The One Fixed Point

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Summary

Long into retirement and after yet another extended absence, Sherlock Holmes comes to visit a convalescent Watson with an unexpected question and a most unusual offer.

Notes

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Warnings for angst, discussion of death and drugs, and ACD canon-esque fantastical elements

I buried three wives I loved in my lifetime, and my friend Sherlock Holmes came only to the funeral of the first.

As I bid goodbye to my Anne, a former patient who wore my ring and my name for not even a year before the liver trouble that brought her to me stole her from me, Holmes stood at my side quietly. It was a frigid February, and he held the umbrella to keep the sleet off my shoulders. My memory is a jumble after that arrival, of red-eyed mourners and white roses and the only thing left steady in the world, the sound of Holmes' measured breathing next to me. Afterwards, I think I should have stared for hours at the broken ground and our lost dreams had Holmes not guided me into a hansom seat. "Home," he told the driver, and I did not protest.
Holmes missed the funeral for my second wife, my precious Mary, whose heart was as generous as it was weak, but at the time I held no animosity about his absence. After all, he had also been missing at his own funeral just eight months prior.

Susan and I were married and content for nearly twenty years late in life before she too left me behind in this world when the next one beckoned. As she sank, she seemed almost excited. Knowing how dearly she loved to travel, the reason was clear. She was embarking on the greatest voyage of all. Susan abandoned me one October morning to go exploring, and I tried my best not to be angry that she did not take me with her on her adventure.

On the other hand, I was livid with Holmes. He was long into old age and retirement then, but for extended stretches I heard nothing from him. When I removed from my finger the last wedding ring I would ever wear for the very last time, Holmes was missing entirely. A year had passed at that point since any of his acquaintances had seen hide nor hair of him, let alone his closest friend. His cottage in Sussex stood empty according to all reports.

I thought of him often. Was he working? At his age? Could he be travelling? With empty days and emptier nights on my hands, he lingered on my mind. Could he require help? Would he still ask me for my assistance if he needed it? As the months slipped by, I was no longer sure. For all I knew, he was beyond my help. I heard nothing from him.

Fortunately, I am never completely alone, because I have a pen and paper. I found myself once again writing with a driven intent, putting words together at a pace I had not achieved since just after our retirement, when I tried to discover what I would be when I was no longer Sherlock Holmes’ assistant, and found I was still and should remain his biographer forever.

But as I wrote this time, I sensed my anger at yet another of his disappearing acts when I needed him seeping through. I wrote of Holmes drowning my revolver in a muck-covered lake without warning. Holmes, refusing to take no for an answer and sending me away from him despite a standing death threat and my every protest. Holmes, going off alone to be beaten half to death in the street, and then lying to me about his progress recovering in order to aid his case.

He was a man of habits, I wrote, and I had become one of them.

I poured out my frustration, but I found another emotion bleeding through the ink as well. I wrote of the case of the Garridebs, another in which we flirted with catastrophe, but one different than all the others. There was Holmes, dragging me with his spindly arms to a chair after I’d been shot by a counterfeiter. Holmes, refusing to listen to any of my reassurances about the severity of my wound and cutting into my clothes to see for himself. Holmes, Sherlock Holmes, for God’s sake, trembling with fear. Fear for me, and fear for himself that he’d lost me. I wrote of the cold mask Holmes often prefers to wear on the outside, but I also wrote of the depth of love and loyalty that I know he hides behind it.

My pages and my time filled up gradually. Another interminable year would pass before I saw him again.

I found myself terribly worried for him as he came in to see me when he finally did. I could no longer walk by then, at least not reliably, and it seemed neither could he as he was shown into the room. He bowed to my nurse, thanked her profusely, and then shooed her away, locking my bedroom door behind her. As he squinted over his thick glasses at me and hobbled to my side, I fretted he would not make it across the room.

"Sherlock Holmes! Heavens, come in! Sit, for goodness sake," I told him, gesturing. "Sit and make yourself welcome."
It was obvious he was in a bright mood. There was almost a spring to his withered step.

"Good old Watson!" Holmes said with a dessicated laugh. "Although I suppose the old is all too literal these days, isn't it?"

At least his sly smile looked young, if not the rest of him. He had a pale, unhealthy pallor to him, and he wobbled his way to the chair by the bed leaning heavily on his cane. His curved back and downcast face read ache from every angle.

"It is a pleasure to see you today, Watson. I cannot tell you how much of a pleasure."

