A Seasonal Sonata (in prose)

by ButterscotchCandybatch

Summary

Being a shameless ripoff of Dicken's "A Christmas Carol" set in the contemporary Sherlock (BBC) universe. I have endeavoured in this mashed up little story to raise a hymn of harmony and reconciliation appropriate to the season. May you find it in tune with your spirits of the holiday, whatever your choice of spirit or celebration!

Notes

For doctormerdington, who promised to read it if I wrote it.

- Inspired by A Baker Street Christmas Carol by doctormerdington
Prelude: Mycroft's Ghost

Mycroft was dead, but surprisingly to some, Britain rolled on regardless. Nature abhors a vacuum, and a power vacuum in particular. A new Prime Minister was elected, a new head of MI6 appointed and world continued to turn.

In Baker Street, life continued much as it ever had. There was less surveillance and fewer callers at the door of the consulting detective, but the clients still came brought by a potent combination of notoriety and desperation. Sherlock Holmes had returned from the dead to a brief flurry of fame, but the nine days of wonder had passed years ago, and the routine work at New Scotland Yard was supplemented now by only occasional private cases. They found him mostly from Superintendent Lestrade's referrals, but rarely some brave soul would contact Sherlock via his website The Science of Deduction. The days of John's sensational and populist blog were long gone, along with John himself, and Sherlock would never have admitted to anyone that he missed either.

When Mycroft died, only Sherlock was sent for, to formally identify the body. Neither of them had a relative, friend or even enemy left in the world, apart from the other - and that seemed to have been how both preferred it to remain. Sherlock left the lawyers to arrange a quick cremation, while he returned to his rooms at 221B Baker Street. Mrs Hudson shed a tear and murmured, "Appearances, Sherlock! How are people to pay their respects?"

Sherlock did not care, had never cared and disdained the facade of caring. As for his attitude to "respects", the less said the better. On the day that Mycroft's earthly remains were turned into ashes he was embroiled in a case that was "at least a six, maybe a six and a half."

Some people had expected Sherlock to use Mycroft's money and country estate to improve his style of living - but only those who had never met him. Sherlock continued at Baker Street with no visible change whatever, which was how he liked it.

John visited semi-regularly at first, and consoled with Mrs Hudson at least, but as the years went by and the visits were never welcomed or returned, they gradually tapered off to an annual duty call only. Mrs Hudson herself visited the upstairs flat less and less often. It grew darker, more cluttered and dustier, apparently without the notice of its only inhabitant.

But what would a sociopath care for any of these trifles which the rest of us call "daily life"? A sociopath sneers at manners and spurns society. With cases to solve and a Stradivarius as an aid to thought, Sherlock's life was complete.

And so it came to Christmas Eve, 2029. Mrs Hudson giggled over the number and predicted a lot of celebrating come New Year. Sherlock sniffed, and informed her, "The new decade starts with the beginning of 2031, and only imbeciles with no numerical ability will be celebrating next week. Which is most of them." As usual, Mrs Hudson pretended not to hear.

They were having their usual debate about whether or not Sherlock would join Mrs Hudson and Mrs Turner for their Christmas Eve party (he never had so far, but Mrs Hudson was nothing if not an optimist) when a voice called up from the front door, "Sherlock? Mrs Hudson?"

Mrs Hudson's face lit up. "John!" she exclaimed, and hurried down the stairs to let him in and usher him up into 221B.

"Merry Christmas, Sherlock!" proclaimed John on entering the flat. "Oh, I know you have cases and experiments to do, but I'm arranging a special little get-together and housewarming at my new place
in Upminster. Mrs Hudson, Mrs Turner, Molly and her little boy and all the old crowd will be there, including Lestrade if he can get away for a few hours. What do you say? It's a cold time of year to be in your flat alone."

Sherlock turned his back in a show of indifference, and picked up his violin. Idly running through the fingering for Paganini's Caprice No. 1, he retorted, "Sentiment. Call it Christmas, Hannukah, Kwanzaa or Festivus - I despise them all the same. You know I can't abide sentiment. What reason have you to celebrate? Your barren wife is dead and your PTSD is so bad you had to move out of the family home into new bachelor digs."

"Sherlock!" Mrs Hudson face was pale with pain and shock. "How can you talk so to John, your oldest friend? Have a thought for his feelings! This is his first Christmas without Mary. John dear," she fluttered, "Mrs Turner and I will come, of course we will. Your house will be properly warmed with a fire and music, and good cheer for Christmas! Of course it will. You'll be so busy and happy you won't miss Mary a bit!"

John winced at the faux pas, but pressed on doggedly, "Molly is bringing her little boy - he's almost three now, isn't that amazing? Because, after all, what is Christmas without children?"

They all left a moment of silence as the elephant in the room was not mentioned. Then, spitefully, Sherlock went ahead and mentioned it. "Of course, Christmas celebrations with plenty of your own children would have been much better, wouldn't it? One little boy with speech delay and a bunch of adults with nothing in common (and not even Mycroft to bring the good liquor) doesn't make for a very merry Christmas, does it?"

John's lips tightened, but he raised his chin defiantly. "Christmas may not bring my wife back, and God knows I'll never play Santa to a bunch of my own children now, but Christmas is still a time of year for harmony and reconciliation. Therefore I won't have any more arguments about sentiment or sociopaths." John pulled a card from his pocket and placed in on the coffee table, facing Sherlock.

"Here's my new address. We'll all be there on Christmas Day and you are welcome to come. Don't feel you need to bring any gifts. As you've said, I have no children but seeing you would be…" He didn't say "close enough" but they all heard it anyway. "… celebration enough for me," he finished. Turning to Mrs Hudson he added, "I'll keep my Christmas amicability to the end and wish you a very Merry Christmas!" He gave her a kiss on the cheek.

"And a Happy New Year to you, John dear," she returned.

"See yourself out, I'm sure you know the way," murmured Sherlock, turning back to the window and starting to play. He changed his mind on the Paganini and instead began his favourite Ysaye Sonata, but was not even well begun on the first theme when Mrs Hudson returned, escorting a shabby, obviously homeless man of indeterminate age, but who appeared to be in his late thirties and was therefore probably around twenty-five.

"Sherlock," prompted Mrs Hudson when he showed no sign of turning around. "Wiggins is here."

"Got anything for me?" Sherlock returned, still facing the window and continuing to play.

"Well, no." Wiggins shuffled his feet on the bare boards of the floor. His shoes were mismatched, the sound was very distinct even over wailing of the violin. "The Homeless Network has fallen on rather hard times since the Second Great Global Financial Crisis, you know. It's a cold time of year and spontaneous donations are not what they used to be. I wondered if you might care to…?" he trailed off hopefully.
"You know my rules," said Sherlock, in a bored tone, "and you know I hate repeating myself. I pay you for information. If you need food or clothing or whatever else," the scornful stress on the words indicated to them all that he was referring to drugs, "refer to the Salvation Army, the Red Cross or the other charitable institutions set up for those purposes. I'm a consulting detective, not a charity. I'm not sentimental myself, and I see no reason why I should provide means for others to indulge when they are not doing me any favours. I solve mysteries and catch criminals, that's my business and if you are not going to assist me in it, I'll thank Mrs Hudson to assist you out of doors."

Both Wiggins and Mrs Hudson left the flat after that, and Sherlock played on as the room grew darker and colder. Sherlock was not bothered either by the cold or the solitude. Alone was good for thinking and Sherlock liked it.

Finally, even Sherlock's arms and fingers grew weary. He returned the violin to its case and stretched out his fingers. A change of activity would be pleasant. He seated himself at the table and logged in to his computer, effortlessly recalling the 16 digit randomly generated alphanumeric password which he changed every week. Not that there was anyone else in the flat likely to want to use his laptop.

The laptop failed to open. He scowled at his failing transport for committing a typing error and rubbed his hands together to warm his stiff fingers before re-entering the password again more carefully: k4fynYETRvNXgMr.

**ACCESS DENIED**

Losing patience, he bypassed the security settings and cracked into the laptop manually. He then reversed the encryption to get the password - always worth a double check to see if there was a problem in the Mind Palace…

He sat back in surprise. Obviously as some kind of ridiculous holiday joke the password had been reset to *MerryChristmasMH*. He changed it to a new randomly generated code, this time using a new system to generate the password and increasing the difficulty to 18 digits: LtS5Lmq2EabcCjzCX8. There. That would stop any more pranking.

He logged into his website and was surprised to see *1 new comment*.

He clicked on the appropriate link:

**Merry Christmas, Brother Mine.**

**See you soon.**

**MH.**

Sherlock looked surreptitiously around the room. This had to be a joke, or possibly a threat? Mycroft was dead, burned and even the ashes buried, over a decade ago. Moriarty was gone, even the blackmailer whose name… Magnussen, that was it. Anyway, he was gone too. He had been shot in the head by Sherlock himself and with him died all the colour and challenge in the world. There had been no really inventive criminals ever since then. Even the Mafia wasn't what it had been, and kept its activities in London very circumspect these days. Who would be sending him death threats?

He was just starting to burrow into the origin of the mysterious email, when a hollow voice in the room repeated the greeting, "Merry Christmas to you, Sherlock. Little brother," it added, when Sherlock merely gaped at the apparition before him with open-mouthed shock.

Sitting directly across the table from him was Mycroft. As Sherlock sat frozen in terror, his apparent
brother reached across and slowly closed the laptop as it lay between them.

Sherlock had never before been speechless in the presence of his brother, but there is a first time for everything. Admittedly, the sudden appearance (through a locked door) of a brother dead, burned and buried years before would be enough to give even the most rational mind serious pause.

As Sherlock's faculties gradually came back online after their shock, he noticed several unusual things about Mycroft - if indeed it was Mycroft, which he was not willing to admit just yet. The apparition looked like Mycroft, but that did not necessarily mean anything. He must proceed with caution.

"What do you want, then?"

The ghost raised his (its?) eyebrows sardonically, "Many things."

Sherlock could not resist giving his trademark eye roll. "I believe it is traditional to ask you who you are…"

"Who I was," interrupted the spirit.

"Well, if I had any remaining doubts, that just dispelled them. You were my most annoying, interfering, supercilious and grammatically correct older brother Mycroft."

Mycroft adjusted his cuffs delicately, "Indeed, during my life I answered to that name more frequently than to any other." He sat back reflectively for a moment, "Can't say it was ever my favourite though. I always fancied myself as a Charles or perhaps an Oliver."

"Oh God, not this again. All right, I'm convinced that you are not just a figment of my imagination, digestion or drug habit. That being the case, why are you here, Mycroft? I presume you did not make your way back from beyond the veil just to trade old speculations as to what our parents would have named us if they had been sane?"

Mycroft leaned forward, causing Sherlock to involuntarily lean back. "Ah," murmured the ghost, "Now we come to it. Please, observe me. It's what you do best, so let's play to your strengths for now. What do you see?"

Sherlock looked, observed and analysed, speaking aloud as he did so. "You look pale, even for a ginger who spent all his life working indoors and shunning leg work. Your hair is moving slightly, as if you were outdoors in a breeze despite the fact that you are sitting here in my living room. You seem to have some small icicles hanging from your left earlobe - truly the ice-man now, I see. Also, I'm not quite sure how to put this, but did you know I can see right through you? Clearly enough to make out the knife on my mantlepiece through your waistcoat."

