Fata Volentem Ducunt, Nolentem Trahunt

by dioscoreantwins

Summary

Before Sherlock can protest Mrs Hudson switches on the telly, and begins fussing with the tea set. He watches the opening credits with a scowl on his face and can feel it deepening when the story starts to unfold, all nostalgia for fake jolly old England.

Notes

In this series I continue to explore Sherlock’s past and his relationship with Mycroft, from his earliest beginnings up to the time he ends up sharing the flat with John at Baker Street 221B. Since the airing of S3 this series is no longer canon-compliant. I don’t know whether I’m entirely sorry about that, though.
“Yoohoo, Sherlock?” Complying with some ridiculous notion of privacy, Mrs Hudson raps her knuckles perfunctorily against the frame of the door that is standing open wide before entering the flat.

The fact that the door isn’t closed doesn’t mean she’s welcome, however. Rather, Sherlock couldn’t be bothered to push it shut before collapsing onto the sofa.

“Go away,” he growls, pulling his dressing gown even tighter around his shoulders and launching himself onto his other side, to present his back like a bulwark against the inquisitive sniffing of falsely gay landladies.

“Oh, Sherlock,” Mrs Hudson sighs. “John’s only been gone half a day and look at the mess you’ve made already. He isn’t going to be pleased about that, you know.” Resolutely ignoring his demands to remove herself from the flat, she walks over to the nearest window and yanks open the curtains, allowing the bright glare of a convivial summer afternoon to sparkle on the white crests rising from the sea of papers that has overrun every flat surface in the living room.

To keep himself from jumping from the sofa and physically bundling her out of the flat – for he would never do that, never mind that the prospect looks most tempting just now – he braces his feet against the armrest and groans in his most theatrical manner. The headache that has been hovering just behind his eyes since John left has by now fully manifested itself and sits throbbing painfully and insistently. Mrs Hudson, in blissful oblivion, prattles on, rearranging the papers strewn over the coffee table.

“At least it looks like the weather will be holding out for them,” she chirps. Then she has the audacity to pat him on the shoulder. “Cheer up, Sherlock. It’s only a weekend. A true friend would be happy for John making a go of it at last. And she seems like a nice enough girl. A bit young, perhaps.”

The inane chatter does nothing for Sherlock’s headache. With the object of burying his head beneath it he reaches for the nearest cushion at hand, only to find it is John’s Union Jack cushion, which he has curled around in search of comfort earlier. Snarling, he hurls it across the room, missing Mrs Hudson, who has just bent to pick up some of the stray papers in the middle of the carpet, by a narrow margin. The cushion sails over her and lands safely in Sherlock’s chair.

“I’ll make you a nice cuppa first,” she continues, unaware she has narrowly escaped falling victim to a collision with a fast-flying object. “There’s a rerun of Miss Marple this afternoon. I know you’re not one for watching telly but it’s a murder mystery so that will make you happy. And you can deduce to your heart’s content for I’ve seen them all twice, so I already know who did it anyway.”

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Straight after breakfast, Sherlock runs to the gatehouse.

Though it’s still early the morning is already unseasonably warm and with each slap of his feet against the ground, the clammy blanket of sultry air he’s pushing against is wrapped a little tighter around him. After no more than two hundred metres sweat trickles in rivulets down his spine and over his ribs. The trees and shrubs stand motionless in the sweltering heat. Not a bird lifts its voice in song. A few tits scurry in the undergrowth, pecking listlessly at the earth.
Sherlock feels his back ripple with unease. Yesterday he was so intent on seeing John that he had no eye for the evidence of neglect sprawled all over the park. Looking about him as he runs, he spies the half-hearted attempts at keeping up appearances but on the whole the borders and copses look eerily unkempt. The grass under his feet reaches as high as the top of his shoes and the big pond is covered with a thick layer of duckweed.

“John!” he shouts when he nears the gatehouse. He tears around the back and pulls open the door. Inside it’s cooler and even more quiet than it was outside. “John?”

John is not in the living room. A trace of body warmth lingers in the small depression in the sofa and the Union Jack cushion lying next to it. The unfinished bust of Daddy is standing on top of the desk. Sherlock picks it up. The collar is more defined now, so John has been working on it after Sherlock left him yesterday. He returns it to the desk and checks the kitchen. A freshly washed cup stands in the draining board to the left of the sink, the kettle next to it still warm to the touch. On the table that stands beneath the window, Sherlock discovers a slip of paper.

*Feeling much better. Am in the shed.*

The vines climbing its walls have run a little wild but inside the shed everything is as neatly organised as ever. John is busy filling the lawnmower with fuel.

“Thought I’d start with the lawn,” he says when he spies Sherlock. “You can do the parts further from the house if you want to.”

As Sherlock despises both the noise and the smell of the mower, he shakes his head. “No, I saw the vegetable garden could do with some weeding.”

John winces. “Yeah, I suppose so. Here.” He picks a straw hat from a hook on the wall to his left and sails it with a twist of his wrist at Sherlock. “Better wear that.”

Catching the hat and dunking it onto his head, Sherlock says quickly, “You don’t *look* better.”

“My, you do know how to cheer up a fellow, don’t you?” John mutters, his eyes crinkled in amusement. With his lopsided smile and his dirty hands, he almost looks like the old John again.

“I nearly lost a stone, Sherlock,” he goes on, reaching up to briefly rest his hand on Sherlock’s shoulder and give it a squeeze, “and Lord knows I had never much to begin with. We’re both members of the skinny blokes club, aren’t we?”

Sherlock shrugs. John’s fingers slide from his shoulder. “This morning I felt like a weight was lifted off my chest and I had my first good cuppa in weeks. God knows I’ve neglected my duties long enough.”

“If you say so. But you didn’t come in for breakfast.”

“Fancy you reminding someone to have a bite,” chuckles John. “I’d rather not overdo it. I might join you for a spot of lunch later. Now be off with you, I want the grass decent again by the end of the afternoon.”

He starts pulling open the big doors so he can drive the lawn mower out of the shed. Once John has properly installed himself on the driver’s seat he turns towards Sherlock.

“You’ve got questions,” he says. “ ‘Course you do. But not now, okay?”

Without waiting for Sherlock’s answer he starts the engine and guides the mower out of the building.
Thanks to the drone of the lawn mower in the background the warm air feels even more oppressive. Sweat drips into Sherlock’s eyes continuously, despite the precaution of a handkerchief tied beneath the hat. Earth cakes the moist skin of his hands, making it impossible to wipe his forehead. Nevertheless, he plods on at a furious pace, searching the scourge of the discomfort to distract him.

Sherlock has finished weeding the carrot and onion beds and is about to shuffle on his knees towards the rows of salad when Cook calls out to him. She’s arranged a tray with a cup of tea and a slice of cherry cake on the bench in front of the wall and hands for him a deliciously cold wet flannel when he walks up to her.

“So he’s pulled himself together,” she huffs. “It’s very good you’re trying to help him, Sherlock. You’re a sweet boy. But John is ill, and he’s a fool for refusing to visit that doctor.”

When John joins them for lunch she screws her mouth shut. The seam between her lips is the only straight line in the round orbs of her face. She slaps the serving dishes onto the table and retires to her stove to create an awful din with several large pots and pans.

Mary ladles the food onto their plates, glowering at Brenda when the girl opens her mouth. With an audible snap, Brenda shuts it again.

John eyes his plate a long time before he picks up his fork and starts shovelling Cook’s excellent ham and pease pudding into his mouth. It’s obvious he could be eating dirt and wouldn’t taste the difference. His hand lifts the fork and lowers it again with the perfect synchronization of a finely attuned robot.

“Are you feeling better, John?” Brenda ventures hastily, just when Mary has taken a bite.

“Much better, thank you.” John smiles at her and brings up another forkful to his mouth.

“You don’t look it,” Mary asserts, before focusing her attention on Brenda and addressing her in a sharp tone. “Stop messing with your food and finish up. The conservatory looks a fright and I want it spick and span before Mycroft arrives.”

“Right. That was lovely, Cook,” John says after he’s laid down his cutlery on his plate. He shoves back his chair and picks up both Sherlock’s and his own plate to place them in the sink. “Come on, Sherlock. That is, if you want to help me for the rest of the afternoon as well.”


“They’re worried about you.”

“All worrying does, is make you sick,” John dismisses the observation with an airy wave of his hand. “And now you’re starting as well. Please don’t, Sherlock.”

“But John, after what you told me yesterday–” begins Sherlock.

“No now, I said!” John interrupts, almost rude. “Oh Christ,” he swears, catching sight of another molehill, “bloody vermin. Sorry Sherlock, but I’ve spent the whole spring chasing those ruddy buggers and now here’s another, damn it.”

By now they’ve reached the kitchen garden wall.
“There.” Pushing his fists deep into the pockets of his trousers John gazes up at Sherlock, scrunching his eyes against the harsh glare of the sun. “I’m embarrassed, I guess,” he says, almost contemplative. His gaze slides away from Sherlock and down to the ground, at a point exactly between their feet.

“Yeah, that’s it,” he sighs. “Ashamed for forgoing my work and stewing in my own juices and feeling sorry for myself. I was a little wobbly, mind you, a few weeks ago. Nothing serious, just shivery. But I sat down and gave in and then I hadn’t the spunk to get going again. I’m not tough, you see, not like Mycroft, and you. It all seemed so pointless, somehow. And then, yesterday was a really bad day, you caught me at my lowest, Sherlock, you did.”

The blinding light has washed nearly all colour out of his face. John’s body looks even smaller to Sherlock than he remembers, than it seemed yesterday or in the muted shadows of the shed. As if he’s wasting away, Sherlock thinks, or have I grown that much? He went through another growth spurt this spring, the bones in his legs hurting like hell and almost visibly lengthening. Each morning he’d stood tottering like a newborn foal after levering himself up out of bed, adjusting to the idea his legs would not betray him and collapse under his weight.

Clearly John expects an answer, preferably the kind where Sherlock says he understands and won’t prod any further. He’s actually craned his neck and is looking up at Sherlock, the set of his eyes demanding Sherlock to release him. The set-up reminds Sherlock of the ‘little talks’ Mycroft engages him in on a regular basis. His resentment of those. As well as his resentment of Mycroft for initiating them and expecting Sherlock to endure them and answer his probing enquiries.

“All right,” he says. “You’re better now.”

“Yes,” John smiles, gripping Sherlock by his bicep and rubbing his sleeve, so apparently Sherlock has forwarded the right answer. “Much better. Nothing for you to worry about. Let’s get a move on. See you in the shed in four hours, okay?”

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The next morning Sherlock narrowly avoids running into Brenda who comes staggering out of the kitchen, half hidden behind a tray overflowing with breakfast paraphernalia.

“Fuck it!” she exclaims. “Oh, I’m sorry, Sherlock. I never meant… But you always do rush about so, and I always forget when you’re off to that school of yours. You’re to breakfast upstairs. Mycroft’s orders. He rang Cook yesterday evening."

“But he won’t be home for another week.” Three days ago, Mycroft had rung to say he wouldn’t be able to collect Sherlock from school and had arranged for David to meet the five o’clock train instead. The instant Sherlock had opened his mouth to argue against this plan, not because it wasn’t sound but because of the principle of the thing, Mycroft had said ‘don’t’, in a tone that brooked no argument. In the background Sherlock had heard a shower running. From this Sherlock had concluded Mycroft was phoning him from his flat, perhaps still in the bed where he’d spent the night with Michael, and he’d ended the conversation by tossing the receiver onto the cradle.

On his way back to his room to fetch his foil for that year’s last fencing lesson, Sherlock had rubbed his hands up and down his thigh to keep himself from slamming his fists into the wall of the corridor. His hands had shaken as he threw his windows open and lit an illegal cigarette. It hadn’t even taken the edge off his vexation. After some pacing the length of the room, cursing Mycroft under his breath all the while, he’d given in and swallowed two of Mummy’s pills – the little blue ones that, now that he’s laid off of them for a few weeks, once more do exactly what the leaflet promises and have the additional advantage of gliding down his throat all by themselves.
“Well, he’s here now,” comes Brenda’s dogged reply. “Or not here. Nanny just happened to look out the window when he arrived. She said he had one look at the front steps and later she saw him making straightaway for the shed. Mum said John is in for a tongue lashing. Eeep.” The tray lurches dangerously to the left. Two small silver saucers with jam commence their inevitable descent down the slope. It seems that years of narrowly avoiding every disaster that may befall an inept girl burdened with an overloaded serving tray have paid off. Brenda’s movements to prevent calamity are almost graceful, though the sight of her tongue sticking out between her lips spoils the overall effect.

Sherlock turns and hurries back up the servant’s stairs in front of her. Outside he finds proof of Mycroft’s arrival in the – already wilting – clumps of weeds pulled from the cracks between the steps and flung aside in anger. The tracks in the gravel and the careless arrangement of the pair of expensive travelling bags and the two silk – Sherlock feels his eyes roll in his head when he fingers the material – umbrellas on the bottom steps bear further testimony to his brother’s state of mind. Mycroft has skidded to a halt in front of the steps, jumped out of the vehicle with uncharacteristic agility, had a go at the weeds, hurled his bags and umbrellas out of the car and driven off at a dangerously high speed in the direction of the garage.

The recently cropped grass obscures Mycroft’s tracks on the lawn. Sherlock reasons he must have cut the shortest route from the garage to the shed and sure enough, he spots the occasional footprint when he joins the tack halfway. Just after he’s rounded a great clump of rhododendrons he catches sight of Mycroft rapidly walking in his direction, his face a mask of enforced composure.

By way of greeting he says, “I’ll have you know I won’t tolerate such insolence in the future. Not from you. You know full well I’d have come to collect you myself if I could have spared the time.” While delivering his address he slaloms around Sherlock without sparing him so much as a glance, and continues his course back to the house.

For a full fifteen seconds Sherlock stands dumbfounded. Then insight hits him and he gallops off after Mycroft. “It was quite obvious you had more important things to do,” he jeers. “And now you have quarrelled.” Syrupy commiseration oozes from his voice when he adds, “oh, poor Mycroft.”

“But,” Mycroft warns, pivoting on his heels and growing very still, very suddenly. “Just don’t.”

The quality of his tone, its implicit assumption of Mycroft’s right to direct Sherlock, together with the fact Mycroft has issued the same order only three days ago, pulls a red veil over Sherlock’s eyes. He takes another step towards Mycroft, until they’re almost chest to chest, their eyes locking. Vaguely, Sherlock reflects he might yet grow bigger than Mycroft. Now, wouldn’t that be funny?

“I’m not a child anymore, Mycroft,” he growls. “Stop treating me like one.”

“It will be my pleasure, brother mine, the moment you stop acting like one. Allowing for your usual mode of ending a perfectly normal telephone conversation, I’m afraid we’ve a long road ahead of us yet.” For Mycroft to resort to such low tactics, he must be truly upset. But Sherlock didn’t run after Mycroft to gauge his sibling’s mental state.

“You’re the one who’s always going on about decent behaviour so I suppose you didn’t let John bear the brunt for your precious Michael letting you down.”

The mask remains firmly stuck to Mycroft’s features. The image of Mycroft practicing the expression in front of a mirror enters Sherlock’s mind and he almost giggles at the silliness of the idea, until he becomes aware of the transformation of Mycroft’s eyes. His brother’s pupils are smaller than pinpricks in the washed out milk of the irises. Such is the colour of the ocean, sweltering under the blazing sun, without so much as a breeze to set the waves undulating. Beneath the glassy surface, sharks patrol. An involuntary shudder ripples down Sherlock’s spine.
“I expressed my chagrin, naturally,” replies Mycroft, his pupils dilating again. Is it possible for a human being to control the widening and retracting of his pupils, according to his wishes? “John admitted my right in doing so.”

“He’s been ill, Mycroft.”

“He is ill,” Mycroft says. “I can’t command him to visit a doctor but I strongly advised him to do so. His illness is no excuse for shirking his duties, though. Mummy is feeble and Nanny’s legs aren’t as dependable as they once were. In letting the steps and the terrace fall to such a state of neglect, John has actively endangered them. Imagine one of them had stumbled and broken a limb.”

“What do you mean, he is ill?” Sherlock latches onto his main point of interest amidst Mycroft’s torrent of information.

“Didn’t you look at his face? The man lost a stone at least. That’s quite a lot for such a small frame.”

“Of course I noticed,” flares up Sherlock. “But he assured me he felt better. He ate very well at lunch yesterday.” The moment the words leave his mouth, he regrets them, for they show him as one who is unobservant and easily fooled. As if John’s mechanical ladling of his pudding yesterday afternoon hadn’t told him the truth? He’d brought it up later, back at the shed but John had demurred, said he was too tired to talk now, they would do so tomorrow.

“Who’d have thought you would fall for such a ruse?” Mycroft chides. The set of his eyes hardens again. “Well, there’s one of your tasks this holiday: persuading our gardener to come to his senses and visit the doctor. You’ll have to do it this week. I understand Mr Whitall will be back from his concert tour Thursday next so your afternoons will be accounted for.”

The casual reference has Sherlock ball his fists at his side. Only through the greatest effort of will can he refrain from rubbing his fingers along each other. That would be a display of nervousness he doesn’t want Mycroft to enjoy.

“Why do you always insist on calling John our gardener? As if he is nothing but a servant?”

“Why?” The question appears to sincerely puzzle Mycroft, creasing the skin between his brows. “Because he is, of course. What else should I call him?” He regards Sherlock, and for a split second Mycroft’s eyes widen, his face completely open and honest. But all too quickly, his eyes narrow again as he regains control of himself. “Ah,” he says, at length. “I see.”

They both stand silent. Inside the cavity of his chest Sherlock can feel his heart thumping violently against his ribs.

“Tell me,” Mycroft demands. Though Sherlock knows this to be impossible he appears to have grown two inches in the last three seconds and now appears to be glancing down at Sherlock again, who, equally impossible, has lost a few inches at least, “ought an affair that ended nearly thirty years ago, before both of us were born, affect us in the present? Reckless youth and a lack of proper guidance led to our father committing a gross error of judgement. I, for one, am relieved he came to his senses in due time. Only imagine the scandal he would have brought down upon our family!”

“It must be such a relief then, to realise you wouldn’t have been around to savour it if Daddy had chosen otherwise,” quips Sherlock. For he can quip, can’t he, if Mycroft is intent on treating him like an ignoramus.

“All your glib answer does, Sherlock, is to make me despair whether you will ever understand the workings of our world,” Mycroft replies. His shoulders, usually so straight and proud, droop a little
inside the suit jacket. His hand dips into one of the pockets of his waistcoat and pulls forth a pocket watch. Sherlock snorts. Mycroft ignores this, favouring the watch with his attention instead.

“Apart from that, I’m disappointed you didn’t care to inform me of John’s illness. You do, after all, keep up a correspondence with the man,” he continues, his tone flat.

“He never wrote a word,” protests Sherlock. His mind races back to the letters he received last term. They had been the same as ever, hadn’t they? Descriptions of the beauty of the gardens, the changes to the planting on Daddy’s grave, a little gossip about Cook and Nanny, nothing out of the ordinary. Though, perhaps, they had been a little listless. But then, that had struck a most harmonious chord with Sherlock’s own state of mind as he sat suffering through interminable hour after interminable hour in that awful prison.

Snapping the watch shut and stashing it back into its pocket, Mycroft informs him, “If you had read between the lines you might have spotted his condition easily enough. But fine.”

The subject, it appears, is closed as far as Mycroft is concerned, for he announces, “It’s nine thirty now. I have to make a phone call at ten fifteen exactly. Afterwards, I will visit Mummy. You and I will continue our talk in the study at eleven. Have you seen Mummy? What was she like?”

Still reeling from the blow Mycroft has just dealt him, Sherlock answers sullenly, “After five minutes she turned her back on me and told me to get out.”

“Oh.” Mycroft’s shoulders droop a little further. “I’m… I’m sorry, Sherlock,” he stammers. The slight twitch of his mouth betrays how much Sherlock’s careless reply has rattled him. “That’s cruel. She shouldn’t do that. I’ll talk to her.”

As if Sherlock cares a fig for Mummy’s actions. He’s ceased being hurt by her, being afraid of her, a long time ago. She’s his enemy and he’s perfectly willing to be hers. That’s the deal they’ve struck and as long as she keeps him in supply he’ll honour their arrangement. What he can’t abide, though, is the idea he’s supposed to love her, and she him. Yet, that’s the fiction Mycroft, with all his so-called love of truth and pretence at penetrative wisdom, clings to with the birdbrained confidence of a small child that believes its Teddy will protect it against the monsters that live under its bed.

“Yeah, go ahead and talk some sense into the madwoman,” he cries out, not bothering to keep his voice down despite the fact they’re close to the house and might be overheard. Suppose Brenda would be listening in on them? Wouldn’t Mycroft just hate that? Serve him right. He opens his voice a little louder to scream at Mycroft.

“You must love this, staunchly putting up with the burden of your beastly family. A degenerate with a predilection for the lower classes for a father, a lunatic for a mother and an ungrateful good-for-nothing for a brother. And there’s you, suffering under the infliction with all the patience of Our Lord Jesus Christ!”

“Sherlock!”

“Why don’t you shut it, Mycroft? Just this once. Go and stuff your mouth with scrambled eggs. The sound of your jaws munching makes more sense than the opinions you insist upon inflicting on me.” The windows rattle in the panes as he slams the French door shut in front of Mycroft’s face, which is nearly purple with rage. A sense of triumph surges in his chest, only to dwindle just as fast and give way to a feeling of infinite sadness.

*I admired him once, didn’t I?* he thinks.
Brenda, of course, is nowhere in sight. Only the breakfast table, all dressed in silver, crystal and porcelain and with a grand bowl of roses to top it all off.

Behind Sherlock, Mycroft wrings open the door with a great deal of ferocity and noise. “I had been looking forward to enjoying a quiet and amiable breakfast in the pleasant surroundings of my own home,” he snarls. “Trust you to smash the concept to pieces within fifteen minutes of my arrival. You’re to go up to your room right now. Don’t let me catch sight of you before eleven. In the study, Sherlock. I’ll be expecting you.”

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The door to 221A is standing open invitingly so Sherlock doesn’t knock but barges straight into the flat and Mrs Hudson’s sitting room to catch his landlady arranging her best tea service on the coffee table in front of the sofa. A plate of his favourite biscuits, still warm from the oven, sits next to the teapot and an amalgam of nostalgia wafts up from a pair of plates covered with tea towels. Anchovy paste and fruitcake. His hostess is attired in a new dress in a violent shade of violet, with a string of purple amethysts around her neck.

“You could have put in a bit of an effort,” she tuts disapprovingly after she’s taken in his ensemble of pyjama trousers, his grey sleep T-shirt and the blue dressing gown. “I may be your landlady but I’ve still got eyes in my head.”

“Fine, I’ll be off again,” grumbles Sherlock, but Mrs Hudson scrambles for his sleeve and motions for him to somehow plant himself amidst the products of her various handiwork classes which have taken over every inch of the sofa like some exotic parasite. “Really, Sherlock. You’re impossible when John’s away. Now sit down and behave.”

“Do I look like a dog?” Sherlock growls, trying to look indignant while wriggling down between a quilted tulip and an excess of needlework depicting some drooping roses in hideous off-beige. The setting rather spoils the intended effect.

“Don’t be grumpy. Here.” Mrs Hudson lifts one of his hands to shove a plate of thin-sliced and neatly cut anchovy paste sandwiches into it. “I know you haven’t bothered with breakfast or lunch.”

Before Sherlock can protest, Mrs Hudson switches on the telly and begins fussing with the tea set. He watches the opening credits with a scowl on his face and can feel it deepening when the story starts to unfold, all nostalgia for fake jolly old England. Mycroft would wholeheartedly approve, if not of the spirit, then of the atmosphere at least.

Perhaps this is, to the casual observer, a portrayal of his childhood. The good bits. Checking the hives in the apiary together with John. Or cycling to Mr Whitall’s cottage, for such it had become in Sherlock’s thoughts. Mr Whitall had a photograph of Mr Mancini in his glory days on the wall in the living room, next to the great bow window, but, as Sherlock has never known that version of Mr Mancini, the picture was devoid of meaning to him.

Ten minutes into the programme Sherlock announces, “That hotel is a sham.”

“Do you think so, dear?” Mrs Hudson replies, absently. From the depths of the sofa she has pulled forth a canvas bag with knitting needles and a great quantity of wool in a poisonous green that pricks the back of Sherlock’s neck with vague memories. “It looks real enough.”

“It’s a sham. Money laundering probably but I’ll know for certain in five minutes.”

“Fine, dear. But do shut up now, would you? I can’t remember this episode at all, I was sure I’d seen
them all. Oh look, what a lovely dress...”

Sherlock ventures a peek at Mrs. Hudson’s knitting. “What do you think?” Mrs Hudson asks. “It’s for Mrs Turner’s great-nephew, he’s just turned six.”

“It’s perfectly hideous,” answers Sherlock, one eye on the screen and the other on the green eyesore. “There, that was the clue I needed, definitely money laundering. Nanny knitted me a jumper in that exact shade when I was six. I loathed the item but of course I had to wear it because of all the effort she’d put into it. Couldn’t you have chosen a decent colour at least?”

“It’s a nice colour,” Mrs Hudson corrects him, unperturbed. “You must have cut a dash in that jumper.”

“No, I didn’t. And it itched horribly.”

“I’m glad there aren’t that many dead bodies,” Mrs Hudson ignores his remark. “Though you must be disappointed. Have another sandwich, Sherlock.”

“The owners and…” Sherlock commences his explanation in the patient tone he adopts when relating a case to Mrs Hudson, but she flaps her hand at him with the impatient little wave she adopts whenever his elucidations threaten to overwhelm her.

“Oh, hush,” she says. “I’m all caught up in it now. Don’t spoil it, Sherlock. That lady friend of Miss Marple looks suspicious to me.”

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Contrary to Sherlock’s expectation Mycroft hasn’t entrenched himself behind Daddy’s desk, but rather elected for the vantage point of the sofa facing the door. Laid out on the table between the sofas are the silver coffee service, a plate with the remnants of yesterday’s cherry cake, a Bakewell sponge tart and a plate of anchovy paste sandwiches. Sherlock shivers. The scene looks far too elaborate.

Downstairs, the front door falls shut with a heavy thud. After a last glance around the living room and the kitchen to ascertain the place does indeed look impeccable but with just the right amount of disorder – as evidenced by the slightly sloping stack of paper, casually pushed aside as if in deep thought until it’s perching dangerously close to the edge of the table – Sherlock tiptoes to the mantelpiece. A quick check in the mirror confirms he looks every bit as composed and unperturbed as his surroundings, except for a mote of lint on his right shoulder. This he removes with a quick flick of his fingers.

He installs himself in his chair and reaches for the book he’d determined on earlier, next to the mug of tea he finished preparing three minutes ago. The book is ‘A Practical Approach to Planning Law’, a volume he must have lifted from Mycroft’s library in a state of pique once. Or perhaps he’d been so out of it he’d imagined swapping the book for… whatever had taken his fancy at the time. He can’t actually remember how he came to possess it and yet he’s sure he hasn’t deleted the circumstances of its procurement.

Slivers of conversation drift up to where Sherlock is sitting. The timbre of Mrs Hudson is deliberately low, almost mother-like, or what Sherlock supposes would be the tone adopted by mothers desperate to know what their son has been up to and equally desperate not to have the child realised that. Nanny had addressed him thus, when the fire he’d started with his flint stones behind the apiary had erupted into a blaze and a few square yards of scorched shrubbery. Had he sat on her lap, when he confessed to her? John’s answering rumble is equally indistinct. Sherlock cocks his head to the side to better catch the gist of John’s mood.

Does he sound…dejected, perhaps? Well, he won’t be able to accuse Sherlock of not warning him in advance. After two days of not paying a whit of attention to any of Sherlock’s arguments, each of them backed statistically and scientifically, as was to be found on the website if only John would care to have a look, they’d had the most dreadful row shortly before John left the flat, hell-bent on his weekend of disaster.

Sherlock has kept a tab on the weather reports – and concluded a drenched Brighton can’t have provided John with the best groundwork for amorous exploits.

Maybe if John had opted for one of the more upscale hotels the weekend might still have lived up to his expectations – the silk scarf Sherlock discovered buried beneath the sofa cushions two weeks ago had told him that – but John had grumbled he simply couldn’t afford such a swish pad. The stubborn sod still refused to withdraw so much as a penny from the money Sherlock transferred to John’s account after that episode with the Chinese smuggling gang. This Sherlock knows because he checks John’s accounts on a regular basis to certify no one else has gone to the trouble of deciphering John’s
ridiculously easy passwords.

No, rather than listen to Sherlock – who had, obviously, only wanted to help his friend and had absolutely no additional self-interested motive in trying to keep John in the flat, or in London at least – he’d chosen to hightail it, to literally sodding Brighton of all places. Leaving Sherlock to fend for himself.

Well, he hasn’t done too badly, has he, considering? Here he’s sitting, calm and collected in a spotless flat, with a freshly brewed cup of tea near his one hand and ‘A Practical Approach to Planning Law’ in the other. An engrossing read, really.

“Oh, poor you.” Mrs Hudson’s soothes. “But, if she said that I say good riddance. Such snobbery.” Her voice has risen in agitation.

Should he carelessly arrange one leg over the other or would that be overdoing it?

“Oh, John. And here Sherlock has been in such a strop. You’d been gone but a few hours and he’d wrecked the place. I don’t know what he’s been up to today but there was the most awful racket the whole afternoon.”

Perfidious woman, giving his game away like that. Well, he can still play it. John mumbles something and then his slow tread starts ascending the stairs. Sherlock frowns at his book. He doesn’t take in a word, but then, planning law must be an exceedingly boring subject. By now he’s pretty certain he must have nicked it from Mycroft.

After John has manoeuvred both himself and his holdall through the door he waits exactly two seconds before lifting his eyes from his reading. The right corner of his mouth curls in pleased surprise.

“John! Back already? How was Brighton? And… and… I’ve deleted her name, it seems. Careless of me.”

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He slams shut the door to his room so forcefully that the bang reverberates through the corridor with a satisfactorily loud volume. Sherlock stands leaning into the door for a long time, willing his heart rate back to normal and his mind empty of all thought.

Unfortunately, his present surroundings – this room where Mycroft had the gall to order him – aren’t very favourable to the business of getting a grip on himself again. He’s sorely tempted to venture outside again and make for the safety of his treehouse even though it barely accommodated him last winter, but Mycroft might have ensconced himself on the landing to await the event and pounce on him the second he opens the door. The bloody git – amidst the agitated jumble of emotions a small thrill of excitement runs down Sherlock’s spine as he realises he’s just referred to Mycroft with a derogatory term, if only in his head – can be every bit as quiet as Sherlock, if he chooses to be so.

At last, Sherlock lets go from the mooring of the door and welters towards the direction of the windows to close the curtains and protect himself from an inadvertent flash of John, lumbering around the garden. That, he decides, is perhaps the most aggravating aspect of the whole brouhaha, the fact that Mycroft, with just one careful prod of his meticulously manicured finger, has managed to point out what Sherlock ought to have detected. And here Sherlock claims to be John’s friend. Some kind of friend he’s proven himself to be.

Well, he will make it up to John. He’s not only going to ring a doctor – not that quack attending to
Mummy’s needs but a real one – but he’s going to accompany John himself on his visit.

The resolve allays his anxiety sufficiently to allow him to flop down on his bed and light a cigarette so he can ponder upon the nature of his discussion with Mycroft and the reasons for its escalation.

It’s obvious Mycroft is the one to blame. How had he greeted Sherlock? Oh yes, “I’ll have you know I won’t tolerate such insolence in the future.” Surely that’s not the proper mode to address a sibling one hasn’t laid eyes upon for half a trimester, never mind the frequent phone calls and almost daily letters. ‘Perhaps he was upset’, a voice in the back of Sherlock’s mind suggests. ‘Yes, and?’ he asks it in return. Besides, the notion strikes Sherlock as so outlandish he shouldn’t even deign to consider it. He’s behaved far more churlishly in the past without Mycroft blinking so much as an eye.

No, in the end he can only reach one conclusion, which is that Michael – stupid, odious Michael – is the one responsible for Mycroft’s foul mood and hence, for the fact Sherlock is lying here now, practicing at puffing smoke rings of different sizes. He uses the end of his cigarette to light another and quietly cheers when the next ring, perfectly round, ends up with a diameter of almost three inches.

A gentle rap of knuckles on his door startles Sherlock out of his fest of resentful reverie. The cigarette drops from the nonchalant hold of his fingers as he jerks upright, straight onto the bedclothes.

“No, wait!” he cries out in a panic, smacking at the cigarette, so agitated he doesn’t even feel it singeing the skin of his palm and staring in dismay at the big hole it’s already burned into the immaculate dark-blue velvet of the bedspread.

“Sherlock,” Nanny’s voice says. “What are you doing up here in your room at this time of day? Don’t you know—” She breaks off her line of inquiry to sniff the air instead. “What’s that smell?”

***

Contrary to Sherlock’s expectation, Mycroft hasn’t entrenched himself behind Daddy’s desk but rather elected for the vantage point of the sofa facing the door. Laid out on the table between the sofas are the silver coffee service, a plate with the remnants of yesterday’s cherry cake, a Bakewell sponge tart and a plate of anchovy paste sandwiches. Sherlock shivers. The scene looks far too elaborate.

“Come in, Sherlock,” Mycroft beckons him with a pleasant smile. “I gathered you might be hungry, since you did forego breakfast.”

“I might be,” concedes Sherlock. When Mycroft keeps beaming at him he ventures away from the door and seats himself gingerly on the other sofa. From beneath the lowered screen of his eyelids he scans the layout of the room that is so familiar to him. The photograph of Daddy and Mummy at university is not standing in its usual place but in the middle of the desk with the front turned towards them, as if Mycroft was looking at it when Sherlock knocked and hurriedly set it down again before making a beeline for the sofa. There he now thrones, emitting benevolence and peace towards man like some pasha straight out of one of the more exotic tales of One Thousand and One Nights. The attar of roses permeating the atmosphere, coaxed from the dewy petals by the sun to waft up and through the open windows, serves perfectly to heighten the illusion. The only item lacking to complete the image is a turban on the top of Mycroft’s head, preferably one with a fat diamond sparkling amongst the swathes of silk and a peacock feather rising high above it.

What can be the meaning of the portrait’s position, planted smack-bang in the middle of the desk as it is? From between the four silver bars of the frame Daddy stares at them, smiling hugely with his
arms around his newly-found treasure trove against poverty and loss of family honour.

*What a mean thought.*

“Will coffee do?” Mycroft asks, slanting his head. “I felt like coffee, but if you prefer tea we can always ring for it.”

“No,” Sherlock answers, warily. “Coffee will do fine.”

“Good.” Mycroft beams with yet more friendliness. “I’ll be mother, then. Have a sandwich, Sherlock. Anchovy paste is your favourite, after all.”

They both take some time to fuss with various parts of tableware. Mycroft must have used a heavy dose of superglue to fasten the corners of his mouth into the soft smile playing over the lower part of his features. What game is he up to now? If only Nanny hadn’t knocked on Sherlock’s door. If only he hadn’t lit that damned cigarette. If only he had thought to take… Sherlock resolutely shuts off that line of thought. He concentrates on his hands instead, willing his fingers to keep their trembling at a minimum.

In the end, everything is Mycroft’s fault. As long as he manages to hold onto that idea, wearing it like a protective Perspex shield against any mud Mycroft might wish to start flinging his way, he will make it through this interview relatively unscathed. The mud will slither off the shield and, hopefully, some splashes will bounce back, straight into Mycroft’s smarmy face.

To show his brother Sherlock considers himself blameless, no matter what clever trick Mycroft might want to pull out of his bag to badger him with, he picks just one sandwich and leans back into the sofa cushions, determined not to open his mouth before Mycroft does.

“There you are.” With a nimble flick of his wrist Mycroft deposits a cup of coffee in front of Sherlock and lifts his own as he seats himself properly again. His gaze swoops over the table and up to Sherlock’s eyes where it rests until, against his instincts, Sherlock has to give in and lock his own gaze with Mycroft’s.

“Sherlock,” Mycroft says. His voice is very, very gentle. “Brother dear, we’ve both of us endured an awkward morning. The result, I’m aware, of the harsh words I uttered upon first encountering you. Please be so kind as to forgive me.”

Sherlock doesn’t know what drops lower, the hand bearing the sole sandwich on its plate or his bottom lip.

“I…” he begins.

“No.” Mycroft raises his hand to stop him. “No. Listen, Sherlock. I was in a sour mood when I arrived this morning – only yesterday I discovered those bloody incompetents at MI5 have mislaid three quarters of Daddy’s dossier and it looks like some files might be beyond retrieval, but you needn’t concern yourself with that. Then I found the grounds neglected and the front steps covered in weeds. That’s not what I expect our home to look like.”

Here Mycroft pauses to sip his coffee. Over the rim of his cup his eyes remain fixed on Sherlock’s. By now Sherlock has shut his mouth again. At least, he hopes he has.

“Forgive me,” repeats Mycroft, replacing his cup in his saucer. “I had looked forward to a more auspicious start of our holiday. Especially as I want to discuss certain developments regarding your future, which will, I’m convinced, meet with your approval.” He watches Sherlock expectantly.
“I’m not going to take up acting again,” Sherlock declares hotly. “If you hadn’t had Mr Harrow sacked I might have—” The school paper being the school paper, it had lauded every performance put up by either the school’s depleted troupe of actors or the school orchestra. A courageous soul had pointed out in a letter to the editor that everyone had obviously given it their best but, on the whole, the performances had been sub-standard, especially when compared to the quality the school had become used to in recent years. After reading the letter, Sherlock had lifted his eyes to let them flick over the vapid countenances of the others, seated at the house’s breakfast tables. Maybe the writer was stuck in another house.

“Sherlock, please,” Mycroft interrupts him. “The school and I allowed you to dictate the terms to continue your education there and we’ve stuck by it, haven’t we? If you hadn’t kept to your part of the deal we might have renounced our promises but the Headmaster declared himself satisfied in our last interview.”

As the stupid idiot ought to be, sod it. Sherlock has rewarded the man with nothing but A+’s, even though the subject they had to cover for history – the histrionics of Rhodes in Africa – was so exceedingly dull Sherlock had felt like screaming for the whole interminable time it took to write that particular essay.

“Well, then I don’t see why you had to lash out at me like you did,” Sherlock forwards. “You’re the one always nagging me about proper behaviour.”

Mycroft closes his eyes. It’s just a blink, really, over in less than a split-second – anyone else wouldn’t even have noticed – but Sherlock, of course, has caught him at it and he takes a bite out of his sandwich in triumph.

There, he thinks, got you.

“Sherlock,” Mycroft says, and suddenly he sounds tired. “Please, I’d like us to engage in an actual conversation, not a verbal joust. This morning I made a mistake for which I have apologised. I’ve followed up my apology with a compliment. Ordinary interaction dictates you should now have the civility to hear me out while keeping up a parade of patience.”

“Allwrait,” Sherlock concedes with his mouth full.

After heaving a few deep breaths Mycroft continues. “Fine. Your grades show you’ve been working very hard, Sherlock. I’m extremely proud of you and I’m sure Mr Talbot feels the same. So I want to propose for you to cut school short by a year and start working for your final exams and your entry test; should the college of your choice desire one.”

“Oh, Mycroft.” Sherlock tosses his plate to the side and scoots forward on the sofa. He hesitates – isn’t he too old for this by now? – but then he launches himself at Mycroft, leaping over the hurdle of the table in one mighty jump, and throws his arms around his brother’s neck. “Thank you,” he cries, “thank you, Mycroft.”

Mycroft grins. “Yes, I knew that was bound to make you happy,” he says, hugging Sherlock in return. “I’ve been so worried about you, Sherlock, but you’ve been so brave, and diligent. An A+ for history. For such a subject. Rhodes was such a tedious bore.”

“Christ, yes.”

“All he’s done for England is to saddle us with a massive headache,” Mycroft sums up the essence of Sherlock’s paper. “It’s, well, not diplomatic exactly, but the presentation of your arguments was very persuasive.”

He lowers his arms and sits back a little, looking rather self-conscious all of a sudden. “I’ve been
thinking of discussing this with you for a long time, Sherlock. Maybe I should have brought it up earlier but I kept hoping you’d find… not pleasure, I suppose, rather… a modicum of contentment in school life. But every chance of that happening was lost even before…”

Mycroft falters and he shoots Sherlock a quick, helpless look. Every molecule of Sherlock’s body freezes. The balls of ice that are his eyes record the tiny drops of water pearl ing on Mycroft’s brow. At least Mycroft still has full control of his limbs for his hand is now tugging at his tie, loosening the perfect Windsor knot.

“… that,” Mycroft concludes and the curse cast on Sherlock is broken and he’s free to breathe again.

“No,” he confirms, recognising he ought to help Mycroft along now in return for glossing over… that.

“I consulted Mr Talbot,” confesses Mycroft. “He refused to discuss you, naturally, but he helped me see I should accept that your outlook on life is radically different from mine. This…” He laughs. “My mind has waged a lot of battles over you lately, little brother of mine.”

Mycroft leaps up from the sofa in a feat of athletics belying his stuffy suit and starts pacing the room, focusing on the path he’s wearing across the carpet. Sherlock remains resolutely quiet except for his eyes, which are glued to Mycroft’s feet, an eye for a foot, and get dragged along the floor with each nervous step.

“You’re so young, Sherlock. So very, very young and vulnerable. Every time I look at you it strikes me anew. I worry about you, constantly. That’s wrong, forgive me.” The words tumble from Mycroft’s mouth as if he’s in a trance.

“You are no longer a child. The dear little child I loved so much, who suddenly became mine to protect and to raise as I saw fit. In my mind your future was ordained, Sherlock. You were to finish school, then Christ Church – I kept my rooms for you – and I’d already assigned you a desk at the office, two rooms down from mine. Close enough to keep an eye on you and for your presence to comfort me. I’m… oh, if only you knew what armies of sheer wilful inadequacy I have to fight every day. But it must be done.”

Abruptly, Mycroft churns to a halt in front of the desk to pick up the photograph with both hands.

“It must be done,” he repeats. Sherlock notices that Mycroft’s knuckles stand out stark white against the silver of the frame. The pain of the sharp edge digging into the flesh of Mycroft’s palms shoots through his own in sympathy.

“Mycroft,” he says.

The frame falls onto the desk with a loud clatter as Mycroft lets go of it. He turns and smiles at Sherlock, wriggling his fingers at his sides to help the blood start flowing again.

“You’re free to do what you want, Sherlock. Whatever choice you make, be it the violin, Christ Church, a Cambridge college, science or philosophy rather than the law, I’ll abide with your decision.”

“Oh.” For the second time that morning Sherlock feels his mouth fall open wide. He must look as vacant as Fowler did when asked to explain in class three weeks ago why it was impossible to square a circle. The unpleasant image has him snap his jaw shut with an audible click.

“That’s,” he stammers. “That’s…”

“All of it,” Sherlock affirms, and how it’s his turn to smile. “All of it.”

“Well,” Mycroft says, his back to Sherlock once more as he’s busy righting the photograph. “That’s good, Sherlock. That’s exactly what I hoped for.” His timbre is a little off-kilter. He appears to be dissatisfied with his efforts in positioning the frame for he picks it up again, swiping his palm across the smooth mahogany of the desk.

“I’m very happy,” he adds.

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Recurrences are today’s theme, apparently, for Sherlock stands leaning into the door of his room once again, except this time is heart is hammering away in fierce excitement rather than excited ferocity.

The enormity of what has just transpired between him and Mycroft, down there in those austere surroundings, with Daddy and Mummy shedding approval on the proceedings from the confines of the frame, is almost too much for his mind to grasp. They’ve been waging a war these last few years, he understands that now. A war of attrition, with Sherlock jumping out of his trench every now and then to hurl a grenade at Mycroft’s massive bulwark of smug self-righteousness.

Or no, now he’s petty and mean again. And here Mycroft has been so gracious and generous to him. Quickly, he apologises to Mycroft. He can clamber up out of the earth now, unbury himself and step out into the light. Down there, on the sofa in the confines of Daddy’s study, Mycroft gave a great tug at the wheel of fortune, spinning it so fast it caught fire and after the old Sherlock had perished in the flames, he helped the new Sherlock to rise from the ashes.

Years of resentment fall away from him like drops of water glancing off an otter pelt and he laughs with the joy of his regained liberty. Years he’s wasted in that hateful school feeding what felt like justified resentment, was justified resentment, Mycroft almost admitted as much, didn’t he? But oh, what do those wasted years matter now? He’s still young, sixteen-and-a-half, and he’s got the rest of his life ahead of him. Just one more year, but that will pass in a flash as he will be chugging away at his GCSEs, and then he will be free to do whatever he wants.

A memory pops up. He and Mycroft, side by side in the cold night, gazing up at the stars, Mycroft pulling him into his warmth. His voice booms like an echo of a distant past, now a little over a decade ago.

“That’s the obligation we have to this country because we’re the sons of our father and our mother and our grandparents. Few people enjoy the advantage of birth we have. Our ancestors ruled this country, Sherlock. Our father rules it now. We owe it to both our parents and this land to improve ourselves and thus improve the world we’re living in. A huge responsibility we’ve been given. You can’t understand that yet, I still barely have grasped the concept myself. But together we’ll be such a formidable force, Sherlock. You and I.”

All these years Mycroft has spent dreaming, imagining himself and Sherlock standing side by side, or perhaps back to back to fight and conquer the rest of the world. Grandiose visions, fed continuously by Mycroft’s successes in school and university, and currently, judging by Mycroft’s attitude in his work, whatever it may consist of. Playing power games. Sherlock has endured enough of those at school to last him a lifetime.

