up, obscuring the scarlet round his neck.

"I'm sorry," Molly starts.

"No," Sherlock says, hurriedly. "No, don't be."

Molly feels her shoulders slump. "What do you need, Sherlock?"

He turns only the scantest edge of his face back towards her and she realises with a thump that she might know what the matter is and what it is that he's not saying. With a rush, her fear for him falls away. In its place is just melancholy.

"Oh, Sherlock," she says. She can't even say for sure what it is that she's caught on to, only that this is Sherlock and his tangle of emotions. Only that this is something embroiled with John and the baby and what it means when your unit of two gets split up, patched up and a new priority thrown in between you. Only that she's too close to the matter to be consulted for help this time and most of that he's deeply, deeply ashamed of something.

"Time," he says, and for once his tone is uneven. "To...adjust. That's all." He pauses, clears his throat and then shrugs the Belstaff more comfortably around himself. "And your silence."

Molly presses her lips together and nods. He sees her do so in the blurred reflection that he can see in the glass panes of the door and he nods back.

But please talk to someone," she begs.

The door swings shut with a whisper, but no reply.

Sherlock leaves through the tunnel-like halls of the hospital; turn upon turn. He passes noticeboards plastered with NHS posters, all sporting cheery, helpful missives like 'Are you missing your pancreas?'. There are medical tips and 24-hour numbers for various support lines if that is the case. Sherlock presumes that for him personally that organ is intact but he has doubts about some of the rest.

His stomach is churning horribly.

Maybe he's ill; maybe that's the reason for all this excess of strangeness. Maybe this is nothing more than some physiological symptom of some underlying biological disorder; some mischance of nature or nurture to which he is the unwitting victim.

Perhaps it can be fixed by pill or injection or surgery; vivisection of emotion or some process of neutering his- he hesitates to call it a soul. Such a small thing. Small and heavy. Disastrous.

He doesn't remember reaching the doors nor hailing the cab. Reality takes a back seat to the richer, more vibrant inner life inside his mind.

Normally he can close his eyes to step through into the controlled world of his mind palace, where everything is ordered according to his law and his laws alone. Today there's too much coming up from the depths. Thoughts and memories bubbling up like magma. Today the mind palace roars out from the inside to the outside.

"What?" he says, in a daze.

The cabbie- mid 60's, weekend jogger, married, happily, small dog and a ferret, smoker, no children, encroaching male pattern baldness under cap- leans right round in the driver's seat with a frown, "I said, 'where to'. You alright? Not going to be sick are you?"

"Fine. Baker Street. Please."

"Baker Street and a weird one," the cabbie mutters under his breath. Sherlock meets his own eye in the rear-view mirror as the cabbie reaches up to rearrange it.

Weird one. Accurate. Weird. Wyrd. Anglo-Saxon pre-christian concept somewhat congruous to fate. Wyrd. Noun. One of the three norns or sisters. Wyrd. Ref: Beowulf. *Gaed a wyrd swa hio scel*. "Fate fares as she must." Associations to the female. Fate inextricable.

Weird. That which happens. That which is happening. Sherlock can't extricate what is happening into logic. There is no logic to it.

This freak.

His hands are pressed together in his lap and he becomes aware that his palms are sweating and that the sweat is making them itch. He scrubs them across his thighs to relieve it, but now that he's noticed, he can no longer block out all the other minor physiological changes. His collar feels tight and too warm under the damned scarf. The sensation of being hemmed in- he tugs impatiently at his shirt to loosen it, popping a button- seems to drain down his middle until even his shirtfront and the waistline of his trousers feel like they're pinching in at him.

"Open the window," Sherlock says, and then repeats himself louder and with more urgency. Alarmed, the cabbie jabs a finger at the electronic control and the window glides open.

"Jesus, you've gone dead pale. What's the matter with you?"

Sherlock leans himself against the car door and pushes his face into a breeze that smells of car fumes but nonetheless slaps him with enough chill to be refreshing. He feels himself stabilise, marginally.

He pushes the car door open as soon as it comes to a halt beside a familiar pavement and shakes the wallet from his pocket, scattering cash on the back seat. Too much for the fare, but he doesn't want to stop. Details. Meaningless details. It's just money.

"Hang on," the cabbie sputters. He heaves himself to the passenger seat, shoving the side door open in concern. "Are you going to be ok? I can call you someone?"

"No, thank you. I'm just having a panic attack. Happens sometimes," Sherlock hears himself say, from some huge inconceivable distance. To his own ears his voice sounds so normal and unconcerned that for a split second he nearly convinces himself to actually be unconcerned. "I don't think it will lead to cardiac arrest."

He escapes, canting unsteadily to the left, half trips the kerb up to the front door in his haste. "Did that once," he says to himself. "Much more painful. Heart rate much less-more unstable." He

shoulders the door open, two fingers on his pulse. "John?"

John isn't home. Stupid. Stupid! Clinic hours. Not home till 4:30 at the earliest. Only three o'clock now. Mrs. Hudson? Don't want her. House quiet- pushchair gone. Bee. Nursery. Shopping.

Sherlock barks a shin on the stairs. He can hear himself humming because there's a noise in his ears like humming and he echoes it with his voice to try and drown out the whistle of tinnitus. Things start to narrow at the edges.

'I've been drugged?' he thinks, astounded. 'Molly drugged me.' Except he didn't drink the coffee.

Ostriches.

Sherlock- Think! There must be something in this ridiculous mind that can calm you down.

Sherlock blinks. 221B is there in crazy duplicate. In his head and under his feet. "Home."

Focus!

'I'm not even dying this time,' Sherlock thinks, with an unexpected dart of self-exasperation. He heaves himself into his chair and hangs onto the arms of it like anchors. This helps. The room broadens out a little, the coat chokes him a little less. He gives his head one furious shake and there's a peculiar sensation like cracking the rind of a ripe melon with a blunt object and then everything flicks away from the mind palace and back to dull reality.

He still can't breathe, but at least he can see clearly.

John's chair is occupied, but not by John. The toy elephant regards Sherlock back, melancholic as always. There's a cloth; pink with butterflies, left on the back of the chair. Sherlock raises his chin a little. From here he can see fragments of the kitchen; no longer his domain. There are bottles in the steriliser on the side and a catalogue of items in the cupboards which, being mundane, Sherlock hasn't bothered to memorise. He hadn't needed to, he determines; that's what John's for. John knows.

It's the most space, percentage wise, that John's ever occupied of the flat since he moved in. The lion's share is still nominally Sherlock's, but it is unarguably by a much smaller margin these days. They've evolved to the point where Sherlock doesn't know what's in the kitchen cupboards down to the last detail. Oh, he can make an accurate summation based on John's character, common sense and laws of probability, but he can no longer be accurate. John's mixed their things. Their things are overlaid with the baby's things.

Sherlock blinks slowly, rasping in a breath.

No.

John's things are overlaid with the baby's possessions, but not Sherlock's. Never have been. There's an unspoken line of segregation, which Sherlock had crossed the first night he'd picked her out of her crib without John's knowledge or consent. A line he'd blurred when he'd secreted spare necessities carelessly under his bed, relying on the fact that John rarely invades his privacy without reasonable cause. He'd blurred it more so over christmas and it had seemed...fine.

As the notes have come off of the fridge door, however, it's been quietly reinstated.

'I quite regret doing that,' Sherlock thinks with dull surprise. 'I should have left a loophole to get back in. I always miss something.'

Worst comes to worst, he'll just go and flash his baby blues around and find some woman to play mummy with.

Would he? John's shown no inclination so far to do anything of the sort, yet it can't be ruled out. Sooner or later. John's not designed to be alone, despite how he pushes people away. He can't be alone. He drowns if he's alone. The last thing Sherlock wants is a scenario in which John Watson ends up alone.

The child isn't enough for John.

John must never realise that fact. He would break his own heart over it.

Bit shit on you.

Hard to say, Sherlock thinks. His own standards for where he considers the limit to his ability to suffer are so far removed from most people's enough to appear lunatic. Much of his life has been juggling the contrary factors of need, tolerance, denial and fury.

Sherlock digs his hands into his hair, trying to dislodge the confusion. He's never had more of John. He's never felt so much that he lacked something of the man either or that John is so slowly but surely slipping away from him. Somewhere from under the panic comes a slash of anger; only partly self-directed.

He'd once been content to simply be aware of the existence of John Watson, and then he'd wanted to know more. He'd become comfortable with John's presence in his life, and then through all the chaos of Moriarty he'd baldly assumed it would be enough for John merely to be alive. He'd thought they'd been on the same page only he'd then treated John rather poorly; not with the lies, but with being stupid enough to think John wouldn't find a way to go on without him. What arrogance had ever made him think that? How could he ever have thought that there was no chance that they'd just naturally drift apart. Or rather that John would drift and he himself would remain, stagnant.

Sherlock's rapidly approaching the horrid conclusion that at an overlooked, basic level, he simply doesn't understand John Watson and how can that possibly be true? He knows John better than anyone because nobody understands John at all.

His lungs tighten again and he forces himself to stop. He can't do this. If he does this, he's going to end up slipping to god knows what dark place. He needs a distraction.

Sherlock gropes in his pocket for his phone. There are e-mails from the website, so many and yet so little substance. He doesn't want to contact Lestrade, and Mycroft even less. His brother's gone behind his back and toppled himself from a pedestal that Sherlock had almost forgotten he'd once set him on. It's another strange sore spot in his life.

Molly. An insane idea; he's just walked out of the lab on her, but that's the fact. She counts. She's trustworthy and against every odd she's... an ally. And she's not stupid. He can talk to her about matters of life, death and national security.

But he can't pick over these sensitive details with her. It's too humiliating. Perhaps if Mrs. Hudson came home-

You wouldn't know. You're always alone.

No.

Sherlock drags himself from his seat and boltholes upstairs to his room.

It's a room that's wholly his; devoid of the intermingling of his life with John, except that it's not. There are ashy marks on the carpet from Christmas still; stains which won't come out. His woodworking tools are still half out; thrown into a box and shoved on the shelf above his desk. The Chinese cat and radiometer; taxidermy bees. Sherlock patters his hands over the items, reinstating them to himself.

He fiddles with the case holding the single violet carpenter bee specimen unusually staged on a long spike of wire rising from the base so that the creature appears to be poised in flight. It looks as though it could burst from the glass case at any moment if allowed only a few more rotations of its fragile wings but it's riveted in its place.

'Looks natural; isn't,' Sherlock thinks. He longs to see one alive and observe its behaviour.

It's not distracting enough.

"Information," Sherlock says aloud. "I need more information." On himself, on John, on people and what people do. He feels for the phone again. There must be a source for such input. He can fake it; he knows he can do that much, but he also knows that he could never sell John that particular lie.

A thought. Voice. Memory.

No dodgy Google searches, or fucking about.

It's still there in his contacts. For all his protests and anger at the gesture, he never actually got around to deleting it. Sherlock stares at the word on his screen. 'Information'. He's never gained much in life without trying his options.

He doesn't feel like he's got many options left.

The phone whirs and his palms grow slick with the sudden sweat of fearful anticipation. Then almost physically he has to fight the urge to fling the mobile away from him like it's vermin, and the bile rises in his throat. Fool- he should have thought; made a character; made a ruse.

Think, think, think, think, what's our line?

Lie. You lied to me. You lied and lied.

That too.

There's a soft click and all at once a woman's voice, very gentle, is speaking.

"Hello, you've connected to the Safe Steps Switchboard. My name's Chanielle. I'm happy to talk to you."

He can't reply. He has no idea where to start and his loathing of telephone conversations is rearing up like a wall before his eyes and why on earth did he think this was a good idea at all?

Indeed, what's the point, brother mine? What do you expect to gain from someone who is entirely likely to be some dull scrap of a girl, in some pokey charity office somewhere in the east end, no doubt with an inclination towards esoteric hobbies and militant vegetarianism. A female who no doubt spends her free time talking to strangers about their feelings in some bizarre way to make her feel better about the inadequacies of her own life, supplementing her own quack therapy with

back-patting and small talk, and- oh do hang up, Sherlock, she's talking again.

Shut up, shut up!

"Hello? My phone is saying that you're still there. Can you hear me?"

The probability that she purports knitwear in garish colours, thinks it 'jolly' and dreams of owning a caravan but amplify. Spare yourself. Hang up.

His thumb hovers over the button to terminate the call and then she shocks the breath out of him by seeming to read his thoughts.

"Please, don't hang up."

He's aware that she must be able to hear his breath, panting faintly down the long, snake-like phone-lines of London- no, stupid! It's a mobile, there are no phone-lines. It's static-magnetic-something. Erratic. 'I sound like a pervert,' he thinks. 'What does she think I'm doing?'

Giiiiiiiing gang goolie-goolie-goolie-goolie watch that Sherlock squirm, Sherlock squirm.

Get. Back. In. Your. Hole.

"Ok, Ok," the voice says soothingly. She sounds calm and composed, her voice dropping a pitch and taking on that kind of tone Sherlock sometimes hears Lestrade use with victims when he's trying to be nice. Or John when he's dealing with idiots. It penetrates through the chaos and with no other option, Sherlock scrambles his resources to focus on it.

"Ok? Just take a deep breath. I'm going to do it with you; ready? Breathe in--"

He sucks in air, feeling rather detached from his body. His hitching lungs protest, but overall it helps. It's so simple; breathing. Loathsome in it's simplicity, and yet why is it that from time to time it gets so aberrant? He shuts his eyes and concentrates on the burning in his throat, the burning behind his eyes and the heave of his diaphragm. To breathe deeply one must force out the belly in order to expand the lower section of the lungs. The muscles of his stomach only twitch with tension when he tries.

I'm a grown man, he thinks, and I can't so much as breathe for myself properly.

Disgraceful.

Humiliating.

"And breathe out again.....2...3...4... there, good. Breathe in--"

Her tone never changes. She fades away into some kind of live recording of herself, and that's better. It's easier when she's not a person; just a soft voice from the innards of his mobile phone; an MP3 track that can't judge him. Like a recording, she doesn't tire, just persists on and on until the rawness and frantic energy is leached out of him breath by breath.

Sherlock sags on his bed, the phone slipping from his ear a fraction, and he feels exhausted. He exhales one last time, and hangs up. The dead noise of the phone is eerily sudden, like a hand pulled from his grasp, but the world has stopped being quite as alarming. He lets both his hand and his phone slither wearily into his lap.

The screen blinks with a missed call and the numbers of the hours and minutes silently tick over.

He's been on the phone a full twenty minutes. Sherlock breathes and feels like he's been dragged up out of deep water. Status quo reestablishes itself and it's still stark but more manageable.

Mrs. Hudson will be back any minute and she can't see him like this.

Escaping to the bathroom, he rubs cold water over his face and by the time he hears her come in, he's outwardly back to normal.

"Coo-ee, boys! Oh, Sherlock, it's just you. I've got your bits and pieces," She deposits the bags on the table and ferrets around in them, not finding anything strange in his quietness. He's picked up the violin, embracing the wood and soothing his fingers up and down the length of the strings.

"And I'm putting some dinner on; just this once for John, mind- he's caught in the rush hour. Anything you fancy?"

A lasso of sudden hunger makes his guts tremble and Sherlock realises with a start that he's absolutely famished. "Yes," he says, getting up abruptly. "Chips."

"Didn't get any," Mrs. Hudson says, disappointingly. He frowns, looking down at the muddle of white plastic bags and groceries on the table. Mrs. Hudson looks at her list. "There's potatoes though. How about a bit of cold roast and mash?" She continues without waiting for an explicit reply, reaching to open the lower kitchen cupboards.

Sherlock puts down the violin and moves from his chair, anticipating that she'll struggle with the heavy stack saucepans. "Thank you, dear," she says, backing up to give him room to manoeuvre. She rubs at her hip. "All this cold's got at it; some days I wonder how I ever used to do all that I did."

Sherlock wonders the same. He sits at the table wordlessly, potato peeler in hand as Mrs. Hudson putters around humming and murmuring to herself over the stove.

'I used to manage everything alone,' Sherlock thinks. He rolls the solid round weight of a potato in his palm, rubbing the eyes off with his thumb. 'I used to be entirely remote.'

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Chapter End Notes

Chapter title comes from Cocaine Habit (Take a Whiff on Me) by Memphis Jug Band, although I recommend listening to the Old Crow Medicine Show recording for cleaner audio.

Rules exists. It's the oldest restaurant in London, but I'm poor and have never eaten there. The brace of grouse and oysters is mentioned in ACD canon as a meal Sherlock puts on so I put it in there.

Dr. Spock was, with rather charming coincidence, actually the actual name of a guy in the 80's who wrote parenting books, mostly in America.

Testicular torsion is also a thing. It can happen for a number of reasons, and although it typically affects younger men, boys and teens, can also happen later in life in rare cases. Ovarian torsion is a thing too. *thumbs up*

Remember Mrs. Hudson's xmas presents? Yep, Sherlock got a violet carpenter bee, the lucky so and so.

'Ging Gang Goolie' is a boy scout nonsense song. I highly doubt Sherlock was ever in the scouts but I can't help but imagine Daddy having been, and singing it at him and Sherlock's forever being wholly unimpressed.

Cold roast meat and mashed potato is still a relatively common thing, I think? It's something my family eats to use up leftovers from Sunday lunch. It's either that or it gets turned into pie. Anyway, cold beef is another food mentioned in ACD canon so, just a tentative nod in there.

Questions? Comments? Burning desire to express your love of birdlife? Leave me a comment!

PS. Tentative guess right now but i'm thinking this may run to about 20 chapters? Just let that sink in there. Awww yeah.

Part 7: Nothing to be Scared Of

Chapter Summary

“Go home, John,” Lestrade says gently, breaking into his thoughts, “Pick your kid up and make her smile and stop... beating yourself up over stuff you’re not responsible for.”

John throws him a perplexed look.

“Sherlock,” Lestrade clarifies, “and making him... not so...”

The look turns challenging.

“No, you’re not. You’re no more responsible for making Sherlock happy than you are making the Tube run on time. He’s got to sort that out himself.”

“He can’t,” John says simply, his anger finally crumbling, “He hasn’t the first idea how.”

Chapter Notes

With thanks as always to my Chiefest of Eggs [Codenamelazarus](#) who has been a v. busy egg lately in RL, so if you feel like egging l'egg on, drop by and send her pictures of baby animals. Especially fruit bats. Seriously. Google baby fruit bats. You won't regret it.

I can be found on Tumblr as [Odamakilock](#). I post a heady mix of reblog of fanart of John cuddling sherlock, Sherlock cuddling John and John cuddling Sherlock while Sherlock cuddles John, and sometimes cats. It's a happy place.

Formatting for some reason gets all jerked up in the hop from scrivener to A03 so if you spot any typos or places where text might have been chewed by the AO3 gremlins, leave me a comment and let me know!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Part 7- Nothing to be Scared Of.

By the second week of February the baby seems to decide that one tooth isn't enough and starts cutting in four at once on her upper gum. John is exhausted. She screams and grabs her ears because it hurts and John's head pounds. Nothing soothes her for very long.

She can't sleep, and she has no reservations about making the fact known loudly and as John can't sleep through her crying, he stays up half the night. Not even Sherlock is able to calm her.

“Sorry, she's teething,” has suddenly become John's stock phrase. He says it when he drops her off at nursery, and says it again at work when he has to duck out early and take her home because

she won't shut up and has worked up a fever.

He says it in the supermarket when he nearly walks off with someone else's child and trolley, he says it again, feeling defeated when he's annoyed to the customer service desk, having forgotten his credit card at the check-out.

He says it to Mrs Turner, who is sympathetic but also a little sore at the invasion on her lunchtime peace and quiet. He says it to Sherlock, at 3AM, when Sherlock emerges from upstairs to see the commotion. John's got his laptop open, googling for new ideas.

Sherlock says, "The men of the pygmy Aka of central Africa allow infants to simulate breastfeeding in order to sooth fractious children while the women are engaged in other labor."

John blinks, his eyes feeling like they're full of sand and hands the grizzling child over. "Be my guest," he says, "I'm going to buy some frozen waffles."

He gets back some time later to a quieter house and finds Sherlock with the baby in the living room with Mrs. Hudson. The kid's conked out at last through a combination of sheer exhaustion and the whiskey that Mrs. Hudson's massaged into her gums.

"Just a drop," Mrs. Hudson says, patting the bottle with a pleased air. "Works like a charm." She shuffles off down to bed.

"Pygmies didn't work then?" John asks, shoving the waffles in the freezer (not a wasted trip- she wakes again at 8am, and the waffles get them through the morning). Sherlock gives him a funny look.

"I meant the fathers do it," Sherlock says, rather tightly, and goes upstairs.

"What?" John says, delayed. He turns to look after Sherlock's retreating footsteps and instead glimpses the clock. "Fuck's sake," he swears and goes to keel over in bed himself.

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"She'll be walking by the end of the month, you mark my words," Mrs. Hudson comments, watching the baby bum-shuffle to the kitchen drawers and then pull herself up to raid the spoons.

"She should be walking now," John replies, slightly peeved. "And talking, and chewing."

"Oh, she's working on it," Mrs. Hudson chides. She takes a wooden spoon from the counter and passes it down to the baby, who at once sits with it on the floor, examining it minutely. "All in her own good time. Maybe she needs talking to more. We can do that, can't we Bee? We can have lovely conversations, yes we can. Can you say 'daddy'?"

"No," John says abruptly. Memory and conversations with Ella, all bottled below the surface threaten to fizz over. Mrs. Hudson straightens in surprise.

"John?"

"I mean, no, she can't yet, sorry. Um, did you buy more washing-up liquid?"

"John Watson, you're being rather funny," Mrs. Hudson gives him a look and then steps past the baby to look in the cupboard. "There, it's right there for you."

“Thanks.”

Mrs. Hudson hums suspiciously and they pass an awkward moment of quiet. John can feel her eyes on the back of his neck, even as the baby wiggles over on her tummy to flop over Mrs. Hudson’s feet.

The old woman stoops stiffly and picks her up and then gives John another hard look.

“I’m sorry?” John says, irked.

“Hm,” Mrs. Hudson says again, moving bottles one handed from the draining board with rather needless force.

“What?” John demands.

“I’m waiting for you to tell me what the matter is, though I shall probably go blue in the face. Really John, after all these years.” Mrs. Hudson gives him a reproachful look. “I’m not such a daft old bat as you think I am.”

“Oh, no, of course you’re not,” John says, appalled.

“Then what’s all this about then, dear?”

John makes some unnecessary motions with the crockery and then finally says, stiffly. “I’d rather not talk about it.”

“It’s it *men’s* trouble?” Mrs. Hudson asks, dropping her voice to a whisper. John half-barks a laugh.

“No. No- I don’t have...let’s just say ‘no’.”

“Well, there’s nothing to be ashamed of if there is; things like piles happen to the best of people.”

John laughs. “God, no,” he pleads, holding up a hand. “I am perfectly healthy, Mrs. Hudson.”

“You’re a doctor, you should know,” She concedes. “And really you should know that Bee’s perfectly fine as well.”

“I know she is- it’s just-“ John gives up and turns, leaning against the kitchen counter. “I don’t know; Sherlock’s being weird. He’s always been weird about Bee and I don’t know how to interpret it.”

And this, he thinks, is about the crux of it. He’s always been able to hazard a guess as to what Sherlock’s thinking and this sudden two-steps forward, one jump back behaviour lately has him at a loss. He doesn’t understand why when for the whole of the autumn Sherlock fought and lied and did everything he could to be there, only to pull out all the stops at Christmas and then do this sudden one-eighty and it’s like they’ve gone back to the day she was born and Sherlock wouldn’t come and see her.

Lestrade had said Sherlock would get used to it, and John had thought that he had, only now Sherlock’s snubbing both the baby and John, and it hurts.

“Why doesn’t he- why won’t he do anything with her unless it’s a secret?” John blurts, suddenly furious. “Does he think it’s going to damage his massive puffed-up ego; you know, it’s going to ruin his street-cred if he is seen looking after my daughter?”

Mrs. Hudson stares at him. Then she looks at him like he's the most colossal idiot she's ever seen in her long and varied life.

"Oh, John!" she tuts, losing her patience. "I should bang your heads together. You are a ninny. Men- born idiots and they never get any wiser," she tells the baby, who looks back at her wide-eyed, sucking her fist. "There, go to Papa," Mrs. Hudson holds her out and flustered, John takes her.

"Ridiculous," Mrs. Hudson says, half to herself, and annoyed, she makes to leave.

John's not sure what's just happened. He reels for a second, and then hurries after her.

"Mrs. Hudson, wait!" He leans on the bannisters to call after her. Mrs. Hudson is steel in response.

"What is it?"

"I'm sorry- I don't know what for exactly, but I am, and- did you just call me 'papa'?"

"Oh, you just made it very clear that you don't like 'daddy'," Mrs. Hudson replies, not accusingly, but with intense frustration.

"I- no. That's... it's perfect," John says. Mrs. Hudson regards him and her demeanour softens. John finds himself caving in response. It strikes him as ridiculous that Ella spends hours and hours digging at him to make him express these things and all it takes is two minutes of losing Mrs. Hudson's approval to make him scramble to get the words out.

"I just don't want her to call me 'daddy'. I just don't."

"Well, she doesn't have to," Mrs. Hudson says, reasonably. "It's not a law, John."

"I know. It's this universal expectation though. It-" he coughs out a breath, and translates it to the simplest expression he can. "It gets right up my bloody nose."

Mrs. Hudson purses her lips, but there's a sudden twinkle in her eye of good humour again; an appeal to her innately rebellious nature. "I dare say we can work with that," she says simply, taking him at his word. He knows that she knows that this is not the whole story. He knows, all at once, that she'll fight tooth and nail for him behind the scenes to make it all so, without ever mentioning the subject again, because she knows that he doesn't want to discuss it.

She's a marvel, John thinks, looking down at her with sudden warmth. It feels strangely good to have said it, and better to find that it's been taken so well and, more importantly, without questioning.

"Mrs. Hudson."

"Yes, I'm still here."

"That's a lot of- it's a long name."

"What is?"

"Mrs. Hudson."

"Yes?"

"No, I mean," John half laughs at her puzzlement. "It's a long name for Bee. To say."

“Well, I haven’t got another one, and I can’t have her calling me ‘Martha’ while you two call me Mrs. Hudson; that would sound very peculiar.”

John smiles, lop-sided. “How about ‘Nana’?” he suggests.

Mrs. Hudson throws her hands up, clasps her face and for a split second he thinks perhaps he shouldn’t have said that while she was standing on a steep flight of stairs. She looks like she might faint. Then she’s beaming brighter than he’s ever seen and careening back up to the landing.

“Oh, John! Oh, John! Yes! Am I really?”

John lets her squash him in a wild and excited embrace, and cover the baby in lipstick-smeared kisses. “Of course you are,” he says, giving in without rancour to her enthusiasm. “Obviously.”

The pub on the Broadway is an old copper’s haunt, and at this time of day, mostly empty. They sit outside in the sharp breeze so that Lestrade can smoke, with John trying to edge into the sun to find some spring warmth and Lestrade clinging to his cigarettes like the spark and nicotine can fire him from the inside.

“I thought you were quitting,” John says, tugging his coat tighter around himself. He squints in the sunlight and jiggles his legs under the table and does his utmost to convey non-verbally that Lestrade should either stub out his smoke or just eat the damn thing.

Lestrade takes another long loving drag. “Bugger that,” he says. “This is all that’s between me and homicide some days.”

John picks up the packet. “Back on the high tars,” he notes. Lestrade shrugs.

“More oomph.”

‘Sharing less, more like,’ John thinks. He’s not great at deducing Lestrade’s private life but he knows the look of a man who’s single and beyond giving a fuck about impressing anyone. Lestrade’s come from the Yard and claims to have been just plodding through paperwork all morning, yet his suit looks like it’s been slept in.

Definitely not the same man who a mere few months ago was sporting swanky tiepins and keeping his shoes buffed. Not that Lestrade ever looks rough, exactly, but John thinks it would be fair to say some of the polish of his relationship has literally worn off.

They’ve met at one of the local chain pubs round from the Yard; standard fair. Fruit machine in one corner, telly above the bar and fried things on a plate for £5.99 on a Friday with a drink. The nondescript bartender, all gangling in first flush of beard comes over to knock his knees around their table and collect the empties left by some other lunchtime drinker.

“I get such an urge to ID them,” Lestrade comments once he’s out of earshot. “I swear they look younger and younger.”

“Sign of getting old.”

“Shuttit,” Lestrade says, without rancour. “Besides, you wait till your kid brings her first spotty ‘erbert home, then see what you make of them.”

John laughs. “Not for years yet. Hasn’t even had her first birthday.”

“This Thursday, right?”

John nods. “Yeah. Though we’re not really doing anything on Thursday. Thought we’d leave it until the weekend. Sunday, probably. Do you want to come?”

“Yeah, sure,” Lestrade says, pleasantly surprised. “I’d love to. What is it? Some of her friends from nursery.”

John shakes his head. “In our flat? God, no. No- not much point really. She’s still so small she won’t remember any of it and it’d probably just be a lot of fuss and noise she wouldn’t really enjoy. I’m not going to all that hassle just to make her howl all afternoon.”

“Right,” Lestrade said, privately thinking that it was a pity. Then he gave an inward shrug; John’s kid, John’s rules, and upon further reflection, he concludes while John is very much a dad these days, he’d still not a children’s party person. He dwells back on his own daughter’s various birthday parties and then gives a slow nod, recalling the stress and expense and work of them. “Yeah, fair enough.”

“Probably earlyish,” John muses, like he hasn’t finalised the details even to himself. “About 3 o’clock.”

“Yeah, I’ll be there.”

They knock glasses on it.

John slips into silence, contemplating logistics. He can grab a cake and some drinks from Tesco on the way home. They’ve got a party aisle. He could get paper plates and plastic cups and save them the trouble of washing up. Not that he’s planning on inviting many people. Maybe Sherlock would like to use the leftover plates and bits for his chemistry. Stop him doing horrible things to the chopping boards.

Next to him, Lestrade sinks into a troubled reverie of his own, bouncing between half-lost memories of gangs of small children in bright clothes careening around the house shrieking, and unrelated developments on other more recent birthdays.

“Are you going to Barts any time soon?” John says presently.

Lestrade pulls himself from his thoughts with some effort. “Spect so. Why?”

“No reason. Just to let Molly know about Sunday.”

“Take yourself down there and see her,” Lestrade points out. “She likes having people in the morgue who can chat back.”

“Oh? I’d have thought she had plenty with Wiggins hanging around.”

Lestrade raises an eyebrow. “Apparently not. He’s not been there, I don’t think. Reckon she gave him the boot.”

“Hm. Fairly predictable,” John says. “Probably pushed his luck.”

“Yeah, and that and she says she’s slamming through some of her workload before the Easter hols. She’s off to... I forget. Camping or something with the Smurfs.”

John wrinkles his nose into his pint glass. “Does Molly like camping?”

“Yeah, I’m not sure she was that convinced, either,” Lestrade replies. “But it was some kind of Groupon thing, and I think a bit of peer-pressure got to her.”

“Should have said no,” John says with a shrug. He drains his pint and gestures to Lestrade’s. “Another?”

“Please.”

John heads to the bar and orders from the teenage bar staff, then wanders back with the drinks, trying not to slop them. When he returns Lestrade is leaning back in his chair, exhaling smoke. His phone is out on the table, and by the way he keeps fidgeting with it, it seems like he’s expecting some sort of message.

John sets a glass in front of him. “Has Sherlock mentioned to you this case he’s working on?” John asks. He’s still curious about Sherlock’s work, and wonders what Lestrade would make of it all.

“Hang on,” Lestrade says with a bit of a grimace. “Something I just want to ask... About Bee’s birthday thing.”

“Oh, it’s alright if you have to work. It’s not really going to be much of anything other than cake and a bit of a meet-up,” John says. “Don’t worry about it.”

“Oh, well, thanks but it’s not that. Um...” Lestrade pauses, thinking hard and clearly trying to phrase something as politely as he possibly can. “This might be a bit out of line, and Sherlock’s not going to like it much, but...”

“But?” John prompts.

“I think you should invite Mycroft,” Lestrade says.

“Mycroft?” John says in surprise. There are no circumstances on the planet in which he can imagine Mycroft having a good time at a baby’s birthday party. “Why? What for?”

“Look, you didn’t hear it from me, but I honestly think he’d appreciate it. I mean, probably if you ask him, he won’t even turn up, so no harm done, but the thought might go a long way.”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about,” John says, baffled and a bit uncomfortable. “What’s Mycroft got to do with my daughter?”

Lestrade glances around as though he expects someone to leap out of the fruit machine and accuse him of high treason at any second. “It’s not Bee, so much- I mean, she’s lovely, you know I think she’s the biz, but it’s more...Sherlock.”

“You’ve lost me.”

“Well, Sherlock’s getting... cosy. He made her that nice box at Christmas- when has Sherlock ever done presents? He can spend more than ten minutes in the same room as her and no one ends up crying.”

“Sherlock’s really good with her,” John says, frowning on Sherlock’s behalf. “Usually.”

“Yeah, exactly,” Lestrade replies, not noticing John’s caveat. “That’s my point. I think Mycroft wants to see that, like in person, a bit.”

John digests this slowly. It's true that there has been an odd sort of shift around in the last couple of months. But on the other hand, whilst he can't claim that Sherlock and he were exactly on the same page and working 50/50 on raising his daughter, there is no denying that up till New Years Sherlock had been doing his bit and... John still wants to believe that that he *likes* her. Really likes her, and no doubt to Sherlock's unending surprise, she likes him too, a fact that John is deeply glad and entirely certain about.

Sherlock's always responded to sincere fascination and love like a starved cat to cream, and now to everyone's benefit he's found a potential source in the baby. John suddenly finds it no stretch of the imagination to see how Mycroft could doubt the veracity of it, and his abstract concerns, given Sherlock's poor track record in looking after his things.

The man crawls through the underbelly of London in a coat worth roughly a grand, and goes through laptops faster than most people get through Pringles. Never mind the unspeakable things he's done to relationships and his own physical health over the years.

"That," Lestrade adds, conspiratorially, "and I suspect he's a bit gone on Bee himself."

"What?"

"I reckon Mycroft's mush about kids."

"No," John says, because that he refuses to believe. As soon as he says it, he second guesses his assumption. There was that card at Christmas; John had in part assumed it was a shallow excuse to poke his nose in and check on things, but maybe...

It's still behind the clock on the mantelpiece; he never did get around to googling- who was it? Lord Peat?

Up till now he's dismissed Mycroft from all parts of the equations; was that an error? He'd been about as sentimental as John had ever seen him, that time on the doorstep.

Lestrade interrupts his thoughts with a snort. "Oh, I'm not saying he isn't awkward; the great prune, but I wouldn't assume he's the bastion of not-giving-a-fuck that he pretends to be, yeah?"

John eyes him and nods slowly. "Right..."

"No, really. Bee comes on the scene and then slowly but surely our usual work chats start getting peppered with vague inquiries and comments, and you know he's bloody nosey."

"You think he's got himself into a hole- he wants to know, but he's feeling too moral for some reason to just spy like he usually does," John says, suddenly feeling like both Holmes are idiots with rather too much in common for their own good.

"Yeah. Or he's not spying because he's worried if Sherlock finds out- and Sherlock always does sooner or later- that Sherlock'll stop."

John sighs. At best, this is just a Holmes being ridiculous again, at worst, it's Mycroft trying to finagle a way to use his daughter as leverage on Sherlock; something John wouldn't put past him even if Lestrade thinks otherwise. Either way, he wants to know which, and there's not many methods of finding out other than a direct approach.

"Alright, I'll send him a message. Date and time; it's up to him to interpret that how he likes."

"Deal," Lestrade says, "That's as much as is needed."

“Might not be much for him to observe anyway,” John says, half to himself.

Lestrade looks at him askew. “Why?”

John shrugs. “Sherlock’s been a bit... off lately. No, he’s still really great with Bee, but, I don’t know, it’s like he’s taken a step back. He was really funny on his birthday- you know. Mycroft broke his phone and-“

“You what?”

“He broke his phone. Sherlock got in a tizzwozz and ran off round to check he wasn’t dead in a ditch but- why are you looking like that?”

“Like what,” Lestrade counters, still looking exactly ‘like that’.

“That,” John says suspiciously. “You’re doing a face. What’s going on?”

“No, nothing! I’m just surprised that Mycroft broke his phone, of all people, is all.”

“Greg, you are a piss-poor liar.”

Lestrade shuffles guiltily on the spot and then when John puts his glass down and squares up to him, caves. “I can’t say,” he grunts at his own glass, nettled.

“What can’t you say,” John demands. Some DCI of Scotland Yard, he thinks privately.

“I can’t say stuff that I can’t tell you,” Lestrade replies, frowning. “I would, John, because I think it’s a bloody stupid idea acting like this is all state secret level stuff and I’ve no idea why Sherlock hasn’t told you, but I promised to keep schtum, so I am going to, and you can put your bloody macho come-ons away, I’m not grassing.”

“Right, I see,” John says, highly put out. “So it’s you and Mycroft and Sherlock all in cahoots, and I’m left out to muddle along like a right berk. Stop me if I’m wrong, but this sounds really sodding familiar.”

“Oh come on, John!” Lestrade turns to him, “I knew *nothing* about that. Nothing. One minute I’m getting a call saying you’re at Barts and Sherlock’s- and then the next I know, Phil’s gone loony with conspiracy theories and then You-Know-Who pops in the carpark, telling me off for sneaking a fag.”

John seethes into his beer, still not mollified.

“Well, I see you and Mycroft are thick as thieves these days anyway,” John says hotly.

“John, you’re being-“ Lestrade cuts himself off, disgruntled.

“I’m being what?”

“A knobhead.”

John snorts derisively. “I’m not the one having an affair with the- Jesus.” He thumps Lestrade on the back as the other man chokes on his beer. “Swallow!”

“Thanks,” Lestrade says, thick with watering eyes and sarcasm. “That didn’t sound at all...”

John flushes and grunts into his drink, still galled. “I meant your ‘work chats’. Since when did you

have ‘work chats’? You don’t work with Mycroft Bloody Holmes.”

Lestrade looks at the sky, digging deep for the strength not to come over all prima donna and upend his glass in John’s lap. “We talk. About stuff. Cold cases usually, or stuff where it seems like there may be a dodgy copper. Yeah, it’s after hours, but it’s not...” Lestrade’s ears are turning red. “Anything dubious, alright? That good enough for you? Got your approval?”

“It’s got nothing to do with me.”

“Hallelujah, tell the press, I think he’s got it. Why are you objecting so much?”

“Because I don’t think I trust him as far as I could throw him.”

Lestrade gives him a long, hard look. “I do.”

“Oh yeah? And what does your...tie-pin make of all these late-night Mycroftings? Jesus, Lestrade.” John shakes his head.

“Hard to say,” Lestrade says, caging his words. “Mycroft’s against it, though.”

John’s genuinely surprised to hear this. “Really? You’ve talked about it with him? What did he say?”

Lestrade gently punts the ashtray back and forth on the table. “He thinks I can do better.”

John looks at him curiously. “Can’t you?”

Lestrade shrugs. “Debatable. I’m an ageing workaholic with commitment issues.”

“What’s she like?”

“Complex,” Lestrade muses slowly. “Demanding, I mean, incredible, but with even bigger commitment issues.” He looks into his drink and then philosophically drains it in one. He coughs and sets the glass down. “Massive issues in general, actually. Issues the size of Pavarotti’s arse.”

“Right,” John says, frowning. “But... you’re alright?”

“I’m alright,” Lestrade replies with another shrug. “I mean, I’ve got no choice, really. Nah, I’m alright.” He pauses and stares into the window towards the bar, counting bottles. “I’m usually mostly alright after getting the chuck... Helps if you go in half expecting it.”

John doesn’t know what to say. Self-consciously he pats Lestrade’s shoulder. “Still... plenty more seas in the fishing...area.” That hadn’t come out right. “Maybe you just need someone less complicated. More on your level.”

Lestrade cuts him an affronted look. “Thanks, John. Really bloody cheering you are. I’m not a complete neanderthal.”

“Sorry,” John throws back, nettled. “I’m just trying to say you shouldn’t give up. Sorry my advice isn’t good enough for you.”

“No offence, John,” Lestrade replies, leaning on one elbow to look at him. “It’s not like you’ve had the best track record.”

“I was married.”

“So was I.”

“My wife. Died.” John hisses at him. “*Yours* just ran off with Mr. Motivator.”

“Your ‘wife’ was the nutter who shot Sherlock,” Lestrade hisses back. “Yeah, I found out about that.”

John goes cold, his fingers flexing. “We sorted that out,” he says stiffly. “Keep out of it.”

“Who sorted it? She sorted it? Or Sherlock?”

“I said keep out of it.”

“Fine. Because it’s not like I care or nothing,” Lestrade grumps. He lashes a finger towards the Spotty ‘Erbert as he hovers around, ostensibly collecting empties. “Oi! Stop fucking listening in and refill those.” He leans in and thumps both empty glasses down on the edge of the table and the student bartender scuttles to obey.

“I should probably be heading home,” John mutters. He doesn’t leave however. There’s a wad of anger lodged in his chest and he’d like to directed fully at Lestrade but can’t convince himself that he wouldn’t regret it. There’s a part of him that says that he can’t afford to be fighting with Lestrade.

“Stay for a bit,” Lestrade says quietly. “And at least finish these beers.”

John relents. At least he’s got one foot literally out of the door and he can always ditch and leave if he decides he’s still furious. They sit in prickling silence and then Lestrade fiddles with his lighter and speaks softly towards the table, deliberately so as not to be overheard.

“It was a personal matter.”

“What was?”

“The thing... with Mycroft.” Lestrade shifts from side to side, visibly uncomfortable. “I should *not* be telling you this.”

“What do you mean, ‘personal’?” John presses. It feels farcical, speaking like they’re not, but he falls into the ruse almost automatically. Lestrade drops his tone to a mutter and the whole secrecy of it sends a thrill up John’s spine.

“Someone got ill.”

John weighs up between the questions he wants to ask and plumps for, “How ill?”

“He didn’t know to start with.”

“Someone important to Mycroft.”

“You might say vital,” Lestrade says dryly. John’s head whirrs. Lestrade continues, “I’m not saying any more, or else I’m not going to have much of a quiet life.”

“You don’t like a quiet life,” John says.

“Nor do you.”

You’re abnormally attracted to dangerous situations and people.

A thought strikes John so hard it leaves him breathless. Blindly he grabs at Lestrade's shoulder.

"John?"

"Sherlock-"

"What ab- oh! No, no John. Come on, you're a doctor, you'd know."

"I don't though-" John blurts with a smile, months of frustration boiling over. "I miss stuff all the time- the drugs- the lies- the fuc- I didn't know Mary was *pregnant*!" He slams his palm hard enough into the table to make the whole thing sway and rattle precariously. Lestrade looks at him, slack with shock.

"You didn't?" he asks.

John gives him another sour smile and then roughly shakes his head. "He knew."

"I thought you planned-"

Another shake of the head. "I thought we were being careful..." John says and the smile vanishes as he presses his lips together. Lestrade gives a long low whistle in surprise. "Nothing wrong with that," he says awkwardly, "Things happen. Most people have a near miss or so..."

John doesn't answer. He has had many long and horrible thoughts on this exact subject; on the uncertainty of his child's conception and the poor timing of it. That things had gone so swiftly and so unpredictably wrong and that although he and Mary had found their own strange brand of equilibrium, the nagging, ongoing thought that he hadn't been either prepared for it or in love with the idea in reality. The idle dreams and desperate wishes of a grieving man had been one thing; in practice it hadn't been what he'd expected.

John has the cold sinking feeling that even if things had gone completely normally, it wouldn't have been what he'd expected.

"Go home, John," Lestrade says gently, breaking into his thoughts, "Pick your kid up and make her smile and stop... beating yourself up over stuff you're not responsible for."

John throws him a perplexed look.

"Sherlock," Lestrade clarifies, "and making him... not so..."

The look turns challenging.

"No, you're not. You're no more responsible for making Sherlock happy than you are making the Tube run on time. He's got to sort that out himself."

"He can't," John says simply, his anger finally crumbling, "He hasn't the first idea how."

Lestrade makes a little noise of empathy, and falls quiet again. John turns his face into the sun and taps his fingers on the tabletop as the pair of them, each in his own way, tries to gloss over the awkwardness of the conversation. In the end Lestrade sighs deeply.

"If it helps," he says, half into his pocket as he feels for his lighter. "He's worried about a lot."

"Worried?"

Lestrade nods jerkily, looking a mix of guilty but relieved. "Yeah. Stressed out, like. Nervy. He's

usually high-strung, I know but-

“But not worked up...” John mutters. “What about though?”

“Probably,” Lestrade says dryly, “Trying to make other people happy. Look, just fuck off home and make him do whatever he does that’s Sherlock for chilling out. More ooze in petri dishes maybe, I don’t know.”

“Yeah,” John says, distractedly, feeling for his wallet. He’s probably got enough for a cab; he could be home in ten minutes or so from here, traffic depending.

“You’re welcome,” Lestrade calls after him as he leaves. John waves a hand over his shoulder, not listening.

“Yeah,” he says, and then he’s gone.

Lestrade huffs and paws at his packet of smokes. He drops the remainder of the packet unsmoked into the ashtray, puts his hands in his pockets against the chill and ditches out before the bartender returns with their drinks.

John goes home. He collects his daughter from her dinner at Chez Hudson and tries not to feel bad when both of them wrinkle their noses at the smell of cigarette smoke and beer on his jacket. The child arches in his arms, annoyed, and he slugs her over his shoulder like a sack of potatoes to cart her up the stairs.

Lestrade’s comments rattle in his head.

Sherlock looks up as he enters and John looks down to toe off his shoes, internally squirming. He hates the idea that he could have gotten things so wrong, with something he thought he understood so well. Sherlock in turn says nothing but instead moves from his chair, making John’s skin prickle with the sensation that he’s intruding into Sherlock’s space within the flat. They’ve been doing this, he realises, for a while.

“Lestrade says ‘hi’ and that he might have a fraud case you can play with,” John says, by way of breaking the silence.

“I don’t play, John.”

“Work on, I mean.” John turns, babe in arms, and finds that Sherlock has slipped from the sofa and stolen up behind him. Sherlock takes a smooth step back out of John’s personal space, gives him a polite smile. John puts the baby down where she beats on his shins while he shrugs off his jacket. “Good day?” John adds, trying to keep things light.

“Monotonous,” Sherlock replies. He’s moved to the desk now, frittering through the pages of a book.

John removes himself to his room and lets the baby crawl around behind bars for a while. He fetches dry laundry from the clothes horse in the bathroom and busies himself with putting it away. The baby’s clothes, unlike his own, are in more of a muddle. He gives the drawers a half-hearted tidy. Gauze wings brush his fingers as he shifts the bee costume aside. God, that had been a weird night, and awkward.

He still doesn't want his daughter to be an inconvenience that his best friend just 'gets used to'.

He's still sort of angry with Sherlock in a vague, accumulative sort of way, for a multitude of grievances big and small that he has already completely forgiven except he can't let go of the anger.

Bitterness is a paralytic.

John shoves T-shirts into order and deliberately reshuffles his socks; not that Sherlock's been in to mess about with them since he moved home. Back. Moved to Baker Street.

"Fine," John snaps to himself.

Home then. A messy, unwonted shambles of one, but begrudgingly he supposes it's all he's got. A family of two and two bits, like a charity shop jigsaw puzzle with random extra pieces thrown in, which he can't seem to put together when it looks like it should be piss easy. John grinds his jaw and sits on the end of his bed. Across from him on the dresser lies the photo album.

'You can't do this', he wants to say, 'you can't be all over her life, and then suddenly back out with cold feet. You can't go from looking after her four hours a night to point blank ignoring her whenever you pass her in the flat. It's not fair. She doesn't understand it.'

'I don't understand it either,' John thinks, with regret. 'Was it me? I thought...'

Clearly what he'd thought was wrong, though. Or not enough now that these mysterious circumstances with Mycroft have apparently sent both brothers into some kind of tailspin. John roughs his palm through his hair and tries to think linearly.

Someone was ill. Someone important to both Mycroft and Sherlock. Either of their parents is of the age to start having the potential for serious health complications, John thinks. Could be anything- angina, glaucoma, Alzheimer's, early-onset dementia. A stroke. Cancer. John purses his lips. For all the mortalities in Sherlock's life, as far as he knows, none of them have been particularly personal.

Except for Redbeard.

God, and hadn't Sherlock taken that oh-so terrifically well.

"Christ." John plants his hands on his knees and stares across the room. "This is insane. Think."

Sherlock Drama Queen Holmes. Responds best to a challenge- supposedly stressing over something. John throws himself mentally back to the army. 'Imagine a Captain. Good at his job, new to the situation; you cannot supersede his authority nor undermine it so how do you deal with him?'

Challenge him.

How?

Take him out his comfort zone.

How?

Something roughly familiar but different...

And managing that ego?

Pose it as a favour.

“Watson, you knobhead,” John mutters, kicking himself. He sends up an agnostic prayer to whatever might look favourably on small children and blasphemers, and picks the baby up off of the floor.

Sherlock’s still doing vague laps of the living room, violin bow in one hand and assorted pieces of antique model anatomy in the other, like he’s on some sort of forensic scavenger hunt.

“Are you busy?” John asks.

Sherlock dangles pair of a waxwork lungs from his fingers. “Not especially,” he admits. “You haven’t seen my spleen, have you?”

“Not... recently,” John says. He tilts his head automatically as the baby puts an arm around his neck. She’s sitting comfortably on his hip, and her damp fingers make ticklish exploratory sweeps as she tries to look in his ear. John smiles, leaning into her slightly to make her stop. She feels at the hard line of his jaw and he feels himself by instinct force some of the tension out of it.

“Bwah,” she announces and John nearly crumples again. Before he can let himself have second thoughts, he detaches her hands from his face and in a flurry, John pits himself against himself and stakes his everything on a gamble. “Here, put that lot down- she needs a bath,” he says, holding her out at arms length.

Sherlock blinks as John drops the baby into his arms, the lungs spilling onto the sofa. “What?”

“She needs a bath,” John repeats, eyes slithering over the floor, the walls and the inside of his own restrained panic. “You can do that?”

“What? Me?” Sherlock says, flummoxed. “The- me, the why?”

“Because,” John says, occupying hands and mind with slowly feeling through his pockets. “She’s smelly and I want to get on with some other stuff.” The words start coming with a rush, fuelled with frustration at himself, “and you’re not doing anything, plus I know- I *know* you love her.” He says it harder than he means to, but spoken aloud, it suddenly feels solid and real. And right. John straightens his shoulders. Sherlock’s mouth falls open.

“No, shut up and go on,” John urges, whisking a finger at the bathroom. He clears his throat and manages to add, more neutrally, “Toys are in the bucket under the sink.”

Sherlock stares at him, looking like someone’s just dropped a sack of gold on his head from a height. Stunned, but not entirely sure it’s all bad.

John pretends to be interested in fishing old shopping lists from his pocket and a lint-covered teething ring that’s also filed with them there; not because he still can’t look at Sherlock, but to allow Sherlock a moment of privacy to recoup. He waits, and then Sherlock claps his mouth shut and draws himself up and goes to give the baby her bath.

John waits until Sherlock’s steps recede and then sags for a moment into the soft cushion of the Belstaff hanging by the door, and then he smiles.

After a moment, water splashes into the bath. The baby chortles. As far as she’s concerned it’s business as usual. Dinner, bath and then bed. John takes a leaf from her book and looks around the flat. A number of chores leap to mind and then he lets them go. More things to share. He clears his throats.

“I’m going to make some fish-finger butties,” he calls towards the bathroom, rallying himself on the other side of the grill pan. “You want one?”

There’s a moment of silence and then Sherlock calls back, “Proper ones or Tesco knock-offs?”

John finds the packet in the freezer and rattles it loudly, the fish sticks battering against the cardboard. “You tell me.”

Sherlock listens. John can imagine him; one knee down on the bathroom mat, pulling the baby’s cardigan off, one ear cocked. It makes John smile again.

“Yes,” Sherlock announces.

They lapse into silence, each to his own task. The flat fills with the smell of the heating grill and the smell of baby soap; the click clack of the knife in the butter dish and the splash of the taps. The kettle roars into life and light and the oven makes the kitchen warm. In the bathroom the mirror steams over. John wipes his hands on a tea towel, and then runs out of things to do. He tries standing there endlessly turning fish-fingers but he knocks one against the coal-red element, leaving a charcoaled line across it, and he stops.

Unable to resist, he goes to peek through the bathroom door.

The tub is full of bubbles; far more than John typically uses and the baby is thrilled. She sits, scooping the foam in her hands and patting it between them, and then laughing when it disappears. Sherlock is single-mindedly focussed on the process of wetting her hair, one large hand cupping her hairline as he pours water over her scalp. Her blonde curls flatten down seal-like, and she’s so engaged with the bubbles she’s not paying him the slightest bit of attention.

John presses his lips together against a flood of warmth that swells up from his core. He sees Sherlock’s shoulders hitch slightly and realises that the man hadn’t noticed him come to the doorway until that moment. Quietly, John forces himself to retreat.

‘It’s fine,’ he tells himself, ‘don’t interfere.’

It’s hard not to. He wants to watch. He wants, even more, to nip in and just remind Sherlock that there’s a flannel on the edge of the sink that is typically for covering her eyes to keep the shampoo out of them, and that she currently likes the plastic frogs best and they’re nothing special and suitable for being chewed on and... and a half dozen other little needless comments of that sort.

He hears her laugh again and, again, tells himself ‘She’s fine. They’re both fine.’ He closes his eyes and the image of them flicks at once back to mind; Sherlock’s hands on her hair. Large hands in contrast to her small head; the fingers curved gently, knuckles pink from the warm water as Sherlock’ had passed his hand down in a gesture reminiscent of a caress. The solemn warmth of Sherlock’s expression, like there could be no other baptism for this child in all the world.

John’s stomach flutters.

She finally takes her first real steps in the third week of February. John isn’t there to see it. It’s not till some hours later, when he’s hunched over his desk with a lacklustre sandwich that he checks his phone and finds that Sherlock’s sent him a message.

All it says is ‘Look- SH’.

A file is attached. John's nonplussed at first; there's only a blurred smudge for a preview and it's not the first time Sherlock's sent him miscellaneous videos. It's not until his own bedroom carpet at Baker Street hoves into view that he starts giving it his full attention. The camera work is characteristically steady, but through the crackle of the audio, he can hear a faint hitch of excitement in Sherlock's breath.

"*Bee*," Sherlock says, disembodied. He lifts the phone a little and John can make out the top of her head on the far side of his bed. She's standing there, gripping the duvet in both fists for stability. She crab-waddles to the right, bumps the bedside table with her shoulder and then begins the longer sideways shuffle to the left.

John smiles lopsidedly to himself, dropping cucumber from his sandwich onto his keyboard without even noticing.

"*Come on, Bee*."

She reaches the corner of the bed and looks up at Sherlock, mouth working thoughtfully. Then she moves towards him. Her gait is still very much right-leg-first, and she moves hand over fist for support until she reaches the next corner and then she stops, burbling to herself in consternation. She's run out of bed between her and Sherlock.

"Come on," John breathes. He's half got his sandwich stuck out before him, as though he were there and could scoop her into his arm. "Come on, sweetheart."

"*Come on, Bee*," Sherlock echoes. His hand blurs the screen as Sherlock extends it past the lens. He wiggles his fingers at the baby, who makes a series of annoyed squats because she can't quite fathom what she wants to do. Sherlock's hand vanishes briefly. "*For a Jaffa cake then*," he suggests, turning one back and forth over his knuckles. The baby reaches out, wide-eyed. She knows full well what chocolate is.

John snorts at the bribery, and then magically, she lets go of the bed.

It's hardly graceful. It's more like a drunken stagger than anything but by God, she does it all by herself. The camera wobbles slightly, and John can just about hear Sherlock laughing with that suppressed laugh he uses when he's genuinely happy, the one that makes his face wrinkle up like a chamois leather, and John is inadvertently pushing things off his desk in his excitement and acting altogether less dignified. The baby blurs the camera with mucky fingers and the video ends.

John watches the whole thing again, enraptured. He feels 26 again, crawling on his knees and roaring joy at the TV, watching England taking the drop goal in the final minute of extra time, with Bill Murray punching him in the back and spilling beer on them both.

Prosaically, however, the door knocks and the nurse sticks her head around the door with a fresh batch of notes for him.

"Are you alright?" she asks, curious, plopping the papers on the least messy portion of his desk. "You've proper squidged your sandwich there..."

"Fine. More than fine. Brilliant," John beams. "Fantastic." She tilts her head.

"Is that so? Well, I'm glad it's not some kind of collywobbles. You were groaning like one of those humpback whales, so you were. What was it? Were you winning the lottery?"

"My daughter's first steps." John relinquishes the phone just long enough for her to get the gist of the clip, and she comes over suddenly sunnier.

“Oh, congratulations. There’s lovely for you. Terribly sturdy, she is too; eating well?”

“Like a trooper,” John replies, proud and then feels the wind knocked from his sails when the nurse says, blind to his feelings. “Her mum must be so happy.”

John’s smile falls from real to forced. “She passed away,” he says simply, returning his mind to his work. The nurse is appalled.

“Oh, I am sorry, love. Oh, I didn’t know.”

“That’s fine, thank you. Can you take these patient records over to Sarah’s office, please?”

“Of course, yes,” she takes them, thrown. “I’m sorry,” she urges again, and then sensing his discomfort, leaves. John senses this will become the staff-room anecdote of the day, and he finds himself resenting his co-workers. He’s sick of being the cause of gossip. John washes off his hands, tidies his desk up, and assigns the sandwich to the bin.

He’s flicking through his notes when his phone pings. John picks it up. It’s a blank message with a few photos attached.

John scrolls down for the snap of his daughter, sat on the floor and smiling, reward in hand. In the second, she’s got her teeth around it, and already it seems she’s found something wrong with it. The third is comical unhappiness directed straight at the camera.

The phone pings again.

‘So it seems that she doesn’t like the orange bit very much- SH’

John’s grin lasts him through the rest of his shift.

On Saturday night Mary slips into the empty half of the bed as John stirs; half-awake, half dreaming.

“Go ‘way,” John growls thickly into the pillow. He’s been drooling and his cheek is damp. “You left.”

Mary doesn’t touch him, of course. But he feels her lying there on her side, looking at the tense middle of his back. Then she seems to smile.

Seems like I’m still here though, doesn’t it, John?

“Jus’ bugger off. ‘M not in the mood.”

Mary doesn’t take him seriously. *You’re always in the mood for some fun.*

“Not any more. You spoilt it.”

Hardly my intention.

John hardens his side into the mattress, resolute, but Mary is colder and more enduring, bone to his mortal flesh.

Don’t you miss it? She wants to know.

John sucks the inside of his lower lip against his lower canines, curls his fingers into the duvet and closes his eyes tighter, willing himself back into a state of unconsciousness that won't come. On a bone-deep level he misses a lot. He misses having a wife; in the abstract. He misses Mary perhaps for other reasons entirely.

Oh, John. You were never terribly good at this.

'No,' John thinks, angrily 'but look who's talking.' And then he feels faintly guilty for that, like he's betraying his own ideals, but what's he meant to do? He's tired. He's got a baby and a job and no spare mental capacity for the quagmire that is life after death. John hauls the duvet up over his shoulder, thumb rubbing into the scar and the stiff muscle around it enough to wake him a little. The baby grunts and slurps in her sleep.

The light from the lamp posts doesn't fall across the desk; the photos in their frames are nothing but dark holes against the backdrop of the mirror. He blinks slowly and feels himself sinking again into the bedclothes. He never goes to sleep to the smell of magnolia hand lotion, or wakes up to the smell of baking any more. He never sleeps even partially naked any more. There's something he misses, but it's elusive and not entirely unique to Mary. He misses having the energy to have the freedom to be himself.

John doesn't let his hands wander into the empty side of the bed for fear of finding no response any more than he has let them sneak lower than his navel in months, between the sheets anyway. Practical pleasure's turned shameful and lonely, and perhaps that's what it is. Perhaps it's that more than anything at moments like this he misses touching mouths and the spontaneity of someone else initiating something. Or the adult privacy even, in having the room to himself.

You've never had a sex-drive so low...

'No,' John thinks, 'I haven't,' and it's like dealing a blow to his own masculinity.

You miss it.

John misses it, but he turns on his back and listens to the baby breathe for a long time rather than face it any further.

His fingers find a rend in the seam of the hem of his t-shirt, perhaps just from wear or from a snag in the washing machine. He dabs his finger over it back and forth. The sheets on the bed are old; from the old house, not the time at Baker Street. The books on his shelf are old; remnants from university lecture halls and times he chased his profession with verve and things given by men who he cherished and who then left his life because of distance or carelessness.

Or death.

The lamp and the alarm clock are old; the wallpaper on the walls is old, the bed creaks with age and so do John's bones and all at once he is sick to death of it.

'I'm too young to be old,' John thinks and chases his thoughts in circles until he's drifting on the edge of weary sleep again.

You're too old to be young. Mary points out from the far side of the bed.

'I wanted to be a young, fun dad,' John argues back.

Never. Mary says with a smile, amused. John's chin drops a fraction. True enough. He's known other young, fun dads with pleasant, polite wives, a daughter and a son; the very picture of the good

old 'nuclear' family, an expression John has always found bitterly apt. Radioactive poisoning lasts years, just like...

Whatever it takes, whatever happens, from now on-

You left.

John turns on his side again, and sinks.

Gradually, through the silence, Mary sidles close again. *We'd have been good parents, together.*

John has no answer to that. He's not altogether sure of that statement. He breathes deep and slow, drifting. 'Dunno,' he thinks. He's not sure he's a good parent now; there's always so much to do and not enough time and energy to do it. He's always felt if Mary had lived he'd have found it easier.

Naturally, with all that security. Mary's tone is sarcastic. *Our little...make-believe.*

John half-dreams of it; Mary at home playing at mother and housewife, walking on tiptoe. He dreams of himself at the clinic in a white coat, meeting Sherlock, playing at action hero. In his dream his hands are made of plastic and stiff to manoeuvre; the equipment is all oversized and blunt. It's a frustrating post-mortem.

Mary tiptoes past them as they work, toting the baby unprofessionally under one arm, balancing play dough loaves on a tray in the other. She watches them for a moment, head tilted on one side and smiling blankly.

Do you miss me? Mary seems to wonder. John loses the grasp of the dream and rolls over. He has no answer to that question, nor does he want one. He ploughs his aching shoulder towards the headboard and drops headlong into troubled sleep without thinking of one.

Tesco is out of chocolate birthday cakes. John gives the space on the shelves a stern look but nothing magically materialises to fill it.

"Bollocks," he says to himself under his breath. There's lemon drizzle, which he's not that bothered about but doesn't seem quite festive enough, or coffee and walnut, which Sherlock likes but which neither John nor the baby will touch.

He shuffles down the aisle, wishing he'd actually put a bit more thought into this and not rushed in thinking it would probably all just pan out. Like too many simple things related to fatherhood, it seems, it's turning out to be harder work than he'd ever expected. This seems unfair, as he'd always appreciated it wouldn't be plain sailing.

John looks down into his trolley. So far all he's got in it is paper plates and a case of Heineken. He twists his lips in thought and then heads for the freezer section. Ice-cream cake is still cake, right? It's a small Tesco though, and all he finds is a Viennetta. John swears again and sticks it in the trolley anyway- Sherlock has a weakness for nostalgia desserts- then wheels the trolley around and drives it grimly towards the middle of the shop. Trifle it is then. He can throw one together in 5 minutes if he omits the jelly, and it'll be good to go by the time the others turn up.

For decoration he throws in a packet of chocolate buttons and a set of candles even though the baby can't blow them out, and calls it a party.

Or close enough anyway.

As a final thought he sticks in a couple of bottles of wine. Perhaps with enough booze in them, no one will notice the oddities.

Lestrade turns up on time, behind Mrs. Hudson who's been popping up to the flat time and time again all day. Molly arrives half an hour later, completing the guest list. Except for Mycroft, of course. True to his word, he'd sent him a text message with the date and the time but John expects him to either be a no-show or come right at the end in order to slink off as soon as possible.

Molly shakes the drizzle off of her coat, cheeks pink from the cold and looks around the room.

"Hey," she says, by way of greeting. She passes John over a gift, much to his surprise.

"Oh, you didn't have to do that," he says, touched.

"It's just a small one," Molly says, still looking around. John wanders off to let the baby tug at the wrapping paper, and curious, Sherlock corners her in conversation. "Who were you looking for?" he asks, looking her up and down calculatingly.

Molly dithers (either embarrassed or nervous he hasn't enough evidence to conclude which) and then says, "No one, really. I just... well, I assumed Billy might be here."

"Wiggins? Why?"

Molly gives him a somewhat appraising look. "He likes you?" She offers. Sherlock isn't sure how to parse that, exactly. He's always worked on the premise that he and Wiggins do not, in fact, especially like one another, but are instead mutually useful. You scratch my back, I'll find something with which to scratch yours without actually having to touch you. That sort of arrangement.

"John wouldn't have invited him," Sherlock points out, and Molly concedes to that.

"I guess not..."

Sherlock is almost prepared to let the topic drop but something niggles at him about Molly in a vague way, and instead he asks a question.

"Why interested?"

Molly shrugs, looks rather carefully disinterested and says, "I'm not. I just- I haven't seen him in weeks and I thought he might be busy. With you. You and John, because you're busy. Together. On cases; busy on cases."

"Yes, I don't know what you're angling at Molly, but do feel free to stop any time you feel like speaking," Sherlock says, flat and dry. Then he clears his throat and tries again to overcome automatic bad old habits. "The last I saw of Wiggins he was in Putney, and no, I haven't had any cases for him."

"Putney?" Molly says, the whole of her being going dangerously still. "Is he living there?"

"One might say so," Sherlock says, feeling like he's stepping onto the thin ice of Molly's moral disapproval somehow and not liking it much. "I'm not his minder. He is, and I'm aware

appearances are deceiving, an adult.”

“Is he,” Molly returns. It’s not even a question. Sherlock frowns.

“What?” he demands, but whatever it is, Molly refuses to argue over it now, with John already trying to frame a birthday party around 36 cans of lager and a jellyless trifle.

Sherlock waves a hand. “I’m sure he’s fine. Enjoying himself.”

“Hm,” Molly replies, with a flash of grimness.

“How about a drink,” Sherlock asks, not waiting for an answer in order to escape. “Yes? Yes. I’ll get it.”

He retreats to the kitchen where John is bantering with Lestrade who is leaning against the draining board, absently scratching his arm.

Sherlock leans over John’s shoulder to look into the bowl he’s working on.

“What’s that?”

“It’s a trifle,” John says defensively.

“Yes, I can see that, why the line?”

John takes half a step back and gestures to the row of chocolate buttons he’s arranged across the top of the trifle.

“It’s a one!”

Lestrade steps in to offer his expert opinion and together the three of them regard John’s efforts.

“It’s a bit... looks like it’s been victim of a drive-by rabbit.” Lestrade says finally and Sherlock blows a filthy raspberry in agreement.

“It’s. A. One.” John growls, and goes to put it on the table.

He has to concede though, once he’s stuck a candle in the middle of it, the chocolate ‘one’ does look less like a numerical figure and more like the decorative input of a very organised dung beetle. Annoyed, John takes it through and dumps it on the coffee table, lighting the candle with Sherlock’s lighter. The baby is at once hypnotised by the fire and John, with sudden clarity, moves it out of reach of her pyromanical little hands.

“Are we singing?” Mrs. Hudson asks, to be met with a chorus of ‘no’s. They settle for showing the trifle to the baby, John blowing out the candle and then a smatter of applause, which of all the shit that happens on a day to day basis, is illogically the thing that startles the baby and makes her cry.

“All in all, I’ve been to worse parties,” Sherlock comments as John goes to pick her up. He’s not even being facetious. John gives him a rueful look, with just a hint of a smile as the baby wipes snot on his shoulder.

“One whole year,” Mrs. Hudson coos, removing the trifle to dish it up. “Oh, she is sweet.”

“Yeah,” says John, not really listening as he daubs at the snot, and then he repeats it again as it sinks in. “Yeah, one whole year...”

A whole year that they've made it to the end of. 'We made it,' John thinks, dull with surprise. 'We made it to a year.' It feels both an unreasonably long stretch of time and at the same time nothing at all. A lifetime and a blip. A drag and a race, but they made it. John's frankly relieved. Uncomfortably, overwhelmingly relieved to hit a benchmark which he never actually doubted they would reach but still... it's something to be grateful for. The trip to get here hasn't been easy.

'But we made it.'

"John?" Sherlock says.

"I'm fine," John replies automatically. He's not really, he supposes. He's still pretty wonky to really be fine and every day, a crisis seems only two steps away, yet somehow he seems to always keep those two vital steps ahead of it. Carefully he settles his daughter back into her highchair and distracts her with her elephant.

Mrs. Hudson witters something about the washing up and pushes a bowl of trifle and a teaspoon into his hand before puttering off to re-negotiate the ratio of custard to everything else that Lestrade is allowed to put in his bowl.

John looks down at his mess of broken sponge cake, custard and cream and then slowly digs his ridiculously tiny spoon into it. Seems about right, he contemplates, shoving the teetering spoonful hastily into his mouth. Fitting. He catches Sherlock doing the exact same gesture on the other side of the room, looking just as thoughtful, and it makes him smile suddenly, glad.

'We made it,' John thinks again. 'and it didn't all go entirely tits up.'

The baby bangs her spoon on her plastic tray. She's already got food smeared around her chops. She notices John looking, whacks again with the spoon and beams at him, the merriest, most content soul in all of England, John thinks, because they've given her a plastic spoon and some trifle.

He swallows. She always manages to disarm him. 'One year, and you've been ok,' he thinks. 'I didn't even manage a year of dating. I didn't manage a whole year of engagement or marriage. I don't think I've even managed a whole year of work in one clinic since...'

John stirs his trifle around thoughtfully, and then catches Mrs. Hudson smiling at him. She comes over from the kitchen doorway, leaving Sherlock picking Lestrade's pockets for nicotine patches.

"This is nice," she says, nudging John. "Everyone's enjoying themselves, aren't they?"

John raises his eyebrows but upon reflection he agrees. "Yeah, bit of a surprise." He's enjoying himself, which is probably the biggest surprise of all. He sticks out a thumb and smears custard from his daughter's cheek, and then allows her to lick it from his skin. He smiles again, more softly. He feels Mrs. Hudson come up behind him; she squeezes his shoulders and he unconsciously leans in.

"There, she's having a wonderful time," she says, fondly. "Even Sherlock's rather chirpy."

"Yeah," John agrees. He glances over at Sherlock and Lestrade, bartering over the last patch with jocular aggression. "He was making jokes earlier."

Mrs. Hudson smiles and bumps him with her hip. "See, I knew it would work out. All just a little settling period."

"What?"

“You said he’d been ignoring her,” Mrs. Hudson points out. Then she thinks and adds, “Then again, you also said he was really good with her.”

“He was. He is,” John replies, frowning. “He was ignoring her but when he wasn’t, isn’t; he’s really good with her. That’s why it was so fucking annoying.”

“John Watson, mind your manners.” Mrs. Hudson shoots him a look. “Though I know exactly what you mean.”

John laughs under his breath. “Anyway, seems like we’re all...I don’t know. Back on the beaten track? If there’s a track.”

“I’m sure there is, dear,” Mrs. Hudson says. “There’s never any way to go but forward, that’s what I always say.”

“Car,” Sherlock announces, sweeping past Molly to curtain-twitch at the window. He makes a noise of annoyance. “Again?”

The rest of them, as one, move over to look as well.

“Oh, my,” Mrs. Hudson says, upon seeing the black-windowed BMW oiling up to the kerb.

“-Croft,” Lestrade supplies.

“Annoying,” Sherlock corrects dismissively. “Why is he here?”

John says nothing. They wait as Mycroft knocks, waits a scant breath of time, and then simply lets himself in as he always does.

“I don’t know why we have that door, almost anyone seems to be able to walk through it these days” Mrs. Hudson says, half tutting, half trying to fish a cup out from under the stack of unwashed dishes. Expert on Mycroft Holmes she may not be, but she recognises a man who won’t swig larger from the can when she sees one.

Mycroft enters the living room cautiously, as though neither sure what to expect or the reception he might receive. In all honesty, John isn’t sure what to say or do either. Sherlock, typically hangs back, and uncharacteristically, so does Lestrade. Molly eyes the pair of them, and then by some mysterious code of non-verbal female communication, she and Mrs. Hudson take over.

“I put the kettle on,” Mrs. Hudson says, prodding John in the ribs as she moves past him to shoo Mycroft further into the room. “Shall I put that on the hook? Yes? Yes.” Deftly she swipes his umbrella. Mycroft looks a little startled. He’s still looking a bit washed out, John thinks, though not as bad as he did at Christmas. Finally John clears his throat.

“We didn’t think you were coming,” he says, realising belatedly that this sounds ungrateful. Is he grateful for Mycroft turning up, John wonders. Good bloody question.

“My apologies. I would have let you know but... last minute arrangements, and all...that.” Mycroft’s gaze trails down the wall to the floor where the baby is lying on her back gently paddling herself in circles on the floorboards. For a moment he looks concerned.

“She does that,” John says, awkwardly. “Sometimes she’s a bit lazy about crawling.”

Very slowly, Mycroft nods. Sherlock snorts. John hears Lestrade make a noise that's either him repressing some kind of hysterical laugh, or he's squashing a budgerigar in his pocket.

"Say hello, Bee," John says. The baby claps.

"Say hello, Mycroft," Sherlock echoes wickedly. Mycroft gives him a sour look. Sherlock bends and lifts the baby from the floor, settling her on his hip.

'Show off,' John thinks, fondly.

"Here, you can hold her now," Sherlock says, casually, and hoping to show the other man up, puts the baby into Mycroft's arms. He vaguely hopes she'll cry.

"But—" Mycroft begins, and then is too scared to breathe, let alone protest as he feels her weight against his forearms. To Sherlock's disgust, Lestrade pitches in to the rescue.

"Here, like this." Deftly, just as John once did with Sherlock, Lestrade moves Mycroft's hands around so that he's supporting her properly. Mycroft stands there petrified and completely awkward, looking down at her like she's a bomb that might suddenly go off. Sherlock's seen John changing nappies after a spinach lunch. The analogy is not wholly unfounded.

Mycroft and baby regard one another. He'd always rather assumed that given their level of neural development, babies weren't especially expressive. John's offspring, however, is frowning up at him with a look as though to say, 'Well whatever in the world is that thing? What am I supposed to do with it?'

Her eyes are blue; a deep, sea blue, which have neither faded to John's grey over time, nor to Mary's pale blue; they are vivid. She folds her hands under her soft chin, making whatever small judgment about him she is capable of, perhaps simply that he is neither food nor toy nor relative. Then she yawns and turns to look away from his face, bored with him. The motion is likely characteristic of all babies, yet it reminds him so much of Sherlock he cannot help but smile.

She reaches out and tugs at his watch chain with small fingers, her motor functions a little clumsy, but with an expression of determined exploration. Mycroft leans on the edge of the table and marvels at human physiology. In a few short years she will have tripled in size, and not only be able to verbalize what it is she is touching but tell the time, give an individual opinion on the use of fob watches in this day and age, and given that she is living in a house with Sherlock, probably pick pocket it off of him; all from these tiny hesitant beginnings. She feels up the brass buttons of his waistcoat and then brushes petit fingertips against the curve of his chin, frowning and making chucking noises.

Across the room, John silently raises his eyebrows at Sherlock and tries not to laugh too openly at Mycroft's expression. Sherlock merely rolls his eyes.

"You never said he liked children so much," Mrs. Hudson whispers in Sherlock's ear.

"I didn't know," Sherlock admits, wrinkling his nose, "isn't it awful?"

For once, Mycroft doesn't even notice them. After a moment however, he comes back to himself and clears his throat. He offers her back to John, who takes her and she greets him by thumping a knee into his solar plexus.

"She seems... very healthy," Mycroft says, straightening his cuffs.

Greg snorts into his beer. "You old sop," he says, with a faint smile. "Let us have a turn."

She treats Lestrade to a coy little smile, all eyelashes and dimples, and he bounces her, grinning like a great big goofball. Behind his back, Sherlock mimes retching, an equal hypocrite.

“Yeah, yeah,” Lestrade says dismissively, not even bothering to turn around- he can tell what Sherlock’s doing. “Enjoy this bit, while she’s so cute. They just get big and then the biting starts and the tantrums and then eventually it’s all about being cool and meeting boys and giving you heart attacks twice a week.” He sighs.

Molly looks at her phone and fidgets “I hate to be a pain, but I need to get back and feed the cat... He’ll be tapping his watch,” she says apologetically, feeling for her coat. “Don’t worry, I can see myself out.” She mouths a not-very-subtle apology to Mrs. Hudson and beats a retreat.

“Bye, Molly,” John manages, belatedly.

Mycroft clears his throat. “I’m afraid I must also be going,” he says, closing his fingers around air where his umbrella is not.

“Back to your satanic mills so soon, such a shame, bye-bye,” Sherlock says, sweeping past him to hold open the door. Mycroft rolls his eyes and takes his umbrella from the hook.

“Thanks for stopping by,” John says, feeling that a more sincere send-off might not hurt. Mycroft merely hums and leaves, with Sherlock dogging his heels.

Lestrade squashes his beer can and puts it on the table, popping the baby down on the sofa. “I should be off as well. Thanks for the party, John. Bye, sunshine. Be good.”

He passes Sherlock on the stairs, still smug from teasing. “Next round’s on Thursday,” Lestrade mutters as he steps around him. Sherlock turns to look down at him, sobering at once.

“Just so you know,” Lestrade adds. “Anthea’s handling it.”

“What time?” Sherlock wants to know, but Lestrade shakes his head.

“Wouldn’t say.” He shrugs his coat up and buttons it. Sherlock takes another step up towards the landing and then pauses again.

“He’ll have arranged it some time in the morning,” he says. Lestrade stops, hand on the door, then nods and leaves.

“He’s such a nice man,” Mrs. Hudson says, when Sherlock returns. For a moment he’s not completely certain which of them she’s referring to, and then she adds, “Such a shame about his wife. He didn’t deserve it.”

Sherlock inspects wine glasses for residue and gives a grunt of dissension. “How about a drink?” he asks. “John?”

Undisturbed, Mrs. Hudson continues.

“Did you say he’d found a new lady-friend John?”

John looks up from where he’s perched on the sofa with his daughter. “Yeah, sure,” he says to Sherlock and then to Mrs. Hudson tilts his head in lieu of a shrug. “He had, but he got given the push last week. Wasn’t working out.”

Sherlock bows out of the conversation, removing himself to the counter to open the wine. He feels

in a drawer for a knife with which to slice at the foil with. The one he finds is oversized but he ignores that in favour of getting on with the job in hand. Nonetheless he can't help but hear the conversation.

Mrs. Hudson tuts, working on the pile of dishes. "Such a shame. Was he very disappointed? Had they been together long?"

"No," Sherlock hears John say, nonchalant, "I'm pretty sure it was just a... one of those. A physical thing."

Wrong!

The thought comes from nowhere; a jolt from the blue that makes the atmosphere seem to suddenly freeze around Sherlock and the floor fall from under his feet with the sudden, unswaying conviction that he is right and John has got it wrong.

And if whatever complex machinations are passing between his brother and Lestrade are not, in fact, mere sex, then Sherlock has no basis of understanding for whatever it is that passes between himself and John.

We are not having sex.

It is sexual.

It's not a relationship.

We have a relationship.

We have this relationship.

We have this relationship and this is all we have.

This was what you wanted.

This isn't.

The blade of the knife slips from the side of the bottle, bites into the mound of his palm fiercely and Sherlock gasps and drops it with a clatter. John looks.

"Oh, Jesus, Sherlock."

John snatches up a clean tea-towel and pulls Sherlock over by the wrist to run the cut under the cold tap. It's a solid slice into the flesh below his thumb- a little more and he'd have raised a flap of loose flesh. John squints at it below the gushing water, but in his opinion it's probably not enough to need stitches. Sherlock bears it all in silence. John dampens the tea-towel and balls it to the wound as a make-shift cold compress. "Here," he says, not letting go. "Press that down and we'll wrap it properly in the bathroom."

Sherlock's face looks rather pale and pinched, enough that John feels compelled to squeeze his shoulder. It's not like him to get squeamish over a flesh-wound, but you never know- normally Sherlock gets banged up rushing around on cases and the adrenaline pulls him through it. Perhaps he takes it worse when it's just a home injury.

"I'm fine, don't fuss," Sherlock says, annoyed. John rolls his eyes and shoos him into the bathroom, without further ado.

“Sit on the bath,” John tells him. “And hold it up.”

“I know what to do,” Sherlock says as he does so, “It’s hardly the first cut I’ve ever had.”

“Not like you to slip, though,” John mutters, half to himself as he washes his hands and pulls out a wad of gauze. The blood has run down Sherlock’s elbow and stained the cuff of his shirt. He throws away the sodden dishtowel and cleans the wound again; it’s still bleeding freely, and no doubt throbbing and painful, but it’s no longer gushing. Sherlock doesn’t show the discomfort on his face, though there’s a tenseness around his shoulders and the fine lines of his brow.

John holds the compress until the bleeding turns more manageable, and then wraps his hand; there’s nothing he can do more- Sherlock’s going to have limited mobility with it for a few days but at least it’s not going to require stitches, and he didn’t slice anything completely off. He tucks the end of the bandage in, and then wipes Sherlock’s arm as clean as he can.

“You’ll need to change that shirt,” he comments. “I’m not sure what can be done about the blood.”

“Throw it out,” Sherlock says carelessly. “I have others.”

He stands and flicks the buttons one handed, passing through the hall and going up the stairs to change, his bandaged hand still held out awkwardly. John lets him go and gets him a glass of water and a set of painkillers for his return.

It takes Sherlock a considerable while, and when he does appear on the stairs again, his shirt is only partially buttoned and he’s scowling. “I can’t do the damn thing,” he complains. “Where’s Mrs. Hudson?” John rolls his eyes.

“Gone to find some spot-cleaner for the carpet you bled on. Hang on, come here. I’ll do it,” he says, “you take these.” He drops the pills into Sherlock’s free hand and reaches for the shirt. Sherlock’s belly hitches before he even lays a finger on the fabric and John glances up, amused.

“Ticklish?”

For a moment he thinks Sherlock is going to protest, pull away, something; his expression is so strange, but then he snaps, “Don’t be ridiculous,” and gulps the pills and the moment is gone.

A little thrown, John buttons his shirt for him. As with all of Sherlock’s clothing, the shirt fits close to his body and the buttons are slick little things that don’t want to cooperate with his fingers. Now and then his knuckles brush the line of Sherlock’s stomach, and suddenly it feels too close, too strange and too intimate. Abruptly, John looks up.

Caught off guard, Sherlock hasn’t the time to shut off his expression; his lips are parted ever so slightly but it’s the look in his eyes that scares John. He drops his hands from the shirt. “That’ll do,” he says, “You can manage the rest.” He plucks the glass from Sherlock’s hand and goes to rinse it, despite the fact that it’s still half-full of water, feeling like some invasive entity has kicked him from the inside.

“I’m going to get some ice,” Sherlock says distantly, and John hears the door shut behind him. The throb of the wound, however, remains.

—

Mrs. Hudson, returns, applies carpet cleaner and then sensing the strange mood, makes herself scarce. Sherlock retires to his room and the wine is left unopened on the counter.

John tidies. Puts the TV on and forgets to watch it, leaving it burbling in the background. When bedtime rolls around for the baby, Sherlock emerges, picking at his bandages and then silently retreats to the window area, to leaf through his sheet music. John gives the baby her bath and then brings her back, holding a story book as a peace offering.

“Do you want to settle her?” he asks.

Wordlessly, Sherlock takes her. Holding her is awkward with his bandaged hand and instead he sinks into his armchair with her, the baby wriggling over his chest.

“Not very sleepy,” Sherlock comments.

“She’s tired,” John replies, “Look at her eyes. She’s just got overstimulated.”

He watches as Sherlock shuffles her into the crook of his arm, her head in her favourite place in the crook of his neck. Sherlock disregards the book and instead hums to her, a tune that stirs at John’s memory until he recognises it as a waltz.

Forward, to the side, together. Back, to the side, together.

Going around in a box and ending up back where you started. Whoever came up with that idea? John wonders.

“Who invented the waltz?” he asks. Sherlock stills the gentle tapping of his fingers on the baby’s back and considers. “It developed, I believe, from the German ‘lander’ folk dances, and spread west with the Napoleonic wars.” He gives John a curious look and then resumes humming.

Forward, to the side, together. Back, to the side, together.

Back to where you started. And doing that, John puzzles, you can somehow get all the way around a whole dance floor.

Even if it makes you dizzy. John leans back into his own chair, watches the TV without watching it, and instead listens to Sherlock as he gentles the baby to sleep. He waits, until he hears Sherlock get up and then looks again. She’s gone limp and careless across Sherlock’s chest, her little legs wobbling on either side of his ribs. With care he has his forearm tucked under her, his other hand across her back. He moves smoothly towards the bedroom, rocking slightly with each step and not even caring, John watches them until they pass out of sight into his bedroom, heads touched together.

The pull of the empty doorway nearly draws John from his seat to follow them. He doesn’t know why or what he’ll do once he steps through it, or what he could possibly say. He doesn’t want to discuss what happened earlier, whatever that was, he doesn’t want to try and find answers to these complicated things that might not have answers.

He would like to stop going round in circles, but he doesn’t want to live a life where no one’s humming a waltz under their breath at all hours of the day.

He nearly reaches the door, but Sherlock meets him there first.

“John?”

John puts his hand on the counter, follows it with his gaze and then picks up the wine bottle.

“Nightcap?” he asks.

Something passes in the quiet depths of Sherlock's thoughts, out of John's sight. Then he inclines his head.

"Why not," he replies.

John yawns enormously and switches off the TV.

"Done in already?" Sherlock asks, amused, "It's barely ten o'clock."

"I'm shattered," John admits, brushing past him to return a book to the shelf. "And it's an early start tomorrow; I might as well turn in."

"Getting old."

"Not getting younger," John agrees, "Goodnight."

He reaches out as he crosses back across the living room and closes his hand over Sherlock's shoulder. The soft edge of John's little finger thwarts the rise of Sherlock's collar and brushes the skin of his neck, making Sherlock inhale sharply. John pulls his hand back and looks at him.

"You're jumpy. Guilty conscious?"

"Your hands are cold," Sherlock lies.

"Yeah, it's chilly tonight. Don't forget to close the bathroom window," John says, oblivious. He gives Sherlock's shoulder a second brief pat, enough to make the other man exhale this time, and then heads for his room.

"Goodnight," Sherlock murmurs to the closed door. The clock ticks, the dust settles and in private, Sherlock reaches up to cup a hand over the line of his neck, holding the tingle of John's touch there like a small and secret treasure.

Chapter End Notes

Chapter title comes from 'Prince Charming' by Adam and the Ants. Listen to it, it's v. rad.

Working title was: 'Spirits rise (among with other unnamed things)', which admittedly is not as snortingly hilarious as previous efforts but hey. Sometimes that happens.

Mr. Motivator; does anyone remember Mr. Motivator? If not, I highly recommend googling him and enlightening yourself to an amazing neon spandexy time in Britain in the early 90's. It was a very special time.

[Viennetta](#) was this ice-cream cake that was EVERYWHERE when I was a kid, and was a 'posh' ice-cream which basically was actually cheap stuff fancied up. It's one of those things which if you find it now, you say 'Oh my god, Viennetta, I haven't had

that for years!' and it's definitely not amazing when you eat it, but it's somehow very satisfying still.

Jaffa cakes can only be eaten one of two ways; you do the full moon, crescent moon, no moon thing, or you take off the cakey bit, lick off the chocolate and eat the smashing orangey bit last. Or you don't eat them at all. They are definitely not biscuits. They had a lawyer prove it.

Tesco knock-off fishfingers are not bad, but Tesco chocolate birthday cake is damn-right amazing and got me through two sets of exams.

Ahahah, I put in so many dumb things in this chapter, I hope you enjoyed it.

Questions? Comments? Burning desire to express your personal nostalgia food? Leave me a comment! Until next time<3 -Odamaki xxxx

Part 8: Waiting For that Feeling

Chapter Summary

“There’s something I wanted to say.”

The ankle Sherlock has had propped on his knee slips off, although he recovers quickly enough to manage the action and turn it into a slow stretch of his legs.

“Say something?”

“Yeah, something I want to say- wanted to say for a bit, actually just... wasn’t the sort of thing you- y’know.”

Chapter Notes

With thanks to the Infinite Egg [Codenamelazarus](#) who set things on fire with this fic. Metaphorically speaking in that she made me start writing it to begin with, and also because when I send her into Johnlock hell with the drafts, she burns.

I can be found on Tumblr as [Odamakilock](#). Recently I've also been acting as tech support for [Intern Kevin](#). Go check him out, he's a pretty cool guy. He tries hard.

Formatting for some reason still gets all jerked up in the hop from Scrivener to A03 so if you spot any typos or places where text might have been chewed by text gremlins, leave me a comment and let me know! Also, is the movie 'Gremlins' worth watching? Ta!

-Odamaki x

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Part Eight- Waiting For that Feeling

March comes and goes without much of note, just the ongoing sensation of dust settling. They pass through Mother’s Day with a notable lack of acknowledgement, although the baby comes home from nursery school with a card addressed to John. It’s a fold of printer paper boasting more of her splashy finger painting- nothing too much more ostentatious than anything else that she’s come home with. John knows that it’s meant as a kindness, but it still aches. He stuffs it under the clock with her first Christmas card, as yet more evidence of the temerity of human relationships.

John picks up more shifts at the clinic as the baby’s teething simmers down and then she catches her first cold and he’s on and off work again, nursing her through it. They’ve settled to a routine. Duties are delegated. John still hordes the bulk of the baby’s time, but for an hour or so a day, she’s passed over to Sherlock’s sole attentions.

Despite the settling, however, all of them are beginning to feel worn down. John has been doing

the cycle of housework, clinic work and parenting day in day out for over a year without pause, save his compassionate leave, which was more a necessary hardship than anything to John. Sherlock picks up small cases here and there; half because he's interested, half to make bank, and in between those he continues to pick at Mycroft's curious code case. He's making steady progress, but each progression unearths new layers of deceit for him to work through.

Towards the end of the month, they all find themselves rasping through a bout of tonsillitis and Mrs. Hudson is told to keep downstairs lest she catches it too. Sherlock stalks in curtailed laps between bedroom, kitchen and sofa, eating chilled yoghurt in abundance and doggedly pretending he's not ill. John sulks in his armchair, feeling dull and more bored than he can express with being run down all the time.

He spends hours on the laptop while he's off work, filling in blog posts and watching telly. At the peak of it, when even Sherlock can't deny that his tonsils have swollen up like golf balls, the three of them try watching inane children's TV. They manage a single fifteen minute stint on *Player* until Sherlock bores of trying to deduce the people in the bulky costumes, the baby falls asleep and John can feel his brain rotting on A-B-C's and 1-2-3's. God, but he hates this tripe.

John lets the baby flop onto the cushion beside him, tilts his head back against the back of the sofa and tries to find comfort in the idea that if she's anything like himself, she'll prefer sport to TV anyway. Hopefully not ballet, though. He looks at the baby and thinks, 'I promise to buy you a car if you want; I promise not to do terrible dad dancing in front of your mates, as long as you swear not to drag me through ballet recitals.' He chuckles thickly through his sore throat and then adds, to himself, 'Take Sherlock to those.'

He's prevented from becoming maudlin when the laptop starts trilling.

John closes the video they'd been watching and fetches the machine back onto his lap, pleasantly surprised to see that he has a call.

"Hello?"

"Hello! Hello! Can you see us?" Mummy booms back, loud enough to make the speakers crackle.

"Not yet- turn your video on."

"Which one's that- Ah, there we are. Hello, hello, John!" Mummy's face pings up on the screen squinting and beaming. "Gracious, you look *awful*."

John licks his lips and self-consciously wipes crumbs off of his t-shirt. "We've got the lurgy." He reports. "Me, Bee, and Himself. I'm off work."

"Poor things," Mummy croons sympathetically. "How's my boy faring?"

"Glum," John says, glancing across the room where Sherlock's curled in his armchair, hood pulled up so that all John can see is the end of his nose and a puff of curls. "And very quiet."

"Bugger off," Sherlock croaks.

"Pour honey and ginger down him," Mummy advises. "Never fails to pep. Darling, do come over and let me see you."

Sherlock unfurls with a grunt and slouches over, thumping onto the sofa next to John. Mummy tuts at the sight of him, as if viruses could be tutted away. "Look at you both, you look completely washed out. It's living in London, I expect, with all that pollution and all the nasties all over the

Tube. Last time we were there, I'm almost sure your father got fleas."

"It's not 1895, mother, we're not living in smogs," Sherlock growls, not because he's angry but because his voice is wrecked.

"It's still not *healthy*. When was the last time you got away for a bit, hm?"

The pair of them stare blankly at her on the screen. For Sherlock the whole idea seems (and has always seemed) rather alien. Why would he want to get away from London? London's where he came to in order to get away from everywhere else. Not to mention that everywhere else is boring, or else excitingly but unfortunately occupied by people who'd quite literally have his head. Sherlock's frankly partial to it where it is, thank you very much.

For John, it's the blankness of being unable to answer the question. It's certainly not been since the baby was born. And the months before that...? Then it must have been Christmas, well over a year ago. "Your house," he says, thinking out loud.

Mummy gives an explosive snort like a cart horse. "*Then!?* And *that* was hardly a holiday!" she says sternly, "Frankly I don't think it matters if you're digging up bog men in Bognor; you really should try and get out of that pokey little flat every now and then."

"There aren't any bogs in Bognor," John says, blankly.

"Pokey?" Sherlock scowls. "Isn't."

Mummy whisks a finger at him. "Pokey. *Smelly*. Little. Flat."

"Isn't!"

John reaches out a hand and catches the lid of the laptop to hold it open even as Sherlock does the same to try and close it. They tussle briefly and then Sherlock gives up with a noise of malcontent. John looks around at the general well-lived-in chaos of 221B Baker Street when no one's felt like doing the cleaning for a week. "Is a bit..." he says. He has to admit, he's getting a bit sick of the same set of walls.

Sherlock looks at him, wounded.

"Well, it is," John says. "Maybe it's not a bad idea." He sags into the sofa, feeling his ribs rise and fall under his own forearms as he sighs. "...Bit of a break somewhere." He's always liked travel. He closes his eyes and remembers kauri trees and the whoop of unknown birds; sunset over the beach and the bay. New Zealand's too far for a do-over of that awkward trip, but he's never disliked France. He becomes aware that Sherlock is still looking at him and looks back to find that the other's expression has changed.

"What?"

Sherlock huffs a huge and needlessly dramatic sigh. "Fine," he rasps, "Next week then. Easter. That's how it usually happens, isn't it? People go away for Easter. Tell Daddy to move his things from the old garage; I'll want it."

"Marvellous!" Mummy says, beaming. "I'll air the spare bedrooms."

"Hang on..." John splutters. "Come again?"

"It'll be cheap," Sherlock points out, oozing off of the sofa and resolutely towards the kitchen to

steal John's Strepils.

"Sherlock!"

"And of course, lovely to see you, mummy dearest."

"Cheek," Mummy chuffs, "Keep that up and you'll find the cupboards bare and nobody home."

Sherlock smirks around his throat sweet. "Sounds ideal."

"Give him a boot, John," Mummy encourages, and then finally seems to notice that John's looking rather startled. "You will come, won't you? It's not a drop of bother. Rather nice to have you all here to liven us up a bit."

"I don't know, we're all ill..." John starts, not at all convinced by the idea.

Mummy shrugs, "All the more reason! Hot meals three times a day, touch of sunshine; air that isn't full of car fumes. You'd have a week to get over the worst of it, and besides, you know he won't come otherwise," she adds, more pleadingly. "Do say yes, we'd love to have you."

John looks down at his daughter and gently nudges her over-pink cheek. She snorts in her sleep and then coughs. John twists his mouth and worries.

"John?" Mummy says, carefully.

John pulls himself back to the present. "Yes, alright," he agrees. "We'll drive down on Thursday."

Sherlock seems to go back and forth with his enthusiasm for the trip, by which John means (as he tells Mrs. Hudson) Sherlock wavers between changing his mind outright and refusing to leave London, and resignation that they're going.

"We've told them that we're on our way," John argues, "You've hired a bloody car."

"I know!" Sherlock snaps and actually has the gall to stomp upstairs and bang the door shut.

"Can someone tell me how many children I actually sodding have?" John rages to the empty living room, and goes to sling clothes into a hold-all.

By the time the morning itself rolls around, however, Sherlock seems to have resolved himself. He packs a suitcase, a box, another box, a clothes hanger, puts the suitcase back and brings down another suitcase, all whilst John goes in nervous circles trying to remember everything.

"Shit!" he swears as the car pulls up. "I'm not ready."

"Too late," Sherlock says, sweeping past him with the baby's car seat. "You can't back out now."

"Tell them to wait a few minutes; go and sign the paperwork," John says, going to check that the windows are locked, and then, as Sherlock comes back to throw his coat at him, asks, "Have you got the teething rings?"

"Safe in my pocket."

"Right, and we can get the flowers on the way... suit--"

“Suitcases are already in the hall,” Sherlock says. “Why are you panicking?”

“I don’t know, get in the damn car,” John replies, pushing him out of the door. He shuts it, takes a step onto the stairs and then finds Sherlock looking at him meaningfully.

“Fuck!” John turns around, goes back into the flat and collects the baby.

Sherlock drives of course. John sulks in the passenger seat and does all of the official muttered-swearing-at-other-drivers for him until they get out of the muck of London and hit slow moving traffic on the ring road. Sherlock drums his fingers on the steering wheel; John hunts through the dashboard for diversion and then gives up and asks, “Can we put the radio on or something?”

“No, it’s inane.” Sherlock replies, staring out the windscreen across the swamp of cars eking their way out of the city.

“What about for the traffic updates?”

“That’s what phones are for, John.”

John leans back so that he can use the rear-view mirror to spy on the baby, who as always when placed in a moving vehicle, has gone dead asleep. It’s like narcolepsy, except on cue. “.... Classic FM?” John persists. Sherlock considers some kind of internal radio schedule and then wrinkles his nose.

“Currently ‘enjoying’ two hours of youth choir.”

“Is that bad?”

“Prepubescent boys trilling cantos? The milage varies.”

“Right,” John says, folding his arms and hunkering into his seat. “In that case; wake me when we get there.”

“... I spy,” Sherlock begins slowly, when John shows signs of waking again some forty minutes later, “With my-”

John cracks one eye open at him. The car is moving along again at speed down the motorway; the traffic behind them. “No.”

“-Little eye, something-“

“I said no, Sherlock. This never ends well,” John pulls himself up in his seat and squints out of the window, trying to determine location. They could be anywhere. It’s all motorway. Sherlock tuts.

“It’s not *my* fault you’re a bad guesser.”

“Last time,” John explains with great, somewhat feigned patience, “You ‘spied’ ‘melanocytic nevus’. Nobody spies that.”

“I do. And you have one. On your arm. About there. And in your hairline about-”

“Jesus, get off and put *both* hands on the wheel, thank you. How much further is it?”

“Not far,” Sherlock replies with mingled feeling. “Junction is a couple of clicks ahead; we’ll hit the service station and then, joy of joys, *the countryside*.”

“Peaceful,” John says, with false neutrality. Sherlock scowls over the steering wheel.

“Nice and quiet; friendly neighbours,” John goes on, even while Sherlock makes scoffing noises. John grins. He nudges Sherlock with his elbow.

“It’ll be fine,” he says gently. “It’s only a long weekend. Plus a bit. I promise we can go out.”

Sherlock’s fingers tighten on the wheel and as John glances over, he swallows back whatever words he has found in his mouth and instead, merely grunts, “Service station. Mummy knows nothing about flowers except what’s cheap.” He pushes his wallet at John. “So get whatever’s the most overpriced. I’ll fill the car.”

He sweeps out of the driver’s seat before John can think of anything to say.

Mummy all but canters out of the house, wiping her hands on a tea towel, as soon as she hears the car pull into the drive.

“Darling!” she bugles, collaring Sherlock as soon as he’s out of the car and planting a kiss on his cheek. Sherlock grimaces and mouths complaints and then scrubs his face with his sleeve like he’s 9 years old again. “Mummy,” he grouses, “Honestly.”

“It’s lovely to see you. And John,” Mummy says, brushing off his griping and squashing John in a hug. Her casual acceptance and bolster leaves John feeling odd, though he can’t put his finger on it.

“Hi,” he says, out of sorts, “Thanks for putting us up.”

“Chez Holmes,” Mummy says, not missing a beat. “We’re not quite the London Carlton, but the views are better.” She smiles at Sherlock. He rolls his eyes and pops open the boot, vanishing behind the pillions of the car to muck around with the bags.

“Is this really her? She’s so big!” Mummy asks, and John turns his eyes away from Sherlock. Mummy is stood a respectful distance from the car, looking through the window but her interest is nearly palpable.

“Yeah,” John says, warmed. “Let me wake her.”

He steps passed to open the car door and gently wiggles his fingers over the baby’s chest until she stirs, squirms and then opens her eyes. She arches her back in a stretch and John smiles. “Hello, you. Are we sleepy?”

She smiles and John unclips her, picking her out of her seat still gooning, and props her on his hip for Mummy to see. “Here we go; look Bee. Say hello.”

“Hello, darling. Oh, she’s *beautiful*,” Mummy melts with love, lifting the baby’s small hands in hers, and John is touched to the core and on the brink of actual sentimentality until Mummy, unconventional as always, laments, “I always had such ugly babies.”

Against his best intentions, John laughs. “Oh god, sorry.”

“A peevish wee sausage and a little red onion,” Mummy tells him, with a gleam in her eye that makes him doubt if she’s not just pulling his leg. “I’ll let you guess which was which.”

“Mother,” Sherlock huffs, digging luggage from the boot. “John, distract her with the flowers.”

“Oh, right! We got you something,” John passes her the baby and feels into the back seat for the service-station bouquet. Mummy is thrilled. “How kind,” she says, throwing Sherlock a knowing look and tucking them under her arm like a drill-sergeant’s baton. “Come on,” she beckons him to the house. “Daddy’s popped the kettle on; we’ll all have tea.”

They settle in. Mummy plies them with tea and cake and small talk until it’s awkward, and then, as introverts one and all, they slope off in their own separate directions to recover from socialising until they can face it all again. John takes the baby to the living room to set up her play area; Mummy to her office; Daddy the old stable workshop, which leaves Sherlock to the rest of the house.

His first thought is to move his case boxes to the garage and start picking at Mycroft’s codes and banking scandals but strangely he’s not in the mood.

This house always seems to prick at his defences, and it’s not only annoying it’s somehow demeaning. It’s not fair how, no matter how long he spends rubbing shoulders with the rest of the adult populace of London, a hour back here and he feels gangling and difficult again; one step behind and yet nine steps ahead all at once.

He avoids his childhood bedroom; the original pin-holed and blue-tack mottled walls and the carpet that once tripled as desk and laboratory and bed as much as floorspace have all long since been stripped back and refurbished into the magnolia linings of a guest room.

His books, those that he hasn’t pillaged away to Baker Street, still tumble against one another on the bookcase; but the battered beloved wooden desk of his young adulthood is gone and replaced with something in glass and chrome which on the one hand appeals to his aesthetic, but on the other hand, he knows how it was chosen with it’s limited capacity for hiding bags of cocaine in mind.

Sherlock wanders; He doesn’t want to speak to John before he’s got this under control, nor intrude on the other rooms- the cot in the other spare, John’s luggage waiting in Mycroft’s old room; another child’s bedroom left more intact but having always been better looked after.

In the end, he holes himself up on the bench at the far end of the garden and finds himself feeling for his phone. He has a need to be doing something; a distraction. He isn’t sure what and then he finds himself dialling. It’s the same time of day; the same day of the week. It’s not unlikely...

He’s reminded of the potatoes that Mrs. Hudson made him peel as he waits for someone to pick up; the smooth white flesh of the tuber emerging from under the mucky brown skins, and the peculiar feel of starch on his fingers. Some of his very first chemistry experiments had concerned potatoes and despite their mundanity, there’s such a variety to the bizarre transformations that one can force upon a potato that he almost finds their versatility enviable.

“Hello, you’ve connected to the Safe Steps Switchboard. My name’s Chanielle. I’m happy to talk to you.”

The same spiel.

Sherlock is calmer this time, although once again, he doesn't speak. After a moment she recognises either his eerie silence or else the number.

"Hello again. I'm glad you called back."

In the background, he can hear a telephone ring. Busy day, maybe. Perhaps there are dozens of others right now, holed up in little private corners of their heads and their homes, groping for a lifeline.

She's unfazed by the silence.

"I understand if you don't like talking. Would you like to try something else?" She waits, as though listening to an answer, or else just waiting for him to hang up. When he doesn't (and he's vaguely curious as to what she will propose), she continues.

"Do you know the game '20 questions'? It's a game where you ask yes-no questions to find an answer. I thought, and you are very free to refuse, we could maybe try that. You could press the hash key once for yes, and twice for no. Don't worry, it won't make the call hang up or anything. What do you think? Want to try it?"

Against his better judgement, Sherlock lets his thumb cautiously poke at the hash key once.

"Great!"

He prepares himself to hang up, because he knows how he'd play this game and the questions he'd ask if he were her, but again she rather surprises him.

"Ok, first question. Would you like me to talk?"

Sherlock gives the phone a puzzled look. What's her angle? Still, it's utterly pointless if they're both silent, isn't it? He nudges the hash key again. He almost hears the smile on the other end of the line and then she does exactly as she offered. She talks.

"I'm sat at my desk; it's quite close to the window and I can see a long line of houses, and the cars passing on the street from here. I'm quite high up so they look very small. Just behind the houses, I can see St James' park. Do you know the park?"

Hash key.

"Yeah, it's lovely, isn't it? I sometimes go for a wander about at lunch time and say hello to the pelicans. I like watching them. They seem really funny and pompous; um, they always remind me of this one teacher I had at high school. His name was Mr. Basset and he had the most enormous mouth, too. Funny thing was, he was allergic to fish. I'm allergic to peas, which I think is about the most ridiculous thing to be allergic to. Do you have any allergies?"

Hash key. Hash key.

"Lucky you! See, I love samosas but without fail they're always full of peas. I always have to--"

It's all prattle. It's generic, mindless chatter; verbal fluff. It's like talking to a weirdly young Mrs. Hudson who doesn't know anything about him. Sherlock lets it go on another few minutes or so before it annoys him and then abruptly he hangs up.

Strangely, he feels better.

They reconvene for dinner later, once the baby has been fed and bathed and put to bed, a routine which for a change John had done. He'd missed it a bit, sitting on the bed with the baby tucked under his arm, pawing at the pages of her storybook as he'd turned them over.

He can't get away with two pages at a time any more. She remembers the pictures and looks for them. She definitely refuses to be stung on the one about the hippopotamus on the roof eating cake. John can't blame her. It's a good book.

He sets up the baby monitor and comes downstairs, where Mummy is already plonking food on the table. Sherlock, like a cat who hates to miss out, is lurking in his usual corner of the kitchen, observing but certainly not helping.

"Looks good," John says, noting a golden-topped pie on the counter. He turns on the kitchen taps to rinse his hands. "What's in it?"

"This," Mummy announces, wiggling past to deliver the pie to the table with aplomb. "Is Father's very best, homemade steak and pygmy pie."

John shakes water from his hands, startled into a chuckle. "Pygmy?"

"Well, made with short pastry," Sherlock pipes up and then basks in the afterglow of John's laugh.

"That's terrible," John complains, taking his seat.

"I know, but we still love him. God help us. John, how much? Big bit?"

Sherlock smirks at John over the table.

"Yeah, that looks enough for me."

"More than he's getting," Mummy teases, dolloping it onto John's plate and then, untrue to her word, giving Sherlock just as much.

They eat. There's wine. Mummy and Daddy chitchat but don't oblige Sherlock or John to join in other than to protest that no, really, that's plenty for me thank you- oh alright then.

They demolish the whole of the pie, and then do justice to a crumble, and then end up indolent over coffee and chocolates for a second dessert until John feels he's going to do himself a mischief if he eats any more and they remove themselves to the living room before Daddy suggests a cheese board.

"Oof. I don't think I've ever eaten like that."

"Obscene, isn't it?" Sherlock splays out in an armchair, head tilted back. "Mummy's a mathematician. You'd think she could calculate portion sizes."

"She's a mum," John counters. "That overrides everything. And at least your dad can cook."

"He can make pie," Sherlock corrects. "That's all he can make."

John hums with amusement.

They wallow in their chairs for a while, listening to Mummy and Daddy clear the kitchen and lovingly squabble, and then when Sherlock goes out to smoke, John raids the bookcases.

The pickings are eclectic, but he finds one of Daddy's paperbacks and wedges himself in by the fire to read, eyes already drooping with post-dinner catatonia.

"Play something a bit?" John asks, when Sherlock returns. Sherlock considers and then shakes his head.

"Tomorrow," he replies. "I think I'll work this evening."

"All night you mean," John says, "and sleep in all morning."

"I'm on holiday," Sherlock reminds him.

"Night then," John says. "Don't get into any trouble."

"I won't," Sherlock promises, sarcastically. "Don't stay up too late reading trash."

"I won't," John lies, and relishes the long quiet of the evening.

The workshop at once reminds John of Sherlock. There is clutter everywhere; projects in various unclear stages of development but there is a merriness to the disorder that suggests its owner knows precisely how it all operates. John looks over the shelves on the walls and gives a low whistle of appreciation. Daddy leans back from the lathe, pushes up his safety goggles and beams. "Aren't they lovely," he says.

"Did you make all of these?" John asks. He picks up the delicate rosewood leg of a side table and turns it around to admire the lion's foot carved into it.

"No, no," Daddy laughs, "I merely restore, repair, clean; completely rebuild in some cases, and well, yes, there are copies I do from time to time. Museum pieces and National Trust items and such that are too delicate for display but they still want something to show; or the original is lost and all that's left is the design."

John levels the table leg at him and deduces with a smile, "You made the Noah's Ark."

"Bits and bats and scraps, yes," Daddy smiles back, wiping his hands on his apron. "Come in, find a chair somewhere; though don't sit on that one, it's got a squiffy bottom."

John sweeps shavings from a stool that he can guarantee isn't an antique given that it's made of plastic and takes a seat. He looks around fascinated and then notes, "No electricity?"

Daddy pats the lamp on the windowsill above the desk proudly. "Battery powered; all the lights are. I try not to use power tools and such; I find it's better to stick to original methods only, so it's all elbow grease and peddle power, and good old fashioned stubbornness here." He treadles the lathe, making it spin a few rotations by way of example. "Art; not really progress," he admits.

"Still, you do all this," John presses.

Daddy waves the notion off. "Oh not -all- of it. I have a lovely chap in Gloucestershire who cuts and trims the wood for me in the old way, and Mummy will run up some dimensions for me when I get all higgledy-piggledy on the numbers. She does my books too, which is frankly a blessing or I'd be all over the place with the cash flow and I'd probably be selling my trousers for varnish or goodness knows what."

John grins.

“Mycroft’s terribly good too; punts me over the odd job or two from his London lot. Y’know? Keeps me out of trouble.”

“I don’t, but I can imagine,” John answers. “I can’t believe Sherlock’s never mentioned it.”

“No,” Daddy laughs. “Sherlock doesn’t see the point of it, I don’t think; plenty of modern stuff around so why all this effort in doing up old junk. And,” he lowers his voice, “I’m afraid that for a great many years my favourite way to use up odds and ends was in making miniatures, and I got rather good at it. So now, any attempt to web-search my name still pops up with dolly furniture rather than my more respectable antiques work; rather much for a boy, I suppose.”

John chuckles.

“Well, I guess I’ll know who to ask when Bee’s old enough to want dolls.”

“Of course! I’d be offended if you didn’t,” Daddy says, which John can’t imagine in the slightest.

“Did you know Sherlock made Bee a toy box?”

“No! Did he really?” Daddy leans forward, zinging with interest. He’s earnest with delight. “He’s good with his hands, isn’t he? Got a bit of a knack for the practical-Mycroft was always the better draughtsman. Give him paper and he’d whip up some lovely designs but I could never convince him to put any of it into practice and Sherlock wasn’t interested. I always said we had one expert split into two people and it was a shame we couldn’t bang them back together again.”

“What were they like?” John asks. Daddy clasps his hands and tilts his head.

“As children?”

“Yes.”

“Sensitive,” Daddy replies, considering. “They took everything so terribly to heart. Well, not that you’d always know it, especially with Mycroft. He was always more naturally secretive, but then he was always the more sensitive one.”

“Mycroft was?”

“Mm. Oh, I know he’s remarkable at acting like he isn’t now, but as a very little boy, he was- well, ‘tender’ I suppose is the best word I can think of. He knew very little unkindness.”

“What went wrong?” John says, half-joking.

“He got a brother,” Daddy says, quite serious. John sobers at once.

“Oh, not like that. I suppose I shouldn’t really be passing comment on it; it’s all old stuff now- water under the bridge and all that, and I don’t mean- well, what I mean is, if you’re not well adapted to being protective but you do it anyway, it’s difficult.”

John nods. He’s not sure he can subscribe wholly to Daddy’s view of things but it’s in insight, nonetheless. It doesn’t take much imagination to see Sherlock and Mycroft as awkward children.

“And our pirate was a little terror,” Daddy chuckles. “I’d tell him off (not very well) and Mummy would make a better effort and we’d end up saying to each other ‘well, that’s Just William’ and he’d be terribly cross and recite ‘I’m not -just- William, I’m William Sherlock Scott Holmes!’”

John laughs and looks out of the cobweb-furred stable window. Across the lawn, the baby is a bright dot of pink and yellow, enthusiastically toddling towards the flowerbeds. Sherlock follows at her heels, head bowed to watch her steps and hands tucked philosophically into the small of his back. All at once, John can picture him both young and old; a teasel-headed boy haring bare-heeled across the grass and an old man, bent-shouldered and grey and still indomitable. John regrets that he will never know the former, and hopes that he'll have enough time with the latter.

"I wonder what she's going to be like..." John says, mostly to himself. Daddy gives a little shrug.

"They change," he says philosophically. "Parts of them are always, always the same, but then they change and there are changes that no matter what you do, you can't effect. Good things," he adds with a smile. "As well things that worry you."

John runs his tongue over the dry roof of his mouth.

"The drugs?"

"Hm," Daddy looks tired. "I... never understood it. It wasn't as though- would you understand what I mean if I say 'he didn't play with it'? My generation- they all just seemed to *play* with substances. I still don't know what started it. I suppose that's just something you're always left to wonder."

"What?"

"If it's your fault, or if it was just...their will. But as I said, sometimes good things too."

John's not sure what to say. He's always been inclined to side with Sherlock, but perhaps that's because he hates the idea that you can try your best with a child and still have it all go wrong. Perhaps his own failings aren't the result of his childhood, but something innate.

Daddy fiddles with his chair legs. "Would you like a go?" he offers, unexpectedly.

"Sorry?"

"With the lathe. Spot of lathing?"

"Oh," John's thrown. "No. Maybe- um. Maybe later."

"Mm." Daddy picks at the splinters around the bore holes for the screws and then speaks again. "Actually, we think he's done well. Rather proud of him."

John looks at him. Daddy shrugs, a touch embarrassed.

"It's none of our business; that is, regardless of what Mummy thinks, bless her, it's none of our business but we are thankful, you know? I know he isn't the easiest to well, 'sympathise with'; I suppose that's the most apt way to put it, but I do feel that knowing you, John, has been very good for him and, to be honest, you've been very good to him as well. No doubt better than he really earned, if we balance things like that. I don't like to; that seems a bit cold, but well... he did make a bit of a mess of things. But, um... thank you, I think is what I'm trying to say. He needed a friend."

"Yeah," John says, thunderstruck by the old man's sincerity. "Me too."

"What's he like, in London?"

“He’s...” John has to think for a moment, “I don’t know. Different, now. Compared to last year. He’s being more careful, I think.”

“Good to you?”

“I- yeah,” John feels the creep of strange emotion up the back of his neck. “Yeah, he’s good to us. He’s a good... Sherlock.”

“I thought so,” Daddy says, satisfied. “He’s been going around that lawn in circles since you came in here, and he hasn’t even got Bee with him now.”

John looks out the window again, and it’s true. Sherlock’s thrown himself down on the grass under the trees, and John can’t think of a single occasion Sherlock’s voluntarily opted to be outdoors if he hasn’t got something deliberate to work on that literally can’t be transported to somewhere with a roof. The baby must have gone in with Mummy.

“Go on; he’s probably paranoid I’ve been blabbing terrible childhood tales of his deeds and plumping you for information and altogether poking my nose in where it isn’t wanted.”

“You have been,” John points out, thinking ‘you wily old bastard’, and not a little unimpressed.

“Yes,” Daddy replies smiling, treading at the lathe again and popping his glasses on his nose. “He’s very clever, is our boy.”

John’s nearly angry with him, except, he realises, that Daddy must have known that Sherlock knew, and Sherlock likewise must have known what Daddy would be like if he got John alone to talk to and Sherlock didn’t stop it.

Shaking his head, and feeling like he’s somehow been played by both ends, John leaves the workshop.

—

“Move over,” John nudges Sherlock with his foot and then takes a seat on the blanket beside him, stretching out. “Never had you for sunbathing.”

“Hardly,” Sherlock drawls, eyes shut against the brightness of the sunshine. “I’m working.” He isn’t, but he suspects John knows that all too well. John’s looking at him with curiosity; he’s puzzling on something to be sure.

“Are you now,” John settles his head in the lawn, which is more moss than grass, and gives the sky an appreciative look. “Good weather for it. What are you working on?”

“Research,” Sherlock says, shifting his shoulders. Whatever’s been said in that workshop, and he can guess, it’s not had too much of an adverse effect. John spreads out more on the blanket beside him until their arms brush. “I’m contemplating the possibility of rates of post-mortem erythema solare and it’s potential for a cross-reference for determining time of death.”

John considers his words for a moment and then grins. “How practical do you intend to take this research?”

“Not to the point of peeling.”

“You’d look daft with a tan,” John chuckles. “Like someone had rolled you in gravy.”

Sherlock stretches out his spine and gives a little hum of amusement. "Been there, done that."

John laughs; it's a rich but brief belly laugh; head back and hands over his stomach, shaking slightly. It makes his arm rub against Sherlock's and the other man smiles. Presently John sighs contentedly and they fall into a companionable reverie.

"Do you like it here?" Sherlock asks, after a while.

"Mm." John tilts his head towards him, crinkled with a smile. His eyes are a greyer shade of blue than the sky, and still as deep. There's a twinkle in them that makes all the feeling in Sherlock's being sink and curl and find an unexpected measure of peace, like a bird returning to a nest.

"No, it's nice," John tells him. He makes a little gesture to their surroundings. "Beautiful orchard, frankly," he heaves himself to sit up, planting one hand on Sherlock's chest for leverage. He leaves it there, regarding the puffs of cloud above them. "Frankly unbelievable weather."

Before Sherlock's eyes, John's hand is relaxed. The tips of his fingers are blunt, the nails square and neat. Sherlock's looked at it a thousand times before, and never felt it more warmly. He looks up at the other man's profile and the line of his arm foreshortened.

As if feeling his gaze John swivels his head to look down at him. "And I love seeing Bee run." His fingers curl on Sherlock's shirtfront. "Bit boring though, mind. Can't imagine a lot goes on around here."

"Not at all," Sherlock drawls happily. "Dollops of murder round here.... If you're a deer. Always disappointed as a boy. Catch a man coming out of the woods bloodstained with a knife, and never anything but a damn roe deer." He considers as John filters this information.

"I did once bust a ring of poachers though. Rather alarmed Mummy."

"Oh my God," John says, delighted. "You actually did grow up in an Enid Blyton novel."

"Lashings of ginger beer, and a terribly gay time was had by all. I think Mummy's put dinner on." Sherlock sits up abruptly, dislodging John's hand.

"Has she?" John says, turning his head towards the house. "I suppose I should go get the rugrat then." He stands up and then turns to extend a hand to Sherlock to pull him up. Sherlock accepts the hand and heaves to his feet.

Sherlock sniffs the air and gives a rumble of approval. "Ham," he says succinctly. John shakes his head in admiring disbelief. Then he snorts.

"You've got moss in your hair, c'mere." John sticks his hand up into the curls at the back of Sherlock's head, ruffling his hair to shake the detritus out.

"Ham and eggs," Sherlock tells him. "And bubble 'n' squeak."

"Bet on it?"

Sherlock smirks as they start the long amble through the orchard back to the house. "What are your stakes?"

"You said ham," John replies, and his laugh makes the trees echo.

It catches Sherlock by surprise.

John's thumb touches against the soft part of his face right next to his ear, then gently strokes around it. Sherlock tilts his head into the touch. He sees John's eyes flick closed and notes the dryness of the other man's lips, the angle of his face moving inexorably towards his own in a motion that corresponds directly to the lump of sudden intense heat moving down Sherlock's gullet into the pit of his belly.

And then John's lips touch dry and warm against his ear, ghostlike because although he knows they are there he cannot feel them. John leans into his arms even as Sherlock wobbles into his and then John goes limp as though he's fainting. Sherlock grabs at him blindly, trying to pull him to his feet and instead John melts through his fingers and drains away through the floorboards like water.

He circles the floor, trying to shout John's name but the sound won't come out and in fact it's like the whole world is on mute. He pulls open door that doesn't exist there and runs down the stairs two at a time to reach the lower floors. John must be here somewhere.

The rooms downstairs are tilted and filling with water. Sherlock splashes through them, baffled; it's not cold or dark, but the water is viscous and no one seems to notice that it's rising.

"Get out!" he calls to a couple. They blink at him stupidly from a windowsill, hand in hand; she in pink crepe and he in a morning suit.

There must be a control room for the sluice gates somewhere, Sherlock rationalises, if only he can find it. He wades through this glutinous sea, now up to his mid thighs, and worries about drowning. When he strikes the surface of the water in frustration, the ripples light up. Fascinating. He does it again, skipping bioluminescence across the length of the empty ballroom like he's skipping stones.

Extraordinary.

He stoops; plunging himself to the waist. He thrusts his arms into the water and discovers that it's utterly brimming with shrimp no bigger than pinheads; translucent and kicking.

"They're krill," John tells him. "An adult blue whale can eat up to forty million krill, or approximately three thousand six hundred kilograms a day."

"What? That's not right," Sherlock says, looking up. John is pale and swimming. He moves away from Sherlock sinuously in the water, belly up, and only the cloudy, flickering lights of the shrimp hide his nudity.

"That's not right," Sherlock calls after him, still cupping the tiny struggling creatures in his hand. "These are undeniably some kind of fresh-water shrimp."

John laughs at him and then tips backwards in a lazy, athletic roll, exposing himself briefly before he vanishes.

Sherlock grunts, rolls over and then sits up, confounded.

The branches of the clambering rose outside his window flicker bright patches of light between the gap in the curtains across his face. Dawn is breaking.

John stands at the window the following afternoon, looking out across the garden and the light, steady drizzle and feels strangely restless. It takes him only a few minutes to make up his mind and he goes up and changes his clothes before he can have second thoughts.

“Can you watch Bee for an hour or so? I’ve just left her for her nap,” John pokes his head around the door of the garage. Sherlock lifts his head from his cards after a four second delay, takes in the t-shirt John’s wearing and seems puzzled. John rarely shows his arms.

“It’s raining,” Sherlock says, glancing through the narrow window.

“Only a bit. I was going to pop out for some air. How’s that going?” John asks, deflecting slightly. He squeezes in past the junk neither Sherlock nor Daddy have bothered to entirely clear away and comes over to look at the table.

“It’s going,” Sherlock says reluctantly.

To John it looks like a complex game of Solitaire or Whist or something. Sherlock has the business cards laid out in tiers; some are coloured with splodges of neon highlighter. A few have crosses through them entirely and there are a few mysterious red cards, unnamed, unmarked and anonymous.

“What is it?” John wants to know.

Sherlock leans back to allow him in closer, one hand hovering over the names. “It’s a... combination; one single correct pattern out of thousands of potential ones. These-“ he puts his name on the only card marked with yellow, and the one beside it smudged with orange, “Was their mistake. Two payments, both bounced into an account via cheque; note the names and numbers.”

“Tom Timpson and Tim Thomson,” John says, amused.

“Same bank, same branch, similar account numbers, yet still unique, and yet they still shunted their payment into the wrong account. Conclusion: They don’t know the numbers.”

“If they don’t know the numbers, then how...”

“Picking them. From a list of names; maybe branch codes, I’m not sure, but at any rate, they left a thumb print for us. It’s a matter of tracing it back to the source.”

“And the red cards?”

Sherlock frowns at them, idly moving cards around. “Phantom accounts I know must exist because it’s the only logical way to fill the gaps but we don’t know who. These,” He trails a finger over the top-most row, coded in blue. “Are the suspected sources of them. The money’s being siphoned from government projects; Mycroft wants to be able to prove how and who.”

“But not do the legwork.”

“Naturally.”

“So hang on, there’s...you said there’s one hundred and four cards-“

“-Including our ghosts, yes.”

“And five or six accounts make the chain, is that right?” John asks, judging from the number of tiers.

“Mm, exactly. So the possibilities are... many,” Sherlock says ruefully. He pats one of the boxes. “It’s a matter of filtering down what’s probable, what’s improbable and what is impossible given the data.”

“Sounds like your idea of a good night in,” John replies and grins when Sherlock pulls a face. “Not boring though?”

“It has it’s moments. If someone were dead it would be more interesting.”

John gives the table a look of admiration. “Keep at it,” he advises, “You’ll get there. Don’t worry about Bee; I’ll ask your mum.”

“No, it’s fine. Don’t encourage Mummy, she’ll start getting wild ideas and offend us all by taking up knitting again.”

“Again?”

Sherlock shudders.

John laughs. “Alright. I’ll be back soon, anyway.”

“No jacket? There’s an old one of mine on the peg by the back door,” Sherlock says suddenly before he can turn to leave.

“I’ll be fine,” John assures him and leaves with a wave. Sherlock pauses a beat and then follows his steps to the garage door, watching him as he leaves down the garden path, waving through the kitchen window to Mummy. John’s bared arms are paler than the rest of him, as is his neck below the dip of his collar; it makes him look strangely young and strangely vulnerable.

There’s a glimpse, just the smallest one, of the old John again. Not his John from before; not the man with the cane and the gun in his pocket and the anger weighed down under slabs of self-doubt, but an different, younger John than that. One from before the war even, Sherlock thinks, and it makes him glad about the change but dread it all in one go. He can’t deny that he wants John to have a gleam in his eye again and pride- he’s got plenty to be proud of if only he could admit it- but he doesn’t want John to become so different that he is, in fact, different.

Sadness and trying to cram their ill-fitting selves into a wider world that didn’t want them; that’s what brought them together, after all.

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John treads the lane down the side of the house between hedgerows already resplendent with puffs of bridal white from the hawthorn. Early harebells peep their blue caps between the grass of the verge and there are other things besides which John can’t name and has no interest to. Everything is dewed over with moisture and the warm earth kicked up under his heels smells clean and pleasant.

He crosses the stile into pasture, turning his back on the house and starts off at a slow jog up the field, kicking at the tussocks of wiry grass with the toes of his trainers and spattering them in the process. Celandines riot in little clumps, so yellow they almost don’t seem real, except that John can smell them and he passes under an oak that must be a century old. John brushes his palm across

its bark as he passes.

It feels good to stretch out his legs. His bike in London has long since been forgotten- shoved out of the way behind the dressing table with a dust sheet slopped over it and whilst he's been walking to and from the station most days, it's not the same. He hasn't run, he thinks, in weeks and he feels uncommonly sluggish.

"Come on," he nags at himself, ruefully thinking of days when he'd have breezed up this path at an endurance lope and not thought anything of it. He's never been a sprinter, though he can put on a respectable turn of speed in a pinch, but he's always been good at just switching off and gritting through for longer than most people.

The air starts to feel cooler on his face as he warms up, and conversely the sunshine feels hotter. He wipes at his face with his arm, feeling the unfamiliar drag of skin against skin until he thinks to tilt his head to catch his sweat on his shoulder.

"I'm getting unfit," he thinks. He's worked up a stitch in his side and has to slow down to walk it off, stretching out complaining muscles and regretting not bringing a water bottle.

From here he can see the roof of the house and the flat field where Magnussen's helicopter had collected them from a year ago. Back then there had been nothing except stunted grass but now it's a swathe of new growth; pale green at the tips and studded with the sly golden faces of dandelions missed by the herbicide.

It's beautiful, John thinks; what a place to grow up. He'd have been out here at all hours, he thinks, making himself impossible to find, and finding places only a child could love like the damp cave made in the rotten crown of a willow tree.

There's no noise; nothing but the rush of air and the peep of nameless birds. John heaves himself atop another style and looks back towards the lane. There's no sight of any living soul, or car or rooftop. It's isolated here. Sherlock must have hated it.

John wonders if he'd hated it less when he'd discovered what other people could be like.

It must have been a disappointment. Distantly, a church bell tolls. John breathes deep the oxygen put out by a landscape older than religion and wonders why anyone would ever want to bother with bells and chapels.

He turns his face and his thoughts from the house and opts instead to set himself a challenge. The fields ease off further from the house and grow steeper, rising to a hill half-furred over with woodland. To the peak, then.

He's not half way up before he starts regretting the idea. London's not known for it's hills, after all, and slogging over ploughed land is hardly a gentle re-introduction to it.

"Come on," he grunts again. He'd covered seventy miles of Welsh mountain once, in three days, toting a pack and a gun. It had been god-awful, but he'd done it, and done it well. Of course, he thinks, that had been back some years when he could say he was blonde without wondering what percentage of that statement was a lie and could have bounced rocks off of his biceps.

He surreptitiously feels at his own arm. It's still not bad, by John's reckoning. It's just not what it was.

He's thirty-seven, nearly thirty-eight, it's only to be expected. It gives him pause for thought though. He's going to be forty before his daughter even starts school. By the time she's ten, he's

going to be forty-seven going on fifty. By the time she's eighteen?

He'll be fifty-five. On the downward slope to retirement.

Old.

And god, he finds himself feeling old already; he can't think what it'll be like in another couple of decades. Worse, he has no idea where he'll be in three years, never mind twenty.

Another house somewhere? It would have to be out of London on a single income, he thinks uncomfortably. It's not something he finds himself that willing to contemplate.

He'll be grey by then; John gives himself about 6 years before he's rivalling Lestrade, though his natural sandiness is a great boon for hiding it.

'Am I,' John wonders, 'Going to be the sort of bloke who one day cracks and tries dyeing his hair? What's Sherlock going to look like by then?'

'Wrinkly,' John thinks immediately, 'Like one of those dogs,' and he laughs aloud to himself at the thought of Sherlock's face if he ever said that to him.

Still, the problem of the next few years weighs on him.

John passes into the fringe of the woods slowly; the dirt beneath his shoes turning from reddish clay into darkest loam and here and there the glossy leaves of wild garlic brush at his ankles. When he treads on them, the scent carries into the air.

His daughter's going to need to go to school somewhere. Central London might be a challenge. He can't afford private school for her and he's leery of the idea of that anyway.

He wishes he'd discussed it with Mary, but they had never talked about it. They'd not, he thinks as he passes into the dry places under the trees, ever had a single conversation about how they wanted to raise their daughter. It had somehow felt taboo to bring up a subject that seemed such a self-evident argument waiting to explode.

Aching, John slows to a walk and stretches out his limbs. They'd discussed bottle vs. breast and he'd handed over the decision to Mary on that one. Mary had discussed John learning to drive and John had agreed to it, but also opted to wait until he had the £600 spare to throw down on an intensive course. They'd discussed basics for the nursery and again, John had backed down and left it to Mary. It occurs to him that through the whole rush before the birth, what with one thing or another, they'd not once ventured onto any topic that John couldn't bow out of and leave to Mary without it a massive row.

Not that Mary had ever argued with him, exactly. No screaming rows; no following one another in circles round the kitchen table ranting and slamming things.

She'd always just dug her heels in and waited for him to be desperate enough to capitulate.

Somehow he always had.

How had she always been so sure that he would?

Gnawing on the question fuels him through the last half a mile to the top of the hill and there he stops, puffing and sweating and feeling the muscles in the backs of his thighs twanging uncomfortably.

“Fuck,” he swears, for too many reasons to clearly define and sinks to the grass, pushing his legs out before him to ease them. In front and below him the hill falls away to the next long flat valley of the Thames, a patchwork of farmland in greens and browns. In the distance more hills make a dusky blue smudge across the horizon, and the clouds are scudding so hard away from him that John feels half pulled into the distance with them, to whatever distant places they have in mind.

He looks out towards the river. There are towns out there; the only evidence in patches of roofs; and the town must be full of people, but could be dead and empty for all he can tell from here.

It’s a landscape of potential. In a hundred years this could be wall to wall of glittering glass and concrete, or it could be unchanged. It could be floodwater or forest.

John doubts they’d ever get rid of the river.

The wind on his back cools him down and as the rain begins to percolate through the fabric of his jogging bottoms, he can almost feel the slightly metallic taste in his mouth of water slugged from a soldier’s canteen. It’s nostalgia of the vaguest sort; but he remembers cross-country running at Sandhurst around the old estate. He almost feels like he could put out his hand and find the straps of his pack, and his shoes feel too light on feet once accustomed to boots, boots and more boots, moving up and down again.

Except he’s been discharged from the war.

John idly imagines someone, maybe Major Sholto, telling his younger first-day-in-training self where he’d be in ten years. No glittering army career; no wife, no house. Medals and a bust shoulder. More water under the bridge than the bridge could reasonably accommodate, a daughter and other unforeseen complications. Too many funerals, some laughter. Less foot-slogging. Honourable discharge from a respectable commission in a dubious war and then a dubious commission found in a what John would like to think of as a more honest one.

In ten years he’s going to be 47, and his daughter will be ten. Nine more birthday parties, he thinks, slightly surprised despite the obviousness of it all. Stuff with school friends. Holidays. School trips. PTA meetings. John finds himself smiling oddly.

Camping. Foisting off art made of pasta-shapes onto Mrs. Hudson.

And it’s not like Sherlock is slowing down with his adventures.

In fact, John’s slow to wonder, where’s Sherlock going to be in five years time? It’s a whole lot less predictable than his own limited map of the future. Sherlock could go anywhere. Do anything, be anyone- almost literally. He spent months pretending to be other men when he was dead, after all.

I worry about him. Constantly.

John shivers slightly. He’s starting to appreciate the weight of that sentiment. But then...

His responsibility of raising his daughter carries weight as well. It’s closed doors for him, at least for the time being, and opened others. It’s given him lines within which to try and redefine and organise his life.

Strangely, it might do that for Sherlock too. John’s not stupid enough to deny that he’s a steadying factor in Sherlock’s turbulent life, just as Sherlock is an earthquake that rips through his inclinations to dig himself into a rut.

‘Sherlock’s not rocketing off, because of her,’ John thinks, blinking in sunlight that makes sparks fly behind his eyelids. ‘And I can’t stop trying for the same reason.’ Something inside of him unknots.

Pulling himself to his feet, John rolls his shoulders and shakes himself off. He turns back towards home- the house. It’s someone’s home, he thinks, even if it isn’t his, and pushes himself into a jog.

Downhill is easier and giddier and more dangerous than uphill. His knees jar as he drops from ridge to ridge of the plough field, kicking the tops from molehills and sending up clouds of disgruntled insects. He knocks branches out of reach of his face and ends up running just for the sheer hell of it; a headlong tilt down the valley that at any moment could send him tumbling with a broken ankle but just let it try. What of it?

For a moment he’s flying and half-invincible. He’s ten years old himself, the same as his future daughter and there’s a field ahead of him born to be run across.

Breathless, John laughs it out on the inside.

He’s slowed to a tired pace by the time he reaches the house. It emerges bit by bit from behind the curves of the lane and the hedges and with it comes inches of Sherlock, leaning on the gate and nonchalantly not waiting for him.

He leans in shirt-sleeves, hands up to his face in part his usual habit of thought and in part to cup the cherry glow of his cigarette against the misty rain. John grins, and behind his fingers, so does Sherlock, draconian with exhalations of smoke.

He moves aside with all the aplomb of an chauffeur opening the door of a limousine as he sweeps open the gate to allow John to squeeze past and then startles when John picks the cigarette from his mouth.

“Mine,” John says, not slackening his pace and heading for the door.

“You don’t smoke,” Sherlock says after him, dazzled.

“As of today, neither do you,” John tells him. He butts open the door with his shoulder and deliberately squashes the cigarette into the hanging basket. He smirks and then shuts the door on Sherlock.

‘I’m going to buy a hundred cigarettes,’ Sherlock promises himself. ‘I’ll hide them in my socks, in my hair, in the skirting boards, in Noah’s Ark and all of John’s pockets and not be remotely subtle about it.’

He leans back on the gate, lifts his face to the rain and thanks every inch of the Thames floodplain for returning to him a John who cares again.

Sherlock opens the door with such brazen self-assurance that John doesn’t even have time to swear; he just sits up, slopping water and grasping for a flannel. Just as abruptly, Sherlock shuts the door again, but not before he’s caught in his mind’s eye the stocky lines of John’s shoulders and the puckered reverse of his scar.

“Sorry, old house, toothbrush, no locks- locks don’t work,” Sherlock stutters out like he’s sending some kind of verbal telegram. “Sorry! Apologising!”

“Yes- ok. I can hear you,” John says, awkwardly. “What- did you need the bathroom?”

Sherlock carefully loosens his hand on the door handle, that he’s still holding hard shut. “I wanted my toothbrush.”

There’s a beat of silence from inside the bathroom which to Sherlock sounds like ‘Is that all?’.

“Which one is it?” John asks, with a sigh, feeling on the floor for his dressing gown. “I’ll pass it out.”

“It’s blue.”

John leans back, craning his neck over the rim up the bath to give the sink an upside-down once-over. “They’re all blue,” he reports. “Is it light blue or dark blue?”

Sherlock frowns at this unexpected curveball. “It’s cobalt.”

John closes his eyes, puffs his cheeks and then expels the breath in exasperation. “There’s blue-blue or there’s bluer-blue, or there’s light blue.”

“What’s bluer than blue-blue?” Sherlock demands, perplexed.

“Like school uniform blue.”

“We wore navy.”

“It’s not navy,” John admits. “Oh, for- just come in and get the damn thing.”

The handle of the door feels clammy under Sherlock’s palm and he hesitates. “Alright, it’s fine now,” John says, in the same tone of voice he uses when leading Bee at a toddle across the road. Cautiously, Sherlock nudges the door open.

There is more of John to see than he’s ever seen before, and less than he’d expected. John’s made a good stab at modesty with one flannel across his vulnerables, and a second cast across chest and shoulder so that only half his chest remains visible, and most of that sunk beneath the milky bathwater anyway. He has his eyes shut; perhaps a childish throwback to the idea that if he cannot see Sherlock, then Sherlock likewise cannot see him.

“I didn’t mean to intrude,” Sherlock says, reaching for his toothbrush. He’s not sure where to look and as a result, notes the constellation of speckles on the mirror, and that while the tiles have been grouted no less than 6 months ago, that the caulking under the sink is getting a bit ratty and could do with a go-over.

“I don’t mind,” John mutters, self-consciously.

“Sorry,” Sherlock says again needlessly. He pats his hand around the sink, grabs the toothbrush, and then wincing, rummages in the cabinet for floss as well. He then turns to go, keeping his eyes on everything but the top of John’s head and then he spots the plate and can’t help but pause in surprise.

“Yes,” John says, mildly embarrassed.

Sherlock squashes his toothbrush in his hand in panic. “I didn’t say anything.”

“Yeah, but you were thinking it and yes, yes it is.”

“It’s a sausage roll...” Sherlock manages, looking at the thing on it’s plate, perched incongruously on the closed lid of the toilet.

“No,” John corrects, clearing his throat. “It’s half a sausage roll. I ate the other half and, given a chance, I’m going to eat that half too.”

“In the bath?”

In the corner of his eye, Sherlock notes John nod just once. “With this beer,” John adds. Sherlock tilts his head slightly to the side and spots the bottle wedged in the corner rack next to the shampoo.

“In the *bath*?” It’s warm in the bathroom, Sherlock thinks, it’ll warm the beer up and make it disgusting, surely. It’s a decent home-brew; one of Daddy’s. He’s almost offended.

“Sherlock, you do disgusting things to our bathtub,” John says, closing his eyes again.

“Yes, but I don’t *eat* in it,” Sherlock counters.

“It was meant to be a secret!” John huffs and Sherlock clocks him trying to avoid being caught looking at Sherlock even while Sherlock’s doing the exact same and then John suddenly chuckles. Despite the residual embarrassment, Sherlock finds himself joining in.

“You must have known someone was in here,” John points out, once he’s able to again. “You’re you, and the light was on.”

“I thought it was Daddy,” Sherlock says, altogether too honestly. John winces.

“Ok, that’s not making it less weird.”

Sherlock opens his mouth, reconsiders and closes it again, glad that he hadn’t said ‘Mummy’ and equally regretful that the explanation for it all is so longwinded that he’s going to struggle to make it sound as honestly innocent as it is. Better to simply drop that one. “I was thinking about the code,” he lies instead.

“Getting close?” John asks, he leans an elbow on the edge of the bath. He pauses and then seems to reach a point where things could go one way or the other, and then he decisively reaches out and picks up his half-eaten sausage roll.

“Um, I- Yes. I think so. Eliminating the red herrings,” Sherlock says. He feels like he should leave, as that seems the obvious action, but now John’s asking him questions, it seems like suddenly that’s not what he should do, and as a result, he’s stuck within the perimeter of the bathroom mat. “There are a lot of variables. A mere five of one hundred and four different bank accounts, in one specific order at one specific time- it’s like-“

“Playing Solitaire with two decks of cards?” John suggests.

“More like two and a half,” Sherlock replies, “There must be other accounts I haven’t got names for.”

“Jokers.”

“Mm...”

“You’ll get there,” John brushes crumbs from his empty fingers into the water, and trying to be of use, Sherlock collects the empty plate from the lid of the toilet. Then he inadvertently glances over John’s face, turned up towards him and simple with faith in him and it is like lightening.

I could touch you, Sherlock thinks, fixing his eyes hard on the towel rail. The bath is within reach of his arm; the bathroom is not large. *I could touch you*. Yet he has no idea how to bridge the gap. There is a blank spot in the capabilities of his imagination. All he has is the certainty that there is opportunity, and that it is an opportunity that would only be disastrous if taken advantage of, and that even if that weren’t the case, he has no idea what he even wishes to express by touching John.

“Sherlock?”

“I’ll take this downstairs,” Sherlock says abruptly, holding up the plate. “You stay.”

He can hear, rather than see John’s faint amusement. “I was going to,” John says dryly. Then his tone softens. “Did you get an idea?”

Sherlock silently crushes the tip of his tongue under his canine until it just hurts, and then, and only then, can he make himself reply.

“Yes,” he says, eyes on the floor as he passes over the threshold, closing the door behind him against the cold air. “I think I might have.”

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He leaves his toothbrush on the kitchen counter and goes at once to the garage, mind singing.

Jokers.

Wildcards.

Other thoughts aside, something about hearing John say those words has made an idea go ping in his head like the mechanisms of a lock tumbling into place. He shoves the door open haphazardly, flicking on the lights and feeling for the table as they blink from dark to dim to bright.

Accounts he hadn’t thought of, which should have been obvious except-

Sherlock deals out the names, discards, rearranges and then after two feverish minutes stands back and observes the table.

It can’t be right.

It’s the nearest possible answer.

He goes back to the boxes and empties them onto the floor, leafing through the tumble of papers to find the right people, the right dates, the right figures. Slapping them onto the table as he unearths them, he goes through thirty minutes without realising it until his knees begin to pain on the concrete floor.

Slowing down, he pulls six cards forward; first the bogey account they’d dropped money into by error and discountable, and next the one it was intended for; the first link in the chain.

A business account linked to internet sales next; a private account in Ireland, China, then one of the suspected accounts. The numbers match. The names seem erroneous, but the times and the figures

match. But there's a jump between the suspect and China. Sherlock feels in his pocket and pulls out one final card from his own wallet, places it between them and then presses his palms together before his lips.

One wildcard. Not a chain of five, but six, and the sixth is...

He reaches into his pocket for his phone and finds that his fingers are unsteady.

It can't be right, can it?

He has a horrible feeling it must be.

If it is, then this is a case like he's never had before; matchboxes and great games and treason aside. It could be-

It could be dangerous.

Sherlock's excitement comes to a sudden cold hard stop.

Wrong.

It IS dangerous.

He's already half-dialled without thinking, caught up in the heady rush of finding the solution to the case, but it's only now he knows what he wants to report.

Sherlock dials. It rings, and is answered.

"Sherlock. Well, this is convivial. How now, brother? Enjoying all the thrills of-"

"I quit."

There's a silence so long he can hear the creak of Mycroft straightening in his chair, hurriedly calculating.

"What?"

"Your case. I quit. I'm done with it."

"You quit?" Mycroft asks, in sheer disbelief. "I'm sorry, is this your way of saying that you can't solve it?"

"I've solved it," Sherlock tells him flatly. "And now I'm done."

"Oh." Mycroft is taken aback, but recovers himself enough to continue. "Well, jot it down then and I'll send someone over to-"

"No," Sherlock says, and then because it is so curiously, hotly satisfying, repeats himself. "No. I refuse. You do it."

This time Mycroft is so flustered by this unprecedented turn of events that he has no idea what to say other than, "Why?"

Sherlock thinks. His gaze tracks over the debris of months of work and the startling end result; the cobwebs in the corners of the garage and the hazy light of John's bedroom window across the garden.

“Not...my division,” Sherlock says, and hangs up. It isn’t. It very firmly belongs to Mycroft.

He feels mixed about it. It feels like the right thing to have done but there’s a part of him that is deeply disappointed anyway. It could have been an incredible adventure, he thinks, but at unknown costs and risks. The part of him that still wants to play fair thinks that he should text the answers to Mycroft anyway, but he’s annotated and noted enough of the paperwork that with some effort, his brother should be able to follow his train of thoughts to the solution anyway. Let the bastard sweat for it.

He resents the set up, slightly, even if Mycroft had no idea.

He’d give good money to see Mycroft’s face when he realises that the betrayal comes from intimately within his own beloved department.

No such thing as foolproof trust these days.

He gives his hard-won conclusion a last wistful look, still slightly wishing he were free to be completely, insanely reckless, and then before he’s too tempted, sweeps the whole lot into one of the empty boxes, all in a muddle once more.

Over in the house, John’s bedroom light is off. John must be sleeping.

“Not worth it,” Sherlock mutters, and turns off the lights in the garage, leaving his case to the dust.

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“We thought we might go out for dinner tonight, if you boys like. Nice little pub in the village, they do homemade sausages and game and potted things.” Daddy looks at them both hopefully. “Seeing as we’re all here for Easter. Excellent puds,” he adds, which might be his main motivation.

John puts down the crossword he’s been picking at and stretches in his armchair. “Yeah, could do,” he agrees. “Sherlock?”

“Quirky,” Sherlock says, not listening.

“What?”

“What?” Sherlock echoes, looking up from his music scores. “Oh- 32 down ‘Oak acting peculiar around irk’- poorly written clue, and yes, alright. Remind the landlord about his long dog, and I suspect he’ll do drinks on the house.”

“Eh? I didn’t know Ian had a dog,” Daddy says, puzzled, “Some sort of Dachshund?”

“A hunting dog,” Sherlock corrects, scribbling on his manuscripts.

“Right-o. Well, that makes five of us, then- I’ll go and tell Mummy to ring up and book us all a table.”

“Long dog?” John asks, once Daddy’s trotted off.

In answer, Sherlock lifts a hand and makes a cocking motion and then silently mimes blasting a hole through the sofa.

“Really? What did he shoot?”

“Me.” Sherlock looks up again from his table to see John gaping at him. “It was only a bit of birdshot; bruised a bit but the pellets shook right out of my blazer and he didn’t actually intend to shoot me- it was dark. Mother was furious about the blazer, mind you. She still doesn’t know.”

“Blazer!? How old were you?”

“Twelve?”

“And you were-?”

“Investigating his unlicensed firearms.”

“Of course,” John says, torn between disbelief and laughter. “Just a day in the life.”

Sherlock looks mildly embarrassed but not at all repentant. “As though butter wouldn’t melt in your mouth, John.”

“I was a good kid,” John says.

Johnnie’s always been the golden boy.

Abruptly, Sherlock wonders what Harry’s been up to recently. There haven’t been any messages. She’s slipped off of his radar, somewhat.

“You going to play us a tune later?” John asks, either because he really is interested or else he’s realised that he’s just implied that Sherlock was a bad child and is trying to make up for it. Sherlock shrugs, a touch sulky.

“I’m composing,” he tells him. “You’ll have to wait.”

“Alright. No need for that, thanks,” John says mildly. “What are you composing?”

“An air.”

“That must be a breeze,”

Sherlock pulls a face and buries himself into his chair. “God help us all. Father’s humour is catching.”

“Not worse than this crossword,” John comments.

“Tempt,” Sherlock replies, wearily. “Six down. ‘Tries to seduce casual worker, a good man’.”

John looks. “Oh yeah. That fits.”

He pencils it in.

The pub is one of those picture-perfect places that seems too much of a stereotype to be real and yet is. There are horse brasses pinned up by the fireplace; not pretty ‘brought in specially for the effect’ sort but attached to leather worn shiny underneath by the heaving might of the draught horse they belonged to. There are names on them, which correlate to the names on the war memorial, and there are stools at the bar which John knows instinctually not to sit on. They carry the grooves of another man’s buttocks. No doubt the type of man who people know has passed

away simply when the stool gets reupholstered.

They sit in the restaurant, such as it is, squashed in on a motley of old church pews and chairs that aren't so much antique as have just never left. John cranes back his head and admires the wide array of taxidermy.

"There's a special's board," Mummy points out. "Third carp to the left and carry straight on till red deer."

"I can see it," John says, trying not to laugh. Sherlock sighs heavily.

"Perk up, dear," Mummy chides. The baby wriggles in the only modern addition John can see- a plastic highchair. Sherlock gives her his spoon. Mummy coos.

"Oh, look, Bee, what's that? Is that a spoony? Yes, it's a spoon!"

"Kill me," Sherlock mutters through gritted teeth.

"Menu looks good," John cuts in, before Sherlock can entirely regress to his teenage years. "Nice, um... stew." He's just picking the first word he can spot.

"Oh, with a dumpling," Mummy says, pleased.

"Yes, darling?"

"Ha ha, oh not you, Daddy. Are you thinking of the stew then, John?"

"Might be, I quite like dumplings." John replies to be polite, turning his menu over.

Mummy goes on regardless. "Mycey always liked a dumpling."

Sherlock snorts. "Mycroft practically was a dumpling."

Mummy sighs. "Yes, there was the unfortunate Laurel and Hardy stage with you two." She swats him with her serviette. "Not nearly as witty, mind."

John catches Sherlock's eye and tries not to grin.

See what I'm forced to endure.

It'll be ok.

"You order for me," John suggests, passing Sherlock his menu. Sherlock frowns slightly but turns his attention to it, skimming the text and to all appearances, genuinely putting the task to consideration. John slips away from the table to the bathroom, still trying not to look as amused as he is. Only two more days.

He wonders if Sherlock's going to make it.

Daddy, likewise, has had the sense to push on with the ordering and the waitress is uncorking a couple of generous bottles of things when John returns to the table.

"What am I having then?" John asks, curious.

"Celeriac soup and a cheese salad."

“Oh,” John says, disappointed. “What about mains?”

“The salad is the main.”

John glances at Mummy and Daddy who immediately begin discussing the wine with some intensity and are next to no help.

“Right. Thanks,” John says, jerking his napkin from his knife and fork. “Lovely. Lettuce. Yes, I’ll have the red. That goes with... soup.”

He’s cruelly left to sulk into his place setting until the waitress arrives with bread for the table and then Sherlock leans in slightly when his parents are suitably distracted by butter. “Scotch egg and the rump,” he murmurs in John’s ear. The words sends a ripple down to the root of John’s spine.

“You’re having that?” John asks, offended. Sherlock smirks and twitches his chin towards John.

You are.

“Oh, you massive git.” John says, relieved. He’s more peeved at falling for Sherlock’s tease than at having been the butt of the joke in the first place. “I honestly thought you’d ordered me a bloody salad.”

Sherlock sniggers into his wine.

“Dick. I’m stealing your fork. Good luck eating anything with just a knife.”

“Far ahead of you, John. I’ve ordered the paté,” Sherlock chuckles to himself.

—

Despite sitting at the same table, they sheer off into two separate dining experiences. Mummy and Daddy bicker lovingly at their end of the table and discuss the various politico-social goings on in the village, Sherlock and John eat in companionable silence, passing scraps from their plates to the baby at intervals.

John practically licks the plate clean of his steak, doubly grateful that it’s not some poxy cheese salad and that there is plenty of mustard. Sherlock tidies away a duck breast, both helpings of onion rings and then Mummy insists on ‘stickies’ and pudding. It comes in the form of Riesling and banoffee tart, both of which stick sugar to the teeth but aren’t unpleasant.

By the time they’re working their way through coffees generously dosed with liqueur, John’s mood is ebullient. They pick at a shared cheese board and John nearly cries with laughter at the baby’s face when offered a stinking ripe camembert. They don’t let her eat it; John’s too afraid of what would come out the other end, but it’s rich entertainment nonetheless.

She gets overtired and starts to cry and, with John wobbling slightly, they make their way home.

They fall into the waiting taxi by instinct. It’s one of those people carriers, which allows for John and Sherlock to squash into the very back and leave Mummy to sit more soberly with the baby in the middle row.

Sherlock props his elbow against the frame of the door, watching the countryside glide by outside the window. He’s rolled up his shirt sleeves to expose his forearms, and his shirt-tail has come untucked. John thinks he looks less clinical as a result.

The car sways around the narrow bends of the lanes, branches whipping at the windows on Sherlock's side. Tucked in close, John can smell his aftershave, although he can't put his finger on what the scent actually is.

John closes his eyes a moment, feeling sleepy. He's been enjoying himself so far, but he wonders about Sherlock. The man has such tremendous issues about his family, and is usually so neurotic about London and The Work.

Blindly, John taps Sherlock's thigh to get his attention.

"Not bored?"

Sherlock doesn't reply, and for a moment John thinks he's just ignoring a stupid question, until he feels the skin of his throat prickling and knows, without knowing how he knows, that Sherlock is looking at him.

He remembers Halloween, suddenly, and that other taxi ride home, which had been so much more awkward, and the way the street lights had zipped over Sherlock's face, shut off with hurt. He half expects to see the same when he opens his eyes but Sherlock's expression is different.

It's dark in the back of the taxi- there are the dim lights from the dashboard and the reflection of the headlights from the hedgerows, but little else. All he can make out are the edges of Sherlock's face and the glitter of his eyes somewhere in the middle, alien.

John inhales, taken aback at the intensity of the look. In doing so he twitches his arm and realises he's gone and forgotten his hand on Sherlock's leg. He takes it off at once. Sherlock doesn't look away.

John opens his mouth to say something and then recoils, half blind as the taxi sweeps into the drive, setting off the security lights. John swears, and Sherlock winces away from whatever he'd been about to say, or do- John's not sure- and it gets forgotten.

They disembark stiffly, Mummy paying the driver, and waddle into the house. John takes a while to undress the baby and stick her in her cot, and when he returns downstairs, Mummy's gone to bed and Daddy's uncorked the brandy.

"Night cap, John?" he offers, waving the decanter. "Or there's a drop of malt?"

"Scotch please," John peels off his jacket and sits at the table. Sherlock's shuffling a deck of cards, which seems ominous, until John notices that they're Happy Families. It's still ominous, but less worrying. It's also a bit ironic, John thinks. Daddy slides a glass across to John, and an ashtray full of tiddlywinks across to Sherlock, and the game commences.

John's laughed so hard that he's given himself hiccups. His cheek rocks against the slack backs of his fingers where he's propped his head on his hand and he looks at Sherlock across the top of them, hiccuping, until it's infectious and the pair of them are snorting and wheezing with mirth like a couple of old dogs.

They've moved from the kitchen to the living room, having cheated prolifically at cards. Daddy, nodding off over his hand, had had to be prodded to leave, and if they're quiet, they can just about

hear him snoring somewhere upstairs. John pities Sherlock's mother.

"It might be her, actually," Sherlock comments when he mentions this, sending John into mild hysterics again.

Sherlock unsteadily tops up his scotch from the bottle and then holds the bottle out for John, who wobbles forward in his chair, glass outstretched. The task of filling it without splashing 20 year old malt all over the carpet is enough to sober them and they both watch the ritual with due diligence. The liquid pours, wets John's fingers and makes them gleam damp against the cut glass.

"Oops."

"Doesn't matter."

With exaggerated care, John sets the glass down on the floor and wipes his hand off with his handkerchief, before glancing up again. His expression is mellowed and soft now, neither caught up in their bit of drunken silliness nor slipped back into neutral. He clears his throat. Sherlock tries to focus.

"Mm? What?"

"Just...thinking."

"Oh. I thought I heard a noise..."

"No, I mean- bloody cheek, but- no. I was thinking."

Sherlock waits. John smooths out the cotton in his hands, pleats it, folds it and then eventually, says his name.

"There's something I wanted to say."

The ankle Sherlock has had propped on his knee slips off, although he recovers quickly enough to manage the action and turn it into a slow stretch of his legs.

"Say something?"

"Yeah, something I want to say- wanted to say for a bit, actually just... wasn't the sort of thing you- y'know."

"Oh, one of those things," Sherlock says with an airiness he doesn't feel. His expression is equally light even as the centre of his being takes on some kind of unholy gravitas. It pulls him down by the guts hard against the floor. John shifts in his chair, leaning forwards, not so dissimilar to his usual manner with his patients. Sherlock can see him choosing his words; tasting them in his mouth until he hits the right ones.

"I want you to- it's..." John exhales, "I love," he says, laying his hand on the arm of Sherlock's chair. Sherlock does not look down, nor allow the faint, polite smile to fade from his lips, nor does he breathe. The glass in his hand feels like a sudden absence of texture and his fingers heavy as though they've been shot through with anaesthetic. John's expression flickers as he concludes: "How you love her."

He points towards the baby's room above them, his finger like a baton that pulls the strings that turn Sherlock's head, or else the switch that makes his lungs start working again. Sherlock swallows the whiskey that's been burning on his tongue for the last twenty seconds, and can only

be glad he's not looking John in the eye.

"And I love," John says gently, "I really do, how much she loves you."

Sherlock says nothing, although he blinks hard and fast.

"You make her..." John holds one hand up with the fingers curled loosely together, looking for a word that the whisky has stolen and then finally pings his fingers apart like he's flinging fire.

"Light up. You make her light up. Whenever you come home." He tilts forward to poke Sherlock in the chest.

"Oh." Sherlock says at that, his tone a little high, a little damp. "Oh, I see."

"Prat," John says fondly. "I love that photo you gave me."

"Hm."

John squints at him. "What?"

"Nothing."

John smiles at him; a long warm smile like Sherlock hasn't seen for a very long time, and Sherlock's too addled by the way it makes his stomach flop to smile back.

"Give me your hand." John gestures, feeling at his own arse. Sherlock looks at him in disbelief.

My hand? Why my hand? What for? Why?

"Your hand," John reiterates. He staggers upright a moment and shoves a hand in his pocket. Once he's fetched his wallet out he opens it one-handed across his knee, his other hand held out palm up. Sherlock's gaze turns from John's face to the outstretched hand. His own arms feel like they're made of poorly jointed wood.

*You have no strings,
Comme ci, comme ça,
Your savour faire is oo-la-la-*

Shut up! Shut up! No!

"Come on," John is saying, his voice breaking through Sherlock's thoughts, "I want to give you something."

Tentatively Sherlock jerks an arm out and touches the fingers of his left hand to John's. The fingers below his curl once, twice to walk his palm forward until they're resting across one another, even while John is still digging in his wallet. Sherlock holds his hand there, the limb feeling heavy, as John slips his thumb between Sherlock's ring and smallest finger, lest he'd pull it away again.

"Here." John's pulled a slip of card from his wallet; pale blue. He looks up at their hands and smiles suddenly like he's only just noticed. "Well that's a funny handshake," he comments, wobbling Sherlock's hand up and down. "Hallo."

"John."

"I'm just saying hello." John disentangles their fingers and turns Sherlock's hand over to press the cardboard into it. "There. Present. Happy Esther. Esther? Easter. Esther might be happy but I think they cancelled that show."

“John?”

What are you talking about?

“Esther Ransom? Wasn’t she a thing? No- no, she’s not important- bugger off, Esther. Look. Present. That was the main thing.” John taps the card. “That’s yours now.”

Sherlock looks. It’s a little fold of card, not new but kept neat in John’s wallet, although one corner is a little grubby from having been thumbed at repeatedly. He uses the same corner to open it out like a card.

It’s a picture from one of those passport photo booths; not recent. By Sherlock’s calculations it’s from sometime a bit before Mary’s death. John’s balancing the baby on his forearm, high against his chest and pointing to the camera. The baby is small, staring straight ahead, a bit startled, with enormous eyes. Her curls brush the corner of John’s mouth. His lips are pursed through a smile.

“Look- “

Their eyes are the same shade of blue.

That’s yours now.

“Oh.”

“You can put it in your wallet. Keeps it flat.”

He could, but Sherlock doesn’t want to stop looking at it yet. He wants the two photos that preceded and succeeded this one; he can tell they existed because of the way it’s trimmed. He knows what they’d look like. The former would be John jiggling the baby up, his face turned down towards hers, the latter would be that purse of the lips turned into a kiss against her scalp.

“You’re welcome.”

He looks up and finds John leaning back in his chair, the back of his hand once more propped up to hide his smirk of amusement. John raises his eyebrows at him briefly, altogether too pleased with himself.

Gotcha. Look at you being all soppy.

The bastard.

Sherlock sneers at him, even while pressing the photo safe into his breast pocket.

I’ll get you back. Wait and see.

John presses his bare toes to Sherlock’s shin in the laziest kick imaginable. They slide down over Sherlock’s sock, his own toes, to the carpet leaving uncanny static electricity in their wake.

Can’t wait. Surprise me.

Sherlock swallows and hastily investigates his glass again, skin prickling. He can suddenly picture John aged ten or eleven, pulling pigtails and when he next glances at John that revelation somehow allows him to see what else has slipped through John’s reserves thanks to the drink.

John is looking at their feet, almost touching on the carpet, and there’s that warmth in his eyes, only this time Sherlock can read it.

God, I like you.

“I think I’m done,” Sherlock says, throwing back the last of his whisky. He can feel John’s gaze go meandering up his body from floor to neckline.

“Yeah,” John says, not moving. “I could go to bed.” Then he stretches luxuriantly.

‘Does he know?’ Sherlock thinks, flustered. ‘Does he know that he does that? How can he not know? Does he mean anything by it?’

Perhaps he doesn’t. Perhaps he’s trying very hard not to know. Sherlock feels unsteady on his feet but when John sticks out an arm for him to take his glass, he still obliges.

John pats his back. “When do I get to hear your tunes then, hm?” he asks.

“Soon,” Sherlock says, steering him towards the stairs. “It’s- It needs polishing.”

Look after yourself.

“Yeah,” John says, leaning his head back to look up at Sherlock. His gaze is blurred with alcohol; his breath is frankly atrocious. “But are you going to play me something pretty?”

“I-“ Sherlock falters on the stairs, looking at him, and wonders at the unfairness of the world. John takes the opportunity to try and sit down. “I don’t know what I’m going to play.”

“Some violin you are. Don’t pull, I’m standing,” John grumbles.

“Go to bed, John.”

John squints at the snap of bright light when Sherlock flips the switch just inside his bedroom door.

“Yeah, ok,” John agrees. He blunders back into Sherlock momentarily and then gives his chest a friendly thump, flat-palmed, over the photograph in his pocket. “G’night.”

“Goodnight,” Sherlock says, disarmed. He waits until the bedroom door closes and then wipes a hand over his face, fingers pulling at the skin of his cheeks and chin. He can’t scour away the way his jaw feels weak, or the flush of heat to the back of his neck.

God, I like you.

It’s not conclusive, he reminds himself. It’s old news, in fact.

Don’t be foolish, Sherlock. Keep to the facts.

I want the two people I love; Mary, and you-

Johnnie was always the golden boy. He was the boy. Straight.

Mary’s dead. John likes him. John’s-

He’s fucked up. Harry’s echo reminds him, tired.

In the guest bedroom of his own home, Sherlock closes the door and feels the photograph free of his pocket again. Carefully he places it on the clean glass of the desk where he can see it, and stands and contemplates it for a while. It’s his now.

The two people I love-

Mary's not coming back.

-Bee, and you.

At Baker Street, his possessions line the rooms from wall to wall, muddled in with John's. There are things that neither of them can recall the original owner of. It occurs to Sherlock that it didn't use to be like that. It used to be more separate. These days, John throws bibs and socks in with Sherlock's shirts and visa versa, and there are picture books on the shelf in John's room wedged next to the medical texts and Sherlock's encyclopaedias.

There's that bloody photo album; which John continues to fill in behind the print out Sherlock started it with, and there aren't any photos of Mary in it.

Sherlock props open the windows of his room as wide as they can go, bringing in fresh air and the smell of the rising dew. He reaches for the black case leaning against the wall, opens it, discards the unfinished compositions inside of it.

The chin rest slips under his jaw, comfortable and firm, and the strings whisper as he runs the tips of his fingers over them, closing his eyes.

Over the sound of his own pulse in his ears, he begins anew.

"You were up late," Mummy comments, passing him a cup of tea. "I could hear you plinging that violin through my wall."

"Which you'd only have heard if you'd been in your office," Sherlock counters. "New equations?"

"No, no, just running a learned eye over some poor student's work. A few interesting ideas, actually, which got me thinking." She plumps herself into an armchair and fusses the cushions. "They have marvellous technology these days. Makes all my student efforts look very shabby."

"Youth is wasted on the young," Sherlock quips. Mummy laughs.

"And what about you? What, or who, was keeping you up half the night?"

Hot tea catches on Sherlock's throat and he coughs before he realises that Mummy didn't mean it like that. "Oh, the baby."

"Yes, the baby. We're rather past expecting the other," Mummy says. It's nothing he hasn't heard before in one form or another, joking or not, regarding a known person or just in general, but this time it stings. And Mummy, despite being forever incapable of fixing anything for him, has never failed to know when he's hurting. She lowers her cup from her mouth in surprise. "Oh darling, I'm sorry."

He's too proud to validate her comment, but that in itself speaks volumes.

She has no idea what to say. His fingers drum on the arm of the chair, neck arched, gaze fixed out the window, looking as pinched and wounded and furious as he did at eight years old, after a run in with other children. He'd looked the same at twelve in the school office, at thirteen waiting to leave for boarding school, at fourteen at Christmas, at fifteen when Mycroft stopped coming home, and then had come the quiet, sly years when he'd been virtually foreign to them.

At twenty-three with his hands taped up from IV puncture wounds, just as haughty in a hospital

gown with gaunt skin as he was in any uniform or suit.

She's never stopped wanting to squash him in an embrace to try and comfort him and keep the unfairness of the world at bay, but past the age of four he's stopped letting her.

"Stop getting upset," he says tersely, when she has yet to look away.

"Well, I am upset for you and with my stupid blabbermouth. I'd like to see you happy."

He lets out a bitter noise and then repents it. "I'm fine."

"Happier."

He looks at her then, taken aback. "What?"

"I was correcting myself. I'd like to see you 'happier' not 'happy.'"

"Never enough, is it?" He gets up from his chair and paces towards the window.

"I'm a mother, of course it isn't. I shan't be truly content until thine cup over-floweth and even then I shall be eyeing it asking 'aren't there any bigger cups?'"

"Is that how it is?" Sherlock wonders.

"It is. But don't think I'm not also jolly pleased and proud to see you as you are."

He looks at her again, this time his face softening into a question.

"I'm already very happy for you," Mummy tells him. "You're doing marvellously."

"I'm doing the same things I was four years ago," Sherlock points out, "Same 'pokey, smelly, little' flat. Same job."

"With a prettier flatmate," Mummy points out.

"Don't call John pretty."

"I-" Mummy laughs helplessly, unable to tell if he means it or if it's just cynical joking. "Oh, Sherlock. Yes, alright, I shan't undermine John's rugged good looks."

He's pretending to look out of the window again but his shoulders have dropped, no longer defensive. He fiddles with the nicknacks on the windowsill, however; a nervous trait leftover from boyhood. Before long he catches himself doing it and clasps his hands behind his back, but is still unaware of his own thumbs rubbing against each other in self-comfort. She'd like to take his hand, but it wouldn't achieve anything.

Mummy's heart goes out to him.

"I'm not sure about 'rugged'," he says, finally.

Mummy would like to smile but in truth, she's holding her breath. Sherlock's looking at her from the corner of his eye, equally tense. It's the first time in years he's trusted her with any kind of vulnerability, and even this small admission is a test.

"Perhaps not," she says, "I've seen his moisturiser."

A faint tick of a smile.

Mummy breathes out. "Gosh, is that the time. I should be getting some washing on the go." She gets up from her chair and collects the cups- Sherlock's only half drunk.

Before she's quite left the room, Sherlock speaks up. "Do you need any help?"

Mummy pauses. "Yes," she says, "Thank you. That would be lovely. Why don't you...go and see if the boys are up and if they've got any bits to do."

"Hm," Sherlock says, thoughtfully. "I will."

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John wakes before the baby, despite all the drink of the night before. The sun filters through the scant curtains in lemon-yellow strands and he takes a moment to wriggle back against the mattress and the soft sheets, feeling delicious.

He fetches her from the cot in the other bedroom before she wakes and cradles her in the crook of his elbow until her eyelashes start fluttering and he spots the first peek of blue beneath them. Feeling indulgent, he takes her back to bed with him.

"Good morning, baby," he tells her when she yawns, equally lazy as he, and digs her bare toes into the duvet. "Sleep well?" She wakes fast; zero to sixty in as many seconds, and begins a sleep-addled clambering exploration of his torso and the bed, making little froggy propelling motions to swim about.

John chuckles, ruffles up her curls, and teases her with the toy elephant. She chatters and squeaks, noisy as a monkey but only as coherent. He dances Elephant over his stomach to her delight and concocts a silly conversation between himself and the sad-faced pachyderm, which holds Bee entranced.

"Your Ellie's starting to look a bit smudgy," John comments, using his thumb to try and smear what he suspects is old jam off of the elephant's trunk. It's left a darkish stain on it, like a moustache. "Looks like Charlie Chaplin."

He tickles her chin with the soft end of the trunk. "Can you say 'Papa'?" John asks her. "Say 'Papa', sweetheart. 'Papa'." She rolls on her back and puts her fingers in her mouth, watching him with sweet curiosity and no apparently interest in the English lesson. The elephant was better. John sighs.

There's a knock at the door which makes them both look over, and then, using his hip, Sherlock opens the door cautiously, a steaming mug held out through the crack in the door first like an olive branch. "I brought tea," Sherlock announces needlessly.

"Come in," John grins at this farce. "Thanks- brilliant." He takes the mug and relocates it to the bedside table, and then with an exaggerated groan heaves the baby up from the spare side of the bed. "Sleep alright?" John asks.

"Surprisingly well," Sherlock allows, sipping at his own mug. He wanders over to crack the curtains open and let in the full glory of Easter morning and then, with practiced disinterest, flops himself down on the empty half of the bed. "Mummy was up with the lark and she's already

rattling about breakfast. There are eggs, or... I don't know, I stopped listening."

John hums with amusement and sits up a bit more until he's lying parallel to the other man. "Here," he says, shifting the baby from his stomach to Sherlock's. "Go to Sherlock, lovely. Papa needs a whizz."

"Charming," Sherlock says, for the baby's benefit. She kicks her heels against his sides, perhaps mistaking him for a racehorse in whatever strange baby world she occupies inside her head. Obliging, Sherlock jigs her up and down in a parody of trotting, and she finds this an uproarious notion. John can hear her laughing from the en suite; the deep, proper chortle that only Sherlock can seem to entice out of her.

"Atypical choice," he comments when John returns, wiping his hands on his pyjama shirt.

"Sorry?"

"Papa" Sherlock holds the baby's hands and lets her wobble back and forth on his tummy. He glances up, but John has focused his gaze on his tea, and the windowsill.

"Oh. Yes."

John sucks first the left corner of his mouth against his teeth and then the right. "Mm. Well. Had to get on and settle on something; she's nearly talking." He leans against the headboard and then, drawn magnetically to the pair of them, sinks back onto the bed again beside them. "Besides," he volunteers, self-consciously. "I...using the same as our dads would be...confusing."

John swallows against the poor excuse too late; it's already out there and he sits, waiting for Sherlock to question it or pry at the meaning in his words. The complexity of his relationship with his father.

Instead, Sherlock pulls his knees up, tilting the baby back until she's resting against her own bespoke baby deckchair in the sunshine. He makes a quiet noise of agreement. "Children tend to acquire voiced plosives in consonant-vowel clusters prior to unvoiced plosives."

"Right?"

"She'll likely call you 'Baba' first."

John reaches over, crossing Sherlock's lap with his forearm to gently rub his knuckles over his daughter's stomach. "I can live with that," John says.

"Hello, hello, what's this then? Oh, some sort of game?" Daddy wipes his hands on his corduroys and crouches to watch.

"Baby block bingo," Sherlock replies. He looks up. "The name needs work."

"Yes, blue block. Blue! Thank you, Bee," John says smugly to the baby. "Now Papa's winning. Get a yellow block now Bee. Yellow!"

"Yellow, yes! Yellow, Bee." Sherlock says, pointing. The baby follows the line of his finger and toddles to collect.

They're sat on the floor facing one another, coloured foam blocks scattered in all directions to either side. Each has a selection of tiddlywinks from the Happy Families Poker game hidden behind a book, and Daddy supposes the aim of the game is to get the baby to bring the corresponding coloured blocks.

He sits and watches. John has the natural advantage over the baby; she brings him more blocks, but Sherlock plays more strategically. Bee seems to enjoy it. She picks colours somewhat indiscriminately but the act of fetching them and pushing them at adults is evidently good fun.

Daddy sits and waits for them to inevitably get carried away.

"Red- get the red block, Bee."

"No, green. Green block! Yes, good girl! Green block for papa."

"Red block."

She stands, torn for a moment between two conflicting suggestions. She stoops and picks up a blue block.

"Green, Bee!"

"Red!"

She drops it and starts to cry.

"Oh, crap," John shoves his book and tiddlywinks aside and shuffles over the floor to pull her into his lap. "Foul- made the baby cry," he jokes to Sherlock. Sherlock's face falls.

"I-"

"I was jok- Actually, think she's needs a change," John says awkwardly. He gets up and walks off, jiggling the baby to comfort her.

Sherlock presses his hands together. "Stop staring," he says in clipped tones some moments later. "Unless you have news of somebody dead."

"Fresh out," Daddy says, amused. "But I'll keep an eye on the obits for old timers vanishing in mysterious circumstances."

"Let's not pretend. There are no mysterious circumstances around here," Sherlock complains.

Privately, Daddy thinks there's never been anything so mysterious as watching his youngest son play with a baby on their own living room carpet.

"What do you want?"

"He worries rather a lot, doesn't he? John, I mean. Is he alright?"

Sherlock fiddles with the tiddlywinks; stacking them and unstacking them, his mouth twisted to one side. "Well, you know... he's had his ups and downs."

"Yes, I'm sure," Daddy replies, reminiscing. "Not easy."

"No."

Daddy gets up, twiddles with his glasses and then stares out of the window humming to himself. “Oh yes; heard you playing. Well, mother told me but same same.”

“Mm. Composing,” Sherlock replies, grabbing readily to any change in topic.

“Grab the old strings then, let’s hear it properly.”

Sherlock gets up, spilling plastic counters from his hand and feeling strangely compelled to oblige. He takes the violin from its case and Daddy settles in a chair with a book over his knee while he tunes it. Daddy doesn’t read, he merely listens as Sherlock plays a couple of experimental runs to warm up his hands. It’s a way for them both to pretend that it’s not too serious. Daddy nods thoughtfully as Sherlock plays through the piece.

The last note fades and Sherlock lowers the violin. “It’s not finished yet.”

“It’s very good. What’s it called?”

Sherlock inhales and then blows out air with a shrug. “Work number 18.”

“Hm. Name needs some work.” Daddy closes the book.

“Name’s not important.”

“What’s it based on?” Daddy wants to know, returning the book to the shelf.

“Nothing, I just wrote it.”

Daddy nods again, humming over the main theme of the piece once or twice. Sherlock toys with the strings. He looks up abruptly when Daddy speaks again.

“‘Ups’,” he suggests.

The pounding of the water across John’s shoulder feels good; old house with no locks asides, there’s been a characteristically Holmes effort put into the plumbing in the place and the shower is good.

He scrubs a hand through his hair, wetting his scalp. Water dribbles down his forehead and he wipes it from his eyes, blindly reaching for the shampoo. He knuckles it into his scalp and ramps the shower up to rinse it away all within a few minutes. It’s only as he’s rubbing shampoo from his eyes that it occurs to him that he doesn’t need to rush.

It’s habit, mostly, that makes him try and get on with things in the most efficient way possible. But it’s the last day of their holiday, and no one else is even awake yet. In a few hours he’ll be back in London going through the post left on their coffee table by Mrs. Hudson and checking in with the clinic on his hours for the week and doing the run to the supermarket because there won’t be anything edible in the flat except tea and biscuits.

John forces himself to slow down a moment. He still needs to pack, get the baby up and all the umpteen tiny chores that entails. Maybe it could just wait an extra twenty minutes.

He picks through the clutter of half-finished bottles in the bottom of the shower, and wonders who originally bought what. There are brands he’s never heard of, possibly foreign, and then the usual

suspects.

Still trying to decide, he rubs his hand over his chest, palm cupped to splash water under his arms. It feels good to scratch up and down his sternum and then over his shoulders. He stands for a moment, reading the back of a bottle and wondering what language it's written in, his spare hand feeling at the muscles of his lower back. Whatever it is in the bottle, it smells oddly familiar and he can't place the scent. Automatically, he buffs his palm over his stomach and then down between his legs.

John cups himself thoughtlessly, still with half a mind on determining if the mystery bottle is shampoo or body wash. He's pretty sure it smells herbal. Deciding against it, he drops the bottle back into the corner and then curls his fingers around himself. He squeezes slightly; just checking in.

The sensation, as always, is dumbly pleasing and he repeats it a couple of times, bringing his thumb into action with no specific intentions. The reaction to the stimulus, however, is predictable and familiar.

John leans an elbow on the wall and looks down.

He watches himself go through the biological mechanisms of erection and then chafes his hand lightly over his length, giving it a bit of encouragement to get all the way there. It lies, rather indolent in his hand; not exactly an embarrassment.

It probably should be a bit shameful, given previous experience with locks in this house, not to mention that this isn't his house at all. Yet the idea of the risks add a little pep to things. His biology's always been somewhat contrary, John thinks, and especially not very good with the word 'no'.

With one ear cocked cautiously, John permits himself a twist of the wrist. Nice. Very nice.

Nice also to know that everything's in good working order. He gives himself a doctorly feel-about; perineum, testes, shaft and head. Check. Pass. Nothing to worry about there. Perfectly healthy specimen, and only not a contender for a standard example of male anatomy due to the size.

John gives a mental apology to all 'average' men out there, and permits himself a leisurely stroke as a reward.

Forgetting the door, he shuts his eyes.

It's automatic to think of sex. John skims over patchy instances of sexual interest- the breasts of one of the mothers at the nursery, gasps from a porno pay-per-viewed something like eight years ago, the more visceral memory of massage oil spilling into a bathtub and slick skin under his hands- memories from his pre-war Casanova days. Back when he had something still to prove as a young man amongst men.

He thinks, with some discomfort, of women with forgotten names who he'd slept with or otherwise fucked and then the ghost of Mary slips into the shower with him, elbowing his other thoughts aside.

The last person he'd had sex with.

John crushes his eyes tight shut and then opens them abruptly. He doesn't want to think about the last time they'd had sex. Later events had thrown a cloud over it, and-

He doesn't want to think about it. The early days had been good and then they'd married and it had never recovered. John wonders how true that is for other men. He'd bet not for the same reasons though.

He misses that; the fun of sex. The sex of those early days with Mary in that rose-tinted Before. Maybe they'd been playing at normal and building on a foundation of lies, but the sex had still been better than with other women. They'd even had a go at making love and John at least had convinced himself they'd done so. Maybe Mary had too. At the very least, the sex had been whole-hearted.

No one could be that clever.

You could.

Could Mary?

Mary had managed to cut through the fog of his first grief like a sudden blast of fresh air. She'd made him laugh; she'd had a cutting sense of humour and impeccable timing. He'd not asked her out. She'd not asked him out either, she'd just somehow worked the conversation around until it was agreed they were going and left John afterwards uncertain how it had happened.

And it had helped. Lie or not, it had been the right combination of distraction and dazzlement to pull him from the very blackest of spots. Not the bright blank headspace he'd been in upon disemployment back to the UK, but a double-edged knife of depression and anger. The anger had made him keep going. The bereavement had made him resign himself to a life of never quite being satisfied, and between the two, a checklist had turned up in his head which had read, very simply, 'Mr. Normal Nobody'.

Mary had implicated to him he could be that, and that it might not be entirely dull.

He remembers drunk enough to be reckless the first time they'd had sex. He'd still been sober enough to question what he was doing, but by then he'd come to like her and how much she stuccoed over his loneliness. He'd seduced himself, more or less, with the implication that it was a bad idea, and as always, he'd gone right for it. Mary had gone with it willingly.

It was a touch humiliating to recall; a desperate, quick and artless fuck against her bedroom wall; he hadn't been gentle. He'd finished, making himself breathless with shock at himself and then apologised. Mary had instead curled her arms around his neck and held him until he'd stopped.

"It's fine. I could murder a cheese sandwich," she'd said. "Want one?"

He'd laughed, grateful and taken by surprise and decidedly liked her more because he'd underestimated her.

She'd come back to bed, still nude, and they'd sat half tucked in the duvet, chewing through homemade bread and brie and sugar-tart cranberry, and laughing away the awkwardness like a couple of bad old friends.

John's erection has flagged.

Not by enough that he can quit what he's started, but enough to be frustrated by. He shakes Mary from his head, swears, and shifts his hand more determinedly by way of distraction.

John watches the head of his cock peek, vanish, appear and vanish again inside the curl of his fingers and thinks back to when he was younger and able to pull one out doing nothing more than

staring at the mould on the old avocado tiles of the house he'd matured in. He hadn't even needed to fantasise back then, it had been just enough to get on with the physical act.

He tries to keep his mind blank, but things intrude anyway. It starts with a song from long ago and then he finds himself caught up thinking about school and his first induction to sexualised conversation in the changing rooms after rugby. He remembers being twelve and curious and vicariously ashamed to hear an older boy explain that he couldn't think of anything kinkier to do with his girlfriend than they've already done. The kid in question couldn't have been older than fourteen at the most and no doubt exaggerating heavily.

John debates the kinkiest thing he's ever done but in truth, he's been a poor scorer on that front. Some stuff, just for the hell of the titillation, but nothing too far out of the ordinary.

He hears an alarm clock go off somewhere in the house and pauses, but there's no further noise of anyone getting out of bed. He needs to hurry up if he's going to do this.

It feels a bit bad- naughty, to be doing this in someone else's shower, but he's had practice at being quick and quiet. Years of living in a house with thin walls and too many people; university halls of residence and then army camps. You got to know when the showers would be quiet, if that were your preference, or kept it to your bunk and tried not to fall asleep with your hand too obviously down your pants.

And if you got caught or blundered in on someone else you took the piss or turned a blind eye. Or sometimes it just got weird and the usual boundaries blurred and it didn't occur to you that it was weird until later. There'd been one guy John had caught with his phone out, filming himself, to which the guy's response had been to hastily explain that no, it wasn't for his girlfriend, it just was a very lucrative online trade. John's exhausted first thoughts had been how on earth that got represented on yearly tax assessment.

John's arm is aching and he's using up all the hot water and running out of time. He turns the shower off, and his own breathing sounds obscenely loud in the confines of the shower.

"Come on," he breathes, looking down again and wishing he had something to make the friction a little easier. He spits in his palm. It helps a bit.

By now he's attempting to finish on principle, and annoyed.

"What's wrong with you?" he asks himself, frowning. There's nothing physically wrong; he knows that for a fact. Everything's doing what it's supposed to be doing but the act's become mundane and effortful. He's always preferred partnered sex to masturbation; no doubt this is just that exacerbated.

He forces a fantasy in his mind's eye; someone else's hand slipping around his hip to grasp him. Something anonymous; a bit risky. He gleans ideas from generic pornography and more specific memory. A broken house in Afghanistan; waiting for a signal to move up the road that's taking forever to come. His post at the window; gun in hand, uniform fake and flimsy. Easy for someone to get a hand inside of. Maybe they've got a gun too; maybe they're not good. It's not easy working on narrative detail on the fly.

The fantasy stalls and loops. John squints at his own cock- it's not as if he doesn't like the look of it, and then he grunts a trickle of semen over his fingers.

It's not much, but he feels satisfied at finishing the job.

“Drive safely,” Mummy says, squashing Sherlock into an unwanted hug. “And keep in touch.”

“Yes, yes.” Sherlock squirms free and escapes to the driver’s seat.

“Thanks for everything,” John says, closing the boot. “It’s been... really nice.”

“I know, we’re pleasantly shocked as well,” Daddy replies, amused. “Only joking. It’s been lovely having you here; you’re always welcome to pop down and pay us a visit if we’re here.”

“We’re off to South America for a couple of months,” Mummy clarifies, “bit of a whizz-bang tour and to see some old friends for the summer. Oh, and I expect Sherlock hasn’t breathed a word of it, but it’s our Ruby Wedding next summer.”

“Not this one coming, the one after-“

“Yes, I did say next year.”

“Having a big shin-dig to celebrate; here; all the family and friends from all over and their friends; honestly our guest list’s probably a tremendous game of guess-who by this point but-“

“-But what Daddy means is ‘bear it in mind’, you should absolutely come.”

“Right,” John says, surprised. “Well, that’s... plenty of advance warning. I’ll save the date?”

“August,” Mummy beams. “We’ll let you know specifics. Oh- and there’ll be other children of course.”

Sherlock leans on the horn. Mummy just speaks louder to be heard. “And the neighbours are converting their barn into holiday lets; so plenty of room for everyone to stay over.”

“It sounds great,” John says, feeling the pressure to escape and Sherlock’s pointed stare on the back of his neck.

“Alright, off you go,” Mummy says, catching him in a hug before he can get out of it. “Lovely, *lovely* to see you.”

“John.” Daddy’s handshake is warm and firm. There’s still that touch of pride in the old man’s face, and it leaves John feeling a bit peculiar.

They wave them off from the drive, Sherlock about to floor it until John grabs at him and frowns. They drive nicely out of the gate and out of sight and then John says “Alright, you can go for it.”

It’s national speed limit technically, down the lanes. This is not to say that it’s at all recommended to whip at sixty miles per hour on hairpin bends, unable to see if there’s oncoming traffic, cars or errant bunny rabbits but they do anyway until they reach the village and have it out of their system.

“Oh god, I thought your mother was going to make me move in,” John says, laughing.

“She would!” Sherlock replies, relieved to have his sights on London. “A whole week playing with a baby? I’m surprised she hasn’t swapped Bee out for a duplicate.”

“Jeeesus. It was nice. It *was* nice,” John says, to remind them both that it was. “But I think a week was enough.”

“I warned you it was dull.”

“It was *okay*. It was the right kind of dull. Let’s get home anyway.” John reaches out for the radio.

“Must you?”

“God, yes.”

“Can I ask you something?”

Ella’s pen pauses on the page and then with a little nod of interest, she lays it down along the edge of the clipboard at rest. “Of course, this is your time. We can talk about whatever you like.”

John licks his lips. “I mean, something personal?”

Ella considers. “If I can answer, I will,” she says, hedging her bets. “What would you like to know?”

John moves his mouth around like he’s feeling across words made of barbed wire. “Do you like baths?” he asks, unexpectedly.

Ella is a little thrown; it’s hardly what she’d expected. “Um, yes. A bath can be very pleasant and relaxing. It’s a good way to unwind and... reconnect with yourself.”

John’s eyes narrow slightly, his gaze drifting into the middle distance as he parses her words on a few different levels. “Right, yes. No, but you have them?”

“I wash,” Ella says with succinct dryness.

“I- no, I wasn’t- I didn’t meant to imply-“

“John,” Ella says firmly, breaking through his spluttering. “I like baths. Showers are nice too.”

John gathers himself, recovers and then seemingly trying to get ahead of his own second-guesses, plunges on with, “But do you talk to people?”

“In the bath?”

John purses his lips, appears on the verge of saying no and dismissing his whole line of inquiry and then with a sudden *tsk* replies, “Yes.”

Ella leans back in her chair slightly, hurriedly contemplating how much of her personal habits she should give away in the name of balancing professionalism and personal counselling. “I sometimes speak to my sister, when she’s in the bath, on the telephone. And, my son-he’s four- he will often come and want to speak to me through the door while I’m in the bathroom.”

John says nothing and she assumes this is because her answer hasn’t touched on the issue he’s haggling over. “Or do you mean, in person?”

“Mm,” John returns, his fingers knotted in his lap and his gaze sliding off to take in the carpet, the neutral artwork, the window, anything but her face.

“And, I feel you aren’t speaking about your daughter?”

“She barges in all the time,” John says, distractedly. “It’s like a spectator sport.”

Not the daughter then, Ella thinks. Which leaves either the landlady or Him, and Ella’s not betting so much as a penny on Mrs. Hudson in this case.

“It happens,” She says, with careful neutrality. “For some people, the bathroom is just an extension of a social living space, and in fact, for some people, the added nuances of that environment can make it easier to talk more freely about things they’ve had on their mind.” And if there’s nothing Freudian about that, Ella thinks, then she’s a cigar.

“Mm.”

“Has something happened, John?”

“No. Everything’s fine.”

Ella taps her pen against her knee once or twice, weighing her options. “Is there anything else you want to discuss on this?”

She watches John sit, running his tongue hard over his teeth and there are words and words and words inside of him that she knows he wants to set free and still he won’t. He hasn’t for years and he still won’t. It’s gone on for so long she can’t even bring herself to find it frustrating, just saddening.

“The boundaries of what is considered ‘too intimate’ vary for everyone,” she says, because for once, she can’t stand the silence. “What’s important is that everyone concerned feels, firstly comfortable with... what they do, and secondly, comfortable enough to say when it is too much. Some... pairs of friends will go forty years and never once touch upon any kind of personal subject. They never talk about sexual matters, or money or physical appearance too closely, and yet one would nurse the other through a severe illness, and it would not be perceived as a breach of their boundaries. Other people know each other a week and they live in separate houses, but their wardrobes are already mixed up, even personal garments. They feel no compulsion to conceal their bodies, or not to mingle finances, and yet they might never talk about their past or their family with that person. There are many people who can’t or don’t want to talk about their jobs with loved ones. Some people don’t even like company when they’re cooking; it’s too invasive for them. It’s different for everyone, John.”

“Yeah, I’m aware,” John says, a bit tersely.

‘And some fell on stony ground,’ Ella thinks, trying not to sigh.

“*Has* something changed recently, John?”

“No, not really.”

Ella gambles on her next question. “Is that the problem?”

It takes John by surprise, she thinks. He stiffens, gaze fixed on one spot on her carpet, and she worries she’s pushed him too much. He’s clenching and unclenching his hand on the arm of the chair and she can see something in him, like a rupture, building. At some point he’s either going to break, she realises with horror, or explode. It’s unexpected- he’s been doing better lately.

‘I’ve made a mistake,’ she thinks. ‘He still needs to step back before he can move forward.’ It’s always difficult- Ella often feels like she’s spinning plates in this job. She helps a patient get one plate spinning on an even keel and then it’s a rush to catch another on the brink of falling.

“Sometimes,” John says, breaking through her thoughts. His voice is brimming with anger, yet it doesn’t seem to be directed at her. “Sometimes I think maybe there is... a life, for me. I can see it. And then I think... ‘I don’t know how to get there’.” He looks up, deeply hurt. “I don’t know I can get there. I- probably I can’t. It’s across some-“

He cuts off, swallowing his words and straightening his spine. Ella’s mouth is dry. It’s the biggest admission he’s ever been able to make to his problems. She gives him a moment to breathe; it’s a chance business- if she speaks too soon he’ll refuse to answer, if she waits too long he’ll start denying they ever ventured down this route of discussion.

“What do you feel is stopping you?” She asks, carefully.

“We’ve gone over time,” John says. He points at his watch, and then turns to check the clock behind him.

“That’s fine, John. Don’t worry about the time.”

“No, I need to go collect my daughter.” He sounds distant, like he’s just woken from heavy sleep or is far away underwater. She’s lost him again.

“John.”

“I’ll make another appointment on my way out.”

“Yes, please do,” She gets up, “But you can stay longer if you need to, John. We can talk more today; it’s-“

“No, I said three-fifteen to the nursery.” He looks at her. “Bee’s got teeth.”

“What?” Ella asks, confused.

“I mean,” John shakes his head. “She’s got the dentist.”

“John, I don’t think-”

“It’s alright,” John says and leaves, because she can’t force him to stay or speak, and neither can he.

John rolls the pushchair along the pavement feeling numb. He usually feels rough after seeing Ella but this is something different. It’s one of those cloudy days; sun interspersed with showers; puddles drying on the pavement and a bright, almost golden glare from above. Fingers of God, some people call them- those big sunbeams slicing down between sodden cloud. Jacobs ladders. John doesn’t know the proper term.

They’re halfway to the bus stop when the baby kicks off with such a sudden and terrible shriek that for a second John thinks she’s caught her fingers in the sides of the buggy or something. He leaps out of his skin and flies around in front of the pushchair to examine her.

“What? What?!” he splutters. Her fingers are intact, she’s not been savaged by a wasp or bitten herself. He squishes her jaw open and peers inside, dabbling around with his index finger and although the gums and there are still incoming teeth, he can’t see anything new that would cause such a fuss.

“What’s the matter?” Had she seen something? Been hit by something? There are cars passing on the road; maybe one of them had flicked up grit into her face or something. John tries to look in her eyes but they’re screwed up and gummy with angry heart-wrenching wails and he can’t make a good examination. He peers in her mouth and ears and can’t see anything different. The nursery has already dosed her for the one tooth he knew about.

She writhes against the straps of her pushchair, reaching and grabbing at the air and he realises that she wants something but he has no idea what.

“I can’t give you more medicine,” John says in exasperation. He fumbles around in the detritus of the nappy bag and tries sticking a teething ring into her mouth but she’s having none of it. Flustered he jerks the straps free and picks her up. She howls in his ear, dribbling precociously.

“Tell me Bee, what’s-” he begins and then she sucks in a tremendous breath and then starts on a blunt vowel that undulates with single-minded demand.

“EEEEELLLBAAAAAANN”

She hiccups violently, thrusting an arm out to point and John pivots on his heels to look. There’s a small crumpled grey blob almost at the far end of the road they’ve just walked.

“Oh my god,” John says, breathless. “Elephant. Is it Elephant?”

The toy isn’t in the pushchair. It should be. John wheelies the pushchair around one-hundred-eighty degrees and, feeling strangely refreshed and almost cavalier, gallops back to rescue the toy.

He plucks it from the tarmac by the tail, briskly shakes the dirt off and at once, the wail cuts off to a damp gurgle and Bee lets go of his neck to grab at the elephant.

“Elephant, sweetheart. Here he is. You’re ok. You were telling me, weren’t you?” John blithers, dazed and delighted. “Elephant. E-le-fan-t, say it again.”

“Elebant,” Bee echoes, and shoves her thumb in her mouth. Cloudbursts or Jacob’s Ladders- whatever they are, John stands in the patch sunlight, feeling like his own soul is flying upwards in elation.

He takes a photo of her with the elephant while they wait for the next bus. He texts it to Sherlock with the news, then Lestrade, then Molly, then on an insane whim he sends it to Mycroft, and finally for good measure, Stamford too. John looks at his phone and grins, doped up with pride.

The bus sails past them and John barely notices. His whole world is full with the pink of Bee’s cheeks and the soft grey flannel pressed to them.

Chapter End Notes

Chapter title comes from the song 'Tender' by Blur. The WIP placeholder titles were: "Chapter 8: He is Risen and by 'He' I mean John's latent trouser feelings, hallelujah!" and "Chapter 8: And lo from the mountains did the prawns softly ring: "For the love of god, John, fuck me already!" "

Mother's Day in the UK is in March- why everywhere else in the world does it in other months, I don't know, but it was very confusing when I lived overseas, I can tell you.

Tonsillitis is kind of one of those things that goes around and then you forget about it. It's a bit like flu with a persistent sore throat. AS FAR AS I KNOW very few people here consider it a big deal or necessitating having your tonsils removed as a preventative unless you have it a lot or really badly. Normally you don't even get any prescription meds for it, just ibuprofen and throat sweets like Strepsils.

Classic FM is the biz.

Melanocytic nevus is the fancy word for a freckle or mole, according to some hasty googling.

I have never been to the London Carlton. I'm sure it's lovely, but for the sake of things, let's just say Mummy likes country landscapes a lot more than the view of London.

[There's A Hippopotamus on the Roof Eating Cake](#) is a real children's book, and it is dated now but rather brilliant. It's about a massive pink hippo that lives on the roof and eats cake, in case you hadn't guessed. (Regrettably there's a mention of smacking children for being naughty (different times when this was published...) so one might wonder why John's reading it...)

The 'steak and pygmy' pie is more correctly 'steak and kidney' pie. It's better than it sounds, I promise. I also apologise for the dubiousness of the joke. Mummy and Daddy; born in different times...

[Just William](#) is another set of books, also very dated now, about William Brown, outlaw and school boy, eternally in trouble but not because he really intends to be. He also likes dogs. I can imagine the parallels drawn between W. Brown and W. Holmes, much to Sherlock's eternal outrage, because unfortunately, William Brown is rather thick.

Erythema solare- fancy talk for 'sunburn'.

In some areas, deer hunters are permitted to gralloch (gut) their kills in the field, which occasionally can upset unsuspecting visitors. It's a messy job.

[Esther Rantzen](#) is definitely not important to this story at all, but this particular drunk mis-pronounce happened to a friend of mine and still makes me laugh.

I'm pretty sure the army frowns upon selling vids of yourself wanking in uniform online.

And on that savoury note, that's all! If you've still got comments or questions- leave me a comment; I always reply to everything. Or, if you have a good dad joke, I am definitely up for hearing it. I promise I will laugh because I have a terrible sense of humour.

Thanks for reading!
-Odamaki x

Part 9: Louder and Softer

Chapter Summary

Sherlock's looming in the lobby of the library looking like some kind of homage to Byron and Asimov rolled into one bad idea. John's heart sinks. He has that closed off, cold look that means he's calculating hard and fast, and isn't confident of a good return. John greets him accordingly.

"What did you do?"

Sherlock doesn't even insult him by trying to deny it or gloss over it, which alarms John further.

Chapter Notes

With a Happy Birthday to my best egg [Codename Lazarus](#) who is today still an urchin but now an aged one.

I can be found on Tumblr as [Odamakilock](#).

Formatting sometimes gets funny when I transfer from Scrivener to A03 and I've had bum-brain from being busy in RL so if you spot any typos or places where text might have been slurped all over by the typoslugs, leave me a comment and let me know! Also the weather here is goddamn glorious- i hope it's lovely where you are too
Ta!

-Odamaki x

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Part 9: Louder and Softer

She calls him 'Baba'.

As they progress towards and then into May she picks up new words one by one; 'Nana', 'tattoo' (by which she means 'thank you'), and 'no!'. She starts to get the hang of the 'p' sound but she still calls him 'Baba'. Over time the vowels extend out into 'Babar' and John's fairly sure Mrs. Hudson's had a hand in that.

The old woman thinks it's hilarious. "Babar's king of the elephants," she tells him, "it's a compliment, isn't it Baby Bee?"

"Dah?"

"He's a... benevolent dictator," says John, on Google. "In a pea-green suit. When have I ever worn

green like that?” And the less comparisons made to his ears, nose and greyness, the better. He scowls at the screen. Fucking elephants. It seems like there’s nothing but elephants wherever he goes these days.

“Babar-!” Bee claws at his thigh until he picks her up and lets her squash in on his lap with the computer. She determinedly types nonsense for him, and rather than let it go to waste, he IMs it all to Sherlock.

“Sherlock,” he tells her, showing her the photo icon of the man. “Can you say that, Bee? Sherlock.”

She gives him her stuffed bee bath sponge instead. “Tattoo”

“Thank you,” John replies, obediently.

The computer blips.

[Are you having a stroke? - SH]

John laughs, and then frees the corner of the machine from his daughter’s grip. She has a gleam in her eye which usually preludes chewing things. He fobs her off from destroying expensive technology with a handful of carrot sticks and then sits her to pull things out of the Tupperware cupboard.

“I dunno,” John mutters, watching her, “Fancy homemade toys; endless bloody toys in fact, and what does she play with most? Lunch boxes from the pound shop and Sherlock’s pull-along suitcase. “ Sometimes both at the same time.

Speak of the devil.

Sherlock bounces in up the stairs, phone in one hand, some kind of plant in the other.

“What’s that,” John asks as Sherlock blindly shoves it at his chest.

“Souvenir. It’s a tomato.”

“I take it you solved the garden centre thefts,” John says, amused. What the hell is he going to do a tomato plant? He wriggles it in on the kitchen windowsill with all the other tat and leaves it to the inevitable fate of all plants in 221B.

“Bland. Foxes,” Sherlock reports. “Why did you text me nonsense?”

“Felt like it,” John replies. “You talk plenty of crap; I figured it was my turn. What about the bland foxes?”

Sherlock sneers at him. “Employee had been hiding the money down an old fox den. Idiot.”

Bee chucks boxes at his feet. “Diddedoo.”

“Indeed he did,” Sherlock says to her. She smiles and gives him a box from the floor. “Tattoo.”

Sherlock absent-mindedly puts it in his pocket. “By the by, I keep getting calls from this number,” he says, holding his phone out to John. John squints at the digits.

“No, don’t recognise it. Ring them back and find out what they want.”

“Probably just a client,” Sherlock says. He reaches for the kettle. “Either they’ll ring properly or they won’t. No loss.” He fiddles with his phone again, and then sighs.

“What is it if it’s oscillation on the phone lines?”

“An annoyance,” Sherlock suggests. Then he brightens. “Or a criminal.”

“Hell, why not both?”

And as if to prove that she too can be both, Bee helps herself to Sherlock’s keys from his pocket and waddles off, banging them on the table legs and shrieking. Sherlock grimaces but turns his attention to the stack of post dumped on the end of the table. He leafs through the stack, messily discarding most of them to the side and then pockets a couple of hand-written missives, perhaps from clients or from some obscure source of information.

“Solicitors,” he announces, holding an envelope out to John.

John takes it. “Doubt it’s good news,” he mutters, tearing it open. The first few lines inform him that it isn’t the first letter. He must have missed one a couple of weeks ago, muddled up with the papers or something. He skim reads half of the letter, startles and then goes back to read from the beginning.

“I get some of the money...”

Sherlock looks up from the stack of newspapers he’s been hunting through and looks at him.

“Mary?”

“I get-“ John reads on and then suddenly sits down, “Oh...”

Sherlock takes the letter from him as it hangs loose in his hand and reads it for himself. It’s the end of a long chain of correspondence back and forth, much of which John has dealt with as fast and as remotely as possible and refused to think about in between times. There’s a folder somewhere, Sherlock knows. He’s read bits of it, whenever he comes across it, but not actually gone prying to find it.

The paragraphs at the end are sensitively phrased but succinct. There will be no pay out from the life insurance, simply a refund on the payments already put in. John’s entitled to the two thousand odd quid kept in a joint savings account that they cannot prove were obtained illegally but he won’t see anything of the rest, which was not an insubstantial amount.

It’s not great news, but it was what Sherlock had expected. In truth, John’s been lucky not to have had his own finances become more snagged up with the fraud investigation and the solicitors fought out the best outcome available.

None of this is why John’s gone quiet though. The last lines contain a double edged knife. John’s been extracted from trouble by the fact that the solicitors have thrown Mary under the microscope. To wit, there needs to be a meeting.

“What’s the point?” John asks to nobody in particular. “She’s gone already. I’m a widower.”

Sherlock places the letter on the table.

“Then tell them that,” he suggests.

“Babar-“

John leans down and automatically tugs Bee up into an embrace.

“Fine,” he says, voice flat. “Fine.”

—
—

It is a great irony, John thinks, that nobody seems to understand his reasoning concerning Mary except for Sherlock, who by all rights has the best excuses not to even want to try and figure it out.

He sits, hands clasped together on the desk before him for the dual purpose of stopping them betraying his nervousness by shaking and also to stop himself from punching the solicitor who at the end of the day, is just doing his job.

“Dr. Watson,” he explains yet again, “I understand that this is neither pleasant nor easy, but for the purposes of the legal paperwork you must indicate that your marital status is single, so that all the paperwork matches. Neither the court nor the bank will accept discrepancies, in fact they will use it as a reason to deny your claim to even this much of the inheritance.”

John feels childish and stupid. ‘But I don’t want to’ isn’t a good enough defence and never has been but it’s the one he really feels.

He’d like to tell them where they can stick the money but they’ve come this far with the legal proceedings and it’s not just his money any more, it’s his daughter’s.

“Why can’t they just invalidate it,” John asks again. A tiny part of him, the bit that can still half-recall hymns and fuzzy felt and pictures of men wearing tea-towels on their head, feels awful that if all of this proceeds as it must, then his daughter will technically be a bastard. The court wants to re-write his history; legally, he’s never been married. Despite himself, John wants to cling onto the idea that, at least for a while, he was.

“The probability of having your marriage made void, Dr. Watson, are slim. It will be- it has been annulled on the grounds that Mary broke significant laws by marrying under false documents. I can perhaps pressure for invalidation based on other grounds, but firstly I doubt they would use lesser grounds to override the felonies, and secondly, we have no grounds.”

“What would be grounds for voiding the marriage?” John asks.

The solicitor sighs. “That the marriage wasn’t consummated,” he begins, “That you could not validly consent to the marriage due to duress, mistake or mental incapacity. That despite giving valid content you were suffering a mental disorder which rendered you unfit to marry.” The solicitor looks mildly uncomfortable. “We could explore that route given that you have had mental therapy since 2009, but there could be consequences should we succeed.”

Not least that Ella could get into hot water, John wonders, or perhaps they’d put some kind of limit on himself.

“I’ve looked at medical reports for the insurance, and neither of you had a communicable STD at the time of marriage, and really the only branch left is the question of paternity.”

“I’m sorry?” John asks, feeling cold. “What question?”

The solicitor is careful when he speaks next, his tone merely factual.

“There is a point that a marriage can be voided if, at the time of marriage, the woman was pregnant with another man’s child. Mary was pregnant when she married.”

“There’s no question,” John says, even as doubt itches at the back of his mind. “She’s my daughter.”

“Then the options, which were already very very limited, are exhausted, Dr. Watson. Perhaps if we look at the paper work again, we could go through it together and get this all squared away.”

Then tell them that.

“I was married,” John says aloud, picking up the pen offered him, and then slowly prints the six letters under ‘Marital Status’ that state that he never was.

“It’s just paperwork,” the solicitor says. He takes the papers back from John slightly too quickly and signs them. Job done.

John leaves wondering how he’s going to refer to Mary from now on, if he can no longer legally call her his wife.

At the end of May, Sherlock receives an unexpected call to his mobile. It’s not the same number as the recent spate of missed calls from an unknown number, but it’s not one he immediately recognises either. He ignores it on the first call, but they call back in intervals of ten minutes over the course of an hour and in the end, annoyed, he picks up.

“What?”

A pause. “Hi. Fucking finally!”

The voice is familiar though he can’t automatically place where he knows it from. He frowns and his silence must convey his question more efficiently than words because the voice on the other ends says,

“It’s me, you pillock.”

The voice itself is lighter in pitch but the intonation and exasperation is so uncannily similar to John that Sherlock knows exactly who it is.

“Harriet.”

“Harry. Yeah. Hi. Are you busy? Today?”

Sherlock unfolds himself from the sofa, curiosity piqued. He scans the room; the scattered magazines and the cuffs of his pyjamas. “Not especially.”

“Is John around?”

“No,” Sherlock frowns. John’s off slaving for money treating people’s sniffing noses and tricky bottoms and whatever other jejune ailments he gets presented with on a daily basis. “Why?”

“Can we meet?” Harry asks, “Without him. I’d rather he doesn’t know about this.”

Sherlock inclines his head, considering her tone and her words. Interesting. “I make no promises,”

he replies.

Harry lets that sink in a moment and then chuckles. “Maybe,” she agrees, but she doesn’t seem to believe for a moment that he’ll spill the beans to John either. “So, are you going to meet me?”

“Noon,” Sherlock replies, stretching out his legs. “The same café as before.” He hangs up.

Harry looks at her mobile, the line dead, and then shrugs at her housemates. Samia raises an eyebrow. “And?”

“Looks like we’re on,” Harry says, pulling a face at her phone and then shoving it in her pocket. “I thought he’d tell me to piss off, to be honest.”

Indre shakes her head, shoving half a croissant in her mouth. “Nah,” she says. “Told you all you had to do was be cryptic. It’s like an instant ego-boner for that kind of man.”

“Good luck, hon,” Samia says, “Worst he can say is nothing, right?”

“Feels fucking weird,” Harry grumbles, getting up from the kitchen table and squinting out of the window. Noon. Two hours away; too soon and too long. “Fuck.” She putters around aimlessly, putting things in her handbag before sitting down and swearing again. Indre rolls her eyes, gets up and raids the treat cupboard.

“Do you want to fucking know, or don’t you?” Indre asks, prodding her on the nose with a chocolate bar.

Harry grabs the bar and whines, “I wanna know.”

“Right,” Indre says, “Then eat your Twix, put your big girl pants on and go ask the fancy twat about the bastard arsehole.”

Harry makes a rude noise back and chews unhappily on the biscuit.

“You’ll be fine,” Samia says, shooing Indre back with her foot. “I can come if you want.”

“We can stand outside the window and give him dirty looks,” Indre offers. She demonstrates her worst and Harry laughs despite her worries.

“Don’t you fucking dare. Stay here and... make me brownies. Massive fucking Everything Brownies.” She gives one last sigh and pushes back her chair. She could stand some dutch courage right there and then, and as though reading her mind, Samia points at the calendar. “Sixteen weeks, Harry. In three more days.”

Harry exhales. “I know. I know. Right, I’m going to go and shower.”

Samia smiles and then leers, “Getting pretty for Sherlock Holmes, Watson? Oof. That’s dangerous.”

“I’ll get jealous,” Indre snorts. “I’ll turn up and show him all my dicks are bigger than his, and then your brother’ll find out and pull a face like someone’s tied his bollocks in a knot.”

Harry belly laughs all the way up to the bathroom.

The café is as dead as usual, despite the hour. Sherlock’s already there, jotting abstract numbers

directly onto the table top with a pencil and holding thoughtlessly onto a mug of black coffee. The ceramic is streaked with marks where he's let the coffee dribble over the rim.

Harry drops her bag on the seat opposite and steps up to the counter to order.

"Can you ask him to stop that?" the waitress wants to know, though she doesn't appear to be very annoyed.

Harry shrugs. "We're not friends. Cappuccino, please."

The waitress slops espresso and milk foam into a cup and bangs it on the counter for her. "Two-seventy-five."

"It's only pencil," Harry says, glaring at the mess in the saucer. She drops the coins on the counter and takes the drink back to the table. She sits and then leans over and pulls the pencil from his hand.

"When you're ready to be an adult."

She looks different to the last time Sherlock saw her. She's lost some of the puffy look of an alcoholic and gained weight instead. More than she needs, but clearly she's been replacing alcohol with comfort-eating. He presses his palms together before his face and, unaware, touches the tips of his fingers to his lips, moving them fractionally from side to side as he contemplates her.

She's had a haircut and refreshed her wardrobe; there's a trace of something about her that's more strongly reminiscent of John. She's no great beauty but neither is she homely. There's just an animation to her face that attracts the attention. Perhaps it's merely her self-confidence.

"You asked to meet me," Sherlock points out.

"Yeah, and you came, so let's not waste time pretending you've got the advantage here," Harry replies, stirring too much sugar into her coffee. Sherlock grunts. She licks the spoon and sets it to one side of the mucky saucer.

"So... how are you?"

Sherlock looks at her askance. "Disinterested," he warns her.

"'You' in general. Kid's ok? John's ok? Life?" She flashes him a look that betrays her hunger for information. John called her at Christmas, but she's heard next to nothing since then.

"Fine." How long has she been sober now, Sherlock wonders. A few months? Not long enough to be considered 'cured', if there's such a state.

"I got a text, you know. About him being away at Easter. That was nice, I guess." She looks at him with unabashed curiosity. Not for the first time, she makes Sherlock feel unaccountably pinned open to her scrutiny. "Was it?"

He struggles to school his mouth from tightening and giving away too much. Behind his eyes he can see the flicker of street lights on a dark country road and the wanted-unwanted weight of John's hand by his knee.

"It was a holiday," he says neutrally, "I don't like rest and I like the countryside even less."

"Me neither. John does though," Harry replies, like a dart. Then she seems to recall that she's not

called him out here to pick at him about her brother. “It sounded nice anyway. He probably needed it or something.” She clears her throat and shoves the foam back and forth over her coffee. She thinks for a moment and then can’t help asking.

“What about the Mary thing? I mean... it’s soon or something, right? One year since she corked it?” Harry prompts, when he looks at her blankly.

“Oh. Yes. June 28th.”

“Any plans?”

“I suspect not.”

“Yeah, suspect not. Not very... festive.”

“What do you want?” Sherlock asks, bored of the back and forth.

Harry whistles through her teeth and taps her nails on the side of her mug. She gives a very John-esque little shuffle of discomfort in her chair.

“I...you have a website right? You do stuff other people can’t or won’t do, right? Can I hire you?” She asks in a blurt. Sherlock is somewhat taken aback.

“Hire me?” He’s actually incredulous. Hire him? Her? “Really?” he stares at her hard, looking for the reason why. Harry blusters;

“Well maybe. It depends on your going rate. What is it? Do you charge per day? Per hour? Is it different depending on what I want you to do? Do I have to buy you dinner?”

Sherlock has the uncanny feeling that he’s being solicited. Harry catches his eye and his thought and then asks, “How much for a blow-job?”

Sherlock all but chokes. He starts to get up from the table. Harry catches his sleeve, half-laughing, half-appalled at herself.

“No, no, I’m serious- not the- Jesus, no. Not that. But-“ She breathes and tugs his sleeve to make him sit back down. “Sit, I was just fucking you about.” Poor choice of words. She grimaces.

“Look, you’re a detective, aren’t you? You go out there and you find out all the shitty truths about shitty people. That’s your job. Well, close enough,” she says when he starts to open his mouth. “I’ve got a shitty person that I want finding.”

Sherlock closes his mouth tight and frowns at her.

“And, if you’re anything like what I think you are, I reckon you already know who I mean. And you’ve probably already gone and found out because of John, so, all I want is for you to tell me. I’ll pay if you want.” She looks up and taps her fingers on the table top and then sticks him with a look.

“Yeah,” Harry continues, like she’s reaffirming a decision made long ago. “I’ve hit this point now, where...I need to know.” She folds her hands and leans in. Sherlock leans back.

“What do you know about my dad?”

James Watson, born 1945 in Argyle, and approximately thirty-two years of age when his children were confiscated by social services in an altercation that resulted in fifty hours of community service, a suicide and the final desecration of a childhood already blighted.

Sherlock blinks.

“What you’ve told me,” he says, and a flash of disappointment crosses her face. “And what I’ve read.”

“You fucker. I *knew* you’d have snooped,” her anger is mitigated by strange satisfaction to hear this however. “How’d you...?”

“Classified,” Sherlock says. He’s not about to admit that he’d had to trade a favour with his brother for the information.

Harry shrugs. “Well, I don’t care how you found out. I doubt it’s plastered up on a wall somewhere for anyone to read. No one else gives a shit, except us. Did it say anything?”

“Not much; name, date of birth, scant criminal record.”

“He wasn’t much of a crook out of the house,” Harry confirms. “He took advantage of everything and everyone, but he was scared of actually breaking a law too hard, I reckon. Yelling at waitresses to see ‘em cry. That was more his style.”

“Speeding tickets,” Sherlock replies, “Scuffle with the police on one occasion. Brief spell of community service.”

“Bad temper,” Harry agrees, hushed. “Didn’t like seeing us getting packed off by social services. We were his, you understand.”

Sherlock neither confirms or denies this. The thought makes him feel cold.

“Is he still alive?” Harry asks. She licks at dry lips and as Sherlock considers his answer, she slowly tenses as though preparing to get hit.

He tells her. Unexpectedly before he even finishes she’s blinking hard and her eyes are watering.

“It’s fine, go on,” she says, when he hesitates. “It’s just- it matters but I couldn’t have sat here and asked that for so long. And I did.” She sounds relieved. “Do you know where?”

By way of answer he unlocks his phone and shows her on a map. Going by how the crow flies, it’s less than fifty miles away. A small place. There’s a green and a pub and a church. The houses are detached with two floors and a driveway apiece. There’s a neighbourhood watch association and a local cricket team, a church and a graveyard and reasonable transport links to the surrounding local area. Harry looks at it until it blurs and then lets Sherlock take the phone from her hand to wipe away the damp splotch with his thumb.

“He had a vasectomy in 1991,” Sherlock tells her. The news surprises her.

“He did?” She’s not sure if she’s just stunned, offended or unutterably glad to hear that. “Oh. Well...”

Harry watches as he gently lays his phone back on the table. “Does John know? No, John doesn’t know, does he? Probably a good idea...”

She leans back in her seat and sighs, hollowed out. “I don’t think he knows about Mum yet, either,” She says quietly. “How she died, I mean...”

“He’s not mentioned it,” Sherlock says, carefully.

“Well, he knew about the pills,” Harry explains. “That’s what we both got told; it was an overdose. Bit of a sugarcoated explanation, at that. Y’know, they threw some doubt on if it were an accident or not. We sent her postcards at the ‘hospital’. I remember that. They didn’t tell us that she kept trying until she actually did herself in.”

“She died in care.”

“Scandal, right? She ran right rings round them. No idea how she managed it, but she found a way to string herself up anyway. They were both smart in all the wrong ways, our parents,” Harry muses. “Imagine if they hadn’t been. Fucking arseholes.”

“What are you going to do now?”

“About dad? Nothing. I just wanted to know for sure either way; I’ve sure as hell not been interested in having anything to do with the old bastard, whatever state he was in, since I was thirteen. I mean that, even before I rang you, that’s how I felt. Dead, alive, dying, whatever. As far as I’m concerned, he dug his own grave before I hit twelve and he’s fucking welcome to it. But I needed to know. Y’know?”

Sherlock closes his eyes briefly and then asks the question that’s been simmering gently in the back of his head for a long while now; since he first read John’s folder.

“Who reported it; the abuse, in the first instance?”

Harry stares at him, her expression mingled affront and surprise. “Me, you great nonce,” she says, lifting her chin. Her tone softens but there’s a grim kind of pride in her words as she speaks. “I did.”

Of course.

Obvious.

They sit for a moment in silence, both absorbing information both asked for and unexpected. Sherlock for one is contemplating the fact that John knows how nosey he is- he uprooted the man’s birth certificate for God’s sake- yet he’s never asked nor made any comment on his past other than that one time he shouted at Bee.

“Do I owe you anything? Other than the obvious?” Harry asks. She puts a hand on her bag and Sherlock feels a deep flush of annoyance.

“I don’t want money.”

“Alright,” Harry agrees, easily enough, closing the zip fully. “Fine by me.” She pauses. Neither of them has finished their coffee and it still feels like there’s unfinished business between them.

“Is John still worrying a lot?”

Sherlock weighs up the possible answers. It’s not the intense sustained panic of before but he equally can’t say that John isn’t something of a helicopter parent either. He allows Sherlock and Mrs. Hudson a measure of trust that by rights only Mrs. Hudson really deserves, but he always has questions. Has she been ok? Has she eaten? Done anything? Not done anything? Smiled? Cried? What toys did she play with? Mrs. Hudson would get weary of it except that she loves talking about the baby almost as much as John does. It occurs to Sherlock that perhaps the intensity of John’s need to know every minute detail isn’t perhaps as normal as he’d assumed.

Nor is he convinced that John has wholly put aside his fears. He's pushed them back for the time being but it would not, in Sherlock's judgement, take much to bring them to the fore again.

"He worries," he replies. Harry's mouth droops slightly. He can see the question writ across her whole being.

How long?

Sherlock cannot answer that. He can't speak for John nor does he especially hold the belief that John is obliged to either help or forgive his sister. She dug herself into her own troubles with her family and he has enough of his own. It strikes him, however, that he isn't wholly insensitive to her efforts.

She regards him cautiously, gulping coffee, and then asks, "How about you?"

"Me?"

"You... took him to meet your parents. That went ok?"

"It was a holiday," Sherlock repeats, feeling suddenly transparently foolish. He blinks, sees John in his mind's eye smiling and telling him, drunk, 'I love how you love her.' "Dull," he says aloud.

Harry doesn't buy it for a minute, but she gets his meaning. Nothing happened. Nothing like that anyway.

Neither of them are even remotely convinced that it would have, and in reality that wasn't what she'd been asking. He doesn't want to answer her actual question. He can't attest that he's truly at ease with how things stand, yet the greater part of him has reached a point of satisfaction in some regards. It's something, not enough, but after everything it is something much needed to know that John approves of his actions. To feel he is back in step at John's side in this matter, rather than an imposition.

"Right, I'm off. Can you... e-mail me that stuff?" Harry stands, brushing loose sugar from her fingers.

Sherlock picks up his phone by way of reply and shoots down the remainder of his coffee. Harry collects her bag, tucks her hair up in a loose ponytail. "Don't tell John," she advises. "Unless he asks."

"No," he says.

"And thanks." He looks at her askance. "I don't know who else I would have asked about this. Can't talk to John and with everyone else... they either don't know anything or don't give a shit." She looks glum to admit it. "Let me know if I can help you at all."

"I don't need help."

"If I can help with anything," she corrects herself, dryly. "Take care."

They part ways, her back to her house in North London to go over the conversation in ever increasingly tight circles with her housemates, until it's rendered almost boring; Sherlock to 221B.

He's disquieted by Harry's astuteness. She has no idea, really, of the things she blunders over in her encounters with him, but at the same time, if someone like her can tell even that much, what must he be broadcasting?

Not good.

I know what you like.

Go away. He pushes open the door to the house and his feet take him straight into Mrs. Hudson's kitchen. Bee plays in her highchair, Mrs. Hudson chatters meaninglessly and fails to scold him for drinking milk straight from her fridge.

There's a payment owed, Sherlock realises, for services rendered. He flicks through his phone to find the number and skips back and forth over the word 'information'. How has he ended up owing so many people so much?

He crouches next to the baby with his phone and gratifyingly she poses rather neatly for the photograph. Later, he sends an e-mail.

—

To: watson_h41@bmail.com

Sub:

See attached.

Enc: Data Sheet James Watson

IMG_103451

The reply comes less than an hour later, and it is short yet, in Sherlock's opinion, it's succinctly accurate.

To: Sholmes@scienceofdeduction.com

Re:

fuck shes beautiful

—
—

She's fifteen months old and the sunshine reflects off her hair making it look like gold. Sherlock totes her around under his arm as he clears things from the kitchen table to make room for his microscope. Every now and then he hitches her up, which makes her laugh until she's gasping. John is nestled in his chair, reading the Sunday papers and looking up at them now and then. His bare feet are propped up on the coffee table.

The light catches the grey in his hair, almost indistinguishable from the blonde, except that it's brighter. Sherlock steals glances, still chewing over Harry's question.

Is he still worrying?

There are lines around John's eyes and mouth that weren't there a few years ago, Sherlock thinks, but also a happiness that wasn't there either. John catches him looking and they engage in one of their silent conversations.

What?

Nothing.

You were looking.

I know I was.

And then John shifts his eyes in a way, which could be anything yet which Sherlock somehow reads as:

Like what you see?

Sherlock turns away, jiggling Bee again to make her laugh and distract them both before his face betrays him with things that they don't talk about and that can't happen. The truth though, is that he thinks John looks happy now. Not merely the happiness of a moment, but contentment hard-won and ground in. He thinks for once the background around John is finally just that; secondary to John himself; no longer merely inhabiting the place and overseeing all it's drama like a stage-manager, but living in it.

Yes. Yes- he likes to see that.

John makes a point to catch his eye again, amused.

What?

Sherlock looks at the laughing little girl in his arms.

I'm being sentimental, and I can't seem to do anything about it.

Bee claps her hands in the air, and it's indistinguishable to whom she addresses her shouts, "Babar! Babar!" Logic says that she means John, but she keeps squirming to turn her face up to Sherlock.

On a whim Sherlock carts her over and drops her between the newspaper and John's chest. "Hugs!" he announces, as she giggles madly at all this fun. John is surprised but pleased and willingly obliges, pulling her close for a cuddle and pretending to eat her ears which makes her shriek with delight.

Sherlock watches John hug her, and feels that little bit closer to them too.

It becomes a habit, John notices. Whenever Sherlock gets bored of holding Bee or needs to move her, he drops her on John pronouncing either 'hugs!' or, more rarely, 'kisses!'. John can't help but find it rather sweet.

It's not even as if Sherlock doesn't cuddle with the baby himself, although John has noticed that Sherlock tends to get embarrassed about it if he's caught out. On the other hand the sight of him squashed onto Bee's tiny bed, his legs drooping over the edge as he goes through increasingly eclectic bedtime stories is a sight that John has yet to stop finding hilarious. Nor has it stopped John from occasionally sneaking up to the bedroom door to eavesdrop on them. He likes the rise and fall of Sherlock's voice when he reads, recites, describes- he never does the same thing twice- and Bee chiming in here and there to point out important things like 'woofs' and 'no-no'.

Sherlock pretends not to notice him eavesdropping and John at least has the sense to slope back to the living room and likewise pretend that he doesn't. Part of him wonders if Sherlock thinks that he only does it to keep tabs on Sherlock's behaviour around his daughter. Maybe that's why he's started this 'hugs' thing, John wonders, just to remind them all she's John's, and that Sherlock has no real claim on her.

It gives him a weird, warmly possessive feeling in his stomach towards them both.

Just once, on an evening when Sherlock has been out late following up a lead on some stolen data, does John try turning the habit on Sherlock. He's just pulled Bee from the bath, all squashy and warm and wriggly in a towel, and as Sherlock comes through the door he drops her into his arms to say goodnight and the word; the demand; just slips out.

The expression on Sherlock's face is so indescribable that John feels he's overstepped some unseen line and he never does it again. They don't speak about it, though John grapples with feeling like they should. Instead he goes through four days of worry until Sherlock finally gets sick of being hounded by John's concern and dumps the baby on his lap with a gruff, muttered, 'hug'.

John lavishes his relief against her round, pink cheeks.

Sherlock discovers that she likes dancing when she's one year and three months old; the start of June.

He has no idea why it took him so long- he already knew that she loves music. He keeps it a secret at first, for no real reason other than he enjoys it so immensely and would like to keep it to himself. He doesn't exactly want to let John know just how much he enjoys it either, for reasons he can't explain even to himself. It's not quite shame and it's not quite shyness.

For the first time, however, Sherlock's found someone who is always happy to dance with him, and it is both an unspeakable joy and completely addictive. He manages to keep it secret for a sole week before he gets too carried away and John catches them humming and waltzing around the living room.

"Hello, having a boogie?" John says, dropping the shopping bags on the sofa. Bee greets him, kicking Sherlock in the kidneys happily and exclaiming "Bababababar!"

Sherlock sniffs, looking awkward. "That was an American waltz."

"Blimey. My mistake," John says, coming over to kiss her. Sherlock watches him do so, John's head brushing close to his chest, and his expression softening slightly. "Is that fun, sweetheart?" John asks.

"Her footwork needs development," Sherlock reports, "But I think she's getting the hang of the rhythm."

John snorts back laughter at this ridiculousness and lets his hand brush over Sherlock's shoulder, unwittingly warming the man like a shot of brandy.

"Margo Fontaine, eat your heart out."

He puts the shopping away, leaving Sherlock to sway slightly with the baby as he tinkers with the editing on the recording playing from the laptop. Presently John asks, "Is that something you wrote?"

"No, simply a reworking."

"It's nice." John wipes his hands off on a tea towel and comes over. "Do I get a go then?"

Sherlock turns his head too quickly to look at him. A little surprised, John holds his arms out. "With Bee?" John clarifies.

“Oh. Yes. Here.”

She bumbles as John takes her; her vocabulary’s improving day on day, especially now that she’s figured out that talking gets her attention, but she’ll still drop back into martian for more ‘fluent’ conversation as and when she feels appropriate.

Sherlock gets the track playing again with his new edits and John starts up a two-step shuffle by the windows. Bee watches him curiously, and, John thinks, with judgment.

“Sorry, love, I only know one kind of waltz,” John tells her, and she’s pleased at the sound of his voice. He recollects for a moment, looking at her big blue eyes. “I danced a waltz with your mother at our wedding. Sherlock wrote it. He taught me to dance it too.” He glances over at the back of Sherlock’s head where he’s scribbling furiously over manuscripts but obviously listening with every fibre of his being.