Mycroft stood up without comment.

"Ah yes, and you are wrapped all around your body with a giant chain, which is made of melted iPads, laptops and the remains of what was once a rather nice fountain pen."

"Yes," replied Mycroft seriously. "You see the chain I forged for myself during my lifetime. These are the choices I made, to hide behind computers, to distance myself from everyone, to look down on and disdain as mere goldfish the real people whose lives I could have touched for the better. I sent men to their deaths with texted instructions and wrote condolence letters to their families with that pen on the same day. I used my intellect and power to play games of self-aggrandisement rather than working for the good of anyone in particular, not even for myself. Does any of this sound familiar?"
Sherlock pursed his lips and looked away.

"You have hidden behind a diagnosis of 'sociopath' and used it like a weapon to drive people away. Beware! We are all required to go out among our fellow men, to make connections and do good work. What you call 'The Work' is nothing of the kind - you hide behind the puzzles and care nothing for the people whose lives you play with. Your chain was longer and heavier than mine when I died all those years ago, and you have been working on it most diligently ever since. Did you even give Mrs Hudson a simple greeting when she came to issue her invitation? I thought not."

Mycroft sighed heavily. "You do not know how many times I have sat beside you at your computer, wishing I could tell you how to make a genuine connection with a person. Wishing you would look up, reach out and touch John, Molly, Mrs Hudson or anyone around you."

"Mycroft, I never enjoyed your presence in my flat when you were alive, and clearly your death has not changed anything in that area. You may be a ghost, but do you have to wail? Do you have anything constructive to say, or should I once again take to my violin to drive you away?"

"I have a little more to say, and then I must go. Sherlock, I have bought a second chance for you. My last gift to you as one brother to another. I can no longer watch over you or protect you, but I have arranged for three other spirits to visit you. They will help you, show you how to change, how to turn from your little experiments and puzzles and address yourself to the real Work of your life - which is the good of all mankind. Patience, compassion, generosity and love - you and I never suffered fools gladly, but for you there is a second chance to learn. Take it, listen to the three spirits I will send and remember me, for you will see me no more..."

Sherlock squinted at Mycroft, who was either growing smaller or more distant than the confines of the room could possibly allow on an earthly plane. He shrank into a tiny dot of light, which appeared to be blown out the window (which had apparently opened itself) and vanish in a streak of light out towards the horizon. Sherlock rushed over to the window to look after it one last time. Looking down on Baker Street, he was overcome with horror to see that his eyes had been fully opened to the supernatural world. Everywhere he could see the transparent ghosts walking among the solid people.

Directly below his window, Wiggins was sitting despairing on his doorstep, shivering in the biting London wind of late December. Two well-dressed ghosts were trying to urge him up, to lead him to a soup station down the street, but they were unable to make themselves heard.

Further up the road a lost toddler was crying while a ghostly lady in heels and with a briefcase chained to her hip was trying to dry her eyes and take her hand.

Up and down the road, as far as he could see, were miserable spirits who were racked with grief and guilt over the human anguish right in front of them, which they had ignored in life. Now, in death, they could no longer close their eyes and disclaim responsibility, yet they had lost for ever the power of doing good.

Sherlock closed the window and turned away. He went back and checked the door of the flat, which was locked just as it had been.

He tried to log into his computer again, but the new 18 digit code would not let him in. He finally choked out of the machine the new code: *AndAHappyNewYearMH.*
Exposition: The First of the Three Spirits

Chapter Summary

A spirit from Sherlock's past shows him the truth about his life.

After Mycroft left, Sherlock could not sleep. This was hardly unusual, so he went about his usual activities of making himself tea, doing online research and generally feeling superior to the rest of mankind for his increased productivity through the night.

He was skimming through a rather mediocre article on the finer points of GPS tracking via biomagnetic fields when his computer froze. He cursed it and tried to force quit. Then he attempted to shut down and reboot the system. The computer responded with the Blue Screen of Death.

"What? What is this, the early '90s?" Sherlock fumed. He yanked the power cord out of the wall socket with more force than was strictly necessary, then held down the power button for the requisite five seconds.

Nothing.

Then on the blue screen an old-fashioned emoticon appeared. It was a happy face, which winked at him and then returned to being a happy face.

Sherlock slowly seated himself again in front of the computer and typed "Are you the Spirit I was told to expect?"

**Word! ;) Sherlock FTW!**

Sherlock was rather taken aback by the Spirit's style of communication. It sounded more like a teenage hacker than a dead spirit sent for his enlightenment.

"Who are you?"

**BRB.**

Be Right Back? What did that have to do with anything? Then Sherlock yelped and yanked his fingers out of the way as the computer was slammed shut right in front of his face.

An Irish voice with surprising flexibility and a rather sinister undercurrent suddenly said "Hi! I thought this would be quicker. Like most old guys you are soooo sloooow on the keys and write everything out in full, I can't stand it. Get with the abbrevs, old man. Do you need some I.T. support? I know a guy you can call."

Sherlock folded his arms in pique and told the oddly young-looking Jim Moriarty in front of him, "You didn't answer my question, and you know I hate repeating myself."

The spirit spread his arms and twirled around, "Don't you recognise the uniform? I thought for sure you wouldn't have forgotten it. I'm here to take you on a little tour down Nostalgia Lane." He straightened the cuffs and brushed off the lapels of the blazer exactly as if it were a fine suit. When Sherlock said nothing he pretended to pout, then suddenly smiled again when he saw Sherlock had
made the connection.

"It's a Harrow uniform from the 1980s, yes I'm aware. You weren't at my school then, I would have remembered such an arrogant little snot."

The ghost of Moriarty (Sherlock could see straight through his tie and blazer) shrugged and lifted one eyebrow. "Look who's talking, mister. I'm the Ghost of Christmas Past. Your past, to be precise. I thought the shirt and tie would add a bit of formality to the proceedings, that's all. You can call me Jim, if you prefer it more casual though."

Sherlock ignored the name from what was indeed, his own past. "If there are proceedings, then by all means proceed. Mycroft told me you were coming and that you were going to teach me to do good, or some such rubbish. I don't think it will work, but you might as well get on with it."

"Sure. Take my hand then, and let's get to it."

"You're a homicidal maniac, why should I trust you? I remember what happened the last time we shook hands," said Sherlock without moving.

The Spirit rolled his eyes and sighed in his exaggerated theatrical style. "I'll be good, I promise. I just need you to take my hand so that I can tune you into the bit stream and upload you."

Sherlock took a step backwards, away from the outstretched hand. "That sounds rather disturbing. I have no desire to be converted into a digital format, especially not one of such outdated technology."

Jim smiled with false brightness, "There's no Wi-Fi where we're going." He lunged forward and snatched Sherlock's hand, holding on tightly. He dragged Sherlock across the room towards the computer. Before Sherlock could do more than gasp, they were diving directly into and through the blue screen.

The moment of dizziness passed, and Sherlock found himself standing on snow-covered grass. He glanced around, recognising the setting immediately. He was standing on the top of Harrow on the Hill, looking down at his old boarding school. Good old, blue chip, all boys, full-boarding school Harrow.

"Do you remember the way?" Jim asked quietly.

"Remember? I could walk it blindfolded. Often did, in fact."

"Yes, you passed many years here, often being bullied, I know. Would you care to walk down to the school grounds? They are not quite empty, even though it is Christmas holidays now."

Side by side, Sherlock and spirit walked down through the snow to the main school buildings. Neither left footprints.

As they entered the dining hall, Sherlock breathed in deeply and with the smell of ancient boiled cabbage came rushing back all the memories of his school days. It had not all been bad, he had loved drama and acting even then, and with his willowy grace he had usually been given the lead female roles in the end of term concerts. He had loved meeting Shakespeare, Marlowe and Wilde in these halls, and had been taken out of himself for a little while.

But the Christmas holidays had been hard. He walked through the dining hall to one of the last classrooms, already knowing what he would see there. One last boy, tall for his age, with dark curls falling forward into his eyes, sat reading alone. The voices which had first called him "Freak!" were all gone and he was left alone, in silence. It was in those days that he had first learned that being
alone was his best protection from the taunts of others.

"Shall we see another Christmas?" asked Jim.

"Why?" returned Sherlock. "They were all the same. Harrow was a full-boarding school, and if my parents paid, they had to keep me and feed me all year 'round. It was a convenient arrangement for everyone. My parents had Mycroft, the heir, to show off his accomplishments and the 'spare' was safely tucked away."

"But they weren't all the same, were they?"

The scene around them changed. The room grew shabbier and older, the boy at the desk stretched his legs further under the table. One of the windows was cracked and the bookshelves sagged lower. Sherlock nodded to himself, this was exactly how it had been, year after year.

Then the door suddenly flew open and a second figure strode into the room. It was another young man, even taller than the teenaged Sherlock but with auburn curls instead of dark. He swept up to Sherlock and seize his hand, hauling him to his feet and catching him into a full-bodied hug.

"I've come to bring you home, Sherlock! Home for the holidays - and never to come back here!"

Young Sherlock's face lit up with the smile that older Sherlock knew his face had not showed for years. "Home, Mycroft? Really?"

"Yes. I'm part of the British Government now, and I've just received a letter from Cambridge - they've accepted you into their accelerated stream for chemistry and you can start there after the holidays. I always knew you were a genius little brother, and this is only the first step to showing the whole world what the Holmes brothers can do!"

Mycroft strode out of the room, and they could hear his voice in the hall, calling for Mr Holmes' suitcase to be brought down. Young Sherlock was feverishly packing up his books and papers, gathering them into a messy bundle. Mycroft bounded back into the room and relieved him of half the load and the two young men walked out together. Sherlock could hear his younger self outside exclaiming over Mycroft's new car and driver.

"You got on well in those days," said the spirit quietly.

"Yes, I idolised Mycroft then and had a ridiculous idea about setting up a detective agency together. But he went away and got caught up in the endless webs of power - that was actually the last of the happy Christmases we spent together. He gave me work, but the dream of a joint agency never came to pass. Our Mother always wanted us to work more closely together, but we drifted apart faster because of her interference, I think. Mycroft never approved of the drugs, and once I became an embarrassment and liability to him, he washed his hands of me except when I could make myself of use."

"Did he never try to heal the breach?"

"I suppose he did," admitted Sherlock, "but I was fiercely independent too, and would never let him see that his abandonment had hurt. The only way I had to strike back at him was to deny him the music that he loved. I refused to play violin with him, even when he went to the trouble of learning the piano parts for my favourite pieces. It was spiteful and childish, but then he lost interest in playing completely and it never seemed to matter. I used to make the violin scream at him when he was around, just because I could. He always had very sensitive ears. Perhaps I should not have done that." Sherlock stood in silent reflection for a moment. "But he's dead now. These days you are
showing me are dead and gone, so what is the point?" The last word was spoken quietly, but with a bitter intensity.

"If you've had enough of Harrow, let's walk just a little further into London," replied Jim.

They took a step forward, and were suddenly in central London, standing outside a building Sherlock knew very well. "New Scotland Yard! The building where I first worked, before it was bombed by terrorists in 2019. This is where I worked with Lestrade, and John…” he drifted off into silent memories.

"Shall we go in?" asked the spirit, already walking towards the main doors.