No, thankfully, thanks to Mycroft’s generosity of spirit, he’s free at last. The realisation hits him
again; hard enough to wash away the pain, all the suffering Sherlock had to endure in those stuffy classrooms. The profound boredom, the rage he had to suppress as Coach stood bellowing at him, spittle flying everywhere, the fatuous nattering at the dinner table, the perpetual tediousness of the Sunday service, inevitably culminating in the horror of nearly three hundred boys hollering off-key at the top of their voices.

And that hat, that infernal hat. And he’s never going to wear a tie again, never never never in his life, no matter what.

Sherlock’s been pressing his forehead against the wood of the door so hard he’s astonished the paint isn’t scaling off. Now he lets go of it and drifts over towards his desk. What he must do first of all is write a long letter to Mr Talbot to thank him for helping Mycroft see reason at last. After all, Mycroft has practically confessed he’d never have reached his decision if left to his own devices. Perhaps he hadn’t even realised he’d asked for advice but Mr Talbot had just been drip-feeding it to him, in those circumspectly crafted sentences designed to prod at one’s conscience and curiosity and, in the end, reconsider one’s views. The strategy was bound to be successful with Mycroft, more successful than it has proven to be with him, even though he loves Mr Talbot dearly.

Also, Mr Talbot must help Sherlock now. Both Mycroft and he have hinted repetitively that Mr Talbot still has friends at Cambridge and one of them will perhaps be willing to help Sherlock find out which college he’d best join if he wants to study natural sciences.

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“So,” Sherlock makes conversation. “The weekend didn’t live up to your expectations.”

“No,” John grits out. Drooping in his chair, he sniffs suspiciously at the mug of tea Sherlock has presented him with. His nose scrunches as he takes a cautious sip, tastes and, having deemed the concoction safe for human consumption swallows and drinks more deeply. The stiff set of his shoulders relaxes somewhat.

“I’m sorry to hear it,” Sherlock replies, feigning an interest in his phone.

“Aren’t you going to say you warned me?” John asks. His teeth snap down on another innocent hobnob to tear off a bite in a rather vicious manner.

“Why? What would be the use?” Sherlock re-joins. The black screen of his mobile is riveting but of course John hasn’t discerned it’s not even on.

“That’s what people do,” John informs him. “Say I told you so.”

“Do they now? Dull.” Sherlock tosses his mobile aside and skips out of his chair towards the table to fire up his laptop. The motion affords him the luxury of a quick once-over in John’s direction. All in all he doesn’t seem to be too defeated. Perhaps he’s already soothing himself with the idea he could better afford losing this particular specimen of womanhood than maintaining her. That’s good.

“Yeah,” John sighs. “You’re above all that, aren’t you? You don’t need anyone. Sometimes, I almost envy you.”

The computer takes ages, rumbling laboriously, lights flashing, but the screen remains infuriatingly blank. Sherlock stands thrumming impatiently in front of it, fists stashed into the pockets of his trousers. Hopefully his pretense of not having listened to a word is convincing enough.

“And what you’ve been doing with yourself? Mrs Hudson told me I had barely left before you’d got your knickers in a twist and started ransacking the flat.” From his faintly exasperated tone Sherlock
infers John is truly as incapable as any of them to put two and two together. Well, he’s a little
distracted now, obviously, so Sherlock shouldn’t be too harsh on him. Even though John’s persistent
belief in sex as a requirement for a meaningful relationship continues to vex him. Here’s Sherlock,
providing him with everything one could possibly desire; company that isn’t downright obnoxious –
most of the time at least, a little danger and excitement, a listening ear, takeaway and a warm fire to
return to at the end of the day. That’s more than most people have got, isn’t it?

Take Mycroft, for instance. What has he got to look forward to at the end of his working day but
stuffing himself with cake at the Dorchester, or, even worse (Sherlock positively shudders with
dread) waste away among those tedious bores at the Diogenes. Or Lestrade – the perfect example of
what’s left after the vagaries of a sex-fuelled affiliation have run their course – burying himself in his
In-tray to avoid the misery of languishing in front of the telly with a discount Tesco Chinese stir-fry
in the flat he can barely afford with what’s left of his salary after he’s dished up the maintenance.

John’s expectant gaze prods him sharply between the shoulder blades as a reminder he should
respond to ward off any hint of awkwardness. The listening ear, he reminds himself.

“Oh really, John,” he huffs. “Don’t tell me you haven’t realised by now our landlady is an even
bigger drama queen than Mycroft.”

“I hadn’t actually,” John answers, amused. “In fact, if someone decided to organise a drama queen
contest…” His voice trails off meaningfully.

“Your sense of humour continues to elude me.” Where does he normally sit at the table? Does he just
pop down wherever is convenient? At breakfast he usually sits on the right. But at present that would
be a bit too obvious, surely? He wants to look at John but he doesn’t want John to realise that that is
what he wants to do. In the end he opts for the head of the table. That way his back is partly turned
to John but the position also allows him to slant his gaze at John without him even noticing.

“What have you been up to then?”

Sherlock rearranges his features to beam a blithe smile at the lamp on the little table beside John’s
chair. “Kept myself busy. I solved one of Lestrade’s cold cases, played the violin a bit, rounded up
my kidney experiment.”

“The kidneys are gone? Oh, thank God.” The information has John perk up in his chair and actually
appreciate the taste of the next hobnob he devours.

“The smell wasn’t that bad,” Sherlock scoffs. “Now who’s the drama queen here?”

“Seeing as how I lack the basic means, that leaves you.”

“Excuse me?”

John smiles. “Aw, come on. You with your cheekbones and curls, and your coat and scarf.”

“Since when does owning a scarf transform one into a queen? It's not as if I have been sporting a
crown lately. You have a scarf, John. Several of them.”

“Yeah, but they’re not true quality, like yours. Mandy said…”

As the stupid, mean witch had been wont to do from the start. Just like Sherlock would have spelled
out to John, had he cared to heed the advice of his friend rather than that of his dick.

“You’d be the last person in the world I’d ask for dating advice, Sherlock,” John had said before
Deciding he’s reached the limit of self-pity and delusions he can stomach in one go, Sherlock turns a deaf ear to the rest of John’s complaint. Every now and then he gives the required depreciatory snort while he sits sifting through his email. A few more hours and John will have sufficiently recovered to consider the prospect of a celebratory dinner to commemorate his renewed freedom from the bonds of dating. He books a table at Angelo, using bold capitals and underlining them to convey the message that they do not want a candle on their table and shoots off an email to Molly next to ask whether anything interesting has popped up on her slabs to fill the void of the lower right-hand drawer in their fridge.

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Outside, the terrace flagstones are so hot they nearly scorch the soles of his shoes but Sherlock is still so dazed with happiness he doesn’t feel the glare of the sun until he nearly stumbles over John who is perched on his haunches, pulling weeds from between the cracks by the handful.

“Careful, Sherlock,” John warns.

The sight of his friend reminds Sherlock of his promise and he pivots on his heels to go hunting for a GP in the phonebook and make an appointment.

A quarter of an hour later, Sherlock finds both the terrace and – after hurrying through the dining room and the hall, where his eye falls on the fresh bouquet of blue delphiniums on the side table – the front steps scrupulously cleaned of even the tiniest shoot of offending greenery.

The gravel around the house is so thoroughly raked not a stone appears to have been left unturned. Dread fills Sherlock at the sight. Whatever has Mycroft said to John, what threats has he uttered in the livid state he was in?

In the end Sherlock finds John near the small lake, gathering duckweed. He’s nearly finished the job. The crests of the small waves eddying away from the net flash as brightly as strings of diamonds.

“Mycroft said he wanted to go for a swim tomorrow,” John explains.

“What else did he say, John? Was he very angry with you?”

“Angry?” repeats John. His forehead wrinkles as he considers the question in earnest. “Oh yes, I daresay he was… and justly so. But most of all he was concerned, for your mother’s safety, and Nanny’s, and… well, that’s as it should be.”

He lifts the net out of the water and deposits another load of duckweed onto the smelly heap steaming in the wheelbarrow.

“No,” John continues. “You don’t do your brother justice, Sherlock. He was patient, he always is. He suggested, very tactfully mind, the upkeep might be a bit too much for one man to handle. Well, perhaps he’s right. I’ve already rung young Richards, he’s a friend of David, you know, and he knows of a lad that might want to help me out every now and then. Mycroft said he’d pay so that’s all right, I guess.”

“Yes, yes,” Sherlock waives all these details. “That’s all very good. Thank god Mycroft didn’t take it out on you. And John, tomorrow we’re going to see the doctor in the village.”

“No you’re not,” Sherlock almost shouts in frustration. “Will you stop this stupid pig-headedness and listen to me!”

“I’m listening, Sherlock,” John answers, quietly. “I think I’m done here, best leave some for the ducks. Come back to the shed. I could use a cuppa.” He reaches for the handles of the wheelbarrow but Sherlock is quicker and elbows him aside.

“You can carry the net, John.”

“Oh, all right. If you insist on treating me like a patient,” grumbles John. His show of displeasure almost convinces Sherlock, but now he knows what to look for the relief is all too evident.

“Please, John,” he grits between his teeth. The wheelbarrow is very heavy and he’s working up a sweat steering it over the grass. “Mycroft noticed straightaway that you’re ill. I saw it too but then you distracted me.”

“I’m sorry about that,” John says. “Relax your arms, Sherlock. You’re as stiff as a poker; that just makes the going harder. I’ll come and visit your doctor with you if it puts you at ease, Sherlock. Not that it will do me any good.”

They walk along in silence. John shoots Sherlock a glance every now and then but Sherlock plods on determinedly, ignoring the rivulets of sweat that have sprung up behind his fringe and are now trickling over his brow. The salt stings in his eyes. His back is wet all over and itches where the cotton of his shirt clings to the skin. At long last they reach the clump of trees amongst which the shed lies hidden. Sherlock heaves a deep sigh of relief.

“Well done, Sherlock,” John praises him. He gently wrings the handles out of Sherlock’s hands. “Now you sit down there, boy, and I’ll make you your tea.”

Gratefully, Sherlock collapses on the small bench in front of the shed. John steers the wheelbarrow over the ground and around the building as easily as a child handling a pull-along toy. Sherlock groans and closes his eyes. The sweat on his back cools now he’s sitting in the shade. The feeling is not unpleasant after having been so thoroughly hot.

Five minutes later John nudges his hand with a mug.

“Take care, it’s scalding hot,” he says. “Still, tea is the best drink in this infernal heat. Cook gave me a slice of Bakewell sponge as well. Do you want to share?”

“No, I already had a slice this morning during my talk with Mycroft.”

“Ah, well I’m going to have it now. Back in a sec.”

What he does carry when he returns, however, is not a plate with a slice of cake, but the bust of Daddy Sherlock discovered him working on two days ago. Even in the muted light of the shade the wood glows, shining almost brightly from all the beeswax that has been rubbed in and patiently polished to a lustre as smooth as that of a mirror.

“Here,” John says. “I want you to have this.”

“Oh no.” Scooting upwards on his seat Sherlock hastily puts his mug aside. “No John, I can’t accept this. Oh, but it’s beautiful. Please, let me hold it.” He opens his hands, desperate to cradle Daddy’s head and John gently places it between them.”

“There,” he says. “It’s yours.”
If only that were true. Sherlock desperately wishes it were so. However, he can’t have it for where would he put it? The house is out of bounds – he shivers when he thinks of Mummy discovering it in his room and he doesn’t know what she gets up to when both he and Mycroft are away. So is school – the thought of leaving this bust of Daddy in his room, alone and unguarded, is unbearable. He still doesn’t feel safe at school, he’ll never feel safe there again, but at least he can defend himself but this bust, Daddy smiling out so innocently at the world, can’t. He shudders to think of all the mischief that might be inflicted on it.

“No,” he says, resolutely. “No. I can’t, John. I just can’t.”

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Oh, if only he hadn’t been so stubborn and acquiesced. Then he would still have it today.

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Chapter Summary

Outside the air is still cloyingly warm. The slight breeze stirring the leaves of the great beeches on the other side of the lawn can’t dispel the faintly nauseating humidity that hangs heavily on the house and the park. Mycroft has tugged his tie loose to open the top two buttons of his shirt and rolled up the sleeves. With his cigarette and his hair in slight disarray, as if he’s pulled a hand through it, he looks endearingly familiar, like the old Mycroft.

John has shifted forward in his chair to take Lady Levison’s extremely neatly manicured hand in his so he can start patting it consolingly with the other. This, Sherlock has discovered, is John’s second weapon in his arsenal of comforts to fall back on when confronted with an upset female client. His first is to propose he fetch a cup of tea. However, Lady Levison had cast one look at the concoction in their mugs and declined the offer.

Age or attractiveness, or indeed, social standing, don’t appear to influence either the offering or the period between the first and the second one, a fact Sherlock deems quite interesting.

Their prospective client’s instant reaction to John’s ministrations is to draw her hand back and cast John a look that a prize poodle might bestow on a flea-bitten mongrel, which has had the audacity to saunter up for a sniff at her rear end. Which is good as it gives Sherlock the timeslot needed for a quick gander at his phone.

*Levison Ltd. All Imports and Exports.*

Founded in nineteen-thirty-three and at that date mostly specialising in German wares. Well, that was her surname explained. Astute man her grandfather must have been.

“I say, Mr Holmes, I have the feeling you’re not interested in my case at all,” the woman now addresses him. The slight wetness clinging to her sibilants betrays her emotion, but Sherlock will still concede himself impressed by her true British composure. The product of either Wycombe Abbey or Cheltenham Ladies’ College, she reminds him of Victor’s mother – though she was a natural blonde, of course, and presented a far more innocuous picture to the world – right down to the quality of her pitch. And people say his accent sounds posh!

Somehow Mummy’s vowels and consonants never managed to attain that height of arrogance. With her French mother and the French tutors, her ‘h’ remains pitiable. Mrs ‘Olmes.

“On the contrary, Lady Levison,” Sherlock informs her, scrolling through the example list of goods passing through the warehouses of Levison Ltd. “Your case looks extremely interesting. PWC and Deloitte do your financial and tax accounting, you say? Your partner must be very clever.”

“Naturally, or I would never have consented to bed him,” Lady Levison confirms in a voice that whisks him straight back to the sunny Regency room – the only light apartment together with Victor’s in that whole lugubrious castle that was the Trevor homestead – where he was told he’d better remove himself from the premises for Victor’s sake. Yet she hadn’t been unkind, not really. Merely wary of her own interests.
“Obviously,” Sherlock replies, his tones as clipped and concise as Lady Levison’s. “Well, there’s no need to discuss his motives for bedding you, I suppose.”

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Despite Sherlock’s remark, for which John seriously upbraided him once Lady Levison had swept out of the room, they have a client and, moreover, one who has promised to pay them £10,000 if they find her supposedly dead lover for her.

“I’ll accept the case, Lady Levison,” Sherlock had said in the end. “Your partner’s reasons for abandoning you will prove to be exceedingly dull, but I greatly look forward to unravelling how he managed to pull it off.”

“Couldn’t you have tried to be a little nice to the poor woman at least,” John now admonishes him from behind his computer screen, where Sherlock has plonked him down straight after Lady Levison’s departure with the instruction to find every newspaper article concerning Timothy Hawker’s suicide earlier that year. Over the top of his own laptop, Sherlock flicks a wry eye in John’s direction. “That woman is as hard as nails, John,” he says. “If you must feel compassion for someone you’d do better reserving it for the lover.”

When John doesn’t reply, he adds, “besides, she wasn’t very nice to you.” The words escape his mouth before he can swallow them and he ducks his head quickly and starts hitting some random keys. kjklajkfjaksfalsjlfajfjkl;askfj;raijirklnfirioahjinklairhfnakvn kjakc,, flashes up on his Google bar. Thank god the speed of his typing still impresses John, so he will have no idea Sherlock is actually hiding behind his screen right now.

“No. But I’m not some poor deluded semi-widow who imagines her lover to be alive,” John carries on the conversation in merciful oblivion. Apparently he didn’t detect anything out of the ordinary. Better bury his inadvertent remark beneath some scathing haughtiness then.

“Timothy Hawker is alive, John. As alive as you and me and Mrs Hudson who has just now left the building on her way to—” Sherlock peers out of the window, “—her book club, by the look of it.”

“But Sherlock,” John continues, gesturing at his screen. “The man left a note. It was found with his clothes on the beach. It says here the current there is particularly strong, and dangerous—”

“—and glosses over the fact the current should deposit anything caught up in it neatly on the coast fourteen miles down,” Sherlock ends the sentence for him. “And yet no body has been found.”

“That doesn’t prove he’s alive. Anything may happen to a body carried away by the sea.”

“Oh yes, anything,” Sherlock agrees. “Like wash up on the shore. Tell me, John, if you were going to commit suicide by drowning yourself in the sea would you choose to walk into the waters from a sand beach or a stone beach?”

This look of exasperation is a new one, Sherlock decides after admiring it for three seconds. Quite endearing with the little thrown-in helplessness, as if John is a small child that suddenly finds the jousting knights he was reading about have come alive right in front of his eyes and are now unitedly confronting him with their lances. Sherlock stashes it away in the room labelled ‘Expressions – puzzled/exasperated’. Maybe he should lay the foundations for a small annexe. However, now’s not the time.

“What does that matter?” John grumps in the end.

“A lot,” Sherlock answers, breezy. “Man is a creature of comfort, John. If you had to choose
between striding over sand or hobbling uneasily over stones, you’d choose the sand, wouldn’t you?”

“Perhaps he was wearing swimming sandals,” John quips. Oh, that notion hadn’t actually occurred
to Sherlock. Ingenious. Quite, quite clever in fact. But no, too outlandish. Nevertheless he tacks the
suggestion of the swimming sandals at the bottom of his ledger of working hypotheses.

John reaches over the table for the newspaper article with the photograph that had convinced Lady
Levison her lover had magically risen from the depths to manifest himself as a spectator at the
Roland Garros tournament.

“It’s nothing but a blob with a silly hat,” John grouses, scrunching his eyes to stare at the vague
shape created out of pixels in various shades of grey. “Only last week you sent away that poor man
who was convinced his brother had been murdered and he had better arguments than this blurry
photo.”

Deftly, Sherlock plucks the article from between John’s disbelieving fingers. “You know my
methods, John. If you prefer to disregard them that’s your decision. Lady Levison and Timothy
Hawker have lived together for almost twenty years. She doesn’t need a clear shot of his face to
recognise the set of his shoulders. Besides, only consider the motive.”

“What?”

Sherlock rolls his eyes. “The age difference,” he almost growls, exasperated with John’s obtuseness.
After all, he’s supposed to be Baker Street 221B’s expert with regard to everything concerning
relationships.

“Lady Levison is a well-preserved former beauty,” Sherlock continues once he trusts his voice again.
“Still, her face and figure are bound to have lost some of the appeal they held when she was a
freshly-widowed thirty-three-year-old and Timothy Hawker joined the firm straight out of
University.”

“Right,” sighs John. “So basically you’re stating Hawker was done with her and faked his own
death. But that doesn’t make any sense.”

“To the contrary, in his mind it must have made lots of sense. Look.” With a flourish Sherlock pivots
his laptop for John’s perusal.

“Hawker is forty-three years old, locked in a life of luxury to a woman twelve years his senior who
has steadfastly refused to marry him, thereby robbing him a lucrative divorce settlement. As Levison
Ltd’s CFO he’s been paid a handsome salary, but you’ll agree a mere 200,000 quid a year won’t do
for the upkeep of a flat in Belgravia, a villa in Tuscany and a hunting lodge in Galloway. Then
there’s the yacht in the Caribbean, and the Aspen apartment. That’s quite a lot to relinquish – I haven
’t mentioned the cars yet, have I? Apparently Hawker has an interest in cars. All of it served his
needs, shallow as they were, until he laid eyes on the new receptionist.”

Susan Jones’ photograph, lifted five minutes ago from the secured part of the Levison Ltd extranet
with pathetically little effort, has a profound effect on John. His pupils dilate until almost twice their
usual size and his tongue darts out for a quick swipe of his lower lip.

“I don’t see…” he begins.

“You do now and Hawker saw her every working day, John. Right there, beaming at him from
behind her desk in the lobby. And here he was, hurtling towards his mid-life crisis, secured to an
older woman by a bond tighter than marriage.”
“You mean…”

“Exactly.”

“But that’s…”

“Clever?”

“Not the term I was looking for,” John answers, clacking his tongue. “More like despicable.”

“Don’t you mean understandable?” Sherlock asks, innocently. “Just look at that face, John. One would have to search far and wide to find a finer example of the Golden Ratio at work.”

“The what?” John asks, uncomprehendingly. Well, he’s not a mathematician, nor a painter or an architect. Neither has he enjoyed the advantages of having Mr Talbot for a tutor, nor those of having Victor Trevor – staunch seeker of an almost ethereal refinement in even the basest of commodities – for a companion.

The amount of discomfort playing over John’s features as he sits contemplating Susan Jones’ beauty makes for a fascinating performance. “She’s very pretty,” he concedes at last, slanting his gaze away from the screen.

“Indeed,” Sherlock agrees. “Levison Ltd’s HR manager shared your opinion and gave her excellent references when she resigned three months prior to Hawker’s suicide. Do you think her neighbours were equally sorry to see her depart? She terminated the lease of her flat two months ago. But then, she’d taken her leave of Whitechapel long before that, I suppose.”

He exchanges his laptop for the picture Lady Levison cut out of yesterday’s The Times.

“Now have a look at the person seated next to the vague blob,” he urges, watching John closely. As ever, the slight raise of John’s eyebrows tells Sherlock when the penny drops.

“So Lady Levison…”

“Oh no. She never even noticed the danger seated behind her reception desk.” Sherlock dismisses John’s remark with a wave of his hand.

“But the money…?” Now John has finally caught up he shows his remarkable talent for posing the right questions again. “Those villas and flats and cars you just mentioned. Lady Levison didn’t say there was anything amiss. Surely she would have been warned by her bank manager if large amounts of money had disappeared.”

“Good. You follow. This whole affair is tediously dull from beginning to end. The only intriguing aspect is how Hawker managed to cook the books.”

“The poor woman.” Shaking his head in commiseration with Lady Levison’s plight, John pushes his chair back from the table. “Right. I could do with some tea now. Do we have any milk left?”

“I’m sure they’ll be happy to serve you a cup at the Levison headquarters, John,” Sherlock replies. “With all the milk you could possibly want.”

When John throws him another exasperated look, he adds a, “come on, John,” for good measure, while slinging his scarf around his neck.

Oh, at last they’re having fun again.
Halfway through dinner that evening, Mycroft rests his cutlery on his plate to smile at Sherlock.

“You wrote to Mr Talbot today?”

Sherlock swallows his mouthful of dressed beetroot. “Yes. God knows where he’s being sent to this summer so I reckoned I'd better do so straightaway.”

“Good.” Mycroft’s fingers toy with the stem of his wineglass. “My impression is Mr Talbot does enjoy these travels to a certain extent,” he says. He lifts the glass and makes as if to drink before depositing it back on the table. “They’re an asset we never even considered to offer.”

For a split-second it seems like he wants to add something but then he thinks better of it and picks up his knife and fork again. “I’m going for an early swim tomorrow. Care to join me?”

“Gladly,” exclaims Sherlock. A jolt of happiness flares up in his chest. He can’t even remember the last time they’ve swum together. Whenever it was, it’s been far too long. “This time I’ll beat you.”

His boast is answered with a smug look and a barely distinguishable, “we’ll see.” A little louder Mycroft continues, “Would you hand me the potatoes, please?”

“Here.” Their hands meet briefly on the serving dish’s handles.

The day has turned topsy-turvy, the great row that had Sherlock forfeit breakfast culminating in the present situation. It’s all snug and civilised, with the sun slanting through the open windows to brighten the room and spin rainbows of gemstones from the crystal on the table to the silver cutlery flashing in their hands and the heavy gold and silver plate on the frames of the pictures amassed on the walls. A grand bowl overflowing with golden and peach pink roses perches at the other end of the table, the celestial sweetness of their perfume mingling with the earthly aromas of the food on their plates.

Perhaps, to add to the general atmosphere, Sherlock should enquire after Michael’s welfare, even express the desire to see him again. On the other hand, he doesn’t trust himself to imbue such a sentence with the amount of conviction necessary to persuade Mycroft of the sincerity of his sentiment. In the end Sherlock decides against posing the question.

This sudden understanding between them is so fresh, so tentative, they should allow it to grow and gather some new strength before putting it to the test. Especially, with regard to anything to do with the subject of Michael. For that sex-addled moron’s demands on Mycroft’s time and attention have further widened the rift between them and that’s something Sherlock will never forgive. Never mind Mycroft might be equally culpable for letting Michael distract him. If asked to, Sherlock could recite from memory Mr Talbot’s letter dealing with the subject. As Sherlock can heed advice if he’s so inclined, he elects not to hold Mycroft responsible for his weakness, however reprehensible it may be. Michael, though, being the main perpetrator, and, of this Sherlock is convinced, the initiator, is a different matter.

So instead of asking after what doesn’t interest him anyway, he says, “I’ve made an appointment for John to visit the doctor tomorrow afternoon.”

“Excellent.” Mycroft beams, his face glowing in the soft light of the summer evening. “You’ll accompany him? I can drive you over if you like.”

“Thank you, but we’ll take our bicycles, John said he’s strong enough to manage. We’ll probably visit Daddy’s grave as well.”
“Of course, if you think John’s up for it. I had a look early this spring. It was a blaze of daffodils and muscari. Very pretty.”

As Sherlock doesn’t know what to say to that he chooses to refrain from answering. An uncomfortable silence threatens to overtake them, despite their mutual goodwill and the sun and the roses and the faint breeze wafting through the open French windows. Maybe Sherlock should mention Michael after all.

He’s just opened his mouth to say something, anything, when Mycroft coughs discreetly behind his hand and reaches for a sip from his water glass.

“Tomorrow some technicians from the office will install a computer in Daddy’s study. It will allow me to spend most of your holiday here at home. Actually, I think it’s about time you become acquainted with such machinery; they are our future, so I found you an old one you can use and a few write-offs to tinker with. I thought you might be interested in the wiring of the hardware and in programming languages. Something to keep you occupied this summer.”

“Mycroft, that’s… oh, that’s… thank you!” exclaims Sherlock, overwhelmed by this additional bout of generosity on Mycroft’s part. He’s been reading on and off about computers, bewailing the stupidity of the school in refusing to acknowledge them as instruments for the delegation of knowledge, and been deeply envious of the boy Mr Talbot is tutoring, who was given a computer for his birthday two years ago.

The lower part of Mycroft’s face lights up in an uncharacteristic smile. “Your reaction is most gratifying. I realise I’m a tad old-fashioned when it comes to these machines. Until a device is invented that’s as restful to the eyes as paper I’ll prefer to read a printout of my files. But in just a few years computers will overturn our world completely, so we’d better be prepared.”

“I’ll take one apart,” Sherlock breathes, all excited.

Mycroft laughs. “I’d anticipated you would, so I asked the technics to find you one they considered beyond repair. Have a go at it and find out whether you can have it working again.”

“Oh, yes, I will. I might need some additional equipment and I’ll have to ask John for permission to use his soldering iron…” In his head the computer is already on his desk and he’s applying one of his tiny screwdrivers to the back panel.

“Whatsoever you want, Sherlock. Remember, you only need to ask for any tools or material you consider necessary.” Mycroft starts folding his napkin to indicate he’s finished his meal. “I asked Nanny to join us for coffee on the terrace but she didn’t dare leave Mummy. She’s in a bad way and refused to talk to me. Nanny told me she’d been sulking ever since you said hello to her. She’s probably feeling guilty about the way she treated you.”

Glancing up from his napkin he observes Sherlock from underneath the screen of his lashes. All too aware of this particular tactic Sherlock chooses to play along in order to please Mycroft. If he desires to cling to the belief Mummy is not high up with the bats in the belfry Sherlock will be the last person to dissuade him from the illusion. Not after all the largesse Mycroft has bestowed upon him.

Thus Sherlock mumbles, “I suppose so,” putting some effort into appearing sufficiently remorseful. “Poor Mummy, it must be even more distressing for her. To see me.”

Mycroft nods, relief at Sherlock’s perception written all over his face.

Perhaps I should colour my hair.. The ludicrous remark is on the tip of Sherlock’s tongue and he
snorts, smothering the sound by dabbing his lips with his own napkin.

“I’ll go fetch the coffee, shall I?” he proposes.

“If you’d be so kind,” Mycroft acquiesces, tipping his chin, and thus their newly rediscovered camaraderie is safeguarded for the duration of the evening at least.

Outside, the air is still cloyingly warm. The slight breeze stirring the leaves of the great beeches on the other side of the lawn can’t dispel the faintly nauseating humidity that hangs heavily on the house and the park. Mycroft has tugged his tie loose to open the top two buttons of his shirt and rolled up the sleeves. With his cigarette and his hair in slight disarray, as if he’s pulled a hand through it, he looks endearingly familiar, like the old Mycroft.

“Cook is determined to stuff us to bursting,” Sherlock grumbles, tilting his head meaningfully at the thick slices of chocolate gateau next to the coffee pot.

“Oh dear,” sighs Mycroft. “That won’t do. I’ll have a word with her. Still, the smell is irresistible. She’s done something with oranges, it seems.”

After a last luxuriously long drag he stabs out the cigarette. Sherlock casts the packet inconsiderately perching upon the table a longing look, his nostrils flaring to catch the wisps of smoke that linger in the heavy air. The smell has the craving for a cigarette gnaw at his insides all of a sudden.

Pouring the coffee Mycroft remarks, his attention concentrated on the hot stream splashing on the bottom of the porcelain cup, “They’re a vice, and, like most vices, hard to relinquish. One’d do better to indulge in chocolate gateau.”

A sliver of panic skitters down Sherlock’s spine. “You should quit then,” he quips, cringing inwardly, afraid his too-quick riposte might have given him away.

Mycroft’s face, while sliding the cup towards Sherlock, is a perfectly blank mask. “I’m seriously considering the option,” he murmurs. In lifting his own cup from its saucer, Sherlock notices, Mycroft’s hand is steady as a rock.

How did he find out, dammit? Was it the smell clinging to his shirt this morning, or has Nanny informed him? No, she’d never do that, Sherlock chides himself. He busies himself with his plate of too rich chocolate tart, shoving big mouthfuls inside though the excessive assault on his taste buds nearly has him gag. Christ, surely Mycroft hasn’t got an inkling about the pills? Sherlock may have made a mistake with the cigarettes this morning – but then, Mycroft will be aware half the school is puffing away like mad during the few minutes of leisure granted them each day – but he has been extremely careful with regard to the tablets he’s come to rely upon. He’s hidden his stash in different locations, both at school and here at the house. Plus, they have the advantage of being odourless

“Michael will arrive next week,” Mycroft announces, once they’ve both gobbled up their tarts and drunk their coffee. “I’ve accepted the two of you’ll never be great friends but I do hope you will oblige me by being civil to him at least.”

Grateful that Mycroft has taken it upon himself to introduce the awkward subject Sherlock hastily assures him he will endeavour to be a good host and pleasant company for the duration of Michael’s visit.

“Thank you,” Mycroft says. “Now be a good boy and find us the chessboard, would you? Let’s see whether you’ll beat me at chess as well.”

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Later that night, Sherlock creeps downstairs and descends the terrace steps to tiptoe over the gravel and onto the lawn. The grass tickles the soles of his feet, an altogether not unpleasant sensation. He lights his cigarette, and stands drawing the smoke deep into his lungs while he gazes up and away at the white-hot indifference of the stars twinkling coldly in the deep-blue velvet of the universe.

His head is a turmoil of swirling thoughts and vague worries: John’s illness, how to dismantle a computer, Cambridge, he’ll be going to Cambridge, the loathsome idea of Michael’s visit, the tired lines around Mycroft’s eyes, but what about the violin and his promise to Mr Mancini, Daddy and John laughing together and... no (quickly he departs from that avenue, forcing his mind to wander in a different direction), his stupid mistake earlier that evening that lost him the game of chess, swimming with Mycroft. He’ll insist they go swimming every morning, even during the days that absurd creature resides beneath their roof.

The balmy night air brushes his face and his nape, the collar of his pyjama jacket affording him less protection than that of his shirt. He shivers, once, in enjoyment of the night’s caress and the luxury of his cigarette, out here in the open, beneath the infinity of the stars.

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Mycroft’s torso and limbs, unencumbered with the harness of the ludicrous three-piece suit, prove to be well-toned with the long, flowing muscles of a swimmer. A feeling of dismay creeps upon Sherlock despite the gentle glow of the sunrays that caress his shoulder, reaching down from a sky where it’s already risen impossibly high, even though it’s early morning still. Resolutely, he disregards the warmth, enticing him to let the pool embrace him and float on his back in languid contentment, with the sun warming his face and chest and the cool waters carrying his limbs. Instead, he frowns at the easy grace of Mycroft’s back as he dedicates himself to folding his dressing gown with meticulous care, before turning to smile at Sherlock.

“Ready?” he asks and strides into the pond with eagerness of a mythical being that has rediscovered its preferred element after an endless quest and can’t wait to immerse itself into familiar surroundings once more.

“You’ve been training,” accuses Sherlock.

“Certainly not,” Mycroft denies, not bothering to suppress the wide grin that stretches almost from ear to ear. He rolls his shoulders with elegant ease as he lines himself up next to Sherlock. “I indulge in a few strokes before work every morning. After all, the saying goes ‘mens sana in corpore sano’.”

“A few strokes,” Sherlock huffs.

“A thousand yards at the most,” Mycroft waives Sherlock’s indignation. “I propose we go across for the stand of reed and back again ten times. Will you count to three?”

The instant he shouts “three” Sherlock hurls himself into the water, Mycroft close behind him. For a long time they swim abreast, both exhilarating in the exertion of the race. Sherlock’s limbs are glowing as they churn through the water, fed by the giddy excitement coursing through his veins.

Nevertheless Mycroft manages to beat him. It’s a matter of few inches at the most but Sherlock still has to swallow hard to trounce his disappointment and offer his hand in congratulation.

“You’ll win next time, Sherlock,” Mycroft consoles, but his smirk tells Sherlock he’s convinced he’ll reign supreme for a few more years at least. The insincerity of his remark, that’s what smarts the most. Even more than Sherlock’s vanquished pride, perhaps.
He’s just flagged down a cab when his phone rings. Gesticulating to John to instruct the driver with the address of the Levison Ltd headquarters, he plucks it from his inner jacket pocket.

“Sherlock Holmes,” he says, while installing himself in the backseat.

“Oh,” a woman’s voice answers. “Oh, hello… Mr Holmes. I didn’t know your name. I… I’ve had so many talks with Sergeant Donovan and Inspector Lestrade and I never even asked them for your name. Apologies.”

Now he recognises the timbre and he’s transported back to a dark alley, kneeling down in the mud next to a crying woman and brushing her hand with just one finger.

Beside him, John is struggling with his seatbelt. Noticing Sherlock doesn’t reach for his belt he sighs, unlocks his own belt and reaches over Sherlock, crowding him at uncomfortably close quarters in the process. Sherlock flaps at him with the hand not holding the mobile against his ear. John mutters something under his breath involving the words ‘bloody – his nibs – arsed – a hundred quid fine’.

Rather than pointing out John should read the treatise Sherlock has put up on The Science of Deduction only last month, in which he proves conclusively that two times out of ten the wearing of a seat belt leads to extensive damage to the internal organs, the spine and has even resulted – in three separate instances – in an almost full decapitation, he submits his body to the treatment and concentrates on his telephone conversation instead.

“Hello Imogen,” he replies. “How are you?”

She’s never called him before. Every now and then he’s wondered, in a vague, detached sort of way, how she was. He’d assumed she hadn’t taken his advice and delivered herself into the incompetent hands of some quack therapist instead.

Upon hearing the name John lifts his head sharply. Sherlock engages in an elaborate study of the cab’s floor mat to avoid his scrutiny.

“Oh,” Imogen Grace breathes again in his ear, sounding a bit overwhelmed. “You remember me. That’s… but then, you were so kind and… He was sentenced today, you know. Imprisonment for Public Protection. I’m so confused right now. I’m happy for myself and for the friends and family of those poor women, but I feel so sorry for his wife and his baby daughter. His wife was there when the Judge pronounced the sentence and she cried…”

As usual, Sherlock hasn’t been following the trial. His job is to solve cases and make sure Lestrade and his team arrest the culprits. Once he’s unravelled the puzzle John writes it up in an overly excited and mostly inaccurate blog post and they move on. Trials, as far as he’s ascertained, are mostly tedious affairs, with Mycroft wannabes boring everyone with an ounce of sense out of his skull with their interminable blithering.

“But that’s not what I rang for,” Imogen goes on. “Mr Holmes, I should have rung earlier to thank you for saving my sanity.”

The cab rounds the corner to head down Swinton Street.

“If you knew how often I’ve sat holding my phone and wishing to dial your number. Every time I felt his hands touching me and… and his… his penis… hurting me, I reached for my phone and I just sat there, holding it in the knowledge I could ring you and you’d understand. Everything I would say to you, you’d understand, and it doesn’t matter that you’re a man… in a weird way that even helped
me… silly though that may sound.”

“Not at all,” he murmurs. “I’m glad. I’m glad I could help you…”

“Yes,” she laughs. “You have truly helped me. I’m so grateful to you. Forgive me for not ringing you earlier.”

“No matter. You’re doing it now. Thank you.”

“It’s…” she hesitates before continuing in a more determined voice, “You’re a good man, Mr Holmes, and a very kind one. Let no one ever tell you differently.”

Sherlock huffs. “Most people would beg to differ.”

Next to him John is now staring out of the window, quite pointedly, offering the back of his neck for Sherlock’s contemplation. An obstinate tuft of hair erupts from the crown of his head, in all probability dislodged when he donned his jacket in Sherlock-induced haste. Sherlock slants his gaze away to stifle the impulse to start patting the hair down. John is his best friend and not some kind of dogged spaniel, never mind he’s as affectionate as the best of them.

“Then most people are idiots,” Imogen Grace declares passionately.

Sherlock’s reflection smiles at him from the cab window. “My stand exactly.”

“Yes, well. That will be all. I’ll keep your number, if you don’t mind. Just in case.”

“You do that,” he advises her. “I’ll ring off now if that’s fine with you. We’re in the middle of a case.”

“Oh, you should have told me. Of course… I…” she stammers and then, strong and determined, “Goodbye, Mr Holmes.”

“It’s Sherlock to you, Imogen. Goodbye.”

After he’s disconnected he sits staring out of the window until the taxi slides to a halt in front of the towering glass totem of Levison Ltd. The shining façade it presents to the world that’s every bit as drearily monotonous as the offices of Shad Anderson. An appreciative noise escapes from John’s throat.

“Nice,” he says.

“Tedious,” disagrees Sherlock, swinging open the door and throwing some notes in the direction of the cabbie. “Come on, John.”

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5th July, 1993
Madrid

Dear Sherlock,

I’m very happy to find that my little ploy to ensure the continuance of our correspondence during these summer months has worked. Obviously, the fact my pupil decided upon just one city as the base of our activities helps in that respect.
You mentioned the heat in your last letter. Unpalatable though it may be, I’m certain it’s nothing compared to the temperatures this city has to endure. I’ve invested a small amount of money to purchase a small fan, and have already profited hugely from the return on this venture. In this heat even the smallest stirring of the air is a relief.

Thankfully the heat relents somewhat during the evenings, which we spend strolling along the grand avenues and magnificent squares of the city. The days are put to use in visiting museums and art galleries here in Madrid or during day trips to the museums of the cities that dot the countryside around the capital.

Enclosed you find a postcard with an example of the art this city has on offer. My pupil, in his youthful enthusiasm, declared it to be ‘the most beautiful painting in existence’. Such passion, as you’re aware, is beyond me but I was indeed filled with a great joy during the many hours I devoted to looking at the picture. I realise you won’t wax lyrical over the quality of the brush strokes or the realistic depiction of the tears rolling down Mary Cleopas’ face, nor the exquisite colouring (though you might be interested in conducting a chemical analysis of the paint Van der Weyden used for the dress of the Virgin Mary). However, I imagined the radically modern approach to several mathematical problems of spatial reality might appeal to you.

But now for your problems with John. My dear boy, I do hope you have managed to overcome the worst of your anger and disappointment and worry by now and made amends. John is your friend and your initial reaction to a decision that’s his to make must have saddened him. If you have not done so yet, go to him straight after you’ve read this letter and tell him you love him and your unkind reaction was the unfortunate result of that love.

Everyone, John first of all, can understand how his decision not to have his illness treated, must have upset you. But it’s his life and his choice. Your duty as his friend is to accept his wishes and ensure the time you’ll both enjoy the time left to the both of you.

What you should do, is imagine yourself in his place. Unlike you, who fears death (as is only natural as you’re young and have got your whole life ahead of you) death to him, might not be such an undesirable option.

There is more liberty in Death than Love.

You can’t deny in some ways for John, who’s dedicated such a huge part of his life to a lover who first chose to abandon him and then died upon him, the poet’s words, though ludicrously swollen, might be true.

Indeed, I sometimes wonder whether your beloved Father fully realised what a fortunate person he was, to have inspired such steadfast love and devotion in the breasts of not one, but two people.

Apart from that I’ve done some research, like you could have done instead of ranting at your friend, and this has lead me to assume that, even if John decides not submit to the treatment, he may still have a long life ahead of him. Prostate cancer, it seems, comes in two versions: a slow one that will kill you eventually but you may have succumbed to a heart attack or other disease long before that and a more virulent variant.

Naturally, because of the choice John has made, we can’t know which version John is carrying but hope springs eternal, Sherlock. Rather than quarrel with John, you should ensure he spends his time in as comfortable a way as possible. Apart from that, as you admitted recently you have forgiven Mycroft for his mistakes in judgement following your rape; I suggest you talk with him about this, if only to unburden your heart from the many emotions currently at rampage there.
While you’re at it you might also inform your brother you’ve managed to hack into his computer. I’m sure he will appreciate both your efforts and the feebleness of the security measures installed by the Ministry’s technicians.

And finally I must reproach you for your reprehensible conduct with regard to Mr Whitall. Dear boy, do you have any idea what a shock your uncouth ingratitude must have been to the poor man? From your letters he’s risen as the image of gentleness and courteousness and here you’ve declined his efforts on your behalf with the comment that you consider the public no better than a stupid clump of tedious idiots and are not interested in performing for them. Even if they are, that’s no way to treat a man who’s been nothing but a friend to you, and with no other motive than the admiration for your old teacher and your playing.

I’m aware I can’t order you but I entreat you to reconsider his offer of an interview at the Royal Academy of Music to study for the GRSM. Remember your promise to Mr Mancini, Sherlock. You are, at heart, an artist and it would be a shame to deprive the world of your playing, which might, eventually, result in a work of art as great as Van der Weyden’s masterpiece.

As requested, I’ve contacted several of my old friends at Cambridge – well, I say friends – but once we were, though now we’re acquaintances at best. I haven’t heard from any of them yet but then they’ll most likely be enjoying their summer holidays.

This has turned already turned into a too long letter. Promise me to end your disagreements with John and Mr Whitall.

In the meantime I remain, as ever, your devoted friend and former tutor,

Edmund Talbot

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On the day Michael is supposed to arrive, Sherlock absconds to the shed straight after breakfast, deeming it the place where Mycroft is least likely to come looking for him. Two days ago, Mr Talbot’s letter arrived and after reading it he’d gone in search of John straightaway and shown the letter to him. They’d hugged and John had cried a little and said Mr Talbot was a wise man and a good friend. Sherlock still felt a little uneasy with John’s calm acceptance of the malign cells growing in his body but he’d come to accept it was indeed John’s life and he was greatly relieved they’d managed to leave the row behind them.

Now John just smiles and shakes his head and makes them tea on the Bunsen burner before traipsing off with his motorised pruning shears and the reminder not to make too much of a mess of his work bench.

On the wall-clock the small hand has just reached the number two when John returns. After a disgruntled look at the bench he sighs deeply. “You’re unbelievable.” From a cupboard he extracts some old flannels and a jar of grease. “I’ll be outside, cleaning my stuff.”

“And I’ll be inside, cleaning your bench,” Sherlock picks up on the unspoken suggestion.

“Always knew you were a smart lad,” John grins. “By the way, Michael got here. Shouldn’t you go and say hello to him?”

“Don’t be ridiculous, John.”

John’s grin widens. “Sometimes it’s best to get things over with quickly. After you’re done, I’ll make you another cuppa. And I brought you a sandwich. Cook told me she hadn’t seen you all day.”
He walks out. Through the doorway the late afternoon sunlight paints a rectangle of liquid gold on
the dark-grey concrete of the floor. High up in the trees a blackbird begins to warble. Now Sherlock
feels he’s actually quite hungry so he works quickly, scraping paint samples off slides and mopping
up stains with turpentine. What he loves most about the shed, apart from the fact that it’s John’s
domain, is its quiet orderliness. Here everything has its designated space, from the position of the
different shears on the wall behind his back to the jars and bottles of poison on the shelf over the
door, some of which appear not to have been moved since they were first put up there, over a decade
ago. And they will still be standing there a decade from now on, after John has been laid in the earth,
next to Daddy.

No, he mustn’t think like that.

“Ah, John. Good to see you again.” The grating drawl of Michael’s voice rips Sherlock’s musings to
shreds. “How are you? Mycroft told me you’d been ill. I do hope you’re feeling better now.”

“Oh, it was nothing,” John answers, all gracious gentleness and willingness to overlook the
condescending attitude. “A nasty cold, what with the spring we had. But it looks like we’re enjoying
a mast year. Can’t remember the trees bearing that much fruit and the strawberries are plenty and
they taste like the best ever.”