“Good dancer, that man,” John confides with her in a loud stage whisper. She makes a grab at his chin and he kisses her fingers. Bee makes a string of noises and gives him a look as he wobbles back and forth with her that makes him tut.

“Alright, I know I’m rubbish. No need to look at me like that.” He stops and sighs, “Sherlock, I think this is a job for you.”

Sherlock sits up and looks at him over the back of his chair. “You’re doing fine,” he says, even though Bee is reaching out her arms at him and clapping.

“Nope, the lady has spoken,” John says, and Sherlock takes her from his arms. His dark curls mingle with her blonde ones as she settles against his shoulder. “You should learn to dance,” he tells John.

“I can dance a bit,” John returns. “Just nothing fancy.”

“The ‘pogo’ is hardly dancing, John. It’s jumping up and down.”

“Yeah, well, I can do that pretty well, thanks. Just you wait; sooner or later she’s going to discover jumping up and down and then we’ll see who’s favourite then.”

Sherlock simply laughs, a little dismissively, and turns through the steps of the waltz elegantly, dipping the baby, which makes her squeak. John smiles at the sight of them, wondering if one day he’d be asking Sherlock to teach him how to dance for another wedding. God, how many years down the line would that be?

John makes tea for them, listening to Sherlock get caught up again in the music and dance. His bare feet make hardly any noise on the carpet, and John plots their course back and forth around the living room by Bee’s chatter.

He comes back with the mugs just in time to see Sherlock set her down, her attention drawn away by her toys. The recording has looped, and John can hear the subtle differences now; improvements made in the flow and tempo of the piece. Sherlock seems pleased with it. He steals both mugs from John’s grasp, plonking them on the table, and then while John still has his hands up, holds his own up parallel and proffers them to John.

“Sherlock, I can’t dance.”

“Help me road test this with someone whose feet reach the floor,” Sherlock replies, slipping his hands, dry and cool, into John’s “Besides,” he adds, playfully, “Bee wants you to learn.”

He guides John, protesting, through the steps and after a moment muscle memory clicks in and he sees how it's similar to the waltz Sherlock taught him before. They speed up to match the music once it's clear that John isn't going to fall over his own feet. It's a cheerful piece, and John's distracted enough by looking at his feet that he misses the expression that crosses Sherlock's face as they dance.

"Am I dancing the man's or the woman's part," John asks, as Sherlock guides him through a turn.

"Does it matter?"

"Well it might," John is looking at his feet again. "Curtains are open."

"I can do either."

"Oh? Good for you." John looks aside habitually to check that Bee isn't getting into trouble. He wonders what the hell he is doing, but maybe Sherlock has a point. It might be nice to know how to dance at least a bit of basic ballroom. "I think I'd rather stick to the men's parts though," he comments.

Sherlock chuckles. "But you don't know how to lead."

"Excuse me, I was an officer in the army."

"Excuse you," Sherlock corrects him. "I hold an RAD grade 5 certification. "

"I... don't know what that is," John admits. He's starting to feel a little dizzy.

They work through the final stretch, John stumbling, the music swelling beautifully and then it comes to a halt and so do they, John's calves butting against the seat of the sofa.

Suddenly, though not quite as unexpectedly as it would have been at the start of the dance, Sherlock motions as though he's going to dip him too. Looking up, John thinks perhaps Sherlock meant it for a joke, just another way to tease him about his two left feet, but then something flickers in Sherlock's eyes and it steals the trick away. John's heart thumps and his mouth suddenly feels very dry. Unconsciously, he moves his tongue to wet his lips and the focus of Sherlock's gaze snaps to his mouth.

He has no idea what to think; no idea what Sherlock is thinking right at this moment nor how to proceed. Perhaps Sherlock's mind has gone as blank and panicky as his own from the surprising intimacy of the moment. Everything seems to have gone quiet and distant. John can't drag his eyes away from Sherlock, who equally can't seem to pull his gaze up from John's jaw.

The moment stretches. John's knee's sag from standing awkwardly pressed against the sofa and Sherlock's arm tightens on his waist to stop him from falling.

One of them- John is later unable to be certain which of them although he'd have put his money on Sherlock- makes a soft noise. At the time it sounded like pain; John is aware he is not as light as a toddler and no doubt holding him up like that made Sherlock's arms ache. Later he reflects, however, that possibly it was simply longing.

The next thing he knows is that he's falling back flat, breathless on the sofa cushions and the doorbell is ringing.

"Client!" Sherlock announces, straightening at once and shaking out his dressing gown. He vaults the table and baby all in one great leap. "Get up John! We have a case!"

John looks at the ceiling, and tries to quiet his pulse.

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It proves not to be a case but a conclusion.

The man in the slick black suit, face impassive, holds open the doors to the car and silently motions for them to get in. They exchange a glance and do so, Sherlock silently lifting the collar of his coat. The red of his scarf disappears, only visible in a splash at the hollow of his throat.

Blue really suited him better, John thinks, and then carefully keeps his eyes on the back of the driver's head and says nothing. They creep through the streets, the engine hardly audible at all, until they reach the exterior of Mycroft's offices in the centre of the city. John cranes out of the window, curious.

What the hell could Mycroft want with them?

Sherlock has a hunch, though he's not particularly interested. It's not his job to come in and help Mycroft mop up his problems; he handed the case back. No doubt big brother just wants to point out that he cracked the code just as easily as Sherlock did, despite the lapse in time.

John falls in at his heels, hands out of his pockets, fingers gently curled at his sides. His presence at Sherlock's shoulder is a comfort as they progress over the muffling carpets past glass walls which hide no secrets and thicker walls which leak no sounds. Mycroft is waiting for them.

He makes no preamble, just turns over a business card from corner to corner against the surface of his desk before he flicks it across the glass to Sherlock's waiting hand. "All very neat," he comments, though he appears to take little pleasure in the fact.

"Did you discover who?"

"No, just their lynchpin. Thought you'd enjoy seeing the arrest."

"So late."

"Timing, little brother. Timing." Mycroft gives them a pale approximation of a smile and gets up. "Shall we?"

"What's going on?" John wants to know, keeping his voice down. Sherlock holds back a half step and leans down to whisper to him.

"Card games."

"Chess," Mycroft corrects.

"Ah, yes. Sacrificing pawns."

They soft-shoe in a group towards an open section of office full of desks and silently efficient workers, separated from them by yet another glass wall. John glances between the brothers, still flustered, and earns nothing but an intrigued look from the wrong man.

He scowls back.

Mycroft composes himself and looks back across his office and it takes John another moment to realise that they're looking through a colossal two way mirror.

“Which one was it, in the end?” Sherlock wants to know.

“By some great fortune, not the one you thought,” Mycroft replies smugly. “A regrettable amount of talent went into throwing a number of distractions across the system but as it transpires, Andrea is in no way culpable.”

“Lucky for Andrea.”

“Who?”

“Mycroft’s favourite. Or would be, were he inclined to have favourites of that sort,” Sherlock replies and there’s something in his tone which makes John stop and chew his words over for a long minute looking for a clear double entendre. What sort?

He assumes they mean ‘Anthea’ of the ‘I’m top totty, please get in the car where I’ll very firmly crush your silly male ego with polite disinterest’ variety. What’s wrong with her sort?

She’d been with Mycroft at Christmas; Wiggins had been unsubtly drooling and chuffing at her the whole scant time she’d been there.

“No, it was him.” Mycroft says, lifting his chin and indicating a desk in the far corner. He looks back over his shoulder past John and gives a little nod, and John nearly jumps from his skin when a pair of men step forward.

‘From the Diogenes,’ John thinks, heart pounding. They’d been so silent. Looking down he notes that their shoes are covered.

‘All the better for kicking and not leaving evidence,’ the cynic in him adds.

They stand in silence and watch as the two men approach the desk. No words are exchanged. The worker seems surprised, but he makes no effort to fight them off. John feels like they’ve been brought there to learn something though he can’t think what. Mycroft always hired from among the most intelligent and the most forgotten. This time, however, the quiet, unassuming young man transpired to have teeth that he wanted to hold to Britain’s jugular.

“We still have no idea how they recruited him,” Mycroft murmurs, watching the man being taken away, pale lips tight, in handcuffs. “Outstanding.”

John dampens the roof of his mouth and then asks, “What’ll happen to him?”

Both brothers look at him and raise their eyebrows in synch.

“Right.” John shifts his weight off of one leg and wonders if anyone will be there to see the unknown man off on his plane, or if there will only be a dark room somewhere and a snick. “Why are we here again, exactly?”

“A reminder,” Sherlock says darkly, giving Mycroft an unpleasant look.

“Nothing of the sort,” Mycroft returns mildly. “I simply thought you’d like to witness the fruits of the work.”

The door at the far end of the office swings shut behind the men and it’s all over just a few moments after it all began. Mycroft turns and points back the way that they came in. “Let’s go to my office.”

“We’ll be leaving,” Sherlock tells him as they tread back through the maze of the old building.
“Things to do. Things that matter.”

“Just a quick chat, before you do,” Mycroft insists. He pushes open a door as the lock green lights, and takes them through into an even more private section of the office. With no other option, they follow. Inside they find Anthea, or ‘Andrea’ at a desk, typing. She looks up and gives them all an insincere little smile.

John can’t help but look at her as they head towards the door to Mycroft’s actual office, and then to his surprise she mouths something to him. He stops, frowning and she mouths again, then beckons to him. Sherlock has already stepped into Mycroft’s gloomy little sanctum with its looming portraiture, but there’s no alternative exit as far as John can see.

He hangs back and approaches her desk. “What?”

“I said, my real name’s ‘Moneypenny’.”

“What?”

“No, I’m just distracting you.” There’s a soft click and when John looks up the door has closed. He starts towards it, angry and suddenly frightened and is held back by her hand on his.

“Don’t,” she advises. “They’re just having a chat.”

“About what?” John says through gritted teeth. She gives him an inoffensive look.

“I have no idea. Probably Sherlock. Or something else that’s personal.”

She reaches into her desk drawer and as John tenses to fend off whatever she’s got in there he’s left feeling foolish when all she pulls out on him is a plastic chip on a lanyard.

“There’s a coffee machine around the corner,” she says. “Try not to assault anyone while we wait.”

Seething, John does as he’s told.

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The door closes behind Sherlock with a soft click and he does nothing. He stands, declines the chairs on offer and insouciantly uses the fingernails of one hand to clean out the fingernails of the other. Mycroft wrinkles his nose and takes a seat at his desk.

“John will be furious,” Sherlock points out.

“John can wait.”

“Not for long.”

Mycroft steeple his hands, elbows resting on the blotting pad of his desk and eyeballs his younger brother. “I got a call from Mummy. Rather interesting.”

“Oh?”

“I hear John is now elevated onto the guest-list for the Ruby Wedding. Anything you’d like to share?”

“You know our mother. Blue eyes, blonde curls; she’s weak. She’s also no doubt *dying* to hear

from you.”

Mycroft glowers. “She seems to be under the impression that she’s gained a grandchild by proxy. Should I disillusion her or is she, by some alarming turn of events, somehow correct?”

“It’s none of your business.”

“As the person who ultimately cleans up after all your dalliances with *emotions*, yes, I do believe it is. People will be hurt, Sherlock. Do not do this.”

Sherlock narrows his eyes, peeling dry skin from the edge of his thumb and flicking it onto Mycroft’s pristine carpet. He simmers with rebellion, and yet in the courtroom of his mind, Mycroft’s warnings echo and echo and will not go away. They’ve always been there.

“She’s not *my* daughter,” Sherlock points out. “If Mummy is foolish enough to forget that it’s hardly my fault.”

“But you *wish* she were, don’t you.” Mycroft’s eyes, paler than his own, feel cold in the heat of the office.

Sherlock says nothing.

“I suppose we should be glad there’s no biological relation. A child of your own? How would that have worked out, I wonder? Do you think it would be pleasant to have someone similar to yourself around?” Mycroft arches one eyebrow. His meaning is clear. The gods have already granted Sherlock one and look how they tear at one another at the slightest opportunity.

“And your little protege turned out to be a very minor distraction. For the best, I think,” Mycroft concludes, straightening items on his desk into perfect right angles. “There should be fewer children burdened with the misery of an intellect such as yours.”

You’re not the smart one.

“Ours,” Sherlock sneers back.

I’m just as clever.

You’re flawed.

Sherlock knows what he means. He lacks his brother’s control and ability to step neatly from one form of thought to another. He lacks the capability both not to be overwhelmed and to be able to switch it off for a moment of temporary truce.

He retaliates by whistling the first few bars of the Colonel Bogey March, and Mycroft’s face sours.

Can you even have children now, brother?

“Childish,” he says. Sherlock alters the tune to ‘Do Your Ears Hang Low’ and allows Mycroft the privilege of transferring the lyrics to the playground variety himself.

“If you’re quite done.”

“Not at all,” Sherlock zings back, bright and cruel. “John has whole song books to crib from.”

“How telling,” Mycroft replies and hums part of the Eton Boating Song, although Sherlock can’t

be sure which iteration of it he's trying to imply. Perhaps merely that given the course of the river, they're all forced to pull in the same direction. Sherlock's none too sure about that. He feels like he's swallowed golf balls.

"Do you wish it?" Mycroft asks again, this time with a trace of genuine interest.

"Is this really all you want?" Sherlock snipes back, incredulous and hurt. "Always picking, brother. Pick, pick, pick. I'm amazed there's anything of anyone left."

"Take, take, take. I wonder the same."

Sherlock looks at him, hard. There's something going on and he's not blinded enough by Mycroft's jabs this time not to notice it. Why is he so bitter? It's a strange sensation but Sherlock rather has the impression that it's not even himself that Mycroft is angry with. It's almost as if he's gone out of his way to be able to see Sherlock for... what? Proof that he still has a brother? Sherlock can't fathom anything other than that Mycroft is paler and more full of bile than usual.

Maybe it's hormonal.

"If there's nothing else," Sherlock says, turning and opening the door. John gets up, discarding a cup of coffee as he does so.

"Everything alright?" he asks, suspicious, looking past Sherlock to where Mycroft has remained at his desk, to all intents and purposes going through papers in his in-tray as cool as you please.

John looks into Sherlock's face, looking for excuses to be angry.

"Fine," Sherlock tells him.

Stand down.

Sure? I'd punch him.

Sherlock smiles slightly. "Let's go. The door please." He gestures to Anthea.

She stands, taking a pass from her jacket pocket and passing it over the touchpad by the door. It swings open with a slight swish and Sherlock passes through it without looking back. As John moves to do likewise, she slips an envelope from her other pocket and holds it out to him.

"Would you deliver this to Scotland Yard on your way home?"

"To Lestrade?" John takes the envelope in surprise. "We can, but why?"

"Just a little missive," Anthea smiles false with politics. "Nothing to worry about. Deconstructing the chain." She examines his hands with disinterest. "Mere paperwork."

"He spies for you?"

"Not at all," Anthea replies, deadpan. "It's been perfectly mutual."

"Is it, by jove." Sherlock has turned back. He plucks the envelope from John's fingers. He's tempted to refuse.

Not your errand boy.

Yet, he would like to see Lestrade's face when confronted with the envelope, although not for any

reason other than morbid curiosity. What is going on? He doesn't like being out of the loop.

"We'll take it. Now back off."

Anthea politely lets them go, allowing the door to close of it's own accord behind them.

"Weird," John comments.

Sherlock snorts with derision. "Family," he laments.

Scotland Yard is the same as usual; phones trilling and people muddling around sharing information and paperwork. They find Lestrade with his feet on his desk, sleeves rolled up as he sheafs through forms. The biro tucked behind one ear makes him look more like a foreman than a detective than ever.

"Allo, what're you two doing here?" he asks, as they breeze in. He looks concerned for a moment.

"Post for you," John says, holding out the envelope. Lestrade wipes doughnut sugar from his fingers onto his trousers and takes it, confused.

"Who from?"

"Her majesty herself. Don't get too excited," Sherlock replies, prying around through the papers in Lestrade's various in, out and shake-it-about trays.

Lestrade slits it open with a thumbnail, taking his feet off the desk. He looks at it, his frown deepening and then darkening.

"Right," he says finally, thrusting it into his pocket. "Thanks."

John thinks that he doesn't sound particularly thankful. "Everything alright?"

"Just perfect."

"What was it?"

Lestrade snorts, picking up his unfinished doughnut again and cramming it into his mouth. "Some crap about... crap." He says around the mouthful. "You know what Mycroft's like. If you see him, tell him to go and fucking... I don't know. Be inventive. Choke on his own arsehole."

"Alright then," John says, taken aback. "I'll... do that. If I see him." He turns to give Sherlock a look.

And what was that?!

An excellent question.

Sherlock opens his mouth to start gleaning information from Lestrade only for the policeman to shove a clipboard with a set of photos in his face.

"Here- girl with her throat slit turns up on a side street, all her clothes inside out. Any ideas?"

John wonders how long Lestrade has been sitting on that one for when he'd need to distract

Sherlock. It's not the best case in the world, but it's enough. Sherlock's face clears from suspicion to interest and he stands stock still to flick through the information. John sighs with frustration and folds his arms.

Greg shrugs at him and nudges the doughnut box forward. Fucking typical. They wait for Sherlock to finish absorbing data but before he does so, his pocket starts to jangle. John waits. Sherlock doesn't stop reading.

"Sherlock, your phone's going."

"Answer it then."

"It's in your pock-oh, fine, never mind." John sighs and leans across Sherlock to fetch it out of his Belstaff. As luck would have it, he misses the call, but by the time he's finished fumbling it out and unlocking it, there's a text message from Molly asking where he is, but there's something else there too.

John stares at the screen, puzzled. He replies to Molly with their location.

"Sherlock, you've got another missed call from that number- oh, it was six hours ago." He passes the phone over. Sherlock frowns at it.

"Not important..." he says, although there's a twinge of doubt as he puts it back into the pocket of his Belstaff. "We're done here...no, apparently not."

John looks up to track his gaze through the glass doors of Lestrade's office and sees what he's spotted. Two police officers in hi-vis, clearly come in off of the street, speaking with Sally Donovan. She's pointing them out, looking surprised.

"What is this?" Sherlock murmurs, intrigued and slides over to open the door. Lestrade struggles up from his desk, elbowing past John and Sherlock both. He opens the door just as Donovan reaches it.

"What's going on?"

"Here to see Holmes, Boss," Sally reports, indicating the PC's. "They've come in off of a call from Kings College."

"University?" Sherlock frowns at once, putting his hand back towards his pocket.

Next to him, Lestrade's also looking thunder-struck. "Oh my god," he says, apropos of nothing. John glances at him, taken aback.

"What's going on?" John wants to know.

"Mr. Holmes? I'm Sergeant Edwards and this is Constable Setter. Can you tell us if you recognise this man?" The Sergeant removes a photograph from his coat pocket; it's been printed in haste on standard paper. John catches a glimpse of a pale headshot, but turns his attention to Sherlock's face.

Next to him, Lestrade lets out a held breath in an explosive 'woof'. "Oh, it's him," Lestrade says, indecently relieved.

"What?" Sherlock says, distracted. "Yes," he turns back to the Sergeant. "We know him."

“He’s currently at King’s College Hospital; no ID on him, just your business card and a second-hand phone containing your number. Only two numbers in fact. The pathologist gave us your address and your landlady suggested that we checked for you here- would you happen to know how to contact any next of kin?”

“He hasn’t got any,” John says. He can see the photograph now; it’s been snapped from directly over the hospital bed. The oxygen mask and bleached sheets between them wash any of the little colour out of Billy Wiggins’ face. “What happened?”

“I’m afraid we can’t really share any of the details.

Sherlock shifts beside John and John drops his gaze to the other man’s hand. He’s gripping his phone in his pocket.

“Inform the hospital that someone will come and deal with it now,” Sherlock says. He lets go of the phone and lifts his collar instead. “John.”

“What- yeah, of course. Christ, hold on!” John scrabbles to keep up with him as Sherlock blows out of the office. He catches up to him, Sherlock firing off text messages.

“Mrs. Hudson will cover.”

“What- oh, right. Why’s Billy- I mean, what do you think happened? Did he get attacked or-“

“Overdose,” Sherlock says grimly, sticking one arm out to flag a taxi. John had half suspected as much. Wiggins hasn’t been around Baker Street in months- not since Christmas, John realises. Well, he popped up once or twice after Christmas but then not since the end of January.

They sit in the taxi as it rolls south across the river and away from the more familiar parts of the city. John squints out the window. He feels like he should say something but Sherlock is hunched, tense and it feels too much like he needs this moment of privacy in quiet company.

John’s aware of the complications of drug use. He’s worked in large hospitals and A&E. He knew people who dabbled when he was in his teens. He’s lived with Sherlock and his addiction.

He has a less certain awareness of the harm that long-term homelessness can wreck on an otherwise healthy individual, but he can imagine.

Cocaine affects the circulatory system, raising blood pressure, body temperature and heart rate. To some extent the symptoms of use aren’t so dangerous, but to someone as underweight and poorly fed as Billy, the effects can be exacerbated to dangerous levels.

Overdose symptoms. John considers both the psychological and physiological effects of the drug. Someone must have been with him who’d had a scrap of sense left to have realised that it hadn’t been a normal high. Maybe Billy himself. Nausea was common, with chest pains. At worst, seizures. Hallucinations. Paranoia.

Treatment would be straight-forward: Ice, saline, sodium bicarbonate, benzodiazepines and fluids. Ventilation, if necessary. Prognosis would depend on the strength of the individual.

The taxi rolls past the red canopied ambulance entrance and kicks them out on a side street. John follows on Sherlock’s heels, who despite never having been inside, has an unerring sense of direction.

They check with the man at the desk but Wiggins is still somewhere in the depths of the ICU- no

visitors. They're invited to wait for an undetermined amount time in a visitor's room. Both of them stop to consider the facts.

"It could be quite a while until he's stable," John comments, needlessly. He could leave Sherlock here and go back and check in on Bee and Mrs. Hudson. Sherlock could call if there were any development.

The bank of plastic chairs creaks as Sherlock sits on it. Between the blood red of his scarf and the off-white-dead-pink walls, his face looks like it's been carved from wax. John takes a seat, knowing that he cannot leave.

Sherlock could go, instead. John could hold the fort and then one of them would waste less time in the waiting room.

"Now they have a name, they'll find his paperwork," Sherlock says out loud. John folds his hands together in his lap. And there are emergency contact details on the papers, John thinks, from the first round of rehab. Name of Holmes, address 221B Baker Street.

Not Watson.

John's not sure who is listed as Wiggins' doctor, but there's a chance it isn't him. It's more likely to be the specialist from the drug clinic.

"Right."

The clock ticks. It's a different hospital, a different waiting room. The smell is the same. The grittiness of his feet sweating inside his shoes is the same and the excessive warmth is the same. After a few moments, Sherlock loosens his scarf. John follows suit, unbuttoning his cardigan.

Sherlock thumbs absently at his phone. John thinks about myocardian infarctions. He drums his finger on his knee.

"I'll get us some co-" John's phone beeps. "It's Molly. She's coming here."

"Of course. They said 'pathologist'," Sherlock says suddenly, straightening.

"Who did?"

"The police officers. They said the pathologist gave them our address."

"Molly knows, then."

"Her number in his phone. Two numbers."

"He only had your card on him too. Do you think... he was forced? Is this some kind of set-up?" It seems ridiculous and yet they've played sinister games before, Sherlock and Moriarty and Magnusson. There were people out there, John has no doubt, who still harbour grudges. People who would look for weak links in a chain.

John types out a reply to Molly.

She joins them twenty minutes later, sweating through her blouse and trailing her handbag loosely from one hand.

"You're fine. Good. Good," she says, relieved. "And I spoke to Martha, she's fine- Did you hear anything yet?" She changes track so fast that John takes a second to catch up, but Sherlock replies

at once.

“Nothing. He’s in intensive care.”

“Haven’t you been in to see him?”

“No one’s said if it’s allowed yet,” John tells her. He stands a half-second after Sherlock does but she turns down both of their chairs.

“They just told me he’s stable,” Molly replies, lifting her bag from the floor and settling the strap over her shoulder. “I wanted to find out if you’d seen him before I tried, but as you haven’t...”

John points out, “Molly, it’ll be family- next of kin, only.”

Molly gives him a hard, sharp look. “I know how hospitals work, John. I practically live in one. Are you coming or not?”

She walks off without waiting to see if they are, approaching the same man at the desk as they’d spoken to before.

“What was that about?” John says again, out loud, disconcerted. He has the strangest feeling like something in the whole world has shifted; a bubble popped and between it and the vacuum left behind, a tumult of life is pouring in. Sherlock’s expression is just as flummoxed but more calculating.

“There’s something going on,” he says, piqued. He’s chiding himself. He’s been so wrapped up in the events of the past few months; of funerals and relocations, John and Bee and the uncomfortable dance they’ve been leading, that other things have slipped his attention, and John likewise hasn’t had the presence of mind to alert him to the fact.

“Please,” Molly is saying to the man at the desk as they approach. Her lower lip is quivering. She looks down, up again and this time there are tears in her eyes. “I’m his girlfriend. Please let me see him. I work at Bart’s- I know it’s not proper procedure but he doesn’t have anyone else.”

John stares at her, jaw dropping. So does Sherlock. It’s the most daring, bold-faced lie he’s seen in a long time. Not since Mary, he realises. She’s making a point to look small and scared and the male nurse isn’t jaded enough not to buy it. She’s left her white coat at the lab but she’s left on her lanyard with her ID visible on it.

I’m one of you, it says. Work with me.

“Alright,” the nurse says, squeezing her shoulder. “I’ll ask. I can’t make any promises, but I’ll see what I can do, ok?”

Molly brushes his hand with her fingers and wobbles a smile at him. “Thank you.”

“You’re not,” John says, in disbelief, once the man’s out of earshot.

“She’s not.” Sherlock confirms. “Why would you lie though?”

Molly flashes him a suddenly furious look. “Because it was nicer than saying he owes me money,” she snaps and stalks off towards the coffee machine.

“Was she angry at me?” Sherlock questions to the air. John has no answer.

“He owes her money?”

“I regret that he probably owes plenty of people money...” Sherlock mutters, a prickle of conscience running down his spine. He remembers those days all too poorly.

Molly buys a bottle of water, drinks half and make a show of dithering around worrying by the desk, which John guesses might be genuine and then exchanges a few words with the nurse when he returns. He nods and points down a hall. She touches his arm, expresses gratitude and then approaches them again where they’re hanging back.

“I’m going in to see how he is and- you’d better be here when I get back.”

John can’t believe her tone. He purses his lips. “I’m sorry, what have we done, exactly? Have I missed something?”

“Just *be* here. Please,” she says, exasperated and still damp around the eyes, and John’s had enough girlfriends to know that he won’t be forgiven if he doesn’t. Sherlock stands like he’s waiting outside of the staff room, waiting to get told off.

“You could say something,” John points out. Sherlock plays with his phone instead. “Lestrade’s coming,” he reports. John throws up his hands.

“Oh good. It’s a party in A&E. My favourite.”

With nothing else to do, they return to the waiting room.

—

Lestrade arrives and joins them, clapping Sherlock wordlessly on the shoulder. It’s dull work, waiting. John unabashedly digs through the stack of old magazines and picks at a crossword. Sherlock retreats into his head, leaving Lestrade the unenviable chore of staring through the narrow window and jiggling one leg to the tune of time crawling by.

Molly comes back not long after Lestrade arrives only to tell them that Billy isn’t conscious yet, and looks terrible, and then when Lestrade hugs her, bursts into muffled tears.

The other two sit there, feeling awkward.

Molly smears a hand under her nose and then gratefully takes Lestrade’s handkerchief. It’s seen better days but it’s clean and more effective than her bare skin.

“It’s alright Mols; he’s still with us.”

“Only just,” she protests, twisting the hankie. “And now what’s going to happen?”

Lestrade looks helplessly over her shoulder at Sherlock, who blinks.

“Nothing can happen until he’s released from hospital,” John says, rationally. Molly sniffs and presses the damp handkerchief back into Lestrade’s hand.

“Excuse me,” she says, and ducks away into the ladies.

They wait again, three men with six left feet, shuffling around on the linoleum. Another woman goes in, comes out, frowns at them for a moment and then picks up Molly’s handbag from the chair that she left it on.

“She’s asking for her bag,” she tells them bluntly, and vanishes back into the bathroom with it.

"Maybe you should check on her," John says after another stunted silence.

"Me?" Lestrade asks. "It's the women's loo."

"You're a policeman. Show them your badge."

"I can't use it for that."

The other woman finally emerges alone, giving them a dirty look. "You're a right piece of work," she comments to Sherlock, to Lestrade, to John or else all of them- it's not clear. She stalks away.

John twitches his head back and forth between the other two, hands held up in defence. "What did we *do*? What did I do?"

"It hardly matters," Sherlock replies.

They return to their chairs, squirming on the hard plastic until a man in a white coat comes and takes a look at them. "Holmes?"

"Yes."

"A pleasure," the doctor says, automatic and sounding like he couldn't care less either way. He ghosts a palm across Sherlock's in a disinterested handshake. There are circles under his eyes. "I'm pleased to say that, uh-" He manages a very discrete glance at his clipboard and then smiles, all professional, "Mr. Wiggins is awake and asking for you."

Six eyes take a glance at the door of the women's bathroom, still resolutely shut. The doctor inclines his head slightly to look as well and then back. "I can grant you a few minutes and then if you'd like to talk through his care?"

"I'll see him. Tell John the particulars."

John extends a hand. "Dr. Watson. I'm his GP."

If the consultant is surprised he's either too tired or too used to being surprised to show it. "How about you go over the notes with my colleague at the desk then and I can answer any questions once I'm back."

John agrees; it'll save time and they part ways. Before he goes, Lestrade gets up and points to himself and then at the bathroom. John nods.

God speed.

Rather me than you, eh?

Your words, not mine. But true.

"She's not... I don't know, pregnant or anything, is she?" John mutters to Sherlock as they walk away. Sherlock looks at him like he's barked.

"Not remotely. Why would you think that?"

"Oh, just go and see Billy," John says, giving up. Sherlock leaves him at the desk, taking out his irritation by bossing the staff around.

It's a strange walk through the halls of the hospital. Sherlock's shoes click heel-toe on the shiny

floors; the consultant makes almost no noise on his rubber soles. He keeps his head bent, partly from the fact that he's worn out and partly because he's thinking about something. Not Billy, Sherlock presumes. He must have other patients and more pressing cases than a washed-up junkie with no family dropped on his case load at the end of a double shift.

Sherlock looks into the other rooms as they pass. Some of the occupants are old, some not so old. Some are awake, some in natural sleep, some caught in the transient space between life and death. There's a woman young enough to look like she's barely out of her teens and a middle-aged couple, arms around one another beside her ventilator. Car crash, Sherlock thinks, given the arrangement of machinery and injury.

Billy is on the end of the row with his own police officer outside, jotting notes.

"Are you questioning him?" Sherlock demands to know.

The reply borders on insouciance. "Not officially seeing as he wasn't carrying anything, externally anyway. Just a few details for our paperwork."

He holds up the book for Sherlock to glimpse at. Date of birth, full name, previous but undetailed convictions.

"I take it I'm allowed in unsupervised?"

The police officer looks at the consultant who has no problem with it other than the time frame. "No more than ten minutes," he says, shrugging. The white coat is too short in the sleeve for him. "And don't worry if he falls asleep on you."

"Thank you."

In the moment that Sherlock opens the door he's transported back so vividly that something inside of his torso just under the scar twinges with empathic pain. He breathes in the smell of plastic and antiseptic, feels the tight pinch of the IV in the back of his hand and the muddled blur of faces leaning over him, touching his fingers, and the voices speaking to him as though from under distant sea.

Self-consciously he wipes his hand- the back of it, against his side, skin crawling. Billy's eyes flicker with recognition.

"Holmes," he mouths. Not boss. That's telling. Sherlock closes the door behind him and moves stiffly towards the bed, observing him. The monitors flicker and beep, Billy's skinny chest rises and falls in synch.

"So, here you are."

"Here I am."

Sherlock tilts his head. Billy's arm hang out over the edges of the blanket, out from the flaps of his surgical gown and white enough to show the veins. Slowly he turns one palm-side up and let's Sherlock see the marks running up his elbow.

Likewise the crooks of Sherlock's arms tingle. He turns away, scanning the rest of the contents of the room. Not much. A locker, charts, no window. No decoration, nothing at the foot of the bed. It's a stark little cage that Billy's put himself into.

Deliberate.

“On purpose. Why?” Sherlock barks, rounding on the bed. Shrugging makes Billy, who is already hunched up, seem to fold in on himself.

“Curious,” he rasps out, at length. “It’s a thin, funny old line between what’s ‘ere and what’s there, innit? Thought I’d investigate.”

A morbid experiment? It’s altogether exactly the kind of thing he’d expect of Billy, who is too much of similar ilk to himself to have the sense of self-preservation not to try it, yet something in Billy’s tone rings hollow.

Would he really have overdosed on a whim? Even for science or to answer some philosophy, Sherlock doesn’t believe that. This was planned. So again, why?

“Intrestin’,” Billy says, voice slurring like treacle. He closes his eyes with a smirk. Sherlock could throttle him.

He narrows his eyes and entertains the thought in sudden, intense detail; the size of his hands in comparison to Billy’s throat, pale on paler; making the veins pop. The inside of the Belstaff seems to swelter him, and he’d remove it but he can feel the cotton of his shirt clinging around his armpits. Sherlock Holmes, consulting detective, doesn’t sweat.

Or shouldn’t.

Billy asks, eyes still shut, “Still ‘ere?” He cracks an eyelid. They regard one another coldly.

“Evidently. You’re not nearly stoned enough to hallucinate me.”

Billy considers this. “Got any cash?”

He says it on purpose to be provocative and despite himself, Sherlock takes the bait. The bed frame rings from the slap of his hand. Another infuriating twitch of the lips from Billy.

The little bastard is laughing at me.

It must seem like a ripe joke. Sherlock’s trod the line between life and the beyond with abandon one too many times himself. When bored he is callously stupid, and behaves worse when ignored. He has very little defence here; there’s nothing he can say that won’t be foul hypocrisy.

Had Billy been bored? Billy didn’t get bored like Sherlock did though. Billy wasn’t as slavish to his intellect... nor as adamantly self-controlled. Billy was only moderately superior to the rest of the herd. He still needed someone managerial to point him in the right-

Billy watches the penny drop with something akin to resentment.

Yeah. Fuck you, ‘Boss’. Where were my jobs?

Sherlock feels like he’s swallowed hot lead.

Indeed.

“Look in my stuff...” Billy unfolds one finger and points it towards the locker in the corner of the room. Sherlock rifles through it; there isn’t very much. Billy’s clothes, unwashed, a faded backpack and a blanket that’s seen better days. “Me ‘ood.”

Sherlock feels around the fabric of the old sweatshirt and then finds the tacking where Billy’s seen up over a hole in the seam of the hood. It’s a matter of a single sharp tug to burst the stitches and

then there's a hole large enough to slide his hand into between the layers of the the hood. There's a slim roll of notes inside.

Removing the elastic band from them, Sherlock unfurls them and counts them out. Eighty pounds.

"Didn't spend it. Give it back to 'er, yeah?"

"You made Molly cry."

"So?"

So have you. More'n Molly. You 'ad loadsa people cryin' over you.

Your little protege turned out to be a very minor distraction.

I thought he had somewhere to go this year.

Perhaps he thought he did

"Why my business card?" Sherlock asks finally. He can see the tiny holes on the front of the sweater, both in and out, where the card had been pinned on.

Billy regards him, deadpan. He struggles to sit up a little and grimaces, and then, once he's garnered his resources, manages a reply in full.

"Didn't have one of those fancy pens what write on glass now, did I?" He waggles his stick-like fingers. "No fucking diamonds neither."

Sherlock swallows, turns and leaves the room.

He finds Lestrade up on the steps by the disabled entrance to the hospital, sucking down smoke, though Sherlock doesn't remember the walk it took him to get there. He takes a cigarette from Lestrade's packet wordlessly and with great care lest he drops it. He lights it. The taste is bitter and beautiful and not enough. Lestrade has the sense to keep his mouth shut.

Sherlock can see him though, mentally drafting tattle-tale texts to John, and no doubt Mycroft. They'll be poking around the flat later; prying in the seams of his coat and tapping at the floorboards.

He can't fault the logic of their suspicions, but it chafes him raw with indignation.

"It's not your fault he OD'd," Lestrade says after a long while. "I mopped Molly up and left her with John for a bit."

"She's angry with me."

"She's angry with herself too, for not telling anyone sooner, but she didn't want to bring up the money thing."

"She assumed, wrongly, that I was dealing with it."

Lestrade exhales a long stream of smoke. "Well, maybe we dropped the ball on this somewhat. There's been a lot going on."

“He was calling me, every few days. I ignored him.”

Lestrade scrubs the toe of his shoe back and forth over the concrete, weighing up his words.

“Might not have made any difference,” he says slowly. “Not to get at you or anything, but we kept you busy and sometimes that still wasn’t enough. It’s the coke, Sherlock. You know what it’s like.”

“It helped though,” Sherlock admits for the first time out loud to Lestrade. “It still helps.”

The cigarette in Lestrade’s fingers quivers and then he drops it and grinds it into the steps, clucking his tongue.

“Don’t,” Sherlock says, but he does anyway, and all he can do is sigh and let Lestrade get it out of his system. It’s too warm to be hugging. The wool of the Belstaff itches Lestrade’s bare forearms, and his hair scratches at Sherlock’s neck. His own cigarette, almost finished, burns down to the filter.

Sherlock closes his eyes and then asks, as a distraction, and because he has this awful feeling that he’s about to drop another ball if he doesn’t.

“Why is my brother sending you blank orders?”

Lestrade lets go, one hand going to his breast pocket. He dips his fingers inside, just brushing the paper there. “Good question. I’m going to ask him.”

“Do it today,” Sherlock says, instead of thank you. He holds out his hand. Lestrade hesitates and then passes it over. There’s not much to see, of course. That’s the meaning of a blank order. Lestrade’s name is printed at the top, the title of Mycroft’s department at the bottom. In between the two like the bright white space of a cancelled contact. Blank orders mean that there will be no further communication indefinitely.

“Think he’ll even let me ask?”

He won’t. Sherlock knows Mycroft too well. He’ll have dug himself in like a toad beneath a stone and no amount of badgering Lestrade could achieve will dig him out again. The coward.

“Pen.”

Lestrade flusters around his suit jacket until he unearths a chewed biro. Sherlock leans on the fire door and scribbles out, although Lestrade cannot possibly know it, the most valuable recompense he can offer in return for the other man’s loyalty. He passes it back.

Lestrade reads it twice and his mouth moves, confused. “I didn’t think either of us won anything,” he comments. “Or is it code.”

“He’ll understand what it means,” Sherlock says, capping the pen. “I suppose it’s code.”

Lestrade looks at him carefully, and then pats his arm. “Go find John,” he suggests. “He’ll be waiting for you.”

The fire door clicks and closes. Lestrade gives the paper one more pass over, still puzzled. It’s such a strange question. “Which of you is the Victor?” He says it aloud but it doesn’t materialise any further meaning. Lestrade tucks it away out of sight again. Who is the victor?

At present it feels like nobody is.

Molly seems to carry the world in her handbag and her pockets. In the last five minutes alone she's pulled out half of Boots, spilling items across the wonky coffee table in the waiting room and distractedly repacking them as she talks.

"Sorry," she says, yet again. She sniffs hard, sounding like she's breathing through glue. "I'm not usually so- I just, it's such a mess!"

"It's fine," John reassures her. He's been repeating the same thing on autopilot because he doesn't know what else to say. He's not comfortable to offer anything more tactile, and her little flares of sudden temper frankly alarm him. It's probably a miracle she hasn't clobbered anyone yet.

"It's not really though, is it? I wish he'd called me. Or just *someone* rather than go and do that. "

John can't fathom the logic of any of it. A mess is about the best word for it, in his opinion.

"Well," he begins and then fails to finish.

"I should talk to him... I would, but I'm too-"

"It's ok."

"Too angry." Molly rams a packet of kleenex into the back pocket of her handbag, zips it closed and then sniffs again, scrubbing at her nose. "Damn."

"Well, he's not really up to talking to anyone anyway yet. I mean, you might feel differently by the time he's out of hospital."

"Not Billy!" Molly throws her hands up in exasperation. "Sherlock! For god's sake, John."

John shifts in his chair, nettled. "Maybe you should just calm down."

Molly gives him a look that could scorch iron. "He took him off the streets when he was useful and then afterwards... he didn't *do* anything with him. It'd have been kinder to have left him in the crack den." Then her mouth wobbles. "And I didn't say anything. He pinched my gas money and I should have told someone but I was so disappointed and just- embarrassed. I let him in my house and he just- and I thought you two were looking out for him."

She gives a dry little hiccup. "I feel awful! What if he'd died?"

"Jesus. Molly, come on now. He's not going to die." John wishes Lestrade were here. Molly likes and knows him better and Lestrade's got that natural old dog ability to calm people. "Stop crying."

"I'm not," Molly replies back, and John has to admit, despite the redness around her eyes and the snot, she's not exactly blubbing. "I'm just mad at the lot of you and mainly myself."

John regards her. He's never seen her so worked up before, excepting the time she smacked the hell out of Sherlock, and even that isn't quite like this. She hadn't seemed hurt back then. She wrings her hands and there's a pinched, anxious look about her that makes him wonder.

He rubs at his brow and, with no small effort, kicks himself into action. "I'll find Sherlock," he offers, "We'll get something sorted out to keep Billy on the straight and narrow."

"He doesn't need controlling, John," Molly points out, just looking sad now. John runs his thumb over his own knuckles. "Just, please. Don't let Sherlock lead him on again if he doesn't mean it."

“He usually means things.”

“When he says them, yes,” Molly replies, “It’s later that’s the problem.” She tugs on the end of her ponytail. “He’s got such low expectations of people.”

John chews on the inside of his cheek, but he can’t make himself ask if she means Billy or Sherlock. Molly gets up from the chair. “I’ll go,” she says, picking up her bag. “I’m sorry, I probably shouldn’t have come.”

“It’s fine,” John says, because he doesn’t want to argue. Molly gives him a wry smile.

“I suppose it’ll have to be.”

—

Sherlock hangs up and steps back in through the fire door. He’s only a few steps down the hallway when John calls out to him.

“Sherlock, there you are.”

John jogs up to his side. He looks at his profile and then, seeing something in it he doesn’t like, shifts round so he can look up at him full in the face. “Hey.”

Sherlock drags his eyes away. “Billy will be fine. He’s going back through rehab. All arranged.”

John reaches out and halts his progress with one hand on his elbow. “Yeah,” he says, carefully, “He’ll be fine.” John’s brow furrows, and his eyes skip back and forth across Sherlock’s blank expression.

Are you alright?

A fainter echo in the back of Sherlock’s head. *You. Machine.*

“Give it six weeks,” Sherlock suggests, pulling his coat closer around himself by driving his hands down deep into his pockets. It’s too warm for it; he’s all but cooking inside the wool, but he can’t bear the thought of taking it off.

John falls into step beside him as they leave the hospital, looking for a taxi back towards the city centre. “He will be ok, Sherlock,” John says, “And it’s not our fault.”

“Whose was it then?”

John’s shoulders drop. “It doesn’t matter. It just... it wasn’t all our fault. Ok? And now we know, we can help.”

“I knew before.”

John’s steps falter. He shakes himself a moment later and catches up to Sherlock. The other man worries him; he has the same disquieting hidden quality about him that reminds John of other times and other mistakes. It’s palpable, and John can’t think of anything to say to make it better.

They can go home, he thinks. He’ll cook, and hopefully Sherlock will like it. Maybe he’ll play his violin or something.

With that thought, an evening of scraping strings yawns ahead of John and he baulks. There’s got to be something better than that. If it weren’t so late, maybe the ritual of settling Bee to sleep might

provide a chance to side-step the issue of Billy Wiggins, at least until the morning, but Mrs. Hudson will have already done it all. He hasn't anything waiting back at the flat other than awkward silence and sad carbohydrate-heavy food trawled out of the freezer.

"Let's not go home," John blurts. Sherlock pivots to face him, his expression one large question.

"Why not?" John presses, with a shrug. "Mrs. Hudson's got Bee; she'll be in bed by now and she won't really need me till the morning. We could... I don't know, get dinner? Go to the West End. Here-" he fusses around, pulling his phone out of his pocket and then holds it up to Sherlock's face, Google Maps a splash of green and yellow across the screen.

"Pick somewhere. I don't mind where. Take me round some bits of London I don't know yet."

Sherlock hesitates and then takes the phone from him, rolling a finger over the map. He glances over the top of the phone.

Are you sure?

Sure.

"Why not?" John says again. He smiles. People pass them by on the road without a second look; the tall man in the stupid coat sweltering in the late afternoon sun and the unassuming little man in the maroon cardigan. An unlikely pair. John's eyes crinkle up in a smile. "Unless you'd rather go home and watch telly."

Cautiously, Sherlock puts up a hand and a taxi rolls to a stop for them.

"Have you ever seen the mail rail?"

John's grin widens.

"Show me," he suggests.

—

They stay out all night. Sherlock takes him underground, to the closed miniature railway of the old postal system and the forgotten railway of the dead. He takes him under the river through one long tunnel, and out again into the air. They talk, and then they walk in comfortable silence, and then they talk again.

Sherlock takes him into the centre as night falls and they climb the roofs of other people's properties and watch the lights flash. Sherlock tracks from on high the various motions of the emergency services. They stand against a balustrade looking down at toy-town London and Sherlock conducts the ambulances and panda cars, always a half-step ahead of them.

They eat as they walk, shoving down mouthfuls of kebab from a van that steams and glows in the darkness of the street it's parked in. Sherlock wipes his hands on the wrapper and crouches on Charing Cross Road to show John, hidden below the surface, the two remaining Victorian road signs indicating Little Compton Street, now a buried forgotten rat run at basement level. At Soho, they lean on the wall across from John Snow's pump and chew the fat over pandemics, hiding bottles of Tiger beer in their sleeves. They visit the nose on admiralty arch and Sherlock stands for thirty minutes, fixed on it, lecturing on the foibles of phrenology. John listens.

They talk about vermin. They talk about architecture. They drink in a well-heeled and ancient pub and Sherlock points out, with the utmost care, the less than innocent characters who frequent it.

This one British, this one Russian, the two in the corner Spanish by blood but working for a Ukrainian.

They slip out before anyone notices that they don't belong there, and zig-zag through streets that stink of traffic and feel like home.

They follow the river, beholden only to the whims of Sherlock's memory and what he can think of that is of interest at this time of morning. The bells at the old bailey hang silent but they stop outside anyway and talk of executions past and present. They follow the river until at last their feet take them in a loop back to Westminster Bridge. It's still miles from Baker Street but it feels at last like they're picking a route back to the flat.

John, footsore, pauses to lean on a lamp post. He dangles his latest empty beer bottle over the edge and lets it wobble back and forth. Sherlock steps up onto the plinth of the lamppost to his right and copies him. John counts to three and they crane to see whose bottle crashes into the water first and then fight over it.

"Look at that," John says, jerking his chin towards the river. "It's getting light."

A look upwards would give them the exact time by the hands of Big Ben, and it's not as though neither of them as a watch. They don't look. John's phone's dead and Sherlock's emits a sad little bleep every now and then to warn him it's similarly compromised. They're out of cash and John feels his parting stinging with sunburn, but they're in no rush. The furthest John goes is to join Sherlock on the same side of the lamppost.

The sun rises, from the muddy flats to the spires, making them squint. The air is chill and the back of John's neck feels grubby. When Sherlock shifts his weight, John can smell the sweat on his coat, although it's not unpleasant exactly.

Sherlock leans on the edge and feels still for a moment. John's shoulder is warm against his upper arm.

There's no need for a coat or a scarf today. John tucks a cardigan into the back of the pushchair for Bee and a second for himself but it's going to be warm enough in the bus.

"We'll be back in a couple of hours. Sure you don't want to come?"

Sherlock looks up from the manuscript paper he's jotting on and shakes his head. "Not today," he replies. John presses his lips together and nods, slowly. He supposes that from one perspective that it's only right that he go with Bee alone. He hesitates for a moment, a bit torn. On the one hand, it allows him to retain the privacy he's so far kept up around Mary.

"Yeah, not today," John agrees, tone mild. 'Another day', he implies, although even as he says it they both know that Sherlock will not visit Mary's grave.

Some things in their crazy mixed up life together have to remain segregated.

"See you later."

Sherlock doesn't reply. John clambers tediously down the stairs, pushchair groaning on one arm, helping Bee toddle one step at a time while hanging on to his other. At the foot of the stairs, John pauses to strap the baby in and listens to the silence overhead. Is it a sulk or respect or discomfort

or just Sherlock being typically dismissive of the common rites of man? He can't quite tell.

At any rate, John finds himself feeling like he wants to go back upstairs and ingratiate himself back into Sherlock's good books somehow, and that feeling in itself leads to a certain automatic level of mutiny. Why should he? He's got nothing to apologise for. The one time he should be allowed a free pass should be today. Of all days.

He hasn't been since November. The closer they draw to the church the worse he feels about this but there hadn't been time and he hadn't had the energy either physically or emotionally. The wheels of the pushchair rattle over the gravel path around the side and Bee stares up and up towards the turret of the non-conformist chapel as they pass it.

Not for the first time, John muses on the appropriacy of both Sherlock and Mary having been buried in it's shadow. They were non-conformists to the bone, in the general sense.

The sexton has kept the grass in the vicinity of the grave neat and short. The pure white of the gravestone has become darker. There's a smear or a stain across the back corner of it, starting from the narrow top and oozing down behind the words. Bird shit, John assumes. It's already long gone thanks to the rain.

The vase has gone. Maybe it broke; more likely someone clocked the neglect of the stone and helped themselves to it. Sober, John kneels on the scruffy grass struggling to grow in the shadow of the yew tree and unclips Bee from the pushchair.

"It's Mummy," John tells her, turning her face towards the stone. She puts out a hand to steady herself on the top of the grave and then mere seconds later turns her back on it to wander towards the brighter, more interesting pebbles on the path.

It's just a rock to her, with no significance at all. John wonders when it will be that it does start to have significance for her. In light of recent paperwork, John wonders when it will stop having much meaningful significance to him.

He leans back on his elbows on the grass, watching Bee pick up one pebble at a time and put them in the pocket of her dungarees. He calls her and she holds one out for him, dropping it on the floor and then pointing at it. "No," she says.

"Pebble," John replies. "What happened, Bee? It fell down."

She's not really listening. A crow has shrieked over head towards the roof and she's looking for it.

Maybe, John thinks, we'll end up doing this stupidly every year and as she gets more involved with it, I'll get less involved. The idea makes him uncomfortable. Can you do that? Can you parcel off grief retrospectively to your children?

Is it awful, John thinks, to feel that things are somehow better now? Bee climbs over his knees from left to right and then back again.

To a certain extent he's always felt that it's bone and ash buried here, and nothing of the various women Mary Watson had been. Even the inscription isn't really accurate. "What am I supposed to do with you?" John asks the empty graveyard aloud. Only Bee looks up at him. The crows scream.

John has the strangest compulsion to push the stone over. It won't move; it's well bedded in, and he'll only feel horrible afterwards but the compulsion is there. He can feel the usual stiffness in his shoulders; it starts around his spine and down his arms until he's flexing his fingers to try and shake it off, loosen the muscle. Warm up.

There's nothing left to fight though.

That's what gets to him the worst. The fact that there's never going to be any final resolution. No accountability, no answers, no... well, John's not sure what he wants from Mary exactly, but he's furious at the fact that he's never going to get it regardless.

Bee fusses at his elbow until he gives in and finds her a bag of crackers from the pocket of the pram. They sit under the yew tree together to eat them, or at least, John does. Bee toddles back and forth aimlessly around the trunk, sometimes emitting shrieks which John hasn't been able to figure out the meaning of yet. It's a seemingly neutral expression just for the sake of making noise.

"Well," John says brushing the crumbs from his fingers. He looks at her. She looks back.

Well, I'm bored of being here.

You and me both.

John cracks a smile and they play a short and repetitive game of hide and seek behind the tree until he catches her and empties all the pebbles out of her clothes.

"Come on," he says. "Let's get home before Sherlock starts wondering where we are."

"Voo-voo!" she insists, kicking, and John obeys, wheeling the pushchair away from the grave with the appropriate racing car noises.

Mary waits until the last hours of the day of her death to come and haunt him. Perhaps it's only that he's too tired for his mind to play it's best tricks on him, or perhaps he just can't be so angry with her today, but she comes as a paler, gentler ghost.

He dreams of her in their old kitchen, where she'd always seemed more human. He doesn't know when or if she ever let down that facade and let anything of another self slip through, or if under the lies there had really been nothing but a killer. However, if there had been a real woman somewhere under the horridness, he thinks it might have been here, eased out from a long repressed past with the smell of butter in the air.

In this part of his head, he's sitting at the kitchen table, side on to her. He's aware of her presence down to the most minute details of her breathing and the way her eyelashes touch against her cheeks when she looks down, but he keeps his face to the front, looking at the wall.

In his head, he can step out of his body and watch the conversation at a distance, if he wants to.

At first they observe merely the ticking of the clock and the silence of a room not entered in a while. John toys with the dust of flour over the tabletop, rubbing it between his fingers until they turn grey with meal. Mary cups a mug of coffee or something in her hands; she's been holding it for a while, it may even be empty.

"Are we really doing this?" John asks.

She clinks her fingernails against the ceramic. Yes.

This is the night, John remembers. Not the night she'd died; the night he'd come back, although not the night he'd returned to the house.

Mary shifts, rubbing the heel of her palm over her stomach. The swelling has receded somewhat, but if the baby were out of sight, a stranger would mistake her for pregnant. She cups a breast; it must ache, and John feels guiltier than sin.

Please, John.

John runs his tongue over his teeth, tasting regrets. He can't hide his doubts, or his lack of trust in her. God help him, he's there because of what happened after Sherlock stepped back down off of that plane and because he wants it to be alright now.

They have a daughter. He has a daughter. For the last nine months she's been Mary's sole creation, in part because he wouldn't come closer, and now he has a chance.

He remembers looking up and seeing Mary waiting for him to do the right thing. The loose sides of her dressing gown hang down like the stiff wings of a moth, like she's waiting for him to pin her to this house.

Unspoken, with too much between them for words, she catches his eye at last and he knows what he'll do. She wants this, because she wants him, and she wants him for all the same reasons he wants this life and he wants her. All the arguably wrong reasons.

'Cowards,' John reflects, and his drowsiness leeches away the natural bitterness of the thought. 'We were such bloody cowards.'

He remembers the walk to the bed; it had been silent. Her first, preceding him by an hour. He follows, switches off the light and pretends to sleep. Ten minutes later, she stops pretending to read and puts out the lamps.

I love you, John.

He hadn't replied that night.

She insists again now, in his ear, melancholy.

I loved you. I did.

"I loved you, too." Sometimes. Too often. John closes his eyes harder, feels the cotton of his pillows against his cheek. The both had wrung more love from each other than either of them deserved.

You loved me? Mary whispers back, and she sounds sadder and fainter. *Is it past tense now? It's only been a year.*

She vanishes on the complaint.

John lifts his head from the pillow in surprise and in doing so lifts himself from the dream. He listens to the empty darkness for a while; nothing but the soft breathing of his daughter and the tick of the clock. He lets his head drop back.

Past tense. It's past tense, he thinks, feeling numb with the insight. Past tense now, and past tense for years.

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—

John takes a moment between patients to phone Sherlock. It takes a couple of attempts before the other man picks up.

“Yes?”

John doesn't bother with any preamble. “I'm going to be stuck at the clinic till late. I need you to pick Bee up from nursery.”

“Isn't Mrs. Hudson doing it?”

“Mrs. Hudson's been at her sister's for the last two days. She's getting back at five, but that's too late. How have you not noticed she's away?”

“I did wonder why there were less biscuits appearing.”

John chuckles. Typical. “I'll tell her that,” he says, not meaning it. “Anyway, can you get Bee at 3:30?”

“Yes.”

There's a knock at his door. “Got to go; I'll be home about seven-ish. I'll ring the nursery when I get a chance and tell them.”

And then the nurse is sticking her head around his door and hissing that Mrs. Cooke really can't wait any longer. John shoves his phone in his pocket and gets back to work.

The nursery is in a modern building on the ground floor, wedged between a dry cleaners and opposite a library. There's only a small window at the front, frosted over with the nursery logo, however judging by the shape of it, it's the sort of building that extends out at the back over the site of an older edifice. There's a yard behind it, Sherlock thinks. He can hear, faintly, the creak of chains from the swings shifting in the breeze.

He steps into a lobby that is light and airy, decorated down one wall with a mural of enormous decals of children and animals playing in a field. Sherlock's not sure where that's meant to be. No meadows around here.

Maybe that's the point.

There's a woman behind a plexiglass screen to his right, and then nothing else but a tiny waiting room and a door beside another expanse of glass. The door is locked; he can tell. No entry. Beyond the glass he can see a little activity room, all tiny tables and big easy-wash mats. He spots Bee in a small muddle of toddlers, overseen by a nursery attendant. Bee's smiling.

He approaches the desk, queued behind a woman who wants to talk about headlice and asthma medication, without any actual understanding of the nature of either, which distracts him off into a musing of the actual science of it. Human parasites. There could be an interesting realm of research to pursue there although the application of it to forensics is perhaps yet to be determined.

“Can I help you?”

He looks down at the receptionist.

“Watson,” he says, reading her life in the muddle of items across her little office space, and that of

the other staff that work there. Not very interesting, but informative.

“Yes?” the woman says, carefully. “I’m sorry?”

“To collect,” Sherlock says, wondering how anyone can be so slow. What else would he be there for- it’s not like he’s about to enrol. He didn’t even attend anything of the sort as a child. He squints at some handprints on a display board surrounding the plexiglass. No photos of the actual children, naturally. There’s one child displaying a congenital bone disorder, he notes. Fancy.

“And your name?”

“Sherlock Holmes.”

She purses her lips and gets up to check a shelf of files. Tedious. Her files aren’t perfectly alphabetised. And her plants are dying. Sherlock sniffs.

“Can we hurry this up?” he asks.

“Just a moment...” She’s got Bee’s file open, he can see. It has her name on it down the spine. He frowns.

She returns to the desk, polite but serious. “Mr. Holmes? Would you mind waiting here a moment? I just need to check with the manager.”

“Yes, yes, alright.”

He waits, irked. What’s the problem? He’s here, Bee’s there. Unless John forgot to call ahead...

The receptionist returns and flashes him a service smile. “She’ll be right out. Just take a seat.”

Sherlock squashes himself into a chair in the waiting room and watches as women arrive, chat with the receptionist and take their children away. Bee spots him through the window and throws up an arm in a wave. He waves back, pleased. She comes away from the attendant and flattens herself on the glass. She bangs on it. He gets up and comes over to say hello.

“Ha!” she says, squatting and rising happily. “Sa!”

“Hello, Bee. Change of pace today.”

She knows doors and how they work. She’s not quite tall enough to reach the handle but that doesn’t stop her from trying. She pushes at it, which amuses Sherlock, and when that doesn’t work, points and stares hard at the attendant. The attendant gives him an apologetic smile and tries to distract Bee with a toy.

“You need to sign her out before we can buzz you in,” she says, pointing to the desk.

“I know,” Sherlock tells her dryly. He moves away from the door to see what’s going on, and Bee makes a noise of discontent as he moves from her sight. She shifts over, face pressed to the glass. She wants out.

“Are you finished?” he asks.

The receptionist gives him a smile that doesn’t reach her eyes. “I’m afraid we may have a problem. I’m afraid your name isn’t on the file so we can’t let her go with you until we can speak to Dr. Watson and have permission.”

“Oh for- Here. I have ID. It shows my address.”

He takes his driving licence from his wallet and holds it up against the glass for her to see. “221B Baker Street. Does that match hers?” He can’t help being sarcastic.

“Yes,” the receptionist tells him evenly. “However, I’m afraid it’s nursery policy.” She hesitates, perhaps dragging something up from some training session. “Unless you have parental rights?” She sounds doubtful. There’s no way, he can see her think, that he’s any blood relation to Bee.

He can hear the baby growing more annoyed and desperate to get to him. She’s started to snivel.

“What? I live with her. I live with John. Look, she knows me!” She’s crying. His stomach lurches at the sight because she’s pressing her nose to the glass and smearing it with misery. She flaps an arm to shake off the cooing nursery assistant and all Sherlock knows is that John never lets her cry.

If John were here, she wouldn’t be crying. If this woman weren’t so stubborn, they’d just let her come a few feet through the door so he could comfort her.

“The fact remains that you don’t have clearance. You’re not her father, and according to our records you don’t have permission to take her. Unless we hear otherwise from Dr. Watson, then I’m afraid we’re not going to be able to move on this.”

“I can’t leave her here- she’s supposed to be home by now. John filed something. I have permission. He called and told you I was coming,”

Didn’t he?

Did he?

Bee’s muffled howls are starting to make his chest hurt. John’s not going to like this.

“Excuse me.” Another woman squeezes up to the plexiglass. “Sorry- I’m here for Osh.”

“He’ll be right out,” the receptionist says and proceeds to ignore Sherlock’s outrage as she calls into the nursery room. This time the attendant brings the child out via the office. Sherlock’s speechless. He stands in cold silence as the woman takes her son’s hand and hastily toddles out of the door as fast as his little bow legs can go. They’re so determined to keep Bee from him that they won’t even open the playroom door.

“Perhaps you could wait outside,” the receptionist suggests.

Bee’s crying hard now, taken away behind the closed door, and all at once all his petty demons of frustration, for months made timid by sheer willpower and the need to Be Good Or Else, break free and overwhelm him. He barely pauses for breath; fury and vitriol. It’s the wrong thing to do, and he knows it; he hasn’t always known in the past but frequency makes habit and months of keeping a constant check on his own words and deeds and the reaction of other people hasn’t been without consequence. He can’t stop, he realises, because to stop will be to regret, and he’s exhausted with it all.

The school receptionist’s face grows more and more pinched behind the plexiglass. Sherlock’s spat words so hard that he’s misted the barrier between him and her. She’s got one hand on the phone but is too transfixed to pick it up and dial. He slams his palms into it as finally he runs out of claws to rake her with- she’s not a bad person- and she flinches. The phone slips from it’s cradle into her lap.

It's quiet.

To his horror she lifts up the phone. "I'm calling the police," she says, small and clipped, jaw clenched.

Sherlock doesn't wait to see her dial.

There are missed calls on John's phone when he switches it on between patients at four o'clock. Seven or eight missed calls in fact. He's about to investigate when it rings again. John answers.

"Hello?"

"It's me."

"Hello- Sherlock? Why are you calling, you never call. Are you ok?"

"They won't let me collect Bee," Sherlock says. His voice sounds odd. His tone is flat but it sounds like he's smoked a whole packet of cigarettes. "I'm not on the approved list."

"No, you should be. I put you down when Bee started there. Ages ago."

"Evidently not."

John opens his mouth to say more on the matter, but Sherlock sounds so strange that he grows concerned. "Look, are you still there? Is Bee? No, just wait there; I'm leaving the clinic now. I can be there in twenty minutes." He pauses, and then needs to ask again. "Are you ok?"

"I'm fine. I'll wait in the library." Sherlock hangs up.

"The library?" John demands of his phone, taken aback and annoyed but only because he's worried. "Jesus, sodding, bugging, arse!" He moves to grab his coat and hurry and then his phone is ringing again.

"Sherlock?"

"Dr. Watson?" It's a woman.

"Uh- yeah, speaking. Who's this?"

"This is Gloria Deacon from Honeyfields Nursery- I'm the manager."

"Hi- yeah, I was just speaking to- I mean, I arranged for someone else, Sherlock Holmes, to pick my daughter up today. He just called to say you wouldn't let him."

"Did he," she sounds grim. "I'm sorry, Dr. Watson, but I'm afraid we're not going to be able to allow Mr. Holmes back on the premises. Are you able to collect-"

"Oh, God," John says, too many terrible scenarios playing through his mind. "Listen, whatever he did, I promise you, he didn't mean it how it seemed. He's not- he has- there's this thing."

"Please come and collect your child, Dr. Watson," Gloria says frostily. "We can discuss-" She takes a breath and then thaws ever so slightly. "How about I refrain from calling the police until after you arrive?"

“Yes? Yes! Thank you- Thank you! I’m leaving now- I’m on my way,” John splutters into the phone, barging the lobby door open with his shoulder, only half wearing his coat. “I promise, I’m on my way.”

“Emergency- my daughter,” he tells the clinic staff. “I’ve got to go. I’ll come back in an hour- ask Girish to cover for me- thanks.”

He leaves the nurse with her mouth hanging open, and throws himself into a taxi.

Sherlock’s looming in the lobby of the library looking like some kind of homage to Byron and Asimov rolled into one bad idea. John’s heart sinks. He has that closed off, cold look that means he’s calculating hard and fast, and isn’t confident of a good return. John greets him accordingly.

“What did you do?”

Sherlock doesn’t even insult him by trying to deny it or gloss over it, which alarms John further.

“I...lost my temper. A bit.”

“Oh, God. With who?”

“Receptionist.”

“Fantastic. Do you know they’re talking about calling the police?”

“Mm...It was mentioned.”

“Good fucking thing we know them then, isn’t it? Come on.”

It feels weird, having Sherlock follow him for a change, but this is John’s domain, after all. There are plastic ducks and plastic people holding plastic flowers, and there are actual people who thrive on the business of being personable with others. They clap their hands and get along and try and make the world softer. Though Sherlock’s domain is no less a very human part of life, this is the reverse of that coin.

It’s not until the door that Sherlock hesitates.

“I’ll wait outside,” he says.

John glances at him, and spots the way the other man’s hands are clenched in his pockets.

“Alright,” he agrees, frowning. “But don’t go anywhere.” There’s bound to be an apology owed, and he’s dammed if he’s letting Sherlock leave him to do it all. Perhaps not a bad idea to go in and smooth the ground first though.

The receptionist is still at her desk, and although her whole body tenses up as he approaches, she doesn’t back down. The manager, Gloria, is waiting for him in the lobby on the public side of the glass. John finds himself holding his hands up in placation to them both. “I’m John Watson,” he says, “Can I get my daughter please.”

“She’s just in the playroom,” Gloria indicates with one hand.

John turns the corner at once, waits impatiently to be buzzed in and then there she is. Bee drops her toy at once and runs to him, arms up. Her face is a smudge of dry tears.

“Babaaaaar!”

“Bee- I’m sorry. Were you waiting? Come here.” He picks her up heavily in his arms and smothers her briefly with apology and love. “I’m so sorry.” He tucks the flaps of his jacket around her, balanced on his hip and jostles her gently up and down when she cries, clinging to him.

“She was haunting the door, poor thing,” the nursery attendant says sympathetically. It must be past the end of her shift.

“Thanks for staying with her,” he says, even with the bloom of annoyance rising in his chest. This could all have been avoided if they’d kept their bloody paperwork in order.

“No problem. She’s lovely. Has he gone then?” She adds.

John looks at her. It takes him a split-moment to cognise what she means by it, and the horror must show on his face.

“Are you alright?” she asks, looking concerned.

“I’m fine. He’s not- No, you’ve got the wrong idea.”

“Oh,” she looks doubtful, and like she’s uncomfortable with his words.

‘She thinks I’m covering up for him,’ John thinks with dull shock. ‘Like I’m some kind of battered wife.’

“He’s an idiot with problems, not actually dangerous,” he says, numb. “And he’s terrible with adults but no- he’s- I trust him.”

“Oh.” That she seems more ready to believe. “Oh, well, as long as you’re sure. That’s a relief. We were a bit scared for her. In case it was... I mean, you see news stories.” John knows. Little girls vanishing on the way home from school.

“Yeah,” John says, with a new, burgeoning and more precise fear. He remembers being knocked out. He remembers coming to with dust from dry branches in his eyes and the smell of frozen muck and the first faint crackle of catching fire. He remembers how large a suitcase looks at nine years old and yet how little of a life you can actually fit in it. “Thank you,” he says again.

He carries Bee back out to the lobby, tailed by the nursery assistant and John’s actually glad she does, because the manager and the receptionist look up from their hushed conversation and John needs someone to back him up.

“She’s ok,” he says, easing Bee’s hands from his jumper and lowering her to the floor. She hangs onto his hand and his leg. “Listen, I’m just going to take her out- she’s going to be hungry by now- and then maybe we can talk about this?”

The manager nods, and then, making John feel small and judged, follows him outside. “I’m not going to sodding run away,” he mutters. She hears him.

Sherlock’s still waiting outside, looking both hot and gloomy in the sunshine, engulfed in the Belstaff. John crouches and points him out to the baby. “Look, Bee. Who’s that?”

Sherlock straightens as she takes a few uncertain steps towards him, and then he catches John’s eye.

Do something. Prove you're not a danger to her. Do the fucking smile and wink. Do something! Please!

Sherlock bobs down to the baby's height and holds out his arms, smiling through panic. What should he say? Should he say anything? What if she, hurt by his failure not to get to her when she was crying earlier, clung only to John under the nose of the manager and then it would be confirmed that he isn't fit to be in her life. That he is the worst kind of danger to her.

For someone who usually couldn't care less what people think, he can't stand the idea of that.

"Bee," he says, softly. "Here, Bee. Here, girl."

The clatter of nails on a tiled hallway; a bass woof and the feel of fur between his fingers.

Really, Sherlock, the dog? No wonder they think you deficient.

She looks at him from beside John's knee and at the space between his hands and his smile which is not his usual expression, and likewise Sherlock looks at the worry- and worse, pity- edging into John's expression that Sherlock might fail this stupid impromptu test.

And then she walks to him. She toddles and breaks into a stumbling jog and then he swings her into the air with arms that feel weak with relief and then, blessed sound, she laughs.

"Why would I hurt her?" Sherlock asks the world. Her hands are in his hair, pulling, and it's never been a sweeter pain. "I was trying to get to her. She was crying."

He could, might still, do terrible things. They both know it far more than the manager does. He could leave or get himself killed or wound her pride, insult her intelligence, frighten her friends and tread all over the diplomatic sensitivities of parenthood and embarrass her. He could love the thrill of drugs and murder more than her. He could make foolish assumptions about her needs and wants and impose them on her. He could make her privy, without thinking, to information about the world she is too young and too happy for. He could fail, on many levels, to give her all the ideations of childhood that are her inherent right.

He could be a god-awful parent, but he'd still never, ever do what the manager fears.

He'd never take her from John.

He'd never even contemplate.... that other thing that people fear grown men do to little girls.

The thought makes his guts clench in outrage. He's hurt men for less.

John's expression flashes pride before he turns to look at the manager. "Are we ok here?" he wants to know. She exhales and nods. "I'd still like to talk with you."

"Alright," John's reluctant although it's unavoidable. "Sherlock, run her home for tea; Mrs. Hudson must be back by now, or- " Dammit. "-Or beg a favour from Mrs. Turner."

"Mrs. Turner?"

"Someone will need to babysit while you come back."

"Ah."

Yes. Not off the hook yet.

Ah.

Don't 'ah', me, you bloody train-wreck. You're not leaving me in the lurch this time.

Sherlock looks wounded. "I'll be back in thirteen minutes."

John comes close to kiss Bee's cheeks. He puts a hand on Sherlock's elbow to do so, and squeezes it before he lets go.

I'm not angry with you exactly. It's ok. I'll sort it out.

Sherlock makes no reply, spoken or unspoken, but John knows he's acknowledged the touch. He steps back as Sherlock sticks out that same arm to stop a taxi and feels guilty though he doesn't know why. There's a strong compulsion to jump in front of the next taxi and go after them and to hell with the nursery.

Instead he steels himself and turns around to face the manager and his responsibilities.

"Right," he says. "Let's talk about what the hell happened here, shall we?"

John drops the file on the managers desk. "There's a form missing," he insists. "I enrolled Bee, I put Mrs. Hudson down there-" he jabs the forms with his finger, "-and then I came back another day later to add Sherlock because I needed to ask him if-" *If he'd be ok with it.* "-If he could give me some ID for you to copy."

The manager frowns.

"It could have been Jamie before she went on maternity," the receptionist ventures. She looks like she's fed up with all of it now and would like to slope off home and lick whatever wounds Sherlock has dealt her.

"There- you see!" John says, triumphant.

"Alright, then fair enough if it was a mistake on our part," the manager says, closing the file.

"However, my staff, Dr. Watson, are not here to have abuse hurled at them for doing their jobs and ensuring the safety of the children in our care."

"No," John admits. "No, I appreciate that."

"Because it does happen. Ex-partners or someone with some kind of vendetta. Do you understand our need to be utterly strenuous with our policy?"

"Yes, yes of course," John says, feeling picked on. "And I'm not saying he behaved well, but..." He has no idea how to explain Sherlock. He feels bad for trying. "He notices everything. I mean everything. Stuff no one else would even think of and he can't always filter that information out. It just goes straight in his head. He's not really a people person."

"The things he said..." the receptionist begins.

John sighs heavily. "I know. Trust me. I know the things he says. He's- but Bee was crying." It's the only appeal he can think of. For him, it's the only one he needs but he's not sure its enough to justify the callousness of Sherlock's less fortunate expressions of caring "You know my wife... passed away. It was sudden. He's been there." This feels awkward. He doesn't want to continue,

exactly, with the words he's not even said to his therapist.

The manager sighs and looks to the receptionist. "Elyse?" she asks, turning the matter over to her.

The receptionist pauses. Are there grounds for her to push charges, John wonders. Would she?

There's a buzz from the intercom, interrupting them. John starts up. "That's him," he says, needlessly.

The manager rises and goes to admit him into the nursery and into her office. Possibly in a calculated attempt to look more approachable and respectable, Sherlock's swapped the Belstaff for a suit jacket. He sits on the chair next to John, hands clasped, like he's entering the defendant's stand at a trial.

Sherlock clears his throat. They sit in silence for a moment, each waiting for another to speak.

"I may have... overreacted," Sherlock says at last. The receptionist riles, John resists the urge to smack something.

"Sherlock."

"I apologise," Sherlock says, looking at his feet. John looks to see if he means it or not, but all he sees is discomfort.

"Anything else?" The manager asks. God, she's a teacher through and through, John thinks. He and Sherlock are both on the slide to forty and yet the pair of them are sat there sweating and bristling like they're teens again, getting told off.

"I'm not going to justify it," Sherlock replies, fiddling with his cufflinks. "Wouldn't that make things worse?" He steals a look at John.

The receptionist looks at her watch. "Fine. I don't really want to go over it any more," she says, in a tone that suggests that while she's willing to drop it, Sherlock's neither forgiven nor his trespasses forgotten.

"Can I just put Sherlock on the list now?"

"Yes," the manager sighs, "Let me get the papers. Mr. Holmes, I'll need your ID."

The receptionist leaves without so much as another look at them. John sags into his chair, exhausted. It's gone five now and he really needs to get back to the clinic as soon as possible.

"Admirable," Sherlock says.

"What?"

"The woman."

"How bad were you?" John asks, despite his better nature.

Sherlock purses his lips. "I was... thorough."

John scrubs his hands over his face. "Then I suggest you think really hard, and come up with some way to apologise. Again. Shut up, I know you just said it, but a gesture won't go amiss." He throws Sherlock a look to let him know that he's annoyed but still not angry.

“Hm...”

“I need you on that list,” John says, leaning over the arm of his chair towards him. “If something happens and I can’t get here or Mrs. Hudson can’t, there isn’t anyone else.”

“Lestrade,” Sherlock says at once.

John doesn’t even dignify that with a reply. He looks at his watch again. “She was alright?”

“Yes. Mrs. Turner had spaghetti hoops, and Mrs. Hudson was home.”

John closes his eyes and gives a tiny huff of amusement. In the grand scheme of things, he’s glad at least for spaghetti hoops.

“Thanks.”

He deliberately doesn’t turn his head to see Sherlock’s look of amazement.

The manager returns and passes John a couple of pages of paper and a pen. John works through it doggedly. Name of child, age of child. He prints Sherlock’s name in full. The nib of his pen hovers over the blank space marked ‘relationship’.

“Is this referring to me or to Bee?”

“Either is fine.”

John looks at it. Is there a word for what Sherlock is to Bee? He has no legal guardianship rights, and no blood relation. ‘Housemate’ seems altogether wrong. Is it meant to be a word to describe his relationship with Sherlock? John’s not sure there’s an apt word for that either. Friend? Best friend? Colleague? True but it sounds weak in the context of the forms. He wants Sherlock’s right to collect Bee to be indisputable.

In the end he prints the word ‘Partner’ and then there it is in blunt black and white. Feeling solemn, John signs and passes the papers over. The manager puts on her glasses and gives it a once over.

“Is that alright?” John asks. It’s quarter past five. He needed to be gone fifteen minutes ago.

The manager nods. “I think that should be fine. Does ‘partner’ refer to a professional relationship or-?”

“Oh for crying out loud,” John says, exasperated, “We live together. We’ve been living together for years. Ask the sodding Mirror, I think they did an editorial on it.”

“Thank you,” the manager says, pushing the papers into Bee’s file. “Then we’re sorted here.”

“Thanks,” John says, getting up. He’s going to be in trouble at the clinic at this rate; they’ll have pulled in someone else early. He’ll have to offer to do the evening shift.

They leave, John hammering out a text as fast as he can with his thumbs. When he looks up to tell Sherlock what’s happening, he pauses. Sherlock’s smiling.

“What?”

“Nothing.”

John somehow finds himself smiling as well.

Chapter End Notes

The title comes from the lyrics to the song 'Andalusia' by John Cale. It's a beautiful, gentle song and I recommend giving it a Google. The place holder title was "Unhinged huge just hit his huh i i&ui&just give hhuu" which continued on with a few more lines of 'huhhhghghh' for no reason other than Egg's phone pocket-mashed and came up with it and it was too funny to change.

British marriage law is old as hell and just as weird. I think I've managed to parse between the lines and come up with the correct assumptions but I'm not a lawyer so... *shrug*. If they'd proved that Mary had the clap when they married, they could have annulled it too. Fun times!

Also for your reference:

[Babar the Elephant](#)

[The Colonel Bogey March as Sherlock meant it](#)

[Do Your Ears Hang Low as Sherlock meant it](#)

[The London Mail Rail](#)

[The London Necropolis Railway](#)

[The Greenwich Foot Tunnel](#)

[Little Compton Street](#)

[John Snow \(who knew quite a lot\)](#)

[The Nose on Admiralty Arch](#)

Thanks for reading!

Interlude 2: The End of the World

Chapter Summary

Another short interlude in which we get some backstory and some insight into the mysteries of tiepins and blank orders.

Chapter Notes

I had a big debate as to whether or not to do this as a flashback and fill all the backstory in detail, but I felt in the end it needed to stay chronological and I didn't want to start backtracking and sidetracking with Mycroft and his testicles. So whilst this section covers some of the side issues going on, the full story is still necessarily a bit vague for now. More information will come out as the fic progresses. I also have some of the backstory written in detail however, so I may be able to finish that and post it as a separate companion piece to this.

This chapter is so far un-beta'd so there may be minor edits to come.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

The End of the World.

Upon leaving the hospital, Lestrade goes straight to the Diogenes club, but his knocking, no matter how loud it gets, is utterly ignored. He kicks the door jamb and tells the unsympathetic wood a few choice words intended for the occupants and drives home in a temper.

At his flat, he orders a takeaway of gargantuan proportions, showers, changes and wanders around his flat, packing. He shoves clean socks and a packet of gum into a carrier bag together with a couple of books that he's started and never managed to finish, two bottles of waters, a travel pillow and, as an after thought, all of his remaining cigarettes. He scratches his chest by shoving the tie pin too hard through his shirtfront.

The takeaway arrives and he steps out of his door, pays the delivery woman and bundles the steaming bag into the passenger seat of his car. It sits, filling the BMW with the smell of grease and ginger, all the way to Scotland Yard where he spends five minutes swearing at the printer and looking for sellotape.

Finally fully armed, he heads for Birdcage Walk.

He pulls up on the park side of the road, about 100 metres down from the corner of Mycroft's abode, where he's unlikely to be clipped by oncoming traffic and the CCTV cameras cannot fail to miss his presence.

Sherlock had better bloody be onto something with this.

Lestrade toes off his shoes and cranks his chair away from the dashboard as far as the mechanism will allow and then digs into his Chinese. He's settled for the long haul.

It's ridiculous, he knows. It's passive aggressive and needlessly confrontational and beneath adult behaviour, but Mycroft seems to be the queen of all these things, and Lestrade has never shied away from fighting fire with fire.

Lestrade flattens the note from Mycroft on his dashboard, accidentally on purpose getting XO sauce on it. He seethes through a mouthful of noodles and plays out the upcoming conversation in his head once, twice, a third and a fourth time, without coming to any firm idea of what he wants to say. A loud part of him simply wants to push the paper into Mycroft's big, smug face and then make him eat it.

He turns up the radio and thumbs through a collection of CD's for something with the right level of self-centred anger and then pumps up the bass. He shovels down grease and feels like he's regressed back to the summer of his sixteenth birthday, slamming doors and breaking his heart over things that were, in retrospect, very petty. That late-seventies boom-time of angry rock.

For a while he loses himself in recollection. The power cuts and that funny summer of...78? 79? The one when Sid Vicious had died, whenever that had been. It was the same year he himself had lost both his virginity and his faith in rebellion when Annie-who-did-History, a girl he'd hardly known, had sent a ripple of change through his world by dying.

Stirring the sauce around, Lestrade feels strange to remember her. Nice girl. Hadn't caused the fight she'd been stabbed in, she'd just got caught up in it. Reminded a whole generation of students that youth wasn't any defence against mortality.

He remembers stepping into the school and hearing about it; him and a couple of others. All year he'd been nagged about his choices; mothers and teachers alike. He hadn't really listened until they'd told him about the blood on the pavement. Nothing to do with him, of course, it'd all been down to some other youth with big boots and a jacket, ideas about The Man and the stupidity to take a knife to a football game.

He'd been forced to consider the ramifications of who he was trying to be, and as a result, changed.

These days he wears a badge and Lestrade finds himself wondering if it's even any better as a symbol. You get lumped in with the herd whoever you are.

He's still contemplating such erroneous thoughts when a man wearing a suit knocks on his window.

"Excuse me, sir. This is resident's parking."

Lestrade flattens his badge against the window and tells him tersely that he's working. The other man doesn't flinch. So, he knows who he is then. Lestrade cracks the window open enough that he's perfectly audible, but that no one can get a hand in.

"Tell Mycroft I'll only fuck off if he comes and tells me to himself."

The suit looks unimpressed. "And how long can you wait?"

Lestrade looks him dead in the eye.

"I can pee in a bottle," he informs him, and rolls the window up.

The suit departs with a sour expression, the unwilling bearer of bad news and Lestrade would feel sorry for him only he finds himself lacking in charitable feeling today. He's frankly impressed he's had any impact on Holmes HQ at all. It seems ludicrous that you can harangue the government into a reaction merely by being an irritable old sod in a car, but then Lestrade figures he's got some kind of special dispensation for getting under the government's skin.

After all, he's one of the rare few to have ever seen the government's skin in the first place.

He looks down the road at the quiet house; no sign of movement yet. He considers. He's obviously made himself noticed but not yet enough of an annoyance. Mycroft's made his move by shuffling out a pawn. Greg pushes his chopsticks into his noodles until they stick and then wipes his hands.

His move.

Peeling lengths of tape off of the roll, he sticks up three landscape pieces of A4 across the top of his windscreen, displaying all of six words in stark black letters.

"There," he mutters. "Try ignoring that."

He still has no idea what it means, but it must have leverage on Mycroft or else why would Sherlock have shared it with him? It'll either light a fire under Mycroft's tail or backfire horribly. He's banking on the fire.

In his youth, aged about nine with a freckled nose and not enough parental supervision, he spent a long hot summer setting fire to wasp's nests. There's an art to it; to get the thing up in flames without burning your fingers or launching a swarm on yourself. The approach should be very soft and quiet. You have to stalk the nest so as not to disturb the wasps. You poke a length of rag, one end dipped in petrol or something similar into the hole using a stick, and then light the end of it and then get the hell away before the creeping flame hits the papery nest.

He'd been good at it. He'd been stung, but never badly enough to learn not to set fire to wasp's nests. And the curious thing is that burning rarely destroys all of the wasp's nest either.

Slowly but surely, he sees Mycroft's nest begin to buzz. A light turns on, a curtain twitches, the suit leaves in a car and doesn't come back. Another car purrs up the road, waits, collects Mycroft's sleek little PA, who hops in toting a briefcase and then vanishes away into the dusk.

As the sun begins to creep down, Lestrade takes a torch out of his dashboard and lights up his windscreen for the whole world to see and then finally, looking like he's been chewing on wasps himself, Mycroft makes himself known.

"Go home."

He's come down in person, without even bothering to put on a coat. Either he intends to see Lestrade run out of Westminster in two minutes flat or he has other plans. Lestrade plants a finger on the button and they both solemnly observe the window whirring down.

"You took your time." Lestrade leans one elbow on the door of his car and acts with a coolness that he doesn't actually feel. "I was getting bored."

Mycroft snips back, "Don't. It hardly suits you."

"Oh, doesn't it?" Lestrade pushes open his car door, forcing Mycroft to take a step back. Stood toe to toe on the pavement he's reminded that contrary to most of his expectations, the other man is a little taller than him. He squares his shoulders, making Mycroft's eyes dart down to catch the dull

gleam of the gold on his breast. "Do you really want to do this right in front of the park?"

"I don't want to do this at all. Go home."

There's a nervousness about Mycroft though, despite the clipped tone and stiff posture. The sharp light of the torch picks out the gleam of sweat across Mycroft's hair line. Even with rigid control, Mycroft can't quite disguise the tightness around his eyes.

"Not until you tell me what's going on. What is this all of a sudden? You sent me that bollocks with John and Sherlock, for Christ's sake- what did you think you were going to achieve?"

Lestrade turns and reaches into the car to turn off both the torch and the radio. One by one, he peels the papers off the windscreen and holds them out. Mycroft reluctantly takes them, balling them up like rubbish.

"I'd like an answer to that too," Lestrade says.

Mycroft snorts at that. "As if you understood the question." He turns and stalks off back towards the house. Lestrade hastens to fiddle with the window, slams the car door shut, locks it and dogs the other man's heels. Even with the delay, however, Mycroft doesn't pace hard enough to leave him behind, perhaps deliberately.

Lestrade catches up to him, glancing down at where the papers show white through Mycroft's fist, striped here and there with the hard black lines of the letters.

'Which of us *is* the victor?' Lestrade wonders. He's got what he wanted, but it doesn't feel as good as he'd hoped. There's an anxious air about Mycroft which makes him recall all too clearly another conversation when he'd cracked a joke and all the colour had drained from Mycroft's face.

Lestrade swallows.

"Listen..." he says, and then, "Christ, Mycroft, it's not cancer."

He says it without knowing if it's true or not; he'd put all his money on the bet that says Mycroft is fine, but only because he can't accept any other outcome.

Mycroft throws him a glance over his shoulder, his expression indecipherable.

"By the grace of God," he says cryptically, and with all the satire of an atheist.

"Oh, come on," Lestrade complains, frustrated.

"I will not." Mycroft is implacable. He closes the door behind Lestrade and his hand clenches like he's looking for something to lean on before he walks off down the hall. "You need to stop coming here. I made it clear; I'm breaking contact with you."

"Why?" Lestrade throws his arms up. "What's the point? What for? Why?"

"It's what I should have done at Christmas."

Lestrade baulks. He remembers Mycroft's quip from back then; not the last Christmas but the one before. Back before anything had happened yet when they'd been on the brink of parting ways for very different reasons in very different circumstances and neither had been sure what would happen in the aftermath of Magnussen's death.

"Oh, and swap me over to your bloody 0800 number?" Lestrade echoes.

“It’s what it’s for. It’s protocol. This is not.”

Lestrade paces, shoving at one of the stools in Mycroft’s kitchen. “We’re beyond fucking protocol! We’ve never been protocol. We haven’t been protocol since I first arrested Sherlock and you told me, by command of the powers that be, that ‘Holmes’ and ‘police paperwork’ had a flexible arrangement.”

Mycroft’s demeanour grows chillier the more Lestrade fumes.

“What if I need to contact you?” the latter asks, the same question from long ago. “What if Sherlock gets in trouble?”

“Call John,” Mycroft replies, matter of factly. “Or Mrs. Hudson. You’re at perfect liberty to hassle them all you like.”

“Right, so John will have your number and can bug you whenever he likes, but I can’t? I don’t see why he’s more authorised than I am.”

Mycroft’s expression closes off. “John has my parent’s number. I think, generally speaking, their child is their responsibility.”

“I wish your mother’d give you a clip around your bloody ear,” Lestrade comments and then his brow lifts in surprise. “Oh my God.”

“Oh, please.”

“No, no- I know what this is.”

“No, you don’t.”

“Are you jealous?”

Mycroft gives a sardonic laugh. “Oh, I promise you, I’m not. I’m bored. I’m bored of all of you.”

Lestrade squints at him in confusion. He can’t find the thread of Mycroft’s argument nor reconcile it with the things that have happened, nor what he flatters himself that he knows about the other man. He refuses to believe that all of a sudden, this week, after no apparent trigger, Mycroft has chosen to finally drop the ball on his big brother duties.

“You live for this though, keeping an eye on all of us. Come on, you’d never let Sherlock go down without trying to grab him back up again. You’d never let your mum try and deal with the kind of shit he comes up with.”

Mycroft spits back. “Well, why shouldn’t I?”

“Jesus, Mycroft. It’s not- *is* it cancer?” Lestrade’s anger softens at the idea. Let Mycroft rage at him, if it is. He has no objections to picking up the fall out of a fury that can only batter itself on the walls of an uncaring disease. The sentiment threatens to shift into pity before Lestrade checks himself. He puts his hands in his pockets and grows quiet, which only seems to incense Mycroft further.

Under that cold surface, he’s boiling. His usually unreadable expression is starting to betray his thoughts, the first of which appears to be ‘*Gregory fucking Lestrade*’, and the second of which is the mortal fear that creeps into his eyes when he speaks.

"I'm fine. You needn't worry yourself about that. I'm not dying."

He's not. Lestrade believes him, but he's not convinced that Mycroft hasn't been tipped off his rail by the idea that his life can be as tangibly finite as anyone else's.

"Good. Don't do that," Lestrade says, a touch gruff with relief. Mycroft's anger crosses into exasperation for a moment and then is disarmed when Lestrade adds, "And if you are, for fuck's sake, tell me. Sherlock'd need more than John."

That last idea seems to be a new one to Mycroft.

"You do know that you're important, don't you?"

"Of course I am," Mycroft throws back, but it's bluster and finally the penny drops on Lestrade. There's no point asking Mycroft why he's doing this. There's no end game to haranguing him with questions about his motives or what he's feeling or if he's feeling anything in particular at all and if that's the reason for all this. It's no good trying to worm information out of him, because the other man simply doesn't know.

For once, and whether it's the first time or not is irrelevant, Mycroft has no idea what he's doing with his life. Just that he's been pitched out of his status quo and is feeling pressured to do something about it. Attempts to dig back into the norm have clearly failed and now it's all swinging the other way- if he can't have his old life, then he'll overturn the world.

"Look, you don't have to cut me off completely," Lestrade says, trying to be reasonable.

"No, I do. I do- this is ridiculous. I cannot be doing this any longer. You come here- do you have any idea of the risks?"

"Yes."

"You do not."

"Mycroft, I am a DCI- alright that's not quite MI5, SAS, MDF or whatever abbreviations you like, but I'm not a complete chump."

"You're being facetious. Worse, you're being naive."

"You're being a twat," Lestrade says, on the edge of losing his temper again. Mycroft colours.

"Why are you pursuing this?" Mycroft demands, "There is...*nothing* for you here; you made that quite plain. There is no reason for you to persist on at me over something you took no pleasure in."

"Excuse me?" Lestrade stares at him, completely thrown for a moment and then shifts uncomfortably. He has some idea about what Mycroft is referring to, but it's a difficult subject to broach in detail.

"I didn't have any problems with you, exactly. I mean... did you want me to keep going?"

Mycroft has pulled himself up to the absolute limit of every haughty inch of his being. "Let's bring this matter to a close. It was folly from the outset and I think we've reached a point where we've both outgrown it."

Lestrade splutters. "It was a relationship, Mycroft. Not a pair of trousers."

"It was not."

“Well it bloody well felt like one at times.”

“How could it have been? You didn’t like it.”

Lestrade gapes at him, thunderstruck. “But you didn’t *want* me to like it. That was the last thing you wanted, but-“ He reels away, riding on a rush of pent up annoyance. The kitchen walls bounce back his words from the brushed steel and marble surfaces- somehow they always seem to gravitate to this room- and Lestrade goes on before they fade away. “But for the record, yes, I *liked* it! I liked it plenty, what we had, Mycroft. Don’t you bloody well start telling me what I liked. I *liked* what we had.” He’s pacing, angry, throwing his hands up in the air. “You don’t have any idea how damn near right it was.”

He should have said it before. He wishes that he had.

“But it wasn’t,” Mycroft says, at a loss for anything else to say. He’s moved as Lestrade has paced, to put the long wall of the breakfast bar between them. His face has gone rather pinched. Lestrade knows what he wants to say, though being Mycroft he never will. It’s the same old mantra.

‘It’ can’t be sentimental.

‘It’ can’t be personal

‘It’ can’t be real

Or permanent

‘It’ must be secret

‘It’ must be fleeting

And above all, adhere to no convention.

The problem is that they seem to have different definitions of ‘it’. Lestrade spouts frustration in the form of a breath like a whale.

“Yeah, ok, fine, it wasn’t quite right. And that’s why I started holding back, but it wasn’t because of that. It wasn’t that we weren’t a normal relationship. I don’t care about that, but I- you were always- it was-“ Lestrade jabs a hand at him, open palmed as if he can just throw the obvious into Mycroft’s face and then finally he hisses the words out, embarrassed.

“It was the *sex*, Mycroft- Jesus Christ!”

Mycroft reels back, just a bit. “The sex?” This is about the last thing he had calculated.

“Yes! Yes! Obviously, it was the bloody awful sex!” Lestrade kicks at the skirting board of the breakfast bar. “You were fine, Mycroft, but the way you have sex? It’s *shit*!” Lestrade’s tone drops to leaden. “You aren’t *there* when you’re doing it.”

Mycroft slowly colours during the ensuing silence and then pales. Lestrade folds his arms and leans back against the bar, awkward.

“Or maybe it’s that I might as well not’ve even been there,” he complains. “Perhaps I could’ve been plastic for all you cared.”

“No-!” Mycroft starts, and Lestrade catches his eye and they both know that Mycroft’s chief objection is the idea of him using accessories for the bedroom. For a moment Lestrade looks like

he's waiting for him to at least lie and deny something, but the dispute doesn't come and the hurt in his expression settles.

"I still liked everything else we had."

"What on earth was that?" Mycroft asks, dumbfounded.

"I dunno. Trust?" it sounds like a foreign concept to them both now. "Company? When it happened, being on the same page just automatically."

Mycroft doesn't seem to know what to do with his arms. He lifts them, folds them, fidgets and lets them drop again. "Sitting in silence and sleeping on my sofa?"

"Yeah, actually. When I needed it and you let me, that was good. Half the time you don't need to ask questions and then I don't have to answer them. Sometimes it's good to just shut up and have some space but not...be alone. On the hard days."

Mycroft says nothing. Lestrade continues.

"But I can't- look, I'm not clever. I'm not classy, I'm not rich and I'm not... anything to brag about basically, but I've bloody well got my limits, Mycroft. It's degrading. Trying to have sex, and the other person's just... masturbating using your body. I can't do that."

Mycroft scrabbles for some kind of defence. "You always came."

"That's biology, mate. Doesn't mean it's fun in the long-term. You know, I could even have dealt with the fact you always got out the room as fast as you could right after, if you'd let me felt like I was actually allowed in on... what we were doing. Casual sex is one thing, but it's got to be mutual, hasn't it?"

Mycroft wavers, torn between the automatic response to be contrary and deny everything or at least argue everything, and the need to be logical without sentiment, which is proving difficult. Not even sentiment, exactly, but there's part of him nagging that he's mismanaged this whole thing terribly and that to lose Lestrade as a resource is going to be a mistake.

There are too many good arguments to make and they tangle in his throat in the fight to get out and yet, all of a sudden, they feel over-used and hackneyed.

"It cannot be-" he begins, without fully knowing how he's going to complete the statement. Lestrade does it for him.

"Look, if it helps, here's no sentiment for you- I'm not in love with you."

Mycroft's eyelids flicker, and the spot lighting, designed to cast a soft clear light over the room suddenly feels as brash as theatre lighting, exposing all the flaws when seen up close.

The words are what Mycroft more or less has wanted to hear, but he's still not satisfied.

"Not saying I'm not more inclined than you are to that sort of thing," Lestrade continues, undermining himself. "Not saying it's impossible, but right now, I don't. I like you. I think this-" he gestures between the two of them, "Is really quite nice, and definitely dead handy for how we live our lives. It works, when you let it work. It's enough. It doesn't have to be anything else."

"You'd never want to tell anyone?" Mycroft asks, finally finding his voice. It comes out unsteady, and not at all how he wants it to.

“I don’t want to tell anyone- God no. I’ve got a job I like and I don’t care how much they bang on about the equal opportunities act, I’m on the road to sixty. I’m quite comfy not bandying things about, thanks.”

”You have a daughter.”

“Who I love, but it’s still none of her business who I sleep with. She’s just a kid, for crying out loud. She doesn’t need to know anything about you.”

Mycroft looks uncertain. Lestrade shrugs.

“I’m not John,” he says simply, in his own way cutting through the whole knot of the problem in one fell swoop.

“No,” Mycroft says quietly, after some long moments. “You’re not.” No more than Mycroft can be Sherlock. They’re not partners; they don’t dovetail in that almost too-intense way that the other two do, even before trying to factor in the question of what form the nature of their relationship actually might be.

Lestrade puts his hands into his pockets, his anger dying off once more, as quickly as it had come. “I’m going home,” he says after a moment. He reaches out and straightens one of the stools he’d knocked as he’d stomped around. “There’s no rush to decide how... this should work. If it’s just sex, then it’s just sex, but we need to change how we do it.”

Mycroft swallows, closes his eyes briefly. “I see.”

“Is that ok?”

The kitchen is too big and too clean. The warm brown wool of Mycroft’s suit makes him look at odd in his own house and stranger still is the way he looks thoughtful. He draws his lips inwards against his teeth, as though to keep them still. For a moment only his chest moves as he breathes.

Lestrade waits. He wants to ask if, other than the sex, Mycroft just found him an inconvenience, but he doesn’t want to give Mycroft that idea as ammunition.

Mycroft makes a slight movement with his head. Lestrade’s shoulder’s drop.

“What exactly,” Mycroft asks, his tone delicate. “Do you want?”

Lestrade lays a hand on the counter next to Mycroft. On balance, he thinks, it’s really very little. “A chance to figure out what works for both of us.” He catches Mycroft’s eye and the self-uncertainty in it, and with sudden daring, he leans in and gives him a short, brusque kiss.

“Maybe one or two of those,” he says, giving Mycroft his space back. Mycroft clears his throat, colour rising, swiftly turning his complexion from corpse to human again.

“Perhaps,” he manages, trying not to meet Lestrade’s eye again. It’s not a terrific vote of confidence, nor is it an outright ‘no’. Lestrade fears that once he steps out of the door, Mycroft will talk himself right back into knots again, just to escape. It strikes Lestrade how ironic that is.

“I don’t mind being your escape,” he summarises. He ventures a crooked little smile. “I just...need one too.”

To this Mycroft gives another slight but more obvious nod.

“Goodnight, then.” Lestrade buttons up his coat, which he never got as far as taking off. He moves through the flat, down the short hall and opens the front door. Mycroft, after a moment, follows him. He catches the door in one hand as it starts to swing back after Lestrade and then stands there, holding it open while Lestrade hesitates again on the threshold. “Stay in touch,” Lestrade asks, before he can bring himself to move.

“Goodnight,” Mycroft replies. Lestrade looks at him a moment and then finally gives in and leaves, listening for the close of the door behind him. When he reaches the lift he keeps his eyes on his feet, shuffles in and pushes the button for the ground floor.

Before the lift moves, he allows himself to look up as the doors eclipse the hallway.

The door to Mycroft’s apartment is still open, the man still stood there with one hand holding it ajar enough to make space for two there between the frame.

Chapter End Notes

Chapter title comes from a song by Matt Alber also called 'The End of the World'. Listen to it [HERE](#) because it really is very lovely.

[XO sauce](#) is a sort of spicy seafood-y sauce. I have no idea what's in it. It's quite distinctive though.

DON'T burn wasps nests. Really don't. Terrible idea, and esp. bad for the wasps.

Next, we're back with John and Sherlock and I will try to get more of the ball rolling SOOOOON, although I am yet again moving house so lkhsglknkkih. My life.

Part 10: Honestly Connect

Chapter Summary

John stands, poised, listening to the other man speaking, houndishly alert. The taller man sways in slightly, gesticulating as John moves to square off to him, and their eyes are fixed onto one another. John drops a hand, pointing down to his daughter, his hand relaxed and he leaves it in mid air as the other stills to say something to him with eyes not words, and the pair of them make a tableau as decipherable as any old master's painting.

Chapter Notes

WILD LAUGHTER

SURPRISE A03 LOOK WHAT'S BACK. Bet you thought I'd forgotten all about this, huh? Ok, so I didn't beat the special to the airdate, but things happened and then I decided that 30,000 words was just TOO LONG for one chapter so it's been split and lo and behold here is 15k to wet your whistle on while I finish up the other half. The other half that is about the same length as this and growing. *dies* I hope you enjoy it, I hope you didn't die from the special. I am SO, SO sorry that I couldn't include Molly Hoopers moustache in this.

My ever-beleaguered Beta, [Codenamelazarus](#), bemusedly bids me to add: "Happy (slightly late) new years, little readers".

Or I guess, EARLY HAPPY FIRE MONKEY YEAR.

Notes as always at the end of the chapter

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Part 10: Honestly Connect

An envelope arrives at the flat at the end of the summer. With it is a missive that reads simply: 'A tip for playing postboy and saving me the hassle of stamps- A.'

Sherlock squints inside the folds of the envelope and then pours out a pair of theatre tickets into John's lap.

"A'?" John wonders, picking them up. "Anthea? Oh, it's a play? That's nice?"

"Hmm," Sherlock replies. "Dull. Take Mrs. Hudson. She likes-" he wrinkles up his face in consideration and then concludes, "-curtains?"

"I think she likes theatre, yes," John says, folding them back into the envelope. "Still, that's unexpectedly nice of Mycroft's minions. What did we do to earn this?"

“Hmm,” Sherlock says again. “I think I need to go to Scotland Yard. Haven’t you got a thing?”

John glances up at the clock, swears and then has to hustle to get ready. “Why didn’t you tell me the time?”

“It was right there,” Sherlock points out, indicating the clock. “It’s not like I changed it.”

John chases the baby around the sofa, trying to text with one hand and smear her with suncream with the other. “Just remember to lock the doors when you go.”

“Yes, John.”

“And if you want something particular for dinner don’t forget to let me know, I’m going to the shop. Or if there’s a case,” John adds, stuffing baby and elephant into the push chair. One of the parties, not the elephant, objects loudly.

“No, John.” Sherlock says over the din.

“And it’s bin day tomorrow,” John adds, more to himself. “ Vroom, vroom, Bee. Fun pushchair, stop yelling. Mustn’t forget to get the rubbish out the bathroom and upstairs-“

Sherlock pauses in pulling his jacket on. “Three bags full, John.”

“Oh God, are there?” John says, flustered and missing Sherlock’s tease. “Fuck it, they’ll have to wait. Snacks-“ he nips past Sherlock to grab up a carrier bag from the kitchen counter. Sherlock steps back to allow him through with droll interest.

“Why do you bother?” he asks. “Why do trips to the park have to be organised?”

John throws his hands up, making the bag rattle, “I have no idea. I’m on a snack rota.”

Sherlock laughs heartily at his folly, but takes the heavy end of the pushchair as they manoeuvre it down the stairs. “Why on earth do we call her ‘Bee’? She’s loud and heavy.”

“Yes, she can hear you, you know.”

“Thank goodness at this age she has no idea of self-consciousness. Wise,” Sherlock says to the baby, who emits an ear-splitting whoop, “Try not to learn it.”

“Thank goodness,” John replies sarcastically over her head as they bump down the last few steps, “She has an excellent role model for that.”

Sherlock shows him a flash of teeth and sets the wheels of the pushchair straight. John zips up his jacket.

“Right. Want us to come find you after? We’ll only be a couple of hours.”

“No, I’ll text.”

They go out the door in a mob of three plus all the detritus Bee seems to need with her wherever she goes. “Alright,” John repeats, hesitating. “Say ‘hi’ to Lestrade for us.” Sherlock wags a hand to show he has heard at least, even if he doesn’t intend to remember to obey. He turns to go and John stops him with a reminder.

“Oi, say goodbye properly.”

Sherlock wheels back, stoops and tickles Bee's middle, making her kick. He rises, using the handle of the pushchair for support over John's hand. Perhaps it tickles John too, because he lifts his hand from the plastic as soon as it's free from under Sherlock's palm, and swats at Sherlock's elbow.

Sherlock skips out of reach and turns away to hail a cab, John starts to turn the pushchair in the direction of the park, wheels spinning forwards and head turned back to watch as a cab glides to a halt. Sherlock waves as he vanishes inside.

"Toodles."

"See you," John says. The car pulls off and, heading for the park, John clears his throat and the grin from his lips before he starts to feel too ridiculous.

John is one of only two single fathers in the National Childbirth Trust group he's been part of since before Bee was born. There are other men, of course, but they only pop up at the bigger events on the weekends, which John tends to avoid.

He finds himself the subject of much curiosity, and no wonder. It was Mary who signed up and attended mostly in those early days of the pregnancy; he'd been busy, though he'd been to a few on Mary's elbow to meet and greet and try not to look bored.

Later, after all the horridness, he'd let Mary go alone, and so ended up on the receiving end of some muddled sympathy and frostiness when he'd tried braving it again, some months after her death. He still didn't like it, as such, but it gave Bee a chance to meet more kids and group tickets to places were often cheaper.

They're a motley, central London bunch. Well-off enough to live there, yet not rich enough nor posh enough to be amongst the Yummy Chelsea Mummies, all cocktails and organic cotton and baby yoga. John doesn't know them very well either, though he recognises most of the usual suspects by sight.

There are the bubbly, mumsy short-namers; Gem and Cat and 'Ness, all uniformly laid back friends from childhood, and gung-ho rivals in equal spoonfuls. There is Sevtap, who turns up at each and every meeting with two kids of her own and some borrowed from amongst other unknown peers, and who makes up for her lack of English and everyone else's deplorable lack of any second language (she speaks French and Russian as well as Turkish), by speaking slowly and with great intensity. Lulu and Stacey between them represent the posh-without-dosh cohort, and although kind and friendly, muddle along with a kind of otherness that makes them hard to relate to.

The rest, numbering 3 or 4 whose names John can never remember easily, are a bundle of single mums, who whirlwind in late and rush off early and are unendingly annoyed by the well-meant advice from the rest. John likes them better for all that he doesn't know them. He relates to their generalised irritation at the world.

Meanwhile, the only other regular dad in the NCT group has this rabbit air of earnestness that makes John uncomfortable, if only because he's nearly the exact opposite of John. An ex-teacher, albeit not a good one, he still lapses into preachy habits.

"Yeah," John says, not really listening to him. John absently pushes the pushchair back and forth forgetting that his daughter isn't in it, and tries not show how he can't stop glancing at the other man's eyes- He's one of life's unfortunately boggly specimens.

'Like a fancy goldfish', John thinks, 'in Birkenstocks. Disgusting. I can't stop looking at them.'

"-And of course the problem with store-bought ham is that it's loaded, absolutely loaded with nitrates; preservatives, you know?"

"Uh-huh."

"Right, and it's just nasty. So nasty." The man trails off, nodding to himself as if the world's problems could be fixed by the annihilation of supermarket lunchmeat, or at least satisfied that John is now suitably aware of the wide-spread sandwich horrors in the world.

John stares over the playground at his daughter and tries to think of an excuse to extract himself from the conversation. He should have followed his first instinct and sat by himself, or just gone and hovered by the Short-Name mums, even though they seem to be having some sort of feud by not saying anything and smiling a lot.

"So nasty."

"Sure," John says, before he's even thought of an excuse. "Um, Pete?"

"Paul."

John pulls himself together and looks at him. "Paul. Of course." He's never met such a Paul in his life. "Sorry, I was... thinking about something else."

"Oh sure," Paul allows, generously. "Anyway, your little one has nothing to worry about. Don't get me started on the ex, ha-ha-ha, but she always said if they don't get allergies in the first year, you're probably going to be fine until they hit two. Or one and a half anyway. Would you like to come over some time?"

John actually startles. "What?"

"For a playdate," Paul clarifies, smiling, like that didn't make it weirder. He points past John. "Just I was thinking I live so close to the park and our girls are getting along..."

"Oh! Oh, right. Er-" John hasn't even contemplated the notion before. Not seriously.

"I know, developmentally, it's really early for them, but personally I think it's good for only-kids to get a lot of exposure to other children, I don't know about you but- well, ha-ha-ha, the offer's open."

"Right," John repeats. It's not the first offer he's had, exactly, but the others all seemed to come with single-woman strings attached. Whilst he finds the interest enjoyable, and not just a little bit flattering, he doesn't really want it. He could go along with it for meaningless sex but it's altogether just too complicated.

There'd be too much baggage on both sides of the equation. Better just to pick up someone at random of an evening, but then, he doesn't go out drinking much these days.

"What do you think?" Paul asks, boggling pleadingly. John startles.

'Someone had sex with that', his cruel mind informs him, quite against his will. 'Imagine it. Really damp.'

He manfully represses any outward reaction.

“Hmm, um, maybe. I’ll have to check my schedule,” John says, and hastily starts looking through the contents of the pushchair as a way to deflect the conversation. Paul doesn’t seem to mind. He gives a contented little hum and begins to remind John of the evils of antibacterial hand gel.

From the other side of the playground, the mums watch, idly helping the older kids with a selection of sticking and gluing at one of the picnic benches, while the small fry waddle around getting into scraps.

“He’s a bit odd, don’t you think,” Lulu comments, peeling PVA from her fingers and wrinkling her nose. “Anyone got any more wet wipes?”

“Paul’s a wet wipe,” Cat replies, pushing the packet of moist towelettes towards her. “I’m not sure about John, either. He’s a bit...quiet, if you know what I mean.”

Sevtap nods philosophically. “John? He is big nose but ok so-so handsome.” The others consider both the nose and the verdict.

“I’ve seen worse,” says Gem.

“Shagged worse,” Cat corrects under her breath. They smile at each other.

“He’s ok on the eye but a bit army-army for my taste,” Ness says, reaching over to liberate a glue-stick from a toddler. “Don’t eat that, darling, it’s not nice. Yucky! Yucky glue!”

“No, I don’t mind that,” Gem muses, “Sandra?”

“He’s single, not dead and not in jail, I’m already sold,” Sandra says, trite but without enthusiasm. “Can’t be worse than some of the er-” she gives a tired glance at the kids, “balloons you get off of internet dating.”

“Nice kid though. Well controlled.” Ness pitches in, “Not like some.” She throws a meaningful glance at Lulu who is too distracted by her phone to notice it.

“Sorry?”

“Nothing. Still, would you want to?”

“Want to what? John?” Cat laughs, spilling paper shapes. “Sure, why not. I’d swap Andrew for a day.”

“Really?”

“No, not really. Don’t be daft.”

“You like John?” Sevtap enquires. The others shrug and laugh the question off. “No? Is good. John has only man’s hat.”

This causes some minor puzzlement and commentary back and forth until Lulu looks up from her phone long enough to say “Oh, the tweed thing, she means.”

“Oh! That wasn’t John though, he didn’t wear the hat- that was the Holmes guy.”

“Yes, I read in paper. John with man and hat. Always two with man.”

“There’s a point. Oh, Sevo, Levent’s throwing bark chips.”

They wait while Sevtap sighs and gets up from the bench, chastising one of her charges calmly in Turkish. The conversation dwindles for a bit and detours away on a roundabout chat about the difficulties of finding schools and language classes for under fives.

“I know,” Lulu sighs, “We’ve found somewhere that does Spanish but, like, we never go to Spain or anything; our summer house is in Tuscany, but I mean like... that’s not the same language, right?”

“Yeah,” Cat says, “I’m pretty sure Spanish is not Italian. Funny that.” She yawns and idly pushes paper shapes back into the bag they came from. The kids, or at least, those who are capable, have lost interest in the crafts and have taken themselves back to the equipment to play, with Sevtap standing over them like an ever-observant drill sergeant.

“Shall we call the chaps over and get the snacks open?” Ness suggests. “Who was bringing this week?”

They decamp from the picnic bench to rally the troops around for something to eat. Lulu totters off on a coffee run to the van parked opportunistically at the other end of the playground, and John unties the plastic bag he’d packed.

“I bought some fruit and some crackers and bits,” John says, dealing the packets out. He’s aware he’d get lectured if he brought anything too ostensibly like ‘junk food’ and so he’d checked in the supermarket; the crackers were definitely from what he privately called the ‘whoo-whoo organic crap’ shelf. More to the point, they weren’t tasty enough to be honoured with the word ‘biscuit’.

“Oh look,” Paul says taking the packet and forcing a smile. He shows it to his little girl. “Gluten! Thank you, John, we’ll ha-ha-ha... save those for later...”

“I’ll eat some,” John says, pointedly. Sandra, a reliable ally, has already pushed one into her son’s mouth and one into her own. “They’re nice,” she says through the crumbs.

“Sure thing, sure thing.” Paul nods and gives the park in general an amused look as if John, the poor ignorant swine, has dished up cat food for lunch.

The rest are satisfied well enough, and the toddlers don’t care what they get as long as they are allowed to grab it in one fist and waddle around with the toys in the other. John exhales, glances at his watch. He could get out of there soon. The others pretend not to notice, although Cat remarks on his ‘restless leg syndrome’ with false sympathy.

The chit-chat recommences on the subject of various cooking shows currently in vogue, none of which John has seen, and none of which he remotely cares about. He sneaks another look at his watch and feels awkward. Sevtap returns, a child under each arm and squeezes onto the bench beside him and joins him in ignorance of the talk. Unlike John, however, she is far more able to just allow things to wash over her head without minding the fact. Likewise, Sandra seems little inclined to add anything, though she nods along in agreement from time to time.

It makes John wonder if the pair of them have a sense of belonging to the group by mere dint of being female. Paul pitches in as earnest as ever, waxing at large still on the horrors of consumables, yet he too remains at arm’s length. They don’t address any comments or questions to him, though they do to Sevtap even when she doesn’t fully understand them. Is it because Paul’s an arse or because he’s a man? John’s not sure.

It makes John wonder if they’d have accepted Mary more easily than himself, which makes something inside him twist. They’d not really have known her at all, and he thinks he’s at least

been honest with the group, albeit that he doesn't find himself wholly enjoying their company. Bee collects bark chips in her pockets and wanders around the other children making little trumpeting noises, returning only when she wants another carrot stick. She's perfectly happy.

Sandra catches his eye briefly and gives him the shadow of a smile, one lonely person to another. He doesn't know her story, and she isn't interested in sharing it. Neither is he interested in asking. Other than the fact that their children for some mysterious reason don't scream blue murder at the sight of one another, he has little in common and so little to talk about.

His phone beeps.

[You look interminably bored- SH]

John's eyebrows shoot up and he looks around, finally spotting the culprit on the very edge of the playground under the trees. Between his dark suit and the shade cast by the limes, he's very discreet.

He starts to text back and then, realising how slow he is at it, puts his phone away and gets up. "Excuse me just a moment," he says, wriggling free of the bench and marching over towards Sherlock is. He gets a dozen paces before Bee runs to catch him, can't, screams 'Babaaaarrrrr!' and he has to slow and take her hand so that she can dodder along with him.

There is a short silence at the table and then a unanimous craning of necks.

"Who is that?"

"Isn't that the hat guy?"

"The creepy sex one?"

"The one Sevo was talking about from the papers; Sherlock Holmes."

"He's tall," Gem says.

"John's short," Paul replies, with unusual prickliness.

"Phew, he's a bit Mr. Grey, isn't he?"

"Really, Cat?"

They watch, rapt as though it were prime-time television as the two men talk.

John stands, poised, listening to the other man speaking, houndishly alert. The taller man sways in slightly, gesticulating as John moves to square off to him, and their eyes are fixed onto one another. John drops a hand, pointing down to his daughter, his hand relaxed and he leaves it in mid air as the other stills to say something to him with eyes not words, and the pair of them make a tableau as decipherable as any old master's painting.

Then the tall man moves, a fraction only just to shield John's face from the crowd; not intentionally; he's leaning forward to speak in John's ear and one of those hands falls on John's shoulder for the sake of something to lean on. John's jaw slips in and out of sight as he nods and then he glances to one side with the hint of a smile. He's amused. The baby pulls on first one trouser leg and then the other, is caressed across her scalp by two different absent-minded hands until she yells and John picks her up with an audible grunt. The conversation goes on.

The baby sits on John's hip between them, one hand fixed in each collar until Sherlock shifts back to one side and the gap widens nearly longer than her reach. John jogs her back into position and she lifts her hand to brush the other man's chin with her fingertips. Still talking, not looking, Sherlock catches her palm against his fingers and kisses her wrist, barely missing a beat in the conversation.

John slaps Sherlock's arm good-naturedly as the conversation comes to a close. He dislodges his hand, shooing him away towards the gate with calm authority and Sherlock is going, with backwards comments, until John says more loudly, "go on." Sherlock takes a pace backwards, but then at the last, Sherlock ducks back and kisses the baby's cheeks, first one and then the second twice, and only then does he leave. John remains, one man with a worn elbow in his jumper, standing on the bark chippings of the playground, except that now he is standing straight.

He watches the other man till he is just a dark blot in the distance across the park and then turns to put the baby down with a faint smile.

Ness raises her eyebrows in lieu of saying 'Well!'

The women dandle their babies in their laps and feel the gossip growing, fruiting questions in their mouths, sweet and tart and thoroughly enjoyable. Paul looks put-out.

John returns slowly, his daughter walking careful rings around one of his legs.

"Sorry," John says as he reaches the bench, "We're going to have to push off a bit early." He doesn't sound remotely apologetic. "Feel free to finish the snacks and things."

"Sure."

"No problem, John."

"See you next week?"

John glances suspiciously from one face to the next. It feels like they're laughing at him, but he's not sure that they are or if he's just being paranoid. Are they judging him?

"Um, yes. Let me know," he says, a touch gruff. "Nice... park."

He takes a couple more awkward moments to pack up Bee and her things, trying not to look too much like he's desperate to get away. They wave him off, friendly as ever, and he knows they'll be gossiping about him after he's gone. Perhaps he should be flattered by their interest, but it doesn't feel very good. Paul catches his eye, but doesn't reiterate his invitation.

Only Sandra shares with him a welcome roll of her eyes and her 'see you around,' sounds more genuine.

"Come on, let's get back to Nana," John says to Bee, bent over the pushchair to clip her in. "Sherlock's got a nice fresh corpse for Papa to look at." She grins at him, gap-toothed and not really understanding, but happy that he's happy nonetheless.

As it turns out, there is no corpse. Instead they wind up in Lestrade's office with dingy cups of coffee and a laptop.

“Ok, so this came in a couple of days ago,” Lestrade explains, “And I think you’ll like it. Locked room mystery.”

“Why didn’t you tell me before now?” Sherlock peevishly wants to know. He fastidiously wipes at Lestrade’s messy screen with his handkerchief.

“‘Cause it involved kids and we know what you’re like,” Lestrade replies blandly. He coughs slightly into the back of his fist and then continues, prodding at the photograph on the screen, the first of many. “Right, anyway, this is The Mews; posh place as you can see.”

The photograph depicts a large, pleasant house in the affluent area between Chelsea and Fulham. The old exterior is complemented by a modernised interior, displayed for their viewing pleasure in a series of dull photographs no doubt taken by Anderson. The only part not slave to chrome and clean white is the second floor landing, a dead end with no rooms adjoining it, which boasts the owner’s considerable antiques collection. A life-long investment banker, the man had sunk portions of his wealth into art, primarily that of 17th century Italy. The crowning glory of the lot was an original Tiepolo sketch of ‘The Sacrifice of Isaac’, and this it seems is also the reason the police have been called in.

John can’t help but gawp at the images; not just at the treasures, but the security. Anderson’s gone further than mere photographs and has included a video to permit them a virtual tour of the hall.

“Hello, here we are at the doorwa-“

Sherlock leans forward and firmly presses the mute button. They watch. The hall is the length of the house, with windows down one side and a solid wall down all of the other three. There is only one door, which can be bolted from the inside, and which also has an electro-magnetic lock installed on it’s foot, meaning that it’s firmly locked as soon as the alarm is engaged. The windows are solid and new. When the alarms are off (Anderson demonstrates) they can be opened in order to air the room, but only to the barest minimum. They watch as Anderson slides one gloved hand into the narrow gap to give them an idea. Even a cat would be hard pressed to squeeze through.

Sherlock gives a hum of approval. No one left or entered by that way.

Anderson tilts the camera up to show them the CCTV camera installed by the door; from it’s vantage point it can capture the entire length of the hall in a single shot with no blind spot, save for the inside of the vault at the far end where The Sacrifice of Isaac is kept in a temperature and light controlled environment.

“It snaps a shot every minute, and as far as we can see, none are missing and it hasn’t been messed with. Besides there are witnesses.”

“What’s the umpire’s chair for,” John asks, pointing to the item. It’s located about halfway down the hall, with it’s back to the windows.

“Whenever he, the owner, Mr.” Lestrade pauses to think and cough again, “Mr. Lee Addison, I mean, opens it to the public, he gets in a watchman to make sure no one touches anything. He sits there.”

Lestrade scribbles on a pad of paper for them. “On the day, he was showing the collection to his granddaughter’s prep school class. About six groups of kids in total, each with a teacher or volunteer, dotted about. Only one group was allowed in the hall at a time so they took it in shifts. Watch the CCTV stuff....”

He starts the feed and uses his biro to point things out.

“Ok, so here, 11:45 we can see the fourth group of kids with Lidia Stringfellow- one of the volunteers, coming into the hall. There’s the watchman, George Templeton.”

By 11:54, they’re looking at the ceramics at about the middle of the room, on a level with the watchman. By 11:58, they’ve moved away to admire a suit of armour.

“And then at twelve on the dot, they open the vault to see the painting.”

“The door closes,” Sherlock notes, as the next image shows the hall empty other than the watchman.

“Yeah, it’s got to be kept a certain temperature so they were told they had to go in and shut the door. It’s part of the security system so once shut it won’t open again for a few minutes to allow the interior to reacclimatise. They’re in there for about 5 minutes.”

“Hmm, next.”

The following sequence of pictures show, at the opposite end of the hall, an old man entering. Lestrade pauses it.

“Watch this guy. This is Lee Addison, the owner.”

They watch as the images progress in erratic stop motion. The old man zips forward to speak to the watchman who then promptly disappears from the picture. “At noon, George gets twenty minutes to eat. He says he went down to the kitchen, got a sandwich and had a smoke and we’ve got a statement saying another group saw him smoking on the back patio, so that pretty much checks out. Addison takes over the watch.”

At 12:06 the group emerges from the vault and the old man moves towards it as the group hurries off. The old man lingers, and then at 12:09 vanishes. Lestrade pauses it again.

“See?”

“The vault door is closing,” Sherlock says. John squints and Sherlock points. “See, it’s out of line compared to before. He went inside.”

12:10, 12:11, 12:12 and the hall is deserted until at 12:14 when another group enters. They proceed through the same motions as the previous group; ceramics and then suit of armour and then at 12:26 they’re visible clustered outside the vault and George is wandering back in. Abruptly at 12:27, they’re back in the hall, the teacher looking around in a panic.

Lestrade stops the feed.

“That’s Julia Goodwin, the Year 3 teacher. She says that the door opened fine, and the kids rushed in, but the frame was empty. She stepped inside herself, in disbelief and then one of the girls noticed blood on the floor, which was when she pulled them back out. Luckily she hadn’t let the door shut behind them.

Sherlock reaches out and toggles between the three images of before they entered, right after they’d stepped out and as they milled around in a panic. He frowns.

“Door opens inwards. Is the vault soundproof?”

Lestrade thinks. "It isn't designed to be and we haven't tested it, but the door and walls are both very thick, so I reckon it's as good as."

"A man goes into a locked vault and he and his priceless drawing vanish," Sherlock smiles. "Remarkable. I want to see it."

Lestrade makes a few further dutiful noises of dissent and then agrees quite readily enough.

"I'll ask, and I'm coming with you, and you've got to remember that it's not your crime scene, it's Anderson's."

Sherlock groans. "Must we?"

"Yep, 'fraid so. No nicking stuff like last time or it'll be my office and Anderson Spielberg Directs with the mute disabled. Is that clear?"

Sherlock seethes. "Crystal." He rallies a moment later. "Kent let me interview."

"We're not Kent," Lestrade points out. "It's not up to me what risks they want to run; this is the Met. And I've got the commissioner breathing down my neck enough as it is."

"Pah!"

"No 'pahs' about it. You know his opinion of the pair of you."

"It's the hat," Sherlock says in disgust. Lestrade corrects him.

"It was the punching and the general being an arse."

John remains expressionless and unrepentant at this comment. The punch hadn't been either his best nor wisest action admittedly, and yet it had been so very satisfying. "It's only a look around. Not like we'd be meeting anyone but Anderson, right?" he suggests.

"Yeah, the grandkids are staying at a foster house until it's decided what'll happen to them."

"Tell me about them."

Lestrade makes a thinking noise and shrugs. "Not much to them. The boy was downstairs the whole time in the kitchen studying. A few people saw him, and he kept out of the way- not very social. The girl was in the last group though; rather shocked, I think, but she couldn't offer anything more than the rest of them."

"Names? Ages? Come on, Lestrade, be precise."

"Willard and Flora Addison, if you can believe it. The boy's 17. He had trouble at school- bullying, not him, he was the victim, so he's been home-schooled by the old man since he was eleven. The girl's 10, she goes daily to the prep school on Fulham Palace Road. Both quite quiet, shy kids; him especially."

"No parents?" John asked.

"No," Lestrade replies. "Dad died young; motorbike accident, and Mum walked out just a couple of years later after a massive row with the grandfather. She was a bit of a drinker; they found her coat by the river."

"What was the row about?"

“The inheritance. Dad didn’t have beans, apparently; it was all the old man’s money and he wasn’t going to give any to her, and nothing to the kids if they didn’t stay nearby. She wanted to up sticks and leave with a new boyfriend.”

“Interesting,” Sherlock mutters. Then he gets up from his chair, dropping his half-drunk cup of coffee into the bin. “Get Anderson out to the house then. We’ll meet you there.”

“I take it you’re pleased then,” John says, wryly amused at Sherlock’s restrained glee.

“A case, John! Something worth spending my brains on for once! Murder!” He inhales as though he can literally sniff out the answers. “Oh, how it makes the world tolerable.”

“Alright, let’s not get carried away,” John says. “Best behaviour on the crime scene.”

“Don’t you start,” Sherlock grouses, but he’s too pleased with the prospects of the case to be nettled for long.

—

Anderson is horribly pleased to see them. He peers around, looking. “No mini-me today?” he asks.

“Really?” John replies, frowning. “No. Funnily enough, we didn’t bring the kid to investigate a murder.”

“Well, not this time,” Sherlock allows.

“It might not be a murder; he might not be dead,” Anderson points out. “We haven’t found a body.” Hastily he adds, before Sherlock dismisses him, “Do you want to see the bloodstain?”

It’s cramped inside the vault, and humid. Anderson’s brought in a lamp to improve the lighting situation, which only makes it hotter. Sherlock blunders thoughtlessly into them all as he examines the tiny space. John, knowing from long experience not to expect too much from Sherlock at first, tries to make his own observations.

It’s a small space for four grown men and a bloodstain, but he can see that you could fit an adult and a handful of children in. Not necessarily comfortably, but no worse than a slightly crowded lift. The frame is fairly high up on the wall, and surprisingly to John, unglazed. He can see the ragged edges of paper just inside it.

“Someone cut the picture out?”

“Not very well,” Anderson says, pointing, “It’s all wibbly, look. Slashed at it.”

Sherlock makes a derisive noise. He toys with the door, moving it back and forth and examining the space behind it.

“Worth much?” John asks.

“Not now,” Anderson thinks. “Not all chopped about like that. And this bloodstain’s weird, I think.”

John looks at him. “Weird how?”

“It’s sort of directional, but towards the wall.”

“Do you mind, I’m thinking?” Sherlock draws, prowling round them to peer at the item in

question.

“What if he’s faked his own death,” Anderson suggests. “Like, suppose one of these walls is fake and he just cut himself a bit and then-“

“Anderson!” Sherlock erupts, but not in anger. He straightens instead, eyes glittering, hands clasped flat below his chin.

“What?” Anderson says, stupefied. “What? Was I right?”

Sherlock inhales abruptly with a thought and then says, “No, I simply can’t believe how persistently stupid your ideas are- Come, John. I want to see the kitchen.”

They squeeze out from the vault, one at a time to avoid treading on anything they shouldn’t. The hall feels chilly after the sauna-like atmosphere inside the vault.

John traipses behind Sherlock, the plastic all-in-ones rustling in synch as they walk. “You’ve got a theory then?”

“Nearly, and oh, but it is remarkable. Clever, John. Very, very clever.”

“Well tell me then.”

Sherlock glances back at him, the firmness of his mouth offset by the warmth of gratification in his eyes. “As soon as I’ve confirmed a few things.”

What he needs to confirm, exactly, John has no idea. They enter the kitchen and Sherlock stands, looking, and then slowly he opens each drawer in turn and looks inside before turning his attention to all of the cook books on the shelves. After a long while spent shuffling around in expectant silence, Sherlock claps the last book shut and thrusts it back on the shelf.

“Brilliant,” he breathes.

“Well? Did Delia Smith do it?” Lestrade asks.

“Who?” Sherlock asks, despite the fact he’d just been through pretty much the entire collection published by the woman. John points at the shelves and Sherlock looks at him pityingly. “Don’t be ridiculous. Rooms. More rooms. There are more. Stairs.”

Sherlock lopes off through the house like a hound on the trail and John and Lestrade follow. They climb the main flight of stairs and Sherlock flips open doors carelessly, looking inside. He’s mostly interested in the bedrooms; the old man’s, the little girl’s and the boy’s.

The first is comfortably laid out; a single man’s room, but rather grandiosely decorated with a genuine four-poster. Sherlock gently opens the cupboards and searches through, examining the suits inside and the shoes. He inspects the laundry and sniffs with interest at the bottles of cologne on the Gentleman’s Dresser. He gives the old horn-back hairbrush a once over and then they move on.

The girl’s room is a fairly typical example of its sort. White with pink accents, soft furnishings and a great deal of books in an organised mess. Sherlock flips through a couple with interest, but otherwise touches much less. He moves with caution, examining the toys, looking incongruous. There’s an iPad by the bed which he unlocks and spends a moment silently exploring while John and Lestrade watch on with frustrated interest.

“Anything?” Lestrade asks. Sherlock flips the screen briefly to show him a snapshot of the house itself.

“She likes taking photos and reading,” he comments and puts the tablet down.

The boy’s room is a counterpoint to his sister’s in that it is almost faultlessly tidy. Sherlock stands for a long moment in the middle of the room, hands behind his back. John can see his eyes moving; the way he’s picking up information and reading the room like a book. Finally, Lestrade can’t hold back any longer.

“What happened, Sherlock? Who killed him? Where’s the body? Is he even dead?”

Sherlock looks at him, startled. He gives an easy shrug. “Oh. No idea. Sorry.”

Lestrade gapes. “Are you- what? What do you mean, no idea?”

“No idea. For now.”

“For now?!”

“Wait,” Sherlock suggests. “A week. Give it one week and then, if my theory is proven correct or not, then I may be able to give you an answer. Until then, I can’t say.”

Lestrade huffs and chuffs, but it’s the only answer he’s getting and he’s forced to give in. They return to the entrance hall and strip off their blues, shoving them in the bin provided. Sherlock straightens the hang of his jacket and then, just as he’s about to step out, turns back and adds.

“Oh, and I think it’s best if you make sure everyone is informed that I visited the house. Square it all off on the paperwork, let everyone know.” Lestrade is baffled.

“Um. Yeah. I can, why?”

“I’m trying this new approach called keeping out of legal mischief,” Sherlock says flippantly.

“Probably best to inform the owners also...I mean, the boy *is* seventeen. I daresay he’s old enough to want a say in what goes on at least.”

Lestrade’s look turns suspicious, but despite being lead up the garden path so many times before, he still trusts Sherlock. “Alright,” he says. “I’ll see that they get a fair update on what’s going on.”

They part ways, Lestrade remaining in the hall looking puzzled, John trotting off on Sherlock’s heels a heartbeat after the man himself has stepped out of the house.

“You’ve got an idea then?” John pries again, hopefully. “Is he dead or did he walk through the walls?”

“Oh, he’s dead,” Sherlock replies, looking pleased. “Highly unlikely he’s still alive.” He shrugs again. “Give it a couple of days and I’m sure we’ll hear... well. We’ll hear.” He gives John a slow, sly smile, and John is hard pressed to feel annoyed because Sherlock’s so clearly enjoying himself.

“Alright,” John relents. “Just don’t run off on one without me.”

Sherlock’s step falters and he casts a look at him; thoughtful. John looks at him in return.

Don’t leave me behind.

I won’t. You’re my partner.

He can't be certain if John reads the words, exactly, but he looks away and doesn't ask again. He stops looking uneasy and they fall into step with one another. Sherlock inhales. The summer air is full of dust and car exhaust and the smell of the lime trees. It's hot and they both sweat, even in the short distance it takes them up Fulham Palace Road towards the tube station. John wipes his upper lip with the back of his hand and sighs. Sherlock looks at him again, stifling in his long sleeves and buttoned-up shirt.

Beaches, John thinks. *Water. Lager*. He grimaces as a bus passes, and looks up and down the road for a taxi.

"Wait," Sherlock tells him. "Tesco."

"What?" John says, but Sherlock's already stepped inside the shop. John can just about see him weaving impatiently through the aisles. John sighs again and props himself in the scant shade to wait, keeping one eye peeled for a taxi.

Presently Sherlock reappears, pushing a wet bottle of water into his hand.

"Oh, thanks," John says, snapping open the lid as they move away and gratefully drinking. "It's too bloody hot," he says with a pant once he's downed half the bottle. Sherlock is rustling with something one-handedly.

John eyes the green plastic with interest. "You got yourself an ice-cream?" he says, trying and failing not to let the *'and you didn't get me one too'* slip into his tone.

"I got you one," Sherlock says, wrestling the wrapper free. "Just a moment."

"Oh," John says, mollified but also not eager to point he doesn't like mint Cornetto's that much.

As if reading his mind, Sherlock holds up his other hand in which he has a second bottle of water and another ice-cream.

"Yours is a Magnum."

John grins. "Naturally." He takes it, the condensation chilling his fingers.

They walk in silence towards the station, working on devouring their ice-creams before the heat melts them.

"Do you remember Nobbly Bobbly's?" John asks, after a moment.

Sherlock stares at him.

"It was an ice-cream. Like the top bit of a Fab?"

"What? No? I don't remember any kind of Nobbly Fab. What? What's that?"

John laughs, ice-cream oozing over his fingers. "Never mind," he says, and then laughs again.

John goes with him to St Barts, because the morgue is cool even when the streets of London are baking. Molly has nothing for them- how could she in a case without a body?- but she equally has no objection to them cluttering up her workspace for half an hour. John snaffles coffee and biscuits from her office and they stand around making small talk while Sherlock follows up on some other small bits of research he's been conducting between times.

“How’s life?” John asks. “Any plans for the summer?”

“I’m going on holiday,” she says, “Just me.” Her expression hardens very briefly in case she needs to defend this statement but John has, at last, learnt and keeps his mouth shut. “I’m going to go to a spa in Estonia to spend a few days just away from everything.”

“Sounds... nice?” John ventures.

“I think it will be. Five-star, really nice bar.”

She catches John’s slow nod. “It’s a spa but it’s not like a health spa. I’m not spending the week eating wheatgerm.”

“Just a bit of R and R,” he agrees.

“I suppose you’re both going to stay in London?”

“Yeah, well, we went away at Easter.”

“So?”

John opens his mouth and then closes it again. “And the money,” he adds, which isn’t true, but is enough to stop Molly prying further.

“I went camping at Easter. It was awful,” Molly says. “It was meant to be comfy camping, and we got some damp little tee-pee type thing that smelt of old camel.” She stops when she realises that John isn’t listening. He’s vanished away into his thoughts.

He doesn’t mean to be rude, it’s more that the thought has crossed his mind that he doesn’t know much about the places Sherlock has travelled to. If he liked it or if, more likely, he hated it. If there’s anywhere he wants to go to or return to. If he went anywhere as a child and if he still holds any kind of feeling about that, regardless of if he were interested in the place or not. He knows Sherlock’s been to Belarus, he suspects he’s been a few other places in northeast Europe, he supposes he’s been to America, but it’s equally possible that he’s less travelled than John is himself.

He can’t imagine Sherlock travelling for pleasure.

For Sherlock the world can be found on either bank of the Thames and preferably within the confines of zones one and two on the TFL rail services.

John would like to go somewhere, but he doesn’t want to leave Sherlock to his own devices either.

“He’s not very busy lately, is he?” Molly remarks, breaking into his thoughts.

“Sorry?”

“Sherlock. Work-wise, I mean.”

“Well, there’s the case we picked up today and we had another one a while back that took him ages to get through-“

“But he has spare time,” Molly says again and this time John gets the hint that she’s angling towards.

“Yes, he’s not rushed off his feet, that’s true.”

Molly sips at her coffee and twists her mouth, though John saw her lace it with plenty of sugar so it can hardly be bitter.

“He hasn’t been to see him, you know.”

“Who?”

Molly expresses her disappointment in him as a human adult male with every fibre of her being. She doesn’t even have to look at him.

“Billy, John. He’s not visited him even once.”

“Oh.”

“He’s struggling, you know.”

“But it’s a good rehab place, isn’t it?”

“Well, if you’re interested, you’ve got the address,” Molly says pointedly. “You could always pop in and check.” She puts her drink down and then ruthlessly upends the mug over the sink. “You know even Mycroft’s stuck his nose in?”

“He has?”

“Not to speak to him, he just turned up to check things were going smoothly.”

“Hell,” John says, feelingly.

“Did you know Billy’s got a degree?” Molly adds. John didn’t.

“Chemistry, unsurprisingly,” she adds, “Mycroft helped get hold of reprints of his qualifications, though he’s been in rehab four times and prison once so I have no idea who the hell is going to hire him. We’ve no idea where he’s going to live once he’s out.”

“Oh...” John bites back a swearword. “Jesus, Molly.”

“Lestrade’s going to ask around for projects that take on ex-drug addicts. He’s entitled to some benefits, although-“ She laughs humourlessly, “*That’s* always a fun game, isn’t it? The problem is keeping him busy, with people around to keep an eye on him.”

“We’ll help,” John says, kicking himself. “I’ll-” do what? Make Sherlock go down there? John’s not sure how Sherlock feels about rehab clinics. He might be avoiding Billy because it hits a little too close to home, and, after all, it’s not like Sherlock’s the type to admit it if that were the case.

He’s a little cross about it though, under the guilt. He can’t help but feel he didn’t sign up to take Billy on as an extra problem child.

“-I’ll make sure we catch up on what’s going on,” he says, which sounds pathetic even to him, but Molly takes it as it’s intended and relents a little.

‘I’d better,’ John thinks, ‘Or Molly’s not going to speak to us again, and if that happens, Lestrade’ll be a complete pain in the arse.’ Never mind what Mrs. Hudson would find to say about it. John’s not sure he can face another cup of tea slammed down in front of him in accusation.

He tries to think of something else to say, but Molly just squeezes his elbow and goes to pry Sherlock loose from the machines.

“Come on,” she says, “I need to get on with some work without you two under my feet.”

Sherlock is reluctant but they leave, back into the sweat of the afternoon, where even Sherlock looks like he regrets wearing a suit for once.

“Let’s get home,” John says, checking his watch. “We’ve been ages. Bee will be wondering where we are.” It’s yet another little jab at his conscience. He wishes there was a way to have it all; the flexible lifestyle for Sherlock and the stable life for Bee, but he can’t seem to consolidate the two well enough.

They tread towards the road and Sherlock pushes his hair out of his eyes looking for a taxi. They don’t find one before Sherlock receives a call.

“Yes?”

John listens, getting only half the conversation.

“I see. I don’t believe that would be possible.... No, you would have to ask Detective Inspector Lestrade to contact me first. Yes. Do you have a pen?”

John listens, baffled, as Sherlock recites Lestrade’s phone number twice for the person on the other end, and then the conversation concludes. He hangs up.

“What is it?”

Sherlock looks at his phone thoughtfully, and pleased.

“We have an interview.”

“When? Now?”

“Later this afternoon, I expect. Once Lestrade’s thought about it.” Sherlock pauses and then brightens. “Enough time to go and review the cold cases.”

“Cold cases?” John echoes. Sherlock hums.

“Coats left by rivers,” he replies, wheeling away to flag down a taxi before John can open his mouth. “Hold on, wait for me!” John hurries to catch up to him. Sherlock turns, just as a car stops for them.

“And I’ll need you to go and speak to an architect.”

Later, once Sherlock’s spent an hour peering through police statements and John’s been sent on an errand to an architect who refused to even entertain John’s questions, they reconvene at New Scotland Yard on the forecourt. Sherlock rounds the corner as John enters and then surprises John by holding his phone out. “It’s Mrs. Hudson,” Sherlock announces.

“What is?” John asks before he notices that the phone is on a call and he scrabbles to take it from Sherlock’s hand and press it to his ear.

“Hello? Hello? It’s me, what’s gone wrong?” he blurts.

“Hello? Oh, John dear,” Mrs. Hudson says, sounding puzzled. “How is the case going? Are you having a nice time?”

“The case?” John’s brow does a quick up and down in confusion. “Never mind the case, what’s happened?”

“Nothing’s happened,” Mrs. Hudson replies, taken aback. “Why, has something happened? Isn’t Sherlock with you?”

“Yes, he’s here,” John glances at him. Sherlock has his back turned, studiously busy with something other than being roped into the conversation, “But why are you calling?”

“I’m not calling, John. You called me.”

John inhales to say that he didn’t and the penny drops and he grumbles instead. “Oh, right. Yes, silly me. Sorry, Mrs. Hudson, it was Sherlock. He didn’t explain.”

“Is everything ok?”

“It’s fine,” John sighs. “I’m just being paranoid and checking in on you. How’s Bee?”

He can hear Mrs. Hudson smiling. “She’s playing,” she says, sounding on the verge of a chuckle. “We’ve had some avocado on toast and a banana. Do you know if you’ll be back in time for me to go to bridge?”

John feels a stab of guilt. “No, but- look, invite them round to ours or something if that helps. Use our big table.”

Mrs. Hudson does chuckle then. “Alright, John. I’ll give the girls a call and see if that’ll work. You take care now- don’t get into any trouble.”

“We won’t,” John tells her and then looks around at Sherlock and amends, “I don’t think we will, anyway. Everything’s going fine here.” He hopes. “We’re just at the station. I’ll come back in an hour or so.”

He makes it a promise to himself. Sherlock is listening and gives a vague nod of understanding.

“Alright, see you later,” Mrs. Hudson trills and hangs up. John passes Sherlock back the phone.

“Thanks,” he says.

“What for?” Sherlock deflects and then heads directly for Lestrade’s office.

Lestrade is waiting for them, troubled. “What have you been up to?” he wants to know. Sherlock contrives to look as innocent as pie. “Nothing,” he says. “Why? Has something happened?”

“Yeah, I got a call back from Willard Addison. He wants to meet.” Lestrade frowns, suspicious with every fibre of his being but with nothing precise to pin his suspicions to. “What’s going on, Sherlock?”

“Well, if he’s asking...” Sherlock says, playing coy. “We should find out what he wants to talk about.”

“Is this because I said you couldn’t meet the witnesses?” Lestrade folds his arms and taps his foot in a good show of parental disapproval. “That wasn’t a cue for you to go and find a loophole.”

“They *asked*. I haven’t forced anything.”

“Sherlock.” Lestrade points a finger at him warningly, but he doesn’t follow this up with anything

stronger.

“You’d be there to supervise,” Sherlock points out, cajolingly. “And John.”

“Yes, I’m not sure that’s really a bonus,” Lestrade replies, throwing his hands up. “We’ll go down to the house,” he says. “And we’re keeping it short, and just- don’t get me in trouble, Sherlock. Please.”

Sherlock stiffens slightly, but John puts his hand on his elbow and diffuses the situation. Lestrade just looks tired.

“It’s only a quick chat. Who knows. Maybe they’ll tell Sherlock something they don’t want to tell the police,” John reasons. “Cash in on his reputation. You said their mum vanished. Police couldn’t do anything so maybe they don’t think the police are much good at solving stuff for them.”

Lestrade jangles his keys in his pockets, still reluctant and having second thoughts. It pricks at his curiosity though, why the kid is asking to meet Sherlock Holmes. Maybe John’s onto something. “Alright,” he says, finally. “Come on. I’ll drive us.”

John squeezes Sherlock’s elbow in support. Sherlock can’t help but look down. John has just the hint of a smile about him. Carefully, Sherlock reaches up to feel that his collar is perfectly flat.

The children have been tucked away in a house that is actually relatively close to their own, but unlike their own home, it feels lived in. John feels a twinge of something in both his heart and his shoulder when they troop in over the doorstep, wiping their shoes needlessly. There are two pairs of mucky football boots in a pile by the door, and the generic clutter of a busy household all over the hall.

The woman steps aside to let them in, wiping her hands dry on a tea towel. “Everything alright?” she asks to Lestrade.

“Yeah,” he reassures her. “Just wanted a quick word with Willard and Flora. Sorry to barge in.”

“Yeah, no problem.” She gives a curious look towards John and Sherlock, but doesn’t seem to recognise them. “They’re in the lounge. We just finished lunch.”

Sherlock hangs back, letting Lestrade and John go ahead of him. He notes the photos on the walls of the same kids at different ages, the lack of newspapers and the smell of garlic. John, with expertise born of familiarity, notes the look in the woman’s eyes. The stack of worn old board games in the corner and the poster on the wall for each child to check their activities. It takes him back, suddenly, to Stella and Ted’s sprawling, noisy house with it’s strange mix of teens who were nearly adults and newborns.

The two children are nominally watching a nature show on TV when they come in, yet the sound is turned down low and the girl has a book drooping from her fingers. The boy turns his head away from the window as they enter and the group of them stare at one another.

Birds flock across the screen to a murmur of narration and then the girl silently picks up the remote and turns it off.

“Hi,” Lestrade says, “Do you mind if we sit down?”

“It’s a free house,” the girl says. The boy says nothing. He fidgets instead, plucking at the seam of

the armchair over and over. His nails are bitten to the quicks.

"I'll get some drinks and snacks," The foster mother offers. "I've got some Kit Kats and OJ."

John closes his eyes for a moment. He remembers that voice. The lack of a question because new kids can get overwhelmed by food choice. She leaves for a mere minute; Lestrade must have called to tell her they were coming before he even spoke to them, because she has glasses on a tray and the biscuits in a bowl.

'She'll put them in the middle of the coffee table,' John thinks, and she does. A way to make them break the ice.

"I'll be right in the kitchen if I'm needed," she says and leaves, deliberately leaving the door wide open. John reaches over and helps himself to one of the biscuits.

"When can we go home?" Flora asks, without preamble.

Lestrade copies John and takes a glass from the tray. "It'll be a bit longer," he says, deliberately vague. "But someone will let you know as soon as anything changes."

"You mean you don't know."

"Don't take it personally," John says, on impulse. "They can't really answer anything because everything's changing all the time."

Willard keeps his eyes on the floor and picks harder at the sofa. Flora gives him a closed-off look and then leans forwards and takes two glasses from the tray, pushing one firmly but gently into her brother's hand to make him stop. "I don't really like orange juice," Flora comments. "Can you ask her to get cola or something instead?"

John clears his throat, aware that both of the other men are looking at him, and says. "You can just tell her. Orange juice is better for your teeth, though."

"It's got bits in."

"What about apple," John suggests.

Flora shrugs. "Better than orange," she concedes, giving him a wary look. "You're the doctor, aren't you?"

"I am."

"That's a really doctor thing to say."

"I know, they make us do it. They give us exams on it."

A tiny crack appears in Flora's cold veneer and she very nearly smiles. She turns back and perches on the arm of the chair Willard is sat in, and John opens his Kit Kat, taking a second and tossing it into Lestrade's lap. It's like smoking a peace pipe. Even Sherlock respectfully accepts one and they sit for a moment munching and allowing the kids to get used to them being there.

"Do you want to talk about why you called me?" Lestrade asks, once the tension in the room has become a little more neutral.

Flora leans slightly against Willard. "Not you," he says, as if on cue. "Them."

“That’s fine. I don’t mind, but I can’t leave the room,” Lestrade says, “They’re not policemen or social workers. It’s one of the rules.”

“Oh.”

There’s a pause and Flora points at John. “He’s a doctor,” she says. “Isn’t it a rule that you can talk to a doctor by yourself?”

“Possibly,” John says before Lestrade can speak, “but there’s rules for me too. I’m not allowed to keep some secrets.” This seems to trouble Flora. “I’d listen though,” John adds, feeling Sherlock breathing on the sofa next to him. “I can promise that. I’d listen, and,” He nods his head to the side, indicating the men next to him. “The same goes for Sherlock and Greg as well. I’d trust them with my life. I have done, in fact. We’ll all do our best to help you, and no one,” he points back at the pair of kids. He can feel Sherlock’s arm against his own. “No one is going to take the piss.”

He swears because he gets the impression that despite the differences in age and experience, everyone present wants to be treated like an adult.

Even Willard lifts his head to stare at him, and then slowly he slides an arm around his sister. “Do you mean that?” he asks, and there’s a flash of something in him that isn’t just nervousness.

“Yeah. I do. That’s what we do. Sherlock solves crimes, I save lives, Lestrade does all the technical stuff.”

“Sherlock Holmes.” Flora squashes herself into the armchair beside her brother, taking one of his hands between both of her finer ones. He moves over to accommodate her and she cleaves to his side; the only anchor in a sharply tilting world. Sherlock gives a little nod of deference. Flora looks at her brother, and then she speaks again for them both.

“He said you’re already investigating how Grandad vanished.”

“I am,” Sherlock replies.

Willard breaks in with a question, his tone shaking. He looks afraid. “Is he dead? Is he coming back?”

“We don’t know,” Lestrade replies, as softly as he can. “We’re looking. We don’t have anything for sure yet.”

“He’s dead,” Sherlock says. There’s a collective sharp inhale from the rest. Willard’s eyes show wide and pale in his face. “There’s no chance of him ever returning. I’m afraid you’ll have to go on in life without him.” Flora looks stunned. John closes his eyes and prays for strength.

Lestrade’s mouth is hanging open.

“Oh,” Willard says, before Lestrade can say anything to Sherlock for that bombshell.

“It’s OK,” Flora adds. She wipes her palms on her skirt. “Everyone’s been- We knew.” She turns her face to her brother, and he looks up, blinking hard against a spill of tears. “We knew everyone wasn’t being honest about it.”

She exhales.

Lestrade’s mouth flaps in a mix of outrage and frustration that, yet again, Sherlock’s managed to get in and out of a fix before anyone could do anything about it. It’s completely wrong according to

anything on paper, but part of Lestrade feels like perhaps it is just better to be honest.

“There’s still a chance,” he says, because he has to. “We still don’t know for certain, but yes. It’s likely... I’m sorry.”

“It’s ok,” Willard says, numbly. His hands shake under his sister’s. “It’s fine.”

“Is there going to be a funeral?”

“Maybe,” Lestrade says, shooting a quick glare at Sherlock, who keeps his mouth shut this time. “Look. Nothing is confirmed yet. When it is, either way, you’re going to get a visit from a social worker, and probably a lawyer who will work with you to sort everything out.”

“Willard’s clever,” Flora says. “We don’t want to live with fosters. Can they make him my guardian?”

“I don’t know,” Lestrade says, floundering. This isn’t his area of expertise. He wishes he’d bought Sally with him. She’s more on the ball with stuff involving what happens to the people on the periphery of a case after it’s come to an end.

“Try not to hold it against him,” Sherlock comments. “He doesn’t know much.”

Another tiny crack in Flora’s expression. Another near smile.

Lestrade looks annoyed. “Ok. I think we’ve probably stayed long enough,” he says, indicating to Sherlock to get up and move, please, or there would be repercussions.

Sherlock, for a split second, looks irked. He stands however, with some unnecessary drama, and makes his move towards the door.

“Bye,” John says, getting up as well.

Flora wriggles free of her brother’s chair and follows them, evading the query of the foster mother, Willard’s hand and everything else in order to do so.

“I want to say goodbye,” she says, impatient, slipping out the house between the lot of them and waiting in the front of the house, her expression stubborn. As Sherlock approaches, she moves to stop him.

“Let him,” John says, catching Lestrade’s sleeve. “Look, she’s got something she wants to say. Let her say it.”

“I’m not supposed to,” Lestrade objects, but he doesn’t move. John turns him on the doorstep and elbows him as the foster mother comes up to the door, looking surprised. “Flora doesn’t like orange juice,” John says to stymie any attempt to interrupt the girl. Behind the foster mother, they see Willard slip away up the stairs like a ghost.

“Oh. Oh dear, is there anything else I can do?” the woman wants to know.

John elbows Lestrade again.

“Uh, well. How are they getting on?”

Behind them, her socks getting dusty on the stretch of paving that amounts to the front garden, Flora is eyeing Sherlock up, with caution. “You’re supposed to be a genius,” she says reprovably after a moment.

“I am,” Sherlock replies with some affront. “I’m certainly not stupid enough to think you’re sad about losing your grandfather.”

She looks startled for a moment and then recovers, scratching at the side of her nose as she thinks.

“I know you read my website. You had it in your history on your iPad. You used it again today to find my phone number.”

She presses her lips together, and then squints at him, trying to judge him as an ally.

“I read that you’re a sociopath. That means you don’t care about people.”

Sherlock shrugs. “A high-functioning sociopath. I care about some people.”

Flora eyes him warily. “Which people?”

“Family. John. John’s family,” Sherlock says, uncertain himself of if he means ‘John’s’ as a contraction or a possessive.

“And you don’t care about anyone else at all?”

“No.”

“You like criminals.”

“No, I find them interesting. But I don’t care about them. I don’t care what happens to them.”

“You fight them. Like the doctor said.” She looks at him curiously. “Have you ever hurt one?”

“Yes. More than one. They hurt my people.”

Flora exhales and then suddenly her whole countenance turns tremulous.

“Good,” she says, gulping, “Good!”

Sherlock crouches so they are on the same eye-level but respectfully moves no closer.

“He was hurting Willard, wasn’t he?”

She nods, swallowing back sudden tears. “He wouldn’t ever stop. He was never going to stop and Willard said- he said- he was only staying- he was only not- to keep me-“ she hiccups. “And then I found out.”

“What did you find out, Flora?”

She beckons to him and he comes forward down on one knee, his head a little lower than hers and he listens as she puts a narrow hand on his shoulder and whispers in his ear.

“I found out there’s a panic room under the vault.”

Sherlock draws back slowly, the enormity of his suspicions becoming fact sinking in. “You noticed from the photographs you took of the house.”

“It’s all the wrong size everywhere,” she replies, nodding, her hair clinging in flyaways to his shirtfront. In something new and alien that he’s learnt from John and Bee, he smooths it back away from himself and she tucks it behind her ears.

“I looked up the architect. Everyone tells you things if you say it’s a school project.”

“People are fairly stupid, yes,” Sherlock agrees. Too bad that excuse wouldn’t have worked for John. Maybe they’d have been more forthcoming if he’d given them doe eyes and said please with a cherry on top. “Did you open it?” He would like to know how she figured out the code but there isn’t that much time to ask. Perhaps it had been something obvious; a birthday or such.

She looks at him, haunted, and whispers an inaudible yes. Sherlock can see it in his head without being told. It must be a flight of stairs down; the lights are no doubt automatic and the whole thing must be accessible from the vault as a means of double security. It was probably designed to allow time for the person using it to lift the valuable painting from the wall and secure it along with their life in the hidden room.

The room itself must be small and rectangular, running at a right angle to the stairs. He can picture it in his head, slotting in with what he already knows of the layout of the house and its general proportions. He blinks slowly, measuring her and adding her to the picture, a dozen months younger, a few inches shorter. In his mind’s eye he looks down over her head.

Years had passed since the time of death, so perhaps very little remains of the smell other than an unpleasant, lingering mustiness. It’s possible the body just dried out thanks to the air conditioning and limited range of insects. No coat. Few visible wounds. Sherlock blinks again. He can’t be sure but he’d put his money on a simple battering gone too far, or perhaps the mother died of strangulation. Battering feels more likely. Was it premeditated?

He blinks again, looking at Flora in the present day. She’d worked it all out alone, at this age, exactly how much of a shit her grandfather was.

Perhaps the mother had known about Willard’s fears, even back then. A panic. A row turned ugly, and then the room conveniently to hand. A secret place for stashing sins.

“Ah,” he breathes, standing and turning as he fixes the images in his head. The order of events. “Yes. I understand.” The kitchen knife taken from the block in the kitchen where people hardly cook, shelves of cookbooks only perused out of a kind of academic interest and never utilised. The inward swinging door of the vault providing a skinny girl a place to stand, a group of identically dressed girls with ponytails; in a moment of distress who would notice one extra or one fewer? The jagged edge of the picture along the top, the neater cut along the bottom where the killer had been too short to reach all the edges of the frame equally.

“How did you know the time?” he asks, turning back. She doesn’t understand him at first and then she does.

“I guessed he’d want to check at lunchtime.”

“Gravity,” Sherlock says aloud, his head filling in the gaps that Flora doesn’t have time to tell him about in detail right now. The door opens, Flora concealed in the space behind it. The old man sees the door to the panic room stairs ajar and the picture missing. He hastily closes the door to the vault behind him, steps forward to look for the picture. It would only have taken a hard push.

Stone steps; a wound. The surprise. He’d have gone down hard- that alone might have killed him. All she’d had to do then was throw the knife in after him and shut the room up again. After all, it had kept his murder quiet.

A step back against the wall of the vault; a few minutes and the door would open again with a new group of little girls. Just a matter of lying. Perhaps she’d even looked distressed.

And if she'd been wrong about the time? Sherlock doesn't ask anything more specific with Lestrade stood so close. He wonders though. She'd have waited like a ticking clock counting down to a deadline that must have been set at her brother's eighteenth birthday. She'd have watched, thought about it. He expects she'd have turned her thoughts to the CCTV next.

She beckons him down so she can whisper again. "You won't tell the police?"

"No."

She looks at him doubtfully, so he lifts his chin so that she can look him in the eyes. "High-functioning sociopath, remember? I don't care about people. I care about clever."

Slowly, her solemn little face splits with a smile. Sherlock smiles back. He presses a finger to his lips and straightens up.

"Look after Willard."

She nods, and then darts back towards the house, squeezing between Lestrade and the Foster Mother, clattering up the stairs. Relieved and worried at the same time, Lestrade cuts the conversation off and shoos John and Sherlock away from the house. As they reach the corner a window clatters open at the top of the house and Flora sticks her head out, waving frantically.

"Goodbye!" she calls. There's a shadow behind her and then she drops off the windowsill, caught by her brother.

"She likes my blog," Sherlock says, preempting Lestrade's flurry of questions. "She wants to be a detective."

"What?"

"She likes my blog," Sherlock repeats, because it's true and the thought makes him laugh.

"Your blog's got nothing on it," Greg points out, not believing him. "John's got the interesting blog." He snorts and falls into a sulk. "You'd better not be withholding evidence," he adds, glowering.

"I'd better not," Sherlock agrees, "But as I said, apparently, I have an admirer." He touches the back of his hand to his chin and strikes a brief pose. "My picture's been in the papers."

"Ha-ha-de-ha," Lestrade scoffs. "She really told you nothing?"

"She asked me to help," Sherlock says. "Although not in so many words." He folds his hands behind his back and considers how to proceed. He has no intention of betraying any trust in him to anything as troublesome as the legal system. He weighs up how great an error it would be to keep everything from John.

"I'll speak to Mycroft," he concludes aloud. Lestrade looks bilious. "Unless you object."

"No," Lestrade says. He coughs. "You might as well waste his time as much as mine. I'm heading back to the yard."

He turns his back on them and trudges off towards his car.

"We're not getting a lift home then," John mutters. He waits until Lestrade's BMW has growled away down the road and then fixes his best stare on Sherlock. They get a taxi and Sherlock holds

up a hand.

“I’ll tell you,” he says before John can nag. After all, John isn’t police and that’s all he promised. He does so, John’s face softening and sickening as he speaks, though he asked few questions and doesn’t interrupt. When Sherlock finishes, he sits back heavily in his seat, appalled.

“Jesus. We have to tell someone, Sherlock.”

“I said I’d speak to Mycroft. Get the bodies removed quietly, and the vault tidied up.”

John wipes a palm over his face. “No, Sherlock, we need to tell the people dealing with the kids.”

“And bring more ruin on their lives than they’ve already suffered? Put the boy up in court to detail the horrors of his childhood before a wall of judging strangers. Separate them and have her picked and prodded at to find out what is wrong with her?”

“She’s ten years old and she planned a murder in cold blood.”

“She’s clever, and she was quite rightfully angry. I might have done the same, in her shoes.”

“If someone had hurt Mycroft?”

Sherlock hesitates, like he hadn’t taken the train of thought so far. “Yes,” he says finally. “I would certainly have.”

John digests this, uncomfortable. He cannot say the same. He cannot say the same even based on a life lived with far closer proximity to Flora’s situation, and the thought makes him feel mixed. Awful. Would have allowed Harry to be abused so much as that, and done nothing? He’d done nothing. It ignites an old guilty war in him; the worst sides of himself playing devil’s advocate against each other, and on top of that, the platitudes of therapy old and new.

It wasn’t your fault, John. You were a child.

You couldn’t have noticed.

No, I knew. I did know. I just went along with it.

You loved your own abuser.

He wasn’t an abuser. He didn’t hit. It wasn’t anything disgusting.

He played with emotions. That’s equally as bad.

How? How is that as bad? I grew up with kids who’d had bad. I never had bad. I’ve got nothing to be sore about.

It’s unfair. I was robbed.

That bastard.

I want my Daddy.

John closes his eyes. Grapples. Experience shows him where to find the secure handholds on this particular rock wall of emotion. “What about Willard?”

Sherlock seems surprised. “What do you mean?”

“I mean, he’s- Jesus, Sherlock. He’ll need help. Counselling. Something. It’s not going to go away just because the man’s dead.” It doesn’t. John knows and knows and knows this. The situation, even ended, goes on. It fades and renews, comes back when you least expect it. It sits in your head like a parasite, feeding on all the good things. Influencing your choices, your thoughts, your behaviour for the rest of your life until you find a way to ignore it.

“What about Flora? What happens when she stops being angry and realises what she’s done?”

He sees Sherlock think hard. Sees him lay an internal eye not only on the basics but, yet again, the side of things that typically fall into his blind spot.

“I don’t know...” Sherlock admits. John exhales.

“Speak to Mycroft,” he relents. “If she’s clever... maybe the government can spare a bob or two to see them sorted out.”

“I threw a man out of a window. You shot a cabbie. We didn’t tell,” Sherlock says, still trying to rationalise it all.

John gives a little laugh. “I know. But we were already...” He gestures between them, back and forth. “This.”

You were already the worst you and I was already a shit version of myself.

We were already us.

“I hate cases with children,” Sherlock says, in lieu of more direct agreement. The taxi pulls up outside the relative haven of the house on Baker Street. “Write about this one.”

“Are you sure?”

“The non-incriminating facts,” Sherlock nods, opening the door. “Tell the world I couldn’t solve it.”

John climbs out, considering. He already has a title in mind. “Will it help?” he wants to know.

“Of course,” Sherlock says, feeling for his keys. He would like to close the door to the house behind them as soon as possible. He wants to lie on the sofa, eat John’s lousy cooking and let Bee shove her grubby, spit-slimed fingers in his ears and try to sabotage his violin playing. He wants to close the curtains and bundle her into a crib and tell her stories that are nothing but fiction.

“The world’ll forget Flora in favour of ridiculing my failure.”

John closes the door on the street softly. “Let’s just get some dinner,” he says, instead of ‘yes’.

From the Blog of Doctor John Watson:

30th August

The Case of the Slashed Isaac

I’d just finished up a fun day at the park when Sherlock arrived with a new case to investigate. It was Sherlock’s favourite type of case. A man had disappeared in a locked room. More than just a locked room, a vault.

He used it to keep a sketch in of a famous Italian painter's masterpiece showing the sacrifice of Isaac. We watched the CCTV footage with Lestrade and it showed him entering the vault and the door closing. It's supposed to close as a security measure so he was basically locked in for about five minutes. Anyway, when the door opened again, both he and the priceless painting were missing.

We were allowed to visit the scene and see where the Sacrifice of Isaac had been slashed from the frame. There was a blood stain on the floor but no real clues that I could see. Sherlock had a lot of ideas about what had happened, and he was very sure the man had been murdered, but there was no way to prove how it had been done.

The man didn't have any enemies, so there's no suspects either. Personally I think he probably faked it all and decided to leave London. He was looking after his grandkids. Maybe he just got fed up with it.

It was certainly one of the weirdest case I think we've ever done. Sherlock's really annoyed he hasn't been able to solve it yet.

Also when we got home I was reminded of that case with the elephant in the room. Bee's been really keen on giving presents lately. Every time I turn around, I'm given Elbant. Or he's just there. Looking at me. Or she's giving him to Sherlock. It never ends. I'm even off out to the theatre tonight with Mrs. H. We got some free tickets as a perk. Guess what show they are for?

The Elephant Man.

4 comments

Ha Ha Ha! Too bad mate!

Mike Stamford 30 August

It was a good show though. I enjoyd it.

Mrs Hudson 30 August

Enjoyed.

Mrs Hudson 30 August

Elephants is it?

Anonymous 31 August

The summer ends in a wave of warm, sticky nights. John's bare feet cling to the floorboards as he walks; he has to leave the windows open or the air in the bedroom gets suffocating. The temperature dips somewhat after dark but the confines of the buildings, the traffic and the concrete are slow to give up the heat of the day.

John washes up lethargically after dinner; the baby snores; Mrs. Hudson sits downstairs in a gentle puffy dream of old times dancing. The pipes to the shower throb and then cut out. He hears Sherlock emerge, tread softly about with a hum under his breath and no doubt an itch for nicotine in his veins. John emerges from the kitchen, drying his hands and finds Sherlock in the half-light of the living room, pouring through his manuscripts.

He's left his shirt behind and the towel dangling around his neck catches the drips from his hair but makes only a paltry effort to make a modest man of him. Given his track record, John supposes he should be glad he put his pyjama bottoms on.

"All yours," Sherlock says, meaning the bathroom. He's made his fingers sticky with rosin already, idly feeling at his violin.

"Moths got at your shirts, did they?" John comments. Sherlock's arms are pale. His surgical scars are fawn and beige and russet and not at all the same colour as his nipples. John finds himself averting his gaze. The last time he saw Sherlock so deshabille, the man had been oozing his way back to life in a hospital bed.

"It's warm," Sherlock complains, though there's a sudden wave of self-consciousness in him. He scrubs at the nape of his neck with the towel and unfolds it a turn so that it covers more of his shoulders.

John sits, not in his chair but on the sofa, a plate of crackers balanced on the arm, and the newspaper spread across his knee. He tries to focus on the articles, but the gentle notes of Sherlock's fingers touching over the strings break his concentration even though they are so quiet.

"Play that one you were working on," John says, politicians' names swimming before his eyes. He can't remember the tune. He remembers the sudden drop to the floor when Sherlock had let go, instead.

Sherlock feels out a few notes, hesitant; they are the same song and John nods slowly in recognition and turns the page. This is normal, for them. Both of them make it so by force of will alone.

The curtains and windows are open but the air is slow to move into the flat, and John feels like their own respiration is preventing it; they're breathing too much, too heavily. He doesn't dare shift on the sofa, merely lays a hand on the newsprint and tries to follow someone else's words about someone else's problems in a wider world than this. Sherlock presses the bow to the strings. He plays the waltz.

It's a moment before John looks up. Sherlock's eyes are fixed on the frets of the violin and his own fingers slowly lifting and descending. He leans into the instrument, hair limp against his temples and starting to creep back into curls at the drying edges. His belly rises with each bar, and John can see something of the neglected dancer in his posture, though Sherlock's still not let him in on that secret. John only looks for a few heartbeats; it's more than enough.

He has a half-formed thought about Sherlock in the same lazy, intuitive way he has always done, but it's overshadowed at once by the reflection in the mirror. It's only a glimpse, not enough to be sure, but the man's back does not match his front. John's mouth opens ever so slightly; he doesn't comment or make a noise. He just swallows and it's that which brings Sherlock's attention to the fact that he's seen. John looks down at the paper at once.

The surgical scars are neat and small, just a touch livid in colour. The ones on his shoulders are older and paler, the dirty sun-tan brown of laceration, untidy across his shoulders, like he's been

scribbled on.

John's never seen them before.

Sherlock abridges the tune and ends it before he leaves the room. John doesn't look up again, nor does he embarrass Sherlock by making any display that he's noticed. Sherlock knows that he has. He knows that John knows this fact too.

He hears Sherlock moving upstairs and the clatter of coat-hangers, and when Sherlock reappears the towel is gone and the scars are under the cotton of a t-shirt, and he stays for a while in the kitchen making tea. John says nothing until he returns.

"It's a good melody."

"Hm. Getting there," Sherlock says, vague and distant. He stands with his back to John, contemplating the windows and the long sunset.

John turns the page of the newspaper, stares at photos of strangers he doesn't care about. "You should finish it," he says.

Sherlock gives a little 'ah' of understanding. "One day," he replies, quietly lifting the lid of his laptop. He sits, the screen lighting his face, and begins to type. They say no more. John doesn't ask what he's writing. Sherlock doesn't ask what he's reading.

Neither of them could easily answer the other anyway.

Sherlock goes upstairs with the dying of the sun, and John tidies up alone, all the lights lit to scare away monsters and questions. There are a lot of things that Sherlock isn't telling him, John reflects. He puts the cups into the cupboard and closes it. Then again, there are things he has never told Sherlock. Upstairs he hears the faint creak of Sherlock's mattress, and wonders if he is sleeping.

John turns out the lights, checks that Bee is soundly sleeping and when he goes to bed he dreams...

....of wadis full of blood-warm water that rises up to his naval. The rest of his skin is hot and dry with dust, but the water, iridescent with oil, slips easily between his thighs. There are men on the banks with no names and no faces, but they carry curling knives with a silent air of menace and so he shoots each of them once in the head.

At the end of the wadi, a major he doesn't know is wallowing. He tells John he's shot fifty-four without wasting any ammo, and as a result, he's won the grand prize. John's angry. He doesn't want any prize.

"It's an elephant," the Major tells him, and it's too big to carry. John supposes he'll take it home for Bee; perhaps she'd like it. Perhaps it'd make up for leaving her to join the army again. He finds a photo in his pocket and remembers that she's ten now. She doesn't look familiar any more. He must bring her the elephant, he just needs to find a truck to transport it.

The nearest trucks are on the wrong side of an opium factory and he creeps through the empty buildings. The sticky drug is everywhere, coating his knees and hands in warm, musky tar as he crawls through improbably small gaps. He finds a barracks of American soldiers lolling about sunbathing, all high from the opium. John's annoyed and worried. They should be firing across the wadi. There are other men out there in the waters relying on them. The soldiers take fistfuls of opium from the plastic barrels and their hands are so coated with it that they look like they're all wearing black gloves.

“Get up,” he urges one of them, who grins and strokes a mucky hand down his own bare chest. That’s how this opium gets you high; you rub it straight into your skin. John watches the opium tar mix with the man’s sweat to make an orange dribble, and wonders if that’s why they all look so tanned.

John tries to find the officer in charge. There’s one man in uniform in a post at the top of the building, leaning on a Jimpy machine gun. John climbs to reach him, up and up the burning brick, but finds nothing but a bedroom at the top. He pushes dangling scarves to one side with a frown and goes to take his watchman’s post at the window by the Jimpy. It’s hot and the men below flop like sea lions over the courtyard.

“Stand down,” crackles John’s radio. “All clear, over.”

“Roger,” John says, wondering why they’re speaking so strangely, but he obeys, sitting on the windowsill and drinking from his flask. It’s red wine.

“Where’d you get that?” the radio asks.

“Came in my post from Mrs. Holmes. They’re in California.”

“That’s nice.”

In the distance, a thunderstorm looms. It’s going to rain hard, he thinks, and flood the wadis.

“That’ll keep the bastards out of mischief for a bit. They’ll be running around to get the harvest in.”

He leans back on someone, he’s not sure who, but obviously whoever was sent to relieve him of his watch. After a moment he realises they have the same voice as the radio. There’s a hand and he doesn’t pay attention to what it’s doing, though he does note that it’s clean and pale.

It’s hot.

John takes his shirt off and waits for the touch of lips on the back of his neck.

Chapter End Notes

NOTES:

Chapter title comes from the song [‘Damage’ by Jimmy Eat World](#).

I like to think Anthea sent them tickets to [Casa Valentina](#), but she probably had the sense not to be so obviously or tastelessly cheeky.

Lime trees, despite the name, don’t grow limes. They do grow flowers, which you can use to make tea though I can’t imagine what it tastes like. Limes get disconcertingly sticky for such an innocent looking tree. At any rate, they are all over London.

This is a [mint Cornetto](#), a [Magnum](#), a [Fab](#) and a [Nobbly Bobbly](#) respectively. These are the ice-creams of my childhood, though I never really understood the fuss about Cornettos. Nobby Bobbly’s are kind of great, but if you ask me, the king of ice lollies is the amazing [Feast](#). Also if you didn’t find Sherlock telling John that his is a ‘Magnum’, I don’t know what to do with you. We all know John Watson is a Magnum

man.

A 'wadi' is an irrigation channel or river bed, that is typically dry outside of the wet season. A 'Jimpy' is a General Purpose Machine Gun (GPMG), sometimes also referred to as a Gympy or a Gimpy.

Part 11: I Am What I Am

Chapter Summary

"You're the one who once told me," John says, putting his hands on James' shoulders regardless, "That you'd seen bigger and uglier men cry unashamed."

"It's true," Sholto says, thickly. He grips at John's upper arm. "But I'm pretty damn ugly these days."

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Part 11: I Am What I Am.

It's the middle of September and his daughter is fast on the road to two; her legs far more robust, and the roundness of her babyhood is starting to fall away. The nights start to close in, the mornings become dim and sluggish and then on one of them, John receives a letter. He reads through it, and then shows it to Sherlock.

"What do you make of this?"

Sherlock peruses it. The handwriting is scratchy but generally legible. The missive however, is short.

"Not enough time to write," Sherlock comments, equally curious.

"Sholto's retired- he's got nothing but time." John stares at the words like they might spell it out for him. "His writing's got better, so it's not that..." he mutters. His brows crease up with concern. "I don't like it."

"Show me the other letters?" Sherlock unfolds himself from the armchair and holds a hand out. John filters through the pile of correspondence shoved under the clock on the mantle and then just passes it to him in a jumble.

Sherlock leafs through, creating piles on the table.

"Letter- mine, letter-yours, notes-mine, bill- gas, death threat-mine, bill- murray, ridiculous Christmas card to Bee- you should probably do something with that, letter- yours, letters..."

He unfolds the letters from Sholto and splays them out on the coffee table, comparing, one long forefinger deliberately landing on certain words, mind at work. He frowns.

"Not good?" John asks, worried. Sherlock twists his mouth.

"Bit not good," he allows.

“Shit.”

John moves newspapers and storybooks out of his armchair and sits, thinking hard. He’s been in touch with Sholto since he left training. He’d had no one else he wanted to write to, and Sholto had asked. And so help him, it had made a difference. Not to be the man who didn’t receive anything when the post was handed out.

After passing out from Sandhurst as a captain, Sholto had written to him to wish him luck in Helmand, and John has long since lost that letter, but it had meant a lot to him. Harry hadn’t been able to write and all his other friends had been otherwise engaged with either medicine or army work elsewhere. Those that had been at Sandhurst had mutually congratulated him, but there had been nothing but that one slip of paper to really commemorate his success tangibly. John had lost touch with Sholto a little after that thanks to the rigours of war, but the Major had resurfaced like a cork the moment John had been discharged from the army.

Distance of time and land and pain had not allowed it to become a close correspondence again, and it was all John had been able to manage to punch out a few sentences to let Sholto know he was alive, if not living. But the messages had been there. Sholto had insisted. He’d found time and method through the hectic life in Afghanistan to have the presence of mind to hassle one other soldier languishing through physical therapy in London.

Sholto had never taken to the blog much, but he’d e-mailed on and off in those days between John meeting Sherlock and the disaster which had reversed Sholto’s fortunes.

He’d come to John’s wedding.

“How bad?” John asks.

Sherlock quietly folds up the letters and purses his lips. John already knows the answer.

“Shit.”

Another spinning plate teetering. Another ball about to go bouncing off into the dust.

“I’ll have to go see him.” John scratches at his eyebrow as he thinks. “If I write, he’ll just—” John’s not sure. That’s the problem. Over the years, Sholto’s always whistled and John has, however reluctantly, answered. He’s not sure the opposite could be said to be true. It’s not written in their hierarchy. “What do you think it is?”

“Recovery,” Sherlock suggests. John nods. It’s the most obvious thing he can think of. Sholto’s always refused to have his own Ella; he’s shut himself away in the confines of his old family home, security up to the rafters, and John can’t imagine what on earth he does up there all day. Fight against the scarring, probably.

Burns rehabilitation is gruelling, John knows. You don’t prescribe six weeks and some exercises to do at home; it is a tunnel entered on day one with barely a glimpse of an end in sight.

“I’ll ask him if I can come up,” John says, thinking aloud.

Sherlock steepled his hands before his face, unreadable and then says. “Don’t ask. Tell him a day and a time to expect you and just go, if you’re going.”

If feels a little wrong to John, to impose like that, but Sherlock has a point. If he asks, Sholto will probably deflect. If he just marches in, there’s a chance the other will buckle in and allow it.

“It’s only going to be a week. Four days,” John looks at him. “Three days.” He exhales. “Bee won’t be able to handle more than that.”

“No,” Sherlock agrees. He gets up from his chair and goes into the kitchen, filling the kettle. John doesn’t like how quiet he is. He follows.

“Sherlock.”

“I’m thinking.”

“Ok, but is there a problem?” John has to force himself not to fold his arms or block the doorway. Sherlock puts two mugs on the counter, drops a teabag into each.

“No,” he says finally. “Three days?”

“I’ll aim for three days,” John says. He doesn’t promise. It might be less.

“I have a project I have been unable to work on,” Sherlock replies. He drums his fingers on the counter. “The space would be welcome.”

It’s difficult for John not to be offended by this, or disappointed. “Right.” He frowns. “Is it a case?”

Is it dangerous?

Is this a danger night?

“It’s merely a project,” Sherlock replies, holding up a hand. “I’ll make use of the child-free space to reorganise the bedroom upstairs.” He taps his temple. “Experiments.”

“Ok,” John says, with reservation. In his head he’s already pinged a text to Lestrade and Mycroft and Molly. Don’t, he begs silently, get into trouble if I’m not here to get you out of it.

“Really, John, there’s no need to fuss,” Sherlock says, with more of his usual aplomb. He drowns the teabags and mashes them irreverently with a spoon. “Save it for the Major.”

John takes his mug. “Yeah, except he hates it too.”

Sherlock laughs at that, just a little.

How much can one realistically accomplish in three days, Sherlock asks himself. The tube veers off from the platform with John lost inside it, spitting lightning across the tracks in sharp blue bursts. Sherlock turns and takes himself to the other platform.

In three days. The clock in his mind is already running down the numbers. The first thing he can do is get the worst unpleasantness out of the way. No doubt John is already thumbing out worrywart messages to Lestrade and certain overbearing brothers. Sherlock puts his hands in his pockets and feels the thrum of London in the crooks of his elbows.

It’s still warm, for September. The Belstaff is sweltering and he regrets not taking a taxi, but he hadn’t been able to resist the lure of seeing John right up till the last moment. It will speak against him in John’s fight for peace of mind while he’s away, but Sherlock’s got a poor track record with resisting temptation.

'I need to be better at this,' Sherlock chides himself. 'Three days to learn. Begin.'

He slips from the train at the next overground station and does a convoluted dogleg by bus out into the suburbs. The tree-lined streets depress him with their lack of imagination.

He alights, mind whirring, and from there it's a short taxi ride to the centre. The driver glances at him; the bloom of sweat around his hair line and the way he stays hunched in the backseat, eyes fixed out of the window. The man says nothing, but Sherlock can read his question anyway.

Visiting, or checking in?

The lack of luggage is meaningless. Sometimes people just break.

He made the appointment that morning, with a soft-spoken receptionist who greets him at the desk and lends him a pen to sign in. The ink jerks from the rollerball unevenly, leaving his name with minute blank spots all over it as he scrawls it in the guestbook. The sight of it sticks in his vision, even after blinking. Sherlock Holmes in blue, maggot-eaten.

Dead men tell no-

His head's getting jumbled already.

"There's tea and coffee and water, just here," the receptionist tells him, steering him towards the lounge. "I'll just find out where Billy is for you; in the meantime, feel free to just relax here."

Sherlock forgets to thank him.

He sits on the edge of an armchair, sober, and focusses on the barest facts of the room. It's clean. It's calm. It's what he's making Mycroft pay for, which no doubt the other man considers a snip in order to have Sherlock over a barrel when it comes to calling in favours for the next year. There are signs of wear, but only of the ordinary sort and whilst the tangible atmosphere of the place is one of medical mass-catering, it doesn't feel like a hospice.

Mycroft at least has been kind enough, to be stingy enough, not to put Billy in the same rehabilitation centre. This place is new to Sherlock, and yet it is awfully, deeply familiar. It's in the feel of the armchair and the colour scheme. It's something innate in the hush of the place. He shrugs against his shirt, his skin crawling, and wishes that he hadn't come.

"Mr. Holmes?" it's one of the staff, not the receptionist. She smiles. "Billy's just out in the garden for you. Just through the doors at the end," she points. "Would you like me to show you?"

"No," Sherlock stands. "I can find it, thank you."

"Alright then. Just let us know if you need anything."

Us. Not me. She can't promise she'll be around when she needs him, but the staff are there; like a hive connected by beepers. Where one is absent, another crawls in to take their place.

The garden is one of those high-impact low maintenance gardens that are designed to look good with a certain amount of artful gravel and topiary, but no unnecessary planting. It's walled against the spread of suburbia, harkening back to the centre's old days as a house of note with servants and a kitchen garden. In the corner where they would have kept the bees, Billy is waiting for him.

Sherlock would rather take his chances with the bees, if he's honest. Wiggins gives no outward reaction to the sight of him, which in itself is a reaction.

‘Still angry,’ Sherlock thinks. Po-faced, he sits opposite him. The table is rickety and small; chipped white enamel over cast iron and greening around the lion’s feet. Wiggins is on one of the matching chairs, knees pulled up, but hood down. It’s summer in this corner too, despite the frosty atmosphere between them. He looks down, frowning and Sherlock can see the name label sewn in round his neck. Reduced to Billy again.

Sherlock says nothing. Billy’s not one for small talk and he himself loathes it. They sit, mutually silent and mutually respectful, like a pair of alley cats too prudent to spat.

Billy’s clearly been camped outside for as long as he can contrive to be. There’s an empty mug set down by the chair, cold now with the residue of sugar making a syrupy crust in the dregs, and a dog-eared paperback from the centre’s library, ignominiously titled ‘A Bullet for Cinderella’. On the table lies a square board, a slice of MDF, repurposed as a games board, with a handful of poker chips by it.

Sherlock frowns at it. “What this?”

“Merels,” Billy says, “You ever play it?”

“No.”

“Made that. We did a workshop thing.” Billy picks at a nail. “Making stuff.” There are notes scrawled in the margins of the paperback, Sherlock notes. Dots in squares. Some white, some black. Billy’s been entertaining himself calculating patterns.

Something pings in Sherlock’s mind palace, supplying him with a name.

“Nine Men’s Morris.”

Billy grunts in acknowledgement, stacking the chips. Half are white, half are black. Simple cut rounds of wood, daubed with acrylic.

“Proto-chess.”

“‘Spouse. ‘cept all the pieces is equal.”

Sherlock picks up one of the black rounds of wood and rolls it back and forth on the rim of the table. After a moment, Billy pushes the rest of the black pieces towards him and lays down the first of the white chips on one dot on one edge of one square. So the game begins.

They alternate, one white, one black, one white, one black until all the pieces have been allotted a dot on the edge of a square or a corner. There are more dots than pieces; the aim is to muddle yours around a space at a time to make three in a row, or a ‘mill’. Once a mill has been achieved, one of the opponent’s pieces is removed from the board.

Billy has more experience with the set up, though Sherlock quickly spots where and how to take advantage, and they begin on roughly even footing, albeit with Billy a little in the lead. They play a fast game. Neither needs to stare at the board to decide his next move for any length of time and Sherlock’s natural quick-wittedness is counterbalanced by Billy’s endless margins of diagrams.

Sherlock proves a better first-time player than either Molly or Lestrade but Billy eventually whittles him down to three pieces.

“You can jump now, if you want to,” Bill offers, charitably.

“Why would I want to?” Sherlock looks irritably at the board. If he jumped his pieces, he could win. It feels like cheating, though, and the stubborn side of him would play the game through with as much difficulty as possible, just to prove... something.

Billy snorts. “Because you’re losing.”

Sherlock frowns. “Play,” he insists.

Billy watches him for a moment, and then breaks one of his mills in a challenge. He has to admit, he’s curious. Molly plays with caution; defensive. She stops him (or tries to stop him) from making mills in the first place, and focusses on breaking up the ones he’s got rather than forming her own. It makes for a longer game, but she rarely wins. Lestrade rushes right through to this last stage, enjoying the last ditch dash around; knocking out Billy’s pieces until inevitably, he loses.

Billy’s not played against someone who could win, and yet deliberately sabotages himself.

They both see the point where Sherlock loses. All Billy has to do is slide one piece into a run of three and he can remove one of Sherlock’s black rounds from the board.

“Not bad,” Billy says, leaving them where they sit.

“Best of three?”

“Nah. It’s a bit late in the day.”

Sherlock looks up, frowning. Billy seems amused; in fact, he is.

Billy looks up at the sky. It’s clouding over, and the short day is indeed closing in. He lets his knees fall out to either side of the chair and takes a deep breath. The wind stirs the ivy across the wall, making the leaves shiver. The light somewhere between the unseen sun and the clouds grows muddled and leaves him with skittering lights in his eyes; synapses and cones flicking on and off inside of his biology; like glitter in mid-air.

The warm air caught inside his sweater breathes out against his throat as he shifts, and he thinks of the people who brought him to this, and the ghosts.

“We’ve not got much in common,” Billy concludes after a very long moment.

“No,” Sherlock all but scoffs. He’s always felt that and he runs with the usual instinct only this time it feels like it lands off-centre somehow.

“You’re a bleeding’ disaster,” Billy throws back. He puts his feet on the floor, rolling his ankles inside of his trainers like he’s testing for stability and then he gets up, collecting the mug. “You’ve got no control.” He looks at Sherlock like he suddenly sees him as all too human.

Sherlock opens his mouth to argue automatically, and Billy just shrugs.

“Think about it,” he advises. “You haven’t. S’alright. Not like you have to be ashamed of that.” He stands a moment, a touch lost. There’s a gulf between them, and at the same time, too much similarity. The difference is that Billy had thought the things they shared would lie in his own future, not their already trespassed miserable pasts. The present is a whole different country altogether.

“Don’t worry,” Billy suggests. “I got people to look out for me.”

“Molly Hooper? Lestrade?”

“Why not? They were good enough for you.”

Sherlock cannot say that he likes this; it’s something of a shock to him and down inside he feels the start of a little-boy whine: ‘but they’re mine!’. He stares at Billy, this cuckoo situation, and wonders if the whole world has been tipped upside down. He’d not realised how much he’d relished Billy’s respect for him; the casual godhood bestowed upon him.

Billy tips the chips from the table into his pockets and tucks the board under one arm, the paperback under the other.

“They’re gonna let me out in a few weeks,” he says, as though commenting on the weather. “Whole new life and all that shit.”

Sherlock puts his hands in his pockets and stands, interested in this new side of Billy despite the uneasy feeling about his own life in the pit of his stomach.

“Oh?”

“They’re gonna help me with a flat, which’ll be shit, and a job, which’ll be shit. So if you want any spyin’ done, let me know ‘cause I could probably use the cash.”

“I see.”

“D’you think they’d let me be a pharmacist?”

“Probably not.”

“Figures,” Billy says without bitterness. He pushes open the door to the centre with his foot. “That’s the problem with cocaine. It pays really fucking well.”

“Not if you’re consuming the profits,” Sherlock says, from experience.

“I don’t fancy prison again, anyway. I’m too cute,” Billy looks at him deadpan. Sherlock nearly chokes.

“Please.”

They stand in the lobby, still cautious as cats but with a mutual agreement between them not to try putting one over each other. Finally, Sherlock extends a hand. Billy looks at it. Slowly, he wipes his palm across his sweater and puts his hand in Sherlock’s. From the look on his face, he had neither expected it, nor ever experienced it before. “Good luck,” Sherlock says, simply.

“Tell Mycroft I’ll pay ’im back.”

“Tell him that and he’ll have you working for him the rest of your life.”

Billy looks around at the hard-wearing stain proof carpets and neutral walls. “I could do a darn sight worse.” He breaks into another look of faint amusement.

Sherlock pauses before leaving. “Does Lestrade really come here?”

“Yeah, he’s a good bloke, but he’s pretty hopeless, isn’t ‘e?” Billy shrugs. He points. “Door’s that way.”

“I know,” Sherlock frowns, allowing himself to be irked. “All of that.” He can’t seem to leave though; the place has got under his skin and it feels like he’s waiting for permission, or to say something, or to hear something yet unsaid. Billy clocks him with a look.

“Good luck,” he says, and then, in case Sherlock thinks he’s wholly forgiven adds, “Bugger off and get on with it.”

As Sherlock’s signing out the receptionist smiles at him. It’s the same dried up ballpoint, but Sherlock uses it with more care and leaves his name written in a single indelible line.

“He’s doing really well,” the receptionist comments. “He’s got a really good support network; it makes all the difference.”

“Yes,” Sherlock demurs, passing the man back the pen. He glances at the book. There are familiar names in it. Molly’s rounded girlish, writing; Lestrade’s scrawling. He remembers weeks dragging by punctuated only by a regiment of meals and health care, one visit from his parents and one from Mycroft per week and his own unending silence. He can’t regret it. Even now, he feels like there’s nothing that could be put into words.

Billy’s quiet, but he talks.

Sherlock remembers the sound of 221B with nobody in it.

“It makes a lot of difference,” Sherlock agrees.

It’s two hours by train between Baker Street and Norwich. Not for the first time, John repents his inability to drive. Or at least, drive legally. Bee amuses herself by crawling laps over and under the seats in a tiring game of hide and seek, and looking out of the window. When she gets bored, he distracts her with food, but it’s a long trip and John’s sick of trains by the end of it. It’s too bad that this isn’t the end of the journey. Sherlock had googled the route by public transport for him before they’d left and, with the typical reliability of rural buses, it had amounted to a charming eighteen hour dogleg from London to the Norfolk moors.

John had nearly called it quits right there and then, only he’d thought about it a little more, swallowed his pride and picked up the phone. He’d called in the favour nominally on Sholto’s behalf, but Bill Murray is waiting for him at Norwich station mostly for John’s sake.

He finds Bill in the carpark, leaning on the bonnet of his car and yawning in the bright early-winter sun. He startles at the sight of John and grins, clasping him into a hug that knocks the breath out of John’s lungs. “Watters!”

“Murray.” Bill’s hardly changed at all, John thinks. The sight of him throws him right back to training, back when John had been through it once and Bill was just starting; John showing him the ropes and Bill reintroducing him to his sense of humour. Bill claps John between the shoulder blades and cheerfully bundles him towards the car.

“Jesus, Watson. Check you out.”

“You’ve bought a sports car,” John says, eyeing it. It’s bright, racer-boy red. It’s got a trident on the front grill.

“You’re welcome. It’s a four seater and I’ve got an ejector seat for the wee one,” Bill points out, goggling slightly at the amount of luggage John has. So much for army training. Most of it’s Bee’s. “Sling your stuff in, if it’ll fit. How the fuck are you? Look at your face.”

“What about my face?”

“It’s too bloody sensible.” Bill laughs and drops himself into the driver’s seat.

“Stop swearing, she parrots everything these days.” John gets her settled in the car seat and securely clipped in.

“Does she?” Bill swivels in his seat, props his sunglasses up on his head and treats Bee to his most charming smile. To John’s annoyance she tucks her hands up and gives him a coy smile with all her eyelashes right back. “What a princess,” Bill says admiringly. “Aren’t you the business, love? Can you say ‘bugger’?”

“Bill!”

Bill gurns until the baby laughs and then fastens his seatbelt as John prods him to put his eyes forward.

“Everyone in? Ready for a nice country run?” Bill slaps around at the radio, messes with his phone until the bluetooth picks up and the music starts. He throws his arm around the back of John’s headrest as he backs out of the parking space. John slithers about on the leather seating. It’s heated.

“How the hell did you afford this?” John wants to know. As far as he’s aware, nurses’ salaries haven’t hit this kind of level yet.

“It’s my girl’s,” Bill admits. “I’ve got a Peugeot.”

“Your wife has a sports car?” John feels at the interior. It’s really damn nice.

“My wife,” Bill tells him, quite seriously. “Has got the lot.”

They hit the road. John pushes his chair back as far as it’ll go and stretches his legs out. Bill croons along to the music, drums on the dashboard and enjoys himself. John’s yet to see Bill in a situation involving music where he doesn’t enjoy himself.

“Stuff been quiet in London, then?” Bill asks presently as they get out of the town centre and onto the long stretch of road towards the coast.

“On and off,” John replies. He looks back using the rearview mirror and notes that Bee has dropped off for a nap.

“She’s good,” Bill comments.

“She has her moments,” John answers, recalling a week or two previous which had featured a blistering tantrum that had started right outside the house and continued all the way to nursery, inspired by John cruelly refusing to let her pick up a crisp packet out of the gutter to see if there were crisps in it. He tells Bill this.

Bill laughs his head off.

John feels oddly self-conscious. He’s not been in touch very often with Bill since his discharge; e-mails now and then, and Bill is a huge fan of the rude novelty greeting card, but it’s been rather

one-sided. Bill doesn't seem to be aware of this at all, simply picking up the thread of things where they'd left it, but John can't help feeling awkward.

Bill chatters, not minding John's quiet. He talks about the new clinic he's working at, his final tour, his interest in trying a year overseas with Médecins Sans Frontières. He talks about his wife, whose job John can't make head or tails of. Something to do with the technical development side of plastic surgery and the patenting office, and whatever it is, it pays ludicrous amounts of money.

Finally the conversation turns to the end of the road.

"How is he then?" Bill asks, pouring himself forward on the dashboard as they creep out onto a blind country corner. John puts one hand on the door and isn't sure how to respond, exactly.

"I don't know," he says finally, "I mean, his letters suddenly got very short but his writing's still good- not shaky, I mean. So it's probably...not physical. You know as much as I do."

"Not really," Bill answers, squinting down the lane in consternation. "We were never that close. He was just the Major to us."

"You don't hear from him?" John's surprised to hear it. He'd not expected them to be close, but to never have heard from him? It implies that he himself is the only one Sholto's been in touch with. It resonates true with him, but equally it worries him.

"No," Bill says carefully. "Never have done. I reckon we didn't have too much to talk about." They pull out from the corner and begin a winding series of unmarked lanes. He shrugs. "I mean, I liked him. Like him. He was a good Major and I don't think he deserved what he got after the op went wrong. I'd have pitched in to help him, but he never asked and I thought it would offend him if I offered. Besides," he sighs. "I hadn't seen him for years by that point. You know how it is."

John knows how it usually is. You move on to a different group post-training, you start your job for real and the men who helped you to get there typically become just a set of memories to pop up only at big events. For him, it had been a little different, due to his own isolation.

"He's shut himself off," John says. "Just him and his staff in his house; he came to the wedding but ran right back up here straight after."

"Yeah, well someone stabbed him, didn't they," Bill says. "Did you come up and see him?"

"No," John says with regret. "There was the honeymoon and then Sherlock wasn't doing well, and then he got shot and then Mary was going to have the baby and Sherlock was leaving, and then he wasn't and--"

"It's a long story," Bill concludes. "Still, it'll be good to see him. Wonder if he'll remember me."

"He will," John answers, frowning. "Of course he will. You produced a record amount of vomit across the Brecon Beacons. He couldn't forget."

Bill laughs at the memory. "I was not at all mentally prepared for that run. Jesus, I forgot about that. I finished though."

"Sholto liked you."

"He thought I was funny and a disaster. He enjoyed yelling at me to make me hustle." Bill is good natured about it, still grinning vaguely at the past. "You were his golden boy, Watson. He liked you more than anyone."

“He was just-”

“He was not ‘just’,” Bill counters. “He thought you were the bee’s knees and you were like a dog trying to please him.”

“Thanks,” John replies, his tone a bit short. Bill just chuckles.

“It was good,” he says to placate him. “You weren’t like the rest of us; you’d already been out there once, you were all closed off and Mr. Army. Frankly he made you a bit less of a dickshit.”

“Thanks!” John sinks in his seat to sulk. Bill tosses a map at him.

“I don’t have any signal for the GPS. Tell me where I’m driving.”

—
—

Sholto lives in a converted farmhouse. It lies at the end of a narrow lane, gated off and John notices that behind the discreet hedging on either side, there’s an electrified fence.

The house itself is traditional brick and flint, soft grey and red, with square chimneys pointing straight up. The view is spoilt somewhat by the ostentatious CCTV cameras and bright yellow house alarm on the front of the building, and the fact that half of the sweeping drive is obstructed by a little pebble-dashed cabin for the security officer. Bill raises his eyebrows as far as they’ll go.

“Blimey O’Reilly,” he comments. “They heard you were coming then.”

“Shut it.”

It’s a long low sprawl of building, the oldest part of which must be 18th century or earlier, with a more ‘modern’ victorian extension in red brick off the side. Bill looks over it with a nurse’s eye; spots the stairs with the hasty concrete ramp, and how it’s been adapted for someone who would have had trouble walking for a while.

“Family home?” He asks. John nods.

“As far as I know.”

The security woman (still only hiring women, John wonders) gives them a once over and directs Bill where to park the car. There’s nothing else in the drive but she reminds them not to block the garage. Bill tugs the handbrake on securely and gets up, stretching. Bee wakes, forgetting where she is and disgruntled to find herself still in a car seat. John frees her, and feels bad. She’s spent most of the day travelling and hasn’t had much chance to play. She’s going to be in a bad mood.

“Just go ahead,” the security woman tells them. “I’ve already rung in and they’ll have seen the car.”

The maid opens the door just as they get to it. She’s a mousy looking older woman, who shows them through into the hall and tells John to leave his luggage, which sparks a back and forth fuss as John tries to figure what he’ll need immediately to hand and what can go up to the room.

“Where’s Sholto?”

“He’s in the living room; he says just to go through.”

John takes his daughter by the hand, and with Bill on his heels to stop him retreating, moves

forward to introduce her to James Sholto.

The man himself is occupying the sofa, halfway through a newspaper (or pretending to be). He smiles awkwardly as they come in, and makes a show of bravado. John thinks really, he looks terrified. He glances at Bee, who clings to John's leg, suddenly dead quiet.

"Allo Major, you miserable old git. What are you doing slacking off?" Bill says, breaking through the ice in his usual way.

"Murray. Not a major any more, really. I think I'm entitled to it."

"Bollocks," Bill replies, bending to shake his hand, "After all the grief you gave me? How're your bits?"

He's part nurse, part flirt, part comrade, and the combination is enough to rally Sholto before he works himself into a funk, and attempt to put Bill back into his place.

"None of your business, Murray. The scars still play up. Don't mind me not standing. I get stiff down the one side."

"That's alright," Bill answers, grinning. "I get stiff in places around the middle, but it depends what the Missus is wearing. John stop being furniture."

"I'm not!" John argues, flustered.

"You're not? You're as wooden as bloody Pinocchio, and you lie about as well. He's still a bloody nightmare, Major. Sort him out. Make him run some laps."

"I'll try," Sholto says, with a flash of dry amusement. He puts out his good hand. "Good to see you, John. You didn't have any trouble finding me?" There's a healthy dose of irony in his tone. John grasps his hand.

"Thankfully someone gave us a lot of practice reading maps. Don't pull, Bee." He stoops and lifts her up where she's doing a dance on the spot and fretting at him, whining. He feels discretely at her nappy, but it was the 'Papa don't ignore me' wiggle not the 'I've peed' boogie.

"She's been in the car a lot today," he says by way of excuse. She buries her head in John's chest, and he realises at the same time Sholto does that she's scared of the scars on his face. John feels a little embarrassed.

"Say 'hello', Bee," he encourages. "This is a friend."

"How about something to drink?" Sholto says, starting to shift awkwardly from the sofa, looking for an escape and a change of subject. "Tea? Coffee?"

"I could murder a coffee," Bill says. "And a piss. Where's the dunny?"

"Through there," Sholto tells him and Bill throws out a seemingly thoughtless thumbs up.

"Cool. I'll tell them to put the kettle on," he says and, with unerring good sense, makes an escape. He winks at John as he passes. John mouths back at him, 'You complete bastard'.

Sholto, with no recourse to get away, lowers himself back against the sofa. John wordlessly takes a seat in the opposite armchair, Bee still hanging onto him like grim death and tearful. He's never seen her so unsure of herself. He's never seen Sholto looking so unsure of himself either. He's

clearly trying not to stare at Bee, or in fact, do anything in case she runs off in terror or screams blue murder.

He oddly reminds John of Mycroft.

Sholto clears his throat. "How old is she?"

John calculates. "About nineteen months old, nearly twenty. Her birthday's in February. How was your birthday?"

Sholto looks surprised. It's old news from last month. "Oh. Quiet. I can't be bothered with it these days. It's nothing special. You?"

John had turned thirty-nine on the seventh, unobserved. He shrugs and asks if Sholto had received his email instead.

"Yes, thank you." Sholto glances to one side, John follows his gaze. There's a printout stuck behind a vase on a bookshelf. The conversation dwindles. In the quiet, Bee braves a glance. John's pulse is strong and his breathing calm, and tucked against his chest it goes some way towards calming her. She peers at Sholto with judgemental interest and then reaches up to touch John's face. It's different.

"Ouch," she says.

"Ouch," John agrees. They've played nurse with Elbant and her other toys. She's generally got a sympathetic soul. She's not sure how to handle it faced with a fully grown man but the basic sentiment is still there. It makes him oddly proud. She steals another sidelong look, accidentally meets Sholto's eye and hides again. He's embarrassed.

"I'm afraid I'm a bit of an ogre."

"She's fine," John disagrees. "She'll come round. She only just woke up."

"Ah. Yes. Not the first thing one wants to see," Sholto replies. He doesn't touch his face, but he curls his fingers in his lap.

"Trust me, she's just playing," John says, tickling her ribs and making her turn around. Bee squirms in his lap, owlsh and bashful. He gives her Elbant and she hides behind him, peeking out as if she can't believe Sholto is real. Gradually this in itself becomes a game. She seems to enjoy the horror of it.

"It's a nice house," John says, grasping at straws, at the same time Sholto blurts, "What's the news on London?"

They both hesitate; an unspoken debate to decide whose question should be answered, only Sholto's question reminds John of reporting to him back in the day, and so, wordlessly, they slip back into hierarchy and John does just that.

He tells him about the tube strikes over the summer and how unusually hot it's been in the city. He gives too many details about the planned engineering works on the underground set for the autumn, and Sholto listens. He talks about Billy and that's easier because Sholto was always his go-to man for advice about his men.

"Do you know how he started?"

"I've no idea," John answers, realising how exceedingly little he knows about Billy Wiggins. Sholto gives a little grunt of disapproval.

"Well, that's a mistake. What can you expect to do with no information?"

"Nobody gave me a file on him," John replies.

"You have to take them on fully or pass them on, John. Pastoral's not something you can half-ar-se. Not without it coming back to bite you."

John looks at him carefully. There's an inflection in Sholto's tone that suggests he's not just talking about Billy.

"I know," John concedes. "I know that. I just... didn't get a lot of practice in the field before..." He shifts his leg and clears his throat. "Bee, you're heavy. Can I put you down?" He eases his leg so that she slides, centimetre by centimetre, to put her feet on the floor. She hangs onto his knee, griping, but stands, restless, curious but not yet brave enough to let go. She sits, instead, peering at the carpet and the carved legs of the coffee table.

"Puss," she says, pointing out the lion's feet to John.

"That's right, lion feet. Rawr."

"Puss-puss-puss. Mee-ow," she corrects and gently strokes each toe of the nearest foot.

It is too awkward to continue discussing addiction with a small person insistently meowing at the furniture, so they discuss the house instead until Bill finally reappears, laden with a tray.

"Your cook's a bit of alright," he announces. "Can I have her when you're done?"

"Bill, don't be--"

"For cooking, Watson. Where's your mind going? Have a fairy cake, you dirty so-and-so."

Bill passes out cups and plates and entices Bee from under the table by magicking a jammy dodger out of her ear. She grabs at it in amazement, shows it to John to make sure he can see it too, and then feels carefully around her ears for anything else. Bill irreverently sprawls on the carpet and lets her climb over him, not minding the jam and crumbs on his shirt, and forgets to use a plate for his own cake.

"What are all the baby trees over the back?" Bill asks, wrestling his mug out of reach of the baby.

"Are you growing a forest?"

Sholto perks up a little. "Actually, that's the idea, yes. A wood would be more accurate."

"A wood would, would it?"

John groans. "Bill."

"Woo-woo-woo!" Bee chimes in.

"It's a restoration project," Sholto says in an effort to make the conversation sensible again.

"Deciduous planting mixed with moorland, for the wildlife."

"Is there much out here?" John asks. It had looked bleak and damp and empty to him.

“Nothing large,” Sholto admits. “Birds of prey here and there; it’s mostly insects. Butterflies actually.”

“Flutter byes,” Bill translates for the baby, tickling her. “Fluttery-buttery-eyes.” She emits a sudden, wheezing laugh, her face screwed up into a slightly lewd expression. Sholto catches John’s eye across the table, with a sudden spark of amusement.

“That’s familiar,” he comments.

“I have never laughed like that,” John protests.

“That’s your laugh. I distinctly remember that.”

“Oh my god, that is your drunk laugh,” Bill agrees, delighted, trying to make her do it again. She gurgles instead, tumbling over Bill’s lap. Bill laughs uproariously. John huffs, annoyed, and pleased. Bill’s too much for everyday life, but he’s glad he’s here. Bill just seems immune to awkwardness.

Bill rolls upright, plumping the baby on the sofa and brushing the crumbs off. The conversation gets easier; Sholto remembers how small talk works, and John finds himself breathing without worrying either he or his daughter are going to offend the Major. They cover the topics of work and home again, skim over the latest news and updates on acquaintances from the army; who has moved to where, or married, or divorced, or been promoted.

Eventually Bill stretches and gets up, relinquishing the honour of being Holder of Elbant to John. “I should make a move,” he says, eyeing the window, “Before it gets too dark.”

“Watch out for pheasants in the hedges,” Sholto advises, putting down his cup. “They’re all loose at the moment.”

John considers the warning, given to men who went through a war, and tries not to find it too funny. Sholto misreads their expressions.

“Hitting a large cock pheasant can dent your bumper,” he clarifies, altogether too seriously. John presses his lips together and steadfastly does not look Bill in the eye. Bill makes a heroic effort not to crack.

“I’ll keep an eye out for large cock-” he manages before creasing up.

“Oh, get out,” Sholto says, exasperated. “You’re a menace.”

“Half of Norwich is going to hear that joke,” John says, as Bill smothers himself in his own coat in a bid to stop laughing.

“Oh, you’re perfect. I love you both, alright, I’m going. I’m going,” Bill promises. “Look after yourselves. And you, gorgeous,” he scoops Bee off the floor and eskimo kisses her. “Keep them out of trouble. Bye, Major.”

“Good evening, Murray,” Sholto says, with stiff formality, but no hard feelings. They shake hands warmly.

“Say ‘bye’, Bee.”

“Bye-bye-biscuit-bye.”

“Bye, John.” Bill crushes John in another bear hug. “It was good to see you. Say ‘hi’ to that detective of yours.”

“He’s not mine,” John mutters, prodding him towards the door. Bill grins and the room feels too quiet when he’s gone. Sholto shuffles to the edge of the sofa and pulls himself stiffly to his feet. “That man has a lot of energy.”

“Bill’s alright,” John replies, stacking the cups back on the tray. “I think I’ll take Bee up now and sort out where we’re sleeping, if that’s ok?”

“Yes, of course. Leave that there,” he gestures to the tray. “I can manage it.” Standing now, John has to look up at him. He thinks he looks tired, and older than when he’d seen him at the wedding.

“Are you sure?”

Sholto looks faintly abashed. “Well. I can call for the staff by myself.”

John reaches up and gently squeezes his upper arm.

“We’ll be just upstairs,” he reminds him.

It doesn’t take John so long to sort out the suitcases and Bee’s nappy. She’s still got a too much energy thanks to all the biscuits Bill fed her, and looking out of the window gives him some inspiration of how to work some of it off before dinner and before she gets completely out of sorts. He puts her coat on her (she hates it). They go out into the garden (she hates it). They try looking for birdies, and at the bit of pond Sholto has, just in case there are froggies (They both hate it). John finds a pile of damp leaves stuffed into an enormous plastic sack by the gardener and drops her in it (She loves it).

John fishes her out, tosses her in the air and then, catching her, dunks her in again. She shrieks, kicks up leaves all over the place and then grabs handfuls of them to go running across the lawn with as fast as her fat little legs can take her. John chases her, round and round the trunks of the trees, doubling back to scoop her up at arm’s length and fly her again.

Her shouts echo off of the sides of the house and the hedges, her cheeks bright pink as the sun sets and the air turns colder. John tucks her under one arm and blows on his own chilly knuckles, turning back wearily towards the house. The lights are just flickering on inside, and upstairs he catches a glimpse of someone at one of the windows.

It’s warm as a greenhouse inside, after the crispness of the garden, and Bee’s hair sticks up wildly when John pulls her hat off. She laughs at herself in the cracked mirror by the back door, and John grins and smooths it all flat again. Her teeth gleam and she throws her head back to look at him upside-down. John is consumed by love for her. He’d forgotten how much fun she can be when he’s not juggling his time with her between chores and cases and clinic and all the other sundry appointments they seem to always have.

He groans with a stretch as they totter in from the hall. It’s a back and forth operation to get dinner into the baby; things have to be fetched from the room, and other things left there. The travel highchair has vanished, only to turn up in a cupboard in the dining room. The maid is helpful, liaising between him and the cook, and somehow food manages to appear, and then disappear into

Bee.

John puts her to bed alone; a bath and a story and tucking her into a cot. John leans over it to see her settled and thumbs over the smooth wooden rails. The bed is a little on the small side for her; it's designed for a baby, but it's not so small that she can't manage a few nights in it. It's old, John thinks. It must have belonged to someone.

He leaves the lights on low and the baby monitor close by, tucking the receiver into his pocket before he returns downstairs.

The dining room's been tidied up from the remains of Bee's dinner and a more solid smell of cooking is wafting out from the under the door hiding the slim corridor down to the kitchen. John finds Sholto more or less where he left him in the living room, a different book in his lap.

He closes it as John enters, and sets it aside on the table next to his armchair.

"All set?" he asks.

"Yeah, she's gone to sleep." John feels over the plastic screen in his cardigan pocket. "The bed seems fine, thanks."

"Good. I said to hold dinner for you, so-"

"You didn't need to do that," John argues. Sholto manoeuvres stiffly from his chair and makes no comment on the matter, other than a grunt as if to say 'don't be bloody ridiculous'. John hangs back and lets him lead the way.

They sit; Sholto at the head, John to his right, oddly formal. The cook brings out the food herself; bread in a basket and butter at first and then soup, and then when that's been spooned down in silence, a main dish of meat and two veg.

The dining room table is old, maybe antique, and very solid. It is also tall. John has to reach up slightly to rest his forearms on the edge of it while he eats and it's not a difference that is noticeable visibly, but he feels it against his ulna and in his shoulders. Likewise the chair has been made to suit the proportions of a taller man, and while Sholto sits in his with flat-footed ease, John's heels are barely scraping the floor.

He imagines generations of straight-backed Sholtos, wearing down the seats of the chairs, but not one of them managing to wear down the table legs enough to fit him.

John pushes his cutlet around his plate and tries to think of something to ease this odd void of conversation between them. He can't get around the feeling of being sloppy and awkward; like he's 7 years old again waiting to be exiled from the table for a thoughtless elbow, or some other tiny crime. Eventually it's Sholto who speaks.

"Can you cut this for me?"

John pauses, food in his mouth, swallows thickly. He lays down his fork. The cook has run a knife through Sholto's meat for him to save him the effort but whether by inattention or design, some of the pieces are still too large. Sholto presses the tines of his fork into one, making it ooze, his face impassive.

"Yeah, of course."

John fights back his chair from the table and shuffles around to Sholto's elbow to pick up his

cutlery and saw at the meat for him.

Sholto leans back in his chair, watching. He's either so used to having to ask now that it no longer embarrasses him, or else he's just resigned to this loss of minor independence.

"Is that ok?"

"Yes."

John passes back the fork and removes himself back to his chair. "It's a bit tough," he says, superficially meaning only the meat. Sholto just nods.

"Have they... said anything about-" John indicates the handicapped arm with his fork. "Y'know. How long, or, if...?"

"It's getting better," Sholto says. He looks down at his own left arm and then slowly, lifts it like he's pumping iron, the fingers curling into a weak fist. With just as much effort, he lowers it again. "They say I may regain some practical function, but not to expect too much just yet."

"Oh."

"I do exercises. They've given me a tennis ball sort of thing. I have to squeeze it."

"Squeeze a ball. Standard rehab," John blabs. "I had stretches."

"I have stretches," Sholto agrees. "And they're going to put a saline pocket in my thigh in the new year. It stretches the skin so they've got more to use for a skin graft. For under here." He points at his armpit with his fork. "That's where I get the most gyp from the scarring. I can't sweat, either."

John ponders over the science of the matter. "I've seen extenders before; we had a woman with one in the clinic, so they could have enough post-mastectomy for a reconstruction."

And phimosis.

I am not mentioning tricky foreskins over pork chops.

John clears his throat. "What was the photo album you were looking at?"

Sholto leans forward and pours out a measure more gravy onto his plate. "Oh, yes. I thought you might be interested. It's a mix of photos, but I remembered I had a few of the Sovereign's Parade and I thought you might like them."

"Have you?" John swallows down a lump of potato. "I've got the class one."

"I have a few others; they were meant for the next brochure and got passed on through the office in bulk and then this and then that; and somehow I ended up with quite a lot."

'You kept them, you mean', John thinks, touched. "I'd love to see them," he says out loud.

"After dinner then," Sholto promises, with a faint hint of a smile. John feels some of his reserve thawing.

"So what else is there to do around here then? Not that picture books and leaves aren't great fun, but, is there a pub?"

"There's the King's Head, which is alright, and there's the Dun Cow towards the coast, which is

nice.”

John waits.

“It’s about an hour’s walk across the farmland.”

“So dead close, then,” John says. “I can’t believe you live here. What the hell did you do as a teenager?”

“Stole my father’s bottles and shot things with my friends,” Sholto replies promptly.

“I don’t believe that.”

“It’s true. Pigeons and game mostly, I admit. We’d get a few pennies for every one we brought in until Mother and the cook both got sick of rabbit.”

“No, I don’t believe you had any friends,” John says, and Sholto’s smile twitches up at the corners.

“Look who’s talking.”

“I bet you bossed them all about until they’d leave you in a field somewhere. ‘That bloody James. Who does he think he is?’”

“Speaking from experience, Watson?”

They grin at each other, but only on the inside. John changes the topic back to Sholto’s health.

“It seems to be going well at least; you seem more mobile than you did before.”

“It’s slow, but I suppose so,” Sholto says reluctantly, savaging a bit of cabbage with his fork. “It’s exhausting.”

“Yeah, well, training’s not designed to be easy, is it?” John counters, leaning his elbows on the table. “You’ve just got to take as much as you can handle and build up to it day by day. Direct quote from some old fogey I met once.”

“Don’t give me that.”

“I will give you that. What’s the problem? You’ve been doing really well. If you’re bored and cooped up, that’s your own doing. Go walk to the Cow.”

“In case you’d forgotten, John, people keep trying to kill me.”

“Yes, I noticed we drove through the slaving hordes on the way in. Not. You’re a bloody soldier, James- take a gun. Get the lady out of the port-a-cabin. Go for a goddamn walk on your own land. Go to the beach.”

“It’s an awful beach.”

“I know it’s an awful bitch, but that’s life for you.”

“I regret inviting you,” Sholto quips, but now there’s a sudden flash of life in him. Something more of his old self. John does grin at that.

“You didn’t invite me, I just came.”

Sholto throws up a hand in disgust at that and calls the cook for dessert.

They eat well. John comments on the quality of the food (three courses!), and it's by no means unhealthy, just pleasant to eat. Sholto explains that after years of slop-inna-bag and hospital cuisine, it's one of the things he refuses now to compromise on.

"Chewing food," he expostulates. "I don't want to be in a position where I've forgotten what that's like again."

John wholeheartedly agrees with him on this. He recalls the cans of pineapple chunks you could get in the mess, after days of mushy pasta rations, and how alien it could feel against your teeth. The resistance and then the sudden burst of juice from the flesh. The scrape of the pulp against your teeth. You'd see men sitting around with weird expressions, mouthing their food like toddlers. John had empathised with Bee the whole way through weaning.

Sholto lifts the album from the side table and passes it to him. It's a mishmash of photos from different locations and times, roughly organised by content rather than chronology or geography. John turns through the pages, inviting commentary on all of it.

There are pictures of Sholto from long ago; his own cadet days in a brand spanking new uniform. Even then with that set to his jaw and a serious sort of gaze.

"Your dad was army too, right?"

"Yes. Malaysia, Nigeria, Falklands, Gulf, Bosnia. Did them all in one way or another. Finally fell to cancer. Pancreatic. Very quick." There's a picture on the wall, an older man and an old man, who must be one of Sholto's grandfathers.

"I'm sorry," John says. "That's one of the worst. Not a lot you can do about it."

"My mother went young too," Sholto says. "That's why I was back from tour and training you snot-nosed recruits." His tone is fond. He reaches over and turns another page and there's John, third from the left on the second row, hat crammed over his brow, looking grim as stone.

"That bastard," John says, jabbing his finger on the face of the next man on the row. "Farted right before they took the photo and the smell- you would not believe."

He squints and finds Bill, chin up to the camera, not smiling but with a laugh in his face anyway, looking somehow bigger than the men around him. He finds other once familiar faces too. Sholto nods in vague recognition.

"He's a major now," he says of one. "And Pillman's got three children last I heard; still serving, expecting a fourth. Davis is out. He did a tour but decided to return to standard medicine. Newbury made captain but took an injury, and I know no more than that. I think he stayed in. He was ambitious."

"He was very good," John says, remembering him. He fills other gaps. "Singh was in a truck that went over a IED. He got thrown but bounced; totally uninjured. Killed the driver."

"Do you want a drink?" Sholto asks, pulling his gaze from the photo. John looks up. "Sorry?"

"I can't drink before I've eaten," Sholto explains, "because of the meds. I'm so used to that I forgot to offer you anything. Would you like a drink?"

“Are you having something?”

“A small one.”

“A small one, then,” John agrees. “Anything’s fine. Whatever you’re having.”

He continues to turn through the pages while Sholto shuffles a couple of glasses from the cabinet and doses them with brandy. He brings them back one at a time, and sits beside John on the sofa again.

“I can’t believe you have all these,” John says. He’s found the photos of Sovereign’s Parades. His own passing out as a captain and another from another year. He feels across the pages like braille, memories rising. He pauses at a picture of himself, face lifted as he raises a flag. It a good picture; it’s brochure quality.

“Take it,” Sholto suggests. “It’s a good one.”

John leaves it under the plastic, though he looks at it for a moment longer. Despite it being his second run at it, he’d made no honours or distinctions before passing out. Somehow his performance had lacked that special something and the Swords and Medal had gone to others. But they’d picked him to raise the flag. It had given him something to make amends for the gap in the watching crowd.

“Why do you think it turned out like that?” he asks. He doesn’t need to clarify; Sholto knows exactly what he means. The other man weighs up his words.

“Because you’re like me, John; a bloody difficult man to like. Unlike me, you’ve always been easy to sympathise with.”

“How?”

“Because you try so damn hard to be better. It’s earnest. It’s one of your greatest abilities. Life... kicks you down and you get up and strive on. And you’re an arse about it, but people respond to your efforts, John. They always have. And you glow in the face of approval.”

“I never get anywhere,” John protests, softly.

“You’ve come a long way,” Sholto disagrees. “From the insecure, arrogant young medic I first met. You never progressed because you could never learn those last missing pieces except the hard way- you couldn’t manage the people. You were too rash in the face of danger and bad at long term planning; I had to agree.”

“I wasn’t that bad.”

“You were awful. You thought you knew it all, because you’d been there and done it, and could shoot through a target faster and more accurately than the rest. The men hated you; you didn’t care. We were worried you were going to absolutely crash and burn but thankfully, you bust your knee and that brought out some of the decency in you.”

“I remember that,” John says, numb. He’d forgotten. “That run...” A little thing. Practicing ops, he’d caught the toe of his boot on a tree root he’d been too tired to see and the subsequent ache had become aggravated due to the constant walking and the weight of his pack. The Colour-Sergeant had refused to let him continue. The thought of being demoted to Lucknow rehabilitation platoon while the rest worked on towards graduating had come as a hard and unexpected blow. John swallows; it’s not exactly what he recalls as his proudest memory.

Sholto reads right through his expression.

“It did you good to show a little vulnerability.”

He’d been befriended by Bill Murray that week, John remembers, shortly after the quiet embarrassment of the breakdown in Sholto’s office. A sudden suspicion wells up in his mind.

“You told Bill to come talk to me.”

“I did. He’s an excellent army nurse. You were injured.”

“He didn’t even look at my knee; he glued a dirty calendar to my wall and made me watch Space Jam!”

“I don’t pretend to understand medicine, John, but I assure you I didn’t tell him to do that. That was entirely Cadet Officer Murray’s brainchild. It worked, anyway.”

It had. He’d had someone to sit with while he cleaned boots. There was someone to drag him into conversation and take the piss out of him to his face, so at least he could throw some of the banter back. He’d had a peer, rather than just the attention of his superior.

John chews on his lip.

“It’s all in the past now,” Sholto reminds him. “I wouldn’t dwell on it.” Tentatively he lays one hand on John’s shoulder. The weight and warmth of it is unfamiliar to John, and though he welcomes it, it serves to remind him how infrequently anyone has ever done this. Mrs. Hudson, in her own fluttering, female way. Bill Murray has slapped his arm to buck him up, and he knows the slide of Sherlock’s fingers, more to turn him around to fit a situation than to ground him. Then, in the early days after Sherlock had left-

I did.

You lied.

“I saw you playing in the garden earlier,” Sholto says. He removes his hand although the warmth of it remains. Inside of John, something he hadn’t realised was there lifts a little. “If you ask me, you should do that a little more often.”

John looks at him honestly for once. Sholto softens slightly from Major to something better. All at once he’s back in Sholto’s office, a thug trying to be a leader, and underneath that, a crumbling kid again, Sholto pulling him up from the mud of his own confusion.

Where’s all your confidence gone, lad?

“It’s... not easy,” John says. “It’s still not easy.”

“You’re still one of the best, John.”

Sholto gets up, collecting the empty glasses in one hand. Slowly, with the other, he reaches out and prods John in the middle of his forehead.

“Sort it out up there, Watson,” he advises again. “Take stock. If you think you can do better, then do better.”

My office is always open to you.

Watson, come over here.

Letter for you, Captain.

Dear John-

John closes his eyes, opens them again and nods. "I worry too much."

"You let other people define you too much," Sholto replies. He closes the photo album. "I'll leave it on the shelf, if you ever want to look at it."

"Actually, do you mind-?" John hold out his hand for it. Mildly surprised, Sholto releases it into his grasp and says nothing when John folds it into the crook of his arm. "I'd just like to go through it a bit more."

"There's no rush," Sholto says, "Take whatever you want out of it. I'd better go up before nurse comes looking for me."

They say good night, and John leaves the living room, forgetting the lights. Upstairs, he puts the bedside lamp on as low as he can and sits for a while with the blankets over his knees, going through old snapshots he can barely see. There are pictures from his commissioning ball; men and women in uniform, pleased as punch and knotted up in friends and family. There's one of himself. John looks into his own face, it's expression flushed with pride and relives it; the new commission on his breast, the arm around his shoulder. Just one person at his side, but he looks no less happy than the others, John thinks.

In the background, John can distinguish Bill with his mum; a fragile looking wisp of a lady. They seem mismatched except for their smiles.

I've only got one.

John closes the album and puts out the light. The pillow smells of soap in a grown-up sort of way and the wind fusses around the windowpane. The baby grunts in her sleep. Across the hall, John can make out the murmur of voices; the nurse and the major, and he drifts off to sleep in a muddle of memories of Chelmsford and a smaller bed, his sister's breathing and the same rise and fall of adult voices in the next room.

It's a small, plastic bag with a ziplock top. The sort of thing that normal people put pieces of jewellery or sandwiches in. Sherlock carefully brushes off the dust and scrutinises it. One of his earlier explorations, he thinks. It has come from the back corner under the bed where at Christmas almost a year ago, he threw the contents of his cigarette album. This one does not contain cigarettes.

He peels the plastic apart and the bottles slide into the furthest recess of the bag. Little bottles with a dribble of liquid left them. It could be water.

It is not.

He'd forgotten all about them. Poppers- *amyl nitrite (isoamyl nitrite, isopentyl nitrite), cyclohexyl nitrite, isobutyl nitrite (2-methylpropyl nitrite), and isopropyl nitrite (2-propyl nitrite)* - aren't his particular vice of choice, ironically given their popular use. He'd toyed with them briefly and then passed them over in favour of drugs that could be enjoyed alone. Besides, they give him headaches.

The rush is too short-lived.

He swings the bag back and forth between the tips of his fingers and thumb, making the bottles clink and debates what to do with them. Given the relative scarcity of amyl nitrate these days due to the efforts of the EU, it might be worth keeping. On the other hand, it's more than a decade old at this point. He perks and shoves the bottles into his pocket, considering the effects of age-decay on party narcotics.

Sherlock's always thought it would be interesting to accumulate street samples of drugs for forensics use; the ratios of cutting and stretching, things that have passed in and out of fashion. The only downside is the practicalities of such a collection. Certain substances would need to be kept in certain careful conditions. It would be far less legal than his piles of dog-ends.

It would be more of a temptation.

He folds his fingers around the bottles in the pocket of his dressing gown. He's not reckless enough to try sniffing at these, but the sight of them has roused memories of highs past and the night has been long and the silence goes on and on and on when John is away.

He'd thought there was nothing in the flat. There's certainly no cocaine. Suddenly he has to wonder if there are other items, other old acquaintances he's forgotten about. There are boxes that he hasn't opened since university; cleared out desk drawers thrown together in a mass the day he'd left.

He'd said to John, rather flippantly, that he was going to clear out the bedroom and sort through his files. Suddenly it seems like a worthwhile distraction. Maybe he has experiments in notebooks languishing unfinished, or copies of files pilfered from Lestrade to sort through. John might appreciate some of his earlier exploits even if all he'd do with them is rehash them poorly onto his blog. Sherlock clucks to himself and sweeps downstairs for bin bags and tea.

By mid-afternoon he's succeeded in making a greater mess than he'd preconceived at the time of his decision. It's the boxes, he reasons, surfacing from a stack of notebooks to realise that the few boxes has spread to two dozen piles of paper across the living room, and that half the contents of his bedroom are now distributed throughout the relatively narrow area between the door to his room and the kitchen. The bin bags are still empty. It's devilish tricky to throw things away.

In an effort to re-home files on the bookcases, he's taken books down but now there's nowhere to put them either.

"Damn," he says aloud, and sneezes vigorously on the dust. He needs to get more boxes.

There's nothing for it but to pick up his coat and abandon the flat for the nearest stationers- *eight minutes on foot, three by car: head south down Baker Street and after 0.2 miles bear east onto Blanford Street. After 321 meters, turn right onto Thayer Street/ the B524; your destination is approximately 300 metres on your left.*

At three o'clock he returns, labouring out of a taxi under the weight of two dozen new box files, expanding document wallets and plastic pockets, three postal tubes, mailing bags and an electric toothbrush bought on a whim as he's always had a fancy to try making his own vibrating lock pick. He shoulders open the door to 221B and is annoyed to find it occupied.

"Go away," he says without preamble.

"These are interesting," Lestrade says warningly, dropping the mess of papers he's been reading

onto the coffee table. "Although I don't think it's possible to jackpot an ATM any more."

"Leave those alone," Sherlock snaps, upending his bags in the nearest empty space. "Why are you here?"

