Longer Than the Road That Stretches Out Ahead
by sunken_standard

Summary

Sherlock loses his mind and Molly holds on to it for him, and they see the world's largest fibreglass Holstein cow.

Notes

Most of this was written in February, abandoned for months, excerpted in Badlands, and finally revisited. The level of realism is about on par with television (especially the medical bits); be prepared to suspend disbelief. Google maps and a calculator were used extensively in the making of this fic, as were Atlas Obscura and Roadside America.

Title is from Two of Us by The Beatles.

Eternal gratitude to my betas, madder_badder and albalark, and very special thanks to shoedog for helping tighten up the sloppy bits. This hasn’t been Britpicked (feel free to point out errors).

See the end of the work for more notes.

Day 0

I'm dead.
No, alive.

Alive; John's alive, Mrs. Husdon's alive, Lestrade is alive.

Dead, alive, undead; ghost, spectre, spirit, memory.

Christ, sitting in Molly Hooper's too plush, too colourful, too cheery lounge shaking like a leaf, wrapped in a crocheted afghan (made by a family member; old, not as old as uni; mother or grandmother or aunt, colours would coordinate if it was a sister [did she have a sister? photos, yes, sister, older, children; brother, younger, no children; middle child, made sense]; cat hair still embedded in the fibres of the yarn after numerous washings [moved a year ago, no pets in the new building; Clapham, she's still hopeful]) wearing only scrub bottoms (shirt pulled in the wrong places, cheaply constructed, cotton-poly blend, John wore--)

John, fuck, tears again, a life for a life and two lives still lost (three; Moriarty; a flash of chrome and the gun fucking Christ he'd always wondered what it would look like so close up; the smell of blood and brain hot and thick and raw--)

Dry-heaving (second round, abdominal muscles and throat hurt [withdrawal was worse]), toilet, kitchen's closer; one mug in the sink (lime green, tapered bottom, over-sized [capacity 10 oz], glaze intact [three months? six at the outside, Christmas gift {colleague}?-- Christmas, lipstick, shame; not helping), swirling skin of congealed milkfat on top of half-finished coffee.

Expectorate; water (glasses, right cupboard [backwards from Baker Street, John is left-handed, everything was backwards until it wasn't and STOP IT], mismatched and second-hand [like her clothing {doesn't make sense; decent wage, reads fashion magazines-- self-sabotaging with personal style? No; comfort, sentiment; kinship with odd cast-offs; neglected? middle child}], arranged by frequency of use rather than size); metallic and cool (not cool enough; ice, freezer).

Ready meals, leftovers neatly labelled in plastic, as expected. Half-pack of B&H silver (ex-boyfriend? no, would be binned; social smoker, pubs? possibly [lack of data]-- photos on the wall; sister, mother prematurely aged, theirs?); not expected. Scented candle (citrus to cover cooking; burned 3/4 of the way down) on the worktop, plastic disposable lighter in the drawer (not matches; social smoker looking more likely [no stains on her fingers or teeth, not often then], still doesn't preclude the possibility of belonging to a family member). Courtesy; open the window, light the candle (shaking fingers, side of his thumb burned).
Oh God yes, nicotine (cigarette slightly stale; tastes like the inside of the freezer), like flying, like falling (so high [never from that high before], so fast, adrenaline and fear and freedom)--

Arousal, a reflex, not the first time after (a case/chase/fight [not only him, John as well; quiet, quick, in the shower or his bedroom, tiny half-moons from his teeth on the top and side of his right index finger], exhilaration); will it away, works most of the time (only transport). Not working (base impulses; fuck and scream and bite and dominate; swallow hard against the image of blue veins, pale skin, suprasternal notch, the curve of--); getting worse.

Alcohol, depressant. Refrigerator, no wine (wine-- wrong! glasses on top shelf, infrequently used); something stronger, top shelf far-left cupboard; god, hope it's not Pimm's; Jack Daniels, interesting (ah-- mother Irish [also Catholic; irrelevant], whiskey = tradition; keeps it [and the cigarettes] for rare [childless] visits from her sister [the rebel, still clinging desperately to the memories of her wild youth]), bottle half-full.

Hands shaking too badly to hold the glass and the cigarette and pour (slight sprain, right wrist, hit the pavement wrong), drinks straight from the bottle (he'll get her a new one, something better [John has better taste, single-malt scotch, sometimes blended, but never bourbon {John will drink more, now; Harriet will encourage it}]). Throat's already sore, the burn unpleasant but necessary.

Should eat something, digestion to reroute blood flow; biscuits, middle cupboard to the left of the sink, chocolate HobNobs. Molly will be back soon, won't stay for her full shift, time-? No watch, no phone, lost track of time on the sofa. Clock on the cooker, 12:19; dead for four hours, thirty-two minutes.

Alcohol isn't helping; sweaty and snotty and still hard as a rock; need to pull it together before Molly sees him like this (no one can see this weakness [she'd understand, she'd do anything {she's the only one left to love him, he could--}; fallibility would scare her, it would make him less in her eyes], even John's never seen it this bad [never will, fuck, how can he be crying and still have an erection? {the scent of a woman's tears lowers the testosterone level in men, if he could find something Molly had cried into recently; --not worth the effort}])

Another shower. He'll just take care of things (like any other bodily function; without ceremony), let the water wash away all the desperation leaking out of him, just as it had the blood that hadn't all come out in the sink in the morgue (his blood, drawn the night before [a look of infinite sadness in her eyes when she watched him find the vein]). On the positive side, if he did it now, it would be some time before that particular need became too great so as to cause discomfort.

The bottle comes with him to the bathroom, as does the cigarette; disrobe; water just the right temperature (41° [don't look in the mirror over the sink]); conditioner for lubrication. Hateful, being trapped in a body. Quick, perfunctory strokes; usually does the trick when he's aching like this; not
working. Visualization, then ('wank bank,' as John referred to it, stupid rhyme he'd thought clever [don't think of that, get it over with]); skin, breasts, the graceful curve of a long neck, no faces.

Better, not enough. Audio component; text message alert (no, too specific); sounds overheard from flatmates' partners, not from Sarah or the spotty one or Jeanette-the-boring-teacher; farther back, Vic's never-ending parade of one night stands (paper-thin walls of the Berwick Street flat and so much coke that he'd almost wanted to try it then, could have [he lied, it does scare him, that close to another person {he's that close to John, it would be easy with John if either were attracted to men}, the potential for harm is too great]); soft sighs, throaty moans, gasps (deleted the snorts and grunts and squeals; objectively interesting but not arousing and sometimes disturbing), flesh meeting flesh and rhythmic squeaking of the bed frame; a symphony of fucking.

Closer; sprained wrist rapidly becoming a problem. Switch hands, use the other to stimulate secondary erogenous zones. Envision a partner, no face; hands on his body (fingernails and teeth? no, not now, the idea of pain or submission unappealing; subtle domination and assertion of masculinity re: size disparity and physical restraint working though, follow that); pinning, covering, legs around his waist--

Yes, that; a pale, delicate throat under his mouth; a voice pleading-begging-encouraging with his name; answered with primal, involuntary vocalizations--

Euphoria, tinnitus, tunnel vision (God what he wouldn't do for a hit; similar feeling, lasts longer and qualitatively better); then the inevitable after-effects of prolactin et al. (everything is dull, muscles are too loose, shame and regret [mild; dissatisfaction with himself for giving in to the needs of his body], melancholy).

Le petite mort, little death. His death.

Too much steam in the shower, hard to breathe. Not worth drying off; scrub bottoms and blanket good enough; grab the bottle and back out to the kitchen.

Glass of water for an ashtray, another cigarette (breathing's boring), back to the sofa; hard to keep it in his lax, trembling fingers (don't burn Molly's blanket).

Everything is slowing to a crawl, his body is finally (mercifully) giving out, but desolation (a desolation angel, side of the angels, not an angel) is creeping in. Molly's flat could be in the middle of nowhere, surrounded by nothing, London is nothing, doesn't exist; his London is gone, he is gone.
All of it, gone, nothing; less than nothing, every bit of good he did in his miserable, worthless life undone, shattered to pieces.

He didn't want to die, he never wants to die, but he did and it was--

"Sherlock?"

Molly's face, frightened, upside-down in his field of vision. She's never seen him like this, she shouldn't, he's crushed everything else with his clumsy, childish fists, he should spare something.

Her fingers, cold like death on his neck (an angel, angel of death and of mercy, but not salvation [there's no such thing]); his body is alive, but Sherlock Holmes is dead.

"Your hands are cold." It's barely a whisper, a ghost of a sound.

"What?" She sweeps her ponytail over her opposite shoulder (considerate; he wouldn't have minded it though [a hazy memory, early childhood, hyper-saturated blue sky and green grass, one of his cousins tickling his cheek with the end of her blonde plait {did it darken with age, as his had?}, and laughing and laughing], Molly's hair looks soft); bends her ear close to his mouth. Her fingers are light against his neck; under her usual scent of morgue and coffee and Clinique Happy, there is the acrid tang of anxiety and it's wrong.

"I'm sorry." It's too much to keep his eyes open; turns his head away. He thinks he's crying again, or it could be water from his hair sliding sideways across his temple, it doesn't matter.

She pulls back, her fingers light on his jaw, urging him to face her; a thumb, prying one eyelid open, then the other. Her too-small lips are pressed tight together and she looks tired and drawn (wrong).

"Why are you sorry? Did you- did you take something?"

He shakes his head.

"I'm dead, Molly."
"Oh." Soft and sad; she understands.

How had he not noticed? Stupid, so stupid. Christmas, and then she'd pretended like it hadn't happened and it had been easy and normal (not normal, baseline) and he'd thought (women are fickle; she'd changed her mind; to be expected)— And the lab (you see me), no time to process it (all he has is time, now), and he's so sorry for letting her love him, for letting any of them love him because he's not worth it (in the end he hadn't been clever enough [and that's all he has, being clever, he's not a good person like they are], he'd thought he was only putting a back-up plan in place, he thought he'd win).

She sits back on her heels; sniffs; she's crying and it's his fault again and there's nothing to distract him from the weight of his guilt this time, no trainers or phones or arguing with John's reproach.

He rolls over, away from her, curls into himself; it's too warm in the flat for the blanket but he pulls it tight over his body to shield him from her undeserved empathy.

She leaves (takes the bottle and the makeshift ashtray), makes tea.

Falling into the not-talking place; catatonia. Dissociation (Mummy, long-gone before she died [in the bath, accident, a cocktail of benzodiazepines and a glass of wine {September 1999, first time in rehab}; was that in the papers?]; an empty woman with an empty mind in an empty house); his body is an empty house, past resident deceased.

He drifts, facts and images and half-formed thoughts floating around him like debris from a shipwreck. He'll wash up on shore or get sucked under, doesn't matter which.

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**Tuesday, 20 June 2012 (Day 3)**

The meeting with her supervisor wasn't as hard as she'd expected. She's already a wreck because of Sherlock (who stares and stares at nothing for hours, his eyes skipping over everything but never settling), so letting out the tears and the trembling was easy when she'd asked for some time off. They were going to suspend her anyway, so it works out better for the hospital and for her record.
Everyone knew about her crush on Sherlock. Everyone knew that she'd dated Jim from IT, and he'd turned out to be Jim Moriarty (who turned out to be Richard Brook [or so they thought]). They all felt sorry for her; quiet, sad little Molly Hooper, who couldn't dress herself like an adult. Who? Oh, the weird one from down in the mortuary, always trying to be nice to everyone. Poor girl. She heard the things people said about her, they'd been saying them for thirty-two years.

She's used to being underestimated (socially, at least; until now she's been the consummate professional and garnered respect for that); it's fine. Attention makes her uncomfortable, most of the time.

Her hand drifts to her pocket as she walks to the tube station. She doesn't feel very bad for going in Tom Mercer's locker (left the lock open because he always forgot his keys) and taking the tablets; they're black market anyway. She'd read the papers and had worked out how Sherlock would have been treated (also the circumstances surrounding his mother's death and her probable treatment), and what not to use on Sherlock now, which left very few options in the way of things she could get her hands on without drawing attention.

It's not a physical injury. She'd checked him over when they'd wheeled him in, and again after he'd stopped crying on her sofa. She couldn't be sure, of course, not without diagnostic tests that she couldn't exactly smuggle him into the hospital to perform.

It's a bit like he's on autopilot, she thinks. He's present enough to drink water and tea, eats a biscuit or two, answers direct questions coherently (if shortly, but that's nothing new). Otherwise, he curls on the sofa wrapped in the charity shop blanket (like so many other things, it had looked lonely and unloved, probably made by someone's gran and packed away in a cupboard for years until it took up too much space), lost inside his own head.

Anti-depressants would take too long. She needs him cognizant so they can plan the next step before everything falls apart. She'd worked too bloody hard to lose her career over this, not to mention that his friends (her friends too, as far as that goes) are still in danger (less immediate, she assumes, since no one is expecting him not to be dead, but real all the same) and he could end up in prison if discovered.

Ethics are a minor annoyance at times like this. She knows what she's been taught, but those things don't always (usually) match with her sense of right and wrong. She's spent most of her life bending rules (mindful of consequences, of course) because following them to the letter would make life harder for more people in the long run.

She's going to give a former cokehead experiencing a psychotic break speed (only a little bit, though), and it's for the same reason she'd let him beat a corpse with a riding crop one day after meeting him. It's the quickest way to get answers.
Day 4

He surfaces again; nuisance bodily functions. Shuffles to the bathroom. There wasn't tea waiting for him the last time, even though Molly was awake and in the flat. Half-life of her patience using lack of tea as a scale for rate of decay (adjusted for her unassuming and self-sacrificing nature): eleven days. 6th July when she turns him out.

Kitchen; water, biscuits. Molly, staring out the window above the sink; startles when he (gently) shoulders her aside. She's no longer uncomfortable with his bare torso; continues to avert her eyes (for his modesty's sake, not hers).

Her nostrils flare, pupils dilate marginally. She's too polite to comment (or afraid to draw attention to her own body's instinctual response [her scent not displeasing to him {dissimilar major histocompatibility complex likely, would need to do bloodwork to confirm (also useful to know should he ever need an organ transplant)}]). John would have manhandled him into the shower fully clothed by now (did it once before). He'll let it go until the texture of his skin bothers him (his scent is a comfort in the too-clean-too-bright-too-colourful flat), two more days.

"So, um should I -"

"Molly."

Usually the warning is enough.

"Should I go tomorrow?"

Checks through his recent memory; no, nothing was worth archiving.

"Where?"
"The funeral."

"That's Thursday."

"Today is Wednesday."

Three in the afternoon. Lost seventeen hours, despite having obviously been to the toilet and drank water at least once in that time. Troubling.

"Mm."

She's waiting for an answer; no matter. She'll do what she thinks is best.

"I-" she starts, presses her lips together. Blinks deliberately.

"I got you something, and it may have been the wrong thing, because I did read the newspaper, but..." She exhales heavily, shoves a hand into the pocket of her jeans, holds out a small evidence bag.

Four tablets; round, pale orange, bisecting score mark with two perpendicular notches; Adderall, 30mg. Not a conventional treatment for DPD (she knows about Mummy, knows his history, figured him out again), very hard to come by (legally or not, only three chemists in the entire city carry it [nicked from one of the techs in radiology {passed him in the hall, figured it for Dexedrine}]) and quite expensive.

He's not sure if right then he loves her or hates her; she is either incredibly confident in his self-control or a touch sadistic (the set of her jaw [something in her history; find out later] rules out ignorance).

A completely new thought strikes him. Molly Hooper could prove to be a dangerous woman (resourceful, dubious ethics [knew that before {body parts}], loyal). He'd been quite remiss in overlooking that fact.

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The Adderall, while not nearly enough to satisfy anything, has at least had the effect of rebooting him in safe mode. He's pushed aside emotion and is absorbing the facts of the last four days.

The interment has already taken place (completely private; no living relative would have attended anyway); Mycroft's people have organized a small memorial service (invitation only) outside the prying eyes of the press. As predicted, he was too squeamish to view the body, wanted to get it all over with quickly. Mycroft himself sent Molly a thank-you note, personally composed and hand-written (that pretentious, gracious fuck), for her care in the matter of handling his brother's body (translation: the disciplinary action she was facing for releasing the body before the post-mortem would be negligible).

The senior pathologist was called in to do Richard Brook's autopsy; Molly would have access to the file when she returned to work.

There were a small contingent of 'fans' who were proclaiming his innocence through social media, vandalizing postboxes and bus stops with variations of Twitter hashtags. Shouldn't be problematic, but he'd have to take extra precaution in going out until the frenzy abated. Mycroft must still be too grief-stricken to start a border skirmish or other suitable distraction.

Molly's name has remained out of the media so far (most likely will, unless another Kitty Riley decides to go digging, something to watch out for). He's not sure how much longer her flat will be safe; Lestrade has phoned her once to check on her (probably more than that; paperwork for the divorce was filed ages ago; depending on how many convictions are challenged he won't contact her for at least two weeks), her sister doesn't always give advance notice of her arrival (this is her weekend with the children; nine days), very slim chance of a colleague bringing a casserole or some such.

The details in the papers were exactly as expected; a bullet-point list of every school from which he'd been sent down, every diagnosis they'd tried to shoehorn him into, every arrest and overdose. Old classmates and landlords were pouring out of the woodwork to give soundbites to any- and everyone with a camera (one small consolation, Seb's career is certainly ruined, couldn't have happened to a nicer chap). Nothing new on Richard Brook, only the things he'd already seen in the file at Ms. Riley's flat.

He finds himself at a crossroads. Two distinct courses of action (with minor variation) unspooled in his brain while in the shower: 1. permanently disappear (go off-grid for a few years, re-establish himself in a foreign city, keep his head down forever; safer for all parties concerned) or 2. find and eliminate the assassins, their bosses, all the way up the food chain to the gaping hole left by Moriarty (would need more resources than currently available, risk of discovery and failure high).
Very few problems fall into a grey area that requires any amount of navel-gazing; unfortunately, this is one. His fingers itch for his violin. A walk will have to suffice, but it's still hours until he can go out.

His body aches from the inactivity of the last few days. The Adderall has suppressed his appetite, but he knows he should eat something. Protein, easily digestible; eggs. Simple sugars; banana. The thought of food turns his stomach. Later, then.

Waves lapping at his feet, the promise of more oblivion beckoning him. Her flat is too quiet, the sounds of this part of London outside wrong. He needs a distraction.

Molly is a shadow hovering on the edges of his field of view. It's unsettling to know she continues to observe him so unobtrusively (not right now, she's lost in a book [battered paperback {charity shop}; some dreadful pulp science fiction]). Her attention is also oddly comforting; he's not a ghost. One person (or six, counting the members of the homeless network he recruited for his final hours, hand-picked for their backgrounds [they'd all wanted to disappear into the cracks of London; none of them will ever speak, nor will anyone listen if they do]) knows that he's still breathing.

He should thank her.

"Molly."

Looks up from her book, startled. "Do you need something?"

Speech is a chore. How does one thank a person for being the last thing anchoring them to the world they shouldn't be in (never belonged in; didn't want to leave)?

"Yes."

She waits for him to elaborate.

"It's too quiet."

"Oh. The remote is on the coffee table, you can watch whatever you want. Or pick a DVD. Or you
can listen to whatever music you like. I don't have much - well, ah, any, really - classical, except a kind of beardy relaxation CD my brother gave me. It's got nature sounds with it, though." She wrinkles her nose at that.

He committed the titles to memory at some point (vague impression of hard, cool plastic, scraping his fingernail over the ridges on the tops of the cases; hates it when he has to reconstruct his own timelines [hasn't happened in years, since before John, before the work]); he isn't familiar with much pop music but he recognizes a handful of albums. Same with the DVDs, some John watched or mentioned (he didn't always delete them, wishes he hadn't deleted any of them).

He's going to miss John the most of all of them. Mrs. Hudson was old, he'd already prepared himself for the eventuality of her death. Lestrade was a colleague, of a sort, and a bit more like what he's given to understand an older brother should be. John was... not any of those things. His better half, his heart, everyone saw it (it's why they all assumed; always bothered John but never him; he knew it for what it was).

"Sherlock?"

Molly. Dragged her into it, she'd been safe, blending into the wallpaper.

"I'm sorry." It's a whisper, he's going under again. He hopes he drowns this time.

Denim against microsuede as she shifts out of her chair, leaves.

Good. Maybe she's developed some sense.

And then a firm hand behind his neck lifting his head from the back of the sofa, fingers on his lips, round-smooth-bitter tablet being pressed against his tongue. The rim of a cold, wet glass pressing on his bottom lip.

He's been forcefully medicated before. This is not generally how it's done. She's a doctor, she should know that.

Her hand moves to his hair, tugs it a bit. Not hard enough to hurt, a warning.
"Swallow." Her voice is firm, but belies a hint of desperation. This is something personal. Familial.

Her face is blank over an angry kind of love, an expression he's never seen on her before (but has been directed at him by his brother [John, Lestrade]). He tilts his chin forward without meaning to, letting her tip the glass enough for him to sip the water.

He watches her watch him swallow. It's a strange moment and he's not sure why; broken when she sags (relieved, apologetic) and looks away. She pulls her hand from his hair and puts as much distance between them as she can while still holding the glass, pressing it harder into his mouth to urge him to take it.

This is interesting. Molly Hooper is a different person; files in need of updating (re-writing).

He takes the glass, brushing over her fingers deliberately to watch her reaction. A slight involuntary jerk, but her hand lingers (pulling away in stages, testing his grip on the glass); uncomfortable but dutiful.

"I'm sorry, I know I shouldn't have done that, but this isn't you, and it's frustrating, and- I'm sorry. I'll just go make some tea."

