O Tempora, O Mores
by stardust_made

Summary


Twenty-first century John Watson finds himself in the late nineteenth century, switched with his counterpart from Victorian times. Can he ever go back?

Notes

Posting this under my own pseudonym. It was written under a different one some time ago but I'm going through a bit of a Victorian Holmes and Watson phase so it's being lovingly reworked and polished. Many thanks to my original beta, tweedisgood, whose stories in Doyle book canon are outstanding and to my dear canon_is_relative, whose beta work is always top notch.

O Tempora O Mores (Latin) is a quote by Cicero that translates as “Oh the times! Oh the customs!”
It has been an exceptionally long day.

John’s feet on each step make a dull, scraping sound. Drag, thump, drag, thump—a symphony of tiredness, an ode to the bone deep need for sleep. The flat door moves closer; three final notes, and John pushes the handle down, swaying slightly inward with the motion.

His drowsy brain stirs in discontent at the need to be alert at one in the morning, but alert it ought to be—it has simultaneously registered three rather startling details.

The first is a very thick curtain of cigarette smoke. That one doesn’t require much thinking: John is going to kill Sherlock. The second is the complete makeover their sitting room has undergone. There is some meagre light, weak and yellow, and under it, scarcely any pointers indicate that this is their sitting room at all. Even the fireplace seems sort of different, out of place.

The third phenomenon engulfs the other two. Silence. Silence of the kind John hasn’t experienced since the desert. Only when you hear it in London, it’s not something that inspires contemplation like it used to, back in Afghanistan. It’s ghostly, unnerving.

The thought stirs John into action.

“Sherlock,” he calls, then jumps at how loud his voice rings. The cloud of smoke has instantly invaded his lungs and John coughs, automatically waves a hand in front of his face to chase it away. “Sherlock!” he calls again when he hears a small noise from the kitchen.

His eyes sting and John suddenly gags in earnest. With a resigned sigh his brain finally rolls up its sleeves and reboots. John catapults himself forward to the window, managing to kick an unfamiliar small table en route, before almost crashing into that same window. He loses no time in throwing it open, then moves to the other one, dazedly noting in motion the new curtains—heavy, floral pattern, a bit worn—before he throws that one open, too. He pokes his head out and gulps the air. Only to find himself choking again, this time on a mixture of fumes he can’t even begin to identify but none of them pleasant enough to really make him try. Somehow, unfathomably, they click well together with the curtains, the smoke, the sodding rearranged furniture, even the quiet.

“Sherlock!” John shouts now, turning, ready to march in the general direction of the kitchen.

There are definitely sounds coming from there, sounds like steps, like the rustle of clothes…

“My dear Watson,” a rich voice, a stranger’s voice, says. “Are you feeling quite all right?”

John stares, then outright gapes at the stranger.

As soon as he actually clapped eyes on John, the stranger had stopped abruptly in his tracks, mouth giving the impression that only exceptional will power was keeping it from falling open too. He is now staring back at John from the distance of a couple of feet, visibly taken aback. The last brings John some odd comfort—the bloke doesn’t look the kind who is often taken aback, if at all.

Taller than Sherlock, and as far as John can tell bonier, the man’s attire lends the biggest
justification to John’s reaction. A long, formal jacket, like a conductor’s; a white, old-fashioned shirt with a high, uncomfortable-looking collar; and something like a short, thin black string instead of a tie, with a fancy knot to boot. An actor hired by Sherlock, no doubt. In costume or not, he seems to fit in the transformed interior of their sitting room more than Sherlock would right now.

John would like to look around to see how on earth such a transformation could have taken place within the twelve hours he was absent. His brain, however, refuses to let go of the stranger. John takes him in, job made harder by the fact that his own eyes are seriously beginning to itch. He finds relief by randomly stretching his facial muscles on all sides, pulling odd faces as is his habit when tired. For some reason, his goggling provokes a slight start and a step back in the other.

What John sees is this: sleek black hair with too much hair gel on. A long face with cheekbones that could rival Sherlock’s, but here, they are more pronounced yet less striking—the face is thinner. The paleness is the same, but unlike Sherlock’s, there are no signs that it ever abates to give way to a healthier skin tone. Someone should have a word with the man’s doctor, is what John thinks. At least the cigarette smoke has an explanation, because that there is a heavy smoker if there ever was one. Privately John feels a weight lift off his shoulders—that God Sherlock didn’t slip into some horrible nicotine binge.

A pair of extremely intelligent eyes is fixed on him with the kind of curiosity John suddenly finds unsettling. The eyes aren’t dark. Their exact colour is unclear but at this point John is glad to be able to distinguish where the eyes are, what with the scant light and with his own eyes watering. There is still uncertainty in the man’s gaze but also amusement as well as keen interest. John shuffles from foot to foot. Seconds tick in his ear, chiming in the quiet, stretching this wretched day even longer.

“What an extraordinary disguise,” the man says at last, his voice unhurried and impossibly posh.

John looks down at his clothes, then looks behind himself. No one’s there. “Do you mean…You mean yours,” he says, nodding to himself. His frontal lobe tingles. “I’m sorry, who are you?”

The right corner of the stranger’s mouth twitches upward. “Most interesting. Just a moment ago you seemed aware of my name. I believe it should be my privilege to enquire about the name of a visitor in my home, but I shall oblige you.” He bows his head formally. “My name is Sherlock Holmes.”

The words take a few seconds to sink in.

John grins.

“Right,” he says. “Where is he?”

The man tilts his own head curiously and the gleam in his eyes intensifies. “Are you asking after my friend and colleague Doctor Watson?”

John nods to himself curtly and pinches the bridge of his nose. He’s too tired for this.

“Right, listen,” he begins. “I’m Sherlock’s flatmate, John. John Watson? I don’t know what you’re both up to and to be honest, I don’t really care. I’m going upstairs in a minute. I’ll give him a call about the state of the flat, but I’ll ask you right now to stop smoking and air the place properly, all right?” John even manages to produce a perfunctory smile.
Throughout John’s little speech the man was looking at him with eyes growing wider and even more amused. Now he takes a step forward and positively peers at John. John thinks that he should probably stop smiling right about now, but this is so reminiscent of Sherlock’s unabashed stare that he can’t help himself. His lips stretch fully, this time with sincerity.

The man gazes at him, utterly transfixed, then suddenly throws his head back and lets out a single exclamation that sounds like *Ha!* He places his index finger to his still twitching lips as if he’s shushing John; his eyes are gleaming with mirth, but preserve something sharp and cool about them.

“Fascinating,” he says.

John squares his shoulders. “What is?”

“You are, my dear sir.”

They look at each other for a few more seconds and John experiences the return of that feeling of unease, almost physically tingling up his limbs. His mind is marshalling all its powers to produce an explanation for all these oddities put together. For some reason, the very air outside, the way the city vibrates, or rather *doesn’t*, feels like the biggest, most disturbing clue.

But the other’s eyes are picking him apart and John is awash with inner quiet. He stands still, patiently, by a force of habit—after all, this kind of scrutiny is an integral part of his everyday life. When the eyes return to his face, however, they are so glazed it’s as if they’ve stopped seeing him. Something in them arrests John’s breath. The room seems to grow rapidly chilly. He swallows.

“Who are you?” he repeats quietly.

The stranger takes another step closer.

“My name is Sherlock Holmes,” he says. “You are, indeed, Doctor John Watson. This is 221B Baker Street and the year is 1895.”

John is about to tell the man to just bloody well sod off, when suddenly he finds that he can’t. Grey eyes are watching him carefully, excitement still there as backlight, but there is now intense, dark seriousness dominating. That look John also knows. Once more, everything clicks together: the dim light indoors, the heavy fumes, the new furniture, the eerie London silence, and the man in front of him. But this time John doesn’t feel like bellowing. He feels like sitting down.

“I can see that some things don’t change,” the other man—the other Sherlock—murmurs. “Over here, there’s a good fellow.” He helps John into a comfortable chair quite in time to prevent John from fainting for the second time in his life.

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It seems that in 1895 brandy is just as restorative as it is in the early twenty-first century. John wonders about which tense he should use here, while he’s sipping through a fog. A quarter of an hour ago, he was in the early twenty-first century, so that is technically the past, but he can’t quite bring himself to formulate the sentence: ‘It seems that in 1895 brandy is just as restorative as it *was* in the early twenty-first century.’ Mrs Blackhurst, his English teacher, would be appalled. Probably not as appalled as Mr McFarren would be, though, who was John’s Science teacher.
A monster of a headache is making itself comfortable in John’s skull that no amount of brandy consumed at any point of the time continuum could stop.

Sat in the armchair across from the one John’s occupying, the other Sherlock is nursing his own glass of amber liquid. John casts him a furtive glance only to catch one in exchange, albeit much more unfazed. Now that the windows are wide open, the air has cleared enough for such nuances in looks to be noticeable. John brings his glass to his face and keeps it under his nose to counteract the scents that have drifted from outside. In hindsight, he should have known Victorian London would stink, what with the sewage system, the horses’ manure, and the general standards of cleanliness of a large portion of the population. Yet he can hardly berate himself that his hindsight did not stretch quite that far back.

Or would that be his foresight? He groans quietly and lifts the brandy to his right temple, pressing it there and relishing the cool, unyielding feel of the glass.

He can’t expect to be faring any better under the circumstances. No one wakes up one morning and on the way to the tube thinks, *I know! To kill some time I’m going to ponder how vile the smells of London were some hundred and fifty years ago.* If anyone does, John prefers not to be that person.

His head lolls forward and he props his forehead with his free palm, stays like that, face obscured for a moment from the piercing gaze across from him. Not that he minds, strangely, but for all the allowances he apparently makes for Sherlocks in their various reincarnations, John is essentially a private man. Plus, he needs to think.

The facts are these: It is 1895, this is Baker Street, and the man is Sherlock Holmes. The thought that there is more than one Sherlock in existence, that there are a number of them scattered through the centuries is a rather enormous one to be defined with plain adjectives such as ‘scary’, ‘intriguing’, or ‘bonkers’. At least they don’t appear at the same point of time in droves. He perks up a little at that thought.

A few more sips of brandy and the shift he experienced earlier when he just knew that this was Sherlock Holmes and that he was telling the truth doesn’t seem so intuitive anymore. His mind must have put together the evidence but he was too dazed to follow its work. The complete makeover of the room—no wallpaper can dry in a matter of hours at this weather, even if a whole brigade of builders worked on the room at high speed. Beyond that, it is impossible to move the fireplace without structural changes to the house. You can’t shift a chimney fifty inches to the right just like that.

Then there was the darkness outside, different to any darkness produced by a power cut. John is familiar it from Afghanistan. It’s complete lack of light pollution. The smell out there alone was enough evidence these are the actual bloody Victorian times. Unless there was a big horse parade near-by and the river Thames was flooding the entire Marylebone area, there is no way to have that combination of smells permeate the air. The kind of depth in the scent, too, that air has only when the ingredients have mixed in it for a long time, penetrated the bricks and mortar, infused into the trees’ bark.

What does Sherlock always say? When you’ve eliminated the impossible, whatever remains, no matter how mad it might seem…

“…must be the truth,” the other Sherlock finishes, making John wonder whether he had been muttering to himself. “I followed the same method to form my own conclusion,” the man adds.
“How?” John asks.

“I could point out at least ten details on your person that seem entirely out of place. There were another five indicating the mark of scientific progress very much beyond our era.” The man’s eyes droop and he stretches his legs, his whole demeanour that of a thin, languid cat that has visitors from the future every fortnight. “Perhaps now is not the time to indulge myself,” he says. “But I shall give you an explanation. May I draw your attention to that object you took out from your pocket, seemed to press some points on it, then slid it back in with an expression of disappointment?”

John is bewildered for a second, then nods. His mobile phone. Earlier he whipped it out automatically to check for messages from Sherlock, explaining the room and the stranger. There was no reception and the display went dark right in front of John’s eyes—battery flat. He had charged his phone in the afternoon.

The other Sherlock is talking still. “It is a piece of extraordinary machinery that produces light of an unprecedented nature. It would have been most remiss of me not to observe it and draw my conclusions about it. Although I confess that I wish I had the opportunity to examine it more closely. You examined it apparently without realizing you were doing it, which speaks of habit. Such an alien item treated with such ease suggests lack of secrecy in its use. We can infer it is not the product of a mysterious scientific laboratory.

“You treated the object as if it had been in common use in public. I haven’t seen anything remotely similar to it in my entire life, and if I’m not very much mistaken, you should be aware that I encounter some remarkable things in the course of my work. Hence, if this was not an object from another place, it had to be one from another time. It was the only explanation to the rest…” A graceful hand moves up and down in the air, roughly outlining John from head to toe. “…anomalies I perceived.”

He pauses, taking in John’s expression. “But I appear to have slipped into unnecessary detail again,” he finishes with an apologetic bow of his head.

John will take an apology, verbal or otherwise, from any Sherlock, any day.

“Do you happen to know why this has happened?” he asks, hopeful.

“Sadly, no. I was rather counting on your providing us with an explanation. You come from the more advanced era after all. But judging by your startled reaction these events are a novel experience for you as well.”

“You can say that again,” John murmurs tiredly. The thin figure across from him leans forward with some mild concern. “Is your hearing suffering, my dear sir?”

“I’m fine, I was speaking figuratively. Ears are ringing a bit, but I can hear you loud and clear.”

The other Sherlock purses his lips and nods. He’s rarely blinking. John suddenly has a powerful wish to look at him better.

“Is there any way to have more light in here?” he asks.

“Certainly.”
The room is illuminated by a couple of more gas lamps. Earlier, a candle was lit and placed on the table next to John’s chair. A second one joins it. As he straightens up after leaving it there, his host’s eyes catch John’s from only a few inches distance. They are a lot more the colour of John’s own eyes—grey blue. It’s a fleeting moment of mutual close study and the other man goes to stand by the fireplace. He seems to examine the mess on the mantel and then, casting a slanted look at John, he say, “You don’t resemble Watson in appearance.”

John decides to call his new acquaintance Holmes, since it seems to be the way flatmates address each other in Victorian times. No wonder the era has its stiff, gloomy reputation.

“And what does ‘Watson’ look like?” he asks Holmes, failing to hide the irritability in his voice. He didn’t realize he was preparing for a beauty contest this morning.

Holmes smile is too brief yet unmissable, like a silver flash across an indigo sky. “I was wrong. Similarities present themselves for those who can see them.”

John scowls, then sighs, and rubs his temple again. “Sorry. I’ve had a very long day and this just takes the cake.”

“Figuratively speaking.”

John laughs without looking up. “Yeah.” He stays quiet for a moment then he lifts his head.

“What does he look like? Really.”

Whatever skims over the other’s features disappears into careful neutrality. “Watson?”

John nods. This is playing for time—no Sherlock would ever repeat the obvious.

“Watson’s appearance is…to his advantage.” The nonchalant tone matches the features; a second longer and the man might look at his nails in a bored fashion.

John suddenly feels impish. “Meaning he’s manly and bloody gorgeous?”

Holmes shoots him a genuinely startled look and John will take that from any Sherlock any day too.