They stepped out of the lift and into chaos. Most of the partitions in the open plan office space were being cleared to make room for a trestle table groaning with party food and an enormous bowl of punch. John was in one corner trying to reach up high enough to hang decorations on a Christmas tree, while a Sherlock in his mid-thirties was twitting him about his height. The two men engaged in a friendly mock-tussle which ended with Sherlock confiscating the gold star and placing it himself at the top of the tree. Sally Donovan was hanging up mistletoe and making notes about where to stand. Anderson was quietly spiking the punch bowl with rum, while everyone pretended not to notice.

"John. John Watson," mused Sherlock as he stood near the door, watching all the activity. "John and I were… well, he was very attracted to me. Poor John."

Jim looked up at him coyly, "So did you two ever…?"

"No! It wasn't like that. I mean, I did wonder at one point, but no. After I came back from… being away, it was never the same. John had Mary by then and even though they lost that first baby they always hoped for more. John might have looked at me a certain way sometimes, but no. Nothing ever came of it."

A loud voice with an Estuary accent interrupted their talk, as a silver-haired Detective Inspector burst out of the inner office making a large “T” shape with his hands. "That's seventeen-hundred everyone! Knock it off and come join the party! All criminals are advised that NSY is off-duty for the next twenty-four hours so they better be good or Santa will put them in the slammer as soon as the hangover lifts!"

"Ah, good old Lestrade!" murmured Sherlock. "In those days he was cheerful and encouraged the team to work together brilliantly. He even managed to get some decent work out of Anderson, and God knows that's a minor miracle in itself."

As they watched, the last of the partitions was removed and the desks shoved aside. Papers were stuffed into filing cabinets and party hats were distributed. Partners and associates drifted in, laying their contributions on the long trestle table and taking up a plastic cup of punch.

"There's Molly! Looking better than I had remembered her. That red lipstick really suits her - it's such a shame she doesn't wear lipstick now. And Dimmock, and oh, goodness, is that Lestrade's wife? It is! This must be the year before they separated."

A short, round woman with a bouncy walk and jingle bell earrings grabbed Lestrade's hand and dragged him over to the side table. "Now, Greg, show me how to operate the CD player and we'll get some music going! It's not a party without music!"

In a few minutes the room was filled with the bright tinkle of "Jingle Bell Rock" and Greg was guided, still protesting, onto the makeshift dance floor. Everyone soon piled onto the floor and
someone switched off the fluorescent lights, leaving the room lit with only the red and green flickers of the fairy lights on the tree and around the window frames.

The night progressed smoothly, easily into camaraderie and shared jokes. There was a lot of shop talk, but the partners mostly tolerated it and told ridiculous and improbable stories from their own workplaces. The food was shared around, and noise level rose as the contents of the punch bowl were steadily emptied.

Finally, everyone made noises about going home and what a great party it had been. Lestrade and his wife took up a position by the door, and presented all the staff with a little Christmas bonus as they headed out into the night.

"Ah, Lestrade. He was so good to all of us."

"Why do you say that?" asked Jim. "He organised an office party. What's so special about that? He didn't even supply the food, he made everyone bring a plate. Those bonuses he's getting credit for handing out? You all earned them. They're part of your pay packet and he can't withhold them. What's so special about D.I. Lestrade?"

"Oh, I don't know," said Sherlock restlessly. "He could have made all our lives so much more difficult. He brought me in as a consultant in the first place, and he helped me to integrate with his team, even making Anderson turn away when his face was bothering me. He had so much power over us but he held the reins lightly most of the time. He made us into a smoothly working machine. No, not a machine. We were…" Sherlock groped after an appropriate simile.

"You were like a body, weren't you?" suggested Jim. "You all had your function and you worked together to accomplish what you could never have done each alone. Lestrade was the head, you were the eyes, John was the hands."

"And Anderson was the arsehole?" Sherlock raised his eyebrows. The spirit shrugged in silent agreement.

John and Sherlock were the last to leave, shaking Lestrade's hand and walking out together, their shoulders almost touching. They stood outside the NSY building waiting for a cab.

John was speaking in a low voice, "Sherlock, this has been the best Christmas of my life. I wanted you to know that. Last year I was in Afghanistan, recovering from my shoulder wound and wondering what to do with my life. This year, I have a job, a purpose and a flat that I share with you. I owe you so much." He leaned toward Sherlock, his eyes bright and cheeks flushed with the cold night air, or the potent punch, or perhaps something else…

"John, you know I'm married to my work."

John rocked back on his heels. "Yes, you've mentioned that," he said quietly. "But aren't I a part of the Work now? Aren't I… important to you? You are to me," he added, so low that Sherlock wasn't sure if he heard or just remembered the words.

"The Work is more important that anything. Clear thinking, John, that's all that matters. The rest is just…"

"Transport. I know." John sighed. "Very well. If that's really your choice, I respect that. I'll still be your best friend, and I… I hope the Work makes you happy."

Sherlock winced in anticipation of his own next speech.
"I'm a sociopath, John. The Work will have a better chance of making me happy than any human relationship."

"Mmm," John made a sceptical murmur and seemed about to say more, but just then the taxi arrived and the rest of the conversation was cut off as the two of them climbed into it.

"Spirit, that's enough! Don't torture me any more with visions of what might have been," groaned Sherlock, watching his younger self reject John's humanising touch and throw away his best chance of happiness.

"Just one last scene, bear with me, you'll want to see this," Jim assured him. "Don't you want to see how it worked out for John?"

"I know, I know what happened!" Sherlock almost wailed. "He married Mary! I was there! Do you think I don't know? Do you think I don't think about it?"

Jim bared his teeth, suddenly threatening despite his boyish face. He grabbed Sherlock in a headlock and dragged him around in a circle. "But I want you to see. Look!"

Before his unwilling eyes, Sherlock watched a new scene unfold.

It was a domestic evening at home, in a small flat, nothing remarkable. Just a small fire in the grate and two stockings hanging over the hearth. Some kind of Christmas music was playing in the background, by a chamber choir and strings. It was probably one of those free CDs that came with the newspapers at this time of year. A small tree sat on the table-top as there was not enough room for a full-size one. John was handing Mary a glass of something that looked like mulled wine, but probably wasn't. As soon as she took the cup, freeing his hand, he rubbed her rounded belly tenderly. She laughed and covered his hand with her own.

Taking a sip of the drink she made a face and said, "John, this is awful! What on earth is it?"

In the low light Sherlock couldn't be sure if John was blushing or not. "It's mulled orange juice and Ribena, with cinnamon and spices. Closest thing I could manage without alcohol."

Mary tipped her head back and laughed uproariously. "Oh my God, warm Ribena! Didn't you ever think of getting some non-alcoholic red wine?"

At John's discomfited glance she reached out for his hand and pulled him in for an awkward hug. She squinted down at her stomach which was getting in the way. "Never mind. By next Christmas the little sprog will be crawling around on the floor and I'll be able to have a real drink."

"Unless you are too knackered from changing nappies and fall asleep straight after dinner!" John joked in return.

Mary sighed and kissed the back of John's hand before releasing it. She sat up with a new thought, "Oh, by the way, I saw Himself today, I meant to tell you."

"Who? Oh, you mean Sherlock. How did you come to see him? I hear he hardly ever leaves Baker Street now, except to go down to Mycroft's club. Doesn't even take many private clients any more, though I understand Lestrade still calls him in to help on MET cases."

"Well, that's it exactly. He was leaving Baker Street in a dreadful hurry. Looking at him I noticed…" she broke off and looked away from John for a moment, clearly uncomfortable with referring to her espionage skills.
"Go on," he encouraged her.

"He looked concerned. Distressed, even. If it had been anyone else I would have thought something bad had happened to someone he knew, but Sherlock doesn't have any friends, does he?"

"Not that I know of," mused John. "Are you sure it wasn't just a thoughtful look from thinking about a case?"

Mary scowled at him. "I may not be a spy any more, but I'm not that out of practice! I know a concerned look when I see one - even if I've never seen it on that face before."

John shrugged, "Maybe Mrs Hudson was unwell, or maybe Mycroft. That's the only thing I can think of, and anyway, it doesn't matter. I'll look into it in the New Year if you really want to know. At the moment I just want you to concentrate on growing our baby into a strong and healthy boy for me to take to the football."

"Girl, for me to take to the ballet," shot back Mary immediately.

"Boy, and he likes getting muddy and climbing trees," John teased.

"Girl, with long blonde hair that curls into ringlets like mine did when I was little."

John's eye filled with a soft emotion that Sherlock had never seen on his face before. "All right then," he whispered. "You win. Make us the prettiest, smartest, most amazing little girl ever seen," he kissed Mary lightly on the forehead, then added with a grin, "and I'll still take her to the football and teach her to climb trees!"

Mary laughed and pretended to slap him. John kissed her deeply and passionately, until the scene blurred as water filled Sherlock's eyes.

"Moriarty! Stop torturing me! I know how it ends - they lose the baby and Mary almost bleeds to death. To save her life, John agrees to radical surgery but they can never have children after that. John never smiles that way again in his life and I… I can't watch! I wish you had never shown me this!"

Moriarty shrugged coldly. "These are the shadows of your past. They are what they are, don't blame me."

"But I don't want to see it! Take me home, right now!" Sherlock's fists were clenched and he almost stamped his foot on the ground.

Moriarty inspected his fingernails, "Aww, don't be like that! Don't you want to see the Christmas party where you humiliated Molly? Or the one where you destroyed Lestrade's marriage? Or the one where you insulted Mrs Hudson's sister and caused a breach between them so that they still haven't spoken over ten years later? That was a good one, I don't think I've seen anyone spit that far for a long time, or…"

The ghost was suddenly unable to speak as Sherlock had both hands around his neck and was choking off his breath. He growled as he throttled Moriarty, "You may be a dead spirit, but if you speak you must need an air supply! So choke, die and leave me alone!"

He squeezed harder and harder, but Moriarty just grinned wider and wider showing more and more teeth… until Sherlock suddenly found himself back in his apartment, squeezing his own mantlepiece and staring into the empty eye sockets of the skull over his fireplace.
Sherlock pushed himself away from the wall and groaned, panting with the unusual excess of emotion. Moriarty! He had never thought to see that face again since purging his Mind Dungeon of the madman after he had ceased to be of use.

Sherlock shuddered. This was only the first of three spirits! How could he bear to see more? He made his way into the kitchen, deciding to soothe his shattered nerves with a cup of tea. He avoided looking at his laptop with its innocently blank screen. Tea first, then he would think of something else to do. Not on the computer, though. If the next spirit was going to hack into his life, he wasn't going to make it easy.

He made himself a cup of tea and took it into the living room, sitting down on the sofa and staring at the empty fireplace. He set the mug on the side table and let it grow cold as he closed his eyes and folded his hands, seeing his past life flicker behind his eyelids. His past, the past he wished he had been brave enough to grasp, the man he was, the man others saw in him, the man he wished he had been. The visions flashed and changed before his mind's eye and he was not even aware of when his memories drifted into dreams, and then into sleep.
Sherlock woke suddenly to the sound and heat of the fire crackling merrily in his fireplace. He sat up, disorientated. It was his own flat, yes, but it was completely unrecognisable. There was a Christmas tree in the corner, holly and mistletoe on every flat surface and a Christmas feast set out on his kitchen table, the microscope having vanished from sight. There were turkeys, cranberry sauce, a goose, venison, oysters, prawns, sausages, ham, mince pies, plum pudding (with jugs beside it of both custard and brandy sauce) fruit of every description and a giant tower of profiteroles garnished with cream and toffee in the middle. That table had never had so many edible delicacies on it at once. The sideboard was not neglected either. There was champagne with real French labels, mulled wine, white wine, eggnog, two bowls of punch (one with orange slices and L-plates, the other with candied cherries and mint) and what looked like several glasses of sherry.