"The pleasure is mine, but Holmes, are you well? You look peaked. I've not seen you in so long. Have these last few years been that hard on you?"

For some reason, that provoked the strangest strangled laugh. "The last few years have been... challenging might be an apt descriptor. But no, don't worry yourself over me, Doctor. Although I do not doubt I am looking rough this evening, I assure you, I am better than well." Holmes squinted at me over his glasses. He was looking for something, but God only knew what it was.

"Watson, I am here with an announcement," he said finally. "I am rejoining the workforce. I have decided to get back into the consulting detective game, and I wish you to join me in this endeavor as my reliable partner."

I'd missed his dry humor. "Excellent suggestion," I replied. "For who could possibly be better suited? Here, let me fetch my revolver, and we'll be off." My amusement faded when I noticed his face. I was still laughing, but he was not. Not anymore. "Holmes? You are not serious, surely."

He looked at me with more earnestness than I had ever observed in him. "Never in my life have I been as serious. I am beginning anew with my work, and I want you to join me."

It was complete insanity as an idea. My doctor's mind immediately brought up the prospect of aged senility. Elaborate fantasies about prior life are common in the elderly. I'd had a few of my own on recent occasion. At some point, it becomes much easier to remember long ago than yesterday, and the distant past becomes a welcome refuge from a difficult present and a dim future.

"But what you are suggesting is impossible, Holmes. You must know this."

"I know nothing of the sort. In fact, of late I have found impossibility to be vastly over-prescribed, Doctor. Just answer the question for me. If such things were possible, would you come with me?"

"Come with you? This fantasy does not take place in London?"

"Ah, no, unfortunately not. We are a bit too well-known on this side of the ocean, I'm afraid. I had thought it might be easier to put up my shingle in a new city I also know well. I spent two fruitful years undercover in Chicago as you'll recall, learning both the streets and the more human lay of the land quite intimately. We would do well there, although I warn you, the snow that comes off Lake Michigan in winter can be fairly monstrous."

"Chicago. You are proposing we move to America for this adventure." Despite myself, I imagined it, the whimsy of an old fool. There was an undeniable appeal to starting again, to beginning anew in a new city and a new world. But while I imagined the feelings, the sensations, the thrill of the chase long missed, I did not see it in my mind. The image of two decrepits pretending to be detectives would have destroyed the illusion for me.

"I knew it would appeal to you, Watson. So say it. Tell me you would do this with me if you
could."

"Holmes, I am still recovering from pleurisy, for heaven's sake, and you are hardly getting from
one side of the room to another, let alone from one continent to another. We have to deal with our
realities."

"We will get to our realities presently, Doctor. But for now, you need not worry about me, only
about yourself and your own desires. Just tell me, would you do this thing if you could? If Chicago
is the limiting factor, I could entertain another option you'd prefer, although the city would need to
be at a sufficient distance, and I would require time to become familiar enough with the locale to
operate."

"What are you talking about? Holmes, you are not making any sense."

"Would you do it, Watson, yes or no? I am asking the simplest of questions in search of the
simplest of answers. Would you come with me to restart our work if such a thing were possible?
Yes or no?"

The obstinacy that had driven me from our partnership three times before seeped in his voice, and
I wanted to be frustrated with it. I wanted to be angry that he had been gone for another extended
stretch of our dwindling years only to arrive unannounced and begin demanding ridiculous things
as if we'd never been apart.

I wanted to refuse him, desperately I did, but I could not. I never could.

"Yes, of course I would. In some alternate world where I was not seventy-four and you were not
half-blind, yes, of course, I would love to come with you. It sounds mad and marvelous to dream of
a new start. But that is all it is. A dream. It is not something realistic, you must understand."

"Excellent, Doctor! If the answer is yes, then the decision is made. Here, I took the liberty of
procuring us two tickets aboard a passenger liner to New York." He dropped the papers onto the
table and I dropped my jaw. "We shall be traveling deeply incognito, so I am afraid there will be no
first class amenities for us. Not until we settle in our new identities for several years, at least."

"You bought tickets? Holmes, please, you must stop with this. This is an elaborate fantasy you
have concocted, but it is just that: a fantasy. We are not starting up in consulting detective work
again. We are not moving to a different continent. We are not hiding our identities. Holmes, for
God's sake, you must stop shaking your head and listen to me. There is no way for us to do what
you imagine. We are old men!"