“Splendid, splendid.” Obviously, as Michael is a prejudiced snob, he is not actually interested in
conducting a friendly chat with John. All the stupid dimwit is interested in is so-called class and
money, rendering him incapable of appreciating someone for what he truly is.

“We came down here to look for Sherlock,” Mycroft’s voice fills the conversational void.

“‘Course, Mycroft, he’s inside. Beware of your clothes. He’s made a right mess as usual.”

A right mess, indeed. Sherlock has made good use of the interval to dirty his hands even more than
they already were and paste an air of unmitigated delight on to his features.

“Sherlock!” Michael is all brave bonhomie when he enters the shed, already extinguishing his hand
to shake Sherlock’s. Sherlock gratifies both him and Mycroft with a dazzling smile and an eager
grasp for the offered limb, which is – unsurprisingly – swiftly withdrawn when Michael notes the
state of Sherlock’s hand. “Eh… later, perhaps,” he deters, his eyes puckering in disgust.

“Fine,” Sherlock shrugs. “It’s good to see you,” he offers.

“And you too,” Michael jumps in immediately. “Mycroft told me you’ll prepare for Cambridge; you
must be so excited. And you’re experimenting again?”

“Yes, well…” Is Sherlock supposed to explain what he’s doing to the moron who isn’t interested
anyway? Luckily the moron himself shifts and turns, and almost snuggles into Mycroft to croon,
“Actually, Mycroft, I’m parched. There wasn’t a cup of tea to be had on the whole of that bloody
train.”

“Of course,” Mycroft responds immediately, snaking an arm around Michael’s shoulders and pulling
him close. “Cook will have served it on the terrace by now. Sherlock, I expect you to join us in half
an hour. With clean hands and dressed in clothes which aren’t an assault on aesthetic principles,
preferably.”

He turns and leads Michael out of the shed, looking back over his shoulder briefly to warn, “Half an
hour, Sherlock.”

“You’d best go, Sherlock,” John murmurs. “I’ll clean up and you can continue tomorrow.”
“I just…” But he doesn’t have to explain himself to John and still John will urge him to comply, because that is what John does. That’s what he has always done and always will do and suddenly this whole meek acceptance of whatever life has in store for him irks Sherlock, the annoyance tightening in a band around his chest.

“Oh, for God’s sake,” he grits between his teeth. He pushes back his chair and runs out of the door to tear in a wide curve around the short route Mycroft and Michael are taking, into the house, and up to his room. There he leaves the door open as he scrubs his hands in the sink and then pushes up his window before marching over to his violin. As Michael understands nothing about music at all he’s bound to hate the piece he’s been practicing lately. After heaving a deep breath to calm himself he lodges the violin beneath his chin, presses his index finger onto the bow, hard, and begins to play.

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“Interesting music, that,” Michael comments.

“Yes. Enchanting, isn’t it?” From behind the vanguard of his scone with clotted cream and strawberry jam Sherlock is genuinely interested in Michael’s opinion on the piece. “I love Ivan Eröd’s work. He’s rumoured to be working on a second sonata. Could be exciting.”

***

During supper – because apparently all they ever do whenever Michael is around is stuff themselves silly, as if… but here Sherlock chooses to shut down his thoughts – the atmosphere around the table is strained and for once Sherlock feels he’s not the one responsible. Neither is Mummy, for, after an afternoon appearance, descending upon them like a spectre out of a bad seventeenth-century play, she’s sent down Nanny to announce she has a headache and to beg for ‘dear Michael’ to excuse her.

‘Dear Michael’s’ expression upon receiving the news was one of instant relief, until he remembered his manners and expressed his dismay and added his hopes for a speedy recovery.

The looks he and Mycroft exchange now over their plates heaped with fresh peas and sautéed carrots and Chateaubriand are positively morose. Michael sighs quite a lot as well. Perhaps they have quarrelled again, but what is it to Sherlock? Instead, he concentrates on wedging his peas and carrots and cut up cubes of Chateaubriand into orderly rows on his plate. For once, Mycroft doesn’t pay attention to him at all. Which is perfectly fine, as his scone-smirking act has sadly resulted in a bloated stomach.

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In fact, Mycroft is so distracted, he doesn’t object when Sherlock announces he’s off to his room straight after supper.

“Good night,” he returns, softly, his gaze resting on Sherlock for a moment before switching back to Michael. Sherlock ascends the stairs two steps at a time. Upstairs he swears beneath his breath when he enters his room. In the morning he forgot to open the curtains again and the air in his room feels hot and sultry. Outside the black night rules, the stars and moon veiled behind a heavy cloak of clouds that bear a promise of rain with a chance of thunder in the early morning.

After brushing his teeth, Sherlock flicks off the light and walks over to the window in order to raise it higher to let in the night air, hoping it will replace the warmth in the room that clings to his skin with the viscous tenacity of a cheap nylon quilt. The view of two bright red spots hovering over the terrace makes him lower his hands again. The pinpoints remain suspended in the air for a moment, sweep down together in a graceful pirouette, and back up again, going through the routine of a
carefully crafted firefly ballet in perfect harmony.

One of them coughs. By the sound of it Sherlock guesses it to be Michael, and the firefly on the left departs the stage, its all too short life cruelly ground out beneath a shoe heel, and what must be Michael’s voice rasps through the air. It’s so thick and swollen, Sherlock hardly recognises it.

“Mycroft, the last week, with you here and… Well, I’ve been thinking… a lot… And, I’ve not discussed this with my parents, not yet. They will be very disappointed… Christ, I can’t bear to think of my father’s face when he hears. But in the end I’ve come to a decision. Tomorrow I’ll write I won’t accept the post after all.”

“What?” The other firefly perishes as well, in time to Mycroft’s quiet hiss of shock. “No! You can’t.”

“Of course I can. It’s the only option I have,” retorts Michael.

“Nonsense. We’ve discussed this. The post is a prime chance. One you must seize.”

“Yes, we’ve gone over it time and again but I won’t accept it, not if you’re not coming with me.”

There’s an intemperate noise, a screech of metal dragged over stone, it appears they have crashed into the table. Michael continues in a muffled voice. “Mycroft, my heart, my Mycroft heart… please, please reconsider. Come away with me, their offer is incredibly generous, you said so yourself…”

Surreptitiously, quieter than a mouse nibbling its way through a hunk of cheese, Sherlock bends his upper body towards the window to survey the scene below. As surmised, their bodies are an oblong shape emerging from the surrounding darkness against the pale blob of the tablecloth.

Mycroft pleads, urgent, “I can’t. Don’t start this again, Michael. I won’t allow you to…”

“Oh, Christ!” Sherlock’s eyes nearly pop out of his head and his forehead connects forcefully with the glass as he watches Michael ball his fist, only to strike it down on the table in a fit of impotent rage.

“You won’t allow what?” he yells and Sherlock hears him pulling in a heaving wet breath when Mycroft closes his hand over the fist.

“For you to sacrifice your career for my sake,” he replies, his voice low and calm. “You covet that position, as you should. I… we… wouldn’t be who we are if we didn’t both strive for the best. That’s what makes us tick. Imagine staying here, in a position that isn’t quite up to your level, sacrificing your ambition? How long before resentment would set in? Justified resentment? No, you must go.”

“I won’t!”

“Yes, you will. Ambition is what binds us. A six-hour flight won’t end that. It’s not like we’re living in Victorian times when it took five days to cross the Atlantic.”

All these arguments make perfect sense to Sherlock, but naturally they don’t do so to Michael because he’s a maudlin idiot and Mycroft has always been far too indulgent with him. “Please come with me,” the fatuous git is entreating now. “New York is much closer to Boston and it’s a marvellous chance. The UN, Mycroft, you can still accept it.”

Slowly, Sherlock lets himself sink to his knees as the significance of Michael’s plea sinks in. Mycroft, with his penchant for boring politics, has been offered a position at the UN, and somehow Michael, or more likely one of his father’s cronies, has managed to arrange this. This is exactly the kind of proposition Mycroft should find impossible to resist, and yet, if Michael’s frantic arguing is to
be believed, that’s exactly what Mycroft has done.

On the terrace below, Mycroft takes a step backwards. Although his hands are hidden by the obscurity of the night, Sherlock is sure he can see his fingers twitch in search of the comforting feel of his umbrella handle. Can one become addicted to a tactile sensation? Like… but no, Sherlock needs the pills merely to keep the nightmares safely stabled in the farthest recesses of his mind. That’s not addiction but a safety precaution.

“I’m aware,” Mycroft’s voice rings loudly across the empty terrace. “I can, but I won’t, and you know it. I do appreciate the offer and all it implies and, as I wrote to both your father and Lord Smallwood, I’m most grateful. But you of all people ought to understand I can’t leave England, not now, not for as long as my mother lives and Sherlock is still too young to be left behind.”

“Oh, hell. You…”

“Please, Michael, it’s no use. Don’t spoil our time here with harsh words you’ll come to regret. If I spotted the tiniest sliver of an opportunity I would go to the States with you, but it can’t be and that’s the end of it.” Mycroft’s voice is infinitely sad. As he’s on his knees Sherlock can’t properly observe them. Sticking his head out of the window is a bit of a risk but all the same he goes for it. They’re standing close again, embracing each other. The whitish strip cupping Michael’s head must be Mycroft’s hand. There’s a wet sound and Sherlock understands it’s a sob. He scrunches his nose in revulsion. How can Mycroft stand such a ridiculous display of sentiment?

“There, there,” Mycroft murmurs, stroking Michael’s head. “There, there. Why this sudden outburst, why now?”

“Because I love you, damn it!” Michael’s back to shouting again, pulling himself violently loose from Mycroft’s embrace to start pacing the terrace. “Because you’re my partner and we’re in this together. Or so I assumed.”

“That won’t change. Not unless we choose otherwise.”

“We won’t be together… in our bed…”

“Our bed will still be here, and I’ll be in it, here in London. We’ll have the holidays, perhaps a few extended weekends. Really, Michael, what’s a mere six hours?”

With a loud groan Michael throws himself into one of the seats. The gesture shows Sherlock that Michael must have acted at school as well for he makes a most convincing Falstaff. Except Falstaff doesn’t wail in exaggerated lament and Michael does when he speaks next.

“I’m sorry,” he sniffs. “Mycroft, I’m so sorry. I know I’m behaving like an idiot and making this even harder for you but I’m so desperate.”

“Darling.” To Sherlock’s disgust Mycroft unceremoniously drops to his knees in front of Michael and cradles him in his arms. “Don’t cry, please don’t cry. You remember what I told you earlier, don’t you?”

“About your father?”

“Yes.”

“But Mycroft, surely our situation is different. I mean, for him the choice must have been easy.”

The back of Mycroft’s neck stiffens, a faint ripple in the blackness of the night, but Sherlock has
noticed it. Mycroft’s chin rests on Michael’s shoulder but he’s gazing ahead into the dark when he says, “So I’d like to assume, yes. But in fact I’m certain it was the hardest decision of his life.”

The remark appears to drain Michael of the last of his resistance. His body slackens in Mycroft’s arms while he breathes out a heavy gust of air in admirable imitation of a punched inflatable mattress.

“A man does what he must,” he says. From the way Mycroft moves his head so he can look at Michael, Sherlock understands he must be quoting one of Mycroft’s beloved politicians. Winston Churchill, no doubt.

“Yes,” Mycroft confirms, all warm approval. “What he must do, not what he would like to do.”

“I love you, Mycroft.”

“Yes. And because of that you will do what you must do.”

“God, yes. If you want me to.”

“Because you must.”

“Yes.”

After that they’re silent for such a long time Sherlock begins to wonder whether they’ve fallen asleep, propping up each other until one of them topples forward. Neither of them can be very comfortable though so he waits for one of them to stir. Eventually Michael’s frenzied babble breaks the spell as he straightens in the chair, apologising, “God, Mycroft, what have I been thinking, your knees, please…”

“It’s fine.” The pitch of Mycroft’s voice – all smiling forgiveness – has Sherlock drive his nails into the windowsill. There’s only one person in the world Mycroft ought to address so. Damn the usurper and his soppy tears. Damn Mycroft for being taken in by such a sentimental show. Pretending his head rules the rest of him. Sherlock sniffs disdainfully when he discerns Michael’s reply. “Let’s go to bed now, love. Let me make it up to you. I’ll be good, I promise.”

Of course those words are all the prompting Mycroft needs to grab Michael’s hand and drag him into the house. Sharp bile rises in Sherlock’s throat but he pushes it down again. Two scones really were too much, he decides and it’s no concern of his what Mycroft and Michael wish to do to each other. Stupid, hateful Michael. Snivelling like a child because…

And suddenly the implications of the overheard conversation hit Sherlock and he hugs himself in glee with his arms wrapped around his knees. An UN post and Michael and the chance to put a whole ocean between himself and the responsibility of Sherlock and Mummy and the estate, and what did Mycroft choose? Without even thinking about it, apparently. Because he’s Mycroft Holmes, and Sherlock and Mummy are his first priorities. He’s made a botched job of it so far, what with Mummy becoming an addict and sending away Mr Talbot when he shouldn’t have listened to Mummy’s threats. Still, he’s getting better at it, with his decision to be done with that awful school, and one day he’ll be the most powerful man in England, just like Daddy was, and all he’ll really care about is Sherlock and Mummy.

“We won,” he whispers, his breath warm and moist against his knees. “We won.” A giggle bubbles up inside his chest, indvertible. Sherlock welcomes it and soon he’s prone on the floor, succumbing to helpless fits of laughter.

It’s glorious. Oh, it’s glorious. He and Mummy won. Michael lost and he can go and sulk on the other side of the Atlantic. Out of nowhere, Nanny’s voice starts singing in his head, the lyrics all too
familiar, accompanying the careful rubbing of shampoo into his curls while he sits swaying in the bath with a cloth pressed against his eyes:

_My Bonnie lies over the ocean_
My Bonnie lies over the sea
My Bonnie lies over the ocean
Oh, bring back my Bonnie to me...

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Later that night a roaring clap of thunder jolts Sherlock awake. Disoriented at first, he pushes himself upright. Cries of anguish erupt from the direction of Mummy’s room, soon drowned by the susurrating thrum of rain, which falls from the sky like a wet sheet covering the house. Sherlock leaps out of his bed and to the window where water is already pooling on the sill. He slams it shut in time to the next roll of thunder. The storm must be directly overhead as a flash of lightning sets the night ablaze the next second. The light shapes out the chairs and table on the terrace against the background of the flagstones in such a stark relief Sherlock is convinced he only has to extend his hand to touch them; they’re standing that close.

His fingers drift over the windowsill, just a little over fifteen feet higher than the terrace.

Mycroft knew Sherlock was up there, listening in on them, hearing every word. Yet, he didn’t end the conversation. Neither did he invite Michael to go back into the drawing room or take a turn in the garden. Instead he almost had Michael spell it out, the luring proposal, Michael’s earnest desire for Mycroft to accompany him, Mycroft’s rejection. If, through Michael, Mycroft told Sherlock he would stay with him, then what, will he demand in return? And when?

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Chapter Summary

Sherlock swallows. The interview is proving to be far harder than he had anticipated. The memory of the crestfallen look on Mr Whitall’s face at Sherlock’s harsh rejection of the proposal to approach the Academy is one Sherlock isn’t very eager to keep. He expected Mr Whitall to be overjoyed upon hearing the good news but the man is apparently as difficult to please as Mr Mancini or Mr Talbot. Infuriating, really. Except that, Sherlock surmises, is probably the reason he can bear the company of the man and even respect him.

They’ve been perusing the Levison Ltd books for three hours straight and Sherlock is growing increasingly irritated, as he still hasn’t hit upon an entry to set the alarm bells ringing inside his head. So far they’ve focused their search on the months following Miss Jones’ first appearance in the Levison Ltd lobby. Accounting is, in Sherlock’s opinion, nothing but the sly manipulation of numbers, not unlike Mycroft’s manipulation of people. But those, though most of them are tedious in the extreme, might go off the rails one day and do something unexpected – if it’s one’s lucky day – whereas numbers always do exactly what they were invented for. Hawker can’t have begun cooking the books without leaving a trail but so far Sherlock’s sniffing has led to nothing more enlightening than a growing headache and a growling flatmate.

“I need more tea.” John groans pathetically, to press the point and starts rubbing his eyes with his knuckles.

Mrs Levison’s secretary, a smartly efficient woman in her fifties, had shown them into the room and instructed one of her minions to supply them with the commodity but John has long since drained the pot. The particular shape and perfume of the accompanying dainty almond cakes reveal their provenance to Sherlock as they, together with a host of other delectable delicacies, habitually grace Mycroft’s tea table whenever Sherlock is made to attend and suffer its excruciating boredom in the interest of some elaborate scheme requiring his involvement. But John has shoved them aside with a scrunch of his nose and plebeian disdain for the finer subtleties the ridiculously rich indulge in.

Acknowledging to himself that turning over the leaves of year results and half-year results and quarter-year results won’t result in him finding what he’s looking for in his present state, Sherlock gathers he might as well kill two birds with one stone and get himself a note in John’s good books with an offer of more tea.

“Shall I ask for another pot, then?” he proposes, the epitome of considerate servility. “Together with some hobnobs?”

“God, yes. If we have to stay here,” John replies. “Though I don’t think we’re ever going to find what you’re looking for. You haven’t got an inkling, have you? Why don’t you just admit it?”

In the interest of amity, Sherlock chooses not to dignify this flare of obstinacy with an answer. He strides to the door, flings it open and shouts, “more tea. And hobnobs,” into the corridor. Instead of installing himself in front of the stacks of business reports again he moves to the high floor-to-ceiling windows to stare down at the heads of people milling in the street below with all the purposefulness of an army of ants.
“Nice,” John comments, drily.

Sherlock shrugs. “Efficient, rather.”

A mere two minutes later there’s a brief knock on the door and it’s opened carefully to reveal yet another minion bearing a tray with a fresh pot of tea and a plate of hobnobs.

“Thank goodness for a decent biscuit,” John quips, snatching one from the plate before the girl has even lifted the plate from her tray. The girl giggles and bats her heavily mascaraed eyelashes at him. The brightly shining glass reflects their interaction as clearly as if Sherlock were looking straight at them.

“You can go now,” he dismisses the girl, pointedly. She throws his back an annoyed gander which it’s easy for him to pretend he hasn’t noticed. With a last flirting look at John she closes the door behind her. Sherlock redirects his attention to the vista below him.

“Jesus, Sherlock,” John sighs. “Do you have to act like an arrogant git all the time?”

“I don’t,” huffs Sherlock, stashing his balled fists deep into the pockets of his trousers. “Do I have to remind you we’re here to investigate a disappearance and not to make eyes at some cheap—”

“Yes, Sherlock, that’s enough,” John cuts him off, his brow furrowing. “All work and no play makes Jack a dull boy, you know.”

Slowly, Sherlock pivots and blinks at John. “No, I don’t. I take it you’re referring to some tedious work of popular culture, whether it be a film, a pop song or one of those ‘thrillers’ you indulge in on a far too regular basis. If only you would—”

And then the insight hits him. Of course. One second John sits glaring at him over his stack of dull accounting reports, and the next his eyes widen as Sherlock throws up his hands in the air with the exhilaration of a Medieval alchemist convinced he’s just discovered the formula to turn base metal into gold.

“John,” he almost shouts, clapping his hands in front of his mouth as his mind hurls off to lead him to the proper path of investigation. “Oh John, John. I’ve said it before and I’ll say it again. You’ve never been the most luminous of people, but as a conductor of light, you are unbeatable.”

“I’ll have you know I still don’t consider that the most stimulating of compliments.” Even through his remonstration John’s face is beaming with a soft glow, as if Sherlock’s remark has flicked a light switch inside his skull.

“Ah, but you should.” He’s practically tap-dancing across the room to stab an accusing finger at the pile of reports they’ve disregarded so far. “You should. There John, all work and no play. Hawker was already heartily sick and tired of the whole business long before Susan Jones entered the premises. All she did was to add an extra incentive.”

“Hang on.” As ever John’s baffled expression is highly satisfactory – and endearing. “So you’re saying… ehm, what were you saying?”

“That we’ve been stupid, John!” With a grand gesture Sherlock sweeps the mound of reports in front of John from the table, exulting in the subsequent chaos of papers and broken spines littering the immaculate, dull, waxed linoleum flooring.

“Or not you,” he babbles, stockpiling a new stack for John’s survey in one arm. “I’ve been stupid, zooming in on one possible explanation of some of the facts to the exclusion of the complete
“Okay. So what are we supposed to be looking for now?”

“The same, basically, but we have to start much earlier. Any anomaly from the basic pattern, John. A new firm or a sudden increase in payments to an existing associate. There has to be something.”

“Like a dead body,” mutters John in a tone bordering on rebellion. He heaves up an enormous sigh, but, after scrubbing his hands over his face, he bends to the task all the same.

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Sherlock wakes to the sordid feeling of his damp pyjama bottoms clinging to his groin and thighs. With a cry of disgust he jumps out of bed to rip off the proof of his body’s betrayal and shove it into the wash. His eyes prickle with the sheer humiliation of Nanny finding the trousers and smiling over them and for a split-second he contemplates lifting the pair and taking them outside to burn the hateful evidence of his body’s base needs.

First he must get rid of the foul flakes of drying semen coating his thighs and abdomen. Under the shower, he lathers a washcloth with a copious froth of lavender soap and scrubs at the revolting area with his eyes scrunched tightly shut. He stiffens when his penis responds to the harsh ministrations, swelling and rearing its ugly head.

“Oh, for fuck’s sake.”

His hand latches itself onto the cold water tap and he wrenches it wide open to launch a deluge of icy water on top of his head. It cascades down his back and his chest, draining his body of warmth until he’s left shivering and his teeth are chattering so hard their noise can be discerned over the roar of the water. Only after his penis has shrivelled up to a tiny mollusc, torn from its shell to be washed up on the shore and wither and die, does he reach for the tap to shut off the water supply.

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“You look perky this morning,” Mycroft compliments Sherlock as they’re seating themselves at the breakfast table. “Michael is having a bit of a lie-in,” he continues, unfolding his napkin and spreading it fussily over his lap. “Tea for now, please. He’ll have to write some letters after, so I thought we might go and visit the bank this morning. It’s about time you opened your own account.”

“Whatever for?” Sherlock asks, genuinely perplexed, almost lowering the teapot again. “Money doesn’t interest me. You take care of everything and that serves me perfectly fine. Milk or lemon?”

“Milk, I think.” After having buttered his toast, Mycroft begins an earnest contemplation of assortment of jams on the table. Eventually he determines upon the cherry. “My dear Sherlock,” he chuckles, his focus etched onto his knife and its swipes over the toast, “you will always be my baby brother but that doesn’t mean I’ll arrange your whole life. That was the point of our conversation nearly two weeks ago. Or have you forgotten already?”

“No, of course not,” scoffs Sherlock. “But that concerned my interests and my future. What has that got to do with the triviality of a bank account?”

“Your remark shows you’re either very wise or very ignorant. As you’ve never gone a day without clothes on your back and your belly empty, I wage it’s the latter. Sherlock, money is indeed nothing but dross. Yet the majority of people hanker after it as if it were the Holy Grail. Unless you learn to handle it and understand what money does you won’t be able to deal with life. You’ll never lack for anything. That doesn’t mean you don’t have to appreciate the machinations.”
“But you promised,” Sherlock wants to shout. “Last night, you promised.”

It isn’t possible Mycroft has not realised Sherlock has been eavesdropping upon his conversation with Michael. In not referring to it now he must be confirming his consent, both with the act itself as with the message thus conveyed. Over the edge of his cup, Sherlock watches his brother but all Mycroft’s face reveals is eager anticipation of his first bite of cherry jam-drenched toast. He opens his mouth wide and his teeth tussle with the bread. Silently, Sherlock broods whether he shouldn’t simply confess to listening in. Surely, with this newly rediscovered intimacy between them they should tell each other everything and nothing ought to be hidden between them.

“Our appointment is at half past ten,” Mycroft says once he’s swallowed the piece. “We’ll have to postpone our swim until late afternoon.”

That’s his final say upon the matter, apparently. Mycroft knows, and he knows Sherlock knows he knows and they won’t talk about it.

“Fine,” Sherlock concedes, with as much ungraciousness as he can muster. “If we must.”

Mycroft nods, once. “Good.” He takes another bite of his toast, before continuing, “I had another talk with John this morning.”

The empty porcelain of Sherlock’s teacup rattles loudly through the room as he replaces it on the saucer. “Oh.”

Now it’s Mycroft’s turn to eye Sherlock. Heat flares on his cheeks. “What about?” he enquires, aiming for, and wholly failing at, imbuing the request with an air of casual nonchalance. Mycroft’s huff confirms the attempt’s futility.

“I asked him to think over his choice and agree to a further examination at least, seeing as how worried you are. I told him we’ll spare no expense. We will hire the best specialists the country has to offer, go for a second opinion, whatever he wishes.”

“He refused,” Sherlock states, his tone flat.

“Yes.” Mycroft is all warmth. “Yes, I’m afraid he did, Sherlock. He seems quite determined to die.” His voice softens on the last word. “I’m so sorry,” he adds.

More than anything Mycroft’s tone of defeat has Sherlock quieting in his seat. Another layer of anguish stretches itself out over the grief and rage he’s been tamping down inside his chest ever since the visit to the doctor, this one on behalf of Mycroft who looks so crestfallen at his lack of success in bending another’s will to his.

It’s adamant Sherlock reaches out to Mycroft with some solace. For Mycroft, in his own eyes, has committed an enormity, all on Sherlock’s behalf. Try though he might, Sherlock can’t imagine Mycroft begging someone, their gardener at that, to reconsider his decision, and yet that’s exactly what he has done. On top of everything else.

How is Sherlock ever going to repay him? For a split-second, the familiar loathing crops up again. Why does Mycroft have to meddle with every aspect of Sherlock’s life? Just as quickly as it erupted, he stifles the unworthy whisperings inside his head. He glances at Mycroft who sits toying with the last of his toast, deliberately slanting his gaze away from him.

“Mr Talbot suggested John might wish to die because of Daddy,” Sherlock forwards. “He’s right, I suppose, so we shouldn’t try to influence John.”

Mycroft swivels his head and their eyes lock, Mycroft’s boring deep into Sherlock’s.
“And you’re fine with that?” Mycroft’s tone is clipped, but Sherlock has to strain his ears to catch the phrase. He swallows painfully but he ducks his head all the same.

“I am.” His voice isn’t much louder than Mycroft’s. Yet Mycroft’s expression shows he’s heard him perfectly clearly all the same.

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Later, as he stands watching the droning bees busily at work amidst the scents and colours of the rose garden, he refuses to mull over the conversation and the understanding he and Mycroft have reached.

“It’s what he wants,” he tells himself.

From far away, from behind the latticework with Constance Spry roses and the screen of towering Blue Dawn delphiniums in Mummy’s garden, John’s voice drifts over, instructing the boy from the village to be a little more careful in the use of his rake. If it were Sherlock beside him there wouldn’t be any need for him to do so.

“It’s what he wants.”

***

The bank manager is a despicable, sycophantic underling straight out of a Victorian novel. He actually wrings his hands after having shaken both Mycroft’s and Sherlock’s, poised behind his desk with a quivering nose and unreserved thraldom oozing down from the oiled hairs draped over the top of his scalp down to the tips of his shoes which are brushed within an inch of their lives. Sherlock doesn’t have to be a monetary genius to discern the shoes must have been hideously expensive, together with every stitch of clothing the man sports. Yet, Mycroft, and even – he realises when he glimpses his reflection in the polished surface of the mahogany file cabinet to the left of the room – Sherlock himself, though he’s dressed in nothing more ostentatious than a casual light-blue linen shirt and midnight-blue slacks, look far more suave and stylish than the man ever could, never mind all the effort both he and his wife put into his appearance.

That’s class for you, Sherlock, John’s voice explains to him, out of the past, from beside Daddy’s grave where they both sat pulling the weeds. In a flash, looking down upon this miserable underling, whose suit shoulders were so carefully brushed only that morning by his loving wife (for they’re completely free of the flakes of dandruff that have dislodged themselves from the man’s scalp since he left the house and now glitter revealingly against the glossy background of his hair) Sherlock discerns what John meant.

It’s all right for Mycroft, whose life consists of ordering people about and having them cater to his every wish before he’s even expressed it, but the idea of people springing to attention to oblige him, expecting him to look after their interests in turn, makes Sherlock want to throw up. Along with the currents of pleasant banter both the manager and Mycroft have kept flowing in the room they’ve seated themselves and now the manager, from behind the mahogany expanse of his desk, and the gold wire frame of his glasses, eyes Sherlock expectantly.

“Sit down, Sherlock,” Mycroft instructs, not bothering to grace either the manager or Sherlock with his attention but rather bestowing it on the umbrella handle resting in the palm of his right hand.

“Right.” The manager scrapes his throat, his gaze drifting slowly to Mycroft, clearly waiting for Mycroft’s instructions. From the vanguard point of his chair, Sherlock watches the scene before him. All Mycroft has done since entering the room is take a seat, and yet he’s master and commander of the building and all its parts and everyone in it.
I’m the exception, Sherlock thinks, feeling quite smug at the sudden insight. He may be sitting here, where he doesn’t want to be, at Mycroft’s expressly voiced behest, but, unlike the man blinking at them from the other side of the desk, he can stand up and walk out of the room at any minute, should he wish to.

And, for all his controlling demeanour, he won’t be able to stop me.

The realisation relaxes him enough to allow him to concentrate on the droning of the bank manager, who’s pushing several papers over the desk in his direction.

“The accounts are already in your name, naturally,” the man says, while unscrewing the cap of a far too ostentatious fountain pen. “Now here we have your debit card. If you’d just sign here please.”

“I’d prefer a chequebook,” Sherlock dismisses the suggestion, resolutely ignoring the proffered instrument.

“Do you now?” Wounded, the manager withdraws his hand to quirk a disbelieving eyebrow in Sherlock’s direction. “Chequebooks are terribly old-fashioned, you know. Most of our younger clients prefer a debit card. Far more convenient and new cash machines are being installed every day.”

“That only goes to show most of your younger clients are incredibly stupid,” Sherlock snaps. “I prefer to believe that particular condition doesn’t apply to me.”

Beside him Mycroft sighs deeply and tightens his grip on his umbrella handle. However, both Mycroft’s voice and face maintain their air of languid detachment as he drawls, “My brother, of course, is referring to the privacy and security issues connected with modern banking methods.” He smiles most encouragingly at the bank manager who valiantly attempts but miserably fails to cast both Mycroft and Sherlock a disbelieving glance.

“I assure you…” the man begins, nodding his head so vigorously a few flakes of dandruff loose their tenuous hold and commence the inevitable descent, down to the dark-grey wool sheeting his shoulders to glitter and sparkle conspicuously.

Sherlock swivels his gaze, determined to distance himself from the proceedings. As Mycroft is the one who insisted they visit the bank and waste their time on an appointment with this moron he can handle the rest of it.

“Naturally.” Mycroft’s demeanour is a study in suave appreciation of the prime concerns of everyone in the room. “My brother and I realise your bank goes a long way to ensure the safety of the monies entrusted to your care and the privacy of your clients but you, in your position, will be the first to acknowledge your safety measures were invented by man. Thus, they’re not infallible.”

“No, but…”

“If my brother wants a chequebook, that’s what you will issue to him,” Mycroft settles the dispute. “In the meantime you, Sherlock, will sign this debit card. One day you might find it of use to you.”

Without bothering to hide his scowl, Sherlock signs the card and the other papers. When he is done he leaps up and arranges himself next to the door, staring pointedly at Mycroft’s back.

“Thank you,” he can hear Mycroft smile. “Please send the book to the usual address.” With those words he leverages himself out of his chair and offers his hand to the manager who hastily rises as well to grapple it and accompany his guest to the door.
“I will. But, if you don’t mind, we haven’t discussed the daily limit yet.”

This next objection to their imminent departure has Sherlock nearly stamping his foot in impatience. Is the stupid fool bent on keeping them locked up all day in this ridiculous office?

“Oh yes.” Mycroft twirls his umbrella and appears to consider the question. “Make it five hundred a day,” he replies after a few seconds. “That should serve my brother’s purposes well enough.”

The audible plop of the bank manager’s throat informs Sherlock the amount must be extraordinary. Luckily, he is already half out of the door and spared the no doubt extremely stupid look on the man’s gaping visage.

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Carefully, Sherlock extends his hand towards the abundance of perfume-drenched pink rose petals, radiant in the dusky late summer-afternoon. Every leaf and flower in the garden glistens with a honey-coloured glow. The corners of his mouth twitch as the fuzzy legs of the bumblebee graze his knuckles.

“Sherlock! Watch out!” Mr Whitall nearly drops his tray in his haste to put it on the table and start waving his arms to chase away the bumblebee. “A wasp. They sting…”

“It isn’t a wasp,” corrects Sherlock. “Don’t frighten it. Look.” Gently, he flicks his fingers and the bumblebee takes off to land on the rose nearest to Sherlock’s nose. “It’s a bumblebee, Mr Whitall, one of the most beneficial species to us human beings. Without them, we probably wouldn’t exist. The wasp has its uses as well, much like the common housefly.”

“Is that so? I can never tell the difference between them. I simply don’t like anything that stings or bites or drones.” Casting the bumblebee, already on its way to another flower, a discomfited look, Mr Whitall pushes a mug in Sherlock’s direction. “It seems I’ve run out of digestives. I can make you a sandwich if you want.”

(Dismissing the suggestion with a flip of his wrist Sherlock lectures, “Without flies and wasps and ants it would be a mere matter of days before the planet would be buried beneath a thick layer of waste.”

“Seriously?” asks Mr Whitall. “We had plenty of flies where I grew up, and lots of waste as well, and I always thought more waste just attracted more flies. My mother dreaded the summers because of them. And the rats of course.” He takes a sip of the revolting mixture in his cup.

Sherlock sits swirling his around, dreading the instant he’ll have to put the cup to his lips as well. Why didn’t he ask for a glass of water? “You grew up somewhere in East London, didn’t you?” he says. “In a…, ah yes, a council estate. Your accent, it has very faint traces of the brogue of the kitchen personnel and gardeners at school. I’ve never visited such a neighbourhood but Mycroft says they’re very depressing.”

Mr Whitall huffs, amusement curling the corners of his mouth. “Oh dear, can you? And here I was convinced my RP was up to measure. Well, you’ve perfect pitch of hearing so I won’t feel too dissuaded. But, to answer your initial question, yes, I grew up Shoreditch, in what was little better than a slum.”

Mischief twinkling in his eye, he continues, “My mother would have been proud of her son ending up in such a fancy house in the countryside, drinking tea with a posh boy like you.”

I’m not, Sherlock wants to protest but Mr Whitall is already laughing at him.
“Don’t look like that. I realise you’re not ‘posh’, Sherlock. Merely extremely privileged.” For a moment Mr Whitall falls silent, a frown wrinkling his brow. When he starts speaking again his voice is much softer. “In some ways being rich must be as difficult as being poor, I suppose.”

“I wouldn’t have to go to that stupid school if we weren’t rich,” Sherlock says fervently.

“Yes. It’s pretty obvious you hate that school for some reason. You wouldn’t have liked mine better, not really. In the end all schools are the same, I think. But I’m certain the teachers in your school all attended the best universities while some in mine were barely literate themselves. I shudder to think how I would have turned out without my talent, modest as it is compared to yours.”

Courtesy demands for Sherlock to declare Mr Whitall’s talent isn’t modest at all but both he and Mr Whitall know he would be lying. Sherlock has profited greatly from the enthusiasm of his instruction, much the same as he profited from Mr Robinson’s, all those years ago when they sat rehearsing with Oliver for the school concert. Like Mr Robinson, he’s very good at voicing whatever he finds lacking in Sherlock’s playing, but unlike Mr Mancini he’s far less apt to demonstrate what the violin should sound like.

“You’re simply too good,” he said the last time they played together and sent Sherlock a wistful smile.

“Right,” Mr Whitall says now, putting down his cup and rubbing his hands together. “So you’ve changed your mind. I’m heartily glad to hear you say so, but, are you sure you won’t have changed it back again two weeks from now on?” He stares at Sherlock expectantly, still faintly amused.

“Yes… about that…” Sherlock begins. This is the part of the meeting he’s been dreading since he came to his decision three days ago. The man must think him a flake, telling him he won’t want to pursue a career in music one moment and changing his tack the next. Several times during the past few days, Sherlock told himself he didn’t care one whit about Mr Whitall’s opinion on him but he recognised this for the blatant lie it is. Together they share a sense of deep love and admiration for their former master, and for the art he’s taught them.

Thus Mr Whitall is lodged irrevocably with what will remain amid the best and brightest parts of Sherlock’s life so far.

There are the memories of Daddy. They’re the centrepiece in the universe, with everyone else orbiting around him on their own planet. Thin filaments run between all the points, connecting them and ensuring the whole structure retains its balance. Increasingly Sherlock finds the present arrangement is impossible to sustain. For he needs not only to hold onto Daddy, Daddy’s laughter ringing through the dining room, his perpetual teasing, his big strong hands as he lifted Sherlock out of the sea and flung him into the waves again, but other people as well. There’s already such a lot of John he wants to remember. John, with his safe smells of sun-drenched earth, and leaves smouldering in a fire, and the cloying sweetness of freshly harvested honey. Soon John will be gone so it’s very important he retains everything that will happen between them from now on.

Circling close to Daddy and John are Mr Talbot and Mr Mancini; all it takes to reach them is a small jump. Sherlock can’t decide which memories he likes best. The great expanse of the schoolroom with its bare walls and the occasional whisper of paper as Mr Talbot turns a leaf of yet another nineteenth-century novel. That one is as equally important as Mr Mancini exerting himself in the bow window, his face red and every chubby flap on his frame heaving with the effort until he lets both the violin and the bow fall to his side and shouts at Sherlock, “Now that is what music is about!”

Mycroft descends from Daddy and he gave Sherlock his chart of the periodic table and taught him to swim. He’s never dodged answering Sherlock’s questions, neither before, when everything was so
perfect and easy (even Mummy was nearly perfect then) nor after, when Mycroft had to try and glue
together the pieces of their shattered world into a more or less rounded spherical shape again.

They are what Sherlock holds most dear but, though he might prefer to keep it so, it’s not an
exclusive gathering. Mr Whitall sidled himself in by proxy, perhaps most of all through his decision
to buy and preserve Mr Mancini’s house. The garden may be improved beyond recognition, the bow
window may be invaded by Mr Whitall’s harpsichord, but the slapdash chaos of scattered sheet
music and newspapers, cakes of rosin, half-finished cups of tea and the occasional forgotten
mouldering sandwich remains. The same vague prints of Venice still grace the living room wall for
Sherlock to focus upon whenever the music asks for that lightness of spirit he’s sometimes afraid
he’ll never truly master. No matter Mr Mancini continued to find fault with Daddy’s finger
technique, Sherlock can still feel the sheer happiness he felt whenever Daddy played the first notes of
the Spring sonata. Oh, to convey such buoyancy and tenderness. Sherlock has practiced so hard, so
often, but sometimes he fears the music is able to strike a chord within him he’ll never manage to
reproduce himself.

But that’s what he’s here for now, Sherlock reminds himself and he shakes his head to free his mind
from all the clutter.

Mr Whitall is still looking at him with a patiently expectant expression on his face, though the creases
around his eyes are slackening somewhat. Twenty seconds must have passed since Sherlock began
composing his sentence and that’s an awkwardly long silence in any conversation. Whenever
Mycroft wishes to make a point he pauses for exactly fifteen seconds before starting his next
sentence, never longer. He must have determined that’s the exact amount of time needed to ensure
his audience will pay due attention to whatever he has to say.

“I was a bit premature,” Sherlock says. This statement causes Mr Whitall’s eyebrows to climb
upwards on his brow.

“I still don’t like the idea of playing for a bunch of morons who don’t understand what I’m doing,”
Sherlock clarifies.

The eyebrows continue their ascent. “Apologies,” Mr Whitall interrupts Sherlock, and brings up a
hand to rearrange his face to its default setting. “Pray go on.”

Sherlock swallows. The interview is proving to be far harder than he had anticipated. The memory of
the crestfallen look on Mr Whitall’s face at Sherlock’s harsh rejection of the proposal to approach the
Academy is one Sherlock isn’t very eager to keep. He expected Mr Whitall to be overjoyed upon
hearing the good news but the man is apparently as difficult to please as Mr Mancini or Mr Talbot.
Infuriating, really. Except that, Sherlock surmises, is probably the reason he can bear the company of
the man and even respect him.

“But I want to play,” he says. “That’s all I want,” he adds after a second.

“Right.” Slowly, Mr Whitall reaches for his cup, stares at it as if wondering what it’s doing in his
hand and replaces it on the table. Then, with a fluidity that’s quite remarkable given his age, he leaps
up from his chair and starts pacing the small terrace.

“Right,” he repeats, his tone matching his quick steps in agitation. “Right. Look… Sherlock… For
me the Academy was… it was simply the best chance to escape the life I dreaded. A life much like
that of my father and my granddad’s before him, except I would have ended up in the registers of the
unemployment agencies for they all worked in the docks and… I wasn’t an exceptionally bright
pupil, I would never have got a scholarship for any university, but I was, I am, a good violinist, good
enough for the Academy to take on at least. In fact, with my background I was a bit of a showcase
for them.”

The time of Mr Whitall’s pacing increases with each step he takes and his hands keep flying up like a pair of birds disturbed while feeding. “But you, Sherlock, are a different case. You are among the best and the brightest of the land. You’ve sat here scoffing about your school and its inhabitants often enough and from what you’ve told me of your pursuits beside the violin I understand that even amongst those you stand out like…”

Mr Whitall breaks off mid-stride to cast Sherlock a wry look. “Well, let’s not feed your ego. What I want you to understand is that a career in music, at the highest level, and I can’t imagine you content anywhere else, will mean you’ll have to totally dedicate yourself to one subject and one subject alone. Considering the time you’ve devoted to it so far your playing is exceptional. You’re gifted with all the requirements to become one of the best violinists that ever lived, except, perhaps with the one that’s most vital.”

At these last words he throws Sherlock another quick glance, almost shyly, before sitting down again. “Think about it, Sherlock. Rethink it. Write to your Mr Talbot if you must. I’m very grateful to the man for chiding you and making you reconsider your earlier outright rejection but I won’t contact the Academy unless you’ve convinced me you’re prepared to devote all your time and energy to the violin.”

“ ‘Course it is, Sherlock,” he concedes easily. “But will it be the same in a week’s time?”

“You’ve no reason—” Sherlock begins but Mr Whitall lifts a hand to stop him.

“The discussion is closed for now. We’re wasting our time and I had looked forward to playing those Handel sonatas together. Let the sweet music you can pull from your instrument sway my decision. And use your week wisely.”

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“Ah,” Mycroft says when Sherlock, after carefully arranging his violin case in the Rover’s boot, flings himself into the passenger seat, “Mr Whitall wasn’t that easy to persuade, I see. The man rises considerably in my estimation.”

“Just shut up, Mycroft,” Sherlock snarls. At Mycroft’s remark he feels a fresh bout of frustration and impotence tug at the corners of his eyes, but he refuses to break down in front of Mycroft. For that he will wait until they’re safely home.

He thinks longingly of his hoard of cigarettes, up in the treehouse, and the pills he sequestered two days ago, a new stash for the upcoming year, stowed away in their plastic bag next to the cigarettes. But no, much as he’d like to, the pills are for school, where everything is truly unbearable. If he starts popping them here as well, he’ll soon be no better than Mummy. And Sherlock despises her.

Mr Whitall may believe Sherlock lacks the drive to become a musician, but that just means Sherlock will have to prove him wrong. Now that, he muses, is something he’s very good at. He’ll write to Mr Talbot for advice first, or no… First Sherlock will smoke three cigarettes to calm himself, then he’ll write to Mr Talbot and after he has deposited his letter on the table in the hall to be posted he’ll arrange the Guarneri on his shoulder, nestle his cheek against the wood and he’ll start playing. For
Mr Whitall, for Mr Manicini, for Mr Talbot, for John, for Daddy, perhaps even for Mycroft, but most of all for himself.
Chapter Summary

The glass is raised once more. If anyone but Mycroft were holding it Sherlock would expect him to throw the glass into the fire, to underscore the gravity of the vow he just made. However, this is Mycroft, so the glass ends up at his brother’s lips and the only indication of Mycroft’s lessened equanimity is the light tinkle of his teeth against the heavy crystal.

Chapter Notes

Betaed by the wonderful susako.

Leporello B.V.

Sherlock grins. The name shows Mr Hawker has had access to some culture at least, and more pluck than one would ascribe to someone who once chose to pursue a career in accountancy.

“Excellent, John.” His finger stabs at the line John has brought to his attention with the deadly aim of a lepidopterist pinning a rare and avidly coveted butterfly into its own especially prepared case. “An Amsterdam-based firm. Must be a fancy letterbox, judging by the name. Clever. Only last week Mycroft sat fuming about set-ups like these swindling the general public out of tax money. Not that it stopped him from stuffing himself with cake.”

He snorts at the memory. Once more, John looks gratifyingly baffled, but then Sherlock has yet to catch him ensconced in The Times business section; an occurrence which, he suspects, is simply never going to happen. Meanwhile he’s already near the door, arms halfway down the sleeves of the Belstaff. “We’ll contact the Dutch Chamber of Commerce. It’s not much to work with but it’s a start.”

“Sherlock, wait!” John pushes back his chair while reaching for his coat at the same time. “How can you be so sure?”