Sherlock stared in confusion at the bounty, the likes of which he had never seen before. This surpassed even the dim memories from his childhood of the formal Christmas table settings his mother had arranged to have catered, in the early years before his father had died.

A warm alto voice interrupted his thoughts, "Here, have a glass of champagne to help you get into the spirit of things."

A champagne flute was pressed into his hand, and he finally tore his gaze away from the room to look at the speaker. It was Irene Adler, a little older-looking than he remembered her but still svelte, wearing a red lace sheath dress with sky high Louboutin stilettos. She had a spike of holly on top of her French rolled hair, and golden angel earrings with little bells that tinkled as she moved.

"Irene?" asked Sherlock, "Are you… dead and a spirit now?"

Her laugh was low and musical. "Dear me, no. I'm not really Irene - I'm the Ghost of Christmas Present. She sends her regards though, from her happy retirement in the Mediterranean. We are not here to talk about the dead past, you know, but what is happening right now. Irene is alive," the ghost peered deliberately at Sherlock, "I'm not so sure about you, though."

She leaned back and took another glass from the sideboard for herself. "Drink up, and let's get to know each other a little. I fancy you don't have much of an acquaintance with Christmas, though I think you have met some of my sisters in the past."

"Does Irene have sisters?" asked Sherlock, confused.

The ghost laughed again, "No, I meant me. I have over two thousand older sisters gone before me, and I am the youngest of the family. Haven't you met any of them?"
"I don't really remember," said Sherlock sullenly. He realised with dismay that he could not recall ever really celebrating Christmas. In his experience it was always a day to be endured, or ignored.

Sherlock sniffed contemptuously, "As far I can see, Christmas Day is an excuse to make people stressed and angry with each other and the season for shop assistants to be terrified of giving people the wrong greeting. Whether they use 'Happy Holidays' or 'Merry Christmas' someone is bound to be offended and even abusive over it."

Irene's mobile mouth turned down at the corners. "It is true that people use the excuse of Christmas to express their pain of exclusion or anger at what they see as the erosion of religion, but that has nothing to do with me. Place the blame for their fearful actions of anger and bitterness on their own heads. I am the spirit of all celebration, of all generous impulses, of all reconciliation and friendly good wishes. People can call me Christmas, Chanukah, Kwanzaa, or a simple gathering of family and friends, and I will answer to any name. I will accept any good deed done in the spirit of kindness and compassion as a gift given to me. Presents are exchanged in the name of Santa, St Nicholas or if you prefer call them Zawadi or just light candles - I'll bless them all.

Sherlock was silent for a moment before tossing his head carelessly, "Anyway, if you have something to show me, get on and do it. Mycroft promised me learning experiences and I don't see anything edifying in this enormous waste of food. Let's get on with the program, shall we?"

"Very well," Irene returned. "We don't need to go far for the first celebration. Just down the road to Upminster, in fact. I think you know the address?" She picked up the little card which still rested on the coffee table, almost hidden between the enormous teapot and coffee plunger, and held it out to him. "Shall we?"

Sherlock took the card between his long fingers. John's address. He had almost forgotten the invitation to join John's Christmas party. He looked up from the card and found himself facing the very door of that address. He tried to conceal his start of surprise. Irene pushed him hard, right in the middle of his back, and he stumbled straight through the closed door and into the room.

The living room was small, but lavishly decorated with a tree, window decorations and tablecloth in matching blue and silver. Sherlock had no difficulty deducing that the colour-scheme was Mary's. John had not an aesthetic bone in his body, as his jumper of the day bore witness. Today it was a navy and red jumper with white snowflakes and three reindeer on it, apparently engaging in some kind of group hug*. Hideous.

John was polishing glasses and setting the table. His movements were steady, automatic, showing that he had done this many times before. Then he came to the napkins. He took out the blue and white cloths (obviously a set with the tablecloth) and tried to roll them into elegant scrolls such as seen in the best restaurants. He rolled them one way, then another, but each time he set them down they unrolled themselves, often flopping off the edge of the table onto the floor. He picked them up and hurriedly dusted them off, glancing into the kitchen as if worried someone might catch him at it. He next tried folding the material into hats and then squashing them onto the plate to keep them from unfolding. Finally, in a burst of frustration, he simply stuffed all the napkins underneath their respective plates and sank down into the chair at the head of the table with his hands over his face, shoulders shaking.

Irene remarked quietly, "John has a tender heart. When he decides to love someone, he doesn't do it by halves or with reservations. He loves with everything that he is, gives his all to his beloved. He is in pain now, yes, since Mary's death. But do you think he would have chosen not to love her in order to save himself from this pain?" Irene's eyes were scorching as she stared into Sherlock's soul.

"No," he whispered. "John was always the brave one. He was always willing to make the first move,
He was interrupted by a knock at the door behind him. John quickly wiped his face with his hands and one of the napkins, before opening the door. In came Mrs Hudson with an enormous turkey and a small jar of cranberry sauce. "John dear, grab it quick. It's heavy. I'll just pop this on the kitchen counter for later," she put the jar down next to the sink and rushed back outside for the rest of the food. "Here we go, orange glazed ham (that was always my mother's traditional recipe) and shortbread biscuits. I've also got mince pies - Sherlock used to love my mince pies, you know - are you expecting him?" She looked around the room hopefully, as if wishing Sherlock might suddenly leap out from behind the four-foot Christmas tree.

John shook his head slowly, "I made a point of leaving a message on his phone yesterday, but he didn't answer. Not even a text."

"Never mind, dear. He might still turn up." She gave him a reassuring pat on the shoulder. "Mrs Turner sends her regrets, I'm afraid. Her sister had a fall and cancelled her trip to Italy, so Mrs Turner went up to Devonshire to spend the holidays with her."

John stared at her with dismay. "So it will be just you and me, then?"

Mrs Hudson stared back. "I thought you said you invited Molly and her boy as well?"

John shrugged with one shoulder, "Yes, but she wasn't sure if she could come. It all depends on how Andy is behaving today. Molly sometimes gets so tired doing everything on her own, you know..." he trailed off awkwardly.

Mrs Hudson lowered her voice and leaned toward John, as if afraid of being overheard. "Do you think her boy is quite... normal?"

John bit his lip and darted his eyes around the room. Sherlock recognised his cornered-but-trying-not-to-actually-lie expression. "Well, I'm not a paediatrician you know. A formal assessment would be the best thing, really, if Molly can afford it. Only I don't know if she gets child support payments and a full multi-disciplinary autism assessment is expensive." He lifted his hands helplessly, "She's never asked me and I don't want to intrude. She's a doctor herself, I think people sometimes forget that. If she wanted to know, she could easily find out."

He stopped abruptly and Sherlock easily read the rest off his face. If she doesn't want to know, I'm not going to break down her denial and force her to confront the bad news.

"Well," said Mrs Hudson into the heavy silence, "How about some of that white wine then? Or are you opening the sherry?"

The next few minutes were busy with hunting through the liquor cabinet for the sherry, finding a glass and pouring out a measure. John decided to get himself a beer. "I didn't make punch, not really worth it for only three people, you see."

Another silence.

"Did you text him?" Mrs Hudson said abruptly.

"No," said John, without needing to clarify the subject of their discussion. "He just ignores texts from me these days. He's got the address if he wants to come over."

"Oh, John," groaned Sherlock. "How did we come to this? I save all your texts in my phone - I read and re-read them, but after all these years how could I just walk back into your life? It's too late, too"
late for both of us."

Irene raised one eyebrow from her station across the room. "Why is it too late? He's not married anymore and you're not dead anymore…"

Sherlock shook his head fiercely, "He might have wanted me once, many years ago, but I've treated him too badly for him to still love me. I'm different too. Older, colder. I don't think I'd be good for him now."

"Why don't you ask, and let him make that choice?" Irene suggested softly.

"I couldn't... I'm too... I mean, it's not..." Sherlock's stuttering was interrupted by a knock at the door.

"Molly!" Mrs Hudson exclaimed, throwing open the door, "Come in, dear, out of the cold and bring in Andy - my he's grown! How old are you now, Andy sweetheart?" she bent down to look directly into his face. Andy averted his eyes and hid his face in Molly's skirt.

"He's feeling a bit shy today, Mrs Hudson," Molly apologised. "Let's go in, sweetie, and you can look at John's doctor's bag." She ushered the boy into the living room. "He always likes playing with stethoscopes, you know. I think he might want to be a doctor one day." She smiled fondly after him.

"I've never heard him talk, but I suppose he does to you..." said Mrs Hudson, fishing delicately for information.

"Oh yes," replied Molly immediately, "He knows lots of words. He just doesn't like to talk in front of strangers - I think he worries about his accent."

"Oh goodness, he shouldn't worry about that at all. People are so much more understanding than in my day. Back when I was a girl no-one would ever want to see a doctor with a brummie accent, but these days..."

"Oi! Lay off Birmingham!" John called out from the kitchen. Then poking his head back into the room he added, "Molly, what's your poison?"

"I'll have whatever you've got open," said Molly, "Bubbles if you have them, or white if not."

"Bubbles it is!" John disappeared back into the kitchen.

"Anyway," said Molly with determination "It isn't that kind of accent. It isn't even a British accent, as such. Oh dear, I mean... You'll hear it as soon as he talks. It's an American accent."

"American?" Mrs Hudson repeated blankly. "How could he have an American accent?"

"I think it's from the telly," said Molly, blushing. "It isn't that he watches it a lot, but he likes Sesame Street and he's just kind of... picked it up," she finished lamely.

Mrs Hudson frowned and was trying to find something non-judgemental to say (and was finding it difficult to do so) when John reappeared with two champagne flutes. He held out one each to Mrs Hudson and Molly and was just making a remark about how Christmas is the time of year to break out the good stuff, when he was interrupted by a small flying body which smashed both glasses out of his hands and onto the floorboards. Andy was shrieking "Poison! Poison! Poison!" at the top of his lungs while stamping his feet in the mess of liquid and broken glass on the floor.

For a few moment pandemonium reigned. Molly was stammering apologies and trying to pull Andy
away from the debris, while Mrs Hudson was fluttering around a strange kitchen looking for a broom and pan, and John was picking up the largest shards of glass in a napkin and trying to reassure Molly it was all going to be fine. Sherlock closed his eyes to the tumult and walked back out through the closed front door. He sat down on the front door step and rubbed his temples.

"What Molly needs is a good man to encourage her to stop using the telly as a babysitter." said Irene.

"Stop it. What do you know about it?" Sherlock hissed at her. "The boy is clearly on the Autism Spectrum and he was in a strange place, frightened for his mother's life. He thought John's comment about 'poison' was literally true and that he was saving Molly from a horrible death. I think John realises it and Molly must as well, no matter how much she's been avoiding it until now. It's blown up in her face, she can't continue to ignore it."