He stood then, stood straight up beside me, his spine no longer curled over. "No." For the first time
in decades, his voice was full-throated and clear. He reached up and pulled his grey hair off his
head with his hat. Beneath, dark swirls burst forth and he tousled them out of his sparkling eyes.
"No, my dear Watson. We are not."

In a matter of seconds, the distorting glasses were torn off his nose, the deep-set wrinkles and elder
pallor were wiped away with a handkerchief, and before me stood a revitalized Sherlock Holmes.
The man who scanned me for my reaction was vibrant, healthy, and at least forty years younger
than he was but a minute ago.

"You must forgive me for the theatrics, but I knew of no better way to both explain the situation
and ensure you believed me at the same time. Also, I confess I could not resist eliciting that
wondrous look of astonishment from you again. Yes, that's the one. Ah! I have missed you,
Watson. I wanted to contact you so many times, but I had no alternative but to wait until I was sure
I was safe to rejoin civilization, and my patience was nearing its breaking point. Steady on, man, you're alarming me. Here, drink this. That's better. It was careless of me to startle you in your fragile state, Watson. I do apologize. I find I am much more impulsive now, a byproduct of my relative age, no doubt."

"How. How...?" One word was the best I was capable of. At least I was fortunate to pick the right one.

"How old am I now, relatively? Or how did I achieve it? The answer to your second question is significantly longer, so I'll save that and address your first instead. Five and twenty, as near as I can estimate it." He grinned, flashing a row of flawless teeth. "In any case, younger than I was when you first walked into a laboratory and witnessed my greatest scientific discovery prior to this one."

"Holmes. Dear God. This isn't real." I found myself reaching for him. I needed to know with my hands the truth, as I had no hope of trusting my eyes. How could I believe it? "Come here. Let me see. Let me see you."

I sat up and he sat down beside me to lean close. With my fingertips, I mapped his face: his smooth forehead, his circleless eyes, his full cheeks. I tried to touch more, his lips, his neck, but my hands were too badly shaking by then. Steadier ones stopped their progress and held them.

"It is me, as difficult as that may be to believe. Do you understand now? Do you see? This is why I am here, Watson. I want you to come with me."

Only then did I fathom his meaning. I fell back upon my pillows and openly gaped. He couldn't mean what he was saying. Even Sherlock Holmes could not possess the powers he was insinuating.

"This isn't... It isn't possible, Holmes."

"No, it isn't likely. It also was not even the desired effect, if you'll believe that. But it is possible. Two years of living it has proved that to me."

"Two years? You did this to yourself two years ago?"

"No, it happened to me two years ago. I in no way created this transformation intentionally."

"Then how did it happen? How could such a thing come to pass? This is not possible."

"It is possible, but here is where I come to the troublesome part of my narrative. To explain it is... complex." I noticed his furtive glance. There was a confession to follow. But I was still captivated by his mere physiology sitting next to me. He was living and breathing and incomprehensible.

"Did it hurt? It must have hurt. Your muscles were atrophied by age, surely their lengthening and stretching to the dimensions of health would be agony."

My question was not the one he was expecting. "Hurt? Ah, well... yes. I suppose the process could have been fairly described as painful. What little I was aware for, at any rate. I spent most of those first three days insensate on the floor of my kitchen."

"My God." Instinctively, I began examining him through his clothes as best I could while lightheaded. It was an invasion of his person after years of not even speaking but he did not flinch. If anything, he leaned closer.

"The last time I saw you, even a small flight of stairs winded you," I said. "Hand me my hat. I want to listen to your lungs."
With my hands on him and as hard of hearing as I was, I could feel his low chuckle more than I could hear it. "You may examine me all you wish, Doctor, but all you will find is a picture of health. Every cell in my body has been rejuvenated. I know it is not an easy thing to accept. I required some good time for that myself."

"It's simply not possible. It's not possible as magic is not possible and yet if not magic, what science on earth could achieve this?" I babbled on, half examining him and half just holding on to him, afraid this incredible apparition might vanish if I let it go. "And you said this transformation was an accident?"

"I had no idea it was going to have this effect. If I had known, I would never have taken it."

"It. You keep referring to it. What is it? What did you do to cause this if it was not intentional?"