She backs away, flees. He follows. Leans against the door jamb of the kitchen. Her shoulders are hunched; she knows he's there. Her movements are those of ritual, precise; not aimless or simply to occupy herself. Task-oriented.

"You've done that before." It's a question.

"I really am sorry. I didn't- I won't do anything like it again."

"Your sister?" Stab in the dark, but close.

Her back straightens. "What about my sister?"

"Is that who you've forcefully medicated before?"
"Why would you think that?"

"The cigarettes and the bourbon are hers; you know better than to give an addict the type of substance they have a history with, but you did it anyway - and in a distinctly non-clinical fashion - indicating a personal experience has overridden your medical training. You're also exhibiting signs of guilt and defensiveness by evading the question."

"I don't want to talk about this. Why- why do you care? No, don't- don't answer that. Just-" A heavy sigh.

Objectively, he doesn't care; beyond the fact that her past is what made her who she is, he has no interest in her history or her memories. She's something new.

Except... that's not entirely true. Molly is a friend. He does care about her, and he finds it unsettling when she's upset (the only times he's seen it, he's been the cause [except once, after Jim, but that was his fault too]).

John has influenced him. Before John (before he knew what friendship was [really knew [intuited]]), he would have pressed until she broke and admitted he was right, heedless of her distress. He's not the same person, now.

Apologies for small things don't come naturally to him (big things either); it doesn't mean he's not sorry (that's what started this bit, his clumsy remorse). Actions louder than words and all that.

He doesn't think physical contact would be appropriate, this time. Contrary to popular belief, he can interpret body language quite well, and Molly is practically vibrating 'stay away."

If it were John, he'd play him something on his violin. Not John, no violin, but Molly obviously likes music.

Back to the lounge. Flips through the CDs most recently played (presumably her favourites [proximity]), stacked haphazardly next to the stereo. He recognizes names from endless tube adverts, flyers, magazine covers, but he doesn't know the music (well, some; he sets aside Coldplay and Lady Gaga, because NO); instead he hefts the stack and takes it to the kitchen to let Molly pick. He doesn't want to inadvertently put her more on edge.
She's stirring the milk into her tea (his cup already fixed); he holds the stack out to her.

"Pick one."

Her eyes are wary. "Why?"

"I don't feel like watching telly." It's true enough.

She debates with herself before using her fingernail to push one askew in the stack. "Don't make fun of it."

"I won't." Also true. If it's truly abhorrent, he'll find something else.

He returns to the stereo and loads the disc, even going so far as to put the one he replaced back in its corresponding case (he didn't do that at home, he always [usually] remembered where he put things, drives [drove] John spare).

Molly curls up on the chair with her tea after leaving his on the coffee table.

The second Adderall is kicking in and he feels himself picking up a bit, not enough to want to do much of anything yet, not that he has anything to do (not until he decides his future). Two more tablets left. Getting more will be tricky (not a good idea).

He hates this in-between feeling, half in the water (thoughts dipping and swelling but never cresting as they should) and not close enough to himself, like a botched lobotomy. He's in his skin, but it sits like a poorly-cut suit. Depersonalization has a terrible gravity, and he needs something more than dextroamphetamine and picking apart Molly's mundane life to achieve escape velocity.

The music Molly chose isn't terrible. Sensual without being seductive, with an edge of anger. He doesn't usually like music with lyrics (the words get in the way), but the singer's voice is a textured contralto and not overpowering. It's neither soothing nor disturbing, not enough either way; tolerable.
He resettles himself on the sofa, his head flat on the cushion and his knees drawn up. He doesn't fit right on Molly's furniture. This sofa is two inches longer than his and he can't press his feet into the arm while pushing back the cushion with his shoulders without his head being at the wrong angle.

"I um, I know we're not-- And with what just happened before-- You can talk to me, you know. I won't- I won't judge you or think less of you or anything. And I am sorry."

Persistent. He should have stopped her after the first bit.

"There's nothing to talk about. Sherlock Holmes took a swan dive off the top of St. Bart's Hospital while making his best friend watch, because if he didn't, all his friends would die. He also defrauded a nation and murdered the man he hired to be his arch-nemesis." He hopes she reads the sarcasm and doesn't think he's degraded into talking in the third person.

"That's... I'm not talking about that Sherlock Holmes."

"There is no other Sherlock Holmes."

"Then who is there?" Her voice is high, nervous.

"I don't know. I haven't decided yet."

"Oh. Well, just don't, um, go all Sybil on me." Tittering relief.

No idea what she's talking about. Cultural reference. Dull.

"Molly, jokes."

"Right, sorry." Prescribed, routine. Better than the alternative.

Anxious quiet, she's figuring out how to phrase something. She'll give up and blurt out a back-to-front jumble of words in three, two, one--
"When I was at uni, my little brother had a hard time of it. He was the only one left in the house-"

Here we go, again. Get to the point.

"-I wasn't there for most of it, but I was home for Christmas and he wouldn't take his medication. My mum wasn't really a violent woman or anything, but she was just at the end of her rope and she grabbed his hair like that and made him take his meds. It scared him. Not that I was trying to scare you-"

As though she could. The one person who could scare him has left the building. Not her sister, though, he was wrong about that (meaningless).

"-I know you can't tell someone with... issues to snap out of it, but, um, I need to know what to do next. I don't mind having you here - you can stay as long as you want - but people are going to start noticing after a while, and I need to make my own plans to--"

"Molly."

No apology, no negation. End of her rope. Silence. Off the chair, over to the desk; three sheets of A-4, biro, coffee-table hardback (life and works of Van Gogh [spine pristine, only paged through, gift]).

"What are our options?"

"There is no 'our.'" She'll be hurt, but she needs to understand that once and for all.

(It could happen, he could try it, nothing to stop him, might be an interesting distraction [he'd break her to pieces {Molly is a friend, deserves better than that}])

"Not like- I didn't mean- no, nevermind. There is an 'our,' because I'm involved in this."

"Guilt, Molly?" Common tactic, ineffective, loathsome (regardless of the truth of it).
"No. I only- this is as much about me right now as it is you. I have a life- no, that's not-" Strangled noise of frustration (how she ever made it through medical school with that level of articulation is beyond him).

"Okay. One thing at a time. Tomorrow- should I go?" Calm, resolved.

"Can you be in a room with people grieving my death without blurting to all and sundry that I'm alive?" Spiteful; he wants her to go away now.

"I know how to hide things."

"No you don't."

"You- you have no idea. You know one very small thing, and you don't hesitate to use it against me, but that's- you don't know." Sore spot. Good.

"Oh please Molly, do enumerate your hidden depths. Tell me all your deep, dark secrets. I'm sure they're fascinating."

"Right. Okay. We'll try this again later. I'm going to bed now, I have a funeral to go to in the morning."

"Passive aggression doesn't suit you, Molly."

The sound of her bedroom door slamming isn't nearly as satisfying as it should be.

*

Three in the morning and he's at the point where he should take another tablet. He wants to save them though, just in case. Coffee and another cigarette, then. It's not as bad as it was earlier, but he's still not... Well. He won't ever be himself again, will he?
No closer to deciding what to do about that. He'd meant to take a walk and clear his head, but there's too much out there in the dark to tempt him. He's teetering right now; he can only go one of two ways (Moriarty already [mostly] destroyed him, wouldn't take much to finish the job).

Needing people is a terrible weakness. He got by his entire adult life (mostly with the help of drugs) without letting anyone be more than scenery. He knew Mrs. Hudson for years, liked her well enough (same with Lestrade), but then he met John (and he was only at Bart's that day because Molly had promised him access to a body, killing time talking to Stamford [who he'd known for a week, by then] before her shift) and everything reached a saturation point. From there it had all crystallized and for the first time ever--

He can't go down that road again. He needs to stop dwelling and move on. That's what people do, isn't it?

He could contact Irene Adler. He suspects she's figured out that he's alive. They parted on neutral terms, both knowing he has the upper hand (also knowing he won't use it), but if he does go to her, then he'll be at her mercy (and she'd like that too much). Knowledge of his continued existence could be a bargaining chip for her, should Moriarty's (or Mycroft's) people ever find her. Not worth the risk (or the potential complications of developing another less-than-professional interest [crush] [or getting his heart broken again]).

Molly wanders out of her bedroom (oversized t-shirt [U2 Elevation Tour] and plaid boxer shorts [ex-boyfriend's]; consciously trying to downplay her romantic interest by wearing items saved from past relationships) and into the kitchen, not fully alert but getting there. Light sleeper.

"Everything alright?"

"Mm. Fine."

She takes down a clean mug and fixes herself coffee, then sits across from him at the table. Not planning on going back to sleep, then.

"You were right about the cigarettes and the whiskey. They are my sister's. She comes down from Northampton every few months when she doesn't have the boys and Dave is giving her a hard time again. She misses who she used to be." She follows with a measured look over the rim of her mug.

He knew he was right. Always nice to have it confirmed, though.
"I used to cover for her. Sneaking out, that sort of thing, then later, lying to our parents about what she was getting up to in London. I know your secret's bigger, and there's more at stake than disappointment and hurt feelings, but I'm not going to give anything away tomorrow. Today. Later."

"Mm." He's really not trying to make her go away this time.

Silence stretches between them and it's not uncomfortable. Conversation isn't Molly's area, but it's not really his, either. Probably more her area than his, if he's being truthful; she doesn't seem to have a problem talking to other normal (ordinary [NO]) people.

"Molly-"

"Hmm?" She focusses on him.

He hates that he's about to admit to anything, but she's already seen him cry (no one's seen him cry in ten years, not since the second time in rehab [one of the nurses, his third day there; she called him 'love' and the tone and inflection of her voice sounded just like Mummy and he lost it {blamed it mostly on the withdrawal}]), so it's not as though she'll think any less of him.

"I don't know what I'm going to do. I didn't plan anything because I thought-" His voice catches and he hates it; reaches for another cigarette as he finishes, "I thought I wouldn't have to."

"Okay." Her voice is soft and gentle and he wants to hate her for it.

"What are your options, and what resources do you have?"

He tells her everything, listing pros and cons and even part of why he doesn't want to go to Mycroft. It only takes a few minutes but it's... cathartic. A bit like talking himself through the pieces of a puzzle that don't add up, except that he's not any closer to solving this problem.

Molly doesn't say anything for a long while. She makes them each another cup of coffee, returns to the table.
"I think, if it were me... I think I'd leave. Discretion being the better part of valour, and all that."

"To die is to be a counterfeit." He thought he'd deleted all that.

"What's that from?"

"Henry the Fourth, Part One."

"Oh." She shrinks a bit; she thinks she should have known that.

"Why would you leave?"

"Lots of reasons. I'm not clever enough to track down assassins, and- I don't know. I think... it's not like anyone would really notice, with me. My sister and brother, and my Mum, but they'd be the ones I'd be trying to protect, so it kind of evens out."

"They might not notice, but at least no one would be celebrating it."

Molly winces. She knows about Donovan and Anderson, but they're only the tip of that iceberg.

He's running out of energy, crashing despite the caffeine and nicotine; a headache forming at the back of his skull.

"You can sleep in my bed, if you want. I mean, I'm not going to be using it for the rest of the night, and I know the sofa isn't that great." Her clarification is half-hearted, as though she anticipates that she's being understood for what she's trying to communicate and not what it sounds like to her own ears. That, or she's too worn-down to care how she's interpreted.

"I'm tired of sleeping."

"You, ah, sleep with your eyes open?"
"No."

"You haven't been sleeping very much, then. Or, um, at all, from what I've seen."

"Mm." Possible, he supposes. He always attributed his previous periods of lost time to sleep, but then, no one was around to watch him.

He should probably eat something, too. "Maybe food, first."

Molly warms up soup and makes him cheese on toast, then leaves him alone in the kitchen to eat, but not before laying a gentle hand on his shoulder, a barely-there touch of fingertips that only lasts for a split-second, as though she thought better of it too late. He almost grabs her hand and asks her to keep it there (why? [something to ground him]), but she's gone too soon.

She turns on the telly, puts in a DVD instead of watching whatever's being broadcast at this hour (not the news, yet, but she's avoiding it all the same).

Molly is a good person. One of the best he knows. She would run. Maybe... If he ran, she would go with him. He's been alone, he can't do it again; she's the best (only) candidate. He wouldn't pretend to love her, she would tire of it (him) eventually and leave, but by then he'd be a fully-formed new person, maybe even a better one (that doesn't put his friends in constant danger of being killed).

He abandons his half-finished soup, returns to the lounge. She's lying on the sofa, the blanket draped over her legs and feet. She looks young (could pass for early- to mid-twenties, she's small; he could pass for mid- to late-twenties [more possibilities the younger one is]) and he falters for a moment; he's being selfish (not everyone is a broken ex-army doctor weeks away from suicide [won't do it now, too much else to live for {at least he'll live}]; she has family and a career [and a life], it would be wrong to take it away). But then she turns her head and smiles soft and fond, curling her legs so he can sit.

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Sunday, 24 June 2012 (Day 8)

She begins to understand Sherlock from a new angle when she sees him with his brother for the first time. He's sprawled on her sofa, taking up the whole space and forcing her to perch on the arm. He's dressed at least (jeans and a plain t-shirt, the only things she'd felt comfortable buying him [if she'd tried to find something to suit his tastes she knows she would have got it spectacularly wrong
anyway]; he doesn't seem to care [a bit troubling]), but his hair is wet and his feet are bare.

He reminds her too much of Neil as a sullen, stroppy teenager. He wasn’t like that just an hour ago. Overall, he's still a bit... vacant, she supposes is the best word to describe it. When he's not directly speaking to her, he seems to fade out. Sad, but it's hollow and not anticipatory (so much like her family when Dad was sick and after he died; Sherlock is grieving). She wishes she could hug him, but she doesn't want to make him more uncomfortable.

Mycroft sips his tea like a gentleman (mismatched cup and saucer, but at least it's not a mug) while staring intently at Sherlock (who, in turn, stares up at the ceiling, his toes scrunching into the blanket wadded up against the arm of the sofa).

Sherlock is going to leave, she thinks. She wishes she hadn't offered up her opinion on it, but he'd never paid her any mind before, so she'd thought it wouldn't matter. It hurts a little (a lot), knowing he'll be alone and she'll never get to see him again, but at least he's still alive.

"Dr. Hooper, if you wouldn't mind giving me a moment with my brother?"

She opens her mouth to politely excuse herself but Sherlock is quicker. "No, she won't. This is her flat."

Mycroft looks annoyed (though it's much harder to tell with him), and she suspects Sherlock only wants her to stay because it will bother his brother. It's so much like Neil and Jodi (even the age difference must be similar, Mycroft can't be more than seven or eight years older than Sherlock).

"Very well. My apologies for my lack of manners, as well as my brother's, since I'm sure he's been a trying house guest."

"Oh, no, it's fine, he's lovely. I mean, it's- fine. Hardly know he's here." And she'd been doing so well when speaking to Sherlock.

"Indeed."

"Skip the tedious formalities, Mycroft. Your apology isn't accepted, nor are any of your offers of 'good will.' I'm sure you have a coup somewhere in the third world to be overseeing." Sherlock scowls at the ceiling.
"And how long are you planning to impinge upon Dr. Hooper's hospitality? Surely you can't hide in the bedroom every time someone comes to call. I believe her sister," he deftly fishes a notebook from his jacket pocket and flips it open, "Jodi Morris, has already made arrangements with her ex-husband, Matthew Green, to take their sons Connor and Owen for the weekend so that she may visit."

Sherlock prepared her for this, more or less. He'd told her that Mycroft effectively is the British Government (which, okay, she could believe, but only because it was coming from Sherlock and, well, everything about his life was something from a film so it only stood to reason his brother wouldn't actually be a tax accountant) and had a dossier on her; he wouldn't hesitate to use any and all information to try to bully her into doing his bidding. He went on to state that the threats were mostly harmless, for the time being. Posturing. She wasn't very reassured.

She really should keep her mouth shut. Sherlock doesn't need her to defend him.

"Oh, that's fine, I'll phone Jodi and tell her I'm not feeling up to it." Jodi won't listen and will show up anyway, most likely, but she has until Friday to come up with something else.

"And the weekend after that?"

"I-"

"Oh, take your heavy-handed intimidation techniques and piss off, Mycroft." Sherlock rolls to face the back of the sofa.

"Reasonable as always, I see. Dr. Hooper, I thank you for the tea. My card, should you need to contact me. And you will."

She thinks that if reptiles were capable of smiling, they'd look like Mycroft Holmes when they did so. Once the door is locked and bolted behind him, she returns to the sitting area and begins clearing the coffee table.

Sherlock straightens out and sits up, then follows her into the kitchen to loom over her for no apparent reason. She thinks he does it simply to prove that he's bigger than her. Neil does it too.
"You could come with me," he says.

"What? Where?" Wait, what?

"Wherever Mycroft sets me up."

"Wha- um, you just told him to piss off."

"Token protest. He has money and resources, two things that I lack at the moment, making him an asset. For the time being." His tone is completely flat and matter-of-fact.

Then she realizes that for all intents and purposes, Sherlock Holmes just asked her to run away with him. If she believed in a higher power, she would think that it was having a good laugh at her expense right now.

"I, um, won't that look suspicious, if I suddenly disappear now?"

"Hardly anyone will notice, you said so yourself."

"I- well, yes, I suppose I did say that, but ah, what would I tell my family?"

"New job, couldn't stand being at Bart's any more since my suicide and your suspension."

"I wasn't suspended. I took a leave."

"Semantics. Besides, how long do you think you can keep this a secret? Weeks? Months? Decades?"

She starts to say she'll keep the secret as long as she has to (she's never told anyone about the time Jodi phoned from uni and asked Molly [already an aspiring medical student and consummate provider of practical advice] what she should do if she thinks she might have been drugged and possibly raped, or that her Mum almost slept with Uncle Phil once [the grief of losing a brother and a husband too much for the both of them], right before Dad died; she'll take those things to her grave), but she realizes it might not be that simple.
She won't stop worrying about him, no matter where he is. She'll slip up with tenses, if she has to talk about him. Her life won't move on as it should, and people will become suspicious or think she's irreparably broken over losing a man who barely acknowledged her when he was alive.

He's watching her from the corner of his eye, waiting for what she's going to say. His posture is stiff; he's unsure of either himself or her answer, or maybe both.

"You should know that I'm not good with languages."

"Yes, your basic command of English would indicate that."

She scowls until she sees the corner of his lip twitch. He's teasing her. That's new.

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Day 26

It's raining in Newark when he finds Molly's car in long-term parking. He's got six hours to get to Boston to meet Molly's flight, should be plenty of time. He debates tossing the GPS out into the car park, but he knows Mycroft's got more than just that to track him. Molly might want to use it; god knows she can't even figure out (could, doesn't care to) how to load music onto her phone (technology another thing to add to 'not her area'), let alone pull up accurate driving directions.

He checks the glove compartment and finds nothing but the car manual, insurance and registration information, an auto club card, a pine tree air freshener still sealed in its packet, and the box for the GPS.

Molly's new briefcase is in the boot (only paperwork for her new 'job' as a consultant for a pharmaceutical company), along with an umbrella (compact, light blue, something a woman would carry), a roadside emergency kit, and an ice-scraper. Everything is brand new, not very subtle. Then again, American.

It chafes that Molly is unofficially his paid minder now (needs must; it was the only way to go about things without him actually taking any of Mycroft's money [won't give him the satisfaction] and his
brother made obtaining the visas and documents that much easier [another olive branch {kindling for the fire}]), but above all, she's loyal to him and won't tell Mycroft anything he doesn't want him to know (Mycroft knows this as well [an indulgence, the smarmy fuck]).

His thoughts turn to John as he adjusts the seat and mirrors (at least they had a woman drive the car to the airport, though a full four inches taller than Molly and a ginger besides). He'd gone to the cemetery the day before (morbid curiosity [vanity]; wanted to see his own headstone) and he was warned with a text that John and Mrs. Hudson were en route, but he stayed. It may or may not have been a mistake.

John was... as to be expected, but it was a comfort to know he didn't limp (not yet; might still). It was one last, terrible memory to store alongside the sound of John's broken voice through a mobile, in a locked room far in the dungeon of his Mind Palace (boarded up most of the place already, spent the entire time on the plane filing and sorting and moving things around, clearing space for this new life).

This is the last time he'll allow himself to think of any of it. His coat is in Molly's flat, shoved in the back of the wardrobe behind the worst of her charity shop (vintage! [not hardly, Molly]) blouses, the scent of London (and blood) being slowly leached out and replaced with 1,4-dichlorobenzine. Mycroft took some of his most prized possessions (skull, violin, the bat and beetle collection, The Woman's phone) from Baker Street and stored them in that Jacobian tomb in West Sussex that they'd loosely called 'home' as children.

His brother seems to think he'll return to London at some point. He won't, even after the last of the snipers has been quietly removed from the board (Mycroft will do it [regardless of his opinion {foolish, unnecessary, and suspicious} out of a sense of... duty {gratitude} to those who stayed loyal to the end]). They're all better off without him.

He peels off his hoodie (it's entirely too hot, the rain only serving to make the air thick, swampy, unbreathable) and starts the car.

There could be work, if he wants it. He doesn't (and certainly not for them).

Molly is treating it like a holiday (or the gap year she'd never taken), planning an itinerary for all the things she wants to see. It's a coping mechanism; she was deeply rooted in her tiny little life and she wanted to cling to it (even after realizing the weight of the secret she kept [the first dull shine of resentment in her eyes as she did so {only a matter of time before it grows}]).
They share a hotel room (something to get used to; they can't risk two very often, just in case; Mycroft is creating a separate electronic trail of transactions for his new identity), a double (height of the tourist season and some kind of convention going on, lucky to get anything). Doesn't matter, he's not sleeping. He's got a new city to explore (to weigh and measure and decide upon).