"Fancied a cuppa," Lestrade replies. He lifts a mug off of a stack of books. Sherlock's annoyed to see that it's steaming. Damn him. Damn Mrs. Hudson. She can never resist. "Been shopping?"

"No, the ends of my arms just magically transform thin air into office supplies- of course I've been shopping."

"Alright, sunshine. I see someone's in a grump."

"I am not," Sherlock grinds out, "In a 'grump'."

"Try being this side of your face," Lestrade replies, sticking his legs out into Sherlock's filing system. "Keeping yourself busy, anyway."

"Oh do go away."

"I was just wondering why I hadn't seen you darkening my door. I know John's gone off somewhere."

"He's not 'gone off', he's visiting Major Sholto."

"Oh?" Lestrade takes a draught from his mug and considers. "Billy rang me. Said you'd been to visit."

Sherlock makes a noise of annoyance in reply.

"It was good of you. He's been wanting to see you for ages."

"He was rude," Sherlock says, squatting to tear labels from his boxes. "He wants nothing to do with me."

"He's a brat," Lestrade says, "I think rehab sees a whole lot of those."

Sherlock glowers, peeling sticky strips of paper from his fingers. "He says you visit him a lot."

"I do," Lestrade admits, rolling the mug back and forth in his palms. "And before you say it, no, I've not got anything better to do with my spare time, so why not?"

"I wasn't going to."

"I could see you thinking it," Lestrade says back.

"It's pathetic you know; the way you scrounge for a second chance of success." Sherlock doesn't mean the words to slip out; they wouldn't if John were here, or Mrs. Hudson. Somehow though, it's just easy to be nasty to Lestrade. The older man doesn't even flinch.

"Says more about you than me if you think anyone needs a second chance around here," Lestrade says. Internally, Sherlock squirms, hoisted on his own petard. "Personally," Lestrade continues, his tone a fraction kinder, "I think the first one's turned out pretty alright."

"Oh, get away," Sherlock growls, "If I wanted misty-eyed twaddle, I'd join John at therapy."

Lestrade grins.

“What?”

“Nothing.”

“Then stop gurning like a mindless ape and go and find me a murder to solve.”

“See, I learned that I’m onto something with you,” Lestrade wags a lazy finger. “If you get all riled up and start it with the personal insults, or else go all quiet and stroppy. John’ll be back soon.”

“I know that, stop speaking to me like I’m one of your pet idiots!”

“He dropped me an e-mail last night.”

Sherlock lifts his head and eyes him hard.

“He thought you wouldn’t be checking yours, and wanted me to let you know he’s got no signal up in Norfolk. Also Bee sends her love.”

Sherlock arches his neck back, his expression mingled affront, false pride and delight, and wishes he could remember under which pile of papers he’d left his phone. Lestrade tries not to look tickled.

“Also a reminder that his train gets in at 2:30 the day after tomorrow, and he’d appreciate it if you could unearth yourself to go meet him at the station.”

“Why didn’t you just say all that when I came in?”

“You told me to bog off,” Lestrade says with a shrug.

“There are world war carrier pigeons more efficient at communications than you,” Sherlock grouches. He’s found his phone and accessed his e-mail. Gratifyingly there are 34 messages cluttering up his inbox, and one of them is from John. Lestrade’s e-mail is only in the CC column. It gives him a little lift to see that he was the priority recipient. True the message is mostly addressed to Lestrade (John’s realistic like that sometimes), but it’s proof of where his thoughts really were.

Sherlock doesn’t tell Lestrade to leave again. He pours out the rest of the tea in the pot and allows him to remain for the delight of watching him shuffle papers according to a logic all of his own. Lestrade sits, hogging the corner of the sofa that isn’t full of detritus and muses into his own thoughts. Now and then he coughs.

“You’ve been ill,” Sherlock comments.

“Just a cold,” Lestrade says, tiredly. “It’s been going around Scotland Yard. Sally’s had flu. It’s just taking a while to shake off.”

Sherlock frowns, trying to decide between two box files for a set of entomological papers. He doesn’t care about Sally Donovan’s health, and Lestrade doesn’t sound like he’s dying. He’d just appreciate it if the other could stop wheezing when he’s trying to concentrate.

Once upon a time he would have been able to tune Lestrade out completely, but it seems that life with John, or more crucially, life with Bee has robbed him of this skill. Somehow he’s always got one ear open for signs of life in the flat. The rustle of a newspaper or the clicking of a keyboard,

the tap-tap-tap of the end of a biro as John wrestles with the cryptic crossword. He listens, constantly, for the thud and patter of Bee's footsteps as she goes to-and-fro, and the pitch of her one-person conversation. He knows if she's speaking to Elbant or to John, or merely making thoughtful noises as she puzzles something new out, like how to break into the bathroom when John's trying to shave.

Now he finds himself aware of the hitch of Lestrade's breathing and the slumped way he's sitting on the old broken-seated sofa, not so much relaxing as dropping to sleep in spite of himself. Sherlock finds himself tracking his thoughts; the glances across the half-bared bookshelves, the boxes, the kitchen, the clutter on the table and the hearth- places he used to check with disappointed frequency. Then his train of thought u-turns and backtracks, fixes on the coats by the door and the bust umbrella that no one ever uses, shoved behind the legs of the hat-stand for years. He seems to sink further into the sofa. Sherlock braces himself.

"I just wanted to say," Lestrade begins.

"Oh, don't," Sherlock says, recoiling from the topic. Lestrade huffs a sigh, and nearly allows the matter to drop.

"Well, just thanks, then." He says it without enthusiasm, but Sherlock doesn't take offence at that. "I mean...It was a good shot." He sighs again, hands deep in his pockets and stares off into the middle distance for a moment. "Anyway..."

"No Victor," Sherlock allows quietly. Maybe his miscalculation? He'd been sure that was Mycroft's motive. He's still not convinced that it wasn't.

"No," Lestrade agrees. "Just... back to square one, I think." He doesn't sound certain. Sherlock can imagine. Mycroft will have swept the slate as clean as he can; professional liaisons only, and barely even those if it can be helped. An attempt to make Lestrade one of those who don't count.

For a moment, Sherlock feels a stab of anger towards Mycroft and a little remorse. It's a strange feeling to see Lestrade so clearly hiding his misery, and it bothering him so much. It's worse to feel that there is nothing he can do about it, and for once he wishes that there was.

"Don't worry about it," Lestrade says, with unusual perception. "I was pushing my luck."

"Molly Hooper's single," Sherlock says, with a flash of inspiration. "And interesting."

"And young. And not into me," Lestrade says, faintly amused. "It's alright." It's not even a half-hearted attempt at a lie.

Sherlock hums for lack of any answer, and resumes the arduous task of trying to make the flat resemble a habitable space again. Lestrade toys with the mug, long since emptied, and then Sherlock, with a building headache, tosses his phone into Lestrade's lap, nearly doing him a mischief in the process.

Lestrade jerks out of his thoughts with a noise of protest.

"Speed dial number 4- get the chicken kebab. I'll have my usual."

Lestrade stares at him for a moment, and then does as he's told. The command seems to rouse him from himself because he gets up from the sofa at last and makes himself useful tackling the pile of washing up in the kitchen. He doesn't have John's need for an actual plate, however, which Sherlock counts as a blessing, and between them they manage to get the mess whittled down to a pile of respectable filing boxes and things yet to be sorted.

The food arrives and they eat in silence, both leaning on their elbows over the table, thumbing at their cell phones. Lestrade grumbles over work emails and begrudgingly answers each and every one. Sherlock browses the social media websites of people he hopes will soon commit something illegal and prove that his system of remote deduction is working.

They ditch the empty packaging in the bin, stuffed to the gunnels and resume haunting the living room.

“You have cases,” Sherlock says, absently lifting his violin from the table.

“Yeah, nothing you’d like though,” Lestrade says, rubbing wearily at the back of his neck. “Even I’m bored with them.”

“Tell me.”

“Just the usual,” Lestrade says, surprised. “Stabbings outside a nightclub; a mugging gone ugly; little girl run down by a drunk driver; some teen set his own house on fire and accidentally killed his mother in the process. They’re not mysteries, Sherlock. It’s just stupid people, and people who need help.” He looks up, exhausted. “The same old stuff.”

‘That’s why you like my cases,’ Sherlock thinks, with sudden realisation. He feels at the strings and then, with another glance at Lestrade says, brusquely.

“Listen to this; I’ve been working on it.”

He plays through the air that he was developing at Easter, twice over because Lestrade has no idea about classical music in any depth, and won’t notice the repetition. The man sinks into the sofa, blinking slowly and listening, and Sherlock is gratified to see him for a moment or two, actually close his eyes. Without being asked, or asking, Sherlock lets the last note bleed into the opening note of someone else’s composition; a long melodic piece that he has always liked.

“That’s nice; sounds almost professional or something,” Lestrade says when he’s finished. Sherlock scoffs. Lestrade hauls himself from the sofa. “I should get going.”

“You should have got going hours ago,” Sherlock complains, immediately hogging the vacated seat. “I have things to do.”

“Alright, I know,” Lestrade replies, placid as a lake. “Say hello to John when he gets back.”

“I won’t bore him.”

“Just do it, you arse,” Lestrade says, pulling on his coat. “If anything comes up, I’ll get in touch.”

“Hm,” Sherlock replies, scrutinising him. “Of course you will.”

“Oh,” Lestrade pauses on route to the door. “That missing painting case, you remember?” Sherlock props himself up on an elbow to listen.

“Nothing to add, really,” Lestrade says with a shrug. “No sign of the body yet and nothing to prosecute on so the investigation’s getting closed down next week. Too much else on to waste time chasing it. The kids seem to be alright.”

“Where are they?”

“New foster home. The girl was reluctant as hell, I hear, but it’s worked out well. Someone in

social services picked up that she's gifted, it turns out, so she's got a new school, and they're getting the boy back into mainstream education somewhere nearby. They seem to be doing well. There's a woman wants to sponsor them, I hear."

"Fancy that," Sherlock says, looking at him. Lestrade looks back. They both know the truth.

"Don't go behind my back again," Lestrade concludes. Sherlock missed the opening of the vault; the musty smell of stale air-conditioning overlaid with rot. The parched corpse of the mother and the gently oozing corpse of the old man. In his head, Lestrade recalls Mycroft pressing a handkerchief to his nose and grimacing. More strikingly, the way his P.A, immaculate heels and hair, had stepped passed them both with the grace of a deer, snapped photos for the record impassively and then leaned forward and spat on the dead man.

Mycroft had only cleared his throat, and gently urged her away from the scene. The bodies had vanished. Lestrade had decided it wasn't worth his time asking anything more about it. Personally he'd felt he'd had to agree- they had more use for a little girl's future than a dead monster.

"Go home, Lestrade, you're making the place look untidy."

Lestrade just huffs a faint laugh.

"Behave yourself," he advises. "Two more days."

John pings awake at 5:30 in the morning when it's still pitch black outside, and cold. The house is dead silent, the baby still flat asleep and John is restless.

He rises quietly, feels through his suitcase for clothes and pulls them on in the hallway. It's a matter of moments to slip down the stairs and minutes for him to find out how to unlock the front door. He stops to poke his head into the port-a-cabin, in case he causes a security alarm by skulking around the property so early, and then he hits the lanes.

He's not been jogging consistently in recent weeks, though he's squeezed in the odd run here and there, and it feels good to stretch out again.

It's damn cold, and the wind makes his ears ache. His nose drips steadily onto his upper lip, and all the sights of Norfolk are swallowed up in the murk of pre-dawn gloom. It feels good, nonetheless. He comes back reeking but with a fresh frame of mind, and by the time he's scoured himself clean, his mood has lifted considerably.

Bee wakes to him like he's the light of the world and it never fails to amaze him. She seems to bloom upwards out of sleep straight into a smile that's his alone. "Hullo, heartbreaker," he says. She names him again, a dozy slur, 'Bapar', and stretches from head to toe in one long wriggle.

They get dressed together, have a romp. She goes caving under the parachute of the duvet when he lifts it up for her. He pretends to lose her and she betrays her position with helpless gasping laughter. He gets as far as putting on trousers and vest, and a clean nappy for Bee when Sholto catches them mucking about. He's already spick and span. Bee is a quivering lump of mirth under the duvet.

"Breakfast's nearly ready," Sholto tells him. John rubs a hand over his chest, conscious of his scar visible through the cotton.

“We’ll be down in five, then,” he says, hurriedly. Sholto leaves, looking amused. John fishes his daughter out of her den by the legs and wrestles her into a pair of tights and a dress. He pulls on a shirt, his cardigan, and then they go down the stairs together, one wobbly little leg at a time. She refuses to be carried and treats the bars of the bannisters like the gate to a zoo, peering down between them and making John panic that she’s going to get her head stuck.

Somehow they manage to make it as far as the table with everyone’s ears intact.

Sholto isn’t there, and Bee’s too hungry for John to wait or go and find him. Bee tidies away an egg with a great deal of mess, and John manages some toast between efforts to keep Bee’s breakfast confined to her mouth and high chair, and not the walls.

He takes her and asks for the coffee to be brought through to the living room, which is also empty. The cook notices him looking.

“He’s just with the nurse, then he said he was going to sit in the conservatory, and give you some space.”

“That’s ridiculous,” John objects. “Tell him to come in here.”

“Not me,” says the cook, putting down the milk. “I’ve got washing up to do.” She leaves. John frowns.

It’s a dull overcast day and the conservatory makes the most of the frugal sunshine. It’s warm despite the expanse of windows and John find Sholto idling in a wicker chair, the bad arm clutching a rubber ball, the other leafing through a set of papers. Printouts with lists of numbers. Something to do with the land, John supposes. He looks up as John clatters in through the door, dangling Bee from one arm, who at once goes wide-eyed with a gasp.

“Here you are,” John blusters. “We were looking for you.”

“Ba-” Bee says, warningly, scrabbling at his knee.

“You didn’t really get a chance to meet Bee yesterday,” John says, “I thought now would be a good time.”

The papers in Sholto’s lap shiver. Carefully he puts down the ball.

“John, it may be better not to...” Sholto goes silent for a few seconds and then says it bluntly. “My scars frighten her. Understandably. She cried at the sight of me before.”

“You didn’t have anything good for bribing toddlers with before,” John says, wishing that she hadn’t, but unable to argue that she had. “Allow me to educate you in the art of making small children like you. Ta-dah.” He drops a tube of Smarties in Sholto’s lap. Bee hears the rattle of the sweets and reacts like a leopard hearing the bleat of an injured gnu.

“Choccie!” She stands, conflicted, both beady eyes fixed on the prize but still leery of Sholto himself. She grabs a fistful of John’s trouser leg and points. “Choccie smardie.”

“You can have one,” John says, a beatific and kindly god. “Go on.”

She looks up at him, incredulous. ‘*Moi?*’ her expression says. ‘*Go over there? By that man?*’

“Rattle it, James.”

“John, I’m not sure-“

“No, seriously. This is how we got her to stop screaming at clients. Shake the tube.”

Sholto reluctantly picks it up by its end and gives it a little rattle. Bee squats and groans with want, pointing and jerking on John’s trousers. “Babaaaaar.”

“Go on, Bee. You can get it.”

She tries a few ear-splitting shrieks, because that sometimes works, and then she tries an angry, wobbling dance to show him her outrage. John is immovable. Finally, with great determination, she approaches, attempting to drag John with her towards the prize. At this, John does relent and allows her to dictate a slow step-tantrum-step towards Sholto’s chair.

“Smar-die,” she insists, pointing, even though she’s basically got her hand on it.

“Smartie, please,” John corrects. She gives a dramatic huff that she certainly didn’t learn from John. “Please,” John repeats, crouching and pointing at Sholto. “Ask James nicely.”

She looks up at Sholto, mutinous and shy, pinches her lips together and wobbles, one foot resting half on the other, leaning against John’s shoulder. John gestures to the packet with his eyebrows. Sholto gives it another hesitant little shake.

“Pl-“ John starts to prompt.

“Peas!” Bee blurts, one fist rising to scrub at her eyes.

“Ok, you can give her one,” John says hastily, wondering if this has crossed over from a necessary hardship to just mean. Desperate not to make a small child cry again, Sholto pushes the tube of sweets into her hand. She fumbles and grabs at it hard, sitting plump down on the carpet and at once wrestling with the top.

“Not *all* of them,” John says exasperated, but before he can stop her, she’s wrenched the top off and sent them spilling all over the place with a long ‘Oooooooh!’ of disbelief and pleasure. John sighs. “Too late.”

“I’m sorry,” Sholto awkwardly stoops to pick one of them off of the carpet; an orange one. Bee sees it go past her face and automatically grabs at it. To Sholto’s amazement, she pulls his fingers forward and makes him put it in her mouth.

“Pickle,” John chides, unable to be annoyed. “Is that good?”

She leans back and grins at him disgustingly through a mouthful of chocolate. “Easily pleased,” John says, winding his arm around her other side while she’s distracted and sweeping half of the Smarties away behind her. Sholto meanwhile, collaborates by cautiously feeding her another one. Bee burbles through all the sugar and concludes that this man’s face might be about to fall off, but she can handle that so long as he keeps up with the goods.

“Look at that,” Sholto mutters, unable to quite believe it. “Happy as a clam.”

“She’s fickle,” John agrees. “But there, nothing to it, really.” He stretches one leg out.

“What are you doing today?”

“I-“ Sholto looks thrown for a moment. “I was going to finish these accounts...”

“That won’t take all day, will it. Show me around the place.”

“You’ve seen most of the house.”

“I meant outside. Show me the forest you’re growing. We can take her for a walk,” John insists, tugging Bee into his lap. She slobbers at her fingers, and John looks up to dare Sholto to say he can’t keep up with her pace. His upper body may be in shambles but his legs work pretty much the same as they ever did. Or they would if he bothered to go out enough.

“There’s not so much to see,” Sholto says doubtfully. “Not at this time of year.”

“Then tell me about what it will look like when it *is* the right time of year.” John gets up, rolling his shoulder. “Or do you actually want to spend all day reading numbers?”

He stands and watches Sholto chafe, the muscles of his jaw working against his pride. Bee hovers down the last of the sweets and begins exploring a pot plant.

“Come on, James.”

“I do need to read these,” Sholto replies, shuffling his papers, annoyed.

“An hour,” John threatens.

“I’ll tell you when I’m damn well ready,” Sholto snipes, scowling at the page. John leaves him to it, taking Bee by the hand and toddling her back to the living room. He waits. Distantly he hears Sholto swear and then bellow for the maid. He stoops and plucks Bee up off the carpet.

“Walkies,” he tells her.

—

They don’t go very fast or very far. Just enough to leave the house behind them for a while. Sholto’s legs and side are stiff with lack of any real use outside physiotherapy, and he leans on a stick as he walks. They amble, aimless. Bee waddles in expanding circles around them as she explores, her mittens flapping from her sleeves.

From far away over the fields there’s the mud and ozone smell of the shore. Sholto points. “The moor used to stretch right inland, except it was reclaimed as farmland before the War. I have no use for crop agriculture so, I’m trying to recreate a mixed habitat of moor grass and deciduous woodland.”

“Who manages it all?”

“I have a hired man, and a consultant from the national woodland trust” Sholto replies. “They email me.”

“You don’t meet,” John comments. They slowly work their way up the side of a hedge and then stop to behold the ongoing efforts to restore the land back to some kind of former glory. Sholto hadn’t lied when he’d said that there wasn’t much to look at. John tries not to be too critical, but it’s certainly dull. The forest is nothing but a waist high field of plastic pipes at the moment. The saplings poke their heads out of the top of the bright blue tubes reluctantly.

“Deer,” Sholto explains. “They’d eat the lot given half a chance.”

“What are you going to do with it all?”

“As they say, ‘the wood that pays, stays’. I’m going to coppice it. It’ll fund itself through kindling and hedging. The estate hasn’t run off of agriculture in years so it’s more about raising the funding to keep someone here to manage the land. The traditional craft association is interested as well. They make things. In the meantime, the established wood is rented out.”

“To who?”

“Pigs,” Sholto says. “They run saddlebacks through there in the autumn and they eat through all the brambles and nettles and improve the ground layer. Organic meat. People pay good prices for it.” He catches John looking at him and grinning slightly.

“What?”

“Nothing. Go on, Farmer James.”

“Don’t be rude,” Sholto says, and then as punishment, he goes on. At length. He points at things with his walking stick, lectures, and by the end of it, John’s head is buzzing with facts and figures and fritillaries, and he regrets ever taking the Mick.

“It’s a lot of work for a few butterflies,” John comments, panting. He’s piggybacking Bee over the tussocky grass. Sholto stops to lean on a tumbledown wall, next to a narrow stand of hawthorns. John balances Bee on the wall. Sholto breathes and his shoulders droop slightly.

“It’s not just butterflies. It’s about undoing decades of error.” He glances sidelong at the baby. “It’s heritage.”

John hears what he really means. Sholto means he has things still to atone for which are out of his reach, and instead he’s chosen this as the only thing within his grasp that he can meaningfully change.

“Have you got a name for it?”

“For what?”

“This project; this charity, whatever it is.”

Sholto shakes his head. John supposes he can’t name it for himself; it would be arrogance at best and hypocrisy at worst. He can’t name it for the dead, either. It would be unwanted. Anonymous donations are as much as he’s permitted on that score. John looks out across the field and envisions fields of poppies; blue and white and red. A resurrection of butterflies.

“The Norfolk Revival,” John says.

“The Norfolk Revival,” Sholto repeats, considering it. He nods, vaguely, even though it suddenly sounds to John like some awful folk music festival, but spares him the pain of rejecting it outright.

They sink into their own thoughts; neither realising it’s a contemplation of the other. For his part, John thinks on the redundancy of pointing out that Sholto misses the army. Not in the same way John misses it sometimes, but the great scope of potential you could get in the service. Sholto misses the logistics and the planning and the men and the projects. He misses the challenge to set his mind to. He’s wasted up here, really. John just misses...

... He misses the clarity of it, he supposes. You had targets to meet and stages to progress through. All of that’s lost to him now. He can go where he likes and do as he pleases. It’s almost a little too much freedom.

For his own part, Sholto looks out over the land and wonders how it is that John doesn't know how greatly he's changed. Life has rounded him out a little. Fatherhood has opened him up in a way that he sorely needed. He should be happier than he is.

He watches John pour affection on his daughter, and sees all too clearly the concern writ through him.

"Where do you expect you'll be," Sholto says, breaking the silence. "In five years time?"

The comment takes John by surprise. He pauses, questioning the question. Sholto derails him by pointing. "In five years, those trees will be taller than my head."

"Well, I won't be," John scoffs, and then considers the question in earnest. "Five years... you'll be seven. A big girl," he murmurs into Bee's ear, "At school somewhere." Dressing herself and doing homework. Making friends and having arguments; obsessing over things, throwing wobbles, asking questions, shedding milk teeth. He can see her clearly right the way into her early teens; oddly he can't see himself.

"I don't know," he says at last, except he hopes. He hopes he'll still be in London. He hopes there will still be tea with Nana- Mrs. Hudson, and Sherlock. He hopes Sherlock will still love her and she'll still love him, and he hopes whatever happens to him, it doesn't interfere with that.

"Three years," Sholto suggests, seeing him stall.

John puffs and lets Bee down from the wall. They set back for the house. In three years, she'll be five; starting school. He'll have to pick up more clinic hours if cases with Sherlock will allow. He'll have added some to her bank account, made some savings of his own. Bought a new mattress for the bed.

"Two?"

"I don't know- I just want..." John kicks at the grass. "Things to be in my favour for a change."

"To be happy?"

"Yes. Why not? Can I be, hypothetically, in a couple of years, happy? Can I have that?"

Sholto doesn't flinch from the sarcasm even a little. Instead he asks, "How exactly are you unhappy now? You have a job--"

"Yeah, but--"

"-Which I presume you're still adequate at."

"I'm a good doctor, thanks."

"The bedside manner lacks, but even so- you have interests outside of the GP's office."

"If you're counting cases--"

"I am. You're not really a hobbyist where that's concerned. You live where you want to live."

"In a two-bed, smelly flat, and we have to share a bedroom."

"Which is how you want to live or else you'd have moved. You don't like people, John but you're too used to living on top of them to give that up."

John stares at him.

“I more or less grew up in barracks as well. For some it’s the first thing they want to get away from, for you it’s the opposite.” Silently, John understands that Sholto adds unspoken ‘as it is for me too’.

“Why don’t you move?” John asks. “If you hate it up here so much.”

“It’s my family’s house and estate. There’s no one else and... I’ve nowhere else to go to.”

John looks across the field to the house and sees it suddenly. The high hedges to keep prying eyes away; made of box and holly instead of barbed wire. The port-a-cabin like a child’s fort, with someone on post at all times; the conservatory come office with its heat and bright light and the palms; the small company of ever-changing staff; not men but women- there to be ordered around nonetheless.

‘He’s brought it all home with him,’ John thinks, aghast. He falters and it’s all the hesitation Sholto needs to move ahead of him. John could easily match his pace again, even dragging Bee along, but he allows the other man his space. He picks Bee up instead and props her on his hip. She hangs onto him with a surprisingly strong grip, and weighs down his arms. She wriggles and slips a bit in his grasp. He hikes her up again.

“I’ve got you,” he says.

Sholto stumps on ahead of them both; Sherlock and Mrs. Hudson are a hundred and forty miles away. If he dropped her now, there’d be only him to pick her up again. He hikes her up a little more securely. She’s not so heavy. He thinks of five hundred saplings in plastic tubes, he thinks of all the times he has foolishly said ‘yes’ to Bee when he should have said ‘no’, for being too scared to do so; he thinks of the stairs in a house of lost children and feels a sudden rush of anger.

‘No child can be that heavy’, he thinks. ‘I wasn’t.’ It’s a commitment but on the bottom line it doesn’t take much to give them a chance. ‘If I can do it, why couldn’t they?’

“Pick up the pace, John,” Sholto yells back over his shoulder. “Stop dawdling.”

“I was giving you a head start,” John shouts back, shifting Bee so he’s got her over his shoulder like a sack of potatoes. She laughs. She sticks all four limbs out like a starfish flying backwards. He jogs to catch up. The three of them go back to camp.

The day passes into evening and the usual rota of dinner, bath, story and bed. They dine together as before, only on a different soup and a different meat with two veg, and a different flavour of dessert. The food is still good, but John can see the routine underneath it all; it’s decent food but not exciting.

It’s not Malaysian rice scraped out of polystyrene with the last clean fork, his feet up on the ottoman, talking murder.

It’s oddly, John thinks, like mass-catering for one.

They stop in the chairs in the living room again, this time over port and crackers. Sholto stirs up the embers of the fire into a blaze and they say nothing for a long, long while. Sholto is accustomed to long silences and for him this is just routine with company. For John, it’s an ongoing struggle with memory.

“Penny for your thoughts,” Sholto says, after watching him frown into the fire, troubled, for several minutes.

John’s brows crease upwards. “I don’t know,” he says.

“Well, there’s something weighing on your mind. It’s been there since the moment you walked through the door.”

John taps his fingers back and forth across his glass and Sholto waits. He’s got endless patience compared to John. He wins out by sheer grit and attrition.

Very quietly, Sholto asks him. “What are you scared of?”

John lifts his face at that, his expression as open to read as the sky. He’d like to deny it, but the fact is he’s felt the sudden chill pinch in the middle of his chest that tells him Sholto is right; he’s afraid. John hardly knows where to start describing it. It’s a fear of being afraid; he doesn’t want to be a coward any more than Sholto does, and perhaps it would be harder to talk to him if he hadn’t realised how far from his pedestal the Major has slipped. Finally he speaks.

“What did they tell you about me... when I started with you.”

“The usual,” Sholto says neutrally, “All the circumstantial and yet very little about who would actually turn up at training.” He understands John’s expression. “It’s one of the things they teach you- to take all the paperwork with a pinch of salt. University graduates who turn out to have no intellect in the face of crisis. Army sons and daughters with no mettle to them, and no sticking power. Reprobates with rap sheets as long as your arm who turn out to be fiercely loyal and possessing great common sense with a bit of kicking in the right direction. It’s not who comes into the programme, it’s who comes out in the wash.”

“And... what did you think?”

“I’ve already told you that,” Sholto chides him. “And it’s no longer accurate to the man sat across from me.”

John struggles to have faith in that comment. It all seems too much part and parcel of his being. His past bleeds into his present and dictates his future as far as he can see. He can’t distinguish the variables as such distinct elements like Sholto can. The older man puts down his glass and considers John’s quandary.

“You never had that role model, did you, John? Someone for those things.”

They give them files, John knows. He’s had paperwork trailing his heels all his life, from the very first time Harry and he had to climb into the back of a social worker’s car. Even so, this is something he’s barely discussed with anyone. Not the child counsellors, not Harry, not Ella, not even Sherlock. Not even Mary. Half of them must have known about it; the professionals asked questions, which he answered as minimally as possible. He’s known Sholto’s been in on it all from day one, but they’ve never spoken about it.

“He was my dad.”

“Yes, he was,” Sholto agrees. “But he served himself first.”

John still can’t talk about it; the man who owned his mother’s love so completely she killed herself in want of it, who made her and Harry’s lives a misery and who bought John’s absolute and undeserved hero-worship through manipulation. Who’d never raised a hand in order to achieve any

of this, and yet could leave anyone in his power feeling struck nonetheless.

“He stopped making you at some point, John. Maybe not the point that he stepped out of your life, but at some point. Whenever it was the balance shifted. I like to think we got an oar in there somewhere.”

“Mm...” John says, uncertain.

“Is that what you feel you’re missing?”

“I don’t know.” He does. He remembers learning manhood from a muddle of magazines and older boys at school and Ted in his well-meaning but alienating way. It still bothers John. Stella and Ted did try with him, but they’ve never managed to connect. He could never decide if it was just because of who they are and their sunny outlook on life, or if it was just something broken in himself. When he’s feeling charitable, he chalks it down to circumstance. When he’s bitter, he blames his parents, and then himself all over again.

He remembers the shame of early puberty and then the carefully constructed antipathy towards it. Later it had turned to a fury; a desire to be ever more adult compared to other boys. A persona to be pandered to in every waking moment. He’d done it with fist fights and sex, mostly, just for bragging rights. The trick was to make the grown-ups think that it was all beneath you, and then do it anyway. Then you never got into trouble. He’d pursued medicine out of interest, but in a flakey kind of way. He’d never settled on a specialty; to be a GP had seemed enough and then, an answer to an unsung prayer, the army had marched into his life.

He’d eschewed it when he was younger on ironic premises. Too rough, too demanding, too much discipline. Big blokes with big egos and machismo to match. He’d not realised that even at a modest five foot five, he could be the best of them. With the ongoing conflict in the middle east, maybe they’d been that little less picky, because they’d given him a shot and then medicine at last had bored him.

“I miss it too,” Sholto admits, breaking into his thoughts. “I don’t have any other living family.”

“Don’t you resent it?” John asks. He has for a long time. They’d left him to a bedsit, with nothing.

“Sometimes,” Sholto glances at the photos on his mantelpiece. “Honourable discharge. What does that mean? It means hiding for my life up here. I don’t hate the men though. When...” he touches the scarred back of his hand. “When my father died, I realised, I’d lost something irreplaceable, and yet, all around that loss were all these other men. Soldiers; rank regardless, who had shouldered part of his duty. ‘Brothers-in-arms’, that’s what we say, isn’t it? The difference is that they will leave you alone if you shut them out. You can drop them.”

“And family sticks.”

“Yes,” Sholto breathes. “Sometimes when it should be exactly the reverse.”

John squeezes his trembling hand around one knee, clears his throat, has no words to offer. Sholto divines who knows what in the dregs of his port and then unwittingly slays John when he adds, “I’m sorry you had the experiences that you had, and that the army dropped you, John. I’m glad you’ve found something better now.”

“I should check on the baby,” John says, thickly. The monitor in his pocket is silent but he stands, fumbling for it anyway; an excuse to turn his face from scrutiny. Sholto knowingly lets him go. He walks into the hall, blind, and falters. He can’t take the stairs just yet, and he can’t turn back. John

chokes in a breath and needs more air. He feels down the hall instead in the dark, until he finds the back door.

John steps out of the house and walks with purpose but not direction. He needs distance between himself and the house and he understands now what it is that Sholto loves about the wild land he's trying to preserve. It is a place where, caught between the scudding grey of a wide sky and the tussocks of grey-green grass, you can do nothing but feel human.

He follows the path out of the garden onto the wild scrappy place where, somewhere unseen, thousands of butterflies are sleeping. His ankles turn on the uneven ground but he's stumbling for different reasons when he reaches a knot of hawthorn trees by a broken stone wall and there at last he's compelled to sit down. The stone is cold beneath his thighs, and the lichen crumbles off under his fingers.

John sits, buffeted by a fresh wind. It fills his lungs and makes his ears tingle, and gives him a sense of the dust being blasted from his body. It's a clean feeling, but it makes the tears that suddenly erupt feel hotter than ever before.

He's never allowed himself to do this; this ugly, open-mouthed, messy sobbing. He's never allowed it to get further than a prickle and a dampness in the corner of his eyes, or else by his internal dynamo, managed to convert it all to rage. This time he makes no effort to hold it back. It would be a waste of energy.

The damp landscape muffles his noise until it's almost nothing, even to his own ears. The wind rushes on, making the branches rustle with white noise, and John feels out his grief in a rush with it. It's not coherent. One moment he spends boiling over in self-pity, the next it's just the old, ground-in sadness of too many wonderful things ruined by life. He includes himself in this for once, and then weeps for the rest, and the unfairness of everything. He cries because life is terrifying, and he's desperate not to be a coward in the face of it.

His face is sticky with salt and the undignified trickling of his nose, and he swipes at it with chilly fingers, realises he's forgotten his handkerchief and breaks into an unsteady laugh. It breaks the back of his crying, that laugh, and after that it's just an indulgence. It feels good. Perversely, it feels wonderful, to sit and almost force the tears out in great dollops, to almost run dry and then find something else to howl about. It amazes him. He's aware of his body in the hitch of his diaphragm and the itch of his eyelids. John's eyelashes stick to each other, to his fingers, to his cheeks, and he ends up almost exploring that; feeling across the wet strands, tugging them to smooth out the clumps.

His buttocks ache from sitting on the stones and his nose feels strange when he touches it in a long wipe across palm then wrist and then the rough wool of his jumper. The cloth rasps at his cheeks, it's like being licked by lions, and does a poor job of mopping him up. Regardless it satisfies.

Time and the draught dry him out eventually. John breathes, one hand cupped around the back of his neck, and feels better. There's no hurry; he spends his time chafing the back of his neck and feeling the tension drop from his shoulders. His feet, for once, feel solid on the ground without feeling like they're nailed to it and every step a drag.

"You're alright," he murmurs to himself, pulling the sleeves of his shirt and jumper back into order. He rubs at his sides, chasing warmth into his bones and then gets stiffly to his feet. He sniffs, wishes he had a tissue, and stretches. His back clicks from where he's been hunched over, and he spends a long luxurious moment easing all the knots out. His face must be spotted with redness, but it no longer embarrasses him.

He goes back towards the house feeling the right kind of exhaustion for once. 'I want a shower,' he thinks; he wants the warmth to finish washing the rest of him clean. 'I want Bee.' It's a physical ache. He's been carrying a hole around in himself and while he doesn't want to say that she fills it, she's instead added to him enough to redress the balance.

He wakes her from her crib, because he can't stop himself and she comes into his arms in a sleepy wriggle of cotton, smelling of nappy cream and soft, clean skin. One palm pushes at his face when he kisses her; he forgot to shave that morning; but she likes his jumper. He absorbs her complaints and her contentment. She falls asleep on his shoulder and he stands in the dark, eyes closed, swaying himself back and forth.

'I'm a good dad,' he thinks. And then because he needs to, he says it out loud. The glass of the windows is shadowed enough to reflect, and he looks at his own muddled image, and feels his heart beat. He's shorter- his mother's height, his father's breadth. The man's colouring, his nose, his jaw, the woman's posture, her feet, her hands.

'You're not going to ruin this,' John tells them. 'And nor am I.'

He reluctantly returns Bee to her bed, tucks her in and promises himself that tomorrow is another day in which he won't drop the ball.

John straightens his back and permits himself one of the old nods. A little of the old ritual, except now it feels just comfortable rather than an encumbrance.

"Goodnight," he says to the room, and puts the door nearly closed. Tomorrow, he thinks. He can speak to Sholto. Call Mrs. Hudson. Text Sherlock. Check in on Wiggins. Molly. Lestrade. Play with his daughter.

He heads for the bathroom, head singing on the thought of all these potential tomorrows.

John feeds the baby early but waits to eat his own breakfast with Sholto. They sit at the same big beautiful dining table, as though they've slipped back into a time where butlers existed. It reminds John of various formals held during his time in the army, but the atmosphere in the room is familial.

He scoops buttery eggs onto his plate and slaps marmalade onto three slices of toast.

"Hungry?" Sholto asks, watching him.

"Something in the air," John agrees, with his mouth full. "Is there any bacon?"

"Possibly. I don't usually have it. I can ask."

"I'll do it," John gets up, taking a piece of toast with him and trots straight down into the kitchen. The woman there is doing the washing up and surprised to see him. There isn't any bacon but she sends him up with a plate of melon and a promise that she's got gammon, if that's not too much. John sucks butter from his finger, flirts though she's probably twenty years his senior and not at all his type, and agrees that's not too much.

"Ham," he reports, plopping back into his seat and cracking a generous dose of pepper over his eggs.

"Like Christmas," Sholto comments, taken aback with this new, invigorated John.

“We should go out,” John says, not listening, chasing eggs with his fork. “Look, the sun’s out.” He jerks an elbow towards the window where a weak and optimistic sun is burning through the cloud cover.

“Where?” Sholto, asks, a picture of doubt.

“Anywhere. Let’s go to the beach. Port-a-Lady can drive us, can’t she?”

“I- I suppose. It’ll be cold.”

“We can wrap up,” John says, unperturbed. “Bee’s never seen the sea before. It’ll blow her mind.”

“I suppose,” Sholto repeats, still not convinced. He’s not been further from his house than the edge of the new woodland, excepting the unavoidable times he has to take himself to hospital.

“Well, why not?” John wants to know. Ultimately, Sholto has no answer that doesn’t seem suddenly pathetic.

“Very well,” he relents. It’s not like the beach in November is going to be teeming with tourists. Given that it’s bleak, it’s hardly a popular destination in the summer, excepting bird-watchers. He has a pair of binoculars somewhere, he recalls. They should take them.

Breakfast takes a while; John’s sudden bounce back in appetite has been rather ambitious, although between them they manage to do justice to the ham and coffee. It’s a safari sort of breakfast, Sholto thinks; all they need is canvas. Presently, John puts down his fork and waits until he has Sholto’s attention.

“James, there’s something I want to ask you.”

Sholto lifts his chin and one eyebrow, “Yes?”

John clears his throat and taps his fingers on the tabletop over his napkin. “The thing is, Bee, doesn’t have any guardian other than me. There’s-“

“Surely Sherlock,” Sholto says, his fingers tightening around his glass. The water in it shivers.

“That’s it. That’s just it. If something happens to me, I want- it would be stupid for anyone other than Sherlock to be the one. And he would. I know he would, but he needs someone to speak for him. You know what he’s like.”

“John... I have no reputation these days...”

“No, listen. You know me. You’ve always known me.” John looks at him, his gaze firm, his tone as set as though he’s reporting to his chain of command and Sandhurst is right outside their window. “I want someone who I know can speak for me. To make sure my wishes get expressed properly.”

“If anything happens.”

“Yeah. If anything happens. Which it won’t, but... if it does. I want to give you power of attorney. Sherlock would be her guardian, but you’d be...”

“A counterweight.”

“Support,” John says, softening. “Come on, Major. I need backup. It’s only until she’s eighteen.”

Sholto actually laughs at that. “Only a short stint then. You never ask for much.”

“Will you do it?”

“I’m not entirely sure you’re giving me a choice.”

“No, I’m not.” John grins slowly. Sholto thaws and some of his natural warmth shows through like a flame through wax. John sees him thinking, ‘it’s only paperwork, it’s only a nominal thing’.

“She’ll expect birthday presents,” John adds, teasing. “Come to think of it. You never bloody sent me anything either.”

Sholto snorts. “You never bloody sent me anything.”

“I was broke.”

“I was broken.”

“Always competitive. That’s not attractive you know.”

Sholto holds his laugh in his mouth, like always, but it sparks in his eyes like someone’s plugged him into the mains and flipped the switch. He rises to John’s words. “I always win.”

John softens into a smile of gratitude, and Sholto clears his throat in embarrassment. He brushes crumbs into a pile on the tablecloth and then asks, “What would she like?”

“For what?”

“I don’t know. Christmas. Birthdays. What should I get her?”

“Anything,” John says, pleased but puzzled. “She’s two; her idea of a good time is wearing Mrs. Hudson’s tea-cosy for a hat and sitting in a plastic box. She’ll like anything.” He’d like Sholto to think about it though. He’d like to make him try and figure it out.

“I see,” Sholto says, his brows knitting up in consternation. He looks faintly like he’d rather go back to the belly of the Helmand.

“She’ll like anything,” John says again, getting up. He pauses, frowns. “What about you?”

“Me?”

“Yeah. What do you want for Christmas?”

“Peace and bloody quiet, if that’s too much to ask,” Sholto replies, inching to his feet. “Never mind that now. Go and get me my coat.”

John grins.

“Yes, sir.”

Mrs. Hudson pops in during the morning to see that he’s been fed and watered, stops to chatter at the back of his head for half an hour and then goes on her merry way. Sherlock’s glad of her, but he needs the flat to himself today. She’ll be back later, he has no doubt, to do the same thing in the

early evening with an update on the world outside of 221B.

You've got no control.

He has to find it again, or else reinvent it.

He begins with the living room. Mrs. Hudson's done the grunt work of hoovering and most of the regular dusting, thankfully, so really it's just an extended chore of relocating items around the room and throwing out the things he has no conceivable use for any more. The things for which he has a conceivable use admittedly number far more than for a normal person, but he manages to whittle it down and slowly fill a bin bag.

Housework is not something he makes a habit of, but when the mood strikes him- and it sometimes does- he goes to it as if it were his sole profession. Nonetheless, it probably won't come up to Mrs. Hudson's standards. He piles Bee's favourite toys into a pile by the coffee table for her, gathered from here and there around the flat, and tips the rest into the toy box under the desk. Then he turns his attention to the mantelpiece.

The skull is covered with a layer of dust that falls away when Sherlock runs his hand over it. It's been left facing the wall and he turns it around to look at him for the first time in ages, thumbing over the brows.

He twists it two and fro in his hand making the old bone gleam. The skull leers at him in a familiar, friendly kind of way.

Absence makes the heart grow fonder.

"Don't start," Sherlock says. He sweeps out the mess of chemistry notes from the skull's spot and returns him to the mantelpiece. Half the notes go into the fire, the rest into his pocket. The skull rocks back slightly and comes to a rest, gazing out at the room with composure.

He leaves the stack of things under the clock, although he does leaf through them and picks out the ones meant for him. The rest he puts back for John.

The curio cabinet is rearranged to his liking. He shifts things around to make better use of the space, and adds in a few items unearthed from his earlier filing. The purple carpenter bee and the radiometer get given a touch more prominence; the bee where the sunlight won't fade it, and the radiometer where the sun might catch it now and then and show off its purpose.

He tackles the kitchen next with less visible effect, although he fills a second bag before he calls it quits. As a kindness to Mrs. Hudson he cleans out the grease trap, which is filled with a variety of things other than just grease, himself. This much achieved, he considers it time to drop the bags on the curb before starting anything else.

On the way out, Sherlock knocks into the coat stand with the rubbish bags and has to hastily grab at it to steady it. The weight of the Belstaff and John's wax jacket pull it off kilter, the whole thing swinging. Sherlock rights it but not before his scarf slithers to the floor. Annoyed, he stoops to pick it up, smoothing the fabric between his fingers. The tassels shiver as he does so.

Red.

What on earth made John buy red? He's never been able to intuit the reason behind it. It's not a loathsome colour, it's just so much more John than himself. Like chequered shirts and hunting green. He shakes the scarf out and refolds it down the length, sniffs it. It smells a little of old cigarette smoke, which Sherlock personally doesn't find automatically horrid, and mostly of John's

wax jacket; a dry, animalish smell.

The waxy shoulders are stiff, and the corduroy of the collar is moleish soft. Lifted from the peg, it would keep it's shape and stand around his head like a box, or a shield, and the inside would smell of-

Control, Sherlock.

Sherlock hangs his scarf back up and turns to take the rubbish down the stairs.

In the afternoon he finishes piling boxes back into his room where they're not quite so obtrusive, and, as this is where Mrs. Hudson refuses to tread, hooovers and changes the sheets. It's dull work, and despite the physical labour of it, he feels himself brewing with an excess of energy. He finds himself planning as he shoves his duvet into a clean duvet case; John's away, Bee's away, Mrs. Hudson is no company past 9 o'clock and how rarely does he have the run of London for himself.

Don't get into trouble.

Not trouble, exactly, but it might be a good idea while he's on this stint of housekeeping to check in on his boltholes; to see if they're secure and habitable, and preferably, uninhabited. He's not ungenerous, though. There are a few places he leaves for the network's disposal. They don't find them ideal, but the exchange of information for not getting kicked out is sometimes as good a bargain as a fifty-pound note.

No good going till after Mrs. Hudson's satisfied that he hasn't died, though. Much as he'd like John to come home, he'd rather it didn't result in a hurricane of furious miscommunication.

Sherlock fishes the last of his washing out of the machine and with it, Bee's socks and pyjamas and bibs and other sundries that seem to be permanently in the wash. He picks them all up on one hand and takes them through to John's room, intending to leave them on the bed, and then finds himself looking instead.

The room is as messy as any other in the flat, despite John's obvious attempts everywhere to keep up standards. Mrs. Hudson invades here without a second thought as it's Bee's room as much as it is John's and familiarity breeds... if not contempt then thoughtlessness. Some of the items in here are Sherlock's, in fact, forgotten and not touched since the day he turned over possession of it to John. Not because he has a long-standing habit of staying out of John's room and never nosing around but because he's simply had no reason to.

Mary smiles at him from the portrait on the desk; her suitcase clutters up the top of the wardrobe. John's left the bed unmade.

Sherlock puts the socks and bibs away himself and straightens the smaller bed. He sniffs the bedding and then strips it bare; the smell of sleep and sour milk are shockingly noticeable without Bee around. He works in an unfamiliar silence, even the traffic outside is muffled.

He picks up the corners of the rumpled bedding and shakes it back into some semblance of order and then pauses, calculating the chances of John remembering leaving the bed in disorder, and the chances of him noticing when he gets back. After a moment, he sits on the end of the bed, and tries to observe the room from John's perspective. When sat upright, he's too tall to copy the angles John must see the room from and so he hunkers down slightly, leaning back on his elbows.

John sleeps on the left side of the mattress and leaves the right side alone. It feels strange to lie on what was nominally his own bed before and find a new dip where John's been lying for a year.

Sherlock closes his eyes and wonders about John's nightmares. He still has them; vague, stilted things. It's not like he wakes up shouting or anything, but he wakes. When John's awake the atmosphere of the house is different somehow to how it is when he's asleep.

Sherlock opens his eyes and-

A cobweb of cracks across the ceiling and the faint dust of spider's leavings, irritating; have to get a ladder and get up there one of these days. Check the clock- 6:00 AM exactly. Barely need that alarm these days, seems to be ingrained. Cold. Get up anyway, no time for lazing around. Check Bee. Asleep; love her. Quick, get along before she needs to wake up. Pee. Flush. Shower five minutes; just the basics. Shower, five more minutes, morning wood. Less often these days, but more often compared to last year. Good. Shave. Stop- listen, is that the baby? Not yet. Rinse off, pull on clean clothes left on the bathroom chair last night. Kitchen; highchair, kettle. Stand by the window waiting for it to boil, stretching and rolling shoulder. Put baby breakfast into microwave, find the leftover half of a banana from dinner. Tea. Leave it to brew, get the baby. She's stirring. Wake her up gently. Love her, love her, love her.

Breakfast; tea; eat an apple one-handed, feed the baby. Share the apple. Listen. Mrs. Hudson's up, there goes her plumbing. Dump breakfast things in the sink, clean up the baby. Take her back to the bedroom, dress her. Nearly 7:00 AM now; soft footsteps on the stairs. Mrs. Hudson in her dressing gown. No noise from upstairs. He's asleep.

'Morning, John. Hello, boofuls. Nice brekkie?'

'Nana!' prickle of jealousy.

'Morning, Mrs. Hudson.'

Drag myself away, drag a comb through my hair. Jumper on, check for keys, jacket, bag, phone. Listen. Still nothing from upstairs.

'Have a nice day, John.'

'Hm. Be good,' kiss Bee. Love her, will miss her. Worry about her. Won't see her again till four, pick her up from nursery. Hope she has a good day. 'Bye, Mrs. Hudson.'

'Say, bye-bye, Bee.'

'Ba-ba!'

'Bye-' Jacket on, pick up bag, click of the door behind me-

Sherlock closes the door, which he hasn't stepped through and turns back to 221B. John does it all day in, day out if there isn't a case. In the afternoon, he'll collect Bee and they'll come home via the park and the supermarket, and cook dinner and play, and then Sherlock puts the baby through a bath and bed, while John picks at emails and reads the paper, and argues with the telly and then lays his clothes out for the morning and goes to bed under the cobwebbed cracks in the ceiling.

The thought of living John's life depresses Sherlock. He moves the baby's bedding into the dryer and something soft, black and yellow, falls out onto the floor. He picks it up and squeezes it. The flannel gives under his fingers, shushing gently as air escapes from the holes in the sponge inside. "Zub." The bee goggles at him with enormous cartoon eyes, it's silvery wings limp and damp. Sherlock closes the door to the dryer and pegs the bee on the clothes horse to dry out.

It's still too quiet and dull. Sherlock puts himself into his armchair and tries to think through old

cases as a form of distraction but all he can hear is the thump-thump-thump of the dryer. They need something new, he thinks; a new case, a new... something. Something that isn't this rut. Something that isn't the four walls of 221B, although he loves it, he can no longer love it alone. Finally for something to do, he abuses the washing machine. His own sheets, his lab coat, John's sheets. He dissects the lint that comes out the dryer and he replicates some of his old thread experiments just for the sake of it.

The flat smells faintly of burnt plastic by the time Mrs. Hudson comes upstairs again. She's impressed, but also alarmed by the state of the place. "Have you scrubbed the floor?" she asks, suspiciously.

"I didn't spill anything noxious. Today."

"I should hope not. I see you've been busy anyway- I'm just going to open a window though, if you don't mind."

"Hm." He closes his notebook and sits, flicking through his phone as Mrs. Hudson turns to praising his effect on the living room. He's remade Bee's bed, all except the sponge bee still dangling from its peg and now quite dry. While she's not looking, he takes it down.

"Is John home today?"

"Tomorrow," Sherlock tells her. "He's sent an email."

"Oh good. Will he want any tea?"

"We'll manage," Sherlock replies.

Mrs. Hudson for once, perhaps still overwhelmed by the fact that Sherlock has spring-cleaned, doesn't pursue the topic. "What about tonight; would you fancy something? I've got a nice fish pie mix."

"No, going out," Sherlock says, standing and kissing her cheek so there are no hard feelings.

"Now, in fact. Don't wait up."

He plucks his coat from the stand and pulls it on. Mrs. Hudson, used to him dashing around, makes no comment until she notices that he has something in his hand.

"What's that you've got, dear? Something for a case?"

"You probably don't want to see," Sherlock says, shoving his hand, full, into his pocket. Mrs. Hudson wrinkles her nose in confusion, but years of exposure to Sherlock has given her the sense not to pry any further. He's usually honest with things like that, and to date, she's never wanted to see.

"I won't ask," she says, putting her hands up. "I just hope you warn your poor dry cleaner."

Inside his pocket, Sherlock closes his fingers around the soft rasp of yellow and black sponge and squeezes it gently.

They walk to the beach, in the end. Sholto all but marching, John piggy-backing Bee along. She pulls at his hair, joggling and giggling, putting her hands over his eyes.

“Jesus,” John swears, blinking furiously. “Cut that out, you.”

She laughs uproariously, and plays his scalp like the bongos. “You take her,” John offers. Sholto just gestures to his arm and his cane in mock-helplessness.

“Alas,” he says, dead-pan.

“You’re an arse, sir.”

Sholto throws back his head and laughs at that, his voice rich and loud enough to make Bee startle. John takes advantage of her distraction to set her down from his shoulders onto the road. She dangles off of his hand, rubber boots squeaking as she discovers stamping in puddles.

“Monkey,” John calls her, and she grins at him, all teeth, and jumps asymmetrically again.

This slows their pace, which is no bad thing. They have no end of time to fill and no end of beach to explore. Beyond the scrub lies a wash of clean yellow sand, muddied up only where the numerous little streams leak out of the turf of the coast. Rocks hunker deep in the sand, and with the tide out, there are shallow rock-pools to explore at the foot of every green lump of stone. John wishes they’d brought a bucket or something.

He stoops for Bee in the wet sand and catches little brown shrimp with his hands. They leap, skittering and she shrieks with horror and delight. Sholto talks quietly on and off of his boyhood on these same beaches; the fossils found and crabs tormented. He and John talk fishing, though neither of them consider it a hobby worth doing.

“There,” Sholto says, pointing out things John wouldn’t think to look for. He helps them find a starfish, which fascinates Bee so much that she cries when John insists that they can’t take it home. They find a huge cromer crab, tossed up the beach by the winter sea, and it bubbles at them in outrage when John taps on it’s carapace.

“Mind, it’ll nip you. They’re bad-tempered things,” Sholto warns, amused.

They sit on the rocky edge of the beach at the high-tide line and eat sandwiches from their pockets. Bee wanders to and fro, finding pebbles and shells to her already enormous collection of things in her pockets, until John tempts her back with a box of juice.

She scrambles into his lap, head butting his chin and shoving Elbant’s well-slobbered fur into his face. John gets a whiff of the elephant’s head and nearly gags. The toy smells, and there’s no other description for it, *bacterial*.

“Good god, what have you dropped him in.”

“She hasn’t, she’s been sucking the seaweed and then kissing him,” Sholto tells him.

John is horrified. “Is that dangerous?”

“It’s kelp. We used to give it to the dogs. She runs the risk of a shiny, wet nose and a glossy coat.”

“Stop eating things that aren’t food,” John says, exasperated. She chortles and steals his crusts.

“Look out there,” Sholto says. “Seals.”

John pulls his daughter into his lap and they look out across the windy sea, where true enough in the distance they can make out the unmistakable round heads of the seals popping up and down in

the surf. John breathes deep from the ozone-scented air and stretches his legs out.

“It’s nice,” he says after a long while. The sun is creeping towards the horizon already, painting the edges of the clouds in silver linings. They split a bar of chocolate between them, and Sholto turns out a packet of old toffees from his coat pocket; tacky beyond belief but still edible.

“Is this where you used to come on leave?”

“Sometimes,” Sholto replies, after a moment. “I visited people too.”

“Yeah?” John says with thoughtless curiosity.

“Mm,” Sholto agrees. “There was a civilian; a little older than me.”

John looks up, startled into silence. Sholto picks at his crusts and begins to carefully fold them back into the paper they’d come in. Logically he knows Sholto is not as cold as he puts himself across- these days it’s the trauma and the scars, in the past it was rank. He’s always had a human streak though and it should come as no surprise that he’s had a history. This isn’t somehow what John had expected.

“Oh,” he says, because the silence seems to expect it. “I- um...” had no idea. He’d never have guessed. He knew Sholto never really went in on the crude one-upmanship of bragging about encounters; John had always considered him rather old-fashioned and very, very private about his personal life, as you might expect from a senior officer. He hadn’t quite connected all of the dots.

“Do you still-?” John finds himself asking.

“No,” Sholto replies, neutrally. “Not for a long time.”

John stares out to sea for a long moment, letting the information sink in. “And you’re not... in love with anyone?”

“Now? No.”

“But in the past-?”

“I loved you.” Sholto doesn’t look up from his sandwich papers. His tone is matter of fact. The silence grows because John has no idea how to react.

“I’m still rather fond of you, in fact.”

“You’re-? Um...”

Sholto lowers the paper and considers. “There’s a lot of names for things these days; I can’t keep up. I’m not a slur, if that’s where you’re headed.”

“No, no- of course not!”

“You know what it’s like,” Sholto continues, his voice very, very carefully even. “You sign up, and you make friends and then it’s more than that, and at some point you realise you’re in deep with men; you trust them to bring you home with some dignity if you don’t make it. You’re signed in to... be their pall-bearer if it came to it. And you wouldn’t let anyone else do it for them. Most people don’t understand that kind of love. Not even a lot of other soldiers.”

John feels it more than understands it. He knows what Sholto means, but he can’t say the words he’s used to describe it are the best, or as true for him as they are for the other man. He hesitates to

redefine it.

“Respect...”

“Respect,” Sholto agrees. “Duty, camaraderie- I don’t know. It’s a lot of things, isn’t it? It’s not quite the same as friendship, even if mostly they do say ‘mate’: ‘this is my best mate’, ‘we’re army mates’.”

John wouldn’t dare introduce Sholto as his ‘mate’, not even if he told him to. Sholto catches his expression and smiles, ever so slightly.

“Exactly,” he agrees.

We’re not that.

What are we then?

“Try not to worry about it, John. It’s water under the bridge at this point.”

“Is it?” John argues, a touch upset. “We’re friends, aren’t we?”

Sholto inhales, hesitates and then gives in. “Yes, we’re that.”

“Alright then,” John replies, troubled. The wind teases cold fingers around his neck. “That’s alright, then.” He looks at the white horses on the crests of the waves and then has to ask.

“Your civilian- was she... he?”

Carefully, Sholto gets to his feet. “Forgive me, John, but I don’t think it’s any of your business to finish that question.”

“Oh,” John says, feeling small again. “Of course. Sorry.”

“Let’s get back. It’s getting cold.” Sholto waits for him to stand and claps his shoulder, leaning heavily on his cane as he leads the way back across the sand towards the shore. John follows, carrying Bee, who is rattling with seashells, on his hip.

“I’m sorry,” he says again. Sholto merely holds up a hand in acknowledgement.

I’m fond of you too, John thinks, and it’s a thought that follows him for the rest of the day.

—
—

John frets. His discomfort feeds into Bee’s temper and she throws a series of wobbles throughout dinner for no apparent reason, to the point where John starts to seriously wonder if an early bedtime might be better for everyone’s sake. It takes him the better part of an hour to settle her, after which point, Sholto capitulates.

“I wasn’t offended,” he says. “I’d merely rather not talk about it.”

John looks up from the book in which he’s been awkwardly trying to keep himself distracted from saying anything he’d regret.

“I shouldn’t have poked my nose in.”

“No, but I didn’t mean to upset things either.”

“It’s fine, you know.”

Sholto looks at him curiously. “What is?”

John tries to think of something to say that isn’t going to plant his foot in his mouth and finally withers and mutters, “Nothing, never mind.”

There had been other gay men in the army that he’d known. A few of them openly, and a few of them obvious but still holding on to the old ‘don’t ask and we need not say it’ mentality. By that point, the inclusiveness of the army had somewhat ceased to be such a hot talking point and most people would rather shut up and get on with the job. This was not to say incidents didn’t occur, but it wasn’t like it had been at the forefront of the latest debate about the armed forces. Almost a joke in fact; you could get cushier quarters and better pay as a serving ‘couple’, if you went as far with the ruse as to tie the knot. As far as John knew, no one had actually attempted it, but he’d heard of some straight guys who’d nearly worked up command into a tizzy with the suggestion that they might.

He can’t even picture Sholto’s civilian; male or female. He can’t picture Sholto on leave, come to that. Somehow it seems like he’d sprung from the ether fully formed, in uniform, and at the times John had been busy worrying his liver with too many shots of cheap booze, Sholto had probably been carefully packed up and stored in surplus somewhere by the quartermaster. It’s a stupid, naive perspective, John realises. He considers what Sholto must think of his own indiscretions and feels embarrassed.

“I’ve not been seeing anyone,” he confesses.

“Ah?”

John shakes his head. “I don’t know why,” he says, unsure of his own words. They feel automatic.

“Your wife died.”

“I know and- I don’t know...”

“I expect you’re busy.”

“Yeah, it is pretty busy,” John says, relieved and yet more confused than ever. “There’s clinic and Bee’s just a time vortex, I swear.”

“And the cases. Housework. It all adds up,” Sholto supplies him, uninterested. “I can’t imagine you’re out there painting the town red every evening you have off.”

“God no,” John laments. “Watching telly and trying not to nod off, that’s about all I manage these days.”

“Only natural.”

John feels nettled. “I might,” he says.

“Hm?”

“See someone.”

“Might you.”

“Yes, what do you mean? Why’s that hard to believe?”

Sholto gives him a very neutral look. “It isn’t,” he says. “You’d probably find it easy to find someone.”

John flicks irritably through the book and picks at the edges of the pages. “It’s not,” he says, once the silence has settled again. “It’s bloody hard in London, especially with a kid.”

“You’re an exciting army doctor, and blond, like the latest James Bond,” Sholto says wearily, “I imagine that’s enough to whet even the duller of imaginations.”

John scoffs at this, coming to the conclusion that he’s really talking to the wrong man on the wrong topic, but too far in to really extricate himself now. “I tried that.”

“Then try it again,” Sholto tells him, folding up his newspaper decisively. “John, you are good-looking, able-bodied, by no means poverty stricken and living in a city teeming with people amongst which, some at least will find you interesting. Frankly all this whining is annoying. Decide what you want and damn well hurry up about it, or find something else to do.”

John is gobsmacked.

“You are,” Sholto concludes crossly. “You’re being a bloody wet blanket. Pull yourself together.”

“Ex-, what? Excuse me?”

“You’re excused.”

It’s only years and years of having to put up with the harsh words of a superior officer and his unassailable respect for the man that makes John pause before he explodes. Anyone else he would have let his temper ride him and it would have come to fists or at the very least, his immediate departure from the premises.

Instead he has a sudden second thought and something in Sholto’s tone makes him stop.

James is jealous of me.

It’s such an unthought of reversal of feelings for John that it quite takes him by surprise and it must show on his face because Sholto suddenly looks abashed.

“You could...” John starts, but there’s no end to that. The odds stacked against Sholto in terms of romance are phenomenal. Even if he didn’t have his lack of confidence to contend with, the man’s personality has never been particularly in his favour when it comes to making overtures.

“How?” Sholto asks. “Look at me, John. I have nothing to offer.” He smiles cynically. “Except money. What good’s that?”

“People find... people,” John says, faltering.

“Yes, perhaps I should telephone up Channel 4: ‘Hello, good day. Have you any space in your media circus for a disfigured murderer, hold the opera, please.’”

“James, don’t.”

“I won’t,” Sholto agrees. “I’ve come to accept it, John. I am used to being alone, but by God, I cannot stand listening to you say how much you want things and then sit there on your hands, in front of me, not even trying to take things which are so well within your reach.”

“It doesn’t feel like it’s in my reach,” John says, with a creeping feeling of ineptitude.

“It has *always* been within your reach,” Sholto says, sounding exhausted. “You’re just so determined to push it all away from you; success, family, friends- everything.”

“What about you?” John challenges. “You said yourself you’ve just... stuck with, what? Your job?”

“It wasn’t a job,” Sholto says, sagging back into his chair. “That was what I wanted, John. The army was my marriage and family and everything else to me. I think I thought I’d die doing it, and do you know, I was at complete peace with that. That at least would have made *sense*.”

John can’t help empathising with him, but he holds back, unsure what to do about the other man’s fragility. “I’m sorry,” Sholto murmurs. “Let’s not fight.”

“Is that what you meant when you said you loved...”

There’s a space, which John counts in hard heartbeats and then emotion tremors even through the frozen half of Sholto’s face.

“God help me. A little of me loved them all, John. All my lads. And you’re the last of them-” his voice has gone thick and soft and there are tears starting in his eyes and it causes a physical pain in John. Sholto bows his head and presses the fingers of one hand against his brow.

“I got them all killed.”

“No, no, come on. It wasn’t your fault.”

“It was my mistake. No-” he holds up a hand as John approaches. “I’m fine.”

“You’re the one who once told me,” John says, putting his hands on James’ shoulders regardless, “that you’d seen bigger and uglier men cry unashamed.”

“It’s true,” Sholto says, thickly. He grips at John’s upper arm. “But I’m pretty damn ugly these days.” He straightens a fraction. Breathes hard; the kind they make you do for pain management. It hurts John too. He looks at it, trying to find something to say about ugliness that won’t come out as cliché, and in doing so finds himself examining Sholto’s face.

It’s changed since the first day that they met; aged and of course scarred, but the underlying features are the same. John’s memories of his childhood have dimmed, but he can still see the faint similarities in the line of the jaw and the brow; different but reminiscent. The set of the eyes is different, thank God, and the whole face put together is by no means comparable, and a great deal more pleasant in John’s opinion. Perhaps only because it belongs to the first father figure he really had.

It’s more than that.

You don’t leave a man down in the field if you can help it. Not even the dead. You take them home and you look after them to the best extent that you can. Sholto taught him that. He taught him a new depth of soldiering; how to handle failure, how to lift his head up and how to be a better captain. He was the model on which John based his own image. He’s earned his regard and his respect through and through.

It’s more than that.

Up close, Sholto's eyelashes are short and straight and coppery.

It's more than that.

It's an old sensation and John remembers it from too many times before, with all the old excuses: first day nerves, and respect for a senior officer; a misplaced childhood longing for a brother, the not-friendship love born from the closeness of death and the muddled roles they've played. It's a kick in the solar plexus that runs south and a sudden fist in the middle of his chest.

It's the exact reason why he's always held Sholto at arms length and fallen at his feet.

'And you saw it a mile away,' John realises, looking at Sholto. 'You knew.' It's why Sholto never did anything about it.

Sholto removes John's hands from his shoulders carefully and perceptibly calms. "I'm alright now," he says, in a tone which doesn't allow for questions. John wipes his palms on the front of his jumper nervously.

"Maybe a good night's sleep," he says. Sholto nods, and John moves back to allow him up from the chair. 'I've been,' John thinks, with disbelief, 'Staggeringly stupid.'

He can't let Sholto leave the room without one last assurance, however.

"You'll still be Bee's godfather, won't you?"

Sholto pauses at the door and then after a moment he nods. "Of course. I'd be honoured to."

"And get some help," John finishes before he can escape. "It's not so bad, the therapy. It does help sometimes."

Sholto narrows his lips and looks disinclined to agree until John adds, "Promise. For me."

"Very well," Sholto says, shoulders lowering ever so slightly. "If you think I must."

"Just want to keep you around for a bit, sir."

Sholto throws a quick look to the ceiling, perhaps touched, perhaps something else.

"Goodnight, Captain," is all he says.

Night falls, extends, quiet and slow and-

It catches Sherlock by surprise.

John's thumb touches against the soft part of his face right next to his ear, then seemingly elongates to stroke across his cheekbone and under his eye. His fingers in Sherlock's hair pull hard as he tugs him down, but Sherlock's scalp is numb and it doesn't hurt. He sees John's eyes flick closed and notes the dryness of the other man's lips, the angle of his face moving inexorably towards his own in a motion that corresponds directly to the lump of sudden intense heat moving down Sherlock's gullet into the pit of his belly.

And then John's lips bump dry and warm against his own, knocking the air out of him, and the rest of his body reacts like a fire to a sudden source of oxygen. They push their chests at one another in a weirdly repeating collision, John breathing hard, and then when Sherlock grabs his shoulders

out of sheer instinct and a need to stay upright, John puts him into a headlock.

Sherlock splutters on the wool of John's sleeve but he doesn't mind, this is what's meant to happen. He lets go of John's arm, shifting his position and reaching back to grab John's thighs to help the man and with some fumbling and a false start, they manage it.

John's not as big as he thought he'd be. Weirdly light in fact, and an easy weight across his spine. John holds him by the shoulders and Sherlock manages to make a smooth transition from bedroom to kitchen. John rewards him by licking the back of his neck, over and over like a dog.

Part of Sherlock is certain, as he opens a lower kitchen cupboard with his foot, that there is something inherently very mistaken and ridiculous with their sexual technique but he can't quite fathom what it could be. His subconscious blinds him to the fact that they are fully clothed and to all intents and purposes, he's doing nothing more obscene than piggybacking John around the confines of 221B.

He carries John around to the kettle and as John is now quite comfortably light and self-supporting on his back, lets go of him to fill it with water and set it to boil.

"Sugar for me," John says, still licking his neck. Sherlock pauses, holding mugs, to enjoy the touch. Everyone makes such a fuss about genitalia but they obviously have been wrong all this time. It's the neck. That's where all the action is. How has no one ever realised this before?

"The neck," John tells him, "has four intrinsic muscles and is the most flexible part of the human body. It's catered for by the chordia tympani, the lingual nerve, the hypoglossal nerve and the vagus nerve at least so it's incredibly sensitive with thousands of nerve endings to convey taste to your brain."

Sherlock pauses. "Isn't that the tongue?"

"Who is the sex doctor here?" John growls, and Sherlock demurs. Besides, someone's gone and mixed all the white and brown sugar cubes up and regardless of whether he's having sex or not, he has to sort them out again.

He's engrossed in the task; each cube is inscribed and he's caught up on the theory that they may have something to do with Mycroft's traitor- when the television turns on behind them in a sudden blare of whoopee cartoon noises.

"Bee, turn that off," Sherlock says. The scuttle-scuttle-whoosh of cartoon characters running, if anything, gets louder; something explodes and something else boings. "You're too young for them," Sherlock says more irritably, turning to look.

The television is huge and about an inch from his face; one huge blown up image of the one man who terrifies him. Moriarty thrusts himself out of the frame at him, decked in garish primary red and blue, laughing like a woodpecker.

Sherlock jolts awake. He half rolls in the sheets, stunned and then with a rasp of breath, clenches his eyes tight shut and so escapes both the Baker Street of the dream and the Baker Street of reality.

The court room is at his disposal at once and it's usually the most neutral place in his mind to retire to, only this time, he's met with a barrage of company that leaves him reeling. From on high in the judge's seat, Mycroft clicks his tongue in disapproval.

"Dear me, little brother. What have you gotten yourself into this time?"

“Never mind,” Sherlock says, turning so that he can keep an eye on everyone- there’s too many. What are they all doing here?

“I assume you have questions?” Mycroft says, unfazed. “Though, of course, I doubt you have the presence of mind to come to any conclusion.”

“Not so clever,” Mary agrees.

Sherlock turns to look at her; red coat over her wedding dress. She touches the lapel and tilts her head. “It’s a nice colour, isn’t it?”

“Very nice,” Irene agrees from behind him. She twines one arm around his ribs to tweak at his scarf and he twists to get away. “Remind me again,” Irene stands, tip of her little finger touching her painted lips, “What was that about matching colours...?” She looks towards the third woman, who keeps her distance.

“Either an unconscious association or one that she’s deliberately trying to encourage,” Molly quotes.

“Shut up,” Sherlock says.

“That would suggest long-term hopes; however forlorn.”

“Oh please, this is all backwards,” Sherlock scorns. The women look at him with displeasure. “John gave me the scarf, nothing more.”

“And is that more to the pity, Sherlock? What’s it you’re really after?”

“What are you doing here?”

Janine gives a little shrug. “Seems I was invited.”

“Yes, what *do* you think you’re doing, Sherlock? I’m not sure what you think you’re going to achieve.”

“Go away, you’re dead.”

“Am I?” Mary challenges. “Oh, I’d think hard about that one, Sherlock. I’m dead? Really? All of me?”

“There’s no such thing as ghosts.”

“Does it bother you,” Irene interrupts, “That you never figured her out? Poor, poor Sherlock. It must be such a trial to you.”

“Why should it bother him? He hasn’t figured John out either. He can’t even figure himself out.”

“What a joke!” Janine laughs. “I think I liked you better with the hat. Much more marketable.” She looks up, back, over her head at the oil painting. “Wouldn’t you agree?”

“No,” Sherlock starts. Distantly he can hear the water. Mycroft moves file after file from one side of his podium to the other.

“So many wretched cases left to be closed, Sherlock,” Mycroft tuts. “Which should we start with? Hm? Of course, if you would be reasonable, we could dispense with all this completely.”

“I think we should start with the-“

“-Impartial biological evidence,” Molly says, flatly.

“- the lies.”

“I think I’m more interested in talking about what he wants,” Irene purrs.

“I want-“

“-Of course he’s wrong.”

“And in any case, guilty.”

“Murder.”

“Sherlock.”

It’s John; red cardigan, blue scarf. Not Sherlock’s scarf but his own. He stands with his hands behind his back in parade rest, at Sherlock’s elbow. “Is this… helping?”

Sherlock looks back at the court room. The people have moved into a line for his convenience, all except Mycroft, who’s bound to his box.

“What is all this, Sherlock?” John asks at his side. “What’s this trial for?” The rest answer for him.

“Human error,” Mycroft pronounces.

Molly stands primly, hands folded over her sex. “Biology.”

“Lust. Possession.” Irene’s smile curls across her face.

“Lies,” Janine suggests, dismissive. “It’s all a pack of lies.”

A laugh from the painting of the waterfall. The courtroom shivers. Sherlock presses his eyes shut until it rebalances itself.

“Weakness.” The dead-pan tone of Magnussen makes the walls echo. “Pressure.”

“Theft,” spits Mary.

“I don’t know,” Sherlock breathes.

“You’ve made such mistakes, brother mine,” Mycroft says. He lifts a sheaf of files from beside the gavel and reads through them, pursing his lips in distaste. “Surely you’d agree that these foolish ventures of yours into ‘normality’ are doomed to fail. You are not like other men, Sherlock, you are different. Was it not simpler, when you had the sense to put all this aside and operate as you only can; emotion will destroy you.”

The water from the falls roars loud for a moment. Sherlock closes his eyes, struggles and then slowly it subsides again.

“Let me tell you, Mr. Holmes, what will happen,” Magnussen says instead. He’s emerged from the very air of the place. Like John he’s stands with his hands folded in the small of his back but now he brings them round in front of him and with great deliberation removes his glasses. He takes a handkerchief from his pocket and slowly cleans the lenses while he talks. “As it currently stands

there are a number of men who would like to see you suffer. To achieve this they will use any manner of tool at their disposal, as you well know.” He tuts, shaking his head with insincere regret. “Stories and stories, Mr. Holmes. You can’t shoot them all down.” He lifts his chin and balances his glasses back upon his nose. “But they can gut you, and your good doctor, and that sweet, sweet little girl.”

“It’s a shame,” Janine chimes in, “‘Cause at the end, we all know you’re not capable of it, are you now? God knows how you’ve done it, but my god, you’ve told such a whopping lie you’ve gone and swallowed it yourself.” She laughs. “You don’t know love. Y’never have. You’re not interested in the other either.”

Molly frowns. “Physically speaking, that’s not quite true.”

“The virgin?” Irene looks amused. “Oh, dear, I think she means it.”

“Libido is affected by a range of factors, including self-confidence and general health,” Molly says doggedly, “This rise in interest may be the natural result of recent dramatic changes in environment and improvement in circulatory health.”

Mary says nothing, she merely tilts her head.

Irene nudges Molly aside and scrutinises Sherlock, her whole face a laugh at his expense. “Is that how it is, Sherlock? Lose the drugs and start playing at families, and-“ she clicks her tongue, looks deliberately down at his crotch. “Up we pop, good as new? Is domestic the new sexy? Is that what you think of John?”

“It’s just a delusion,” Janine scolds.

“It’s an emotionally tense time which may be conflicting with coincidental physical changes to confuse you,” Molly counters.

“Oh, Sherlock,” Mycroft looks weary. “When will you learn?”

“He’s not yours,” Mary whispers.

It’s a clamour of voices, muddled and the painting on the wall begins to dribble noise again, and then water, flooding slowly onto the floor with a laughing song.

*If you set your foot awry,
Gentle John will make you cry-*

“It’s just me,” John says, stepping round between Sherlock and the crowd. He’s holding Bee now, and she has her arms around his neck and she smiles. “It’s just me, and Bee and you against everything else.”

“Is it?”

“Isn’t it?”

John straightens his back and looks at him, calm as you please. The corners of his eyes crinkle slightly with fondness. The water fades from the wall. For a moment, just a moment, Sherlock sees the tweeds and the moustache and the high collar.

How did you get out?

It's not like you locked me in there with him. I'm always around.

Doctor Watson.

Let me see what I can remedy for you.

John lowers his arms, empty and looks back at the silent wall of ideas populating Sherlock's court of law. He jerks his chin towards Mycroft first.

"You said it was me, always me," he says, "Not him."

"Yes," Sherlock breathes, shaken. "Yes, I did."

Mycroft leans back in his chair, reposed, and lays down the gavel. Sherlock blinks and he's gone. The rest of the line waits in silence, threatening. Sherlock looks at them over John shoulder, and dreads.

"And them?"

John glances back just for a moment. He looks down at his own leg and pats it. "Sometimes things hurt even when there's nothing wrong with them." He lifts his head and Sherlock can see the shine of dark glass behind him. "I told you that you were human."

Molly smiles. "Take care," she says.

"And them?" Sherlock asks again before she vanishes.

John gives Mary and Magnussen and the painting each a hard look in turn. "No ghosts, Holmes. You know that. That's not Mary. They're all you. You brought them here and you can send them away again."

"Then how do I know-?" Sherlock turns to the man as the courtroom starts to empty.

"In here? You can't. You're putting yourself on trial when there's not a court of law in the country that would put this down as a crime."

"I need to know."

"Well, then," John says, setting his hat on straight. "If it's information you're after, you know quite well how to go about that."

Sherlock curls his fingers, already feeling the plastic of his phone under them. He stays in the courtroom, under the eyes of his problems while he calls.

"Hello, you've connected to the Safe Steps Switchboard. My name's Robert. I'm happy to talk to you."

No, no, that's the wrong person. He doesn't want to speak to a stranger that he doesn't know. Hash key. Hash key. Hash key.

"Sorry?"

Sherlock hammers on the hash key again.

"I'm sorry there's something wrong with the line. Can you hear me?"

“Not you!” Sherlock snaps, desperate and embarrassed; why can’t these people talk to one another? How many people do they have who call and don’t speak? “The other one! Chantelle.”

“Oh- sorry? Chanielle?”

“Yes.”

“Please wait, I’ll transfer you.”

The line clicks and whirs and buzzes, annoys him with a tinny version of Vivaldi’s ‘Spring’ and then clicks again.

“Hello again. I’m glad you called back. I’m happy to talk to you.”

He doesn’t know her face, though he can guess from her voice at her age, her background. He can guess enough but he doesn’t want her in here with him and the others. He refuses to have another construction cluttering up his head.

“Do you want to talk to me today?”

In spite of everything, he does not. He hesitates, hears the echo of his own lungs on the line. “Do you think she’s clever?” Irene asks him.

“Will she know when you’re fibbing?” Mary adds.

She isn’t, she won’t, but it’s all he’s got to fight with.

“Take your time,” the woman says, “You can take as long as you need.”

“How long?” he asks. He’s spent more than two decades on this type of problem and most certainly the greater part of the last year. There are no doors out of the courtroom; he could go round and round in circles for the rest of his life in here.

“As long as you need,” she repeats, “I won’t cut you off or hang up. This is a safe line for you to talk on and I’m here to listen.”

He turns his back on the line of judges and hunts for a logical way to begin amongst a host of thoughts that are anything but logical. Only Molly goes with him. He sits opposite her on one of the benches, the phone between them. She’s wearing her lab coat and her hair is pulled back from her face, making it look pale.

What do you need, Sherlock?

If I wasn’t everything that you think I am, everything that I think I am, would you still want to help me?

“I’m not here to judge you. I’m just here to help in whatever capacity I can.”

“You said it yourself, I throw away the gifts I was born with and betray the love of my friends.”

His face hurts.

“I get high. I tell lies. I tell very good lies. I want things that I’m not entitled to.”

There’s a pause; Molly sits impassive, the lady on the phone thinks quickly as to which of these routes she can or will pursue.

“Have you taken anything recently?”

“No.”

“When was the last time you took drugs?”

He tells her.

“That’s really good; that’s a long time,” she says, gently. Molly echoes her relief in her face. Molly would care, Sherlock thinks. Molly’s always cared, but she’d also understand too much. She probably already does.

“Do you find you’re having thoughts about using drugs though?”

“Constantly.”

“Have you tried to take any actions about it?”

“No.”

“Have you spoken to anyone other than me; contacted your doctor?”

“No,” Sherlock says, with a choke of bitter laughter.

“Ok, but you’ve not tried to buy anything, or take anything?”

Hash key, hash key.

“You should be proud. That’s not easy and you’ve come a long way. The first months are the most vulnerable time and you’ve made it past that. Was the last time you used also the last time you received treatment?”

Hash key.

“Why do you feel that now, after so long, it’s becoming a problem for you again? What’s bringing it into your thoughts?”

What isn’t?

You look sad.

“There’s too much happening.”

“How long would you say you’ve been feeling like there’s too much for you?”

This takes Sherlock a long moment to consider. Time he can calculate in an instant, but feeling is a cloudy area of mathematics. Work has not been enough. Intellectually stimulating though the case of the Slashed Isaac was, it came as a double-edged sword. No more cases with children. Avoid anything that will involve Mycroft. Nothing that makes John’s face look like it did stepping into that lounge. But if none of that... then nothing? The thought is terror to him.

The smell of floor cleaner in a hospital setting; he smells it at Bart’s all the time and cannot show how he hates it. It’s such a neutral smell with such horrible connotations. He’s not sure how to judge himself if he’s earned even Wiggins’ contempt.

Wiggins needed work; Lestrade needs something other than work and other than Mycroft who

needs to stop bringing trouble into Sherlock's life with cases that do nothing but blow up in his face and his stupid biology. A dirty roll of money in Molly's hand, and the look on her face. Dancing with John and the shape of his lip, and John telling him he loved how he loves...

"Easter."

That's when it had started, anyway. With John's hand on his leg in the dark.

Molly nods. The woman makes a noise of understanding. "About four months ago. And something changed around that time?"

Hash key.

"Do you feel you can explain it to me?"

Sherlock puts one finger over the key and Molly looks at him.

John's worried you're dabbling again.

January, Sherlock thinks, remembering. How it all goes around and comes around. He'd almost made himself forget.

Please talk to someone.

He draws his finger back from the key. Molly waits. He'd thanked her and kissed her cheek, back then, when the problem had been the baby and John in a different way. When the door of the fridge had become blank white without its post-it notes, and Sherlock found himself faced with the unfounded certainty that his space in the flat would be slowly choked into an increasingly narrow definition. When John was so adamant about doing almost everything alone, and suffering flashes of resentment against his daughter and unable to face it. When John had been mourning Mary whenever anyone was looking, and glancing helplessly at other mothers when he thought they weren't. Scrabbling to keep John happy.

Christmas, he remembers, and treading on eggshells before that around John's distemper. Before that, and the atmosphere of the stranger in the flat; bulbous-headed with an unfocused blue stare. The screaming, both internal and external. He still doesn't want this conversation. Sentiment is still embarrassing. He still doesn't want to be domesticated.

The folder and the conversation with Harry; the jig-saw click of John's past into that present and troubling life of his. The weeks before that in the flat just waiting and watching and not being allowed to do anything. Or say anything. The weeks after the funeral, with John locked up in himself on the wrong side of London. The day of the funeral itself, and the almost-empty hall.

Before that, the call.

Before that, the emptiness of 221B when Sherlock had thought he was used to it. John with his feet set on a path away from him, which was bearable because he wouldn't be alone the next time Sherlock foundered on the rocks.

Before that-

"Deep breaths," the phone reminds him. "There's no pressure."

It all keeps unravelling back in his head, from point to point and each mistake, and because hindsight brings clarity, there's just one vein of truth that he can at least admit to.

"I don't want John to be alone."

She asks another question, and he doesn't have an answer for it because that's really the problem; there's no explaining what he and John have.

Finally, she says, "I want you to understand that there's nothing wrong with what you're feeling, and it's good to have those feelings. But... if this is the wrong time; and I do really think now is a time you should be focussing on your own health; and from what you're telling me it seems like this may not have the kind of result you are hoping for. If that's the case then this is only furthering your current feelings, and giving you this situation in which you feel so overwhelmed, especially given what else you are grappling with."

She pauses. Lets the words sink in.

Sherlock reluctantly presses the hash key and she continues, delicately.

"Especially if this person is not in a place to return those feelings, in my experience, then all this will just be unfair to him, and to you, because you can't put that on someone and have that hope for them without it hurting you. It's difficult, I know, it's incredibly hard, but finding a little distance is probably the best course of action you can take right now."

Hash key. Hash key.

It's obvious. It's not what he wants to hear.

"I am not saying you need to cut them out of your life; absolutely not. But I think you need to give it time, and you must give yourself time. Rehabilitation is a long and ongoing process and you've come almost three quarters of the way. It's not uncommon for people to start wanting to really push ahead once they can see the end of the road, but the process of combatting addiction is lifelong and you will always need to have a place in yourself to prioritise that. If you stop laying your foundations carefully now, it could undermine your efforts later. I get the impression also, that John is the one who helps you mostly when you have problems with the drugs, is that correct?"

Hash Key.

"I would advise finding someone more neutral that you can turn to. Even if it's us. We can be there for you any time, but can you see that it would be helpful to have a degree of separation between the two? So you're not trying to tackle all the things all the time, all with one person."

Obvious. As ever, he's stupid.

"And then you can focus on all the aspects of your relationship that have nothing to do with that. To enjoy a friendship, with less pressure from the things you are weighing down that friendship with."

Her words leave Sherlock with a peculiar feeling. A friendship. When did he get so accustomed to having a friend that anything else became such a troublesome option? It's a dash of cold water to the face, but rather than harsh, it's almost refreshing. How could he be so foolish as to jeopardise something he has earned, with so much blood and effort and sacrifice, on the basis of something so unspeakably ridiculous.

You are flesh and blood; you have feelings.

"Perhaps," Sherlock murmurs to himself, "but higher feeling can govern lower."

“Take time to think about everything, and remember that you can always call us if you need us. Twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. Any of us will be happy to listen to you and help you keep moving forwards as much as we can. You’re not alone.”

“No,” Sherlock says; that’s the one damn thing he knows all too well. Even in the privacy of his own head. Unless he chooses to be. “Yes, it’s a choice, isn’t it.”

“It is,” she agrees. “And sometimes the kindest action you can do for yourself is to make the difficult choice to let something go.”

“Thank you, Molly.”

The woman, with her faint burr of Gujarati heritage, doesn’t miss a beat. “You’re welcome,” she says gently and his thumb over the button makes the line goes quiet. When he looks up from putting his phone in his pocket, Molly too has vanished.

“Just us,” Irene says, leaning her chin on one hand.

He tosses his coat to her. “Put some clothes on.”

“This is how nature made me, you know. Besides,” Irene flaunts away from him, trailing the Belstaff. “It wouldn’t matter how many clothes you put on, underneath, you’d still be nude.” She turns and pulls the coat on teasingly, one arm and then the other. The collar fans around her face. “Let’s have dinner.”

“I’m busy. Go away.”

“Oh, very well,” Irene sighs. “But I make no promises, Mr. Busy.” She perches herself on the edge of a bench, thighs somehow more obscenely bare slipping from the folds of the coat than when she was stark naked. She smiles at him. “After all,” A flash of teeth. “I know what you like.”

And then she’s gone.

Mary stares at him.

“Who’s she?” Mary asks, on his right.

The other Mary on his left tilts her head.

“Oh, really?” Mary says, exasperated. “Mr. Holmes, that’s not very flattering.”

He slips into the persona; passes one hand over his scalp and the hair smooths back, before folding his hands behind his back. A magic trick against himself. “My apologies. An overactive imagination.”

Mary purses her lips, but her eyes sparkle. He likes her; this version. He likes her sense of humour and her cleverness. In another world- another again from 1895- maybe he would have made another friend. “I wonder, Mrs. Watson, if I might leave her to you.”

“I dare say so. She’s no Ricoletti, after all.”

He turns away and runs his hands in the opposite direction, shaking his curls free and the walls of the courtroom fall at last to be replaced with the walls of his own bedroom. Sherlock lets his hands fall to the mattress, tired. His whole body is flagging. His watch on the nightstand blinks at him, 5:45AM. John will be home today. Bee will be home today.

Sherlock claps his hands together and steps up from the bed in one smooth motion, plucks the towel and dressing gown from the back of the door and patters barefoot down the stairs. “Go wisely and slowly,” he quotes softly to himself. The bathroom is chilly underfoot and noises seem loud in the enclosed space; the clatter of the toilet seat and the roar of plumbing. The clink and thump of the bottles as he tips them into the waste bin.

He turns up the water in the shower, and tests the blade of his razor with his thumb; quotes while feeling at the stubble on his upper lip. “In this the antique and well noted face, of plain old form is much disfigured...” He shaves, dragging the blade through soap and shaking the gobs away into the bath, muses. “And, like a shifted wind unto a sail, it makes the course of thoughts to fetch about, startles and frights consideration, makes sound opinion sick and truth suspected...”

He closes off the water and towels dry; lifting the light dressing gown from the floor.

“For putting on so new a fashion'd robe.”

Dressed, he looks no different from normal; crisp shirt, clean trousers. He'll wear the red scarf and the coat because it'd be obvious if he didn't. John will be tired and out of sorts, guaranteed. Exhausted after three days solo parenting. Give him the evening and go through the client e-mails. More work. Something silly.

Sherlock smooths his fingers around his collar.

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John leaves in the morning straight after breakfast. Not too early, despite that; they eat a little later than normal and Bill is, perhaps deliberately, also a little late. It's almost eleven by the time the car sweeps up the drive.

Bill doesn't come in. They stand around on the gravel of the drive instead, in the sun which is making a brave effort at warming the house. Bill stacks John's luggage into the boot of the car, humming the Tetris song, while John tries to find the words to say goodbye.

Sholto holds out a hand to him and John shakes it. Before he can move to let go, Sholto tightens his grip and John looks down, waits in silence while Sholto fights his bad arm into obedience and with difficulty, grasps John's hand with both of his.

“Take care,” Sholto says.

John squeezes his hand back and nods, dumbly. “You too,” he manages. “Write. Send Bee some photos of your butterflies.”

Sholto gives a curt little nod and lets John's hand slip free. John takes it back with strange reluctance and fills his empty palm with Bee's instead.

“Say goodbye, sweetheart. Say bye-bye to James.” He crouches and waves to show her and she mimics him on autopilot, raising a hand, opening and closing her fingers like code and not looking at Sholto in the slightest. She's spotted another wobbly-faced baby in the hubcaps and is more interested in making her acquaintance.

Sholto gives a thin smile.

“Goodbye.”

“For a bit,” John corrects. “Maybe we'll come up in the summer, when the beach is nicer.”

“I don’t know about that,” Sholto replies, “There’s no guaranteeing the weather.”

“She won’t care, as long as there’s kelp,” John says ruefully. He stoops to lift her up and turns away to get her into the car.

“You’re welcome any time,” Sholto says suddenly, making John pause and turn back. “If you want to visit, any time.”

John’s mouth lifts at the corner. “Thanks.”

“And Sherlock; I doubt he’s remotely interested, but the invitation is extended to him also. Or anyone else you might-” Sholto glances over as Bill shoves the boot closed with a loud thump.

“I’ll keep it in mind, James. You look after yourself.”

Sholto nods again, this time more sincerely, and for a moment John thinks he sees the man’s shoulders drop a fraction. Bill crunches over the gravel towards them and John moves to put Bee into her car seat. He clips her in while Bill talks to Sholto; he doesn’t hear what, just Bill’s laugh, loud and boisterous as always, and Sholto’s quieter answer.

When John pulls his head out of the car, Bill’s looking both amused and thoughtful, and Sholto has that old spark around the eyes again; a glitter of amused intelligence.

John taps his watch. “Come on,” he says, “I’ve got a train to get on.”

Bill pumps Sholto’s good hand and says one last goodbye, scrambling into the driver’s seat and revving the engine. They leave ruts in the gravel as they go, Bill honking the horn twice before they exit the gate.

“Have fun?”

“Something like that.”

“Oh yeah?” Bill changes gear and the car settles to a purr as they begin the long wind through the lanes.

“It was good,” John says, watching the hedges slide past them. The sun casts dappled shadows through the scant leaves.

“He’s alright, isn’t he?” Bill says with confidence. “I like Sholto. I mean, gloomy as fuck, which is fair all things considered, but he’s got a sense of humour with it.”

“I think he’s alright,” John agrees, mulling over the ambiguity of that statement and unwilling to put any stronger certainty on Sholto’s future and as for his own thoughts about him; “We get on.”

“How about you?” Bill asks.

John settles back in his seat and flips down the sun visor so he can peek at Bee in the back seat. She’s chewing doggedly on the corner of a cardboard book.

“Me?” he’s a little taken aback by the question for some reason. “Yeah, good.” She taps at a picture of a duck with her fingers and mutters ‘quack’ to herself. John smiles.

“Everything’s good.”

For once it doesn’t feel like a total lie.

They have to wait for the train at Norwich station. John parks himself on the bench on the platform, keeping a stern eye on Bee, who is fascinated by the pigeons and has apparent ambitions to rugby tackle one right onto the track. It's a busy day, however, and the drifts of people between them and the rails serves as a makeshift barrier, keeping her in a three metre radius of John's feet.

John watches the crowd. There's a woman with another kid of school age and a sullen teenager. The two kids slang at each other and pinch whenever their mother is the slightest bit distracted. "Don't do that," she repeats, automatic and ineffective. John presses his lips together. 'Don't just bleat, do something,' he thinks.

The family drift away into the muddle of people and board a different train.

John wonders what other people think when they look at him and Bee, and decides for the first time that it's probably not too unfavourable. She's not a bad kid, despite all the odds. She's got a temper, to be sure, and he's probably far too much of a soft touch with her, but she's not a bad kid. She never kicks or hits out of spite; she doesn't bite. She's generally decent to other kids too, although she struggles with other children so much as showing interest in Elbant.

'I'm alright at this,' John reaffirms to himself. 'Look at me. I'm an alright dad with an alright kid.'

She's squatting, watching a pigeon on the pigeon's level as it walks in circles, puffed up and cooing. She coos back. John inhales and sees a scene with nothing missing in it for once.

At some point he stopped making you.

Is it past tense already, John?

John stretches out his legs and ignores the voices of his ghosts. They only have power if he listens to them anyway. What can they do to him now?

"Bee," he says, calling her. She comes back to take his hand and he sits her on the bench next to him. "Look, there's the train." People pass them without a second look. No one steps from the crowd to tell him what he's doing wrong or to ask him where her mother is.

Don't need one.

You've only got one.

That's enough.

It's enough. In the hurry to get the suitcases and Bee on the train, John forgets his thoughts on the platform.

The train clonks into the station and the pell-mell of London at rush hour. Paddington is noisy and bright, tripping with the noise of thousands of voices speaking at once, the trundle of wheels, the slam of doors and machinery. John stumbles down the platform under the hindrance of two suitcases and a toddler in a pushchair, who doesn't want to be strapped in. He squeezes through the ticket gate and fights his way towards the surface.

Sherlock is waiting for them by the taxi rank.

He reaches out, and smoothly takes the bags from John's hands. John can't stop smiling.

"Hello."

They don't have the luxury of time. Bee is kicking up a tempest and the taxi driver is tapping his watch. Sherlock drops the bags into the open boot and shuts it. John stoops and releases Bee from the horrors of health and safety. She yowls as he lifts her out, too caught up in complaining to appreciate that it's over. He turns her towards Sherlock as a means of distraction.

"Look!" he insists, jiggling her. "Who's that?"

She hiccups and looks, pawing tears from her eyes and then, even while still howling, smiles and waggles her whole body at him.

John puts her down, already pedalling in mid-air. "Who's that, Bee? Who's that?" She goes to Sherlock, almost tripping, with a cry. Sherlock steps in, catches her under the arms and lifts her like a trophy. She gurgles. "Addede," she says, when Sherlock pulls her close again.

"Hello, Bee. You're slimy." Sherlock gets into the taxi, pulling a handkerchief from his pocket to wipe the disgrace from under her nose. John climbs in, one hand out to support her as Sherlock organises his seatbelt. He leaves her planted in Sherlock's lap, both her hands trailing upwards over her head to play with his scarf. Sherlock switches the end of the cloth briefly over her face to make her laugh.

"I take it we've been missed?" John asks, clipping himself in as the taxi pulls off. He gives a blink of contentment, not expecting an answer. In his eyes he says something else.

I missed you.

"It's been very quiet," Sherlock allows. Bee caterwauls, cheery again, in his ear. He stuffs his dirty handkerchief into his pocket. "Quiet. Clean."

"Lord, I bet you hated it," John says, one breath away from a laugh.

"I got a lot of things done."

"Hated it," John says, self-satisfied. "Living off of take-away and doing whatever you wanted. That's suffering, that is."

"Yes, let's not get carried away," Sherlock says. "How was Sholto? It went well."

John shrugs, "I suppose. I think we left him a bit more buoyant than when we arrived. You were right; he wasn't good. It's that house of his. He keeps himself sequestered. Won't get help."

If Sherlock finds any irony in John's words he doesn't comment. They have differing opinions on how insightful Ella is in terms of assisting John with his issues. In fact, all three of them have differing perceptions of what issues John even has to begin with, but over time, Sherlock's come to appreciate that if nothing else, it's a matter of a space for John. Even if he doesn't use it.

"Vatican cameos?"

"No. Not that bad. He's got butterflies."

Sherlock lifts the corner of his mouth ever so slightly and with more than a little wryness. John looks up from where he's been rubbing at his own fingers.

John clears his throat. "Rare ones," he continues. "And a forestry plantation, which at least gives him a reason to keep going till spring. I've told him he's got to write to me. Said I wanted photos." John doesn't care an ounce for a small section of new damp forestry in Norfolk.

Sherlock hums, considering.

"I asked him...he's agreed to be Bee's... y'know. Back up."

John feels guilty saying it. It was something he wanted for someone else and something he hadn't quite made his mind up about fully, but it's done now. Sherlock accepts the news without any outward reaction. "And... how was that?"

"He didn't want to. I thought it might help," John says, and it's only half a lie.

"He was flattered."

"Yes, I think so. It's only a bit of legal paperwork. But he liked Bee."

"Naturally."

"Not great with kids," John comments. "Wish you'd seen it. You couldn't tell who was more scared; him or her. Worse than Mycroft."

"Mycroft," Sherlock sighs, tone full of disparagement.

"Your brother's pretty funny."

"He's always been 'funny'."

John remembers Mycroft goggling at Bee the year before, and the silly pompous way he'd gotten Anthea to slip him that envelope.

"Remind me to look up that Christmas card when I get in."

"It's a first edition of the original one thousand prints of John Callcott Horsley's design commissioned by Sir Henry Cole, coloured by Mason and sold at one shilling per print in 1843. Nine of the five hundred prints sent by Sir Henry Cole are thought to survive, although that figure is obviously one short as you own the tenth. Suspected cost at auction is in the region of £9000."

John nearly chokes on his own spit.

"How much!?"

"More accurately, around £8500, but given a new one hasn't come onto the market for decades, it could spike extra interest."

John's jaw drops nearly to his lap. "I've been keeping it under the clock!"

"Did it no harm."

"Jesus! Did I say thank you?"

Sherlock shrugs. "Probably not," he replies, accurately. "I can contact the Ephemera Society and ask them how to go about selling it."

"Jesus," John repeats, slumping in his seat. He glances at Bee. "You'll get one year at uni anyway."

Blimey. Really?"

"Really," Sherlock replies, and then he laughs. He's been sitting on this joke for months. It feels good. It feels nine million pounds of jade good.

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They arrive back at Baker Street and the flat is a little too warm and smells funny and John loves it. The floorboards creak in all the right places. Bee's feet slap as she does her usual little half-run-half-dance-all-jerkiness like someone's wound her up and let her go. She flops onto the rug by the coffee table and gathers her toys, still where she left them, into a suffocating embrace of love.

John does a lap of the living room himself and then gives Sherlock a look of pleased suspicion. "Did you tidy up?"

"I hid the evidence," Sherlock allows. John nearly grins and then goes into the bedroom, dropping his bags on the bed and then emerging again, pleased.

"You did all the laundry, even the sheets."

"I hid- well. That wasn't evidence," Sherlock says, only just about stopping himself from unthinkingly repeating his earlier joke. "It just smelt stale."

John pauses, grappling with not letting himself read any kind of horrible double-entendre into this, and also the embarrassment. "Well. Thanks." He clears his throat. "Kept meaning to but didn't get time before I left."

"No. Well. All done," Sherlock sing-songs over his own embarrassment and hurries to put the kettle on. Or boil his own head. John's not going to ask. He hurries to bury the conversation in time spent unpacking and sorting out what he's brought back that needs to be washed. Eventually, when he's recovered enough to pretend nothing happened, he calls out to the kitchen. "What are we doing for dinner?"

Sherlock reappears at the door, holding a mug in each hand, his expression blank.

"Ok, rephrase: what do I want to do for dinner?" John says, taking a mug and thinking. He can't be bothered with cooking. He'd probably have to go to the shops and that's more hassle than he cares for.

"Pub?" he asks.

"Dinner? Angel?"

"Yes...Devil?" John hazards.

Sherlock looks at him, his expression a picture. "The Angel in the Fields. In Marylebone."

"Oh. Yes. Good lamb chops there."

They are preserved from further stupidity by Mrs. Hudson. Sherlock takes the first note of her coo-ee to feign engagement in Something Very Important With This Bookcase On The Other Side Of The Room.

"Coo-ee! John, you're back. How was your trip?"

“Good thanks,” John replies, turning to her. “Bit damp. How have you been?”

“Not too bad, thank you dear. Hello boofuls,” she adds with a coo at Bee. “Were you good?” Bee leans against Mrs. Hudson’s leg, calls her Nana, and Mrs. Hudson stoops stiffly to kiss her.

“She was good. Howled on the train home, but she was tired.”

“It’s a long way,” Mrs. Hudson agrees. “I can’t sit that long either. It does my back in something awful.” She points unsubtly to the clean coffee table and mouths ‘Did you notice?’

Sherlock, ever perceptive, closes his book loudly and scuttles off with it.

“It wasn’t the same without you,” Mrs. Hudson says.

“It was fine,” Sherlock complains, out of sight, halfway up the stairs.

“Sherlock missed you terribly,” Mrs. Hudson informs him, with zero sensitivity for male dignity. “We all did.”

“It wasn’t even a week,” John objects, though he can’t deny all this is something of a fluff to his ego. He piles clothes into the washing machine and chitchats with Mrs. Hudson, who makes herself comfortable on the sofa with a magazine crossword, happy to spend an hour with the baby while John and Sherlock get something to eat.

John yells up the stairs that Sherlock has an hour before dinner, and goes to sort Bee out for bed. Sherlock recovers himself while John is bathing the baby and makes himself seen again, if only to revenge himself on Mrs. Hudson by blurting out the answers to her puzzle.

John wrestles Bee into her pyjamas and, after one last slobber at Mrs. Hudson and Sherlock both, takes her to bed.

“Zub,” says Bee, looking under her pillow.

John hunts through the bed with her. The bee sponge is missing. He checks under the bed, but honestly, it could be anywhere in the flat. Zub tends to travel around and get dropped in daft places. “Don’t know, baby, he’s not here.”

“Zub...”

“Snuggle with Elbant.” He brushes the elephant’s ears into her hands and she cuddles him almost reflexively.

“Elbant...” She takes the alternative but he can see her still thinking about it. She settles down after a story, and John dims the light and closes the door on her.

“You haven’t seen her bee, have you?”

“No, dear. Thought you took it with you,” Mrs. Hudson says, unruffled. “It’ll turn up. Might be in the toy box.”

“Oh, probably,” John says. “Right. Food. Ready?”

Sherlock abandons his chair wordlessly, and shrugs into his coat, pressing his hands into his pockets. He hesitates.

“What?” John asks, zipping up his jacket.

“Nothing. Let’s go.”

They go. It’s not a glamorous meal, but it’s reasonable food. They eat in silence, smearing sauce on their plates and letting the background noise of the the pub wash over them. They have a pint apiece while they eat and sit back once the food is gone nursing a second. It provides John with the merest edge of a buzz, enough to be comfortable and sleepy. Sherlock leans in his chair, gaze fixed on the passers-by on the street.

“Anything interesting?” John asks presently.

Sherlock turns his face back towards him.

“No.”

John waits for further clarification and gets nothing. This feels strange, he thinks. For the first time, it feels like there’s something obstructive between them. John looks down into his glass at the bubbles on the surface of his beer and feels the rising self-reproach. Too much, he thinks. Too much of a fuss coming home. Too many jokes. The back of his neck prickles.

“Thanks again, for... you know, tidying round. Saves me a job.”

Sherlock shrugs carelessly.

“What?”

Sherlock shrugs again.

“Lestrade says he came round.”

“Mm.”

John looks at him, confused. Dessert arrives and as small talk seems to be going down like a lead balloon, he eats in silence. Sherlock’s attitude irks him, but there’s nothing he can put his finger on. He was genuinely pleased to see them, and now he’s acting so inconstantly. For his part, Sherlock is kicking himself. This is hardly how he’d intended to start out, but there’s something so perceptibly different about John that he hadn’t been banking on that he’s found himself uncharacteristically tongue-tied. It’s like someone’s turned down the gravity on John. He looks like he’s about to bob up towards the ceiling at any moment.

You’re a bleedin’ disaster.

John’s given legal guardianship to Major Sholto, in case something happens.

Please, Sherlock, you’d be a good Godfather, really.

Sherlock’s said no twice or more. He has spent the weekend with a plastic baggie of out-of-date recreational drugs in his dressing gown pocket and a courtroom in his head, and now even John has come to agree that he would not be suitable. They wouldn’t let him collect Bee from the nursery. Sherlock picks at his food, appetite dwindling. His head buzzes. His inner elbows itch.

“Sherlock, are you ok?”

He’s not, in too many ways. All it’s taken is for John to walk back in and he’s found his self-control crumbling like tissue paper. John prefers to do things rather than say them and they’re sat close enough that it would be the ill-thought action of a second to do something. He needs John.

He needs John, because there's no one else like him, and he's never going to have another friend of this calibre, if ever he has another friend at all. There are too many problems and too much conflicting advice, too much input and nowhere for it to go. John's hand is on his wrist.

"Sherlock, talk to me."

Something he's been holding back for months, slips. "I want a cigarette."

John puts his knife and fork down, wipes his hands on the napkin. "Ok," he says, carefully. "Ok. Let's go home then."

"I don't want it." Sherlock says in his own defence. He just wants everything else he can't have. "I don't want anything else."

"That's ok; I'm here. We can go home. You can have a cigarette. We'll get through this."

Against his own wishes, Sherlock meets his eye.

I'm exhausted, John.

John takes cash from his pocket, drops forty quid on the table and pulls Sherlock's coat from the peg. He's paid too much, but he doesn't think twice about leaving the money there and walking Sherlock home. He steers Sherlock along the street, fingers curled right over the bit where his elbow is itching. John talks a whole lot of nothing; stands beside him while Sherlock chokes down a cigarette outside of Tesco for a feeble nicotine hit that really does nothing for him, chemically speaking. The ritual of it calms some of the agitation in his head. John takes him home.

"Give me a number, Sherlock," John asks him, just by the door. Sherlock grapples with a lie, but it's too late for lies now.

"Eight."

John only says, "Ok."

It's an exercise in waiting and distraction and an enforced game of opposites. Sherlock would like to sequester himself away, disengage, and coke himself to the eyeballs; John makes him keep him company. Makes him talk in meaningless conversation. Goads him into squabbles and puts on the telly for the noise. They sit with their backs to it while The Voice is on and try to guess what the people look like. When Sherlock starts to slump he makes him get up and shower, change his clothes, make tea, check on the baby, tell him a story. John invents an unending list of civil demands, and Sherlock fulfils every one of them.

They play games; all of them, one after another. Sherlock makes a Merels board from a sheet of paper and a jar of mixed currency and feverishly teaches him how to play. John loses spectacularly every time. It doesn't matter.

"Give me a number," John says, sifting pennies.

"Six."

They sit up together, watching idiotic movies in their pyjamas, John's eyelids drooping. He stays up all night in the end, on one side of the sofa, Sherlock with his fingers pressed under his chin, running patterns for Nine Men's Morris in the emptiest corner of his mind that he can muster, and then without knowing it, it's hours later and the sun is creeping in at the window.

John is still on the sofa, leafing through a book. He's got dark circles under his eyes, but his expression is calm. Sherlock stirs, annoyed at himself for falling asleep.

"How are you doing?" John says, noticing that he's awake.

Sherlock squints at the expanse of white over and between them. "This is your duvet."

"Yours was upstairs," John answers, closing his thumb in his book. He pats Sherlock's foot where it's drooping over the edge of the cushions by his leg. "You look a better colour."

"Two," Sherlock says, grimacing at the crick in his neck. John makes no motion to move from where he's settled and even goes so far as to open his book again; he's near the end of the chapter. Sherlock lies back for a long moment, watching the lamplight and the sunlight vie for which is going to light John's face the most. John's shoulders rise and fall with even breaths. The marshmallowy end of the duvet obscures his lap and muddles with the soft cream of John's jumper. It makes his hands look smaller and his knuckles redder; the line of the back of his neck more vulnerable. Sherlock waits for it all to hurt him, to thrill him, to do something, but it doesn't. It's just John this morning.

He shifts an arm free of the duvet and plucks at John's wrist in order to read the face of his watch. John's pulse is steadfast. Six in the morning.

The room is chilly outside of the covers. He arches his back until the joints pop and sits up slowly. John gathers the duvet away into his own lap. "Go up and sleep a bit more," John suggests, prodding him. "Go on. I'll be down here if you need me."

Sherlock goes, just for the space now that he's capable of living in it without falling into ruin. His room is dim and cool compared to the living room; the blinds are drawn and the duvet smells of nothing but soap. He sinks into it with the idea that in a few hours, John will be dead asleep and Bee will be waking, and he'd like to be there. His mouth tastes unpleasantly of old cigarette smoke, and he lies back, sucking his gums to be rid of the flavour.

He feels better for having slept.

He hadn't meant to tell John about the drugs. Up till now it had felt like making it too obvious would be a burden to John and a disappointment. Strangely, it's been neither.

It hadn't been awkward.

"I always miss something..."

Which came first, the chicken or the egg?

Which comes first, the drugs or John?

A lot of answers to that, Sherlock thinks. Too many.

Molly's answer had been to give up and make space between them; find someone else to confide in, either herself or someone else. Distance. It strikes Sherlock now that maybe that works for normal people. People who don't have five different thoughts at once, and more friends and more reasonable lives. Maybe it works for people who don't live every facet of their lives through the lens of their interests. People who have jobs that they can switch off from.

If that's the case, then he needs to decide for himself what he's going to do.

What comes first?

John. Without a doubt.

What comes first for John?

Bee. He can't even begrudge admitting that the priority is no longer his.

Irene's right. He can't rid himself of his body without destroying himself. He can't change his base nature, but if he can rely on this much from John, then as ever, it's not a rotten compromise. Difficult, but no worse than shrugging off any other harmful indulgence.

You should avoid entering a new relationship for two years after rehab.

It will be two years in the spring, and not before. It'll be two years for John in the summer, and not before. The tar in his mouth tastes disgusting; no more cigarettes. Cold turkey; it's the only way that ever works for him. Sherlock stretches his legs out and closes his eyes. He hears, faintly, the creak of John's mattress.

Downstairs, where he needs him.

—

John finds Zub the next day when he's collecting his coat from the rack by the door. He pushes aside the Belstaff and there he is, yellow nose poking out of Sherlock's pocket. John gently tugs the sponge free, puzzled and then smiles.

They were missed.

Chapter End Notes

Chapter title comes from the song 'Family Man' by Fleetwood Mac. The alternate we played with was 'The Needle and the Damage Done' from the song of the same name by Neil Young/Harvest.

A Bullet for Cinderella is a real book. It's nothing terrible and nothing brilliant, but the title is hilarious and I wanted to use it.

Bill's car is a Maserati Ghibli. Eyyyyy.

The pubs mentioned are real, but I have no idea on the food quality other than what Yelp suggests.

Cromer crabs are big, tasty bad boys.

'If you set your foot awry, Gentle John will make you cry' is a line from a very old children's nursery song. I don't remember the dance but I vaguely remember the song from English country dancing at school. The lines run something like:

"Round about in a ring I go, a maiden gone a-maying. Here's a flower and here's a flower, as red as any daisy. If you set your foot awry, Gentle John will make you cry, but if you set your foot amiss, Gentle John'll give you a kiss." I remember it because a) Daisies aren't red and this annoyed 7-year-old me no end, and b) as far as I was

concerned, 'Gentle John' was more likely to get a plimsol to the delicacies if he tried anything, and then we'd see who was crying over dance steps.

'Go wisely and slowly' Advice from the Friar to Romeo; Romeo and Juliet. Sherlock also quotes Salisbury from The Life and Death of King John, which also by Shakespeare, but most people don't bother with it.

In the UK you have to have a safety seat for a child in a car, except in a taxi, then they can sit on your lap. Madness.

The Christmas card John got is a real deal, and worth actually about that much. Boggle with me. It depicts a family at Christmas having a feast, and one lady is giving her child wine, so it's clearly from Different Times.

'Boofuls' is how my Granny addresses anything smaller and cuter than herself, especially if it's got four legs. It's sort of slang for 'beautifuls'. It's also the name of the green jellybaby. My granny is very similar in many ways to Mrs. Hudson, only she was never an exotic dancer, as far as I know.

I have no idea on the quality of the food at The Angel in The Fields. You'll have to go and investigate the lamb chops for yourself. :)

Questions or comments about something not mentioned here? Feel free to drop us a message. My beta reader is [Codenamelazarus](#) and I am [Odamakilock](#)

Part 12: All This Frustration

Chapter Summary

The envelope gleams. It's fresh brown paper of the nice sort. A little glossy across the surface. It's not even sealed.

Finally he can't stand it any more. He eases the paperclip off of the flap and with the trembling tip of just his forefinger and thumb extracts the document.

'Last Will and Testament' is written across the top. Sherlock reads, half blind.

"I, John Hamish Watson of 221B, Baker Street, London, W1U 6SJ, revoke all former wills and testamentary dispositions-"

Chapter Notes

Double updaatttte, double updattee! And I bet you thought I'd chucked it all over in favour of derpy teencroft ficlets and making Sholto happy, but tah-daahhhh. Thanks due and given in plenty to my beta-reader, [Codenamelazarus](#), and to everyone who has supported the fic, left kudos and comments so far. Gee, but you're swell. <3

Also may I direct your attention to the fire exits at the front and rear of the fanfic; the tags, which are readily available to inform you of all information available; the rating, which you will be interested to see has skipped up a notch; and the chapter headings which are now helpfully referred to as 'parts' and 'interludes' to sort out the confusion in numbering on AO3.

Happy May Day! -Odamaki xx

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Part 12: All This Frustration

She's nineteen months old. One year and seven months, and John's trying to teach her how to say 'Sherlock'. He can't understand why she can't seem to put the syllables together. If he presses his finger to his lips, she'll mimic him and blow spit and say 'ssss!', she can manage a long vowel and a 'k'. Somehow she can't or won't produce anything even vaguely resembling 'Sherlock'. Not even 'Saawock', which John is certain is within her capabilities.

At most she manages something that is uncomfortably close to 'sir'; mostly she prefers to babble at Sherlock. 'Ah-bah', she calls him, or 'Eeewo' or 'Ad-ad'.

"It doesn't matter," Sherlock says, after another frustrated effort. "We can wait until she's old enough to say it." He tries to turn a blind eye to the impatience on John's face. Tries not to read too much into it.

“She’s got to call you *something*. She calls everyone else something,” John grouches, looking down at her with his hands on his hips. “Say ‘Sherlock’, damn it.” She finds his annoyance funny and laughs up at his face.

“William,” John tries, as a last ditch effort. She sticks a finger up her nose and explores the wonderful world inside it instead of paying his words the blindest bit of attention, and John gives up. Silently, Sherlock is relieved.

He would not be able to explain why.

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—

The rehab centre moves Wiggins onto outpatient care at the end of September. By most reports he’s done well, albeit with a few hiccups here and there. They give him a group to attend and a support worker. Thanks to Lestrade and Molly’s joint meddling, they’re able to deliver him to a flat in Elephant and Castle, which is done up in shades of beige and grey and smells of the bleach that has been used to scrub out all the mold. It’s chilly and prone to condensation, but as Billy resignedly points out, it’s got a whole roof and he’s got permission to live under it. In that respect, it’s an upgrade.

Molly raids the local branches of Help the Aged and Oxfam and helps him add to his single duffle bag of possessions with a enormous pile of second hand furnishings. She buries the creaking depression of the old sofa under a loud piece of crochet donated by one of Mrs. Hudson’s bridge ladies, and hides the dingy carpet under a sky-blue rug. She gently bullies Lestrade into shifting furniture, making minor repairs and hanging a notice board where she pins Billy’s good-luck cards and appointment schedules. Billy stands in the middle of his new living room, looking overwhelmed at this sudden wealth, and doesn’t know how to protest when Molly tells him it’s going to be alright.

By the end of the week, Molly’s determination has carried them all forward like a tidal wave and John stands, picking drying orange paint from his fingernails and looking at the kitchen walls with ambivalence.

“It’s still a bit bright,” he comments, squinting.

“I don’ mind,” Billy says, sitting on an upturned bucket washing brushes out. “S’like being in a bottle of Sunny D.” He smiles at Molly.

“It’s cheery,” Molly adds, pleased. She’s got a streak of yellow in her hair and more down her jeans. The citrus colours are an improvement on the cold white, John supposes. Billy hums and sneezes on the fumes from the turps.

The man’s proudest acquisition is a stereo. Lestrade had dug it out of his box room and donated it to the cause, along with a whole lot of other bits and bobs he’d taken out of spite in his divorce and was now forced to admit he had no use nor taste for.

“Cor, what’s all this for, then?” Billy had asked, unearthing a food processor and a lamp from a box. Lestrade had shrugged. “If you don’t want it, bung it to charity or something.”

Sherlock has not set foot in the flat, but he has, in a gesture, sent John with a set of notebooks and one of his old laptops. Billy had leafed through the papers and his expression had gone from flat to three-dimensional in the matter of a moment. John had sent a text.

[Is it dangerous?]

[No. Internet research- SH]

Lestrade had deliberately overlooked it, and Billy had squirrelled his notebooks away on the lopsided bookcase.

Molly makes tea and they collapse on the scant furniture to drink it, shivering a bit with the windows open to dispel the paint fumes. "It'll be alright," Molly comments again, looking around. "It's really not half bad. Hope the neighbours are decent."

"Mm," Billy says, stirring his tea with his finger. "D'you think I could get a tank in here?"

"What do you want a Challenger for?" John replies without thinking.

"I meant for a lizard."

"Oh."

"Not a big one," Molly says, "but you could get... something, I suppose. One of those little go-faster ones."

"Skink!" Billy enthuses.

"Bless you," says Lestrade, who hasn't been listening.

Molly collects the cups once they've been emptied and John tags along behind her to the kitchen. As discretely as he can, he closes the hatch so that they can talk without the other's listening in too obviously.

The running of the tap drowns out the noise of Lestrade and Billy trying to figure out how to make the internet work, and John sidles around tapping his fingers on the kitchen counter before he manages to get around to what he wants to say.

"Molly, can I ask you something?"

She puts down the tea towel and turns her attention to him, questioning.

"I need to make a will, y'know, well, update it," John blunders, feeling awkward for no obvious reason. "I'm asking the Major- James Sholto; he was at the wedding, I'm asking him to take power of attorney, but he can't come down to witness it being signed and I can't ask anyone who benefits from the will so-"

"Why do you need power of attorney?" Molly interrupts, surprised and concerned.

"For Bee. Just in case something happens to me- actually, I didn't exactly plan this. But he was willing and I need someone to handle the paperwork and help with the decisions if anything happens to me."

"Executor," Molly says.

"What?"

"You mean you want him to be an executor of your will. That's what they call that." She gives him a shrewd look. "Because of Sherlock?"

“Because of Sherlock,” John says, glad that she understands without him having to go over it all in painful detail.

“We did it all before my dad died,” Molly says, recalling. “I got quite good with all the terminology.”

“I’ve never made one before,” John confesses. “There was only Harry and inheritance was automatic and just...I let the army handle everything.”

“Give Mycroft power of attorney if you have to give it to anyone.” She leans on the counter. “Or me. That’s the person who’d handle your money and make medical decisions for you if you go ga-ga, or you’re too sick to do it for yourself.”

She gives him a faint smile. “Anyway, I’d help if things... went bad.”

I’d look after them.

“You’re a really good person, Molly,” John blurts, with a measure of respect that surprises both of them. She flushes and for an instance, John can see another universe where Molly Hooper is exactly his sort of woman. She picks at the paint on her jeans, embarrassed, and the moment disappears.

“Do you have an appointment with your solicitor or anything?”

“Not yet,” John says. “I wanted to ask you first.”

“Let me know when; the nice thing with my patients is that they can usually wait a few hours to be seen to, and they don’t usually complain.”

“Thanks.”

She pauses, wondering how nosy her next question will sound but then asks him anyway.

“What have you planned for it? Your will, I mean.”

John sucks on the corner of his mouth, leaning on the counter so he’s got a good view of the door. Not intentionally, but he’s keeping an eye on anyone walking in anyway.

“There’s not much in terms of material stuff. I don’t know what happens with my pension; there are some bonds. More or less, everything goes to Bee.”

“In a trust or something?”

“I suppose.”

Molly considers for a moment. “If your solicitor is good, I’d make him executor of the will,” she says, after a long moment. “And name the Major as the trustee. Then your solicitor pulls together all your assets and it’s the Major’s job to make sure they’re handled and given out at the right time to the right people. Like... the executor gets all the money together, and the trustee banks it. Would that work?”

“I think so,” John says.

“Get it drafted,” Molly suggests, “and run it past Mycroft. He’ll know all the paperwork you won’t, and your solicitor may miss or not have access too. Regarding...well, Sherlock’s past.” She folds her arms over her stomach and the breeze from the open back door rumples the loose hair over her

forehead. “Then the stuff that doesn’t look... too good. You can; I don’t know, stock up some counterarguments.”

John scratches at the back his neck, uneasy. “Will that be enough?”

Molly hems her lips together for a minute or two, worrying the same, and then she says, “Ultimately, it’ll come down to if she’s happy with Sherlock or not. That’s what they’ll look at most. That’s the best argument. Besides,” her brows knit up in concern. “You’re not actually dying, John.”

“Not yet,” he agrees.

“I don’t fancy it, you all...slabbed out in my morgue.”

“Thanks,” John scoffs, nettled. Molly wrinkles her nose.

“Well, I don’t.”

“I’m not in a rush to get there, either.”

The hatch clatters suddenly as Billy pulls it open, his expression sepulchral, making them both jump.

“We have broadband,” he announces.

The baby gets an eye infection and passes it to John, who spends a week scraping gunk from his own eyes and trying to hygienically squeeze ointment into hers.

“Sherlock,” he calls, pleading from the bathroom. “I can’t bloody see!”

Sherlock slouches in, feet tapping on the tile. John can hear the amusement in his voice. John stands, one eye welded shut, a flannel dangling from his hand, the baby flat on her back on the changing mat, grizzling.

“Help.”

“Staphylococcus aureus,” Sherlock comments, lifting Bee up and jiggling her until she stops. “Or, haemophilus influenzae, or, streptococcus pneumoniae, or pseudomonas aeruginosa.”

“It’s one of them,” John agrees. “I hate drops. Here, this one’s hers.” He holds the flannel out blindly and Sherlock takes it. He squeezes it slightly, dripping warm water onto the floor. Bee whines and shoves at his hand when he wipes at her eyes.

“Easy,” he murmurs. Behind him, John buries his face in a second steaming flannel and groans.

“Thanks,” John says muffled. “Her ointment’s on the side.”

It takes both of them more than ten minutes to distract her enough to get the medication where it’s supposed to be. John holds her hands, mutters blind comforts at her, while Sherlock deftly pries each eyelid down and lines them with medicine.

“There. Not so bad, is it?” John says, brushing her hair.

“Ow,” she complains.

“Drama queen.”

Sherlock picks up the bottle of adult eyedrops and tilts it from side to side. The liquid inside sloshes. He thinks of the pair of little glass bottles he emptied out in this very room. John still has no idea. John’s changed his will. Sherlock hasn’t read it, although he so easily could. It’s filed with all the other things in the cardboard box in John’s bedroom. There’s no secrecy about it.

He breathes deep.

“Two years,” Sherlock reminds himself.

“What is?”

“Nothing.”

“She’s not two until February,” John replies. He holds his hand out for the bottle.

“January for me,” Sherlock says, and then pushes the thoughts away firmly and holds up the bottle. “Can you manage?” he asks, making fun, “Or do you need adult assistance?”

“I can manage,” John says, looking at him questioningly. “And if I can’t, I’ll be sure to ask the nearest adult. Mrs. Hudson is in, isn’t she?”

“Of course,” Sherlock tosses the bottle to John, who fumbles to catch it. He stoops and lets Bee grab at his fingers, toddling back into the living room. “We’ll be next door.”

John leans against the sink, squeezing drops into his eye and blinking wildly. His reflection is a blur of peach and blue, and from the living room he can hear Bee lecturing Sherlock over something or other that has popped into her head, and he grins. The excess medicine dribbles down the side of his nose and he blots it away with the flannel.

This was our life.

Mary’s just a faint whisper these days.

I never got sick when you were around. People just got hurt.

I would have nursed you.

“I don’t need pandering to,” John mutters, rinsing his hands. He dries them, listens to Sherlock lecturing Bee back about bacteria, and when he emerges, he finds them both on the edge of the kitchen, Sherlock carefully planting Bee’s hand against a petridish of agar jelly.

“How’s the experiment going?”

“She’s a very efficient collector,” Sherlock says, pleased. “Technicolour molds.” He straightens, capping the dish and scrolls through his phone to show John the series of photos so far.

“That’s horrendous,” John says, admiring the process. “What’s she picked up from nursery?”

“Not sure. Molly’s still processing the results.”

“You should do one,” John replies, groaning as Bee treads lovingly on his foot, swinging off his knee. “You grub around all the time. You must have some interesting germs. I bet he does,” he

says to the baby. “Rare and ‘orrible ones.”

She laughs her head off and points.

In the end, Sherlock finds some dishes big enough to accommodate and takes imprints of both of their hands. A week later, John glues the resulting photos into his album; Sherlock’s, Bee’s and his own hand outlined in flourishing bacteria. It’s disgusting.

He couldn’t be more delighted with it.

October comes around again, tacky and cold and ripe with promise. The baby waddles with even greater proficiency, and her speech develops enough to include simple questions, her favourite of which is ‘Whaddat?’.

On the 24th of the month, Mrs. Hudson signs for a package and brings it straight upstairs. “Special delivery, Sherlock,” she announces, “A chap in uniform brought it, so I thought it was important.”

Sherlock puts down the bow of his violin and plucks the parcel up by the corner. Standard brown paper wrappings, printed. Return address for the unnamed occupant of an address in central London, or at least, a PO box there.

He sniffs along the sealed edge, feeling blindly for the bowie knife on the mantelpiece, Mrs. Hudson watching him with curiosity. He slits it open. The contents smell of wood and oil and something like cardamon. He tips it out into his palm.

Rosewood; highly polished to bring out the ruddiness of the grain. Inset with real ivory stained with age and what appears to be jet and good quality garnets. He turns it over in his hand. The carver has taken care to accentuate the folds of the creature’s ears and around its eyes, giving it a pensive expression. The trunk curls in a gentle loop, first down and then up again between the tusks. Beads line its cheeks and over the back, on top of the carved saddle.

Someone’s been reading John’s blog.

It’s antique, obviously not British. Sherlock has a hunch that even if he searches he won’t find any record of it. Whomever it is who has a newly empty space in their private collection won’t have reported it. Victor’s clever with his little hobbies like that.

He shakes the envelope and a card slips out into his hand. The Strand Palace Hotel, Covent Garden. Victor must have been overseas. He’d be staying in Knightsbridge if he’d come straight from Mumbai.

Turning the card over from corner to corner in his hand he notes that a room number is written the back. Given that the postmark is London-based and recent, he must only just have arrived. 24-hours to account for the jet lag...

Sherlock places the carved elephant on the mantelpiece between the skull and the clock and reaches for his mobile.

“Yes, I’d like to leave a message.” He repeats the room number, declines to be put through on the line and waits for the concierge to find a pen.

His message is short and to the point.

“Tonight, 6pm.”

The taxi collects Sherlock in the evening and zigzags him through the city via the British Museum and then drops him off by the river. It's dark and a chill wind blows in off the water making him turn his collar up. The Strand Palace Hotel looms somewhat over the street, a confection of white stone and pomp, pleasantly lit.

Sherlock sweeps past the doorman with a nod and makes for the restaurant, without needing to pause to ask for directions. It gives him a sense of déjà vu as he walks towards it; it's been... how many years since he last met Victor here?

The man is waiting for him, seated alone at a table for two. He's taken the seat with it's back to the wall, leaving Sherlock with the one facing into the corner. Typical of him, Sherlock thinks, with mild irritation. It's not a hideous corner, but neither is it as interesting or distracting as the view of the room.

“I knew you'd turn up at nine,” Victor says, putting his phone away as Sherlock approaches the table. “When did you figure out I'd converted? No, don't tell me actually, I'm just pleased that you did. Come,” he picks up the jug of water and pours for both of them. “I took the liberty of ordering,” he says, gesturing to the table. “That's one perk of fasting during Muharram, by the time you get to the evening, you know damn well what you want to eat and that's everything.”

“America,” Sherlock comments. Victor gives a knowing little smile.

“As always, one step ahead of the conversation. Although I think I've become predictable on that front. One too many American ‘delicacies’ and I come scampering straight back to somewhere with flavour. In England you cook all the flavour away, and in America they pump it full of sugar and fry it. I asked for tea and it came in a plastic bottle and tasted of saccharin. I'll never understand it. Eat.”

In the years since they last saw one another Victor has not changed so much. His skin is a little drier due to age and a hot climate, and he's gained a few pounds. He squeezes his own waist and jokes, “Us two skinny boys filling out, heh? Nothing low-fat on this table anyway.” He drops his voice a fraction, “Of course, there are better Indian restaurants in London, but none with an elevator that goes right to my bedroom.”

Sherlock looks at him, but Victor seems unaware of the *entendre* of his words. The trouble is though, in Sherlock's experience, Victor often feigns ignorance that he doesn't have.

The other man begins picking food off of dishes. “Eat with me,” he insists, gesturing to Sherlock's plate. “And say something, goddamn it.”

“Should a religious man blaspheme?”

“He can if it's your god and not his.”

“I don't have a god,” Sherlock says and then realises too late that he's blundered into one of Victor's teases. The other man grins.

“Mine's only adopted,” Victor admits. “But it pleases the family and there is something about all the ritual that appeals to me. Sometimes it puts things into perspective. I think you agree. You were always a man of ritual, as I remember.”

Yes, certain rituals. The ritual of swabbing skin and filling a syringe, the actions exact to the instructions held in Sherlock's head until addiction had eaten away at the order and everything else in his life.

"Not so much these days."

Victor observes him from under hooded eyes, one jaded man to another before quoting at him.

"Every act of rebellion expresses a nostalgia for innocence."

"I'm hardly prone to sentimentality."

Liar.

Victor looks amused at the idea, tearing off chunks of bread from a naan puffed up like a football. As the dough withers, the steam escaping, Sherlock feels oddly empathic with it. Damn Victor. Damn himself for being foolish enough to meet him again after so long.

"Did you like the elephant?" Victor wants to know, with another sly glance. "It's beautiful, isn't it? Over one hundred years old and still as much an elephant as the day it was made."

"Many owners?" Sherlock inquires, pointedly.

"I like to think after all this time that it owns itself," Victor replies, holding up both hands, empty palms turned towards the ceiling. Mea culpa. He gives an enigmatic little smile. "But then I haven't asked it; it's a very quiet little elephant."

Victor wipes his fingers on a napkin and begins to turn up the sleeves of his shirt with the deliberate motions of a showman. "We all need our little diversions in life," he comments. "You have your crimes."

He palms a clean teaspoon intended for the chutney over the back of his hand and it disappears.

And I have mine.

In another life he could have been a magician; Sherlock has no doubt the general public would gladly fall over themselves with their jaws dropping open to watch Victor at his art. He could have made a name for himself in it, except for the fact that Victor is uncannily bad at making things reappear again once he's vanished them.

"Left pocket," Sherlock says. He's seen that trick enough times not to be impressed.

"Maybe. But which one? Eat your vegetables; you look peaky."

Sherlock reluctantly picks up a fork and spears, heron-like, direct from the dishes. Victor says nothing about his bad manners and they eat in silence for a while. The food is superb; Victor doesn't order to pander to a western palate, and although Sherlock can appreciate the heat and the richness and the delicacy, the greater part of him prefers the monotone thug-like flavours of an anglicised curry, eaten from sweating plastic in the comfort of his own chair, with John snuffling through a rogan josh across the way.

"How goes the work?" Victor wants to know. "I've been reading your blog; well, not yours but the other fellow's. I don't think he has a glittering career in story telling waiting for him, but it does add a certain man-on-the-street credence to your..." He waves the fork back and forth, searching for the right word. "Escapades."

“A murdered millionaire the month before last,” Sherlock comments, slowly pushing his own fork right through a chunk of meat with more force than necessary. “Who knows who will turn up dead this month.”

“No doubt you wait with bated breath,” Victor replies with a smile. He glances across the table. “My apologies, I forgot to order any drinks. I, of course, will be on the Holsten, but they have real beer or wine if you like.”

“Beer will suit,” Sherlock replies. “How long are you in London for?”

“Only a few days; just stopping over on my way to Europe and then next week it’s home again, home again, jiggity-jig. You’re one of my few old acquaintances who won’t bore me with stock market commentary over my dinner, and who is reliably free at short notice.”

“All part of avoiding the rat race,” Sherlock says.

“Hmm, must be nice. I doubt I’ll ever know such sweet succour. Freelance suits you and I enjoy being my own boss, but I still like a more or less predictable schedule. Tell me,” he looks at Sherlock with curiosity. “Does the baby not interfere with all your great work?”

Sherlock looks at him hard for a moment, trying to appraise the angle of the question. Victor wipes sauce from his fingers and then waggles a bare fourth finger at him.

“I’m married, did you know? Yes, a wife. She’s a very sweet girl. I don’t like wearing the ring though. People tend to look at rings. Not conducive to sleights of hand.”

Sherlock says nothing to this at first, unsure what would be appropriate to say. Finally he settles on ‘Congratulations’ and Victor chuckles.

“Don’t look so sour. I treat her well and she puts up with me ‘doing my duty’ as infrequently as possible. It’s actually a reasonable arrangement. Though she’d be happier, she says, if I managed to give her a baby. Too bad I can’t just steal one of those.” Victor shows a gleam of teeth.

Is that a threat? Sherlock stills for a split second to parse what he knows of Victor and then decides that the man is only joking.

“I’d advise against it.”

“I’ll get her pregnant and then after that we’ll adopt. I have no problem with filling the house with babies if she’s the one who wants to look after them.”

“You wouldn’t care to?”

“You would?”

Sherlock pulls a face in lieu of a reply. Victor chuckles. “As I thought. Never minding the disruptions of a brood, one baby must interfere quite enough.”

“Surprisingly little,” he says, cautiously.

“Surprising indeed,” Victor chuckles. “Imagine my expression when I read you, of all people, had-well, it’s Dr. Watson’s child really of course, so you’d be free not to- but... you know.” Victor words stumble to a halt and he pauses to collect himself; aware that he at last has taken a misstep. Sherlock’s gaze has hardened a fraction, and his tone lowers when he responds.

“Do I?” he asks.

Victor inhales, raising his eyebrows and then has the sense to take the opportunity to summon a waiter and order their drinks. Fuming, Sherlock puts his fork down and drums his fingertips on the table instead. He has half an inclination to leave, but something keeps him in his seat.

“Business is good,” Victor says when the drinks arrive, as if the preceding conversation had never happened. “I still spend my time haggling over market prices and tax, like my father, only unlike him I do it in boardrooms in Mumbai and go to the estate only a few months of the year. Of course you know this already.”

He shrugs, arms open as if to invite Sherlock to read his life across his shirtfront, but it’s not as if Sherlock needs to. He’s always kept an eye on the company, albeit an inconsistent one.

“At any rate, times change and they change, I feel, for the better. I at least am content.”

He looks at Sherlock again with curiosity, and Sherlock understands that this, more or less, is Victor’s one and only motivation for meeting. Inwardly he curses John’s blog for giving people ideas and creating this public channel for people to come prying into his life though. Not that he’d take it away from John; he understands how it is cathartic for him, but he could do without his past nosing around it and deciding to pop up, feeling entitled to an update.

Victor seems to understand that they are on the same page. “A lot of water under our bridge,” he comments.

“Too much,” Sherlock says succinctly.

Had the other man come to this meal expecting something? Sherlock cannot begin to fathom why he would. Sherlock knows the words on John’s blog but as always there’s some level of personal inference that is invisible to him and which other people seem to read with altogether too much ease. John paints out a facsimile of their life only; oddities painted over with farcical annoyance and, just perhaps, tints of domesticity. What had Victor read between those lines?

Malcontent?

Had he assumed that Sherlock might be bored living with John and his complaints and his offspring? That he might be looking for something? What could Victor be able to provide?

It’s an old, open question that neither of them had ever been able to answer to any satisfaction. Too many other variables interfering with what could tentatively have been called a friendship. It had certainly been the nearest thing Sherlock had ever managed in his youth; Victor had been more adept, but perhaps just as unfortunate.

A mutual exchange of benefits on the basis of social interactions. In some respects, that’s a friendship defined, but compared to other examples in their university, they’d both lacked a certain level of consideration between them, and yet had a little too much feeling. The lack between them didn’t bother Sherlock back then, and nor does it bother him now; people either learn to put up with his ingratitude and insensitivity or they remove themselves from his life. He doubts it bothered Victor either; he’s always been something of a serpent.

That little extra thing, however...

Sherlock remembers the back of a woman’s neck. He’d gone with Mummy to see some show or other, when he was about ten, and an unknown brunette had been sat in the row in front of him. There had been something about the nape of her neck that had captivated him more than the

performance they'd paid to see. He'd never seen her again but even now he can recall it and feel the same warm thrill in his gut.

Later, it had been forearms. Men's, specifically, but not just anybody's. To this day, he's never been able to define the exact factors that make one pair of forearms superior to another, but it largely has to do with the proportion.

Moving into his young adulthood, he'd gained a certain penchant for shoulders, or torsos of a particular type. Again, it was not so much the size or the shape so much as how well it fitted with the rest of the body, and, Sherlock later realised, how straight the person carried their back.

Victor, long-necked and raised by an ex-army man, with a soft voice and a wicked streak a mile long, hadn't blown him out of the water, but he'd not been able to forget him either. It had perhaps helped that in their first encounter, he'd distracted Sherlock with the dog and thieved his wallet and Sherlock hadn't been able to figure out how he'd achieved the latter whilst stood at the other end of a frothing bulldog on a straining lead.

What was it Irene had said about brainy?

Victor allows the conversation to lapse into silence. Sherlock fills his plate and then his mouth for the sole purpose of an excuse not to talk. Perhaps Victor senses that the door has firmly closed on whatever opportunity he'd guessed might be there. Yet nor does that seem like the old Victor that Sherlock once knew. He wasn't one to go sniffing about.

Rivalry for the hell of it; that was more his style.

Sherlock chews with growing suspicions. Is this about John? He considers the two in contrast.

By most people's standards, Victor is not much to write home about, asides from the length of the number on his bank balance. He has one canine longer than the other, which he likes to think makes him look roguish, and indeed on occasion it can, but just as frequently it makes him look sleazy. His face is a little on the narrow side. He's not handsome, though in the right light you could mistake him for good-looking.

As for John? Handsome? No. John isn't handsome; conventionally speaking. He's not tall enough, his ears stick out and he's too old to be a heartthrob. He's greying. He's technically a pensioner, albeit on an army pension. He's scarred and aggressive and not half as polite and friendly as he thinks he is. He's bright but not 'clever' on the scale that Sherlock measures clever on. He needs therapy according to some, including John, and his own sister warns people that he's fucked up. John's free with his praise when he's impressed, but sparse with any more detailed comment on his opinions about people. It took death to shake the words loose, and even then John fought to choke them back down again afterwards. So help them all, the fact is that Sherlock doesn't mind.

And more than that.

He's John's best friend.

But more than that.

And previously he'd thought that this fact was only his opinion, but these days things have changed.

Sherlock grits his teeth for a moment and tilts his beer bottle to and fro, watching the liquid bubble. Memories surface, despite the fact that he is growing increasingly repentant of this train of thought; of conflating the two men and the two situations. They're not the same. They cannot be.

He's not sure what he'll do if he's forced to conclude that they are.

It must be different. His history is different and while many things haven't changed, Sherlock is loath to say that he's the same creature he was when he was in his early twenties. It's different, surely. He remembers, slightly sick, that they slept together once, in the same bed. Both had spent the night sailing on a cocktail of drugs which Victor ultimately found nauseating rather than pleasing, and did far too little for Sherlock's appetite even in those days.

It feels like the blood is stirring in his body. There had been... well, an idea between them. The kind of idea that tells young men that the curve of a neck can be pleasant to behold and the movement of a lip alone can be the oldest kind of invitation.

Yet a combination of fury and duty, shyness and the wrong kind of chemistry had meant that the hypothesis had been left untested and nothing had come of it.

Victor clears his throat. "How are your parents?"

Sherlock drags himself back to the present and shrugs. "The same as ever. Mummy gets fatter, Daddy gets older. They both still enjoy... things. Line dancing."

"Give them my regards. Tell them I still remember visiting them with fondness," Victor says, quite sincere.

"I will," Sherlock agrees, if only because he fears Victor might actually do it if he implies that Victor should tell them himself. Having John in cahoots with them is quite enough. On the other hand, he doesn't delete the message and it's true that his parents had gone above and beyond kindness the summer Victor's father had died. Victor had taken it quietly with pragmatism, and returned to India as soon as the leaves had begun to turn their colours.

Often Sherlock wonders if it contributed to the way he outpaced Victor with the drugs. At the time he hadn't been sorry to see him go; he'd only realised later, when he was retching into a hospital toilet.

"And how is Mycroft?" Victor asks, too casually interested.

Sherlock breathes. "Still uninterested," he replies pointedly.

"Pity. Clearly I need to steal more."

"Information theft's not your style."

"No. Isn't it a shame?" Victor chuckles. "No, all of that is far too much work for me. I like my little opportunist pick-ups so much more. It adds a certain spice to life if it's all unplanned."

"Unplanned?" Sherlock pushes bread around his plate philosophically, trying not to misstep in yet another conversation they'd only ever skimmed in the past. "Is that so?" Victor considers him, puzzled and amused and then seems to settle on the topic. It's years behind them now; not such a sore point.

"Unplanned on my part," Victor elaborates. "Mycroft was never a nut I intended to crack and then imagine my surprise when it fell open in my lap anyway. Do excuse the expression. You did bring it up." Sherlock had thrown down his fork in disgust.

"How on earth could you have done it?" He has long wanted to know.

Victor shrugs. "He offered. And you know me; wherever I go, I go away with something. In that instance, a little more than I'd bargained for."

"You regret it?"

"Somewhat. But it seemed just desserts. You were so busy with your own liquid lover and there was poor old me, getting bored silly and about to be packed off back to the old family pad. And at the risk of putting you off of your dinner, the anger was delicious."

"He never wanted you."

"Virtually no one did, back then," Victor points out, smiling thinly. "I didn't mind being wanted even if it were just to spite you. Thankfully the right people want me now and I needn't sound like I swallowed all the silver spoons in Henley to do so." He picks up the accent like a puppeteer picking up a marionette in order to drive home his last point. He snorts, and drops back to his usual tone.

"It never bothered me." Sherlock frowns. The sensitivity of the matter has never occurred to him before.

"It never appealed to you either."

"Nothing appealed to me then," Sherlock says honestly, and Victor acquiesces to that.

"Nothing except cocaine, and she was a very poor mistress to you. Not that your crime-solving seems to treat you very much better but at least it's not as consistent. Make a hobby of it, that's my advice."

It stings Sherlock that after all this time, Victor still fails to understand his motives.

"Have you never been fascinated by anyone; purely fascinated?" Victor wants to know.

Sherlock recalls the glitter of very dark eyes, untouched by the smile beneath them.

"Of course."

"Me too, but I didn't marry any of them. Keep your fascinations at arm's length, or you'll find they turn out to be very boring. Likewise keep close something of the mundane. You always need someone around who will remember to purchase toilet paper. Treat them well."

"This is your advice? From on high, as master of all you survey?"

"It is. Treat them as well as you can. I will never change what I am. I will never try to, but that's no excuse not to appreciate that someone wants to stick by me even so."

Victor catches his eye full on.

You know what I mean.

Sherlock does, but somewhat wishes that he did not. Victor wipes his mouth and leans back in his chair.

"There, the curry's brought back some colour into your face," he points out.

Sherlock swallows and scowls, discards his napkin on the table and shifts his coat around in a prelude to leaving. Victor laughs.

“I mean it. Enjoy the spice of life. I do.”

“Oh, stop postulating and just ask for the bill.”

He lets Victor pay for his share, or perhaps more accurately, by passive aggression he makes him. Victor offers no objection. He waves a hand and the bill vanishes, added to some unseen tab he’s keeping with the hotel and with that the meal is concluded.

Victor stands from the table, popping one of the mint imperials brought with the bill into his mouth and he rolls it back and forth with his tongue, clicking against his teeth as he waits for Sherlock to rise.

‘He always did that,’ Sherlock recalls, buttoning the Belstaff. ‘After we smoked, he ate mints and clicked them against his teeth.’ The memory makes him feel unusually nostalgic and annoyed all in one. John likes extra-strong mints; the kind that you can keep in your pocket forever and that crumble up in your mouth. He huffs out the menthol through his nose when he eats them, and then that always makes him sniff.

They emerge from the restaurant and repair to the lobby; Victor walking in the opposite direction to where he intends to go, but apparently in no rush.

The lobby is almost empty, save for the concierge and lady at the desk. The former is sorting through post for the morning, the latter is engrossed between her computer and her telephone, busy pacifying someone with a complaint. There’s one other guest waiting by the lifts but he vanishes within a minute, and to all intents and purposes, they are alone.

“Well then, good night,” Sherlock says; meaningless words of social ritual but they fill the silence.

“Yes.”

Standing, Victor is half a head shorter and he’s obliged to look up to meet Sherlock’s eye.

He opens his mouth and then gives a little breath and diverts from what he expects himself to say, and remarks, instead, “Look after that elephant, won’t you?”

Sherlock hesitates, unclear exactly what he means. He understands it is metaphor, he understands that at it’s core it’s something about them or him; it’s something about human nature, but...

Victor sees him puzzling and the corner of his mouth lifts. “Just don’t throw it away, Sherlock,” he says, dry. He reaches out a hand. Sherlock finds himself mirroring the action.

For a moment Sherlock sees the kiss in the corner of Victor’s mouth with his smirk, and the old ideas of kisses never ventured in his eyes, but despite that, all he does is clasp his hand and bump dry lips to both of Sherlock’s cheeks, very metro-cosmopolitan. When he draws back, it feels writ between them that these days, they both have someone else.

In Victor’s case, Sherlock suspects it’s not the wife.

“I can only despoil my marriage bed with so many beautiful white boys,” Victor agrees in a low tone, “And you’d never let me anyway.”

“No,” Sherlock says, exhaling. As magnetic as Victor still is, meeting him has brought into focus how the axis of his life has tilted.

Victor holds his hands up empty, his smile now carefully similar. “I’ll live,” he promises. “Perhaps

if I'm in town again, let's not meet."

It's honesty at least. "Let's not," Sherlock agrees. Nonetheless, Victor can't resist one last shot as he turns on his heel, leaving Sherlock to let the cold air in, the doorman patiently waiting for him to leave.

"So long," Victor says with a backwards wave, "Do give Mycroft my fond regards."

Sherlock shakes his head and lets the night air slap him before he clambers into the back of a waiting taxi. The door closes with a sense of relief. 'Strange,' Sherlock thinks, as the car purrs away, the lights of the river flashing beyond the window. 'I hadn't thought I'd needed to finish any business with him.'

He wishes it were more open and closed; more logical with concrete actions he could pin down as stepping-stones to an explanation of it all. He's had cases before where inaction and things unsaid were as revealing as things done and secrets let slip by thoughtless mouths, and yet those instances felt so much easier to track in thought than things that applied to his own life.

At any rate it's over. On one level, Sherlock feels that this time, he won, but on the other hand he can't see how Victor has lost either.

'Which of you is the Victor', he'd written, which he'd done both to be arch at Mycroft and also because he'd assumed it would help Lestrade goad his brother. Now he has to wonder.

It's not until he's halfway home that Sherlock shakes off his daze enough to notice that Victor has stolen his watch.

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The manilla envelope has been left on the top of John's dresser for over a week. On one of the quiet days, when John's at the clinic and Bee is at nursery, Sherlock feels it calling to him.

He knows there was a meeting; Molly had been unsubtly involved and John had slunk off one Wednesday morning looking awkward, and come home looking sober. Sherlock had expected him to at least file it somewhere but instead he's left it out. It's as if he wants it to be read.

Perhaps he does. John's terrible at confronting anything with any personal gravity, Sherlock knows. He's hardly much better than himself.

Sherlock stalks in and out of John's room on pretences that even he has to admit are puerile. He needs a pen; his hands are dry and John's moisturiser is closer. He collects Bee's toys and puts them back in her toy box and her bed, and tries to design a system by which to categorise and organise them. He settles on order of favouritism according to Bee, and then, feeling the display is too evident of how much time he's spent at the foot of John's bed today, puts it all back in a muddle as though he's marched in and just dumped the armful there.

The envelope gleams. It's fresh brown paper of the nice sort. A little glossy across the surface. It's not even sealed.

Finally he can't stand it any more. He eases the paperclip off of the flap and with the trembling tip of just his forefinger and thumb extracts the document.

'Last Will and Testament' is written across the top. Sherlock reads, half blind.

I, John Hamish Watson of 221B, Baker Street, London, W1U 6SJ, revoke all former wills and testamentary dispositions-

He skims the revocation, which is surely unnecessary given that he's certain John's never made a formal will before.

I appoint Major James Sholto of Heath Farm, Holt Lane, Norfolk, NR25 7YJ to be Executor of my will, provided that there should be at all times one (1) Executor of this my will so that in the event that my above-named Executor shall have pre-deceased me, or shall be unable or unwilling to act or to continue to act, I appoint in the following order of priority such one of the persons hereinafter as shall not already be acting and as shall be able and willing to fill the vacancy so created, namely, my solicitor, Keiran Harvey of H&S Solicitors, London, England, and my friend, Mr. Michael Stamford of-

Sherlock stops. He reads. He stops and reads again, the black and white skipping in front of his eyes. His own name is there.

- has attained the age of eighteen (18), then I appoint Mr. Sherlock Holmes to be the personal guardian of such child. The reason for my selection of Mr. Sherlock Holmes as personal guardian of my daughter is as follows: He has acted as a secondary carer of such child since four months of age. If Sherlock Holmes shall have predeceased me or shall refuse or be unable to act or continue to act as such personal guardian, then I appoint my Executor, Major James Sholto, to be the personal guardian of such child in the place and stead of Sherlock Holmes, or if unable or unwilling to act or continue to act, to appoint a suitable permanent guardian from among my living relatives.

3. My Trustees shall hold the remainder of my estate in trust-

It's five pages of conditions based on a whole range of possibilities. There's a £1000 bequest to a British Army charity. His own name is there again; a bequest leaving him John's service medals and identification tags. There are instructions for his remains. There's a £2000 bequest to Harriet Watson as an after thought. Sherlock swallows thickly. There are instructions about Bee, and about the money.

It's so John throughout; thoughtful only in the immediate and dismissive of the rest. A little bit all or nothing. Molly's signature in the witness box is a loopy swirl at the bottom of the document. There's a second, of some other unknown solicitor.

I appoint Mr. Sherlock Holmes to be the personal guardian of such child.

Carefully, Sherlock slides the papers back into the envelope and returns it to the desk.

-has acted as a secondary carer of such child since four months of age.

He almost wants to read it again, and be sure that the letters haven't changed. It's strange; it feels so unreal that he can neither claim to relish the idea nor abhor it. The will may as well have been written in a foreign language; the logic behind John's choices and behaviour around the will is recognisably John's own, but that's what makes it so nearly indecipherable to Sherlock.

It's Dr. Watson's child really of course, so you'd be free not to-

Except he's clearly not. By hook or by crook, he's been had, Sherlock realises with a tiny smoulder of anger. He's taken such pains until now not to pry and behave. He wonders in how much detail John spoke to Sholto about this plan. Presumably quite a lot. Presumably also, John hasn't said a

word to Harry about it. Obviously he still doesn't trust her. It's a bit of a mean bequest as well, but then again there's the argument of the years of estrangement.

But John didn't ask him, either.

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By the end of the month, Wiggins has finished the notebooks Sherlock provided and started making vague hints that he's going to get a job. He's been visiting Molly's morgue as often as he dares, and also ferreting around London. Concerned, Molly puts her foot down and demands a test for her peace of mind. He watches her in silence as the chemical reaction fails to take place, and says nothing when she smiles at him.

"It that alright?" he says when she's composed herself.

"It's good, Billy," she agrees. "But don't stop."

"I won't," he says. "So stop worrying." She looks at him, smiles again.

"And happy birthday," he adds.

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Bonfire night rolls around again, and John finds himself more at ease, with none of the panic from the year before. Sherlock feels it for him instead, pacing in restless circuits of the flat until John gets irritated.

"Right," he says, throwing down his book. "Pick something to do, we're going out."

"There's nothing to do," Sherlock snaps back at him. There isn't. He's not had a decent puzzle to solve in over a month and hardly anything is coming in on the website these days. Apparently if you're not in the limelight, solving high-profile police cases, the public tends to forget about you.

"We'll take the kid out," John suggests, and then has to hold his temper hard when Sherlock scoffs so hard he nearly gags.

"Right," John says again. Sherlock turns his face away, and John thinks he sees a flash of shame cross his face before he does and that softens the edge of his anger.

"I need something to do."

John breathes until it feels more fair that this isn't about killing time, it's about killing Sherlock's mania, and then he drums his fingers on the arm of his chair. "Let's go to the yard," he says. "If Lestrade hadn't got anything, maybe someone else does."

"Not supposed to go to the yard uninvited," Sherlock mutters.

"I'm inviting you," John says, picking the Belstaff from the hook and slinging it at him. The skin around Sherlock's eyes is still tight, but his lips dart up into a brief smile.

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"Out," Sally says the moment Sherlock lays a hand on the door handle. He opens it anyway, scowling.

“Where’s Lestrade; you’re in his office.”

“Am I? How did you deduce that?” Sally looks small in Lestrade’s beast of a chair. She looks up from the computer only to frown and then goes back to hammering out an email. She has dark smudges under her eyes and a pen speared through her hair, which is tied in a tight bun.

“Why are you here? You’ve not been promoted.”

“They bloody well should promote me,” Sally grunts, slamming the enter key and pushing the chair back to look at the pair of them. “I’m covering is all, so no, I’m not giving you his cases and no, I’m not ringing him to ask. I’m not bothering him just because you’re about five and need constant entertainment. He’s not well,” she concludes shortly to her files, digging the tip of the biro in.

“What ill? How ill?”

Sally swivels from side to side in the chair, arms raised to indicate the general frenetic energy of business around the department and distinct lack of Greg Lestrade in the office. “What do you damn well think!?” She calms a moment later and shakes her head. “It’s bronchitis or something. He’s steamrollered, the daft shit.”

“A week,” Sherlock says, eyes narrowed. The usual patina of coffee rings has been wiped away, the stacks of files reorganised, the plant struggling along on the top of the filing cabinet has sprouted a new leaf, which it would never have done had it been subject to Lestrade’s usual forgetfulness. There are empty plastic bottles in the recycling bin, yet Lestrade doesn’t drink either mineral water nor energy drinks in the office.

“About that,” Sally agrees.

Sherlock flicks through files. It’s Sally’s writing throughout. There’s tension written throughout her posture; the stationary’s been restocked, the usual mugs are gone. ‘You’ve been doing this for a while,’ Sherlock thinks. ‘Catching everything Lestrade’s been dropping. Not letting anyone else know.’

“Anyway, feel free to go,” Sally says. “I don’t have time for babysitting.” She picks up the phone and punches a button. “Hi Liz, can you put me through to Edwards.”

She frowns and jerks a thumb towards the door when they don’t move. Sherlock scowls at it and when she puts a hand over the speaker to tell them to shove off again, says, “Here or here,” he says, putting a finger on a place on a map.

“What? Why there?”

“It’s patently obvious; look at the radius and how built-up everywhere else is.”

“Look, that’s not yours, just put it back- sorry, Edwards, we’ve got the Help in. And he won’t leave. Just forward me that report from Hants.” She puts the phone down.

“Holmes, it’s stolen JCB’s, we can handle it.”

“This one is your man; he’ll be the ringleader with three to four associates.”

“Sorry, how’s there any proof for that?”

“The landowner has no idea and you’ll waste time questioning him. Why haven’t you closed this

case yet?"

"It's not-What?" Sally pauses, half rising, interested. "Wait, go back. Why doesn't the landowner know? Why that guy?"

"Because of the theatre carpark footage! God! I can't do it!" Sherlock explodes, turning on his heel.

"What was that?" Sally demands, baffled.

"That," John tells her, irked on Sherlock's behalf, and also a touch apologetic, "Was Sherlock Holmes trying to be nice." He turns and goes after the other man, catching his elbow to slow him down.

"Why isn't it clear; they have the footage, look at the position of the driver's seat, it's been moved right back; evidently a tall man and they have a suspect who is six foot eleven! Why do they bother with such stupid questions?"

Sally, barrelling out of the office after them, catches Sherlock's last remark. "I have to ask stupid questions!" she snaps. "It's not just me who has to get it! I can't walk into court, throw down a file and go 'duh, it's obvious'. I've got to fucking spell it out for the two idiot lawyers and the however many morons there are in the jury. I have to be able to present a full picture of evidence. It's got to be idiot proof; it's not just figuring it out and being clever, Sherlock. It's proving it. Legally." She wipes a hand over her brow, "Trust me, I wish I could pin every case on gut instinct because more often than not, we're right; and that one bloke we pick out as a piece of shit, really is a piece of shit."

She eyeballs Sherlock for a few seconds and then unwinds slightly. "But sometimes we're wrong. Sometimes the piece of shit is innocent."

John glances between them, wondering if he's going to need to step in and break things up, but instead Sherlock gives her a hard, calculating note and instead says, "Noted." He nods, just once, and she nods back, backing down.

"Look, if you want to help, go see Lestrade. I haven't got time and he'll just want to talk work with me," she says, sounding remorseful. "Tell him to hurry up and get better; we miss him." She looks at John. "Make him take his medicine and eat some bloody vegetables, alright?"

Sherlock merely turns his back and walks away. John hesitates and then moves to follow when Sally stops him.

"John," she says, "Actually, if you're seeing Lestrade, can you take him something?" John waits while she darts back into the office, returning with a small item in her hand.

"Found it when I was emptying the bin; it must have got knocked off the desk- Anyway, I'm worried it'll get lost in all the junk." She drops the cold gleam of metal into his hand. John stares at it. "I'll pass it over," he agrees; his phone buzzes. "I need to go."

Sally nods. She glances down the empty hall. "What's up with him?"

"Nothing," John says automatically, frowning, zipping the tie-pin into his pocket. Sally gives him a look of disbelief and John can't help but ask, "Are you sure you can't give him any work?"

"They've bounced all the big cases off of our squad while Lestrade's out. It's larcenies and domestics." She casts a look to the ceiling as if praying for strength and then says, "I'll have a

quiet word around, but I'm not advertising for him. It's more trouble than my job's worth, and I'm not bloody well getting Lestrade in trouble. Isn't there something other than crime he can get involved in?"

"Drugs."

"Typical," Sally says, and then Lestrade's phone is ringing and she's gone.

John catches up to Sherlock outside of the Yard, bothered to see him still pacing, rubbing his thumb between his first and middle fingers.

"Give me a number."

"One!" Sherlock snaps, and then catches John's look and relents. "Three."

"Let's get some fags then and, we'll think of something else to do today. Put our heads together, yeah?"

Sherlock snorts bitterly. "Heads," he scorns.

"Yeah, I know, I'm thick as shit," John says, propelling him towards the kerb and the corner shop. "Is it worth giving Mycroft a ring?" he asks, and regrets it when Sherlock growls. "That's a no, then."

He purchases the smallest packet of cigarettes on offer, passes one over and stands upwind of Sherlock while he chokes it down, grinding the butt into the pavement when he's done.

"Where do you want to go?" John asks. "We've got the whole day. We can even go out of London, if you like," he adds as a joke; Sherlock looks appalled at the idea. His answer, however, surprises John.

"Home."

"You sure?"

"Yes."

"Do you need anything first?"

"A case!" Sherlock flings his arms up in frustration, and then aggressively hails a taxi, slumping into the back seat.

"Number?"

"Two."

Sherlock closes his eyes, feeling reduced to a rather childish temper. Bronchitis. That could take weeks for Lestrade to recover from; another person floundering. It's exhausting. Why can't everyone look after themselves better? Juggling and juggling; first John, then Mycroft, then Molly, then Billy, now Lestrade. One plate reaches the pinnacle velocity of its spin as another starts to wobble and fall and it's unending, Sherlock thinks. There will always be a plate about to fall and one day he's going to fail to catch them, and then who catches the juggler? What he needs is more time between each one or less space, or a break or else-

“More hands,” he says aloud. John looks up.

Self-righting plates. Sherlock thinks, staring at the door of the taxi. Plates that pick up other plates; the magic that turns a plate into a juggler if spun in the right direction. If he can lighten the number, he can manage, he thinks, about two by himself.

He'd be happier managing two.

“You ok?” John asks.

“Lend me your phone.” John doesn't even waste breath asking where Sherlock's is. He just presses his mobile into his hand. He's surprised however, when Sherlock makes a call rather than texts.

“Wiggins, want a job? Scotland Yard. Now. Ask for Donovan.” He hangs up before the other end gets a word in.

“You're sending Billy down there? Not sure Sally will like that.”

“Billy likes questions.” Sherlock replies. “I don't.”

The taxi pulls up and they enter the flat, Sherlock taking the stairs two at a time and flinging his coat only in the general vicinity of the coatrack. Mrs. Hudson is surprised to see them. Sherlock's stress bleeds through and she throws an anxious look at John, wringing her hands.

“Oh dear, what's happened?”

“Nothing!” Sherlock snaps, and the baby stands up and shrieks. She's not scared, just joining in the noise. Sherlock forces himself to go still and clicks his tongue at her. She stomps, making a game of his anger, and John plucks Mrs. Hudson away by the elbow.

Bee comes to Sherlock, holding both fists up like a salute and chanting, ‘Adaddaddaddad.’

“Add add add, divide divide,” he says back, picking her up. He looks into her face, and she gives him a sly, coy little look back, pulling on his collar. He feels the breath in her lungs in the rise and fall of her back. Then on impulse and because he hates the jagged feeling inside of himself, blows a raspberry on her cheek. She pushes his mouth away and complains through a laugh until he perches her on his knee to be jogged up and down.

John makes purposeful noise around the kitchen, glancing through the open doorway now and then to check on Sherlock.

“John, is everything ok?” Mrs. Hudson frets.

“Not really,” he replies, scrubbing a hand through his hair in frustration. “He needs a case.”

“Oh dear, weren't there any?”

“Nothing interesting; he's passing the scraps over to Billy. We've got to get him a project, and I haven't got a clue.”

“Will he be alright?” Mrs. Hudson worries, peeking around the door. She can make out the tense line of Sherlock's shoulders over the back of John's chair. Bee shouts, enjoying herself, even if Sherlock seems to be all but vibrating with excessive energy.

“He's been out of sort for weeks,” Mrs. Hudson comments. “There must be something we can do.”

“I’ll go through the client emails again,” John says. “Maybe something’s come in or we’ve overlooked something that’s better than it sounds.”

In the living room, Sherlock bowls blocks across the carpet, sending Bee chasing after them. He pauses when his phone starts whirring. He pulls it from the muddled folds of the Belstaff and looks at it. After a moment’s thought, he answers.

“What the hell is this?” Sally demands.

“An aide de camp,” Sherlock replies and hangs up. He gets a text moments later.

[You’re bloody weird when you’re being nice.]

In the end John leaves Sherlock with Bee and Mrs. Hudson, who has unearthed a distraction from the mantelpiece in the form of a piece of mysterious broken plastic. As cases go, it’s banal and a humdinger all in one. The item’s so nondescript that it could have come from just about anything. Sherlock groans at the prospect, but ends up standing, Bee balanced on his hip, scrutinising the thing together. It’s from somewhere in the apartment, nothing special, nothing meaningful.

It’ll provide an hours distraction at most, and John grabs at the opportunity with both hands to go and do something useful.

“Where are you going?” Sherlock asks, the minute he picks up his keys.

“To see Lestrade; if he’s not going to a doctor, then,” John holds his hands out as self-evidence. “We can send one to him.”

“How convenient.”

John comes close to him, giving the baby a kiss goodbye. He glances up.

Be alright?

Trying.

Me too.

John squeezes his arm and then glosses over the motion with a bluster of activity, pulling on his jacket and clipping shut his bag. “I’ll be back in a couple of hours- got my phone on!”

“Yes,” Sherlock says, for lack of anything more adroit. The picture of him in the middle of the living room sticks in John’s vision before he leaves. He holds the baby gently, but close. She likes being high up, pointing things out and burbling to the man; Sherlock’s eyes are fixed on the window, sight without seeing, and for a moment John sees his face slip as a blurred reflection across the glass.

Don’t leave us.

“Sherlock-“

The man turns, posture and expression carefully schooled into mute enquiry. John’s breath catches on unknown words. He tightens his grip on the doorframe. The silence stretches.

“Don’t forget to eat something.”

I don’t want food.

I know.

Bee squirms and Sherlock leans to let her escape onto the carpet with her toys. Just once, he nods.

John’s never been to Lestrade’s tube stop, never mind the man’s apartment. It’s not a terrible place to live, he considers, treading towards the address Sherlock provided. It’s not on the doorstep of central London like Baker Street is, but it’s not stuck out in zone six or anything either.

The building itself is new, or at least, built within the last forty years by John’s best estimate. It’s not sparkling modern, but it’s certainly more up to date than 221B. He leans on the buzzer, which is unmarked and waits for the click and static of an answer.

“What?” Lestrade says, voice distorted by the intercom.

“Charming,” John says. “It’s me, John Watson.”

There’s a pause and then the speaker crackles again. “Are you alone?”

John leans back, twists his mouth against a laugh and replies, “The KGB tried to follow me, but I shook them off.”

“What?”

“I left Sherlock at home,” John says, rather than any more accurate statement along the lines of ‘Sherlock sent me’, “He’s babysitting.”

There’s another brief silence and then the door buzzes and clicks. John shoulders it open. The door to Lestrade’s flat is ajar when he reaches the second floor landing, which is clean and otherwise featureless. John hears shuffling around as he approaches. It opens into a narrow hall, cluttered with coat pegs, coats and other outdoor paraphernalia, and then leads straight into the kitchen where Lestrade is abashedly pushing takeaway boxes into the bin.

“Alright?”

Lestrade’s well bundled up in a nondescript grey sweatshirt that looks like it’s seen better days, cryptically printed with the logo of some kind of training company, the cuffs unravelling and worn out. Lestrade hunches in it, aware of his shabbiness and the circles under his eyes. More oddly, the tips of his fingers are a dull purple.

“What are you doing here?” he asks, coughing into his sleeve.

“Came to check on you, but Smurfette’s already been round, I see,” John says.

Lestrade splutters.

“I’ve been eating blackberries!”

“Well, it wouldn’t be cherries at your age.”

Lestrade looks cross and tries to retort but his irritation is lost in a fit of racking coughs. He grasps at his ribs. John doesn't like the sound of it. "Ribs hurting?"

Lestrade chokes in a breath of air and nods. "Like I've been kicked," he rasps. John eases him into the living room, dropping his bag on the already littered coffee table and dislodging a full ashtray.

"Might be pulled muscles," John comments, feeling carefully down Lestrade's side. "Breathe deep for me."

"No thanks."

Lestrade does as he's told however. John goes through the standard checks, Lestrade looking a mix of put out and grateful. John rips the velcro arm cuff from his bicep and rolls the blood pressure monitor up. "Good news, it's not pleurisy, I shouldn't think," John concludes, indicating Lestrade's ribs. "Bad news, it's probably viral and there's nothing exciting that I can give you for it."

"S'what the other guy said," Lestrade says, slumping back against the sofa. He gives John a slightly guilty look. "Went to a walk-in place last week. Had to get a note for work."

"Git," John tells him, half-annoyed but glad Lestrade hasn't actually just been letting his cough get worse without doing anything. "Did he give you anything?"

"Fluids and rest and a packet of nicorette. Just been using over-the-counter naff."

John hums, and feels around in his bag. "I'll get you something stronger for the gunk in your chest," he offers, scribbling on a notepad. "But they're right about the smoking. Pack it in."

Lestrade grumps into his collar, but reluctantly lets John swap the packet of cigarettes on the table for a nicotine pen. He admits to the second packet stashed in his room and heaves himself up to get it, while John drowns and bins the first pack. An almighty clatter makes him dart to the bedroom door.

"I'm fine," Lestrade wheezes, angry. "The fucking pegs on the bookcase just went again."

There's a sprawl of stuff on the floor, which Lestrade is wearily trying to pick up and also boot under the bed to deal with later. Not wanting to intrude, John comes up quietly, picking up some of the books.

"Should glue them," he suggests, meaning the pegs. They're the cheap, flat-pack furniture type, which swivel too easily in their sockets, dumping the shelf on the floor.

"I know I bloody should," Lestrade grouches. "Leave it, I can do it later."

John ignores him, scraping up a pile of papers spilling from a folder and the album underneath it. Curious, he peeks in it.

"Is that you?" he blurts, taken aback. Lestrade looks, grunts, and tries to take it off of him. John leans out of reach and turns over to another page of photos.

"Oi, put that back," Lestrade complains without any real fire in his tone.

"Just looking," John says, flicking through. It's an album with a hodgepodge of snaps put in by someone else; loopy curly writing and a rough chronological order. "My daughter," Lestrade says, begrudgingly. He can't help the twinge of fondness and pride in his tone. "Did it for my birthday a couple of years ago."

John softens. "Mind if I go through it?" he asks. Lestrade shrugs permission and finally finds the cigarettes he was looking for, dropping them in the bin. John perches on the foot of the bed, turning the pages. Most of the photos predate digital cameras, some are faded.

"First day?" John asks, grinning and holding up a photo portrait of a much younger Lestrade in a new police uniform. Lestrade grimaces and takes himself back to the sofa, pointedly turning the TV volume up. John follows him with the album.

They sit on the sofa, Lestrade with one eye on the football, gradually being drawn in to John's interest in his photos. Likewise, John has one eye on the album, slowly being distracted by the match and Lestrade's commentary. It's an odd feeling John has, going through someone else's life. Despite the rocky patches Lestrade's gone through with his divorce and career, he's had a fairly normal and pretty successful run at life. There are beach photos, standard family holiday prints with a small girl in a shocking pink frilly swimsuit, holding up handfuls of sand at the camera. Pictures of Lestrade with sunburn and dodgy shorts, grinning in a way that implies there's something a little salacious going on between him and the lens.

Lestrade touches an older picture, so faded by sunshine it's nothing but shades of beige and green. "That was my mum," he says. "She was lovely."

"She looks nice," John says, though he's looking more at the younger Lestrade in the picture. Probably no more than twenty, with freckles over the arch of his nose and a bright smile that John's never seen on Lestrade in person. He can see the overlap between the two faces if he focusses; the similar shape of the eyes and nose.

It occurs to him that Lestrade is unexpectedly good-looking.

John closes the album. "I should get going," he says, dragging Lestrade's attention from the football with a prod to the upper arm. He picks up his bag and needlessly checks that he's packed everything back inside it correctly. "Come round when you're less infectious and take the kid off my hands for an hour," John says, eyes down into the depths of his bag.

"What, really?"

"Babysitting's expensive, and you're free, so—" John feels Lestrade's grin on the back of his neck, and waits until he's stopped before looking at him again.

"I'd like that," Lestrade says. He pauses to cough, looks rueful, and scrubs under his nose with his sleeve.

"Get better," John suggests, tone dry. "And no more fags."

"Yes, Mum," Lestrade growls, eyes narrowed. John snorts and puts his hand in his jacket feeling for his wallet and keys. His fingers brush something. "Oh," he says, with recollection. "I almost forgot."

He removes the little metal bar from his pocket and holds it out. "Sally asked me to hand this over," John says, holding the pin out. "She said it was in danger of getting lost in your office." Lestrade doesn't take it at first. "Or was it in the bin on purpose?"

"No," Lestrade says, with an effort. He puts a hand out and takes the tie-pin, pushing it between a mess of magazines on the coffee table. "Thanks."

"I thought that was all over ages ago."

“It was. It’s complicated,” Lestrade replies, looking uncomfortable. “I don’t know, we might figure things out still. It’s just... slow going.”

“Issues,” John says, recalling their conversation at the beginning of the year. “Well, good luck with it. Failing that, find someone nicer.”

Lestrade scoffs with disbelief. “It’s fine. Thanks for coming round. How’s Sherlock?”

“Wound up,” John says, falling for the change in topic hook, line and sinker, worrying out loud. “He needs a case but it’s more than that. This whole overdose thing with Billy, me going to Norfolk. He’s not been the same since I got back. It’s all got him out of sorts. Have you seen his shoulders?”

Lestrade mutely shakes his head.

“He’s got scars all over...Did you know?”

“I’ve not seen them, no.” Lestrade shuffles to the edge of the sofa, coughs into his sleeve and then frowns. “He was like this before. Don’t you remember? Back in February. Got all weird and distant that time.”

“Yeah,” John nods. He shifts his weight from one foot to the other, remembering. “I don’t know if it’s exactly the same though. He’s not distant so much as just... stressed. A lot. It’s more like when- Magnussen,” John finishes, stilted. Not liking to say it out loud.

“Hm,” Lestrade says, just as concerned. They both know the score there; the errors and the consequences. “You’ve just got to figure out what he’s got wrong this time. What did you do before?”

John shrugs. “Made him help with Bee. He wanted to,” he adds, “He’s still really good with her. She’s smitten.”

“Oh. Right,” Lestrade considers and then feels through the debris on his coffee table, unearthing a chewed biro and a scrap of paper. “Here. It’s not much, but it might distract him for a bit. Get him out of the flat or something at least.”

He passes over the scrap and John reads it, puzzled. It’s nothing more than an address and a time. “Wednesday evenings,” Lestrade supplies, “Ask for Kavanaugh, though you won’t miss him. He runs it.”

“What is it?”

“That’d be telling,” Lestrade says, grinning and then hacking into his elbow until his eyes water. “God, bugger off and let me die in peace.”

“I’m going,” John tucks the paper into his breast pocket. “Look after yourself.”

“Look who’s talking,” Lestrade quips.

some hefty mucolytics and
confiscated his cigarettes.]

[Stupid bastard was still smoking]

[Need to check on him in a few days.
Maybe antibiotics.]

[Bronchitis: viral -SH]

[I know that. Just to avoid
pneumonia]

[Inhaler? Theophylline?
Steroids? -SH]

[Leave the NHS website
alone.]

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John comes home, bag in hand and finds his daughter in a tussle with his flatmate. She's misbehaving, hammering a fist on his knee to force his attention and wailing. Sherlock is looking at her, a book loose in his hand, and having none of it.

"Biscuiiiittt!" she raises the word to a tooth-rattling shriek and Sherlock cuts her off, low but firm.

"Enough."

There's a pout, a grizzle. "Biscuit..."

"No. You've had one."

"Biscuit! Biscuit!"

"No." Sherlock is resolute. She opens her mouth to argue and he cuts her off at once. "No." Bee's lip wobbles. She grasps his trouser leg and swings on it, scuffing a foot against his bigger one as she weighs her options; tries to garner his sympathies by looking sad and thin and starving and unloved. "Go and play," Sherlock says more gently, stooping and pointing at her toy box. "Where's Zub?" She hesitates. He points again. "Get the ball, Bee." She looks at him and then relents, flopping across the carpet to paw at the box.

John's breathless; he wouldn't have dared.

"She'd scream if I did that."

"She screams because she knows it works on you," Sherlock says, straightening.

"Babar!"

"Oof, hello darling, yes, mind my bits." John stoops and heaves her up on a level with him, feeling off-kilter.

"Kisses!"

John obliges. "Behave," he says, gentle. He would have given her the biscuit and the notion bothers him. "Lestrade sent you something," he says instead, handing over the piece of paper.

Sherlock squints at it, "Community centre," he comments after a moment, having consulted some sort of map in his head. John shrugs.

"No idea. Do you want to go?"

Sherlock shrugs back, though it's piqued his interest. He fiddles with the book he's reading, discontent.

"I'll go," John offers but the paper disappears into Sherlock's pocket. "Alright, next week then. What do you want to do until then?" He drops Bee gently into Sherlock's lap and she crawls over him, all biscuit denial forgiven. Sherlock scoops her against his chest and looks momentarily lost.

"Research," he says at last.

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The morgue is cold at this time of year. Molly's bundled up under her lab coat, which has the disadvantage of making her sweat and restricting her movements. She ends up removing her jumper and replacing it at intervals, depending on if she's busy with a chest cavity or simply running tests.

"You brought coffee," she says in surprise as Sherlock barges through the door. He looks down at his own hands, seemingly taken aback to find cups in them.

"Yes," he lifts one and then the other to check the contents and then plants one on the bench at her elbow.

"Thanks." Molly sits back and rubs her hands free of her gloves, reaching for the cup. "You're working today?"

"Space," Sherlock says cryptically, pulling up a stool opposite her and rummaging in her box of pipettes.

"Oh, well. Plenty of that here," Molly says. She looks at him and appearance-wise he's the same as ever; pale and expressionless, the red scarf bleeding down his chest under his chin. There's a weariness to his motions though, and he lacks something of his usual purposefulness.

"Been busy?" she asks. He grunts. She tries again. "We had a woman come in the other week with all her organs reversed. I sent you a text, but I guess it's not really interesting. I mean, it's interesting, it's just not crime interesting, is it? I took some photos."

"It's not interesting."

"Right," Molly agrees, chewing on the lip of her coffee cup. 'Arse', she thinks, without an iota of dislike.

"Billy's doing much better," she blurts, moments later.

"I know."

"How's Bee?"

"She's fine." His tone is flat.

“Oh.” Molly worries at her lip, hands curled around the coffee, watching him. “And how are you?”

He doesn't answer her for so long that she assumes he's opted to ignore her. It's been a long time since they've been in the lab together like this. Last time he'd looked simply stressed and sad. Now, reading only from the lines of his body, she thinks he still looks stressed but with the worn in stress she sees in the senior consultants; so prevalent it's hard to see anymore. It's just there, written through them head to toe.

Worse, she recognises the same sluggish restless motions; her mother had taken it out in mute, fierce bouts of cleaning. The ruthless abandonment of bags of clothes at charity shops and sudden refusals to say Molly's father's name. It hadn't meant she loved him less; it was just hard not to be bitter in grief.

Molly picks at her paperwork, one ear on her own voice recordings of banal post-mortems, the rest of her mind still thinking about the inevitable turn from sadness to anger.

She'd been peeved too, in her own mild way. She'd been old enough to have been able to talk about his illness and mature enough to handle being told the bare facts. He kept her out until it was too late, out of love, she supposed. It still stung. It still felt like a waste of all too precious time.

Molly puts down her pen and rolls up her earphones decisively.

“Do you want to see my pig?”

Sherlock looks up, momentarily thrown. “Pig?”

She points up. “On the roof. They gave me some for my PHD. Um. I have another one in the Thames but he's a bit far down to get at easily. Dudley's just upstairs though, so just... if you'd like. We could go and see him.”

“Oh.” He sits back and regards her with new eyes. They've barely ever discussed her research; he's never been interested and she's never had the guts to make him be. “Dudley?”

“It was quite a fat pig. Never mind,” she adds, when the reference is lost on him. Best to keep to herself that the other pig's named Jonah.

Sherlock blinks, his eyes slip from side to side, chasing thoughts. “Oh alright,” he says, getting up with a spring in his action that betrays his interest.

They climb up the infrequently used side stairs to the roof, Molly unlocking the door with her card. There's a new electronic security lock. Their sides clink with tools.

It's a fresh day, a wind plucking at Sherlock's scarf and Molly's ponytail. He hasn't set foot on the roof at St. Barts for a long time.

“Over here,” Molly says. Her voice is soft, her footfall barely audible. They slink like a couple of ghosts over the paving to the body bag tagged and tucked between two of the air vents. It dwarfs the pair of them.

“Imported,” Sherlock notes, reading the tags.

“I had to get a bag sent specially from the states,” Molly says, slipping a couple of ventilation masks from her pocket. “Might pong a bit,” she warns.

It does. They lean back grimacing, eyes watering upon the first gasp of fetid air from the bag.

“How long?”

“About three weeks?” Molly says. “Just under. If you could help me get a leg off, I’d be grateful.”

“Kneecaps?”

“And hips,” Molly agrees, pleased. She lets him do the more grisly aspects of the work. They don’t often get in corpses in advanced states of decay. Molly natters about the origin of the pig (previous name Hartbury-South Patrick 23rd, a retired stud boar), breed and procurement through a friend of a friend of her mothers in the rare pig society, in order to get a pig of more advanced age than standard.

“And it had to be a big one,” Molly adds, hands on hips. “So I could cross-compare with what a lifetime of obesity does to your knees.”

Sherlock, sweating, finally saws through and hauls aloft a forelimb, dropping it into a bag for her.

“Perfect.” She knots the top up and drops it on the side. “Anything you want to do?”

He looks at her, absently wiping his hands on the borrowed lab coat. “Me?”

She shrugs. “It is there for research purposes. If you leave the legs intact, I honestly don’t need much of the rest.”

“Right.”

Molly watches him, willing him to just let go a little. “Or I can always get another one.”

“Hm.”

Molly looks at him sidelong. “I’ve got some really big blow torches,” she says.

Sherlock inhales, exhales.

“I’ve got some gunpowder.”

They sit in the office afterwards, incongruous against the clean white of the walls and the murmur of talk-radio, sipping from mugs.

“Better?” Molly asks. He considers, rubbing a charred patch from the sleeve of his lab coat. They both reek of burnt hair and burnt pork.

“Yes.” He absorbs this fact for a moment and then adds, uncertain. “Not good?”

Molly purses her lips, crosses her legs and notes that she’s going to have to throw out her tights before she goes home. Blood spatter is a bitch on nylons.

“Well...” she catches his eye, and they both know that by common standards it’s not good, but as she goes on to point out, “Who’s going to know?”

“Ah. True,” he clears his throat. “Sorry about...”

“It’s fine. I’ve got a very generous pig allowance.”

His lips press together and then, to her relief, he laughs. Molly bumps him with an elbow, which only makes him chuckle harder.

Be ok.

Wordlessly he reaches over and squeezes her hand.

Thank you.

“Anything you’re going to work on now?” She asks him before he leaves. He leans heavily against the wall and regards the ceiling.

“Yes, Lestrade’s throwing me back in the ring tomorrow,” he says, looking bemused.

“Keep me posted,” she replies. “And Sherlock? Keep giving people the benefit of the doubt. Outside of cases, I mean. Don’t do it with blood-thirsty nutters.”

He doesn’t reply, exactly, but he does smile before buttoning up his coat.

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John looks up at the building and can’t help but be a little non-plussed by the venue. It could be a pub, John rationalises, of the flat-roofed variety, inevitably full of sticky floors and glaring fruit machines. A hangover from his youth, in fact. John has nothing against flat-roofed pubs. There’s always one and they’re always reliably cheap and open, especially if you’re willing to sit on the splintery benches outside with all the smokers and someone else’s dog hovering around your feet.

This one is called, with great literal-mindedness, ‘The Union’, and is in fact, a union.

“Masonic?” John jokes.

“No, worse. Lestradic,” Sherlock replies, pushing open the narrow clouded door. Inside is huge and empty like a village hall. There’s a utilitarian bar which sells no less than three types of lager and an array of bottom-shelf liquor. Orange juice is offered as a mixer, provided you were the kind of person who didn’t mind your orange juice to come out of a tap and only vaguely remember ever being an orange. John feels oddly at home. He used to sneak into places like this as a kid with Harry and smuggle off a forgotten half-pint to be sick in the bushes on.

Incongruously, the middle of the space beyond a smattering of tiny tables and chairs is filled with an enormous block of sky blue matting that’s seen better days. John eyes the posts and ropes and raises an eyebrow. The air rings with the slap of fists on padding.

“Where’s George Foreman then?”

“In the bleeding kitchen,” the barman wheezes. He gives them a suspicious basset-hound look and then creaks off to bully the coke pump into producing coca cola.

There’s a handful of men around; aged from barely twenty up to middle-aged and paunchy. Wiry blokes from the surrounding estates, half of them tattooed, some of them muscled. Sherlock finds a corner to lurk in and John joins him.

“So, we’re here...?” John prompts.

“Lestrade’s idea of a wholesome activity,” Sherlock replies. “I’ve been before. It’s amateur.”

“Oh yeah?” John turns his attention with interest to the barrel-shaped man projecting instructions to the rest. “I didn’t think you’d be into this.”

Sherlock looks down his nose.

I’m not.

Are you any good?

Sherlock doesn’t dignify that even with an expression. The corner of John’s mouth lifts. “Well, we came all this way. Might as well stay for one.” He feels in his pocket. “Pint?”

“Hm.”

John goes to the bar but discovers in short order that they only take cash and returns. “D’you have a tenner?” he asks, “They won’t take my card.”

Sherlock grunts and extracts his wallet from his pocket, eyes on the match starting up in the ring, and slaps it into John’s palm. Somewhat irked, John goes back for round two with the shuffling barman. He thumbs a ten pound note out to pay, the only benefit being in the amount of change he gets in return along with two dish-washer scoured glasses, brimming with nondescript beer.

He turns the wallet round to shove the coins into the zippered part and pauses, running his thumb over the clear plastic pocket where Sherlock keeps his ID. It’s tight fitting, with just enough space to hold a medical information card and a bit of photo ID behind it, but there, obscuring half of Sherlock’s name, his blood type and emergency contact details, is a photograph. It’s been a bit bent at the corners, but it’s there. John only vaguely remembers giving it to Sherlock; he’d been so drunk at the time.

“You softie,” he murmurs, tucking the wallet into his back pocket to leave both hands free for the beer.

Sherlock accepts the glass and the return of his wallet without comment and they sit back and observe. Presently John whisks a finger towards one of the men in the ring engaged in a practice bout. “I reckon he’ll win.”

“No,” Sherlock says at once. “Poor posture. The other man.”

“I don’t think so. More endurance. Here,” John feels in his pocket again and drops a pound coin on the table. “I bet a quid my bloke wins.”

The pound sits in a clear patch of table between beer spills. Sherlock matches it with one of his own. To his irritation, at the end of the match, John pockets both coins. “Told you.”

“Luck,” Sherlock sneers.

“I told you,” John grins. The sweating victor and his runner-up climb out between the ropes and are replaced by another pair. “Go on, you can have first pick this time.”

Sherlock narrows his eyes and makes his choice, leaving John with the middle-weight with the ugly tattoos. This time they even the score.

The man running the show must be Kavanaugh, John decides. He’s a barrel of a man, not fat just stout with a lot of muscle piled onto a short frame. He leans on the ropes surrounding the ring, giving encouragement and insult where applicable. Once or twice John notices him looking in their

direction, a look of faint calculation on his face. He supposes Lestrade told the man they were coming.

Boxing's never been his sport, outside of the bare-fisted brawling he'd picked up in the army. There had been training in unarmed combat, which he still fell back on, but he generally found that real fighting was sharp and dirty and he preferred it to the rule-bound and ritualised versions in sport.

"You did fencing," John comments, after a moment.

"Fencing," Sherlock agrees. He raises a hand and lazily ticks off a list. "Aikido, mixed martial arts, pistols, judo, singlestick..." he trails off. There are others, but one-off dalliances only and more than a few things he proved to have no aptitude for. He's not, if he's honest, very good at fighting. He can hold his own, especially if given the element of surprise, and he can fight with his head in combination with his fists, which is a skill not all men can boast. On the other hand, it's no guarantee. He's been in a few incidents with people who really knew what they were doing and not always come off the best.

John hums, interested. The match in the ring comes to an end with a victory for the faster fighter, and the men drop out from under the ropes, feeling for water bottles and towels.

"Take 5, lads," Kavanaugh shouts across the buzz of commentary, following suit. He strolls over to their table.

"I see you're back, darkening my door, Holmes," Kavanaugh comments, wiping perspiration from his moustache. He looks, to John, like he's escaped the strongman exhibit in an old-world carnival. He indicates John with a forefinger. "And whose is this?"

"John Watson."

"A friend," Sherlock says, at the same time. John purposefully does not extend a hand. Kavanaugh looks him up and down.

"And you've an interest in boxing?"

"Not really," John says.

"Ah, well that's fair. Y'know this isn't a spectator day, don't you?" he adds, to Sherlock. "If you're in here you'd best be prepared to tog up and get stuck in."

Sherlock holds up his empty hands. "Sorry sir, forgot my kit."

"Nothing stopping you there, just strip down to your cacks. Or are you not wearing any?"

"I shouldn't ask," John says.

"How about you, Mr. Uninterested. You'll not show him how it's done?"

John smiles without letting it reach his eyes and shakes his head. "No thanks."

"Well, to be fair, I don't know who I could put against a little man like yourself. That's some nice knitwear you have there, by the way."

"Excuse me?"

"Nothing, I'm just sayin'," Kavanaugh leans in and grins. It's not friendly. "Is it your Granny's

handiwork, it's quite lovely."

"I'm sorry," John says, falling for the goad and squaring up, "Are you saying I couldn't hold my own in the ring?"

"Ah, now, I wouldn't say that," Kavanaugh laughs. "But if you're feeling too ladylike for it."

John realises too late that the comments are designed to rile him and that Kavanaugh isn't even putting much effort in, all the while getting the reaction he wants. John knows it. It doesn't stop him from getting up from his chair and pulling his jumper off. "Alright. Let's do it," he says, emptying his pockets onto the tabletop. "Look after my stuff," he orders.

Sherlock looks up at him, owlish.

"Give me some kit," John asks, considering his outfit. His trousers are fairly loose and comfortable enough to move around in at least for a short spell. They won't chafe like jeans would, which is a blessing. He unbuttons his shirt and rolls up the sleeve but makes no move to remove either it or the vest he has on underneath.

"Head," Kavanaugh agrees, passing him a set of padding. "You'll have to go barefoot."

John toes off his shoes, aware that he's being watched. He stoops and picks up half of a pair of hand pads, tossing it lightly into Sherlock's lap.

"Well, I'm going to need to warm up first," John says, at Sherlock's unvoiced question.

—

It's cathartic. John stretches out and slugs at a punching bag. There's a smell to the room, not exactly pleasant, but it brings up a whole host of gut memories until it's almost nostalgic. Unlike other kids, he'd enjoyed PE class.

Sherlock, having been roped in, proves in an infuriating way not to have forgotten much of his earlier boxing experience. He goes at it with only half a thought, swatting the hand pads held for him by Kavanaugh but finds the other man's movements predictable.

John's hair, grown longer than military standard, forms a zigzag of quills against the back of his neck as he sweats. His shirt darkens, further obscuring his shoulders. He doesn't go pink with exertion like Sherlock does, and he doesn't breathe as hard from the workout either. Inwardly, Sherlock curses the cigarettes.

"Sloppy!" Kavanaugh chides when Sherlock's glove clips just the edge of the pad. "Pay some more bloody attention!"

Sherlock wallops it with a satisfying clap.

—

The move from practice to match is inevitable. John climbs through the ropes onto the sticky floor of the ring and squares up to one of the regulars; a tall, skinny man, who blinks at him stupidly, but who proves to be a very technical sparring partner.

They move in circles, John aware of Sherlock's eyes following him around the ring, giving him a mild thirst to prove himself. If it were a bar brawl he'd have won already; the downside of boxing is that you have to obey the rules. The man, Patel, keeps him busy with his feet. He's a dancer, and

John tends to prefer to plant his weight and move only when he has to, rather than jig about for the sake of keeping his opponent guessing.

They trade blows. Scuffles really, nothing heavy. It's more about proving who can get past a defence to touch the other more than aiming to really hit, which feels tame to John. He loses as a result, and steps down shaking his head. He's not really bothered, or he wouldn't be if Sherlock would stop smirking. He swats him with his glove as he passes. "Go on then, your turn," he challenges.

Kavanaugh pairs Sherlock up with a heavier man, and yells a lot more at both of them. To John's gall, he realises he's been set up with one of the weaker boxers of the group.

This match is more abrupt. Moments of calculated stillness followed by explosions of movement. Despite the difference in body type, they fight in a similar style. It moves into a second round, Sherlock pausing to pull off his gloves and his clinging shirt, baring his shoulders.

John watches. They turn about the ring, the broad tanned back of Sherlock's opponent towards him at first, and then after another burst, Sherlock's narrow triangle of a body.

Without a towel around his neck, the scars are more obvious. The workout has brought up the colour across Sherlock's skin and they show up in lines of skin that is past blushing. It makes John deeply uncomfortable.

They still haven't talked about it. How can you ask? Evidently Sherlock's reached some point where he's willing to show them in public, or at least in John's presence, but he shows them like defiance. Other than the rough conclusions John can make based on medical background, he has no idea how Sherlock got them either, and it bothers him deeply.

Sherlock wins the round with a careful feint. Kavanaugh kicks Robson from the ring and throws a bottle of water to Sherlock.

"Five minutes," he says, and then jerks a finger at John, "Then you're up."

—

They move into each other's space with bravado that is only surface deep. Sherlock flexes his wrists, pops the vertebrae in his neck and pulls himself up to his full height to loom over John. Likewise, John drops his weight into his heels and flexes his shoulders. He's solid in the ring, whereas Sherlock is full of motion.

'How many times have we done this?' John wonders. They've had dust-ups before but never anything so organised. On a wet, boring afternoon, a chat about British army training had turned into a rather physical discussion about various debilitating joint holds, which had been education on both sides.

But not like this. Not a head-to-head without provocation, and not without one of them starting it.

John usually starts it. Sherlock usually provokes it.

Kavanaugh stands between them and then drops his arm as a signal to start, falling back to a corner to watch and bellow advice from.

Both of them are deaf to him.

'It's interesting,' Sherlock thinks. He's already contemplated how it would go in a real fight with

John. He's confident he could win, but it would take effort. John's got power right through his core and is tough to knock off balance or get behind, especially if you lack the element of surprise. On the other hand, he fights with gut instinct rather than planning and gut instinct can be fooled, in Sherlock's book.

John's got obvious weak points too. A shorter reach than other men, and a bum shoulder. Add in a leg with psychological weakness, and really, it could go either way.

The only troubling factor is that John is difficult to read sometimes. Of the two of them, Sherlock's the one more likely to be accused of being robotic, but few people have seen John when he really shuts down. Given the right push, John knows how to compartmentalise as well as the next high-functioning sociopath.

It's a thought Sherlock doesn't have time to pursue as John's fist flicks towards his jaw. He blocks it.

John takes the middle of the ring, keeps his stance low and goes for his ribs. He attacks to defend, keep Sherlock on the outside, circling. The ropes recoil against Sherlock's middle back and then he pushes forward, connecting the flat end of the glove on John's forehead. They swap positions.

John frowns from under his padding and then his face turns neutral except for the clench of his jaw and Sherlock predicts trouble. They're both competitive.

John throws out a couple of reachers, not looking to connect just to test his defences and to see what's within the length of his arm. They dally for a moment, and then John manages to land a blow. Their arms cross one another as they throw out a punch at the same time, John's shirt shifting.

Unspoken, the pace and severity goes up a level; Sherlock wants to win, not because he can or because it's a competition but because it suddenly feels important. It's an alien feeling that rises up from his diaphragm. He lands another blow, glove sliding off of John's ear, hits his forearm as he lifts it to defend, hears the other man's grunt of surprise and shocks himself by liking it.

"Use your shoulder; get in," Kavanaugh yells from the ropes.

Taking advantage, Sherlock hits John on the collar bone and the other man concedes ground to him at once. He chases it, burning, eyes fixed not on John himself but the elements that make him up. His ears ring. It's overwhelming. A thousand petty injuries come flooding back, and he grits his teeth. It's unfair.

She's here, Sherlock. Six pounds even.

It's unfair. Nothing from John for weeks and then that call, and then nothing again for months.

Took the bodybag off, then?

One-! One more mistake, and John will already have long forgotten it, but it burns in Sherlock in a mix of shallow fury and deeper shame.

Talk to John would you?

I acknowledge I am an arse to the first degree. Still friends?

Still friends. He pauses for breath he doesn't have and John forces him backwards. He digs in his heels and lashes out. John's eyes flash; he knows something changed in this match. Words are their

greatest failure, but John knows fists like old friends.

Hit him twice, John- one for each lie.

If they trade blows for lies, Sherlock would be the worse off.

And once for being a little shit?

They're not boxing so much as hammering now; John whips in a blow to his ribs that makes Sherlock gasp. He hisses between his teeth as he lashes back, on a wave of conflated anger. John's expression flickers.

For a moment, Sherlock is blind to him completely, his head lost in a steam of fury that wells up. More than he thought he had, more than he'd thought possible. It's John. It's not John. It's him. It's everything. With it comes a roar.

John flinches, taken aback.

His fist smashes round, a motion pure and free from thought; it's fast and solid when it connects with John's jaw. There's a split second of surprise on his face. Pink-tinged saliva erupts from his lips as his teeth clack shut on the tip of his tongue, and his neck seems to bulge as his head is thrown back by the impact. John goes down hard on matting, shoulder first, with an audible slap.

Kavanaugh booms, fists raised over the ropes. "Beautiful!"

Sherlock pulls his fist back from the follow through, reeling. The space John has left in the air in front of him suddenly feels like relief. He hauls the smile back from his face before it forms and fumbles to pull off the head padding. John groans and rolls, dribbling blood.

"Alright, back up," Kavanaugh scrambles onto the mat, holding Sherlock at bay. Sherlock's too stunned to do anything other than wobble back and forth. His mouth is dry.

"Easy, lad. Show me." Kavanaugh peels down John's lower lip and makes him stick out his tongue, streaking blood down his chin. "A bit of a love-nip," Kavanaugh says after pouring water over it. "Nothing missing."

Sherlock drops his head between his knees, breathing.

"That was one hell of a crack." Kavanaugh guffaws, rolling John to sit square on his behind and bleed more tidily over a bucket, a towel squashed to his mouth. "You alright?" he adds, giving Sherlock a second look. He's gone pale and shaky with the adrenaline. "Not going to be sick are you?"

Sherlock shakes his head. There's a buzz of background noise from the nosey crowd, a smatter of questions mixed with applause. Kavanaugh shoos them off and gently but firmly pushes them both out the ring.

"Have a sit till your head stops hurling," Kavanaugh advises John, pulling his gloves off for him. "And we'll call it done for the day. Don't forget to cool down."

"Really?" John says through the towel, managing weak sarcasm.

Kavanaugh laughs it off. "Come back some time with some proper kit." He buffs John's shoulder. "Like a mouthguard. You'd be good, I reckon. Good to see you on form, Holmes."

His hand stings against Sherlock's bare arm as he claps him with good will and walks off.

They sit in silence, Sherlock too breathless to speak and John carefully bleeding through the towel. He dabs cautiously after a while, grimacing, and then finally drops the ruined cloth into the bucket. Sherlock creaks to his feet; he's going to feel all this tomorrow; and reaches for his shirt in silence.

Behind him, John gathers up his things.

It's a physically uncomfortable journey home. Sherlock's clothes are clammy with cooling sweat, his hair already going crisp, and John sits mute, mouth throbbing. His jaw's going to come up a nice colour, Sherlock thinks; already there's a tinge just under the surface, pinkish-yellow. No hot drinks for a while.

Once home, John feels in the freezer for ice. There isn't any, of course, they almost never have enough ice, but there's a bag of peas that does just as well. He sits at the kitchen table and just nods, face half-hidden by the bundle when Sherlock mentions the shower.

He's still there twenty minutes later when Sherlock returns, redressed. Slowly John lowers the peas, putting them down with a soft thud on the table.

"I'm sorry."

He waits, half-expecting a reply but the only noise is the hum of the refrigerator and the muffled sound of traffic from the road outside. John feels at the raw patch in the corner of his mouth unconsciously and finally looks at him.

Reflexively, Sherlock makes a dismissive noise. John's shoulders sink a little lower.

"No, you've been...miserable. And I haven't done anything to help."

It's a statement that's neither entirely true nor entirely false. Sherlock fills a glass with water and swallows it back, along with his exasperation.

"It's fine."

"It's not though, is it?" John says, watching his shoulder blades move under his shirt, concealing his skin. "You never told me."

"It hardly matters."

"You've got scars down the whole length of your back, Sherlock," John says. His voice is odd; the swollen lip and the bitten tongue and something else besides. "I just... wish I'd known. I wish you'd thought you could tell me."

Sherlock drops the glass into the plastic washing up bowl and stares ahead of him. There's a dead plant from god knows where left shrivelled on the window sill. "And what would you have done?"

"I don't know. Nothing, but...I don't know," John repeats, sounding defeated. "Been more aware."

Sherlock hears the chair shift behind him. "Look," John says softly. He hasn't stood up. "Sherlock, look at me."

Reluctantly, he turns. It would be too easy to let everything slip. The cupboards above John's head need wiping; there's a film of cooking grease across them that isn't on the countertop because Mrs.

Hudson always thinks to run a cloth over it but never has her glasses on so can't see the faint orangish tinge on the wood. There's a chip in one, wear and tear and also Sherlock's fault, slamming it in too great a haste to get back to an experiment. In his defence, it had been a volatile one. There's a child lock on it for who knows what reason other than it's one of Sherlock's designated cupboards with some of his chemicals and equipment on it. It's not like Bee's capable of climbing that high yet. She's probably never even seen it open because he doesn't do that kind of thing when she's in the house-

"I'm sorry," John says again, voice level. "I've been...a shit friend."

At that, Sherlock does jerk his gaze down.

John's expression is even, but his body spells out contrition. It's almost as bad as the anger, Sherlock thinks, wishing it away. He shouldn't have agreed to go to the union. Bloody Lestrade and his stupid ideas. His own damn foolishness to never leave anything well enough alone.

His inadequacies all round, in fact.

Deficient.

John can still taste blood in his mouth, an acrid tang. It hurts to talk.

There's been an unspoken obstacle between them for months, he thinks. It's not just coming back from Norfolk and finding Sherlock struggling; it's not just the lack of cases. It's been going on ever since he moved back, and the size and shape of it is overwhelming. It's too much left unsaid.

"I wish we could go back," he says, honest and without thought.

Sherlock opens his eyes.

"What do you mean?"

"I don't know. Just back- before...Bee, and everything else."

Before it got complicated.

"You don't mean that."

"Sherlock, making you unhappy is a price... I hadn't banked on," John says, "and I don't want to do it anymore."

"Oh."

"And I don't know- what would help? It's me, isn't it?" John forces his shoulders back, posture straight. It's so typical of him it cuts right through Sherlock. "Maybe if the flat was bigger-? More space to get around each other?" He gets up from the chair, one hand on the table top for support. "Or-"

Sherlock never knows exactly what John was going to suggest. He flies too quickly back into memory of the days when John wasn't there, the stale unmoving air of the flat when no one was in it, day after day. The sour smell of chemicals, the endless sound of his own voice. It was difficult to let John back in with the baby but now?

Bitterness is a paralytic, love is the more vicious motivator.

Now fear leads him to impulsive action too fast to stop or take back.

John's had people hold him before. It's a simple, human interaction. Harry's steady arm around him in the back of a car on one of the few evenings they were united against the world. Back in the eighties they weren't so precious about touching kids. It gave a free ride to the creeps, but he remembers the genuine warmth of a WPC's hand between his shoulder blades, and the weight of a man's hands; Mr. Hedley, head of science; on his shoulders themselves, telling him to keep trying and he could make a medical degree.

Sholto's arms, not touching him but laid on the arms of the chair either side of him, crouched on a level with John's aching knee to pick up the pieces.

The drunken touch of strangers in crowded bars. The careful, withdrawn hold of rehabilitation therapists and nurses, easing him from one bed to another, processing him out of meaningful life into dreary ambivalence.

Even more dimly, he remembers his mother's cradling hold around him, back when he was very small.

Other women too, pulling and laughing, clinging on between a sweat of sheets across a whole host of beds and rooms and countries.

John's held them back, and other people beside. Mrs. Hudson, looking paler than ever in funeral black, talking in his ear all the time. Bill, because there's no escaping the man; a bump of chests and a slap on the back, if that even counts at all.

He's held Sherlock before; drunk and drugged, and twice because he couldn't help it. Once in wedding black, once awkwardly offering him a Christmas.

There's a difference, in holding someone and making them hold you. It's a bigger difference again to be held by someone.

Sherlock's forearms bump like sticks against his sides, and then the man's fingers close on the back of his jumper. His breath goes still. Not because he's relaxed, but because he's holding back, breathing deliberately shallow. With his shorter stature, John's hidden from the door if anyone were to walk in, and it would be easy to mistake this for what it isn't.

He puts his hands on Sherlock's waist for stability and no more, not until the other man moves first. It's a bit jerky; John feels collared, though he doesn't mind it. One of Sherlock's hands bunches in the hollow of his lower back, the other is a fist a little below his neck, pulling his jumper tight against his throat. Slowly, John slides his own hands past Sherlock's ribs to meet.

When they've hugged before, he's always pulled Sherlock down to his own height and thrust his chin over his shoulder, but this time Sherlock won't bend and John doesn't know where to put his head. This close, he can smell him; alive and human, both familiar and new. It's hard not to be aware of his feet on the floor, the pair of them wavering slightly against the tension of standing still.

He can't see where Sherlock is looking and doesn't dare to tilt his head back to check, then all at once, Sherlock seems to breathe again.

It's progressed passed impulse into deliberation now, beyond extraction or retraction. Sherlock's knees unlock and he wobbles. John's cheek brushes his shirt. It's only then he begins to let go.

It takes a moment to untangle his fingers. John mirrors him. If they both step back at the same time, they can save face. He can already tell that Sherlock is embarrassed by the way he clears his

throat. John swallows; the motion making his lip and tongue throb.

The air feels half a degree cooler when they're apart. Sherlock half-turns, not moving his feet, just hiding his face, one hand raised to rub at his jaw and mouth with teenage self-consciousness, a slip of a man devoid of armour. With a wash of calm, John reaches out and touches his elbow with his fingertips. Sherlock startles.

"Steady..."

"I'm sorry," Sherlock blurts, "That wasn't-"

"It's fine," John shakes his head a fraction. "It's fine."

His tone makes Sherlock glimpse at him.

I don't know if it is.

I'm scared of myself.

"Ok," John says. He wets his lips while he thinks, opens his mouth for words he hasn't planned yet, becomes stuck. "I wish I hadn't stopped seeing my therapist."

He sees Sherlock's expression and looks chagrined, placing his hands on the back of the chair and leaning on it.

"Because then I might know what to say, and all I've got is 'I'm sorry, please don't be sad'." He looks up.

And what use is that?

'It's not terrible,' Sherlock thinks. John looks like a kid behind the chair, caught out telling lies, now trying to be honest. It's an impasse. Sherlock exhales; it's easier than before. After a moment, John pushes the chair away.

"Wait here," he says, turning and stepping decisively back into the living room. Sherlock follows instead. John ducks into his bedroom, slams drawers and says, "Wait, wait," on repeat, until he finds what he's looking for.

He comes back with an envelope, fingers shaking as he pulls it open, tearing the flap. It's white paper, not manilla. He shakes it out over the sofa, spilling photographs that Sherlock has never seen before and sorts through them. "There," he says, grabbing one and pushing it at Sherlock. "Look at it. That. That's my favourite picture."

It's more than he meant to say, and it's true.

Sherlock holds the fragile paper in his hands. It's him, close up, head and shoulders and arms. He's holding the radiometer up to the light, in profile, eyes fixed on the vanes, a blur inside the glass as they spin. He remembers it being taken; Wiggins with the camera, John's delight. It doesn't look like him, he thinks. He's spent time looking in mirrors, practicing expressions, and this doesn't look like something his face could achieve and yet... there it is.

Why?

"It's the only one I've got where you're bloody smiling," John says. His mouth creeps sideways in a tentative smile himself. He stoops to feel through the stack of photographs again and finds

another; the first. Not quite in perfect focus, and in which Sherlock looks annoyed. He passes it over.

Bee's cuddled into his lap, hanging on to his stocking with both hands, looking surprised, mouth open in a soft 'o' of wonder. He holds it aloft in front of her, his other hand gripping her stocking and supporting her on his knee at the same time.

"I want more like these," John says, not looking up. There are other photos; Molly and Lestrade, Bee by herself. There's a terrible selfie featuring mostly nothing but Wiggin's nose. There are none of John.

John sorts them back into a stack and tries to worry them back into the envelope. Quietly, he adds, "I'd like one of us. One that's not some... shit newspaper job."

Sherlock looks down at the picture in his hands again. He hadn't been aware of smiling at the time, but it's there in the creases around his mouth and eyes. Wiggins is a good photographer.

"I don't mind that you have problems with the drugs; it's not your fault," John says, after a moment. "I don't mind that you go haring off on insane jobs which could put us in danger- that's just what we do. I don't even care if you don't want to always be involved with Bee."

A lie.

"...You didn't sign up for it, and kids aren't easy. It's fine. You care about her and that's enough."

Not a lie. Sherlock feels the lump in his throat grow thicker.

"But I'll care if you leave. Or if you get hurt. Or if I hurt you. I'll care a lot, alright?"

Sherlock swallows the lump down. It's a croak when he manages to say, "And you?"

"Me?" John stares at him like it's the first time he's seen him in years, and comprehension dawns across his face.

"I am not leaving, Sherlock. I'm not moving out. I'm not taking Bee. Not unless I'm taking you with me."

"Why?"

"Because you're what I've got, you-! You're reckless and dangerous, you're a neurotic pain in the arse at times, but-" he wipes a hand across the air in front of him as if he can literally push that train of thought aside. "You stood at my wedding and said how much I'd gone around saving your life and...that's not a one-way street, Sherlock. Plus she loves you and I-" John pauses, hands on hips, puffing.

"I-hm," he makes a little jerking motion with his head, "I don't exactly function without you."

"No," Sherlock agrees, astonished.

"And we've seen the fucking messes you get in when I'm not around so-" John chews on his inner cheek for a moment, "So you're stuck with me."

"Oh."

"Sorry about that."

“Oh. No. It’ll...do.”

“It’ll have to, I’m not giving you a bloody choice.”

“Right.”

“Good.”

Good.

John reaches out and takes the photograph out of his hands. “And I’m framing that,” he adds.

John follows through on his threat and has the picture framed. Nothing ostentatious, just glass and a plain bit of wood around the outside, and then he surprises Sherlock by putting it on the mantelpiece above the fire where anyone can see it.

Sherlock contrives to bury it with clutter; junk mail and bits of filing, or else shift the taxidermy bat across to hide it. It rather embarrasses him that it's public; this proof of his own humanity. John firmly pulls it back time and again until he gives up and lets Sherlock have his way.

A little at least.

Sherlock opens the kitchen cupboard and finds it there instead, propped next to the box of teabags, on top of the tin of shortbread.

"Idiotic," he mutters, taking it out and dropping it face up in the cutlery drawer instead. John laughs when he finds it and relocates it yet again to behind the kettle where Mrs. Hudson is baffled to discover it.

"Boys," she says with exasperation, and leaves it on the windowsill between the empty pot from a forgotten tomato plant and a deep green vase that they never use. It fits, just about, and once a day seems obvious as the sun finds a way in between the shadow of the buildings outside and the clutter.

It’s a few short weeks left till Christmas and the baby is getting into everything. The whole apartment is on permanent high-level lockdown, with baby gates and baby locks and constant negotiation.

The fall happens, as they always do, without warning and in spite of all the precautions. Somehow she gets the toes of one foot tangled on her own calf and fells herself like a tree. By pure misfortune, she falls straight into the corner of the coffee table. Sherlock’s head jerks up from the microscope at once, his body already moving before his brain’s even given it permission to do so. In the bedroom, John hears the smack and the sudden absence of Bee’s happy burbling and freezes.

The first few seconds are silence. She presses the heel of one hand to her head and then as the pain registers along with the shock, she opens her mouth. The cry that comes out is at first noiseless, and then moves into a high-pitched keen of distress that cuts through John like a knife. Fumbling, he struggles up from his seat. He’s foolishly wrapped a blanket round his legs to ward off the chill and can’t get untangled fast enough.

Sherlock gets there first.

She's sat plump on the floor, both hands clasped to her forehead under which Sherlock can see the bloom of a livid mark that will mature into a bruise soon enough. Her nose is streaming, her eyes crumpling up in suffering as her gaze meets Sherlock's.

The next few seconds seem to last eternity; forever imprinted in Sherlock's mind. Years later, when Baker Street is fond memory, he still has perfect recollection of her face in that moment. The parting of her lips from the grimace of initial pain and the rows of her teeth showing pearly white between her lips. The touch of her tongue against the ridge of the roof of her mouth for the first consonant and the first spill of tears between the two syllables. Her mouth closing for the second sound, another touch of the tongue, a baring of the teeth into the last and longest part of the word, and then her arms reaching for him.

He hits the floor, hard on his knees, the breath knocked out of him. She slips in his grasp- his hands are shaking. It takes him two efforts to pull her up onto his lap and by this point she's said it again and John has staggered to the doorway.

They make eye contact but the enormity of it all is too much to touch upon just now. Instead, John creeps closer, breathing hard and instead checks on the baby's forehead. There's no blood. It's just a bump and a shock. She grizzles into Sherlock's shirtfront, clinging. The man's gone pale.

"Sherlock?"

"I didn't-" He says at once. "I never-"

"Don't," John says, cutting him off. He can't bear it if Sherlock says something now that will hurt them all, and he doesn't want Sherlock to say something in a panic that he doesn't mean. He rubs gently at the red mark on the baby's forehead. "It's ok, darling."

Sherlock gulps, the baby slipping on his lap, but John hasn't the heart to take her out of his arms. Instead he guides him to lean on the old red armchair and squats there with them both until the world stops tilting so swiftly.

The baby stops crying eventually. She remains clingy for a while longer because she knows that they are upset and it feeds into her ability to bounce back from her shock.

"I think she's alright now," John says and slowly, Sherlock lets her ease from his lap. She finds her feet again far faster than either of them, and, thumb in mouth, she wraps an arm around Elbant. Silently John switches on the television and the bright chaos of cartoon animals distracts her.

Sherlock says nothing.

"I think we need to talk about this," John says, quietly. Sherlock lurches slowly to his feet and then sinks onto the sofa, looking like a man waiting for a verdict.

Instead of asking questions, John makes them both a mug of tea. Bee lies on her back, cheek buried in the elephant's ear like she can hear the sea in it, while Peppa Pig oinks across the screen.

"There's sugar in this," Sherlock says after the first sip.

"Yeah," John says, nudging the bottom of the mug back towards Sherlock's lips. "Hot, sweet tea. Doctor's orders."

"Oh."

John sits. They look down at the top of the little girl's head and wonder how to begin.

"Are you..."

"Fine," Sherlock says, even though it's a blatant lie. He swallows thickly. "I've never said that to her."

"I believe you," John replies. He hasn't said it either, not in this context. "Maybe she picked it up from nursery."

"You can..." Sherlock starts and then runs to a stop as sudden as if he's hit a brick wall. "You could-" He can't finish the offer. It's a generosity and a sacrifice long since beyond him.

John looks at him carefully. His heart is pounding hard, but he's found a strange place of calm inside all of the emotion that allows him to ask, "Do you want her not to?"

Sherlock stills. His lips are pressed hard together against the words in his mouth. He twitches suddenly and at once John has his hand on his shoulder.

"No, don't. Stay with me, Sherlock. I can't make this decision alone."

Sherlock squeezes his eyes shut for a moment and with a half-gasp, he's back. Unwillingly, but he is present, and looking deeply uncomfortable.

"We can fix it if you don't want to," John adds, and he can't hide the disappointment in his voice. "But..."

"John, I don't think-"

"You can," John says. He curls his hands into his lap, one into the other. Jerkily, Sherlock turns his head a fraction to look at him out of the side of his eye. "You can have the choice. If you want it. Sherlock, she wants you." Sherlock finally looks him in the eye, uncertain.

You can have this.

You can.

"How?" Sherlock asks, finally. John chews on the inside of his cheek, looking down into the depths of his mug. It will be complicated- of that he has no illusions. It's going to cause a whole lot of confusion, John knows, although reality seems very far away compared to how he feels about it now that he's heard her say it.

He lifts his head to find Sherlock staring at him, blank with panic, and realises he's been smiling to himself.

"We'll figure it out. It's not so... Loads of kids these days; you know. People get divorced, they remarry."

"Your will."

John stares at him. "What about my will?"

"I thought you'd asked Sholto, legally speaking... but I read-"

John knows it. "Are you mad? Of course not. He's disabled; he hardly knows her. He's just... organised. You, Sherlock. Whatever all the paperwork says, it's you. You've been there all her life

for her.”

And me.

“And you’re not about to pack it all in now, are you?”

“No,” Sherlock agrees.

John exhales a shaky breath. “Go on, then.” He jerks his hand, the one holding the cup, towards the baby in a little bravado gesture. More confident than he feels, and yet never more certain that despite all logic and reason this fits and feels right.

Sherlock looks at her. She feels his gaze, points at the screen and oinks for him; more a little girl than a baby these days, and yet still pink and vulnerable, blue-eyed and perfect. Slowly, Sherlock creeps off of the sofa and moves to join her in front of the TV.

“Can I sit here?” he asks. He lowers himself to the carpet, copying her posture. She rolls into his side and lies heavily in the crook of his arm and he can’t turn his head away, because for the first time in his life, the emotion is too much to bear privately. It is rapture, and it is terrifying.

She’s oblivious, thumb in mouth, half her mind on the TV, until she looks at his face. Curious, she reaches up and touches his damp chin. “Ow?”

“Who’s that, Bee?” John says, wobbling through a smile. She looks at him. He points. “Who’s that?”

Her fingers curl absently with a tiny scratch of nails against Sherlock’s stubble. She bumps her head against the man’s chest, curling into his arms, filling them.

“Daddy.”

Chapter End Notes

- 1) ‘Holsten’ is a non-alcoholic beer. I haven’t checked but it may well be the one shown in the christmas scene in A Scandal in Belgravia. It tastes like beer, but a bit more pointless.
- 2) The postcodes given throughout are fake. They’re linked to the same general area but not to any real residence as far as I know. So y’know. Disclaimers.
- 3) Muharram for some muslims (in as much as I, a non-muslim, understand it) is similar to a second Ramadan, in which you may or may not fast during daylight hours.
- 4) Molly’s research is semi-invented. There ARE dead pigs scattered around London for forensics research simply because there isn’t the space or wriggle-room in policy to allow for a human body farm, like in the USA. Also the UK has such ridiculously varied climates you wouldn’t be able to generalise data from one anyway. Like John, Molly’s career path is really difficult to map out as there’s no reason why she’s called Miss Hooper if she’s a doctor, and yet she works in the morgue, which is weird if she’s a surgeon. I like the idea that Molly was originally an osteopathic surgeon, who deferred to morgue duties for some reason.

5) Chapter title comes from the song 'Born of Frustration' by James. (Although it was damn near 'Deeper than Sleep' from the song 'Ring the Bells' also by James, but I went with the more literal lyric. Just listen to both. In fact, just listen to the whole album.)

6) The working title for the doc was 'In Which Bee gets Tired of All this Faffing Around and Takes Matters into her Own Hands'

Comments? Questions? Just need to mash some keys in my general direction? We love it all.

Thanks for reading! - Odamaki.

Interlude 3: Do You Realise?

Chapter Summary

"I don't want to talk to you."

Lestrade goes still and takes the toothbrush from his mouth. It's neither Sally nor the Yard, nor anyone else he'd have expected to be ringing him on a Monday evening so late. He swallows the residual toothpaste foam on his tongue.

"Alright," he says slowly. "That's going to make for a weird telephone call though. Or were you expecting someone else to answer my phone?"

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

INTERLUDE: Do you realise?

It's warm in the Diogenes club rooms. It's always warm. Mycroft pulls absently at his collar and scores another line with his pen under the text he's reading. The notations are unnecessary; he could memorise the page in a few seconds and highlight the relevant details mentally, but lately he'd rather save the storage space up top.

He doesn't want to admit that the work has become a chore rather than a pleasure or a duty. He used to relish even the boring aspects of it. Unlike Sherlock, he's come to terms with the fact that the world will always spin a touch too slow for him. He learnt to read all of the bigger pictures in life and find satisfaction in taking the mundane and using it to illustrate the greater glory. Long-term evolution rather than short-lived thrills.

The tap at the door is a welcome distraction. The man, soft-shoed and silent, signs that he has a visitor.

'Who?' Mycroft replies, one handed.

The man hesitates. 'A woman?'

It turns out to be more than a mere woman. Mycroft withers back into his chair. "What are you doing here?"

"Charming. I came to have lunch with you, you great booby," Mummy says, plopping down into the empty chair with a puff. "Daddy sends his love. Rather sour lot you have out there," she adds, meaning the assorted politicians and businessmen ensconced in the lounge. "I understand the appeal of a bit of peace and quiet, but half of them look like they're four breaths from the grave. How are you, darling?"

"Fine," Mycroft says, suspiciously. "Why are you here?"

"I told you; I rang up yonks ago for lunch and was told when and where like I was one of your Westminster cronies. Really Mycroft, your own mother."

"I'm sorry, Mummy. Just..." He hammers out a text. The reply is instant.

[Whoops- A]

He scowls at his phone.

"Myc?"

"Bureaucratic error. I am sorry." Reluctantly he heaves himself up and treats her to a peck on the cheek. "It's lovely to see you."

"No, it isn't," Mummy says. "You forgot I was coming."

"No. I didn't know you were coming."

"Oh, well that's different," she agrees, perking up. "Surprise! It's not a bother is it?"

"No," Mycroft sighs. "I can make do. I haven't made any reservations I'm afraid."

"Tosh. We'll manage," Mummy replies, "There's a Pret on every corner in London." She ignores his grimace and collects together her shopping bags, handbag and coat. He doesn't suggest eating in the club; Mummy thinks it stuffy and the food predictable. Not to mention having picket-lined her way through the seventies, she disapproves of some of its premises.

He takes her through St. James' Park instead, cringing at the pigeons in their hordes, and with Mummy giving him a blow-by-blow account of encounters with pelicans in Florida, which he has heard many times before.. They sidle into what is ostensibly named a cafe on St. James Street and yet somehow also tramples the epithet into the dust with its prices.

Mummy waits until they've ordered before grilling him.

"You haven't been home in a while."

"I've been busy," he replies, pretending that he's more interested in the art on the walls than her expression.

"Even Sherlock came home at Easter. And John calls. Daddy and I were starting to think you'd fallen off the face of the planet."

"Alas," Mycroft says, appraising the lights. "Here I am."

"Don't be facetious- it makes me worry about you."

"I am perfectly happy; don't fuss," he tells her firmly and she has never looked less convinced in all her born days. She gives him a hard look over her reading glasses, and then takes them off.

"Mycy, I have two sons, one of whom is capable of telling barefaced lies directly to my person and fooling me, and I am sorry to inform you, that you are not he."

He gives a shiver at the syntax, and as prevaricating isn't working, tries deflection instead.

"Have you finished the guest list for the ruby wedding?"

"More or less; Daddy's using Facebook to track down the last few addresses, no, don't offer to help. It takes him hours tucked away in the office and frankly sometimes the world could use the peace. Do you know he broke the coffee machine? Brand new! How he managed it is beyond me."

She chuckles over the matter in spite of her words, and softens under all her exasperation into fond love. “How are plans from your end?”

“On track, of course. I’ve arranged a florist-“

“Oh, Myc, we can’t. Cissie’s insisting-“

“-Who will come in on the day, discretely correct cousin Cissie’s disasters, and leave. Rest assured, Mummy.”

“Just please do not start a family feud. We’re barely over the last one,” Mummy says, picking up her knife and fork as the starters arrive.

“Not at all. I’m endeavouring to remain ‘*arcanum boni tenoris animae*’,” Mycroft quips.

“Oh, yes, yes, amo, amat, amas, hail Caesar, and the jolly rest of it. Just bear in mind ‘*familia supra omnia*’.”

“I wouldn’t dare forget.”

“No, I don’t suppose you would,” Mummy agrees, touching his wrist. “How is that brother of yours? Causing trouble?”

“Remarkably quiet,” Mycroft answers. “Doing good deeds, and... being domestic.”

“Happy?”

“I’m sure he’s fine.”

“Tell me truthfully.”

“Then, no. Fairly damn miserable.”

“Mycroft!” She looks genuinely shocked.

He spears arancini with petulance. “You did ask.”

“I know, and I told you to be truthful and you were,” she sits back, concerned; the cafe and the food could be made of cardboard for all the attention she’s paying to it now. Mycroft squirms under the attention- internally. Outwardly he eats with the flat, bored motions of a man taking on fuel, which is revealing enough by itself. She sighs, full of regret.

“*Aut Caesar, aut nihil*,” he mutters.

“Aut John, aut nothing, you mean,” she says, “rather too much of the aut nihil all round.”

“Don’t get upset.”

“I can’t help it, I’m your mother. I simply loathe seeing you both so down and dumpy, and not being able to do anything about it.”

He frowns and leaves his plate alone, dismissing the salad.

“We’re adults.” There’s no pleasure to be found in telling her that Sherlock has at long last cast him aside. There’s no point in lying and saying that adulthood has somehow magically equipped them to manage, or that things will naturally sort themselves out. In Mycroft’s experience, that’s nothing

but a Hollywood falsehood. He doesn't want to tell her about the surgery, or his other problems.

"Come home at Christmas," she says, and it reminds him of past conversations of a similar ilk, in the days just past graduation and after a funeral he's never told anyone about. "I know it's dull for you, but I'd like to see you."

"You'll have your hands full with Sherlock and John."

"Family, Mycroft. In the end it's all we have, whether we like it or not."

He disagrees, and it frustrates him. Sherlock has never been able to provide him much beyond a crisis and a welcome occupation for his mental acuity; it's been one-sided and although Sherlock's postured and thrown fits to the intention of cutting him loose before, his brother has never had anything else to drift to other than a stupid death. Except now he's fully thrown his lot in elsewhere even if it ruins him. There's a chance that it won't, and that bothers Mycroft far more than he'd like to admit.

"I'll see," he says, and she translates this as 'no'. He always does these things just to humour her, for which she is grateful, but oftentimes, it'd be easier if he just admitted there was a reason he still huddled around his immediate family so far into middle-age, and sleeps with a lamp lit.

She lapses into silence, pawing at a plate of linguini without tasting it, feeling old. "Well," she says after a long while. "I suppose there will be a lot happening at Christmas. It's hard work with a toddler, and all the washing to get on top of every day. Perhaps you're right."

"I can possibly come down for a day."

"Come to think of it, there won't be so much space with everyone there; we'll have to put Sherlock in your room because of John and the baby."

"What about the second office you were converting to a bedroom?"

"Not even started," Mummy laughs. "It's on Daddy's to-do list."

"Oh."

"No, you're right. I shouldn't keep trying to drag you home every other month when you have your own life to lead. Call us though; after the speech?"

"Very well," Mycroft says, feeling like he's taken a step on the wrong foot. He'd be suspicious of Mummy trying to use reverse psychology on him, except she never, ever has in the past. "Of course, this is all months away," he begins and then she oscillates again.

"Only if you're sure you don't mind? Perhaps we could get one of those sofa-beds--"

"No, it's fine," Mycroft says hastily, abhorring the idea of sofa-beds in general and at the specific idea of being made to sleep in the living room, demoted to the least important houseguest. "I'd rather spend it quietly."

They plough on through the ensuing silence and remaining pasta until it's safe to call for the bill and escape. He tries to order her a taxi or a car or some other respectable mode of transport, but she insists on him walking her to the tube instead. "I have things to do," she says, "Involving my credit card and Marks and Spencer's. The wardrobes won't know what hit them."

"Try not to go overboard," he says, pecking her dry cheek. She beams at him and then softens.

There are people milling around the station, passing blindly back and forth with not even a second's worth of attention to spare for the grey-haired lady in a rain mac and her city son leaning on his umbrella. She trades him back on advice.

"Do look after yourself," she tells him. "You're looking terribly washed out. Is it work?"

He smiles, the same narrow placating smile from the days when it was the only thing thin about him. "Work is exactly how I expect it to be."

"Well don't let it take advantage. You don't need to do it *all*, Mycroft."

"I know," he lies, and waits until she's bumbled through the barriers and gone down the correct escalator before leaving. He does not return to the Diogenes. The disruption to his schedule has thrown out his train of thought and he decides it would be better to leave his pet projects alone again until tomorrow.

Returning through St James, he commits himself to an observation of the ground at his feet and nothing more; ignores the squawk of tourists and flap of wings, ignores the faint roar of the fountains and the tread of pairs of aimless shoes. Birdcage Walk has little traffic, and he returns to the flat the long way round, taking the stairs to avoid company in the lift.