The laughter that follows is entirely unexpected and almost silent; the sounds that do come out are deep and rumbling, and so like Sherlock’s—John’s Sherlock—that for a moment the floor seems to spin.

Will he ever see Sherlock again? John’s heart contracts as his mind vehemently recoils from considering the alternatives.

“You are certainly John Watson,” this Sherlock says. “You have both the quick temper and the generosity of spirit to apologize for it, but most tellingly, the pawky sense of humour. I can see that being careful in your presence will require a great deal more concentration.”

John smiles sincerely. “Don’t be. You know that I’m,” he struggles for the right word, then finishes hoping he’ll be understood, “him. You don’t have to be careful with me.”
Holmes doesn’t respond. John searches for something to say to break the awkward moment.

“Was I right?” he asks.

A quizzical eyebrow, again too much like Sherlock’s.

“Was I right about his looks?” he clarifies.

The briefest hesitation, then a nod. John is about to ask another question about ‘Watson’ when a thought strikes him, draining the colour from his face.

“Do you think he and I have…?” He is trying to merge a few questions into one, whilst keeping a tab on rising discomfort. It’s not an easy job. “Do you think he and I have swapped?”

Holmes’s eyes widen. He must have been too focused on the fascinating mystery in front of him to consider its wider implications. He is considering them now all right.

“I don’t know,” he says at length. “We oughtn’t to dismiss the possibility.”

John nods slowly, trying to wrap his head around it. Holmes’s voice doesn’t give him much of a chance.

“Would you care to inform me as to the appearance of my future counterpart?”

“What? Oh.” John has to pause. He lifts his eyes, trying for an earnest eye contact to soften the blow—no one likes to be compared to someone unfavourably.

The other’s gaze turns simultaneously clouded and wry.

“I believe you are kindly trying to avoid the repetition of the term ‘bloody gorgeous’ to spare me unpleasant feelings?”

John gapes. He is about to protest that he wouldn’t go as far as calling Sherlock downright gorgeous, then he finds he actually would. Call him that. Sherlock gorgeous. Thankfully, Holmes continues, sparing John the humiliation of sitting there with his mouth open like a hungry chick. “You needn’t worry about me,” Holmes says. “I can assure you that attractiveness is not even remotely a matter of concern for me—especially my own.”

John feels quite superficial and decides it’s best to keep his mouth shut, both literally and figuratively speaking.

The other man fidgets, his fingers briefly dawdling invisible symbols on the mantel. His voice is quiet next.

“It is a trifling matter but my curiosity is well known—he is a remarkable looking fellow, then?”

John swallows. He may have thought of Sherlock’s looks at some level but he’s never thought of them out loud, as it were. He feels himself nodding his dazed agreement.

He watches the Holmes’s thin hand skitter over to an Eastern-looking slipper hanging on the wall by the fireplace. There, it hesitates, then drops on the mantel, limp. “The same brain in a more attractive physique?”
John really doesn’t have anything to say to that. For one thing, it’s the bleeding truth. For another, you cannot lie to Sherlock Holmes. Last but not least, John has noted Sherlock’s ‘physique’, you know, as you do, but he hasn’t dwelled. He isn’t sure how he feels about freely associating it with the word ‘attractive’.

He upturns his face, silently giving permission for it to be roamed by that discerning gaze. Their eye contact stretches to several seconds, then Holmes sighs.

“I shall have to smoke. I apologize, since this seems to inconvenience you, but it will be impossible for me not to—at least not for a long period of time.”

Before John has the chance to offer any response, Holmes gives words to his shambled thoughts. “I am not sure I should treat you entirely as I would a visitor.” He spreads his arms and looks about. “You are Doctor John Watson and these are the premises you inhabit, only at a different point of time.” Thinner lips than Sherlock’s—whose aren’t?—quirk as they prepare to close around the mouthpiece of a pipe.

“It feels almost inappropriate to tell you to make yourself at home,” Holmes finishes. “But I shall ask for your permission to smoke.”

John’s smile of assent is half-hearted, more in appreciation of the humour and the goodwill than in real delight. He hasn’t missed the trembling of the fingers as they picked up the pipe or as they stuffed it with tobacco from the slipper.

“We don’t know whether I’ll ever be able to go back, do we?” John says very softly.

The other remains silent, while he draws on his pipe. “No,” he says at last. A moment ago, the match’s flame illuminated his narrow face and high brow—orange imprints of those are still dancing in front of John’s eyes.

He takes a deep breath. “Right,” he says briskly. “Do you have… Not a theory, you probably hate theories. But any, I don’t know, ideas about what’s going on? Is there anything we can do?”

Holmes takes his pocket watch out and looks at it, eyebrows shooting up.

“I intend to think,” he says. “I shall need silence for that and, I’m afraid, at least three pipes. My suggestion is that you retreat to Watson’s—”

He stops abruptly. His gaze softens, as if reluctantly returning from the journey it has already begun.

“What?” John asks.

Holmes purses his lips tightly, giving John the easy impression of trying to stick them together with invisible glue. Pause, the longest yet, stretches between them. A gust of fresh wind finally stirs outside making the candles’ flames tremble in discordance.

“I was going to say that I believe you should be comfortable in that room.”

John knows a diversion when he sees one, but he can also respect what he doesn’t understand. He nods, then sniffs and squares his shoulders. “Well, if you could find me some clean sheets and a
second blanket...”
A distant voice reaches John in his sleep as if through thick glue. His mind doesn’t have a chance to spark to full wakefulness; it registers the use of his surname and propels him instantly upright into a sitting position. John swings his legs around until his feet touch the floor and he springs to attention, body thrumming.

Only then do his eyes snap open.

An image comes into focus, which slowly fills with meaning as John wakes up properly: a tall, sophisticated-looking man who has nothing to do with the military personnel John expected to see. John blinks quickly at him, trying to calm his heart. The other Sherlock—Holmes—blinks back apologetically.

“I am very sorry,” he says. “I didn’t mean to alarm you.”

John’s shoulders relax and with that, a head rush accosts him, making him sit back on the edge of the bed.

“It’s all right,” he mumbles, rubbing his eyes. “I’m not used to hearing my surname while I’m sleeping. Makes me automatically go into army mode.”

“Of course. In your time, it is the norm for people to address each other by their first names. I should have thought of that.”

“You can’t have known.”

“That isn’t so, my dear fellow. You are too kind trying to save me the embarrassment. Yesterday you introduced yourself by your first name, when you still thought I was an acquaintance of your friend. Before that, upon entering the premises, you were calling my first name. It’s something Watson doesn’t do even—” Holmes cuts himself off abruptly. “He does it extremely rarely,” he amends. “From everything I’ve gathered about your relationship with my counterpart I should have concluded this was not over-familiarity on your part. Therefore it must be the custom of the era.”

John presses the heels of his palms to his eyes. “Something like that, yes.” It’s too early to jump into elaborate descriptions of twenty-first century social etiquette. “Let’s just do this,” he offers. “You call me John and I’ll call you Holmes, if that’s all right.” John doesn’t say that he can’t bring himself to call anyone else Sherlock. It feels too early to be speaking at all.

As if echoing his thoughts, Holmes says, “My apologies…John. I should have given you a moment to wake up. Perhaps my counterpart has more consideration, but I’m afraid I never was very mindful of others when my mind is excited. And you must admit that our current predicament, although trying in many ways, does have certain aspects to provoke the deepest interest.”

John starts giggling, head still bowed.

“Sherlock is not considerate, trust me. You are so much more…” He pauses and lifts his head to wave a loose hand in Holmes’s general direction. “I can’t get over how you just are. The way you talk, you’re so polite. You sound like Mycroft, only like you really mean it.”
Holmes’s eyes animate. “You’ve met my brother?”

“I have. He kidnapped me on the day I met Sherlock.”

“How extraordinary! Is he a criminal?”

John grins. “Mycroft? I’m going to play safe and say no. No, he was just saying hello. He offered me money to spy on Sherlock.”

Holmes’s eyes are staking a claim to about a third of his face. “Am I…Is my counterpart the criminal?”

“He isn’t, although I suspect it was touch and go. No, no one’s a criminal.” John sighs. “Try not to look too disappointed. What was I saying? Oh yeah. Mycroft, kidnapping me. It’s practically how he communicates. He’s very powerful, fancies a bit of drama, too, like—”

John’s ‘er’ goes unnoticed just like the awkward cut of the sentence’s end. Holmes has gobbled up John’s every word and is evidently waiting for him to continue. John scratches his stubble, then decides to give him the whole picture. “He and Sherlock don’t get on,” he says.

“Get on?”

“Their relationship isn’t amicable,” John explains. His words sound like the rustle of old lace.

Holmes looks as if he’s about to join him sitting on the bed. He’s clad in a comfortable looking dressing gown and has slippers on his feet—a little detail that puts John more at ease.

“How is your Mycroft?” John asks. “Do you—I mean, is your relationship good?” He has a swift afterthought. “Sorry! You must think I’m a nosey git.”

Holmes’s eyebrows are certainly more expressive than Sherlock’s, John will give him that.

“I believe we shall both need to make the necessary allowances for the other.” The unspoken ‘Because we might be stuck with each other,’ hangs in the air. In a moment Holmes continues.

“As to your questions about my brother and our relationship, under different circumstances they would be most inappropriate coming from a stranger.” Holmes lifts a hand to prevent John’s apology. “As it is, you are neither a stranger, nor to remain in the dark.”

He turns to the bedroom door abruptly. “You shall have the opportunity to find the answers for yourself. I came to wake you because we shall be visiting Mycroft. I am expecting his reply to my message with instructions. I thought you might like some time to prepare yourself for the meeting. I wasn’t so absorbed as to completely neglect my good manners. Watson has a hearty appetite under all circumstances.” Holmes’s nose wrinkles in the most eloquent fashion, leaving John with the impression that said healthy appetite is both endearing and off-putting for Holmes.

“I took the liberty of asking Mrs. Hudson to prepare some breakfast,” Holmes continues. “Will you partake? I trust you have a Mrs. Hudson?”

John tries to nod and shake his head at the same time. As a result his head spins.

“Hold on,” he says. “Wait. We’re going to visit Mycroft?”
“I would have preferred that he came here but that is highly unlikely. My brother abhors leaving the small quadrant of London within which he lives, works, and goes to his club. I should know within an hour at what time it’ll be convenient for him to see us.”

“Okay. Good.” John is sure he needs to pursue the topic further but frankly, he’s still in his underpants and he needs the loo. Also, yes, some coffee would be very nice. “We have a Mrs. Hudson,” he confirms with delay. “But this one here doesn’t know me. What shall we tell her?”

“I was planning on discussing the matter over breakfast.”

“Oh, right. Thanks.”

Holmes acknowledges John’s gratitude with an unpretentious little bow of the head and opens the door, where he turns again. “Watson’s clothes should fit you.” The tone is perfectly even. “He is taller and of a heavier build, but I am sure something can be fashioned.”

John opens his mouth but is saved the need to figure out what to say by the door being closed softly behind Holmes’s back.

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John is ready to go downstairs thirty minutes later, wearing clothes that make him feel both dashing and a bit of a twit. His taking half an hour might seem like an awful lot—John has very little idea about the etiquette at this end—but considering the interesting affair that bathroom time turned out to be and his curiosity about Victorian John Watson’s wardrobe and personal belongings, John reckons he’s down in record time.

The previous evening all his plans to explore the bedroom where he was to spend the night came to nothing. He had hardly entered the dark, small space when he felt as if lead was pouring into his eyelids and feet. Holmes brought up a spare blanket and directed John to search for clean sheets in an old chest. It was barely outlined in the corner—the sole sources of light were two candles, one in the hand of each man. Then, with a whisper of goodnight, there was just the one flickering flame. John turned around in the middle of the room, shadows dancing on the wall and the odd creak following his movements. Everything felt too surreal to contemplate; added to John’s exhaustion it sent him out of his clothes and under the blankets in a matter of seconds, sheets forgotten.

He’d extinguished the candle just in case and laid his head on the pillow, closing his eyes. His first thought was that it must be gone past three. His second thought, also last, was that he would probably not be able to unwind and go to sleep for a while.

This morning he explored a little around the room in daylight—an old medical bag was impossible to resist—but everything he saw evoked so much the feeling that he was on the set of a costume drama that he found he was unable to really connect to his surroundings. The things that were material and real were the scents. They were everywhere in the room, unfamiliar scents, impossible to define as good or bad. John felt the way he did when he was little and his family visited a Bed and Breakfast, decorated in an old-fashioned style, or some older relatives’ homes.

Only this was supposed to be the house of people his age. The little bowl and the jug, the coarse flannel he found in the cupboard, the antique furniture… That was the thing—they were not antique. They were contemporary utilitarian objects, part of people’s everyday lives. So were the
modest gentleman’s ‘costumes’ in the wardrobe.

John realized his psyche would have to work overtime on suspending disbelief, so he abandoned his attempts to comprehend an entirely different reality and just got on with it. He dresses promptly, taking care of his morning needs to the best of his abilities, and he turns up by the breakfast table at a reasonable hour.

Now he is standing in the middle of the sitting room, taking it in with renewed curiosity.

The space looks different in broad daylight. Outside it’s a clear, beautiful autumn day and the air in the room seems almost fresh. John wonders briefly whether it’s the routine of the house to have the windows open first thing or it’s a sign of consideration on Holmes’s part.

The man himself looks different, too. Upstairs, in the somewhat dingy room, he still resembled the previous night’s apparition straight out a Victorian play. Here, he seems fleshier. He is younger than John’s first impression, but definitely older than Sherlock. His pallor is still unenviable; however, now the effect is largely dispelled by the hypnotic, shining eyes that follow John everywhere as John wanders about the room, peering at things or carefully touching them. Holmes’s fringe flops over his forehead and is occasionally combed back with a quick, sweeping gesture of his long fingers. His thin but expressive lips curl around vowels and cigarettes in an almost mesmerising fashion. His nose looks more patrician than beaky.

John concludes that while fate is a touch unfair in how it seems to have distributed the good looks between the John Watsons out there, it is nothing but egalitarian when it comes to the Sherlock Holmeses, making each of them impossible to miss from a mile.

After his little expedition to familiarize himself with the room—Holmes obligingly replying to the odd enquiry about various objects—John sits himself at the table and looks across.

Holmes sits with his legs crossed, his pose leisurely, leaving John with the impression that if a belly dancer materialized on the table in full gear, the man would still react without a hair out of place.

He is now giving John another quick once over. This one, it may be John’s fantasy, approving.

John looks down at his chest where a slightly worn formal white shirt is peeking above a beige waistcoat and a matching jacket. John put on a dark brown tie with it, trying not to think what Sherlock would say about his choices of colour.

“Is this okay?” he asks, unnecessarily. It’d be nice to hear a compliment from a Sherlock, no matter which one.

Holmes takes his cigarette out of his mouth. “If you could translate ‘oh kay’ for me, I shall be much obliged to you.”

“What—Oh. Fine.”

A pause. Holmes is looking at him expectantly. John looks back with a similar sentiment.

“Yes?” They say at the same time, then mirror each other’s confusion again.

“Did you expect me to say something else?” John asks.
“Nothing more than offer the meaning of ‘oh kay’.”