He leaves Molly to rest (she doesn't fly well; the turbulence from the same coastal storm system he was caught in had made it worse) and starts wandering. The rain has stopped (for now) and the thickness of the air and the smell of the harbour is wrong. He keeps going though, matching street names with their counterparts in London until he can't stand it any longer. He buys a pack of cigarettes and a Coke (when in Rome, etc.) and finds a hidden spot in an alley to ensconce himself, then watches the drunk tourists stagger by in loud, happy groups after last orders.

It's not terrible here, but it could never be home.

He watches the sun rise over the water, then picks up coffee and a muffin for Molly on his way back to the hotel. She has a meeting later in the morning; she'll be up hours too early until her body adjusts to the time difference.

He wants to stay in her good graces as long as possible. Being around her isn't the chore he once thought it would be. She keeps mostly to herself. Sometimes they talk, usually about fascinating articles they'd read (and she's very well-read, not only in medicine but on a variety of subjects), as well as bits and pieces of their lives, things they did or saw that stuck with them for one reason or another (Molly's best story was of finding a trichobezoar the size of an egg in a teenager's stomach [he would have liked to have seen that in person, but it was before they met; she showed him pictures, though]).

It's odd, how they've become real friends. It's a quieter thing than his baseline idea of friendship (she's only shouted at him once so far, when she was packing her suitcase and he made his opinion known on most of her wardrobe [she took it entirely more personally than he expected]) and a bit less physical (she's still afraid to touch him [her attraction hasn't waned, but she keeps it in check]); softer around the edges (he doesn't have to hide emotions, she can see right through him anyway). It's a bit fraternal, a fond annoyance that's always been there, but there's a protectiveness as well. She belongs to him now, the way the others had, and he does take care of his things (some of them, the irreplaceable ones, even if it means-- [NO]).

Surprisingly, Molly is still asleep when he lets himself into the room. She is not the elegant sleeper he always pictured most women to be; she's sprawled on her back with the covers half kicked off, head turned to the side and mouth open, one arm over her head. Her over-sized t-shirt has ridden up to reveal a strip of pale skin and the very top of an appendectomy scar (old, early teens), and it seems wrong to look at her like that (he's seen her sleeping before, passed out her sofa, but fully covered
and her face mashed into the cushion).

Irene was right about him not knowing where to look. It’s easy enough with most females, there’s always something else to focus on, even the ones he finds physically attractive (and Molly is, objectively, physically attractive, despite her lack of bust, straight figure, and too-small mouth). There’s something intimate (bordering on scandalous) about the scene in front of him and it’s uncomfortable.

He clears his throat and makes as much noise as possible when setting down the coffees and the paper bag from the café.

Molly startles awake. "Did I miss my meeting?"

"No. It's only seven-thirty."

"Oh." She deliberates for a moment, then swings her legs over the side of the bed.

"Got you coffee. And a muffin." He rattles the bag. "Apparently the corn muffin is the official state muffin of Massachusetts."

"Does every state have an official muffin?" It's a genuine question.

"Don't know. It was on a sign in the shop."

Molly laughs and takes her coffee, then switches on the telly.

"I was thinking of doing some sight-seeing after the meeting, if you want to come," she offers.

"Saw everything I needed to last night."

"Oh. So not Boston, then."
"No."

"Mm." Molly sips her coffee.

Friday 13 July 2012 (Day 27)

Boston is interesting enough, lots of brick buildings and ironwork and statues and plaques bearing the history of any given location, even if they tend to make the British out to be cartoon villains. She wonders if she can convince Sherlock to spend an extra day and go to the science museum (she thinks he'd like that, maybe, or maybe not at all).

He seems in relatively high spirits, which is good. He hasn't really said what he's looking for, just that he wants to find somewhere that he can get lost in permanently.

America is a big place, very easy to get lost in. No borders to cross (unlike Europe), meaning fewer favours Mycroft has to call in, but still troublesome enough to place Sherlock there, what with having to get Sherlock's status as *persona non grata* (he was vague about that, but it had something to do with the CIA and Jim) reversed. He's accepting his brother's help (or taking it as his due), but not without making it difficult.

She doesn't mind that she's the intermediary, not really. Story of her life, so far.

She's not exactly happy that it's a job (more or less; she's being compensated [her flat's being paid for and looked after, as well as deposits to her savings to cover the part of Mum's mortgage she helps pay] and she has an expense account to cover petrol and hotels and food), but it's better than the alternative (really, there hadn't been much of an alternative).

Even so, she's getting to travel, something she's never taken the time to do. Seize the day, and all that.
Day 31

He gains a new respect for Molly when she talks her way into the restricted areas of the Whitney Medical Library. They'd gone to see the jars full of brains and she'd ended up chatting with one of the staff at the circulation desk, which was overheard by a professor (fifteen years her senior) who seemed a bit taken with her. She played it up in her sweet and earnest way, and there they were, being given a guided tour of the storage area for the rest of the collection.

She begs off when the man asks her to lunch, but gives him her email address (fake). He won't use it, he's already seeing two separate women (a post-grad and an older woman, most likely dating her for appearances after his second divorce).

As they walk back to the car he can't help but look at her like she's an entirely new person again. She wasn't acting and she wasn't telling the absolute truth, flirting without being obvious (did she even know she was doing it?), and it was all entirely natural for her. She used her awkward charm to her complete advantage, unselfconsciously so.

He's painfully reminded of John, but he shoves that aside.

"What?" she asks while unlocking the car doors.

She's driving because she's a terrible navigator (as predicted) and the GPS is next to useless. She still moves to let herself in the wrong side of the car more often than not, but she's otherwise adjusted easily to left-hand drive (automatic transmission is another matter, her foot always moves for the gearbox).

"Do you do that very often?"

"Do what?"

"That thing you did back there, with the professor."

"He was nice." She ducks into the car.
Sliding inside the car is like sitting in a lit oven, and sweat prickles uncomfortably on his back as he buckles the seatbelt. She slips on a pair over-sized Hollywood starlet sunglasses and starts the car, then fiddles with the controls on the dash.

He regrets informing her on how to both load mp3s onto her phone and plug it into the auxiliary jack in the radio (his first complaint was met with, "Driver picks the music, shotgun shuts his cake hole," and a triumphant laugh [a pop-culture reference she'd been waiting years to use, no doubt; he didn't ask because he didn't want to have to delete it later]) when the first strains of some hateful rock ballad fill the interior of the car.

"You don't normally act like that."

"Yes I do."

"No you don't."

"With strangers I do."

"That's backwards. Wouldn't you be more at ease with people you know?"

"Not really. You, um, you don't have to prove a stranger right or wrong, and it doesn't matter if you make an ass out of yourself because you'll never see them again. Which lane do I need to be in?"

"You're going south, so the right. Which was on the sign we just passed."

"That I couldn't read because the complete wanker in front of me doesn't know how to bloody indicate!" she shouts, then punctuates by laying on the horn when said wanker swerves back into their lane.

"Sorry," she adds.

"Quite alright. Do try not to get us killed, though."
Wednesday 18 July 2012 (Day 32)

Sherlock is too quiet. He had a nightmare early this morning, not that he'd admit it. She didn't mention it, even though he knew it woke her up. She wonders if that's why he doesn't sleep very much.

He hates her jokes and her pop culture references, and really, she's just grasping at straws, but he hasn't done much more than hum in indifference or dissent to anything she's said so far today. She's fairly certain he's never seen *Jurassic Park*, so he won't recognize the context (past the fact that they're in a museum milling around in front of a bunch of dinosaur skeletons), but the punchline is bad enough that he'll be compelled to say something.

"What do you call a blind dinosaur?"

He looks at her askance, obviously puzzling out what the hell she's on about.

"Do-you-think-he-saurus."

He looks straight ahead.

"What do you call a blind dinosaur's dog?"

His shoulders tense.

"Do-you-think-he-saurus Rex."

"How is that remotely funny? If the dinosaur is blind, he can't - by definition - see 'us.' Rex isn't even a common name for dogs. Incidentally, 'Molly' is the most popular dog name in the United Kingdom."
"Really?"

He pulls his phone from his pocket and types something; a few moments later he flips it to show her the screen. It's a web page with a top-ten list of popular dog names. 'Molly' is number one for females. Wonderful.

"Why- why do you even know that?"

"For a case. Dog owners are a chatty lot and I spoke with four who had dogs named Max. It seemed like a statistical improbability, so I researched it."

"Ah," she says. "So, um, what was the case?"

"Doesn't matter," he says, shuffling away to stand in front of the next exhibit.

Well then. At least she got him to talk a bit, even if she probably made his mood worse.

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Day 36

New York continues to rank highest on the list of places he thinks he could live, even if the corners are too square and the cabs are the wrong colour. They're only going to stay another day; he's not ready to settle. Molly busies herself with being a tourist, snapping photos and buying trinkets to send to her family (it's allowed, even encouraged; it makes her cover story more authentic).

They're in separate rooms on separate floors; it's New York, and the corresponding dates can be attributed to merely coincidence, should anyone ever make a connection. They won't be able to do the same thing again for some time.

There's a bit in the news about a murder in Tribeca (locked room, no apparent motive for any of the suspects, previous report by the victim of stolen artwork), and it's tempting (more like a scab that won't stop itching until you peel it off). He can't though, he knows he can't, and so they have to leave.
It's entirely too easy to get his hands on anything he wants, as well; the only one to try to stop him is Molly, and she couldn't if she tried. She'd be disappointed, though.

They'll start west tomorrow, away from cities. He needs to be awed, see something bigger than himself to gain perspective. He's always appreciated the beauty of the natural world, only he's not usually very vocal about it (no way to put that feeling into words that a thousand poets and philosophers haven't already thought of; some things are best kept to himself besides).

Tuesday, 24 July 2012 (Day 38)

Sherlock is still too quiet. He participates in conversations, but he's talking without thinking. Museums are of moderate interest; his eyes skate over everything and some things actually intrigue him enough to pull out his phone and do a bit of googling, if only to prove something about the object's description wrong. He's done that twice, so far.

She's happy in those moments, when he resurfaces. He's fine, otherwise, scarily polite and considerate (relatively speaking; objectively he's still a git). She tries to draw him out, a little at a time, by making wild guesses at what someone does for a living or what the rest of their life is like, but it doesn't work. He rattles off details like reading a shopping list, and she knows he's taking no pleasure in his own cleverness.

Sometimes his eyes slide sideways to gauge her reaction, and there are moments when he realises his gaze is aimed four inches too high and his posture locks up for a split second before course-correcting to a point in the middle distance.

It breaks her heart.

She doesn't speak with Mycroft directly, which is a small mercy. He expects weekly updates. She's emailed him once so far, mostly to say that Sherlock was sleeping and eating (not lies exactly, though she did stretch the truth and he probably knew it). There's not much else to tell, really. She's not to give specifics of the places they visit.

She's tempted to ask after John (the others too, but mostly John), and she almost does in the second email, but she thinks it's better if she doesn't know, because if she knows, Sherlock will know, and if
it's something bad... Best not to think about it.

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Day 39

The decision to see Niagara Falls wasn't a good one. He remembers falling (flying), the roar of the water like the blood in his ears, Reichenbach (he'd never been, had privately thought he'd want to go after seeing the painting [doesn't now]), Rich Brook.

Molly sees it, she understands what's happening in his brain even if she doesn't know, and her tiny fingers dig into his arm hard enough that he will bruise (he doesn't bruise easily). She bites her lip, thinks about calling Mycroft (the last things he needs).

She tugs his arm but he can't stop looking; vaulting over the railing would take a second, another to spring (calculations; topography, height, speed, trajectory). He'd survive, but not from here. Wrong angles, he'd shatter on the rocks.

Molly is behind him, her arms around his waist, her mouth pressed against the thin cotton over his shoulder blade. To anyone around them (tourists; spotty bored teenager mooning over her secret boyfriend [mother {social worker, likes her job} knows, doesn't approve; father {transportation engineer, hypertensive} would take away her car {blue varnished nails tapping on the key on the ring hanging from her bag (got it last month, proud, on display)}], older couple [empty nesters, both retired secondary school teachers {her biology, him art}], lone child [boy, seven, thinking of the same thing he is]), it would look like a lover's embrace.

Her mouth moves over his shoulder, her chin digging into his scapula as she speaks through his skin. "Don't you dare, Sherlock, don't do this in front of me, don't make me tell your brother--"

He crosses his arms and takes one of her wrists in each hand, preparing to dislodge her (forcefully, if need be, she may know how to cling like a limpet but he's got strength, size, and skill on her).

"-He'll kill me - really kill me - for letting you, you can't--"

It's a sickening thought as well as effective emotional blackmail, since there's the possibility of truth to the statement. Mycroft could easily have her killed for failure to perform her duties. His brother is
not often a vengeful man, but when he is, it is intricate and untraceable (light from the headlamps, dry-cold desert air, Goodbye Mr. Holmes, Oh--); and the only person who could outmanoeuvre him would be dead. More likely he wouldn't have her killed, only make her wish she'd died.

Then again, it's hard to say exactly what the grief might do to him (for all that he knows his brother, there are some things beyond predicting [vague memory of Mycroft telling him Mummy was gone, split knuckles carefully bandaged]).

His fingers relax, cover the fists bunched in his shirt, then interlace with hers. Unmistakably intimate, he's never held someone's hands like this, tangled up and unable to move properly (but that's what it is, isn't? Tangled up in people, slowing him down, holding him back from destroying himself [destroying the world]).

She doesn't know Morse code, but he taps out thank you on her radial styloid process with the tip of his right index finger anyway.

He breathes deeply through his nose (water, hot concrete and metal, sunblock, cotton, sweat, Clinique Happy), lets the tension leave his muscles. Molly shifts, ready to step back, but he keeps her in place. It's entirely too hot to have another person this close, but for once (just this once, he can't let her think--) it's nice to be... held. He’s been hugged before (both as a child and an adult, what a shocking revelation that would be to some), and while usually annoying and invasive, sometimes it was welcome.

She understands, presses her cheek against his shoulder and sways a bit (too fluid a movement to be conscious [maternal instinct; also displayed in romantic partners to provide comfort, theory suggests part of the mating ritual to prove nurturing capabilities {thereby fitness for the rearing of offspring}, irrelevant]).

The moment passes, as all do, and he lets go of her hands. She stands next to him at the railing, leaning over a bit herself to look down, and he can tell she's seeing it all in her mind's eye; the fall, the body (his body, a broken heap on her table; she may do [did, past tense] post-mortems but no one is immune to every horror); the curiosity, if it would be better to follow or to wait for Mycroft to send someone for her (it would be quick and relatively clean; wrong-place-wrong-time scenario, mugging or the like, not important enough to waste too many resources on); acceptance and resolve.

That... He doesn't like that (wrong). Molly has been willing to follow him this far, and now he knows exactly how far she'll go. He's broken everything else, and now her.

His apologies are meaningless; he covers her hand on the railing, leaving it for a moment before he
takes it in his and pulls her away.

They won't talk about this, he's sure; she's been suppressing the vestiges of her infatuation (she'd given up hope long before the fall, Christmas was the last nail in the coffin) and wants very much to keep the status quo.

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Thursday 26 July 2012 (Day 40)

She dreams of falling. In it, she's him. It's slow, more like floating, and it starts at the top of the falls and morphs into London before turning into a hole in the ground. She never lands, simply moves on to another part of the dream. She's still Sherlock, but she's also Molly, and Jim is there, but he's off to the side and not important. She's covered in mud (that's also acid) and she needs to wash it off before it eats into her (Sherlock's) coat. There are too many people around for her to be naked.

She wakes up confused, then realizes Sherlock is in the shower and the sound must have filtered into her unconscious mind. His bed is made, but the duvet is rumpled. He didn't sleep again. She was an idiot for falling asleep. Her laptop's been moved off the bed and plugged into the charger. She knows she didn't do it, so Sherlock must have.

He's trying to make up for yesterday.

God, she doesn't want to think about that. It was easier not to when she was driving, or later, when she was finding more things for them to see, anything strange or silly (the world's largest glass paperweight had amused him, probably more for the technical process and the planning of its creation than the actual object, but it was a starting point; she was looking for more things like that, fruits of strange obsessions and dedicated labour), anything low to the ground.

She still doesn't know what to think. She doesn't know what he was thinking (well, jumping, but past that). She probably could have handled it better, but she hadn't really thought much past the fact that she had to restrain him and the security guard was looking and the last thing they needed was her doing something strange to attract attention.

And then the bit after, when he held her in place, and then held her hand (like a lover the first time, a friend the second), and it was... There was a moment when she'd realized that she would always pull him back from the edge, no matter the cost to herself, and if it meant that...
No, she can't think about it. If she thinks about it, she'll start with all her romantic notions and the wanting will rear its ugly head again, and it will make everything unbearable.

He's her mission, she's his handler. A bit like *The Bodyguard*, except the other way 'round, like if Kevin Costner fell in love with Whitney Houston first, but Whitney Houston didn't love him back and they didn't sleep together. Not very much like *The Bodyguard* at all, really, when she thinks about it. It was on telly when they were in New York and she indulged herself a bit since she had a room to herself. Maybe she should make him sit through *Dirty Dancing* if it came on sometime; he wouldn't be able to resist a cutting remark and he would be like his old self for a bit.

She groans at her weirdness and mornings in general; she needs coffee.

Sherlock pokes his head out the door, steam wafting out around him. He's half-dressed, jeans riding low on his hips without his belt, chest bare, towel draped around his shoulders. His toothbrush hangs from the side of his mouth. She should really be immune to it by now, she thinks.

He leans back in the bathroom, spits, then hangs out the door again.

"Coffee maker's broken. I was just getting ready to go out."

Of course he read her bloody mind. Then again, he probably knows all her breathing patterns and sighs and movements by now; he's continuously observing everything.

I makes her uneasy that he's being so nice. Before, she knew that he was trying to weasel something out of her, and that was fine; she'd take anything she could get from him. Now... well, that hasn't changed, as such, since she still enjoys simply being near him, but it's unsettling all the same because she thinks he's trying to stave off... something. Her disliking (betraying?) him, maybe. As if he hasn't already given her a million reasons to, and yet she comes back for more every time.

It's that, the insecurity; it's wrong on Sherlock. It's always been there, deep down (easy to spot when you see it in the mirror every time you look), buried under all his cleverness and the puzzles he was the only one able to solve; now all that has been scraped away and he's a bit pink and raw and vulnerable.

There's really nothing she can do for him; they just have to keep going until he finds something, she supposes.
Day 41

Detroit is a broken, abandoned place trying to struggle back to life. Post-apocalyptic, with the odd freshly-painted building or mural (like the first flowers poking through the ash after a wildfire). The crowds are too young and hip and too old and world-weary for him to be comfortable there.

It's also a reminder of John, who loved Motown music with an undying passion (dancing about the flat, pulling faces into a spoon while he lip-synced to Gladys Knight or the Jackson Five), who keeps creeping into his thoughts despite the memories being locked away.

He's happy to leave.

Molly decides to make a detour south instead of going straight on to Chicago, to a tiny nothing of a city (Lie-ma, not Lee-ma, she corrects gleefully), just so she can take a picture of the 'Now Entering, Population, Home of' sign. It amuses her, so that's fine. He drives so she can gawk to her heart's content. He won't let her near the radio, though, repeating imperiously, "Driver picks the music, and shotgun shuts her cake hole, I believe?" which sends her into a fit of hysterical laughter. It's infectious, and he smiles to himself periodically on the way to Dayton.

They stay in a motor lodge outside Indianapolis. One bed again, but it's fine. Molly is small and doesn't take up much room; they've been living practically on top of each other for two weeks (longer, if one counts her flat) and there's no mystique left when it comes to cohabitating with a woman (exactly like a man, only slightly less noxious). They both need to sleep; he hasn't had more than an average of two hours per day (fine on a case, not so much now) since they left New York and Molly has a fairly typical circadian rhythm.

The window unit rattles as loud as a jet engine, but it serves to drown out the traffic from the interstate, as well as the amorous couple in the next room over (an affair, she's older [first time cheating on her husband], he's younger [makes a habit of this type of arrangement]; it won't last for more than a month) and the office supply sales rep (middle-aged, obese, sleep apnoea, dead in six years) on the other side.

Molly cycles through periods of stillness and restlessness; every time he begins to drop off she shifts or makes noise. He thinks about taking his pillow and sleeping in the car, but it's too hot for that (another record-setting day, a mass of hot air stuck over half the continent [climatology is dull],
worse than the year before).

After getting kicked (she needs to clip her toenails, they're like bloody talons), he switches his pyjama bottoms for jeans and goes outside for a cigarette. He crouches with his back against a concrete planter of wilted geraniums and idly studies the cracks in the pavement by the buzzing yellow sodium light of the car-park.

Mycroft has let him alone so far, only texted when they crossed over into Canada with a warning not to treat the Mexican border so lightly (relations are strained with his people after the recent elections, apparently; if Molly weren't along he'd drive straight to Matamoros out of spite).

Molly. Something is different between them now, easier. He supposes every friendship has a point where it solidifies and sets like concrete; Niagara was theirs (John shot a man, but that's apples to oranges). He thinks he could do or say (almost) anything and she'd take it in stride. She doesn't nag him about the cigarettes or when he drives too fast (she hardly has room to talk, there), and she doesn't look at him like he's a monster when he points out a harsh truth of human nature, she accepts it as she does everything else.

He's trying to be kinder to her in return, thinking before he says something terrible that might hurt her feelings (which is much easier to do now that he knows to give anything related to sex, love, her personal life, or her appearance a wide berth), and so far he seems to be doing well.

She said something about St. Louis, seeing the arch from underneath. They can put Chicago off for a bit, they've got nothing but time.

