Summary

Sheldon's turning thirty. To Penny's shock, that's the age of a mid-life crisis for a theoretical physicist. She'll help Sheldon face himself and his biggest nemesis - Kripke and his widdicule.
The Webley Infraction

A/N: The story is told in continuous daily snapshots from the gang’s lives over three month periods.

Each day is separated by xTBBTx.
Other scenes taking place on the same day are separated by XxX

It’s not canon as eventually it becomes a Shenny.

Of course I don’t own The Big Bang Theory. I just like to play in their world.

I was about half in love with her by the time we sat down. That's the thing about girls. Every time they do something pretty... you fall half in love with them, and then you never know where the hell you are. ~J. D. Salinger, The Catcher in the Rye

xTBBTx

Penny came out of her apartment wearing ankle-breaking high heeled shoes and a clingy purple dress that ended at mid-thigh. Normally she didn’t go dancing mid-week but she felt too good to stay home. One phone call later and she had a group of girls ready to hit the clubs. She knew better than to approach apartment 4A to see what was up for ‘Anything Can Happen Thursdays’ since the last time she did Howard, Raj and Leonard followed her to the bar. It wasn’t that she didn’t like the guys’ company or had a problem with being seen in public with them; it was hard bringing her ‘A’ game man-hunting skills when Howard utilized his ‘charm’ on her friends.

Leonard she just felt sorry for since he was so awkward and shy. Penny wished he could take some lessons from Sheldon and at least find some way to entertain himself but that was like asking Howard not to make a pass at a woman in booty shorts. This was the one major difference between Leonard and Sheldon—Leonard liked people and wanted to be around them whereas Sheldon preferred to be alone. Penny wondered if Sheldon ever felt lonely. Surely he must, but she wondered how he ‘processed the emoting algorithm’ or however he defined emotions.

She made it barely three steps before the door in front of her opened and Howard and Raj stood in the entrance, seemingly stuffed into the doorframe.

“Why hello there pretty lady,” Howard preened. “Might I say you look smoldering this evening?”

“Hey guys. So what’s with you, tonight?”

“Well, as this is the third Thursday of the month we thought to ourselves ‘why spend the night indoors when we could be out and about experiencing all that the city has to offer’,” Howard drawled. Raj smiled and nodded his head enthusiastically. “So where are you going this evening?”

“Oh, out dancing with the girls. Kinda need to get out myself.” She looked at Leonard for help as he came to the door.

“That’s nice. I hope you have a good time,” Leonard smiled nervously although his brown eyes clearly communicated his understanding of her plight.

Howard smiled as he turned to face his friend. “Leonard,” he mumbled under his breath. “This could prove to be an adventurous night.”
“You’re engaged, Howard. Besides, sometimes it’s nice to have a mono-gender night, right Penny?”

“Sure. I’m in the mood for mono,” she said and made a series of kissing sounds.

“Penny,” said a voice from within the apartment. “The desire to—oh wait, a double entendre. You mean ‘mono’ as in singular while at the same time alluding to mononucleosis aka ‘the kissing disease’.”

“You got me Sheldon.”

“Oh Mistress Sarcasm, your language eludes me no longer,” he said to himself as he typed away at his computer.

“At least let us walk you to your car since we’re heading in the same direction,” Howard said.

Leonard took his keys from the bowl by the door. “Only we’re going straight to my car just so Howard doesn’t spontaneously get lost and follow you to your destination.” He gently pushed his two friends through the doorway. “‘Night Sheldon.”

Sheldon waited until the door closed and the voices and footsteps faded from his Vulcan hearing before he stopped typing and let out a Cheshire grin.

“Alone at last,” he purred to himself. “A little chamomile tea and the hunt for that pesky neutrino will commence.” He proceeded into the kitchen. He couldn’t think of a more perfect way to spend the evening.

XxX

Sheldon stood before his whiteboard in his red plaid pajamas and housecoat drinking a cup of warm milk. He’d gone to bed at his usual time but after an unexpected bladder break he found himself unable to fall back asleep. Only now could he admit to himself that his sleep was not undisturbed; he remembered standing at his whiteboard writing out equations, his frustration mounting, until he woke up. Now that he was actually staring at his equations he felt his anxiety subside. It would all come together soon enough.

His head cocked to the left as he heard Leonard and Penny mounting the stairs. While the odds weren’t astronomical that they could return from their outings simultaneously he found it highly unlikely and somewhat suspect. Why go through the rig-a-ma-roll of pretending to go their separate ways if in the end they were—

“Good Lord they couldn’t be dating again.” Sheldon paled at the thought. The woman had caused untold chaos in the apartment the first time they got together and he couldn’t afford to have his concentration compromised at this critical junction.

The lock turned and Leonard entered the apartment.

“Oh, hey Sheldon. What are you doing up?” He dumped his keys in the bowl beside the door.

“I couldn’t sleep.” Sheldon took a sip of his milk. “I heard Penny and you had a good time tonight.”

Leonard smiled grimly. “Hardly. Howard talked Raj and I into going to an internet café so he could look up some new bars. Unbeknownst to us he was really engaging the GPS in Penny’s phone to see where she was. We were all surprised to run into each other until Howard gave one of his Snidely Whiplash smiles.” Leonard absentmindedly began cleaning his fingernails. “It seemed the
thing to do to drive Penny home since she got a little intoxicated.”

Sheldon snorted. “Penny getting ‘a little intoxicated’ is like getting ‘a little pregnant’ or having your latest equation ‘a little off’.” He turned back to rinse his mug in the sink.

“What’s wrong with my equation?” Leonard whined. It was much, much too late to be discussing such matters but his pride demanded at least a half-hearted defense of his work.

“Oh, nothing a good night’s rest, a hearty breakfast and a lot of common sense couldn’t cure.”

Scratch that. It is too late for this, thought Leonard as he trudged towards his room.

“I’ll give you a hint where you went wrong. Starting with—” Sheldon turned around to find the room empty. “Well, so much for budding enthusiasm for scientific inquiry.”

xTBBTx

Penny wasn’t sure how she made it from her bed to the couch but she was thankful she at least had the coordination to bring her blanket and pillow. By the light streaming into the apartment she figured it was still morning. Rolling over onto her back she absentmindedly rubbed her eyes with the palm of her hand. Man I was wasted.

She thought back on the night and how pissed she was when the guys showed up at the bar. At first it was all chalked up to coincidence until Howard began extolling the odds of random chance. Then it clicked: short stuff had set this up. Leonard was mortified and tried to exit the situation as gracefully as he could but Penny had sighed and said there was no point in going since they were already there. That was a grownup response to the situation; going on to get right hammered was not.

“Man, I’ve got to work too,” she muttered to herself.

Out in the hall Penny heard someone stumble on the steps.

“Dude hurry up,” said Raj in a rushed tone.

“Relax,” said Howard. “It’s 8am. Penny has the ‘no rising before 11am’ rule.”

A quiet knock. Silence. Another knock.

Penny smirked as she reached over to pick up a plastic cup and set it back down on the coffee table with a loud Thunk.

She could almost taste the pause in the hall before she heard a more insistent knock.

“Come on, come on,” muttered Howard frantically.

A lock turned and Leonard let out an “Ow, hey—” before the door closed. And locked.

Inside apartment 4A, Leonard was rubbing the knuckles of his left hand as Howard and Raj settled themselves on the couch.

“What are you doing here?” asked Leonard.

Howard looked down and to his right. “Well, it was a tad cold so we thought to drop in early and see you guys.”
“Besides, Howard thought Penny would still be sleeping at this hour,” said Raj with a pumpkin grin. Howard gave him a dirty stare.

“You know you’re going to have to apologize for last night,” Leonard began as he crossed into the kitchen to get his mug of coffee. “Penny was really upset.”

“Yeah, I suppose I should,” Howard agreed.

“Dear Lord please do and let the drama end,” said Sheldon as he came down the hall, messenger bag at the ready on his hip. “Leonard had already talked my ear off last night regarding the incident and I sure don’t need to begin my day rehashing the same old same old.”

Standing up, Howard wiped his palms on his thighs and gave a brave smile to his friends before opening the door and accepting what fate had in store for him.

Penny was just about asleep when she heard a knock at her door. After a moment the knock repeated itself, but not in the machinegun staccato used by Sheldon. Groaning as she got up and trudged over to open the door she knew she was a horrible sight. All of this did not matter as she saw Howard standing in front of her with a sheepish smile. Suddenly Penny was very much awake.

“Yes?” she said brusquely. Howard began to rub his arm with his right hand.

“Good morning Penny. Might I say you look lovely?”

She folded her arms across her chest. “What do you want, Howard?”

“Well, I believe I might have stepped across the line last night.”

“Geez, ya think?”

Howard’s blush deepened. “Anyways, I just wanted to apologize.” He looked up at her. “It wasn’t meant to be, well, what it was. It’s just that you know where and how to have fun and I wanted to have fun too instead of turning an ‘Anything Goes’ into another ‘wasted and gone’.”

In spite of herself Penny felt bad for Howard. While he could be quite disgusting at times with his crudeness at the heart of it all he was only trying to fit in. Sensing a weakness he tried to press home his point.

“Well, I believe I might have stepped across the line last night.”

“Geez, ya think?”

Howard positively beamed. “Which is not an absolute. I hear and obey my Queen,” bowing slightly as he backed away from the door. He knew a small victory when he saw one and it was best to scamper away with the morsel before it was taken back.

“Howard—”
“Sorry Penny got to work.” He continued to smile as his hand reached behind him and fumbled with the doorknob. In a burst of speed he turned the knob and was in the apartment. He leaned back against the closed door, eyes wide.

“So how’d it go?” Leonard asked.

“She invited us out dancing,” Howard grinned.

XxX

Two voices are heard down the hall at the university.

“I’m telling you Sheldon, it doesn’t work that way. Cold Dark Matter is the plausible explanation we have for galaxy distribution,” said an excited Raj.

“We’ll see what’s what in 2015, my friend. If the KATRIN experiment goes as I predict it will you can say goodbye to your Cold Dark Matter particle.” Sheldon adjusted his messenger bag so it rested more firmly on his left hip, the strap cutting the Green Lantern logo on his t-shirt in half.

Raj frowned as both men stopped in front of Sheldon’s office. “Only you can be gleeful at the prospect of disproving modern cosmological theory."

“That’s what happens when astrophysics plays in the big-boy league,” said Sheldon with a smirk as he removed a note taped to his door. His eyes glanced briefly at the page and in an instant his good mood was gone.

“What’s that?” Raj asked.

“Just a faculty memo,” said Sheldon darkly as he unlocked his door. “I will see you at lunch.”

Too used to his friend’s quirkiness Raj merely shrugged his shoulders as the door quickly closed in front of him.

After turning on the light Sheldon took a deep breath to steady himself. Taking off his messenger bag he placed it and the note on his desk and pulled out an antibacterial wipe from his pocket. As he cleaned his hands his eyes flickered to the equation on the white board. He tossed out the wipe and stepped closer to the board, intent on mulling. As the minutes went by Sheldon’s jaw began to spasm. He shifted his weight from one foot to the other and continued to stare at the board. A sudden thought flashed across his brain, a dismissive scowl in hot pursuit. More minutes passed and color came to his cheeks as he read and reread his calculations. Suddenly he whirled and stepped to his desk, taking up the note. It was comprised of two words but to Sheldon they carried the weight of the world.

Five weeks, it said.

While his face remained stone his hands worked in a frenzy tearing the paper to shreds.

XxX

Leonard rolled his eyes as he handed out the food packets, virtually ignoring the questions thrown at him as they required pat answers.

“—chicken diced, not shredded?” Sheldon asked.

“Yes,” said Leonard.
“Brown rice, not white?”

“Yes.”

“Did you stop by the Korean grocery store for the spicy hot mustard?”

“Yes.”

“Low sodium soy sauce?”

“Yes.”

Raj paused just as he was about to open his food container. “You know, every week when we get Chinese food you always get a bottle of mustard and soy sauce. What happens to the old bottles? You surely don’t use that much mustard in a week.”

“As I’ve gone through the effort of having Chinese food made fresh why should I then entertain the thought of using second-hand condiments?” explained Sheldon, wrinkling his nose at the whole notion.

“So you just throw them out?” asked Howard as he reached for a packet of soy sauce.

“Indeed I do.”

“Dude, that is such a waste,” said Raj, shaking his head.

Sheldon frowned. “No Raj. ‘Waste’ is this conversation since it delays me from eating. By thumping a cadaverous Equus ferus caballus regarding my refuse disposal habits I risk consuming my cashew chicken at an unsatisfactory temperature.”

“So what’s tonight’s theme?” Leonard asked in an attempt to change the subject.

Howard grinned. “Well as I managed to get my grubby little hands on an Atari 5200 I thought we should test our skill in a measured twenty minute dash for thirty-two treasures otherwise known as Pitfall.”

“Don’t forget Pitfall II,” added Raj.

“Oh, if only we could,” sighed Sheldon.

Leonard leaned back in his chair. “When I found Pitfall I so lived out my Indiana Jones fantasies.”

Sheldon made a tutting noise. “Pitfall Harry deserves to be recognized for his own merit, Leonard. Among the many technical achievements the Harry persona is both non-flickering and multicolored. We won’t even get into the creative use of polynomials to create two hundred fifty six individual screens within fifty bytes of code.”

“So in the jungle there’s more to his byte than his bark,” Howard quipped. Raj and Leonard laughed.

Sheldon looked at him quizzically. “Yes, I suppose you could say that, although I don’t know what —” His eyes narrowed as he thought over Howard’s words. Given the context of my previous statement the dog’s ‘bite’ must be a ‘byte’. Oh wait! ‘Bark’. Harry’s swinging from trees so bark is floral, not aural, in nature and in this case is comprised solely of bytes.

Sheldon took a series of internal breaths as a little smile crossed his face.
There was an extra kick to Sheldon’s step as he strolled into the kitchen. Normally this would be a well-orchestrated routine like every other Saturday but this day was a little extra special—BBC America was airing the conclusion to a two-part Dr. Who story. In a whimsical moment to mark the occasion he bypassed the higher fiber content cereal for his Honey Puffs. After pouring out the cereal and adding a quarter-cup of 2% milk he carried the bowl to his end of the couch, sat down and turned on the television.

About half-way through the program he heard a noise from the hall and nonchalantly grabbed the remote and engaged the captioning feature. A few minutes later he heard a knock at Penny’s door. Thock Thock

“Someone has a death-wish,” Sheldon commented, remembering Penny’s ‘I’ll punch you in the throat’ rule if she’s woken up before 11am.

The knock came again, deeper in tone. Thunk Thunk Thunk

Sheldon leaned towards the television with a scowl on his face.

Thunk Thunk Thunk Thunk

“Good Lord what is this, annoyance by increments?” He relaxed slightly as he heard Penny’s lock turn.

“Mr. Webley,” said a familiar voice—Penny’s. “I was told to come here if I wanted a part?” The door closed.

Thunk Thunk Thunk

“Mr. Webley…. I was told to come here if I wanted a part.” Again her door closed.

Sheldon rolled his eyes. During the climax to a two-part Dr. Who story was surely one of the worst times to have a neighbor succumb to a psychotic break. Minutes went by and Sheldon was completely absorbed as the Doctor made his last-ditch effort to spoil the Master’s plans.

Thunk Thock Thock Thock

“Oh, this is quite intolerable,” Sheldon growled as Leonard made his way down the hall. “Leonard, please have Penny refrain from making noise until Dr. Who’s finished.”

“What’s she doing?” Leonard yawned as he poured himself a cup of coffee. Thank goodness for programmable coffee makers.

“It sounds like she’s perfecting a call-back to a casting couch.” Leonard spewed out his coffee.

“Excuse me?”

“Leonard, my program.”

Thunk Thock Thock Thock

Mug in hand, Leonard opened the front door and stepped into the hall to find Penny standing at her door.
“Mr. Webley…. I was told to come here if I wanted a part?” After a moment’s pause she opened her door and stepped inside. While he couldn’t make out what she was saying Leonard thought she was having what sounded like a one-sided conversation. Penny’s door opened. She was startled to see Leonard.

“Whatcha doing?” he asked.

“Oh, hi Leonard. I didn’t wake you did I?”

“No, but you’re perilously close to a strike.”

Penny was confused for a moment before she remembered. That’s right: Dr. Who. She wasn’t sure what strike she was on; all she knew was that there was no way she was going to take a course from Dr. Whackadoodle.

“So? What’s all this?”

Penny stood on her tip toes in excitement. “I’ve got an audition at eight am. A friend of mine who works in casting got me a shot at CSI. Can you believe it?” Leonard opened his mouth to speak. “I know I couldn’t,” Penny continued. “Even better she gave me the script of the part. It’s not a big role but I’ve so got to nail this.”

“What’s the part?”

“I’m an aspiring actress auditioning for a musical, only the producer is dead and I walk in on the crime scene.”

Leonard shuddered involuntarily at the word ‘musical’. After viewing Penny’s performance in ‘Rent’ he’d force-fed himself ‘Fiddler on the Roof’ for three consecutive nights so he didn’t lose all interest in the format.

“You don’t have to sing, do you?” he asked tentatively.


Leonard gave an encouraging smile. “I’m sure you’ll get the part.”

“I hope so.”

“Wait, I thought CSI was shot in Las Vegas?”

Penny shrugged. “Except for parts that can be done on set, I guess. Anyways, I don’t mean to be rude but I’ve got to keep practicing.”

Excusing himself, Leonard went back into the apartment.

“Well?” Sheldon asked as he placed his bowl in the drain rack.

“Penny’s practicing for an audition this morning.”

“I see. Well, given the disturbance she’s causing I hope it proves fruitful because this cannot continue.”

“It’s just a cameo, Sheldon.”
“Nevertheless, as she’s yet to ‘land a role’ it’s important that she start somewhere.”

“True,” agreed Leonard. “Well you can’t say she won’t get the part through lack of trying.”

Thock Thock Thock Thock

“Indeed,” Sheldon said as he went down the hall to brush his teeth. “Once she figures out she’s one knock redundant I’m sure everything else will fall into place.”

XxX

A red t-shirt was placed carefully on a plastic frame. Three distinct folds—arm, arm, body—were made and the resulting perfectly pressed t-shirt was carefully lifted and put on the pile of other clean laundry.

Spying Sheldon working diligently as she entered the laundry room, Penny couldn’t help but smile.

“Hi Sheldon.”

“Good evening Penny,” he responded as he fluffed out another t-shirt before laying it gently on the rack. “As you show no obvious signs of discomfort I will hazard a guess and say you are well.”

“Very well,” she laughed as she opened up the dryer to pull out her laundry. “And how are you this evening?”

“I find myself in good health.” Sheldon gave a twitchy half-smile before looking away.

“Well that’s good,” Penny replied, not knowing what more to say. She pulled out a tank top and spun a strap on her finger for a moment before folding it properly and putting it in her basket.

Reaching into the dryer she grabbed a sweatshirt sleeve and drew it out with the flair reserved for magicians doing the ‘silk scarves pulled from a pocket’ trick.

The flamboyant actions played havoc with Sheldon’s peripheral vision so he straightened up and looked head-on at Penny. He knew social protocol dictated he ask her what was the source of her good mood but was unsure how to proceed until he remembered the audition. He frowned, thinking about the Dr. Who disturbance, before realizing that in the social scheme of things he should be benevolent given the circumstances. I shall refrain from giving her a strike, settling instead for a lecture on noise levels and neighbor relations. That settled, he returned to the matter at hand.

“From your display of jubilant clothes-folding I’m to understand today’s audition went well?” he asked.

Penny clutched a skirt to her chest as she leaned towards Sheldon. “It was amazing! I mean it’s not like I got to see anyone big because it was Saturday morning but to go to the studio and see ‘CSI’ written on the door I just couldn’t believe it.”

Sheldon looked down to straighten the arm of his shirt but couldn’t contain a quick smile. While he wouldn’t mention it aloud lest it promote unnecessary overreactions in the future he did enjoy Penny when her level of enthusiasm surpassed normal parameters. As she continued to describe her audition his mind casually distinguished the cadence of her tone from her vocabulary in an attempt to extrapolate the emotional content for closer analysis. Sheldon prided himself on being able to learn anything he needed to know by study alone. He never thought he’d need the help of a college dropout to understand how to detect and process another’s feelings, however.

“So when will you know if you’re successful?” he asked when Penny finished detailing her day.
“Tomorrow afternoon at the latest. The shooting’s Monday so it doesn’t give me a lot of time to practice.” Penny squealed as she bounced on the balls of her feet. “Oh I hope I hope I get it.”

“I’m sure your talent will see you through,” Sheldon said as he began sorting out his socks.

“Aw, thank you sweetie.” Penny continued folding her laundry. “So what did you do today?”

Sheldon stopped what he was doing and looked up. “Well, as you are aware I have in the past year diverted my attention from bosonic to heterotic string theory as its combination of bosonic and superstring models offer an intriguing recombination of dimensions on a self-dual lattice.”

“Erk?” said Penny.

The urgency in Sheldon’s tone continued to escalate as he talked. “In string theory the left-moving and the right-moving excitations almost do not interact with each other. But, what if it’s possible to construct a string theory whose left-moving excitations function on a bosonic string propagating in $D = 26$ dimensions, while the right-moving excitations function as if they belong to a superstring in $D = 10$ dimensions?”

Sheldon waited expectantly with a smile on his face for Penny to fill in the blank. Unfortunately all he got was a blank look on her face.

“Well as can be seen through basic mathematics there is a 16 dimension discrepancy between both strings that must be compactified on a self-dual lattice,” he said slowly. He waited a moment before a frustrated sigh slipped from between his pursed lips. Cocking his head to the left, Sheldon looked Penny in the eye and gave a pleasant, though awkward, smirk. “I spent my day thinking,” he said simply.

“Ah,” Penny said casually as she turned to get more of her laundry from the dryer. She could feel her cheeks growing hot and hoped Sheldon wouldn’t notice. Not like he’d understand her embarrassment over not knowing what he was talking about. No, that wasn’t quite it. There were plenty of times when Sheldon said things that were way over her head and it didn’t bother her. In this instance he was truly excited about his research and wanted to share his enthusiasm. Sheldon rarely shared anything truly personal and she feared one day he might give up all together and not share anything else with her. “Well, good luck finding your string thingies.”

“String theory, Penny. Only a unifying formula for the creation and structure of the universe.”

“Well I hope you don’t get all strung out looking for them.”

Again Sheldon stopped. “That’s sarcasm.”

“Can’t get it past you anymore, Moonpie,” she said with a mischievous grin.

“Don’t call me Moonpie. Only Meemaw calls me that.”

“Sorry. I’ll do my best to keep it under wraps so I don’t ‘moon’ you in future.” Penny folded a tank top and plunked it in her basket.

Sheldon frowned but said nothing. Good Lord but this woman was frustrating.

xTBBTx

“Knock, Knock,” said Howard as he opened the door to apartment 4A.
“Hey Howard, I’m almost ready to go,” greeted Leonard as he grabbed his jacket from the back of the chair.

Raj leaned against the doorframe. “Hey Sheldon, you’re sure you don’t want to come to the museum? The dinosaur hall won’t be the same without you.”

Sheldon turned away from his whiteboard. “While I admit the opportunity to view dinosaurs typically trump all other activities I find myself at a particularly intriguing crossroads that I must puzzle out before dinner so that I may enjoy our time Wii bowling without distraction.”

“Well I suppose we can spend more time in the mammal halls,” piped in Howard.

“I guess,” pouted Leonard; he wanted to see the dinosaurs.

“A very good idea, Howard,” said Sheldon. “Did you know in the African Hall you can see an example of a kudu or African antelope—an extremely shy animal which is rarely seen in the wild. Male kudu can be found in bachelor groups and displays of dominance are generally fairly peaceful, consisting of one male making himself look big by standing his hair on end.”

“No kidding?” said Leonard as he unconsciously checked his hair to see if it had fluffed up after his shower.

“Leonard, why would I jest about something like this? Biology is an organic offshoot of scientific inquiry whose significance, granted, is analogous to examining toe nails on a disembodied brain but nevertheless those that do study it are most sincere.” Sheldon returned to his whiteboard.

“Have fun,” replied Leonard as all three friends left the apartment.

Sheldon cracked his knuckles before swinging his arms in a circular motion to stimulate circulation. He raised and lowered himself on the balls of his feet. Sufficiently relaxed, he took a step back to a comfortable distance and began calculating.

Time went by.

Around one thirty pm Sheldon heard music from apartment 4B.

He continued to think.

Near prevening, Sheldon erased and replaced a number in his equation.

As the minutes ticked by it slowly dawned on him that the music had stopped in Penny’s apartment. He could not recall hearing her step out.

“Perhaps she’s decided to take a nap,” he said to himself.

He looked at a number sequence and thought some more.

Sheldon felt his jaw muscles tighten.

He looked at his watch before calculating out the variables on a small part of the board. Putting down the marker he stepped back to look out the window before checking his new equation. It seemed sound:

There was a high probability Penny did not receive the news she was hoping for.

Hearing voices in the stairwell, Sheldon quickly erased the Penny equation and ran into his room to
fetch his messenger bag. He returned just as Leonard, Howard and Raj came in the door.

“Be prepared to turn around,” said Sheldon as he approached the group. “We’re eating out tonight.”

Howard was stunned. “Why Sheldon—a change.”

Sheldon scowled. “I think my ability to adapt has been documented on a few occasions.”

“So have polar shifts,” smiled Raj.

“Nevertheless, I believe this is a moment of spontaneity that shouldn’t be wasted.”

“Shotgun,” Howard cried as Sheldon closed the door.

“Not fair,” pouted Raj. “You rode shotgun all the way to the museum and back.”

“All right you two,” said Leonard as he followed Raj and Howard down the stairs. “Keep this up and it’ll be no dessert.”

Sheldon waited by the door until the boys had cleared the lower landing before he crossed over to Penny’s apartment. He shifted his weight from one foot to the other, unsure if he should knock. While he could not be absolutely certain things were not well with Penny unless he asked her outright he thought such an interruption if things were unwell would be unwelcome. And awkward.

Granted, things wouldn’t resolve themselves until he conferred with Penny but Sheldon was nevertheless pleased with himself for realizing that if Penny was sad and uncommunicative the last thing she’d want to hear was laughter emanating from her neighbors’ apartment; therefore he had proposed eating out.

As he turned, Sheldon heard a cork pop from behind Penny’s door.

He noted no celebratory exclamation.

xTBBTx

A/N Thanks to Wikipedia for the consult: Dark Matter; Pitfall; Heterotic String Theory; Kudu.
Yes, I donated $20 to the campaign so I don’t feel guilty referencing it every six seconds.

cadaverous Equus ferus caballus: dead horse

Thanks for reading!
Sheldon’s shoulders stiffened as he saw Penny at the mail boxes through the lobby door but knew he was past the point of retracing his steps to avoid detection. Taking a deep breath he composed his thoughts before opening the door and crossing over to stand beside her.

“Hello Penny,” he said casually as he retrieved his mail.

“Oh, hey Sheldon,” Penny responded in a pleasant though flat tone. She put two flyers through the junk mail slot and turned to go upstairs.

Sheldon looked nervously at the mail in his hands before clearing his throat and fell into step beside Penny.

“You know Penny, when I was ten years old I was incessantly harassed by Bobby Kappel and his cronies at school. This was part of the motivating factor for me to elevate the level of my studies so I could escape their clutches. Lo and behold, the next year I was in college far, far away from their idiocy.”

Penny glanced at her neighbor. “So things got better.”

“Well actually Bobby Kappel and his ilk were replaced by a more intimidating group of football seniors but I think this detail renders my original point moot.”

In spite of herself she laughed. Sheldon smiled shyly. He was pleased his attempt at ‘bucking her up’ worked since he found it disconcerting when Penny did not display her usual level of exuberance.

“Thank you, sweetie,” she said as she wiped the last of her laugh tears from her eye. “I really needed this.”

“Penny, you know how much I value our friendship.”

“I’m not the acquaintance,” she said with a little smile as she remembered Howard.

“No. Far from that. I consider you to be one of my closest friends.” Here Sheldon paused to gather his thoughts. “Your insight into the human condition has proved to be most beneficial to ‘broadening my horizons’ so to speak.”

“Well I’m glad.” Penny looked at Sheldon as they reached their floor and for a moment their eyes refused to let go before a nervous tic on his part broke the connection. He quickly turned towards his door and fumbled with his keys. “Bye Sheldon,” she called warmly.

“Goodbye Penny,” he responded as the door flew open under his body weight, sending him sprawling into the room. In less than a heartbeat the door closed.

Her grin widened as she imagined Sheldon pressing the door with his back trying to keep her out. Of course it wasn’t Penny he was trying to elude but those nasty emotion things like ‘empathy’ and ‘sympathy’.

“That’s my boy,” Penny whispered to herself as she went into her apartment.
“All I’m saying Sheldon is that like them or not they’re the prequel to the main story so we have to watch them,” said Leonard as he moved the dvd case from his seat to the coffee table.

Sheldon scrunched his mouth in distaste. “Not true. While it’s hard to see through Lucas’ impenetrable dialogue and abysmal turns of plot, episodes one to three are part of the main story—i.e. the corruption and redemption of Anakin Skywalker.”

Leonard shrugged. “You know what I meant.”

“I dunno. I thought the movies were ok,” Penny interrupted. Sheldon’s face twitched.

“Ok? Ok?” he sputtered as he sat down at his computer. “Penny, the amount of Dark Side points Obi-Wan would have accumulated as a result of letting Anakin nearly burn to death is astronomical.” He logged into his account to retrieve his email. There was an urgent posting from the university. When he clicked on it he scowled as a pop-up appeared. He trashed the email. “And what was this whole ‘he brings balance to the Force’ idea? For all their enlightenment the Jedi council couldn’t utilize basic math skills to determine that a thousand to one ratio of Jedi to Sith was not the time to bring in an equalizer?”

“What was that?” Penny asked from over Sheldon’s shoulder.

“Junk mail.”

“It looked like a cake with candles.” Penny smiled in surprise. “Sweetie, it isn’t your birthday is it?”

“Not for another month,” said Leonard. “Someone sure jumped the gun. Who was that?”

“An uninformed admirer,” said Sheldon brusquely as he shut his laptop. “Our food has arrived.” A moment later the door opened and Raj and Howard entered the apartment.

“Who’s got a birthday?” Howard asked as he set the bag of Thai food on the table.

“Sheldon,” said Penny. Sheldon glared at her as he made his way to his spot on the couch.

“I thought it wasn’t until May?” said Howard.

“It isn’t,” agreed Leonard. “Someone sent him a card early.”

“My mi krop please,” demanded Sheldon.

“So, Star Wars, huh?” said Penny as she noted the look on Sheldon’s face and changed the subject.

“Beginning ‘A long, long time ago in a galaxy far, far away’,” said Howard. Raj leaned over and whispered into his ear. “Just like Sheldon,” Howard interpreted.

“Ha ha,” said Sheldon with a sneer.

“Now Sheldon, don’t worry. Raj never meant to infer that you were old,” soothed Howard. Raj gave a wide grin.

“I hope not,” said Sheldon indignantly. “Thirty is a very versatile number. It is the largest number where all the coprimes smaller than itself, except for 1, are prime. It is the atomic number for zinc. It is the total number of major and minor keys in Western tonal music, including enharmonic
“But adding up some subsets of its divisors makes 30 so it’s also a semiperfect number,” said Leonard. “The numbers 5, 10 and 15 all divide evenly into 30 and total 30,” he added to Penny.

“Well, it isn’t perfect but it is what it is,” mumbled Sheldon.

“Kind of describes tonight’s movie,” said Raj through Howard.

Every once in a while Howard or Leonard would call out a discrepancy or groan at a piece of dialogue.

Out of the corner of her eye Penny saw Sheldon picking thoughtfully through his mikrop with his chop sticks.

Penny couldn’t believe it. It was six fifteen and Leonard and Sheldon weren’t at the restaurant. Raj and Howard chatted with each other as they drank colas and she didn’t want to interrupt as Raj would go mute. At six twenty-five Howard began drumming his thumbs on the table as a worried look crossed his face.

Just as Raj took out his cell phone Leonard and Sheldon entered the room.

“Sorry we’re late,” said Leonard as they sat down. “I had to tear Sheldon away from his whiteboard.”

“Well, it wasn’t my fault an epiphany made an unannounced visit to my frontal lobe,” said Sheldon haughtily. “Brilliance knows no constraint.”

“Neither does my stomach,” complained Raj as Howard waived Penny to the table.

“So where were you two?” asked Penny as she arrived with a cola and lemonade in hand.

“At the university,” explained Leonard. “Sheldon was working late.”

“I see,” said Penny while trying to keep the surprise out of her voice. Never in all the years of eating at the Cheesecake Factory did she ever recall Sheldon being late for a meal without something completely out of his control occurring. “Same ol’ same ol’ I take it?” Three out of the four at the table nodded.

“I’ll have the barbecue bacon cheeseburger—barbecue sauce, bacon and cheese on the side,” ordered Sheldon as he looked through the menu. Penny never understood why he perused the menu since he ordered the same dish every week.

As soon as she left the table Raj leaned forward to address the group.

“So did you all get the memo from Leslie Winkle about the paint ball game this weekend?”

“Yeah, it seems as though the geologists are looking for a rematch,” said Howard.


“Well it’s not our fault we formulate highly complex battle plans. We’re not experts in crawling through the mud like the Dirt People,” said Sheldon.
“Nevertheless, this is a matter of pride. Our department has been called out and it’s imperative we all come together to show them what physics is all about,” rallied Leonard.

“In other words, let’s get Penny,” said Raj.

“Yeah, she’d show them how to eat trajectory,” agreed Howard.

“We can’t use Penny,” Leonard argued. “She’d be a ringer.”

“All I know is that without Penny we’ll all be dead ringers for dead people,” muttered Raj.

Penny returned to the table with the entrees.

“So who’s killing who?” she asked. Raj turned pink as he realized Penny had heard his last comment.

“Oh, the geologists want a rematch in paintball,” explained Leonard as he freed his fork from the napkin.

“We were hoping you could come play ‘Lady Terminator’ with us on Sunday,” said Howard.

“Sorry guys, I’m working,” said Penny sadly. “Good luck with it.”

“We’re scientists, Penny. We deal with probabilities, not fortune,” admonished Sheldon. “In this instance it is most likely the physics team shall lose because I will also be unable to attend the match.”

“Why not?” asked Leonard incredulously. “How can our ‘Fearless Leader’ abandon his men?”

Sheldon paused as he assembled his burger. “While I admit this has caused turmoil I cannot abandon my work at this point. I’m afraid you will have to fulfill your duties as classic Star Trek red-shirts and die accordingly.”

“Well Ka’plah to you too,” mumbled Howard.

xTBBTx

Raj, Howard, Leonard and Sheldon were flipping their way through adjoining comic bins.

“Can you believe they’re doing another Spider-Man movie?” said Raj.

“Too soon,” said Howard. “At least wait until the previous movies have left the consciousness of the mass market.”

“Perhaps they’re trying to make up for the third movie?” suggested Leonard.

Sheldon stopped flipping comics. “If atoning for cinematic errors were important we’d be up to our armpits in Superman movies.”

“Hey, the first two were good,” argued Howard. “Just because you object that Lois wouldn’t have survived the fall from the building doesn’t mean the rest of the film sucked.”

“Oh, I wouldn’t say ‘sucked’. It was a load of hokum.” Sheldon continued flipping. “Can you imagine the utter devastation caused when Superman stopped the earth from rotating? Everything on the planet should have continued moving in excess of one thousand mph until slowed down by friction.”
“Not to mention the dissipation of our atmosphere,” said Raj.

“Exactly Raj. There’s no point in telling a story with gross scientific inaccuracies,” sniffed Sheldon.

Leonard rolled his eyes. “Of course. Why would I expect suspension of disbelief in a movie about a space alien who flies and fires red lasers from his eyes?”

“That’s because Superman’s powered by our yellow sun’s rays as opposed to living powerless under Krypton’s red one—should Krypton have survived,” amended Sheldon.

Raj moved to another bin. “Back to Spider-Man. Perhaps Marvel is trying to make up for killing off Peter Parker?”

“I don’t know about that,” said Stuart as he walked by with a bundle of new comics destined for the shelf. “A younger, fresher face playing Spider-Man makes it a turning point for the comic.”

Sheldon grimaced. “No, a younger fresher face makes him a Spider-Boy not ‘man’. Besides, what are the chances he could find the exact same fabric to make his costume? Does one peruse the webbing aisle at Vogue Fabrics for ‘Spider-Man red’?”

“Maybe we should just stick to The Avengers movie,” said Leonard trying to appease the situation.

“Oh yes, The Avengers movie,” scoffed Sheldon. “How can it be an origin movie without the Wasp and Ant-Man? Dr. Henry Pym’s scientific creations are instrumental in overcoming many super-powered foes, not to mention he is the creator of Voltron.”

“I think they did it to make room for the Black Widow,” said Leonard.

“And what delicious eye-candy Scarlett Johansson makes,” drooled Howard.

“Huh. Too bad they didn’t have tryouts like they do in the Legion of Superheroes. I mean what are the chances Henry Pym, scientist extraordinaire, could be bested by a red-headed sex pot?” asked Sheldon.

Feeling three sets of eyes on his person he looked up. “What?”

xTBBTx

Howard and Leonard were talking excitedly among themselves as Raj and Sheldon approached the lunch table with their trays.

“What’s with you two?” Raj asked as he sat down.

“Well, as you know asteroid 2005 YU55 is coming into view in the next week and a half,” began Howard.

Raj brightened. “Oh yes. The department’s been in a tizzy over the last month in anticipation.”

“So anyways, Howard and I thought what better time to bring the girls to the desert and watch the event unfold.” Leonard smiled in order to coax a similar reaction from Raj. “It’ll be fun.”

“Ah, like how last time was ‘fun’. We missed the meteor shower entirely,” Raj reminded him.

Howard grinned. “Well, to be fair Raj we traded in meteors for a glimpse into the whole chain of being, man.”
Sheldon paused, holding his tuna fish sandwich on whole wheat in mid air. “I assume by placing
the word man at the end of your sentence you are trying to associate your experimentation with
pschotropic drugs with the 1960s counterculture? I fail to see the connection.”

“It’s all groovy,” Howard cooed. Sheldon rolled his eyes and bit into his sandwich.

Leonard laughed although with an embarrassing blush on his face. There was no way in this or any
other universe they could ever be considered ‘cool’. For God’s sake they appeased their
‘munchies’ with a cold brisket.

“I don’t know,” mumbled Raj. “Why can’t us guys just go?”

Howard’s eyes twinkled. “Because chicks dig star-lit nights.”

Raj scowled. “Oh sure, you all get to entertain girls while poor Raj plays with his telescope.”

“Hey, it’s not like that with Penny and me,” Leonard corrected. “Only Sheldon and Howard are
licensed for hanky panky.” He paused. “Ok, only Howard.”

“I hope you’re not suggesting that I will embark on this trek,” said Sheldon.

“Come on Sheldon, Amy’d love to go. Besides, if Bernadette and Penny are there she’d feel left
out if she wasn’t invited,” Leonard pointed out.

“Oh, by all means invite Amy. All I meant was that her going is not dependent on my going—since
I’m not.”

“Why no—ow!” Leonard cried as Howard stepped on his foot.

“Well that’s too bad,” said Howard quickly. “I guess we’ll soldier on without you.”

“Yes, well as the last astrological outing proved disastrous I’m sure I shall spend my time at home
in a more productive manner.”

Leonard put down his fork. “You’re not going to be working again that night, are you?”

theorize.”

“Really. So how does Halo fit into the equation?” Raj asked with a smirk.

“It’s funny you brought that up, Raj. Just last week a particular explosion pattern from a RPG made
me postulate altering the mass-energy density of the observable universe from four point six to
four point five percent.”

As Sheldon continued with his explanation, behind him Barry Kripke entered the cafeteria and
spotted his mark. He sneered as he watched Sheldon’s long fingers sketch mathematical symbols in
the air as the lanky man excitedly relayed his idea to his friends. God I love doing this, Kripke
thought as he neared the table. Leonard spotted the approach and inwardly groaned.

“Tick, tick, tick, Coopah,” Kripke said, tapping his watch with a finger as he walked by.

Sheldon’s cheeks went crimson. “Your attempts at sarcasm continue to be ignored,” he called after
the plasma physicist.

“What was that about?” Howard asked. All three turned to face Sheldon, who quickly looked down
at his tray to compose himself before his eyes flashed defensively at his friends.

“What? Am I not allowed to banter with my colleagues?”

Raj snorted as he harpooned a cherry tomato with his fork. “And I suppose Darth Vader was being whimsical when he choked the admiral with the Force.”

Sheldon glared as he pursed his lips at Raj. Howard pressed his temples with his fingers.

“I sense a disturbance in the Force. Kripke must be near,” he quipped.

Feeling cornered, Sheldon grabbed his tray and rose from the table but not before giving Howard a look of betrayal. “I see our conversation has regressed to a juvenile level. I shall seek solace in my office where higher thought prevails.”

Howard, Leonard and Raj watched Sheldon stalk off.

xTBBTx

“I don’t even know why I’m here!” Penny screamed as she stood before her couch. What was it, the hundredth time? Bazillionth? She laugh-sobbed. Was that even a number? Perhaps she should ask Leonard. Sheldon would do in a pinch but he was someone who got her ‘A’ game or nothing at all.

Penny took a deep breath and let all of her frustration exhale into the room. Wiping her eye as she crossed into the kitchen for a clean mug and a bottle of wine before returning to the couch, she sighed as she sat down. So much for only drinking on weekends. As she sipped she thought about earlier in the day when she had been at a casting call. She thought herself a shoo-in after winning the hemorrhoid commercial. After all if she could fake rectal discomfort what was a mere headache? Unfortunately she never got a chance to demonstrate her method acting.

“Two lousy sentences and ‘pfft—next!’” Penny growled and took a gulp of wine to stay her anger. Her ‘problem’ was that she was ‘too tall/short’, ‘too fair/tanned’ and her all-time make-her-scream ‘too blonde/dark’. Her hair was gold without the peroxide whiteness that seemed to slither into the Californian hairstylist repertoire.

Oh wait; there was that Italian director who thought she looked ‘too healthy’. What the hell was that? Penny’s cheeks felt warm as she drained the mug and set it on the coffee table for a refill. As she poured she heard voices in the hallway:

“Leonard, you know that’s not true.”

“Just drop it will you, Sheldon?”

“How can I ‘drop it’? It wasn’t I who dropped the proverbial ball to begin with.”

Keys jangled and a lock opened.

“I know someone I’d like to drop.”

“Threats of violence against my person are really uncalled for.”

“What threat? I was thinking suicide.”

A door closed and the voices were no more.
Penny smiled to herself. How like Leonard to take the coward’s way out. When Sheldon drove her to the edge her natural reaction was to go all junior rodeo on his crazy ass. Insanity was to the lanky physicist as water was to fish and Penny was too good a swimmer to drown.

She ran her fingers through her hair as she sat back on the couch. Damn but it felt good to kick back and relax. All she needed was a little food in the system and—holy crap on a cracker! She forgot she told Leonard she was in on the Chinese order for ‘Vintage Video Game’ night. Penny wiped her face from brow to chin. How was she supposed to pay for dinner when she was on the verge of being short on rent?

After putting the cork in the bottle Penny got up and crossed the hall to apartment 4A and entered.

“--Saying Sheldon is that something’s bothering y—oh! Hey Penny.”

“Hi guys, what’s up?” she asked.

“Nothing,” scowled Sheldon as he grabbed an orange soda from the refrigerator.

“O-kay,” said Penny, sounding unconvinced. “Um, listen Leonard, I forgot about Chinese tonight and had already made some stuff so count me out.”

Leonard paused before he spoke. “I don’t mind paying—”

“No, Leonard. Really, I’m fine.”

“Why Penny, it’s pleasing to see you exhibit such fiscal restraint, especially near the end of the month,” noted Sheldon.

“Gee, thanks Sheldon,” said Penny with a wry smile. “Anyways, that’s about it so have fun tonight.”

Back in her apartment, Penny uncorked the wine and poured herself another glass.

“Hello, Sex and the City,” she drawled as she turned on the television.

Penny awoke to the sounds of Carrie undergoing her latest round of anxiety regarding Mr. Big.

“What time is it?” She squinted as she looked at the VCR clock: nine thirty. Almost as if on cue her stomach began to growl. After refreshing herself in the bathroom she went to the refrigerator to see what was in there to eat. Pickles and bread.

“I wonder if the boys have any soup? Oh wait, of course they do.” Sheldon always kept an emergency supply in the cupboard in case he got sick. It’d take charm and a crap load of promises to get a can but her tummy was about ready to swear to anything at the moment.

As soon as she entered the hallway she heard three voices chanting:


Curious, she quietly opened the door to see Raj, Sheldon and Howard doing gorilla dances behind an obviously annoyed Leonard.

“Will you guys stop it?” he growled, jerking the game controller sharply to the left as he stared at the television screen.

Penny closed the door. Boy could she ever go for a pickle sandwich about now.

“Good evening, Penny.”

“Hi Sheldon.” She paused in mid-stride, arms full of damp clothing, as Sheldon gazed upon her in what she could have sworn was disappointment.

He brought his basket to the washing machines and began sorting his clothes according to ‘lights’ and ‘darks’. “Your early arrival indicates structured plans for the evening.”

“Yeah. Got a birthday bash to go to: a friend of a friend of a—well, it’s this girl’s birthday.”

“Ah yes, marking one’s time on the planet by way of gyrating and inebriation.”

Penny lifted herself to sit on top of the dryer after starting it running. “How else should you—oh wait, who am I talking to? What’s a perfect birthday Sheldon, a Halo marathon and Thai food?”

He frowned. “Hardly, Penny. Halo is played on Halo night and Thai food is eaten on Mondays not Wednesdays so unless my birthday falls on a Monday I obviously wouldn’t be eating Thai food.”

“Spontaneity, what was I thinking?” She stretched her legs out before her and tried to touch her toes. “Ok, I’ll bite. So what’s a good birthday for you?”

“One that is kept secret,” he said after a moment.

“Oh sweetie you can’t be serious,” Penny said sadly. “Birthdays are meant to be celebrated with friends and family.”

“To celebrate what?” Sheldon said, voice rising as he gathered his clothes. “After years of perfect renewal we become subject to cellular senescence? What about neuron loss? Cognitive decline? Oh frabjous day for all!” Turning abruptly with basket in hand Sheldon stalked from the room.

Penny sat there slack-jawed. “What the frak was that?”

Sheldon cursed himself as he mounted the stairs two at a time. He didn’t mean to snap at Penny, only that he was overly sensitive to the whole birthday phenomenon thanks to Kripke’s teasing. Damn that man. Taking a deep breath, Sheldon opened the door and made long strides across the living room towards his room, ignoring Leonard on the couch.

“You’re back early,” Leonard began. Sheldon’s response was his bedroom door closing. “That’s weird.” Tonight was laundry night, which usually meant seeing Penny. What could have gotten Sheldon’s tighty whities in a knot? Leonard refocused on the television. He’d ask Penny about it later.

Puckering her lips to better apply her lip balm, Penny gave herself the once-over in the mirror. If this little off the shoulder pink dress couldn’t get her a few birthday bumps of her own she didn’t know what would. She grabbed her purse and evening clutch, transferring essential items like wallet and makeup from one to the other.

“Keys. Damn.”

After searching her bedroom Penny moved into the living room, tossing stray clothes and
magazines aside. Man this place’s a mess. Wonder if I could get Sheldon to tidy up again? Sheldon.

“That’s right. He wanted me to put the keys in the bowl only I’m too lazy to do that so I always put them on the shelf.” She moved aside a small picture frame and behold—the keys. She smiled to herself as she grabbed her clutch and went to the door. As she locked up she again thought about Sheldon’s weird—even for him—reaction downstairs. Surely he couldn’t be freaked about getting older, could he? Whatever his deal he was in distress so she at least had to let Leonard know something was up.

She rapped twice on the door before opening it; Leonard turned his head and beamed. Penny couldn’t help but smile in return: a reaction like this was exactly what she was hoping to achieve.

“Hey Leonard. Listen, I had a weird conversation with Sheldon.”

“When aren’t they?” Leonard quipped as he muted the television.

“I mean beyond whackadoodle weird. We were talking about birthdays and he gave me a short lecture on how our bodies age and then stormed out of the room.”

Leonard’s brows came together in thought. “That doesn’t sound like Sheldon. Unnecessarily long and detailed explanations and a captive audience are like candy for him. I’ll see what’s up.”

“Thanks Leonard. Have a good night.”

“How can I go wrong with a Star Trek marathon on a Saturday night?” His smile froze on his face after Penny had closed the door. “Yay Leonard,” he said mockingly as he rose from the couch to see what got his roommate off-kilter.

Knock Knock Knock “Sheldon?”

“Go away.”

Leonard leaned against the doorframe. “Sheldon, I’m not going anywhere until you tell me what’s wrong.”

“We had a slight weapons malfunction but everything’s perfectly all right now.”

“Huh,” Leonard said as he rolled his eyes at the Star Wars quote. “For God’s sake open the door and let’s talk.”

After a moment more of silence he opened the door to find Sheldon curled up on his bed, back to the door. Leonard bit his lip: whatever it was that was bothering Sheldon it was something big.

“So,” Leonard began. He cleared his throat. “Penny said you were upset earlier.”

“Yes, I can see how she could construe such a thing.” came his quiet response.

“And she said that you became upset after she brought up the topic of birthdays.”

Like a spring Sheldon turned and sat up. “Do you know what happens four weeks and three days from today?”

“Four weeks. Four weeks.” Leonard brightened. “That’s right, it’s your bir—”

“Shh!” Sheldon said as his hand waved in the air. He looked pained as a tremor passed over his
lips. “Leonard, I’m turning thirty.”

“And?”

“You more than anyone else should know what that means,” Sheldon said darkly.

Leonard ran a hand through his hair as he leaned against the door. “Sheldon, it’s not written in stone.”

“Isn’t it? Then tell me Leonard. Give me one example and I’ll concede the point. You can’t, can you?”

“Maybe you’ll be different. God knows you’re different enough.”

Sheldon was irate. “Maybe didn’t calculate relativity. Maybe didn’t create the path integral formulation.”

“Feynman was thirty when he did that.”

“Yes, but he completed his research earlier.” Sheldon’s blue eyes became as water. “All I have are a bunch of numbers on a whiteboard, Leonard. I’ve failed. Now please, get out.”

He looked so despondent Leonard didn’t know what to say.

In a rush the door opened and three men in camouflage fatigues burst into the shack, the last slamming the door shut. After a moment spent catching their breaths they took off their goggles.

“Man, those geologists are mad,” giggled Howard as he wiped the sweat from his face with the back of his glove. “That’s what they get for keeping their nose to the ground.”

Leonard grinned. “Who woulda thunk a little tree-climbing would stump them?”

“There they were, looking for us on the ground while we sat in the air like gods,” smiled Raj. “Then Leonard went all commando.”

Howard sat down on a bale of hay. “That was some smooth shooting, buddy.”

“Yeah, well the gun got tangled up with my jacket,” said Leonard sheepishly. “There’s not much grace involved while you’re falling out of a tree.”

Raj bent over to pull out a few leaves from his boots. “You should have told us you’re afraid of heights, Leonard.”

“I’m not afraid of heights. I just get apprehensive being any distance from the earth where elevation factors into the equation,” Leonard stammered defensively.

“Dude, you’re elevated when you climb stairs,” said Raj.

“I guess we know who doesn’t like being on top,” smiled Howard. Raj laughed while Leonard made a face.

“Speaking of ‘being on top’, what are we going to do about Sheldon?” Leonard asked as he sat down next to Howard.
“You say he really lost it last night?” said Raj.

“The poor guy was freaking out because he hadn’t resolved the universe yet and he’s thirty in four weeks.”

“Age is just a number,” said Howard with a frown. “Granted I’m no physicist, hence not subject to the curse, but even I’m impressed at the amount of formulas Sheldon has composed, proposed and resolved. He’s got an impressive body of work.”

“Yes, but this is Sheldon. You know, the man who threw the Physics Bowl because he wasn’t going to win. The one who refuses to promote papers unless he is the primary author. The one who insists Dlvl’ pegh Dlp is Justice League in Klingon,” reminded Leonard.

“Maybe we should have an intervention,” suggested Raj. “Call his Mom.”

“I talked with her this morning before I left. She said she’d call him later in the day.” Leonard absent-mindedly ran his finger along the gun’s barrel. “You know, even when we pranked him in the North Pole by sabotaging his findings he wasn’t as upset as he is now. I wish there was something I could say ‘sorry’ for but all I’m sorry for is him.”

A Pop Pop Pop Pop of paint balls was heard coming closer to the shack until the door flew open and another camoed body entered the room.

“This a private party or can anyone join?” asked Leslie Winkle as Raj quickly closed the door. She looked around. “Where’s Dr. Dumbass?”

“At home having a crisis,” said Leonard.

“What’s with him? Somebody graffitied his whiteboard with accurate calculations?”

“He’s turning thirty and not liking it,” explained Howard.

Leslie nodded her head. “Ah, yes, the infamous age thirty ‘Precipice Principle’. So Mr. Humility’s feeling the heat.”

Leonard stood up to confront Leslie but once standing found he was too nervous to look her in the eye. “It’s serious, Leslie. He’s really upset.”

Pop Pop Pop Pop

Everyone turned to the door but the sounds passed.

“He should relax. Everyone knows he’s a crazy genius,” Leslie said.

“A crazy genius who hasn’t revolutionized the world,” said Howard as he looked out the window.

“I suppose this must be difficult for him. After all we came into our careers because we like them. Sheldon’s gift made physics his destiny,” mused Leonard.

“You’re making him sound like a Jedi,” said Howard through gritted teeth. He was sure he saw a geologist among the trees.

“Look, don’t tell him I said this but Sheldon’s the real deal. He’s just got to cut himself some slack,” Leslie said seriously.

“Incoming!” shouted Howard as he ducked away from the window. “We’re going to be
surrounded. Any suggestions?”

“Spray and pray always worked for the Divinity College,” shrugged Leslie.

Leonard opened the door. “Ladies first.”

“Gee Leonard, you’re such a gentleman,” Leslie scowled before charging out the door followed by Raj and Howard, with Leonard bringing up the rear.

XTBBTx

A/N Wikipedia: number 30; Richard Feynman

Ka’plah: Klingon word meaning ‘Success’.

2005 YU55 asteroid: passed between the earth and moon in November 2011. I moved it to April 2012 so it fits the story.

Dlvl’ pegh Dlp: Klingon--Dlvl’-organization; pegh-be secret; Dlp-justice. I made this up. Yeah I know it’s kind of sad.