The flat itself is odourless. He hasn't eaten here in over a week; there's no rubbish, the smell of soap from the shower has already faded and the rest is neutral. Parting the curtains brings in a little light from between the trees, and he stands for a moment, noting the dust. There's always dust. You can buy all the hypoallergenic fabrics you please and clean the place from top to bottom but there will always be fragments of dust. They show in the light as they fall, sparse.

It's neither cool nor particularly warm. If he removed his jacket and waistcoat he may consider an alternative, but for now it's as if there's no discernible temperature in the building at all.

He has no appetite for caffeine at this time of day, and he won't waste time making drinks he has no need for. The office, since the removal of its mole, has been hushed. Busy, of course, it's always busy, but global catastrophe has taken a back seat for a while, at least in those catastrophes that he prefers to concern himself in. There's work to be done; he could go to the office, More of the same thing as always.

The clock does not tick, the windows quarantine all sound from the outside. It is home, after all. It's supposed to be private. A bolthole.

Mycroft sits and exhales, and feels time extend out indomitably before him. The hearth is empty; it's been cold enough for fires but he's hardly been here enough to bother with them; that's what the central heating is for. His heels touch the base of the sofa. He closes his eyes, goes back, smells the burnt paper and peat of whiskey and stale cigarette smoke.

It would be an awful mistake to repeat.

He tilts his head back and observes a bookcase full of texts he has already committed to memory, music already heard, ideas already had, and a window to a street with an address that is starting to feel ironic.

He closes his eyes and presses his palms together to think, to find answers, to glean something left from this mess. He leans his head on his hands.

"Oh, hell."

Lestrade stumbles out of the bathroom, toothbrush tucked into his cheek and grabs at his phone. By some luck it's still ringing when he jabs a thumb against the screen to answer.

"Lestrade. Yeah?"

"I don't want to talk to you."

Lestrade goes still and takes the toothbrush from his mouth. It's neither Sally nor the Yard, nor anyone else he'd have expected to be ringing him on a Monday evening so late. He swallows the residual toothpaste foam on his tongue.

"Alright," he says slowly. "That's going to make for a weird telephone call though. Or were you expecting someone else to answer my phone?"

"That's not what I meant," Mycroft's voice is made flat by the phone; in the background, Lestrade can hear faint music, something soft with strings. "I meant- let me start again."

"Ok," Lestrade sits on the end of the bed. "Go ahead."

"Lestrade."

"That's me," Lestrade says, a faint smile growing. His lungs hitch and he fights back the cough. "How can I help?"

He can hear the hesitation, and it makes him curious. After all this, he can't imagine what's prompted Mycroft to suddenly get in touch, but he's grateful. It even sounds like Mycroft is trying.

"I hate Christmas," The other man announces. "I hate the traditions and the obligations and all of the tat and trappings. I hate it. I will be... spending the day at home, alone, and enjoying the privilege of not being forced to attend to any kind of anything."

"Right?" Lestrade says again. "I mean, I'm not that bloody keen on it either. No law about it, is there?"

"Oh do shut up," Mycroft begs and Lestrade obeys. The silence this time is longer.

"If," Mycroft manages at last. "... if...you have an interest in sitting and... not talking, then, ah... I'd like to offer you the option."

"The option?"

"The option. Yes. The spare armchair."

"To come and sit with you on Christmas day, and not do Christmas, and not talk?"

"Yes, I do see your point...I-I usually read. Something in the line of, I don't know, a salmon en crouete."

'After months of nothing, he's offering me something, and it's a bloody fish puff,' Lestrade thinks. It's a novel approach, he'll give it that. "Should I bring anything?" he asks, warily.

Mycroft has to grope for an answer. "Pudding? Emphatically nothing with 'Christmas', 'Yule' or 'Mince' in the name."

“How about tiramisu?”

“That would do.”

“I’ll... bring some tiramisu then,” Lestrade replies, unable to believe his ears.

“And stop smoking,” Mycroft adds shortly, “I don’t want you coughing through the Speech.” Then in a fluster, he hangs up.

Lestrade stares at his phone. He’s not been asked out like that since the days phones had curly wiring and phone calls of that nature were conducted at the utmost limit of the curl’s allowance, sat on the washing machine, preferably with the kitchen door shut.

“Christmas?” he repeats incredulously. Where was all this last year, he’d like to know, not that he’s about to begrudge a sudden change of whatever Mycroft is using as a heart, but he can’t help but be suspicious. He types out a message and sends it. Some time later he gets a reply.

[He’s with me. Why?]

Terse. Typical John. Lestrade breathes out; on the one hand it’s a relief to know that Sherlock’s fine, on the other, he’s more unnerved by Mycroft’s sudden offer. His phone buzzes.

[Case? -SH]

[No. Sorry. What are you doing at Christmas?]

There’s a longish wait for the answer; Lestrade can picture them debating the matter, which no doubt John’s already got sorted out. His hunch is confirmed when the reply comes.

[We’re going to my parents’. -SH]

Lestrade can almost hear the sulk in the words.

[You can’t come. -SH]

He doesn’t bother to reply, though he isn’t offended. He thinks hard about Mycroft’s offer instead. It would be pleasant, if what he’s offering is exactly as stated on the phone, if he himself can keep his act together and nothing goes off piste at the last minute.

‘We’re adults,’ Lestrade thinks. ‘We should be able to bloody well sit around for a few hours for dinner and no conversation.’ They’ve done that much before, and they could probably manage it again; the main trick is going to be not falling into the trap of having sex for the hell of having sex.

Lestrade looks vacantly across his living room, hands on hips, and tries to think of a time when they haven’t. It’s not long before he comes to a short conclusion on the matter.

“Shit.”

TWO YEARS AGO

In the hours after Magnussen has finished bleeding out on his own patio; in the time it takes for the

handcuffs to start to rub lines into Sherlock's wrists and for John's hand to start to become unsteady again; Lestrade is disturbed by a call.

It's a truncated conversation, which conveys to him good evening, Merry Christmas and the fact that in the previous hours something has gone very, very awry. Lestrade rubs a hand over his mouth and agrees to do as he's asked. Within 50 minutes he's on a train back into central London.

By the time Lestrade actually arrives at Mycroft's flat, the man has been back in London for 4 hours, and at home for forty minutes. Enough time for him to start pulling the immaculate shelves into disarray.

He admits Lestrade to his lodgings via the buzzer, but makes no effort to show the man in from the front door. Lestrade drifts in on a cloud of shock and ill-ease, feeling like an intruder, until he finds Mycroft in the living room and there he pauses, further aghast.

"What are you doing?"

"A touch of housekeeping," Mycroft says, gesturing with his glass. He tosses a handful of onionskin letter papers into the back of the fire and watches as they dance up at once as ash. "Sherlock's murdered someone. The police have him."

"What? No." Lestrade's diaphragm twitches. He repeats himself, with more emotion.

"As touching as your faith is, it's misplaced. He shot Charles Magnussen in the head at about 4 o'clock this afternoon before witnesses, including myself. Dr. Watson is being held for a statement."

Lestrade baulks. "With who? My lot don't have him."

"I know," Mycroft says and Lestrade nearly wobbles into a chair. If the Met. don't have them, someone else must, and it must be someone out of Mycroft's bubble of influence. The man carelessly dribbles another ream of thin papers into the flames.

"Shouldn't you be... wherever Sherlock is?" Lestrade asks. He unbuttons his coat in the heat of the living room and watches Mycroft in disbelief. The man is barefoot, jacket-less, sans tie and utterly, coldly uncaring about it.

"I have to be in Westminster first thing tomorrow morning to try and convince my brother's less invested enemies not to throw him to his very much invested enemies, and try and attempt to scrounge up some sort of believable allies to speak in his defence. Except that Sherlock, in his great wisdom, has never made a single ally of any note whatsoever. All he has is family, accomplices, degenerates and not much else."

"He's got me," Lestrade says, heart sinking.

"I was counting you."

"Not as a degenerate or an accomplice, I hope."

"You're 'not much else'." Mycroft says, but his tone falls flat and Lestrade's not convinced he means it. Mycroft looks sullenly into the flames for a moment and then tilts his head back, emptying his glass with a grimace. "Have a drink."

"Not sure that's a good idea..."

“Nothing’s a good idea. And I wasn’t offering. Here.” Mycroft plucks up one of his cut-glass tumblers from a tray and pushes it into Lestrade’s hand. He gives him a cynical twinkle. “Think of it this way- if you drink up, there’s less for me. Chin-chin.”

He bluffs the edge of his glass against Lestrade’s too hard, and then sits himself on the carpet with a grunt, back to the armchair.

Slowly, Lestrade juggles off his coat and then joins him, legs stretched out up to the hearth.

“What is all this?” Lestrade asks, scraping the delicate pages from the bottom of a near-empty box and squinting at them. They’re indecipherable.

“Oh, souvenirs, picked up here and there. Reasons to be glad we as a nation do not engage in the torture of British citizens on British soil. ‘Officially’ speaking, that is,” Mycroft takes them from Lestrade’s fingers and feeds them to the fire. “I shouldn’t ask, to be honest. I shouldn’t like to make you complicit. Burn the box as well,” he adds. “Go the whole hog.”

“Jesus, Mycroft.”

“No,” Mycroft laughs humourlessly. “You won’t find either of us in any of those pages.”

Lestrade sits, palms sweating as he tears the cardboard into chunks and adds it to the fire.

“What are they going to do to him?” He looks over at Mycroft’s face in profile, hellishly lit from the fireplace and then sighs with compassion for him when he doesn’t reply.

“You’re angry,” he says without thinking.

Mycroft’s expression turns gorgonian and for the split second after his knuckles have tightened hard around his glass, Lestrade thinks he’s going to hurl the crystal to the back of the hearth in rage.

Instead, Mycroft steels himself again. “I’m furious,” he replies flatly. “Furious.”

There’s a sharp, hurt edge to him, like he broke the glass anyway, and for a long while Lestrade doesn’t speak for fear of being cut. He plucks pieces from the box until there’s nothing left and then builds up the fire until they’re both sweating but even the ashes of Mycroft’s secrets are gone.

Lestrade leans back when he’s done, loosening his tie. Mycroft’s mood is catching and he knows from long bitter experience the hardships of waiting for the other boot to drop, knowing it’s going to hurt when it does. “Pass the bottle.”

Mycroft leans to the side and picks up the whiskey from the table, thumping it softly between them. Lestrade pours for them both and grinds the stopper back into the decanter.

“What do you need me for?” he asks.

Mycroft looks at him out of the corner of his eye and gives a slight shrug of his shoulder. “Not much. It was more to inform you of the situation without an unwanted audience.” He waves his glass in a small circle, gesturing to the bookcases and the ceiling. “This is the one place I can guarantee to be private. And as much as I’d like to retain our usual convenient lines of communication.” He drops his hands to his lap slowly and looks down as though he can scry something out of the scotch. “I suppose it’s going to have to undergo a few alterations.”

“How do you mean?”

“I mean... Sherlock will have to leave, if he doesn't end up in prison for the rest of his now inventively shortened life. I shan't have much call for police correspondence after that.”

“What if I've still got call for government correspondence?”

“We've got some sort of 0800 number.”

“I like the direct line better,” Lestrade says. “Comes with complimentary booze, sometimes.”

“Only when the line's been bad.”

“It'll be alright,” Lestrade sets his glass on the carpet and shifts to face him, one elbow on the seat of the sofa. “It'll- you'll- something will work out.” The question of whether or not he believes that is evident in his eyes.

“I haven't got any cards left to play with,” Mycroft says softly with the barest shake of his head. “And that's the truth. He and I between us have made ourselves into the very definition of a pyrrhic victory. “

“A what now?”

“Pyrrhus, King of Epirus. He fought the Romans at Asculum in 279BC and despite winning his battle sustained such tremendous losses that he is oft interpreted to have stated that with one more such victory he would be returning home alone.”

“Right. Well, shit.” Lestrade says. He falls silent, palpably upset, and Mycroft begins to wallow again, but then Lestrade startles Mycroft from sinking too far into thought by asking, “So then what happened?”

“What do you mean?”

“Pyrrhus of Equinas. What happened to him?”

“Epirus,” Mycroft corrects automatically. “Oh, a year or so later he became King of Sicily, then tried to take Carthage but gave it up and went home. Then he became King of Macedonia a few years after that, and eventually died when an old woman threw a roof tile at him while he was fighting and knocked him from his horse, widowing his fifth wife.”

Lestrade pauses and then points out, “So he was king three times over and got through five wives and then he died doing what he liked. On the scale of things, that's not exactly an unsuccessful life, is it?”

“I wouldn't personally choose it,” Mycroft says but Lestrade can see him weighing up the argument.

“I agree, I can't imagine you with five wives.”

To his relief, Mycroft actually gives a tiny chuff of amusement. “No,” he agrees. “Certainly not.”

“Me either. One was enough of a mistake.”

The whiskey burns their tongues as they drink and eventually the sweat on them starts to cool as the fire simmers down from a roar to a murmur. Mycroft keeps intending to ask Lestrade to leave but the silence stretches on and on without rankling, and he doesn't want to be the one to break it.

Lestrade tops up the glasses, generously in the case of his own and meanly in the case of

Mycroft's. He's obviously taken the comments to heart about drinking it in Mycroft's place, or else he's trying to catch up. It would take him more, Mycroft calculates. He himself is the larger man, but Lestrade is a more hardened drinker by far.

Already he feels the twinge of nausea and the unsteady feeling of his senses detaching from their ability to make logic of co-ordinated motion and gravity, and all the other pleasant symptoms one gets when binging on quality liquor. Lestrade, in contrast, seems to become increasingly more solid, like the booze is pinning him to the carpet.

His demeanour has an oddly calming effect. Mycroft knows from hard experience that he can sup on the dregs of anger for days, eking it out in carefully rationed acidity and turning it into a source of fuel when otherwise he's running on empty. Using it as a barrier between himself and those other emotions no less powerful but so much less productive.

Like loathing and fear. Guilt is the worst, and he does not speak of loneliness, even in jest.

Lestrade shakes the last drips from the decanter into his glass and neglects to put the stopper back in. The smell of the alcohol is strong enough to tingle but not so bad that Mycroft feels obliged to do anything about it. Instead he finds himself staring at the neck of the decanter, and although there's nothing to see, he imagines a world in which he could witness the vapours escaping irrevocably from the bottle.

"Fuck," says Lestrade, emphatically. He puts down his glass and feels in his pockets, eventually turning out a battered cigarette case amongst the loose change and knots of paper. It rattles, and a single cigarette spills out.

"Don't suppose you have any?"

"I quit," Mycroft says, watching him with dull interest as Lestrade hunts for a lighter. The other replies.

"So did I. A bit. Shit and sod it all!"

He's left the lighter in his desk or in his car, it hardly matters where, he doesn't have it and that's the main thing. Lestrade examines his scraps of receipts for something to make a taper from but they're ragged or wadded up with old gum. He tosses them into the hearth with contempt and then kneels down, kowtowing to the fire and risking his eyebrows to light his cigarette from the flames.

"For god's sake, there's kindling on the mantelpiece."

"No, I've got it."

He leans back, miraculously with cigarette lit and eyebrows intact. Mycroft watches and then takes the cigarette for a drag as Lestrade shuffles unsteadily back to his post, exhaling a plume.

The smoke stings the back of his throat and makes his eyes prickle. It's difficult to swallow the inhalation and he passes it back, trying not to cough. "Unpleasant," he comments.

"Cheap," Lestrade apologises.

"I had cigars somewhere," Mycroft comments, glancing around. "Nice ones."

"And you forgot where you put them?" Lestrade is making significantly better innings on the cigarette. He leans forward and drops ash onto the hearth.

"I mislaid the location. Something of an attempt to 'lead us not into temptation'" Mycroft quotes.

"And deliver us from Cubans?"

Lestrade is gratified to earn a roll of the eyes and a chuckle. "I dare say I could deduce where I left them."

"Don't," Lestrade advises, offering him back the second half of his cigarette. "The mood I'm in, I'll smoke half and pocket the rest."

"You'd be welcome to them." Mycroft sets the butt of the cigarette to his lips and nips smoke from it tentatively. "High tar..."

"Next time."

Mycroft looks at him, a simmering mix of curiosity, anger and too many other things and it strikes Lestrade that he hadn't been professing hyperbole. This might actually be the last time they ever cross paths. With mounting fear he wonders if he's already seen Sherlock for the very last time.

He can't remember anything he said to him, but no doubt there was nothing meaningful. Not that Sherlock likes anything meaningful, but nonetheless. He'd have liked the chance to have stood there and to have said something stupid to be remembered by.

"Oh God."

Mycroft puts out the cigarette.

"Oh God," Lestrade repeats, horrified.

"If it's any consolation, I don't think he even cares," Mycroft says, his tone a knife. His words sound oddly practiced. "Not about the likes of you nor I. We are mere inconvenient collateral."

"That bloody idiot!"

"There's something we agree on," Mycroft comments. He puts the stopper into the bottle and moves it aside but makes no attempt to move from his place by the fire. The lines on either side of his eyes are picked out and deepened by the shifting light. He looks beyond physical tiredness.

Blindly trying to help, Lestrade puts a hand on his shoulder. Mycroft looks at it, tilting his head, his eyes hooded. Lestrade can feel the rise and fall of his collarbones as he breathes and the warmth of his body through his shirt. He can feel the hem on the wide strap of the vest worn underneath.

Lestrade opens his mouth to ask what he can do but Mycroft murmurs, half to himself, "Next time..."

"Yeah," Lestrade breathes in agreement, "Of course."

And then Mycroft kisses him.

The kiss is soft though harsh with alcohol and tobacco; a dyadic sensation which reverses as the taste fades and Lestrade overcomes his initial surprise. Mycroft leans away, not enough to break the kiss but to lead it to the fat seat of the sofa, obliging Lestrade to press him into it.

When that kiss ends, Mycroft turns his face from the next one. Lestrade hesitates but a hand on the back of his neck encourages him to mouth at the jawline instead, his lips stinging over the faint stubble there. He kisses Mycroft under the chin, down into the vulnerable swell of his throat and

then into the hollow where it meets with his chest. Mycroft sighs from somewhere far away from the living room with it's burning secrets and the horror of failure hanging over them both.

They progress with wordless clumsy gestures. Lestrade sits to unlace his shoes and peel off his socks, his gaze on Mycroft's surprisingly graceful feet, which idle back and forth over the carpet, waiting. He gets impatient when Lestrade fumbles with his own buttons, and stands, beckoning him into the bedroom.

The doorway is dark from the blackout blinds already drawn within the room. Lestrade feels a hand over the wall for a light switch but doesn't find it. Mycroft has no interest in helping him with that. He catches his belt instead in one hand and draws him inexorably towards the bed.

They continue blind. It's only here that Mycroft undresses, his motions efficient and unseen. Lestrade reads his body with his hands in wondering, blundering discovery. His fingertips find the bobble of a mole upon his ribs and the rough hair that provides him with a braille trail from the middle of his chest downwards. Mycroft runs his hands up his back, helps him wriggle from his shirt and his trousers; pulls impatiently to get him naked and on top, and then slips one cool hand inside his pants.

Lestrade groans. He tries to kiss him again and misses in the dark, mouthing his earlobe instead and prompting a noise that makes him stiffen despite how chill Mycroft's fingers feel in contrast to the heat of his length. He wonders if Mycroft is flushed. He can feel the sweat on him and taste it too, a little dampness across his chest. Mycroft's hands slowly warm up.

He doesn't move it quickly against Lestrade. He teases; or perhaps deduces. His touches aren't nearly as brusque, though he seems to encourage it in Lestrade. Instead he ghosts his hand over Lestrade's shoulders, down the planes of his back and his buttocks in calculated caresses that make Lestrade shiver.

"Move back a little," Mycroft says, just as he's worked Lestrade to a pitch. He leaves cold air between them as he shifts aside. Lestrade waits, lost, hears the soft slide of a drawer and then the crinkle of foil.

"Are you sure?" he asks.

The darkness answers in Mycroft's voice as Lestrade feels the man's legs slide from under him to around him. "Don't you want to?"

The latex is warm; Mycroft's rubbed the packet between his palms before opening it, and he slides it down the length of Lestrade's cock with aplomb. Lestrade doesn't answer his question in words. He curls his fingers around the bottle pressed into his hand instead, and lets Mycroft guide him.

Lestrade's dizzy with alcohol and arousal. In the dark he loses track of time and space and at the same time feels acutely sensitive. He's usually loud when he has sex; tonight his voice seems to echo off the walls, disorienting him, and he goes through the process almost like dreaming. Mycroft is quiet aside from his ragged breathing and sudden demands.

"Come along," he urges, grasping him again, leaning into his body. Their chests bump, Mycroft presses his lips, chaste, to Lestrade's cheek and that more than anything makes him hurry.

"You've done this before?" Lestrade wonders aloud, but he gets no answer other than the arch of Mycroft's body and all of his fingers digging into his shoulder blades.

There's little finesse to it; they're both too far gone. The headboard clatters, Lestrade groans and

Mycroft gives a little cry. His hands slip against Lestrade's chest, pushing him up and simultaneously moving closer, until Lestrade gets the hint. He sits up, grasps the other man's hips and does his best.

"God- god!" Lestrade chokes. It's been a long time since he last had sex like this; a mad, scrabbling affair that's about chasing orgasm more than feeling good. He feels a hand over Mycroft's belly until he can curl his fingers around him and lets the motion of their combined efforts make it slide back and forth in his grasp.

The stutter of the headboard changes; Mycroft's grabbed it with both hands, and using it for stability, he rises against Lestrade's thrusts. "There!" he blurts, "there!"

Lestrade's thighs are aching; he's going to be a broken man in the morning but this doesn't even occur to him now. He leans forward, open mouthed, goes faster and hopes like hell he's got the right angle though it feels more than fine for him.

He can't put a word to the noise Mycroft makes at the end; whatever it is he nearly allows to slip out is abruptly curbed back to something soft and indefinable. His whole body moves however, into a taut curve and then a long, long, shudder. Lestrade falters, caught by surprise, but doesn't stop. He pumps his hand until his palm and knuckles both are slick, and then at Mycroft's touch lets go. He plants both free hands on the surface of the bed and rocks, pushing Mycroft's knees up between hard-fast and deeper-slow. Mycroft twitches, shifts beneath him and erratically, they bring it all to the finish.

They fall apart onto the bed. Lestrade stretches out, languorous, his muscles twanging. He startles when Mycroft's hand finds him again, blindly but confidently removing the condom. Numb from orgasm and tired, it takes Lestrade a few minutes to gain the impetus to try coiling an arm around the other and get properly comfortable. Too quickly, his naivety is rebuffed.

"Bathroom," Mycroft utters. The bed creaks as he gets unsteadily to his feet. Lestrade sprawls into the warm space he's left. He doesn't mind waiting. There's the soft sound of something light falling from a height and the clonk of a metallic lid, followed by the click and rumble of a closet door and the swish of coat hangers. It's not until Mycroft reaches the door that he pauses.

"Mycroft?"

There's a little light coming through from the hall where he's opened the door. Mycroft pauses. Lestrade can't see much of him, but he can see his profile and the thick woollen dressing gown and he can see something of the other man's expression. Lestrade pushes himself up on to one elbow.

"Stay," Mycroft says. "I want to shower and then I need to sleep." He glances back. Lestrade, suddenly aware of his own nudity, shuffles the corner of the duvet across his thighs.

"OK?" He says, uncertainly.

"Good night," Mycroft says, and leaves the door only a sliver open behind him. Lestrade waits, the damp patch grows cold, and under the belligerent influence of the whisky, he sleeps before he hears the shower stop running.

He wakes late in the morning alone, still in the dark. He stumbles to find the window, which is a thin square of light behind the blinds and winces painfully when rising them lets the sun in. Their clothes are still strewn across the floor in drab piles like lost moths, chill to the touch. Lestrade separates out his own and uncomfortably pulls them on.

The doors to some of the other rooms are demurely kept closed, though the door to the bathroom is open. Lestrade warily tries the handles. Two transpire to be locked, the other opens smoothly onto a second bedroom. The bed has been used and the sheets left rumpled, the mattress is already cold.

The flat is empty. He finds a note in the kitchen which informs him that he is free to feed himself from the fridge and that the alarms will set automatically the minute he departs. Lestrade stands in the middle of the kitchen, barefoot, and considers the fact that Mycroft is in Westminster haggling for his brother's life against the weight of disappointment in his chest.

He makes coffee and leaves the cup as a sign that he wasn't wholly offended. He collects his shoes and coat, drags them on and leaves on a cold, damp Christmas morning.

Chapter End Notes

1) There are pelicans in St James Park in London, which aren't the same as the Florida brown pelicans. We've got big hossoff white ones that lurk around the tourists hoping for snacks, and chomp on the pigeons now and then. Not that I can ever bloody find them when I'm there. *Huff*

2) Mycroft's pretentious Latin translates to 'the secret behind a good mood', to which Mummy replies 'family before everything else'. After that he says 'Caesar or nothing', which Mummy translates for you.

3) The chapter title comes from the song, 'Do You Realise' by The Flaming Lips. The working title is 'In which Mycroft is nagged by his mother and realises that his emotional boner for Lestrade is never ever going away.'

Part 13: I've Loved Them All

Chapter Summary

They stand next to a bed which is too obviously single-occupancy, with the background sound of a man reading storybooks to toddlers. John wets his lips, his mouth dry.

Chapter Notes

Well. This is it. Here we go. The big rollercoastery one.

There are notes at the end for you, as always.

If you enjoy it, spare a little love in the comments for [CodenameLazarus](#) who is the best of eggs even at the worst of times, and does an excellent job for very little credit.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Part 13: I've Loved Them All

It's been awhile since he's set foot in Ella's office. He's been there only once or twice over the summer, to um and err through forty minutes of avoiding her eye, and after that, he'd let things slide for a couple of months.

The room is undecorated for the season; not even as much as a few extra pastel coloured glass balls or a stretch of ribbon. It's supposed to be a neutral space. John finds it strangely dreary.

"How have you been?" she asks, once he's seated.

"Alright. Not too bad."

"That's good to hear. Are you sleeping well?"

He scrunches his face up and indicates a mixed result in the side-to-side motion of his head. "It's been alright," he concludes. "A few odd nights. Not too regular."

"Well, that sounds manageable," Ella comments. "How about the severity?"

John shrugs. "No worse than before. It... I wake the baby up, when it is bad."

"Do you worry about that when you're trying to sleep? That you'll have a dream and the reaction to that dream will accidentally wake the baby?"

"Sometimes." He looks unsure and embarrassed.

"Is it just the usual nightmares, John?"

“Yeah, mostly. I think I’m just dreaming more in general,” he says, shifting his weight in the chair, so she knows he’s lying. She nods, as if in agreement, and makes a note on his records.

“As you know, I don’t like to put too much weight on dreams, John. They can occur for a whole range of reasons, some of which we can’t even understand. It’s not always a sign of what’s happening in your life; it can just be random, but sometimes it’s helpful to look at common elements and discuss them. Sometimes that unpredictability or the raw sensation of the dream can help you think about yourself in a new light.”

He looks distinctly uncomfortable now, and she notes it as a warning and eases off the topic. “Just bear it in mind for our next session; perhaps note down anything you think you’d like to explore.”

John nods once in a curt manner that expresses ‘no chance in hell’ far better than a shake of the head.

It’s a matter of give and take; with that much information gleaned, Ella sits back and lets him free on his favourite topic.

“How’s your daughter?”

“Yeah, she’s great. She’s brilliant, in fact.” He sits up, one elbow on the arm of the chair, suddenly conversational. “Trouble, though. She swiped a little tin of fish the other day; it must have been on her eye level on the shelf. Anyway, it set all the alarms off and the security guard found it in the bottom of the pushchair.”

“My son used to try and eat the grapes,” Ella says, knowingly.

“Yeah, she doesn’t like that I have to put the bananas in the basket and through the checkout before she’s allowed one. I think she just liked the picture of the fish on the can.”

“Probably,” Ella agrees. “She’s too small to have a strong concept of personal property. It’s not as though she’s taking things and hoarding them.”

“Why? What would that mean?”

“Sometimes nothing,” Ella replies, backtracking. “It’s simply a more marked behaviour in older children. I don’t think you’ve got anything to worry about.”

“Hm. She um, she talks a lot more. She can put a couple of words together now, like ‘bye Nana’ and ‘chocolate please’.” He gives a rueful little smile. “She’s getting the hang of questions now. You can say ‘where’s’ something, and she’ll point or go and get it. She gets a lot out of nursery. Lately it’s been ‘iddy iddy ock’ which I think is meant to be ‘hickory dickory dock’.”

Ella chuckles, curious about his sudden verbosity. Almost as if he’s keen to rush ahead of the topic for some reason. Interesting. “My son’s latest is, ‘spy spy with my diddle eye, something beginning with window’, and then he gets cross when I guess it too quickly.”

John actually laughs at that.

“Something to look forward to,” she says. “That and summer holidays. Did you go anywhere?”

“Oh. Um, I went to see a friend, actually. Back in August. From the army.”

“Really? That’s nice,” Ella says, with some enthusiasm. He hardly ever mentions anyone. “How was that?”

“It was ok. Hm. Sad. It was a bit sad. He’s... not doing as well. Lonely, you know?”

She can guess. There are a limited number of people John’s ever mentioned and Major Sholto has been one of them. Ella knows at least the part he played in John’s life and can guess at some of the effect that’s had. She uncrosses her legs and puts the clipboard down for a moment.

“Tell me about it.”

He grapples for a place to start. “It was alright,” he says, his favourite fall-back. “Bee was really good on the train, I mean, it’s a hell of a way up there. Norfolk,” he adds, as she starts to look questioning. “Not a lot of public transport. I, um, got a friend- another army contact- to drive us.”

Ella says nothing, allowing the pause to grow until John squirms and fills it. “His name’s Bill. He was a nurse I knew out there.”

“You mentioned him before, once, I think.”

“He’s a good man,” John says, flat toned in case she thinks he’s being sentimental. “A very good nurse.”

“He sounds nice. He must be a friend, then.”

“Yeah.” John nods and looks at the carpet. He’s less aggressively defensive today, Ella notes. Something’s changed, that’s for sure. Something’s gotten under his skin and doused some of his usual outrage.

“How did it feel to reconnect with someone you felt so strongly about?”

He looks up, startled, his expression for a second and a half completely transparent.

“We talked about Major Sholto briefly before,” she reminds him, “How you felt badly about his injuries, and how important he was when you were just starting your career.”

John’s still thrown by her wording and it makes him unexpectedly honest. “It was strange. I mean we- stuff’s changed. He’s... still miserable. I can’t do anything about it. No, I know; I know it’s not my job and all of that, but he’s still my friend.”

“You’re close,” Ella says. “It’s not easy seeing someone you’re close to be unhappy.”

John’s expression wavers. For a moment she thinks he might mention another name, another similar situation, but he doesn’t.

“I asked Sholto to help look after Bee, if anything happens to me. I’m... trying to reconnect.”

Privately Ella questions the wisdom of using his daughter to do it, but John at present seems to go through the world with the two-year-old thrust out in front of him like a shield and she’d be an idiot to try and take that away from him right now. He’s barely over the misplaced guilt he feels about becoming a father in the first place.

“You should keep in touch,” she agrees.

“We talked about some stuff,” he confesses, watching the leaves through her window steadfastly. “His family and...my family.”

“Who did you talk about?”

“My dad. That... Sholto was a better man than him.” John clears his throat and shifts his weight in the chair, sinking back and touching his knuckles to his chin. “He told me some stuff about him too. That I hadn’t known.”

“What kind of thing?” She wishes she could guess.

“Just stuff. It’s private. But it-“ John pauses. “I dunno...” Ella doesn’t move in her chair lest she spook him. “He told me just to enjoy stuff more, and it made me think how much I wasn’t. Not because I couldn’t, I just... I didn’t think I was allowed because if I got carried away, I’d end up like...like I might get angry.” He scratches hard at the side of his neck.

“You’re a different person to your father, John.”

“I know.” He looks up. He means, ‘I know that now’.

“I cried,” he says, after a moment. “Just...I don’t know. I wanted to.”

“Then it sounds like you did the right thing.”

“Yeah,” John says, lifting a bit with relief and sinking at the same time with the memory of the emotion. She sees him clench his jaw a moment and his gaze flick down. His hands tighten. His throat moves.

“Sometimes a little space and a little privacy is the key to letting go.”

“Yeah.”

“Did you feel better?”

“Yeah. A bit. A bit muddled.” He snubs his nose on the heel of his hand, thinking hard about something. “He had a go at me for...”

Ella waits.

“Well, he thinks he’s past it; no one’s going to look at him twice.”

“Do you agree? He’s disfigured, isn’t he?”

“No,” John says, suddenly frowning. “The scars aren’t that bad. Uglier bastards get- they get laid. They get married,” he corrects himself.

“Is that what he’s looking for?”

“I think he just doesn’t want to be alone. He just wants someone to be with him; anything else’s just a perk. Just a really good friend would do.” He glances up abruptly, as though aware he’s let something slip.

Ella reaches up and adjusts the line of her cardigan, thinking. “John, may I go off topic for a moment?”

His face shutters down with skepticism, and then he shrugs. She continues.

“Do you know what the largest living thing is? I read about this lately, although admittedly on the internet.”

He shrugs again. “A whale, isn’t it?”

"I thought so too," Ella agrees. "But apparently it's a mycelium, um, I suppose a sort of mushroom. It's called a honey fungus."

John doesn't move, blank with disinterest. "I—" he begins, working up to a dismissal of the subject, but then he has a second thought. He has to close his eyes to do it, but he reins himself back and finally opens a palm to her; permission to continue. "A honey fungus?"

"It's about 10 kilometres across, I suppose. It covers an area of more than two square miles."

John gives an incline of his head in begrudging respect for the fact. "A big mushroom."

"The thing is," Ella persists, "Is that it's almost completely invisible. The whole thing; it's just an enormous network of fine white strands underground, all through the earth and the roots of the trees. A hidden and intrinsic part of the forest floor in these mountains in America."

"Right."

"And it lives off the trees. It kills some of them and eats the dead wood, so there's a concern about the size of it. But then, on the other hand, the dead wood provides shelter and nourishment for all kinds of insect life, which in turn feeds the larger animals."

"I know what an ecosystem is."

"My point being," Ella says, letting the gibe slide, "That it is part of the natural process there. It changes some things, and it helps other things. It is a complete and neutral force. And it might be even bigger than we think, because you can only tell where it is when a tree dies; that is, you only see the negative effect. If you focus on that, you might mistake it for a terrifying epidemic, destroying the forest. Or you might not notice at all- the trees are fairly scattered amongst the rest."

He's listening now, a faint frown across his brow, but she doesn't think he's annoyed. He's trying to understand.

"It's edible too, surprisingly. It's supposed to be delicious. And in the autumn, I think, when the conditions are right, it fruits. Imagine that; they grow quickly. Hundreds of them appearing from seemingly nowhere overnight, and suddenly you have an idea of the size of the thing, when previously you had no idea it existed at all."

She sees his Adam's apple bob as he swallows. Whatever else he's thinking, she has his attention.

"The question is, now we've realised it's there, and we're aware of its size; what do think we should do with this information?"

"Scientists?"

She opens her hands and gestures that the person is irrelevant. "Yes," she allows. "What should the scientists do?"

"I don't know. I don't know anything about mushrooms."

"Objectively, there are options though?"

"They could... study it more. Can it be killed?"

"They could use fungicide or something, I guess, but the matted root substance would remain, and that much poison could hurt the forest, don't you think?"

“Leave it alone, then,” John counters. “If it’s meant to be there, what’s it to do with them? Let it get on with things.”

“True, they could do that.” Ella agrees, in a tone that makes him visibly prickle.

“Alright, then they could... contain it or something.”

“It’s 10 square kilometres in area.”

“Then I don’t know. Just eat the fucking mushrooms.”

“Do the mushrooms want to be eaten?”

“How should I know? Yes. If that’s not the case then why make them delicious. That’s fucking evolution isn’t it?”

“I suppose that’s right,” Ella says, visibly amused. She notes, that despite his swearing and protestations, he’s not demanded to know what the hell it has to do with him. A moment later, he confirms it.

“Can we stop with the fungus analogies. I’m not here because I’ve got athlete’s foot,” he grouches.

“That’s true,” Ella agrees gently, “So it remains for you to decide; what do you want to do?”

John hunches forward in his chair, elbows on his knees, hands in front of his mouth. After a long time, he says, “I want to go home. And think about it.”

Ella nods. “That’s fine, John. I think that’s a sensible answer.” She uncrosses her legs and gets up from the chair, making a few brief scribbles on his notes. He doesn’t look while she does so, and she keeps it deliberately private, knowing he hates the idea of anything being assumed or stated.

“I want to put in another appointment for the end of the month, but other than that, take your time. If you don’t have an answer, then you don’t have an answer, and that doesn’t mean you’re doing anything wrong.”

He takes the slip and feels like he’s retreating when he leaves. For once, though, it feels calculated. It feels like he has a reason all of his own to be in therapy and something that is his alone to work on. It’s oddly satisfying.

John tucks the slip into his jacket and turns his collar up under his ears against the sharp air.

He needs to buy another scarf.

It’s one of those quiet evenings. They’ve settled the baby and retired to separate pursuits. Mrs. Hudson, downstairs to a roll up of strong herbal soothing; John at the laptop, picking at words and surreptitiously searching the internet. Sherlock toys with chemicals at the kitchen table, where he will spend the whole night if he possibly can.

John’s phone buzzes at his elbow, even as he’s trying to remember how to spell the word ‘equipment’, and he blindly picks it up.

“Hello?”

“John, I’m sorry calling so late at a bad time.”

John leans back in his chair, checks the caller ID and puts the phone to his ear again.

“Sandra, hi.” He checks his watch- it’s just gone nine o’clock- and it’s not usual for anyone from the parents group to call him so late, unless there’s been a sudden change of plans. “Let me guess, I’m down for emergency snack rota?”

Sandra pauses on the other end of the phone. “Can we talk? I mean, are you busy? Or...with someone?”

John glances around the empty sitting room, makes eye contact with Sherlock through the other man’s goggles. “No, it’s fine. I’m just sorting some e-mails out. What’s happening?”

In the background, John can hear muffled traffic. Sandra sucks in a breath before she speaks.

“I know it’s private, but I read- I heard, from the others, you work with... police? With Sherlock Holmes.”

“In a way,” John says guardedly, signalling to Sherlock, who puts down his test tube at once and prowls closer. “I’m not an officer or anything.”

“No,” Sandra sounds grateful. “That’s... what I want. I don’t want police, it’s just- You’re not scared of bad people?”

“Is everything alright?” John asks, with the certainty that it isn’t. Wordlessly he puts the phone on speaker and holds it so that they can both hear. Sherlock crouches, still wearing his goggles, frowning.

“You know I don’t talk about my husband- he’s not a nice man. I’m trying to keep away from him. It’s not-“ Sandra breathes. “I think he’s in my flat.”

The line of Sherlock’s shoulders turns predatory, so John knows she’s not lying.

“Where are you?”

“In the car,” She says, matter of factly, “I got as far as the staircase and you’re going to think I’m crazy; I’m not crazy; I could *smell* him. He’s there, or he’s been there, I swear on my life. The window was open and I know I locked it and I can’t go in there- I have Luis with me-unless I know he’s gone- I can’t stay there-”

“Calm down,” John says and she stops speaking at once. “Ok. Just take it easy. You’ve got your car, right? Just, come here,” he says, nodding to Sherlock. “221 Baker Street. Ok? Bring Luis, just come straight here and we’ll get it checked out.” Sherlock reels away, peeling off his goggles and dropping them in John’s chair, followed by his dressing gown. He springs up the stairs, two at a time.

“Ok. Thank you. I’ll come. Thank you.” She says something in Portuguese, which is either a prayer or, more likely, a swear of relief and then John hears the engine start.

“I’ll keep my phone with me,” he offers. “Just drive safely.”

“Yes. Thank you.” She hangs up with a crackle.

Sherlock reappears, fully dressed, just as John is saving and shutting down the laptop.

“Vatican Cameos?” John asks.

“Hm,” Sherlock says, without commitment, prying the curtains aside to look out. “We’ll see.”

Some time later the car pulls up and parks in front of the house, where it hesitates. “Go down,” Sherlock tells John. “Tell her not to worry about the parking.”

When John opens the door, Sandra blinks in the sudden light. Most of her is obscured by her son, wrapped in a car blanket, a weight on the leftwards cant of her hip. She’s wearing her uniform, and a light coat, her handbag slung over one shoulder. “There’s a packet of mince on the back seat,” she says. “We were coming home from the supermarket.”

“I’ll get it,” John tells her, taking the keys from her cold fingers. “Just go up, the doors open.”

The little boy is a bundle of sleep, sagging over her narrow shoulder, face screwed up in annoyance even in a dream. A dinosaur, once a pair of socks, dangles from his fist, tucked for security under her elbow. John locks the car and shows her up, dropping the shopping on the kitchen table, which is now miraculously clear.

“Thank you,” she mouths, over her son’s curls, and then her mouth narrows with fury at the world for making her so reliant on the kindness of near-strangers.

John just shakes his head. “You can use my room,” he whispers, but she puts her boy down on the sofa and tucks him in, her attention shrinking down to his level. She murmurs something and kisses his forehead before straightening, arms folded across her stomach. “Sorry,” she says and then becomes openly aware that she’s being scrutinised.

“This is Sherlock Holmes,” John says. Sherlock, poised as ever in his armchair, unfurls himself to his full height to shake her hand. She does so, with cautious solemnity.

“Tell me about your husband.”

She does, in flat brief sentences, like she’s told the police before. It’s not an uncommon story; it’s nothing dramatic and it’s very short. A vulnerable time being poor and lonely, living alone for the first time, had made an outgoing and generous man seem like a good idea. And then it turned out he had a temper, bad friends, bad ideas. Unreliable throughout the pregnancy, she says, and here John shakes out his fist and starts to pace.

“He was bad for Luis,” she concludes, with a shrug. “So we left. He didn’t like that we left.”

She’s rubbing at her ribs unconsciously, where the bruises never showed. Sherlock narrows his eyes. ‘We left’ is a short way of putting it, in his opinion. He makes a guess at what she really means, based on the evidence he has.

She means ‘we left everything’.

She means, ‘He didn’t like that I took ‘his’ son.’

John eye meets his eye across the room with murder in it.

Sherlock straightens up, and falsifies a smile. “Might we borrow your car?” As she passes over the keys, he adds to John, “Go and see if Mrs. Hudson is in any sort of useful state.”

John snaps to, bearing down on the logistics of the case. By some good luck, Mrs. Hudson is only a quarter of the way through her roll-up and amiable to the idea of stubbing it out and pitching in.

She's rather mellow and red around the eyes but she's still mostly *compos mentis*, and John supposes it'll have to do.

Sandra's stood where they left her, the shadow of her body falling over her son. John has to consider what to say even as he opens his mouth. "This is Mrs. Hudson, she'll tell you where anything in the flat is." He hopes. He looks around, hands out to indicate what has been referred to as 'the flat', which consists of the living room and the kitchen. The plastic bag on the kitchen table wilts.

"Oh, you can put your stuff in the fridge." John pauses and looks at once to the other man. "She can put her stuff in the fridge, can't she?"

"Yes.... Yes! Of course. That will not be a problem." Sherlock rocks on his heels, still playing mien host. Sandra nods in faint disbelief.

"Help yourself to anything."

"Except the top left cabinet."

"Except the top left cabinet. It's chemicals."

"It's child locked," Sherlock adds, brightly, and then his expression drops. "John, we're wasting time. Do excuse us." And with this professional leave, they go. Mrs. Hudson flutters after them as far as the top of the stairs.

"Take care! Oh, they're off again."

She totters back, blinking, to the stranger abandoned in their living room. "Oh, you poor dear, and at this time of night."

It's only nine-thirty. Mrs. Hudson smiles to give the woman reassurance, hands folded over her heart in sympathy. "I expect you'll be wanting a sit down and a cup of tea after all this excitement. Put your feet up, I'll get it."

Sandra sags gingerly into Sherlock's armchair, feeling as out of place as she looks. She watches Mrs. Hudson shuffle around with some trepidation, but the old woman somehow seems to manage to tidy away the mince without thinking about it and summon up a pot of tea. It's only when it's poured and Mrs. Hudson's wobbling smile finally breaks through her anxiety, that Sandra's shoulders drop.

"Sorry," she says to the old woman, "Are you...?"

Mrs. Hudson leans forward and pats her hand gently. "Don't worry. It's not as strong as my Christmas present," she says cryptically. "Have some sugar in that. It's good for shock. Or there's brandy."

"Tea's fine. Thank you."

Mrs. Hudson regards her, puzzling out the next kindness. "I can lend you a nightie if you're staying the night. I expect you will; they'll be off for hours. Always are." She clicks her tongue as she tries to think what else will be needed. At present, only one other thing seems particularly pressing.

"And I'll open a new tin of biscuits."

Time passes. The floors of the house settle and creak, pipes pop and likewise, Mrs. Hudson starts falling asleep on her own creaking frame and the stranger feels obliged to encourage her to go.

“Will you be alright, dear?”

“Yes, I think so.”

“I’ll be right downstairs if you need me.”

Sandra nods, and watches her uneasily as the old woman descends the stairs. ‘A few more years,’ she thinks, ‘and that’s going to be a real challenge’. She returns to the refuge of the living room.

Luis snuffles into the sofa cushions, far more relaxed than his mother. He sprawls with the absolute freedom of babyhood, legs akimbo. She tucks him in again and perches on the edge of the seat, trying not to intrude even on the empty house. The mugs and biscuits are left untidily on the table. Feeling she ought to do something, she collects them up. She picks up another mug from next to the red chair, varnished over with dried tea in the bottom, and no less than three half-drunk mugs from the table-come-desk by the window.

The flat has a smell to it, she notices, which reminds her of a combination of her brothers and a swimming pool changing room. Slightly like mould, much like worn shoes, and with now and then a hint of toilet chlorine. Then again, cologne, and the not-unpleasant biscuity smell of sweat. And baby.

She puts the mugs on the kitchen table and slowly ties up her hair into a ponytail. There are daubed paintings on the fridge, held on by magnets, and there are post-it notes which must mean something to someone but are cryptic to her. Strings of numbers. Shopping lists for things she’s very sure you can’t pick up at the supermarket.

Emptying out a cold scum of water from the sink, she uncovers evidence for a meal for two: two plates, two knives, two forks, a single pudding spoon, no less than five teaspoons. She washes all of them in silence, facing an unexpected photograph of the terrifying Sherlock Holmes looking likeable. Drying her hands first, she picks it up.

He’d struck her as very intense. Like a searchlight swinging this way and that- it was either glaring directly on you, prickling your skin, or away, leaving you in the dark, uncaring. But he’d had a good handshake, she recalls, like John, and he’s the stretched blob labelled in the baby’s paintings so perhaps this photo isn’t so far off the mark. Carefully, Sandra puts it back where she’d found it.

It’s restless waiting. She doesn’t want to put the TV on in case it disturbs Luis, and she doesn’t want to spend the evening prowling around the flat either. Hands behind her back, Sandra reads the spines of the books on the shelf.

Time passes. It’s long since gone midnight and the woman’s gone as far as to take off her shoes and claim a small space by the door to put them in. More boldly, she’s helped herself to the magazines stacked haphazardly under the desk. They’re old, waiting-room style samples providing a mix of New Scientist, National Geographic, Woman’s Weekly and Cosmopolitan, the perfume samples all decayed to the same stale smell.

She stares tiredly at a completed quiz at the back, started in one hand, finished in another and corrected in a third which has gleefully scrawled ‘wrong!’ over several answers. It’s ludicrous.

Downstairs the door clicks softly and there are footsteps on the stairs. Muffled conversation. She

uncurls her legs and sets her bare feet on the floor, waiting.

Sherlock climbs the stairs two at a time, but no faster than normal, easing the crick in his neck. John follows, his shoulder stiff. He swaps the plastic bag from one hand to the other and flexes his sore fingers. The knuckles throb. Sherlock pauses before the door a moment, listening and then enters. Over his shoulder, John spots Sandra, chin up, somewhat wide-eyed and expectant.

Sherlock holds a hand up.

Peace.

She stands up anyway, looking them over.

“Hey,” John says. The bag slips from his fingers as Sherlock grabs it, and John shrugs his jacket off. “You ok?”

She nods and he takes it at face value, shaking off his shoes and treading round in just socks to open his bedroom door and peek in. Bee has her tail up in the air, cheek squashed into the mattress. Thumb in mouth, she barely stirs at his presence. He tweaks Zub round from her face a little, and softens.

In the other room, he hears the rustle of plastic bags and Sherlock’s soft rumble.

“It’s kebab. Want some?”

John touches Bee’s curls, lost in thought. A moment later, Sherlock puts his head around the door. “Ice, John.”

“I know,” he says, nettled. “I am a doctor.” They pass a look.

“She’s fine,” John mouths, and comes back to the living room, leaving the door just open.

They circle each other in silence, like cats. Sandra on one side of the table, John and Sherlock on the other. The latter efficiently places two plates out, shaking a styrofoam container onto each, taking clean forks from the drying rack with no comment on the fact that the dishes have cleaned themselves. It’s possible, Sandra thinks, that he hasn’t noticed.

John takes ice from the freezer, bundles it in a tea towel and holds it to one of his hands. He catches her looking and just grunts.

“It’s fine. You’ve been alright?”

He’s noticed the washing up, even if Sherlock hasn’t, which strikes her as backwards. She gets the impression also, that he’s asking about the baby and the flat more than her.

She nods, not trusting herself with words.

She’d like to ask outright, but they don’t seem to be telling. The voice of caution in the back of her head, an old and trustworthy friend, is hissing at her ‘plausible deniability’.

Nonetheless, her heart is beating in her throat.

“Um, you won’t want to be driving around this time of night. You can sleep in with the kids if that’s ok?”

“Fine,” she says. She’s standing between them and the sofa, Luis behind her back, where she wants him. “Your… neighbour lent me a nightie.”

“Hm. You’ll be warm then,” Sherlock comments wryly, picking at his food with his fingers and licking them. Sandra can see the glimmer of comedy in his expression and for a moment the situation nearly tickles her too.

“Sure you don’t want anything to eat?”

She couldn’t. Her stomach’s churning. “No, thanks. I had biscuits.”

“Right.”

“Then…” the silence is awkward. The ice over John’s knuckles melts. Her backbone quivers in empathy. “I’ll… Are you sure about the room?”

John looks up and shrugs. “Yeah. Don’t worry. We’ll manage. I’ve had worse.” He smiles like it’s a joke and she recalls that he’s been in the army, so she supposes it’s true. It almost sounds like he means something else though.

She smiles back, in the same way, and steadies herself before scooping the dead weight of her sleeping son from the sofa cushions. As she crosses the room, Sherlock gets up from the table to push the door open for her. He leans back as she passes, giving her space, his gaze over her shoulder onto the smaller bed.

“Don’t worry, you can put the lamp on. She won’t wake,” he says, voice low. “She’s used to it.”

Sandra swallows on a question.

“Don’t worry about it,” Sherlock repeats, and then instead of ‘goodnight’ says, “Till the morning.”

She opens her mouth to say either good night or thanks, but his mouth twitches up at the corner and he softly closes the door.

Luis complains and she places him on the bed- the right side, where he always crawls in when he has a bad dream. The door to the wardrobe is hanging open across the corner, and she changes behind it into the long-sleeved nightgown. It smells mostly of lavender and a little of pot.

The duvet is cold, except where Luis has already warmed it. She slides in and tugs him close, lying awake. There are unfamiliar bumps in the mattress under her, where it’s conformed to someone else’s body shape. The red figures of the alarm clock flick over without a noise. They’re bright enough to illuminate the base of the lamp, an empty glass, and a battered plastic bottle of ibuprofen, child-proofed.

The table on the other side is empty except for a lamp that doesn’t match.

Sandra lies there, head on a pillow that smells like a stranger, listening to the kids gurgle in their sleep, and the distant noises of the two men in the kitchen. The bathroom light flicks on, the tap runs, the toilet flushes- Wrong way round, she thinks, automatically, and then she’s corrected when the tap runs again. The light turns off. There’s more muttered conversation in the living room, verging, she thinks, on a habitual squabble.

“Fine, alright. Don’t make a row,” John says, near the door and his footsteps vanish upwards. A moment later, the second man follows, and then after two long minutes, one of them returns.

The bathroom light flicks on again; Sherlock this time, she supposes, the steps are quieter. John Watson stomps. He clears his throat. The tap runs.

Cleaning his teeth.

The bathroom light flicks off.

Silence, except for traffic and babies. The light slinking in under the door is interrupted as Sherlock passes by. The softest *pling* of violin strings- just one at first and then another, and then a slow and steady nonsensical pattern, upscales and down.

Before she knows it, she falls asleep.

John wakes first, the gleam through the skylight pulling him out of sleep abruptly. He stretches out, feeling his vertebrae pop. Rolling over and upright, he stretches again through a yawn and grimaces when the stretch of his fingers makes the muscle right down to his forearm twang. He flexes it, looking down. It’s bruised, or so it feels, but the colour hasn’t yet come up. Instead there’s a dirty coloured cloud of yellow just beneath his normal colouring. At least it’s not swollen.

It gives him a feeling of grim satisfaction.

It’s early, but his internal clock is insistent and he knows Bee will be up and baffled in a short while, and he’d rather pre-empt any distress.

He pulls on his trousers from the day before for lack of anything better. In the awkwardness and disorganisation of last night, he’d forgotten to take his pyjamas from his room. His teeth feel furry. Leaving his socks in Sherlock’s laundry basket, he comes downstairs.

The other man is an apostrophe in the confines of his armchair. Coiled like a cat. John doesn’t know how he can stand it, and how unfair it is that the other man never seems to get a backache as a result.

“Morning,” John says, not expecting a reply. If Sherlock’s by chance actually asleep, he won’t respond. If he’s thinking he might, or he might not. If he doesn’t say it, though, then Sherlock will definitely notice. One eye cracks open.

“Six thirty.”

“Spot on. Have you been practicing?”

“Hm.” Sherlock unspools, improbably long, and crackles as he stands to his full height. He takes a moment to tidy his violin away into its case and prowls forward. Perhaps he hasn’t slept, John thinks. He has bags under his eyes. He glances towards John’s bedroom door.

“She’s waking.”

“Bee?”

“Mm. No wait,” he says, catching John’s elbow before he can take a step towards it. “Go armed.” John’s face wrinkles up in confusion. Sherlock gestures to the kettle. “In fact, let me.”

Are you sure?

Sherlock makes no indication if he is or he isn't. He simply presses the button on the kettle and it roars almost at once to the boil.

'He's been down here waiting,' John thinks, taking a seat at the table, watches as Sherlock flows around the kitchen making tea, picking things up unerringly without looking.

'Of course he can. He lives here.' John rubs at his knuckles. Bee's going to wake up and start talking. He doesn't know what's going to happen when she does. If she'll say it. If Sandra will notice. If she's already noticed. How she'll react. How Sherlock will react. If she'll say something. If she'll say anything to other people. John's RMC mug lowers in front of his eyes to the tabletop, startling him.

"Relax," Sherlock says, holding one of the nice mugs. "You look like you're about to kill someone."

"I am relaxed," John says, picking up his tea. He doesn't ask how Sherlock knows how Sandra likes her tea. He doesn't watch- much- when Sherlock approaches the door. He hears him knock and wait a long moment before carefully and slowly opening the door. His feet don't move for a moment longer.

He hears Bee's whoop and wail.

There's motion and Sherlock talking quietly, insistently under Bee's chatter and a second high voice- Luis must be awake. Sherlock emerges, without the tea and with Bee balanced on one hip, the sheet from the bed under the other.

"Babar!"

"A small accident," Sherlock announces, dropping Bee into John's willing lap and stooping to shove the sheet into the washing machine.

"Pabar!"

"Yes, Bee. Hello. What happened?"

"Nothing."

"Luis wet the bed," Sandra says, from the bedroom door, looking flustered. "First thing this morning. I'm really sorry. I think the duvet escaped."

Bee squeals and points, fascinated. Her face breaks into a slow grin and she bubbles out with laughter at the hilarity of the fact that Luis is in their house. John grins with her. "Were you surprised?" he asks her. "Who's that Bee? Is that Luis?"

"Oo!"

Sandra presses her lips together, less embarrassed but still awkward. The nightgown is too long for her.

"Don't worry about the bed," John says, pragmatically. He's not going to resent a toddler for dodgy bladder control. "It's seen worse, I guarantee it. Um. I mean. Bee's thrown up on it before."

"Right." Sandra says. Then she wordlessly picks up her son and vanishes into the bathroom,

sparing them all from further awkwardness.

“Daddy, oo!” Bee’s still laughing. This is the best morning she’s ever had.

John’s heart thumps. “Here,” he says, holding her out. “She could do with a clean nappy too.”

They gather for breakfast, strangers at the world’s oddest B&B. Luis clings to his mother, refusing to even have his own seat at her side; he’d rather sit in her lap. Bee is shamelessly coy and playful with him. Hiding behind the table leg and peeking, and then darting off to bring toys over.

Sandra picks at a slice of toast, feeding more to her son, who prefers licking the jam and butter off to eating the bread. She lets him, just for once. It’s been a long night and she hasn’t the energy to fight.

John yawns hugely, shovelling cereal. Sherlock fiddles with the radio for the weather forecast. Lately he’s been testing his ability to deduce meteorological phenomena.

Finally, she speaks up. “Is there anything I need to know?”

Sherlock settles himself. “He was there.”

“Not anymore,” John grunts.

“He’s reconsidered his position,” Sherlock explains. “I reminded him of a few things he’d forgotten.”

“Hah,” John says, recalling.

Sandra’s complexion has drained of colour. John frowns.

“What’s wrong?”

“She’s just realised she can’t decide if we’re nice or not. She’s wondering if we’re the sort of people she should keep around in her life, or more specifically, his.” Sherlock indicates the little boy. He bites into his toast and makes it crackle like insect shells, then lays down the crust and wipes his fingers off on the lapel of his dressing gown. “She’s trying to work out if she’s gone out of the frying pan and into the fire. But, might I point out, you didn’t want nice.” He peaks his fingers together before his lips. “You didn’t want police. You wanted efficient.”

Sandra, very still, finds her own voice coming from a distance like a ventriloquist’s puppet. “I want to see the son of a bitch run for once.”

Sherlock’s smile is hidden by his hands, but it shows nonetheless.

“He’s gone north. London’s a little warm for him, it seems.”

It takes her a moment to catch her breath. “What do I owe you?”

Sherlock looks at her as though he’s trying to gauge if he’s offended or not. Then he drops his hands, resumes his toast and says, “Nothing.”

She presses her teeth together against her own pride.

“Just be nice to any homeless people you see.” He turns and leans down just as Bee comes

galloping up, shoving the blunt side of an My First edition into his thigh.

“Book!”

“Ah, this one again,” he stoops lower so she can stand with one hand up on the table for balance and see the pictures. “John why does she have this? It’s very misleading. They will not actually send you animals if you write to the zoo; I have tried.”

John snorts, half believing him. “What did you ask for?” He remembers a dream about trying to bring Bee an elephant home.

“Dart frogs.”

“That might be why. Ignore him,” John adds to Sandra, rubbing the back of his neck. “She just likes the animals, Sherlock. Just read it to her.”

“I’m trying.”

Bee’s idea of reading is to examine the first page, and then skip to the end. On this, Sherlock somewhat agrees, but unfortunately, Bee also has the idea of being cheated if they skip the middle.

Luis cranes his neck to see, inasmuch as he can while still holding onto Sandra like a limpet.

“I should head off,” Sandra says. “I’ve got work.” She gets up and takes Luis back to the bedroom to gather their things. John follows, after a moment.

“Um, about...”

“About what?” She bends and picks up her handbag, her baby’s damp trousers draped over the top, still drying. Before John can find his words, she points with a bent finger to the photo of Mary on the dressing table.

“I remember her. I mean... we met. Not friends or anything, but she came to the group, obviously.”

“Yeah.”

“Cat and Ness thought she was funny,” she says, which makes John tense. He hadn’t been there, back then. He’d never seen her with the women. He’d only slunk back after, when he’d been alone and Bee had needed more company than he could give.

“Oh.” It’s damning praise. Cat and Ness are a long way from murder for hire, but they’re not nice either. John’s heard their idea of a joke and it’s usually paid for by someone else. They stand next to a bed which is too obviously single-occupancy, with the background sound of a man reading storybooks to toddlers. John wets his lips, his mouth dry.

Sandra pulls her bag over her shoulder. “Thanks. You’ve both been really... I appreciate it.”

“It’s fine,” John says. It occurs to him that he might not see her for a while. They’ve been made privy to too much of each other for it to be a comfortable acquaintance any more. She’s seen his life and he’s seen hers and they’re both a mess. In another world, John thinks, he might have tried his luck. Instead he offers her his hand.

“Our pleasure.”

She shakes his hand and calls for Luis, who comes running at once. “Home time, little man,” she says. “Say thank you to John and Mr. Holmes.”

He sucks his fingers instead and buries his face into her collar bone with a sudden attack of shyness. Bee pesters.

“Loo!”

“Luis is going home now,” Sherlock says, picking her up so the two children are more or less on a level. He rocks from side to side with her.

“Daddy,” she says.

Sandra knows she doesn’t mean John. She’s heard Bee call him ‘Babar’- it’s an unmissable oddity- and the child isn’t even looking over her shoulder to the man. Her gaze is fixed much closer. Both men hesitate and she can feel John Watson’s discomfort. Sherlock’s expression is carefully blank. With the situation placed in her hands, it relaxes her.

“Bye, Bee. See you at playtime.”

“Hm,” Sherlock manages.

“See you,” John mutters as she pushes her feet into her shoes and leaves.

Bee leans up, palms against the window to watch as the door downstairs opens and closes. Sandra spots her from the pavement and Luis flaps a hand at her prompt.

“Oo-ish!”

“Say goodbye, Bee. Goodbye.”

“Aye!”

The pair of them crowd the window; Bee in her pastel striped onesie, Sherlock in his dressing gown. John feels it in the pit of his stomach first; warmth and gratitude. It’s like Ella said; it comes up with the rain overnight, that singular and omnipresent thing you knew was there, but it amazes him to see Sherlock flourishing so openly. He looks triumphant.

Sandra’s car purrs away down the road. Nothing was said and the world didn’t end, and for that alone, John’s thankful. He’s glad for Sherlock.

This mess of their lives suddenly feels that much more coherent.

Bee pats the glass and turns her head to beam up at Sherlock, laughing again. Sherlock nudges some of her hair out of her face and her eyes crinkle at the corner, just like his do. He smiles, and then looks up and sees John’s face.

“What?”

“Nothing. I was just thinking, we did something good last night.” Bee clambers down from Sherlock’s knee, muddling through the things on the floor. Sherlock’s face reverts to his usual mask of dispassion.

“You punched a Glaswegian in the teeth and then we put him on the last train to Aberdeen.”

We’re not nice.

They’re not, and John doesn’t care. He doesn’t care that Sherlock double and triple bluffs and in doing so shows his whole hand anyway. He’s been acting like a man on a stage all morning;

playing at the perfect domestic host, and ironically, genuinely is. A man who goes out and threatens people because he wants to, but let there be no doubts, is a faultless father not to be judged. Sherlock's still looking at him.

I'm not nice. I'll never be that.

No, maybe not.

"Yeah," John grins. "But it was a good thing we did." His daughter pushes at his knees.

"Book!"

John looks down, comes down to her level and kisses her forehead.

"Give it to Daddy. He *loves* the zoo book."

They go to Sherlock's parents for Christmas; Sherlock, John and the baby, from Christmas Eve through to Boxing Day, leaving 221B in the care of Mrs. Hudson.

Sherlock had made several attempts to suggest that they should stay home, in case something happened. He'd also invented a few chivalrous lies about Mrs. Hudson being left on her own for Christmas, until she'd pointed out she was expecting company and would be fine.

This had flummoxed them both, until Mrs. Hudson had admitted it was her sister, and no less a combination of Molly Hooper, Billy Wiggins and Mr. Chatterjee from Speedies. At this news, Sherlock had weighed up the options and decided a quiet weekend in the country was relatively bearable.

Mycroft, however, is conspicuous by his total absence, and they hear nothing of him at all on Christmas day, much to Mummy's disappointment and concern.

"It's not like him," she says, not for the first time. "Are you sure Myc didn't say anything to you?"

"I'm sure he's fine. Wallowing in pastry somewhere," Sherlock replies, which is hypocritical given how many mince pies he's hoovered away that morning alone. "Let the man be. He never rings anyway."

"He never rings you," Mummy corrects, put out "He always gives *me* a little call..."

"Maybe he's working," John points out, to soothe over the cracks in the matter. Mummy huffs and washes cups with aggression.

"You'd think the prime minister could manage to run the country for *one* day by himself," she protests, and then frowns when John and Sherlock both bark with laughter at the idea.

Daddy comes in from the garden, breath smoking and stamps his shoes on the doormat out of habit. It's damp outside, rather than a Dickensian snowscape, but the chill is pervasive in the old cottage. John's glad of the fireplaces that Daddy keeps stoked up. He helps him lump the bucket of pinecones through to the living room and the pair of them toast themselves in front of the flames, warming through their creaky joints until Mummy's finally done fussing over the sprouts.

"Wonderful," Daddy cheers when she comes through to join them, shooing Sherlock ahead of her,

burdened with coffee. "Presents? I think I know a little girl who might have something from Father Christmas under the tree. Shall we look?"

He goes down on all fours with her, playful, teasing her with the packages. Sherlock rolls his eyes and John grins.

Like you don't do the same.

Do not! You might.

Of course I would.

"Woof!" Bee says in delight as the head of a sleepy-eyed, pastel coloured dog pops out of the torn paper. Daddy squeezes its paw and at once the head bobs gently up and down as it plays a jangling version of 'Love Makes the World Go Round'. It's hideous. Bee absolutely loves it. John can't even imagine where the hell they found it.

"Thanks," he says, already foreseeing 6 A.M wake up calls to the theme from Carnival. He meets Sherlock's eye again across the room.

Break it.

"John, here's one for you," Daddy interrupts, passing over a gift. John lifts it; a rectangular, heavy package the size of a wine bottle though it doesn't slosh when he tilts it. He checks for a label but there isn't one. This, in itself, is telling.

Is this from you?

Might be.

John runs a thumbnail under the sellotape, picking it free from the paper and peering inside before opening it fully. It's a plastic box with a dark wooden tray inset, in which stands a row of three fat candles in glass cups. He nearly opens his mouth to ask, 'Is this for me?', but he knows, deep down, that it is.

"Um, thanks," he says, surprised. It's a rather astute gift. It says a few things about the giver and the recipient both, which makes the back of his neck feel hot. It's not quite embarrassment, not yet pleasure. The candles are smooth white wax; classy, in fact, and smell of something he can't quite place without scrutinising the label. A pleasant smell, and not too floral.

"One for Mummy," Daddy says, which John accepts gratefully as a distraction.

"That's from us," he points out, as she unwraps it.

"Ah, very Jackson Pollock," she says, once she's got the plate free of it's wrapping. "Am I to assume the artist is in the room?"

"Her, not me," John says, pointing at the baby who is still enraptured with the singing dog. "It's a bit cheesy."

"It'll fit two slices of toast," Mummy points out, "that's the main thing."

"One for you, Sherlock."

They continue to swap gifts around. Nothing remarkable; gift cards from Mummy and Daddy to them both; the usual compilation of goods from Mrs. Hudson, and more things for Bee than she

can possibly use or want, the biggest of which is a dolls house.

John helps her pull the paper off and tries not to let her be more enamoured with it than the generous gift itself. "Look, Bee."

She gapes, touching the roses around the door. It's a cottage, one storey, but otherwise not dissimilar to the house they are in, simplified to make it easier for small hands. John turns the fat peg on the side to release the front wall and it swings open slowly to show the rooms inside.

"This must have taken ages," John comments, astounded.

"Oh not really," Daddy blusters. "Knocked it together over a weekend or two. Nothing to it."

It's wallpapered inside, with wooden floors. John brushes his fingertips over the tiny bedroom wall, recognising the same pattern from the hall, reading the texture. There's furniture too- not the delicate model antiques Daddy specialises in, but more practical stuff. Square, blocky furniture which can stand being chewed, and nothing in the way of small items.

"What's this?" John says, finding the house occupied. In lifting and moving the house around, the dolls have been spilled around the living room. He chuckles. "They've had a party," he says, righting one of them and pausing. Bee reaches in to take the smallest one, slack with pleasure.

"Babby!" It's a round, peg doll with blonde hair and pink and yellow clothes on. Bee pets it and shoves her headfirst into the bed.

"Yeah," John says, "That's the baby, look- here's the Papa."

It's blonde as well, and blue eyed, wearing what he assumes from the paint job are jeans and a tartan shirt. It's him. It's not a totally unmistakeable representation, but John feels it deep down. It's him.

He bends his head and looks inside. There are other dolls. He plucks one out from behind the sofa where, inert, face down, the sight of it upsets him. Despite the impossibility of making it look right in mere paint, there's a suggestion of curls. The eyes match the rest of the dolls- blue. Which is also wrong, John thinks, and the dark clothing makes it look a touch gothic and silly in the context of the pretty floral cottage. Oddly, it's this that brings a smile to his face. He holds it up. Sherlock stares.

"What the hell is that?"

"It's you, of course- look, it's grumpy."

"No, that! What the hell is that?"

John turns and looks back into the house. In the back corner, he unearths another doll, which immediately makes him laugh.

"It's Mycroft," Daddy says, taking it and brushing it off. "You said to do the family."

"I said 'a' family, not ours!" Sherlock protests.

"Wait," John interrupts, as Bee successively grabs and and throws each doll she can find. There are three left, both grey haired and both even more unmistakeable. Bee coos and puts one headfirst in the bath and the other face-down on the sofa, delighted with this new godlike power over these tiny wooden people. She picks up the John doll and holds it in one fist and then picks up the last.

It's blonde and blue eyed, and dressed in green, though John couldn't say why. It's prettier than the others.

Bee touches the doll's face, curious, and then shows it to him, questioningly.

"That's the mummy," John says. Bee stares at his face and then uncurls one finger at a time and drops Mary on his knee.

"I did mean to do a few more," Daddy adds apologetically, "But I ran short of time."

"That's fine," John says. "Thank you. This is more than enough."

"Tell me if you think I should do anything else though, I mean, before her birthday," Daddy says, smiling awkwardly, popping Mycroft back into the house. He glances at Sherlock.

Oh dear, have I-?

Shut up, Father.

Oh dear...

"I should probably check on that turkey," Mummy says loudly. "John could you give me a hand with the cups?"

Bee trumpets to herself, sweeping the Sherlock doll back and forth across the kitchen floor like a low-level superman and John catches himself with a smile. "Yeah," he says, distractedly, picking up the biscuit tin. He places the Mary doll carefully on a chair inside. "Is that fun, Bee? Do you like them?"

"Yow!" she says, which seems good enough for a yes. John leaves her to play, and Sherlock to bicker at his father, who no doubt will take it on the nose and apologise too much.

Even before John's out the room, he feels Sherlock's glower turned on the old man.

"Daddy!"

John hears the voice behind him; not Sherlock, but Bee. He hears her shuffle on the carpet and her laugh, and Sherlock's grunt, which means he's picked her up.

"Too-doo-do!" she trills.

"Oh. Is he playing music?" Daddy asks her, and John has his back turned and the sound of water running in the kitchen sink muffles the noises, but he hears Sherlock clear his throat, and Bee laugh and Daddy trill back, "Toodle-doo-de-doo". He relaxes.

"All the men in my family are born idiots," Mummy confides apologetically, her hair curling as she pulls the turkey from the steaming oven. "Savants, the lot of them, but absolute idiots."

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He gives Sherlock his gift last, later in the afternoon. "From me and Bee," John says, passing him a mug brimming with tea. Sherlock glances at it, restraining a smile. It's white and spattered, in much the same style as Mummy's new toast plate, with brightly coloured daubs of paint in a range of fingerprints. Some are tiny, others he recognises at once, regardless of the larger size.

"Charmed," he says, taking it. The shape is not conventional; a round pot-bellied mug, as little like

the style he'd choose for himself as he could imagine. It reminds him at once of Bee instead.

"Drink your tea," John says, oddly flustered. He takes a seat opposite, and pretends to read the paper, instead prickling with energy that Sherlock can tell is mostly focussed on himself. Curious, he watches John, then examines the mug again. He tilts it slightly, making the tea move, and then glimpses the marks inside.

He has to drink to uncover them, the tea hot down his throat.

It occurs to him that John thought about this; he's a left-handed man and it would have been an easy mistake to make to write it on the wrong side. Instead he must have imagined it, how it would look to Sherlock when holding the mug in his right hand.

He took care with the lettering. John can write neatly when he wants, though he usually resorts to a doctor's scrawl. The letters here, though they blur a moment before Sherlock's eyes, are rounded and clear.

"Is that ok?" John asks, when Sherlock doesn't say anything, or move, for a long time.

The mug tilts and Sherlock puts his free hand on the other side to support it. "Mm," he says, not trusting himself with full words. He clears his throat and nods. He's a collector of stuff by nature. He's owned and discarded hundreds of belongings. Some meaningless, some full of his identity and yet still discarded. Very little of it given.

He wonders if John has any idea of how rare an item this is to him.

"Thank you," he manages.

"That's ok," John says, carefully neutral. "Glad you like it."

The mug bleeds heat into Sherlock's fingers. Slowly he tilts it back and forth to eclipse and uncover the words. The tea cannot wash them away. Rubbing his thumb over the grooves of them does nothing to erase the word. It's a comfort, he thinks, seeing it so permanent. Even unspoken, anyone could stumble across it and read it.

"Daddy," Bee says, trying to shove a doll up his trouser leg. She laughs, oblivious to everything except playing peekaboo with her new dollies.

"That's right," John murmurs.

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Daddy's workshop is still a friendly chaos of wood-shavings and bits of furniture, but quieter and tidied up for the holidays. Sherlock finds him sweeping out sawdust from under the bench with a broom. "Screwdriver," he says, by way of greeting and Daddy simply nods towards the myriad toolboxes on a chest against the wall.

"Help yourself! Fixing something?"

"Hm," Sherlock says, "Kitchen door."

"Been meaning to get around to that," Daddy responds. His son gives him an arch look, reminiscent of his older brother, although Daddy's too wise to mention it.

“I know. Mummy mentioned it once or twice in the last hour.”

“There’re some screws in that tin that should fit it.”

Sherlock rummages, dropping them one by one onto the bench to compare. Daddy moseys the broom around Sherlock’s feet one at a time and gradually shunts the growing pile of dirt towards the door.

“Any cases?” he asks presently. Sherlock just sighs heavily.

“Too bad,” Daddy says, “I know you like to be busy. While you’re here, actually, I could do with a bit of a hand shifting some bits around in the storage container, if you would? Need to get out a staircase I’m doing up. Bits of one anyway- or perhaps John wouldn’t mind me asking? Do you think he’d-“

“I’ll do it.”

“Oh good. The keys are around here somewhere- I had them just a moment ago, must have put them down, oh. You’ve got them.”

Sherlock rattles them impatiently between his fingers and shoves them in his pocket. Daddy continues to meander with the sweeping.

“Won’t be a moment. How are you keeping in London?”

“Fine,” Sherlock says, distracting himself by prying through Daddy’s long familiar collection of varnishes. The old man makes his own still and the ingredients clutter a shelf all along one wall: mineral spirits, linseed oil, beeswax, polyurethane, tung oil, naphtha, steel wool, denatured alcohol, shellac and gum turps. He presses his thumb into the beeswax, leaving the whorl of his prints there. Bringing his thumb to his nose, he can smell the long-lost honey the comb had held.

“He’s still good to you?”

Sherlock looks up. Daddy stops sweeping. “He’s looking after you alright?”

“I don’t need looking after.”

“Well, not so much these days,” Daddy says, soft as butter. “And you’re looking after him too I see, which is good. It’s good to see; I mean we’ve always known you’d find your feet some time or other, I suppose you’ve always been as bad as your brother in that respect.”

“Ugh, don’t compare me to Mycroft!”

Daddy chuckles. “It’s true. You’ve both always needed something to look after. Mycroft’s thankfully found the nation, and you found John.”

“I didn’t *find* him,” Sherlock points out, “He blundered in.”

“And you let him,” Daddy replies. To this, Sherlock has no rebuff to make, even though his instinct is to stick to being as contrary as possible. “It’s done you good. It’s only been... eight months or so since you were here last? You’ve filled out.”

It’s the lack of cigarettes, Sherlock would argue, and it has been in part. But it’s not the only reason.

“She eats all the time,” he grouses. On cases, he can still pull down the wall of cold logic and

make all the rest fall away into the background. Except if Bee cries. It sets off something primal in him that not even John can nag his way through to, let alone anyone else. When she means it, when it's fear or distress or his fault, it cuts right through; physically painful.

And Bee likes sharing. She'll climb on his knee and push a soggy cheese cube into his cheek or something, and John lets her because he finds it funny and inevitably Sherlock will eat it rather than upset her. It's all very strange and complicated.

Daddy holds his tongue and thus the peace. He props the broom up against the wall and takes something off the shelf from amongst the bottle of solvents and oils- a round, battered travel tin. Sherlock remembers it from his childhood; finding it in the tool box or in the glove compartment of the car and pilfering the contents.

His father twists it open and proffers it. Sherlock takes one- blackberry or aniseed, it hardly matters- shoving the sweet in his mouth and rattling it around his teeth. Daddy does the same, closing the tin again. He smiles.

A year ago you'd never have taken one.

'A year ago,' Sherlock thinks, 'I was on a case and itching to get high.'

They leave the workshop and go around the back of it to the storage unit. It's better organised, by which Sherlock senses the doings of a delivery man rather than his father, and he has no trouble picking out the cut pieces that Daddy would like moved to the front.

Daddy directs for a while, helping with leverage. He asks, "What's the plan for New Years? Stay at home or see the fireworks or-?"

"John doesn't like fireworks," Sherlock says, shouldering a beam of oak. "Because they put him in a bonfire. My bad."

His mind clouds up at the memory. Not just that- snipers, explosives, explosions, men with hypodermics, men with knives, men with their bare fists. Poison darts for crying out loud. Nominally 'good' men who want to hunt them down and put them in a box for their own safety and the greater good.

Sherlock tugs at his own lower lip. "If it were just John..."

"Cross those bridges when they come," Daddy says, uncertain where Sherlock's thoughts are flying to. "Give yourself a bit of slack."

"How?" Irritated, Sherlock heaves the beam up over end and lets it crash down into the metal floor of the unit. He bounds over it, shaking his arms free of the dust. "I court disaster and crave chaos. How can I let up? It's what keeps me alive."

"Surely not now," Daddy says, "Before, well, you had a difficult time and things weren't so good- the business with the- well, least said soonest mended, that's how it goes. But, surely not now, Sherlock?"

"Yes, now! Yes, always!" He swivels on his heel and glowers. "How am I supposed to balance that-" Sherlock gestures in the direction of the house, the unseen John in the wood shed and Bee, "-and this?" He slaps the side of his head in frustration. His hand drops to his collarbone where he grips at his own shirt before letting his hand fall into the crease of his thigh.

And this?

Sherlock claps his jaw shut abruptly, feeling he's let too much slip. Daddy is sympathetic but hesitant. They've danced this sort of thing before; Sherlock's heard every variation of Daddy's sentiment over and over, and the problem with repetition is that it makes even the heartfelt meaningless.

"What can I say?" Daddy asks, when Sherlock darts a suspicious look at him for his silence. "Will it be easy? No, but I think it's possible. I think it's already happening, in fact, and for what your foolish old father's opinion is worth, and although I know you've always struggled- unfairly, at times, and regardless of what you think, not always your fault- you've got so much, William. So much."

It's the use of the name that stops Sherlock from scoffing loud and outright. Daddy hasn't used it since- well, for a very long time. It's eerie; almost like someone else's name, and alien from disuse and yet...

He remembers being William. He's too tall now and too different for Daddy's hand to brush across the top of his head; for him to put his ear against Daddy's ribs, exhausted, and hear the rumble of his voice.

"Bee loves you," Daddy says, closing the doors to the unit. "Mrs. Hudson adores you, you have faithful friends. And, I think, even more so, a man who cares for you evidently, and sincerely."

Sherlock's tongue is stuck to the roof of his mouth, and all he can do is swallow.

"Focus on the good things," Daddy says, "I find that always gets me through." He smiles and, appreciating that Sherlock has too much to say to actually say it, piles an armful of bannister spindles onto him. "If you fancy giving the old door a miss, you could mix me some copal up for these. Bags of time before the order is due, but it's handy having the varnish done to mature in advance."

Sherlock follows, deaf to Daddy's chatter. The old man's hips bump against the two sections of newel post he carries; the stump under one arm and the ball cap tucked under his arm like Anne Boleyn's head.

He wonders, through a mist of input and thought, if it's all really just as straight-forward as Daddy's suggested.

It's an idea that keeps him quiet even when they get back into the workshop. Daddy deposits the pieces of staircase and retrieves the screwdriver that Sherlock originally came in for.

"Going to stay here?" he asks, before leaving. Sherlock wordlessly picks up the tub of resin by way of reply. He can make varnish without needing to think about it too much. It's ritual. Daddy nods. "Pop the kettle on then, shall I? Have a brew nice and hot for when you come in."

Then mercifully he leaves Sherlock alone.

First, copal; dark pieces removed.

He sieves through the lumps, like so much raw sugar on the work top, discarding the darker pieces into a separate jar. A crucible over an alcohol lamp to cook it. When friable, he'll crush it fine, twice, and mix it with linseed oil and, eventually, pure, sweet-smelling turpentine. A noise attracts his attention outside.

Through the workshop window, Sherlock spots Mummy emerging with John from the house. She's in mid-flow of some kind of lecture, and given the expansive hand gestures upwards, he assumes

she's giving John the full blow-by-blow account of the time they had the roof changed on the old part of the house from thatch to tile. It's a story that every visitor to the cottage gets at least once and that everyone is bored ten times over with.

Sadly, to the uninitiated it's also quite funny. Personally Sherlock feels that once you've passed the age of thirty, your mother should promise to stop rehashing the time you got stuck on the chimney stack to every fresh pair of ears. Or at least only mention it outside of your presence, and to people you don't know.

John is giggling as they move out of his sight towards the woodshed.

"Right," Mummy says, dropping the basket down on the floor and dusting her hand off. She eyes the woodpile. "I thought Daddy had done enough but he's terrible. You give him a piece of wood and he drifts off thinking about chair legs. Do you think you can split some of these bigger ones?"

"I can give it a go," John offers. "It's been awhile since my Duke of E, but I should manage."

"Duke of Ed.," Mummy says, approvingly. "I once thought the boys might want to do it but Sherlock was too spirited to make it reasonable and Mycroft would never have seen the point."

"I can't see Mycroft willingly doing sport, no," John chuckles while Mummy feels around the back for a nice dry log.

"There's an axe around somewhere. Over there," she says, gesturing to the other corner. John moves to fetch it.

"While I have you," Mummy continues, pulling the log free from the pile and dropping it to the ground with a dull thud. "Don't think me unfair; I'm aware that boy of mine thinks we're a pair of blind idiots, but we're not deaf yet."

There are conversations you should have while holding an axe and conversations you should not have while holding an axe; the former including such talk as how to hold the thing and how much wood is needed if wood be needed, and the latter being almost any emotional conversation whatsoever.

John hates the feel of his empty hands though, so he picks it up.

"I shall try hard *not* to presume that this is just Sherlock... being Sherlock and making a point; that we're not to get involved, but, do tell me, John, because I must ask. Are we meant to acknowledge this?"

He leans on the axe for a moment. On the one hand he can see it starkly from her perspective. Bee's said the word, she's called Sherlock 'Daddy' in front of them in total innocence of the bomb that goes off every time she does it. Neither of them warned Sherlock's parents it was going to happen. Part of John was hoping that it wouldn't, or they wouldn't notice. That it would stay part of the bubble of 221B somehow. No questions asked.

It must seem like they're being callous.

On the other hand... everything else.

"I don't know," John says, hefting the axe. He gestures for her to move back and brings the head down through the log where it sticks.

Mummy eyes the botched job and makes a little 'hmm' noise. "Perhaps the little one," she

suggests, rather than pointing out John's amateurishness, and turns to feel in the woodshed, returning with a blunt, wedge-headed maul. "Try that."

John wrests the axe free and bounces the maul off the log once before it comes down with a satisfying thunk and splits the wood.

"Why don't you know?" Mummy asks, replacing the broken log for him to break into quarters. John breathes and puts his weight into his heels before hitting the log; hard.

"I don't know if he wants to talk about it. It's still... new."

"Hmm," says Mummy again. The wood falls into the basket with a clatter and she sets up a second log. "I know he's not the easiest of people..." She stands back, hands on hips and flinches slightly when John brings the maul cracking down again. He's got the swing of it now, and uses his discomfort as energy to fuel him through splitting the wood. Mummy takes the hint and eases off, but she doesn't drop the matter entirely.

Instead she comes at it from another angle.

"Who's 'Nana'?"

John pauses. His forearms and lower back aches from the unaccustomed motion,

"It's what she calls Mrs. Hudson."

Mummy nods, and for an instant, her face seems too narrow and he can see in her the wild, haughty streak that he knows in Sherlock and loves so well.

"When... or if," she says, hefting the basket onto her hip and vigorously rearranging the kindling. "Anyone gets around to feeling sensible- I'd like to be 'Granny'." Her mouth briefly becomes a parabola. "If I may, of course."

"Oh," says John, taken aback.

"Do you think this should be enough? Maybe one more? I don't think it'll go much below freezing tonight, do you?" She gives it one last good shuffle and then, her embarrassment clear, tells him she expects he doesn't need her fussing about when there's washing up to be done and goodness, Bee might be waking up soon; and she leaves.

John slowly fills the basket and puts the maul back where he found it, digesting the information. He's chopped more than necessary, just for the sake of something to do. The work has warmed him enough to take off his jumper and deafened him to the closing of the workshop door.

Alone, John lumps the wood to the back door where he leaves it, opting to cool off his sweat in the garden. He paces the perimeter of the house on autopilot, and then suddenly finds Sherlock ahead of him.

"Hullo," John says, straightening, scraping the back of his forearm over his forehead. "What's out there?"

For a moment an old suspicion rises, because Sherlock's leaning on the gate with his back to him, looking out into the lane, and the hunch of his shoulders is tantamount to his sloping smoker's hunch. John inhales but smells nothing but the crisp muddy smell of the lane. Sherlock glances back. "Nothing. Just fancied..."

He gestures vaguely to the open space before him and then takes a half-pace to the right to allow John room to join him.

“Your mum’s getting broody,” John tells him, without intending to.

“Ah,” Sherlock says, softly. “I wondered.”

“We probably should have told them.”

“Probably.”

John rests his forearms beside Sherlock’s and looks out across to the hill where he’d gone running at Easter and the field where Magnussen’s helicopter had come down for them.

“I said nothing was going to happen just yet.” There are few leaves left clinging on to the branches of the hedgerow. John pulls one off from beside the gatepost and crumbles it bit-by-bit between his fingers. “While we’re still getting used to things.”

“Don’t want to...rush.” Sherlock says, one syllable at a time. “For Bee.”

“Right.”

John shivers and leans back to pull on his jumper again. “I don’t mind,” he adds, once he’s done. “It’d be nice if Bee had like...grandparents.”

At this Sherlock tips his head to one side. He says nothing to the contrary, and nothing to agree. John reads ‘I’m thinking’ in his body language.

“How would you murder your parents?” John says, conversationally. Sherlock shifts his weight from one foot to the other.

“Oh, hm,” he says, brightening, watching the same leaves as John. “Wire trip at the top of the stairs; wasps.”

“Who’d be wasps?”

“Mummy- she’s terribly allergic.”

John laughs. They stand by the gate until the sky starts to darken.

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The caulking under the sink has been replaced, John idly notes as he cleans his teeth. It’s brilliant white compared to the greyish grouting of the tiles. The taps flood water into the bathtub, making the surface billow up. Although there’s signs of some TLC around the place, there’s still no lock on the door. He drops his towels in front of it instead, feeling a bit naughty as he twitches off his pants and hustles into the water.

Looking over the side, he realises he’s not left the towel at the foot of the door precisely. It’s a half-pace before it, enough he supposes to stop the door opening fully and buy him time to scabble for decency, but not enough to stop it opening at all. But what are the chances of it happening twice?

He eases back into the tub, stretching out his good leg and the one that sometimes pretends to be a bad leg. It’s been behaving very, very well lately. John pats his own kneecap and lets the warmth

of the water sink into his muscles.

The house is very quiet. Bee's already asleep and Mummy's retired to her office and Daddy likewise left with a book in the living room. Sherlock is around somewhere, John knows. He'd gone out for a prowling and come back just in time to see Bee to bed, smelling of the outdoors and with a drizzle of rain across the shoulders of his coat. It had made his hair curl more, and the air had left unusual colour in his face.

John sits up in the bath and reaches up to the windowsill where he'd left his three-pack of candles. He turns it over in his hands and attempts to read the label, but it's first of all minuscule and secondly, seems to be written in Swedish and so it's not very illuminating. He wriggles one free of the packet, out of its snug socket in the wood and sniffs at it tentatively.

Pleasingly, it's not too potent. Nor is it exactly recognisable either. It pings something in his memory, and a second sniff makes him think that he's smelt something like it before but he can't put a name to it. Wood, maybe, he thinks. Some sort of exotic wood, or shrubby herbs.

He balances the packet on the back of the toilet cistern and places the candle on the lid of the seat. There's a basket of odds and sods on the windowsill; packets of soap and shampoo bottles taken from hotel rooms, a rusty set of nail clippers, hair pins and half-burnt tea-lights. As he'd expected, there's also a lighter.

It takes him just a moment to fire it up and get the candle burning. It crackles as it lights, casting a soft glow across the toilet as far as the wall and the edge of the bath. John drops the lighter back in its basket and wallows again, watching the flame steady and then begin to make inroads into the wax.

It's quiet. The slop of water as he covers his upper body with a flannel seems embarrassingly loud. John rubs slightly at his scar. He's not relaxed, exactly. The scent blooms out and fills the room until he can no longer smell it, his own brain cancelling it out from too much exposure at close range, but he leaves the candle burning.

If anything, he feels invigorated. He rolls the flannel around the back of his neck, one hand on his lower belly and heaves a sigh. Glances at the door, but he's safe. No one's going to walk in; ironically the open door is too great a tell that the room is occupied and thus out of bounds.

John watches the candle flicker when he moves, and the intermittent trickle of white wax from the top to the base of the thing.

In his room, Sherlock lies on his back above the covers, gaze fixed on the ceiling. The faint smell of water and wax steals in through the door that he left ajar for the purpose of allowing it to, and distills itself from distant perfume to intimate lump inside of his body.

There's an arcade by the sea at nighttime, full of flickering machines with citrine lights, and reels that switch from orange-to-cherry-to-lemon-to-banana at dizzying speed.

"John went missing over twenty-hours ago," Sherlock barks, sweeping down the aisle between the rows of pinball machines, pausing briefly to tug the handles of each one methodically. "Pass me the DNA sequencing."

John looks down, drops belly-flat to the floor and wriggles like a snake under each bank of

machinery, collecting the papers put out by them. Dust tickles his nose and he sweeps it away before him, pushing the pile of dirt away with his gun. He brings the papers back, to Sherlock, now on the end of a pier by a dark ocean, staring out across the waves.

“He was pulled in here,” he tells John, who salutes.

“The results sir,” he says, “And I’ll call the major.”

“Don’t bother. We just have to wait for the killer to come back. Man the machines.”

John nods and hurries back into the arcade, hunting for a coin for the pinball machines. He’s in a dreadful hurry. The pinball machine glitters and whirrs with Las Vegas extravagance; almost too tall for him to reach the buttons. The screen fills his whole vision, and through it he sees back into the past. The boy on the pier, a hand coming out of the water to pull him in. They struggle below the waves, and there’s a face, a terrifying white face laughing, clownish, impossibly big, with a white collar.

“Become a fish,” John says, feeling a sense of power over the scene and the boy does, turning in on himself and darting away. The creature in the waves lunges at him and he falls back from the pinball machine, triumphant.

“He’s not dead!” Sherlock crows at the news, before John has told him. “Quickly then- this must be why he’s holding John captive.”

John touches the buttons of the pinball machine and from the slot at the bottom spills his prize. Coins in a liquid wave that reform themselves into an image of himself, just a little different.

“John?” John says. “But John’s in the ocean.”

“You can’t all be John,” Sherlock complains. “And look at him, he’s too happy.”

The prize John grins and puts his hands in the pockets of his suit, unbothered by being too happy.

“We’ll call him John Greenwood,” John suggests, basing this on the fact that the man is wearing a green tie. “Go and help Sherlock,” he commands, and turns back to the pinball machine. He works at the machine again, now alone on the beach. It shows him a playground, from the park near the nursery where he takes Bee, and in fact there’s Gem and Ness and the Posh Mums, and Bee by herself holding the lead of a dog John doesn’t recognise but who he instinctively trusts. Then the sky breaks and the face is there.

“SHERLOCK!”

Sherlock’s on the pier. He looks up as John runs through the sinking sand, taking an age to get there. The end of the pier has become a laboratory, Molly in the middle of performing an autopsy on a huge black fish. She’s brought an assistant with her, another pinball prize. John looks at John who looks at John Greenwood.

The new John touches his bowtie. “John Yellowhammer,” he says, soberly. John Greenwood laughs.

“He’s attacking the playground,” John pleads, “We’ve got to get there. Sherlock! Now!”

“Come along,” Sherlock says, taking his hand and pulling him into the water. They wade. It’s the fastest way to get to the park, so they wade through the cold rough sea until it becomes a tropical blue. They have to let go of each other’s hands to swim, the water washing away John’s uniform

and Sherlock's coat. It warms up as it becomes more Caribbean, until it's bath hot. Sherlock swims on ahead, leading the way, and John follows as they approach clusters of islands. Some are small, so small he could do little more than balance a drink on them.

"There's sausage rolls here," he says in surprise, looking at a tiny palm tree. They look like the ones he buys in Tesco's. Sherlock wallows back in the water, bare-chested and shrugs. "The natives hoard stores around here to sell to the ships," he reasons. It makes sense to John.

The house is on one of the islands, John remembers, and Baker Street station on another, connected by a bridge. Mrs. Hudson is probably expecting them home soon. In fact, he can see the lamps on the beach that she's left for them to light their way.

Sherlock wades from the water first, shaking the salt from his hair. Naked, he's several shades paler than the sand on the beach, his back a long expanse of unblemished white. John stays in the shallows, self-conscious of his own nudity, even on this, their private island. "Where are the towels?"

Sherlock stretches, one arm, then the other. "Wait here," he says, "I'll get the clothes." He pads away up over the high-tide line, a ripple of muscle. John's apprehensive. Whilst he knows it's better for Sherlock to walk around with no clothes on, rather than himself, he has a worry that people will disapprove or otherwise give the man attention that he doesn't want.

He can see the side of the house through the bushes. Mrs. Hudson's got the laundry on a line all around the upper windows; Bee's babygro's and Elbant, and the bedsheets too, which embarrasses John. She shouldn't be going into his room, even if she means well. It's personal.

He hears Bee inside, asking for a snack and is glad she got home ok. He should have known the dog would have brought her straight back here from the playground.

John rolls onto his back, half in the water still, and examines the sand, which is full of ossified stars. His thoughts meander away on the construction of human bone in vitro, and the difference between bone and cartilage, and then a splashing pulls his attention back to the water.

The clone has followed them, though without his clothes, John can't tell if it's John Greenwood or John Yellowhammer. He thinks probably Yellowhammer, as the man isn't smiling like a goofball, but on the other hand, he is smiling.

"Which one are you?" John asks.

"John," John says, simply.

"John's gone though," John points out, "He melted."

"Well, I'm here," John replies, taking a seat next to John on the sand and pulling his feet from the water. He's almost white blonde from the sun, like Afghanistan sun, and his skin is a uniform bronze with tan. No scars, John notices, so he can't be John. Not the real John. Perhaps he's the boy who turned into a fish, now grown up.

"What?" John asks, his eyes a laugh and a smile. They're very blue, John thinks. Not his own eye colour, but a tremulous blue that shifts with the colours of the sea. The clone leans back, digging the heel of one hand into the soft sand at the small of John's back.

"What?" he asks again, jokingly. John can see all of his eyelashes.

"Are you...flirting with me?" John asks, amused, and he supposes that John is, because the next

thing he does is kiss him.

It's good kissing. It's kissing like he's twenty-one again, with Bill Murray as his wingman, having satisfying cheap and easy sex on the spare bed at house parties. Once on a washing machine.

"I know, I was there," John tells him, pushing him into the sand and then putting his tongue in his mouth. They tug and writhe at each other, the sand a whole lot of nothing under John's back; it could be sugar now, or ash. He gropes at John's backside, groaning, because it feels like forever since he's done this, and John's cupping his balls, and it's great because it's John and he knows exactly what he likes.

"Fuck," John chuckles and pushes his knees apart-

John wakes with the sheets in a tangle round his legs, sweating. 'Jesus,' he thinks, heart, amongst other things, throbbing.

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Mycroft graces them all with his presence no later than Boxing Day afternoon, when the sun is already nothing but a smear on the horizon. He arrives unannounced, taking everyone by surprise.

"I thought you'd have already left," he says, upon finding Sherlock still occupying the place.

"We have to stay for dinner," Sherlock tells him, sour.

"We'd like to," John corrects, motivated mostly by the fact that their own fridge contains (as best as he can remember) some wafer ham, a withered bunch of spring onions and some milk that if not rescued by Mrs. Hudson has probably gone off. Mummy's fridge, however, still contains the greater part of a side of smoked salmon, not to mention the healthy amount of other leftovers. Daddy is already thumping away at some sort of dessert in the kitchen, humming. "We should buy a cool box," John adds, thinking aloud.

"I think there's still a ham for you," Sherlock says to his brother, "if you don't consider it cannibalism. Oink, oink!"

"Do grow up."

Mummy swarms in from the kitchen, having heard the familiar and oddly welcome noise of her boys bickering, and swamps Mycroft with a hug. "I thought I heard you! How was the drive down?"

"Not too bad, though there's been an accident on the slip-road."

"Oh! Sherlock, you were going to go that way, do you think it'll be clear? Is it southbound or northbound?"

"I'm sure we can check the GPS," John says, but nonetheless it turns into a protracted conversation about alternative routes.

"It's no good referring him to Denise from the canine society's house, he doesn't know her," Mycroft interjects, exasperated, and still holding his overnight bag.

"Yes, well," Mummy says, waving him quiet, "It's a big old house with a tree, you can't miss it. She used to have the most gorgeous labradors, and Sherlock knows it, don't you- oh, he's gone."

He has. He's crept away from the bustle to hide out with Bee upstairs. John tells them to leave him to it.

Bee rouses from her nap a short while later and flops willingly into his embrace. There, one by one, she explores his pockets, amused by his keys and very pleased to find a cracker. He'd forgotten about it, but the lint is easy to pick off and it eases off the inevitable need to go down for dinner for a bit longer. She bumps around her playthings, chattering meaninglessly and yet it's as calming as the bubble of a stream to Sherlock.

"Come here," he says softly, holding his hands out to her.

He looks at her hands; her clammy little fingers wrapped around his own dry thumbs and marvels.

"Why do we even call you 'Bee'?" he comments out loud. "You walk like a baby rhino and sweat like a frog."

She hiccups through a laugh. "Fwog."

"Frog. Frrrrrog."

"Fwog!"

"Fwogs it is then."

She laughs and screams the word right in his face, for the hell of it. Sherlock winces. "No," he tells her. She squirms out of arm's reach and tries it again, a fraction quieter. Testing the water. She gauges his reaction, wobbling back and forth as rebellion turns to guilt when he doesn't waver.

"No, Bee. Don't shout." He puts his finger to his lips.

"Shh," she says, after a moment. She copies his gesture uncertainly, eyes wide and all the better to see him with.

"Good girl."

She's becoming a handful, Sherlock thinks, taking the lid off a bucket of blocks for her. She wipes her face with her hands, dislodging her hair across her brow and then flops down to bum-shuffle on the carpet, stacking blocks. She tells Elbant all about it as she goes.

"There was a little girl, who had a little curl," Sherlock quotes. She's got John's temper and Mary's sharp wit and now and then he can see flashes of something else; a little wild and a little animal, something new. He has no point of reference to know if all children have this slightly alien quality; a sign of a flourishing personality, or if this is some kind of result of Bee's heady mixture of genetic makeup and environmental input.

She grins, noticing him watching her and playing up to his attention. Showboating with the blocks, in fact.

"That looks familiar."

Sherlock doesn't dignify the comment by looking up to acknowledge it. He lours instead.

Mycroft comes into the room with a soft tread, taking evident pains not to disturb Bee from her game. She pauses anyway to see what he's doing and who he is. If she remembers meeting him a year previously, she gives no outward sign of it, and the chances that she does are slim to nothing.

anyway. She shuffles somewhat closer to Sherlock's feet, standing to hold onto his thumb and knee, staring up at Mycroft.

"Say something- you're threatening," Sherlock says, breaking the silence.

"Hello," Mycroft offers. Bee's side presses against Sherlock's shin, warm and alive.

"Sit down," Sherlock says.

"Perhaps if you stopped hunching up like a gargoyle?" Mycroft folds himself smoothly to perch on the arm of the sofa. It doesn't do a huge amount to reduce his ability to loom over Bee, but he does radically alter his body language to soften it. He glances over the child, openly curious.

Sherlock straightens his back and makes himself drop his shoulders. "What do you want?" he says, the words harsh, the tone all false sugar.

"Nothing, Mummy wanted to know if you're coming down to dinner or not." Mycroft looks him up and down, impassive but shrewd.

"Not bothered."

"Agreed," Mycroft says, "It makes no difference." He's not talking about eating, Sherlock knows. He's talking about if Sherlock's at the dinner table or not. It's a low, petty jab at him, and made more for the sake of familiarity than from actual malice.

"You've had a nice Christmas, I see," Sherlock says. He stacks a block for Bee. "I'd comment more, but I might be sick."

Mycroft goes a little still, other than the rise and fall of his stomach as he breathes. "At least as nice as yours. Very cosy, I see. Drunk a lot of tea?"

"Some," Sherlock says, feeling the metaphorical thinness of the ice beneath him. "What of it?"

"What of it, indeed." A second block. She watches. Stoops to pick it up and give it back.

"Bock-bok, Daddy."

Something tight and bitter in Sherlock shivers. Something sweeter in him rises. "What of it?" He repeats, brushing Bee's nose. She opens her mouth in an expression that's half grimace, half grin and all incredulous happiness.

He doesn't want to look up from her face in case he sees Mycroft's mouth doing something very much the same as his daughter's.

"The food's probably on the table," Mycroft says, terrible and neutral. He gets up, says nothing more and Sherlock realises that at last, in some strange way, he's finally won. That's how it feels, that every argument they've ever had- every squabble, was all a prelude to this one moment in time. Ludicrous. Irrational.

But I'm not supposed to win.

Sherlock turns in the armchair, craning his head around over the side to throw his words at Mycroft's back.

"Victor fasts during Muharram."

Mycroft halts. "Pardon?"

"He's not religious, he cheats on his wife without shame and he steals whenever he has the opportunity to. He travels and leaves his wife at home. He could do whatever he likes, but he still fasts during Muharram. Why would he do that?"

Mycroft stares at his brother like he's grown a second head. "I haven't the faintest idea."

"Lestrade, then," Sherlock says, pointing, almost breathless. His lower eyelids crinkle up as he appraises his brother who in turn makes eye contact only with the clock. It ticks on loudly for a minute or so.

"Less than John," Mycroft finally replies, dragging his words out carefully. He leaves the statement open to interpretation. A comment on Greg's comparative value? Or a comment on the intensity of their.... whatever? It's a conundrum Sherlock has no desire to pick apart.

"Hm," he says instead. Then he warns, just in general, "Don't."

"No," Mycroft agrees, and then to both party's immense relief, Mummy interrupts them.

"Dinner!" she announces, glancing between the two. "You aren't fighting, are you?"

"No."

"Sherlock started it."

She gives them a hard look, takes Bee's hand and leads her off at a stately toddle towards the dining room.

Mycroft clears his throat, and they both hesitate to see if the other wants to resume the discussion or...well, make an outward show of pretending nothing has happened. For once neither can read the other's intentions. What happens is that Mycroft sucks in a tiny breath suddenly as if changing his mind and then coughs and leaves the room.

A minute later, Sherlock unsticks himself from the chair and follows. John purses his lips on sight of him and frowns. He glances at once to Mycroft and then back to Sherlock's face.

What's up?

John's eyes follow his jaw as Sherlock gives a minute shake of the head that Mycroft pretends not to notice. Mummy loudly goes about putting Bee into a booster seat so she can join them at the table. Daddy taps the table by John's spoon, distracting him.

"Hm?"

"Drink, old boy?"

"Uh," John's eyes slide back towards Sherlock, still bothered by how he'd looked when he'd come to the table. "Just one," John says, feeling the dryness in his throat. "We're driving home soon."

—

They leave yawning and restless to get back to the city and the flat and their own lives. Somewhere between Sherlock's parents house and the pitstop at the service station, Sherlock has fulfilled another promise to John and no matter how insistently Bee shakes at her toy dog, it nods to a mysteriously silent beat.

John stretches out in his seat, cranks up the radio and hums along to try and dispel the ditty from his head.

The dolls house rattles in the boot every time Sherlock runs over a cat's eye, one hand on the gearstick next to John's leg

John watches the landscape slip by.

"What do you want to do for your birthday?" he asks.

Sherlock grunts. "Ignore it. Murder," he says. John turns his face to the window again and chuckles.

"I'll do my best."

—

When they get home she pets his knees like they're animals and demands for a 'book' before bedtime. Her definition of the word is very flexible. Picture books are 'books' just the same way television shows are 'books'. The television set is a 'tewee' so she has grasped that there is some difference in terminology, but stories are universally 'books' to Bee.

Sherlock wrestles her into her bed and takes his customary seat on the windowsill before trying to chose a paperless book from the great library in his head. These days it's getting tricky. She knows far more language than she can produce, and she knows when to respond emotionally to it. He'd tried repeating some of his early-baby-day recitals only to watch her face get puzzled and then wordlessly unhappy and had to stop.

She tolerates poetry but his repertoire is unexpectedly limited; he has a wider range in literature, but the stuff seems to be plagued with mothers. He flicks through the books on her shelf; gifts from friends and family and gleanings from charity shops, and he can't stand any of them.

Each Peach Pear Plum, I spy inane boredom.

It's no good if he loathes the source material. She can hear it in his voice and is quick to protest 'No!' even to offerings John can put forward without objection. Sherlock supposes he should take that as a compliment. He has mentioned this to John.

John had laughed and said, thoughtlessly, "No, they're rubbish, but you just do them wrong."

She strokes the ears of the pastel dog and looks up at him, waiting, growing sleepy and irritable. Feeling guilty he thumbs on his phone until he finds the lyrics. Together they set the dog to nodding and he sings it to her, the tune a hundred times less terrible from his own throat than from the tin voice box of the toy hound.

"Love makes the world go 'round, love makes the world go 'round. Somebody soon will love you, if no-one loves you now."

In the kitchen, drying dishes, John hears the hum if not the words, the key not quite minor, not quite joyful. Bittersweet. He wonders, wiping in time to the tune, if it's a waltz and then with blossoming intensity, remembers a time they had danced in the living room, the curtains open and Sherlock had dropped him onto the sofa and there had been... something.

"High in some silent sky, love sings a silver song; making the earth whirl softly, love makes the world go 'round.'"

'He looked at my mouth,' John recalls. He can still see the expression on Sherlock's face; the mix of thoughts and feelings. He shifts in his chair, his heart rate beating and something under all his abdominals tightening.

He'd looked at his mouth.

And then he'd looked away and dropped him.

In the bedroom, Sherlock clears his throat and frowns and the blatant pandering to sentimentalism inherent in the song and then to the dozy nodding dog and babe in his lap, he sings it all again anyway. He rocks her in time to it, leaning down to croon the words to her.

"Somebody soon will love you, if no-one loves you now."

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Billy is six months sober when he next takes a step into 221B in Sherlock's presence. It is New Year, or will be shortly.

He's changed. The last time John saw him, he'd been a bundle of angry sticks in a hospital bed—he's filled out since then. If it weren't for the fact that Billy's face is so distinctive, John wouldn't have recognised him.

"Ullo," Billy says, bundling through the door. He still moves like he's homeless, in a shiftless full-body gangle. In another life he must have been some kind of legless creature. Either that or it's a habitual effort to soften the next blow.

"Hi," John replies, warily. Billy's carrying a tupperware. "What's that?"

"Nosh, innit," Billy says, tapping the lid. "Brought my famous pecan slices."

"What?"

"It's like a little cakey thing," Billy says, as if John's an idiot. "With pecans in. They're nuts. There's apricot and tofu as well, but they taste well good."

"Right," John says, stumbling back to let Billy up the stairs, all the while re-orienting himself in a world where Billy Wiggins bakes. He senses Mrs. Hudson's influence.

The man is still wearing his usual uniform of jeans, a hoodie and trainers, but John notices the quality is vastly different. "New clothes, Billy?"

"Aw, yeah," Billy says, pleased. He plucks at the front of his sweatshirt and shows John the design on it, which John pretends to make sense of. "Went shopping. I love clothes. Used to have loads of clothes."

"Great," John says, at a loss for words.

"I'm gonna ask Mrs. Marth for a plate," Billy says, shambling off in the direction of the downstairs flat. It takes John a split second to realise he means Mrs. Hudson.

"Marth?" John mouths to the empty hall. It beggars belief. "Martha?"

Feeling like his head will implode if he tries to make sense of it all, John retreats to the upstairs flat, leaving the door ajar.

They have (which in reality means Mrs. Hudson has) invited the bare minimum of people, which has ended up being a shocking number compared to their usual paltry efforts at seasonal fun. Molly of course, and Lestrade. Mike Stamford, simply because he happened to be around the morgue at the time John dropped in to ask Molly. “Pot luck,” John had said, flustered. “Bring a dish and some booze.”

Wiggins, evidently, but not Mr. Chatterjee, which Sherlock deduced meant that the man had blotted his copy book again and on Christmas Day no less.

“No more Kasbah Nights,” Sherlock had whispered in John’s ear when he’d figured it out. “Thank God.”

Privately, John agreed.

He’d mentioned the get-together to Sandra the last time they’d crossed paths at the playground, who’d politely but firmly turned it down.

“I’m seeing someone,” she’d said. “He’s nice. Two kids. We’re going to have a quiet one at his.”

“Good,” John had replied, and left it at that. Sandra makes him uncomfortable, and he’s aware that it’s an unreasonable and ingenious thought, but the matter of her ex-husband has come between them. Usually they don’t see clients again.

This concludes the short list of attendees to the Baker Street Christmas Period Drinks Event, which to Sherlock’s consternation seems to be becoming an *annual* thing. It’s bad enough he also seems to be adhering to convention and contacting his family every December.

Bee has a lot to answer for.

At any rate, for ease John tells everyone to bring their own catering and throws down a chunk of cash on a generous quantity of Chinese takeaway for his and Sherlock’s contribution to the meal. It turns out to be oddly pleasant. Bee roams the flat doing her own thing, making pit stops for attention from their visitors, all of whom she’s already met. Sherlock does roughly the same thing.

“How was Christmas?” Molly asks, “Thanks for the gift card and the hand cream by the way. I can always use hand cream.”

“Oh, yeah. You’re welcome. Thanks for the...uh...”

“Biochemistry journals”

“-And the beer,” John concludes. “Christmas was nice. Pretty quiet. You?”

Molly winces as Bee thumps her leg to get it out of her way, “Lovely, thanks. I saw my mum and my auntie. Ow-“

“Bee, don’t hit,” John asks, lifting Bee over Molly’s leg, “You can climb over. Where do you want to go?” The doorbell rings, before he’s finished speaking. “Can someone get that?”

The baby talks at him, enunciating one word in five clearly enough for John to make sense of. He frowns, crouching so he can hear her better over the babble of conversation. “What, Bee? Do you want some juice?”

Someone leans on the doorbell again.

“That’ll be the takeaway,” John says to the room at large. No one budes, except for Sherlock, who looks up from his phone long enough to say “It is,” before throwing his attention back to whatever it is he’s doing.

“It’s in the Southbank Centre, I think,” Stamford is saying. “They’re doing a mix of the old German composers and then some new ones... Hold on, there’s a website...”

“Hindemith?” Sherlock asks. Bee stamps her foot. The doorbell shrieks a third time.

John orders, distractedly, pulling his wallet from his pocket and shaking it at the air. “Billy, get the door.”

Without protest, Billy extracts himself from a tofu slice and takes the money. “Yes, Boss.”

“What,” says Sherlock, looking up at once, “Why is he ‘Boss’? I’m ‘Boss’.”

“Yeah, but, eeehhhhh,” Billy says, looking between Sherlock and John and making it sort of obvious without speaking who he regards as Sherlock’s boss. Sherlock frowns.

“Yes, Cap,” Billy amends with a shrug to John and goes to get the door.

“Stop that,” Sherlock says, once he’s gone.

“I’m not doing anything.”

“You’re all grinning,” Sherlock grouses, scowling terribly.

John’s grin widens. “I’m not.”

Molly demurs, lips pressed together so she doesn’t actually laugh. “I wouldn’t make anything of it. He does it to everyone. He calls me ‘Doc’.”

“He doesn’t call me anything,” Lestrade chips in, puzzled and annoyed at this revelation.

John’s just as puzzled. “How come you’re ‘Doc’? I work as a doctor,” he asks. He’s not complaining, he’s simply curious.

Molly thinks about it. “I suppose I’m technically more of a doctor than my title-”

“You’re a surgeon, though. Surgeons don’t use ‘Doctor’.”

“Some do, John,” Molly says flatly, as a reminder of where her limits are. John shrugs and would let the matter drop, except Wiggins returns toting takeaway bags and Mike shoves his oar in on the conversation.

“So, Wiggins. How come you don’t call him ‘Doctor’? Why ‘Captain’?”

Billy gives him a deadpan look, then scratches his chin nonchalantly. “Does anyone want a plate?”

“I’ll get them,” Molly says, slipping off to the kitchen. “John, where are the clean ones?”

“They’re all clean- well, ok, the ones under the- actually, never mind, I’ll show you.” John sighs and heaves himself up from his chair, heading after her. “Christ, Bee, let’s not pull at my trousers...Mrs. Hudson, what’s she after?”

Mrs. Hudson scuttles after them, voice lifted over Bee’s yelling. “Might be her books...? Or a

drink?"

Lestrade helps himself to John's chair and unpacks a hot foil package from the takeaway bag. "You didn't answer, Wiggins."

Billy shrugs and scratches his chin again. "Any of these veggie?"

"Wiggins," Sherlock says, with a frown. Billy straightens to look him in the eye.

"Alright," he says, shrugging in a motion that starts somewhere around his knees and undulates up. "See, well, John might be a doctor, but 'e don' cure what ails me." He gives a look which manages to be both coy and filthy all in one. His intonation is truly ambiguous, and Sherlock can't help but parse the sentence differently to the rest of them. Despite himself, he feels a hot rush up the back of his neck.

Greg's head whips round at once. "What, really?!"

Sherlock coughs back his indignation. "Ambitious as always, Wiggins."

"You asked." Billy gurgles a subtle laugh to himself and wanders off to fetch cutlery.

"Blimey," Greg summarises, when they have the living room more or less to themselves. With Bee having a strop, it's not like the group in the kitchen has much chance of hearing them anyway.

"Can't see that getting off the ground."

"Hm," Sherlock agrees. "Molly hasn't any taste, but she's got eyes in her head."

"She used to fancy you," Stamford comments, twinklingly amused.

"My point precisely," Sherlock replies archly, and then fills his mouth with a piping hot spring roll so that no one can ask him anything else.

Greg peels cardboard tops off of cartons and tries to guess at the contents. Like most last-minute Chinese takeaway orders, it's a familiar mix of oily rice, neon sauce and interesting but unidentifiable crunchy bits that you assume are water chestnuts but could honestly be anything.

"The bub's is cross today," Greg comments, to change the subject.

"Mm," Sherlock says again, but makes no further inroad into that conversation. Thankfully at that point, Mrs. Hudson manages to defuse Bee with a cup of juice and a book, and Bee forgets why she was originally upset before anyone can work out what it was. They dig into the food.

John drops gladly onto the end of the sofa to shovel steaming noodles into his mouth. Greg plants a fresh bottle of beer in front of each of them and joins him, and they end up in their own bubble of conversation while Molly, Mrs. Hudson and Stamford divert onto the subject of cooking shows on TV, Billy hovers, and Sherlock one-handedly picks straight from the carton, eyes still glued to his phone.

"No cases," John asks, watching him.

Lestrade shrugs. "Nothing that'd interest him much. If he fancies a robbery, I've got one."

John gives a one-note laugh. "Not really. Billy's funny," he comments, indicating the man with his chin.

"He's come round," Lestrade agrees. "Actually pretty useful too. If he can keep himself sorted out,

I've said I'd do him a recommendation for the specials."

John considers it. "Yeah?"

"Well, it'd give him something to do between times. He'd enjoy having a uniform I think. And he knows the streets and dealing with odd-balls. It's a long shot for him, but I thought planting the idea'd give him something to work towards. A bit of carrot to go with the stick."

"Seems he's found his own carrot," John says, watching Billy listen intently to Molly's every word.

Lestrade grins. "Trust me, she's just as much stick."

"Speaking of chipper, you seem perky."

"Do I?"

"You've shaved."

"I shave sometimes. It's a party."

"Alright, well you've not nicked yourself either. Sherlock's not the only one who does deductions."

"Your deductions are shit though," Lestrade points out. "But alright, I have shaved, I'll give you that. So what?"

"So, are you seeing someone?"

"Might be," Lestrade says, clearing his throat, and making it absolutely clear that he's just playing coy with the topic. "Might be."

John almost drops his fork. "Who?"

"It's um... well, no one new. We got back together. Shh, no, keep it down. It's still all very delicate."

"You're a dark horse."

"Yeah," Lestrade says, deeply pleased. "Not sure how it happened. Change of heart or... Look, I'm not going to question it when it's working in my favour."

"God no," John says, rubbing black bean sauce from his lip. "Well. Good?"

"Good," Lestrade confirms. "Fresh start, taking things slower. Finger's crossed no one fucks it up again."

He shifts in his chair, a touch shy, but evidently also happy. John chews on a mouthful of noodles, wondering about it all.

"Is this the tie-pin girl?"

Lestrade chokes on a pea, loud enough that the others look across and when he's finished spluttering he won't talk about it again. John gives up, drawn into a conversation with Sherlock and Molly on one of the articles in the biochemistry journals instead.

Afterwards, when Bee's conked out fast asleep and they've all left, and it's just him shoving the

debris half-heartedly into a bin bag, John considers the strange normality of the day.

“I enjoyed that,” he says out loud. Sherlock, mostly leg, lifts his head from the back of the sofa and grunts in disagreement. It’s nearly two in the morning and oddly, John’s not tired. He shuffles the bottles off the table and splashes a scant amount of the good whiskey into a couple of glasses.

“Have a nightcap with me,” he says, shooing Sherlock’s feet up off the cushion so he can sit down. Sherlock takes the glass and swirls the liquid around and around in lazy rotations. “Happy new year.”

“Happy new year.”

This year, John thinks, will be better. It already feels full of promise. No doubt it’ll turn out differently, but for now it’s ok. Sherlock lies back, contemplating his glass, as relaxed as John’s ever seen him, though it could be the booze. His long fingers move in time to some mysterious, silent tune in his head and his ever-expressive mouth moves in minute echoes of whatever lyrics he’s thinking about. John feels his own lips curl in response.

Presently, Sherlock’s eyes lift.

What?

“Cheers,” John says, touching their glasses together against Sherlock’s chest. Then he drinks, and lets the warmth burn right through him.

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January closes with gales. London, with its dearth of trees, experiences less damage than the headlines, but John steps over smashed tiles on the way to the station and the trains on the overground get delayed.

In the lull between happenings, the clouds boil across the skyline, and one day, a tempest of their own sends Sherlock to view them from the top of his favourite roof in Whitehall. The wind up this high is sharp and wet. It blows into his nostrils, stealing air from his lungs.

Bee’s always been loud. Louder than other children, and now she’s becoming increasingly louder.

“Shh!” John says, after one particularly deafening yell for his attention, and it makes her laugh. Then because it’s funny, she shrieks again. “Shh, Bee! Christ, the whole street can probably hear you.”

He pushes a toy into her hand as a distraction, which she immediately propels with force across the room, making the display case rattle. It’s a great game. Flustered, John moves to pick up the toy. At once, she races him to it, winning because she’s closer, and to overtake her, John would have to trample her.

“Right,” John says, frustrated, taking it off her.

This time she screams again in earnest; earsplitting fury. “NO! NO! MY BUNNY!”

“Stop it!” John snaps, thrown out of temper and then as she bubbles over with outrage and tears, pulls back aghast at his own irritation. “Ok, ok, I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to shout... here,

sweetheart, here you are.” He waggles the toy in front of her, and she lights up like a banshee again, shoving his hand away. “Bad! Go ‘way! I want to!” She pushes a stack of magazines off the table, knocking over a half-full mug along with it, and John’s temper flares. Then it forcibly redirects- if Sherlock didn’t leave shit all over the flat...

It takes John thirty minutes of placating and a biscuit to resolve things. She sits in the cushion of his chair to eat it, watching him, calculating, as John performs an ineffective tidy up of the mess and his own guilt.

It takes them longer to realise how the balance of the flat is spiralling away from them.

That evening she wants John’s chair and he gives it to her, rather than engage in the battle it would take, the howls, to say ‘no’. He sits on the sofa instead and when Sherlock comes home later and asks, puzzled, “What are you doing?”

John just shrugs. “It’s fine, she’s just a baby,” he insists.

Sherlock frowns but says nothing and lets the matter slide for the time being.

They pass her second birthday quietly; she got so much at Christmas that John asks for no gifts except for clothes, which she’s rapidly busting out of at the seams. There’s no room in the flat for anything more and he’s forced to do a cull of her toys to keep it to a more manageable proportion. He donates them to the playgroup, so it’s not as if Bee’s deprived of them entirely, and it seems only fair after she gets into a mild spell of trouble there, for refusing to share, and pushing.

“It’s the terrible twos,” Mrs. Hudson says, by way of forgiveness, after Bee bites her. John feels awful.

“She shouldn’t though.”

“I expect she just doesn’t realise that it hurts,” Mrs. Hudson replies, still rubbing the crescent moon on her forearm. She bruises easily in old age and the marks are a stubborn bright pink on her skin. “I shouldn’t worry. She’ll grow out of it.”

Instead, she starts hitting more.

John develops whiplash from the daily back and forth. The pace of life at toddler-speed is around mach 4 and he point-blank can’t keep up with her caprices, never mind whatever alien logic fuels them. He never knows if she’s going to cling to him and wail if he so much as tries to go to the bathroom without her, or if he’s going to get the cold shoulder. Some days it’s like she needs him just to keep breathing, and other days, she wants nothing to do with him and he’s ousted by Sherlock as her god.

Against his better nature, her favouritism hurts him.

The problems escalate. By the end of February, she’ll settle down at night or get dressed after minimal attempts with Sherlock, but John’s lost all control over her. She takes no notice of his efforts other than to go to war with him.

“Bee,” he says, soft with empty warnings, three dozen times a day. “Come on. Just do as you’re asked.” She won’t.

He steps outside sometimes, fists balled up, breathing hard.

It had all been going so well.

It all finally erupts over dinner. John can't get her to eat. At least, not what he wants her to eat. She grizzles and thrusts the spoon, the bowl, the meal away from her with shocking strength, spilling peas across the table.

"Bee, just eat it. You *like* peas. You eat this at nursery all the time."

"Just give her the spoon," Sherlock says through the din, frown glued to his microscope.

"No, she makes such a mess and I don't have time to clean up after her. Come on, Bee. Open up."

"She's perfectly capable of spooning for herself."

"No!" Bee yells, crying and pointing, as she has done every night this week, towards the cupboard where she knows John keeps the snacks. "Don't want dinner, wanna-" but what she wants is an indecipherable wail.

"You can't have chocolate for dinner," John argues. "For crying out loud." He gets up to move away from her; he can feel the frustration souring to anger in his chest and the shout trying to rise in his throat. He's not going to shout at her. He's never going to shout at her or-

He slams the bowl of peas into the sink instead.

"John," Sherlock says, irked.

"What?" John snaps. "You bloody make her eat then."

"If she won't eat, just leave her."

"She's hardly had anything! She's going to be starving! I'm not putting her to bed hungry, she'll be miserable."

"She's in the 80% percentile for weight for her age. One skipped meal is hardly going to do any damage."

"Excuse- I'm sorry, are you saying she's fat? She's two, Sherlock!"

"I'm saying she's not going to waste away overnight if she won't eat dinner. Why is everyone obsessed with dinner? I skip dinner all the time?"

"You-are-a-lunatic!" John seethes. "Your eating habits are literally the opposite of what I want her to do."

"Boys!" Mrs Hudson interjects, breathless, coming in the room "What's all this shouting about?"

"Bee's not eating."

"John's having a stupid conniption over peas."

"Sherlock!"

"Ooh!" Mrs. Hudson squeals, hands up by her ears. "Honestly! That's enough, the poor lamb's upset!"

Bee sits back in her highchair, arms raised in loose surprise, staring at John with wide, watering

eyes. John's heart drops to the soles of his shoes. Mrs. Hudson elbows closer. "I'll take her downstairs," She says firmly. "I've got some fishpaste and soup. Maybe she'll have that. Come to Nan-nan."

John nods, mute at first and then struggles out a line in the face of Bee's shock. "Fine. Sure. Yes, take her." He scours a thumb into the arch of one eyebrow. Mrs. Hudson unclips the baby from her chair and picks her up. "Oh," says Bee, and the pair of them vanish down the stairs.

"Jesus," John swears. *I can't do this.*

"Why does it bother you so much?" Sherlock asks, leaning back on his stool and eyeing John.

"Because she won't do anything any more!" John explodes again. "It's like she hates me-everything's a fucking fight!"

"Because you're spoiling her!" Sherlock snaps. "You don't say 'no' to her like I do, and she knows it."

John turns to him, denial and pride rearing up ugly inside of him, and it's frustration and jealousy and the same old fear as always that forces the words to come out in a hot uncalculated rush.

"She's *my* daughter!"

It's the wrong inflection. John hears it even as he says it, even as he sees the blood drop from Sherlock's face and the man reel.

It's the echo of a voice in his head. John's fingers quake against his palms, and at once the heat behind his eyes is gone and in its place is a tight, cold feeling. Sherlock's expression.

I thought-

"She's- she's just a kid," John stutters.

'Our' daughter. I meant- I meant-

I know what you said.

John's stomach's roiling. Sherlock, with a strange, smooth motion, puckers his lips and tucks his hands into the small of his back. He nods.

"I've interfered." He drops his hands to his side at once, turns his face away and the two metres between them become a gulf.

"Sherlock," John says, a beat too late.

The other man lifts his coat from the peg, one hand already on the door handle.

"Sherlock- wait! Let me-"

The door doesn't slam and that's the worst of it. That he's not even angry. That it's not even a fight, just that he's gone. John jerks, falters, and then with his knees seized up, throws himself at the door.

"Sherlock!"

The Belstaff flaps as it shrugs across Sherlock's back.

Leave me alone.

The front door clicks. The hall remains. John leans on the door at the top of the stairs, alone, bile in the back of his throat.

“Oh for fuck’s sake...” he breathes, and then repeats the swearword louder as the enormity sinks in. Then again. Again. He slams the door himself. His shoulders hitch and the glimpse of himself in the living room mirror is too much.

“What is *wrong* with you?” he demands of his own reflection. “What the fuck is *wrong* with you? God...”

The disappointment in himself stings.

He paces restlessly, away from the kitchen, away from the living room. The bedroom remains his only bolt hole, and it’s here that he paces, trying to untangle himself.

Mary’s photograph stands on the dresser, smiling at him. Looking at it, he thinks the angles of her face have changed since he last paid it any attention. The slight tense squint around her eyes makes them sharp and evaluating. The smile is insincere. The face of someone awkward before a camera, or just plain, undisguised spite?

My daughter.

He slams the frame down against the top of the bureau so she’s not looking at him. He’s angry, then, a sudden blinding anger at her and her death and her whole damn self, like he’s never felt before.

“Get out,” he hisses, clenching his fist. He grabs the picture frame, the other picture frames; even the one of his own stupid smiling ignorant face from before and hurls them onto the bed. Dust clouds down from the top of the wardrobe when he pulls down the old, white suitcase, thumbs jar against the catches as he opens it. If he gets rid of it all...

The glass cracks on one of the portraits, either hers or his, he doesn’t stop to check which, he just wants to shove them deep into the suitcase and bury the froth of white lace wedding dress. He tries to close the suitcase. It won’t shut; the pictures are too bulky; too awkwardly arranged. He flings the lid open and shoves them around. The largest of them catches on something sticking out of the fabric. The curved end of the bottle of Clare de la Lune.

He grabs at it to move it and, like Mary, it slides between his fingers, and at this his fury bursts.

Afterwards, he stands panting, regretting it. The wall below the window drips quietly, reeking. The glass split but didn’t shatter like normal glass. It was far too thick for that. The air is already choking with perfume.

John stumbles and opens the window, staggering back to sit on the end of the bed. The suitcase will close now.

He can’t have it in the bedroom any more, he thinks. He can’t bear it. It’s just rubbish anyway. It could be stored anywhere. He picks up the suitcase and carries it into the living room and then stops. The white handle creaks in his grip. There’s nowhere obvious it would fit, and to put Mary here feels like an invasion of a space that was always separate from her.

Someone else’s house? Who would he ask? No one’s going to want his baggage hanging around their home. He puts Mary down on the seat of his armchair, and scrubs a hand over his face.

Maybe he should just throw it out.

Once the idea occurs to him, it seems feeble not to do it. Nonetheless, it wrenches deep inside once the leather thumps into the bottom of the bin. He lets the lid fall back feeling like he's committed murder, and then, like any killer, runs from the scene of the crime.

He's intercepted by Mrs. Hudson in the hall.

"John, what was that?" she asks him, shocked. "Oh dear, what's happened to you?"

"Nothing," he says, almost laughing. "Nothing. Sorry."

He steps past her, and is about to go upstairs and try to remove the blot of perfume on the wall, when she steps past him and goes to the door.

"No, leave it," he pleads. Bee stands at the door of Mrs. Hudson's flat, trailing her elephant.

"Babar?"

"This is Mary's," Mrs. Hudson says, hand on the top of the bin, looking in. "Oh, John, you can't throw this out. Her pearls are in there."

"It doesn't matter. I don't want them. It's just stuff."

"But it's important," Mrs. Hudson replies. She struggles to lift the case back out. "Be reasonable, John."

"I am! She's dead! What are we keeping it for? Just throw it back."

"Babar-!"

"You can't," Mrs. Hudson insists, her hand gentle on his wrist. "It's not yours, John. It's hers."

"She's dead; it's just junk."

"*Bee*, John! Bee doesn't know that! Imagine her, all grown up and asking 'Why didn't Papa keep anything of mummy's?' What do you think, John? Shouldn't she have something to know her mother by?"

It's unfair, John thinks, defeated. Every time he tries to do right it goes wrong.

"I hate her."

"Throw that out, if you've got to chuck something," Mrs. Hudson recommends. "You get no peace hating the dead." She takes his hand and takes him back inside, closing the door behind them. John realises she's speaking from experience. The fight goes out of him. It's one thing to yell at Sherlock- a wrong thing but possible.

It's impossible to hurl abuse at Mrs. Hudson.

"Babar..." Bee insists, arms up. She jigs and stamps for his attention, brow stubbornly puckered up. He drops to one knee and clings to her, which she allows for a minute before tiring of it.

"Cup of tea," Mrs. Hudson says firmly, once he seems to have found some sense again.

"I should go find Sherlock..."

They both know he won't be able to. Sherlock will have gone to ground somewhere by now, off-grid and ignoring his phone. They've never had a row quite like this. Usually it's John who shouts out of the conversation and leaves. He's never driven Sherlock from the flat before.

"One thing at a time," Mrs. Hudson says. In the back of her mind, she's already dropping a warning call to Mycroft. "Tea first, detectives after."

You need to calm down.

Bee jiggles about their feet, and then pauses a moment to examine John's anguish. She spiders her fingers over his nose. "Ouch?"

"Ouch," John agrees, undone. She smells strongly of sardine- he could cry. Ouch indeed.

"Up you get," Mrs. Hudson says, whisking a finger as if she can sweep him up by sheer force of will. "I'll bring that in. You go and sit down a bit."

She does so, propping the thing against the leg of her kitchen table while they make the tea. With no more energy, John sits, watching Bee smear soup around her bowl, having a great dinner. Quite a lot of it even goes inside her. Mrs. Hudson plants a steaming mug of tea in front of him and eases into her own chair.

"What's all this about?"

John exhales through a humourless laugh. "God...I'm just at the end, Mrs. Hudson. I'm-" he closes his eyes against the swill of bitterness and makes himself say it. "He does it better than me."

"Oh, John!" Mrs. Hudson tuts. "What a thing to say."

"I know- I know! I know..." John casts his eyes up at the ceiling. "I've bollocksed everything up. I keep just bollocksing it up. I can't control my own kid, I can't control me."

"Well, there's no good crying over spilt milk," Mrs. Hudson says, blunt as a pestle. "Sitting here telling me how awful it is- that's not going to do much good."

John knows. It's bloody obvious but as always, his emotion has gotten the better of him. He scrubs at his neck, feeling grubby and wrung out from a dire cocktail of feeling. He wishes Sherlock would come back. "Fucking honey fungus," he mutters.

"Eh?"

"Nothing. I know," John says. "I... need to sort things out. I'll... ring Ella."

"Perhaps that's not a bad idea," Mrs. Hudson says. Then she pats his hand, and John thinks that's two out of three people who have forgiven him. He's not at all confident about the third.

"What'd we do without you?" John asks suddenly, squeezing her hand back. She smiles.

"I dread to think."

Bee sits back in her chair, legs swinging, sucking her fingers and humming to herself. John's gaze slips from his daughter to the suitcase, which has slumped negligently against the table at an angle.

It's hers. Mrs. Hudson's right. It's almost got nothing to do with Mary any more. All of it belongs to his daughter, down to the dust and whatever disappointment or identity she finds in it.

The edge of his anger turns dull at long last. He hadn't realised how hard he'd been holding on to this particular resentment. It's a double-edged blade; every regret he has that she died, is made counterfeit by his life now. Every wish that he'd never married her is spun on it's head as soon as he looks at Bee.

His bedroom's going to stink of Clare de la Lune for days; the smell of Mary- except... not really. Sherlock worked that one out ages and ages ago. What was it? Magnolia hand cream and detergent and camomile ointment and bread?

Clare de la Lune belonged to... someone else, perhaps.

"That's your phone," Mrs. Hudson says, breaking into his thoughts. It is. John clambers up the stairs and snatches it up just as it goes over to voicemail. Tersely he jabs at the screen until the call cuts out and he can ring through to receive the message.

[Hi, John, it's Molly. Um... Sherlock's here. Just... letting you know ok bye.]

John lets loose a noise he didn't know he was holding back. "Oh, thank God." He's ok. He'll be ok. Molly will keep an eye on him. Molly's a pair of safe hands.

"He's at the morgue."

"Oh. There," Mrs. Hudson says with a sigh of satisfaction. She's followed him up, leading Bee by one soupy hand. "We should've known. That's a relief." She lets go of Bee, who sits down and starts to idly pull her socks off. The pair of them watch her industry in silence.

"You will sort things out, won't you?" Mrs. Hudson asks.

John gives a brusque, single-note laugh that is all air. "I'll try," he says, holding his hands up in defeat. "God, I'll try."

It's very late when the door finally creaks open as Sherlock enters. The living room is dark; Bee's long since gone to bed and Mrs. Hudson retired to her own flat again, but John is sitting up for him. His face is made ghostly by the blueish glare of the laptop screen. He pauses the video he's been watching and puts it aside as Sherlock cautiously comes in.

The Belstaff peels off in two heavy movements and the noise of it as he hangs it on the peg sounds loud in the silence. Sherlock lets his arms drop to his side, still stiff with chagrin.

"I thought you were going to be out all night," John says, weakly. He leans over and turns on one of the side lamps. He hadn't before, in case Sherlock had seen the light from the street and decided not to come in.

I'm sorry.

Sherlock turns to him, his hands behind his back. John can see the little strings of Molly Hooper's influence in the man's resolve. With Sherlock standing, and John still on the couch, the difference between them seems enormous. John rubs at his hand, and lets Sherlock speak first.

"Why did you say that?"

"I don't know."

"Yes, you do."

John squeezes his pulsing knuckles into the grasp of his other hand, ashamed of himself. He can feel the shame like a physical burden, pinching the back of his neck.

“My...dad wasn't... nice. He shouted a lot. Said things. I don't like talking about it.”

It's then that John realises that Sherlock already knows this. It's not even surprising that he knows; it's Sherlock. He must have gone and found out of his own accord- no stone left unturned when it comes to John's privacy.

“You never mentioned it.”

“No,” Sherlock agrees.

“Well... then you know,” John says. He locks his fingers together and rubs the ball of one thumb over the length of the other, then vice versa.

“No,” Sherlock says again. “I don't.” He moves around on the other side of the coffee table and sits down in his chair, at right angles to John and not facing him.

“Oh. I... suppose it's not really an excuse.”

Sherlock turns his jaw ever so slightly more towards John.

I'll leave that to you to decide.

“I want her to like me-“ John says, squeezing his hands until his fingers actually hurt. “I want us to be friends.”

Sherlock tilts his head back to the ceiling. It'd be easy to go upstairs and shut the door and end this. He still has bolt-holes, he still has connections. Lestrade at the very least has a sofa and Molly has a spare room she is too willing to sleep in. John's words wash over him, skimming the surface of his hurt and anger. He taps one finger against the leather of his chair.

The red armchair sits empty before him, John displaced to the sofa, giving him a clear look through to the tidy kitchen, and all the sundry scrap-paper on the fridge and the dark frame of the photograph behind the tap.

Why can't we be friends, hmm, William? Mycy and me are friends.

“She doesn't want a friend,” Sherlock blurts. Too much memory. “She wants a parent.”

He hears John lower his head. “I know...”

“She's like me. She doesn't know- you have to tell her.”

You're being not good, William.

Not good, Sherlock.

Why doesn't anyone ever say what they mean?

Kindness is tedious, Sherlock thinks. Too much short-sighted kindness ruined him.

“Tell her when she's bad so she knows. Tell her when she's wrong.”

“Sherlock?”

He lifts the finger from the arm of the chair, needs the lack of conversation in order to still his bubbling thoughts and then précis his argument into as short a sentence as possible.

“You need to say no to her.”

When he looks at John at last, the other man is cowed. His hands fall open between his knees, palms up towards Sherlock.

Which her?

Both.

In silence, John nods. I’m sorry, he says with his eyes and then his expression flickers and he says it out loud.

“I shouldn’t have said it. I shouldn’t have even thought it. I’m sorry.”

“You need to tell me,” Sherlock says, as though reading from a cue card, “What is ok for me to do.”

“God, anything. Anything!” John blurts at once. “Don’t change- you’re amazing at this. I’m... not,” he adds.

Sherlock bends around in his chair, picking up on the wave of hurt that goes through John at such an admission, and he peers at John closely, increasingly perplexed.

“What *are* you talking about?”

“No, it’s true. I’m crap- I’m crap dad. It’s; You’ve seen how she is with me. I don’t know- ok, I do know. I’m too soft on her, I get frustrated and then I lose my temper, and I can’t do that. I can’t afford to blow up on her.”

“Then why let it escalate?”

“It just happens-“ John protests. “How do you do it? You just snap your fingers and she jumps. How do you know what to do?”

Sherlock hesitates and then, with a squirm, leans out over the coffee table and shows John his phone. “I read a lot of books.”

“Alright,” John says. He shifts to one end of the sofa and taps the seat next to him; an invitation. He’s never read one. Not a single one; he’d just assumed. “Teach me... a method or something.”

“She won’t like it,” Sherlock warns, hanging back. “You’ve given her the upper hand; it won’t be returned without a fight.”

“Well...” John pauses. The flat is quiet, the usual mess mostly cleared away for once thanks to hours of waiting for Sherlock to come home and the fear of this conversation happening when he did. In the morning, John thinks, if he doesn’t change anything, it’ll all start over again. He can’t start to fail so soon. He’s terrified of the idea of driving Sherlock away.

“Do it with me,” he pleads.

Sherlock takes a deep breath and then sharply claps his hands together, loud enough to make John jump half out of his skin. Then the other man is up, launched from his chair and ablaze with new energy.

“To work, then.”

When John first warns her, Bee just laughs. How can she take it seriously when it's just Babar, and Daddy's the one to watch out for? The laugh turns to fun when he actually tries to follow through on his words and still she doesn't believe it's anything more than a joke.

Except Daddy's there and every time Babar backs off, Daddy whispers in his ear and Babar comes back, and they begin another round. To this, Bee shows first disbelief, then strong indignation.

By the end of half an hour she's furious. It becomes the most ear-bending temper tantrums she's ever thrown; so prolonged that the salt from her tears dries on her temples in a crust.

“This isn't working; she's killing herself,” John says, resolve crumbling. “Listen to her.”

“She's fine. She's not in pain, she's... possibly hungry, she's crying because she's just angry that she can't do what she wants.”

“Is that so bad?”

“She wanted to kick you,” Sherlock reminds him, one arm planted on the doorframe so that John will have to physically barge past him to get out. John squares up and seems to be contemplating the idea.

“John.”

“Alright! Alright. God... how much longer?”

“Until she calms down enough to say sorry.” Another set of thuds reverberate through the living room as she batters her heels hard on the floor, and even Sherlock winces when she screams again. “And... it's what the books say.”

“God, Sherlock.” John despairs. He's teetering on a fine line between this and anger.

“Go in the bathroom,” Sherlock orders. “Stick your head under the tap if you have to but do not jeopardise this.”

“God,” John swears again, but he goes.

It's more than an hour before the stars align, the signs are there, and both Bee and John are calm enough to bring things to a close.

He comes back to the living room, almost as tired as she is, and kneels down by her. Sherlock hovers, equally invested. “You kicked Papa, after Papa told you not to. I want you to say ‘sorry, Papa’.”

She crumbles up behind her hands, which makes John feel wretched, and for a moment he thinks she's going to fling an arm out in another wild slap at him, but this time she's listening and the meaning of what's going on has sunk home.

“Sorwy...”

John opens his arms in a flood of relief, and lets her topple into the nook of his chest and be

engulfed there. Beside them, Sherlock rises a fraction to give them space; to stand or perhaps just to leave, and is at once arrested by John's fumbling hand on his collar.

"C'mere."

John pulls him awkwardly close, obliging Sherlock to drop onto his rump and sit beside them, John's elbow digging into the middle of his back against the arm chair. They both arch and John brings his arm lower, into the hollow between the armchair's legs, his hand on Sherlock's waist. Sherlock sprawls his arm on the nearside over the seat of the chair, and then, when his arm aches, submits to the natural curve of his elbow and rests it across John's shoulders.

John kisses Bee's streaky face and she clings on to the comfort. After a moment she pecks him back between hiccups.

"Thank you," John says, "That's nice." He rocks her. "Ahh, sweetheart, that's nice."

Relief overflows into something rapidly approaching happiness. It's confidence, John thinks, with a rush. He'd had no confidence that he could say 'no' without her rejecting him, and yet, after all that, after saying 'no', after all the screaming, she still loves him.

Feeling ridiculous, he wobbles into a grin, which then he wants to share. Looking up, he wavers.

"Hey," John says, because Sherlock looks more exhausted and more humbled than he's ever seen him.

You alright?

Sherlock makes no verbal answer, and the non-verbal one is muddled. Looking at him, John instinctively nudges Bee until she's looking too.

"Give Daddy a kiss."

She stands on John's thigh to do so, teetering, hands on Sherlock's collar and John's broad palm supporting her back. Sherlock's expression weakens and then he detracts from it by pretending to tickle her chin. She worms against his chest, trying to burrow into Sherlock's armpit.

'We make a circle,' John thinks. His fingertips brush Sherlock's fingertips across Bee's small back; the little girl cohering them together. He squeezes Sherlock's ribs under his other hand, feels the warmth and human vulnerability of him.

"Thanks," he says out loud, and then says it again, more softly.

Bee's face could do with a wipe, John could do with a stiff mug of something and Sherlock deserves a respite. John would drain every penny from his bank account if it meant he could make up for this. For now, he sits with him on the carpet, and says, "You're amazing. I don't say that enough. You're absolutely incredible."

"Hm," Sherlock says.

'Pleased,' John reads in his eyes, and it makes everything seem brighter.

The call comes unexpectedly in the first week of March, when John is leaving work. He dithers

about answering it, but he has time on the walk to the station and climbing down into the underground is a good excuse to hang up.

“Hello?”

“Hey, it’s me.”

“I know, the phone tells me who’s calling, Harry.”

“And you still answered?”

“I still answered,” John says, with a twinge of guilt. “What’s up?”

Harry hums and says, sounding uncharacteristically wary, “What are you doing Friday afternoon?”

Working. Investigating a crime. Cleaning the kitchen, washing his hair, Bee’s got an emergency appointment with the vet.

The excuses, force of habit, fly through his mind. He doesn’t hate Harry, but whenever they meet, especially at her instigation, it’s always such a bleeding disaster.

What he says aloud is, “I don’t know, I’d have to check. Why?”

“Well, hear me out before you invent a man you have to go and see about a car or anything,” Harry says, not fooled for an instant. “So I’ve been sober for a while now- really sober, I mean. Got the medals and fat arse from eating my feelings to show it. Um, I’ve been at university.”

“University?” It’s the first word in the sentence that John actually really listens to, it’s so unexpected. “But you’ve got a degree.”

“I know, I went back. I’ve been doing a course to get qualified as an accountant, and I’m graduating this week.”

John pauses in the street to absorb this information. “Oh. That’s- that’s pretty good, is it?”

“Thanks. Can you not sound so surprised I’m not a hundred-percent fuck up? I know it steals some of your thunder-”

“Harry,” John rubs at the bridge of his nose. “Look, congratulations. It’s good. I’m sure you worked hard.”

“I did work hard!”

“I didn’t mean it like that,” John answers, kicking himself. “Stop jumping down my throat.”

“Stop being a cunt, then.”

“Do you even want me to come to the graduation?” He means to sound scolding, instead he sounds faintly incredulous.

Harry pauses, caught between disgruntlement and insecurity, and the second feeling wins out and is apparent in her voice when she says, “Will you? Everyone’s got family coming.”

It’s petty; it’s always petty and mean between them, but John flies back to graduations long past, with crowds of strangers and one person missing. She’d never been there.

“I’ll have to check who’s collecting Bee from nursery.”

“Come on, it’s in Waterloo. You don’t even have to change trains. The ceremony’s only 20 minutes long before they kick us out for nibbles and you don’t have to stay for that. Counting travel, it’s not even a fucking hour.”

“Alright, fine. I’ll come. What day is it?”

“I told you- Friday.”

“What time then?”

“Two o’clock,” she tells him, with a bubble to her voice and it’s strange to hear her suddenly glad and stranger to think that she wants him.

“Alright,” he relents, “I’ll be there.”

“You can bring someone, if you want,” she adds, almost shyly. “There’ll be other kids- most of us are mature students. It’s going to be fairly relaxed.”

“No, she’ll make a row,” John says, “I suppose I’d better air out a suit or something.”

“Yeah,” Harry says, and he can hear her smiling and it makes him feel rotten for being ungracious. “See you Friday.”

“Alright.”

“Don’t forget,” she says, because she has in the past, and it needles John for exactly the same reason. He hangs up with a swift “Bye” before they can break peace again. All in all, he’s not sure what to make of it.

It’s an overcast day, and Waterloo station is heaving with passengers. John elbows his way free of the ruckus, trying to straighten his tie with the other, and squints at the directions on his phone. It turns out to be a modern building, tucked in on three sides by the old victorian back-to-back terraces, and the great circus of the roundabout on the forth.

He’s very nearly late, squeezing inside muttering ‘thanks, excuse me- ‘cuse me-’ and sitting in a chair marked ‘Watson’ as quietly as possible, just as the event is beginning.

It’s one of those slightly sham graduations; plastic tubes of air instead of the actual degree, which will be posted to the students later. No caps or robes, though each student is wearing a set of ribbons pinned on and the dress code is an academic navy blue. He spots Harry on the stage, and she spots him, shocked. She crosses the boards and shakes hands with the dean, distracted. John applauds and tries to pay attention through the speeches.

When it’s over, and they’re mingling in the university canteen, Harry hunts him down.

“You came!”

“Congrats, Harry,” he says. “You look really good. I mean it, well done.”

“Alright, don’t over-egg it,” she grumbles, never one for praise, and then squashes him in a hug to show that she’s glad of him anyway. Surprised, John hugs her back.

“So,” he says, clearing his throat. “An accountant? Does that mean I can get you to do our taxes?”

“Fuck off,” Harry says with a hearty laugh. “Not unless you pay me.” Someone calls her name and she turns, eyes sparkling and waves over someone from the crowd.

“Heya- Sam, this is my little brother, John. John, my housemate, Samia.”

“Pleasure,” says Samia, eyeing him inscrutably for a moment before gently gathering Harry up in a hug and kissing her temple. “Fab job, lovely,” she says. “I’m dead proud of you.”

Harry chortles. “Thanks. See you at home?”

“Yeah, gotta rush back to work. Nice to meet you.”

“Uh, yeah. You too,” John replies, thrown. His eyes follow her out of the room. “New... girlfriend?”

“She’s a PA and a model,” Harry says. “Nice bum, huh?”

“Um. It’s- It was- I didn’t look.”

Harry breaks into a delighted snort of laughter. “You tit, John! She’s just my housemate; queer and uninterested in anyone below the waist. You haven’t a snowball’s chance.”

“Oh.” He riles slightly. “I wouldn’t want to date your mates anyway. They’re all barmy.”

“Look who’s talking. Let’s get a drink.”

There’s a heartbeat and he sees Harry kick herself for her words. “Not a drink-drink,” she mutters. “Obviously. What do you want?”

John shrugs. “Anything’s fine.”

“Round of coke then,” Harry says, rueful. Other people are drinking; he can see the faint hunger for it in her face, but she shakes it off and holds out her hand instead.

“What?” He asks, looking at it.

“This dress doesn’t have pockets, you know. Come on, it’s my graduation. Treat me to a measly coca-fucking-cola.”

John huffs, though without much irritation and pulls his wallet from his pocket, pushing it into her hand. “Alright, but you can go get them.”

Harry grins and stomps off on her new heels, ribbons flapping. Somehow it lifts John up a little. She yaks with someone at the bar, the bartender, even the someone’s partner- shakes their hand and then rabbits on like they’ve known each other for years. She’s always been good at meeting people, John thinks.

He sinks back into the background, leaning against a pillar, and feels himself become at odds with the occasion. He watches the crowd for a moment but sees little to interest him. Harry hadn’t exaggerated; most of the people here are mature students, with partners and children. A couple of people look at him, once a woman with some interest, but whatever it is they see, it doesn’t compel anyone to approach him.

John turns his head back to look at Harry at the bar. She’s rummaging in his wallet, and he starts to

wonder if he left enough cash in it- there has to be a fiver, at least- which should still cover a couple of cokes in a student union- and then he realises she's probably just being nosy.

Harry sees it at the same time as he remembers it being there. He sees her pause, even as his back straightens away from the pillar. Her shoulder's hunch, his stiffen. She glances back, her expression one big question, mouth soft and open as if she's going to ask it there and then, right across the space in front of all these people, and John feels the bottom of the world fall out from under his feet.

Oh God, I'm so stupid.

Stupid!

The barman speaks to Harry, making her jump. The pillar bumps between John's shoulder blades and it's this that stops him from doing anything as idiotic as escape. Harry swaps change for cola in a daze and he swallows hard as she returns, drinks spilling in her hands. His wallet is tucked into one armpit, her elbow clamped to her side. She hold out the drink. It's freezing and sticky against his fingers, and he panics for a moment he'll drop it, and make an obvious display of himself.

"Cheers," he grinds out. Harry stares at him. He smiles and takes the wallet back, hiding it in his pocket again. Out of sight, out of mind. Everything's fine. Nothing's happened. Nothing to talk about.

"John. I know I'm a shit sister, but is there anything you'd..." Harry twitches, on unfamiliar ground. "I dunno... Do you need any-? I mean- fuck, I don't know what I mean. What's going on?"

John keeps his fingers tight around the glass like an anchor to reality. "Nothing," he says, and it slips out, ghostlike through a narrow smile; a patent lie. His whole face feels pulled out on strings.

"You've gone dead white," Harry says. Her hand is in the crook of his elbow, steering him out of the main body of the canteen, into a plain corridor leading to some of the lesser lecture halls. She puts their drinks down on top of a boxed fire extinguisher and waits.

John shifts his weight from foot to foot, still smiling like glass, squeezing his own traitorous hand behind his back.

"You've got photos of him in your wallet. With your baby."

"Just photos," John says. He can't look her in the eye, so he looks away, over NUS posters and desperate ads for research participants. Behind his back, he shakes his hand out. It doesn't stop.

"They're not just photos," Harry says carefully, "because you're not angry with me and we're not having a row- you're panicking." She's using a tone he's not heard for years and not quite like this. It's big sister but tempered with years of circle talks and therapy. It's Ella, but with a sting in it's tail that tells him 'John Watson, I've known you since day one, and you know I don't take your bullshit.'

The wallet's in his pocket but he might as well have opened it out on the floor between them. Laid bare under Harry's eyes, it's not nearly as subtle as he'd thought. He might as well have carved the man's name into a desk or something. Written it on his diary.

"God, John," Harry says, soft and heartfelt. She searches his face for something; a reaction other than rictus, "He likes you."

This is not a conversation Harry has ever envisaged happening, and even if she'd had the foresight

to imagine it, she wouldn't have put it here, in a nondescript corridor, with a crowd of nearly 200 strangers just a few feet away behind a steel grey swing-door. She sees John clench his teeth, clench his hands, and braces herself to catch his fury; he's never spared her, not even when they were kids brawling and punching on the living room floor, and it's what she knows. It's almost a thrill, to anticipate a fight again; the echo of shouted words, and abuse of furniture.

She wishes she wasn't stone-cold sober.

And then visibly it's like something inside of John finds the long hot fuse and tips a bucket of cold water on the whole lot. She sees him swallow back, once, twice, head nodding forward like he's going to be sick, a restrained full-body shudder that comes out more as a tiny series of clockwork jerks than anything else.

"I know."

"Christ, why haven't you said anything?"

"I don't know. Don't." He stumbles back out of reach and then tries to pull himself up ramrod straight, clamp the lid on it all, only it's not working. She catches his gaze, and is spooked to see that he's ashamed and, worse, on the verge of brimming up.

"John," she says. There's nowhere in the corridor to go unless he pushes past her and then he has a choice of the graduation party or the dead end of the social science classrooms.

"I don't know," he says again.

Harry's thirteen again in a scratchy grey dress, cemetery mud on her school sandals, and John's nine, and has just realised what they're saying goodbye to mum forever this time. And Dad's not coming to take him home, or Disneyland, or any other of those places that don't really exist except in your head.

She remembers the six months of bedwetting and sharp-edged emotion, sitting under the blankets reading volume after volume of *Astrix and Obelix* from Ted's bookshelf, shutting out the world and wishing there was a potion to make you indomitable in reality. Longing to be a champion. John, lonely, haunting Stella around the house ceaselessly, but making life difficult by acting up at every opportunity. A kind woman with frizzy hair and silly sayings, and the only possible mother figure left to John. He'd resented it so much. Hated the coddling.

Harry unpacks a tissue, rather ignobly, from her bra, takes his hand and makes him hold it.

"It's not the end of the world, John. I promise."

He pinches his mouth shut, perhaps from sheer disbelief or maybe just the noticable limpness of the tissue in his fingers. 'I don't really need it,' his expression says, and it's true that Harry's always been the sobber out of the pair of them.

"Your nose is running," she points out, instead.

He blots, sagging slightly.

"He really does love you, though."

John nods, miserable and grateful in one horrid clump of feeling.

"Christ, let's sit down somewhere," Harry says. She grabs the cokes and shoos him ahead of her

down the corridor, this strange new shuffling man and all his vulnerabilities. The lights in the classroom are on motion sensors and blink reluctantly to life as they enter. It's not so dissimilar to a waiting room, John thinks, sinking into a red plastic chair, by a grey plastic table. Harry slides him his cola.

"Drink it," she advises.

It tastes over-sweet and over-chilled, the bubbles prickling at the back of his nose uncomfortably when he tries to swallow it. It's not easy. His throat seems to be seizing up. Harry, with rare tact, doesn't insult him by asking if he wants to talk about it. Instead she clicks her fingers on her glass while he sips at his.

Finally she says, "Well, your life's pretty much bollocks, isn't it?"

He coughs and he'd almost be laughing, if only he didn't feel so sick.

"So... can I ask when?"

He shakes his head; not that she's not allowed to ask, but simply that he doesn't know.

"Ah. One of those."

"I thought he was going to...once." John stares down at his drink and the tiny wincing bubbles. He remembers Sherlock's face above his, more than once, the expression on it. Once with terrible need and, another time, buttons against his fingers, with fear.

"Oh, John."

"It's all gone wrong. I can't-" and there is the bitter anger Harry knows so well; as tart and sharp and stomach curdling as unripe apples.

"I can't," John grinds out, heel of his hand butting against his forehead like he can hammer himself into the shape he wants to be. "I can't get anything *right*. Why can't I get anything right, ever?"

"You're asking the wrong fucking woman, here," Harry says, concerned. "Cut that out." She pulls his hand down and he reluctantly lets his elbow drop off the edge of the table and they sit, an awkward pair, her hand on his wrist.

"It's alright if you're scared. We all get scared. It's pretty much just constantly shitting yourself and figuring out how to carry on anyway."

"Don't take the piss."

"I'm not taking the piss," Harry replies, hurt. "Why would I take the piss? I fucking know what it's like. If that's what's been eating you, let it go, John. Bottom line, it's no one else's fucking business at all, if you don't want it to be. Not even mine, though you're a bloody fool if you don't use me. I've done all of this this, John, years ago. I made all the mistakes first-hand. Let me give you some advice."

He goes quiet and still for a long moment and she has no idea what he's thinking, other than the rawness of it, the guilt and his horror at his own dishonesty when it's something she knows he values. They grew up lying through their teeth, in a sham of a family. He's always wanted to be noble, at least a little bit. It's a sore point to have to admit that he's not.

"Sorry," he rasps, finally.

“You daft sod.” Harry drags her chair closer and offers him a smile. “Cheer up. Least you’ve not having to have this chat while wearing your own sick. That’s something.”

“God, Harry.”

“Cheer up,” she tells him firmly. “The gay police aren’t going to leap out the walls and force you across Clapham Common in skinny jeans and body paint, yeah?”

“Shut it,” he says, but he licks his lips so they aren’t so dry and swallows back another mouthful of coke, so she knows he doesn’t really mean it. John rubs at his mouth with the back of his hand and exhales a long, shuddering breath. Harry’s done this before, he thinks, on both sides of the conversation. He picks at his trousers where they cover his knees.

“I like women,” he says.

“No, you don’t,” Harry says at once, matter of fact. “You don’t,” she repeats when he looks at her, mouth open to argue. “You think they’re sexy. You want to have sex with them, but you don’t *like* women. How many female friends do you even have?”

“There’s... Molly.”

“She’s Sherlock’s friend. And before you start scraping the barrel, your therapist and your landlady don’t count either. Anyway, that’s not the point. Point is... deep down, you know, don’t you? You know if you feel something physical for someone or not, and if you love them or not. And that’s something at least, I’ve always thought. It’s a pile of shit, but at least you know.”

He breathes out a sudden ‘huh’ like he’s taken a wallop to the solar plexus and his expression transforms.

“Yeah,” he says, from a million miles away. Harry eases from one buttock to the other, peeling her thighs off the plastic seating, while he stares at the universe from a new and beautiful angle.

“Own it,” Harry advises. “I don’t mean come out or anything, but it’s a lot less miserable just to allow it. Then it’s just you against everything out there- not you against yourself and the world. Pissing hell, I want a drink.” She closes her eyes and allows herself a grimace of memory. “I’m going to need to eat something.”

John comes back from the far side of Jupiter in order to stare at her. “We’re missing your graduation party.”

“They’ve only got shitty vol au vents. No one survived fucking anything on a smear of fish in a fairy fart. Get up. Leave that,” she adds, waving at his glass. John abandons it willingly enough and they sneak out through the graduation mingler, into the grid of old houses. Harry’s heels clip clop as she marches ahead, obliging John to keep up with her. There’s an off-brand man-in-a-van under the railway bridge next to where the homeless people camp and ask for change, and where they pause for John to drop his last tenner on a greasy polystyrene container of chicken and chips, and the change into the empty coffee cup next to a dirty sleeping bag.

They walk without a plan in the general direction of the river in silence, picking at the chips.

The waters of the Thames are a sulky brown even on the brink of summer, and the smattering of clouds overhead does little to improve the colour despite a brave sun. They stand looking at it wordlessly, with a horde of pigeons eyeing them up, and John is transported back to any number of childhood holidays- always a long weekend to the seaside, taken in Ted’s clapped out old van hanging on to the back seat (no seatbelts), and inevitably someone would be sick from all the

hairpin lanes.

“Remember going to Bournemouth?”

Harry rolls her eyes up in reminiscence. “Those fucking tents.” Then she looks at her brother. “What about Bournemouth?”

He shakes his head; there’s not words for it and it’s not Bournemouth specifically. It’s just the smell of malt vinegar in the open air and the big silent conversation hanging between them—running on the wet grass between the tents with a pack of other boys. He’s forgotten their names and faces; just the general impression of them remains and the intensity of friendship based on the question “Do you want to play with us?” He envies his lost ability to drop all his issues and throw himself into the rough and tumble at will, briefly reinvented as someone else.

Harry eases her weight from one heel to the other and recalls the smell of canvas in the rain and the foul-lovely flavour of cheap cider, roll-ups, girl’s spit and chapstick lifted from Boots. John remembers getting grass stains on his knees and palms from attempting tries, the rubber of the ancient ball and pushing bare-chested into a scrum that was mostly a wrestling match. Innocent, of course, back then. But he remembers the warmth of other boy’s arms carelessly slung round his shoulders and the glow of having them there.

Harry flicks a chip into the river.

“What you going to do?”

John chews on his inner cheek, picking at the stonework. The air has cooled him down a little. He shrugs.

“Nothing,” Harry translates. She clicks her tongue.

“I can’t,” he says, closes his eyes, closes his fists. “It’s complicated. I’ve only just got...this.”

“Got what?”

“Bee and... him. Got everything feeling ok. After everything. Alright? I don’t want to ruin that.”

Harry, despite her own issues, is too straight-forward to understand. For her the equation is always simple. “But he likes you.”

“I don’t know that. *You* don’t know that. It’s not that kind of thing anyway. It’s- it’s more.”

“Well how’s it more?” Harry wants to know, but frustratingly John can’t elucidate it. She’s got no point of comparison. He can’t explain the two sided coin that is every day of living with Sherlock. The hot and the cold of it; the strange new wonderfulness of Sherlock’s gentle love of his; their; daughter, and his very deliberate caution around John. He can’t describe the flavour in his mouth and the noise in his head that he gets when they forget themselves. It’s too contradictory to try and get across how he can burn with pride for Sherlock’s efforts all the live long day and rally to the slightest call to arms to protect him- yet struggle to find the faith that he’ll never again commit a misjudgement as wholly, as spectacularly as stepping from the roof of Bart’s again.

Because he’s Sherlock.

Because he might.

Because he’s scared of getting hurt again.

Because what they have is already a miracle and because Sherlock seems to have come to the same conclusion: to dig deep and make peace with holding on to this much.

This much time together and this much love; overwhelmingly, this much of his daughter, who pours more and more into their lives with every passing day. This much of an identity.

“You know what you should do?” Harry says, breaking into his train of thoughts. “Write some stuff. You’re better at that than talking, right?”

John rubs uncomfortably at the back of his neck. He can’t foresee how he’d manage to do that any more easily than talk about it. She has a point that writing’s always been easier for him- it’s the main premise behind the blog, and Ella’s been pushing him since forever to keep up with it. The thing with the blog though is that it’s not actually private. It’s quite open and he’s not ready to be open with this. The laptop as well is about as secure as a damp paper bag.

“Maybe,” he says. He straightens, allowing himself one moment to hiss out air between his teeth and then clears his throat and somehow finds the guise of John Watson again. Harry looks at him, still concerned.

“Ok?” She asks.

“Fine,” he says, then under her scrutiny changes that to “Good enough.” He crumples up the empty polystyrene and shoves it in a bin. “I’m going to head off.”

“Look after yourself,” Harry advises. “Give us a ring if... you know. I know I’m shit but I do know people who are less shit.” She smiles crookedly, “or you can make do with your big sis.”

“I usually make do,” John says. Harry swats him in the arm before he can do anything foolish like hug her.

“Take care,” she says again. “I’ll walk to the station with you.”

“Actually... I think I’ll walk home,” John says. It’ll take him an hour at least, but the idea of it appeals to him. He’s got time before he needs to collect Bee from nursery. He walks Harry back to the station anyway and sees her off, before turning his face back to the Golden Jubilee Bridge.

—
—

Orange 3G
||Messages||

3:17 PM
Unknown number ||Edit||

[Hey]

[U there?]

[I dont believe u ever put
ur phone down]

[Oh my god Sherluck]

[Fucking answer me!]

[Sherlock -SH]

[Finally!!!]

[Its harry btw]

[I know -SH]

[I guessed from your atrocious
disregard of spelling and
grammar -SH]

[>(]

[What do you want? -SH]

[Afjalkn ffs I was still typin]

[I saw john today. He got upset
but not like bad upset]

[Why? -SH]

[We just talked some stuff]

[Main thing - don't panic k]

[Hes gone 4 a walk but I think
its all ok.]

[U still there?]

[Yes. -SH]

[K. Dont be mad. I promise
I didn't fuck things up 4 you]

[He cares a lot about you
and bee]

[But hes got some shit to do]

[K?]

[Fine -SH]

[K. Just wanted to warn you
cause hell be home late and
you'd notice shit was
different]

[And? -SH]

[Nothin]

[Just hang tough]

In the early evening, John shoulders the door to the living room open wearily, Bee toddling in front of him. “Hey, we’re back.” He closes his eyes as Bee slips her hand free of his and totters forward to pick up Elbant where Sherlock’s left him on the arm of John’s chair. The room smells of the bin and old toast, baby wipes, and a little like antiseptic. Sherlock must have been working on one of his experiments today. John wonders what it was.

He peels off his jacket and drops into his chair, Bee laughing and pawing at his lap.

“You went to the park,” Sherlock says, from the sofa.

“Yeah. Went for a walk,” John says. It’s not untrue. Bee runs back and forth between them, clambering onto Sherlock’s stomach. He grunts at her weight and the peril of her knees in sensitive places. It doesn’t quite distract him, however.

“What do you want for dinner?” John asks. He tilts his head back in his chair and lets the back of it cradle his aching neck. The middle of his back hurts from sitting hunched over a picnic bench for too long. He absently flexes his hand. The obvious sits between them, but Sherlock says nothing.

Sherlock swings Bee around instead, and at her pealing yell for ‘biscuit!’, heaves himself up to see what’s left in the cupboard. “No biscuits,” he tells her. “Healthy snack.” He wrinkles his nose in sympathy.

“There are a load of rice crackers for her,” John comments. He breathes in the dusty non-smell of the fabric of his chair and sinks deeper into the seat.

“There are some,” Sherlock admits. John opens one eye questioning.

“I got peckish.”

“They’re disgusting though. They’ve got no flavour.”

“Mrs. Hudson was out,” Sherlock says, as though this explains everything. John feels the vertebrae of his spine pop slightly as he arches his back. His shoulder aches.

“What about risotto?”

Sherlock makes a noncommittal noise and Bee gums at a rice cracker, bringing it over to show John. He tells her it looks yummy and decides Sherlock’s noise implies that risotto isn’t a no, even if it isn’t a resounding yes, and besides, they’ve got the end of a block of cheese to use up. Sherlock fusses around the kitchen. Bee ploughs a book into his kneecap for him to read and he does so, letting her turn the pages and dictate. She polishes off the rice cracker between thrilling exploits such as ‘Tiny fish finds a friend!’

“Snack! All gone!”

“All gone,” John agrees, leaning forward to smile at her. She grins back. He looks up as Sherlock sets something on the table next to him. Bee reaches for it.

“Chocolate!”

“No, they’re not,” Sherlock says, keeping his hand on the pills as a defence against her prying fingers. “Those are Papa’s. Here.” He prompts.

Taken aback, John takes them from him and pops them down at once, dry, chasing them with a mouthful of tea. He swallows down the bitter medicine with guilt. He had filled half a notebook and then soaked the pages in the drinking fountain until the ink had run and the paper dissolved into sodden illegibility. Then he'd dropped it and all his spent thoughts into a bin, to be buried under discarded crisp packets and baggies of dog shit. He'd not discovered anything he wanted to say yet, but it had helped to offload.

The twinge in his wrist from just lifting the cup makes him appreciate it, though. That and the very obvious lack of comment.

"Thanks," he says, quietly.

Sherlock says nothing in reply. He simply pounces on Bee instead to distract her from working up a grizzle at the cruelty of not being allowed the painkillers, which she is still firmly convinced were sweeties. She howls until Sherlock launches her towards the ceiling in a reckless sort of game that she loves. It makes John's heart lurch every time from a combination of factors, but Sherlock's movements are impeccable. He wouldn't drop her, John's sure. It still takes his heart with her at every toss.

Sherlock catches her and wheels around, holding her out bodily over John's head. She swims in mid-air, wild-eyed with mirth.

"Incoming," Sherlock intones and lowers her towards John's face, pulling her back up at the very last moment. Bee loses it at the hilarity of John's face zooming in and out before her eyes, sinking into wheezing, slack-jawed belly laughs.

"Stop," John pleads, "She's dribbling!"

Wickedly, Sherlock continues.

It's a statement of his deduction, John thinks. Sherlock knows he spent the afternoon doing a considerable amount of writing, and maybe he's not going to ask what or why, but this is the pay off. It could be worse. John wipes baby drool from his forehead and wrestles her from Sherlock's grasp, pulling her down onto his stomach.

"Kisses," he says, and Bee slimes his chin without hesitation. He loves her for it. His eye catches Sherlock's over her dandelion curls and he hopes it conveys thank you enough. He spins her round and hoists her towards him with a growl. "Grab him, Bee. Hugs!"

With Sherlock's hands full again, he takes the opportunity to pull himself to his feet, ruffling her hair as he passes towards the bedroom. "I'm going to change and then cook. Last chance to veto the risotto."

"I very much don't care," Sherlock says, his wrestle with Bee devolving into a sort of swaying jig.

"It's fine then?" John asks, pausing in the doorway. Sherlock looks up, expression blank and innocent.

"It's fine," he agrees.

March fades and April passes into May. The weather flutters between humid warmth and sharp days, and at two and three months old, Bee's found a new hero to dote on. Lestrade, taking John at

his word, pops in to babysit on an irregular basis, his infrequency increasing his popularity with John's daughter.

Whatever is going on with the tie-pin, Lestrade won't talk about it, and Sherlock merely makes disgusted noises if he's in earshot when John tries to ask. Lestrade just grins and looks sheepish, and changes the subject. At any rate, John thinks, he looks happy and he can't begrudge Lestrade that.

Not when John's finding life easier himself.

One morning, when John doesn't seem to have any plans for the day, Sherlock keeps close to the common areas of the flat; dressed.

In his good intentions he makes himself a bit too obvious and eventually John drops the newspaper away from his face into his lap and fixes him a look from under his eyebrows.

"Are you going out?"

Sherlock makes a vague little motion with his pipettes by way of reply. "No," he says.

John's look narrows. "Did you want to go out?"

This question seems to disarm Sherlock to the extent that the only reply he makes is an unintelligible noise that could be anything. John sighs, slaps the newspaper onto his side table and shuffles himself with regret from the comfort of his armchair. "Come on then," he says.

Sherlock scoffs and deflects. "I didn't say I wanted to go out."

"No, but you've been vibrating around the flat all morning. Let me get my shoes- Where are we going? Do I need a coat?"

"No, it's quite clement out," Sherlock says automatically, following him towards the bedroom and then stopping on the threshold. "I wasn't planning anything."

"Well, do I need boots or can I wear my normal shoes?" John asks, undeterred by these protestations. "I don't want to go anywhere too mucky."

He turns to find Sherlock looking at him, unprepared. This puzzles John. Sherlock's been circling the door like a dog with it's lead in it's mouth for the entirety of the morning and now he's apparently genuinely blank on if he wants to go out or not.

"Really? Nowhere?"

Sherlock's eyes dart to one side as though hoping to find the right answer scrawled on the frame of the door. As it happens, there is a scribble there but it's at knee-height and a scratch of illegible crayon. "Not... specifically?" Sherlock ventures, and then he rallies. "Perhaps I'll leave it to you for once."

"Me?" John squints at him, trying to figure out his game.

"I can be charitable."

"Rude," John chides, shrugging on a jacket. "My decision then?"

Sherlock tucks the bow of his violin against the neck of the instrument. "All yours."

John considers. "Alright. Let's... go to Hampstead Heath." He watches as Sherlock's mind gives a little tick, no doubt recalling a few of the park's more morbid features. "You, me, Bee and Mrs. H. We'll take lunch or something."

"Hm," Sherlock says.

John, checking his wallet for cash adds, "It'll be nice. We'll have a civilised picnic, you can kick the bushes and see if any bodies roll out." He looks up, a touch playful. "And dog-watch."

Sherlock's face fights for a split moment between enthusiastic and arch, with arch winning over. He looks down his nose.

I don't dog-watch.

Yeah, you do. You love it.

Don't. Shan't.

John chuckles and moves to push him ahead of him out of the room. "You said it was my choice."

"Doesn't mean I have to like it," Sherlock mutters, but he swipes Bee's coat off of the peg and goes to get the pushchair out from under the stairs without being told to. John grins. He closes the windows, which gleam. The air smells fresh with the promise of warmth, but the breeze is strong and it blusters through him, blowing the cobwebs away. It's with a spring in his step that John precedes Sherlock from the flat, bumping Bee down the stairs to her delight, and yelling down to Mrs. Hudson to get ready. Acting like he's twenty-one again.

Sherlock pauses to clap the kitchen window shut and before he leaves glances at the calendar. There's no mistake. The date is there in stark printed numerals and he feels strangely foolish for having been concerned at all. May 18th.

He steps out, chasing John's heels down the pavement in long easy strides, letting Mrs. Hudson catch his arm and cluck about how warm he'll be in that great heavy coat of his, and he marvels at the back of John's head.

"Penny for your thoughts?" Mrs. Hudson asks him. Sherlock hums.

"Worth more than that, Mrs. Hudson," he muses. He'd tell her gladly, but for now this is his secret. He has no intention of spoiling John's day by reminding him of his own wedding anniversary.

For once he is glad that John is not observant.

John sits in the chair. He's not fidgeting, he's not slumped back like he's here just to tolerate the time- he sits. He's quite calm today, Ella thinks, and she can't decide on the given evidence from John Watson's body language if this is some kind of unforeseen breakthrough or the eye of some unforeseen storm.

They talk, as always, about his sleeping patterns.

"Too much caffeine," John comments, "It's just all the time at work, and then at home's not better." He gives a faintly rueful look at the ceiling, something to do with his sense of masculinity perhaps, as he adds, "I've bought decaff. Tastes bloody horrible."

"I agree it's a good idea to trim back if you feel it's affecting you," Ella replies.

"More water," John comments.

"That too."

They discuss the baby, who is slowly but surely progressing into short sentences of two or three words. "She's still got her best friend at nursery," John says, "A kid from the NCT group. It's cute. I went to collect her yesterday- he's a bit older, Luis, I mean- that's his name, and he was leading her down the carpet by the hand and she was laughing her head off."

The blunt line of his shoulders all but melts at the recollection, and he smiles; a real smile that meets his eyes and makes them light up from the inside. 'He's a mess of a man,' Ella tells herself, only as a reminder to be professional. In fact, she thinks he's doing very well. If he could smile like that all the time, he'd leave a devastated trail of prim ladies across London, Ella thinks. She clears her throat very very quietly, and he still giggles.

'You bastard,' she thinks. 'You didn't mean to do that'. At least, not at first. Now he's clocked her, he's purposefully experimenting, like a cat playing with a mouse.

You're not my type.

'Mine neither,' Ella broadcasts as firmly as she is able, and the moment evaporates, only ever as substantial as summer fog.

"Has anything changed recently, John?"

It's been awhile since they met. He'd come, of course, before Christmas, and then twice more for what had amounted to short non-talks both at the end of February and the end of March, and now it's nearly June. In the courtyard garden, the lilacs are already fading out and the dog roses have started to show their faces. Whatever has changed, Ella puzzles, is not wholly new.

"We got a new kitchen table," John says, "The leg fell off the old one."

He's calm, Ella thinks, calm enough to crack jokes. He's in control; grounded. He's not talking but he's not clamming up either. Perhaps he's got things to say, but it's clear that this time, it's not that he can't say them, it's just not her he's interested in talking to. She leans back in her chair and takes a deep breath. There is no doubt a few hurdles left further down the road but this is ultimately what they've been waiting for.

Time to let go.

Ella caps her pen and tucks it under her clipboard. "Alright," she says, "I think we can call it a day."

John glances at the clock. There's still five minutes on the clock and she's usually keen to keep going right up until the end. He points this out to her.

"That's true," Ella admits, "But I feel like we've covered everything we have to discuss for now."

John half opens his mouth to blurt that he hasn't told her anything at all, and then shuts it again. She knows. Ella, good therapist or incompetent, has always been well aware that he doesn't tell her the vast majority of things he should probably say. It dawns on him how different this session has

felt. Ella smiles slightly.

“You can go,” she says with just a hint of teasing. John stands up, feeling a little embarrassed, though he can’t say why exactly. It’s not even a bad feeling because there’s no guilt to it, nor frustration. Ella seems perfectly at ease.

“Do I need another appointment?” he asks. She’s not nagging him to make one; she’s not even started feeling around for appointment cards as per usual.

“How about this time, we wait and see how things go before deciding that?” The idea is a pleasant surprise to John.

“It’s ok?” he asks, picking up his coat. Ella folds her notes up into his file. She looks up, and her expression is warm.

“Well, I’m basing this on my opinion, but ultimately, it’s your call,” she tells him. “Do you feel happy to move forward without me?”

John takes a short moment to weigh the question in his mind and then he looks at her and his eye is clear and steady. “Yes,” he says simply, without hesitation, “I do.”

Sherlock’s been doing chores when he gets home. The old kitchen table top is propped up outside the door, and the door itself is open, letting the fresh air into the hall. John’s about to go inside when he hears them behind him, on the pavement coming the other direction. He waits for them on the step.

The legs for the table have vanished, and there’s a skip belonging to some other tenant around the corner, so John supposes Sherlock followed through on his idea to dump them in there. He waits, warmed up in the sunshine, feeling at his collar one moment and then folding his hands together in the small of his back.

Bee comes into sight first. The hem of her dress is brown with dust and her cheek smeared with something that John suspects is jam. Mrs. Hudson must have taken her to the corner store, because Bee’s hand is clasped tight around the handle of her own little pink plastic basket- her favourite game. She collects leaves and pebbles and flowers on the way there, ‘shopping’ richly from the hedges and the park, on the condition that it all gets left for the fairies before she comes in the house.

She drops another scattered handful on the path, and then, arms flapping, mouth open in a squeal, comes to him at a run.

“Hello, my girl,” John says, kissing the clean side of her and then scrubbing the jammy side of her with spit and the corner of his handkerchief.

Sherlock follows at a more sedate pace, his arm looped through Mrs. Hudson’s, one of her shopping bags in his hands.

John’s hair is a gleam of silver-blond, the sun making him squint. He grins a welcome.

“Home again,” Mrs. Hudson says, oblivious and apt, and on a whim, Sherlock squeezes her shoulder. She blinks at him in surprise and then, mind on the melting groceries, squeezes between John and the kitchen table to take Bee inside and unpack them.

“Hello, welcome back,” John says, leaning on the doorframe. “You got the legs off ok?”

“Buried them under a carpet,” Sherlock admits. He joins John on the step, leaning just a bit on the opposite frame. John’s teeth show white between his lips.

“What are we going to do with that?” John sticks a foot out to tap the old worn table top.

“Leave it,” Sherlock suggests. “Sooner or later someone will pinch it.”

John agrees, though he grins and Sherlock knows he’s remembering when the damn thing broke, spilling an entire pot of ink into Sherlock’s lap. His own fault, John had pointed out; he’d been mistreating that table for years. It didn’t help that the ink was of his own creation, and that Sherlock is still outrageously blue in certain areas thanks to the fact he’d been wearing just his pyjamas at the time. They’d served no barrier against the spill.

“You were lucky it wasn’t a hot drink,” John comments again, seeing him thinking about it.

“Well, it wasn’t.”

“Nope,” John says, poorly concealing another laugh. “Has it come off yet?”

“Oh, give up,” Sherlock huffs, though the situation is ridiculous and it strikes him as very funny too.

“You know I’m not going to let you off so easily, don’t you?” John warns him, amused and fond and always, still, unrepentantly John.

‘Yes,’ thinks Sherlock. The uncomfortable tightness in his middle has softened. It’s not gone but as with the kitchen tabletop, the flaws have worked into the grain so as to be difficult to find unless you go actively looking for them. It’s familiar and worn down. Sherlock finds himself tripping on the heels of another unexpected thought. ‘I believe that I am content with that’

He allows only the hint of a smile to cross his face. Still trying to save his image, still a little Sherlock Holmes himself even after everything. John laughs, knowing exactly what he’s doing. Sherlock looks away and pretends to make light of it all, body-language a touch flippant.

But he opens his mouth and says it anyway and the feeling slips into his tone.

“I do.”

Chapter End Notes

1) [Honey fungus](#) is a real thing. It really is that astoundingly colossal, and apparently, pretty tasty. If I ever get a chance to try any, I'll let you know what I think. Also, check out that Latin name: *armillaria*. Is there anything more fun to say?

Ahhhmillaaaaaarriaaaaaaa

My princess name in another life.

- 2) Do I need to explain [Dear Zoo](#)? It's a lovely book. The others mentioned are [Each Peach Pear Plum](#) which is a gorgeous book and was one of my favourite when I was a wee Lemonling. Finally the hideous pastel dog plays [Love Makes The World Go Round](#) which was the theme from the 1960's musical [Carnival!](#)
- 3) If you're wondering why Mummy references a male prime minister when we're now um... enjoying? Teresa May, just recall this scene is set in Christmas 2015 when we were still um... enjoying? David Cameron.
- 4) In case you missed it, the inside of of Sherlock's mug says 'Daddy'.
- 5) Not sure this note is necessary but a newel post is like the decorative stump with a thing on the top you get at the end of a staircase.
- 6) 'Duke of Ed.' is more properly called the Duke of Edinburgh Award (DofE), and is a long standing youth programme in the UK. The idea is that you do volunteering, some kind of sport, you learn something and then you do an expedition, and earn a medal for it. It occurred to me that it's the kind of thing that John might have drifted into as it's cheap but challenging. I can't see him doing scouts or anything but St. John's Ambulance and DofE and the structure of it is very Johnnish.
- 7) Hindemith has no relevance to anything in this other than that I see Stamford and his wife being experimental theatre goers and aware that Sherlock likes a bit of German. Also, there really is a performance this year!
- 8) Sherlock's child wrangling approach is an unspecified cobbling together of various techniques and whether or not it has any credentials is up for debate. All I can say is they're trying and doing what they think is best, based on a median of their own childhood experiences.
- 9) Fishpaste is delicious, and I won't hear otherwise.
- 10) The chapter title comes from The Beatles' song ["In My Life"](#), and the working title was "Chapter 13: It's time to acknowledge gayness For. Your. Life! Good luck, and DON'T fuck it up!"

and- that's it! Questions? Comments? Spotted a lingering typo or have a burning desire to tell me about your favourite mug? Leave us a message! Answers guaranteed. :)

-Odamaki

Part 14: It's Been A Long Long Time

Chapter Summary

It's the way John keeps looking at him.

Sherlock feels it right down to the bone- these long, rather unsubtle looks. Calculating. On the one hand it's uncomfortable; he feels a bit examined and he has no way of telling if he lives up to whatever vague criteria John may be looking for, if he's looking for anything at all.

On the other hand, it's flattering. Sherlock feels like art, some days, when he catches the slow sweep of John's eyes by the pricking of his spine. It nudges at his vanity and the temptation to show off all the time becomes increasingly hard to resist.

Chapter Notes

Holy cannoli, an UPDATE- aaahhhhhhhhhh! Big chapter ahead you guys. Make sure you've peed, keep your arms and legs inside the bed at all times while flailing, and ensure nervous pets are in a secure location. I love you all.

Big Squishy Hugs for [Codenamelazarus](#), who read this first and who said (and I quote) 'I AM SCREAMING ON TBE TOULEY. TLILET. FUCK!'

Now there's a review you can't argue with. Notes as always are at the end of the fic.

Bonne appetit!

[-Odamakilock.](#)

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Part 14: It's Been a Long, Long Time.

She's 2 years and 5 months old, and John feels he can declare himself a master of multitasking. If someone had told him he'd one day be able to play with a baby, cook a lasagna and file taxes simultaneously, he'd never have believed them. But here he is, doing exactly that.

"Kishish!" She demands and John at once turns his head to smack a kiss on her cheek. She laughs, bouncing on his hip. He scribbles the pen over the forms he's filling in and casts a quick eye over the potatoes.

She giggles again, "Kishes!" She's clingy today for some reason, and this is a surefire way to get his attention. John obliges her every time, so he can hardly complain.

"Mwah! Kisses," he agrees. He feels a bit ridiculous, but it can't be helped. Sooner or later she's

probably going to discover pink and ponies and he's going to have to kiss goodbye to some of his dogged masculinity anyway. Secretly he hopes she'll pick on Sherlock for those games though. It'd amuse Lestrade if nothing else.

Sherlock swoops into the kitchen, passing behind them, on some sort of mission. He narrows his eyes at the oven, deducing the contents, and then sneaks an arm around John to thief a pen. He's been busy, John knows, though not what with. He's asked but Sherlock has waved him off with 'Not a case.' He assumes it's research. There have been parcels at the door, and emails from professors, and chemical smells from the upstairs bedroom.

"Daddy!" Bee cries.

"Kisses," Sherlock says, not thinking, intent on making a note of his figures as soon as possible.

Not thinking, or rather, thinking only about ISAs, John turns his head and kisses the cheek there. Stubble brushes his lips.

Both pull back and look at each other in complete surprise.

"Sorry," John says hastily. "I got uh..."

"It's fine," Sherlock blurts back.

"Kish!"

John laughs awkwardly, brushes her forehead with his lips despite her complaint. She smacks his shoulder with a fist.

"No Babar!"

For a brief second, Sherlock inhales, and all his great intellect is narrowed to a world where John isn't holding the baby right this second and there is a chance for him to press John boldly up against the refrigerator, touch him shoulder to hip and kiss him until the universe stops.

Until the ticking of the clock stops from the sheer force of Sherlock's will, and the cars on the roads stop and London stops and everything that has ever stopped Sherlock from doing this up till now simply melts away like so much fog and all that is left is this one kiss in this one systolic moment.

And then one heartbeat later, he has exhaled and bent to distract the baby by kissing her ear and making her squeak. John laughs more naturally, and turns away to settle her in her highchair.

When he turns back, Sherlock has turned his back to scribble furiously on the back of an envelope.

It doesn't go away. It's better but the longing remains. Just a passing fancy, even if they do pass altogether too often.

When he turns back, John's straining potatoes, the steam catching under his chin and making the hair across his forehead lift ever so slightly. His eyes, with the bags below them and the lids hooded over them, are inscrutable. That's the worst of it. For all John's transparency, with this John's written in a language Sherlock cannot read.

"Dinner in about twenty," John says.

"Hm."

He'd resolved himself to be content; he'd gotten the ground under his feet, and it had lasted a few weeks before it all shifted again. Something's changed. A nebulous thing in the air, like someone's turned the oxygen up and sent them all mad. Spring fever, if Sherlock were inclined to believe in such things and if it weren't practically already summer.

It's the way John keeps looking at him.

Sherlock feels it right down to the bone- these long, rather unsubtle looks. Calculating. On the one hand it's uncomfortable; he feels a bit examined and he has no way of telling if he lives up to whatever vague criteria John may be looking for, if he's looking for anything at all.

On the other hand, it's flattering. Sherlock feels like art, some days, when he catches the slow sweep of John's eyes by the pricking of his spine. It nudges at his vanity and the temptation to show off all the time becomes increasingly hard to resist.

With regret, he has had no real opportunity to show off. With his resolve to stay sensible iron-clad, and with the need to farm out the basic cases to Billy, he's had little from Scotland Yard to occupy his time. Likewise the client emails have been nothing but dross. A few worth hassling with, and a nice little shooting, but nothing of the type of calibre as the Slashed Isaac.

Hence the bees.

Nothing to do with his daughter- *His daughter. HIS daughter. JOHN'S daughter. THEIR daughter* - Sherlock still marvels at this co-paternity of an actual living person- but the insects themselves. Their small world is wide and complex and delightfully alien.

Parasites!

The behaviour!

It's very nearly as good as murder.

Of course, given the confines of the flat, he's obliged to keep most of the research theoretical, but it's something. John finds it interesting, though he finds Sherlock's enthusiasm for it a touch surprising. He doesn't question it though, nor does he make fun of it. Instead Sherlock comes home one day and finds a package on the table.

"It's yours," John says, before he even opens his mouth.

Sherlock hovers over it, frowning. He didn't order anything of this size lately, which means John must have. Besides, John's doing that face which means he's up to something.

The package has already been opened once- to remove the receipt?- and then lazily folded shut again. Sherlock shakes it open, and a book falls into his lap.

It's a hardback, nice and glossy, with full colour pictures and a close up photograph of a gleaming green abdomen on the front. "Bees of the World", it reads.

"For your project," John says, wiping his hands on the arms of his chair. "You can tick off the ones you've seen."

It's more of a photography book than a field guide; it's hardly pocket sized either, but Sherlock just says, "oh", touched at the thought and opens it. It's organised by continent, and alphabetically by country where applicable. The Americas account for a large portion of the content, with sweat-bees galore. Sherlock slowly flips through.

John picks up his own novel and pretends to read it, pretending not to notice when Sherlock suddenly gives a bark of laughter.

“Really, John?” he says, tickled and half-disapproving. He turns the book around to confront John with his handiwork. Under the title ‘British Bees’, the photograph of a bumblebee has been obscured by a photo of their daughter.

Sherlock shakes his head and folds the book up under his arm, taking it upstairs.

Amongst the journals and slides, the drawers of borrowed specimens and notes, he finds a prominent place to prop it.

It helps to soothe the boredom.

The summer goes on. There are minor cases here and there; a woman sets fire to a car in protest over her father’s ‘accidental’ death. As it turns out, it was murder, but he wasn’t in fact her father. Another week and it’s a man who’d been briefly ‘kidnapped’ by a laughing taxi driver, a situation which Sherlock feels uncomfortably familiar with. Other than losing his dignity and a portfolio of scripts, the man had not been hurt, and within an hour, Sherlock has found the real cab driver, and the students who’d ‘borrowed’ his vehicle. Sherlock takes the time to follow the case to its conclusion, but all in all it’s rather pedestrian.

Instead, the most dramatic thing that happens over the next two months is at home.

It blindsides them both in how quickly it happens. The TV is on, burbling through the news at six, Sherlock alternately picking at his violin and telling John about *apocephalus borealis*, the North American zombie fly, and of his interest in contagions that alter human behaviour.

John listens, shuffling food onto the table and tidying up the debris in the aftermath of cooking a shepherd’s pie. Bee sits in her highchair, already shuffling her dinner into her mouth.

“I knew a guy at university,” John mentions, wiping his hands and gesturing for Sherlock to put his violin down and come to the table. “Came off his bike on a hill- clipped by a car. He was wearing his helmet but his brain got shook like it was a jelly and he had real problems after, but also his personality. He was more aggressive.”

“Concussive trauma?” Sherlock says, sweeping up to the table. He prods at the contents of the plate. Mince and peas, potato and carrot. Tolerable.

“That’s what we figured. He had some issues with fine control; doing his shoelaces and stuff, I mean he was in hospital a while. But he changed afterwards.” John turns to dump the last saucepan in the sink, running hot water in it. “I didn’t much like him.”

“Perhaps he was just showing his true col-“

Something in the corner of Sherlock’s eye catches his attention and makes him break off. Bee’s gone suddenly very quiet.

“His true what? Colours?” John says, looking for the plug in the sink. Bee writhes in her chair, eyes wide, mouth popped open in a wide ‘o’, but no sound comes out. A split second later, Sherlock realises that no air is either.

The shock of the thought is tantamount to pulling out the plug in his brain. His mind goes blank. He's read about this; he knows he's read about this, but the horror of realising that Bee is dying and he's right there and couldn't prevent this has scared the information away.

Heimlich manoeuvre-

-but that's for adults.

Hit the child, his brain manages to scream and a flood of information comes forth. Cerebral hypoxia- Infants suffering from oxygen deprivation often develop disabilities, such as cerebral palsy autism, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), seizures, and behavioral problems. Such conditions often require long-term specialized care including medication, occupational, physical, and behavioral therapies, specialized educational methods, and even home modification. These requirements can be financially and emotionally taxing for many families. This Isn't Helping!

He points, instead and stammers, "C-choke!"

John, turns, observes, and drops everything.

"Move," he says.

Sherlock presses himself back against the cupboards. John rips the plastic clips on the highchair apart and pulls Bee from it bodily. Her eyes are popping, her limbs swimming erratically. Two bright spots have risen on her cheeks in sharp contrast with the bluing of her lips. With his heel, and without looking, John hooks a chair out from under the table and sits.

Bee flops over his lap face down like a rag-doll. John's hand cradles her neck.

He hits her. Once, check, twice, check, three times. The flat of his hand lands again with a muted thud like the beat of a drum. He hits her again. Bee suddenly curls and spits, and there it is on the floorboards, a lump of mashed potato.

Just potato.

Sherlock can't unpeel his grip on the kitchen cupboards. John lifts Bee cautiously and checks her mouth. She's breathing again, long wheezing breaths, eyes screwed up against a spring of tears. John's face is distant and professional, even as his hands cradle her close.

"She's still not breathing right," he says, rising from the chair. "Call a cab. Now, Sherlock." He adds when the man fails to register.

The boards of the stairs strike Sherlock's bare heels as he runs down them, John not far behind. He's stopped only to pluck one of Bee's blankets from her bed.

Grit on the road; hard, warm concrete. The bottoms of his feet will be black with dirt. "Taxi!" Sherlock all but throws himself in front of one. "Emergency," he gasps. The cabbie stares at him and then, taking Sherlock's panic at face value, opens the door.

John comes out, a bundle of pink in his arms. The front door slams behind them- neither has keys.

"St. Mary's A&E," John barks. "Quickly please."

Sherlock squirms onto the backseat with them. "Seatbelts," the cabbie prompts- it's part of his job and he'd hate to see a bad situation turn worse- but he pulls off without waiting for them to fix

themselves.

It's a six-minute drive without traffic, Sherlock thinks, calculating. Except it's six o'clock and the evening rush hour. He banks on it being more like ten, which isn't very long, except Bee's still wheezing.

"What's wrong with her? It came out."

"I don't know exactly," John says, and his professionalism starts to waver. "Maybe she inhaled some or- I don't know but she's going to be alright."

He says these last words firmly. He believes it because he has to, because he refuses to accept a world cruel enough for it to be a lie. He says it, because even though below the veneer he's scared, he doesn't want Sherlock to be scared too. "She's going to be fine."

Bee's face is blotchy. She's crying, but only with effort, and her breath still a horrible whistle. John rocks her, and in doing so rocks himself against Sherlock's side. *It's going to be fine. It's going to be ok.*

Sherlock, atheist, prays that it will.

The cabbie puts his head down and drives. At the A&E drop off, John empties his wallet into the man's hands and, without waiting, strides in through the glass doors. People, even in this busy environment, turn to look at him. John walks like a giant among men, head up, with purpose. "I've got a child here," he announces, "with breathing difficulty."

Sherlock hovers along at his heels. The cabbie has ducked out his car to follow. "Here; your chap gave me far too much," he insists, even though Sherlock is in pyjamas and has no pockets. He presses thirty quid back into Sherlock's palm. "Hope she's ok."

"Yes," Sherlock says, numb.

John's found a nurse, who has paged a doctor, and has a stethoscope pressed to Bee's back right there and then in the middle of the A&E lobby. "Come this way," she says. Thanks to Bee's age and symptoms, they've jumped the queue.

They hustle deeper into the building; long, warm corridors.

"I'm a doctor," John says. "It could be an allergy we didn't know about."

"But she was definitely choking?"

"Yes."

"I'm going to call the children's nurse for you- wait here."

They're left in a booth with a bed and blue curtains. John sits on the end of it, Bee in his lap. Tentatively he feels around her ears and throat.

"She's puffed up," he says, leaning back. "Look at her face."

Sherlock looks. It's not immediately discernible but there's a new softness to the shape of her jawline and the roundness of her cheeks. A different nurse comes back, and Sherlock finds himself trooping back to reception alone to deal with the paperwork.

He stands at the desk, the dorsal of one foot tucked behind the calf of his other leg, rattling off

details to the nurse there, who types them in. His thoughts stay with John, and he hurries back as soon as he's able.

The children's nurse has attached a blood oxygen monitor to one of Bee's small fingers, and John is trying to coax her to breathe into an oxygen mask. She doesn't like it. The smell and the noise of A&E frightens her. Not being able to breathe easily frightens her.

"You're in luck," the nurse says, "It's quiet at the moment so the doctor shouldn't be too long."

"Thanks- I can manage this," John says.

"No worries, mate," the nurse says.

When the doctor comes, it's a young lady with a glittery stethoscope. She's polite but clearly has a lot on her plate. She does no more than John expects, diagnoses a sore throat from the choking, which will pass, and allergic reaction which needs to be tested for, and leaves the nurse with instructions. No overnight stay is considered necessary, especially when John points out his profession.

Together, John and the nurse manage to sympathetically wrestle a blood test out of Bee, who has had more than enough of hospital. Afterwards she flops, quietly weeping against John's chest.

"Poor little lady; you've had a bad night of it," says the nurse, labelling the samples. "We'll get these sent off, see if we can figure out what caused it for you."

"Thanks. It was just shepherd's pie."

The nurse considers. "And she's never puffed up before? Not with dairy or anything?"

"No, she's always been fine."

"What about spices?" the nurse asks, peeling off his gloves. "I've got a cousin allergic to cinnamon?"

"No cinnamon in mash," John says. The nurse has an Australian twang that makes half of what he says sound like a question. Gloves off, the man pushes hair out of his eyes and smiles.

"You know what I mean, mate. Nothing new?"

"Um. Spuds," John says, trying to think. The nurse is wearing green scrubs and cartoon badges. His lanyard has superheroes on it, but his outfit is like a disguise for the well-built man underneath. "Butter, milk," John goes on, trying to concentrate. Overall he respects nurses and this guy is both kind and competent. It's no mean feat to get a blood sample from a distressed toddler, but the nurse has managed it with competence and the minimal amount of stress.

The nurse glances at him; green eyes. Polite expectance.

John stumbles through the rest of his list. "...Salt, mustard. Pepper. I don't think there was anything else. A few gravy granules."

The nurse has a smattering of freckles in the corner of one eye. They must vanish into his laughter lines when he smiles or squints into the sun-

-Or orgasms.

"Did you say mustard?"

“Wholegrain,” John says. He clears his throat and rocks Bee in his lap.

“That could be it,” says the nurse, looking up again from the paperwork. He smiles again and his teeth are film-star perfect. “Not so well-known, mustard-seed allergies, but they’re pretty common in France.”

Sherlock has been on his phone throughout the conversation, Googling. The nurse is correct. He feels better for at least having an idea of what caused it. He searches again, and opens up a space in his mind to deposit the information. He needs it better to hand. He needs to be able to bring up important information like this correctly. He’d remembered too much about choking and not enough about first aid and this is an error he cannot allow to happen again.

“Hmm,” John is saying. “I don’t know if she’s had mustard before. I mean she could have. Sorry, what’s your name?”

“Jason,” says the nurse.

John laughs. “Like Jason Donovan.”

Sherlock pauses at once. He’s heard that laugh before. John’s smooth little ‘isn’t this nice?’ laugh, when he’s trying to be friendly. Sherlock looks up abruptly, in time to see John lick his lips and duck his head to fuss over Bee. What the devil is John talking about? The only Donovan Sherlock knows works at the yard, and this man is as white as the day is long.

The nurse clearly doesn’t think much of the joke either. He gives a forced little laugh. “Yeah, kind of. They call me ‘Ace Jace’ for different reasons though.”

John clears his throat again. His Adam’s apple bobs.

“I should go and get her signed out then. Or you know how it is. A car crash’ll turn up and we’ll be stuck here all night.”

The nurse laughs again, and passes him a form. “No worries. I should just fill you in on the prescription first but-”

“No, it’s fine. Tell him,” John says. He shifts and kisses Bee’s temple. “Go to Daddy,” he whispers in her ear. “Daddy’s got you.”

She slides into Sherlock’s lap and he folds her to him, still faintly indignant. The back of John’s neck, right by the hairline, has gone pink the way it always does when he’s guilty and embarrassed. John lifts his shoulders and walks off, the same walk that once confused Billy Wiggins, and leaves Sherlock with the nurse.

“Alright,” the nurse says, oblivious. Sherlock examines him in hawkish detail. Melbourne-born by the sound of him, with musculature that says both swimmer and gym-goer; natural tan somewhat fading, so only been in the UK a few months. Scars on his elbows- no doubt from boyhood exploits; Sherlock would put money on skateboarding.

And he says ‘mate’, and he’s not ace, whatever John is referring to, and it’s just intolerable.

“So, the doc’s setting her up with a junior emergency pen, it’s like a kind of adrenaline shot you can give her if she starts having a serious allergic reaction again. I mean, at least until the test can figure out what exactly caused it. It’s nice and easy, just find a bit of thigh and pop it in. It’s nothing you shouldn’t be able to handle.”

“I know how to inject,” Sherlock replies. “Just give me the prescription.”

“No worries. Um, there’s a Lloyds pharmacy just outside, but you’re not going to be able to get it filled-“

It’s the kind of comment Sherlock’s been waiting for. “Why not? I’m her father.”

The nurse pauses, taken aback. He glances at Bee and Sherlock has never been more aware of how blonde she is. “Right. Good on you, but the Lloyd’s is going to be shut around now, so what you want to do is go round the back and over the road to Boots.”

The nurse holds out the paper. “Or your husband could do it.”

“He’s not- Exactly speaking. Yes, actually, he could and yes, why not. He’s my husband.”

Sherlock bites his mouth shut against blurting any further misguided nonsense, and the nurse stares. The man has a bead of sweat on his hairline, and the puzzled expression of a heterosexual processing a conversation backwards and tallying up the missed cues.

He holds up his hands once he’s arrived at the score.

I don’t want him.

“I- uh...Don’t take this the wrong way, but I’m honestly not interested. It’s none of my beeswax. I mean...You do you and it’s all cool by me. ”

“Right. Good. Cool.” Sherlock regrets trying the word. He takes the paper and shoves it into his pocket. Illogically now he’s irked at the man’s flat rejection. He’s perhaps not to know that the man with shepherd’s pie on his jeans is Doctor John H. Watson, ex-captain of the Fifth Northumberland Fusiliers and veteran of Helmand Province.

But he bloody well shouldn’t need to in order to be flattered.

“Good luck,” the nurse says, and leaves as fast as possible. It’s A&E. It’s not rude if it’s A&E. Sherlock hefts Bee onto his hip and finds John in the lobby waiting for the doctor’s signature.

“There you are,” John says, glad to see him. “This is taking ages.” He turns towards them; open shoulders, open chest, legs apart just a shade beyond shoulder width, and smudges the ball of his thumb against the streak of tears on Bee’s face. His other hand finds Sherlock’s elbow.

“We’ll be out of here soon, sweetheart,” he says consolingly.

“You could have done all of that,” Sherlock says, while they wait. “They barely did anything.”

“I didn’t want to do it,” John answers. “I wanted to be her dad, not her doctor. Someone had to stick her with a needle and it was going to be scary and painful. I didn’t want that person to be me.”

Sherlock looks thoughtful.

“I can’t hurt her and comfort her at the same time,” John says. “I can’t do two roles, sometimes. That’s how it is.”

“Ah.”

Eventually they get to go home. Sherlock drops money out of his pyjamas and they hammer on the door until Mrs. Hudson opens it for them, clucking and worried. She’d heard them rush off and

assumed it was a case, except no one had called her to look after Bee and with the baby gone too...

"I worried! Is she alright? Poor little duck, how's my baby?"

"She's ok. She's... allergic to something. She'll be fine," John says, letting her kiss Mrs. Hudson goodnight. "Just tired out and ready for bed."

"Probably gone right off of shepherd's pie," Sherlock adds. Little by little they disentangle from Mrs Hudson's worry with promises of a morning at Nana's as soon as she's up to it, and then wearily climb the stairs.

As they enter the flat, John looks at the congealed plates of food still on the counter, the chairs still shoved into disarray and the broken highchair. "You were brilliant," he says.

Sherlock startles.

"Me? I didn't do anything. You saved her life."

"No, you did exactly right. You didn't panic. You didn't- you just got my attention and we got her to hospital really fast. You were fantastic."

It would sound like sarcasm from anyone else but John. Sherlock fidgets, his arms still around his daughter. "You were very efficient," he replies.

This would sound like weak praise from anyone else but Sherlock, but John knows and he smiles, a soft smile that blankets his face.

I'm glad you're here.

John's warmth is almost palpable. He reaches out a hand and touches Bee's back, and while Sherlock finds himself still stood habitually straight, John seems to curve in around them both.

'Like protection,' Sherlock thinks, surprised, and he almost wishes he could detach himself away from his body to check if they look from the outside how he feels on the inside- like they've merged into one unit, rather than three individuals. It's a new and familiar sensation all in one. Once, he'd felt like this with John, after the darkened swimming pool, before his year of isolation.

John's looking at him, with something secret on his tongue that he's trying to say, but he hasn't yet prepared the words. There's not enough immediacy to push them out. Sherlock would give his teeth for a bomb to spur things on.

He doesn't want to mention the nurse when John's looking at him like this. He doesn't want to confuse things more by going off on a wild goose chase for a label and a frequency and all the dirty specifics.

I'm dying to know.

John's stance just says 'mine', but this is one area where Sherlock's forever failed at reading faces. He can't see what John's thinking. Maybe nothing.

What would happen if I-?

John's brows droop. There's a minute lift at the corner of his mouth but his head equally moves back a minute fraction. Slowly he moves his hand up to touch the curls of blonde hair scant inches from Sherlock's chin.

“Bee’s been ill,” John says, soft like an apology.

“I’ll sit up with her. You can get some sleep,” Sherlock replies.

“Are you sure?” John isn’t. He’s not sure he’ll sleep again.

It’s fine.

“Let me sit with her.”

John lingers close, though he understands the plea. His free hand’s found Sherlock’s elbow again, supporting Bee’s weight against his arm. “I’ll leave my door open,” he promises. A glance up. There’s a flash of something.

Now’s just...I’m sorry.

I know. It’s fine.

“Kiss Papa,” Sherlock says. Bee leans back, still miserable, to glean comfort from John. He cuddles her in Sherlock’s arms, soothes his thumb over the place they took her blood. He squeezes Sherlock’s arm.

“Goodnight. Just... call if you need anything.”

You.

Bee whines. “Elbant...”

John fetches the toy and fusses her again, and then realising the constant fussing is keeping her from actually settling down properly, makes himself leave. He cleans his teeth, and allows himself, as he needed to, to relive the evening.

He hadn’t thought when he’d heard Sherlock say ‘choke’. He’d just acted. Instinct, maybe. It had felt good. Amazing, in fact. He spits out toothpaste into the sink and turns on the tap. His heart beats. He’d never want it to happen again, but it had felt so right to react to an emergency again after so long. To win against disaster.

John rinses the brush and leans on the sink, looking at his reflection. He’s neither fat nor skinny, and the grey has blended with the blonde in a way that today seems almost pleasing. His teeth may not be gleaming Australian white, but they’re good.

He has a faint itch; nothing physical. If he were ten years younger and two people less involved with, he’d have a drink and go out. Fight someone.

Or do the other thing young men like doing.

‘Go back in the living room,’ John says to himself. He even comes close to doing so. But from the hall he hears Sherlock crooning to the baby, and can’t bring himself to interrupt. Bee needs her daddy and sometimes you can’t be two roles in the same moment.

‘I need to sort this out,’ John thinks. He slips into his room and leans his head back onto the pillow, listening. ‘Not tonight, but I’ve got to. Or we’re all going to explode.’

He reaches for his phone and for the sake of it, thumbs out a text.

[Bee’s got allergies. We met an Australian version of you today.]

The reply is instant.

[Bollocks. I'm one of a kind.]

Before John can think of anything else, there's another soft ding and another message on his screen.

[Or was his name Bill Murray?]

[Sorry. Jason.]

[No. I'm Bill, remember? Kid ok?]

John laughs under his breath. [She's ok.]

[You ok?]

[Fine.]

[So what's Jason got that I haven't?]

[Huge white teeth]

[Shame. I've got a huge white something else.]

[Yeah yeah]

[No kidding. I've borrowed a caravan.]

John leans back in bed and feels the heat of his phone against his fingers. Sherlock's still murmuring to Bee. John rubs at his mouth and remembers caravans (though he never set foot in one) in the summer, grass under his back, earth under his nails, hustling for the football. The delight of falling on that other boy to wrestle whenever the mood struck. How he'd clung on always just a bit too long. Did Sherlock ever have anything like that?

[What are you going to do with that?] he replies.

[New patient] Bill sends back enigmatically. [He needs a holiday and a nurse. I'm killing two boners with one hand.]

[Not sure I read that bit of the nursing manual.]

[You didn't have to. You're a natural born wanker.]

John can almost hear Bill laughing. 'I met an Australian today,' John thinks, feeling out the idea. 'Who reminded me of you because he was good at his job and I liked him. Because he was good looking and he knew it, and he was straight-forward and I liked him. Because you'd have taken the piss if you'd seen me and made it a joke and kind of unreal. But I'm fed up with joking it away when it hurts people. It's hurting me.'

[How's Sherlock?] Bill asks, when John doesn't reply.

'Hurting,' John thinks, 'because I keep failing to be honest with myself. I like him more than I've liked anyone. In all kinds of ways. '

[He's ok. He's comforting Bee.]

And himself.

'I should be doing that.'

[I've got some pics he'd like from a buddy. Homeless diabetic with necrotising fasciitis in his leg and audible maggots. We think the maggots were keeping him alive by bio-debriding the decay out the wound.]

[He'd love that. Thanks.]

[:) I'll send them at dinner time. G2g. The wife's home.]

[She has you under her thumb then.]

[She has me in all positions. I love it. Night!]

John turns off his phone, lies back and listens.

—

Sherlock settles himself on the sofa, Bee lying across his chest like when she was a newborn. She snuffles into the crook of his neck. She's so much bigger and still so fragile, Sherlock thinks, his hands around her middle. The tips of his fingers can still touch. He thinks she's going to have John's height. He wonders if John was a slight baby too.

"A story," he suggests to her, though she's pretty much asleep. Something for himself then. He dredges up something from his youth.

"O'er the glad waters of the dark blue sea,
Our thoughts as boundless, and our souls as free,
Far as the breeze can bear, the billows foam,
Survey our empire and behold our home."

Bee breathes against his neck.

"These are our realms, no limits to their sway—
Our flag the sceptre all who meet obey.
Ours the wild life in tumult still to range
From toil to rest, and joy in every change."

He pulls her blanket over her back as it rises and falls with sleep.

"Oh, who can tell? not thou, luxurious slave!
Whose soul would sicken o'er the heaving wave;"

Sherlock leans back and lowers his voice to a murmur only they can hear. The street lights intrude but the room is still dim. Looking over towards the mirror he can barely make out his own figure there.

"Not thou, vain lord of wantonness and ease!
Whom slumber soothes not—pleasure cannot please—
Oh, who can tell, save he whose heart hath tried,
And danc'd in triumph o'er the waters wide,
The exulting sense—the pulse's maddening play,
That thrills the wanderer of that trackless way?"

John doesn't sleep except in patches for a few hours. Long before it's really time to, he gets up. He slept with the door open, but Sherlock hasn't moved from the sofa. John didn't really expect him to.

The night's been warm and the flat is stuffy. John comes into the living room, where the drawn curtains are hazy with new light, and pauses.

Sherlock's fallen asleep on the sofa. Bee is a comma against his ribs, one knee tucked up so she can sleep with her bum in the air like she used to when she was only a few months old. She's pushed one arm free of her blanket, and her cheeks have gone a soft rose in colour. One of Sherlock's feet hangs loose over the edge of the cushion.

John leans his elbow on the doorframe, the knuckle of his hand against his lower lip. He wants to go in and join them, but he doesn't want to disturb them. There's a sob of warmth that spreads up from his abdomen into his chest.

'I do love him,' he thinks. 'God, I do.'

John rubs at his lip and wonders. He's written pages about this, which he hadn't kept. He almost wishes he had, just so he could read it again. He wrote about panicking, and his need for control. He wrote about hating change in some respects, particularly in regards to himself, and being afraid of ruining things.

Sherlock would probably have taken one look at it and pooh-poohed each and every idea. John's not so sure. He'd been a capable officer, but never the best. A bit too impetuous, and then he'd got shot. He's a good army doctor, and that much he's proud of and willing to claim, but on the other hand, he doubts he's a good GP. Efficient, maybe, but it's not the same thing.

He doesn't need all ten fingers to count his friends, and while this doesn't bother him, he's broken up many more relationships than that. Not least of them Harry. As for his marriage, that had been a mutual disaster.

'I'm not gambling with this,' John thinks. 'I want to be sure. I want to know.'

Bee grunts, extending a leg. One of Sherlock's fingers twitches. Perhaps he's dreaming. The thought makes John smile.

'But I do love you.'

August comes with regular, firm reminders from Mycroft that Sherlock is beholden to attend his parent's Ruby Wedding anniversary party. Sherlock sneers and deletes each message as it comes but John notices that he makes a point of complaining about them out loud before he does so.

"I think he wants to go," he says to Lestrade, who gives a shrug.

"Maybe he does." He clears his throat, coughs on his beer and then asks, "What are they actually like? His parents, I mean."

John considers how best to describe them. Finally he settles on, "Weird, but in a nice way."

“How weird?”

“They look like they’d collect garden gnomes and then really like them.”

“Right.” Lestrade frowns into his glass. “Ok, not as weird as I thought.”

“He makes dolls’ house furniture,” John remembers, “and they go line-dancing.”

“They sound...er...”

“I know.”

“How the hell did they end up with Mycroft and Sherlock for kids?”

“Who knows,” John answers. “They probably ask themselves that all the time.”

“Are you taking Wiggins along?”

“No, he’s still in the doghouse with Mrs. Holmes after drugging the tea. Molly’s going to go over and visit him this weekend and Sherlock’s leaving him some of his... books.”

“Some of my boring cases, you mean. Yes, I know exactly what Sherlock gets up to with my files, the little bugger. Remind Billy he’s not to breathe a word of anything to anyone.”

“Molly’ll keep tabs on him,” John says, draining his glass. “What about you? Working that weekend?”

“No, actually. Weekend off,” Lestrade says. John looks at him, suspicious of his tone, and his inkling is only reaffirmed when he spots the slow creep of colour up the back of Lestrade’s neck.

“Oh? Busy one, is it?” John asks, smirking. “Should we warn your neighbours?”

“Bugger off. We can’t all be having dirty weekends every which way.”

John’s chuckle fades out into self-consciousness. He clears his throat and is suddenly very interested in the foam patterns inside of his glass.

“Oh,” Lestrade says, staring at him. “Really?”

“I didn’t say anything.”

“Yeah, but-“

“I’ve not said anything. It’s none of your business.”

“Yeah,” Lestrade, agrees, “But, how long?”

“I don’t know- a while!”

“Blimey.” Lestrade looks thunderstruck. “Last person I’d expect to have a dry spell-“

“Yes, say it louder for the people over there,” John snaps, exasperated.

“Really, though? And you’re not constantly —?” Lestrade nods his head to one side in the ‘you-and-I-both-know-what’ signal of men nationwide, and gives the requisite two-tone whistle and hand gesture to match.

“Of course I’m bloody- —ing,” John reluctantly repeats the head jerk and whistle, though he draws the line at the gesture. “I’m not made of... plank. Shut up.”

Lestrade laughs, then finds some sympathy. “Too bad, mate. Too bad.”

“Alright, no need to look like that.”

“Oh, you’ll get through it,” Lestrade says, too smug for John’s liking. He’s trying not to laugh, so much that he can hardly finish his next sentence. “You just have to, you know, keep your pecker up.”

John groans and jabs him with an elbow. “Fuck off.”

“Tut, language!”

John shares a few other choice expletives, because he can, and Lestrade laughs heartily again.

“Seriously though,” Lestrade says, once he’s done, “How come? I’d have thought you’d be all over...y’know.”

“Well, I’m not. I don’t know. I haven’t really since...”

Lestrade looks at him blankly.

“Since Mary, if you have to bloody well know,” John grouches, ashamed.

“Christ. I’m sorry. I am. I thought things were uh... different these days.”

“No. So drop it.”

“Alright.”

They lapse into silence, John awkward.

“Ruby Wedding though; that’s something,” Lestrade says changing the subject. “I turned 47 this year. They’ve been married nearly as long as I’ve been alive.”

John considers this, doing idle maths in his head, and then realises something unexpected.

“They’ve been married two years less than Mycroft has been alive.”. Lestrade processes this.

“Huh.”

“I know. Surprising, isn’t it? I just figured it out.”

“Doesn’t mean anything though, does it?”

“Don’t think so,” John chuckles. “Unless there was some really clever milkman knocking around in the early 70’s.”

“Could’ve been,” Lestrade comments. He tips the remainder of his pint down in a couple of mouthfuls. “Right. Shit. I should get off to work, or Sally’ll be furious. She’s meant to have the evening off.”

“Yeah,” John says, making space on the bench for him to get up. “Thanks for the drink.”

“You’re welcome. Happy birthday and all that.”

“Thanks.”

“Doing anything this evening?”

John smiles, deep and content. “Just dinner at home. Sherlock’s cooking.”

“I’ll warn poison control,” Lestrade jokes. He claps John’s shoulder and sticks his hands in his coat pocket for his car keys. “Have a good one.”

“You too,” John offers, apropos of nothing. He stays for a while to finish his drink. The barmaid comes and takes the glasses with a smile that John returns until his phone buzzes.

[When are you coming home? -SH]

John’s mouth lifts at the corner, blind to anything except the screen.

[Now. Dinner on?]

[Keeping hot -SH]

[Perfect.]

That evening John’s reading to her in the bedroom, in a curl in the duvet on his bed. She’s lying half over his stomach to look at the pictures in the book in his hands, and his voice is low and soporific. Sherlock peels off his jacket and comes to the doorway to listen.

“That is very high, thought Little Nutbrown Hare. I wish I had arms like that.”

Bee giggles and sprawls on her back, arms up to pat at the sides of John’s face, and he smiles.

Sherlock knows the story. It’s one of Bee’s favourites. She likes the rabbits and the drawings. She likes copying the actions. John tickles her toes and she laughs through the thumb in her mouth, pulling it out only to echo the words of the text.

“I lub you.”

“‘I love you across the river and over the hills’, said Big Nutbrown Hare.” John kisses her crown and pushes her curls around. She sighs with contentment and touches the pages as the big hare puts the little hare to bed.

Sherlock keeps himself to the background. John knows he’s there but Bee hasn’t noticed him yet, and he doesn’t want to excite her when John’s got her almost settled already. She’s blinking heavily as John reads through the next couple of pages, deliberately slow.

Around the side of the doorframe Sherlock mouths the words as John speaks them. “-settled Little Nutbrown Hare into his bed of leaves. He leaned over and kissed him goodnight.” John catches him doing it and smiles. He holds up a finger around the side of the book. One minute. His other arm is around Bee, ready to scoop her up and into her own bed.

‘I’ll wait till she’s asleep,’ Sherlock thinks. He can do this all himself tomorrow. Perhaps he’ll take a turn on the morning routine for a change and run up a mess of breakfast before John goes to work. She can be fun first thing, when she’s properly awake and raring to go. Perhaps-

“I love you,” John says, eyes rising over the edge of the book and across the room and straight through Sherlock like a pin. “To the moon,” he says, without looking at the words. “And back.”

At the end of the month they drive down to Sherlock’s parents house in the rental car. Bee is, as always, in the back, engaged with Sherlock’s tablet and the same episode of Peppa Pig on a loop. She’s watched it three times. She loves it. She’s in pig heaven and entrenched in an obsession that they fear is going to last years. John wants to pull his own face off.

“I can’t whistle,” John quotes, despairingly. Sherlock hunches over the steering wheel and glares at the road.

“Can *you* whistle, Suzie? God it’s in my brain. I’m going to go mad.”

Sherlock’s only response is to trill a sarcastic run of notes, birdlike.

“I see you’re already there. Are we nearly there yet?”

“You’re welcome to get out and run,” Sherlock answers.

“You can whistle, because you’re *old*,” John quotes again, staring at the ceiling. Bee giggles madly. John whistles. “Daddy pig is whistling. Please kill me.”

“Delighted to.”

Fortunately before John either cracks or Sherlock kills him, they pull off the motorway and Bee’s silent nasty requires them to stop at the service station. By the time they get back in the car, Sherlock has made the tablet disappear, and she has to content herself with Elbant for entertainment for the short remainder of the trip.

The house is an explosion of activity when they arrive. There are cars clogging the lane, and a young woman in wellies exasperatedly directs them into the field at the back. “Park down the edge away from the pond,” she hollers through the glass at them. “Or you’ll get bogged!”

“Don’t bog the rental,” John agrees. “Who’s that?”

“Cousin something-or-other’s something-or-other. Wife? Sister? I forget.”

John giggles, craning his neck to peer at the fluttering pennant visible above the hedges. “Blimmin’ hell. They’ve pulled out all the stops.”

“It’s not too late to go home,” Sherlock mutters, hauling on the hand brake. The car groans but stabilises on the rough ground. John knocks his arm and clatters out, shaking out his shoulders. He’s looking forward to the party. It’s the one thing that makes it more bearable for Sherlock.

They empty the car of suitcases, toddler and other such necessities, and slog their way around the field gate and down lane towards the house.

“Quack quack,” Bee comments, pointing to the pond, which is devoid of ducks, but then she’s very optimistic.

“John,” Sherlock says suddenly, stumbling on a rut. Bee grabs at his lapels in surprise. “I forgot to tell you- my extended family, they’re-”

“They’re fine,” John interjects, herding him forward with both suitcases. “You’re fine. It’ll be fine.” He catches Sherlock’s panicked look softly. “Promise.”

Galled and comforted in equal measure, Sherlock clears his throat and pushes the small garden gate with his hip.

They are confronted at once with a vertically perambulating table.

“Oh no,” Sherlock says, backing up, wall-eyed with horror at the shoes visible under the edge of the table.

“What?” begins John.

“Hello, hello, who’s that there?” The table booms, “Lend a hand, won’t you? Just grab that end-”

Compelled, John puts the suitcases on the path and reaches down to help pivot the table into a horizontal position. Doing so reveals a woman bearing a strong resemblance to Mummy, and whose combination of gun-metal grey hair flying up in curls from her temples and general front-heaviness gives John the impression of an Atlantic steamer in full chug, about to flatten anything in its path.

“Hallo, Slim!” she says, loud enough to make John reel. “Fancy seeing you come out of the woodwork.” She laughs heartily, and whisks a finger across John’s line of vision like a colour-sergeant. “Heave-ho, let’s plonk this with the others. To me, to you!”

“Oh,” John says, before the table nudges him insistently in the groin and he has no choice but to pick it up and back up according to her direction.

“Left a bit. There’s a boy, and- drop it!” she says, satisfied, once it’s lined up with a ramshackle gang of other tables. She thrusts a hand out over the top of it.

“Aunt Lydia; Dilly to most. Pleasure to meet you. Good strong chap. Who the devil are you?”

“John Watson,” John says, bemused. She pumps his hand and beams.

“Thought so! Didn’t like to say. And how are you, you young troublemaker?” she adds, turning on Sherlock who, with his hands full and unable to defend himself, finds himself hauled down and his cheek firmly kissed. “You’re looking robust for once.”

“Aunt Lydia.”

“And who’s this? Excellent hair, I approve.”

“Thanks,” John says, taking Bee from Sherlock’s arms, and so placing himself between the flustered Sherlock and his erstwhile aunt. “This is Bee. We should go in and get her settled down. She’s not had her nap.”

“Oh well, no doubt we can sort that out. Did you see Tolly in the field? My daughter,” Aunt Lydia throws out for John’s benefit. “Did she warn you about the pond?”

“She did,” John says, trying not to smile.

“Damn thing needs more drainage. Hedging and ditching- Sherlock, have you any idea what Daddy’s meant to be doing with the seating?” She adds, changing tact abruptly. She purveys the tables, hands on hips, as if she can whistle them into order if only she can remember the right note.

“He’s in an awful muckle with the arrangements.”

“Why would I know?” Sherlock asks, taken-aback. “I’ve had nothing to do with the planning.”

“Well you’re clever, aren’t you,” Aunt Lydia says, matter-of-fact. “You could figure it out.”

“He could,” John agrees, earning himself a dark look from Sherlock.

“No, never mind, there’s Mycroft. I’ll ask him,” Aunt Lydia says, pointing over their heads. She waves a hand, which Mycroft, lurking by the gate, spends a full three seconds trying to ignore, to no avail.

“Coo-eee!” She bugles, somehow making the delicate syllables as bludgeoning as a foghorn. Reluctantly, Mycroft soft-shoes over to join them.

“Aunt Lydia,” he says smoothly. “Lovely to see you again.”

“Hallo, Jeeves!” She greets him ebulliently, giving him a smacker on the cheek, which he returns with a dry peck of his own and a frown.

“What?”

“Good heavens, Mycroft. Stick your nose in a book sometime. Your father needs someone to give him a hand putting the tables down in the marquee; you know what he’s like, and John needs somewhere quiet for the baby to nap,” She continues on in a business-like fashion, looping an arm through Sherlock’s first and Mycroft’s second, before either of them can squirm away.

Mycroft looks put upon. Aunt Lydia isn’t perturbed in the slightest. She chortles to herself and prods her nephews in the ribs.

“You’re looking trim these days, Mycroft, and you too, Longshanks- awfully fine fettle. What are they feeding you up in the big smoke?” She talks back over her shoulder to John. “Like Jack Sprat and his brother these two, growing up, you know? One fat, the other lean and never anything in between. Of course, you got that from Rudy’s side of the family, Mycroft,” Aunt Lydia rallies on, despite the ever stonier looks on either elbow. “Always bred big, that lot. Built like cart horses up top, although downstairs- that’s not precisely disadvantageous!”

She laughs raucously and Mycroft casts his eyes to the heavens as though for once in his atheist existence he’s contemplating praying for a smiting against boisterous aunts.

“John, can I give you a tour of the house? John’s never seen it, have you, John? Lovely to see you, Aunt Lydia. As always,” Sherlock says between gritted teeth, disentangling himself and attempting to frogmarch John off by the elbow. Mycroft watches after them with a bilious expression. John would feel sorry for him if it weren’t so hilarious. He risks the wrath of both brothers by calling ‘see you later’ behind them.

Aunt Lydia hoots back a raucous, “Depend on it! No hiding away now, Wills!”

“I can’t believe that’s your aunt,” John splutters once he’s been pulled out of earshot. He’s still trying to hold back his mirth. “She calls you ‘Wills’. She calls you ‘Slim’- She’s- She’s-”

“Horrendous!”

“Hysterical. I like her.”

Sherlock looks offended.

“I like her,” John repeats, not very apologetically. “She’s nothing like you.”

Sherlock looks more deeply offended.

“Not like that, it’s just funny because you’re so different. She’s-?”

“My mother’s sister. Deplorable. I’ve managed to go eight years without having to cross paths with her and now see what you’ve done.”

John sniggers to himself a bit, shifting Bee on his hip. “Alright, let me find somewhere to put the wee one down. I’ll try and save you from your loving aunties, Slim.”

Sherlock splutters.

“Sorry,” John grins. “Couldn’t resist.”

He remembers the house from the previous visit. Nothing has changed except that the air of habitual chaos has intensified. Sherlock lumps the suitcases up the stairs and John tucks Bee into a crib that she’s outgrown but will do for a nap. Mummy catches them as John’s unearthing the anniversary present from the bag and trying to bully Sherlock into signing the card he was supposed to have done days ago.

“John!” She smothers them both with hugs and clean towels and rattles on excitedly about the general arrangements for the party until Bee whines and they’re forced into retreat from the bedroom.

“Lovely to see you’ve made it,” Mummy stage-whispers in the landing. “Almost everyone’s made it, even Myc’s pal.” She raises both eyebrows dramatically and Sherlock chokes. John looks between the two of them, bemused.