There was hesitation. "What I was attempting to do was pass time. In my seventieth year, the monotony of the retired life hit rather a crisis point for me. I was bored, more weary of the tedium of existence than I had ever been, and alone in what meagre studies were left to me at my age, bees and books. And seeing as I had no fellow lodger to disappoint, I decided it might be... entertaining if I endeavoured to concoct a new form of amusement to aid my brain in surviving the passing of the days." From an inside pocket of his old-style jacket, he revealed a miniature vial filled with a pale, clouded fluid.

"It began as a distillate of cocaine. Yes, I am well aware you disapprove. As I said, at the time, I was disappointing no one but myself. In any case, I decided I wanted to augment my creation with a selection of particular sensory-enhancing botanical essences, things with unique properties I'd come across in my travels and as such, I acquired and added a few other rather more singular ingredients to this final batch here. The pulverized root of the Sudanese acacia, for one, and a solution made from the dissolved cocoons of certain Sumatran caterpillars, for another. Ultimately, I have my suspicions the lingzhi mushroom spores from Tibet were the primary catalysts for the effect, as the fungus has a long-standing use in shamanistic longevity rituals that I had previously dismissed as mere superstition, but more likely a combination of the elements involved is to blame."

"To blame," I echoed, lost. "Holmes. This is a miracle. You have created a miracle."

"I have created no such thing. What I hold is not medicine, Doctor. It is a chemical aberration, a dangerous accident. It is something that should never have existed yet does. Do you remember that hideous Presbury business? The Creeping Man, I think you decided to call it? For once, your lurid title underplayed the incident. Thinking of that case unsettles me to this day, and yet this serum is far more powerful than any that Lowenstein ever devised. I do not take lightly the subversion of Nature, Watson. Deviating from the road of destiny is fraught with danger. This is all of the drug that remains and all that ever shall be created. After another lifetime, its formula will die with me."

He paused and gazed at his invention, tilting it in the light.

"But for now, the drug does exist, and its effects cannot be undone. Well, perhaps they could be with some great and dangerous effort, but I am finished experimenting with my own chemistry. This last dose is all that there is and all that shall be. Enough for one, and one only."

"You cannot keep this a secret, Holmes. What you have found surpasses every medical discovery in ten thousand years. You have discovered an end to suffering, an end to pain. Perhaps an end to death itself! More than what any physician has ever dared dream. Imagine the possibilities for a restorative such as this!"
"I have imagined the possibilities in some detail, which is precisely why no more of this serum shall ever be made. Imagine the possibility for yourself, Watson, of another Great War, only one fought with a never-ending supply of youthful bodies to be chewed up by the Maxim guns as they top the trenches choked with gas. Everyone could be a soldier, or more likely, made one. Or simply imagine the possibility of a world filled with the emptiest of spent souls, reprocessed a hundred times over and conceding no space on earth for the truly young nor any new ideas. I only look twenty-five, Watson. Imagine a world filled to the brim of pretenders and liars. I intend to make the most of the extra time I have stumbled upon, but I should never have stumbled upon it."

"And yet you have invited me to stumble upon that time as well, to lie and pretend right along with you. You can't be as offended by these incredible effects as you protest if you are so willing to share them."

"I am only willing to share them because I am sharing them with you and you alone. I would not offer this secret to any other man, alive or dead. But I know you, Watson. I know you. I know that I can trust you to be responsible with this heavy gift. Few could. I do not even fully trust myself with it, to be perfectly honest with you, which is part of the reason I am here today."

He stood again, his emotions no longer able to be kept inside a still body. A quickly lit smoke helped soothe him. He walked about the room stretching his long limbs as that old familiar fog developed around him.

"I suppose I should quit these noxious things and try to manage at least some degree of self-preservation this time through." He took a last pull of sweet tobacco and stubbed his cigarette out to face me. "I do want you to take it, Watson. I realize that is a wholly hypocritical stance, but it is the truth regardless. I want you to take it while there is yet time, and I want you to come with me."

He dropped the phial in my hand. I had never held anything with such immensity of power before and yet it was but a few drops of thin liquid floating in a tiny jar. Holmes' words rang sharp in my ears.

"Yet time. Then you know. You know that I am dying."

He blinked twice, but composed himself instantly. "Of course I knew. All creatures alive are dying. I am dying as well, albeit a bit slower. The finish line is the same for all, wherever a horse stands upon the track."

"I always believed we are meant to cross that finish line, Holmes."

"Yes, and we shall. Both of us, in time. What you are holding is merely a way to defer that arrival somewhat."