"I see," said Irene. "And exactly how much do you know about it?"

"Enough," said Sherlock flatly.

Irene raised one elegantly sculpted eyebrow. "And why would that be?"

Sherlock sighed heavily. "Everyone knows there is a large age gap between Mycroft and myself. What they don't know is that the son born between us was autistic. He drowned having a seizure in the bath when I was five, and everyone thinks I have forgotten him, but I haven't. I haven't." He repeated fiercely. "I read all about the autism spectrum when I was older, medications and how to manage seizures and the behavioural issues. I was too late, of course, but it's all saved in the Mind Palace room I have dedicated to Sherrinford. Andy is just as described - acquiring an accent off the television, taking everything literally, and so on."

Irene frowned at him, "Did you ever tell anyone about all this?"

"No-one would believe me. How much do you remember from when you were five years old? I loved Sherrinford, and when he died I gave that love to Redbeard. When he died, I swore I'd never love again. Caring, love - they only bring pain. Mycroft was right about that. Being alone is the only sure protection. Look at John and Molly right now if you don't believe me. They both love and it cuts their hearts open and leaves them to bleed. Calling myself a sociopath keeps everyone at a distance and makes sure they don't get close enough to hurt me, or themselves by becoming attached to me. People are afraid of those more intelligent than themselves anyway and I've cultivated a few eccentricities which confirm their prejudices. It's better this way for everyone."

Sherlock hung his head down between his knees. "I can't go back in there, spirit. I know exactly how it will be. Molly will apologise and will have to either take her son home early, or they will hang on for another hour in agony for everyone. Andy will be emotionally fragile and overwhelmed and might even have a meltdown. Molly will be tense and unhappy. John and Mrs Hudson will try to help and only make it worse by drawing attention to the problem." Sherlock ended with a gusty sigh. "I don't need to see it to know how it will all play out."

"Very well," said the Ghost of Christmas Present quietly. "Let's move on then. Shall we see what New Scotland Yard is up to this year?"

She snapped her fingers, and they were standing in the middle of the office space outside Lestrade's office. He had a bigger office now, as suited the Superintendent, but he was still working inside it and there appeared to be no signs of any kind of party from the night before. The office floor was very quiet, with only two Sergeants on duty. They were quietly talking about Lestrade, Sherlock realised.
The woman was speaking, "… take the boss some coffee? Seems a bit sad that he's here working on Christmas Day. Price of success, I guess."

The man shook his head, "No, he always works Christmas. Says those with families should spend the day at home while those without can work and treat it like any other day. I think he tries to forget it's Christmas Day, to be honest. Since his second marriage broke up he always works both Christmas and New Year, and that was before he became Superintendent."

The man looked at his fellow officer speculatively, "So you're single, I presume?"

"Yep, unattached and fancy free…"

Sherlock shifted his attention from their predictable flirting and moved towards Lestrade. He looked tired, worn and depressed. Sherlock remembered that he had been reinstated at NSY after the debacle surrounding Sherlock's fake suicide was all sorted out. He had been promoted but he still worked too hard, and then his second marriage had failed leaving him nothing but his work. Clearly Lestrade had not bothered to try to form a new relationship since then. He and Sherlock had texted information back and forth for years, but Lestrade was too senior to attend crime scenes himself now, so even Sherlock could not remember the last time they had actually spoken.

"You could have called him, you know," said Irene. "You knew he was alone. You knew from the state of his shoes, even though he never told you."

"I… yes." Sherlock did not try to excuse himself. "Spirit!" he exclaimed, "Show me some hope! Surely someone, somewhere is connected with someone else. Surely someone is celebrating sincerely and with true affection!"


At the aghast expression on Sherlock's face, she relented. "You never had much use for friends or family before, but I suppose since it's Christmas we can let you borrow some."

The scenes flickered past his eyes, changing as soon as he fully comprehended their meaning. Clara and Harry Watson embracing and sharing champagne flutes filled with sparkling soda. Mrs Turner and her sister dusting icing sugar over mince pies, far too many for the two women, they were obviously going to take them to the neighbours. Dimmock being welcomed home by his family after working a morning shift - they had waited Christmas lunch for him. Sally Donovan surrounded by her three children and a massive extended family of aunts, uncles and cousins.

Then even faster, people he did not know at all. Families gathering for lunches, for dinners. Work colleagues sharing coffee. People gathering in groups in churches and synagogues. Miners on isolated stations putting up tinsel, and oil rig workers sharing food and lighting electric candles. In the southern hemisphere summer, families were eating cold seafood and then going out for beach cricket or swimming.

The visions blurred before his eyes until he cried out "Stop! Stop spirit, it's too much!"

The images immediately ceased, and they were back on the doorstep of 221B. "Too much happiness? Too much friendship and love for you?" asked the spirit sarcastically. "Never mind, look over there," she nodded towards the group of homeless people gathering under the bridge. They were warming their hands over a fire built in a rubbish bin and talking.

"Christmas not too cold this year, eh Robby?"
"All for the best, and I got a real nice bunch of fruit from the posh lady on the corner, look. Want some?"

"Thanks. I didn't get nuthin' from the git back there. Time was, when the doctor was around, that he would give out plenty of dosh in view of future information, but not now. He don't care for anyone but hisself now."

"Does he care for himself though? Since he came back from the dead, he hasn't been exactly the same, you know."

"True. He's back from the dead, but not exactly fully alive either."

"You tryin' to say he's undead? Like a zombie or sumthin'?"

"Nah, nothing like that. He's just walking around half alive since his doctor left."

"I'm not a doctor but I could live pretty nice in that flat if he's looking for a new flatmate!"

They all laughed and the conversation moved on. Irene touched Sherlock lightly on the arm to direct his attention down the river the other way. Further along the shore three people were lying huddled in blankets close to the water's edge. One was a child, the other two not much older, teenagers Sherlock guessed from their sizes. As Sherlock looked they seemed to come closer, though he was not conscious of moving. They were lying very still and appeared to be asleep.

The angle of the vision suddenly shifted and from where they appeared to be hovering over the water Sherlock could see the pools of blood in which they lay. All three of them had been murdered, their throats slit as they slept.

"Oh no, spirit," whispered Sherlock, "Who would do this? It is obvious they have no money. It was a crime and a waste to kill them."

Irene opened her eyes wide in pretended surprise, "But you like murders! Even if you think this one was boring," she gave the word his very own inflection, "why should it upset you? It isn't your business. You're not a charity, remember. They are only useful to you as they supply you with data. If you didn't give anything to Wiggins, who is useful to you, how much less would you want to waste your time and thought on these three?"

She leaned closer, "Do you want to know who they are? Would their names interest you?"

Sherlock could not help himself. Information, clues tantalisingly out of reach, had always been his obsession. "Who are they? Were they children of someone I know?"

"They were the children and the responsibility of all of Mankind. They lived in all corners of the globe. The boy is Justice. The girl is Altruism. The child is Love."

"Who would kill such innocents? Tell me, that I may track down their killer!"

Irene looked at him sadly, "You know their killers well. They were killed by Fear and Hate, while Estrangement stood by and said nothing."

Sherlock gasped, "Estrangement is not a crime."

"No, but it is the alienation of society from these children that allowed them to be killed. If they were fed and nurtured in the hearts of all, their killers could never have reached them."
Just then the echoing toll of Big Ben striking midnight throbbed through Sherlock's body. The very atmosphere seemed to shake, and the Ghost of Christmas Present vanished, and Sherlock started to fall towards the cold, black water of the Thames. He tried to cry out, but before he could snatch a breath the icy water closed over his head and flooded his lungs.

Chapter End Notes

John's jumper can be seen here: http://www.firebox.com/product/5399/Reindeer-Threesome-Christmas-Jumper
Recapitulation: The Third of the Three Spirits

Chapter Summary

The Ghost of Christmas Future shows Sherlock shadows of what his future might hold.

Just when Sherlock was finally sure he was drowning, a strong bony hand seized his wrist and dragged him out of the water. His head broke the surface, then his body, followed by his feet. Somehow, instantly he was dry and floating above the surface of the water, still with his wrist captured in the skeletal grip of a caped and hooded black figure.

After a few gulps and gasps of air, Sherlock finally managed to croak through the dread clotting in his throat, "Am I in the presence of the Ghost of Christmas Yet To Come?"

The shrouded phantom did not speak but continued to draw him along as they skimmed across the dark water of the Thames. They touched down on the cobblestones outside 221 Baker Street, and Sherlock's hand was released. The figure turned to face him, and Sherlock finally managed to get a good look.

The hooded cape was made of black feathers, and underneath the woman was wearing a long dress of darkest forest green velvet. It was caught in a gold chain link belt at her waist, and there was also a flash of gold around her bare upper arm. Cascading from under the hood was mass of dark red curls which fell almost to her narrow hips. She was very tall, nearly as tall as Sherlock himself, and he found his gaze captured by her glass green eyes. Her skin was milk pale, and Sherlock would have said she was beautiful, in an eerie way, but for the rather distracting tattoo of the crescent moon on her forehead and what appeared to be black lipstick darkening her mouth.

"You are dressed as The Morrígan, the Phantom Queen of Celtic mythology, are you a future adversary of mine?"

The Spirit did not answer his question, only turned and continued to drift towards the centre of Baker Street. Stopping in the middle of the road, regardless of the traffic passing through her, she raised her hands and pointed to a congregation of journalists and passers-by on the footpath.

"You are supposed to show me the shadows of the future - things which have not happened yet, isn't that so? Spirit, speak to me!"

The Morrígan appeared to shrug. Sherlock wondered if she could not speak, or chose not to. She extended one long pale hand, and pointed imperiously to the gathering of people. Then, as if it did not matter to her whether he followed her instructions or not, she turned her back on him and stood contemplating the building.

"Ghost of the Future, you are fearsome in your appearance, but I know you were sent by Mycroft to do me good, so I will listen and try to understand." Without further speech, Sherlock moved towards the knot of people on the street opposite his own flat.

A journalist with a pencil microphone tucked behind his ear was speaking, "I don't know that much about it, really. I just heard about death last night, so my editor sent me down here to see if I could get a glimpse inside."
A female news anchor answered with a laugh, "And to find out the destiny of the Baker Street building, I'm sure! It's a valuable property and no-one knows what the will might say about it."

"I just know it wasn't left to me!" joked the first journalist. "They never liked The Sun much in that house, not even after Kitty Riley was fired."

"Isn't there supposed to be heaps of money hidden in there?" asked a passing teenager, "Or at least valuables of another kind, maybe drugs?"

An elderly woman, who Sherlock eventually realised was a much older Mrs Turner, frowned repressively, "No, I don't think that was true. I never observed any drug use going on in there."

A street beggar stopped by just in time to hear the last few words and rolled her eyes, "You never saw it, huh? You think you would have anyways? So what about… you know who?"

"Voldemort?" joked the first journalist, to blank stares all around. "Ah, never mind. None of you read the classics as kids, obviously."

"Hasn't been seen for weeks," interrupted the news anchor. "Too bloody cold to go out, I expect."

"That's true," admitted Mrs Turner, "I can't remember such a cold December for years."

"Good for skating, though" observed the beggar, "Speaking of, if any of you want to join us the lake in the park has frozen over."

There were several demurring comments, at which the beggar shrugged and moved away and the knot of conversation broke up by mutual consent.