Sheldon turning 30: I know, he’s already 31. Call this a parallel universe Sheldon?

Thanks for sticking with the story!
“Come on Sheldon, your mi krop is getting cold,” yelled Leonard from the living room. As he looked helplessly at Raj and Howard he heard a door open.

“Hey Sheldon,” Howard said tentatively as the tall man entered the room.

“Hello Howard. Raj,” nodded Sheldon as he sat in his spot. He said nothing more as he grabbed his carton of food and a pair of chopsticks.

Leonard bit his lip as he looked at Howard, who encouraged him with a flip of the hand.

“So Sheldon.” Leonard cleared his throat. “We were thinking that maybe—”

“Save it Leonard. There’s nothing to be said on the matter,” Sheldon said dismissively.

“Au contraire,” said Howard. “You sell yourself short, my friend. Granted that’s surprising coming from a stark raving egomaniac such as yourself”—here Sheldon glared—“but nevertheless it’s true.”

“I agree,” said Raj as he set his food carton on his thigh. “You’ve done a lot of things to be proud of: determining that three-dimensional string-nets provide a unified picture of fermions and gauge bosons.”

“Merely accounting for the chiral coupling in the standard model,” said Sheldon.

“Showing how neutrinos emerge from a string-net condensate,” continued Raj.

“A matter of application,” dismissed Sheldon.

“What about reconciling the black hole information paradox?”

“Someone had to shut Hawking up. And I didn’t even get a baseball encyclopedia for my efforts.”

“Well?” Leonard said, trying to impress upon Sheldon the ramification of his statement.

“Well what?”

Howard dropped his jaw. “Sheldon, you’re arguing with Stephen Hawking. Doesn’t that tell you something?”

“That I can win a fight against an invalid?”

Leonard rolled his eyes. “No Sheldon. Much as I hate to admit it to your ego, your research is at the forefront of theoretical physics.”

“Unless I’m challenged by a fifteen year old wunderkind,” muttered Sheldon darkly before taking a bite of his noodles.

“Yes, but Dennis Kim found a girl of his own and that was that,” Leonard reminded him.

“He was younger than me by half a year when he won the Stevenson’s Award,” argued Sheldon.
“He got lucky,” Leonard mumbled, sensing he was beginning to lose the argument.

“Lucky?” Sheldon said excitedly. “He took one look at my calculations and realized a Lorentz invariant field theory approach would solve things quite nicely.”

“And he reconciled the primary paradox in physics: nerdy scientists dating hot chicks,” sighed Raj. Leonard glared, causing him to look away with a blush.

Sheldon stood up and went to his whiteboard.

“I should have known I wasn’t destined for greatness when Leslie Winkle touched my board.” His hand stroked the board’s smooth surface. “I didn’t even see the error,” he said quietly. “Von Neumann would have found it. Peter Lax said he had the most ‘scintillating intellect’ of the twentieth century, leaving many to wonder if he wasn’t a superior species to man. By age twenty-nine he’d made groundbreaking strides in quantum mechanics, various forms of operator theory and the ergodic theorem. He was a giant among men.”

“Sheldon,” Leonard said his voice trailing. He didn’t know what to say. He looked to Howard for help but the engineer shrugged his shoulders.

“All I’ve managed to amass in twenty-nine years are insignificant tidbits—”

“They’re not insignificant—” said Leonard, voice rising.

“—that ring around the mulberry bush when my intension is to pick those berries and make jam,” said Sheldon angrily. “I’m thirty gentlemen, my toast has popped and I’ve nothing to spread.”

“I always thought a unifying theory would be a jelly, personally,” said Raj in an attempt to break the tension.

Sheldon paused before speaking. “You’re right. It would.”

He went to his room.

xTBBTx

“So where’s Sheldon?” asked Penny as she finished writing out the dinner orders.

“At the university,” sighed Leonard.

Penny looked up. “Wasn’t he there last week too?”

“Yup,” said Howard. Penny looked at Leonard but he didn’t elaborate.

“This doesn’t have to do with what happened on Saturday, does it?” she asked worriedly. After he left the laundry room she’d thought about going after him but eventually chalked up his reaction to a bad case of ‘Sheldonitis’. Right now she could just kick herself.

“Kinda,” Leonard admitted. “Sheldon’s killing himself trying to solve the universe in four weeks.”

“I couldn’t decide between two pairs of shoes in three hours,” said Penny with a little smile. “I have no idea how he thinks the things he does.”

“Trust me, no one understands how he thinks,” said Howard. Everyone at the table nodded in agreement before Penny headed off with the order.
“So what’s the plan?” asked Raj as he toyed with the salt shaker. “Do we let Sheldon get sucked into a black hole of his making or do we help him out?”

“I don’t think he wants anyone’s help,” said Howard with a little smirk. “We just have to hope that he comes out of this without losing more of his grip on reality.”

“Like Professor Thorson. When he thought the millennium spelled the end for mankind he locked himself in his own bomb shelter for six months,” said Leonard. “He got in trouble, not for leaving the university but because he took his mark books with him.”

“Oh the power of tenure,” said Raj in awe.

Leonard shook his head. “I don’t know if I could imagine Sheldon with less of a grip. Remember when Penny slipped him a couple of drinks and he started reciting Shakespearian poetry in the voice of Jar Jar Binks?”

“Although when he reversed it and used sixteenth century English for Jar Jar it really elevated the level of The Phantom Menace,” countered Raj.

“At least he didn’t come up with Jar Jar. Then we’d know he’s crackers,” murmured Howard.

“So as long as he merely talks like a fictional character he’s fine? Man we have a low threshold for sanity in the physics department,” smirked Leonard.

“You’re essentially using mathematics to represent ideas you can’t actually demonstrate in the real world. It’s like when you talk about getting a hypoallergenic cat every time you need a girl,” explained Howard.

“I’m not that bad,” glared Leonard. “After Sheldon brought in all those cats because of Amy I saw replacing a woman’s love with feline attention wasn’t the way to go.” He paused. “Especially since a dog really is man’s best friend.”

“Too bad we just couldn’t get Sheldon a dog,” sighed Raj.

“I think that’s a great idea. I mean look what a good job he did training Leonard,” laughed Howard.

“Hello, Amy. How are you this evening?”

“Why hello Sheldon. You must forgive my confusion as this is not our usual time to Skype. In fact, I believe it’s Halo night?”

“Indeed. However, I must confess that I don’t find myself in the mood for games as of late.”

“Yes, I gathered as much from the email I got from Leonard. He’s quite concerned.”

“I wish he’d keep his concerns to himself.”

“He’s just being a good friend. Now it’s my turn. Under the ‘Relationship Agreement’ Section four, paragraph six it’s my responsibility to provide comfort in times of emotional distress. What can I do?”

“Unless your research has found a way to repress cognitive decline I fail to see what you can do to
assist me.”

“Sheldon, your obsession with age thirty is illogical. Perhaps this is a manifestation of your OCD.”

“No it’s illogical to ignore evidence to the contrary. Despite my heightened IQ, eidetic memory and advanced understanding of the universe I’ll fall short of my goal due to mental decline. Oh, and I don’t have OCD.”

“Your denial is fascinating. So what is your goal?”

“To provide a unifying theory to explain the universe as we know it.”

“You’ve made many professional advances.”

“But now it’s too late.”

“Sheldon, your emotions have flawed your thinking. As long as you’re alive and cognitively aware it’s never too late.”

…

“Relax, Sheldon. As Bestie would say: get your head out of your arse and enjoy the ride.”

“Coming from someone who’s in a permanent state of denial when it comes to financial planning.”

“Nevertheless, she is correct.”

“Her electricity was cut off for three days last month.”

“Irrelevant.”

“Anecdotal evidence as to state of mind.”

“Acknowledged. Evidence dismissed.”

“On what grounds?”

“Bestie’s strengths are intuitively-based. In this instance I believe she’d agree that your fears are unfounded.”

…

“Sheldon.”

“I shall think over what you’ve said.”

“I think you’ve already formulated your conclusion. It’s in error.”

“Goodnight Amy Farrah Fowler.”

“Goodnight Sheldon.”

xTBBTx

“Hurry up,” urged Howard as Leonard ran from the bathroom to his bedroom before catching his breath in the living room.
“Damn, let me get my spare set of glasses,” said Leonard as he checked his pockets. After the Planet of the Apes marathon when he broke his glasses within the first five minutes of the film and had to face a sick Sheldon (not to mention a very pissed off Penny) at home, he made it priority one to keep a spare set on him when he went to the movies.

Howard rubbed his hands. “Hot vampire chicks await, my friend.”

“Don’t forget the werewolves,” said Raj. “Everyone forgets about them. Oh sure, they can be your best friend, offering you their shoulder to cry on until their hearts are crushed as soon as you dump them for your vampire boyfriend.”

“That’s Twilight you douche,” said an astonished Howard. “We’re seeing the Underworld marathon tonight.”

“Yes, but I found it doesn’t have the emotional punch like between Edward and Bella.”

Leonard rolled his eyes as he entered the room. “Why am I glad I just missed the previous conversation?”

“Dude, don’t let your heart turn to stone,” said Raj in a huff as he opened the door.

Leonard grabbed his keys from the bowl and hesitated, turning to face the room. After a moment he followed Howard out into the hall and locked the door.

“Not that I’m complaining about this but are you sure it’s a good idea leaving Sheldon alone?” asked Howard. The last time they saw Underworld Sheldon spent the entire movie criticizing the inconsistencies and plot faults when all Howard wanted to do was get into Kate Beckinsale’s pants.

“He was up pretty late last night so I’m hoping the silence means he’s getting some sleep,” said Leonard as they descended the stairs.

“Poor Sheldon,” said Raj as he shook his head.

“I guess it’s only a matter of time now. You know, before he has to go to the ‘hoo haa house’, ” said Howard.

Leonard frowned. “I’m giving him until the weekend to snap out of this or I’m calling his mother and taking him to the hospital.” Howard and Raj nodded in agreement as they exited the building.

Back in apartment 4A, a bedroom door opened and Sheldon entered the living room. He was wearing a Bat-Man shirt over a blue long-sleeved shirt. Normally when he was working he wore The Flash (representing his speed of thought), Green Lantern (for his creativity) or Superman (self-explanatory) but tonight he felt like skulking around. Moreover he was almost keeping Bruce Wayne hours: sleeping fitfully for an hour or two during the day before rising to sit and stare at his wall. And think.

At the end of the day that was the problem—he couldn’t stop thinking. Numbers and formulas swirled in his head, driven by an incessant fear of missing an important clue or making a mistake. Time was of the essence and he couldn’t afford to spend what he had on foolish endeavors, not if he wanted to be among the Nobel Prize elite.

He opened the refrigerator and pulled out a pizza box. Opening it on the counter he saw Leonard had ordered it with his favorite toppings: sausage, light olives and mushrooms. As frustrating as he could be, Leonard really was a great friend.
Taking a slice of pizza, Sheldon stood in front of his whiteboard looking over his work from earlier in the day. The board was so packed with equations it was difficult to read in some places. What he really needed about now was more space. Perhaps he should go to the university? He scanned the apartment and spotted Leonard’s board in the corner. Crossing the room, he picked up the board and easel and moved it next to his own board. He quickly read over Leonard’s formulas before rubbing them off with a cloth. It’s not like he was using the board for anything important.

For the next two hours Sheldon interspersed his writing with pieces of pizza and pacing around the apartment. At times he would scrawl out several lines of equations only to erase them in their entirety a few minutes later. On one occasion an idea came to him with such a jolt that he ran back to the whiteboard to record his thoughts. While he was excited at first, he quickly realized that he had no idea what to do with it. He knew it was important; he just didn’t know how it fit into the primary equation. Yet.

“If ever,” he muttered to himself as he set down his marker. He pinched the bridge of his nose as he closed his eyes. Sheldon was tired but too anxious to rest. He closed the pizza box but stopped himself before putting it back in the fridge. The box was too cumbersome; he should wrap the pizza slices in saran. Grabbing the wrap from the drawer he pulled out a strip and straightened it on the counter. He stared at the pizza box. After a moment he tore the strip of saran and put it in the garbage.

XxX

Knock Knock Knock “Penny.”

Knock Knock Knock “Penny.”

Knock Knock Knock “Penny.”

Penny opened the door to see Sheldon standing awkwardly in the hall. He thrust a pizza box in her direction.

“Penny, I seem to have some pizza left over and as you’ll require sustenance at some point between now and the end of the month I offer it to you as a token of our friendship.”

Penny grinned. “Aw thanks Sheldon.” She held the door open. “Come in.”

Sheldon stepped tentatively into the room as Penny put the pizza in the refrigerator.

“I see your efforts at maintaining a sense of order in your apartment have met with some serious opposition,” he said as he looked around.

“Yeah, I’ve been pretty busy.”

Sheldon picked up a wine bottle from the floor and set it beside the other two on the coffee table. “So I can see.”

Penny frowned even as she blushed. “So Sheldon, we missed you yesterday. Halo wasn’t the same without blowing your head off.” She gathered the bottles and put them in the kitchen.

“I was at the university,” he replied as he spied ‘his’ chair covered in female apparel. He twitched as he turned away and sat down gingerly on the couch.

“Yeah, Leonard said you’ve been spending a lot of time there.” She curled her leg under her as she sat next to Sheldon. She stared at him until he lowered his eyes and scrunched his lips nervously.
“Ok, Moonpie, what’s going on? Leonard told me something but I’m not sure I understand.”

Looking up, she could see Sheldon was annoyed. “What did Leonard say?”

“Only that you were upset because you’re turning thirty.”

Sheldon hesitated, thinking, before slumping against the couch. “Penny, as your friend I have listened to you talk about your acting career. I now know what you mean about failure. I am at the brink.”

Penny’s brows met for an instant; she was sure there was an insult in the mix yet decided to ignore it before she replied. “You? Come off it Sheldon. You’re being paid to do what you love. You’ve gotten a bazillion awards and everyone knows you’re a success.”

“Hardly.” His jaw set as a bitter look came to his face. “Here’s a well-known fact in the physics world: no one has ever come up with a major break-through after age thirty and, as Kripke has reminded me over the last two weeks, I’m nearing that mark.”

“Oh sweetie. I thought you didn’t believe in all this destiny ‘hokum’?”

“It’s not ‘hokum’. It’s fact. Physics is a young man’s game. Now I’m forced to determine whether I’ve got ‘the stuff’ to bring my research to a successful conclusion or else retire from research and do what Leonard should have done three years ago and resign myself to teach.”

“You can’t give up, Sheldon. Man, you sound like you play professional sports: ‘He’s a washed up old man at thirty three’. Thirty is young. You’ve got lots of years to find your string thingies.”

Sheldon opened his mouth to interject but Penny shushed him with a swoosh of her finger. “Besides, as you keep pointing out you’re smart. Smarter than I could ever think of being. If anyone can break this age curse it’s you.”

“I thank you for your belief in me Penny,” Sheldon said at last. “I shall do my best not to let you down.”

“You drive me crazy sometimes Sheldon but you’ve never let me down.” For a moment Penny was sure she saw a genuine smile cross his face as he eyed her gratefully. She smiled warmly in return. “Just promise me you’ll never sell yourself short like this again. It throws the world off when Sheldon Doctor, Doctor, Masters Cooper doubts himself.”

“I appreciate the sentiment, although the titles appear after the sir name not between the given and —” the devilish smile on Penny’s face stopped him short.

“Like I said: Drive. Me. Crazy.”

“At least it has become a familiar destination,” Sheldon said with a twinkle in his eyes. “Bazinga.”

Penny cocked her head as a smile came to her lips. She got up and quickly made her way past a puzzled Sheldon to her stereo. After a moment’s scanning through the songs she let it play.

‘I got a feeling. That tonight’s gonna be a good night. That tonight’s gonna be a good night. That tonight’s gonna be a good good night. Woo Hoo’

Coming back to stand in front of Sheldon, Penny pushed the coffee table aside with her leg as she began lip-synching to the Black Eyed Peas. He rolled his eyes. As the lyrics commanded she reached out and grabbed his hands and hauled him off the couch. Before he knew what was happening she started swaying her hips from side to side in time with the music although she was
mindful to keep her distance from his body.

Instead she let all of her passion flow through her hands as her fingers intertwined with his until they pressed palms. Swinging their arms all around to the beat Penny grinned fiercely at Sheldon, who could only stare at her with a sense of wonder.

Raising her arms straight in the air she twirled them before slowly lowering their hands until they lay at his side. Penny stood on her toes and she leaned in toward his ear as the song quieted.

‘I got a feeling. That tonight’s gonna be a good night.’

“You’ll do it, Sheldon. I know you will,” she said and without thinking gave him a soft kiss on the cheek.

Standing firmly on her feet, Penny looked into Sheldon’s wide eyes. She didn’t breathe. She didn’t think. She was too busy swimming in the blue.

Color came to Sheldon’s cheeks as he took in Penny’s sclera, iris, pupil, eye muscle and something he couldn’t identify behind her eyes that made them seem all the more alluring.

At this point Penny knew what would usually happen given anyone else on the planet but since this was Sheldon (Sheldon!) what was supposed to happen and what would happen were two very separate things. With every passing second she could see his look change from surprise to curiosity to nervousness and—something more?

Sheldon felt his body go rigid as a facial tic threatened to consume his right eye. Sensing the tension Penny suddenly moved their arms to the beat and leaned away from him, grinning all the while. A shy smile passed over Sheldon’s face.

‘That tonight’s gonna be a good night. That tonight’s gonna be a good night. That tonight’s gonna be a good good night. Woo Hoo’

The song at an end, Penny let go of his hands to turn off the stereo. Sheldon looked down at his hands and gently rubbed his finger tips against his palms. The contamination was immense. Yet…. He had his antibacterial wipes in his pocket. And yet…. He looked at Penny as she pressed the power button and again at his hands.

Not yet….

xTBBTx

Penny and Leonard sat in the living room chatting about Robert Downey Jr. and The Avenger’s movie while Sheldon and Amy were on his computer.

“You’re in a better mood this evening. I’m pleased to see you’ve taken my advice,” said Amy.

“Advice?” asked Sheldon. “Oh, yes. I believe my ‘arse’ has voided my cranium.”

“Have you managed to achieve REM sleep?”

“I believe I had a cycle last night.”

“You should remember how you relieved your anxiety and repeat the process as necessary,” suggested Amy as she got up.

Sheldon blinked his eyes extra hard but said nothing.
“Knock, Knock,” said Howard as he entered with Bernadette and Raj in tow. “Who wants Chinese?”

“As we placed the order I think it’s safe to assume we do,” said Sheldon as he closed his laptop.

“I see someone’s feeling better,” noted Howard.

“Oh, Amy, Penny, I’m glad you’re here. I found the prettiest—”

“Bernadette,” Sheldon tutted. “What was the rule about discussing wedding details in mixed company?”

“ Doesn’t apply when the company’s mixed up,” said Penny. Both she and Sheldon glared at each other.

Raj sniffed in indignation before whispering into Howard’s ear.

“No, we don’t want to know how the type and weave of the lace determines the style of the wedding dress,” Howard said while shaking his head in disgust as he passed Raj his food.

“On a subject of real importance”—here Leonard gave a start as all three women eyed him sharply —“not that I’m saying that wedding plans aren’t important, just that we…. Anyhow, the 2005 YU55 asteroid is coming into view this Monday and we were wondering if you girls wanted to see it?”

“I don’t know. Howie told me all about the last excursion,” said Bernadette.

“I’m game,” said Amy enthusiastically. “The last time a man took me out to see the stars we were lying in the back of his truck: me taking in the sky while he took in about a mickey of rum. Apparently astronomy wasn’t his forte and he needed help with his homework.”

“Oh honey, that’s terrible,” breathed Penny.

“That’s nothing. The first time Raj took a woman out to see the stars every time she asked him a question he nearly peed his pants,” said Leonard. “Brings a whole new meaning to ‘meteor shower’.” Raj shot him a dirty look.

“Come on Bernadette, it’ll be fun. We can snuggle up and see the stars,” coaxed Howard.

“We can roast marshmallows,” said Amy.

“Did you know the use of the marshmallow was originally medicinal since it contained mucilaginous extracts?” noted Sheldon.

“Goodbye S’mores,” said Penny as she made a sickly face.

“What about you, Bestie? Care to come along and see a cosmological equivalent of a near miss?” asked Amy.

“Gee, I’d love to but I’m working,” said Penny with a pout. “Maybe I could switch shifts but I doubt it.”

“What about you, Sheldon?” Leonard inquired.

“Alas I, too, will be working.” The room went silent.
“You can take a night off, Sheldon,” said Amy.

“I could, and I plan to—when I have this latest formula resolved.”

“You’ve got the weekend,” said Penny enthusiastically. Sheldon looked incredulously at her. “Well, you never know unless you try….”

“Quite right, and in my free time on Sunday I can always solve for the last digit in pi and come up with a plausible argument that changing the order of Han Solo firing at Greedo from first to second was a rational act,” said Sheldon haughtily.

“She’s only trying to be encouraging,” said Leonard icily.

“Well it’d be more encouraging if she could at least comprehend the magnitude of my research if not its intricate components.”

“Oh I ‘get’ it all right Sheldon,” said Penny as she rose. “Too bad you never comprehend what a colossal douche you are.” She stormed out of the apartment followed by Amy and Bernadette.

“Way to go Sheldon,” growled Raj.

“What? I was just relating an observation.”

“So was she,” remarked Howard.

XxX

Sheldon’s Log. Star Date 12413.15

At 20:37 the following statements were uttered:

Sheldon: Well it’d be more encouraging if she could at least comprehend the magnitude of my research if not its intricate components.

Penny: Oh I get it all right Sheldon. Too bad you never comprehend what a colossal douche you are.

Result: Penny became upset and left the room.

Query: Why?

I was just stating the obvious fact that she does not know what it is I’m doing much less care. For all she knows I could be wasting my time formulating redundant ideas like Leonard.

Observation: Penny became upset and retorted with a personal attack.

Evaluation: Based on my experiences with Penny she only responds in this fashion when she is similarly attacked.

Conclusion: What I said was interpreted as a personal attack.

Query Two: Why was Penny offended?

Observation: In her answer she stressed the inflection on the word ‘get’ suggesting that she ‘got’ something beyond my statement.
It was intimated that part of the reason why Penny broke up with Leonard was because of her feelings of inferiority regarding their intellectual divide.

Evaluation: She interpreted my statement as meaning she was too dumb to comprehend my work in its simplest form when I meant that it would be pleasing if she would take the time to understand the importance of my research. Good Lord I can’t get Leonard and Raj to comprehend my work half the time. I’m not surprised at Howard’s failure to follow my thoughts since he only has a Master’s degree.

Even though it is her misunderstanding history has shown that, as the originator of the statement, it is my duty to rectify the situation.

Conclusion: I must apologize to Penny.

Query Three: Why does it matter if Penny cares about what I’m doing?

Insufficient data.

While it was his routine to do his laundry at eight-fifteen pm Sheldon surmised that Penny would most likely do her laundry at an earlier time to avoid him. Sure enough at six-thirty he heard Penny’s door open and footsteps going down the stairs. He looked at his watch. As the washer took forty minutes he didn’t have to go down until seven-twelve, giving two minutes for Penny to begin unloading the dryer so she would be ‘stuck’ in the room while he apologized. More pointedly, she couldn’t hit him if her arms were full of damp clothing.

At the appointed time Sheldon made his way downstairs with his laundry basket. Penny was surprised to see him.

“Good evening Penny,” he said nonchalantly as he picked out his washers.

“Hello Sheldon,” she said icily. “What are you doing here?”

“As it’s a laundry facility and I’m carrying soiled apparel it should be obvious,” he said, puzzled at her line of inquiry.

Penny rolled her eyes. “Of course. How stupid of me.” She turned her back and continued loading the dryer.

Sheldon felt his jaw tighten as he sought to compose himself. “Penny,” he began amicably. “It’s come to my attention that I had offended you last night. I’ve come to apologize.”

“You know Sheldon,” said Penny as she stood up. “I might not be the brightest bulb but that doesn’t mean I’m dueling banjoes in my apartment. I know you’re smart. I know what you’re doing is something important. Give me some credit, will you?”

“You know Sheldon,” said Penny as she stood up. “I might not be the brightest bulb but that doesn’t mean I’m dueling banjoes in my apartment. I know you’re smart. I know what you’re doing is something important. Give me some credit, will you?”

“Penny, I am in no way comparing your intellectual capabilities to mine as there are few who truly register on my scale.” She glared at him. He swallowed before continuing. “I may even be so bold as to say for a waitress, I find you to be surprisingly challenging at times.”

She held up a fist, causing Sheldon to flinch. “Don’t mess with Queen Penelope.”

“Oh, your skills at Age of Conan and Halo haven’t been brought into question beyond the first night of playing,” agreed Sheldon. “However, in this instance I was referring to your wit. You’re
very adept at using puns and other forms of word-play to frustrate me.”

“Yeah, that’s Penny—a big laugh.”

Sheldon frowned. “That’s not what I’m saying. Please refrain from applying invective sarcasm to the conversation.”

“So what are you saying?” Penny sighed.

“I’m saying I find you to be a pleasant person despite your annoying habit of using our wifi without permission. I can further assure you that if you were ‘dumb as a blunted wooden pole’ I wouldn’t be friends with you.” A strange look came to his face. “As you’ve become a part of my social routine I find myself at a loss when you’re distressed,” he said softly.

Penny thought it over for a moment before letting out another sigh. “Ok Sheldon. Apology accepted.”

“Excellent,” nodded Sheldon as he put his clothes back in his basket.

“Aren’t you doing laundry?” Penny asked.

“Penny, it isn’t eight-fifteen. I always do my laundry at eight-fifteen.” He smiled awkwardly before leaving the room.

Penny stared after him with a look of amusement.

xTBBTx

“Hello, Sheldon. How are you this evening?”

“Hello Amy. I’m well. I’ll assume since you’re here that you’re in reasonable health.”

“Indeed. Given our conversation earlier in the week I wasn’t sure if you wanted to talk tonight.”

“Why wouldn’t I? It’s eight-thirty pm on Sunday—our scheduled time to Skype.”

“True. I’m hoping you’ve apologized to Penny for your comments on Friday.”

“I have.”

“And it was accepted?”

“I believe so. Why Amy Farrah Fowler, is this your attempt at ‘getting the dregs’?”

“Guilty as charged. Penny has yet to return my call.”

“As yesterday was Saturday I assume she went out and therefore is having an unproductive day. I’m sure no offence was intended.”

“None taken. There are times when I find myself too occupied to respond like when I’m unconscious, ill or locked in an isolation booth. On another subject I take it you’re still resigned to staying home tomorrow?”

“Yes. I have to take advantage of the times Leonard is out of the apartment. His presence can be a distraction.”
“Your work proceeds well?”

“It is proceeding…."

“Progress by any other name is still progress.”

“It would have to be or else it wouldn’t be progress. Goodnight Amy.”

“Goodnight Sheldon.”

xA/N My faithful Wikipedia: String Net Condensate; Black Hole Information Paradox; Von Neumann

Reference to baseball encyclopedia: Physicist John Preskill bet Stephen Hawking that information was not lost in black holes. Hawking conceded defeat and awarded Preskill with the encyclopedia.

Professor Thorson: True story. Gotta love tenure.

Sheldon poo-pooing his work: In actuality Sheldon has resolved major problems stumping physics today—hence the reason why the university puts up with his idiosyncrasies.

Age 30 physics precipice: My cousin (a physicist—although Sheldon wouldn’t approve: he’s experimental not theoretical) mentioned this in passing one day and it stuck.

I laughed when Leonard started singing ‘I Got a Feeling’ since I’d written my dance piece about a month prior. Very Twilight Zone.

Thanks for reading!
Bernadette and Amy were reclined next to each other on a sand dune looking at the sky. It was a bit of a drive getting to the observation site but they both agreed it was worth it.

“You know, times like this I understand why Howie keeps working for the space program,” said Bernadette.

“Indeed. The only time my work allows me to see stars are when I’m testing shape recognition in primates or have concussed myself,” said Amy.

“Sometimes I see star-shaped bacteria at the lab but it isn’t quite the same,” agreed Bernadette.

“I know it may not be socially appropriate given Penny’s absence but as I am your Maid of Honor I feel it necessary to inquire as to the status of Howard’s Best Man selection.”

Bernadette sighed, her finger drawing little swirls in the sand. “He’s not sure. Sometimes I think it’s a wonder he was sure enough to propose.”

Amy raised an eyebrow. “The only proposals I get from Sheldon have proper theses and a table of contents.”

“Wow,” said Bernadette, turning to face Amy. “You mean you’re ready to marry him?”

“Ready. Resigned. Definitely not repulsed by the idea. I am under no illusion that I am in any way considered to be a ‘catch’. Sheldon is egotistical, socially inept, sexually absent and disdaining of others but he does have a nice singing voice.”

“Aw Amy, you make it sound like you’re settling. There’s someone out there for every one. I mean look at Howard and me: who knew I would meet an engineer while working as a waitress?”

Amy raised herself up on an elbow. “Lightning has indeed struck twice at the Cheesecake Factory as Penny also ‘picked up’ Leonard. Perhaps I should seek a part time job.” After a moment she sat up and dragged her backpack to her side. Bernadette heard the sounds of bottles clinking before she felt a cool touch of glass against her hand.

“What’s this?” she asked as she looked at the bottle.

“Mississippi Mud cooler,” Amy smiled. “I figured what the heck let’s find a proper drink to toast the Milky Way.” She held up her bottle to the moon. “To friends and lovers.”

Bernadette touched Amy’s bottle with her own. “And to friends who are lovers and lovers who are friends.”

Amy paused in thought before taking a long drink.

On the other side of the sand dune Raj and Howard were putting the finishing touches on the assembled telescope.

“You know Howard I’m perfectly capable of doing this myself,” snapped Raj as he attached the eye cup. “It’s not like astrophysicists and telescopes are strangers.”
“Take it easy. All I’m saying is that you might as well take advantage of an engineer in the midst,” soothed Howard.

“Don’t mind Raj. He’s just sore the department wouldn’t let him take any of the higher end sensor equipment after the last time,” Leonard said while rummaging for a cola.

Raj was annoyed. “Dude, do you know how embarrassing it was having nothing to show for the meteor storm except a recording of you and Howard recreating the Battle of the Death Star with soda bottles and an empty brisket pan?”

Leonard shrugged. “Maybe it’s karma for us sabotaging Sheldon’s experiment in the Arctic.”

“Are you kidding me? With the amount of karma I acquire through knowing Sheldon I could kill a school full of Jedi children and get away with it,” scoffed Raj as he adjusted the lenses.

“So are we ready?” asked Bernadette as she and Amy came into the camp.

“Wop hop a top sop u pop?” said Amy as she kicked some sand.

“What?” said Leonard with a grin.

“Sorry. I was echoing Bernadette’s sentiment,” explained Amy.

Howard spread out a blanket over the sand. “For you, ladies. Tonight’s main attraction will commence in one hour and twenty-four minutes.” He looked to Raj for conformation, getting it with a nod and a little smirk.

“So what will we do until then?” said Bernadette as Howard sat down next to her.

“I know what we could do…” he purred. Bernadette giggled as she swatted his shoulder.

“Yeah, it’s not like we can just look at the sky and pose questions to an astrophysicist or anything like that,” said Leonard as he sat down on the cooler. Raj scowled at him.

“I have a solution,” said Amy as she held up a bottle of Mississippi Mud.

“Right out of Beetlejuice,” laughed Howard.

Raj gratefully took the bottle from Amy and took a gulp after opening the cap. He turned to his friends grinning like a fool.

“Now, where were we?” he started. “Ah yes, the 2005 YU55 meteor. Well, since its discovery….”

XxX

Sheldon checked his watch as he stood in front of his whiteboard and frowned. Nine- fourteen. Given the time of night, distance and speed it would be useless to attempt going to the meteor viewing. Especially if Penny’s made a diversion on her way home, he thought as he corrected his equation. He didn’t know why he had this sudden urge to see the meteor. If he had been so inclined earlier he could have gotten a ride with Leonard or Howard instead of waiting impatiently for Penny.

‘Solve for P=’ he wrote in the lower left hand corner of the board. Once he was finished the new formula Sheldon stared at the equation: usual time she leaves work, distance, average speed for Penny which of course meant a minimum of ten over the speed limit equals P where P equals ‘Home’.
“That was rather disjointed. I should have solved for ‘H’,” Sheldon muttered as he replaced the ‘P’ with an ‘H’. “Come now Dr. Cooper, don’t let basic mathematics slip from your grasp.” His eyes drifted to a particularly complex formula and read it as easily as a comic book. “Cognitive functions are normal.” He again looked at the simple set of numbers in the corner and narrowed his eyes: the input was correct as was the answer yet he felt as if something was wrong. After erasing the ‘H’ with his thumb he scrawled in ‘P’. Now satisfied, Sheldon continued with another problem until he heard the sounds of footsteps and jangling keys.

He crossed the hall and stood in front of Penny’s door, waiting exactly one minute before knocking since it gave her time to set things down and slip off her shoes yet not so much that she would become settled in a new activity.

Knock Knock Knock “Penny.”

Knock Knock Knock “Penny.”

Knock Knock Knock “Penny.”

“Yes Sheldon?” Penny asked as she opened the door.

“Penny, as you are aware the 2005 YU55 meteor is scheduled to pass between the Earth and the Moon tonight.”

“Yup.”

Sheldon’s mouth gave a sudden twitch as he attempted to smile. “You’re also aware that Leonard, Howard, Raj, Bernadette and Amy are presently situated at a pre-designated GPS coordinate awaiting the arrival of the meteor.”

“YuP,” she said, emphasizing the ‘P’.

“I believe our attendance is non-optional as this is a designated group social outing and we’re part of the group collective,” he explained.

Penny blinked. “You’re saying now you want to go? Why didn’t you go earlier with Leonard?”

Sheldon cocked his head to the left. “I didn’t realize until later that I desired to participate. However, even if I did accompany Leonard we’d still be at a quandary because you wouldn’t be there.”

“I said I had to work,” she responded as she leaned against her doorframe.

“Yes, but how could we calculate our outing as coming to a successful conclusion when we’re missing the Penny variable?”

“‘Penny variable’?” She couldn’t help but smile. “So now I’m a math equation? Sheldon you’ve got to get some air time between you and your marker board.”

“Well there have been many instances where I considered you a ‘problem’.” He paused. “Bazinga.”

“Yeah, yeah,” said Penny as she rolled her eyes. “Look sweetie, I don’t know if I’m up to having a drive tonight. Besides, isn’t it too late? I thought Leonard said the meteor thing was sometime after ten-thirty?”
“That is why Leonard isn’t an astrophysicist,” said Sheldon as he shook his head.

“Sheldon—”

“Penny, it isn’t in my nature to press my point”—here she dropped her jaw—“but in this instance I feel it necessary to note that 2005 YU55 is a once in a lifetime occurrence and so is the opportunity to see the aforementioned meteor in the presence of dear friends. It would make for a truly unforgettable evening.”

Sheldon bit his lip as Penny thought it over.

“Do I have time for a shower?” she said at last.

“Of course you do,” said a relieved Sheldon. “I’ll be back in eight minutes.” He returned to his apartment.

“Crap on a cracker,” Penny muttered as she closed her door and ran into her bedroom.

XxX

“So what made you change your mind about going?” asked Penny as she drove.

“Something Howard said about how juvenile Gallus gallus domesticus appreciate cosmological spectacles,” said Sheldon as his fingers rubbed an edge of his seatbelt.

“What was that? Juvenile Gallus—”

“Gallus domesticus,” Sheldon smiled. Penny shook her head.

“You’re really something else, pumpkin. So—wait. ‘Chicks’. You mean we’re driving out there because you think I want to see this?”

Sheldon looked out his side window into the darkness. “I also thought we could use the driving time as a means of ‘catching up’.”

“O-kay,” said Penny hesitantly as she signaled to pass a pickup truck. “So how’s work coming?”

“Slowly. I feel myself growing anxious as the day in question approaches.”

“Your birthday,” Penny confirmed. Sheldon nodded but said nothing. “Well as I said, if anyone can do it it’s you, Moonpie.”

Sheldon turned back towards Penny. “No, you said I will do it—and don’t call me Moonpie.”

“Let’s put it this way: do you think there’s a scientific answer as to how the universe formed and how it works?”

“Yes.”

“Then I believe you’ll figure it out,” she said as her green eyes caught his blue ones in the rear view mirror. “Believe Luke.”
“Why Penny, you’re quoting Star Wars,” Sheldon said in a pleased tone.

“If I couldn’t after all these years of knowing you and Leonard I’d have to have cabbage for brains.”

Sheldon was puzzled. “Why cabbage?”

Penny braced herself for the groan. “Because I’d ‘produce’ no thoughts.”

After a moment Sheldon smiled and gave a gaspy laugh.

The rest of the ride went relatively smoothly as Penny only had to bite her tongue once against a particularly backhanded comment. She knew he didn’t mean it to sound as harsh as it did but that didn’t mean she was a pushover. Of course, Sheldon didn’t even realize he was push-ing to begin with.

“Pull over Penny,” said Sheldon after looking at his watch.

“But we’re not there yet,” she said as she signaled to leave the side road for the desert.

“We won’t make it. The meteor will pass in five minutes and we’re still several miles away from the observation site.”

Penny drove around a small dune and put the car in park. Grabbing their jackets, both Penny and Sheldon exited the vehicle and climbed onto the hood.

“So where should I look?” she asked

“At the moon. Although it won’t make much difference. We need a telescope.”

“Ah.” She looked at a particularly bright star. “What’s that?” she pointed.

“The planet Venus.”

“Really?” said Penny in shock. “I thought all we could see was Mars and the moon?”

“With the naked eye it’s hard to discern the other planets from the stars but it is possible to see Mercury, Jupiter, Saturn and Uranus,” answered Sheldon. “Pluto and Neptune are too dim.”

“Wow.” She looked at the stars. “So you know all about this.”

“Not ‘all’,” Sheldon began.

She elbowed him. “You know what I mean.” She looked up. “When I see the sky I feel so insignificant.”

“We are insignificant,” said Sheldon. He noticed in his peripheral vision that Penny looked sad. “Of course that’s in perspective of the general universe. In a more personal cosmology some people are an integral component of gravity necessary to support life.”

Penny smiled. “Yeah, you rock my world too, Sheldon.” He blushed nervously as she leaned back on the windshield. “So show me the Big Dipper.”

He leaned over and pointed at the sky. “Do you see that particularly bright star? That’s Polaris or the North Star. See the star directly below it? Now follow to the left and you have the ladle. And up—”
“I see it!” Penny exclaimed.

“While we’re in the vicinity there’s the House of Cephus and later in the evening we should see Cassiopeia.”

Penny smiled warmly as she gazed at Sheldon. “Thanks for bringing me here.”

“You drove,” he conceded.

“No, I mean ‘here’.” She held up her arm to span the sky. Sheldon swallowed hard before glancing at Penny, a shy smile on his face.

“Of course,” he stammered, “Cephus was the Ethiopian King whose daughter Andromeda was offered up to the Krakken until she was rescued by the hero Perseus.”

“Perseus? You mean Clash of the Titans?”

“Indeed.”

“Wow. Is Perseus out there too?” asked Penny as she scoured the heavens.

“He’ll be to the east of Cassiopeia and north of Taurus,” said Sheldon as he directed her vision.

After taking a moment to look, Penny let a sly smile creep onto her face. “Wait, you’re a Taurus aren’t you?”

Sheldon pursed his lips in distaste. “Yes.”

“That makes you practical, determined and a generous friend,” she quoted from memory.

Sheldon rolled his eyes. “No, genetics, environmental exposure and experience make me what I am, Penny.”

“Oh, did I say stubborn?” she asked sweetly. He wrinkled his nose. “So what’s Amy?”

“Capricorn.”

“Ooo, two earth signs. That’s terrific. Capricorns are practical, disciplined and funny.”

“While I attribute none of this to astrological hokum I do concur that Amy Farrah Fowler does possess these characteristics,” said Sheldon grudgingly.

“See? It’s destiny you met.”

Sheldon was silent as he looked at the sky. “I believe you said you’re a Sagittarius. What traits does that seemingly bestow on your person?”

“I’m a free-spirit bay-bee. Honest and optimistic,” Penny grinned as she raised her arms over her head.

“Nothing negative?” he asked, eyebrow arching.

“Well, maybe a little irresponsible.”

Sheldon laughed. “Fascinating. Maybe I was too hasty in trivializing astrology.”

Penny stuck out her tongue.
Despite arriving home at three forty-seven am Sheldon felt wide awake as he crossed the campus towards his office. Granted he hadn’t had a proper sleep cycle and his bowel movement was delayed twenty-three minutes but all in all he managed to keep to his scheduled departure time with Leonard.

Sheldon flashed a little smile as he thought about the previous evening. Once he brought down his conversation to Penny’s level she was a bundle of questions. She proved to be a willing student as they spent the night charting constellations and talking about star systems and even a little string theory. True, this wasn’t the most stimulating conversation on M-theory but to Sheldon it was one of the most important talks of his life. He was particularly mystified by Penny’s analogy on dark matter:

“So basically this Fritz thought up dark matter as a way of explaining why his numbers didn’t mesh with what he thought they’d be,” said Penny.

Sheldon looked at her sharply. “You make it sound like Professor Zwicky was attempting to conceal an error. In actuality he was the first to employ the virial theorem—‘a whole whack of math’ as you put it—to locate evidence of ‘missing mass’ in the orbital velocities of galaxies in clusters. Subsequent observations support the presence of dark matter such as the rotational speeds of galaxies, gravitational lensing—”

“What’s that?”

Sheldon took a moment to think. “Think of my fist as a galaxy cluster and directly behind it we have another galaxy set at an indeterminate distance. Now the spacetime around my fist is curved due to gravitational principles. For us observing on Earth, the background galaxy appears to be larger and in another location than it really is because of the closer galaxy’s gravity working on the spacetime around itself.”

“No kidding. Sounds like unrequited love to me.” Sheldon turned his head, a puzzled look on his face. “Think of my fist as a hot guy and behind him is a nice guy. Now the hot guy’s got an uber aura of muscles and dimples and a killer smile. From a girl’s perspective she might see the nice guy but he’s distorted because of the hot guy’s hotness. So while she sees the nice guy as only a friend he’s really over here in the ‘wants to be more than friends’ area.”

Sheldon looked at the sky, an unexplained rush of adrenaline causing him to flush. Perhaps he was catching something? He cleared his throat. “The vast majority of dark matter is nonbaryonic—not formed from atoms—and does not interact with ordinary matter in the usual manner because they do not carry any electric charge. Moreover nonbaryonic dark matter can only be detected by its gravitational attraction or by indirect detection such as the presence of neutrinos. It—”

Penny laughed. “Now this sounds like a shy guy who can’t tell a girl how he feels. The only way anyone knows he likes her is by seeing what he does for her like making sure she gets home after drinking at a party; listening to her as she complains about life.” She dug her elbow into Sheldon’s side. “Look at you: playing with numbers and formulas to solve the universe when at the heart of it all physics is the language of love.”

“Unrequited if we follow your examples,” Sheldon amended.

“Well that’s why we’ve got you smart guys working on it,” she grinned.

As he opened the door to his wing of the building Sheldon saw a series of helium balloons equally
spaced along the hallway with numbers increasing in sequential value. He opened his messenger bag and pulled out a pair of small scissors. He popped the first balloon then each succeeding on as he made his way towards his office. As predicted, balloon thirty was tied to his doorknob. He cut the knot and unlocked his door. He turned on the lights and walked nonchalantly to his desk, his calm demeanor betrayed by the shaking of his hand as he dropped the balloon strings in his garbage can.

XxX

“But I need those shifts,” Penny complained. As it stood she’d just make rent this month with little else to spare. ‘God, the car insurance is going to kill me next month’. The assistant manager smiled sympathetically but couldn’t alter the schedule. Feeling herself tearing up Penny flashed a quick smile and went to get the order. She bypassed Bernadette at the counter and went further into the kitchen. Putting on a pair of latex gloves she put some shredded cheese and strips of bacon next to —but not touching—the hamburger sitting on the plate. She placed the little dish of barbecue sauce on the side and carried the plate to her serving tray before removing her gloves.

“Right on schedule,” said Mike as he deftly turned the chicken on the grill. “I could almost set my watch to that guy.”

“He’s punctual,” Penny agreed as she put three more plates on her tray.

“And particular.”

'And peculiar', she thought with a little smile as she recalled last night. It had to be one of the most educational dates she’d been on. Not that it was a date date only that it felt so intimate she didn’t have another way to classify what had happened. Of course it was hard to classify anything when Sheldon Cooper was involved. Nevertheless she had to admit to herself that she had fun.

“Ok, that’s pork chop with baked potato for Howard,” she said as she set down a plate in front of each person. “Fish and chips for Raj, lactose-free fajita for Leonard and of course our ever-loving cheeseburger for Sheldon.”

“Barbecue bacon cheeseburger,” Sheldon corrected as he lifted the bun to inspect the patty.

“Ok then,” said Penny with a curt smile as she walked off to serve another table.

Sheldon looked up as Leonard started talking about the conversation he had with Leslie Winkle, although the lanky physicist wasn’t focused on his friend. 'Odd. Penny usually engages in meaningless social chit chat for one to two minutes after serving. Moreover she is usually more verbose'. As he listened in Sheldon rolled his eyes as he quickly understood Leonard’s conversation with Leslie was social in nature. While he considered their work to be insignificant in the scheme of things he could at least tolerate hearing about irrelevant scientific data.

“So what do you think she meant by that?” asked Leonard.

“Well, it depends on how she said it,” said Howard between bites. “I mean there’s ‘You bet’ as in ‘I’ll see you later’ and ‘You bet’ as in ‘counting the minutes until we’re making it like wild dogs’.”

“There’s also ‘You bet’ as in ‘when next we meet you’ll be at my feet basking in the radiance of my perforated hymen as I cut my way in line to use the free electron laser’,” suggested Raj as he wiggled his eyebrows.

Leonard put down his fork. “You don’t think she’d use sex to get the laser….” He thought about it, a wistful smile coming to his face. “Do you?”
“Why not?” interrupted Sheldon. “The bonobos—primates with whom we share a common ancestor—use sex as a way of greeting, to acquire sustenance and to resolve disputes, with the males conducting a rather unorthodox ritual involving penis fencing. It’s hardly a stretch for an optical physicist to offer coitus in exchange for a laser to conduct research in quantum chromodynamics.”

“We can only hope,” said Leonard with a grin. It had been a while since he’d had sex so he was more than open to Leslie’s advances.

As Penny approached the table Sheldon noticed her expression alter as she affixed a rather stiff smile to her face.

“Everything all right?” she asked.

“Indeed,” said Sheldon. “Might I enquire as to your status?” The rest of the guys stopped eating to look at Penny, causing her to blush.

“I’m fine. Only…could you guys use another body for Halo tomorrow?” she said hesitantly.

“But of course mi’lady,” Howard said smoothly. “There’s no greater turn-on than a woman kicking ass with a grenade launcher.”

Sheldon raised an eyebrow. “Penny, I thought you were working tomorrow.”

“So did I,” she muttered through gritted teeth.

“But how will you pay—”

“Drop it Sheldon,” Penny warned although she kept her smile for the rest to see. “All right then I’ll see you guys tomorrow at eight.”

She placed the bill folder on the table and left. She couldn’t deal with any questions about her finances, particularly when she didn’t have any answers. Well that wasn’t true. Sheldon would say it all boiled down to an imbalance between her net pay and expenditures—most of which he deemed unnecessary. Of course how was she supposed to explain the need for three pairs of open toed sandals in different colors to a man whose idea of formal wear was a plaid suit?

After the guys had left she brought her tray to the table and began piling the dishes. She carried the dishes into the kitchen, only stopping by the cash so Julie could snag the billfold tucked in her apron pocket. As she was returning to the dining area Julie motioned her over.

“Wow, you really made an impression tonight,” she said with a sly grin. Penny raised her eyebrow in puzzlement as Julie opened the billfold.

Behind the monies owed for the meals were four twenty dollar bills.

xTBBTx

“That’s that,” laughed Penny as Sheldon put his controller down in disgust. He had to wait until his character regenerated before he could continue with the game.

“You did that on purpose,” he pouted.

“Darn straight,” said Penny as she concentrated on finding Leonard. Sheldon’s eyes narrowed as he quickly took in his blond nemesis.
Her primary metacarpals moved in seemingly perpetual motion as she pressed buttons and controlled the joy stick. If she did not take more frequent breaks she would expose the median nerve to carpal tunnel. As for her other fingers they were symmetrical with the distal phalanges tapering nicely. The electric blue coloration of her fingernails enhanced the illusion of length.

The feminine adornments on her wrists, while annoying when they clashed against each other, added visual complexity as the rest of her arms were bare. Her skin was cream colored instead of tanned, perhaps a sign of a conscious effort on her part to remain melanoma free.

In response to Leonard’s taunting her neck tendons appeared, indicating an elevation in stress levels. The way she leaned forward made her upper ventral region of the torso protrude and with the low cut nature of her shirt—

“I see you, pumpkin pie,” she chortled. Sheldon felt his cheeks warm until Leonard’s cursing revealed to whom she was speaking. Her bracelets tinkled against each other as she reached for her soda. Sheldon’s eyes moved quickly to her lips as she took in the straw and drank. As she licked away the remaining pop from her lips he felt an inexplicable urge to lick his own.

Her eyes were a rich green, a combination of yellow and black melanin that was aesthetically pleasing.

Penny’s eyes narrowed as she glanced at Sheldon.

“What?” she said suspiciously.

In response Sheldon raised his controller and began shooting.

For a moment all that could be heard in the apartment was the clattering of pushed buttons.

As one Penny and Sheldon jumped.

“Oh, were you where I just tossed the grenade sweetie?” she asked innocently.

Sheldon glared but Penny’s head didn’t explode.

xTBBTx

“HOW-ARD! GET THE PHONE! I’M IN THE WASHROOM!”

“I DIDN’T NEED TO KNOW THAT, MA!” Howard cleared his throat as he picked up the phone. “Hello?”

“Hey Howard, still up for pizza tonight?” asked Leonard.

“WHO IS IT?” came a call from the other end of the house.

“IT’S LEONARD!” Howard shouted back. “Oh you better believe it,” he said into the phone as he glared at his bedroom door. God, he needed to get out of there before he pulled a Norman Bates on his mother.

“Great. Sheldon already placed the order. Pick it up on your way over.”

Howard licked his lips nervously. “Actually Leonard I’m glad you called. Bernadette has been hounding me to make a decision and, well, I guess I’ve settled.”

Leonard laughed. “What is it? Deciding on the type of cocktail weenies?”
“I want you to be my Best Man.”

Leonard froze. “Are…are you sure? I mean thanks. It’d be an honor. I… Me? Ok, we know it’s me. It’s just—”

“Leonard, don’t make me regret my decision,” warned Howard.

“What about Raj?”

“Don’t worry, he’s cool about it. He couldn’t give the Best Man speech without being drunk and I know Bernadette would freak if he went on a tangent.”

Leonard ran a hand through his hair. “Wow. Ok. Umm… the pizza should be ready in—” he looked at Sheldon.

“Twenty seven minutes,” Sheldon said without looking up from his computer.

“Twenty seven minutes,” repeated Leonard.

“See you in a bit,” Howard said. After hanging up he felt the color drain from his face. 'My God, I’m getting married'.

xTBBTx

Knock Knock Knock “Penny.”

Knock Knock Knock “Sheldon.”

There was a pause. Penny smiled to herself.

Knock Knock Knock “Penny.”

Knock Knock Knock “Sheldon.”

Knock Knock Knock “Penny.”

Knock Knock Knock “Sheldon.”

“What’s up, buttercup?” Penny asked as she opened the door, her jovial mood fading as she saw the anguish in his eyes. “What’s wrong Sheldon?”

“Kripke,” he spat as if it were a curse. “He…. I…. ” Sheldon marched past Penny and sat on the couch. He set on the coffee table what looked like a pyramid made from ping pong balls.

“Calm down, Sheldon. It’s ok.” She closed the door and sat next to him, catching herself before she put a hand on his thigh. “So what happened?”

Sheldon took a deep breath as he rubbed his legs with his palms. “When I went to my office on Tuesday there were thirty balloons waiting for me in the hall.”

“Oh sweetie,” Penny said in sympathy.

“Given the history I had assumed his pranks were limited to once a week but I discovered this morning that I was in error.” He indicated the pyramid with his hands.

“What is it—besides the obvious I mean.” She held up her finger before Sheldon could speak.
“‘Obvious’ as in it looks like a pyramid made out of plastic balls.”

“When building a square-base pyramid the tiers stack as shown: one, four, nine, sixteen, etcetera. The sum of the first four tiers is thirty,” he said angrily although Penny knew it was not directed at her. “Not that I’m saying I find any of his previous acts of mischief in any way amusing but at least they were out of the realm of mathematics—well, besides the premise of the number thirty itself. This is...demeaning. What’s next? A thirty-sided tricontagon? Geometric configurations made from the Tutte-Coxeter graph? Zinc?”

“Zinc?” said a puzzled Penny.

“The atomic number of zinc is thirty.” Sheldon leaned back on the couch and rested the heels of his palms on his eyes. “I just want this to stop.”

“Can’t you go to the dean or something?” growled Penny. She didn’t like seeing Sheldon so upset. Granted it didn’t take much to stress him out but this was different. This was deliberate and mean.

“Penny, if there’s anything I learned from grade school, no one likes a tattler.”

She dropped her jaw. “You’re doctors at a university. Why—"

“Exactly,” Sheldon cut in as he sat up. “A university is an educational facility and all the rules still apply. In case you haven’t observed there are distinct physical differences between people like your ex-boyfriend Kurt and people like me. When Kurt bullies someone he uses size, musculature and displays of physical prowess.” Sheldon poked the pyramid with a finger. “Academics are by and large less than prime physical specimens and therefore must utilize cunning and pettiness in order to establish a ‘pecking order’. So you see Penny I can’t report this or it’ll never stop.”

While what he said was delivered in a typical Sheldony drone the color on his cheeks and the swimmy look to his blue eyes told Penny all she needed to know. Her tin-man most definitely had a heart.

“Oh Sheldon,” she said softly as she began rubbing her hand on his arm; he stiffened but she didn’t stop nor did he attempt to pull away. They sat in silence, Penny averting her face to give Sheldon his privacy as he turned away to wipe his eyes.

“Listen Moonpie, why don’t you grab a pop from the fridge while I get some Kleenex, okay?” she said after a few minutes. Sheldon nodded, a strained smirk flashed across his face. Penny went into her bedroom and looked around. Now where the frak’s the box?