“‘Pal’? What ‘pal’? Mycroft doesn’t have ‘pals’. Since when does Mycroft have ‘pal’s’?”

Sherlock barks a laugh that becomes a cough. “Indeed.”

“Well, he’s got one now,” Mummy says, pleased as punch.

“‘PA’, more like. Or he’s brought one of his ‘guests’,” John says, assuming the mystery guest is probably Anthea, though he can’t think of anyone less ‘pal’-like, except for Mycroft himself.

“I got your nice jacket out of the loft as well, Sherlock,” Mummy continues, unconcerned.

“I brought a jacket with me,” Sherlock replies with a frown. “It’s nice enough.”

“Your smart jacket, though. One without burn marks on the sleeves and with both it’s elbows.”

“I dress well! If anyone needs help, it’s John.”

“Excuse me?”

“Yes, but the nice one is navy, and the vicar is here,” Mummy pleads, as if Sherlock has ever given any consideration to the local clergy.

“Uncle Rudy is here as well, I don’t see you chasing him with jackets!”

“Uncle Rudy is a law unto himself and we’ve all had to make peace with that. Besides, he’s got his sensible dress on today.”

“I don’t see why my clothing is suddenly considered any more flashy,” Sherlock continues, annoyed. “Mycroft’s been seen in houndstooth before. *John* owns a velvet jacket.”

“One. One jacket, which is brown and it’s really not- what are you trying to say?”

There is a pause.

“Nothing.”

“There’s nothing wrong with my jacket.”

“No.”

“Or velvet.”

“Wouldn’t dream of saying so,” Sherlock agrees.

“Right then,” John concludes, firm. “Everyone’s got a jacket. Good.”

“Good,” Sherlock echoes, unsure of what just happened.

“And you will wear the navy one, won’t you?” Mummy wheedles. “You look so *handsome* in it.”

“That’s not encouragement anyone wants to hear from their mother,” Sherlock throws back, rolling his eyes and appealing to John.

“We’ll have to see how it matches his trousers,” John says, by way of rescue. Mummy narrows her eyes at him but concedes that she can’t have a patchwork son parading around any more than a scruffy one, and to their relief, she leaves them to get settled.

“So,” John says, when she’s out of earshot. “No elbows and burn marks in the sleeves?”

“Mycroft’s graduation,” Sherlock grouses, stalking around his room. “She’s never bloody forgotten.” He sweeps the jacket from the bed and shakes it at the air.

“Your mother’s right. You should wear that one,” John says, folding his arms.

Sherlock scowls.

“She’s right, though,” John insists.

“She’s never right,” Sherlock complains. “What’s the difference between this and the grey one?”

“Think about it,” John suggests. Sherlock’s eyebrows shoot up and then his frown turns contemplative. John says nothing, contenting himself with unpacking.

Sherlock thinks about it through a cup of tea and all of Bee’s nap, throughout an hour of avoiding chores and just when John has all but forgotten the conversation, he mutters;

“Handsome doesn’t matter.”

John looks up at him from where he’s fiddling with his cufflinks, puzzled expression turning to careful neutrality.

“Never said it did,” he replies. “Do these up for me.”

Sherlock’s thumbs slip on the cotton of John’s cuff, and the slippery metal links. “When did you get these?”

“When you solved Reichenbach.”

John’s hand slides from between his own, and picks up the jacket from the bed again, holding it out. Sherlock pulls it on, dark against the crisp front of his shirt.

John’s mouth ticks up at the corners. It exhilarates Sherlock, and makes him more doggedly rebellious.

“I’m still not going to wear a tie.”

“Never expected you to,” John replies. And he says nothing about the unfastened top buttons either.

“There,” Sherlock announces, “I suppose now I’m ‘handsome’.”

"Oh, you polish up alright," John says, checking they've got cash between them. "Gorgeous George, eat your heart out. Ready?"

"George?" Sherlock says, with an airiness that does little to veil his beating heart.

"George Clooney," John laughs, shaking his head over his wallet.

"Who?"

"Oh you know, the coffee man. He was big in the.. Hollywood, something. I don't know, he's handsome. Supposedly. Getting on a bit."

Sherlock stares at him.

"You look good," John yields. "Shall we go? They'll be starting soon."

"Hm."

John picks Bee up and straightens out the creases in her skirt. Elbant likewise, is prettied up for the occasion with a bow sewn very firmly around his neck. “Is Papa handsome?” he asks her.

She hums around her fingers, more interested in feeling the clips in her hair than John’s vanity. John smooths down the dress again, and hopes it at least stays clean enough for a photo.

Sherlock’s got a second in his pocket, just in case. “Ready?” John asks again.

Sherlock picks up his violin case and tablet from the bed, fills his spare pocket with no less than Zub, a packet of crackers and a packet of crayons and shrugs. “Let’s just get it over with.”

At the top of the stairs, though, he pauses by the full length mirror slightly and then leans towards John and smirks.

"I *do* look good."

The tent hums like a great iced beehive squatting on the lawn. John estimates there must be about a hundred and fifty guests all in all, given the number of cars and the level of noise.

Sherlock reduces their pace to a crawl as they approach, letting Bee lead him by the hand. Her legs stick out from under her skirt like mushroom stalks, pale and chubby. She's fascinated by the bunting, uncertain of it's meaning but with something vague pinging in her limited memory that equates bright colours with family and presents.

As far as she knows, it's all for her.

There are other children. A few lanky pre-teens who scatter as they approach, heels digging into the dirt. Skinny legs pumping gracelessly away with all the energy of childhood, despite the grown-up clobber, licks of cosmetics and phone clutched in one hand.

Younger children too. A five year old lost in the splendour of his own imagination, driving a plastic truck round and round the edge of a table.

The tables under the mushroom canopy are laid and waiting, each dinner plate topped with a folded napkin and a name card, but as yet mostly unoccupied except by those whose feet aren't up for aimless standing. A tremendously old woman squints and gums at John as he passes, says 'Henry' to herself with great ambiguity, and then forgets he exists.

"Big crowd," John comments.

The crowd is mingling. A hodgepodge of florals and summer suits, spiced up with eccentricity. John eases Bee around a man in cowboy boots and spots, at a distance, a man who can only be the egregious Uncle Rudy, of whom John had only had a vague and (he can now see) somewhat uncharitable vision of in his head.

The man is striking.

Sherlock steers them away.

From somewhere out of sight- the neighbour's field perhaps, John catches the smell of something cooking. There's the pop of a cork and an unsmiling girl in black and white passes with a tray of empty glasses. John tracks her progress towards a table by the canvas wall, loaded with bottles.

"D'you want a drink?"

"Later," Sherlock says, stooping to pick Bee up onto one hip so she can see something other than knees.

"Water?" John offers.

"Please."

John weaves through the people, feeling anonymous, and joins the muddled queue for drinks. He's in the process of tipping water from a jug into a highball, when a comment in the crowd makes him look up.

"Can you pass that tonic?"

It's not directed at him, but the voice is unmistakeable. John turns his head and stares. A middle-aged woman reaches across the breadth of the table and picks up a bottle, passing it to the man who's spoken, whose head is down concentrating on tipping a double measure of gin into a glass.

“Lestrade?”

Lestrade’s head jerks up, guilty for a fraction of a second before he grins to hide it. “John.”

“What the hell are you doing here?”

“I was invited.”

“By *who*?”

“Who d’you think. Want this?” Lestrade offers him the tonic.

John narrows his eyes. Not Sherlock. Not a chance. He’s about 80% sure of that. So if not Sherlock then must be. “Mycroft.”

“No, tonic,” Lestrade jokes. He puts the bottle on the table. “Don’t drink neat gin, John.”

John takes the bottle. “You’re not... working here?”

“No,” Lestrade laughs. “I told you. I’m a guest.”

“Oh.”

“Sorry?”

“No,” John says, taken aback. “It’s nothing to do with me.”

“That’s true,” Lestrade says, taking the initiative and pouring a scant measure of tonic for John. “Cheers.”

“Does Sherlock know you’re here?”

“He does now,” Lestrade says pointedly. He indicates over John’s shoulder with his chin and John looks and sees Sherlock, Bee still perched on his hip, talking to his brother.

Or arguing. It’s not yet shouting anyway.

“Christ.”

“Shall we go and help keep a lid on things?” Lestrade suggests, but John’s already heading over.

“-Even for you,” Sherlock is saying as they approach. Mycroft sniffs, and throws a glance at John sidelong. Lestrade steps to the side of John and like that they’re stood in pairs, facing one another.

‘This is weird,’ John thinks.

“Mummy insisted on a plus one and Anthea’s got time off,” Mycroft says, his tone stiff with lies. “I see you brought John.”

“Of course I brought John. It wasn’t even a plus one. He got a *named* invitation.”

Mycroft sneers. Sherlock makes a noise like the verbal equivalent of sticking his tongue out.

“How charming.”

“Lovely,” Sherlock agrees, bursting with disdain.

“Chuffed,” Lestrade cuts in. “Your mother wants a word.”

Mycroft narrows his eyes. “No she doesn’t.”

“You sure?” Lestrade asks.

“Papa,” Bee says, reaching out to pull John’s elbow. It breaks the tension like a knife through a cord.

“Hold on sweetheart,” John says, making Sherlock take his glass of water and putting his gin down. She wriggles as Sherlock steps close to pass her over, shoulder to shoulder with John. John puts a hand under her rear and then pats it.

“She’s damp. Couldn’t you feel that?”

“She was sitting on my jacket,” Sherlock says, craning his head and feeling at his pockets. “I’m dry.”

“She isn’t,” John says. “We should have brought the bag down.”

“It’s in your room.”

“I’ll be back,” John says, looking at all three of them in turn. What he means is ‘Don’t start a brawl without me.’

Mycroft clears his throat. “Perhaps I’ll check on the... catering.”

“No doubt you will,” Sherlock says. Mycroft sneers again, but removes himself from the conversation at last.

Left alone, Sherlock and Lestrade eyeball each other. Since the day Sherlock found him in Mycroft’s flat, they have been ignoring the situation as much as possible.

“He’s just toying. He’ll barely bother to see you after this,” is Sherlock’s opening shot.

“Well I’m busy usually, so, so what?”

Still at bay, Sherlock switches to goading. “He’s a hog.”

“Cut it out.” Lestrade’s tone is immovable. Sherlock grinds to an abrupt halt before it, startled. The other man levels an eye at him in spite of the height difference and there’s an edge to it. “I mean it. I know you both like to go at each other like a couple of bloody terriers, but I don’t recall him ever taking the piss out of your coping method. Cut us some slack.”

“Well!”

“Well, nothing.”

Sherlock is quiet for a moment. He knows what he’s doing with his needling, and it’s a surprise to learn that Lestrade does too. He knows exactly what the score is, and somehow that Sherlock doesn’t mean to be cruel either. Lestrade watches the pulse point in his jaw judder before Sherlock opens his mouth and concludes with what he’s been thinking all along.

“You deserve far better.”

“Maybe,” Lestrade agrees with a shrug. “I think that’s for me to decide and anyway,” he softens to

his usual demeanour, so easy to underestimate. “If I’m a very lucky boy, he might get there too, one day.”

The hidden praise catches Sherlock blindside. “Oh.”

Lestrade’s lips split into a sudden grin. “I’m going to give it a bash anyway.”

“I really,” Sherlock answers emphatically, relieved to be back into the joke and away from the real emotion. “Have no desire to know *anything*.”

Lestrade gives a great ‘ha’ of laughter at that and claps his shoulder in a grasp that lingers a moment in fraternity. “You know what’s a laugh? They’ve put me down with John and your cousins, and you two on the top table. I’ll wave.”

“The hell they have,” Sherlock says, alarmed. “I’m not sitting next to Mycroft all afternoon.”

“Thought not. I swapped them around.”

“Good man,” Sherlock says, vaguely. He’s always liked Lestrade, but a Lestrade who sneakily mucks around the seating arrangements to his advantage is a new idea. Maybe his association with Mycroft has some benefits after all.

“Have a good one,” Lestrade says, and with that he ambles off, hands in pockets, his shirt coming untucked at the back.

‘An enigma,’ Sherlock thinks, watching him go. ‘How very unexpected people are.’

Not least John, although he is predictably bull-dozing his way back across the tent to him, after what must have been the fastest British Army standard nappy change in all of Bee’s short life.

“Daddy,” she says, looking slightly stunned.

“Still in one piece,” John comments, looking him up and down, relieved. “Are the others?”

“Yes,” Sherlock replies, ruefully. He swaps John his gin for his baby and lets her clap his puffed-out cheeks with her hands. She gurgles with a laugh.

“Bit of a surprise,” John says. Sherlock looks at him.

‘He’s angry,’ he notes, which is curious. John is. A low-level fume, but unmistakeable for what it is. It’s the same contempt and hurt John usually reserves for himself. Strange.

Why?

John represses it, however, gulping back a mouthful of his drink and shuddering. The party fizzles on around them, spiked with laughter. It’s not a place to be bitter.

“Shall we find our seats?”

If anyone notices the switcheroo with the name cards, no one says anything. By the time the meal actually starts, the crowd is pretty well lubricated with preprandial gin and tonics, and more interested in nibbling on a bread roll than arguing about seating. That’s to be saved and savoured later, once the foods gone down and the comfortable squabbling over old resentments can begin.

John cossets Bee into a full body apron to save her posh dress from getting too swampy with lunch, though smearing around the edges is inevitable. She shares their meals, alternating between picking peas off of the plastic highchair tray and leaning over to grasp for another interesting dainty.

Sherlock, unconsciously similar, drops forkfuls of fish in front of her between absent portions pushed into his own mouth from not only his plate but John's too. He jiggles his knee under the table, eyes roaming around the marquee, wary.

"Relax," John says, bumping his leg under the cloth.

"I am," Sherlock says automatically, still hawkish.

"I don't think anyone's going to drop dead."

"More's the pity," Sherlock answers, a touch too loud. The cousins shuffle themselves a bit closer together on the other side of the floral centrepiece and start discussing mortgages.

John supposes it is sort of a pity.

Dessert is an enormous cake in a cape of golden yellow icing, dotted with crimson flowers. "Poppies," Sherlock says, digging the tines of his fork into the tablecloth.

"Why poppies?"

"Daddy and Mummy and something or other. Sentiment. I don't remember."

"Relax," John breathes again. He passes Bee a portion of his cake. "Share with Daddy."

"He's got his own," Sherlock says, distracted, and then when Bee's outstretched hand waves in front of his face, at once eats the morsel offered.

"Fishy," he comments. "Thank you."

"Here, see if she wants any of the fruit salad," John suggests, swiping a bowlful from the tray going around and the cream from the cousins. He passes Sherlock the bowl and leans his elbows on the table carelessly to watch as Sherlock breathes and stills, his attention focussed on passing Bee one grape at a time.

Over the flowers and the fascinators of the cousins, John inadvertently meets Lestrade's eye again. He's sat on the very end of the top table, practically up the wall of the marquee, Mycroft at his elbow. Mycroft has his eyes down, slowly working through a slice of cake in silence.

Lestrade raises his glass slightly, and John lifts his in return. The motion makes Mycroft glance up at Lestrade.

Across the bustling marquee, John can't hear when Lestrade says, and he puts his hand half across his mouth before he speaks anyway. Mycroft shrugs and tilts his plate slightly towards the other man and waits while he removes a pinch of the cake with his fingers.

"God," Sherlock says, in disgust.

John pretends not to notice, pretends to focus on wiping Bee's hands clean. He says nothing when later, without thinking, Sherlock helps himself to the discarded curl of icing on John's plate.

Mr. Holmes beams affably at the crowd in the marquee. He raises his glass to the left hand side of the tent to be greeted with a good-humoured cheer and then repeats it on the other side. Next he pauses and appears to have forgotten why he's stood up in the first place.

"He's stalled- Give him a swat, Mummy!" Some wag, who can't be under 60 himself, calls from the back. From someone with a beard that bushy, the moniker should be somewhat disconcerting, however, John has come to realise that to almost everyone present, Mrs. Holmes is known as 'Mummy', without affect and with nothing more than old-fashioned eccentricity.

"Cousin Jeremy," Sherlock confides under his breath to John. "No less than four illegitimate children."

"Friends," Mr. Holmes begins, "And family. It is my great pleasure to see you all, and to thank you all for coming all the way to join us today, in our little marquee." He pauses again to give the white canvas a friendly sort of pat. "Awfully good price from Erwins, incidentally, for weddings and things. Popped the whole thing up in a hour too, which I thought-

"-Was very quick, yes. Daddy, do get on," Mummy warns him.

"-Was very quick. Right, ah, where was I? Oh, yes, of course."

Next to John, Sherlock is sliding down in his seat, cringing with second-hand embarrassment while conversely the rest of the audience is perking up for what is seemingly going to be an excellent bit of unintentional comedy.

"Almost as good as your speech," John whispers to Sherlock, who gives him a withering look which says, roughly, 'MY speech capped off with a murder, made people cry, and inspired you to hug me in public. It was streets ahead of this piffle, thank you very much. Besides. Wait.' Or at least, that's what John paraphrases from the look.

John folds his hands over his stomach and chuckles to himself.

"Marriage, is, I believe, so much more than the joining of the lives of two people," Mr. Holmes continues, working through his words with great care, although it's possible the carafe of champagne on the table is in part responsible for that.

"Forty-seven years ago, I had the most stupendous luck I have ever been subject to in my entire life. I was chasing an errant hound down a country lane and there at the end of it was a car, and next to the car was a young woman. My first impressions of her were very simple. I was first and foremost struck by her unbelievably enormous pair of-

Sherlock makes a pained noise.

"-Shorts, which, as I have never forgotten, were polka-dotted," Daddy went on blithely, completely innocent to the barely-restrained, boozy tittering making it's round of the marquee.

"This singularly remarkable young lady was jumping up and down on a tire jack, as the wretched thing wouldn't turn, and being a well-meaning young man in the first flush of summer, I naturally was compelled to stop to, uh, and uh-

"-He stopped to help me," Mummy supplies, looking up at him fondly.

"- to admire her bosoms," Mr. Holmes continues, taking both the swat and the outburst of laughter beatifically. "Which I still find fantastic, incidentally. Oh, I say!" he breaks off, the second swat having evidently been more enthusiastically administered than the first.

John notes Mycroft's exasperated expression, its twin currently being hidden behind Sherlock's hand, and has serious trouble with not folding up in hysterics.

"I shall take your glass away," Mummy threatens with a twinkle in her eye. She enjoys the compliments but it wouldn't do not to pretend otherwise.

"At any rate," Mr. Holmes persists, smiling at her, "Who I met that day, though I didn't know it then, was so much more than one exceedingly gorgeous young woman. I had, to put it simply, met my family." He stops, blinking and looks across the marquee. "Many of you know, of course, that between us here today, there are so many absent loved ones. Less of you, perhaps, know how many of them- my loved ones- you were never given the opportunity to meet." He closes his smile, and genteelly inclines both head and glass in a silent toast. Others here and there raise their glasses and grey heads in response, and together they drink.

Mr. Holmes clears his throat.

"When we marry, we take into our lives a sum of people so much greater than our relationship alone." He breaks off again to regard the mob in the marquee and when he starts again, his speech is punctuated with small lifts of his glass towards the different factions around the tent.

"We gain... new parents, new siblings and cousins. Marrying my wife has brought me new friends and colleagues and neighbours through the years in an unceasing array of diversity. Forty years of marriage, of love and of ageing together has brought us to this; our very own association of the most wonderful people I am privileged to know; mutually maintained and mutually complained over. Marriage in all its forms is an end to isolation, and it sometimes strikes me very deeply just how quickly it was that... she taught me how not to be lonely."

John glances to Sherlock, who has stopped pulling faces and instead started pleating his napkin into introspective, mute little folds. Warmly, John reaches out and squeezes the back of his neck in lieu of more overt affection. Sherlock's lips twitch.

"And of course, more than anything, we have been blessed with our children. Not a road for everyone, but one we, as do so many young couples, ventured down with foolhardy willingness and utter naivety. Yet, today, we are both honoured to be the parents of clever, accomplished men who have overcome every hardship life has thrown at them- and some very difficult hardships indeed. We could not be prouder."

The muscles of Sherlock's neck flex under John's hand as the man looks up, his face a picture of surprise at this unsolicited praise. Without thinking about it, John gently digs his fingers in again; it's both a reminder that he is there and an agreement with Mr. Holmes' words.

Across the marquee, Greg is grinning as Mycroft mirrors Sherlock in complete astonishment. John meets Lestrade's eye and the older man chucks his head towards Mycroft as if to say 'Cop a load of these idiots.'

John supposes they are, just a bit. Sherlock has always seemed peripherally aware of his family's affections for him, but typically he takes it in his stride and dismisses it, perhaps without ever letting the effects of it percolate fully through his thick layer of defensive pride and thin skin.

Having it laid out like this, in front of everyone, seems to make the sentiment hit home.

Mycroft's voice is a little low as he fumbles his champagne flute from hand to hand and speaks, embarrassed enough that he forgets his usually impeccable grammar.

“Which wouldn’t never have been possible without the constant love and support of you both,” he manages through a blush; in a rush; and Sherlock surprises them all with a sudden and loud, “Hear, hear!”

Mummy glows at him, one hand in her husband’s.

“See,” she says, happily, “Nowadays, they sometimes even agree.” This gets a laugh from those who have ever had the misfortune to be in the same room as the brothers for any significant period of time.

Flustered, Sherlock reaches for the coat collar he isn’t wearing to turn it up, tugs futilely at his shirt instead and then leans to fuss needlessly over the toddler. She bats him with her toy bee and laughs; her little voice raucously happy, accusing him of being, ‘Silly Daddy’.

“We, or at least I, have never been able to keep up with them,” Mr. Holmes says, and there is true warmth in his voice as he watches Sherlock gently brush the fluffy bee antennae against the baby’s nose to shush her. His mouth wobbles briefly, until he manfully gets it under control again.

“Children come into your life as little strangers, and they stay strange, uh, in my experience, for almost forever, and you’re left there, completely flummoxed as you scratch your head and wonder where that crater in the lawn came from, but-“ he waves a hand dismissively.

“I’m digressing. As I was saying before, marriage is about connections. Mummy and I have been very blessed. Our sons, Mycroft and Sherlock have brought yet more people into our lives and we can stand here today, after forty years, with the profound sense that this marriage and this family, will only ever go forward. So I’d like to propose a toast-“ He raises his glass for the last time.

“To kith and kin.”

The toast is taken up as a rumble around the room, with a tinkle of glass as people nudge glasses together. John murmurs the words and turns in his chair towards Sherlock and their daughter. “To family,” he agrees.

He can’t help but notice the way Sherlock’s whole expression flutters, from his lips to the dark lashes around his eyes as he looks down suddenly.

“Yes,” he says firmly, a moment later when he looks up again. He doesn’t clink his glass. Instead he touches their knuckles together where they are each holding the bowls of the flutes.

“To family.”

Bee has gone limp with sleep, sprawled slack-jawed against John’s shirtfront. John rocks her, quiet; content. The party bumbles on around him, tables shunted aside, final cups of coffee drained and dinner digested.

He people-watches.

He’s been introduced to the dogsbody cousin, Tolly, who has the same sort of efficiency boiling under the surface, but unlike her mother is quiet. She’s saving for entrance money to a riding competition, John is informed, which is why she’s in charge of logistics at the party, and apparently also baby-sitting the youngest relatives.

The rest he still doesn’t know, but as it turns out, neither does Sherlock. Mummy and Daddy’s

swathe of friends is vast and varied. Some are antiquarians, others from Mummy's academic work, others again from their line-dancing lot. They're nice people, by and by, but no one stands out to John.

Roughly in the middle of what will become the dance floor, Daddy is still in his element, mon bonhomme, and genuine about it. He's as tall as Mycroft but age and a habit of stooping to appear less intimidating have robbed him of their stature. He's got Lestrade in a conspiratorial knot of other grey haired gentlemen. Trouble brewing, John suspects.

Mummy circulates, moving from one conversation to the next making introductions and swapping jibes. In her wake she leaves different conversations in different configurations. In contrast, her eldest son also circulates, but passes through each one like a ghost.

Mycroft operates on autopilot. John can see it because he's sat so far away. The man makes conversation, holds his glass, smiles, comments, and keeps the ball rolling without being actually present at all. Only once he sees a woman pull her head back from him slightly and John would put money down that Mycroft said something only Mycroft could say, dry and sharp. Poor idiot. She has no recourse to argue, it would have been too pithy for her.

He feels a little flare of petty fury again. It's an anger from his gut and totally ill-founded. Had he known about Lestrade and Mycroft and their... situation, whatever it was, would he have said anything? Done anything differently? Felt differently? Reacted to Harry differently?

Probably not.

But it might have been a comfort to know.

Lestrade's been married too- they've got that much in common and more besides, though John knows enough to be cautious about assuming too much without asking.

It is actually a comfort to know. Or it will be, once he gets used to the idea.

He glances back over to where Lestrade is in the middle of a round of scotch, and then back to Mycroft, oiling away from another round of small-talk. They're not a very likely couple, John thinks. He can't imagine them working together, or living together. He can't imagine Mycroft acting as a step-father to Lestrade's daughter. He can't picture them sharing a joke, even. Not like-

Well. He just can't. Lestrade's got a warm sense of humour, Mycroft a mean one. In fact, that's just it. He can't see Mycroft in a relationship. He's too competent and self-reliant. Mycroft seems to be able to function alone, unlike-

John doesn't finish the comparison. There is no comparison.

Sherlock sticks out from the crowd wherever he is, six foot of stiff pride, lost. The other people migrate from one party of small talk to another. Sherlock stands like a stuck pin in the middle of the board, like the gangrene coloured statue in a village square, and they all rotate around him.

His otherness is palpable; arrow-straight back, hands tucked in against his spine. John doesn't have to see his hands to know that the thumb is twiddling restlessly against the locked fingers. His head jerks from one focus to the next, unable to decide where and with whom it is appropriate for him to exist.

John's on his feet already.

He can't go fast, he can't elbow people aside but they part around him with the same unconscious

flutter of a shoal of fish avoiding a predator. When they don't, he says, "Excuse me" and they melt from his path at the sight of Bee, his lucky charm; a people repellent.

When he reaches Sherlock he says nothing, just slots Sherlock into the space beside him and like that, they're their own group in their own bubble, the same as everyone else.

"Past bedtime," Sherlock comments.

"Just a bit," John agrees, checking on Bee. Her cheek is a round wrinkle against his shirt. He hitches her a little closer, arms starting to ache. "It was a busy day. Lots of new things."

Beside him, Sherlock sighs, eyes roving.

"How many others do you have to talk to?"

"I calculated I'd have to put up with four or five of the more prominent people, and the Professors came in a clump so, I suppose... one."

"Just one?"

"One of the significant ones," Sherlock clarifies.

"Hi," John offers. "Gosh, it's been ages."

"Well," Sherlock says after a pause, groping for a script. "It's been a while."

"Years," John says. "What are you up to these days?"

"Oh," Sherlock loosens from the shoulders down, "The usual."

"Really?"

"A few changes," Sherlock admits, turning towards him a fraction. "Nothing much." He considers and then, enunciating, glibly he adds, "Kicked the habit."

"That's good," John says, swaying with Bee. He smiles at the joke, and smiles because it's true, it's good. He's proud of Sherlock. He hitches Bee's weight again. "Any lucky ladies in your life yet?"

"Just one. Perhaps not terribly lucky."

"Bet she is," John counters, promptly.

"Probably more than I deserve."

"No," John shakes his head. "Can't see that. Dead wrong."

"Oh." He's more pleased than he knows how to show.

Someone taps on a microphone and the speakers crackle into life around the marquee. "One two, one two. Testing." The sound is a fuzzy growl and the sound clicks off again. Bee's fingers curl up and she squirms.

"We should take her in," Sherlock says. It's going to be a loud party. Even if she were awake, it would be too loud for her. "Put her to bed."

John sways her till she goes still again. There's a turquoise shiver of light against the wall of the tent. It's growing slowly darker outside. Against the falling evening temperatures, the canvas breathes against the heat of the people, like curtains.

Sherlock remembers dancing with John, back and forth across the carpet. John remembers it too.

"We can come back out," John says. He knows Sherlock isn't interested in parties, or in the people, he knows he won't want to talk to anyone of his own volition. John doesn't suggest it. "Finish off the night," he offers, instead. Leaving the invitation open. "Bit of music?"

The lights pulse as the DJ tests the system and the veins in their throats do likewise.

"Alright," Sherlock agrees.

It's dark now, and the lower floor of the house is lit up at one end where the pre-teens are conducting a party of their own in the living room, under the eye of cousin Tolly. It's Sherlock who passes her the baby monitor and takes Bee upstairs.

"She usually sleeps right through," John tells her, trying to ignore the eleven year olds giggling at him behind Tolly.

"It's cool. I can come get you if she wakes up or anything."

With nothing else to do, John helps Mummy go about the garden setting up giant citronella candles. She gives him a piece of spaghetti to light them with. Gradually the flowerbeds light up like Wonderland, the flares flickering and their bamboo holders vanishing in the shadows so that the flames look like they are merely hanging in mid air.

She stands back after they get the last one stable in the ground and lit and plants her hands on her hips with a small noise of satisfaction.

"There, now that looks rather nice, don't you think?"

John's gaze goes back across the dark lawn, lit by the splashes of colour leaking out from the disco just warming up in the marquee. Moths skitter helter-skelter across the garden, going mad for the sparkling of the fairy lights strung in the trees, and with the flames, everything is rather magically muddled and indistinct.

A figure detaches itself from the tent in the gloom, merely the outline of a person, however John still recognises Sherlock. He pads across the grass unerringly towards John, and the various lights wink off of the wine glasses he's holding.

"Yeah, it all looks fantastic," John replies.

They avoid the party while still being in it. Two chairs behind a table makes a comfortable barrier between them and unwanted conversation. Some people leave their coats beside them, but neither man begrudges that.

They talk when the booming of the music allows them to. Sherlock names names which John promptly forgets, and tells anecdotes about the people. John tells him about once having to operate

on a pilar cyst as the forwarding base didn't have a dedicated dermatologist. He tells him how if you're lucky, you can get them to pop right out of the scalp like a peeled lychee. Sherlock is fascinated. They complain about the music until it changes, and then they complain some more. John, in his seat, demonstrates the Boat Dance for Sherlock's education, and laughs heartily at Sherlock's disgust. John pilfers a bottle and refills their glasses, and they rehash an old conversation about guns, about new technology, about standards

After a while they just lean back into their chairs and mellow.

There are women on the dance floor- the daughters of his mother's committee friends- blonde and brunette and willowy. Nice girls, and smart enough. They dance together in a bit of a gaggle, sometimes flashing the men around the edges of the dance floor a glance; Sherlock hasn't missed how John sometimes glances at them back; their breasts and legs, with an unreadable question in his eyes.

"You could go dance," Sherlock says, eventually.

John shakes his head with a laugh, "Me? You're the one who likes dancing. Don't let me stop you."

"Go on," John urges, when Sherlock doesn't move. "I'm sure one of them will, if you want to."

Sherlock looks them over and then turns his head to look at John, the pink and gold lights of the disco flashing off his curls, and John reads loud and clear in his expression;

I don't want them. I want you.

And then Sherlock breaks convention and says it aloud. Over the throb of the music John can't even hear his words but he sees the movement of Sherlock's lips.

"I want you, John."

They are already close; they squashed their chairs together to take mutual advantage of the shadows in the corner, to avoid conversation other than that which they chose to speak into each other's ear. The song that is playing is fast, and John's heart pounds like a metronome, keeping time. Likewise, Sherlock's eyelids flutter as he drops his gaze to John's mouth.

John's lips are parted slightly, his teeth showing white as the lights revolve, sliding over them even there. His tongue slips forward a fraction, dabs his lower lip and makes it shine. Sherlock can't look away; it's like the seal on an invitation.

There have been so many false ones over the years, all John's blind little actions, except this time he lifts his chin a fraction, and when he exhales his breath mingles with Sherlock's. His hand is relaxed around the stem of his glass, his eyes seemingly shut as his focus drops to Sherlock's mouth. Sherlock can make out each of his eyelashes; and will remember how they looked in the peacock lights of the disco for as long as he lives.

John's shoulders drop slightly; it opens the breadth of his chest and Sherlock's hair lightly tickles his forehead as he closes the distance to mere millimetres. The DJ distantly burbles some nonsense into a microphone that makes him sound like he's underwater, and they are both deaf to it completely.

They breathe, taking turns. John can smell Sherlock's aftershave; he twitches a hair's breadth to one side, and as the track changes, slows, Sherlock kisses him.

It's like air.

John's eyes slide shut, they find the angle. Both kiss slow and still; a chase is unnecessary after so long. Sherlock opens his mouth to the smooth slide of lips, a strange contrast to the texture of the tablecloth under his fingers. Plastic confetti catches under his nails and flicks away as he slides his hand, and one hand alone, forward. John's fingers are damp on the stem of his glass. He leaves it in the crook of his thumb as he opens his hand up, and their fingers dovetail around it.

They are deaf to the music and blind to the lights. The tips of their thumbs touch. After a moment, so do their chins, then noses and it's no longer a kiss but a press, face to face. John exhales, a weight against Sherlock's cheek and only then does Sherlock close his eyes. It's only when John bumps his forehead a fraction trying to find his lips again, that Sherlock feels gravity unravel.

The music swells.

Sherlock soars.

On the other side of the room, Mycroft leans over to report into Greg's ear over the din of the music. "John and Sherlock are kissing."

"What?" Lestrade shouts back, leaning back to hear him. Around him is the scattered remains of a considerable booze-up from which he's the last man standing. Daddy has long since been shuffled away by his wife and the other old soaks similarly mopped up by spouses and sons.

"Kissing!" Mycroft repeats. Lestrade grins at him sloppily and pulls him down by his tie to plant a rather wet, drunken snog on him. It is the sort of thrilling behind-the-bike-sheds sort of kiss Lestrade was no doubt king of as a teenager; mostly tongue and enthusiasm.

Mycroft owlishly blinks and wipes his mouth after.

"Lovely," he says, "Thank you for that."

Lestrade grins at him, chuffed with himself. "More where that came from, Shunshine."

"Gregory Lestrade, you are as drunk as the proverbial skunk."

The other man contemplates this suddenly. He gives a solemn nod. "Yes," he says slowly, still pleased with the general proceedings. As far as Mycroft can tell, the whole world must be looking pretty rosy to Lestrade right now.

Lestrade holds up his thumb and forefinger for Mycroft to see. "A liggle," he confesses. "I'm a very liggle frunk."

'Useless,' Mycroft thinks, brushing the hair back from Lestrade's face. "You are going to have so many regrets in the morning," he sighs. "Time you went to bed, I think." On cue, Lestrade puts a large warm paw in his, full of trust, and allows Mycroft to lever him to his feet.

He teeters heavily into Mycroft as they leave, stumbling down the steps of the podium. Under Mycroft's hands his ribs rise and fall with each breath, his shirt damp beneath the arms with sweat, his mouth ripe with the smell of whiskey, and still he's warm and stabilising against his side. He gives Mycroft another messy grin once he's on the solid ground on the edge of the dance floor, and it's a smile full of something that makes Mycroft feel rather miserly.

“You’re dunk,” he repeats, regretting the fact, touching Lestrade’s face.

“I’m ok,” Lestrade mumbles back, trying to look at his hand. “What’s the matter, hmm?”

Mycroft leaves his hand with its palm prickling against Lestrade’s five o’clock shadow, and looks back across the dance floor. Between the sway of people, he can still make out the vague shape of John and Sherlock, merged into one, lost in their own world.

Sherlock and John are kissing.

“Don’t be sad,” Lestrade murmurs in his ear.

“I’m not sad.” He isn’t. He’s glad for Sherlock; it’s been a long time coming, and he hopes it’s not just the free-flowing wine that’s finally led his brother to it.

“Don’t be jealous then,” Lestrade suggests, wobbling against him. He worms an arm around his waist and squeezes him.

“I’m not,” Mycroft repeats. What he feels is a touch of regret. He puts his own arm around Lestrade and gently urges him towards the opening to the tent. “Come along now.” They step out into the fresh smell of the rising dew, where after the dazzle, it’s velvety dark. Not brave enough to do it even in the blur of the disco, Mycroft kisses Lestrade, just once, in the dark.

They kiss. Two thousand three hundred and eighty four days of knowing John and Sherlock can only marvel at how much remains undiscovered. John is unaware of such numbers; all he knows is that this is the first touch of eyelashes against his cheek.

The wine glass stumbles between their fingers, making them both jump. Sherlock frees one hand and, with vaudevillian deliberateness, plucks up the glass and carefully sets it out of harm’s way. His lips curve; John swallows. They’re still.

John can feel the heat of his own body rising, cocooning him inside of his suit. The buttons of Sherlock’s shirtfront wink sleepily, rising with each breath. Each one is like falling. John breathes out and the effort of it makes him sway closer, pulls his eyelids heavily shut, until the tip of his nose is touching Sherlock’s cheek and they’re tipping over the edge again. It’s a kiss where they’re barely touching but John feels it in the soles of his feet and in electricity over his scalp.

Sherlock’s body is perfectly still in his chair, other than the novice movement of his mouth and the hitch of air caught between motions. John tilts his chin up towards Sherlock’s and finds his hand again amongst the confetti on the tablecloth. They spill it into their laps, clumsy-fingered, John thumb pressed into the middle of Sherlock’s palm.

The edge of the chair pushes back against John’s knee.

He hardly notices.

Inside the house, it’s quiet with the weary pleasure of a party now over. Mycroft’s shoes scuff through a soft debris of discarded streamers and withering balloons. Lestrade lurches sideways when he kicks one, sending it rebounding in muffled hops ahead of them. He chuckles. Mycroft tightens his grip and rights him.

“You’re too drunk,” he complains.

“I’m not drunk.”

“What are you then, I’d like to know.”

Lestrade halts incrementally from the head down as whisky lag delays the memo to his feet to stop moving. He pulls himself up, cartoonishly bombastic. “I am a plolishman; a bloody good poli-polish-” he hiccups, looks annoyed, “Ins-pec-tor. And... and.” Then he crumbles with happiness, both hands on Mycroft’s shoulders. “A very lucky man.”

Quiet, Mycroft reaches up to touch his hands, which are warm. “Come on,” he says, more gently. “We can’t stand here all night.”

Lestrade falls in at his side and lets himself be guided, shambling along, humming and content. It’s easy, somehow, to make him happy.

Overwhelmingly so.

Mycroft grasps the newel post for stability in steering Lestrade upwards, but stops in the shadow of the stairs. Lestrade looks at him. “Lucky,” he repeats. “Don’t look sad.”

“I’m not. I’m just... foolish. Let me-” They lose the space between them. If there is a certain deeper level of tenderness about it, that they are unaccustomed to, well, there’s no chance of anybody seeing it. If Lestrade says anything about it, or there is any reply to his words, then that remains in the shadows also.

The subsequent blunder up the stairs and Lestrade’s belly-flop onto the bed is markedly less gentle, yet not base enough to ruin the overall pleasure of the evening. Mycroft loosens Greg’s collar, apologises for dropping him and picks at his shoelaces until the Oxfords fall off. Greg mutters nonsense, satisfied with the arrangement.

Then, with a consideration that runs deeper than mere romance, Mycroft rolls Lestrade onto his side and leaves him in the company of a bucket to sleep things off.

They’re pulled back to reality when the music comes to a stop. John draws away into his chair, his lips peeling from Sherlock’s, disorientated, squinting as the lights flicker on white and bright. People clap tiredly and sway away from the dance floor, back towards the tables to grope for cameras and clutches, discarded bow ties and bags. They speak in the half-shout of people gone deaf to the sound of their own voice. John shies away towards the canvas.

“Outside,” he suggests, slipping the ropes from a seam, and making a private exit for the two of them.

After the stifled air of the tent, the night is both refreshing and sobering. They move by instinct to the quietest place, around the back of the marquee and the forgotten scrap of lawn there.

There’s no one around.

Sherlock’s arms hang awkwardly at his side; John rubs his palms against the pockets of his jacket. The kiss is still on their lips, an invisible feeling. Ironically it makes them both feel slightly out of synch, like they’re walking above reality.

There’s no bench so John sits on the lawn itself, facing away from the marquee, towards the hedge and the sky beyond. There’s too much light from the tent to make out any stars, and the clatter of

the staff clearing up after the guests allows them some privacy.

Sherlock sinks to one knee and they try it again, in a silent, purposeful little experiment. The angle is new, John's head tipped up, Sherlock's down, and it's still wonderful. For a moment, it's pure liberation. Sherlock feels too big suddenly. Not in comparison to John, but to his own mean human body. The suit is too tight, flesh too ordinary, civilisation too narrow. It's a wild feeling; quixotic; he could laugh. He could fight something. He could spit in the eyes of fools.

John is still, all his motion confined to his mouth and one hand. He can feel Sherlock's energy through his fingertips. He can feel the heat of him, like opening the door into a warm room. John's own body feels heavy, in a way that makes him feel real again. The grass under his right hand is cool, and the body under his left hand is not. He can smell the night air and the rising damp and Sherlock's collar; starch and sweat and aftershave. He's aware of his heels making divots in the earth, and the clap of canvas in a faint wind. He's aware of his bones and his lips, his belly and a hundred other things he forgot he owned.

They stop by increments, Sherlock sinking to take the weight off of his one aching knee, coming to sit on the grass beside him.

Both of them have something they want to say. John clears his throat, and then Sherlock swallows.

You first.

No, you.

I'm not ready.

We can't sit here in silence all night.

Why not?

Sherlock breathes out a long held-back sigh. His senses are numbed a bit from the alcohol, the world has lost some of its clarity, and he's sitting on a damp lawn in the dark with John and he wouldn't swap it for anything.

"Here we are," he says, meaning the dew and the dark and the buzz of their lips. John looks down at his own knees, plucking tips of grass.

"Yeah," he agrees, after a pause. "This is..." he considers saying 'new' but the word is far too inaccurate. "Good," he says instead, more honestly. Sherlock looks cautiously pleased.

"Good," he agrees. "Yes." It's such a beautiful understatement. "It's alright."

"Not bad," John says, and all the corners of his being seem to lift and light up in delight that they're still them, and they can still joke, even about this.

"I've had worse."

"Piss off," John says, shoulders shrugging in a silent laugh. "You've not..."

Had worse?

Had me. I'm sorry. I'm so sorry.

Their upper arms bump. John licks at his lower lip, conflicted. "I've been thinking about this a lot."

“This?” John’s been thinking about it. How much? How often? Since when? *How long has he known?*

Sherlock’s chest stings.

“Us,” John says, and the word in his mouth is like a song in a language he’d forgotten. Us. There’s been an ‘us’ for so long and now it’s an ‘Us’. He smiles and then at once stops. Sherlock looks pensive- hastily, he adds, “How things have been. How we met.”

Sherlock makes a little noise of recollection.

“A long time ago,” he says, rubbing at his own scalp. A lifetime ago. The thought is not mere sentiment, but literal. Bee’s lifetime ago. Or perhaps his own (and this is sentiment), considering he’s gone through a resurrection in more ways than one, with John guiding his helm all the way like a pole star.

John looks anxious. “I should have...talked more. Before.” Before the kiss, but also before... John’s not even sure when. “I’m not trying to mess you around. Shit, this is coming out all wrong.”

It’s an awful truth. John presses his tongue against the roof of his mouth- it’s gone dry. Slowly, he picks out a sentence, or two, built with words from a notebook once incoherently filled and then shoved deep into a rubbish bin.

“It wasn’t always like- at first it was still all Afghanistan in my head and I didn’t know where I was going or what I was any more, and then there was you, and- you.”

“I remember.”

“And even if I’d been willing, I wouldn’t have been capable, and I had no idea if-”

“No,” Sherlock shakes his head. “Hardly occurred to me either.”

“Yes, I thought so. I mean there was-“ John makes a vague gesture. There’d been background noise; very generic. The big knot of underground spores that John hadn’t acknowledged despite seeing the mushrooms here and there. “But... we were alright, weren’t we? In those days? It was good. It was really good. It was everything I needed.”

Sherlock leans back, the heel of his hand making a soft hollow in the dirt near the small of John’s back.

“It was a good year,” he agrees. The sting has gone out of his chest; John calms. They consider how it ended, but that’s old, well-worn ground now. John sighs.

“And then Mary,” he concludes. “There she was. I settled. Then you came back, and then Mary... and then, Mary.” He lifts one hand and presses his knuckles to his forehead. “Well, she was Mary.”

“She was something,” Sherlock agrees softly. Someone.

John chokes on a laugh. “She was a bloody awful wife,” he says, finally. “For what I wanted, anyway...” Sherlock watches his profile and the shift in the muscles of John’s face.

“But she was....yeah. Something.” John turns his head to meet Sherlock’s eye and they both feel the acknowledgement. A full stop and a line drawn under something for the very last time.

“I don’t think I ever really understood her,” John’s eyes crinkle at the corners as he searches

Sherlock's face.

The difference is, I understand you.

It's mutual.

I think for once, I understand me as well.

"It's all been very...long." John says. He licks his lips. "I'm not..." he starts slowly. "I'm-" He lifts a hand, falters and then with deliberation threads it into Sherlock's.

"I want; but, I'm pretty broken up."

"Harry did warn me."

"Yeah, well, you're broken too. And I mean, we've been doing this for years now, but I don't think we can kid ourselves, it's never going to be- there's going to be a sharp edge somewhere with us. Starting this- it's not going to just...make all that go away."

"My broken edges."

"Mine too."

"Edges wear down."

"And sometimes they make new edges," John says carefully, even while knowing that it isn't what Sherlock wants to hear. The other man simmers; he swallows and when he speaks next his voice cracks.

"I want to be your partner."

"Of course. Of course you are," John stares at him. "You are my partner. You're Bee's daddy- there isn't anyone else."

"I want to say it. I want other people to say it too." Sherlock slurs, not from the wine, but the weight of the words. He's tired of being Sherlock Holmes, the man in the deerstalker; the act and the isolation that made addiction seem like living.

"I don't think anyone's ever shut up about us," John says, easing the flippancy from his tone with hands that are gentle down the side of Sherlock's face. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to have this conversation right now. I just want to go easy. It's a big change."

"Risky," Sherlock says.

John smiles and it's bittersweet, and all Sherlock wanted.

"Well, I'm not adverse to a flutter even on bad odds. It's a bit... exciting."

"Dangerous."

"Mental, really," John says. He closes his eyes and exhales, before meeting Sherlock's eyes with a level gaze again. "It's never going to be normal for us. That's why we need to be on the same page, but-

"But it *is* a yes. It is. To all of it," he finishes.

Their palms meet again, cool and dry, and with his free hand, Sherlock brushes the loose grass off of the side of John's suit jacket, his fingertips barely touching John's sides as they rise and fall under his clothes, as he breathes. John lays his own fingers on Sherlock's back, spreads them and feels the living warmth of him.

"You know how we fit. How it works," Sherlock murmurs and again, John nods without speaking. He touches his cheek to Sherlock's lapel, inhales him. The pulse in Sherlock's neck is steady and stable. Sherlock turns his head to look down at as much of John as he can from that angle. His grip tightens slightly on John's hand.

Let it be, John. Let's stop talking.

John presses him to the grass and forms a language with lips and tongue that is so much older and more eloquent than English.

Mycroft sweeps the balloons aside, and makes himself a cup of tea in the unlit kitchen. A trickle of noise remains from the party- the DJ packing up his equipment, the slam of his van door, and the slow stumble of people heading away. To home, or bed, or a fresh pair of arms, or somewhere.

No sign of John or Sherlock.

The tea warms one of his hands as he chews absently on a hangnail on the thumb of his other. It's an old, and rarely indulged bad habit. He's tired. The caffeine, such as it is in tea, is probably a bad idea.

He's a touch drunk; at a stage of drunkenness that is already starting to blur into a hangover at the edges. If he closes his eyes and really listens, he can hear Mummy snoring. Daddy sleeps like the dead, and Lestrade limp as lettuce across the whole space of the bed.

There's a good argument for just going to bed. There are better arguments for not being here, where someone might walk in. Instead he turns on the lamps as a warning of his presence and sits with his hands propped under his chin, and leaves without going anywhere.

He deliberately keeps his head full of the sound of Christmas Day being ignored.

No lights, no carols. No mince pies. He'd warned Lestrade but the man still glances around the flat in a way that makes Mycroft almost regret it.

"Peace and quiet," Lestrade comments. It's drizzling outside, and the water's left a mottled pattern over his shoulders. He holds up a bag. "I uh... got the tiramisu but it got a bit squashed in the car." He doesn't add that it was due to taking corners too fast, but Mycroft can tell that anyway.

"It'll do," Mycroft says, which sounds petty as soon as the words leave his mouth. "Thank you."

Lestrade shrugs, smiles lopsidedly. "I didn't cook it," he admits. "Bought it from that Italian place Sherlock likes. With the fat carjacker."

"Angelo's," Mycroft says.

"Angelo's," Lestrade repeats, "That's the one. Have you ever eaten there?"

“No,” Mycroft says, a split moment after he realises that Lestrade is attempting small talk rather than exercising his ignorance. “Shouldn’t dare to trample on little brother’s territory.”

“Suppose not. Not your sort of place.”

“Dinner’s warming through,” Mycroft says, changing the subject. He sees Lestrade inhale, acknowledging the smell of butter and pastry that’s slinking into the lounge from the kitchen.

“Can’t wait. Oh, I brought-“ He rummages in the folds of his coat and brings out the bottle of wine Mycroft already knew was there. “It’s nothing special, but I thought, with the ‘misu.”

Mycroft accepts the bottle and turns it so he can see the label. It’s an aged Marsala, possibly from Angelo’s stock as Lestrade himself is not the type of wine-drinker who asks details. It’s the sort roughly equitable to port, which Mycroft has, but this will go just as well with the cheese-board.

“Thank you. I’ll decant it; take a seat.”

Lestrade shrugs out of his coat and hangs it, like always, over the back of the chair even though there are perfectly good coat-hooks by the door. He catches Mycroft’s eye and leaves it there. Technically, Mycroft reminds himself, he’s invited Lestrade here as a guest. It’s not as if the coat is terribly wet, just damp.

It flops over the antimacassar like part of a skinned elephant.

“Drink?” Mycroft says, soothing his ruffled nerve with the comforting glug of marsala flooding the decanter.

“What have you got?”

“Anything, more or less.”

“I’ll have a beer, then.”

Mycroft removes one from the cooler and determinedly empties it into a glass. Whatever Lestrade does with his coat, he’s certainly not going to drink from the bottle like the living room is his personal bus stop.

Lestrade sniffs the head of foam curious, as well he might be; it’s not Heineken. “Not bad,” he says, after rolling it around his mouth. “What is it?”

“Trappist. Little place in Belgium.”

“Posh,” Lestrade says, with a twinkle that Mycroft interprets as a tease and there’s a slight thaw between them.

“I hear Sherlock’s gone off with John to your parents’ place this year,” Lestrade comments, leaning forward and carefully setting his glass on a coaster. Mycroft tracks the progress of a bead of condensation trickling down until it beads up on the onyx surface of the coaster.

“Yes.” The apparent willingness of his brother to do so had surprised him, though he suspected John Watson of having a heavy hand in the matter. “No doubt enjoying himself.”

Lestrade meets his eye. There’s a beat and then they both snigger, and then the stupidity of sniggering at something so small transforms into a laugh.

“I’m sure it’s not that bad,” Lestrade says, once the laugh has calmed down.

“Yes, I’m sure the time is just flying by, in a plethora of yuletide fun and games,” Mycroft says, rising from his seat as the oven beeps. Lestrade follows him to the kitchen.

“Well, they’ve got the bubs this year. That’ll take the edge off. It’s always more fun with a kid and your mum and dad’ll be going potty over her, I bet.”

“All too likely,” Mycroft sighs. “I’ll be amazed if I can still expect an inheritance come New Year.”

“Yes. Given how you’re struggling along with just a silver wine cooler and, I can’t even tell what that thing is. What’s that for?”

“It’s a plate warmer. It dries and warms the plates”

“Really?” Lestrade is both incredulous and delighted to know that Mycroft Holmes, who does not cook, has something as ridiculous as a commercial grade plate warmer in his kitchen.

“Go home,” Mycroft says, flustered. “I didn’t design the house, I was just given it.”

“Oh, given it, were you? Woe is you indeed.” Lestrade laughs, leaning over the bar partition.

“Assigned it. It used to belong to an ambassador- they did parties.”

“Did they?” Lestrade says.

“Don’t pick on my grammar; you’re hardly one to talk.”

“I can talk well posh if I want to.”

“Pest,” Mycroft says, taking two scalding hot plates from the warmer and setting them on the counter. “I’ll give you a cold one.”

Lestrade’s grin turns briefly into a leer before he remembers that he’s not supposed to be flirting. He clears his throat hastily. “Need a hand with anything. Forks?”

“Already laid,” Mycroft replies, though god knows all their words seem dirty suddenly. He takes the food from the oven, already divvied up on two foil trays and transfers it neatly to the plates. “There’s some water in the fridge,” he says, once he’s thought of something that can’t possibly be construed as innuendo.

Lestrade gets it, once he figures out which cabinet is actually the fridge, and carts it through to the dining table.

“Looks nice,” he says, pouring a couple of glasses and taking his seat. He remembers his napkin, plucking it from the wineglass. Mycroft fills the glass itself with a crisp yellow wine, which Lestrade lines up behind his beer, of which he still has a third left.

The food is good. Crisp buttery pastry and salmon cooked so that it flakes away in rosy leaves, just cooked through. There’s a melting sauce, stuffed with herbs; there are potatoes and beans. It could be a summer meal, set out on a patio over the ocean, except it’s cold out and they’re both cosseted up in jumpers and the window overlooks St. James’ Park.

They eat in a comfortable silence. Mycroft lost in a reverie of butter, and who knows what other contemplations, Lestrade content to catch a moment’s peace with the world. By mutual agreement they drink a second cautious glass of the wine, both reminding themselves to pace it, and for god’s

sake, not to get drunk and do anything stupid.

They clear the table and return with the tiramisu, two large creamy portions, then as hunger wanes, conversation rises again. They nibble at the cheese board. Mycroft gives him an expert narration on the cheese concerned, and Lestrade tells him about Cornish yarg, which Mycroft has heard of but never eaten, and Lestrade more or less grew up on.

“One of my cousins still makes it,” he says. “I should get some, sometime.” He hasn’t spoken to his cousin in years. Mycroft makes a noise of assent and interest.

“Do you go back to Cornwall much?” he asks, despite knowing the answer.

Lestrade hesitates. “No,” he says, taking the in-road offered. This is the first personal exchange they’ve had since he got there. “My parent’s are both gone, I mean, years ago now, and I never had any siblings. There’s an aunt still, who I was kind of close to when I was young- they lived in the same village, but I’ve not seen her in years.”

Mycroft offers no platitude on this, nor any suggestion that Lestrade should either have kept in touch or make moves to rectify the lapse.

“They died young,” he says instead.

“Yeah. Mum first, then Dad. He just couldn’t really keep going without her. I mean, he lived a lot longer than her, but it was downward slope after she went. Know what I mean?”

“I can guess,” Mycroft says, trying to be gentle.

They slip from this into espresso, black, and small glasses of marsala, which both feel inordinately dainty in their hands. Intermittently they talk, between silences that don’t scream to be filled with anything, though both feel like they should. Mycroft finds himself talking, even when he doesn’t mean to. He should be used to it, given the nature of his job, he should be used to having whole avenues of conversation and half of them booby-trapped, and yet with Lestrade it’s more difficult.

Perhaps because he’s not trying to manipulate him.

They can’t discuss politics, they don’t want to discuss work. Taking inspiration from the decor, they meander around the topic of English Heritage and the National Trust. Mycroft’s been to very few of their establishments as a tourist (he wouldn’t) but his breadth of knowledge is vast. Lestrade’s is not. Talk teeters precariously on the edge of lecture before Mycroft reins himself back.

“Go on,” Lestrade says, sat back in his chair. “What were you going to say?”

So Mycroft talks and Lestrade listens. Now and then he asks questions, back of his hand leaning against his cheek. Mycroft has a glimpse of him as a school boy though he’d struggle to believe that Lestrade was an especially diligent student. He asks him as such, and Lestrade laughs.

“No, I did alright. I’m alright with reading and learning stuff, if it’s interesting. I just always bottled it in exams.”

“They were the easy part.”

“Not for me. I used to panic. Get a real case of the sweats. I could never figure out exactly what they wanted. I mean, I did well enough, but I was never going to break records or anything.” He looks at Mycroft with interest. “I bet you used to frighten the hell out of them.”

"My teachers only knew I wasn't cheating because I used to do the same in class. It was exam boards who had trouble believing it."

"Blimey."

"Except when I was cheating."

"Shocking."

"Security was very poor in those days," Mycroft said, "And I was desperate to go to university."

Lestrade sits up slightly. "How come?"

"Why else does any young boy want to go? To get away. I thought a seat of higher learning would be better."

"Huh. Wrong call."

"Quite," Mycroft agrees. He hadn't intended to slip something that personal and now Lestrade is clearly thinking about it.

"What was it like? I mean, loads of brainy people at Oxford, but somehow I don't see you fitting in."

"I liked the libraries. That was the main benefit over school. Literally miles of publications, and I soon badgered my way into access to most of them. And I liked the languages."

"Yeah?"

"Mm. Native speakers of things more interesting than French. I'd long since acquired French. I learnt Russian, Cantonese, Hindi, Japanese in succession."

This is a safer level of conversation, and yet it brings back memories.

"Say something in Russian," Lestrade demands. Mycroft obliges. He speaks Russian for Lestrade, then French, then Spanish, then Mandarin, then Arabic. He says, 'I don't know what I'm supposed to do with a man like you'. He says, 'You're a forty-seven year old male with blue eyes and grey hair.' He says, 'Stop smiling at me.' 'I am in a state not unlike that of Diogenes as described by Lucian' he quotes, for the hell of it.

He says, 'I wish you could just fuck and forget.' It sounds better in German. He's allowed to be crass in other languages. Lestrade has no idea, other than what he knows about Mycroft Holmes.

"That one made you go wrinkly between the eyebrows. What did it mean?"

"I've got a headache."

"I thought headache in German was 'Kopfschmerzen'."

"Swiss German," Mycroft says, picking up his glass. "A dialectical version. It's different.

There is a long pause. Lestrade toys with the teaspoon in the saucer of his coffee cup. The clink-clink sets Mycroft's nerves on edge; distantly there's the hum of wheels on tarmac.

"You don't trust me?" Lestrade asks. He's not accusatory, just puzzled. "It's not like I can lie to you. You can see right through me, so I don't bother."

Mycroft leans back in his chair. Where does he even begin?

Mycroft opens his eyes and eases the kink in his back. It's grown cold in the kitchen, and there's half a bed upstairs that's rightfully all his if he wants it.

Why doesn't he trust him?

He leans his elbows on the table and considers it.

There's grass stuck to John's elbows when he pushes himself to his hands again. The lights in the tent have gone out and left them in the dark and Sherlock's face a still, pale smudge on the lawn.

"What are you thinking?" John whispers, looking down. *Why did you stop?*

The blue of Sherlock's eyes has deepened out to brown in the dark, making the whites of his eyes stand out. This close, John can see the faint line of the scar by his mouth. He looks vulnerable.

John shifts back, giving him space to sit up.

"Sherlock?"

Sherlock comes slowly upright, resting his forearms on his knees. He holds up a hand at John's concern. "A moment."

"Are you alright?"

"Processing."

"Ok," John says. He takes a seat at Sherlock's side, within arm's reach but without touching. "I'm here if you need me."

Sherlock turns his head to contemplate him. Once or twice in his life, Sherlock's got everything he wanted. Once it had been a birthday gift that had come in a box with air-holes, with liquid brown eyes, that had broken his boyhood. Then Cambridge; an escape that had quickly turned into a dead end. In adulthood, he'd had a case so huge and so dangerous it had nearly defeated his intellect, and ruined too much else. Between all of that, gram upon gram of cocaine, each one a key to the higher functions in his mind for a while, until his appetite for it robbed him of function anyway. Most pertinently, he'd wanted and undeservingly received a friend, except his own rapacity wouldn't let him be content with just friendship.

John is watching him back. "Take it easy," he says. He'd half expected this. Sherlock wipes his nose on the back of his hand, legs stuck out akimbo.

"Alright?"

Sherlock gives a scant nod.

"I'm still here," John tells him. "If you want me."

From the corner of his eye, Sherlock looks at him. "Why wouldn't I want you?" He asks, unable to help the creep of doubt. His tone touches John deeply.

“Well, I don’t know,” John says, as always, trying to play things off lightly. Then he says, “I want you, though.”

Sherlock has no words to give a reply. He can’t speak. There’s a lump in his throat.

“We can take it slow,” John says. “This is fine. I can do this.”

Hesitant, testing, rather more bravely than Sherlock knew he was capable of being, Sherlock turns the hand nearest John palm up. The tips of his fingers are shaking. John checks his face, confirms what he wants and then slides his hand into Sherlock’s, warm and confident.

“I can do this,” he repeats, and squeezes.

—

Why doesn’t he trust him?

Mycroft’s still nagging on the question. He has concluded that, on the contrary, He’s a little too sloppy about letting Lestrade know more than is safe to do so. That’s always been true. So how to reply to Lestrade’s question? Now, just as at Christmas, he chases the memories back a year further, looking for the answers.

—

The nearest full-length mirror is in the wardrobe but Mycroft hasn’t the nerve to go and look in it. He sits on the bed instead, staring at the ceiling, trying to summon the courage to look down. He furtively puts his fingers down there instead, hand trembling.

It’s six forty-five in the morning and outside, London is simultaneously getting up and going to bed and going about its usual business of a December morning, ignorant of the fact that for one man out of the multitude, today has begun in disaster.

He’s neither the ascetic his brother is, nor a hedonist. He’s always tried to adhere to the Greek philosophy of ‘medan agan’ - to never to either extreme on any spectrum. He indulges himself and his pleasures once in a while, and whilst he likes to seek out quality, he rarely goes to the point of excess- only sometimes. Never for any prolonged amount of time, and he compensated for those times- he worked so hard to balance out the bad credit intemperance always left in its wake.

It feels cruel for his body to be betraying him in such a profound way.

The air on his naked skin is chilly and he rubs at himself absently with a bath-towel that moments ago was a minor household object that barely blinked on his radar, and now feels like comfort of a very basic sort. He wraps it round his shoulders, feeling smaller and more afraid than he has done in years.

The world feels like it’s slipping out of his grasp; reins he once held comfortably now jerk and buck and he has no idea where his life is headed now.

Ten minutes ago he’d been in the shower, with nothing more crucial on his mind than a few routine board meetings scheduled today; piddling stuff; and the annual dilemma over what to get Mummy for her birthday.

To think, he’d even been starting to consider his life a little mundane in the last few months. Now, with mounting horrors, he considers his plans; the big ones. The global ones that have been painstakingly built up over years and years of intricate effort and which he was supposed to see

come into fruition in his own ripe old age. Plans designed to forge a... well, 'better' might be over-ambitious, but a stable Britain for the next few generations.

Now it seems as though he's going to have to- he swallows as he thinks of it- delegate. In which case, it will all come to nothing now.

'Stop that.' He tells himself in silence.

He sucks in air with a whistle, and forces himself to calm down. 'It's no good panicking, Mycroft. Not a bit good at all; not when you don't know anything for sure.'

And that's the worse part of it; his complete and total ignorance. It's the not knowing for sure that's making his head spin. The floor feels like a black hole of fear under the soles of his feet and he pulls them up and lies back with a groan.

This cannot be happening.

He's not even fifty for crying out loud.

For fuck's sake! He's not done with life by half!

'Alright, alright, that's enough. You can't afford to get yourself into a tiz-woz now. Breathe. Get dressed. It's not going to kill you in a day.'

Was it? Unlikely. But how long? Days? Weeks? Months? Did he have years and years left, or was it down there now, ticking away like a sea-mine. It suddenly seems terribly remiss of him to have never learnt the first thing about it. He fumbles urgently for his phone and the baulks and puts it down again.

There will be doctors, he thinks. There will be tests; examinations. He's always been proficient at those but then, all they wanted to do was confirm his mental agility and he's always been superb at that.

Contrary to popular dogma, Mycroft doesn't think with the portion of his anatomy at fault.

There will be time off work.

He pushes a hand through his hair and grits his teeth with the discomfort that thought brings; what will he fill the time with? In the next moment he grips his hair like he can compel it to stay fixed to his scalp.

A wig; he's not sure he could bear the humiliation.

People will want to know. Worse- People will have to be told.

Mycroft lies and watches the ceiling vanish behind the lens of his mind's eye and the onslaught of possible futures waiting for him. Some of them are short.

It's seven o'clock in the morning but he forces down a finger of scotch- it's hardly going to kill him now- and smokes until the nicotine floods his system enough to give him false courage. He picks up his phone.

First, there will be doctors.

Mycroft remembers making plans with uncharacteristic hesitation. In his line of work there has to be a measure of foresight, which was compromised by not knowing. He began with the basics instead; an appointment scheduled, the office warned of possible time off, and then with reluctance, he had summoned DCI Lestrade to meet him at the Diogenes.

A stack of folders had been placed on his desk: instructions, instructions for the instructions, plans and backup plans. Things concerning Sherlock and Doctor Watson, amongst other things. A few bits and pieces he'd been quietly nurturing until the right time, except then he hadn't known if he'd still be around for the right time.

First things had been first, however; a case to keep Sherlock busy and distracted as much as possible. With any luck, he'd thought, Lestrade would have turned something up as well, though Mycroft has never been one to rely on luck.

Strangely, Mycroft doesn't remember what he said to Lestrade when he'd entered, hot under the collar and irritable. It had been strange to see him in the flesh again. They'd been avoiding each other. Lestrade had worn that same damn coat, the same rumpled tie. It was as though Mycroft had had no effect on him at all, and that bothered him.

Except Lestrade had been uncharacteristically short with him. Mycroft supposes he must have given him the litany, because the next thing he recalls clearly is Lestrade's hapless comment.

"So, you haven't said," Lestrade says, cutting him off mid-sentence. "What's all this in aid of, or aren't I allowed to know unless I sell my soul to Her Madge?"

"It's nothing. I'm merely taking some time off."

"Blimey, time off," Lestrade says, joking. "Are you dying?" He looks up from his phone and then goes still. Mycroft's aware that his expression hasn't changed. He's certain it hasn't, but he can feel the blood has drained from his face completely, and his ears are ringing.

"Mycroft? Oh my God..."

"Don't say anything," Mycroft says hurriedly, feeling paralysed. "It's nothing confirmed."

"Jesus, shit, I'm so sorry, I didn't mean to- God. Are you ok?" He drops the phone on the desk with a thump. Mycroft draws his hands back into his lap before Lestrade can do anything as foolish as touch him.

"That's the question," Mycroft says, and although he aims to sound flippant, it comes out strained. "It's fine, I'm handling it," he says, unable to look at Lestrade when he's looking so concerned. "You don't need to be concerned. Involved."

"Yeah, but someone's got to worry about you," Lestrade says, without a second thought. "Does your mum know?"

Mycroft feels bile rise in his throat at the thought.

"Your dad?" Even Lestrade can deduce it's not the answer he'd hoped for.

"No." He'd blab. "No one knows and no one is going to know." Mycroft jabs the point of his pen into the blotting sheet of his desk. "You do not know this, Lestrade. We have not discussed anything here today other than the contents of those files."

“You’re a bloody great tube, do you know that?” Lestrade tells him, crossly.

“What?”

“Trust me, I was thinking something ruder. And before you start- Yes, I get it. Sherlock’d be less than helpful, government position blah-de-blah, let’s not upset Mam- but, for God’s sakes, Mycroft. Get someone to help you, if it’s serious. Don’t do it by yourself. Can I do anything?”

Mycroft doesn’t know what to say. It’s been just a month since their ill-conceived attempt at a second run failed miserably, and yet here’s the man, all but offering himself on a plate again.

“I-I don’t think there’s anything,” he manages. “I don’t know what it is yet.” A cold rush blooms outwards from his spine, sweeping under his skin at his own words. He rubs his fingers into his palms, smearing the dampness around and wishes that breathing was a quieter process.

“Alright,” Lestrade says, “Alright now, let’s not get ahead and scare ourselves then.”

“I’m not scared.”

And hadn’t that been a great big lie? He’d been terrified. Scared enough to be grateful enough to send Lestrade a bottle of wine for Christmas, even though they were officially ‘over’. Even though that turned out to be a lie as well, because Lestrade had come back.

He’d stuck around; he’d even kept the tie-pin.

Mycroft has a new thought, which is obvious in hindsight, and feels stupid not to have thought of it before: ‘Perhaps I underestimated the effect of my presumed imminent death on the man’.

It’s a very long path to connect the dots from there to this evening and Lestrade’s heroic self-sacrifice to the scotch in order to fractionally preserve his father’s liver, but Mycroft can sort of see a connection. It’s not *un*-connected anyway.

The front door on the other side of the kitchen clumps quietly as someone opens and closes it. Two someones. Mycroft closes his ears to the tread of four feet climbing the stairs. They are walking close together. Perhaps they are touching- holding hands? He can’t tell by listening alone. John goes up the stairs first, his step heavier than Sherlock’s. That’s all he wants to know.

Strange to think of it, after so long. He’d thought something had happened months ago, and then realised that patently it hadn’t. For the sake of them both, he’d never mentioned it, but he’d worried how long Sherlock could carry on pretending before it irreparably damaged him.

And so here they are. Sherlock with all of his aces finally coming up trumps, and the surreal experience of hearing Sherlock addressed as Daddy.

Mycroft folds his hands under his chin again and broods, rounding his shoulders under his thoughts. On paper, he concludes, it all looks quite good: Sherlock has a career, invented though it is; he has financial security, a daughter, a partner- indeed, a family. He is if not sane and sensible, at least long last sober. He has, above all, a motivation to remain so, and a drive to remain alive.

‘Put like that,’ Mycroft thinks, with a sudden wounded feeling, ‘Sherlock’s outdone me.’ It’s not even that his own life is totally lacking; but Mycroft has always believed that in every man there’s a box of emptiness that must simply be lived with, given that it can never be filled. It’s hateful to admit, but he enjoys Sherlock’s reliance on him.

To think that Sherlock's taken a step into adulthood beyond him is a shock, now that he's seen it in person.

And there's Lestrade's offer, and Mycroft had been swept up enough to kiss him. He thinks about it, coming back to his one great stumbling block.

"You don't trust me?"

Mycroft leans back in his chair. Where to begin?"

"I don't trust anyone."

"I know," Lestrade says, with unexpected patience. "But you go well out of your way to pretend to with me, and I just don't get it. I mean, what's the point?"

The point, Mycroft thinks, is to get what he wants from Lestrade without handing over anything compromising. He's aware of the irony in the situation.

"I'd listen," Lestrade adds, his tone verging on complaint. "You'd only have to say how works best for you and I'd try and accommodate, or at least compromise."

"I thought I'd made it clear."

"Do you?" Lestrade says in a way that is absolutely not a question, and at the same time reminds Mycroft in no uncertain terms that Lestrade has a pre-teen daughter, who also lies.

And then before Mycroft's rallied himself, Lestrade, waxing philosophical, jabs a finger into the arm of the chair and asks, "Why can't we be friends with benefits, and actually be friends?"

Mycroft, despite himself, squirms. "Must we put it like that?"

"What else would you bloody well call it?" Lestrade wants to know.

"In some circles, it's referred to as 'relief work'."

Lestrade colours and then says, in surprise, "Oh, you're not actually taking the piss. Really? That's a bit tacky, isn't it?"

"Perhaps a change of subject."

"Mycroft, come on. Don't weasel out again."

This touches a nerve. "Weasel!"

"Weasel," Lestrade insists, his temper getting the best of him. "You're a right coward sometimes."

At once, at Mycroft's expression, he puts up a hand. "That was uncalled for," Lestrade says. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean that."

"Yes, you did," Mycroft replies, dumbfounded. It's one thing to know it, it's another to be told it. "It's true."

"Doesn't mean I should have said it like that," Lestrade agrees. "Bollocks, this has gone wrong."

He sits back for a moment, chewing his lip, worrying his thoughts. Mycroft picks at his own thumbnail, the only expression of his agitation that he'll allow.

"Let's... put that aside," Lestrade begins slowly, counting his thoughts off on his fingers. "The past stuff, who was right, who was wrong- because we both messed up, the whys... Let me just. Make a suggestion."

"Very well."

Lestrade uncrosses his legs and sits up, leaning forward as though brokering a business deal.

'He's so terribly earnest,' Mycroft thinks.

"Alright, how about this then. We stop wasting our lives and have sex again- Hold on, hear me out first," Lestrade says, as Mycroft moves in his chair like he's sat on hot coals. As far as Lestrade can tell, he's one step from bolting. He isn't. Almost the reverse.

"Um, where was I? Sex. But with a couple of conditions, otherwise I'm not going to be comfortable with it. Alright? If I'm right off key you can say, and I'll drop it. I mean it, I won't bring it up again. But give me a chance. One chance."

"One chance," Mycroft demurs.

Lestrade runs his tongue around his mouth, which has gone dry. "Ok, so, new rule number one: a kiss. At the end. You can go shower, you can sleep in another room, you don't have to say anything, but I want a kiss before you go."

"A goodnight kiss?"

"Yeah. A goodnight kiss. Kiss me goodnight," Lestrade smiles from the corner of his mouth. "We can pretend it's the 50's and we're being really polite."

This prompts a faint twitch of Mycroft's lips. He's amused. He's also listening.

"And your other conditions?"

"Just one," Lestrade says, hesitantly. "Um. It might not work. I don't know how you feel about it, but I'd like to try... me... not on top. We could switch after. Maybe," he adds hastily when Mycroft looks surprised. "But first, I really want to try Not being on top."

"Have you ever done that before?" Mycroft asks after a beat. The phrasing of the request is not lost on him. Lestrade's thought about this; practiced it even.

"Not in a very long time," Lestrade admits. His eyes don't stop moving, trying to read something in Mycroft's stonewalled expression. No manipulation; he's trying to be considerate. The idea is rather disconcerting to Mycroft.

Lestrade adds, "You'll have to go easy on me."

"Ah. Is that the idea?"

"Kind of, If it really doesn't work," here he winces, "'cause as I said it's been decades, maybe we can think of something else. But what do you think? Is that something... you can do?"

"I have," Mycroft says, doubtfully. "Likewise, not in this half of my lifetime..."

“But you have?” Lestrade presses, relieved. “And it wasn’t too crap?”

“It’s not my preference, but... I have. It wasn’t disagreeable.”

“Great!”

“I haven’t agreed.”

“I know,” Lestrade says, half-daft, “But that’s good to know. That it’s not such a stupid idea.”

It’s a stupid idea. It’s a terrible idea. Mycroft has half a mind to kick him out to teach him, if nothing else, a lesson in self-respect. Except worse, it would be a lesson wasted because Lestrade doesn’t seem a lick concerned about his own pride. And this strikes Mycroft as being at odds with what he knows of Gregory Lestrade. The man’s not in the same league as himself or Sherlock, or even Sally Donovan when it comes to pride, but he’s not devoid of it.

And then three thoughts from inside his own head, in quick succession;

Question: Would it be worse?

Fact: loss of virginity to female partner had not resulted in feeling more adult, more in control, more desired or more masculine.

Fact: first attempts at penetration with male partner had not resulted in feeling less adult, less in control, more humiliated or less masculine.

“Mycroft?”

He blinks and the room swims back into focus. He opens his mouth to say, ‘Give me time to-’ and Lestrade pre-empts him.

“Think about it,” Lestrade says. “I don’t need any answer today. It’s an idea. If you want to try it, I’m up for it. That’s all.”

And Mycroft had agreed.

—

Mycroft opens his eyes. It’s been a scant minute. The footsteps have come to a clumsy halt on the landing, and all Mycroft need do now is wait until they either pass through one or another of the doors there before he can safely leave the kitchen. He’s not sure about sleeping yet.

The night is waning already; in three hours or so it’ll be light again. He unfolds his hands and looks at them. No calluses of course; they’re uniformly rather wan. He links his fingers. Technically, he’s been thinking about this since Christmas.

Technically, he’s been scraping along with Lestrade on a wish and a maybe. Mycroft rubs at his eyes. They feel gritty and sore.

“In the morning,” he concludes, and then, privately;

‘I kissed Lestrade goodnight and not even slept with him. That’s probably reason enough.’

—————

Upstairs, John hesitates at his bedroom door. Bee is sleeping inside, he can’t leave her to wake up

alone in the morning. They're both far from being really sober. He's not sure where he intends to take things when he asks; "Do you want to come in for a bit?"

Sherlock smiles faintly. "I'm not going to sleep."

He sees John pause for thought, and then stops him from chasing ideas into dark corners with this new found power he has. John closes his eyes against the touch of lips and opens them again as soon as Sherlock pulls back. "I want to compose."

"Oh," John says, a little dazed. "Oh, I'll see you in the morning, then."

"In the morning," Sherlock agrees.

In the morning.

In the morning.

In the morning they'll still have last night. They'll still have a whole day, a tomorrow, a today. Sherlock can't wait. John is grateful. In the morning it'll continue. It's not a goodnight, it's a wait and see.

"You're grinning."

"Yeah," John says, "It's already morning. Technically."

Sherlock laughs and waits until John has quietly shut the door before crossing the hall to his own room, throwing himself down on the bed. The walls rock and sway around him in a way he hadn't noticed when he was upright. It's perfect. He is the captain of a boat of his own making.

Shedding his clothes, he pulls on his pyjamas then undoes the clasps of the violin case. The wood gleams. He touches the strings and they whisper to him.

He holds the violin until dawn but in the end he doesn't play a single note. Reality is too poor for the symphony in his head.

Morning cracks like an arse over house, too soon and unwelcomed by almost all. John pulls the pillow over his sore head and groans, even as his daughter, bright and awake and eager for everyone to get up and play now, bounces on his stomach.

God, the sun is bright. Everything is loud.

Downstairs, Mummy alone has made it out of bed. She shuffles into the kitchen and heroically puts both the coffee maker and the kettle on, and stuffs teabags into no less than three teapots. Some people, she predicts, will not be making it to the table this morning.

Good thing there's plenty of bread for dry toast.

Mycroft joins her presently, looking rumpled and wearing two different slippers. On anyone else this might be a standard morning look, but Mummy hasn't seen her son in a dressing gown with his hair unbrushed since he was about fourteen.

"How are you feeling, Myc?" She asks in a whisper. "There's plenty of aspirin."

"I've had some," he replies huskily, groping for mugs.

"Father's feeling very poorly," Mummy reports, dutifully pulling out a frying pan and a butcher's packet from the fridge, even though her stomach is churning. "Too much Jameson."

"He's nearly done Gregory in," Mycroft says dryly, eyeing the sausages, which he has never wanted more in his life, and yet which also seem like the worst idea in the world at the same time. "I think he's still drunk now."

"It was a good party," Mummy reflects happily and then winces when she accidentally drops the spatula with a clatter onto the kitchen counter. "Best I've had in years, and blessedly no one was offended except for Great Aunt Jessie, and well, pooh-pooh to her, the old trout."

"Mummy."

Upstairs one of the toilets is flushed repeatedly.

"Mine or yours," Mummy queries, listening. She fires up the gas ring and tips the sausages straight into the pan to get on with things.

Mycroft regards the ceiling. He considers the question. "Regrettably, mine."

"Hurrah for stout modern plumbing."

"Mummy!"

Mummy chuckles. "Well, what's the use of a sober party anyway," she concludes, prodding the sausages apart. "It was what I wanted. A thoroughly tipsy knees-up, and even Sherlock obliged me."

"Did you know," Mycroft begins, slowly, "That that's the first time in over two years he's approached anything like intoxicated."

Mummy hesitates. "Is it?"

"Oh, not that I mean last night undid anything," Mycroft continues, adding a silent 'I hope', "Just that... well, did you know?"

"I didn't. I had hoped he was doing much much better," Mummy says, thickly. She rattles the pan and sends the sausages rolling around, as an output for her emotions. "They do say two years..."

"It's the best he's ever done."

"Oh, Mycroft!" Abruptly, she cries. Not for very long; two great heaves, only the second with a dribble of tears and then Mycroft presses the tea towel on her in alarm.

"Whatever's the matter?"

"Nothing, oh, I'm a silly old woman!" She scrubs her eyes and buries her face in the tea towel with a robust *blort*, and then re-emerges, pink around the edges, but Mummy again.

"I'm alright," she insists. "It's just- It's such a relief to hear it. Are you quite sure?"

A waver of doubt, because Sherlock's never been anything but sly with his secrets, but Mycroft nods nonetheless. "I think so. I've heard nothing to the contrary. He's... tried, this time."

Mummy bothers the sausages for a long time in silence. They sizzle wetly, striped with brown between the pink, bloating up. Judiciously she spears them one by one with a fork and the fat trickles. Mycroft puts himself to use sawing a loaf into slices, full of lethargy. He startles from his thoughts when she speaks up again, out of nowhere.

“It was John leaving that did it. I knew from the minute he called.”

“I’m sorry?”

“Oh, ages and ages ago. John had a bit of a moment and walked out, and Sherlock called me of all people.”

Mycroft throws his mind back over the last few years and finds a time frame to fill the gap with. “I remember.”

“Why do you think he called me?”

“I haven’t the faintest,” Mycroft says, candidly. It’s just fact that Mummy has never been Sherlock’s first port of call in a storm. “What did he say?”

“‘He’s left me with the baby.’”

“That’s all?”

“It was his tone,” Mummy turns off the stove and shuffles plates around on the countertop. “It wasn’t ‘he’s making me babysit’, it was ‘he’s left me’. I don’t think I’d have gotten on the train otherwise.”

“No?”

“Oh, well, you know what he’s like when he panics. You’re the same. Huge drama, demands that I attend at once, and then I’m halfway there and it turns out the keys were in someone’s pocket the whole time.”

Mycroft says nothing. He cannot. His mother has always made a creeping habit of making other people’s problems more about her. It’s something symptomatic of the post-war generation, in his opinion. She’s always needed Daddy to soften her, as he’s always needed her to make anything of himself. Mycroft dreads the inevitable day when one or the other of them passes.

“But that time,” she says, over his thoughts. “That time I thought, ‘he’s really frightened’.”

“I expect he was,” Mycroft says, for the sake of filling the silence. The sausages swim in a puddle of grease, forgotten. He toys with a crumb of bread, rolling it into a pill between his finger and thumb.

“Is it terrible to say that it was a good thing?”

He looks up sharply.

“Not poor John’s bad luck, but... hasn’t it made Sherlock pull his socks up? I knew he’d find his potential if he could just get the right motivation.”

“Hm,” Mycroft says. “I suppose.” He slides a piece of bread onto a plate, mind busy. What was it Sherlock himself was so fond of saying? Love is the most violent motivation. He makes a point to annoy Sherlock by purposely misquoting, but whatever the wording, he ruefully concurs. He

spends his days finding out how to manipulate people with bastardisations of the same concept; jingoism polished up into patriotism, greed corseted up as a love of progress. There's no easier man to play than an egotist; make him think it's an act of love to himself and he'll move mountains to achieve it. Look how Irene Adler had played with it to her own downfall.

Not for the first time, he wonders at Sherlock's exact thoughts about throwing himself off of the roof. As ever, he can't quite decide, and it's a question he'll never dare ask the man himself, out of dread of revealing too much. A thought occurs to him.

"He texts you, doesn't he? Questions."

"Not so much these days, but after that, yes." She never waits for him to needle the information out of her. "All sorts of things."

"Advice."

"Mm. He's very concerned about what's 'normal'."

'Fear the man who loves nothing,' Mycroft thinks.

To his surprise, Mummy reaches up on tiptoes to kiss his temple. "Don't fret, you're still my best boy."

"I remember when Sherlock was born," Mycroft says. "He was so small he fitted almost perfectly from the crook of one of my elbows to the other, and I was only seven."

"He was so fragile," Mummy smiles, remembering. "That bloody nurse said he'd struggle to thrive, but I told her nothing with a smile like that just gives up and dies. He wanted to thrive. He loved living. One sausage or two?" The question is brusque and businesslike, perhaps to avoid soiling another tea towel.

Mycroft's stomach squirms. "Four," he says, somber, eyeing up the challenge. He puts them onto one plate, with three slices of bread and a dollop of brown sauce. "I'm going to share," he adds, when Mummy cocks an eyebrow at him.

"You'll share the bread, I'm sure," she says. She tips the bacon into the pan with a sigh. "If you see anyone alive roaming up there, tell them this lot'll be in the warming drawer. Self service."

"Wilko," Mycroft replies, treading heavily away.

Sherlock's door is ajar, the man himself sprawled in the window-seat in shirt and pants, one long leg propped up with his toes on the stonework, the heel of the other scoring a track in the carpet pile to the beat of the music he's devising. He has the violin right up to his ear, pizzicato, the same six notes over and over, looking for the seventh.

He catches Mycroft looking, but goes on regardless.

Mycroft silently greets him with an incline of the plate.

"Breakfast's ready."

Sherlock's heart beats hard before he makes himself lift a hand and tap on the door. In the

morning, they'd said, but that was hours ago.

It's one thing to kiss in the dark. The cold light of day is different. Sherlock knows this. He's read the books.

"Yeah?" John says from inside. His voice is thick and sleepy and husky. Sherlock's spine feels watery.

"It's me," he announces. *Please let me in.*

"Door's open."

Sherlock pushes the mug of tea through the gap of the doorframe first. Just tea. Like normal. Nothing to get alarmed about.

"God, you're a saint," John says, voice low. Bee screams with delight, making both of their heads ring with pain.

"Shhhhhh," John pleads. "Be nice to Babar."

Sherlock worms into the room, shuffling the door closed behind him with his foot. "There's sausages and bacon downstairs, or we could go out."

John scrubs at his eye with his fingers, moving the sleep around and only half listening. "Bacon," he mumbles to himself, but gropes for the cup of tea first.

"You look washed out," John says. Sherlock stoops and picks Bee up. In terms of hangover, Sherlock's not feeling too bad. The lack of sleep has just left him light and pale, like someone's turned up the transparency on him. John, in contrast, feels heavy, like he's been roughed all over with sandpaper and then left to wither up like a raisin.

"Mm," Sherlock replies, swaying with Bee. "I'll sleep later."

The neck of John's t-shirts gone saggy, showing off a wider scoop of neck than intended. John scratches at his scalp at the nape of his neck. He's ostensibly looking at the tea, but in a sleep-fog, he's not seeing the tea at all. Sherlock stands there as John's gaze slips from his thoughts to Sherlock's shins and then slowly works upwards to his middle.

Bee struggles to get down.

With nothing to do with his hands, Sherlock tucks them behind his back. He should have brought a second mug, he thinks. He could drink tea and it would make this less awkward. Stupid. John's gaze lingers.

Sherlock licks his lips and wonders what to say. It's John. It should be easy. Words pop up unbidden from his memory.

*If I'd been out till quarter to three
Would you lock the door?*

"Alright?" John asks, softly. Sherlock nods, a bit too fast, a bit automatic.

John's back crackles as he gets up. The skin of his face is chapped with lines from sleeping face-first in a pillow all night, but the light seeping through the fabric of Mummy's yellow curtains turns his hair into a younger shade of blonde. Alcohol dehydration's made the crinkles of his face

deeper, but this only makes the smile simmering below the surface all the more obvious.

Steam from the mug curls up between them and kisses Sherlock's chin. He wants to reach out and wipe the tiny spot of yellow from the corner of John's eye. John looks at him steadily, rises to the balls of his feet unsteadily and then drops again, swallowing.

"I've," John begins, looking at Sherlock's mouth. A faint pinkness appears around his ears. He licks at his teeth. "I've got dog breath," he says.

"Oh," says Sherlock, with a slow nod. "I see."

I don't care. I like dogs. I don't care.

"Just... let me... brush my- clean and," John goes pinker. Bee yanks on Sherlock's pyjama leg, nearly pulling them down, and then shoves her socks into his surprised hands.

"Sok-sok!"

"Oh yeah," John says, looking down. He blinks. "She probably wants breakfast too."

"Bikky!" Bee agrees, pouncing on the idea at once.

"Not for breakfast," Sherlock tells her, and crouches to pull her pyjamas off. "Do you need a new nappy?"

"No!"

"Fair enough."

The tips of John's fingers brush his scalp and he looks up.

That was deliberate.

It was. Of course it was.

"Back in a minute," John says. He hasn't moved his hand. Sherlock's heartbeat rises to somewhere behind his eyes and he knows he's grinning stupidly. John grins back. "Just- half a minute."

He's dying for a pee, Sherlock realises, watching him scuttle into the bathroom. On route, John downs the tea, never mind how hot it is, and leaves the empty mug on the edge of the dresser clumsily. Sherlock can't stop grinning.

Bee attempts to push a sock up his nose in reproach for ignoring her.

"Daddy."

"I'm here," he says, because she's incapable of waiting. "Where's your t-shirt?"

He dresses Bee while John does what he does in the bathroom, and they go downstairs. Slowly the house is rousing. They find Daddy propped at one end of the table, his eyes bloodshot, cheerfully working his way through a solid breakfast.

"Boys!" he greets, through a hiccup, and then carefully closes his mouth and has a long hard look at his plate. He puts more dry toast in, as a means of ensuring nothing else comes out.

"Oh you're alive. That'll please Mummy," Sherlock says, settling Bee into her highchair. A few of

the teens, who'd slept in the living room, are in a huddle compiling bacon sandwiches with ludicrous amounts of condiment. They whisper amongst themselves in their own teen language, and as pointedly ignore the others as they are graciously ignored by them.

Aunt Lydia has arrived to find her daughter, who is conspicuously absent. A late night and one medicinal dose of Pino too many and Aunt Lydia is significantly quieter, for which John is grateful.

"Off-duty," Mummy says, of Cousin Tolly, "I shouldn't worry. She can get home."

"I've got the land-rover," Aunt Lydia points out. "It's a hefty walk."

'She won't have to,' Sherlock thinks. The barest edge of the DJ's van is still visible above the hedge.

"She'll manage," Mummy says, with an air of superior mystery. Sherlock glances at her slippers. Mud from the lane. Of course. She's already been out to supply them with coffee and baps.

"Oh well, drat that girl," Aunt Lydia concludes. "She can sort herself out." Behind her back, Mummy winks at her son. Sherlock feigns ignorance. Besides, who cares about who Cousin Tolly's snogging? He's got activities closer to home to think about.

Or preferably, activities close enough to home that he can get there in barefoot, but not so close that anyone can see.

John pushes a plate of sausages at him with a hidden smile, one of those soft ones, and suddenly Sherlock doesn't care if he has to go across hot coals to get to where he can kiss John.

Kiss me?

"Now!" Bee demands, but she's talking about food. Sherlock breaks off a piece of his ketchupy toast for her, stacked with sausage, and blows on it until it's cool enough for her to handle.

"That's not very healthy for her," Mummy chides. "Wouldn't she rather have some fruit?"

"Bee's favourite food is 'what Daddy's eating'," John says. He has deliberately cultivated it to be so. It works perfectly, because in order to enthuse Bee about eating stuff she isn't so keen on (though John will admit she mostly eats anything), all he has to do is get Sherlock to enthuse over it. And this means he actually has to eat it.

Bee knows when he's only faking.

"Would Bee's Daddy like some fruit?" Mummy continues, waving a banana. "Good for the colon."

"Bee's Daddy would not. Stop talking about my colon."

"Bee might if you ate it," John suggests to Mummy. Sherlock jumps on the idea.

"Oh yes. Why not try it. Have my seat," he suggests, wriggling aside and gesturing Mummy into place. Bemused, she takes his chair and peels the banana.

"Mmmm, nummy nana. Wouldn't you like some?" she says. Bee stares. Then she grunts and lunges for it.

'Leave you to it then,' John thinks, and then says, aloud. "It's a bit warm in here. I need some air."

“He’s hungover,” Sherlock says, and follows him out of the back door.

“He’s as subtle as you were,” Lydia comments, as the door is pulled closed behind them. ““No, Mother. I think I’d best go check on him. Terrible tummy ache. He was groaning all night.’ I bet he was.”

Daddy chortles, Mummy colours. “Not in front of the children,” she says firmly, and tucks a chunk of banana into Bee’s waiting grasp.

The narrow patio is sun-warmed. John props himself on the back of the broken garden bench with his breakfast, carefully out of sight of the windows. The sky is a pale robin’s egg blue, broken up by smears of cloud along the horizon. Lavender lines the edge in pillows ranging from egg-shell white to deepest amethyst. The damp from the night before is burning off, and the bushes are already thick with bees, kicking up clouds of perfume.

Tendrils from the hanging baskets tickle at the brickwork, and the same breeze works its fingers through Sherlock’s hair.

“Morning,” John says.

“Morning.”

The thick walls of the cottage obscure the noise of the kitchen, and likewise those inside can’t hear them. John’s got one arm folded across himself; the sun might be warm but the air is cool, and his t-shirt is flimsy. It occurs to Sherlock that he’s never seen John come outside without getting dressed first. He likes it.

The back of the bench presses into the backs of John’s thighs as he leans there. As Sherlock watches, John lowers his arm and sets the heels of his palms on the wood on either side of him, broadening his chest.

Come over here.

Sherlock deposits the plate he’s still holding on a blooming window box and approaches. There’s moss from the gutters all over the flagstones and it sticks to his feet. He wouldn’t notice except that it’s dried out and prickly. In front of the bench he tries to rub it off the sole of one foot using his own shin. Automatically, John’s hand finds his waist to balance him.

“The magpies throw it down,” Sherlock says, leaning to brush it away.

John kisses him.

It catches Sherlock by surprise. John’s thumb touches against the soft part of his face right next to his ear, his fingers just touching Sherlock’s hairline as he coaxes him down. The world is let loose from it’s anchor and floats away from under them, rising so swiftly that it makes Sherlock’s ears pop. John’s lips are dry, his tongue is not. Their feet bump against each other, chilled by the stone in contrast to the liquid heat sinking down inside Sherlock’s chest.

His cheeks and chin must be sandpapery under John’s hand; he hasn’t shaved yet this morning. John’s thumb moves back and forth under his eye and down his jaw anyway, and then John’s hand is on his neck, a heavy and welcome warmth.

Lestrade coughs and spits into the bowl of the toilet, then spits again. Mycroft sits on the edge of the bath and passes him a glass of water when he's done.

Lestrade croaks something that might be a thanks, might just be another heave, and sips.

"Still with us?"

"Just about... No," Lestrade corrects himself, and ducks his head again with a full-bodied spasm. Mycroft wrinkles his nose.

Eventually Lestrade leans back and flushes the toilet, his face pale. "Sorry," he says.

"Oh, I wouldn't worry. You're not the first nor the last person Daddy's lead into vice. There's usually *someone* stuck here after a party, having overdone it."

"Sorry anyway," Lestrade says, contrite. Mycroft passes him the water again and waits for him to finish it.

"I suppose I forgive you. Hundreds wouldn't," Mycroft says, stern. He doesn't feel very stern though. Nor even very disgusted, though it would be a long stretch of the truth to say that Lestrade is at all alluring at present.

Instead, Mycroft feels oddly still within the world for once. In a way, he's waiting for Lestrade to notice it. Lestrade, however, is too nauseated to manage much beyond not vomiting again. He picks himself up slowly and staggers back to the bedroom, where he has had the manners to open the window before anyone else could enter.

"I can bring up some ginger-ale. That might be better than water."

"Would you?" Lestrade asks, pathetic with gratitude. He sinks back into the bed and looks at Mycroft. Being horizontal helps to slow the merry-go-round his brain has gotten stuck on, and he scrutinises Mycroft from the pillows.

"You're being nice," he deduces.

"I'm not. I'm gathering blackmail material," Mycroft replies.

Lestrade groans, taking it as the joke it's intended to be. He lies there for a while, letting gravity stabilise and his stomach simmer down. He fidgets with the frill on the pillow, and even more decently, makes no comment whatsoever on the fact that Mycroft Holmes has frilly pillows.

He's chewing on a thought though, Mycroft notes, and so he waits, fiddling with his mobile until Lestrade finally comes out with it.

"I don't remember much after they cut the cake."

"Nothing happened to you," Mycroft says, checking Lestrade's reaction. "I walked you up the stairs. You told me you were very lucky."

"Thanks," Lestrade says, looking at the ceiling. Pleased, he adds, "I think I am then, if I convinced you not to dump my drunk arse in the ditch."

"I wouldn't do that."

Lestrade glances at him to be sure of that. Mycroft sits a little straighter.

“Fly-tipping’s illegal,” Mycroft reminds him.

Lestrade laughs. “Cheers.” He softens and manages to lean himself up on one elbow. “Um... just to be clear. Should I be reading into this...” He pauses and gestures between them. “-Thisness.”

Mycroft thins his lips. “I thought perhaps... we could play it by ear.”

“Ok,” Lestrade says. A smile rises on his face like the dawn. “Great. Fantastic.” He goes momentarily still and then swallows. “I’m very happy to hear that, really,” he says hurriedly, getting up. He walks straight past Mycroft and vanishes into the bathroom. “Really.”

And then he’s gone again.

“I’ll get that ginger-ale,” Mycroft tells him, when he’s not retching. He steps up to the doorway. This is not the best time nor way to bring the matter up, but better to mention it before Lestrade blunders downstairs. “Also, so you’re forewarned; Sherlock has...made his move.”

“What?” Lestrade asks hollowly from the toilet.

“With John.”

“Bloody hell. Really?”

“Yes.”

“Fucking good on him,” Lestrade says, and promptly vomits again. Mycroft doesn’t leave until Lestrade raises a thumb to show that he’s ok.

Sherlock’s packing his suitcase. It’s a little before lunchtime, but neither of them are hungry. Bee can eat in the car or they can stop at a pub on the way home. Right now all they really want is privacy.

He closes the lid of his violin case, checking that the clasps are secure. His suit has grass-stains on the shoulders and the seat. They aren’t so visible against the dark blue, but he can smell them if he presses the jacket to his nose; an earthy smell that makes him giddy with new memory.

“Drive safely,” Mycroft says.

Sherlock grunts, tossing the jacket into the bag and muddling it in under the rest of his clothes so that Mycroft can’t see it too closely. He throws his pyjamas in on top.

“Don’t let Lestrade die of alcohol poisoning,” he says, “Useless though he is, I still need a police officer around now and then.”

“Mummy’s feeding him soup.”

“Is she? Don’t care. Are you done blocking my doorway? I know you fit there perfectly with your large squareness but-“

He breaks off. Mycroft has done something unprecedented. He has removed his hand from his pocket and offered it to him. Sherlock stares at it.

Slowly, Mycroft extends his arm to within Sherlock’s reach.

Sherlock hesitates. He doesn't want to take it. To take it must mean the end of something that's been part of his life for as long as he can remember. It must be an admission of truce, or else it means to accept that he no longer the counterpart to Mycroft's image. That they are something different, and rather more ordinary. It must be a declaration that Mycroft is no longer there to be relied on and Sherlock will willingly not come running to him with his problems. He's wanted that very freedom for a long time yet the idea that he's on his own now, John aside, is frightening. He'd like to slap the hand away, sneer, refuse to be an adult. He could dump the suitcase into Mycroft's grasp and flippantly end it all on a joke.

And keep Mycroft.

Mycroft waits, hand extended. The tip of his thumb trembles slightly. Quietly, he says, "I wish you would."

Numbly, Sherlock shakes his hand. Very little happens, except he must look hurt because Mycroft says, "I'm not going anywhere," faintly amused.

"Too bad," Sherlock says, after a heartbeat, a feeling that's not quite relief knotted up in his chest. "You could give us all a holiday."

"Look who's talking."

"Are you two squabbling again?" John says, from behind Mycroft.

"He started it," Sherlock says, a fraction ahead of his brother. To his own surprise, this makes him laugh. Mycroft waves a hand with false impatience.

"Oh, go on back with you to your den of iniquity."

Go away and let John look after you.

Go away and be nicer to Lestrade.

Out loud, Sherlock says, "He deserves better. I told him so."

"I know," Mycroft says, though to which piece of information isn't clear. "I'll see you in London."

Sherlock nearly chokes. "Not if I can help it."

"You can't," Mycroft says airily. "It's Daddy's birthday next month. We're sworn in to take him to the Mayfair antiques."

"Get out," Sherlock says, and smugly, Mycroft leaves.

"What was that about?" John asks.

Sherlock flings the remainder of his belongings into his suitcase and shuts it with a clatter. "Tedious older brother bothering me," he complains.

"Uhuh." John knows Sherlock too well to believe him. He picks up his suitcase for him, his own already grasped in his other hand. "Ready to go?"

"God, yes."

—

They're going home again. Sherlock slings the bags into the car- who cares about suitcases. He's got three hours in a car to put up with, with John at his side. John's very tolerant about most things, but kissing at 70mph is probably not one of them.

Lestrade doesn't come out to see them off. Sherlock's willing to bet he and his brother will be lingering another night until Lestrade's fit to go. It doesn't bear close scrutiny and he refuses to think about it unless he absolutely has to.

John hugs his mother goodbye and shakes Daddy's hand. Walking to the car in the field, they catch sight of the enigmatic Tolly slinking across the field. The DJ's van is gone. She gives them a lazy little wave and climbs the stile at the far end, on her way home.

"Under-endowed," Sherlock says.

"Beg your pardon?" John lifts his head from the backseat where he's trying to arrange Bee into her car seat.

"Nothing. Let's get out of here. I'm sick of the sight of trees."

John laughs and shoves the door closed. "Let's go."

They get out of the field and onto the road. The bunting from the marquee has blown loose over night and decorates the hedge as far as the corner. John turns his head to have a last look at the house and then they're gone, through the village, out towards the motorway.

Sherlock focusses on driving, John on chewing his thoughts over. They don't turn the radio on for once. Sherlock breaks the silence with a noise of appreciation when they start seeing signs marked 'London.'

"Glad to get back?"

"Always."

"It was nice though," John muses. "Your parents are daft, but they're dafter about each other. That's nice. That's... reassuring. I hope they keep that."

"They'll be like that for the rest of their lives," Sherlock comments.

"Do you know what I want to do for the rest of my life?" John says. They overtake a caravan at close distance and when the driver gestures at them, John gives him a lazy two-finger salute. Sherlock pulls them into a cruise down the middle lane, and glances to his left. He has no idea what John's about to say.

"I want to keep finding whatever it is in you that just...lights up," John says, turning his head. Sherlock puts his eyes on the road, and swallows thickly. "And keep making it light up. All the time."

Sherlock swallows again. John leans back in his chair, legs stuck out, seat moved back as far as it will go. He sighs, contentedly, and folds his hands over his belly. In the rear-view mirror, he can see Bee sucking her thumb. Elbant is cuddled into her lap. She hasn't noticed him looking, busy watching the world go by.

"Bee's pretty good at that, and I want to be better at it too."

"Oh."

“Is that alright?”

Sherlock goes quiet for a moment. He’s listening for the voices from his mind-palace; his own doubts, his personal demons. His own sheer disbelief born of lack of faith that anyone, let alone John, would willingly try to make him happy. He’s waiting for the inevitable part of him that wants to make a mockery of his life.

“Sherlock?”

“Yes,” Sherlock blurts, in his own voice. “Yes, that’s fine.”

“Good,” John agrees. His hand briefly nudges Sherlock’s where it lies on the steering wheel. “I’d have done it anyway.”

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Chapter End Notes

Notes (roughly in order? Maybe scroll up and down and check.)

1) [The Boat Dance](#) is a mysteriously British phenomenon from the late 70’s/ early 80’s and a favourite at wedding receptions and school discos for the older set. Basically whenever ‘Rock the Boat’ or (more traditionally) Oops Upside Your Head by The Gap Band plays, you sit on the floor and pretend to be in a boat. Why? I have no idea. You just do. **(EDIT: LINKS FIXED!)**

The other two favourites are [The Birdie Dance](#) and [The Hokey Cokey](#), which should be done in a full circle and the very real danger of cracking your head against someone else’s. Like a rugby scrum. None of this gentle American waggling around politely.

2) “I am in a state not unlike that of Diogenes as described by Lucian” Is a quote from the letters of Johann Joachim Winckelmann to his student F. W. Peter Lambrecht. Winckelmann wrote about Greek Art, wore leather trousers and had a fairly interesting life before he got murdered. You can find out more about him [BY CLICKING HERE](#).

3) Sherlock’s summer cases reference an episode of Waking the Dead Season 1 episodes 3-4 “Burn Out” and [The Adventure of the Laughing Jarvey by Stephen Fry](#). Which is worth reading but uh... I guess uh... spoilers? *SWEATS*

4) Big thanks to the folks of the Antidiogenes Club for their help figuring out what happens in A&E. Together we fudged together an idea, but we’re none of us doctors so forgive us our trespasses please. This proved to be rather difficult to Google, what with being so specific.

5) [Jason Donovan](#) was kind of HUGE in the 80’s/ early 90’s. I mean, [look at this be-mulleted dreamboat](#). Plus he was half of the duet in soap opera ‘Neighbours’ that launched Kylie Monogue to stardom, and had his own pop career, and I literally did not know ANYONE at the time who wasn’t vaguely aware of this. You didn’t have to like the show or even watch it. It just came on after children’s TV and you left it on in that gap before tea was served and you had homework to avoid. I fully HC that Harry

used to watch it, saying how amazing 'Ace Jace' was, but ogling Kylie. I suspect John did some casual Kylie ogling too, but... [those arms...](#) (You have to remember, the 80's was a pretty sad time in many many respects. The TV influx of half-naked ozzies with mad hair and terrible shorts were about one of the few good things of the decade.)

6) Sherlock quotes the opening lines of [The Corsair by G.G. Byron](#). Byron's first names were George Gordon. How disappointed he must have been in them.

7) Sherlock reflects on a few of the lyrics from 'When I'm 64' by The Beatles.

8) The title comes from ['It's Been a Long Long Time' by Charlie Spivak with vocals by Irene Day](#).

9) The working title was 'Hey little brother what have you done? Hey little brother, who's the only one? It's a nice day for a- GAY WEDDDDDINNNGGG (anniversary)'. (I'm always weirdly convinced that White Wedding is by Meatloaf, but it's actually Billy Idol. Wtf do I even know anymore?)

10) The 'slow song' mentioned when they first kiss isn't named or anything, but I sort of head-canon it as a cover of Whitney Houston's 'I want to Dance with Somebody' by Mathew Alber.

11) HAVE I MISSED ANYTHING? I think that's it? If not, just let me know! (There may be types in the final section of the fic :E Apologies!)

Comments? Questions? Just have burning desire to tell me about that one family wedding thing you had to go to when you were just a wee cabbage and had to wear *THAT* outfit? LET US KNOW!

Tarah for now,

-Oda xx

Part 15: Only Grant Me

Chapter Summary

Sherlock unfolds himself from the chair and self-consciously finds a tangle in his hair with his fingers. He teases the knot apart, mind whirring.

"I'll... go get dressed then."

"That could be an idea," John says. His eyes follow his every movement. "I'm not sure they'd let you in otherwise."

Chapter Notes

So a slight change in plans. This chapter got split off from the mammoth chapter it was becoming as part of an attempt to try and make updates that little bit quicker, and that little less exhausting to write. After this there will be 8 shorter parts instead of 4 long ones, including the epilogues that are already written. As you might have guessed, that means the fic is not going to be finished by the time S4 airs, but my policy is that this fic is now very much an AU. It's the same up to the tarmac scene and then it splits away from canon and does it's own thing.

The rest of the story is planned and I'm probably NOT going to reference anything from S4 in it- unless I am a very lucky lemon and the whole of S4 just melds in beautifully with it, but that's not really likely.

Notes as always are at the end of the fic and as ever, love to [Codenamelazarus](#) who is still tirelessly helping with the fic.

-[Odamakilock](#).

EDIT: SO LITERALLY I WROTE THIS AND WENT OUT AND WHEN I CAME BACK -THAT- TRAILER HAD BEEN AIRED. Fuck a duck, guys.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Part 15: Only Grant Me

She's two and a half years old and her parents are acting as though they are nearly as innocent.

Baker Street has not changed even though everything else has, and they spend days in a strange social dance around the fact that they have kissed and intend to keep doing so.

The other thing that happens in the days after the Ruby Wedding is that Bee needs new shoes. John

buys her ones that have pigs on them. She adores them. It has opened up two whole new worlds to her- pig-related merchandise and shoes- and she does her best to take full advantage of this profound new insight into life.

“New shoes!” she insists, beaming, petting her own feet. “Look! My nice, new shoe-shoes!”

She wants to wear them all the time and show everyone. When she’s distracted from her shoes, she forgets them. When she remembers them again, she’s delighted all over again, and displays them to the world with the pomp of a tiny emperor.

Sherlock catches her in a quiet moment, tracing the characters on her arches. She feels him looking and smiles at him, grasping her toes.

New shoes!

Like father, like daughter, Sherlock thinks. Both fathers, in fact. He says it out loud, meaning to be enigmatic and funny, but to his pleasure, John knows exactly what he means.

They keep catching each other’s eyes during routine moments and without doing anything, they share the knowledge.

New shoes!

I’ve got a Sherlock!

My nice John.

The knowledge curls like butter in John’s belly. They’re too happy for Mrs. Hudson not to notice that something’s going on, but by unspoken agreement, they don’t tell her. There’s a contrariness in their wanting to bugle about their change in relationship long and loud, and a desire to keep it smuggled away, their own secret.

“What are you thinking about,” she asks John, with friendly suspicion. He manages to rein in the dopey smile on his face, and fake some interest in his newspaper again. “Shoes,” he says.

Sherlock coughs.

She looks between them, but they’re as tight as oysters and she’s happy enough to take her clues downstairs and gossip with her own correct assumptions. She tuts instead of asking. “There’s a fool born every minute,” she says, making John grin again.

“Shoes?” Sherlock says, politely interested, after she’s gone.

“Mm. Just... y’know...” John tries to think of a funny type of shoe, and fails. “Shoes.”

“Curious. And what were you thinking?”

“Oh,” John lowers the newspaper again, gaze skittering as he thinks. “I was looking at them. I thought ‘those are a good pair of shoes’.”

“In what way?” Sherlock leans towards him.

“Sturdy,” John says, which makes Sherlock frown, “I mean, good quality. You could walk a long way in them and they wouldn’t let the water in. Warm feet.”

“Oh.”

Sherlock takes the mangled metaphor as the compliment he's been fishing for, and is satisfied. Life goes on.

There aren't many big cases; just the usual parade of predictable thefts and betrayals, but Sherlock finds himself not minding the lack of diversion. His life seems full enough at the moment, with a toddler and a profound new relationship.

It's never been so pleasant, and yet there's an endless compromise to be made between reality and expectation. Habits don't break so easily, and none are so set in their ways as Bee. The bedtime routine is sacrosanct, or else it leads to tantrums and arguments.

With no high-ticket cases, it's John's income and Sherlock's savings keeping them afloat. Sherlock's attempts to be flippant result in John presenting him firmly with the bill from Bee's nursery. They squabble about it. Between them it's possible to avoid sending Bee to nursery all together, but that's besides the point.

She enjoys it.

So John pulls hours at the clinic and Sherlock ghosts around the apartment alternating between delighted at how things have turned out and wondering why things haven't just melted into perfection overnight.

It's not bad, quite the opposite- he's worked hard and waited long enough and the sheer overwhelming relief that it's reciprocated has yet to lose its edge.

They'd driven home from his parents house, Sherlock with his heart singing in his mouth, and the knowledge that it was All Over At Last. He'd parked, and looked at John, who'd looked back, long and warm and kissed him.

They'd go inside, he'd thought, and close the door and start the rest of their lives. And in fact they had, except it had come down to the rather un-romantic realisation that someone needed to change Bee's nappy and the other needed to do something about lunch, which meant going to the shop because there was nothing in the fridge worth eating.

And what with all of that, the first afternoon of the rest of their lives had passed little differently to any previous afternoon.

They steal moments from each other, morning and evening, when they get a snatch of time alone and in doing so, they both sense the feeling creeping up on them that the relationship is 'other' or 'extra' to what passes for normal in their day to day lives.

In his weakest moments, slumped on the sofa picking at his violin strings, Sherlock allows himself to wallow in disappointment that relationships require work.

"Every time I think I've reached the bottom, it changes and goes on," he mutters into the sofa cushions, thinking it unfair that each time he takes a step forward, some unseen hand seems to come down and move the goalposts.

Not that anyone has reached a bottom, yet, he reflects. They've been a little old-fashioned and all reaching has been above the waist. This actually surprises him with what he knows of John Watson. He'd gone for female bottoms like an arrow.

This leads Sherlock into a knot of half-baked suppositions, although he's self-aware enough to remind himself that this isn't his area of expertise and half of his conclusions must be wrong. At least, some of the time. It's difficult to be rational.

In his mind palace, when he approaches the issue, he has the sense to confront himself with a giant red flag composed of Molly, Lestrade and John himself telling him it is too soon to start making bold questions about sex in lieu of proper conversation.

Especially not questions like ‘When are we going to have sex?’ and related inquiries starting with ‘do we have to-?’

Of course, there’s one scenario in which he does just stand up from the kitchen table, pins John with a look and demands, ‘when are we going to have sex?’. To which John replies (annoyed, turned on and aghast that he has not been doing his duty) ‘Now’. After that the fantasy gets a bit hazy, but starts with a lot of kissing and promises a lot of kitchen table, and altogether is lovely, but makes Sherlock worry about how he’d handle spontaneous sex. There would be a lot going on. Emotional things.

And that’s before contending with the neurotic little voice echoing behind his thoughts. The one that tries to tell him John might not be interested in that. With him.

With nothing solid yet to counter-argue that with, Sherlock finds it difficult to squash.

At least- not until John comes home Friday evening and drops his bag on the kitchen table with a thump.

“Go put something on,” he says, striding over and kissing Sherlock where he’s slouched in his armchair. Sherlock grunts with surprise, not just from the kiss but the fact that John smells of soap and aftershave- he’s brushed up before coming home from work.

“What? Why?”

“Because I like you and I think we should go out and have fun.”

Sherlock processes this. The words have an echo of familiarity to them. He sits up. “A... date?”

John smiles a slow little smile. “Something like that,” he agrees. “I mean, yeah. Technically speaking, our first date. How about it?”

Sherlock unfolds himself from the chair and self-consciously finds a tangle in his hair with his fingers. He teases the knot apart, mind whirring.

“I’ll... go get dressed then.”

“That could be an idea,” John says. His eyes follow his every movement. “I’m not sure they’d let you in otherwise.”

“I went-“ Sherlock begins, about to say that he went to a cafe in just a hospital gown once, but suddenly doubts if that really happened or not. There had been a lot of morphine. Instead he clears his throat.

“Mrs. Hudson is halfway through a soother.” The fact has not escaped John, he’d smelt it coming up the stairs and at any rate, he’d anticipated the problem.

“Don’t worry, I’ve found a babysitter.” John shrugs. “That kind of prompted the idea, actually. Go get changed.”

Curious, Sherlock lopes up the stairs. There’s a number of options for babysitters he can think of off the top of his head. He’s hoping it’s Wiggins but the likelihood of John choosing him ahead of

the rest is somewhat low.

Sherlock scrabbles out of his pyjamas and stands shivering, fumbling through his wardrobe. Clothes. Dates. What was the etiquette here? John's in his doctorly shirt-and-a-cardigan outfit, with the corduroy trousers that Sherlock hates. He hates them because taken out of context he can't think of anything more dampening to the libido, and yet a corduroy trouser full of John is somehow rather exciting. Still. John's not wearing his nicer trousers, so it's not a formal date. Nothing rocket-fuel. A going-out-for-dinner kind of date.

A dad date.

Feeling obliged not to let his reputation down, however; Sherlock wriggles into his third-best suit. Crisp off-white shirt undone at the throat and the rest dark blue. He comes downstairs straightening his cuffs as the front door clatters.

The tread on the stairs is familiar. Sherlock's heart leaps into his mouth.

"Him?!" he hisses at John, who shrugs. The door opens.

"Evening!"

Lestrade is looking too pleased with himself for words. He comes in like he owns the place and nods to Sherlock. "Alright?" he asks, like he knows the answer.

Sherlock feels like he's slipped into a parallel universe as he watches John clear his throat and- of all things!- shake Lestrade's hand.

What the devil are they doing?

Glancing at John it's clear John's having the same alternative dimension experience.

"Bee's in bed already," John says, feeling his pockets unnecessarily for his wallet and his phone. He pulls on his jacket- not the boring brown one he wears for work. The black one. The leathery one he likes because he can stuff his gun in the small of his back and the cut of the jacket keeps it secret there. The one he wears to go chasing crime with Sherlock and has gun oil stains on the lining and smells strongly of John under the arms in a nice sort of way if you happen to like the smell of John and leather combined. "Any emergencies, you've got our numbers."

Lestrade is trying hard not to grin at them. "Have a nice time," he says, despite Sherlock's glower.

"We'll be back about half eleven," John says. It's only 7:45 now, Sherlock notes. That's a whole three and a half hours of date. He can't even imagine. "She shouldn't wake up. There's stuff in the fridge but don't open the left-hand crisper."

"Noted," Lestrade says, making himself comfortable in Sherlock's chair and looking like he's just conducted the drugs bust to end all drugs busts. He waves Sherlock off. "Bye! Try and be good!"

Sherlock splutters but John's already out of the door of the flat and he has to scuttle to keep up.

"Lestrade!?" he repeats, once they're at the foot of the stairs.

"Yeah, well, I said ages ago I'd let him know if we needed a babysitter and I was talking to him at lunchtime, and he said he was free this evening so..." John falters. "Not good?"

Sherlock can't even decide. They've been pussy-footing around acknowledging how things are all

week and the last thing he expected was for John to take the initiative and discuss it with someone else.

John coughs. "He already knew," he says, shortly. "Your brother's a bloody muckraker."

Sherlock recoils with a noise embarrassingly close to 'ew'.

Flustered, John shoves the door open, into the cold night air. "I mean, he's a gossip. We were seen at the party. We weren't exactly very subtle."

"Oh," Sherlock answers, with relief, "I thought you—"

John shrugs with a laugh, "Well, he might be that too."

"What was Lestrade calling you for anyway?"

"He sometimes calls me," John answers, closing the door behind them. "For no reason. This might be a surprise to some people, but I have got friends."

Sherlock looks down at him from the step.

"Some friends," John amends, trying to be peeved but failing. "Look, never mind. We're out." He gestures to the road. "We're off duty for three hours. Let's not waste it with Mycroft, Greg or the kids." He jerks a thumb in the general direction of the city. "Let's just go somewhere."

"Where? Taxi?"

"Might as well. I thought we could get something to eat in Soho. It's a bit unplanned," John says, apologetically. "Spur of the moment kind of thing."

"I don't mind," Sherlock says, truthfully. He thrusts an arm out and stops a taxi. "Food or something more interesting?"

"Food?" John suggests. "Lunch was a while ago..."

"I can tolerate food." Sherlock flicks through his phone and then thrusts it between the front seats to show the driver an address.

It's a short drive through Marylebone, skimming Shaftesbury Avenue and then diving straight into the clogged and maze-like backstreets of Soho. The taxi driver leans on his horn and mutters about tourists on Boris bikes and pedestrians. They twist into the odd bit of Soho that's part boutiques, part eateries and part council estate and then, when the road hits a dead end, the driver kicks them out.

"Where are we going?"

"Lebanese," Sherlock says, pointing down an alleyway. "You'll like it."

"Sure I will," John answers. For someone who purportedly hates food, Sherlock has an outstanding working knowledge of places worth eating at. "You should put it on your website," John teases, following him into the gap between a hipster gift shop and a delicatessen. He eyes the massage parlour as they pass it, which these days is probably just that, and chuckles.

"Put what?"

"Your extensive restaurant map. How do you find these places?"

“I walk a lot.” Sherlock pauses at the door and looks back. “If I have nothing better to do.” Or too much fractious energy to burn off.

“Just... walk around London?”

“Never know where something interesting will pop up,” Sherlock replies. “I check in with my network. Refresh my visual memory of the lay of the land. Things change quickly. I have to keep up.”

The restaurant is tiny- barely a dozen tables crammed into a space the size of their own living room in front of a glass counter. It’s already full but Sherlock’s luck has yet to run out and they arrive just as another couple are leaving. The man and the woman squeeze past them through the doorway, holding hands, and meander away into the city. John follows behind Sherlock, who with his height and his sweeping coat, seems to take up all the space and air in the place.

They’re seated in the far corner by the window, the glass of which is chilly against John’s elbow when he shrugs his jacket off.

“Bit cosy.”

“Some would say snug,” Sherlock replies. Their knees bump under the table. It’s warm inside, though, and despite the proximity of the other diners, loud enough and atmospheric enough that they don’t feel overlooked. From the corner, John realises that no one else has spared them so much as a second look. They’re too busy eating and talking and bumping knees and calculating how much their share of the food is.

“What do you recommend?”

“Haven’t a clue,” Sherlock replies, turning his menu around and passing it to John. “I just got us here. You pick.”

You’re lying.

I know I’m lying.

John purses his lips and accepts the challenge. The first thing listed is ‘hommos’ which gives him a start until he realises it’s ‘hummus’ spelt with ‘o’s.

“Is that deliberate?” he wonders and then grins. “How about a salad of ‘gym lettuce’?”

Sherlock pulls the menu back and spots the errors. “Presumably they care more about the cooking than the typing.”

“Fine by me,” John says.

He orders, skipping the shawarma in favour of a tableful of mezze to share instead. The waitress brings wine (Sherlock’s choice) and a steaming basket of pitta bread. The dishes flow to the table as and when they’re ready and for a while, they do nothing except sample, pinch bread, dip, chew and savour.

Sherlock, appetite sated faster than John’s, sits back and asks the question he’s been dwelling on since they arrived.

“What makes this different to dinner?”

John, licking baba gannouj from his finger, looks up. He wipes his hands slowly on his napkin and considers. "Nothing, I suppose," he says at last. "I just thought we should... try this. A bit of time without everything else," John toys with his fork. "Just you and me."

"Is this what people do on first dates?"

"Pretty much. I mean... it's just a way to get to know someone."

"You already know me."

"I do," John agrees. "And you know me probably better than I know myself but... this is still new, isn't it?" He lowers his voice slightly. "Us."

Without Bee. Without cases. Without your issues and my issues. Do we really know ourselves as 'us'?

"Ah. I see."

"I just... thought it might be nice." John picks up his fork and stabs it into one of the little dishes, dislodging pomegranate seeds onto the tabletop. Sherlock chews on his inner cheek. He realises he's drumming his fingers on the table and his spine has locked up rigid straight. He forces himself to relax back into his chair.

I'm making you nervous.

John's tongue dabs at his lower lip. Lettuce slips sideways on his plate.

A bit.

Out of sight of prying eyes, Sherlock gently presses his kneecap against John's.

"Are you kicking me under the table?"

"Why not?" Sherlock says flippantly, and John grins.

"Prat."

The dishes are cooling and they work for a while to empty them- christmas coloured fattoush with fat tomatoes and occasionally fiery wafers of radish; Lebanese sausages doused in lemon juice, that burst in the mouth hot enough to burn; crisp-edged chicken livers, slick with pomegranate molasses and scattered with bright green herbs.

Sherlock reaches out and steals the ruby kernels of pomegranate with his fingers, one at a time from John's plate. Behind John, the walls of the restaurant are panelled with streaky planks of wood. To his right, the window is a dark square and between the two contrasts, John seems to simply fit.

"What?" John asks, catching him looking.

"Nothing."

John chuckles. His fingers slip up and down the stem of his wine glass. He's looking out the window on purpose, though there isn't much to see. He must feel Sherlock's eyes on his neck. What can be seen of it between his hairline and the stiff back of his collar stands out pale in contrast to the warm brown of the walls.

Sherlock swallows a mouthful of wine, which stings all the way down- shouldn't have tried to breathe at the same time as drinking.

John leans his face on his fist and looks at him. "What are you thinking?"

"It's been a while. Since we ate out."

"I can't remember. I mean, we've grabbed food, but..."

"Not dinner."

"Not dinner," John agrees. "So. We were overdue then. We should go to the theatre again."

Sherlock makes a pleased noise at the memory. He folds his hands up under his chin, resting his elbows on the table and looks John over again. They've changed a lot, Sherlock thinks. John's posture's changed. He's upright again but without the uncomfortable feeling that he's being stretched taut against his will. His shirt is snug- he's been running again when time and energy allow and Sherlock suspects he stops in the park to exercise. At any rate, his shoulders have filled out under the seams and where, a year ago or so he was skinny around the middle, he's moved back towards something a bit beyond slim, but healthier.

"What?" John asks again, more softly, almost laughing.

What are you looking at?

"You've got parsley in your teeth," Sherlock invents, shifting in his seat, and laughs when John scrubs at his mouth, disgruntled.

—

The bill comes and their fingers bump when they both reach for it.

"It's on me," Sherlock says firmly, pulling it towards him.

"We can split it."

"You paid for the last one."

John pauses, frowning as he tries to remember. "What one? That one? That was your birthday- that doesn't count."

"You paid the gas bill," Sherlock argues, squirrelling the bill out of John's reach and pinning his credit card to it with his thumb.

"I pay all the bills. You forget to," John says, but he lets his hand slip back from the table into his lap, and says nothing while Sherlock runs the card through the server's machine until it's done.

"Thank you."

"My pleasure."

John snorts, pulling his jacket on. "You're a right... I don't even know what. Have you seriously been waiting to do that since what... two years ago?"

Just one of Sherlock's canines shows as he tries not to smirk. "Good things come to he who waits."

They come out the opposite end of the alley, back towards Piccadilly and Chinatown, where the streets are lined with shops named things like ‘Growler’, ‘Crayze’, and places advertising full nude striptease. There’s a bookshop with a number of things that aren’t books in the window and a bar with Chinese dragon statues and a large poster of a nude male torso. John tries to look as disinterested as Sherlock actually is.

“What?”

“Nothing,” John says. “Um. Do you want to get a drink before we go...Not here, obviously.”

“Obviously,” Sherlock says, dry with humour.

They reach the main road and drift closer to the bright lights of Piccadilly Circus, to the fringe where it’s still cheap and a bit seedy, but less openly so.

“There’s a pub,” John points out. It’s an old hole-in-the-wall type, with a familiar portrait of Victoria dangling over the doorway. Inside is warm and full of elbow-rubbing company. They press their way down the length of the bar and find a breathing space at the end and part of a table to prop on.

“We won’t stay long,” John promises. The bar is packed with 20-somethings and although no one is doing anything obnoxious, it’s not Sherlock’s sort of atmosphere. John eavesdrops on the nearest conversation while he orders, a couple of women of different ages- coworkers, John guesses- trying to tell the man with them he’s not ‘typical’ compared to other men.

He smears a drop of water, spilled beer maybe, on the dark wood of the bar-top and wonders what ‘typical’ is supposed to mean. The young man is having an equally hard time figuring it out.

Perhaps people just want to feel normal sometimes.

John glances back to where Sherlock’s perched on a barstool at a table, sticking out like a sore thumb, and feels his heart go out to him. This is ridiculous.

He collects their drinks and presses the glass into Sherlock’s hand, knocking the rims together. “Cheers,” he says, “We’ll have these and go.”

Sherlock nods, and takes it as a written instruction, gulping so large a mouthful that John has to press a hand to his elbow. “Steady on.”

“I can’t think in here, it’s too loud,” Sherlock says, over the hubbub.

“Sorry, I should have realised.”

John squashes into the space between Sherlock and the wall, facing outwards down the bar. There’s probably less than forty people in there other than themselves, but the place is so tiny it feels like more.

“Shaped like a bus,” John comments. “You know they do those? Bars that are buses. Bus bars.”

“Also a conductor within a switchboard. A ‘busbar.’”

“There might be a conductor, but he’s more likely to be a bartender,” John says. “How’d you know about busbars?”

“How do you?”

“I did a course on electronics at school.”

“I broke a lot of electronics,” Sherlock says. John laughs.

“What’s the worst thing you did at school? I mean, to annoy the teachers.”

Sherlock considers. He forgets the noise and the close confines of the bar. He bows his head towards John, who leans in, and he tells him stories. All the best ones he can think of, and the dull ones that he embellishes slightly. He tells him about bartering for fireworks, taking them apart in the fields behind his parents’ house, and then putting them back together. He talks about rigging make-shift detonators for fire crackers and hiding them in cowpats.

“I waited for ramblers and then set them off,” Sherlock says. “And Mummy and Daddy still bought me a chemistry set for my birthday.”

John’s resting his glass on the table in front of Sherlock, and because he has to lean in close to hear Sherlock over the din of course, he bares his ear towards his mouth, and puts his hand on Sherlock’s waist for balance.

“What happened next?”

Sherlock stumbles unthinkingly through the story. The chemistry set had been a large one and the joy of his life one summer, until he’d brewed something that had puffed up with knock-out gas and put him out cold. Even Daddy had put his foot down after that, and the chemistry kit had been taken away.

“Just so you know, we’re never buying Bee a chemistry set,” John says, once he’s stopped laughing. “Or,” he amends, seeing Sherlock’s disappointment. “She’s only using it supervised.”

“Kids today don’t get any fun. I was fine.”

“You gassed yourself!”

Sherlock has no answer to that which isn’t an obvious lie. Besides. John’s hand is still on his waist. It’s discrete. They’re in the corner at the back of the pub behind the bar. In front of them is the glass washing station and to Sherlock’s right the table and a pillar, which shields them from the direct gaze of the people on the next table. Not that they’re remotely interested in what John and Sherlock are doing. Not that they could really see even if they could. John’s standing close but so is everyone else. There’s no other choice.

John lifts his glass and drains it. “Finish up,” he says.

—

The streets are loud in a different way. They sidestep through the crowds and decide to walk home. It’s still early; they’ve got over an hour until Lestrade is expecting them, so why waste it. Sherlock digs up more stories of his childhood misadventures. Nothing tragic; an exploit with a dead owl that he’d tried to taxidermy with only partial success.

John returns a few, but on a less personal note. He tells him about a man he knew in the army who set off all the fire alarms and caused a panic by trying to bake a cupcake over a lighter.

“The thing was,” John says as they amble along, “He was only using sodding dairy milk and rice

krispies. It was a rice krispie cake. You don't bake them."

"Oh."

John halts, and then realises he's talking to the exact kind of man who might, at an outside chance, try to bake a rice krispie cake if he wasn't thinking properly. The thought makes him smile again.

"I wouldn't," Sherlock protests. "I'd know better."

"Make rice krispie cakes with Bee," John suggests. "She'd love it."

"Stop saying 'rice krispie'."

"You should make them, though. Or cornflake cakes."

"You're obsessed with breakfast food, why? Mrs. Hudson can do that anyway, why should I have to?"

"Make me cornflake cakes," John nudges him. "With our daughter."

Sherlock's heart flutters. He tilts his head back and looks up at the roofs and the black, orange smeared city sky, letting the air cool his throat.

"Sorry no one got murdered over dinner," John is saying, when he comes back again. "I did, you know, ask around. Oh, is that a smile?"

It is. John grins back, relieved. "Thank god for that. I thought that pub had killed the evening off completely."

"Are you rude to all your dates?"

"Only the ones I really like," John says. He's swaggering, hands in his pockets, playing up to him. The nice cardigan is hidden under the leather jacket now it's zipped up. The corduroy just looks black.

Come on. Come on then.

"Tsk, John. So *short* on manners."

"Excuse me?"

Sherlock sweeps past him. "Should I speak a *little* louder?"

"You're an arse." John snorts and lengthens his pace to keep up with him. Presently they slow to a dawdle again. They're in amongst the houses on the edge of Regents Park. Here a multi-million pound cream and cast iron residence, there a pebble-dashed council flat. There's an upturned shopping trolley outside one of the stunted tower blocks, like a gutted animal on the side of the road.

The park itself is locked, but they walk along its edge. Now and then they catch a glimpse through the hedges and hear the croak of waterfowl. Sherlock's a tall shadow against the laurels when they step out of the reach of the streetlights, nothing stands out except his face which remains pale in spite of the pinching cold.

Slowly John removes a hand from his pocket, and without moving his head, sticks two fingers inside Sherlock's near-hand sleeve and tugs. Sherlock moves his hand closer, looking down.

John's looking away across the traffic, watching the lights change at the crossing. His fingers curl like commas into Sherlock's palm.

When a car passes, hissing against the tarmac, John says, "Hold my hand?"

"I used to hold onto Redbeard's collar," Sherlock says. Their hands are cold and it's hard to feel John's skin against his own. It's dry and solid. Together, they catch a little pocket of warm air. "To stop him straying off."

"Did he do that much?"

"He had a pathological need to chase bicycles and a certain deafness to the word 'heel'. Then typically he'd get lost."

"Sounds familiar."

Sherlock makes their hands swing slightly. "Worried about getting lost?"

"If you let go, yeah. I'd be lost."

The toe of Sherlock's shoe scuffs the pavement, spoiling the gloss of the leather. "John."

John's hand closes tighter, making their hands one balled fist between them. He lifts it slightly and shakes it as if to test the connection, to prove to them both it's there and then smiles. Sherlock flexes his forearm and stops the movement. "John, I—"

"It's ok." John leads him when he falls behind. Sherlock stares at the back of John's head until he looks back.

I've got you.

It's not a long enough walk home to close the conversation. There are too many people and Sherlock is speechless anyway. John steps back alongside him, their hands hidden in the billows of Sherlock's coat. No one glances twice at them. The house looks empty as they approach it. The shutters of the cafe are down. Above, there's the gleam of lamplight through the curtains.

They pause. John's keys clink as he takes them from his pocket. He needs to let go to reach in front of Sherlock to unlock the door.

Sherlock takes a step back when their hands do part. His fingers tingle, warmed by John's. He runs them through his hair at the back of his head, and in the same motion makes a snap decision. He rocks forward, so that to John it seems like all one action, and then puts his hands up to John's face as the man turns in surprise and kisses him.

Standing, he can use his height as leverage, and John leans back into the door with a thud. John gasps through his nose, fingers digging into Sherlock's sleeve, pulling the Belstaff askew. His stubble prickles Sherlock's palms but his skin is smooth where Sherlock's little fingers brush the sides of his throat.

John has to lean up into the kiss, his free hand on the back of Sherlock's neck. The door knocker rattles, dislodged by their shoulders.

They breathe. Sherlock's hands drop to John's lapels, pulling him up. They slip into the corner of the door, still standing, John's shoulders braced between the wood of the frame and the brick of the house.

John's hand is on the back of Sherlock's collar when they stop, foreheads touching.

"Same," Sherlock says. He closes his eyes, rocks his head against John's. "For me. It's the same."

He feels John take a deep breath and something unwinds between them. John's hands are on his face. His eyes look brown in this light. It's difficult to swallow.

There's a clatter as the curtains of the window upstairs are pulled aside, and then the main light comes on. They fall apart, conscious of the fact that while this is home, it's not yet private.

Sherlock clears his throat, brushing the front of his coat.

"Right, well. That's good," John says breathlessly, tugging his jacket down again. "Perhaps we'll do this again some time." He pauses and considers if 'now' is an option.

"I think I'm supposed to invite you in for coffee," Sherlock says, finding the key in the lock and twisting it. "But unfortunately, you live here, so that takes the fun out of it somewhat."

"You can still make me coffee," John answers. He looks to Sherlock like he's just fallen off a roller coaster. The sort that throws you upside down, but God knows, that'd be the kind John would go for. "I like coffee."

"Coffee, then."

"Stop saying 'coffee'. Rice krispie cake."

Sherlock bursts with a laugh he hadn't felt coming, stumbling on the doormat. John closes the door behind him, and it's hot in the hall. The radiator clicks with effort. Sherlock undoes the top button of his coat and starts loosening his scarf.

"Coffee."

He starts to climb the stairs, pausing only a moment on the second step to turn back invitingly to John, holding his scarf open wide.

Come on then. Come on.

John chuffs and follows.

"Drop your keys, did you?" Lestrade says, getting up as they come in. "Or couldn't you find the keyhole?"

"Shut up, Lestrade."

Lestrade guffaws, and then remembering the baby, stifles it.

"Go away." Sherlock flings his scarf onto the coat hook. He's already deducing the flat and the minute changes Lestrade has made in their absence.

"Thanks, Greg," John says, with better humour but a warning in his eye. "I took him to a pub; let's not wind him up further."

"Alright. You had a nice time then?"

"Yeah."

"Looks it. Just as well neither of you wear lipstick. Alright, I'm shutting up." Lestrade holds his

hands up. “The bubs has been dead to the world. I helped myself to your cheese. Haven’t heard a peep from Mrs. Hudson either. Next time I’ll come over when people are awake.”

“Yeah, if you’re not working and fancy a job,” John says, herding him towards the door.

“I just wish you’d warned me your film collection was so naff.”

“We don’t watch films.”

“Neither did you by the looks of it,” Sherlock says, fiddling with the remote. “Had a go, did you?”

“Yeah. Well. Bye then,” Lestrade says hastily, and he’s gone. John looks between the door closing behind Lestrade and Sherlock, still dissecting the TV history, crouched in his armchair.

“What the hell was he doing?” John wants to know, alarmed.

“Watching three hours of that annoying dance competition Mrs. Hudson likes.” Sherlock points down by the coffee table. “And judging by the scuffs in the carpet; I’d say a quickstep.”

—

They make the coffee together in the kitchen. John pushes aside the jar of instant granules and pulls out the stovetop espresso maker. It’s dusty. He bought it years ago now, or else it was a wedding gift. He can’t remember. It makes good coffee but he can rarely be bothered.

In the back of the fridge there’s a plastic container with the coffee in it. John sniffs it and then passes it to Sherlock to investigate.

“I think it’s still ok.”

“It’s passable,” Sherlock agrees. The gas flares up blue around the base of the coffee maker, and the heat spreads out into the kitchen. They pass cups from hand to hand onto the counter. Sherlock tips sugar into his.

“Do you really need three sugars?”

“It’s strong coffee.”

“It’s bad for your teeth.”

Sherlock bares his. To John’s eternal annoyance, he has perfect dental records, even considering the horrors of his diet and distraction. John feels the rough patch in his back left molar where he has a filling that aches when he eats ice-cream.

“It’s because I don’t snack.”

“I don’t snack. Much.”

“Twix wrapper in your work bag begs to differ.”

“You keep out of there.”

John drips the scantest amount of milk into his cup and sticks the milk back in the fridge. They lean on the counter, catty corner to one another, and sip.

“That place wasn’t bad,” John says. “I liked the chicken with pomegranate. It was sort of

Christmassy.”

Sherlock gives a little ‘hm’ to show he’s listening. The steam curls up from the cup around John’s face. It finds the little flick of hair that’s grown down over his forehead and makes it furl at the edges.

“No, it wasn’t bad,” he says, recollecting. The countertop presses into his lower back, harder and colder than John’s hand. ‘Is this what it’s like for everyone else?’ he wonders. ‘Do they do these things and feel like this?’

Sherlock shifts his weight and pushes his shirt sleeves up. He doesn’t want to move from this spot. They watch each other drink their coffee, saying nothing. Sherlock presses his thumb into the space between his naval and his sternum. He’s already full, and the coffee is just adding to the comfortable lethargic feeling.

He isn’t hungry, and nothing aches.

It’s such an uncommon feeling to him that he goes still to explore it. His heels weigh into the kitchen floor. The nape of his neck is cool, and his hands warm from the coffee cup. There’s no noise except for the clink of John’s mug on the counter when he sets it down between sips and their breathing.

He’s seen John take a scalding hot drink before and neck it. They’ve been stood here- Sherlock closes his eyes and thinks- for more than fifteen minutes. There’s a tag of skin on Sherlock’s upper lip. He rubs at it with his tongue and then pushes his lip against his teeth with his thumb and pulls it free. It must have been there when they kissed. Perhaps John felt it.

The coffee doesn’t last forever. Eventually John has to turn and set his empty cup, now cold, into the sink. The caffeine and the warmth have put colour back into his face, two smears of pink on either cheek. Sherlock stretches a hand over the short distance between them, and touches one.

“I’m going upstairs.”

He sees John’s throat bob. He’s gone still; like he’s listening with every fibre of his being. Fractionally, under Sherlock’s hand, he nods.

John washes the cups while Sherlock climbs the stairs. He turns off the lights and cracks the door to his bedroom. Bee is a lump in her bed, snuffling around her thumb under the pale blue glow of her nightlight. Softly he closes the door again, his whole chest feeling tender.

The flight of stairs stretches up. He goes up them slowly, letting his tread sound loud on the boards. It sounds quieter than his heartbeat. The bannister is rough under his hand; his whole body is alive.

Sherlock’s room smells of books; paper and dust. It smells of washing powder from the bedding, and faintly of chemicals from Sherlock’s boxes. Coming inside the room more fully, John catches the faint smell of Sherlock’s aftershave.

The blind has been drawn over the skylight and the lamp lit, making everything orange.

Sherlock turns as John’s foot leaves the stairs. His fingers flutter. “I was just tidying.”

He drops the pillow he’s holding back onto the bed and finishes pushing a box of god knows what under the bed.

"It's fine," John says. "Looks the same as ever."

"Not much space," Sherlock says. He puts his hands behind his back and grasps his own fingers.

Nervous.

John bites his tongue, the pain making him calm down and focus. "So, can I come in?"

Sherlock jerks an arm free and gestures to the room. John takes a step farther in and touches his toes to the leg of the bed. He smiles.

Relax.

"Been a while since I ventured in here."

"There was no reason not to."

"I didn't want to invade," John says. He points to the shelf above Sherlock's desk and it's mishmash of items. "Besides, you've got loads of company."

Sherlock makes a noise and twists the skull around so it's leering at the wall instead of the bed. "It's too fragile for a box."

"No, it's nice. You've got your purple bee. It's a little party up here."

"Don't take the piss, John."

"I'm not," John says. He opens his arms, lets his shoulders fall. "I'm not. Come here."

Nervous.

I know.

Angry. Frustrating. Stupid.

"Come here." John sits down on the end of the bed, and it sags under his weight. Sherlock stands remote a moment longer and then sinks onto the chair by the desk. His eyebrows come together; it's a puzzle he can't figure out.

I thought this was it. Why isn't this it?

"Maybe we're...getting ahead of ourselves," John says. "It's only been a week."

"Years."

John recoils briefly, but regroups. "Ok." He pulls a fold in the duvet cover flatter and smooths it out. "Let's just... take a few things off the table. Lower the stakes. Let's just..." He pauses, trying to gauge Sherlock's thoughts. The vein in Sherlock's neck is throbbing. "Let's just go to bed."

John holds out his hands in compromise as Sherlock lifts his head from the back of the chair. "I'd like that," John offers. "We could camp out up here. Pretend we're chasing monsters across the moors. I'll bring my gun."

The corner of Sherlock's mouth lifts. His eyes glitter, but he doubts.

"For god's sakes, that's what you do sometimes. That's what you do. You dick around wasting

time together until it feels right. It doesn't have to be just jumping straight in."

"And that's how it works?"

"Yeah," John says. "And sometimes that's the best thing. You get someone who's willing to lie around in pyjamas, talking bollocks with you. It's easy to find someone who just wants to have sex. It's harder to find someone like you."

The words have come out in a rush, and the silence after just echoes the throb of John's heart in his mouth. Sherlock's heart is beating just as hard. The word 'sex' sounds so bold and flat said aloud. It's a silly word, scrawled in the space between them like graffiti on a school desk, but it is what it is and there's no other way to put it. John feels as defensive as if he'd farted. He wants to say it again, and again until it's no longer strange to either of them.

He can see Sherlock recovering, rallying. His voice scrapes when he speaks. "Oh well, in that case. If it's got to be 'special'."

John clicks his tongue and gets up. "I'm going to change," he says. "And clean my teeth, and then I'll come back."

Sherlock nods. He follows John down the stairs and takes the bathroom first. He scrubs his teeth, leaving the tap running and eyeballs himself in the mirror. Abruptly, he's ashamed of himself.

You don't know how to be close to people. Not even John.

I can learn.

He puts the toothpaste back in the cabinet and pushes the mirrored door shut.

He can feel the sting of laughter; some rhyme or other deriding his efforts on the edge of his mind, but he purposefully wrenches away from it. "I'm not doing this."

"Doing what?" John asks. He's wearing his pyjamas. All of them, buttoned up. He's holding a book. He frowns. Not angry, just trying to work this out.

"Do you... want the room to yourself?"

"No." Sherlock lowers his chin. He hadn't intended to bark the word out. "I... I appreciate I haven't thought things through quite fully."

"It's all a bit new," John says. "I'm still figuring it out. It's probably going to take us a while. That's fine. I'm fine with that. I really enjoyed this evening. Can I use the sink now?"

Sherlock moves aside. John takes the toothpaste from the cabinet and uncaps it, businesslike. He squeezes it onto the bristles and pushes it into his mouth.

"Going to watch?"

"No."

"See you upstairs then." John's looking out of the corner of his eye to see what he does. Sherlock throws up a hand and makes a show of huffing off up the stairs. Remarkably, he feels better.

John reads in bed, one handed. It's an old autobiography of a doctor from the early days of modern

medicine. Now and then he reads out the choice bits to Sherlock.

Lying on his back, Sherlock listens. John's side is warm against his. It's not so different to how they sit around downstairs, except they're touching. Now and then John's free hand strays to the crown of his head, particularly when he wants him to listen.

And suddenly, it's easy. John reads, and Sherlock chimes in. They talk about the advent of germ theory and medical tools from history. John knows a few things about bladder stones that Sherlock doesn't, and while the whole conversation is ridiculous, it warms him through. If this is it, if this is what he's meant to do, then it's a piece of cake.

They turn out the lamp and lie in the dark. Sherlock's never done this before. Not without any pressing reason, such as having no other choice. In which circumstances, he's always turned his back and kept to himself.

They play a game of 'what if?'. What if John, impossible as it was, went back in time. How would he doctor? It's an interesting set of conundrums and Sherlock enjoys testing John's knowledge and resourcefulness as much as John enjoys being tested.

Eventually John's answers become slower and more thoughtless. He yawns, shifting back into the mattress. Sherlock's mind is still humming. He tries to lie still as John starts to drop off. John rearranges himself to get comfortable, once it's clear Sherlock intends to let him sleep.

There are no clocks in the room but John's watch on the nightstand ticks. Sherlock can hear it through the bed. He'd like to move it, but to do so would mean leaning over John. His leg itches. He slowly lifts his other foot to scratch it. He looks at the spider cracks on the ceiling and plays a violin concerto in his head, hoping to slow his mind down, but all he can think of are ways to embellish it. His fingers flex over the top of the duvet, picking strings.

The itch gets worse and he has to pull his leg up and thrust his hand down to scrub at it, and then spend a minute or two trying to ease the covers back into place. He's rumped his own pyjama leg and it's riding up around his calf. Slowly he tries to use his toes to pull it down.

John grunts.

Too active. Sherlock folds his hands under his chin. He's offset from the patch of mattress he usually lies on and it feels strange. There's a bit of a dip as well, which makes him lean towards John. He needs to think of something other than how he's lying. Organic chemistry is a staple fallback. He concocts new and more convoluted historical medical cases for John to try at a later time. After a while, he doesn't realise he's muttering.

John rolls over, his face only half visible behind the hump of the pillow. He shifts, trying to settle, and his eyes flicker over Sherlock's face. Slowly his lips rise in a smile. He shuffles his shoulders closer, wrestling a hand free of the duvet to lay his palm over Sherlock's cheek and deliver a slow and loving kiss. He pulls back, and waits for Sherlock to open his eyes before saying the words Sherlock's been dying to hear.

"Bugger off and let me sleep."

"Oh thank God, are you sure?"

"Yeah." John squeezes the back of Sherlock's neck, hand flopping down over his collarbone as he yawns. "No point us both lying here being awake. You're not even sleepy."

"You are remarkable."

“Thanks,” John agrees, nudging him towards the edge of the bed. “Shut the door.”

“John?”

“Mm?”

“I’ll come back in the morning.”

John’s face does that singular, unknowable thing it does that never fails to make Sherlock’s heart stick in his throat. It’s more than a smile, and so much more than a crinkle in the corners of his eyes. To Sherlock it’s like the click of all four pins falling into place in a lock, or the first pure note pulled from a violin string.

“Don’t wake me up at the arse of dawn,” John says, his fingers lingering on Sherlock’s knee. His words don’t match his tone, nor does his tone match his body language. Sherlock wavers, bends and kisses him.

“I could lie very still,” he whispers into John’s ear. John’s fingers are hot.

“Come back in the morning,” John says, smearing his lips down Sherlock’s jaw, making him shiver. “Wake me up.”

It’s a delightful idea. Sherlock checks the clock. How many hours does he have to wait?

“No earlier than six,” John warns, pulling the covers up. “Unless you find swearing romantic.”

“I don’t mind when you swear.”

“I bet you don’t,” John says, filing that away for later. He grins into the pillows. “Dirty sod.”

“Goodnight,” Sherlock says, and goes downstairs, humming.

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John sleeps like a plank, straight up and down flat on his back. He’s hardly moved all night, a fact that is evident in the pattern of disruption in the bedclothes or lack thereof. Sherlock knows it’s been years since the man slept in a single bed but clearly too many army lodgings, cheap bedsits and the narrow on-call room bunks have indoctrinated him into wasting all the glorious sprawl of the queen-sized. He’s not that cuddly either. Sherlock likes something to hang onto while he sleeps; usually half the duvet. John merely squashes the corner of it under one elbow and at first Sherlock thinks this might be some kind of unconscious way of preventing certain persons from hogging all the covers but then a more interesting idea presents itself.

John grunts, awake from the moment Sherlock sets foot into the room, but unwilling to be awake. Sherlock slithers in on the empty side, filling the cold spaces up. John grunts again, and shifts one heavy leg to make room for him to get closer. The clock reads exactly 06:01 A.M.

He waits for John to open an eyes before asking.

“What was it called?”

“What?” John asks blearily.

“The bear.”

“There was a bear?” John half sits up in consternation, and Sherlock finds it rather endearing that John could possibly believe there was an actual bear. Then again, there had once been an actual elephant.

“The teddy bear; the one you had as a child.”

“Oh. How did- ?” John lies flat again with a thump. “No, never mind. Big Ted.”

“How enthrallingly original. Let me guess, did he have a compatriot by the name of ‘Small Ted’.”

“ ‘Little White Ted’ actually,” John says with a grumble, and Sherlock sniggers into his shoulder. He can picture John as a child, some poor toy locked in a half-Nelson under his elbow, the head of the beast gone floppy where all the stuffing had been hugged out.

“Yours?” John prompts. Sherlock can see his thoughts sluggishly working; probably weighing up between his interest in the conversation and his need to take a piss, with the added wild variable of how long it would be before Bee wakes and comes charging out demanding breakfast.

“Yours?” John rolls onto his side and grabs him under the covers.

“Unwin Jones.”

“ ‘Unwin’ ?” John’s caught between a laugh and disbelief. “What was it? A Welsh rugby player?”

“We bought it in Llandridnod on holiday. He *was* Welsh. I was four,” Sherlock adds with a sneer at himself, as though even at that age he should have foreseen the embarrassment of 30-something. John just chuckles. The shiver of it travels the length of John’s arm and makes his hand jostle against Sherlock’s back.

Presently John leans on his elbow and asks, “What did Mycroft have?”

“A steiff.”

“Oh dear, did he take long to recover?”

“A *bear*, John. It’s a kind of stuffed bear. It spent most of its life on the shelf. Mycroft used to lecture it when he couldn’t bend my ear.”

“Name?”

“Ptolemy.”

“Of course it was,” John says with droll amusement. He sits up, letting his back crackle. Ptolemy Holmes and Unwin Jones. How could he have expected anything else? “Harry had a rabbit called ‘Penny Any-Jenny’. I think she’s still got it.”

John stretches out and rolls his shoulder, letting the joint pop. Sherlock watches. “May I?” he asks.

John looks at him questioningly, but says nothing to the negative.

Sherlock’s hand is large enough to cover most of John’s shoulder. He touches each section of it in turn; from the lowest vertebrae in John’s neck - a vulnerable place- to the hard bobble at the curve of his shoulder. ‘Acromio-clavicular joint,’ Sherlock murmurs. In the front, clavicle and deltoid muscle. The wedge of muscle from the side of John’s neck to his shoulder is solid under his hand when he probes it. John winces.

“You slept awkwardly.”

“That one’s always a bugger.”

Sherlock pivots his hand and presses the ball of his thumb into it, following the knots down around the edge of his shoulder-blade. Once or twice he fancies he can feel the displacement in the bone and muscle where the bullet ripped through. Once or twice he knows he touches over the scar. He can feel it through the fabric of John’s shirt.

He squeezes John’s upper arm, working down and up again. Down. Up. Gradually it relaxes. John winces again when Sherlock unerringly digs a knuckle in beside his spine. He can feel it the whole length of his back, from the crown of his head down to his tailbone.

“Did I hit a nerve?”

“You hit something.”

John leans his head to one side and tenses, and the crack is audible. “God that’s better.”

In response, Sherlock stretches out one leg and flexes his toes. They pop in unison, followed by a ringing snap as he rolls his ankle.

“Jesus, we’re falling apart,” John groans. “Did that hurt?”

“Twinged.”

“Don’t do it if it hurts. Has that always done that?”

“I landed badly on it once...”

John hands are folded in his lap, the nails short and stubby.

“I imagine it wasn’t really high on your list of concerns at the time,” John says lightly. He touches his own shoulder, a hair’s breadth from Sherlock’s fingers. “I suppose I should be grateful I’m here to complain as well.”

“True. Although we’d be grateful if you stopped complaining,” Sherlock says by his ear, low and serious. John pushes his elbow back into his ribs and the mattress creaks as Sherlock worms out the way, chuckling.

There’s a scar on John’s scalp, just above the hairline, pink and taut and mostly hidden. It feels smooth in contrast to the prickle of hair around it. They don’t talk about what happened after Sherlock’s aborted exile, but they remember it.

Sherlock remembers the dull thud of impact on the back of John’s head and the slack look of surprise as he’d crumpled over. He shivers and it translates through John as a hand closing on his kneecap, warm and tight.

“Bee’s going to be up soon,” John says. He looks over his shoulder.

Let’s not do this. I don’t want to remember.

He twists until he’s able to reach and kisses Sherlock.

“Soon,” Sherlock says, breathing the air between them. “Not yet.”

“Should probably decide what we’re going to do today.” John scratches at his leg and rubs under his arm. He could do with a shower, he thinks. “What happened to the bear?”

“Hm?”

“Your Welsh teddy bear.”

“Oh, I out-grew all that. I don’t remember. Probably got passed on or chucked out.”

“Speaking of toys and toyshops, we need to take Bee shopping at some point. She needs pants and maybe if we find her a pig-themed potty...”

“She’d be obsessed.”

“As long as she’s having fun,” John says, “She hasn’t asked, but she’s getting good at hauling a nappy on and off and she came and told Mrs. Hudson the other day that she’d done a poo.”

“Did she?”

“Loudly, in fact. They were in Tesco.”

“Thrilling for Mrs. Hudson.”

“Thrilling for the other people in the queue, that’s for sure. What do the books say.”

Sherlock hums. “Girls typically manage it before boys, and if you’re lucky you can achieve it in a matter of days.”

John considers never having to change another nappy and marvels. “That would be incredible.”

“Praise and bribery.”

Sherlock leans back into the pillows and yawns.

“What were you doing while I was asleep?”

“Oh, this and that. Reading mostly- our game inspired me.” Sherlock lets one leg loll off of the side of the bed. “Serial killers. I almost wish I’d been born twenty years earlier. All the biggest names were at work in the 1970’s it seems, never mind the small fry. I estimate at least a handful I could have caught after the first instance.”

“More of a challenge for you,” John agrees. “Less technology.”

“Technology’s only a small portion of a case,” Sherlock says. “It confirms and is otherwise necessary for conviction, but in terms of finding killers- largely they haven’t changed since the 1800’s. A man with a grudge and a knife can still take himself on a spree and slash up homeless people in this day and age.”

“CCTV.”

“Pointless if he wears a mask.” He yawns again.

“You’re tired,” John says, “I should probably let you get some kip.”

“No, talk to me. You’re a doctor- do you know exactly how many serial killers have been medical practitioners?”

“A few spring to mind,” John says. His thoughts take him away for a long moment. Sherlock’s propped up in the pillows, one arm still looped around the bedclothes next to John. He taps on John’s ribs and their eyes meet.

Lean back.

“You’re not listening.”

“I thought I was supposed to be getting up.”

“As I was saying-”

John leans back to listen, and gravity pulls him down until they overlap. Sherlock hogs the middle of the bed and John’s head rests at an angle on his shoulder.

“Nurses,” Sherlock muses. “Seem to get away with loads of murders before anyone cottons on. That’s relatively clever. Well... Cleverer than a man with a hammer half the time anyway.”

John says nothing. He’s not sure he’s got anything left to say on the subject of clever killer nurses. Sherlock murmurs off on a tangent thankfully, detailing for his own pleasure how he could have solved crimes in the 1960’s, and how the police may have been less tedious about accepting outside help if it made their job easier.

Sherlock’s ribs rise and fall underneath him. As he speaks, Sherlock lets go with one hand to gesticulate, but the other creeps closer.

John closes his eyes. Sherlock lectures, the roll of his voice a vibration that John feels more than hears. Sherlock’s hand finally falls onto his stomach and settles there in an embrace. John’s back is warm.

If anyone were to walk in, it would be difficult to mistake this for what it isn’t. Sherlock breathes deeply, still caught up in his thoughts. His forearm weighs down on John’s stomach, fingers limp over his shirt. John’s aware of his belly under the fabric, alive and part of his body.

Sherlock is a curve that fits to his spine, and he can’t help but compare it to the last time Sherlock had reached out for him. John makes a noise to feign that he’s listening and inhales. The other man’s shirt still smells of coffee, and the dusty, biscuity smell of him.

There’s that old familiar sense of pressure low in John’s belly. He catches himself breathing through his mouth and closes it, breathing on manual.

‘Then I am,’ John thinks. There are cracks on the ceiling and a cobweb in the corner. Sherlock’s still talking. John can feel the seam of his pyjama bottoms against his skin. It’s not yet become anything obvious, but the thrill of it is there.

It feels different without the denial and the guilt.

Even as John’s still exploring the sensation in contrast to a lifetime of distress, Sherlock’s voice trails to a halt and all at once the texture of his body changes.

John doesn’t tilt his head back to check, but he knows that Sherlock is looking at him. At his hand over Sherlock’s on his own stomach. He hears Sherlock’s mouth move.

I just realised...

It takes a moment to nudge their fingers together into some sort of order. For a moment Sherlock is simply limp with surprise, and then he carefully squeezes John's hand.

"This is what you meant?"

John shifts, turning his ear towards him.

"Wasting time together until it feels right."

"I think...this feels pretty comfortable," John says.

He looks different. Sherlock's not sure how to translate the mild look of self-regard, but it's evident that John's passed through something in the privacy of his own person, and come out the other side changed.

He looks for something quantifiable, but if John's heart rate has changed, so has his own. There's a nuance to his posture; something more like a challenge.

"You know," John risks twisting round to face him, and to let himself be examined. "We still don't have a good photo of us."

Sherlock has no need for a photograph. He has, immediate of now, an image of John which he will never forget and the likes of which he's never seen before. A new angle. He almost doubts his visual recall.

"Camera's somewhere," he manages, and then a noise from below makes them both remember Bee.

"Shit," John swears sitting up. "She's trying to get out of bed. No, it's alright," He presses his palm into Sherlock's stomach, making him lie flat again. "Get some rest."

Sherlock's not sure he'll ever sleep again he has so much to dwell on. Besides, the room feels inexplicably warm. John's tongue touches his lower lip.

"I'll come back later then," John says, and then another thump and a push from Sherlock sends him hurrying down the stairs.

He's met at the junction of the door to the landing by Mrs. Hudson, who squeals at his approach from an unexpected direction.

"John!" she bustles at him. "I nearly dropped my tea-tray! Where did you come from?"

"Sorry, Mrs. Hudson. Hold on, Bee-" He opens the door to the bedroom and Bee roars at him, indignant and horrified at waking up alone and ignored and clearly suffering and neglected for so long. She throws herself like a rag doll into his arms.

"Drama queen," John says. "Look, Nana's here already for breakfast."

"Breakfast! Weet-ix and nanah!"

"Nanah?" Mrs. Hudson echoes, playing on the same joke they have every morning. "You're not going to eat me, are you?" Bee devolves into a fit of hilarity.

"Noooooooo Nana! Nanah!"

"Buh-nah-nuh," Mrs. Hudson says, "A great big buh-nah-nub." And then abruptly she turns on

John. “You were upstairs!”

“Uh. Yes.” John edges past her to get at the fridge.

“Get big BUH nanah, get big BUH nanaaaah...nah.”

“But that’s upstairs.”

“Yes, I was aware,” John says. The top of the banana cracks open and he peels off the stringy bits. A hand appears from near his ankles and grabs at it. “Can we eat it in the chair today, Bee?”

“NO!”

“Oh alright... but don’t put it anywhere.”

“Namnahs.”

Mrs. Hudson follows him around the kitchen table with the tenacity of a pit bull terrier. “Where’s Sherlock, then?”

“Gone to bed,” John says, pulling the box of cereal from the cupboard. Mrs. Hudson stands, drumming her fingers on the handle of the teapot she’s bought up. She tuts, thinking, and pours a mug. Then she puts it down again in a flurry.

“Oh. Perhaps I’d best not come up in the mornings. I mean...”

John reaches over and very deliberately picks up the cup.

“Play it by ear,” he suggests.

Chapter End Notes

1) Do I need to introduce Soho? Maybe a bit of context... Soho is that one area that all cities has that lives off of a slightly out of date reputation. The Soho of John's (and definitely Lestrade's) youth was a dying sleazy heartland of sex shops, strip clubs, drugs and prostitution. Which are all still there, but in far fewer numbers. It was the edgy bit of London well-connected to the music industry, and by the 1980's it was the focus of crack-downs on crime. Not only of the criminals operating there but the police force itself, which was hugely corrupt in the 70's. It's still kinda sleazy nowadays but people usually assume you mean to get dinner not sex when you suggest going to Soho for the evening. There's also a huge LGBTQ scene there. At any rate, Soho is where you can probably find both dinner and sex in equal measure, which was the idea John had in the back of his head when he suggested it.

2) [Boris Bikes](#). These are officially called something boring like *Insert name of bank sponsoring the bikes* Bikes, but no one calls them that except boring official people. Everyone else calls them 'Boris bikes', because they were the brainchild of profiterole in a wig, Boris Johnson. Yes he who was that mayor of London who got stuck on a zip wire. Arguably one of the better things he achieved as mayor. You can borrow one by the hour to cycle around London and then put it back somewhere else. How you know where the bike stands are is kind of a mystery.

3) The Lebanese restaurant exists, complete with those exact spellings on the menu. It is very, very good and very small and I have a weakness for unintended hilarity caused by menu spellings so it went in the fic. I'm sorry, I really should stop dropping shit I like in the fic. Is it annoying? In my defence, I've been to a lot of places in London and 99% of them aren't in the fic, so there is a vague process of reasoning and elimination behind each thing I reference.

4) [Baba gannouj](#) is delicious aubergine (egg plant) dip that is all smoky and silky and amazing. Try. It. [Fattoush](#) is a kind of salad. Try. It. Lebanese food is so good!

5) How gay was this dinner? I refer you to TMWTBTW part 6 (or chapter 7 on AO3). To conclude: Pretty damn gay.

6) 'Growler' and 'Crayze' do not exist, but fucking hell, Growler should. Get on that, Soho. The bookshop and the club with the chinese dragons probably do exist in some form or other. The pub does exist, and it's a standard little drinking nook and you could do far worse.

7) Don't take fireworks apart and blow things up. You'll blow yourself up. Also to get these anecdotes I asked my Dad what stupid shit kids he knew did as children, and he told me the stupid shit HE did instead, which coming from a very mild mannered British chap, was very eye-opening indeed. He also got drunk and stuck in a beer crate. I still don't know if i should be impressed or just shake my head.

8) [Rice krisipie cakes](#). Do NOT contain marshmallow. That is something different. [Cornflake cakes](#) are literally the same, but with cornflakes.

9) I unoriginally made up the idea of a biography of a doctor, but I don't actually know of one. This is a shame because it'd probably be pretty interesting. Any of you guys know of anything like that?

10) The title comes from 'The Nearness of You' by Hoagy Carmichael, with lyrics by Ned Washington and vocals by Jo Stafford. Although we did consider "Gay Bar".

Got a comment? A question? Just want share the funniest thing you've ever seen on a menu? Feel free to leave us a message!

-Odamaki <3

Part 16: Absolute Beginners

Chapter Summary

They're sitting close. Close enough that Sherlock would only have to bow his head in order to kiss him; and the temptation is there. It's always there. It's driving him mad even more now than when he'd thought the whole idea was a possibility. John's looking at him with concern.

'Stop,' Sherlock wants to say. He wants to lift a finger and press the tuck of skin between John's brows until it smoothes away.

"Hey," John says again. "What's going on? What do you need?"

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Part 16: Absolute Beginners

Bee is climbing the walls. It's a sunny day and she's rapidly becoming a pest in the confines of 221B. John draws the line when he catches her drawing on the walls on purpose as well. This is after she's broken a full mug of tea and emptied the laundry basket into the bath.

"Right," John says through gritted teeth, hefting her up bodily. "We're going out."

"Park!"

"Yes," John agrees. "Who's coming?"

He means amongst her army of toys- Elbant is a given but she's gaining new favourites and he can't keep up with the weird hierarchy of stuffed animals. Mrs. Hudson's rediscovered the joy of crochet, and the current beasts in Bee's inner circle include a horse with uneven legs and a dolly wearing a dress made of one of John's old shirts.

Sherlock tosses the book he's reading against the skirting board and gets up. "I am."

"Really?"

"Why shouldn't I?"

"I'm not complaining, but you hate the park," John points out. "It's full of people and fresh air."

Sherlock makes dismissive noises. "I can look at the pigeons."

"They're all disgusting and diseased."

"I know, that's what makes them more interesting than the people."

Bee screams in John's ear and without another word he passes her to Sherlock and goes to fetch the pushchair.

They aren't the only ones to have been driven outside. The park is busy, even though it's a weekday. There's a horde of kids already scuffling up the surface of the bark chipping play area, and separate cliques of parents hogging the benches.

"Lev!" Bee yells at the sight of a little boy. He is squatting under the slide, engrossed in making a garden of bark chips, with spit and orange juice for a pond.

"Hello," John mutters to himself. If Levant is here, then Sevtap from the playgroup must be too. This is tolerable. Sevtap is not one for either small talk or gossip.

He unleashes Bee from the pushchair and she careens off, bouncing the crochet horse through the dirt. John grimaces. Sherlock looms over his shoulder, observing. He's the only person visible wearing a suit. Not that it will stop him, John thinks, if Sherlock takes it into his head to join in. For the moment, however, Sherlock hangs back behind him. John can't imagine Sherlock did this much as a kid.

"Let's find somewhere to park this," John says, tilting the pushchair back on two wheels to manoeuvre it. There are no benches, but Sherlock spots a place by the fence in the shade where they can lean side by side. Bee runs over to check on them, lovingly head-butts Sherlock in the thigh, smearing his trousers, and then jogs off again.

"What do we do?" Sherlock asks, presently, wiping snot from his leg with his handkerchief.

"Just keep an eye on her," John says, one eye on his phone. "Make sure she doesn't con anyone out of snacks."

"She does that?"

"She'll try," John says, with begrudging admiration. She has learnt the phrase 'Can I have one, please?' with the specific inflection and fluttering eyes of the Cute Little Girl schtick, and has seemingly zero shame about begging.

"Were you a fat child?" Sherlock wants to know, watching her jump around the swing set.

John chokes. "No! All toddlers are chubby!"

Sherlock looks at him.

"I was normal sized! Mostly. Shut up."

"Mycroft was a perfectly spherical boy," Sherlock replies mildly. John bursts out laughing.

A sharp shriek from the playground catches their attention. Bee's put herself in the path of an unmanned swing and taken a bump to the head. Sherlock, with his longer legs, reaches her first. As her father, his first action is to pull her upright and brush the dirt off. John, as her doctor, inspects her head.

"Not even going to bruise," he diagnoses.

Bee is less than impressed and smacks the swing. "Bad!"

"She run there," Levant informs them, hovering around, face split with a grin. "And the swing went bang!"

“Yes, well, don’t you run there,” John advises. Levant crowds in under Sherlock’s arm to peer at Bee’s head with ghoulish interest.

“There is blood?” A finger comes out to poke Bee’s scalp. John uses the sheer bulk and presence of his adult body to crowd the boy out of arm’s reach.

“No. There isn’t,” he says.

Levant gives his verdict on this without hesitation. “Poo.”

A soft voice says something firm in another language and Levant scuttles off, giggling. “Doctor, hallo.”

“Hi,” John says, flustered. Bee claws at Sherlock’s stomach until he picks her up, whereupon she plays the dying martyr even more.

“Hallo,” Sevtap says again, to Sherlock. She then looks at John and makes a polite little gesture towards him. “This is the hat man? Very good to meet you.”

“I’m the what?”

“Right, um, Sevtap, this is Sherlock, not hat man. He doesn’t like the hat. The hat is just a... newspaper thing. Sherlock, this is Sevtap, from the NCT group.”

“My pleasure to meet you.”

Bee squirms. She wants their undivided attention. On the other hand, she’s spotted a new game building up under the climbing frame and she’d rather go and stick her nose in there than fight for their interest. She wriggles out of Sherlock’s grip and is gone. As she trundles off, Levant runs back. He delves a sticky hand into Sevtap’s pocket, removes a toy truck which he replaces with a soiled chocolate bar wrapper, and then dashes away again.

Sevtap, with great dignity, removes it and mutters something under her breath. John needs no translation.

Sherlock raises an eyebrow and says something brief in... well, John only can be certain that it isn’t English and he’s pretty sure that it’s not Turkish. Sevtap looks at him in surprise and then gives a pleased, throaty little laugh.

She replies and then it’s Sherlock’s turn to look surprised and to John’s amazement, he does his ‘I’m very good’ thing. The hands behind the back, rocking on the heels, slightly abashed and on best behaviour thing, usually performed for the sole benefit of Miss Molly Hooper after he’s been bad and wants back into her good books. Absolutely faking it.

“Sorry, what’s that?” John asks, curious and a tiny bit alarmed.

“Russian,” Sherlock says, innocently. “Picked it up a few years ago.”

“Russian.” John stares at him. Sherlock speaks Russian. This is not an insubstantial revelation. “You speak Russian?”

“A bit,” Sherlock demurs. “Con conversationally.”

“Con conversationally as in...”

“Well... conversation, mostly.” Sherlock’s lying.

“Say something else.”

Sherlock considers, awkward, and then obliges, voice low, a little guttural. ‘Good God,’ thinks John, with a shiver. Sevtap has not stopped chuckling. She says something back to Sherlock, obviously about John and then looks sly. Sherlock looks embarrassed again, and this time John’s not convinced it’s so fake. John opens his mouth to question them, only to be cut off.

“Helloooo!”

John’s heart sinks. Of course, it’s just his luck.

“Hey, Sevo. Hello, John!”

John draws his lips up into a polite smile and turns to face them. It’s not the full cohort of short-namers, which is some relief. Ness smiles, gaze sharp as she looks Sherlock up and down with undisguised curiosity. The other two pass less intense greetings; Gem, who always seems to be attached at the hip to her friend, has softened recently due to being six months into a second pregnancy. The last, Stacey of the ‘posh-without-dosh’ side of the NCT group, is always a little remote.

“Mummy, I’m going on the slide!”

“Wait for mummy,” Stacey says, waving a wrist. “Don’t fall off.”

Sherlock regards them both with a carefully blank expression.

“Haven’t seen you in a while, John,” Ness points out. “You’ve been holding out on us.”

“Oh, well, you know how things get. It’s been pretty busy and the summer and all,” John says. He can feel Sherlock’s eyes on the back of his neck and glances at him.

That’s a lot of words with which to say nothing.

John returns his look with the barest of shrugs.

“And is this the man himself?” Ness continues. She holds out her hand. “Vanessa,” she states, beaming. “And this is Gemma, and that’s Stacey Bennell. John’s been keeping you very secret.”

“Yes,” Sherlock answers, flatly. He stoops to brush his palm against hers and then puts it in his pocket before anyone else can try. Sevtap says something in Russian and gives a polite smile. Sherlock at once shows a faint flash of wicked humour, which only John catches.

“Oh,” Ness says, taken aback. She forces a laugh. “That’s unfair, Sevo, we don’t all speak multilingual.”

Sevtap’s response is to shrug, and wander off to check on her son. Bee loops back to exchange her horse for her beloved elephant, who bumps dolefully in the dirt behind her.

Ness claps her hands, bright and breezy. “So,” she says, “Lovely day for it. How have you been?”

“Not bad,” John says and this is as far as the conversation gets. They lapse into a busy silence before a question from Gem’s daughter neatly splits them back into two adjacent groups again.

John stands, arms folded and legs akimbo watching Bee like a hawk. Sherlock stands a little way back, hands behind his back like a schoolboy in a china shop, and flicks his attention between the child and the man, and a dozen other minor things that no one else can follow.

The women multitask.

Stacey drifts after the children, following the conversation whenever a toddler's erratic path leads her within talking distance of the others.

"Excuse me, I've got no shame and my feet are killing me," Gem says, dropping her coat to the floor and sinking down on it with a sigh of discomfort. Ness props herself against the fence beside her and they superficially swap pregnancy stories, all the while with a portion of scrutiny fixed upon the two men. Primarily Sherlock.

Artistic, thinks Stacey, in a way that John is definitely not. Sherlock would not look out of place in her husband's gallery, though exactly the sort to require discrete manipulation in order to keep him wading into conversations and causing a problem. Raw talent, in summary, with no social skills.

Ness, ever earthier, is preoccupied by his hands. They flutter as he thinks, tucked in close against his spine in a manner that seems more taught than natural. His face is utterly expressionless. He's awkwardly handsome, she thinks. While not so ugly as to be out of bounds, it would be the sort of sexual interest you'd have to justify to your friends. The suit is a nice touch, though. She looks at his hands again. Big hands, with strong fingers. Men's hands, for certain, though comparatively fine.

Outwardly she recites a well-worn anecdote about a friend of a friend and a midwife, all the while entertaining herself with a vision of those huge pale hands and how they'd look cupped around a breast. Not specifically hers, but in the privacy of her own thoughts, why not?

It's more of a dirty academic hypothetical than a real fantasy, but the impossibility and silliness of the idea just adds to her curiosity about them. John is so impervious to prying questions, and so secretive, she's had to give up ever getting a straight (she laughs) answer from him. The other half sadly looks far too up himself (ha ha again) to dare ask either. A pity.

Big hands, big feet. How well packed is he? John must feel her gaze on the back of his head as he turns and catches her. She smiles. "Give us a doctor's opinion?"

He puzzles, skimming the conversation back a few comments. He says, "Not my area, but I'd say if you're planning on pain relief, get the epidural started sooner rather than later. No point hanging around."

Ness' smile curves. What is his area, she wants to know. And what's his?

Sherlock is even more acutely aware of her look and returns it with such abrupt ferocity that she's repulsed, hot and defensive. It's only thoughts. It's only natural to wonder.

From the floor, Gem says wearily, "Can someone help me up? I've got to pee." A willing arm descends but wobbling on her heels, Stacey nearly goes headfirst into Gem's lap.

John does the job instead, forearm tensed as he heaves her to her feet with ease.

"Thanks."

John opens his mouth to reply only to be distracted by Sherlock stepping away from the fence with sudden purpose. He spots Bee only a split-second later. "Ah- get down!" he projects across the playground, making all the children pause for thought not just his own. "Not without Papa!"

Bee lets go of the climbing frame with a guilty start. The slide- her goal- is not unsafe. She just has no apparent fear of heights or speed or flinging herself down the first with as much of the second as she can muster. She's big enough now that when she clumsily flings herself down at an angle, the

sides, rather than catching her, clip her neatly in the middle and propel her headfirst in a Fosbury flop towards the floor.

John's twice caught her in the past, and once missed. Since then, the rule has been doggedly ground home- no climbing the slide without Papa.

"Bada, slide! Sorry! Sly! Elbant slide!" Bee dashes back, veers from John at the last minute to collide with Sherlock's leg instead. "Daddy, slide!"

She's not loud, but the word seems to reverberate to the people closest enough to hear it. The playground buzzes with children's voices, and nothing stops, but at the same time something changes. John clears his throat.

"She just needs someone to make sure--"

"I know," Sherlock says. He stoops to let her grab his fingers in her sweaty hand and pull him along towards the slide. She pulls him into her world- the anthill of the climbing frames covered in other children- conversation of single words spoken to everyone and no one and mostly herself. Sherlock's heels scuff the bark chips.

His heart beats in his throat. Deliberately, he does not look back. Bee climbs the slope of wood and rails to the platform for the slide, grunting with effort. Her nappy makes her backside a circular bulge under her dress, like a moon eclipsing most of the rest of her. Sherlock stands with the other careful parents at the base, ready with the flat of his hand to either catch her or give her a boost.

She makes it, muscles in her legs bunching as she shimmies over the final ledge to the top.

"Wait," Sherlock tells her. She dances in place, shaking Elbant by both ears for two other children to take their turn. "Wait," Sherlock says. "Wait."

Frustrated, she bites on Elbant's trunk and shakes him like a dog, but by God, she waits.

Another child pants up from Sherlock's left. "Watch me, mummy!"

"Don't push ahead, darling, or mummy will be cross."

The four year old catches Sherlock's eye and rolls her eyes. Sherlock wonders who she's copying- he suspects her mother.

"Slide! Beezlide!"

Through the criss-crossing structure supporting the slide, Sherlock spots a familiar pair of legs stood akimbo. With relief, he says, "Go on then, Bee."

She throws the elephant down first in a squeal of delight. It makes no noise as it disappears. The metal slide gongs under Bee's heels as she sits plump down on her bottom and uses all her weight to throw herself forward.

John cheers. Bee screams when he catches her. He tickles her ribs until she's a limp bundle of giggles in his arms. "Babar, nooooo!"

She's warm and wriggling against John's chest. He hugs her against him, tipping her upside down until her hair brushes the ground. Her eyes are screwed up as she howls with delight. He makes bear noises and pretends to eat her ears, all the while, his heart thudding hard in his chest.

There are people everywhere. Kids butt past them on their way to and from their games. Parents hover- most focused only on their chit-chat and their children, but here and there are eyes. People glancing at the two, few men on the playground.

The space between John's shoulder blades itches and sweats. He's used to being the only dad at times. He's used to being glanced at. Mothers do, to check what and who he is in an animal sense. A threat? A interest?

Is he going to touch their kids?

Is he going to touch them?

Is he sexually available? Approachable? Friend? Foe? Sad?

Saveable?

Hateable?

Loving?

Good dad or bad?

Ella's already pointed out that most of this suspicion is unfounded but he doesn't think he's always totally wrong either. It's there- a grain of it perhaps in each person. How can it not be? It's in him, too.

Ella says even when people are judging a bit, he's over-projecting his fears. John catches their judgement even more in the occasional flick of eyes in Sherlock's direction and it makes his temperature rise.

People looking at Sherlock, trying to appraise if his homosexuality is a pity or not. Looking at John, trying to pin down what their relationship is to the smallest, grossest detail. Perhaps they're earmarking his orientation for an unseen jury of his peers.

He doesn't want to be on the stand to be questioned; he doesn't want strangers asking each other- how do you find his relationship? Valid or invalid?

"Daddy ticky!" Bee is free, dishevelled and with a new game. She wriggles her fingers on Sherlock's shirtfront and is annoyed when he doesn't yawp quickly enough to suit her pantomime. "TICKY!"

"You ok?"

"You?"

"Fine."

You don't look fine.

I'm freaking out.

Good. As long as I'm not the only one.

"I'm gonna get you!" John says, wildly. Bee waddles as fast as she can, yelling her head off around the base of the monkey bars. John chases. After a beat, Sherlock chases John.

Somewhere in the resultant idiocy, in Bee's loud and unrestrained joy at their game, it gets easier. Between Bee's tiny alien imagination leading them off on detours and Sherlock's natural oddity, they distract themselves.

"What's that for? It's too big."

"It's workout equipment."

"What?"

John demonstrates the wheels and steps, to Sherlock's vast amusement and Bee's jealousy. John lifts her up so she can shove at the wheel. Sherlock piggybacks her around the playground. She loves it. She does the monkey bars perched on his shoulders. He has to squat-walk along the floor, putting up with the discomfort.

"Daddy do!"

He does, even though he's too tall and too heavy to take his feet off the ground. He apes it instead, hanging off the end of his arms, knees bent up, and Bee loses it. It's the funniest thing she's ever seen. It's pretty high up on John's list too.

She runs into Sherlock, who drops from the bars to his knees to scoop her up. Her laugh pierces the sky like a bird.

On his knees, Sherlock pushes his nose against Bee's neck. He copies John, because it seems to work, and growls like a bear. She reverberates in his arms, soft palms pushing at strange angles against his head. She smells of soap and baby sweat and happiness. Around them the playground whirls. Bee's blue eyes flash at him, Mary's in shape and John's in depth, but brimming with a laugh and a love that's unique.

"Kiss?"

"Kisses," she agrees, and pecks at his chin and it's all so simple.

'Leave me here,' Sherlock thinks. 'In this one moment when I've got things right.'

"Mind if we join you?"

John unfolds his arms and steps back, surprised. Worse, he finds himself blushing, though he can't say why. Some soldier. He hadn't heard her approaching.

"It's a free country," he blurts.

"You'd think," Ness agrees, her two boys swinging off of her arms. "The kids have spotted the ice-cream van so we're going to go and get a round. Do you guys want to put in an order? We're all having something. Stace?" She shouts over to the other woman.

"Cider lolly, please! Lilly will share mine."

"No worries," Ness turns back. "You lot?"

"Might as well," John says. If they don't and Bee sees it, she'll create havoc. "Sherlock, have you got any cash?"

"Pocket," Sherlock says. He's got his hands full of a toddler who wants to climb him, and in the process, has attracted Ness's youngest who thinks the game looks like a good one. John steps

around the boy and pats under Bee's stomach at Sherlock's jacket.

"Back pocket," Sherlock corrects, trying to find a way to hold his daughter that she won't immediately wriggle out of. John sandwiches her to Sherlock's chest with half his body, reaching around Sherlock as discretely as he can and picking his pocket.

"What do you want?" John asks, suddenly very interested in the contents of the wallet.

"The usual."

"Sammy, are you coming?" Ness asks, "Or staying here? Would one of you keep an eye on them? Dennis is at the top of the frame somewhere."

"Mammy!"

"Yeah, we can," John replies, distracted. "Am I going then, or are you?"

The little boy shoves his hand in his mother's and jumps twice for every one of her paces. "Come and help carry," she suggests over her shoulder.

"I'll go," Sherlock says, letting Bee ooze into John's grasp.

The ice-cream van is parked up under the trees, surrounded by a mob. Sherlock sidesteps around knots of people blindly consuming ice-cream before it melts. The toddler giggles at him and blows raspberries.

"So you're... police, is that right?" Ness asks, once they're in the queue.

"No. I'm a detective."

"What's the difference?"

"I actually solve crimes."

"Ouch. Ok. Fair enough. Is that how you met John? He does something with police doctors, doesn't he?"

"He's a GP," Sherlock says, staring at her. Ness shrugs.

"He's never actually said," she answers. "We rarely get a word out of him. He usually just turns up with a face like a spanked bum and talks about Bee."

"Why do you invite him then?"

"Don't pull my skirt, Sammo. Well, he's one of the group, and Bee gets on well with my boys and everyone else," Ness answers, as if it's obvious. "Don't take it the wrong way, but I suppose at first we felt a bit sorry for him. I mean, he's sort of shy, isn't he?"

Shy is about the last adjective Sherlock would have thought to apply to John. She catches his look.

"Probably not with you," She laughs, gap-toothed and unashamed. "Bit frightened of all us women poking our noses in, though. Do we scare you too?"

"I'm not scared."

She grins. "Could've fooled me. No need to stand on ceremony around us, you know."

He doesn't. He frowns.

"I mean," she says, lifting her son forward a metre as the queue progresses. "We're not going to start sharpening pitch-forks or anything."

There's a menu on the side of the ice-cream van that's both familiar and alien to Sherlock. He skims over it once, twice, a third time, trying to make sense of it. Mr. Bubble, Cherry Brandy (non-alcoholic), Banana (ugh), Tasty Orange (is it?), Lemonade, Mr. Magic (why are so many ice lollies male? Why is it 'magic'?), Rocket, Twister. It goes on- faux Caribbean concoctions in tube form and pellet form. Different ice-cream shapes on sticks- white chocolate, milk chocolate, dark chalet, mint. Slush- comes in blue or red, neither natural, neither tasting of anything except blue, or red. Sundaes- strawberry, bubblegum, chocolate (of course) inexplicable flavours derived from soft beverages of yore, few of which are native to London, but there they are anyway. Screwball; fatty ice-cream with free choking hazard- reminds him of his childhood.

"Bee's lovely," Ness says. "I wish I'd had a girl. Not that I don't love my boys, but it'd just be nice. You must love it."

"Is there a difference?"

Ness falters and then laughs. "God, you're modern. Yeah, I'd say there is. As much as I'd like to say there isn't. Boys are definitely different. I've got nieces and they're just wildly different in some ways. Like the verbal learning."

"She talks," Sherlock says distractedly. They're almost at the window. Something plain for Bee and nothing too fancy for John- Sherlock knows what he wants. As running home and spending the day in solitude is not an option, however, he settles for the mint Cornetto. It reminds him of the previous summer and the little murderess, and John's looking at his scars for the first time.

"Would you have another?" Ness asks. Sherlock startles.

"I mean, adoption or something. Or surrogacy."

"Bee was Mary's."

"Yeah, but you've... adopted her?"

"No," Sherlock says, and then isn't so sure. He's her guardian if John dies, he knows that much. "She's my daughter," he explains.

"Oh," Ness says, confused. "I thought John-"

"He is."

"Oh. Oh- did you marry?"

"No."

"Right, so John's your... boyfriend? Or civil partner?"

Sherlock's mouth is dry. "Partner," he says, and then, from a great distance and behind the ringing in his ears, "A mint Cornetto, one of those blackcurrant things and a 99 flake, please."

—

John takes the ice-lolly and looks Sherlock over, checking he's still in one piece. Ness looks

suspiciously like she's got a prime bit of gossip tucked away under her tongue, but he can't think of anything Sherlock would have willingly told. Besides, John's confident that Ness isn't sharp enough to get around Sherlock either.

He wipes the frost off of the label instead, curious about the choice.

"Haven't had one of these in years."

"Well, as you'll be finishing the ice-cream as well..."

"Yeah, I'm not sure I'll want much of her slobbered on leftovers," John answers. He lowers it to toddler height. "Here, Bee. Two hands."

They sit, leaning against the fence in the hot sunshine. John parks Bee on his lap so he can help her, Sherlock at his side.

The topic of conversation ebbs and flows from one thing to the next. Concentration is low, and the toddlers are demanding. Ice-cream dominates for a while, then cooking then school, then trousers. Sherlock focuses on finishing his ice-cream and not saying anything. Tomorrow, when they're not here, the women will talk. He reminds himself that he doesn't care, but the problem is that he can refuse to care all he likes- John cares.

John has sprawled his legs out and picked the foil top off of the ice lolly. He squeezes the tube until it protrudes from the end a little, dark pink. Distracted, he mops at Bee's ice-cream as she licks at it. Sooner or later she's going to drop at least half of it on the floor and John's hoping it's not going to be on him.

His actions are entirely thoughtless when he squishes the ice lolly from the packet further against his lips. It's melting in the heat and the juice slurps.

"Bit hot today," Gem comments over her bottle of neon-pink indigestion medicine.

"Hm," Stacey answers. "I'm feeling it. You must be, Ness."

"I think I am," Ness fans at herself. Wickedly, she adds. "John, your lolly's just about dripping."

"Shit." There's a sticky drizzle of purplish syrup threatening to ooze out the top of the paper cone all over John's fingers. He holds it out over the chippings. "Anyone got a tissue?"

There's tissue in the public bathrooms, a mere 30-yard spring away. Sherlock knows without looking there are also three handbags within grasp, all of which doubtless contain a plethora of wet-wipes, and that not even counting any of the other bags around the playground. In his own breast pocket, he knows he has a handkerchief. He could stand up and pull down a leaf for crying out loud.

He can't move though.

John grunts as the syrup wells up. He bobs his head forward and runs his tongue around the rim between the sopping cardboard and the ice. The lolly slips from the packet in a smooth glide. John remembers these from his childhood and there's a knack to them. The syrup melts out just that bit faster- one hard suck and the ice acts like a straw. He remembers the tropical ones- watching them go from technicolor orange to pale yellow.

The lolly droops from the tube to a length of- Sherlock refuses to acknowledge exactly how many inches other than 'some'- and John put it in his mouth.

Ness elbows Sherlock, and says, for a joke.

“Well, you’re a lucky boy.”

This, John hears. He bites the top off of the lolly- it’s agony against his teeth and starts a throb in his left temple. It doesn’t do much to make the situation any better either.

“What? Why?” Sherlock says.

John tries to say his name between his teeth, and succeeds only in gargling.

“Because if Gem could enjoy ice-lollies like that, she would not be swigging prescription pink from the bottle right now,” Ness says. Gem punches her in the arm, and then tips her head back and laughs for the first time that day.

“Birthdays and Christmas,” she says, holding a finger up in her defence. “And I haven’t seen snorkels and lip balm on your shopping list either, Mrs. Crosslin.”

Ness cackles. Stacey groans and complains

“You’re all being crass. We’re in a public play park, for heaven’s sake.”

“Whoopsie. I’ll save the story of Cucumber Pat for when we’ve got some wine.”

John by this time has choked down his mouthful of ice and Sherlock has not only comprehended the joke, but considered four or five other thoughts about it too. The back of his neck has gone red.

“If you’ve finished taking the piss-“ John starts, working up to a huff. He’s interrupted by a mixed cheer of ‘never!’ and ‘language!’.

“Come on,” Gem says, “Don’t listen to these chuckleheads too seriously. Besides,” she adds, wallowing back on her coat and patting her belly. “You can’t be angry with me, I’m pregnant.”

“I can try,” John offers, but somehow they’ve managed to dampen his fuse. “Time to go home, I think.”

“Oh no, you’re not really offended are you? Don’t go. We like you.”

“We like you lots more than Planet Paul.”

“Planet Paul?” Sherlock says.

“Oh God, yes. Definitely. He’s got horrible, damp, limp, little hands.”

“He’s just... inept. Actually, properly socially inept. It’s like talking to someone from another planet,” Ness says, emphatically. “You wouldn’t believe how rude he can be without even realising it.”

“Perhaps I could,” Sherlock says carefully, and gets up. Bee, impervious to any awkwardness, smiles up at him through a mask of vanilla ice-cream. Her cheeks are sprinkles with brown, which might be escaped pieces of chocolate flake, or just grubbiness off of the floor.

John picks her up gingerly and tries to wipe the worst of it off before putting her in the pushchair.

“Lord, even Elbant’s had ice-cream,” he comments.

“It was nice meeting you,” Gem says, from the floor. “Sorry we’re such a horrible bunch.”

“Cat’s back from holiday next week and Sandra says she’s got time to bring Luis to the soft play place if you want to join us,” Ness adds. “Probably Wednesday. Would you be working?”

“Depends who dies,” Sherlock answers.

They leave, John puffing to himself, Bee humming happily to her elephant. She drops off into a sticky doze in her pushchair before they’re even half-way home.

‘Bunch of harpies,’ John thinks. It’s a hard day when a man can’t even eat an ice-lolly without people making lewd comments about it. Then he remembers the existence of Bill Murray and on second thoughts, starts to feel like they got off lightly.

“How was that?” he says, noticing Sherlock’s keeping very quiet.

“How was what?”

“Well,” John says, tightening his grip on the handles of the pushchair. “They know now.”

“I don’t care,” Sherlock says.

“No, I suppose you wouldn’t.”

“They didn’t care either. Look,” He gestures out over the street and the houses. John looks.

“What am I looking at?”

“The world. Not ending,” Sherlock answers. John snorts.

“Alright, point made. I’m being... a dick. Paranoid. You’re right, I should just ignore it.” He leans forward to look into the pushchair. Bee’s mouth is hanging open and she’s drooling in strings down her front and he still thinks she’s cute. “She had a good time anyway.”

When they get home, John wipes the baby down with a wet cloth and negotiates her into a new t-shirt with judicious use of grapes. He makes sandwiches, which he eats, Bee plays with and Sherlock eats all the filling out of, discarding the bread.

John eats a yoghurt, scraping the sides of the pot and licking the spoon clean. Then resenting both the yoghurt and the spoon for making him feel weird. ‘It’s food,’ he tells himself firmly.

Sherlock tries hard not to watch. Both of them can feel an electric prickle up the spine and the air feels close and ripe.

“Might storm,” John says, cracking open a window. “Watch your violin strings.”

The space between his shoulder blades as John shoves at the glass creates a nook Sherlock wants to press his face into, even if it is awkwardly low. He wants to kiss him, but they’ve fallen out of synch and now John’s talking about dinner and washing up. He’s undone the top button of his stupid check shirt and Sherlock can see the hem of his stupid sensible vest, which is surely unnecessary in hot weather like this. Underneath there’s a whole lot of John he can’t see, and it’s a John who licks spoons and ice-lollies and categorically not enough non-food items.

Sherlock scrubs at his hair.

What’s wrong with the freak now?

He's hungry.

Go away, Woman!

But Irene's purr seems to linger on the edge of his hearing.

He picks up his violin and flicks his nails over the strings until they whine and spit discord.

"Sherlock, play something," John complains. The look Sherlock gives him thumps right in behind his breastbone and makes him feel like a bastard.

Sherlock turns his back and plays one of his many nameless tunes. It's not musical, but it has a pattern and it's less obnoxious than the scraping. He saws the bow, focussed on his own thoughts more than the music. It transforms into a repetition of the same short phrase which he repeats over and over until even John thinks he recognises it.

After a while, Sherlock remembers the words- 'So what are you gonna do?'

It's a damn good question.

That evening, Sherlock is restless. He leaves his dinner on the kitchen table and picks at it in errant bites between other chores until it congeals. Left completely, John scrapes the greater part of the meal from the plate straight into the bin and makes a point of washing up.

"Haven't you got an experiment to do?"

"Run out," Sherlock snaps, brushing his teeth.

"Put Bee to bed then."

He manages to give her a bath, which involves impromptu calculation of the volume of water that her plastic paddleboat could churn through if it could propel itself the length of the Mississippi river. It ends when John reprimands him for Googling while his daughter is sitting up to her waist in water.

"What's got into you? You're never careless like this." John bundles her into pyjamas and tries to mollify her after her high-tension bath.

"On. Edge," Sherlock says, "Going for a walk."

"Sherlock," John catches his arm in a hard grip. "Give me a number."

The crook of Sherlock's elbow prickles under John's fingers. It's true. He can feel the whine of need in the base of his skull; purely psychological.

"Five."

"Give me ten minutes to put her down," John says, not letting go. He gently palpates Sherlock's upper arm. "Ten minutes."

Sherlock jerks a nod in response.

"Promise?"

“Yes.”

“Where will you be?”

“Sofa,” Sherlock says, and only then does John let go. He slinks away. John leaves the bedroom door open, trying to give Bee his attention and also keep one eye on Sherlock.

Sherlock takes himself dutifully to the living room, furious with himself. He clenches his fists at the air, and then slaps both cheeks with both palms just once. The sting doesn’t clear the frustration but it brings his focus back. “Stupid.”

Foolish to let that woman rile him. Lucky boy, he hears in that tone of voice she used. He squirms uncomfortably. The worst of it is that he knows he is, lucky. Lucky to be alive, lucky to have John, lucky to be loved.

Yet he hasn’t got lucky yet and he’d like to know what that means in the scheme of things.

Perhaps he just hasn’t been obvious enough.

He throws himself down on the sofa to chew his thoughts down to something more manageable.

It takes John slightly longer than ten minutes to settle Bee until she isn’t grasping for him when he tries to move off. He emerges backwards from the bedroom, flustered, torn between his daughter, who doesn’t understand why he’s in such a hurry to leave her, and his concern for Sherlock.

When John turns around, however, Sherlock’s lying still, his hands under his chin as he always has them when he’s deep in contemplation.

It troubles John. He’s not seen Sherlock go still and pale like this in months and it worries him to see it again when things have been otherwise going well. Still, he supposes it’s the nature of the beast. Maybe they’ve just grown complacent. Or maybe they’ve been focussed so much on their domestic lives that Sherlock’s brain has gone off the rails as a form of protest, given it’s constant need for stimulation.

He approaches quietly, touching the cool expanse of Sherlock’s forehead.

“Give me a number,” he murmurs.

Sherlock’s lower lip tics. “Two,” he says finally.

John squeezes himself onto the edge of the sofa, the ball of his thumb working small circles on Sherlock’s temple. “Do you still want to go out?”

“Go out where?”

“Or stay in. Watch something. Play a game?”

Sherlock nudges aside John’s hand as he sits up. “Is Bee asleep?” He’s asking himself more than John and they listen intently for a moment. Muffled, they can hear her complaining to Elbant, but she doesn’t sound in danger of staying up for too much longer.

“Bee’s fine,” John says. His hand has fallen onto Sherlock’s knee. He squeezes gently until he gets the other man’s attention. “Hey.”

They’re sitting close. Close enough that Sherlock would only have to bow his head in order to kiss him; and the temptation is there. It’s always there. It’s driving him mad even more now than when

he'd thought the whole idea was a possibility. John's looking at him with concern.

'Stop,' Sherlock wants to say. He wants to lift a finger and press it to the tuck of skin between John's brows until it smoothes away.

"Hey," John says again. "What's going on? What do you need?"

Another damn good question. John waits for him to swallow against a rush of communication that Sherlock fears will come out as more of a moo than anything coherent. It brings a faint smile to John's face. He squeezes Sherlock's knee again, feeling the muscle, warm and human.

"Easy," John chuckles, "You're going red. What are you thinking?" He looks him up and down, holding in a smirk. "Something naughty?"

With a rush of heat to his scalp, Sherlock forces everything else aside and kisses him.

John lifts his face to meet him, a beat slower than Sherlock. Their noses punch together; he's at the wrong angle. John's lip snags on his tooth and they both grunt with the shock of it.

The sting makes John jerk back slightly, and then he leans in. His hand makes a bold, zinging slide up Sherlock's thigh, his thumb pressed to the hot crease of his leg, against the pulse. He tries to make it slower and more tender, but Sherlock's started now and he's lost all ability to brake. His neck cricks. John's elbow thuds into the back of the sofa with a hollow sound.

John leans his weight back into the sofa but Sherlock follows, adding his own weight to the press. His hand slips up to steady Sherlock around the ribs, and the weight grows until it's a solid press right through the line of his forearm, holding Sherlock up. John pants into the kiss. Their teeth clip together.

"Sher-" John starts, and then Sherlock bumps their foreheads together by mistake and there's a whole new sensation to get to grips with. John makes his core relax, his arms left taut or else Sherlock will drop hard on him.

Sherlock rises, twisting, following John's mouth as gravity and capitulation pull John lower into the sofa. His heel bumps the coffee table, sending a slippery avalanche of magazines onto the floor.

His breath is faster than John's. He's stuck in fifth gear and John's holding him back and it's both beautifully typical of John, and a bellows to the flame. He steals John's breath.

John grasps Sherlock's jaw, winning a fraction of space between his head and the wall and some leverage. He puts his arm around him, a prelude to a manoeuvre that would put John figuratively, if not literally, on top. Sherlock pushes back, one wild thought propelling him.

No, this is my kiss, I'm doing it!

John makes a bubbling noise, one knee rising in surprise. It's fuel to Sherlock's fire. He loves surprising John. He knows John loves to be taken by surprise as well. He ignores the nagging sensation that this is not coming together quite as hoped and presses his lips close again.

For a moment, things seem to fall into place. John's back is a curve out of line with the cushions but he fits to Sherlock's chest instead and that's so much better. They wriggle like sea-creatures, and then carried away, Sherlock leans down again.

The fact that he's so into it is wonderful, but the execution is strangely frantic. Sherlock's got his

hand on that damn unfastened button and that fucking awful vest and, without a plan, stuck his fingers down it. John opens his mouth to suggest an alternative, and then it really does go wrong.

Too close, too single-minded. It turns from a kiss that is innocently clumsy and working its way up to something better, to something desperate.

“Gl- Sherlo- Jesus, hold on!”

John gets a palm flat on Sherlock’s chest and pushes him back a blessed inch so he can breathe. His whole body feels like someone’s heaved him upside down and shaken him. Sherlock freezes, except for his eyes.

Guilt creeps over Sherlock’s expression. Slowly, John wipes the back of his hand over his mouth. He does not let go of Sherlock and the man remains half propped over him, but nonetheless he can feel him instantly withdraw.

“Let’s- can we-?” John’s too bewildered to finish his own sentence. Sherlock removes his hand like a schoolboy caught stealing. He flushes again under John’s scrutiny, but it’s anger.

John’s tongue dabs the sore bit inside his lower lip where his tooth caught the flesh. He has several thoughts, all bad choices to put into words. ‘Why,’ he wants to know, ‘does this feel more like an achievement you’ve set out to gain rather than something you want?’

“Am I... disappointing you?” John asks. “If you want more-?”

“No, I’m sorry.” Sherlock drops his heels to the floor and stands up, out of John’s grasp. “I got-” It sounds so stupid and over-wrought when he tries to explain it. A loop of they thought and then I thought and I think you thought but actually...

“I don’t mind,” John says. He kneads his own legs because Sherlock looks like he’s going to ping off the surface of the planet if he touches him right now. “Just...” He touches the sore spot again and holds his hands up, open and soft and within reach. "I'll throw my back out before we've even had any fun."

A beat of quiet then, “Can’t have that,” Sherlock says.

John shifts to the edge of the sofa and tilts his head until he can look up at Sherlock from directly where Sherlock’s looking down.

Look at me.

I’m an idiot! Idiot!

“Sherlock,” John says, and then again when he doesn’t respond. “Look.” John gets up off the sofa and taps Sherlock’s chin once before pointing. “Look!” Sherlock reluctantly looks.

“What? It’s a book case, we’ve got several of them. I’ve read everything on them.”

“No, it’s the world,” John says. “Not ending.”

A hot prickle wells up in the back of Sherlock’s throat. He shifts his weight from one leg to the other, and John waits, but the silence stretches on and Sherlock has nothing to say that isn’t clear in the set of his body.

I’m very frustrated.

John's heart starts to sink. "Listen, I don't want to make this a conversation if-

"No," Sherlock agrees, suddenly. "Let's do- one of those things. Time out. I have some thinking to do."

"Ok," John rocks back with relief. "That's fine. That's ok. That's great." He ducks back close and hesitates, and then gently kisses Sherlock's cheek.

"I'll be- Uh, I guess I'll have a shower and head to bed. So... you know where I am. If you need me. Don't go out."

Sherlock stops chewing on his lower lip and says, "I'll be downstairs."

"Ok. Ok?"

"Goodnight."

"Alright. Goodnight."

It's Sherlock who steps away first, ducking away towards the kitchen. He's two steps through the door before John says his name again. He turns back and John's still stood in the middle of the living room, feet planted shoulder-width apart, hands at his sides. John gives him one sharp little nod.

"We'll figure it out," he says. "We'll find our way."

—
—

John's confidence carries him into the bathroom and lasts until the door closes. He turns on the shower and then grips the sides of the sink and waits until the wobbly feeling in his gut lessens.

The bathroom lights make him look faintly yellowish. John wipes steam from the glass and eyeballs himself.

"Get your bloody act together," he whispers to himself. He presses the knuckles of his left hand against his reflection's cheek in a mock punch. "Grow up."

He sniffs, makes himself raise his brows out of a frown.

In the shower, he scrubs himself briskly until he's pink and raw. The suds swirl down the drain and when he turns the water off, he's still frustrated but the resolution has solidified.

They need to talk about this. Sherlock needs him to talk about it. He wonders what Ella would have to say about it. Strangely, he knows roughly what Sholto would say about it: There's no excuse for putting off solving a problem. And it's a bloody disgrace to go on letting a problem carry on when it starts to affect other people.

"You fucking coward," John scolds himself. "Pissing yourself over what a few housewives think of you."

He rubs the towel over his neck. He cleans his teeth and spits out mint into the sink and the bitter taste of knowing that he's spent years telling people it's fine to be who they are and waiting to hear it directed at him from someone he could believe in.

Until now, he'd never realised he could say it to himself.

Sherlock waits for John to slip past up the stairs before gladly giving up his microscope. He glances through the crack in the door to Bee's bed. The double in there is crisply clean and tidy. John's been at it with an army mentality; there are hospital corners under the duvet, and neat stacks of Bee's laundry at the foot of it.

It's not been long enough for the place to look abandoned; John's been in and out and Bee's things occupy almost all the space. Some of Sherlock's belongings from long before are still there too. The bed, however, is no longer anyone's.

Nominally, Sherlock understands, they have one bed in use, which they share. Yet so far, the sharing's been on a my-turn-your-turn basis, simply because that's what works. Neither can keep to the others hours beyond a short stint and Sherlock likes going in each morning.

Some mornings he collects Bee from her bed and they bomb John before he can get up, and it makes them feel like a family.

Sherlock flops back into the sofa. He's sweated through the underarms of his shirt in little lemon-shaped patches of damp. He plucks at the material and flaps it loose around his middle.

If there were a thermo-imaging camera on the ceiling, he muses, it would make for an interesting picture right now. His hands feel hot and the whole surface of his chest. There's a run of perspiration from his breastbone down to his stomach, which itches as the cool air reaches it.

More vital is the taut, tied-up feeling in his groin. He flexes his bare feet.

When was the last time he felt so wholly connected to his flesh? He wraps his hand around the buckle of his belt and sprawls there for a long moment, just feeling.

Going back to basics?

Is that so wrong?

Poor Virgin.

Sherlock gives a grunt of annoyance. Irene swans past, comfortably nude.

"I can do that," he mutters. She raises an eyebrow.

"Being naked isn't sexual," she says, "It's about power. My power. I possess it, right down to the tips of my toes." She hops up onto the desk behind his shoulder, folding her legs, breasts jutting proudly. "You wear a sheet."

"I wear a sheet," Sherlock concurs, dryly.

"For which we are all very grateful," says a new voice.

Sherlock lifts his head from the duvet and frowns at the spectre that's emerged from the woodwork. He stands, hands on hips, framed incongruously by Sherlock's lanky feet.

"What are you doing there? You're not in my head."

"Seems I am now, Sunshine."

Lestrade seats himself heavily on a school trunk that is not, in reality, in Sherlock's living room.
"Who's this bird?"

"No one."

Irene clicks her tongue. "How rude."

Sherlock waves a hand in front of his face in dismissal. "Why are you here?"

"Because you think I'm a loser. And now you feel like one too, guess who? Anyway, you want to know how I do it."

"Do what?"

"Your brother," Lestrade leers.

Sherlock makes a retching noise which isn't fully pretend.

"It's true though," Lestrade says, amused. "You're bloody nose as hell and it's winding you up to think we've got our shit sorted out and you two haven't."

"It's an impossibility," Sherlock answers, leaning himself up on the armrest. "How have you done it? Mycroft's not... boyfriend material."

"You're the genius, you figure it out," Lestrade says. He leans back, arms folded. "I'm enjoying this. Seeing you stumped."

Sherlock sneers. "I gave you that note. Did you blackmail him into it? No... Mycroft would have wormed his way out of anything like that. You're too much of a sad sentimentalist to have entered a cold-blooded deal just for sex. What did you do?"

"Isn't it bleeding obvious? What am I good at that you two are terrible at? What do you always tell me off for?"

"Being too simple," Sherlock guesses, and sits up. The room is empty and he's alone.

Upstairs the flat's gone quiet. John will be putting his pyjamas on, Bee's asleep with her thumb jammed in her mouth, Zub pressed to her cheek.

It would be simple to go up and join him. John will be lying awake for a while yet, on his back, one arm crooked behind his head. There's an empty side to the bed.

"Is that how you do it?" Sherlock asks the air. He runs his fingers through his hair once unconsciously and then over and over because it feels good. He likes to run his finger in the groove of his neck, right where it meets the skull and the muscle gets tight.

Relax.

There are three positions he has tried before- standing, sitting, lying flat. Standing is not his preference, but as a teenager he'd found that pressing his shoulder blades to the nook between the wall and the desk had leant a comfortable support. That sportsman of a wall. Once exterior and now interior thanks to rigorous renovations in the late 1950's it supplied a soundproof friend to groan against, unlike the traitorous wall by the bed. Here, no one could spot him through the window either, and being placed conveniently in the blind area behind the door, it was a place of safety.

Bonus, you could get it across the desktop and see how far it went.

Bonus again, oak is much easier than carpet or bedsheets to clean ejaculate from quickly.

Bonus the third, this was not the worst thing he did on the desk, a desk of science, which meant no one ever bothered to investigate it too closely.

School terms between desk experiments had been the days of sitting down to do it. Little grubby cubicles in the communal bathroom. You had to keep your mouth shut and your ears pricked harder than your cock. The best place was the chapel toilet, even though it didn't lock, because it was a stand-alone convenience and also came with the thrill of doing something so awful somewhere so holy. Not that Sherlock had held many illusions about the cleanliness of the place on any level considering it had housed 150 years worth of school boys, teachers and priests. One lesson they all learnt was the ability to hold the door closed with one hand, commit sins with the other and catch the result in toilet paper.

University had been a lot more lying down, for a number of reasons. Drugs and alcohol gave him rubbery legs and disappointment with the world had lead to an unshakeable lethargy. When he wasn't clawing the walls in desperate boredom, that is.

He undoes his belt buckle and pulls the whole thing free of the belt loops, dropping it to the empty side of the sofa. The process of unzipping his flies and rearranging himself is a banal proceeding. He pauses to adjust the cushions into the small of his back and so compromises between lying flat and sitting, left foot tucked under the knee of the right leg to make a '4'. Then he grasps himself.

No foreplay. He's never been in the habit of practicing it. Youth had made it seem like a waste of time, and then later, numbed through by hard living, it had done nothing for him. Perhaps if someone else tried, but that would have obliged him to let someone touch him and no one, not even Victor, had managed to ooze over that boundary.

Except John.

He scratches his fingers through his pubes, a same-same-but-different feeling to scratching his scalp. 'Like boar's bristles,' he thinks, not for the first time. The association and the visual of the damp flesh protruding from the hair always strikes him as satyric. He rubs the underside, low down, and like a tame animal it butts lazily upwards in response.

He's aroused, but it's not like the stiff aches he's been spending down the toilet in the last few months. Even his body knows he's chagrined. He uses the ring of his forefinger and thumb to bolster it, and it droops over his stomach before finally rising and swelling. He coaxes it up, until it stands erect, blown up like a hot air balloon out of the grass.

The rhythm of it comes automatically, thumb kneading the skin back and dabbing at the sensitive bit under the head. He inhales with the rise of his hand and exhales only when he needs to. When he needs more motion but less friction, he spits into his palm and it facilitates a wet slide up and down that's better than nothing.

'I should buy lubricant,' he thinks. He never has before, for sexual purposes. Victor had once turned up with a pump bottle of the stuff but he had used it for removing the squeak from hinges when sneaking around other people's properties.

Lube felt adult, like making a professional commitment to the deed. Especially when spit was more readily available. Once or twice, needing something, he'd used olive oil. If it had been good enough for the ancient greats, he'd reasoned, and besides, there was something friendly and co-

conspiratorial about the adjectives on the bottle.

Grimly, Sherlock pumps a little harder. He watches himself without embarrassment and only mild curiosity. It's a self-indulgence, and watching his thumb stroke his own twitching flesh has a meditative element. He has no imagination for this, and not watching often allows in distracting thoughts. More than once he's wound up sitting, cock in hand, forgotten, mind trundling away on completely unrelated rails.

He cups his balls, pushing the first knuckle of his middle finger under them, up into the giddy place that can make him actually huff if he gets the angle right. His fingers look pale in contrast. He turns his hand over, pushing away from his body, and tries to picture his hand smaller, browner, rougher. Faded gun calluses on the base of the thumb and the v leading to the forefinger; square, short nails.

Would he moan like people do? Say, 'oh, John, oh, oh, John! John!'? Or other things? 'Yes, yes, that's it. Come on, big boy?' He hears it in his head and it sounds so extraordinarily silly and put on that it comes out as a prickly rush of pride up his spine, right from the tail bone up.

He swears, grumbling, and scowls at his crotch. His own hand, a narrow fist, brought up to work over the head. Anger's surprisingly helpful. He works harder, scratching the tingling itch at the top with the soft middle of his palm.

"That's better."

He tweaks himself and shivers, bare feet like commas on the carpet. 'Hurry up,' he thinks, willing it on from a hot nebulous curdle to a proper twang of nerves, firing, a bowstring cut loose.

It's not going to be that dramatic, he knows. He's not aroused enough. He spits again, swaps his hand back to first position and digs the knuckle deeper. Faithfully his body doodles to a plateau and then- a spark- a tiny final struggling lift-

-his breath hitches- a thud in the core of him, a very distant depth charge.

It spills out in a little wet surge over his fingers, followed by a second quick dribble. His thighs shiver once involuntarily, and he lets go the lungful he's holding and a sigh.

Awkwardly, he leans forward and fetches a tissue from the box on the coffee table. It leaves snowflakes of paper on his fingers that he has to scrub off in tiny pills. He chases them off of his skin into the waste paper basket and then bends and pulls up his pants.

Physically his body feels... different after release. He does not especially feel less frustrated, but he doesn't feel worse either.

And no one walked in.

He rolls back onto the sofa, stretched out, facing up, feeling limp. It's a small win for the short term, he supposes, but...

The blanket throw flops down off of the back of the sofa, dislodged by all his shuffling around, and he flings it out over his legs and lies still. Somewhere under his knees is the divot in the seat created by John's buttocks.

Under his back is his own.

You're aware you don't have to sleep on the sofa, I hope?

‘Only for tonight,’ Sherlock thinks. He drums his fingers on his chest. Out loud he says. “I’ll sort it out tomorrow, John.”

There isn’t an answer.

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John wakes at 5:30 the following morning, feeling hot-wired. His brain scuttles around a mish-mash of thoughts, few of them coherent and all of them highly colourful, before he actually wakes up feeling like he’s already been caffeinated.

The sheets have been mauled out of order and his pyjama bottoms cling to him. He plucks the fabric, damp with sweat and other even less socially acceptable fluids, and takes himself to the bathroom as quietly as possible.

Re-invented in clean pants, his face and undercarriage still damp with cold water, John slips out into the living room.

Sherlock is flat on his back, dead asleep. His jaw is lax, and one arm sags off of the side of the sofa, just grazing the floor. Other than the slight rise of his belly, he’s totally motionless.

‘Don’t wake,’ John pleads, not liking to disturb him. He creeps around the kitchen, even though Sherlock is usually deaf to the world when he’s properly out of it like this. The tap seems to roar when he fills the kettle, letting the water trickle in. It’s even louder when he puts it on to boil.

The hand of the clock creeps closer to 6, and downstairs, he hears the rumble of Mr. Chatterjee lifting the metal security cover to get into Speedies. There’s a second dull thud as the newspapers arrive; all of them. John slinks downstairs to collect them, bringing them up in his arms like an offering.

Sherlock’s turned his face into the back of the sofa and collected his arm from the floor. Instead, one foot protrudes from under the blanket. Carefully, John corrects this.

6:15. A faint mewl from the bedroom. Downstairs, he hears the click of Mrs. Hudson’s kitchen door and then the very distant burble of her radio.

Bee’s barely awake when he goes in. He cracks the curtains just a little and she whimpers, grinding her fists into her eyes and turning rump upwards to avoid daylight.

“Morning, love,” John whispers. “Up you come.”

“No,” she says, half-heartedly. She droops in his arms, trying to go back to sleep. John carries her deadweight down the stairs, blanket, elephant and all, and gently taps on Mrs. Hudson’s door.

She shuffles over, hair porcupine-wild and muddy surprise on her face.

“Morning,” John says, “Mind if we-?”

He sidles through the door and joins her in the kitchen, rocking Bee. Mrs. Hudson has the gumption to realise something’s not quite right. Bee yawns hugely, and whines.

“Aww, the lamb. Pop her in my bed, John. It’s still warm.”

He does, leaving her sucking her thumb hard. “Sorry,” he says when he returns.

Over the kettle and the tea things she's automatically put out for two, Mrs. Hudson asks, "Everything alright?"

"Sherlock's flat out on the sofa, I thought I'd let him sleep a bit," John says, which isn't a complete lie. "Can Bee have breakfast with you this morning?"

"I don't mind. But I take it you're not staying."

John rubs behind his ear, plucks at the hem of his t-shirt. "No, I'm uh, going to sort out some food for himself and then, hopefully, have a chat."

"Oh." Mrs. Hudson says, significantly.

"I'm not sure how it's going to go," John adds. "If it ends up a row or...something then. Best she's out of it."

"Yes. Oh dear. Tea's not going to help..." She turns and bustles in the cupboard. Coffee appears with a rapidity John wasn't aware existed outside of a drive-thru, and then she pulls something out from behind the fridge.

"For luck," she says firmly, upending a dose of brandy into the mug. "There you go."

The clock has crawled as far as 6:45, and the hot combination of coffee and liquor burns down John's throat.

"Bleugh," he says, shaking his head. "Christ."

"You needed that," Mrs. Hudson diagnoses. "Off you go, then." She lays a hand on his elbow, quite tender. "Get it all out in the open air. You'll feel better for it."

John swallows. "Right." Almost silently, "Thank you."

Clutching his mug for courage, he begins to climb the stairs.

—

Sherlock floats out of a mindless sleep, drifting like a loose barge until at last he comes back to reality with a bump.

"Steady," John says, placing a hand over his.

Sherlock squints, offended by the light sneaking through the gap in the curtains, disorientated. "Wassa?"

"It's about 7ish," John says.

"Hnm."

A long finger rises to scrape the sand out the corner of his eye and then flops towards the cup of tea John's holding with single-minded focus.

"I can smell coffee."

"I can make you a coffee if you want."

"Have you been *drinking*?" Sherlock adds, as his brain catches up with his nose. He slurps at the

tea, which is scalding and perfect.

“I got Mrs. Hudsonised,” John says, levering himself up off the coffee table. “Dunno how you can sleep on that thing.”

“S’a good sofa.” Sherlock crunches through a jaw cracking yawn and swings his feet to the floor. He rolls his shoulders and they pop.

“D’you want anything to eat? I’m making toast.”

“Yes,” Sherlock says, head cocked to one side. He can hear movement downstairs. He deduces.

“What do you want?” John asks from the kitchen.

“Oh, whatever’s fine.”

“Marmite it is then.”

Sherlock looks round at once. “Don’t you dare.”

John smirks, dropping bread in the toaster. He stands over the plates, watching that the bread doesn’t burn, but mostly listening for Sherlock shuffling towards him, giving him his attention.

The toast pops, and John improves it with butter for Sherlock, and both butter and jam for himself.

Sherlock takes the plate with a hum of approval, slumping into a kitchen chair. He folds the toast in half and posts it into his mouth, the slice disappearing in three absent-minded bites.

Finally, when they’re both picking at crumbs, he says, “Bee’s downstairs.”

“Yeah.” John gets up and clears the plates, leaving them in the sink with a splash of water over them. “I thought it might be a good idea. There’s some stuff we need to... Well, we had a bit of a miscommunication yesterday, didn’t we?”

Sherlock continues to arrange errant toast crumbs into constellations on the tabletop. After a moment, he shrugs one shoulder.

“I didn’t mean to piss you off.”

“I’m not angry.”

“You’re a bit angry,” John says. Sherlock sucks his inner cheek between his teeth and then begrudgingly waggles his head from side to side, which John translates as ‘I suppose’.

“We can’t miscommunicate like that. Me as much as you,” he adds, Sherlock’s running his thumbs over his fingertips, and twiddling them. He’s deeply uncomfortable. “We’ve got to let each other in.”

“Mm.”

“Right?”

“Hm.” Another shrug, a slight tension in the jaw. John sits down opposite him. He licks his lips, presses them together, presses his palms to the edge of the table.

“Knock knock.”

Sherlock's head jerks towards him. "Really?" he says, in disgust.

"Knock knock."

Sherlock gives a snore of exasperation, "Who's there?" he asks, leaning over the table and John grins slightly.

"Me."

"Me who?"

"Just... Me." John holds his hands up in defeat. "Sorry, I can't think of a punchline."

Sherlock makes a show of rolling his eyes and puffing and clicking his tongue like a maiden aunt before something vulgar, but it makes John breathe easy. If he's hamming, he's engaging, and likewise some of the tension in the room seems to leach away.

"So, can we talk?"

His heart going pitter-patter, Sherlock squirms in his seat and proffers his empty palm towards John. Go ahead.

"Ok. Um. So. What are your thoughts on...relationships?"

"You know my thoughts on relationships. I gave a speech about that at your wedding."

"Yeah, but, has that changed? I mean, we've changed. Things have changed. Have you had any other thoughts since then? Or... I don't know, just tell me something about you."

"Me?"

"Well, not Fred West. Yes, you."

"The West's had an interesting relationship."

"Yes- I regret mentioning the child murderers. How about- when did you know?"

"Know-?"

"That you were err...or didn't like...women? Or did you ever think you were straight? Was Irene a thing?"

The question seems rude and clumsy even as John says it. He runs his tongue behind his teeth, inwardly cringing and he's about to open his mouth to correct himself, when Sherlock holds up a finger.

"Fantin-Latour's Charlotte Dubourg," Sherlock says.

"What?"

"Oh for- Fine. The Venus de Milo."

"What?" John repeats.

"She's beautiful, for a given value of beauty."

"Yes? So?"

“Do you think she’s beautiful?”

John shrugs expansively. “She’s got no arms-oh alright. Yes, for the sake of whatever argument you’re making, she’s beautiful.”

“And if you were to wake and find her in your bed, what then?”

“Why is the Venus de Milo in my bed?”

“Would that be strange?”

“Yes!”

“Disconcerting?”

“Yes, very!”

“Precisely.” Sherlock calmly picks up a crumb and goes back to arranging them in shapes on the tablecloth. “Women are art. I can appreciate that other people find them aesthetically pleasing, but I wouldn’t want one in the house.”

“Right,” John says, uncertainly. “Ok. So, Irene was art-“

“No, she was interesting. Her beauty was irrelevant- she played the game, played it well and she nearly won. It’s a pity she was otherwise so... compromised. And,” Sherlock adds, with a exaggerated wrinkling of the nose, “She was a little obvious.”

“Those texts,” John says. He clears his throat. Sherlock hums, thoughtful.

Then he says, “Irene was the same. As me. Not interested. Like that.”

John has to agree. “She told me that once, that she was gay. But going back to talking about us, we already know we’re a bit different to each other. My preferences and yours, I mean.”

“Obviously.”

“Pretty much.”

There is a long pause. John tilts his cold coffee around his mug. Sherlock fidgets. Finally he says, “And, you?”

“What do you want to know?”

“Do you think...?” Sherlock makes a swift incoherent gesture at his own person. “Acceptable?”

“Yeah. Yeah, pretty accep- well, more than acceptable. Yep. Yes, I mean. Look at you.”

Sherlock’s lips form a thin, wobbling line. Both cast a look at something else in the room that is less inclined to set them off blushing, and award themselves a little point for getting thus far. John coughs and then applies himself to the real matter at hand.

“So, where do you stand on.... Um,” John frowns, his expression more inwards than outwards. He folds his lips against his teeth and makes a little *puh* sound of consideration before finishing his sentence. “Sex.”

“I haven’t,” Sherlock says simply. “To date, I’ve stood ‘off the board’ on the matter.”

“So, you don’t know if-“

“I know what I like.”

“How can you *know* if you’ve never...?”

“For God’s sakes, John, I’m not *sheltered*, I’m not an *innocent*,” he splutters, even though there is a mark of emotion on each cheek bone, like someone’s been digging their thumbs into his face. “I don’t play competitive chess either, but I know which side is my general preference and the moves I am more inclined towards. An opponent isn’t required to know that much.”

“What? No? There’s no ‘opponents’ in sex. I meant-“

“Partner! Partner then!”

“Yes, alright, don’t yell! So... I just want to understand, Sherlock. That’s all. I’m not getting at you. I’m not taking the piss. Come on...” John holds his hands up in a gesture of peace and then drops them when Sherlock likewise drops his shoulders again. “So, you... I really don’t want to say ‘practice’...”

“Yes, yes it was a bad analogy, let’s not keep flogging it,” Sherlock replies irritably, and now he does look embarrassed. “But to answer. Yes. I... that.”

“Ok. Then that’s....” John breathes out long and hard floundering for words. “A relief? I sort of thought you might, but I wasn’t sure.”

Sherlock sits, John sits at the corner of the table with him. Sherlock’s hands make loose fists on the tabletop, John’s hands clasp in order to hang on to a shred of the idea that he’s a doctor and should be the better one of them at this. Just barely he brushes the tip of his fingers against the knuckles of Sherlock’s hand.

“Is it a relief?” Sherlock wants to know. John’s fingertips slide down the back of his hand and then up to the knuckles again.

“I don’t know which I would find more frightening,” John admits. “That you didn’t know *anything*, or that you have....everything, and I’m the one who- because I don’t know everything. And I haven’t not known what I was doing since I was fifteen and I don’t remember what that was like, if that makes sense.”

Sherlock watches their hands and then loosens the one closest to John’s, slipping his fingers between John’s palms.

“This troubles you.”

“Oh yeah. I’m terrified of making a muck of things. And then half my time I spend wanting to get into real trouble with you, like I *was* fifteen again.”

Sherlock gives a crooked little smile at the insinuation. “I’m flattered,” he says with bravado, because laughing at their own gremlins feels better than aching over them. John doesn’t laugh. He squeezes Sherlock’s fingers between the vice of his palms a little, and he moves closer when Sherlock bends his head to brush a kiss at the corner of John’s mouth.

John doesn’t laugh; instead he parts his hands and lays them on Sherlock’s forearms as he returns the kiss more squarely, leaning in over the table.

John's hands slide up to Sherlock's elbows, Sherlock's own performing the same action only mirrored as they both tilt into the kiss, squeezing tighter until John lets go in favour of pressing a hand to Sherlock's cheek instead. When they break apart, Sherlock's thumb is still pressed into the crook of John's elbow, rubbing into his thin shirt. Sherlock notes the beat of John's heart, looks down.

"Told you I was trouble," John says.

"Oh," says Sherlock, softly. He swallows, looks down, up, down again. "Well... Thank you." His sincerity is so palpable it saves John from smiling too much and hurting his feelings.

"So, you understand, don't you? It's not 'if', really. It's 'when'. So... you don't have to... panic. Ok? It'll happen. I want it to happen."

Sherlock's face then does something peculiar.

"I do," John says, and now he almost laughs, "I want it to happen. Honest. God, I'm sorry." Sherlock's face is still peculiar, and he's clumsy, wooden when he lets John lean in and kiss him. "I'm sorry, come here," John says, "Come here. Don't," he pleads.

He smears Sherlock's cheekbones with his thumbs, forehead to forehead. "Don't doubt it. I mean it. You can feel my pulse. It's going bonkers."

Sherlock tilts his head up. The kitchen table shudders when John bumps it with his hips, angled over the corner of the table to reach him. In the end, he just sits on the damn thing, twisted to cup Sherlock's face and kiss him.

"Tonight," John says, staccato between touches. "Come upstairs, after Bee's asleep."

Sherlock digs his fingers into John's shirt. The table sways. Sherlock's chair rocks back precariously onto two legs and then shrieks when Sherlock forces it back to make room. John slides from the table top, jarring his kneecap into the seat of the chair on one side of Sherlock, his foot bracing against the floor on the other.

'John's bum is covered in crumbs,' Sherlock thinks, eyes screwed shut in case he opens them and finds this isn't really happening. 'I know this, because *I've got my hands there.*'

It makes him splutter against John's mouth, and then he's laughing, helplessly, booming great guffs of laughter. He can't help it. It's too absurd, and he's always, always loved the preposterous. It's a laugh that exorcises his stress.

It takes him a while to stop. John starts and that sets him off again, laughing till his belly aches, and then John plants his hand squarely in Sherlock's tea, upsetting it everywhere.

John's just trying to wipe tea off of his rear, when there's a sharp rap on the door.

"Go away," Sherlock yells, good-humoured. He rocks back in the chair and points. "You missed a bit."

"Leave that," John growls, squirming out of his reach.

"Boys," Mrs. Hudson calls through the door uncertainly. "I wouldn't bother you, but you sound like you're not fighting."

"We're doing splendidly, Mrs. Hudson, you really don't need to come in."

“God,” John mutters under his breath. “Spare us.”

“Only there’s a girl here,” Mrs. Hudson calls, sounding put-out.

“Tell her to bugger off.”

“She says she’s family.”

The joke falls at once from both of their faces. “What the hell is Harry doing here?” John says, in alarm. It’s karma, that’s what it is. She must have known, somehow. It must have pinged up on an innate lesbian radar that something homosexual was happening and she’d better hot-foot it over to stick her nose in before it stopped.

Sherlock rears out the chair and goes to look out at the pavement. No one to be seen.

“Get changed,” he says, throwing a tea towel over the spill. “I’ll see what she wants.”

“Not without me,” John says, even more dismayed. “Wait- Wait!”

He drags a pair of last weeks trousers from the washing machine and hauls them on in the kitchen. It’s only 8:00 and he’s already had a wet arse twice, he thinks ruefully.

Sherlock gestures for him to hurry up and glides down the stairs. He alters at the seventeenth step, head up, adjusting his cuffs, somehow seeming to wear the coat even though it’s still upstairs on the peg. John marches behind him, doggedly ignoring the fact he’s wearing a faded old t-shirt over nice trousers that smell of clinical antiseptic.

The door to the kitchen swings open.