"Spirit," asked Sherlock, hesitantly, "Why are you wasting my… I mean, our time on such trivia? So someone died and people are wondering about the will. This happens multiple times every day all over London. Even those journalists were not sorry or concerned, and why should I be? If the person wasn't murdered it's no concern of mine."

The Spirit's black lips widened into a mirthless grimace, and she pointed towards 221 Baker Street.

"Should I go in and see myself? Very well, if you think that would be of use. I admit I am curious to see what I shall look like in the future. My father lost his hair as he aged, I hope that hasn't happened to me. Mycroft had the same receding hairline…" Sherlock decided not to waste further breath talking at a Spirit who did not appear inclined to reply. Without further comment he floated towards the well known door of 221B.

He passed through the door and stopped immediately, recoiling in horror. At the bottom of the stairs, lying face down, was a body. A murder, in his very own house? Was it…? But even as the thought crossed his mind, he could see it wasn't himself. It was a woman, in the first instance. It also was clearly not a murder - a death, yes, but not a murder. Everything about the angle of the body, the line of the neck in particular, suggested an accident. A fall down the stairs most likely. The woman, clearly elderly and living alone, had fallen and broken her neck. The body had probably lain undiscovered for some time, as marked by the fumes of decomposition filling the hallway.

Sherlock wondered if it might be someone he knew, a client possibly? She looked far too elderly to be living alone safely, and a woman that overweight should have been more careful on the stairs. A fall at that BMI was always going to be a disaster. He slid past her, intent on going upstairs to his own flat. Would he be there? The smell might have driven him out.

He glanced at the face of the body as he sidled around. Could it be…? He leaned down closer,
suddenly oblivious to the odour of decay. Yes. The features were distorted by the double chin and the layers of fat, but it was clearly Mrs Hudson.

Sherlock sat down suddenly on a step, seeing it all. Her hip getting worse over the years, leading to less and less exercise and eventually less movement of any kind. Spending all her spare time cooking and eating logically would lead to her gaining more and more weight each year until this end - a fall down the stairs and a broken neck. Apparently Sherlock must have been away on a case, or he would have heard her. Perhaps she was even attempting the stairs to look for him or to clean the upper flat. He sunk his head in his hands, his interest in his own residence waning. His hair, or lack thereof, seemed suddenly immaterial. Was everyone he once knew dead? Surely not. Lestrade, Molly and John were not old enough to have died of natural causes.

What about unnatural causes? John was alone after the death of Mary and had a family history of both depression and alcoholism… Fear seized his throat and choked off his breath. The Phantom approached him through the door, drifting closer and closer, grinning as if feeding off his turmoil. She seemed to bring with her the sound of rats scratching in the walls and worms feasting on dead flesh.

"John." Sherlock finally managed to gasp out, "If he's alive, show me John."

The Morrígan's unholy grin widened, as if he had asked for the very thing she wished to show him. She held out her bony white hand, demanding his compliance. He shuddered, but placed his hand in her cold grip.

This time there was no sensation of movement. It was as if the scene at 221 Baker Street was suddenly blown away and he was left standing in John's living room at Upminster. It was completely bare of decorations. There was no sign of its being Christmas at all. The room was spartan, functional furniture only. There were no pictures on the walls, no tablecloth on the table, only an empty vase on the sideboard.

Sherlock was just wondering if John were here, when he suddenly heard an unmistakable cry of orgasm from the bedroom. John, certainly. Sherlock felt the heat rising in his cheeks before remembering he was a ghost in this time and place. He darted another glance around the flat. There were no photographs to indicate a second wedding, but John was partnered and happy, so that was a good thing, surely? Sherlock ignored the unaccountable tightness in his chest, and rechecked the details of the room. It did not look like the living room of a happy couple. There was no sign of a woman's touch, no sign of a second inhabitant at all, even to Sherlock's eye for detail. One mug in the sink, only John's books and medical texts on the shelf and coffee table, only one set of keys in the bowl by the door.

Sherlock was just preparing himself to go into the bedroom to actually see John, when the door opened and a young man came out. Sherlock blinked to double check his vision. The man was tall, with a messy mop of dark curly hair. He had brown eyes and had somewhat more tanned skin than Sherlock's laboratory-grown pallor but he was a very passable double for Sherlock as a young man. And he looked about twenty-five years old.

"See you next week?" he called out as he was slipping on his shoes.

"Yeah, sure. Pull the door shut on your way out, thanks." John voice from the bedroom was tired, resigned. It did not sound like that of someone giddily in love with a toy boy.

Sherlock shifted his weight from foot to foot, debating with himself how long he should wait for John to make himself decent. He had to see John, but was afraid of what he would read in John's face and body. If his weary voice was any indication, the years had not been kind to John.
Just then, John himself appeared in the doorway, shrugging on his dressing gown. His hair was completely grey now, his posture stooped, his bearing no longer that of the soldier of Sherlock's memory. He was stuffing his wallet back into the dressing gown pocket as he limped across the kitchen to boil the kettle. His wallet? Why would he need his wallet in his bedroom...

It all clicked into place. John had given up on love, on relationships completely and was paying a prostitute to visit him at home. John was a broken down, hopeless old man, who was uninterested in making more of his own life. His success in his medical practice was not enough to interest him in living, so he had opted for a slow death by alcohol. Even now he was pouring a generous slug of something into his tea, and his nose and cheeks were flushed with the broken veins of someone to whom this is not a rare occurrence.

John took the tea and the bottle into the living room, kicked his feet up on the coffee table and switched on the telly. He started and seemed surprised to hear the tinny Christmas carols that came on, and double checked his watch for the date.

"Huh, Christmas," he murmured to himself. "Comes around faster every fucking year. Ah well," he raised the bottle, "Merry Christmas to any of you who have anything to be merry about."

He took a drink, then raised the bottle again, "And to Mrs Hudson, and to Sherlock, you won't be merry I suppose, but I'll drink to your health anyway."

Sherlock realised with a cold chill that John did not know Mrs Hudson was dead.

John took another, longer gulp of his drink, then slowly raised the bottle one last time, "And to me, may it be my last Christmas, merry or otherwise."

He polished off the rest of the bottle and resumed staring, glaze-eyed and unseeing, at the telly.

"No, Spirit, no!" groaned Sherlock. "John is a good man, a good doctor! He deserves so much better than this! He could get married again, he could build a good life, a family. He shouldn't be drinking himself to death, alone with only hookers for company on Christmas Day!"

The Phantom Queen curled her lip at him, and held out her hand once more. Sherlock reluctantly took it and once again the scene abruptly changed.

Sherlock squinted in the sudden harsh light of the morgue at St Bartholomew's. The fluorescent lights overhead were flickering unpleasantly, giving him an almost instant headache. Who did he know here? Did Molly still work here?

The unasked question was answered when Lestrade walked in, followed by a young doctor and an even younger sergeant. He was talking, apparently about a recent murder victim.

"...the body like that. It would never have happened in my day. I never hauled the Superintendent out on Christmas Day, and Dr Hooper would never have let..." he was interrupted by his phone ringing.

"Lestrade," he snapped into it. "No, I can't. This is a complete balls-up and... I know, I know. Go ahead without me and... Yes, yes I will. All right. Sorry, love. See you tonight." He stabbed a button on his phone much harder than necessary and slid it back into his shirt pocket before rounding on the young doctor with a vicious snarl. "I still rue the day Molly Hooper resigned and they appointed you to this position! Get the body out and double check, and I'll be in the staff room wrapping my wife's apology present. You had better not be the ruin of my third marriage or I'll kill you myself!" Still fuming, he exited the room abruptly, leaving the other two to stare at each other in dismay.
Sherlock drifted down the hall following the muttering Lestrade. He gathered from the flow of the one-sided conversation that Lestrade's third marriage was on the rocks, he suspected his wife was cheating on him but was afraid to look at the evidence. He was drowning in work, as usual, but apparently finding it less satisfying than before. Sherlock noted uneasily that his own name was not mentioned, despite this apparently difficult case. Was he still working for the MET at all?

"Morrígan!" demanded Sherlock, "Where is Molly? If she resigned, where did she go? Show me Molly." He held out his hand but the spirit declined to take it. She merely raised her arms and flicked her cloak of raven feathers until it swirled around them both. When she unwrapped them, they were standing in a tiny shoebox of a flat.

Sherlock peered around the main room which comprised both kitchen and living room. He noted the padding on the corners of the kitchen table and coffee table. Did Molly have another baby? Her son must be at least thirteen by now, judging by the amount of time elapsed. There were no baby toys on the floor, and the house was quiet except for the murmur of a television behind a closed door.

Sherlock floated towards the sound, through the bedroom door into a boy's bedroom. He was sitting on the bed, watching the end of a Star Wars movie. Sherlock recognised the final scene of the award ceremony to the heroes of the Rebellion, and remembered with a half-smile how John would rant about one of the main characters missing out. There was something odd about the way the boy was sitting so very still and sucking his thumb. Sherlock glanced around the room to gather more clues as to how the boy’s daily life proceeded.

Sherlock noted that the corners of the posters on the wall were all perfectly aligned, as were the edges of the books on the bedside table. Clearly the boy’s Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder was far out of control - a common issue in those on the Spectrum. His reading was well advanced for his age though, as the books were as thick as the ones Sherlock had read himself at that age. He recognised some of them; A Brief History of Time, Darwin Awards, Guinness Book of Records. He frowned, noticing that none of the books were novels or fiction of any kind. Obsessions with facts might be a problem, more data needed. The corner of the desk in here was also padded - the boy must have fits of some kind, so perhaps the glaze-eyed stare at the television was a result of medications rather than teenage indolence.

The credits of the movie finished and Sherlock glanced across to see what the boy would do next. He blinked, then reached for the remote beside him and with a well-practised flick of his thumb, set another movie playing. Sherlock wondered with disapproval if Molly usually let him watch movies this often, or if this was just a holiday indulgence. Really, he should not be so isolated and occupied with telly, it would just feed the obsessions and make him more anti-social. He wished he could have told Molly sooner - early intervention would have helped before some of the more extreme behaviours became entrenched.

The opening credits rolled with the typical strident trumpet fanfare of the Star Wars series, but as the text scrolled past Sherlock realised with a jolt that the old-fashioned yellow lettering proclaimed this was “Episode IV”. Wasn’t this was the same movie playing again from the beginning? Sherlock had never been a particular fan, but John had watched the movies often enough that Sherlock was aware of the odd numbering of the “first” trilogy, despite the fact that the franchise had run to twelve in total before petering out. This was even worse than he had initially thought.

Where was Molly? Sherlock drifted through the wall of the boy's bedroom, deducing from the size and layout of the flat that this should take him directly to the master bedroom.

He was correct, in a manner of speaking. Molly's bedroom was slightly larger than her son's but appeared more crowded because of the desk and computer, in addition to the single bed. She
obviously worked from home. That this was her office was evident in the reference disks piled on the
table, the tiny microscope and slides crowded next to them.

Molly was not working at the moment, though. She was sitting on the bed, crying quietly. It was
indisputable that she lived alone, worked alone and probably was, on a daily basis, completely alone
in the responsibility for her son. If she was at home on Christmas Day, it was unlikely that she had
any other significant connections at all.

"Oh, Molly," sighed Sherlock, "What happened to you? Could I, could anyone have helped you
before it came to this?"