Sheldon went to the refrigerator and opened the door to find three cans of diet cola and not much else. As he looked over his shoulder towards the bedroom he made his way to her cupboards.

“Good Lord, Mother Hubbard had more to offer her dog,” he whispered to himself. He quickly tabulated when her next paycheck came based on when she last had disposable income for takeout food. He quickly closed the cupboard door and scampered back to the refrigerator and grabbed two cans of pop.

“Sorry about that Sheldon. Took me a minute to find it,” said Penny sheepishly as she entered the room.

“Well if you let me into your bedroom we could bring order to one of the last vestiges of chaos in the building,” he offered.

“Corn-free day in Nebraska when you’re allowed back in there,” she smirked as she handed him
the box of Kleenex. He pulled out the top sheet with two fingers and put it in the garbage before grabbing another. Penny couldn’t help but laugh. Yup, he’s ok.

“So what do you want to do now?” she asked as Sheldon dried his hands with a paper towel after washing up.

“So actually,” he began hesitantly. “I find myself in a similar state of distress as last Friday and since your solution temporarily eased my symptoms I was wondering….” He looked away as a small tic made his right eye squint.

Penny grinned. “One song coming up,” she said as she jumped to the stereo.

This time it was Sheldon who moved the coffee table to make room. He still found himself at a loss as Penny stood before him. She held up her hands and he did the same although they didn’t touch. A big grin came to Penny’s face as she began to move her hands and Sheldon mirrored her movements.

Watching her swing her hips Sheldon thought she was made to dance. She began bobbing her head from side to side and he did the same. He felt himself blush as she laughed joyfully.

“Get down, Doctor Cooper.”

A wicked look came to Penny’s face as her fingers began to wiggle menacingly. She stepped forward, making to tickle Sheldon’s sides although she kept about a foot’s distance. He automatically backed up and twisted his body to avoid contact. Even though he knew Penny wasn’t going to touch him he still felt the invasion of his personal space.

He stumbled over the coffee table but knew he had to keep back-peddling or he’d be in real trouble as Penny was in hot pursuit. At the sound of cracked plastic they looked down and laughed as they realized in his haste Sheldon had accidently stepped on the pyramid which had fallen to the ground.

The song repeated itself as they stomped on the stray ping pong balls.

xTBBTx

A/N Wikipedia: Dark Matter; Gravitational Lensing; Bonobos; Number 30

Wop hop a top sop u pop: ‘What’s up’ in Amy’s secret language.

Amy as Capricorn: I made this up.

Thanks again for reading!
Gravitational Objections

Chapter Summary

Well here we are at the end of the first month, story-wise.

From this point forward I hope my attempt at a little romance doesn’t screw up the tone. Reviews as always are much appreciated. ~Lynn

xTBBTx

After stifling a yawn Penny took a big slurp of her iced coffee. Sheldon didn’t say anything when she made the purchase; he didn’t have to since his expression spoke volumes—he’d made a series of eye twitches while his jaw turned rock-hard with tension.

To his credit he waited three minutes before unloading.

“You do realize that for the price of your beverage you could have gotten five bags of pasta or three and a half pounds ground beef or—”

“Hey, I thought this was your shopping trip. I’m just the driver,” Penny reminded him. “So where is Leonard anyhow?”

“He had a previous engagement with Howard and Raj,” said Sheldon as they entered the air-conditioned grocery store. Penny had to marvel at his tenacity to wear two layers of shirts in a minor heat wave. As it stood she was dependent on her drink and sandals to keep her temperature down.

Sheldon reached into his pocket and pulled out his pack of antibacterial wipes. He mopped off the handle before offering the shopping cart to Penny.

“You did say you were driving,” he said drolly.

Penny rolled her eyes as she took the cart. ‘This is going to be a long afternoon.’

Sheldon produced his grocery list and began reading as they ventured further into the store. Penny followed him through the produce aisle until they reached the apples.

“My Meemaw said the Golden Delicious is a most versatile apple as it is equally good in pies, butters and raw eating,” he commented as he lifted the top two trays and set them aside without dropping a single apple. The fingers of his right hand unconsciously rubbed themselves as he looked over the remaining tray.

“You know someone’s touched them all, right?” Penny pointed out.

“In this instance, aside from the initial picker, the sorter at the plant and the stock-boy are the usual sources of contamination. I insist on buying my fruit here because they leave them on trays thereby somewhat limiting the number of times my apples are handled,” he said as he carefully selected six apples. Taking another produce bag he picked out six more.
“You really must like them,” said Penny as she looked at the small containers of caramel spread strategically placed next to the apples.

“I have one a day. The other six are for you as I want you to try them. They’re my favorite,” he said as a way of explanation.

“Thanks Sheldon,” Penny said brightly. She picked up two containers of the caramel spread and put them in the cart. Sheldon glared at her. Eyes locked, Penny reached out and put one of the containers back on the pile.

“I need bread,” she said as they stopped in the bakery. She looked over the assortment and picked the cheapest of the white breads. Sheldon put his hand over the cart to block her.

“Penny, you’ve selected bread composed primarily of refined flour. Might I suggest one such as this?” He turned over the Country Harvest loaf so they could read the ingredients and the nutrition chart. “Four grams of fiber per slice—that’s sixteen percent of your daily needs and as a bonus they come from whole grain wheat.”

“I don’t like finding crunchy things in my bread,” said Penny as she made a face.

“The French bourgeoisie also hated those ‘crunchy things’ and only ate refined flour, thus contributing to malnutrition and tooth decay not to mention irregularity. How regular are your bowel movements?”

“Sheldon,” Penny muttered between closed teeth as she looked around to see if anyone was listening. “This isn’t something I want to talk about.”

“Well are you at least imbibing the yoghurt that proposes to promote feminine regularity?”

“I’ll think about it,” she growled as she put the white bread in the cart. Sheldon sighed as he fished out the bread and put it in the basket before putting his loaf on top. As they perused the aisles Penny had to halt the urge to squish Sheldon’s bread with her fingers.

“So what kinds of soup do you like?” Sheldon asked casually as he put two cans in the cart.

“Usually Campbell’s chicken noodle or minestrone,” Penny replied. Sheldon grimaced.

“Sodium, Penny, sodium. The Campbell Company borders on depraved indifference for its contribution to hypertension. At least take the reduced salt.”

“I go for what the budget allows,” she said defensively. Sheldon paused in thought before he set four cans of reduced salt chicken noodle soup in the cart. “I thought you didn’t like Campbell’s?”

“You do,” he said casually as he began walking.

Penny felt her cheeks grow warm. “Sheldon, you don’t have to buy me groceries. I’m fine.”

“Let me correct myself: they’re indirectly for you. They’ll be in the bottom cupboard next to my soup. When you feel so inclined to rob my larder leave my soup and take these instead.”

“You make it sound like I’m in your kitchen every day,” she huffed. Sheldon dropped his jaw.

“You are in my kitchen every day unless Leonard is sharing his coffee with another pajama-clad woman living across the hall. Then there’s the disappearing milk, Leonard’s missing cookies and ___”
“Ok, ok I get it,” Penny mumbled darkly. “I’ll stay out.”

“I’d have more success combating climate change. No, best to just prepare,”” he said as he crossed out a line on his list. “So do you find Leonard’s cookies satisfactory or should we buy another brand?”

“They’re fine—not that I’m going to eat them any more,” snapped Penny.

“Mmhm.” Sheldon grabbed two boxes of cookies and put them into the cart. “Out of concern for freshness I’d suggest opening one box at a time and sharing.”

“Sheldon,” said Penny as she stopped the cart. “You’ve done more than enough for me.”

“I’m not shopping for you; I’m preserving the integrity of my food supply.”

Penny walked from behind the cart to stand next to him. “Enough.” She lightly patted the side of his arm. “You’ve been wonderful: the apples, the soup and we can’t forget the tip on Tuesday. But that’s it, ok? The last thing I want is a ‘Pity Penny Party’.”

“Technically the tip was a group decision but I shall assume full responsibility if it saves the others from being similarly confronted.” He turned away to gaze at the shelves. “Although according to my understanding of social convention you’re supposed to thank, not chastise, others for thinking about you.”

“Thank you,” said a blushing Penny. Sheldon nodded and proceeded down the aisle.

xTBBTx

Sheldon gave Howard a dark look as the shorter man flinched at the sound of paintball gunfire.

“Good Lord, we’re in a protective shelter. Get a grip,” the tall man said.

“Forgive the Jewish propensity for paranoia. After circumcision we assume everybody’s out to get us,” replied Howard.

“What’s the battle plan, oh great chief?” said Leonard as he stood watch by the window.

“Commander,” amended Sheldon. “I have not assumed leadership of an aboriginal tribe.”

“Whatever dude,” Raj said worriedly. “All I know is that you shouldn’t have insulted those English majors from UCLA. They’re out for blood.”

“What insult? I just said the liberal arts were symbolic of the ‘no child left behind’ sentiment since it allows anyone not suited for academia access to college,” shrugged Sheldon.

Pop Pop Pop Pop Pop

All four men unconsciously ducked at the sound of gunfire. “So much for the pen being mightier than the sword,” joked Raj after a moment’s silence.

“Well to be fair, when Edward Bulwer-Lytton coined the phrase he couldn’t have predicted the paint ball gun,” said Leonard. The other three agreed.

Howard put his hands behind him to stretch his back. “Speaking of ‘coin’, Bernadette has booked an appointment next weekend to try on suits for the wedding.”
“Gee, I don’t know if I can make Saturday,” began Leonard. “Could it be another day?”

“It’s the only day the ladies can all be there. Apparently Bernadette doesn’t trust my taste in apparel,” Howard sniffed.

Leonard looked at Raj, who nodded. “We’ll be there.”

“As I’m not in the wedding party I don’t have to participate,” said Sheldon as he knelt to detail a rough map on the floor.

“It’s non-optional, Sheldon,” said Leonard.

“How is it ‘non-optional’? Penny has already picked out a perfectly good suit for me and as I’ve only worn it once I’ve yet to maximize value for my dollar.”

“It’s the whole ritual of it all,” explained Raj. “We’re all going to be there so you should be too.” Sheldon rolled his eyes as he sighed.

“Besides, we’re already going to be missing some time when we’re at the conference,” reminded Leonard.

Sheldon frowned. “What conference? Oh yes, I remember now. We were invited to speak on our work on the Bose-Einstein condensate. I thought I made it clear that I wouldn’t do any more conferences unless I was presenting on my own topic?”

“And I thought I made it clear that the Babylon 5 film festival commences that Saturday and each succeeding Saturday for the foreseeable future unless we go,” threatened Leonard.

“Very well,” Sheldon said in a huff. “Now can we get on to today’s battle or shall we spend the rest of the afternoon in here?”

Pop Pop Pop Pop

Howard, Leonard and Raj looked at each other.

“I’ve got a deck of cards,” offered Raj.

xTBBTx

“It doesn’t matter—the energy levels you propose reach just outside the Planck scale, thereby making the quantum theory of gravity ineffective,” said Sheldon as he leaned back in his office chair with a whiteboard marker held between his two forefingers.

“Yes but if we utilize the data just before the cut-off we can make a conjecture as to what will happen until a new model is established,” said a voice on speaker phone.

Sheldon shook his head. “Won’t work. My research into quantum gravity suggests that it will require exact precision if we are to synchronize it with special relativity. Hodge-podgery has no place here.”

“True but if we can make models based on gravitons without knowing they exist I can’t see the harm.”

“It will be a waste of time.”

“Maybe.”
“Dr. Hanzel, I deal neither in absolutes nor ‘maybes’,” Sheldon frowned.

“Nothing’s absolutely certain, Dr. Cooper,” laughed Dr. Hanzel. “If we wanted to be absolutely certain we were always right we’d be a Senator or Congressman.”

“Perhaps but I don’t have time for any more extracurricular activities.” Sheldon got up and went to the middle whiteboard and looked over a set of formulas. “Besides, gravitons do exist. Gravity cannot be the lone exception.”

“It better not be. I’ve got a lot riding on those little fellas.”

Sheldon made a calculation on a side board and added another line to his formula. “We all do.”

“I thought you didn’t deal in ‘maybes’?”

“Gravitons are unproven certainties.” Sheldon stopped, his head turning towards his sideboard and a small set of variables he’d absent-mindedly scribbled in the corner.

Laughter again. “In the real world we call them ‘hunches’, Dr. Cooper.”

“Well it’s a good thing I subscribe to the idea of many worlds so I’m not constrained by the limited thoughts on this one,” Sheldon said as made a new series of calculations. As the numbers came out a sense of panic overtook him and he accelerated his computations.

“Well, it’s ten o’clock here and I’ve got to get these old bones to bed if I’m going to be worth anything in the morning. …. Dr. Cooper?”

“I’m here,” Sheldon said absently before gathering his thoughts. “That’s fine. I seem to have come to an epiphany of sorts that I must clarify.”

“Good luck to you, Dr. Cooper, and good day.”

“Good night, Dr. Hanzel. And there’s no such thing as luck.” Sheldon returned to his desk and hung up the phone. He sat in his chair and spun it around so it faced the whiteboards. There was no need to recheck the numbers—he was just staggered they even existed—as he knew they added up. Literally that is. He had no explanation for the emotional content. Granted he’d found his thinking on the subject in question had increased incrementally until it began affecting his work time. If his calculations were correct this rate would continue until it threatened to consume him unless he did something about it. But what? Normally if he needed advice on social or emotional conundrums he’d go to Leonard or Amy or….

He stood up and grabbed the eraser from the ledge and one by one erased the calculations from the board:

‘Number of times and durations spent thinking about subject, positive or negative, in the past twenty-four hours; week; month; six months; year; five years.’ “This is intolerable,” Sheldon sputtered.

‘Total leisure time in minutes divided by total duration of distraction. Affecting total productive output over previous twenty-four hours; week; month; six months; year; five years.’ “Invasive.”

‘Projected productive output if left unresolved over next twenty-four hours; week; month; six months; year; five years.’ He put extra effort in rubbing this one from the board, having already worked out to his dissatisfaction his negative output for the rest of the afternoon. “Obstructive.”
Sheldon felt himself annoyed as he glared at the remaining formula—Solving for P=. He put a question mark at the end and circled it several times.

xTBBTx

Like clockwork the boys were seated at their usual table. Penny had their drinks poured and brought them over less than a minute later.

“Hey, guys. So what’s—”

“I’ll have the barbecue bacon cheeseburger, barbecue sauce, bacon and cheese on the side,” interrupted Sheldon. “If you’ll excuse me I need to use the facilities and hopefully not come into contact with anything contagious.” He left the table.

Penny smirked as she wrote down the order. “Everything else the same?” she asked the guys. Raj whispered in Howard’s ear.

“Raj isn’t feeling particularly ethnic tonight. He’ll have the roast beef,” said Howard. Raj gave him a smack on the arm.

“Fair enough. I’ll be back’,” said Penny in an imitation of Arnold Schwarzenegger.

“You know, I’d never appreciated before now how sexy Schwarzenegger’s voice could be,” said Howard after Penny had left. Both Leonard and Raj looked at him incredulously. “Well you’ve got to admit he sounds better than Jason Momoa.”

“Ugh. Don’t even bring up the new Conan,” said Leonard as he made a face. “Whoever thought it a good idea taking a slow-paced, nearly nonverbal epic and making it even slower, less talkative and two hours long should be shot.”

“I don’t know. There were some cool lines: ‘I live, I love, I slay…and I am content’,” quoted Raj with a twinkle in his eye.

“Sounds like Penny’s ex, Kurt,” grinned Howard. “That boy sure took his vitamins.” After seeing him at one of Penny’s parties he couldn’t believe Leonard and Sheldon had worked up the courage to ask for the return of her television.

“Ron Perlman should also carry the blame. After redeeming himself from Beauty and the Beast with Hellboy he returns with this?” Leonard scoffed.

“No wonder your love life is kaput, Leonard. Beauty and the Beast touches the very heart of feminine mystery,” explained Raj. He was about to articulate further when he saw Penny approach with dinner.

“Where’s Sheldon?” she asked as she set his plate on the table.

“Still in the bathroom,” shrugged Leonard. “He could be in there for an hour depending on how unsanitary the conditions.”

“Yeah I remember one theater we went to—obviously not ‘Sheldon-approved’—where he used up a pack of antibacterial wipes, half the soap and all of the paper towels cleaning his stall,” smirked Howard as he began cutting his pork chop.

“Lovely,” said Penny. “Well I better not get any grief over the hamburger getting cold.”
Leonard looked at his watch. “We’ve got it timed, Penny. Don’t worry about it.”


Almost to the second Penny had left to serve another table Sheldon returned and took his seat.

“The prodigal child returneth,” quipped Howard between bites.

“Indeed,” remarked Sheldon as he took off the bun to inspect his patty before hastily applying his condiments. As his food had been on the table for one minute and forty seconds he knew he had little time to assemble the burger to his satisfaction.

As they ate Leonard couldn’t help but smile to himself.

“What?” Howard asked at last.

“Nothing,” said Leonard. He was about to take a bite of his fajita when he lowered his fork.

“I was just thinking about what Raj said. You know, about ‘feminine mystery’. I’ve solved one of them—Leslie and I are seeing each other again.”

“And?” prompted Raj.

“And she asked to use the laser,” blushed Leonard. Howard and Raj laughed.

“As long as it doesn’t interfere with your work it’s all good,” said Howard.

“Yes, because if it does hinder, the amount of lost productivity can never be regained and you’ll find yourself falling short of any goals you’d set out for yourself at a very early age,” said Sheldon through gritted teeth.


“Just some idle chit chat,” said Sheldon, smiling awkwardly.

“So, what happened?” prompted Raj.

“Well, you know she wanted to use the free electron laser, right? Well it turned out her research wasn’t at the point where the laser was necessary,” began Leonard.

Sheldon marveled at Penny’s sense of balance as she carried her serving tray. Not once did she spill a drop of barbecue sauce onto his plate nor did his fingers feel anything on his glass other than condensation. Even now as she served two steak and potato dinners he could see that she kept her back straight. Between the two of them she had the more developed shoulders.

“So that’s when it began to dawn on me—why would she be asking me for the laser when she didn’t need it?”

“Come on dude,” warned Raj as he waived a fork. “Keep it real or forget it.”

“Oh,” said Leonard with a slight pout. “What actually happened was that Leslie said, ‘I suppose you’re wondering why I asked for the laser when I obviously don’t need it’. Then it dawned on me.”

Penny’s laughter caught Sheldon’s ears. Normally she used a short laugh when she faked amusement but this was genuine. He wondered what the male diner said to garner such a reaction. The way Penny clutched her tray seemed to indicate a level of comfort if not attraction.
“So is this recreational activity or something more?” asked Howard.

“I don’t know and frankly I don’t care,” admitted Leonard.

“Leslie Winkle,” Raj said with a sly smile. “It’s been a while.”

“It has, hasn’t it?” said Leonard as he thought back to the last time they’d spoken. After a year and a half Leonard had presented himself at her doorstep asking for sex. She suggested that he was only there because Penny dumped him. Then she slammed the door.

It had been over three minutes and Penny was still talking to that man, Sheldon noted. What could possibly be so entertaining that— He noticed her body began to shift; she was leaving and given her walking pattern it was almost certain she was returning to his table. He quickly pulled out his wallet and counted out his bill total.

“I have to go back to the apartment. Leonard, let’s go,” Sheldon said hurriedly as he rose.

“Ok, let me get the bill and—”

“I’ll be by the car,” and with that Sheldon left; Penny had to turn aside lest she got run over.

“What the frak was that?” she asked.

“Don’t worry, he’s fine,” assured Howard as he got to his feet. “The rocker was never quite big enough for Sheldon to sit without falling.” Raj gave a small wave as both he and Howard left the table.

Penny gave Leonard a worried look. “He is ok, right?”

Leonard gave a half-smile as he gathered the money and tucked it in the billfold. “As ok as Sheldon can be.”

“This reminds me,” she said as she took the billfold. “I just wanted to thank you for last Tuesday. It was really sweet.”

“What happened last Tuesday?”


“What did Sheldon do?” said Leonard with a sigh.

“What do you mean?”

“Well he’s the one who tipped last week. We take turns.”

“Oh.” Penny’s brain began to spin as she thought over the implications.

xTBBTx

It was waiting outside his apartment door—a previously used brown box with the top flaps taped shut. Sheldon felt his stomach tighten as he read his name written on the side, not because it was for him but because it was from her.

He snatched up the parcel and entered the apartment, not stopping until he was in his room with the door closed. Gingerly he placed the box on his bed. His heart was hammering although his face was deathly calm as he stood back to stare at the parcel.
Sheldon never had doubts and yet here he was unable to open a little package from a neighbor across the hall. Without seeing what was inside he knew he was given an obligation. He failed in his previous attempt at reciprocity—who could accept mere bath soaps for Leonard Nimoy’s DNA?—and knew he couldn’t do so again.

He opened a drawer and took out a pair of scissors. As he reached for the box Sheldon saw that his hands were shaking.

“Come on Dr. Cooper,” he said in an exasperated tone. “You’ve opened the secrets of the universe. It’s just a box.”

The scissor’s point pierced the tape and slowly made its way along the seam. As soon as the tabs were free Sheldon took a deep breath and opened the box.

There were five of them: one red, one purple, one yellow and the rest blue. She had improvised and used wooden skewers wrapped in green ribbon for stalks but otherwise this was a genuine bouquet of Penny Blossoms, complete with card:

'Thank you for everything. P'

XxX

Leonard had changed his shirt five times. He wanted to look cool. Ok, that wasn’t going to happen. How about passable? Nada. How about ‘won’t be picked out as being different and summarily sacrificed to the fire god’? He stood in front of the mirror in a t-shirt, pair of jeans and his military green jacket.

“Nothing to see, move along,” he murmured to himself wearing a self-deprecating smile.

As soon as he left his bedroom his nose was assaulted with the smell of cologne emanating from the bathroom.

“I ‘scents’ Howard’s still in there,” he joked to Raj and Sheldon as he entered the living room.

“At least when we ride on his scooter there’s air circulation. We’re dead men in your car,” groaned Raj.

“Might I suggest foregoing air conditioning for open windows?” said Sheldon as he typed away on his laptop.

Raj rolled his eyes. Though he was still wearing the same sweater over a collared shirt combination from work it was obvious Raj had spent a significant amount of time on his hair.

“Oh sure, let’s destroy what little improvements I’ve made.”

Leonard paused at the refrigerator. “Off topic I know but it just came to me: where did Howard get the cologne? It’s not like he carries a bag and his pants are so tight you couldn’t get a sheet of paper into a pocket.”

“Maybe he has a pocket dimension in his pants,” suggested Raj with a shrug. Sheldon spun his chair to face the astrophysicist.

“‘Pocket dimension’ as in the concept of inflationary theory proposed by Alan Guth or as in the pocket universe designed by the Time Trapper as a means of maintaining the pre-Crisis on Infinite Earths Superboy in a post-Crisis universe?”
“I always considered my pants Time Lord technology since what’s inside is bigger than it appears on the outside,” grinned Howard as he came down the hall.

“Thanks for the imagery Howard,” said Leonard with an air of disgust.

“Yes, thank you so much,” said an annoyed Sheldon. “You’ve managed to soil the purity of a BBC franchise that’s entertained people for over thirty years.” Howard laughed.

“Just how ‘pure’ is this Doctor? He invites women into his private box for a free ride.”

“Obviously the allure is space and time travel. Why else would he have companions?” huffed Sheldon.

“Why don’t we ask Rose?” grinned Raj.

Sheldon turned back to his computer with a frown on his face. Of all the Doctor’s new companions he found Rose to be the most troubling. When they met she was a mere store clerk yet she managed to prove herself invaluable time and again with her ingenuity. She wasn’t going to win an intergalactic edition of The Weakest Link but she’d Tarzan-swing to knock aside the Doctor’s captors in a heartbeat. Then the BBC got soft and had the Doctor and her fall in love. Who could ever believe—

The door opened and in came Penny wearing a tight-fitting long-sleeved pink dress cut to mid thigh and open-toed heeled sandals. Her hair was slicked straight and a single Penny Blossom kept her right bang from her face.

“Ready to go?” she asked brightly. As one Howard, Raj and Leonard practically stumbled to her side.

“Let me get my jacket,” said Sheldon as he rose from his desk.

“You’re coming? asked Howard incredulously. “You do know there’s dancing, right?”

“Dancing, the consumption of alcoholic beverages, excessive noise, crowds. Yes, I’m quite aware and as prepared as I can be on short notice.”

“Yeah, sorry about that,” apologized Penny. “I didn’t know I’d be going until last minute.” She felt restless this evening and after several attempts at settling down to watch television she admitted defeat and got dressed to go dancing. Since she had to work tomorrow she didn’t want to be up to all hours so she thought to check out one of the smaller clubs closer to the apartment. Besides, she felt badly for acting the way she did the last time the boys were with her and wanted to make amends.

“Sheldon, you don’t have to go if you don’t want to,” began Leonard.

“Oh, but I do. Tonight’s Thursday and we always conduct group activities unless we’re on the third Thursday when chaos reigns supreme. As this is not the third Thursday I’m compelled to accompany you as I’m nothing if not a team player,” said Sheldon as he exited the apartment.

“Boo-yah,” said an unenthused Howard.

XxX

Sheldon sat at the table nursing his virgin Cuba Libre. He tutted to himself as he saw a couple getting down and dirty in front of the speakers. ‘They’ll remember this as the night they exposed
themselves to damaging decibel levels.' He thanked the Lord he’d remembered to slip his earplugs in his pants pocket as Penny thought it best they leave their jackets in the car.

“This is so cool!” laughed Raj to Howard as they came off the dance floor to get their drinks. “Look at me: a mere boy coming from poverty into the land of plenty.”

“What are you talking about? Your dad is a gynecologist,” Howard reminded him.

“I tell you Howard, I could count the number of blond girls in my life with no hands before I came to America.” He put an arm around Howard’s shoulder. “Now I’m here with a pretty girl surrounded by other pretty girls and I’m happy, happy, happy.”

With the music slowing, people came together on the dance floor like Velcro. Sheldon stood up from his stool in order to scan the crowd for a particular pink dress. He let out a breath of air he didn’t know he’d been holding when he saw Penny and Leonard coming to the table with more drinks.

“So that’s five shots of rum followed by Cuba Libres—one virgin of course,” said Penny as she and Leonard distributed the drinks among their friends.

“I’m not drinking,” said Sheldon as he slid the shot towards the center of the table.

“Come on Sheldon, it’s a toast,” pouted Penny. “One drink and that’ll be that. No more. Scout’s honor.”

“I thought you were in junior rodeo,” said Sheldon dubiously although he did take back the shot.

Penny grinned. “We might not be as good with knots but we kick ass when it comes to rope work.” Sheldon thought about this and nodded, although he found his cheeks grew warm.

Leonard held up his shot. “To you guys—and gal,” he smiled. “Thanks for having me.”

“Thanks for putting up with me,” said Howard sheepishly.

“Knowing you all has enriched my life,” sniffed Raj.

“I never thought in a million years I’d meet people like you but here I am. And you know what? I like this,” beamed Penny. As one the table turned expectantly to Sheldon.

“Well I don’t quite know what to say. My social inexperience leaves me without a means of comparison”—as one the gang began to groan Sheldon’s name—“but I find my world forever altered by your presence,” he added with a nervous twitch. Five glasses clinked together.

“Who’s up for some Black Eyed Peas?” asked Penny as she recognized the new song.

“I’m up for anything my little Chick Pea,” said Howard with a smirk. Penny rolled her eyes and turned to face Sheldon.

“What about you sweetie? Care to flatten the floor with your plaid pants?”

“I don’t dance,” Sheldon reminded her.

“You sure about that?” she asked, her eyes twinkling.

“Very,” he said firmly even as his eyes begged her to stop with the teasing.
“Ok Moonpie,” she said softly as she put up a hand to feel the hotness of his cheek. “Leonard?”

“I’m good thanks,” he replied.

“Ok then,” Penny said as she winked at Sheldon. “Gentlemen?” Howard and Raj offered their arms and the three friends made their way onto the dance floor.

Leonard sat down next to Sheldon and held out his drink. Sheldon nodded as they touched glasses before the two physicists settled back to watch the crowd.

“Howard can really get down with the chickens,” Leonard commented.

Sheldon noted the observation but could not verify as he found himself otherwise occupied. While the shoes would one day contribute to arthritic foot problems he had to admit they drew attention to Penny’s legs. His eyes trailed upwards from her sandal straps to her knees and thighs, along her tummy and over her breasts until they rested on her face. Every beat of the music seemed to slap her body and yet she was serene with her eyes closed to the world. When they’d danced in her apartment she was all smiles and giggles. Here she allowed others to bask in the glory that was Penny.

He knew he had to stop looking but he couldn’t help himself. Her arms wove an intricate pattern around her body and as he watched he realized his beautiful mind had encountered someone infinitely more lovely. Sheldon spent his life looking for an all-encompassing theory that would explain the origin of everything. As Penny danced he realized that the universe had no choice but to come into being. Everything was here because ‘she’ was here: a physical constant whose value was the same under all possible system of units. This epiphany wouldn’t win him a Nobel Prize but it offered a far greater reward if only….

Leonard made a few more observations about Raj and Howard before he understood that Sheldon wasn’t listening.

Following the taller man’s gaze he found himself staring at their lovely neighbor from across the hall. Mouth open, Leonard looked again at his friend.

“I quite agree, although I’d consider Wolowitz’s movements more akin to a pigeon than a chicken,” said Sheldon.

Both men looked at each other before Sheldon turned to take a sip of his drink.

xTBBTx

A/N Wikipedia my friend: Quantum Gravity; Pocket Dimension; Dimensionless Physical Constant.

‘I live, I love, I slay…and I am content’: Actual quote from Conan.

Thanks again for reading!
Imperfect Paradigm Problem

Chapter Summary

Reference to The Flaming Spittoon Acquisition.

To all the Shamy people: I’ve done my best with this chapter so my apologies if I didn’t execute it to your satisfaction or Amy’s credit. ~Lynn

xTBBTx

Penny smiled as she made her way to Sheldon, who was in the process of getting his mail.

“What’s the gist, physicist?” she joked as she began opening her box. Sheldon nearly jumped out of his skin.

“Hello Penny. Obviously I didn’t hear you come in.” He slammed his mail box shut and turned to go upstairs.

Penny frowned. “Sheldon wait.” He stood still as stone, his Vulcan hearing telling him that she’d taken a step towards him. He closed his eyes. “Hey,” she said lightly as she tugged on his long sleeve.

“Yes Penny?” he asked nonchalantly.

“Is there something wrong? You’re making me feel—”

Sheldon whirled around to face her. “Wrong? Wrong implies there was something amiss or gone awry or misconstrued or— why would there be anything wrong?” He could feel his heart accelerate and the warmth associated with the first signs of perspiration.

“I…I don’t know. You’re just acting weird. I mean more than ‘Sheldon weird’.” Her eyes softened. “Sweetie that Kripke guy didn’t do anything else did he?”

“Fortunately no. However I must apologize if you’ve taken offence to my actions as of late. You see I’m distracted”—by your presence—“with work at the moment. I’ve just uncovered some”—long repressed feelings—“startling information that has engrossed me to no end and until it is resolved I will continue to be ‘out of sorts’.” He flashed a nervous smile.

“Fair enough,” Penny said politely. “I’ve got to close up here so I’ll talk to you later.” Sheldon nodded and ascended the stairs.

She turned the lock to her mail box in one swift motion. She didn’t care what Sheldon said; something was up to unnerve the poor guy and she wasn’t going to stop until she found out what.

xTBBTx

“Howard Wolowitz you march back in there and change this instant,” ordered Bernadette. He looked hurt.
“But I haven’t even shown—” In front of him Penny gave a thumb’s down while Amy blew a raspberry. “I thought you said the wedding was going to be done in blue?”


“Ah.” With a sigh Howard made his way into the dressing room. There was no way he’d ever find a blue suit with dark blue trim in his size again.

“Where’s Raj?” asked Penny as she looked around the fitting area.

“He’s picking out a jacket,” said Amy. Since Howard was busy and Raj couldn’t talk to the girls (Bernadette was adamant he was sober) it was decided he work with the male clerk.

“Uhh, I’m having a problem,” Leonard called from his change room.

“What’s up?” asked Amy. Leonard cautiously stepped out holding his pants by the knees so he wouldn’t step on them. Another clerk quickly bent to one knee and began rolling up the cuff.

“Don’t worry about it Leonard. I have to get things altered all the time,” said Bernadette. “The important thing is how is the jacket?” He straightened as he let his arms hang free.

“The sleeve length is adequate as is the shoulder width. How are you for breathing room? Do you think you can sit? Dance? Lean a woman over a banister?” asked a poker-faced Amy.

Leonard blushed as he swung his arms and took a deep breath of air. “Seems fine. It looks ok?”


To Penny’s right a curtain parted and Sheldon entered the room. As one the group turned to find the usually t-shirted and plaid panted physicist in a black tuxedo, complimentary vest, crisp white shirt and a rich blue tie. He looked horribly put out.

“I hope this one meets to everyone’s satisfaction as I refuse to try on any more.”

“Sheldon, you look quite handsome,” said Amy as she approached. “Your stature greatly adds to the suit’s presentation.”

Penny bit the side of her cheek as her brows met. She wondered if a longer-cut coat would better balance his proportions.

Sheldon glanced at Penny as she made her way to another suit rack. She was going to subject him to yet another fitting. There seemed to be no placating her until everything was just-so. ‘How irritating to deal with someone so particular’, he thought without a trace of irony.

Grinning as she flipped through the jackets Penny couldn’t help but feel giddy at the sight of her guys all dolled up. Leonard cleaned up well as would Howard once they got him on track: the blue suit was hideous but it did indicate how good he’d look in a tailored cut.

Then there was Sheldon. She was floored when she’d first seen him in the suit they’d picked out for his presentation. Gone was the geeky boy-in-a-man’s-body and in his place stood a dapper theoretical physicist.

Penny recalled the first time she’d looked up to see him in the hallway. She was unpacking in her apartment as Leonard and Sheldon watched. That’s not quite right—Leonard gawked, Sheldon watched. Even at that moment she knew the difference and felt herself attracted to the tall man with
the shy smile. She thought him a ‘beautiful mind’. In a way he still was she supposed as she pulled out a jacket from the rack. Only he was also Sheldon: Sheldon who had to sit in ‘his’ spot and do his laundry at eight-fifteen exactly and knock on her door in threes. Sheldon who loaned her money and took care of her when she dislocated her shoulder and bought her groceries. She looked at him standing next to Amy and for a moment wondered if the neurobiologist knew what she was in for.

'At the very least it’ll be interesting times', Penny smirked to herself as she returned with the jacket. Sheldon rolled his eyes as he gave a heavy sigh.

“Penny—” he began.

“Just one more. I want to see how a long-cut looks on you.” He glared at her. “I swear it’s the last one. The one you’re wearing looks good but I want to see if this one makes you really ‘pop’.” After a moment’s pause Sheldon grabbed the new jacket and marched into the change room.

“Oh. My. God,” breathed Bernadette as she raised a hand to her mouth.

“Quite stunning,” agreed Amy as her eyes took in every detail.

Raj grinned from ear to ear as the pleased clerk presented him to the group.

“After trying on several styles we both agreed that the Asian collar was the most flattering,” explained the clerk. “He felt it made him look more exotic for the reception.” Raj blushed as he nodded.

“You’re a right pretty fella,” said Howard to Raj, who winked in return. Howard held out his arms. “My pants and sleeves are too long.”

“Let’s have a look-see,” said Amy as a clerk pulled out a tape measure.

Quietly, Sheldon slipped from his change room to stand in front of a mirror. Penny came over and put an arm around him as she stood by his side.

“So do I ‘pop’?” he asked with a raised eyebrow.

“Oh, you ‘pop’ all right,” said a breathless Penny. “So what do you think?”

“It fits.”

“But are you comfortable?”

He looked at the both of them in the mirror. “Not yet, but I’m sure I’ll adjust.”

Penny rubbed his back as she leaned against his arm.

XxX

“This afternoon was fun,” said Penny as Sheldon sorted his wash into separate machines.

“Only if you think spending an indecent amount of money on clothing you’ll only wear once is entertaining,” he snorted.

“What’s wrong with that?” she asked innocently.

Sheldon rolled his eyes. “Ask Leonard, although I’m sure your ever-evolving wardrobe could compliment his suit for years to come.”

“I see,” said Sheldon in his best attempt at sounding nonchalant. “So who are you taking?”

Penny added the soap to her machine. “I don’t know. Probably Zack.”

Sheldon’s jaw clenched as he thought about Penny’s ex-boyfriend. Zack was amiable enough but so dumb he thought it a wonder the man had opposable thumbs.

“Given his chiseled looks he’ll be quite dashing,” he said at last.

“Psst Sheldon, don’t tell Dr. Cooper but he was pretty dashing himself this afternoon,” Penny said with an impish smile.

“Really Penny,” he said haughtily. Inwardly he found himself quite pleased she noticed.

“Junior rodeo winner’s honor. You and Amy will be the belles of the ball.”

At once his good mood was gone. “I suppose.”

“It’s really great having someone in your life especially at a time like this,” said Penny wistfully. He looked at her quizzically. “It’s a wedding, Sheldon. It’s a time to celebrate love and everything it means. I’m going to lose it when Howard says ‘I do’.”

“Why?”

“Because he’s Bernadette’s soul mate.” She smirked. “Ok, it’s Howard, but still it’s the certainty in the words ‘I do’ that always get to me. I’ve had a lot of guys like me but no one’s ever been certain, y’know?”

“I can’t say I do,” said Sheldon evenly.

“‘Always the bridesmaid and never the bride’—that’s Penny,” she said as she started her machine.

“Never is an absolute. I hardly think it applies here.”

Penny grinned. “Yeah, I’d like to think there’s hope for me. Thanks Sheldon.”

“You’re welcome, Penny.”

'Amy's a lucky girl', Penny thought to herself as she mounted the stairs—and meant it.

xTBBTx

“Hello Sheldon. How are you this evening?”

“Hello Amy. I’m physically well. Yourself?”

“Grand. Your statement implies you’re not well emotionally. Are you still having trouble achieving REM sleep?”

“I have one cycle a night.”

“Not ideal but better than recent history.”

“Agreed.”
“How is your work proceeding?”

“Not well. I find myself unable to concentrate.”

“I see. Are you thinking about anything in particular?”

“I can’t say.”

“You ‘can’t say’ as in the colloquial phrase meaning ‘I don’t know’ or ‘can’t say’ as in you are unable or unwilling to tell me?”

“In this case it’s the latter.”

“What’s wrong, Sheldon?”

“I can’t tell you.”

“Why not?”

“Social protocol dictates that in certain circumstances discussion on certain topics is to be avoided at all costs.”

“And what ‘certain circumstances’ do we fall under in this instance?”

“The paradigm shift in our relationship status.”

“You mean you can’t talk to me about what’s bothering you because I’m your girlfriend.”

“That would be a fair statement.”

“While there may be a myriad of topics considered too ‘taboo’ to discuss I must admit only one comes to the forefront. You’ve involved yourself with another woman.”

“No.”

“Your coloration, quickness to answer and the tone of your objection indicates an au contraire.”

“Amy Farrah Fowler, I haven’t engaged in a relationship with anyone—except you of course.”

“No Sheldon, I believe your statement was more accurate before the verbal addendum.”

…

…

“Amy, it’s imperative that we talk.”

xTBBTx

As she got out of the car Penny admitted to herself that she was still in shock. There was no way she heard over the phone what Amy told her—the Shamy was no more. They were as close to two peas in a genetically-engineered pod as you could get so what the hell happened? Penny went to the trunk and pulled out a backpack and a plastic bag full of alcohol. This was going to be a late night and she’d be in no shape to drive home.

She heard a harp and Amy singing as she neared the apartment:
“I play my part and you play your game
You give love a bad name
You give love”—Strum Strum Strum—“a bad name”

“Amy?”

“It’s open.”

“Hey honey how are you doing?” asked Penny as she closed the door.

“Oh, as well as can be expected for someone who has been kicked to the curb,” Amy replied as she got up from the harp and took the bag of drinks and began placing the various bottles on the coffee table. “I had taken the liberty of picking up some high fat, high calorie snack foods. Usually the first choice is a frozen cream-based product but I thought it wouldn’t go well with a crap load of alcohol.”

“Been there, done that,” agreed Penny as she returned from the kitchen with two glasses and a pair of shot glasses.

“I believe we’ll start with tequila before settling into vodka and cranberry,” said Amy. She measured out two shots and handed one to Penny. “What a trip.”

“What a trip,” said Penny as they clinked glasses and drank. “So, did Sheldon give a reason?” she asked as she poured out the vodka.

“He said he could no longer fulfill his obligations under the relationship agreement and that it would be unfair to me to continue.”

Penny handed Amy her glass of cranberry-vodka. “Huh. Did he say why?”

Amy took a sip of her drink. “I asked him the very question and he said that after much reflection he’d come to realize that it was an error to have made the paradigm shift in our relationship.”

“And?” Penny prompted. Granted she’d never heard it quite like this before but she sure knew the sound of feet-shuffling.

“He found himself unable to commit to me in an emotional capacity. He had assumed since we had a relationship of the mind we could overcome this detail.” Amy drained her glass. “Obviously homo novus has had a setback.”

“Emotions are a bitch,” said Penny as she handed Amy a shot.

“Indeed.” Glasses clinked and were emptied. “As a small source of consolation Sheldon took full blame for our breaking up.”

“So what are you guys going to do? Is everything pfft or can you still be friends?” said Penny as she worked on another round of drinks.

“I’m unsure. I find myself unable to answer the question because the ramifications of our breakup are unknown.” Amy began to wring her hands. “In over a year I have managed to construct a social group comprised of Sheldon’s friends, neighbor and friend’s fiancée. I assume if I wish to maintain these friendships I will have no choice but to keep Sheldon in my social circle.”

“Amy—”
“I don’t want to lose you Penny,” Amy said sadly. Penny was heartbroken.

“Oh sweetie I’m not going anywhere,” she said as she gave her a hug.

“Thank you,” mumbled Amy as tears of relief slipped from her eyes. All her life Amy poured herself into academics as a way to make up for her lack of friends. Of course she knew she was deluding herself as, unlike Sheldon, she saw value in establishing and maintaining social relationships. She’d watch her female classmates whisper and laugh and hug and hold hands. Amy so wanted to join the sorority of femininity but she never got an invite. Then she met Penny and in an instant the door opened wide and she got to experience girls’ nights and pajama parties. Living vicariously through the blond Nebraskan she imagined herself pretty and popular. She imagined touching and being touched.

Losing Sheldon was tragic but recoverable. Losing Penny would be catastrophic.

“So,” said Penny as she broke the hug to rub Amy’s shoulder.

“Another round Bestie?”

“You sure?”

“With you I’m sure of anything. Hit me.” Amy took off her glasses to wipe her eyes with her sleeve while Penny poured more shots. “By the way, the termination of the relationship is to be kept quiet until after the wedding so as to not disrupt the festivities however Sheldon agreed that under the circumstances I could seek solace from my best friend.”

“Gotcha,” said Penny with a weak smile. She hoped to God she’d be able to keep this from Leonard.

XxX

Sheldon picked listlessly through his mi krop with his chopsticks as Leonard, Raj and Howard were enjoying an episode of Next Generation. It was now eight twenty-three. He had heard Penny leave her apartment shortly after six. Despite lacking any conclusive evidence he was sure she went to console Amy. Television had taught him that they would imbibe alcohol, eat nutritionally-deficient foods and conduct a ‘Sheldon bitch fest’.

What would Amy say? What would Penny think?

He’d tried to be as forthcoming as he could be towards Amy without divulging his feelings for Penny. Even though he wasn’t always socially astute he knew better than to admit ‘dumping’ a girl for her best friend. Besides, he was still coming to terms with his desire to redefine the relationship paradigm with Penny. How could he articulate what he couldn’t fully comprehend? He wasn’t Leonard, who never let ill-conceived notions or half thoughts stop him from conveying an idea aloud.

Sheldon put down his food container and stood up.

“Digestive distress,” he murmured as a means of explanation but it proved unnecessary as his friends were absorbed by the television. He went to the far end of the room to look out the window.

What if Penny was angry with him?

It was a risk but unavoidable. He wouldn’t permit his relationship with Amy to continue as it was; the neurobiologist was an incredible woman and deserved to be treated with respect. She deserved
to be loved. He thought it ironic he could come to this conclusion given his previous belief that knowledge and logic superseded baser notions like ‘feelings’.

So what would he do if Penny said good-bye?

Who would sing ‘Soft Kitty’ to him when he was sick or frustrate him to no end with emotional complexities or be a better partner in Age of Conan? He thought over all the times she’d comforted him or confronted him and always, always challenged him. What would he do if this ended? He could envision the beginning of the universe. Almost see the strings that made up the cosmos and everything it contained. It was embarrassing that a theoretical physicist lacked the ability to imagine a world without Penny. That was her paradox: she could make him feel so unsure of himself and at the same time able to take on anything thrown his way.

She said he’d solve the riddle of the universe. She believed in him.

Sheldon gazed at the phone line where he’d previously hung Penny’s laundry.

xTBBTx

He was uncomfortable but it had to be done. Coming from Texas Sheldon knew to get back on his horse and ride but that didn’t mean seeing Penny after she chatted with Amy was going to be easy. Things between Penny and him rarely were.

“Hey guys,” said Penny as she got her pen ready to take their orders. There was a pause, adding a “Hello Sheldon” with distinctively less enthusiasm.

“Hello Penny,” Sheldon replied hoarsely; he didn’t lift his eyes from the table.

“So Penny,” began Howard. “Raj and I were thinking next time we go dancing we could try one of the clubs on ‘sorority row’. You know, it has a nice view of the, um, city.” Raj whispered in his ear. “From within the city. Yeah, thanks for the help.” Raj and Howard glared at each other.

“I don’t know,” began Penny. “I mean, isn’t the area kind of sleazy?”

“It’s just a place where young co-eds with unabashed enthusiasm for all things hot and wild go to unwind after a long week hitting the books,” amended Howard. After talking with Raj he had the feeling the astrophysicist was just about out of his mind for want of a girlfriend. This adventure might not find him the future Mrs. Koothrappali but at least it might stem the hormonal tide.

“Eyah,” said Leonard as he rolled his eyes. “I’m sure studying was on their top ten things to do. Count me out.”

“Out? You’re kidding me, right?” sputtered Howard.

“Clubs I don’t mind”—scrutinizing eyes turned in his direction from all sides—“You know what I mean. I just don’t feel comfortable going to places where I wonder if my hepatitis vaccination needs updating.”

Penny grinned as she touched Leonard on the shoulder. “Good for you, Leonard.” Again Raj whispered to Howard, causing the engineer to guffaw.

“Yeah I guess,” he said to Raj before addressing the table. “Proof Leonard and Leslie are getting it on.” Leonard blushed but did nothing to refute the claim. Feigning shock, Penny shoved his shoulder away with her fingers.
“You men are all alike.”

“You mean homo sapiens sapiens, Penny. Try to remember we’re in mixed company,” Howard teased as he indicated Sheldon with a nod of the head. Sheldon turned aside his menu to shoot him a withering look.

“I never said I was immune to sexual attraction, only that it didn’t control my actions,” Sheldon asserted in an annoyed tone. He tried to gloss over in his mind how ludicrous this idea was in the face of recent events.

“I’m sure Amy considers you a hotbed of smoldering passion,” Howard retorted. Penny and Sheldon inadvertently looked at each other.


“I’ll have the barbecue bacon cheeseburger, barbecue sauce, bacon and cheese on the side,” Sheldon said quietly. Again their eyes met as he handed her the menu, her stern look causing him to wince. It was as he had feared: Penny was angry, although how much remained to be seen.

After Penny punched in their order she took a moment to scrutinize Sheldon. Here he was socializing like nothing happened— She took a breath to cool her temper. No, that wasn’t true. He was more subdued and seemed embarrassed? No. Penny felt herself go numb as it came to her: he was afraid. It came through in his eyes; she never truly appreciated how expressive they were until she found herself immersed in their gaze. Surely he didn’t think she’d blurt out anything about Amy and him breaking up? Ok, she almost said something when she ran into Leonard earlier at the mail box but that was accidental. She wasn’t going to pull a Kripke and make Sheldon squirm in public and she was angry he’d even think her capable of doing something like that.

Sheldon felt Penny’s stare and automatically turned to meet it. She turned smartly on her heel and walked into the kitchen.

xTBBTx

“Last night Bernadette brought up how good we all looked in tuxedos on the weekend. I tell you gentlemen if I knew how much of a turn on it was I would have bought one years ago,” said Howard as he grabbed his comics from the shelf.

“Um Howard, I think it only worked because she picked out the suit. Given that your first choice was a baby blue number I don’t think you would’ve had the same reaction,” said Leonard.

“Yes, dude. If you want to talk style you should think of James Bond. That Pierce Brosnan is a pretty man in a tux,” gushed Raj.

“Speaking of James Bond they’re coming out with another one this summer. ‘Skyfall’ I think it’s called,” added Leonard.

“Oh dear Lord not again,” Sheldon sighed while flipping through a comic book. “Well I suppose they had to do another one given it’s the fiftieth anniversary since the release of Dr. No.”

“Come on Sheldon, don’t tell me you didn’t imagine yourself as 007: the girls, the gadgets.” Howard paused. “Ok the girls.”

Sheldon raised an eyebrow. “Hardly. I found the entire franchise to be complete hokum what with Bond’s endless supply of techno gadgets and ridiculously named female paramours like Pussy
“Every engineer’s dream,” sighed Howard.

“Yeah things did get kinda silly at one point,” admitted Leonard as he flipped through a comic bin. “Remember when Bond had a miniature helicopter stored in four suitcases?”

“I agree. Given how airlines are run what are the chances all the suitcases would even arrive?” said Raj as he thought back to his own luggage nightmare when he first came to America.

“Then there were crazy villains like Jaws. With his metal teeth I’d hate to be his orthodontist,” Howard said. Sheldon rolled his eyes.

“He had to be the worst character in the franchise. Granted our second molars exert a bite force between 1,100 and 1,300 Newtons—far more than the orang-utan or gibbon—but it’s inconceivable that he could bite his way through steel bars and the like. As I said before: pure hokum.”

“So how is it you can read about heroes lifting cars and leaping tall buildings without a problem?” asked Leonard.

“Your particular reference to Superman answers your statement. Unlike Jaws, he’s an alien. Other superhuman abilities are commonly explained as coming from science mishaps, mutation, or advanced weaponry, not dental implants,” scoffed Sheldon. “Really Leonard, sometimes I find your reasoning completely outside the realm of the possible.”

“And the Green Lantern isn’t?”

“Alien technology,” explained Sheldon.

“The Flash?”

“Science experiment.”

“What about the Kingpin?” piped in Howard.

“He’s just a big dude with muscles,” said Raj dismissively.

“Not so fast Raj. While his physical exploits grossly exaggerate the capabilities of a normal human male there is one thing that redeems the character entirely,” said Sheldon.

“What’s that?”

Sheldon was poker-faced. “He beat the stuffing out of Ben Affleck’s Daredevil.”

xTBBTx

Sheldon turned the corner and ascended another flight of stairs. While he’d never take them personally he understood why prescription sleeping aids dominated the market. His body seemed to start off well but his lack of sleep always caught up with him by prevening. He’d have to incorporate a snack into his afternoon routine so he could last until dinner. It wouldn’t be so bad if he could just take an early bedtime one night to regulate his system but he found that as soon as he lay back on the pillow his brain was a wash in formulas. Formulas and her.

He had no idea how he got to this point but somehow this was all Leonard’s fault. If he hadn’t brought other people into Sheldon’s life like Howard and Raj and—he remembered a young blond
with legs that went on forever stacking boxes in a nearly empty apartment. In that instant he found himself unable to move; thank the Lord Leonard was with him or else who knew how long he’d have stared at Penny from the hall.

‘Penny. Penny. Penny. What am I going to do?’

Almost as if in response he heard her voice from the hall.

“Hey Leonard, getting ready for your conference?”

“Just going over my notes tonight. Sheldon has the whole thing memorized but of course refuses to be the primary presenter.”

“Huh. Sheldon Cooper difficult. Hard to believe.”

“Yeah, well, it’s been known to happen.” Leonard turned his head to the staircase. “Hey Sheldon.”

Sheldon glowered to himself as he climbed the last of the stairs. He hated it when people talked about him behind his back even though he should be used to it given he’d been subjected to the practice his whole life. It didn’t bother him as much at first; only when he began recognizing sarcasm did it become annoying.

“Leonard. Penny,” Sheldon said formally as he made for the apartment door. He could really use a nap about now.

“Sheldon, can we talk for a minute?” asked Penny. His back went rigid as he stood frozen. He knew they had to talk; whatever the outcome he’d be in a better place because at least he’d know where he stood. This thought didn’t take dread of the encounter itself out of the equation, however. He turned to face her.

“Of course,” he said evenly. Penny opened her door as a way of invitation. Swallowing hard to calm himself he strode into the apartment.

“See ya later,” she said to Leonard before closing the door.

“Uh yeah,” replied Leonard. Before he let curiosity get the better of him he unlocked his door and went inside.

Back in apartment 4B Sheldon paced agitatedly around the room.

“Sheldon—” Penny began.

“Penny, I just want to say that…. I mean, what I really want…. ” He closed his eyes and grimaced as a nervous spasm crossed his face.

“Sheldon, calm down and breathe. Here, sit down,” she said gently. He sat down rigidly on the edge of the couch.

Penny gave herself a moment to regroup. Her plan was to read him the riot act for dumping Amy but he looked so worn out she couldn’t do it. Even from the doorway the dark circles under his eyes were evident and the hollowness of his cheeks augmented the delicate features of his face. Penny’s inclination was to gather him into a protective hug and tell him that things were going to be okay. Before she knew it she was sitting beside him and put a hand on his arm only to remove it as he visibly flinched.
“Sweetie, you look like hell,” she said at last. His eyes flickered in her direction as one thumb nervously rubbed the top of the other.

“While I don’t profess such a place actually exists I concur with the sentiment,” he said quietly.

“When’s the last time you got any sleep?”

Sheldon rubbed his tongue along his cheek as he thought. “I managed a single REM cycle last night which brought the total number of hours of rest in the past ninety-two to eight.”

“Oh my God, Sheldon,” said a visibly upset Penny. “Honey this can’t continue.”

“Undoubtedly. It’s only a matter of time before I succumb to sleep from sheer exhaustion.” He closed his eyes. ‘Time to get this over with.’ “Penny I’m surmising you called me in to talk about something specific. Please proceed.”