Sherlock almost rolls his eyes. A disinterest in economics, business and trade he can condone – without Mycroft for a brother he’d know next to nothing about those either, and besides most of it is excruciatingly tedious – but John’s indifference to music is harder to accept. Real music that is, not the arbitrary noise John insists on forcing Sherlock to endure while he’s cooking or partaking in some dull household chore, staring daggers at Sherlock who habitually retreats to the quarterdeck of the sofa during these outbursts of activity with his hands pressed to his ears.

If John had agreed to accompany him to the opera two weeks ago he would have grasped the solution to their current small puzzle himself and they could have basked together in the wonderful blankets of sound. Leporello’s witty aria should appeal to John, being both a blogger and a ladies man himself, and the Finale had been rendered with exquisite ferocity, the orchestra outdoing itself. Instead, John had elected to get pissed with Lestrade at the Yard’s local. Sherlock had been so
annoyed with John he’d ignored him for much of the following morning. Unfortunately, John had read this as a rare instance of consideration on Sherlock’s part for John’s – judging by the groans and noises of retching which had issued from the bathroom – extensive hangover.

“The clue is in the name, John. And the pattern. Look.” In two strides Sherlock is next to John to point out the entry. “These are the accounts for the year two thousand and one. See this? One hundred and three thousand and twenty nine pounds and seventy nine pence,” he reads out. “A very specific amount, sufficiently large enough for no one to raise an eyebrow, yet small enough not to furrow them either.” His eye flits over the rest of the lines. The amounts paid to Leporello BV show a steady increase over time, with an occasional dip. Sherlock supposes those converge with the dips of the economy, another favourite topic of discussion during those exceedingly dull dinners chez Mycroft his brother has him attend whenever he desires Sherlock’s opinion on the trustworthiness of one of his moronic underlings or partners in crime.

“Yes. So?”

“What have we been looking for, John? This exactly. Leporello is the servant of one of the greatest rakes in opera history and keeps count of his master’s exploits in a catalogue. And here we have a firm selling high quality paper, based in Holland with its paper mills and convenient tax laws. Oh, it’s all too clever. We’ve got another brilliant one on our hands, John.”

He’d like to snort with derision but the idea of tracking down Hawker has Sherlock rub his hands instead. To his frustration John doesn’t look half as excited as Sherlock is feeling. At the very least right now he should be mouthing his awe at Sherlock’s particular cleverness. They’ve barely been on the case for four hours and he’s already solved it. Well, the important parts anyway.

“The poor woman,” John is mouthing instead.

Sherlock scoffs. “Hardly poor, John.”

“Jesus Christ, Sherlock.” Now John is actually looking shocked, as if Sherlock has said something not good; and not just a bit not good either.

Oh. Sherlock blinks quickly a few times as understanding hits him. A secret part of him huffs, exasperated. As if he cares one jot about money. Surely John ought to have picked up by now that’s Mycroft’s department entirely. Granted, he presented Lady Levison with a fee John must have considered outrageous but that’s because John doesn’t realise she wouldn’t have taken them seriously if he hadn’t done so.

Sherlock doesn’t need money, doesn’t want money, doesn’t want to be bothered by money, not ever again. He’s wasted too much time in the past chasing the damned stuff, degrading himself in the process. With fierce determination, hiding his hands behind his back to hide his whitened knuckles, he drives the hateful memories back in the dark coal cellar where he’d locked them. That’s what thinking about money does: it brings out the worst, takes one down.

Something which Sherlock will never allow to happen again. Should they, for whatever reason, end up in dire straits Sherlock won’t hesitate turning to Mycroft to ask him help to float them along. Mycroft will be all too happy to oblige, provided Sherlock won’t start popping any pills or injecting himself with anything illegal again, but he doesn’t need that, not when he has The Work.

And, he adds after some wavering, as long as he’s got John, who has become essential to The Work, in a manner he doesn’t want to contemplate too closely. Together with Lestrade and Mrs Hudson and even blundering, blushing Molly for without her he has no access to the lab and the morgue, and he needs those. Obviously. Only yesterday he’s collected an extensive range of eyeballs in every
colour imaginable. He still has to catch on a useful purpose for them, but he’ll conceive of something in the next couple of days. After all, great science is often the result of a spur-of-the-moment caprice.

“I’ll never get you,” John interrupts his musings. “One moment you’re all compassion, the next you’re a fucking twat. Can’t you see? All this time that poor woman has been living a lie.”

“Aren’t we all?” replies Sherlock. No doubt John will consider this another heartless and flippant remark but Sherlock can’t just whip up sympathy for the Lady Levisons of this world at John Watson’s command. He’s simply met too many of the kind.

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Naturally, Lady Levison’s reaction upon receiving the results of the investigation is entirely in line with Sherlock’s estimation. She purses her lips in a small moue of distaste but otherwise doesn’t bat so much as an eyelid.

“The fool,” is all she says before raising her cup to her lips for a delicate sip. After replacing it in her saucer with a mellifluous tinkle of eggshell china she rises swiftly, the plaids of her tweed skirt swirling around her legs, and walks to a small writing desk on the left of the room.

There, she seats herself with the air of a woman preparing herself for the unpleasant task of unblocking the sewer with nothing but her bare hands for an instrument and engages in the task of unscrewing a diamond-studded cap from a fountain pen. “In a few days I want you to go to the Continent to inform Mr Hawker the game is up,” she tells them while the nib scratches over a sheet of paper, handmade by the sound of it. “My lawyers will need some time to draw up the contract for a small life settlement. I’d be obliged if you and Dr Watson would be so kind as to deliver it to Mr Hawker.”

In fact she’s ordering them to. The set of her shoulders tells Sherlock she won’t take no for an answer, sorely tempting him to give her just that. On the other hand, they haven’t exactly finished the case yet. And a trip to Amsterdam might be fun. It’s not as if they’ve anything more interesting going on at the moment. The eyeballs can wait.

“I’ll arrange for my usual suite at the Amstel Hotel,” Lady Levison continues, still writing. “Unless you’d prefer alternative accommodation.”

“The Amstel will do,” Sherlock re-joins crisply. He shoots John a quick glance, the first since they entered the room. A hazy sheen of confusion clings to the corners of his mouth but otherwise he’s doing better than Sherlock expected. Perhaps the Amsterdam scenario has perked him up. “You know where to find me. Don’t bother ringing for the maid. We’ll see ourselves out.”

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“Ah, it’s good to see the old school again,” Michael exclaims, slanting his gaze towards Mycroft and smiling at him.

“Hmmm,” Mycroft hums but he’s smiling back at Michael all the same and that makes Sherlock want to scream at the pair of them.

He has been angry since Mycroft entered his room that morning to casually inform him Michael would be accompanying them.

“You’ve got to understand, Sherlock,” Mycroft said. “Michael will be off in three days and it will be many weeks before we’ll have a chance of seeing each other again.”
Sherlock nodded, already fuming inside. “Of course,” he said in a stiff tone and turned his back on Mycroft to fumble with his suitcase, which Nanny had already packed to perfection yesterday. All he had to do was sneak in a fresh supply of pills among his meticulously folded shirts. He didn’t open his mouth during breakfast, except to cram it with toast and scrambled eggs. However, Michael kept up such a constant stream of inane chatter Mycroft probably didn’t even notice his silence.

The drive down to school had been more of the same. Michael babbling away, Mycroft humming and smiling with his eyes on the road, his right hand on the steering wheel and his left on Michael’s thigh, caressing. Entrenched in the backseat Sherlock glared at the moron’s tanned neck with such intensity he was amazed it didn’t catch fire. Must be because he’s such a soppy 
douchebag
, he decided with spiteful resignation and began a study of the boring landscape hurtling past the window.

“Be kind, Sherlock,” he heard Mr Talbot’s reproving, yet gentle, tones. “The poor man is obsessively attached to your brother and they’ll be parted in just a few days. You may not understand why Mycroft would wish to consort with Michael but his preferences are not yours to judge.”

Now he holds out his hand to Michael. “I can’t stop you if you want to have a look around but I have some unpacking to do,” he says. His voice rings a little false in his own ears but Michael is too wrapped up in satisfaction on having wormed his way into this excursion to pick up on Sherlock’s hostility, especially as he’s cloaking it with the blandest smile from his store of innocently sincere smiles.

Of course the smile doesn’t stump Mycroft in the least. Over the edge of Michael’s shoulder he’s glowering at Sherlock. Safe in the knowledge Mycroft won’t haul him over the coals in front of Michael, Sherlock smirks at his brother.

“I’ll be seeing you in three weeks,” he says. If asked he’d swear he wasn’t trying to gloat, but, if he’s completely honest with himself he might have to admit he’s failing rather spectacularly at doing just that.

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10th December, 1993

Dear Sherlock,

You must be the first boy in existence to declare himself ‘bored to tears’ during his final year. However, I won’t mind this superciliousness too much since your results so far show you must have been working very hard. I suppose Mr Beckett is a very happy man right now, despite your choice of career. After all, you might still do important work in chemistry in the few spare hours the violin will permit you.

Thank you for the recording you sent me. I’m impressed with your technical mastery of the fugue. A friend of mine who knows far more of music than I do once explained this one to be the most difficult Bach has written. But I confess I liked the adagio best, for in it you displayed a depth of feeling anyone unaware of your history would be astonished to find in someone so young. Your playing confirms the wisdom of your choice. Devoting yourself to the violin will help you channel your past and your emotions in a way science would never be able to do, and enrich the world with your performance.
Please remember to give my highest regards to Mr Whitall the next time you meet. He’s ‘played’ you properly, hasn’t he? You ought to be very grateful to him. I do hope you’ve told him as much.

My pupil and I followed your advice regarding his computer to the letter and it appears to be working as it should be again. My employer, who had asked for some of his IT-personnel to look into the matter, was not amused. My pupil, however, sends you his most sincere thanks.

Do let me know your history results as soon as you’ve got them.

In the meantime I remain, your devoted friend and former tutor,

Edmund Talbot

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“I thought we could spend a few days in London together,” Mycroft says once they’ve entered the M25. “How about leaving for London the day after Boxing Day and staying until the New Year? I haven’t got that much going on at the office. We could visit the British Museum, go to the opera, whatever takes your fancy.”

“Oh,” is Sherlock’s first – not very eloquent – reaction. Mycroft’s proposal takes him by surprise, as he has mentally prepared himself for another long stretch of Michael. Surely the bungling dimwit will want to be home for Christmas, and thus be around sooner or later to annoy the hell out of Sherlock. How can he not, after having missed his darling Mycroft so much?

“Yes,” Sherlock delivers next. “I’d like that. I’d like that very, very much. And perhaps we might go to the Royal Albert Hall. If they’ve got anything interesting, that is.”

“The Albert Hall might be a bit of a problem at such short notice but I’ll see what I can do,” promises Mycroft. “You deserve it, after working so hard.” All along he is studiously avoiding meeting Sherlock’s gaze. In the fast fading light of the wintry afternoon the white skin of his knuckles glows against the dark leather of the steering wheel.

So, no Michael then. Something is definitely off but it is obvious Mycroft doesn’t want to discuss whatever has occurred between the two of them. Not with Sherlock anyway, which, Sherlock reckons, is something to be grateful for. Doing so wouldn’t fit with their roles of older and younger sibling, the wise and responsible man versus the fickle, reckless boy. Almost a decade ago the role was assigned to Mycroft and he has committed himself to the part with ceaseless abandon. Now he needs Sherlock to confirm that he has chosen correctly. They’re two sides of the same coin. They both need to rub it equally hard to keep it in mint condition. If Sherlock so much as asks what’s wrong with Mycroft he will break the spell.

All the same, he can be sympathetic. For whatever it is that is bothering Mycroft.

Sherlock extends his hand and lets it rest on Mycroft’s arm. He doesn’t grip it, just allows his fingers to lie there, on the Glen plaid of Mycroft’s jacket. After a few seconds Mycroft lifts one hand from the wheel and presses Sherlock’s fingers briefly before returning them to the wheel. His gaze never leaves the same stretch of road flashing up in the headlights.

“We’ll have a great time,” he says. “I’m looking forward to it.”

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At home, Sherlock finds both John and Nanny seated in front of the fire in the kitchen. John, incongruously, is peeling potatoes, a sight which has Sherlock blink a few times, but otherwise he
looks fine, all considering. At Sherlock’s entrance he leverages himself out of his chair easily enough and his frame, when they embrace, doesn’t strike Sherlock as having withered that much since the summer. Perhaps the doctor was wrong, he thinks for an absurd moment. Then both Nanny and Cook are competing to fawn over him and gush how he’s grown yet again – when will he ever stop growing? – and John quietly resumes his place in front of the fire.

“Now you sit down and I’ll cut you some sandwiches,” Cook says. “They still don’t know how to feed you properly down there it seems. And I’ve got some cranberry apple cake left. It actually tastes better after two days.” She casts a fierce look around the kitchen as if daring anyone to challenge her here in her own domain.

“Oh yes, absolutely,” John hastily com�iles, winking at Sherlock. “I wouldn’t mind another bite myself, if Sherlock doesn’t need it all, that is.”

“I’ll never understand what they’re doing at those schools anyway,” Nanny is complaining in the interim. “They don’t know how to darn a sweater vest, that’s for sure. I hope you haven’t burned any new holes in the last ones, Sherlock.”

“No, Nanny,” Sherlock replies with just the right amount of meekness. “I’ve been careful, like you told me.”

“Good,” she says and pats him on the shoulder. She has to reach up really high in order to do so. “You should take care of your clothes. The state of your dress tells people everything about the state of your mind.”

“Yes, Nanny.” Sherlock folds at the waist to brush his lips over the drooping skin of her cheek. Her arms fly up and hook around his neck.

“Oh my boy,” she says. “I’m so proud of you. And so happy for you as well.”

“For not burning any holes in my clothes?” he asks, frowning at her.

“Yes, you cheeky boy. And… oh, just wait until you see.” Then, to Sherlock’s astonishment, she claps her hand in front of her mouth as if she’s a little girl about to spill a secret and all of a sudden remembering her promise not to give anything away.

“Sherlock, sit down for your tea,” Cook interrupts them, practical as ever. The look of gratitude Nanny sends Cook’s way is as thick and sweet as the inevitable slice of fruitcake accompanying the cup and the sandwiches.

“What?” Sherlock starts but, in a rare show of solidarity, the two women turn their backs on him and when Sherlock glances at John in search of enlightenment John shrugs and wiggles his eyebrows to indicate he hasn’t the faintest what those two are going on about.

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Sherlock enters the dining room to find a woman standing in front of the French windows. An abundance of grey hair perches on top of her head, the artfully arranged bobbing mass of thick strands a pleasing contrast to her rather severe black velvet dress. Upon hearing the click of the handle as Sherlock closes the door she turns around and smiles at Sherlock.

“Darling,” she says and holds out her arms to him.

Sherlock freezes and stares at his mother. Her appearance, with her lips stretched wide in welcome, strikes him as astonishingly normal. It’s been almost a year since he’s last seen her. After being sent
away time and again he has stopped going up to her room to say goodbye when leaving for school. To his knowledge she hasn’t strayed from her self-imposed prison in over two years. And yet here she is, smiling brightly, welcoming him...

Or her darling, a voice in his head warns.

“Hello,” he forwards, hoping his tentative greeting will warn her she’s not dealing with Daddy. Except perhaps his voice resembles Daddy’s as well? He can’t remember what his father’s voice sounded like and, momentarily, it panics him. He invites the bewilderment for it’s a better alternative than the infinite sadness the idea he’s lost the memory of Daddy’s voice forever evokes in him. But then, he thinks, surely Daddy’s voice was like his, not darker. A similarity is much more likely, seeing how he’s his father’s image in every other aspect. He should ask John. He’ll ask him tomorrow.

All these thoughts jump through his mind while he vacillates over the question approaching the woman, hovering close to the door and studying his mother’s face for giveaways to the state of her mind. Who does she believe him to be? Daddy, which will result in a frantically passionate hugging of his body, the idea of which revolts him? Or her son, which will in all probability result in her trying to scratch out his eyes?

In the meantime, Mummy’s expectant look hasn’t wavered. She walks to her place at the dining table, which, Sherlock now spots, is laid for three, and sits down on her chair.

“Do come here, Sherlock,” she says, patting the table next to his seat with her hand. The flesh is very white, her lacquered nails protruding from the end of her fingers like great beading drops of blood. “Sit down and tell me how you are. Nanny kept extolling on your achievements in school. I want to hear all about them.”

So today he’s himself, apparently. Sherlock lets go of the breath he was holding and ventures away from the door.

“Of course.” Quickly, he walks up to the table and bends to kiss his mother dutifully upon the cheek she tilts towards him for just this purpose. The skin is firm and very soft, almost as firm and soft as it was that evening, when he’d nearly drowned in the sea and she sat hugging him after she’d slapped him. Her eyes, beneath the long mascaraed lashes, are lucid. In that moment, Sherlock acknowledges, his mother is every bit as sane as he is.

“My dear boy,” Mummy murmurs. “But sit, sit, for I want to know all.”

“There’s nothing much to tell, Mummy,” Sherlock begins when the door is thrown open wide to give access to Mycroft.

“My sincere apologies.” His voice is as smooth and glowing as the freshly scrubbed and waxed parquet flooring in the corridors. In three strides he’s in front of Mummy who surges up into his arms. “Mummy, I’m so very, very happy to see you looking so well,” he says and presses her small form tight against his chest.

His act is, Sherlock admits, impressive. More so, naturally, because Mycroft is entirely honest in his declaration. His love for their mother is unaltered, a perpetual truth flowing naturally from the fact that Mycroft is her son. As such, his duty is to love the woman who gave him life, without question and without fail.

Not being assaulted by said woman on a regular basis greatly helps with keeping up the pretence.
Mummy is still holding on to Mycroft. Over the top of her head he opens his eyes, allowing Sherlock a brief glimpse before lowering his lids. The white of his eyeballs is tinged with red.

A shiver slides down Sherlock’s spine and he slants his gaze.

When their eyes meet again Mycroft’s are as pale as translucently white glass again. The pinkish hue must have been an effect of the lightning, Sherlock tells himself. That’s the problem with candles, they shed no proper light at all.

“Oh, I’m so glad to have my two sons back home again,” Mummy says. “We’re going to have a wonderful Christmas, all by ourselves.”

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“What do you think of Mummy?” Mycroft enquires later that evening, after their mother has retired for the night. Every now and then he lifts the tumbler of whisky to his lips but mostly his hands make use of the glass as an alternative to gripping the armrests of his chair. Sherlock sits with crossed legs in front of the fire, poking at it in a desultory fashion, while he considers the question.

“I don’t understand,” he concedes at last. “It’s almost like she’s swapped places with someone else. Which is impossible, for Nanny would never allow it. And why didn’t anyone tell me?”

A chuckle emerges from Mycroft’s throat. As his brow remains crinkled with unhappiness the overall effect is slightly unsettling.

“I specifically asked Nanny and Cook not to in order not to distract you from school. But really, you ought to feel proud of Nanny. She refused our new GP access to Mummy’s room at first, necessitating me to drive up from London and negotiate on behalf of the woman. I confess to some doubts, initially, but Dr Davies has proved herself to be a remarkable asset.”

Slowly, he raises the glass to his mouth for another gulp. When he lowers it again the level of the liquid has visibly dropped. Mycroft swallows, almost painfully.

“I’d given up on her, Sherlock. After that episode with the book I gave up on her. It was wrong of me… I realised at the time… but she had betrayed my trust, and that hurt me so. I’d begged her to wait, and she just upped…”

He almost chokes on the words. Sherlock ventures a glance up at Mycroft’s face, already afraid of what he’ll find there, and swivelling it straightaway back to a philosophical contemplation of the flames when he catches sight of the dreaded, mortifying sheen bathing Mycroft’s eyeballs and the quick quiver of his lashes.

No, Sherlock thinks, no. I don’t want to see this; I’m not going to watch him fall apart over her. She’s not worth it.

He makes a great show of scooting up and reaching towards the basket to retrieve a log of wood and arrange it on the fire, hoping Mycroft will make use of the interlude to recompose himself. It’s a shrewd move on his part but unfortunately it doesn’t stop him from encountering Mycroft’s words, spoken quietly with the fierce dedication of an oath, sworn in blood dripping on every holy book on the planet. “I won’t bow out, ever again.”

The glass is raised once more. If anyone but Mycroft were holding it Sherlock would expect him to throw the glass into the fire, to underscore the gravity of the vow he just made. However, this is Mycroft, so the glass ends up at his brother’s lips and the only indication of Mycroft’s lessened equanimity is the light tinkle of his teeth against the heavy crystal.
“So Dr Davies discovered Mummy was locked up high with the bats in the belfry for no reason at all,” Sherlock drawls, pushing at the log with the poker. The fire protests at this treatment with a wild flickering of its flames before discovering the fresh log it’s been fed and attacking the wood with great ferocity. Sherlock wonders whether Mycroft buys this sudden riveted interest in a tame fire contained within the tight confinement of the fireplace. Probably not.

“Shortly put, yes, that’s what happened.” Mercifully Mycroft sounds like his usual self again. “Apparently some new insights have developed over the past few years and Dr Davies proposed a change of diet, a regimen of exercise and extensive sessions of therapy. She chucked out most of the pills as well.”

“Oh.” Sherlock’s head whips up upon hearing that particular piece of information, which is quite unwelcome, as he’d reckoned on replenishing his stock this holiday. He does some rapid counting in his head and concludes he’s got enough pills left to help him through the remainder of the year. As Sherlock won’t be expected to waste another precious second in the company of any of those morons once he’s finished there he won’t need the pills anymore. He’s not an addict. He’ll be living in London, surrounded by people whose life consists of nothing but music, which will be perfect. Each day will be nothing but a chase of the perpetual puzzle of notes and that will be an occupation intriguing enough to last him a lifetime. Still, it’s always smart to be prepared for any eventuality such as a massive outbreak of IQ-lowering stupidity on an unprecedented level, incapacitating the entire school population even further.

“Yes, thank God,” sighs Mycroft, obviously – thankfully – misinterpreting Sherlock’s reaction. “We can’t thank Dr Davies enough, Sherlock. She’s the epitome of patience, almost outdoing Nanny in that respect. Apparently their sessions helped Mummy see she has some things left to live for. With some proper guidance her mind may be sharpened again. A restoration to its former glory is unlikely, but, should she wish to engage in a fresh study, we might find her an assistant.”

The notion strikes Sherlock as a ludicrous aspiration on Mycroft’s part and he harrumphs, but quietly, shoving his lower lip forward whilst attempting to create a diversion by stirring up the fire. Not that it works.

“You disapprove,” Mycroft observes; both voice and bearing when Sherlock looks up at him perfectly neutral, so Sherlock rewards his acuity with a smile before thinking over the implied question.

“I don’t know,” he admits at last. “Why would she suddenly wish to seem normal again, after playing the invalid for so long?”

“Playing the invalid,” Mycroft repeats in a dull tone. “That’s harsh, Sherlock, considering she’s our mother.”

“What has that got to do with it?” he asks, not bothering to hide the exasperation Mycroft’s stance creates in him. “She’s a con artist. Don’t tell me you still fall for her tricks? I don’t mind that she’s taken in that doctor and Nanny… and Cook, but you?”

“Now you’re petulant as well as unkind,” Mycroft chides him. “Callousness is a blunt instrument wielded by savages. I expect you to do better than that.”

A hot molten stream of indignation wells up in Sherlock’s chest, suffusing his face with treacherous warmth. He’s grateful for the disguise of the fire’s heat, providing him with an excuse for the sweat he feels beading his brow and pooling in the hollow between his collarbones.

“And I expect you not to be cruel,” he grinds out. “You as good as promised…”
“How does a desire for some consideration on your part amount to cruelty?” But for the white-knuckled grip of his hand as he reaches over to place the emptied glass on the mantle Mycroft appears perfectly cool, unaffected by the hotness of the flames whose shadows dance over his face. His tone is equally unaffected, another clear indication of his anger. “You’re no longer a child so it’s about time you adopt a more adult attitude towards Mummy and her problems. She’s our closest kin and we should support her in her attempts to regain a life, not scoff at them.”

Sherlock opens his mouth, only to find he’s literally speechless, so, rather than sitting there gawking like a simpleton the forces his jaw to snap shut again. What happened for the evening to disintegrate into such a shambles so rapidly? How is it possible Mycroft and he are but a hair’s breadth from coming to blows? Mycroft, the person he loves and admires more than anyone else in the world. This is all Mummy’s fault.

“Sherlock,” Mycroft enquires, sharply, and right then Sherlock feels such pity for Mycroft and his perpetual desire for Mummy to be the woman, the affectionate and loving mother, she may have been once, before Sherlock came into his world to mess with Mycroft’s small and safe existence. Rather than answering his brother or meeting his gaze Sherlock leaps up and storms out of the room, throwing the door shut behind him with a mighty bang.

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When Sherlock enters the shed the next day he finds both John and the boy bent over the engine of the mowing machine. The sight of their closely conferring heads sends the bile surging in his throat. The resulting taste of eggs, bacon and tomatoes with a liberal dash of stomach acid and several cups of tea nearly has him retching. He hides his mouth behind one hand and, through an act of will every bit as hard and unpleasant as any of the tasks Hercules was forced to undertake, transforms his misery into a polite cough.

“Sherlock,” John says, rising and reaching for a rag to wipe his hands on. He turns to the boy. “We’ll manage to fix this ourselves, I think, but we need the right size screws. You can bring them tomorrow. Why don’t you go and burn them leaves like I showed you last month.”

“Will do,” the boy says, and, with a brief nod in Sherlock’s direction, saunters off. John sighs.

“The lad’s bright enough but cocky, know what I mean? Cook says he’s insolent but he’s a good kid at heart, just could have done with a few scoldings when he was younger.”

“Yes, fine,” Sherlock answers, aiming for impatience with a touch of imperiousness. “I didn’t come down here to discuss your dull underling. I want to know how you are. You’re looking well at least.”

“His name is Billy Robertson, Sherlock. And he’s not the only one who could’ve done with a few scoldings if you insist on behaving like that.” John’s tone is sharp but the look he shoots Sherlock is filled with his customary exasperated fondness. “I like the lad well enough but he’s not you, Sherlock. Don’t tell me you’re as stupid not to realise just that.”

“Of course not.” Sherlock aims for ridicule but his voice, he notes, is giddy with relief.

“Oh, Sherlock.” John shakes his head, slowly, as if in disbelief. “You Holmeses are all the same, so clever, and at the same time so eternally stupid. Now, I know you want to have a look at that strange fungus I wrote you about but I want you to help me clear this bench first, all right?”

“If we must,” grumbles Sherlock, but he picks up a screwdriver and a rag all the same. After cleaning the screwdriver he neatly slots it into its assigned space on the board hoisted against the
wall. The shaking of Sherlock’s knees lessens gradually as they fall into their familiar pattern of working side by side, John humming a tune under his breath.

Together they tidy up the tools that are spread out neatly on the workbench. “I saw the cogs in your head working yesterday afternoon,” John says in a casually conversational tone. “Almost disappointed, weren’t you, to find I hadn’t been lying when I wrote I’m doing well, all considering.” He switches a pair of hammers. “No, this one goes here,” he mutters to himself.

As John has hit the nail right on the head, Sherlock is speechless for an instant. “Well,” he defends his assumption, “you hadn’t been entirely honest with me this spring.”

“Yeah, I suppose so,” John concedes, throwing Sherlock a quick, lopsided smile. “But then, there was nothing to be honest about then, was there? I didn’t know and now I do.”

A terrible realisation hits Sherlock at those words, immediately followed by the thought that the trite phrase about veils being ripped away from one’s eyes is in fact staggeringly true. How callous and self-centred he’s been, and not towards some average moron he doesn’t care about but towards John.

“John,” he says, “John, I… you didn’t want to know and I made you. God…”

“No, please.” With a swiftness belying his age John spins towards Sherlock, and then, wonderfully, comfortingly, he is hugging Sherlock close to his chest, never mind that the top of his head barely reaches Sherlock’s nose. Sherlock lets himself relax into the embrace, inhaling John’s familiar scent of earth and burning fire and honey with just the faintest whiff of motor oil.

“I don’t mind,” John says. “I really don’t. There’s a certain intensity to life now, that’s good. Yes. While picking the apples I thought, this is the last time, John, better enjoy it, and that does help. And also…” He falters and, delicately, distances himself from Sherlock to regard him with the calculating look of a man assessing the width of the abyss he’ll have to jump. In the end he backtracks and takes the leap, against his inclination perhaps, the words half-slurred in their reluctance to make it out of his mouth.

“Once I wished I were dead. After your father told me and went back to university, to your mother. When you’re young the idea of dying doesn’t seem that terrifying. Less terrifying then losing love, that’s for certain. But it passed, and I lived, and sometimes I was even happy, in a way, until I lost him again…” He breaks off to heave a deep breath, fastidiously not looking at Sherlock.

“Ever since, I haven’t been afraid of death, not any longer. I haven’t been looking for it, but I don’t mind knowing it’s got an eye on me now. This summer – that day you found me... Like I said, not looking but I can’t say I mind now I know it’s looking for me. So all in all it’s a good thing you made me visit that doctor, Sherlock. It’s good to have the time to say goodbye. I love this shed. I love being with you in this shed. And somehow, now I love it even more.” John laughs and reaches up to right a small saw. “There,” he says. “That will do for now. Let’s talk of something different.”

“Why’s that?” Sherlock asks. Inwardly, he cringes at the heatedness of his tone. Another part of him huffs at his own question’s stupidity. It’s not more than natural that John wants to end the discussion. After all, he’s the one who’s going to die shortly. And, though Sherlock regularly feels like he’d rather die than live another minute of excruciating tediousness, he realises this is a far thing from actually Knocking at death’s door. If he were the one who’s end was nearing he’d spin on his heel and start running, as fast as his legs could carry him, running all the way to India, or Isfahan, he can’t remember. Which is deplorable, and probably due to the fact that he can’t access his mind properly right now, thanks to the wide sea of roaring emotions that has flooded the cavity behind his eyeballs.

“I’m not dead yet, you silly boy,” John replies. “We’ve more than enough time left to discuss the
subject. To bore you to death with it. Don’t feel hurt. Imagine you were me. Would you like to talk about dying all the time?”

“No. But for you it will be over once you’re dead.” And try as Sherlock might run to India or Isfahan John will be gone, gone forever. Can’t he see how unbearable that is, how lonely Sherlock is going to be? Despair clutches at his shoulders, his face, rendering his eyes moist until the world is nothing but a murky blur out of which John’s features swim up into his vision.

“That,” John says, “is one of the most callous and self-centred things I’ve ever heard from you. I know you’re not like that, not really. So let’s forget you ever said it, all right?”

No, Sherlock wants to shout, no! I mean it and you’re asking me to deny what’s real, but instead he nods dumbly and gives John a brave smile.

“All right.”

“Hmmm.” John watches him, head cocked to the side and then he sighs. “We’ll talk some more later. Now let’s go have a look at those mushrooms, shall we? A whole new crop of them sprouted yesterday, close to the small gate.”

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“Ah, Sherlock.” Mummy calls out to him as he slinks past the door of the yellow drawing room. She’s languishing on the sofa, one slender foot peeping out from under the embroidered hem of her silk morning robe. “You’re just the man I wanted. Do be a darling and find me Mycroft, would you? And run for Nanny to bring us coffee and another serving of that divine Christmas cake. I’m too lazy this morning to stand and ring for her.”

“Oh, and dearest, straighten your shoulders,” Mummy continues, frowning at him over the edge of the book she’s holding. “You’re such a pretty boy, that slumped posture is quite unnecessary. Head high, Sherlock.”

Sherlock sucks in air between his teeth, bracing himself for the inevitable comparison to Daddy, followed up by a dirge of requiem-like intensity bewailing her loss. The room remains, however, conspicuously quiet. After three seconds he risks a glance in his mother’s direction only to find her attention engaged by her book again. He squints to read the letters on the cover around the splayed tendrils of the exotic flower that is her elegant small hand. *Chekov!* Mummy is reading Chekov, Daddy’s beloved author.

*Oh.*

Dazed, Sherlock gropes for the support of the doorpost to steady himself. Mummy chooses that instant to lift her gaze from the page and direct it straight at him, the corners of her – tastefully lipsticked – mouth turned up quizzically. “Still here, darling? Chop chop.”

“Yes, Mummy,” he slurs, as if he’s a first-rate idiot, before pivoting on his heel and making a run for it. He runs straight down the hall and the corridor to Daddy’s study, which, apart from his own room and the yellow drawing room, is Mycroft’s favourite place in the house.

Mycroft’s head snaps up with an almost audible crack of his vertebrae when Sherlock tears into the room after a knock so brief the term perfunctorily doesn’t even begin to describe it properly.

“Sherlock?” The flesh of his brother’s cheeks is shiny and slightly swollen, as if he hasn’t slept well,
though he seemed his customary unruffled self when at the breakfast table, which they left but two
hours ago. With the deliberate pomposity which overtakes him whenever he holes up in Daddy’s
study, as if he’s undertaking a careful study of the traits and peculiarities which are the stuff of great
men of state, he arranges his fountain pen next to the pile of documents and letters in front of him.

“Mummy wants you in the yellow drawing room,” Sherlock announces.

“Oh.” Mycroft blinks thrice, chagrin fleeting over his face to be replaced quickly with tired
resignation. “What for?”

Sherlock shrugs. “She didn’t say and I didn’t ask. Perhaps she wants to talk dinner arrangements
with you…”

“Still hostile, I see,” Mycroft sighs while screwing the cap on his pen. “Well…” He pats the pile into
a neat stack and leverages himself out of his chair. “You’d better become used to her presence
around the house again. Generosity, Sherlock, if delivered in the appropriate dosage is a boon to
donator and receiver alike.”

“I suppose I’m still too flabbergasted by the sheer wonder of the resurrection to appreciate the gift,”
quips Sherlock.

“Would Easter have been a better time for you to accept this new reality?” Mycroft enquires. “If so,
forgive me for inconveniencing you.”

“Mycroft, it’s not…”

“No.” They’re almost nose to nose in the door opening now with Sherlock shrinking back into the
corridor to give Mycroft room for passage. “I realise it’s not whatever you were going to say. But
Sherlock, please, accept her back into your life. For our sake, if you’re unable to do it for hers.”

Sherlock gulps, and nods.

“Good.” Mycroft’s smile is very faint. “Very good, Sherlock. I’m proud of you, little brother of
mine.”

***

“I just can’t believe it.” John shakes his head in a bout of fresh bewilderment. “Lived with the man
for twenty years and doesn’t bat an eyelid.” In a higher pitch he imitates Lady Levison’s words,
incredulity marring his performance. “ ‘My lawyers need some time draw up the contract for a small
life settlement.’ ” Back in his normal register John concludes, “Jesus, is she even human?”

And, at the moment, sincerely lamenting the fact, no doubt. She’ll get over it. Everyone does.”

In the reflection of the glass, John spreads his mouth around a deep puff of breath before rubbing a
hand over his face. “I don’t know,” he says, wearily. “When Clara broke it off with Harry again she
went postal. Somehow strikes me as more natural.”

The ludicrous idea of Lady Levison ‘going postal’ briefly inserts itself in Sherlock’s mind, causing
him to snort dismissively. “The day your sister decided on a career in real estate she deprived the
English stage of one of its greatest actresses.”

“As spoken by the top drama queen himself,” John deadpans.
“Only when I’m bored, John,” he shoots back. For an instant they both freeze at the brazen honesty, and then they’re both giggling like mad, collapsing helplessly into each other, drawing the cabbie’s eyes to the rear mirror. John’s eyes are scrunched shut as tight in amusement as his mouth is wide open so Sherlock’s eyes are the ones to intercept the cabbie’s disapproving look. Which is, frankly, perfect in every way that counts so Sherlock laughs even louder.

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Fata Volentem Ducunt, Nolentem Trahunt, chapter 6.

Chapter Summary

The sharp sound of leather shoe soles slapping against the parquet flooring of the corridor startles Sherlock. Hastily he returns the letter to its position in the stack and tugs and twitches at the papers and folders until it looks exactly like it did when Mycroft left the room. Grabbing the photo frame he jumps away from the desk and arranges himself on the end of the sofa to engage himself in an earnest contemplation of the picture.

Chapter Notes

Thanks again to the wonderful susako who continues to be the most amazing and patient beta.

The most annoying thing about Amsterdam, Sherlock decides after five minutes of walking along one of the city’s famous canals, is that everyone – and he means literally everyone, regardless of age or gender – is almost as tall or possibly taller than he is. He may have the advantage of a good coat and a short friend but they rather fall flat in this country peopled by giants. Thankfully, he has more weapons in his arsenal: his curls, which he tosses with an arrogant shake of his head, and, more particularly The Glare, which he puts to use relentlessly, together with a wide swoop of billowing coat tails, as he strides along with John in tow.

“Are you thinking of emigrating yet?” John asks, a little breathless, plastic carrier bag flapping against his thigh, as Sherlock stares down another horde of cyclists bent on a suicide mission of ignoring the traffic lights. Those sodding morons are everywhere, turning the narrow thoroughfares and bridges into a warzone where they wield their vehicles with as little regard for their surroundings as the average army recruit let loose in the Afghan desert in the deceptively safe environment of the newest tank model.

“And do Mycroft a good turn? Never,” Sherlock replies grimly, gripping John by the hand to drag him to the other side of the street, narrowly avoiding the next surge of maniacs seemingly hell-bent on instant martyrdom.

“The longer I think about it, the more I suggest the move,” John insists, a mischievous twinkle in his eyes as he jogs along beside Sherlock. “Just going to the shops will be an adventure. Imagine you getting the milk for once.”

“Another perfect reason to stay put at Baker Street.” Sherlock declines the suggestion with a flick of his wrist. “Besides, Mrs Hudson is too old to adapt herself to another country and she’d miss Mrs Turner. I find this whole discussion extremely ludicrous.”

Instead of answering, John yanks at his arm, pulling Sherlock out of the path of a cyclist hurtling himself at them with the steadfast determination of a hound cutting down to the chase.

“Oi, watch it,” John shouts, the tips of his ears turning an enraged red. The man whips around on his
saddle, yells “stupid tourist assholes” in their direction and throws his bicycle in the general fray with renewed vigour.

“And everyone is as rude as you are and they all appear to speak some of the language,” John continues.

Whilst carefully rearranging his scarf, Sherlock twitches his nose. “I’m never rude, merely efficient,” he dismisses John’s remark. “Unlike these people wasting precious body energy with their ridiculous antics. Did you know that a cyclist has to expend about twenty times as much energy as a pedestrian in order to reach his normal journey speed? Ah, here we are.”

“Nice location,” John comments drily as they climb the stoop’s short flight of hardstone stairs, a material that must have cost a fortune when the house was built. Here the canal is slightly broader, stretching away around a slight bend, covered by pretty bow bridges and lined with rows of flowering elm trees on either side. The sight is actually quite pleasing.

“A great eye for location is the universal hallmark of the average con man, John,” he lectures. “Or woman,” he adds as an afterthought. “First rule, actually.”

“So there are rules. Shouldn’t you put those on the website?” John asks with an innocent raise of his right eyebrow.

“Yes, well…” To his mortification Sherlock feels a blush overtake his cheeks. He presses the elegant bell, and pretends an ardent fascination with the reflection of his finger in the shiny brass surface. “Wouldn’t do to give the game away.”

“No, I guess not,” John agrees. Thankfully the door is buzzed open at that particular moment, providing Sherlock with the opportunity to sweep into the entrance hall with a great swish of coat and drama, leaving John to trail behind him like an afterthought.

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The lobby is impressive in an understated manner, Sherlock supposes. Original check-pattern marble floor, a six-foot-high scroll of grisailles depicting frolicking gods and goddesses running along the walls… the Dutch seventeenth-century merchants were as adept at living the luxury life as the aristocracy in other countries at the time. Behind him he can feel John slightly stiffening his posture, propelling the bag from his right hand to his left for the umpteenth time, and in response Sherlock plasters an even haughtier sneer to the curve of his mouth.

“Interpol,” he tells the girl – a business school student on an internship, hoping for a permanent job – behind the desk, waving one of Lestrade’s ID cards in her direction. “Wij willen de heer Van der Moolen even spreken. Mijn collega spreekt helaas geen Nederlands. Daarom zouden wij de conversatie graag in het Engels willen voeren.”

John’s mouth has fallen open during his small speech. It’s not John’s best look so Sherlock wriggles his eyebrows at him while pressing his lips firmly together. John’s response is a tightening around his eyes but at least he closes his mouth again.

The girl meanwhile, has gone white and is staring at Sherlock as if he were one of the gods on the wall behind her, tired of eternally chasing some dull nymph and deciding to step down and equip himself with a suit and a coat to have a go at chasing a human. Clearly the type who likes overbearing men. Due perhaps to the fact she must be five feet eleven without heels. Or merely a father complex? Her nails tell him her parents divorced when she was still very young.
“Umm,” the girl says, and swallows with some difficulty. Her eyes are glued to his face. “Umm.” Sherlock waits patiently for her to gather what wits she has left, lessening down on the sneer somewhat to speed up the process.

“Ja?” he asks slowly, his voice considerably softer than when he first addressed her.

Apparently, this helps the girl to recover somewhat. Sherlock determines he would advise Mr Van der Moolen not to hire her if she were the last receptionist in the world to offer her services. Her recent mental crisis has given him the opportunity to study the office’s telecom system, assess the interesting fact the office isn’t equipped with a CCTV system, and ascertain that Mr Van der Moolen’s agenda is suspiciously devoid of appointments.

“Sorry,” the girl says. “Excuse me. Interpol? I’ll have to check with Mr Van der Moolen.” Her fingers are already skittering towards the phone on her desk, while Sherlock favours her with another encouraging smile.

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The first impression of David Harm Van der Moolen is in accordance with Sherlock’s research. Outfitted in a suit even Mycroft – the, Sherlock reluctantly admits, preeminent authority on dispersing an impression of power through the means of sartorial elegance – wouldn’t have looked at down his nose, the man exudes confidence at a level likely to strike terror in the hearts of the meek. This particular quality has never been Sherlock’s strong suit so he gives the solicitor a once-over while pressing his hand and introducing himself. Once he’s let go he sweeps his glance across the room, lingering on some of the scrolls on the wall panelling but the office appears to be clear of any electronic devices. The biggest asset Van der Moolen has to sell is absolute discretion. What better way to ensure it than in not recording any transaction undertaken in here?

When John pulls his hand free from Van der Moolen’s grip there’s a slightly bemused look beneath his pleasant smile. The lower-middle class manners his parents have drilled into John forbid him from showing in any way what Sherlock felt as well, Van der Moolen’s palm is quite moist. The man is nervous, and a skilled actor for hiding it so well.

“Gentlemen, pray take a seat,” Van der Moolen invites them in a passable accent and with a wide gesture of his arm at the leather and chrome seats in front of his desk. “Would you like anything to drink?”

“No, thank you,” Sherlock dismisses the suggestion for them both. They had tea at the hotel, which was enough to convince them the Dutch know nothing about preparing a proper cup.

Van der Moolen shrugs, eyeing them both closely, and lowers himself onto the swivelling chair behind his desk, all glossy wood and shining metal. Sherlock feels a grudging respect for the man’s acting abilities. But then, his research already told him to expect some. Someone ought to have tipped off Van der Moolen about the sweaty handshake. It does spoil the overall impression.

“Then tell me, what are you here for, Mr Holmes… and Watson, wasn’t it?” The last is added with a tiny apologetic lilt, as if Van der Moolen hasn’t caught John’s name because he was distracted by the sight of someone bringing a Tesco carrier bag into his tastefully decorated office.

“We want you to give us Timothy Hawker’s current address,” Sherlock answers. “And his alias.”

As Sherlock expected the solicitor laughs. “Excuse me,” he says. “I’ve no idea what you’re talking about. I’ve never heard the name in my life.”
“Knew you were going to say that,” Sherlock affirms pleasantly. “You’ll have heard of Kees Lijffijt and Sam de Wit though. Timothy Hawker’s address and current alias, please.”

The merriment has frozen on Van der Moolen’s face but his tone is admirably breezy when he replies. “I still have no idea what you’re going on about. I will however, contact Interpol, and lodge a complaint against the two of you.”

“Please do. We don’t work there so it won’t affect us. But Interpol might be interested in talking to you after reading the file on your exploits I prepared for them.”

The chair swivels a quarter of an inch to the left but that’s the only indication of unease coming from the other side of the desk.

“You think I’m bluffing,” continues Sherlock. “Underestimating others is your main weakness, it seems. One of the side effects of surrounding yourself with incompetents. You obviously go to great lengths to remain in the shadows but even you rely on the internet to conduct your business, and everyone who uses the internet leaves a trace. Why do you think governments are so desperate to lay their hands on that data? Your government might be interested in some tiny facts with regard to monies that don’t officially exist. Monies to do with the two gentlemen I mentioned. Though they aren’t actually very gentle as far as men go, are they?”

“You use a lot of words, Mr Holmes.” Van der Moolen keeps his cool. “But what have you actually got to prove them? Print-outs in that plastic bag, I suppose.” He sneers at the bag leaning innocently into John’s chair and sits a little straighter, stretching his arms along the desk in a slightly threatening pose. As if Sherlock is likely to… oh.

“I wouldn’t press that bell at the underside of your desk,” warns Sherlock. If he’d shouted ‘Vatican cameos’ John wouldn’t have reacted more quickly. He’s halfway around the desk, looking every inch the army captain who once invaded Afghanistan. In the physical world this leaves him several inches short of the other man but no one is better than John at showing there might be more to a person than first meets the eye.

Slowly, Van der Moolen sits back from the desk with a scowl on his face. John returns the expression whilst maintaining his position at Van der Moolen’s side. Sherlock smiles warmly at them both. “The bell is right in front of you, John,” he informs his friend before consigning his attention to their unwilling host again. “And yes, we brought my findings along to refresh your memory but an email with the same information and some explanatory cues will pop up in one hour in the inboxes of a number of officers at the AIVD, Interpol, CIA and MI6 unless you give me what I want. Not good for business to have them understanding the data they’ve tapped.”