“Daddy!” Bee chirrups from her highchair.

Sherlock abruptly stops.

“What are you doing here?”

She’s leaning against Mrs. Hudson’s back door, hands shoved deep into the pockets of a large mud-scuffed waterproof, legs looking like bowed sticks underneath.

Tolly gives them both a nod. “Got a case for you,” she says.

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Chapter End Notes

NOTES:

1) ‘So what are you gonna do’ comes from ‘Undecided’ by Sydney Robin and Charlie Shavers. There’re several versions of this song. I like the quirkiness of the Ella Fitzgerald version but the Ames Brother’s cover is also quite a jam.

2) The chapter title comes, of course, from David Bowie’s ‘Absolute Beginners’ although in my heart the whole terrible snogging scene here should be set to ‘Let’s Do

It' by Victoria Wood and it's a joint dedication to romance and clunky middle-aged suburban sex.

3) THE ICE LOLLIES WERE 100% WRITTEN PRE S4 AIRED AND I HAVE NEVER FELT SO VALIDATED IN MY LIFE. I AM IN FUKING TUNE WITH THE SHERLIVERSE AAAHHHHHAHAHAHHA. It bodes well guys. Maybe ep 3 will be Just As Gay.

4) I rate this chapter 8/10 needs more ginger nuts. Sadly though, I had to put the Mystrade in another chapter nyahhahahaha.

5) I am a stupid head who left her laptop charger on the other side of the country and I have only two hours of battery life in which to do all this aaaaaahhh.

6) [Charlotte Dubourg](#) is a painting by Henri Fantin-Latour and she's a) v beautiful but also b) v. annoyed and I couldn't think of anything more fitting. The Venus de Milo is that one statue of the naked lady who has no arms.

7) Fred West and his wife Rosemary are/were notorious British serial killers who were aptly named as they lived in the south west of England. John's top tip if you're trying to get down and dirty with your boyfreind- probably best not to mention these guys. Bit of a mood killer.

8) Flipping hell 56mins of battery left HOW. Ok, i'm going to have to whoosh this out real quick so FORGIVE PLEASE any remaining typos and oddities and missing notes. I'll fix them later in the week when I am able to. ohiuydtecvbjknL LOVE YOU ALL <3<3<3

Comments? Questions? Simply want to share your awkward 'I was eating a thing and I just Did Not Realise' stories? Leave me a comment!

-Odamaki

Interlude 4: Somewhere in the Summertime

Chapter Summary

“Did you see his wood?” Bill asks.

The other man wipes sweat from his neck and nods. “It’s small.”

“It’s still growing,” Sholto snaps, and then despite himself, sees the funny side of it. “You bastards.”

“It’s restorative deciduous planting,” Bill says, pretending to push a pair of glasses up his nose, “For the squirrels.”

“Oh, bugger the squirrels,” Sholto says, emphatically.

Bill sucks air between his teeth and shakes his head. “They really don’t have much to do in Norfolk.”

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Interlude 4: Somewhere in the Summertime

The caravan smells strongly of coffee. Bill picks the sleep from his eyes and the fold of his pants from his arse-crack and stumbles from the top bunk. He yawns and scratches, perking up to find that breakfast is ready.

The tiny kitchenette is awash with grease- they’ve got one style of cooking and the choice is to either boil it or fry it. There’s a plate brimming with curling bacon on the table already, and even as Bill slides into the banquette, the toast pops.

“Need a hand?”

The other man grunts a negative answer, and brings the coffee over. Bill piles bacon between white bread and baptises it with brown sauce. They eat in silence. Beyond the window there’s a slight view of the sea between the other caravans. Bill licks his fingers and clears his throat. “So we’ll head down the coast today and go meet my buddy. I told him we were coming.”

The other man grunts around his bacon sandwich, this time to the positive. Mouth full, he reaches out and taps on the map.

“Yeah, that’s the place. You’ll like it. No hills in Norfolk.”

That prompts a grin.

They finish breakfast and give the kitchen a once-over. When the plates are secured and Bill’s thrown his clothes on, they roll the caravan out onto the road.

It’s a good day for a drive. Bill cranks all the windows down and they lean, elbows out the

window, picking up the breeze. The sea rolls; a green-grey swatch on the edge of the shore. They pass a beach, deserted except for a few tiny fishing boats and a cloud of gulls, which swoop overhead. Bill turns the radio up and they yell incoherently over the lyrics, knowing the tune but not the words. The other man thumps the beat on the door of the car.

The gate to Sholto's house is narrow and Bill hops out to open it himself. The man in the car squints at the buildings, and raises his eyebrows. He points to all the security.

"Well, like I said, I told him we were coming," Bill says, shuffling back into the driver's seat. He cracks a grin, the other snorts, and they ease the caravan through onto the drive.

To Bill, it's like entering a time capsule. It has barely changed since the previous autumn, when John was there. It certainly hasn't changed since the last time he dropped by, back in the new year. Inside, he's annoyed to notice that it's cobwebby in the top corners of the entrance hall. Sholto needs not only a better cleaner, he needs to go out more. He'd have noticed the dust and yelled at someone if he'd come in here recently.

He props his sunglasses up on his head and swaggers forward, beckoning his friend after him and sweeping past the housekeeper with a wink. Flustered, she trots after them.

"Hallo, Major!"

"Murray, you're on time."

"Never late for a date," Bill answers, clasping Sholto's hand and shaking it firmly. "Can't bear to keep a pretty girl waiting."

"Is the door still open?" Sholto asks the housekeeper. "He can leave."

Bill laughs. He has one eye on the man in the chair and the other on the man behind him, and feels like he needs a third one for the housekeeper, who is still fluttering around. Sholto looks well, though, he's pleased to note. He's gained a bit of weight and the way he's sitting suggests his back is more comfortable.

"You're looking good," Bill comments, throwing himself down into a chair. Sholto receives the housekeeper of some of her anxiety by asking her to fetch something to drink, and then turns his attention back to Bill.

"That's a loaded statement."

"Well, how are things, then?" Bill asks. He twiddles his sunglasses in his hands and then gestures for the other man to join them. "This is Mark."

Both men eye each other politely. They're both clued to the fact that Bill has told each of them about the other, in terms of history and disability. It's private information, but as the swap has been two-way, neither had found much of an argument against the matter.

"You served with the RAF, is that right?"

"Mm."

"Squadron Leader," Bill supplies, "Two tours?"

The quiet man gives another short nod of assent. Sholto has no need to ask why the man is no longer serving. It's a hot day, and in stark contrast to Sholto, Bill and his friend are both in shorts

and t-shirts. The man's leg is truncated halfway through the thigh.

The housekeeper returns and lays them out a tray of glasses and lemonade. Sholto makes the effort to lift his once-dead arm out of his lap, first onto the arm of the chair, and then carefully puts pressure down through into the heel of his palm, using it to lean forward and pick up the jug.

The condensation on the jug is equal to the thrill of cold sweat down Sholto's spine. On the other side of the table, the prosthetic sticks out brazenly, like a challenge to conversation, but it's not this that is making Sholto's hindbrain fizz like static. It's the face. It's familiar.

'Or is this just the paranoia?' he asks himself. The lemonade jug wobbles.

"Alright?" Bill asks, frowning.

"Fine, how's the trip going?" Sholto asks, letting the jug thud back on the table. He's unable to place the man in his memory. 'It's just his look,' Sholto tells himself. 'He just looks military.'

"Good!" Bill chatters on, telling Sholto about the week they've spent so far, trucking around the north coast. He tells him how bloody cold the sea was, and that Mark got mobbed by seagulls at Great Yarmouth and they both got ripped off by the arcade games. They digress into fishing stories, which start off (as they always do) as small fry and end up whopping great lies.

"It was bigger than that, Mark," Bill says, and he obligingly holds his hands wider apart. Bill cackles. "And that's why I'm a married man and you two aren't."

Their annoyance is pleasing. Especially as it's something they've got in common. Bill slaps his thighs and gets up. "I'm going to piss. Try not to start the party without me."

He slips out into the cool dim hall, treads flagstones so old they've worn to dips in the middle. The bathroom door shuts on a stable latch. He stands in front of the toilet and snaps a picture.

It takes a minute or two for a reply to come.

[Why are you sending me pictures of that? Do you want my professional opinion?]

[Guess where I am.]

[A bathroom.]

[Ok, but where.]

There's another slight lag. Bill sniggers, and takes a seat on the loo. He can imagine John huffing, annoyed, prying himself from his armchair and pushing the photo under Sherlock's nose.

[Is that Sholto's house??]

[I'm in his back loo.]

[Congratulations. Why?]

[We bought Murray Arrend up to Norfolk on tour.]

[God is that the caravan's name?]

[John, you know you want to and if you're very good to me one day I'll take you for a long ride in Murray Arrend.]

[I'm ignoring that. Is Sholto going camping with you?]

[This is The Plan. How do I make him leave the house?]

Bill fidgets as the reply takes a while to come. It's chilly. The walls of the old part of the house are thick and the summer heat has no way of seeping through.

[Hurry up] he types [I told them I was pissing. I can't piss forever.]

[I'm thinking]

[Think faster. Murray Arrend is getting cold.]

[I don't know. Just convince him it's his idea. Don't do anything stupid.]

[Look who's talking.]

[Who did you mean 'we'???

Bill doesn't answer the last message. It's pretty much none of John's business, and besides, he has a feeling John would want to get all involved if he tried to explain it, and if that happened it could go anywhere from a cock-up to outright disaster. Better to leave John be and hope he had things to occupy his attention back home. Bill hums to himself, flushes the toilet, and returns to the living room.

Two pairs of eyes fix on him the moment he comes through the door, both with the same expression. A mix of relief and fury at being left to make small talk.

"You want to come out and see the caravan? It's great!"

"Yes, good idea," Sholto says, grabbing the arms of his chair and heaving himself up. He's spotted the first opportunity to get out of a conversation with a man he hardly knows and grabbed it. Bill feels bad acknowledging that privately, he'd hoped as much would happen. The quiet man gives Bill a hard look from under his eyebrows.

"Sorry," Bill mouths, shrugging behind Sholto's back.

They file out onto the gravel, where the great hulk of the caravan looks ridiculous wedged in between the house and the portacabin. Bill gives Sholto the tour and they metaphorically kick the tyres together.

"It's pretty sturdy. We've had no problems so far."

"Murray *Arr*-end?" Sholto reads off of the side.

"Murray *Arrend*," Bill corrects. "You've got to be a bit less posh and a spoonful more Irish."

"I see. And did you call it that because it's large, white, and likely to start leaking as it gets older?"

Bill guffaws. There's a scuffle and a thump as Mark strikes the side of the caravan with his fist and then walks off shaking his head.

"What's the matter?" Sholto asks, alarmed. "What happened?"

Bill manages between gusts of laughter to say, "He didn't get the joke! Oh my God. He didn't get it until just now! What a champ! I've been asking *constantly* how he liked Murray Arrend and he's

been giving me the thumbs up!”

“You are a disgrace,” Sholto tells him. In lower tones he asks, “Where did you meet him?”

“Friend of a friend from the vet’s support network,” Murray says. “My mate Simon volunteers with a group and asked me along to one of their meetings to give a hand. And you know me, I can talk for three people, no worries. We played pool.”

“Where’s he from? Does he talk at all?”

“Swears,” Bill says. “On a good day he gives full sentences if you give him enough time to parse them out, and he’s better if he can get a run in the day. There’s nothing wrong with his system. It’s just in his head. Besides, he’s shy and you’re terrifying, so don’t expect too much.”

“I’m not terrifying,” Sholto answers, “Am I?”

“You can be. You can range from intense to crap-your-pants.”

“Good,” Sholto says. “Where’s he from?”

“His base was Brize Norton. Relax,” Bill adds in a lower voice. “I checked, ok? I double-checked. I double-double-triple checked and I even gave him the squat-and-knickerbocker-glory check. He’s not a threat unless he farts in a closed space.” He elbows Sholto and Bill’s put-on stupidity makes Sholto relent.

“I just...it’s not like people haven’t tried,” Sholto mutters and then cuts himself short as the crunch of uneven steps on the gravel approaches.

“Anyway,” Bill says loudly, patting the caravan. “We’ll be out of your hair in the morning. Thanks for putting us up.”

“It’s no problem at all,” Sholto says, still processing that he’s had it wrong. ‘I suppose I was thinking of someone else,’ he puzzles, and besides, Bill seems so adamant the man is an ally that Sholto has a flicker of regret. He has a great sense of hospitality, for all that he so rarely entertains and it bothers him that he might have made his guest uncomfortable.

The afternoon fades away reluctantly. They have lunch and Bill winks Sholto out of doors for a wander around the garden as the quiet man sets out for a run. It’s a golden, lazy afternoon, and Sholto seems immune to all of it. Bill stretches.

“So, where will you head to next? You and Mark?” Sholto asks.

“Across country,” Bill says. “We’ve done Brighton and Yarmouth and all that bit of the south coast. Thought we’d cut through to Birmingham and then up around the Welsh coast. Hit Cornwall and come back to Brighton that way.”

“Bit of a haul,” Sholto comments.

“In an air-conditioned car,” Bill points out. “Not like we’re cramming in a Mastiff cooking our balls off. We’ve got cola. Besides, the idea is to stop in interesting places and mooch around.”

“A jolly holiday.”

“It’s not been bad,” Bill says. “We play the radio, eat ice-cream. Sit on the beach in the rain. It’s

fun.”

“Not quite my idea of fun.”

“Steak,” Bill says, “He likes a putter around castles and whatnot. You’d like that. You should come. I mean, it’s a bit of a squeeze getting three in Murray Arrend, but it’s not uncomfortable.”

“I think I remember that from your CV,” Sholto comments.

“I mean it,” Bill says, grinning. “You should come.”

Sholto makes a vague noise and feigns interest in the garden around them.

The nagging feeling hasn’t totally gone away, and he’s cultivated a whole new paranoid idea that the man, Mark (if that’s his real name) is here under pretences. Not to get inside Sholto’s house to kill him, and not to lure him off in the caravan so the deed can be done in a less heavily secured location, but to convince him to stay so that the bomb he’s going to plant is guaranteed to finish him off. A bluff.

Sholto has been mulling this idea since before lunch, and come to the conclusion that it could be done if you happened to be a very determined killer (it was certainly no more ludicrous than a delayed stabbing), and also that he is sort of enjoying the threat, which rings a little silver bell in his brain that says ‘Oh dear’.

“Sure you don’t fancy it?” Bill asks, ever optimistic. Sholto repeats his vague noise.

There’s another problem in the form of the fact that, despite his lingering suspicion that Mark wants him inventively dead, Sholto likes him.

He can speak, and he saves himself for when the effort is worth it. There’s a dry sense of humour in there and independence and apparent good-sportsmanship that puts all Sholto’s instincts at odds with one another. It’s the same burn in Sholto’s gut that used to tell him a scab-head thug could be a good man, if kicked in the right direction. More confusingly, it’s not the cold feeling of watching a good soldier, and realising they are a bad person.

A sharp whistle makes him flinch, and Sholto realises with a shock he’s been walking blind for several minutes, and brought Bill back to the house without being aware of doing so. The quiet man is walking towards them, sweating.

“Good run?”

“Good,” he says, breaking into a sudden smile and then adds to Sholto. “I like your place. Out there.”

“It’s a restoration project,” Sholto says, taken aback. “Deciduous planting mixed with moorland. For the wildlife.”

“Did you see his wood?” Bill asks.

The other man wipes sweat from his neck and nods. “It’s small.”

“It’s still growing,” Sholto snaps, and then despite himself, sees the funny side of it. “You bastards.”

“It’s restorative deciduous planting,” Bill says, pretending to push a pair of glasses up his nose,

“For the squirrels.”

“Oh, bugger the squirrels,” Sholto says, emphatically.

Bill sucks air between his teeth and shakes his head. “They don’t have much to do out here, Mark. Don’t move to Norfolk- you’ll end up in a squirrel-fucking cult.”

“Go home,” Sholto growls at them and stomps ahead into the house, so they won’t see him laughing or aching- God, how he misses all this.

Bill brings up the matter of Sholto joining the great caravan tour again after dinner, while they’re mulling over coffee in Sholto’s living room. Mark shrugs his agreement and puts forth no indication that he objects to the idea. Sometime during dinner he’d lapsed into muteness again. As it gets darker, the quiet man makes fewer jokes, fidgets more and then finally removes himself from company. Sholto watches him closely.

The nurse checks in and Sholto sends her away. He wants to sit up and listen. He wants to be sure he’s safe. The nurse hesitates, but he tells her if anything is needed, Bill can suffice for one evening. Bill sits up with him, and Sholto can feel him edging around the topic for a while before, typical of Bill, he gets impatient and tackles it head on.

“I think you should come on the trip with us.”

Sholto grumbles.

“No, I do. John thinks I should just annoy you or trick you into thinking it’s your own idea, but John makes bad choices so I’m throwing his idea out with the bathwater.” Bill props his foot up on his knee and looks at Sholto squarely.

“I did also have this clever psychological ploy mapped out where I double-triple bluffed and got you to come out of spite and the idea either John or me was going to lose a significant bet, but you know what, you’re a fucking adult and you’re a friend, and as your friend, James: I’m telling you you need to get out of your living room.”

Sholto picks at the fabric of the arm of his chair, mutinous. “I like my living room.”

“Yeah, it’s very nice but you don’t do anything. You don’t even go as far as your own front door, do you?”

This Sholto can’t deny, and even should he try to, Bill’s got cobwebs on his side.

“It kills me,” Bill says. “To see you wilfully pissing your life away being scared and angry and punishing yourself, and when’s enough going to be enough? You’re not a coward. Not the man I know, so can we just pick your balls up off the floor and get in the caravan?”

“I don’t feel-“

“No,” Bill cuts him off, getting up. He paces when he’s wound up. “Stop farting around your feelings. Just, get in the caravan.”

“It’s dark,” Sholto says sarcastically.

“Don’t be a prat, you know exactly what I mean. Come on, it’s the last chance. Pack a bag. Grab

your life back. I promise I'll keep you safe."

"How? How? Nowhere is safe!"

"Alright, no, it's not. You know, a month ago I was nursing a young lad with anorexia. He died. For him, the most dangerous place was inside his own head, and so I don't care if you think there's a nut job behind every bush waiting to see you dead, let me tell you, they're not what's killing you right now."

"I can't."

"Yes, you fucking can. You can. We'll be with you every step of the way. We'll help." Bill shakes his hands at him in open-palmed encouragement, like Sholto's his home team on the brink of a goal.

Sholto grunts. "I've got help."

"Hired help. I'm offering my expert services for free. You like my services," Bill leers. "I'm a very good servicer."

"I can't," Sholto says again, feeling ancient.

"Come on, James." Bill rubs the back of the man's neck, lets him lean his forehead on his middle. "Come on, Jamie. You know you hate living like this. Just...think about it for me, alright? Don't just say no and stick to it. Fucking think about it."

Sholto reclaims his posture and nods.

"Have some space," Bill offers. "Have a bit of a sit. I'll be in my room if you need me. Say something so I know you've taken that in."

"You'll be upstairs," Sholto says. Bill squeezes his shoulder and leaves him to find his breath again.

Halfway up to the first floor, Bill pauses to Google 'elephant turds' and forwards the image result to John with the caption 'me' attached.

[What did you do?]

[Told him why I thought he should go.]

[Do I need to come up?]

Bill pauses before answering. [I'll let you know in the morning.]

Downstairs, it's very quiet. Bill leaves the door to the bedroom open a crack and lies on his back, fully clothed, with his fingers crossed.

Sholto sits for a long while, thinking. There's no fire- it's too warm for one, and the clock is nothing but a muffled heartbeat. It's very quiet, he realises. It's always very quiet, and he'd never noticed.

It's quiet enough for him to hear the tap of movement down the hall towards the kitchen. Slowly, good hand closed around the hilt of the cast iron poker, Sholto stalks it.

The kitchen light is on, which slightly precludes burglary. As Sholto enters, he clears his throat, and the one-legged man startles guiltily.

“I don’t have any alcohol,” Sholto says. “Sorry, the meds keep me off it.” He pictures, even as he speaks, the bottle locked in the drawer of his desk in the office. It had seemed a little like overkill but Bill had warned him to get it out of harm’s way. It’s not a full bottle, not enough to cause much trouble in the short term. Just enough to knock you off the wagon.

Mark shifts, uncomfortably, and gestures to the fridge.

“Help yourself.”

Sholto takes a seat as the other man, now coerced, opens the fridge and after staring at the contents, takes out the milk.

“Glasses are in the top cupboard. No, thank you,” Sholto adds as the man follows his directions and then proffers a second glass from the shelf.

He sits opposite, still embarrassed and pours out a measure into the glass. He gives Sholto an ironic little salute with the glass and grimaces as he drinks it. Sholto feels the flicker of a smirk.

“Skimmed,” he says. “It’s good for your cholesterol, I’m told.”

Mark looks offended.

He wipes milk from his upper lip and then clicks his fingers to get Sholto’s attention. He points at Sholto and then thumbs in the general direction of the open road. Finally, he gives a little questioning shake of his head.

“No. Perhaps. I don’t think it’s wise.”

Mark gives the fractional, simultaneous eyebrow lift and head tilt that universally says ‘sure thing, buddy, if you say so.’ He catches the way Sholto grits his teeth and then holds a hand up and shrugs. ‘None of my business.’

“It’s just the wrong time,” Sholto says, feeling pressure to explain himself. “You have to understand, I’ve had threats.” He watches the other man closely.

A twist of the shoulders. He’s uncomfortable. Nothing to say to that.

“People want me dead,” Sholto says, and then sees something that makes his pulse jump. A flash of understanding in the other man’s face. Sholto can’t place if it’s empathy or pity or just that the man has realised he’s been found out.

The quiet man contemplates his milk and the thin oily swirl of it against the glass. After a moment, he taps an imaginary watch on his wrist.

“The clock’s above the fridge.”

Frustrated the man waves a hand and then repeats the motion followed by a mime as if he’s stretching dough.

“How long? Four or five years.”

Nonplussed, the man gestures to all of Sholto’s body before him. ‘You’re still here.’

“It’s complicated.”

They both lapse into deeper silence. Mark picks up his glass and makes another attempt to finish it. Sholto drums his fingers on the counter. Outside the security light flicks off, making the window fall dark. Mark’s head whips to look and Sholto sees him swallow.

‘He’s scared of the dark,’ Sholto thinks in a flash. Then, faster, he thinks, ‘I could snap off the light and while he’s confused and frightened, lay in with the poker. He’d go down. I could kill him.’

It’s this idea that makes him take a step back. Bill had pleaded that he’d checked. Bill must be lying. ‘No,’ Sholto thinks, horrified at himself. He’d told Bill once that he was an excellent nurse and so to go and look after a soldier who’d injured his knee. And Bill had done it. Not by talking or using his medical expertise. He’d been a friend to John instead.

‘I have to trust *someone*,’ Sholto tells himself. Carefully, he lays the poker on the counter and lets go of it.

“What do you think I should do?” Sholto asks, asking himself what John would do. “What would you do, in my place?”

Mark considers. He’s been watching Sholto. He’s frozen into place, and for a long moment, he doesn’t move. Then, slowly, he sits down, one wary eye on the poker.

He leans his elbows on the counter, and when he finally has an answer, he squints. His index finger rises and points at nothing- ‘wait’, it says, ‘I’m searching’. The muscles around his eyes flick-tense, release, tense, release. He seems to be disgorging something into his throat, and then, like corks out under pressure, come the words.

“Go camping,” the quiet man says.

They leave in the morning. Mark moves into the back seat to make room for Sholto, who sits strapped into the passenger seat, holding his knees, still half-expecting the Landrover to go vertical at any moment.

Bill keeps the radio turned up and the windows rolled down and they bundle away from Sholto’s stronghold with the wind in their faces, until the shore is out of sight.

“Fuck, traffic news,” Bill says as a crash is reported over the radio. He groans. “Alright, new plan. We’ll swing around Doncaster and overnight in the Peaks. How does that sound?”

He turns to look into the backseat and adds, “You’ll hate it, it’s full of hills.” Mark snorts but gestures for him to do what he needs to. Bill changes gear and overtakes a rattling trailer. “You’ll love it,” he says for Sholto’s benefit. “There’s fuck all there.”

“I’ve been there before,” Sholto says, his mouth dry. The back of his neck feels electric and his belly like water. There’s a voice in the back of his head that goes on and on in a shrill flat whine. ‘You’re going to die’.

“Good. You’re in charge of the campsite then,” Bill says, dropping his phone into Sholto’s lap. “Nowhere crap.”

The change in plans cuts their travel to a reasonable 3-hour dogleg across country. They don’t die. The caravan rolls along the motorway at a steady pace and they don’t crash, and nothing explodes and the quiet man sitting in the back doesn’t suddenly dive into the seat behind Sholto and slam a

blade into the back of his neck. In fact, by the time they arrive on the western side of the Peak District, Sholto can reluctantly admit he's starting to enjoy himself.

He feels alien when they arrive at the campsite, the man with scars and a dead arm. Pride makes him want to grit his teeth and hold his head up high, shame makes him want to scurry inside the caravan as soon as it's unhooked from the Landrover, and stay there.

Bill whistles and slams the driver's door as he jumps out. Mark follows and then, steeling himself, so does Sholto.

The campsite is busy, but the crowd has segregated itself into little pods of activity around each caravan. The English make their homes castles, Sholto thinks gladly, even the naff ones on wheels. It's a whole field of green and white and khaki.

It could be a camp.

They unhitch the caravan and raise the white awning, during which time Mark and Sholto raise white flags of their own in a cautious truce. As the evening progresses, they even manage to make a very small party of it. Bill fires up the barbecue and adds a third method to their repertoire: burning stuff. They eat a traditional starter each consisting of sausages of charcoal with dubious centres heavily disguised with ketchup, and then Mark puts his foot down and oversees a trio of steaks, which come out significantly better.

Sholto watches him cook and starts to feel the knot of paranoia in his gut shift.

They can't drink, so they indulge the vices of eating too much and playing increasingly underhand card games. To Bill's vast amusement, the quiet man is too expressive to be any good at poker, although it's Sholto who scrapes the matches and cashews they're using in place of counters towards himself chuckling.

"I'm out," Bill says, leaning back and throwing his cards down on the table with a yawn. "Go nuts with those winnings." He laughs at his own joke, and then eats his own.

The sun is setting in one lazy roll towards the horizon, and it's late but light.

"I might go for a walkabout," Bill says. Here and there in the campsite there's the upward trickle of smoke other barbecues and the bubble of laughter, and he can't help but be curious about it. About who's out there and what they're doing. "I'll catch you two later."

"You're leaving?" Sholto blurts.

"I'll be back in a couple of hours-ish," Bill says, getting up. "Relax," he says, and then mouths. "Trust me."

Sholto watches him leave, resentfully, and then turns back to find the gaze of the other man fixed on him. He looks away first, leaving Sholto staring, and then both feeling awkward.

"Not sure where he's planning on going," Sholto comments, to break the awful void in communication. The campsite is surrounded by hosts of wilderness, and the people here are strangers. Mark scoffs and makes a gesture with his forefinger and the tunnel of his other hand.

"Ugh. They're all middle-aged couples out there, aren't they?"

He holds up his hands in surrender at that. Sholto chuckles, uneasily. “I think I’ll go in.”

“Table,” Mark says, so low that Sholto almost misses it.

They clear up the table and the remains of dinner between them. Mark ferries objects to the caravan door and Sholto shuffles them into their respective places and although he is still uncomfortably aware of the other man’s presence, it makes him feel better. Whether or not the man is going to kill him, he’s good at working in tandem and it’s good to be working in co-operation again, doing something. Mark grasps the top of the door and swings his one leg up the steps with gymnastic ease.

‘Show off,’ Sholto thinks, and takes a mental note to watch out for the man’s upper body strength.

Discretely, he flexes his good side and feels a stab of annoyance at his bad one. It’s like living in a shell, some days. As though if he could just manage one good dog-shake, one hard flex through the agony, the scars would just crack right off and leave him free again.

Mark washes dishes and at a safe distance, Sholto dries them as well as he can between two dishcloths. Likewise from a safe distance, Mark inches them away from Sholto and puts them in the cupboard.

Afterwards, the quiet man turns on all the lights, so that the caravan glows like a holiday pumpkin and a more comfortable silence falls. He reads, thumbing through the pages of a novel. Sholto, with minute movements, eases his phone from his pocket and pretending to examine the road atlas, discretely takes a photograph.

Sholto slips outside, feeling silly, but equally still strung on a taut wire of fear. He sits in one of the deck chairs in the dark, backlit by the glow of the caravan, and stares into the night. A moth throws itself against the glass, dusting it.

The screen of his phone is glaringly bright as he types out the message. After a moment, the reply comes.

[I can check. Also, traffic collision, fires or CO poisoning? -SH]

[Murder?]

[Residential or holiday camp? -SH]

[Holiday] Sholto types back.

[Boringly few.-SH]

This makes Sholto smile. Then the phone pings again. Sholto reads. It begins, [FYI- SH], and continues with a copy and paste of the conversation John had with Bill the day before, complete with photos.

Sholto closes the app and rests a moment. Then he rises stiffly and goes back into the caravan. It’s warm inside, almost sticky, and he leaves the door open for some air. Mark is curled up, back to the wall, eyes on the exits.

Sholto pauses, and then asks, “What are you reading?”

Mark looks up and then, surprised, shows him the spine of the book; a collection of letters.

“Any good?”

There’s a nod before Mark drops his gaze back to the page without reading. They breathe in synch, eyes on paper, and after a while, he adds, “Marx.”

“Karl?”

“Grouch.”

“Ah. Slight difference there,” Sholto comments, and does not mention the way the name has been reduced to one syllable. Sometimes efficiency is just better than accuracy.

“Any other books to hand?”

Mark points to the pull-out cupboards under the two fixed bunkbeds. Bill occupies the top and he the lower bunk, and it’s there Sholto leans down to search. He’ll find a book. He’ll sit and read the book and not obsess.

He’s clumsy trying to bend, and his hand catches the handle and pulls it outwards, even as he hears the grunt of alarm from the man behind him. It’s the wrong cupboard. There are clothes and personal items inside. Sholto staggers and tries to turn to fend off an attack that isn’t coming, tries to push it back with his foot, but there’s no mistaking what else is held in there.

“It’s shut,” he blurts, straightening, thoughts ringing. The cupboard closes with a soft thud.

Mark has limped over to check that the cupboard is tight closed again, and then stands, at an awkward loss.

“I’m sorry,” Sholto says again. “I had no idea.”

The quiet man holds up his hands to stop him. He jerks a finger towards the cupboard, it’s bundle of unpaired socks and the funeral urn, and mouths, ‘Mine’. He’s angry with frustration. He could have directed Sholto away from it, if words had come easier. If he’d thought.

“I wasn’t snooping!” Sholto says, cornered. “You pointed.”

Mark rubs at his forehead as if he’s got a headache, and then sits on the lower bunk. The brief soap-bubble calm has popped, but the man looks so defeated, even Sholto’s worst paranoia can’t quite register him as a threat.

“Are you taking them somewhere?”

A gesture. He doesn’t know.

“Who is it?” Sholto asks, but the answer is a shake his head; a vehement no.

“I shouldn’t have asked,” Sholto admits. He backs off so that there’s an arm’s length of space between them. Mark doesn’t move. Sholto backs away to the other end of the caravan and his own bunk. It’s the only way he can think of to end the conversation and remove himself from the awkwardness of the situation.

Sholto sits on the edge of the one double bed and does his physio self-consciously, thinking. After a long while, Mark moves, but only as far as to lie on his back. Sholto props himself up against the pillows and guards himself.

They can hear each other breathing and awake. The air is crowded with the dead. Sholto swallows

through the wet, cold grasp of guilt that is never far from the space under his lungs. His bones ache, though there's nothing really wrong with them.

When Sholto's phone trills, it frightens the life out of them both. He scrabbles for it. The message is from an unknown number and contains no text, just a series of images of some paperwork. Sholto stares at it and the world clicks into place.

It must have been four years ago. Sholto's impressed at his own memory, but then he's always had a good memory for faces. It must have crossed his desk and in fact, yes, there, on the last page, an electronic signature to say that it had passed through his office.

"The convoy between Kandahar and Bastion," Sholto says aloud. Four hours by truck. Command had sent out a handful of men with a supply convoy, and halfway there it had come to grief.

"You were there."

There is silence from the other end of the caravan.

"Squadron Leader Jonathan Mark Smalls," Sholto says, rising from the bunk. "You went missing after the attack. That's how I know you. I read the report. It mentioned you; we were all to look out for any sign of survivors but they recovered you in a civilian hospital weeks later."

'Weeks,' Jonathan mouths. He sits up, looking hunted.

"Does Bill know?"

He nods and then shakes his head. His one leg is shaking. He waves Sholto away, not to approach, and Sholto backs off again to the banquette, where they sit and stare at each other. Then Jonathan grasps his phone and the evening just gets stranger.

—

They swap numbers. The first message that comes through is registered of course as an unknown number, and fittingly all it says is [no one knows].

Sholto enters him into his contacts as both Mark and Jonathan, and sends him the report. Jonathan reads it, knuckles pressed to his teeth. The report does not describe the attack in detail, nor the aftermath, and so the man does instead. Bit by bit, the story emerges and Sholto reads it.

[I don't believe this is true.] he replies. It's too incredible to be true, it's more preposterous than a murderous serial-dating photographer. Jonathan looks at him, and then gets up. He takes the urn from the cupboard and brings it to the table. They sit opposite one another.

"...open it," Jonathan says. The ceramic scrapes on the formica as he slides it towards Sholto. The lid is stiff and difficult to remove, but it pops out and Sholto looks inside.

"Good God."

He's never seen anything so green that wasn't fake, but the way these glitter, he can only assume they are real. The largest emerald is the size of his finger nail. He tilts the urn and the handful of stones spills out onto the table. The rubies are the colour of pigeon's blood.

"Good God," he repeats. "Where does it come from?"

"I don't know," Jonathan says, staring at them. "I never knew. I got caught up in their crime and

it...it just kept going.”

There is thousands of pounds on the table between them in a heap not even half the size of Sholto’s fist.

“I don’t know what to do with it.”

Sholto doesn’t either. From Jonathan’s story, he understands it’s treasure taken through theft, bad luck and murder, and he doesn’t want them. They’re a millstone around his neck, too difficult to give away or sell.

Sholto scrapes the jewels back into the urn and closes the lid. Outside the very first hint of dawn is in the sky.

“Bill’s not back,” Sholto notices. Jonathan shakes his head, exhausted, digging his fingers into the dark circles under his eyes.

“Sleep,” Sholto suggests, feeling equally washed out. “Hide them, and sleep.”

“Can’t.”

“I’ll watch the door,” Sholto hears himself offer. He’s too wired to sleep now either. “Besides, you said they were all dead now.”

There’s a flicker of an expression over Jonathan’s face. It’s an intense, terrified look that says, bold as brass and without the man’s intention: *‘You’re not dead.’*

And then it’s gone again. He puts the urn, sealed tight, back into the cupboard.

Bill comes back as the campsite starts waking up, and yet is as chirpy as ever. He cooks breakfast for them all and ignores the note in the air that implies that something has happened. Sholto passes Jonathan the tea, who lifts the heavy kettle for them both.

“Head into Wales today,” Bill comments. “If we go about 11? Then you can have your run and we can go to the shop.”

Neither chooses to object, and so they part ways. Jonathan vanishes at a slow pace into the wilderness, phone strapped to his arm, and Bill and Sholto wander southwards towards the nearest village.

“You had a late one,” Bill comments once they’re away from the bustle of the campsite and into the privacy of the lanes. Sholto leans on his cane and squints into the sunshine.

“Look who’s talking.”

“You saw the urn,” Bill guesses. “Did he say who it was?”

“Not really,” Sholto says.

Bill alters his stride so that they can keep pace. “Never really got any clear explanation, but then I figured; did it matter? It’s obviously important to him.”

“Mm. He seemed to suggest he was just... holding on it.”

“Must be hard to let go then,” Bill offers.

The road leads them downhill, a hill of twisted trees on one side and a fern-studded dry stone wall on the other. Despite what Bill said before, the gradient here is shallow although it’s long, and the going isn’t too difficult. They pass cottages with their rears tucked against the wall, seeking protection from the winter weather so that nothing but the roofs and crowned chimneys are showing. Bill sticks his finger in the bell of a foxglove run to the wild. Then he notices Sholto’s brooding quiet.

“What’s up? Side hurting?”

“I need to stop,” he says, and they find a place on the dry stone wall to sit on. The trees behind them are alive with a squabble of sparrows. It’s not just the side, Sholto thinks, it’s much more than that.

“Do you want to talk about it?” Bill asks.

“You’re not faithful to your wife,” Sholto points out. “We could talk about that.”

“Oh, that,” Bill says. He stretches his legs out onto the tarmac. “No, that’s not quite how it looks. We’re married but we’re flexible.”

He catches Sholto’s eye and laughs faintly, shaking his head. “I know, it sounds like we’re just shit to each other, but it’s something we agreed on when we first got serious. There are rules, and the biggest rule is no secrets. And it works for us. We’re just not monogamous people.”

“So you married for the benefits?”

“Ouch. Alright, that’s cynical. I mean, the benefits are a perk, but no. I married her because I love her, and she married me for the same reason. And incidentally, we did our own vows. Nothing about to the exclusion of all others in there.”

“I can’t imagine it.”

“You wouldn’t,” Bill agrees. “You’re a one-person person. And you’ve got massive trust issues. You’d have to know you were the only one, and you’d never break a promise. You’d call things off first.”

Sholto is nettled. “How do you know what I’d do?”

“Because, duh, but also because of how you were with John.”

Bill shifts, trying to find a bit of wall that doesn’t jab into his buttocks. “I’m not saying that to be a dick,” he adds. “You were good to John when he needed you to be. That’s still true.”

Sholto has thought about the situation with John a lot, both before and after his visit. Both during and after their time together in the army.

“I’m not in love with John,” he says, and unspoken there are the words ‘but I do love him’ attached. It’s not a sad thing. He’s accepted it, and he’s always known the difference between loving and being in love, a fact even truer of the time when John didn’t. “Anyway, John’s moving on...”

“Does it bother you?”

“No,” Sholto says after a long pause. He picks at the moss on the wall with his good hand. “No, I’m glad for him. He’s become a father. He has Sherlock. He’s...John’s life is starting to be fixed. I’m just...perhaps I resent that it’s not me helping him.”

“I don’t think Sherlock’s going to fix John. Not like that,” Bill says, staring at the open sky. “Well, he might. That’d be nice, but my experience suggests otherwise.” He plants his hands on his hips. “Mostly what happens, and what’s best, is finding something that makes being broken and weird easier.”

His eyes crinkle with a wry smile. “It’s too hard to go back to square one. There’s too much damage after a while.”

Then he claps his hands as if the noise can chase away his private unpleasantnesses. “Anyway, you still could help. You’re Bee’s godfather. John would love it if you took that on more.”

“What could I do?”

“It doesn’t matter what you do, just show you’re interested.” Bill stands up, rubbing his thigh. “Is this hill going to do you in?”

“No, I can manage.” Sholto pushes the heel of the cane into the road and levers himself to his feet. He tucks the handle into the crook of his elbow to prove a point and walks without it for a stretch. As they come into the village the houses get taller and closer together, clumped up, looking like bricks of toffee. “We’ve passed three pubs and literally no other businesses,” Sholto notes.

Bill laughs.

Sholto’s thoughts move in lazy circles like bees. “He has trouble with drinking?”

“Hm? Oh, him. Yeah,” Bill says, thinking for a moment that Sholto meant John instead of Jonathan. “When he got back. It was depression, mainly, and then it got into a cycle with the drink. Long story short, he didn’t get enough help.”

“He was missing for weeks,” Sholto says, “and then invalided home. You know what they would have done.”

Bill pauses, uncomfortable with the truth. “They’d have rinsed him.” Neither knows exactly what to feel about this. It’s something they can accept in theory, but in practice it falls into a dark grey area. Sholto remembers his court martial, which had been agony enough. He can’t imagine what it would be like to be whisked out of hospital and kept apart for questioning over and over until someone was convicted he hadn’t adopted any radical sympathies, and then lumped back into the system.

“What were you planning by introducing us?” Sholto asks, voicing what’s been bothering him since he first agreed to join the trip. “It’s not a coincidence, is it? I’d like to know if you only invited me for his benefit or if you’ve dragged this man across the country for mine.”

“I didn’t drag anyone anywhere. I just told you that you should get out more, and then here’s this poor other bugger...It just sort of clicked together and made sense. Although yes, I thought you might do each other some good.”

Sholto frowns.

“Come on, you can’t argue that you haven’t got a lot in common. You two match.”

Sholto snorts. "Ah yes."

"I was hoping you might make a friend who understands what you've been through."

"And what do you gain from it all?"

"Is it such an alien idea to you that some people want others to be happy?"

"You want to meddle."

"Yeah, a little bit."

"You think I've made poor decisions."

"I think," Bill says slowly, stopping, "you've made the decisions you had to make so you could keep going. There's nothing wrong with that. But it's like you've hit this plateau now. I guess what I'm saying is, what do you want from life, James? Or are you happy how things are?" He phrases this last question with genuine curiosity. "If you're happy, then I won't bring it up again."

"Am I happy?" Sholto asks himself, knowing the answer. "No, I suppose I just don't care either way."

Bill says nothing, standing with his arms hanging loose like a kid. Sholto remembers the first impression he'd had of Bill; careless and generous to a fault, not gullible but obstinate about seeing the best in people. Something of a clown. Now there's a thought behind the devil-may-care attitude, and a method to his fooling around.

"I stopped thinking about it," Sholto confesses.

Bill nods. "I get that."

"You?"

"Me," Bill agrees. "I came home, and I laughed a lot and went out a lot and slept with a lot of people, and for a good stretch I didn't feel anything about anything. I was watching my own life on TV and I wasn't even particularly fucked what happened to the main character. Something like that?"

Sholto digs the rubber end of his cane into the gritty road. An ant scuttles from it, moving in frightened circles. "A bit like that. What did you do?"

"Nothing. I ended up at a funeral, and all of a sudden I knew I was feeling shit, and that was kind of nice. I went home, sat in a heap with the stereo cranked up. And then...I dunno, the weather looked nice, so I went to the shop."

"Went to the shop?"

"Went to the shop for biscuits and then found they'd removed the Irish section, and did some yelling."

"Over biscuits."

"I was in a troubled place; I just wanted a packet of Jam Mallows, is that a crime?"

"I'm not even sure what those are."

“Yet more proof you aren’t living,” Bill tells him. He jerks his head to one side, indicating the village co-op, which Sholto had failed to notice appearing on the horizon. “Tell you what, you pick the biscuits.” He shakes a shopping bag from his pocket and pushes the door open.

Sholto grips his cane and squints into the dark interior of the shop. “And then what?”

“And then we eat the biscuits, and see how we feel. They’re biscuits, not a fucking cure-all.”

“You’re carrying it all home,” Sholto orders, takes a deep breath, and steps over the lintel.

Inside it smells of the clean dusty smell of things in packets. They sidle in between the shelves, browsing and picking things with no list, no plan, and no idea how much it’s going to cost. ‘I haven’t done my own shopping in years,’ Sholto thinks, dully amazed. Everything he gets is planned and ordered mostly by someone else, and if he doesn’t like it, he simply says and it never appears again. In hindsight, he’s faintly amazed that he’s not considered the risk of poisoning in full. He picks up a tin of spaghetti hoops and stares at it like he’s never seen one before.

As a matter of fact, he can’t remember when he last did. Wordlessly he drops them into Bill’s basket. He could eat spaghetti hoops on buttered toast, and fuck healthy eating.

“Actually, no,” he says, revising his opinion, and taking it out of the basket again. “Too much salt messes with my pills.”

“You alright?”

“Shut up, I’m busy.”

“Ok, I’m going to... I’ll be over there.”

Sholto crabs away down the tiny aisle, burning with sudden indignation. He glares at the stack of fruit boxes and decides that he wants apples. In fact, he wants these apples. They are going to be his apples, the apples he chose, and they are going to be good. He forces out his arm; not the good one, and tightens the claw of his fingers around one bright red globe.

And now he has an apple: nothing more and nothing less, but it is at least something in his hand that he wants there.

They drive off into Wales, this time with Jonathan at the wheel. He’d been sitting on the steps of the caravan when they’d returned, expression neutral, but it had been obvious to Sholto that he’d been waiting for them. His hair had been dry and his shirt unchanged, and his mouth clamped tight shut. Evidently that morning’s run had amounted to nothing but show, but Sholto supposes in Jonathan’s place, he would have come back to guard the urn as well.

They push on through the afternoon away from the mountains until they hit the coast again. The beaches here are proper summer-holiday beaches and tamer than the bit of Norfolk marsh Sholto knows. Bill snores on the back seat, Jonathan stares at the road, Sholto broods on his memories. The apple wobbles on the dashboard.

The air slipping through the opened window becomes damp and sea-weedy, and Sholto counts the splats of rain on the windshield up to 100 nine times over and then privately races the drops against one another while he thinks. It squalls hard and then clears, like a child’s tantrum, and by the time they feel sick of driving and reach their next stop, it’s sweet and fresh again.

It's Saturday and busy, so they follow the path of least resistance and take themselves to the nearest takeaway. They crunch down the pebbles to the high tide line and eat the fish and chips from greasy fins of paper and watch the sea lick the shore.

"These aren't even the really good beaches," Bill says. "Wait till we get down to south Wales."

"I expect these are quieter," Sholto answers, looking at the scrap of sand they've found. He's not entirely convinced they're not trespassing, but there wasn't an obvious sign and it's good to sit in the sun after the long drive. He flexes his hip and licks vinegar from his fingers.

"When is it you have to get back by?" he asks.

Bill taps his fingers on his knees and considers. "Week and a half," he says. "I've got a new job starting after that. Should be a week really, but I'm sure I can swing it."

Sholto nods, and sits, his heels dug in the sand, with the germ of a sentiment forming in his core. He balls up the fish and chip paper, and wipes his fingers as clean as he can on his trousers. "I'm going for a walk."

The others look up, questioning. Jonathan's is something like muted suspicion, Bill's a more obvious 'Should I come?'

Sholto makes an impatient gesture instead of answering and Bill's question turns to an 'Are you sure?' and Sholto limps away rather than allow it to become a debate.

He walks into the carpark back to solid ground, away from the beach and the caravan. He finds an isolated post and rail fence designed solely to show idiots the limit of where they should park, and parks himself on it.

It's quiet.

The others are out of sight behind the slope of the beach, and Sholto has the view to himself, except for the sand fleas that skip harmlessly around his feet. He presses the end of his cane onto a bubble of bladderwrack, but it refuses to pop and Sholto rather respects that.

'Am I happy?' he asks himself. He has been asking himself this on and off all day. 'No,' he thinks, 'but I'm not totally dead inside.'

He has his back to the road and the carpark and when a car glides past it sends a sharp prickle up the back of his neck, but he makes himself sit and face the ocean, like he's not frightened. 'Maybe if I do this long enough, I won't be.' Either that or he'll be dead.

Is that worse than rotting away in his own living room?

It's too large a question to answer right there and then. For now, it's enough just to sit on the post and not look over his shoulder. It's not enough to make him stop wishing someone else was there to do the looking for him.

Paid help, Bill had pointed out. Not the same as... anything else.

'But I've felt like this for a long time,' Sholto realises. At some point he had just quietly slipped into the mindset to neither pursue nor permit pursuit and he cannot pinpoint when that was- before, or after John? Before or after the bomb? Before or after his civilian, with whom he had deferred the decision to formalise the affair back and forth so many times that the matter had bowed like a string across everything that had bonded them, until one day it had found nothing left to saw

against.

There had been no hard feelings because it had disintegrated to a point where there were no feelings.

He hears the uneven footsteps before he looks up. Jonathan brings himself to a respectful distance and sits on another post. If they want, they can pretend they haven't noticed one another.

Instead, Sholto says, "Why don't you just... throw it in the sea?"

He feels the other man's eyes on him, and knows what he's thinking. It's a fortune, twice stolen, and the rightful owner unknown. It could be used to some better end than mere disposal, and yet, how simply it could all be washed away. One good fling and no one would ever find it. No one would ever know.

It would be gone as if it had never existed.

"People died," Jonathan says, with effort. Another car crackles down the road and Sholto is not the only one to grip at his own knees and fix his gaze on the grey horizon. When it's gone, Sholto lets go of his breath and clears his throat.

"Was Bill worrying where I'd gone?"

He means to change the conversation, but Jonathan says nothing, and when Sholto gets up to leave, the other man stands as well.

"I'm tired of being looked after," Sholto tells him, frowning.

"I need your help."

Sholto stops. They are ten paces apart, hands at their sides, on edge. Each waits for another car to pass, for Bill to come looking for them, for the tumbleweed to roll across the space between them, for the signal, for death. Yet Sholto's feet feel steady and his breathing even. He was made for moments like this. He'd felt the same taking the stairs up to that guest room, flicking the clothes in his suitcase off of his gun and taking a seat to wait for his murderer.

In control.

"I'll consider it," Sholto says, and Jonathan nods, just once, and the matter is settled.

It's not for another two days, of thinking and trundling down the Welsh coast that the result of the conversation comes to light. Bill's aware that something is brewing but he has yet to put his finger on what.

All he can be sure of is that no one has fallen out, and if he's honest, that's all he wants to know.

They're especially shifty at breakfast on the third day. There's a lot of eyebrows from Jonathan, who is still terrible at poker, and who breaks the silence by saying "Tell him," and going out for his run.

"Tell me what?" Bill asks, "James, I'm all of a sweat."

"Sit down and shut up," Sholto asks.

They sit opposite each other at the fold out table, still strewn with breakfast dishes. Sholto had cooked that morning, which meant a relatively healthier meal of boiled eggs and buttered toast smothered in condiments.

Bill lines up the empty eggshells and feigns being coy. “Be gentle.”

“We’ve been talking, and that’s a semi literal statement.”

“You’ve been passing notes, I’ve seen that.”

“We’ve been talking about the urn.”

“Right?”

“We’re going to go and find a place for it. And we don’t know how long that’s going to take.”

“Ok. And you... in particular, you’re going too?”

Sholto feels at the scars down his bad arm under the sleeve of his shirt. “I’m going to do what I want.” It should sound selfish, but Bill understands. Then he raises his eyebrows, catching up with where the conversation is headed and the fact that by ‘we’, Sholto is not being wholly inclusive.

“So you need me to...”

“Leave,” Sholto says. “Give us the keys, and go home. He can drive, I can navigate. We’ll be fine.”

“You’re kicking me out of my own caravan?” Bill says, incredulous.

“Yes, you’re a bloody hindrance. Don’t start grinning like that, you look-“

But he doesn’t get much of a chance to come up with what Bill looks like. The man is drumming on the table in delight, knocking the eggshells over. “Aw, I knew I had a good feeling about Wales. Wales is like Australia, or Ireland. There’s something in the air that makes you go barmy.”

“Don’t gloat,” Sholto complains, “Will you go?”

“Are you kidding me?” Bill says, “Kick me out in the next town and Murray Arrend is yours to ride as long as you need to.”

He laughs at his own joke and then sobers. “Stay safe.”

“I think I’ve been trying to stay too safe,” Sholto replies. “But I’m not going to put myself in unnecessary danger.”

“Your call. But I’ll keep my phone with me. Day and night. If you need me, just ring.”

Sholto coughs on the tightness of his throat, and nods, suddenly very interested in his own hands. “You might also text John,” he says, trying to sound flippant about it. “I expect he’s been worried. Just mention I’ve enjoyed this so much I’ve decided to extend the holiday.”

Bill looks momentarily guilty, and then confused. “Is that lying?”

“White lies,” Sholto says. “Now, please, fuck off. I have a lot of things to do.”

“You only had to say it once,” Bill says, holding out his hand. Sholto glides his weak arm across the table top, ignoring the crumbs, and slips his fingers into Bill’s palm and they shake on it.

“Are you ever going to tell me what happens?”

“I don’t know what’s going to happen,” Sholto says, standing up. “But maybe. One day.”

“I look forward to it,” Bill says. He looks around the caravan and then slaps the tabletop decisively. “Ok,” he says, like he’s looked ahead and seen that it will be, and he says it so convincingly that Sholto sits down again while Bill goes to pack, and does nothing more than wipe the table clean.

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They leave Bill at Aberystwyth station whistling and waving them away. Jonathan drives them away from civilisation until the train has left and it’s too late to go back and change their minds. The enormity of the situation starts to sink in.

As the town vanishes behind them, they exchange a glance.

‘I have nightmares,’ Jonathan had warned him. ‘I don’t talk much.’

‘Neither do I,’ Sholto had answered, rising to the joke. What they mean is; ‘This is stupid and ill-advised’, but it’s the recklessness that makes it so appealing.

At worst, they will waste two days, get scared again and drive the caravan straight to Brighton. At worst they will part company and not look back, but even as Sholto is thinking this, Jonathan pulls the caravan up to a halt at the roadside.

There’s a heavy slap as he lifts the old-fashioned AA roadmap onto the dashboard and heaves it open. His expression is intense as he flicks through the pages. There’s no signal here, they’ve gone off-grid.

Jonathan taps on the dashboard as he looks at the road network. “Well?” he says, finally. “What are your thoughts?”

“Right,” Sholto says, with a brisk inhalation, pulling himself together. The road in front of them is filled briefly by a car passing, and then it stretches out ahead of them again in invitation. “Right. Go where you want to go.”

Jonathan flashes the briefest grin, pushes the gear stick into drive and puts his foot down. As the car begins to pull the weight of the caravan, it starts to feel familiar. ‘I used to trust strangers,’ Sholto thinks, ‘as long as they were wearing the same uniform.’

“Do you prefer ‘Mark’, or ‘Jonathan’?” Sholto asks.

Jonathan’s smile crinkles the lines of his face and his false leg clicks with a plastic noise against the door of the car as he sits back.

“Anything except ‘Small’,” he says. “What do I call you?”

Sholto presses the button to roll the window down and then deliberately loosens his cuffs. He sets the elbow of his weak arm on the edge of the door and lets the wind brush his scars, exposed for the first time.

“James,” he suggests.

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Chapter End Notes

Notes:

1) I've been informed that [Brown Sauce](#) is a Mystery to my American buddies, and to be honest it's kind of a mystery to me too. It's like if ketchup and Worcestershire sauce had a very robust child. News Just In: you may know something similar, dubbed 'steak sauce', but that sounds like a terrible affront to steak and I shan't allow it.

2) Bill mentions 'cramming in a Mastiff'. This is not a dog, but [a type of armoured vehicle](#), which look like something that glitched in the matrix. I am assured are uncomfortable when the air conditioning works, and hot enough to start cooking people when it doesn't. It's sort of like a really angry sauna on wheels, with no nudity. Less nudity. More nudity? Who knows what the army does?

3) I have no idea what Bill was going to make them do in Birmingham. I hear it's a nice place, but I usually just rush through it on the train to somewhere nicer. Sorry, Brum. Also Disclaimer: all squirrel-fucking cults are fictional (as far as I know) and I'm sure Norfolkians have better ways to have fun.

4) The Peak District is an unimaginatively named district full of mountain peaks. In the winter it can be bleak, and other things ending in 'eek'. Bill is perhaps right to say that there is not a lot there, but he neglects to say that in the right conditions it is [Pretty Damn Gorgeous](#)

5) All caravans, like boats, should have a silly name, it's the law of the open highway.

6) Headcanon that Sholto was secretly a huge fan of Mary Poppins as a boy, and other such early hybrid Disney films. I'd say more on this but I'm afraid i'm going to end up on some weird Sholto's first crush being Bert the chimneysweep tangent and not be able to stop.

7) [Jam Mallows](#) are impossible to describe other than as... 'sweet' and I've not had one for donkey's years, but basically, it's a biscuit, with raspberry jam down the middle, and blobs of marshmallow down either side of the jam, and then a sprinkle of coconut. The coconut is why I don't eat them, because I hate desiccated coconut and will never be convinced it is anything other than scrapings of dried up sun tan lotion. If anyone is a Jam Mallow man though, it's probably Bill Murray. He likes marshmallow teacakes and s'mores and other marshmallow themed snacks.

8) Interlude title comes from Someone Somewhere in the Summertime by Simple Minds. :) The most excellent working title was 'Bill and James' Bogus Journey *AiR GuITaR!!!!*'

And That's IT! This is a bit of a detour from the main run of things (though it does tie in). On that note, there will be another update VERY SOON. And not exaggerating this time. Let's say, a week? A week. 15th of April, even; how about that?

Comments? Questions? Just want to tell me an amusing camping tale of your own bodacious vacation? Leave me a message! Until next time!

-Oda xx

EDIT: Still haven't quite got the Murray Arrend joke? [Get thee to Tumblr](#) where i've made a post of me reading the segment. :) Narf!

Part 17: Kiss Me With Adventure

Chapter Summary

“No really, quite a deduction,” Sherlock says with a smile that flashes to surprise when John advances on him. They are alone in the barn with the dust. The muscle in John's neck moves under his skin, his shoulders held broad and solid from his body and a thrill goes up Sherlock's scalp.

His heel scrapes the concrete under the dirt as he turns immobile. Up close, John's face seems to flicker for a moment and then Sherlock realises it's because he's blinking rapidly.

“You're being bad.” John says.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Part 17: Kiss Me With Adventure

She's two years and 6 months old, and she won't be shushed. Tolly ignores the chatter, accepts a spoon, and they converge around Mrs. Hudson's kitchen table.

“How many dead?”

Tolly pushes her hair behind her ears. “Four,” she says. Sherlock sits up.

“Four?”

“And one more- last night. That's why I came.”

“And you waited until murder number five before coming here?” John says, blowing on his tea with a frown. Exasperated, Sherlock waves a hand in his general direction.

“Shut up, John. Tell me about the victims.”

“Excuse me?”

Bee's spoon clicks in the tray of her highchair. It is the only sound in the room. “Uh-oh,” she says. Sherlock swallows.

“I didn't mean...”

“Don't tell me to shut up,” John says.

“I didn't come before,” Tolly says, talking over the situation, “Because I thought the police were going to handle it. Anyway, the last one was kept quiet. I've brought photos...”

She takes a folder out that she'd been keeping zipped up inside her jacket- *close to the heart, new folder, must have sat down and considered-chosen the photographs carefully- grief-* and lays the pictures out on the table top.

"These are the victims?" Sherlock asks. It must be, the first ones anyway.

"These are horses," John says. They are. Three of them, which all look roughly identical- big brown things with narrow faces and a leg at each corner.

This time it's Tolly who gives John a look; one that imparts that not only does she find his objection incomprehensible, but also implies that she takes it as if John had offered to spit in her grandmother's ashes.

"Sorry," John mutters. "Someone's killing your horses?"

Sherlock's sorting them, ordering them, eyes flicking over the details. "You said four- there are three- Ah."

"I know," says Wiggins, over Sherlock's shoulder, and is ignored. Sherlock plants his finger on the centre photograph. "My condolences," he says.

"Someone's killing my horses," Tolly says, "And for the clinical amongst us, this particular mare-" she jabs her finger down on the same photograph, "cost £15,000 at the initial purchase price, plus a £4000 stud fee and about another £700 in breeding costs; and given that this is her first year, we could expect her to have a breeding run of between 7 and 8 foals... then maintenance, let's call that another ten grand, and given that we were expecting to make a break-even of £22,000 on the foal, which we have now lost. Never mind the potential profit, this represents a total financial set-back of anywhere between £60,000 and half a million. Is that enough?" Tolly stops, having run out of breath. She's leaning, palms flat on the table, fixing them with her eyes.

"But mostly," she hisses, "Her name was Ruby, and I loved her and some bastard butchered her."

"It's shocking," Mrs. Hudson says, tutting and plying Tolly with tissues she doesn't need. She grits her teeth instead, and just looks furious.

"John doesn't relate to animals," Sherlock says, by way of an olive branch. "How were they killed?"

"I'm sorry, I wasn't trying to be insensitive," John says.

Tolly waves a hand dismissively. "Slashed. Someone got into the field, and the fucking stable. Right through our security- and slashed them with... just, something sharp. They probably didn't resist as they're used to being handled by different people and getting checked on at odd hours. It was the same on all three of them; cut low on the belly so they just bled out. We found them in the morning. Our boy was still hanging on by a thread. We had to get the vet in."

"Is he ok?" Wiggins asks.

"No, we called the vet to bring the rifle and the big truck," Tolly says flatly.

"What about the other one?" John asks. Sherlock's still staring at the pictures. "You said there was another; one last night?" Then John pauses and lays his hand down on the table. "The police wouldn't hush up another horse slashing. It was a person wasn't it? It's started with horses, and now people are dying."

Tolly scrubs her hand under her nose. "Yes. But that only happened after the ghost reappeared."

There is a long, pregnant pause.

“There’s no such thing as ghosts,” Sherlock says. Nonetheless, he’s stopped looking at the photographs.

“We’ve got one,” Tolly says, so matter of fact that a chill runs down John’s spine. “And it’s riding again.”

It’s a matter of minutes after this that Sherlock decides that he’s taking the case. As a matter of course it’s accepted that John is going too, which only leaves the awkward little matter of logistics.

“Look, we’re not going to get out the door before nine,” John argues. “It’s already gone eight, and I don’t know if I can get Bee into nursery today on short notice.”

There’s no amount of fuss Sherlock can make; they’re simply not going to get there any quicker.

“You can leave Bee with me,” Mrs. Hudson offers. “I’m not going out and it’s just for the day, isn’t it?”

“It’s a two or three hour drive,” Tolly states, “I left at five to avoid the traffic but there’s road closures around Winchester. Even if we leave in an hour or so, we won’t get there before noon.”

“Besides, I need to be there after dark,” Sherlock says.

“To see the ghost. That doesn’t exist.”

“Exactly!”

“Then I’ll have to stay here,” John says. “It’s too long to leave Bee.”

“You can’t *stay*,” Sherlock objects, “I need you with me. What if I need you? Wiggins can babysit.”

“Oi,” says Wiggins, catching this last part of the discussion. John crowds Sherlock out of the kitchen into the hall and closes the door so that they can squabble in relative privacy.

“Listen, we don’t leave Bee with Mrs. Hudson overnight, that’s the arrangement. We love her and she’s very, very good to Bee, but that’s the arrangement.”

“Just once,” Sherlock argues, “Why is that such a problem? Wiggins can sit upstairs and listen in.”

“We’re not leaving Bee with a stoned OAP and your ex-drug dealer all night,” John hisses, putting his foot down. Sherlock gulps, looking wounded at John’s lack of trust and then realises that maybe this is not an argument to plant a flag and die on.

“Can’t Bee just... come too? Aunt Lydia’s farm is large-“

“And full of horse slashers and murderers! And horses! What if she get’s kicked because we’re too distracted looking at corpses?”

“Ugh,” Sherlock answers, emphatically and then holds his hands out in peace. “Molly?”

“Molly,” John agrees. “Go ring her now.”

Molly takes the pencil from behind her ear and chews thoughtfully on the end of it for a long while before scribbling out a sentence on the paper she's reading. Satisfied she's phrased it better, she chews on the pencil again and reads the next highlighted section.

Her phone purrs and she drags her eyes from her work to see who it is.

"Oh, hell..." She bites her lip. It's Sherlock's name on the screen and normally she'd answer at once but the paper lies in a stack in front of her, with the letter and the train tickets and deadline looming.

"Oh, pants," she repeats and answers the phone. "Hello, Sherlock."

"Molly!" He's too cheerful. He's often deliberately over cheerful. Molly suspects it's so that she knows that he wants something.

"I'm a bit busy," she says upfront, not cheerfully so that he knows she means it. "I'm not in the lab today."

"Ah. No, that's not what I- you're not in the lab? Actually, that's perfect. I need you to come over."

"I really can't today, Sherlock. I've got--"

"Bring it with you!" He chirps. "We just need someone to keep an eye on Bee for a few hours this afternoon and a bit of the evening and probably overnight."

Molly fiddles with her pen. "I'd love to but," she adds, loudly, so he can't talk over her. "I have a meeting this evening, out of London."

"Cancel it."

"No, Sherlock. I can't cancel it. I've waited months for it."

"I doubt he's worth it."

"A work meeting," Molly clarifies, trying not to bite through her tongue, or worse, laugh. "I'm meeting someone to discuss my PHD. The paper I was using the pigs for."

"Oh. I see." She waits, pressing him with silence until he catches up with her and offers, "I'm sorry. A defence?"

"Something like that. It's fine," she says, through a smile. She catches sight of her reflection in the cafe window, phone cradled to her ear like a teenager catching sweet nothings, and pokes her tongue out at herself.

"How are... the pigs?" Sherlock asks.

"Not mine any more," Molly answers, "I packed up the remains and sent them to the incinerators."

"Oh."

"Barbecue," she agrees. "Have you got a case?"

"Animal mutilation and murder and a ghost," Sherlock answers, devilishly pleased and then the next moment glum. "But I suppose I'll have to do this one on my own..." He pauses, she can hear him breathing down the line and then, like treacle, his thought processes oozes to the finish line

and he adds, “Best of luck with your meeting.”

“Thanks. I’m a bit nervous.”

“Why?” he asks, and the genuine surprise in his tone hits her in the middle of her stomach and lifts it like a balloon.

Molly chews on her pencil behind a smile and feels a touch guilty. “Listen. I have to go but don’t worry about Bee. Leave it to me,” she says. “Trust me, I’ll find someone and if I can’t, I can be there by midnight, if I rush back. Could Mrs. Hudson hold on until then?”

“Molly Hooper, you are perfect,” Sherlock says. “Remind me to buy you... I don’t know what you want. Flowers? A new pig?”

“Go away and solve a murder,” Molly says, covering her mouth. It’s good to hear him sounding happy, she thinks, and she nearly says it out loud. In the background she can hear John nagging, and Mrs. Hudson fussing, and Bee’s high voice, and then John is suddenly closer.

His voice is so clear he must be right next to Sherlock, she thinks, touching body to body. Of course. She touches the edge of her report- months of work. Her work. It feels solid and important, fleshed out in real paper for the first time.

“Let’s meet when I’m back and you’re back,” she says, smoothing the cover. “And have coffee, and I’ll tell you more about the pigs.”

“What? Oh yes, alright. I know somewhere good.”

Molly smiles, and puts the phone down on the table, and lets the call end.

—

Sherlock hangs up and tells John that Molly is babysitting, which he presumes is accurate enough even if it’s by proxy.

Bee wiggles around his knees, knowing something is up and willing to get loud and needy over it. He lifts her into his lap and nods away John’s questions.

“It’s fine, you can come. Mrs. Hudson and Wiggins can manage until midnight.”

John gives him a narrow look but reluctantly agrees. He takes Bee from Sherlock’s lap and sits her on the table to wipe her clean of breakfast, and Sherlock watches him with his heart singing. A case! A real case. A case with substance to it!

He loses himself in a delightful run of musings, all of course on that cold vein of logic he holds above all other things in life, but which also features some happenstance like John saying nice things, and looking very impressed.

Which isn’t a daydream, because Sherlock has already calculated the percentage chance of it happening, albeit not the actual wording. There are limits to self-imposed embarrassment after all.

“Oi,” Wiggins says, clawing his way onto Sherlock’s cloud nine. “I want a word with you.”

Sherlock gets up from the table and shakes his head. “Later.”

“No, now,” Wiggins insists, verging on a whine. He dogs them out of the kitchen as John moves to return to 221B and Sherlock follows. “Shezzer!”

“Listen, I’ll deal with the toddler if you deal with the teenager,” John whispers sensing something brewing. He takes Bee out of it, upstairs to get dressed.

Sherlock closes the door to Mrs. Hudson’s kitchen and turns to face Wiggins in the hall.

“What?”

“I wanna go with you.”

“No, not this time.”

“Aw, but you said I could have cases, and I wanna go.”

“You can have another case. One that’s not in Wessex.”

“But why not?” Wiggins trails after him like a shadow, huffing. “I could do stuff and help.”

“You’re not- it’s the wrong sort of case.”

“How’s it the wrong sort of case?”

“It just is!”

Wiggins response to this is to swiftly kick him in the shin. Sherlock recoils, clutching his shin. On the other side of the hall Wiggins squares up to him, brow lowering like a storm.

“Take me onna case.”

“You kicked me!” Sherlock snaps, indignant. Wiggins raises his foot warningly. “Put that down!”

“Not till you say I can come.”

“No,” Sherlock says, just to be contrary. Wiggins kicks. Sherlock kicks back. They butt the soles of their feet together, posturing, windmilling.

“You always keep the good ones for yourself!”

“Then find your own ones!”

“How? Everything comes through your email! Ow! Awww gerroff! Mrs. Hudson, he’s bullyin’ me!”

“He asked for it!”

They bump the hall table and make the vase on it rattle. Mrs. Hudson squawks from the kitchen. Sherlock has just got Wiggins into a headlock and started grinding his knuckle into the crown of the man’s head when the door opens and Tolly upends the washing up bowl over them.

“Stop fucking about,” she says.

They fall apart, shaking the water off. The bowl had not been very full, mostly foam and a few cupfuls of water at the bottom. Wiggins had taken the brunt of it. He pulls his sweatshirt off. “I want to go on the case,” he growls, twisting his shirt in his hands. Drops of murky water splatter on the hall floor.

“Are you useful?” Tolly demands, and then seeing Wiggins turn awkward redirects the question to

Sherlock.

“Is he useful? Can he do the thing you do?”

“He’s not entirely stupid,” Sherlock says, begrudgingly.

“Fine. Here, if you’re any good.” She fishes in her pockets and tosses Wiggins a set of keys. “The big gold shit-box parked off the A501. Should be pretty obvious, it’s got my feed order in the back.”

“Aw, nice! See, she’s letting me come on a case,” Wiggins says, triumphant, and then skedaddles out of reach of Sherlock’s foot and out the door.

“You know he can’t legally drive,” he comments.

Tolly looks exasperated. “Shit-box,” she reiterates. “If it gets another dent, no one will notice. And he only has to move it a few hundred metres. Anyway, it’s -my- case, and -my- farm. I don’t know what you think you’ve got to hide there.”

Sherlock mutters and scuffs the carpet.

“Oh, go pack a bag,” Tolly says, unsympathetically, “Or I’m calling your mother.”

They leave Mrs. Hudson and Bee waving from the kerbside, following Tolly’s mud-splattered 4x4 which looks like it’s been running off of grit and swear-words since the 90’s. Sherlock sulks over the dashboard behind the wheel of a hire-car.

“Look at him, he’s pretending to make smalltalk,” he complains, gesturing to the shit-box

Through the car windows, John can make out the blur that is the back of Wiggin’s head.

“On the bright side, we’ve got our car to ourselves,” he points out, “So what do you make of all this then? Horse slashing and ghosts and now actual murder. Coincidence?”

“Hardly,” Sherlock sneers, cutting up a taxi. The blare of a horn echoes after them. “No, that much is apparent.”

“And the ghost?” John teases, “The malicious soul of the lost Hussar, riding the countryside seeking his bloody revenge?”

Sherlock snorts. “An opportunist preying on superstition and local idiots. I don’t think there were Hussars in Dorset.”

John mulls over Tolly’s story once again. After she’d dropped the bombshell at the breakfast table she had gone on to explain the local legend of the Hussar.

There were still Hussar units in the army, John knew, though his knowledge of them was sketchy. As best he understood, they were cavalry units with something to do with the napoleonic wars, moustachioed and sabre-bearing, something something Charge of the Light Brigade? He couldn’t remember. He, like Sherlock, suspected a lot of local colour had been added over the years, not least with some more recent inspiration cooked in following the advent of gory forest themed horror films.

The tale was simple and perhaps more effective for lack of detail. A soldier on a white horse, sword in hand, charged in silence down the hill through the old by-ways and those unfortunate enough to see would be cursed, and ultimately die. The spectral rider had been seen 4 or 5 times in the past fortnight, and two of the witnesses were now dead of very un-spectral stab wounds.

“Anyway, surely even out in the sticks, no one believes in any of that?” John says, thinking out loud.

“Should you wish to find nonsensical superstition alive and well, or at least pandered to, go to a fishing wharf or a racing stables.”

“Is that so?” John settles back in his chair. Sherlock just grunts in reply and resumes staring at the back of Wiggins head like at any moment he’s going to discover telepathy. John toys with his phone and then it dings and he has a picture message from Bill Murray.

“What the...?”

He squints at the picture Bill has sent and then thumbs a reply. When the answer comes, John stares again at the photo and then shows it to Sherlock.

“It’s a toilet,” Sherlock observes with barely a glance.

“Yeah, where is it though? Bill seems to think I know it.”

Sherlock takes the phone and props it on the dashboard, eyes skittering over the image. “Never seen it before,” he says after a few seconds. “Rural location, old house near the coast.”

“I don’t know any-“ John says and then thinks again. “Wait, that’s Sholto’s house.”

He messages this back and gets a confirmation. “He’s taken the caravan up there. It’s got a stupid name,” John reports. “Oh no, what’s the silly bastard planning...”

“What is he planning?” Sherlock asks, drawn into the conversation.

“I think he’s planning on taking Sholto on a caravan holiday.”

“Bastard,” Sherlock says, emphatically. “That’s just cruel.”

John laughs. “It’s just a caravan. I don’t know. It could be good... Don’t grab-“

“‘I told them I was pissing’,” Sherlock reads out from the screen. “He’s with somebody other than Sholto.”

“Who the hell’s he with?”

John asks as much by text, but there’s no reply. It gives John an uneasy defensive feeling in the pit of his stomach. He’s not sure he likes the idea of Bill mucking about with Sholto without him being there to keep an eye on things. Especially not with a party, or parties, unknown.

He squashes the feeling down for dissection at a time and place in the future that with luck will not arrive, and changes the subject.

“So this is your Aunt Lydia’s place then?”

“Mm,” Sherlock says, sounding reluctant to discuss it. “It’s complex. It has an owner before, but to all intents and purposes, Aunt Lydia runs it alone.”

“She’s funny, your cousin. ”

Sherlock gives John a sharp look that’s underlaid with a flutter of insecurity. “Tolly has no interest in anything unless it farts and neighs,” he says, and then with another flutter when his traitorous mind informs him John is technically capable of both of these things, adds, “and eats nothing but hay.”

“Right,” John says. “You’re being weird. Anything I should know? Have you got, I don’t know, a dark horse on this family farm of yours?”

“No,” Sherlock says after a long pause. “Nothing really.” He glances left.

Nothing compared to you.

There's a beat where John moves and Sherlock doesn't, and then another when Sherlock moves but John has shifted in an unexpected direction and nothing comes of it. They sit back and stare at the road.

“Today's going to be pretty busy,” John comments. He is thinking ahead to the evening, which is now taking a very different shape to the one they’d arranged this morning. Sherlock is hawk-like over the steering wheel and his attention is already being drawn away, magnet-like away from their everyday existence to adventure again.

“Yes.”

John folds his hands in his lap, and reads the number plates of the passing cars and composes blog posts in his head that he will never ever breathe to a living soul.

There are three situations that make you really appreciate how close the seats in a vehicle are. The first is on public transport in hot weather, and you can smell other people. The second is when you are caught in a conversation you do not want to be part of, which has no end because they won't shut up. Flattening yourself against the window provides no escape. The last is when you are next to someone you desperately want to touch, for whatever reason, but you are stuck on the motorway with no chance to pull over.

~~Or pull.~~

“Fucks’ sake.”

“What’s the matter?”

“Nothing.” John gropes around for an excuse and comes up with, “I’m still wearing my dirty trousers from yesterday.”

“I don’t suppose the horses will care,” Sherlock says, and then, a smidgen higher in tone; “I hadn’t noticed.”

If he doesn’t do something, John feels he’s going to rocket off through the sunroof, and besides, he’s charmed by the lie. So he reaches into his pocket and pulls out a roll of mints. “Here.”

He nudges Sherlock with the end of the packet and makes him hold his hand out.

“I don't really eat on cases,” Sherlock says. The mint is smooth and cold in his hand.

“It’s just a mint. We can have sweets on cases can't we?” John asks and Sherlock puzzles for a

moment before deciding that this, like chess, is something more and he puts the mint in his mouth and lets it click against his teeth. It melts sweetness on his tongue and the menthol hits his sinuses.

'I'm an idiot,' Sherlock thinks, unaware that John is having much the same revelation.

John puts the radio on for the sake of both of their egos and when the flavour fades Sherlock holds out his hand and lets John slip him another.

It's hours of driving. The shit-box rattles along, and Sherlock ditches it behind them, sweeping past on the middle lane. John catches a glimpse of the other two as they overtake; Tolly with her head tilted, listening, Wiggins expounding on something.

"They're getting along," John comments, shifting in his seat and fussing with the seatbelt. "We should have brought sandwiches."

"Hm," Sherlock says, darkly, checking his wing mirror.

"What? I'm sure she'll be alright. I know it's Wiggins, but she doused the two of you with fairy liquid earlier. I don't think she's that easy to freak out."

"No," Sherlock says meaningfully. He gives the rearview mirror one last long squint of suspicion, and then takes them off at speed until they've lost the shit-box in the traffic.

"I've been thinking about the case," John says. "I mean, it's just a nutter isn't it? Someone who's decided he's the descendent of the Hussar, going riding around at night and just topping off whoever he comes across."

"No," Sherlock says. "No, the killings would be random. These operate in a locus around a central object. Obsession though, you're warmer there."

"Am I? Oh, good," John says, pleased. "And you've been to this place before, right? Did you use to come here as a kid?"

"Once," Sherlock admits. "It was supposed to be good for us."

"Was it?"

"Hm," Sherlock says. "I've never been convinced."

"I'm sure Mycroft loved it," John comments. "All that fresh air and exercise. Did you ride?"

"Never my thing," Sherlock says, and then brightens. "They put Mycroft on a fat pony though. He fell off."

John grins. "I rode a bit."

The car crosses the white lining on the road before Sherlock thinks to pull the steering wheel straight again. This is absolutely news to him.

"What? When? Where? Why?"

"I learnt to ride," John says, pointing at the road until Sherlock is paying it at least a modest amount of attention again. "When I was at Sandhurst. I injured my knee on a training exercise and until I recovered, I couldn't do much in the gym or play rugby, but I could sit on a horse. So I spent

a term learning to ride.”

Sherlock stares at the road, clearly filing this information away. John does not mention the other reasons he was asked to transfer his extracurriculars. There had been a few blunt words from his superiors about moving his ego down a peg, and learning something about teamwork.

John taps at the dashboard.

“Did you like it?” Sherlock asks.

“It was ok. Not my thing, but it was fun once I’d learned how to go fast.”

“Oh.”

“Not a fan of the trousers.”

“Jodhpurs,” Sherlock supplies.

“Them as well,” John agrees. “Absolute bugger to get off.”

“Oh,” Sherlock says again, and nearly misses their junction.

The road becomes a narrow country lane without pavements, and hedges grown up almost to touch overhead. They pass a tiny white cottage with thatch on the roof, and another with honest-to-god roses around the door and a tiny pointless wishing well in the front garden. Tolly’s shit-box barrels along, trimming branches as it goes.

They round a bend and then all at once they’re on a long straight avenue running uphill and there at the end of it, lies the farm.

The stable yard is empty when they finally roll through the gates; the doors to most the stalls hang open. Evidently someone has been there though, as the soiled straw has been scraped out and piled up.

Yet certainly there is a buzz of unseen activity, and no shortage of animal life. From overhead there is the persistent chirrup of housemartin chicks from inside the brickwork, and after a moment he spots the black v shapes of the parent birds skimming the rooftops. Tolly slams the driver’s door, prompting movement from behind the straw pile: the oily trot of a whippet up to no good. It slips around the corner of the stable block and vanishes.

“No horses in?” John observes, once they’re all milling around stretching their legs.

“We’re still grazing most of them during the day with one of the grooms on guard. I’ll show you the fields in a minute. Just a moment, better get Bertie out of there...” Tolly peels off across the yard to one of the closed stables, whistling.

With a bass ‘oof’, the stable-door rattles, and then a sad, clownish face appears over the top. Tolly coos. The clown drops down out of sight and Tolly unlatches the door. It teeters out on stilt-like legs, all one long wiggling motion.

The chest is covered by a neat white bib, the rest of the fur a bright brown down to the upright nub of a tail that is wagging so hard that the whole rear end of the animal has taken on a mind of its own.

“Hello, Bertie, who’s my best soppy? Is it you? Who’s that? Is that friendlies- Yes, it’s best friendlies, go give them kisses. Kisses, Bertie!”

The boxer obligingly squirms across the concrete to fawn first at John’s feet and then Sherlock’s, sliming the tips of their fingers with his tongue and whiffing at their trousers.

“A dog,” Wiggins comments. “What is it?”

Sherlock clicks his tongue in scorn and bows to ruffle the dog’s ears. It groans and treads on his feet and he loves it. “Hello, boy,” he says, and then catches John smiling at him.

Tolly coughs. “We should probably let Dilly know we’re back. She’s going to be pissed I shot off this morning without warning her. Let’s check the office.”

She leads them out the back of the yard down a worn path to what John mistakes for a barn until he catches the lingering smell of ammonia and wood that heralds an arena.

It takes him back. Brown horses in a line, the up-down bobbing of the row of black hats going round and around, warming up. The smell of the leather and the saddle soap- bloody ages spent cleaning tack, scraping spit from the bits, and muck from the horses’ hooves. The riders in the arena move in circles, now and then leaning to one side to check the motion of their horse’s legs.

Lydia stands on a platform overseeing, an old phone glued to one ear. She looks harassed and torn between what is obviously a quarrel and what is obviously her joy. She pauses even as they approach to bawl across the open space to one of the jockeys. “How are you doing?”

“Moving fine,” the man calls back. Lydia grunts and finds a scant second to spare them a nod before going back into her phone call.

“We can wait; they’re heading out soon,” Tolly says, flopping down into an old deckchair apparently left there for this precise purpose. John takes himself up onto the end of the platform and leans on the wall of the arena to watch.

The horses flow like they are all of one mind. Each animal gleams; they show their worth in the care that has been put into them. So much so that John only notices the riders as an afterthought.

The men look shabby in comparison, and diminished without the pizzazz of their racing colours. Most are wearing long-sleeved t-shirts in grey or black, or another such slobber-proof colour. The muscles of their forearms flex, hands still, all the control in the feet and the thighs and the balance. John grins. How many times had he been told he rode like a sack of fucking potatoes? More than once.

They make it look effortless. A man passes right before them, mind bent solely to his work. He stands in the stirrups, evaluating some mysterious aspect of the motion, and he is lean, John notices. The white of his jodhpurs is stained and the elastic stretched out, clinging to the solid mass of his body. An athletic body, John appraises, as a soldier and a sportsman himself, as a doctor, and as a man.

The top of the arena wall is splintery with chipboard and it grazes the balls of his hands when he grasps it. Instinct tells him to stop looking. John grips the wall tighter. ‘No,’ he tells himself, ‘not instinct. Training.’ He forces his hands to lose and his head not to turn. He looks at the riders.

Little by little he starts to tell them apart. The man with the broken nose, the tallish man, the blond, the one with the short sleeves, the one with a birthmark like a port-wine stain down the back of his neck, the one on the snappy horse that keeps its ears back. Black jodhpurs.

'I like his determination,' John thinks, watching the man rein back his stallion. 'And it's ok to admire someone.' His next thought is the reflection that clearly if you have a lot of therapy, some of it sticks.

John chews on his inner cheek and considers how he admires lots of people. Sherlock, for one. In fact, Sherlock first and foremost. Sholto, for another. Bill, a bit maybe.

'Or maybe,' another bit of his brain says, the one in his gut, 'you just fancy them'.

John bites his own mouth by accident. Probing the sore spot, he watches the riders and wonders if Sholto has gone with Bill. He wonders if Sholto is ok. He wonders if he should call, or if he should not. He watches the man with the snappy horse pull his elbows tight to his body and sit back with a flex of his buttocks as the stallion baulks and John's saliva turns to chalk in his mouth.

His wonderings burst like a soap bubble when he feels Sherlock's eyes on him.

Sherlock says nothing, but instead pivots his head back and resumes John's post for him, watching the riders. A heartbeat later, John realises Sherlock's looking too.

Not just watching. *Looking*.

John turns his head to the other side and sees Wiggins watching and only watching. Tolly is looking but not at the men. She leans forward on her chair to a gap in the wall, upper body pushed through within touching distance of the horses and mutters to the riders as they pass.

But Sherlock is looking.

It makes a little jealous fire flare up in John's belly, which he knows is irrational, but it's there all the same. In spite of him. He lifts his head in defiance, deliberately stares for one moment longer, and then makes himself turn towards Sherlock.

Sherlock is looking at him.

The riders pass them one last time and then Lydia shouts again across the arena and the leader takes them out. One by one they vanish into the sunshine.

Tolly leans back and waves at Aunt Lydia, who just gives an exasperated look. They pass a short, fluttered conversation in nothing but gestures and then Aunt Lydia stomps down off of the platform, enters a door behind which seems to be an office, and then closes it.

"Shit, sorry," Tolly drawls, stretching and getting up. "Guess she's stuck on the phone to Ireland. We'll have to catch her later. So... this is the arena."

She gestures to it and, just to be polite, they look at it like they haven't just spent the last 10 minutes eyeballing it. Sherlock has snapped back to case mode, strutting down off of the platform and entering the arena itself. He ploughs through the surface like he's walking on snow and examines the wall at the far end.

"Anything?" Tolly shouts.

"Hm," is Sherlock's only answer. "Show me where the horses were mutilated."

"This way. In the paddocks."

Wiggins nudges his elbow into Sherlock's ribs as they reconvene at the door. "What did you

notice?" he asks. "You were looking at something back there."

Sherlock chuckles. "You know what's good about farms?" he asks, turning on his heel. His eyes glitter.

"What?" John says, taken aback. He catches Sherlock's eye. He can't read his mood now that he's come all over deerstalkerish.

"No one ever gets around to throwing things out," Sherlock elaborates, before John can worry any further.

"So what did you notice?"

"There are holes in the arena wall, at the far end." He mimes prodding something and makes little popping noises. "All the way round."

"What about them?" John asks, annoyed that Wiggins has immediately grunted and nodded his head in understanding.

"Obvious," Wiggins says.

"That's not fair, give me a clue," John argues.

In lieu of answer, with a sudden quick motion, Sherlock throws his arms up in a loop, and twirls.

"Come on, Bertie," he calls to the boxer, striding off, and John stumbles along at his heels with the dog, puzzling as to what possible clue the pirouette is meant to convey.

Tolly explains the layout as she chugs along, leaving them to keep up as best they can. "This is the racing yard, but the slashings have all been on the stud, which is weird. There's no reason for it that we can work out, unless they've got a chip on their shoulder about breeding?" She shrugs.

They cross the lane again, through more gates. John plots their progress, moving from 7 o'clock to 5 o'clock around the crown of the hill. "Do you own all of this?"

Tolly gives him a look of blank surprise. "Uh. Yeah. Well, the owner does. I'm broke as shit, I just live well."

She points up at the cameras appointed over the gate and warns them about the electric fencing. "We whack the volume right up on everything around each paddock at night. You know that bit in Jurassic Park where the kid goes flying off into Richard E. Grant's arms? You'll look like that if you touch it."

John frowns. "That wasn't Richard E Grant, I don't think."

"Richard Attenborough then," Tolly says, shrugging again. "Same thing. Point is that you'll get frazzled, so, don't touch it after dark."

Wiggins clicks his tongue and skirts the white tape carefully.

"Does the ghost only appear on the stud farm side?" John wants to know but Tolly shakes her head.

"No, mostly in the lanes." Tolly points. "We're on the top of the hill here and the lanes and gallops

run either downhill or round, or a bit of both.”

“Wossa gallop?”

Tolly gives Wiggins the look of inherent suspicion that the rural has for the urban. Wiggins squirms his toes inside his Nikes and shrugs defensively.

“What? There ain't no horse stuff in Peckam.”

“It's that,” Tolly says, pointing out across the vista. “The long white railing marks our practice course where we run the horses. That's the road you came up over there, but there's a whole network of by-ways too. See that line of trees? There's one runs along there. You can get a quad bike up them but they're too shit for cars. Handy though. With those, we're connected to pretty much everywhere. The police say that's half the trouble- it's all so spread out.” She waves her hands helplessly, mocking. “Rural constabulary. Got no resources.”

“Ghost must be local then,” John guesses. Tolly unlocks the padlock on a gate and opens it for them into a field.

“That's what I think. It's too specific for anyone from not around here. They even get the grey horse right.”

“The ghost rides a white horse?” John asks, looking across the field and the herd.

“That's traditional,” Tolly answers, “Death comes on a pale horse.”

“Right, it's just I can't help but notice that you haven't got any white horses around here.”

“We wouldn't. Racehorses are pretty much all bay, though you get the occasional outlier like Desert Orchid, but the bloodlines all come from the same three horses.”

“So you can have any colour horse you like, as long as it's brown,” John muses.

Tolly whistles piercingly, and the horses lift their heads. In the middle of the field, a man looks around from where he's sitting in the middle of the grass, a lurid horror novel in his lap. John spots the same whippet mincing around the hedgerow, looking for rabbits.

It gives John a thought.

“Dogs,” he comments, to Sherlock.

“Yes, well spotted,” Sherlock demurs. The boxer is glued to his leg, although John suspects that has a lot to do with whatever Sherlock has in his pocket that he keeps slipping to the animal. “All these dogs.”

“Dogs,” Wiggins agrees.

“What are you lot blithering about?” Tolly asks, over her shoulder. “Tony, these are... a last ditch effort. Wills etcetera, meet Tony, our stable manager.”

“Sherlock,” Sherlock corrects through gritted teeth. The man with the book gives them a lift of his chin in recognition.

“Gents,” he says. “Come to solve our conundrum, have you?” He has a broad face, and a solid build. His posture is relaxed and his voice softened by the burr of a diluted accent, Welsh maybe, or more likely given what Tolly's said so far, Irish.

“Halfway there,” Sherlock answers, but the conversation is broken up by a horse butting its head between them, looking for affection.

“Y’might want to head back to the block,” Tony says to Tolly, squinting in the sunlight. “Donna was getting close to foaling, we thought about 9 o’clock this morning. I’ve left Callum keeping an eye on things and Dom’s manning the phones.”

“That’s all I need,” Tolly says, fraying at the edges. “That prat’ll be head deep in some pulp novel. Has the vet been down?”

“He’s been, she’s fine.” Tony replies. He brushes the dirt from his jeans and yells for the whippet. “Got him to take a look at Fawley’s knees while he was at it. You should get down and take a look and decide if you want to keep him or sell him.”

“I’ve got to get on,” Tolly says at this news. “Look, just... there’s the farm, there’s the lane, there’s Tony- if you have any questions, ask him. He knows most things there are to know. Go and find that bastard and then bring him back here so I can gut him myself, alright?”

She’s gone before Wiggins can say, “Cor, yes, ma’am.” John shakes his head. Tony shoves his novel into his back pocket.

“I’m sticking around here for the next couple of hours,” Tony offers.

“We’ve got our orders, then,” John surmises. “Where do we start? Fields, seeing as we’re here?”

Sherlock stoops and lets the whippet cringe at his fingers. “Seen them. Boring. No.” He straightens and regards the farm buildings with a devious look. “Let’s go barn hunting.”

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There are not just barns on the grounds of the farm. As they go round, they unearth other out-buildings, a horse lorry and a set of water tanks, as well as a caravan slouching on worn-out axles in a thicket of nettles cleared to the door. John beats another path through to peer through the windows, but the effort wasn’t worth it.

“Thick with dust- no one’s been in there.”

“Course not,” Wiggins points out the cigarette butts on the floor. “Sneaky smoker’s seat. That’s all that is.”

“You could have said before I bashed my way in there,” John answers. The nettles had got through the wool of his jumper and stung his elbows.

“You seemed keen. Unlike some,” Wiggins says, frowning.

Sherlock isn’t listening. He has found a stick. It’s a good one- just a bit thinner than his wrist and long enough that the boxer can get a good clamping mouthful of it in the space between his hands and they can have a really good tug of war.

John thinks if it were at all feasible, he’d fill the flat with dogs just to see Sherlock pull that face again. It’s the one all dog-besotted people do, all popping surprise and exaggerated excitement.

“Get the stick!”

The boxer barks and leaps, clearly already a devotee. Sherlock chortles.

“You’re gonna get replaced,” Wiggins observes to John. He thumbs his nose and then claps his hands. “Oi! Can we look for a murderer? Or a ghost? Or something?”

Sherlock reluctantly lets the boxer get away with the stick. “Just because you’re slow,” he complains. “Haven’t you worked it out yet.”

“Might have,” Wiggins replies. “Some’v it.”

“Ghost or murderer?”

“Slasher.”

“Oh, warm. Not quite. Of course there’s two.”

“Three.”

“Two and a half.”

“Good,” John interjects. “Then you can share.”

Both of them stare at him. “You can share,” John repeats, “Pick one- Ghost or murderer? Sherlock, take the ghost. We’ve done loads of murders.”

“I *like* murders.”

“You also don’t believe in ghosts,” John points out. “Anyway, why not solve the murder and just not tell us.” He shrugs. “You do that half the time anyway.”

“No, he doesn’t,” Wiggins argues. “He likes to show off.”

“I do.”

“He does,” John sighs, correcting himself. “Well, you can show off to me, how about that?”

“Yuck.”

“Yes, thank you, John,” Sherlock says, tilting his head back towards the sky. The boxer shoves the slobbered stick into his hand. “And thank you, my dear Bertie.” He flings it away for the dog again and wipes his hand on his shirt.

“Deal,” he says abruptly, holding his hand out. Wiggins takes it, impervious to the damp, and they shake.

“No butting in though,” Wiggins warns.

Sherlock’s smile is crooked. “Wouldn’t dare.”

The barn is dim and full. There’s straw stacked up in the centre in a neat block twice John’s height, and a broken down tractor clutters one side. The back of the barn is a dark hole stuffed with old sacks, old furniture, old things in general. Sherlock had only been joking a little when he’d said they never threw anything out.

“What are we looking for?” John calls up. Sherlock’s already shot in around the back of the straw

and the miscellany of unused items. His rear bobs up and down as he stoops to rummage. John's Adam's apple does something similar.

"Y'mouth's open," Wiggins says, flatly, after a minute or two. "Did you know?"

John coughs and unfolds his arms and turns to Wiggins. "What's he looking for?"

"He's gone after a clue, Scoob. Think I might go look somewhere-"

Sherlock makes a noise of discovery before Wiggins can finish his sentence. He stands up and turns, ghoulishly brandishing a piece of cloth that he holds up in front of his face. "Boo."

Wiggins recoils. Dangling limply in Sherlock's hands is a dirty red garment. Rectangular with a structured bulge on the top edge, it's broad enough to obscure most of Sherlock's face from view. Two holes, punched high, seem fit for horns to protrude. Two others, punched lower, gape like empty sockets. The effect is enhanced by the hard edge of raised plastic around them.

"Woss' that?" Wiggins asks, wrinkling his nose, "Pants? Why's there four 'oles?"

"Race mask," John says. Sherlock lowers the object low enough to stare at him.

"Is it?"

"Isn't it?" John says, suddenly uncertain. "It's just a guess. Stops them looking at the other horses, I think."

Sherlock wiggles his fingers through the top holes, mimicking the twitching of a stallion's ears. "Hm." The dome fits his skull like a cap. "Well noticed. At any rate," says Sherlock, tossing it back in with the rugs. "It's the wrong colour."

"I'm going back to the house," Wiggins announces. "I've got my own ideas."

The barn feels bigger and emptier after he's gone; Sherlock seems taller and John feels warmer.

"So... What next?"

"Keep looking," Sherlock says.

They rummage together in silence for a while. Sherlock grunts with annoyance at every item he pulls sacks off of that turns out not to be the mysterious thing he's looking for. John drifts around the far side of the barn, by the broken tractor and digs in the more organised stacks of buckets and debris. He pulls a tarp to one side and then bends to dip his fingers down. He rubs them together and then grins.

"I've got it," John says, struggling out from behind the sacks. "Here, look what I've found."

He heaves the item bodily out into the open and dumps it down at their feet. It puffs as it settles, and John stands over it triumphantly. "There."

"And?" Sherlock asks, nonplussed.

"It's how they're getting the white horses. Look, it's the only one that's open." John kicks the sack of whitewash powder with the toe of his boot and it puffs up another smoke signal.

"Really, John?"

“It was hidden!”

“Forgotten,” Sherlock says. “And too elaborate an idea. But good effort,” he adds, seeing John’s face.

“Alright, don’t take the piss.”

“No really, quite a deduction,” Sherlock says with a smile that flashes to surprise when John advances on him. They are alone in the barn with the dust. The muscle in John's neck moves under his skin, his shoulders held broad and solid from his body and a thrill goes up Sherlock's scalp.

His heel scrapes the concrete under the dirt as he turns immobile. Up close, John's face seems to flicker for a moment and then Sherlock realises it's because he's blinking rapidly.

“You're being bad.” John says.

Sherlock doesn't say anything. He can't. His tongue has cleaved to the roof of his mouth.

“Hm,” says John, and he applies a home remedy to this that upends gravity and makes thoughts of anything else rather muted and unimportant.

They stumble back into the rusting hulk of the tractor. John's hands are warm to the point of stickiness. It should verge on unpleasant, the tang of ancient animal shit and John’s sweaty palms around the small of his back but it fires up relics of sensation in Sherlock’s brain. Something of the hunt and the chase and the blood of the caves muddled with carnival toffee and the smell of breaking into empty houses.

This time, they don’t bump noses or bust each other’s mouths. John’s mouth is warm against his own, and the kiss itself is intense but slower than the hash they’d made of things on the sofa. This time, there’s give and take, and a rhythm to it.

John groans.

Sherlock thinks, ‘We need to leave the house more often.’

It is dangerously exciting. He's quivering like a dog before a storm, full of fear and howl and the need to crawl into a dark space, or else tear off baying into the face of the threat.

He grasps John’s shirt and then, embarrassed by how he had jammed a hand in John’s vest last time, loosens his grip. His fingers tremble upwards instead, to ghost around John’s jaw and then, like he’s cast a spell, it all turns sweet. John’s hands smooth up his back.

When they shift their lips, the skin clings, so they can’t part without it dragging.

Sherlock’s breathing, boiling hot. A vat with the lid shoved down tight.

“John...”

“One more,” John mutters. Sherlock is pushed against the tyres. “Just once more.”

Just once more. A slow and single-minded once more, and once more again with the barest of touches so that it doesn't even count.

Sherlock feels John detach before John’s hands move to let go of his body, though neither moves out of reach. Torsos apart, John lifts his head so that his brow touches Sherlock's cheek as Sherlock bows his head. An animal caress, nose to nose.

'If we were home,' John thinks. 'If we were alone.'

'If only,' Sherlock thinks, with no end to the thought other than to press his mouth to the hollow behind John's ear and suspire.

There's a clatter of hooves, nowhere near, and John's hands slip free. He wipes them on his jeans.

He's dropped his gaze merely for the illusion of personal space. John stands hands on hips, body angled still towards Sherlock's and Sherlock watches him, unblinking, waiting for him to decide if he's going to step away or step back- caution be damned- and carry things on to their conclusion.

"You finished?" Wiggins asks, yards away in the open door of the barn.

They startle like cats, Sherlock bristling and frozen to the spot; John turning, backing, spitting, throwing his hands up to bracket his head in defence and disbelief. He's so angry he chokes out nothing but random consonants.

"Sorry," Wiggins offers, expression flat as a pancake. "You looked finished. I can go 'way 'n' come back."

"Yes!" John explodes.

"Only there's been a development--"

"Here's a development," John starts, taking a step. He's turned a brilliant pink around the edges and his fingers are twitching. Billy turns tail and hot-foots it.

When John turns back, Sherlock has his lips pressed together. He shakes his head.

"It's not funny!"

Sherlock presses his lips thinner but his whole mouth wobbles to show that, to him, it's really too funny. It wobbles, and shows John that underneath the laugh, there are other emotions.

"I'll wring his bloody neck," John threatens, still sore with embarrassment, at a loss. Sherlock's lips part slightly, despite his best efforts.

"I will. And then drop him in the sodding Thames and you'll damn well help me move the body."

"I didn't think we were at the weekend couple's activities stage yet," Sherlock says.

"Christ," John says, rubbing the back of his neck. "Christ!"

Then he checks himself, drops his hands back to his chest, unsure, and his mouth turns down but for a moment. "I don't mean," he begins. His jaw works hard for a moment, and then he concludes with the mutinous tone of a younger man, "I'm not ashamed."

He is ... something though. Charitably one could call it awkward. Sherlock sees it in the tension his muscles and the way he struggles a moment before he finds his feet again. Then John gives a sudden grunt and says, "No, it's not you. Shit!"

John turns and kicks one of the plastic buckets, a good solid fly half's kick. The bucket soars, spinning and clatters down again out of sight.

John turns back, hands on hips. Sherlock hasn't moved. John nods, looks away, eyes closed, eyes open, nods again.

“Come here,” he invites.

Sherlock comes away from the tractor, his fingers dusty with muck from the door and his back speckled with rust. John clicks his tongue.

“Look at the state of you.” He brushes the coat down vigorously, tucks his own shirt back in where it got disarrayed and when he finally meets Sherlock’s eye again, the spark is back in it.

“I suppose we’d best go find this fucking murderer, then. Or just commit one, it’s been a while.”

Sherlock laughs, and John laughs in silence too, both brittle as knives. It’s a joke without mirth, but it ties them together so much better than repartee alone could. “Well, if we have to.”

“Don’t lie, you love a murder,” John says, and they skim from blackest humour to something more normal again.

“I do,” Sherlock admits. “I do.”

He bites his inner lip.

Not so much as I love you.

John just nods, accepting, and then, in a way that rather charms Sherlock, he goes up on tiptoe to peck the corner of his mouth. He clears his throat.

“Let’s get this done,” John says, and Sherlock follows him from the barn, the ball of thumb touching the divot between lip and cheek, saving John’s affection there.

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The main yard is in uproar when they get back. Tolly is fizzing with indignation before a man in a wax jacket and there’s a car parked at a scruffy angle, blocking the place up.

“Is this any way to run my bloody stables?” the man seems swollen with anger. “Thugs clattering up and down the lanes, slashing people up? Ripping up my fences? Where the hell is Lydia, why isn’t she dealing with this?”

“I told you- she’s in the office-!”

“Waste of fucking space,” the man barks, striding off.

Tolly scrubs her hands through her hair and gives a muffled scream through her lips. Wiggins spots John and Sherlock at the gate and makes a tiny ‘ta-da’ motion towards the scene. As they approach, he says, “Told you there had been developments.”

“Who’s he?”

“The owner,” Tolly groans. “Baldwin; Spends most of his time in Ireland, thank fuck, but he’s been arguing with Dilly for months about the courses, and now he must have heard about the killings and gone and shown up.”

“So you’re friends then?” John quips.

“Don’t start,” Tolly warns, gently squashing the boxer’s wrinkles around its face. “Have you found anything yet?”

“Only just started looking.”

“Let’s get out of here. I’m not hanging around to get my ear bent by that old bastard. I’ll show you the lanes.”

“How’s the horse?” Sherlock asks.

“False alarm. Maybe tomorrow though.” Tolly pats her pocket. “I’ve got my phone if anything happens.”

“It’s all go around here.”

“Something like that. Come on, Bertie. This way. We’ll take the course and then the by-way.”

—

Tolly takes them on a walk towards the racecourse itself. The ground is chopped up in places by the passage of hooves, and she shows them the gallops where they exercise the horses.

“Christ,” John says, looking at one of the practice jumps.

“It’s the same height and width as Becher’s Brook,” Tolly tells him. It rears above their heads in a wall of green, looking threateningly solid. “We’ve got replicas of most of the really sticky jumps so the horses can practice them. Give Baldwin his due, he spent ages back in the 80’s putting them all in. They need updating though...”

“He doesn’t like the idea.” Wiggins pokes a finger into the evergreen front of the fence. “Bit precious about it?”

“No,” Tolly agrees. “Thinks we can just do it on the cheap and tweak the surfaces, but Lydia’d like to take the lot out and reorganise the whole course. It’s just that bit too dangerous.”

“Who fell?”

Tolly doesn’t waste breath asking Sherlock how he knows. “One of our jocks. Horse landed short and went over on top of him. Broke his back. It’s the drops, you see.” She points out the colossal difference between the approach and the landing of the fence. “Even the official courses have reduced them. That’s why we want to take it all down to grass roots and then if we’re going to do that, we might as well move it to join up with the newer stuff we’ve built since this was put in.”

Sherlock breathes in the smell of pine and frowns. The leaves are sticky between his fingers, making the skin tacky and fragrant with resin. It reminds him of something.

“Anyway, the bloke who got stabbed was over there, on the bridle-path.”

The contrast between the open land and the ancient by-way strikes John as perhaps part of the mystery. The closeness of the trees that line it on either side creates a deception of a tunnel, the end of it reduced to a pinprick of light. At night, he can imagine, with the wind baffled by the branches and coming in from any number of unexpected directions, the place could prey on the imagination. Particularly that of persons who’d fuelled their imagination with spirit from the pub at the bottom.

“There’s a few like this,” Tolly repeats. “This one runs more or less from the tanks right down to the village at the bottom. There’s one over the top of the hill behind us, and then the lanes of course, where the cars get around.”

“We saw those tanks earlier. What are they for?”

“We use them to swim the horses, but they’re getting old and leaky. Bloody things. I’ll show you them when we get back if you want; half the water’s gone.”

“Would most people around here be familiar with where these lanes all run?” John asks, trying to keep things on topic.

“Everyone,” Tolly answers. “They’re in constant use.”

“And yet...” Sherlock strides off, and then back, passing them, squinting and making abstract motions of thought. He seems puzzled suddenly, and even the dog is forgotten to slip back to Tolly’s heels.

Tolly watches him, nonplussed. “Does it usually take very long?”

“Depends,” John answers. “Put it this way, he’s your fastest option. I don’t get the impression he thinks the case is particularly taxing though.”

“Good. I just want matters done with.” Tolly worries at a fingernail. “Before we lose more horses.”

“And people have died,” John adds, to which Tolly makes a motion to show she agrees that this is an unfortunate side effect. They begin to wander down the hill after Wiggins.

“You call her ‘Dilly’,” he comments after a while.

“Everyone calls her ‘Dilly’.”

“Alright.”

Tolly huffs her fringe out of her eyes and scuffs the ground with her heels. “Also, I’m adopted. Which was what you’re asking, isn’t it?”

“No, sorry,” John says. “I didn’t realise.”

“It’s fine. I forget sometimes too, but I’ve never seen her exactly as my mother.”

“No?” John hedges, feeling he’s treading on thin ice.

“She’s just ‘Dilly’,” Tolly replies, and then she strides ahead. “Come on, we’re getting left behind. Oi, have you found anything useful yet?”

John follows Tolly’s swinging ponytail, slipping in the mud.

“It’s coming from the farm, aren’t they?” John says as they come level with Wiggins, who is crouched to squint up the slope of the path. “It’s got to be someone from there because of the dogs, right? They’d raise hell otherwise.”

Wiggins shrugs. “Maybe...” He straightens up, and whereas Sherlock seems to be looking uphill, he looks downhill. “Pub down there, right? You go there much?”

“Yeah, There aren’t many other places to go. What’s wrong with the pub?” Tolly asks. Wiggins heads towards it, frowning. “No one new turned up?”

“No. Tourists sometimes, passing through but you can live here for five years and still count as new, like Rory.”

“Who’s that?”

“You met him,” Tolly says, to John’s surprise. “He was the DJ at the Holmes’ Ruby Wedding bash. It’s like Rabbit and his friends and relations around here. Tony’s sister did the cake on the cheap so, mate’s rates all round.”

“Can we talk about the dead people? The living ones are boring,” Wiggins pleas. “Who died here?”

“Nice guy. Local,” Tolly answers, hands in pockets. She leans on her heels and John sees something fleetingly soft cross her face. “Adam. He was a tree surgeon.”

“You knew him well?”

“Fairly well,” Tolly says, in such a tone, that John thinks there’s more to that statement than she wants to let on.

There’s a section of the by-way taped off, with a tiny mushroom-like tent parked to show where the man died. On the far side, closer to the pub, John sees a pile of colour and cellophane. People have left flowers already.

John turns to Sherlock to ask a question but he isn’t there. Looking back up the path, he finds him stopped dead in the middle of the lane some distance back, staring at a gate. “Sherlock?” he calls.

Sherlock has forgotten them, quite without intending to, but the gate in the hedge, overgrown at the corners, has struck his senses with unexpected weight.

He reaches out and puts a hand on it. It’s old metal, flakey at the top but sprayed a glaring white. Compelled, he sets his foot on the middle bar and carries himself over it, dropping into the field on the other side.

The bowl of land hasn’t changed; the slope oozes down like a lawn, fading to trees in the distance, overhung with the sky. It’s green as baize and rumped, like a hand has unfurled the cloth over the sleeping hummock of the hill. Sherlock feels the breeze around his neck and it prickles down his spine. He remembers this. He didn’t know he remembered this.

The sign in the hedge is still there; not the original, but close enough; turned around so as not to confuse the traffic.

‘Fair’ it reads, with an arrow.

Sherlock steps out into the field, remembering the sun on his bare arms and knees. He remembers wriggling through the gate and looking down at the morass of people in the field; tents everywhere; Mycroft and Mummy waddling behind, infuriatingly slow, the dog already digging in the hedge. The nearest tent had echoed with the stuttering start of *Swing the Mood* playing from a radio - *Come on everybody-c-c-come on everybody!*

Mummy shuffle-dancing on the grass so very ‘Look aren’t we having a *nice* time?’; Mycroft’s disgust.

“I’m going to see the horses,” the girl had said, pulling free of Aunt Lydia’s hand and darting away like a pale hare down the slope.

‘That’s right,’ Sherlock thinks, and the memories flare up magnesium bright in his mind’s eye. ‘We came here in the summer.’

1989 is the year of the beginning of the end of the cold war. It was the year of the Kegworth air disaster and the fall of Pan Am flight 103. It was the shock of Ted Bundy and so many other interesting little happenings that Sherlock only found out about later in any detail. Aged 8, he'd spent little time in the world beyond the bubble of his family, and his small world had consumed his whole attention to the exclusion of anything else.

He remembers the field, the feel of the leather strap in his hand and the warm jangle of the chain that did absolutely nothing in the face of Redbeard's enthusiasm. The grass had been cut short, or maybe it had been a wheat field or oats or beans or other things Sherlock hated to sing about. Sherlock remembers like a series of Polaroids. It's crisp with detail though the context has blurred out of focus. He slips back in time, blinking between reality and memory.

In the heat the cut stalks smell like new hay, delicious. They crunch under his shoes. Redbeard, straining, one long red muscle that is pulling him through the crowd. Sherlock would follow him anywhere.

There is shit in the grass that he can't identify. Dry brown sausages that aren't dog shit or sheep shit and too small to be any larger animals' shit- *Goose* - They break apart against the toes of his shoes - he is a dog anchor, a shit-kicking pirate on a quest and, ultimately, satisfied with this lot in life. *What a little fool I was.*

The centre ring is an oblong circus of straw bales crowded with people. Dogs bark. A cow in the agriculture section lows. The tannoy is painfully loud right underneath it and incomprehensible at any greater distance. It barks about charities and lost children and refreshments and the St John ambulance. *John would have been twelve.* Sherlock would cup his ears but the dog is on the trail and pulling him on again. His ice-cream is melting over his fist.

"Mind it!" a voice says from the world of adults, but it's no one Sherlock knows and he's at liberty to ignore it. Still do.

He squeezes between linens and floral skirts, marking the route back with vanilla stains and then he's under a length of string into a concourse and Redbeard's tail is up and beating his chin as it wags.

"You joining in? It's 10p, love."

"What?" Sherlock asks. Eyes are staring at him with goatish curiosity and he sees himself for a moment as they see him- scab-kneed, sunburnt and dirty. *An ugly child.* They're all holding dogs on the ends of ropes.

"This one's 'waggiest tail', dear. Is that the one you are looking for?"

Redbeard is a tense comma of ecstasy, fawning in the grass. It seems a good bet. Sherlock shoves his ice cream in his mouth and gives the lady a sticky pawful of change.

She gives him a grimace and a sticker.

"Go and join the others," she tells him. *She dropped the 'dear', I note.*

And now it's Sherlock pulling Redbeard, who is overcome with desperation to play and to please and who is no longer a noble pirate hound, but puppy-daft. Sherlock tempts him along with the last soggy piece of ice cream wafer. *Idiot. Idiot. He hardly knew other dogs. Should've known.*

The tannoy blares and now he's in the arena, and there are more dogs.

"Children's class, the one with the waggiest tail everybody! Let's have a round of applause and we'll-" *Oh hell.*

The gleam in Redbeard's eye is unfamiliar. He rises from his belly, twisting and then he's lurching off, nearly yanking Sherlock's arm from its socket.

"Redbeard!" *Won't work.*

His knee blooms with a graze, his palm chafes on the leather. Redbeard is gasping and heaving with single-minded determination.

"What are you doing? Come back- Stay!" *Wasting your breath. Don't bother.*

But the dog is deaf. Sherlock gets the impression of a wide-eyed little girl as they come barrelling across the arena and even then, the oh-no feeling is rising in his chest, his belly a hot wobble of uncertain embarrassment that is then made absolute.

"Redbeard, get off!" he hisses, hauling. *Wasting your breath.* The dog yelps, tongue out, panting hard and the bitch is just egging him on, raising her bottom. *Mother would call her a tart.*

"What are you doing? What's he doing? What's your dog doing?"

The girl's voice is high and hysterical. She pulls on her dog's lead to no result, too frightened to get close to Redbeard's gurning face and undulating spine.

Sherlock hauls again desperately and then the woman is there, all hot flash and bother, elbowing him aside. She grabs the setter by the scruff of the neck and heaves him vertically, smacking his nose and saying loudly to the air, "There, there dear- no harm done!" Redbeard squeals like he's dying. *Bitch!*

"Get off!" Sherlock chokes, pushing her away. He puts both hands through the collar and drags his dog to the ringside through a swarm of stinging riotous laughter, Redbeard still obscene underneath. Still wiggling to get back to his business.

Maybe the girl is crying. Someone has been.

Sherlock's got that awful salty taste in his mouth.

"How could you!?" Sherlock shouts in conflict. They are under the ash trees now, cool and remote, though Sherlock is still burning, burning inside. "Why would you do that?"

Redbeard whines, treading on his feet, loving him despite the betrayal.

Sherlock snaps back to the present. He rubs the back of his neck uneasily. The memory froths in his head; pertinent somehow, if only he can put his finger on it. There's so much information, filtered so wrongly that it leaves him conflicted.

"What?" he snaps.

"Can you *stop* a moment?" John is panting. "I've been chasing you halfway across this whole bloody field. I've been calling your name- what's going on?"

Sherlock stops, and looks back. The gate is shockingly far away and his calves ache. How long has he been marching for? 'Where was I going?' Sherlock wonders. They're halfway between the lane

and... nowhere, as far as he can tell. Back towards the courses. Tolly is a bright blob in the distance.

“Sherlock?”

John’s brows are pulled down low over his eyes, in concern. “Was I talking?” Sherlock asks.

“No, not really.” John doesn’t ask if he’s ok, he doesn’t ask for a number, he simply comes close and cups his hands around Sherlock’s arms. “I didn’t hear you say anything.”

“Nothing. Something,” Sherlock squints at the expanse of grass, moving in the wind like an ocean. “I’m not sure. Just a... flash? I was going uphill.”

John nods. “A flash?”

Frustration bubbles up in Sherlock and he makes John jump when he suddenly slaps his fists against his thighs and wheels around. “Back,” he says.

“Right,” John blows out a long breath and then hurries to match his pace. “Back to the farm.”

“The beginning,” Sherlock answers. “Right the way back.”

Right the way back, he thinks, to something forgotten.

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The sun is setting. It goes down over the brow of the hill in one angry glare, distorted by the trees. They have repaired, for the moment, to Lydia’s sitting room, Sherlock with the boxer drooling on his knee (shamelessly bribed there with biscotti), and they wait for the dark.

Tolly has unearthed a map of the farm for them, over which Wiggins is annotating with obscure graffiti of his own. John tracks their route that day- lane, stud farm, arena, barns, by-way, field and course, stirring his chopsticks around his pot noodle.

“Whatch’oo thinking?” Wiggins asks, seeing him frown.

“I’m having a stab at it. Deducing.”

Sherlock laughs and then looks acutely interested. “And?”

“Not telling,” John answers.

Tolly chews on her thumbnail and scowls. “Is this all a game to you lot?”

Sherlock opens his mouth to agree, even if it’s not strictly true, John to aver the opposite, but it’s Wiggins who says, “How ‘bout a drink?”

He sits back and calmly folds up the map. “It’s not going to be proper dark for hours and this is boring. I’m going down the pub. Who’s coming? Boss?”

“Hmmm... no,” Sherlock drawls. He is picking at the Boxer’s fur, scowling with thought again.

“Alright, get your coat then.”

“Me?” Tolly says, taken aback.

“Well I ain’t taking him- I’ve got street cred to keep up,” Wiggins says, jerking his chin at John and sauntering off without waiting for a reply.

Tolly pauses, curls her lip and then gives a whole body shrug. “Well, sure,” she says to the world at large and stomps off after Wiggins. John waits a beat and then gets up, stacking the cold pot noodles and following into the hall.

“Don’t get murdered,” he suggests, feeling more like a dad than ever watching Wiggins and Tolly pull their jackets on. “And if you see the ghost, record it. He’ll want to see.”

“I’ve got my phone,” Tolly says, pulling her hair free of her collar and stepping outside, gently pushing the boxer back in with her boot. The dog whines.

“No silly buggers,” John warns Wiggins.

“None but the most sensible buggery. You’re not coming, Cap?”

“Um,” John throws a look back towards the living room. “Not without Sherlock. He’d get the hump.”

“Yeah,” Wiggins agrees, clicking his tongue. He zips his jacket tight up under the chin and flips the hood up. “Guess you’re right. You’d better stay.”

“Maybe I’ll follow you down in a bit?”

Wiggins shakes his head. “Nah, stay,” he advises, and then leers, twisting the door handle and wriggling out through the gap. “Give ‘im the ‘ump.” Snuffling a laugh, he shuts the door.

John watches him wander off through the window, bandy-legged after Tolly, towards the lane. His face feels hot. ‘Next time,’ John swears privately, ‘I’m going to hold Wiggins head first in a horse trough until he forgets he ever saw.’

The most infuriating thing is how well it was going. Certainly one of their best efforts sober, and then just their sodding luck. Tonight, they’d said, but tonight’s going to be spent either trailing around treading in horseshit looking for a ghost that didn’t exist, or Aunt Lydia’s house.

They have a room to share, but not a bed. ‘I could nip up now,’ John thinks, ‘and shove them together.’ But he doesn’t know what Sherlock will make of this, if he’s jumping the gun or if it will be an unwelcome hindrance to Sherlock in Deerstalker mode.

Wait and see, John decides. As always, wait and bloody see.

—

John goes through the silent house to the kitchen and dumps the noodles in the bin. The place makes his skin prickle, There’s a tension in the air and the place feels occupied by unknown persons. John has a half expectation that he’s going to round a corner and immediately bump into someone.

The owner, Baldwin, is still around somewhere. Probably still arguing. Lydia has passed them on her way out as they’d come in and said she was taking Baldwin down to the insurance company office to look at the details of their claims. They hadn’t seen her since. What the hell could they still be talking about?

John is just wondering about this when a car pulls into the drive, its headlights flashing through the

kitchen window. The passenger door slams and he sees the bear-ish form of Baldwin grunt a goodbye to Lydia and then the tyres crunch off across the gravel. 'No spare room,' John thinks, a touch smug.

He has no reason to dislike Baldwin, other than an odd feeling. Even the fact that the man is large and shouty doesn't particularly irritate John. He's met plenty of the sort, and he can begrudgingly accept that the man has some justification to be upset. 'I just don't like him,' John thinks, pressing down the lever on the kettle.

Lydia batters through the door, dumping her wallet and keys on the table. "Oh, you read my mind," she sighs, looking at the kettle. "Look in that cupboard, and I'll have whatever you're having with a slug from the first bottle you find."

She slumps into the nearest chair and eases her boots off.

"Long day?"

"Oh, pfft. Bloody awful." She looks up and digs up a smile from somewhere for him. "And how are you? How's Long and Dramatic?"

John grins. "He's fine. He's in the other room, brooding over your ghost."

"Oh, that," Lydia says dismissively. "Give me a big stick and half an hour with the boys around here and I'd find out who it was, toot sweet. It's those poor blighters cut down in the lanes that worries me. You know, we've never had anything like this around here. Well, the vet's boy was caught sniffing things he shouldn't have been and there was that awful scandal with the Mathersons', but that was *years* ago."

"What happened to the Mathersons?" John asks, scenting gossip. "The missus caught bending over for the vicar or something?"

"If only," Lydia looks scandalised. "No. No, it was a nasty business. The husband was abusing the daughter."

John feels an ice-cold thrill shoot down his spine. "Piece of shit," he says.

"Cheers to that," Lydia agrees, raising her mug to him.

"What happened?"

"Oh, someone noticed the poor thing was pregnant and a letter turned up at the police station and then questions got asked and it all came out. He went to prison, she was whisked off to... somewhere. A care home, no doubt. I've no idea. Horrid to think about." Aunt Lydia swigs from her mug and shudders, not least because John has been generous with the rum.

"Nasty," John echoes. "Well, I think Sherlock's making progress. I'm kind of expecting him to go all Agatha Christie on us at any moment."

Lydia chuckles. "Oh yes, he does do that, doesn't he?"

"He said he'd come here once as a kid," John mentions, leaning on the back of a chair.

"The same summer," Aunt Lydia recalls. "Yes, they came down for a weekend; we went to the country fair. The first thing he did," she adds, "was make Tolly cry and the first thing she did was bop him square on the nose, and honestly, we counted it getting off lightly when they refused to

“speak again, other than regarding the dogs.”

Lydia drains her mug and gets up heavily from the chair. “Now, I am going to go and soak until my back stops aching. Shoo.” She waves John out of her way and then smiles again, with a twinkling knowingness that makes John uncomfortable. “Go and ruffle up that ridiculous nephew of mine.”

“Hm,” says John, not trusting himself to speak in case he squeaks.

“Nighty-night, Hastings!”

John goes back to the living room, where Sherlock is curled up in the armchair, fingers steepled against his lips. The room is larger than at Baker Street. It makes Sherlock look smaller.

“Hey,” John says. Sherlock blinks and a moment later looks up.

“Yes?”

“Nothing. I brought you some tea.”

John sets the cup on the table next to Sherlock. He curls his long fingers around it and brings it to balance on his knee, but doesn’t drink. It’s very quiet. John wishes Bee were there to liven things up. It’s been nice running around like old times without her, but the thought of her has been there in the back of his head all day. She must be having a bath and going to bed.

“I’m going to call home,” John says, rubbing the back of Sherlock’s neck. “Check everything’s alright.”

Sherlock’s hand finds his inside his collar in a caress. “I have to think.”

“I know,” John says softly. He has the idea to bow his face into Sherlock’s curls and press his mouth to the crown of his head, just for a moment, but at the same instant Sherlock moves in the chair and raises the mug to his lips, and the opportunity passes untaken.

The boxer has stretched out on the carpet, snoring. “I might have a walk around,” John says. “I’ll be upstairs in a couple of hours, if you need me.”

“Yes,” Sherlock says distractedly, and then when John’s fingers slide away from his skin, he pursues them with his hand and looks up. “Are you going to bed?”

“After,” John promises.

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221B has no landline phone for many good reasons, so John calls Mrs. Hudson. She sounds as giddy as a schoolgirl on the phone, and as he speaks to her, he feels one of the worries in him relax slightly. They’ve been having a good time without him and Sherlock. It turns out Molly’s idea of the next best thing to herself was Lestrade, which Mrs. Hudson is delighted by.

“If I were a jealous man, Mrs. Hudson,” John says, “I’d worry that we weren’t your favourites.” And then he has to hold the phone away from his ear as Mrs. Hudson brays and passes him to Lestrade.

Lestrade chirps down the phone at him, states that he’s got takeaway and John’s stack of naff action films lined up, and he’s good to sit on the easiest stake-out of the year until Mrs. Hudson springs back into action around breakfast time.

“Sounds good. Make a night of it,” John says, listening to Bee splashing and wowing in the background. “If you need a kip, feel free to doss in our bed.”

“O-oh,” Lestrade says, at the same time as John processes what he’s just said. “Yeah, thanks,” Lestrade goes on, talking over John’s silence. “I’ll probably make do with the sofa.”

“Sofa’s good! Sherlock sleeps on it all the time. I mean, he chooses to. I think he just likes it a lot,” John gabbles, “There’s a blanket on the back, I think, or if you ask Mrs. Hudson she’ll show you where we keep them though you probably already know, all those drug raids and what have you. Um.”

“It’s fine,” Lestrade says, cutting him off. “Relax. We’ll manage here, won’t we, Princess?”

“Papa!”

“Not in the water, sweets. Yeah, ok... if you climb out. Here, someone wants a word.”

John smiles into the dark of the stable yard. “Hey, sweetheart. Are you being good?”

“Yes!”

“Are you having fun with Nana and Uncle Greg?”

“Yesh, Ungle Gog! Pabar?”

“Yes?”

She’s silent. He can picture her; the phone too big for her, Lestrade helping her hold it against her ear. She’d be wiggling slightly on the bathroom mat. She doesn’t have enough words to carry on the conversation.

“I love you, Bee” John says for her.

“Kisses.”

“Kisses,” he agrees and grins when he hears her slobber the screen of the phone. “Lovely.”

“Did you get that?” Lestrade asks, chuckling. “You two are doing alright? What’s this case?”

John describes it to him, wandering the house. Eventually, Bee has to go to bed, and John has to hang up. The feeling of being at home fades as soon as he does, leaving him in the dark.

He passes around the perimeter of the yard, around the back of the blocks and then takes himself out on a wander around the outbuildings again as well. He wonders if Sholto is awake and doing the same; if Bill is still in the house or if he’s been given the boot. Who they’re with.

A growl brings him to a halt as he drifts around another block of stables and he realises he’s not alone.

“Who’s there?” A voice demands.

“Dr. Watson, I’m Tolly’s friend,” John calls. A pair of shadows detach from the wall, and whistles. The whippet slopes out from the night to join it.

“Just us,” Tony answers. “Checking on the mares.” The horses shuffle in their stalls and a few poke their heads out to look at him.

“How’s she getting along?”

“Nothing yet, but she’s moving.” Tony says. “Dom, why don’t you get back with that laundry.”

The other man grins and picks up a black bin bag, hanging it over his shoulder and taking off. There’s a sliver of light through the stable door, and John moves to peek but Tony cuts him off.

“I’d rather she’s not disturbed,” he says. “If you don’t mind.”

“No,” John answers. “Seen anything suspect this evening?”

“Not yet,” Tony says. “What are you doing out?”

John holds his phone up. “Looking for signal. Good luck with the foal.”

He turns his back to retrace his steps but can’t resist glancing over his shoulder. ‘Bit late to be doing the washing,’ John thinks, and stores the information away to tell Sherlock when he gets back.

As John rounds the corner back to the house, his phone buzzes with another message. He opens it to find a missive from Bill that consists of nothing but a picture of an enormous pile of dung.

“Oh god,” John says, caught between a laugh and a cold feeling of worry. He can’t see how this bodes any good.

[What did you do?] he replies, and Bill must have been waiting with his phone in his hand because the answer comes instantly.

[Told him why I thought he should go.]

John exhales, rubbing at his forehead. He clicks his tongue in concern. Knowing Bill, this could mean anything. “Why the hell didn’t you ask me to go too?” John asks the phone, which achieves nothing beyond confusing Siri.

“Shit.” It’s several hours of driving back to London, never mind Norfolk, but he could get to a station first thing in the morning and take the train- Bill’s got a car. He could meet him at the other end.

[Do I need to come up?] John texts. *Does he need me?*

Feeling muddled, he shakes the phone, as if doing so can speed up Bill’s answer. Finally it buzzes. All it says is; ‘I’ll let you know in the morning.’

“Oh for fuck’s sake.”

“What’s a fuck’s sake?”

“Jesus, Billy! Where did you spring from?”

Wiggins holds up his hands at a loss. “Just walked up the drive, didn’t I? Not my problem you weren’t looking. I wasn’t hiding or nothing. Fact is, I didn’t see anyone.”

“How was the pub?” John asks and then does a double take when he actually looks at the other man. He looks like he’s come through a hedge backwards. “What on earth happened to you?”

“I’ve had a breakthrough in the case.”

“Oh?”

“Yes.”

“In the pub?”

“No,” Wiggins says slowly, “In uh, she’s got like a small ‘ouse, y’know. In the village. I had a talk. Kind of. With *her*. *There*.”

“Did you now?”

“Yeah. She said have another drink, and then I said I was nearly at the point of solvin’ the case, there was just something about her I had yet to put my finger on, and then she took it sort of literal.”

“Oh God,” John says, “Really?”

“I’m not sure what happened,” Wiggins admits. “We was talking, and then we wasn’t.”

“Are you alright? Is she alright?”

“Before or after she grabbed my-?”

“Either,” John interrupts. “I mean... has she fallen off a horse lately? Bumped her head?”

“That’s rude,” Wiggins answers. “I escaped while she was in the shower.”

John is speechless. “You cut and run? Sherlock might actually kill you.”

“Would he? Why would he? He wouldn’t, would he?”

“I don’t know,” John says. “I would if I’d heard you’d been all woody over my cousin.”

“Not all over. Just the select bits she aimed me at. To be honest, I just sort of... shut me eyes and hoped.”

“Shitting hell,” John says. “I can’t believe it. And you left?”

“I am dedicated to my work,” Wiggins says solemnly. “Also, I did actually have an insight into the case.” He gives a jaw-splitting yawn. “An’ I’m bushed.”

John doesn’t trust himself to comment on that.

“You can probably go in. There’s not going to be no ghost tonight, I don’t reckon. My neck hurts. John?”

“What?”

“Are all girls like that?”

“Sorry?”

“I’m just wondering ‘cause usually I’m not too sober and it’s all a bit of a blur.”

“Go to bed, Billy,” John advises, for his own sake as much as Wiggins’. He waits until Wiggins has stumbled through the door and up the stairs and then comes inside as well. He’s got the start of a headache.

“This is too bloody much,” he mutters, shoving his phone in his pocket. He closes his hand around it though, heavy with concerns about what could be happening on the other side of the country. “Ghosts, then slashers and murderers and I don’t even know what else anymore. It’s like being in East-sodding-Enders.”

He pokes his head back into the living room to find that in his absence Sherlock and the dog have swapped places. The boxer snores in luxury on the cushions in the armchair, and Sherlock is a sprawl on the rug.

“I’m going up,” John whispers. Sherlock unfurls from the floor. “Are you coming? Wiggins says there won’t be a ghost tonight.”

“No,” Sherlock says from a distance.

“‘No’ there’s no ghost or ‘no’...”

“Both,” Sherlock says. “I’m still working.”

“Alright.”

It never ceases to amaze Sherlock how much John can seem to pack into the shortest of words. Sherlock avoids his eye; in case his thoughts spill out into his face. He catches John’s face in both hands blind, instead, and he kisses him. He knows what the words he should say are, but they don’t feel sufficient for everything in his head. He grins against John’s mouth and the anxious tensions all click open in the other man, like they’ve cracked the code to a safe on the first try.

“I enjoy being able to do that.”

“Only because then you don’t have to say anything,” John replies, relieved.

“It says it all.”

“Speak up,” John says. Sherlock loops one arm around his waist and pushes him back against the wall to do so. John on his toes, head tilted back. Sherlock wishes he could see it from the outside.

“Think I heard you that time,” John says, once he has space to breathe. It must have been loud; his ears are singing.

“Get some sleep,” Sherlock tells him. “I’ll see you in the morning.”

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The moon comes through the window; an old friend, and paints silvery patches over Sherlock’s body. He has made little progress. He keeps going in circles. Logically he knows there is something more to be found in his memory, but for some reason he keeps getting stuck on the moments in and around Redbeard’s faux pas.

“What have I missed?” he asks the boxer.

It teases Sherlock, and preys on his insecurities. Maybe he’s only worrying about it because of the recent developments with John. His brushes with intercourse in his early years had been few, and obscure until he’d discovered onanism in his teens.

Sherlock rubs at the tight patch between his eyebrows and hopes he didn’t look so undignified that

time on the sofa. He wishes John were here to talk it out. He's glad John isn't.

"It would be nice to have several Johns," he tells the boxer. One to be embarrassed in front of, before he tried anything with the real John. "John B."

There's me.

"You're not really him," Sherlock says to the John in his imagination. The real one is upstairs. Creaking, Sherlock picks himself up from the floor and treads the stairs in silence. The door is a fraction open for him, which touches him. John likes to keep the door closed. It makes him feel safer, the same way he likes to have the bed facing the door, and the way he likes to sleep with one hand under the pillow, nursing a weapon that's not there.

He slips in and John stirs, half rising on an elbow before he recognises Sherlock and thuds back into the pillows of his single bed. "Only me," Sherlock whispers. John grunts, half asleep again.

The other bed is parked beneath the window. Earlier Sherlock had calculated that if he lay right on the edge and stretches his arm out as far as he can over the bedside tables, he'll be able to touch John's blanket. Now the bedside cabinet is gone and in its place is a compromise. The beds are within reach of each other, but they remain a pair.

Sherlock slips in between the sheets, his feet cold and tries to lie very still, listening to John breathe in the dark. He can just make out John's profile in the dark. John grunts again and sighs as he gets comfortable.

'When this is over,' Sherlock thinks, and then closes his eyes and thinks of the dark, and thinks of numbers so that he can't think of anything else, and eventually sleep pulls him under too.

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It is one of those nights where the space of time between closing one's eyes and opening them seems to not have existed at all. Sherlock rouses, tired and buzzing with unspent energy. It takes him a moment to orientate himself out of sleep. It is morning. In fact, the sun must have come up some hours ago and he sits up, surprised at himself.

John sleeps shallow; a fold in his brows and the twitch of muscles in his face to show that he is dreaming uneasily. From this distance and at his height, Sherlock can look down into his face. His lips are pulled against his teeth and his fingers move in tiny, fractured motions.

Sherlock's focus narrows gladly; John is a space of familiarity after the heated running of his brain until so late the night before. It's not the usual nightmare, he thinks, cataloguing. It's not a nightmare at all, but it isn't pleasant either.

John stirs, perhaps aware that Sherlock has woken, but the dream rushes him on, worrying him about-

- the leather in his hands. Dark brown and slippery with soap, the loose end keeps twisting up as it dangles from his fist. He stops, again, to unwind it, and it's tangled up with other straps, and now John knows he's getting left behind the other men, some of whom have already completed their quotas. He swears and pulls at them, and hurries to dip his sponge in the bucket. He moves to the next section, rubbing hard.

The room is stacked with pieces of harness, and the men work, chattering, ignorant of John's difficulties. John turns the leather over in his hands, and is dismayed to find that the stitching is

fraying.

"This isn't good," he comments to the next man.

"It's too fucking bad," he answers, but it's not clear if this is an agreement or a dismissal. 'He's not my senior officer,' John thinks, suspiciously.

He has lost his sponge. It's vanished and he can't find another one. He scrambles about the piles of leather, starting to panic. If he doesn't get his kit clean by the time the siren goes off, they'll be forced to leave him behind.

"What do I do?"

"Use your shirt, you twat!" someone yells, and John laughs with relief. How had he forgotten? It's embarrassing.

He pulls a fistful of cloth from his shirt and it's yellow and green and tough. On examining it, John realises it's in fact, made of the same stuff as kitchen sponges. How useful.

He is looking for the way back to his station when the siren goes off. Lights wail, sirens flash, or something, and it's a muddle of sensations and now he's in his barracks room in Sandringham, with a window to Afghanistan, and Sholto is at the door - all the doors- shouting 'Move! Move! Move! Move! Move! Move!'

John struggles into a leather, sponge padded and soap-slick pull-over, which puzzles him. He'd had fatigues and webbing before. "How the fuck is this meant to stop bullets?" he asks. The man he speaks to is familiar; John knows the face but he can't for the life of him remember his name. He's not waiting for John to remember anyway, slamming the safety off of his rifle and plunging into the wadi, yelling back, "They cut the fucking EU funding, didn't they?"

"Shit."

Sholto is in the command centre; John knows this like he knows which way is up, and he knows he must report there. He runs out of his room down the side of the wadi, boots thumping on short grass that fades into linoleum, his gun is a clipboard under his arm, and it clatters against the swing doors that suddenly won't swing.

Of course, the base is on lockdown. If the doors are locked, they won't open, and there's Sholto, probably getting annoyed with waiting for him, in the command tower above the opium fields. John is exasperated. An ambulance blares and he turns back to see what it's bringing in, reaching automatically for his stethoscope.

"What is it?" he demands, pacing alongside the gurney, trying to read his clipboard but he can't make sense of any of the words. "What the fuck is this? Why's this written like this?"

"He's come from Russia. Male, white, 6ft no inches, 35 years old. Blue eyes, dark hair-"

"No, no, no, no no," John groans, stumbling. The man's face is covered with a mask, the underside bloody, and his body by a sheet. He reaches out a hand to pull it back, to see, to know, to be certain, but the gurney is whizzing ahead of him. John crashes through the door and finds himself in the medical archives. If it's Sherlock, if the patient really is Sherlock, then it will be written somewhere here.

He looks, pulling out the drawers on the cabinets, which spill out receipts and ISA forms and the cardboard fronts of cereal packets. He leans down to pick up Tony the Tiger and then- and then-

John blinks awake the moment Sherlock's feet touch the floor. It's hard wired into his system. "John," Sherlock whispers, leaning over the bed. "Are you awake?"

"Yes, sir, here." John does half a sit up from the mattress before his brain catches up with his body and he remembers where he is. He slumps back, and yawns. "Fucking hell."

"You were dreaming," Sherlock comments, wobbling on one leg as he pulls on his shoe, still leaning. He has slept in his clothes and his shirt is wrinkled. John picks at the sand in his eye.

"I was..." he mumbles. Pieces of the dream shake around in his memory, already fading, leaving him with an uncomfortable feeling he should be somewhere. Sherlock plants himself on the edge of John's bed to tie his laces and waits for John to say more.

John says, "I was dreaming about work. I think you were there."

"Was I?" Sherlock is interested to know this. "What was I doing?"

Disturbed

"John?"

Sherlock stops, crosseyed at the tips of John's fingers touching his chin. He leans and follows the touch as John brings his hand back towards his body, and it takes him straight to John's lips. Sherlock softens into John's touch and for a moment, he relaxes away from the constraints of the case and in letting go, tiredness seeps into him. There's a temptation to go with it; to let it take him out of busyness into the coil of John's body.

He kisses John and there are no hard feelings, but the pull of the case drags him up again, though he remains sitting on the bed. John pushes himself around to join him on the edge of the mattress.

"We need to solve this case," he says, after a moment.

"Mm," Sherlock agrees. John stretches and gets up, grabbing his jeans from the floor and shaking them out.

'Good man,' Sherlock thinks, touched.

"So where are we going?" John asks.

"I've been thinking," Sherlock reports, which is an understatement. He's been trailing through his memories, dozens of them, and getting distracted a lot, and he still hasn't found what it is that keeps snagging on his thought processes. "Thinking, thinking, thinking and it's getting me nowhere."

"About the killer?"

"About the field. 1989, I was eight years old. We came here for no more than two days, but something happened in that time, I know it. It's *somewhere* in my head, I just need to get hold of it."

"You think these murders go right back to then? It's a... copycat or related somehow?"

Sherlock pauses, his expression ceramic as he considers John's words.

"No. That was nearly... but no. No, not related. Unless... *related*. I keep going back to that fair."

“What fair?”

“Summer, 1989.”

“You’ll figure it out.”

“Of course I will,” Sherlock says, a hair indignant, but it’s a relief to hear it. This one is chewing at him on a personal level, and he doesn’t like it. John leans forward and touches his lips with his own.

“What do we do first?” John sits back down, taking up his phone from the bedside table. No calls, no messages.

“I need to go back to the field. Be in it. Look. Walk. Alone,” he adds, remorsefully. John presses his thumb to Sherlock’s chin. “My head’s too full.”

“It’s ok,” John says, disappointed. “Anything I can do?”

“Find the photographs. Anything, from 1989. Ask Tolly. See if there’s anything strange.”

John nods. “Leave it to me,” he says and takes pleasure in the way it makes Sherlock happy.

Sherlock rises from the bed, snatching up his jacket and pulling it on, leaving the Belstaff flopped over the bed. John hurries out of his t-shirt into a button-down and follows Sherlock out of the house, shoving his shirttails into his trousers. “When will you be back.”

“When inspiration comes.”

“Lunch time?” John presses, “I’m going to come find you if you don’t show up in two hours, do you hear?” He checks his watch is showing the correct time and then catches Sherlock’s wrist and ensures that Sherlock’s is too. “Two hours.”

“I’ll be fine,” Sherlock grumps good-naturally, squirming free. “Two hours.”

John’s satisfied with hearing him say it, and Sherlock darts off with a backwards glance and a kiss on his lips that he’s keeping for now, just for the tease of it.

The stable yard is fresh and gleaming in the morning air. Clean air. John breathes it in. It’s a huge difference compared to London. A cat rolls in the dust on a doorstep and then picks itself up and strolls away, tail raised and indifferent to John’s existence.

He stands for a moment, enjoying just being, scratching idly at his face. He forgot to bring a razor and his chin itches from the stubble. It’s so pleasant that he’s almost disappointed when Tolly appears, clutching a pair of mugs and dragging her feet.

“Morning’,” she says. Her hair is loose and tousled, and she’s wearing a mishmash of clothing. Pyjama bottoms tucked into a pair of muddy riding boots, a sweatshirt and the outsized jacket.

She yawns so wide John can see her molars, blindly proffering him a mug.

“Gah, sorry. Saw you through the kitchen window,” she says after he takes it. “Hope you don’t take sugar- we’re out.”

“No, that’s fine.” He doesn’t take milk either, but as Bill had often crudely put it, it was hot, wet

and warm, so what more did he want? “Thanks.”

“Welc.”

“What’s going on?” John asks, hearing a car door close and a vehicle depart on the other side of the stable block.

“Donna had her foal,” Tolly says. She has deep dark circles under her eyes and a lazy smile. “At about four-thirty this morning.”

“Everything go alright?”

“Yeah,” she heaves a tired, satisfied smile that just borders on daft, “Little colt. He’s beeeeeeeautiful. I love them. I love them so much. He’s just gorgeous.”

“Congratulations.”

She slumps down on a straw-bale, giving it a thump by way of invitation to John to join her. He takes a seat and they bask for a moment in the emerging sunlight, trying not to doze.

Tolly yawns again. “Are the others around?”

“Sherlock shot out of bed about half an hour ago and went to look at that field again. Haven’t seen Wiggins since last night.”

She grins sidelong at him and waggles her eyebrows. “He’s a lad.”

“So I hear.”

Tolly snorts at him, her hair flopping into her eyes and making her look more like a shaggy pony than ever.

“He’s actually quite a good laugh, your mate.”

“Wiggins?”

“Yeah. He did this magic trick he said he’d learned to do so he could impress girls. I told him it was rubbish.”

“And?”

“And he said that was the point- then he’d know the girls who’d feel sorry for him, the devil.” Tolly gives a dirty little chuckle. “And he showed me his lizard.”

John spews bubbles into his coffee.

“It was cute,” Tolly says. “Told me he was saving up for a bigger one.”

John’s imagination goes off on a wild and dicey flight before he remembers with a thud that Wiggins has an actual gecko of some sort.

“Oh!” he says, “That thing. The skink.”

“Well, that’s what I’m calling it anyway,” Tolly says, and chuckles again at her own filth and just like that, John discovers that he likes her. He shakes his head, squinting in the sunshine, and remembers doing this with other mates, on and off over the years- talking crap the morning after a

night out, on the edge of a hangover, comparing disasters and inventing dirt for their reputations.

“I won’t ask what you got up to last night,” Tolly adds. “House to yourself.”

“Your aunt was in the room next door,” John objects. The joke takes him off-guard but if it shows at all outwardly, Tolly doesn’t notice.

“She sleeps like a rock. You could scream the roof off and she wouldn’t notice,” Tolly says in the voice of one who has tested this theory to its fullest extent. “But she gets up early and forgets to knock.” John laughs and then slides his fingers over the smooth ceramic of his cup. Tolly says nothing and he likes that too, that she knows when to speak and when to not.

They bask for a while like a couple of frogs, blinking stupidly against the glare of the concrete. The boxer comes bowing and scraping out and washes Tolly’s free hand for her.

“D’you like dogs?” She asks, wiping her fingers on her knees.

“Yeah,” John says. “Not chihuahua’s maybe, but real dogs? Absolutely.”

“If you ever move out of your shit-box to somewhere actually habitable, I’ll give you a dog, if you want.” Tolly squints at him, pushing her hair out her face, oblivious to the slobber. “Do you think you’d ever leave London?”

“I’m not sure... I’ve thought about it,” John confesses. “I don’t think it’ll happen though.”

“Cause of himself?”

John thinks of the other house in the country, with the boggy lane and village pub with walls covered in taxidermy. A place Sherlock ironically belongs to but does not fit in. Then again, John asks himself, does Sherlock fit in in London? He dreads the day they have to face the fact that they are outgrowing 221B. It’s a grubby, run-down dedicated bachelor pad come laboratory, and John loves it, and it’s home, but he can see it will only take them so far.

“There’s a lot to tie us to London,” John says instead. He reaches out awkwardly and scrubs the boxer’s boney head, and the animals’ eyes turn up to him adoringly, showing the pink crescents of its lower lids.

“It’s funny,” Tolly says. For a long moment she doesn’t elaborate. John teeters on the edge of a response but is unable to form one for a long moment either and the silence inches into discomfort.

Finally John says, “You...you’re not interested in something long-term?”

“Couldn’t imagine it,” Tolly says frankly. “I’m cool with having sex and stuff, but all the rest of it just sounds like a headache. I don’t want to compromise what else I’ve got going on.”

“The farm?”

“I love horses,” Tolly reminds him. “Always have. I had herds of hobby horses as a kid, way before I even came here. If I could find a sock and a stick it’d have button eyes and a name by tea-time.” She muses, tapping her nails against her mug. Then she shrugs.

“And I’m too thick to do much else even if I wanted to.” John is surprised. “It’s true. I didn’t even get GCSEs hardly.”

“That doesn’t make you thick.”

“Well, I’ve always been smart enough to know what I want and get it, so there is that,” Tolly agrees, considering.

“I’m not sure I have,” John says. The interest in medicine had come on during his teens; the army idea a brainchild of his frustrated early twenties. The longing for a child hit home a little later than that. But he has always wanted a family and a single, unwavering friend. He’s always wanted a Sherlock.

Tolly guesses from his expression and she gives a slight shake of her head in pleased disbelief.

“Dunno what you’re thinking, but you’re either loved up or going daft.”

“Yeah, maybe,” John allows. Tolly laughs.

“We’re all mad round here.” She eases off of the straw bale, shooing the boxer away. “Speaking of things that are smart and daft, shall we go find them?”

“Sherlock and the skink?”

“Slim ’n’ him,” Tolly says and then laughs again unaffectedly, until she snorts. “Fuck.”

John grins, waiting for Tolly to emerge from behind her hands before shaking his head slightly.

“Actually, Sherlock wanted some space to work. He did ask me to do one thing, though. Have you got any old photo albums around the place? From when you were kids?”

“Sure, there’s a stack in the house,” Tolly answers, “probably more in the loft. And there’s all the records in the office, but I’m guessing you’re not after the stud photos, right?”

“Uh, I don’t think so. Do you mind if I look?”

Tolly shrugs. “Help yourself.”

Sherlock stands in the grass up to his knees, and watches it sway in the breeze. He feels drawn here, as if by magnetism, but he’s thought and he’s thought and gone through his mind palace and he still cannot fathom what it is that keeps pulling him back to this. It’s a block in his brain; a wrench jammed into his machinery and nothing else will click into place until he solves it.

He just can’t remember.

Or he remembers too much, of too little relevance.

“What am I missing?” He shudders, frustrated with himself, and then gives in and refers himself to a memory as great as his, but which has been organised for longer than his own. He is glad that he is at least at the top of a hill; the signal is weak, but it works.

“1989,” he says without preamble, as soon as the phone stops ringing. “Why did we come to the farm?”

There is a pause on the other end of the line and he hears Mycroft moving through a house, only a short distance, and closing a door.

“Where are you?” Sherlock asks, frowning. Something else has pinged in his brain.

“Why are you asking about the farm?” Mycroft deflects. There’s the soft click-click of the man

flicking one nail thoughtfully across another.

“Why did we go there? You, me and Mummy. Daddy wasn’t there.”

“Daddy was working, and besides, we went to see Aunt Lydia.”

“We never went to see Aunt Lydia, ever. Not Christmas, not birthdays, not holidays. Not once, except that time.

“Ah, well... It was down to Aunt Alice’s letter.”

“Who?”

“Not a real aunt, of course.”

“You don’t say?” Sherlock barks back. “I’d have remembered.”

“Ottoline’s mother. She disappeared off in a state and then sent some letter back or other. I don’t know, I wasn’t interested at the time. I was busy. Oxford applications.”

Tolly’s mother. Of course. There’d been a present...

“The boat,” Sherlock says, half to himself. A plastic monstrosity- a pirate ship- with a card he can only dimly remember; even back then he hadn’t cared much for sentimental ritual, but he’d liked the present. It comes back into vision now, Aunt Lydia’s enormous loopy writing - To William, love A L O. Three kisses.

“What did the letter say?”

“Something, something, gone home, keep the child, I think,” Mycroft answers. “Why? Have you found her somewhere?”

“I have to go,” Sherlock says at once, and hangs up.

A moment later his brain catches up with the echo of the closing door, the thud of it, the external background noise.

Baker Street, he thinks, but he has no time to be aghast over it.

He’s on the edge of it; the fizz of some kind of memory he’d discarded as irrelevant- if only he’d had all the information as a child.

Something about the summer fair. Something...grass?

Redbeard rolling in the grass? - Wrong

Grass in his hair? - Wrong? How is that helpful?

Hair like grass? Maybe?

Sherlock squeezes his eyes shut and scrabbles for every long-faded scrap of memory, and they bubble up, these tiny glimpses of an 8-year-old’s interests.

A fallen tree, long weathered. The bark flaked off like scabs under his thumbs; pull and pinch at the wood, and it comes apart in damp foamy strands like roast chicken. A bee hive sandwiched between glass, ice cream, a wire pen full of basset hounds, ferrets; big man laughing pushing along

a pig with a board, foam around the pig's mouth. The sweet stall and treacle toffee, bare-armed men with long saws competing to halve a log; the crack of clay pigeons; the black ends of the fire eater's fingers. Terrier racing.

Useless.

Tolly, he remembers, standing on the fence at the heavy horses ring, watching them resolute with her back to him. Her hair had fallen loose around her shoulders in limp fronds. Something itches at the back of his mind.

The back of a blonde head.

Before he is cognisant of the fact, he is dialling Mycroft's number again.

"Who was the girl?" he demands. He hears Mycroft's intake of breath. He has absolutely surprised him for once in his life.

"I—" Mycroft begins, the edge of a lie.

"The girl at the stall." That's it. That's what he remembers. The memory wells up; still blurry but now identified. A lean, older teenager in cut off jeans with her back to him, looking into one of the booths, and Mycroft. That's what he'd noticed. There's something... off about it all.

Mycroft's round, freckled face swims back into detail in his mind- perhaps he's just painting it in based on assumption, but the expression feels real. Perplexed. She'd said something to him.

"What did she say to you?"

"This is—"

"Who was she?"

"Sherlock, don't be—"

"Why were you shocked? What did she want? Why is she important? Why did I notice you? Why did you not notice me? Hello?" Mycroft has hung up. Sherlock is blown away at the impertinence. He dials again. No answer.

He stands and dials, over and over, for the next half an hour until finally Mycroft picks up in irritation. "Will you stop?"

"You could turn your phone off," Sherlock points out and enjoys the strangled sound of Mycroft in a fury. He would never turn his phone off, of course. What if someone important called?

'Well they have,' Sherlock thinks, 'Me.'

"Tell me, or I'll keep annoying you."

"It's private," Mycroft is grinding his teeth. "Mind your own business."

And just like that, Sherlock knows.

The plastic crackles as John turns pages in the photo album. He has a spread of them over the dining room table, which start in black and white and end abruptly in the early-2000s.

There are photos that make John smile. He finds one of what must be Mummy, gowned and capped and clasping a drooping bouquet. Aunt Lydia beams out the photo beside her and a young man mugs for the camera over the tops of their heads. Must be Uncle Rudy.

He laughs out loud at a school photo of Tolly, and the idea of there possibly being similar indignities featuring Sherlock is downright delicious. He'll have to find out. John wonders what happened to his old school photos. Presumably Stella still has some somewhere. She'd been a keepsake kind of person.

He lets the album slap closed and opens the next. It is not well organised and it takes some back and forth delving to find sets that he's fairly confident must be from around the 80's. He lays the albums all out on the floor using Tolly's age as a point of reference and a story starts to emerge.

John squats, letting his fingers trace the threads of it. Aunt Lydia at the start of her career dressed in silks, looking tremendously thin. She must have had an ongoing battle with her height and it must have become clear quite quickly that she had no real future as a jockey. There are pictures of her with various horses in different stables.

Gradually more familiar faces start to appear in the pictures - Baldwin, with all his hair and with less of his pot belly and more photos of racecourses. John turns one over. Lydia's scratchy writing tells him that it is from Ireland, 1979. He turns it back. It's a group shot of some racing association. John assumes this was Lydia's career move, to shift from jockeying to breeding.

There are more of a dozen other trips of the sort, and as John flicks through the pages, a more tentative face starts to show up. The resemblance is striking though he finds only one clear snap of the woman from this time. She's tiny, in a raw, wiry sort of way. She squirms before the camera with an embarrassed smile, hands thrust deep into the pockets of a smock apron. There's nothing other than a brick wall lined with an explosion of fuchsias; John can guess she was a reluctant subject. On the back it simply says 'Alice in the flowers'.

Curious, John looks for others. He finds them, dated 1982, this time in the English house, and what he immediately thinks of as happier times. He finds one of her standing, hands on hips, looking down at a black and white cat. Another with her sprawl-legged on a lawn under a tree, a chicken nesting in her lap, no question as to where Tolly gets her love of animals. There are pins holes in the top of the photo and one side has been smudged slightly with black ink.

John puts them aside, still hunting. There are so many pieces of paper- literal decades of snaps and ephemera. He pockets some of his finds, just borrowing, as he flicks through the years.

1987. He finds a sun-faded photo of a setter, marked 'Rooster'. He takes it to show Sherlock. 2001, Tolly on a lanky yearling in the arena, doubled by her reflection.

"Ahah," says John, triumphant.

1989, and finally some of the fair. Disappointingly few - a smatter of random shots of people doing things in a straw-lined ring. There's evidence of Sherlock's story about Mycroft and the fat pony, however, evidently taken before the fall. Mycroft looks utterly bilious. John takes this one too.

Only two others take John's notice, neither of which strike him as helpful, but he is drawn to them. One is nothing more than a picture of a large shrub, but the caption makes him laugh aloud. It's underlined twice and reads, 'William Will Not!'. He can't wait to ask what the story behind this was. He smiles, and feels a pang of something he's felt many times before. A bittersweet happiness at witnessing the love of other families.

The other is from August 1989, marked 'After Goodwood'. A horse is lined up for the camera in front of a great conservatory. The horse is prettied up in a coloured rug and with a rosette dangling from its head collar. The rest of the frame is crowded with the staff of the racing yard and the back of the photograph is crowded up with their names. If nothing else, it's a good reference of who might have been around at the time.

John sits on the carpet, easing his knees and the one foot that's gone dead and sighs. 'Find anything that's strange,' Sherlock had said, but the spread of photos doesn't amount to much. He reaches for the group shot again to read through the names and then something else catches his eye and distracts him; the crown of a curly head.

He inches it from between the pages where it has slid and turns it right-side up. The lost photo is a candid shot of a boy, absorbed in something he holds in his hands. It looks like nothing more than string to John, but no doubt of utmost importance at the time. John marvels because now and then, he's seen Sherlock pull the same face as an adult. Little Sherlock's home knit is shoved firmly up to the elbows, exposing a scab and his hair is falling in his eyes in a manner that rouses an instinct in John to try and reach in and smooth it back from his brow. He wipes the dust from the surface and learns that it just about fits into his shirt pocket, against his breast. Safe and sound.

"Oh," Sherlock says, surprised, and then takes the phone from his ear and stares at it in disbelief.

This is rather much to process so suddenly. He's not even disgusted, it's just left him blank. He's rarely ever been so dumbfounded.

This is almost as powerful a surprise as John saying nice things about him like they are true. It is as shocking (though nowhere near as sweet) as Bee touching his nose and laughing and calling him 'daddy' every morning without a fraction of a doubt, because almost every morning he has forgotten somewhat that he is her daddy, after the doubts have crept in overnight.

Theoretically, he'd always known it must have happened at some point- he'd had a hunch, anyway. It would have been nice, in a way, to assume that his brother had remained a virgin as long as he himself had. Maybe not to present day but it would have been one little note of solidarity between them. Other small hints over the years have long since worn the idea away, but it's still a shock to have it confirmed.

Mycroft had been oddly quiet after the fair. Sherlock remembers not being teased about Redbeard's indiscretion, which he'd been too relieved about to question at the time. He remembers Mycroft holing up as soon as they were home, to study.

"Why?" Sherlock says, putting the phone to his ear again.

Mycroft sounds flustered, and gives him a disappointingly simple answer.

"She *asked*."

Right. Except, Sherlock doesn't even need to go to his mind palace to see his brother between the ages of 15 and 16 vividly. Always clever, the school had finally allowed him to put some of his brains to use, and apply for university two years early. He would go from being merely unpopular to an alien amongst his peers in a stroke, as soon as he'd passed the interviews.

Which he would.

But back then?

Fat, Sherlock remembers. Not just baby-weight, or big bones, Mycroft had been fat at that age. The dieting wouldn't kick in with any real seriousness until after he'd gone through the first term at Oxford. Fat and red-headed- not a popular combination. And whilst it had never been a bright ginger, more auburn and coppery in the sunshine, Mycroft had been unmistakably red. And freckled, and erudite, but awkward.

This in mind, Sherlock has only one other question.

“Why you?”

“Ah,” Mycroft says, slowly, embarrassed. “Yes. That.”

‘Is this related to the murder?’ Sherlock thinks, as he waits for Mycroft to say more. ‘No? Maybe... somehow.’ But he can feel the link growing tenuous the more it all unravels. ‘So then why did I bother to remember this?’

Because, Lestrade answers, looking fondly amused. It changed things between you. He grew up, and you didn't. You just blundered through puberty and didn't mature.

All children grow up, except one.

Do you know what we call you? The ice man, and the virgin.

Sherlock shakes his head.

“Sherlock?”

“Just answer my damn question, Mycroft. Who was she? Why did she...?”

“Her name was Sophia Matherson.” Mycroft says, sounding tired. “And I don't know what she was thinking. Maybe she wasn't. Personally, I've always preferred to chalk it up to a cry for help.”

“What?”

“Oh, go and read a newspaper,” Mycroft says, and when he hangs up, Sherlock does not dial back.

He's more troubled now than before the call. Matherson? It doesn't ring of importance in any way whatsoever. Newspapers?

Aunt Alice?

“But it doesn't connect,” Sherlock growls at his phone. “It doesn't fit!”

Oh, dear.

“Why you? Why is it always you?”

Irene's wearing his coat, the red lipstick, the smirk. She stands out black and white against the green of the grass. She opens her mouth and says, I know what you want, and then for once, Sherlock doesn't know what she's going to do. He imagines the reproachful pout of her lips, that expression that says all too loudly, ‘you stupid male’, but he can't imagine what she wants to say. In the next blink, she's gone again from his mind palace.

Perturbed, he returns to the farm.

John is waiting for him in the yard. Sherlock crosses the concrete to him, eyes fixed on him but distracted by the sensation of his atrial muscles contracting a fractional moment before they should; a disruption maybe in his sinoatrial node, or a surge in blood pressure.

Your heart skipped a beat, Lestrade translates in his head.

“Go away.”

“Sorry?” John says.

“Not you. What are you doing?”

“Um, I was looking for you. Thinking a lot about the case too, actually.”

John puts his hands on his hips and looks up at him, head cocked to one side. He’s like a pugnacious bird, Sherlock thinks, thrilled. The sun has brought out the brighter colours in John’s hair, and the gleam of the pale grey he’s inevitably going to turn one day. John’s hands are closed on the stupid cotton of his own shirt, but Sherlock can feel how they want to move and cross the gap in the air between them.

He can feel the cold metal door of the tractor at his back again.

‘Wouldn’t it be nice’, Sherlock thinks to himself, ‘if my brain would shut up and let me go and do that.’ Instead, he can’t help but stare at John’s hair so hard that John lifts a hand and touches it self-consciously.

“What?”

“Not sure,” Sherlock says slowly. “I keep coming back to hair. Too many blondes.”

“What blondes?” John asks, automatically suspicious. Sherlock tilts John’s head down using John’s ears as convenient handles and peers at the crown of his head.

“What? What are you looking for.”

“Good news, you’re not balding,” Sherlock says, absently. He scrutinises the texture and the colour in closer detail and then lets go. “Wrong colour...Where’s Tolly?”

“Cooing at her new baby,” John tells him, rubbing at his ears, baffled. Sherlock claps and turns around in the yard. No dogs. All in all, it’s a rubbish morning.

“Mathersons...”

“What?” John says for the third time.

“Never mind, it’s... a thing that makes no sense. Tell me your thoughts. I need to hear someone speak. You.”

John looks at him, and Sherlock’s atrial muscles do something strange again at the blueness of John’s eyes. John’s thoughts seem clear and a little exciting.

“About the case,” Sherlock adds, swallowing. “Solve it. Did you have coffee without me?”

John looks at the empty mug on the straw, and shakes his head with a laugh. “Alright, Lets get you one and I’ll tell you my ideas.”

They find Wiggins with roughly the same idea in the kitchen, looking scruffy. There's a faint scratch on the back of his neck, no more than a centimetre, which has barely broken the skin; the angle and shape of it suggests a fingernail.

"Ew," Sherlock summarises.

Wiggins gives him a close-mouthed, insincere smile and oozes into a chair. "Thanks," he concludes. "Wossup?"

"The arena wall," John says, proud of himself.

"Oh you figured that out?" Wiggins says, digging in his ear. "Nice."

John ignores him, and surreptitiously pushes the photo of Tolly in the arena deeper into his pocket. "It used to have a mirror on it."

"The bolt holes," Sherlock agrees.

"That's what you meant- like in a ballet studio, so they can watch their posture."

"Exactly. Why take it down? It had clearly been there for years. Unless, someone suddenly thought of another use for a big, horse-sized mirror."

"The disappearing trick."

"Well done, John!"

"Hold on," John says, raising a finger. "Let me guess one more thing. The leaking pools... There were no hoof prints or anything on any of those runs the horseman was seen on. And the horseman always went *downhill*, but we're at the top. They washed the paths, didn't they? Pumped the water from the pools and sluiced it down the lane."

"An' off-road, the prints would be muddled in with too many other marks to really stand out," Wiggins chips in.

Sherlock says. "At the end of the lane, the accomplice waited with the mirror. As the horse passed behind the mirror and vanished, they just got off and turned the sheets over. Dark horse at night? Almost impossible to see on the other side of the hedge.

"Wouldn't it have made a noise?"

"Cloth on the hooves. Oldest trick in the book. Maybe they lead it, or just holed up until they thought they were alone."

"That racing mask; how d'you make a brown horse white? Bleeding obvious. Sling a white sheet over it."

"So... this is what I can't quite figure. They didn't kill anyone?" John asks, puzzled.

"No. In fact, I think it may be pertinent to go and talk to the ghost, or, ghosts, about what they *were* doing. Fancy a guess at who?"

John purses his lips and rises to the game. He names the only name that makes any sense.

Sherlock chuckles and sweeps open the door for him. "Let's go see if you're right." His smile glitters.

“You ask the questions,” John suggests, trying not to grin like a dope. “I’ll look threatening so they get answered.”

“And *I’m* ew?” Wiggins sighs.

They go back to the yard again.

“Round and round and round they go,” Sherlock mutters to himself. It could be the lack of sleep but he’s buzzing with energy. There’s so much to pick apart and it’s all so very interesting. “Oh this is a good case. Right- Wiggins, pick a door, any door.”

The jocks’ block is the low slung building between the main house and the yard, and the door is unlocked when they barge in. Some of the men are already awake- there’s a handful of them at most, anyway. One looks up, hand stuck in a boot he’s polishing. “What’s going on?”

“Not you,” Wiggins says, brushing past. They go down the corridor, pushing open doors and surprising the people inside until Wiggins opens one and stops. “In ‘ere.”

The man is in bed, sprawled out and barely awake when Wiggins and John lay a hand each on one of his ankles and pull him out from under the sheets. He offers a polite objection at this.

“Y’fucking barmy bastards, what the fuck’s your game?”

“Hello,” Sherlock says, nicely. “Dom, isn’t it?”

“Depends on what cunt’s asking.”

“What the hell are you doing?” another jock demands.

“Don’t mind us,” John says, “Though if you could find Tony, that would be really helpful.”

He shuts the door on the onlookers before anyone can argue, and Dom splutters from the floor, swearing and hauling himself up.

“You’re a fucking lot of daft smackheads,” he grouses, “What you doing, coming in my room, I was fucking sleeping!”

“We’ve got questions,” Wiggins says, swaggering around the side of the bed. “And probably the answers too, but we thought we’d try a mental exercise first, like, in thinkin’ aloud.”

“Oh aye? Come here, and I’ll give you a slap, you lanky shite.”

“Wiggins, stop enjoying yourself before you get hospitalised,” Sherlock advises. “No, this is just a chat really. You see, we’re looking for someone stupid enough to come up with a ridiculous idea like a ghost, and someone smart enough to put it into practice. We’re assuming you’re the former.”

Wiggins rummages in the bedside cabinet and holds up a book. It glitters with lurid red drops and boasts a cover where the author’s name is significantly larger than the title. There are dozens of them. “Busted.”

John takes it from him and examines the blurb on the back. “Werewolf CSI?”

“That’s fucking prime, man, leave it alone!”

“Mind if I join you?”

They turn and Tony is there, holding the door open a fraction and looking at them expectantly.

“Get dressed, Dom. Gents, if you’d come outside and stop clogging things up?” There’s a scuffle of conversation outside the door, and when Sherlock opens it fully, the jockeys are shuffling off, looking confused and annoyed.

Tony leans in the room again, and waits for Dom to finish struggling into his jeans.

“Want to see the ghost?” he asks.

It’s a bit of time-wasting really, but Tony shows them the mirror and the white cloth used to turn the ex-race-horses of the stud into the spectral stallion of the Hussar.

“The police talked a lot,” Tony explains. “And didn’t achieve anything. So then Dom hit on the idea, a stupid idea really, of bringing back the Hussar. Even if it didn’t deter the slasher, we figured it might be enough to get someone else down here.”

He folds his arms and looks Sherlock up and down. “So I’d say it worked.”

“You did this just to get Sherlock’s attention?”

Dom makes an exaggerated gesture. “That’s how it goes, don’t it? You only care if it’s proper weird? This was the weirdest we could come up with on short notice, like.”

“Hold on, so you rode out once and someone got murdered, and you thought, oh well, let’s just carry on?” John asks.

“It could have just been coincidence,” Dom argues. “Sometimes people just get stabbed, you know.”

“Maybe in Cleveland!”

“We stopped, didn’t we?”

“After someone died!”

“That’s got nowt to do with us! We were just... trying to get that fucker slashing up our horses nicked. Tolly’s been upset as. Right, Tone?”

“Is that right?” Wiggins asks at once, looking between them.

‘Oho,’ John thinks. Tony shifts, defensive, staring down Wiggin’s piercing look. A beat behind on this occasion, Sherlock oscillates his attention between Wiggins and Tony, glances at Dom and then looks at John in bewilderment.

“What?” he says, even as he realises. “Oh no.” Then he says, “Oh” again, in a very different tone.

“I think the general take-away, Sherlock, is that Tony makes a lot of visits to your cousin’s cottage,” John says, trying not to smile. He looks to see if Sherlock has either understood or appreciated the funny side of the conversation, but Sherlock is no longer paying any of them the blindest bit of attention.

Instead, Sherlock is staring at something over Tony’s shoulder, his expression gone very strange.

“What’s the matter?”

Without speaking, Sherlock pushes past them all and reaches up, to the door of the stable. The wood has cracked a little and there, on the splintered edge, is caught a few fine threads. He pulls them loose and looks at them.

“Horse hair,” Tony says, “They like to rub on the edge of the door; have a bit of a scratch.”

“Oh,” Sherlock says, from very far away. “Yes. That was it...”

Hair.

No wonder it’s been sticking in his mind, and no wonder he’d forgotten. Such a tiny, insignificant thing. Hair. He’d given it only the briefest of considerations as a child, the few strands of hair caught on the trailing branches of the ash trees, by Brecher’s Brook. He’d pushed the branch aside and they’d gleamed in the sun, gold and white, and then he’d let go and seen them sway in the air. He’d turned his head and thought, ‘That’s odd,’ and then Redbeard had pulled on the lead and he’d turned back to continue pouring out his disappointments.

Blonde hair. It could have come from anywhere, but it must have been left there recently. Caught and torn from someone’s head as they’d passed through. Sherlock holds his hands out in mid air to estimate his own height age eight. So... the branch must have been....

He raises one of his hands to compare and then lifts the other to Tolly’s present height. “It’s too low,” he says, looking at his hand marking the branch. “It’s far too low... Why did no one-? Of course.”

“Sherlock,” John says again. Sherlock has stopped paddling his hands in mid-air and gone very still.

Then abruptly Sherlock snaps to attention and turns on his heel. “I need to- You-” he spins back again and prods Tony in the chest. “Have you a licence for heavy machinery?”

“Uh. Yeah. What do you need?”

“Something better than a tractor.”

“I’ve got a friend with a hydraulic excavator?”

“Perfect, where?”

Tony tells him and Sherlock looks it up. “Perfect,” he repeats. “We can have a look at the microfiche on route. You come with me. John, stay here. Keep your eyes peeled.”

“What am I looking for?”

“I need a distraction... Wiggins, make a distraction.”

“Here?”

Sherlock turns in another circle, blinking rapidly. “No, later. I’ll text. Yes. Something big. Get everyone over here. *Everyone*, do you hear? Start the Pudding Lane protocol if you have to.”

Wiggins rocks back on his heels, eyes wide. “Are you sure?” John is alarmed. He’s not heard of Pudding Lane protocol, and it sounds far more ominous than the code name suggests.

“Fake it,” Sherlock says dismissively. He starts when John grasps his arm.

“Sherlock, is this Vatican cameos? The murderer?”

“What? Oh, oh no, not that one.”

“That one?” John repeats, incredulous. “What do you mean, ‘that one’? Yes, that one. The one we came here to solve. Is there another one?”

“Wiggins can manage the killer, it’s really nothing.”

“Wait, wot?” Wiggins says, catching onto John’s alarm. “Are you mad? He’s gonna stab me!”

“Why would he want stab you?”

“Ah, right, ‘bout that-“

“Take John,” Sherlock interrupts, “He’s killed people too and no one’s ever stabbed him.”

Wiggins can’t argue with this, having personally attempted it and come off the worse for it.

“Alright, um...”

Sherlock slips on the concrete, pulling John to one side. “1989, John,” Sherlock says feverishly, once they are apart. “1989!” He shakes John’s upper arms. “It was staring me in the face-! I need the headlines.”

“What headlines? Where are you going?”

Sherlock stutters backwards over his thoughts, shaking his head. “Newspapers, John. Scandal. They don’t keep the archives that far back online. I need a library.”

“Ok, and the heavy machinery?”

“I need to do some digging.”

“Is this going to be dangerous?”

“Yes,” Sherlock says, squirming free. “No, I mean, yes dangerous here. Libraries, generally speaking, fairly safe. Paper cuts, falling books, people with B.O. Don’t get stabbed,” he adds, as an afterthought. “I’ll be annoyed.”

“I won’t get stabbed,” John says. He half believes Sherlock, and he can’t say what there is to make him uneasy other than his sense of danger is creeping under his skin. “Are you sure about this?”

“Oh, yes,” Sherlock answers, at once. “Oh, but don’t let Wiggins get stabbed too badly either. He’s useful. Take my keys.” He throws this last demand in Tony’s direction, along with the keys to the rental car.

“Wiggins, explain about the slasher. I’ll text,” Sherlock promises John, pointing at him. Then throwing his other finger at Tony, commands, “Make sure I text, I forget.”

John opens his mouth to argue and then lets it go. “Alright, just keep in touch. Wait, here.” He fumbles in his pocket and presses the Goodwood photograph against Sherlock’s shirtfront. Sherlock’s finger’s clasp his own as he takes it. “What’s this?”

“Found it in the albums. Maybe it’ll be useful.”

Sherlock runs his eyes over it and goes still. “Aunt Alice...” He flips it over and frowns at the back, his lip curling. “August.”

“A bit before the fair, I think,” John adds, and is cut short when Sherlock suddenly ducks close, his mouth tickling John’s ear as he whispers, “Thank you.”

Sherlock lets go, turning so he can’t think about it again, and bundles himself into the passenger seat, thumping the dashboard until Tony gets in and starts the engine. They pull away, the tires churning up dust from the concrete.

“Nearest large library,” Sherlock says, unlocking his phone and typing rapidly. “And don’t talk to me.”

Tony shuts his mouth and drives.

The photograph curls on Sherlock’s knee, a smiling group of people, their grins and bare arms flashing. All except for Aunt Alice, who is grimacing behind a smile, and wearing a scarf.

Wiggins sucks air between his teeth. “So this killer,” he starts.

“Don’t talk to me a moment.”

John stares at the screen of his phone until his eyes water, and then, thank God, Sherlock texts.

[Believe something happened summer here gone to get proof - SH]

They’re already too far down the hill for him to see anything more than the settling dust and the tiles of the outbuilding roofs turning a deep, bloodstain brown in the sunshine. He closes his eyes a moment instead and frowning, pecks at his phone with his forefinger.

[Don’t get yourself killed]

He pauses. He’s acutely aware of Wiggins lurking around behind him, and Dom giving him the evil eye from only a slight distance further. Sweat prickles down his collarbone, but things are moving fast on this case, to an end John can’t predict. The dust sticks to his jeans and his lips, and it’s hot. Not desert hot, but hot enough in this sun trap of a yard.

‘You have regrets,’ Ella has tried to discuss with him on so many occasions. John types, just in case. He sends one more message, phone shielded by the curve of his body and it takes him only seconds to get out the words of a lifetime.

[I love you] he types, and hits send.

Chapter End Notes

Notes:

1) It is a fact never acknowledged enough about Britain that any journey of more than a few hours, is always effected by road works. There are always road works.

ALWAYS. And if there aren't road works then there's an accident or congestion. Fact.

2) Wessex is one of those shady places that no longer technically exists, but The People still know. It has a lot to do with King Alfred the Great, who laid the foundations of the idea of England as a political unit by being really pedantically organised between bouts of piles.

3) Housemartins are these [cute, swallow sort of looking birds](#). They're synonymous with summer and stables to me. Apparently they migrate to Africa, but despite numerous (like hundreds of thousands) attempts to ring and track a bird and find out where, scientists still aren't sure. They are like 'Cotton Eye Joe' in tiny bird form.

4) Do I need to explain whitewash? I feel like this is not so much a universal thing so probably I do. Whitewash is like... cheap paint? It comes in a powder that is (unsurprisingly) white, and it's used to paint the insides of stables and sheds and shit like that. It doesn't wash off, but it does crumble off, and you can flake old whitewash off the walls in a really satisfying way. It's got this interesting feel to it in damp weather as well, kind of smooth and puffy and in dry weather it leaves powder on your fingers. I'm not sure if modern stables still use it much, but definitely as recently as the early 2000's, the farmer I knew was still slapping it on his chicken sheds and so on. Probably the only real reason to use it is that it's slightly antibacterial and bugs don't like it.

5) I love comments a super great deal, but (and I'm speaking to a **tiny** minority predominantly in my Tumblr inbox here) if you could hold back on the 'MOAR NOW YOU MUST UPDATE WHEN DO THEY SEX CAN IT BE SEX NOW????' messages until pretty much the end of time, I'd be grateful.

6) Also, have you spotted a word that just looks plain wrong? Please drop me a line saying 'hey, bud, I think you goofed in this line here' and you will have my thanks. These chapters are beasts and things always get through the net, so it's honestly a big help. Y'know, I typo, my computer does weird things between the British typing input into US software on a Japanese laptop. It tries its best, yet additional vowels are a hurdle it can fall flat on it's face over. So, no need for English lessons; I promise. I'm good.

7) Slight disclaimer; Now the fic has got to this size and stage, I've started splitting up some story arcs in the run to the end, but this means I don't always get the full thing written before I post a section. The pay off is I can put chapters up quicker, the downside is sometimes I get hit with a bit of story logistics later, and cases are the worst for this. Be kind with this chapter; it's likely one of the ones I come back and edit when the whole story is completed.

8) The horse stabbing case is a nod to ACD, if you've read his biography. Interesting stuff. It's also loosely based on a couple of nasty instances that occurred in a town I know quite well, including the 'how the fuck are they getting past the CCTV?!?' issue. Also, a fun game of the mid 90's- convincing your more urban male cousins to chance it peeing on the electric fence.

9) It is well worth taking 5 minutes to google Hussars. [They were fancy!](#) And boy did they know how to rock a moustache! They still exist (now clean-shaven) in the form

of the King's Royal Hussars and the Queens Royal Hussars. They're also associated with pegging. [Tent pegging, that is.](#) A little known sport which involved basically ruining other people's camping fun by dropping the canvas on their heads unexpectedly and then sending the infantry in. Pakistan, India and Iran really hold the laurels for this though. They ride at phenomenal speeds.

10) The chapter title comes from the song 'Cliffs Edge' by Haley Kiyoko. The working titles were 'Kiss me, Stud', 'Maximum Weenie' 'A Very Scooby-Doo Adventure' AND 'John: Do you ever have déjà vu, Mrs. Hudson? / Mrs. Hudson: I don't think so, but I could check in the kitchen', plus a few others that have been lost to time, because we went through THAT MANY FUCKING EDITING REVISIONS.

And that's it! Comments? Questions? Do let me know if there's things I've not explained that you would like explained. Or if you just want to let it all out about that one awful childhood photograph of yourself (mine featured a strawberry smock. Why, mother, WHY?) then get in touch!

Have a great weekend! -Odamaki xx

Part 18: Talk to Me

Chapter Summary

Sherlock turns his head back to look at the white expanse of ceiling and simply feel. Presently John shifts onto his side and looks at Sherlock in the darkness. With his eyes only, he follows the silhouette of Sherlock's brow, the bridge of his nose, his mouth, his chin, his throat. Sherlock swallows.

And waits.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Part 18: Talk To Me

It is 1978 and Uncle Vern is dying.

The family are rallied together at the farm in Wessex for what will come to be a very important meeting. They arrive in twos and threes, or in Lydia's case, alone. She is twenty-eight years old and hasn't been home in nearly a decade. Not since she had to give up racing.

It is strange to be back. England is very green in contrast to Texas and Kentucky, and yet not as green as Asia. Lydia feels much the same. It is stranger still to find her baby sister has been whisked away, and in her place is another, 'Mummy', towing by the hand a perfect blob of a four-year-old. Lydia and the toddler stare at one another. They do not initially get along.

The facts of the matter are these; Uncle Vern is in no condition to be anywhere other than a hospice bed. His assets are exactly as they see before them laid out in papers, turf, stone and bloodstock, and for some time now there has been concern about Uncle Vern's decisions. In short; the business has floundered itself to the brink.

They have options. They can wait until the old man passes, and disperse the livestock in one sale, then lease the land, or they can form a committee and run the business themselves. 'They' in this case, consisting of Lydia's mother, her sister and her brother.

All three siblings have a certain flair for numbers. For 'Mummy', it has come to be expressed as academic-theoretical. For Rudy, it's sociological. For Lydia, it is purely financial. The three of them consider the prospects.

Mummy isn't interested. Animals do not translate well into the pure number theory that she prefers to play in, nor is it grounded in physics. Too many uncertain variables. She proposes the sale. Rudy is also in favour of dispersal with an eagerness that suggests he has an eye to get his inheritance sooner rather than later.

Mother points out the inconvenient fact that Uncle Vern is still sound of mind and would not agree. To sell his life's work would kill him.

Rudy retorts that he's dying anyway. There is a short, sharp, disagreement after which all eyes turn to Lydia.

Lydia says nothing. She alone has the emotional connection to the farm. It's where she spent most of her summers as a teenager, until familiarity had faded to contempt, and it was clear that her biology precluded her from ever achieving any note as a jockey. It's Lydia who reads the papers in full, spread out on Uncle Vern's desk. She is aware that as the eldest daughter, she occupies a particular place in the family hierarchy. Namely, she is not the boy. Secondly, she has exceeded expectations on many levels and drastically disappointed others. To wit, she is unmarried and now unremarkably employed despite her education. A P.A with a masters in finance.

She's very good P.A, to be sure, but she hasn't published any books, and she hasn't instigated anything political, and she hasn't even had the good manners to bring home a husband.

She says, "I'd like to see the accounts before anything is decided."

Her leave from work is extended for three days, during which Lydia walks the farm and re-traces the pedigrees of the horses. The old trainer, whose hands have long been tied by Uncle Vern's dogmatic approach to running the place, has a foot out the door, but he also has a son who is keen to stay on. He introduces them, and Lydia considers the second Mr. Ott carefully. He is not his father, but perhaps beggars can't be choosers.

Lydia calculates. When she meets again with the executor and her mother, she points out that the inheritance tax is going to be nearly as much as they'd earn from a sale. They have good bloodstock, but no large winners. Not recently. She leaves them to chew on that, and returns to America.

But the idea follows her back to her desk in Kentucky, and it nags at her in between managing millionaires who can turn fortunes overnight but can't make their own coffee. Some of them have invested in racing; she's been with them to the Wood and the Derby and the Flamingo Stakes, and overseas in Ireland. Many times it's been the closest she's travelled to home. She has an inkling of the other side of racing, the one with it's feet in the muck on the floor.

She telephones one of them, just to do a little routine book-keeping, and also asks what the market for Shere Khan bloodstock was these days. It's not a beast on the farm, but she's aware that it's thickly writ in the pedigrees. There's a young mare, Sheer Silk, one of his grand-daughters, with a good pedigree on the dam's side too. She's almost fit to be bred. Her sister, Silky Sea, has bred winners for another stud. The odds are there, she thinks.

"Haven't heard of Shere Khan in a while," the man answers, sucking air between his teeth. "but I know of him. He was a damn good-looking horse, and should have been a damn good hunt racer. "

"Should have been," she agrees.

"Tore 'em up right through his two year old races and looked like he was going to transition well as a three year old and do it again. Broke a leg in transit, whole career gone - poof! Overnight. Why?"

"I may have the chance to pick up some Shere Khan stock. Do you think that's a bad bet?"

"No, I'm interested to hear that. Folk were jumping hard to get breeding rights for Shere Khan back in the day, but the owner locked it up tight. Now and then a descendent pops up on the market, but always the duds. If you get that, you call me."

"If I ever raise a syndicate, I will. One more thing. Can you give me Conn Baldwin's personal number?" Lydia asks. She jots a note, and hangs up.

At the end of three days, Lydia has made her decision. She proposes it to the others and eyebrows shoot up and down, but ultimately, and with some argument, they agree. After more deliberation, they put the idea to Uncle Vern. He sighs, but he also signs.

Lydia picks up the phone to Ireland.

"Mr. Baldwin," she says, feeling lucky, "I have an offer to make you."

The deal is wrapped up. The inheritance is split- the sale price of the land goes to the inheritance tax. Mother and her siblings take shares in any future profit of the racing business. Lydia takes on the younger trainer, slashes the running costs and disperses the deadweight horses that are perfectly nice animals, but who will never come to anything on the track or the stud.

Baldwin, likewise is delighted. He has known Lydia for a number of years and likes her style. His own stud in Ireland is crowded in by older, more established estates and he'd needed land. Lydia had needed someone with money in his pocket. As recompense for asking more than the land is really worth, Lydia gives him a share in Sheer Silk.

"Boy Forthwright," he says, picking from his best stallions; the ones who have won. "Bring her over. We'll see what we get."

Hoping, Lydia crosses her fingers first, and then the Irish Sea.

1979. The stud firms itself up in Ireland, the training ground relocates to England. Lydia loses her trainer and has to agree to promote Baldwin's man in his place. She takes the trainer's son with her to Ireland, following her horses and it's Daniel Ott who notices the other woman on the farm first, though it takes either of them near on a year to do so.

It is the other woman who makes them breakfast, and who cleans the house. Baldwin has never married and never will, and Lydia is uninterested in housekeeping for him. She experiences this other female only in a secondary kind of way - a plate washed, a window opened, sheets changed, floors swept, a footstep scuttling out of sight. She is a silent presence on the cramped and busy stud, until Lydia trips over her at a race, walking horses and they finally exchange introductions officially.

"I'm Ailís," she says.

Ailís has lived by the racing estate all her life. Like Lydia, she is the oldest living daughter, overshadowed by more precocious siblings. Unlike Lydia, she has lived her whole life in her parents' home. Her mother is not strong, she confides, though it's public knowledge. She cares for her mother, and earns a wage doing chores at the estate, because it's close and her father wants her home to do the same chores there. She has raised 5 of her siblings. The one duty her mother can still perform is to produce a new one, whenever Ailís seems to have too much idle time on her hands.

She knows horses. Lydia finds herself trying to catch Ailís around to ask her questions. She is not the only one. More than once she has caught Daniel asking Ailís questions as well. He slips in to sit at the table while she's scrubbing pots or scrubbing floors, and Lydia thinks nothing of it.

The pace of life is continually increasing for Lydia, but it all really starts when Sheer Silk produces a colt in the alternate year that Lydia has claim on the offspring. They name him Shere Boy, and he is her first horse of any note. Dark pointed, tall even as a foal. Ailís looks at the colt and, with rare confidence volunteers, “I think this is one to focus on.”

The animal breaks well, and when he ships to England to train, Lydia and Daniel go with him.

Lydia is not aware of anything amiss for the next year. Shere Boy debuts solidly. He races well. He brings in money. Lydia is delighted with him. It all feels like it’s going well. She starts to think about settling in England, and after negotiating with Baldwin, she eases his load by becoming his eyes and ears and voice, on her own land.

1982. Shere Boy has not achieved what they’d hoped; just another Shere Khan. A fall in his final race has extinguished his spirit for it, and he will not race well again. Lydia retires him to stud, and watches anxiously to learn if he’ll prove himself better there.

She receives another blow when Daniel suddenly announces that he is leaving. He claims he’s found a better position where he can be the only trainer and he leaves. The same winter that blows him out of England, blows Ailís in. Lydia has not seen her in months, and received only summary, business-like letters to which she has only responded in kind.

Ailís has no real answer as to what she is doing there. She comes clutching a single suitcase, thin-lipped and looking hunted. She knows no one outside of her own town, never mind England and Lydia doesn’t know what to do. Before she has time to really let it sink in, Ailís has found an apron and make sense of the chaos in the kitchen.

“I’d like to work with the horses,” Ailís says, wiping her hands. “And, I think what with all the English folk here, maybe say my name is Alice.”

“Daniel’s left,” Lydia says, as ‘Alice’ sits down opposite her.

“I know.”

Lydia watches the other woman wring her fingers together on the table top, and feels furious and guilty. Later, she will find out where Daniel is working, and deliver him a telephone call that nearly melts the plastic of the receiver, but for now, she pats Alice’s hand and keeps her temper.

“Well, then. Alice. I suppose...” she says, and she notices the bare patch at Alice’s throat, where a crucifix once dangled. Lydia chews on her tongue. There are things that need to be asked, and things that need to be said, but why Alice has come to England with her unborn child is not one of them.

“Come and look at my horses,” she says, instead of what she’s thinking. It’s one of the best things she ever says, and Alice becomes one of the best friends she could ever have hoped for.

The tyres crunch down the road from the stable yard. The trees whip past in a blur of brown and green, and Sherlock is staring at his phone.

He’d flicked the message open just to check and dismiss it, and instead, it’s all but flipped him on his head. Tony glances at him sideways, but decides that it’s none of his business to ask what the matter is.

It must be true, Sherlock wonders, if John's written it. He has said similar things before in a peripheral sort of way. Best Friend. Best Man. Those were nice things.

This is a very nice thing too, even though it seems to have curled his stomach up somewhere in his gullet and made his mouth feel like wet elastic.

It's a very, very nice thing. Probably the nicest thing anyone's ever said to him, other than 'I forgive you' at times that in hindsight he'd really pushed his luck to the brink. Should he say thank you? He has no idea what to say, because John usually does things instead of saying things, which in many ways is quite helpful because Sherlock also has a better idea of what to do than what to say.

'I love you too,' seems a bit predictable.

'I love you more' is hard to quantify and prove, but feels more fun, but then might that be getting into the kind of romantic conversation that goes back and forth and cumulates with some revolting pet name. Not that John ever would resort to a revolting pet name, but then who knows if he's started saying things.

He might go completely mad and call him 'Sherl' or something.

Or 'Darling'.

Or 'Honey.'

Or worse.

I love you. It's there in black and white on the screen. I love you. Without the full stop, like it doesn't have an end and will go ever onwards as an enduring constant in their beings. Like John's rushed to say it, which makes it more real.

I love you

Don't get yourself killed

Also without the full stop, so it's not a command. It's a plea.

Please don't get yourself killed I love you

And if it is 'I love you' then it is also 'I don't want to lose you' which therefore also means 'I want you' and/or 'I need you'. Furthermore, Sherlock realises, it is present tense, it is right now. He's bouncing in a car through a Wessex country lane and John's solving a case and actively loving him at the same time, without Sherlock having to be there in person, trying to be good or working to make it happen.

Phenomenal.

And it must be past tense too, because John's slow and takes a millennia or two to take any type of thought out of his brain, untangle it and process it through his mouth, so this has clearly been going on for a while. Friend-love, Sherlock knows, has probably been skirting around for a long while, which is a warm thought, but this is more than that.

This is in text, and direct with no caveats, like bundling him up with friends and family and 'people I love'. Not that Sherlock isn't grateful for that, but it's just different. This is... partner-love.

Officially.

The whole of Sherlock's skin shivers at the thought.

On top of everything else, there's an implication. Water boils at 100 degrees centigrade. Lead is heavier than iron. Speed equals distance over time, death is inevitable, I love you. The sun will rise, the moon will change shape, I will love you.

How do you reply to that by text?

Two nitrogen plus one oxygen makes nitrous oxide. The speed of light through a vacuum can be calculated using the formula $c = 299\,792\,458\text{ m s}^{-1}$ and you love me.

His face hurts from smiling. He's grinning like a fool. Tony says, "Everything ok?" but he doesn't answer. He is rolling in emotion because fully, for the first time, life feels like a friend.

He presses the side of his finger to the junction of his nose and upper lip in a slow, sideways rub that smears the damp away, then repeats the movement in the opposite direction with the back of his thumb.

"Hey," Tony says, concerned. "Do we need to go back?"

"Drive on," Sherlock says, fetching all his emotion together into a ball and holding it tight in his middle. It's like holding down a cork underwater. The little text next to the message changes from 'just now' to digits. John's still waiting for a response.

His thumb slips on the screen, and he has to wipe his hands on his shirt to dry them before the phone will properly register his touch.

He replies.

The words are very simple, but all his own. He lingers to look at them a moment before closing his messages.

"Better?" Tony asks.

"Never better," Sherlock says, trying to sound impartial, and failing. He's grinning again, and thankful that Tony remains unfazed when the cork drags him to the surface and explodes in a champagne burst of relief.

—
—

John stands on the edge of the road, but the car is already out of sight. With Sherlock gone, the case looms large before him, and there's one thing he has to do before he does anything about the killer. Just in case. He walks away from the yard until he has a moment's privacy. He closes the messaging app and her face is there, smiling out from between his apps like a reproach for taking his time to remember to call. He dials home, to Mrs. Hudson and it rings and rings before anyone answers.

"Hello, John," she says, when she does pick up, sounding breathless. "Sorry, love, I was upstairs. How are you? How's Sherlock? Are you coming home?"

"We're fine. We're doing well," John says, "It's got a bit complicated here, I'm not sure where this case is headed. Is Bee there?"

“She’s fine,” Mrs. Hudson says, and he can hear her creaking up the stairs. “Being rather stropky, but we’re managing. One of those days.”

“Was everything ok overnight?”

“Oh yes, no problem, dear. Greg and Mycroft have been very helpful.”

“Mycroft?” John splutters. “What’s he doing there?”

“I don’t know, he was just here this morning before breakfast. Bee thinks he’s hilarious.”

“Don’t we all,” John replies, stunned. “Is he there now?”

“No, no, took himself off. You’ve just missed him. Molly’s coming soon, though. It’s a busy day here, isn’t it, Miss cheeky-chops?”

Bee chortles and John smiles. Lestrade rumbles in the background, and takes the phone when John asks.

“Hey, how’s tricks?”

“I don’t know, you tell me,” John challenges. “Mycroft came round?”

Lestrade coughs and wriggles at the question. “Uh, yeah. It’s not a big problem is it?”

“No, I... you could have asked.”

“Yeah, I know. It wasn’t really planned. Sorry. It was fine, though, he was playing with Bee first thing. They’re both morning people, it’s awful. I have a video.”

“Alright,” John allows, reassured. “Email that to me and we’ll call it quits.”

“Did you want to talk to her?”

John’s heart tears. “No, leave it,” he says, with a wrench. “She might get worked up if she’s already in a mood. Thanks though. I mean, thanks for babysitting so long.”

“It’s no problem,” Lestrade answers, “Molly’s coming in for the afternoon, but I’ll be back in for the evening unless you boys get home before that. Alright? Don’t stress about it; we’ve got it all covered.”

John swallows a lump. “Thanks,” he says again. “I owe you a drink.”

“You owe me three hundred quid in babysitting fees,” Lestrade laughs. “See you soon, yeah? I’ll send you some pics.”

“We’ll be back maybe late this evening,” John says, and hangs up. On his messages, he now has a reply.

John’s heart thuds.

[I swear to look after myself - SH]

“Oh, look at that,” John says, stunned. He holds the phone to his chest for a moment and turns his face to the sky before he checks the screen again, but the words are still there. ‘I swear to’.

Funny.

Funny what a difference 'I swear to' makes, compared to 'I can', or 'I will' or even 'I promise'.

Sherlock has a rocky relationship with the truth. He can cut through the world and see details no one else can; he revels in hunting down secrets and exposing them to the light, but he lies to himself all the time. He lies by omission; he lies for the sake of a joke. He misdirects when he is uncomfortable, or doesn't know how to deal with the people in front of him.

Sometimes Sherlock makes promises that get broken. Sometimes, despite Sherlock's greatest wishes, life moves outside of the sphere of his control. But John does not doubt that he means it when he makes his promises.

He believes Sherlock means what he's written, and it's a weight off of his mind.

[I'll see you later.] John writes, and sends the message, followed by a single x that he has half a premonition Sherlock is going to scoff at, but only because it'll make him squirm. John smiles.

When he comes back to the yard, Wiggins and Dom have apparently used the time to get chummy, and are comparing Wiggins' scars to Dom's tattoos.

"I'm thinking of getting ink," Wiggins reports.

"You'd look like a tosser," John answers, killing that dream dead. "So what's the plan?"

"What's what plan?" Tolly asks behind him. Her hair is still wet from the shower, clinging to her neck. "Is Tony around?"

"He's gone off with Sherlock to... visit a library, we're not too clear," John says, "We're going to try and sort out what's been going on here, though honestly, I haven't got a clue what's been going on here."

"Course you do," Wiggins scoffs. "If you think about it."

"As if I've been doing anything else," Tolly argues, throwing her hands up. "As if anyone's been doing anything else. Just tell us before I tip you in the shit heap."

"The guy, Adam, was going down hill when he died."

"He was?" John asks. Wiggins looks exasperated.

"Balance of probability. What's at the top of the hill? What's at the bottom? Where would he be going at that time of night?"

John rationalises. "Coming home from the pub if he was going uphill, or... walking to the village if he was going down hill, which means he started from, well, here."

"And he lived?" Wiggins prompts.

"In the village," Tolly says quietly. "Yeah, he was going home..."

"So he was here the night he died, until late. Doing what? Oh." John looks at Tolly, who does not blush.

"Yeah, I was staying up here because Donna's foal was due, and he saw me home after we had a drink."

“And stayed,” Wiggins adds.

“And stayed for an hour or so.” Tolly shrugs. “So what? I already told the police that, it’s no big secret.”

Wiggins throws an arm out at the yard. “Right, but how many horses? They’re everywhere, so why are only your favourites getting slashed on the stud? Why not the actual racers?”

“Right...” John says, remembering Sherlock’s words in the car on the way down. “Sherlock said it was about obsession.”

“There you go,” Wiggins looks satisfied, “Which just leaves the question- who’s new? What happened just before all this started?”

“Nothing,” Tolly says, flummoxed, “Everything was fine, and then I come back from a party and out of the blue, someone carves up Sweet Surrender in the middle of the night and-“ she stops, and her face stretches with hollow realisation, mingled with disgust and guilt, and other feelings besides. “Oh God,” she says.

“Tolly, do you know who it is? Should we call the police?”

“I think we should break his legs,” Tolly says, with the distant tone of someone who is so far into their anger, they’ve come out the other side and gone numb. “I think...”

“I think you should sit down for a moment,” John says, hastily, seeing how pale she’s turned. He steers her onto the old straw bale they’d had coffee on just a few hours earlier, and presses his fingers to her wrist. “You’ve had a shock,” he tells her, gently nudging her head down. “Breathe deep.”

“I’m fine,” Tolly growls, swaying. “Piss off.”

“Yes, I’ve heard that one before. Shut up and breathe. We’ll sort this out,” he adds. “That’s what we do.”

“Yeah,” Wiggins crouches next to her, peering up under her fringe. “We’re the heroes; appreciate the swooning.”

“I’m not swooning!”

“Don’t be sick or nothin’ either.”

“That I’m not making any promises about.”

“She’s fine,” Wiggins diagnoses, “She’s snappy.”

“We’ll go down to the police station,” John says, using one foot to push Wiggins aside. “We’ll tell them what we think, and then it will be over.”

“We will?” Wiggins looks up, surprised. “What about chasing the criminal and all that?”

“You don’t want to get stabbed, remember,” John says, with a feeling in the back of his mind that he doesn’t really want to get stabbed either.

“What about the game?”

“We’re not playing today,” John hears himself say, and all at once he feels strangely older. Not old,

but it's the obvious, sensible thing to do and for once his need for excitement isn't overriding his ability to take the safer choice. It's a father's decision, he thinks, taking the mug of water Dom has had the sense to fetch and pushing it under Tolly's nose.

"I don't want you all coming," Tolly says. "Dom's gotta stay here." She gently pushes John's hand away.

"Hold on, where are you going?"

"Police station, I'm not stupid. Dom can't come, someone's got to be around the yard."

"Wiggins better stay here as well then. Sorry, you're not exactly Mr. Squeaky Clean, if they think to look you up."

"Squeak, squeak," Wiggins says sarcastically. "Who solved the crime?"

"It's Tolly they'll want to hear from," John points out. "Look, maybe Aunt Lydia should go with you."

"No! God, no, I can't get Dilly involved if-" Tolly rubs at the bridge of her nose. "You come."

"If you want me to," John agrees.

"I don't, I'd rather have Tony, but he's not here." She gets up, pushing her hair back and shaking off John's hand. "I'm fine now."

John does not quite believe her, but it seems Tolly's aware she's lying when she opens the passenger door of her shitbox and passes the keys to him. He considers this is not the time to mention that he can't legally drive, and puts his concentration into backing the car out of the yard.

Wiggins taps on the windows as they pass him; John winds it down.

"I'll let Aunt Lydia know where you gone," he says, squinting inside at them. "An' keep an eye out for Sherlock. Good luck 'n' all that."

"Thanks, Wiggins." John steers the car out into the road, the tyres rocking on the churned up verge where the horses have cut through in wetter weather. Tolly stares ahead out the windscreen without seeing a thing, still thinking hard.

"I'm sorry Sherlock's not here," John says, as they descend the lip of the hill. He doesn't like how grim she looks. "He usually covers all this bit. Makes such a furore there's generally no need to go and... report something. I'm sorry," he adds again, "I think he'd already worked it out when he left the yard. I admit, I'm still a bit unclear."

"No," Tolly says after a long pause. "You were right. Obsession. And you have seen him- he was DJing at the anniversary party" Her tone turns cynical. "And they're all going to say I brought it on myself."

"Then they're wrong," John says, startled by both the news and her tone "And fuck them." The car bumps over a pothole and Tolly stops staring into the distance.

"Anyone ever tell you..." she starts and trails off. "I dunno."

"Usually me saying 'I dunno'," John says, awkwardly. The gears grind until he finds fourth, and Tolly plays with her phone, the screen tilted away so that John can't see. John waits for the

conversation to resume, and when it doesn't, he says "We could always go back to just breaking his legs. I do know how to do that."

Tolly looks up.

"Start with the ankles? No? Offer's there."

She doesn't smile, but she does relax into her chair, shaking her head. She curls up with her phone and John leans over the steering wheel, following the road ahead.

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The library they need lies miles distant, and finding it requires Sherlock to make several sharp phone calls to not only every library in a 10-mile radius, but also most of the local papers, until he reaches someone who can direct him to the right archive.

Tony plays his part as chauffeur and dogsbody, leaving Sherlock to load the microfiche while he negotiates on the phone with his friend. He knows a lot about the yard, gleaned from the few years he's been working there, and helps fill some of the gaps.

Sherlock finds the reports of the fair; the standard pap journalism listing the winner of the Victoria Sponge baking contest and details of how much jolly fun it had been. Pictures of cows, but nothing about a missing woman. Nothing until a week after, and then it's about a different girl, who is not missing.

"Alice was from Ireland, I know that much," Tony says, "Transferred from the other stables before they set up the secondary stud here. That's how it worked in the early days; horses bred in Ireland and the training done here."

They find her hidden towards the middle of a small paper; a plea for information from local police and a photograph of her with a chicken, quite unposed.

"There was a letter, saying she'd gone back to Ireland," Sherlock comments. There's absolutely nothing about it here, which is disappointing.

"I heard that too," Tony says. "But she didn't go home. She vanished between here and there and no one heard from her again. I think the police assumed she'd come to mischief in the port or something along the way, or lied and taken herself off somewhere else. Thing is, the way they tell it, I don't think Alice knew many folk."

And her disappearance was obscured by a bigger local scandal, Sherlock thinks, thanks to the unwitting actions of his own brother.

"What are you looking for anyway?"

"Personal satisfaction," Sherlock growls at the screen, but he hasn't found it. The headlines glare boldly back at them.

It must have hit the local area with the force of a missile. Sherlock skims through the articles, all shockers. Commentary, editorials, people questioning child safety. Her life is plastered all over the pages, but there is not a single photograph of Sophia Matherson, or a single line of the anonymous letter that tipped people off. He flips through the editions about her case, but all too abruptly public interest turns back to a wider picture of concerns: the economy, a fire, the football, the IRA.

“No good?”

“A bit no good,” Sherlock concedes, fed up. “But it was a long shot, and we had time to kill.”

The farm will be a scatter of activity across the grounds, and Sherlock has no intention of making his move until he knows the majority of people will be around the yard. Tea isn’t until 6.

“You think that girl in the 80’s, or Alice, has something to do with Adam’s murder?”

Sherlock swivels in the chair to regard Tony. “You knew the victim.”

““Course.”

“Does it bother you?” Sherlock leans forward, curious to know. “My cousin has no interest in being faithful to you. And all the things that are pulling her attention away from you; the other men, the horses- all of them are dying. Perhaps you don’t satisfy her.”

Tony closes his eyes and opens them again; a very deliberate blink.

“You’re making this a bit personal.”

“Am I wrong?”

“No. Maybe I don’t tick all her boxes. Maybe she’s not got any boxes to be ticked,” Tony shrugs. “But she keeps coming back, and we get on. And I don’t think you think I’m the killer, so why does any of that bother you?” He waits patiently for an answer, which he doesn’t get. “Really, why does it bother you?”

“It doesn’t bother me.”

“It does. It really gets you. You hate the idea that I’m with her, but she’s still interested in other people. You wouldn’t be able to handle that.”

“I am just trying,” Sherlock says, through a lazerbeam of insight about some of his own anxieties, “To establish who would have motive. In both cases. Who wanted Aunt Alice gone?”

Tony hums and folds his arms across his chest, but accepts the change in topic.

“I don’t know about motive, but everyone had the opportunity. It was sheer chance that year.”

“What was sheer chance?”

“Check the sports sections,” Tony suggests, but Sherlock slaps his jacket pocket instead.

“John,” he breathes, pulling out the photograph. “I. Am. An. Idiot! What is wrong with me?”

“With respect, I don’t think I’ll answer that,” Tony replies. He peers at the photo. “Yes, that’s him,” he says, touching the horse. “That’s Sheer Chance. He swept up at Goodwood. He was the horse they founded everything on.”

“Ireland and England,” Sherlock says, touching faces. In his mind, he sweeps a black marker over the ones he knows cannot be involved. Alice’s scarf means something, he knows it. He needs to uncover her body to know for sure.

“We’re done here. Machinery now,” Sherlock announces, getting up from the computer, still scrutinising the photograph.

Too many unknown faces; it should be obvious, but it isn't. Sherlock worries for a split second that maybe he's losing his touch. It's true that he's more distracted than normal. It's true that this case is becoming increasingly more and more personal. Sherlock's phone burns in his pocket.

John called home last night, and Sherlock didn't take a moment to speak to their daughter. Wrong timing. Or is that just excuses? He misses Bee. Yesterday was Friday, and he has missed their afternoon. When John is at work and Mrs. Hudson is at bridge, it's his turn to be her only adult.

Sherlock tucks the photo away as they return to the car, and takes his phone out instead. To Sherlock's surprise, he has missed two messages.

They're from John, of course. 'I'll see you later', and a kiss to tide him over. It's a very normal thing to do, he thinks, and he isn't used to it.

'I am going to explode,' Sherlock thinks, 'If I don't close this case and get John to myself.' He considers Tony's words again and his stomach flops with nerves. 'And I'm going to wither up if...'

If he's not enough. If it doesn't work. If the moment in the barn was just that- a moment. An aberrant moment of things all falling nicely together and the reality being a mis-match of sexualities and experience that just won't...work. If it changes things in a way that is just ever-so-slightly... Off.

"What machinery can you get for me?" Sherlock asks, dragging himself from his thoughts.

"Depends what you need it for. I know a guy, but it's a bit of a drive. You said we had time to kill right?"

"We have time," Sherlock agrees. "And I won't be able to get to Alice without something better than that old tractor Aunt Lydia has rotting in the barn."

"There's the other tractor, but it's only used for trucking hay and feed around. That kind of thing."

"I want," Sherlock says, emphatically. "A big pusher-downer."

Tony nods, considering. "Then a big pusher-downer we shall get," he says.

The plastic chairs in the police office squeak whenever they are moved against the floor. Tolly sighs, tearing a piece of paper into confetti. They've been there for over an hour. Tolly's been in one interview room, John in another, and now it's just a matter of waiting, while the police check out their story. Tolly's still on edge.

"It'll be fine," John says.

"Right," Tolly agrees. The silence billows, making the room seem claustrophobic. Paper flutters to the floor. "Have you heard anything from Sherlock?" she asks presently. John shakes his head.

"I sent a message a while ago, but nothing."

"I can't get through to Tony either." She nibbles on her lip. "It's no big deal. If they've gone round the hills or into the national park then there's a bunch of black spots."

John remembers Bill saying that he and Sholto would be heading into rural Wales, perhaps that's

why he hasn't heard from them yet either

"It'll be fine."

"Easy for you to say."

"Well... it will be. It'll be shit, but in the end, it'll be fine." He picks a piece of skin from beside his thumb. "Trust me, I've done this a few times."

"Confess?"

"It's not your fault," John says, surprised. "You weren't to know he was off his head."

"Maybe. Indirectly. I just don't really get it. What did he think I'd do if my horses died?"

"I don't know. That you'd take comfort in his arms? What do men like that expect?"

"I'm very clear," Tolly says, "I'm always really clear with them before anything happens. You know? We'd flirted once or twice, and then he at the anniversary party and like most other people there are family, so to speak. I just thought, why not?"

"It happens," John says, and then clears his throat. "Sometimes. Listen, people hook up at parties, I've done it myself."

"No, it's different if you're a guy," Tolly says, "I just thought it'd be fun; a 1970's deal, back of the DJ van and everything. Instead it was just grabby and I banged my knee to hell on one of his speakers. Am I just an idiot?"

"No?" John rubs his fingers together. Privately he is thinking that it's too damn typical of his luck that when he'd finally kissed Sherlock, there had been a murderer in the room. Sooner or later, he thinks, it's going to turn out that one of Sherlock's aged relatives also had a corpse in her handbag or something.

"He texted a lot afterwards," Tolly is saying, back to tearing up paper again. "But you know, he was local, so I didn't really think much of it. He didn't seem mad."

"He was probably trying to be nice," John says, tiredly.

"Conniving piece of shit."

John muses for a while in the following silence, on how, if at all, he will represent this on his blog. A killer DJ. It's nearly as stupid as death by poison dart. It's not quite as stupid as death by candles. It's horrifying as well, perhaps because of the ridiculousness.

"So you've done this a lot?" Tolly asks, startling him. The evening light is fading away through the window. The last village bus rattles past, making the floor tremble.

"Police statements? Loads. More than I like to think about. I've wasted hours in police stations," John says, trying to lighten the mood. "Is this your first?"

"No, don't be daft. My mum disappeared," she clarifies, "Remember? I got 'talked to' by a 'nice lady officer' back then."

"I'm sorry."

"Nah, it's fine. It was just a weird experience, you know? Being a kid and all that shit going on."

Then the whole adoption thing, which was it's own shitshow."

"I know."

Tolly stops tearing the paper. "You do?"

"I was... I didn't get adopted. I uh, grew up in a foster home."

"Oh." Tolly takes this in, settling back into her seat. "Then you do know. It's fucking weird, isn't it? I mean at the time, but then looking back it's just 'what was that?'"

"I guess," John agrees. He's rarely talked about it so frankly. "It's not quite normal."

"What's normal anyway? You've seen the people I, well, you've met the fam. Any geniuses in your lot?"

"Not that I know of."

"It's fucking annoying, let me tell you. Years of 'Oh, William and Myc are geniuses, William solved an algorithm over a single day, Myc is going to university two years early, they're so clever' on and on at every family tea party. Almost felt a bit vindicated when it became 'Sherlock is having a spot of bother'. And Myc was often just an arse. Sorry, I know that sounds awful," she adds hurriedly, "I'm just being honest."

"No, that's fine," John says, prickling.

"Is it your doing?"

"What?"

"Sherlock being nice."

John thinks of the man who smilingly handed him a cane he had forgotten in a restaurant, who had been carelessly generous with his money when John had had none. "He was always nice," he says, "You just had to know how to see it. He's not always social..."

"I'm just curious. I haven't seen him in years, and he is different now," Tolly answers, leaning forward to stretch. "And I'm trying not to think about how I'm going to explain to people the fact that I fucked a killer. Has that ever cropped up in your line of work before?"

John stares at a pock-mark in the wall opposite. "I just deny it."

"The fucking or the murder?" she asks, before she realises that he's not kidding. "Actually?"

She sits up, pushing hair from her eyes. "Not Sherlock?"

"No, not Sherlock..." John trails off, aware that this is only true on a very minor technicality. "My wife... had a history."

"Oh. That must have been pretty bollocks to find out."

John waits for the knot to grow in his throat or the twist of his guts, but instead he just agrees. Tolly thuds a heel on the floor, dislodging a lump of dried clay from the treads of her boot. After a while, John says, "Can I show you something?"

He takes his wallet from his pocket and opens it, taking out the little photo of Sherlock and their

daughter. He tells Tolly her name, and explains it's a little bit old, that she's nearly three now, and is conspicuous with how he touches Sherlock in the photo.

"Funny," Tolly says.

"He's a really good dad."

"I've seen him with dogs," Tolly agrees, which John accepts as it's intended. "So... in the end, it's fine? That's how it goes?"

"Maybe," John says. "We're not quite at the end yet, but I hope so."

"You can't be doing too badly."

John reaches to take the photograph back, just as the door opens. The detective clears his throat. "I have some news," he says, closing the door behind him. "We've made an arrest. If you wouldn't mind coming back through to answer a few final questions?"

He nods to Tolly who awkwardly rises.

"I'll wait for you," John offers and she nods.

"Yeah. Sure. Well, don't worry. Not like I'm the first person this has happened to, right?"

The detective frowns, John shakes his head. "Right," he confirms. "Piece of cake."

She glances back before she leaves, her face pinched again. John paces the office alone. He sends Sherlock a text to update him on what is going on, but there's no reply. He calms himself with the thought that maybe if he's out in a library somewhere maybe there's still no signal. Maybe Sherlock's turned his phone off. John's laugh rattles around the office at this second thought.

He sits again and takes out the photos from Lydia's albums, looking for the one of Sherlock as a small boy, lost in a world of his own. It's so like the one they keep on the kitchen windowsill, of Sherlock with his radiometer.

It's proof that he's right. That Sherlock's good points have always been constant.

John makes a note to purchase another picture frame.

It is the biggest, yellowest squashing machine Sherlock has seen in person. It's fantastic. In truth, it's probably somewhat average-sized, but it's his first, so it looks enormous. Sherlock is actually rather thrilled by it. If it were at all feasible, he'd take it home and keep it, just for the pleasure of knowing he had a gigantic squashing machine right there, for flattening things that annoyed him. Tony spots the gleam in Sherlock's eye and has second thoughts about giving him the keys.

"This is a very expensive bit of kit," he says warningly. "As in, if you break it, there will be hell to pay, and a really eye-watering amount of money."

"That's fine," Sherlock says absently, feeling in the air for the keys.

"You're not licensed to drive it."

"I am licensed," Sherlock says, swinging himself up into the cockpit. "Ask the government." His head appears through the opposite window. "That's my brother, incidentally."

“You’ll have to take the car,” Tony insists. “You can follow me.” He looks around nervously at the CCTV cameras. The owner, his friend, has granted him this as a favour, but there’s an unspoken understanding that Tony is sensible and trustworthy. Sherlock is patting all the levers and chuckling to himself in a distinctly untrustworthy kind of way. He bends down and looks under the dashboard.

“Sherlock,” Tony says, and then the bulldozer growls into life. Tony closes his fingers around the keys. “Did you just hotwire that?!”

“Did you know that most tractors operate on the exact same key?” Sherlock yells down. The bucket on the front of the bulldozer whines experimentally up a fraction and then down again. “Honestly, it’s really quite easy.”

There’s a crash of gears, a blart of the horn, and then the bulldozer starts to slowly roll forwards.

It is a big, yellow beast, designed to make things move out of the way. At present, the thing mostly in the bulldozer’s way is Tony. Tony considers his options, and moves. The machine creeps forwards, flashing amber lights. Sherlock grins down at him.

“Please,” Tony asks.

By way of answer, Sherlock puts on his seatbelt, and with an air of celebration, unhooks the hard hat from its hook in the cab and plops it on his head.

“Thank you,” Tony mutters to himself as the bulldozer trundles out of the gate. Then he goes to collect the hire car, close the gate, and take his place as the rear guard of the idiot parade.

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Tolly does not say much when she leaves the detective’s office. She’s angry again, but it’s more than mere anger, she’s shaken. John wordlessly takes away her keys to the shit box again and drives her back to the farm. The police had tracked Rory the DJ to his house, which they’d searched. The investigation had revealed two conclusive pieces of evidence. The first: a large flathead screwdriver, sharpened all the way down one side. “Something sharp,” John had said upon hearing this. Puncture and slice. Enough to do it for a big animal, if you went for an artery. The second was evidence of having stalked Tolly for some time now, compounded by a previous record of complaints of harassment before he’d even moved to the village.

“I’m going to have to go to court,” Tolly says, “And I have to talk to Adam Kettering’s mother. I don’t know about going to the funeral. Would you go, if you were me?”

“I might, out of respect to Adam.” John says. “But I hate funerals.”

Aunt Lydia rushes out to meet them as soon as they arrive. “My girl!” She clasps Tolly’s elbows, their shadows throwing one long eerie shape across the concrete.

“I’m fine,” Tolly lies, but she folds slightly as Aunt Lydia rubs her arms, and wraps her in a hug. “Come inside and then go have a lie down,” Lydia suggests, taking her towards the kitchen. Inside, Tolly shakes her head and a couple of aspirin from the bottle.

“You look wrung out.”

“I feel it,” Tolly says. She swills down the tablets and looks lost. “I might check on the paddocks.”

“No, go up and sleep it off, or have a hot bath. Don’t come down until dinner,” Lydia fusses. “Though God only knows what we’re having. Something from the freezer.” She sighs. Tolly shrugs and pulls her boots off.

“I’m not hungry,” Tolly says, and shuffles out the room. The silence that follows prickles.

Uncomfortable, John feels he has to ask. “Is she going to be ok?”

“We’ll bounce back,” Lydia says, with a nod and a dark look. “We always do. That’s how we function around here. Though it might not be easy. Why are some men such swine?”

John raises his hands in defeat and Lydia snorts. “No, I suppose ‘swine’ is too good a word. Have you ever met a pig? They’re lovely animals, actually.”

“Can’t say I have.”

Lydia thumps herself into a chair at the kitchen table and rubs at the bridge of her nose. “Where’s Sherlock?”

“Still out. I haven’t heard anything from him yet,” John says. He’s been checking his phone obsessively since they left the station, but there’s only been one new message from Bill. It isn’t much, just a hastily written text to say [all good on the road] with a little car emoji. At the sight of it, John had breathed a sigh of relief he hadn’t realised he’d been holding onto, and checking it again now, he wishes there was something from Sherlock or Baker Street as well. He sends Sherlock another brief message just to say that they were back at the farm and then can’t help but sigh again.

“Cup of tea?” Lydia offers.

“Anything but tea. I had endless bad cups of it at the police station.” John takes a seat. “Is Wiggins around?”

“Talking nonsense about monsters with Dominic in the jock block. That boy,” she tuts. “I don’t know where Sherlock finds you all.”

“I found Sherlock,” John answers. “He was in a morgue, having just beaten up a corpse.”

“Oh well, if you put it like that.”

She drags a tub out of the cupboard and spoons powder unceremoniously into mugs. John drums his fingers on the table.

“So what now?”

“With what? The farm?”

“Mm. Now you’ve lost horses and so on. I mean, will that be a big problem for the business.”

“It’s a set-back,” Lydia admits, “Especially losing the mare; she was one of our best and we were banking on getting another Sheer Chance.”

“That was... one of your horses?”

“He was,” Lydia fills the mugs and brings them to the table with the milk bottle. She tosses John a spoon across the wood, mashing around the bottom of her mug with her own. “He was our biggest winner, and his daughters have made the best broodmares. Thankfully, we have a few of them.

Perhaps in the spirit of things, we'll name the next one Sheer Murder."

"Sheer Chance doesn't ring any bells. I know I'm no expert, but he didn't become famous, exactly, did he?"

"Well. 1989, we never stood a chance." Lydia takes in John's blank expression. "Desert Orchid. He blew everything out the water the year before, and then he did it all again. We had a good horse, just... in the wrong year. Alice said it, and she was right."

"Alice raced?"

"No, she wasn't a terrific rider. She could ride, she just wasn't a natural at it somehow," Lydia says, "Bit of a hot-seat actually- could never find the brakes. She fell off Lucky Jane the day before that photo was taken. Gave me a heart attack, but it was just winding and a nasty case of whiplash. Her neck was in a support."

"Scarves in August," John says, but that's not what bothers him. "Have you got any other photos?"

It's been nagging him faintly all day; he knows there's something he's missed, if only he can identify what. Lydia takes him not to the dining room, but to her own room. "Here's some," she says, taking an old book from her shelf. She pats the cover. "I kept some." She sounds almost rueful. "We really were good friends. It might sound surprising, but I haven't had many in my life, and Alice was kindness itself."

"I know," John nearly says. These are personal photographs. There are pictures from what must have been Tolly's first or second birthday; the baby in the plastic highchair, Alice wearing a headscarf, mothering her. Pictures of Alice and Lydia, gooning around for the camera, Lydia pink with a flush of alcohol. New Years, perhaps. Alice is restrained in the pictures, Lydia effervescent, but satisfaction exudes from both of them. There are photos of Ireland. Alice handling a foal, trying to lean out of the shot. A christening; Alice standing with her family. Lydia must have taken these, John realises.

Lydia lays them out, and John puts them into chronological order, and then he sees it. He'd thought she'd looked happier in the photos in England, but he'd been looking at it the wrong way. What he should have noticed was that she'd been miserable in Ireland. A terribly familiar misery. He presses his lips together.

"Did you know she was ...unhappy?"

"I had reasons to suspect she'd run away," Lydia says tactfully. "I didn't think it pertinent to ask for all the details. I hoped she'd tell me in her own time."

"Did she?"

"Some," Lydia says, sitting down heavily on the end of the bed. "She came from a very conservative place, you have to understand. Even in the 80's it was still in people's heads that not so long ago, unmarried mothers should be sent away to a... place to deal with their shame. And abortion isn't easily available there now, never mind back then."

"But she was unhappy before it got to that stage," John says, with such confidence that Lydia wonders how he knows.

"True," she agrees. "I don't think she was allowed much of a life outside of home and work."

"Let me guess," John says, dropping the photos to the bedspread in disgust. "Her father was a

bully.”

“He was a lovely man,” Lydia says. “Generous, funny, downright charming, but yes, I think he controlled her far more than anyone ever saw. Unless it was the mother. The woman was frail and hardly left the house. I don’t know. There was something ugly going on, John, but I’ve never worked it out. I’ve never been able to reconcile what I knew of the people Baldwin and I dealt with, and Alice’s reactions. There was someone crushing her spirits, put it that way, but in Ireland? First hand? I only ever saw her acting as a devoted daughter. Or playing that part, at least. I’m certain that she would never, ever have left if the pregnancy hadn’t forced her to come to a decision.”

Dad’s a piece of shit, John!

No, he isn’t!

John rubs at his chin. They used to have summer barbecues with the neighbours, and his dad used to go whistling off to help a family friend fix up their bathroom, for example, on a Sunday. They went to local events and people flocked around his father, having a good time. Smiling. Laughing.

No, you don’t understand. He wasn’t like that- he was nice to people! Including Mum!

Oh, for God’s sake, John!

Harriet, John’s sharing his perspective and we should explore this. John, can you tell us about a time you remember. Something nice your father did for your mother?

Stronger than mere memory alone, John can almost feel the prickly cover of the seat under his bare boy’s knees, the greasy feel of the metal frame of the chair where he’s gripping one side of it like the whole thing is going to rocket him into the sky.

He’d said, ‘He gets her presents for no reason’. And he’d been telling the truth. His father had used to buy their mother things, even when it wasn’t a special occasion. Orchids and kitchen gadgets and things like that; quite show-offy things for the time. To John it had been a lovely gesture. It was proof of how much his father loved her.

And then the plants would die from neglect or mis-handling or the gadget would break, or he’d find out it she’d gone back to her old potato peeler instead of the mechanical one, and he’d be upset. She didn’t love him back. She couldn’t prove that she loved him.

John pictures himself: a little boil of a child, full of resenting her, because grown-ups were supposed to be able to do things easily, but she couldn’t, and so it was her fault daddy got hurt. And hurt really meant angry.

But of course, he’d come to see that she didn’t pass any of his tests, because he’d rigged them. The gadgets were time-wasting, space-wasting flimsy bits of crap that made a mess and kitchen work less efficient than doing it the usual way. She wasn’t much of a gardener. It wasn’t remotely in her interests. John had just assumed it was, because why else would daddy buy her plants?

There was no way for her to know what to do with any of them unless she went to the library and read up on the exact foibles of the exact type, and he never bought her anything easy. Always, flashy orchids or quaint miniature roses. Fussiness things.

John remembers the Christmas cactus. She’d managed to get it going quite well, by a fluke, perched on the bathroom windowsill. It had started to flower; they’d started to follow its progress with interest. Then abruptly it had given up and died. His father had been annoyed.

John remembers playing in the garden, poking around the compost heap looking for slow worms, and looking at the recently discarded cactus, denuded of its pot and crushed into the top of the pile.

Even now, John can smell the gassy reek of vegetable matter, and the acrid smell of bleach. John flexes his hand.

“And Tolly’s father?”

“Oh, that was... He was an ordinary man, not bad, and not cruel, but no kind of sticking-around sort of chap. He knew about Tolly, but he was never going to be a father. Alice was... very innocent in some ways. She craved affection.”

John straightens one of the photographs and looks away from his mother’s smile in another woman’s face. He has no photographs of her, but the memory of it has stuck with him. After all, it’s only in every third photo that he looks like himself. In the old photographs, there was too much of that same pinned-on smile, and now more and more as he’s aged, he’s started to look like-

“John?”

“Sorry, I was thinking about-“

“John, is that smoke?”

Lydia barrels to the window, palms against the glass. “My God, the barn’s on fire!”

“What?” An electric thrill goes through John’s system and then he spots Wiggins clattering around. He’s banging a bucket and yelling ‘Fire!’, and John can’t help a tiny scoffing laugh.

“Pudding Lane protocol,” he mutters. Lydia thankfully is not really listening. She’s off, knees pumping, squawking, pounding down the stairs.

“You devil,” John says to himself, admiring Sherlock’s daring. He hopes Wiggins hasn’t actually set the barn on fire, but he suspects it’s more like some very carefully arranged bit of chemistry. There’s enough stuff lying around for someone with Wiggins’ skill set to knock something together easily enough.

He takes the stairs two at a time after her, though Lydia has churned on ahead, adding to the racket. A cloud is emerging steadily from the barn, and then seems to fold in on itself to have a little think before it belches outwards, flooding the yard. John coughs on it, moving towards the edge of the cloud and bowing madly to gasp a breath of clear air. Towards the corner he finds Wiggins lurking near one of the horse troughs.

John coughs on the smoke, arm against his face. “Christ! Wiggins, what is that?”

“It’s a fire,” Wiggins says, perfectly reasonably. “Don’t worry.” He looks at the smoke pouring from the barn and tilts his head. “It’s like mostly not dangerous. Mostly. Hmm... ‘scuse me a mo’.” He pulls his sweatshirt off and dunks it in the trough before balling it around his nose and mouth and plunging off through the smog.

One of the horses neighs. People are yelling; mostly Aunt Lydia, who has missed her calling in life as a drill sergeant. Baldwin strides in, waving his arms as if he can clear the smoke by just wafting it away. He stops a few yards from John, coughing. Someone else bumps John from behind, and then grabs his elbow.

“What the hell is going on?” Tony shouts over the noise.

“You’re back?” John says, twisting in his grip “Where’s Sherlock?”

“He took the bulldozer and went off.”

“What?”

“He took the bulldozer!” Tony yells, “And went off on the estate. Said he was going to the Brook.”

Another gout of smoke belches from the barn and they have to stagger even further back out of it, eyes streaming. Tony streaks soot across his face. The yard is lost from sight.

“For Christ’s sake! Has anyone called the fire brigade? Have they moved the foals?”

“I don’t know,” John coughs back. “Wait, why’s Sherlock got a bulldozer?”

But Tony is already vanishing. John blunders into clearer air, and looks around. In the dusk and fumes, it’s hard to make out what’s going on. He picks out Lydia trying to form a bucket line and others hurrying horses out of stables and out towards the stud paddocks. Hooves clatter, horses yell; John can’t see any flames. He’s worried Wiggins has gone too far- there’s so much smoke. He hasn’t emerged from the barn yet.

John rubs his eyes and picks figures from the crowd. Lydia, Tony, Dom, Callum- the stable leaders. Tolly rushes past, wrapped in a white dressing gown. She bobs ghost-like through the haze, her feet obscured. Briefly, Wiggins surfaces to meet her, now stripped to the waist. The smoke is thinning. Down in the muddle, John checks off the faces he doesn’t have names to amongst the myriad jockeys and grooms and other stable staff- the man with the broken nose, the blond, the one with a birthmark like a port-wine stain down the back of his neck, the one he’d liked.

John looks.

He looks again.

‘Get everyone,’ Sherlock had said, but someone had left, despite the risk of losing valuable horses and property.

‘He’s taken the bulldozer,’ Tony had shouted. To the Brook.

John stops stock still and makes himself think it through. He only has a very vague idea half a minute later, but it’s enough. He turns on his heel, and breaks into a run.

It is not quite night.

The sun has inched just low enough to be confused by the brow of the hill and the trees, which throw long shadows out across the land. An insect whirrs past John’s ear and he brushes it away, scanning the horizon. The farm feels deserted. John ducks the rails of the gallops and heads out deeper into the course.

Out in the gloom, John can hear the muffled throb of an engine. The grass catches the toes of his shoes, sounding like plastic as he runs through it. Muscle memory makes him crouch as he runs, keeping his head below the visual level of the hedge. His arms move automatically into position, ready to bear up the steady weight of a firearm he no longer owns.

Sherlock has dimmed the lights of the bulldozer, but around the broken shape of Becher's Brook, John can see the light bleeding. There's a snowfall of tiny insects attracted to it, but no sign of Sherlock. Breathing hard, John ducks and runs outwards, covering the ground in an arc to see behind the broken logs without being spotted. As he comes to an angle where the light is better, he sees them.