The dark figure of the Morrígan intruded on them through the wall. She held up her finger, then
crooked it in an indisputable command to him to follow.

Sherlock scowled, "Spirit, no. I need to comfort her, help her. She needs to know that she isn't alone,
that she has friends."

The Morrígan threw back her head and laughed, raucously. It was a harsh, cawing sound like a
demented crow. In her open mouth, between her black lips, Sherlock caught sight of the stump of her
tongue. So she could not speak to him even if she would.

She lifted one expressive eyebrow as her laughter died away, and Sherlock had no trouble recalling
his own words: \textit{I don't have friends.}

"Spirit!" he cried out, "Where am I? Those I cared for are all alone, isolated from me and from each
other, either living in despair or dead. Where am I? Show me what has become of me - I demand it!"

The Morrígan laughed again, as if this was the best joke yet, and swirling her cloak around them
both, whisked them off into the clouded London night sky.

They flew over London, not in the direction of Baker Street, but towards the Tilbury docks. The
shady end of town - Sherlock could imagine himself pursuing a suspect or searching for information
down this way, and he started to relax. For a minute he had been concerned…

The Ghost of Christmas Future took him swooping low over a building right on the edge of the dock
complex, further from the busy water-side areas. It was not much more than a tin shed, a warehouse
of some kind probably. They were hovering a good ten metres above the roof, when with a
discordant shriek of laughter, the Morrígan wrenched her cloak away from his desperate grasp and
Sherlock started to fall.

He plunged down through the roof and smacked into the attic beams with what would have been
bone-bruising force, if he hadn't been incorporeal. Still, his spirit was shocked with the suddenness of
the relocation and he took a minute to catch his breath and look around. There wasn't much to see.
Presumably he was in hiding, was this a stakeout? The attic appeared to be empty. Even the ghostly
spirit was absent. It was completely silent apart from his own harsh panting. He forced himself to
hold his breath, in order to listen better. He strained his supernatural hearing to the utmost, but it vain.
It was utterly soundless in the attic.

Sherlock frowned. His future self could not possibly be present here. It was impossible even for him
to be as silent as a ghost. He floated himself towards the other end of the attic, where the trapdoor to
descend to the main building should be.

In the corner of the room he found the trapdoor, but it appeared to be locked. He pulled and pushed
at it, with his hands and then his feet but was unable to force it open. Finally, he sat back on his heels
to further consider this apparently insurmountable problem. His gaze drifted idly from directly in
front of him into the darkest corner of the room and there, finally, he caught sight of his own face,
waxy and pale and very obviously dead. The glassy stillness of the eyes, the hollow cheeks and the
blood dried around the bullet hole in his temple all told the same story.

He could not suppress a groan of dismay. How could he be here? His body had clearly been
undiscovered for some time, as it appeared almost desiccated. From the state of the skin, he observed
dispassionately, he had most likely been there about a month, maybe three weeks if there had been
warmer weather earlier in December. And yet, apparently John did not know he was dead, Lestrade
did not appear to know - nobody appeared to have missed him at all.

And how did he come to die or rather, be killed, as the gunshot wound to the temple was both
bloody and obvious, and then his body stashed away in this remote place? Was anyone investigating
his death? His observations suggested that no-one knew or cared that he was gone.

Sherlock was disappointed with himself. He had plainly taken on a criminal who had outwitted him,
or else he had grown slow and careless with age, and got himself shot in the head in the midst of a
case. Now not only would the case be inconclusive, but his own death would be unnoticed, unsolved
and - he bared his teeth with a deep emotion he had never known he could possess - unavenged.

He sat down next to his own earthly remains and finally spoke aloud. "Is this the end? Is this how
my life's work, The Work into which I poured myself, finally reaches its termination? A common
criminal, not even knowing what he destroys, puts a bullet in my brain and hides my body. And I'm
never found, am I?"

Sherlock looked around for the Ghost of Christmas Future, but seeing no-one, shouted aloud in his
agony, "Spirit! Are these the shadows of the things that WILL be, or just a prophecy of what MAY
be, only? If I should change my actions, change my choices, then can I change this dismal future for
all of us? It must be so, or else why torture me with visions of what is immutable? I have always
been as I chose, but if I choose differently I can change! I will change!"

He looked around the attic again, wildly. "Spirit! Hear me! You have shown me one possible future,
but I am not the man I was. Your chain of visions has been effective and now I know what my true
Work is, the work of the rest of my life."

The Morrígan suddenly materialised right in front of him, so close he was forced to scramble
backwards as he leapt to his feet.

"My Work now is not just to solve the puzzles, but to bring Justice. Not to use my gifts for my own
entertainment and the belittling of others, but for the good of All. And most of all, at Christmas and
all the rest of the year, not to dwell in proud isolation but to climb down off my self-constructed pedestal
and touch other people for good, especially those closest to me. I should have been there for Mrs
Hudson, reached out and shared what I knew with Molly, stood by Lestrade. And John…"

Sherlock looked beseechingly, frantically, into the unsympathetic glittering eyes of the ghost. "Tell
me it is not too late for me and John? Tell me it is not too late for the one great love of my life! Tell
me," he reached out and grasped the hand of the Spirit, "Tell me!"

Sherlock was strong, but the Morrígan was stronger still. She wrenched herself from his clutches and
quicker than he could see, before he knew it was happening, she threw her cloak over his head,
shutting out all light. In the same instant as the cloak enveloped him, Sherlock felt his substance
sinking through the floor and then falling through the air below. He braced himself to hit the ground,
but disorientated and dizzy, he felt himself landing on his back on something soft, which bounced his
falling body unexpectedly gently.
Panting desperately, almost crying with panic, Sherlock fought his way free of the imprisoning folds of the cloak and sat up, blinking in the bright sunlight of early morning, shrugging off his own covers in his own bed.
Coda: The End of It

Chapter Summary

The final ending of it all... unless it is actually the beginning.

Chapter Notes

I think technically it is still Christmas somewhere in the world, so I'm getting this posted just in time! Merry Christmas to all!

Sherlock sat up in his bed, panting but elated. He was alive! He was here in his own bed, in his own room, in his body with his own future life stretching out before him! Everyone had always said Sherlock was brilliant, and he was going to prove it by not making the same mistakes twice.

He dashed into the bathroom to check his face. It was a little more hollow in the cheeks than in former days, but the temples were clean and dry and his skull intact. "I am here," he whispered to his reflection.

"Those shadows of things that would have been are gone like the sound of the violin after I lift my bow. They will never come to pass, I will make sure of it!" He smiled a little, the movement feeling stiff on his face and rather unfamiliar at first, but he gave it a few more tries, and really for a beginner the effort was quite good.

He ran back into his bedroom and threw up the sash of his window, sticking his head out onto Baker Street. For a moment he just breathed in the cold air and enjoyed actually feeling the chill moving in out of his real, functioning, living body. Having seen it lying dead made him less inclined to dismiss his body as mere 'transport'. It was part of him in a vital way which he had not previously appreciated.

He was babbling to himself, "There's the café, and there's Mrs Turner's place, and there's the empty house opposite, and some homeless people clustering under the bridge... And there's Wiggins!" He stopped for a moment to hear the bells of St Marylebone ring the hour of nine. But what day was it? How many nights had the journey with the Three Spirits taken? He had no idea.

He shouted down through the open window, "Hey, Wiggins, I'll pay you for a very useful piece of information! What day is it?"

Wiggins stood in the street staring up at Sherlock and scratching his head. "To-day? Why, it's Christmas Day! Obviously." The last word was spoken in an undertone, but Sherlock caught it anyway.

"Obviously? Yes, of course! The Spirits did it all in one night! Of course they did, and I haven't missed it! There's not a moment to lose. Wiggins!" Sherlock struck the window frame with his fist in sudden resolution.
"Yes, sir?" returned Wiggins, detecting a promising change in the consulting detective's manner.

"I need a plum pudding." Sherlock said, decisively.

"A… a pudding, sir?" returned Wiggins, wrinkling his nose.

"Yes, perfectly understood! I'm glad we agree. And a ham, some punch, some real French champagne and napkin rings. The best napkin rings you can find. And a book on ABA - Applied Behaviour Analysis. One suitable for children with autism. Here's money," he threw down from the window a few hundred pounds in notes, "keep the change, and if you are back here within the hour I'll give you another twenty pounds on top of it!" He slammed the window shut, as Wiggins was already off down the street.

"Right," said Sherlock rubbing his hands. "What else do I need for a celebration? A shave!" He bolted into the bathroom and nearly cut his own throat with the straight razor while shaving, he was still dancing around so violently with unaccustomed glee. "I'll take my violin - Mrs Hudson always loved hearing me play carols on the violin, and a copy of Handel's Messiah for Andy, something with interesting and intricate mathematical patterns in the music. Can't get him started on music too soon."

Sherlock dashed back out to the main room of the flat and snatched up the small rectangle of paper with John's address from where it still lay on the coffee table. "John! It is still Christmas! It is not too late! I'll make amends, you'll see!"

Sherlock gathered up his violin and his coat and scarf and hurried downstairs. He was too impatient to wait for Wiggins to return. Just as he was passing Mrs Hudson's door, a thought struck him, and he knocked.

She answered the door, saying "Who… Oh, Sherlock! It's Christmas, you know, and I have to get this turkey all packed up for John. Whatever you need, can it wait until tomorrow?"

Sherlock's lip curled with self-derision at what this speech implied. "Mrs Hudson, I am here to apologise," he said stiffly. "I have not been fully appreciative of all the work and care you put into not being my housekeeper, which is above and beyond any small favour I may have done you years ago. I would be honoured if you would allow me to accompany you to John's for Christmas."

"Oh Sherlock!" exclaimed Mrs Hudson, beaming and hugging him. "I'm so glad… John will be so happy to see you! Do you have a gift for him? Don't worry if you don't - I'm sure I have a spare tea cosy around here somewhere…"

"John said no gifts, didn't he?" asked Sherlock.

"Yes, dear, but he was just being polite. It's Christmas! You don't want to turn up without at least a little something to show him that you were thinking of him."

"I'm always thinking of him," said Sherlock, "And I don't think a tea cosy…" he stopped suddenly. "Actually, you are right. Just give me a moment to get something from upstairs and then I'll call us a cab and we'll go to John's. Wiggins should be here any moment, tell him to wait for me."

Sherlock ran back up the stairs, long legs pumping and coat flying. He was back almost immediately, slipping something small from his palm into his pocket. Just as Mrs Hudson was about to ask what he was giving John, the front door rattled with a vigorous banging.

"Ah, that will be Wiggins, and I hear from the use of his foot that he has been quite successful in obtaining all my requested items. Excellent, let's go."
He popped open the front door, to the surprise of Wiggins who was just trying to balance on one foot in order to assault the door again. "I got everything you asked for, and a box of chocolates as well, just in case, sir. Always best to be prepared, sir, ain't it?"

"Brilliant!" declared Sherlock, "Excellent deduction! I'm glad to have you on my team. That looks like an excellent ham, too..."

"Oh Sherlock," interrupted Mrs Hudson with rebuke in her eyes. "How could you forget? I always do my special glazed ham for Christmas. Now we have two, how can we eat..."