Penny weighed whether she should mention it but since Sheldon brought it up things might as well get out into the open. “I went to see Amy on Monday.”

“I hope she is reasonably well, given the circumstances.”

“That’s just the problem Sheldon. What are the circumstances?”

He looked troubled. ‘I thought I was clear in my explanation to Amy.’

“Yeah well forgive me but my bullshit meter went off when she told me what you said.” Sheldon frowned at her language.

“I wasn’t lying as you’re implying. I dissolved the relationship agreement because I couldn’t fulfill its terms.”

Now it was Penny’s turn to frown. “Yeah I get all that. What I don’t understand is why? I thought you and Amy were perfect together.”

“Compatible, not ‘perfect,’” Sheldon amended.

“Same thing,” Penny shrugged.

“Penny if there’s anything you should know about me by now it’s that I don’t deal in absolutes. Amy and I share many traits and interests but that doesn’t make us ‘perfect’—something which should be obvious given our paradigm shift.”

There was something about his tone that brought on the fire in Penny. “Get off this ‘paradigm shift’ crap. You make this sound so clinical.”

“It’s not clinical,” agreed Sheldon sharply. “I’m sorry if I’m not emoting at a level to appease you. I’m doing the best I can.” That shut Penny up.

“So how come you can’t do this with Amy? She knows you’re not going to be all gushy lovey-dovey with her,” she said after a moment.

Sheldon sighed. “It’s not a question of my limited ability to express my emotions. I don’t have any feelings for Amy in a romantic capacity.”

Penny was floored. “You’re kidding me, right? There had to be something there for you to ask her out.”
“It was a mistake.”

Now Penny was really angry. “What the hell did you think this was an experiment? Damn it Sheldon if you didn’t like her why did you bother asking her out?”

“Because you told me to,” he said in a raised voice.

“Me?” shrieked Penny in shock.

“Yes you,” he growled. “You said I had asked you on a date so as to make Amy jealous. You said I had feelings for her. You said I should ask her out. So I did.”

“You’re incredible, you know that?” said Penny as they both rose from the couch. “You’re not even taking responsibility for—”

“I’m taking full responsibility. All. Of. It. I shouldn’t have let myself be swayed by your argument. I’ve hurt Amy when she’s been nothing but a good friend to me and now I’m losing you.”

“What? Sheldon you’re not losing me. You’re—aargh!” She threw her hands in the air. “I don’t know what to do with you, Sheldon.”

“I know,” he said in a tone of defeat. His blue eyes rose to meet her. Penny felt her breath catch in her throat.

“I should go help Leonard prepare,” he said as he turned to go.

“Sheldon,” she whispered. He paused for an instant before he went into the hall.

xTBBTxs

A/N Amy’s song: ‘You Give Love a Bad Name’ by Bon Jovi
As a reminder I’ve classified the story as a ‘humor/drama’ so as much as I tried to put funny episodes in here so are there serious ones. Hopefully it’s a palatable blend.
~Lynn

Leonard knew he should say something but he was loath to since he didn’t know what had happened. Penny and Sheldon went to talk and the next thing he knew they were yelling at each other. ‘Because you told me to’ Sheldon had said to her. What did he do?

Leonard glanced at his friend as he sat quietly in the passenger seat. Since he got back from Penny’s Sheldon had said only one word to him—‘No’—when Leonard asked if he wanted to skip the conference.

There was always a delicate nature to Sheldon’s physicality which weeks of abuse had turned positively fragile. From the look of his dull eyes it was obvious he had slept little if at all. Leonard could kick himself for not nipping this in the bud earlier but he’d left it as over the past three weeks Sheldon’s mood had improved. While he still spent an abnormal amount of free time working on his research there wasn’t the sense of urgency there had been previously. This change in attitude still didn’t address his physical needs as Leonard noted his sleep disturbances and loss of appetite continued. ‘Stupid, stupid me.’

“So anyways I was thinking that I can explain the experiment and present the data. You can talk about how this figures into wave-particle duality and the Standard model for Quantum Mechanics,” said Leonard to break the silence.

“I know what to say Leonard,” Sheldon said softly. “You detail the experiment while I explain how this is more than a redundant observation of the Bose-Einstein condensate.”

“It isn’t redundant; no one’s done this particular condensate composition.” Leonard sighed. “It may not be what you really want to solve but it’s still important research.”

“How do you know what I ‘really want to solve’? Are you now telepathic?” snapped Sheldon. Leonard sighed again as he kept his eyes on the road.

As they drove Sheldon stared out the side window and couldn’t help but be reminded of another night when he was driven into the desert to show off the cosmos to a good friend. He snorted in irritation, causing Leonard to look at him out of the corner of his eye. ‘Good friend’. Good Lord’, thought Sheldon. It wasn’t because Penny was a ‘good friend’ that he felt a sense of urgency to see the meteor with her. He didn’t analyze her physical attributes on Halo Night because they were ‘chums’ or ‘mates’.

And then they danced….

“I’m—sorry for my conduct,” Sheldon said.

“It’s ok,” Leonard replied. “You’ve had a lot on your mind lately.” Sheldon nodded.
“Your pairing with Leslie Winkle goes well?”

Leonard grinned. “Yeah. Who knew? Guess I found a way to accommodate Quantum Loop Theory with String Theory.”

“Oh that Leslie and I will always agree to disagree,” said Sheldon diplomatically. Leonard laughed. “You’re a good man Leonard. I hope you achieve a level of happiness you find fulfilling.”


Again the car went silent. The miles clicked by.

“Leonard, what happens if one has found his happiness yet can never truly experience it?”

Leonard licked his lips as he thought. “That’s tough. Is there any particular reason why he can’t experience it?”

“Gravitational lensing.”

“Pardon me?” Leonard understood the principle he just didn’t get how this applied to Sheldon’s attempt to pass off personal feelings as philosophical discourse.

“Never mind,” Sheldon said with a sigh.

“Just to toss something out there: is he having problems dealing with the consequences of having happiness in his life?”

“All actions whether positive or negative have consequences. He would not be an adaptable organism if he couldn’t accommodate change.” Sheldon closed his eyes and leaned back against the headrest.

Leonard cleared his throat. “All I’m saying is that if he’s having trouble reaching out to his happiness that maybe he should cut himself a little slack since the pressure obviously wouldn’t help things and he has a tendency to over-think things at any rate.”

Sheldon opened his eyes with a start. “Leonard, what on earth are you talking about?”

“I uh,” Leonard began to blush. “I thought you were saying you were having problems communicating your feelings to Amy.”

“Amy Farrah Fowler has nothing to do with this,” Sheldon snapped. “I was merely asking an abstract question which obviously you can’t answer without making it personal.”

Leonard rolled his eyes. ‘Abstract question’. He mulled for a moment. “Sheldon?” He hazarded a glance at his friend. “Sheldon does this have anything to do with your fight with Penny?”

Sheldon turned his head and closed his eyes. “I don’t want to talk about this anymore.”

“Fine,” said Leonard even though he knew it was anything but.

xTBBTx
Leonard cleared his throat. So far so good: he didn’t bobble the presentation and he just had to wrap things up and send it to Sheldon.

“…And so with the particle density combined with the Planck constant over mass per boson and the Boltzmann constant we came up with a differential of .876 where…..”

Out of the corner of his eye he saw Sheldon sitting to his right seemingly oblivious to the world. Right from the start Leonard knew this wasn’t going to be easy as he had to wake Sheldon up at four minutes to nine so they’d be ready for their presentation at ten; the haggard look to the taller man indicated he must have gotten a meager amount of rest at best. It was a good thing Dr. Sheldon Cooper had a reputation for being an eccentric so the audience shouldn’t be too surprised if he didn’t get up to speak.

“…particle density of .8745 over the Riemann zeta function .6124 we then arrived at the critical temperature of -273.15 when interference was observed.” Leonard smiled in relief as polite applause came from the overwhelming crowd of forty two. After the debacle from last time when a disagreement turned into a brawl it was standing room only for the Cooper-Hofstadter presentation. “So now I’d like to pass you on to Dr. Cooper for analysis of the interference due to wave-particle duality. Dr. Cooper?”

The crowd waited with baited breath as Sheldon stayed put in his chair. Leonard’s smile faltered as he stepped over to his friend.

“Sheldon?” he said gently. A head rose and two blue eyes focused on his face. There was a pause then Sheldon sprang out of the chair and in two large steps was at the podium.

“So now that you have the results it’s time to see what significance, if any, it has to the wave-particle debate.”

“Sheldon….” Leonard gave him a pleading look. Sheldon closed his eyes and sighed before looking up to address the audience.

“In order to understand the rate of interference we have to consider the complimentarity nature of wave-particle duality. When seen in the light of the Copenhagen interpretation…..”

XXX

After the presentation Sheldon left Leonard to mingle and tried to get some sleep. He’d barely made it to his bed before weeks of exhaustion took him into thankful oblivion. When he next opened his eyes it was after midnight. After lying in bed for a half hour he took the time to fully stretch his limbs. While he was still tired he felt grounded enough to act instead of just react. Leonard’s dragging him off to the conference turned out to be the best thing he could have done. The presentation placed Sheldon fully in his element of raw science. He didn’t have to think about birthdays or Amy or…

“Penny.” Sheldon smiled weakly; he must have improved because he could actually say her name without his gut wrenching. He knew they had to talk when he got back but he wasn’t sure how to start much less what to say. At least this sleep gave his brain a fighting chance to come up with a plan. Sitting up, Sheldon realized he was hungry and as room service was done for the day he’d have to fend for himself. After showering he got dressed and left the hotel room, only stopping to leave a note under Leonard’s door indicating the current time and saying that he went for a walk.

With the crowds coming out of the bars he didn’t feel like going to the main strip so he took a more circuitous route in the hopes of finding a quieter place to eat. He bypassed a pizza and chicken joint
as the idea of greasy food was unappealing. As he continued down the street he saw a pub at the corner. Through the window he could see someone using a spray bottle and a cloth on the tables. While this was an encouraging sign he wasn’t in the mood for pub fare.

It was as he was turning the corner that he clearly saw her. It was the blond hair that caught his eye and he stopped to watch as she obliviously cleaned the table in large circular swipes. Before he knew what he was doing he had stepped through the door. Aside from two men sitting at the bar it was empty. Sheldon took a moment to decide where to sit; the bartender kept an eye on the lanky man standing stock-still at the entrance as the blonde waitress went to greet her customer.

“Hi,” she said in a voice that was nothing like Penny’s—it was higher in pitch and a tad nasal. She was older too with Sheldon placing her in her early forties; yet there was something about her that felt familiar to him. “Can I help you with something?”

“I’d like a drink,” he said. She smiled.

“You’ve come to the right place. Have a seat and I’ll be with you in a moment.” Sheldon started towards the right side of the room before the draft and lack of ambient lighting brought him to the center. He didn’t want to watch television so he would have to face the window.

The server couldn’t help but smile as she watched this strange man decide between two tables. She didn’t smell alcohol on his breath and he seemed shy rather than under the influence. ‘Finally’, she thought as he took a seat. To her the two tables were the same but obviously to him there was a world of difference.

“You sure?” asked the bartender as he indicated Sheldon with his head.

“I’m sure,” she said before taking a menu to the table. “So,” she said to Sheldon. “Welcome to the James Joyce. I’m Natalie.” He nodded and gave more of a twitch than a smile. ‘Man he’s shy.’ “So what can I get you this evening?”

“May I have a virgin Cuba Libre, please?”

“Coming right up, pumpkin.” She grinned and in that instant Sheldon took in her dimples and eyes. Her green eyes.

She returned with his drink. All the way to the table she felt him watching her. To her surprise she didn’t feel creeped out; the vibe was all wrong: she felt scrutinized not oogled. She placed a coaster and the glass on the table and turned to leave.

“Why did you come to California?”

“Pardon me?” She’d been there for over twenty years hence wasn’t used to being called out as an outsider.

“Your euphemism for me: ‘pumpkin’. A friend of mine calls me that. She’s from Nebraska and is also a waitress.”

Natalie laughed. “Must be something about us farming states. I’m from Iowa. Yourself?”

“East Texas.” He paused. “So why did you come here?”

“It seemed the thing to do,” she shrugged. “I was young and full of ideas of being a movie or TV star.” She smiled wistfully. “All I knew was that Iowa was holding me back.”
“You couldn’t have been a waitress in Iowa?” Sheldon asked, puzzled.

She paused as she looked over this blue-eyed Texan who sat with the most earnest expression she’d ever seen. Natalie burst out laughing.

“Boy they sure make ‘em blunt in Texas.” She pulled out the chair opposite Sheldon and sat. “No, I couldn’t have been a waitress in Iowa—not because Iowa doesn’t need waitresses,” she said before he could interject. “It wasn’t a place I could stay. It wasn’t home.” Sheldon nodded.

“I, too, found myself orphaned until I came here,” he agreed. He flashed her a look. “My family doesn’t understand me.”

“I’ve got a feeling not many people do,” said Natalie. Again Sheldon nodded before he took a sip of his drink. “But at least you’ve made some friends here like your Nebraskan and they say friends often become your family.”

“The ability to select one’s peers based on similar interests and disposition often trumps biology.” He took another sip. “I’ll assume that at some point you realized your dreams of stardom were unattainable. Why didn’t you return to Iowa?”

Natalie leaned both arms on the table as she thought. She could have returned home but what a home-coming it would have been for someone who swore on a stack of bibles to anyone she encountered that she was getting the hell out of there and never coming back.

“My life’s here: my friends, my boyfriend,” she said simply.

Sheldon put down his glass. “What does your boyfriend do for a living?”

“He’s in IT.”

“How did you meet?”

“Friend of a friend. I was at a party complaining about my computer—I’m always having troubles with it—and he offered to help me. I don’t know, it was probably stupid opening my home up to a near-stranger but hey, look what the cat dragged in, huh? Twelve years of free tech support,” she grinned.

He nodded, thinking back to his first meeting with Penny: she’d accepted Leonard’s invitation to eat with them without a second thought towards whether it was safe or not to go into their apartment. He also noted that she, too, had enjoyed free tech support over the years.

“How soon after you met did your relationship status change?”

“We were friends for about five and a half years before we decided ‘to heck with it’ and got together.”

“I see.” Sheldon was silent and Natalie thought the conversation was at an end. She smiled as she got to her feet. “How did you know it was right to shift the paradigm in your relationship?” he blurted out.

“What?”

He bit his lip as he rephrased the question. “How did you know it was ok to be more than friends?”

“I don’t know. We just knew something had changed.” Natalie’s eyes narrowed as a thought came
to her. “You’re sure curious about my relationship. This has nothing to do with a certain Nebraskan
does it?” Sheldon flushed and he lowered his eyes. “Hey, it’s ok,” Natalie smiled warmly. “Does
she know?”

“No,” he said as a bitter smile came to his lips. “Who would expect Dr. Whackadoodle to have
feelings? It’s her nick-name for me as I’ve two doctorates,” he explained to Natalie.

She was going to laugh but something told her that it was this perceived difference that was at the
crux of his problem. “Have you thought about telling her how you feel?”

“What would I say? ‘Penny, after five years it’s occurred to me that I’m rather fond’—” he
clamped his jaw shut even as he closed his eyes. He took a deep breath. Natalie patted his hand in
comfort; for some reason inexplicable to Sheldon he didn’t pull away.

“Look pumpkin, I can’t speak for Penny but what I’m seeing here is someone who cares very
deeply for her. I know I’d want to know that. I’d want to know that I mattered to someone.”

“She matters a great deal,” Sheldon agreed. “But she’s also angry at me.”

“Why?” Natalie asked. “Hey, before we get into that can I get you anything else?”

Sheldon shrugged. “I actually left the hotel in search of food. Pub fare at one-thirty in the morning
doesn’t sound appetizing.”

Natalie thought for a moment. “How about some toast with grape or strawberry jam?”

“Strawberry please.”

She smiled. “Ok. I’ll be back.”

Sheldon was astonished at what he was doing: he went into a non-approved eating establishment,
let himself be touched by a complete stranger and was now preparing to eat food that was probably
not being prepared with gloved hands.

“See what you’re doing to me?” he asked the air.

When Natalie came out of the kitchen he was gone, a twenty dollar bill left in his place.

xTBBTx

Penny knew Leonard and Sheldon were going to be back sometime later in the day but it didn’t
stop Sunday afternoon from being one of the longest she’d ever experienced. She casually moved
her head to see the clock on Amy’s end table. One forty-six. Grabbing her glass she took another
sip of her rum and cola and tried to pay closer attention to Bernadette and Amy as they went over
last-minute details before the upcoming wedding rehearsal.

“I can’t believe how fast time’s going by,” said a panicked Bernadette. “What if we don’t get
everything done in time?”

“Your lack faith in my organizational abilities. I assure you we’re still according to plan even when
we take into account Howard’s ‘hemming and hawing’,” soothed Amy.

“And his mother,” amended Penny. All three women clinked their glasses together before drinking.
It wasn’t so much that Mrs. Wolowitz was being that much the meddling mother-in-law; like
normal her ‘suggestions’ often frustrated Howard and Bernadette found herself playing the
diplomat as she soothed tensions. They only had to get through the next three weeks and the couple would be in their own place. When they were shopping for apartments Howard suggested they get a three-bedroom unit. ‘Otherwise where will Mother sleep?’ he said with a twinkle in his eyes. That night Bernadette creamed him with a pillow.

“So we go over the ceremony at three-thirty and have dinner at six. Will Sheldon be ok going to the restaurant? I don’t want him making a scene since there aren’t many Jewish buffets around,” said Bernadette.

“He’ll adjust,” said Amy evenly. Penny looked at her friend but if Amy was troubled by the topic she showed no sign. “Besides, he owes me.”

“Oh, oh. What did he do now?” inquired Bernadette while opening the ‘Bridesmaids’ dvd case.

“He made an unexpected alteration to my plans the other night.”

Bernadette nodded in sympathy. “Yeah, I hate it when Howard changes his mind or even worse, forgets about our plans entirely. I remember one time I had the entire apartment decked out. I mean flowers, candles, dinner. And where was Howard? At the movies.”

“Pass me the chips,” asked Penny to change the subject.

“Here’s hoping the guys won’t base Howard’s bachelor party on The Hangover,” said Bernadette as she started the movie. All three girls looked at each other before bursting into laughter.

“Ten bucks it’s gaming night at Dave and Busters or something like that,” said Penny.

“Wager noted and declined,” smiled Amy.

Something was bothering Penny. As the movie played she found her mind wandering back to Thursday night and her fight with Sheldon. She’d felt absolutely horrible about the whole thing given how tired and worn he looked. ‘Not exactly something a friend does’, she thought. Of course what else was she supposed to do? She was also Amy’s friend and it was just plain wrong that he’d ended their relationship. Penny glanced at Amy. She had a lot of respect for the neurobiologist in deciding to keep the whole thing discreet for Bernadette and Howard’s sake. Penny didn’t know if she could keep it together if it had happened to her. ‘I’ve only fought with Sheldon and I feel positively drained.’

Their normal disagreements had taken on the air of legend for the level of one-upmanship and stubborn mule-headedness exhibited by both parties; even though she had dated Leonard she could honestly say she spent more time scheming about Sheldon than she had dreaming of her bespectacled ex-boyfriend. There was just something about Sheldon that got her blood boiling—and not just in anger. While she got an absolute kick out of slaughtering him at Halo she had to admit the rush when they teamed up to take out the others. Through many hours of practice he was good. She was a natural.

This time was different. Sheldon had often been annoyed or exasperated by things she had done but he’d never yelled at her. A line had been crossed, that much she knew, although who had stepped over first remained to be seen. He’d blamed her for pushing him into asking Amy out but that made no sense. Why else would he try to set up a date with Penny if not to make Amy as jealous of him as he was of her for seeing Stuart? Penny frowned. He was jealous, wasn’t he? Penny prided herself for being able to read the physicist through his big-word babble. He had seemed calm but she knew something was out of whack when he came up with some cock-a-maimy idea that Penny liked him.
This had to be his biggest ‘bazina’ yet.

Wasn’t it? Penny rolled her eyes. ‘Come on Penny, it’s not as if he actually likes y—’ Her mind flashed images of him listening to her problems and loaning her money and ‘bazina-ing’ her jokes and buying her groceries and ignoring her for no reason and—

‘He was afraid he was going to lose me.’

“Holy crap on a cracker,” she breathed.

“Something wrong, Penny?” asked Amy.

“Just remembered I have to change my schedule next week.” Penny finished off her glass in several big gulps while Amy watched.

“That bad?”

Penny shook her head. “Just weird that I’d never thought about it before.”

She looked down at her empty glass, suddenly finding herself very sober.

Sheldon stifled a yawn as Leonard sat down at the lunch table. After sleeping reasonably well at the conference he’d come home to find himself too anxiety-ridden to rest. It didn’t take much: he only had to look at Penny’s door and the memories of Thursday came back in a rush. He almost moved Leonard aside to open their apartment door himself when the smaller man took his time finding the right key. From behind, Sheldon heard Penny’s lock turn but before anything could happen Leonard had the door open and he rushed inside.

“Thanks again for coming to the conference,” said Leonard.

Sheldon idly observed Leslie Winkle grab a pop from the machine. “This is the third time you’ve thanked me. If this continues I will refuse to do another project with you.”

“Sorry,” Leonard said while trying to contain his giddiness. Their presentation was noted by Dr. Franklin of the MIT group and an offer to collaborate was hammered out at the reception. Using Sheldon’s interpretation of Leonard’s numbers as a basis for further research meant exciting times for the applied physicist. Of course it would mean working with Sheldon, who was loathe to deviate from his current research. Perhaps Leonard could interest him if he were merely consulted instead of actively participating. The corner of Leonard’s mouth lifted in amusement. That and given formal recognition for his ‘Cooper Constant’.

Howard and Raj were all smiles as they strode across the cafeteria.

“Read your Facebook update. Congratulations, buddy,” said Howard to Leonard.

“I couldn’t have done it without Sheldon: my numbers, his constant,” admitted Leonard. Granted he had done all the leg work and come up with the experiment to begin with but he hadn’t seen the broader implications of his results. Only Sheldon could take the mundane and spin it on its head until it achieved the cosmic.

“Indeed,” Sheldon agreed evenly although he was pleased at the acknowledgement.

“Oh oh,” murmured Howard under his breath. “Kripke at four o’clock.”
At the mere mention of his name the tension level at the table rose substantially. The veins in Sheldon’s neck stood out from the strain as his jaw locked.

“Hewwo Coopah,” Kripke said in a mocking tone. “I hear congwaduwations are in owdeh.”

“Thank you,” Sheldon said icily.

Kripke gave a short laugh. “Solving foh quantum effects is qwite the show stoppah foh you. Guess the gweat Coopah goes out with a whimpah instead of a Big Bang.”

Before anyone could react Sheldon was on his feet and standing directly in front of the plasma physicist.

“For your information I have not resigned from my position nor have I wrapped up my career. I’ve resolved more postulates in thirty years than you will in a lifetime,” Sheldon said in a calm voice that belied the fire in his eyes and the coloring of his cheeks. “As for your allusion to universal creation I’m still working on it and if you doubt me you don’t know me. Now take your mockery and depart before I decide to spend my declining years systematically deconstructing your papers one by one until you’re the one who’s left whimpering.”

The entire cafeteria was silent as all eyes were on Kripke.

“Happy Biwfday,” he said. After a pause Sheldon nodded. Kripke turned and walked from the room.

Sheldon sat down. His hand shook as he reached for his cola but other than that he felt fine. No, he felt more than fine. He looked at his friends’ shocked faces.

“Don’t mess with the junior rodeo,” he said.

xTBBTx

The day didn’t feel any different and yet Sheldon knew things would never be the same again. Not that things ever repeated themselves exactly as homo sapiens sapiens existed in a linear time-stream but the sentiment still applied. He opened his eyes and looked at the clock. Leonard would be leaving in ten minutes. It’s a good thing Sheldon had decided to take the day off; he’d found his request already approved before he even asked—the department secretary knew to put this day aside for him. He frowned at the notion of waiting for Leonard to leave before getting up as it implied his roommate held some power over him. No one ruled over Sheldon Lee Cooper while he lay in his Fortress of Solitude. He was—and always would be—his own man and march to the beat of the universe that was relentless in its call.

Like a magnet his eyes went to the vase of Penny Blossoms on his shelf.

“So much for the call of the universe,” he said quietly. 'Happy Birthday, Doctor Cooper.'

Leonard heard the bathroom door close and pounded down the last of his coffee. It was a given that Sheldon wasn’t coming; in all the years since the discovery of the ‘Precipice Principle’ there’d only been one physics professor who went to work on his thirtieth birthday: he smiled at his colleagues, winked at the secretary and was heard whistling as he entered his office. When it was discovered that he wasn’t heard from in three days it took the fire department several minutes to chop down the door so the paramedics could gain access. Needless to say the poor fellow went on immediate sabbatical.

Sheldon was made of tougher stuff. Besides he already had a whole whack of crazy in his head so
he wouldn’t do anything stupid. Right? Leonard was loathe to leave him, remembering the night Sheldon had his breakdown and hoped his friend wouldn’t endure any more heartache. ‘Let’s hope for the best’, he thought as Sheldon came down the hall.

“Good morning Leonard,” Sheldon said pleasantly as he adjusted the ties on his bathrobe.

“Hey Sheldon,” replied a relieved Leonard. It looked as though Sheldon had gotten some sleep last night. “So anyways, I was wondering if you wanted me to pick you up after work to go to the restaurant since it’s Tuesday?”

“I’d prefer to stay here. If you could bring home take-out for me it would be appreciated. I’ll have the bacon cheeseburger, pickles sliced lengthwise, onion rings preferably double-coated on the side and a lemonade.”

“I’ll try to remember,” Leonard said dryly. “Is it ok if we have people over? Raj said that he’d like to drop by and I’m sure Howard would too.” Sheldon stood a moment in thought before he nodded his assent.

“As long as it’s understood to be an ordinary evening it will be acceptable,” he said.

“Ordinary. Understood,” agreed Leonard as he grabbed his computer bag. “Have a good...um, day,” he smiled awkwardly.

“I shall.” Sheldon answered as the door closed. For a moment he stood stalk still, feeling the weight of the day threatening to spill over him, before his brows met. “I shall have a good day because it’s no different than any other day.”

He bypassed the Honey Puffs for Fiber-One—a cereal he found to be ironic since it sat number three in his order of cereals arranged by fiber count. After adding his quarter cup milk to the bowl he settled in his spot on the couch to eat. He stopped himself from looking at his whiteboard: while today was to be treated no differently from any other that didn’t mean that Sheldon himself couldn’t rearrange his schedule to make room for a movie this morning. He was, after all, an adaptable organism. He put a hand on his abdomen as it gurgled. Well to a point….

After he’d finished his morning routine he made himself a mug of chamomile tea and sat down to watch Star Trek IV: The Voyage Home. He found the whole premise of an alien probe devastating the planet in search of extinct whales fascinating. While he wouldn’t count himself a die-hard environmentalist he was aware the planet had finite resources. Unless cybernetics achieved a critical breakthrough where he could transplant his consciousness into a robot body he’d be subject to the same perils as the rest of humanity.

After the movie ended Sheldon shut off the television. And sat. He glanced at his watch and noted it was just after eleven. He stared out the window—another sun-shiny day in Pasadena. Time to get started; he looked at his whiteboard. She should be up by now. He washed his dishes and placed them in the rack before drying his hands with a paper towel. Time to get started; again he looked at his whiteboard. He grabbed a marker and quickly dashed off a new formula:

Solve for P=

He added the number of men he’d seen with Penny and extrapolated that over her entire dating history which initiated at age fourteen by her own admission, arriving at two hundred and nine plus or minus eight. In the corner of the board he jotted down his own experience: one.

Thinking over all the men he’d seen, he had to conclude Penny’s ‘type’ was tall, dark-haired and
physically fit. Raw intellect didn’t seem to figure into her equation although she did have sex with Leonard after being subjected to a mind-numbing date with Zack.

“She said it was a mistake,” he reminded himself. Nevertheless she had previously gone out with Leonard so there was a precedent of Penny being attracted to an intellectual albeit a tenuous one as .476% of the total number of men wasn’t great odds.

“I’ve worked with smaller,” he said as he glanced at his quantum work formulas.

XxX

It was only as he decided to get his mail that he’d come face to face with it. Like a basilisk the envelope lying in front of the door had Sheldon standing still as stone. He’d been working so intensely he hadn’t realized it was after three o’clock. Hadn’t noticed Penny close and lock her door as she left for work. He certainly didn’t hear her slip the envelope under the door.

Before he even picked it up he knew it was a card: the proportions and type of envelope left little doubt. He opened it without fanfare. The cover was of a galaxy cluster. A little gasp left his lips as he read Penny’s message:

’Find your Undiscovered Country.’

He turned to face his whiteboard. The mail could wait.

XxX

“Hey Sheldon,” said Leonard as he entered the apartment followed by Raj and Howard but Sheldon was too engrossed by the television to respond. “What ya watching?”

“Star Trek VI,” said Raj as he sat on the couch next to Howard. “I guess Sheldon’s had a film festival today.”

“Hardly,” Sheldon muttered as he engaged the caption feature on the television.

“I thought you didn’t like the ‘Undiscovered Country’?” asked Leonard as he set the take-out bag on the coffee table before sitting down.

“Upon reflection I found myself rediscovering an appreciation for the film,” Sheldon responded as he took out his burger and condiments.


Howard checked his cell phone and immediately sobered up. “Umm Sheldon, I hope you don’t mind that the girls want to pop in to say, you know, ‘hello’.”

“The more the merrier at this point,” sighed Sheldon before taking a bite of his burger.

Aside from a few tense minutes when Leonard and Sheldon argued Klingon Shakespearian grammar rules the room fell silent as everyone immersed themselves in the film.

At nine forty-three there was a short knock at the door and Howard leapt off the couch to answer it. Sheldon held his breath as the door opened. Bernadette, still in her Cheesecake Factory uniform, gave her fiancé a kiss as she entered.

“You’re late,” he murmured as he nibbled her ear.
“I know. I left straight from work to pick up Amy,” she giggled as she tried to shoo him away. At the mention of Amy’s name Sheldon turned to face the door.

“Where is she?” asked Howard.

“Downstairs with Penny getting the mail. Since we were so late I thought I should come straight up,” squeaked Bernadette.

At the sounds of footfalls on the stairs Howard stuck his head into the hall.

“Good evening, ladies. Yon chamber awaits.”

“Hello Howard,” said Amy.

“Hey Howard,” Penny greeted, although to Sheldon’s mind her voice seemed father away.

“Where are you going?” asked Howard as he stepped into the hall. Sheldon didn’t hear the response as he had a more immediate issue to attend.

“Hello Sheldon,” said Amy evenly. He stood up.

“Hello Amy,” he answered in a similar fashion. Both stood in awkward silence but as they often did no one else in the room thought it out of the ordinary.

“Although you still hold an irrational association between your day of birth and your intellectual potential I feel it necessary to acknowledge this day. Happy Birthday Sheldon.” Amy gave a brisk smile that was not unkind.

Taking this as a sign, everyone else wished him a ‘Happy Birthday’ but he was too stunned to answer. He couldn’t take his eyes off of Amy. Amy, who understood him as no other person had. While he knew her smile wasn’t an invitation to come waltzing back into her life he was encouraged to think that their friendship could be salvaged. ‘Thank you Jesus—as my mother would say.’

“So where’s Penny?” asked Leonard.

“She said she was dead on her feet but that she’d already said ‘Happy Birthday’ earlier,” answered Howard. Leonard frowned but before he could inquire further Bernadette had pulled out a camera and suggested a group shot.

“But it’s not a ‘group shot’. Penny is a part of the group and she’s not here,” Sheldon pointed out. “Therefore it would only be a picture of a gathering of people, nothing special.”

“Sheldon, don’t be a party pooper,” Bernadette admonished.

“I’m not, because this isn’t a party. Leonard, you said this was just going to be a few friends coming over and—” He paused as he looked at Amy. “The photo is non-optional isn’t it?”

“Suck it up, Cooper,” Amy agreed. After a moment he nodded.

It was a little after eleven when everyone had left. Leonard went to get ready for bed, leaving Sheldon alone in the living room. While he was pleased his first physical interaction with Amy after the break-up went better than expected he was still bothered by Penny’s absence. Perhaps she was as tired as she had said and went to bed, but he saw her light on under the door as he said goodbye to the others. Unless he was mistaken. Before he could stop himself he was at her door.
The light was still on. He swallowed.

Knock Knock Knock “Penny.” (He didn’t know what he was doing.)

Knock Knock Knock “Penny.” (He didn’t know what to say.)

Knock Knock Knock “Penny.” (He was terrified.)

Silence. He knocked again and she still didn’t answer. Maybe she was ignoring him? He doubted it; if she were ignoring him she wouldn’t have left him the card earlier in the day. She either was asleep or out of the apartment. As it was nearly midnight and she’d just come off a long shift he doubted she’d gone dancing. The lateness of the evening also nixed off laundry. That only left one place to check….

Penny was on her back looking at the stars. Although she knew the view wouldn’t be as spectacular as it was in the desert she still couldn’t resist coming up to the roof. She felt cooped up in her apartment and was more than a little lonely hearing the laughter coming from across the hall. She knew she could have gone over but things were already awkward with Amy there pretending that everything with Sheldon was ok without adding herself to the mix.

She still didn’t know what to make of her fight with Sheldon on Thursday. Granted she had her own theory—and while it would make sense if this was anyone else on the planet, she was dealing with Sheldon Cooper—but it seemed too incredulous to be believed: he dumped a brainiac neurobiologist because he had a thing for a college drop-out waitress. No way. Penny took a sip of her rum and cola—she’d slipped the rum into the can in case she ran into anyone. She knew Sheldon hadn’t had many friends much less female ones so he was limited in his ability to express his emotions. There had to be a perfectly rational, clinical, logical reason for him to have asked her out; she was just too dumb to see it.

“What a shock: Penny can’t understand Sheldon,” she chuckled as she took another sip. She quickly lowered her can as she heard footsteps in the stairwell, holding her breath as the door opened and Sheldon stepped out.

Seeing her, he immediately closed the door behind him and began fidgeting with his hands. After taking a moment to decide what to do he walked over to where she lay, keeping his eyes skyward.

“Hello Penny,” he said quietly.

“Hi sweetie.”

“Penny, you told Howard you were tired. Why are you here?” he asked nonchalantly. He was glad she couldn’t see the nervous tic cross his face.

She shrugged. “I just didn’t feel good going over to see you. You know, after Thursday.”

Sheldon nodded. “I left things unresolved. I felt we were at an impasse and I was too tired to deal with it.”

Penny took her eyes off the sky to look at him.

“I know. I was an idiot to push you. Some ‘friend’ huh?”

He lowered his head although he still kept his back to her. “You’re a great friend, Penny,” he said seriously.
“Eyah.” She sat up. “Well great friends know to leave well enough alone and I clearly don’t.”

“Penny…” Sheldon’s voice trailed off sadly and she found herself unable to continue. If she said what she was going to say it would change things between them forever. It had already been five days of hell and now that they were talking again she knew she couldn’t risk losing him. She stood up and touched his arm to turn him around. Their eyes met and again she found herself lost in the depths. Aside from the desire to leave Nebraska to become an actress there weren’t a lot of things in Penny’s life of which she was absolutely sure. She was sure now: Sheldon Cooper liked her.

Sheldon’s jaw clenched as he fought down the panic. He noticed a change in Penny’s expression and every instinct told him he should run and hide.

“Sheldon? Are you ok?” she asked, her voice full of concern.

“It depends,” he said quietly. “Are we ‘ok’?”

“We’re ok.” Penny smiled warmly as she ran her hand up and down his arm. He nodded curtly although the look of relief on his face was evident. “Sheldon?”

“Yes Penny?”

“Happy Birthday Moonpie.”

“Thank you.” He raised an eyebrow. “Only don’t call me Moonpie.”

xA

A/N Back to Wikipedia: Bose-Einstein Condensate; Wave Particle Duality

Sheldon’s birthday: All we know is that he’s a Taurus. For the story I put it on May 8th.

The Star Trek murder mystery: Who were they trying to kid?
The Progenitor Complication

xTBBTx

“Why’d you pause the game?” said an exasperated Leonard.

“Because Howard said he was ‘going in all silent like Blade’ and I refute the analogy,” explained Sheldon. Howard rolled his eyes.

“Sheldon, I just meant that I was sneaking in from behind,” sighed the engineer.

“Even if I were to accept your premise that you were ‘sneaking in’—though Raj’s kill shot should have made it obvious that you were in no way traversing undetected—I object to you referencing Blade. He uses a sword; you’re using advanced projectile weaponry.”

“Ok, ok, my bad. Now can we play?”

“Of course,” said Sheldon smugly as he resumed the game. Howard shot him a dirty look.

“I think it would be awesome having Blade in Halo,” Raj said as his character fired off a spray of bullets to cover Sheldon’s avatar running to the building. “He can kick some serious ass. Remember when he fought the vampire in the subway tunnel?”

Again the game paused.

“Do I?” spat Sheldon. “The subway train took over sixty seconds to pass Blade and Quinn. If the train was traveling at thirty miles per hour it would have to be a half-mile long or sixty-six train cars at forty feet per car length.”

“Sheldon,” warned Leonard. The game resumed. The room was silent save for the sounds of clicking remotes and the occasional shouts of ‘cover me’ or ‘behind you’.

“Ethylenediaminetetraacetate is not blue,” said Sheldon as he waited for Raj to catch up to his location.

“What?” asked Howard.

“The anticoagulant Blade says he uses in his glass darts. However ethylenediaminetetraacetate is white while his solution is clearly blue.”

“Howard, to the right,” warned Leonard. He fired off a quick series of rounds. “Maybe Blade colored it blue.”

Sheldon lobbed a plasma grenade over a wall and waited. “Why on earth would he do that?”

“So he doesn’t get it mixed up with his serum?” suggested Raj.

“If he can’t tell the difference between an anticoagulant and the serum responsible for sustaining his life then he really does deserve to die,” said Sheldon, his mouth twitching. “Raj if you swing forty-five degrees you should be able to see Leonard.”

Leonard threw his hands into the air. “Gee Sheldon, can you telegraph your next move any plainer?”
A quick smile flickered across Sheldon’s face. “When you present yourself as a credible opponent I shall be more secretive in my planning.” He glanced at his put-out friend. “Muah-ha-ha.”

“Speaking of ‘secretive planning’ I keep catching the girls talking about Bernadette’s bachelorette party. Leonard! No, right! Right! Ah damn it.” Howard put down his remote as his avatar fell dead to the ground.

“Any idea where they’re going?” asked Raj.

“Not in so many words,” said Howard as he took a sip of his water. “But I did hear some key words like ‘muscles’ and ‘tequila’ and a hell of a lot of giggling.”

“I wonder if it’s too late to join the bride’s party?” teased Leonard.

“While people tend to associate a ‘bachelorette party’ with a night of unbridled debauchery it is more common for the participants to engage in ‘female bonding’,,” offered Sheldon as he waited for Howard’s avatar to regenerate.

“Nothing bonds females tighter than muscles and tequila,” grinned Raj.

“Why not? Seems to be a winning formula for Penny,” said Howard, who turned as he felt Leonard and Sheldon glare at him. “What, did I speak an untruth?”


“And?”

“And even though we broke up I like to think that our time together was special. Compared to her other relationships I stood out.”

“‘Out’ as in out of character. Face it Leonard, you were her close encounter of the geeky kind,” said Raj, his avatar changing weapons as tracer bullets zipped overhead.

“Yeah, you ruined her for the rest of us,” agreed Howard who growled as his avatar stood only to be blown to bits by a grenade. “Gee thanks for letting me get up, Sheldon.”

“You’re welcome,” Sheldon said icily. Leonard turned at the tone in his friend’s voice but the lanky physicist was staring fixedly at the television screen.

xTBBTx

It’d been five weeks since she last heard from her agent. Five weeks since her last audition for the headache commercial.

“Sure have a headache now,” Penny joked to herself as she padded across the floor to the kitchen in her flip flops and comfy pajamas. The afternoon shift at the Cheesecake Factory was a joy and a half as she had a gathering of new moms and their babies in her seating area. Two hours as a baby-barf napkin disposal unit left her desire for children severely diminished. She snorted as she poured her cola into a glass. If she had stayed in Nebraska she’d probably have two kids by now: two kids, a part-time mechanic husband, trailer park home and a waitressing job.

“Well at least I’ve got one piece of the puzzle securely in place.” She pulled out a bottle of rum and topped off the glass. Grabbing a magazine off the counter she made her way to the couch, popped off her flip flops and settled in for the long haul. Instead of relief she found herself grow more anxious as she turned the pages to see celebrity after successful celebrity staring out at her. 'Why
couldn’t I be one of them?’ It’s not like she wanted to be the next Angelina Jolie or Meryl Streep—she wasn’t attractive enough to make Brad Pitt stray nor was she even a fraction as talented as Meryl. She was just another blond-haired dreamer who knew it was soon time to wake up.

Penny threw the magazine to the other end of the couch and took a sip of her drink. One day she’d look back at this point in her life and call this the ‘good times’: parties, dancing, getting by on her looks. That’s how she got into Leonard and Sheldon’s lives; it wasn’t by discussing the latest article in Physics Today or having a witty conversation to dazzle their socks off. She was pretty and for Leonard, that was enough. When he’d admitted to her how long he’d had a crush she thought it flattering. Now she wasn’t so sure. He didn’t even know her. He just knew that he liked her and for that he was no different than the other guys she’d met at the clubs. And then there was Sheldon….

“Sheldon, Sheldon, Sheldon,” said Penny as she took another drink. “What the frak do I do with you?” She still couldn’t get over what happened on his birthday. He liked her. She might not know chaos theory but she sure as hell knew the look he’d given her on the roof. How long had this been going on? It had been nearly two weeks since he’d broken up with Amy and knowing Sheldon and his fear of change his feelings must have been festering for a while. Penny thought over their interactions over the past few months to see if there were any signs but aside from his most recent activities all she brought to mind were their usual laundry nights and verbal sparring. Somewhere along the line things had changed for him. The question was, what about her?

She put down her drink and lay back on the couch, feeling as if she were at a psychiatrist’s office given the topic at hand. Off the cuff she always referred to Sheldon as a whack job. He might be brilliant—ok, he was brilliant—but his idiosyncrasies were seemingly limitless and at times beyond ludicrous. He was a top of the line egomaniac: ‘his’ seat, ‘his’ restaurants, ‘his’ structured nights by which everyone else had to live. Oh wait, there was the third Thursday of the month where ‘Anything Goes’. Maybe that was a sign he was changing—Sheldon Cooper developing a devil-may-care attitude one night a month. Penny laughed. That’s Sheldon, a regular rebel. And yet when she thought about it he really was a rebel. He might read over the National Safety Council’s annual report and know the statistics behind every study imaginable pertaining to whatever Penny was doing at the time but he also wore comic t-shirts and plaid pants to work and constantly thought outside the box. He was stubborn, but of course he was a Taurus so that wasn’t surprising. What was surprising were the times he deviated from his norm given that his habits were so precise they were almost ritualistic. The more she thought about it the more Penny realized Sheldon’s statement that she ‘broadened his horizons’ was true; of the group she was the one who frequently took him out of his comfort zone. At the very least she brought a little reality to his cocooned life.

“Yeah, reality sucks,” Penny grimaced as she put an arm over her eyes. Reality meant slogging it out at a dead end job and never getting to do what you want. In spite of herself she grinned; Sheldon had a successful career and always did what he wanted. Maybe she should be a physicist. Or crazy.

At the very least she could date a physicist. She’d admitted to Raj and Amy that her time with Leonard really did something to her as she found herself bored stiff with ‘regular’ guys. She liked playing paintball and Halo and witnessing science experiments. Who but a geek could invite a beautiful woman to the roof so he could bounce a laser off the moon? Of course there was one major problem: sometimes he made her feel dumb. Sometimes he talked to her as if she were dumb.

Penny lowered her arm from her face as a new thought stopped her cold: Sheldon made her feel
dumb. Sheldon talked to her as if she were dumb. And yet from him it didn’t matter. If she didn’t
know what he was talking about she would ignore it or ask him to clarify instead of worrying about
what she missed. When he talked down to her she got sarcastic and returned the favor as opposed to
running and hiding.

Leonard was a crush and sometimes she truly felt smothered; Sheldon was a challenge she always
rose to meet.

But should she go out with Sheldon? Should she get her head examined for even thinking about it?
More likely than not she’d end up burying his body somewhere along the freeway. He irritated her.
She frustrated him. And yet not talking to him for those five days made her miserable. Penny stared
at the ceiling. She had to be sure before she made a move. There’s no way their friendship would
survive if she took him on for a couple of dates before changing her mind. Leonard was ok going
back to just being friends but Sheldon was a different animal altogether.

“Ok Penny, cut the frak and get to the real point,” she said aloud.

After Leonard she found herself dissatisfied with her other friends and ‘ordinary’ guys.

What would she be like after Sheldon? If the relationship didn’t work then that’d be that. Ditto if
things did work. But what if it was one of those devastating half-lives where there was so much to
like and yet not enough to make it last? Could the ordinary ever satisfy her again? Penny didn’t
know.

She wasn’t sure she was brave enough to find out.

xTBBT

She knew the boys would be busy playing their vintage video games but she figured if they were
distracted enough they might not be disagreeable to the plan.

Penny knocked twice before she opened the door. Howard and Raj sat in front of the television
with old style joysticks in their hands while Leonard stood behind them. Sheldon was in his spot on
the couch reading a book.

“Hi guys,” she said sweetly. “What’s tonight’s poison?”

“Hey Penny,” grinned Leonard. “‘Aztec Challenge’ on the Commodore 64.” Sheldon harrumphed.

She indicated Sheldon with her head. “What’s with him?” Penny grimaced as soon as the words left
her mouth. Howard and Raj risked their on-screen characters’ lives to glare at her.

“What’s with me?” ruffled Sheldon as he inserted a bookmark. “I’ll tell you Penny. Tonight is
‘Vintage Video Game’ night.” Penny crossed over to look at the blocky characters moving through
block-like structures on a perpetually scrolling screen.

“Looks pretty ‘vintage’ to me,” she shrugged.

“Don’t encourage him,” Leonard muttered but Sheldon was already on his feet.

“No, I have to end this charade before Penny thinks she’s seen the original article when in fact the
game is a remake.”

Leonard rolled his eyes. “For the love of—Sheldon this game’s over twenty years old. It’s vintage.”
“Point,” said Sheldon grudgingly. “Although I still maintain it violates the spirit of the night. If we play Aztec Challenge it should be in its original format, in this instance the Atari 400 or 800, where it can be appreciated in all its 8-bit pixilated glory.”

“Think half the glorious special effects you see before you,” explained Howard to Penny.

“Wow.” She stretched on her toes as she tried again with an enthusiastic smile. “Well it’s completely off-topic—and that’s the point—but I hope you guys aren’t doing anything next Saturday because I want to book some time.”

Howard grinned. “Count me in. There isn’t much time left before I’m happily married.” Raj frowned as he elbowed Howard in the arm. “Oh Raj is in, too.” The astrophysicist opened his mouth to contest the engineer’s earlier statement before closing it in defeat. He looked sadly at Penny and nodded.

“What’s up?” asked Leonard. Sheldon looked suspiciously at her.

“Well Bernadette, Amy and I were talking about the wedding reception and we thought it would be fun if we all had some dance lesso—”

“Oh, I don’t think so,” Sheldon cut in before returning to his seat.

“Come on, Sheldon,” Penny pleaded as she followed him to the couch. “It’ll be fun.”

Sheldon removed his bookmark and placed it beside his leg. “‘Fun’. Indeed.”

“At least one Sheldon in the parallel universes likes to dance,” she eyed him knowingly. His lips scrunched up as he fought for composure although his eyes never left the page.

“Is it ok if I bring Leslie?” asked Leonard tentatively. He still wasn’t comfortable bringing up romantic relationships with Penny. He knew it was silly; it wasn’t like she still thought about him from time to time. Right?

“The more the merrier. It’d be better if you could bring your dates—unless you’d rather not,” she amended as she looked sympathetically at Raj, who sighed. Here’s hoping there were a lot of single girls and plenty of alcohol at the reception.

“That’s cool. It’s been a while since I’ve seen Zack. I miss our witty banter,” grinned Howard as he stood up and offered the joystick to Leonard, who declined with a wave of the hand.

“Be nice,” growled Penny.

“Oh very well,” sighed Sheldon indignantly as he closed his book. “Since the endless badgering will not stop unless I agree, consider me a part of this endeavor.” He took his book and went to his room.

“Ok, well that’s that,” said Penny brightly after taking a moment to realize she had no idea what the frak just happened. “I’ll get you the info as soon as possible.” She rose and went to the door. “Have fun tonight.”

In Sheldon’s room the lanky man did his best to curl himself into a ball on the bed. What was he doing? Dancing lessons? Amy would be there. They’d be expected to dance. Perhaps she’d counted on Sheldon’s disdain for dancing and would now be horrified he’d agreed to go. He’d text her tomorrow to make sure it was ok.
“Of course it’s not ok. Good Lord I’m going dancing,” he muttered to himself.

xTBBTx

While he knew the laundry wouldn’t be finished for another seven minutes Sheldon nevertheless found himself exiting the apartment, folding board and basket in hand. Of course his early departure had nothing to do with hearing Penny leave her apartment just shy of three minutes ago. It wasn’t an attempt at rectifying an imbalance: since she had missed their usual eight-fifteen laundry start they were out five to twelve minutes of ‘chat time’.

When he entered the laundry room he saw Penny standing in front of a washer in a pair of patterned fleece pants and a tight-fitting hoodie holding a basket of clothes.

“How are you this evening?”

“Eh, you know,” she shrugged as she dumped her laundry en masse in the washer.

“If you’re not sure you’re ‘ok’ I can only assume something’s impeding your sense of well-being.”

Penny sighed as she leaned against the washer. “How ‘bout everything and nothing? I know, I know,” she said as Sheldon opened his mouth to protest. “You don’t like absolutes.” She swept a strand of blonde hair behind her ear. “I guess tomorrow’s bringing everything into perspective.”

Sheldon took a moment to think. “Tomorrow is Mother’s Day.”

“Yeah,” Penny said morosely. Sheldon seemed confused.

“Oh. I had no idea you desired offspring at this moment. Given your precarious financial state and —”

“God no,” blurted Penny. For some reason she always associated her having a baby with a life in Nebraska—something to run away from. “It’s my mother. I have to call her.”

Sheldon nodded. “That is the social protocol, although I still protest at the whole concept. Every day a woman has offspring is a ‘mother’s day’. Why should one day be any better than the rest?”

“It’s a day to thank them for raising us and all that other stuff.” Penny’s eyebrows came together for a moment before she slapped on a forced smile.

Sheldon folded his arms across his chest as he scowled at Penny. While he might not ‘get’ all of her emotional expressions he never wanted her to fake anything with him, least of all happiness.

“What’s wrong?”

Penny closed her eyes as she tilted her face to the ceiling. “Calling my mother is like bathing in ice water. Or pulling off a bandage. It means hearing about how everyone’s doing at home.” Her voice lowered. “It means telling everyone how I’m doing.”
“I see.” He paused as he thought about her dead end waitressing job, scant acting opportunities and revolving door of boyfriends. One look at Penny told him now was not the time to articulate the list.

“I just don’t want to hear the ‘I told you so’ in her voice, y’know? She has this way of being silent for a moment after I tell her about my life that drives me crazy.” Penny angrily snatched up her laundry basket. “Then it’s the ‘you know, you can always come home’ talk. God she’d freak if I ever took her up on the offer.”

“Why would you do such a thing?” asked a stricken Sheldon. “I thought you hated Nebraska?”

Penny’s green eyes looked tired. “I can’t do this much longer, sweetie.”

Sheldon’s heart nearly stopped. “Define ‘this’.”

“All of this: waiting tables, going to audition after audition to hear ‘next!’ ‘next!’” She turned her head; her sigh was so long and deep Sheldon found himself completely unnerved by his sense of helplessness. Penny straightened her shoulders as she turned to look at him, a crooked smile on her lips. “I’m a failure, Sheldon. Don’t you get it? No, probably not because Dr. Cooper has succeeded at everything he’s ever tried to do.”

Sheldon shook his head. “That’s not true. For instance, I’ve tried to grasp sarcasm and have been moderately successful at best. Furthermore, my attempts at assimilating social conventions have only ended well after ample coaching by Leonard or yourself. Indeed, when I find myself at a loss as to what to do in a particular situation I often think, ‘What would Penny do?’ Then I suppress a giggle and continue with my initial response.” Sheldon’s smirk came and went in a flash. “That’s meant to be humorous. I’ve noted humor is often used to diffuse tense or awkward situations.”

“So which is this?”

“Both. You’re often the recipient or instigator of multiple emotional responses.”

Penny thought about this and frowned. “So I’m a drama queen?”

“You’re complicated,” Sheldon amended.

Penny rolled her eyes as she turned towards the door. “I must be since you can’t figure me out,” she said jovially. “‘Night Sheldon.”

Sheldon’s jaw tightened as his eyes found something interesting to study on the back of the laundry room door as it closed.

“Not through lack of trying,” he said softly.

xTBBTx

“Why Shelly, what a nice surprise.”

“As it is Mother’s Day and you are my progenitor you should have realized the odds of my calling were heavily in your favor.”

“Now remember: no sass on Sunday. God keeps a peaceful house and so should we.”

“Yes Mother. My apologies. How are Missy and George?”

“Your sister seems to have found ‘Mr. Right’ again. Lord, please may he be brighter than a burnt
bulb—or Missy for that matter. As for your brother he’s doing well with that construction job. He has his father’s hands and work ethic. It’d be nice if he’d abstain from drink but I suppose we all have our crosses to bear. How are you?"

“I am well.”

“Shelly….”

“My work is proceeding slowly but steadily.”

“You’re over that age nonsense?”

“Overcoming at present.”

“Well so long’s you do. So how’s Amy?”

“…I surmise she is well.”

“What do you mean ‘you guess’? What did I tell you about paying her a little more attention?”

“Recent events have made things complicated.”

“Shelly, everything with you is complicated. But the Lord gives me strength. Tell your mother what’s wrong.”

“Amy and I are no longer a ‘couple’.”

“Oh baby I’m sorry to hear that. Did she say why she left?”

“It was I who ended the relationship.”

“Now why on earth would you do a thing like that?”

“While Amy Farrah Fowler is intelligent, resourceful and at times refreshingly sassy I find that I am not attracted to her in an emotional capacity.”