There are blueish shapes by the crooked wall. One is low, the other high, holding what at first glance look like dowsing rods. As John's eyes become accustomed to the dark, he makes out more detail. Sherlock is crouched, head thrust into the cavern left by the dislodged fence, digging in the dirt with his hands. Baldwin stands, as still as an angler, waiting for him to do the inevitable and sit back on his heels from the hole.

In his hands he holds the plastic sticks that hold up the electric fence, and between them drifts a slim white loop. John stops dead. He's near the rest of the thin tape fence. It clicks. A tiny snap like the press of a tongue behind a set of teeth with each burst of electricity that runs through it.

There will be a box somewhere, with batteries, that he could rip out.

But he can't see it.

Sherlock's elbow pistons back and grasps the grass at the edge of the hole. His muscles move as he rearranges his weight in prelude to sitting up. Baldwin inhales, intent on his work.

John is already moving. The grass is springy, the air fills his lungs, crisp and cold. Sherlock grunts. It's six paces to the man.

There's no echo to the thud of flesh hitting flesh. It's simply one solid sound. Baldwin has only enough breath to make a scant noise before John hits him again and he topples off-balance. It's a simple matter to thrust his heel into Baldwin's knee and the man goes down. The wire beneath the man rattles.

Sherlock shoots up in alarm at the first noise, and stands there, open mouthed as John rolls Baldwin over between clicks. The front of the man's jacket is unmarked but the man himself is dazed. Blood oozes from the corner of his mouth and John squats to check that he's breathing.

"He's fine."

"I didn't hear you," Sherlock stammers.

John slowly wipes his knuckles onto his handkerchief. "I was being quiet." He looks Sherlock up and down. "Are you ok?"

"Yes," Sherlock says, absent-mindedly copying him by wiping his hands on his shirtfront, wide-eyed. "Quite well. Oh, you're bleeding."

"Caught it on his tooth," John says ruefully, dabbing his knuckle. "Or zip, or something. It's nothing."

"You knocked him out."

"Nearly," John says. "If you've got any cuffs on you, now would be the time... Before he gets going again."

Sherlock does not have cuffs on his person, but he does know how to disable an electric fence and use the tape to tie someone up. And then it is quiet. John shakes out his hand, and Sherlock would

take it in his own, but the atmosphere of the situation stops him.

John indicates the yawning space under the broken fence instead. "What's down there?"

"Aunt Alice," Sherlock says. John holds out his hand, the bleeding one, and Sherlock fills his palm with his torch and his own gloves. His shoes picking up the clumps of disturbed earth, John climbs down to look at the body.

She is curled up on her side in a pagan burial, her grave goods consisting of nothing but the plastic shell of the neck brace, dropped in over her arms. There's a tangle of hair still clinging to the back of her head. John reads her bones. A missing back tooth, an otherwise complete body still bagged up in the ruins of its outfit. John touches just one bone with his gloved hand; not even touching really- the tips of Sherlock's gloves droop past the ends of his fingers. Then he straightens from the pit, and turns.

There's a wall in the way. John can't see it clearly. He's half blind. The wall is a warm, dark heaving thing that pushes back when he shoves at it. The edges of the world have gone and the air is smouldering hot and hard to breathe.

"John!" Sherlock snaps urgently.

"Move," John growls, pushing him again.

On the grass, Baldwin groans. It only makes John angrier.

"John, you're not thinking--"

"He broke her neck!"

Baldwin groans again, agonised. He's speaking, but John has no ears for him. Sherlock's grasped him by the shoulders, trying to block his path and his view to the man. John's digging his knuckles in to Sherlock's chest trying to push passed him; he has to. He doesn't have a trigger to pull, and the lack of it is driving his fury to frustration.

"Stop it!" Sherlock orders.

John thrusts him back to arm's length and rounds on him, bristling.

"You dropped a man out a window."

Sherlock has his arms spread wide. "I did," he says. "You don't."

"Oh, no. Oh ho ho, oh no, Sherlock. I do. I have always. I sho--" He is about to say something inadvisable aloud, regardless of if Baldwin can hear him or not.

"What about Bee?" Sherlock says, dropping his hands to his sides. He wipes his palms on his thighs and his shoulders slump. "I need you."

His words cut through John to the quick, and John stops, the anger not yet gone, but sharply brought up by the reins. He closes his mouth, and as the immediate pain of fury subsides, he's glad Sherlock stopped him when he did. Baldwin does not need to know that John has lost no sleep over shooting a cabbie.

John's fists are shaking.

"I want to hear it," he says. "I want to know why."

Sherlock purses his lips, and John knows he's uncertain and surprised at John's emotion to all of this. It's not John's aunt. It's not even really Sherlock's aunt, and the question is right there in Sherlock's posture.

Why are you so upset?

'Because it's so cruel and needless,' John thinks. He holds up a hand, not a fist, and takes a deep breath.

What are you thinking?

'I'm thinking,' John doesn't say, 'That if any man ever lays a finger on our daughter, I don't know what I'll do.'

He's thinking more besides.

Sherlock slowly nods and then sweeps the Belstaff back as he crouches by the man on the floor.

"Jesus," Baldwin is saying to himself. "Oh Jesus."

"John has questions," Sherlock tells him, staring him in the eye. "It would be a good idea if you answered them."

"I didn't know; no one knew, Jesus, how could I have known? It was just a--"

"Just a what?" John says, coldly. "A big misunderstanding?"

Sherlock rises to put a hand on John's elbow. John doesn't pull away. It's not an invasion; it's an anchor.

"No, no! It was, God, I had no idea-!"

"Talk," Sherlock's shadow falls across Baldwin as he drops the word on him like a slab.

In pieces, Baldwin does.

1989, Goodwood year.

The child is six now; tall for her age, and with the pragmatic maturity of the woman who has raised her. She is not allowed to play with the horses, or get underfoot on the stud. It's dangerous for one thing, and no one has time to supervise her. Tolly plays with the half-feral kittens in the barn, and plays at being a wild thing herself, before running back to plunge her face into the floury middle of mother's arms.

These are good times.

On English race days, when the yard is temporarily flooded with Irish horses, and jockeys and voices, Alice slips away for a holiday. She takes Tolly to the seaside, year after year, for ice-cream days. When the baby was small, she used to go to visit Daniel Ott in Derby, but with his new job and his new interests, the visits have dwindled down to nothing.

In the run up to Goodwood, they are short-staffed. Alice takes a mare, Lucky Jane, onto the estate to walk her. It's a standard task, an easy ride, a generally calm animal. It's a hot, dry summer, and it takes just one insect to send everything into a tailspin that Alice will never recover from.

The wasp is drunk on windfalls.

It's torpedo body is swept along on the air, unable to gain any real height or progress, and with only the instinct to avoid landing on the ground if it could. In doing so, it finds Lucky Jane's flank. As good a place as any for a rest. The wasp crawls on the horse's fur. Neither Jane nor Alice notice it.

Alice shifts in her seat. She leans over to check the girth around the horse's middle, away from the wasp. The wasp sees a promising dark gap appear, and it wanders towards it. Alice sits up. The flap of the saddle shifts under her weight and comes down on the wasp's head.

The rest is predictable.

The fall is a bad one, onto hard ground. Jane bolts for home, arriving riderless and lathered. When they find her on the estate, Alice tells them her neck hurts, but she's badly bruised all over, and they find her already limping home, so no one realises how seriously she's hurt. The fracture in her neck lies waiting for just the right sharp movement to complete its work.

Instead, Alice collects a neck brace from the GP for the whiplash, and spends a day in bed. Tolly is sorry for her mother, and sorry to miss out on the sea side, but delighted to be there for Goodwood. Ecstatic to be around for the completion of their course of jumps: Becher's Brook and The Chair and the Cheltenham Second-Last, and all these people! It's exciting.

And then good fortune turns to bad. Against expectations, Sheer Chance is a success. They bring him home in a blaze of glory that they will never match again; a champion amongst other horses, save one.

Desert Orchid will go on to take the King George VI Chase, the Gainsborough Chase, the Victor Chandler Chase and the Cheltenham Gold Cup in the space of a year, and Sheer Chance will fade to obscurity, exhausted trying to keep up with a god.

But that summer, they all love him.

Lydia is beside herself with happiness. She calls Conn Baldwin from the finish line, sobbing. He boards the first boat to England, and arrives to see the horse come home, beaming. They celebrate it with a photograph; all of the staff from the boys who shovel the dung and walk the horses right up to the jockey who rode him to victory. And Alice. And Tolly.

Alice winds a scarf around the brace to hide it, and tries to stay innocuous amongst her countryfolk. She doesn't want to be seen or spoken to. She's frightened of what they might say.

Baldwin, when he sees her, is shocked. He has had no idea she was living here. He sees her through the crowd, and the sight of her is almost an affront, that she could have been here so brazenly, when back home they'd worried so much. He's shocked again when the little girl runs up to grasp her hand and, in an English voice, calls her 'mam'.

Things have not been good in Ireland. Alice's father had at first claimed she'd gone to visit relatives, but bit by bit the gossip and the shame got about as it inevitably would. It was a hard blow for his daughter to run away. And no one had expected it, least of all the old man. He declined, and it pains Baldwin to see him become a joke to the community. The man is a friend. Baldwin may have the money, but they live cheek by jowl, and Alice's grandfather had been a fellow to rely on in the hard times in Conn's life.

And there had been hard times.

Baldwin can't understand it. It's against all his principles, that she could walk out on her family, go off with a man to England in secret, sever all ties. That she should live here in ease on the estate, and not even write home to check how her parents or siblings were. To shame her family. How could she do it?

At first all he wants is an explanation. He invites himself to stay at the house, as he usually does. Dinner is a celebratory, protracted affair and it's late and dark by the time he gets her alone.

The conversation is a muddled blur. Alice has never lied, just refrained from saying anything at all. Her story unfolds in pieces: Daniel Ott, the affair, the pregnancy, the birth. That she is unmarried, that Daniel had left and she doesn't care. She doesn't want to go back to Ireland. She doesn't care. Baldwin cares. He cares deeply, with the conviction of a man who has found truth and comfort in the pages of a black book. He believes. More than believes, he has never thought to question it. God's law is, by definition, sacrosanct.

They were both raised in the same church. He reminds her of this. That her child is a bastard and she is living in sin and she should go home.

And Alice, who used to polish pews, spits at him.

He remembers hitting her. He does not remember deciding to hit her. By the time he had thought about it, the palm of his hand was stinging and she was on the floor.

She did not get up again.

It's possible he has not killed her outright, but he is in too great a confusion to think. When she doesn't respond, he shakes her. Is she pretending? He shakes her again, harder, and anger turns to begging, turns to praying, but Alice is still limp and unresponsive. He touches the corner of her eye and she does not blink.

Baldwin panics. He cries, he cradles her. He appeals to God, and all God gives him is darkness. She is a tremendous weight when he lifts her and blunders away onto the estate. Moving, carrying her, makes him calmer. All he needs to do is put one foot before another and take the next step. He takes her away from the house, keeping to the trees. He needs to put her somewhere safe.

He drifts, without thinking too hard about it, towards the construction site. The trees hang low and catch at his clothes. They hook their branches into Alice's hair and he has to tug it free, hardly able to see what he's doing. The strands that are left behind won't be noticed by anyone but a small boy, only a few days later. He will think them strange enough to tuck into his memory, but he won't dwell on them long enough to work it out.

The construction machines are silent hulks who oversee him as he scrapes a shallow grave in the hard earth. Baldwin buries her. The next day, the grooms and the construction workers get up early to work as usual, while the rest sleep off hangovers. Tolly comes down to the fence and stands at a distance, and watches as they lower the heavy mass of Becher's Brook into place.

'Baldwin stays until Alice is missed, and the letter is found.

Her handwriting is both distinctive and ordinary; she never learned any way to write other than the round print of a child's exercise book and the police take it at face value. Lydia doesn't know what to make of Alice's excuses. Baldwin offers to go ahead to Ireland to see if he can catch up with her, the Irish police are contacted, but no sign of her is ever found.

They try dogs, but with horses and men and people everywhere, the trail is too cold and too

muddled to make sense of.

Lydia finds herself unexpectedly a single mother. She is fond of Tolly, and always supportive, but she has been an Aunt, not a mother, and the difference suddenly seems enormous. Tolly needs a mummy. So does Lydia, and not her own, so she picks up the phone and calls the most dedicated mother she knows who isn't a horse.

Mummy agrees to come at once. "I'll bring the boys," she says. "And don't worry, Lydia, Alice can't be far. Something will come up."

Instead, another family's disaster washes Alice from public discourse, and the leads dry up, and time goes by, and Tolly grows up in the shadow of Becher's Brook.

It does not take long for Wiggins' smoke screen to fade away, and word to spread that a body has been found. Some of the stable hands come first, to see Baldwin sitting on the ground, his suit stained, by the open grave. The bulldozer is a silent threat over the broken jump while they wait for the police.

The small crowd parts for Lydia to step through. Sherlock steps forward, with no clear intentions, but Lydia pushes him gently to one side. "I want to see."

Sherlock has heard Aunt Lydia argue with his mother before. She has a voice that can carry across acres, and a fearsome sense of pride. Her spine is rigid as she takes in the scene. She sets her jaw and when she turns back from the skeleton, there's a deep coldness in her eyes that takes him aback. She does not shout.

Baldwin chokes, "Oh Jesus, Lydia, please," but she does not approach him. She doesn't even look at him. For the first time, John can see something of a family resemblance between her and Sherlock.

Tolly is open-mouthed with shock, the breeze tugging the strings of her hair around her throat. She clutches the front of the soot-stained dressing gown, barefoot on the grass. Lydia takes her elbow and steers her away, back towards the farmhouse. On the road, blue lights wail from between the trees.

"God," Baldwin pleads, but no one is listening.

"John," Sherlock asks, pinned to the spot. "Would you..." He grapples for what needs to be done, that isn't purely pragmatic police procedure. "Make a cup of tea?"

"Me?"

Lowering his voice, Sherlock hisses, "I don't know what to do about them."

And it's family.

"You don't have to do anything," John says. He grits his teeth and shakes off his anger, finding something more professional. "Go on. I can manage here." He nods his head towards the crowd of men and women milling around in a stupor. "Someone's got to organise this lot."

Sherlock twists his hands together behind his back. "Well, if you want to hog all the fun."

“Go,” John orders.

Feeling very clumsy, Sherlock goes.

The police have arrived, along with the fire service. Tony is talking heatedly to both of them, trying to explain the situation. Passing through the yard, Tolly twists herself loose of Lydia’s hand and takes off, dressing gown fluttering behind her. Sherlock catches up to Lydia in two strides, but she shakes her head as he moves to speak.

“Let her go,” Lydia says. “She’ll go down the foaling barn and stay there, I know my daughter.”

“Ah.” Sherlock fidgets on the spot, and then trails his aunt as she shakes her head at Tony, who has only just managed to convince the fire fighters that there’s no fire. Lydia pushes open the door to her office by the arena, and turns the computer there on.

“What are you doing?”

Lydia plonks herself into the creaking seat and clicks at the mouse. “Work.”

“Work?”

There’s a pair of reading glasses in a case on the desk. Lydia snaps it opens and puts them on, “If you could go and deal with the police, that would be helpful, Sherlock.”

“John said I should...” John hadn’t really given him clear instructions. Sherlock dithers. “Should I...?”

“No, you probably shouldn’t,” Lydia says, opening a fresh word document. “But it’s very sweet of you to offer.” She rests her hands on the keyboard a moment.

“What are you going to do?”

“Oh, everything,” Lydia says, “I have a degree in business law, Sherlock, which is sadly going underused, and I know a great number of people. Solicitors for a start. I expect in my place you’d and John would happily break all your knuckles on that brute’s thick head. But I-“ she stabs at the keyboard with a finger. “I am going to dangle him like a worm on a hook. I am going to write something so cast iron that no ferrety little Irish man can wriggle out of it, and I’m taking it all back. Our family’s land, our house, our stables, our horses. I’m going to make phone calls. Conn Baldwin has no place in racing anymore, just some little cell somewhere,” She smiles a charming, acid little smile.

“Which begs the question of what happens to all of those lovely Irish assets, doesn’t it, now our leader has fallen. Do you know, I think the value might suddenly drop to... something frighteningly affordable to the right buyer. Don’t you?”

“I think it might,” Sherlock agrees, slowly. “Let me know if it doesn’t.”

Lydia raises an eyebrow.

“I know people too,” Sherlock says. “Who aren’t... solicitors. John’s quite good too.”

“I think you might be my favourite youngest nephew yet. Although,” she adds, “if you set fire to anything on my land ever again, I’ll have you gelded.”

“Yes, Aunt Lydia.”

“Close the door when you leave, there’s a good chap.” Her tone is brusque. She whisks a finger towards the door and Sherlock moves to leave, and then pauses.

Sherlock.

Mrs. Hudson cocks her head at him reproachfully from between the filing cabinets. Sherlock chews his lip.

The poor woman.

You’re in my head.

It must have been such a shock for her, after all those years of not knowing, and now here it all is. Isn’t it awful? Say something.

Say what?

Oh really, Sherlock, even children know the magic words.

“Aunt Lydia... I’m very sorry.”

“Oh, well,” she waves a hand dismissively, and Sherlock nearly takes it literally, until he spots that her chin has gone wobbly.

The edge of the desk bites into his thigh as he squeezes around the edge of it. Aunt Lydia presses her lips into a tight line, to stop them shaking. Tentatively, he pats her shoulder.

“Thank you, William. That’s kind...” She pats his hand back. She squeezes his fingers. “I’m not actually angry with you. Hm. A little bit,” she confesses, and then slaps his knee, back to Aunt Lydia normal though sheer force of will. “You’re a naughty boy, but I think we’ll keep you. Now please, go and bother the police, I have clever things to do.”

Sherlock gets up, feeling funny. He puts the door to behind him, muffling the sound of the keyboard.

That’s kind.

Sherlock rubs his fingertips together and considers those words. They make the feeling in his chest warmer. It feels different to happiness, but it feels good. Childishly, he wants to tell John. How perfect if John could have seen it. Would he have smiled? Would he have made a little fun of it, like they do, but shown through his eyes that he was pleased? No doubt about it.

You’ve changed.

Sherlock turns to the empty arena. Magnussen’s heels don’t sink in the sand, so he’s not really there.

“So it seems.”

But you’re Sherlock Holmes. The consulting detective, the man who is always in trouble. The man who solves crimes as an alternative to getting high. The high-functioning sociopath who killed rather than lose.

“I am,” Sherlock agrees.

Dr. Watson. The child. And now all this. You're becoming dangerously sentimental.

Sherlock imagines that the man removes his glasses and wipes them leisurely on the silky end of his tie. It's perfectly true, what he says.

Some would say-

"I don't care. You're dead."

He turns his back on the ghost in his head, and steps back into the yard. There are police officers there, staff from the yard, and faces flick up to stare at him, the man in the dark coat. He picks out the man in charge, and approaches him.

"I'm Sherlock Holmes," he introduces himself, holding a hand out. The officer shakes it automatically.

"I've heard of you. You've got a reputation."

"Your information's out of date," Sherlock answers, reaching up to turn up the collar on the Belstaff. "Now, how can I assist?"

—
—

It takes a few hours to settle matters. The police are naturally jumpy at arresting two murderers in as many square miles in the same day. They want answers, they want explanations, and everyone has to go down to the station. It takes some phone calls to the Met to establish their own innocence in the proceedings, although Sherlock gets a slapped wrist and points deducted for driving heavy machinery without a proper licence.

Baldwin spills his guts without prompting, and it's his own willing confession that wraps the whole thing up.

"Right," the officer says wearily, beckoning John from the waiting room. "Just you to come through and give us prints and your autograph, and then you two can go."

Waiting alone, Sherlock messes with his phone. He sends Mrs. Hudson a message to say that they should be leaving within the next hour. A moment later, he receives two messages in succession, but to Sherlock's surprise, it's not from Mrs. Hudson. Curious, he opens them.

Sholto's messages are apologetic but direct; two queries accompanied by a photograph of a man that Sherlock does not recognise. They read, 'Who is he?' and 'How many caravan deaths occur each year?' A puzzling question, and not information that Sherlock has immediately to hand. He considers it and then replies.

[I can check.] he offers, [Also, traffic collision, fires or CO poisoning? -SH]

He watches the little tick switch over to 'read' and the reply flicks back almost at once.

[Murder?]

[Residential or holiday camp? -SH]

[Holiday]

A pity. [Boringly few.-SH]

It's an interesting question nonetheless. And as for the man... Sherlock examines the photograph, which tells him the basics, but cannot give him a name. There's really only one resource he has for that. He clicks his tongue and forwards the messages to a private number.

Predictably, they are received quickly, and with a condition.

[Another favour?]

Sherlock frowns at Mycroft's reply. He writes a reply and then changes his mind. He'd like to hear Mycroft's voice; things have been going on, he's been at Baker Street and Sherlock can deduce more from a conversation than a text message. He dials. It rings.

"Who is this?"

"It's me," Sherlock replies, "Who else would it be?"

"Of all the people I might expect to actually call me from this number, you are the among the last. Are you ill?"

"I found Aunt Alice."

"Ah." Mycroft's tone loses its sardonic edge. "But the happy homecoming party is cancelled, I presume?"

"Accidental manslaughter."

"Dear me. Messy?"

"Broken neck; relatively clean."

"How fortunate. Am I to inform mother?"

"If you would," Sherlock agrees. After a moment, Mycroft prompts him.

"And Aunt Lydia is...?"

"Fine, I believe. Plotting a coup. Tolly's not making a scene either, so there. I haven't upset anyone. I've tried not to."

"I'll forewarn Mummy," Mycroft says, caught off guard by his brother's tone. "Will you be back this evening?"

"Ideally." Sherlock aches for London. "It depends what John wants to do."

"Ah yes," Mycroft says, with unusual softness. Sherlock squirms inside his coat, embarrassed at showing his hand like that.

"I read up, you know," he says, needing something to even the score, and so curious. "The Matherson scandal."

Mycroft clicks his tongue in disapproval. "I've already had to go over this once, with a far more relevant party. Stay out of it."

"I had to look it up. She was blonde, and stuck in my memory. I was hoping for a photograph to compare."

A heartbeat while Mycroft hops the mental steps to follow Sherlock's logic. "To Aunt Alice."

"Two of them, two crimes, one clump of blonde hair caught in a tree, and I couldn't remember the exact colours to deduce whose, if either. At any rate, Baldwin had no connection to the scandal, and much more connection to Alice and the fences he was so precious about. The presence of the neck brace capped it all off."

This is fast and disorganised thinking even for Mycroft. "I look forward to reading about it," he says wearily. "Is that all you wanted?"

But Sherlock is still thinking out loud. "It was just one great sloppy coincidence. Isn't that annoying? I always feel like the world should be tidier."

"I know several presidents who feel the same way. I spend a lot of time reminding them that bombs are not the housewife's cleaning tool of choice."

"And you didn't know."

"About Aunt Alice? The matter didn't interest me at the time. I assumed it would run its course and she'd turn up dead or alive, and that would be it. As it dragged on, I concluded she was dead."

"She might have been found sooner."

"That's hardly my fault."

"Sophia Matherson."

"Well, what else could I do?" Mycroft clears his throat, deeply uncomfortable. "It seemed fair recompense. All I did was write a letter."

"Was it yours?"

"What what mine?" Then Mycroft splutters. "Good God, no. Life's great irrefutables, Sherlock- you cannot heal the dead and- well. The deed was already done."

Sherlock's stomach twists at the implications of this. It's a sordid, awful thing. He grips his phone, feeling a cold anger compared to John's fury.

"Is this why you're so weird about sex?"

"I'm not weird about sex," Mycroft starts and Sherlock answers that with such judgmental silence, that he's compelled to speak on. "We're something other than average in many respects, Sherlock, even biologically. Why should that be any different?"

"And with Lestrade-?"

"Hell's teeth, Sherlock, none of your business. You don't even want it to be your business. You think the whole idea is rotten."

"It is," Sherlock says flatly. "But I can't stop it."

"No, you can't," Mycroft says, riled, "And I wish you wouldn't bother me about it. It's a cheap way to score one up on me, and don't pretend that it isn't. Years of you paying no attention to my affairs and now all of a sudden, here you are, digging around. What on earth do you want of me other than my humiliation, as if you've not enjoyed plenty of that to date. What is it you could possibly want to know? Frankly, your concern over my sex life is bordering on disturbing,

Sherlock, and-”

“Well, it doesn’t make any sense- how do you do it!?” Sherlock barks, and then bites his words back too late, kicking himself.

“Do it?” There is a dead pause while Mycroft stops, backtracks, pieces together the information he has. “Sherlock, why do you say ‘do it’? Surely with John,” he sounds perplexed, “Then, you haven’t...oh. Oh I see. Well. Obviously not. Well.” He’s surprised enough to repeat ‘well’ to himself once more.

Sherlock writhes on a hook of his own making. “Shut up, Mycroft. Just shut up.”

“Forgive me, little bother, I have scarcely ever imagined a universe in which this conversation would ever come to pass, let alone what I’d say in it. Good grief, why me? There’s a whole internet out there, you know.”

Sherlock makes an indignant, agitated noise.

“Sherlock.” Mycroft’s tone is tinny through the ear piece when it’s held at a distance. “Before you hang up.”

“What?”

Mycroft heaves an enormous sigh of resignation and then says, in kinder tones, “I will tell you two trite things, which have turned out to be true enough, and then for both our sakes’ please, please expunge everything from your memory and pretend that none this ever happened.”

Sherlock grunts his consent, fidgeting his fingers against the buttons of his coat.

“Then it’s this: it will be fine; don’t overthink it.”

“That’s it?”

“I warned you it was trite.”

“Right,”

“Especially don’t overthink it,” Mycroft advises. “And now I’m going to hang up, before my skin crawls off at the thought.”

“Mine’s already crawled,” Sherlock sneers, just for appearances.

“Good luck,” Mycroft says, and the line clicks dead. Sherlock drops his phone to the plastic chair beside him like it’s burning.

“Urgh,” he says, scrubbing at his hair. “Ugh!”

“What’s wrong?” John says from the doorway. Sherlock rockets from his chair; “Nothing! Are you done? Can we go?”

John holds his hands up, still stained around the edges with ink. “We can go. Something happen?”

“I hate waiting rooms,” Sherlock says, snatching up his phone and bundling his coat across his chest. “Hate them.”

“Sure,” John says, not quite believing him. “Well, waiting’s over. Here I am.”

Sherlock swallows. John nods his head towards the door.

“Come on,” he says. “Let’s get you out of here.”

The yard lights make everyone look gaunt. John drops Sherlock’s overnight case into the boot and closes it with a muffled slam. Sherlock has already turned the car’s nose towards the exit.

“Safe trip,” Lydia says, squashing John’s hand in her own.

“Take care,” John says, “I’m sorry about... Well, all of it.”

“That’s nice of you, and very stupid,” Lydia says. She lifts her chin towards Sherlock as he comes over, pulling down his sleeves. He looms awkwardly, and then lets Lydia embrace him.

“We’re ready to go; hurry up Wiggins.”

Wiggins doesn’t move from the doorstep he’s camped on. He yawns instead and shrugs. “Nah, think I’ll hang out a bit longer.” He scratches his stubble. “Police still got questions and stuff. It’s gotta be answered, innit?”

“How will you get back?” John asks.

“Train or something. Or hitch. You can piss off anyway,” Wiggins concludes, jerking his thumb towards the car. “I’m gonna try this country life thing for a day or two. Y’know. Like I’m a professional cynic but my heart’s not in it.”

Sherlock rolls his eyes. “When he tires of rural living, you have our number.”

“See ya, Boss. Cap.”

“Bye, Billy,” John says, uncertainly. Sherlock has wriggled away from Aunt Lydia’s reach with a trilled ‘Byee!’ and dived into the car.

“Bye, John. Look after Slim, won’t you? Keep up the good work, and all that.”

“Yeah,” John says, touched. “Of course I will.” He hesitates, a moment, feeling a certain empathy with her situation. “About...”

Down in the foaling barn, there’s still a faint light on. Tony has seen Tolly home from being questioned by the police, but the farm work goes on. Another mare, another foal.

“She’ll be fine,” Lydia says. “One way or another.”

“We’ll do what we can,” John promises. “Court dates, statements. Expert testimony. Anything you need, just ask me.”

“John,” Lydia is touched. She senses that for John it’s more than just a case. “I heard you nearly wrung Conn’s neck.”

“Seemed fitting,” John answers grimly. She squeezes his hand again. John wants to say something more, about his frustration, and his sympathy for Alice, but the squeeze is a firm one, and it tells him this isn’t the time or the place.

“That aside, you’re always welcome, if you’re ever passing.”

John hesitates, but then catches a movement from the corner of his eye; Wiggins making a shooing motion. ‘I got this,’ he mouths and John nods, trying to smile. “Alright, we’re off then. No more ghosts,” he adds, to Dom, who grins.

Sherlock has the engine running and the air con turned up when John gets in.

“I see Aunt Lydia has adopted you.”

“She’s nice,” John argues. “Your family’s really nice.”

“They’re quite good,” Sherlock agrees.

“I think it would be nice,” John says, watching the fields slip away behind them. “Maybe one day get a family home. A bit of land.” He looks at Sherlock. “Get a dog.”

“It’s an idea,” Sherlock says, but for now London is calling him, and the home they already have.

John is quiet on the way home. He sits with his elbow braced on the door, fist against his mouth and bit by bit Sherlock feels him slip away into a knot of thought.

He’s never seen him like this after a case. John sometimes drifts away, it’s true, but it’s because he’s mentally writing up his notes and musing, not this deep, silent brooding. It bodes trouble, Sherlock thinks, and makes the nape of his neck prickle.

“I thought Chinese for dinner, when we get in.”

John grunts, not listening. He’s watching the road with weary eyes, shoulders hunched. In contrast, Sherlock takes his eyes from the traffic to look at him.

“What’s wrong?”

John jerks his head at the sound of his voice and rumbles “nothing,” as if even he can’t even be bothered to lie. His mouth turns down.

Sad

The sooner they are home the better, Sherlock thinks, steering the car towards the exit of the motorway. John watches the flick-flick-flick of the passing signs and then he picks a hand up off of his knee and holds it uncertainly in the air. Sherlock glances at it and when John doesn’t move, continues driving. He clicks the indicator to start manoeuvring towards the exit, and then suddenly John flicks his hand to the right.

“Don’t turn off!”

Sherlock swerves the steering wheel right back into the middle lane before he can even register the command fully. John’s sat bolt-upright now. Sherlock tightens his grip on the wheel, driving blind.

“What is it? Where is it? Where are we going?”

John’s clearly having second thoughts, or else the first ones had caught him by surprise. “Just drive straight-“ he does lay a hand on the wheel then and inches them back onto the correct side of the

white lining. Sherlock's too busy staring at him. John's breathing hard. Sherlock can see the doubt physically ripple through John as he changes his mind.

"No, never mind, just come off at the next junction. I-"

The tyres scream as Sherlock, instead, careers them across onto the hard shoulder and puts his foot down hard on the brakes. Their seat belts snap into their collarbones and John's hands slither over the dashboard.

"Jesus!"

There's a blare of a horn from behind as a car they've cut up passes them. It slows and someone shouts through an open window, "What the fuck?"

Sherlock sticks his head out his own window and bellows, "There was a dog!"

He retracts back into the driver's seat, and locks his elbows, grimly staring out down the road ahead, the colour on the back of his neck rising. "Where am I driving to?" he asks, once he's regained some composure.

"Christ," John says, rubbing at his throat. "I- Just- home, for crying out loud. Just, go home."

"No."

"We can go home, be with Bee, turn in for the night."

"No," Sherlock insists. "There's something here. You've been dwelling on it for hours and it means something to you, enough for you to keep us on the motorway at the last minute and we're going there, whether you're going to be a coward about it or not, now tell me where I am driving to." The traffic thunders past them.

For a split second, John veers into anger because he's afraid, and then the better man in him sees the faint tremor in Sherlock's arms.

"Chelmsford," John says quietly, sinking against the car door, defeated. "We're going to Chelmsford."

Just a nod. Sherlock flicks the indicator to the right, checks his mirror and pulls out back into the traffic. With one hand, he smacks at the GPS until it turns on and a robotic lady tells them to follow the road ahead.

When Sherlock's hand rests on the gearstick, briefly John's does too.

I'm sorry.

After that, between gear changes, Sherlock's palm covers the back of John's hand.

They drive in silence down the ribbon of the M25, curving up and around London until the robotic lady tells them to take the next exit. Sherlock follows the signs, and then as they start to break into the edge of the town, he turns off the GPS.

"Left or right?" he asks.

"Left," John says. through a maze of suburbia; little cul-de-sacs with floral names and crescent shaped housing estates branch off the road on either side. John takes them down a few dead ends by mistake before they pass a park and then John face flashes with recognition.

“Left,” he says again. “It’s left.”

They twist half back on themselves and wind up in a row of post-war builds; semi-detached redbrick houses with white upper storeys and, here and there, mock Tudor pediments. Sherlock slows the car to a crawl down the length of the road until John jerkily indicates for him to pull into a parking space.

Sherlock waits.

At last, John says, “That’s it.” He leans forward to reach a hand around in front of Sherlock and point at a house across the street from them on the diagonal. It’s one of the few detached houses, vulgar in its effort to be perfect, with five windows and a door and clipped shrubs on the lawn. The exact sort of place where divorces are born.

“I grew up there,” John says, carefully removing any importance from each word before saying it. “That was our house.”

There are lights in the downstairs windows belonging to another family. Sherlock pictures them. Two children and two adults comprising a family of four, three of whom are watching TV together, passing commentary. Bicycles in the garage, swing-set in the garden. Father mows the lawn more often than it needs, simply because he likes walking up and down with his shirt off. Mother sews a quilt for everyone, and the children bury themselves up to their chins in private lives where they can be completely different people. John did not grow up here, Sherlock thinks immediately, this was just somewhere he inhabited.

“We moved in when I was about five, and Harry was about nine- Dad got promoted at work, so he wanted the bigger house, though it was further from everything except the corner shop. Mum couldn’t drive...” John’s mouth is dry. Sherlock can tell from the way he moves his tongue.

“Keep going.”

“We had a Ford,” John says, remembering, “A silver one, and then later a blue one, and he’d get these things to hang on the rear-view mirror which were meant to smell like floral things, but smelt more like chemicals, and they used to make me retch if I was stuck in the car for more than half-an-hour. Harry scratched it once, with the clasp on a handbag and then it disappeared. I think Mum threw it in the bin. Harry went mental-“

Sherlock leans his forearms on the steering wheel, watches the house and listens, even when it doesn’t make sense. Especially when John doesn’t make sense. The memories must be huge.

John lolls back in his seat after a while, and he talks, and he talks. It’s a jumble of anecdotes given factually, tiredly, until it’s clear to Sherlock that John’s told his own story so many times to nobody, rehearsed them and handled them for so long, that they’ve become thin and dusty with use.

John tells him all the mundane things of his childhood, and in doing so, the bigger picture as well. He talks about magazines, and the garden, and his school, and the neighbours. He talks about his boyhood longings for certain toys, riding his bike around the park and playing football until late in the street. Birthday parties, camping in the garden, barbecues, rough games with Harry. Reading under the covers until the small hours. Hot Sunday dinners, A dozen other things Sherlock knows of and few of which he has experienced first hand.

On paper, aged five to nine, John’s life was ideal, and yet in every meander of his memories, there’s something sharp that John’s been dancing on for years. He’s so well versed in it, he comes

across as dismissive, though he's careful to add phrases like, 'it wasn't right, of course' and other expressions that his nine-year-old self had needed to come to realise.

John talks, and talks. He clears his throat when his voice cracks, and then he goes on.

"I forgot some of it," he says, "I remember coming home from school. I remember doing spelling homework, and I misspelt 'furniture' as f-e-r-n-i-a-t-u-r-e, and I remember having jackets and beans for tea." John blinks. "And I remember all that so clearly but not much else, so I know I must have just... made myself forget. The neighbours said there was shouting. I must have been in bed, but I don't think I was wearing my pyjamas, so maybe I wasn't. And they didn't really tell us. The social people, I mean. They didn't think we needed to know. I don't know who called the police, probably a neighbour, but I remember seeing the lights on my wall, flashing through the window. Don't be upset..."

Sherlock doesn't know what his face is doing, but he feels dark and sour, and it must show. He could weep vinegar for John. "It's unfair," Sherlock says.

"No, it's not," John agrees, "But it's not about what's fair, is it?"

Sherlock picks at the leather on the steering wheel. Once upon a time he'd never have considered fairness even a ghost of an argument. Life wasn't fair. Fair wasn't logical. Up till now, he's not appreciated how strong a sense of justice he has.

Another thing that has rubbed off on him from John, he wonders.

"Go on," Sherlock says. "Don't stop."

Before John can continue, however, they're interrupted when a light flickers on in the porch of the house nearest them.

John goes tense; fight or flight distilled down to frozen, as a man steps out of the door and approaches the car with a measured, cautious tread. From arm's length away, he stoops and gestures for them to open a window. When John doesn't move, Sherlock puts a finger on the electronic controls and John's window shudders open a few inches.

"Everything alright?" the man says, trying to sound polite but too suspicious to be successful. "Sorry, just noticed you've been parked here a while."

"Fine. We're fine. Sorry, We're just..."

"None of your business," Sherlock says, waspish. "Push off."

To the man's credit, he presses, "You sure?" cutting his gaze straight past John's tense white face to Sherlock's red-eyed one. Sherlock swallows. John holds up his hands.

"Everything alright?" The intonation of the question is identical to the man on the pavement's, only older. A stooped gentleman appears from behind the glare of the porch lights. The younger man turns.

"Dad," he says, exasperated, "Go back in."

The old man walks with a cane, and stops short of the edge of the lawn. With a jolt, John knows him. On any other street he would have passed him in an instant without so much as a blink of memory, but outside his own house, John remembers him. The name is completely gone, but he remembers the shape of the face and the shuffling gait. Something to do with an old knee injury.

“Eh,” the old man says, taken aback. “You’re off the telly.” He points at Sherlock. “Anyone dead?”

“No,” Sherlock says, clearing his throat.

The old man hesitates, squinting at the inside of the car. His fingers loosen and close on the handle of his cane. “Y’looking for someone?” he asks, only this time he’s talking to John.

Mutely, John shakes his head.

“Well, take care. Knock if you need jump leads or something. Ben,” the old man carefully turns and his son, with another suspicious backwards look, decides that seeing his father manage the sloping lawn is more important than glaring through a car window.

John doesn’t breathe until they’ve gone in and the front door closes.

“He knew you,” Sherlock points out.

“We should go somewhere else,” John says, “Let’s just drive on somewhere.”

“He lived here when you did,” Sherlock says, starting the engine. “But he recognised you based on how you look now.”

“I know. I look like him.”

Not the old man. Sherlock closes his mouth and eases off the handbrake, pulling them back out into traffic. They drive aimlessly around the housing estates, Sherlock’s mind whirring.

“I should have guessed. You keep hardly any pictures of yourself.”

John shrugs. “It seems more obvious when I look at photos. I’ve gotten used to me, but...” he trails off in a cough. “I’m dying for a drink.”

Sherlock glances at him sharply, gloves creaking on the wheel.

“Water,” John corrects and then reassesses himself at once. “No, something fizzy. Sugar.”

“Drive-thru.”

“Yeah. Go right.”

Having a purpose puts them more at ease. John fidgets as they first find and then inch their way through a deserted fast-food joint. He balances the bag in the well between their seats and Sherlock peels them away from the road once more.

They pull up into a carpark and sit in the dark, picking chips from the bag as John talks. John tells him about his mother. He talks about meeting Stella and Ted for the first time and moving to their house. He talks about sitting on the stairs and calling his dad and never seeing him again except once, in a court case that John had been hustled into for all of five minutes. They hadn’t spoken. He assumed it was something to do with custody, but had no idea if it was his dad suing for the return of his kids, or social services trying to enforce fatherhood on him.

At any rate, they’d never gone back to him.

“He was suddenly single and in a scandal; I don’t think he’d have wanted to bother with us other than out of sense of ownership. We were settled. He could have come back later when he’d reset

his life and got me, but I guess later never came along.”

“As if you’d have been interested.”

“I’d have gone with him in a heartbeat,” John says. Their fingers are damp with grease when they touch. “If my dad had shown up at any time and said he wanted me, I’d have gone. If he’d wanted me.”

It’s a kind of loyalty that Sherlock can’t fathom. It’s too illogical. He twists his fingers between John’s instead and clasps their palms together instead of trying to find the words.

The ice in John’s drink rattles as he tilts the cup.

“What about now?” Sherlock asks, presently.

“Don’t know. Don’t tell me anything if you know.” John looks up. “Not unless I ask.”

“Of course.” Sherlock’s eyes glitter in the dark. He knows. Through a combination of what he’s learnt from Harry and research neither John nor Harry has had the heart for, he knows. It’s almost a disappointment to learn that John will likely never ask. He’d have liked to have imparted that information. He’d have loved to be part of John’s anger. He’d have loved to find the scraps of the man who once was John’s father and push John’s successes into his face.

Look what he became, and he didn’t need you to become it. Look what he made of me. I’d like to break your fingers.

John just looks guilty though. Sherlock reins back his train of thought and tries to pick up the threads of John’s again. In some ways, it’s much on the same lines, but then John says, “He’s probably an old man now. What’s the point? What would he even care?”

Sherlock has no smart answers to that.

“Don’t get upset,” John says again, upset, and then, he kisses him.

It’s sweet and salty with junk food. “It made me who I am,” John says, and there’s that raw edge of bitterness again beneath the sentiment. He leans into the driver’s seat and tries to kiss it away. Sherlock presses his free hand against John’s ribs.

Steady.

Sherlock bows his head to kiss again; hoping it’s the fairy tale cure for all manner of curses and ills, but John’s breath hitches hard and he pauses.

"John?"

"I'm fine," John says, thickly. "Sorry, I don't know what's the matter with me, dragging you to sodding Chelmsford like this, for a fat load of nothing. Bending your ear about a lot of old crap when we should be home by now."

John leans, gripping the seatbelt, sick with apology. He’s a breath from bowing over and sobbing. The car feels airless and grimy and he presses his head to Sherlock’s shoulder, when Sherlock presses him close enough to do so.

“I’m probably just tired. It’s just this case.”

Sherlock's free hand glides around the steering wheel, caressing the leather anxiously. John shivers

under his hand with frustration. Sherlock has long suspected that John has cried before, in secret, too proud and ashamed to share it with anyone. To have to do it again...

Sherlock's read books about grief, to try and understand, but he remembers nothing of them now. Instead it's other words that come to him, flung out desperately from the depths of his mind.

"I have mourned and yet shall mourn with ever-returning spring."

John chews his inner cheek, surprised out of his downward spiral. "That's Walt Whitman."

"Walt. Whitman." Sherlock nods slowly. He has no idea if it is or not, but his memory flickers and he remembers a few pertinent items about the man.

"That's not like you," John says, struggling for small talk. "Walt Whitman."

"A very sentimental, backwards looking man."

"Not like you at all."

"His mother did his laundry."

"A bit like you," John amends. He puffs his cheeks out, blows air, clears his throat. His insides feel like they are swimming. He can't get up.

"How come you read Walt Whitman?"

"To see what the fuss was about. Nothing much as it turns out, but I liked the poetry."

"Yes?"

Yes. Oh yes, some of it. Little bits of it had spoken to his younger self, before he'd reached the point where he'd piled all his interests up and set fire to them, just to see what would be left. He's surprised he remembers so much.

*It is in his walk, the carriage of his neck, the flex of his waist and knees, dress does not hide him,
The strong sweet quality he has strikes through the cotton and broadcloth,
To see him pass conveys as much as the best poem, perhaps more,
You linger to see his back, and the back of his neck and shoulder-side.*

"Mm," Sherlock says aloud, and John wonders what he means. He regards the blur of grey through the window, and now it has all subsided and he doesn't do anything except breathe damply out and then give one sodden sniff before sitting up.

"What's the time?"

The red glow of the dashboard tells them it's nearly one in the morning. John sighs. It's an hour and a half to drive home, and neither can face it. John wants to be somewhere now, without the smell of congealing french fries.

"To hell with it," he says, gesturing over the dashboard to the only lights visible in the darkness of the industrial estate they've strayed into. "We've been staring at a Premier Inn for the last hour and a half. We're checking in."

It's drizzling as John crosses the car park to the hotel. The headlights of the car sweep the empty

spaces as Sherlock moves the rental closer. For security reasons, the lobby door is locked and John has to pull up the number on his phone and call through before someone notices to come and open it for him.

“Is there anything available?” John asks, pulling his jacket around him against the chill.

“How many rooms will you be needing?”

“Uh, one,” John says. Sherlock’s bundling the remains of the drive-thru packaging into the lobby bin, and eyeing up the vending machine next to it.

The man behind the desk clatters on his keyboard. “And is that a twin or a double for you?”

“Double,” John says, pushing his hands into his pockets and fussing with his wallet. The back of his neck feels exposed when Sherlock drifts up behind him.

“Water,” Sherlock reports, plonking two bottles down on the desk. They drip with condensation. “What’s the damage?”

“It’s fine,” John says, pushing his own debit card at the receptionist, who doesn’t care which of them pays. The man whisks the card away and then returns it in the pin pad for John to thumb his PIN into.

They accept the card keys and trundle down an anonymous hallway to their room. Sherlock reads the details scrawled on the card key holder and clears his throat.

Double.

John slips his card into the slot and the light blinks green.

It’s dark inside the room and very quiet. The hotel is insulated against the noise of the road, which leaves the whole atmosphere muted. They slip in, trying not to make any undue noise. The lights blink on, just the lamps, around the edge of the room as Sherlock pushes his key into the switch on the wall.

Against the sharp white linens on the bed, John feels gritty. The double is a good sized one; big enough to pretend-

“What?” John says, looking up.

“I asked if you wanted the shower.”

“Oh. No, go ahead. I’m just going to...” He gestures and then bends a knee up to pick at his shoe laces.

Sherlock peels his gloves off and then lets his coat slip from his shoulders. It dominates the space inside the little wardrobe, even when John’s jacket is added beside it. They shift around one another, ostensibly getting ready for bed as normal. Sherlock scrolls through his messages, fires a few away back to Baker Street.

“Is Bee ok?”

“She’ll be fine with Molly and Lestrade. We can go back early.” Sherlock looks at his phone, and then switches it off to both conserve the battery and keep the world away.

He feels at his own shirtfront, considering his outfit and it’s adaptability as nightwear.

When he turns, John's still sitting on the edge of the bed, rubbing at the back of his neck.

"John?"

John looks up at the sound of his name.

Are you ok?

He's tired. He smiles back, a weary, glad, little smile. Slowly, he plants one hand on his knee and the other on the mattress and stands. There's not a lot of space between them. Sherlock feels like he's hovering, hands raised, not sure where to put them. John closes the space a little for him instead, until Sherlock's fingertips are brushing his shirt.

They come together like clockwork; not smoothly, but unfailingly.

John holds his own hand in the curve of Sherlock's back. The embrace is loose and questioning. Gradually, Sherlock figures out the measure of it; how heavily to let his arms rest against John's body, how to balance his weight with John's leaning against him.

Gratitude bleeds between them. When John looks up, the faintly perplexed look on Sherlock's face makes him smile.

"How come I'm so lucky?" John asks. Sherlock gives a little grunt of surprise when John squeezes him.

I can't believe this either.

John disconnects his hands and uses one to guide Sherlock's face down. The kiss is simple and short, just checking in. And then another, just to say thank you and other such sentiments.

The clock is on the steady tick to 2 am when they disconnect and start thinking about sleep more seriously. Or at least lying down. Sherlock's knees creak as he follows John into the bathroom. Too much rough treatment and being the wrong side of thirty is starting to show on him in the early hours these days. They stand and share the sink in silence, finger brushing their teeth. It freshens the breath, even if it doesn't clean much.

Sherlock uses his right hand, John his left. Between them, their little fingers tangle.

In the bedroom, John pulls off his jumper and his shirt. He's wearing a vest and his typical sensible underwear under his trousers; all in all he's not dressed any less than in his summer pyjamas.

Down either side of the strap of John's vest, Sherlock can see his scar. His own are more profuse, and he has no vest to hide them under. He unbuttons his shirt halfway and then leaves it loose as a compromise. His underwear is also somewhat less... stalwart than John's.

The hotel central heating is cranked up to a degree just above strictly necessary, but the sheets are cool when John tugs them loose at the corners. Sherlock picks up the fold of contrasting coloured fabric from the foot of the bed and drops it on the floor without ceremony. "Pointless thing."

The mattress sinks a little under their combined weight. Sherlock flicks off the lamp on his side, and John leaves his burning on it's lowest setting. Turning his face towards him, Sherlock tries to lighten the mood.

"Well-" he begins.

Here we are again.

Instead of a joke, however, John's hand finds his under the covers.

"Oh."

"No?" John's grip starts to untangle. Sherlock's tightens.

"No, that's fine. Nice."

Sherlock turns his head back to look at the white expanse of ceiling and simply feel. Presently John shifts onto his side and looks at Sherlock in the darkness. With his eyes only, he follows the silhouette of Sherlock's brow, the bridge of his nose, his mouth, his chin, his throat. Sherlock swallows.

And waits.

The sheets rustle almost inaudibly as John finally rolls over, his right hand finding the unseen patch of mattress between Sherlock's left arm and his ribs. From there it inches, palm-up, beneath his shoulder blade.

Their interlocked hands rise as if by instinct then flop back onto the pillow by Sherlock's ear.

'Hands up who wants a go,' Sherlock thinks, in a muddle. 'Me, sir!' He almost laughs. John makes it hard to concentrate. Sherlock's got one hand free to hold John by the waist and lean up into the kiss, and John's body feels hot even in contrast to the warmth of his own hand.

John's knees make divots in the mattress, holding his body up and away, giving him the manoeuvrability to keep the kiss going between pauses.

It's a tired kiss, full of care.

Gradually, because comfort demands it, their hands unwind from one another's grasp and John leans on his forearm. The muscle of his arm stands out from bearing his weight up. Sherlock's hand first spiders down from the crook of John's neck and his beating pulse, then skims the seam of his vest from scar to armpit. He strokes the edge of the hollow, John squirms, and then Sherlock brings both hands to rest at John's waist.

Holding him like this gives Sherlock a measure of control that thrills him.

John sighs and lets him take up a fraction of his weight, but inevitably weariness and gravity brings him down.

There's no embarrassment about it, though there is a touch of cautiousness. They've been dancing around the matter for so long, after all, and now it's gone two in the morning in a budget hotel on the wrong side of Chelmsford, they're both shattered. It's all very unplanned.

John clears his throat.

Sherlock can't see anything in the darkness between their bodies, shrouded as it is by the sheets. He doesn't have to though.

"Oh."

"Mm," John replies. Then his breath hitches when Sherlock's hands make a daring move under the hem of his vest. "Ok."

John opens his mouth and then pauses again.

Should we - ?

God, no.

Sherlock stops them both before he can think twice about it, and before John can speak again. The compulsiveness of it all, the sense that things are teetering on the edge of his grasp is both frightening and rousing. His stomach clenches like he's stepped off of the lip of a building and it's as though the air is roaring in his ears.

John's muscles bunch under his fingers. He must- he does- sense something under Sherlock's urgency, because he pushes him back and takes over. His fingers tremble down Sherlock's stomach.

Nervous.

He fumbles at Sherlock's hip, while Sherlock tries to decide what to do with his hands other than plant them at random places. They rock. The headboard clatters with a noise that shocks them. John breathes a swear word and grabs it, startling a laugh out of Sherlock.

"Shh!" John says, burying his face in the side of Sherlock's neck. He swears again, and then mutters, "Oh, who cares?"

Sherlock shakes with amusement, hanging onto John's vest. The sheets have slipped askew and his feet are sticking out of the bottom. He pulls them back under into the warmth, one knee cocked on either side of John's hips. Their feet brush and he realises at the same time as John does that John's forgotten to take his socks off.

The stupidity of it, the fact that they both fixate on the socks makes Sherlock laugh again. John sits back and pulls them off, throwing them at the wall. He looks down and understands the tension behind the laugh. He touches his thumb to Sherlock's chin.

"Maybe we should talk first," he suggests softly, offering. They could stop, for now, he means, and he means it to be kind. They could wait until they're better worded to stumble around the necessary conversation.

Sherlock's frustration at the idea is too obvious though.

John smooths his hand over his chest.

I know. You're nervous.

Sherlock chews his lips. He wants the security of sex. Something tangible, even if he has no idea how he'll feel on the other side of the act.

"Hey," John says, pulling his attention back. "You've got me. I'm here."

The corner of his mouth rises, self-deprecatingly and he gives a slight motion of his hips by way of evidence. "I'm interested."

That's unarguable. There's evidence that not even Anderson could ignore. "Or we can just... get cosy." John adds. He rubs his hand up Sherlock's arm. "Sleep. Sort ourselves out in the morning."

"Shut up."

“Really?” John wants to know, kissing his chin.

Not really. The curl of nerves in his stomach is winding, but the line of John’s back is noticeably freer of tension. It gives him the confidence to press his fingers a fraction harder into John’s skin and kiss him like he wants to.

“Just this much?” John asks, when they stop. “You’re ok with...?”

“Why shouldn’t I be?” Sherlock says.

“It’s hard to tell how much you want or expect.”

Everything. Nothing.

“You’re allowed to expect things,” John says, quietly. “You’re allowed to ask.”

Sherlock throws him a briefly challenging look. “Aren’t you?”

John’s lips part. “Yeah, I suppose so,” he says, like the idea is brand new to him. “I- Yeah. It goes both ways.”

“What do you want? What do you expect?”

“I’d just settle for making you happy at the moment.”

“Happy?” Sherlock leans up on one elbow.

“Satisfy you,” John says. They’re eye to eye. In a slow, smooth motion, Sherlock reaches one longer arm around to press it to the mattress near the small of John’s back.

“I don’t want to be satisfied,” Sherlock answers, his voice so low and so close to John’s ear that John feels his words in his chest. “I want to excite you.”

The sheets puddle to the floor, ignored. John squares his shoulders up to Sherlock’s and pushes up against him. Sherlock pushes down. It’s a boyish, meaningless bit of fun that results in John dropping Sherlock flat against the mattress, breathless.

The headboard thumps, and they ignore it. There’s no one to wake up except for strangers. The bed belongs to no one. The pillows smell of neither of them. One by one they’re jostled aside and flop to the floor. John laughs, a short-winded, disbelieving sort of laugh and Sherlock hums.

“Put the lamp out,” Sherlock says, and the darkness is blue before their blinking eyes.

John skims his thumb up the centre of Sherlock’s body, he pushes the shirt from his shoulders, kissing them like each is a lover of his in its own right. There’s a tenderness to the touch that makes Sherlock shiver and it’s this, it’s this, it’s this he’s craved for so long, so unknowingly. Not the touch; the tenderness.

His body moves of its own accord; the pulse rises, sweat dew, muscles tic under John’s hands. John knows what he’s doing when he kisses the arch of his neck. He touches him and to Sherlock’s dizzied perception it is as if John has found a way to reach through him, and smooth him out from the inside.

“John?”

The shirt has slid to the floor. John sits up to take off his vest in the dark, eyes closed so that only

their fingers can see their flaws. Sherlock rises with him, mirroring his Atlas stretch, and then chases his hands down before John does and so swallows him in an embrace. He reads his body, from the wrinkles of John's elbows to the kissing depth of his navel.

They slow and stop again, fingers dabbing one another. Sherlock presses a finger to one of John's dimples, just to see the way his smile can be pulled out of shape. He makes it roguish and then clownish, and then John's laughing too much for him to have any effect.

"You," John says, pushing his hand away and his teeth are bright as he grins.

"Get up a moment," Sherlock says, aching. He twists to find room and then with one thumb hooked in the waistband of his own underwear, Sherlock pushes them halfway down his thighs. John's hand finds and closes around the damp stretch of fabric between them and then it's gone, whispered off the length of Sherlock's legs and dropped to the carpet with all the air in his lungs.

John pushes his fingers inside the elastic of his own. It's not elegant, but he drags the cotton down and stands for a moment to drop his pants to his ankles. The lights from the motorway are seeping through the blinds, colouring John in nameless shades, barely visible. Sherlock can see the shape of him, moving in the dark, and for a moment this sense of John is so new to him that he fails to recognise the shape as John at all, but something brutal instead.

"Where are you?" John asks, lost.

"Here," Sherlock says, voice cracking. His mouth is dry. John comes like a shadow towards the bed, expression obscured, body obvious. Sherlock's eyes are fixed, his back fixed to the pillows, a throb low in his belly. It's fascinating.

It's desire.

It's a terrible, unknown thing.

"Sherlock?"

"Here."

"Hey," John says, his hand blundering to Sherlock's arm, and now it is John again, warm and honest. His hand strokes the crown of Sherlock's head, pulling him close and falling down with him into a sideways tangle.

Sherlock presses his palms to John's chest and feels his heart thudding away underneath, slower than his own.

"That's ok," John says. He tugs a pillow under their heads and they kiss there, staving off the things they hadn't expected to come to bed with them.

"I'm fine," Sherlock echoes, furious with himself.

"I know. I know."

There's nothing between them but sweat. John lies beside him, brushing Sherlock's face with his fingers, like he's spent his whole life without human contact. It's such an unexpected thing, Sherlock thinks.

"You are," John says, "The most incredible person."

John is a deep pool of calm. He's crossed the hurdle between the anxiety of reaching this point and actually doing it, and found it not such an trial after all. Instead, it's Sherlock who is curling his feet up with nerves. It's so contrary to his usual broad-painted confidence that it exasperates him. He's about to express it when John's hand tickles up his side, distracting him.

John laughs when he shivers. "Ahah," he says, knowingly, and then it's just another of their games again. Sherlock tussles back, hand gripping John's. They bump the bedside table and the lamp wobbles; it's this that appeals to Sherlock's tense sense of humour. John looks down at him, shaking with an unexpressed laugh and Sherlock marvels at how John can adeptly turn his feelings on a pin. As if he can read Sherlock's mind, John puts a hand on Sherlock's hip.

There's a phenomenal need to be close.

John finds room somehow, to encompass the whole of him. In the dark, Sherlock's perceptions of size and space are getting distorted; he feels smaller, John, greater, even though it's John's knees that are nudging against his thighs.

Sherlock aches.

He breathes, conscious of the heat and weight of himself between his legs. His fingers move over John's body, skimming around under his arms and grasping his shoulder blades as John's hand moves lower.

John cups him, making a faint noise through his nose as he does so. At this, Sherlock comes alive; his grip firmer on John's back. His lips first, and then teeth, graze the side of John's neck as he pulls him back into a kiss that expresses the continuation of what they started in the barn.

John twists to find leverage over him and room to work his fist. They make space between themselves, Sherlock arching. Their foreheads remain touched at the corners, and their noses bump as they slide out of a kiss. John turns his head to look down. His interest drags Sherlock's attention down as well.

They watch it together, John's hand moving.

Their feet are tangled. Sherlock draws unhurried lines with his nails down the middle of John's back as John adjusts his grip.

They're quiet. They've both been keeping their sex secret for so long that it feels strange not to preserve a little of the silence. The mattress creaks, muffled. Sherlock pants. Intermittently, John makes an involuntary noise deep in his throat when he swallows. When they do speak, it's a whisper so low that only the consonants are audible.

Sherlock pushes up, grasping at John's buttocks and delighted to find he can palm one in each hand and pull John closer. John brings his hand free from between them, pressing it to the bed, and uses the whole of his body instead. He finds an angle to work at and the headboard rattles again as precision is dumped in favour of vigour and a tried-and-tested motion.

John screws his eyes shut and mouths a swear. Sherlock chases up against his body, finding a kiss but too breathless to do anything with it, except smear his lips from the corner of John's mouth to his chin. There's a ringing in his ears like he's underwater, and a sensation like a tide is pulling him about. It sucks him, writhing, down as far as he can stand, and then with a bang dumps him back on the shore, his belly wet and his legs shaking.

He's dazed as John arcs above him, thrusting a hand down to briskly finish himself. He chokes first

against Sherlock's neck, and then into his own fist.

They lie flat for a while, equally shipwrecked. The muscles down Sherlock's thighs keep hiccuping, not to mention elsewhere. Eventually, John heaves himself from the bed and feels his way to the bathroom. The light is a harsh intrusion, and they're both half-blind when John turns it off and stumbles back to the bed.

"Towel," he mutters.

They paw at the mess halfheartedly and sling the towel into a corner. John curls on his side. He reaches out and touches Sherlock's cheek. "Go to sleep," he says. Sherlock's skin is wan with exhaustion.

"I'm fine," Sherlock shakes his head, "I'm awake."

"I mean," John whispers back, fingers hesitating now over Sherlock's temple. "Sleep with me. Rest."

Wake up with me in the morning.

In truth, Sherlock feels too sodden with tiredness to move without the greatest effort. He fumbles his fingers into John's and kisses them by way of agreeing. John rolls onto his back, how he likes to sleep, taking Sherlock's hand with him and clasping it in both of his right on his diaphragm. It rises and falls with John's chest, and the hairs on the back of Sherlock's arm tickle as the sweat dries from his skin.

"John?"

"Mm?"

He squeezes John's hand tight, instead of speaking. Tight enough maybe to hurt but all John does is squeeze back, eyes closed, and tug it closer.

The hotel room is still dark when John wakes. There's a bright crack of light down the edge of the curtains, however, and when he squeezes his watch to make the numbers light up, he's shocked to see that it's already gone nine in the morning.

Sherlock is a silent stretch under the covers next to him. John remembers fetching the duvet from the floor. He does not remember giving it all to Sherlock. The man is pocketed inside the fold of duvet, legs pulled up. John eases the edge back to peek at him, and finds a face filled out with sleep, soft jawed and lovely.

He doesn't stir as John sits up, nor when John eases from the bed, and closes himself in the bathroom.

The bathroom light is just as obnoxious as it was a few hours earlier, and not too helpful given that he turned it on to see where he's peeing. All he can do is screw his face into his shoulder until it stops blinding him.

The shower door rattles too loudly when he closes it behind him, but the rush of water itself is quiet. John stands under it for a moment, letting the water knock on his skull until his higher functions start to answer. He scrubs his face. He is tempted to do nothing more than rub a towel

over his skin and crawl back into that pocket of duvet, nude and damp, to stick his heartbeat to Sherlock's.

He's reluctant to step out of the bubble of the shower, never mind the hotel. He does not want to draw the curtains, or climb back into his gritty clothes.

He wants to lie on sheets they don't own, and talk, and drink tea and feel Sherlock's weight leaning on him, and just exist for a while as lovers. He could sit, propped up on pillows, his arm around the warm curve of Sherlock's back. They could touch by daylight; they could coil like ammonites into the shells of each other's bodies, or lie flat, stacked as a pair of kippers marinating in a dish of salt.

He pictures it all just so, although with less poetry. His body is only sluggishly awake, his feet lumbering around the base of the shower. The clock ticks in his head - already past 9 in the morning! - even as he furrows a hand under his testicles. Washing. Mostly.

Partly just to feel himself.

Partly just to marvel and compare their differences and similarities.

John rolls his neck from side to side and re-lives the gorgeousness of it, before resigning himself to scouring his body with soap, businesslike.

Sherlock is still asleep when he reenters the bedroom. The light and the sound of John moving around gathering their clothes together doesn't disturb him either. John knows he won't wake until he's good and ready, unless someone shakes him, and he can't bring himself to drag Sherlock into the morning yet. Like that, face wrinkled into the pillows and his shoulders naked above the duvet, he remains something tender from the night before. A few more minutes, John thinks.

He fills the tiny kettle and clicks it on, finding the tea things in the dresser drawer. He draws the curtain on his side only and sits in one of the chairs, half-dressed, toying with the empty milk pods. Sherlock lies at a comfortable angle, like the right hand side of a pair of parentheses. Without moving from the chair, John forms the left.

Sherlock projects awareness before the man actually moves; something in the change of his breathing and the way he lies. His hair sticks out at an angle on one side and is flattened on the other when he lifts his head from the pillow. He looks unfocussedly at John and gives an owlish frown. It takes him two efforts to speak, taking in the tea and John's state of dress and what he says makes John smile.

"Your vest is on inside out."

"I know. It's grubby," John answers, getting up. The kettle splutters to a boil again and Sherlock twists to sit up in bed, scrubbing his hair into uniform disorder. The duvet puddles in his lap as he reaches forward to take the mug.

Before he'd gone missing, Sherlock had always been comfortable being only passingly decent. John had once told him he'd been born in the wrong century and ought to go back to some time and place they'd worn togas, to which Sherlock had responded with a muddled discourse on how impractical a toga was, but also approval for the fact that the Greeks had held a healthy suspicion of tight trousers. John had found this last fact somewhat contradictory, given Sherlock's suits.

After he'd come back, he'd kept more covered. Waltzing around the flat in pyjamas and a dressing

gown, yes, but no lazy, comfortable nudity. Just that one time, making a point with his scars.

But Sherlock takes the mug with no apparent discomfort at his own display, and it's a breath of fresh air. He yawns and scratches his curls into a more equal mess. His skin is only a few shades darker than the duvet, and he is all angles poking out of the marshmallowy swathes of it. He's no longer as greyhound thin as he was when Mary died, but his body is still narrow at the waist.

John drinks him in. The vulnerable hollow of his throat above a chest that John is not convinced is naturally hairless, down to his belly, which morphs from pillowy to taut as Sherlock reaches back to put his cup on the bedside table.

He pauses with it in hand, drains the last sip and looks up. They share a moment of acknowledgment of where they are now.

"It's... eight thirty?"

"It's quarter to ten," John corrects. He pushes back more of the curtain and Sherlock digs sand from his eyes.

"I'll get up." Briskly he plants the teacup and wriggles from the bed. The emptiness of it seems sad. The lines across his back are sadder; dull brown and old. John pulls on his trousers and looks for the things that have fallen from the pockets. He sits on the edge of the bed and checks his wallet for cash. Faces look at him from under the plastic ID pocket and it makes him pause. He's still sitting there when Sherlock comes back.

His touch on John's shoulder brushes the edge of his vest.

"What are you thinking?"

"I was..." John runs his thumb over the old photo of Sherlock and Bee. "I was thinking about my family, actually."

"Which one?"

John is startled at the question, at least as much as Sherlock is for having said it.

"I didn't mean-" Sherlock begins and then stops. "I suppose I did mean."

"Both. All of them," John says, slowly. "I hadn't considered it like that. Maybe that's how I see it, though. I was just thinking I wish I'd kept my photos."

Sherlock sits on the bed beside him, damp and smelling of hotel soap. When he doesn't say anything, John continues.

"Of me, maybe, when I was a kid. Your aunt's got loads. I nicked a few." He peels them out of the inside of his wallet and fans them in his hand.

He touches the picture of the red setter with delight. "That's Redbeard's mother." He chuckles at the photo of Mycroft on the fat pony, and puzzles at himself as a boy, unwittingly making the same expression.

"That's my favourite," John says, tapping the photo of the shrub marked 'William Will Not!'

"I remember that," Sherlock says, "I'd forgotten. I didn't want them to take my photo so I went behind the bush." He does not mention the tantrum that had accompanied this act of rebellion, but

John's eyes glitter with an inkling of it anyway. He tucks them back in among the £10 notes.

"I know you think they're idiotic, but it's lovely to see them."

"It is?"

"Course. See what you looked like as a kid and your mum with her 80's hairdo, and that awful zip-up jumper thing you had."

Sherlock bites his inner cheek.

"It's nice," John says. "I don't have that. There weren't many, and I threw out what I had. And now I don't have any pictures of me before university, and I don't have a single photo of my mum."

"Do you... want one?" Sherlock asks, before it occurs to him that this is the wrong question. John's expression drops to something raw.

"John, there was nothing you could have done."

"I know." John looks up towards the ceiling. "My therapist's mentioned it once or twice."

Sherlock turns hawkish, still, seemingly inspecting the space above John's shoulder. "It's..." he begins and then stops again, unsure of what it is that John needs to hear, and unclear on what it is that he needs to say. John's watch beeps for the hour. They must have started exhuming Aunt Alice by now; the bones brushed out of the damp earth.

He could not have saved her life, but he could have identified her resting place, and her killer. He recognises the futile twinge of anger and guilt that he didn't solve it; that he wasn't as clever as a child as he was now. It's the small-scale version of John's guilt.

John plants his hand on Sherlock's and gives it a friendly little shake. "It's getting late," he finishes for him, expertly packing the conversation back into its boxes, and shouldering it again for another time. He pockets his wallet and leans past Sherlock to pull his shirt from the bed.

"Where's your phone? Mine's dead," Sherlock says.

"Bedside table. Do you know who's leading the investigation?"

"No," Sherlock says, reaching for it. "I don't care. I'm calling home. I want to speak to Bee."

When he looks up, John's expression has coloured to something dangerously sentimental. Sherlock mutters over the keypad. John pulls on his shirt, watching him as he dials. He pushes his shirttails in and sits on the bed behind Sherlock, behind the scars, and wishes many things.

"Lestrade," Sherlock rumbles. "Yes. Yes. Yeess, shut up. Let me speak to her."

There's a pause, and Sherlock turns slightly to see what John is doing. John's not doing anything yet, but he's touching the duvet by Sherlock's hip and it's distracting.

"Hello, Bee," Sherlock says. "It's Daddy. How are you?"

John can faintly hear her babbling down the phone. Sherlock moves the phone back from his ear a fraction and smiles. "Oh yes? Is Lestrade behaving? Uh,... Greg. Oh. I see. Ungle Gog. What an excellent name, I'm sure he loves it."

His shoulders shake with a chuckle.

John wraps his arms around him from behind and leans his cheek on Sherlock's back, listening to him speak.

"Can I speak to Uncle Gog, please, Bee? Yes. We're home soon. No, please don't cry; it doesn't make the A12 shorter. Ah..." Sherlock hesitates and then rambles on about the London road network, over Bee's tears until the sheer persistence and cadence of his voice calms her down. He pauses, and John guesses someone else has the phone.

"Hello, Gog. Is Magog still there somewhere?" Sherlock asks.

Lestrade's voice rattles out from the microphone. "Ha bloody ha." He sounds actually amused though. "He's Mygoff, actually. Like Van Gogh, but—"

"Fatter."

Lestrade laughs in spite of himself. "Mind it," he warns. "He was only here for a bit."

"You're lying."

"Trust me, you're happier with the lie."

"Has civilisation fallen in our absence?"

"What's John doing? Isn't he there?" Lestrade asks, before Sherlock can get too far into his lament.

"John's...fine," Sherlock says, touching John's forearm. In fact, he doesn't know what John's doing, and he suspects John doesn't either, but that's no real reason to stop it. John loosens his embrace anyway, emerging around Sherlock's arm.

"I'm here," he says, loud enough for Lestrade to hear. "Is Bee ok?"

Sherlock switches the phone to loudspeaker.

"Yeah, she's fine. She's just been awake since four. Literally four this morning. She's kind of hyped up looking for you two. Are you going to get back soon?"

"It's going to take us about an hour and a half, but we'll get on the road asap," John promises, feeling guilty. "Sorry, things got away with us this end." Sherlock squeezes his knee.

"Tell us about it when you get in."

"Read my blog," John replies.

"We've got to get going," Sherlock cuts in, stopping Lestrade winding the conversation out into small talk. "Look after Bee."

"Yeah? Dunno about that. What do you think, Sunshine? Shall we go to the park, or should Uncle Greg give you a cigar and take you to the pub?"

"Parb!"

"One hour, forty-five minutes," John says firmly, and then goodbye. Sherlock hangs up and twists his head back to look at him.

Alright?

John smooths his thumb down Sherlock's back, hungry. "I'll get us some breakfast for the road," he offers. His thumb skims the edge of the duvet and Sherlock's breath catches.

"Hmm."

The clock ticks on relentlessly.

Sherlock closes his eyes as John's lips cling briefly to his, pulse rising, but all too soon, it's over. "When we're home," John promises. "When Bee's gone to bed..."

"She's been awake since four," Sherlock says.

John considers this, gently shooing him towards his clothes.

"Then she can go to bed early," he suggests.

They somehow manage to put themselves in travelling order before the next ten minutes have elapsed. Sherlock has the fastest, coldest shower he can stand and flings his rumpled suit back on before likewise flinging the keycards at the reception staff. John has charmed coffee and croissants from somewhere, the latter of which are small and pale and flabby. John will eat them all anyway, and Sherlock will make do with sugar and caffeine until they're home and Mrs. Hudson makes them sandwiches.

Sherlock seethes through the hustle of the lobby; a group of younger men indecently hungover, a bickering middle-aged couple, a family with small children, all excited. Outside it's as cloudy, and brings down their mood, and Sherlock can't make up his mind as to if it's because he wants to collar John and pull him back into the seclusion of the hotel room, or the fact that they are not home and missing a limb without the baby.

John picks at a croissant as they cross the carpark, equal parts glum and soppy, exactly like the toddler when she's got a cold.

"You're not feeling ill are you?"

"What? No. Do I look ill?" John feels his own face, and then stuffs it with croissant.

'This idiot,' Sherlock thinks, and unlocks the car.

The slam of the car doors shuts them off from the world again. Sherlock starts the engine, checking for any vehicles roaming the car park. Nothing moves; it could be a graveyard for cars. The hotel is a blank facade, concealing who knows what goes on. Sherlock puts his arm behind the headrest of John's chair as if he's about to reverse, and then abruptly leans across and kisses him instead.

John grunts, Sherlock's hand eclipsing half his face. He grips the other man's shirt, feeling Sherlock gulp from three angles.

Sherlock pulls back to growl, "When the hell are they going to automate the motorways so that no one has to ever damn drive?" and then kisses him again.

"I dunno," John says, dazed, or means to say once his mouth is free. Instead he says, "What?" finds a fistful of Sherlock's collar and stops him from getting away without a third snog.

“Better?”

Sherlock hammers on the steering wheel with the ball of his hand a few times. “Yes,” he says finally. “Keep doing that, that’s good.”

“Alright,” John says, feeling his mouth with his fingers, wondering if Sherlock knows he’s got flakey pastry on them both now. “Hang on, only ‘good’?”

“Not bad.”

“Very good, I thought.”

“Let’s not flatter you too much, you get puffed up.”

“I get puffed up?” John scoffs. “Excuse me, there’s one man with a giant ego in this car, and it’s not me.”

“I’m vain, you’re egotistical. There’s a difference.”

“I’m a damn good kisser.”

“Hmm,” Sherlock says again, in a way that makes John grin, ego absolutely puffed, although if he’s not careful a few other bits will puff as well and the windows are already steaming up.

“Let’s go home,” John says, letting some fresh air into the car. Sherlock shoves the gear stick into drive and John tries not to cast any more wistful looks at the Travelodge.

Sunday morning traffic; barely there and barely going anywhere. They slip out of the town with ease, hitting the main road for the run back to London.

“Just good,” John muses again, after a while. “Have to do something about that.”

“I’m driving.”

“Well, when you’re not driving.”

He chuckles in a way that Sherlock has never heard before. A deep, purposeful little chuckle that makes the hair on the back of his neck rise and his groin throb. He shifts in his seat and pushes his foot down on the accelerator.

“Speed camera,” John warns as they fly past it in a bright flash.

“Bugger it,” Sherlock replies, and flashes through a second just for the hell of it.

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—

She is two and something-or-other years old, and missing her fathers. Lestrade jollies her along and Mrs. Hudson distracts, but as time passes, she knows something is missing and misses it more with each passing hour.

“Soon, sweets, they’re coming.”

She cries.

Greg picks her up, trying to make her laugh, and he has barely managed to stem the worst of the

noise, when a voice cuts across the room.

“Hello- what wailing wight calls the watchmen of the night?”

“Daddy!”

Sherlock is stood in the doorway, unbuttoning his jacket, and comes forward with arms outstretched for her to fall into. He kisses her face, and then a beat behind is John, whose face wrings itself out at the sight of them. She slips from one embrace to the other, John gathering the whole sweet warmth of her to his chest, and they rock, turning away from the rest of the room.

“I’m home, sweetheart, I’m home,” John whispers.

“What happened?” Lestrade asks, taking in the bags under Sherlock’s eyes and John’s countenance. Sherlock shakes his head, and with good tact, Lestrade takes his leave quietly, and without further interference.

John leans back when Sherlock touches his shoulders and they slip into a three way muddle of arms, Bee in a paroxysm of emotion, crooning ‘babar, daddy, daddy, babar,’ over and over.

Sherlock can see only the tops of their heads, but John’s fingers a hard twist in the fabric of his jacket, contrary to the rest of John’s body, which is sagging.

“I’m sorry. We’re sorry, we missed you,” John says, rocking the baby. She clings to his shirtfront, wrinkling her nose at the strange smell of his clothes, but unwilling to let go.

John sinks onto the sofa with her, and then slumps like his strings have been cut. “God, that’s better,” he murmurs. He opens his eyes when Sherlock touches his face.

“Tea?”

Please.

Sherlock picks over the debris of Lestrade’s babysitting, pausing only to flick the television on. He returns with mugs and Bee’s yellow ducky cup, and squeezes onto the sofa. Bee climbs onto his chest to point at the TV and tell him, in serious tones, everything the herky-jerky stop-motion moon mice are doing, until her thumb drifts into her mouth and she starts to go still and dopey. They let the day disintegrate into a welcome stretch of nothingness.

Sherlock wraps his arms around her, and watches a pink mouse fly a tin can boat to the stars. Bee’s finger strokes her own nose as she sleeps, John’s side is a wall against his own. Sherlock rests his head back into the sofa, Bee’s curls against his throat.

My little girl.

The moon mouse whistles and plays tunes that become elaborate ditties playing from the walls, and he’s not aware that he’s dozed off until John gently touches his shoulder.

“Here,” he whispers. Bee is an open-mouthed sprawl now, dribbling into her own ear. She doesn’t stir as Sherlock slides sideways into John, who has propped his feet up between toys on the coffee table. “Just for a minute,” John says, head back and eyes shut. On the telly, the moon mice are feeding the space cows felt flowers. Sherlock’s stomach gurgles, but he’s not hungry enough to get up yet. John has his arm around them both.

Sherlock’s feet hang over the end of the sofa. Bee is a deadweight on his ribs and his head is at an

awkward angle against John's stomach, but it's warm, and worth every discomfort.

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Chapter End Notes

1) Here's a fun fact, when I was thinking up a first name for Baldwin, the first thing out of the grab bag in my head was Alec, and it just felt so right. I was pleased. Here's a name, I thought, that has a ring of a pretty realistic sounding name. A few days before completing this chapter, I was reading Neil Gaiman's account of the Oscars from the cheap seats, in which he mentions Alec Baldwin. And I went "Huh, that's a coincided-oh shit." So thank you, Neil Gaiman, from saving my dumb ass from taking Alec Baldwin's name in vain, as the lousy inept murdering villain in a fanfic case acting as a backdrop to my slowburn Gay Sherlock 'n' John Yarn (tm). I owe you one.

2) Uncle Vern is of course a nod to [Vernet who ACD Holmes cited as his touch of art in the blood.](#)

3) Becher's Brook is one of the most famous fences that horses must jump in the Grand National, one of the most dangerous fences in the world and one of the most difficult. It is named for Captain Becher, who fell off into the ditch at the bottom and had to crouch there in the dirty water while the rest of the race passed over his head. Famously, he reported on his experience by stating that 'water tastes disgusting without the benefits of whisky.' The fence has been reduced in size and scope in recent years, but the hedge still stands at some 4.5ft on the approach, with a drop to the ditch on the other side of some 7ft (or 2m for our metric friends). [This is the scene in 2012 that lead to further reduction of the height](#), so it would have been a absolute beast in the late 80's. If that sounds like plenty enough, just remember that the horses can't see the drop when they take off!

4) Dom, if you blinked and missed it, is from Cleveland UK, stab capital of these fair isles, though probably rubbing shoulders with equally dodgy places nationwide in the rankings. Cleveland is technically another of those counties, which like Wessex, no longer officially exists. It includes t Middlesborough and Stockton-on-tees, which are... rough? They have their highlights, but put it this way, when my friend started university there in 2005, their bragging point was that they'd finally installed some general street lighting which had reduced the rape rate. People here are known as 'Smoggies' and there's [a fairly distinctive accent/dialect](#) that goes along with it. There's also a faint ACD connection- his brother-in-law and Raffles creator E.W.Hornung hailed from Middlesborough, and apparently could speak fluently in no less than three Yorkshire dialects. Champion!

5) 'Pudding Lane Protocol' is a nod to the Great Fire of London, which started in Pudding Lane. Pudding is a complex thing in the UK. Codenamelazarus and I have had to agree to disagree following the Great Pudding Argument of 2014, and there is now a moratorium on defining pudding between us.

6) Electric fencing can be great fun. Fun you can have with it includes - trying to grab it and let go between clicks. The same game with other parts of your body. Convincing

your male cousins to pee on it. Watching that one shitty Akita dog* pee on it. Making a long chain of people holding hands and sharing the shock... (I'm lying none of these are fun, don't do these.)

*Akita dogs are generally fine animals. This one was a mean bastard.

7) Spot the Blur reference.

8) 'What wailing wight calls the watchmen of the night' is a line from William Blake's poem 'A Dream' from his Songs of Innocence. [The poem is about a tired ant trying to get home to her children.](#) Sherlock also comes up with a bit of Walt Whitman, firstly the line about mourning from [When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloomd](#) and the verse from [I Sing The Body Electric](#). I don't feel Sherlock would -love- either of these, but I think he'd have read them.

9) They're watching The Clangers at the end. [It's very cute.](#)

10) The title of this part is from ['Talk to Me' by Sunny and the Sunglows](#) (also sometimes known as the Sunliners), which is a real sweetheart of a song and you should definitely listen to it. The working title was 'Honing in on the Bone Zone. Target Incoming. 15 meters. Spread 'em, lads!'

And that's it! Thoughts? Comments? Questions? Just want to tell us about your most embarrassing childhood photo? Leave us a comment, and hey. Thanks for waiting - Oda

Interlude 5: While Our Blood's Still Young

Chapter Summary

*“Hey,” Lestrade says, lightly. He reaches out and dabs Mycroft just on the ear.
“What’s up?”*

Chapter Notes

HAPPY NEW YAARRRRR EVERYBLOBBY! S5 may be that unicorn the fandom is chasing and who knows what the future may hold, but for 2018, Auntie Oda has your back. Here is a little Mystrade interlude (with what they got up to at Baker Street) but if this isn't your jam you can comfortably skip it to the next chapter.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Interlude: While Our Blood's Still Young

It is nearly bedtime when Lestrade arrives at Baker Street, tie shoved in his pocket and his shoelace undone. Mrs. Hudson kisses both his cheeks and is delighted to see him. The child provides a far less enthusiastic welcome, until she realises that Lestrade is one of those rare adults who hasn't yet had his fill of Dr. Seuss and is willing to sit on the sofa and be forced to read through her entire library of the good Doctor's works.

By the time she's had her bath and said goodnight, she and Lestrade are firm friends again, and Mrs. Hudson is chuckling her head off.

“You forget how knackered they are. Give me criminals any day,” he groans, but his day's not over. Mrs. Hudson appoints him sous chef to her kitchen and they sit and put the world to rights while cooking a lasagna. Lestrade approves of how Mrs. Hudson cooks; the lasagna contains nearly an entire bottle of wine and it smells fantastic.

They drink the last quarter of the bottle together over dinner, and all in all, it's a far cry from Lestrade's usual culinary efforts.

“I'll have to come round more often,” he says.

“If you do the washing up as well as that, you can come every night,” Mrs. Hudson promises. “It's a bother cooking for one all the time, and the boys are so hit and miss with their schedules, it's impossible to plan for them.”

““Fraid I'm not much better.”

She forgives him with a slice of ginger cake drowned in custard and they round the evening off in the living room of 221B, drinking Sherlock and John's coffee and chewing over gossip quite happily.

He's rather sad to say goodnight to her, but she totters off downstairs regardless of his feelings; she has her sights set on her bedtime 'medicine', and he must kill evening hours alone. Lestrade props his feet up on the table, makes another coffee and turns on the first film he can find.

Then he spends an hour cold-calling Mycroft's various phone numbers and hanging up on the first ring.

Eventually Mycroft is annoyed enough to call back. Lestrade lets it ring and go through to voicemail. Mycroft doesn't leave a message.

After another 10 minutes of missed back-and-forth like this, Mycroft sends a peevish little text message, which simply says "What do you want?"

Lestrade does not reply to this either, safe in the knowledge that curiosity and paranoia will win out, and he's correct. Within the half-hour there's a car at the door and the unmistakeable sound of someone opening the front door with a key.

"What the devil is going on? Where's Sherlock?"

"Evenin'," Lestrade says, comfortably sprawled out on the sofa. "You took bloody long enough."

"I was writing a dossier for the European council."

"Sounds boring."

Mycroft does not deny this out loud, but he gives Lestrade a very disapproving look because he must. "And my brother is?"

"Buggered off with his other half for the weekend. We're babysitting."

"To where?" Mycroft asks, astounded. "We? What do you mean, 'for the weekend'?"

"Firstly, Molly didn't say, but it's probably a case. Mrs. Hudson said some blonde called Tilly or Tina or something was here and took them off. Something about horses. Not my area, really. Secondly 'We', as in you and me and Mrs. Hudson, I suppose, and 'weekend' as in the two days at the end of the week."

"*Ottoline?*"

"Otter what?"

"Our cousin," Mycroft says, pinching the bridge of his nose. "Oh, I dread to think."

"Don't then," Lestrade advises. "Have you eaten? I saved you some lasagna. Trick question, I know you haven't."

"How the hell do you know I haven't?"

"Because on the way over here, I rang your PA and said 'don't feed him, he's getting catered for at Baker Street', and she said she'd send you over."

"This is mutiny," Mycroft protests, as Lestrade pulls food out of the fridge.

"No, this is garlic bread."

The look on Mycroft's face makes him grin. "Come on, stay. Your dossier can wait - if your PA's

let you out of your cage then it's not that important, is it?"

"Perhaps I do them for fun," Mycroft bites back, following him into the kitchen. "I don't approve of being tricked."

"As if we could trick you," Lestrade scoffs. "You'd have figured it out like a shot, but I'll take the flattery. Do you want beer with this or wine? I'm only going to have a half. John'll have my bollocks for a hat if I have anything more than that."

"Beer will do, unless it's that swill John likes."

"There's the Blue label."

"That's just insulting."

Lestrade laughs. "Mrs. Hudson left us a Belgian blonde."

"What's his name?" Mycroft says dryly, taking the bottle. "Am I allowed a glass or are we stooping to the lowest level of artless barbarianism?"

"Glass, plate, real cutlery," Lestrade says, dishing up. "And even," he pauses, and pulls a swatch of fabric off of the counter with a flourish. "An actual napkin, your lordship."

"No need to go that far," Mycroft snorts, taking the tray of food and stalking into the living room. Lestrade notes he has nothing to say about eating off of his lap. Lestrade pours out the glasses of beer and while Mycroft makes himself at home in Sherlock's armchair, plants himself on the floor by the coffee table.

Mycroft lifts the cheesy top of the lasagna, inspects it and then gives a little sniff of approval. Lestrade lets him eat without interruption, idly watching the film until Mycroft puts his fork down for the last time and finishes checking for sauce around his mouth with the napkin.

"Pudding?"

"What is there?"

"Ice-cream."

"Just a little then."

"How's work been?" Lestrade asks from the kitchen, dropping the dishes into the sink to soak and digging ice cream out of the carton. He favours the chocolate and strawberry stripes of the Neapolitan block, just to annoy Sherlock. "In general terms. You were away a while."

"Just a trip to keep an eye on things that need an eye kept on them. Nothing beyond the ordinary," Mycroft answers, taking the bowl with his thanks. "Ah, Mr. Sainsbury's finest, I see."

"John typically does the shopping in this house," Lestrade reminds him. "Yeah, we've been busy too, but nothing clever, just the usual round of bollocks. Just about ready for a break."

"Oh?"

"Yeah. Next week. Going to the south of France with er... the kiddo. Bit of late sun, bit of sand." Lestrade shoves ice-cream in his mouth. He hadn't meant to bring up his daughter. It's something they don't discuss much. Mycroft is leery of the subject and Lestrade sees no reason to muddy recently calmed waters by introducing the two. Acknowledging this, Mycroft pretends to find

something interesting in his bowl.

“Sounds abysmal.”

“France isn’t that bad,” Lestrade jokes, and then deflects the conversation away to something safer. “Come on, you’ve travelled, outside of work?”

“Now and then.”

“See, holidays.”

“Well, I suppose. Only under duress. I like being at home. What’s the point of having a home if you can’t stand to be there?”

Lestrade considers this. It seems to say an awful lot about Mycroft; his homebody lifestyle. Work and lurk, that’s all the man ever seems to do, and whilst Lestrade isn’t about to pin himself up as the poster boy of Having Fun, he has to admit he’s curious as hell about how little Mycroft poses to have in his life that isn’t under the lock and key of the National Secrecy Act. And he’s not totally convinced it’s the truth. After all, he’s seen Mycroft’s flat.

“What do you do, then? When you’ve got time off, when I’m not there?” Lestrade persists, leaning on one elbow across the back of the sofa.

Mycroft hesitates. “Sometimes I write.”

Lestrade is surprised. “Yeah? That must be... Well, I can’t actually imagine. That’s great. What do you uh... write about?”

“Ah...Well. Different things.”

“Yeah?” Lestrade says again, “It sounds interesting. I mean, I reckon you’ve got a lot of interesting things to write about, although probably half of them aren’t printable. So, go on. Tell us something about it.”

“No, it’s not interesting.”

“It’s not top secret though, is it?”

“Not exactly.”

“Then why can’t you tell me?” Lestrade grins. “Go on, I’m dead curious.”

“No, I’d rather not, it’s...”

“...Embarrassing?” Lestrade asks, latching onto Mycroft’s expression. “Oh-ho! Really? Well, well, well, Mycroft Holmes - smut peddler.”

“What?! No! No, I do *not* write- I don’t write erotica!”

“Oooh, I bet you do. Dirty manly porn. Harlequin gays.”

“Lestrade!”

Lestrade laughs and leans closer. He leers. “Any hot coppers?”

“I write,” Mycroft says, turning plum, his tone very clipped, “Wikipedia articles.”

“Come again?”

“Wikipedia. It’s on the internet.”

“I know what it is, you turnip. You write wikipedia articles?”

“Well it happens I know a lot about obscure subjects, and I- it’s, it’s like charity.”

“Oh my god, you are... like the most actual non-train-spotting anorak I have ever met,” Lestrade says, his grin sliding sideways into the stupid dog smile of a man who has discovered something adorable.

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“You know, like those blokes who stand at railway stations in their little rain coats, watching the trains and scribbling things down in their little notebooks. Going home and staying up late playing with their little-“

“Lestrade, so help me-”

“-train sets.”

“This is very unflattering.”

“No, it’s nice. You’ve got this whole thing... A thing that you do. People probably use the stuff you write. It’s got a purpose. I only ever sit around on my arse, watching telly and eating crap. And then I usually just end up working from home anyway.”

“I don’t always write the whole thing. Sometimes I just correct other people’s mistakes.”

Lestrade wrinkles his nose in disbelieving delight. “You’re such a boffin. Did you actually call it charity?”

“There’s no need to poke fun. Especially not with that much lag.”

“I am genuinely endeared. If I didn’t think you’d seize up, I’d kiss you.”

He actually hears Mycroft hiccup backwards as the man’s breath catches in his throat. “Don’t you dare,” Mycroft says after a heartbeat and a half.

“I won’t,” Lestrade promises, and in doing so, rather makes Mycroft wish he would. If he could, that is, without either first making Mycroft aware of it, or physically doing so. As the art of surprise telepathic kissing has yet to be invented; however, Mycroft has to admit this leaves them both at a disadvantage.

“Sorry, have I ballsed it up?” Lestrade asks.

“No, no.”

“Yeah, but I’ve gone and made you all awkward.”

“I’m always awkward, so there’s no need to flatter yourself. This is an entirely self-perpetuating awkwardness.”

The scraps of ice-cream left in the bowls have melted, and the dribbles of cheese sauce on the plate congealed. Lestrade clears his throat slightly and glances up again. “Could put a film on,” he

offers. "You like films?"

"Yes," Mycroft answers, "Um... older ones, usually. Classic cinema."

"Alright," Lestrade says, getting up, willing to go along with anything to recover the evening.

"Let's see if we can find something. Pretty sure this TV hooks up to the net." He fusses over the remote until Mycroft wordlessly holds a hand out and he relinquishes it.

"I used to watch," Mycroft says slowly as he tinkers with the television, "'Double Indemnity' with Sherlock when we were boys. He only ever really liked the noir films. Or things with ships. Here's one... Have you seen it?"

The screen flickers a grey light over the pair of them, as Lestrade sits slowly down on the edge of the sofa, hands grasped in a loose fist between his knees. He shakes his head. "Not this version. I've seen the modern one."

"This one's an experience," Mycroft tells him. The credits flick over the screen - no fade between panels, it's that old; the tinny music swells, all pathetic violins and sterling stuff. Mycroft smiles as the film begins with a storm. They watch the captain of the ship entrust his letter to Dantes and then even Lestrade grins as they switch suddenly to Marseilles and some unfittingly jolly music. Mycroft chuckles.

"Come sit," Lestrade says. "You're in the way."

Mycroft, fixed to the screen, slips back to occupy the other end of the sofa. "They changed it all from the book, of course."

"Haven't read it."

"Illiterate," Mycroft accuses.

"I'll read it," Lestrade says. "Lend me a copy."

"I haven't got one."

"Now who's illiterate?"

"I memorised it."

Lestrade chuckles. "Read it to me then."

"Shh."

Lestrade shushes. He can't help but enjoy the film. It's all so terribly British and terribly dramatic. Edmond Dantes seems pretty much a wide-eyed plonker. "Fernand and Mercedes... look really Spanish."

"Elissa Landi, she was Italian. Sidney Blackmer was American, mind you."

"Would you climb a tree for me?" Lestrade asks, presently.

"I wouldn't climb a flight of stairs for you. I'd make you come down."

"I'd go down for you," Lestrade says without thinking and then sniggers awkwardly when Mycroft does a double take. "Maybe. Ahem."

He leans back into the sofa and the film rolls on. Edmond Dantes is wholesome and hammy, the Abbe in the prison magnificent. They chew the scenery together as the script condenses (unknown to Lestrade) just under a quarter of the story down to a few scenes. The artfully yokel prison guards are tricked and Dantes escapes the Chateau D'if in his old friend's shroud. On board the smuggler's ship, he takes on the name Sinbad.

And Mycroft is eating it up.

He relaxes, is visibly amused. To Lestrade this seems so novel that it attracts his attention more than the film. Lestrade pays half his attention to Dantes as he turns up in a ruffled shirt and a cape, now the Count of Monte Cristo, and half of his attention to Mycroft.

It is only as the scenes skip to Paris and to Dangars and de Villefort gossiping over the mysterious count, that by instinct, Lestrade gets it. Only because he knows Sherlock so well.

Sherlock, in the unadorned words of John Watson, is a massive drama queen.

'And you're a romantic,' Lestrade thinks. 'Of some sort.'

This sort maybe; the kind where the kiss is the climax and only comes at the end. A clinical kind of romance, prescribed to a formula.

Maybe he doesn't even buy into it, what with all his cynicism, and general scorn of human emotion, but watching him now, Lestrade has an intuition that he would like to. He's not convinced, however, that Mycroft wants to be the hero of his own story. Lauded, yes; given the happy ending, but without the risk or the suffering.

'You big kid,' Lestrade thinks.

On the screen, Dantes as the Count tests and spurns Mercedes, and has a distasteful go at her for marrying after she believed he was dead. She likewise, gives it to him between the ribs with cold hard etiquette.

That, Lestrade thinks, is very Mycroft.

He has started to lose the thread of the plot. Ali Pasha is tangled up in this and Lestrade only has a very dim notion of who that was or if he were real at all. No doubt Mycroft could explain it, but he's enjoying the silence. There's only a few inches between them, a perfectly comfortable little gap. Mycroft folds his hands over his stomach and breathes easily. Gradually, Lestrade copies him, with the exception of one foot propped up on the coffee table, his knee sagging slightly towards the other man.

Dantes is hatching convoluted financial plans to bring down his enemies. Lestrade tops up their glasses, the beer foaming up to a head, his fingers damp as Mycroft retrieves his drink from him. He focuses on this and his own thoughts rather than the film for the last thirty minutes, until it all wraps up with a triumphant fanfare; Dantes has his tree and his bride and his vengeance, and it's all very prettily bloodless.

Mycroft makes a little noise of satisfaction and mutes the television. "I'm sorry, this bored you," he says.

"It wasn't bad."

"You stopped paying attention."

“Yeah, but it wasn’t bad,” Lestrade stresses. “Next time, maybe we can watch one of those noirs. This was nice.”

“Yes.” Mycroft doesn’t comment on the phrase ‘next time’. The quiet crackle of the end of the film fills the silence, and it doesn’t bother Lestrade. He’s fine with silence. What he doesn’t like is the loneliness. He spends too many evenings lonely, the quiet unpleasantly invaded by the row from the road and the people living cheek by jowl in the buildings around him. Music, TV shows, arguments, footsteps, laughing, fireworks, fucking. The blare of horns at the junction, the rattle of the trains in the distance.

Baker Street is pretty loud too, with the road right outside after all, but there are no upstairs neighbours or downstairs neighbours and the next door marrieds tend to keep their heads below the parapet.

It’s nice.

Lestrade rubs at his chin. He could do with a shave, but it’s late in the day and it always grows in fast. He glances to his left, and finds Mycroft looking at him.

He raises his eyebrows questioningly, and then when Mycroft continues to say nothing, tilts his head. *What?*

Nothing.

Lestrade fakes a grin, elbow propped on the back of the sofa between them. *Ta-dah! It’s me!*

Nothing.

“Hey,” Lestrade says, lightly. He reaches out and dabs Mycroft just on the ear. “What’s up?”

Mycroft’s eyes dart to the side and stick there, on a line with his fingers. Lestrade curls them, just a little caress. Mycroft doesn’t move. He doesn’t tense up, simply stills, waiting, eyes hooded. Like the kick of a muted drum, Lestrade can feel his heart beating.

“Can I-?” Lestrade asks, reckless abandon. He doesn’t know what this means, but he’s willing to take the risk, and not stop until it’s over. Mycroft’s gaze lifts, a hesitation.

“You know,” Lestrade says, sharing a secret. “I remember being on the stairs with you. In the house. I was drunk and all the balloons were on the floor and you were right there. Like this. Was that real?”

He’s within reach. Not just physically, in fact, no part of them is touching.

Mycroft moves as if to say something, and instead simply nods.

“So... then,” Lestrade leans closer. “Can I?”

He does. Once, their eyes closed, at the end of an old movie. Mycroft sits, head tilted, his hands in his lap, Lestrade bent in, his arm along the back of the sofa. To a casual observer, he could be simply whispering something in the other man’s ear.

It is difficult not to pursue more. It would be easy to deepen the kiss, or put his hands on him, but Lestrade’s too aware that could ruin things, so with effort he inches back instead.

Mycroft swallows.

“You know, it occurred to me the other day; it’s been almost a year,” Lestrade says. “On and off.”

“Has it?” Mycroft almost stutters in surprise, and then calculates the time. “So it has.”

“This bit still feels new, doesn’t it?”

Mycroft rubs his hands together. In a blink, almost a whole year has gone by, he thinks and what has changed? Neither of their jobs, which remain as busy as ever. They have met sporadically for what could tenuously be called ‘dates’. These have largely consisted of either mutually agreeing to spurn other occasions in favour of a dinner at Mycroft’s flat, or little two-man work parties at the Club, sitting in the same room, each struggling along with whatever particular knot he had to untangle. Rather sociable, for them. It stops Mycroft sitting alone and staring at the walls, going too deep inside his own head. It stops Lestrade sitting alone and drinking.

It’s been... mutually beneficial.

And he’d been lying earlier when he’d said he’d liked his home.

His home is four walls and some windows. No, his flat is. His home, Mycroft thinks, is in reality his office or his club, with the obvious disadvantage that without a national emergency or large financial backhanders to key members of staff, they kick you out of it at night.

“Hey,” Lestrade says, “Come back.”

“Sorry, I was... thinking.”

“About me?”

“Yes.”

Lestrade fiddles with the fold of his trousers in the crook of his knee for a moment, considering. Then he asks, “Is there a reason why you’re weird about kissing?”

“I’m not weird, I’m... particular,” Mycroft says, aggrieved.

“Alright, I’m sorry. Again. That was unfair of me.”

“Thank you.”

Lestrade thinks for a while. “I snogged George Michael’s brother once.”

This is such a turn in conversation that Mycroft stares at him blankly for long moment before he can wrap even his giant brain around the idea. “George Michael’s brother?”

“Yeah, I came up to London- for a punk gig actually- and then I ended up in this club; you know, that one that they all used to go to in the 80’s, and I got through the queue with this girl because I saved her shoe from a drain, and anyway. He was there.”

“George Michael?”

“His brother. And we got dancing and then when he had to go- gave us a little kiss.”

“His brother,” Mycroft says, tone flat with disbelief.

“Dead ringer for George,” Lestrade says, reminiscing. “Then I went back to Janet’s flat. Janet! That was her name. She looked a bit like that woman from the holiday programme.”

“You do know that George Michael didn’t have a brother.”

“What? How do you know?”

Mycroft Holmes, King of Wikipedia, simply raises an eyebrow. “You’ve been had.”

“No, you can’t take George Michael’s brother away from me. Anyway, I can’t believe you’ve never had anyone famous. I thought you spent all your time hobnobbing with the VIPs.”

“You have seen the state of politics these days?” Mycroft asks, leaning on the arm of the chair and using a tone with a hint of ‘and you have seen me?’

Lestrade chuckles. “Who would you go for? If it were no holds barred, no strings attached, do and be done kind of scenario.”

“Of anyone?”

“Anyone famous.”

“No one,” Mycroft says promptly. “I can’t think of anything worse.”

“Really? I know who I’d go for.”

“Who?” Mycroft asks, despite himself.

“George Michael’s brother.”

Lestrade leans against the sofa and laughs heartily at his own joke. “Aw, I’m enjoying this.”

He is. It’s the nicest evening he’s had in weeks. He’s had fun playing with the baby, and he likes this. He likes the weird cosiness of 221B, because it’s so lived in. He loves Mrs. Hudson’s penchant for every kind of gossip, and how she has a genuine interest in everyone’s well-being. He likes sitting here, at ease, joking around. He likes the way Mycroft is leaning his elbow on one arm of Sherlock’s chair, his fist propped against his chin.

“I haven’t done this in years.”

“Done what?”

“Rung someone up while I was babysitting. Had a little party in someone else’s house. Do you want to snoop around? Or have you noticed anything already?”

“I can see most of it,” Mycroft says. “The same old mess.”

“They’re both in that room upstairs now, you know. No-one’s using that one.” Lestrade jerks his thumb towards Bee’s room.

“I know,” Mycroft says. He smooths his thumb over the lumpy seam of leather on the chair. “I foresaw it.”

“Blimey, Mystic Mycroft.”

“Well, it was obvious,” Mycroft sighs. “After the Ruby Wedding party.” He pauses. “What exactly do you remember?”

“I remember eating your cake. I remember your dad telling some downright unbelievable stories

about Las Vegas,” Lestrade pauses, wrinkling his nose. “I remember the hangover. You put me to bed.”

“Yes,” Mycroft says, softly. “I did.”

“I remember you taking my shoes off. That was nice,” Lestrade says. He leans his cheek on his hand, squashing the ball of his cheek up towards his eye, making his face seem rounder. He remembers John and Sherlock kissing, in the corner way across the dance floor and the closeness of Mycroft when he’d pointed it out. He remembers the pink and teal lights shifting around, but not the music, and only a vague impression of standing on the lawn, feeling giddy and thinking if he didn’t hang on to Mycroft’s shoulders properly, then the ground was going to go whizzing off into the air.

“I remember you being nice to me.”

“Nice? ...I tried.”

“It was nice,” Lestrade says. He seems comfortable, Mycroft thinks, even sitting on the floor in the middle of John and Sherlock’s flat. The place is littered with all the trappings of a family.

‘My own brother has barely figured this out,’ Mycroft thinks. Unerringly, his eye finds Sherlock’s silly deerstalker where it’s been dumped on one of the bookshelves.

Maybe he doesn’t mind being different. He doesn’t necessarily have to be isolated.

Exactly. Why would anyone mind.

I’m not...

“Why didn’t you tell me you remembered?”

Lestrade pauses in the middle of tidying the dishes. “Uh...”

“About the Ruby Wedding.”

He shrugs, rubbing the back of his neck. “Didn’t seem like... part of the plan.”

“But it was months ago. And you’ve said nothing. You’ve done nothing.”

“Oh my God, was I supposed to?”

“Well, I wasn’t going to! You’re supposed to be... leading.”

“Oh,” Lestrade says, dumbfounded. “So we’re... at that stage then? Kissing?”

“I suppose.”

“That’s not a yes.”

“I’m aware it’s not a yes,” Mycroft snaps. “I’m aware it’s not a no.”

“You are bloody annoying, are you aware of that?”

“I’ve been told!”

And then Lestrade laughs. “Alright, Mycroft Holmes. How about this?” He clears his throat. “Next

Friday night; or the next one that I'm not working and you're not working, let's have dinner."

"A date?"

"Yeah. A date. You and me. Nothing over the top, just us. We could go to that place with the good tiramisu."

"Angelo's," Mycroft supplies, automatically.

"Angelo's," Lestrade repeats, with a smile that blooms across his face.

"You always forget the name."

"You always remember it for me. So. Angelo's. With the good tiramisu. We could take a walk afterwards, and find somewhere for a drink. See how it goes."

"See where it takes us."

"Does that sound ok?"

"I suppose," Mycroft says, on purpose. Lestrade nudges his shin with his foot.

"You're going to send me to an early grave. Look, I'm going grey already," Lestrade says, getting up. He collects the dishes and stacks them up. "Can I tempt you with a coffee?"

"You're spending the night here," Mycroft says, thoughts taking a step to the side.

"Yeah," Lestrade agrees. "Pyjama party. Me and the bubs and the telly."

"Sounds like too much fun."

Lestrade shrugs, nonchalance feigned. "You could join us. I'd appreciate the company..."

"I'm not sure," Mycroft begins. Things with Sherlock have been good lately, and equally well with John but he's conscious of the fact that his inclusion in the family circle is far more peripheral than that of Lestrade's, and the child herself makes him leery of overstepping the mark.

"Two baby-sitters are better than one," Lestrade argues. He holds his hands out helplessly. "Safer. That's just a fact."

'Here's another fact,' Mycroft thinks, 'You're a perfect idiot about me, and I hardly deserve it.'

"But it's your choice."

"How good's the coffee?"

Lestrade grins. "I could sweeten the deal. I know where Sherlock keeps his biscuits."

He lifts the stack of dishes and takes it to the kitchen, leaving Mycroft for a moment to consider his choice. When he comes back with the drinks, Mycroft has eased out of his suit jacket and hung it carefully on one of the coat hooks.

"I could stay for another film," he suggests. "Just to keep an eye on things."

Lestrade's mouth twitches at the corner.

"Let's pick another film then." He plants both the cups on the coffee table where they can only be

reached from the sofa and settles down on the right hand side. Mycroft joins him on the left, picking at the buttons of the remote until he finds another likely choice.

“How about this?” He suggests. Lestrade doesn’t look at the screen.

“How about,” he says, instead, “We turn the sound down a bit, and when we get bored halfway through, I’ll kiss you so that you don’t have to.” The springs of the sofa creak slightly. Lestrade lifts one arm and extends it along the back, settling into the cushions. “Or I can pretend I’m not looking and you can kiss me.”

Mycroft presses play and picks up his cup as the credits roll. Lestrade nods and turns his face to the film. The voices of the characters on the TV are just a murmur, the images a movement of black and white; a city, a house, a couple.

Quietly, Mycroft says, “Don’t look now.”

Chapter End Notes

1) Blue label is non-alcoholic beer. It's actually relatively drinkable, as far as these things go.

2) They're watching The Count of Monte Cristo, and yes, it's the version also mentioned in V for Vendetta for no reason other than I have been slogging through The Count for the last month and I like the silly, hammy 'You get your own tree' ending. Also it provided the basis for Lestrade cracking a dirty joke, so, y'know. Had to be done.

3) George Michael definitely didn't have a brother.

4) They're not watching anything in particular at the end, but if you have any recommendations, I'd love to hear them!

Part 19: Turned Out a Lover

Chapter Summary

“It’s warm,” John agrees. He tips his head back, exposing his throat to the sky and Sherlock wants to grab him by the scruff of his t-shirt and do something, God knows what. It’s the heat and all this talk of thick walls and unexpected sunglasses affecting his brain. People aren’t designed to look into someone else’s eyes and see their own warped face looking back at them. Trust John to be oblivious of this.

‘He is oblivious, isn’t he?’ Sherlock wonders.

Chapter Notes

Oh my god, thank you so, so, so, so, so much for your patience for this update. The amount of time this took is just embarrassing, but was in part down to RL interference not lack of will. Strange to think there's only one chapter left for me to write as the rest is already finished!

My goal is to get that done as soon as I feasibly can, and fingers crossed for reasonable work hours, no family problems and no call for me to have to move house again. This is the shit that usually stops me from writing. 2017 was a harder year for fanfic for me, and a better year for other creative endeavours. I think 2018 may be different again, but we'll have to wait and see.

Happy New Year again to you all, and best wishes for the next 12 months! - Oda.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Part 19: Turned Out A Lover

The fingers of his free hand throb and he flexes the joints to make them stop. It’s just a few days since their return to Baker Street, and John’s picked up the phone, prodded to do so by a sense of having put things off for too long already. Sherlock is stretched out in a puddle of sunshine on the carpet, Bee using his leg for a race car track.

John goes upstairs to the bedroom, out of earshot.

“Hey,” he says, when the phone stops ringing.

“Hey?” Harry answers, “Uh... how are you?”

“Yeah, good. Yeah, not bad, thanks. I’m ok. Ah... you? How are you, these days?”

“I’m fine,” Harry puts her hand over the phone and mouths ‘It’s my brother’ to her housemate. Indre holds her hands up questioningly and Harry pantomimes madness. She doesn’t specify who.

“Uh yeah.” John says. Harry waits for something else. Apparently, so does John.

“The weather’s nice?” she offers, when the silence becomes scalding.

“It’s great. Really nice out. Still quite warm.”

“Still quite warm, yes.” Harry claws a hand down her own face and leans her head against the wall.
“John.”

“I’m taking Bee to a soft play place,” he says. “They have a kind of café thing you can sit in while they muck around inside where you can watch them. I’m going on my own.”

He says this last bit in a tone that makes Harry confused. “Oh,” she says. “Right. Sounds alright.”

“The kids just mostly get on with it. It’s pretty safe as long as you watch them.”

“Ah. Yeah. Can’t be too careful these days,” Harry says, with no idea what she even means, or what he means.

“I’m going to be there about 2-ish anyway. Between 2 and 3 o’clock.”

Harry wedges the phone between her ear and her shoulder and grabs Indre’s mobile from the other woman’s surprised hands. “And it’s in...?”

“Oh, it’s central. Near Edgware Road.”

“Oh, that’s quite reasonable from Baker Street, then. Dead easy. Are you -shit, come on you buggering bastard- are you walking? Nice day for it?”

“What?”

“Nothing, the wifi is pissing awful around here.”

“I thought we’d walk, yeah,” John says. “Anyway...”

“Is it the leisure centre place?”

“Uh. Yeah. It’s got a big yellow sign outside. It’s called Playzone. Anyway,” John repeats.

“That’s... where I’m going to be. This afternoon.”

“Ok,” Harry grins at the phone, breathlessly. “Ok. At 2 o’clock? Bleeding hell, John, you don’t give me much notice, do you?”

“I- if it’s awkward, we can do another-”

“Not on your nelly,” Harry interrupts, “I’ll be there with bells on!” and she hangs up and screeches.

“Good?” Indre asks, when she finishes. “That was a good scream right?”

“Indre Sakalauskaitè, you should know all my screams by now, my dearest chum. Yes, that was a good scream. That was the scream of victory, because that was my arse of a brother calling to offer me an actual olive branch.”

She jostles the table in her excitement. “Do I look ok?”

“Mind my coffee,” Indre answers, picking her mug up. “And I always think you look ok, stupid girl.”

"I've gotta go get a gift. Come with me. What should I get?"

"For John?"

"For the baby," Harry says, and she softens into a smile no one has seen for a long time. "I've got a baby niece. How about that?"

—

John comes back down stairs with a heavy tread and stops at the bottom, chewing on his thoughts.

"She accepted?" Sherlock lifts his head from the floor to frown at him.

"Yes."

"You asked her?"

"Well, not as such, no, but it- the conversation got there." John plants his phone on the coffee table and stands there, hands on hips.

Sherlock sits up from the floor, Bee rolling into his lap, quietly chanting, "Daddy is a baba-boom, and this is a baby baba-boom..."

"Are you sure?" Sherlock asks over the top of her head. After their return, John had been to see Ella, for a conversation that Sherlock suspects did not include a lot of content, but let John tick off a little box on his checklist of normality. That and it always gives John a sense of control to go and sit in front of his therapist and refuse to talk.

"Yes. No? I don't know, I don't think it's a case of... they should meet." John gestures to the little girl. "I've been putting it off. At least I'll know," he adds.

Sherlock pats Bee's stomach slowly. "I believe she's sober," he says, meeting John's eyes when the other man crouches beside them. John longs for Sherlock's deduction to be true. He shakes his head a fraction.

"I've got to see that for myself."

"You trust me."

John touches his face, surprising him. "I trust you," he agrees. A smaller hand wavers up between them and unerringly pushes the tip of one finger up John's nostril. "Bee, that's my nose."

"Doze," she giggles. "Papa's snotty doze."

"It's not snotty, but it doesn't need you picking it. Where's your nose?"

She touches it, grinning.

"Is that it? I think that's a nice nose, don't you, daddy?"

"It's a shapely specimen."

John laughs. "A shapely specimen? Have you been reading your Victorian novels again?"

"I don't read Victorian novels."

“Oh, yes you do,” John sits on the carpet with him, to tease him at eye-level. “I’ve seen you smuggling them into the loo with your magazines.”

“Daddy do a poo?”

“Not as often as you do,” Sherlock tells her seriously. “And he’s looking forward to you learning how to wipe your own bum.”

“Bum-bum,” Bee sings in agreement, crouching and wriggling. John loves them. He loves that their conversations change topic as fast as blinking these days, and are so often pure nonsense. He loves playing; to meet Sherlock’s eye and just throw sense out the window for five minutes. He loves that when Bee is being awful; defiant, or whinging or just dull, he can meet Sherlock’s eye again and know the work is shared and there’s a joke to be made about the difficulty.

“Sandwich?” John offers, using Sherlock’s shoulder as leverage to stand again. “I’ve got time…”

Sherlock nods. “If you’re making one.” He sprawls back against the sofa, hands folded, and waits. Bee potters back and forth using the crook of his elbow as a stage for a plastic panda, endlessly rolling Hello Kitty up and down a plastic slide, happily tootling to herself.

‘It’ll be ok,’ John tells himself. He breathes deep.

‘It’ll be ok.’

—

Harry is late. John is a small figure amongst many in the cafe. The space is busy, but although the tables are spaced far apart and it should have been easy, it still takes her a long moment to spot him. She doesn’t realise that this is because she was looking for him at the edge of the room, and today he is front and centre.

“Hey,” she says, barrelling up, all too aware of the way her hair is coming loose from her ponytail and how sweaty she is. “Sorry I’m late, I, er, you know. Buses.” She’s looking around.

“Do you want a coffee?”

“Uh, yeah. Sure, why not? Coffee’s good. Let’s have coffee.” Harry is hard pressed to hide her disappointment. John slowly peels a fiver from his wallet and passes it to her.

“It’s on me. Can you get me a glass of water, though?”

“Sure. Sure, why not?” Harry dumps her bag on the empty seat next to John and stomps off to join the queue at the counter. “I didn’t come all this way to play waitress to John bloody Watson,” she mutters at the fiver. The queen stares blankly back, not giving a fuck. “Bitch,” Harry whispers at her.

John meanwhile, puts his hand between his knees and flexes it, out of sight below the table top. ‘Calm down’. He keeps his eyes fixed on Bee, who is following a pair of somewhat older girls along the squishy foam mats. Even as John watches, she pushes her hand into one of theirs without even thinking and lets herself be led along, all three of them bouncing on their knees.

“Is that her?”

Harry carefully plants the tray she’s holding on the table and smiles slightly. “Must be. Got the Watson curls.”

She does, John realises, shocked. Bee looks a little like Harry did at that age. She has the same broadness of the face and flyaway hair. “Yeah.”

“She’s fucking adorable.”

“Harry, don’t swear.”

“Oh, right. I’m sorry,” Harry squirms into the seat, flustered. “I won’t swear again, I won’t. I, uh, bought her a little thing. Just, y’know. I’ve missed a birthday or- here.” She thrusts the plastic bag at him and John peers inside. A pair of enormous sparkly green eyes stare back at him. John plucks the toy out, and thinks it’s the ugliest thing he’s ever seen. Bee will love it.

“Thanks.”

“It’s cute, right?” Harry plucks the toy kitten from his grasp and pats its head. It’s a startling pink. John is just thankful it doesn’t move or talk.

She perches it on the table. There is a faint hunger in her eyes as she watches Bee playing. “Who’s she with?”

“I don’t know,” John admits. “I can’t keep up with it. She makes friends at the drop of a hat.”

“No bad thing,” Harry says. “Making friends.”

Their conversation is kept private by the squeal of children’s voices and the music pumping over the speakers; the babble of other conversations, but John is reconsidering if this is the best place to be having this talk. He nurses his cup in his good hand, and keeps the other pressed between the bones of his knees.

“How’s work?” Harry asks.

“Fine, same as ever. Just doing three days a week.”

“Same,” Harry says, latching onto the scantest similarity with relief. “Well, I work full time, but only three days in the office, so I can keep up my meetings and other things. I’m doing well,” she adds.

“Good,” John nods, “That’s good to hear.”

“Haven’t had anything, and I’m not in on Thursdays, which, y’know, gives me a way out of the office boozing.” She sounds a little like she hates this fact. John nods slowly.

“I hate working Fridays.”

“I hate meeting new people,” Harry admits, suddenly. “Like they want to know about you and I don’t know which I should say first. Like, ‘Hi, I’m a massive lesbian’ or ‘sorry, I’m an alcoholic’. Bit awkward.”

“A bit,” John looks at her properly. “Awful, isn’t it?”

Harry smiles. “Absolute shi-eeugar. I’m not swearing. Does that even count?”

“Yes, ’s-h-i-t’ counts as swearing.”

“Rats. You could leave me some joys in life, you know.” Harry swills her coffee around. “Speaking of things...How’re other things now?”

John tracks Bee's progress to the ball pit, one of the other little girls encouraging Bee into her lap, and supporting her up under the armpits. John's grateful that they're being so kind. They're making a game of no great sense from the colours, sorting them or something.

"They're ok," he says slowly. "Um, we're getting along."

"What does that mean?"

"He and I, we're... trying it. And it's been going ok."

Harry stares at him, astounded. "Wait, what? Did you hook up? Did you make out?"

John winces, reddening around the neck. "Things have happened," he mutters. "I mean, yes. It's not really any of your business."

"Oh my God. You've shagged?"

John holds up a hand, pausing. Harry frowns. "You've not shagged? Holy hell, John. What are you waiting for?"

"I didn't say that. Can you keep your voice down?"

"Then what do you mean by 'trying it'?" Harry whispers loudly, leaning over the table. "What does that mean?"

"It means we're together," John snaps, on the verge of getting angry. "And never you mind what we've done, alright? Keep your nose out."

"You're together. As in, together-together?"

"Yes," John relents. "And... it's going ok. I love him."

"Well, duh," Harry says, hearing herself from a distance. He loves him. He won't say out loud that they've kissed but he'll tell her that he loves him, bold as brass. Harry's throat tightens up a notch. "Ok, but how'd it happen? I mean, when, where; give me something, John!" She drums on the table. "I can't believe it. Really?"

"Really." A slight smile pulls at the corner of John's mouth. "And it was a bit conventional. We got drunk at a party."

"I'm gonna scream. Are you having me on? *You got drunk at a party?*"

John shrugs. "I don't know what else to call it. We got drunk at a party. It was just like the mood was right, and it suddenly happened."

"After all *that*," Harry says, her voice rising again, "And it was nothing even mega-dramatic?"

John recalls the coloured lights slipping across Sherlock's brow and the sincerity in his eyes when he'd said, unheard, 'I want you, John.' The throbbing of his pulse, the closeness of it all, the way Sherlock's mouth had framed the word 'you', and then added his name so that there could be no doubt. The purse of Sherlock's lips on the 'J'.

His own mouth had been parched and he'd been too aware of his tongue, so that it had slipped, against his wishes as it always did, to dab at his lip. He'd been thinking 'I wonder if he's going to,' and he had kissed him in his mind first, before Sherlock could lean forward. In his mind's eye, he'd done it first, even while his body had been too cautious to obey him.

He'd been frightened of going in too hard and too fast, so he'd waited.

John remembers the alcoholic note on Sherlock's breath, echoed in his aftershave as a cleaner, sharper smell. The touch of their hands, which had been good. John had found Sherlock's fingers around the stem of the glass and held them, to stop himself flying away.

The damp bump of their foreheads was when he knew it was real.

"It was enough," John says aloud, heart thudding hard. "It was plenty good enough. Hold on."

"Where are you going? You can't stop there, like--"

He stops her and gets up. Bee is swimming to the edge of the ball pit, wriggling and calling. John goes to pick her up, feeling her soggy bottom. She clasps her sweaty arms around his neck and whines his name into his ear.

"I know, let's get you a new nappy. Then you can meet Harry. She's got you a present."

The child stands on one leg, clinging to John's knee, overcome by shyness.

"Come on," John says, trying to coax her into his lap so she's at least on a level with the adults. She climbs up, eyes swivelling warily across the table and then burrows into his front.

"Hi," Harry says. She crooks her fingers in the air, feeling like the witch behind the gingerbread house. Bee exposes the white of one eye and then slowly reaches for the phone in John's pocket.

"What are you doing, Bee?"

"...Peppa."

"You can watch Peppa later," John says. The hand retracts, uncertain.

She can feel the tension between them, Harry thinks. The kid isn't stupid. She can tell, even if John can't (or pretends he can't) that Harry's smile has a twinge of anger behind it. She tries to make it brighter, so things remain civil.

"Lovely!"

"She's shy."

'No shit,' Harry wants to say. 'Also, you're merrily fucking gay now!?' Instead, she says aloud. "I got you a little kitty, Bee. I hope you like her."

John picks it up from the table and Bee stares at it. She touches one dangling leg and then the toy is slowly subsumed into her grasp. "What do you say?" John prompts. His heart is still thudding, and he's coasting along, never more grateful for the stuck-record phrases of parenting.

"Meow," Bee says.

"It's fine," Harry says, brittle with suspicion. She can't help but test it, smiling at the little girl. "Is that nice, sitting with your daddy?"

Bee looks up at her, and Harry knows from the little girl's open-mouthed frown of confusion.

"You'll have to show him when you get home," Harry amends. Bee's attention fades back to the

toy. She bounces the toy on her knee, already smitten.

John's throat bobs.

Harry's sure there's something cuttingly ironic to be said about pink pussies and John's present situation, but the wit of it gets balled up in her mind in a vulgar mass of edges and it's too sharp to hang on to. "So," she says, "Better late than never."

"Mm?" He's about to agree that he and Sherlock have taken the long road when she speaks again.

"Only 30 years."

John looks up and his mouth pinches, and then he's hurt that she's angry. "Nobody else really is aware..." No one that counts. No one else Harry and he share. To the people who matter, they can surely just get the idea without the whole rigmarole of a conversation about it. It's only Harry who needs the whole song and dance routine.

"Yes, I'm very privileged," Harry says, trying not to sound bitter and failing. The little girl's hands tighten on the fur of the cat and both adults stop as if she's pinched them too.

Harry grates her back teeth together, wishing she could smoke, wishing more for alcohol - physically. Her gut churns. She presses her tongue behind her teeth and focusses on the in and out of the stale air of the play area, and counts backwards from ten.

"Maybe," she says afterwards. "We should go and walk a bit in the fresh air."

John looks doubtful.

"It's supposed to be good for you. Clears the mind." Stops you from wanting to shake your little brother until his fucking teeth rattle right out of his stupid, potato-shaped head.

"Right."

Alone, John gets Bee into her pushchair and together they stomp down the concrete mass of the main road towards Paddington Basin and it's little scraps of greenery. The pushchair, thrust ahead at arm's length, crushes early leaves beneath it's wheels. At the first park they find, Bee tips from her seat to chase a squirrel.

"Why are you pissed off with me?" John mutters, arms folded.

"Why am I? Because- because, because- ugh!" Harry throws her arms out. "Thirty years, John. Longer. Thirty! And just-just... I just kind of *hate you*."

"Right."

"No, I'm just. You never, ever showed you got what it was like. Not once. I've gone so long thinking you just never got it."

"I don't 'get it' though!" All this time and he's still looking at her for the answers. "It's different, isn't it?"

"Only in small ways!" Harry jigs on the spot and sniffs hard, counting numbers again. She gets to 4 and then blurts; "Fuck, John! You know, if we lived everything all over again but I thought maybe you understood how it was like, even if you died at a hundred without saying anything to anyone, it would have been better than..." Her arms drop to her sides. "Being the freak of the family."

When he's not clenching his jaw and standing like someone's shoved a broom up his bottom, John looks like a different man. He's got soft lines across his forehead and at the corners of his eyes. He no longer fits Harry's mental image of him.

"I'm jealous," she says, feeling the horrible truth of it, "You've got it all."

"It's not all been roses."

"No," Harry agrees. "Still..." Bee is making piles of grass cuttings and feeding them to the kitten. Harry sags back against the park railings.

"Harry..."

"No, shut up." He waits for her to take another shaking breath and then she claps her hands to her face and blurts, "You've done alright. I am annoyingly happy for you."

"Thanks."

She turns on him with a glint back in her expression and John gets the feeling that the Harry Express is back on the rails. He's not wrong. She tosses her pony tail back and prods him hard in the chest.

"You owe me a whole adolescence of big gay heart-to-hearts, so spill. What's it like sucking face with Sherlock Holmes?"

"My daughter's right over there, you know."

"She's miles away. Come on, details; has your whole world changed?"

A muscle ticks in John's cheek and she's afraid he's angry again, and then instead it pulls his mouth into a totally different kind of smile than she's used to seeing on him.

"Not a lot's changed actually. Day to day, I mean." He scratches the back of his head. "We were close before, now it's just... warmer. It just feels so much more secure."

"Yeah," Harry says. "Like a roaming bit of you can finally have a sit down and go 'ahhh'"

"Yeah," John looks at her, "It's like that."

"Ahhhh," Harry repeats, thinking of her girls past and present.

"Like getting in a hot bath."

"I can't believe you just got drunk and hooked up at a party."

"It wasn't quite like that," John says, gaze tracking Bee. She runs back to him.

"What are you doing, Babar?"

"I'm talking to Harry, sweetheart. Do you want to sit in your pushchair?"

"No, I'm an elebant. Pa-roooooo!"

"Ok, go do elephant stomping."

She trumpets away, smashing her heels into the ground. Harry stares. It's a whole lot to keep up

with.

“So what happened after?” she asks. “You just... went home and everything slotted into place.”

“Kind of. Not exactly.” John shifts about on the spot. “A few speed bumps. Conversations.”

“Conversations like this? The big old news-bomb type?”

“That’s the type. We got a bit caught up in a case, there was a lot going on, and um... We talked about it. I showed him our house,” John leans slightly over the pushchair. “I told him a lot. About dad, and leaving Chelmsford. I just... talked a lot.”

“Oh.”

He doesn’t miss a beat. “What’s ‘oh’?”

“I have a kind of confession to make,” Harry says, slowly. “I’ve kind of... met Sherlock. Well, we’ve spoken a couple of times, actually.”

John’s face turns to stone. “When?”

“Ages ago. Not about you,” she adds hastily. “Mostly not about you; he was kind of freaking out when you moved home with the baby and wanted to know what to do, but I actually didn’t have an answer. Anyway, I was feeling pretty mad around then, so I hired him.”

“What? To do what? What are you saying?”

“John, relax. I wanted him to find out what happened to dad after mum died.”

“I don’t want to know,” John says, too quickly.

“I wasn’t going to tell you,” Harry snaps back. “I know you don’t give a shit.”

“I just don’t want to know.”

“I already said I’m not going to tell you!”

“So what then?”

“Nothing,” Harry says, shrugging. “He got me the information I asked for. Which took all of two seconds... He was pretty stressed out over you, John.”

John chews on his lip. “It was a difficult time; Mary was gone, it was...”

“It wasn’t that,” Harry corrects him, frowning. “I mean, the kid probably did knock him for six, but it was his feelings for you that he couldn’t really handle by himself. Has he ever been with anyone else?”

“I don’t think so. Not really. He got into drugs quite young, and that pushed him off-course. He’s not... he can’t be with just anyone. He needs support.”

When he looks up, Harry is chewing her inner cheek, hurt again.

Didn’t I need your support?

“I did my best, Harry,” he says, by way of apology. “Neither of us were in a good place; I didn’t

have any money even. I did what I could.”

He’d made phone calls to Clara, she knows. Clara had forwarded them to mutual friends, who’d charity-worked Harry through her rehab. To fill the silence, John jabbers on, plastering on a fake smile when Bee looks at them from across the grass.

“I mean, I need him too. He supports me as much as I do him,” John says, sounding like it’s the first time he’s ever lined up the words and let them get out of his mouth before. Harry hopes it’s only because he’s forever tedious about admitting weakness.

There’s a silence while they wait for the child to turn her attention to her game again.

“I quite like Sherlock,” Harry says. “He’s an arse and he’s easy to shock, and he was sincere, you know, really trying. I think we kind of got on.”

John doesn’t even bother to disguise his disbelief. Harry laughs.

“I’m gay and an addict,” she says, wearily, “And constantly furious at you, even though I love you really, I think. If you’re really fucking lucky, which you always sodding well seem to be. I mean, put it like that, and I’ve got a lot in common with your ridiculous posh boy.”

“...Was he really angry with me?”

Harry shakes her head. “Frustrated. Confused. I got the impression he’d spent a long time shut off from his sexuality, and not much time talking to people about it. Sound familiar?” Harry sighs. “But don’t shit the bed over it, I showed him where he could get some help, and stayed out of it. Obviously, it’s turned out alright.”

“I had no idea,” John says, stunned.

“The word you’re looking for is ‘thank you’.”

“That’s two words.”

“Arse.”

“Thank you.”

Harry looks at him from the corner of her eye. “I would have done the same for you, if you’d let me.”

John looks back, doubtfully.

“Not that you’d have given me a chance,” Harry surmises.

“I might have,” John lies too late.

“Bollocks- you could never get around the idea of my drinking.”

“Because I drank,” John says, and the words fall like slabs from a height on their relationship.

“You were never tee-total.” Harry stumbles out the sentence, throwing it out so that John can change his mind and not take them down this path.

“No... I drank,” John says. He feels lighter for having said it, like his lungs had been bogged down with fluid and someone had finally, found the right space between his ribs to puncture and let it all

out.

“Just a bit to excess to start with. University parties. Everyone drinks, and you remember all that lot...and then you were in rehab the first time and that worried me enough to push me towards the army. And then I got shot, and I was in hospital for ages, but it was only a shoulder. They were going to send me back for GP duties on bases. I could have limped around diagnosing sun stroke and the flu. But I drank. I drank, and I drank and I got angry, and they found out I wasn’t ok at all.” John rubs at his eyebrow with his thumbnail. “And I got discharged.”

Harry is silent.

“And that’s why I couldn’t be around your drinking and I made such a big noise about it. We’d have lead each other down and down until one of us had killed ourselves on it.”

“I felt so guilty,” Harry says, “When you wouldn’t let me see you. I knew you were in a fucking pit after you came home. I know I was a mess after Clara, but you wouldn’t even talk to me.”

John rubs his shoulder. “I’d stopped drinking by then. I got some... strong words from my old commanding officer. I stopped.”

“Good thing you could always follow orders,” Harry says, still wounded, and bitterly casting about her memory for another stone to sling.

“I bought my gun home.” John says first.

Harry stops dead and stares at him. “Oh my God, John. Please tell me you didn’t-”

“No, no! That kept me going. I wasn’t planning to... use it. I just kept it in the drawer and it was like a balance. If things felt bad, which they did, then that reminded me that it still wasn’t final. And if I wanted, I could choose. It was my choice. And it felt good. It felt... dangerous. I could look at it and say no, not this time.”

“That’s not good, John,” Harry says, horrified. “That’s really, really fucked up! Did you tell anyone about this?”

“...I’m telling you. I think Sherlock knows. He’s probably guessed.”

“Oh God, John.”

“Harry, don’t cry. Come on, it’s embarrassing...”

“Papa?”

John blindly scoops Bee up. She clings to him, frightened, and it’s enough to well-spring tears of her own. ‘Shit,’ John thinks, despairing. ‘I keep making girls cry.’

“Harry, come on.”

“Oh, shut up,” Harry sobs. “It’s too much- this is too much!”

“I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to”

“No, you never mean to, you just do anyway...”

“Come on, come on,” John says, jiggling Bee, and then alien to all of them, he puts his arm around his big sister and lets her howl into his shoulder. “I’m sorry,” he says against her head. She treads

hard on his foot, and then sobs harder, enough to make Bee feel she's losing the competition.

"Shh," John says, nosing Bee's face. "It's alright, sweetheart."

Harry swallows and looks up. "Oh," she says thickly. "You're talking to her."

"Same applies," John says quickly, letting her go as she straightens to wipe her face. "I'm sorry..."

"Yeah..." Harry sniffs enormously. "Have my eyes streaked?"

John checks. "No, not too bad."

"Waterproof mascara," she hiccups.

"Uh, well, seems like it does what it says it does on the tin."

Harry smears her palms across her eyes again and when her vision clears, Bee is staring at her, equally splotchy.

"Oh *dear*," Bee says, sounding so Mrs. Hudson-ish that John bites his tongue and Harry nearly smiles.

"Yes, oh *dear*," she agrees. "Ok, I'm done. I'm going home. No, I need to think. I need a really strong... cup of tea and like four Crunchies, and- John, you don't still have it, do you?"

"Have it? Oh. No. No, bottom of the Thames."

Harry pauses, feeling around in her handbag. "Do you need a cab?" John offers.

"No, I'll get the bus. I don't want to be sitting in a car crying with some bloke I don't know."

"Right... better to cry with everyone else on the tube to Elephant and Castle."

"Oh, stop," Harry begs, though she notes that he's remembered her station. "You're not funny."

"Can't be," John says, "I'm a Dad."

He shifts Bee's weight on his arm and rocks her, the little girl turned all shy and clingy again, hiding her face. He's squinting against the sun and the awkwardness of the situation. For a moment, Harry can see how it will all pan out. She will turn and so will he, and they'll walk in excruciating silence until he makes an excuse not to go all the way to the station with her, with no long goodbye, and no making of plans.

'How was it?' someone will ask, and he'll say 'disaster', and she'll say 'the absolute fucking worst', and it will be decided not to repeat the experiment.

There will be weeks of brooding on what has been said, which will all get distilled into new secrets to bottle, to burst out again all over-fermented at their next run-in. Harry can see it all, and it makes her gloomy.

John licks his lips, she supposes to smooth the way for the excuses.

"Um," he says. "I think I'm going to walk home, actually. Stop at the shop. I think...maybe next time I'll leave Bee with Sherlock. We can just have a coffee. Vauxhall or somewhere."

"Vauxhall?"

“Or somewhere,” John says.

“But this was awful.”

“Alright, then we don’t.”

“Do you want to?”

He doesn’t know. Would it be better with other people around or just the two of them again? He doesn’t want Bee there again, but who else do they know? He can’t imagine bringing Sherlock like the third quarter of the world’s most horrendous double date.

“I’m not saying no,” he concludes.

Harry fidgets with her handbag. “Alright, then somewhere, sometime, once in a while. We both just... try and be a bit less... us.”

“A bit less us. Yeah,” John agrees. “You’ve got my number.”

“You’ve got mine,” Harry returns. “If you ever fancy going to see Ted and Stella.”

“Yeah, maybe,” he says, startled by the idea.

“Just a thought,” Harry says. “Oh, we’re having the long goodbye after all.”

“The what?”

“Nothing. Go home.” She brushes past them, and waves at the baby, who only stares at her, but Harry keeps waving even as she turns her back. Behind her the pushchair creaks and John whispers to the baby, letting Harry get a head start before following her to the station.

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Sherlock has been nervously waiting the whole time that John’s been out. It’s obvious by the violin music scattered around the stand and the fact that numerous other small items have been rearranged as Sherlock has vibrated in his anxiety around the confines of the flat.

“Hey,” John says, sitting Bee down to pull off her shoes.

“Tea?” Sherlock offers, hovering over them both. “Hello Bee.”

“Hello, Daddy. Up please.”

“What’s this? A cuddle?”

“Yes,” she says and greets him with a kiss, for which Sherlock is genuinely very appreciative. “And a bic-bic.”

He gets two out of the cupboard. A tiny gingerbread man for her and a stem-ginger oat thing for John that Bee carries to him, with only a very little sampling. For his part, Sherlock palms three custard creams and approaches John mug first to find out the news.

“It was ok,” John says, before Sherlock asks. “We survived.”

“I didn’t ask.”

“You were thinking it.”

“Wasn’t.”

“Were. You’re a loud thinker sometimes.”

“Am not.”

Sherlock plants himself on the carpet in a sprawl, slurping from his mug.

“Anyway,” John concludes. He rubs at the back of his neck and then joins Sherlock on the floor. “I told her.”

We’re not a secret anymore.

Sherlock puts his mug down as John walks his hands on either side of Sherlock’s hips and then kisses him. Shifting his weight, he palms Sherlock’s jaw and kisses him again. Small, firm footsteps marching up to them make them both pause.

“What are you doing, Babar?” she asks, enunciating. She is breathing more or less in Sherlock’s ear.

“Kissing,” John says, pressing his lips together against a grin.

“Oh.”

“Can you go away a little bit, please?”

There is a pause. “Hmm,” says Bee, thoroughly suspicious of them. She backs off a couple of spaces and then stops. John risks a look at her at the same time Sherlock does. She is holding onto Zub in both hands and frowning at them so sternly and so unsure, that John drops his head, laughing.

“I think we’re in trouble,” he whispers to Sherlock. He drops his head to Sherlock’s shoulder, giggles at the whole high drama of the day and then sits up with a huge breath of air. Sherlock has gone pink around the ears.

“No,” says Bee, who has no idea what she is saying no to, but in her experience it’s a very effective word.

“No?” John says, “After all that today, ‘no’?”

“Uhh?”

“Hmm, tough,” John says and kisses Sherlock again in one quick, surprising smack.

“Wah!”

“John, you’re scandalising the toddler.”

“About damn time,” John says, and he does it again, and again, until Bee prods him in the ear and he has them both in his arms, flat out on the carpet, bundled close to his heart.

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Molly peels off her gloves and removes her goggles, dropping them with a thud onto the work surface. “Sherlock.”

He grunts, eyes fixed down the barrel of his microscope, mind a million miles away.

“Sherlock.”

She reaches over and pokes him in the crook of his elbow and he grunts again. “What?”

Molly pauses. “Coffee?”

“Mm. Yes.”

“Please.”

“Please,” he says, blinking at his bacteria.

“And then come up to the office,” she adds, prodding him again to make sure he’s listening properly. He looks up, taking in her words. ‘Why?’ his expression says, but Molly says nothing, simply sweeping her dirty gloves into the biohazard bin and leaving him there to make up his mind.

The office upstairs is a shared one, full of the debris of four research projects, and more vigorously mapped down to the last inch of ownership than the trenches of WWI. Unlike the staff room, however, it has a door that when closed, precludes interruption. Molly heaves herself into a chair and shuffles through her own materials, the coffee steaming on the windowsill.

He makes her wait another 5 minutes before he prowls through the door, taking the other chair. He sits, pulling one of his intimidating faces which, now that Molly knows him well, she can interpret as Sherlock acting the Professional Adult. Now that she knows him very well, in fact, his face-pulling has lost all ability to seem stern to her, and instead appears more like a cross between panicked and constipated.

“Here,” she says, passing him his coffee.

“Thank you.” He sits bolt upright, waiting for Molly to instigate the conversation, and when she doesn’t he stumbles to do so himself. She lets him stumble. It’s good for him. “This is nice.”

“Mm...” Molly saddens. “Actually there’s something we’ve got to talk about.”

“Ah... the application of cyanoximes and their metal complexes?”

“No, something more personal, I’m afraid.”

“I’ve read some quite interesting things about peculiarities vis-a-vis anions,” he says, hopefully.

“Sherlock, please listen. I need to tell you. I’ve handed in my notice.”

“Notice?”

“A couple of weeks ago. I’m er...I’ve got a new job.”

“New job?”

“I thought you’d have guessed,” she tries smiling and shrugging. “You being you.”

“Guessed- I?” The coffee cup is tilting. Carefully, Molly nudges it upright again. “But where? *Why?* But you live *here!*”

“It’s not forever,” Molly says, leaning forward. “A few years. They’ve offered me a place where I can manage my own lab and continue my research full-time. It’s a... really great offer. I hoped you’d be happy for me.”

“But- where? Not London?”

“Near-ish,” she says. “Ascot.”

“Ascot!” He snorts, putting down the coffee cup hard. Ascot might as well be the moon. A few years might as well be forever.

“It’s a good offer, Sherlock. I’m taking it.” She turns and reaches into the drawer of her desk for the bound copy of her work. It had arrived just yesterday, and the edges were still fresh and scalpel sharp.

“Here. This is yours.”

Bound in blue, the appendices concertina’d in on themselves, it makes for a sizeable volume even in Sherlock’s huge hands. He takes it, smoothing his fingers down the spine and over the letters of the title. “This is your work.”

Molly nods, her face lightening to a smile. “I got... inspired,” she says, touching the papers and then opening it in his hands to leaf through the pages. “Will you read it? And tell me what you think?”

“Why do you need to know what I think?” Sherlock says, “It’s been reviewed by the board already; they can’t all be complete dunderheads. Well, they could be actually...”

“I want your opinion,” Molly stresses. She’s smiling still, that faintly exasperated, loving smile of hers that makes Sherlock feel like an idiot sometimes. “Just make sure you read all of it.”

Sherlock turns the book in his hands, feeling the weight of it. There’s a lot of information here; the report itself might only comprise a third of it, but there’s the data as well. There’s an old-fashioned quality to having data printed out like this. One half of him (the bit that has a poorly concealed love affair with all things Victoriana) finds the aesthetic of the document highly appealing. The scientist in him bewails the stupidity of not having it all in a form that lets you search and manipulate. As if reading his mind, Molly takes a USB out of her pocket and drops it into his.

“May I take it home?”

“It’s your copy,” she laughs behind her fingers. “You can keep it. Just promise to tell me if you find anything interesting.”

“Oh, I see. Thank you.”

“Aren’t you going to ask me to autograph it?”

“I don’t know if it’s any good yet,” he says, holding it back out of her reach. Molly giggles. She leans back and he sees the way she relaxes into her chair, relieved to have told him, relieved that he’s not exploded, he supposes, though he has to hold the papers tight.

‘I’m losing her,’ he thinks suddenly, and it hurts. The whole of St. Barts becomes a shell without

Molly Hooper. This stuffy office, the shining slabs in the morgue, the smelly, run-down staffroom with the horrible coffee; none of it will be the same. Oh, there'll be Mike Stamford, who'll see he still gets access to do his experiments, and there'll doubtless be some new pathologist or such who will learn to tolerate him, but it won't be Molly.

"When...?"

"I've got a flat, so I'm moving next week. I'll be based in Ascot, but I'll be here at least once a week for the next month while things get set up there, and things get handed over here."

"So soon."

"It was all a bit sudden. I'm using up a lot of holiday actually, going... back and forth. Notice period and everything..." She trails off, looking around the place, and trying not to scrutinise Sherlock too closely, because it's going to make her cry. "Just so you know, I'm going to miss this too."

"You'll probably have a nicer office."

She nudges his shin with the toe of her shoe. "Our chats. Well, your lectures, my listening."

You.

He can't stay. The room is too small, the feelings too large. He clears his throat, fussing around his pockets, moving the USB from his jacket pocket to his breast pocket, patting the cover of the report. "I, ah—"

"Have things to do?" Molly suggests. The coffee is still steaming on the windowsill, but he'll never finish it now.

"Yes. That. I—" he cuts himself short. "What time?" he asks. She shakes her head.

"About 10-ish, but it's ok. Don't come; I'm not very good with goodbyes. I'll go all pathetic."

"Can't have that."

"No," she says, kindly, getting up. "Anyway, it's my birthday at the end of the month. You'll have to come and see me then."

"Halloween," he remembers. It hardly feels like it's October. Summer has stretched itself out this year, so full of everything that thinking back it seems impossible that so much has changed in so short a time. Even the weather is still warm. He stands and there's a tiny moment of awkwardness.

"I'll... probably head home now," he comments. "Things to do." He doesn't want to sit in the lab all afternoon, knowing she's not going to be there next week.

"I might go see if Mike's around," she agrees. He opens the door for her and then they both seem to get stuck in the doorway.

Goodbye?

I don't know.

"Am I supposed to...?" He holds his arms open. "Is it required?"

"No," Molly says, but she steps forward anyway and puts her arms around his middle. He hugs her.

She's little compared to John, and the difference makes him feel clumsy. She wobbles on tiptoe and then hastily they both let go, Molly brushing her hair back from her face.

"Alright, shoo, go, that's it," she says, pink. "Go and do your things you need to do. And will you tell John? I don't know if I'll see him. Or I can call?"

"I can tell him," he agrees, stepping into the cooler air of the corridor. The door shuts behind them with a soft thud. "Safe journey."

Her eyes are very soft and brown, warm with affection. "You too," she says. "You take care."

Please take care.

He nods, keeping his mouth shut and leaves before he can do anything foolish, like beg her to stay.

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John startles awake in the middle of the night when the phone rings. He is sat up and has it clapped to his ear before he's even fully aware of the fact; no one ever rings him unless it's an emergency.

"Hello?"

"John? It's me." There is a tremendous amount of background noise and the line is crackling. Music thumps, a woman yells.

"Yes, who is this?"

"No, it's meeee?" she says, hiccupping, "It's Molly, I'm a me."

She's spectacularly drunk, is what she is.

John frowns, checking the clock. "Are you alright?"

"I'm great, just great. No, wait, no, I'm not. I'm very worried. I am very, very worried, John."

"Do you need us to come and help you home?" John says. He gets up out of bed and takes the stairs down at a fast clip, scrubbing sleep from his eyes. In the living room, Sherlock jerks up out of his chair like an offended cat.

"Molly," John mouths at him and mimes drinking. Sherlock lowers the violin bow he'd raised in defence and slinks closer to try and listen in.

Aloud, John asks, "Molly, where are you?"

"I'm inna loo." She finds this hilarious and bursts into giggles that turn into hiccupy crying. "John."

"I'm here." John sits on the arm of Sherlock's chair, whilst Sherlock paces around in front of him. "What's the matter?"

"I'm very drunk. It's my leaving drinks, and there's been lots of- lots of fizzy things."

"I can tell," John says. It'd be funnier if it wasn't so unlike Molly to involve them in her escapades. "Who are you with?"

“Is Sherlock there?”

“Yes, he is. Do you want to speak to him?” John says, even as Sherlock lurches forward to take the phone while simultaneously shaking his head no. The phone remains in John’s hand.

“What’s she doing?” Sherlock whispers, frowning.

Molly must be in a cubicle now; John hears her sit and the background noise is reduced slightly.

“John, I just wanna ask you, cause he’s got no friends. He’s got no friends, John. It’s really sad.”

She’s crying the way drunks cry, just weeping full of emotion for the larger scale of existence.

“He’s got no friends and he needs looking after, and I’m going to Ascot. Ascot, John.”

“Ascot’s not very far,” John points out. “I’m sure we’ll all come visit.”

“Where’s he gonna go when I’m not in my morgue?”

“He’ll be fine,” John says.

“Can you look after him?”

“Yes, Molly,” John smiles at Sherlock and points at him. Sherlock’s eyebrows shoot upwards. “I’ll take good care of him.”

“I’m such a shit friend,” Molly snuffles.

“Tell her she’s not,” Sherlock says at once. John relays the message.

“But I’m going away and there’s all this *emotion*, and I’m crying in a loo and I’m drunk and I can’t fix anything for him. I just can’t do it, it’s too much, and there’s these feelings all over and it’s just a mess I can’t fix.”

“Tell her she doesn’t have to!” Sherlock says urgently, hovering over John and twiddling his hands together. “Why is she crying?”

“Because she cares a lot about you, you berk,” John says, hand over the speaker. “Molly, I’m going to take really good care of him, I promise.”

A huge *blort* echoes down the line; Molly blowing her nose. “You do?”

“Of course I do.”

“Cause he’s weird and likes dead things, but I like dead things and everyone else hates him and his funny face.”

“I quite like dead things as well,” John reassures her. “And I like his face.”

Sherlock frowns harder.

“Ok?” John presses.

“Ok,” Molly says damply.

“Who are you with? Is anyone there with you?”

“Jools, and Herm.”

“Ok, Molly. I think you should go drink a big glass of water, and go home. It’s three in the morning.”

“I know,” she says, indignant. “I’m a doctor too. I doctor stuff. John?”

“Yes, Molly?”

“I changed my mind. Tell Sherlock, I changed my mind and I want him to come to the station and say goodbye. And you. You have to come too or it’ll all go to poo. I wanna hug his stupid... stupid shirt.”

“Ok, Molly. I’ll make sure he comes. Molly, are your friends still there?”

“Yes. Oh no.” He hears Molly move again and then there follows such a row on the phone that John can’t make out anything for a minute or two. Finally, a completely different voice says, “Hello, hello? Hello, there. Hello.”

“Hello, who’s this?”

“This is Richard, who is this?”

“This is John. Is Molly there?”

“She’s err... having a little vom at the mo, darling,” Richard informs him, and then distantly adds to someone else, “Jools, can you hold her bag, I have a boy on the phone.”

“Better out than in,” John concludes.

“Exactly what I say,” Richard oozes. “Um, how’s your evening, John?”

“It’s three AM.”

“Gosh.”

“Is Molly Ok?”

“Yes, she’s- hold on, here, here you are babe, say hello to John.”

“Fuck off, John,” Molly growls. “I need to be sick.”

At this John decides she’s probably fine. “Please just see she gets home,” he tells Richard firmly. “And I will check, so she had better be safe and sound come morning, hangover aside. Is that clear?”

“Err, quite,” Richard says. “Won’t let anyone harm a hair on her head.”

“Thanks,” John says, and Richard hangs up.

“Well?” Sherlock demands.

“She’s fine,” John says, stifling a yawn. “She’s going to have a monster hangover, and I’ve had to promise to look after you.”

“I heard that.”

“Which means,” John says, heaving himself to his feet and dropping his phone on the chair. “I’m

going back to bed, to sleep, and so are you.”

“I am?” Sherlock says, even as John takes him by the wrist and leads him towards the stairs.

“What for?”

“Because it’s three in the sodding morning,” John sighs, “and after all that, I think I’d like to lie down and hug you.”

The bedroom is as dark as John left it, the covers thrown back to grow cold. John drops heavily into his side of the double, tugging the duvet over him. “Here,” he says, flipping back Sherlock’s side and making space for him. Sherlock slips in along his side, all awkward shapes until John finds a way to wriggle an arm around him, and Sherlock figures out he needs to not put his elbow right into John’s ribs, and they are, for the moment at least, comfy.

“Is this really necessary?” Sherlock asks, before John can doze off.

“Yes,” John says. He has his eyes shut, but he turns his face into Sherlock’s space and squishes him with the arm around him. “Because you’re sad Molly is leaving.”

Sherlock counts three of John’s breaths before admitting he is right.

“You’ll miss her?”

“Yes.”

“We’ll go visit,” John says, glancing across at him. “And we’ll go and see her off at the station.”

“Yes.”

“Maybe someone’ll get murdered. It’ll be like old times.”

Sherlock chuckles into John’s pillow. “Yes,” he sighs. “Perhaps.”

“And I’ll look after you.”

Sherlock is so silent that it seems that the conversation has naturally closed. John waits for a response that doesn’t come and doesn’t come, and he has just closed his eyes again with the intention of speaking when Sherlock says his name.

He leans over John, tugging his arm free so that he can touch his face. He looks down intently, not blinking.

“And I will look after you, until my dying breath.”

John can do nothing but make an ‘uh’ sound. All the air has gone from his lungs. He has absolutely no doubt that Sherlock means what he says.

“What the hell am I supposed to say to that?” John asks, when he has the ability to form words again.

Sherlock’s eyes slide to one side as he replays the conversation and considers it.

“That’s rhetoric,” John says softly, moved. He prods Sherlock’s chin until he’s looking down again and then kisses him once, slowly. “Drama queen.”

“I just meant-”

“You’re the best thing that ever happened to me.”

Sherlock stops dead, as taken aback as John had just been.

“Well, you are,” John repeats, smiling. He steals another kiss. “I love you,” he says, and laughs softly. “I am incredibly lucky to have you.”

“Stop,” Sherlock protests, not very strongly.

“Handsome,” John adds, with another kiss. Sherlock grunts in disagreement. “Determined. Intelligent. Funny; No, I’ve got more, don’t interrupt.”

“John, you’re being soppy.”

“Strong,” John murmurs, brushing his fingers down Sherlock’s cheek. “But you know...I don’t know how best to put this, but you don’t have to be perfect all the time.” He twists his fingers into Sherlock’s. “It’s great, there’s so much you can do, but... I don’t mind if there’s things you can’t. Or you’re just not good at.”

“I’m not perfect...”

“And that’s fine, I’m not either. Not by a long shot. All I’m saying is, if there are things that are too much for you, or upset you, share that with me.” He pulls their knuckles to his mouth and kisses Sherlock’s fingers. “Maybe we can figure it all out together.”

“Like this.”

“Just like this,” John agrees. Sherlock stretches out against his side and sighs, leaning into John’s warmth and the softness of the pillows. The red figures of the alarm clock click over silently for some time before he speaks again.

“I never thought she would leave.”

John stirs, waking from the doze he has slipped into. “Mm?”

“Molly,” Sherlock says to John’s shoulder. “She’s always been at St. Barts.” He lifts his face to look into John’s.

What can I say? It’s breaking me up.

“Just tell her how you feel.”

“I’m annoyed. I’m hurt. I have barely managed to arrange things nicely and now she’s ruined it all and for what? A job,” Sherlock says, with tangible scorn. “In Ascot. Where is Ascot? A pointless place. Nobody interesting dies in Ascot.”

“Sherlock,” John says, opening one eye. “We don’t get to tell Molly what to do with her life.”

“I know,” Sherlock says, frustrated.

“‘But what about me’?” John summarises.

“Yes...”

John turns his head to look at the alarm clock. “You’ve got about thirty hours to figure out how you want to say goodbye to Molly at the station,” he says. “I would start with not being angry at

her.”

Sherlock grunts and sits up. John eases himself up onto his elbow. “I mean it, Sherlock. If it’s hard now, it’s going to be worse if you go to say goodbye and you’re full of resentment. Get it out of your system.”

Sherlock decamps from the bed, pulling on his dressing gown.

“Sherlock?”

“I need to think,” Sherlock says, tugging the garment closer around his body. More quietly, he adds, “You may be right.”

“Just maybe?”

“Go to sleep, John.”

“Hold on,” John objects before Sherlock can step out of the room. He looks at him expectantly, and then beckons him closer. “Kiss.”

Sherlock uses the bedstead for leverage, lowering his face to meet John’s. John’s hands are warm around his cheeks as he kisses him back. “Don’t do anything without me.”

“No.”

“And come back to bed at getting-up time.”

“Alright.”

Reluctantly, John lets him go. “Good luck,” he adds, tucking himself back in. “And I’m here if you need me. I don’t mind if you wake me up.” For a moment, Sherlock debates just getting back in the bed and burrowing into John’s midriff like a desperate fool until somehow, magically, emotions just disappear and his brain goes quiet. Instead he takes his fractious energy downstairs to kill it by pacing the flat while bowing inaudible airs on his violin.

How could you do this? How could you make such an enormous decision without discussing it with me?

The Molly in his head is strangely intangible. It’s not like she’s really there as usual. Even in his mind palace, she’s leaving him.

I just told you why, John says instead. He’s dressed for work, stethoscope dangling around his neck, hands in the pocket of his boring trousers. *She has her own life and it doesn’t revolve around you.*

It’s unfair, Sherlock wants to complain. I need her. I need to know where she is and where she should be is Barts, where I can find her when I need to.

You’re acting like a child who’s just learned his teachers don’t actually live at school, Mycroft tuts. He swings his umbrella. Sherlock waves him away in embarrassed impatience.

“But she’s making it so difficult!”

Molly whispers. *I said you could still see me in Ascot...*

“It’s so inconvenient!”

“That’s how relationships go,” John says. He hesitates in the doorway, arms folded across his chest awkwardly. “I got worried,” he admits. “How’s it going?”

“I don’t know, I’ve only just started!”

“It’s been a couple of hours,” John corrects gently, “This is really eating you up that much?”

“I don’t want her to go,” Sherlock says, shoulders slumping.

“I know,” John says, coming away from the door. “We can talk it out, if you want? And don’t tell me to go back to bed; I can’t sleep knowing you’re getting in a ruck with yourself down here. What do you need?”

“Less emotions,” Sherlock grouses, giving in. He drops his violin into his chair and slopes over, “I didn’t think this would be difficult.”

“Didn’t see it coming, did we?” John agrees. “But you know, Molly cares about you a lot.”

“I know.”

“So just tell her you care about her too and wish her well.”

“That’s it?”

“That’s it. ‘Best of luck with your new job, I’m sure you’ll be brilliant. We’ll come and see you soon.’”

“That sounds so socially contrived,” Sherlock complains, sinking to the sofa.

“It always does, you just have to say it anyway, and let your big weird face do the talking.” John leans over him and taps his chin. “The one we like. Better?”

No worse, Sherlock thinks, and then when he reflects on it, he does feel better. He’s not sure John’s answer is the one he was seeking but perhaps the one he was looking for doesn’t exist. It’s a fall-back. It’s socially acceptable. It won’t make Molly cry.

“Can I sit?” John asks. Sherlock shifts over to make room for him on the sofa, and feels better. John pats his knee. “Don’t stress about it. You’ll think of something right when you need to and if not...” John pauses, his jaw cracking in an enormous yawn. “Sorry. If not, I’ll say something polite and normal and you can post her a bit of necrotic intestine or something with your love later.”

Sherlock laughs. “I’ll bear that in mind.

“You’re welcome,” John says. He stretches out his arm on the sofa and entertains a vague hope that Sherlock might settle now enough to come to bed with him, but by the way the other man is fidgeting, this appears to be unlikely. Instead he picks up the volume of work Molly gave him and starts leafing through it, chewing on his thoughts. John pulls the blanket down off the back of the sofa and arranges himself with it around him, prepared to sit it out.

“You’re going to fall asleep,” Sherlock warns him.

“Mm,” John grunts in agreement. He props his feet next to Sherlock’s on their coffee table and Sherlock is glad of the company. John snores slightly into his own collarbone, and it provides a rhythm to Sherlock’s thoughts. He reads through Molly’s research, properly this time, and becomes so absorbed in it, that Molly is back in his mind-palace, crystal clear, without him fully recognising

the fact.

He is not aware of how much time has passed when he reads the very last page of the document, and finds a phrase that makes his eyes skip back to read it again, not once but twice, before it makes full sense to him.

He puts his thumb in the pages and shakes John awake. "Look," he says, holding it open to show him what he has found. John squints, rubbing his eyes. There is grey light seeping into the room, and he tugs the page closer to his face so he can make out the blur of letters. It takes him a couple of efforts to work out what it reads.

"She wrote it," Sherlock says.

"So she did," John says, touched on his behalf. He reaches for Sherlock's shirtfront and pulls him back down onto the sofa with him.

"She wrote it for me, John."

"Of course she did," John says. He props the document up for them both to appreciate for a moment, and then when Sherlock is ready, lies it down on the blanket and sinks back with Sherlock in his arms.

"You should read it," Sherlock means the whole work. "It's good. Very good, in fact."

"I will," John promises. "In the morning."

"There's a lot she'll be able to do with it."

John just makes a pleased noise and nods. Later, when he's more awake, he'll have something more comprehensive to say, but for now, it's enough for Sherlock that John confirms what he's read and what it means. After all, there's as big a difference between seeing and knowing as there is between seeing and observing, sometimes anyway.

Reaching out, Sherlock tilts up the document again to look at the page and the final words written there.

Special thanks in particular to my good friend, Mr. S. Holmes.

Waterloo station is brimming with passengers. They're high above the crowds in the cafe, a little huddle of three up on the concourse on an eye level with the great clock. Announcements echo over the hubbub of a hundred conversations. Molly's travelling lightly enough. Just a single large trundle suitcase and a cat basket, in which a large amount of tabby cat is snoring off a mild sedative. Toby, it appears, is a poor traveller.

"Some's in storage, some's gone ahead," Molly explains. She's letting her flat out in her absence, and taking up another cheap rental in Ascot. To Sherlock this sounds hopefully like insurance. Surely then she must come back some day, even if it's only because her new tenant has done something stupid like knock down the shelves or flood the bathroom.

On this thought, Sherlock takes the opportunity to point out he's very good at DIY, which unexpectedly derails the conversation.

“I could profile your potential tenants.”

“I might consider that,” Molly says, “But for the moment it’s going to a friend, so please don’t scare her.”

“Why would I scare her?”

Molly chuckles and places her hand on the cat case. She is listening to the announcements with one ear, her mind already skipping to the journey ahead of her. She sways slightly, awkward about the goodbye.

Discrete as he can, John nudges Sherlock with his elbow. Sherlock rocks on his heels and pretends not to notice until John nudges him again and forces him to look down.

Are you going to say anything?

I don’t know.

Are you going to give her that?

I don’t know!

Now or never.

“Finished with that?” John says aloud, picking up Sherlock’s cup and Molly’s muffin wrapper, and leaving them to hash it out. He takes his sweet time finding a bin for it, and hangs around mimicking great interest in the breakfast menu while they talk.

Sherlock isn’t saying much. In thirty hours he hasn’t come up with the right thing to say, and though his brain feels like its going at a thousand miles an hour, inspiration isn’t striking now either. The handle of the carrier bag is sweaty in his hand. Molly’s been casting curious glances at it, but she hasn’t asked. She fiddles with the ends of her hair in the silence.

“Thanks for coming,” she says, after a moment. “I know this isn’t much fun...” She looks up, squinting with concern. Now or never.

“Here,” he says, holding the bag out. “Just... a thing.”

She takes it carefully, easing off the stool to take it in both hands. It’s slightly heavy, but the weight leaves his fingers with almost next to no effort. Molly peeks into the bag.

“Oh Sherlock, are you sure?”

“He’s a very good listener,” Sherlock says, putting his hands behind his back. “If you find yourself in need of an ear. Not that he has any ears...”

“I’ll look after him very well,” Molly promises, reaching in to gently pat the skull on his shiny carapace. “Are you really sure?”

He nods. It feels right. He hadn’t been sure until the moment he’d held out the bag, even after he’d suggested it to John and John had agreed that, as it was Molly, she probably wouldn’t be adverse to the skull. She cradles the head into the crook of her arm and looks up with a smile.

And she knows, he realises. She already knows what he’s trying to say, even though he’s terrible at it. Still, he wants to say something; she’s done so much in his name and for his sake, and everything’s changed so much that he wants her to know just this; that he will miss her deeply,

even though he's poor at showing his affection.

But she already knows. *It's ok.*

And it is. Molly straightens and they move on. "Thank you," she says.

"Thank you," he corrects, and that turns out to be the words he was looking for all along. The plastic bag crinkles as she places it on her lap, smoothing it out. He relaxes next to her and she leans into his side, and they just watch the crowd for a moment.

Carefully, John eases back into the space on Sherlock's other side. He presses Sherlock's shoulder blade with his palm.

Ok?

Good.

Molly leans back from the edge with a sigh. "Nearly time," she says, excited. "I should get moving."

She tucks the skull into the top of her handbag and touches shoulders with John in a careful boy-girl hug before she rises on tip-toes to kiss Sherlock's cheek.

"Best of luck," John says moving in as she steps back.

"No such thing," Sherlock says warmly. His cheeks wrinkle into a real smile. "She'll manage them all famously."

"I'll scare them with my skull," Molly agrees, and then John makes a little noise of surprise. They turn to look where he is looking, down at the concourse of the station.

"What?" Sherlock says, and then Molly's hand touches his arm and he stops.

"I think they've just called my train," she says, "Thanks for coming."

She steps away, waving back before turning and wheeling her suitcase towards the escalator and the man waiting in the crowd. John watches her pony tail swinging away with a growing feeling of unease. Just before she'd left, she'd thrown him a quick, meaningful look.

"He's not, is he?" he says to himself, though it's all too clear that Wiggins is. Clean shaven, he looks about five years younger, carefully tucked into a suit that doesn't quite fit him. He cradles the bunch of flowers shyly, fully aware that he must cut a bold and pitiable shape.

"Oh, Wiggins," John says, "What are you doing?"

What he's doing is giving Molly Hooper a bouquet. She takes it and briefly inhales the perfume as he talks. She doesn't shake her head when she answers, but she doesn't have to. She touches his face instead, without any lover's insinuation. Wiggins nods and his head curls down towards his chest.

"Shit," says John. "Oh shit, I wonder..." He hasn't got any friends. He comes to the morgue with his love of dead things and his funny little face. She couldn't help him.

"What did he expect?" Sherlock asks, frowning.

"Not the time, Sherlock. Bollocks." John tugs him by the hand towards the escalator. In a few

moments time, he predicts, they're going to have their hands full.

Molly takes the flowers and eases away into the crowd, waving back as she passes through the barrier, and then she does not look back again.

Wiggins remains under the clock, very carefully not watching her go. He shoves his empty hands in his pockets and feigns nonchalance, but the pretence breaks down almost at once when they approach.

"That was hard," John says. "You alright?"

"No," Wiggins' face bubbles with unrestrained tears. He lifts his hands up near his head. "I am having a conflict."

John holds his own hands out too, in case he needs to catch him, stop him, just in case. He doesn't like how Wiggins is rocking slightly. "Conflict?"

"Yeah cause a bit of me is asking 'why can't I ever have anything good?'" Wiggins jabs his forefinger angrily towards the floor, "And then the part of me that's had all that therapy's like, she's not there to be your bit of good."

"Alright," John says, cutting him off. "Come on, no, you're not doing this." He hooks Wiggins in the curve of his arm and props him against his shoulder, while Wiggins heaves out a flood of disappointment in life that goes far beyond Molly Hooper. Sherlock hovers, and then lays a hand on Wiggins' shaking back.

"You can telephone Molly any time. She's very good like that." He avoids John's face when he says this, and they both know what all the tears are really about. If Molly's gone, then so is the bolthole of her morgue and her understanding, and her uncompromising insistence that they all be better people.

"But I never phone- if it were that fucking easy," Wiggins breaks off, crawling from John's grip and smearing his palms across his face, fearful. "That's why it always goes wrong."

"It's not going to go wrong," John says, even though he knows he shouldn't make promises.

"You've got us, you've got Mrs. Hudson, you've got your group; worst comes to worst, Ascot's only a bloody hour away. Are you listening?"

Wiggins nods, and blindly takes the handkerchief that Sherlock gingerly offers him.

"Yeah..."

"Come stay at the flat. You can play with Bee."

"Yeah..."

"Read Sherlock's journals."

"I gotta feed my skink."

"You can bring the skink," John says, reluctantly. "As long as it stays in the tank."

"Ed's got manners," Wiggins says, with damp indignation.

"Yes, but Sherlock's not above experimenting on him so I'm making a new house rule," John says, chivvying him towards the taxi rank. "And Mrs. Hudson's not too keen on reptiles. Why are you

pulling on me, Sherlock?”

“Because there’s a café around the corner that can knock out a half-decent fry up.” He shrugs as they both stare at him. “All-day breakfast. My treat?”

“You cannot stop up the great void of drug addiction and depression caused by chemical imbalance and emotional isolation with egg ’n’ chips,” Wiggins says, flatly, wiping his face again.

“No?”

“No.” A fresh gush of tears threatens to send Wiggins into a pile of jelly again but to John’s surprise, he masters it and stops walking, waiting. Sherlock points in the direction of the cafe, and they shuffle towards it, Wiggins slowly drying out until the handkerchief is a sodden wreck and Wiggins’ face is once more dispassionate.

Sherlock springs around with nervous energy, parking them at a table and fizzing around the counter after their order.

“How’s the void?” John asks, once Wiggins has finished wiping his plate clean with his toast. However excruciating his inner turmoil might be, it doesn’t seem to have killed off Billy’s appetite.

“Hurts,” Wiggins says. He stares at his plate for a moment and then just sighs, wiping his mouth. Sherlock drums his fingers on the tabletop.

“Merels?” Sherlock offers. Wiggins shrugs, uninterested. He toys with the napkin and then says in a small voice, “I’m tired.”

“Home,” John says, deciding for them both. Wiggins looks like he’s been up for three days straight, even without the red-rimmed eyes. He has a vague suspicion there’s a bit of Dutch Courage in Billy’s system.

“Come on, I’m taking you two home. We’ll put the telly on, make a cup of tea.” John drops money on the table to cover the bill and hustles them out onto the dirty road, brooking no argument. Wiggins slops along, scraping his feet on the tarmac, looking like a puppet with all his strings cut. John meets Sherlock’s worried eye over his head, and lifts his chin. On the fridge at home they’ve got all the phone numbers; John knows what to watch out for. Mrs. Hudson knows Billy and how to deal with young men with issues.

We’ve got this. It’ll be ok.

Sherlock turns his face back towards the road ahead as they climb the shallow slope towards the taxi rank.

“I’ve gotta get my skink,” Wiggins reminds them. He wobbles as John puts an arm around him.

“Alright,” John says, “Let’s go and get your lizard.”

With his free hand he gropes in mid-air until he manages to catch Sherlock’s sleeve and then spiders his fingers down the fabric right into the pocket to Sherlock’s hand.

Sherlock glances down in surprise.

And I’ve got you.

Sherlock tightens his fingers in reply, and holds on.

Back at Baker Street, there is a concerted effort to be normal. John turns the TV on in the background for them all to ignore. Sherlock starts pulling various books and files off his shelves as peace offerings and temptations, but rather than look at them, Wiggins sits on the floor and lets the toddler order him around.

John exhales as some of the tension eases, and busies himself with the endless regime of chores that they always seem to be scrabbling to keep up with, while keeping an eye on all three of them.

“Doing ok down there?” John asks, more than an hour later, leaning over the ironing board. Wiggins stacks another block and shrugs. The toddler has by this time wandered off to pester Sherlock, but Wiggins continues to stack and unstack her building blocks at the threshold between the living room and the kitchen.

“Still feel like shit?”

“Yeah.”

“Give it time,” John thuds the iron over a collar. “I’m aware that’s generic advice, but it does sometimes help to just... give yourself some space to feel like shit.”

Wiggins stacks blocks in silence, drawn into himself. Then he says, “It’s sort of... not nice, but I dunno. A sign maybe?”

“A sign of what?”

“Hard to say,” Wiggins stretches his legs out. “Just I don’t normally feel anything much, so feeling really shit is feeling something, I s’pose. The stuff I was on a lot before? Just kind of numbs you out.”

“Yeah,” John says slowly. The iron drifts over a sleeve. “I think I understand that.”

“Thanks. I ‘preciate all this,” Wiggins waves a block tiredly at the kitchen. “Big of you, what with you not liking me and all.”

John opens his mouth to argue, and then can’t. The lie sticks, but the funny thing is, he hadn’t recognised the resentment until Wiggins had said it out loud.

“It’s alright. I can’t blame you, not when I was the one helping the boss chug himself up to the eyeballs on-”

“Yes,” John says curtly, thudding the iron again on a wrinkle. “I admit, I like you better when you’re not helping Sherlock get coked up to the nines.”

“Sorry.... I know it wasn’t good. I’d say it wasn’t any of my fault but I’ve thought about it, and I probably would have cooked him shit without him twisting my arm, but you don’t really flippin’ think much anyway, when you’re high. Sorry about that.”

John rests the iron on the bench. “Did he beat you up?”

“Not really,” Wiggins allows. “Not like proper. You broke my wrist, anyway.”

“Sprained it.”

“I miss it,” Wiggins says. The back of his head meets the kitchen door with a dull thunk. “Fuck, I miss it rotten. It’s like... beautiful. Cooking drugs, I mean. I can make anything you want. Anything. Top quality; get it really pure, filtered, unadulterated class A’s. Just put some music on and spend the afternoon cooking up. Whenever I really, really wanted to; like when I was dying for a break from all this,” Billy gestures to himself, “she’d let me in the lab and I’d do samples for her. Boring, moron stuff, just pipetting gunk into tubes, but it was something. I miss it. Only thing I was ever good at.”

“Can’t you just make things that aren’t drugs?” John asks, knowing the question is naive.

“Can’t get hired nowhere. No one wants a chemist who can’t be trusted. I was going to be a pharmacist once. Or a teacher in a university. Or a college, maybe. Make sure little squits like me got a good education and all that. Buggered that right up.”

John puts down the iron. “I didn’t know.”

“Course not. It’s not about you, is it? Not everything in the world is about John bloody Watson and what he knows and is having his own crisis over.”

John grits his teeth. “Don’t get shitty with me.”

“Well, you’re an egotist,” Billy diagnoses succinctly. In the living room, Bee is yet again telling Sherlock off. “No! Not *your* drink, Daddy. It’s not *yours*. It’s *Mine*.”

“All three of you.”

“Well, we’re all you’ve got,” John points out. “So you’ll just have to make do.” He looks down on Wiggins over the edge of the ironing board. “Is that what you’re saying, anyway? You want to cook something, now?”

“God yeah.”

“Does it have to be chemistry?”

“How d’you mean?”

“I don’t know.” There’s the ever present shopping list pinned to the fridge that looms up in John’s mind. He says, flippantly, “We’re out of jam and fish fingers, and we need something for dinner tonight. How about actual cooking?”

Wiggins grunts and sits still for so long that John thinks the idea has been taken as an insult and deservedly left by the wayside, but then Billy gets up and goes to pick through their scant selection of cookery books. He come back with two and balances them on his knee, waiting for John to finish the ironing. When John does, Wiggins silently closes the door on on them all in the living room, and an ominous clattering starts up.

“I’m not sure he’s that alright,” John comments, dropping the clean shirts on the sofa and putting them on hangers. Sherlock eyes the kitchen door and hums in agreement.

Sherlock opens his mouth to comment when the door opens to show Billy plastered with flour. He growls, “You need more sugar!” before thumping it shut again and loudly mixing something with the hand blender.

“Right. Well. I’ll go borrow some from the neighbours, shall I?” John says, raising his eyebrows at Sherlock. Sherlock nods once, clipped.

“I will be one hour,” John says, swinging on his jacket. “One.” He lowers his voice. “Anything happens, call me. Promise.”

“I’ll call,” Sherlock promises, relieved. Before John leaves, he mouths, ‘not hospital’.

John nods back in agreement, and leaves to see what can be done.

All is not well when he returns. Bee is sitting on the sofa, looking highly perplexed, eating a picnic lunch, and Sherlock is fretting around the living room. He gestures to John to keep quiet, and then mimes on no uncertain terms not to enter the kitchen.

“I spoke to his mentor,” John says in a whisper. “And I’ve got the bloody sugar. What’s happening?”

“Mrs. Hudson,” Sherlock mouths back, and when John looks, he realises there are two people in the kitchen now, which is quieter, but much more tense.

“What’s going on in there?”

“Pastry,” Sherlock says, in a voice that most people use to conclude ghost stories. At any rate, John can hear Mrs. Hudson talking in firm, low undertones, interjected by unintelligible noise from Wiggins.

John gives up and leaves the shopping on the coffee table. He wipes Bee free of crumbs and puts her down for her nap, tidies the living room, and then sits with Sherlock, awkwardly eavesdropping.

“Well?” he asks, unable to make anything of the noises.

“Not sure,” Sherlock concludes. He has tried sneaking up to the door to listen better, only for Mrs. Hudson to pop out like she’s been spring-wound and tell him to ‘Shoo!’.

“It’s our flat!” Sherlock complains, but there’s nothing to be done, other than appeal for them not to hold the kettle to ransom while they work out whatever it is they’re working out in there.

It takes time. Bee has woken from her nap and John is starting to get concerned about dinner, when the door finally opens, and Wiggins steps out, looking even more tired than usual. “Sorry,” he says, and then at once turns and walks away down the stairs to the front door. Mrs. Hudson follows, unrolling her sleeves with a sigh.

“He’s agreed he needs to go somewhere for a while,” she reports, “Until he has sorted his head out properly.”

“Go where? Rehab won’t take him, not unless he’s lapsed,” John says. “I was out trying to arrange that.”

“There’s a place,” she says, holding a hand up. “We made a call, it is all organised.” She exhales. “A week’s retreat out of London will do him the world of good. I think we all could,” she adds, under her breath.

“Does he need any help?” John asks. He wonders who she called, and then guesses she probably

cut corners and twisted Mycroft's ear off.

"Oh, plenty. But for the moment, someone to go and make sure he packs a bag properly is about the most he needs. I've had enough for one day."

"I'll go," John says, stopping Sherlock before he can offer. "You stay here; get Mrs. Hudson some dinner."

Look, she needs you.

Sherlock hesitates, but Mrs. Hudson really does look worn out. "Doctor Watson," he agrees and John nods. Someone not so close. A helper less emotionally compromised, but not a stranger.

Billy is still waiting for a cab outside; like John, he seems to be ignored by the drivers, who just roll passed without looking. In the end, John goes with him on the bus.

"Sorry," Wiggins says again, after a long silence.

"Don't worry about it," John answers. "What are friends for?"

London is empty in these weeks of autumn. John rings Lestrade to see if he can provide anything to fill the gap left by Molly's absence, only to remember that Lestrade is in the south of France with his daughter, and won't be back for two weeks. The tank in the corner of the room sits like a guilty reminder of Wiggins, who by all accounts has settled into the retreat well. The sudden distance between friends weighs on everyone's minds. Worse, the weather wavers obnoxiously between autumnal cold and sudden hot spells that make even Mrs. Hudson irritable.

"Would you like to go away again?" John's leaning on the back of his armchair, the nail of his left thumb pressed against his front teeth.

"Would I leave?" Sherlock is flummoxed by the unexpected question.

"Only for a weekend," John says hastily "You and me, and Bee, like a holiday."

"Oh."

"Since Molly's gone and Lestrade's off as well, and we've got no cases. Mrs. Hudson could do with a break from us, maybe." He meets her eye and she knows he's not inviting her on this weekend trip, and understands why. Frankly, she's fit to raise a hallelujah over it.

"It's been a while since I saw my sister," she thinks out loud. "And she might like to see London."

"Go away?" Sherlock mulls it over. He considers the fact that if Mrs. Hudson has her sister here, the house will be loud with the gossip of old women, and he'll have to be polite even if she's annoying. Maybe it's also still something stirring in the blood from visiting Aunt Lydia's farm, but he's not wholly opposed to the idea of ditching Baker Street for a weekend.

"Just for a couple of days," John urges.

"My choice of destination?"

"If you want," John offers, pleased he's even thinking about it. "Anywhere's fine."

“Anywhere?”

“Anywhere we can take Bee.”

“Anywhere...” Sherlock is sat on the floor, legs splayed, mind whirring. He reminds John of Mr. Toad sitting in the road having seen the motorcar; he has the same dazed expression. The thought makes John grin.

“Why are you looking so daft?” Sherlock asks, popping John’s bubble of thought.

“I was thinking about Ratty and Moley, living in their hole.”

“Fugitives?”

“They whacked a few stoats, I think,” John says. “They’re children’s book characters, Sherlock.”

Sherlock sweeps up from the floor, his dressing gown billowing like a matador’s cape. “Boring, please go and be useless somewhere else. I have things to plan.”

“Charming,” John says. “Where are we going then?”

Sherlock smiles, bright and sharp, “Wait and see,” is all he’ll say.

They leave mid-week, not even willing to wait for the weekend. Mrs. Hudson waves them off at the door, left to the pleasures of 221 by herself, except for the skink, which will be left for her and her sister to fight over having to deal with the poor creature.

“Where are we going?” John asks, raring to go. Bee catches onto his mood and is equally fizzy, making it hard to strap her into the car seat.

“Away,” Sherlock says, slamming the doors.

“Are we nearly there yet?”

“We’ve not even left the road!”

John laughs, and amuses himself by passing sweets around the car and annoying Sherlock with ludicrous guesses until, despairing, Sherlock launches into one of his lectures and by sheer doggedness, reduces John to listening.

“Brighton?” John asks, as they spin out of London on the south circular.

“No. As I was saying, the precipitate collects in numerous layers, providing indication...”

John chuckles, and settles down to watch the scenery blow by. Sherlock keeps the nose of the car south, and as John suspects, they spring out of Greater London on the road to the coast, and Sherlock turns east. They squabble over the last of the jelly bears, and John passes the iPad back to Bee so she can watch 2 episodes of Peppa Pig and play her new favourite; a song list containing nothing but brain-rotting songs about transport.

“She likes trucks,” John says, trying to convince her to play The Wheels on the Bus for once as a welcome respite from the big truck song. “She gets that from you.”

“She’s a good girl,” Sherlock agrees, and speeds through the High Weald all the way down to

Camber.

With the exception of Dover, John has never been to the southeast coast before in his life. Sherlock drives without even consulting the GPS; however, that's no real give away. He might have just memorised the route.

They pull up around noon outside of a cottage. "Is this yours?" John asks, as Sherlock pulls the keys from his pocket and unlocks the door.

"It's a holiday home," Sherlock says, and when John takes this at face value, adds, "I... rented it."

"Ah, right."

"Why would I own it?"

"Listen," John says, helping Bee out of the car. "If anyone has a secret house that they just 'forgot' to mention, it would be you. I mean, you won a fake house in a game of poker. Who knows what else you have."

Sherlock has no argument for this. Especially not as technically he has access to a time-share in Switzerland. He's never been there, but the fact remains. "Hmm," he says, and lugs in all the suitcases instead.

"Two rooms," John notes, once they're inside.

"Opposite ends of the house. I brought the baby monitors."

"Right," John says, looking at the thickness of the wall between the living space and the kitchen. It's roughly the width of his own body. "Old place, this."

"Pretty old." Sherlock stands there, processing. This hadn't actually been included in the criteria for choosing the cottage, but he has to admit, it's a substantial bonus. "Hmm."

"Hmm," John agrees. "Anything to do around here of an evening?"

"Pretty quiet," Sherlock comments, opening Bee's suitcase so she can get at her toys. "There's a beach."

"Nice."

"And it's not so far to Hastings."

"Hmm," John says, thoughtfully. "Maybe tomorrow."

"Papa! Read this one!" He takes the book from his daughter and flicks it open. "Alright," he agrees, "One story, and a snack, and then we'll go out."

Sherlock straightens from the cases, eyebrows raised.

"You said there was a beach," John says. "So, let's take her to the beach."

Camber Sands is an aptly named location. The dunes lie in hillocks up and down the western end

of the beach, crowned with tussocky grass. It being late in the season, they largely have the place to themselves, although the warmth has brought out a few locals. From the road, they can see people kite-surfing at the other end of the beach, the bright balloons of their kites seeming to drift slowly as the black dots of the surfers whizz about underneath.

“That could be fun,” John comments.

They pick their way through the dunes where the beach lies in a broad swathe before them. The tide is out. Sherlock has already pointed out the most interesting features of the place, which includes shipwrecks, rip tides, not to mention the topographical circumstances required to form quicksand. “Still, it’s quite a nice deathtrap,” is John’s conclusion to all this.

And it is pleasant out; the sun is riding high and out of the wind, it’s warm.

“I want the twuck song, Daddy,” Bee calls, over her shoulder.

“Play the truck song for her,” John asks. She’s been repeating the same question since they left the house. It’s getting irritating. “You can have the truck song once, and then we’re going to play on the beach.”

“I haven’t got any signal and I don’t remember the tune,” Sherlock lies. He hates the truck song. It’s poses the question ‘are there trucks on Mars,’ which he knows to be scientifically improbable and considers it an insult to better songs with questions about what is on Mars. He has never mentioned this latter issue to John, rightly fearing he would never live it down.

“Bee likes the truck song, You could sing it,” John suggests, knowing Sherlock would rather chew his own fingers off.

“I like the twuck song, Daddy!”

“Bee has questionable tastes. I love her, but she eats her own snot.”

“You put yours under the microscope,” John argues back. He lifts Bee up over his head, sitting her on his shoulders facing the sea. He croons the ditty of the song, and it makes Sherlock’s heart go pitter-pat even though it is not a very accurate rendition.

“There are many kinds of trucks. They go on adventures from here to there,” John sings, bouncing down the beach path. Bee jogs on his shoulders, laughing hysterically. “I like big trucks.”

John turns and grooves back up the path again, to Sherlock’s brain’s embarrassment and his lower half’s unexpected delight. “Y’like big trucks,” John growls, half laughing with a gleam in his eye full of innuendo, and Sherlock’s lower half is not just delighted but about to get downright unruly.

“Stop that,” he says to all of them, trying to sidle past. “Behave.”

“Trucks have big motors, they go vroom vroom vroom,” John says, behind him. Sherlock raises his eyes to the sky and strides off ahead. The ocean looks nice and cold this time of year.

“I like big twucks!” Bee yells.

‘Not as much as I do,’ Sherlock thinks with regret and he plunges down the scant remainder of the path to the beach.

There's a sheltered spot where the dunes throw back the sunshine and make it almost hot. Bee treads experimentally in the sand, thrusts a handful into her mouth and then cries. Sherlock rinses her out and shows her the plastic bucket and spade and how the one can be rattled inside the other to make a loud and irritating noise, and she cheers right up.

"So much for peace and quiet," John comments. He throws himself down on a towel and watches the shore. He rubs the sand between his feet and then pushes a pair of sunglasses onto his nose, which Sherlock has never seen before.

They look ridiculous; all macho-macho and security forces, completely opaque so that he can't see John's eyes.

Sherlock squints at the sun, regretting not having any himself. "Would you have ever worked security," he asks.

John turns the glasses towards him, inscrutably sexy. "Never thought about it. Why?"

"Idle curiosity."

"Maybe a bouncer," John concludes. "Not a bodyguard. I could handle being shot at, but I couldn't stand all those rich snobs."

"As I thought," Sherlock says, thrilled.

John is amused by his reaction. "You alright?"

"Fine."

"You're wriggling around."

"Restless energy. It's hot. This weather is preposterous- it's October."

"It's warm," John agrees. He tips his head back, exposing his throat to the sky and Sherlock wants to grab him by the scruff of his t-shirt and do something, God knows what. It's the heat and all this talk of thick walls and unexpected sunglasses affecting his brain. People aren't designed to look into someone else's eyes and see their own warped face looking back at them. Trust John to be oblivious of this.

'He is oblivious, isn't he?' Sherlock wonders.

"What did you say the shipwrecks were?"

Relieved for the chance to divert his thoughts, Sherlock expounds at such length on the subject until not only is the topic exhausted but his mouth is dry and John's stopped listening in order to entertain Bee. They are comparing seashells.

"...And that's why qanats exist in so many places."

"Mm," John says. He digs in the bag for more toys. "Did we leave the ball at the house?"

"It's in there," Sherlock answers, getting up.

"Sorry," John says, as Bee clamours for the plastic crab mould he has in his hand. "I was listening. Kind of. Not really. Ok, Bee, here, stop clawing my hand."

"My crab!"

“Crabbie-crab. Where are you going to put him.”

“Umm... by my seahorse!”

“I’m going for a walk,” Sherlock says, bowing to kiss her head.

“Go,” John says, his lap inundated with plastic sea animals with googly eyes. “Be free.”

“Where’s Daddy going?” Bee asks, her pigtails bobbing as she looks up at him.

“For a walk,” Sherlock answers, moving so that his shoulders shade her little face. She grins through sand-speckled lips.

“To ca- to catch a fish?”

“I don’t have a net.”

“Oh. Boring. Bye Daddy.”

“Where does she get that from, I wonder,” John groans. “Well, we won’t go anywhere. Have you got your phone?”

Sherlock taps his shirt pocket. John nudges his ankles, leaning back on his elbow. “See you in a bit,” he promises. The sunglasses flash. Sherlock hastily pushes his hands into his pockets and walks off, the sweat prickling on the back of his neck along with the feel of John’s eyes following him.

He does not go all that far. He follows the curve of the dune a few hundred yards and then turns his back to the sea. The dunes rear before him.

Sherlock scrabbles up the nearest one, knocking sand loose under his toes. He grunts without meaning to, and is transported back decades to doing this as a boy, grabbing fistfuls of seashore grass to pull himself to the top. The climb is much shorter these days, but feels steeper.

At the top he stands, panting. John and Bee are hidden by the wall of dunes, and the roar of the sea washes away their voices. He is very nearly alone under the roof of the sky. The sea bucks before him, grey-blue and beautiful. A lizard skips through the grass as he throws himself down into the sand, and he stares out at the horizon, imagining.

He lies still, belly warming from the ground, and watches the patterns the waves make between the spindles of grass. The leaves bow to the wind, and with each blink he breathes in salt and earth. Sherlock rests his head in his arms, and relives that old fantasy of a ship in full billows, marching to the wild beyond; the first love of his life calling in the creak of the sails and the whispering rush of the brine beneath the prow.

He digs his fingers into the soil, caressing the long leaves of the sea pinks as they bob in the air above his head. Turning his head, he presses his ear to the crook of his elbow and listens to the hollow sound there. The sand is so many colours: speckles of black and Demerara sugar brown, carrot orange, ashen grey, all mixed up with the dusty clay of old plant matter. Coastal clay.

Something drones by his ear. He squints open one eye and observes the creature visiting the sea pinks. The bumblebee is selective. It closes in on and retreats from one little trumpet in the cluster after another. Sherlock rolls onto his back to track its progress, and it alights after some

consideration on a flower head. The abdomen pumps with busy service to the flower, the nose buried into the cone, and the whole stem of the flower bends under the bee's weight. Then it buzzes, picks itself up into the air, and is gone.

Sherlock sits up.

It is quiet. Bee's voice comes and goes with the fickle wind, now near and now far away. Sherlock sits, legs crossed, the fabric of his trousers warm between his knees and his hands, and it is quiet.

It is an acceptable quiet. It is not a quiet that frustrates him, or bores him. He cannot stop his own ability to collect the sensory minutiae of his surroundings, but it does not irritate him. It feels like background noise; an organic wash of information that passes him by with no more intrusion than the caress of the waves on the shore.

When he inhales deeply, he feels the tiny stickiness in his lungs that comes from too much smoking and surgery. He no longer possesses the body he once had.

'I'm thirty-seven,' Sherlock thinks with faint praise of himself. 'And still alive.'

This is not a thought he can rush past. Truth be told, he'd not expected to make thirty-five at the most. At twenty, he'd thought that beyond thirty was old and done for; territory scarcely to be imagined. He'd had no ability to plan that far forward in his life.

He'd once entertained a vague hope that he would die at twenty-seven, so as to be in good company, or failing that, perhaps thirty-three. And then cynicism had drowned both ideas because what did it matter when you died? It certainly wouldn't matter to him once he was gone. The 'how' had mattered more. As long as it wasn't painful.

'If I died now,' Sherlock thinks, and the idea closes his throat for him, somehow choking the thought in his brain as well.

'No,' is all that struggles out.

No.

Not now. To die now would be a waste. It would be a shame. It would...it is sad and upsetting. It makes him angry; his life has no business ending so soon, and thinking this in itself makes him stop, because-

'How often have I wanted it all so much?' he thinks, dazzled by the sun.

He can taste the salt on his lips from the air and his own sweat, and it's good. His leg aches and it's good, and his head is hot from the bright, messy weather and it's wonderful to be inconvenienced by living. He hugs the feeling close.

The tops of his knees smell dusty, and he breathes in the smell of his own forearm, salty and human and pleasing. His fingertips dabble down the firm bones of his shin to his bare feet. They are remarkably attached to him and ache when he presses the ball of his thumb into his arches. He is curious to note that there are hairs on his toes, which he has barely ever paid attention to before. Yet there they are, existing, doing whatever it is they are supposed to do down there without a by-your-leave.

Curious, he pushes the hairs upwards and feels the polite complaining prickle at their roots. They've been lying flat forever. It's a sensation he can't recall ever feeling before. And it's his own body at that. Incredible. 'What else don't I know?' Sherlock wonders, shocked at himself.

‘What else have I missed out on by not caring?’

He checks. The freckles on his arms are unexpected strangers to him, except the big one on the cusp of his armpit, which is darker and more repugnant than the others. It has always offended him. The others are myriad in their colours and textures. He notes that on his calf, four form a near-perfect square, if you forgive the one that’s ever so slightly slanted. Sherlock rather wants to forgive it. He wants to point it out to John and say, ‘look, a square,’ just to see if John looks at him like he’s mad or says ‘I know, I’ve seen it.’

John.

He tilts his head and listens, and yes, he can just hear John’s voice on the air. Eyes closed, he impresses it all into his memory; the feel of the stones against the bones of his seat, the cooler air snatching through the sunshine on his face and the feeling of being all in one piece and content to be so.

‘I’ll come back here,’ Sherlock thinks, ‘Next time I need to.’ To a comfortable place where John and Bee are just around the corner, playing a game in the sand and waiting for him. In his mind, he blinks and down the end of the beach by the kite-surfers he populates a cafe. It’s not a thought, just an instinct; something interior in his mind that recognises that it isn’t only John and his daughter who lie within his reach. the others are similarly nearby.

Oblivious to Sherlock’s telescopic gaze, Lestrade props a bare foot up on his own knee, bared in a pair of ugly old shorts, and turns the page of his sports paper. Sherlock furnishes him with a coffee that will gently steam forever in his imagination, and likewise, does not imagine any cigarettes.

To the east, he finds her, the toes of her sandals pressed into the sand, the wind blowing her ponytail towards the shore. She has both hands in the pockets of a yellow rainmac that seems too big for her, gazing out at the same great horizon. She has been with him on his walk and wandered just a little way away to think.

Mrs. Hudson? In the cottage of course, on the landward-side. He gives her the cottage garden and a telephone. In his mind, he can hear her enjoying her conversation. It doesn’t matter who she’s speaking to.

On a new promontory of unlikely rock, Sherlock builds a lighthouse, and without going inside of it, puts Mycroft there. At night, his mind supplies, when the café closes, Lestrade will go there too in order to light the lamp. The door will close and the lights around the bottom by the living quarters will be warm. He can live with that; with Lestrade crossing his beach.

He opens his eyes, keeping his other people like dolls in his pocket. Later, at home, he’ll keep building as he determines where they should be. There will be a merels board in the cafe, he’s certain. His foot has gone numb and his scalp feels tender. He’s been sitting here for a long while. Even as he realises this, his phone beeps.

Missed messages.

[How are you getting on?]

[Thinking about snacks soon]

[U coming back?]

He types back a message and gets up, shaking the deadness from his legs.

[Be there soon- SH]

John is sprawled out on his stomach, helping Bee to dig a hole to Australia when Sherlock gets back. She screams and dances in the hole, brandishing her spade as John scoops more sand out around her feet.

“Hello,” he grins as Sherlock approaches and then grimaces. “You’ve caught the sun.”

Sherlock feels at the bridge of his nose and is surprised to find that it’s tender to the touch. John chuckles. “Lose track of time?”

“Somewhat.”

“There’s some suncream in the bag.” John hops up, shaking the sand off to fetch it. Sherlock takes his place at the edge of the hole. The bottom of it is damp and cool. Bee leans on his knees, grinning, hugging his legs. It’s even hotter in the sun trap at the foot of the cliff now.

“Here.” John passes him the tube of suncream, and Sherlock daubs some on Bee’s scrunched up face before wiping it over his own. It’s not just his nose, his ears feel burned as well. He supposes that will go some way to disguising his blushes at least.

John rubs his shoulders and holds out his hand for Sherlock to squirt some lotion in to it, which he slaps on the back of his neck. He plucks at his t-shirt where it clings to his back and Sherlock watches as, with heavy deliberation, John slowly pulls it off.

He’s pink and white underneath.

John scratches his back self-consciously, and waits until Sherlock is at least pretending that he’s not staring before smearing suncream as best he can around his bared flesh. Bee clambers out the hole, staring enough for a whole army of people.

“Papa!” She is faintly concerned, as well she might be. Like Sherlock, she’s never seen John in a public place in any degree of undress more than unbuttoning the collar of his shirt. “What doing, Papa?”

“It’s hot,” John says. “You’ve got your swimmers on. I might go for a swim,” he adds for Sherlock’s benefit. Sherlock does not say anything. “Do you want to paddle, sweetheart?”

“No! I’ve gotta do a big sambedcastle.”

“Alright, stay with daddy then.”

John heaves himself up and plops her into Sherlock’s reach, not looking him in the eye, and then he treads away down the beach. He does not really want to swim; it’s going to be bloody freezing, but he’s started now and so he’s going, hand twitching all the way.

Sherlock blindly passes Bee her bucket, and feels proud of John, and rather bothered. John has a freckle on the button of one vertebrae, right in the middle of his back, and another oval mark like a smudge of gravy riding low and faded above his kidneys; a worn out birthmark. Sherlock wonders again if he were to point these out, John would be surprised or if he already knows. He wonders what John’s face would do if he points out that John is handsome.

Or, more precisely, if he makes a point of saying that he finds John handsome. That it is a

completely arbitrary assessment of the general arrangement of a person's facial features, but that nonetheless, to Sherlock's eye, John has scored well.

If it were safe to leave Bee, he might make a point of chasing John down the beach, maybe throw off all his own clothes - who cares? What's the fuss about? Get naked. Yards away John hitches his swimsuit, one arm held coyly around his middle. All these stupid little issues people find to throw themselves on.

But underneath all these thoughts, Sherlock's still proud.

John blunders into the water. He stoops to cup water into his hand, splashing it up his belly, wincing at the cold. He wades out until he is thigh deep and then falls forward into the water, surfacing a moment later shaking his head. Then he's off, suddenly confident again. His arms flash whitely as they arc and disappear. He's a good swimmer, Sherlock notes. He doesn't swim very fast, but he gives the impression that he could keep it up for a long time.

"Daddy!" Bee smacks his shin with her spade trying to climb onto his lap and Sherlock turns his attention to her upturned moon face. She grins. "Do this, daddy!"

He kneels to help her fill the bucket, one laboured scoop at a time, and he builds the sandcastle. The edges crumble as they dry. He uses his hand to dig a moat and continues to line the drawbridge with pebbles long after Bee has lost interest. She sits in his shadow, pulling seaweed to pieces and harassing the sand hoppers. He lets her bury his feet, wiggling his toes up as soon as she's finished patting it all down so that she squeals.

It's a wonderful afternoon.

John returns in due course, dripping and breathless all the way back to them. The backs of his thighs have gone pink with sunburn where his shorts have ridden up; sand sticks to his skin from his feet to his knees. The hair of John's armpits hangs straight when it's wet, whilst the hair low on his belly curls up. He puckers his mouth from the salt that leaks into it, and Sherlock's tongue goes dry in sympathy.

He reaches a goose-pimpled arm past Sherlock and shakes his towel off the beach and scrubs at his body.

"It's good," he reports, flashing a sudden smile. His hair is a mess.

The water from John's body drips onto Sherlock's sleeve; John's feet push sand up Sherlock's trouser leg as he moves around to take a bottle of water from the bag at Sherlock's elbow. He drinks, tipping his head back, but still glancing down. Finally, John laughs a tiny laugh. "Cross your legs," he mutters, and buries his grin in his towel.

Sherlock sits up, leaning forward over his knees. "I'm not."

John chuckles behind him, and sits. He says nothing, but instead peels fruit from the bag. "Bee, do you want some apple?"

She leans on John's shin like it's the sofa at home and takes a wedge in a sandy fist. John wiggles another in front of Sherlock's sulk. He takes it. The flesh is crisp and dewy when he bites into it. He chews his mouthfuls to paste and it helps with the dryness in his mouth.

"Water," John says, nudging him with the bottle.

They alternate swigs. John wriggles back into his t-shirt, making it damp down the back where his

hair still bleeds water. His clammy skin rucks it up around his front. They take other bites to eat from the bag. Sherlock peels a tiny cheese for Bee and licks the salt from his fingers.

“Nectarine?” John offers. The fruit is soft to the touch and when cut in half leaks juice onto their hands. Sherlock sucks the flesh from the stone and flings it into the sandpit. He leans across to take the wet wipes from the bag and in doing so leans too close into John’s space not to kiss him.

“Mm, hello,” John says, between kisses. “This is very nice.”

“Shut up,” Sherlock replies, and keeps John busy until a small voice says, pointedly, “Ah?”

John looks down to see that Bee is giving them a funny look, sucking on the cheese in her mouth and frowning.

“The fun police are on to us,” he whispers in Sherlock’s ear.

“They have to sleep at some point,” Sherlock points out. John laughs.

“Hmm,” Bee says with deep suspicion. “I not sleep.”

John creases up, “I think,” he says, still chuckling his head off, “I’m going to be a really disreputable dad on holidays, c’mere.”

He pulls Sherlock into a wet snog that makes Sherlock think that holidays, boring or not, are worth the trouble. The kiss doesn’t last long, if only because Bee is still watching, eyes on stalks. “More of that later,” John promises.

“Later.”

“Definitely.”

They disentangle and John scoops Bee up with a playful roar, which she loves. “What are you up to, my girl? Hmmm, what’s this? I think someone’s got jelly bear ears.”

“Nooooo,” she howls, laughing wildly as John pretends to eat her head.

They finish up the afternoon by taking Bee for a paddle. Sherlock rolls up the cuffs of his trousers and lifts her over the surf, just skimming her toes, before fun dissolves into tiredness and tears. Sherlock props her on his hip while John packs the bag up.

On the way back to the car, John comments, “You took your time.”

“How?”

“Making eyes at me all morning.” John elbows him. “Keeping me waiting.”

Sherlock nearly chokes on his own spit. “You could have,” he protests.

“Yeah, but...” John trails off. The damned sunglasses stop Sherlock from fully guessing what it is he’s remembering. In fact, it’s the door of 221B and how it had felt pressed against his back that one time after they’d had dinner. “I didn’t think you’d hang back so much.”

Sherlock shifts Bee’s weight on his hip and considers. “Hmm. Is this broad-brush permission to kiss you when I want?”

“If you need that.”

“Anywhere?”

“You can kiss me anywhere.”

“Anywhere?” Sherlock muses, considering the breadth of the statement. “Anywhere I want?”

“Anywhere,” John agrees. “Within reason. Preferably not over a corpse or in front of journalists.”

“In the kitchen.”

John laughs, “Yeah. I mean, you already do, but...”

“On the toilet.”

John’s laugh becomes explosive with surprise. “What? Why do you want to kiss me on the toilet?!”

“I don’t, I’m just testing the limits of the theory. I’m not going to kiss you while you’re on the toilet. You can’t multitask.”

“Rude.”

He opens the door to the cottage and they step inside the cool cave of the kitchen there. Before he puts Bee down, Sherlock tests the theory in physical terms, very quickly. John smiles with his eyes.

They converge in the bathroom, hosing off the worst of the salt and the sand and swapping out greasy t-shirts for fresh ones. Bee twirls a wobbly dance in her sundress, snuggled into a cardigan. It’s cooler inside the house. She refuses to nap and they don’t try and force it.

Sherlock takes her for a slow amble around the garden instead, pleased to find another solitary bee exploring the knots of an old tree. Bee is less impressed, but she sits tolerantly on the step and talks to Elbant while Daddy is weird about insects and that’s a kind of love all in its own right.

When they come back in, John is waiting, the kettle rattling. He leans on the kitchen counter, his arms loosely crossed against his middle.

“On the back of the neck,” Sherlock suggests.

John’s tongue dabs at his lower lip. “Sure.”

“On the knees.”

John laughs again, snubbing his nose with the back of his hand, a little shy and soft at the notion. He squares up slightly, interested, even though his eyes are warm and he’s wearing that particular expression that says so clearly, ‘you ridiculous fool, I love you.’

He stands there, beckoning Sherlock into his space with his whole body. Sherlock moves into it slowly, reaching for him. It’s so serious it makes John grin.

“I think I like kissing you when you’re laughing,” Sherlock says, breath hitching as John’s hand finds the small of his back under his shirt.

“How about when I’m angry?”

“Is that safe?”

“No,” John answers, his lips brushing Sherlock’s earlobe. “No, that’s not safe at all. Fun though, sometimes.”

He uses the kitchen counter as a prop to push up off, lifting his head up into the kiss. Sherlock closes his eyes and breathes him in, the smell of sunscreen and ozone. One of John’s hands delves into his back pocket, disturbing the car keys and Sherlock’s ability to stand up properly. He grasps the counter and the back of John’s neck.

It’s a lovely, warm way to kiss.

The corner of the iPad digs insistently into Sherlock’s buttock and a small hand tugs on his trouser leg.

“Yes?”

She eyeballs him. “I want to see Peppa.”

“You can have one Peppa,” John says, eyes on the ceiling as the kettle clicks off. He adds, under his breath, “And early to bed.” He tips up the kettle, emptying it into the teapot.

Through the steam, Sherlock grins.

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The cottage kitchen is chilly out of the sun. John throws open all the windows and turns on the radio while making dinner. The sunset is a blaze behind the garden wall, and it paints John gold and orange. He ferries things out to the garden where the barbecue spits out clouds of smoke and ash.

They eat inside, shoving sausages into buns and picking at the salad with their fingers. Over the top of Bee’s head they swap secrets. It is the most dizzyingly normal thing they have ever done. Afterwards, they win the battle of bedtime with two showings of Room on the Broom and chocolate button bribery, which is allowed because, after all, they are on holiday.

And the main thing is, it convinces Bee to sleep in her own room.

After that, night falls, and it is quiet. John pulls on a jumper and opens the French windows for the air, tipping the end of the bottle of wine into their glasses. “Cheers,” he says.

The sea still rushes back and forth beyond the garden and the dunes. John takes himself off on a small errand, and when he returns, Sherlock is still stood at the windows looking out.

“Nice night,” John says.

“Yes.”

John strokes Sherlock’s arm with his fingertips, and then toting his wine glass, steps out of the cottage into the garden. Sherlock watches him amble down the path until he is just a silhouette, and then follows him.

“Did you close the door?”

“Put it to,” Sherlock says. The night air has a bite to it; the temperature is far colder than in the daytime, though the wine helps. John drains his glass and puts it down on the wall. “Want to go out?”

“Bee?”

“Baby monitor,” John reminds him. He pulls his phone out of his pocket. “I borrowed your phone. I can hear clear enough.”

Sherlock presses his ear to the phone and it’s true. The incoming call picks up the sound from the monitor quite well. In his mind’s eye, he traces John’s steps around the cottage, that he’d overheard while he’d been thinking of other things. One monitor by Bee, another in the living room, Sherlock’s phone laid beside it.

“Clever.”

“So, are you coming?”

It is pitch black away from the cottage. They move in silence, their footsteps muffled by the loud sighing of the water and the wind through the grasses. At high tide the sand is much reduced but there is still a sizeable portion of beach. The sandbars are covered, and the sea shows only as a myriad of glittering eyes crowded towards Hastings and a shifting grey line where the waves break as their eyes adjust to the moonlight.

John scuffs the sand with his shoe. The breeze teases Sherlock’s hair up at the back.

“Look at that,” John says, tipping his head back. The moon is a punch of light high above them, the sky freckled with stars and blotted with clouds. It grows momentarily darker as one drifts across the face of the moon and away again.

They walk a short way down the beach together, to the edge of the water. John dips a toe in, balancing on one leg. It is too tempting not to push him.

John’s foot lands with a splat, no harm done, other than to make him take his hands from his pockets and retaliate. Sherlock fends him off, backing up the beach, catching his hands. They push at each other, John laughing.

“I’m going to get you.”

“No, you won’t.”

“I’m going to make you eat sand.”

Sherlock laughs, twists free and darts out of reach, checking to see if John is chasing him. He is. Unobserved, they pelt up and down and round in circles like a couple of fools.

“I’m winning,” John pants, overtaking him.

“What?”

“Race you!”

Sherlock has longer legs but more exhausted lungs. John thunders down the beach to the arbitrary goal of the edge of the dunes, Sherlock hot on his heels. He grabs the scruff of John’s neck to slow him down. “Cheating!” John cries, squirming free and rugby tackling him.

They go down in the cold sand with a thud, Sherlock roaring. “Off!” he capitulates. John rolls free, giggling madly, already rubbing at his shoulder.

“You’re heavy,” Sherlock complains, winded. John just giggles and then winces. “Oww.”

“Serves you right.”

“I’m too old for this,” John says, getting his breath back. He doesn’t mean it in the slightest.

They lie, propped on the dune facing the sea to recover, cold on the outside and warm on the inside. John shuffles closer to get comfortable, so that they are shoulder to shoulder. He heaves a sigh of contentment, and takes a moment to just admire the night sky. The clouds shift around like ink in water, pushed out to sea by winds higher up. He finds Orion’s Belt with Betelgeuse winking at the hunter’s shoulder. He squints to trace the stars east to Gemini. Castor and Pollox are faint as they are, drenched in moonlight, and then a cloud slips over them and he looks away.

Sherlock is looking out at the water again, eyes fixed on something far away. John follows his gaze but there’s nothing really there except the faint lights out to sea that could be anything, and the glitter of Hastings.

“I forgot I used to do this,” Sherlock says, wonderingly. “As a boy.”

“Do what?”

“Be.”

At his side, John shifts closer, their legs bumping. Slowly, John closes him in half of a loose embrace. Sherlock leans his weight against him.

“Perhaps this is how Mycroft does it.”

“Does what?”

“Sit. Doing nothing. Without all of the noise. Usually I’m a dozen paces ahead of my body, or the other way around.”

“And now?” John asks.

In reply, Sherlock makes a motion towards the sea, smooth, like something flying.

“Like sailing.”

“Yes,” Sherlock says, eyebrows lifting. “Like sailing.”

They lapse back into a comfortable silence, watching the sea rush the sand, rocking faintly to the sound of it. Just being. John lays his hand over Sherlock’s, warm against the cool sand, and they breathe the night air in synch. Sherlock leans into him, the tension gone from his body for once, his limbs feeling pleasantly elastic.

“I’m glad we did this,” John says. “I can’t think of anything that could make this better than it already is. Not even a case, I’m afraid.”

“A corpse might spoil the mood,” Sherlock agrees. “The promise of a case tomorrow?”

“I’ll do my best,” John answers. “I think we’ll go into Hastings tomorrow. See the boats. Get something to eat.”

“Shipwrecks.”

“If you like.”

John checks the phone on his pocket. It's difficult to hear anything from it, but there's no crying or anything that sounds like they need to hurry back. He tucks it away again. Sherlock shifts his weight at John's side and then clears his throat.

"I've thought of something."

"Oh? To make this better?"

"Yes." Awkwardly, Sherlock rises, brushing the sand from his backside. He turns, holding a hand out to John, oddly proper. Bemused, John takes it and lets him pull him to his feet.

"Have I-?" Another clearing of the throat. "Have I told you I like to dance?"

His fingers coax John to shamle closer. Close enough to put a hand on his shoulder. "Not in so many words," John says, "But I had a feeling."

"Ah, well..." Sherlock instigates a gentle swaying motion. "I don't suppose?"

"I think that'd be alright." John slides a hand round to the small of his back. "You're right. This is better."

"I'm quite clever," Sherlock confides. "I have these moments of genius."

"Flashes of inspiration."

"Exactly," Sherlock hums, rocking them round in a little circle. It's not much of a dance; John barely knows what to do with his feet but they two-step around to a pattern of their own devising, neither really leading the other, to music that only plays in Sherlock's imagination. Growing bolder, they add a little side-to-side shimmy that to any observer would look silly, and as they're both aware of this, they do it more and grin through the embarrassment.

"Think we'd give Fred Astaire a run for his money?"

"At the very least," Sherlock agrees. John's hand rather unprofessionally sneaks lower and further round his body, until he's got his hand somewhere that would get them disqualified from any dance competition. Not to be outdone, Sherlock steals his fingers into John's hair at the back of his neck, and pulls their linked hands in against his chest and so takes them from the two-step to the close-held sway of young love in the discotheque.

It stops feeling silly.

It's an experience Sherlock knows they will never, ever breathe a word of to anyone else, perhaps not even again to each other; one of those moments in life that can't be decanted into sentences without cheapening it. Besides, rising in Sherlock's memory is the notion that it has already been written for him.

They danced by the light of the moon, the moon...

'Too long have we tarried,' he agrees.

The moonlight washes away all the bolder colours and is kind to the fine lines around John's eyes. On the edge of the sand, they turn, heels dipping in the surf. Without a jacket or a jumper on, Sherlock is cold. John chafes his arms, feeling the goose-flesh underneath the fabric and then, hand in hand, they return to the cottage.

Neither of them moves to turn the lights on. The thump of the door closing is too loud.

When John looks at Sherlock again, he is blushing, but it's not embarrassment. When Sherlock is feeling humiliated, he blushes high on his cheeks, and up around the ears. This blush starts at his throat and seeps down across his chest, pinking over his collarbones until he is painted to his diaphragm. This is something else.

Bed, John says with his eyes.

After that, it's simple.

They've had a few chances to practice this since Chelmsford; bedtime kisses that have stretched into longer activities; mornings in the short lull between the alarm and the day, always hushed, always just enough until the next time. John reaches behind his head and pulls his jumper off, dropping it on the end of the sofa as they pass through the living room. In the corridor beyond it they pause against the wall, mouths together, John's fingers in Sherlock's belt hooks as Sherlock slips John's t-shirt half way up his torso. Like the jumper, he pulls it off over his head.

Muted, John laughs and brushes his hair back into place. Sherlock resolves to mess it up again as soon as he can. John's t-shirt is still warm in his hand. On impulse, he lifts it to his face and breathes.

"Oi," John says, fetching his chin out of the cloth and directing it back towards his kisses.

They trail the hem of the t-shirt along the floor as they progress down the hall, Sherlock pushing the door open with his heel and then the fabric slips from his fingers without a second thought.

The door swings on the weight of its own hinges behind them, nearly closed, leaving just a slash of light across the bed that Sherlock tips himself back into. He reaches out.

John steps into his reach, bare, tipping forward over him, his fingers slipping down the buttons of Sherlock's shirtfront, flicking them free of their buttonholes.

Sherlock's stomach hitches where John's fingertips nudge his skin, and each time it's like bouncing at the end of a bungee, only better.

"Ticklish?" John says, delighted. His eyes are gleaming.

"Shut up," Sherlock says, pulling him close by the back of the neck so they can sprawl out across this magnificent borrowed bed and make out like it's going out of fashion. Typical, of course, it's Sherlock who can't stop blabbing.

"I'm going to buy a cottage," he swears between gasping breaths. "Just for this. Sell that stupid facade. Sell my watch. Can you buy hotel rooms?"

"Shhhh!" John laughs against his mouth. He bites Sherlock's chin, which strikes Sherlock as a weird kind of lovely and distracts him from trying to remember if he ever solved any cases that benefitted any hotel managers who might now be feeling generous about it.

When Sherlock arches against his touch, John stops rushing. He wriggles out of his jeans, and inches Sherlock out of his, laughing when he finds that the pockets are full of sand. "You've got half the beach in your bum," John teases.

Sherlock simply cocks an eyebrow back at him.

He reaches back and turns on one of the bedside lights and sits up. "Never mind the sand," he says, peeling the trousers from John's hands and tossing them aside. "Come here."

John purses his lips and inhales, "Ooh, I don't think you want to start giving me orders. I'll get ideas."

"And?" Sherlock says carelessly, but his chest is rising and falling, and there's no mistaking his interest. He parts his knees slightly. John throbs.

He steps into the space between Sherlock's thighs at the edge of the bed, cups his face upwards and kisses him.

Sherlock wraps his fingers around John's cock, and it's perfect. John breaks the kiss to look down at him, pushing into the grasp of his fingers. Sherlock lifts his face up, expression a mix of calculation and determination that John loves and makes him smooth his thumb between Sherlock's brows.

He tucks Sherlock's curls behind his ears and closes his eyes. Sherlock tightens his fingers, letting his head tip back with a sigh.

"That's good."

"Hm," Sherlock says. The tip of his nose runs a line across John's chest. "Hmm."

John eases his hands down over Sherlock's shoulders and up again, swaying into his touch. He likes how, when he runs the edges of his fingernails over Sherlock's skin, through his hair, it makes the man shiver and roll his head back towards John's palm. His lip catches on the ball of John's thumb and the sharp colour of his eye under those dark lashes thrills him.

"Shift back," John says, easing free of Sherlock's hand though it's a wrench to do so. Sherlock doesn't just shift, he serpentine back across the bed, waiting, one knee and his chin up. When there's space, John follows, hand over hand. He grasps the other man by one hip and then the other and tugs; Sherlock falls back willingly off his elbows with a little huff, twisting his neck to grin into the pillow. John kisses the side of his knee.

Sherlock stretches, pretending to be languid even though his heart is beating hard and high and fast like a snare, folding his arms behind his head.

"Saucy," John chides, sliding his mouth from one knee to the other. He sighs down the very edge of Sherlock's inner thigh and then pauses, taking him in with his eyes, cheek rested on Sherlock's kneecap.

Sherlock half opens his mouth to say something; tease him back, ask him what he's thinking, ask him what he's waiting for, but he's curious to see where John's thoughts are taking him. Usually by now, they've gone past the foreplay to hands and grinding.

Instead, John's gaze flickers slowly from his navel to do a circuit of his torso and down. Absently, his nails run electric down the back of Sherlock's thigh in a caress.

Sherlock opens his mouth again to speak when John ducks his head and kisses the crease of his knee. Really kisses. It tickles; the slip of John's tongue into the chink between his thigh and his calf makes Sherlock's heel slip on the bedsheets, but John's hand is there on his shin, supporting his leg and then his mouth is moving lower.

He finds the edge of the muscle down the inside of his leg, mouths it, touches it barely with his

teeth in a way that sets Sherlock's spine on fire. John's other hand prowls welcomingly up around his other hip, covering it.

Down the length of his own body, Sherlock watches John's shoulders arching, the muscle in them, as he inches lower. His breath catches in his throat.

The first touch is so soft he's almost sure it's a trick of the mind, and then it happens again; the dab of John's tongue against the side of his cock and then it's certainly there in a slow slide against his skin and he really can't breathe.

Or he can, in shudders that catch his voice on the way out against his intention. He drops his head back into the pillows, lips against his skin moving up on one side, fingers on the other side gently drawing down.

He can't keep his eyes open, they flutter shut on him, making strobe lights over the ceiling. How can the human tongue be firm and so soft at the same time? He can feel it when John exhales, almost cool against the wet head.

"Easy," John says, very low. He presses Sherlock's hip. Sherlock hadn't even realised he'd been squirming. John doesn't wait for a reply, just nudges his fingers around the root of him, through the curls, and starts again.

The close of John's mouth around him seems to take all the strength from Sherlock's legs. John's hand pumps slowly. He leans forward, resting one forearm on Sherlock's hip and slipping the fingers of his other hand underneath to cup him.

Sherlock leans back, grasping the pillow under his head, twisting the corners. John pauses to change position slightly, kissing down the side, between his own fingers, which haven't stopped moving. Sherlock's belly hitches.

"Nearly?" John asks.

"Not quite," Sherlock gasps. John thumb presses in under his head. "There--"

John grunts in understanding and tightens his grip, moving his hand faster until the friction warms Sherlock through and the sensation makes the sweat break out over his collar bone. John leans over to kiss Sherlock's hipbone, and then gently bite it.

Sherlock digs his heels into the mattress, everything sounding loud to him. He looks down as John looks up and with new boldness, John licks over and between his own fingers, and it tips things over from coherent to a beautiful chaos, stirred up beyond the point he could bear it.

John presses down, through the arch and the spill, feeling the full length of Sherlock's body leap under his hand, the muscles of his stomach and the pure vitality of him.

'This is us,' John thinks, with a throb that rises into the bell of his throat and, the thought somewhat late, he wishes he'd chased Sherlock more closely. In haste, he drops his hand between his legs, yelping at his own sensitivity, cheek against Sherlock's twitching thigh with one eye sighted up the pale line of him, to his shaking lips.

Then everything is white behind his eyes, and tight down below, and there's wetness over his knees.

'I can smell the wood of the bed,' Sherlock thinks with his eyes shut, 'and detergent and myself. Oh, John.' His heart is still knocking.

John squirms up next to him, meeting his gaze with a nonchalant little shrug of pretence that this is all something he's had readily within his remit for years. Sherlock reflects that it's just as well that he's breathless or else he'd say something really stupid out loud.

"Don't mention it," John says, easing his back out. He's covered in a dew of sweat like flocking, his muscles aching as he wriggles an arm around Sherlock and draws them skin to skin till they stick.

Lips on his brow.

Sherlock blinks his eyes closed again, laying his body down to rest over half of John, nose in the crook of his neck, in the sweat, against his pulse, and without further effort conveys the weight of his love in literal terms.

"You're squashing me," John says. His laugh joggles Sherlock's head against his shoulder, but his arms tighten. He sighs, and then again, in great lungfuls of contentment.

"Daddy, are you awake?" A pair of tiny fingers are prizing apart his left eyelid. If he weren't already awake, he would be.

"Yes," Sherlock concedes. "Don't touch my eye, please."

"Yes, Daddy. I awake now."

"So am I."

"I want papa."

"Papa's asleep. Don't bother papa."

"But I want papa." A pause. "Is papa sleep?"

"Yes. Leave him alone. He's tired."

"Oh. Babar's tired. He needs to sleep."

"Any bloody chance of that though?" John growls from his side of the bed. He is determinedly hitching the covers up over his chest.

He hears her footsteps coming round the side of the bed, *plap plap* on the tiles. "Where is your jammies, Babar?"

'Oh my god,' John thinks, cramming his head into the pillow. 'And I spunked on the *floor*.'

"Bee," he says out loud. "Can you find Papa's phone? It's in the living room."

"Phone?"

"Yes, can you find Papa's phone for me, please? On the little table?"

"Yes!"

"It's in your jacket pocket isn't it?" Sherlock says as she patters away barefoot down the corridor,

nappy sagging.

"I know," John hisses, launching from the bed and scrabbling for his pants. "Put your knickers on." He tosses Sherlock's clean pyjama bottoms at him, hastily tossing the sheets down under the bed and then grabs his phone and scuttles out the room.

"Never mind, Bee," he calls, "I found it."

Sherlock flops back on the bed with a groan. Then he heaves himself upright and drags on the pyjamas and his dressing gown, blundering into the living room. She's chatty this morning, raring to go.

"It's not as nice out today," John comments as Sherlock emerges, like it's just another morning and they're just another family. "Bit cloudy."

"Rain's forecast," Sherlock says, squinting out the window. "Hastings, I think."

"Sure."

And after that it's all surprisingly easy. They have a good time. John willingly releases Sherlock into the True Crime museum for a couple of hours, from which he resurfaces looking deeply, darkly pleased and carting a supermarket carrier bag. Bee is otherwise covered in ice-cream and has enjoyed romping like a maniac around the play centre around the back.

"What's that?" John asks.

"Something for later," Sherlock answers, herding them through the drizzle towards lunch. Distracted by the potential for steak and lobster, John forgets to ask again until they're back at the cottage.

"What did you buy rice krispies for?" he asks, baffled, lifting the packet out onto the counter. "You don't eat cereal."

"It's not for breakfast," Sherlock says, shaking two bars of chocolate out of the bottom of the bag and lifting the tin of syrup from his coat pocket onto the table with a thud.

John stares. "Are you planning on baking?"

"It's raining," Sherlock points out. "We're on holiday. I thought we'd make rice krispie cakes. Also our daughter is mad and needs to be kept occupied, or she won't go to bed."

"You're mad," John says fondly, winding his arms around him. "Are you really enjoying this?"

"More than I expected," Sherlock admits. "I couldn't do it all the time though."

"That's alright. We'll get back to London, you can go and prod the network. Find a case."

"But for a weekend," Sherlock continues. "Once in a while. And at least you're here."

"I'm glad I make the difference," John chuckles.

"You do," Sherlock says, frighteningly sincere, and then he leans forward and adds in a whisper right in John's ear. "And the blow job was quite nice."

John bursts out laughing until tears spring to his eyes, thumping Sherlock in the chest. "Now you're in trouble."

“Me? Moi? But I’ve been so good.”

“You’re a bloody menace,” John replies, eye twinkling. “Bee,” he calls. “Come and see what Daddy’s got you.”

She comes running, dragging Elbant behind her, all knees and smiles, arms reaching up excitedly even as Sherlock stoops to pull her up to his height. “Are you do- are you do cookings?” she pants, legs peddling in midair. Sherlock cups her face. Her eyebrows are so pale and fine they are barely visible, her irises a colour between the slate grey-blue of her mother’s and the brighter blue of her father’s. She purses her lips, an expression that is part Sherlock and part her own invention, and wriggles when Sherlock plants her on the counter.

“Yes,” he says. “Cookings today.”

‘And when we’re older,’ he thinks, ‘Chemistry.’

She’s three years old, and has broken John’s phone. It’s been a hell of a morning and it’s not even 8AM. Bee wails, and even though he’s forgiven her, John’s still in something of a dudgeon by the time he’s given her breakfast. Their whole schedule is knocked back, and at this rate Bee’s going to be late to nursery and he’s going to have to rush to get to work on time.

In his haste, John knocks the half-jar of coffee granules with his elbow, spilling it across the counter and the draining board, where it immediately turns to a thick brown slime in the damp.

“Oh, for fuck’s sake!” John says, smearing it furiously with the dishcloth. The mess is everywhere. Sherlock appears at the bottom of the stairs, takes one look at the chaos and wisely fetches John the Hoover without comment. John sucks up the dry bits, pushes the worst of the wet coffee into the sink and gives up on any hot drink that morning at all.

Besides, now he has to wrestle Bee into her clothes and that demands his full attention.

And then Sherlock slides a plate in front of John loaded with a warm chocolate croissant. John startles. He hadn’t heard him slip down to Speedies and back.

“What’s this?”

“Instead of your phone,” Sherlock says. “Maybe it’ll sweeten you up.”

“Oh,” John fights back a smile. “I wouldn’t be me if I wasn’t grumpy.”

Bee sidles between them, forefinger waving towards the croissant like the exploratory tentacle of an octopus.

“Babar,” she says, dragging the syllables, “You need to share.”

“I need to share?”

“Yes, you need to share.”

John groans. “How am I supposed to argue with that?” he wants to know, tearing off the end of the croissant, which disappears at once. He sighs, mood lifting.

“Alright,” he says, taking a bite, “I’ll lighten up. It’s just one of those days. What are you doing

this morning?” he adds, noticing that Sherlock is up and dressed unusually early.

“Molly’s in town. Popping in to see her at St. Barts. Find out the news about Ascot.”

“Say hi for us.”

“Hmm,” Sherlock agrees, pulling on his coat. They heft Bee and her pushchair down the stairs together, yell goodbyes to Mrs. Hudson who is still blearily putting back a cup of tea, and then let the door to 221 thump shut behind them.

“See you this evening then,” John says.

Sherlock already has one arm stuck out like a flagpole, which by magnetism or something, immediately attracts a taxi.

“Later,” he says, reaching for the car door.

“Oi, say goodbye properly,” John complains. Sherlock chuckles, ducks back, uses one hand to stir up Bee’s hair into a bird’s nest and the other to grab John’s lapel and kiss him. John knocks his hand free, pleased, and shoos him. “Go on.”

Sherlock twists on his heel cheeky, waving and then bounds into the idling taxi and is gone. John chuckles.

“Daddy messed my hair!”

“Yes, he did,” John agrees, checking for traffic before crossing Baker Street. “It’s ok, I’ll mess his later.” He leans down over the pushchair and gives her a wink. “Right, ready to go?”

She gives him a firm nod, Elbant thrust out like a colour-guard’s baton. “Go!”

“Go, go!” John agrees, and they’re off.

Chapter End Notes

1) The working titles were ‘oh it’s a Harry, Molly, holiday with you, Sherl’, ‘The Sherowl and the Johnny-Cat’ and ‘FINALLY, FINALLY THE BUTTONS HURGHNNNNNNnnnnngnggnnnNNN.’

2) The title comes from Frank Sinatra’s ‘Oh! Look at Me Now’ which the Egg and I are both feeble for at any time of day. Also, it’s so fucking perky after so much angst that it makes me laugh; like Sherlock tap-dancing away down Baker Street at the end of this chapter. If I ever did a podcast of this, I’d have to beg someone to rearrange it to a minor key and then a major key for the intro and outro respectively. Lordy.

3) Egg challenged me to use the phrase ‘anal vapours’ in this chapter after an incident in which we both hilariously miss-read a shop sign. As you can see, I chickened out of that one.

4) Indre is from Lithuania. Because why not.