I shook the bottle and imagined drawing a syringe of the whitish solution. Holmes had to navigate his battlefield of scars to find a vein when he injected himself, but I would not have any trouble. And then, after three days of being barely alive, I would have thirty years or more, if I was careful, of just being alive. Being alive when I otherwise would not be. Being alive when I had no right to be.

"I don't know that I can accept this, Holmes."

"Yes, you can."

"But you know that I can't. You should know I can't. How many times have I had to tell you that other people beside you have self-respect and ethics too? What makes it right for me to take advantage of this, this subversion of nature as you called it, but wrong for every other man, woman, or for God's sake, child in the world? How would it be acceptable for a physician to allow
himself a medicine that cures age itself, but one that he can never give to another who needs it?"

"Watson, these are extraordinary circumstances requiring extraordinary consideration. This should never have happened, I fully agree with you. But it did. It did. As you said, we have to deal with our realities."

"My reality is that I have a choice."

"Do you? Pray, what is that choice? As far as I can tell, your choice is to take this drug and live for another five decades, or do not, and lie here wasting away in bed until eventually pleurisy or somesuch finally manages to get the better of you."

"Cancer."

"What?"

"The pleurisy was only a temporary setback. When my time comes, it will be the cancer that takes me."

"You have cancer? When did this happen? You did not tell me."

"How could I have told you? I learned of it roughly at the same time you took a turn in your time machine, while you were vanished and out of communication."

The truth of it was more that I never tried to tell him. There was no benefit to Holmes knowing my diagnosis. I did not want to see this look in his eyes or hear that tone in his voice in reaction. I wished I still had not.

"Then it is all the more important that we act quickly, before any permanent damage is done that the drug cannot undo."

"But what can it undo? I will die without it, as you say. But I will also die with it. Only the timing differs." His eyes glistened. "Holmes, you have been the dearest friend I ever had, a friend a man meets but once in a lifetime. I followed you as long as I was able, but I cannot follow where you tread this time." I held out the phial. "Thank you. Sincerely, I thank you, Sherlock. I know what it means that you brought this offering to me. But you know I cannot accept it."

"Clearly you know NOTHING of what it means, John." Holmes spat the words and waved me off. Instead, he went back to pacing about my room, tall and elegant even in an old man's suit. In our years apart and in the decades since our youth, I had forgotten just how striking he was when he moved, and how crimson he flushed on the rare occasions when frustration finally overtook his studied composure.

"This was not meant to be difficult," he said. "It is simplicity itself. You wish to come with me, Watson. You said so yourself. This is why I asked you that question first, before telling you anything besides. You wish to come with me and you can come with me. In the end, everything else is irrelevant."

Irrelevant, he said. Irrelevant. The single greatest achievement in the history of medicine. The most insidious and devious weapon of war ever devised. Both and the same sloshed a quarter inch above my palm inside a tomb of glass. I was a man of medicine, by duty sworn to help and not harm, and in my hand I held the strands of existence themselves unwound, life and death teased apart from one another as one unravels an old fraying rope. And according to the judgement of Mr. Sherlock Holmes, all of that was entirely irrelevant.
"Do not be obstinate for the sake of mere pride, Watson. That is arrogance. You wish it had never been invented. Well, you are absolutely right. If I had known what I was creating when I was preparing it and what it would do, I would have never finished the formula. I would have remembered my own words from the Presbury case and allowed fate to take its natural course. But it is far too late for that consideration now. We cannot undo what has been done. There it is, and here we are. You can inject the stuff yourself or you can pour it into that flowerpot over there. I don't know if my serum works on plants, but I suppose we shall find out. I'll have fifty years of a botanical experiment with the pansies blooming on your grave."

I felt tired to my bones, but Holmes never looked more awake. His eyes, clear and burning now instead of clouded by cataracts, bored into me to read my intentions. Young healthy lungs unsullied by a lifetime of tobacco smoke sighed in exasperation at finding nothing.

"Watson, you know you must do this. Are you honestly going to choose your own death? John Watson, self-described man of action, would prefer to simply resign himself to pointless waste? I cannot believe that. I do not. Say something, at least!"

Holmes was never a patient man, but his refound youth made him all the more demanding and impetuous. I had to remind myself again that it was not he who was young, only his body. The man himself, the soul and heart at his center that he took such care so often to hide, was over seventy years old. If the flesh he was wearing on the outside looked a half-century younger, well, that was only the latest in a long line of successful costumes for the consummate actor.