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Tuesday 7 August 2012 (Day 51)

It's odd, she thinks. She always assumed Sherlock to be a dyed-in-the-wool city person, but since New York he hasn't wanted to stay in the same one for more than two nights, more interested in the open road. Detroit, Indianapolis, St. Louis, Kansas City, Omaha, Davenport, Chicago (that was three nights, but there was a lot she wanted to see and she kind of badgered him into it, thinking maybe there was something there for him; there wasn't). Tonight Milwaukee, tomorrow Madison.

Honestly, they're all beginning to look the same to her. Maybe to him as well.
"Mars Cheese Castle, next exit," he says, enunciating each word.

She really doesn't care what's there, she likes the silly name. She's going to buy something emblazoned with 'Mars Cheese Castle' and keep it until she dies, and when her nephews are sorting her things for the charity shop they'll think she was a bit batty, and then someone like her will see that knick-knack sitting on a shelf somewhere, lonely and unloved, and they'll buy it because it's a bit odd. Cycle of life.

His head is tipped back against the passenger seat, lolling slightly to the side so he can gaze out the open window. He's been dragging his thumbnail slowly over the ridges on the cap of his water bottle for the last forty miles.

It's going to be one of his quiet days, she thinks. It's still fairly early, just gone ten; they've been on the road for less than an hour. Maybe this will drag him out of it for a little while.

He should be medicated. He refused the single time she brought it up, before they left London. She couldn't force him to do anything and any plea she would make would fall on deaf ears. She's doing the best she can and every day she's reminded that it's not enough.

She would cry, if she were ever alone long enough to do it. He'd still know, though.

The Mars Cheese Castle isn't really a castle, only built with a façade to vaguely resemble one, but it is full of cheese (and cheese- and cow-themed merchandise). She wanders the aisles aimlessly, basking in the chill of the air conditioning. The car has it, but she never uses it when she's driving; it makes her sleepy.

Sherlock finds her after he's finished his cigarette. She knows he's thinking of Mrs. Hudson as he eyes the pastry case. It's a softer look than when he thinks of John, sad in a different way that she can't really explain, but it's a bit like when her brother and sister talk about Dad.

She's not usually a physically demonstrative person, and she's still a little afraid to touch him (she can count on one hand the number of times she's done so intentionally), but she wants him to know that she understands and it's okay. She lays a hand in the middle of his back; his posture stiffens and he turns to look at her.

A flicker of guilt passes over his features, like she'd caught him doing something he shouldn't have been, before his face goes carefully blank. She withdraws her hand and he tells her he's going to wait
in the car.

He needs a minute to himself, that's fine. She hunts down her perfect knick-knack (sadly less to choose from than she thought; she can't decide between a shot glass or a magnet, so she gets both) and selects a few different kinds of sweets (she can afford more sugar in her diet since she's picked up Sherlock's habit of skipping meals), then chats a bit with the lady at the till (her mother-in-law was originally from Kent, a war bride); everyone seems to think her accent is a reason to make conversation. The woman smiles and wishes her a safe trip, which is nice.

Sherlock is leaned against the car; he pitches another cigarette aside and swings into the driver seat. It's going to be a full-pack day, she thinks, judging by the way he's been so far.

She's glad Jodi quit when she was pregnant with Connor. She really needs to phone them soon; tonight maybe. No, this afternoon; the time difference. At least she has 'work' as a plausible excuse for not phoning.

When she gets in the car, Sherlock rifles through her handbag (nothing new there, no sense of boundaries, but it's fine) and extracts her phone. He plugs it into the radio and scrolls through her playlists (she's better at setting them up now) until he finds something he knows that she loves and he finds barely tolerable. She takes it for the apology that it is, though she knows that she's not the one he's really apologising to.

She wishes she could just tell him that it's okay for him to grieve what he's lost and that he doesn't have to keep shoving it away. She doesn't want to be the one to bring it up, though.

She unwraps a lolly and jams it in her mouth, then tosses him the packet. He could use the calories. She thinks she might be pushing her luck when she cranks the volume up, but he'll only turn it down if it's too annoying.

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Day 54

While waiting for Molly outside the 'rest area' (hardly restful, two dingy loos separated by a bank of vending machines; he told her she'd regret the second cup of coffee and successfully predicted within two minutes when she'd start squirming), he browses the wall of tourist-trap brochures. Apparently the Midwest is home to not one, but three of the world's largest balls of twine, along with
innumerable theme parks and roadside curiosities. He's already been dragged to a good number of them, thanks to Molly's love of odd things (and her incessant need to fill every second of every day to keep him occupied).

It's half-ten in the morning and already in the mid-eighties; he's tired of the heat and the sun and how far away everything feels. He hadn't slept enough again, only three hours or so, and he aches down to his bones with exhaustion. There's a dull throb in his temples that's been there for days.

Molly comes out of the of the rest room with her phone pressed to her ear, worrying her bottom lip. It's Mycroft; she hadn't finished drying her hands before answering (second call, must be important).

"And they're sure. Okay. No, he told me doesn't want to know." She cringes.

One of the snipers. He should feel something, relief or fear or anger or something, but there's nothing. Hollow, blank, like holding your ear to a seashell.

He's trying not to picture their faces in an attempt to illicit a reaction from himself, but his brain is pushing those images at him on purpose, each one worse than the next, a slideshow of every brutal act and atrocity he's ever seen superimposed over John, Lestrade, Mrs. Hudson.

Jim Moriarty's face as he pulled the trigger. The ground rushing up at him.

His stomach churns (greasy diner eggs and coffee thick as tar) and he swallows against it but he knows he's going to be sick; he makes it to the bin just in time. Molly lays a hand on his back and he pushes her away roughly. Her phone clatters to the ground, then vibrates with another incoming call.

Mycroft can go fuck himself.

He spits, wipes his mouth, staggers into the building without looking at Molly, heads for the mens room.

He washes his hands and face, rinses his mouth, rubs a wet paper towel over his neck and throat. The feeling from the first day returns and his muscles are too-tight and weak at the same time.
He should be in London, doing the job himself. It would be finished by now if he started two months ago.

He stares at the face in the mirror. *Sherlock Holmes, you are a coward.*

Sherlock Holmes is dead.

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**Saturday 11 August 2012 (Day 55)**

*It's a new day*, she tells her reflection in the mirror.

Sherlock is still sleeping, thank god he's sleeping, thirteen hours and counting. He made her press on to Devil's Lake after the bit outside the toilets. He wasn't content to meander the waterfront.

She panicked a bit when he climbed atop a rock formation (thirty feet high at least); she didn't have the skill to follow him up. She was relieved beyond measure to see more hikers (university age, three girls and two boys) making their way up the trail.

They spotted Sherlock ("Oh wow, you guys! There's some dude standing up there!") and watched in awe as he climbed down. He looked at one of the boys and said "Wouldn't try it," while gazing pointedly at his left ankle, then swanned off as though he hadn't almost made her have a heart attack.

Keeping up with him was difficult; her trainers were designed for aesthetics and walking on pavement rather than the rugged outdoors. He was well ahead of her when he reached the top of the trail; he doubled back and fairly dragged her the last hundred feet or so and steered her to the overlook, right up to the edge. He kept his hands on her shoulders while she took in the view.

It was amazing, of course; pale blue sky, green trees, a band of grey rocks, deep blue water. For a split second she thought it could be the most romantic moment of her life, even if it were fantasy.

Then she looked down the steep slope, more rocks and trees all the way to the bottom. One step, one push, one desperate grab--
God, that was a terrible thought, and she tenses at the memory of it.

Her body reacted unexpectedly to the fear, a sudden pang of desire hitting her low in the gut and racing to her fingertips and toes. Thankfully she was wearing her smooth-cup bra; her nipples could have cut glass. It was the adrenaline making her brain mistranslate the heat and the scent of him and the feeling of his huge hands cupping her bare, sunburned shoulders; that's all.

She shrugged him off and stepped past him, trying not to touch him. Her legs were shaking from more than exertion as she picked her way back down the trail, Sherlock ambling behind her. At least by the time they reached the bottom she could blame her unsteadiness on muscle fatigue and a touch of dehydration.

She was doing so well, keeping herself in check. She gave up hope long ago, but she's resigned herself to her feelings. How can she not? The more he lets her see, the more she loves him.

It's almost like a betrayal of his trust to still feel that way, sometimes. It's complicated; there are so many layers to her affection now, more than hero-worship and lust. Shades of anger and resentment and envy are tangled up with tenderness, sort of like the complex love she has for Jodi and Neil, but she cares more about Sherlock's comfort and happiness than theirs (she's a terrible sister).

It doesn't matter. As long as they can keep going, nothing matters. He'll find whatever he's looking for and she'll help him get himself sorted, and then... Well, whatever happens then. She's more concerned with the first bit.

It's just after ten, checkout is by eleven. She'll go to the office and secure the room for another night and find something for breakfast. One foot in front of the other. Right.

She opens the bathroom door and Sherlock's right-bloody-there, his eyes alert (completely at odds with the bed-head and red spot on his cheek from where it had been resting on his forearm) and clutching a bundle of his clothing in front of him.

Then again, he didn't get up since he collapsed on the bed after his shower and he drank the better part of a half-gallon of water right before that, so of course he's impatient.

She apologizes and scurries past. She'll pack their things and be ready to go by the time he's finished dressing. Or showering, which apparently he's doing again. She supposes she'd want to as well, if
she slept that long.

*

Maybe he simply needed to sleep, she thinks. He smiled earlier, when she’d clambered up to sit on the Large Green Chair (good thing she decided not to wear her sundress today) then offered (offered!) to use her phone to take a photo for her family.

He was trying to be nice, and it was weird and not him, but he was more animated and not lost in his head, so she’d take that as a small victory.

They’re both tired of pre-packaged snacks, diner fare, and sandwiches; they only have casual clothes, so fine dining is out of the question. They eat at a quirky little vegan café with dark purple walls and strange mosaics (beercaps, buttons, stones, doll parts, scraps of paper; all kinds of things) under thick, clear resin on the tabletops. A duo (both female, mid-twenties, pierced and dyed and dressed like ‘fucking hipsters’ [according to one of their friends]) play ukuleles and sing silly but melodic tunes while a small crowd cheers and laughs; it’s fun to watch.

Sherlock is bored out of his mind by it. She asks him to tell her about the crowd to keep him engaged and in the moment. He points out who’s sleeping with whom, which one is a barista and which one is a bike messenger and the three that work in offices but pretend that they don’t, one who participates in Anonymous actions, two who eat dairy on the sly and another who doesn’t hide that fact; the list goes on and on.

It feels good to have him back. She knows better than to get her hopes up that it will last.

They’ll leave tomorrow, she can see it in the way his eyes glaze over as they walk back to their hotel. No matter; one foot in front of the other.

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**Day 57**

There is a dream-like quality to everything as they stumble on through Minnesota. Molly is more interested in the forests and the farms and the low red-brick buildings of small-town Main Streets, the picturesque scenes that America tries to present itself as. The day before they left the motorway and
took back roads, bought sandwiches in the morning and spent most of the time simply driving.

She's keeping a mental tally of how many cigarettes he smokes in an hour, a day, using them as a barometer for his mood. He could get patches, but they're not nearly as satisfying.

She left him in the hotel room to go shopping last night. On a whim, she decided she wanted to try camping. She'd been to Glastonbury twice with her sister when she was a teenager; she'd liked it then.

They pass tents already set up in the clearings between the trees; two families of seasoned outdoorspeople and a trio of students. Having fulfilled his obligation as pack mule, he leaves Molly to it and sets off down to the lake.

He follows trails aimlessly, winding nearer and farther from the water, over rocks and through trees. When he was young, six or so, he wanted to be an explorer (refined from wanting to be a pirate; same spirit of adventure, more scientific [he'd been devastated when he'd realized the kind of pirate he wanted to be hadn't existed for almost two hundred years {or at all, really, he'd bought into the romanticism of it until he'd learned about scurvy and lice}]). He wanted to be the first human in history to ever set eyes on something (anything); it had seemed possible when he was that young, before he intellectualized that people have been almost everywhere by now, places changed over time and civilizations ebbed and flowed.

He finds a dead tree toppled into the lake. He toes off his shoes and socks, rolls his jeans up to his knees, and walks along it. The wood is smooth and grey and sun-warm under his feet. He sits where it disappears into the water, lets his legs dangle. His toes scrape the algae-covered rocks of the lake bottom.

Nothing is ever new, time marches on, all that, and that moment of realization is always depressing (no matter how many times one is reminded of and struck by it). One life - famous, infamous, or mundane - means nothing in the grand scheme of things. If one person doesn't discover something, someone else will eventually. If society is ready for an idea, they'll let it advance; if not, it's lost to the ages (natural selection, more or less).

He thought he mattered. He had mattered, to the people important to him (and to the ones he helped, but that's all been undone now), and those people are important to other people, but in a hundred years, they'll all be names and bones and nothing more.

His mind is stagnating. There's enough new data to keep him from going under again, but it's qualitatively unimportant. It will take more time to delete all the meaningless trivia than it did to
Before the work, he had the drugs. Before the drugs he was young and still trying to force himself into the spaces everyone else carved out for him. Now he's got 3.1 million square miles of a place that can never be home (3.9 if one counts Alaska, Hawaii, and all associated territories) and Molly Hooper.

It's only been a month, but it's starting to wear on her. What she once pretended was a long holiday with an open-ended return date has now become an exercise in filling time while worrying over the state of her companion's mental health. He's already dreading the moment (he won't see it, she still hides her most private thoughts so well [decades of practice]; he'll know by how it will ooze out of the cracks in her veneer) when she decides that this isn't enough, it's a chore and her sole burden to bear. She'll want to leave and he'll do everything to make her stay because the thought of being alone again is worse than anything.

It's more than that, though, and that's the most troubling thing. He looks forward to her often-silly (but sometimes eerily insightful) observations, and the way she can anticipate his needs. He's caught himself thinking of her on more than one occasion, cataloguing and categorizing the myriad ways she laughs and the slope of her nose in different lighting conditions. He feels a kind of soft fondness for her that makes him temper his responses, much like he'd done with Mrs. Hudson.

It's not a romantic interest. He doesn't have those, full stop. Irene Adler was an anomaly, his equal in will and cunning, and for a while he thought... He had loved her, which is painful to admit to himself, even now (dangerous disadvantage, losing side).

She was perfect, the archetype of everything he associated with the word 'woman' (aristocratic bearing, flawless and sharp beauty, impeccable taste; she made herself untouchable and that only made him want to put his dirty hands all over her), but she proved to exemplify the worst traits of a woman (cruel, manipulative, duplicitous) as well.

Knowing her profession was both exciting and terrifying. He hated to lose any kind of control in front of other people, and she would happily break him to pieces (less like shattering a mirror and more like cutting a diamond, skilled precision and intent, shaping him into something beautiful and just for her); what's more, he thinks he would have liked it. It wouldn't have been safe (or sane, or consensual), but the idea of finding new limits was always thrilling.

They couldn't have had any kind of lasting relationship. A series of encounters, like two jaguars crossing paths in the jungle to fight and mate--
Damn Molly Hooper and her stupid pop music (four nights previous, folding the laundry while he flipped through channels on telly, made him go back to the video |"The song references wolves, why are they in Sri Lanka? They don’t have any wolves there." "Indiana Jones." "Ah." {more pop culture, didn't really care to follow that line of enquiry further}|). Although it was amusing to watch her try to keep herself from dancing, as though he would be personally offended if she enjoyed herself.

He picks at a crack in the log, his thoughts derailed by that stupid song (and the ones after it, a medley of Madness and Simple Minds and god-only-knows what else [tuned it out when she composed herself {not as amusing}]); he digs at a splinter of grey wood with his thumbnail. His feet and legs are cold but he's sweating.

He's not ordinary (continuously trying to erase the newer connotation, as everything Moriarty), but he's beginning to see that it's not as black and white as he once thought. Ordinary people do extraordinary things all the time (strange and meaningless, usually, like making scale replicas of entire cities from matchsticks or winding a two-tonne ball of twine), build their identities around those things; in that, he is very much the same.

Parts of his sanity are stretching thin, he knows this. He longs for a thrill, a chase, danger. Calculated risks with a very slim margin of error.

There were train tracks behind the motel they stayed at two nights ago, after Devil's Lake. He thought about waiting for one and jumping aside just in time (too easy, not enough [cigarettes and coffee instead of cocaine], but something); Molly might have woken and would have noticed his absence and her sidelong glances would eat their way into him.

He hates the responsibility he feels for her now. John understood perfectly his need for danger, Mrs. Hudson clucked over it in a 'boys will be boys' sort of fashion, Lestrade envied it, Mycroft thought it juvenile; Molly is afraid of it. He doesn't like that, and the why of it bothers him.

He gave her a taste of the vertigo and the urge to fall (technically the second time; no railings or guards, though, only them), and she reacted with terror. Not outright, she was stronger than that, but he felt the pebbled flesh of her forearm when he brushed it with his and watched her try to stay upright on wobbly legs as she picked her way down the trail.

He can't do that again. He wants to, though. He wants her to crave it like he does; she understands so much of him but not that and a terrible part of him wants her to be as sick as he is.

Fresh sweat breaks out on his back, his throat, his scalp. He's not a monster, he's not Moriarty.
He digs his nails into the wood beneath his hands, forces himself to breathe. It's too hot and too bright and too still and too fucking quiet.

He empties his pockets (wallet, phone, keys, cigarettes, lighter) and puts everything in his shoes. He slides off the log and into the lake. It soaks the cuffs of his jeans, but he doesn't care. He turns, sucks in a breath, and falls backwards.

The cold water is a shock, even though he was expecting it. He twists to face downward, keeps himself under until his lungs burn, surfacing only when his base survival instinct takes over and forces him onto his back to gulp air. It's not enough, but it's something.

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Monday 13 August 2012 (Day 58)

Camping was a stupid idea, but she's running out of ideas.

Four hours yesterday, out wandering around, then he came back soaking wet, smiled an easy-fake (familiar) smile at the boys (Jason, Tyler, and Mike, all going into their senior year at the University of Minnesota, two for engineering, one for education) as he draped an arm around her shoulders like he was marking his bloody territory (Tyler had given her a beer, singular, and he might have stared at her chest a bit but he was ten years younger than her and not the least bit predatory and it was nice to be noticed), then didn't string more than two syllables together for the rest of the night.

She wants to take him by the shoulders and shake him, scream in his face that he has to- has to something. Snap out of it. 'Get his shit together;' in the native dialect.

He'd probably just stare at her.

God, she wants to cry. If she starts, she doesn't think she'll ever stop.

It's all stop-gap measures. He's going to find a way to kill himself and he won't know that that's what he's actually trying to do until... Well, he won't know, because he'll be dead, but she'll know.
He thinks he wants to feel alive, but that's not it. He's the clever one, why doesn't he see it?

She's been up most of the night, lying on top of her sleeping bag in the thick, muggy heat (made worse by the lack of ventilation and the combined warmth of their bodies). The inside of the tent reeks of nylon and 'new thing' smell, sour beer sweat, lingering traces of cigarettes, and the dead-vegetation scent of lake water. She needs fresh air.

The problem is that Sherlock's stretched out in front of the door and it would require a feat of gymnastics like something out of a spy film with a laser hallway to get past him without waking him. And she shouldn't wake him; he needs to sleep. He's a bit better when he's slept (or he fakes it better, at least).

Sod it, she thinks. He gets to run off and do whatever he feels like and make her bloody worry about him constantly and it's not fair that this is all on her and she deserves to be able to take ten minutes for herself to go watch a sunrise and splash in a lake.

She grabs her jeans and starts to slide off her sleep shorts, and of course it's when she's got her shoulders dug into the ground and her hips in the air with her t-shirt slipping down her stomach that he inhales sharply and rolls his head toward her.

"Molly?"

His voice is rough with sleep and he's so fucking gorgeous that she hates him.

"Go back to sleep." It comes out a bit sharper than she intended. She focuses her attention on getting changed, refusing to look at him.

So of course he props himself up on his elbows and bloody watches her wiggle into her jeans. She doesn't think for a second that he can't see every freckle and mole on her skin in the weak pre-dawn light. Fine. It's not like he cares about what he's looking at. It's like changing in front of her cat (in the six months she had a cat).

She sits up and crosses her legs under her, pushing up on her knees. She grabs the rest of her clothing, then strips off her t-shirt and puts on her bra (not the sexy way, clapping it first then threading her arms through the straps, but the real way, arms first and bending forward with a little waggle to get everything straight and snug before clapping it; quick and efficient); she tugs her top
over her head and swings toward the door.

It's an awkward knee-shuffle past him to get out, but she doesn't bloody care what she looks like right now. He has the grace (or the sense) to pull his legs out of the way and keep his mouth shut.

Pine needles bite into her palms as she crawls out of the tent. She stands and brushes the debris off one foot before jamming it into her shoe (left outside because feet and rubber were two layers of scent they didn't need inside), then the other. She picks her way down the path to the lake.

She strides to the end of the dock and sits facing east. She dangles her legs over the side, but she can't even skim the surface of the water with her toes.

Her anger leaves her gradually as the sky goes from blue-pink to blue-yellow-orange. It's cooler over the water and she leans back, weight resting on her palms. She closes her eyes, tips her chin to the sky, and breathes; the ends of her hair drag and catch on the weathered boards of the dock.

God, she's an idiot. Flouncing off like that.

She hears footsteps crunching down the path and her pulse speeds up, thinking for a moment that it's Sherlock.

It's not (silly, stupid girl); it's Mike (she thinks; no, he was the shorter, stocky one, so- oh, who cares?).

"Mornin'," he greets quietly, nodding.

"Morning," she answers.