Holmes’s face lights up. “Ah. I assumed you simply replied in agreement to my request to explain.”

John thinks this through.

“Is it possible to have some coffee?” he says in the end.

“Of course. Just the small matter of your presence here instead of that of the good doctor whom our landlady has been accustomed to seeing. I suggest we introduce you as Watson’s distant relative on his mother’s side. He never speaks about that side of the family so any cousin appearing without notice wouldn’t surprise anyone. Your colouring would lend credibility to our story. I believe it best to say that you have spent most of your life in America. Perhaps some business with cattle? An outdoor life, most certainly. That would also explain any peculiarities of your speech, although I suggest you refrain from talking. We cannot be too careful.”

John takes a second to close his mouth, then promptly opens it again to say, “Yeah, okay.”

Holmes cocks his infernal eyebrow at him. “I can see your natural eloquence will find itself terribly restricted.”

John’s smile stretches, slow and bitter-sweet. “That’s more like it,” he says. “I was getting worried you were too nice.”

His heart makes itself known. Ever since this started, John has spent a great deal of mental energy not thinking about Sherlock—a difficult feat, additionally complicated by the person across from him who is both so like and unlike Sherlock.

Holmes’s smile makes the briefest appearance on his lips, as John begins to suspect is its habit, but his eyes are unreadable while they scan John’s face.

John shuffles in his seat. “Coffee, please?” he prompts.

Holmes nods.

“How’s that?” he yells.

“Jesus!” John exclaims.

“Casual blasphemy is in fashion, I see. Mrs. Hudson!” The second cry is louder than the first.

A third isn’t necessary; John can hear the sound of feet up the steps, then the door behind him opens.

Mrs. Hudson is nothing like Mrs. Hudson—only her friendly, slightly unperturbed manner is the same. The woman who nods at John with a smile as he jumps to his feet during introductions is elderly, and it shows. Her hair is dishwater grey and kept in a dull bun; her dress leaves no trace in the memory, the crisp, white crocheted collar the one thing to refresh it. John tries to keep his eyes
on her for only as long as he thinks is appropriate. He doesn’t want to embarrass the kind woman, nor himself. He doesn’t want to reveal himself as the anomaly that he is, either. It’s bad enough that one look at him and probably anyone can see he is an impostor.

Throughout their short exchange, Holmes appears very relaxed, but John has the feeling he’s also struggling with some pertinent questions. Such as whether John is an impostor or how they’ll explain his continuing presence if this situation doesn’t get resolved quickly.

Mrs. Hudson serves breakfast and coffee, making polite enquiries about the length of John’s stay and his business in America. All are very skilfully answered by Holmes. John discovers that after all, he is a medic, too, like his ‘distant cousin’, travelling long distances to visit his patients. Apparently he will be staying for a few days, waiting for Watson who was ‘urgently called away just last night’ to attend to an old friend’s sick wife in Lancashire. He missed John by half an hour, ‘how unfortunate’. John suddenly wonders where Mrs. Hudson was the previous night but decides that Holmes knows what he’s doing.

At the thought, a rush of confidence makes him lift his eyes openly first to his host—he continues to think of Holmes as his host—then to this version of their landlady.

“It’s nice to meet you, Mrs. Hudson,” he tells her with a bright smile. She smiles back, eyes lively and crinkling further.

“And you, Doctor Watson,” she says. “I can see the family resemblance, can’t you, Mister Holmes?”

“Yes, yes, quite, Mrs. Hudson, thank you,” Holmes replies, impatient. “Could you show my brother in when he arrives?”

John frowns at him, but Holmes facial muscles only make a quick, complicated dance to tell him to keep quiet.

Mrs. Hudson nods and leaves. John watches her slightly hunched back retreat then faces Holmes.

“She’s so different,” he says, turning again and looking at the closed door. “Our Mrs. Hudson would have a cardiac arrest if she saw her.”

A strong scent of coffee hits him and he swivels in his chair. Holmes is filling his cup. “Pray continue,” he says.

John shrugs. “It’s just that she looks her age. Our Mrs. Hudson does her hair regularly. You know, cuts it and dyes it, and she does her nails. I don’t think I’ve often seen her without make-up, even around the house.”

Holmes’s cigarette has frozen halfway to his lips and his jaw hangs a bit lower. He finally speaks.

“Is she what our neighbours across the English Channel call ‘a Madame’?”


Holmes stabs his cigarette in the ashtray and shakes his head slowly. “I must confess I was never drawn to the study of society but your comments interest me a great deal.” His eyes lose focus for a
moment before he shakes himself off. “To more practical matters. Indeed, my brother will be here soon. I received his reply while you were still upstairs. He asks that I stay indoors and wait for him. Well, well! Between your turning up here and him deciding to grace me with his presence at my home, the world is certainly taking a most peculiar turn. But let us enjoy our breakfast. Have your coffee, my—John. I hope it’s to your satisfaction.”

John takes a sip and swallows, eyelids fluttering. “Oh, this is good,” he murmurs, takes another sip. “Nothing like the blends at Tesco’s.” He opens his eyes. “It’s a shop, Tesco’s. A very, very big shop. Food and drinks from all over the world, pretty much anything you can think of. Actually, probably a bit more than you can think of.”

“But not necessarily of the finest quality.”

Their eyes meet over the rims of two lifted cups. “No,” John agrees with a smile.

“Let us see how you find our bacon and eggs.”

***

John’s mum always used to say that his dad was a different person when he put some food in his belly. John is much the same. Full with Mrs. Hudson’s delicious offerings and having washed them down with a nice cup of coffee, he now wanders about the room again, feeling quite uplifted. The sound of horse hooves hits him and he heads towards the window, realizing he has actually avoided it so far.

The view outside continues to gnaw at John’s common sense like everything else has done, and his brain persistently provides associations that are clear and safe. In this case, that John is looking at a big, purposefully built TV studio set, or that the street has been transformed to serve as a filming location for a period drama.

He turns and is about to make a comment on how empty the street seems, compared to what he’s used to, when he spots an object the associations of which have nothing removed about them. A cold hand seems to clasp around his throat at the sight. The drawer of the desk by the window is left open just enough for the glint on the syringe glass to catch John’s eye.

He can’t help it. He challenges Holmes, reciting with punishing detail the exact damage the man is doing to himself, paying special attention to the detrimental long-term effects on a person’s mental faculties. John can’t say how advanced science was on drug use in Victorian times but he is pretty sure the data he is offering Holmes has to be new. He has the uncomfortable suspicion that drug use is not even a crime in this era.

Holmes rolls his eyes in response, informing John icily that he is not an imbecile, then proceeds to draw unflattering parallels between all Watsons in their doctor’s capacity who just don’t understand what it feels like when the mind is in stagnation.

“But me guess,” John says, hands on his hips. “You sometimes wonder what it must be like in our tiny little brains.”

Holmes turns his head to one side and squints at him suspiciously. “I detect irony. However, in the interest of truth, the thought has crossed my mind. I am surprised you gathered the essence of it so effectively, if somewhat crudely.”
“Sorry, I can’t take credit for that. I was quoting Sherlock.”

A pause. “Well,” Holmes says at last, shrugging. “If he was under duress, he is excused. I can imagine that the constant preaching in one’s own home, where a fellow is entitled to resort to the use of some recreational seven percent solution —”

John barks a laugh. “No such luck. Drugs are illegal where I come from. He can’t just have them lying about the house like you do, thank God. And he’s been clean for some time. At least I hope he has and he’s not lying to me.” Fear rears its ugly head. The ever-present, ever-suppressed fear that one day he will come back to find Sherlock drugged to his eyeballs, in spite of John and Mycroft’s combined best efforts. “And just so you know,” he adds with surprising spite, “I don’t preach.”

Holmes eyes him for a long while and chooses to leave the last word to him. He does start moving aimlessly about the room, until he arrives next to John by the ill-drawered desk. He lifts some papers away to reveal his violin underneath.

“Does he play?” he asks.

John can feel his face soften. “When he’s in the mood.”

They look at each other. Holmes nods, his eyes big and incredibly clear under the abundant light from the window.

John doesn’t move but continues his journey of discovery by looking around. His amazement at how artistic the space seems becomes sidelined by a new realisation: that it is also, in essence, quite like their own sitting room.

It’s not just a feeling. John can point out concrete details, like the colour and shape of some of the furniture or the stacks of books on the floor. There are the mismatched armchairs and their cushions, and the precarious clutter of objects that should be patented under the name ‘Sherlock Holmes’.

There is even, astonishingly, the knife on the mantel of the fireplace, blade down into the wood.

Yet John’s is also a stream of intuitive perception; a vibe he can pick up just as animals pick up the scents of their home from miles and miles away.

“You have no idea how much science has advanced,” John says as he pushes himself away from the windowsill. He crosses the room and stops at the assorted Holmesian equipment spread out on a heavy table that has seen better days. Glass is glass, of course, but the microscope, the boxes of chemicals, the Bunsen burner seem ancient for all that John is sure they’re some of the best on offer right now.

Excitement swells in him out of the blue at the prospect of painting a shining future for science for someone who will really appreciate it. John knows he’ll have to primarily focus on the progress forensics have made in the last century—his audience is unlikely to give a toss about Higgs-Boson—but the limitation doesn’t bother him, it elates him. He opens his mouth just as Holmes starts speaking.

“I can predict with some certainty,” he says musingly, still perched on the table by the window, “that in your time criminals can be caught by the simple location of their fingerprints, coupled with
producing a match for them from some sort of special archive for fingerprints.” The light hits Holmes’s back now and gives him a glowing, platinum outline of dust. John gazes at him and swallows his disappointment that once again he is not going to shock Sherlock Holmes. He lets his admiration take over; Holmes reads it on his face and gratifies him with a smile that starts from his eyes.

“When you are an expert in your area to the extent in which I am, the only issue of prediction becomes the exactness of its accuracy. What else has changed?”

Naturally, IT and the Internet lead the parade. John talks about the amount of data beyond anything imaginable; that it is readily available in a matter of seconds and what is more, readily available from almost anywhere in England and quite a few places around the world. He doesn’t leave out the detail of the actual physical storage of data. He gives terms simplified definitions, employs metaphors and comparisons, and uses visuals. (He is quite proud of the small matchbox pretending thousands of photographs.) His effort earns him the sight of a riveted Sherlock Holmes with such illuminated eyes that John thinks his own skin might start smoking under them.

He continues to speak, mentioning radio waves and mobile communication. Then a few significant medical discoveries, plus, naturally, the leaps pathology has made. He talks about means of transport, about synthetic materials, about data banks: weaponry, textile molecules, mud, ash… Holmes all but stops breathing; his face grows more and more stony. It shimmers with some animation only when John detours to say—with what he is sure is cloying fondness—that the existence of any of these data banks hasn’t stopped Sherlock from contributing to the world the most dull, audience-specific literary creations.

Finally, John speaks about DNA.

Holmes stays quiet after John puts the virtual full stop on his last sentence. All the while he did ask John questions, pertinent ones that showed he was following him better than most people who actually live in the twenty-first century would. It wasn’t hard to spot the directions Holmes’s mind was going—that formidable brain was sieving through all the data and arranging it according to its relativity and usefulness to crime solving.

In the last few minutes of his impromptu presentation, John began feeling numb discomfort. Now, in the silence that follows, it transforms into acute tension.

It takes him the time necessary to go to the table and pour himself a glass of water to identify what he is feeling.

Guilt. Not just at the prospect of overwhelming one of the greatest minds of his time, of all times. Guilt at trying to overwhelm him perhaps, for reasons of John’s own. He doesn’t have the time to pick them apart, but they pick themselves apart in that crafty way the psyche has when it manages to process something faster than any of the super advanced computing systems he just described to Holmes.

The truth is, it isn’t always easy to be the one perpetually overwhelmed. John lives with a bona fide genius. Who, to make matters even more overwhelming on a different level, is also very human. Intimately close. Sherlock is pyjama bottoms at odd hours and orange peel preserve at breakfast and stomach cramps after he stuffs himself with reheated Asian takeaway. He is John’s flatmate and his best friend.

Yet he is also completely unattainable, the way people are for those who will never, ever be their
equals. It makes John feels terribly alone sometimes, but for Sherlock, it means separation on a whole new level, a deeper one. John knows only two people who are Sherlock’s equals and Sherlock considers them both enemies. The feeling of how isolated from the rest of humanity he must feel always ends up tugging at John’s heart more than his own pangs of loneliness.

Sherlock doesn’t just overwhelm John with his very person, with his explosion into John’s life that is still expanding John’s universe. Sherlock dazzles him. He steals John’s breath no matter how many times John thinks he has seen it all now. Sherlock also ties up John with ropes of questions and locks him up into a maze of confusion, without the slightest intention or awareness of doing so. He is a paradox of a man, but for John, he is the paradox of John’s needs, some of them unnamed, some of them nameless.

John gulps his water like a truth serum and knows that deep down he might be harbouring some resentment, too, together with the fascination, the admiration, the readiness to practically die for the man. Sherlock doesn’t let John belong to himself, nor belong to his own life. It makes John furious on some level, but on another, profoundly grateful.

He puts his empty glass back on the table and Holmes’s continuing quiet behind him helps with the final joining of the dots. What was happening with that tirade about the wonders of the future was John showing off, for once being in the lead.

It feels like taking an unfair advantage if there ever was one. John is like the Moon; he was shining, but his light was the reflected light of other celestial bodies, yet he was preening as if it were his own, as if he had invented the electronic chip or the car engine.

“Well,” Holmes says to John’s bowed head, giving him a start. “What an unfortunate time to be alive,” he pauses, then finishes, “for my counterpart.”

The mess of thought and emotion evaporates as John gazes at Holmes in confusion.

The other man spreads his arms. “It’s very simple, my dear fellow. With all the resources that you describe, the police must be solving a great number of crimes. The crimes themselves must have become far more the kind perpetrated in the heat of the moment. Who would risk his future, knowing the chances of being caught are high? Who would plot a robbery knowing he would likely be captured on a series of images?

“One only has to look through history to see that the true artists of crime are very few and far between anyway. By all means, what you describe is most beneficial for society and for the sound sleep of ordinary man. But I’m afraid that for the only consulting detective in the world the twenty-first century must be a bleak, monotonous place of boredom.”

Holmes begins listing on his fingers. “Fewer crimes, fewer unresolved crimes, fewer interesting crimes, and when he finally does come across a mystery stimulating enough, where is deduction? Where is the exercise of the brain? Most of the work is completed by machines, I gather from your words. No, no; I see the moral advantages of such a world, but I am a selfish fellow and would not wish to be part of it myself.”

John needs to counter him, almost in Sherlock’s defence.

“Criminals have changed, too, you know,” he says. “They’ve adapted, I suppose. He is bored, you’re right about that. But I get the feeling you are, too.” John throws a not too discreet look at the drawer. “You both are, when there are no cases, no chase. He’s actually quite busy, despite all
his moaning. Lestrade alone is popping in with a new case often enough.”

Holmes jumps on his feet. “Lestrade! Good man! How is the inspector?”

John smiles, nostalgia sweeping through him once again. Odd, considering that less than twenty-four hours have passed since...