I thought of him, of us, and how I had imagined our parting. In those early heady days of investigations and getting to know him, he was so incandescently alive in my eyes, so nearly magical in his ways, that I thought he might well live forever. As time went by, I still felt that way, but part of me also came to fully expect him to get himself killed any day, either through his constant rank negligence with himself or his unbreakable fearlessness in the face of evil. As it turned out, my second guess was right.

Later, in our long retirement, I assumed I would simply hear word someday he'd passed on. From his years of treating his body as a cage, I expected a stroke perhaps, or a heart attack, something as quick and sure in its end as a murderer's blade. A literal murderer's blade was always still a viable option as well, of course. Regardless of age, Sherlock Holmes never lacked for enemies.

However I imagined them, though, our endings were inevitably the same in one way: I was to outlive him. I had outlived everyone else by then, so it only came to reason, after all. I was a widower three times over. I had lost countless patients, scores of friends, all of my family. I survived, and they did not. I had even outlived Holmes himself once already. Why not twice, I thought. I had always been the last man standing, the stalwart. What did he call me once? The one fixed point in a changing age. How would anything ever be any different?

The little bottle had something to say about it. I tossed it about in my hand, rolling it over. Part of me wanted to use its contents, right then and there. The concoction would work. If ever I needed proof to believe that, he was looming just to my left, walking a hole into my carpet. Holmes had lit another cigarette, and sucked on it as if his new life depended on it. Part of me wanted to throw the bottle straight at his head.

Why had he waited? A discovery of this magnitude and he stands by for years before telling anyone? Why? The day I met him, he could not help but show off the modestly named Sherlock Holmes Test as soon as it was devised. But the discovery of the fountain of youth? He apparently could stand to wait for that. No matter how much he was needed. No matter what he could have done. No matter how much he could have changed.
My silence was no longer an option.

"You could have saved her."

Holmes snapped his head at me. The cigarette twitched between his lips and then his entire demeanor softened with a blown breath filled of smoke and weight.

Susan.

"No, Watson. No, I could not. Surely you know that."

"She was still alive then. Your miracle drug couldn't have stopped a straightforward case of consumption?"

"Absolutely not. Not then, at least. Do you have any understanding of where I have been for the last two years? There was nothing I could do for anyone until I knew."

"Until you knew what? Where were you, Holmes? Why did you have to disappear again when you were most needed?"

He may have regained his youth, but he did not regain the ability he'd lost gradually over our years together to fully hide his flinch when I had stung him. Still, he steeled himself.

"Can you even ask? I had to be sure."

"Sure of what?"

"Sure of a thousand things, Watson, none of which I could abandon, regardless of how much I desired to and regardless of how much I needed to." Holmes sank onto the edge of my bed and spoke to the cigarette burning to ash between his fingers.

"At first, lying askew and adrift between my stove and my sink, I was unsure if I even remained alive. I assumed I'd overdosed myself, but I was too weak to move and too dazed to even ponder a remedy. I seemed to still be breathing, so I settled for that in between bouts of oblivion. When I finally could crawl to a mirror to witness my results, well, then I spent an unknown number of hours attempting to confirm I was sane. That proof is one of the most difficult in science, I discovered to my misfortune. How does one convince oneself of the truth when one's own body and senses can no longer be trusted?"

"For days, I locked myself in my house and racked my brain over the formula, the ingredients, and my own physical symptoms. I wondered if what I was experiencing could even be called symptoms. The word implies something is wrong, but this was quite the opposite of that. I wished for a wordsmith and a physician, but I had none, of course."

"Why did you not call me? You know I would have come if you'd but asked."

"Exactly what was I to say on that call, Watson? 'Oh, hullo, old chap, how are things with you these days? Might I trouble you for a visit to the countryside? I seem to have accidentally reversed time itself.' There was no help to be found for me. Besides, I was well aware at the time that you were very much otherwise occupied."

Otherwise occupied. Holmes' oblique method of saying without saying that he knew I was then attending the slow death of my wife. From him, they were words of sympathy.

"I still would have helped you if you'd asked." It was the truth. Even with Susan as fragile as she
was, I would have found a way. I always did for him.