He kicks out of his flip-flops as he drapes his towel over one of the posts.

"You, uh, mind if I-" he gestures to the lake.

"Not at all," she smiles.
He takes a few steps back and gets a running start before cannon-balling into the water. He surfaces a few moments later and whips his wet hair out of his eyes, grinning like a schoolboy. Christ, he practically is a schoolboy.

She gives him two thumbs up and he laughs, then paddles over.

"Where are your mates?"

"Still sleeping. Lazy bastards. Where's your, uh... that guy?"

"Still sleeping, the lazy bastard," she parrots back with a little laugh.

He's not; he's probably slouched against a tree and sucking down his morning fag, brooding.

"So, you guys live here, or you just on vacation?"

"Bit of both, I suppose," she says vaguely.

"Cool," he says, then ducks back under the water.

They continue chatting (and she's once again the cultural ambassador to Great Britain, which she didn't mind at first but it's starting to get old; she reminds herself he's only a kid and answers his questions and he's really very polite about everything) until the other two come staggering down to the dock. She exchanges good-mornings and excuses herself, then heads back to the campsite.

She won't admit it, but she misses the anonymity of London. Here she's a stranger in a strange land, a curiosity. The only normal, constant thing she has is Sherlock, and that being considered 'normal' is patently absurd.

It's only temporary, only for as long as he needs. He's what's important.
He's leaned against a tree in front of their (now cleared) campsite, lit cigarette in one hand and bottle of water in the other. He shoves the water at her and stalks off toward the car park without a word.

Well, she got to see her sunrise and watch someone splash in the lake, so there's that.

One foot in front of the other.

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Day 63

Small towns and farmland have given way to the long, flat, endless brown and green of the Great Plains. They're working their way to the Pacific coast, putting a continent and an ocean between the place they're both homesick for.

A storm is rolling in, black swallowing up the horizon. Molly's got her shoes off, foot out the window, toes curled over the top of the mirror. Her stick-thin legs are still winter-white, but the top of her knee is sunburned from her time in the passenger seat.

He swallows against something coiling inside him, pulling against his spine; blames the heaviness in the air for the way his skin tightens.

He eases off the road as the first fat drops of rain hit the windscreen, static crackling through the low hum of the radio. Lightning flashes in the distance and the sky is dark as night in the early afternoon.

Molly draws her foot back inside and rolls up the window. She's been quiet all day.

Getting out of the car (Faraday cage) would be a supremely stupid thing to do (wind turbine seventy feet ahead of them across the road [lightning doesn't always strike the tallest object]), but it pulls at him; the danger, the need to feel alive again. Molly's blunt nails rake over his forearm as he flees the safety of the car, into the storm.

It's glorious. The rain is cold, quickly soaking through his shirt and into his too-hot skin, plastering his hair to his forehead. Molly is pulling him towards the car, shouting over the rumble of thunder.
jagged bolt of lightning hits the ground a mile off, searing itself into his retinas (blue-green-red after-image on the insides of his eyelids); he can feel it in his blood.

Something inside him cracks then, splintered apart like a telephone pole, wires severed and sparks flying. He yanks Molly back to him, pulls her into an embrace, and catches her mouth in a wild kiss. This close together, wet skin pressed to wet skin, they are one object. If he's struck, it will travel through both of them (enough points of contact, water as the conductor, she's barefoot on wet ground), and they'll go together (direct hit nearly always fatal [10-30% mortality rate for a miss {no matter}], no more waiting for either of them.

She bites his lip and pushes him away, takes his arm and hauls him to the car (pulling back with all her weight, he could resist), reaches behind her and opens the door, prods him into the back seat and follows close behind him.

She's flushed with exertion and anger, pulse fluttering in her neck. He can see the outline of her nipples through the wet fabric of her sundress, a thin stream of water from her hair running over her collarbone. He can smell her in the humid interior of the car, rain and fear and arousal.

His tongue flicks out to where she bit him (metallic, not hard enough to draw blood; artificial cherry lip balm); she tracks the movement with her eyes (pupils dilated). Horripilation, not from the water on his skin or the static in the air, and then Molly's got a fistful of his hair and is biting his mouth again with more aggression than he'd ever expected from her.

He's never properly kissed a woman before, but Molly is too frantic to notice his lack of skill. She wedges her knee between his thigh and the back of the seat, braces her foot on the floor, and pins him back against the door, her knuckles (hand still in his hair, twisting and tugging and it hurts [doesn't want her to let go]) cracking against the window. She nips his bottom lip again in retaliation, as though it's his fault she'll have bruised knuckles later.

He grips her waist as she shifts again, bringing her sex into alignment with his erection. She rolls her hips against him, panting into his mouth, and he bucks under her at the sensation.

It's too much too fast and he wants to push her off; at the same time he wants her to touch him, use her mouth, fuck him, anything. His hand finds her breast, cups the weight of it in his palm through the clinging fabric of her sundress; he can feel the floral pattern of the lace of her bra, follows the seam with his fingertips, over the nipple; she makes a high pitched noise and breaks her mouth from his to plant kisses on his jaw, his neck (oh god his neck).

She lets go of his hair and she shifts back, blindly reaching for his belt (and oh god, she is, she's
going to touch him and no one's ever touched him before outside of a medical examination and he
can't-- doesn't know what to do [knows what his body wants {transport, only transport} and she is
soft and tastes like artificial cherries and Coke and the Swedish Fish she was eating since they
skipped lunch {staining her mouth red (red is the only colour a newborn can perceive after the
contrast of black and white; a sexual signal indicating willingness to mate; the colour of oxygenated
blood, not enough oxygen, oh god}); knows he shouldn't because once he knows he'll never want to
stop doing this {like cigarettes (pack in the glove compartment almost empty), like cocaine (why
shouldn't he stop any of it? he's a new man now)}]; working the buckle with quick, nimble fingers.

Blood is pounding in his ears as the rain pounds on the roof of the car (as the water did over the falls)
and he gives in and lets himself drop.

His focus narrows to Molly and where their bare skin touches; clothes hastily pushed aside and then
she's sinking down on him, taking him into her body, and he wants more. He's barely seated inside
her when she jerks and convulses and ripples around him, and it's the most incredible physical
sensation he's ever felt. Seconds (minutes, hours) later he's push-pulling her hips and ejaculating
inside her.

She kisses his neck-jaw-chin-lips and he responds weakly, thinking he's crossed another line that he
shouldn't have even gone near (and he's going to keep crossing lines until there are none left).

Molly pulls away and he realizes he's shaking a bit; he can tell by the look on her face that she thinks
she's done something unspeakably horrible, like forcing herself on him.

"Oh my god, I'm sorry, I'm- I didn't mean to- I've never done that before--"

She covers her kiss-swollen mouth (not too small now) and gracelessly dislodges her body from his,
trying to put more space between them.

He should say something, but he doesn't know what; his brain has short-circuited and he reaches for
her because that's all he can think to do, pulls her back to land awkwardly against his chest. It's not
comfortable, the door is digging into his back and the seatbelt into his bare arse cheek; his groin is
sticky from sex and his wet clothes are rubbing against his skin wrong; her elbow is in his ribs and
her shoulder is perilously close to his Adam's apple.

"I've never done that before, either." His voice sounds thick to his own ears.
He feels rather than sees the exact moment the penny drops. She tenses against him and struggles to sit up so she can look at him. He takes the opportunity to pull up his pants and jeans, because he'd rather not have a necessary (and probably excruciating) conversation with his cock hanging out.

"That, as in, 'in a car,' or that as in, ah, that?"

"Sexual intercourse, Molly."

"Oh my god. Sorry, no, I didn't mean-- I mean, there's nothing wrong with--"

"Molly." He plants his hand on the seat and pushes away from the door, righting himself.

"Why did you just-- let me?" Plaintive, confused.

"I did kiss you first."

She's too quiet, he can see the guilt twisting her insides into knots.

"It wasn't as though I was clinging to my maidenly virtue out of some misguided notion of waiting for-" true love dies before it makes it to his lips, that would be like a slap in the face to her, "- anything. When I was younger and interested, I never had the occasion, and when I was older I thought it was something I was better off living without."

It's mostly true, if oversimplified. Maybe he'll explain more precisely later, but there's something raw and overwhelming happening right now (like the aftermath of an explosion); he has to tread carefully until they find their footing. This isn't one of those things they can pretend never happened.

"So, um, what now?" She's staring at the top button of his shirt.

"It's terribly cliché, but I think I'd like a cigarette."

Molly smiles thinly, then crawls over the front seat, balancing on one foot while she gropes for the glove compartment, nearly kicking him in the face with the other as she does so. He grabs her ankle
to steady her and she grunts as she pops the latch and fishes out the packet. She hands them back to him and turns the key in the ignition to put the window down, then returns to the seat next to him with her bottle of Coke (warm and flat now, but he takes it when offered).

He lights the cigarette and blows the smoke out the window, watching it curl into the rain (lighter now, the storm is passing and the heat has finally [if temporarily] broken).

"I'm on birth control, and I'm clean, so you don't have to worry about... anything," she offers, her hands folded demurely in her lap.

"Why are you on birth control?" He thought she'd given up hope, and she didn't seem the type for unprotected one-night stands (not that she had the time or energy to go out and find one, so far). It's not the Pill, he'd have noticed her taking one every day, nor an implant (would have seen that). Something else, then.

"I've been on it for years, mostly so I wouldn't have, um, periods."

"Ah." He neglected to observe that, even though he did know that women tended to menstruate on a regular basis. Never having lived with one of childbearing age, he dismissed it as irrelevant.

Good to know, really, if they decide to make a habit of it.

He takes a drag of his cigarette. "Do you always orgasm that quickly? I'm given to understand that it usually takes longer for both parties involved."

Molly looks away, blushing furiously. "It, ah, yeah, it doesn't take very much. It's not quite, um, normal, according to um, most of the women I've talked to. I think they don't believe me."

"Can you have multiple orgasms?"

"Sometimes." She looks out the window.

"This makes you uncomfortable."
"It's weird. Not um, talking about it with you. Well, that too, a lot, but- me. It's freakish."

"Mm. And you care what other people think?"

"Sometimes. I had a boyfriend in uni who thought it was... weird." 'Weird' in this case being a nice way of saying repellent, by the way she wrinkles her nose.

"That's stupid."

"It is, a bit."

They lapse into silence for a few moments.

"I'm just, ah, going to get some clothes from the boot and change. Do you want me to get you anything?"

He waves her off. "I'll get something in a minute."

He flicks the ash out the window and tips his head back against the seat. His thoughts spin in lazy, aimless circles; a bit like being drunk. If he told her he never wanted to do that again, she would pull away, still convinced she violated him.

Does he want to again? He can see the potential for dependence, but he's already so entwined with Molly that he couldn't extract himself if he tried, not without losing... something. Himself, but he's already lost that. His new self, whomever that is.

Will she start expecting things of him now? She knows better than to ever think of herself as his girlfriend (doesn't she?). Besides, it's not as though he has much to offer, he's been called a bastard more times than he cares to remember.

Mycroft is paying Molly to look after him, and that was fine, she was going to be doing it anyway, so why not get paid by someone who obviously has the means? She saw the logic in that reasoning,
it hadn't been an issue. Would it be now? Would she have some kind of objection to either the money or the sex, based on her values? Did he himself have any objection?

This is why relationships are not his area; too many questions, not enough clearly-defined answers.

Molly slams the boot closed and gets back in the car, front passenger seat this time. He watches her change, seeing considerably less than he's already seen before (in bits and pieces on different occasions).

He takes one last drag of his cigarette and pitches it out the window, then gets the keys from Molly and finds himself a dry shirt. He doesn't care about the rest.

*

Two hours of strained silence later, they pull into the car park of the Bismark Super 8. Molly fidgets with her seatbelt before turning to face him.

"So, um, one room?"

"Too risky for two until Seattle."

"One bed or two?" It's equal parts hope and resignation, but she'll quietly accept whatever answer he gives her. She wouldn't have asked if she didn't want to (at the very least) sleep next to him, so this is her attempt at chivalry.

"One."

"Okay." She looks unsettled; had he read the situation wrong?

They check in, shower and change, decide on a place for dinner; their usual routine. They go to a steakhouse (he rarely craves any specific kind of food, but the thought of red meat is unusually appealing [must be something instinctual]).

Molly is nervous, barely touching her food (and he knows she likes it; chicken strips and french fries
are fairly universal in quality throughout all the places they've been) or looking at him.

Back in the room, Molly takes her pyjamas into the en-suite to change as usual, brushes her teeth, and crawls into bed (she always sleeps on the right, unless the left is closer to the wall, even when they're not sharing). It's still early, not yet gone nine, but she switches on the telly (usually she busies herself with other things, reorganizing her suitcase or planning for the next day).

Molly's mood is affecting him; he's keyed-up when the combination of food and travel (and sex) should have him ready to fall into a coma. He switches off the bathroom light and slides into bed, keeping the customary careful eight inches of space between them.

He wants to touch her (and hopefully have sex again, because he's decided that yes, he does want that [until it becomes a problem; then he'll re-negotiate terms with himself {as he did with every other addiction}], although he thinks it would be acceptable to simply feel the warm weight of her body close to his [the idea of cuddling should be distasteful but it's not]), but he doesn't know how to initiate contact.

"Molly."

"Hmm?"

"You're uncomfortable."

"I'm not uncomfortable."

"Your shoulders are hunched up to your ears and if you grip that remote any tighter you'll snap it in half. Do I need to give you the rest of the list?"

"No." Drawing attention to anything about her: not good (as a general rule, but very specifically now).

"I just, um, I don't want to... I know that I'm not- I don't know what this is, now."

Ah. She still wants to be his girlfriend, wants some kind of reassurance of... What? Sentiment?
Fidelity? He could easily provide both and they wouldn't be entirely untrue, but he doesn't think she'd accept them (too good to be true; for all her optimism, she is, at heart, a realist).

He finds himself at a loss for words. Exactly what he says and how he says it is important right now. He doesn't know how normal people navigate these kinds of things.

"This really isn't my area." It sounds entirely more frustrated than the neutrality he was aiming for.

"I know." She looks sad, but she's hiding it. He doesn't know what she thinks, exactly, but it's probably her personal worst-case scenario, and in it, he's found wanting.

It's- he doesn't like feeling that he's not enough. It's more familiar than he cares to acknowledge, for all that he disregards most people's opinions.

"Tell me what you want." He leaves it unspoken that he'll know if she's lying.

She sighs and switches off the telly, leaving the room in almost complete darkness (easier for her to speak if she thinks she's not being watched). She rolls onto her side to face him (feels the need to be direct). He mirrors her position, making it a conversation and not simply her addressing him.

"Honestly? I don't know. Everything's changed, even before we- had sex. We're not..." She takes a breath. "I really used to think I was in love with you, but I didn't... I didn't know you, then."

Use of the past tense. Has her opinion of him degraded so much over the last two months? "Oh."

"No- I mean, I do. Love you." Her voice quiets as she says it; she's afraid to admit it.

His skin prickles hot and cold from his scalp to his toes (like sudden hypotension but not) and a thick feeling lodges in his throat; his face flushes. It's a curious combination of sensations.

"But it's different, now. I used to think-- Nevermind. I- I'll take whatever you want to give, and I don't want you to feel obligated to- to pretend we're something we're not, just to try and make me happy. I know you do that sometimes, for me, but I wish you wouldn't."
He wonders how she's got this far in life by being so selfless. It should make him dislike her (would have once, but then he didn't understand sacrifice).

"Molly, may I kiss you again?" He hates how formal and stilted he sounds, but he doesn't want to do things wrong, like he had earlier.

"O-okay."

She shuffles closer and he reaches for her, skimming his hand up her arm and cupping her jaw. Their positions are awkward and he's not as sure of himself as he had been before; he touches his lips to hers softly, hoping he can effectively convey the strange new affection swelling inside him.

They share a series of small, almost chaste kisses, each lasting longer than the one before it, and then it's a continuous slide and press of lips and it's-- Too many feelings all at once to name, but it's not overwhelming (or rather, it is, but in a good way).

It's nothing like the first time. It's slow and exploratory and it's questions and answers and reassurances, a kind of communication wholly unlike anything he previously associated with sex. He has a vague thought that he wouldn't like this... intimacy with someone else, but because it's Molly and he does trust her, it's okay.

Everything is a blur of sensation, hands and mouths and skin, desire pleasantly clouding his thoughts (like morphine, but better). She pulls him on top of her and his hips rock between her thighs in an imitation of sex. They're still half-dressed, shirts discarded but bottoms kept on in favour of mouthing over each others' shoulders and chests in turn and more kissing. So much kissing, he never imagined how good it would feel.

She claws at his back and begs him not to stop; he presses harder and she nips his earlobe, panting his name before she climaxes; it's more erotic than any fantasy he's ever entertained. He forces himself to calm down; there's so much more he wants to try now that he can and he has no idea how long his own refractory period is (obviously less than six hours at present, not something he tested in the last twenty years and he'd rather wait to begin experimenting).

He works his way down her body, comparing her pre- to post-orgasmic skin sensitivity and adjusts his (still admittedly clumsy, but he's always had a steep learning curve) technique accordingly. He wants to try oral sex; some men love performing it and others hate it, but he's always been ambivalent about the thought of the act (until now; Molly's scent triggers an instinctual response of
salivation and he wants to follow that mental line of enquiry).

She's slick and hot and she keens at the first brush of his tongue. He can taste a trace of himself on her and it sparks something deep and darkly possessive in him; this is *his*. He'll examine that thought later, when his head is clear (if it's ever clear again).

She makes him stop before she has another orgasm, wanting to get on with it already, and he thinks that's a fine idea. He hovers over her as she guides him inside her, and they both groan with the sensation. He can't seem to find a rhythm, every drag and slide bringing him too close to the edge, and he's surprised when she digs her heels into the bed and fucks him (and there's some kind of power dynamic being explored, he thinks, but it's not malicious or exploitative and oh, the possibilities with that).

He's close but he needs to be closer; he slides his arms under her and curls his fingers around her shoulders, tells her to wrap her legs around his waist, and oh god yes, that's it for her and he follows seconds later.

*This is dangerous in an entirely new way,* he thinks after, once he's shifted down her body to rest his cheek on the sweaty, flushed skin over her breastbone, his arms wound tightly around her ribs. He'd known it would be.

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**Sunday 19 August 2012 (Day 64)**

*Oh,* she thinks idly, seconds after waking up, *that actually happened.*

She doesn't panic, but it's a near thing. Sherlock’s got her in a tight hold, one arm threaded through the space between her shoulder and the pillow, the other folded up against her torso, the weight of her breast resting against his slack fingers; one of his legs is wedged between her sticky thighs and his flaccid penis is brushing her bum.

She'd been so selfish, dressing it up as 'whatever you need,' when it was all about taking something for herself.

No, that's not completely true.
It's- she doesn't know what happened out there on the road. She didn't ask why he'd kissed her. He doesn't love her (no startling revelation there); she thinks... she doesn't know what to think. He'd looked wild and scared and there was a longing in his eyes that wasn't for her and her brain had simply shut down.

It's a bit intimidating, knowing that he was a virgin. He abandoned whatever principle he'd held to that made him think he was better off without sex. She knows it's not her fault, her feminine wiles hadn't tempted him from his life of celibacy, but...

And then after, when he asked her (more or less, as much as he asks anything) what she wanted, she got all stupid and he was his version of sweet and--

This is just another distraction for him. He'll get bored with it, and she'll tell him it's okay, they'll go back to the way it was before, and they'll keep on pretending everything is fine.

It's going to hurt, but she'll endure. It's what she does, isn't it?

And it probably makes her a terrible person, but she's going to hold on to this as long as she can. He's not in his right mind and she shouldn't, she really shouldn't, she should take the ethical and righteous path, but she's been so lonely for so long and he's put her through hell and she loves him so much--

His breathing changes as his fingers twitch against her breast; he's fully awake in seconds.

She's been dreading this part.

He removes his hand from her breast as he twists away, his leg still slotted between hers and his shoulders flat on the bed.

"Molly, my arm is asleep," he says quietly, trying not to jostle her or pull her hair as he works to extract it.

"Sorry," she answers, her voice too loud in her own ears.
She's not graceful as she disentangles herself; sleep-hot, sticky skin catching and pulling uncomfortably as she moves her legs. She sits up, the sheet drawn in front of her. It's still dark in the room; dim, early-morning light creeps in around the edges of the curtains. 6:37 AM.

The silence stretches on forever (less than a minute, since the clock flicks over to 6:38 as she's staring at it), and then Sherlock's cold fingertips swirl over her lower back. She startles and she knows he's smirking by the little huffing sound he makes.

Her skin breaks out in goosebumps. She remembers the way he touched her last night, not at all tentative, but still... respectful, she supposes is the right word for it. Somewhere between reverent and clinical, but neither of those things. It certainly wasn’t anything like her fantasies (in which he was considerably more experienced and [embarrassingly] completely besotted with her), but it was better, since it was real (and also worse, because it was real).

She's unaccountably nervous, more than she was last night. She doesn't have a stellar track record with mornings-after.

"So, ah, coffee?"

"That would require getting dressed, so no."

"Oh, I don't mind, I'll go and get it. Free breakfast, you can even make your own waffles-" *Waffles, Molly? Seriously? "-or I'm sure they have fruit or yoghurt or porri-"

She's cut short when Sherlock sits up and cups her jaw, turning her face toward him, then kisses her. He doesn't even seem to care about the morning breath (although his isn't great either).

And dear god, can he kiss. She'd daydreamed about it, but knowing that he never snogged anyone and his kisses are tailor-made for her... Well.