“Greg is fine,” he hurries to say. “Had a bit of trouble at work some time ago around the whole Moriarty business, but—”

Holmes lifts his chin sharply, interrupting John. “Aha! The Professor has provided a few interesting cases, I’m sure.”

“Professor? What professor?” A bulb lights up in John’s head. “Moriarty? He was a nasty, unscrupulous criminal in a…” John waves a hand, searching for a suitably insulting finale. “In a fancy suit.” It’s not what he hoped for.

Holmes looks torn between laughing and scowling.

“Leaving aside your understandable dislike of the deceased—yes?—the deceased James Moriarty, he must have been one of the foremost minds of his generation?”

John purses his lips. His nod is rigid. “He was clever, yeah.”

“Yes,” Holmes drags quietly, eyes resting somewhere over John’s shoulder. When they fall back on John, Holmes tuts.

“Now, now. Let us return to safer subjects. Tell me about Lestrade. Is he as much of a hunter’s dog as the man I know?”

John ponders the florid turn of phrase, then hums his agreement. “He’s a decent bloke. Considering the shit—Excuse me. Considering how Sherlock behaves sometimes and how he pisses off—I mean, how he…aggravates everyone else at the force, he’s lucky Lestrade’s stuck by him through thick and thin.”

Holmes hums his own agreement in turn, but John can see his thoughts are somewhere else. “Not the owner of the gentlest character your…Sherlock, I gather?”

John starts laughing. “He’s an arrogant sod who lives to get on the wrong side of people. He’s a terrible flatmate.” His eyes squeeze shut with emphasis, but then he coughs, shocked by the rollercoaster his emotions seem to be undergoing. “He’s also brilliant. He is quite extraordinary.” It’s all he can do not to let his eyes prickle. Thank God he didn’t call Sherlock moody. “He’s a good man,” he finishes.

Holmes is watching him with his most unguarded face yet, but John doesn’t have the chance to make anything out of it. There’s a knock on the door.

“Come in,” Holmes calls.

Mrs. Hudson enters with an air of efficiency. “Another telegram for you, Mr. Holmes. Are you finished with your breakfast?” The question is directed both at Holmes and John. John nods and thanks Mrs. Hudson as politely as he can. She smiles appreciatively and starts clearing up. Holmes
hasn’t replied, of course, leaving petty things like communication to the lesser lot. He’s read the telegram and now waits for Mrs. Hudson to finish, humming softly an recognizable tune. John notes the pleasant baritone and remembers how many times he has heard Sherlock hum in the bathroom. He’s always wondered if Sherlock’s even aware he’s doing it.

Mrs. Hudson is barely out with the last plate and saucer when Holmes announces, “Brother Mycroft is on his way.”
Aside from faith that nothing is beyond the combined powers of the Holmes brothers, John feels curiosity about meeting another person he sort of knows. He is beginning to grasp the sheer wonder of what’s happening to him. There is the small, intimate world of these rooms and the people strangely close to John through their future counterparts—it’s like watching actors cast in the parts of characters from John’s favourite TV series—but then there is Victorian London, hustling and bustling outside, so familiar, yet so alien, waiting for John to dive in and try to tame it.

Beyond London, the entire world of the nineteenth century. John tries to get his head around that and completely fails.

Holmes has been called outside by Mrs. Hudson to make arrangements for John’s stay, so John has a few minutes by himself to contemplate his predicament. He knows that millions of people would give an arm and a leg to be in his shoes. John has always had a fanciful side to him—writing a blog about the adventures of a mad genius detective surprised only those who never knew him well in the first place. Okay, that’s not true. It surprised pretty much everybody, because not many people get to know him as well as a person should be known. It’s who he is. Around people, he’s always put forward his sensible, practical side. The dreamer he keeps hidden, but the dreamer is now tingling with excitement at how amazing this whole experience is.

Holmes comes back into the room and sits in the chair across from John, all angles and liquid elegance. Sherlock occasionally wearing suits at home gets a whole new understanding from John—obviously no Holmes is sloppy in his appearance. John is sure this Holmes’s hygiene habits leave nothing to be desired, either. After all John can recall only a handful of instances when Sherlock smelt anything other than squeaky clean and subtly expensive.

Damn him.

In all the years he’s known Sherlock John has muttered to himself a begrudging remark or two. He can’t help it. It pains him to see it all wasted on Sherlock: the nice scent, the fastidious self-grooming, the immaculate sense of style. The rich mop of curls and the lean legs, the exotic eyes that have the colour of a sodding lagoon, for crying out loud. Never forget Sherlock’s ridiculous lips, of course, which every mediocre writer would call ‘made for kissing’. Sherlock’s mouth is rivalled only by his stupid cheekbones. Even Irene Adler commented on those and she has got to have seen it all.

And what’s it all for? John has to struggle through life like a billion other men, making a constant effort to look all right, to be noticed and hopefully get a leg over. While Sherlock has the arsenal of a serial womanizer and is the last man to make any use of it. John has caught himself a time or two wishing Sherlock was, indeed, gay so that at least someone from his own sex would appreciate him. Sadly, John has stereotypes like the worst of them—he just can’t bring himself to believe that there are gay men out there who don’t have excellent taste. Of course they would notice things that even women might miss, such as Sherlock’s smooth, creamy white chest—nothing crass about the musculature—or even his nails.

That’s all to say, John sincerely hopes someone at this end is appreciating the refinement and the classy looks of the man in the chair across from him.

The thought startles him out of his daydreaming.
Holmes has been observing him with something almost indulgent in his gaze. He’s evidently read John like an open book and John has a stab of apprehension that there were footnotes on the pages hidden from him.

Holmes’s lips twitch like the wings of house martins and John can’t help but smile back. It’s astonishing how trust happens with him—he really should have gone on seeing Ella.

“What?” he asks.

“Oh, a mere whimsy,” Holmes says. “I was trying to decide whether a lack of moustache on Watson’s face would make it easier to decipher him. On one hand, you, my dear fellow, might as well have handed me your thoughts on paper. On the other, Watson’s moustache has the most singular ways of expressing his feelings. There are innumerable little ways in which it shows when he’s angry or amused or concerned. Indignation is a particular favourite of mine.”

“He has a moustache?”

“Indeed.”

Of course he does. He is ‘manly and bloody gorgeous’, isn’t he?

“I don’t think it would suit you,” Holmes says. “Besides, only a fool would not think you man enough.”

“Er, thanks. Can you stay out of my head, if that’s all right?”

“I shall have to go blind or you’ll need to learn to be more inscrutable…John.”

It’s odd to hear his name said by Holmes. John isn’t a great detective himself, but he can sense that Holmes finds it odd, having to call him John. Odd, and somehow…

John squints at him. The other holds his gaze defiantly.

Intimate. That’s how calling John by his first name feels to Holmes—too intimate. Part of Holmes relishes it, but another feels very awkward about it. He keeps referring to the other John as ‘Watson’, not as ‘John’. They were so repressed in this era, it’s legendary. John would die if he had to lounge about at home dressed in a bloody three-piece suit. There were certainly no tracksuit bottoms in the wardrobe upstairs. Oh yes, Victorian manners and all that—Holmes must call the other man ‘John’ very, very rarely, probably in some very private situa—

*Intimate.*

John forces his gaze to remain calm, open. Holmes turns slowly to the fire. His profile is that of a masterfully carved marble bust.

“People just don’t need to be that inscrutable where I come from,” John tells him softly. “Everything and everyone is quite free, compared to how it used to be.”

“How so?”

“Well, women can vote, for one thing. Also, I don’t know…Divorce doesn’t leave you marked as damaged goods for life? People marry whoever they choose, mostly.” John crosses his legs,
motions unobtrusive. “Being gay is fine, too.”

He privately compliments himself for his show of diplomacy, but the deep line between Holmes eyebrows begs to differ.

“Was there a period of history when being gay was not fine?” Holmes asks. “How peculiar!”

It’s John’s turn to frown.

“I thought…How is it now? Is it not illegal? I thought people were persecuted for that sort of thing.”

“I can assure you that it’s quite normal. The theatres are full of gay people and no one persecutes them.”

Historians certainly got something very wrong, John thinks. His brow wrinkles with effort.

“Right. That’s…good to know. It’s certainly not what we know about your times. My sister often talked a lot about how happy she was to be able to marry Clara, that was her girlfriend, and to be openly gay compared to—”

Holmes has lifted a finger to silence John, for the first time a truly astonished look on his face.

“You have a sister? Who is married to a woman?”

“Was,” John specifies. “Didn’t work out.”

Holmes brings the same finger to his lips, as it seems to be his habit. John can hear the clock ticking.

“I believe we were talking at cross-purposes just now,” Holmes says in a beat.

“And I believe you, because I have no idea what we were talking about at all.” John sighs. “It’s that damn way of speaking so fancy, in a sort of roundabout way. It’s catching. Plus, you know…I didn’t want to say anything that’ll make me put my foot in my mouth.” He notices that Holmes’s lips are twitching and his right eyebrow has shot halfway up his forehead.

John pinches his nose between his eyes. “Right, listen. We’ll have to work around the language a bit.”

“I don’t think it’ll be necessary. I was wrong about you. You have Watson’s colourful turn of phrase, only yours is not restricted to your writing. You do write?”

John hums. He doesn’t bother asking how the other knows—he needs to clear up the whole gay thing. Holmes beats him to it.

“When you said that being gay was fine,” he starts, “I assumed you meant ‘gay’ as in ‘being of light-hearted temper and prone to enjoy oneself’. You mentioned it was no longer a crime. Well, you can understand my surprise at the implication that at some point of time it ever was! We are not the most jovial of nations, but the prisons would have overflowed!”

John gazes at Holmes, then bursts out laughing. Holmes’s dry chuckle joins him in a second.
“And then,” John says between breaths, “you said the theatres were full of gay people and well, can’t argue with that!” He goes on laughing for a bit longer, encouraged by Holmes’s grin.

A few seconds of quiet follow after their mirth peters out. Holmes looks intensely focused, as if replaying their conversation in his head. Their eyes meet. Holmes uses the fire-tongs to take a coal and light his cigarette. He slowly blows out some smoke that curls in front of his face.

“Being ‘gay’ is not illegal?” he says.

“Yes, not illegal. It’s fine, too. For a lot of us, at least.”

The musician’s fingers raise the cigarette again. The prolonged glow of the tip speaks of a long drag; more smoke fills the space before Holmes’s face, as if left by a train departing from a station.

John shuffles in his seat. “I’m sorry,” he says. “That it ever was. Not fine.” He feels stupid for saying it, but he’d feel infinitely worse if he didn’t.

Holmes stares at him, right through him and John stares back with fierce earnestness.

At last Holmes speaks.

“I rarely have the opportunity to say this, but your sentiment is appreciated.”

John realizes he has been holding his breath. He releases it with a quick nod of understanding. Holmes flicks some ash into the flames and waves his hand, suddenly relaxed.

“It’s a nuisance, of course, and it bothers Watson a great deal which makes it an issue for me as well. He is constantly worried about indiscretions. I’m afraid he is more concerned about my reputation and well-being than about his own. But when you’re known as an eccentric with no romantic affiliations and when the other party is an ex-military surgeon, adorned by a masculine bearing and his war wound, suspicion hardly ever visits, let alone lingers.”

John knows these are very deep waters bridged over by unprecedented confidence, but can’t help the lopsided turn of his mouth.

“Well, I’ll tell you this,” he says. “Where I come from, it’s sort of the opposite. You only have to move in with another bloke and people automatically assume you’re together and start offering you double bedrooms to stay in.”

“They do the latter here as well; it’s quite common.”

“Yeah, but no one does it assuming you’d dive under the covers and shag each other senseless.”

Holmes’s eyes glisten with the light from the fire. “That,” he says after some consideration, “sounds most appealing.”

John looks at him sharply, wondering whether the ambiguous phrasing is a gentleman’s revenge in response to John’s vulgar turn of phrase. What he reads on Holmes’ face makes him feel oddly chastened.
“Yes. I’m sure it does,” he says. “I’m sure such tolerance—We sometimes take it for granted, but to you it must seem…” John doesn’t have the words to finish.

Holmes looks him squarely in the face.

“The picture you are painting is exceedingly difficult to imagine.”

“’s true, though,” John says immediately. “There are still people who are ignorant, of course, and sad thing is, there are still some idiots, who...But no. It’s very different than how it was. I mean than now.”

“I see.”

John’s heart clenches at the level tone, the nonchalant movement of the cigarette, the careful rearranging of the fringe. He feels compassion brimming over in him. He feels very angry, too, and he suddenly, inexplicably misses Sherlock to the point where he needs to cough to clear his throat.

Silence settles in again, both men looking at different corners of the room. John’s head is a swirl of questions, memories, shards of fragile emotions, and around it all Sherlock runs like a thin golden band.

“Why did you call Mycroft?” he asks to change the subject.

Holmes’s back straightens; John imagines him reacting like that to the news about an interesting case. The voice is all business, too.

“I spent most of the night dedicating my not inconsiderable intellectual powers to the issue at hand, with little success. I was able to deduce that you come from a world some hundred, hundred and twenty years ahead of my own. Another fact we can safely count as established is that Watson is now with my future counterpart. I must confess that my concerns about Watson affected whatever limited scope I had for reasoning—one more proof that one should steer clear of emotions. Well, well, nothing can be done about that and frankly, in the case of Watson, I don’t wish to do anything.

“It was easy to conclude by your reactions,” Holmes continues, “that the occurrence was something completely unheard of in your time. Therefore, you couldn’t provide me with useful data. I had the idea of coming into your room to examine your clothes more closely, but I was convinced that the solution of this particular puzzle would not be contained within the molecules of leather. I am still of the mind to put all of your belongings through my modest chemical laboratory, as well as, if you permit it, some samples of your hair and epidermis. But doing that would hardly inform us about the exact mechanics of the processes that have effectively exchanged your and my Watson’s places. No, no; my powers thrive on facts and these are not in great supply here.

“My brother Mycroft, on the other hand, is someone who pieces together the whole from the smallest, most inconclusive parts. He abhors exertion and has learnt to look at seemingly random details and arrive at conclusions about their effects from the comfort of his chair. Between him and myself, I have some confidence we can advance towards finding some answers.” Holmes pauses. “You are allowed to speak, John.”


“Just so you know, Sherlock is not...He doesn’t have your manners and he can be a bit rude. Very
rude, actually. But he isn’t unkind on purpose, and your Watson should know the deal by now so I reckon he’s all right. Plus Mrs. Hudson is a diamond; she’ll take good care of him.” John feels a stab of jealousy at the quicksilver thought: *of them.*

Holmes, meanwhile, is shaking his head at John reproachfully. “How typical! Naturally, you would manage to hear only the unnecessary detour I made to express my concern about Watson.” The tone gets even more brisk. “I thank you for your reassurance—inasmuch as knowing Watson is residing with the man you’ve described can be reassuring. Yet I can hardly hold telling the truth against you. I have every faith in Watson bearing his situation stoically.”

Holmes springs to his feet, energy streaming out of him.