"I know. I know, Watson. But there was another reason I did not contact you, nor anyone else. When the reality of the situation finally sank in, I found myself sinking as in a mire. I understand the world through connections, through the repetition of patterns. In my mind, there was only one analogy I could draw upon and it turned my blood to ice. Professor Presbury. In my memory I could see him there on the lawn that night, feral and distorted, dragging his knuckles across the ground and clambering up the ivy wall, a subhuman chimera created by an unscrupulous scientist far more interested in short-term personal gain than the advancement of mankind. That was my link, Watson. My only connection.

All I was left with were questions, and all of them grotesque. What had I done to myself? Was I still fully human? Was I still even fully me? There was no way of knowing any answers, not at first. I fled my house that night and spent the next four months alone, a hermit scraping by his existence in the abandoned seclusion of the High Weald. I could not risk any personal interaction, because how was I to know if I even remained in control of myself? The only example I had to draw upon for information gave me every reason to doubt the safety of anyone I encountered."

"You were much more of a danger to yourself than anyone around you, I'm sure."

He shrugged. "That was the least of my concerns. In any case, the time passed by slowly. I kept a watch on myself, and was pleased to discover I was not swinging through the trees nor sprouting wings and leaves. That seems ludicrous now to say aloud, but after what we have seen, and with a transformation this dramatic? I could not dismiss the outer fringes of likelihood.

"But after a time, tentatively I reemerged into civilization. First I allowed it only for short necessary supply runs, fearing the worst. As I became more confident, I ventured to take a small room in a farmhouse and then I found my way into a job as a groom. Or one Thomas Whitlock did at any rate, as Sherlock Holmes could hardly do so, not looking like this. I began also quietly meeting with a series of local physicians, complaining of various vague nonsense so they would check me over for any anomalies. Examining a man in the prime of youth, they reacted to finding nothing but a case of hypochondria with a complete lack of surprise, although I'll admit to some fair astonishment on my part.

"And that left only one question remaining, one point pressing upon me. Would I still age as normal from now on? Or had I damaged that natural process beyond repair too? Obviously no doctor could tell me that. The only thing that could tell me was time.

"So I waited. I traveled often, changed names nearly as frequently, and I kept my head down as I bided my time, because protecting my identity was more important than anything."

"It sounds familiar."

"It was sickeningly familiar. I dreaded the thought as history repeated itself that the darkest aspects of my disappearances would come to pass again. My instincts were, as they so often are, unfortunately right. I am sorry you were alone for your wife's passing, Watson. You deserve better than the semblance of friendship on offer from me. I should have been there with you."

"You would have been, had things been different."

"I would have been, had I not been so selfish as to have nearly destroyed myself in search of fleeting personal pleasure, you mean. Is that really any solace?"

It was, even if he could not understand why. He was too much a narcissist to focus on anything but
his own guilt, but I knew better.

I am as gifted in insight as he is in only one way. Sherlock Holmes reads the entire world and sees the truth beneath. My mastery is much smaller, but no less remarkable. I read Sherlock Holmes and see my friend's heart beneath. He cannot detect everything and neither can I. But we both see far more than anyone else even dares.

The reason he was missing when I lost Susan is that he was possessed by the need to know the formula he'd made was safe. The reason he was possessed by the need to know the formula he'd made was safe was that he wanted to give it to me. Presented with the chance for a full new life, any he could imagine, he wanted one thing only from his old life to keep. Not his wealth and comfort, not even his name. All Holmes wanted to take with him was me.

"Watson. My dear Watson, you're... Here, please, take this." He held out a handkerchief for me. To admit aloud my tears was too much for him, but his distress over them was palpable. He needed this as much as I did. I sat up and pulled him into my arms.

For the length of a few controlled, deliberate breaths, he held himself perfectly still as I wrapped myself into him. He held himself as long as he could, and then I felt one hand creep around my back, followed by another. Finally, Holmes took a desperate fistful of my shirt along with a full embrace.

"Don't," he repeated, as soft as a whisper and as weighted as an incantation. "Don't, Watson. Don't. Please, don't."

"Don't what?"

"Don't leave me. Not again. Not forever."

I pulled him even tighter to me, this changed man made exactly as he was, as tight as my elderly arms would hold him, which is to say not nearly enough. I had no answer for him, at least not yet, but I realized I was still holding his hopeful answer for me. The little glass phial sat clenched in my fist behind the taut muscles of his neck. I'd never let it go, through our entire conversation. In all these years, through the changing of ages and the tides of time, I'd never let go of him either. From the very moment we met, my fixed point had always moved along his line, no matter where it led. Holding him then, I wondered if it still would. I wondered if it still could.

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