He's quite keen to get her on her back again, and that seems like a very good idea. He settles immediately between her legs, the tip of his cock grazing the skin of her thigh. He balances on one elbow while he palms her breast, mercilessly rolling the nipple between his fingers as he kisses her.
God, she's so close already, just from this. She would normally protest and try to stave off the inevitable (because all the blokes she's been with thought they were sex gods at first, but then they got tired of it or accused her of faking it, and she doesn't want that to happen with Sherlock), but obviously he's not in the mood for sleepy, drawn-out morning sex.

He shifts his hips into alignment with hers, and with a bit of guidance he's positioned and sliding inside her. The hand on her breast moves to behind her knee, hitching her leg around his waist. His thrusts are still a bit slow and jerky, but it never takes much for her.

She's not usually very loud, but then she usually had neighbours or her partners' flatmates to keep quiet for; she really doesn't care if there's a family of tourists with small children or someone's gran on the other side of the wall. Sherlock is just as loud, groaning choked-off half-words against her mouth, which resolve themselves into her name and something like "let me feel it" (his tone halfway between a plea and a command), which is enough to tip her over.

It takes him a bit longer than the first two times (although not very), and he collapses, staying inside her until he goes soft and slips out.

She really didn't expect him to be a cuddler, more the type to simply lie on the other side of the bed after, barely touching, then leave at the first opportunity. She couldn't have been more wrong.

He holds her tightly, and when he's calmed a bit he traces the lines and curves of her body like he's making a topographic map (he very well could be doing exactly that, for all she knows). It's unbearably intimate, and part of her wants to scream because it's not... It's not what she wants it to be.

It's something, though, and right now it's all she has.

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Day 65

They leave Bismark mid-morning.

The temptation to stay in bed with Molly twined around him warred with the urge to keep moving; in the end, the idea of reaching a destination after being aimless for so long won out.
The heat has finally broken after two long months of brutal high summer. It's still warmer than strictly comfortable, but infinitely more tolerable.

Molly lounges in the passenger seat, relaxed and shagged out (and that's a truly revolting bit of masculine pride, but well-deserved); red-purple marks from his teeth stand out on the pale skin of her throat (it's completely classless to find them so alluring).

He wasn’t wrong about the destructive power of the neurochemistry of love, but that doesn’t really matter now. He doesn't need his mind to be razor-sharp. He is free to let it wander, since it keeps circling back to Molly instead of getting dangerously close to everything he was forced to give up.

He knows that sex is just another high, and in time he’ll develop a tolerance, but for now it makes simply existing bearable.

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Thursday 23 August 2012 (Day 68)

"We're in luck. They had a cancellation," she says, dangling the room key by the plastic salmon it’s attached to. "Oh, and it's non-smoking, so um, you might want to finish that now."

Sherlock is leaned against the car, ankles crossed and hands resting behind him on the boot in his 'smoking sprawl'. He looks so far away.

He took over driving ever since they decided to go to the coast, almost a week ago now. Eleven hours on the road today, including the traffic getting through Seattle and the ferry ride, over four hundred miles. It's good that he has a goal, she thinks, even if her back is killing her.

The room is on the second floor of the motel, overlooking the bay. She watches the sun set over the water from the walkway outside while Sherlock is in the shower. She never thought she’d tire of scenic beauty, but it only serves to remind her how alien this place is.

She's stopped buying postcards and random things. Well, almost. She bought a bracelet in Bozeman, sterling silver and turquoise with a thunderbird motif. She rarely wears jewellery, and the bracelet is a
bit chunky and not really fitting with her style; it was a spontaneous purchase. There was a tiny sign on the counter with an explanation of the thunderbird legend, and it reminded her of Sherlock (voice like thunder, eyes like lightning; what had happened during the storm). A bit silly of her, really, and more than she should have spent of Mycroft's money, but she was feeling sentimental.

She likes the weight of the bracelet and the way it looks against her tan skin. She could never pull off those long, flowing gauzy skirts, or the look of effortless and free beauty that the woman who ran the shop had, but she pretends for a moment that she could be like her. Peaceful and gracious, instead of frumpy and odd and nervous.

Sherlock sidles up next to her and looks out over the water. He's tired, and it's not just from the day in the car.

It's terrible, but she can't be this close to him right now. She wants to hold him and tell him everything is going to be okay, but it's not. She simply doesn't have it in her to fake it.

She lays her hand over his and gives it a quick squeeze before turning and going back to the room. She takes a t-shirt and her sleep shorts into the bathroom with her; she's not very hungry and there's no point in getting dressed just to get changed again.

A week ago she would have been more worried about him going off somewhere alone and not coming back. She's still a bit uneasy about it, but she feels like she owes him more of her trust. Nothing much has changed since Bismark; the addition of sex to this fucked-up codependence hasn't complicated things like she thought it would (so far). It's not a false sense of security, because she knows it isn't going to last.

Tomorrow is going to be not good, she thinks. They're going as far as they can go without jumping the border (and his brother had warned her that they were not under any circumstances to do that again). It isn't going to be enough for Sherlock, but he was half-crazed with the idea since leaving Minnesota.

She'll just have to deal with the fallout, whatever that is. If worse comes to absolute worst, she'll phone Mycroft and he'll have Sherlock sectioned, or something like it. The man has enough contacts that he'd be able to find somewhere discreet, she's sure.

She can't think about it.
She startles awake when she hears the key in the lock. It's just before midnight, so he's been gone about three hours. He doesn't say anything, but he knows she's awake. She watches him undress by the flickering light of the telly.

His skin is cold and he smells like the ocean when he slides into bed beside her. His hand burrows under her shirt and he presses his mouth against the back of her neck, but she doesn't get the feeling he's trying to initiate anything.

"Everything alright?"

"Mm. Over the course of the last five years they've found fourteen detached feet on the shores of the Salish Sea."

"Didn't find number fifteen?"

"No," he says, sounding mildly disappointed.

"Hmm." She feels herself dozing off again.

"Molly."

"Hmm?"

"Don't fall asleep yet." He starts to bunch up her shirt, trying to work it off of her.

"Aren't you tired?"

"Yes. I don't want to have sex. I'd simply rather you not be wearing a shirt."
"Oh. Okay."

She sits up and struggles her shirt off, made more difficult by Sherlock's 'help.' Once she's settled back on her side, he snakes his arm around her waist and pulls her flush against himself, his nose buried in her hair.

He's very affectionate in the dark, she muses. In daylight hours he touches her about the same amount he always has (although the hands on her shoulders linger just the slightest bit longer now, she thinks), but at night he can't seem to get enough of her skin.

"How are you different?" he murmurs into the back of her skull.

She thinks he's asking himself, muttering like he tends to do, and she'd rather not point out that she's not the one who's changed, he simply hadn't bothered to look before.

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Day 69

Cape Alava is the westernmost point in the continental United States. It's as far as they can go and not nearly far enough. Nowhere is far enough, and it took standing on the edge of the Pacific to see that.

His body is the cage his mind is trapped in; the whole planet is the cage his body is trapped in.

Molly's hand is cool and small in his as the tide rolls gently up the rocky shore, lapping at their bare feet.

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Saturday 25 August 2012 (Day 70)

"I found out what the 'team whoever' t-shirts mean," she says, getting back in the car. "Apparently
She hands him his coffee and fits hers into the cup holder. It started to rain while they were still in the forest, and they're both damp and cold. She'd really like a good cup of tea, but she needs the caffeine.

She's back to picking the destinations, and she wants to take some pictures for Jodi of Kurt Cobain's hometown, maybe phone her from underneath the bridge that the song was written about. Tomorrow, after they've had a good night's sleep.

"Whomever. A film?" He's trying to appear engaged, but he's far, far away.

"And books."

"Ah."

"Vampires. Good thing you have a tan, now, and you're not wearing that coat of yours, or I'd be pulling the girls off you left and right," she says, then cringes.

They don't talk about anything London; it's an unspoken rule. It also sounded vaguely possessive, and she doesn't want him to think that she thinks--

"You think I look like a vampire." It's a question.

"Not... exactly? I mean, a bit, maybe. More like Jonathan Creek now, though, with the hair." He desperately needs a haircut; he hasn't had one since London and he's forever pushing it out of his eyes.

He raises an eyebrow at her.

"The dim one from *QI*." He should remember that, they watched it the night before on BBC America. Rather, she watched it while he studied her fingertips (she thinks he was memorizing her fingerprints; he was very quiet, but at least he wasn't having a meltdown).
He looks mildly affronted, but that's a good sign.

"Maybe a bit more Robert Smith, or Tim Burton. Edward Scissorhands." she teases. Anything to cover up her minor misstep. "You can google them, I'll wait."

He frowns at her, but fishes his phone from his pocket. He snorts and scowls, then she hears the first strains of *Friday I'm in Love* coming from his phone.

"Switch seats. I'm driving. We're not listening to this, now or ever."

"Are you sure? I've got most of *Staring at the Sea* on my phone." She grins at him. He's going along with the distraction, which means he wants to be distracted, and she can do that.

"No." He draws out the word, his eyes going wide.

She laughs, then, and he smirks back at her. She remembers that they really are mates at moments like this (so few and far between), despite everything else. This is the feeling she has to hold on to in order to keep going.

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**Day 71**

"Molly."

"Hmm?" He feels her voice vibrate against his clavicle. He twists a strand of her hair around his finger.

"Do you want to go back?" He doesn't have to say where, she knows.

It is cool and very wet in Aberdeen; the bite of the wind and damp reminds them just enough of London. They've spent the morning curled together under the duvet, dozing and periodically trading soft kisses and caresses that don't lead anywhere. Homesick. He never imagined he'd find comfort in
"Do you?" Deflection. It's as good as a 'yes,' coming from her.

"Mycroft told you about the second one." He read it in her face when she returned from getting them breakfast.

Her arm tightens around his waist. "He did."

"Who's left?"

He already knows, he's known the order since the beginning (the most important would be the hardest to track down, Moriarty's finest). He's not sure why he's asking her. Testing her, maybe. Testing himself.

"You told me not to tell you."

"But you want to."

"Mm." Non-committal. She thinks she's protecting him.

He listens to the sound of her breathing, feels each exhalation through his t-shirt. She traces two branches of a y-incision over his chest. She has a skewed sense of romance, he thinks, but it suits her. Them.

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Wednesday 29 August 2012 (Day 74)

Sherlock's cough (and the fact that he's still smoking like a bloody chimney) is starting to worry her. His face is pale, forehead pressed against the window of the passenger seat. He looks young and small, hunched in on himself and wrapped up in a hoodie.
He insists he's fine, of course, and he tells her to stop nagging him. They're headed back to the coast, since Portland was full of boring, stupid people (she thought it was nice enough, though she wouldn't want to live that close to a volcano, dormant or not).

She doesn't think he's ever let himself get this close to another person, not even John. Then again, there's always a kind of manly distance best mates keep; part of the 'bro-code' (so many interesting phrases she's picking up), she reckons.

He doesn't really talk about his childhood, but the details from the papers and the few things he's mentioned paint a bleak, lonely picture.

He grew up in West Sussex, out in the country with no other children nearby. His brother must have left when Sherlock was only six or so. He hasn't said, but she thinks they might have been close, before that. His father died quite suddenly when Sherlock was fifteen (not at home, but with his mistress). She only knows the bit about his mother from the papers, but she's pretty sure that the woman had mental health issues for years before she died. He wasn't a swot, usually coming in near the middle of his class (she was willing to bet he calculated the mean and tailored his academic performance to fall as close to the centre point as possible, doing just enough work to get by without drawing attention to himself) until he got to uni, where he'd been top of his class until he was sent down.

Their lives had been very different, but she thinks they're the same at heart. Jodi was Dad's favourite, Neil was Mum's as soon as he came along, when she was almost six and Jodi was seven. Jodi was the wild child, Neil was the baby, and she was often overlooked because she was always the clever, responsible one (that's not to say her siblings are dim, Neil is a primary school teacher and Jodi was studying journalism before meeting Matt). She always worked hard to be the top of her class, and she always was, even though she wasn't the best or the brightest. She didn't have many friends, being 'Little Miss Perfect,' and everyone thought her odd for having her life mapped out since she was fourteen. She lied about wanting to be a pathologist, even though she knew that's what she wanted to do, because paediatrician was more believable and less... creepy.

The thing that makes them the same is the alienation, she thinks. He cultivated it, whereas she always tried to bridge the distance to other people.

She always kind of wondered if Sherlock recognized the way she was ‘other’ as well and tore her down because of it, like how children always single out someone smaller and weaker than themselves in the schoolyard to prove that they’re bigger and stronger. Like her freakishness was a painful reminder of how different he was, and maybe he was a little envious of how she was able to appear normal (or disappear completely), so he reminded her at every opportunity that she wasn’t so great.
She needs to rein herself in. She's projecting and trying to manufacture more of a connection than what they have now, which should be enough.

She wonders what enough actually is. She's had boyfriends that she loved, but it was never this big or all-consuming, or this exhausting.

Not that he's her boyfriend. She doesn't think he could ever be someone's boyfriend. Lover, maybe, but that sounds too tawdry. Significant other or partner, yes, but those positions are already filled, even if John's not in the picture at the moment.

Mycroft warned her that the third assassin would be extremely difficult to find. He has pieces of information, but she got the sense that his attention is divided among too many things for him to concentrate on tracking the person down. In this matter, Sherlock's immediate well-being is his priority, and his resources are finite.

Sherlock is wracked with another coughing fit. He resettles himself to face front, his head tipped back against the seat. He rubs his temples and pinches the bridge of his nose. She doesn't care what he says, they're getting a room in the next town they get to. He needs to rest.

They both need rest. Or maybe stability is a better word. Something other than endless hotel rooms with industrial carpeting and the same cream-coloured walls and pastel prints and the inside of this bloody car. Breathing room.

She ponders mentioning New York. He said early on that he'd consider living there. If they pushed, they could be there in four or five days. He's in no condition for that right now, though, so maybe it's best she doesn't say anything until he's better.

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Day 81

They're stuck in Florence, Oregon. The cold he thought he'd come down with in Washington has progressed into pneumonia. Molly does her best to keep him comfortable, even when he shouts at her.
She chatters on in her soft voice and strokes his hair with cool, gentle hands (soothing a child [she doesn't want children, she thinks it would feel like a parasite {all the better, easier to keep her}]); she tells him stories she picked up from the locals (her favourite was the exploding whale, she laughed all through her narrative, then found footage on YouTube and laughed even harder). It's better than telly (full of stupid, lazy accents and glib sensationalism).

He thinks he told her he loved her when his fever was spiking. He's not sure if it's untrue, now, and he doesn't mind her knowing. If any woman could be trusted with his heart, it would be Molly Hooper, without question.

His thoughts circle around those he loved, all lost to him now. He should be doing something. It's not Mycroft's responsibility, it's his. He's been running for months and he's tired. He can't outrun himself.

Before he changes his mind, he sends Mycroft a text, requesting all the information he has on the third and final sniper.

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**Tuesday 4 September 2012 (Day 87)**

She drives to the airport (really only a landing strip with an office and some hangars for small planes) to meet one of Mycroft's people. The woman is tall and honey-blond; she looks like she could have stepped off the cover of Vogue. She's sharp and all business; there's a handshake and a hand-off and she's back to her waiting plane.

She can feel the weight of the two memory sticks in her front pocket on the way back to the motel. They're more than plastic and circuitry, they're a way *home*.

Sherlock is more Sherlock than he's been in months, even though he's still quite unwell. His fever dreams had been the worst, shaking and gasping and going on about angels and demons and fairy tales, thrashing on the bed before pulling her against his sweat-soaked t-shirt and clinging like she was the only tangible thing in the world.

There's a familiar spark in his eyes, glazed over with sickness as they are. He'll be well enough to travel for a few hours at a time within a few days, she thinks, although she's going to try to keep him in bed as long as she's able so he doesn't overtax himself and end up in hospital. Getting him there the first time for a chest x-ray was bad enough.
Mycroft said he was arranging other accommodations for them, but he didn't give specifics. He explained that these things take time, as though expecting her to argue with him or, more likely, anticipating Sherlock's impatience.

She didn't like Mycroft very much at first, but she thinks she understands a bit more about him now. In an odd way they're kind of alike; their personal identities are firmly rooted in responsibility. She thinks he seeks it out, though, while she's more the type to be everyone's last resort.

She lets herself back in the room. Sherlock has showered in the half-hour she was gone. He's cocooned in the blankets of the second bed, the one she's been sleeping in (when she's able to sleep). She's been doing her own housekeeping, getting clean linens off the owner, Linda (a nice woman, about her age; it's a third-generation family business and the thirteen rooms of the motel are her pride and joy), who asks after Sherlock's health as though she genuinely cares. She'll have to go bother her again, since he's probably going to sweat through her sheets as well.

She's surprised he doesn't have his laptop set up and ready to go. She sets down the carrier bag from the chemist's (more tinned soup, nicotine patches, two new toothbrushes, Gatorade) and walks to the bed. She smooths his wet hair and gives him a kiss on the forehead; his arm circles her hips and he leans into her stomach. He uses his other hand to fish the memory sticks out of her pocket. He turns his face to look at them, flipping them over in his fingers.

"Do you want me to get your computer?" she asks, still stroking his hair.

"Not yet." His voice is hoarse, but his breathing is a lot better today. The steam from the shower always helps.

He tosses the memory sticks onto the armchair next to the bed and pulls her so she's off-balance. She flails for a minute and smacks her palm flat on the wall to keep herself upright. He exerts a constant pressure while he wraps his hand around the back of her knee, tugging a bit.

He likes when she's on top of him. He admitted he enjoys the weight and the solidity of her body pressing down on him. He was feverish and coughing into her shoulder when he said it, and it wasn’t very tactfully or succinctly worded, but she doesn't mind because she likes it as well.

"Shoes," she reminds. He lets go of her, only to start working the button on her jeans.
"Shirt too. All of it," he says, curling his fingers into the waistband of her knickers.

Oh. Well then. It's been almost two weeks (not counting the handjob she ended up giving him during a cuddle, which was a bit weird because that was when his fever was at its worst and it was kind of skeevy to do that to a sick person and enjoy it; he mumbled that he loved her afterwards, but she's been trying very hard not to think about that), and she's certainly not going to complain.

They don't kiss on the mouth, since he periodically has to cough and sometimes it's... productive, which should be more disgusting, but she is a doctor and she's seen him much worse off, so it's really not all that terrible. It's worth the attention he lavishes on her, like he's a starving man and she's a banquet.

* 

"Do you want your laptop now?"

She's changed the sheets on his bed and they've both showered (separately, because the intimacy of showering together would have been too much for her after playing nursemaid and having sex), and he's finished a slice of toast and most of an orange. She thinks he's avoiding looking at the files. If he wanted her to leave so he could be alone to do it, he would say so. Probably. Right?

He hesitates for a split-second. "Yes."

She fetches the laptop from the bedside table where it was charging, along with his phone and the other pillows so he can prop himself up and be more comfortable. He's shuffled over to the side of the bed with the armchair, digging the memory sticks out from where they fell behind a folded stack of clean clothing.

She tidies the room a bit to keep herself busy. Every time she glances over to him, she gets the distinct impression he's just looked away from her.

She decides it's best if she makes herself scarce for a few hours so she's not distracting him. It's a nice enough day, a bit overcast but not raining and a walk would do her some good.

*
She drives to the dunes. She really does like the ocean, always has. Yesterday was Labor Day and the unofficial end of the tourist season. The car park is deserted.

She scoops a handful of sand into a plastic bag. She's going to pour it into a jar and make a nice label that says 'Spice' and send it to Neil. She thinks he'll appreciate it, since he's always been a bit of a sci-fi nut and they both read all the *Dune* books when they were kids.

She hadn't expected she'd miss her family so much. She never really thought of herself as close with any of them, not like some of her mates' families. She's gone months without seeing them before, but she thinks it's made worse by knowing that she can't simply hop on a train and be on their doorstep in a couple hours' time if she needs to be.

She hopes Sherlock is able to find the last assassin and that he decides to return to London and find a way to clear his name, rather than drifting through the pale existence he has been, even if it means losing him.

She's been pushing all the thoughts of what might come after to the back of her mind, but she's going to have to face them sooner or later. Not today, though. It's getting close to sunset and she doesn't want to end up spraining an ankle while trying to clamber her way back to the car in the dark.

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**Day 94**

Mycroft has set them up in a house in Boulder (two bedroom bungalow in a middle class neighbourhood, fully furnished, company house [Montpelier Geochemical, as it states on his visa] for short-term residents [CIA probably, could be Interpol]). He's got contacts there ('minor' government officials) with access to classified information, which it's understood he'll trade favours for (a complex currency, he doesn't like the exchange rate from himself to Mycroft to a third party, but needs must). It's far from ideal, but he needs a place to work that isn't a run-down motel room or the passenger seat of a car, and he needs the information.

He doesn't have a name yet, but he will.

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Sherlock is deep inside his own head, stretched out on the bed in his 'office,' fingers steepled under his chin. He's not lost in his mind like she’s seen him before, he's working. It's a bit odd, but he looks almost like a different person, like he fits inside his skin the right way again. Helps that he got a haircut, she thinks. He really did look a bit wild.

He already told her he won't be eating tonight; she goes to the supermarket and buys ingredients (pasta, veg, chicken), not prepared meals. She's not a great cook, it's never been something that interests her, but after months of salt and grease and high-fructose corn syrup, she's ready for real food.

The end is in sight, she thinks. It's a relief beyond measure and it's killing her at the same time. She doesn't know what she's going to do with herself. Her life will be hers once again. She'll be going home. She'll probably be able to get her job back at Bart's, maybe even without Mycroft's help.

Sherlock isn't quite himself yet, but he's getting there. A bit like coming out from under anaesthesia, clawing his way into consciousness.