“If you’ve all got it sorted like you say, there’s little I can do to prevent you.” Van der Moolen has crumpled already, staring at his hands which he has folded in front of him. It seems that beneath all the outward bluster a despicable coward hides. Or a desperate one. On the other hand, if Van der Moolen were desperate he’d have fought John. Pondering their host’s strange behaviour Sherlock flicks up his gaze and catches Van der Moolen blinking furiously. Following his gaze he notices the mirror on what he now sees is a hidden door in the room’s panelling. Probably not a mirror at all.

In a split-second Sherlock is behind Van der Moolen’s chair with John on his knees next to him and the blade of his Swiss Army knife lodged against the man’s jugular.

“Tell your goons to back off and stop being annoying, Van der Moolen,” he growls. “We’ve only got fifty-five minutes left before that email will send itself. You can tell them in Dutch. I’ll follow.”

“I…” Van der Moolen swallows thickly, slicing his skin on the edge of the blade. A small trickle of
“John?” Sherlock instructs. John glares at him, obviously wondering why he should always be the one to retrieve phones out of jacket pockets whenever he’s around Sherlock, but complies, because he’s dependable like that. Sherlock passes him a grateful smile while the phone slips from John’s hand into his.

“Yeah,” John breathes but he looks happy.

“Key?” Sherlock prods their hostage.

“Nine,” Van der Moolen replies. “Do you mind… I’m bleeding into my collar.”

“Of course you are, you just cut yourself on a knife.” Sherlock dials nine and briefly listens to the outburst of Dutch profanities exploding into the room. “Tell them to walk out into this room with their weapons down. They’re to leave them on the floor so Captain Watson can collect them. How many of them?”

“Two,” Van der Moolen croaks. Sherlock presses the knife closer against his throat. “Really,” the man cries out. John fixes Sherlock with a significant look and Sherlock nods and relieves the pressure of the knife somewhat.

“Here.” He wedges the phone against Van der Moolen’s head and listens to the instructions. The door opens and two men, not more than boys really – Dutch, twins, began both dealing drugs at sixteen and kicked out of school accordingly – walk out, each of them carrying an AK47 and a Sig Sauer. They glance towards the ensemble behind the desk before lowering the guns onto the floor, taking their time in straightening up again.

“Achteruit en snel,” Sherlock snaps at them. The command startles them out of their show of slowness.

“Stelletje klootzakken,” one of them hurls an insult in a last stance of defiance, making Sherlock want to indulge in an eyeroll.

“What did he say?” John asks.

“He called us a pair of assholes,” Sherlock informs him.

John shrugs. “He has a point, considering.”

Sherlock snorts. “Amateurs. Deal with them, would you?” To Sherlock’s amusement one of the brothers – the eldest – turns quite white around his nose at these words. He lets go of Van der Moolen’s phone. The instrument slithers into the man’s lap. Using his emptied hand to tug some tie wraps from his coat pocket Sherlock thrusts them at John.

“These are not on the official list of employees, I take it,” he says to Van der Moolen who shakes his head, eyes still focussed on the point where the knife rests against his throat. John ties up the pair quickly and efficiently. Sherlock lowers the knife and springs to his feet. A sob wrings itself from Van der Moolen’s throat. His hand flies up to touch the blood on his neck.

“What now?” The man sounds harrowed. “What are you going to do?”

“There’s no need to panic,” Sherlock soothes him. “We’ve still got forty-three minutes left. Captain Watson is going to lock up your pals and you’re going to give us what we came for. We asked nicely. Your keys, please.”
While John guides the brothers into the tiny room hidden behind the panelling Sherlock searches Van der Moolen’s desk, unearthing two other sets of keys. When John walks into the office again Sherlock throws him the sets. “Find out which are the keys to that room and appropriate them,” he instructs John. “And now,” he turns to Van der Moolen, “we want you to give us Timothy Hawker’s current address. And his alias.”

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“Well, that was an exciting turn to a case that stopped being interesting several hours after it began,” Sherlock says happily while hopping of the stoop’s staircase.

“They’ll come after us, you realise that,” John says stomping down after him and hefting the – decidedly heavier – Tesco bag from one arm to the other.

“Oh, I don’t think so,” Sherlock murmurs and fishes his phone out of his pocket. “They first have to free themselves. Those were extra strong tie wraps.”

“They will in the end,” John counters. He casts the bag a disparaging look and transfers it seamlessly to Sherlock, as if Sherlock is a first-class idiot rather than a genius. “We may have taken the keys and the guns but they’ll just break down that door…”

“And damage an original De Lairesse?” Sherlock pretends to be shocked. At the last moment he whisks himself out of the path of yet another bicycle. Changing an email setting on his phone while keeping up his side of a conversation and navigating the busy quay is proving to be a bit of a challenge albeit one he should easily manage. “But you do have a point; we should get rid of those guns.”

“That’s not what I meant.”

“Obviously.” On the back of his coat Sherlock can feel John’s gaze attempting to bore itself through the thick wool. Rounding a corner he ducks into an alleyway and straightaway finds himself surrounded by blessed solitude.

“Sherlock, what…” John comes tearing after him

“Shh,” Sherlock shushes. “I promised Van der Moolen to cancel that email, remember?” John nods. “And so I did, look.” He holds up the phone for John’s inspection. “Kept my promise. But Van der Moolen never asked me how many emails there were,” Sherlock continues. “He should have. The Dutch police will want to speak to him at short notice once they receive my email. In fact, I’m certain they might be the ones to contact Interpol.”

“That’s not very honest,” judges John, a critical frown disfiguring his face. “Clever though,” he adds and the unpleasant expression is swept away by his smile. “You’re a complete bastard, in case no one had told you yet.”


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From the doorway Sherlock watches Mycroft’s back, clad in casual striped tweed. It makes him look advanced in years beyond his actual age. His slightly bowed head doesn’t improve the general aspect. Perhaps Mummy will chide Mycroft for his posture as well. A noble task to encumber herself with, now she’s bent upon full recovery from whatever ailed her.

Sherlock is about to pull the door shut when his gaze falls on the desk with its stacks of manila
folders patiently guarded by Daddy and Mummy smiling in perpetual bliss from the safe confinement of the silver photo frame and the neat pile of papers in the middle. In his mind’s eye the picture of Mycroft’s deft hands rearranging the documents flashes up. He throws a glance in the direction of Mycroft, whose whole form except for the lower half of his right leg has already disappeared down the doorway to the yellow drawing room. Slanting his gaze back to the desk, Sherlock steps into the study and closes the door behind him, pressing his shoulder blades into the hard wood for an instant.

In three strides he’s in front of the pile and sorting through it. Government drivel, several invitations for New Year drinkies, more government drivel, until at last his fingers skim over a sheet of paper filled with the precise, slightly old-fashioned handwriting he’d recognise everywhere as he deciphers it so often in the letters addressed to him. In his haste to pull the paper from the stack he nearly rips it in two.

15th December, 1993

Dearest Mycroft, my dear, dear boy,

Of course you’re free to rant and rave and pound your chest, pull out your hair if you think those actions will give you comfort. Indeed, they will give you comfort for the few short hours you indulge in your grief, but what of the many hours that will follow after? Do not think I make light of your feelings, Mycroft, they are only natural and, considering the circumstances, just.

But, apparently, Michael has made his choice, and really, accepting the inevitable doesn’t turn one into a coward, or a cynic. Oftentimes, resigned acceptance is the best course, my dear boy. And the swiftest to that blessed state of benign distance, both from ourselves and others, which allows us to understand motivations and act or react accordingly.

Here, the writing is smudged and the paper faintly wrinkled, but the context and his familiarity with the handwriting help Sherlock decode the next sentences.

You’ll agree with me, my dear boy, that the only option you’ve got is to pack yourself together and get over this. I sincerely hope you haven’t tried to contact Michael since writing your last letter for you’ll agree with me such an action would never do. One doesn’t beg one’s ex-lover to reconsider, no matter how acute the agony one is enduring.

Over the years you have steadfastly refused to contemplate my misgivings with regard to the relationship, as was your right if you felt Michael’s contribution served you enough. The photographs you were so kind as to send me from the earliest beginnings of the affair explained your infatuation to a certain extent, given how young you were when you two first met and the boy’s beauty, which, even your old tutor can’t but acknowledge is exceptional indeed. I beg you to forgive me, but truly, the discerning eye will never tire of discovering fresh joys to entice it, however fleeting they may be.

Sherlock snorts with derision. It’s obvious Mycroft has never supplied Mr Talbot with a recording of Michael’s inane conversation and thus spared him the agony of actually having to listen to the twit. Surely, supposed beauty notwithstanding, the experience would have made their old tutor want to screw his eyes shut, and after opening them again order Michael to bloody well shut up by means of nothing but just one stern look. The news, however, is excellent and there’s no better person in the world than Mr Talbot to help Mycroft see the foolishness of his emotions, and direct them back to where they belong. Quickly, Sherlock sets his eyes to scanning the rest of the letter.

But, my dear boy, I’ve never stopped wondering what – apart from said beauty and a certain gaiety
of spirit, so wholly unfamiliar to you – warranted your attention to this otherwise unremarkable creature. Your former lover, for that must be his status from now on, has always struck me as a true son of Venus, appreciative of the idea of love rather than the actual object of his professed devotion. He’s but a mirror in a darkened room, and like that mirror he believes himself to be the bright flame that is reflected in the sublime smoothness of the glass. Robbed of the candle, he had to search another one. To blame the mirror for its ignorance would be an injustice, both to you and to Michael. He has given you great joy; now, while you may indulge in the memories whenever you find yourself at leisure, you should straighten your shoulders and devote yourself to your duties with fresh determination; your family, your country, and, perhaps I should have named her first, your Queen.

With regard to your family I still disagree with your decision not to have informed Sherlock earlier of the improvements.

The sharp sound of leather shoe soles slapping against the parquet flooring of the corridor startles Sherlock. Hastily he returns the letter to its position in the stack and tugs and twitches at the papers and folders until it looks exactly like it did when Mycroft left the room. Grabbing the photo frame he jumps away from the desk and arranges himself on the end of the sofa to engage himself in an earnest contemplation of the picture.

“Still here?” Mycroft asks after he’s closed the door. “Didn’t you have an appointment with Mr Whitall?”

“He rang earlier today to say he couldn’t make it. Something to do with the plumbing,” Sherlock answers in the most nonchalant tone of his repertoire. A wonderful lie as it is actually true. Mr Whitall had sounded a bit stressed-out and kept the exchange short, expecting a return call from the plumber any minute.

“I’m sorry to hear it,” Mycroft murmurs. His nose twitches in distaste.

“Yes,” Sherlock answers airily, pretending to be utterly engrossed in the photograph whilst Mycroft makes his way back to the desk. Halfway through, Mycroft suddenly changes course and before Sherlock knows what is happening the frame is plucked from his fingers.

“Hey,” he protests and surges up to grab it back. “I was busy – ” Mycroft’s glare freezes both Sherlock’s hand and his tongue. His brother chuckles; a short explosion entirely devoid of merriment. No doubt Mycroft has been practicing hard on this particular sound as a weapon to strike fear into the hearts of his underlings at the ministry. Gallingly, it proves to be almost equally effective when wielded against cherished little brothers.

“So you were,” Mycroft confirms. “Apologies for interrupting your reading of my letters from Mr Talbot. Riveting, wasn’t it?”

Sherlock wills the flush threatening to rise from his collar to remain stuck to his collarbones, tossing his head to stare up at the figure looming over him. “I’ve no idea what you’re going on about.”

“Next time you should replace the documents in the exact same way you found them,” says Mycroft.

“But I – ” Sherlock begins and stutters to a halt. For a second he can’t decide what’s more embarrassing, the blush which must have rendered his skin the colour of a strawberry, bedewed and ready to be picked and swallowed, or his sibling’s quietly triumphant smirk.

“Come here,” Mycroft crooks his finger at Sherlock, summoning him to the desk. “Always remember to take a mental picture of the objects you’re about to rifle. If you had done so in this
instance you would have noticed the top of the stack was aligned exactly with the blotter and not
three millimetres below it, see?"

Mycroft’s index finger stabs accusingly at the minute gap. “Also, I expect... ah, yes...” His fingers
pinch at something on the maroon leather and he holds out a single auburn hair for Sherlock to
inspect. “The average human being loses about a hundred a day of those, and a very useful asset they
are. In your haste to rifle through my correspondence you never saw it, did you?” Mycroft tsks and
shakes his head as if pained at Sherlock’s obtuseness.

“You’re young still,” he ends his little lecture. “And clever. Mummy was the one to teach me the
technique, in case you were wondering, and you should feel free to employ it as well. I already told
Nanny I won’t lunch today. We’ll have tea at five sharp, in the blue morning room. Now, if you
would be so kind as to leave me, I have a telephone conversation to make.”

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Lighting one cigarette with the other Sherlock paces the orchard, trying to determine whether
Mycroft’s ‘instruction’ means he and Mummy know of the pill pilfering. Surely if Mycroft had been
aware he would have put a stop to it. It’s his little brother’s health, he ought to be worried. Somehow
Sherlock can’t conceive of Mycroft not lecturing him, should he discover how many of them
Sherlock pops away on a regular basis. Not here obviously – though Mummy’s constant presence is
getting on his nerves a bit – but at the school, where the pills keep him afloat and prevent him from
being shipwrecked by the waves of asininity that perpetually threaten to swell to staggering new
heights and crash his boat on a hostile shore. Sherlock is not an addict, he just needs the pills to
preserve his sanity, but Mycroft would think differently and want him to speak with a psychologist,
maybe even send him to an institution like Mummy all those years ago and a fat lot of good that had
done them all.

Oh God, and now he’s angry with Mycroft and Sherlock doesn’t want that. He loves Mycroft and
his brother is in pain because of a dull nitwit. Venus’ son! Sherlock snorts. Look what submitting to
his base urges has done for Mycroft. Despicable, really. Just like Sherlock has always thought.

LeFeuvre’s pleading face billows up, shimmering between the naked branches of an apple tree. It
hovers there, out of Sherlock’s reach, but he swats at it all the same and mercifully, with a last
longing look, the apparition disappears.

Never, Sherlock thinks. Whatever happens in the future, he will never surrender himself to another
person like Mycroft has done. He will never be a victim, to be used and cast aside once he has
fulfilled his purpose.

Like Daddy did with John. The notion jumps up like a jack in the box, just as suddenly as
LeFeuvre’s face did. Immediately it finds itself a cosy nestling place amongst the convoluted twists
and turns of Sherlock’s brain and there, with a wicked little grin, installs itself, wriggling its fat rear
and wobbling inside Sherlock’s head where he can’t bat at it.

His fingers tremble when he fumbles in the packet for another cigarette. He’s heading towards a
nicotine overdose but he needs to occupy his hands with something, anything and the violin won’t
do. All he would do would be to maul the instrument. In this state he’s unfit to do as much as rosin
the bow. Asking John for a task is equally unfeasible. One look at him would tell John all and have
him rack his mind for a denial of the truth.

Useless, it’s all so bloody, bloody useless.

He reaches for another cigarette, only to discover he’s just smoked the last one. With a snarl of
disgust he throws the bloody, bloody useless empty package on the ground where it stands out like an eyesore against the grass, carefully trimmed to a length of half an inch. When he glares at it the packet glares back even harder and in the end, hating himself for doing so but acknowledging John would be so very disappointed should he chance upon the carton, he bends to retrieve it and put it into his trouser pocket.

***

Things were definitely easier when Mummy was ill, whether she was faking it or not. At least it was easy to keep track of her movements, the last few years, whereas this holiday she pops up everywhere, acting as if she owns the place. She does own the place, obviously, Sherlock scoffs, but her behaviour closely resembles that of a dog spraying urine everywhere to re-establish its mark on the territory.

The fact that Mycroft doesn’t notice this, or pretends not to notice and, in that case, doesn’t mind the infringement on their freedom in and around the house, baffles Sherlock. Apart from that, it’s annoying, both Mummy’s behaviour and Mycroft’s generally relaxed attitude towards her.

Christmas morning Sherlock is in the music room, back to the door and the music stand in front of the window, so he catches a glimpse of the small copse in the far distance whenever he lifts his gaze from the sheet music, when Mummy barges into the room.

“Oh, Sherlock, you’re here,” she says and laughs in an affected manner, pressing a hand against her chest as if she’s a shy young girl, rather than a middle-aged woman. “For a moment I thought…” She falters and an awkward silence threatens but then she shoves her lower lip forwards in determination and continues, “I wasn’t expecting anyone to be in this room until I heard the music.”

Sherlock lowers the violin. “It’s the music room,” he points out.

“Yes.” Her eyes travel over the room, contemplating every aspect and every object in it, all the while giving both him and the music stand a wide berth, a circumstance Sherlock finds particularly infuriating. “Yes, this is the music room, I realise. Sherlock chose it and it’s his home so I complied. He gave me the blue garden, and my study.”

She walks a little closer and, still not looking at him, positions himself in front of the window next to the one in front of which Sherlock is poised.

“But I’ve always considered it such a pity. This room is so beautifully situated, far better than the yellow drawing room and the blue morning room. Those are both so depressingly dark at this time of the year.”

“That’s only to be expected as they’re both on the north side of the house.”

“Yes dear.” His mother smiles tiredly. “Do stop pointing out the obvious. Precisely because they’re both on the north side I am considering a little renovating. No one ever uses this room except for you and you can put that music stand anywhere, can’t you?”

“What?” In spite of his determination to appear always perfectly cool and composed in his dealings with his mother, Sherlock is close to shouting. Perhaps he should have seen the suggestion coming – once Mummy has actually lets the bombshell drop he despises himself for not anticipating it – but the idea of Mummy wishing to change anything pertaining to the memory of her beloved Sherlock is so outrageous that spots start dancing before his eyes. His mind grasps the spots are in fact created by the light that reflects on the tears of anger and frustration welling up from his tear ducts and he blinks furiously to make them slink away again.
Mummy, meanwhile, has cocked her head. The smile has become slightly triumphant, as if she were a master strategest who, after weeks of moving regiments over the board in the war conference room, finally witnesses the actual battle to see it unfold exactly as she had predicted.

“You… you talked this through with Mycroft,” Sherlock tries to delay the inevitable but he already knows the answer. He walks over to the small cupboard on the right to place his violin in the case, afraid he will damage it as the strain of the conversation gets to be too much for him.

“Oh, yes,” Mummy confirms, breezily. By now the smile aggravates Sherlock so much he wishes he dared to smack it from her face. Most blood-boiling however is the realisation she isn’t actually proposing this in order to hurt him, or as a means to make less of the memory of Daddy. She’s just being very practical, something which ought to appeal to Sherlock, as it’s, understandably, done to Mycroft.

“I see,” he says.

“But you don’t approve,” Mummy ends the sentence for him. “I recognise this is your home, Sherlock, but unlike me, you don’t spend that much time here. Besides, you have your own room, practically right above this one.” Meaningfully, she flicks up her eyes towards the ceiling.

“That’s not what I mean,” protests Sherlock.

“Of course not, darling,” Mummy purrs. “I understand what you mean but I think it’s about time we moved on, isn’t it? Mourning Sherlock forever won’t bring him back and we all have got a long time ahead of us yet.” Her gaze slants towards the window, her smile intensifies, and when Sherlock looks into the garden he catches sight of John passing in front of the copse, beating a holly branch against his leg and with his face turned up towards the sun. “Well, most of us, that is,” Mummy finishes.

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His mother is a mean and nasty bitch and Sherlock never wants to exchange another word with her. Despite wasting away the whole afternoon on the task Sherlock has sadly failed to come up with a better term for the frightening amount of loathing and hatred her remark have evoked in him. He’s on his bed, knees drawn up to his chin, rocking back and forth and thinking of the best way to do away with the woman whose DNA helped create him for in that moment he hates her so much he would gladly cut her throat and never mind that Mycroft would be saddened greatly if he did so.

The sound of the dinner gong knells through the house with the solemnity of a funeral toll and Sherlock presses his hands against his ears to block the siren call summoning him to the lower regions of the house to confront the one person he’s desperate to avoid.

John will be at the table in the kitchen now, tucking into his Christmas dinner together with Nanny, while Cook ambles between the Aga and the table, keeping watch over her pots and pans and the hired help who’s to serve him and Mycroft and Mummy their dinner. Except, Sherlock won’t. He refuses to participate in a charade of good manners that is utterly false. He’ll tell Mycroft, who is bound to come up the stairs to fetch him. Mummy’s faithful envoy. Sherlock will tell Mycroft exactly what he thinks of his mother, of their mother, and if his message doesn’t please Mycroft that’s his problem, not Sherlock’s. If Mycroft wishes to choose their Mother’s side that’s fine with Sherlock, totally fine, he doesn’t need Mycroft. Sherlock isn’t the one to let himself be lulled into a stupid sense of security by so-called sons of Venus. He doesn’t have friends. Well, he does but one of them will die shortly and the other might as well be living in Australia, for all the good he is to Sherlock.
Round and round and round the rant goes in Sherlock’s head whilst he sits waiting for Mycroft to throw open the door and order his younger brother downstairs to eat his Christmas Dinner.

***

Two hours later Sherlock is still in the same position.

At first he’d been trying to come to terms with Mycroft’s choice to sit down with their mother and not even attempt to coax Sherlock out of his sulk and into the dining room.

Several times he’s been on the verge of caving in and deciding to go downstairs himself. At a quarter to nine he found himself unlocking his arms and considering a change of shirt but luckily his pride intervened and saved him from embarassing himself by refusing to aid his legs in working properly. He tucked his knees back under his chin and his arms around them to brace himself against a fresh wave of filial hatred threatening to crash over him, with a gentle tiny wave of sibling animosity rushing in straight after.

These continuing onslaughts are exhausting and he sits racking his brain to find ways to evade them. Locking himself in his chamber doesn’t stop the emotions from overrunning his brain so perhaps he shouldn’t try to lock them out but rather lock them in. Lock them in a room inside his head, turn the key and throw it away so all the feelings with regard to his mother can wither and die and disturb him no longer. The more he thinks about it, the better an idea it seems.

In the end Sherlock frees himself from the bond of his arms and reaches for the switch of his bedside lamp. The sudden burst of light is a bit of a shock to his eyes and for a split-second he sits blinking as frantically as a mole who’s just popped his head out of the ground at noon. After his eyes have adjusted themselves he stretches himself out on the bed and begins a careful inspection of the ceiling, in the hope the exercise will erase every thought from his mind and allow him to concentrate on his task.

After three minutes he’s ready to start screaming. Clearly, this isn’t working at all. He leaps up and begins to pace his room, seventeen steps from the bed to the door and seventeen steps back to the bed again. Every now and again he swerves to his wardrobe, perched on one side of the room and his desk, standing beneath the window on the other side. Each time he passes the desk his right hand reaches out of its own accord to twiddle with a pen or a magazine or the mushrooms John found him, anything not to have to contemplate that he’s not succeeding in what he ought to be doing: exonerating himself from his mother.

On one of his rounds Sherlock knocks a magazine to the ground. He bends to retrieve it. The magazine has fallen open to a picture of a stone effigy. The subtitle informs him it’s a statue of some knight in some cathedral somewhere in France. He carries over the magazine to his bed and sits down to study it. There’s something about the total serenity of the statue’s features that fascinates him. That, Sherlock recognises, is the state of mind he should attain before cementing one stone on top of the other, but how does one assume it? He stares at the statue’s hands, exquisitely long and slender and carved in great detail, the fingers templed beneath the chin in a prayer to a God Sherlock doesn’t believe in. Placing one fingertip against the other he copies the gesture and lets himself sink back on the bed. He pulls his legs on the bed as well and stretches them. His eyelids fall closed.

It takes him three minutes of concentrating hard on his breathing to free himself from his body.

Then he starts building.

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Fata Volentem Ducunt, Nolentem Trahunt, chapter 7.

Chapter Summary

Now Mycroft laughs openly. “No,” he says. “We’re all but five miles from London. I’ll have Nanny send us the book. Besides, I have an aquarium to build to store my precious goldfish.”

Chapter Notes

As always, betaed by the great susako. Thank you, susako!

The good thing about taking on cases for ridiculously rich clients, Sherlock decides, is John’s enjoyment of the fringe benefits. He ambles out of the ensuite that separates their rooms to catch the ex-army doctor at bouncing on the grandiose four-poster, which comes completely attired with a gilded canopy, with the happy expression of a four-year-old enjoying his fifth ride on a merry-go-round.

“No, John,” Sherlock says disapprovingly, neatly launching the towel he scrubbed his hair dry with in the direction of the bathroom. John bounces a final time and throws Sherlock an equally disapproving look.

“What?” Sherlock shrugs. “If I hang it over a railing, housekeeping will worry we think their floor tiles are dirty.”

John snorts. “Sure.” Whatever he was going to say next is cut short by the ringing of his phone. John fishes it out of his pocket and stares at the screen with a bemused frown before wedging it against his ear.

“Hello?”

Sherlock pricks up his ears but he can’t hear the voice on the other side of the line.

“Oh hello, Mycroft,” John says, the frown’s bemusement widening its stance on his face.

“Mycroft!” Sherlock exclaims, pacing over towards John and aiming for the phone. “What’s he calling you for? He knows I don’t want him to stalk you.”

John switches the mobile to his other ear, just out of Sherlock’s reach. “Yeah, he’s pretty worked up already,” he says. “Mentioning your name tends to do that. What? Oh, fine. Hang on a minute.”

Instead of handing Sherlock the phone he fumbles with it and positions it on the bed. “… extremely accommodating of you, John.” Mycroft’s dry tone fills the room.

“What do you want?” Sherlock snaps, collapsing on the bed and glaring at the phone as if the device has, through some wholly unscientific process, transformed itself into a miniature version of his brother.
“A good afternoon to you too, brother mine,” Mycroft’s suave voice sweetly ignores Sherlock’s question. “Most people find the sight of Paris’ major hallmark quite uplifting. You, I gather from your belligerent tone, don’t belong to that category. Should that worry me?”

Sure enough John’s gaze flits towards the Eiffel Tower, which is on rather prominent display in the centre of the window.

Sherlock grits his teeth. “I’m sorry to hear Lady Levison is as prone to gossiping as the rest of her sex. And Tannhauser, Mycroft, really?”

Mr Mancini abhorred Wagner, claiming the work was bereft of true musicality. A favourable review of a performance of one of the master’s works would invariably result in an explosion of passionate rage against ‘that vulgar Teutonic’s assault on the senses’. Mycroft, on the other hand, makes certain to attend every fresh London production two times at least.

Mycroft’s artificial sigh tells Sherlock his brother is leaning back in his easy chair with a tumbler of whiskey dangling from his left hand in a frippery of nonchalance. “Yes, atrocious, even with earplugs. But most expedient. People tend to be far chattier during Wagner intervals than those of any other composer. Perhaps something to do with the quality of the notes?”

“The quantity, more likely,” scoffs Sherlock.

“I’ve never understood why Wagner doesn’t appeal to you,” Mycroft says. “His love of dramatics almost equals yours. But I suppose you’re a better judge of the musical aspects of Wagner’s oeuvre,” he concedes as an afterthought, managing to sound gracious about it.

“Though not necessarily of people,” he Waltzes on. “Your assessment of Lady Levison is too harsh… and stupid. The poor woman got a nasty shock and yet she was kind enough to praise your speed in producing the proof she hadn’t looked forward to receiving. But then—” Mycroft’s voice drops a full octave and teems with condescending disapproval when he finishes, “—you never learn, do you?”

Snarling, Sherlock grabs the phone and squeezes it so hard the scientist in him admires the resilience of the casing and makes a mental note to set up an experiment to test the composition and durability of the different mobiles in the market. See whether they’d survive a good pounding with a hammer. The skin covering his knuckles stands out stark white against the surrounding paleness of his hand.

“Hey,” John protests.

“John can’t help it you couldn’t resist stuffing yourself with trifle at some dull embassy lunch, Mycroft!” Sherlock hurls at the mobile. “Stop harassing him.”

Mycroft’s reply is an infuriating chuckle, the tiny one he employs whenever he wants to drive home the message to Sherlock and the world at large that Sherlock hasn’t mentally matured past the age of thirteen.

“Harassing your flatmate and the only friend you’ve got? Pray tell me; in what way would that serve my interests? My main concern is and will always be protecting you against your self-destructive tendencies? Ringing John was a last resort. I wouldn’t have dreamt of contacting him if you had answered your phone.”

“I was in the shower,” Sherlock hisses. “You could have texted.”

“I never text,” Mycroft declares in a tone which indicates partaking in such exercise would be too much fingerwork. Why he isn’t even fatter than he actually is, is a mystery to Sherlock, although one
he’d prefer not to have to unravel. The odious sod probably spends all his weekends at some
hideously expensive clinic hidden in some remote Welsh valley wrapped in layers of seaweed and
aluminium foil or having the blubber sucked away. Sherlock hopes it hurts like hell. He opens his
mouth for another scathing remark but John beats him to it.

“Girls, girls, all right,” he shushes. “I guess you didn’t ring for a lovely round of sibling snark,
Mycroft.”

“Indeed, John,” Mycroft agrees. “Both Queen and country are in need of your services…”
Predictively, Mycroft falls silent at this point, waiting with the patience of a cobra fixing its prey with
a mesmerising stare to let the small pause do its insidious work of flattering John – thus coaxing him
to choose Mycroft’s side in the ensuing battle of wills – and aid the appeal to John’s patriotic
sentiments.

“…and Sherlock’s,” he continues smoothly after two seconds. “My sincere apologies for shortening
your stay in the French capital but I would have you board the Eurostar at nine ten this evening.
Your tickets have been sent and a car will be waiting for you at St Pancras, naturally. That way
you’ll have plenty of time to conclude your business with the unfortunate Lady Levison’s former
lover. My business really can’t wait much longer, I’m afraid.”

“Oh.” John’s face has fallen, obviously disappointed with the turn of events but resigned to the fact
they won’t have a chance to have a look around the city.

Lady Levison, declaring herself much satisfied with Sherlock’s tracking abilities, had insisted they
make use of her suite for a week at least. Sherlock had been about to wave away the offer when John
had surprised him by saying he’d never visited Paris before and would love to have a look around
the place. In the taxi from the Gare du Nord to the hotel, he’d been looking eagerly out of the
window at the boulevards and avenues, pointing out the Arc de Triomphe and the great domes of the
Grand Palais and the Invalides to Sherlock, who’d nodded and turned his attention back to his
phone.

The memory of his week with Victor had flared up as soon as he’d descended the train. The seedy
hotel in the twentieth arrondissement, so different from their current abode. The first tiny cup of café
they’d drunk in the bar on the corner, its innocent frothy layer inviting them to knock it back in one
go and necessitating them to go back to the hotel and change their shirts. Their long ramblings along
the grand boulevards and down sleazy back alleys with Victor pointing out architectural details while
waxing lyrical on the French flair for city planning and the genius of Haussmann. Sherlock
meanwhile extolled on the genius of Eugène François Vidocq, explaining the ingenuity of his
methods in a time when the word ‘crime scene’ had yet to be invented.

John is likely to be more interested in those aspects of Paris than Victor ever was Sherlock told
himself when John exclaimed at his first view of the Eiffel Tower. His enthusiasm will more than
make up for any trepidations Sherlock might endure. He’s not going to let Mycroft spoil John’s
holiday. His brother has got a whole army of minions to solve his tedious problems for him. It’s not
Sherlock’s fault Mycroft seems intent on hiring only the densest specimens of the bunch of
intolerable simpletons Oxbridge lets loose upon an unsuspecting world every year.

“No,” he declares in his most decisive tone. “We’ve only just arrived and we like it here. Find
someone else for your tardy investigation. Or lift your fat behind out of that chair and do it yourself.”

The phone transmits a vague whispering as of rustling papers.

“Even if I were thus inclined my agenda won’t allow it,” Mycroft blabbers. He sighs again and
sounds almost bored when he goes on, “I’m afraid you have little choice in the matter, Sherlock.
You’ll board that train of your own volition or my people will accompany you there.”

Inwardly, Sherlock groans. He vaults himself across the room in three strides and opens the door to reveal a pair of Mycroft’s lackeys, who each give him a deferential nod. He scans the corridor for the other two stationed in front of the door to Sherlock’s room. Sherlock scowls at the lot and shuts the door into the faces of the first pair.

“What is it with you and your propensity for abducting people?” he demands.

“Sherlock—” John tries to pacify him whilst Mycroft tuts in galling condescension, “You should find yourself a different hobbyhorse, Sherlock. Of course I knew you were going to refuse as a matter of principle.”

“As if your strategy of bullying people differs from the one you used twenty-five years ago,” Sherlock retorts.

Mycroft sounds extremely vexed when he replies, “That’s because you prevented me from explaining about the carrot. Lady Levison has generously extended the invitation for the suite to me and you both are free to make use of the offer whenever you like… after you have completed this little mission on the behalf of your country. I will, of course, reimburse your train tickets. Will that do?”

***

“You’ve got to admit it’s pretty generous,” John is saying while they weave their way down the Avenue d’Iéna. At his request they’re walking to Hawker’s apartment, rather than taking a taxi. They’ve got plenty of time before their meeting and Sherlock reasoned the exercise would help him get rid of the last shreds of Mycroft-induced irritation.

Once Mycroft had hung up and Sherlock had taken the time to lick his wounds, he’d rung Hawker in the guise of an EDF employee and, mumbling vaguely about the need to check the electricity meters because of a suspected fraud by a couple living in the next building, wrung an appointment out of him. John’s expression of awe while Sherlock conducted the conversation had served as a big plaster on his injured soul.

“Amazing!” he’d exclaimed. “I know three French sentences, ‘Beaujour’, ‘Au revoir’ and ‘Voulez vous coucher avec moi? Ce soir.’ and here you are rattling away like a native, same as you did in Holland.”

“For god’s sake,” Sherlock had nearly choked. “It’s 'bonjour' John. And have you any idea of the meaning of that last sentence?”

John had grinned. “As a matter of fact I do. Harry played that single so often my Da went bananas, especially once he’d found out what his daughter was listening to, and snapped it clean in two. ‘Course that got Harry’s knickers in a twist so bad he had to go and buy her a new one.”

As Sherlock hadn’t had the faintest what John was going on about – something to do with Harry’s taste in music which Sherlock had been exposed to during the first, and, if it’s up to him, also last, visit he ever paid her – he’d waved him off and turned on his heel to dress and toss his shirts back into his travelling case.

The air in Paris feels different from that in London. John has already commented on it, to which Sherlock has replied it’s the effect of the river and the city’s distance from the sea when compared to London as well as the difference in latitude. The breeze is so light it doesn’t catch on the trees’ bare
twigs, nor impede the effect of the February sun’s tentative rays on their cheeks.

“Hm, lovely,” John says happily. “So when you were here before, was that for a case?”

“No, it was long before I invented my job, on a tour of Europe’s main cities. Somehow Amsterdam didn’t fit into our schedule.”

“Our schedule?” John asks, lifting his eyebrows.

“Yes.” Sherlock’s reply is curt and he swivels his gaze away, as if discovering an acute interest in the slow file of traffic rumbling past them.

Thankfully John takes the hint though he can’t refrain from snorting, as if this is the most outlandish scenario imaginable, “Right. So it was Mycroft, back when you and he were still great chums.”

Well, if that idea makes John happy he’s free to find pleasure in it. Anything rather than having to tell John about Victor. Sherlock clears his throat.

“You’d do better to concentrate on the case. I don’t think Hawker will take the news very well.”

“No,” John agrees. After a few seconds he adds, “Though he should be grateful. She’s incredibly kind to him.”

Back in London they’d both pored over the details of the settlement explained to them in an accompanying letter. John’s eyes had considerably widened when he read the amount of the monthly stipend. Sherlock suspected the sum mentioned barely covered Mycroft’s account at his tailor’s.

“A matter of perspective,” he says. “Hawker will take a different view.”

“I propose we start checking the panelling as soon as we walk in then,” jokes John.

“Always a good idea,” Sherlock approves. “Provided there’s panelling, of course, which I doubt. That Van der Moolen was a nasty brute. Hawker is merely an idiot.”

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A prepared idiot though. Something crumples in the man’s face when, half an hour later, he opens the door to them.

“Oh,” he says, his eyes raking over Sherlock’s whole frame, before hopping over to John’s. “So… how did she find me?”


“Yes, yes, of course.” Hawker steps aside and bids them entry with a gesture of his free hand. After closing the door he leans into it with closed eyes for a moment, breathing heavily through his nose. In the harsh overhead light Sherlock can see the hairs in the man’s nostrils flutter in the stiff breeze he’s conjuring. It’s clear why the term ‘ashen’ is so often applied to describe the colouring of people’s faces who’ve just had a shock.

Seamlessly, John has switched into concerned doctor mode. “Are you all right?” he asks. “Perhaps you’d better sit down. Let me get you a glass of water.”

“Mr Hawker’s fine, John,” Sherlock rumbles. “You’ve been expecting this for some time, haven’t you?” he turns to Hawker.
“God, yes,” Hawker says, rubbing his face with shaking hands. “Yes, I’ve… actually it’s good, yeah, it is, I guess. Sue won’t like it though… poor girl. Living room’s through that door.” He points with a trembling index finger.

Sherlock throws open the door to reveal a room that would have traumatised all of Lady Levison’s sensibilities, as well as those of his mother or Mrs Trevor’s. Gaudy doesn’t begin to describe the onslaught of white marble and leather, topped up with an overabundance of cut crystal and gold leaf. This, Sherlock gathers, is what happens when lack of taste and breeding meets free and easy money.

Behind him Timothy Hawker huffs. “Sue likes it,” he offers in apology, a wince creasing the bridge of his nose. In the twenty years he spent as Lady Levison’s companion he has picked up some of her sense of refinement and aesthetics, apparently. Sherlock sweeps his gaze around the dismal room and compares it to the elegant salon, all shades of verdigris with little dashes of apricot, where Mr Hawker’s fate was sealed. He may not care for the subtleties of interior decorating himself, but he recognises the rigid codes held in such high esteem by the people Hawker has been rubbing shoulders with until recently. This room is a nutshell of everything that set disdains, spelling out its owner’s current misery to Sherlock.

Not to John, however. The doctor’s eyes are too busy drinking in the details of the blown-up photograph gracing the wall over one of the ridiculously low sofas. “That’s her,” Timothy Hawker says. Sherlock inclines his head. “She’s not in, having her nails done.” He draws his hands over his face again. “Damn. Why don’t you take a seat, yeah, Mr…?”

“He’s not making a run for it, rather the opposite; our visit is the answer to his prayers.”

Rotating slowly on the backs of his heels, hands sneaked comfortably into his trouser pockets Sherlock scans the room, his eyes taking in every nouveaux riche detail until finally settling onto plain, unassuming, refreshingly lower middle class Dr John Watson.

“I can see you’re still enthralled by Miss Jones’ beauty,” he explains. “Timothy Hawker is heartily sick of it by now. Someone once told me that most people spent chasing their lives that which they don’t have. At the time it struck me as wrong, I couldn’t imagine people wishing to squander their life in such a silly pastime but now I think he was quite right. Well, turned out he was right in most things. Hawker has been pursuing his independence and added a tasty morsel at the last instant to further spice things up. Now the novelty’s worn off and he realises life at Lady Levison’s side did
have its advantages. Isn’t that so, Mr Hawker?”

As red as a beetroot up to the tips of his ears, Hawker enters the room balancing a tray with the steam rising out of three mugs and a plate of petit fours.

“Errm yes,” he says. “That’s the gist of it. God knows Sue is a lovely girl, and she’s stunning to look at, but… oh damn, forgot the milk. I won’t be a moment.”

See? Sherlock wiggles his eyebrows at John who answers by shaking his head disbelievingly and pursing his lips.

“You both take milk?” Hawker asks, pouring them both a heavy dollop when they nod. “And have a petit four, they’re from Fauchon. Laetitia favours them.”

For a second John looks confused but then he cottons on and, inclining his head, helps himself to one of the tiny delicacies. “They look very tasty,” he says. Sherlock rolls his eyes but Hawker beams at John.

“You friend Van der Moolen was less forthcoming, initially,” Sherlock comments from behind his cup of tea and the beam is sniffed out by the descend of a dark cloud.

“I wish I’d never met that asshole,” growls Hawker. “He was the one to plant the idea in my head. We literally bumped into each other at the Tefaf, back in two thousand and one that was. Laetitia had sent me to purchase a painting by some obscure Belgian, reasoning I would get her a better deal than if she went to haggle over the price herself. I had been looking forward to a weekend touring with some old mates in Scotland. Instead I ended up getting sloshed in some hotel in fucking Maastricht, because I was nothing but her majesty’s dogsbody. Do this, do that, lie on your back, roll over. Christ.”

“Yes, well,” Sherlock interrupts the complaint, drawing the contract out of his inner coat pocket and spreading it on the coffee table in front of him. “No need to tell the story, it’s nothing special, so Dr Watson and I can fill in the details ourselves. Lady Levison has determined we should be the ones to inform you she won’t have you back and you’re to relinquish the remainder of the monies you’ve taken to her. If you conform to her terms she’s willing not to press charges and to settle a lifelong annuity on you.”

“Christ.” Hawker’s hands start to tremble so badly the tea sloshes over the cup he’s holding. John leaps up and coerces it gently out of the man’s grip. “Christ,” Hawker says again. “I’d hoped…”

“You lived with the woman for twenty years,” Sherlock scoffs.

“Sherlock,” John admonishes in his try-to-be-kind-for-a-change voice.

“Oh fine,” huffs Sherlock, putting his cup down with a bang sharp enough to have the tea slosh over the coffee table’s marble and collapsing against the sofa cushions. These are precariously far away so he ends up stretched in a near horizontal position. He’d been planning to cross his arms for good measure but – after contemplating that this would merely make him look preposterous – he opts for an extra fierce pout instead.

John sighs. “Look Mr Hawker,” he says and that’s the last thing Sherlock hears for he tunes out John and Hawker and their dull conversation for the tedious twenty-three minutes it lasts. In the end Hawker accepts the pen John’s been offering and – bawling like a six-year-old who’s lost his Mummy, an analogy that, Sherlock suspects, may not be too far from the actual truth – signs on the dashes, in triplicate.
“It’s for the best, Timothy,” John says. So they’re on a first name basis now. Sherlock cracks open one of the eyes he’d mentally closed to observe John’s hands ordering the copies into a neat stack, which he then waves in Sherlock’s general direction without looking. His mastery of the situation is so perfect Sherlock can’t help but smile. He grabs the sheets out of John’s fingers, which are slackened because John knew Sherlock’s hand would be there to take over the papers, in yet another example of their flawless teamwork.

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“You can’t blog about this one,” Sherlock says when they’re standing outside again. “I’ve got the perfect title for you.”


“Poor enough,” shrugs Sherlock. “But no.”

They fall into step, heading in the direction of the Seine. “What then? And why this sudden interest in my blog? Don’t tell me you’ve started reading it; your attendance will pollute my hit count.”

“No, it won’t,” Sherlock counters. “Unlike the rest of the internet I’m not stupid.”

“Ah no, of course not, you’re a genius. How could I forget?”

“Exactly. It’s nothing but a whim but I thought ‘Love’s Labour’s Lost’ fitted the bill perfectly, won’t you agree?”

“That’s… something Shakespeare, right?” John asks, uncertainty furrowing his brow. “Never paid much attention during those classes to be honest. We all considered him a bore.”

Sherlock snorts. “His average tragedy sports more bloodletting than those silly spy novels you insist on addling your brain with. But Love’s Labour’s Lost is actually one of his early comedies. No victims.”

John scrunches to a halt and lays his hand on Sherlock’s arm. “That’s more than a bit not good, Sherlock,” he states. Concern oozes from every line on his face; almost drowning Sherlock with the depth of his empathy towards the main players in the tragedy of errors they’ve just rounded off, but towards Sherlock most of all. “In this case everyone is a victim, even the perpetrator. Please tell me you get that.”

Sherlock sniffs and plucks John’s hand from his arm with his thumb and index finger to let it drop to his side. “Obviously. What you don’t get is the premise of every play Shakespeare has written. You’d have done better concentrating on your lessons rather than Alison Walker’s breasts.”

“How…” John exclaims in an exasperated tone before dismissing the question with a limp gesture of his wrist. As Sherlock had no intention of replying anyway he pivots on his heels and starts walking again.

“You know the answer,” he says. “Ask Mycroft if you want to find out about Shakespeare’s main theme. He’s living it every day, or so he’ll have us believe.”

***

A distant rumbling rouses Sherlock from his sleep. Disoriented, he lies blinking a few seconds against the harsh wintry light spilling through the windows, surprised to find himself on top of the
bedspread, clad in a shirt, trousers and with socks on his feet.

Building the Mummy room must have drained him of all his energy. Sherlock can’t remember falling asleep, but his mind is blissfully free of maternal anxiety.

The growling sound intensifies, accompanied by pangs of hunger. Apparently, his stomach has decided to wake Sherlock in order to be fed. He tries to ignore it, rolling onto his side and scrunching his eyes shut. In response his stupid stomach sends a cramp through his abdomen that nearly has him doubling in pain. Determined to stand his ground against the claims of his body, Sherlock lifts himself from the bed and pads towards the bathroom for a long, hot shower.

Downstairs both Mummy and Mycroft look up from their plates when Sherlock enters the breakfast room. He bids them good morning and makes a beeline for the sideboard with its covered dishes of scrambled eggs, rashers of bacon, black pudding and fried tomatoes.