“I knew I should have pressed on with the therapy for you but your father wouldn’t pay for it. You’ve always been a quiet duck but I’d hoped you finally found someone to let in.”

“Mother who I choose to let into my life is my business.”

“I never said it wasn’t. Shelly you’ve always been special and I admit there are times when I had to stand up for you like when the government men came to the house about the uranium but you’re thirty now. You’re a grown man and I’m glad you’re taking responsibility. Just be sure you’re making decisions because they feel right not because you feel scared.”

“I shall.”

“Ok, baby. I’ve got to go pick up your Meemaw for the noon tea at the church. I’ll give her your love.”

“Please do. Happy Mother’s Day.”

XxX

Penny climbed into the bed, grabbed Brave-Heart from her Care-Bear collection and began to sob.
'Damn you Mom.'

xTBBTx

“Oh Howard, I love it,” grinned Bernadette as she spun on her heels like a Sound of Music reenactment in the middle of the empty apartment. In one swift movement he grasped his fiancée’s hands and they began to waltz.

“It’s nice,” he agreed. After looking at several apartments in their price range this was by far the best. It was an older building, though not as old as Raj’s ex-watch factory apartment and stood a comfortable six floors. As for the apartment itself the two bedrooms were spacious and the four piece bathroom was recently redone. The living room balcony was a bonus for Bernadette since it gave her room for her plants.

Above all there was one factor that tipped the balance in this building’s favor: it was the absolutely closest they could be to the university while at the same time being far, far away from the Wolowitz family home.

“I’ll put in our application tonight,” said Howard. Bernadette sealed her assent with a kiss.

XxX

Knock Knock Knock

Penny was surprised at the silence that followed. The knock was the tempo and loudness to be Sheldon’s but obviously it couldn’t be as the sequence wasn’t repeated.

She opened the door but there was nothing in the hall save a small grey-lidded box. Smiling, she picked it up and closed the door. 'Guess I’m getting a taste of my own cooking.' It must have eaten Sheldon alive not knocking out the rest of his ritual. She moved the remote from where she sat on the couch and opened the lid. She gasped and after a moment reached in and carefully removed the origami water lily from the box. She marveled at all the delicate folds in the ice pink paper. Her eyes narrowed as she peered at the center of the flower. There had to be twenty anther stalks surrounding the piston, their little red heads looking either like lips or barbells.

It was as she was returning the flower that she noticed Sheldon’s concise printing at the bottom of the box:

'Don’t Despair.'

Penny felt her eyes begin to water so she quickly moved the box and flower from her lap to the coffee table lest she got them wet. She wanted to rush over and thank him but knew Sheldon wanted to keep this private. Whatever ‘this’ was.

She looked again at the water lily. Whatever this was it was beautiful.

xTBBTx

“That has to be one of the stupidest things I’ve ever heard,” Leonard said incredulously.

“What?” said Raj defensively. “It’s called thinking outside the box.” Sheldon gave a gaspy laugh as he glanced at the astrophysicist.

Howard put down his menu and rolled his eyes. “Mime school is not the answer to overcoming your fear of talking to women.”
“Look I can’t stay intoxicated forever and smiles and hand waves can only say so much. I need something more articulate,” argued Raj.

“Yeah because nothing makes a great conversation starter like ‘Why do you have white makeup all over your face?’” sighed Leonard as he took a sip of his cola.

Sheldon sat up straight as he addressed the group. “You’re thinking of the Jean-Gaspard Deburau-influenced mime, Leonard. However the art of the pantomime is cross-culturally diverse. Raj’s culture, for instance, indulges in musical theater where the performers construct a narrative through hand, body and facial gestures while accompanied by background songs detailing the actions.”

“So what does that mean, Raj has to hire an acapella group to follow him around?” Leonard looked for Penny, nodding his head when he had her attention.

Howard grinned at Raj. “You do realize they have an entire field of study called ‘psychiatry’—”

“A load of hokum,” Sheldon interjected.

“Sheldon, you’re not helping,” Howard muttered.

“There’s a long track record of success with behavioral modification,” said Leonard. “You should know that Sheldon. Remember when you were training Penny with chocolate?”


“Hello Penny,” said Sheldon with a bit of color on his cheeks. Penny gave him a crooked smile as she narrowed her eyes. She’d find out about this ‘chocolate training’ soon enough.

“So Bernadette tells me you guys found a place?” Penny asked Howard after taking the dinner orders.

“We’re crossing our fingers. The application was a little unusual but the superintendent said the owner was eccentric but otherwise ok.” Raj whispered into Howard’s ear. “No, not Sheldon eccentric.” Raj shrugged as Sheldon gave him a withering stare. “Essentially we have to be married before we can claim the place. Even though we’d be in a legal position to move in on the first, since our wedding’s on the second the rental agreement stipulates we can’t take position of the apartment until the third.”

“It makes sense when you consider tenants in a stable relationship are less likely to cause property damage,” Sheldon offered.

“Or maybe the owner is a romantic who wants everyone to be in love before they enter the nest,” countered Penny.

“Penny, people can be together without being in love,” said Howard. For a moment the table was silent as each man save Raj thought about his respective parents. Sheldon in particular found himself in an uncomfortable position given his amicable though loveless relationship he had had with Amy.

“Well that’s not the case with you and Bernadette,” Penny said lightly to lift the mood. “You’re perfect together.” You love her and she loves—and can stand—you.

“Thank you Penny,” gushed Howard. “It takes perfection to recognize perfection.”
Penny blushed although her smile said she didn’t disapprove of the comment. ‘Man I have to get out more when Howard can wow me.’ “I’ll be back.”

Sheldon noted the causal effect of Howard’s comment on Penny. For once he found nothing erroneous in the engineer’s statement. He wished he could have said something similar but as he abhorred absolutes he knew it wasn’t possible.

“So when will you know about the place?” asked Raj.

“Saturday at the latest. God knows I want to be the hell out of my mother’s house after the honeymoon,” Howard growled.

“You could always live with Bernadette for a bit,” suggested Leonard.

“I guess. I’d really have to pare down my stuff though.” A smirk came to Howard’s face. “You think I’ll have to get rid of my Halle Berry poster?”

xTBBTx

“What’s going on?” asked Stuart.

“Marvel VS DC Films,” whispered Raj.

“Ah.” Stuart walked away before the carnage ensued.

“Iron Man,” said Leonard.


“Thor.”

“Superman 2.”

“I thought we weren’t counting sequels?”

“I don’t acknowledge any other Superman films.”

“Captain America.”

“Green Lantern.”

“Sheldon, how can you compare Captain America to the Green Lantern?”

“Captain America battled the Red Skull. Green Lantern had to deal with Ryan Reynolds’ limited acting abilities.”

“X-Men.”

“Watchmen.”

“Wolverine.”

“He’s part of the X-Men franchise.”

“Well technically Superman, Bat-Man and the Green Lantern are members of the Justice League.”

“Point. Catwoman”
“Seriously?”
“Elektra, Leonard.”
“True. Blade.”
“The Flash.”
“That was a TV show.”
“The series pilot aired as a made-for-tv movie.”
“Daredevil.”
“Really, Leonard? Jonah Hex.”
“Fantastic Four.”
“Steel.”
“Wait a minute. You ride me for Daredevil when you pick a film with Shaq?”
“Daredevil has Ben Affleck. I believe I made my point.”
“Hulk.”
“Constantine.”
“The Avengers.”
“That movie isn’t out yet, ergo you lose.”
“The movie exists, Sheldon. We’ve seen the trailers. Besides it’s out this month.”
“Trailers do not a movie make. Just accept the loss and move on.”
“Fine. Forget the Avengers. I’ll go with Ghost Rider.”
“I’m sorry Leonard, there are no do-overs in Marvel-DC film comparisons.”
“Who says?”
“Don’t get mad at me. It’s not like I made up the rules…. Leonard? Where are you going?”

xTBBTx

A/N Wikipedia: Aztec Challenge; Mime
Blade factoids: The Internet Movie Database. The techno opener made the film.
Howard and Bernadette’s apartment hunting: I just couldn’t see them staying at the Wolowitz house (apart from the comedic value on the show). They have to at least try it on their own first.
Halle Berry Poster: It’s on the ceiling above Howard’s bed.
The Cuckoo's Nest Scenario

Chapter Summary

I find writing the group interactions much easier than the Shenny parts; apparently I’m more of a smartass than a romantic? Forgive any OOCness should they occur as I attempt to amalgamate the two parts in the following chapters. ~Lynn

xTBBTx

Sheldon stood in thought as he scanned his rough equations on the whiteboard. He must have gone wrong somewhere because the end result was a neutrino short. Under his breath he began humming Darth Vader’s theme from Star Wars. Through dancing with Penny he realized that music could ease tension as it gave his brain something else to think about besides how he’s not getting the answer he wanted. While he was no longer in imminent danger of a nervous breakdown since he’d turned thirty he still felt a need to prove himself. At least he had another three hundred and fifty-six days to solve the universe before he was thirty-one.

“Aha,” he said with a lightsome smile. He quickly made the correction to his formula.

Knock Knock “Hey Sheldon,” said Leonard.

Sheldon made a single knocking sound on his whiteboard. “Good afternoon, Leonard. What brings you to my office?”

“Oh, just thought I’d stop by. You know, to say ‘hi’,” said Leonard as he looked down to check his nails.

“I see,” Sheldon nodded and went back to his whiteboard. Leonard took a moment to register shock at the reaction before he chastised himself—this was after all Sheldon.

“Sheldon I want to talk to you,” began Leonard.

“I thought you were here to say ‘hi’?” said a puzzled Sheldon.

“It was a conversation starter.”

“Well it was a poor one since you achieved your stated objective—your greeting—thus closing the loop,” snorted Sheldon. Leonard rolled his eyes. “For someone with the propensity for idle chit-chat you sure haven’t grasped the art of the conversation.”

“Anyways, I was on the phone with Dr. Franklin from MIT. We met at the conference and we thought we could collaborate together.”

Sheldon nodded in agreement. “Good idea. Perhaps he can supply some original thought to the project, something which your work typically lacks.” He began writing another problem on the board.

Biting his tongue, Leonard took a deep breath. He had to remember why he was there. “Dr. Franklin was very impressed with your ‘Cooper Constant’ and wants to test it further on other
solids to see if it holds up.”

“There’s no reason why it wouldn’t.”

“Nevertheless we’d like to use it.” Leonard did his best to keep the whine out of his voice but he was beginning to get nervous. He had to have Sheldon on board or the project was nixed.

Sheldon sighed as he turned to his friend. “Leonard, as you can plainly see I’m busy. I don’t have the time or the desire to take on another project.”

“Oh, we’re not asking you to join,” Leonard blurted out. “I mean, I realize you’re busy,” he added to hopefully erase the frown on Sheldon’s face.

“Why would I involve my work in a project where I’m not the principle overseer?”

“Well we did the first project together. You made sure I didn’t make any…mistakes. And as you pointed out I will be working with Dr. Franklin.” God, but Leonard hated it when he had to belittle his work like this to Sheldon; it would be quite understandable if they were ridiculing his social life. “What if you were a consultant? That way we could ask you for guidance when we get…stuck…and it won’t take up too much of your time.”

“That would be acceptable,” said Sheldon after a moment. Leonard let out the breath of air he’d been holding.

“Thank you, Sheldon.”

“What are you thanking Sheldon for? Being a dumbass?” asked Leslie as she came up behind Leonard.

“I don’t recall inviting you into my sanctuary,” scowled Sheldon. Unbeknownst to him he began vigorously turning his marker cap.

“Isn’t that your bedroom?”

“No, like so much of your work you’re incorrect. That is my Fortress of Solitude,” said Sheldon haughtily.

“Ah yes, Masturbatory Manor: the secret home of the hands of steel,” smirked Leslie.

“Yes, well, your information on Superman is grossly inaccurate,” sputtered Sheldon.

“Ooo,” Leslie replied as she wiggled her fingers in front of her face.

“Ok, that’s enough pleasantries,” said Leonard. “Come on Leslie.”

Leslie grinned at Sheldon. “See ya later, dumbass.” Leonard shrugged apologetically before following her into the hall.

“Yes, later bane of my existence,” muttered Sheldon as he took two strides to the door and closed it with a resounding slam.

“Did you have to be so rough with him?” Leonard asked Leslie as they walked into the stairwell. “He’s just coming off a near breakdown.”

“Leonard, the last thing he needs is to be coddled by me. We fight. That’s what we do. He needs consistency.” She smiled evilly. “No one’s ever mistaken me for Mary Poppins.”
“Hey Leonard,” said Penny brightly as she went to get her mail from the box.

“Hi Penny. Nice day we’re having.” Unlike Sheldon, she didn’t have to ask Leonard to wait. He had that faithful companion feel without the drool and carpet accidents.

“You know I’m glad we ran into each other because I need you to clear something up for me.” She closed her box and slipped the junk mail through the slot. “You know, just between us.” Even though Penny looked normal in her jean shorts and red tank top and sounded normal in tone every instinct Leonard possessed warned of imminent danger.

“Of course,” Leonard said nervously. “So what needs cleaning? Because as you know I like to clean. Well maybe not as much as Sheldon but—So what’s up?”

“Remember at the restaurant when you said something about me and a chocolate experiment? What were you talking about?” Penny’s smile was fixed firmly on her face but her eyes were emerald-hard.

Leonard caught his breath as a quasi-hysterical smile slipped onto his face. “Remember when we were going out and Sheldon was complaining about you being over at the apartment? Well, he found that if he rewarded you with chocolate for doing things he wanted like knock before entering or not putting your feet on the coffee table you kept doing them. It’s kind of humorous if you think about it.”

Penny had to pick her jaw off the ground. Memories of Sheldon offering her chocolate, particularly during one stretch where she put on two pounds, came to mind and with them a sense of indignation.

“Son of a bitch,” she hissed. Her eyes focused on Leonard. “You knew he was doing this and didn’t tell me?”

“I didn’t know right away,” he said defensively as he unconsciously began cleaning his thumb nail. “Once I realized what he was doing I told him to stop.”

“But you didn’t tell me.” She had to calm herself before she strangled him in the lobby. Best to do it where there were no witnesses.

“What was I going to say?” Leonard was apologetic in tone but in his eyes she could tell that he knew where this was leading and that he cared enough about her to not want to go there.

‘My girlfriend is too stupid to figure out she’s being manipulated?’ “Good point,” Penny mumbled.

They began walking up the stairs. “If it helps any he’s conducted lots of experiments on me, everything from finding out my exact sensitivity to lactose to knowing at what point to stop pestering me before I actually follow through and kill him.” Leonard smiled kindly at Penny. “Believe me I’m capable.”

In spite of herself she laughed. “I’m not that gullible.”

“So you’re not mad?”

“Oh I’m mad all right. And if you know what’s good for you, you won’t say jack to Sheldon.” Leonard grinned. “Junior rodeo time?”
Penny smiled in return.

XxX

Sheldon had a curious look on his face as he entered the building.

He could have sworn he heard Penny yell ‘Yeehaw’ in the stairwell.

xTBBTx

“Now behave,” warned Penny as she signaled to go around the delivery truck.

“Really Penny,” Sheldon snorted. “You don’t have to reinforce social protocol.” He kept his eyes on the passing storefronts; if he faced forward his anxiety levels rose due to Penny’s speeding and the ever present ‘check engine’ light.

“Of course not. Look who I’m talking to,” said Penny as she rolled her eyes. “So are you ready for this?”

“Which specific ‘this’ are we discussing? ‘This’ as in my current position as passenger in your car —to which the answer is always a staunch ‘no, but given the circumstances I have no other choice’; ‘this’ as in dancing in general; or ‘this’ as in dancing with Amy?”

“The last. Come on, let me in, let me in,” she whispered before she gave a little wave out the window as she went back into her original lane.

“Given our resolve to keep matters discreet I do not anticipate any problems per se.” He paused. “Although I do admit some level of apprehension.”

Penny grinned. “That’s them-thar feelings again, pumpkin. We’re nearly there so keep your eyes peeled for a parking spot.”

“The original wording for the expression was to keep one’s eyes ‘skinned’, presumably meaning with the lids drawn back,” said Sheldon as he scanned the side of the street.

“Ew. I’ll keep with mine, thank you very much.”

“There’s a parking spot coming up in approximately thirty feet.” Sheldon braced himself for Penny’s abrupt stop. He was not disappointed.

“Oh, let me just—Hey! Same to you too buddy!” Penny shouted out her window. Sheldon cringed in his seat. “Some people have no patience,” she growled as she backed into a parallel park.

“You’re not parked six inches from the curb,” warned Sheldon as he closed the car door.

“Close enough,” said Penny without looking. She popped the trunk and pulled out a pair of high-heeled shoes.

“I’m surprised you didn’t wear them here,” he said as he opened the studio door for her.

“You’re the one telling me not to wear heels when I’m driving, so I didn’t,” Penny replied.

Sheldon sighed deeply. “Oh yes, flip-flops were the obvious choice of prudence.”

They climbed the stairs and turned down a little hall leading into the main studio. As they entered Bernadette came rushing up to Penny.
“We got the apartment!” she squeaked.

As Penny congratulated Bernadette Sheldon shifted uncomfortably on his feet as Amy approached.

“Hello Bestie. Glad to see you made it on time given your usual penchant for being ‘fashionably late’,” adding her fingers to the air quotes for emphasis.

“Yeah well it’s hard to be late when you travel with Punctual Pete here,” replied Penny as she elbowed Sheldon on the arm.

“Indeed. Hello Sheldon,” Amy said poker-faced.

He gave a curt nod in response. “Hello Amy. I hope you’re well.”

“I find myself in no physical discomfort,” she replied matter-of-factly. Sheldon nodded again before looking away. He knew their meeting would be awkward but he didn’t expect Amy to be so obviously distraught.

“Okay, ladies and gentlemen. An hour goes by in a heartbeat so let’s get started,” said the instructor. She clicked over to the stereo in her four inch heels and started the music as her male assistant came into the room. “Now, everyone grab your partner and come stand over here.”

Bernadette flitted over to Howard as Penny leaned against the wall as she traded flip-flops for heels, leaving Amy and Sheldon standing uncomfortably together.

“Well Sheldon, I believe this is one of those times when a person decides to be bigger than the situation.”

Amy offered her arm and he obliged.

“Now that we’re all paired up we can start,” began the instructor.

“Actually my date’s not—” Penny stopped as Raj stood beside her and flashed a big grin as he waved with his fingers. “Never mind.”

“Let’s go over the elements of the waltz. Clasp your hands like so—observe where John and I put our free hands. Now we’re going in a three-step mode so watch what we’re doing with our feet.”

Sheldon rolled his eyes and sighed heavily as everyone else took in the demonstration then tried to emulate the instructors’ movements.

“There’s no need to feel awkward honey,” said the instructor to Sheldon. “It’s not that hard once you get in the swing of it.”

In a snap he had Amy’s arms in position, the confident gesture bringing the neurobiologist’s eyes to his own.

“Follow my lead,” he told her assuredly. In a fluid motion they began to dance; with shortened steps to better accommodate Amy’s stride he guided her around the room much to the delight of the instructor.

“I’ve so got to spend more time watching YouTube do-it-yourself videos,” sputtered a shocked Howard after the couple rejoined the group.

“Mother signed Missy and me up for dance lessons so we’d ‘look proper’ at the community social,” explained Sheldon. “As I only had one dance I fail to see the cost-effectiveness since if I desired to have physical contact with my sister I could have done so without leaving home.”

The
instructor was struck dumb as she looked wide-eyed at Leonard.

“It’s not like how it sounds,” he explained. “He’s a germaphobe.”

“Is that the new word for nutcase?” Leslie asked sweetly. Sheldon glared at the back of her head but it didn’t explode.

“Ok, well let’s get back to it. On the beat and one, two, three,” prompted the instructor.

“Remember, your eyes are in mine or at our feet. Any mid-point straying and I’ll make castrate out of caste, got it?” Penny growled. Raj swallowed and gave a slight nod before lowering his head.

After forty minutes of stubbed toes and, in Leonard’s case, twisted ankles the instructor suggested the couples change partners. Bernadette transferred from Howard to Leonard as there was only three quarters of an inch difference between the two men. After getting one of Howard’s ‘hello there’ smiles Leslie marched over to Raj and practically dragged him onto the dance floor. With a nod of her head Amy acknowledged Howard and the two walked away arm-in-arm.

Penny felt suddenly shy as she glanced at her neighbor who was busy applying a hand sanitizer. He might look gangly but after watching Sheldon traipse Amy around the room she knew there was grace in that body. After a moment of hesitation Sheldon closed the distance until they stood face to face.

“God, I’m going to be so bad,” she said apologetically.

“You were more than adequate with Koothrappali,” he said calmly. Penny smiled weakly. “You’ll be fine.” With a twitchy smile he held out his hand.

“Babe.” Penny and Sheldon turned to see Zack coming towards them. “Sorry I couldn’t get here any sooner.” He put an arm around Penny’s shoulder and gave her a quick kiss on the cheek. He stuck out a hand towards Sheldon. “How’s it going?”

“I can’t complain,” he said coldly as he ignored the gesture. As always Sheldon was technically correct: given his perceived relationship with Amy he was in no position to publicly object.

“Who’s this?” asked the instructor as she came up to the trio.

“Zack. I’m Penny’s date.” He smiled amiably and the instructor couldn’t help but respond in kind.

“Well then, you two need to get up to speed pronto.” The instructor looked warily at Sheldon. “You mind if I help them out?”

Taking a step back, Sheldon extended an arm for them to proceed before walking over to the wall. Penny looked stricken as Zack and the instructor led her to the floor. As the instructor positioned Zack’s hand on Penny’s back Sheldon felt his own body stiffen. Minutes seemed hours as he watched the pair go from struggling with their first steps to moving proficiently. He held his breath as the printer’s assistant leaned in to whisper something in Penny’s ear; felt his stomach wrench as she laughed. Never in his life had Sheldon ever wanted to change places with anyone. Even when he had his ass handed to him by Kevin Pater in fourth grade he knew he’d rather be beaten for being smart rather than be the asinine bully. Of course, he’d never had a beating quite like this before.

XxX

Sheldon’s Log. Star Date 12512.15
It has come to my attention that I will indeed be a part of the wedding procession. I had assumed since Amy is my official ‘date’ and she is walking solo down the aisle in her role as Maid-of-Honor that I would be safely in the pews for the exchange of vows. Unfortunately Bernadette has other plans. Drat.

As ‘best man’—although I still protest the arbitrary label. Wouldn’t the position be better described as ‘best of the lot as determined by subjective and unsubstantiated criteria’?—Leonard will be at the front with Wolowitz, thus leaving Koothrappali to walk Penny down the aisle. Now the plan has been altered given the addition of Bernadette’s cousin from Maine. Since she shares a similar build to Bernadette, Koothrappali would be the more prudent partner than me. Therefore I will be paired with Penny.

Query: Why am I so distressed at being Penny’s companion in the bridal party?

Observation: When informed of our mutual role I found myself in immediate gastric distress which I have now come to associate with Penny. ‘Butterflies’ indeed.

My stress hormones engaged, leaving me with the desire to flee the restaurant and return home. To Texas.

Evaluation: I am finding this too convoluted. Either Penny should walk the aisle with Zack or else she should go to the wedding with me. However these choices are foiled by my friendship paradigms as I am more familiar with Wolowitz than Zack and therefore the better candidate for the ceremony. Moreover, Amy and I have agreed to go to the wedding together so as not to ‘rain on the parade’. I have already dissolved our relationship agreement; I do not wish to disappoint her again.

Observation: I found myself unable to look away from Zack as he engaged in conversation with Penny.

I didn’t like it when he made her laugh at the dance studio.

Evaluation: Homo novus is not immune to primitive impulses.

Conclusion: This will end badly.

I was able to relinquish Penny to Zack at the studio because we had not commenced to dance.

At the wedding Penny and I will constitute a couple as we fulfill our part of the ceremony.

At the end of the ceremony she will return to Zack.

I don’t know if I’ll be able to give her back.

xTBBTx

“You want me to get it?” Leslie asked. Leonard sighed as he shook his head.

“Just leave it.” He reached over for a throw pillow and put it on top of his cell phone which sat on the end table.

“As much as I’d love for you to remain here since it makes it more convenient for coitus you do have to go home at some point,” she said not unkindly as she sat next to him on her couch.

“Don’t remind me,” he groaned as he rubbed his face. “I had no idea—I mean I know it’s Sheldon
but I just didn’t think…. I just didn’t think.”

“Ya think?” Leslie pulled him in for a snuggle. “Normally I’d say something like ‘give him time and he’ll go away’ but since this is dumbass I can’t offer the comfort.”

“That’s ok,” Leonard said as he kissed her on the cheek. “You’re comforting enough at the moment.”

“Just don’t expect my sympathy to extend over weeks,” she said while stroking his hair. “You get this fixed tomorrow or I’ll do it for you.”

“Yes Mary Poppins,” Leonard chuckled.

“Oh no. The anti-Poppins is my designation regarding Sheldon. For you I’m that other much-loved healer, Nurse Ratched.” Her smile widened as she felt Leonard’s body stiffen.

“I feel like I’m in a cuckoo’s nest.”

“What he needs is more of a love nest. We’ve got to get him working on Dr. Fowler,” Leslie said as she pushed Leonard’s glasses firmly onto his nose.

“I think the receding of the ice age glaciers moved too fast compared to those two. They’d been together for over a year before he realized they were a couple. God knows when they’ll get together biblically.” Leonard shuddered. “Could you imagine Sheldon Junior?” Leslie grabbed another throw pillow and put it over Leonard’s face.

“I can’t bear to see you this way. Can’t bear to see you this way’,” she giggled then shrieked as Leonard tickled her.

To their right a pillow began vibrating on the end table.

xTBBTx

“I swear I’m going to kill him,” growled Leonard as he sat down at the lunch table.

“Uh oh. What’s Sheldon done now?” asked Howard while stirring his rice salad.

“Remember the Bose-Einstein condensate project?”

Raj laughed. “Oh I could see this coming a mile away. Let me guess, someone’s more of a hands-on kind of guy than a consultant.”

Leonard scowled. “If he was any more involved he’d be counting the particles by hand.” Seeing Sheldon approach he picked up his fork and began to eat.

“Gentlemen,” Sheldon greeted as he set down his tray. While he was loathe to use the conversation starter he’d come to expect idle chit-chat from his compatriots no matter if he spoke or not therefore it gave him a chance to practice civility should he be forced to use it in future.

“So I hear your project with Leonard’s going well,” said Howard as he grinned at the applied physicist who looked daggers in return.

“Actually I can already tell it’s going to be tedious. Why they don’t even have a working hypothesis,” tutted Sheldon.

“I haven’t gotten together with Dr. Franklin to discuss what we’re doing yet,” seethed Leonard.
“And it’s this kind of lackadaisical effort that has led to little progress in your career, Leonard.” Sheldon took a bite of his tuna on whole wheat sandwich.

“You know Sheldon you’re looking at this all wrong,” said Raj in an attempt to soothe the situation. “In Star Wars the Emperor doesn’t micromanage the Empire. Oh sure he might have ordered the invasion of Hoth but he didn’t command each ship from the bridge.”

“The difference Raj is that the attacks were conducted by the Empire and not on the reputation of the Emperor. When the Death Star was built it was the ‘Death Star’ not ‘The Death Star by Emperor Palpatine’.”

Leonard shook his head. “Wait, how did we get on to you being the Emperor? It isn’t your project.”

“Yes but as I am the most senior member of the team it’s only fitting that I appear the most prominent,” sniffed Sheldon.

“Senior? Dr. Franklin’s fifty six,” sputtered Leonard.

“Yes but he’s an applied physicist. I add credibility to the project.”

“You’re incredible all right,” muttered Howard. Sheldon shot him a withering glance.

“Look Sheldon, just let us get the experiment up and running ok? I swear I’ll give you progress reports and consult you should we require the input of a tyrannical megalomaniac,” said an exasperated Leonard.

“‘Strike me down with all of your hatred and your journey towards the dark side will be complete’,” warned Sheldon.

“Sheldon….”

“Oh Very well. Let it not be said that Sheldon Cooper is a ‘control freak’.”

Raj, Leonard and Howard shared a look.

“You are a control freak,” Raj said, still incredulous that Sheldon could have sincerely said what he did.

“That’s only when it’s imperative a project provide accurate results. I shall chalk up this experience as another lesson in whimsy.” Sheldon gave a twitchy smile before continuing to eat.

“I’ve got to get back to the lab,” said Leonard darkly as he rose from the table.

xTBBTx

“So have you decided what kind of wedding you’re having?” asked Raj.

“Half-Jewish, half traditional Christian. Ma wouldn’t contribute anything to the wedding without the Jewish part. Of course she also wouldn’t stop complaining until blood ran from my ears either,” replied Howard. Sheldon put down his menu.

“Is this really appropriate dinner conversation? I think not.” He went back to reading.

“That’s because you’re not a romantic Sheldon,” admonished Raj.
“I think that requires feelings, not a synaptic response,” joked Howard.

Sheldon was puzzled. “But feelings are a synaptic response.”

“Thank you Spock,” said Raj. Sheldon smiled, quite pleased at the association.

“Now, now, Vulcans have gushy feelings for each other, they just don’t like showing them,” corrected Leonard.

“And how are Vulcan feelings ‘gushy’? Their mates are chosen by their parents at age seven and linked telepathically until the pon farr where biology compels them to marry. That hardly seems Harlequin to me,” Sheldon said defensively.

“Before Sarek married Amanda Grayson and had Spock he got it on with a Vulcan priestess,” Raj reminded him.

“Besides, his parents obviously didn’t pick out a human female for him,” added Howard.

“Sarek was a devoted astrophysicist and ambassador. He didn’t have the time or inclination to forge a permanent relationship,” Sheldon sniffed. “Besides, marrying a human proved advantageous in his role as Vulcan-Human liaison.”

“Yes, but he admitted to Spock that he married Amanda because he loved her.” Leonard was on cloud nine when they had Sheldon on the run.

Sheldon pursed his lips in an attempt to keep a tremor at bay. “Every hero has a tragic flaw.”

Raj rolled his eyes. “Only you could see love as a flaw.”

“Well it isn’t helpful: it hinders work, wrecks havoc on one’s eating pattern, digestive system and sleep cycles.”

“Wow. Sounds like you’ve got it bad for Amy,” grinned Howard.

Sheldon scowled even as he felt himself blush. “Why does everyone seek to personalize my general statements?”

Raj raised an eyebrow. “‘General statements’?”

“We already went there,” said Leonard, remembering the car trip to the conference.

“You know what would be cool—a Klingon wedding,” grinned Howard. He could get into the female members of the bridal party all trussed up in leather corsets. Hell, he’d even offer to tie them in.

“Aren’t you a little short to be a Klingon?” quipped Leonard.

“Ooo, making a play on Princess Leia’s barb at Luke when he was dressed as a storm trooper. Well done,” said Sheldon before ending in a gaspy laugh.

“I rather like the operatic aspect of the Klingon ceremony,” said Raj. “In India we have a similar custom where the bride has to demonstrate her loyalty to her new family by changing her sari during the wedding to the groom’s color.”

“Actually with the tea ceremony and the recitation of poetry I always associated the Klingon wedding with the Japanese,” mused Leonard. He began looking around for Penny, spotting her
serving a large party of people.

“Until the Tawi’yan presents the couple with bat’leths so they may mock battle each other,” said Sheldon who also looked for Penny. It was now six twenty-five and they still hadn’t ordered. If dinner was delayed much longer his evening bowel movement would be off.

“Yes well my best man won’t be handing Bernadette anything with a blade. One circumcision is enough thank you very much,” Howard shuddered.

“Don’t forget the end of the ceremony when the guests attack the couple with ceremonial weapons,” Raj said.

“Barbaric,” Sheldon said simply. Leonard was incredulous.

“What about the koon-ut-kal-if-fee? How is a Vulcan fighting to the death so he can mate in any way civil?”

“I am so sorry. Things are absolutely crazy here tonight,” Penny apologized as she arrived with their drinks. She quickly took their orders.

“Actually Penny it’s fortuitous that you’re here as we need a female opinion. At your wedding would you rather watch your mate fight to the death or be attacked by your guests?” asked Sheldon.

“Um, neither,” she said as she left the table. This was so not the time….

“I see she isn’t a romantic either,” grumped Raj as he shook his head in disapproval.

xTBBTx

Though he was loathe to do so Sheldon removed his noise-cancelling headphones. He breathed a sigh of relief at the continued silence. Apparently coitus had not commenced—unless Leonard arrived early and they were now settled in for REM sleep. As he opened his bedroom door he was surprised to see the light of the tv bouncing off the far wall.

“Don’t tell me he left the television on again,” Sheldon tutted. No wonder the electric bill kept rising. He’d have to speak to Leonard about it in the morning.

Before he made it three steps he heard the distinctive smack-ing sounds of kissing from the living room.

“Oh dear Lord,” Sheldon sighed. Eleven fourteen at night was not the time to be ‘sucking face’ as Penny would say. He debated whether he should proceed with his quest for warm milk before shaking his head. Leonard may fall prey to the more primal urges but that didn’t mean Sheldon should alter his routine for carnal endeavors—particularly when he was not involved and the chances of that happening were remote.

“Don’t mind me,” he said aloud, averting his eyes to focus solely on the refrigerator.

“We won’t,” said Leonard between kisses. Leslie chuckled softly.

“Although I thought you should know it’s eleven-fifteen. As your bed offers better lumbar support than the couch it might be more preferable to relocate before engaging in coitus,” offered Sheldon as he poured the milk and placed the mug in the microwave.

Leonard managed to eek out a “Goodnight Sheldon” before he was overwhelmed by Leslie.
Sheldon knew he’d kick himself for doing it but he had to know. He glanced in the direction of the couch and sure enough—Leslie and Leonard’s feet were on his spot. Biting his tongue, he grabbed his mug and beat a retreat to his room. As Leonard had gone through the proper channels as per the Roommate Agreement and supplied twelve hours’ notice before having a female guest over for the purposes of coitus there was little he could do tonight. Tomorrow was another story. He’d make Leonard sanitize the entire couch.

It was after midnight when Sheldon bookmarked his spot in the International Journal of Theoretical Physics and closed his laptop. Taking off his headphones he immediately grimaced as he heard carnal sounds from the next room. He placed his laptop on the nightstand and reached for his bathrobe. Venturing into the hall he made his way to the bathroom to relieve himself before returning to his bedroom, nearly jumping when Leslie let out an unexpected groan.

He made a beeline for the headphones and put them on before taking off his bathrobe. Next time he had to go to the bathroom he’d wear them and if a would-be robber intercepted him in the hall so be it. With a click the light was off and he got into bed. He made sure the sheets around him were lying smooth and with a sigh he put his hands on his chest and closed his eyes.

His headphones failed him as Leslie’s yell seemingly echoed in his room. Frowning, Sheldon rolled over on his side away from Leonard’s wall. This reminded him of the time Penny and Leonard engaged in boisterous sexual activity. It had proved a difficult night to sleep; at the time he’d assumed it was because of the noise but now he wasn’t so sure. Maybe he’d unconsciously harbored affection for Penny even then? At the very least there was a physical attraction—with a flush he admitted that Penny had satisfied him through his own hand even as she engaged Leonard. In those moments it was he, not his bespectacled roommate, who ran his mouth along her throat. He caressed her breasts in lazy circles with his thumbs. He made her ‘Yeehaw’ like she had.

Sheldon crossed his legs as he forced himself to think about something else. He rattled off the closest stars to him in order of distance, taking into account the reorganizing of the Procyon stellar system and 61 Cygni system according to RECONS. Various red dwarf and binary stars flitted though his head until he rested on the yellow brilliance that was Sol: the golden rays that empowered Superman; the satin color of Penny’s hair.

“Drat,” he muttered to himself.

Against Sheldon’s will the image of Penny and Zack dancing came to mind: the assistant printer’s hand on the small of her back, their fingers entwined as they clasped hands. Sheldon closed his own hand as he combated the image with the memory of Penny and him dancing in her apartment. Letting himself be pulled from the couch was impulsive. Her fingers wove their way through his own until they seemingly became as one. He felt a titillating shock every time their palms met, his hands never feeling so vulnerable to another’s touch. And then she kissed him. Her words tickled his ear. He’d do it. He’d solve it all.

Sheldon gave a disgusted little sigh as he felt the bulge in his pajama pants. This was going to be a long night.

xTBBTx

A/N Star Trek Wiki: Pon Farr; Klingon Wedding; Sarek

‘I can’t bear to see you this way.’: quote from One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest where the Chief smothered McMurphy after he had a lobotomy.

‘Strike me down with all of your hatred and your journey towards the dark side will be complete’:
The Emperor to Luke in Return of the Jedi.

The star reversal order in Sheldon’s ditty: The Big Blog Theory
The Red Vine Objective

Chapter Summary

We come to the close of the second month. Thank you all SO much for sticking with the story. ~Lynn

xTBBTx

“Oh, let’s stop in there,” gushed Penny. Sheldon rolled his eyes while Leonard suppressed a smile.

“Shoes are not on the registry, Penny,” Sheldon reprimanded. “I realize it’s asking a lot of you to show restraint but this task is arduous enough without the added distraction.”

“I don’t know. Howard might look good in a pair of pumps,” chuckled Leonard. Penny blew him a kiss much to Sheldon’s disapproval.

Sheldon pulled out his phone and scrolled down the page. “As we are late in procuring wedding presents we’re left with little choice. I have no desire to pick out breakfast nook furniture or accessories much less bedroom paraphernalia.”

“What about the humidifier?” asked Leonard. Sheldon’s eyes moved down the page.

“Gone. I told you we should have done this earlier.”

Leonard stood beside the taller man and peered at the list. “What about a spa certificate?”

“Oh yes, nothing like presenting them with a day at hepatitis palace.”

“Come on Sheldon, spas make you feel g-o-o-d,” cooed Penny as she ran a hand down the side of his arm. He flinched but to his credit didn’t drop the phone.

“Did you know that the bacteria counts caused by the warm waters in whirlpool baths can initiate candidiasis in a woman’s vag—”

“Sheldon. Too much information,” said Penny, making a face.

“But Penny I was just—”

“Remember our deal? We don’t mention anything biologically gross in public.”

Sheldon pursed his lips. “I’m still awaiting the distinction between ‘biologically gross’ and a necessary part of biological function.”

“If you can hoark it, ooze it, blow it or spew it—not a word, got it?” Penny warned. Sheldon opened his mouth to speak but the look on her face suggested this was not open for debate.

Leonard smirked to himself; his roommate had an uncanny ability to make any disagreement sound like an argument between an old married couple. God knows how many times the physicists had been mistaken for partners in public.
“How about an air purifier?” he interjected.

“I don’t know. Since we all need to shop for something I was thinking we could pool up and get a joint gift,” said Penny while looking around the mall storefronts for inspiration.

“An air purifier would be an excellent communal gift since it would benefit us in the long run when we visit their apartment,” argued Sheldon.

Penny frowned. “That seems kind of impersonal. We need something thoughtful. Something from the heart.”

Leonard was skeptical. “I don’t know Penny. Bernadette and Howard are two different people. Her apartment is airy and feminine and full of plant life. Howard’s bedroom would make a professional gigolo blush.”

“We could pick something up for each. Like, we could get Bernadette high end crystal wine glasses for special get-togethers. She’s been meaning to pick up a fancy set since Amy and I’ve been going over for girls’ nights.” In a stint of drunkenness Bernadette thought it’d be nice to drink from goblets of living crystal like the queens they were rather than glasses that gave a Dixie cup feel.

“So that’s one down. What do we get Howard?” Leonard stared blankly at Sheldon.

“Don’t look at me. He’s just an acquaintance,” the lanky man shrugged.

“We could get him some tools.”

“A theoretical physicist picking out tools for an engineer? Why don’t we ask Bill Gates to come to his house to install a virus protector?” scoffed Sheldon.

Leonard threw his hands into the air as he rolled his head to the right. “Well I don’t know. Aside from comic books and tinkering with machines the only other thing he’s into are women and somehow I don’t think Bernadette’d appreciate us giving him a stripping automaton.”

“I’m afraid we could only offer a gift certificate. The Japanese haven’t yet perfected the art of the cyber tease.”

Penny was horrified. “Do you really want to gift Howard anything that’d get him off?”

There was a pause.

“Air purifier,” Sheldon checked off on the list as Leonard hastily agreed.

“Ok you guys get the purifier at Sears while I’m off to the Body Shop to pick up a basket for the bridal shower. We’ll meet at the Crystal Rose near Aldo’s.” She was greeted with two sets of blank eyes. “Down the hall on the same side as Radio Shack.” Ah, comprehension.

Penny sighed as she picked up stray items of clothing in the living room. The bridal shower was on Sunday but since the wedding rehearsal and dinner were tomorrow the only time she’d have to prepare the place was right now. Her hair was still a little damp from the shower so she put it up in a lazy bun with a scrunchy. The afternoon shift at the Cheesecake Factory went uneventful for once but she still needed to get off the work grime. She laughed out loud. ‘God, I sound like Sheldon.’ Before she knew it she’d be knocking in threes and sitting in her own ‘spot’. Of course it’s not like
she didn’t have a veritable spot lined up: her place on the couch was next to Sheldon. First officer to Captain Quirk. Yes, it was a sign she watched too much Star Trek when she knew the seating order on the bridge.

As he mounted the stairs Sheldon noted the incremental rise in music volume and based on the song selection deduced that the music was coming from apartment 4B. He was not disappointed; Penny’s door was wide open and he could see her making a pile of magazines on the couch. He could also see her shapely legs as they were bare until her upper thighs were unfairly cut off by a pair of jean shorts. After knowing her five years he still found the sight of her body made him breathless. In these moments when he watched unobserved his eyes traced every curve, noted the coloring on her cheeks, the way her arms moved in a concise yet elegant manner. Every detail was committed to memory. Like Mr. Eidetic could ever forget.

Penny’s surprised when she turned and saw him in the hall: messenger bag hung across his body wearing a Flash t-shirt (because it was Friday after all) and plaid pants. She flushed as she wondered how long he’d been there. He was so still as she approached the door; for a moment he really was like a baby deer and she couldn’t help but smile at the memory of Mary Cooper’s analogy about her son.

“Hello sunshine,” she said amiably as she leaned against the doorframe. He flashed a quick smile.

“I see you’ve decided not to let procrastination get the better of you and have started cleaning.”

“‘Started’? Huh. I’ve been at it for over an hour,” Penny sighed. Sheldon looked over her head into the apartment to take a closer survey.

“Indeed.” His next smile was more twitchy, something which Penny did not fail to notice.

“Hey, I’m doing my best,” she pouted. “It’s not like I have your housecleaning genes.”

“The ability to clean is not of itself a genetic trait, merely a culmination of my attention to detail and—”

“OCD. Yeah, Amy told me about that.” Penny grinned even as a frown crossed Sheldon’s face.

“I’ll let you get back to your cleaning,” he said in a huff. “While I don’t adhere to the notion per se I will pass on the social convention and wish you ‘good luck’ as you will most certainly need it.”

“There’s a package of Red Vines in it for you if you give me a hand,” said Penny as Sheldon was opening his door.

“Any and all attempts at bribery shall fail.”

“I’ll be late for Chinese food tonight,” she warned.

Sheldon stood frozen, hand on the doorknob. ‘Drat.’ He had a scowl on his face as he turned to face her. “I’m still holding you to the previous offering of Red Vines.”

“I wouldn’t have it any other way,” Penny said sweetly before returning to her apartment.

Sheldon appeared five minutes later with his own cleaning supplies and a box of latex gloves. He offered her a pair but she declined.

“Just a sec.” She went to the counter and came back with a package of Red Vines, offering the bag to Sheldon after popping it open.
“I thought I was to receive the commission after the task was completed?” he asked as he took a piece of licorice.

“Payment in advance. For the completion of each mission you get another one.”

“‘Mission?’” he said, raising an eyebrow.

“Table, book shelf, cupboard, sink—you name it, I’ll pay it.” Sheldon nodded his assent. “Agreed.” As he ate his licorice Penny took a pair of gloves and proceeded with a roll of paper towels and her own bottle of windex into the bathroom.

“I think I’ve got all of it but if you find any more clothing just toss it on the bed. I’ll do my closet tonight,” she called.

“Why are you organizing your closet? I thought the bridal shower was in the living room?” he asked while scanning the apartment to see where he wanted to start.

“Because the coats and presents go in the bedroom and everyone sneaks a peek at the closet when they’re at a strange place.”

“Except for my room. No one is allowed in there.” He pulled out a bottle of antibacterial cleanser for his hands. “Although I find myself disagreeing with your absolute—not ‘everyone’ snoops another’s closet because I don’t.”

“I know honey but you also don’t think like the rest of us.”

“I should certainly hope not,” Sheldon agreed although he had the feeling she wasn’t making a sincere compliment. He’d have to revisit this later when he went over his conversation log.

In a little over an hour and a half the apartment came into shape. Now that Sheldon understood any place was privy to prying eyes he made sure the glasses in the cupboard were arranged by size and shape and even aligned her cans and bags of pasta. He was pleased to see a supply of food in her kitchen albeit refined and sodium-enriched. 'One battle at a time, Dr. Cooper.' Penny surveyed his work from the bedroom door and couldn’t remember the last time her apartment looked so good. Oh wait, of course she could—it was the last time Sheldon helped her clean. Even now he was realigning her television a fraction of an inch to the right; it took her by surprise that the hinnie sticking out at her as he bent over definitely held its own—an extreme compliment considering its plaid-covered exterior. 'I could get used to this.'

Now satisfied with the angle, Sheldon took his cloth and wiped his prints from the side of the screen.

“Perfect,” Penny said happily.

“Adequate,” Sheldon amended, though a smile did escape his lips.

“Adequate, shmadequate. Thank you so much Sheldon.”

He nodded as he stripped off his gloves and carried them between his thumb and forefinger to the garbage. “Of course this needn’t be an arduous chore were you to perform weekly maintenance.”

“Yeah, but nothing motivates a girl more like panic.” Penny crossed to the sink and opened the cupboard door for a glass. “Oh my God, sweetie. You did everything. I mean you did a lot.” It
wasn’t until she began hanging out with Sheldon that she realized how often she spoke in absolutes.

“And will be sufficiently rewarded for my efforts,” he reminded her, indicating the bag of Red Vines with his eyes.

“Ok, so how many do I owe you?” she asked as she grabbed the bag.

“As per our agreement I shall ‘name it’: table, television stand, couch, counters, sink, lower and upper cupboards, refrigerator—” Penny held up a hand.

“Let’s just cut to it. How many do I owe you?”

“Nineteen.”

Penny did a quick count. “That’s the entire bag.”

“It did simplify matters that you left the opened package on the counter,” Sheldon said smugly.

“I think we both deserve a treat for this,” said Penny as she took a licorice and promptly bit into it. Sheldon’s mouth opened in shock.

“Penny, you’ve broken our agreement. By taking a Red Vine for yourself I’m now owed payment for my services.”

Her mouth cut a sinful smile. “Maybe there’s some other way I can pay you.”

Sheldon felt his throat constrict as he soundlessly opened his mouth several times to speak, the deepening coloration on his cheeks articulating his plight. As Penny came forward he found himself taking a step back.

“Shall hold you to one Red Vine owing on your next package,” he stammered. He quickly picked up his box of cleaning supplies and hurried for the door.

“Sheldon,” Penny called. “You don’t have to go.” He stood at the door for a moment before turning towards her, his face awash in tic-filled tension.

“Oh but I do.” He gave a crooked smile before fumbling with the door handle and disappearing into the hall.


xTBBTx

They’d already run through it twice but since Bernadette felt better doing a last run Penny knew she had to find Sheldon. The lanky physicist had disappeared from the main hall so she checked the outer vestibules of the church.

‘Did he leave?’ Penny exited the building to do a sweep of the grounds. She found him sitting on the back steps, arms casually folded and resting on his knees. He seemed to be deeply absorbed as he stared at a lower step and didn’t raise his head as Penny approached. She sat down next to him and waited for God knew what. He could be thinking anything: why he was here at a church instead of at home solving the universe; solving the aforementioned universal riddle. Me. She smiled to herself as she gazed at the little garden to the right of the steps. The idea Sheldon Cooper liked her still left her reeling but if she needed convincing all she had to do was think about their
practice walks down the aisle to remove all doubt:

"He'd seemed relaxed enough standing side by side in the hall. Once the music started and the
doors opened it was a whole new ballgame; Sheldon was practically stroke-stiff as Penny took his
arm.

"Sheldon, bend your arm," she whispered. He moved with the precision of a toy soldier. "Ok
honey, now ease up from your side a bit so you don’t crush me." Immediately his arm loosened as
his blue eyes looked down at her with concern.

“I didn’t mean to cause you any discomfort,” he murmured.

She rubbed his arm with her free hand. “It’s ok sweetie,” she said as they made their way into
the main hall and down the aisle. Penny couldn’t count the number of times she’d walked next to
Sheldon. This time, whether it was the location or something else she felt taller at his side. She
smiled at Leonard and Howard who responded in kind; everyone was more than a little giddy since
the wedding was a week away.

When they arrived at the front she went to part from Sheldon so she could join Mrs. Rostenkowski
(who stood in place of Bernadette’s cousin since she couldn’t arrive before Friday) but found her
arm trapped in his embrace. She kept her smile up as she discreetly twisted her arm. There was a
hesitation then she was free and she went to stand next to the mother of the bride.

After the run finished the pastor suggested they try it again.

“We have to get the nerves out,” agreed the rabbi. He looked kindly at Sheldon. “I know she’s
lovely but you have to let the lady go when you get to the front.” Sheldon lowered his head and
gave a quick nod.

Penny winced as everyone chuckled. She started towards Sheldon but he was already heading to
the exit leaving the rest of the procession to follow. When she got to the hall he was standing at the
appointed spot though she could see from his body language that he wanted to be anywhere else.

“Hey,” she said warmly. Sheldon didn’t look at her as she took his arm although she could feel him
tense. “Hey,” she said again as she gave him a little tug. “Look at me.” His eyes flickered in her
direction although he did not meet her gaze. Baby deer. Baby deer. “We’ll get through this ok?
Then you can sanitize yourself to your heart’s content.” She regretted saying what she had the
moment it left her lips. While she meant to lift the mood she found it did the exact opposite as
Sheldon’s jaw muscles tightened and he looked straight ahead.

All the way down the aisle Penny kicked herself. When they got to the front he promptly dropped
her arm and took his place beside Raj. Crap on a cracker. Penny’s eyes kept glancing over at
Sheldon while the ceremony concluded but he stared fixedly a few feet in front of himself.
Clapping commenced as Bernadette and Howard kissed, Howard taking the opportunity to then
lean over his fiancée and rub noses. In all the subsequent commotion of people rushing to the altar
to separate the pair she lost track of Sheldon—an irony given he was the tallest man in the
building.

Now as she sat next to him he seemed a little boy lost.

“Can I borrow some hand sanitizer?” Penny asked. Sheldon sat up and reached into his pocket
before proffering her the bottle. She took an ample gob and washed her hands thoroughly.

Now clean, Penny reached over and rested her hand on his own. Sheldon didn’t pull away; instead
he turned his head towards her with questioning eyes. Instantly he recognized that she knew he had feelings for her.

“Come on Moonpie,” she said softly. A moment passed before he nodded and as one they stood.

“You used my hand sanitizer,” Sheldon said as he put the bottle away.

Penny was puzzled. “And?”

“You said you were borrowing it but you can’t give back what you’ve taken.”

“Well, you gave it to me anyways,” she answered as she opened the church door.

“I didn’t have a choice,” he said as he held the door for her to enter.

“I see,” Penny said softly. Somehow she didn’t think this was about the sanitizer. “So what do you want to do about it?”

He shrugged as he fell into step beside her. “I’ve already dispensed the sanitizer. How you choose to reciprocate is solely up to you.”

Before Penny could respond Mrs. Rostenkowski came into the vestibule and waved a hand to hurry them on. Penny and Sheldon quickened their pace and in a moment were situated in their spot in the procession. With Penny’s arm securely tucked in his Sheldon began the slow walk down the aisle.

'It’s all up to me.’ Penny inwardly sighed as she knew he couldn’t handle the pacing of a normal courtship. Flirting was on the back burner for now (she had to give Leonard the package of Red Vines for Sheldon) although she found he was more tolerant of her casual touches. He still flinched but that was more habitual than a willing attempt to avoid her. She had to be receptive but patient if she didn’t want to scare him off.

Third time really was the charm as the ceremony went off without a hitch.

xTBBTx

Penny kicked off her shoes and flopped on the couch, a glass of white wine firmly in hand. Amy collapsed next to her and the pair clinked their glasses before they sipped.

“One bridal shower over and done,” Penny sighed as she pulled out her hair tie with her free hand.

“I believe the event was satisfactory and concluded in a reasonable amount of time,” agreed Amy. “Again I thank you for hosting—the close proximity of Leonard and Sheldon’s apartment for the purposes of housing our guests’ male companions proved advantageous.”

Penny smiled grimly to herself as she thought of the repercussions of the boys housing unknown (and in Sheldon’s case unwelcome) visitors in their home. “I hope Leonard doesn’t get into too much trouble for agreeing to this.”

“I’m sure that under the circumstances Sheldon will be lenient in the matter.” Amy raised her glass. “To Leonard: may he rest in peace.”

“To Leonard,” echoed Penny. Again the glasses clinked and wine was consumed.

XxX
Knock Knock Knock “Penny.”
Knock Knock Knock “Penny.”
Knock Knock Knock “Penny.”

“The door’s open Sheldon.” He entered although he refrained from venturing further into the apartment.

“Now that the intruders have left my abode I’d like your help in cleaning.”

Penny looked around her apartment with the countless glasses, plates and wrapping paper seemingly in every corner. “Seriously?”

Sheldon’s face began to color. “Penny, I have spent the last two hours in the company of more strangers than can be humanly tolerated.” He grimaced. “There were children present.”

“Yeah? Well I’ve got two words for ya: Mrs. Wolowitz. You try getting that woman up and down the stairs without working up a sweat. God, the way she yells instead of talks I’m sure I’ve pissed off everyone living next to the stairwell.”

“To get back ‘in the good books’ so to speak you ought to help out your neighbors—starting with this one.” Sheldon folded his arms so as to keep from flinching in agitation.

Penny rolled her eyes. “Sheldon, if I drag my sorry ass off this couch over to your place and I don’t find anything majorly messed up—you’ll be. Got it?” Once Amy left she jumped in the shower and now found herself in her comfy pants and red tank top curled up on the couch watching a Project Runway repeat. After rising bright and early to set up and later hosting a large group of women in a close environment she was ready for some peace and quiet. Unfortunately this was Sheldon she was dealing with so the chances the evening would be uneventful were remote unless she took drastic measures.