- 5) Sherlock absolutely reads Victorian literature. Or at least, there's a copy of The Lamplighter in 221B, so I'm rolling with this head-cannon.
- 6) [Crunchies](#) are a 'chocolate bar'. They have a thin ammount of chocolate over honeycomb toffee (or cinder toffee- same thing), and they're disgustingly sweet.
- 7) Elephant and Castle sounds cool, but has some pretty manky bits. RIP Harry. Vauxhall is like... the new Gay area of London. If you think John is not aware of how very gay Vauxhall is, you are wrong.
- 8) There are a few contenders for the greasy spoon Sherlock takes them to around Waterloo. Best bets are down in Lower Marsh, which also operates a really good food market. I'm gonna plump for Marie's Cafe, which I think Sherlock would like. It's a standard caff during the day and a very good Thai canteen at night, bring your own bottles.
- 9) [Mr. Toad, Ratty and Moley are of course from The Wind and the Willows. I am also very jealous of the fact that Mark Gatiss has Ratty's house built in his garden, following playing Ratty in the BBC version.](#) I grew up with a cassette tape of the book read by Kenneth Williams and it was THE BEST.
- 10) Camber Sands is gorgeous, and there really is a crime museum in Hastings, though I haven't had a chance to go to either yet.
- 11) The Truck Song is this hilarious mess [that I found it in a drunk moment and it amused me altogether too much.](#)
- 12) You can pry the head-cannon that Sherlock is Hard Emotional for David Bowie from my cold, dead claws.
- 13) I have NO idea if the baby monitor trick works, please do not copy John and Sherlock, they are horned up to the eyeballs and applying dubious parenting.
- 14) Sherlock references 'The Owl and the Pussy-cat' by Edward Lear.

And that's it! Questions? Comments? Just want to tell me about a beautiful place you haven't had the chance to go to? We'd love to hear it! As ever, I'm [Odamakilock](#) over on tumblr and this hot mess was beta-read by [An Egg](#). We do our best, but if you find a typo/error that's free for you, keep it, it's a gift, it's yours, I don't want it.

I <3 u all

Oda xx

Part 20: New World Coming

Chapter Summary

“Have I... forgotten a date?” John asks, too stunned to finish walking into the kitchen.

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, is it our anniversary or something?”

“Which anniversary when?” Sherlock asks, staring at him. John stares back.

“Good question. I’m just wondering, not that it isn’t very nice and not that I’m at all unhappy, don’t get me wrong, but what’s er, inspired all of this.”

“It was just time,” Sherlock says simply, pouring the wine with a flourish. “Don’t you think?”

Chapter Notes

On this day about four years ago (**EDIT: so I’m a damn fool and read 03/07 as 07/07, but CLOSE ENOUGH.**) I posted the first chapter of this fanfic. We were waiting on S4, and I fully expected to get this whole thing written and done during the hiatus. *looks around and laughs hysterically*

Clearly I succeeded at that!

From what started as a flippant 100 word response to a prompt and subsequent begging from Codenamelazarus, it’s developed into something frankly enormous, and has been a very big part of my life for what amounts to the same quantity of time I spent in university, and ultimately, I think, about as much of an education.

Writing this fic has been a very long trucker haul of a ride and the situation we find ourselves in at the end is not the one we started out in, but I suppose that’s symptomatic of life in general so I’m not going to complain. Things change and move on and this is at it’s core a story about how things change and move on. It’s also largely about growing up, and how much fucking effort that takes, and how that process doesn’t stop when you’re 18, or 25, or even 45. You’re going to be growing up your whole life.

I am probably not a very good author when it comes to being in the fandom; I tend to keep to my corner and I don’t have many vested interests in emerging from it, and even if I did, I expect that window of opportunity is long gone. But I have to say, that doesn’t matter. I am, when I think about it, overwhelmed by the consistency and patient support of all you readers. Your open-mindedness when I took the story in directions you perhaps did not expect, your candid and at times deeply moving feedback. You made me feel like a storyteller, and a good storyteller. You told me you lived with my words in your pocket and enjoyed them, and the only response I’ve ever had to all of this is thank you, thank you, thank you.

Thank you.

Thank you for journeying all this way with me, and thank you for coming in at the end and greeting this work fresh. Thank you to everyone reading this for the first time a few years from now, and thank you to everyone who read, left kudos, wrote recs and tweets and notes on the bookmarks and commented, and who silently did none of these things but loved it anyway. Thank you if you read it in English when that isn't your first language, thank you for staying up late for one more chapter. Thank you for crying and laughing and telling me you dropped your coffee at the good bits. Thank you for being generally an incredibly decent and considerate bunch of readers, even though I'm a prescriptive, defensive old grump to the nth degree.

You made a difference. I would have finished the fic come hell or high water, but you all made it so much more enjoyable.

So, here, at the end, my last words outside of the lines are these:

Thank you.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Part 20 - New World Coming

Autumn is short this year. The days fade out from a long summer and then collide with a bang with the end of the year.

Life goes on.

John moves from one surgery to another, the latest in a string of temporary positions, which he is never out of, despite his track record for reliability and patient handling. Some rare days he mingles with the other staff, the full-time nurses and reception staff, the other GPs, and listening to their conversation he considers that he's lucky to be employable at all.

It's hard to care about a job when you know from day one you'll be moving on in six months at the most. He deals with patients who don't want to see him and are annoyed their regular doctor has gone on holiday, or been inconsiderate enough to have a baby, or hypocritical enough to get sick.

Sometimes when he's at the kitchen table, clearing bills and budgeting, he wonders if there would ever be enough for a practice of his own, but this is a pipe dream to be shelved. It's too expensive in London, and Sherlock has the work to do.

Bee has moved into a new 'class' at nursery. She's with the older children now, and it's almost pre-school. She's becoming a proper little academic, chanting from one to ten and A to Z. She can pick out P 'puh' Papa, and D 'duh' Daddy, though she sometimes gets them back to front, or otherwise mixed up with B. She can pick out the first letter of her name, E 'eh' Elephant, and Z 'zzzz' Zub.

She learns so fast that it's breathtaking.

John takes her to the aquarium, where she scolds the sharks soundly, and with Sherlock-ish self-assurance points at in a tank and says, 'That's a lionfish'.

It isn't, but it's a damn close call.

“How’s my clever girl?” he says, when he collects her from nursery. “Have you been putting the world to rights?”

She always grins and says, “Yes!”

He can’t imagine she’s capable of less. He’s besotted again.

The world has a loveliness to it that it hasn’t had in years. Sunny days are brighter, bad days fine. The flat isn’t pokey, messy and smelly. It’s cosy, lived-in and homey.

“What’s the matter with you?” Sherlock says of an evening, puzzling at him over the edge of Guns ‘n’ Ammo. “You’re making a face.”

“Think I’m in love.”

“Hmm,” Sherlock says, pressing his lips together, pleased, before discarding the magazine and tugging him up the stairs to their room.

Things are good.

Things are more than good.

He tells Ella this the next time he sees her, and they discuss it at length, and so he’s surprised when she insists he schedule another appointment.

“But I’m feeling better than I have in I don’t know how long,” he argues.

“John, you came to me with a long list of things you needed to unpack, and for a long time, there are a number of items which I have rarely if ever pushed you on. Primarily, because we had more immediate bridges to cross. We have been working for much of the time we have known one another on building a baseline; and we did it your way with my input, and you’ve done well. There have been enormous setbacks along the way, but you’ve now reached a point where those feel safely out of reach.”

“So what’s wrong with me now?”

“I think we should talk about how losing your mother affected you and your relationship with your family. You’ve told me you’re starting to invite Harry back in, and I want to see that you continue to deal with how you feel about that. Think about it, and come back for your next session with a memory you have that we can discuss. Perhaps something small to start with.” She opens the door for him. “Have a nice Christmas.”

He does. They do. It’s one of the nicest Christmases he’s ever had. Nothing happens.

Strange, John thinks at the end of the day as he lies in bed, hand relaxed in the warm divot under Sherlock’s neck. Once ‘nothing happened’ was the worst that could have befallen him on any given occasion. Now he almost enjoys it. Even the nothing days are full.

In the run up to Christmas, Lestrade invites them for drinks at the Yard. His team is prepping for a run of court cases due in the early weeks of the year and they’re so important that there’s no time off allowed. “So it’s all hands on deck,” he tells John on Friday morning over the phone. “But I’m ordering in a greedy amount of takeaway at about 5 and we’re going to crack a few to make up for

it. Bring himself. The others are bringing partners.”

“Are you?” John asks.

Lestrade barks a short laugh. “I’ve got the most important person coming,” he says, warmly, “It’d be good to actually introduce you. On that note, kids are welcome.”

“We’ll stop by,” John says.

Sherlock agrees, although perhaps only because the website has been dull lately and he’s keen as ever to have a rummage in Scotland Yard’s cold cases. He’s been down the Yard more often lately in Molly’s absence, and according to Lestrade, not even making an enormous nuisance of himself. Although John’s had his ear bent enough to know that Sherlock’s still apt to be very rude about the cases he thinks could have been easily solved years ago.

They go as a four, he and himself and the baby and Nana. Mrs. Hudson spruces up in her best plum co-ordination for the occasion, giddy as a schoolgirl to go out with them to a party. Bee refuses to wear anything except a spotty dressing-up outfit Mrs. Hudson concocted from an old table cloth and vast liberties with Disney’s classic designs. John convinces her at least to leave the mouse ears at home and to put tights on underneath.

For obvious reasons the party isn’t held in the team’s main office, but in one of the Yard’s training rooms; plastic tables and whiteboard and everything, although someone’s had the sense to make off with the whiteboard markers before it gets rowdy.

“Hey! You’re here. Hullo, Mrs.,” Lestrade says, swooping down exuberantly and kissing Mrs. Hudson’s cheek.

“Don’t,” Sherlock warns, too late. “You’ll make her go twitty.”

“Stop,” Mrs. Hudson says, pushing them both with her handbag. “I won’t. I’m not!” She’s preening, delighted. “Ooh, Greg, this does look lovely.”

“Mycroft here yet?” John teases, and Lestrade shakes his head laughing.

He surprises them both by saying, instead, “Come in. Come and meet my kid.”

He leads them through the milling officers and friends and introduces them to a girl every inch the gawky pre-teen.

“This is my girl, Georgie.” Lestrade says, squashing her in a side hug never mind how she squirms and says “Dad, ‘Gina’,” in warning tones. She eyes them with the shy self-awareness and inherent suspicion of all young women, and offers only the palm of her hand in greeting, strictly not to be shaken.

They don’t look much alike, John thinks, as he nods back a brief ‘hey’. Thick dark hair, for one, which surprises him, although he’s never seen Lestrade as anything other than grey, so what does he know? Maybe she resembles her mother.

“This is ours,” John says, ushering Bee forwards.

“Hey,” the kid says again, eyes fixed as Bee drifts forward to touch the sparkling design on Gina’s handbag.

“Umicorm,” Bee declares, beaming upwards.

“Yeah...”

‘This is our future?’ John wonders. He can’t picture Bee being shy, or so tall. Gina seems a rapid contradiction with every motion, one minute a little girl and the other affectedly adult.

“This is John Watson, and this is is Sherlock Holmes,” Lestrade says. Gina’s head flies up at once.

“I see my reputation precedes me,” Sherlock says.

“Don’t mind him. He’s not as flash as he thinks he is.”

“Georgie’s interested in medicine.”

“Are you?” John perks up.

“Well, I don’t know that,” Gina says, squirming. “Just like... maybe.”

“Well, if you’ve got any questions, feel free.”

“Umicorn. Clip-clop, clip-clop. Hrrmmmmpphhhh,” Bee says, circling John’s knees. Her horse noises sound rather like elephant noises.

They, or at least Gina, are saved by the arrival of a familiar face. “Oh hallo. Who let you two in here?” Sally says, breezing past them to hug Gina. “Hullo, beautiful. This lot bothering you?”

“I’m handling it,” Gina says from under Sally’s arm.

“I bet you are. Sic ‘em.”

Gina flashes a broad grin that only widens when Sally jerks a thumb behind her and adds, “Henry’s here by the way. “

“Great!” and she’s gone in an instant, ponytail bouncing.

“Long time no see,” Sally offers into the silence that follows. She glances at the child, now tall enough to stand half-way up John’s thigh and they realise it has been a very long time indeed. Sherlock says nothing, retreating into the safety of keeping his mouth shut, out of consideration of absolutely no adult here, but he refuses to upset his daughter by making a scene.

“About... five years?” John says, but he can’t actually remember the last time they saw Sally face to face. “How’s life?”

“Good,” Sally says, nodding. “Um. Very good. Shock-horror, I’ve been promoted. And you’re alright?” She adds, to Sherlock.

Sherlock merely gestures to himself. “As you can see.”

“Right,” Sally nods again. “And I know it’s a bit late, but I was sorry to hear about... you know.”

“What?” John says, drawing a blank. Awkwardly, Sally glances towards the child.

“About your wife.”

“Oh.” John is taken aback. For a moment he thought she was harking right back to Sherlock’s trial. “Oh. Yeah. We’re uh... we’re doing ok.”

“Yeah,” Sally says, watching Bee dance on Lestrade’s feet, holding onto his fingers and laughing. “Seems like.”

“Well, this has been a thrill,” Sherlock cuts in. “Excuse me. Bathroom.”

He’s hit his limit, John guesses, and Sherlock leaves them, circuiting the crowd to step out the room.

“Probably my cue to bugger off,” Sally says. “No, it’s fine. I don’t anticipate he and I ever shaking hands. And fair enough. Greg says you’re living with him again.”

“Yes. Have been for the past few years,” John replies.

“He’s put a lot of weight on. That’s not a bitchy comment, before I go on. Last I saw him he was a skeleton in a suit that didn’t fit.” She pauses. “Sorry, you probably want to get after him.”

John considers it for a half-beat and then shakes his head. “Why? He’s only gone to the loo.”

“Thought that was Sherlockese for getting out of dodge.”

“Not these days.”

“Things change.”

“They do,” John agrees. Sally gives a faint smile. Her hair is swept tightly back off her forehead and her clothes are clean but they look like they’ve been only recently unpacked from a bag; there’s a faint crease across the stomach of her blouse and it makes John wonder if the promotion’s come with a cost. Bee squeals as Lestrade picks her up overhead.

“Where’s my girl gone?” Lestrade asks, tucking the toddler under one arm.

“Swapping memes with Henry,” Sally tells him. “My baby brother,” she adds for John’s benefit, and suddenly he can see a touch of something familiar in her. A bit Harry, a bit Sandra, and for the first time he nearly gets her attitude.

“I’m going to grab some drinks,” John says. “You alright with that one for a bit?”

“We’re grand,” Lestrade tells him, hitching his giggling load up higher under his armpit. “Erm, I think Mrs. Hudson’s getting a bit keen on Edwards.”

He gestures with his chin over John’s head and John turns. Mrs. Hudson has indeed corralled one of the officers into a talk he can’t escape from. John can just imagine the conversation.

“Edwards is a twat,” Sally says. “Don’t rescue him too quickly. He’s also got a big mouth. Any trouble... well, you could handle it, but I’d appreciate the chance to be the first to yell at our staff.”

“Noted.”

“John,” she adds, almost military in tone, and then she’s turning back to Lestrade and saying hi to Bee, and the line of her shoulders relaxes.

He hadn’t quite realised that they made each other nervous.

Sherlock still hasn’t come back from the bathroom, but that doesn’t mean anything. John has, in the past few years, had a similar panic that Sherlock had either escaped through the window and ditched him, or had otherwise died in there, only to find him fussing with his hair.

He fetches a couple of drinks and browses the food offering. It's a cobbled together buffet of snacks and takeaway. He helps himself to a slice of pizza and chews through it, idly listening to the hubbub of the room. He can hear Bee talking away, her high voice cutting above all the burr of the adults.

"Still bothering about with officers?"

John turns and sees another old and familiar face. "Dimmock- it's been a while." They shake hands just to measure each other up.

"It has. Any more bankers?"

"Not lately."

"This is my wife, Angie," Dimmock says, gesturing to the woman beside him.

"Pleased to meet you," John says, dazzled by a ruby smile and a long brown arm extended for him to shake. He damn near kisses it.

"I've heard about you," she says, "He likes to pretend he does all the work around here, but I know my husband." Angie laughs easily and charmingly. "That's rude," Dimmock grumbles, understandably smitten.

"You on your own?" Angie asks.

"No, no. Greg's nicked my kid and uh..." John scans the room, heart thumping. "And my partner's around here somewhere. Avoiding the party, I expect."

"Oh, no," Angie says and then throws Dimmock a look. "I wonder what that's like."

"I like a dinner party," Dimmock says in his defence, "I just don't like dancing."

"Mine's the opposite," John comments.

"Likes a boogie, does she?" Angie laughs. There is a wicked pause. John licks his lip, just to buy time and courage before he answers.

"He likes a... he likes a dance, yes. I'm not much good at it myself."

The pause turns first puzzled then polite. "Oh right," Dimmock says, carefully. "Right. Well. Guess it's a bit...complicated. Y'know. Figuring out the feet."

John waits. He waits for the boot to drop or the awkward question to be asked, or the bolt of thunder to come down and strike him in the top of the head and crack the ground from under his feet. Instead, Dimmock just shuffles and says, "Just so I don't make an arse of myself, we are talking about Sherlock Holmes, aren't we? Not some other bloke?"

"Hon, don't ask like that..."

John finds himself laughing. "Yes. Yes we're talking about Sherlock Holmes."

"Oh good," Dimmock says, relieved. "I was just worried I had my wires crossed, and bloody hell, you don't want to be dating any of this lot." He snaps his fingers, eyes widening. "Wait, I remember now. You got married, didn't you? Well, congratulations."

"I, uh... thanks," John says. He's spotted Sherlock at the door, Bee swinging off his arm. "

“So he’s here? Blimey. Is he still doing the consultancy thing?” Dimmock is asking. “Only I might have a couple of bits he could cast an eye over, maybe, if you were there to keep things...” He makes a vague patting motion in the air. “Calm and collected.”

“No, he’s good these days. We’re good,” John says. “In fact, I’ve been holding this glass for him for the past ten minutes. Mind if I-?”

“You go ahead,” Angie says, crooking her fingers into Dimmock’s elbow. “We’ll catch you later.”

“Yeah. Later.” John raises a glass to them and works through the clutter to reach Sherlock.

“Hmm,” says Sherlock with narrowed eyes, taking in the faint redness at the tips of John’s ears and the way Dimmock’s wife is talking to the man.

“It’s fine,” John tells him. “Here.” He clinks his glass against Sherlock’s. “Stay for one and then you could take Bee home, and I’ll bring Mrs. Hudson back when I can catch her.”

“Deal,” Sherlock says, his expression thawing.

One inevitably turns into two. Mrs. Hudson is living the highlife and Bee is enjoying herself far too much to be dragged away so soon. She has charmed a policeman’s helmet out of someone and is dee-dawing around the tables to John’s increasing embarrassment, arresting people.

So far Dimmock is her favourite victim, and he has arrested on three accounts, all of which are nonsensical. Lestrade finds the whole thing hilarious. She trundles past him and into Sally who turns down the offer of being arrested by saying, “You can’t arrest me, I’m the law.”

“You can’t arrest me either,” John adds, “I’m your father.”

“Yes, I can,” Bee answers, “Because you eat piggy poo!”

There’s no easy come back to that.

“We should get a picture of everyone together,” Lestrade decides. Gina groans openly. “No, come on. It’ll be nice. John, where’s himself got to?”

“I’ll get him.”

John finds him easily enough. It’s no use lurking behind a whiteboard that’s only five foot tall at the most. “We’re taking a picture.”

“Pass.”

“No, we’re taking a picture,” John tells him firmly, putting his hand over the screen of Sherlock’s phone and forcing him to look up. “Come on.” He tugs Sherlock’s wrist just once and reluctantly, Sherlock joins them as they assemble, Bee dancing around his legs.

“Up!” she yells, until Sherlock sets her on his hip, assuming as cool and remote an atmosphere as he possibly can in spite of this.

“Angie, do you mind?” Lestrade asks, fiddling with his phone.

“Sure, no problem.” She takes the camera and backs up, tongue stuck out in concentration.

“Alright, everyone squidge in a bit. Ok, looking good. Gimme ‘cheese’!”

“Eeee!” Bee says, baring her teeth with glee. Gina shrieks as her father tickles her. Sherlock stiffens.

Afterwards, John leans slightly on Lestrade’s elbow to see the result and then prods the first of the three pictures. It’s the worst, but that’s why he likes it.

“Email me that one.”

“You sure?” Lestrade asks. “Well, I can send them all.”

‘No, that’s the one I like,’ John thinks, trying not to smile. In the picture, Bee is nothing but teeth. On the other end, Gina is open-mouthed and blurred by a gleeful shout, Lestrade grinning as he hugs her. Sherlock alone is bolt-upright and aloof, slightly wide around the eyes, and John loves it because only he knows that he’d slipped his hand around Sherlock’s waist right as the camera had flashed.

It’s tears at home time. Bee does not want to relinquish either the helmet or the handcuffs, despite reminders that they have both at home and rash whispered promises she can have her own once she’s older. Sherlock hitches her higher on his hip as she leans back and howls.

“So cute at that age,” Lestrade remarks. “I’ll walk you out.”

“No need,” Sherlock says, over the din, but Lestrade slouches along after him anyway, affable and undeterred.

He holds the door for Sherlock at the end of the corridor, which echoes as Bee settles to crying that’s merely loud. “Cheer up, Sunshine,” Lestrade tells her, chucking her chin. She squirms. “Where’s my happy girl gone?”

“Nooo,” she complains, and thumps her head into Sherlock’s lapels, which goes some way to muffling the chaos. Lestrade just laughs. He stands back, hands in pockets, and then surprises Sherlock by saying, “Can you believe it’s been a year already?”

“Hm?”

“Just in general,” Lestrade clarifies. “I was just thinking; this time last year. Well, it was all quite different, wasn’t it? You going to your mum and dad’s again?”

“No, not this year. We’re spending it at home. It’s Mrs. Hudson’s turn.” Sherlock turns a pained expression to the ceiling that is mostly ham acting these days. “Mummy and Daddy are visiting the day after Boxing Day.”

“Yeah, I’ll be working. I’m around New Years though, I think. If uh,” Lestrade sniffs and rubs at his upper lip. “You lot want to come over.”

“To yours?” Sherlock says, “To your... I don’t know what you live in.”

“It’s a flat,” Lestrade tells him, “And yeah. I’ve done it up a bit. Though don’t ask Gina if I did a good job, she thinks it’s well uncool.” He shrugs. “Can’t please ‘em both.”

“So,” Sherlock says, stilted, mind whirring over ‘both’. “So I can assume that... my brother will... be in attendance at this...” without a hand free to gesture with he makes a strange motion with his chin instead. “Soiree.”

Lestrade's laugh bounces off the walls. Bee stops crying, staring.

"Soiree? Bleeding hell, Sherlock. Soiree...It's just drinks." Lestrade holds up his hands. "Just a couple of drinks on the rocks and a bit of auld lang syne. I've invited Molly, and Wiggins and... that's about it really. My whopping great social circle."

Then he says, in a way that makes gravity feel real, "It's really just the people who already know."

The night air bites as they step outside, though it's not yet below freezing. Lestrade walks them down to the kerb and waits for Sherlock to magic up a taxi. "I can ask Mrs. Hudson what her plans are... for babysitting," Sherlock says, watching the road.

"Bring her and Bee along, and all," Lestrade says, hands in pockets, leaning back on his heels. "I think Myc'd like to see her. But no pressure, eh? Oh and Happy Christmas."

"... You too." Sherlock shifts Bee's weight in his arms. "Give my regards to Mycroft."

Lestrade's smile wrinkles right up to his ears. "Will do. There's a cab."

Sherlock shuffles Bee again so that he can extend an arm to flag it. It curves across the lane, gliding towards them.

"And I'll tell John," Sherlock says, as the taxi rolls up, engine purring. "About the drinks."

"Yeah. Well, I can mention it to him as well. You get home safe, now," Lestrade says. He raises a hand to see them off, and before getting in the taxi, in synch with his daughter, Sherlock raises one back.

Sherlock emerges from the shower disgruntled, shaking his head like a dog that's got a fly caught in its ear.

"It's bust," he reports.

The announcement goes largely unnoticed. Bee is busy with her wooden people, marching them around the table legs and getting quite literally under John's feet. The man himself is engrossed in a National Geographic.

"I said," Sherlock repeats, louder. "The shower is broken."

"What's wrong with it?" John asks, without looking up.

"The water won't... shower. It just dribbles."

This rouses John from his chair to come and tut over the state of it with him. He jiggles the head around and shakes it, squints at it and gives up. "Maybe it's bunged up with limescale," John mutters. "Maybe Mrs. Hudson's got some of that scale remover stuff to dunk it in. Hold on..."

He twiddles the taps about and manages to get a gout of mostly cold water from the mixer. "Well, the bath works," he concludes. "You'll just have to wash your hair in that."

"That takes ages," Sherlock complains. "It wastes water."

"Use the sink then," John says, and then leans back on the tiles, raising an eyebrow. "Or is this how you get yourself into my baths?"

Sherlock pauses. "Hadn't even occurred to me. Not an entirely terrible idea, though."

John chuckles: "Oh I see. And I suppose it'll be down to me then to fix the damn thing?"

"I didn't say that."

"It will be though. You'll get all keen on baths."

"Baths are dull."

"Baths are great," John corrects. "When I'm in them."

This sounds like a theory to be tested. Sherlock adopts a lecturer's position, hands on the ends of his towel, drawn up to his full height.

"In the interests of comparison, then?" he suggests. John snorts.

"Shut the door," he replies, and pulls Sherlock forward by his towel.

"You're quiet tonight," Indre says, slipping onto the sofa and nudging Harry with her hips to make her budge up. "What's up?"

Harry shrugs, expression clouded.

"Talk," Indre insists, elbowing her again. "We agreed on this. No stewing. You go wonky when you stew and I can't help you."

"I don't know what to say."

Indre leans forward and mutes the TV show that neither of them are watching and parks her dinner on the coffee table. "Cuddle?" she offers.

"You're eating."

"It's a cheese toastie and salad. If it goes cold it just becomes a cheese sandwich and salad. I can eat it later. Cuddle or no, you daft bitch?"

Harry groans and slumps sideways under Indre's arm. Indre bundles her up close. "Tough meeting today?"

"Not especially," Harry says, muffled against Indre's side. "It was pretty normal, I just got thinking like... what have I got left to do?"

"And?" Indre asks, wriggling slightly to get hold of her toastie. She takes a bite and then wafts it in front of Harry's nose until she does as well. They both chomp silently for a moment.

"I think I have to see my dad. Put it to rest... I need to do something about it."

"Hit the wall?"

"It's just this fucking ball and chain I'm dragging around with me," Harry says, sitting up and helping herself to another bite of toastie. "It's constantly in the back of my mind; he is, I mean, and it stresses me out, and I don't really want to see him, I just..."

“Want it to be over?”

“Yeah,” Harry admits. “But then there’s John.”

“His process is not your process,” Indre says, firmly. “Like mine isn’t anyone else’s either. I think you just need to be clear.”

“Just tell him I’m going.”

“Yes. It’s not a negotiation if it’s something you need to do. Even if he’s hurt by the idea or wants nothing to do with it, I think it’s fair to just let him know and give him the choice. If you want him to go with you,” Indre adds, looking at Harry full of doubt. “If that’s not too much.”

“I dunno,” Harry replies, biting her lip. “Might be. For all of us; who knows. Might just be tea and awkward small talk and nothing comes of it.”

“You could speak to someone there,” Indre suggests. “See what he’s like these days?”

“Would you?” Harry asks, giving her a pathetic look that isn’t totally feigned.

“I can try. Don’t know if they’d tell me anything though. I’m not family.”

“I’m barely family.”

“The Law,” Indre drawls. “Don’t care. You got his genes; that’s kind of enough.” She pulls the plate into her lap and shuffles the salad around through a blob of ketchup. “Sleep on it.”

Harry lounges back on the opposite side of the sofa, toes kneading against Indre’s thigh. She puts the volume back up and they stare at the TV for a while, Indre chewing her horrible dinner, Harry thinking.

“If I go,” Harry says, after a while, “Will you drive me?”

“Course I will, babe,” Indre says easily, patting her foot. “I’ll even come in if you want me.”

“Have I ever told you you’re the best friend in the world?”

“Yes,” Indre says, amused. “But feel free to say it more often. I like hearing it. You could also show your love by getting me my tapioca from the fridge?”

Harry hauls herself up from the sofa, padding into the kitchen and fetching the cup of pudding. “I can’t believe you like this shit. It’s like frogspawn.”

Indre grins over the back of the sofa. “I have shit taste,” she agrees. “S’why I love you, froggy-bae.”

Harry laughs, exhales and tears the lid off the pudding. “If I get pissy later in all this and forget to say thank you, I’m saying it now, over this fucking awful excuse for dessert. Thank you.”

Indre takes the pot from her gently and smiles. “You’re welcome.”

February gives way to March, and unexpected storms. The wind turns on London like a cornered fox and bites across the capital from the east. They’ve been cooped up for days while the rest of the city struggles to carry on as normal through the ice.

Billy turns up one afternoon as scheduled, 3:45, so bundled in his coat that he's hardly recognisable.

"No, not today thank you," John jokes, opening the door to him.

"Aw come on, let us in, can't you?" He stamps into the hall, shaking off the damp and his hood.

"New coat?"

"Yeah," Billy says, "What d'you think?"

It's khaki, cut straight around the hips and evidently well water-proofed. "It's an anorak," John comments.

"Fuck off," says Billy, good-naturedly and leads the way up the stairs.

With the change around with John's work, they've been doing this lately. On a day when Bee is at nursery, and typically John is at work, Bill comes over and spends the day tinkering around the flat on various experiments or 'pointless' cases with Sherlock. John has had reservations about what it is they get up to, but on the whole it seems to be working out quite well.

They even almost always remember to scrub down the kitchen table afterwards. And other than the hundreds of dead bees John finds himself now sharing a flat with, he can't complain. It seems to settle Sherlock down a little.

Today John lets them get on with it and he retreats to his armchair, letting the noise of the two men working meld into the background of 221B. Billy rattles glass around softly, the kettle rumbles, as does Sherlock.

"Ugh," says Billy, "Do you have to do that?"

Sherlock's head jerks up from his work, offended on behalf of his bees. "What's wrong with it?"

"Not that," Billy replies, gesturing to the table with his stirring rod. "I mean hum. Sing. You're all happy. It's weird."

"Was I?" Sherlock puzzles for a moment. He'd been thinking particularly hard about invertebrate parasites, and didn't recall having a tune in his head, let alone vocalising it.

"You was," Billy answers.

"I don't think I was..."

"You definitely were."

"You were," John confirms from the living room.

Sherlock grumbles. "Shouldn't you be at work?"

"Cancelled. Nothing going by rail to Basingstoke today."

Usually it's just the two of them. Thursdays are the best day for this, and even Mrs. Hudson has gone out to play Whist (and will inevitably return surprisingly richer than she left), leaving Sherlock to enjoy his bees in peace.

He has taken to collecting them for testing in various complicated ways. They come in the post in

bubble wrap from all over the country, having apparently replaced cigarette ash as his latest effort in cataloguing things that there's a crying need for.

He does the cataloguing at the kitchen table and the testing in the lab down at Barts, generously allowing Billy to use his own kit at Baker Street.

The truth is, and Sherlock has only admitted it in so many words the once; Billy is the better chemist. In his own way, Sherlock is starting to realise, Billy is also the better people person. He's still annoying, of course, and John isn't as convinced by the theory, but Billy does remember more about people he meets. Not in a 'failed to forget' kind of way, either, but because he makes an interest out of remembering things about people and then proving it. Sometimes it's not dissimilar to how a lepidopterist is interested in his specimens, but it's interest nonetheless.

"Herpetologist," Billy corrects, when Sherlock voices this opinion. "I ain't keen on flapping things." He leans back on the kitchen counter stirring his tea first and then his experiment.

"You know what I learned the other day? There's this lizard from New Zealand called a tuatara and it's got a whole new type of haemoglobin. It's this super primitive reptile but apparently, it's got one of the fastest rates of molecular evolution." Billy grins into his conical flask and adds, dreamily, "And an unknown acid in its cloaca."

Sherlock considers this and replies, "It takes somewhere in the region of a thousand honey bee stings to be fatal. Unless the victim is allergic, then only one. Such is life."

"Some people in Spain have stolen four tonnes of oranges," John chimes in from the living room.

"Unsolved?" Billy asks hopefully.

"Sorry. Caught them on the road when the oranges started falling out of the getaway car." John raises the newspaper for them to see the photograph. It's a small car, and an astonishing number of oranges.

"Idiots," Sherlock says, scornfully.

"Wonder what they expected to do with them all," John comments.

"Orange juice, of course."

"Marmalade, of course."

John just laughs. "Wrong," he says, "They were probably just completely pissed." He folds up the paper and drops it onto the coffee table with a slap and then stretches.

"Right, I'm going to take myself out for a wander for a while. Anyone want anything from the shop?"

"Rolos," Billy says promptly.

"Sherlock? Treat? Cadbury Twirl?"

"Wispa," Sherlock corrects and then stares very hard at the fridge when John impishly repeats 'Cadbury Twirl?' in a whisper.

"Why do I tolerate him, Wiggins? What earthly use is a man who resorts to awful puns?"

"Oi, this man's about to buy you chocolate." John chuckles his way out, pleased with himself.

“Well, it’s ‘cause he’s in, innit?” Billy says, once he’s gone.

“What?” Sherlock says, already distracted by his bees again.

“Why you tolerate him. I reckon pretty much by now you just haven’t got a choice. He’s in.”

“In?”

“In,” Billy confirms. “Like. *In*. With it.” He waggles his stirrer to indicate the whole room. “All of this. ‘Sides, you’re getting all old and mellow.”

“I am not!”

“Oh yeah?” Billy asks, folding his arms and giving him a look. “What ev’s. By the way, I want to do the next case you get on your website.”

“Fine. It’ll only be some boring affair anyway.”

“Hah!”

“What?”

“Mellow,” Billy says, smugly. “And you hum.”

Sherlock frowns but before they can reduce the conversation to a long companionable bicker, the front door clunks open and then bangs shut again.

“Yoo-hoo, boys. Only me!” Mrs. Hudson bustles in still with her coat on and noses around the chemistry set with interest. “What’s this then?” She asks, and then without waiting for a reply. “I’m popping out to the shop. I just came up to see if you wanted anything.”

“John’s just gone to the shop.”

“Has he? Oh bother, I could have given him my list. Never mind. Nothing you boys wanted.”

“I’m about done here. I could come with,” Billy offers, wrinkling his nose at the contents of his conical flask and then upending it down the sink. Sherlock raises an eyebrow but doesn’t look up from his bee.

“Would you, love?” Mrs. Hudson beams and pats his arm. “Then I can buy washing powder. Those plastic handles are awful on my fingers.” She flexes them, inspecting the swollen joints. “It’s this damp.”

Billy catches his eye over the slide, conspiratorially.

“Yeah, no problem, Missus. Shezz. You want anything?”

“Perhaps a Wispa,” he replies, innocently. Then his mind pings up something lacking on his mental inventory of the flat and he adds, “Wait. Lighter fluid.”

“Mm,” says Mrs. Hudson, folding her shopping bag over her arm. “I’ll see if they have it. Nothing else?”

“No. Thank you,” he adds, a beat later, remembering. Mrs. Hudson wrinkles a fresh smile up for him and shoos Billy down the stairs ahead of us, fussing him into his coat.

With the others gone the flat sinks into quietness. Sherlock works on his bees above the scarred surface of the kitchen table but finds that he can't focus. Slowly, he sits back and just... sits.

Has he really started humming?

The clock on the mantelpiece is not one of those that ticks out loud, and yet the sense of passing time is tangible, somehow, in his breath and the steady beating of his heart. The light pours through the open windows with the sound of the traffic and the scuffling of London trooping by on the pavement in front of the house. Sherlock crosses to look, and thinks 'how many hours have I spent looking out this window waiting for someone to call?'.

In the end, they'd all come. Lestrade, and then John. Molly then Billy and inevitably Mycroft to try and throw his weight around these narrow halls. Mary and Bee.

He lays a hand on the desk and disturbs a pile of paper, things he's been meaning to file. The pile has grown over the last few months; the bookcases are full and John's bought him the boxes he needs to put them in but not even the internet can cram any more wall space into the flat. In desperation, John suggested shelving on the only empty wall, but it would ruin the wallpaper worse than the smiley face, and deprive him of the one free space to pin out his thoughts when there are too many for even him to keep inside his head.

Sherlock shuffles the papers into a neater pile and weighs them down with a fossil. He runs his fingers over the contents of the table, the historic apparatus, the magazines, the notes started in John's hand and liberally annotated in his own. He finds a post-it note that makes him chuckle, even though it doesn't say anything clever. Bee has contributed a smear of blue crayon at the bottom of the page it's on. John has written 'Worms'. Sherlock doesn't remember when or why this happened, but he's glad that it did.

He leans back on the window, hands deep in the pockets of his dressing gown where once they would have found a cigarette or something less legal to fiddle with, only now there's nothing but lint and the camel from the Noah's ark. He rubs his thumb over its face, polishing the grain of the wood. When he lifts it to his nose, it still smells of beeswax.

*The camel's hump is an ugly lump
Which well you may see at the zoo;
But uglier yet is the hump we get
From having too little to do.*

"Humph," Sherlock says, for his own amusement. These days, though, it feels like the Cameelius black and blue humph has been absent for longer than he'd realised.

Although the shower is still broken. The limescale remover hasn't achieved a thing and Sherlock's got a hankering for further scientific comparison on horizontal versus vertical bathing.

He puts the camel back in the ark and tosses his dressing gown aside before going to look for the spanners.

"Coo-ee! Goodness, Sherlock, what are you doing?"

He wriggles out from the gutted remains of the bathtub and gives her a sour look. "I was trying," he says, with emphasis. "To fix the shower." He rises, shaking flakes of grout from his hair. "It's not working. Where's Wiggins?"

“Putting the shopping away. Did you want a cup of tea, love?”

“Yes.” He can’t help looking glum. 221B’s ancient plumbing has defeated him. He can’t fix it without tools and parts he doesn’t own and no amount of bodging things with improvised fixes will last more than a day by his calculations. They’ll have to call a plumber.

“Come down and have it with me,” she suggests. He acquiesces, straightening his pyjamas and following her down the stairs. She takes them one at a time, holding the rail even as she chatters away, and at the bottom she stops for the span of a breath before moving away down the hall. Sherlock follows her slowly.

“Oh, well done, Billy. Sandwiches. Did you have lunch, Sherlock? Oh, silly question...”

Billy makes them white bread sandwiches, stuffed with tomato and salad cream, enriched with slices of hardboiled eggs that Billy juggles out of their shells, face screwed up in concentration. “Here y’are.”

He delivers them to the table without any flourish and they sit and munch over the sound of the BBC’s Gardener’s Question Time. With no trace of guilt, Billy follows his sandwich with an entire tube of Rolos whilst Sherlock inhales his own chocolate bar.

“You’re quiet, love,” Mrs. Hudson comments, interrupting his thoughts. She takes his plate, and deposits it in the sink. “It’s only a shower. I’ll get a lad in. Mrs. Turner’s got some Polish boys who helped her marrieds. Or Czech...”

“Just don’t get one who’s an assassin,” Billy comments. “I don’t fancy getting shot.”

“Ooh, Billy, don’t you joke young man.”

Sherlock isn’t listening.

“Can I see downstairs?” he asks.

His question puzzles them both. “Downstairs?” Mrs. Hudson echoes. “What do you want with that old dump?” Then she twists in her chair. “Billy would you pass my handbag for me; I’ve got some keys... Always carry them in case of break ins or something...”

“Thank you.”

They trail after him as he goes down the narrow stairs to 221A, their whispered gossip floating back up to the hall like a slip of smoke. Down here the building smells of wet paving and neglect. The door to the flat has swollen and he has to lean his shoulder against it before it will shudder open. Inside it’s dim and fungal.

Mrs. Hudson says, “Oh,” in disgust and tuts. “I really must get some fans down here some time,” she mutters. “Oh, it’s disgraceful.”

“I’ve been in well ranker digs,” Billy tells her comfortingly. Sherlock stares around in sudden disappointment.

It’s damp. He’d known it was damp and unoccupied but the extent of the rot is worse than he’d recorded. And it’s small. Not even quite as big as 221B; just a couple of rooms mouldering down here in the dark, the back room already cluttered with cast-offs from the space above. There’s a selection of chrome chairs from the cafe, a stained armchair, a fold-out table; a mannequin Sherlock had once brought home to prank a would-be murderer.

It's no good at all.

"The trouble is, I just don't know what to do with it," Mrs. Hudson is saying. "It's not a nice place to live in, is it? And it's cold in the winter..."

"Recording studio?"

"No, I don't want people thumping away down here all hours of the day."

"Sound-proof it."

But now Mrs. Hudson isn't listening. She's seen Sherlock's face. Quietly she motions to Billy to shut it and shuffles over to slip her arm in his. "What did you want it for, love?"

Sherlock looks around the damp room one last time and confesses. "I thought storage."

"Well, you'd be welcome to it," she tells him, fingers caressing his arm. "But I wouldn't put anything precious down here. The mould is something ferocious."

No papers, no furniture he could care about. No experiments- all of them too fragile and susceptible to contamination. The space is just too unsuitable. And upstairs just too small.

"Are we finished?" Mrs. Hudson asks him kindly. She leans on his arm as they return to her flat.

"What about one of those storage places?" she says, pouring out more tea.

He shakes his head. John could do it. John would cut off an arm if the choice was four limbs or staying in 221B with his family. John can always, ironically, ditch the debris of his life. He culls through Bee's things on a regular basis, taking out bags of clothes and toys outgrown or not loved enough. Almost ruthlessly, John owns less and less in the confines of the flat as Bee and Sherlock's possessions accumulate.

'But I can't,' Sherlock thinks, torn. 'The whole point of keeping it is that I want it near me.'

Even when he'd left, it had been on the basis that he'd known it would all be there for him when he came back. If he came back.

The only things he's ever been good at throwing away are offers of friendship and himself.

"Oh crumbs, Billy," Mrs. Hudson says, "I've just remembered I forgot I was meant to bake a cake for bingo on Sunday and I haven't got any baking powder. Would you be a dear and run back to the shop for me?"

"I could just bugger off home if you want to talk," he replies, un-offended.

"Oh good. Would you mind?"

Wiggins sniffs and shrugs. "Nah, should probably get back. Ed'll be missing me. See you tomorrow?"

"What's happening tomorrow?" Sherlock asks, distracted from his own woes by sheer curiosity.

"Billy's taking me to that candlelight thing. The concert at St. Martin's in the Field. I did invite you," she adds, "But you said three rude things about Vivaldi."

"Oh, Vivaldi," Sherlock says, scornfully. "No wonder I deleted it."

“Later,” Billy says. He suffers Mrs. Hudson to kiss his cheek and then scurries away out the back door, rattling the bins as he goes. Once the kitchen has settled with just the two of them again, like the old days, she turns to him.

“You should talk it over, with John.”

“I know.”

“I don’t mind,” she adds, smiling so that he knows that she means it. “You silly goose. I’ve been expecting it for a long time, you know. Now, now, don’t look like that.” She rounds the table so she can squeeze his shoulders in a sideways hug. “It’s not the end of the world.”

But it is. It’s the end of everything, and it’s awful because...because they have to. And because part of him wants to.

“I must admit, I did think it would be John bringing it up first, but he knows how much you love it. I suppose he didn’t want to upset things.”

“No,” Sherlock says, thickly. “But I’ve been holding things back.”

“And don’t get any stupid ideas, now,” she adds. “I’m not going anywhere. I’ll be fine!” she laughs at his look of horror at the idea. “It’s more a worry as to what we’ll do with all the extra space.”

“We?”

“Well... me. Maybe I could start a B&B...”

“You’d hate it. You like having us here.”

“Well then, don’t move too far away, so I can still come and visit,” she says, matter of fact and she’s done it. She’s said it, and put it into words out loud. She goes on, relentless. “Do you think you’ll stay in London?”

“Yes. No. I don’t know. I need to ask John,” he realises. “Maybe somewhere... different.”

“You could do what you like, really. You’re not short of a penny or two.”

She’s right. The thought hits Sherlock like lightning that she is completely right. Certain parts of London remain outside their budget, but they have... options. They can do whatever they like.

“You just think about it,” Mrs. Hudson suggests, emptying the teapot and rinsing it. “I know you. All you need is to have a good long think about it, and you’ll get there.”

Outside of the corner store, John hangs up feeling numb. His hand hurts from how tightly it had closed on the phone.

“I want to go and see Dad.”

No.

‘No’ is his first, hardest reaction. No. Never. Better not to even acknowledge the man’s existence. Better to be above that and retain, like Sherlock so long had, a personal mythology of having sprung from the ether fully formed and unburdened by anything such as a childhood.

No.

And yet in the same breath as the 'no' and somewhere before the 'never', there's a hook of possessive need in him. To be involved. Or at least not be left out.

Or at least, not to seem cowardly.

Or at least, to get his own pound of flesh if that's Harry's purpose.

Or...

"I want to go and see Dad."

Once the slam of a car door would have sprung him from his bed or from the floor in front of the television and sent him running. That slam like a starter's pistol announcing 'Daddy's home', would have gone through him even in the depths of sleep and started his legs pedalling.

He always ran when he heard his dad coming, John thinks, right out and into his arms. Into that big presence of his, this god who could bear him up and show him the face he would become. The person he most longed to be.

John blunders away from the shop, fists pushing the seams of his pockets. Instinctively, he turns for the park, feeling too blown up to go under a roof just yet. The open space is sparsely populated, though the sky is a sharp blue following the storm. A few daffodils straggle bravely across the ground, endeavouring to lift their trumpets to the blue.

How can Harry want to do this?

He follows the path that he knows blind by now, all the way around to the children's play area. He does not intend to stop, but a distinctive voice shouts 'Bee!' out from the railings at him and he stumbles to a halt.

"Oh," he says, shaking the fog from his expression. "Hello, Luis."

The little boy shows him a letterbox smile that's all teeth and the madness of a toddler having fun. "Where's Bee?"

"Not with me today, I'm afraid. She's at nursery."

"Oh," says Luis, swinging on the railings. Then he lets go and scampers off towards the slide, pausing only to loop around his mother's knees as she approaches from the other side of the playground.

"Only me," John says, sinking deeper into his coat.

She's bundled up against the chill as well, quilted jacket with a scarf that only seems to emphasise how angular she is. Sandra nods, mirroring him on the other side of the rail.

"Hi," she says.

"Hi."

Her gaze drifts towards his ankles and then skips back up again. "Out alone today?"

"Just been to the shop," John says, pulling a squashed tube of Rolos from his pocket. She regards the crushed chocolate but makes no comment so that John feels he has to. "Just... having a walk."

"It's stopped snowing anyway," she rationalises for him. The wind has slapped roses into her cheeks.

"Yeah, but the rail signals are all bugged. Impromptu day off. Touch of cabin fever."

She gestures helplessly to her son who is tearing around the fireman's pole by one hand, head thrown back in the midst of some prehistoric frenzy. John chuckles. "You too? How's work?"

"Ugh," is all Sandra has to say to that.

Her smallness is a welcome distraction. The fact that she's here alone allows John to throw his wits onto something other than Harry's bombshell. He gestures to the stand just a little further down the park.

"I was going to get a coffee. Can I get you anything? Go on," he adds when she looks wary. "It's freezing out here."

"Espresso?" she says, feeling for her purse. John shrugs away her money.

"You can get the next one," he says instead, and goes to give the deserted vendor some custom.

They take up the park bench to drink them, the cups steaming hard, and periodically interrupted by Luis. He has the same dark eyes as his mother, like tunnels, and her caution around men he doesn't know well. It hits John hard, how the little boy skirts him now John's this side of the railing, squashing into his mother's side to whisper what he needs to tell her.

John lowers his cup as Sandra stares down into the depths of hers.

"Have things been alright? He's not tried to contact you?"

She shakes her head. "No. He's stayed away."

"Good. If you have any trouble--"

"Thank you, but no. I couldn't ask that again. I'm just glad he's gone and I can concentrate on my son." She sits still for a moment, so evidently thinking so hard about it that John doesn't like to interrupt. Then she says, watching Luis climb up into the wooden castle, "I should have done it myself."

"He would have just hit you," John hears himself say. "He wouldn't have listened. You were right not to put yourself and Luis in danger."

"No, I know. I know... I'm glad it's over. Yes," she decides, "End of the day, I don't care how it happens, I only want him gone, but I know as well that I wanted to be the one." She turns on him fiercely, years of anger brewing in her eyes. "You know? I wanted to be the one who could make him go. Make him feel small, *cabrão*. Tell him 'you don't own me, you don't own my son, *va' se foder*.'"

"So he knew. I could spit on him." And then just as quickly, she flattens all the rage away again under the surface as Luis emerges on the turret by the slide.

"Mama! Watch me!"

"I'm watching, baby."

They watch together as Luis thumps his bottom down on the metal and squeaks down the slope to

the bottom.

“Whoo! Go again.”

John’s coffee has already gone cold. He opens his mouth to say something and then changes track completely.

“This might be over-stepping a line, but would you and Luis like to come over to ours some time?” He turns to her on the bench. “Bee would love it. We can be civilised sometimes. Sherlock’s even been known to clean the kitchen when I tell him to.”

“I’ve got shifts most of next week...”

“It’s an open offer,” John says. “And this year, I’m thinking we’ll have an actual birthday party with some of Bee’s friends. We’d love Luis to come. Maybe not in the flat,” he adds. “We’ve barely got room to swing a sodding cat, but maybe at the soft play?”

Sandra’s lower lip slips out from between her teeth. “Ok.”

“Is that a ‘yes’?”

Sandra pulls a face as she nods. “Yes. Yes, it’s a ‘yes’.”

“Good,” says John softly. “Bee will love that. And don’t worry, we’re not inviting Paul.”

“Thank you.”

“It’s for Paul’s safety really. Mrs. Hudson’ll murder him if he cracks on about how bad birthday cake is for you, never mind Sherlock.”

“I mean for...” Sandra shrugs. “Understanding.”

John ends up shaking his head. “We’ve seen a lot, him and me. And... we’ve been through a lot. Things that are not nice. I’m glad we could do something. No regrets. And I do know what you mean. It’s... embarrassing. You feel embarrassed.”

“I feel ashamed,” she corrects him, softly. She twists the cup in her hands, though she has barely taken a sip, “That makes me angry.”

“Does, doesn’t it?” John agrees.

“Mama!”

“Hey, baby, you’re looking chilly.”

“I should head off,” John says, making space for Luis to wriggle into his mother’s lap. Sandra heaves him up, the crown of his head to her nose and starts to tug the boy’s mittens back on.

“Us too,” she says, edging the coffee out of harm’s way. Over her son’s head she lifts her chin to John in goodbye and then narrows her eyes and makes a little punching motion with one fist. Her seal of approval.

Go get them.

He tells Sherlock about Harry's call that evening, privately in the dust of their bedroom. Sherlock listens, the line of his shoulders sharpening as he does so.

"Will you go?"

For once, John does not dissemble. He nods slowly, still convincing himself, but it is a nod all the same.

"Should I come?"

"I want you to be with me," John says, "But I don't want you to see me. I don't want this," He spreads both hands, palms down, to indicate the bed, the room, the flat, this family. "To touch that. I want it to be two things."

"Should I come?"

"Can you be something I can come home to?" John asks, instead of no, and instead of yes. If Sherlock wants to follow, wants to add to the file that John knows he keeps hidden here somewhere, just in case, then he may.

"Always," Sherlock says, coming closer. "No need to ask me that."

Indre drives them. She's the only one with steady hands. John says nothing in the car, Harry just turns up the radio and stares out the window until they arrive.

"Here?" John asks, looking out.

"Here," Harry says, with more sadness than she realises. She opens the car door and waits for him to shuffle out of the back seat to join her on the pavement.

"Want me?" Indre asks, leaning over the passenger seat and out of the window.

"Be here for after," Harry says, touching her hands. "...I don't think we'll be that long."

The building has a double set of automatic doors of which only the first open. Harry thumbs the button at the side and the receptionist lets them through. 'Must cost,' John thinks. It's clean and nice and warm. The carpet is a royal blue and there's a tiny cafe in the back of the lobby. Free tea and coffee and cake.

It's not what he'd imagined.

"John," Harry says. She passes him the pen to sign in, and he scrawls his name distractedly.

"Room 215, on the second floor," the receptionist breezes. "Do you want someone to show you up?"

"No, we're fine," Harry says, flashing a blink-and-you-missed-it smile.

"No worries. Codes are by each door, just punch it in and hit the green button. And feel free to ask any member of staff if you have any questions."

"Thanks. ...How bad is it?" John asks. His lips are dry. "I mean, how is he today?"

"He's been a bit cranky about getting up lately, but he was up for breakfast this morning," she

replies. "If you want, I can page Jackie for you. She's his main nurse and can fill you in on anything you want to know."

"Thanks. We'll... after," John says. He clears his throat and gestures for Harry to go ahead towards the lift.

"I'm nervous," she says on the way up. "I'm really nervous, John."

"Mm," he says. With great deliberation he takes her hand for a brief moment. It's as much for his reassurance as hers. The lift trembles to a halt and opens silently.

"What number did she say?" John asks. His mouth feels like it's lined with old butter. His stomach cramps suddenly, sharp enough to make him hold his breath.

"2-1-5."

There are cases outside each room filled with pictures and personal effects to help the residents navigate back to and identify their quarters.

The door marked 'J. Watson' is half open but they stop, holding back. John stares into the case and feels the earth wobble beneath his feet. Next to him, Harry does the same, understanding skittering over the things this man and his carers felt important enough to define his identity.

"That's us," Harry mouths, unseen. She tries to point at the photo, and stubs her finger on the glass instead, the noise making them flinch. It's like a library in here.

The photograph is sun-bleached, the colours of the 1980's print job leached out to a brown which could be called apricot at best and urinal tideline at worse.

"Paignton Zoo," John says. He dimly remembers the trip. He remembers the t-shirts better. White ones, matching, with cartoony animals all over them. He'd inherited Harry's once she'd grown out of it, and so owned both of them for years.

John is gap-toothed in the picture and Harry stands next to him in a pair of enormous pink shorts. They both have ice-cream cones grasped in their fists. The span of years between here and there feels so great as to be fake.

Harry's hand closes on his shoulder, and then rummages down his arm to his fist.

"Stop that."

He shakes his hand loose and shakes his fingers too. He can feel his pulse in his knuckle, like a pain.

Harry plucks at his sleeve and gives the door a little push. She pats it awkwardly with her hand instead of knocking.

"Hello?"

She stops short and John blunders into the back of her, sending them both forward into the room. The bed is tucked out of sight behind the wall of the ensuite; it has hospital sides to it, for someone who needs a bar to hold to sit up. The old man is sitting catty-corner to the window. He is old in a papery, nodding way, even though the hair is still peppery with dark streaks. He makes a noise of enquiry as they shuffle into view, peering.

“Allen?”

Neither of them know who that is.

John unsticks his throat. “No, dad. It’s us. It’s John and Harry.”

“Harriet,” Harry corrects in a small voice. “Hi, Dad.”

The muscles in the old man’s face sink slightly as he treads over the murky spots in his memory. He pulls at his lip, and the index finger of the other hand wags on the arm of the chair as if he’s measuring against his memory how tall they’ve grown.

But neither of them knows if he understands who he is looking at yet.

Harry looks at John helplessly. John takes a deep breath and gestures her towards the foot of the bed. She takes a seat while he slowly moves a pile of vests from the stool at the dressing table and sits. “Do you remember us?”

“What? What kind of stupid question is that. Took you long enough to come see me.”

“Didn’t know where you were, dad,” John says, flatly. “You didn’t tell us.”

He shrugs expansively and shuffles through the papers. “Eh? Eh. Left that to her to sort out. Silly cow. Never mind. Tell her next time. So you’ve come to see me, then?”

“Don’t think we know anyone else here,” Harry points out. She has a bright pink mark high up on each cheekbone. “Don’t go around visiting old farts for fun.”

“You mind your manners,” he says, in a voice that throws them all back thirty years. He sits there, blue eyes under broken-veined lids scrutinising them. He pulls again at his lip and then reclines back in the chair, mouth crooking up at the corners.

“How’s my boy then?”

John’s breath sticks. It turns to feathers in his lungs, impossible to grasp and sharp at the ends.

“What do you want to know?”

“How’s my boy?”

“Fine.”

“John’s a doctor,” Harry says. John’s heart thuds in pace with her words. Of course, their father probably wouldn’t know.

“A doctor, is it? A doctor’s not bad.”

“I was in the army too,” John says, on a swell of spite. “I served in Helmand, I came back, I have a daughter. She’s three; nearly four. Harry’s an accountant. A graduated accountant,” he adds, looking at her. “And I’m really proud of her. So yeah. Thanks for asking. We’re doing great.”

The old man’s thin eyebrows rise, pulling on their heartstrings. “Well, well...” he says, slowly. “A doctor and an accountant. How about that.”

“How about that,” John repeats.

A silence laps across the three of them, the old man nodding. And John can’t believe how old he’s

got. How the giant of his memory has dwindled to one small person in an armchair with trembling hands. Years ago, he'd sworn that if they'd ever met again, if they ever in the great whole scheme of fate just happened to cross paths, he'd let his father have it. A fist, a dozen years of anger in one blow, and one tirade, but the man John had struck in his imagination had been young and fit.

This isn't the same at all.

"Warm today," the old man comments. "It's been a hot summer this year."

"It's only March."

"No, that's not right. It's... August. Nearly September."

"It's March 3rd."

"It's September! Don't argue with me, I've seen the paper. It's in the fucking paper, Allen!"

"I'm John," John says, sinking. "I'm John. Your son. You haven't seen me since I was ten years old."

"Where've you been then?"

"Growing up without a dad," John tells him. His vision has narrowed; not blurred, just narrowed to a hot dry prickle of white. "We were in foster care, for years. Years. Our whole childhoods, actually. You missed out."

"I grew up in London," their father tells them at length. "What was that house near Putney? Elmsbridge Road? There was a pear tree in the back garden, the one you fell from and broke your arm."

"Do you like it here, Dad?" Harry asks, hoping to diffuse the situation. She fractured her arm as a girl, once, but it had happened coming off her bike. The old man's memories are so confused that neither of them can follow his conversation.

"Eh. Eh. Full of wogs," the man grunts. He leans forwards and hisses conspiratorially. "They're all fucking thieves."

"Don't say that, Dad. That's not true," Harry says, uncomfortably. "They seem to be looking after you pretty well."

John stares at her. Of the two of them, he'd have thought Harry would be angrier. She usually is. She always is. Harry's the one who loudly refuses to give a shit about anyone and tell them so to their face. She's the one who bulldozes through brashly for better or worse, butting heads with the world. He can't believe how mild she's being.

She clenches her jaw against his stare and fixes a look out the window. "We can't stay too long," she says, cutting them both off. "Indre's waiting for us in the car." She turns back. "Indre is my girlfriend, Dad. And my best friend. I love her and we've been together for over a year."

The old man says nothing. There's confusion in his eye and a flinty look all at the same time. His gaze wavers towards John, and then back to Harry when John is not forthcoming. It's news to John too, after all.

Their father's face seems to narrow. "What kind of fucking foreign name is 'Andre'?"

“Indre. It’s Lithuanian.”

“The fuck’s that?”

John finds himself laughing suddenly. It starts off a bitter little thing and then grows until he is actually just laughing, snuffling through a giggle that he can’t control. Harry gapes at him, and that makes it worse. It’s like being in front of a teacher telling you to stop laughing, and he can’t.

“What the fuck is wrong with you?” Harry asks, irrationally indignant.

Somehow between gasps for breath he manages to stutter out ‘Sher-‘.

“Sherlock,” she says for him, and she doesn’t laugh exactly, but she gets it. She scoffs in disbelief and good-humour. “What kind of fucking foreign name is ‘Sherlock’?” she mimics, and John loses it then, hand clasped across his face, silent with the effort of laughing almost to the point of hysteria.

After a moment, John manages to get out, “It’s Lithuanian!” and they’re both gone, howling like a couple of maniacs, the old man just staring, lost.

John wipes his eyes eventually, hands shaking in a new way, and exhales. Next to him, Harry wobbles as she struggles to control herself. The old man comments, “Warm summer this year,” ignorant of the radiator ticking away in the corner of the room.

Opening his wallet, John slides out the photograph from between two ten pound notes and lays it on the table in front of him. The old man has to pluck it close to his face to see it, muddled.

“Where’s this from?”

“Christmas,” John says, tucking his wallet away again. “It’s me. That’s my family. That’s my daughter, and my partner, and our friends. You can keep that,” he adds, “I’ve got more. Loads more, actually.” He glances at Harry, aware that she’s not in the picture and suddenly aware of all the people they have; all their friends and extended family, who also aren’t.

‘I want that,’ John thinks. ‘God, we should do that. Get one big snap of everyone together someday.’

“Who’s this tosser I’m with?”

Harry wobbles again. “That’s not you, Dad, that’s John and his boyfriend. I didn’t think to bring one of me and Indre. Should have,” she adds in a mutter for John’s benefit. “Got some fucking cracking ones of us at Pride.”

John doesn’t say ‘bring them next time’ because they both know there won’t be a next time. If there were a next time, it would go no better than this, they would glean no better understanding than this, and James Watson would be no more present in his own body than this.

In many respects, it’s all been left too late. Or perhaps this is for the best. John flexes his hand and meets Harry’s eye and realises that’s why she isn’t angry. She’s disappointed, perhaps. Maybe later she’ll go home and cry or be bitter, or the anger will surface again later, but for now it’s gone deep. Harry, in her own way, has spent almost as much time working with ill and unhappy people as he has. In some ways, she’s better at it.

“Enjoy that,” John says of the photograph, rising from the stool. He shrugs his jacket around his shoulders and shoves his hands in his pockets.

“You off?”

“Yeah, we’re done,” John agrees, nudging Harry to stand and then looking at her questioningly. For a moment, her expression clouds, but whatever she’s going to say to the old man, she doesn’t. Instead she just lets her gaze glide past him and says, “Bye, Dad.”

“Tell Allen to drop by,” he tells them, already picking at his paper. “And I want to go out for lunch.”

“We’ll tell him,” John lies, and that’s it. It’s over. They don’t even close the door behind them, leaving it cracked open as per how they found it.

“He only asked about you,” Harry comments as they descent in the quiet of the lift.

“That doesn’t make me happy.”

“I know.”

“Just take it as proof that he wasn’t entirely ga-ga,” John replies. “The old shit was still in there somewhere. He knew what he was saying, didn’t he? He understood us.”

She nods. “Oh well. Do you think he’s really alright here?”

The lift doors open onto the lobby again, with its deep blue carpet and little cafe, all dumpy armchairs and home-made cake.

“I think he’s fine,” John says flatly. “I think he’s lead the life of fucking riley.”

She nods again, fists shoved deep in the pockets of her jeans. Then quietly she bumps him with the whole side of her body. Awkwardly, he bumps her back. Harry’s mouth twists. He puts an arm around her.

“Let’s go find Indre,” he suggests. “And go get...hot chocolate?”

“Alert the press, the man learns,” she replies, and then smiles at him. John lets his hand slide down her back and return to his pocket.

“You know what I just thought?” he asks, “All that fuss about him, but we almost never talk about Mum.”

She pauses, shoulders falling a fraction. “You want to talk about Mum?”

“I was just wondering if it might be nice to go and visit Mum some time. Make sure... you know. The plot’s being looked after.”

Harry swallows. “I’d like that.” She nods. “We could, um... pick a weekend or something?”

John takes a deep breath and a step forward towards the car park. Indre is sprawled out in the driver’s seat, the radio pumping.

“A weekend,” he agrees.

John fills the right hand side of the bed. When he breathes, it’s like the house breaths, and day by day it becomes less special. Sherlock lies with his head pressed into the pillow, contemplating the

raw power of oxygen. A fire-starting gas, everything burns brighter and life thrives in the presence of oxygen.

The evening had been quiet. John had told him what had passed at the nursing home in short sentences, and Sherlock had as always observed and not needed to ask questions, and only nodded when John stepped out to phone Ella. And yet it feels better. John is sleeping deeply, worn out, but it's better.

John snores, ever so slightly. 'But I'd miss it if he weren't here,' Sherlock thinks, and God, that's horribly like his parents as well. Mummy complains about his father but she wouldn't know what to do if he suddenly changed all his habits.

Reaching over John's chest, Sherlock picks up his wallet from the nightstand and flicks it open with his thumb. The photo is still bright, kept carefully and uncreased, the baby's eyes big and blue. When she sits on his knee now, it goes dead after a while. How has she gotten so big.

Sherlock rolls on his back, the wallet propped on his chest bone and he stares at the photo. He should have photos in his wallet too. Not that it's necessary. Not that it isn't silly and sentimental. It covers up vital medical information, in case John is hit by a car or stuffed in another bonfire or something.

Sherlock.

"Hello Molly."

Not really. She's not wearing her lab coat, and her hair is loose around her neck. *Are you alright?*

Sherlock considers. 'Yes,' he thinks, easily. 'Yes, I'm well.' He regards the ceiling, thumb smoothing the plastic cover in the wallet, and feels Molly smile. *Did you forget, you silly man?*

'What did I forget? Forget what?'

Christmas.

He nearly sits up in bed, puzzled at himself. "But it's April."

John's breath catches and Sherlock stills, mind still whirring. Christmas? Christmas? What did he mean by Christmas? And which one? The Christmas just gone had been nothing more than mediocre. Having done more than two now, Christmas has no great significance any more.

'But it did,' Sherlock thinks, suddenly, senses lighting up. Despite the fact that he hasn't smoked in months and months, there is a perpetual smell of old tobacco in the room, caused in part by the collection of old cigarette butts in albums on top of the wardrobe.

The collection is no longer complete. The specimens from one year of his time at university are gone; tossed to make for a photo album. For Christmas.

For John and a half.

Sherlock lies back, breathing the fading smell of ashes, and feels annoyed with himself. It seems so obvious. People don't like things in halves. They like wholes, and in this Sherlock is unexceptional.

"I'm an idiot," he breathes.

“That’s nice,” John answers, half asleep.

“John, I want it all.”

John gropes blindly over the covers and pats his thigh. “In the morning,” he tells him. “When I’m awake.”

The idea unfolds. Now that it’s in his head, Sherlock can’t ignore it. It follows him around minute to minute crowding his thoughts with what could be and what could happen, both positive and negative, and he has no more patience to stall things. Why not? Why not just do it?

On Wednesday, Sherlock makes arrangements. John is at work and Bee is at nursery, which simplifies the matter of keeping John out of it, but then Sherlock’s not spent years running circles around John Watson for nothing. He can still keep secrets when he has a mind to.

He cleans the flat, or at least, rearranges it a little. He moves the dust around and covers the worst of the sins where possible. At the end of it, the living room looks only marginally different from when he started, and there’s a real possibility that John will give Mrs. Hudson all the credit if he even notices the difference at all.

Standing and taking it all in, a magazine tucked into his armpit, Sherlock considers the flat, and then spends a second hour messing it up again until it feels right. It’s staging, he tells himself. John needs to understand.

John must already understand, but Sherlock feels like he needs to underline it tonight, to prove that he understands it too.

The kitchen is another matter. Away with the chemistry set, and for the sake of hygiene Sherlock thoroughly scrubs the oven before using it. He removes an old green vase and a plant pot from the windowsill, nudging the photos of himself into the space left behind. Funny, that little diptych. He doesn’t remember when the one of him as a boy was taken or who took it. He can’t even remember what it was he had been holding that had so absorbed his attention, but it doesn’t matter. John loves it. That’s enough reason to put up with it.

Sherlock makes a note to source some photographs of John one day, and then pauses. They could have a whole wall of pictures, he thinks. There could be somewhere to properly hang his sketches and his taxidermy. Or something new.

It’s been a long time since he bought something new for the sole purpose of decorating.

All at once he can see it; a room with a wall lined with cabinets full of drawers, and each drawer arranged, neat, the pins gleaming silver above each tiny carcass. Not merely husks in plastic baggies shoved in a box under his bed, but a Collection.

He forgets why he’s holding the vase.

Right.

Plans.

He dumps it on the empty kitchen table and fetches his coat; there’s a lot that he needs to do before nightfall.

When John comes home, he's unsurprised to find the flat is more or less the same weary tip it was this morning. He's completely flabbergasted to discover that Bee is spending the night with Lestrade, and that Sherlock has cooked dinner.

"Have I... forgotten a date?" John asks, too stunned to finish walking into the kitchen.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, is it our anniversary or something?"

"Which anniversary when?" Sherlock asks, staring at him. John stares back.

"Good question. I'm just wondering, not that it isn't very nice and not that I'm at all unhappy, don't get me wrong, but what's er, inspired all of this."

"It was just time," Sherlock says simply, pouring the wine with a flourish. "Don't you think?"

"I don't know what to think," John tells him, stealing a kiss, "But I'm smart enough to know when to shut up. It's not drugged is it?"

"John. Really? Why would I drug a goose? Why would anyone put anything in a goose?"

"Because you're completely barmy and life's full of weird things. But thank you. This looks lovely."

'Lovely' is very nearly an understatement. The kitchen table has been swept clean and set for two, whilst the air hums with the rich smell of roasting. It is a single course, already served. The bird is golden, dripping, and a sight for sore eyes after lunchtime's flabby cheese sandwich.

"Why a goose?" John asks, taking his seat. "It's actually a goose?"

"It's a small goose," Sherlock agrees, not wishing to discuss how he'd gone out for a chicken and then ended up in a panic purchase instead. Still, the goose has crisped the potatoes up a treat, and they crackle heavily onto the plates as he tosses them out of the serving bowl.

"Mrs. Hudson pulled all the stops out," John says, teasing.

"Oh shut up and eat it," Sherlock tells him, squeezing into his own chair and tossing the dishcloth over the wreckage in the sink.

"I will," John enthuses. He ploughs in and it's good. He's always suspected Sherlock could cook well if he ever put his mind to it and the proof is in the Yorkshire pudding. "So," John says, when they're halfway down the bottle and the goose is looking well savaged, "What did I do to deserve all this?"

Sherlock lowers his fork, licking gravy from the corner of his mouth. "Would you like to know now?"

"Any reason why not?" John counters, and Sherlock supposes that is the truth of the matter after all. He puts down his cutlery and wipes his hands and considers. He's been rehearsing this all day.

"Then, it's this. John, lately I've come to the conclusion that your input has not in all these years made me so much as one iota more intelligent."

He interrupts before John can huff, “But you’ve made me use my intellect more wisely. You’ve made me wiser.” He looks suddenly sad. “Anyone can be clever, John. You can train cleverness into people.” He pinches his lips. “You can train cleverness into dogs. But you can’t train right choices. I’ve made almost every bad choice there is, except one and I’m looking at him.”

“Blimey, this sounds serious,” John comments, eyes crinkling up. He’s flattered. He shifts in his chair, making it creak, sweating slightly. He’s never taken compliments very well. Sherlock gives them out so unpredictably too.

“John, shut up. I’m trying to say something and I hate talking.”

John laughs. “You? Hate talking- alright, I’ll shut up,” he says, seeing Sherlock’s face. “I’m listening.” He nudges Sherlock’s shin with the toe of his shoe under the table and repeats it.

“I’m listening.”

Sherlock is nervous, but he’s had the words in his head for days.

“John,” he begins again. “I’m aware that in given social convention I’m supposed to say something along the lines that I’m immensely fond of you and that I can’t imagine life without you,”

John says nothing, confused. He smiles anyway, a little thing, because Sherlock seems so serious, and suddenly John has an inkling of what is happening and it renders him speechless.

“The thing is,” Sherlock says with a hint of hesitation. “I can’t say that.”

John blinks. “No?”

“No. Because I have lived without you John, and without exaggeration it was bleak, and foolish and-and barely comparable to living as I know it now.”

John’s mouth falls open slightly.

“We have...made stakes against the world,” Sherlock clears his throat, “And we are friends, and... we are partners in our work. We have a daughter. You have always, against every adversity, asked me so many times, in so many ways if I could commit. You’ve put yourself by my side and I was wondering if, if you’re amenable, if I could legally put myself at yours.”

John stares at him. Sherlock waits.

“That’s your cue to... say something...”

“I uh-“

“Mm?”

“Right so- you-“

“Mm.”

“Want to...”

“Yes.”

“...Marry me?”

What?

Sherlock's breath catches and he's at once somewhere up in the air, pinballed up on a flipper and mind pinging in a mad zigzag around the bonus buffers, and then he's lit up completely. He's hit the high score and already cracking right open into a smile. "Of course. Of course I want to." He laughs into his fist and then fumbles around behind the toaster. "And this. This is--"

He fetches from the clutter a folder which John could not have noticed. John watches with curiosity as Sherlock brings it back to the table. Wordlessly, Sherlock slides it across the wood to him and sits there expectantly as John first wipes his fingers on the napkin and then picks it up.

"It's not a case?"

Sherlock shakes his head. "Open it."

John pauses with his finger on the edge. "Did you really just propose to me?"

"Open it."

"Ok, ok, I'm just," John says, thrown. He's not clear if he's said 'yes' properly yet or not, but Sherlock makes an urgent motion that prompts him to flip the folder open. John stills when he realises what it is. "Oh, Sherlock."

"It would be... good, wouldn't it? And we could marry. I could marry you."

"Sherlock, slow down," John cuts him off, and then swallows. His fingers shake as he touches the papers. "Come here."

"You don't think-?"

"Come here, you bloody fool, I need to--" John stumbles up from his chair, bumping the table and pulls him into a warm kiss. It's a kiss that demands that one of them comes around the table, and John does, papers drifting from the folder unheeded across the kitchen floor.

It's a kiss that's familiar now, and sweetened by intensity.

John's thumb touches against the soft part of his face right next to his ear, his fingers in Sherlock's hair as he pulls him closer. When John kisses him like this, it loosens all the weight that ties them to the ground and makes his head sing. It might only be the heat driving down his body that keeps them on this mortal plane at all.

Their chins brush, John's a little rough with a five o'clock shadow, and prickly, the same movement making their chests press close together. Sherlock's running out of breath and the effort of it pushes him against John.

When he pulls back slightly, it's to look John full in the eye even though the world has gone watery. Sherlock rubs his hands in under the edge of John's jumper, the wool hot against his hands. John thumb passes under first one eye and then the other.

Sherlock hadn't expected this.

John's mumbles something against his lips, his face nosing close down Sherlock's cheek so that the short hair at the fringe tickles Sherlock's skin.

"I love you."

Sherlock can't quite answer. His throats glued up.

"Oh."

John's chuckle reverberates down Sherlock's arms. "You're welcome, by the way," John adds.

"It's nothing," Sherlock says. He closes his eyes but he allows himself one long slow blink, and to tighten his grip around John's middle. They wobble slightly. He can feel the steady thumping of John's heart and John must be able to feel the running of his own.

When he opens his eyes again, John is smiling one of his long slow smiles that lights him up from the inside out. It's catching. It makes Sherlock feel like a boy sailing at the beach again, even though he's grinning like a wrinkled fool.

"Are we really getting married?" John breathes against him. "My God, you don't have to marry me to adopt Bee. I don't need you to marry me."

"That's not quite..." Sherlock "But we might as well, if we're going to tidy up all the loose ends..."

John barks with laughter. "You arse. You complete arse," he says, fondly and kisses him again in the sprawl of adoption papers, in the middle of their home, and says there and then with his whole body, 'I do.'

Chapter End Notes

- 1) The title comes from the song 'New World Coming by Nina Simone.
- 2) I can't believe I referenced Georgina all the way back in Part 2 and she's only now ventured into the story. Similarly Sally. Did you know we have had almost NO Sally this entire time. Trust me, I've been SUPER aware of this, but I didn't really get an opportunity to use her much and this particular scene really benefitted from characters who haven't seen Sherlock or John since before they got together in any sense of the word.
- 3) Isn't it awful when you hear yourself say something and think 'oh no, that was straight from my mother's mouth'? Unfortunately I think it's inevitable.
- 4) The Cameelius black and blue humph and associate verse about the camel is from Rudyard Kipling's Just So Stories 'How the Camel got his Hump'. Admittedly, it's one of his preachier ones.
- 4) Allen is a mystery. Please take your best and wildest guesses on the identity of the Unknown Allen, and then let us know in the comments. The weirder, the better.
- 5) The J. of J. Watson stands for James. This was mentioned all the way back in Part 1 (!!!) so you're forgiven if you forgot that. As with Bee there are deliberate choices about naming and how name-references to characters are written throughout that scene which I feel the tiniest bit pleased with myself about even though it is a bit pretentious. Enjoy that. I have.
- 6) If you're wondering/forgot, their mother is named Helen Elizabeth in this fic. There's no real reason for this name, other than it sounded suitably middle-class and bland.

7) That proposal scene was written SO FUCKING LONG AGO.

8) This chapter was edited in haste as I ran around getting ready for the races so there may well be some typing errors that escaped my notice. Learn to love them.

9) Oda, that's it? It's over. Say it ain't so!

10) It ain't.

In the next few days I'll be posting an epilogue, or two, and a whole chapter of the deleted scenes and back content for you to enjoy. Right now though I'm going to crack a bottle of something open and luxuriate in having the house to myself and a slight breeze.

Love, Oda.

Interlude 6: Sentimental Waltz

Chapter Summary

As for the rest...

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Interlude 6: Sentimental Waltz

Mycroft has not yet retired. He won't, Anthea suspects, until he absolutely has to, when he's 70-something and has to be firmly rolled out the door and the locks changed. She doesn't mind in the slightest.

The work has changed, of course. The world keeps on changing and progressing, and all they can do is keep their eyes firmly fixed on the boiling surface of it and try to predict what's going to rise up next. They've moved so far beyond where they started out, it sometimes staggers Anthea to think about it.

She remembers computers with green type on black screens; the first she ever broke apart and figured out. Now the technology is mind-blowing. 'And yet still,' she thinks, dismissing documents from her screen with a flick of the finger, 'we have children who can break it apart and figure it out.' She glances up.

The woman at the opposite desk is perfectly poised as she manipulates a string of data.

"I have the Holborn files online," she reports, looking up with a glimmer of a smile.

"Thank you, I'll take them," Anthea replies.

"Over to you, Panther." A flick and the material is in front of her at once.

Anthea tuts. The other woman shows a flash of humour and then it vanishes again as Mycroft emerges from his den. "A slight change of plans," he announces, "I'm going out for lunch."

"Give our regards to Lestrade," Anthea says. He huffs and then pauses between the desks.

"You're leaving early tonight," he says to the younger woman. She nods.

"My brother's conducting this evening. Anthea said I could go."

"Yes. It's going to rain; take an umbrella."

"Yes, Mr. Holmes."

"He's in a good mood," she comments, once he's gone. "Usually he makes a fuss."

"He's getting mellow in his old age," Anthea replies. She picks up a few memos, too vital to risk throwing around on the system, and takes them to Mycroft's desk for his return. While she's there, she straightens things up a little. There's a silver frame with a long-out-of-date picture of a little

blonde girl in it, wrapped in the arms of Mycroft's younger brother.

The younger woman stretches and fiddles a loose strand of hair back into place. Anthea glances at her. Her colleague had been a little blonde girl once too. She's 25 now with all the graduation photographs, and still as brilliant and almost as fierce. Some days Anthea's glad they're on the same side. She wonders how Sherlock and John are coping, sending their daughter away from home for the first time.

"At any rate," the younger woman continues, "I'd better finish this before I go."

"No lunch?" Anthea asks, knowing what's coming.

"Maybe if someone brings me something, kindest Anthea-Panther?"

"Flora, don't be a baby."

Flora laughs, showing her teeth. Anthea types rapidly into her system and then, minutes later when Flora's focussed on her work again, says, "Look in your desk drawer."

"You're too good to me!" Flora exults, upon finding the sandwich there. Satisfied, she bites into it, still processing code one-handed.

Mycroft hasn't retired yet, Anthea thinks, but when he does, they'll be ready.

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"Alright, well, text me when she gets there. Yep. She'll be fine, stop fussing, you old bag."

Harry leans back in her chair, rolling it away from the desk in the living room. Her sandwich drops crumbs on her leg and she frowns.

"She's going to Edinburgh, not Timbuktu. Yes, I know it's a long way, but rumour has it, Scotland's at least as civilised as we are. Anyway, you said she'd be driving with a friend."

Harry picks crumbs off herself and chews through a quarter of her sandwich while John twitters on the other end of the line.

"John, you're being a twat. Having stupid hair and piercings doesn't make you a reckless driver. You're a reckless driver, and you've got boring hair. Come to think of it, Sherlock's got stupid hair and he's a good driver."

Indre raises an eyebrow from where she's sprawled on the sofa. Harry rolls her eyes and mimes a yapping mouth with one hand.

"Listen, I've got to go," Harry says, cutting John short. "Because I've got stuff to do! Shit to plan. A will to live to maintain without my baby brother worry-warting at me. Trust me, John, she's gonna be fab. Anyway, have you got your dinner orders?"

Harry leans further back in the chair and whisks a hand at Indre who passes her a pen and a kiss without thinking twice about it.

She scribbles a note on the paper and chuckles.

"Yeah, that's fine. But if you don't turn up, we're charging you. Well I know you; last minute it'll be 'Oh well, there was a bee crisis' or 'Someone got murdered and we had to go to London'."

Indre wags a finger and frowns.

“Indre says she’ll hunt you down if you don’t come to our wedding. ... Because neither of us wants to do the bloody speech!”

Harry laughs at John’s reply, full throated. “Listen, Samia’s coming all the way from Los Angeles, you can come to London from fucking Sussex. Yes, I know she loves me more, that’s a given. Alright then. Go and bother your detective,” she finishes, and hangs up.

“Let’s just not order their meals,” Indre suggests, wicked.

Harry snickers. “Nah, they’ll come,” She says, dropping her phone on her desk and cramming the rest of her sandwich in her mouth. She chews, shifting over to plop onto the sofa next to Indre. “I’ve got Bee on their case.”

She grins through a mouthful of tuna and brown bread.

“You’re gross,” Indre says, lovingly, and kisses her forehead.

The office overlooking St James’ park has grown no bigger and no smaller over the years. People have come and gone, but some remain. The mission is still the same.

The radiator is bunged up and needs bleeding, but no one’s had the time or presence of mind to get around to it. Instead, one of the volunteers brought in a pair of plug-in space heaters and they make do. The computers are out of date, but the chatline works. The phones are old but they still connect; it’s enough to do what they’re needed to do.

“Afternoon,” she says, “Everyone alright?”

A thumb is raised from behind a screen- he’s on a call, but that’s fine. As long as everyone knows what they’re doing. She has her own desk now, and spends more time managing admin than taking calls. It’s a job now.

She sits down with a puff, shedding her scarf and unzipping her coat but leaving it on until she’s adjusted to the temperature indoors. Her shoes squeak on legs of her chair. She logs in and checks the boards, checks her email, checks the accounts.

The phone rings. She answers.

“Hello, you’ve connected to the Safe Steps Switchboard. My name’s Chanielle. I’m happy to talk to you.”

In central London, it’s business as usual.

Lestrade stands outside in a patch of late summer sunshine, not smoking. It’s been years and he’s still not smoking, but he likes to come out and take a smoke break anyway. He drums his fingers on his cup, idly mulling over his latest caseload.

From the exterior, not much has changed. More gum on the floor, maybe.

As he stands there, Donovan arrives back, looking tired. She's been in court all morning.

"Hey, Sal. How'd it go?"

"We got him," she reports, glad. "He's going for a long holiday in a small room." She lights a cigarette and wafts the smoke away from him.

"Congrats."

"He'd have had to wriggle hard to get off the hook," she demurs. "We had solid forensics on him."

"Good for you," he says, nonetheless.

"How are you, you old dog? Haven't seen you in ages."

They work in different teams now; Sally leads her own. By the time she retires, Lestrade thinks, she's going to have mopped her way through most of Scotland Yard. He shrugs.

"Same old, same old."

"Waiting for his nibs?" she asks. She's the only one who knows, because she's the only one who put two and two together and then had the balls to ask him.

Sheepish, Lestrade gives a pleased little shuffle. "Yeah. We're going to get some lunch."

"Day time fraternising, ooh get you," she says, puffing. The ring on the chain around her neck winks in the sun. She won't wear it on her finger- too dangerous, she says. She drops the cigarette and treads it out with her high heel.

"Well, have fun," she says, "I've got some heads to go and bang together."

"Enjoy it," he says, basking in the sun. She laughs and waves him off.

Wiggins stumps down the stairs, scratching the back of his head and yawning. He pushes open the door to the downstairs flat and sticks his head inside.

"Aright, Marth'?" he shouts.

Mrs. Hudson is crabbing around the kitchen, making tea. She turns, blinking, and then adjusts her hearing aid.

"Morning, dear. Kettle's on."

"Thanks. Shopping today, innit? Where's your list?"

"On the fridge, but only if you're sure it's no trouble? How's that flat upstairs? I expect it needs a good dust and a Hoover."

"Done it yesterday," Billy says, reading the list. She's not been up the steep stairs to 221B in over a year, but she still offers anyway. Billy suspects she can't hear the Hoover through the floor and thinks he's lying.

"Tea," she says, punting a cup across the tabletop to him. "And you got another of those horrible

deliveries. I left it in the hall.”

“Brill,” Billy says, scampering off to look. “That’s crickets.”

“It’s chirping,” Mrs. Hudson complains. “It’s not right.”

“Wolfgang and Ed’ll only eat live food,” Bill points out, not for the first time. “They’re particular. Could be worse,” he adds, leaning back in the kitchen. “Could be mice.”

“Not in my house,” Mrs. Hudson says firmly. “I draw a line and absolutely not! No snakes!”

Billy chortles and Mrs. Hudson pretends not to be amused. She loves their squabbles, which are as familiar and well-worn as old slippers. Billy runs the case of crickets upstairs and empties it into the tank he keeps for the purpose. In the second, larger tank, the lizards bask and blink.

The decor is still much the same, though the details are different. Same wallpaper, different paintings. Same kitchen, different experiments. The decor is a mishmash from the bad old days of Sherlock Holmes, and the startlingly opposite tastes of Billy Wiggins and Company.

The first floor bedroom is in constant use; the second floor one more sparingly so. Molly stayed there throughout Mrs. Hudson’s recovery from her hip operation, once Sherlock had been persuaded to go home.

She’d stayed a little longer than that, because she’d wanted to. Toby had just recently gone to where all good cats go. Molly had missed him terribly. Now and then, she stays again. It’s complicated. It’s just a room.

There’s another cat now, with a tuxedo front and other than Baker Street, other than her flat in London, Billy knows there’s another house she goes to in Ascot. He has not let himself deduce if it is a spare room or otherwise. Molly is discrete.

It’s complicated, but she kind of likes it like that.

Billy shrugs through the complexity regardless. He has a friend in Molly if nothing else, and a business partner. Unlike Sherlock, he takes any case, even if it is just cheating husbands. It doesn’t bore him. There’s a certain satisfaction in ratting them out. Once in a while something juicier turns up, and Molly’s happy to help. She has a patent in her name, now, and the freedom to do what she likes.

He compared them to Sherlock and John once, just once, and then had the very good sense to never do so again. She’s right- he’s no Sherlock Holmes and she’s not his Watson. It’s Hooper and Wiggins or nothing, and together they’ve had some respectable successes. There’s a noticeboard of thank you letters to prove it, one of which no less, is a birthday card from Donovan.

Then again, Donovan likes them. Billy calls her ‘Ma’am’ and Molly does things by the book. Sherlock scoffs constantly, but it brings in clients and steady income. It’s not as glamorous, but Billy’s got no interest in finding a Moriarty to contend with.

Billy thumps back downstairs, whistling tunelessly and scratching at his arm and the sleeve of ink that first originated in the crook of his elbow.

“Right, then, Mrs,” he says, shrugging into his hoodie. He picks up his mug and drains it in one go. “Let’s get us to the shops.”

“And the newsagents,” Mrs. Hudson says, collecting together her shopping bags. “I want some

rizzlers. Put a coat on, it's cold out."

"I got my scarf," he reasons. She's not convinced.

Bullied into dressing for the weather, regardless of if it makes him look cool or not, Billy walks her to the shop, like he does every week. He'll carry the shopping back, and wait while she talks to almost every neighbour on the way without complaining. He's got his phone for company, and the promise of a run of clients this afternoon. Later on, he's got his chemistry club.

Besides, if he's good, Mrs. Hudson will buy him a tube of Rolos.

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"That's it, hold him up there."

The stallion flinches back on his hocks, eyes rolling. The photographer eyes him warily. It's no laughing matter to see a quarter tonne of horseflesh fling itself up in the air on a whim, never mind when you've got a camera this expensive in your hands.

He's a brute of an animal. The groom is trying to edge out of shot on the end of the lead rope, and the stallion is taking it as permission to misbehave. His ears swivel back and forth- mostly back. He's bitten two members of staff before and is crafty about finding new ways to pin people to the wall. 'He's an absolute bastard,' Tolly thinks, fondly. He could be a winner.

"Move Spanish more towards the gate so he can see her," Tolly bawls over the yard. The second groom tugs the mare he's leading across as ordered, and the stallion whinnies, high and ear-splitting. The mare has caught his interest and he stands, knees locked at four corners of a square, head erect, ears pricked, brimming with vitality.

The photographer hastily clicks.

"This do?" he asks.

Tolly shields the sun from the display and leans over his shoulder to look. "That one's perfect," she says. The grooms disperse to put the horses back, the stallion pogoing. He's young, with a lot of training ahead of him, but she's hopeful they'll see something out of him in the next season.

The cameraman fiddles with the machinery in the back of his car and comes back a few moments later with a dry print. Tolly admires it; the gleam of muscle under a bay coat so dark you could mistake it for black. "That's great."

"Is this one for your wall?"

"Not until he wins," Tolly says, still looking at the picture. "No, this one I'm sending to someone. Can you run me off a couple of surrounds for it? I've got a frame, but I want his race name printed on it. Usual size."

"Sure," the photographer says, fiddling with his machinery. "What's he going to be registered under?"

"Haven't quite decided yet. It's either going to be Deerstalker Dandy, or Sure Luck's Source," Tolly says, grinning. "Think I'll send them both, and see which annoys him the most."

"What?" asks the photographer.

Tolly laughs. "Never mind, just print 'em," she says, turning back to survey the yard. One of the rides is heading out. The stallion throws up his head and yells a long high challenge. Distantly, he is answered. The photographer backs out of the workshop in his van and holds out two surrounds for her, printed with the gold lettering.

One of the jockeys leans over the gate as he passes. "Dilly's looking for you," he calls. "Back paddock."

"On it," Tolly shouts back. "Later, Ben."

"Later!"

She tucks the prints into her jacket and the dogs follow her, scuttling their heels across the straw flecked concrete, like time hasn't changed a bit.

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Bill's car scrapes the hedges as he drives too fast up the lane. The end of summer rain has made the trees grow like crazy and suckers ding off of his windshield and rattle his wing mirrors. Bill whistles through his teeth.

The gravel crunches under his tyres as he pulls up outside the house- the old porta-cabin is gone, pulled down in favour of a new-fangled security system, and the dogs.

They charge out the house, baying, a scrap of spaniel and a beagle, who promptly cocks its leg and pees on his number plate.

"Oi!" Bill yells, opening the door. The spaniel howls and savagely licks his hands in greeting. They're old friends. "Whosa girl? Whosa beautiful puppy, eh? Get down." He rumples her ears and pushes her off, clambering out the driver's seat. He honks the horn twice before slamming the car door. The beagle charges in circles.

An upstairs window cracks open and Sholto sticks his head out. "Stop making a row," he calls down. Bill takes his sunglasses off and laughs up at him.

"Come down and make me, you grumpy old shit."

Grumbling, Sholto closes the window and Bill hears movement inside the house. The spaniel rolls over to show her tummy, groaning. "Tart," Bill says, scrubbing his fingers down her hairy chest until her back legs ping with ecstasy.

The door opens and Sholto emerges, greyer again since Bill last saw him, but standing straighter. He walks without a cane, although still with a limp. The scars have faded to the colour of milky coffee.

"Murray," he says, formal as always. Bill shakes his hand, glad to see him. "Ready to go?"

"Let me just send the dogs in. Go on, in! Back in, now."

The spaniel scuts through the door at once, tongue lolling. The beagle has to be collared and pulled, tail between his legs, looking like the most abused animal in the world. Sholto shuts them both in the dog cage in the hall. The beagle howls.

"Shush! Where's your bone? Here, eat that. Good dog. Stay."

“Poor doggos.”

“They’re bloody terrors, don’t let them fool you,” Sholto says, getting in on the passenger side.

“How are you doing?” Bill asks, once they’ve pulled out of the drive. Sholto nods. “Well for the most part. Manage to avoid the stomach bug going around at least.”

“He told me about that,” Bill comments. “Upchuck galore.”

“He wasn’t too bright, no,” Sholto agrees, in the understatement of the year. “It was porcelain one end and a bucket the other.”

Bill laughs, and changes the subject. “How’s his new leg? Must be good if he’s competing on it.”

“He’s happy with it,” Sholto agrees. “It’s weighted much better than the last one, so it’s more comfortable for longer wear. He doesn’t get such bad backache from running on it.”

“Good!”

They talk about Sholto’s estate; the young woodland starting to mature and the butterflies. They talk about last winter and the storms up the coast which damaged the roof, and Bill’s wife and his most recent trip overseas.

“She’s getting another practice in Brighton, so I thought I’d settle there too for a bit,” Bill says, shrugging. “Get cosy.”

“Oh?”

“Yeah. We like Brighton. Plenty of nightlife and we’ve got friends with similar interests there. Besides, I think we’ve had enough of the long-distance stints.”

“It gets hard,” Sholto agrees. “Turn here; there’s the sign.”

Bill brings them into the village, past a temporary neon pink sign. Further on, there’s a tiny spattering of bunting by the finish line.

They park and join the milling crowd; friends and family, waiting for the runners to come home. The cafe and pub are taking advantage of the moment, spilling out onto the street. Bill wheedles them two chairs on the edge of a table so they can sit facing down the high street.

The first runners come in, sweating, arms up for a cheer from the crowd. Bill and Sholto clap politely, and order drinks. One by one, more runners trickle by.

“He said it’d take him longer,” Sholto says, when they’re halfway down the cup.

“Yeah, of course,” Bill answers. “Have you heard from John lately?”

“Not much; I think they’ve been busy packing the kid off to university, and Sherlock lost a hive, so I’d say John’s had his hands full.”

“Did you send anything for her 18th?” Bill asks.

“Card and some credit for textbooks.” Sholto looks at him when he feels Bill’s disapproval. “It’s what she needed.”

“We sent a big bottle of fizz.”

“What she wanted,” Sholto admits.

“Don’t worry,” Bill claps his shoulder. “This is why you’re the godfather and I’m only the cool uncle. Isn’t that your bloke?”

Sholto rises in his seat to scan the incoming crowd of runners and smiles, starting to clap. Bill whoops from his seat. The runners slog in on tired legs, slowing and reaching for the bottled water being handed out past the finish line. Sholto’s smile grows.

Bill lounges back in the chair and watches him go over, clapping the other man on the back once he’s free of the tangle of people and embracing him. The other man is panting, his one leg trembling, but he’s smiling. Sholto indicates Bill through the crowd and the man raises a hand in greeting.

Bill lifts his in return.

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The weather is stifling hot compared to London, but fresher than the cities, up on the edge of the mountains. Nonetheless, Victor’s shirt clings to him the moment he steps out the air conditioning of the car.

The estate house is set with a view over the plantations, which are a sea of green extending almost to the forest. The house is green too, with long sloping roofs to deal with the seasonal rains. It’s been touched up in lieu of his arrival, Victor is pleased to note. Some of the paint looks fresh.

A lanky boy of around nine is lounging on the porch in the shade, eyes fixed on his game. Victor strolls over.

“Where’s your mother?”

“In the house, she has a headache,” the boy says not looking up.

“And don’t I get a hello?”

“Hello, Pita.”

Victor clicks his tongue. “Lazy boy,” he chides. He leans on the veranda and surveys his domain, while his son bleeps and picks at his game, oblivious. Or pretending to be. He’s as smart as Victor was at his age; smart enough to know his parents aren’t terribly invested in one another. Stupid enough to think the course of his life is going to be plain sailing with money to burn and a company just to walk into later in life. Victor has had one or two thoughts about that, but there’s still time to do something with the boy, now that he’s old enough.

Victor hums, toying with his own phone. In a week, he’ll be out of India again, back to East Asia. Back to one of his favourite haunts, a house in Nagoya and one of his pining boys. He’d prefer Germany again but a gut feeling and a silver snuffbox are telling him not to push his luck.

He couldn’t help it. It had an elephant on the lid.

The video game bleeps and then dies. Victor pockets his phone, pleased. He turns around and claps his hands.

“How about,” he suggests brightly, “We do something?”

His son regards him with closed suspicion. "Like what?"

Victor twitches his fingers in the empty air and then all at once there's a pretty brooch dancing over his knuckles, winking in the sunlight.

"I think it's time I taught you one or two of my tricks."

"Mother says..." the boy begins, and then catches the brooch when Victor tosses it to him.

"Well..." but his eyes show the flicker of intellect and greed Victor knows so well in himself.

"Maybe one."

"Maybe one," Victor agrees, and his laugh rattles off the guttering like a magpie's.

Lisbon airport is a clatter of echoing noise; footfall, tannoy announcements, the general buzz of conversation.

"Ring me when you land."

"I'll text," Luis repeats, adjusting the straps on his rucksack. He stoops and kisses his mother's cheek, fine with lines. Her hair is salt and pepper grey, but her spine is still stiff with pride.

The gate is being announced for his flight to Heathrow.

Sandra squeezes him close and then folds her arms to hold herself instead. 'It's only natural,' she tells herself. The two of them have been rootless for years, looping from one country to another. Luis grew up in England, and then they came back here, to reclaim something. Their language and a home sponged free from the bad decisions of the past.

Now he's going back.

"Look after yourself," he says. Sandra swats him.

"Don't tell me what to do," she says. He thinks she has a boyfriend that she's not yet told him about. He's had exams and then been caught up in the onslaught of university applications. She'll tell him, he hopes, as and when it gets serious.

"They'll meet you at the airport," she says, following him as far as she can towards security. "Have a safe trip."

She waves. He waves back, smiling, excited to be off. He'll be alright, she thinks. He has a knack for making friends wherever he goes. And they know people in London; it's not like he's travelling into the unknown. She has her own network of allies to look out for him when he's out of her reach.

And in an emergency, if he ends up in a situation where 999 doesn't suffice, he knows who to go looking for. Sandra sighs and hopes it won't come to that. At any rate, the thought comforts her. This year there will be dozens of new police officers in the metropolitan police training programme, some of whom may also think to call on Sherlock Holmes in dire straights as they progress through their career. Luis has already pointed out he has some advantage there.

"It's been a long while. He might not remember me, or you," she'd warned him, when he'd brought the idea up.

Luis had laughed. “I peed in his bed; would he forget that?”

Sandra waits until the boards tell her the plane has departed, and keeps her fingers crossed for luck.

The office is a quiet whirr of activity. The telephones purr, and the soft glow of machinery is kept to a discrete minimum. There’s a vase of flowers, pinky white orchids, set in the focal point of the room. She moves between the banks of employees, heels on carpet.

“Is it ready to go?” she asks.

“Yes, in just a few minutes.”

The woman fixes her earpiece and adjusts the settings to light the screens.

“Thank you. Please be ready to begin with the minutes.”

There’s a clicking pause as they wait for the conference call to connect. It’s always the same, she thinks. No matter how much the technology improves, they always have to wait on those few stragglers who let earlier meetings over-run, lost track of time or are just less competent.

“Good afternoon,” she says as the screens begin to fill with faces. “Thank you for joining us for this strategy meeting. We’ll start in a few moments with introductions.”

There’s a rustle and fluster as people shimmy into chairs hundreds of miles away, click their pens, sort their notebooks, whisper to associates. She goes round the group one by one- the architect, the project manager, the local authority, the ecology officer, the chief investors. As she does so there’s a soft, constant pat-pat of fingers at her elbow, the woman typing in long fluid streams, automatically translating for the benefit of the foreign office.

“And finally, you may also recognise Sevtap Hazinedar, my P.A., who will also be acting as our interpreter today.”

The typist lifts her head and shows her face, middle-aged and hawkish, softened by a smile around the eyes.

“Now,” says the CEO and the pat-pat-pat of industry begins again at her side, flipping meaning across continents.

“If we’re ready to begin?”

Mummy re-tucks the quilt under her chin and shoos Daddy’s leg back onto his side of the bed. He snores quietly.

“No,” she whispers into the phone, chuckling. “We’re having a lovely time. We saw a moose! ... Well, it was just wandering in the distance, being a moose. It wasn’t doing anything.”

The clock ticks. She listens to her son talk, her eyes drifting over the open suitcases and the discarded clothes over the chair. “What do you want as a souvenir?” she asks, while the thought is fresh in her mind. “They had some rather snazzy t-shirts. No, I know you don’t wear t-shirts but they’d do for sleeping in if it’s cold or odd jobs, and wouldn’t Gregory like one? ... Well, there’s

no need to sound like that.”

She can hear him pinching the bridge of his nose.

“What about socks? They’ve got some lovely warm socks here. I’ve bought Daddy some for Christmas already. Toasty.”

He makes begrudging noises of assent.

“Socks it is then. How’s that brother of yours? Has he been stung to death yet?”

Mycroft informs her as to the latter, for which she’s glad. She appreciates the honey, but she can’t really see the appeal in the business. Still, if it keeps him happy, she’s not going to complain.

“We thought we’d pop through Edinburgh on the way home. While we’re still used to the cold. No, January probably. Of course we’d warn her we were coming! Anyway, Daddy wants to try the whisky tour. I do too, come to mention it.”

Mycroft makes rather more appreciative noises on this particular topic.

“Maybe for your birthday,” Mummy says. Daddy snorts into his pillow. “Yes alright, I’ll let you go. Love and kisses.”

She waits.

“Mycroft.”

She waits again. He sighs. He mutters the sentiment back.

“Thank you. Right, well, I suppose we’d best get out of bed; they’ll be dishing up breakfast before we’re ready for it. Have a nice lunch!”

She hangs up and drops the phone on the bedside table with a little hum of contentment. Outside the sky is starting to come out a startlingly clear blue, cold and sharp. She stretches and then pats Daddy on the head until his snoring halts.

“Hup, hup,” she says, nudging him. “It’s a beautiful day!”

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Lestrade is grinning. Mycroft pushes his phone into his pocket and grumbles.

“It’s sweet,” Lestrade says, following him into the restaurant.

“Oh shut up,” Mycroft answers without rancour. “I only have an hour, let’s not waste it on my mother.”

“Fair enough,” Lestrade agrees, shuffling into a seat. “They’re having a good time then?”

“They are. God knows why or how. I don’t know what’s possessed them. Daddy’s nearly seventy and she’s dragging him around the arctic circle.”

“Well, why not?” Lestrade reasons, flicking open the menu out of habit. For fifteen years, Mycroft’s been ordering for him, but he likes to peruse the options anyway. Just in case. Mycroft usually knows what he’s thinking while he reads.

“It’s... cold,” Mycroft answers. “And there’s nothing there.”

“They like to travel. I like to travel.”

“I’m aware. I recall leaving London on your behalf more than once.”

“You enjoyed it.”

“Hrm.”

“France was nice.” Lestrade taps Mycroft’s shiny shoes under the table. “That nice place in Normandy. Oysters. The little house in the middle of the town.”

He gives a vague leer at the memories.

“Breakfast.”

“Shh!” Mycroft clears his throat. “Enough of that.” He buries himself in the menu, studying it intently.

Lestrade chuckles and turns to look out of the window. They’re within spitting distance of a square lined with plane trees, their huge, hand-sized leaves dropping in crisp brown drifts.

He rests his feet between Mycroft’s and thinks London looks pretty peaceful from this perspective.

—
—

The grass in the cemetery is crisp and green in the well-kept areas. September is warm enough to keep it growing and the groundsman busy with mowing the paths around the church, but the more distant corners are left to the bereaved to maintain.

Under the yew trees, nothing grows high. There’s not enough light and the trees steal the water, so the weeds don’t thrive. As a result, the front of the gravestone remains clear. The other side, where the sunlight sneaks once a day for a few hours, has brought the grass up in thigh-high pollen-spilling fronds. They rustle in the breeze.

The lettering is stained with green; a scant coat of lichen and moss struggling to get going. Over a year’s worth of growth can be wiped away in minutes by a determined hand, but it’ll be left to overwinter and fill up the grooves of the ‘W’.

It’s quiet, and still.

There could be no one there at all.

Chapter End Notes

The chapter title comes from the classical piece *Valse Sentimentale* by Tchaikovsky.

Epilogue: A Memory of a Dear Place

Chapter Summary

She's eighteen years old and packing boxes into her car.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Epilogue: Memory of a Dear Place

She's eighteen years old and packing boxes into her car.

"Right, that's the lot of it," she brushes off her hands in a practical way, a characteristic that reminds Sherlock so strongly of John. He's in her face today. Sometimes Sherlock sees Mary, sometimes flashes of himself, but today she's all John. John's brave face masking over deeper emotions; John's hard-headed sense of get-on-and-get-things-done.

John is fussing.

"Ring us when you get there," he says, closing the bonnet of the car where he's been fretting over the water and the oil, both of which are fine, because Sherlock got up at 3am to go down and check them himself, and also give the tires a once over.

She rolls her eyes, suddenly Sherlock. "Relax. I'm not going to die."

"It's a long drive, Bee. Make sure you stop if you get tired and be careful on the motorway; don't get hemmed in between those big tankers."

"Yes, Pa." She smacks John's cheek with a kiss and squishes him in a hug.

"You two behave," she says, reaching for her car keys. "And tell Uncle Mycroft I want all evidence of my Fresher's week erased from every database ever." She flashes Sherlock a wicked look. "I intend to have a good time."

Sherlock doesn't waste his breath on advice- she has heard it before or she won't listen anyway, or it would just be hypocritical. Instead he kisses the top of her head and murmurs, "We'll miss you."

She softens, Mary's ghost now around her eyes. It's come up clearer as she's aged. "Miss you two, too," she says back, tough veneer cracking a bit. "Look after each other." She gives Sherlock a bone cracking hug and then dives into the car before she gets teary.

"Byeeee!" she bugles out the window. "Love you!" And then she's cranking the radio up to some god-awful band neither of them can name and the car is trundling down the street. John leans on the gate and waves until he can't see her any more. Then his shoulders slump.

"We should have gone with her; made sure she was alright settling in..."

"She didn't want us to," Sherlock reminds him. "Let her be independent, John." He leans down and kisses him, twisting his fingers into John's so that their rings click together. John sighs.

They lean on the gate a while longer and then turn back into the house. The doors on both sides are thrown open. Outside of London, there's a benefit to letting the air in and Sherlock spends half the day charging back and forth between the kitchen and his workshop and his garden anyway. John has long since given up nagging him about security.

John puts the kettle on and stoops to scratch the ears of the laconic bulldog stretched out on a blanket by the Aga. Now in his decline, the dog snorts affectionately and slimes John's fingers with his tongue, but doesn't bother to get up. "You lazy old sod," John tells him fondly. He foresees a time they'll be sitting up late into the night still putting off making the decision to call the vet, or simply waiting, but perhaps not this year. He has already decided that he will break the news to Bee himself when that day comes. He can spare Sherlock that much heartache.

The house feels both empty and normal without her here.

It's not the first time she's gone away. There have been camp trips and nights with friends. She spent two weeks travelling in Europe, getting into trouble and passing a memorable day bothering her uncles.

"What are you going to get up to this afternoon?" John asks, tidying the remains of breakfast away.

"Orchard," Sherlock says. "Unless..." He insinuates himself into the space behind John, tone lowering. "You had other plans?"

The bulldog farts. John looks over his shoulder, eyes pale and crinkled with a laugh, though he doesn't dare open his mouth too wide. "Still in the mood?"

"A bit off-putting," Sherlock admits, leaning past him to push open the window.

"Later then? I was going to Hoover and put the bins out."

Sherlock groans at this romance, and steals an apple from the counter, letting John go. The one nice thing about life now, is there seems to be no end of opportunity to do what he wants. He bites into the apple contemplatively, and gives the bulldog a gentle shove with his foot. "Mood killer," he says, accusingly.

The dog whines and fawns at his ankle.

"What's the plan for the orchard? Fighting the mistletoe?"

"Mmm, mistletoe," Sherlock repeats, in a similar tone to how he'd once said 'nemesis'. "No, I need to finish some planting. And I thought I'd think over that Laughing Australian death again."

"Don't go falling off any ladders. I'm not putting up with you with a broken leg; I'll ship you back to Mrs. Hudson."

Sherlock takes one more bite of the apple and pushes the uneaten half into John's mouth.

John removes it, used to such treatment. "I'll come find you for dinner," he offers.

"What are we having?"

"Whatever you're given," John retorts. "And take this smelly beast with you. I think he needs to go out."

Sherlock crouches, coaxing the dog up by the collar and together they take a stately walk out of the

back door and through the garden to Sherlock's orchard.

For fourteen years, he's been tending it, the trees laid out according to his whim, and with a depth of meaning in places that he has never quite shared, not even with John. It was not intentional, exactly, but seemed to evolve naturally from his choices. Even without the explanation, John knows it's something special.

In the orchard, Sherlock is conductor, and minor god, he is custodian and collector. The hives at the middle are the nucleus, dotted upon, the neat white lines of them at odds with the apparent disorder of the trees. To him the space is a replica of a mind. It is foolish and primordial, but he lays this out as his church, filled with the people and places and memories worth preserving. One day, perhaps, in the event all his intellect fails in his old old age, he will at least be able to come back here and retain a sense of it all.

Bee helps. She enjoys it, doing battle with the wasps for the windfalls with a pair of wooden tongs. There's more than they can possibly consume in chutney and jam and liquors. John gives it away, happy to make people happy. People sometimes find them even here, the really desperate ones. The people who won't settle for Wiggins. Even if they don't get the answer they are looking for, they usually leave with something sweet.

The bulldog flops down comfortably in a patch of grass, expressing a long sigh of contentment. Sherlock walks amongst his trees, touching each one in turn, lighting up parts of his mind palace in passing.

He finds Molly in a cherry tree; an old English variety. The fruit are yellow, shot through with pink veins like a chick emerging on its yolk before they blush to a translucent red later in the season. It's perhaps this grotesquery that has made it fall out of favour. The flavour; however, is incomparable.

A damson for Mrs. Hudson; Mycroft is the quince. It amuses him. The fruit is inedible unless boiled for a lifetime, and then tastes so similar to apple that in Sherlock's opinion, it's hardly worth the effort. It is the first thing to flower in the adverse conditions of early spring. Even with snow on the ground. A boon for the bees. He has it planted next to a pear, a Conference cross, name unknown. The skin of the fruit is russety, and tough, a green-brown fading to grey, and a late one for the harvest. He leaves it on the branch until the first frosts. John uses it for perry cider.

Sherlock passes others, the sloe tree bristling with thorns in the hedge and the sterile ornamental cherry which lasts only two days a year and then expires in a shock of white. Others, like the plum, are just trees.

It's still a work in progress.

He pauses at Bee's apple tree. Not planted for her, but adopted. She has worn the bark of the bark shiny from sitting in the crux of the trunk where it bisects. Years of sitting. From a small girl grunting as she climbed, a rucksack on her shoulder stuffed with simple treasures, to a teenager, procrastinating over homework. He recalls coming down the grass in the dark with a torch, getting his feet wet with dew to fetch a soggy, smelly, toy elephant from the branches, forgotten before dinner. He recalls her bouncing tiny unripe apples off of him to get his attention, and then pretending she didn't want it.

Bee and John and the dog, picnicking on the grass under his trees, not minding that he worked.

Sherlock completes his circuit and returns to his workshop. The veil and white suit dangle on the inside of the door like a shed skin, and the place is infused with the smell of beeswax.

This project has been a long time in the making, the tree only arriving the night before.

Grafting is a satisfying experiment. He has become adept at it over the years; there's a plum tree that blossoms pale pink all over and then fruits half in large yellow drupes, sweet and suitable for anything, and the other with deceptive purple fruits, which are described officially as having a 'subacid and astringent flavour'.

This too, is something special.

He carries the tree out into the orchard with care; he's unlikely to ever be allowed another one. The variety is rare, and closely kept. It's only by favours and persistence he's managed to obtain one. He knows exactly where he'll put it.

The apple tree he heads for is the first one he'd planted, right next to the hives. A russet. The fruit it bears are large, with soft sandpapery skins that look bronze in the sunlight. They keep well, softening into wrinkles and growing sweeter with age. Excepting one branch, which curves outwards of its own accord. He grafted it to the trunk the year after they moved in. The variety is called 'Pristine' and it deserves the name. Fresh faced apples, a pale lemon yellow, with a honey like flavour. The bees are addicts to it.

Sherlock brings a spade, and in the space on the other side of the hives, begins to dig. He settles the new tree in, well mulched, staked for security, and stands back to admire it. It's little, for now, but should grow in time to match the russet, which will never grow very tall. This, as well, he does not intend to prune back so hard. It should be tall.

The apples it will bear in time will be red. Inside and out, red.

And when its large enough, he'll graft again, and let the yellow apples bridge the space between the trees. He'll experiment; russet on to red, red onto russet, and have both a lovely muddle of the three; the old English, the new sweet, the botanical freak.

The bulldog waddles up to his heels, panting, and tolerates being petted with muddy fingers.

"Go home," Sherlock tells him, putting the spade down. "I'm going to tend to the bees now."

Time doesn't matter here. He goes through the meditation of the hives. They crawl on his fingers, toffee coloured specimens, their hind legs orange with pollen. One bee rests on the back of his hand, her wings shivering. She jerks as she takes off, perhaps her last flight as the weather winds down towards autumn.

He smiles faintly, and makes a mental note to ask John what he knows about laughing diseases. He has a recollection of something related to cannibalism.

A bell rings in the distance. Five o'clock already, and the sun is sinking. Sherlock restores the hives and puts the spade away. He washes his hands under the garden tap and goes straight to the living room where he knows John is waiting.

"Hullo, you're back again," John says, his glasses slipping down his nose as he smiles. Sherlock eases back into his armchair, legs stretched out until their feet knock. In the kitchen the bulldog snores. John leans over and turns the TV off. "What's the plan for the evening?"

Sherlock considers, hands folded over his belly.

"Let's stay up," he suggests. They're both aware that for the first time in a long time, they have the house entirely to themselves. On second consideration, it's not altogether a terrible thing.

“Are you thinking of getting me into trouble, then?” John asks.

“When,” Sherlock replies, leaning forward, “Have I not?”

The End.

Chapter End Notes

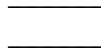
- 1) An Aga is a type of cooker which is basically a behemoth cast-iron box in which the heat is always on. They double as heaters. They're great but really expensive and very countryside-y and so there's a stereotype of the Aga owner as a result. John and Sherlock's came with the house.
- 2) Perry is pear cider. It's alcoholic and typically sweeter than apple cider.
- 3) You should really graft apple trees in
- 4) Their retirement location is loosely based on Midhurst in the South Downs national park; it's very cute and rural but actually very well provisioned and usefully close to the A-road for getting back to London toot-sweet. The clincher for picking this location though, was the presence of a farm at the top of the hill which is oddly apart from everything yet within walking distance of a medical centre, and the fact that Midhurst also hosts a -bulldog- rescue (!!!!).

Bonus Content: Deleted Scenes

Chapter Summary

A whole bunch of things that got cut, rewritten, reworked or otherwise revised over the 4 years of progress on TMWTBTW.

Bonus Content: Deleted Scenes



Written for some point around Part 2: ‘September 6th’ but didn’t quite fit in as a bridge, and didn’t really move the plot along either.

The incredible howl from the living room above brings John running up from Mrs. Hudson’s kitchen, vaulting the stairs two at a time.

“What, what is it? What happened?” He asks, frantically scanning the room for injury, blood, death, plagues, whatever it was that could prompt such a cry of pain and outrage.

Sherlock is sat in his desk chair, tugging on his hair with wild frustration, but seemingly unharmed. The baby, sat on the floor, watches him with mild fascination and an impish gleam in her eye. Sherlock blusters.

“She-she turned it off! She flipped the bloody switch on me!”

John exhales, and simultaneously steels himself for whatever nonsense is evidently to follow. “Are you hurt?” he asks, enunciating every word.

“I had data! I hadn’t saved! That was hours of work, John, of immeasurable value!”

Blithely, she reaches out and toggles the switch again, beaming at John over the laptop power pack on her knee.

Look at my new trick! Isn’t it clever how the lights go on and off?

“Why didn’t the battery kick in?” John asks, going to pick her up.

“It’s dead,” Sherlock grinds out between his teeth. “I hacked it apart to refit my other laptop.”

“Well, that was a daft idea,” John says. He stoops and hoiks the kid up off of the floor. “What are you up to, trouble?” She giggles, her whole body shaking with robust chortles at Sherlock’s expression. “Come on, leave him alone. He’s trying to... do whatever it is he’s doing. I’ll take her downstairs,” he adds to Sherlock, who looks at him with a glower.

John can sense a sulk of epic proportions brewing already. “She didn’t mean it,” he says, in the baby’s defence. Sherlock is seemingly unmoved. “It’s not too late,” he informs John darkly. John raises an eyebrow.

“To swap her for a dog. Something trained.” Sherlock says with a waspish sneer. “Something

useful. Something that doesn't howl at all hours of the day and make messes all over."

"Oh yeah? On that logic I should have gotten a dog before she was even a gleam in my eye," John retorts, shoving at one of Sherlock's toppling stacks of magazines with the toe of his boot.

"Anyway, you can't bloody be angry with her. Look, she's too cute." He holds her out at arms length in Sherlock's face and the baby gives Sherlock a look of adoration from under her eyelashes.

'Fucking Watson charm, that,' Sherlock thinks, irked that it's not entirely ineffective on him. 'Jam and Jumpers and bloody enormous blue eyes.'

"Go away, I'm busy," Sherlock says, but the snap has gone from his voice and his temper is more-or-less spoilt when the baby plonks a friendly hand on the end of his nose, stroking him like some sort of beloved pet. Flustered, Sherlock waves them away.

"Go and ruin someone else's life's work."

"You have it all in your mind palace anyway," John says knowingly. He settles the baby on his hip and then offers. "And you never know, most of it might still be there on a backup. Try booting it up again."

"Typing," Sherlock complains.

John gives him a smile from the doorway. "Control plus 'S'," He suggests.

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A few lines cut from Part 3: I Remember. Around where John mentions his army gun never feeling heavier than it did in London. Cut because it didn't really make sense.

Once in a while, such musings on John Watson's gun take Sherlock off on a brief fantasy in which John had, at that time, turned the handgun on someone else, giving Sherlock a run of murders faked as suicides and a run of interesting shootings all at once, but that daydream always ends with everyone concerned unsatisfactorily dead.

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Drafted very roughly for some point about Part 3 and referred to in Part 7; cut because it was a bit repetitive with the Tesco runs and also, basically just really fucking silly. Replaced with frozen waffles. Gives a little interesting insight into how I write though, lmao.

They get caught up in a case and run out of milk, and Sherlock does yet another tesco run because the baby's crying and hungry. and when he gets back, John's sat in his armchair, red faced with his shirt off, letting the baby suck on his own nipple "I couldn't think of anything else" and Sherlocks just like ~omgscarhellogoshJohnchest~ but out loud "the pygmy Aka's of central Africa do the exact same thing, well done John"

and for weeks after that, anything nipple-related sends them into daft fits of giggles.

and Greg asks a logical question at a crime scene and getting 'The pygmy Aka's of central Africa do the exact same thing' for no good reason other than Sherlock thinks the case is dull, and John is just in awkward hysterics

Greg muttering to Sally 'are they acting barmier than normal, or is it just me' and she wisely

informs him it's parenthood induced lunacy, and he should be glad they don't spam them with baby-related inspirational fbook statuses and Greg's just like 'uhhh....' and Sally's like '=___= my sister has kids.'

'she asks me to look at their poo sometimes'. and gives Greg such a look, Greg thanks his lucky stars that if there's any poo analysis to be done at 221B, Sherlock's jealously guarding it all to himself.

Then Greg wondering how awful he was as a new dad and going home and pulling out the photo albums and thinking back and realising 'wow. yeah. having a baby makes you go mental.'

Cut from Interlude with Molly and Billy: 'A Station on Your Way'

(Discussing John and animals)

Molly mulls this over, a touch awkward again. "Well, I guess I can't really say. He's good with children, but I suppose that's not the same thing. I mean..." She looks at her cat and twists her mouth to the side. Give her a dead person or something with four legs and she's well away but the living are more troublesome, in particular children and anyone who can even ironically be described as 'cool'.

"Sherlock's like that," she says as the thought occurs to her. "Not that I've ever seen him in action so to speak, but I think he's an animal-person." She hesitates when Wiggins doesn't reply.

(Discussing corpse handling)

"How'd you do it all by yourself, then? It's heavy right?"

"Err... Depends what I'm doing. Sometimes one end at a time," Molly says. "I sort of shift the head across and then run round and make the legs catch up. If it's a really big body, I work southwards and get a footstool so I can have some better leverage."

Never placed in a chapter; another draft of one of Sherlock's calls to the hotline

"Hello, you've connected to the Safe Steps Switchboard. My name's Robert. I'm happy to talk to you."

Wrong person. Hash key. Hash key. Hash key.

"Sorry?"

Sherlock gives a click of annoyance.

"Wait- are you- I'm sorry. Would you like to speak to Chanielle?"

Oh good. People who talk to each other. Hash key.

"Please wait, I'll transfer you."

“Hello again. I’m glad you called back. I’m really sorry if I said something last time that upset you.”

What had she been talking about? Sherlock can’t remember. Something stupid and unimportant.

Hash key. Hash key.

“Oh good. Would you like me to talk today?”

Hash. Hash.

“Alright. Would you like me to ask you some questions instead?”

Cautiously, after a long pause- Hash key.

“Is it alright if I give you a nickname? It feels odd not having anything to call you.”

Hash. Whatever.

“Ok... how about ‘Buttons’?”

Sherlock actually snorts aloud at that. She laughs. “Oh, go on.”

Fine. Hash.

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Cut from Part 7 ‘Nothing to be Scared of’; John considering his relative position as a single dad, before giving her over to Sherlock for a bath.

I could do this, he thinks, I could do all of it by myself; the late nights and the screaming and the rush between nursery and clinic and counting every penny and trying to play every fucking role everyone thinks can only be done by a mother. I don’t need his help. Bee doesn’t need another parent; she’s got me and I fill all the criteria. All of them.

He exhales long and slow.

So I can afford to share.

(SKIP)

No, he (John) tells himself. You’re projecting- getting muddled. It’s confusing when he’s so close. Don’t get confused.

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Cut from Part 10: Honestly Connect.

(Discussing Mycroft), dropped for dubious puns and lack of opportunity to use it though BOY I WOULD HAVE.

“Yes, he’s certainly been a little testy lately.”

“Sherlock.”

“No pun intended.”

“Good, because I really don’t need bollock humour at this time of the morning.”

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Cut from Part 10 and replaced with the Slashed Isaac. Mostly because this one was too fact/detail oriented, which made it boring, and secondly because there wasn’t enough overlap between the events of the murder and Sherlock and John’s situation.

The body had been found face down on the floor of the first-class carriage on the last train to Oxford. A young man, apparently in good health other than the fact that he was dead. Handsome, impeccably dressed and still in possession of his wallet. It’s taken hours to evaluate the scene; sweeping the tracks for evidence and then decoupling and moving the carriage off to a siding in order to be examined, halfway back towards London.

John crouches, blue boiler suit rustling as he examines the corpse. "About twenty-eight," John hazards, Lestrade leaning over him as he begins. John sniffs and peels back an eyelid.

"Sober, I'd say, died probably between ten to fourteen hours ago, give or take." He lifts down the collar under Sherlock's watchful eye and examines the neck. There is no discolouration nor bruising; there are no puncture wounds and peering into the mouth reveals nothing either.

He runs his fingers over the scalp and finds something hidden in the thick hair.

"Bump on the head," Anderson says loudly, pointing to make sure everyone was aware that he'd found that on his first examination. "Old one though, it's scabbed over."

"Must have been a fairly big bump," John comments, measuring it by eye. It's about an inch and a half- must have bled like anything but as Anderson says, it was well on the way to healing. "I suppose he could have been knocked and had a sudden bleed on the brain... aneurysm?" They wouldn't be able to tell until Molly got her bone saws out.

He gives the hands and wrists a once over, now being hovered over by Anderson also.

"Nothing under the nails... Is that varnish?"

Sherlock gives a little hum of approval. "Varnish," he confirms, adding with a drawl of interest, "Manicured."

"Right," John says, puzzled. "Pretty keen on himself then." He thinks, feeling some kind of deduction is expected of him, and then comments, "Unless he was a biter."

Lestrade makes a choking noise of surprise. Anderson and John look at Greg in surprise, Sherlock looks at John, taken aback. John catches him looking and the penny drops.

"Nail biter, Lestrade, not- Jesus, I didn't mean 'pillow biter'! Nails," he repeats when they all stare at him blankly. "You can get this stuff to put you off- it tastes bad- oh, look, never mind! And can you move back?" John adds in exasperation. "Stop breathing down my ruddy neck."

Lestrade and Anderson reluctantly shuffle back a step, Sherlock looms closer, naturally. John resumes. There are no scuff marks on the knuckles, no residue under the nails to suggest a fight. Around his wrists, however, there are no less than four watches.

“Six,” Anderson comments. “He had two more in his pockets. I’ve already bagged them.”

"Anything else?" John asks.

"Wallet with plenty of cash but no credit cards, and no train tickets of any sort. No ID either."

John glances at Sherlock but while the other man is still thinking, he's not prepared to offer any opinion. He points instead, and John moves to follow his direction. He lifts up the back of the man's soft sweater but the flesh there, although waxy pale in death, is unblemished.

"I don't get it," John mutters. "It must have been something internal...Can we roll him over?"

"Go ahead," Lestrade allows, "We're about to bag him anyway."

Anderson lends a hand, keen not to let John hog his crime scene, and together they flip the body. The chest is mottled with the blood that has settled since the time of death, but they can find no incision nor wound nor puncture mark to suggest any cause of death. "Arms?" John suggests. Maybe he'd been injected with something. Maybe he'd just had a case of heart failure.

"Take his trousers off," Sherlock says before John can reach for the sleeves.

"What?"

"Trousers," Sherlock repeats, "Off."

Anderson's eyebrows vanish into his hairline as he looks at John with a mixed expression and a number of alarming questions. John looks back at him with every silent iteration of the word 'NO' that he can muster.

"Trousers?" Lestrade says, hesitantly and perturbed. "What for?"

Sherlock rolls his eyes in annoyance. "Can we not argue and just do whatever I tell you to do?"

John looks at Lestrade who gives up, and nominates Anderson as the lucky hand to unzip the victim's flies. Sherlock sniffs and then pulls a face. "Urine," he says, sounding pleased. So it is; a rather stale smell but strong, and undeniably urine. Oddly enough, the seat of the trousers is quite dry.

"He's not wearing any pants," Anderson complains, although he perseveres, shifting the slacks lower down the thighs until something unexpected emerges. They are small, only about the size of a five-pence piece each, perfectly round and a few inches apart on the man's right thigh. Each one contains a divot left by something piercing the skin.

"They're burns," John comments. He frowns and stands up. "He's been tasered?"

"Evidently," Sherlock remarks, straightening up also.

John frowns, even more confused. He feels down the fabric and comes up with nothing. "There's nothing on his trousers. How's that possible? I mean if it was enough of a shock to burn flesh then they should be burnt too."

"Oh good, we've caught up," Sherlock straightens. "Note the size of the trousers also, if you will. They're a size too big; the belt's been cinched right to the last hole."

"So?"

"So the wear on the belt is on two holes further out. It's not habitually been worn so tight; strange, don't you think, for a man who takes such care of his dress to suddenly change his habits?"

"Wait, are you saying someone shot him with a taser, killed him, stole his pants and put him in someone else's trousers?"

Sherlock considers. "Yes."

"But that's mental."

"Well without all the facts, yes. I suspect they had a reason, however."

"What reason?" Lestrade asks.

"No idea yet. Too many ideas," Sherlock replies, hesitating over a thought or three. Then he unzips his boiler suit decisively. "I'm done here. Don't let anyone stand in this near corner or touch the seat. Who found the body?"

"The conductor. He's coming in to the yard to make a statement."

Sherlock pauses and looks at Lestrade. "I want to hear it," he says.

Lestrade sucks air through his teeth. "I can let you look at a copy of the transcript," he says after a moment. "You know the interview rooms are still out of bounds to you."

"Ridiculous," Sherlock scorns. "They're letting me on crime scenes, what's the difference?"

"The difference is," Lestrade says wearily, playing devil's advocate. "You can be rude to him," he jerks his thumb at the dead man, "And he can't go lodging complaints. And the rest of us are just used to it. You're not allowed to interview my witnesses."

Sherlock's face clouds over. "Kent let me." He's mutinous.

"This isn't Kent. Not up to me what risks they want to run outside of the Met. Me? I've got the Commissioner breathing down my neck and you know his opinion of the pair of you."

"It's the hat," Sherlock says in disgust. Lestrade corrects him.

"It was the punching and the general being an arse."

John remains expressionless and unrepentant at this comment. The punch hadn't been either his best nor wisest action admittedly, and yet it had been so very satisfying. "Can't he just listen in?" he suggests. Lestrade makes a few further dutiful noises of dissent and then agrees quite readily enough.

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They see the train conductor at New Scotland Yard from a distance; a fat chap in a flannel shirt with a plain anxious face. "Hm," Sherlock says on sight of him, in a tone that implies that firstly he doesn't think much of him, but also that he has already discredited the man as a potential mastermind of the murder.

"Collar down," John mutters at him under his breath.

Sherlock gives him wounded look only to get a second drubbing when Lestrade catches up to them.

"You stay in the booth," Lestrade instructs. "You can advise me, but you're not going in the interview room. Is that clear?"

“Crystal,” Sherlock intones, in his most put-upon voice. He is well aware of the liberties they are unrightfully being permitted just by setting foot in this part of the building. “I’m on my very best behaviour, Inspector.” He can’t help a little mocking bite to the words. Lestrade throws him a look.

“Mind you are,” he says, although there is warmth and understanding in his face even if it doesn’t come out in his words.

‘It would be easier,’ Sherlock thinks, wearily, ‘without all the posturing and wist slapping.’ He’d thrown his life into the maw of trouble for Queen and country and been exonerated of his treason. Surely that was enough? He feels Lestrade’s hand squeeze his shoulder as he passes; an apology. It helps, but the bitter taste remains in Sherlock’s mouth. ‘Weak,’ he chides himself. ‘You ought to be used to being unwanted.’

A moment later he feels John’s eye on him. He risks a glance but the other averts, looking back again only once Sherlock has turned his head back to the door. Sherlock waits a heartbeat or two and then catches him in the act. John’s expression is worried.

Are you ok?

...Fine.

The edge of his collar feels cold when he reaches up to turn it down. John’s gaze still prickles. Now it’s turned a little contrite.

This rubric’s gone stale. I hadn’t realised.

‘No,’ Sherlock thinks privately, ‘People hardly ever do.’ Out loud he says, “Can we get on?” John wisely keeps his mouth shut and Lestrade lets them into the booth.

He leaves them there, perched on uncomfortable plastic chairs with just the screen of the two-way mirror in front of them and the microphone which Sherlock understands is not to be touched unless it’s strictly necessary.

Sherlock sighs as Lestrade goes through all the necessary niceties and John stirs two sugars into a plastic cup of coffee for him.

The conductor begins.

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Cut from John’s blog in Part 10 because I changed the case and it didn’t segue into the next section of the story too well.

The Man with Six Watches.

I’d just finished up a fun day at the park when Sherlock arrived with a new case on the trains. Ever complain about them running late? Well this train was running behind schedule for sure. And someone had been murdered. What’s more, three people had gone missing from first class- a woman in a veil, her father and a smoker. All they’d left was a dead man in the carriage and no one knew who he was. Even weirder, he had no less than 6 watches and someone had stolen his pants.

Everyone had a lot of different ideas about what happened. First we wondered if he was a pick-pocket who finally tried to steal from the wrong person. Then it was decided maybe he’d been in love with the missing woman passenger from first class. Obviously there’d been a fight between

the young man and her dad. Except that didn't explain where the smoking man had got to.

Sherlock investigated more, especially about the pants and that turned out to be the key to the whole thing. It turned out that the woman had actually been the victim dressed up. And the smoking man had been his brother! Bet they were pretty surprised to see each other. Anyway, Sherlock worked out that they'd had a fight and the young man had been accidentally tasered, which was what killed him, and the two other men had called a truce and decided to jump out the train window.

It wasn't our best case, anyway and Sherlock was really annoyed because when we went to the station to explain how it had happened, the brother was there! He'd handed himself in and already told everyone, so case closed.

Cut from Part 10: Honestly Connect. John talking to the Mary in his head:

John- "You took everything and gave me so little back."

"I saved you after Sherlock left you. I gave you her."

"You didn't want to. you didn't want her, you didn't want this. You didn't want to do this! You just wanted the control!"

"How do you know what I wanted? I'm just the voice in your head. You don't know what I wanted. You don't know who I was. I wasn't the demon you're making me into."

"But you never told me anything..."

Mary scoffs. "And he does? And you do? No one tells anyone anything. It's too dangerous. "

Cut from right after the Flora and Willard Case in Part 10. I was going to write out Mycroft and Anthea opening the vault in full, but decided it was unnecessary. There's also a fragment of a conversation where they discuss Lestrade, I think.

Mycroft is sweating in his three-piece. It doesn't matter how light the fabric or how well designed, there's no avoiding the fact that his fashion choices leave him suffering when the weather breaks into a heat-wave. Anthea in a chiffon blouse and linen jacket, drifts along at his heels like a cloud.

They keep the operation very discreet.

(SKIP)

"That was obliging of him," Anthea had commented. Mycroft makes a little noise of amusement.

"As though he had any other option." Anthea doesn't reply, which is usual for her, but she does stop walking, which isn't. Mycroft halts and turns to look at her. She raises both eyebrows at him.

"No," he tells her, something in his stomach squirming. "I think not."

Cut from Part 11: I Am What I Am. A bit of filler on how Sholto and John interacted and their background.

After his promotion, Sholto had written him congratulations and John has long since lost that letter, but it had meant a lot to him. Harry hadn't been able to write and all his other friends were in the army. They'd congratulated him, but there had been nothing but that one slip of paper to really commemorate his success tangibly. They'd lost touch a little after that thanks to the rigours of war, but Sholto had resurfaced like a cork the moment John had been discharged from the army.

Distance of time and land and pain had not allowed it to become a close correspondence again, and it was all John had been able to manage to punch out a few sentences to let Sholto know he was alive, if not living. But the messages had been there. Sholto had insisted. He'd found time and method though the hectic life in Afghanistan to have the presence of mind to hassle one other soldier languishing through physical therapy in London.

He'd never taken much to the blog, but he'd e-mailed in those days between John meeting Sherlock and the disaster which had reversed Sholto's fortunes.

Cut from Part 11: I Am What I Am. Originally I was going to have Sholto confess the actual depth of feeling he has for John, not necessarily as a sexual/romantic love but, including that. I was also going to have a backstory about Sholto having a brother who died, but it was all a bit too over-dramatic and over-egging it.

"For Christ's sakes, John, I love you. Without remorse. I do. Without shame or... expectation. I can't say that you would have been, in another life, the little brother that I never got a chance to have. Who never grew up. I wouldn't say, in another life, you could have been my lover- the man that I-" he inhales, smiles tight lipped and tries again. "That I..." Defeated, Sholto stops.

Cut from Part 12: All This Frustration. I was going to have Molly have another drinks party, but it all got shifted to a New Years event instead.

"I don't mind Halloween, but sometimes I just like a birthday party," she says, taking John's phone and entering a time and a date into his diary. "Nothing big, just the usual suspects."

"Sounds ok," John agrees. "I expect we can make it."

"Try not to sound too enthusiastic," she remarks, and passes him the results he's been waiting to collect for Sherlock. Somehow John finds himself making up for his failings by volunteering the flat as a venue. Molly brightens.

"That would be lovely," she says, and sends him on his way with the vague suspicion that he's been played.

Cut and rewritten heavily for the end of Part 12:

John makes it to the living room in time to both hear it and see Sherlock drop to his knees like he's been shot, his face painted with broad strokes of sheer surprise. For a split second, John thinks Sherlock's about to start howling too.

It transpires, like most minor injuries, she's howling more over the fright of the bump than the pain, and with Sherlock holding her she simmers down almost instantly. The same cannot be said for Sherlock.

"She called me 'Daddy'," Sherlock says faintly to John, reeling. "She called me 'Daddy'."

"She did," John concurs, smiling a slow smile.

"Why would she do that?" Sherlock asks in complete bewilderment.

John cannily returns question for question. He leans on the doorframe, folding his arms. "Do you wish she hadn't?"

"No!" Sherlock is horrified at that, scooping her closer.

She puts one palm flat on Sherlock's nose and says 'ba!' and wriggles. John holds out his arms for her and Sherlock passes her over, still thunderstruck. The baby wriggles harder, hearing the siren call of playtime and John sets her down where she zooms off, clearly already over the ordeal.

Sherlock however, is not, he watches her run off, his fingertips pressed to his lips.

"Hey," John says softly. "You're important to her, you know."

"I know," Sherlock says, rather defensively. John chuckles, reaches out and squeezes the back of Sherlock's neck.

"Bit of a surprise though," he says. "Actually, I'm not sure where she picked that up from, but..." He doesn't look at Sherlock, but he lets his fingers dig in a fraction as he continues. "It makes sense. I mean, you're always here. You look after her too."

He's surprised and rewarded by the heavy weight of Sherlock's forehead on his shoulder. The taller man gulps.

"Are you--"

"Don't be bloody ridiculous, of course not," Sherlock says back, thickly. Then he has to sniff because the toddler isn't the only one whose nose runs when she cries.

"Of course not," John says wryly, but he hugs him anyway, ebulliently happy.

And yet another draft of the same thing:

She's toddling around the living room with her blocks, John in the bedroom two-finger typing and Sherlock at the kitchen table tinkering with slides. Both of them hear the thud of her fall. Both of them pause, listening as the whimper grows to a yowl. John struggles up from his seat. He's foolishly wrapped a blanket round his legs to ward off the chill and can't get untangled fast enough. Sherlock gets there first. She's sat plump on the floor, eyes and nose both streaming, her face a crumple of woe as she howls and the edge of the coffee table has left a mark on her forehead

that will blossom to a bruise soon enough but all these details flash through Sherlock's mind and are at once completely lost when she thrusts up her arms at the sight of him and wails.

"Daa-aaaddyyyy!"

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Cut and rewritten from: Interlude: Do You Realise? I was originally going to have Billy in this scene, but ultimately it made more sense with Mummy and coming at it from a different angle.

It's warm in the Diogenes club rooms. It's always warm. Mycroft pulls absently at his collar and scores another line with his pen under the text he's reading. The notations are unnecessary; he could memorise the page in a few seconds and highlight the relevant details mentally, but lately he'd rather save the storage space up top.

He doesn't want to admit that the work has become a chore rather than a pleasure or a duty. He used to relish even the boring aspects of it. Unlike Sherlock, he's come to terms with the fact that the world will always spin a touch too slow for him. He learnt to read all of the bigger pictures in life and find satisfaction in taking the mundane and using it to illustrate the greater glory. Long-term evolution rather than short-lived thrills.

The tap at the door is a welcome distraction. The man, soft-shoed and silent, signs that he has a visitor.

'Who?' Mycroft replies, one handed.

The other man pauses. 'Unsavoury fellow.'

Mycroft sighs aloud. There are no bets on who that could be.

'Send him to the visitor's room.'

Reluctantly he ups himself from his armchair and leaves the blessed silence of the main room for the smaller office he favours at the back of the building. The irony is, he considers while regarding the man, that even having undergone considerable improvement he still looks seedy around the edges.

Mycroft skips the pre-amble, sinking heavily into his chair and leaving the other man to stand.

"What do you want?"

"Job, innit," Wiggins lolls easily, hands in his pockets and eyes sliding over every surface with hidden calculation.

Mycroft smiles humourlessly. "I'm not hiring."

"I'm not asking'," Wiggins sniffs, "I've got a job, right."

"Sherlock put you up to this."

"Nah, I'm here on my own cause," Wiggins drawls. Mycroft can see the little touches he's made

towards civilisation; a haircut, the weight gain; a much needed trip to the dentist and a new set of clothes. It's an interesting mix. Mycroft disapproves of the trainers with the loose suit trousers. T-shirt and a jacket? It's not exactly Eton. "On account of my havin' a bargain to offer you."

"A bargain? For me?" Mycroft can't hide his amusement. "And pray tell, what does that entail?"

"Little exchange," Wiggins says, idly scratching the stubble on his chin. "Mutual helpin', you might call it."

"Well if you'd care to elucidate."

XXX

WIGGINS MEDDLING.

XXX

"What I mean is, he might get low enough to ask for help and he ain't going to ask you, and she's soft-hearted enough that she'd say yes, 'cause he's nice, isn't he?" Billy frowns. "So by my calculations, that makes you 'n' me something like indirect rivals."

Mycroft scoffs loud and long. "You're here on behalf of a half-boiled suit for Molly Hooper? She wouldn't look twice at you."

"She'll not look once at me if Lestrade's hanging around like a kicked dog," Billy replies. "I'm game to give it once. S'her call, but I want a fair shot."

"Oh and I'd so hate to disoblige you both," Mycroft says.

"He's got a cough."

"It's winter, he eats rubbish, and colds abound in the public domain, what of it?"

"So it's not going away. Man like Lestrade, he's not going to go to a doctor or nothing, is he? He'll just sit on it. Try and tough it out."

"Good luck to him," Mycroft says shortly.

"'Cept he's working himself to rags, and when he's not, he's drinking. Smoking 'orrible fags and...." Billy eyes him thoughtfully, "Coughing."

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From the same Interlude; Lestrade telling Mycroft off a bit:

"Those bloody blank orders you sent made me panic, I hope you realise that. Right after a couple of bobbies showed up, asking for Sherlock, someone hospitalised... "

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Cut from Part 13: I've Loved Them All. Daddy comforting Sherlock

Sherlock claps his jaw shut abruptly, feeling he's let too much slip. Daddy is sympathetic but hesitant. They've danced this sort of thing before; Sherlock's heard every variation of Daddy's sentiment over and over, and the problem with repetition is that it makes even the heartfelt

meaningless.

“What can I say?” Daddy asks, when Sherlock darts a suspicious look at him for his silence. “Will it be easy? No, but I think it’s possible, and I think if anyone finds a way, it’d be you, and if you don’t, then somehow you’ll still... manage. You’ve got a beautiful, truly beautiful, little girl who thinks the world of you, and shall do whatever you do.”

“I didn’t! I never did!” Sherlock argues.

“Of course you did,” Daddy says, closing up the reordered unit. His tone is calm and so devoid of arrogance it throws Sherlock completely off. “You always come home in the end and we’re always happy to have you.”

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Cut From Part 13: I’ve Loved Them All. John confiding in Ella at the start of December:

“He’s not happy. I’m not...making him happy. No, I know; I know it’s not my job and all of that, but he’s still my friend. And it’s killing me I don’t know if I can make him happy or not. Maybe I can’t, and that kills me. ‘Cause he made me happy.”

“He made that speech at my wedding, he stood in front of strangers and said how I’d saved his life in every way and I don’t think he knows how much he’s done the same for me.”

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Rough Notes cut and redone for Part 13: John talking to Harry. Played with the idea of this happening because John finds Harry at Baker Street talking to Sherlock. It all being very VERY dramatic and John confronted with the way Sherlock’s hurting, and then Sherlock having it shoved at him that John DOES feel for him but won’t act on it, and leaving the flat. Then I decided I loved life too much for that kind of angst and changed it to Harry’s graduation.

"Take it from your big sis, ok? 'Cause if they handed out Girl Guide badges for fuck-ups, I'd have every single one of them. For the love of God, do the one thing i was always so spectacularly shit at; force yourself to do it."

"What?"

"Talk to him."

John despairing, "How? What can I-...I don't even know what I should say."

"Oh for fuck's sake, John, I don't know. I can't put words in your mouth. What do you want to say?"

John just staring because Ella usually gentles him over this and Harry sounds more like a Major and the conditioned part of him is complaining over the rough treatment of his feelings, and the rest of him is like 'actually no, shut up, I can work better with orders.'

John eventually calming down and saying thank you, and Harry shrugging it off but glad. "I mean, for him. Looking out for him." John says, adding, unspoken, 'because I couldn't'.

Harry giving this odd little look and a half smile. "Yeah, well... he turned out to be a bit special." Harry shrugging again, not as composed. "Got my brother acting human again..."

(SHERLOCK RETURNS HOME)

He's been writing because Harry pointed out he's better with words like that, and he's been making fucking notes and none of them make any sense but it's been cathartic. There's empty mugs lying around. He stands up when Sherlock comes in, sort of sweeping them into a pile, embarrassed and then realises the whole fucking point was to try and communicate something to Sherlock- the most important things and so it's no good hiding them.

"Trying to...find an answer," he manages to say, fiddling with the biro and then putting it down on the table and folding his hands behind his back. "To, lots of things. Lots of things i should say." Sherlock uncertainly says his name. "First," John blurts, "First, please, don't go. Please don't think that I don't want you here."

Sherlock just sinks into a chair, torn, because John's trying so damn hard to tell him something and after all this, Sherlock's not sure he's going to hold up to hearing it. He has pretty low and fairly negative expectations.

Cut from part 14: Ruby Wedding. There was a similar (though weaker) joke with the tonic, and then it didn't segue nicely either from or to anything so.

They're interrupted by a hassled blonde. Cousin Tolly, Sherlock realises.

"Sherlock, Sherlock! There you are; the caterer's have made a mess of things; were you a trout or a spatchcock?"

"Anthropoid, last I checked."

Tolly stares furiously at the menu. "Is that allergies or something?"

"He's a trout, I'm a chicken," John says, from behind her. Relieved, she tallies off two on the list and scuttles away to harass the cousins for their orders.

"You're a chicken?"

"Spatchcock, apparently."

The champagne burns down Sherlock's throat in too large a mouthful. He coughs.

Cut from Part 14: It's Been A Long Long Time. This was meant to be somewhere right after the end of Daddy's speech, but didn't quite work out.

"Speaking of which," Daddy adds, over the tremor of feeling reverberating through the tent, "One of you still has Cousin Cissy's porcelain serving platter with the Christmas roses on it, and she won't stop reminding us that she wants it back."

"That'll be Deborah!"

“Ooh! It’s not! Georgie broke it last summer- Cissy just forgot!”

“No, he broke the Worcester plate. The big yellow one.”

“Yes, my one.”

“Well, you shouldn’t have had it in the first place.”

His distraction well-played, Sherlock slithers away and leaves them to their clucking.

John raises his eyebrows at Sherlock who shrugs helplessly and mouths at him ‘relatives’.

“Which one’s Aunt Agatha?” John whispers, but the reference falls, as it had with Mycroft, on deaf ears.

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Cut from Part 14: It’s Been A Long Long Time. This was originally going to be part of the end of the chapter but there was too much of a time skip, so the whole thing was reshuffled and redone in Part 15 instead.

“How are things?” Ella asks, folding her legs. He hasn’t bought the baby today. Interesting.

“Um, good. Um, a few changes.”

“Yes? Can you tell me?”

John wonders where to start. He tells her about the Ruby Wedding; meeting Sherlock’s family; the sense of strangely fitting in with the crowd of someone else’s relatives. “They’re nice,” he says. “Sherlock obviously is like a square peg in a round hole, but they were welcoming. Non-judgemental.”

“Is it important for you to have the approval of his family?”

“He wants a relationship,” John says, and the words slip out so easily it surprises him enough into repeating himself. “A relationship. So, yeah, we’re... going to try that.”

Ella clocks him with a look, and the first bloom of a smile she’s trying to hide. “You sound very certain, John. How do you feel about the change?”

He rubs his palms together, anticipating awkwardness, but as before it’s suddenly easy to discuss. “Nervous, but, I think we’ll take it a step at a time. It’s, well, we live together already, we have our daughter. It’s hardly entirely new territory.” He laughs slightly, aware that for once he honestly doesn’t really care what she makes of it. He’s going to do it anyway. Ella can sit there and nay-say for the next thirty minutes if she likes and he’s still going to do it; without a second thought, and without regret. It’s a pleasantly liberating feeling. He rubs his palms again slowly, feeling Sherlock’s touch there.

Instead Ella does smile. “Good for you,” she says, warmly. He looks younger, to her eyes, and electric with excitement.

“How about the physical aspect of a relationship with another man?”

John pinks a bit around the collar. “So far so good,” he replies, and looks a bit awkward; he’d

prefer not to touch on this in too much detail, however she notes that the edge of shame she'd expected is lacking. He's awkward, but there's a note of pleasure in there too, perhaps at his own perceived naughtiness. She nods, tries not to look amused and makes a note.

Cut from Part 14: It's Been A Long Long Time. Due to tone mostly. This was part of the first draft which was written shortly after I'd posted Part ONE (if you can believe it!), and went through a great number of revisions. In the end we wanted something more positive and less doubting and angsty.

"I want to be your partner."

"Of course. Of course you are," John stares at him. "You are my partner. You're Bee's daddy- there isn't anyone else."

"I want to say it. I want other people to say it too." Sherlock slurs, not from the wine, but the weight of the words.

"I don't think anyone's ever shut up about us," John says, easing the flippancy from his tone with hands that are gentle down the side of Sherlock's face. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to have this conversation right now. I just--"

"Oh, God. Shut up!"

John does. He moves closer instead, slipping an arm around Sherlock's ribs and bringing the planes of their faces together.

I'm sorry.

"You do this. Yesses surrounded by no's and I can't tell which way is up! I am bad at this."

"You're not. Oh, you're really not."

"You're meant to be quiet now."

"No, listen. I get it. I'm a pain in the arse. I panic over things I can't control and I don't actually like change all that much and I end up messing people about because I get scared that I'm going to just ruin things."

"But you don't," Sherlock starts, baffled,

"No, I do. I ruined my career- both of them; I am not a good GP; I'm a good doctor, but that's not the same thing. I've ruined countless relationships- and friendships; Harry. My marriage was, let's face it, a mutual fucking disaster. And if I make things more difficult than they need to be then it's just because it's too important. It's too important to fuck up. I like big risks, but I don't want them here."

"John..."

"And it's never going to be normal for us, is it?" John closes his eyes and exhales. "That's why we need to be on the same page, but-

"But it is a yes. It is. To all of it." He finishes. If anything, Sherlock looks more puzzled than

before.

“So...?”

“Yes.”

“I see.” Sherlock tilts his eyes up at the heavens and swallows. “That was a very, very long, inefficient way to say ‘yes’, John.” He exhales shakily. “And I’m not an idiot. I know there are issues. We’ve managed this far without needing to talk about it. Why start now? I’d say that was your problem, John. You want to fix things that are fine as they are, even broken.”

“Maybe,” John admits, after thinking about it for a moment. “It’s complicated.”

“It’s simple. We’re better together.”

John nods wordlessly.

“We’ve always known that.” Their palms meet again, cool and dry, and with his free hand, Sherlock brushes the loose grass off of the side of John’s suit jacket, his fingertips barely touching John’s sides as they rise and fall under his clothes, as he breathes. John lays his own fingers on Sherlock’s back, spreads them and feels the living warmth of him.

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Cut from Part 15. This was the first draft of them going upstairs and trying out ‘couple’ things, but I ended up not liking the tone, scrapping it and redoing it. I think it came out a lot better the second time, but there’s the odd line in here that I still quite like.

“I think I’ll just go upstairs. To my room.”

Sherlock looks at him and tries to convey ‘this is A Hint’ as loudly as he can.

“Ok?” John says. His face shows that he has noticed the hint, but is wondering whether it’s a trick question or not.

“I shall be upstairs then,” Sherlock repeats. “If you... need me.”

“Alright,” John says, teetering on the balls of his feet. “I’ll just uh...” He briefly touches his upper lip, frantically weighing options and reevaluating the situation.

Should I come too?

‘Yes,’ Sherlock wants to shout. Instead he turns on his heel slowly and climbs the stairs. At the foot of them, he can hear John still dithering.

What’s there to question? Sherlock feels he’s made himself clear enough, even for someone with such spectacular moments of density as John. And John’s good at this. For Christ’s sake, John’s flirted with enough people, surely? Had them flirt with him?

Briefly Sherlock wonders if he could have refined his approach any, and then concludes he doesn’t care. He paces. Where would be best? Standing? Sprawled on the bed? They do that in magazines and romance novels. Should he take his clothes off as an added incentive? He pulls briefly on his shirt, untucking it at the front and then lets it drop. Perhaps that’s a step too far after all. No need to sacrifice all his dignity over this.

The sound of John's tread on the stairs sends him into a sudden flurry. He picks up the pillow, puts it back; grabs at the lamp but hasn't the coordination to fiddle the switch into the 'on' position. He makes an aborted attempt to step towards his desk and do something and then John's in the doorway. He wheels to face him.

"Yes?"

"I—" John looks startled, holding the doorframe. Sherlock, still functioning on some higher plane of panic, kicks a box of experiments under his bed.

"Yes?" he barks, and then clears his throat. He hadn't intended to sound so abrupt. Or so high-pitched.

"I forgot to ask, uh, if you, I mean... Did you want to do the nursery run tomorrow?"

Sherlock makes a choked noise of apoplexy. How can John stand there and ask him questions about something so ridiculously mundane when he- oh.

John's not moved. He's looking at Sherlock intently, eyes fixed on his. Oh. This is not a question. It's an excuse.

I want to talk to you.

"Hardly matters," Sherlock manages to wring out of himself. John shifts forward slightly, until the middle of each foot is over the fitting plate holding the carpet down at the edge of the room. Half in; half out.

"You sure? I mean, I don't mind swapping and doing the morning for a change."

Invite me in.

"I don't like the afternoon receptionist," Sherlock says, candidly.

"She doesn't like you," John corrects. Sherlock laughs shortly.

"It's mutual. Besides, if I can avoid her forever, why shouldn't I?"

"What you fancy for dinner tomorrow?"

"Anything."

"You always say that," John says, unfolding his arms and taking a step inside. "It'd be helpful if you gave me an idea once in a while. You're not the easiest person to cater to, you know."

"What are you talking about? I either eat it or I don't; when have I complained?"

"I know, but I'd rather make something you like and will eat than, you know."

Sherlock opens his mouth to argue and then frowns.

Are we talking about dinner or...?

You tell me.

John picks up a book from Sherlock's desk and flicks through it without seeing a thing. "How about risotto?"

“That’s fine.”

“That’s fine,” John echoes softly. He drums his fingers on the book cover, searching for another topic of conversation to follow, at least until the weird atmosphere in the room feels normal; more like them and less like this awful high-wired version of themselves. He can’t think of anything good- the fact that they need to start thinking about potty-training springs to mind but there are fewer ways to bring the tone down.

“Sometimes I forget this used to be my room,” John comments, looking around. “It looked bigger when I was in it,” he adds, joking. Sherlock toes the boxes further under the bed. In the room downstairs, there’d been enough space for him and all his junk without it looking or feeling cluttered. In John’s sloping room, he feels gigantic.

“It still is, technically. You just share Bee’s room.”

“Where’s your room then?”

“The rest.”

“True,” John says, soft with amusement. “What experiments are those you’re trying to hide?”

“Nothing much,” Sherlock says. In truth, he’s totally forgotten. They were just time-wasters really; a means of filling a space in his head to keep his demons down.

“Show me,” John says.

Reluctantly Sherlock stoops and pulls out the box, rummaging in it. He sits on the edge of the bed and then, to his surprise, so does John.

Oh.

More excuses.

Privately Sherlock wonders how anyone ever gets any procreation done. It seems to take such a lot of social manoeuvring and thus far hasn’t matched anything he’s been lead to believe. Surely there was supposed to be a single heated look, a lot of hurried discarding of clothes and then the deed just happened.

“How about,” John begins slowly. He looks at Sherlock like he can’t decide if Sherlock’s about to bite him or not; like he requires delicate handling. “How about I just lie here for a bit? Or longer, if you want. I could go get changed, bring my book up. We can just chill out.”

Chill out. It sounds like a death knell to Sherlock. What interest has he in chilling out?

Yet at the same time it sounds perfectly normal. It sounds like the kind of thing couples do when they’re alone being couples, it sounds like a step towards all the things that Sherlock is wordlessly hungry for. He agrees.

“Sit tight then,” John says and gets up. Sherlock can’t. He paces the room, fidgets with the items on his desk and arranges and rearranges the pillows. Waiting is impossible. Supposing in the dark, with the covers over them, he changes his mind again. Or John does?

He reaches for his phone.

“Found a case?” John asks hopefully, when he comes back in some minutes later. He smells of

mint. Sherlock thumbs his internet browsers closed at once.

“No, nothing.”

“Not sure it was nothing,” John says, eyeing him, but seeing that Sherlock is disinclined to share, lets the matter drop. Sherlock drops the phone on the bedside cabinet and then shifts uneasily on the bed, rubbing the backs of his knees. He’s sweating.

“Something— book?” He asks, gesturing. John looks down at his novel.

“It’s alright. Not your calibre, I’m afraid. Borrowed it from the waiting room.”

Sherlock thieves it from him. It’s the type of paperback that looks damp even when it’s dry, printed on cheap paper in large volumes. He skims the blurb on the back.

“You won’t like it,” John says, embarrassed.

“Kinky slayings? Twins?”

“It’s a pulp crime novel.”

Sherlock frowns and flips through the pages and then makes a noise of disgust. “It is twins?”

“Oh come on, I haven’t got that far yet,” John says, taking the book back from him.

“It’s obvious from the title!”

“That’s not the point,” John says, holding it out of Sherlock’s reach. “Why can’t it be twins? I’ll read the crime scene bit from the first chapter then, and you tell me who the killer is.”

“Ludicrous!” Sherlock objects, but he throws himself back onto the bed and gestures to John to get on with it.

—
—

Cut from Part 16 for the unintended and utterly stupid metaphor about John’s readiness for sex.

Briefly Sherlock looks down.

“You’re leaving your socks on?”

“It’s cold,” John says.

“We can turn the radiator up.”

“I get cold feet,” John apologises. “I’ll take them off when I’m in bed.”

—
—

A never placed rough sketch of a scene but was related to them getting into the habit of sharing a bed/having sex; again superseded by Chelmsford.

“Can I come in?”

Sherlock looks up at John in the doorway, seemingly surprised, and then wordlessly he moves to one side of the bed.

John sits beside him, legs stretched out on top of the duvet.

“Should I...?”

“If you want.”

“Oh. Hm...Do you want sex?”

....

He puts his hand on John's. “Good?”

“That's ok.”

“And we just... sit?”

“We just sit. Couples sit sometimes.”

“It's easier than I thought.”

...

“Lie down.”

“What are you doing?”

“I'm covering the back of your neck.”

“Right?”

“It's a comfort gesture. Next time you watch sport, look for the man who's failed- half the time, he'll rub at his mouth, the rest of the time, he'll put his hands on the back of his neck. Self-comfort.”

“Vulnerable spot....It's quite nice, actually. Here, let me-”

...

“I think I remember mum doing this. Kind of. Not like this but, when I got upset when I was little...Did yours?”

“Sometimes.”

“I like your mum. I know they must have been a clueless disaster when you were growing up, but they're kind. I like them.”

John?

“I wish you could've met my mum. Or well... that she could've met you, really. You and Bee...”

...

“She killed herself. I was about ten. Just, filled herself with pills and got hospitalised. They brought her round for a bit but she'd damaged her kidneys and liver or something so much it all just failed

and she died a few weeks later. And then that was the last time I saw Dad- at mum's funeral."

...

"I wish you could've met him."

"I'd have murdered him."

He feels the cold thrill go up John's neck against his palm, and the sudden hike in his heartbeat. Sherlock's not being flippant.

"I don't think I could find him now even if I wanted to. Better off leaving it all well alone."

....

"Not good?"

"No," John breathes, "But don't worry about it." He moves closer, one leg over Sherlock's, weighing him into the mattress. Quietly, he kisses Sherlock's jaw.

"One day," he murmurs, "I'm going to ask you to marry me, and I hope you say 'yes'."

...

"No planning, no... bridesmaids. Just us. I'll ask, and I won't know when until I do it, and then we'll just get it done in a rush. Like always."

....

"Let's have sex."

—

—

And another never-placed scene; ditched because I didn't like how it defined things. I liked how John related to Sherlock, but it didn't fit as well with the narrative we wanted to tell and Codenamelazarus sensibly steered us off in a better direction.

"Are you gay?"

"No." A pause. "You?"

"No comment."

"Alright. That's fair. But this?" lifts their linked hands.

"Is in line with my interests." ... You?

John presses Sherlock's knuckle to his lips. Sherlock watches him perform the action and then dares to ask;

"Not... quite straight?"

John runs a finger over the bones of Sherlock's knuckles and into the dips. "I don't know. Maybe

Harry's right. She thinks I just like women for... sex. Just I like the biological side of things. Tits."

"Thank you, I'd presumed that far. Farther in fact."

"Right well. That's... kind of it. I don't know if I ever really fell in love with a woman. I mean, yes, there was Mary but then she came along when I was at my lowest and I don't know what my emotions were doing and she was..."

"Mary."

"Is it possible to say she was feminine but nothing like a woman?"

"I once solved a case in America by identifying which of a group of Jehovah's witnesses had slipped her faith and no longer believed in it. Hardly a stumper. Even the elders had worked it out. She was the woman who didn't look cowed."

John digests this. "Mary was fearless," he says. "Or... didn't see the point of being- God I don't know. You know what I mean. I couldn't figure her out when I was married to her, never mind now. She was different."

"Exceptional."

"Mm. That's the word. That's what she was. What about you?"

"I looked," Sherlock says succinctly. "I like looking. I never loved. On any level."

"Oh. None at all?"

"There was an... almost. From university. It turned out we liked cocaine better."

"Jesus, Sherlock."

"He's past and gone. Were there many others? Sholto?"

"No."

"No?"

"Well, yes, but we never got like this. And yeah... there were others. I've had some intense friendships."

"But never physical?"

"Never physical," John confirms. "But usually I was getting a lot from the other side, so I didn't notice."

"How can you not notice?"

"I just assumed... side effects of shit I grew up with. I mean, compared to some kids I was normal and doing ok. I thought it was just an attachment thing. I mean, I usually went for people I looked up to." John reconsiders. "I didn't let myself think about it too deeply. It was... frightening."

"And then there was me," Sherlock says, his voice heavy with irony.

John smiles, a spark of good-humour in his eyes. "I looked up to you."

“I wore a poorly fitting suit that I’d worn while trawling through rubbish in skips.”

“I know. I thought it was great. You didn’t give a shit. You did whatever the hell you wanted and I’d have given a testicle at that point to have that confidence.”

—

—

Cut from Interlude: Somewhere in the Summertime. This snippet is from the evening scene where Sholto talks to Mark. This was before I’d settled on Mark’s identity, which it turned out, I’d still ballsed up massively. *SHRUG* I was originally going to leave him totally nameless, but Codenamelazarus was like ‘it’s weird’ and we through in a name, and I felt very clever until I realised I was, after all, a total moron.

There’s a sense of expectancy. Maybe he should say something out loud, something reassuring. What could he offer though? His relationship to the dead is clearly so different and he knows nothing about the quiet man and his urn. Only that it must have been someone dear.

Instead, it’s the quiet man who speaks. Slowly, and with effort, and to the world at large, emphatic.

“I fucking miss drink.”

“God,” Sholto says, and here they at least have a kind of sympathy that isn’t pity.

“Fuck,” says the quiet man again, and then the bunk creaks as he laughs.

—

Originally, Bill was going to video call John and have John witness the whole thing, and there was going to be a lot more back and forth on the telephone with John and Sherlock while they were on the case, but this got dropped for being too damn clunky to line up on the timelines. It was always a day out whichever way I put it.

“I’ve been rumbled,” Bill says to John via a crackling telephone connection in the following 30 minutes. They are in the car, the quiet man behind the wheel. Bill has the video on. “Right pair of fucking teenagers. This one-”

John receives a quick look at the quiet man hunched over, eyes grimly fixed on the road- “Threw his tea and broke his mug, and this one-“ a shot of Sholto sulking in the backseat, brooding at the sunny beach beyond the window. “-has been slamming doors.”

“You’ve acted with utter disregard or respect for-“

“Oh no,” Bill cries, sarcastic. “I introduced you both to a potential friend, what a bastard am I!”

“You were meddling!” Sholto snaps. “And if we weren’t in the arse end of fucking Wales, I’d get out the car this minute and take my chances.”

John opens his mouth to pitch in his two-penny’s-worth, when the video jerks and the car veers into a lay-by. The quiet man cranks on the handbrake, leans across Bill and opens the car door.

“Out,” he says, with effort.

(SKIP)

“John? Still there?”

“I’m still here. What happened?”

“They’ve hijacked Murry Arrend and left me about 4 miles outside Aberystwyth.” Bill says, and then he starts laughing. “They mutinied.”

(SKIP)

“Oh my god, look!”

Bill turns the phone around and shows the long ribbon of road ahead of him. The quality isn’t great but John can make out the white blob of caravan in the distance. It doesn’t seem to be moving. Bill chuckles, making the phone shake.

“What is that?” John says, squinting. He can just see a small dark thing appear on one side of the caravan. It vanishes, reappears on the other side, and vanishes again.

“They stopped. That was Major James ‘How Dare You I Hate Friends’ Sholto getting in the front seat.” Bill crows. He turns the camera back and beams at John.

“What are you going to do now?” John asks.

“Walk to the station and go home, I think.”

—
—

Cut from Part 17 Kiss Me With Adventure when the case was moved to September and Tolly came in person

November creeps in with an email in Sherlock’s inbox. He takes one look at it and drops his toast onto his stack of apiology journals, taking the stairs down almost in one giant leap to find John.

“What? What’s happening?” John twists in his chair at the sound of his name.

“Duty calls,” Sherlock says, tossing his phone into John’s lap.

John reads the email, “Hang on, this is from your cousin.”

“Pack a bag, we’ll have to go out of town.”

“Horses? You’re taking a case about horses?”

“Why not? Shergar,” Sherlock says, cryptically.

“What?”

“The racehorse. Stolen at gunpoint in 1981, never recovered. Obviously shot within hours of the theft but the exact thieves never identified nor the remains found. Not clever,” Sherlock says, pausing to consider. “But spicy. The police bungled it completely.”

“Wasn’t that the IRA?” John wants to know. The idea of getting mixed up with something as intense as terrorism again sends a thrill up his spine.

“Eh, nearish,” Sherlock says dismissively, “I don’t think Wessex is that politically charged however.”

“Sorry, Wessex?”

“Aunt Lydia’s stables. Wessex. Read the email.”

John goes over it again. It’s as terse as one of Sherlock’s best- clearly a few things run in the family and Tolly has wasted neither words nor time.

‘Sherlock,’ it reads, ‘Horses dying, no idea why. First mare slipped foal. Second mare dead Tuesday; seemed to go mad and bit groom, became progressively more uncoordinated, fitting etc went down with colic as the day progressed and put down. Remaining horses securely stabled to scour fields but two more dead Wednesday, Thursday, lost first stallion today. Farm dog now sick also. Cannot find source of poison. Vet clueless. Had whole staff out- fields gone over with fine toothed comb- nothing. CCTV- nothing. Stud in jeopardy.

What poison? How do we stop it?’

The address follows.

Despite the fact that John only learnt of her existence a few months ago, Tolly seems to have some idea of how Sherlock functions. He can see why it might pique Sherlock’s interest.

“What are we going to do with Bee?”

“What do you mean?”

“We’re not taking her to a stable full of diseases and or poison,” John says flatly. “We’re not.”

“Ah. Point.” Sherlock turns his head. “Mrs. Hudson!”

“She’s going to need help, if we’re going to be away all night. It’s already getting on in the day,” John points out.

—
—

Cut from Part 17 Kiss Me With Adventure when logistics wouldn’t let me squish it in anywhere. Sadness.

They stumble back into the main house, Sherlock shaking his coat from his shoulders. “Good. Good!” he says, scrubbing his hair.

“Shh,” Tolly says, toeing her filthy boots off. “You’ll wake Dilly and set the dogs off.” She yawns, beckoning them further into the house. The moon filters through the gaps in the curtains enough not to bother with the lamps.

At the other end of the building, Tolly opens a door and points down a corridor. “Billy, you’re in with the jocks. Sorry, it’s a bit basic, but it’s comfy enough. Number 5.” She passes him a key.

“Keep your eyes open,” Sherlock says, and clutching the key before him like a guard with his rifle, Wiggins vanishes into the dormitory building.

“You two are upstairs in the guest.”

As they tread up the stairs, there's a wheezing attempt at a bark and a grinding sound which might be a growl. Tolly bends over, matter of fact, and pulls out an ancient corgi from underneath a bureau on the landing. "Shh, Rummy. Be nice."

John pretends not to notice Sherlock's attention or find it endearing. The corgi sneezes wetly, and eyes them with idle belligerence. John guesses there's a threat of getting a vicious suck should the beast try to savage anyone. He likes his odds.

Cut from Part 17 Kiss Me With Adventure. We were going to have a Scooby Doo adventure looking for the ghost but it just got too silly, too long-winded and too irrelevant.

"It's got me! I've 'eard it! Its 'orrible!"

"Where? Where did it come from? Describe it!"

"It didn't come from nowhere- I was just in that field there, and it screamed at me when I got my back turned."

"A white shape?" Sherlock asks, suspicious.

"No," Wiggins says, slowly, eyes rolling. "No. Just a nasty rustling, an' a smell."

There is a pause. Tolly clicks her tongue. Wiggins, feeling that they're not really getting on board with his horror, gestures open-handed at first them, and then at the dark field behind him.

"It's out there!"

"No, it isn't."

"That what've I just been attacked by?"

"Fox," Sherlock says. John shrugs.

"Fox," he agrees.

"Vixen," Tolly corrects. "If you'd been by the copse I would've said owl, but."

Wiggins guppies with disbelief. "It sounded like someone dying!"

"He's cute," Tolly comments, "Has he never been out of London before?"

Cut and rewritten for Part 17: Kiss Me With Adventure. This scene got heavily edited numerous times to try and get the tone right. There are a few lines I still quite like, but they needed to be with different characters at a different time in a different scene and possibly a different fic on a different planet. :L

John runs his teeth over his lower lip. "It's just, we're not really, not quite... you know."

She slips into a smile; a test; and it whispers straight from her across John's body like velvet. She has an animal vitality about her- she knows how to use it. She smells of hay, and her body curves

under her clothes, suddenly obvious.

The straw crunches under John's buttocks as he shifts his weight, a little like a pendulum, once towards her and then away. At this she props one ankle up on her knee and her body becomes angular and disinterested again. The smile remains, now strictly platonic.

"Gotcha," she says with her eyes.

John is tongue-tied.

"There's a dorm over there full of short men with big egos who live together," Tolly says, with a shrug. "Some of them even do it less figuratively, off the farm, so to speak. No big deal. The only difference as far as I'm concerned is I'd trust them with those I love."

"Oh," John says, wounded.

"I love horses," Tolly reminds him. "I wouldn't trust you with a hobby horse but you can do whatever you want with Wills."

"Oh," John says again, and is satisfied by this slight. "Well I've never had or ever wanted a horse, hobby or otherwise." He has, however, always wanted a Sherlock. Tolly guesses as much and she gives a slight shake of her head in pleased disbelief.

"I had a herd of them. If I could find a stock and a stick it'd have button eyes and a name by tea-time," Tolly muses. "Then I moved here and I got real horses, but anyway, I'm talking a load of old fart. What's the plan for today? Where's this murderer?"

"Not sure. Sherlock's got a bite on something, I'm pretty sure, but where it's going is beyond me. He's acting odd."

"Odder than normal?"

"Yes, actually," John says, needled. "And he's not odd."

Tolly lowers her mug and stares at him. "Fuck me, you're properly loved up."

—
—

Cut from Part 18: Talk to Me. It was the quickest way to wrap up the stabbing but in the end it seemed just that- rushed and lazy and as John rightly points out, really boring. Plus I foresaw everyone being like 'Who is Rory?' because in their defence, he was only mentioned in one line in the previous chapter, posted like 3 months previously. Plus I needed to set Wiggins up a bit better, and properly tie in the Bill 'n' Sholto Summer Holiday stuff.

John stands on the edge of the road, but the car is already out of sight. He pockets his phone and turns his mind from the empty lane and the message he has just sent and instead turns it to business.

"Right, so who wants to explain first?"

Wiggins and Dom, the stable hand, alternate squirming and kicking of pebbles. Eventually Wiggins owns up.

"So there's a well good chance either me or that bloke is the next victim."

“What bloke?”

“Him. The one who went off in the car with Shez.”

John digests this for one hot moment, his brows shifting progressively lower over his eyes.

“Sherlock has gone away, in a car, with a man,” he says as the thoughts file in, “who someone possibly wants to stab.”

“But not too likely,” Wiggins adds, “being as it’s daylight and he’s not on his own in the lane.”

“And the killer?”

“Dunno his name,” Wiggins says, exasperated. “But I saw him in the pub. Definitely him. Got the shifty eyes and big pockets.”

“Is that all?”

“And he was watchin’.”

“Wiggins, if I have to ask you to explain every damn thing, I am going to introduce you to the nearest muck heap, do you get my meaning?”

“He was watching me and Tolly in the pub when I did my magic trick and he wasn’t talking to no one and then when I was leaving he was leaving and I did a dodge around the houses ‘cause fuck it I’m from London and I know a thing or two ‘bout losing people I don’t want followin’ me and he didn’t see where I went and I came back and-“ Wiggins takes a huge gulping breath and finishes in a rush, “And he had a screwdriver. Sharpened, like, all down one side. Big one.” He holds his hands up to demonstrate and surrender at the same time.

“Something sharp,” John says, thinking fast. Puncture and slice. That’d do it for a big animal, if you went for an artery.

Then he realises exactly why Sherlock was happy to leave this in their hands. “We need to go to the police.”

“With what?”

“With the fact that you saw an armed man in the pub; surely that’s enough,” John argues. “And then no one winds up stabbed, I thought that was the point?”

“Yeah, but where’s the fun?” Wiggins asks.

The words hit John hard because the question makes too good a point. Where is the fun?

In the old days, the days before Sherlock left, it had always been fun. Even when it had veered into frightening and lethal, even when it had been bizarre or sordid, there had still been that singular sense of whoopee about it. They’d always been waiting for the next one; Sherlock always churlish for another, but with a sense of good spirit when one did come along.

It had been the game.

‘Somewhere along the line, I stopped playing,’ John thinks.

“Let’s just get someone official to make an arrest, alright? No one gets stabbed and- and- I need to make a phone call. Just go and find a car, both of you,” he commands.

(And then the scene continued with John's phone call and a brief discussion with John, Dom and Wiggins to go down to the police station, without Tolly, which then skipped on to-)

"Sorry, can you repeat that?"

"We think we know who murdered the man in the lane," John says again, trying to keep his voice low.

"Adam Kettering," Dom supplies. "This guy thinks he's seen the man what did it."

"Hi," says Wiggins. The police officer gives them all a doubtful look.

"Wait here, I need to refer this to someone."

"Go to the police," Wiggins mutters when he's gone. "Do the right thing. This is dead borin'. Y'know I've got a record. They're going to be right up my arse."

"Lucky you," John says, now considering that his own paperwork isn't entirely squeaky-clean either. He turns to Dom. "You?"

"Ah, me and the boys in blue are alright these days. I did my bit."

"What for?" Wiggins asks, curious.

"Nicking stuff."

"Ah, nice. I made meth."

"Shh," John hisses. "Not the time. Definitely not the place. Hello," he adds to the second police officer who has appeared behind the desk. "We've come to report a criminal."

"Name?" she says, eyeing him.

"John Watson. I'm a doctor."

"Alright, we'll take you all through to make a statement."

"Statement," Wiggins mutters as they shuffle through into one of the offices. "We're going to have to fill in forms, Boss."

"Shh," John says again. "Forms are fine. Forms are safe."

"Right," says the officer, gesturing to a seat. She licks the end of her pencil and turns a fresh page on a notepad. "Start at the beginning then, and tell me in your own words, what has happened."

Dom turns to John who turns to Wiggins.

Wiggins leans back in his chair, clasps his hands under his chin in his best imitation of Sherlock Holmes and says, "Well, it goes like this-"

He begins. A few minutes later, the officer stops him, and goes out to speak to another officer, and slowly a buzz begins to fizz around the station.

“I’m bored.”

They’re sitting in a row, still in the interview room, still explaining themselves.

“What time is it?”

John checks his watch. “We’ve been here an hour and a half.”

“Should have just let the bloke stab me, it’d be less painful,” Wiggins laments.

“You’ve had four free cups of tea, and a biscuit,” John points out. “It’s not exactly like we’re sat in a gulag. Wonder how it’s going. Do you think they’ve made an arrest yet?”

“Might have,” Wiggins muses. “They went out didn’t they?”

John leans his head on the wall and remembers why it is that he and Sherlock do stupid things like break into other people’s houses. “Maybe they’re having to fight,” he says, trying not to sound jealous.

“Maybe ‘e’s got a police officer hostage.”

“They’d have to get armed police,” John agrees, “Guns.”

“And then the moon rises,” Dom adds wistfully. “Bloodbath.”

“They’re not hunting a werewolf.”

“How d’you know?”

“I’m gonna ask for another cup of tea,” Wiggins says, getting up. “And then ask if I can have a piss. And that,” he glares at John, “Is about as excitin’ as this afternoon’s going to get.”

Wiggins is wrong.

It doesn’t end up as exciting as a Semtex jacket in a darkened swimming pool, but it’s a little more exciting than a rural constabulary’s lavatory.

Some 40 minutes after Wiggin’s 5th cup of tea, they are summoned from the waiting room. “In there, please,” the officer tells them, and points them into a room. The waiting detective gestures to a man in a separate interview room, having his own mutinous stare down with the police.

“Aw yeah, that’s ‘im,” Wiggins says, pleased. “Find his screwdriver?”

“We’ve reason to believe your story warrants further investigation. Can I take it that you’re making a positive identification.”

“Positive.”

“Who is he?” John asks. The man is a stranger to him. The officer shakes his head, but Dom stares and then blurts, “Fucking hell, that’s Rory.”

“Who?”

“New guy, isn’t it? Newish. Yeah, he’s always down the pub playing pool. He’s quite good at it.

Runs like a little DJ business out of his van.”

“DJ? Wait, no, you’ve got to be kidding. That’s the DJ?”

“Lookit his thumbs,” says Wiggins, like it’s obvious.

“That’s the DJ from Sherlock’s parent’s anniversary party?” John repeats, incredulous. “You’ve got to be joking. That’s just bloody typical.”

“What is?”

“Never mind,” John says, not about to spell out to this lot that the first kiss he had with the love of his life was at a cheap disco with a killer DJ. “I don’t get it. What’s he got to do with anything?”

“Tolly,” Wiggins says. “Bet he’s got a history of hassling girls.”

“I’m not at liberty to say,” says the police officer.

“Does his cock work?”

“Billy!”

“I’m jus’ saying, that’d be a motive. I mean, she says no and then there’s her lumberjack and stable man with their bigger willies, and horses, with big willies.”

“Jesus, Wiggins, what is wrong with you?”

“He just looks like the kind of man who’d get like a bit Freudian. I’m not sayin’ she’s....diddling ponies. Tolly’s got class.”

“Can we go?” John asks of the police officer who agrees readily.

Once discarded outside the police station, Wiggins sighs. “Y’know now we won’t find out anything else now unless we nag them. Maybe Lestrade can call ‘em.”

“To be honest, I’m not sure I even care to know,” John says, rubbing his face. “Murderer’s caught and before you mention my blog, yes, I think I’ve got enough of a story for the public without making it incredibly weird. You can go and write your own... horse porn.”

“I was trying to explain that he’s probably got issues! Normal people don’t wake up all ‘Ooh, I think I feel like gutting Bullseye today’. That’s just dark.”

“I think we understood he had issues when he stabbed someone.” John throws his hands up. “I give up. This is the stupider than the time the murder weapon was candles. No. In fact, this is stupider than-”

John trails off. A police car has just pulled into the forecourt of the station. Thin-lipped, Tolly gets out of the car and slams the door. She stalks past them into the station, head up, followed by the officer who collected her.

“Oh fuck,” says Dom.

There is a pause as they weigh up their options.

“Is it going to be worse if we stay, or worse if we bugger off?” John asks, finally.

Wiggins wrinkles his nose. "Definitely worse if we peg it."

"I could go back and tell them what's going on," Dom volunteers.

"No, you don't," John says, steeling himself. "You'll come and wait and drink shit tea with the rest of us."

Wiggins nods soberly. "Like a real man," he says, and ducks.

(It ended with Tolly returning to the farm, more or less as it ended up)

And in yet another version....

"Nothing," Tolly says, flummoxed, "Everything was fine, and then I come back from a party and out of the blue, someone carves up Sweet Surrender in the middle of the night... No, you can't be serious. It was a one-night stand."

"What was?"

"I fooled around with Rory at the anniversary party in his van; Wiggins is saying--"

"The DJ?" John says, catching up. "Hold on, are you saying the DJ is the maniac?"

"On and off the floor," Wiggins says, and then apologises at John's glare. For his part, John can't quite get his head around the fact that his first kiss was a romantic moment presided over by an obsessive horse-slasher. It's too bloody typical of his life.

"Should we call the police?"

"I think we should break his legs," Tolly says, with the distant tone of someone who is so far into their anger, they've come out the other side and gone numb. "I think..."

"I think you should sit down for a moment," John says, hastily, seeing how pale she's turned. He steers her onto the old straw bale they'd had coffee on just a few hours earlier, and presses his fingers to her wrist. "You've had a shock," he tells her, gently nudging her head down. "Breathe deep."

"I'm fine," Tolly growls, swaying. "Piss off."

"Yes, I've heard that one before. Shut up and breathe. We'll sort this out," he adds. "That's what we do."

"Yeah," Wiggins crouches next to her, peering up under her fringe. "We're the heroes. Appreciate the swooning."

"I'm not swooning!"

"Don't be sick or nothin' either."

"That I'm not making any promises about."

"She's fine," Wiggins diagnoses, "She's snappy."

“We’ll go down to the police station,” John says, using one foot to push Wiggins aside. “We’ll tell them what we think, and then it will be over.”

“We will?” Wiggins looks up, surprised. “What about chasing the criminal and all that?”

“You don’t want to get stabbed, remember,” John says, with a feeling in the back of his mind that he doesn’t really want to get stabbed either.

“What about the game?”

“We’re not playing today,” John hears himself say, and all at once he feels strangely older. Not old, but it’s the obvious, sensible thing to do and for once his need for excitement isn’t overriding his ability to take the safer choice. It’s a father’s decision, he thinks, taking the mug of water Dom has had the sense to fetch and pushing it under Tolly’s nose.

“I don’t want you all coming,” Tolly says. “Dom’s gotta stay here.” She gently pushes John’s hand away.

“Hold on, where are you going?”

“Police station, I’m not stupid. Dom can’t come, someone’s got to be around the yard, and he’s got a record for nicking stuff; they’ll just be harsh if he’s there.”

“I do,” Dom admits. “They do get harsh, it’s a fuckin’ insult.”

“Then don’t get caught if you’re stupid enough to nick stuff,” John advises unsympathetically.

“Wiggins better stay here as well then. Sorry, you’re not exactly Mr. Squeaky Clean, if they think to look you up.”

“Squeak, squeak,” Wiggins says sarcastically. “Who solved the crime?”

“It’s Tolly they’ll want to hear from,” John points out. “Look, Aunt Lydia can go with you, I’m sure.”

“No! God, no, I can’t get Dilly involved if-“ Tolly rubs at the bridge of her nose. “You come.”

“If you want me to,” John agrees.

“I don’t, I’d rather have Tony, but he’s not here.” She gets up, pushing her hair back. “I’ll go get the shit box.”

“Get the what?”

“My car.”

“I know. You can’t drive, you nearly fainted.”

“You can’t drive,” Tolly counters. “What do you want to do? Walk? Take a horse?”

John opens his mouth.

“There’s no way you’re riding any of my horses.”

“Right,” John says, giving in. “Shit box it is then...”

Cut from somewhere around the end of the horse case in Part 17. This was written VERY VERY early on (like 2 years before we got to this chapter?) and was a first draft of a run up to them having awkward first-time sex before I hit on the idea of Chelmsford. And Mycroft and Lestrade were also being pig-awkward and wouldn't get on board with this at that point either so...

Sherlock unlocks the door for them, tugging off his scarf and diving straight for the takeaway menus. John feels for his phone and calls Mycroft. The man must have been sitting up waiting for the call, as he answers at once.

"Good evening, John."

"Hi, Mycroft. We just got back." John glances at the clock. It's already gone 11pm. "I can swing by and pick her up now if that's ok?"

He hears Mycroft set down a newspaper or a set of papers or something. "She's asleep quite soundly now, John. It might just be better to wait until morning."

John feels mingled about the idea; part relief at the convenience for all concerned and part longing to go and collect his daughter. "Are you sure you don't mind having her overnight?"

"Hardly a bother," Mycroft says, "I can bring her around first thing in the morning."

No lie-in tomorrow then, John foresees; first thing to Mycroft usually means seven AM or earlier.

"Alright. Thanks Mycroft. We meant to get away sooner but you know how these things end up."

"Mm," Mycroft says, sounding both distracted and pleased. "Just a moment, Greg's home."

Mycroft lowers the phone, giving John only muffled insight into the proceedings. He hears Lestrade come in, huffing and complaining about something (no doubt the case), and his voice growing louder and quieter as he moves around. Mycroft says, "Hello, dear," in tones of fond amusement, and then the sound of a brief kiss, then a second. "Who's that?" Lestrade asks, a bit nearer. Mycroft says nothing, but must have simply showed him the name on the screen for then Lestrade takes the phone and growls down it "Paperwork!" at John.

"My apologies," Mycroft says presently, having wrested the phone back, but he shifts the phone again a second later and speaks to Lestrade. "On the counter, by the toaster. No. The open one, of course."

"Hello?" John ventures.

Mycroft hastens to answer. "Yes, I'm still here. Sorry, Gregory can't tell the difference between an open bottle of merlot and a sealed aged tokay." He sounds very long suffering. "As I said, I'll bring her around in the morning."

"Have you got enough food?" John asks, but he needn't have worried.

"Plenty," Mycroft reports, and there's the sound of Lestrade settling beside him with a sigh that is almost a groan of contentment. John wonders if they're sat on the sofa, or in bed and feels a little peculiar at the thought of being privy to such domesticity. Distantly John hears Mycroft murmur, "Gracious, your feet are cold."

“Ok. Well, see you in the morning then,” John hangs up, giving his phone an odd look as he lets himself settle.

“Everything alright?” Sherlock asks, in that odd way he has which is all at the same time knowing and yet concerned that he in fact knows nothing.

“Fine, she’s asleep,” John says, shaking off his jacket, but not the feeling. Who knew Mycroft Holmes was so, well... wife-y? And they kissed without hesitation or shame, right on the phone with him listening. Lestrade stuck his feet on Mycroft.

Probably did more.

A lot more.

Jesus.

Sherlock is frowning at him, and then sticks a menu under his nose. “I want number 32.”

“Right,” John agrees.

Was never included anywhere, but I was originally going to boot Molly off to Ascot much sooner and the whole Wiggins with flowers thing was put in just for laughs until the plot developed further and I realised that wasn’t going to work exactly.

“Stop the car.”

Wiggins shoves his head back through the window. “Can I borrow a fiver?”

“What for?”

“Sweets, cause I’ve been a good boy,” Wiggins says flatly, swiping the note as soon as John’s taken it from his pocket.

“Not a bleeding word,” Wiggins says, clambering into the back seat with his bouquet.

Cut from Interlude 5: While Our Blood’s Still Young. I spent so long working on this that I forgot it had only been about a month in fic time since Mycroft had resolved to stop being a massive prune and actually try having a relationship. These sections assumed they were still in the weeds and made the whole thing a lot angstier, so they got the chop.

“I found some chocolate earlier, when I was scrumping around,” Lestrade says. “Want to sit in their bed and eat it, and talk bollocks?”

For a moment, Mycroft is absolutely breathless at the proposal. There are too many things to be said and felt, so he dives straight to the ridiculous as a way to get out of either. “You can’t eat in bed.”

“You can eat in bed.”

“You’ll get food in the bed. You’ll drop crumbs.”

“That’s half the fun. I refuse to believe you’ve never eaten in bed. Ever.”

“I have- once, maybe, twice,” Mycroft amends, when it is evident that Lestrade isn’t buying it. “I get out of bed to eat.”

“But you’ll stay?”

“I- Aren’t you supposed to be baby-sitting?”

“Yes, we are. Two baby-sitters are better than one,” Lestrade argues. He holds his hands out helplessly. “That’s just a fact.”

‘Here’s another fact,’ Mycroft thinks, ‘You’re a perfect idiot about me, and I hardly deserve it.’

“It’ll be like...your flat. We’ll put some music on, and just, see how we go.”

“Please not John’s music,” Mycroft says.

Lestrade simply presses his phone into Mycroft’s hand and replies, “Your choice.”

“Do you just never kiss anyone?”

“No. Why would I?”

“I don’t know. It’s just a thing that happens, isn’t it?”

“Not to me,” Mycroft says firmly.

“Just sex.”

“The intercourse is planned.”

“Mostly planned.”

“Never unplanned,” Mycroft corrects. “Sometimes I don’t spend very long concocting the plan, but then I think faster than everyone.”

“So you do,” Lestrade agrees. “Huh.”

“What?”

“Nothing, I just never thought of it like that.”

“How did you think of it?”

“I just thought you hit these moments where you had to let off steam or go bananas.”

“I’ve never been reckless.”

“Have there been a lot?”

“Is that a question you really want the answer to?”

“Then there’s either been a lot, or just me.”

“That’s an presumption.”

“Well, if that weren’t the case you’d have just said. People usually just say. I don’t think I’m the only one.”

“It’s not been a ‘lot’,” Mycroft hedges.

Lestrade lifts an eyebrow. “It’s been some?”

“Some,” Mycroft agrees.

“None of them special?”

“No, I wouldn’t say that. No, the opposite. Each in their own way.”

“Never lasted though.”

“No.”

Lestrade mulls on this for a moment. He is not actually bothered by this revelation. If anything, it is exactly as he’d expected. “Anyone famous?” he asks. “Any dukes or princesses?”

“I wouldn’t tell you if there were,” Mycroft says, amused at the idea, but pretending to disapprove. “I’m not sure who you think I spend my time with either. But no, nobody anyone has ever heard of.” Save perhaps that broken young lady who’d been first. But of the others?

He mentally lists them in order; from the affair that had been more intellectual than anything else, which had ended at consummation; another that had cumulated in a damp little funeral. There had been many, many funerals to be attended to in the nineties, and he’d only attended one. Then there was his most recent mistake, made out of anger and burnt out of his system with Sherlock’s only friend. Of the others here and there, none of any significance. Of all of them, no one truly important.

Some of all this memory must flicker on his face, because Lestrade is watching, and only after does he say, “Must have had some times.”

“Some,” Mycroft admits again. “And you? Some?”

“Yeah, some,” Lestrade says. “Never a boyfriend or anything. Few very secretive flings in my miss-spent youth, but girls mostly. And then Caro, of course. Now, about 30 years too late I’m getting back into this other part of me I’ve been keeping shelved. To be honest, sounds like you’ve had more experience with men than I have.”

“About equal, actually. Between the one and the other.”

“Get out!” Lestrade says, in surprise. “Sorry, I just assumed you were gay, really. I mean, do you have a preference?”

“I suppose I consider myself egalitarian, so bisexual would be more accurate. There have been more men, if that matters.”

“No, not at all. Don’t think it matters. I mean, I was married.”

“All sorts of useful little subcategories and boxes these days,” Mycroft muses. “Have you heard of

demisexuality? In simplistic terms, it's a case in which the person is only sexually interested in other parties if they have gotten to know them first. I think there should be a term for the opposite; I tend to lose interest the longer I'm around a person."

Spotting Lestrade's face, he adds, "There are exceptions."

Cut from Part 19: Turned Out a Lover. Just a cute little snippet which got thrown out in order to move things along a bit faster.

The cottage kitchen is chilly out of the sun. John throws open all the windows and turns on the radio while making dinner. The sunset is a blaze behind the garden wall, and it paints John gold and orange. He ferries things out to the garden where the barbecue spits out clouds of smoke and ash.

John fusses over it, and then as the heat from the grill and the sun make him sweat, he tugs his t-shirt off over his head and dumps it on the garden bench. All the noise and the smells and the heady sight of John bustling around bare-chested makes it hard for Sherlock not to get involved.

Wisely, John puts him to the dual task of distracting Bee from the more dangerous aspects of making dinner, and putting together a salad to go with whatever protein he is burning.

"To-ma-toes, yuck!" Bee says with delight, pulling the stalks off and dropping them on the table top. In fact, she likes tomatoes, she just like the production of pretending that she doesn't more. Sherlock leans over the table and lets her pop one into his mouth.

"Mmm," he says. The tomato squirts into his cheek.

"MmmmMMMmmm!" she corrects and then, dropping another one in the bowl, "Yuck!"

Cut from the Wrap Ups. Written before I decided to set all of them on the day Bee leaves home, 15 years in the future.

The doorbell rings, cutting through the sound of the piano, and after a moment the homeowner comes to the door.

"Hello," she says, as the piano resumes. "She's just about ready. Do you want to come in?"

The younger woman on the doorstep hurries through the end of her text and then carefully tucks the phone away in her pocket before looking up and smiling. "Sure."

"Flora! Are you ready to go?" the homeowner yells up the stairs and at once there's a thump and a clatter of feet and then an exultant cry of greeting.

"Panther!"

"Hello, Flora."

The girl is lugging a satchel stuffed to the brim with an unidentifiable amount of stuff. She pushes her feet into sandals and hops at the woman's heels. "Let's go!"

"Say goodbye."

“Bye, Maggie!”

“Bye Flora, have a good time. You’re taking all that with you?”

“Yes! Don’t worry, I want Anthea to check my homework.”

“Well, don’t do it for her,” Maggie says wryly and Anthea just chuckles. “See you later.”

They walk for some time on the street, Flora puffing with her satchel until Anthea stops and insists she empties at least two of the books out. Sliding them into her own bag, they resume, Flora almost swinging on Anthea’s arm.

“Willard was playing very well.”

“Mm!” Flora agrees. “He’s working through all the angry Rachmaninoff and giving Chopin a rest. Very teenage. Maggie thinks its good for him. Are we going to see Mr. Holmes today?”

“Not today,” Anthea replies, “He’s busy. We’ve got lots to do anyway.”

“Ok, good.” Flora says, almost breathless. Anthea smiles, which Flora notices at once. “No, I don’t mean-He’s nice. But he’s very...” She pulls herself up and pulls an owlish face that’s very reminiscent of Mycroft indeed and Anthea laughs.

“He is-!” Flora protests. “I never know what to say to him.”

“We all feel like that,” Anthea confides. “The trick is to remember he’s just a man.”

“I like spending time with you,” Flora says, content. “Anthea-Panther.” She casts her a mischievous look from under her eyelashes. “And I’ve got my homework. Where are we going?”

“I had thought that we’d go to the Science Museum, but with all your clobber, I think we’d better go to the British Library instead and work.”

Flora lights up. “Did you bring me a phone?” she demands, bouncing with excitement.

“I might have,” Anthea says slyly.

“Oooh! Where is it?”

Anthea slides it out of her pocket, a sleek black model. Flora grabs at it in both hands, looking it over. “If you can unlock the photos on it by the end of the day, there’s a treat for you.”

“Fantastic. Tell me about it,” Flora says, already playing with it. “Who owned it?”

Anthea’s smile curls up. “You have to guess; that’s part of the game,” she says.

“I love deductions,” Flora answers, skipping, her hand slipped through Anthea’s. They walk towards the bus stop, their hair lifted by the wind.

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Cut from the very end of Part 20: New World Coming. I’d originally wanted it to end on moving to the South Downs, as a set up to the epilogue. No marriage. But it got unwieldy and there wasn’t enough ground left to cover in which to build a good (and interesting to read) bridge to this point, and I’d had the proposal drafted from about... two and a half years ago?

So we reverted back to that, and with the marriage and the adoption we figured that was plenty. :)

She's four and a half years old and has found a snail, which absorbs all of her presence of mind. John distractedly reaches for Sherlock's hand and slides their fingers together.

"Are you sure?" he asks.

Sherlock pauses for a long time before answering. "I don't know if I'll ever be sure," he admits. "But it doesn't discomfort me."

John needlessly checks the listing again, thumbing up and down the information; oddly in the past month or so, they have reversed roles. It's been John obsessively fact checking and list making and evaluating. Sherlock each time has gone with his gut instinct, and as ever, John has gone along with it.

"It ticks almost all the boxes," John says, lowering his phone. He calls to their daughter, who is drifting away down the long leg of the drive, singing nonsense to her snail. She dances back, head wagging.

"What?"

"What do you think, Bee? Do you like it?"

"Yes, it's very nice," she says, not looking up from the whorls of the yellow shell in her palm.

"Do you like the house?" John clarifies.

She looks up, squinting, upper lip rising in puzzlement. John crouches. "Would you like to come and live here?"

"This one?"

"Yes. With the little bedroom for you. And the big bedroom for Daddy and Papa."

"And Nana."

There is another deep pause. "Nana will have her own special room," John tells her. "For when she comes to visit."

"Ok."

Bee doesn't quite understand, but she has a snail, and the sun is shining, and it's a day trip. She trusts them to sort it out, because they always have, and they haven't failed her yet. John rises again and takes a deep breath.

"Your call, Sherlock. What should we do?"

He says it simply, trustingly. Your call. Sherlock feels the weight of that, and is surprised to find that it's not more than he can bear.

"Well, let's do it," he says. "Let's make an offer."

Cut and re-written for the Epilogue. Also written VERY EARLY on in the proceedings. I'm

talking like... 2014.

She's eighteen years old and packing boxes into her car.

"Right, that's the lot of it," she brushes off her hands in a practical way, a characteristic that reminds Sherlock so strongly of John. He's in her face today. Sometimes Sherlock sees Mary, sometimes flashes of himself, but today she's all John- John's brave face masking over deeper emotions; John's hard-headed sense of get-on-and-get-things-done.

John is fussing.

"Ring us when you get there," he says, closing the bonnet of the car where he's been fretting over the water and the oil, both of which are fine, because Sherlock got up at 3am to go down and check them himself, and also give the tires a once over.

She rolls her eyes, suddenly Sherlock. "Relax. I'm not going to die."

"It's a long drive, Bee. Make sure you stop if you get tired and be careful on the motorway; don't get hemmed in between those big tankers."

"Yes, Pa~" She smacks John's cheek with a kiss and squishes him in a hug.

"You two behave," she says, reaching for her car keys. "And tell Uncle Mycroft I want all evidence of my Fresher's week erased from every database ever." She flashes Sherlock a wicked look. "I intend to have a good time."

Sherlock doesn't waste his breath on advice- she has either heard it before or she won't listen anyway, or it would just be hypocritical. Instead he kisses the top of her head and murmurs, "We'll miss you."

She softens, Mary's ghost now around her eyes. It's come up clearer as she's aged. "Miss you two, too," she says back, tough veneer cracking a bit. "Look after each other." She gives Sherlock a bone cracking hug and then dives into the car before she gets teary.

"Byeeee!" she bugles out the window. "Love you!" And then she's cranking the radio up to some god-awful band neither of them can name and the car is trundling down the street. John leans on the gate and waves until he can't see her any more. Then his shoulders slump.

"We should have gone with her; made sure she was alright settling in..."

"She didn't want us to," Sherlock reminds him. "Let her be independent, John." He leans down and kisses him, twisting his fingers into John's so that their rings click together. John huffs and tugs one of Sherlock's stray curls.

"Good thing I still have you."

Sherlock smirks.

"I know, you even got married and I didn't leave. What does that say?"

"I love you."

Sherlock looks at him, a funny expression on his face. John reaches up to smooth the crow's feet around his eyes.

"What? What's the matter?"

“That’s the first time you’ve ever said that,” he tells John. John is taken aback.

“No it isn’t. I’ve said it loads of times.”

Sherlock purses his lips. “Well, you’ve expressed the sentiment loads of times,” he agrees. John’s brows, silver, knot together. “I’m sure I’ve said it before,” he repeats, but there’s an element of doubt to his tone now.

“You’ve said ‘me too’ and ‘yes, I do,’ and said it by proxy with any number of startling sexual acts,” Sherlock says, ambling unselfconsciously back towards the cottage and making John blush. Sherlock gives him a sly look over his shoulder, “and as it is always a delight to watch you suck my cock, kindly don’t stop.” He pops the plosive wickedly, and John digs his knuckles in to his arm.

“No, no, John,” Sherlock says, grinning and grabbing him by the belt hooks. “We’re allowed to be filthy now there are no children in the house to traumatise.”

He watches the cogs tick over in John’s head as to how much spontaneous kitchen sex they can potentially have now versus the creeping late-middle-aged ache in his knee that might put the clampers on that sort of horseplay.

“Hmm,” says John, thoughtfully. Sherlock mouths at one of his ears, despite the fact that they’ve not even reached the doorstep yet.

“But,” Sherlock concludes, “If you would care to start voicing the last sixteen years worth of buggery and superlative companionship in that most dull, cliché way as advocated by the greetings card industry, I suppose I don’t mind.”

“I love you,” John says, “and you know it.”

Sherlock twinkles at him. “Yes,” he says, reaching to close the door, “I always have.”

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That's all! Hope you enjoyed that little foray into the editing process.

Bonus Content: Out-takes

Chapter Summary

Sometimes, you're trying to write, but your brain won't co-operate and in that situation I default to harassing Codenamelazarus with bad sequiturs. Here's a few of my especially stupid moments

Bonus Content: Outtakes

(From Part One- The one that Isn't Here Anymore)

She's one hundred and twenty seven days old when John is woken in the middle of the night, his hip damp and warm.

"Mary?"

He reaches for his wife in confusion and finds her shaking.

"Mary!" He rolls her onto her back in desperation and then scowls when Mary bursts out laughing.

"I popped the fucking hot water bottle!"

(From Part One- The one that Isn't Here Anymore)

True to his word, John hasn't budged from the sofa by the time he gets back. His face is washed with relief to see Sherlock coming through the door.

"She's getting warm again," he reports, his eyes on the carrier bag in Sherlock's hand with a kind of intense desperation. Sherlock doesn't waste any time in passing the medicine over. It's not the same brand, but one that John recognizes, with similar ingredients. It's not the only thing Sherlock's squirreled up either; there's infant rehydration solution and a packet of fig rolls. Sherlock lets him dose the baby while he mucks around with the microwave.

He comes back and squeezes in next to John on the sofa, pushing a mug into his free hand and carelessly, a fig roll into his mouth.

"Eat," Sherlock commands. "Eat the figgy pudding. Eat it."

(From Part One- The one that Isn't Here Anymore)

"I did promise, you know," Sherlock says presently. John glances at him questioningly.

“That one time,” Sherlock clarifies. He leans in a little closer. “When she turned up.”

John remembers. He’s been holding his arms with such tension that pulling his left hand out from under his right only happens with an awkward jerking motion. He hesitates with the palm of his hand held flat, pats Sherlock’s back once in a backwards parody of comfort-giving and then gives in and puts his arm around him like he wants to. He closes his eyes and hopes that Sherlock can at least feel his gratitude, because he’s turned to press it against him. Perhaps Sherlock does, for a moment later he reciprocates the gesture.

Out in the kitchen, the microwave beeps. Sherlock squeezes John briefly to make him look up and then makes him an old offer.

“Quickie?”

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Cut from Part 15. Mycroft would have been the warbly bird-woman had I continued on this vein.

Sherlock nudges aside John’s hand as he sits up. “Is Bee asleep?” He’s asking himself more than John and they listen intently for a moment. Muffled, they can hear her complaining to Elbant, but she doesn’t sound in danger of staying up for too much longer.

“Bee’s fine,” John says. His hand has fallen onto Sherlock’s knee. He squeezes gently until he gets the other man’s attention. “Hey.”

They’re sitting close. Close enough that Sherlock would only have to bow his head in order to kiss him; and the temptation is there. It’s always there. It’s driving him mad even more now than when he’d thought the whole idea was a possibility. John’s looking at him with concern.

‘Stop,’ Sherlock wants to say. He wants to lift a finger and press the tuck of skin between John’s brows until it smoothes away.

“Hey,” John says again. “What’s going on?”

“I try,” Sherlock says, “Oh my God, do I try. I try all the time, in this institution.”

“And he prays,” added Mrs. Hudson, appearing with a tea-tray at the door.

“Oh my god, how I pray. I pray every single day.”

“Nyaahh!”

—

Cut from Part 17: Kiss Me With Adventure. Egg was trying to make me make certain scenes ‘softer’ (read gayer and gooier) and I wasn’t really in a romance writing mood, so I goofed around to make her laugh and then, as usual, had an actually good idea and wrote that instead.

“Then I’ll have to stay here,” John says. “It’s too long to leave Bee.”

“You can’t stay,” Sherlock objects, “I need you with me. What if I need you?”

"And I need you, Sherlock," John says, looking at him soulfully. Sherlock squirms in his pants, knowing exactly what John means, but they can't-! They mustn't-! Whatever would Mummy say?

(She'd say 'GET IN THERE SON!', and 'you foolish boy'. I'll let you guess which one each statement is addressed to.)

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Through the car windows, John can make out the blur that is the back of Wiggin's head.

On the bright side, we've got our car to ourselves," he points out, casually unbuttoning his woollen cardi. "It's a bit warm in here." John licks his lips and Sherlock grips the steering wheel ever tighter.

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"Right," John says. "You're being weird. Anything I should know? Have you got, I don't know, a dark horse on this family farm of yours?"

"No," Sherlock says after a long pause. "Nothing really." He glances left.

Nothing compared to you.

In his mind, he can hear the throbbing of an alto sax. He could do with a cigarette. There's sweat trickling down John's neck, and John gulps, feeling the hot, heavy intensity of Sherlock's gaze. "It really is warm in here," Sherlock comments. But neither of them rolls the window down.

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"Not a fan of the trousers."

"Jodhpurs," Sherlock supplies.

"Them as well," John agrees. "Absolute bugger to get off."

He pauses, looking at Sherlock, his eyes dark. "Not like these." he puts one hand on the button of those damn, clinging corduroys and demonstrates the truth of his words by letting the silver disc slip loose from the button hole, like a moon phasing through an eclipse.

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It makes a little jealous fire flare up in John's belly, which he knows is irrational, but it's there all the same. In spite of him. He lifts his head in defiance, deliberately stares for one moment longer, and then makes himself turn towards Sherlock.

Sherlock is looking at him.

"Hey babe," Sherlock says, his voice a long low drawl, all smoke and vanilla. "Take a walk on the wild side."

-

'Wouldn't it be nice', Sherlock thinks to himself, 'if my brain would shut up and let me go and do that.' Instead, he can't help but stare at John's hair so hard that John lifts a hand and touches it self-consciously.

John flutters at his touch, blushing, twisting coyly in on himself, and yet Sherlock knows that deep down, John is thinking 'That's it! Yes! Now take me, you magnificent bastard.'

-

“Nothing. Something,” Sherlock squints at the expanse of grass, moving in the wind like an ocean. “I’m not sure. Just a... flash? I was going uphill.”

John nods. “A flash? Like this?”

John grasps the front of his shirt and pulls. It, and his trousers, fly apart on seams of up-to-then perfectly concealed velcro.

Sherlock gapes, wonderstruck.

—

—

Cut from part 17. More of me goofing around with music jokes. Egg didn’t even get the jokes. I’m not even an Eminem fan. Complete fucking waste of effort.

Tolly guesses from his expression and she gives a slight shake of her head in pleased disbelief.

“Dunno what you’re thinking, but you’re either loved up or going daft.”

“Yeah, maybe,” John allows. Tolly laughs.

“We’re all mad round here.” She eases off of the straw bale, shooing the boxer away. “Speaking of things that are smart and daft, shall we go find them?”

“Sherlock and the skink?”

“Slim’n’ him.”

“Ah well, he did go through Recovery, and he is Phenomenal,” John jokes, and then he adds, with deadly seriousness, “And I ain’t never seen an ass like that.”

—

—

Cut from part 18.

“I warned you it was trite. It’s mostly serviceable advice; however.”

“Right,”

“Especially don’t overthink it,” Mycroft advises. “And now I’m going to hang up, before my skin crawls off at the thought.”

“Mine’s already crawled,” Sherlock sneers, for the sake of appearances.

“Good luck,” Mycroft says. In his chair at home, he does a little side-to-side wiggle of his head.

“And don’t... fuck it up.”

(Where’s my drag race AU hmm? “It’s for a CASE, Jawn!”)

—

(Cut from Part 19)

“That’s rhetoric,” John says softly, moved. He prods Sherlock’s chin until he’s looking down again and then kisses him once, slowly. “Drama queen.”

“I just meant-“

“You’re the best thing that ever happened to me.”

Sherlock stops dead, as taken aback as John has just been.

“Well you are. God only know what I’d be without you-“

“God only knows!” Mrs Hudson echoes, launching out of the wardrobe with a trombone.

“God only knows,” Lestrade agrees, falling through the window.

“God only knowwwws,” the choir sings, until Harry pushes her way to the front, finger pointed at John and brings the whole thing to a halt.

“You’d be fucking TRASH, John!”

Bonus Content: FAQ

Chapter Summary

In which I hope to answer a few ongoing things that I know people have been asking about or otherwise commenting on for the last four years.

Bonus Content: Frequently Asked Questions

1) Bee's Name

Here it is. The Big One. The one you've all been asking:

What is Bee's real name!? Did I miss it?

Nope, because she doesn't have one! You missed nothing! It's never mentioned, and never will be, LMAO.

So you didn't plan this because you wanted to tie in with S4? Wasn't this a clever way to make Bee's secret name 'canon'?

Actually, no. That wasn't the plan at all, either. I'm really not that savvy. In fact, the original plan was for to have absolutely NO name whatsoever. Not even a nickname, but as story started to grow from a 10K one-shot to something much more significant, I had to bite the bullet and pick - something- the characters could use to refer to her by in order to stop labouring around avoiding it unnaturally. Hence 'Bee'. Anyway, that way she follows a great Holmes tradition of monikers. Mummy and Daddy are very proud; they don't have known names in this universe either.

So...Why does she need to be nameless?

Well, I thought about it for a long time and my original intent behind keeping her nameless are twofold.

Mostly it's because I was making a conscious effort to keep her under-developed as a character and out of the limelight. Yes she IS a character, she's in the story a LOT and as a catalyst for plot she's pretty important, but she's also not really very interesting as a character.

She's my character. She's just another OC, and for the most part she doesn't have a story arc to play with. She's born, she eats, she poos, she learns to eat and poo more in keeping with social mores, etc. It's not riveting stuff worthy of over 100,000 words of fanfic. The interesting thing with the baby lies in John and Sherlock and their reactions to the changes she brings. As I said, as a plot device, she's a lynch pin, so, as a way of counterbalancing and to stop the whole story from becoming All About Baby, I took her name away. She can't be a tag. It helps hold back on making her a deus ex macina.

In short, I didn't want to sell 'Bee' as a New Character. Without an 'official' name, she remains

nothing more than a fun and engaging prop for the Johnlock story I wanted to write. Handicapping her narrative influence kept the parentlock aspect more real for me in my head, and while there are some lovely parentlock fics that have gone the 'So-and-So Watson-Holmes' route, there's no way I could have written one without it being lame as hell. I'd get into this temptation to 'voice' the character beyond the actual capabilities of a child that age.

The other reason is that I never set out to write S4. When I started the fic, no one knew really where the series was going to go, and I always wrote with the intention of this being a strict AU, and whatever S4 turned out to be, I was never ever going to try and tie it in. This is why Sherlock has no sister in TWMTBTW, and Mary isn't revealed to be an assassin, though I may have mentioned the ginger nuts. This isn't because I hate S4 (though I can't say I loved it), it's because... it's a different story. My fic and canon diverge at the tarmac scene and never overlap again. And for that reason, Bee and Rosie aren't the same either, and it's weird for me when I see people refer to Bee as 'Rosie'.

Bee really, really doesn't have a name?!

The furthest and most concrete we ever got was 'E. Watson'. An 'E' name seemed to fit so well, but obviously 'Emma' was out, and as 'Watson' 'Mary' 'Elsie' and 'Evelyn' are all actual in-use names amongst my family and friends, I didn't like committing to those either. Neither could we saddle the poor mite with something like 'Ethel' or 'Eudora' and fanciful names like Esmerelda or such-like seemed so un-John-ish that they were a write-off as well. So we went around in circles a few times and then fetched up with nothing more than initials, and 'Bee' because I literally couldn't keep having John refer to her in speech as 'the baby'. If she has a middle name it's possibly Helen, because that's what I named John's mum. But probably not. Anyway, there's nothing important about her name; it's not significant in any way whatsoever, it's not a hint, a clue or a subtext. I'm just an annoying and lazy troll. Ellen could work, I suppose, but it's a bit late to be really deciding things now.

BONUS: For fun, keep an eye out for where she shifts from being Bee in character's speech only, to referenced as Bee in the prose instead of just 'the baby' etc. You'll be surprised at how late in the fic that is. Coincidentally, that's also when people tailed off asking me every chapter what her name was. Fascinating.

But what about 'Sherlock'? Sherlock is a girl's name! Or Sherl? Or Shirley? Or Shelly?

Names have nuance and connotation, which is unfortunate and basically wrong, but TMWTBTW John with his aim of middle-class picket-fenced perfection is completely fucking biased, and he'd never have allowed it. Also Mary laughed her arse off and said no.

2) The End of S3

(This was something a few people commented on back about halfway through the fic, and I still anticipated finishing the story before S4 aired (how stupidly optimistic I was!). I began writing this FAQ at that time, and U have left my original answer below because I think it's interesting to see how much things changed!)

You never really addressed the end of S3; how come? How did Sherlock get off of a murder charge? What was the deal with 'did you miss me'? Why were John and Mary together at the start of this fic? Why did John even forgive her?

Post S4 Edit: Hahaha, well no one bothered with any of this in Canon either, so am I off the hook? Anyway, here's my original answer:

Because while those are awesome questions, the answers make for a totally different story! I'm not concluding S3 with this fic, nor am I writing S4, and I don't think I could have addressed it without writing ANOTHER 100K just to cover those points, vastly delaying all the actual character progression part. Either that or I'd have to throw something in hastily in the first chapter as a 'btw, this happened'. That would have felt slapdash. (*Post S4 Edit: And boy, didn't it?*) It would be a ramble of justifications muddying up where I wanted to kick off and what I wanted to write and wouldn't have really needed referring to as a theme in the later story telling. So I decided, screw it, I'm handwaving it all.

I follow the canon as close as I can right up to the airstrip scene, and then I cut loose (*Post S4 edit: excepting the Jonathan Small fuck-up. :L*). As far as this timeline is concerned; the Did You Miss Me thing happened, was resolved in what you could think of as a missing episode, but it is now That Which We Do Not Speak Of. Magnussen's murder was resolved. How? It's a bit fishy, but somehow it came out on an even keel, more or less, albeit John and Sherlock parted ways somewhat, as per the ACD canon after Dr. Watson marries.

There's a few lines here and there to suggest that Things Happened and it Wasn't All Ok, if you look for them. I haven't honestly considered it too closely other than making some efforts to show that things aren't entirely what they once were. On cases, John and Sherlock aren't doing their own thing any more- they are heeled at almost all times by the acting DI and his officers, or they're consulting on cold case paperwork. But yeah, I never addressed it really. I did mention; I'm annoying and I'm lazy.

3) Mary.

(Like the section above I wrote this answer prior to S4, and honestly, it's a gag. I include it here with my post S4 edits underneath and in italics throughout.)

So is she evil?

Who the fuck knows? Wait till S4 and information from the powers that be. (*Post S4 Edit: *SHRUG**)

I'm personally pretty neutral about Mary. I'm not apologising for nor dismissing her actions. I'm not making her good and I'm not making her evil. I don't think either stance is that realistic and I think the character gets a shit enough deal from fandom already without provoking more A vs B type wank. Love her, hate her, do what you do, but I think she's far too interesting to throw her out the picture entirely.

In terms of this story, I could have made her a big-name villain, I could have come up with some convoluted explanation to redeem her but eehhhhhh, neither option feels like it fits when the rest is all so subtle. (*Post S4 Edit: *stares into the camera**) So, whilst I didn't want to off Mary, doing so meant I could use her character more effectively in a way. In TMWTBTW she's a conflicted person and an excellent liar, and someone who could be a great deal of different things to different people. She dies at an open point in her arc, and forever after remains an unanswered question, pure and simple. That's the point. At the start of the story, no one knows. And now she's dead, no one will ever know. Getting the answer would be boring. (*Post S4 Edit: *wheezing noises**)

To John, she's always going to be a 'what-would-have-?' and there's nothing he can do about that.

That's part of his story; how he just has to come to terms with not knowing. He has to just live with it: the guilt, and the loss and the relief of an uncomplicated exit from the relationship that was perhaps not going to survive. He has to deal with the conflict of wondering who was more real; The woman he fell in love with and had a child with, or the woman who was self-serving and lied? He can't answer for her, so he has to choose which version he's going to keep. This is thematic in John's life. He did the same thing with Sherlock after Reichenbach to a lesser degree, he had similar issues when he was put into care concerning his father: what was more important to him? The abusive, manipulative fake, or the person he loved? *(Post S4 edit: and with regards to his father, he realises neither really exists any more. It becomes less about having it out with his abuser, and about reconciling with Harry, which proves to be better for all concerned.)*

In the end, John chooses that, for his daughter, Mary's always going to be a loving young mother taken too soon. He doesn't have to like it, he doesn't have to agree with it, and he doesn't even have to really believe it, but the price of honesty is too much. It's not worth hurting his daughter just to be vindictive to a dead woman; not when all he can say is what she 'wasn't', and not really what she 'was'.

POST S4 COMMENT:

So clearly Mofftiss and I came at this from RADICALLY different angles. I'm not here to stir muddy waters- they did what they did, and while I'd bite my tongue off before calling it 'the best thing ever', I've still seen far worse television. You're welcome to disagree, but I'm not really here to discuss what S4 was on the grander scale. Moving on. In their story, anyway, they redeemed Mary and then killed her.

TBH, I've always felt that you only really had two routes to go the longer Mary was around. She either got redeemed or she was the villain all along. If you decide she's a villain to the end, then it's difficult to make it clever and unpredictable and not moustache twizzingly cheap. If she's redeemed, then you've got a choice of cheaply, or with great soul-wringing, and they kind of hustled towards an Economy Redemption.

From another perspective, approaches to the dead in fiction are varied but I guess writing Dead!Mary you've got three options or so:

- 1) Hallowed Be Thy Name For We Don't Speak Ill of the Dead: the dead are raised to a new level, usually in a positive manner, or more rarely for a villainous character, they become a powerful, deity-esque source of inspiration to a sycophant.
- 2) Sorry, Who?: This character is gone. Done. Vanished. They seem never to have really existed and will never be mentioned again. You'll forget they existed, until 9 episodes later when something vaguely references them, and you'll squint to remember. The name is lost- you refer to them only by their relationship to the living main character.
- 3) Did Not Go Quietly: Character refuses to be dead in the narrative. Other characters are haunted by the loss, there will be a whole story arc dedicated to putting this to rest. It could be very touching, or it could be more like 'bring me salt and a stake, we need to nail this bitch down in hell before we'll get any peace around here'. At any rate, character remains active colour in the subsequent happenings.

Whatever Mofftiss aimed at, they at least didn't pull a 'Sorry, Who?', which would have been an enormous waste of Mary's character, but the end result just came off... well... 'divisive' is probably a diplomatic way to put it. TV puts a lot of limits on what you can do in terms of time and money, so I can understand a little why it got a little rushed and abrupt. I still maintain that for me

at least, Mary is most interesting as a question. In my story she does not Go Quietly, she remains, and only when it feels right does she go in peace.

4) A few notes on using this fic

Can I tattoo this fic on my body?

Yes. Sure. If that's what you want?

Can I create fanart or mood boards or playlists or a collage made of cheese based on this fic?

Yes :) Absolutely! Please show us if you do!

Can I write a fic inspired or based on this fic's universe? A Billy/Molly (as you didn't go there! After all that teasing!), or a missing scene or something?

Sure, I don't mind. If you host it on AO3, please link with us! :)

Can I translate, podfic, or otherwise transform this story?

OK, so I'm going to sound super harsh here but: YOU NEED TO TALK TO ME FIRST. I am perfectly open and willing to discuss translations (there is an excellent Spanish translation ongoing already!), and other such matters, but it must be that - a discussion. You may not simply say 'hi' once, swipe it and run, ok? I do not give blanket permissions and there is a disclaimer on the front of the fic to that effect. I'm aware other fandom writers do give blanket permissions, but I'm sorry, I'm not one of them. Please respect that. Like I said, this sounds harsh, but really all I'm asking for is very basic, and unfortunately there has been something of a run of situations that have spoiled my patience for it, so I'm just not willing to hand over so much of my hard work to anyone who isn't willing to engage with me with at the lowest level of consideration.

But honestly, I'm not a dragon. This isn't a flat out 'NO NEVER'; I love people's enthusiasm, just talk to me before you jump in feet first.

Also I maaaaayyybe have ambitions to reproduce this fic in a few other formats myself, so if I say no, there's likely a good reason why. Watch this space.

Ok, grump over. Let's get back to the fun stuff.

5) Other Little Ponderings You Folks have Pondered

Elephants and Bees. Explain.

Where do I start? Without turning this into an essay, the reoccurring elephant is of course, a large nod to the reoccurring elephant in the TV show. Bees are a nod to ACD Holmes' retirement as a bee keeper, and also the fandom obsession. As to what they represent? Well, it's a bit open to interpretation. I will say, however, there's a deliberate progression in the use of the name 'Bee'. It's not used in the prose for a long time as I mentioned above. The elephant has more complex use. By all means, share your best meta!

Who was Mr. 'Tie-Pin'?

Points at the neon sign above Lestrade's head that reads 'I fucked a Holmes and I liked it'

Not Sherlock.

Where does the name of the fic come from?

From the 300K+ of them dicking around having meaningful eye-talk and discussing shit in their brains but NEVER SAYING ANYTHING like fucking competent grown-ups.

That and it was literally like the last thing left to think of after writing chapter one and I blanked and kind of threw that at it and then it was too late to change it. I regret because it's too long to tag on things and people keep tagging 'The Men who Talk Between Worlds' anyway so. \O/ here's to a basically shit title. *Laughing* I don't think I would change it now.

Can I have a list of the songs you referenced?

Sure you can! Here's the full '**A-Side**', in the order of reference within the fic:

- 1) Mr. Ambulance Driver by The Flaming Lips
- 2) September 6th by Secabest Bestabed
- 3) I Remember by Damien Rice
- 4) Not Perfect by Tim Minchin
- 5) It Came Upon the Midnight Clear - Traditional
- Interlude 1: Winter Lady by Leonard Cohen
- 6) Cocaine Habit by Old Crow Medicine Show
- 7) Prince Charming by Adam and the Ants
- 8) Tender by Blur
- 9) Andalusia by John Cale
- Interlude 2: The End of the World by Matt Alber
- 10) Damage by Jimmy Eat World
- 11) Family Man by Fleetwood Mac.
- 12) Born of Frustration by James
- Interlude 3: Do you realise?- The Flaming Lips
- 13) In My Life by The Beatles
- 14) It's Been a Long Long Time by Charlie Spivak with vocals by Irene Day
- 15) The Nearness of You with vocals by Jo Stafford
- 16) Absolute Beginners- David Bowie
- Interlude 4: Someone Somewhere in the Summertime by Simple Minds
- 17) Cliffs Edge by Haley Kiyoko
- Interlude 5: Sweet Disposition by The Temper Trap
- 18) Talk to Me by Sunny and the Sunglows
- 19) Look at Me Now- Frank Sinatra
- 20) New World Coming by Nina Simone
- Interlude 6: Valse Sentimentale by Tchaikovsky
- Epilogue: Melodié, Op. 42, No. 3 Souvenir d'un lieu cher by Tchaikovsky

What it sounds like compiled as an album is anyone's guess though. (:L) Oh wait, nope. [I put it on Spotify for you all here](#)

Songs that didn't make quite the cut or were only referenced fleetingly:

The **B- SIDE**; in no particular order other than this arrangement sounds the least like a hot mess.

Ring the Bells by James
Blue Song by Mint Royale
Sexx Laws by Beck
Out of Touch by Hall and Oates
Slow Burn by David Bowie
Prince Johnny by St. Vincent
One Day by The Verve
The Drugs Don't Work by The Verve
Living Colour by The Paper Kites
Music to Walk Home By- Tame Impalas
Aberdeen by Cage the Elephant
Thank You by Led Zeppelin
Ode to my family by The Cranberries
From Afar by Vance Joy
Higher Love by James Vincent Mc Morrow
Wake the Earth by the Honeytrees
I Wanna Dance With Somebody by Matt Alber
The Needle and the Damage Done by Neil Young (Harvest)
Where do you Go to My Lovely? by Peter Sarstedt
Deep Purple by Billy Ward and the Dominoes
Have I the Right by The Honeycombs
Gotta Travel On by Billy Grammar
Deep Purple by Billy Ward and the Dominoes

[Which is also available for your listening pleasure](#)

And just for fun:

The SEA-SIDE

Walk the Dinosaur by Was (Not Was)
Home by Phillip Phillips
Mi Unicornio Azul by Silvio Rodriguez
The Great Pretender by Frank Sinatra
Pick it Up by Paul Weller
Sometimes When We Touch by Dan Hill

Which. I didn't.

What was The Twelve days of Christmas thing?

Actually no one asked this, but just because:

Starr- obvious; a star.

Rey and Czar are the Spanish for 'king', and the word for the emperor of Russia pre-revolution and/or a Slavic ruler respectively. Caspar (Rey's first name) and Mel (Rev. Weisz's first name) come from Kaspar and Melchior; the names of two of the kings according to the bible. Couldn't get Balthazar in, sadly. Weisz originally meant 'white' in German, but is often mis-pronounced to sound like 'wise', hence you have 2 kings and a wiseman all going in circles around a star.

As for the lyrics:

12 Drummers Drumming - Timothy Drummer
Eleven Pipers Piping- Sergeant Piper

Ten Lords a Leaping- The word 'Lord' occurs 10 times in this chapter.
Nine Ladies Dancing- Emily Starr has a picture of 9 women in Thai dance costumes on her wall.
Eight Maids a Milking- Emily has a china milkmaid on her dresser.
Seven Swans a Swimming- Literally, seven swans are swimming on the duckpond.
Six Geese a Laying- Sherlock demands takeaway from the restaurant on Goose Lane.
Five Golden Rings- Emily had 2 pairs of gold hoop earrings and a gold ring next to her bed.
Four Calling Birds- Mrs. Weisz has 4 photos of ex-pet budgerigars.
Three French Hens- Mrs. Weisz also has a watercolour painting of three chickens.
Two Turtle Doves- Mrs. Weisz has a painting of a pair of doves.
A Partridge in a Pear Tree- The local pub in Swanley is called The Pear Tree.

Laughs away into the distance because it's all such a lot of soft shit

I still don't understand the joke behind Murray Arrend.

I have rarely regretted a joke so much. I wish I'd called the caravan Maria Rend; maybe that'd have worked better. It's a play on words anyway, and if you say it with the right accent it's pronounced /mʌrɪə'rend/ or 'M'rear end' or, typed out, 'My rear end'. (:L) It's a linguistics bum joke. [You can hear me reading a bit of the fic with the joke in here.](#)

Also Sheer Luck's Source is another of these; if you mangle your phonemes enough it sounds like 'Sherlock's Horse'.

Are you gonna write anything else?

Absolutely! I'm probably going to take a good long rest from Sherlock fanfic and You may have noticed a recent run of Gundam Wing fic; this for me is the writer's equivalent of binge-eating ice-cream after slaving through a 4-year diet of careful writing. But I have some Sherlock WIPs on my back burner which I may in due time turn my attention to again.

I have some quite serious intentions to work on an original story (or 2), which I will share as soon as I can work out the best way to do so, and there's definitely an ambition to rework my other Kidlock story Skater in the Snow as a novel, if I can figure out how.

Oh! So why not TMWTBTW reworked as an original novel?

Lord, it's so long. I don't think it would really work either. Certainly it would require some very intensive editing, and I think I'd need to go back to the beginning and start again, and I don't think I quite have the energy for that right now. More likely, is that I would recycle certain ideas in future works. Rest assured though, if you ever see me talking about a project called 'A Family Man', then that's the one you'd want to pay attention to.

Final Statistics:

Manuscript word count, compiled without the footnotes: 380,700 words.
Number of pages equivalent in a paperback novel: 1,439
Some books this fanfic is longer than:
Lonesome Dove, Larry McMurtry – 365,712 words
Anna Karenina, Leo Tolstoy – 349,736 words
Bleak House, Charles Dickens – 360,947 words

Jonathan Strange & Mr Norrell, Susanna Clarke – 308,931 words
A Feast for Crows, George RR Martin – 300,000 words

I kind of wanted to beat Les Mis, and I was only 8000 words short of spiting The Count of Monte Cristo, but I can't have everything I suppose.

That's it! Comments? Other questions? Do you have a burning desire to tell me the weirdest place you read this fic or the one line you'd be willing to put on a t-shirt and wear around a convention so that I could point and scream with delight if I ever saw you(I have one already, it says 'Hello, having a boogie?' but I'd consider another!)?? We'd love to hear from you!

As ever, I'm [Odamakilock on Tumblr](#)

Much love

Oda <3<3<3<3

Works inspired by this [one](#) [\[Cover\]](#) [The Men Who Talked Between the Words](#) by [allsovacant](#)

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