She doesn't know what will happen when they return to London. No, that's not true, she does. Time will reset itself back to June, to the day before she opened her mouth to offer support because she couldn't stand to see him looking so sad. A glitch in the Matrix.

She's been in relationships that were over long before the actual breakup, and going through the motions (clinging to that last bit of hope) is the worst part. She does it though, every time, because she thinks it will lessen the pain overall. Going out with a whimper instead of a bang.

She'll be civil about everything, should their paths cross after (and if she's back at Bart's they will, sooner or later). If he needs her help again for anything, she'll give it freely, because that's who she is.

She shouldn't be angry at him or herself (it's pointless, irrational, doesn't solve anything), but she is. He shouldn't have got them into this in the first place. He shouldn't have asked her to come along, he shouldn't have kissed her. She should have had some bloody self-respect and said no to everything.

For one terrible moment, she wishes she never met him, then immediately regrets it. It wasn't all bad.
She was special, if only for a little while. She had a precious thing all to herself for months, she'd seen and done more in that time than most people do their whole lives.

She's not very hungry any longer, so she settles for a cup of tea. Proper tea, not iced or the stale, astringent rubbish found in petrol stations and diners. She doesn't bother with the telly, she's seen enough repeats of *The Simpsons* and grizzly, toothless men wrestling alligators into boats to last a lifetime.

She stretches out on the sofa and shoves the cheap earbuds she bought somewhere along the way into her ears, thumbs open the folder of all the music Sherlock found intolerable, and tries to find the person she was before all this began.

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**Day 99**

Molly tries to help, but she's too tidy. She organizes information like paperwork, rows and columns and charts and outlines. She doesn't ask enough of the right questions. He shouts until she leaves him be, but he'll make it up to her later (only when he needs to step back from analysis and connections and let his mind rest like a strained muscle; sex has not yet become routine enough to be numbing, but is as bad for brainwork as any other indulgence [minus stimulants]).

He needs to clear his head completely, let the cool-dry wind blow the fog out of his mind. The climb up the trail between the first and second Flatirons is somewhat tedious, but invigorating nonetheless. He surveys the city, low and wide and sickly yellow in the early autumn light. It's beautiful and horribly wrong.

He's no longer running; this is exile. He can't return to London yet.

He still doesn't have a name, but he has a map and a timeline. The records have been altered, but he wouldn't expect less for Moriarty's pet assassin. He's obviously a favourite, he's been utilized heavily since 2005 (more, in the beginning; only for the most important things as time went on and Moriarty's empire grew). While Sherlock was busy losing himself to drugs and clawing his way into Lestrade's good graces, Moriarty had already been piecing together his syndicate, spinning his web.

Nauseating, to think that he hadn't noticed. He may have, if his head hadn't been elsewhere. Dwelling in regrets is pointless.
Supine on sun-warmed sandstone, he strolls the halls of his Mind Palace, prying loose the boards on everything that is London. There is more information there, perspective from more vantage points than the simple data Mycroft’s people provided.

He runs through crime scenes and cases, picking up threads and stringing them behind him, pulling new-old details along with him as he moves from room to room.

He stumbles down the trail by the light of the full moon, back to the car (Molly's sunglasses clipped to the visor, spare change and a folded gum wrapper in the centre console, maps wedged into the pocket in the passenger door, everything else neat as a pin; she cleaned out the inside of the car yesterday for something to do), back to the house.

Molly inspects him at the door, worry on her face. She's eased somewhat since he's himself again, but her constant vigilance has been replaced with a new kind of tension, waiting for the other shoe to drop and those last few parts of him to snap back into place and dismiss her as he had before.

It would be so much easier if he could.

He combs his fingers through her hair, draws her close. He's been pulled away from his thoughts by the simple, automatic act of driving (it requires just enough attention to be a nuisance); he could go back but he'll only be dragged away again by the needs of his body for food and sleep, and the need for Molly.

Arousal hums under his skin, slow and warm and aching. He leads her to the bedroom (they still share, the other is where he works; too many windows in the lounge and too many friendly neighbours) and strips her out of her pyjamas (new, cotton flannel; the nights are growing cooler), tastes her clean-salty skin until she moans and shakes apart (there's no challenge in pleasing her; the satisfaction he derives from it is something more primal).

He pulls her into his lap and she slides onto him, more gently than the first time, but with the same sharp, urgent quality. He encourages her with rough words and blunt teeth until she clenches tight around him, but he's determined not to finish yet. He rolls her onto her back and rests on his heels, watching the movement of her small breasts, her bared throat, her hands fisting in the pillow above her head as he holds her hips in place.

She's beautiful like this, letting the layers of insecurity and nervousness and conditioning drop away until she's wild with nothing but her desire for him. He covers her, she twines around him, and he
never has words for the feeling of complete acceptance in the moments before passion overtakes him and he drives into her harder, as though he can fuck himself deep enough inside her that he'll leave a permanent space for himself.

She responds so sweetly to her name like this, urging him to fall with his own name in kind, and with the pull of her third climax, he does, in thick, shattering pulses.

He used to hate the finality of ejaculation, even as a spotty, hormonal teenager. Now, with Molly stroking through his hair and her heartbeat strong under his sweaty cheek, he knows it to be a coda before intermezzo.

It's always slower the second time, languorous and indulgent. There's a small voice just under the surface of his mind that tells him this will be the last time. He's very close to a name, he's got the profile and background (like a photograph with a blurred face), he only needs one more piece and he'll be able to find him. The world will tilt back to its correct axis and everything will change. His life as Sherlock Holmes will resume.

Molly, ever-perceptive, feels it as well. She sucks and bites marks into his skin, a temporary claim. He does the same, a promise that won't last. He lets himself love her, lets the feeling wash over them both, and for a moment he wants so badly to be this man, to be able to chose this over everything else, but there is no choice to be made. He is as he's been created (by himself and the world), and there is only one way for him to be.

After, they lie in silence, her head over his heart. When he wakes, he'll begin packing it all away, closed up in stainless steel drawers in the sterile and brightly-lit morgue, covering it over with the scent of antiseptic and decay (as it should be).

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Monday 23 September 2012 (Day 100)

She watches him and she knows. It's almost too much.

It has to be this way, though, she thinks. He has a job to do, and he’s putting all his walls back in place so he can function. She wishes she could tell him that it doesn’t have to be like that, but she can’t see it being any other way.
She knows the things people have to do in order to maintain impartiality and clinical detachment. Sometimes one has to see people as things (tools or puzzles or anything other than the sum total of their experiences as a human being) in order to get things done. The bodies she’s autopsied are people before and after, but while she’s working, they’re objects; a collection of component parts, a container for all the bits she has to measure and examine and take samples of. It’s not something she would ever admit to anyone.

He has a way of compartmentalizing things to keep his mind ordered and focussed. She doesn’t think he would be able to balance her as a lover with her as another tool at his disposal, and she thinks he would try to keep it separate. She can’t be two different people to him at the same time.

Really, it’s probably better it ends here and now. He’s not going to be the same man when they’re back in London. She’s not going to be the same woman. They’ll pretend, though, because they’re good at that.

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Day 101/Day 0

Mycroft brings to his attention the ballistics report from a recent murder in London. He knows who the killer is, and he knows how he can find him now. Sloppy; a personal vendetta (a wild beast without a master to stay his hand).

He buys himself a new suit and makes flight reservations while it's being altered, then texts Mycroft to have his coat cleaned and ready for him by the time he arrives at Baker Street.

Molly stares resolutely ahead through the windscreen as she drives him to Denver. She parks in the passenger pick-up and drop-off area; she won't see him off at the gate. He has a small carry-on and nothing more; he has no need for any of the clothing he wore here.

She stands huddled in the rain, the charcoal hoodie he wore when he arrived at Newark providing little protection from the weather. It's not purely a gesture of sentiment, she hasn't bought a proper coat yet. Her mouth is pressed into a grim line of acceptance.

His last goodbye to someone he cared about was jagged and tearful, his life quickly unravelling around him. Now he's knitted it back together and there's no place for that.
He stands in front of her, bends to kiss her cheek formally. He doesn't thank her, the words would catch too thick in his throat. When he straightens, he sees the first tear spill over her lashes.

He pushes away the emotion threatening and walks briskly toward the airport, already turning out lights and slamming doors in his Palace closed behind him.

Wednesday 26 September 2012 (Day 102)

She's raw and sick from crying three months' worth of tears. All his clothing is sorted for the charity shop, his toiletries disposed of, his suitcase now filled with the odds and ends she picked up along the way (waste not, want not); the beds have been stripped and everything washed and put away in cupboards for the next guests, the kitchen and bathroom have been scrubbed. The pictures and sticky notes have been taken down from the wall and burned in the back garden. It's amazing what one can accomplish when one doesn't sleep.

Now all she has to do is wait for Mycroft's instructions.

She's so ready to go home, but she's afraid of it all the same.

She's still worried about him; what if the man he's after gets to John before he does, what if Mycroft's people haven't been able to clear Sherlock's name (three months hardly seems like enough time to do it); what if, what if, what if.

The worst bit, the absolute worst, was knowing that it hurt him to leave her. It would have been so much easier if he was truly the cold, unfeeling bastard everyone thought him to be. God, he didn't even try to hide the gratitude and the pain in his eyes. Then again, he's many things, but merciful isn't usually one of them.

Her thoughts are swirling out of control, snatches of memories of him tangling into a giant knot of longing. She has to stop it.

She's been relying on movement and distraction to get her through for so long, she doesn't know what to do with herself now that she's alone in this empty house. She doesn't know how to be alone again, full stop.
Maybe she needs one more distraction. A last hurrah, since she doubts she'll ever come back to the States. A proper holiday, where she can relax and enjoy herself and find the shape of herself as herself, not Sherlock's (lover) minder.

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Day 103/ Day 2

John blinks, sways on his feet, grips the door frame as his knees go weak, then laughs like a maniac while insulting him in increasingly more colourful fashion. He grins in return and everything rights itself. John grabs his gun and scrawls a note for Harry, and then they're off into the cool, damp London night.

Mrs. Hudson was warned of his return in advance, and she fussed and clucked over him like a son just back from his first term at school when he collected his coat.

Capturing Moran is easy. There's a scene, of course, but by then Mycroft's people have already whisked the unconscious body away. Donovan and Anderson's faces are priceless, as is Lestrade's (off duty, brought his own car; he suspects Mycroft's involvement).

John nags him for his after-dinner cigarette (he'll quit again, this is the last) and eyes the marks on his neck (doesn't ask; he will eventually) and they return to Baker Street for milky tea and bad telly.

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Friday 28 September 2012 (Day 104)

Mycroft's assistant phones; Sherlock is safe, John is safe, the man Sherlock was after is in custody, all is right with the world.

An agreement is reached about her travel plans. She has nine days; her flight information will be sent to her in an email. Everything in London is as she'd left it, her former supervisor will be in contact regarding her reinstatement. Mr. Holmes considers the matter concluded.
She loads her suitcases in the boot of the car, adjusts the mirror, slips her sunglasses on. There's a storm on its way in from the north, it might snow. She's chasing the warmth south, even though the summer is over.

She plugs her phone into the radio and turns the volume up, then turns it down to a more comfortable level when she realizes that she only did it to be spiteful to someone who isn't there.

No matter. One step at a time.

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**Day 105/ Day 4**

He wakes with a start, ready to grumble at Molly for--

Oh.

Odd, that, how quickly it became so commonplace. He sags back against the pillows, the colour of the mid-morning light washing his room in grey half-tones. He's on the left side of the bed. He moves to the centre, sprawls across cool Egyptian cotton and breathes in his own scent, faint from three months of absence.

John isn't there, he's back at Harry's packing his things. It's Thursday, Mrs. Hudson is taking lunch with Mrs. Turner, no doubt flushed with happiness that she has her boys back.

London traffic, London pedestrians, the knocking of the pipes as the heating kicks on again; old wallpaper paste, furniture polish, rosin, and tea; his senses are flooded with *right* and *comfort* and *home*.

There is nothing missing (sun-warm hair under his lips, Clinique Happy, soft breath and strong heartbeat). He is home (the heat of her mouth, salt of her skin, bodies pressed tight together). The marks will fade, his tan will fade, the ache will fade. Three months is hardly anything; one month is nothing.
Wednesday 3 October 2012 (Day 109)

She stands on London Bridge and laughs. Part of it is exhaustion, since she's found herself keeping the same frantic pace in her sightseeing as they did before; part of it is genuine mirth from the absurdity of someone buying a bridge and shipping it across the ocean and putting it in the middle of the desert; part of it is something brittle and bitter because she can't help but think of Sherlock and what he would have to say about it.

Only a few more days and she'll be standing on her London Bridge, and this will all be just a collection of weird memories.

Day 118/ Day 17

His return is kept out of the media for the most part. In the time he was away, Mycroft had filed a libel suit, retractions were printed, he and John were exonerated for the kidnapping, and the general public had quickly forgotten who Sherlock Holmes was.

The process of rebuilding is going as well as could be expected; laborious, tedious, and entirely too slow. Heads have rolled at the Yard and Lestrade is to be reinstated. Moran is 'cooperating' in exchange for protection from extradition to six other countries, only two of which have laws against capital punishment.

Moriarty was not as careful in his creation of Richard Brook as he should have been, enough to fool the press and Scotland Yard, but not Mycroft's forensic accountants; a sign of his decaying mental state, no doubt (once he would have crowed over that, now he is simply relieved).

The identity of James Moriarty is still a puzzle, and one he will chip away at in idle hours, but it's no longer a priority. The criminal underworld is unstable on an international scale, various syndicates vying to fill the vacuum left by Moriarty; that shifting landscape should be enough to keep him occupied for some time.
He gets a text from his brother stating that Molly is on a return flight from Los Angeles (she went to see the stars and the sign; he stops himself from picturing her fitting her hands inside some starlet's handprints or snapping photos of every building she ever saw in a film and grinning like she was half-mad; no matter). It's of little consequence, that part of his life is concluded.

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Thursday, 1 November 2012 (Day 138)

Jodi phones and invites herself down for the weekend, which is fine. She hasn't seen her in person in close to seven months. She makes a shopping list (ice cream, new bottle of Jack Daniels, Diet and regular Coke, fresh pack of cigarettes) for the morning, tidies, then sits down with her laptop to organize all the photos she took. She's already sent her sister some, but there are more she knows Jodi will enjoy (and she'll be a little envious of, which is satisfying on a very childish level).

She hasn't been able to do this until now. She's not trying to forget, but she's trying very hard not to remember specific things. It helps that she doesn't have any photos of Sherlock (even she wasn't stupid enough to take pictures of a dead man).

She's not going to tell Jodi anything about Sherlock, or about her 'job.' Her sister won't care anyway, after two drinks she'll start in on Matt and how he's always trying to buy the boys off, or Dave and whatever habit of his is up her arse that week, or how Neil’s girlfriend loves to spend his money. Jodi will sleep it off for most of Saturday, and thankfully she couldn't beg off work, so she only has to worry about Sunday morning's conversation. She'll think of something, she always does.

She's made it through to Iowa (musing over some of her odd choices of subject and angle) when she gets to a picture that makes her gasp (then feel like a tit at her reaction to it). It's mostly blurred blue sky, framed in the top corner by the interior of the car. Sherlock's profile is reflected clearly in the window, his lips quirked in a soft smile.

She remembers that she was trying to get a picture of a yellow water tower painted with a smiley face. The windows were up because he always had the air conditioner turned to bloody Arctic when he drove; she'd leaned around him a bit to get the photo since it really wasn't worth finding a place to stop and take a proper one.

She doesn't remember him smiling, but then again, she hadn't really been paying attention to him. She'd automatically saved the picture without looking at it, just like she always did.
She feels the pressure in the bridge of her nose, but she's not going to cry. She knows her way around a break-up, and this is really only part of the process. Sometimes something she sees or smells or hears is going to snag on a memory and pull his absence to the forefront of her mind; she can’t stop it any more than she can stop a sneeze. It gets easier with time.

She moves the file to a separate folder, burying it inside a sub-folder of another folder with all of her boring work documents (evaluations and email exchanges and the like).

She takes a deep breath and moves on to the next photo, a plaque commemorating a bank robbed by Bonnie & Clyde.

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**Day 157/ Day 56**

He strolls into the morgue, Lestrade and John in tow. There's a body, a string of unimaginative serial murders (six different possibilities so far, four already discarded on the cab ride).

He stops short. She's not supposed to be here. He memorized her shifts and took pains to juggle his experiments so this wouldn't happen.

His vision narrows to the contrast of black and white; Molly's white coat next to the black body bag, his black coat and black suit in the vast white room.

Her smile is bland and pleasant (the one she uses for strangers) as she turns toward him. It changes with recognition; her lips part then press together, settling back into something trying for friendly, but too jagged around the edges. He can't meet her eyes.

The oxygen rushes back into the room as the door to the mortuary squeals open (they won't oil it; don't want to give anyone a fright with a sudden visitor [Stamford's cheery explanation]) and John and Lestrade make their appearance.

Pleasantries are exchanged as she clutches her clipboard, knuckles white; he cuts it off, impatient to see the body (prescribed, of course; if not for them he'd still be standing there, rooted to the spot).
Bright red and purple lividity, found face-down on Peckham Rye Common, details and cataloguing (takes very little brainpower after all; already saw what he suspected he'd find but he needs another minute to sort himself).

Lestrade is making small talk, flashing his easy grin at Molly (divorce finally gone through). His hackles rise; he stands straight and strides past them, out the doors and through the corridor. In total, he's in the mortuary for four minutes.

They catch up, he rattles off what he knows, where Lestrade can find the killer and the next intended victim, case closed, hardly worth his time; everything is baseline, back into the blur of grey and splotches of colour that is London.

John knows, put the pieces together when he found out from Stamford that Molly had returned from a job in the States that she hadn't fit into half as well as Bart's. He told John then in no uncertain terms that the matter was closed.

They're in the cab for two minutes before John comments.

"Going to grind your teeth to powder, you keep that up."

He ignores him and traces the outlines of buildings with his eyes.

"You- you didn't even say hello to her, did you?"

Oh, soon it will be the righteous indignation in the form of a rhetorical question-

"You've not spoken to her at all since she's been back, have you?"

-and he'll dictate the proper behaviour for delicate social situations-

"You can't- you can't just ignore this, Sherlock. You have to at least acknowledge her."

-cue indifferent rejoinder-
"Why bother? She's obviously aware by now that whatever happened is long over and there's nothing to say about it."

-indignant sputtering, angry acquiescence-

"Nothing to-? Unbelievable. Nothing-- No, nevermind. Just keep deleting--" Purses his lips, pulls his chin to his chest, shoulders squared.

-and scene.

They exit the cab and retire to different areas of the flat; John to the kitchen, himself to the lounge. He considers his violin, but that would tell John entirely too much. Instead, he checks his email, then picks up a book. He stores what he reads on reflex while his mind circles back to the brief encounter with Molly.

Hair back, tight to her skull, lighter from the sun but darker at the roots. Tan almost faded to nothing. No lipstick, cherry lip balm. Hideous floral print blouse, white cherry-motif cardigan, black wide-leg trousers. Clinique Happy. Her fake smile, forced cheerfulness. An awful, flat joke about being back in the land of the living. Deliberately not looking at him, not even to steal a glance.

He checks his watch. Her shift ends in an hour (unless she's pulling a double [had done before instead of asking someone else to switch; most likely scenario]); revised to thirteen hours; forty minutes to get home, ten for tea and toast, twenty to shower and get ready for bed; asleep for five, toilet, glass of water (+/- an hour for telly or reading if she's troubled [she will be]), back to sleep for another four. Useless calculations, he won't go and see her.

He can't. One moment of weakness that leads to another and another, he knows what happens. He rubs the patch on the inside of his forearm, wishing for a cigarette.

It's simple physical release his body craves, not the feel of her skin under his palms or her lips against his. Sexual desire is easily understood and overcome, or if too strong, taken care of expediently (although it was only six days since his last orgasm, in the shower, forcing himself to concentrate on physical sensation and not falling prey to the weakness of memory [the water had gone cold; lied to John later, told him it had been for an experiment]).

Thirty-eight days. That was all, the sum total of time spent as not-himself that overlapped with the
time he spent with carnal knowledge of Molly Hooper. He'd been back in London longer than that.

She is no longer a mystery, nothing left to discover about what makes her act and react, no previous assumptions left to be overwritten with new and accurate data.

She isn't an engaging conversationalist (sentences dropped and revised mid-thought, tripping over the easiest phrases); her attempts at humour are morbid, awkward, and ill-timed, best avoided entirely; and, though her capacity for analysis and retention is higher than most, he has others to talk to. It doesn't matter that her voice is soft and melodic, or that some of her jokes are amusing, or that he doesn't always need to speak in her presence to be understood.

Just because he experienced feelings of a fond, loving nature doesn't mean that he's *in* love with her, or that there is any kind of equality or reciprocation of those feelings. She said it the first night, after the storm -- she'd thought she loved him, but hadn't known him; she loved him as he was then, the man who was a shadow of his current (and former) self. A man who no longer exists.

This fact shouldn't stick in his throat like it does.

There's no comparison of the feeling of loss, not even to that he experienced while he was away, not to that of Irene Adler when he thought her dead. Those were sudden, sharp sensations. This is something dull and deep and *wrong*, like the thick feeling in his chest when was developing pneumonia.

It's Post Acute Withdrawal Syndrome from the soup of neurotransmitters and hormones that swamped his brain (not exactly, but close enough; better to think of it as such than something distasteful like 'heartbreak').