“The degree to which an apartment can be judged ‘messed up’ is dependent on the initial condition—which in my case was devoid of foreign contaminants. Billions of microbes have invaded my home, Penny.” He started shifting uncomfortably from one foot to the other, the conversation clearly upsetting him.

“Sheldon—”

“As this was your idea it’s only fair that you should assist Leonard in restoring the apartment to its original state.”

“Ok, just calm down first sweetie,” soothed Penny as she got off the couch and approached him.

“I don’t think you understand the magnitude of the situation. Books were touched and action figures moved. My telescope was commandeered and my DNA model partially disassembled. I—Penny they didn’t keep behind the line in the bathroom and it wasn’t like I could give them strikes and Leonard said I couldn’t kick anyone out and—”

“Sheldon, stop.” Penny reached out but Sheldon immediately recoiled.

“Don’t touch me!” he shrieked.

At once the room was silent. Penny was absolutely devastated. “Oh honey, I’m so sorry,” she breathed.
Sheldon closed his eyes and took a shaky breath to settle himself. After a moment he glanced at Penny and smiled apologetically. “Once we’re done with my place we can start on yours.”

Penny nodded. “Sure. I… Sheldon I never would have…. I mean you go out in public all the time so I never thought—”

“In public I expect to run into contaminants hence the reason why I change clothes and shower twice daily. My home is my Sanctum Sanctorum. Only Leonard and I can invite people in, although after this incident I’m calling into serious question Leonard’s ability to discern ‘a few people’ from a horde.”

“Let me get ready and I’ll be over, ok? And Sheldon—I never meant to hurt you.”

He shook his head. “It’s my fault. I should never have agreed.” His eyes met hers. “I tried.”

Penny smiled sadly. “I know Moonpie. Just give me a few minutes.” Sheldon nodded and departed.

She managed to make it into the bathroom before she started bawling.

XxX

“Well I’m out of here,” said Leonard as he took off his latex gloves. “I left your bedroom to you.”

“Sounds good. Thanks for helping, Leonard,” said Penny as she put the last of the plates in the drain rack.

“It’s only fair since you spit-polished our place. ‘Night,” he said as he turned to find Sheldon in the doorway. “Not that I’m saying she spit anywhere.”

“Of course not Leonard,” Sheldon said haughtily. “I’m not that much of a literalist.”

Deciding discretion was the better part of valor Leonard left the room with Sheldon quietly closing the door behind him. Not being deaf, Leonard had heard Sheldon’s shout of distress from earlier and surmised an apology was in the works.

“Penny if I may have a moment,” Sheldon began.

“Sure,” she agreed and sat on the couch.

“Upon your arrival at my apartment I couldn’t help but notice your eyes were swollen and blood vessels dilated. I have upset you.”

“No, it’s ok. I was just taken by surprise,” she replied.

“No, it’s not ‘ok’, ” Sheldon frowned. “I didn’t account for my idiosyncrasies causing you any undue distress.” It was going to be hard enough for Penny to like him the way he wanted without upsetting her with outbursts of anxiety.

“You were just ‘stressing’ your point,” Penny said, gently teasing. Sheldon flashed a little smile in return.

“Bazinga.”

“Sheldon I—” ’know you’re special, both weird and wonderful, and can’t treat you like other guys. You amaze me and scare me and I have to be sure so I don’t hurt you.’ “We’ll get through this.” It
was funny that for a talker and a big ol’ five she couldn’t find the words to say what she wanted.

His blue eyes processed her words and he nodded. “I appreciate the consideration. Goodnight Penny.”

“‘Night sweetie.”

After he left Penny stretched on the couch which now had a lemon scent to the fabric.

xTBBTx

After the movie everyone began to talk.

“Raj, I swear to God you bring up Twilight one more time I’ll kill you,” growled Howard. Raj dropped his jaw in shock.

“How can we have a serious discussion on vampires if we don’t include Edward? The Cullen family is at the forefront of the popular imagination.” He took a slug of his beer in disgust. ‘Western Barbarians.’

“Yes and if we consider that the forefront also includes the Kardashians and The Real Housewives of Beverly Hills we have to conclude that this aforementioned imagination is the result of a lobotomy,” Sheldon sniffed.

Penny swatted him on the leg. “Hey, trashy reality tv is entertaining.” Sheldon rolled his eyes.

“No, building the Lego Death Star is entertaining. Reality tv is a travesty.”

Howard grinned. “Now Sheldon I wouldn’t be so hasty. As I recall America’s Next Top Model had some pulse-pounding moments.” Now it was Bernadette’s turn to smack her fiancé. “Hey, it was Penny who got me hooked on it.”

“Of course. Always blame the woman for inciting moments of charged sexuality. Although in this instance you’d be correct in assessing Penny’s ‘rrrrrr’ factor,” said Amy evenly, causing Penny to flush.

“I think we can chalk up John Carpenter’s Vampires as another Blade: cool opening sequence and all downhill from there,” summed up Leonard who was appreciating his seating position on the floor since it allowed Leslie ample access to his hair.

“The part where the head vampire slaughtered the hunters in the motel was kind of cool,” countered Howard.

Sheldon straightened up. “And completely inaccurate given the historical vampire’s origin as being nothing more than——”

“Honey, honey, the vampire’s cute. It’s all that matters,” shushed Penny. Sheldon closed his mouth although his displeasure at being cut off registered on his face.

“Well, that’s if you go for tall, dark and handsome,” said Leonard.

Leslie covered Leonard’s ears. “As an optical physicist I’m more than qualified to test Penny’s hypothesis comparing a vampire’s physical prowess to his ‘hotness’ factor.”

“How does physics assist you in that?” asked Sheldon.
Leslie smiled thinly in an attempt to keep the ‘dumbass’ tone out of her voice. “I’ve got the equipment to test friction and fondle his joules.”

“Perhaps it would be better if we put this under my paradigm of neurobiology,” suggested Amy.

“Or chemistry,” piped in Bernadette. Penny agreed, causing Sheldon to purse his lips as he glared at her.


Bernadette spontaneously clapped her hands. “Speaking of work I can’t believe this is my last week at the Cheesecake Factory.”

“And your last week as Ms. Rostenkowski,” reminded Howard, causing Bernadette to blush.

“We should document this,” said Raj as he stood.

“Let me get my camera.” Leonard grudgingly got to his feet and went to his bedroom.

“Let’s change places,” said Amy as she offered Howard her spot. “It is, after all, the center of the couch—not the universe,” she amended to Sheldon. He flashed a little smile as he patted his cushion: coordinate 0.0.0.0. in the Cartesian system was the single most point of consistency and it was nice to have others acknowledge its importance.

“I thank you Madam,” Howard responded as both he and Bernadette settled themselves on the couch. The bright side of being tiny people was that they sat comfortably as opposed to feeling sandwiched by Sheldon, Penny and Amy.

As Leonard set up the tripod Raj and Leslie moved the coffee table to the side to make room. Raj then took up the camera, commanded a “Cheese” from the group and clicked.

“Camera Raj,” ordered Leonard. The astrophysicist complied then lay down in front of Howard and Bernadette with his legs towards Sheldon. “Ok, are we ready? Amy, you sure you don’t want to switch?” indicating Penny with his eyes. Amy hesitated, looking at Sheldon for confirmation before nodding her head.

“Of course.” The last thing either of them wanted to do was spoil the moment.

Sheldon’s jaw clamped down hard as he moved aside so Penny could get up. The two women danced around each other before settling into their new seats.

“All right, countdown from three. And three, two—” Leonard flopped down at Penny’s feet and Leslie nuzzled into him. “One.” He kissed Leslie then got up to look at the picture. Everyone looked straight ahead and there were no goofy finger horns behind anyone’s head. More importantly all the couples were sitting together and Raj and Penny didn’t look left out. “Perfect,” he declared.

Sheldon frowned. He really hated absolutes.

XxX

Amy considered herself a smart woman.

While she didn’t skip off to college at eleven she did win a prestigious scholarship and completed her doctorate in neurobiology with distinction.
Though her early life was a portrait in alienation more recent events had proved fortuitous as first her middle-eastern ‘fiancé’ Fiesel had agreed to fund her lab and then she’d found Sheldon. By answering the personal ad set up by Howard and Raj she’d gone from keeping to herself to friends, a boyfriend and most importantly a best friend. Someone like her wasn’t supposed to ‘have it all’ and yet here she was.

And then as they say, shit happened.

She clicked on her computer and flipped through her photos until she came to the group shot from Sheldon’s birthday. Granted there had been tension given his preoccupation with his turning thirty and their meeting each other for the first time since the breakup so Sheldon hadn’t been his usual exuberant self.

Amy’s finger moved and Leonard’s Facebook page appeared on screen. She clicked on the candid photo Raj took from tonight’s get-together. There was Sheldon with a fidgety smile, his palms on his knees with Penny sitting next to him. Sitting in Amy’s spot. The spot which had previously been Penny’s spot. Amy clicked between the photo and the formal shot taken by Leonard: there was less distance between Penny and Sheldon’s knees; Sheldon’s right shoulder angled slightly away from Amy; his relaxed smile; his wooden posture.

The life in his eyes.

That’s what struck Amy: until she’d seen it she’d never known he was capable of that much happiness.

They had shared a relationship of the mind. What he was experiencing was something much deeper. Something that moved him in a way he’d never been. She was familiar with the sensation: until she met her Bestie she’d never experienced even half of what Penny brought to the relationship. Penny was beautiful, strong, humorous, sympathetic, intuitive, a force to be reckoned. Amy and Leonard couldn’t help but be swept away; Raj and Howard worshipped the ground she walked.

She cropped Raj’s photo until it was just Sheldon and Penny.

Amy considered herself a smart woman.

xTBBTx

A/N Though Sheldon has improved greatly in the series I decided that for this fiction he's still a big germaphobe. His affliction is telling in 'The Benefactor Factor' when he acknowledges to President Siebert that it's the germs he objects to when he's touched; however if Siebert wore sterile gloves Sheldon would let him check for a hernia.
Premarital Party Contention

Leonard closed the mail box, tucking the small package in the crook of his arm. He thanked his lucky stars it had finally come since it would mean a little more quiet in the apartment. For Sheldon’s birthday present he had gotten what worked out to be a ‘train engine of the month’ club. Granted Leonard would be forced to sit among train tracks and eat with locomotives but at least he could work on his Bose-Einstein condensate project in peace.

As he turned the corner to mount the last flight of stairs he heard dance music coming from Penny’s apartment. Usually she played such music when she was preparing herself for clubbing and even Leonard thought five twenty-three was a little early to get started.

“Sheldon,” he called as he closed the front door and put his keys in the bowl. “Mail call.” Leonard waited but to his surprise he didn’t get a response. As he crossed through the living room he spotted a bottled water on the coffee table and what looked to be new posits on the whiteboard. Sheldon was most certainly home—but where was he?

“Sheldon?” Leonard called from the hallway. Maybe he was asleep? Leonard doubted it as it would throw off Sheldon’s sleep schedule and he was virulently regimented considering his recent bout with insomnia. The only other option that came to Leonard’s mind was Sheldon curled up in a ball on his bed.

Knock Knock Knock “Sheldon?”

He sighed as he weighed the implications of incurring another strike. ’Damned for caring—story of my life.’ Taking a deep breath, Leonard opened the door and was greeted with an empty bedroom.

“What the hell?” Leonard thought about surprising him and leaving the train on his bed but thought better of it given the ’no one can be in my room’ rule.

As he went to close the door they caught his eye: five Penny Blossoms on stems arranged in a little vase sitting above Sheldon’s comic collection right next to the Flash action figure. Leonard took a moment to process the sight.

“Huh,” he said at last. Part of what made him choose experimental physics was his innate curiosity for knowing how and why things occurred. Ok, playing with lasers also came into the equation but that’s another matter. His job was to essentially put two and two together as he attempted to discover and replicate particle reactions to help verify other peoples’ theories. Sometimes he came up with things on his own but he knew that wasn’t his strength no matter how much he refuted this in his roommate’s presence.

In this instance he was coming up with his own idea. It did equal four. Even if this was Sheldon.

“Way to go Amy,” Leonard smiled. It looked as though the relationship with the neurobiologist had finally opened Sheldon to moments of emotional expression even if they were kept in the confines of his room.

Hearing the front door close Leonard quickly shut Sheldon’s door and tried to get the guilty look off his face before making his way into the living room.

“Yeah. It’s nearly five-thirty.” It wasn’t often that Sheldon lost track of time without there being a
game console or whiteboard in front of him. “I got the mail.” He handed over the package. Was it
his imagination or did the lanky man look as if he’d been sweating?

“What’s this?” Sheldon asked then froze as he saw the logo for the American Railroad Hobbyists’
Association stamped on the box. He looked questioningly at Leonard.

“It’s not a birthday present. Call it a thank you for helping me on the project.” Sheldon tried his
best to frown but his excitement couldn’t be contained.

“Leonard, you know I don’t like gifts.” His eyes sparkled as he looked at his roommate. “Although
I did help you with your experiment and continue to assist in your latest endeavor so this closes
rather than extends the reciprocity loop.” With a childlike grin he made his way to the couch so he
could open the parcel.

The experimental physicist smiled to himself as he went to get a bottle of water from the
refrigerator—he should have thought of this years ago. He turned his head as there was a knock on
the door followed by Penny entering the apartment.

“This is getting out of hand.” He closed his mail box and took his time weeding out
the junk mail.

“Oh, hi Sheldon,” Penny greeted as she got to the lobby. Sheldon’s response was frozen on his lips
as he saw she had a laundry basket in her arms.

“Oh, hi Sheldon,” Penny greeted as she got to the lobby. Sheldon’s response was frozen on his lips
as he saw she had a laundry basket in her arms.

“What are you doing? Tonight isn’t laundry night,” he sputtered.

“Sheldon, Saturday’s your laundry night not mine. Besides the wedding’s this Saturday so you
won’t have time for laundry,” said Penny calmly. It was a new tactic, speaking in a relaxed tone as
opposed to revving up the tension by inserting an acerbic comment. She thought it might help his
overall nerves if he stayed relatively stable—at least for Sheldon.

He thought about what she said and frowned. “I hadn’t anticipated my routine being disrupted by
this weekend’s events. Weddings are truly a nightmare,” he said grimly. Penny had to conceal a
smile.

“Well, we all have crosses to bear. Yours will be doing laundry on a Thursday night,” she grinned
as she started walking. Sheldon quickly followed one step behind Penny as she descended into the
“I suppose,” he said at last. “Although this throws my schedule completely out of kilter what-with Thursday being temporarily altered, Friday’s Vintage Video Games supplant by a bachelor party and of course we know about Saturday.”

Penny bit her lip as she set her basket on a washer and opened the lid. She knew this was going to go over like a wet blanket. “Oh yeah that’s right. I’ve got to miss Halo tonight because I’m packing for tomorrow.”

“But Penny, it’s Wednesday and Wednesday’s Halo night,” whined Sheldon who found himself stamping his foot in frustration. He was really starting to get miffed.

“I know sweetie but after I get the laundry done and put away—yes you heard me: put away—I’ve got to get my overnight bag together.” She grabbed a scoop full of soap and tossed it into the machine over her clothing.

“Tomorrow is the bachelorette party. Wolowitz has been dreading this for days.” Sheldon was loath to admit it but the idea of Penny involving herself in a night of supposed wild abandon did not sit well with him either. “So you don’t anticipate being home until Friday.”

“Nope.” She started the machine.

“I see.” He moved to cross his arms before deciding the posture looked too confrontational so he lay them at his side, shifting his weight from one foot to the other as he did. He was uncomfortable feeling what he felt; it wasn’t as though they were dating so he couldn’t place any expectations on her. Besides, it wasn’t as if Penny’s goal was to engage in coitus with strange men. She was going out with Bernadette and Amy. Amy. Thank the Lord there would be a voice of reason in the midst. Of course after several drinks this self-same voice of reason had kissed him and as alcohol was a frequent part of bachelorette parties…. “You’ve left a means of contacting you at your destination should you not return Friday?”

Penny leaned against the washer for support as she couldn’t believe what she thought she was hearing. “Of course I’ll be home Friday. Besides you have my cell number.”

“You’ve adequate funds for your trip should you require an emergency cab or—”

“Covered.”

“You know where to meet should you become separated—”

“Won’t happen.”

“Penny, Los Angeles is a big place with lots of people. Anything could happen should you not be prepared.” Sometimes things happened regardless of how prepared one was.

She raised an eyebrow. “Who says we’ll be in Los Angeles?”

Sheldon stopped. “Given your precarious financial situation I’d assumed you’d stay in the vicinity. I’m not prying as you seem to be insisting.” His eyes looked at the floor as he swallowed hard. ‘Why was this so difficult?’

“Sweetie.” He raised his eyes to meet hers. “We’ll be fine. And yes we’ll be in L.A.—just don’t tell Howard.” Penny wanted to reassure him with a hug but knew that would be crossing the line. Secretly she was thrilled with the whole conversation. It had been too long since a man cared
enough about her to worry; that this was Sheldon made it even more extraordinary.

“I’m glad you’ll be close—should anything arise,” he amended.

Penny laughed. “You make it sound as if all hell’s going to break loose.”

“All three of you will more likely than not be intoxicated hence your cognitive reasoning will be impaired and I don’t want you making ill-advised choices,” he said softly. “That is, unless you want to make them.”

“Nothing’s going to happen, Sheldon. I promise you.” ‘I might not know what this is but I care too much to screw it up.’ Unconsciously her hand rose to lie against his chest; at the last moment both she and Sheldon noticed but before she let it drop he raised his own and they touched palms. Penny looked to him for confirmation but found his face poker-straight; only the color on his cheeks and the intensity of his stare told her of the roiling emotions inside Sheldon Cooper.

After what seemed like hours in four heartbeats he removed his hand and exited the laundry room.

It took a moment for Penny to catch her breath.

Moving her hips she slid between the lyrics as the beat danced around Penny’s limbs and body. Not that she needed alcohol in order to dance but she felt more relaxed and the music came with her instead of at her. She didn’t know how long she’d been on the floor; she’d lost Bernadette and Amy at least four songs ago and knew she should head back to the table. Opening her eyes Penny was surprised to see a cut body and cute grin facing her direction. As she took in this lovely specimen she couldn’t help but compare him to all the other guys she’d been with—well, except for Leonard. The short physicist worked like a bucket of ice water and not because he was in any way horrible. He was different. She learned from him that she liked different. ‘And boy oh boy do I ever have different in my life now.’ Grinning more to herself than her dance partner Penny excused herself and went to find her friends.

Bernadette and Amy raised their glasses in greeting as Penny approached.

“Come rest your weary yet scintillating body and have a drink,” Amy said, her normally even demeanor titillated by the sight of a very hot and luscious Penny in her go-go inspired dress.

The waitress grabbed her vodka and cranberry and took a long drink. She was glad she’d taken longer on the dance floor since it helped her pace her alcohol consumption. It was Bernadette’s night after all so if anyone should be helped back to the hotel room it was her. Penny smiled at the diminutive woman in her hip-hugging bell-bottoms and long sleeve top cut to mid rift that accentuated her ample bosom. It was decided that tonight would be a retro sixties night; even Amy, who usually did not participate in wearing costumes, found herself a flattering flower-power dress and flat leather sandals. She had argued that her hairy legs added authenticity to the garment but was outvoted and forced to shave.

“What are you thinking?” said Penny, noting the little smirk on Bernadette’s face.

“If Howard could see us tonight he’d think he died and went to horny heaven.” Bernadette glanced at her chest then gave her torso a playful wiggle and laughed. She didn’t know what martini she was on and at this point it didn’t matter. In under forty-eight hours she’d be Mrs. Bernadette Wolowitz and a whole new chapter of her life would begin.

“I believe we all look exceptional tonight,” agreed Amy. “To us: hotness comes in all shapes and
sizes.” Three glasses clinked together.

“Are you sure you don’t want to go back to the casino?” Penny asked as she set her glass on the table. She had set herself a fifty dollar limit, blew over it by thirty dollars, and knew she had to be good as rent day was tomorrow.

Bernadette nodded. “I can’t lose any more of my luck cuz I’ll need lots of it dealing with Howard’s mother.” She leaned towards Amy and Penny, raising her hand to shield her mouth in a conspiratorial manner. “She can be difficult.”

“I believe taking out one’s own appendix to be difficult. Dealing with Mrs. Wolowitz is a hardship even Job would turn down,” said Amy as she thought back to the bridal shower. “You know Bestie, I believe that delectable man in the blue shirt and oh-so-rightly cut slacks is looking your way.”

Penny followed Amy’s gaze and felt her heart rate increase as she saw black curls and a strong chin completing the package. She shook her head in amazement as he made his approach. Just a couple of months ago she’d been complaining about feeling undesirable and now that she had something going on with Sheldon guys were coming out of the woodwork.

“He’s cute but I’m not into him,” Penny said casually.

“You don’t have to be into him. I think he wants to be in you,” piped in Bernadette. Both Amy and Penny looked at her in shock. “You know, I think I may have hit my limit.”

“Did you want to dance it off or call it a night?” asked Penny.

“Let me stand first.” Bernadette used Amy to steady herself as she got to her feet. “Hiya cutie,” she grinned back.

His eyes glossed over her tiny frame and Amy’s amiable smirk to settle on Penny’s face.

“I’m a lucky guy,” he said with a wink.

Amy turned to Penny. “All for one, fellow musketeer?” Penny nodded.

“Let’s give this guy a dance he’ll never forget.” She smiled sweetly at Devon.

XxX

“So what do you think they’re doing?” pouted Howard as he sat dejectedly on the couch.

“Don’t think about it,” said Raj without looking away from the television. It was decided that an evening of Battlestar Galactica was in order so to keep Howard from wondering too much about the girls’ night out.

Howard sighed. “I just don’t get how they need to be out overnight to have a party. Sheldon, I thought you said bachelorette parties were about female bonding?”

“There are many ways in which to bond although a species is said to practice female bonding if the females form supportive groups, in particular for the purposes of attacking other individuals.”
Sheldon took in Howard’s exasperated stare. “Though in this instance I do not see Bernadette, Amy and Penny assaulting passers-by.”

“Unless he’s cute,” smirked Raj. Howard gave him a smack on the arm.

“Thanks buddy,” he growled.

“Relax Howard. The girls are out for some harmless fun,” soothed Leonard. “When Penny and I were dating she still went out dancing and nothing happened.” He smiled wistfully. “In a way it’s too bad I didn’t go with her. It would have been funny walking out of the club with her on my arm.”

“And the geek shall inherit the earth.” In spite of himself Howard grinned. “You’re right of course, nothing’s going to happen. How could Bernadette even begin to find someone to replace me?”

Sheldon and Leonard looked at each other but said nothing.

XxX

On the dance floor Amy and Bernadette skipped clock and counter-clockwise respectively around Devon and Penny as she did her best mime impression of a wall. Then as one the girls grabbed their noses and did a swimmers’ wiggle as they bent their knees. By the time they’d finished bird-dancing, hokey pokeying, congaing and a tame chorus line Devon was killing himself laughing and gave several ‘I’m not worthy’ bows.

Before they parted ways he wished Bernadette good luck for her wedding, kissed Amy on the hand and offered Penny a napkin with his phone number which she took graciously. The girls blew him a big ‘muah’ kiss and left.

“I believe we were successful Bestie. I don’t think Devon will forget this evening,” said Amy with a glint in her eye.

They were still laughing as they got to their hotel room.

xTBBTx

“Why did you buy them if you’re not going to eat them?” asked Raj as he rubbed the sting of Sheldon’s slap from his hand.

“They’re for later,” Sheldon replied as he gathered up the carton and put it in the refrigerator. He knew it was foolish to have ordered her dumplings but he couldn’t stop himself. Penny wasn’t home by the time he got back from work and he had no way to verify if she’d been home earlier unless he texted her and that was something he was not going to do. Obviously she was still busy doing whatever it was the girls had planned for the day and being a member of the opposing gender it wasn’t his place to intrude. Besides, it wasn’t like she was his companion. She could do whatever she wanted. At least that’s what he kept telling himself.

Howard cleared his throat while wiping his hands with a paper napkin. “As the girls have obviously gone somewhere wild and crazy we should too.”

“How do you know that? Oh God, Howard you didn’t track Penny’s phone again did you?” groaned Leonard.

“Of course not,” Howard said indignantly. “Besides if I were to do something like that I’d follow Bernadette. Although FYI they stayed in Los Angeles.”
“So where do you want to go?” Raj got off the couch and went to the computer. “You feeling classy, sultry or smutty?”

“Why not all three? Gentlemen this is my last night as a free man. It’s our duty to make this something I won’t forget,” said Howard.

“Actually our duty in fulfilling this rite of passage is to detach you from your former life and leave you in a limbo-like state until your reincorporation into the world as a married man,” stated Sheldon. “If Leonard were to take his role as ‘Best Man’ seriously we’d be camping in the desert or participating in smudging at a sweat lodge.”

“It’ll be limbo enough being in a place full of attractive women,” Raj grinned as he thought back to the night Howard and he ‘fixed’ the satellite dish at the America’s Next Top Model house. In a flash he felt a pang of anguish as he realized the days of plotting out house locations by way of star charts and military drone technology were over. Of all his friends he was the only one without a girlfriend. Unless he got over his phobia of speaking to women soon he might as well marry his telescope. The gods know he’d already given it the best years of his life.

Leonard checked his watch. “Well it’s early yet. What do we do until then?”

“Well it is ‘Vintage Video Game’ night,” began Sheldon.

Howard shook his head. “Oh no. That’s just what the girls’d expect us to do. We are so not staying home playing games.” He paused. “Not when we can go to Dave and Busters to play games.”

XxX

Around ten o’clock Penny made it back home. She had noticed the silence from apartment 4A and was pleased the boys got it together enough to go out. As for herself she was exhausted. After waking up early (at least for Penny after a night of dancing) they’d had a spa treatment (Amy’s surprise) and brunch before setting off to make sure the last minute details were settled for the wedding; they later met up with Bernadette’s female coworkers for evening cocktails. Though it wasn’t her special day Penny found herself growing more anxious as the time ticked closer. She stripped into her pajamas and went into the bathroom to brush her teeth.

All she knew was that Amy was an awesome Maid of Honor—her methodical nature brought a sense of order to the whole affair so it didn’t become overwhelming. Penny would have the neurobiologist orchestrate her wedding—even the hotel and last night’s festivities were well thought out. ‘Of course it depends on who I’m marrying.’ Somehow she doubted Amy’d service a wedding with Sheldon as groom.

Penny gawked at the mirror as she almost choked on her toothpaste. ‘Now where did that come from?’ Hell they hadn’t even gotten around to dating yet. At the current progression of their relationship it’d be a decade before she’d get a little action. Her cheeks were red as she rinsed her mouth.

‘Down girl.’ She turned off the light and got into bed, remembering to set her alarm for the morning. Her mind was still spinning from all the activity over the last twenty-four hours so it was no surprise she was restless. Hanging out with Amy and Bernadette was fun but she had to admit to herself that the highlight of the night was when Devon showed up, though she did her best to deny he was so her type—and he had a sense of humor to boot. Penny was so sure the weird dancing would scare him off but he even encouraged the girls’ outrageousness.

Devon had to be the reason why she felt so turned on and yet when she sought to lose herself in a
moment of self-sensuality it wasn’t his hands she imagined on her body. The long fingers that massaged her inner thighs belonged to a certain East Texan who looked positively scrumptious without his comic book t-shirts. His motions were sure and as he stretched himself to cover her body she knew she wouldn’t wait any longer. She was a big ol’ five and longed to show him everything she could do. As minutes rolled by she didn’t disappoint him—or herself for that matter.

XxX

Raj, Howard and Leonard were positively hypnotized by the dancer’s choreographed movements. Even Sheldon had to admit her awareness of her body made for an intriguing demonstration in kinesiology. As the young lady wound her body around the pole he wondered if she knew how many billions of foreign microbes to which she’d just exposed herself. Of course it didn’t look like she much cared at the moment; certainly the men in the establishment had no problem looking over this matter of hygiene.

He looked over as the waitress appeared at his elbow.

“You want another pop?” she asked. From their initial conversation she learned that he wasn’t drinking this evening even though he wasn’t the designated driver. When she teased him about not wanting to forget a thing about the show he assured her with his eidetic memory he wouldn’t whether he wanted to or not.

Sheldon caught Leonard’s attention, asking when they were planning on leaving. The shorter man guessed after the main attraction.

“How long until the feature act?” Sheldon asked the waitress.

“About half an hour,” she replied as she took the empty glasses from the table.

He pursed his lips and gave a nod of the head. One more hour tops and he could go home and shower.

Feeling the vibration in his pocket he took out his phone.

’Home. c u 2morro. P’

Though he cringed at the butchery to the English language he had to admit these ‘words’ put his mind at ease. His thumbs danced across the keyboard.

’I hope you had an entertaining evening.’ (But not too entertaining, he thought as he erased the message.)

’I’m glad. I found your absence troubling.’ (He erased this too.)

’Until tomorrow.’

It sounded like an appointment with destiny if he actually believed in that kind of hokum. Rather it was the culmination of all that had previously transpired that brought him to this moment. He’d only to take one more step and he’d reach the apex yet he found himself in a state he’d rarely found himself—unsure. There was no guarantee Penny would be in favor of altering their friendship paradigm but he had to at least state his case. He was a man of science; he would be thorough in his argument. He only hoped it would be enough.
Chapter Summary

And now without any further adieu—the wedding. ~Lynn

xTBBTx

All four men were waiting for their cue in the vestibule. None looked the worse for wear after last night considering they’d left the strip club around one.

“So are you ready?” Leonard asked as he straightened Howard’s tie.

“Why wouldn’t I be? I’ve found my soul mate.”

“Howard,” Raj coaxed with a bit of a frown.

“When I got home last night I cried like a little girl,” Howard said sheepishly. “Of course it could have been the alcohol.”

“Alcohol usually functions as a depressant,” Sheldon offered. “There’s no proof it causes hysterics.”

“It didn’t. This was all about the little boy freaking out because he’s becoming a man,” said Leslie as she came to stand beside Leonard. She looked over the group. “I must say you guys clean up well. Even you Cooper.”

“The sentiment is reciprocated,” he replied as he’d never seen her in a tailored outfit before now. Her crème-colored dress and jacket accented with a wide black belt and heeled shoes gave her a level of sophistication not found in any of her experiments.

Leslie glanced to her right. “Well I better grab Forrest Gump and head in.” She kissed Leonard before walking towards a tall man who was talking with a pretty brunette. “Oh Zack,” Leslie said in a sing-song voice. He turned as she tucked her arm in his, giving the brunette her best ‘yes he’s with me so get lost’ smile.

Leonard looked at his watch. “I guess we’d better get in there.” He smiled nervously at Howard who began to pale.

“Oh no dude not now,” Raj swore as he grabbed the groom by the shoulders and gave him a shake. “Listen to me: you’re going to go down the aisle with Leonard; you’re not going to pass out when you see Bernadette; most importantly you’re leaving here a married man, got it?”

It took Howard a moment to get himself together but at last he gave a tentative smile. “Thank you.” He looked at his friends. “Thank you all,” Raj began to tear up and Sheldon acknowledged the comment with a nod of the head. Turning to Leonard, Howard let out a deep breath and together they left for the altar.

Sheldon and Raj waited at their appointed spot for the bridal party. While he told himself he had nothing to be anxious about Sheldon nevertheless felt his adrenaline pumping. Casually he clasped
his hands behind his back and raised himself on the balls of his feet. If the girls did not come out soon he’d be forced to go for a walk. As if on cue a door opened and out came the flower girl in a lacy baby blue dress with a dark blue sash followed by a moment of pure relativity.

He knew it was only a matter of a minute or so before Penny was at his side but for him time stopped the moment he saw her emerge from the room in her light blue sheath dress whose hem opened in the front and tapered to the back where a trace of dark blue ruffle drifted to the floor. She shuffled her feet to encourage the flower girl to move, causing both of them to laugh. As Penny spotted him and smiled Sheldon realized he’d never believed in absolutes because he’d never encountered any. Until now.

“Look at you guys,” Penny said to the two physicists. Raj’s mouth quivered but finding himself unable to speak elbowed Sheldon and extended his hand towards Penny.

“Elegant,” Sheldon said softly. Raj nodded his head enthusiastically with a big grin.

Blushing, she took Sheldon’s arm even as Raj offered his to Margot, Bernadette’s cousin. After the rest of the party got in line a signal was sent to the front and the music began.

At the altar Howard nearly jumped out of his shoes as the organ started. Leonard put a comforting hand on his shoulder even as he whispered for his friend to keep breathing. The doors opened and in came the procession. As Raj neared the front he wiggled his eyebrows in encouragement; Howard smiled although his teeth were clamped shut to keep him from screaming.

Leonard wasn’t paying attention as he was struck dumb at the sight of Penny. It was as if all the times he’d seen her look amazing, and to be honest there never was a day he didn’t think so—Age of Conan obsession week aside—had culminated into this one moment. Instantly he was awash in guilt and pleasure as he recalled their times together and wished Sheldon was the Father of the Bride and him the groom.

Sheldon did his best to keep the frown from his face as he took in Leonard’s unabashed stare. He wanted to stay in the moment: feel the pressure of Penny’s arm as it lay in his; maintain an even cadence as they made their way to the front. With each step he felt them become synchronous but he knew this harmony would not last. At their appointed place he let her go and as ever the gentleman waited for her to start on her way before he stood next to Raj.

Wearing similar apparel as the bridesmaids save for the addition of a short jacket and a diamond tiara Amy was grinning from ear to ear as she walked the aisle as the princess in her dreams. Thankfully she was carrying a bouquet or else she’d have difficulties refraining from waiving her hand in that Queen Elisabeth ‘hem-hem’ kind of way. On a whim she made a slight curtsey towards Howard before moving off to join Penny and Margot.

The music changed and the congregation stood on their feet as the bride entered the hall, Bernadette looking ever the doll next to her six foot tall father. Her gown was clingy until the hip where it flared outwards though not so much that it overwhelmed her slight frame. Her long sleeves were made of thick lace and coated her arms until they met her bare shoulders. As a concession to Mrs. Wolowitz for the modern gown she wore a transparent veil. She kept her eyes locked on Howard.

“I’m going to faint,” murmured Howard.

“You’re not going to faint,” Leonard assured him.

Mr. Rostenkowski offered his daughter’s hand and Howard nervously accepted. Together the
couple stepped under a canopy as the rabbi came to join them. He smiled kindly as Howard and Bernadette took a moment to settle themselves.

“Ladies and Gentlemen,” the rabbi said. “Today is a day of great joy, for we have come to witness the joining of two people in love....”

XxX

“God I look a mess,” said Penny as she did her best to fix her makeup. She’d called it in the laundry room: once Howard said ‘I do’ she started to cry. It was quite a transformative moment as in the uttering of those two words he became a man. “They really should do the photos before the marriage.”

“Bestie, I assure you that apart from the bride whose day this is no matter any evidence to the contrary you are still the apple of everyone’s eye;” Amy responded while moving the Kleenex box closer to Penny. 'Especially mine.'

“Ok let me just”—here she took a folded Kleenex and removed the excess lipstick—“and there we go.” Penny smiled at her reflection: the hair dresser really had flair when he pinned up her hair as the strategically placed 'stray curls' had a natural candor. She’d almost call the whole effect perfect were it not for Sheldon’s voice in her head warning her of a potential strike for using an absolute.

They exited the powder room and made their way through the newly married couple’s family to their friends. Raj smiled and nodded his head slightly in greeting.

“Just in time ladies. The wedding party’s next,” said Margot in a voice eerily similar to Bernadette. She grasped Raj’s hand causing an “Eep” to escape from his lips; from the blush on his face, however, it was not taken as a sign of distress.

“Ok, can I first have the Maid of Honor and Best Man,” asked the photographer’s assistant. Leonard and Amy followed her to where Howard and Bernadette were posed. The engineer still looked a tad overwhelmed but he seemed to stand straighter next to his ladylove.

“Howie you’re doing fine,” Bernadette soothed. Part of the deal she had with Mrs. Wolowitz and her mother was a huge wedding album in lieu of more guests in order to keep costs down. As it stood there were over a hundred guests.

Behind the camera there was trouble brewing.

“I hadn’t taken the possibility of posing for photographs into account before I agreed to this,” growled Sheldon as he watched his roommate and ex-girlfriend smile at the camera. Penny rubbed his elbow lightly as she did her best to catch his attention.

“Don’t forget you have to look happy. No frowning. No poker face.”

“But Penny I’m fluctuating between irritation and indifference. You know I’m not good at emotive joviality,” he pouted.

“I know honey but you’ve got to do it for Bernadette and Howard.” An idea came to her and she quickly whispered to Sheldon.

“Oh Amy Farrah Fowler will love that. It’ll be our private joke as only she, besides you of course, will truly know what I’m thinking,” he said before giving a gaspy laugh.
The assistant motioned for the rest of the bridal party to join the two couples before the camera. After a group shot with a wide-angle lens the couples were mixed and matched until every conceivable combination was captured for posterity.

Once the last picture was clicked Sheldon massaged his face. Never had he smiled so much in his life—not when he left Galveston behind, won the Stevenson Medal or finished his first doctorate did he feel the need to prolong the torture like he had now. Any time he felt he could take no more he’d feel Penny’s arm tighten around his or he’d catch a glimpse of her sympathetic smile and hear a whispered “Just a little longer Moonpie.” The Wolowitzs truly owed Penny for the quality of their photographs.

“I’ve never seen Sheldon behaving himself like this in front of a camera,” said Leonard to Amy as they exited to the waiting limo.

“That’s because you don’t know koalas,” Amy responded bluntly.

Leonard raised an eyebrow. “Koalas?”

“In psychotherapy they call it transference. Sheldon likes koalas. He pretended he was looking at them.”

“Huh,” said Leonard after a moment’s silence. “Who knew Sheldon had a soft spot for anything besides his grandmother and you?”

“You’d be surprised,” Amy said quietly.

XxX

He’d read the order of the place cards several times although with his eidetic memory each time beyond the first was redundant.

“This is unacceptable,” Sheldon murmured to himself as he sat down next to Leslie Winkle.

“Don’t think I’m too charmed by the idea either,” she responded. Apparently enhanced hearing was a common trait among physicists. “Don’t worry, I’ll do my part to engage in stimulating conversation,” and with that angled herself towards Leonard.

Sheldon pursed his lips as he gave her a slight scowl before turning to Amy. “I seem to be in a conundrum: I find myself situated next to my nemesis yet as the placards are distributed in order of man-woman I cannot ask you to exchange seats without breaking the order. I can’t contribute to chaos.” Amy processed his words and gave a curt nod.

“Understood. I shall do my utmost to engage in a smattering of chit-chat as social mores dictate. So have you taken up Dr. Givental’s request to collaborate on supersymmetric gauge theories in light of mirror symmetry?”

XxX

“What’s up pumpkin?” said Penny as she saw the look of disgust on Sheldon’s face.

“I don’t care for this part of the wedding ritual.” He took a moment to think. “Actually I object to the whole notion but in this instance I’m forced to witness a violation of several health codes.” He blanched as Bernadette took a bite of cake proffered by Howard. “How can she be sure he washed his hands?”
Penny couldn’t help but smile. “I’m sure he did. Besides, it’s not like they’re not going to be exchanging a lot more than germs tonight.”

“I suppose. However human contaminants have no business in food. As a waitress you should know there’s a sacred covenant between cook, server and patron.”

“Someone’s obviously never heard of whipped cream,” she said teasingly.

“Of course I know what whipped cream is but I fail to see how stiffened cream, sugar and vanilla are improved by the addition”—here his eyes opened wide—“Oh.” Penny laughed as he flushed. At the mention of whipped cream he had thought of Meemaw’s strawberry pies. He’d never associate the two again. “You can take a girl off the farm,” he said slyly as he looked at her out of the corner of his eye.

Penny’s mouth dropped open as she gave Sheldon a swat on the arm.

“Hey you come from cow country too,” she sputtered.

“Longhorn beef cattle. To link me to dairy cows I’d have to be from Pennsylvania,” he corrected.

“Too bad I don’t eat beef,” she said coyly.

“Broiler chickens are Texas’ second highest livestock export,” he said without missing a beat.

“I’m sure they are Moonpie,” she chuckled.

XxX

“Abba was right—call me the dancing queen,” Raj gushed to Leonard and Leslie. Since the dancing started and the bar opened he’d been out on the floor with a number of women. Aside from Sheldon he’d demonstrated the best technique at the dance class and the alcohol released enough of his performance anxiety to let his feet flow freely.

“I’m still trying to get Fred Astaire here out on the floor,” smirked Leslie causing Leonard to blush.

“I’m just waiting for the right moment,” he stammered.

“Why wait when the moment’s right now?” grinned Raj as he offered Leslie his hand. “I promise to be gentle yet gallant. Sultry yet suave.”

“Hands high or hospitalized,” Leslie said sweetly as she took Raj’s arm. To his credit his smile faltered for only a moment.

As soon as they left Leonard went to join Sheldon who was doing his best to be discreet standing away from the dance floor. The tall man greeted him with a nod while Leonard grabbed a glass of champagne from a passing waiter.

“What are you doing over here?” Leonard asked.

“As the hall provides little in the line of concealment I’m hiding in plain sight.”

“From who?”

Sheldon’s eye twitched as his demeanor animated. “The question is better phrased from whom am I not? I should have realized from knowing Penny that dancing functions as a powerful attraction to women. My one dance with Amy Farrah Fowler seems to have marked me as a desirable partner
so I’m doing my best to avoid confrontation.”

“I’m sure once they get a dose of Dr. Cooper’s charm they back off,” said Leonard before he took a sip.

“Indeed. However I’m forced to endure multiple intrusions into my personal space and that is intolerable.”

“Actually, speaking of women where are the girls?” Leonard commented as he looked around for the distinctive bridesmaid blue outfits.

“Amy Farrah Fowler is currently conversing with Mr. Rostenkowski and Penny is on the dance floor with our ever lovin’ Zack,” Sheldon said crisply.

Sure enough Leonard spotted Penny and her date moving among the other couples. “For a dumb guy he sure gets his way with women. Maybe Raj was right and we should hit up Dennis Kim for tips on asking women out.”

“Oh I don’t know, you’ve done quite well for yourself,” Sheldon said encouragingly. “Since I’ve known you I’ve seen you with a myriad of aesthetically pleasing women such as Joyce Kim, Dr. Stephanie Barnett, Priya Koothrappali and Penny.”

“You forgot Leslie,” Leonard said dryly.

“Yes, well Superman doesn’t praise Lex Luthor for his devilishly handsome demeanor—although the way the man carries off his baldness is truly—Oh no.” His brows met as he glared at the dance floor. “Inexcusable.”

“What?” Leonard asked excitedly as he scoured the room.

“Zack apparently lacks the ability to count to three. Penny’s foot is going to be—there! I told you,” Sheldon growled.

Leonard adjusted his glasses as he looked and had to admit Penny was doing her best to cover Zack’s lack of footwork. Of course if it was Leonard dancing instead of her chiseled beau she’d be lucky to hobble her way back to the table.

“He should be leading. A gentleman always leads,” spat Sheldon as his right arm jerked in a spasm of anger.

Again Penny made a slight fumble although to his credit Zack kept her standing.

“Intolerable.” Sheldon’s icy voice made Leonard turn to face his friend. “A lady is in trouble Leonard and Mary Cooper didn’t raise her son to be a bystander.” He strode out to the dance floor, leaving his open-mouthed roommate speechless.

Sheldon felt his breathing grow heavier with every step but he would not let himself be deterred. ‘Get it together Dr. Cooper.’ He neatly cut between two couples as he bee-lined towards Penny.

“Excuse me,” he said to Zack as he appeared at the brawny man’s side. “I’d like to engage in the age-old practice and ‘cut in’.”

“Sure,” Zack said amiably. “Cut into what?” Sheldon’s mouth began to tremble as his brain sought to wrap itself around the idea of someone truly being this stupid.
“Sweetie, he means he wants to dance with me,” soothed Penny absently as her eyes were solely on Sheldon.

Zack stepped back. “Well then just say so. Babe, I’ll be at the punch bowl,” and with that he was gone.

The other couples on the dance floor twirled in and out of Sheldon’s peripheral vision while both he and Penny stood as if in a stasis bubble. She smiled, albeit nervously, and Sheldon was sure the look on his face was no less tremulous.

“May I?” He offered his hand. Penny nodded as she accepted. The sensation of skin on skin as their fingers clasped left Sheldon breathless; his mind warned of the exposure to potentially harmful bacteria.

“You ok?” Penny asked, her green eyes bright and earnest.

In response he placed his other hand on her back and in a swift motion began the dance.

It had come as a pleasant surprise to his mother that Sheldon could dance as well as he could given his lack of interest in ‘gettin’ out there’. The waltz itself was not a far stretch from what he did everyday in his room as he poured over his math and physics text books. The basic motion was a pendulum swing whose arc was determined by the timing of the music combined with the width of the couple’s stride and proximity to each other. For instance, the current music employed a three-quarter beat. He guesstimated their stance at fourteen to sixteen inches since his eyes hadn’t left Penny’s from the moment they began moving.

The closeness of their bodies meant that the movement of their hips was synchronous as a result of isochronism—a property utilized in maintaining accurate time in clocks. Of course Penny’s nearness also invoked a variety of arrhythmic and respiratory reactions not observed in his earlier dances with Amy or Missy. He felt light-headed and disconnected from the rest of his body and wondered if it had anything to do with the scant scent of vanilla emanating from Penny’s hair. It was hard to tell nowadays what with all the additives to personal hygiene products.

‘She really is elegant’, Sheldon realized as he led Penny across the floor. Like anyone open to the allure of numbers he was always drawn to the elegant proofs: succinct, original and providing unexpected results. Take Penny’s arm for instance. According to the Pythagorean Theorem the length of her shoulder to elbow and elbow to wrist squared roughly equaled the length from her wrist to her chest. Well, perhaps not entirely accurate as she did have an ample chest. He felt his cheeks warm, something which did not get past his dance partner.

“What?” Penny asked with a grin.

“You said you weren’t very good at dancing the waltz and yet we’re moving quite commendably,” Sheldon stammered.

She laughed. “Yeah well every time I try it with someone else I screw up.”

“It may not be a matter of your technique. Perhaps you’ve never had the right partner,” he said seriously. Feeling her eyes searching his own Sheldon now found it an appropriate time to determine their stance width and promptly lowered his gaze.

“Sheldon.”

He steadied himself internally even as he looked up to grin. “Now we turn.”
The calculations now had a second variable as the arc of their curve as they neared the end of the dance floor was divvied up by the circumference of their slow turns. From their extended hands to his opposing elbow he estimated a distance of three feet which to \( c = \pi x d \) meant a circumference of two hundred and eighty seven point one four centimeters, one hundred and thirteen inches or nine point four one feet. Adjusting for the arc they’d achieve two point three six turns before straightening out.

Sheldon let out a soft gasp and closed his eyes as Penny laid her cheek against his chest. He swallowed before looking up lest they run into anyone. He was the one in charge of the dance and it was a responsibility he took seriously. Especially now as the location of Penny’s head meant she was totally dependent on him for direction. It was easy enough as he had height and always tended to look several spots ahead. He’d always done that: from grade five to college to doctorate; Stevenson Award to Maxwell Medal to Max Planck Medal; perhaps the Dirac Prize to Lorentz Medal to Nobel Prize?

It had been his dream since he’d first understood the prestige associated with the Nobel Prize to be recognized as one of the greats in his field. He had the talent, of that there was no doubt. He wanted others to acknowledge his greatness, his superior intellect and ingenuity. But perhaps there was a more elegant proof at work? Sheldon felt as if he walked in zero gravity as he realized ‘Solving for P=’ was comprised of any number of proofs like ‘home’ and ‘friendship’ and ‘trust’. At its most basic level it was simply thus: Belief. As the Vulcan Kiri-Kin-Tha’s first law of metaphysics stated, nothing unreal exists. ‘She believes in me. With her I can do anything.’

“Penny,” he said softly. “I have to tell you something.” Reluctantly she tore herself away from his chest and he beheld her green eyes. He was nervous and terrified. She was patient and welcoming. “Penny—” his left eye twitched as his vision related to his consciousness unwelcome news. “Mr. Rostenkowski wishes to dance with you.”

“He can wait,” she whispered. Sheldon brought them both to a halt as the man arrived.

“I hope you don’t mind the intrusion but as I’ve already danced with the other bridesmaids I’ve only you left on my list,” smiled Mr. Rostenkowski.

For a moment Penny’s smile faltered before she recovered with only Sheldon noticing the slip. “Of course,” she said.

His thumb traced the length of her palm as she withdrew her hand. Bowing slightly to the father of the bride Sheldon withdrew and made his way off the floor, bypassing a number of wistful stares from women looking for a dance partner with his style. He felt himself begin to tremble. He’d almost done it. He’d almost told her how he felt and now he felt, what? Foolish? Relieved? Agony.

Taking a glass of champagne from the waiter he exited the hall onto the patio beyond. There were a few couples dispersed along the stone railing that corralled the area towards the garden steps. Sheldon found his own place to privately mull over what had just happened or more accurately what was still happening as his nerves were testament to his unease. He was so used to being sure about everything. He winced. Another absolute. Obviously the statement was in error given his current dilemma. He wasn’t sure about Penny. No, that wasn’t it. He wasn’t sure about himself with Penny. This feeling he had, this ache causing his pectoralis major muscles to contract, was unlike any he’d ever known. He felt himself akin to an addict; a Sherlock Holmes of the physics world who instead of cocaine sought solace in the arms of a— No, that wasn’t right either. It didn’t matter if he ever touched Penny—it was her presence he couldn’t do without. Her inner joy.
“Good Lord just admit what you feel,” he growled to himself. But he couldn’t. It didn’t make sense. Oh it did in terms of explaining the motivations behind his actions over the previous months regarding Penny but a feeling as profound as this didn’t happen to homo novus.

It didn’t happen to him.

A bitter smile came to his face and he toasted the air. He drained the glass.

“Given your propensity for disrobing in public I suggest pacing yourself. Unless inebriation is your goal; in that case you should invest in a locking cinch belt.” Sheldon turned at the sound of Amy’s voice. The neurobiologist stood with her fingers casually clasped in front. “Hello Sheldon.”

“Hello Amy.” He looked at his former girlfriend in her baby blue gown, noting that she had switched from heels to a more sensible flat shoe for dancing. “I hope your evening has gone well.”

“Better than yours.”

His mouth began to tremble. “I don’t know what you mean. After being forced to participate in wedding rituals, photo shoots and sitting next to Leslie Winkle tonight has been relatively anticlimactic.”

“You forgot dancing from your list of burdens unless you’ve reconsidered your negative opinion,” Amy said with a crooked smile.

Sheldon hesitated after opening his mouth to speak. “I suppose it depends on the style of dance,” he said at last.

“And your partner,” she said cryptically.

“It was a pleasure dancing with you,” he said.

“I wasn’t talking about me.”

“Amy—”

“You always said we had a relationship of the mind. Please don’t do us a disservice and belittle my intelligence,” she said curtly. He paused for a moment as he set the champagne glass on the stone railing before nodding his head.

“You’re right. I’m—sorry. For a lot of things.” He swallowed as he gathered his thoughts. “Amy I’ve never known anyone to be more like myself than you. Your intellect, while not at my level, is nevertheless quite staggering. I can interact with you in ways I never thought possible unless there were vast improvements in artificial intelligence. Your absence over the last month has made my life all the poorer. I wish we could go back to our original paradigm.”

“Friends.”

“Friends,” he agreed.

Amy smiled as she stepped nearer although she was still mindful of his personal space. “Sheldon, I never stopped being your friend. Your decision to terminate our Relationship Agreement was surprising and it’s taken me a while to process the ramifications. After consultation and soul searching I have come to the conclusion that I’m ok with the shift in our status. I found myself a cocooned caterpillar with you. I want to be a butterfly.
“Most importantly I want to be looked at the way you look at Penny,” she said quietly. “You know I cannot fault you for your choice. I, too, have fallen victim to her zest for life. While her ambition to become an actress shall surely fail, by packing her belongings in her car and moving out here she’s taken a big risk—something I’ve never done. Until Penny, all my decisions came only after much consideration.”

“As have mine,” said Sheldon. His eyes gazed upon her with an anguish she’d never seen. “Amy I’m—unsure.”

She came up to stand face to face. “I know you’re scared Sheldon but the rewards are boundless.”

The tips of Sheldon’s mouth upturned ever so slightly as he reached out to finger her diamond tiara. “I believe you were in error when you claimed to be a princess when I gave this to you as there can be no doubt you’re a queen.” Amy kissed Sheldon lovingly on the cheek and embraced him, his arms folding over her in response.

XxX

Penny excused herself from Mr. Rostenkowski and made it her mission to find Sheldon. She had no idea what he was going to tell her but it couldn’t be half as important as what she had to tell him: she was ready. There was no doubt there would be trouble from time to time as Sheldon’s nit-picking idiocies drove her out of her mind. That being said, she wouldn’t trade one spat she had with him for a hundred sweet kisses from Leonard. She was Queen Penelope of the Junior Rodeo and Texas was cattle country. If anyone could tie Sheldon Cooper down it’d be her.

She hastily made her way towards the far side of the room, smiling as guests greeted her although her eyes were continuously scanning for a certain theoretical physicist. When he left her to dance Sheldon had walked off in this direction and she couldn’t see him cutting through the crowd. He definitely wasn’t sitting down and as she excused herself as she made her way through a small gathering realized she’d run out of options unless he went onto the patio.

Penny stopped herself at the door. She’d found Sheldon all right. Amy was in the middle of kissing him. She then snuggled into him. What was most critical to the whole encounter was that he hugged Amy—and Penny didn’t mean the robotic slapping of forearms on the back. Not knowing what to do, she slipped inside the hall and dazedly made her way towards Leonard, Leslie and Raj. ‘What the frak was that?’ She immediately tried to calm herself. Maybe they’re friends again. Or something more….

“That’s sure not helping, Penelope,” she grumbled to herself even as she slapped a smile on her face to greet her friends.

“Well hello there, pretty lady,” grinned Raj. “Looking for a brown boy to show you a good time?”

“Take it down a notch Romeo or my heel plays piñata with your testicles,” said Leslie. She raised an eyebrow as she focused on the bridesmaid. “Something wrong, Penny?”

“No. Just getting tired I guess,” she replied. The optical physicist was unconvinced but let the moment pass. “So how’s it been for you?”

Leonard fluffed out like a peacock. “Leslie and I danced.”