“But look at this!” he exclaims. “You have infected me with your softening. It simply won’t do! We need to focus and keep our minds free of anything illogical. Brother Mycroft is likely to arrive in protest at being driven out of his comfortable nest. I am rather shocked by his decision to leave his premises at all—he has been here just once so far. But I did say the matter was urgent. For us to present ourselves in a state of emotional upheaval would be extremely trying for him and I can assure you, as a result, for us as well. While much like your Sherlock my brother isn’t deliberately unkind, he can be surprisingly—Ah, but here he is!”

Head spinning like it never did even back in the days when he first met Sherlock John gets on his feet and turns to the door. A thudding series of slow steps echoes in the entire building. At last they stop outside the door.

It swings open and Mrs. Hudson, almost obscured, lets in a tall man the size and shape of a large barrel. Despite the heaving of his chest his high brow is barely covered with perspiration. He has grizzled, coarse wavy hair and long, bushy side-whiskers that manage to draw the eye away from the excess of flesh under his chin. His eyebrows are thin yet the hairs are sticking out; currently the eyebrows draw themselves together as the staggering, intelligent eyes underneath fall on John.

Then they roll.

“Oh no,” Mycroft Holmes says. “Not another one.”
Chapter 4

It’s not like John doesn’t have the training to be in the company of two Holmes at once. He is all too familiar with the dizzying confusion experienced on occasion in their company, too, as if he’s suddenly back in Kabul and can make no sense of what’s been communicated around him. With time he’s learnt to regain his balance pretty quickly and wait until the brothers arrive back to human speech, or deign to enlighten him as to what has just passed between them.

But now it’s not elaborate Holmesian speech that’s scrambling his brain. There’s simply too much for it to try and cope at all. Instant restoration of balance won’t be possible if only for the sensational implications of Mycroft Holmes’s comment. John takes turns to boggle at both men. At his brother’s opening line Holmes only let out his monosyllabic laugh and is now exuding extreme excitement.

It is not quite reflected in Mycroft Holmes’s frowning, majestic face.

“Has he left the house?” he asks, serious.

“No.”

“Good! That’s good.”

“I gather you have some information about this singular occurrence?”

“You have it, too, dear boy, at least some of it. You only need to apply yourself to the matter at hand. Is it possible that your fine logician’s brain has been hindered by your interactions with the gentleman here? Or is it your concern about Doctor Watson?”

“It is all very well for you to make such remarks, Mycroft, when you obviously have the advantage of me. You are in possession of some facts that I am not, so perhaps you will choose to enlighten me instead of questioning my mental faculties.”

Mycroft Holmes raises an eyebrow, blinding John with the flash of momentary resemblance between him and his brother.

“You appear very highly-strung, Sherlock, but that is understandable,” he says. “Let us not argue. This is no light matter and we shall need all of our resources. Last night, I take it?”

“Indeed.”

“I would say early twenty-first century.”

“You are correct.”

“Naturally. Can I trouble you for a hot beverage? And perhaps a plate of biscuits? I had the most loathsome—”

John had had enough at a much earlier point in the proceedings, but he regains command of his vocal apparatus only now.
“Excuse me,” he says, lifting a hand. “Can we talk now and have tea later? What’s going on?”

Mycroft Holmes looks at him, deadpan, then turns to his brother. “He has the same propensity for action, I see, but a rather more unceremonious approach.”

“And ‘he’ also gets pissed off much quicker,” John says. “Not to mention that he’s right here.”

The elder Holmes grins at him—it’s not a warm smile, but it isn’t a malevolent one, either.

“Mycroft Holmes,” he says.

John shakes the proffered hand. “John Watson. Pleasure to meet you.”

“And you, my dear sir, and you. You are forgiven your lack of manners. This must have come as quite a shock.”

Holmes’s impatient voice butts in. “Can we leave the pleasantries for later? John is right, Mycroft. What is going on?”

Mycroft Holmes looks from one to the other, sighs, and waves a hand as if to virtually clear the space in front of him.

“Let’s sit down. There is no reason why we shouldn’t make ourselves comfortable while we speak.”

John steps away, letting the man’s impressive form move past him on the way to the inner space of the room. He leaves the two brothers to take the armchairs on either side of the fireplace and sits on the small sofa that faces it.

Mycroft Holmes takes out a handkerchief and wipes his face, then returns it to his pocket, carefully folded. He rests his large, bun-like hands on his legs, looks from John to Holmes—who is watching him, the very picture of barely contained mental force—and shakes his head.

“This is a most remarkable business, Sherlock. It’s rather a relief for me to be able to discuss it with you—a short-lived one, sadly, as you will find out in a moment.”

He burrows himself into his chair.

“Six years ago,” he begins, “I had a telegram from you, requesting an urgent meeting to discuss a very peculiar occurrence. I invited you to my home but in several hours I received another telegram from you, informing me that circumstances beyond your control had made it impossible for you to leave Baker Street. There was nothing for it but for myself to make my way over here. Upon arrival, I found you in a state of considerable agitation. It was evident that you hadn’t eaten or slept for over thirty-six hours. I am, let me say, glad to find that the periods between the event and your summoning my help grow shorter. It is as if, unbeknownst to yourself, you do benefit from the repetition of the same experience. But I digress.”

John would give a lot to somehow record the spectacle of a Sherlock Holmes keeping himself in check, out of respect for his brother. Holmes’s eyes are protruding from suppressed energy and impatience. John is sure Sherlock would have come down on Mycroft like a ton of bricks for not being given all the facts as soon as possible, but being spoken at in zigzags, instead. At least Mycroft is reciprocating his brother’s admirable conduct—he hurries to put him out of his misery
“You told me that Doctor Watson had disappeared and a strange fellow had appeared looking rather out of place and, as you put it then, “simply wild”. At first you had taken him to be an actor, possibly an agent of one of the many forces that would be interested in the ruin of your career. But no logical explanation presented itself as to what end this person should be sent to you. After eliminating all other possibilities, you arrived at the extraordinary conclusion that the man was from another point of history. Moreover, you had deduced that he shared many a trait with your missing companion, together with some similarities in personal circumstances. There were, however, significant differences between the two men.”

Mycroft Holmes leans forward, his pause the perfect length to ensure the dramatic delivery of his next line.

“The fellow was a savage. He spoke some peculiar, unheard of language that consisted predominantly of grunts and loud exclamations, but few of the latter did appear to be some sort of words. He wore clothes roughly made of animal skin and fur, and his hair and beard were indeed reminiscent of the fur of a wild animal. I was surprised that you hadn’t resorted to drugging him—from your account of the events, communication with him had been most difficult. He had fainted upon seeing the room which I understood to have been lit exceptionally well at the moment of his appearance. You had gathered a lot of your data while he was unconscious and then had gone on to raise him back to consciousness and to interact with him.”

Mycroft Holmes takes a breath reminding John he should try some breathing as well.

“Over the next twenty-four hours you had locked the door to the flat and thrown yourself into solving the puzzle with your customary dedication, but with no success. It was then that you decided to call on my assistance, but when you attempted to leave the house, the man had suffered some sort of a fit—possibly at the prospect of leaving the house, possibly, as you reluctantly admitted, at the prospect of letting you out of his sight into what he perceived to be an extremely strange, dangerous world outside. So you found yourself unable to visit me. While our conversation was taking place, the man was sleeping, exhausted, in Doctor Watson’s room.”

John is utterly swept away in Mycroft’s tale. He throws Holmes a couple of curious glances, frowning, and a stab of longing snaps him right out of the extraordinary narrative unfolding in their presence. Sherlock, Sherlock, always Sherlock. Sherlock would have erupted three times by now, demanding to know why Mycroft was telling a tale where he was one of the chief protagonist but he couldn’t remember it. Holmes, however, is quiet as a mountain. John rests his gaze on him for a beat longer and mentally amends—a mountain that is still an active volcano.

Meanwhile, Mycroft’s large face is turning meditative. “You seemed peculiarly protective of the strange fellow,” he tells his enraptured sibling. “In turn, evidently he trusted you as well, for during your attempts to solve the mystery he had been docile and even helpful; not quite the savage that he was.”

Mycroft leans forward with surprising ease, expression darkening.

“And he was a savage, Sherlock,” he says heavily. “I shall never forget my shock at the appearance of that poor creature. Here, in this very room! You led him into it as one does a skittish animal; he was clinging to you and looking at me with a gaze where there was barely a flicker of intelligence. Yet as you spoke, both to me and to him, his posture relaxed and his face cleared. I was able to observe a remarkable change come over whatever was visible from his features—he appeared very
much a reasoning creature, and one with certain dignity at that.”

A movement from Holmes’s chair makes John look to him. Holmes has leant forward, too, propping his lower arms on his thighs—the most unselfconscious John has seen him yet. His eyes are blazing and his lips are pressing so hard together that his jaw muscles are strongly outlined. John coughs and realizes his throat is dry like parchment. He oughtn’t have obstructed the eldest Holmes earlier when the wise man had requested some tea.

Mycroft Holmes continues, voice almost reverent.

“You and I both uphold pure reason and logic as the grandest ruler of the human mind. Yet we were both completely at a loss what to make of this man or the entire situation. Reason defied it and if there were some laws in play, we were not able to see them. We concluded this was beyond our powers of observation and deduction—there was simply too much data we had no knowledge of and no means to acquire that knowledge. You had tested under your microscope every single piece of material evidence of this fellow’s existence and none of it had given you the secret of the process producing this unprecedented occurrence. But before we had the chance to grow desperate, something took the matter out of our hands, and with some equally astonishing results.”

Fitting to the drama of the plot and the narrator, a knock at the door makes everyone jump.

“Mrs. Hudson!” Holmes explodes, shooting out of his chair and crossing the room like a cheetah. He yanks the door open. John whips his head around and finds that true, it is Mrs. Hudson, bless her. Carrying a tray with some cups and a tea pot! She emits a frightened, vaguely disapproving sound and takes a step back. Holmes grabs the tray from her hands, marches to the table where he all but slams it down, and returns to the door.

“Thank you,” he says pointedly. He nods at Mrs. Hudson and shuts the door in her face, then turns and sighs deeply, eyes lifting up to the invisible skies in a theatrical display of exasperation.

John feels something pinch his gut from the inside and hook him like a hapless fish.

Familiarity— that was the fisherman’s bait. Holmes was the spitting image of a character from another story, John’s own story. In it, he met a madman who has now become the single most important thing in his life. The thought of never seeing Sherlock again storms the gates of John’s barely contained consciousness. It’s as bad as that week by the sea two months after Bart’s rooftop, when the shock had finally lifted, letting anguish have its way with John and tear him to pieces. He wants to pause time and let his shoulders drop, let his face find shelter in his palms while he battles tears at the irony that he has finally found the one place he never wants to leave by coming profoundly away from it.

Worst of all, maybe irreversibly, too.

The insight takes a quarter of a second, but it’s enough for Holmes to throw him a glance of mild reproach. John doesn’t care. He can bloody well roll on the floor and throw a tantrum if he wants. He can’t see anyone in his shoes doing much better.

“I’m going to have a cuppa,” he says firmly. Holmes silently observes him out of the corner of his eye as John goes to the tray and makes himself a cup of tea.

“Would you like one, My—I’m sorry, Mr. Holmes,” John asks.
“Yes, please. Thank you, Doctor Watson. I’m gasping to be quite frank.”

“Oh, for God’s sake!” Holmes throws his arms in the air, then dives back for his chair. “Tell us what happened, Mycroft!”

Mycroft Holmes chuckles. “Sherlock has all the energy in the family, but hardly any of the patience.”

John turns and smiles, since the remark is obviously aimed at him. “Sugar?” he asks.

“Oh, yes, please.”

John brings Mycroft his cup, then returns to the table for his own. He stirs it carefully, the rare delicate clunk of the teaspoon touching the walls of the cup strangely soothing in how material it sounds. He then comes back to his place on the sofa.

The first taste is bliss. John lifts his eyes to Holmes to find his head has fallen back. He’s now looking at the ceiling, fingers drumming. John bites another bitter-sweet smile and looks at Mycroft Holmes, expectant.

“Now,” Mycroft says, bristling with sudden efficiency. “I shan’t torture you both much longer. I spoke of the events being taken out of our hands. Not more than an hour had passed since my arrival, when a most singular phenomenon took place. In front of our very eyes the fireplace went abruptly dark. I mean completely, Sherlock—fire and smoke disappeared in a second and there was only a black...hole, I suppose, left in their place. Impenetrable black like nothing I had ever encountered before, with no shape or form. Barely a moment later the door flew open and there Doctor Watson was, standing under it and looking utterly confused. His eyes fell on us and to say that euphoria came over his features would be an understatement.

“The savage had jumped to his feet at the sound of the door opening. He shot for it and gave a cry of utmost excitement, then bolted through, almost knocking sideways Doctor Watson. You too, Sherlock, were at the door in the blink of an eye for your reunion with the doctor. I detest any energetic movement and my physique forbids me to walk briskly, let alone jump, but I managed to get to the door just in time to observe the most uncommon sight.

“I saw some vast wilderness beyond, but right at the door’s threshold there was something akin to the opening of a stone hut. In front of it was a man, tall and gaunt, looking similarly wild and hairy like our savage, who had thrown himself at this man with cries of joy. The man himself appeared sufficiently animated at the sight of the other, but his eyes locked with mine in shrewdness that surpassed anything we’d seen in his companion. This man was fearless, and very much aware of himself and everything around him, including me. That was all I managed to perceive before the door closed. When I opened it again, the familiar sight of your hallway greeted me.”

It is obvious that Mycroft has more to add, but he stops to take a couple of sips from his tea, watching his brother over the rim of his cup. Holmes puts the tips of his fingers together and places them to his lips, then proceeds to speak through them.

“Why don’t I remember any of it?”

“That was as deep a mystery as the one we’d put behind, unsolved. You had barely had the chance to rejoice in having Doctor Watson back when the fire returned in the fireplace just as abruptly as it had disappeared. I turned to you to comment that there was undoubtedly some useful data to be
gathered by a close inspection of the fireplace when I saw that you were looking rather bewildered, as if you had woken in the middle of a dream. Doctor Watson wasn’t in a better state himself. I carefully questioned you both about your well-being only to find you unresponsive and barely able to maintain eye-contact. You both seemed to be suffering from some sort of shock. I made another attempt at communication but was unable to draw anything sensible out of either of you.”

Mycroft Holmes takes a last big sip from his tea and places the cup on the small table by the armchair, then shakes his head heavily. “The fright you gave me then, Sherlock. Never have I had my entire life, all my life-long habits and routines, my orderly mind so turned upside down. And in a mere couple of hours! I had to rush and call for Mrs. Hudson to send out for Doctor Perkins immediately. He arrived quickly, thank heavens, and diagnosed you both to be in a state of nervous collapse. He gave you each something for your nerves and sent you directly to bed.”

There is a ring of finality in Mycroft’s next sentences.

“I returned to your home on the next morning, having slept very little myself. I found both you and the good doctor pale but in good spirits. All my careful probing showed that none of the events of the previous couple of days seemed to have left a trace in the memory of either of you. I watched you closely over the following weeks and noticed a peculiar far-off look in your eyes, as well as the doctor’s, but nothing to suggest that either of you consciously remembered anything. I had the fireplace most studiously examined by the best engineers and scientists of the land. Nothing out of ordinary was discovered. All in all, after some time a weaker man would have started wondering whether he wasn’t the one suffering from some peculiar mental exhaustion that had produced such vivid imaginings.”