“You shouldn’t indulge too much, darling,” Mummy reproaches with a look at the small mountain Sherlock has scooped onto his plate. Rather than taking the bait Sherlock reaches for the salt. “Breaking such a long fast with so many saturated fats is bound to be unhealthy,” Mummy chirps on blithely. “What say you, Mycroft?”

“The subject lies outside my sphere of expertise,” replies Mycroft before lifting a piece of dry toast to his mouth. He eyes it warily but proceeds to insert it all the same.

Probably tucked too greedily into his Christmas dinner and is now suffering the consequences, Sherlock concludes. “I’m hungry,” he tells his mother as curtly as he dares and starts shovelling food into his mouth. At the back of his head a loud pounding has started, as of fists pummelling a sturdy oaken door. Each mouthful he swallows is another heap of dirt thrown in front to block the sound and block the exit.

“Well.” Mummy dabs at the corner of her mouth with her napkin. “I disapprove of your phrasing but I can sympathise with the sensation, though you brought it wholly upon yourself.” Her fingers play with the starched damask when she adds in a tiny jilted voice, “I had so looked forward to yesterday evening.”

Inside Sherlock’s head the racket’s volume increases despite the loads of matter he’s already dumped in front of the door. With an ear-splitting crash the wood splinters at last and the first symbol of every aspect of Mummy that Sherlock resents pops out. It’s a part of the tortoiseshell mirror she broke in a fit of jealousy during the row Sherlock witnessed when spying through the keyhole of his parents’ bedroom. With the gracious air of a model on the catwalk it twirls in the spotlight and then hops neatly down the mound to make way for the bathing suit she wore when she slapped Sherlock’s face.

Less than five minutes in Mummy’s presence and all the work Sherlock’s undertaken yesterday to bury his feelings regarding her has come to naught. He wants to groan with frustration. The walls of the room are so sturdy, and he’d thought not to add a window to prevent his emotions from escaping, and he’d taken a long time to hammer together the sturdiest door he can imagine and here he is, back in the corridor with Mummy calling his name in a puzzled voice from the music room.

“Mummy,” Mycroft sighs, his gaze fixed on his cup of tea as if it were the Holy Grail itself containing every solution to all the conundrums of the universe. His wary exhale hides perfectly whom exactly Mycroft is irritated with; Sherlock, Mummy, or the both of them, though Sherlock suspects it’s mainly him.

‘Of course it’s you,’ his mother is chanting. She’s waltzing around the room. Her right hand rests
upon an imaginary shoulder and her left arm reaches around an invisible waist and she’s smiling, the truly dazzling smile Sherlock remembers from those times he watched her dancing with Daddy during those dull Christmas parties. ‘Of course it’s you and some of us are going to die soon.’

Even while she’s whirling, right behind Mycroft’s chair, she’s sitting at the head of the table, frozen except for the faint quiver of her lower lip. Her voice is very small when she says, ‘It’s true, Mycroft.’ With her left hand she raises a lace handkerchief to dab at the sharp spikes of her meticulously groomed eyelashes.

Apparently, Sherlock is the one going off his rocker now. He swallows; looks down at his plate with the remnants of his breakfast, and up again. Around him the room is the same as it was, with Mummy still poised in her chair, trailing him with heavy-lidded eyes. A slow exhale shakes itself out of Sherlock’s throat. It’s just his anger with Mummy playing tricks on him and exulting in its escape. This evening, at Mycroft’s place in London, he’ll start building a new room, a better room, or no… He’s going to build a cellar, a deep dank cellar, burrowed inside the ground, with walls as smooth and hard as a polished diamond…

‘Did you pack everything?’ Mycroft’s voice interrupts his architectural drawings. ‘Your evening attire as well, for I got us seats for the Albert Hall.’

‘Oh,’ Sherlock wants to say. ‘Oh, why did you have to do that? You must have gone to such lengths to get those tickets, and I’ve been so bloody horrible to you.’ He feels like kicking himself, straight in the middle of his shins where it hurts the most.

Mycroft must be angry with him. Mycroft probably is very angry with him. And yet he still wants Sherlock to stay in London with him, and take him to a concert he himself won’t enjoy much.

If only Mummy were still locked up in that room of hers, then everything would be so much better.

***

As soon as he’s adjusted his seatbelt Mycroft fiddles with the knobs of the radio until he finds a program that has four politicians yapping at each other on the chances of peace in Northern Ireland; a clear indication he doesn’t want to talk with Sherlock.

John is standing in front of the gatehouse, as he promised he would when they said their goodbyes that morning, and raises his hand in greeting. Mycroft slows down but doesn’t stop. Quickly, Sherlock pushes the button to lower the window.

“You boys have a good time,” John calls.

“Thank you, John. I’ll write soon,” Sherlock shouts back and then they’re through the gates and on the road to the village and the highway to London.

“Raise the window again, would you?” murmurs Mycroft. “It’s freezing.”

Rather than complying Sherlock folds his hands between his legs. “I’m not cold,” he mutters.

Keeping his attention on the road Mycroft reaches in front of Sherlock and presses the button until the window slots firmly into the upper part of the frame. “Not helping,” he says.

“If all you’re going to do is to be mad at me I don’t see why you want me to visit,” Sherlock counters. The idea of slinking around the house and the gardens in an attempt to evade Mummy’s ever watchful eye doesn’t hit Sherlock as an enticing prospect but it’s infinitely preferable to tiptoeing around a moody, quietly simmering Mycroft.
“You have almost a whole hour to contemplate the question,” Mycroft responds and switches off the radio before adding, “I always think better without noise in the background.”

The silence that settles upon them is so deep they might as well have decided to travel to London with a stopover at the farthest star in the Milky Way. In the dashboard in front of Sherlock the large hand of the clock soundlessly ticks away the minutes. At either side of them the road hedges, though brown and bare with just a faint dust of snow, block their vision. They’d have to crane their neck to take in the expanse of the sky widening above them. Inside the Rover’s tiny cabin they’re cut off from the rest of the world as snugly and securely as if they’d really stepped into a capsule to explore outer space.

“I’m really sorry, Mycroft,” ventures Sherlock eventually and as he means it he works hard to ensure his voice is saturated with contrition. Surely Mycroft will swivel his head now and tip his chin, once, to indicate all is forgiven.

Instead, Mycroft keeps staring ahead, hands resting lightly on the steering wheel. In a tone carrying his habitual composure he answers, “That won’t do, Sherlock. Too general. I’m really sorry for a lot of things as well, you see. The most recent cabinet reshuffle for instance, or the obliviousness of those incompetents dealing with the IRA.” He nods at the silenced radio. “What exactly are you sorry for?”

“Please,” Sherlock groans. Once again he wonders how Mycroft manages to retain his outward façade during these discussions, appearing as indifferent to the proceedings as a fish draped on the fishmonger’s cooled slab of marble. For all of Sherlock’s endeavours to present an equally unperturbed front, he can’t refrain from twitching in his seat and his fingers are itching to outline the words that will make Mycroft see reason into the air, like the hand of God writing on the wall at Belshazzar’s banquet. If he had his violin in his lap right now he could occupy his fingers plucking notes from the strings. Fraught and annoyed with himself Sherlock decides in the end to sit upon his hands.

“I’m sorry about Michael,” he offers. This is true, partially at least. Never having to endure Michael’s company again is a definitive boon, certainly. However, the fact that it’s bought at the price of a blow to Mycroft’s pride that must be excruciating rather diminishes Sherlock’s satisfaction at the outcome. “He proved me right and that must be hurting you. For your sake I wish he hadn’t done it.”

“For my sake,” huffs Mycroft. “Well, thank you, you’re too kind. Except, I’m not interested in your opinion of Michael, or in Mr Talbot’s.” His throat seems to choke on their former tutor’s name, the first suggestion of emotion Mycroft has shown all day. Keeping one hand on the steering wheel Mycroft brings up his other hand in a fist to cover the embarrassing revelation behind a small cough.

When he resumes Mycroft sounds cool and collected again. “Of course, I’ve taken his advice to heart; it’s sound advice so it would be unwise to disregard it.” Sherlock bobs his head in acknowledgement. He’s about to open his mouth to confirm the sagacity of Mr Talbot’s every word when Mycroft blows up. Anger and despair floods from his body with the indifferent ferocity of a natural disaster, leaving the interior of the car as desolate as a beach swept clean by a tidal wave, with the dead(?) left jouncing upon the once more gently lapping crests to bear testimony to the occasionally unfortunate effects of the laws of physics.

“Such good advice,” he all but hisses. As suddenly as the shockwave emerged from his body it subsides, as if Mycroft is sucking the eruption of emotions back into his very core. A quick swipe at his eyes with one of his thumbs smoothes over the last ripples and he rearranges himself in his chair until he’s sitting as neat and ramrod straight as the meticulously rolled umbrella resting on the backseat. A flick of his fingers to remove a piece of imaginary lint from the midnight blue cashmere
of his lapel indicates they’re both to pretend that whatever it was which just happened simply didn’t occur.

“Your behaviour towards Michael has always bordered on contempt,” states Mycroft in a sober voice. “From the start you’ve kept him at arm’s length. For the wrong reasons; don’t even pretend to yourself you knew all along something like this would happen.” He casts Sherlock a sharp glance, freezing words to that precise effect in Sherlock’s mouth.

“What you and Mr Talbot don’t get, Mr Talbot because he’s too old, and you because you’re too young, is that I loved Michael,” Mycroft goes on. “Or love him. I need him. My body wants him. I crave the touch of his hands, the feel of his lips, and when I think he’s now giving another what was mine I want to smash the world. When I first got his letter I was mad with grief. Thankfully, there was a mild flu epidemic making its rounds at the office that week. My ally, for it allowed me to hide my watery eyes behind a handkerchief and explained the cracking of my voice.”

By now they’re entering the highway and Mycroft leaves off for a moment to concentrate on merging with the flow of traffic, his foot pressed down on the accelerator. Once they’re settled at a steady pace he coughs and resumes.

“A part of me will continue to mourn what I lost. What I gave up willingly because I was blind… and bound. He’s the first, and right now I’m very determined he will be the last for I never want to feel such debilitating dependence again. For the greater good of my mind I will willingly deny the pleasure to my body and my soul.”

“I…,” Sherlock tries, feeling he must say something, offer words of consolation perhaps, though frankly he’s out in the woods and busy battling his revulsion at the thought of Mycroft and Michael doing that. Thankfully Mycroft seems cured of the proclivity.

The loud smack of Mycroft’s gloved hand against the leather of the steering wheel almost makes Sherlock jump in his seat, despite the seatbelt. “No. Shut up, Sherlock. For once in your life I want you to shut up and listen to me! I don’t need your outlook on Michael and his decision. It simply doesn’t interest me. All these years I’ve tolerated your caddish behaviour towards the boy I love, formulating apologies on your behalf, and right now I’m not in the mood to overlook whatever opinion you wish to inflict upon me.

“I said ‘Shut up’, didn’t I?” he snarls when Sherlock opens his mouth again to argue he wasn’t going to say anything hurtful, or not deliberately at least. Mycroft raises his hand and whacks the steering wheel again. And again. And again in a frenzy of rage that has Sherlock almost cowering in fear.

His mind is whirring furiously to connect this man whose mood vacillates as wildly and unexpectedly as that of Mummy in her worst moments, with his brother, the man who is the essence of temperance itself. The last time Mycroft displayed such raw emotion was a decade ago, at his first half term visit after Daddy had died, but then he’d been even younger than Sherlock is now. He must have been upset when Sherlock was nearly murdered in the pool and that other time… which Sherlock is determined not to think about, ever, because it’s too disgusting. But in both instances Mycroft had enjoyed the benefit of Sherlock being oblivious for several hours after the event which granted Mycroft ample time to suppress his emotions and compose his face.

The flat of Mycroft’s hand connects with the wheel again with such force Mycroft winces and for a split-second Sherlock imagines he can actually feel the car veering to the right. It’s the end of the storm, apparently, for Mycroft heaves a deep breath, blinks once and starts speaking again.

“Just know, Sherlock, that Michael asked – no, he insisted – for me to go to the States with him. At the time I was annoyed… I, well my thoughts on the subject aren’t of interest to you. I only want you
to grasp that he wasn’t pleading on his behalf, as I believed he was, but on our behalf. He taught me a lesson, the most valuable one I’ve ever received. We are very clever—you and I—and we’re very good at reading people. But reading people isn’t the same as understanding what makes them tick. Michael, it turns out, knows himself all too well. He’s one of those people that cannot bide alone. If I’d wanted to keep him, I should have followed him. Mind or matter, it’s really quite simple.”

Then why didn’t you? Sherlock wants to scream. Why didn’t you go off with your precious Michael and leave me to fend for myself? I can do that. I’m older than you were when you decided to assume Daddy’s role. I don’t need you.

Mycroft huffs. “Please, the whole world doesn’t revolve around you, Sherlock. Once you’ve finished school your life is your own to conduct. Mind or matter, that was my main choice, any concerns with regard to Mummy or you came up second. If I’d accepted Michael’s proposal I would have seriously impeded my prospects of ending up in the position I want.”

Confused anger surges in Sherlock’s chest upon hearing these words. “Then why did you use Mummy and I for an excuse?” he blurts out.

“Did I?” The split-second before understanding floods his face Mycroft appears genuinely perplexed. “Ah,” he mutters, disapprovingly. “Eavesdropping again, weren’t you? I thought I saw your head moving behind the window but I wasn’t sure at the time. Well, much good did it do you, as ever. You really should rid yourself of the habit.”

“I was grateful,” Sherlock emits, but Mycroft dismisses the remark with a short shake of his head.

“Triumphant more likely,” he judges. “And afraid, for you were at a loss how to repay what you saw as my renunciation. What happy day for you then, to learn my sacrifice was for Queen and country and the sake of my career, rather than family. I reckoned playing the family card would serve me better than the career argument, not that it mattered in the end.”

The digest of his argument is bitter enough but by the time Mycroft reaches the end his voice has assumed its usual quality again. “You may speak, if you want to,” he grants.

Sherlock swallows, painfully, around the sharp-edged lump of glass lodged in his throat. As ever, Mycroft has managed to place his finger on the sore spot, right there where it hurts the most. An ugly desire for revenge twists something deep in Sherlock’s belly and he almost stumbles in his haste to jeer, “You learned your lesson then? I never understood why you liked him.” When Mycroft doesn’t react to this he adds, his pitch rising from the sheer excitement of his impertinence, “And I still don’t. From what you’re saying he might as well have been a goldfish, nice enough to look at but quite stupid. Or a Koi carp. I read an article in The Times——”

“Yes,” Mycroft cuts him short. “I know the article you’re referring to. I also realise you intend to wound me because of a perceived slight on my part.” He sighs in a very put-upon manner, as if thoroughly exasperated. “Really, Sherlock, you’re almost seventeen years of age. Time to say goodbye to the stroppy teenager and set the first step on the road to becoming a man.”

“I would if you’d begin treating me like one.”

“Honestly?” Keeping his hands on the wheel Mycroft swivels in his seat to raise an eloquent eyebrow at Sherlock. “Pray tell me where I come into the equation? You’ve made it obvious you don’t intend to shape your life in accordance with my wishes or directions. Wasn’t that the gist of our discussion last summer?”

“You’re still telling me what to do and what to feel,” yells Sherlock. “You’re angry at me for not
coming down to dinner yesterday, for…” he twists his voice and his face into a mockery of Mycroft at his most aloof manner, “…being so resentful and disappointing Mummy so much. Do you know what she did, Mycroft? Do you know what she said?”

Mycroft’s equilibrium is maddening. “She told me you had an argument regarding her proposal to turn the music room into a sitting room. I do realise the scheme would rub you the wrong way. Though the idea makes sense, you must admit that.”

Of course she has seen fit to omit informing Mycroft of the cruelty that was the real reason Sherlock spent yesterday evening in his bedroom. Sherlock groans and pushes the palms of his hands into his eye sockets in frustration. The loathing he feels for his mother in that moment nearly has him shaking with emotion in the car seat.

“That wasn’t all.” To his own ears his voice sounds exhausted, dejected. Surely Mycroft must hear it as well and pity him. Which is not the sentiment he likes to inspire in his elder sibling but right this moment anything is preferable to the carefully poised equanimity Mycroft is transmitting.

“Ah,” murmurs Mycroft. “I see. Nanny must have told her.” Briefly, his left hand lets go off the steering wheel to pat Sherlock’s knee. “Some things will never change, Sherlock. Look at it from her point of view.”

“When I do I see a man who’s worked his fingers to the bone sprucing the gardens that became hers when she first set foot on the grounds,” Sherlock replies indignantly, glaring at the hand resting lightly on his knee. It lingers for another split-second before taking off and landing on the steering wheel again, to the accompaniment of Mycroft correcting him in a stiff tone, “That’s what you want her to see. You deliberately refuse to look at the whole picture.”

These words infuriate Sherlock no end. “And you deliberately refuse to look at the picture from my side,” he accuses, his tongue nearly tripping over his words in his anger. “You always take her side in an argument and when I lay my finger on the spot you tell me I’m behaving like a petulant child. It’s beyond unfair!”

He’s back to shouting, which just serves to vex him even further for he realises it makes him sound like a petulant child, but right then he’s so angry with Mycroft, he couldn’t rein in his temper, even if he wanted to. When Mycroft doesn’t react he turns away, disgusted, and starts fiddling with the window switch, lowering the window. “Maybe I don’t want to come to London with you after all,” he mutters for good measure. “Why don’t you just drop me off at school?”

The window slides back up of its own accord and, to Sherlock’s increasing ire, remains that way. He presses the switch a few more times before pivoting to fix Mycroft with a glare spirited enough to have the car go up in flames, should either of them choose to ignite a match in that instant. Rather than the quietly triumphant smirk he expected to find, his brother’s features are wearing a frown of profound concentration. “Now what?” demands Sherlock, not bothering to play down the aggression in his tone. “What?” he repeats when Mycroft doesn’t reply but keeps staring at the taillights of the car in front of theirs.

“I feel like I owe you an apology,” says Mycroft at last. “Your outburst made me reconsider. With Mummy being so unstable all these years and you holding up so well I may have switched your prospective parts in my mind.”

“Obviously,” Sherlock is quick to retort, before adding. “I try to fight it, you know. After our discussion, I tried to be better. But she… Yesterday I was so angry I couldn’t face her. I decided to build a room… in my mind that is... I thought of dumping all my hate there. But it broke down. During breakfast.”
His mind is in such a whirl he can’t properly string two phrases together. However, Mycroft is nodding keenly in response.

“Of course,” he says. “Of course. Oh, Sherlock, I’ve been such a rubbish big brother to you.”


“Perhaps it’s wisest not to restart the argument regarding Mummy’s merits,” decrees Mycroft. After a moment he continues, “What you were telling me right now is actually rather neat. A vanishing room, rather than a memory room. Clever.”

“What?” Sherlock enquires, momentarily bewildered by the conversation’s turn.

“The room you said you built,” clarifies Mycroft. “It’s the inverse of a familiar concept. Don’t tell me you haven’t read Yates’ *The Art of Memory*? It’s in the library, second upper shelf on the right next to the windows.” At Sherlock’s blank look he goes on. “It’s a study of how people managed to retain stores of knowledge before the printed page was invented. One of the techniques described is the creation of so-called memory rooms, where you bind whatever it is you want to remember to specific objects. Much like the kerchief knot, though far more expedient, obviously.”

“Ah.” Sherlock can feel his face light up. “So—”

“Exactly. You could use the technique the other way round as well. But it’s no use just stashing every grief in the hope it will disappear. It will take months before you’ll be able to properly build a tiny cell and then you’ll have to put up all the shelves and master the art of interior decorating to bestow each memory in its proper place. Otherwise they’ll just roam around and be of no use, whether to hold or to forget.”

“Will you teach me?” Sherlock enquires, eagerly. Smiling, Mycroft shakes his head. “You’ll have to teach yourself. I can help you to grasp the basic concepts. I’ve got a copy of the book at my flat. Though you really should look up the one at home. It’s scribbled all over with Daddy’s and Mr Talbot’s notes and those were extremely useful to me.”

“Let’s turn around then,” cries Sherlock.

Now Mycroft laughs openly. “No,” he says. “We’re all but five miles from London. I’ll have Nanny send us the book. Besides, I have an aquarium to build to store my precious goldfish.”
Chapter Summary

With a heavy sigh Sherlock closes the folder and reorders the stack. There’s nothing of interest for him here. He flops down on the sofa, and debates shortly whether or not he dares place his feet on the seat. After determining he does he decides to add insult to injury by balancing the plate of ginger biscuits on his abdomen and cramming them carelessly into his mouth, scattering crumbs all over his clothes and the leather sofa cushions.

Chapter Notes

Many, many thanks to the wonderful susako who continues to be a great help and a wonderful beta.

“…This kind of behaviour is clearly unacceptable. Could you for once try and act like a grown-up?” By now, Mycroft’s tone has acquired the quiet sense of control which shows he’s actually on the cusp of losing it. Not that he’ll start shouting. Oh, no such mundanities for Mycroft Holmes. The last time he shouted at Sherlock was… Sherlock runs quickly around Mycroft’s rooms – and there are quite a lot of them, too many in fact – but he can’t find the occasion. Maybe when Sherlock had been screaming at Mycroft that time… But no, he must have deleted it. And really, he just doesn’t want to descend into that cellar, there where all the other memories are waiting for him. Besides, what’s Mycroft–

“Sherlock, I am – as you may have noticed – a rather busy man,” Mycroft grates.

Sherlock eyes him down his nose. “I can’t help it if you insist on sticking that big nose of yours everywhere it has no business to be, Mycroft. Why don’t you just lay off and let the world run itself for a while? It might be a big improvement over you starting wars everywhere and disrupting the traffic.”

“Very droll,” Mycroft replies drily. “And that joke lost its poignancy a long time ago, Sherlock. I suggest you lay off, seeing as your admiring audience isn’t around to applaud you.”

That’s just… Sherlock digs his fingers deeper into the arms of his chair to moor himself to the stability it provides. “I’d be obliged if you’d keep John out of this,” he says. To his satisfaction his tone sounds perfectly reasonable. Much more so than Mycroft’s certainly.

“So would I, brother dear.” The incline of Mycroft’s head borders on condescension as he continues, “but it’s you who chooses to drag the good man everywhere, even where he’s not welcome. Lord Cavenaugh wasn’t exactly pleased. Understandable, as the nature of his predicament was ah… of an extremely delicate nature.”

While speaking these last words Mycroft actually looks discomfited, just the tiniest bit, which, considering the case’s circumstances, was perhaps – Sherlock smirks – understandable.
“Yes, Mycroft,” he answers in his most supercilious voice, just to show Mycroft that he isn’t the only one present able to pull off that particular trick. “I’ve solved it, so there’s no need to beat about the bush. You know as well as I that the Right Honourable Viscount Cavenaugh is a moron. Worse, he’s boring and so was his tedious problem for which you had us whizzed back to England while we were actually enjoying ourselves. Or John was, which is more important to me than your desire to be chummy with the duller representatives of our so-called aristocracy.”

“There’s no need to be rude. I realise that is your customary mode but you’re talking about one of the pillars of the realm…” Sherlock snorts but Mycroft carries on as if he hasn’t heard, “…and you could have shown a tad more delicacy. Everyone knows about John’s blog. Lord Cavenaugh was your client and it—”

Mycroft cuts himself off abruptly to stare at the chocolate digestive that has landed in his lap after bouncing off his waistcoat. His shocked expression is almost comical to behold. The chocolate stain smack bang in the middle of the dove-grey merino is definitely most satisfactory to behold. Sherlock lifts another biscuit from the tray and aims it at his brother’s face.

“John carries more sense in his little finger than the entire government combined,” he declares haughtily, ruminating in his brain for a truly offensive choice of words, an expression that will jolt Mycroft out of his self-satisfied complacency even more thoroughly than a biscuit attack. “You and every one of your nasty pals aren’t fit to lick his arse clean after he’s taken a shit.”

A less astute observer would have missed the look of outrage that flits over Mycroft’s features. In less than half a second the bland, vaguely exasperated mask that has never left Mycroft’s face after he first applied it over two decades ago replaces the expression.

“Must you?” he murmurs and lifts the biscuit from his trousers between his thumb and forefinger as if they were a pair of pincers used for handling an insalubrious representative of the lesser animal kingdom. After depositing the biscuit next to the mug of tea he earlier prepared himself when Sherlock didn’t offer him any, he switches his gaze to Sherlock. “I’ve no wish to enter into a discussion of the doctor’s no doubt many excellent qualities but your vocabulary has definitely taken a turn for the worse since you became flatmates. I can’t remember you using such coarse language before.”

“My ample schooling in that respect was finished long before I met John,” Sherlock answers, meaningfully eying Mycroft’s tie. “The foulest tongues are those wagged at our country’s so-called top-notch boarding schools. Of course the memories of my school days are vastly different from yours. Cavenaugh must have been living in a veritable Eden at Eton, seeing as he’s slightly younger than Daddy would have been. Makes one wonder where he picked up his… oh well. John once told me how much Daddy hated school for the same reason I did. Our John, that is, Daddy and mine’s. Never your John.”

Mycroft has coloured slightly, his eyes flicking down to his tie before locking with Sherlock’s again. The corners of his mouth have dropped. “Sherlock,” he begins, disapprovingly, but halts when there’s a knock on the doorframe.

“Yoohoo.” Mrs Hudson enters the room, carrying an Asda bag and two of Sherlock’s suits, swathed in plastic. “Mrs Patel said the grey suit will take another few days, Sherlock,” she starts rattling off straightaway. “She said she’d never seen such fine woollen trousers caked with so much mud before.”

Deftly, she hangs the suits over the back of the nearest dining chair and makes for the kitchen. Only then does Mrs Hudson appear to notice Sherlock’s visitor and blinks visibly. “Oh hello, Mycroft,” she says. “Fancy you sitting here all nice and cosy. Sherlock was so angry with you for dragging
them all the way from Paris and you really should have allowed them to stay a little longer. John has
been working so hard lately; he could have done with a holiday.”

“Yes, thank you, Mrs Hudson,” Sherlock attempts to interrupt the effortless flow but she carries on,
not ignoring him outright, but more or less outmanoeuvring him, a course of action that reminds him
sharply of Cook when intent on having her say.

Maybe this is a feat accomplished solely by elderly women, Sherlock thinks while shutting his
mouth. However, the British government’s mild twitches of mounting discomfort are most amusing
to behold and Sherlock mentally encourages his landlady as she launches a harangue on the average
human’s occasional need for leisure time.

“It’s all right for you, Mycroft Holmes,” she’s saying in a tone that brooks no argument. “I
understand perfectly well you’re one of those people who’d drop dead the minute they’d stop
working, and I’m not going to tell you how unhealthy that really is, for it’s your life and your
decision. But some of us do want a little time off every now and then. Me, I’m happy with a chance
to put up my feet and watch some telly. But here the boys were already in Paris anyway and Paris is
so romantic. I remember when Mr Hudson and I—”

“Fine, Mrs Hudson,” Sherlock interposes, more firmly this time. He’ll never understand Mrs
Hudson’s inclination to wax sentimental over her marriage to the mean brute, the memory of whose
large hands on his throat he can easily recall. Mr Hudson’s thumbs had been intent on pushing
Sherlock’s Adam’s apple straight through his trachea, until one lucky jerk of Sherlock’s knee into Mr
Hudson’s groin made him gasp and loosen his grip just long enough for Sherlock to render him
unconscious with a few well-aimed uppercuts. The accompaniment of Mrs Hudson’s whimpering
hadn’t ceased until Sherlock had made her switch places with her husband and tied him to the chair
from which she’d been forced to watch how her would-be rescuer almost ended up as Mr Hudson’s
fourth victim. Sherlock was the first to admit he was happier than most when making the
acquaintance of a murderer but for all his viciousness, Mr Hudson’s methods of offing people had
been decidedly dull. Apart from that the man had been sloppy. If he’d chosen London as his venue,
the Met would have arrested him straight after the first murder. Not that Sherlock had seen fit to share
these observations with Lestrade, obviously.

“—Severe matters of state.” Mycroft is meanwhile defending his actions.

“Oh yes.” The Asda bag swings dangerously close to Mycroft’s head while it changes hands. “I
know all about those severe matters of state of yours…”

This disclosure causes Mycroft to cast Sherlock a look of such profound horror Sherlock can’t
contain a snigger. Mrs Hudson is off on one of her own rants (why everyone is always going on
about his occasional fits of wordiness when Mrs Hudson is the one who’s literally blathering all the
time, is beyond him) and hasn’t the faintest about the unsavoury affair John and he have been
working on, obviously. Given Mycroft’s earlier insulting assumptions his present uneasiness is
delicious to see.

Sadly, its duration is shortened by another of Mrs Hudson’s instincts coming to the fore. “Oh dear,”
she says, glance shifting over Mycroft’s waistcoat. “Oh, your pretty waistcoat. What have you
done?”

“Hmmm…” Mycroft racks his brain but Sherlock pipes up happily, “he always was a messy eater,
Mrs Hudson.”

“Oh, no, I don’t…” Mrs Hudson titters nervously. “Wait,” she tells Mycroft and hurries through to
the kitchen, leaving Mycroft to stare daggers at Sherlock who shrugs and picks up his violin.
“Why don’t you come here so I can clean your waistcoat?” Mrs Hudson calls to Mycroft at the same time Sherlock calls to her, “he was just leaving.”

“Sherlock!” Sherlock can’t decide what’s more distressing; Mycroft’s smug look as he levers himself out of John’s chair to obey the command or Mrs Hudson’s rebuke. In the end he determines none of it really matters. He leaps out of his own chair to position himself in front of the window, with his back on his brother and his landlady, the room and everything in it and starts playing his own variation on the presto of Vivaldi’s Summer concerto. The notes he coaxes from his instrument fill his head and drown the sounds behind his back, the noises of life outside on the street and the hum of the universe until he’s all alone, with just his music to protect him.

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“Ah, Mycroft. What a fortunate coincidence…” And for the umpteenth time since their arrival in London four days ago some fat moron wriggles himself between Sherlock and Mycroft and starts nattering about some boring problem, which, nine times out of ten, consists of a perceived slight of the speaker’s public or political importance.

“Sir Geoffrey, what a pleasant surprise.” For the umpteenth time Mycroft casts Sherlock an apologetic look before devoting his consideration to the interfering nuisance. Sherlock grits his teeth and pivots on his heel for an extensive study of the dress shoes and accompanying high heels tottering on the carpets around them. These constant interruptions have spoilt their visit to the British Museum two days ago and their walk along the Embankment. The day before Mycroft was even accosted right on the doorstep of the Hunterian Museum. Thankfully, once inside it turned out they had the exhibitions to themselves but the experience had disconcerted Sherlock all the same.

The encounters have awoken the memory of Daddy holding court at Glyndebourne on that glorious summer day when Sherlock was but five and could still pretend to be asleep. Unlike Daddy, whose graciousness was an ambiguous veneer designed to hide his general impatience with the idiots who dared trouble him and his family, Mycroft is sincerely gratified with every token of attention. Not that the extremely annoying member of the peerage currently talking to Mycroft has got an inkling of the good turn he’s doing Mycroft by buttonholing him here, in front of what Mycroft has earlier explained to Sherlock comprises the cream of London society. The whole contemptuous fat lot of them. Mycroft ought to take care for he’s rubbing so close the fatness might wear off and he might end up being every bit as detestable as they are.

Mycroft’s features have assumed a curious mixture of blandness and goodwill with a mere hint of disdain. This slight aloofness, in opposition to the other’s mobile movement of his eyes and hands, signals to all whom it may concern – viz. the entire assembly at the Royal Albert Hall – how quickly Mycroft’s star has risen in the few years since he left University.

“The concert begins in two minutes,” Sherlock reminds Mycroft, inserting his left wrist with his watch on prominent display right under Mycroft’s and his discussion partner’s noses.

“The concert? That’s not…” the man waves aside Sherlock’s suggestion they go find their seats, which Sherlock knows are on the other side of the auditorium.

“Ah, my dear Sir,” smiles Mycroft. “I’m afraid my younger brother is one of those rare eccentrics who come here to listen to the music.”

“Good Lord.” Sir Geoffrey stares at Sherlock and sniffs. “He takes after your father in more ways than one, I see.”

“Mycroft,” Sherlock prods.
“Indeed.” Mycroft wraps his fingers around Sir Geoffrey’s proffered hand. “I’ll mention it to Trevor,” he vows before turning to Sherlock. “Come Sherlock,” he says in a gentle tone, “show me the way.”

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That was when he first heard the name. It didn’t register, though. Of course not, as it didn’t bear any significance to him at the time. Besides, he was intent on finding their seats in the one minute left to them, dragging Mycroft along at a half-trot through the corridor, muttering under his breath all the while.

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It’s the same at Mycroft’s office where they have to ‘pop in for no more than a minute, Sherlock, promise’. People jump out of corners, vying for Mycroft’s attention, as unpredictable as a horde of Jack in the boxes and every bit as irresistible to Mycroft as the toys themselves are to a three-year-old. Soon, Sherlock is installed on the Chesterfield in Mycroft’s office, with a tea service brought in by a simpering secretary and a copy of last week’s *The Economist* and yesterday’s *The Times* while Mycroft attends to ‘a few issues that require his consideration’ though they ‘won’t take too long’.

*The Economist*’s content bores him and *The Times* doesn’t sport one juicy little puzzle like a baffling murder or a sudden disappearance so a quarter of an hour passes with nothing but the globe on Mycroft’s desk to warrant Sherlock’s attention. He spins it this way and that, timing the number of turns per minute and experimenting the efficiency of different materials in slowing it down. A deferential knock on the door launches him across the room and back onto the sofa.

A young woman, myopic eyes peering anxiously over the rim of her glasses, the upper part of her torso hidden behind an immense stack of folders, enters. An anguished noise erupts from her throat when she notices Sherlock and the empty chair behind the desk. She spurts toward it to drop her load and spin round to confront Sherlock.

“Mr Boothby said Mr Holmes would be in,” she says in an accusing tone. “Where is he?”

“Well,” drawls Sherlock, “technically speaking Mr Holmes is in the room.”

Her eyes dart from one wall to the other. Sherlock sighs. “I’m his brother,” he explains. “Mycroft was called away. I don’t know where to but he told me to wait for him here so he’s likely to return at some point in the hopefully not too distant future. If and when he does I’ll inform him Mr Boothby is the one responsible for the disruption on his desk.”

“Yes,” the girl says. “Yes, that’s… if you would? Mr Boothby said it’s really important, you see.”

“I sincerely doubt that,” Sherlock replies. “If your superior bears even the vaguest resemblance to any of the other patronising pains in the ass I’ve met over the past few days, I suppose the country would be better off if he dropped dead right this minute.

“Oh.” Confusion colours the young woman’s cheeks and behind the glasses her eyes acquire a moistened look. “What a horrible thing to say.” Her fingers fidget with the hem of her cardigan while she glances at him before spinning and fleeing the room, throwing the door shut behind her with a bang.

For the full duration of a second, Sherlock stares at her point of departure. Perhaps she’s right. No, scratch that, she’s actually right, but he’s bored out of his mind and fed up with all these vapid overbearing empty-headed total twits taking up Mycroft’s time and thus his. He rises and ambles to
The government considers that wherever overt surveillance in public places is in pursuit of a legitimate aim and meets a pressing need, any such surveillance should be characterised as surveillance by consent, and such consent on the part of the community must be informed consent, he reads.

Good god, how does Mycroft stand such blather? Was it as bad in Daddy’s time? Poor Daddy. Or perhaps not. ‘Hard as nails,’ Mycroft had asserted. If that was true no one would have dared bother Daddy with this deadly dull nonsense. And it also means Mycroft will have to come a long way yet. But then, he’s working on that, isn’t he? That’s why Sherlock is stuck here in the stifling torpor of Mycroft’s office, rather than outside on the streets, where things are actually happening.

He turns the page to reveal a photo of an unwieldy camera, stuck against a wall, and snorts. Do these people really believe mounting cameras everywhere will stop people from misbehaving? Would Percy-Smith have decided not to enter Sherlock’s room with his pals if a camera had been stuck above Sherlock’s bed? Will there be less viciousness, less violence, less unruly behaviour if people know they’re being constantly watched? Surely the camera’s main effect will be to transfer pre-meditated acts of violence from the limelight to back alleys and the thoughtless drink or drug-induced turpitude will continue, regardless.

The next file proves to be equally mind-numbing and Sherlock is briefly confused as to the century he’s living in when reading the words, …in the case of the injury or destruction, by persons riotously and tumultuously assembled together, of any machinery, whether fixed or movable, prepared for or employed in any manufacture, or agriculture, or any branch thereof, or of any erection or fixture about or belonging to such machinery, or of any steam engine or other engine for sinking, draining, or working any mine or quarry, or of any staith or erection used in conducting the business of any mine or quarry…

With a heavy sigh, Sherlock closes the folder and reorders the stack. There’s nothing of interest for him here. He flops down on the sofa, and debates shortly whether or not he dares place his feet on the seat. After determining he does he decides to add insult to injury by balancing the plate of ginger biscuits on his abdomen and cramming them carelessly into his mouth, scattering crumbs all over his clothes and the leather sofa cushions.

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5th February 1994
Copperbeech Hall

Dear Sherlock,
Thank you, dear boy, for your very kind letter but Cook has been making a mountain out of a molehill. I’m fine and you shouldn’t worry about me. I’d already gone to the doctor and he assured me the dizzy spells in the morning were due to my low blood pressure. If I don’t jump out of bed but wait a few seconds before standing I’m perfectly fine. Nanny said she’d been suffering from the spells as well and she followed the advice and she’s also doing better now. The doctor also said the low blood pressure was to do with me being so thin but he added thin is still better than being fat. So Nanny and me have been teasing Cook a little, but nothing too bad.

The builders have made a right mess of the border beneath the music room. I don’t see how or why they have done so for all the work is inside the house but I fear the Constance Spry rose and the peonies are ruined. Remember those snowdrops I planted there last year? They came up fine and suddenly the sprouts just withered. I’ve collected some of the earth for you to examine when you come home. Once the builders are gone I’ll dig up the bed and start working in fresh earth. But both Nanny and Brenda say the room already looks very beautiful. Mary keeps complaining about all the dirt and the dust. Apparently she’s insisted everything in the corridor and the hall must be covered while the men are around and they’re forbidden entry in any other part of the house. Cook has even banished them from the kitchen.

I’m glad we’ll be seeing each other again soon. Now stop worrying over me and concentrate on your lessons.

Goodbye,

John

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The small boy in front of him, staggering under the hefty weight of his books, reminds Sherlock of Edward. If the child hasn’t managed to procure himself friends during the first term it’s likely he’ll be a loner for the rest of his career at school, perhaps at University and in later life as well. Too bad but not Sherlock’s problem right now. He’s too busy composing his letter to Nanny, considering the appropriate phrases for coaxing the truth about John’s current state of health out of her. When he nearly trips over a hat he looks up sharply. The boy that was walking in front of him is now cowering hatless in front of a sniggering clump of elder boys, Fyfe-Rief among them.

“You cap when passing your betters,” Fyfe-Rief is shouting. “What are you, some gormless half-wit or what?” The boy stands petrified, fearful eyes locked on Fyfe-Rief’s snarling visage. Never particularly attractive to begin with it now looks downright ugly. “Answer me, you fucking eejit,” Fyfe-Rief demands, tone rising. Several of his companions laugh out loud.

“I… I…,” the boy stammers, but that’s all he manages before his tongue turns to stone under the glare of the hissing Gorgon in front of him.

“Cut it out, Fyfe-Rief.” Sherlock has strolled towards the group and is now offering the hat to the boy. The child gazes up at him and Sherlock is struck anew by how much he’s like Edward. “Take it,” Sherlock urges, stabbing the hat impatiently in the direction of the boy’s hand. “Take it and be off with you.” Slowly, the boy accepts the hat and pushes it on his head before pivoting and fleeing in a flurry of fear. “Straighten it,” Sherlock calls after the swiftly departing form. Behind him, Fyfe-Rief is working himself up to an impressive level of righteous indignation.

“I was teaching that dimwit some manners, Holmes,” he hisses, fists already balling at his sides. So tediously predictable, but then, bullies always are.

“Were you? Well, fancy that.” Sherlock raises his eyebrows. “And now I assume you want to fight
because I spoiled your fun for you. If it were anyone else, I’d be happy to oblige but I’d rather not have your hands on me, given what they were doing only five minutes ago. You really should clean them afterwards, you know. That’s only polite.”

One of Fyfe-Rief’s friends snickers. Fyfe-Rief turns on him with the lumbering abruptness of a moose stung by a hornet. “What’s so funny?”

“Nothing,” the boy shrugs, his face drawn in a mask of surrender and goodwill. “Nothing. Hey, it’s only natural.”

Fyfe-Rief is as tall Sherlock but he has at least three stone on him. That isn’t a problem, not for Sherlock who’s won every brawl he’s ever engaged in (except with John, but that’s only proper because John is the one who taught him. And those two times he was attacked by Percy-Smith and his pals don’t count, because both times it had been four against one, and that second time…). Sherlock shakes his head to clear his thoughts and concentrates on the unconscious flexing of Fyfe-Rief’s revoltingly thick fingers. Thick but strong, but not a problem, because Fyfe-Rief is distressingly stupid. God, why do all his opponents have to be so bloody, bloody stupid? It’s so tedious. If only, one day, he would meet and get to fight someone at least as clever as he is. What a glorious day that would be.

Today, however, is clearly not that day. Sherlock briefly closes his eyes and heaves a deep breath, dragging it up all the way from his toes.

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“I’m deeply disappointed with you, Holmes,” the Headmaster is intoning. The desk has been moved since the last time Sherlock was in this room. It’s lined up straight in front of the high windows. Beneath the raised blinds, harsh February light slants into the room and into Sherlock’s eyes, reducing him to a seeker of faith, blinking at the figure of the Headmaster, who stands out darkly and ominously in his high-backed chair. The elaborate set-up might serve to disconcert a luckless thirteen-year-old summoned here to receive a sermon on the subject of his sins, but all it inspires in Sherlock is a feeling of contempt. So much so in fact he doesn’t even bother with concealing it behind the blank mask of deference one is expected to adopt when entering the room. It had still been in place on Fyfe-Rief’s face when he stepped out into the antechamber where Sherlock sat waiting for his turn to be scolded. Upon noting Sherlock it had been quickly replaced with a hatred that was no doubt partly attributable to the rainbow of bruised flesh blooming on his left jaw.

“Ever since I took up this position your name has been a synonym for trouble,” the Headmaster is now droning. “I realise that’s partly because of reasons that are… uhm… well, better left unmentioned for all concerned. But the fact remains, looking at your results and… other evidence, you could be a poster boy for the school if you chose to and yet, consistently, you refuse. That’s not the way it works, Holmes. Yes, I’m talking to you and you can wipe that smirk off your face.”

He’s not smirking, is he? For that would imply Sherlock were feeling some kind of amusement, albeit brief and a tad malicious, and right now Sherlock is most definitely not amused. Bored out of his mind and wishing he were anywhere else, certainly. Even being stuck at home with Mummy dominating conversation at the breakfast table would be preferable to the current situation with the Headmaster now extolling on the school’s supposed benefits.

“The school is giving you an education, a background. The mere mention of its name on your CV will open doors which might otherwise have remained firmly closed to you. In exchange, you deny the school the utility of your talents and are always on the lookout to engage in a brawl. You and your contemporaries must set an example on gentlemanly behaviour to the younger boys, not roll around in the mud like a pair of ruffians straight out of the slum.”
So it goes on for a very long time. Sherlock does his utmost to at least appear duly chastened, reasoning that strategy to be the fastest exit out of the room and into his own where his essay on Marcus Antonius awaits him. Another dull boor, but with the distinct advantage of having been dead for almost two millennia.

“I have, of course, contacted your brother,” the Headmaster is now saying in a low voice. He has the audacity to chuckle at the sharp whip of Sherlock’s head. “I knew that would get a reaction out of you. You may go now, Holmes. I suggest you go to your room. Your brother will arrive——” rather ostentatiously, the Headmaster pretends to check his watch, “in about an hour or so.”
Chapter Summary

The beginnings of a headache throb behind his right eye. He wishes he’d thought of swallowing a pill before Mycroft’s arrival because the whole situation – Mycroft’s exasperation and his concern – here, in the confines of the school, is so humiliating.

Chapter Notes

Many, many thanks again to the wonderful susako for her beta. Also many thanks to the lovely cutglasscaress for providing me with a great idea.

Even Philip Anderson himself – the forensics expert who nearly buggered their last case by stupidly wiping the unusual pollen pattern of the victim’s left cuff – wouldn’t miss the envelope perched prominently on top of the stack of newspapers, journals, bills, boring letters sent by his bank at Mycroft’s behest, more bills, advertising leaflets and various other flotsam carried by the tide of modern life to litter doormats all over the UK in an unrequested bid for attention. The ostentatious crest, pressed into the ludicrously expensive handmade paper, extends over one third of the missive’s rectangle.

John, already ensconced at the table, raises his head from his newspaper when Sherlock is halfway through the living room. “Morning,” he greets, his gaze bypassing Mrs Hudson’s version of ‘the full English’, complete with beans on toast, spread out in front of him to land on the velvety creamy paper glowing warmly against the muted background of a foggy December day that hasn’t yet truly begun.

“Just toast and tea for me, thanks,” Sherlock tells his landlady and, after plunking down in his seat, blatantly ignores the object of John’s and Mrs Hudson’s interest to shift through the stack for The Beekeepers Quarterly, which should have arrived with this morning’s post. Its glossy paper will serve as an effective screen between him and the attack on good health, both general and mental, arranged on John’s plate. A small geyser of indefinite liquid squirts from a sausage as John spears it with his fork.

Sherlock sniffs, slants his gaze away from the stomach-turning horror and opens his mouth—

“Don’t,” John warns sharply from around a mouthful of saturated fats. “Not after making me run what must have been two marathons all over London last night.”