Leslie smirked. “All I had to do was threaten to withhold coitus for a month and he quickly came around. I must also say I found he performed fairly well. Perhaps he works better under constant threat.” She paused. “Ah I see Dr. Dumbass and his bride are ambling their way over.”
“Bride?” sputtered Penny as she glanced at the approaching couple.

“Like in Frankenstein,” Leonard explained. “They’re made for each other.”

“Yeah I guess.” Before she knew what she was doing Penny grabbed Raj’s hand and started off towards the dance floor. “Ok, Raj show me how to do it Asian style.”

Raj waved to his friends as he left. ’When you’ve got it Rajesh, you’ve got it.’

Sheldon’s steps shortened up as Penny and Raj left the group. She’d looked startled as she turned towards Amy and him then practically dragged the astrophysicist onto the dance floor. Since Sheldon hadn’t done anything to warrant a rebuke he merely noted the behavior as ‘odd’ and would later reflect on it in his Log since he had something more immediate to do.

“Hey you two,” said Leonard amiably. “I was wondering where you were.” He wiggled his eyebrows.

“What’s ‘this’?” asked a puzzled Sheldon as he wiggled his brows in return. Amy turned to her ex-boyfriend.

“Sheldon, I think Leonard is intimating that we skulked off like two thieves in the night to engage in carnal acts.”

“Well that cuts you off,” Leslie said as she took the champagne glass from Leonard.

“I believe they have a virgin punch. Perhaps we should procure less stimulating beverages for our male folk.” Amy bumped Sheldon’s hand with her own.

“Yes Amy, I’d—love a beverage,” Sheldon replied with an almost strangled look to his smile. ‘Yes, let’s all drink from an open communal bowl and share floating saliva emanating from the mouths of people talking as they ladle.’

Leslie gave a bemused look at Leonard. “Sure,” she said sweetly. ‘Let me ‘procure you a beverage’,” and with that walked off with Amy.

“You know, this is the first time we’ve both been in a relationship at the same time. It’s kind of nice,” smiled Leonard.

“What are the chances,” Sheldon said noncommittally. He noticed Leonard looking at him. “Of course I mean what are the chances I would find myself partnered up; your weakness for the ‘fairer sex’ has been well documented so there was no surprise there.”

“Nope.”

Sheldon cleared his throat. “Am I to take it that Leslie and you have taken your relationship ‘to the next level’?”

“I think so,” Leonard said after a moment. “I mean we haven’t said anything but it seems to feel that way. Whatever this is it isn’t a series of one night stands.”

“I see. And you find yourself satisfied with your circumstance?”

Leonard narrowed his eyes. “Perfectly. Sheldon, what’s going on?”

“Why Leonard, whatever do you mean? Can’t your roommate and best friend inquire as to your status?” Sheldon asked, a twitch flickering across the right side of his face.
“I guess,” Leonard said although he wasn’t buying the story. “You’re not mad I’m with Leslie are you?”

“Of course not. Granted, I find it hard to conceive of anyone engaging Leslie Winkle in a romantic relationship but that doesn’t mean you’ve made a bad choice.” He licked his lips as he tried to bridge his way to what he really wanted to talk about. “I assume this means you won’t be pursuing a change in your friendship paradigm with Penny at this time or any time in future?”

Leonard was silent as his eyes immediately sought out Penny on the dance floor. “Sheldon,” he said quietly. “Did Penny say anything to you about this?”

At once the tall man blanched. “I was just making conversation. I had noticed while walking Penny down the aisle that you were veritably gawking at her.”

“As bad as that, huh?” Leonard blushed. ‘God I hope Leslie didn’t see that.’ “Look, Penny and I have tried dating twice and it didn’t work. It’s taken a long time for us to be friends again and I don’t want to spoil it.” He smiled at Leslie as she approached with two cups of punch. “I also don’t want to spoil what I’ve got with Leslie.”

“So as you’ve ‘moved on’ you’d have no problem with Penny doing the same?”

“Of course not. I want her to be happy. I assume this is also ‘just making conversation’?” Leonard said with a crooked smile.

“Indeed,” Sheldon replied and with that the two men were silent.

“For you kind sir,” Leslie said as she handed Leonard a cup of punch. “Amy said she had to use the ladies and would bring your punch after she’d properly sanitized her hands,” she told Sheldon.

“Sensible,” he replied evenly. ’Amy you truly are a queen among women.’

XxX

Penny had to admit that Raj was a lot of fun when he wasn’t being a douche. His attempts to throw a little ‘Indian flair’ into their dance steps made for more than a few giggling bouts on both their parts.

“God I’m laughing too much. Let me off here so I can use the facilities,” she told Raj.

“Your wish is my command. Shall I wait?”

“No, it’s ok,” she said as she spotted Zack waving a hand. “Besides I think you’ve got a few ladies interested after our dance.”

“And what kind of gentleman would I be if I were to disappoint?” he winked as he kissed Penny’s hand.

“Later Raj,” she said as she rolled her eyes. She kept in the general direction of the washroom but left time for Zack to catch up.

“Been a while, babe,” he said with a grin.

“Yeah, I know. You were talking with a brunette at the punch bowl and when I looked later you were gone,” she said with a knowing smirk.

“Glenna. She’s Howard’s cousin. Nice girl,” he blushed. “So, where’re you off to?”
“Washroom. Look we’re here,” she said a little too brightly. “I’ll see you in a bit, ok?”

She cut through the powder room to the lavatory. ‘God what a night. First I fall for Sheldon yet can’t get him without Amy, then my date snogs it out with Howard’s cousin. Eww. There is no way this could get any worse.’

After using the facilities Penny thought to touch up her makeup.

“Hello Bestie,” said Amy as Penny entered the powder room. The neurobiologist was sitting on a stool in front of the mirror. “I hadn’t seen you come in. I must have been voiding.”

“Eyah.” Penny sat down next to Amy and took a concealer pen and lipstick from the little pouch that hung from her wrist.

“This has been quite a night; I’ve surpassed the total number of dances with male partners I’ve ever had, even if we include trollops around the lab with a cigarette-jonesing capuchin monkey,” gushed Amy who had wiped off her lipstick and was applying a medicated chap stick.

“Well good for you. Those lessons were such a good idea. Even Leonard got out dancing.” She patted her forehead and cheeks lightly with a Kleenex. The Micabella makeup used at the salon was amazing; the natural mica stone base was extremely durable and allowed her skin to breathe.

“I have yet to dance with Leonard but as it’s tradition for the wedding party to dance with each other at least once I must risk foot stomping and ankle twisting if only for Bernadette and Howard.” Amy hesitated for a moment. “Have you danced with Sheldon yet?” she asked innocently even though she knew the answer.

“Yup.” Penny felt herself blushing at the memory and quickly snagged another Kleenex to pat her face. “I can’t believe how good he is.”

Amy nodded. “Even considering his strict Christian upbringing and almost obscene worship of Star Trek I find Sheldon to be a man of many surprising talents.”

“Yeah, he’s a whackadoodle all right,” Penny said with a friendly grin. “He drives me crazy sometimes but I don’t know what I’d do without him.”

“Indeed. That’s why I’m glad we have resumed our relationship.”

Penny’s mouth dropped. “Really?”

Amy put her hand down and looked at Penny through the mirror. “We have agreed to continue our social activities. I’m happy to report there’s been no reduction in our level of affection for each other. If anything our consistency has been a comfort to me in this time of crisis.”

“Oh.” Penny felt the blood drain from her face as she recalled Sheldon and Amy embracing on the patio. She quickly stood up and gathered her makeup. “That’s great. I’m—happy for you both.”

“Penny?” Amy asked with a look of concern. “You don’t look well. Are you feeling faint?”

“No.” She forced her hands to quit trembling as she closed her pouch. “I should go.” She tried to smile but her lips would only go so far before she felt them begin to quiver. Abruptly she turned and exited the room before she made more of a scene.

'Oh God not now.' She found Zack in conversation with Sheldon although there was little doubt the physicist was doing his best to ignore the man. Sucking in a breath she put on her best waitressing
smile and went to collect her date.

“All finished. Let’s go,” she prompted Zack as her hands tugged on one of his own.

“Just a minute babe,” he responded as he pulled Penny a step towards himself. “I’m just working out a time for another trip to the comic store. So when’s good for you?”

“Wednesdays,” Sheldon said as he stared quizzically at Penny who was doing her best to avoid his eyes.

“Ok. I’ll call Penny and set up a day,” Zack replied.

“All set?” Penny asked in a voice that sounded a little too high even for her. ‘God please, please, please’—Zack grinned and led her off.

“Penny?” she heard Sheldon say with uncertainty.

She didn’t turn around. She wouldn’t know what to say if she had. Emotions were playing tug of war in her chest as she wasn’t sure if she was hurt, angry, embarrassed or some combination of the three. All she knew was that she had to get away. No more Sheldon. No more Amy.

‘Oh God there they are.’ As she danced with Zack Penny caught Amy and Sheldon talking with each other as they stared at her. She felt so exposed being out there under the scrutiny of the two scientists she could feel herself begin to panic.

“Zack, let’s get out of here,” she said breathlessly.

He looked at her for a moment before comprehension dawned and a devilish smirk came to his face.

“Whatever you say, babe.” Without a second thought he stopped dancing and planted a quick kiss on her lips. He gave Penny a knowing wink and together they left the dance floor.

XxX

Now that Sheldon had accomplished his goal and indirectly garnered his roommate’s blessing to ask Penny out he was anxious to find her and seal the deal. He frowned as he scoured the dance floor but didn’t see either Raj or her.

Excusing himself from Leonard and Leslie Sheldon made his way to the washrooms to collect Amy as two sets of eyes were always better than one. As he walked he spied Raj talking with a couple of ladies at the side of the dance floor but no Penny in the vicinity.

Sheldon inwardly groaned when Zack came up to him, drink in hand.

“Great party. Glad Penny invited me,” Zack gushed.

“Indeed,” muttered Sheldon in return as he continued to scour the crowd.

Zack noticed the distraction and turned to where the physicist was gazing. “Looking for someone?”

“Penny.”

“Well you won’t find her out there. She’s in the washroom.” Zack took a sip from his glass. “So, it’s been a while since I’ve been to the comic book store. What about you?”
“Three days. I go every Wednesday.” Sheldon brightened as the door opened and Penny emerged. She spotted Zack and him and made her way over.

“All finished. Let’s go,” Penny said as she took Zack’s hand and attempted to lead him away.

“Just a minute babe. I’m just working out a time for another trip to the comic store. So when’s good for you?”

“Wednesdays.” Sheldon tried to catch Penny’s gaze but she seemed to be intentionally avoiding his eyes. A sense of panic set in as he felt his stomach drop.

“Ok. I’ll call Penny and set up a day,” said Zack.

“All set?” asked Penny. If Sheldon didn’t know any better he’d say she looked positively desperate to get away but where and why?

“Penny?” he said tentatively but she turned and walked away with Zack to the dance floor as if she never heard him. Only that wasn’t true: the way her shoulders stiffened as he called her name more than suggested she heard. ‘Danger! Danger!’ Sheldon was at a loss to understand what was happening. Did she really have a burning desire to dance at precisely this moment? ‘Did I do something wrong?’ Immediately his brain recalled every interaction he had with Penny since the start of the reception.

“Sheldon we have to talk,” said Amy with an urgent tone to her voice. In his distraction he didn’t hear the neurobiologist come up beside him. “Penny’s distraught.”

“I’m gathering something has occurred. What happened?”

Amy pursed her lips as she watched Penny dance. “If I didn’t know any better I’d say she’s not impressed we’ve reconciled.”

“Why would she be against our friendship?” frowned Sheldon.

“Perhaps she feels threatened by our intellectual commonality although I can’t understand why since the matter has already been decided.”

All at once Zack and Penny stopped dancing and kissed.

“Sheldon I’m sorry,” Amy said quietly as she watched them leave the dance floor.

He didn’t say a word.

There was nothing to say.

xTBBTx

A/N Wikipedia: Pendulum; Pythagorean Theorem; Mathematical Beauty
Leonard took a sip of bottled water as he flicked through the channels. Normally he’d take advantage of viewing time without Sheldon to pop in a Babylon 5 dvd but the whole day had seemed off. It was only a guess since he’d spent the night at Leslie’s but it was more than likely Sheldon’s seclusion started last night. All Leonard knew was that he lost track of when his roommate left the reception; since Amy had also disappeared it was his hope that maybe they were spending couple time. Leonard’s brow furrowed as he took another drink. If they did go home together something horrible must have happened because except for two trips to the washroom Sheldon hadn’t left his bedroom.

A whistle came from Sheldon’s computer. Leonard checked his watch—eight thirty.

“Sheldon, it’s Amy,” he called out. There was no response and the electronic whistle sounded again. Leonard got up and padded his way to the computer and hit a key. Instantly Amy appeared in her apartment.

“Hi Amy,” said Leonard hesitantly. “Sheldon’s here but he won’t come out of his room.”

“Hello Leonard.” She nodded with a grim look on her face. “Given his propensity to internalize trauma I’m not surprised. I had hoped to speak with him earlier but I was busy making sure Bernadette and Howard got off to the airport with their luggage and proper documentation. Moreover I’ve made arrangements for the delivery of their presents to Mrs. Wolowitz’s house among other post-wedding details. I’m afraid I’ll be unable to make it to your apartment before Tuesday.”

“Great. Here’s hoping I can get him ready for work tomorrow.” He paused to gather his thoughts. “Do you know what happened? The last time I saw him at the reception he seemed fine. Both of you did,” he added quietly. “If it’s none of my business just tell me and I’ll back off.”

Amy glanced at the ceiling as she thought for a moment. “Since it’s after the wedding it is now appropriate to discuss our status. Sheldon and I have concluded our romantic relations.”

Leonard’s eyes went wide. “No way,” he gasped. “When? Last night?” No wonder Sheldon was devastated.

“Just over a month ago,” corrected Amy as Leonard shook his head in disbelief. “We both felt it important to keep our paradigm shift secret lest it detract from the wedding festivities.”

“I don’t know what to say,” Leonard sputtered.

“There’s nothing to be said. Sheldon and I have resolved our differences and continue to be friends.” She smiled amicably. “We’re fine Leonard.”

“O-kay. So why’s he all holed up in his room?”

At once she turned serious. “I’m afraid I can’t discuss that without his permission. As my not being forthcoming with pertinent information will only be a distraction I suggest we end this conversation. Tell Sheldon I would welcome a text. Goodnight Leonard.”

The window turned black and Leonard was alone.
“Huh.” Poking the side of his cheek with his tongue Leonard flopped into the padded chair to think. Something had happened but what? Sheldon was fine before the ceremony and was even on his best behavior at the photo shoot. There hadn’t been any sniping between him and Leslie at the dinner and whenever Leonard ran into him at the reception he acted normal.

A thought of ‘That’s not true’ screamed through Leonard’s head. When had Sheldon ever been this well behaved? The only blip on the radar was when Sheldon got angry and stormed onto the floor to rescue Penny from Zack. Leonard shook his head. Nope. That wasn’t normal either. Sheldon danced and it wasn’t even a non-optional convention. More to the point, the physicist looked like he was enjoying himself. Leonard had thought it something akin to a Christmas miracle as he watched his friends glide across the floor for Penny herself moved with her own grace.

Penny. His head cocked to the left. Sheldon was with Penny most of the day. Sheldon asked Leonard if he’d moved on from Penny. Asked if he’d mind her seeing someone else. “Oh my God,” Leonard whispered.

Although not in Sheldon’s league Leonard was an exceptional physicist. 'Sheldon and Amy aren’t going out.' His job was to essentially put two and two together. 'Sheldon asked me about Penny.' Sometimes he came up with things on his own. 'At the end of the night Penny left with Zack.' But original concepts weren’t his strong suit. 'The Penny Blossoms in his room.' Unfortunately this was a path Leonard knew all too well.

Before he knew it he was off the chair and in the hallway. “Sheldon.” He remembered seeing Penny with Eric after she and Leonard broke up. It had crushed him. “Sheldon, Amy called.” Then there were other men in her life. He felt insignificant. “I know what’s going on.” New Years Eve at the comic book store when Zack had kissed her nearly killed him. ‘I understand.’ “I’ll be in the living room in case you want to talk.”

XxX

Sheldon waited until Leonard left the hallway before he resumed reading. Since waking up he’d eaten breakfast, voided, showered and got dressed even though he wasn’t planning to venture out beyond his room. Good hygiene required a faithful adherence to routine and a routine contributed to an overall sense of wellbeing. It was a simple tit for tat that made sense and right about now he clung to anything suggesting normalcy. He’d taken a few bottled waters, Goldfish crackers and a Golden Delicious apple into his room before Leonard got home. While it felt like the end of the world he wouldn’t weaken and raid his emergency disaster rations.

He really had to congratulate himself for maintaining his Log books as it made it simpler for him to determine where he went so wrong. As he read and reread the entries over the past five weeks he came to the conclusion that his primitive emotional drive overwhelmed his rational faculties until he interpreted every friendly action on Penny’s part as something more than it actually was. In the past she’d taken care of him when he was sick and cheered him up when Kripke bothered him and made sure no one touched his food without wearing gloves. She was being a good friend when she listened to his fears about turning thirty and when they danced she only wanted him to loosen up not fall in—

Not that he wasn’t already interested in her; since Penny’d moved into apartment 4B he’d devoted fifty eight percent of his journals to recording and analyzing their conversations so as to better understand the complex emotional and sarcastic undertones that emanated from her. Even then he still managed to get things wrong and either hurt or anger Penny. At first he thought it was a matter of her being too sensitive but if last night showed him anything it was that emotions were painful and dangerous. As a ten year old he sustained radiation burns from his home-made CAT scanner
but at least he knew the principles involved in its construction and operation. He obviously didn’t have a clue about relationships since he couldn’t tell if Amy had liked him and erroneously thought Penny did.

At least he hadn’t told her how he felt. ‘Thank you Jesus.’ He only had to get over this hurdle and they could continue being friends like always. There’d be no problem; if Leonard could handle seeing Penny every day and going out on dates and knowing she was having coitus with—

Sheldon angrily flipped to the back of the journal and grabbed his pencil. He began page twelve in the same meticulous block printing. Over and over the word ‘STUPID’ repeated. Seventeen times to a line. Five hundred and seventy eight to a page. Six thousand three hundred and fifty eight and counting.

XxX

"Now I understand why Leonard has Alanis Morissette in his collection." Penny wished she had something heartbreaking yet angry; she had Jann Arden to fall back on but the songs were only making the deep hole in her chest even deeper. Yesterday was such a whirlwind of highs and lows she still felt disoriented. Eat your heart out Katy Perry.

After her conversation with Amy in the bathroom Penny found herself unable to make sense of anything. She thought—no she knew—Sheldon liked her and yet in less than three days since he’d worried about her going to the bachelorette party he’d reconciled with Amy. ‘What the hell was that?’ Here she was taking things slowly so as to not spook Mary Cooper’s ‘Baby Deer’ and instead she got bitten in the ass. Should she have moved faster? Normally when a guy liked her she knew what to do: either decline the invitation or jump at it with everything she had. In this case either choice would have been disastrous. Better to hide in her apartment like she had at the reception until she could sort things out for herself.

Penny would have given her soul to leave the dance floor and Sheldon and Amy’s stares. It was a miracle Zack got the hint; she hadn’t expected him to kiss her, however. Nevertheless it wasn’t the time to quibble since he’d taken her by the arm and exited the hall. He began to chuckle as she pulled him down the stairs into the garden. She didn’t want to be on the patio where Amy and Sheldon had made up. It seemed obscene to do so. Once they’d traveled along the path Zack dragged Penny behind a blooming rose bush and began kissing her. He was surprised when she put her hands between them and asked him to stop. After clearing up the confusion she’d practically sent him running to find Glenna. Just because Penny wasn’t having a good time didn’t mean Zack shouldn’t get lucky. She didn’t know how long she stayed in the garden thinking over what had happened. It had taken a good dose of courage to reenter the hall but to her relief Sheldon and Amy were no where in sight.

At least she didn’t drink herself silly. In fact Penny was surprised she wasn’t drinking now. Alcohol had always been a great friend when things went wrong but this time her stomach wouldn’t have it. Every time she thought she’d calmed herself down images of her dance with Sheldon sent her gut roiling.

“I guess I know what he wanted to talk to me about,” she whispered to herself. Unwelcome tears slipped down her face before she could close her eyes. Here she was thinking Sheldon was ready to be with her when in reality it was Amy all along. Thank God she hadn’t run into him as she’d hoped and told him what she felt. Now there was a chance for the two of them to pretend nothing happened. Technically nothing did happen but it sure didn’t feel that way.

With Leonard, her relationship had a definite beginning, middle and end. Even when she went through a period where she wasn’t quite over him there was at least some tangible memories to
hold her together. All she had with Sheldon were bits and pieces that told her to get ready for something spectacular. Penny began to cry in earnest. "Why couldn’t it have been me?" Another thought told her to get real. He was a theoretical physicist and she, a college dropout turned waitress. If she was meant for a fairytale ending she’d have struck it rich by now with her acting career instead of striking out.

She had to get it together, at least for Amy’s sake if no one else’s. As far as anyone would know things between Sheldon and Penny were the same as always. It would surely be her best performance, but one she’d begin tomorrow.

Today just hurt too damn much.

xTBBTx

Sheldon went through his routine normally enough and when greeted responded in kind. It was when Leonard looked into his roommate’s eyes that he knew something was amiss. There was a hardness that hadn’t been there previously; a menacing quality to his presence as he moved and talked so effortlessly even though Leonard could feel the tension underneath. There was no way he was going to let this much angst simmer. It was too soon since Sheldon’s near breakdown and Leonard was damned if he’d let him go through that again.

Once they got into the car the atmosphere was frightening as Sheldon’s calm demeanor did little to curb Leonard’s foreboding. His tone was too concise even for Sheldon; only when the wedding reception was brought up did he clumsily steer into another topic. At least it gave the experimental physicist an idea where things went wrong on Saturday. After he’d let Sheldon off at the door he’d parked the car and rested his forehead on the steering wheel. All he had to do was get through today and Amy’d be there tomorrow to help with the damage control.

After lunch Leonard got a text from Raj asking about Sheldon. He’d found the tall man’s behavior chilling and wondered if Sheldon hadn’t finally snapped and become a super villain. Leonard debated about letting the astrophysicist know what was going on but as he had little more than his own hunch to offer he thought better of it.

It was five thirty when Sheldon called Raj regarding the ordering and pickup of their Thai food.

“I’ll of course have the mi krop with extra peanuts and chicken satay,” Sheldon said.

“Ok, that’s Leonard and you. What does Penny want?” At once Sheldon’s face began to flush.

“I—don’t know.” It’d be easier to say that she didn’t want to eat with them but it would seem weak on his part. Besides if it ever got back to her she’d know how much she’d affected him and he didn’t want that. “Just a moment.” He picked up his cell phone.

'We’re ordering Thai food. Are you interested? If so, what do you want?’ he texted Penny.

In apartment 4B Penny heard her phone tweet. When she saw who the message was from her heart nearly broke through her chest cavity. That is, until she got the context of his call.

“Crap on a cracker,” she growled. After everything that happened on the weekend he’s asking about Thai food like nothing happened. She was ready to go over and rip his throat out before she remembered the promise she’d made to herself about keeping this whole mess quiet.

“Ok sweetie, let’s play your game,” she said with a hard smile as she typed her response.

'Thanks. I’ll have the vegetarian Pad Thai.'
Sheldon took a moment to register her acceptance before relaying the order to Raj. Leonard’s head involuntarily turned towards his roommate at the mention of Penny’s name. He waited for something, anything, to happen after Sheldon hung up but instead the lanky man grabbed the remote and turned on to the SyFy channel.

Penny checked herself in the mirror one last time and smiled. As far as she could see she looked normal. She’d wait until the food was there before she went over just in case things were weird. Opening her wallet she took out an extra ten dollars and put it in her pocket. There was no way she’d be short tonight and give Sheldon Lee Cooper a reason to look any further down his nose at her. Tonight he got her ‘A’ game.

Raj’s quick knock at the door made Sheldon jump; he hadn’t realized he was so nervous. Hopefully Leonard hadn’t seen his reaction. He had the feeling his roommate was paying too close attention to what he was doing and he didn’t like it.

“Sheldon you have to vary your menu,” admonished Raj. “The cashier was all friendly until she saw my order and knew it was yours. What did you say to her?”

“I had called to complain about the inconsistency in volume assigned to the request for ‘extra peanuts’,” explained Sheldon. “She had come up with an offer of counting each peanut but I assured her a leveled measuring spoon would suffice. She then said the order wouldn’t be long and hung up.”

Leonard took his carton from Raj. “I don’t think she was serious about counting the peanuts.”

Sheldon paused in thought. “Drat. And here I was thinking the service was about to improve.”

“Hey guys,” said Penny cheerily as she entered and closed the door.


She paused for a moment as she realized she’d be sitting next to Sheldon but one look at his casual demeanor as he stirred his mi krop left her more determined than ever and she veritably bounced onto the couch.

Frowning, Sheldon pulled himself closer to the end of the couch. He didn’t know what he’d expected from their first meeting since Saturday but it wasn’t this level of exuberance.

“So how was your day?” asked Leonard as Raj handed Penny her food.

“Slow thank goodness.” She really paid for being on her feet in heels for as long as she was on Saturday. “You?”

“Oh, well you know, just getting together a proposal for a joint project with colleagues at MIT. Usual stuff.”

“How is working with Dr. Franklin in any way ‘usual’?” said Sheldon with a raised eyebrow. “Normally your work is ignored by the scientific community.”

“God Sheldon that’s harsh,” admonished Penny.

“I’m just stating a fact. You’re the one insisting it’s a personal slight,” he replied evenly.

Penny shook her head as she stabbed at her Pad Thai. “It doesn’t matter what you meant, you shouldn’t say things like that.”
“When I need a lesson in social etiquette I’ll consult an expert,” he said curtly.

“It’s ok,” Leonard said hurriedly to Penny in order to ease the tension. “I’m used to it.”

“It doesn’t mean you have to put up with it. I wouldn’t,” said Penny sharply.

“Obviously,” concurred Sheldon as he took a bite of his food.

“Yeah well I don’t like someone making me look stupid.”

“Too bad you don’t extend the courtesy,” he said quietly.

Penny flushed as she turned towards him. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Merely an observation—I’m not allowed to express an opinion.”

“Oh by all means express away. It’s not as if you mean what you say anyways.”

“Excuse me?” Sheldon snapped.

“Oh I’m sorry. What you don’t say.”

“You’re making fun of this?” he spat as he stood.

“Fun? You think it was fun seeing you snogging with Amy?” Penny said as she got out of her own seat.

“What are you talking about?”

“I saw the two of you snuggled together on the patio,” she said hotly.

Sheldon’s mouth dropped as comprehension dawned on his face. “Penny, that’s not what happened.”

“I might not have a perfect memory like you but I sure as hell know what I saw so don’t get off telling me what I did or didn’t see,” Penny said in a loud voice. “You strung me along and like a stupid puppy I followed.”

“Amy and I are not in a romantic relationship,” he countered adamantly.

“So you’re saying she’s lying? Because that’s what she told me in the bathroom.”

“If that’s what she implied then yes but I don’t see her doing anything of the kind.”

Penny stepped over Raj’s feet as she made her way to the door. “I don’t think ‘I’m glad we resumed our relationship’ is a hint, Sheldon.”

“It’s not true, but even if it was at least she’d given you the courtesy to let you know privately instead of flaunting her rebuff in front of everybody like you did when you kissed that idiot,” growled Sheldon as his hands curled into fists at his side.

Now it was Penny’s turn to blanch. “I didn’t kiss Zack, he kissed me.”

“Semantics. Your lips met.”

She rolled her eyes. “Whatever Sheldon. It’s ok for you and Amy but I get kissed and I’m a slut?”
“I never said that,” he said angrily.

“You never say a lot of things but you sure imply an awful lot or is this another case where Penny’s not bright enough to get it?”

Penny and Sheldon glared at each other for a moment before she left, slamming the door behind her. A moment later a second slam was heard as Sheldon stormed into his bedroom.

The room was silent.

“Holy shit,” breathed a wide-eyed Raj.

xTBBTx

With each step to the landing Amy practiced deep breathing exercises in order to control her nerves. After Leonard called her last night she knew things wouldn’t get patched up with a simple text so she waited until she had time to visit both parties. Amy paused in the center of the landing and looked first at one apartment then the other. Deciding Penny would be the better choice to start with she crossed over to 4B and knocked at the door.

“Penny, it’s Amy. It’s imperative we talk.” She fought to control her heart rate as the seconds ticked. “Penny please.” She exhaled as the lock turned and the door opened.

Penny was in her Cheesecake Factory uniform and had one hand holding her hair in preparation for a pony tail. “Hey. I’ve got to leave soon so this has to be short.”

Amy nodded. “Hopefully this will be dealt with promptly.” With her eyes she looked at the couch. Penny caught her meaning and let the neurobiologist into the room. Sitting primly, Amy made to dust off the cushion next to her in preparation for Penny.

Sighing, Penny sat down in an exhaustive huff. The two women looked at each other in silence.

“So I guess Sheldon told you about last night,” Penny said at last.

“It was Leonard, actually. He gave me the gist of the altercation and I have to say I’m disturbed by its content. I’m here to clear up some confusion and hopefully reconcile your differences.”

Penny laughed bitterly as she tied her hair. “‘Differences’? Batman and the Joker have differences. Sheldon’s just a whack-job.”

Amy frowned. “You don’t mean that.”

Penny was about to gather up a big ol’ ‘You betcha’ but there was something in her friend’s look that burst her bluster. “Sorry,” she murmured. “I know he’s your boyfriend.”

After pulling down the hem of her wool skirt Amy folded her hands on her lap and looked at her best friend. “That’s the first thing we need to correct. Sheldon is not my boyfriend. He’s a boy friend.” Penny’s face didn’t convey anything. “A mate or chum if you will. Penny—”

“Wait a minute, wait a minute. You’re not a couple?”

“No. As I was saying—”

“So why the hell did you tell me you were seeing each other?” Penny exploded.

“Bestie, I didn’t say Sheldon and I were a ‘couple’, only that our relationship had resumed,” Amy said matter-of-factly.
Penny was confused and felt her stomach begin to knot. “But you said your feelings were consistent and a comfort.”

“Sheldon and I altered our friendship paradigm to ‘date’ but aside from the change in classification from friend to girlfriend there wasn’t much difference. In other words we didn’t ‘do’ anything risqué or sultry with hot unbridled passion like a bitch in heat.” Amy cleared her throat. “Our current relationship never regressed because there was little progress although all of this may have changed after Saturday and my ill-conceived attempt to let you know that I was ok with everything. Now I’ll be lucky if he even wants to talk to me. Penny you have to believe me I never meant for any of this to happen. Please don’t hate me.”

“I don’t hate you Amy,” Penny mumbled as she took in everything that was said. She began to feel a pressure in her ears. “I just don’t know what to say. I mean I saw the both of you on the patio and then you said, well you didn’t but it sounded like you made up with him.”

“Misconception two. We’d just decided to maintain our friendship and Sheldon had parlayed a particularly flattering compliment so I reacted with feminine whimsy. I assure you the kiss was chaste and the hug innocent.”

At once Penny was off the couch and ran into the bathroom. Amy kept her composure as she went into the bedroom to locate the box of Kleenex and then sat on the bed waiting for Penny to finish throwing up. In this instance a little of the neurobiologist came to the forefront as Amy wondered what neurons in her best friend’s head fired in such a way as to bring on the nausea.

In the bathroom Penny was in the throes of dry-heaving as she willed her body to expel her emotional turmoil. 'Amy and Sheldon aren’t dating.' This was good news. It meant everything that was said, or in this case unsaid, was true. Sheldon—'I made fun of his feelings for me.' She made another dry heave into the toilet followed by a sob. Quickly she clamped her mouth closed. If she started crying now she wouldn’t make it to work and she couldn’t afford to blow any shifts if she had a prayer of staying afloat this month. Closing her eyes Penny willed her lips to stop trembling as her nails dug into her palms.

“Penny?” Amy said softly as she stood in the doorway. “I hate to be the harbinger of doom but it’s nearly twenty after and I believe your shift starts on the hour.”

It took a moment for her body to react but slowly Penny began to nod her head. As she opened her eyes to look at her friend she had to wipe her cheeks with her hands.

“God, I’m a mess,” she sniffled.

“I must admit you don’t smell too pretty either. Might I suggest reacquainting yourself with your toothbrush and mouthwash?”

As Penny brushed and gargled, Amy talked. Yes, after Penny went to work she’d speak with Sheldon. No, there was no guarantee he’d listen to her much less accept her apology but she had to try.

“It’s not your fault, Amy. I’m the dumbass who didn’t understand—like always,” Penny sighed as she turned off the light to the bathroom.

“Perhaps I should take more time to learn social slang so my words don’t boggle you with their formality,” Amy said seriously. “We bang on, sistah?”

“Yeah, we ‘bang on’,” Penny said with false enthusiasm.
“Good. Now if you could clear up one thing for me it’d prove helpful in my talk with Sheldon. Aside from the obvious answer that your hormones got the better of you after smelling his manly scent why did you kiss Zack?” Amy shifted on the bed to make room for Penny.

“Oh my God. Why is everybody saying that? I didn’t kiss him he kissed me—and if you say ‘semantics’ Amy I swear I’ll scream.” Penny lay back on the bed, stretching her arms over her head.

Amy joined her friend. “It’s not semantics, Bestie. I’ve only ever kissed Sheldon and believe me it would’ve made a world of difference if he ever initiated any advances.” Her eyes rolled to Penny’s face. “I take it by your word choice Sheldon was not convinced by your argument.”

“‘Our lips met’. What was I supposed to do, slug Zack out in the middle of the dance floor? He didn’t know what was going on.” At this Penny began to giggle. “God when does he ever know what’s going on?”

“His basic comprehension skills are a tad lax,” agreed Amy with a smile of her own.

Penny groaned as she put an arm over her eyes. “What am I going to do, Amy? I basically called Sheldon a jerk for leading me on.”

“Let me talk to him first and we’ll go from there as there’s no point in speculating given the number of possible outcomes.” She checked her watch. “Again I have to bring up the time.”

“I know.” Penny sat up. “Amy do you ever get the feeling you’re cursed?”

Amy thought for a moment. “While I’ve endured some misfortune in my life I can’t say I’ve ever felt targeted by a particular entity. I take it by the line of inquiry you’re feeling particularly ill-fated?”

“Story of my life.” Penny stood up and straightened out her uniform. “I leave Nebraska for an acting career and I spend the next five years waitressing. I meet Leonard and then shy away from commitment. Now Sheldon wants to be something more and I chase him off.”

“From your narrative it seems you’re your own enemy Penny.”

The waitress turned to look at the neurobiologist. She wanted to be angry but as her mother said snapping at the truth only made you look like an idiot. “Look I’m done at nine so give me a call and let me know what happened.”

“Will do.” Amy followed Penny into the living room while the blond collected her purse and keys. “If it isn’t too late and the man nixes the talk maybe we can hang after you’re finished working your gig.”

“Sure,” said Penny as they exited the apartment and she locked the door. “Good luck with Sheldon.”

“As he always points out there is no such thing as luck”—here Amy paused as Penny disappeared from view down the stairs—“although in this instance a little hokey pokey couldn’t hurt.” Amy tucked a strand of hair behind her ear and cleared her throat before knocking at 4A.

“Hey Amy, come on in,” invited Leonard as he opened the door. “So how’d it go with Penny?”

“It seems my turn of phrase confounded her leading to the comedy of errors we have before us,” said Amy as she crossed the common room towards the hall. “Fortunately we’ve rectified the
situation and I can report our bond is as tight as ever. I take it by Sheldon’s absence you haven’t been as successful?”

Leonard leaned a hand on the stuffed chair. “We had some progress. He was out here watching television until we heard Penny and you in the hall.” The very instant the two women spoke Sheldon had turned off the television and marched into his bedroom despite Leonard’s plea not to go.

“I see. Well it seems the mountain will have to go to Mohammed,” Amy said with a grim smile before venturing down the hall. She listened outside Sheldon’s door for a moment and hearing nothing, proceeded to knock. “Sheldon, it’s Amy.” Silence. “We have to talk.” She put her hand on the knob.

“Don’t come in! No one can come in!” said a panicky voice from behind the door.

“Then you’ll have to come out here.”

“I don’t want to.”

“Sheldon, you may think we’re at an impasse but I assure you my objective shall prevail. I will concede to you the location but our talk is non-optional.” She waited. “A prompt response is also required.”

“I will come out to talk only if we agree I may terminate our discussion at any time and return to my room.”

“If you leave before I’ve presented my argument I will have no choice but to follow and start again.”

“Unacceptable.”

“Too bad. You will hear me out.”

… “Very well. I shall join you shortly.”

“I’ll be waiting,” and with that Amy turned abruptly and went back into the living room. “Leonard, I require this space so I may converse with Sheldon.”

“No problem,” he said as he turned off the tv. “Call me after you’re finished.” He grabbed his keys from the bowl and exited the apartment.

Amy crossed over to the couch but thought better of it and instead chose the stuffed chair. She leaned back with her hands clasped and waited. A few minutes later a door opened and Sheldon made his way to his spot, the jut to his jaw and pursed lips indicating he was not pleased.

“Before we begin let me inform you I’m not interested in idle chit-chat,” he said flatly.

Amy nodded. “Agreed. It has come to my attention that several misconceptions were borne on Saturday. We need to settle them before they do irreparable harm.” She looked to Sheldon for input but the physicist sat still as stone. “Firstly, Penny interpreted what I’d said in the bathroom as meaning we’d reconciled our romantic relationship when I only meant that we’d salvaged our friendship. She then took our earlier aside on the patio as a sign of our togetherness and subsequently left the bathroom distraught. I then made the error of assuming she was upset because you and I were friends, which I told you shortly before we left and for that I apologize. Discuss.”
Sheldon took a moment to absorb her words. “Apology accepted. You couldn’t have anticipated Penny’s incomprehension although there are times when communicating with her is like talking to a monkey.”

“As I talk with monkeys I know your analogy is erroneous,” countered Amy. “Penny might not be homo novus but she is astute enough to grasp social concepts exceedingly well. Besides if she were analogous to a primate I doubt you’d be in love with her.”

“I never said I was.”

“That may be part of the problem. You never stated your intent but at the same time you have expectations that Penny follow the basic tenant of a Relationship Agreement.” She gave him a knowing look. “There’s no doubt you’re in love, Sheldon.”

He turned his head to gaze out the window. He couldn’t get over how easily Amy talked about love; aside from his Meemaw and his blue jay he’d never loved another soul. Never felt as vulnerable as when he saw Penny on the dance floor with Zack.

“They kissed,” he said quietly.

“There have been many times when you were unreceptive to my touching yet you put up with it,” Amy pointed out. “She neither initiated nor was gratified by the encounter so it’s irrelevant.”

“All of this is irrelevant. I’ve decided to conclude my pursuit of Penny. I don’t like the uncertainty and vulnerability which accompanies affection. I’d rather be self-assured and alone rather than expose myself to this continued misery.” Amy wanted to protest but his clear blue eyes were set. “I shall chalk this up to a failed attempt at social conformity and will know better than to repeat the process.”

“No man is an island’, Sheldon. Even you.”

“Perhaps. That doesn’t mean I can’t try.” He stared fixedly at her for a moment before standing. “I’ve heard you out and we’ve remedied the errors from Saturday. I’d say this conversation has concluded itself.”

“Hardly. We’ve addressed the errors but the ultimate conclusion you’ve reached is disastrous. Nevertheless, I agreed to stick to the facts not opinion.” She gave a curt nod before she got out of her seat and made her way to the door.

“Thank you Amy,” he said evenly.

She hesitated a moment. “As your friend I can only tell you that you’ll regret your decision. Goodnight Sheldon.”

Out in the hall, Amy closed her eyes. Catastrophe.

xTBBTx

She was scared, of that much she was sure. Penny reread Leonard’s text: Sheldon was in the living room. The ball was in her court.

After talking with Amy she realized she’d have to do a lot more than apologize. While it didn’t exactly tickle to have Sheldon suggest she was a slut for kissing Zack she knew now wasn’t the time to win another round; she had to make sure they were still playing. Only that was part of the problem: they danced around the subject of his liking her so long—"No, we liked each other. Don’t
Penny got off the couch and took a deep breath. She was so nervous she’d wanted to have a drink to take the edge off but decided against it. Besides, if things went horribly wrong she’d have a bottle at the ready. ‘Always be prepared’ wasn’t a junior rodeo motto but in this case she’d make an exception.

'I’m coming over', she texted Leonard.

In apartment 4A Leonard felt the phone buzz and read the message. He quickly typed in his confirmation and got out of his seat. “I’ll be back.”

“Where are you going?” asked Sheldon as he paused the dvd.

“Raj wanted me to look up something for him,” said Leonard nervously as he hurried down the hall.

“I’ll just be a minute.”

“Odd. What could be so urgent it couldn’t wait until he came over to play Halo?” As if in answer the front door opened and Penny entered. Since Sheldon didn’t believe in coincidences he quickly put two and two together and made a note to speak to Leonard about involving himself in matters that were none of his business.

After the initial shock of seeing each other Penny was relieved he didn’t leave the room.

“Hey Sheldon,” she said tentatively.

“Penny.” He turned off the television.

“Don’t go. Please,” she said as she sat down on the far side of the couch.

“I wasn’t planning on leaving. This is after all my home. If anyone is in violation of trespassing laws it’s you.” Much to his relief his voice was calm; he didn’t want to sound weak.

“Look, can we just talk? No fighting—just talk.”

“As I doubt I have a choice in the matter I’ll agree.” He angled his body to face her. “You may proceed.”

She cleared her throat. “I’m sorry about what happened a couple of days ago. Things were said that shouldn’t have been. When Amy told me about you and her I realized I was an idiot.” Penny gave a mocking chuckle. “What a surprise, huh?” She looked at Sheldon but there was no reaction and she felt her courage begin to weaken. “I can’t believe how screwed up this got.” Feeling her eyes begin to burn she lowered her head to stare at her hands.

“I’d anticipated difficulties but nothing like this,” Sheldon agreed. “You always have a way of confounding me, Penelope.” Her shoulders stiffened at the sound of her name.

“It’s what I do,” she said as she sat up.

“Indeed.”

Silence made its way into the room. Sheldon’s eyes gathered in Penny’s every detail from the way her hair fell gently to either side of her face to the fold of her pant leg as she sat with one leg tucked under herself. While he wasn’t emotionally astute he did know she was very upset yet trying hard to contain herself and for that he was grateful.
“So what do we do now?” she asked at last.

He recognized the look in her eyes as something he himself faced in the mirror when he’d realized he liked her—fear. Fortunately he was no ordinary man, he was homo novus; he wouldn’t succumb to baser emotions. Amy Farrah Fowler was incorrect. He was an island. Timeless stone.

“I’d like to retain our friendship. Your favorable attributes haven’t lessened because of my foolhardy attempt to alter our paradigm. Hopefully you feel the same.”

Tears streamed down Penny’s face as she nodded wordlessly. She sought out the blue in Sheldon’s eyes but only found herself reflected in their pools.

“Your apology is accepted. I am also—sorry.” His head angled to the left as a thought occurred to him. “It’s too bad I abhor the idea of cyborg technology due to my fear of being taken over by the machine overlords because a memory reset protocol would be welcome at this moment.”

“Forget all about this,” Penny whispered.

“But like Wii bowling life has no do-overs. Best to just learn from our mistakes and move on.” His attempt to uplift her spirits failed dramatically as her face twisted in sorrow. He knew there was nothing else he could say, not without risking everything. One more clumsy attempt at consolation and he’d ruin even this tenuous relationship.

“I’ve got to go,” she sputtered while uncoiling herself from the couch.

“Am I to assume you’ll be unavailable for Halo tonight?” he asked evenly.

“Yeah.” She wiped her cheeks with her palms.

Sheldon stood up. “I hope you feel better soon.” His face was unreadable.

She gave a hollow smile. “You know me: junior rodeo.” She opened her mouth to say something more but couldn’t. “Bye Sheldon.”

“Goodnight Penny,” he replied as his neighbor left the apartment. There was a moment as Sheldon stared at the door before turning away. He looked at his watch; Raj would be over soon so he pulled out the take-out menus and put them on the table for easy access.

Penny managed to keep it together until she got to her bedroom.

“Son of a bitch!” She flopped onto her bed and put a pillow over her face to keep from screaming. Not arguing with Sheldon was like not breathing; every time she thought about interrupting his smooth as silk delivery she kept quiet because it would only end badly. She’d almost died when he called her ‘Penelope’. He sounded so like her mother when she was disappointed in her youngest daughter. It was like the cherry on top of a very shitty sundae.

Maybe she could use her ‘acting skills’ and pretend everything was ok. After all she and Leonard managed to stay friends. It only took what, two years before everything became normal? Of course it’d take a few months for the initial adjustment: she couldn’t just do her laundry on Saturday and eat at the apartment like nothing happened. She wasn’t Sheldon who even now waited for Halo night to begin.

The problem was she wasn’t anything. No, that’s not true. She was lonely. And tired. The girl who won third prize at the junior rodeo was beat. There wasn’t enough alcohol in California to make her feel better much less give her the illusion that her life could turn around.
Picking up her phone she made the one call she never thought she’d make when she left Nebraska.

“Hi Dad…not bad…no the weather’s pretty constant here: sun, sun, sun all the time…yes please…thanks…. Hi Mom…yeah I guess it is…not much…. Mom, remember how you said I could just say the word? ...Yes please... Thank you…”

xTBBTx

A/N ‘No man is an island’: from Meditation XVII by English poet John Donne.
The Repatriation Project

xTBBTx

Usually an empty whiteboard was a challenge for Sheldon to scrawl his knowledge across its plane but today he saw the beauty in its simple state. Some people would say it represented nothingness but it was full of something—possibilities. In this moment he stood before the creation of everything.

'And God said, “Let there be light,” and there was light.'

He frowned at the vestige of his Christian upbringing. It would be nice: say a magic phrase and everything comes into being. It sounded as plausible as Loop Quantum Gravity at any rate. How Leslie Winkle could think the universe stemmed from the collapse of a previous universe was beyond him; especially since string theory offered a more plausible cyclical universe where new matter and energy came into being every trillion years when two extra-dimensional membranes collided.

Unfortunately, Sheldon didn’t have a trillion years to wait nor could he affect extra-dimensional membranes to trigger another Big Bang. He was in the here and now examining the cosmic aftermath of a universe-forming explosion.

“You never say a lot of things but you sure imply an awful lot.”

He had to work with what he was given. The Big Bang had occurred and within less than a microsecond since its birth the universe underwent a flurry of changes as the grand unification epoch gave birth to the electronuclear force followed by the electroweak, Quark, Hadron, Lepton, Photon epochs and reionization.

The question was what to do with it all. How did he organize it so it made sense and put the universe in its proper order? This could be easily solved if he could contact one of the Sheldons in an alternate universe who’d already solved the riddle; however it would take away the challenge.

‘‘From childhood's hour I have not been / As others were; I have not seen / As others saw’,” murmured Sheldon to himself.

Realizing he was at a standstill and needed a diversion he pulled out his phone and scrolled through Raj’s email concerning a problem with Dark Matter. While he was not on Sheldon’s scale the astrophysicist did have his moments.

“Unfortunately this isn’t one of them,” sighed Sheldon as he stepped to another board and began writing his solution. Raj’s focus on dark matter was trivial in the light of quantum gravity. It was like measuring the dimensions of a puzzle piece without concern for how it relates to the other pieces or the picture itself. Nevertheless if that’s what he wanted to work on who was Sheldon Cooper to tell him any differently? Best to be a team player now and argue its insignificance later.

The office door opened even as Leonard knocked. “Why haven’t you messaged me back?” he said testily, the tone causing Sheldon to look at his roommate.

“As we’re still ‘on the clock’ I thought it best to do what I’m paid to do. I check messages at lunch and at scheduled breaks with the next occurring at two forty-five.” He put the cap back on his marker. “I hardly see the sense in coming all this way to see me since we go home in an hour and —”
“Penny’s leaving.”

At once Sheldon turned to face the whiteboard. “This couldn’t wait until four o’clock?”

“Sheldon,” Leonard growled. He did his best to control his breathing. A threat didn’t seem as intimidating when followed by an asthma attack.

“Unless she’s leaving before four pm I can see the interruption but even if that were the case it still begs the question: so what?” He uncapped his marker and started a second part to Raj’s equation.

“Are you insane? Penny’s leaving and it’s ‘so what’?”

“Leonard you’ve given me nothing else. Penny could be leaving for a variety of destinations and for a multitude of reasons. I can’t see how I can make a pronouncement, positive or negative, without facts.”

Raising his glasses so he could massage the bridge of his nose, Leonard did his best to calm himself and formulate a concise presentation. Sheldon was not being difficult per se; he was being Sheldon, although it’d been said the two concepts were synonymous.

“Amy called. She’d spoken to Penny who said she was going home—and no I don’t mean back to the apartment. I mean Nebraska.”

Sheldon’s hand froze in mid air before resuming writing. “It’s been a while since she’s visited her family. I imagine financial constraint has contributed to the absence.”

“Sheldon she’s not coming back.” There, he’d said it and even as the words died in the room Leonard still couldn’t believe he uttered them. Sheldon stiffened and after a moment lowered his hand. He looked questioningly at Leonard.

“What about her belongings? Clearly she can’t bring everything back to Nebraska on a plane and I doubt her car could make the trip.”

Leonard shrugged. “I don’t know. She’s going home to look for a place and then coming back to pack. So yeah before you correct me I was wrong, she’s coming back, but only so she can leave.”

“Why would she do a thing like that?” Sheldon sat on the edge of his desk and put the cap on his marker. “Granted her attempts at an acting career have faltered and she’s been stuck in a dead-end job for years but I’d assumed she’d accepted her mediocre lot in life.” He noted the edge to Leonard’s glare. “I just mean she’s never done anything to improve her situation,” he added evenly.

“Well I guess she is now,” Leonard said unhappily.

“Hardly. I somehow doubt moving back to her parents’ farm is a step forward in any sense of the word,” said Sheldon as he crossed his arms. He almost dared Leonard to contradict him.

The shorter man sighed as he slumped against the door. “Just talk to her Sheldon.” At this Sheldon straightened up and retreated behind his desk.

“What would I have to say?” he said as his eyes kept to the papers lying before him.

“Anything would be good.”

“As you’re aware Penny and I have already talked. We both agreed to maintain our friendship. I
can’t see how my position is in any way more advantageous than yours. In fact since you’ve dated you’re the logical choice—”

Leonard slammed the door and crossed over to stand in front of the desk. “Fix it,” he spat. Sheldon took a step back. He’d never seen his friend so upset.

“There’s nothing to fix, Leonard,” he said gently.

Leonard began to pace. “You know Sheldon, sometimes I get the feeling you’re intentionally obtuse. There’s no way you can’t put two and two together on this and see why she’s leaving.”

“I know what you’re intimating,” Sheldon said darkly. “And frankly I reject your premise. Penny isn’t leaving because of me. If anything our aborted attempt at dating is similar to when Penny dumped you and you both ended up good friends.”

“So it’s just a coincidence you decide to ‘just be friends’ and the next day she’s going home? I thought you didn’t believe in coincidences?”

Sheldon opened a drawer and pulled out a stapler. “I also don’t ascribe to conjecture. Penny must have given Amy a reason for her departure. Surely you asked what it was?”

He took a few papers and tapped them until they were uniform.

Leonard stopped in the middle of the room, his fingers playing with his jacket zipper. “Penny said it was everything: her career, job, life choices. You. We can’t fix the first three but you can undo the fourth.”

“Don’t you think if I could undo my actions I would?” Sheldon asked as he stapled the papers together. “Unfortunately our time course is linear—good God didn’t Deep Space Nine teach you anything?”

“Just talk to her,” Leonard whined.

“And say what? ‘Penny, don’t go’? She’ll ask why and what then? She’s living hand-to-mouth here so I can’t just tell her to make changes to her life willy-nilly even though I believe California offers her better options than cornhusking in Nebraska.” He took a second pile of papers and began sorting them.

“Tell her the options. Tell her you’re sorry. Tell her anything at this point,” Leonard said as he watched his friend staple more sheets.

“I’ve already apologized.” The room fell silent save for the clicking of the stapler. “I suppose we could discuss her options although it’s been my experience when Penny’s determined to do something it’s easier to dissuade Yosemite Sam.”

“Well the sooner you do it the sooner we can all go back to normal,” said Leonard as he turned to go.

“Back to normal’. Please. Penny is contemplating moving home. It’s not like she’s off to the twenty-third century with Spock,” Sheldon said haughtily.

“So you mean it’s always normal for you to staple your recycling or are past due department meeting notices something you file for future reference?” Leonard snorted as he closed the door.

Sheldon took a moment to discern what he’d done before reaching into his desk for a staple puller.
There was no doubt about it—she had too many clothes. Worst of all, she’d gotten rid of most of her Nebraskan wardrobe so she had nothing to wear when it got colder and brother, Nebraska got cold. Penny folded another pair of sweat pants and squished them into her suitcase. She’d look like Bride of the Jock but at least she’d have something to wear besides shorts and mini dresses. Thank goodness she kept her Cornhusker sweater since it was as necessary as skin at home.

Home. God, she hadn’t been home in three years. Not that she was avoiding it by any stretch; she just couldn’t afford the air fare without making sacrifices to her lifestyle. You know those little extras like food, hydro and gasoline. Ok, maybe a pair of shoes. Or two.

Knock Knock Knock “Penny.”

Knock Knock Knock “Penny.”

Knock Knock Knock “Penny.”

Sheldon waited at the door. Surely she would answer. It wasn’t like they weren’t friends. She’d answer the door and they’d talk. He’d make his points and she’d see reason and all this nonsense about her moving away would vanish. Of course all of this was moot if she didn’t open the door. As he was about to embark on another round of knocks he heard her flip-flops stop at her door. Now he was in a quandary: did he give her time to think over whether to open the door or should he pretend he didn’t know she was there and knock again? He felt his breathing begin to quicken.

Anyone who says knocking at a door is ‘no big deal’ has obviously never knocked at the right one.

She knew he was there. The question was did she have enough strength to deal with him in here? Penny turned to look at her living room with the pile of dirty Kleenex and empty glasses on her coffee table, her comforter and pillow on the couch and clothing tossed here and there. ‘Maybe he wouldn’t have the strength to come in.’ She turned the lock and opened the door.

Standing in his red single cell to robot evolution shirt with his hands behind his back Penny had the feeling Sheldon wanted to be anywhere but here.