Mycroft lifts his chin and his eyes, the colour of steel, glint. “Naturally, I knew I was of perfectly sound mind. What I had experienced—what we had all experienced—was inexplicable as a whole and in some particular aspects, but real without a shadow of a doubt.”

John swims out of his reverie to look closely at Mycroft and notices an air of strain around him as if recollecting the whole episode represented an almost physical effort. His eyes are piercing and vibrant, though; the only thing at odds with his body and his demeanour. They aren’t leaving his brother’s face.

Holmes has folded himself up in his chair, knees to his chest, resembling a big, quite beautiful insect. His eyelids are half-closed, but John makes no mistake in thinking him drowsy or indifferent. He waits for him to say something as well. Eventually, when no one speaks John shuffles in his seat.

“Is that it?” he asks. “We just sit here and pray...what? The same thing happens again?”

He gets further ignored for all his troubles. The Holmeses are now both staring at each other, the younger one’s expression of great concentration, but clouded, too. There is some apprehension in his eyes that reflects right into John’s gut.

“Holmes,” he says slowly. “What’s going on?”

He finally gets acknowledged—Holmes turns his head to him and his gaze softens an ounce.

“Mycroft hasn’t finished his most interesting account, John.”

John looks at Mycroft, shaking his head in mute question and spreading his hands for emphasis.
The response to his unspoken query comes from Holmes.

““This wasn’t the only incident.”

“How do you know?” John asks more by habit than because that’s his priority question at the moment.

“He has told us. If you apply my methods you will find that you know it, too.”

“Okay,” John says slowly. It’s not the time to play games, but when has timing ever been any concern of a Sherlock Holmes? John thinks back to Mycroft’s story, tries to recall as many details as possible. His memory yanks him further back, though, to the initial exchange between the two brothers. Something starts worming forward in John’s mind.

“Mycroft said,” he begins, uncertain. “He said something about the periods between the incident and your calling him growing shorter? Plural, incidents. He also said that you should know some of what he knows, too. Was it because you expected him to remember?” The last question is addressed to Mycroft.

“I expected him to think, as he is capable of doing.”

John looks between the two men in quick succession.

“And?” he asks neither in particular.

“And he has,” Mycroft replies.

John pinches the bridge of his nose again and keeps his eyelids shut tight, almost painfully. “Right. Listen. Can you both, please, stop that? And can someone condescend to tell the superbrain… challenged what the hell is going on?”

Amazingly, raising your voice at people works even better in this era. Holmes starts speaking straight away, but not before he’s given John a lopsided grin that John would have missed if he’d blinked.

“Mycroft’s comment upon arrival was enough for me to conclude he had obviously had some experience similar to this one or rather, had witnessed it here. The fact that I couldn’t recall it could mean many things, but one seemed the likeliest: that I had suffered a selective memory loss. You also remembered his words about a number of similar events taking place. Evidently, that incident hadn’t remained isolated.”

Holmes takes a drag from the pipe he was filling up while he spoke. He inhales and blows out the smoke in quite a exaggerated fashion.

“What I encouraged you to do,” he tells John, “is apply your own knowledge—in this case indubitably superior to my own—on the laws of nature and physics, then see what you can deduce about our situation. I am blind, John. My single excuse is the fact that I simply do not care enough for these aspects of science to keep them cluttering up my mind. Yet my brother’s venerable presence has had its typical stimulating effect on me.”

John’s lips start to form a What, but Holmes points his pipe at him.
“So!” he exclaims. “To what conclusions can you arrive about our current predicament knowing, I presume, the basic laws of our world, especially those concerning time?”

“Erm,” John says eloquently, head shaking lightly and mouth corners going down in hesitation. “That time is a linear function? For us, humans, at least. That…what was it? That time travel is possible through wormholes, perhaps. There was something about a paradox…That you can’t go back on your time line, I think, or that you shouldn’t maybe?” John doesn’t want to admit how much of what he’s saying at this point might be coming from *Doctor Who* rather than his knowledge of Physics. He’s pretty certain that thing about the paradox was real science, though. Something about meeting yourself…How it can lead to—

He can feel his eyes widen as he leans forward. Holmes has frozen and is watching John like the horse on which he’s put all his cash.

“You don’t look like Sherlock one bit,” John says, excited. “You can’t, of course—he was born in the twentieth century. This, this isn’t time-travel at all! All this time I’ve been thinking, you know, past Sherlock, present Sherlock.” John uses his hands to point between Holmes and somewhere vaguely out of the window. “While it can’t be! You are your own…thing.” John’s finish isn’t quite as impressive as to warrant him praise, but praise he gets.

“Very good, John, you have it!” Holmes smiles at him. “Continue.”

John thinks hard, eyes not leaving Holmes’s face, but not quite seeing it, either. This *is* Sherlock Holmes in front of him. Yet John has left another Sherlock Holmes behind, and one he really, really hopes is still there, still real. There are two of them, just as there are two John Watsons, two Mycroft Holmeses, two Mrs. Huds—

Three! There was an allusion of another pair a moment ago. Maybe even four, five—who knows how many? An indefinite number of Sherlock Holmeses who all somehow exist together but in different places. An indefinite number of—

Universes! The answer arrives to John and he is amazed at its simplicity. He’s even read about it, theories...

“Alternative universes,” he says.

“Excellent!” Holmes cries. He watches John with glowing eyes, pride evident in his features, and John feels himself flush stupidly.

“Oh, good. Er, thanks,” he mutters. “So?”

Holmes swivels abruptly in his chair and points his pipe at Mycroft this time.

“So now, brother Mycroft will tell us what he knows about them.”
Chapter 5

Sunlight is streaming into the room, but it’s a cold London autumn outside. Earlier by the window, when he was looking down at the unrecognizable slush that is Baker Street in the nineteenth century, John noticed the steamy breaths of some loiterers. Thousands of images have registered in his brain, he is sure. Images that will grow into reality; develop slowly in the darkened room of John’s mind like old-fashioned photographs in a tray.

However, from what John has just heard, chances are he won’t remember any of it. Regret is a pale word to describe his feeling at the prospect but paler still is the regret itself, as it stands against John’s willingness to pay this high price for his reunion with his Sherlock.

He turns his attention to Mycroft to whom Holmes has just thrown his half-commanding remark to elaborate on the rest of what he knows about their situation.

“I shan’t make this story long,” Mycroft says. “Indeed, you have both arrived at the inevitable conclusion: the only way another person like oneself can exist, is if that person exists in another, altogether independent world from one’s own.”

Although Mycroft has declared his intentions to keep it short, the writhing of his backside on the cushion suggests settling in for the day.

“Less than a month after the first incident,” he begins once more, “I had already turned the matter over in my head a thousand times. I had exerted myself so far as to travel to Greenwich. Greenwich, Sherlock! That should tell you how perplexed and uneasy I was. All my enquiries and research showed the idea of a parallel world to our own to be utterly preposterous. I could have dispensed with some of the looks I received when I discussed my little theory, as diplomatically as I could, with some of the most prominent scientists of the land. Yet I was unyielding—to my mind, the hypothesis was not to be dismissed lightly. Why shouldn’t there be another world like ours? And why only one?”

Mycroft leans forward, eyebrows wriggling almost playfully. Clearly, the ability to compartmentalize is an inherent shared trait in the Holmes family far and wide—the elder brother seems just as temporarily oblivious to the practical repercussions of their wretched lives as is his younger sibling.

“Mycroft,” the latter now says politely, yet warningly—the equivalent of Sherlock’s ‘Either tells us what happened or piss off!’

Mycroft’s voice is quite triumphant. “I was extremely lucky to have a confirmation that my theories were right very soon after I’d formed them.”

John sits up. “The same thing happened again.”

“Indeed, sir. But this time the other fellow was from a world much more advanced than even yours. Doctor John Watson, a different Doctor Watson, of course, came from a point in time some nine thousand years into the future. His world was so advanced, in fact, that its inhabitants were able to understand the process of crossing from one ‘universe’ to another. It was then that I discovered the term in its meaning related to the vast space in which our planet and all celestial bodies exist.”
John’s regret that he won’t remember any of this doubles up. Oh, the delicious relish in proving to Sherlock that knowing a thing or two about the Solar System might come in handy!

“It was also then that I was able to put these bizarre occurrences into a wider context,” Mycroft is meanwhile saying. “I was given to understand that your humble abode, Sherlock, is ‘replicated’—meaning that there is an indefinite number of its varieties in existence. Just as there are varieties of you and Doctor Watson in different points of time, but always at the same place: here, this exact place. It appears that there are no two worlds containing the exact same versions of you at the exact same point of time.

“As I’ve said, 221B Baker Street changes in appearance much as you do, but the location remains fixed and is absolutely essential for this whole process, I am afraid that I was unable to understand everything; some details and explanations, not to mention,”—Mycroft lifts his eyes to the ceiling as if he’s about to quote the exact total of the Government’s budget for the next year—“terms such as ‘decoherence’ seemed abstruse even to someone with my mental faculties. But from what I gather, this location is some sort of a door between the worlds; a ‘portal’ was the word in use. Ah, but I see that at least this is a concept Doctor Watson here is familiar with!”

John, who must have nodded unconsciously, finds himself in the spotlight. “Yeah, um. No,” he says with devastating consistency. “I mean, I’ve seen it in films and I’ve read about it, but it’s more like fiction where I come from.”

“Believe it to be real, dear sir,” Mycroft announces solemnly. “Believe it to be real. I have it from a trusted authority after all. He told me that it was imperative the person who crossed from his native world into another did not leave the area of the ‘portal’.”

“That much is obvious.” Holmes’s voice rings clear, out of the blue. During Mycroft’s monologue, he had looked almost catatonic in his immobility. His eyelids are still half-closed but it’s as if an electrical current is humming under his skin. “You enquired if John had left the premises,” Holmes intones, “which was a rather singular enquiry to put forward as a starting point of your assessment of the situation. It had to be of the utmost importance.”

“It is.” Mycroft nods. “I was told that once either man left the premises something quite final would take place, making it impossible for them to return to their respective worlds. I believe there is some sort of extremely sophisticated machinery involved.”

“But that means,” John interrupts, realization dawning rapidly. “I mean, if the computer seals the portal...Oh,” he backtracks, finding both sets of Holmesian eyes fixed on him. “A computer is a sort of machine that can perform incredibly complicated actions a million times faster than humans. So,” he returns to his starting point, impatient, “if it’s something to do with a computer, the creation of this portal, and if it’s sealed so it can’t be opened again, it means that having it open in the first place is...” John isn’t sure where he is going with this but luckily, he’s in the perfect company if he wants his thoughts finished.

“Correct,” Mycroft says. “The ‘portal’ opening is something that is not supposed to happen. The fault, however, occurs regularly.”

“A malfunction. Okay...Why?”

Mycroft looks between John and his brother with hooded eyes. “Because, as I understand it, this is an unusual, fragile place. Something occurred here that was not supposed to happen. An
occurrence with a lasting effect that turned this place into a spot where the very fabric of the world is permanently weakened.”

For a moment, only the sound of the cracking fire can be heard.

“What occurred?” John asks.

“Both of you,” says Mycroft gravely.

Stunned silence follows his unexpected statement. Unexpected and yet… John was never a fatalist but it feels like the world finally fits with something he’s always felt, right at the outer edges of his mind, whenever he’s thought about how…un-ordinary his life has turned out to be. He opens his mouth.

“How?” Only the ‘o’ is audible.

Mycroft’s voice is quiet, too. “A young scientist in the very distant future was working on an experiment; an illegal experiment that resulted in him crossing from his own world into a parallel one. No real damage was done and the fellow was about to return to his home when an incident took place and started a chain of events, of which this situation here is only one of its innumerable consequences.”

“I was that fellow,” Holmes says crisply. “Or rather, a version of me. But what was the incident?”

Mycroft’s eyes bore into his brother’s with what seems a completely uncharacteristic sternness.

“Sherlock Holmes met Doctor Watson,” he says. “And decided to stay.”

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John can’t quite tell how long it takes for him to process this, but when his brain considerately prods him to breathe, the oxygen stirs him into action. His neck cracks alarmingly as John turns to stare at Holmes. Just in time to see his glazed eyes animate—he’s looking at Mycroft with an expression John can only call ‘flabbergasted’. For the first time John sees this Sherlock Holmes utterly lost for words.

John coughs to get their attention. Obviously, it is once again left to him to prevent them all from being swept along in a dramatic Holmesian tide.

“Excuse me,” he addresses Mycroft, judging him the more approachable. “How exactly do you know any of that’s true?”

Mycroft moves his interested gaze from his brother’s face and looks at John. “Because my source was very reliable,” he replies.

“Yeah, I wouldn’t call any version of me, no matter how advanced the world he’s coming from—”

“I wasn’t referring to you.” Mycroft sounds mildly irritated. “I was referring to myself.”

“Right,” John drags and leaves it there. Some things you just don’t question.
Mycroft sighs. “Sherlock, close your mouth, dear boy. Doctor Watson, the communication I received was impossible to retain for proof. Not that I thought I’d ever be in the company of someone with whom I could share it. Nor that my word would be doubted, for that matter.”

John is sure his *Sorry* is written across his face in capital letters. Ironically, although this Mycroft doesn’t scare him either, John finds that for all his resemblance to a rather large penguin and his polite, slightly indifferent demeanour the man across from him makes him feel like a schoolboy who needs to watch his act.

He blinks quickly under Mycroft’s discerning gaze, certain that all his thoughts have joined the silent apology on his face. Mycroft says nothing, though, and John gets the feeling he isn’t exactly the man’s priority at the moment. They both cast a quick glance at Holmes, whose flabbergasted status hasn’t changed. With something akin to an eye roll Mycroft returns to his story.

“A voice spoke to me,” he says. “But not in the profound spiritual sense that would have gained me some rather special honours in certain quarters. I could hear it in my head through the hand of your counterpart who placed something in his palm over my right ear. It was most remarkable! The man to whom the voice belonged was without a shadow of a doubt another version of me. We were very pressed for time. I was quickly told about the initial incident, amongst other things.”

Mycroft turns to Holmes. “Apparently you did cross from one world into another, brother mine,” he says, waving a finger at him. “Well, you understand how I use the personal pronoun ‘you’ here for convenience, for it was indeed a version of you. And you did meet Doctor Watson, resulting in your refusal to leave the do—I mean, to return. Your crossing was a serious offence in the world you were coming from. I imagine it would be in any! Think of the chaos, think of the effects on causality! But it was never in your character to consider such matters. You’ve always been so wayward, Sherlock, not to mention criminally blithe about the bigger picture. Naturally, these would be qualities all your versions would have.”

Mycroft’s breath is getting laboured. He leans back in his chair and his hand seems to clear an invisible spider’s web in front of his face. “So for the reason I mentioned earlier, you decided to stay,” he says, more calmly. “For its potential consequences this was a far, far graver offence.”

“My prayers have not been answered, however,” he continues. “Or perhaps I should say were not? Will not be? It is hard to choose one’s correct tenses in such turbid waters.”

“Yes!” John chirps, unable to help himself. It earns him a swift berating look. Mycroft suddenly seems a bit cross.