Sherlock held up his hand for silence. "Wiggins," he said slowly, "This is for you and your friends to share, as a small token of my appreciation for your work during the year. Also, I wish you and the whole Homeless Network to have lunch at Phoenix Palace. Very good Cantonese food, and they should be open on Christmas Day. Remind them about the horse meat incident, and tell them to charge it to Sherlock Holmes. Eat as much as you like, I'd be surprised if I ever see the bill."

Wiggins' mouth fell open, and he was still standing in silence staring at the ham in his hands when Sherlock whirled off again, calling for a cab.

* * * * *

At John's door Sherlock felt an unaccountable hesitation. What if John did not really want to see him? Would it be intruding for him to accept the invitation that John didn't think he would accept?

"Knock, dear," said Mrs Hudson getting out of the cab behind him, "This turkey is heavy."

Mentally kicking himself for being ridiculous, Sherlock knocked.

"Come in Mrs Hudson," exclaimed John as he opened the door, only to fall silent on seeing Sherlock standing on the doorstep.

"It is I," said Sherlock stiffly, then coughed slightly and added, "I mean, thank you for the invitation, I... decided to accept." He felt his cheekbones heating up as he added, even more awkwardly, "I hope that's still... acceptable to you. May I come in?"

John closed his gaping mouth and grabbed Sherlock's hand, ushering him into the room and fluttering about to find him the best chair. He took the turkey from Mrs Hudson and carried it into the kitchen, returning with a bottle of sherry and one of sparkling wine.

"Can I tempt either of you?" he asked, waving the bottles in their general direction. "Molly should be here soon with Andy, but they are going to be late. Something about not wanting to put his shoes on, I think. Anyway, we should start."

"I have a gift for you John," Sherlock said quietly. He forestalled John's protests with an upraised hand. "Yes, I should have. A great many past acknowledgements which I should have given you at the time will have to be comprehended in it. This is only the first instalment."

He presented John with the champagne bottle and a tiny gift box. "Open the box later, the champagne is for now - I know that Molly loves her bubbles!"

"Well, yes," said John, "I'll just go get the glasses."

While he was in the kitchen, Sherlock swiftly took up all the napkins and reset the table with the red napkin rings Wiggins had procured. It gave a splash of colour to the table that warmed up the otherwise rather cold blue and silver of the rest of the setting.
After the sherry and champagne had been poured, just before an uncomfortable silence threatened to set in over the party, the doorbell rang. Molly and Andy were shown into the room, and Sherlock quickly engaged Mrs Hudson in conversation about comparative mince pie recipes. He kept her fully occupied for at least eight minutes, giving the boy a chance to look around the room and to settle down in the strange place. Once Andy was safely inspecting the tree, Sherlock pointedly offered Molly a glass of the champagne, before John could say anything that might be misconstrued.

The rest of the Christmas party went off beautifully. Sherlock and John took turns involving Andy in opening presents, or examining the decorations, or plying him with Christmas foods. Molly had initially appeared on edge, just waiting for an incident to occur that would require her intervention. But as the afternoon progressed, she relaxed and talked to Mrs Hudson about the little details of Christmas events in the extended family.

Sherlock was just putting on the Messiah CD he had brought along, when the lull in the music allowed him to overhear what Molly was saying.

"...so hard finding childcare that I sometimes feel like I'm working just to pay the bills. If I could work from home I could keep and eye on him and do online reporting and save so much."

Sherlock quickly turned and addressed Molly, "But you couldn't do autopsies from home, could you? Or work with the MET? And aren't those the parts of your job you like best?"

Molly blinked at his unexpected interruption. "Well, yes, I suppose so, but there are other things I could do. Online second opinions and reporting is a booming business now."

Sherlock rolled his eyes, "Oh please. Reassuring anxious pathologists they got it right the first time, and looking at photos of slides that any blind man could see haven't been stained properly in the first place? You are better than that. There is more to your job than the money. You need to get out and talk to adults, use your professional skills, that's all there is to it."

"Sherlock!" protested John with a laugh, "You can't just decide someone's life path for them!"

"No," sniffed Sherlock, "but I can point out the obvious which other people may have failed to observe. Staying home for a small increase in cash flow for a few years would cut Molly off from climbing the career ladder at St Bart's and by the time Andy is ready for school, she would be too far out of current medical progress to get back in at a major hospital. My way is better."

"That's enough badgering Molly, Sherlock," scolded Mrs Hudson. "Off you go and get your violin and let's have some music."

"Yes," agreed Molly, "music would be lovely." She dropped her gaze and seemed to sit staring into her empty glass for quite some time after that.

Sherlock put on the CD and let the music wash over him as he tuned the violin to match. He let the overture pass, and the first couple of arias and some recitative until finally the piece he wanted came on; the full-choir chorus of 'And the Glory of the Lord'. Closing his eyes, he used his violin to pick out and reinforce the main theme as it appeared, first in the alto line, then repeated by the bass and tenor parts, finally recurring as a soprano descant floating over the rest. The fugue developed the theme in all four parts, the increasing speed of the reiterations a challenge for a single violin, but by playing the first few notes of the subject he was able to point it out to his increasingly riveted audience.

At the end of the piece he opened his eyes to the amazed stares of John, Mrs Hudson and Molly. Where was Andy, the one it was all for? Trusting his intuition, he turned and spotted the boy. Sitting
on the floor behind him, sucking his thumb and still nodding the rhythm of the last few bars, was Andy. Ignoring the bauble discarded on the floor in front of him, his steady gaze was fixed on Sherlock.

He took the thumb out of his mouth, "More," he said, demandingly.

Sherlock flicked the CD forward a few tracks. "You'll love this one, the mathematical progressions in it are fascinating."

Sherlock played as the choir sang: for unto us a child is born, unto us a Son is given.

Absorbed in the music Sherlock suddenly realised what the next line was going to be, and with extra feeling he doubled the bass choir as they sang the second subject of the piece, what he thought of as 'Mycroft's Theme': and the government shall be upon his shoulders, and his name shall be called wonderful counsellor...

His thoughts were suddenly derailed as the CD clicked loudly and jumped several tracks before resuming playing with: Hallelujah! Hallelujah!

"Sorry about that," said John, stopping the CD. "Must be a bit of dust in the player, it hasn't jumped like that before." He restarted the CD, and the calm intricate music of the Pifa resumed without further interruptions. Andy sat on the floor still staring at the CD player, completely captivated. Occasionally he would nod his head or tap his fingers on the floor mimicking the complex rhythms of the four-part choir and full orchestra.

"Molly," said Sherlock as he touched her shoulder, "Your son is…"

Molly flinched back from him, half closing her eyes, "No, don't."

John started forwards, one hand outstretched in an effort to stop him, but Sherlock knew what needed to be said.

"Molly, your son is a mathematical and musical genius."

Molly's hand flew to cover her mouth as her eyes widened and a tear dripped slowly down her cheek. "Really? You really think so?" She sat down suddenly on a chair, her voice barely able to be heard through the thickness in her throat. "I never wanted him tested. I didn't want him labelled... for people to only see disability and difference when I see him as a wonderful, talented little boy. Oh Sherlock, do you really think it could be true?"

She scooped Andy up from the floor and hugged him on her lap. He tolerated the embrace for less than half a minute before squirming to be let down. "More," he explained, pointing to the CD player. "Yes, love," Molly whispered, "but can I have a hug before you go?"

Andy tilted his head to one side as he considered his mother. "OK," he conceded. He held up one hand, his stubby fingers spread widely. Molly matched her left hand to his right, interlacing her fingers with his and squeezing for a moment. Then she let him go, to run back to the fascinating music.

"That's his preferred way of hugging," she explained, rather self-consciously. "I read about it in a book. An amazing book really, written by... anyway, it doesn't matter." She smoothed her ponytail in lieu of further speech.

"Actually, I have a book for you that I think you might like," said Sherlock into the subsequent silence.
"Yes, presents!" exclaimed Mrs Hudson, "I have something for Andy too!"

The rest of the afternoon passed very pleasantly with good food, amiable company and just the right amount of punch to make everyone cheerful. Altogether, Sherlock could not remember ever being so relaxed and happy.

Molly was the first to take her leave, needing to get Andy home for a light supper before bed. She offered Mrs Hudson a ride home, which was gratefully accepted. There was a little bustle at the door, then they were gone and Sherlock and John were left staring at each other.

"You were good with Andy," commented John at last.

Sherlock shrugged, "A personal interest," he conceded. "But you never opened your present."

"I was very interested but you said to wait for later, by which I inferred that you wanted me to open it after everyone else left."

"True. That circumstance now applies."

John cocked one eyebrow, "Is that Sherlockian for 'please open my gift I want to know what you think of it'?"

"Not precisely," said Sherlock darting his glance away from John, "If you open the box in front of me I'll see your first reaction to it and I won't need to ask what you think of it."

Without further delay, John produced the small box from his pocket and proceeded to open it, pretending not to notice Sherlock's long fingers knotting and unknotting anxiously. It was a small box, plain navy in colour and not decorated as a gift box, by which John guessed that it had been a last minute impulse and was not a standard Christmas present. The box was light and small enough to fit in the palm of his hand. He would have thought maybe it contained cufflinks except that it rattled slightly as he tilted it. Not cufflinks or a tiepin then, though maybe a box from one of those repurposed to hold…

A key ring? John felt himself gaping slightly at the prosaic item which seemed to be making Sherlock so apprehensive. It wasn't anything special as key rings went either - just a standard fluorescent yellow tab with a piece of paper inside to label the key. Was the important part of the gift the paper? John picked it up, letting the key dangle as he brought the paper close enough to read the tiny print inside, written in pencil in Mrs Hudson's uncertain script.

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John's fist closed possessively around the key as he realised what it was. His own key to… to what? What exactly did Sherlock mean by this? Was he asking John to move back in with him? As flatmates again? Or something more? Did Sherlock know now what John had realised since Mary's death?

Sherlock watched with satisfaction as John's hand tightened convulsively around the key. "Yes," he said aloud. "Yes to all of it. Move back to Baker Street with me. Come home, John. Come home to me, at last."

Tears were shining in John's eyes as he finally met Sherlock's gaze and repeated one of the first things he had ever said to Sherlock, "Oh God, yes."

* * * *
Sherlock was better than a great man, he was a good man from that day forward. He was like a second father to Andy, and John became like Andy's favourite uncle. Sherlock and John had a big wedding, much to John's amazement, with all of their friends and family, parts of New Scotland Yard and most of the Homeless Network attending. "After all," Sherlock reasoned, "If we're going to have a party it is more efficient to invite everyone at the same time."

It would be nice to say that he was a changed man ever after, and if it wasn't quite true, it was very nearly true. The transformation had begun at least and John, with time and love would complete the cure. Some people laughed in their sleeves that Sherlock Holmes himself, who had always disdained sentiment, should live to repudiate his own oft-repeated axiom. Sherlock just shrugged and said, "It is the height of idiocy not to be able to learn and change. If only some of those at NSY could learn from past mistakes the force would not be in the dismal state it is now."

They never saw or heard from Mycroft again, but every year at Christmas Sherlock would put on the Messiah CD and toast his brother of fond memory. John eventually got used to it.

And Sherlock and John celebrated Christmas joyfully every year, and the Birth of Love every day of their lives, and their home was always filled with laughter and music as they lived long and happily ever after.

The End of the Dream: The Beginning of the Rest of Their Lives

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