Briefly Sherlock contemplates denying he meant to say anything but he supposes John knows him too well by now to buy this so he settles for a shrug and a sigh instead. “Well, you’re the doctor.”

“That’s right.” Simple natural science decrees John’s mouth shouldn’t be able to open wide enough to accommodate the next forkful of scrambled egg and bacon but it appears the laws of the universe don’t apply to John Watson this morning. Determined not to be riled, Sherlock rips off the magazine’s covering.
“There’s nothing wrong with a good English breakfast, Sherlock,” Mrs Hudson adds her twopenn’orth to the conversation, while pouring him tea. “You could do with some carbohydrates yourself.”

“Perhaps,” he murmurs, sipping his tea – which is perfect, just the way he likes it – and pretending to sink into the magazine’s contents. At the sound of the toast popping out of the toaster he lifts it in front of his face.

“Your toast, Sherlock.”

“Thank you, Mrs Hudson.”

Sadly – naturally – the dismissal falls flat. Beneath that innocuous exterior of affectionate, dithery granny hides a feral beast that could have taught Captain Ahab a lesson or two about dogged determination.

“Well,” she says, standing next to his chair as solidly immovable as Mohammed’s mountain itself.

“What?”

“Aren’t you going to open it?” Her hand flaps impatiently towards the letter.

“I wasn’t planning on it, no.” Sherlock stares her defiantly in the eye. “Why?”

“Why?” she repeats, incredulous. “Sherlock, just look at that crest. It’s bound to be important.”

“I sincerely doubt that. But, as you’ve been suppressing the suspense since you swept up the post off the doormat two hours ago and look like you’re about to start hyperventilating in a minute, which will necessitate John to interrupt his breakfast so he can help you breathe into a bag, I give you leave to open it. Now, there’s an article on Varroa I do actually want to read very much so could you please be so kind as to pour me some more tea and make yourself scarce after, preferably for the next two weeks or so.”

“Sherlock,” John admonishes. Mrs Hudson’s mouth is a tight pink line of disapproval, but her hand snatches the envelope from the stack all the same.

“What?”

“Oh, let him be, John,” Mrs Hudson sighs wearily, drifting towards the sofa and sinking down on it. “Today is stroppy teenager day, apparently.” Which, contemplating her own behaviour this morning, is a totally ridiculous assertion. Sadly, the sound of his justified snort is superseded by that of heavy paper protesting the indignity of being torn apart by impatient fingers. The intensity with which Mrs Hudson begins scanning the letter practically vibrates against Sherlock’s back, despite the protective layers of Egyptian brushed cotton and silk and the wooden shield of the chair back.

“Goodness gracious,” she breathes, her hip momentarily forgotten as she leaps up and stands hovering beside him in less than the blink of an eye. “You never told me, Sherlock. Oh dear, that means you went to school with that actor – what’s his name – and... half the present Cabinet—” She looks down at him expectantly. “And now they want you to come and hold a lecture. Such an honour. Did you know Sherlock went to that school, John?”

John shakes his head. “No, I didn’t, but it figures. A bit hard to imagine Sherlock at an ordinary grammar school... or Mycroft.”

“Do you think I could come as well, Sherlock?” Mrs Hudson asks. “It will be so nice to see you
lecture those young people and I’d love to have a look around. The grounds are supposed to be very beautiful. Hopefully the weather will be better…”

“I won’t go,” Sherlock interrupts her.

“What?” Even John looks a little flabbergasted.

“I won’t go,” repeats Sherlock. “My time is too precious to waste it on a crowd of pill-popping, sex- addicted idiots. That was what comprised the school’s population in my day and I’ve little reason to suppose it’s improved since.”

“Sherlock!” Mrs Hudson actually looks shocked. Both the mention of drugs and sex doesn’t usually cause her to bat an eyelid so Sherlock supposes it’s the mention of those vices in connexion with people moving in a certain social sphere. Colourful past and an addiction to gossip magazines notwithstanding, she remains a perfect example of old-fashioned British class-consciousness.

“Mrs Hudson,” he replies. “We’ve known each other for more than five years now. I know you’ve talked yourself into a wholly inaccurate…”

Her face glowing with what Sherlock assumes must be indignation she brandishes the letter at him. “But the Headmaster himself writes…”

Sherlock takes hold of the letter, scans the signature, crumples the paper and launches it across the room. Neatly bypassing John’s right ear, the small ball hurtles straight towards the goal of the fireplace to land bang on top of the merrily crackling flames. They leap up and the three of them watch as the magnificent missive is reduced to a small pile of humble ashes.

“The last time I saw the man he berated me for denying the school the utility of my talents. He’s given me no reason to change my either my actions or my opinions on him and his deplorable institution since.”

Mrs Hudson’s colour has risen considerably. John, however, is watching him intently, his head cocked to the side. “Not deleted, eh?” he says and re-applies himself to his newspaper.

“I still would have liked a look around,” Mrs Hudson states rather aggressively.

“I’ll take you for an outing to Queen Mary’s Gardens,” Sherlock tells her. “And if you shut up now I’ll even buy you a cup of tea and a scone at the café. With clotted cream.”

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“…I really don’t have time for this,” Mycroft rounds off his exhortation, twisting the oak of the umbrella handle with a vengeance to underline this statement.

“Then why did you come?” Sherlock enquires, in a tone not quite as petulant as he would have liked. As he’s the one seated on the bed he has to look up at Mycroft in order to catch his gaze. He’s tried to counterbalance this downside of their seating arrangement by adopting the most listless posture on his repertoire but Mycroft appears singularly unimpressed, not even twitching as much as an eyebrow. Instead he heaves a heavy sigh and insinuates himself deeper into the questionable comfort of Sherlock’s desk chair.

“You’re moderately clever,” he shoots back in a clipped tone. “Figure it out, Sherlock.” The corners of his mouth, already almost painfully lowered, descend even further.

“The Headmaster is an idiot,” ventures Sherlock. He knows Mycroft will disagree as a matter of
course even though they both know Sherlock is right. As expected Mycroft exhales with an impatient flare of his nostrils, followed by an abstract pinching of the bridge of his nose.

“Tell me, Sherlock,” says Mycroft, and his voice sounds infinitely weary. “If everyone except you is an idiot, how come you’re the one who ends up in trouble every time you interact with others?” He scrunches his nose. “And no, I’m not going to answer the question for you.”

“Pity.”

“Probably, yes,” agrees Mycroft. “My plane leaves in an hour so I suggest you give me your answer, now.” A loud tap of the umbrella tip on the floorboards emphasises his impatience, with Sherlock, with the current situation, with everything he should be seeing to instead of being cooped up here in Sherlock’s room.

“In an hour? How do you…” Mycroft’s quiet growl stops Sherlock short. “Oh, all right.” He flaps his hand dismissively and sinks a little further into the mattress. “Fyfe-Rief is excruciatingly stupid and dull and a bully. I told him off and he tried to hit me. You can hardly blame me for defending myself.”

His brother stares at him for a long time before declaring with the air of a judge delivering his decree “I can blame you for sneering.”

Sherlock launches himself off the bed and in the direction of the window with the urgency of someone bitten by a flea. “Sneering?” This is totally ridiculous. What on earth has that moron of a Headmaster whispered into Mycroft’s ear? “Since when is pointing out a few obvious facts akin to sneering?” he almost shouts.

The beginnings of a headache throb behind his right eye. He wishes he’d thought of swallowing a pill before Mycroft’s arrival because the whole situation – Mycroft’s exasperation and his concern here, in the confines of the school, is so humiliating. Also, his brother’s presence reawakens memories he’s still working hard to delete. The book Mycroft has lent him is helpful, but building the rooms, especially digging for the cellars, requires lots of concentration, a commodity always far more evasive at school than in the safety of Mycroft’s flat, or even his own room at home.

Sherlock always keeps three pills hidden amongst the random mess littering the desk drawer, should an immediate need for them arise. His awareness of their existence, right there, close to Mycroft’s elbow, a mere three steps away from his hand, is vexing beyond endurance. To distract himself he starts fumbling with the hem of the curtain.

Meanwhile Mycroft has cocked an eyebrow. “Don’t play stupid, Sherlock, it doesn’t suit you.” Umbrella now planted firmly between his splayed knees he lets his gaze wander around the room, from the bright red chenille bedspread to the scuffed light oak of the wardrobe and the velvet curtains, the colour of which resembles that of the overcooked ham they get served every three weeks or so. The sole attempt at adornment and proclamation of ownership is the periodic table chart on the wall over the bed. For all of three seconds Mycroft’s eyes rest on it, before he swivels them towards Sherlock.

“What you choose to term bullying is viewed as character building by most. Apparently, it works. For ordinary people, that is.” Mycroft’s mouth twitches in distaste. “I’ll admit it’s extremely unpleasant to have to witness. But needs must for such are the ways of the world. Occasional bouts of compassion don’t help to improve the morals of our society. To the contrary, for sentiment is always irrational, and as such a dangerous impulse you should suppress rather than succumb to.”
During the speech his gaze has searched Sherlock’s and now Mycroft forces Sherlock to look at him and lock their eyes across the width separating them. Twelve feet at the most but they might as well be twelve light years for Sherlock wholly appreciates Mycroft’s argument but that doesn’t mean he has to concur with it, now does he?

“If,” Mycroft resumes, “as you continue to declare, you loathe this school, and given the fact I’ve gone to great lengths to ascertain there’s no need for you to interact with any of your fellow pupils, why address anyone at all? Where’s the logic in that?” During their week in London Sherlock was amused to learn Mycroft had spent considerable time perfecting a look of genuine bafflement. Why Mycroft believes the expression works on Sherlock is almost equally baffling so Sherlock returns the volley with a slight creasing of his forehead. For he fails to understand why Mycroft fails to understand that a tutor, anyone but Mr Talbot, is simply not an option.

“Logic? The whole concept is defied by the mere fact of this institution’s continuing existence. Highly irrational is more like it.”

“How very droll,” replies Mycroft, not bothering to hide the jaded slump of his shoulders while he clambers out of the chair. “I must say I find your new habit of deflecting every chance at a straightforward conversation by answering in riddles very exhausting. Please try to rid yourself of the practice before the end of term.”

Straightening his cuffs he adds, “I will be abroad for a while, a whole month to be precise. You won’t be able to contact me directly. I’ve left instructions for the Headmaster to ring our solicitor, should anything untoward happen. Please be so good as to prove these precautions excessive and unnecessary.”

“I’ll try,” Sherlock spits. “But you can’t hold me responsible…”

“I can and I do,” Mycroft cuts off. “Don’t disappoint me, Sherlock. Not again.” He’s already near the door, his hand on the handle. “Goodbye,” he says and he’s gone.

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From the covert vantage point of the curtain Sherlock watches his brother stride to the parking lot, umbrella swinging at his side. For an instant he imagines he can hear the crush of gravel beneath Mycroft’s leather soles but then he realises the sound derives from the cogs turning in his head. He closes his eyes but all this does is to increase the noise’s creaks and crunches so he opens them again. Once Mycroft’s figure disappears behind the big beech tree on the right, Sherlock turns away from the window and launches himself at the desk. Despite his efforts to keep them still his fingers tremble while reaching for the drawer. It isn’t until he’s dry-swallowed two pills and collapsed onto the bed that the quivers stop. His heartbeat keeps racing, however, and the maddening jumble of fleeting thoughts and emotions – anger at Mycroft, the Headmaster, that idiot Fyfe-Rief, the realisation John is dying, the Pavlovian dull sense of hatred that even a fleeting thought of his mother inspires in him – race round and round his head like a demented teddy bear. He groans and grinds the heels of his palms into his eye sockets, blinking at the colours exploding against the inside of his eyelids, clawing at snapping silken strands, anything, anything to distract him.

At long last the pills kick in and his hands fall away from his face as the soothing nebulous gauze starts winding itself around his fevered brain.

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The big clock in the hallway chiming the eighth hour rouses Sherlock from his stupor. He scrunches
his eyes shut against the bright glare of the moonlight that comes slanting through the window to bounce off the surfaces in the room: the windowsill, the wardrobe, his violin case, lying to the left on the desk, the desk chair.

The same desk chair where Mycroft sat and told Sherlock he would be gone for a month with no way for Sherlock to contact him. They’ve never before been separated for such a long time. Since as long as Sherlock can remember, they’ve kept up an almost daily interaction, either directly or through letters and telephone conversations.

The idea of not hearing from Mycroft for such a long time is inconceivable. What if something happens to John? What if Sherlock needs him? And on what business should his brother, who, as is printed on his card and stated on the bronze plaque attached to the building where his desk perches in front of the wall with the Queen’s portrait on prominent display, works for the Home Office, have to go abroad for such a long time?

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23rd February 1994
Copperbeech Hall

My dear Sherlock, my darling boy,

Did you recognise the handwriting on the envelope, I wonder? I spent part of yesterday comparing my present hand to some notes I’d made fifteen years ago and to me the writing looks the same. However, both Mycroft and Nanny tell me you’re a very careful observer and I remember you walked a lot around the house with that small magnifier you filched from Sherlock in front of your right eye so I suppose you’d spot any differences. Or perhaps I’ve never written to you before, I don’t remember. I used to do most writing on my typewriter but darling Mycroft has brought me one of those word processors. I don’t like it, my fingertips don’t agree with the feel of the keys, but Mycroft had it installed for me and now we can’t find the typewriter, though I had Brenda search all the attics.

Oh dear, I’m rambling. Know then, my dear boy, that I’m writing to you because now I’m feeling better again at last, I want us to become much closer than we’ve been before.

I’ve had such a horrible, horrible month the whole of January. I cried so much at the idea of Sherlock being dead for a decade now. Horrid, horrid day. I’ve been such a defective widow to never visit his grave, but I can’t, I can’t. I miss him so. Every, every day I miss him. That’s why I’ve so often been so awful to you and such a bad mother. In looking so much like him, you... but no, Nanny says those are wicked thoughts. Nanny also tells me how much you still miss Sherlock, that you still remember and talk about him and always with great love and respect. Bless you. But then he was the best man that ever lived and I love him so very much. I still do. I always will. For he’s mine, you know. I can tell you for you loved him more than Mycroft did. You’ve always been Sherlock’s child, much like Mycroft is my child. But I will try to love you too. Though you could help by not being so attached to that horrible creature. No, I didn’t mean that. Oh my dear dear darling, your Mummy is so very, very unhappy. I

Dear Sherlock,

oh dear, I’ve made rather a mess of things, haven’t I? I’m so embarrassed because I’d meant to
write you a nice and sunny letter and... but I want to be totally honest with you. So I decided to continue the letter I started three days ago and we will become friends. Not fast friends, naturally, for such a relationship is inconceivable between a parent and a child but I expect us to tolerate, respect and eventually love each other. Just know it’s my intention to reach that outcome.

Now Sherlock, my boy. I fully realise you’re not happy with my decision to alter the music room, but you will turn round once you come home for the holidays and can see the effect for it’s turned out beautifully. Those stuffy velvet curtains are gone and it’s such an airy, gay room now. I’ve had the walls covered with the loveliest pale-blue silk so you feel almost completely surrounded by the sky while sitting there. I’ve had your music stand placed in front of the corner window. You must play for me, darling. Nanny is always saying you play so well, almost as good as Sherlock did.

Oh, and dear boy, you’ll never know what I did yesterday, but I will be honest with you and tell you and you must write back immediately to tell me it doesn’t matter and you give me leave to enter your room as often as I like and sit there whenever I want to. Only when you’re not here, of course. Your privacy is very important to me. But I feel that being surrounded by all those small knickknacks you’ve collected and those artefacts you’ve created – I adored your lovely model of a beehive, so very accomplished – helps me get to know you. Though I confess I felt disconcerted by the skeleton of what I take were a mouse and a squirrel on display on your desk. They reminded me of an episode... I believe I once found you in that spread of trees near the wall... I can’t really remember but I realise you’ve always had a morbid fascination for dead things. That’s a thoroughly unpleasant habit, Sherlock, and one you must rid yourself of. I told Nanny to throw those nasty things away. We will have to talk about this, Sherlock. And I’ll have a word with Mycroft as well for, perhaps not encouraging but at least indulging such distasteful pursuits, which simply doesn’t do...

But darling, don’t be afraid. Your Mummy isn’t really angry with you. Just worried. I want you to be Mummy’s happy boy, much like Mycroft is. Though he isn’t very happy now, I know all about Michael who must be the shallowest man alive to give up on someone like Mycroft, don’t you agree? Ah well, there are but few couples who can be as thoroughly happy as Sherlock and I have been. Are you in love yet? No doubt you are constantly. I was when I was your age. Even though I had no one but Nanny and my dear parents and mémère for companions. I was infatuated with one of mémère’s stable boys for one whole summer. Of course, I wasn’t even aware of my darling Sherlock’s existence at the time. My darling darling Sherlock.

Ah, rambling again. And I suddenly realise I’ve been filling far too many pages already. I must be boring you. Please write to me soon, my darling boy, and tell me what else interests you apart from music and science for I know precious little about those and if we are to engage in a proper correspondence we must have something to write about.

Much love,

Mummy

After finishing reading the letter Sherlock sits staring at the wall behind his desk for a very long time. What on Earth is he to do with this outpouring, this verbal diarrhoea of a raving maniac? She’s mad, she’s totally off her rocker, he’s always known it and here she’s been so kind as to deliver him the very proof in writing. More than anything he wants to thrust the letter into an envelope and direct it to Mycroft, FYI, here’s conclusive evidence she’s lost her marbles. But no, Sherlock doesn’t want to hurt Mycroft, not after his relief at her seeming normalcy.

A furious rap of knuckles on his door stirs him out of his reverie. “Go away,” he shouts, but the Deputy House Master is already barging into his room to berate him for the fact he hasn’t turned up for his fencing lesson and inform him he’s just earned himself the pleasure of writing five hundred
lines that read ‘I don’t shout ‘go away’ at people knocking on my door but bid them to enter in a deferential tone.’

“What’s wrong with you, Holmes?” The man has the gall to enquire next. His eyes dart between Sherlock’s face and the letter. “What is it?” he asks, his voice flooding with sympathy. “You’re looking a little green around the gills. It’s not bad news, is it? Not from your…”

“No, sir,” Sherlock cuts him off. “Not from my brother. It’s just… unexpected.”

“Oh well. Perhaps you’ve been driving yourself a little too hard lately, Holmes. The wife said so, noticed you were even paler than usual. And where’s the necessity, seeing as you’ll easily equal your brother’s marks.”

“Thank you, sir.”

“Only one person to thank, Holmes. Well, and your parents of course, for providing you with the brains. Mr Butterworth and I had a most pleasant discussion of your Mother’s excellent work only yesterday evening. Her studies on Roman attitudes towards female health remain impressive.”

After delivering the observation the Deputy House Master falls silent to allow Sherlock to express his gratitude on his mother’s behalf. Sherlock lowers his eyes deferentially to a contemplation of his fingers laced in his lap. His mouth twitches.

When it becomes clear Sherlock is not going to meet his expectations, the Deputy House Master scrapes his throat. “Fine,” he croaks. “You may add another sentence, Holmes. ‘Each time a member of my family is paid a compliment I gracefully accept on their behalf.’ A thousand times, I think. I’ll have both tomorrow morning at eight. Good night.”

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In the end Sherlock decides to simply pretend he never received the letter. Probably his mother herself has already forgotten she sent it. Instead he replies to Nanny’s and Cook’s small missives which are all both full of their usual goings on (he skips the part in Nanny’s letter that deals with Mummy’s continuing good health) and thus provide him with a much-needed whiff of normalcy.

One morning he finds an envelope sent by John, containing a brief note and a photograph of Daddy’s grave covered in snowdrops. He fusses over his letter to Mr Talbot, but leaves off from informing – and likely alarming – his old tutor about his Mother’s overture. Mycroft will be home before Easter break to help Sherlock weather whatever he’ll encounter at home.

Four days after he first set eyes on the hateful epistle he’s called into the House Master’s office. He enters to find the House Master seated behind his desk with the receiver at his ear and a face that resembles the aftermath of a minor natural disaster.

“He’s just entered the room,” the man says. “I’ll explain and then I’ll leave the room for five minutes. You understand how extraordinary– oh no, I concur. Completely. Hold on, please.” With an impatient flick of his wrist he beckons Sherlock to the front of the desk and, while levering himself out of his chair, shoves the receiver into Sherlock’s hand. “Your brother.”

“Mycroft?” Sherlock says. Behind him there’s the sound of a door pulled shut with excessive thoroughness.

“Sherlock,” Mycroft replies in a curt tone that oozes disapproval and – even worse – disappointment.

“What’s wrong? It’s not…” And suddenly Sherlock realises why Mycroft is calling him. He remembers another time he was called into this room and he closes his eyes to brace himself for the
news. “It’s not John, is it?” he whispers.

“What? Speak up, Sherlock. The line is bad enough as it is.”

“John!” Sherlock shouts into the receiver.

Mycroft emits a pained noise before continuing, “I assume he’s as fine as circumstances allow. You must be aware he’s not the reason I’m going to such lengths to phone you. Especially not after the warning I gave you.”

“Then why did you ring?” Sherlock asks, genuinely puzzled.

“Mummy sent you a letter, didn’t she?”

“Yes. How do you—”

“Why haven’t you replied, Sherlock? Mummy is very upset. A few sentences with the promise to write more later would have sufficed.”

“I… I don’t see… Where are you?”

Mycroft ignores this to say, “Look, Sherlock. I gave warning when I left, didn’t I? Right now I’m extremely displeased with your behaviour which is childish and unworthy of you. I order you to go to your room right now and write our dear Mother a polite and friendly letter in which you’ll answer any questions she may have asked.”

“But…” begins Sherlock.

“Just do it,” Mycroft tells him and the next sound in Sherlock’s ear is the sharp click of the receiver being positioned on its cradle at the other end of the line. For a few seconds he remains standing, then he replaces the receiver at his end as well before sinking down in the nearest chair.

“All well, Holmes?” the House Master’s voice launches him off the seat.

“Yes, sir. Thank you, sir.”

“Be off with you then. Important day tomorrow.”

Sherlock stares at the man, his mind a complete blank. The House Master sighs.

“Prepping for the Latin exam, Holmes. The whole House counts on you to do us proud. Please tell me you’ve been studying.”

“Of course, sir,” he lies glibly. As if there’s a need.

“Good. Go and study some more then.”

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What hurts the most is the fact that she obviously was given free rein to contact Mycroft while Sherlock isn’t even trusted with the information where Mycroft went off to exactly.

Back in his room he retrieves the crumpled ball of paper from his wastebasket and flicks his eyes over the mad rush of syllables again in preparation of his reply. His fingers are stiff and cramped by the time he ends his letter but he has managed to jot down five sentences, which he considers something of a success. The first sentence runs to seventeen words. The second and the third each
have nineteen, the fourth eighteen and the last one fifteen. Thus he’s come to an admirable approximation of the average length of an English sentence.

He tops it all off with a Your affectionate son, Sherlock Holmes, folds the paper and shoves it into an envelope, praying it will serve to drive the message home.

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Unfortunately, it doesn’t. Four days later he finds another envelope addressed in his mother’s hand in his pigeonhole.

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“You should look at it from the bright side, Sherlock. It’s good that she reaches out to you in search of some kind of relationship. She deserves a fresh start.”

John blows on the mug of tea clasped in his hands. His fingers are mere sticks and he’s shivering constantly, as if his body has lost the capacity to generate warmth, but he’s pooh pooh’ed Sherlock’s worries away with a quick smile and brisk shake of his head.

Mummy stood waiting at the top of the terrace steps when Mycroft’s car rounded the last bend before the house. While the car closed the last hundred yards or so she sprinted down the steps, opening her arms wide in dramatic entreaty and throwing herself at Sherlock to clasp him to her bosom.

“Darling!”

She disgusted him. Mycroft’s watchful eye had him wrap his arms around her back but it was hard to suppress the shudder rippling down his own at the contact.

“Mummy,” he said, and was relieved to find Nanny hovering close by so he could let go of his mother with good grace and embrace the old woman instead.

“I simply don’t see why she should suddenly be interested in me,” complains Sherlock. “It’s creepy. Admit it, John.”

The wrinkled skin around John’s eyes crinkles even further as he smiles into his mug. “Why should a mother be interested in her child? Good question, Sherlock. Luckily you’re none too stupid so one of these days you’ll figure it out.”

“Now you’re being deliberately obtuse,” scoffs Sherlock.

“No, I’m not. I just believe in second chances. Everyone deserves those. She’s trying to make amends. And she’s your mother, she gave you life.”

Tea sloshes over the rim of Sherlock’s mug when he puts it down with a bang on the worktop.

“Am I somehow supposed to be grateful for that?” he almost shouts. “She didn’t ask me beforehand, now did she?”

“No,” John replies, and his smile is so mild it enrages Sherlock even further. “But it’s good to be alive, isn’t it?”

“You say that?” chokes Sherlock. “You?” He stares at John as if the cancer that’s eating at him has somehow reached his friend’s brain and is now gobbling away at his mental sanity. “How—”

The next second he’s at the door and out of the shed, flying as fast as his legs will carry him though
he doesn’t know where off to. “Sherlock!” John is calling after him. “Sherlock, please,” but he ignores John’s entreaties in favour of dashing through the trees behind the shed, pushing aside low branches that threaten to slash him in the face, following the wall until he ends up in the orchard and finds the door that gives access to the forest behind the estate.

He keeps running down the beech tree avenue until he ends up in the glade where he found the fox’s body, the year that Daddy died. Now the spot is empty, nothing here but the grass at his feet, the grey trunks of the trees in a circle around him and the silent swishing of the rolled-up leaves, coaxed by the sunlight into pushing themselves out of their tight buds. The sound of his hammering heart is beating loudly in Sherlock’s ears. In the tree closest to him a blackbird starts warbling its song, which is picked up and answered by another one, perched in a tree behind Sherlock. The song rallies back and forth between them, like a tennis match. The air itself feels bracing, crackling with the urge to live.

He crushes the heels of his palms into his eyes until the pain makes him stumble and topple into the high grass. The stalks brush his hands and his face to protest the havoc brought upon them but he just mashes his face even harder into the sun-kissed earth, which thoroughly mulched with leaves as it is every autumn, still retains the early morning’s dewiness.

Everything is warm and toasty, everything but the inside of his chest where a block of ice is blistering his innards.

“I want a pill,” he mumbles into the grass. “Daddy.”

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7th April 1994
Copperbeech Hall

Dear Mr Talbot,

How are you? I hope you had a nice Easter. Mine was plain awful. Mycroft spent Easter Sunday locked in Daddy’s study in a phone conference that took forever. Cook served him both lunch and dinner there. Nanny was very upset but Mummy made the most of it. She went all out with the histrionics, looking like some long-suffering heroine in a play determined to weather life’s nasty surprises. In the end I was so disgusted with her I fled to my room and worked some on the mole John gave me to clean and prepare as a replacement for my mice and squirrel skeletons that she threw away.

I don’t like her, Mr Talbot. I know you and John want me to at least try and respect her but I can’t. Both John and Mycroft tell me I ought to be happy with her showing an interest in my pursuits but I’ve been thinking about that and I think she’s not interested in who I am but in who she wants me to be. She was adamant I play for her in that horrible new room she’s rigged up in the music room but she wasn’t even listening, just sitting there and looking out of the window, pretending to listen because apparently I’m her project or something. Like Mycroft, she’s never understood music. But Mycroft tries for my sake and gets some of it. All she’s done is state she’s very disappointed with my choice for the Academy, predicting that means I will be dependent on my trust income and Mycroft for the rest of my life. Which is ridiculous as Mr Mancini had great faith in me and Mr Whitall is convinced I’m already a great violinist, ‘just a bit too impetuous perhaps’ he keeps declaring, and they’ve both shown one can make a living out of music. Besides, it’s what I want, money bores me and I understand we’re filthy rich anyway.

But she keeps whining how she wants me to follow in Daddy’s and Mycroft’s footsteps. Yesterday, to shut her up, I told her that my second choice, after the Academy, was natural sciences and so Cambridge, and that was such a shock she pretended to faint and Nanny had to revive her, all the while looking daggers at me. I shrugged and took my leave, which earned me a ribbing from Mycroft later that evening. Why can’t she stay locked up in that room of hers, nagging at Nanny who’s only too happy to be of service?

Mycrof is totally useless. To console himself for that idiot giving him his walking papers he’s opted to work himself to death apparently. He couldn’t even spare me an hour for a swim, whining about some stupid conference instead until I thought my mind would atrophy from boredom just listening to him being pompous and tedious.

John has turned frightfully thin but he keeps saying he’s feeling fine and insisting I must be happy for him. But how can I be happy when I know my friend is going to die? Everyone I love dies or is taken from me. And Mummy continues to deride and hurt him. Mr Talbot, I know Mycroft does the best he can (though I’m still angry with him) and your letters really help but I would so like to see you again, and speak to you, if only for five minutes or so. I’m so desperate I thought of discovering where you live (which, for all your secrecy wouldn’t be that difficult) and visit you. I won’t, but only because you’ve asked me not to.

Please Mr Talbot, I’m so very sorry to be writing you such a dismal letter, wallowing in self-pity, which doesn’t do as they keep telling me at that stupid school. No, I must retain a stiff upper lip and suppress every feeling. But I can’t help it. I’m just like Daddy, I suppose and I’m proud of it. I don’t want to end up like one of those self-serving machines that are only interested in chasing power and pleasure.

They’re over the moon with my results so far, by the way. But really, that curriculum is designed for idiots with an IQ of sixty or so. I don’t even look at their stupid books before sitting down for an exam.

The dinner gong just sounded and Mummy insists I join her for every meal and be nice to her so I have to end this letter. I hate her, Mr Talbot. I really do. Apologies for the whining. Please write to me soon.

Your (sadly former) devoted pupil,

Sherlock

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“Now, this is the term that’ll count, little brother. Are you properly prepared for it?”

Mycrof’s hands rest lightly on the steering wheel but the throb of his pulse point above the stiff collar of his shirt reveals his nervousness.

“Yes, Mycroft. No need to worry. I won’t soil your and Daddy’s reputation.”

“Obviously. You actually have the advantage of me with regard to chemistry, which never terribly interested me.”

So now they’re reduced to being ‘nice’ to each other. Sherlock slants his gaze towards the window on his left to study Mycroft’s profile in the glass’s reflection. Ah, the little finger of Mycroft’s right hand twitches, indicating he’s as ill at ease with the situation as Sherlock is. Well, Sherlock thinks grimly to himself, he’s the eldest and the wisest as everyone keeps insisting, himself included, so he
“Sherlock.” Mycroft’s sigh is a study in the art of dignified suffering. “Please stop your sulking, it’s childish and, as I’ve explained, wholly unnecessary.”

“I don’t think so. But it’s all right, Mycroft. It’s all fine. And I’m not sulking. I’m looking out of the window. Or is that forbidden somehow? Is the useful Mr Boothby or one of those other stultifying bores at your office drafting a law against using one’s own eyes?”

“Haha, most amusing.” The command Mycroft has over his voice is remarkable. He sounds like he doesn’t even know how to laugh. “For God’s sake, Sherlock. Didn’t you listen to what I told you?”

“I’m afraid I did,” Sherlock replies. By now he’s desperate to outdo Mycroft so his clipped tones are a perfect imitation of Mycroft’s when dismissing someone on the phone. “Enlightening, but no reason to change my opinion on the subject. You told me not to try and contact you but you allowed her to do so. That’s…,” he sucks in a quick breath, “you betrayed me.”

“Forgive me, but that’s the biggest load of twaddle anyone has tried to lay on my doorstep so far, and you well know it. Cut the dramatics, Sherlock. I want this done with before I drop you off. I won’t have this tosh interfere with your exams.”

“You needn’t bother, for it won’t. I’m not stupid, Mycroft.”

“No,” Mycroft readily agrees. “Merely vindictive, it seems. We’ve had this conversation before and I fear we will clash on the issue for as long as she lives. Please try and be a little less hard on her and you’ll make life easier for yourself… What is that…” He interrupts himself to glare at a bright-red Jaguar that suddenly swerves in front of their car.

“Moron,” he mutters.

“Yes,” Sherlock assents. “That’s Fyfe-Rief’s elder sister’s car. Look at that number plate. The whole family probably suffers from a virulent strain of idiocy.”

“Yes, yes. Never mind,” Mycroft waives the assertion irritably. “Just know that I’ve spoken to Mummy about her behaviour towards John before we left. It’s… it’s not a pleasure to have to lecture a parent, Sherlock. I only got through for your sake and by reminding her of the duty to her husband. In the end I wrangled a promise from her that she’ll back off but I want you to realise that’s all I can do. Afterwards I spoke to John and…”

“I know that, Mycroft,” Sherlock cuts in. “John told me.”

“Of course. I’m glad he did. But then, he’s a sensible man.”

“Yes. More sensible than you, certainly. Or her.”

“Bloody hell, Sherlock.” Mycroft looks like he’s close to head-butting the steering wheel. “Please, remember we’re a family. A dysfunctional family perhaps, but a family nevertheless. Accepting that basic truth would make your life – our lives so much easier. I’d love to be able to concentrate on things that actually matter, rather than this feud you insist on waging with Mummy. Just please. I’m aware you don’t love her, and, given the past I condone your feelings, but, for the sake of everyone who is not Mummy, can you at least try and pretend?”

“You want me to fake a sympathy I don’t feel?”

“Yes, Sherlock, I do. It’s what people are doing every day to cope with daily existence. It’s called
life.”

“Fine. I love Mummy. Do you want me to wear a T-shirt with one of those heart symbols?”

Gesturing expansively at his chest Sherlock turns in his seat to cast Mycroft a withering look. Unfortunately his well-aimed arrow bounces off his brother’s steely exterior.

“That would be overdoing it,” Mycroft comments drily, and rounds off his statement with a perfect arc through the school’s gateway.

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15th April 1994

Dear Sherlock,

Dismal letter indeed. My dear boy, your old tutor’s heart went out to you while reading your complaints. Your anguish is fully understandable and, given your character, I think you’re handling it admirably well already. All the more so, since, as I gather from your letter, Mycroft is currently, unable to help you. Never unwilling, for sure. However, even Mycroft is, for all his excellent qualities, just a man.

To begin with I want to assure you there was no need to apologise for the tone of your letter, nor its content. Genuine grief warrants but profound sympathy, and I heartily commiserate with your impending loss of a dear and trusted friend, and a kind man whose love for you is close to that of a parent.

I confess myself shocked at your description of the degree of John’s decline. My background reading hadn’t suggested such rapid deterioration and in the occasional letter John sends me he writes he’s feeling well. Cook informs me his appetite is as healthy as ever so I had comforted myself into believing John had a good few years ahead of him yet. Now your report tells me his death may be a matter of months or even weeks. Your eye is sharper than Cook’s, so yes, I suppose you must prepare for what, for you, will be the worst.

For you, I repeat, because my dear boy, as bitter and hard to swallow as this particular pill may be, the fact remains that John doesn’t look with trepidation upon his own death, but rather, welcomes it. We’ve talked about this before, and really, Sherlock, instead of moaning and weeping, and thereby creating a discomfort John wouldn’t necessarily feel otherwise, you ought to be proud of your friend and tell him so.

Instinctively, John is putting into practice what Seneca and Epicurus themselves have taught us and many a man who found himself more esteemed in this world failed to put into practice when confronted with the same conundrum; to live each day as if it were the last and to welcome the inevitable. Let’s both learn from his extraordinary example so we may be equally well prepared when the death knell will toll for us, whenever that may be.

We’ve talked about this before, haven’t we, in our correspondence? You resolved to bide with John’s decision and be a bright beacon of friendship and love for him during the time left to him. I’m not berating you for failing to do so, for you’re still very young and thus prone to attach a higher importance to your own emotions than those of others. In fact, too many people never overcome this reprehensible weakness, which goes a long way to explaining the suffering man perpetually inflicts on man and beast alike. Quisque sibi proximus est.
Please, dear boy, I know you have it in you to rise above such base paltriness. Show yourself worthy of the love John so freely bestowed on you and the father you loved and be a source of comfort to him, rather than a source of unease.

Why don’t you reach for your pen now and write John a letter in which you tell him of your love and friendship and tell him that, when he dies, he’ll live on in your heart where he will be honoured and loved for the person he was for as long as you’ll live. For we don’t really cease to exist until the time arrives for those we have known and loved to close their eyes and resign themselves to death.

Do it now, my dear boy and you will rest easier afterwards. Then, after John has died, together with you I will weep and grieve over the friend we’ve lost. But not now.

As ever, your devoted friend and former tutor,

Edmund Talbot

P.S. Regarding your mother’s attempts to establish a connection with you I advise you not to rebuff her advances but rather to endure them weekly and politely. Be glad she recognises you for yourself at least and no longer struggles under the illusion you’re an image of your dear father. We’ll discuss this more extensively later. Now go and write that letter to John.

***

Oddly enough, he does feel much better after having written to John. In a flash of generosity he squeezes out a few impromptu sentences to his mother as well. His reward arrives a few days later. There’s another epistle from his mother that he tosses aside after a perfunctory scan, but sitting next to it is a big yellow, very official-looking envelope from Mycroft.

Upon opening it Sherlock finds four closely written pages. They form an uncharacteristic cocktail of praise, assurance of fraternal love, the promise of a week at the seaside during the summer holidays enhanced with a liberal ‘and John is welcome to join us if he so chooses’, an urging to do their old tutor proud and equal Mycroft’s performance in the exams and lots of unnecessary advice on how best to prepare himself for those. Next to the letter sits an estate agent’s brochure fashioned out of thick glossy paper and filled with carefully understated photographs of one-bedroom flats in the NW1 area.

Marylebone Road, York Terrace, Baker Street, Devonshire Place. For now these names are a blur among Sherlock’s London impressions but after the summer he will walk these streets every day. They will become his home, as familiar as the lanes on the estate and in the surrounding countryside.

Mycroft writes that Sherlock should choose the flat that appeals to him the most so Mycroft can purchase it. ‘Or do you prefer a two-bedroom flat?’ is scribbled beneath the photograph of a Marylebone Road apartment that’s obviously struck Mycroft’s fancy. Sherlock goggles at the booklet and Mycroft’s words. He expected Mycroft would want Sherlock to live with him. Mycroft’s assumption that Sherlock prefers a flat of his own is a gesture of such overwhelming trust and benevolence that for five minutes his heart flutters like a freshly caught bird in the cage of his chest.

When he remembers how to breathe again he lets his gaze flit over his present surroundings, which have never stopped reminding him of a prison cell, of that other room. The coppery taste of blood flows over his tongue and Le Feuvre, slanting his gaze while offering the dressing gown. Just a few more weeks and he will be free from these memories, forever, and he’ll never return to them again.

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Fata Volentem Ducunt, Nolentem Trahunt, chapter 10

Chapter Summary

In a few hours Sherlock will have finished this last exam and be free to saunter off to his room and wait for Mycroft to come collect him. He’ll doff the loathed uniform and toss it into his school trunk – in the knowledge he’ll never have to don it again. At home he’ll nag John into helping him build a great bonfire for a ritual burning of the mind-throttling bluer and trousers, that god-awful boater and that despised gag rag of a tie. He’s never, never, ever going to wear a tie again.

Never.

Chapter Notes

As ever, many, many thanks to my marvellous beta susako. We discussed this chapter extensively and I couldn't have written it without her. Apologies It took me so long.

Disclaimer: all characters you recognise belong to the BBC and Steve Moffat and Mark Gatiss. My profit is the joy I had in writing. Yours, I hope, the joy in reading.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“…Either you cut it or you can bog off, Sherlock, ’cause right now I’ve had it with you. Fuck it, you’re supposed to be clever. How come you haven’t worked out yet that insulting people who are only doing their fucking job isn’t exactly helping?”

Lestrade’s eyes are bloodshot and both his cheeks’ pallor and his hand’s slight tremor while jabbing a sloshing cup of lukewarm coffee perilously close to Sherlock’s white-shirted chest indicate the DI hasn’t seen his bed, or any horizontal surface that could serve as such, for the past twenty-eight hours. Over his left shoulder Donovan’s eyes are spitting fire at Sherlock while her left hand is patting the back of the young DC sobbing into a crumpled tissue hastily produced by a quietly sympathetic John together with some mumbled advice to just ignore Sherlock and not listen to a thing he says.

Which is exactly the point, isn’t it? Time and again he’s insisted for the crime scene not to be contaminated by having the likes of Anderson – or worse – blundering all over the spot and time and again his request – his, when considering what they’re trying to do here, entirely reasonable request – is ignored. No, rather than taping off the scene and waiting for Sherlock to arrive and tell them what they’ve failed to observe, NSY allowed an amateur, a Boeotian incompetent that joined the CID three weeks ago, to go boy scouting obliviously all over the place. If they had equipped the moron with a bulldozer and ordered him to wreck this remote corner of Kensington Gardens, he couldn’t have done as thorough a job at wiping out every last trace of evidence. Yet, with nothing useful left for him to read, Lestrade has the audacity to demand Sherlock deduces the victim’s identity whose empty eyes reflect the fresh blue morning sky above them, tell Lestrade how the boy ended up here, and, additionally, lead his team to the killer.
“He just flew off the handle, sir, like the mad freak he is.” The remark appears to be delivered for Lestrade’s sole benefit but Donovan has adjusted her voice to the perfect pitch for Sherlock to catch every word without the need to strain his ears. John looks pained and glances uneasily at Sherlock, who does a mental eyeroll.

“Having a moron stampeding over the crime scene isn’t exactly helping either,” Sherlock overrides her pathetic attempt at sullying him. A gesture towards the flattened earth swarming with footprints serves to illustrate his point.

True to form Lestrade acknowledges his observation with a short, sharp nod. “Right,” he concedes, “point taken. Just hold your tongue next time, okay? Now tell me what you’ve got. You being you, there must be something we have missed.”

At these words Donovan’s look of indignation intensifies until she appears ready to explode. Huffing loudly she turns to lead the sniffling constable to one of the squad cars, every square inch of her rigid back screaming with disgust and hate.

Mentally obliterating Donovan and beaming the scorched remains to an outlying corner of the universe, Sherlock, after stepping daintily across the muck surrounding the body, perches himself on one knee. His eyes flit over the corpse’s horribly contorted limbs and lodge themselves on the marks covering its wrists.

“Yes,” he confirms, waving at the boy’s right arm, flung out in a grotesque cry for mercy, “this is the third victim. Notice the marks on his wrists, similar to the other victims’. And here I expect…” Sherlock shifts on his haunches and is extending his fingers to roll up the hem of the right trouser leg, when his hands still to hover halfway along the boy’s thigh.

“What?” John asks. Instead of replying Sherlock fumbles in his pocket for his magnifier.

“What is it?” John edges closer, excitement tugging at the creases around his eyes.

“I’m not sure—” mumbles Sherlock, adjusting the magnifier’s angle to scrutinise the stain on the trousers as closely as possible. “Remember that Indian case? This looks… I’ll need to go to Bart’s.” Stashing away the magnifier he reaches to unbuckle the boy’s belt.

A gasp of horror accompanied by a shriek of outrage and a bellow from Lestrade swells from the herd surrounding them. Sherlock whips up his head and zooms in on Lestrade, the only officer with the actual wherewithal to appreciate his methods.

“Problem?” he snarls.

“Jesus, Sherlock.” Lestrade licks his lips, his colour switching from ashen to scarlet and every shade in between. “You can’t do that. Not here. Not you. It’s indecent and… and… against the rules.”

Fury surges so quickly its leaping flames temporarily blind him. “Fine,” he spits, springing to his feet and grabbing John’s hand in the same move. “I assume you don’t want this solved quickly then. Be my guest. You can transport him to Bart’s and have Molly get him out of his trousers for me to examine that stain. Meanwhile John and I’ll go and do what your lot excel at, which is to find us a coffee. Come along, John.”

Tugging at his flatmate’s hand he marches away from the scene in the direction of Palace Avenue. John almost stumbles but corrects himself halfway and scurries to keep up with him.

Warmth floods Sherlock’s chest. “Costa or Pret a Manger?” he enquires.
John’s wide-eyed astonishment almost makes up for Lestrade’s inanity.

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Sherlock stifles a flash of disappointment at the thud announcing the door to the Headmaster’s suite of offices has fallen shut, followed by the faint clank of keys and the click of the levers setting in the lock.

The little effort it took him to immure himself in these rooms is another blot in the school’s copybook. Especially when every boy up for his finals is close to snapping under the strain of the impending examination period, kicking off Monday next with History – and the knowledge the exams arrived today. A multitude of eyes glued themselves to the couriers who emerged from a van stacked with boxes that contained the gateway to a glorious career. Happily ignorant, the two undereducated labourers piled the treasure upon a trolley that they then wheeled inside to stash the boxes into the safe Sherlock is currently observing through the crack between the door and the jamb of his hideaway.

The small boy Sherlock unhanded from Fyfe-Rief’s pestering a few weeks ago had been surprisingly willing to provide the distraction Sherlock needed to slip into the room and tiptoe behind the assistant-Headmaster’s turned back to the door that gives access to the servant’s stairs. The commotion had been such that the deputy Headmaster – who had been fussing and getting in the couriers’ way as he darted around, basking in the importance of the task he was unnecessarily overseeing – had assisted Sherlock by lifting up the sash window and bending out of it to better reprimand the pair of boys engaged in a mud fight beneath the Headmaster’s rooms. Naturally they got a thousand lines each (A true gentleman avoids common brawls. A pupil of this school remembers to cap when spoken to by his superior.), but Sherlock had furthered the boy’s collaboration with the promise he’d deal with the punishment, no matter its length. He’s written more lines than he cares to remember anyway. An extra two thousand hardly counts.