“Sorry,” John mumbles his apology but privately protests. It’s not like it’s his fault that the first Sherlock Holmes decided to shack it up with the first John Watson. Then he thinks about facing the same dilemma: meeting Sherlock, then having to leave him and go back to his previous life, never to see him again. Fierce understanding of that first Sherlock rises in him, effervescent and
grateful.

“So, it’s because of all that we’ve all come to exist,” he says, half-asking.

“Correct,” Mycroft replies. “Something to do with the ‘universes recalibrating’. I understand the term to mean to adjust to a standard. In this case, the standard being the world in which Sherlock Holmes appeared when it was not supposed to contain such an individual. I cannot testify to a full understanding of the process, but the result was the existence of a Sherlock Holmes in every world, spinning a mini-universe around himself as it were, to correspond to the original one in which there was a Doctor Watson, a Mrs. Hudson, myself, and so on and so forth.”

“The replicas,” Holmes murmurs. His eyes are incredibly intense. In his peripheral vision, John has caught him casting slanted looks at him, but now all his attention is on Mycroft. “Professor Moriarty was my invention. How fitting!”

“Don’t take such a myopic view, Sherlock. The matter is most serious.”

“I know it is. So was the existence of the late professor. You can’t blame me for appreciating the irony, my dear Mycroft,” Holmes says drily. He suddenly sits up, humming with efficiency. “But let us consider the big picture, as you suggested. It appears that no matter what I do, if the reverse process is to take place, I shall forget all about this incident. The question that presents itself is: why you haven’t attempted to communicate any of that with me after the incidents. There were more incidents, yes?”

“Yes,” Mycroft confirms. “Five altogether; this is the sixth. Nothing could be learned from them that I hadn’t learned from the second one—it really was most fortuitous that I was able to communicate with a version of myself from such an advanced point in history. The rest were all from a point in the past. Doctor Watson here is only the second man coming from what we can call ‘the future’. But to answer your question, Sherlock, what good would it have done to try and persuade you to believe in the existence of other worlds, of other versions of you? Those incidents, of which you lacked any recollection, did not harm you in any way. You seem to have it ingrained in you to contact me whenever they occur, and I have kept an eye on you and your home, of course.”

“What about evidence? Have you collected any?” Holmes asks briskly and John thinks of his own clothes upstairs.

“I can leave my mobile phone here,” he says. “My watch, too.”

“Hmm!” Holmes’s eyes shine at him, approving.

But Mycroft shakes his head. “No evidence is left behind, Sherlock. It disappears as soon as the reverse process takes place. It is a safety mechanism put in place from the first Mycroft, I am happy to say. The man must have been exhausted.” Mycroft shakes his head in sad sympathy. “He put these measures in place because any remnants, the slightest trace of another world’s presence makes the spot weaker still. It will be an entirely different matter, of course, should Doctor Watson here find it impossible to return. I am not quite sure of the protocol then, but I was given to understand unequivocally that there is a procedure as well and one which—”

“Wait, no, wait,” John cuts, uncaring about his bleeding manners. “Hold on. What do you mean if I find it impossible to return? Has everyone swapped places back so far?”
“Yes,” Mycroft replies, but John doesn’t miss the sideway swift glance he exchanges with his brother.

“What was that?” John asks. “What are you not telling me?” He turns to Holmes. “Do you know anything about this that I don’t?”

“I know nothing more than you do, John. It’s more a question of paying attention to what you do know.”

“Yes, yes, I’m an idiot.” John is too anxious to mind his language or any reactions it may provoke. His heart is beating faster and faster, thudding in his chest like oppressive clouds that are just gathering but won’t break into rain. He licks his lips. “Please. Tell me what—I haven’t left the house. That’s what’s important, right?”

Holmes gets up from the chair and leans back on the fireplace’s mantel, facing John. There is tension in his pose that mirrors what’s happening in John’s chest.

“Each finite line has two ends, John,” he says quietly.

John is about to comment scathingly on the need for fewer metaphors, thanks—

—when the meaning of Holmes words hits him like a boomerang thrown from a friend right next to you.

“No,” he says, shaking his head, quickly, vehemently. “No. He hasn’t left the house, either.”

“John…”

John’s having none of it. “I’m telling you: it’s fine. They’re fine. Your Watson has stayed in, he must have.”

“You can’t know that.”

“Course I can. I know it—he hasn’t left the portal.”

“How can you be sure?”

“Because Sherlock is there!” John shouts. “He’s figured it out! He wouldn’t have left him leave the flat. Sherlock—He’s figured it out. He has to. He…has to.” His outburst had sent John up on his feet, but he now drops back on the sofa, knees weak.

He rubs his face once with both of his palms, then lifts his chin defiantly. Holmes is still watching him closely with some concern. They hold each other’s gazes for several long moments.

“I can’t lose him again,” John says simply. “You don’t know what it was— You don’t know how it was.”

“My dear fellow, I do know—"

“No, you don’t! How could you! You were the one who…I can’t…” John closes his mouth, a sob forming in his throat like a mini-tornado out of nowhere.
He takes a couple of deep breaths. “I got him back,” he says. “It’s not even been that long.”

“In this world, Colonel Sebastian Moran was apprehended exactly eleven months ago,” Holmes says evenly, but his eyes look turbulent. “I cannot profess to understand the depth and character of your own experiences at the time, but I do know something of them…since.”

He turns his face to the window and John watches his profile grow pallid. Holmes remains quiet for some time, then sighs, looks at John, and lifts an eyebrow. “I sincerely hope that your faith in my counterpart’s ability is not akin to Watson’s tendency to embellish my own achievements and to see me…” Holmes stares at John, then bows his head, dark fringe rustling down to obscure his face. “…with the kindness of his heart.”

“No,” John says, calm. “I know him for real. I always have and I’m telling you again, he would have thought about this.”

“Not to mention,” Mycroft speaks from his chair, “that we can place some hope in the presence of my own counterpart there, too. Isn’t that so, Doctor Watson?”

John quickly considers the likelihood of Sherlock jumping to call on Mycroft’s help, first thing.

“No,” he says.

“Why not?” This elderly brother looks puzzled where the one John knows would look sarcastically, pointedly resigned.

“John tells me our relationship is not terribly cordial, Mycroft,” Holmes voice rings, some humour hidden in it.

“Well, you always were a bit trying, dear boy.”

Holmes looks sharply at his brother, eyes widening in amused incredulity. He seems poised for a smooth, ironic return, but John has no time for this.

“All right, all right,” he intervenes. “If it’s that serious, he will call Mycroft. Mycroft’s spying on him anyway, so there’s that. Maybe, I don’t know, it’s some sort of programming too? Like…Like the original Holmes knowing that his brother is there to sort things out for him.”

John can practically hear Sherlock’s Oh, God! at the exact same time as Holmes murmurs, “Incurably romantic!” under his nose. John tuts. “I don’t care what you think. I reckon chances are some sort of subconscious link takes place that makes you contact your brother each time.”

“John.”

“And Mycroft said you were getting quicker and quicker to call him, right? I mean—”

“John!”

“—it has to be a sign that there is such a link, maybe a—”

“John, do be quiet!”

John’s mouth closes instantly.
“Look,” Holmes says and takes a step to the left. John’s eyes fall to the spot his body was obscuring.

The fireplace is an empty, bottomless, blood-curdling black.
Chapter 6

Chapter Notes

Here it is, the final chapter. A quick note to say that it is not canon compliant with anything post season two of 'Sherlock' but I think it still reads well within the 'verse of the show. I hope you enjoy and thanks for stopping by!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

John and his mum went to a posh do once, at his dad’s ex-boss’ house. Dad had been gone for over a year and his boss called John’s mum to invite her over for a little get-together. She took only John with her, worried that Harriet would misbehave. John was fifteen at the time, already mature enough to pick up that Dad’s old boss was a rich man whose wife was looking for help around the house, so it was more like a job interview—an opportunity for the wife to meet John’s mum and speak to her.

Mum was so nervous. She had put on her best dress and her best, her only good necklace, the pearl one that still carried the faintest scent of Mum a year after she was gone. Her hand had been constantly on the necklace that day, touching it, readjusting it so that the clasp stayed at the back under her hair, worrying the little pearls. To this day John remembers the necklace suddenly dissolving under her fingers, pearls raining down and hitting the marble floor, loud and random, quick as a flash on their individual journeys.

This is what is happening with his thoughts when he sees the void in the fireplace. Uncontrollable thoughts, scattered, some of them never to be captured just like some of the sneaky pearls were never found. John is barely aware of jumping to his feet, gaping at the darkness that gapes back, then at Holmes, whose face seems to be made of lighting. I never asked you, John thinks, I never asked about the pubs round here, about your favourite violin piece, about your cases, about how you two made it work, being together—

Mycroft’s risen from his chair as well and is already looking at the door. Through the ringing in his ears John hears him order, “Go to the door, Doctor Watson, go! You must be ready and wait for them to open it, then be quick.”

John storms ahead to where Mycroft is pointing. He has the swiftest fantasy that the door will open like an embrace ready to swallow him mid-flight. It stays closed, though. John stops abruptly in front of it, stares at the wood for what seems like an eternity, the high-pitched noise in his ears growing unbearably loud. He swallows a few times and swears under his breath.

“Are you sure I can’t open it?” he asks Mycroft without turning back.

“I know your impulse to act is powerful, John.” Holmes is the one to reply to him, voice just a hint unsteady. “But you mustn’t do anything. You can open this ‘portal’ only from the outside. Am I right, Mycroft?”

“Indeed you are,” Mycroft says.
“But what if something’s gone wrong at their end,” John insists, panicky. “What if they can’t open it or—”

He feels a wave of nausea as sudden pressure booms inside his head, then terrific weariness replaces it. That same symphony of tiredness he felt when he was coming here, that same ode to the bone-deep need to sleep. The door seems to move closer once again. John blinks and sways back on his feet, hand instinctively reaching, reaching…

The door opens soundlessly and for an instant—the shortest instant yet enough to make John’s whole being go limp like a dead fledgling—there is nothing but darkness under the frame.

Then, as if someone’s switched on a projector, shapes and colours and dimensions materialize. The Baker Street hallway, John’s Baker Street, comes into view. A very good-looking bloke sporting a moustache and John’s least favourite jumper is at the forefront, right under the doorframe.

And behind him is standing Sherlock.

John’s heart comes alive with the power of an infinite number of suns.

Sherlock is looking at John as if he were the only man in the world. Which, seeing that he isn’t even the only John in the room, is a pretty great feeling. Everything seems to happen in slow motion, each millisecond crammed to the brim with content. Sherlock’s lips part and start forming a monosyllabic, the one word John realizes he has bitterly missed hearing in Sherlock’s voice. John, Sherlock is about to say. John.

With a cry of “Holmes!” the other John—Watson—rushes past, almost making John spin around his axis. On instinct, John follows the motion, turning his head to look over his shoulder. The two men are standing in a loose embrace, gazing into each other’s eyes, Watson’s face ecstatic.

“Watson,” Holmes whispers, his voice the kind to send poets scribbling about velvet rose petals on an early morn. “Watson!” he exclaims and laughs, all poetry allusions dispelled by his rich, masculine timbre. He lets himself be pulled tight against Watson’s body, eyes closing. Watson is saying things, too, quite loudly, but it has all become background noise to John.

Like a man possessed, he barrels ahead through the door, while his head is still turning to face forward. He nearly collides with Sherlock, who’s moved toward him, too. They both halt in their places, inches between their bodies. John’s head spins with the different light, the different smells, the different noises of a whole new world—his old, own world, with Sherlock the epitome of it, making John want to be enveloped in the scent and sight and feel of him.

They look at each other in silence, then John’s face start splitting into a grin that must be even more revoltingly sappy than his Victorian counterpart’s. Sherlock scans him, unblinking; suddenly his own face does something ludicrous and the most genuine, full-toothed smile lifts his plush lips like curtains in a theatre.

“Fancied a little adventure on your own?” he asks.

John laughs and looks sideways, shakes his head, then lifts his gaze to Sherlock’s luminous face.

“Yeah, but I thought I’d pop back. Not as much fun without you.” His voice is a bit scratchy.

Sherlock’s eyes go big and round in a most fetching way, but then they look away from John’s,
The door behind him creaks.

“Holmes,” he hears himself say, then turns around quickly in time to see the door begin to close. It moves, snipping away ribbon after ribbon from the tableau in its frame: two gentlemen in a dimly-lit Victorian room, shoulders brushing as they stand next to each other looking John and Sherlock’s way.

“Holmes.” John takes an instinctive step forward.

Holmes quickly comes closer, too. The door’s speed feels sort of respectful, but its advancement is inexorable. John steps to the side to earn precious seconds, but still finds himself numb. He senses a motion behind his back and knows Sherlock has moved to stand behind him. John sees his own counterpart mirror Sherlock’s action, but John’s eyes are on Holmes’s pale face. Two flushed spots have appeared over his cheekbones.

Holmes lowers his head as if he is trying to take a better look at John, eyes almost silver. Silver, like the clasp of a pearl necklace.

“I don’t want to forget,” John tells him softly.

“But of course you don’t. Perfectly understandable. Neither do I.”

The gap is getting narrower. They all shift again, in synchrony, to keep seeing each other.

“Goodbye, Mycroft—Mr. Holmes,” John calls. “Thanks for your help.”

Mycroft’s voice floats to him like a voice from an old gramophone. “Not at all, Doctor Watson. Best of luck.”

The door keeps sliding, but no one moves this time. John looks Holmes squarely in the face.

“Thank you,” he says. His hand shoots out for a handshake, but he puts it behind his back, mindful of the damage he could do. “I—I’m sorry I rushed out like that. I should have said goodbye properly. It was really amazing to—”

Holmes has started shaking his head halfway through John’s sentence.

“Now, now, none of that.” He pauses. “The pleasure was all mine, my dear…John.”

There is a lot John would like to say, but he doesn’t. He just nods curtly, straightens, and stands to attention. He keeps his eyes trained on Holmes’s face as does the other on his, and for those last few seconds the rest of the sights and sounds disappear.

Holmes’s lips twitch for a smile. John’s eyes itch.

The door closes with a soft click.

John looks at its panels from this side for a few seconds, then scratches his head and lets his body
relax. He rotates on his spot to face Sherlock.

“I guess we better go in,” he says, indicating with his head. “We’re about to go a bit mad, I’m told. No one would notice with you but I’d like to keep it private.”

Sherlock’s face turns sour. “No such luxury. Mycroft’s in there.”

“Oh, you…You called him, then?”


“Yeah,” John says, reaching back in search for stability. “I can feel it too.” To say that the floor has started the cha-cha would be a gross understatement, and it’s as if someone’s slowly filling John’s headspace with the softest white flour.

“Inside,” he groans and tries to push Sherlock out of the way, whilst holding him by the elbow.

Sherlock’s eyes close in visible pain, but he shakes his head. “No! No, wait. I need—Something, I need to—Not in there, Mycroft’s in there…”

John’s finding it hard not to go cross-eyed. He strains his neck and tries to make Sherlock’s face appear in focus.