John watches him now, more closely than in the first few days after his return, made even more curious by his reluctance to talk about his time abroad. There's nothing to tell (I lost my mind and I let Molly hold onto it for a bit, but then I got it back, and yes, I did see both the world's largest fibreglass Holstein cow and the only museum in the world dedicated to black velvet paintings, it was quite the spiritual journey). John knows of the three assassins, but he doesn't know that Mycroft's people took out the first two. He'll find out eventually, as Mycroft is prone to gloating when he's of a mind, but until then, it's best to let him keep thinking that Sherlock Holmes is a hero. Better than the alternative.

There's still the work, of course; it's not as if he's cast himself upon the sofa, pining like Victorian heroine.
Angelo makes a bit of a scene with hugging and tearing up (it's undignified, but it's also a trait of the culture he was raised in, so it's tolerable); he still puts a candle on the table.

It's not until the food arrives that John's expression indicates he's going to broach a delicate topic.

"Could do worse than Molly Hooper, you know," John begins lightly as he surgically quarters a meatball.

"I'd rather do without entirely."

A pause, John considers as he chews.

"It's not a weakness to care about people. And before you say anything, you know that's absolutely true or both of us wouldn't be sitting here now. You obviously still care about her."

He should deny it entirely; the lie feels wrong on his tongue. "Your point?"

"My point is that you don't have to be miserable. The world isn't going to end because Sherlock Holmes gets a leg over."

"Eloquent as always, John. Women are a distraction, and I can't be distracted. Not my area, married to my work, I believe we've had this conversation before, although we did have a better table at the time."

"And yet you figured it out about Moran, in what, two weeks? - when your brother had three months and probably half of MI6 on it? I'd say that's not too bad, considering."

Mycroft told John some of the details, then. Irrelevant, though irksome.
"Eight days, actually, from the time I got the complete files. It would have been considerably less had Molly not been there."

It's a small lie; she let him be (lost half a day at most to her attempts to help). He would have needed sleep at some point, regardless of her presence, so it ultimately didn't matter that he did so in the bed they shared (with her fitted snugly against him, also of little consequence).

"Ah. You do realize that right now you're talking complete bollocks, right? Don't forget, I have personally witnessed you ignore entire rooms full of people, not to mention the fact that you completely tune me out whenever you're lost inside that massive brain of yours."

"If you wouldn't be so dull all the time, I wouldn't have to."

"Right, yes, of course." Sarcasm, followed by another forkful of pasta. It's a tactical retreat; he'll bring it up again later.

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He huffs and turns over; he can't get comfortable in the centre of the bed. He thought the glass of Scotch after dinner would help him sleep, but he was wrong.

He can't get her out of his head. Her scent, her smile, her presence; he misses her. It's a craving, and he knows how to fight cravings.

God, he doesn't want to fight it. He wants to give in, take a cab to her flat, crawl into her bed and bury himself inside her, feel her body thrashing under his as he brings her to orgasm over and over until she's delirious with pleasure and the only thought on her mind is his name, and then after, when she kisses him so sweetly and nuzzles into his neck, her thin arms wrapped around him, holding him together--

This is why love is dangerous; it's the original addiction, honed over hundreds of thousands of years of evolution, his stupid monkey brain hard-wired for the desire to mate, speedballing on the hit of dopamine and the calming effects of oxytocin. He wonders vaguely what it would feel like to take her from behind like an animal, to sink his teeth into her shoulder while rutting into her--

Ugh. He's not going to get any sleep now, not until he takes care of himself. He never should have
let her get so close, it was like a Pandora's box had been opened and twenty years of repressed sexuality had come pouring out.

He gives in with a sigh and grabs a handful of tissues from the box beside the bed, then pushes his pyjama bottoms down along with the bedcovers. He runs through remembered images and sensations, her breasts and mouth and the wet, clinging heat of her around his cock; at least it doesn't take him very long this time.

He drops the tissues in the bin by the side of the bed and flops back against the pillows, winded and sweaty and aching somewhere deep inside.

He's suffering when he shouldn't be; what he wants is within his reach. Possibly.

She hasn't made any effort to contact him since she's been back. He has the terrible thought that she’s happy to be rid of the burden (unfairly placed upon her) of keeping him from going over the edge.

She's probably already moved on, at any rate. He doesn't even know if she's dating anyone, or gone on any dates; he failed to observe anything of note because he was so entrenched in his own emotions.

And that, that right there is the problem. He doesn't like blindspots. Iren- The Woman had been a blindspot, and he almost lost because of it. Caring is not an advantage, and it's been proven to him time and again. No one can be allowed to have that much power over him, not even someone as responsible as Molly.

No, Molly wouldn't take advantage of him. He knows her. If anyone would abuse their connection, it would be him, as he had almost constantly since first meeting her. He's not a good man, he's never been a good man, nor will he ever be, and Molly deserves that. She deserves better than him and he hates that, because the thought of her finding someone else is like... He doesn't know what it's like, but it makes his blood boil and his skin crawl and his stomach sink.

He's not going to think about it any longer. It's over. Next time he sees her he's going to read what she'd done and where she'd been and not think about her as a person at all, he'll be 'back on his game,' and everything will be normal.
She passes John in the corridor on her way to the ladies' after she's left Nick to sew up and put away her last cadaver of the day. He's got two cups of coffee from the canteen; preparing to be there a while, then. They exchange polite smiles and greetings before she ducks into the toilet.

She wonders if it would be weird if she dropped in to see what Sherlock is working on. It shouldn't be, really, she's not going to try flirting with him or bring up the past or anything stupid. If they're going to be in the same place at the same time, they'll both have to get used to it sooner or later.

Really, seeing him for the first time again hadn't been excruciating. Surreal and painful, but bearable, even if Sherlock was short with her and refused eye-contact. He seemed a bit shaken by it, but he'd never been through this kind of thing before, so she supposes it was to be expected.

When she walks into the lab, she interrupts some kind of hushed argument between Sherlock and John. Sherlock is scowling and sour-faced, John tries to look nonchalant.

It's probably too much to hope for that they weren't talking about her.

"So, um, interesting case?" she asks, putting more enthusiasm into her voice than she feels.

Sherlock gives her a once-over, his eyes hard and sharp. She knows that look; it's been a very long time since it's been turned on her. It doesn't matter, she's got nothing to hide. She waits for him to point out some tiny flaw in her appearance and make her feel terrible for it, but he only hums neutrally and turns back to the microscope.

"Bit early for people to be sending Christmas cards, isn't it?" he asks, his voice overly casual.

Ah. There it is.

"Birthday, actually," she says, trying not to sound contrite. No reason for him to remember or anything.

A fleeting look of annoyance passes over Sherlock's face. "Who sends a thirty-three year old woman..."
"a birthday card with glitter on it?"

"My older sister. Strange sense of humour," she says, directing it more at John, who's watching her.

Well, if by ‘strange’ she meant ‘annoyingly diminutive’ (the card has a fairy princess in a pink gown on the outside and some disgustingly twee rhyme about little sisters on the inside)... But they hardly need to know that.

"So, um, what are you looking at?" she asks, glancing to Sherlock, whose attention is focussed on the slide in front of him, then back to John.

"Horse shit," John answers lightly.

"Horse-?"

"Proving that a groom has been tampering with the feed of a racehorse to throw the Welsh National," Sherlock says, sounding bored as ever.

"And you can guess who got to collect the sample," John says dryly.

She snorts a laugh and quickly covers her mouth; she doesn't know why she's embarrassed by it, it's not as though she has any semblance of dignity to preserve in front of Sherlock, and John is... Well, she doesn't really care if John thinks she's uncouth.

Sherlock ignores them both; John's eyes dart between her and Sherlock. The momentary silence stretches on uncomfortably before John licks his lips in preparation to speak.

She quickly clears her throat, denying him the chance to say anything. "I'll um, I'll just leave you to it, then. If you need anything, I'll be in my office."

_idiot_, she thinks to herself as she leaves the room. So much for keeping things normal; she thought she could pretend, but it's too much.
She pops into the lab when she's ready to leave for the day (or night, rather; she was caught up in research and didn't realize how late it had got), thinking she'll tidy whatever mess Sherlock has left, or say goodnight in the unlikely event they're still there (maybe if she exposes herself to him a little at a time, she'll build a tolerance).

Most of the lights are off; Sherlock sits in front of the computer typing away at something. The blue glow of the monitor makes him look alien and ethereal, so far removed from her memories of bright sun and tanned skin.

"Did you solve the case?" she asks quietly, taking a halting step toward him.

"Yes. The groom and the trainer were paid off by the wife of the owner. They weren't trying to kill the animal, only make it unfit for racing, apparently to teach the husband a lesson of some sort. Boring."

"Oh. Well, I'm um, heading out. Did you need anything before I go?" she asks. The question was more reflex than conscious thought; it's terrible of her, but she hopes he declines.

"Coffee," he says, standing.

"Oh. Ah, okay." It's a simple enough request. She looks around for John, thinking he's probably sleeping with his arms pillowed on one of the tables like he does. "Shall I get one for John?"

"Hmm? No. He has a date," he says distractedly, pulling on his coat.

"Are you leaving now?"

"The coffee across the street is better than the canteen's." He picks his mobile up off the table and checks it (habit) before slipping it into his pocket, then gestures to the door. "Shall we?"

"Um, okay?"
She trails along behind him, wondering if he'd waited for her. It hardly seems likely, but there they are. Maybe it's some sort of olive branch. She's not going to get her hopes up, though.

It's strange, she thinks, seeing him so animated as they walk through the corridors. He's fully present and focussed on what he's doing, with a sense of purpose to his stride. Good. It's good he's found himself again.

She thinks that some part of herself should be relaxing at that, the confirmation that he's back, even though she's known it for months. He's all sharp lines and contrast again, not the washed-out, grey man she'd known.

She's happy for him. She is. Even though it means the Sherlock that was hers for that little while is well and truly gone.

He holds open the exit door and his hand falls onto her shoulder as he follows her through, leaving it there as he guides her across the street. She can't feel the shape of his fingers through the bulk of her coat, only the weight; she clamps down hard on the memories of his hands on her skin.

He steers her into the café and orders their coffee (he remembers how she takes hers, but it's not significant, he'd brought her coffee a few times when he needed something before) and two pastries and tells her to grab them a table (even though they have their pick; it's near closing time and the few blokes in the back are just there waiting for their mates to get off work).

She takes a table by the window because she knows he likes to watch the street. She thanks him when she accepts her cup.

Sherlock doesn't say anything after he sits down, merely pops the lid off his cup to let it cool and eats his pastry. She tries not to stare at him; she's watched him eat a million times and it's not like she needs the reassurance that he's getting enough food now.

He puts the lid back on his coffee and takes a drink, gazing out the window.
His eyes grow distant and she has a moment of clawing panic, a knee-jerk reaction to that look. The 'I'm thinking about doing something stupid' look. She reaches across the table and covers the hand wrapped around his coffee cup. It's instinct to touch him, keep him grounded.

He refocusses on her, his eyes once again razor-sharp.

"Sorry," she says, withdrawing quickly. She clasps her hands together around her own cup and looks away, because this isn't then, and that's not how they are here.

After a moment's pause, he says quietly, "I was picturing it."

It takes her a second to understand what he's referring to, and then she realizes he's looking at the Old Pathology Building. The spot where he jumped. John was standing just outside, a few feet away from where they're sat.

"Oh god, I'm sorry, I wasn't thinking! We can, um, switch seats, if you want, or-"

"Molly." His tone is soft, holding no trace of scorn or reprimand.

"Sorry," she mumbles. She picks at the serrated edge of the paper wrapper over her pastry. She's not hungry.

Being here with him is harder than she thought it would be; the elephant in the room is just too big to ignore. She needs to find a way to broach the topic without sounding desperate or accusatory. Before, she would have made some silly observation or stupid joke, but those tactics are wrong now.

"I- I don't know how to do this," he says, breaking the silence. There's a raw note to his voice that she's only heard a few times before, the night before he jumped and those awful first days after.

She swallows thickly as her chest constricts. She has a sudden, terrifying thought that he’s going to ask for her help again. Maybe everything wasn’t cleared up as she’d been led to believe; thousands of possibilities run through her mind without taking shape. "Do- do what?"

"I can't reconcile your previous role in my life with what it became and what it is now," he says, his
frustration evident. He adds, muttering, "Not for lack of trying."

Oh. The knot of dread in her stomach loosens a bit.

"I um, I didn't think you wanted to ah, talk about it."

"I don't. I want it to make sense."

Bizarrely, it's like so many of their old conversations, times when she was hovering around him in the lab and he was ranting, flummoxed by some aspect of the human condition, like why John was ever-hopeful his sister had finally cleaned up her act when he knew she'd relapse at every major holiday (including anniversaries and birthdays), or why Greg went on holiday with his wife when she'd already been to the solicitor's for the divorce papers three times in the two years previous, or something irrational one of his clients had said or done in the name of love (of one kind or another).

She always glossed over it then, because she didn't know their exact reasons and it wasn't her place to speculate on other people's feelings. Usually by the time she thought of a diplomatically-worded response, he'd moved on to another topic anyway.

She can't do that now, though. Not after everything.

"I don't- I don't know what to tell you. It isn't- it's never easy. Sometimes it just... doesn't. Make sense."

She exhales heavly. She can feel tears threatening, which is stupid, she's not some fifteen year old going through her first breakup. She doesn't have to be the one in control all the time any longer, though, and apparently her body has recognized this and turned traitor.

"What kind of an answer is that?" He pins her with his gaze while still managing incredulity.

"The only one I have, I should, um, the bus will be here in a minute. Thank you for the coffee and the um, pastry," she says, scooping up her things.

She can't do this, not here and not now. She's a bloody coward.
She knows he's watching her as she hastily stands and straightens her coat and bag, and while she scurries to the door. She has to wait for the bus to pass before crossing the street, then jogs past the ambulance building to catch it.

She flops into a seat as the bus starts moving, then takes a minute to catch her breath. She's not that out of shape, but her heart is pounding in her ears.

Stupid, so stupid running off like that. Better part of valour, she tells herself, then remembers that stupid conversation months ago. Stupid, stupid, stupid, all of it. She had a chance to get it all out in the open, get some closure, and she blew it.

She sniffs and swipes at her cheeks, then presses the heels of her hands into her eyes to make herself stop. Deep breaths, watch the lights of the city go by out the window. It's fine.

She gets herself under control by the time she changes buses; from there it feels like it takes forever to get home. She's going to go straight to bed and sleep it off, or maybe fix herself a drink and finish the ice cream in the freezer first.

She doesn't see the figure crouched on her front step until she's right in front of him. She startles and clutches her chest as Sherlock unfolds himself to his full height. His dark hair and once-again pale skin and long coat make him look like something from an Edward Gorey illustration, but the effect is ruined by the pinkness of his cheeks and the tip of his nose.

He must have been there for fifteen or twenty minutes, if he took a cab. It's cold and damp and her breath fogs when she stammers, "Wha- what are y-"

"I have to know -- how you forget it. How to make it go away. Just- just tell me how you do it. Please."

He's worked himself into a state since she left him in the café. She can feel the misery pouring off of him in waves, and it's- she didn't realize he was still hurting so badly. She thought he moved on, but he'd only locked it all away like he had with the others. She should have known; repression was his coping mechanism of choice.

Her heart aches for him, but he deserves an honest answer. "It- it doesn't go away. You just... keep going."
"I've tried. Everything else has gone back to normal, I have the work and I have John and London and Mrs. Hudson, but there's always something missing that wasn't missing before, and I thought my life would just close up around that space, but it gets bigger every time I see you," he says, growing more agitated as he speaks, shuffling from side to side because there's no room between the hedge and the wall for him to pace.

She opens her mouth to ask... something. Why, but why what, exactly, she doesn't know.

A door down the street opens and the neighbour steps out, led by his Golden Retriever (whose name is Molly, coincidentally) for her before-bed walkies.

"We should go inside," she says, conscious of the scene they're already making. This isn't the kind of conversation to have on a doorstep at half nine at night in the freezing cold.

His expression is wary; he hesitates before stepping aside so she can unlock the door. He trails behind her up the stairs and into her flat, scanning the room as she dumps her things on the table and hangs up her coat.

"So, um, tea?" she asks, grasping at some semblance of normalcy. She turns and bustles to the kitchen without waiting for his answer.

He follows, but stops to lurk in the doorway.

"I'm in love with you."

She freezes a foot from the sink and turns to look at him. He couldn't have just said that.

"I don't know what to do," he adds quietly; it sounds like some kind of shameful confession.

Her whole body flushes hot and her scalp prickles with something like fear (and maybe it is, a bit).

"I- I don't... I can't tell you what to do. I didn't think that you-" She gropes behind herself and finds
the worktop, then leans heavily against it.

She can't think straight; her heart feels like it's about to pound out of her chest. He misses her and he
loves her and he's admitting it but he doesn't know what to do about it; they're all facts without
context or meaning.

"What do you want, Sherlock? You have to tell me, because I don't- just tell me."

He looks at her, his expression open and vulnerable and searching; his eyes harden with resolve
before he draws a breath to speak.

"You."

It's so much like that night, the night everything changed, and when everything changed again, but
there are so many more layers to it now; he's not asking for her help, but for her and it's terrifying
and perfect and she's not exactly sure what to do with it.

She pushes away from the worktop and moves to stand in front of him. She lays a hand on his chest,
her eyes focussing on the red buttonhole of his lapel; his hand automatically moves to cover hers, the
leather of his gloves cold against her skin. They're both trembling a bit, though at least Sherlock has
the excuse of being outside for so long.

She finally tears her gaze away from his coat and looks up to his face. To anyone else, his expression
would be unreadable, she thinks, but she can see that he's anxious and hopeful and bracing himself
for the worst.

"Are you- sure? Because if you're not-"

His lips are on hers before she can finish her sentence, desperate, demanding, apologetic. It tells her
more than any words could. She kisses back, pouring every ounce of how much she'd missed him
into it.

They break apart, panting; Sherlock's hand cradles the back of her skull as he rests his forehead
against hers.
"I um, I think we're going to have to talk about this," she says when she's caught her breath. "You might want to take off your coat."

She doesn't know what about it he finds funny, but he huffs a quiet laugh before kissing her again, which is really more just smiling with their lips touching.

There are more kisses; sweet, happy ones and oh-god-I-missed-your-mouth ones that turn into we-shoulds and yesses and lead to teeth and tongues and open mouths, lips barely catching; eyes wide and sightless, straining and crying out and murmured words she never thought she'd have the chance to say or to ever hear.

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Day 164/ Day 63/ Day 1

He sits at Molly's tiny kitchen table shirtless, his hair wet, wearing only the blue hospital-issue scrubs he'd first arrived here in and wrapped in the blanket from the sofa, smoking one of her sister's cigarettes. The muscles of his thighs and arse and shoulders ache when he shifts in his chair. Every now and then he sees a white snowflake mixed in with the dull grey rain spitting down outside the window.

"I feel like I should be reading a map right now," she says around a mouthful of toast.

He graces her with a soft, genuine smile and sips his coffee.

There are things they'll have to figure out, almost impossible things like how they can make it work, but that will come later.

He didn't expect last night to turn out as it had. The suggestion of coffee was a peace offering of sorts; testing the waters. He needed to prove to himself that he could spend time in her company and maintain his composure without John as a buffer (or to witness and admonish him like a child later on, should he fail).

His own reaction to the building surprised him; he'd visualized it in his mind as he'd been planning everything, but he hadn't actually ever seen it from that angle and he relived the fall in a less visceral, almost detached sort of way. He understood then what it must have looked like for John, and a bit
what he'd put Molly through more than once.

And Molly...

She pulled him back, because that was what she always did. Because she loves him.

He rehashed the same argument with himself, logic warring with sentiment until he had to know how she, the more emotional of the pair of them, was able to deal with separation and loss when he couldn't.

Something in him broke just then, some remnant of that man he was (and wasn’t) pushing through to the surface and taking over, desperate to connect with her as he had before.

And then he upset her and she left and he couldn't let it be.

Everything felt like it was spiralling out of control in the cab and it only got worse as he waited for her to get home. He had to know; he thought there had to be some kind of trick normal people had intuitive knowledge of that made it easy, and he couldn’t ask John because he didn’t want his sympathy (not like after The Woman, months of sidelong glances and seemingly-innocuous questions skirting the issue of his emotional state).

Standing there in the doorway to her kitchen watching her, his mind flooded with memories, he'd felt the kind of certainty that came with an epiphany and he blurted out what he’d been trying to deny, needing her to understand how out of his depth he really was.

He gets up from the table and runs the end of his cigarette under the tap before binning it, then takes his mug and pads into the lounge to watch the news. It's too much to hope for that anything interesting is happening, but he finds he doesn't mind it so much today, since he's planning on taking Molly to bed again once she's finished with her breakfast.

It's strange, he muses as he settles on the sofa; it's both familiar and new at the same time. They know each other's habits and aversions and share a common dialect of non-words and body language, they know exactly how they fit into each other's space, but they're both trying to work out how to make sense of the people they were before, during, after, and now.

Her plate clinks against the bottom of the sink and she runs the tap; her stocking feet thump into the
lounge and she flops down next to him on the sofa. He finds her gracelessness in the morning ridiculously endearing.

"I hate polo necks," she says, apropos of nothing. She absently rubs the spot high on her neck his mouth returned to over and over during the course of their lovemaking.

"Wouldn't cover it anyway. Do that loose side-plait thing that makes you look twelve, if you need to hide it."

"Mm," she hums non-committally, then turns into him and burrows her arms under the blanket to encircle his chest.

After a bit of shuffling, he's on his back, Molly stretched out on top of him with one leg between his, the blanket wrapped around them both. He still doesn't fit right on her sofa, but he finds he's quite comfortable like this.

End Notes

The playlist for all the songs I had in mind while writing this is [here](#).

Cover art made by thecollapseinwonderland and used with permission; link to her own fanmix and the original art can be found [here](#).

Works inspired by this one

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