“Are you going to steal the exams?” the boy breathed, his eyes double their size with awe.

“No!” Sherlock spat indignantly. “That would be cheating. I’m going to turn top of the country anyway. I don’t have to cheat.”

“Then what?” the boy pressed.

“Christ, you’re a nosy brat. If you must know, I need a look at my brother’s grades.”

“Couldn’t you just ask him?”

Sherlock smiled, noting that the hint of disdain curling his mouth fostered the air of hero worship the boy was already exuding. It was… not unpleasant to be regarded so by a fellow-schoolmate, even one four years younger than Sherlock. A refreshing variation on the range of ganders usually thrown his way.

“Now that would truly be cheating,” he said.

“Why?”

For god’s sake, did the boy really expect him to explain every last particular of his motivations?

“With a pair of whining seven-year-old sisters for siblings you won’t comprehend. Will you help me?”

“Of course,” the boy agreed, spitting into his palm and proffering his hand to Sherlock.
Overcompensating for a thoroughly female household. Suffers under his lack of fighting skills, thanks to an overbearing mother and Nanny. Shuddering inwardly, Sherlock shook the boy’s fingers.

“Take up boxing,” he advised. “Your fists are the only argument to convince the likes of Fyfe-Rief.”

The whim to engage in a little competition with Mycroft had cropped up the day he overheard the Headmaster’s secretary complain about reshuffling the Headmaster’s schedule at the last minute to fit in a distant relative’s funeral. Sherlock hadn’t eavesdropped, just happened to pass the tiny patio where the secretary and Matron were enjoying a cigarette and tilting their faces towards the sun.

He’d dismissed the grievance from his mind instantly – straight into the waste bin – until he discovered yet another letter from Mummy in his pigeonhole. The missive had been full of exhortations to do well in his exams, simultaneously noting she realised he could never hope to outdo Mycroft. Where the woman had mastered the cunning ability to make him see red with every letter she sent him was a mystery he’d probably never unravel. Heart pounding in his chest with rage, he balled the sheets of paper and threw it at the Hg symbol on his periodic table chart, missing by a wide mark because his vision had gone blurry. He’d been on the brink of seeking stouter comfort when the earwigged exchange had jumped up and launched a novel idea; one that seemed infinitely more rewarding.

The deputy Headmaster dolefully fulfilled Sherlock’s assessment of the man’s character. Brimming with self-importance, he flapped around the rooms, crossing the paths of the people doing the real work, making a nuisance of himself and managing to make everybody swear under their breath. It’s nice to have one’s judgment confirmed, Sherlock muses, staring at the closed door. How the man can stand having to deal with himself on a daily basis is a puzzle Sherlock would rather not contemplate. With the aid of his watch’s mutely glowing hands he counts down the ten minutes he’s decided to wait before emerging from his hiding place. Once the deputy Headmaster has planted his behind into the accommodating leather of his favourite chair to nurse the tumbler of whiskey poured by his spouse he’s unlikely to stir for the next two hours, leaving Sherlock with plenty of time for an investigation of the school’s archives.

His palms itch with sweat inside the morning gloves he’s donned but he doesn’t dare take them off. Instead he concentrates on his watch, willing the hands to inch forward. When the time is up he pushes open the door and steps into the school’s sanctum sanctorum, shivering with the excitement Ali Baba must have felt when first entering the thieves’ cave.

Ignoring the safe he heads to the small room adjacent to the anteroom. In another defiant show of the institution’s general contempt for post-Empire civilisation, the room’s walls consist of rows upon rows of tan cardboard boxes containing the school’s history since World War I. Suppressing the impulse to search for Daddy’s records, Sherlock selects the box marked ‘1982: H’. He sifts its contents two times before concluding it doesn’t hold Mycroft’s records. Which is absurd. The suggestion of a set up flits through his mind: Mummy and Mycroft in league against him, wanting to expose him for an incompetent fraud, searching for the exam papers in the most incongruous place. He shakes his head to exterminate the image, jinxing Mummy for what feels like the hundredth time since her resurrection and forcing her back into the rickety cellar where he’s tried to bury her.

“Think, you idiot.” The sound of his own voice startles him into action.

“Obvious,” he whispers and his right hand reaches for Mycroft’s final year. From his examination of the files in the other box he’s gleaned the filing system’s colour code and he lifts the only one with a scarlet cover. “Got you.”

Mycroft’s grades are every bit as outstanding as expected. Which is, Sherlock thinks, utterly
reassuring and also utterly unnerving. But forewarned is forearmed, as the saying goes.

Sherlock takes his time to redistribute the dust on the shelves, his lens blower gently puffing away. The dull task allows him to mentally readjust his personal exam schedule. Perhaps he should cram in more time for Latin and German and cut back on natural sciences.

Once he’s content with the shelves’ general aspect he exits the premises via the servant’s stairs. Pitch darkness doesn’t impede picking a lock as the work is mostly done by ear anyhow. Evidently a clean attic doesn’t rate highly on housekeeping’s priority list. A viewpoint Sherlock might have supported under different circumstances. After half an hour spent nearly doing himself in and ruining the gloves’ peccary leather in his attempts to curb the sneezes that keep assaulting him, he admits there’s a lot to be said for Mary’s outlook on dust accumulation in attics. He feels even more heartily for Brenda, as it’s she who ends up on her knees doing the actual scrubbing.

Once his system has adjusted itself to the environment’s vagaries, Sherlock has a chance to observe yet another advantage of cleanliness. In the scant light that percolates the grimy windows the track of his shoeprints trailing the ocean of dust stands out as starkly as the Plough against the night sky, a clear indication of his escape route, should anyone elect to come up here and investigate.

Despite the unlikeliness of such an event – and having nothing better to do while waiting for nightfall – Sherlock decides to muddle his tracks, as he can’t very well cover them. He capers around a bit, circumventing the floors in a haphazard manner, ensuring he ends up in front of all the windows at least once and unlatching them all. After he’s done the sun’s dying rays grapple at floorboards crossed with an irregular pattern devoid of meaning.

Sherlock hoists himself through the window he’s selected during his reconnaissance earlier that day. Under cover of darkness, deepened by the great horse chestnut guarding that corner of the house, he shimmies down the drainpipe. Mission accomplished, he’s back in his room and in bed before lights out, unable to wipe the smug smile from his face even as he falls asleep.

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The postcard’s front shows a black and white picture of the house’s façade, taken from the driveway. Many of the staircase’s steps are broken with pillars lacking from the banisters. The plaster resembles a centenarian’s flaky, cracked skin; a huge patch between the windows of the dining room and what used to be the music room missing altogether. Copperbeech Hall is printed in elaborate script in the top left-hand corner.

On the back John has written, Dear Sherlock, look what I found while going through some old stuff of mine? My da must have bought this years ago. This is what the house was like for much of my youth, can you imagine? The lawn looks good, though. I suppose you’re studying very hard right now. You must want to outdo Mycroft. I’m keeping my fingers crossed for you. Cook and Nanny do as well. Love, John.

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“And yet I know you’ve all studied very hard and are determined to meet my expectations. Gentlemen, this is your last exam. The Headmaster and I understand you’re exhausted, mentally as well as physically, after the harrowing month you’ve had. Even so, we expect you to flare brighter than those flames you fired up in the school’s labs. We expect you to give us the best you’ve got. Not for our sakes, nor for that of the school. Those futures were moulded a long time ago; we can take care of ourselves. No, it’s your own future that is at stake here and it’s up to you to either make it… or break it.”
Here, Mr Beckett draws to a halt to sweep his hawk-eyed gaze over the assembly in front of him. Some boys are chewing their lips or scratching their noses, others are fumbling with the hem of their sleeves or fiddling with their pencils, a few are staring into space with their mouths hanging open and blinking stupidly when hit with their teacher’s laser beam.

Sherlock meets Mr Beckett’s stare head-on, inviting his nod of encouragement. When his teacher does indeed tip his head slightly in his direction, Sherlock is quick to repay the compliment to the only person in this institution for whom he experiences a regard akin to friendship. After the attack, when Sherlock had sought oblivion through pretending nothing had happened to him, Mr Beckett had been the only teacher to understand and act accordingly.

“Ah, Holmes,” he’d greeted Sherlock, his attention drifting up from the line of Bunsen burners he was aligning on the work benches. “I chanced upon a delightful book on Paracelsus last week. Fascinating material. I’m willing to lend it to you in case you’re interested. His open-minded observational approach should appeal to you, as well as his fresh outlook on life in general. Dosis facit venenum indeed.”

His hands were back to fumbling with the burners’ needle valves before the end of his speech. Only later, upon finishing the book, Sherlock had grasped Mr Beckett’s kindness in suggesting it.

Sherlock knows he’s outdone himself so far. The past month he’s lived in a bubble of his own device, forgoing his correspondence with home, Mr Whitall (his violin has been withering in its case), Mycroft and Mr Talbot to concentrate on the task of giving both Mummy and the school their comeuppance. He’s no saint, he isn’t above celebrating petty victories over his enemies.

Mycroft hasn’t sought contact either. He rang the Sunday evening before the exam period kicked off to express his confidence that Sherlock would do him proud. He’d visited the Hall that weekend and found everyone doing relatively well and as excited about the finals as Mycroft himself. John had looked a bit better than the last time Mycroft saw him and claimed he’d profited from the recent spell of good weather. He sent his special love.

Sherlock has even managed to scorn the pills’ beckoning call during a bad stint of boredom thumbing through *Die Leiden des jungen Werthers* for German literature. The hero’s dogged insipidness had him gritting his teeth and wanting to kick in those of the novel’s protagonists and the imbeciles of the GCE awarding body who saw merit in pupils all over the country wasting precious brainpower on a fawning libretto without the benign aid of heavenly music to aid swallowing the hogwash. And to imagine this was from the same man who’d enriched science and the world with his *Zur Farbenlehre*, a work the GCE morons hadn’t deemed worthy of mentioning. After throwing the book across his room his gaze had wandered irrevocably to his desk, from which the drawer front protruded ever so slightly.

But he’d restrained himself, lit a cigarette instead, and he knows he’s pulled off reciprocating exactly what the board wanted him to, giving them a piece of his own mind to boot. The German grammar incident was a different matter entirely, best forgotten. The school will have to order a scarlet cover with a gold lining to file his results for future reference, or – Sherlock snorts inwardly – one in imperial purple. This exam will serve as the jewel in his crowning glory.

Sherlock can read it in Mr Beckett’s wink before he lets his gaze glide to the boy seated behind Sherlock. Regulations forbid the masters to sneak a peek at their pupils’ work but naturally every last one of them has – yes, even Mr Beckett, who is not a patch on Mr Talbot.

In a few hours Sherlock will have finished this last exam and be free to saunter off to his room and wait for Mycroft to come collect him. He’ll doff the loathed uniform and toss it into his school trunk – in the knowledge he’ll never have to do it again. At home he’ll nag John into helping him build a
great bonfire for a ritual burning of the mind-throttling bluer and trousers, that god-awful boater and that despised gag rag of a tie. He’s never, never, ever going to wear a tie again.

Never.

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Halfway through, with just four questions left to answer, there’s a rap on the door. Mr Beckett looks up from his book on bridge problems, frowns, closes the book, walks to the door and opens it a crack. Fierce whispering ensues, the agitated tones emerging from the hallway carrying a close resemblance to the Headmaster’s secretary’s voice.

Three quarters of an hour later Sherlock jots the last dot onto the fifth sheet of paper he’s filled, screws the cap onto his pen, collects pen and paper and sets off for the dais.

Mr Beckett smiles when Sherlock hands him the papers and indicates for Sherlock to wait while his eyes flick over the top sheet. His eyebrows shoot up and start a little jig on his forehead soon joined by the corners of his lips. “Holmes,” he murmurs, his tone vibrating with badly veiled excitement.

Sherlock dips his head. “Mr Beckett,” he mouths and is already pivoting on his heel to retreat when Mr Beckett’s left hand lodges itself onto his elbow while the other offers a slip of paper bearing a demand for Sherlock to proceed to the Headmaster’s rooms straightaway.

In response to Sherlock’s raised eyebrows Mr Beckett shakes his head to indicate his lack of knowledge regarding the request’s rationale.

Outside in the corridor Sherlock decides not to heed the command. What’s the Headmaster’s displeasure to him after giving the man and the school his grades to brag about? Surely that should absolve him from any nagging about some stupid rules of theirs he may have inadvertently breached during his last days in this prison. All he wants now is to go home. The mere idea of having to spend another four hours at this godforsaken temple of misery makes him want to scream with frustration.

In the room that shortly will be his no longer, that has in fact never even felt like his, Sherlock lifts his violin case from the top of his school trunk that has been packed and ready for the last five days. Upon opening the case the instrument leaps into his hands of its own accord, the strings vibrating to be touched. Sherlock places it at his shoulder and picks out the opening bars of Handel’s Va tacito in pizzicato. The Guarneri slackens its strings in protest at being neglected for such a long time and Sherlock winces.

“I know,” he whispers. “I’m sorry.” He fiddles with the pegs, letting his hands and the violin become acquainted with each other once more. Soon he’s absorbed in the task to such an extent the instrument almost slips from his hands at the sudden sharp rap of knuckles on the door.

Before he has a chance to respond, the door opens to reveal Mycroft and the Headmaster. Both stare into the room for a moment. Then Mycroft purses his lips and addresses the Headmaster, “It appears we’ve found the sheep that strayed from your flock.”

“Yes, so it seems.” Predictably, the Headmaster glowers at Sherlock who’s bristling to return the courtesy when he notices the set of the man’s shoulders. They’re rigid from the tension of hiding… whatever Mycroft told him.

“I’ll leave you.” He nods at Sherlock and Mycroft both. Mycroft ignores him in favour of entering the room and pushing the door closed.

“You’re early,” begins Sherlock. “I didn’t expect you—”
“Sherlock.” Mycroft’s voice is a reedy, thin stream, shattering on the hard rock of the plosive.
“Sherlock.”

With a swiftness belying his demeanour’s feebleness he’s in front of Sherlock, just in time to save the Guarneri from ruin as it slips from Sherlock’s suddenly slackened grip.

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“How?” He’s propped up on the bed where Mycroft guided him, leaning against his pillow and the balled-up blankets and bedspread Mycroft has arranged into a makeshift burrow. Their present position is an echo of the interview that took place a few months ago, with Mycroft seated in the desk chair once again. That’s where the similarity ends though.

“A heart attack, during his sleep. He never suffered, Sherlock.”

A booming noise pounds the inside of Sherlock’s skull. It’s a great lurching wave of white sound, battering reason’s edge and drowning him in sorrow. He flinches when Mycroft’s face crumples with empathy, rendering it nearly unrecognisable. Whatever Mycroft is going to say next, he doesn’t want to hear it. John simply cannot be dead. Not now, not the night before Sherlock’s return.

“A heart attack? But how…” he gasps.

“Cook sent the Robertson boy to the lodge when John didn’t show up for breakfast. She said he was fine the evening before—”

The evening before, you mean yesterday, Sherlock means to correct but Mycroft rolls on with the relentless efficiency of a chairman holding sway over a mutinous horde of outraged underlings, “— finished his supper and told her he’d turn up for breakfast early. Something to do with the green peas. She waited for half an hour, then ordered the boy to have a look. He rang her ten minutes later. She feels terribly guilty for not having gone down herself.”

Inching forward on the chair Mycroft bridges the gap separating them, inviting Sherlock’s hands into his. His fingers, when Sherlock acquiesces, feel comfortingly warm and dry and squeeze Sherlock’s in mute apology. “We’re sorry,” the fingers are saying. “We’re so very, very sorry.”

“Apparently John was sicker than he’d let on to you… to any of us,” resumes Mycroft, only to almost immediately pause again. His demeanour is uncharacteristically hesitant, reminding Sherlock of his behaviour in the car a few months ago, when they were quarrelling over that stupid oaf Michael.

“This time the doctor was quite frank. John must have been living in constant pain since Christmas. He refused all medication, because he wanted to remain lucid until the end. It’s… when I consulted Davies he asserted it’s a miracle John lasted that long. You can imagine I wasn’t well pleased to hear so. But Davies assured me John passed peacefully. Likely as not he was asleep and never realised he breathed his last.”

“Oh god,” Sherlock moans, freeing his hands from Mycroft’s grip to press the heels into his eyes where hot tears threaten to quell and start overflowing from their ducts. He’s seventeen years old, he will not cry. Not in front of Mycroft, that is. Later perhaps, at home, in the privacy of his own bed with the duvet drawn over his head. But not here, not now.

Home? With John gone from the gardens and Mummy reinstated as the rightful chatelaine what kind of home is left for him to return to?

Quashing the notion as resolutely as his tears, Sherlock leaps up. “Why are we still here, for god’s
sake? Let’s go. We must organise the funeral. I’ll have to notify Mr Talbot. Do you think he can attend if we…”

“Sherlock!” Mycroft calls him to heel in a firm tone.

“Sherlock.” And suddenly Mycroft’s voice is much softer, almost squirming with dread as if he were a condemned man who’s just had his first glimpse of the gallows from which his lifeless corpse will be dangling in less than an hour. “Please, there’s nothing left for you to arrange though you may write to Mr Talbot. I reckoned you’d be the right person for that particular task.”

“What, why?” His knee joints liquify all over again, causing the upper part of his body to sway dangerously. He’s so intent on staying upright he nearly misses Mycroft’s reply.

“John’s already buried, Sherlock.”

Sherlock gasps. For a terrible second that feels like eternity, Mycroft’s face and hands waver between advance or retreat. The outcome – thankfully – is a politician’s move. Clenching a fist around the handle of his umbrella he coughs, once, before continuing, “Perhaps you’d best sit down again, Sherlock.”

Good advice, especially as Sherlock’s legs are actually collapsing beneath him. He topples onto the bed in a heap of chaos and limbs gone awry.

The words tumbling from Mycroft’s mouth are equally cluttered, as if he were indeed a murderer desperate to confess the sin that has been eating away at his soul. “We buried him last week, in the plot next to Daddy’s… not in Mummy’s place of course, on the other side, but very close all the same. The spot was spoken for but I made the family see reason. Mummy wasn’t best pleased.”

“Last week?” Sherlock latches onto the only information of any importance Mycroft has given him. Mycroft pauses, the gears visibly grinding in his brain, his breathing shallow and quick. “Hear me out, Sherlock. We… she made a bit of a row.” The acute embarrassment flickering in his brother’s eyes yanks Sherlock back in time, to a dark corridor where he’s bending with his eye at the keyhole and Mummy shouting accusations at Daddy. There was something far more important going on but…

She’s shown Mycroft her true colours now.

The thought pops up in Sherlock’s head like a perfectly formed soap bubble and explodes at the ragged sound of a sob, dragged up from somewhere deep in Mycroft’s chest.

“Last week?” Sherlock grinds out, leveraging into a more or less upright position that will enable him to poke a finger in Mycroft’s chest. Not that Mycroft appears to be conscious of Sherlock’s presence. He presses on in a self-induced trance.

“I’m… I yelled at her. For the first time in my life, I yelled at her. I told her to shut up and behave with the dignity she owes her position in life and our father’s memory. The man is dead, they’re both dead and it’s only decent, any decent human being—” Mycroft shudders and closes his eyes in a last ditch attempt to evade the inevitable.

“Last week?” Sherlock croaks. “Jesus, Mycroft. Please tell me you’re mistaken.”

Without warning Mycroft’s eyes fly open. “It is true, Sherlock. John died two weeks ago. Believe me… had circumstances been different I would have told you, I’d have come to fetch you, like I did when Mr Mancini died. The situation being what it was, my hands were tied; there was too much at
stake for you. I wanted you to pass your exams so you can leave the school. And you have. Please, you do realise why I couldn’t, now don’t you?”

“No!” Sherlock shouts, disbelief supplying his legs with the strength to jump up from the bed so he can tower over Mycroft. “No, you’re lying. I don’t believe you. You of all people wouldn’t do that to me.”

Mycroft’s nostrils twitch. The plea in his eyes is still the doomed criminal’s, accepting his fate at last and prepared to meet his maker with his eyes wide open.

“I might dissemble but I would never lie to you, Sherlock. Never. Please, you’ll have to believe me. John died on us a fortnight ago and we buried him Saturday last.”

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“No!”

“Sherlock?”

“No!”

“Sherlock, look. I understand your distress. I understand at this moment you refuse to see the point of my decision. Please, I get that, I really do. But you’ve fainted twice now in less than an hour. You’ve just finished a strenuous month and been dealt a great shock. Let’s visit Matron, have her sort you out with some biscuits and tea to get some strength up, and leave, okay?”

“No!”

“Sherlock, we really want to be off shortly or we’ll be stuck in the traffic and it’ll take us hours to reach home. If we go now we might stop by... we can go and have a look at the graves this evening. You’d like that, wouldn’t you?”

“No!” He doesn’t want to look at a grave. What he wants is to look at John’s face, the weather lines that furrow the leather of his skin crinkling as he smiles up at Sherlock and tells him ‘well done, Sherlock.’

“Sherlock.”

“No!” That’s what he will be shouting at Mycroft for the rest of his life. 

The mattress sags and dips under the weight of Mycroft’s body. Heat from Mycroft’s hand seeps into Sherlock’s shoulder as it settles there. He forces himself to keep his breathing regular and not to flinch, for that would be an acknowledgement of Mycroft’s presence. His nose itches from the blanket’s scratchy wool against his face. Sherlock grabs at the discomfort and holds on, blessing the distraction.

“Sherlock?”

Oh, damn him.

“Just go away, Mycroft,” he mumbles into the blanket. “Just bugger off and leave me alone. I never want to see you again.”

“Sherlock,” Mycroft’s voice is laced with even deeper concern. It rings horribly false though it’s probably true and Sherlock just hates that reality. Mycroft shifts his hips, causing his buttocks to ride against Sherlock’s and this time Sherlock does react, because he wants to hurt Mycroft, because

"NoNoNoNoNoNoNoNoNoNoNo!!!!!!!"
Mycroft’s cheek cries for punishment, and he shuffles his body away from Mycroft into the wall’s protective embrace. The sharp intake of breath behind his back tells him the motion has hit home. Triumph sparks briefly to sizzle and die in the lake of grief where he’s floundering.

“Fine,” sighs Mycroft. “I’ll go and find Matron myself and ask her for that tea. I suppose she will comply, given the situation’s particulars.” Still sighing, he gets up from the bed and tugs at the bedclothes on which Sherlock is sagging. Quickly and efficiently he pulls the bedspread over Sherlock’s torso and legs as if they’re children again and Mycroft is tucking him in after shutting the book they’ve been reading together before lights out. If Sherlock twists around and flings his arms around Mycroft’s neck, his brother will hold him and kiss his forehead, like he used to. Momentarily, Sherlock gives in to the aching sweet memory of a time when everything was so much better, when Mycroft’s name was a synonym for goodness and safety, when he didn’t know yet about death except for the small mole’s perfect stillness and the nasty smell later on. And the explosion of flies, obviously, right into Nanny’s face. But that had been funny. Well, not according to Nanny.

“Try to relax some.” Mycroft’s murmur yanks Sherlock back to present’s harsh reality. “I’ll be back shortly.”

A swish of air swirls through the room as he closes the door. Sherlock jolts upright. In two strides he’s beside the trunk and lifting the lid. He searches through its contents, finds a pair of ordinary trousers and two plain shirts, socks and underwear. He stashes it all into his black holdall, together with his passport, wallet and chequebook. The wallet is brand new, a present from Mycroft presented the day after their bank outing. Stacked inside are ten crispy fifty pound notes Sherlock hasn’t found any use for at school, as well as the bank card and chequebook which are in the same mint condition. The violin case is a close fit in the bag, but Sherlock pulls it off with some pushing and careful guidance of the strained zip.

After he’s finished he whisks off his tie and the bluer and opens the top two buttons of his shirt. Much more casually attired he sits down on the bed to await Mycroft’s return.

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No way is he going home to watch his mother alternating between throwing a hissy fit and gloating over John’s death. What he will do is find Mr Whitall and stay with him for the summer months until he can start his studies at the Academy. They’ll play duets together and Sherlock will ring Cook to have her deliver a fresh cake every two days. Mr Whitall is quite partial to her fruit cakes.

***

The whiff of strong tea mingled with the cloyingly sweet smell of the revolting pieces of cardboard Matron passes off as biscuits herald Mycroft’s return.

“I’m not going home,” Sherlock announces before Mycroft has made it halfway through the door. Quite a challenge for a man not accustomed to such mundanities as carrying a serving tray. Sherlock almost applauds him for keeping the thing straight. He notices only a small amount of the tea has sloshed over the mug’s rim when Mycroft positions the tray onto the table.

“I’m afraid I didn’t follow. You were saying?” Mycroft finds a Kleenex in one of his pockets, wipes the bottom of the mugs and makes to hand Sherlock one. “Here.”

Defiantly staring at his brother Sherlock shoves his hands beneath his thighs. “You heard me perfectly fine, Mycroft,” he says, shaking his head and welcoming the strange calm descending over him as Mycroft returns the mug to the tray with a resigned air. “I don’t want to go home. I don’t want to see Mummy. Not now, not in a few months, possibly never again.”
Mycroft groans and rubs his hands over his face with unusual vigour, a sure-fire indication of distress. When he lets them fall away, the whites of his eyes glisten with a faint pink hue. “Please,” he says, his bearing so downcast Sherlock is nearly swayed to compassion. “Please. You’re angry and right now not thinking properly. You can’t condone my decision. I understand that. We’ll discuss it later, once the worst of your grief has worn off. But whatever your opinion on the outcome I beg you to believe I only had your best interest in mind. The past month may well have been one of the most important of your life. Think of the stakes, your future, the Academy, your career. We couldn’t risk you forsaking those for grieving over a… a family friend.”

“Nice touch, Mycroft.” Judging by his brother’s cringe, the stab of sarcasm hits right where it hurts the most. Encouraged, Sherlock proceeds to twist the knife. “Glad to find John has finally come up in your world. Pity he’s dead and unable to appreciate the patronage.”

“Sherlock…”

“Please, I wasn’t finished yet. It’s my life, Mycroft, my future, my career. Not your life, your future, your career! I think it’s about time you let that penny drop, don’t you? I resent that you still consider me a stupid child, unable to follow a sensible course of action.”

“Sherlock…” Mycroft tries again.

“No!” shouts Sherlock. “Would you for once just shut up and listen to me! How dare you come here and coolly tell me my friend, a man I’ve loved and looked up to all my life, a man who has been nothing but decent and kind and whose life was devoted to loving and serving Daddy – and us – a man who’s never uttered a harsh word to Mummy though her behaviour certainly gave him license… How dare you make me miss his funeral? How dare you deny me the chance to say a proper goodbye? Oh, I know it’s nothing but sentiment and you don’t do that, not since your precious Michael…”

Mycroft’s cutthroat glare is that of a snared fox, fiercely struggling in a last-ditch effort to slip free of the wire at the poacher’s approach. His upper lip curls to reveal teeth glistening with saliva. Sherlock realises his mistake and hurries to change tack. This is about John. If only Michael were the one to have died, but at least he’s history, and even alive he’s nowhere near as important as John is. Was. Is.

“John would have wanted me to be there. I would have wanted to be there. You already robbed me of my chance to play at Daddy’s funeral—”

“That’s not fair,” interjects Mycroft.

“Who cares about fair?” Sherlock jeers, spurred by Mycroft’s plea. “You don’t, obviously.”

“I care about truth and facts.” Amazingly the fox has managed to break free. “However unpleasant they may be.”

“You sound like a prissy old bore. Perhaps you are a prissy old bore. The notion certainly bears consideration. Well, since you care so much for them, have a truth and a fact, Mycroft. The truth is I loathe you right now and the fact is you can drop me off at Mr Whitall’s. I decline the pleasure of spending even a minute with you and Mummy under the same roof.”

Sherlock hefts the bag’s shoulder strap and marches to the door. “I’ll wait for you downstairs.”

Mycroft coughs. “I’m afraid Mr Whitall won’t accommodate you.”

“What? Why not?” Quick as a man whose back is prodded with an impertinent finger, Sherlock wheels and lashes out. “The house is big enough. I won’t be in his way.”
Unfazed, having regained complete control of his faculties and the situation, Mycroft sips his tea and pretends to nibble at a biscuit. “I daresay not as he’s currently out of the country, touring the United States. This evening he’ll play in – San Francisco, I believe his manager said.”

“You’re making that up.”

“Am I?” Mycroft shrugs. “Your suggestion I’d concoct such an unsophisticated ploy to inconvenience you rather perplexes me. Unless it was meant as a deliberate insult, which would be a mundanity that doesn’t suit you at all, dear brother. The answer to your implied question is perfectly simple. Forewarned is forearmed as the saying goes. Over the past days I’ve played every possible outcome of this conversation in my head. A decision to burrow yourself at Mr Whitall’s appeared the most viable scenario so naturally I approached him to find if he was amenable and discuss the particulars. Thwarted, I put the second-best scenario into effect and asked Brenda to sort the gatehouse – I hope you won’t mind sleeping in John’s bed – and asked the proprietor of the Chiltern Street flat to bring forward the leasehold a month, from August to July. I gathered you’d wish to speak to Nanny and Cook at least before leaving for London.”

The world spins, necessitating Sherlock to seek the doorjamb’s support. “For Christ’s sake, Mycroft,” he mutters. “Have you any idea how totally presumptive and vexing your eternal meddling is? I’m not a game of chess or one of your tedious projects to be mulled over in search for the best strategy.”

“Indeed,” Mycroft agrees. “You’re far more important than any of those.” Puzzlement fleets over his features, seemingly genuine. “And far more difficult to fathom. I fail to see how my present actions are such an issue all of a sudden.”

“Exactly.”

“Ah.” After a beat Mycroft enquires, “so what will it be, Sherlock? The gatehouse? Or would you like me to arrange a hotel?”

“The third option,” scoffs Sherlock.

“Indeed.” At least Mycroft has the grace to lower his eyelids. “You decide, Sherlock.”

“I—” Suddenly overwhelmed with grief, he realises anew that John won’t welcome him home, because he’s dead, his oldest friend is dead. The knowledge is an ache so unbearable he needs to rip it out – except it would revive straightaway, like Prometheus’ liver, and he may tear at it time and again and the grief will crop up, perpetually, just as the realisation of Daddy’s loss is a burden he’ll never accept. Sherlock shudders and lets go of the doorjamb. If he spends another five minutes in these premises that have dealt him nothing but misery his head will explode. Not literally, obviously, heads don’t explode spontaneously on a perfectly fine summery afternoon. For that reaction to occur, preliminary action would be needed of a kind highly unlikely in the meticulously kept grounds of the country’s most prestigious elite school. But that’s not how he feels.

“I’ll stay at John’s for now,” he ventures and, readjusting the bag’s shoulder strap, makes for the stairs.

***

The M4 with the cars bobbing on its surface like a spill of discarded plastic bottles doesn’t resemble a motorway so much as the stale creek of barely moving sludge in a photograph accompanying an article on pollution Sherlock once flicked past in The Times.
Neither of them have spoken since Mycroft’s injunction for Sherlock to adjust his seatbelt, an exhortation Sherlock answered with his dirtiest look.

“Excuse me for caring about your safety,” Mycroft hissed in return, throwing the steering wheel to the left so sharply as he turned the car out of the school gates Sherlock had nearly cried out at the pain that shot up as his scapula smacked into the car door.

Since then he’s kept a steady gaze on the view outside the side window, oblivious to the information forwarded by the contrasts and colours which assault his retinas, determined to deny Mycroft’s existence. Perhaps he will never acknowledge it again. His assumption that Sherlock would neglect his exams, neglect his duty when confronted with John’s demise shows a betrayal of trust on an unprecedented scale. As if Sherlock still has no better impulse control than the five-year-old who kicked Mr Talbot in the shins, enraged by the amusement curling beneath his tutor’s moustache.

What will Mr Talbot say when he hears… when he hears of this? John was Mr Talbot’s friend too. Sherlock may know very little about Mr Talbot but he’s convinced that with John’s passing away, Mr Talbot hasn’t many friends left. For a moment he lets the hate he feels for Mr Talbot’s pupil blossom in his chest, wallowing in the misery of jealousy to ease the greater misery of his mourning. The surge of relief is all too brief and the pain of his loss throbs even more insistently after, so much so he has to drive his head hard against the window glass and his nails equally hard into the flesh of his palms.

More than anything he desires the chemically-induced oblivion of a baby-blue pill. Its innocuous colouring is such a perfect advertisement for the gently lapping waves of peace they cause to roll over him. If only he hadn’t swallowed the last one after German grammar, insufferable though it had been. Then he could be drifting now on his bed of shells and seaweed while gazing up at the azure expanse of the tranquil ocean and maybe, if he were very lucky, catch sight of Daddy swimming over his head with long, vigorous breaststrokes.

***

In Kensington Road a black sedan glides to the kerb ten yards ahead of Sherlock and John, its wheels rolling in sickeningly slow motion. The backdoor swings open, seemingly of its own accord.

“Care for a lift?” Mycroft’s voice floats up from the car’s interior.

“Sod off, Mycroft,” he snarls.

The voice tuts. “Language, Sherlock. If Nanny could hear you now.”

“Good thing she can’t then, having been dead these last ten years.”

“Quite so,” Mycroft agrees in an affable tone. “So, I gather you managed to annoy the good DI once again? What was the man’s name again… ah… Lestrade, wasn’t it? Detective Inspector Gregory Lestrade?”

Exasperated, Sherlock latches his hand onto the car roof and bends to glower at the backseat’s occupant. The car draws to an abrupt halt.

“Stop your blathering and tell me what you want,” lashes out Sherlock.

Mycroft blinks, unfazed, his hands crossed sedately on the handle of his umbrella, the point planted firmly into the plush carpet beneath his feet.

“Why, brother mine?” he asks, his face a study of smooth innocence. “As ever, my sole desire is to
further your happiness in this life you’ve created for yourself. I gathered you and the doctor were on
your way to Bart’s, having hit upon a fresh line of inquiry regarding these quite mysterious deaths
and, as I happen to be headed in the same direction, thought of offering you a ride. Quite without
premonition I assure you. Now please tell me, in what way does this offend you?” He twists in his
seat as if attempting to look past Sherlock. “Care to offer your opinion on the matter, John?”

“Leave him out of this,” Sherlock begins at the same time that John offers a half-amused, “Nope.”

“There you go,” Mycroft affirms, blithely. “Even you can’t deny this automobile offers more comfort
than the average London taxi, not that I’d want to appear disparaging of the average hardworking
cabbie crisscrossing the capital in honest pursuit of his daily bread. Come on, Sherlock, don’t be a
curmudgeon. Let me tempt you with the thermos of excellent coffee my housekeeper has provided
me with, far superior to that loathsome drab they serve in these dreadful places that cater to the
general public’s lowly tastes or the vile stuff the lovely Miss Hooper fetches you from Bart’s
canteen.”

John swills the last dregs in his Costa paper cup and squashes it in his fist.

“We’ll take the Tube,” he informs Mycroft and barrels off, his back a (admittedly unfortunately
short) line of blatant disdain for every posh snob depleting the oxygen supply of other, far more
deserving individuals. Sherlock shoots Mycroft a triumphant look and pushes the door closed in his
face.

***

Two miles from the Hall, Mycroft’s car is overtaken by an ambulance going hell for leather with
flashing lights and a loudly blaring siren.

“Stupid gits,” Mycroft mutters beneath his breath. The next instant he throws the steering wheel to
the left and nearly parks the Rover in a hedgerow to make room for the fire engine hurtling past them
along the sunken lane that’s far too small for the truck’s enormous bulk.

“Why?” he breathes, his expression suddenly grim, his hand working the clutch and his foot pushing
down as he reverts the car out of the hawthorn thicket and sends it belting after the fire engine.
Sherlock struggles out of his slump into an upright position. As they pass a gate he catches a glimpse
across a field towards the house. The view is obscured by a coiling black mass of smoke.

“The house is on fire!” he yelps.

“Good God.” Mycroft inserts the car into the fire engine’s slipstream. Once they’ve cleared the
estate’s gates he speeds past it, wheels ruining the carefully clipped turf – John will be angry,
Sherlock thinks before remembering John will never be angry again – basically ignoring the
driveway’s elaborate curves. Their nostrils fill with the acrid smell of burning. Their first sighting of
the house when they round the last curve is obscured by the smoke billowing over the lawn and up
from the house where huge flames leap out from the windows on the left wing’s first floor.

“It’s… Christ… the bedrooms—” Mycroft skids the car to a halt in front of the right wing and jumps
out. Quickly, Sherlock scrambles in his wake. Running up the terrace stairs two steps at a time,
Mycroft makes for the open gap of the front door. The hallway is a décor out of a nightmare with the
household’s women – and of course, that is the household’s dominant sex these days – screeching
and shrieking and sobbing and breathing down the neck of the ambulance personnel perched like a
pair of glaringly bright-outfitted vultures amidst their paraphernalia over the dreadfully still figure
sprawled on the black-and-white tiles.
“Leave them be.” Mycroft has grabbed Nanny by the shoulders and is now shaking her violently. “Nanny, they’re helping her. These are professionals, there’s nothing you can do. Let’s get out of here.” Sherlock notices Mycroft averts his eyes from the place where Mummy lays even as he cradles Nanny’s small figure in his arms and brushes his lips over the top of her grey head. There’s a big hole in the stocking on Mummy’s left leg and the heel of her shoe is broken in half.

“Everything will be all right,” Mycroft shushes Nanny in a grotesque reversal of their customary roles. Tiny hands scrabbling at the lapels of Mycroft’s jacket she clings to his frame with the washed up despondency of a young sparrow fallen out of its nest. The printed pink roses on her dress quiver in a rhythm with each heaving sob rising from her throat.

“Valerie — my darling girl — Mycroft, oh, she’s going to die.”

“Nonsense.” Mycroft says crossly. His gaze travelling up the staircase and towards the tendrils of smoke creeping out of the corridor to snake over the gallery, he adds, “though there’s a high probability we all will if we remain standing here.”

Handling Nanny as easily as if she were a bag of bones he turns towards the men attending Mummy. “Gentlemen, apologies for bothering you, but, for the sake of your safety as well as that of your patient, I’d like to ask whether it is possible to see to her needs outside this building.”

“Thought had occurred,” the man arranging an oxygen mask over Mummy’s lower face grunts. “We’ll put her on the gurney in a moment.”

“Right.” Tucking Nanny even tighter under his arm Mycroft lays his other hand between Mary’s shoulder blades. “We’ll wait for you gentlemen outside. Come on, Nanny. Mummy — your darling — is in good hands. Sherlock?”

Following Mycroft’s example, Sherlock reaches for Cook and Brenda. Cook complies willingly enough, dabbing at her eyes with the edge of her apron but Brenda shakes herself loose and remains rooted to her spot, rocking back and forth and moaning around the fist in her mouth.

“Oh poor Mrs Holmes! But she shouldn’t, she should never have done that, it’s not decent… It’s not! Oh, the poor woman…”

“Come,” Cook says, for once addressing Brenda with patience bordering on gentleness and she helps Sherlock steer the desperately keening girl onto the terrace and down the steps.

Outside, Mycroft is talking to the fire engine’s crew manager over Nanny’s head, who still clings to him with the persistence of an English ivy vine twisted around an oak tree.

“Are there any persons unaccounted for?” the man asks.

“The Robertson boy?” Mycroft enquires of Cook.

“He didn’t come in this morning.”

“And the painters finished the conservatory a day early and packed everything yesterday, scaffolds and all,” Mary chips in.

“Well, that’s something to be grateful for at least,” Mycroft sighs. “That leaves my mother and the ambulance personnel inside, but they’re in a different part of the house and will emerge shortly.”

The crew manager inclines his head and marches off. Mycroft looks after him before redirecting his attention to the left wing in front of which several fire engineers are swarming in a way Sherlock
hopes appears more disorganised than it is. “Looks like the painters can start all over again,” Mycroft observes. “Thank god your important possessions are in your school trunk, Sherlock.”

“Oh Sherlock.” Nanny wrenches herself loose from Mycroft’s support to launch herself at Sherlock, her skinny arms reaching up and clasping his neck. Instinctively he stoops to accommodate and hug her small figure, its brittle sharp bones once more reminding him of a sparrow.

“You must forgive her, my boy,” whimpers Nanny. “She didn’t mean it, I’m certain. Oh Sherlock, she’s been so dreadfully unhappy these past few weeks since John died and… that thoughtless stupid girl.” The glare she flashes Brenda from her eyes might be hotter than the flames refusing to succumb to the water spurtling at them.

“I never!” Brenda protests from around her fist, fresh tears fighting nature’s laws to follow a course down her bloated cheeks. “All I did was what Mycroft told me to… I couldn’t know she’d go half-mad, now could I?”

“Go half-mad over what?” Mycroft jumps in. “Please get your act together and tell me exactly what happened.”

“Brenda went to tidy up John’s house a bit for Sherlock like you asked her to,” Cook ventures, “and she found this box in the sitting room filled with photo albums and huge blocks all wrapped in paper and a note on top saying it was for Sherlock. She brought it over and put it in Sherlock’s room for him to find and… well, it seems your mother found it first and the contents must have upset her in some way… It was Nanny who raised the alarm. I was just checking on my walnut date cake. Got it out of the oven in time.”

“I see,” Mycroft says, grimly. Sherlock flinches as the weight of Mycroft’s scrutiny is added to that of Nanny’s arms, rendering them suddenly insupportable. He cries out and staggers. In two strides Mycroft is beside them, tugging Nanny’s hands loose with fingers clumsy from trembling.

“Sherlock.” His voice is a reedy whisper of anxiety and for a few seconds Sherlock is tempted into pondering when the last time Mycroft’s voice nearly broke on his name was. Was it when he first regained consciousness after Percy-Smith’s assault? Or even longer ago, when they had sat side by side on the sofa in front of the fire in Daddy’s study, Sherlock’s hands clasped in Mycroft’s as he listened to the sentence Mummy had instructed Mycroft to deliver? Mycroft’s fingers had been trembling then as well, but his palms were dry, unlike his cheeks, which shone moistly as he begged Sherlock’s forgiveness for complying with Mummy’s demands and packing off Sherlock to that hateful school. For banishing Mr Talbot.

“Sherlock, please,” Mycroft is begging, again. “Mummy has pulled a shameless stunt. But as she’s its principal victim I hope you have the grace to forgive her.”

“What?” The enormity of Mycroft’s request hits Sherlock squarely in the solar plexus. Naturally Mycroft hasn’t an inkling of the box’s contents – nor their significance. The swathed blocks are Daddy’s busts – were Daddy’s busts, shrines to a quiet devotion that have fallen prey to the rage of a madwoman’s insatiable jealousy. John must have swathed each bust carefully – lovingly – with packing paper to shield them from prying eyes.

*Mummy’s prying eyes.* The box, once Mummy knew it existed, lured her as irresistibly as the patch of pavement winks at the suicide hurtling his transport over the rooftop’s edge.

“I’m so sorry,” Mycroft offers and Sherlock scrunches his eyelids shut for *good god* his brother’s constant repetition of the weather-beaten bilge is seriously getting on his nerves.

“Shut up, Mycroft,” he grits between his teeth, and amazingly – marvellously – Mycroft does indeed
shut his mouth and lets his hands drop from Sherlock’s shoulders.

When Sherlock opens his eyes again the reason for Mycroft’s compliance becomes clear. Assisted by the ambulance personnel, smiling winningly from between the men guiding her, Mummy has chosen this moment to make her appearance on the terrace.

“Mycroft,” she cries out in a pathetically feeble voice before collapsing into a dramatic coughing fit, her soot-blackened hair sweeping the flagstones.

“Valerie!” Quickened by her darling girl’s resurrection Nanny scurries to the stairs. All eyes focus on the eerily arresting vision wobbling down the steps on inadequately shod feet to meet her, arms widened for a moving embrace. Bile rises in Sherlock’s throat.

Everyone’s attention is focused on Mummy, Mycroft’s – naturally – but even Cook’s. “Thank god,” she groans, laying a beefy hand against the fat folds of her throat. “Only imagine, such wickedness.”

‘Cook,’ Sherlock wants to say, no, wants to shout at her, ‘yes exactly, such wickedness. You know what she’s done, you’re the only one who knows she’s gone too far this time and yet you’re standing there and feeling sorry for her…”

Which leaves Sherlock with no one, no one to feel sorry for him.

Swatting angrily at the tears threatening to blind him Sherlock breaks into a run for Mycroft’s car. He lifts his holdall from the backseat and closes the door softly. An unnecessary precaution perhaps as Mummy is holding sway over a riveted court intent on reassuring themselves she isn’t going to pop off and make everyone’s life so much pleasanter.

At the corner of the house Sherlock turns for a last look. Mycroft is kissing Mummy on her streaked forehead, the sides of her face cradled in his big hands. If his brother had chosen to stab Sherlock’s heart with a pointed dagger he couldn’t have wounded him more fatally. Sherlock might even have preferred it for at least his life would have ended then and there together with the pain constricting his chest.

The pressure in his bicycle tyres is sufficient to carry him and the bag to the nearest train station. He feels bad for riding the bicycle over the grass and has to remind himself that John can’t mind any longer and he doesn’t care about the Robertson boy or any other person who’s going to maintain the estate grounds from now on.

Besides, he thinks, once the small door in the wall has fallen shut behind him and he’s cycling along the great beech lance bisecting the woods, he’s never coming back here again.

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End of book IV

Chapter End Notes

Huge thanks to everyone who’s been reading, left kudos, and much, much love and thanks to everyone who’s been commenting and forwarded their opinions and thoughts which help me learn so much about all the other lovely people in the Sherlock fandom and about Sherlock himself and the fic I’m trying to write.
I've already started on chapter 1 of book V and I do hope you'll be there as the story continues.

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