“John,” Sherlock moans softly, then inhales deeply. He grabs hold of both of John’s upper arms—John’s seen someone else do that recently, funny that…

He’s so tired…

“John,” Sherlock’s voice implores him so he opens his eyes and grabs Sherlock by the arms as well.

“I know you’ll forget,” Sherlock says, “but that’s not—No, I am not saying…It’s not because you’ll forget it.” He’s beginning to slur.

“Younotmkhhingsense,” John tells him.

“John!” Sherlock says loudly. He sounds distressed. John’s fingers tighten on Sherlock’s biceps.

“I’m here,” he says as clearly as he can. His forehead hits Sherlock’s chest. “I’m here.” It’s nice, so nice…

“I missed you,” Sherlock says quietly into his ear. “That’s…what I wanted…I missed you.”

Something surges in John: a memory, telling him that he is about to forget. The last vestige of something dear and wondrous, something old and cherished, and something that’s about to become very new.

“About that,” John mumbles and lifts his head. Sherlock’s face swims in his vision, but he catches it between his hands. For a moment, his face is in high-definition and it makes John’s mouth go
dry. “You…I must…Won’t ever do it probably but I know you’ll forget so…”

The surge carries him to the surface and then John dives in again, already breathless, pressing his lips to Sherlock’s.

The last thing John feels before the world evaporates into oblivion is Sherlock resolutely kissing him back.

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The weak autumnal rays of sunshine make dust seem to float serenely in the air, like something out of an old black and white photograph. John’s been watching it drowsily for about ten minutes. It’s fairly hypnotic. It’s also completely unproductive but that’s fine—it’s not supposed to be productive. John is supposed to avoid any mental strain and this feels good, a part of the healing process.

It’s been three days since he and Sherlock both collapsed from nervous exhaustion. At least that’s the official diagnosis of the prominent medical specialists conjured up by Mycroft. No doctor, however—including John—has been able to offer a plausible explanation as to how two grown men with no previous symptoms to indicate mounting stress or fatigue, two men in fairly good general health to boot, managed not only to have an unexpected nervous collapse each, but synchronize them to the minute. John reckons he might need to read up a bit on some anthropological studies, or at least check out those articles about the morphic field.

Sherlock, for his part, is of the firm opinion that this was Mycroft’s cunning ploy designed to keep him away from a very important case with potentially severe consequences for MI6. John has listened to his conspiracy theories with one ear. He’s quite sure poor Mycroft, who has been looking in on them every day, relief gradually replacing controlled tension, has nothing to do with their current predicament.

Although he was there when Sherlock and John regained consciousness.

If only John could remember anything from before passing out. All he has are blurred flashes that don’t even appear to be real memories, but rather like the emotional memories from a dream. One from a very long time ago. The flashes are exactly the way people remember dreams—the feeling of it shimmering somewhere in there, for an instant, irrational and subliminal, but no tangible detail within the mind’s grasp.

Sherlock’s experiencing the same. Predictably, it’s driving him up the wall. He is in dire need of finding an outlet for his frustration so John has let him vent in one of his favourite ways, namely holding his brother responsible for any eventuality in the known universe. He now throws a look to his left where Sherlock’s stretched right next to him on the sofa and sure enough, there is a scowl on that expressive face.

It’s not the face that draws John’s eyes though. He gulps quietly, averting his eyes from Sherlock’s throat and remembers how they woke up from their collapse.

Prostrate on the floor in the landing, on top of each other, limbs and torsos contorted and tangled up in such a complicated fashion it was a surprise there were no actual fractures at separation. John’s memories from those first moments are extremely scarce and surreal. He remembers disorientation of epic proportions, the kind a toddler must experience after falling asleep in their mother’s arms in the bright afternoon, only to wake up in a changed world where the shadows have
grown very long. John remembers the hardness of the wood floor beneath him. He remembers feeling the weight of his every cell.

He remembers the creak of a door.

He remembers his nose and open mouth being pressed against the skin on Sherlock’s throat, remembers the heat and the damp and that scent…

He tries not to shuffle. His left thigh is perfectly aligned to Sherlock’s right thigh, like a drawing in a Geometry textbook.

Ever since they were found in their symbiotic state of bodily existence, they seem to have done nothing but recover and redefine the boundaries of their personal space. This situation here, for instance. Sherlock was slouching on the sofa, feet up on the coffee table. John wandered around the room, then chose to sit down next to him, so close that he made Sherlock sway into the dip John’s drop produced. Their shoulders bumped, then settled on merely brushing. John, too, put his feet up on the table. In a minute, he slid lower. In another, Sherlock followed, doing the same.

The windows were open; a chill swept into the room, but no one wanted to get up and close them. A gust of wind made them shiver—no one wanted to get up and fetch a second blanket, either. Sherlock had been using the one they already had as a cushion. He pulled it out and threw it over both of them, tucking himself in, while avoiding John’s eyes. For the purpose of acquiring more than three square inches of the precious cover John shuffled even closer to the warm body next to his and tucked himself in as well.

Then they both stilled, and that’s how they’ve stayed for the last hour.

The TV is on but it’s more of a quiet background hum. Outside, there is surprisingly little noise, too, especially as far as car engines are concerned. What’s more surprising is that John isn’t that surprised. It makes him feel almost nostalgic. He would say it reminded him of how it used to be in his childhood if that wasn’t a complete lie. At least the sound of horse hooves he seemed to be hearing in the first couple of days has dwindled to the point of extinction.

“I had another one,” he informs Sherlock with soft laziness. They’ve been sharing all such irrational experiences, comparing notes as it were. John believes Sherlock is storing everything somewhere in that big brain of his, to ponder and seek the most tenuous connections.

“What was it this time?” Sherlock asks.

“That I used to live in Baker Street when I was a boy. How weird is that?”

John fancies that Sherlock would cluck his tongue in sympathy if it wasn’t too pedestrian.

As much as they hope to find common themes, everything so far has been completely individual for each of them. In all fairness, Sherlock is so depleted of energy—John struggles to remember a time after a case to match this—that even if there was a link between their bizarre illusions he could have missed it. John’s contribution to their ‘research’ has been the peculiar feeling that whatever it is they’re looking for, it doesn’t want to be found.

There is one other, secret discovery he’s made.

He has caught himself looking at Sherlock’s mouth, but not when Sherlock is speaking. It’s when
his lips are plump and still, his relaxed mouth sort of…inviting. John’s had the most persistent, guilty, sensory *déjà vu* about the taste of it too. It’s been on his mind a lot. Fascination with Sherlock is nothing new, it’s more like this particular branch of John’s fascination...

Speaking of branches, once down that road the phantom memory of the taste of Sherlock’s mouth—the impossible memory—has been spreading out to imagery of their arms wrapped around each other in a loose embrace. This is the most bizarre thing because the images have that dreamlike paradox to them, the one where you know the person in the dream is you yet it is also an entirely different person. John hasn’t shared this specific peculiarity with Sherlock.

Neither has he shared his actual dream from last night after which he woke up with a hard-on, the kind that would impress his past eighteen-year-old self. The image of Sherlock’s damn neck, bared with the motion of his thrown back head, did not just linger—it adamantly refused to leave, a suitable representation of the man himself because in no universe would Sherlock Holmes be just a whisper. Sherlock is a shout, he echoes through John’s world, just like John’s own shout of pleasure still echoes in his own ears. As far as erotic dreams go, this one had it all: the moans, the sensation of Sherlock’s hardneck in the tunnel of John’s hand and that of Sherlock’s mouth down there, the feel of it absurdly natural, as if they’d done this a thousand times. (That did not make it any less arousing—John is half-glad, half-crushed he did not wake up with an actual mess on his belly.)

His eyes go down to his crotch of their own volition, then jump to Sherlock’s mouth and what do you know! Sherlock’s stealing a glance at John’s lips. He was doing that yesterday too as well as the day before so John had stupidly thought he found another common idiosyncrasy that connected their scattered minds.

That was until last night when they were having some amazing sausages. Sherlock said something about John loving brown sauce a little too much. John said that no, he didn’t, Sherlock said that yes, he did, there, he even had it on his face right there by his mouth’s left corner again, like a few nights ago. John let this blatant nonsense pass, took a breath, and as casually as possible asked Sherlock if that was why he was looking at John’s mouth.

Something flickered over Sherlock’s features, but it was neither endearing awkwardness nor denial. It was approval of John’s observational skills, as it turned out from Sherlock’s words to that effect. (John found himself strangely disappointed at the high praise.) Then Sherlock chased some chips around his plate and eventually sighed, the air swishing out of him with a hint of irritation and resignation.

“To answer your question,” he said. “No, I wasn’t looking at your lips because of this or any other condiment. It’s worse than that, John. It’s—it’s one of those things.”

John laid his fork carefully by his plate.

“Tell me.”

“There’s not much to tell. And I’m not particularly looking forward to hearing your comments about it, especially if it turns out to be true. In addition to proving that I have lost my powers of observation, it would also provide you with an opportunity to nag about my not noticing whether you live or die, or something melodramatic to that effect. Don’t gape. The brown sauce by your mouth makes you look like a calico goldfish out of water.”

“Piss off. And I have no idea what you were talking about just now.”
“No,” Sherlock conceded, then sighed again. “I am talking about the possibility that you did grow a moustache at some point in the past and shaved it recently—both of which I somehow managed to miss.”

“What?”

“Pay attention, John, I don’t know how I can put it more simply. I keep thinking that you should have,” Sherlock waved a finger near John’s upper lip, “something up there.”

At least John didn’t have to wonder whether that was true or imaginary.

“You can relax,” he said. “I’ve never had such an abomination on my face and never will.” His newfound irrational resentment of moustaches settled in his heart with surprising ease.

Sherlock squinted at him. “No,” he dragged. “You’re right. It wouldn’t suit you. You’ll look like someone out of a gay porn film from the seventies. Oh, for God’s sake, John, don’t gape! Still… A moustache would make for some very informative reading of your moods.”

“Can’t you read my mood now?”

A quick, lopsided smile was John’s consolation prize from this conversation.

Sherlock’s voice in the present startles him out of his reverie. “Pass me my phone.”

John looks around, even lifting himself up on his elbows, until he spots the phone.

“It’s right next to you,” he points.

“Yes.”

“On your other side. You know, the one closer to you than I am.”

“I know where it is. I didn’t ask for its location. I asked you to pass it to me.”

John glares at Sherlock. “And you can’t take it yourself because…”

“I don’t want to take my arms out from under the blanket.”

“Nice,” John says with mild sarcasm. “Neither do I. Sorry.”

“Come on, John.”

“Nope. It’s right there.”

“John…”

“Take it yourself.”

“Please.” Sherlock’s voice seems to be emitting from his bones, judging by the low vibrating sensation John experiences where their elbows touch.
“No,” he manages to say. He tries to clear his head and grasps at straws. “Why do you need it anyway? You’re not supposed to work for at least another few days. You’re weak as a kitten. How do you plan to run around London exactly?”

Sherlock rolls his eyes and turns to face John fully. At this proximity, it’s as if John bought a 48-inch TV for a twenty-square-foot room. He draws his head back to see Sherlock better. He expects a pout but the bigger picture reveals an insult in the making.

“No all of us are just brawn, no brain, John.” There it is. “I can solve a case from under this blanket and quickly, too.”

“Yeah, but you’ll need your phone for that.”

“And?”

“And I’m not leaving the blanket territory, either. So there.”

Sherlock pulls his head back as well and regards John’s face with scrutiny that’s worrying for how feeble it is. John tries to school his features into something firm, exuding less of the utter contentment he’s feeling in his current situation. He doesn’t think he’s very successful. Sherlock’s eyelids begin to droop and his mouth slackens.

“Please,” he rumbles again, his vowels curling like thin wisps of smoke.

John knows he should object, vociferously. Discourage Sherlock once and for all, or at least tell him off for thinking of using John as an extension of his own body. But he is caught in the sound of s in Sherlock’s plea, in the seductive parabola of his suspended eyelashes. He is trapped in the crease right in the middle of Sherlock’s bottom lip, stranded on that light-brown speck in the iris of Sherlock’s right eye, the one that looks like a tiny island in the waters of a sodding lagoon.

Oh God.

Oh God, John knows he’d had that thought before. It was not a dream. He knows, he knows of a moment in time when he was desperately recalling that small island, because he was terrified he would never find his way back to it, but when, when, when?

He has forgotten to breathe. His head throbs.

Another crease, this time between Sherlock’s eyebrows. His eyes open wide.

“Are you feeling all right?”

What a voice, a voice to send poets scribbling about rose petals in the morn, and that, that, too…


Sherlock raises one eyebrow and John’s vision swims, the pieces of Sherlock’s face re-arranging for a split second into something with a completely different synergetic effect, one that jolts him alive like nothing before. For a split second only, a new face appears over the familiar features, too.

John swallows. His throat has gone dry.
Sherlock suddenly moves, arm coming out of the burrow. He reaches across from John, crowds over him, his throat, its line, smell, damp, white, pulse beating—

Sherlock passes John the bottle of water he’s picked up from where John left it on the other side of the sofa.

“Drink.”

John gulps whatever water is left, then closes the cap on the empty bottle and rolls it across the sofa. It plummets over the edge to the floor, an empty vessel down a dry waterfall.

“Sherlock.”

“Hmm?”

John hesitates. Not because he feels any actual hesitation over this but because an epiphany that binds reason and feeling, past and present and future, two people for good, is not easy to articulate simply.

The sole of Sherlock’s bare foot brushes along John’s ankle in a silent prompt. John sees stars at its wake; they arrange into letters, the letters into words.

“I don’t want to leave,” John says.

Instead of confusion at this inconsequential remark, Sherlock offers John a bashful look. His lips tremble into about five different shapes, until at last he speaks.

“Good. That’s…good. Because lately, ever since… You know, we’ve been…” Sherlock looks at his finger, which is doodling on the blanket over John’s thigh. “God, it’s really frustrating, because it is completely illogical, but it’s good. What you said, I mean.”

“What is illogical?”

Sherlock’s eyes don’t lift. “That…it’s as if I miss you. Why should I, when you’re here all the time? But I do and I—Anyway. It’s good that you’re not planning on going anywhere…”

John stops listening and licks his lips for courage. His fingers catch Sherlock’s chin, smooth from this afternoon’s shave—

*Sherlock slept until midday today, came into the living room dazed and relaxed, hair sticking out. He mumbled at John, toes pointing at one another on the floor, hand absent-mindedly diving under the t-shirt, wrinkling it higher and higher to reach the itchy spot on the side of his ribs, exposing Sherlock’s abdomen where there were still flushed spots and creases from where he’d curled in bed, and John wanted to do something, do something to him…*

He lifts Sherlock’s face to look him in the eyes.

“I didn’t mean now,” John says. “I don’t want to leave at all. Ever.”

Sherlock’s not blinking, or breathing for that matter.
“Oh,” he says at last.

“Yeah.”

The chin jumps in John’s fingers as Sherlock gulps.

“That’s…good, too. Very good.”

“Yeah,” John says. He sees Sherlock’s eyes flicker to his lips, back to his eyes, back to the lips, bolder this time.

“Come here,” John says and leans in. Sherlock’s mouth is open and hot, like a fireplace.

Chapter End Notes

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