“Hey,” she said softly.

While it was good she didn’t show any sign of lacrimation Sheldon was unnerved by the absence of something in her eyes. Her green eyes dilated—she was pleased to see him—but their inner brilliance was faint as if he stood light years away.

“Hello Penny,” he replied. “Leonard tells me you’re planning to go back to Nebraska.”

“Yeah.”

“As your friend I want to hear your reasoning behind this move and determine its soundness.” He said this as plainly as he could yet a frown still crossed her brow.

“So now I’m crazy too?” Before he could answer she turned to go back to her bedroom although she left the front door open.

Undaunted, Sheldon entered the apartment; his nostrils flared at the sight of the dirty Kleenex and made note not to touch anything unless absolutely necessary.

“I’m not ascribing a diagnosis, Penny. I only want to understand why you want to go.” Why must
you always make this so difficult?"

“A lot of reasons,” she called from the bedroom.

“As I’ve gathered. Could you list them?” He visualized the apartment without its clutter. Remembered what it looked like after the transvestite left the building. Stark. Empty.

“Well my acting career for starters. I’m twenty-six with a hemorrhoid commercial and a play staged over a bowling alley to my name. I should have a body of work by now and instead all people want is my body. Maybe I should’ve taken your advice and did the porn.”

“I said no such thing,” Sheldon said with indignation as he appeared at her bedroom door. “As I recall you erroneously arrived at a casting call for what was thought to be a cat food commercial but was instead a pornographic production. I merely asked if your audition was successful.”

Penny rolled her eyes. “Yeah thanks about that. It so puts you in a better light.” She picked out a few earrings from a small box and put them in a baggie.

“Please Penny, I don’t want to argue every point.” He had no idea why he’d said what he did; of course he knew she wouldn’t have done the audition. It was just nice to hear her reject the notion aloud.

She looked to the ceiling and sighed deeply before she faced him. “I don’t want to fight either. Maybe we should just call a truce and leave it at that.”

“We most certainly are not going to end this conversation.” He cleared his throat as he shifted his weight. “I only have one reason for your leaving. While I grant you that your career hasn’t reached its potential are you sure you’ve done everything possible?”

Penny sat down next to her suitcase in a huff. “I’ve done the acting classes and the dancing classes. I’ve got an agent and even a contact or two but at the end of the day I’ve got nothing. This girl’s too ‘mid-Western’ for Hollywood.”

He thought over her statement and found her assessment sound. “Fair enough. What’s your next reason?”

“I’ve been at the same crappy job for over five years. I barely make enough to support myself and I’m tired of eating Ichibon Noodles and having my cable cut.” She pulled her hair into a pony tail before letting her hand slide down its length.

“Some of this might have to do with budgeting issues—which we won’t get into,” he said quickly as he caught the scowl forming on her face. “However I agree with your basic premise that the Cheesecake Factory provides insufficient income. Have you looked for other employment?”

“Different shovel, same shit.” That’s what her dad said when he talked about dealing with the government about subsidies. He had about a thousand euphemisms surrounding the word ‘shit’. Must be a farming thing.

“Perhaps another business would have a better ‘promote from within’ policy.”

“Yeah after what, four or five more years waitressing? No thanks. And before you say it, yes I did think about going back to school but I can’t afford it. Not if I stay here.” She looked down at her electric-blue painted toenails. “Dad said they’d help me out if I moved back to Omaha.”

“That’s generous,” he said evenly. He couldn’t find fault with the plan. Penny needed a new start
and this would provide her the educational tools necessary for her to succeed. Oddly, he didn’t feel comforted by the news.

“It is,” Penny agreed. She wanted to hear Sheldon say it was a stupid plan and that she should stay. She couldn’t read the look on his face and if there was ever a time she wanted to know what he was thinking it was now.

“The next reason for leaving?”

'It kills me seeing you here standing like nothing’s changed.' “I miss my family.”

“They have phone plans, Skype and transportation to take care of that. Next.”

'I remember the blue of your eyes as we danced.' “I want to feel better about myself.”

Sheldon hesitated before answering. “Where better to be than with your friends? We’re all—fond—of you and want nothing but the best. I’m sure I speak for the rest of the group when I say you can count on us to do anything within our power to make you see your significance.”

“Thank you Sheldon.” She’d wondered what it would sound like to have Sheldon Cooper compliment her like a ‘normal’ guy. The words were still formal yet contained a passion she knew existed underneath his layered t-shirts. Too bad it didn’t mean what it could have.

“Is there anything else we didn’t address?”

The big ol’ elephant in the room. “I don’t know. Can you think of anything?” she asked as she wiped her eyes.

“It’s not my list,” he said quietly. Penny nodded as she sniffled.

“Sheldon.” She got up and took three steps until she stood in front of him. “Thank you, Moonpie.”

Sheldon braced himself for the hug but his arms were wooden as they clumsily encircled Penny. Her hair was soft against his hand and he found himself lost in her vanilla scent. His jaw muscles clenched as he fought to contain himself. Leonard gave him the preposterous idea she was leaving because of their failed union. Obviously Penny had done a lot of thinking and knew her own mind. He wasn’t the reason why she was leaving.

He sure as hell wouldn’t be enough for her to stay.

Her hands eventually found his shoulders and gently she stepped back. For a moment Penny searched his eyes and immersed herself in the blue, a ghost of a smile touching her lips even as tears glistened. Without another word she walked into the bathroom and shut the door.

Feeling himself begin to panic Sheldon quickly exited the apartment.

“Shel—” Leonard’s greeting died on his lips as his roommate passed by the couch.

Sheldon was never so happy to reach his bedroom. He closed the door and stole his way to his bed in the semi-darkness. With legs tucked upwards he curled himself into a ball. That’s when he felt it. The double shirts kept the wetness from his skin but as his fingers stroked the damp cloth he knew he’d never be the same.

He sang softly to the night:

“Soft Kitty, Warm Kitty, Little ball of fur…..”
Leonard was already up and dressed by the time Sheldon came to the kitchen for breakfast. He didn’t say anything even though his germ-phobic roommate was still wearing yesterday’s clothes; from the sheer exhaustion marked on his face it was a miracle Sheldon was here at all.

“So you know you’ll be taking the bus to work since I’m”—Leonard caught his friend’s warning stare—“busy this morning.” He’d told Sheldon last night he’d be bringing Penny to the airport. She’d taken a week off to look for an apartment and a job in Omaha. “I’ll skip half my lunch so I won’t have as much time to make up after work. If you don’t mind waiting I’ll take you home.” Sheldon nodded as he prepared his cereal. Leonard checked his watch. “I should go over and see if—I’ll be back,” he stammered and exited the apartment.

Sheldon stared into his bowl for a minute before taking a spoonful of cereal. He wasn’t particularly hungry but he knew better than to skip the most important meal of the day. Today would already see little output on his part and he didn’t want his bowels to emulate his energy level. He checked the clock: Leonard wanted to leave about fifteen minutes ago but given Penny’s propensity for lateness their departure time would be no earlier than seven oh five. He massaged a dull ache in his left temple as he finished his cereal. He’d take an aspirin when he got to the bathroom. There were no heroes when it came to tension headaches.

In apartment 4B Leonard discreetly checked his watch as Penny made sure her windows were left open a crack and that she’d unplugged unnecessary electronics.

“Ok, you’ve got the spare keys and I’ve got the ticket, phone, keys.” She checked her purse.

“Damn it not now.”

“Are these them?” Leonard asked as he fished a set of keys out of a little bowl on her entertainment unit.

“Yup.” Sheldon might have something there with the keys-in-bowl idea after all. “I guess that’s it.” Penny smiled sympathetically as the corners of Leonard’s mouth turned bravely upwards even though he looked like someone shot his dog.

“I’ll get your bag,” he said as he extended the handle on the suitcase.

“No sweetie it’s ok. It’s heavy and I don’t want you wheezing by the time we’re at the lobby,” said Penny as she took the bag.

“I’m not that bad,” frowned Leonard as he lifted the suitcase with a grunt before setting it on the ground. “Although you sure packed an awful lot,” he admitted.

“That’s not true. I like to think I performed quite well in the bedroom. You know, after a bit of practice.”

Penny laughed as she rolled the suitcase into the hall. “And just what base do you think we’d have gotten on if I wasn’t a ‘big ol’ five’?”

Leonard closed and locked the door. “I’d have gotten there eventually. Mind you evolution did take millions of years and the ability of physicists to ask out beautiful women is a recent phenomenon.” He crossed over to his apartment. “Let me tell Sheldon we’re off.” He opened the door but the room was empty. Hearing the shower running he quickly took a piece of paper from his desk and wrote a note. He folded the paper so it stood upright and put it in the key bowl before
closing the door.

“He’s in the shower,” he said to Penny as means of explanation.

She nodded as she lifted the suitcase and hit the stairs. It might be cowardice on her part but she was glad Sheldon wasn’t there to say goodbye. After last night she learned that Penny plus Sheldon equaled Penny in tears and she didn’t want to look the baby today. It was hard enough trying to appear grown up when flying home with her tail between her legs especially since her parents had paid for the ticket. Crap on a cracker.

Once the car was on the road the conversation fluctuated between upbeat chit-chat and moments of silence that only two people who’d cared about each other could share. Glancing at her as she sat quietly looking out the side window Leonard wondered if this was the moment he’d consider ‘their moment’. Penny was a constant: five years of morning coffees and mailbox greetings until she became one of the gang. Except she wasn’t. Not really. There was always something about Penny that was apart—not aloof—from everyone. Leonard would sometimes see it when she looked particularly pensive but those moments were few and far between.

Penny was twenty two when they’d met and her eyes were on Hollywood not solving the world’s troubles. Next to her beauty it was her zest for life that got to Leonard. What could have seemed flaky came across as exuberance personified as she found the secret joy in things most people took for granted. She’d gotten him to try things he’d never even dreamed of doing; sometimes he even came back from these excursions without an injury. Penny never complained when she helped him hobble up the steps. She always took things in stride when it came to her coordination-challenged boyfriend. Except when I said I loved her. In that moment he ran into an insurmountable wall. He thought it was him. He never guessed her problem lay with her self-doubt.

Part of him was flattered that she didn’t see herself as being in his league. Except in academics no one had ever looked at him in such a way and even then having Sheldon as a roommate made his career accomplishments pale by comparison. Perhaps that’s why he never properly addressed the issue. He told her he liked her as she was yet kept putting his foot in his mouth by making suggestions for improvement. Penny was great. Penny two point oh would be amazing.

At the end of the day Leonard thought too much when he should have acted. More brawn, less brain. Now he found himself in a car driving the first woman he ever loved to the airport and he hadn’t told her what she meant to him. He hadn’t thanked her for showering him with her loveliness and showing him how to laugh. All they had was this moment with Leonard’s mind whirling a million thoughts a second as Penny looked to the sky for something he knew he could never see.

“So are you nervous?” he asked as he took the exit ramp to the airport terminal.

“A little. Even putting everything else aside it’s been three years. I know things will be different and yet the same.” She shrugged her shoulders and smiled at Leonard. “I’ll be fine.”

“I’m glad one of us will be. Let me drop you off then find a place to park.” He signaled and took a spot at the curb.

“You don’t have to stay, Leonard. I’ve got my phone and I’ll buy a couple of magazines.”

“Penny.” He grabbed her arm to keep her from exiting the vehicle. “You’re leaving us not the other way around. I’m not going anywhere, ok?”

Forgetting her earlier promise not to cry Penny leaned over and gave Leonard a long and heartfelt
That’s the thing about Leonard Hofstadter: he may hem and haw and think things over twenty seven billion times but at the end of the day he comes through—even if it’s at the eleventh hour.

XxX

The bus would be there in seven minutes if it was on time although it had been Sheldon’s experience that the Pasadena Transit Commission schedule was more a suggestion than something he could set his watch. Nevertheless he should be out the door by now instead of sitting in his spot wearing his bus pants.

The thing was he had a problem and unless he learned how to control his fear of heights—which he hadn’t—and go out the window it only had one answer. He picked up his keys and pretended to quickly lock a door. He repeated several more times before adding a new twist: after removing the key he turned his body to the left while keeping his head staring straight ahead.

Sighing as he got up Sheldon crossed over to the apartment door. He’d only have one crack at this so it had to be done right. He closed his eyes as he stepped into the hall, only daring to peek when he faced his own door. With a fluid motion he inserted his key in the lock and turned.

“Eyes right,” he whispered to himself over and over like a revered mantra.

Sheldon raised his left hand to his eyes to help shield himself from the other side of the hall as he stared at the wall to his right while descending the stairs. He let out a breath as soon as he passed the first landing.

“Not bad,” he said shakily. Adding together a week’s worth of arrivals and departures he only had to endure seventeen more trips through the hall until Penny came back.

XxX

It was while she was walking through the Omaha airport that Penny realized she forgot to ask who was picking her up. She pulled out her phone and dialed home but no one answered. ‘Hel-lo. Farmers.’ Either Dad was out in the fields or Mom was doing her own thing—her farm chores were always done in the morning so she’d have some ‘me time’ in the afternoon for quilting or Wii aerobics. After sport fishing with Leonard at the apartment her father Wyatt had to get himself a Wii for the winter months. Ann first frowned at her husband’s idea until she tried out the bowling and died laughing as she relived her childhood Saturday mornings in the Little Lanes League. Penny had wanted to be there to see her parents play.

“Be careful what you wish for,” she muttered to herself as she scoured the airport for a familiar person.

When she saw him she nearly died.

His hair was browner and shorter than she remembered but the relaxed way he leaned against the pillar quietly scanning the crowd screamed her brother Greg.

“Oh my God!” Penny squealed as she practically dragged her suitcase behind her. Greg gave a crooked smile as he let himself be pulled into a hug. “Mom and Dad didn’t say you were home.”

“How are you little girl?” As kids Greg always made it a point to stress Penny’s femininity since Wyatt was raising her as the son he always wanted. Not that Greg wasn’t welcome he just wasn’t a farm boy.
“Up to my neck in problems as always,” she grinned as they began walking through the airport.

“Yup. Mom told me some of the details but I wanted to hear it straight so I wouldn’t get the PG version.”

“There’s not much dirt in the details. I struck out acting and need a second start,” Penny shrugged.

A twinkle came to Greg’s eyes. “So what’s his name?”

“What?” She balked and turned red before she whapped her brother on the arm. “You’re trouble, you know that?”

“Just tellin’ it, Pen. You haven’t made a move without a guy since you found out we’re for more than playing tag in a corn field.” He grinned as Penny flashed him a semi-serious glare.

“Well don’t you be ‘tellin’ it’ to Mom or your ass is grass, got it?”

“Yes Ma’am,” he replied as he held open the door for Penny to pass.

They continued to chat about California in general until they got to the truck.

“You know, I really could do with an iced coffee before we head back,” Penny said as she put on her seatbelt.

Greg checked his phone. “If we make it quick.”

“What, Dad’s got you under his thumb?” Penny laughed. In answer Greg lifted his left pant leg to reveal the monitor around his ankle.

“Something like that,” he said with a little smirk.

“Holy crap on a cracker. How long’ve you had that?”

“Since I got out. Eight more months of good behavior and we can part ways. I’m only allowed off the farm for specific errands and even then Dad’s pretty strict.” He started the engine. “Starbucks ok?”

“Sure.” Penny waited for the truck to move but nothing happened. She looked questioningly at her brother.

“Do I get a name?” he asked simply.

“Give me a break, Greg. I’m twenty-six years—”

“Fourteen minutes and counting before we go straight home,” he warned.

Despite her frustration Penny giggled. “His name’s Sheldon.”

Greg put the truck in gear. “That’s a new one. Dad only ever spoke about Leonard and even then he was a holy subject.”

“Well Sheldon might not be new to Dad so just keep it quiet, ok?”

“Sheldon. Not exactly a California beach bum kind of name.” He signaled right to get onto the strip towards downtown.
“He’s a physicist from East Texas,” Penny replied as she looked out the window. Omaha wasn’t Los Angeles but it was a city of over four hundred thousand people—not bad for being located in farming country.

“Isn’t Leonard a physicist?”

“Yup.”

“Who knew a science geek could be the heartbreak kid?”

“I know what you mean,” Penny said quietly. Greg stole a glance at her through the rear view mirror.

“You should’ve known scientists are trouble. Look at me.”

She smiled. “The family chemist.”

“Bet Mom sure regrets getting me ‘101 Science Experiments for Kids’ when I was ten. As for me, I’m just happy I didn’t blow myself up. Meth cooking isn’t exactly done with an Easy-Bake Oven.” At this Penny laughed out loud. “What?”

“Sheldon used his sister’s Easy-Bake Oven to make a robotic arm to keep her out of his room.”

“Cool stuff. Fortunately for me my sisters were better behaved than that.”

“Naw, we just didn’t get caught.”

Greg pulled into a side street and parked. “I’ve got to go with you so I have someone to vouch for me.”

Penny got out of the truck and waited for her brother. Joining hands, she swung their arms back and forth like a little kid.

“Make sure the coffee’s sugar-free,” he said drolly.

“Ha ha. I’ll get you one too.” She opened the door and he followed.

Greg couldn’t help but smile as a guy sitting at a table practically choked on his coffee as he spotted Penny with her pink mini-dress and platform sandals.

“Welcome home girlie,” her brother murmured.

xTBBTx

She remembered hearing the rooster and thinking this was way too early to get up. That was the last coherent thought Penny had until ten am when her eyes opened for the second time. It was sunny and cool with the breeze lazily poking at the curtains. She thanked her lucky stars she took down her butterfly wind chime although she was so tired last night it might not have made much difference.

Almost from the get-go it was gab, gab, gab with her mother and Greg; her dad choosing to listen and eat dinner as opposed to talk. Unless he had something to say or was enthused he said little, following his personal motto to say nothing and be thought a fool than speak up and remove all doubt. There was such a sense of relief that her youngest daughter was home that Penny’s mom didn’t bring up anything serious. There’d be time enough to discuss Penny’s plans for moving and what she wanted to do in Omaha.
Tossing back the covers she got out of bed and slipped into an old pair of flip-flops she used as house slippers. Penny went to her closet and put on her blue housecoat; she was smaller than before and had to cinch in the belt. At least California living had done something for her hips. After refreshing herself in the washroom she made her way down the stairs into the kitchen for some orange juice. Opening the fridge her eyes couldn’t believe the amount of food stuffed into its shelves and bins. She took out a wrapped plate of scrambled eggs and sausage along with the juice. While she was used to having cereal in the morning—’it’s Saturday which means he’s eating bran cereal and a quarter cup milk while watching Dr. Who’—she figured she’d make less trouble if she just followed the local menu.

While the bread was toasting she opened the newspaper to the want ads and began looking for her new life. Because of the recession there weren’t a whole lot of jobs to choose from but there were some waitressing opportunities (ugh) available. Her experience at the Cheesecake Factory meant she could also apply for the bartending ads. With her looks and disposition she thought she’d be a shoo-in. Of course she’d thought she’d be golden in California so who was to say what would happen here.

As she ate she scanned the apartment listings and couldn’t get over how inexpensive the rent was away from the coast. Even around the University of Nebraska—Omaha campus the two bedrooms were no more than what she paying for her small apartment. It was sad to say but if she could only transfer her job she’d actually be doing ok financially, especially if mom and dad were going to help her out with school.

Penny hated to admit it but the more she looked at the move the more it made sense. She really could start over here and hey, it wasn’t like she’d have to give up California all together. She’d have a place to stay with Amy and could visit the guys and go clubbing and shoe shopping. It’d be the best of both worlds. Really. She sighed as she doodled in the newspaper margins. More importantly the move would give her time to come to terms with Sheldon and maybe salvage their friendship although she had the feeling it’d never be the same.

She wondered if she’d ever get back to some sort of normalcy. After hanging out with genius friends she found everyday conversation didn’t engage her unless there was an odd reference to Star Trek or some science trivia that got her brain thinking about what really did exist in the universe. Not to say she couldn’t name all the Kardashians and didn’t follow TMZ religiously; she found balance between trash and treasure and knew she’d be hard pressed to keep it up without her friends. After a few years she wouldn’t have anything in common with them and slowly but surely they’d fade from her life….

XxX

“—And that’s when we learned Howard’s still not over his fear of the ocean,” said Bernadette as she closed the photo album tab on the laptop.

“Aren’t you supposed to have that licked before you’re off to the space station?” asked Raj.

“Yeah. Looks like it’s back to the swimming pool next week,” sighed the engineer.

“I’m surprised they’re putting such an emphasis on swimming since the Russian Soyuz capsule is designed to land in the Kazakhstan desert,” said Amy with a raised eyebrow.

“I think it’s in case the landing’s off,” Leonard offered. “Although I don’t know how comfortable I’d be flying in a space program that makes contingency plans for missing a continent.”

“They’re thorough.” Raj gave Leonard a stern look then indicated Bernadette with his eyes.
“Not that I’m saying anything’s going to happen,” Leonard added hastily.

“I see you bought a yellow bathing suit,” said Amy to change the subject.

“I wasn’t going to but Penny and you went on and on about it being my color so I thought oh what the heck.” At once the diminutive woman put her hand to her mouth. There had been a gentleman’s agreement that Penny wouldn’t be mentioned even though it was her absence that brought the newlyweds to the apartment the day they returned from their honeymoon.

As one the group looked around and let out a communal sigh as Sheldon hadn’t come back into the room from whatever he was doing in his bedroom.

“Speaking of the unspeakable did anyone talk to Penny before she left?” asked Howard quietly.

“I spoke to her on Thursday, as did Sheldon. Obviously we were unsuccessful in our attempts to dissuade her from going home,” replied Amy.

“Poor Sheldon,” sighed Bernadette.

Almost as if in response Sheldon came into the room, laundry basket in hand.

“What’s going on?” Leonard asked his roommate.

“It’s eight fifteen. I should think it’s obvious.”

“Sheldon, we have guests.”

“Are they planning on being here for at least fifteen minutes? Then we’ll still have guests when I return.” He stopped at the door and took a breath before dashing into the hall and down the stairs.

Raj looked at Leonard with a puzzled expression. “What’s with that?”

“He doesn’t want to see Penny’s apartment.” Leonard rolled his eyes. “I hope he gets over this before he misjudges a step and falls down the stairs.”

XxX

Leonard was surprised to see the hall light on as he opened his bedroom door. It was after two am and while Sheldon didn’t have to get up for work the late night would throw his sleep schedule even more out of whack. After going to the washroom he walked to the living room to find Sheldon looking at his whiteboard.

“Whatcha doing?” Leonard asked with a yawn.

“Sleep has eluded me so I’m trying to be productive.”

Adjusting his glasses, Leonard glanced over Sheldon’s equation. It was an odd combination of M-Theory, Quantum Loop Theory (Leslie would have a giggle fit) and—geometry? “What are you measuring?”

“What?” Sheldon asked, puzzled.

“You’re solving for ‘P’. Perimeter of what?”

“Of everything.” Sheldon made to grab the dry eraser.
“Just a second. Let me see what’s what before you wipe it. Maybe I can help.”

Sheldon snorted. “I doubt it.” Nevertheless he stood aside to let his roommate look over the board.

“So let me get this straight,” said Leonard after a few minutes. “You’re postulating a return to a self-contained state post Big Bang? Not going to happen.”

“I disagree. If Quantum Loop Theory says the universe recreates itself and String Theory says a new universe forms from extra-dimensional matter colliding there’s a moment when things essentially rest.”

“There’s nothing to suggest the universe resets,” said Leonard as he put the kettle on to heat. “It could just as easily return as something completely different in composition.”

“Hardly. It can only form from what’s available.” Sheldon added a new equation to the board. “The variants would be minute.”

“Not necessarily. The cat’s already out of the bag. The Big Bang’s done. Pure states have been mixed and new elements formed. There’s no going back.” Leonard got out a mug and the box of chamomile tea. “Besides, what’s the point of going back to a self-contained state when another Big Bang’s only going to shake up the universe again?”

“Not if it’s careful,” Sheldon said quietly.

At once Leonard was still. ‘String Theory my ass.’ Quickly he sought to translate the math into something more personal. “Sheldon, even if the universe is careful it still carries with it memories of the Big Bang. The Bang happened and the results are all over the place and not going away.”

“The universe will adapt.”

“But will it be happy?”

“Where do you get happiness out of this?” scowled Sheldon.

“Dark Matter.”

Sheldon looked at his board. “I don’t follow.”

“The universe was very much alone all of its life. Oh sure, it met other universes and sometimes even tolerated them but it never really connected. Then in one moment the universe encountered something so extra-dimensionally beautiful and Bang—everything changed. New elements formed: friendship, empathy, happiness. Love.” Leonard cleared his throat. He couldn’t believe what he was hearing when Amy said Sheldon was in love with Penny; that Sheldon wasn’t now arguing with him removed all doubt. “And if the universe now wants to pretend they don’t exist it should know that its gravity numbers to support life will never balance out without accounting for things like dark matter. And dark matter, as we all know, is detected by its gravitational attraction. Believe me Sheldon, there’s attraction. Both ways.”

“It’s too late.”

Leonard sighed. “It’s not too late. Like you said, all the elements are still there in the universe. All it has to do is reach out.”

Sheldon thought about this for a moment as Leonard made tea. “What if the universe is too afraid to act?” the taller man said at last.
“Then it’s an idiot. I know that extra-dimensional beauty first-hand and—oh for crying out loud Sheldon, talk to Penny.”

“And say what?”

“You miss her. You like her.” Sheldon looked at him incredulously.

“She left for a variety of reasons, Leonard. I highly doubt she’d return just because I—miss her.”

“You never gave her a chance to decide. And yeah, it’s going to be scary as hell and you may be right. You might not be enough to bring her back but at least you tried. Don’t give up without a fight.” Leonard gave Sheldon a friendly bump on the arm as he passed. “Goodnight Sheldon.” He was just about to turn the corner when his roommate spoke.

“Leonard?”

“Yes Sheldon?”

“Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.” Beaming, Leonard practically strutted into his bedroom.

xTBBTx

A/N Wikipedia: Loop Quantum Gravity; Grand Unification Epoch;

‘From childhood’s hour I have not been / As others were; I have not seen / As others saw’: ‘Alone’ by Edgar Allan Poe. This poem is so Sheldon it’s scary.

Penny’s brother: His name isn’t mentioned on the show.
The Cornhusker Reacquisition

He already has his gloves on as he grabbed the keys from the bowl. Box of cleaning supplies in hand Sheldon took a moment to steady himself before opening the door. Across the hall Penny’s door seemed to mock him; its close proximity suggesting her nearness when in actuality she was several States away. Sheldon straightened his shoulders as he bridged the gap and unlocked and opened the door. He stood in the hallway for a moment as he watched the dust particles twinkle in the air. Normally it didn’t bother him (much) but in this instance the absolute stillness magnified everything. Taking in the apartment, Sheldon’s eyes immediately honed in on the Kleenex pile on the coffee table. Spurred into action by the sight he closed the door and turned on the lights.

Sheldon set down his box and pulled out a garbage bag. Gingerly he picked up the Kleenex and dropped them into the bag. The pile wasn’t as big as Thursday so Penny had at least attempted to clean up. That was the thing about Penny: she had a lot of potential but never demonstrated the inclination to follow through. Even when it came to the dream that got her here Sheldon found her desire to act tenuous at best since it wasn’t like she was chasing after every lead like a starved dog a bone. Instead she seemed to be in a holding pattern, waiting for something to force her into making a decision.

“Don’t let it be said Sheldon Cooper can’t shake things up,” he said dryly as he stacked the glasses and brought them to the sink.

After cleaning off and wiping down the coffee table he thought it best to launder the comforter and pillow case. Putting on a new pair of gloves he went into her bedroom and dug out her basket and detergent. Sheldon hesitated as he looked at the bed. What was another load if it meant she had clean sheets to come home to? He pulled off the blankets and tossed them into the basket. When he removed the pillows he was surprised to find a familiar grey box against her headboard. Picking it up, he took off the lid and stared at his paper creation. Meemaw had got him the book on origami so he’d have something to do indoors on days when he wanted to hide from the neighborhood kids.

He liked measuring angles and making the precision folds necessary to bring forth a dinosaur or X-wing fighter—and maybe a koala bear or two.

Normally he wasn’t interested in flowers. He found the patterns too simple in design and with exception of the traditional lily merely caricatures of the real thing. Indeed he stumbled upon his original water lily creation quite by accident as he was attempting to recreate the Sarlacc pit from Return of the Jedi. Row upon row of paper teeth stacked upwards and outwards until he had a prop big enough to swallow his Boba Fett action figure. His dad didn’t much like his son ‘playin’ with paper dolls’ but it was Meemaw to the rescue, claiming the Sarlacc pit to be a water lily from her loving grandson. He’d felt a sense of relief every time he went to her house and saw his creation safely behind the glass shield of her china cupboard.

The notion of the water lily wouldn’t die however and as the years went by he perfected the petals and increased their count from twenty to forty until its current number of seventy three. It was in the center of the flower that the Cooper whimsy revealed itself as the heads of the anther stalks were modeled after oxygen molecules. He did his utmost to see life through scientific eyes and the molecules were his attempt at breathing life into his paper creation. Bazinga.

Sheldon was nervous as he left the box at Penny’s door not because he thought she’d hate the gift but because he wished he could have been there to see her face when she lifted the lid. He wanted to explore each petal through her eyes and answer any question she might have had regarding its
construction. More pointedly he wanted her to understand and she did and things were supposed to be anything but what they were at present.

Replacing the lid, Sheldon put the box on the nightstand and removed the under sheet from the mattress. If he started the laundry now everything would be dry before lunch after which he could start on the kitchen in earnest. The last job he’d done on the apartment was adequate given the time constraint. This time he’d see how close to perfect he could get.

XxX

Penny found her brother sitting against the barn wall gazing at the growing corn fields to the west. With his dirt-stained jeans he could have passed for a farm boy were it not for his backwards turned baseball cap and Rage Against the Machine t-shirt underneath his checkered long sleeve. There was always something about Greg that didn’t belong on the farm. Whereas Penny took like a duck to water when it came to fixing the tractor or lining up the rows for planting he spent his time listening to music and hanging out with his friends. Not that he didn’t do his chores he just wasn’t Wyatt’s first choice when it came to helping around the farm.

“Hey girlie,” Greg said as his sister sat down beside him.

“What ya doing out here?” she asked as she pulled out a pack of gum and offered him a piece. He declined.

“Gives me a place to kick back and look over the land without dad telling me to mow it or hoe it.”


“So how went the job hunt?”

Penny had spent the afternoon dropping off resumes and looking at apartments. Since most managers didn’t work weekends she found herself with a whole list of places she’d have to revisit during the week.

“I think I’ve got a shot at the Townhouse. The owner seemed to like my resume among other things,” she said with a cheeky smile.

“Yeah Paul comes across as a pervert but he’s really a decent guy.”

“I’ve got five years’ experience handing a pervert so I’ll be fine,” she laughed as she thought about Howard. “So how’d you know him?”

Greg looked at Penny incredulously. “You do know what I was busted for, right? It’s good business being on good terms with bar owners. We share the same clientele.” He pulled up a handful of grass and tossed it gently at the pile between his feet. “Of course the downside is that everybody knows what happened and want to stay as far away from me as possible but eh, what ya do?” he shrugged.

“So how come you came back here anyways?”

“Where else was I supposed to go? I had to be monitored. It’s not like I could ask Stacy to watch over me,” he added with a wry smile.

“You still see her?” Stacy was his on-again off-again girlfriend for most of Penny’s teenage years. “Oddly enough you go to the big house for two years and not a lot of girlfriends stick around.” He
Pulled more grass and let it fall between his fingers.

Penny made a face. “Skank. I remember you bailing her out all the time.”

“I guess there’s a difference between ‘bail’ as in help you out with stuff and ‘bail’ as in a hundred and fifty grand.”

“I suppose. So are you happy being here?”

He rested his head against the wall as his eyes scoured the fields beyond. “I’m happy to be out so I guess in that way I’m happy to be anywhere.”

“You know what I mean,” prodded Penny as she gave him an elbow.

“Yeah I know what you’re saying. In a way it’s sort of stepping back. Sometimes I wonder if it’s a mistake. But for me it is what it is. I don’t have a choice. What about you?” Penny looked at him questioningly. “Is this a mistake for you?”

“I don’t think so. What else was I supposed to do? I struck out in California. I’ve gone to auditions. I’ve taken classes and I just—that’s it. There’s no way I’m going to be the next best thing out of Hollywood.”

“So maybe acting isn’t in the cards. What else do you want to do?”

Penny gazed at the fields beyond. “I don’t know.”

“Well if you don’t know then it doesn’t really matter where you are.”

“I guess but here at least I’d have food in my fridge.”

Greg looked at his sister. “As bad as that?”

“If it wasn’t for Leonard I’d be screwed,” she admitted. “I get more microloans than the farm.”

“So you still talk to him?”

“Yeah, he’s Sheldon’s roommate.”

“Roommate?” Greg gave a pumpkin smile. “You’ve gone on from Leonard to his roommate? Pretty classy, Pen.” She stuck her tongue at her brother as he chuckled. “So tell me about this Sheldon anyways.”

“He’s obsessive compulsive, egotistical, anal retentive—”

“And those are his good points.”

Penny smirked. “No. He’s…. I don’t know it’s hard to explain. He’s sort of detached yet when it comes to the important things…. He’s… He’s just something.”

“Man you’ve got it bad for him,” Greg teased.

“You have to really experience Sheldon to understand,” blushed Penny.

“And I guess the experience was too hot to handle.”

“He’s kind of thick when it comes to emotions and even when you get through to him he’s shy.”
She paused as memories of the past eight days flashed through her mind. “I thought he was leading me on,” she said quietly. “I thought he made up with his ex-girlfriend. When I found out none of it was true it was too late. I scared him off.”

“I see. So it didn’t matter that it was a misunderstanding?”

“No. He still wants to be friends. I just—I can’t do it. It was two years before Leonard and I could be around each other without being awkward. I went five days without talking to Sheldon and I just about went nuts.” A smile came to Penny’s face as she leaned against the wall. “We have the greatest pissing contests. He’s actually more stubborn than I am.”

“Impossible.”

“Improbable. Impossible is for people who lack imagination. Something Sheldon said.” The two siblings sat quietly as the sun started its reddish descent. Tomorrow was going to be a beautiful day.

“So you really like this guy,” Greg said at last.

“Yeah.”

“Shitty.”

Penny gave a crooked smile as she leaned her head on Greg’s shoulder. “Misery loves company.”

“If I had a choice you wouldn’t be here,” he said after a moment.

“Gee, thanks a lot,” said Penny in mock indignation.

“You’re not the screw up. I am.”

“You just made a mistake.”

“Yeah, and it cost me.” Greg forced Penny to sit up as he turned to face her. “You know what you did? You went off on your own and followed a dream. Nothing wrong with that. Ok the acting idea’s for shit. But the rest of it....” Their eyes locked and his hazel gaze refused to let her go. “Find a new dream and run. You’re not going to find happiness here.”

“When did my brother get so wise?” she asked as she took his hand in hers.

“I had two years to either get a killer physique in the prison gym or do a lot of thinking. You no more belong here than you’re dad’s ‘ Slugger’.”

“Bet I still can plough a row straighter than you,” grinned Penny.

Greg returned the smile. “Just promise me you won’t settle, ok?”

Penny squeezed her brother’s hand. “I promise.”

XxX

“Hello Sheldon. How are you? Or should I say where?”

“Good evening Amy. I’m at Penny’s apartment.”

“So I can see. May I ask why?”
“She left it in a state of disarray. Her absence allowed me the opportunity to set things right.”

“I see. How much did you clean?”

“All of it.”

“And by ‘all’ you mean floors, windows—”

“Cupboards, closets, drawers, shelves, dresser—”

“You do realize this is an outward manifestation of anxiety.”

…”

“Sheldon you have to talk to Penny.”

“Why does everyone tell me that? I did talk to her. She wanted to go.”

“Did you tell her how you feel?”

“Why should that make any difference?”

“Sheldon, there isn’t a soul on the planet who wouldn’t want to hear she’s loved.”

“Amy, her life is a mess. Things won’t magically right themselves because I—like her.”

“Your organizational skills are legendary. Give her gentle guidance and a supportive arm.”

“All of this is moot. She’s putting her new life together as we speak.”

“Then you don’t have much time to decide although if you ask me it isn’t much of a decision at all given the alternative. Time to shit or get off the pot, Sheldon.”

“Language, Amy.”

“Sometimes you gotta call a spade a spade. You’ve got a decision to make. I won’t keep you. Goodnight Sheldon.”

XxX

Knock Knock Knock “Leonard.”

Leonard reached for his glasses.

Knock Knock Knock “Leonard.”

It was one fourteen in the morning.

Knock Knock Knock “Leonard.”

“What is it Sheldon?”

The door opened and Sheldon stepped into the darkened bedroom.

“I need you to take me to the airport this morning at eight.”

“What’s going on?” Leonard’s heart began to accelerate. He prayed he knew where this was going.
Sheldon flexed onto the balls of his feet as he clasped his hands behind his back. “I’ve done some thinking and have come to the conclusion that Penny is making a mistake. I’m also responsible for gross misconduct as I failed to detail all the reasons why she should stay. I don’t know if she’ll change her mind but I feel it is prudent that she at least know all the facts.”

“I agree.” Leonard couldn’t help but grin. “This is great.”

“‘Great’ would be bringing Penny home. This is terrifying, but as Amy Farrah Fowler pointed out it’s also necessary. Goodnight Leonard.”

“‘Night Sheldon.”

Leonard fell asleep without losing the smile from his face.

In 2004 there were twenty airline accidents resulting in five hundred and fourteen fatalities. That averaged out to point nine fatal accidents and twenty three point two nine fatalities per million departures. Sheldon would’ve been happier if his statistics were more current but his knowledge base was at the mercy of the FAA.

He checked his watch. Departure time was at ten oh five (and to its credit it was) with arrival at Omaha airport at five pm after a stopover in Phoenix. The airport wasn’t a major pipeline to the East so it would be easy to find his way through although the thought of being some place new while unescorted still made his stomach lurch.

The plane hit turbulence and Sheldon involuntarily sucked in a breath.

“Soft Kitty, Warm Kitty, little ball of fur / Happy Kitty, Sleepy Kitty, purr, purr, purr,” he sung softly to himself. After all, being absolutely horror struck at the thought of dying in a horrible crash was a kind of sick….

The woman sitting next to him gave him a look out of the corner of her eye. The plane lurched again and the lanky man appeared to crush himself against his seat in fear. She knew she’d have to do something about this or else she’d be in for a hell of a flight.

“There’s nothing to be nervous about. It’s just turbulence,” she offered as an opener.

After a moment’s hesitation Sheldon glanced at his neighbor. “Did you know turbulent flows are predominantly characterized by their irregularity, diffusivity and rotationality?”

“I can’t say I did, no.”

“They’re one of the unsolved problems in classic physics. In the case of airplanes clear-air turbulence is caused by the mixing of warm and cold air in the atmosphere by wind.” A twitchy smile came to his face. “It’s nevertheless quite unsettling.”

“Well you just take a few deep breaths and relax. Nothing’s going to happen.”

“Statistically speaking you’re correct. American Airlines had only ten fatalities per seventeen million flights due to the operation of the aircraft.” Sheldon made sure his seatbelt was secure before folding his hands on his lap. “As things go you should be more worried about your luggage as the airline has the worst percentage of lost luggage in the industry with nine point eight nine mishandled bags per thousand.”
Well at least I’ve got a better chance of making it to Omaha than my luggage,” laughed the woman.

“I should think a crash from thirty thousand feet would eliminate the possibility of either you or your luggage making it to Nebraska,” corrected Sheldon. He noted the woman’s fading smile and turned to face the front.

XxX

Sheldon watched the country side with vague interest as the cab made its way along the highway. Since he had no means of transportation he’d arranged ahead of time for a flat fee of twenty-two dollars per hour with a two hour minimum. The driver was waiting for him at the airport and after Sheldon inspected the taxi and determined it acceptable he began the drive to Penny’s farm. Quite early on the cab driver learned this was going to be a trip rode out in silence as his fare neither wanted conversation or the radio. As the city quickly faded from view Sheldon noted that this part of Nebraska was extremely flat; the absence of even trees to break up the landscape gave the overall impression of infinity to the declining sun when in fact it was only one hundred and fifty million kilometers away.

It was two thousand four hundred seventy eight point eight kilometers from Pasadena to Omaha but it might as well be a continent away given how Sheldon’s stomach churned with anxiety. He didn’t like traveling by himself much less to somewhere he hadn’t been. Moving from Galveston to Pasadena had nearly driven his mother mad with all of the checking and rechecking of the university’s credentials, choice of apartment with its proximity to amenities and work, packed belongings stacked in priority of shipping order. More than once she’d offered him a paper bag so he could keep his breathing under control. He could really kick himself for not packing one for his current trip.

At the end of the day, however, the opportunities and research funding outweighed his fears and he ended up two thousand five hundred seventy one point six kilometers away in sunny Pasadena. In similar fashion Sheldon couldn’t pass up this trip to the Midwest given the possible outcome dependent on Penny’s decision. That was the one thing that left him out of sorts: no matter how much planning he did or how smoothly he presented everything came down to her and what she wanted to do. He positively loathed feeling this helpless and yet he knew he had to bite down on his need to bring order to the situation. As he learned from their previous conversations the best laid plans could be sent off kilter by a flux of emotions.

He freely admitted emotions baffled him and in fact often wondered aloud why they seemed to play so large a part in a person’s life. Science was a pure state where reason could rid herself of ‘feelings’ and formulate elegant equations explaining the theory of everything. Sheldon had seen first-hand what happened when emotions got in the way when he visited Heidelberg University in Germany. At fifteen he was invited to the prestigious school to continue his post-doctoral research. It was both an honor—although to his mind it was merely an acknowledgment of his capabilities—and a thrill to be associated with an institution founded in 1386 and had fifty five Nobel Prize laureates among its alumni.

Various professors made it a point to meet this American wunderkind who won the Stevenson Medal and seemed poised to take the physics world by storm. As he toured the various labs Sheldon had found himself at peace; here, finally, he was in a place where his brilliance was acknowledged and he was treated with respect. In hindsight he could say this view of the university was a tad naive, particularly when it came to Dr. Ernst. The professor was dismissive of Sheldon when he visited the lab. Looking at Dr. Ernst’s whiteboard he saw what the professor was doing and offered a solution. (Indeed it was partially déjà vu that stunned Sheldon when Dennis Kim did...
From conjecture Sheldon surmised that Dr. Ernst worked out the formula and found Sheldon’s proof worked because as he and his guide stood in the building’s quad he heard a guttural ‘You!’ He turned to see Dr. Ernst practically charge at him; Sheldon remembered a flurry of emotions on the professor’s face as he demanded the ‘demonkind’ stay away from him. To this day he still hadn’t worked out all Dr. Ernst hurled at him.

He knew when Dennis Kim suggested a Lorentz invariant field for his own work he felt a mix of embarrassment, anger and perhaps a tiny bit of fear but these were directed at himself not the Korean student—although he didn’t have a problem with Howard’s plan to sabotage the young man’s career in order to keep the physicist’s dream of the Nobel Prize alive. In those few days Sheldon found his output negligible as in his panic he abandoned science for a Middle East peace plan involving the building of a second Jerusalem in Mexico. No, there wasn’t any room in science for emotions and since science was his life the logic was simple.

And then there was Penny. That’s what it always came down to. It wasn’t a case where he couldn’t live without her; they were after all two separate entities. Rather he found the world less vibrant without her presence. When Priya insisted Penny stay away from Leonard Sheldon thought little of it until they met in the laundry room. Penny had smiled as he spoke, insisting she’d missed his ‘gibber-jabber’. Sheldon was insulted at the suggestion his words were rambling although it didn’t stop him from talking. It had surprised him how much he had to say as if he’d been storing away little factoids and anecdotes for when Penny came back into his life. If he could only have her ear again he’d weave such a narrative it would make even Scheherazade’s one thousand and one nights pale in comparison.

The cab signaled right and struck down a side road. Sheldon’s breathing began to labor as he bit his lip. He wondered if Penny would see him. He wondered if the farm had chickens. As there weren’t any trees in which to climb he knew he’d have to be careful: Gallus gallus domesticus was a formidable opponent when riled.

“This it?” said the cabby as he stopped next to the mail box.

“Yes,” confirmed Sheldon as he spotted Penny’s family name. The cab turned left and started its way down the drive. As they got closer Sheldon began to appreciate the size of Penny’s home; his house in Galveston could easily rest within its walls with room to spare. Perhaps due to her hand-to-mouth financial situation in Pasadena he never really thought about where she came from. Of course, it wasn’t like she volunteered any information about her home life in Nebraska save for her triumphs at the Corn Queen’s Court and the junior rodeo. Not like he could criticize given his simple anecdote that growing up in Galveston was ‘hell’. Obviously there was a lot they had yet to share and he gave a little prayer to Jesus he’d get the time.

Greg couldn’t believe his eyes when he saw the taxi cab making its way towards the house. Wyatt was still in the fields and Ann was at a neighbor’s house working on a quilt—and a little hooch since the house had to be clean for Greg’s sake—so it was up to him to greet the visitor. He stepped onto the porch and waited for the car to stop. From the back seat emerged a gangly man wearing a Green Lantern t-shirt over a longer sleeved shirt and white and brown plaid pants.

“Excuse me, I’m Dr. Sheldon Cooper and I’m looking for Penny. Is she here?”

“Yup,” said Greg with a grin. So ‘this’ was the infamous Sheldon Cooper, lady killer.

Sheldon turned to the driver. “I’ll need you to wait.”
“No you don’t,” Greg quickly interjected. “We’ll get you to wherever you’re going.” He had no idea how Sheldon convinced a cab to drive all this way but he sure as hell wasn’t going to make it easy for him to escape.

Sheldon seemed to ponder this for a moment before nodding. After paying the fare and retrieving his travel bag from the trunk he waited for the man to fetch Penny.

“Can I take your bag?” offered Greg.

“No thank you.” Sheldon had no idea who this man was in a t-shirt describing its portrait of a partially skeletal zombie as a ‘Slayer’, much less how clean.

Because of the nature of the farm with its human-animal interactions there were a myriad of pathogens just waiting to jump the species barrier like avian influenza.

“Ok, well I’ll take you up. She’s in the back barn.” Greg stepped off the porch and Sheldon followed alongside as they made their way along a dirt road.

“From the familial resemblance and the lack of basic social skills I’ll hazard a guess that you’re Penny’s brother.”

Greg laughed. “Well here in Nebraska we take our own time doing things. I’m Greg.” Sheldon nodded in response. “It’s a surprise seeing you here, Dr. Cooper. A good one though.”

“Penny has obviously spoken about me,” sighed Sheldon. “I’m not sure I should be pleased with this turn of events although I suppose it’s not to be unexpected given her penchant to blather.”

“As far as I know she’s only spoken to me about you. Mom and Dad have no clue.” Greg had wondered why Penny was so cryptic about Sheldon but after meeting the good Doctor he realized it really was difficult trying to sum him up in a word or two. “So, your first time in Nebraska?”

“Yes it is. I never had any intentions of coming before now. In fact when I considered moving from Pasadena to a ‘safer’ city I excluded Nebraska as a whole,” said Sheldon as he repositioned his shoulder strap.

“Nebraska’s not safe?”

Although the line was delivered matter-of-factly Greg thought he detected a little color on Sheldon’s cheeks.

“I see. Well, just follow the grass road and you’ll hit the barn.” Greg put his arm out to block Sheldon’s way. “She doesn’t belong here so don’t screw this up.”

Sheldon gave a curt nod and told himself to keep breathing as he made his way through the grass. As he approached the barn he heard someone using a ratchet and remembered Penny’s admission she’d rebuilt the family tractor when she was twelve. Perhaps he hadn’t been fair to her when he thought her folksy ways ignorant; clearly she had more in common with Howard than either would admit—not that being an engineer was anything to write home about but it at least paid better than waitressing.

He stopped in front of the door and took a deep breath as he went over what he wanted to say. While he didn’t ascribe to absolutes he realized that at this moment absolutely everything was on the line. As he stepped into the barn he saw Penny standing on a bale of hay as she was reaching into the tractor engine. Her hair was in a loose ponytail with the end tucked under a checkered shirt that looked to be her brother’s for its size. The sleeves were rolled to the elbows and the front was
tied in a knot to tighten the fit though with her leaning over like she was her midriff peeked out. A look of concentration was etched onto her face, something he’d never seen before outside of an intense round of Halo or on the paintball field.

Not wanting to be a distraction Sheldon waited for her to finish what she was doing. He didn’t want her to break anything or fall. More importantly he didn’t want her to throw the ratchet at him. Given her childhood playing baseball with Wyatt he knew she’d have little trouble beaning him at this distance.

Penny finally got the lug bolt on securely. Weaving her hand out from the engine she noticed someone standing at the door. Her initial thought was her brother because who else would it be but her mind screamed out a warning which caused her heart to nearly explode—the man was wearing a Green Lantern t-shirt.

“Sheldon?” He stepped forward into the barn. “What the hell are you doing here?” Her tone was confused, not angry.

“I hadn’t seen you off on Friday,” he said evenly.

Penny rolled her eyes. “I’m back in three days. Leonard must have told you that.”

“He did. However what I have to say can’t wait.”

Penny jumped off the hay bale. Not that she wasn’t receptive to what he had to say, she just wasn’t going to be a pushover. Her emotions had already been on enough of a rollercoaster ride and all she wanted was a little closure. “Ok. Shoot.”

“While we only experience time in a linear progression I was hoping you’d indulge me and revisit our conversation from Thursday evening.” His eyes flashed to her face. She waited expectantly for him to continue. “First of all you’d given me four reasons as to why you wanted to leave Pasadena. I successfully argued one, maybe two if we put aside that I—upset you.” He cleared his throat at the memory of her crying. “I’ve put further thought into your other reasons and I want you to hear me out.”

“You don’t have to do this,” Penny said as she took off her work gloves and tossed them onto the bale.

“Yes I do. As your friend I’ve already failed you twice. I won’t succumb to a third strike. Besides, if you think I came all this way to settle for a ‘never mind’ you’re sadly mistaken.” He looked for a place to put down his bag but seeing nothing suitable he again repositioned the strap on his shoulder.

At the word ‘friend’ Penny felt her stomach churn. It’s funny how a word she used to treasure could somehow turn so vile when Sheldon spoke it aloud.

“I believe your career and employment issues can be addressed with education. Yes I understand that Omaha has a university satellite here but as it’s only Nebraska it’s not like you’re missing out on anything important if you school elsewhere. As I’m sure you’re aware by your affiliation with Leonard and me Pasadena is ripe with educational opportunities.”

At this Penny laughed. “What? Am I supposed to go to Caltech?”

“Hardly. Caltech only caters to the academic—” Here he stopped, a slight flush came to his face. ‘Sarcasm.’ “Pasadena City College offers general educational certification and opportunities for transferring to the university itself for completion of your degree.”
“I think the University of Nebraska offers the same thing.”

“Yes, but in Pasadena you have five doctors and Howard to assist you in your academic endeavors. Here you have chickens and a brother who doesn’t know enough to introduce himself when a stranger calls.”

“I’m sorry this isn’t enough for you, Sheldon,” Penny spat. “But it’s where I’m from so take your ‘too good for here’ attitude and go home.”

Sheldon waited for her words to die down before responding. “This has nothing to do with me. You’re too good to be here,” he said quietly. At this Penny seemed stunned so he continued his point. “Penny, when you left here for California it was for a reason albeit a naïve one. However it has to be said that while you were moving towards an acting career you were at the same time getting out of here. What makes you think anything’s changed?”

“I’m the one who’s changed,” Penny answered. “Maybe I learned no matter what kind of hot shit I thought myself leaving Nebraska I’m just a nobody. And you know what nobodies do? They shut up and do their job and that’s what I’m going to do.”

“Like hell you are.” It was hard to discern who was more shocked at Sheldon’s words. Again he cleared his throat. “Pasadena offers you a better chance at success. I suggest you take it.”

“If I go back I can’t afford school and I doubt I’d get a student loan with my credit score.” Penny folded her arms across her chest. She didn’t know what she was feeling at the moment only that she needed to hold herself together.

Sheldon nodded. “I agree. However your financial needs could be addressed by continuing to work at the Cheesecake Factory and a series of loans I’m willing to offer you—so long as you’re willing to let me budget your finances.”

“I can’t let you do that,” Penny cried. “Sheldon, what if I screw up? What if I don’t get a job? What if—”

“Conjecture offers postulates, not certainties.” Penny gave him a blank look. He sought to rephrase his thought. “As long as you dedicate yourself to the endeavor I cannot see you failing. Remember when we made the ‘Penny Blossoms’? You came up with a marketable product and put forth a positive work ethic. We just need to apply this to other aspects of your life.”

“‘Way aye blow the man down’, ” Penny said with a little smile.

He flashed a quick smile in response. “Come home, Penny.”

Penny slowly shook her head. “I am home.”

“No we are currently at your childhood residence. Your home is apartment 4B at 2311 N. Los Robles Avenue in Pasadena where your personal belongings are located and is furthermore your primary mailing address.”

Her green eyes caught his gaze. “It’s the proximity to 4A that’s the problem.”

“I see.” In spite of himself he set down his bag after sweeping a spot on the floor with his foot. “I should also like to admit an omission from Thursday night. When you asked if I could think of any other reason for you to stay I offered nothing. I would like to amend my response.” Sheldon hesitated before taking a step towards Penny.
He licked his lips before he spoke. “In the Marvel universe there are two characters: the Juggernaut and the Blob. Now the Juggernaut is unstoppable and the Blob can’t be moved. One of the conundrums has been who’d ultimately win in a contest of might. In our case it isn’t might as much as wills as neither of us has been willing to say what needs to be said regarding our change in status. I—”

“No way,” Penny said as she moved to stand in front of him. “Say it right, Sheldon.”

“What I mean is that my ability to express what I feel is rather limited,” he said seriously. “Whether this is due to a dysfunctional home life or a quirk of personality I can’t say. All I know is that until I’d met you I never felt inadequate for lacking in this area of communication because there hadn’t been anyone worth the effort.”

“But I’m just a waitress,” she breathed.

He gave a short laugh. ‘Just a waitress’. Penny your gravitational output is nearly infinite. Do you not see the joy you bring to your friends? Leonard can sing nothing but your praises, as do Howard and Raj. You’re Amy’s ‘bestie’ and I consider her to be a sound judge of character. While Bernadette is not an accurate gauge since she speaks kindly of anyone I nevertheless attest that she does not exaggerate when she describes your amiable qualities. Suffice it to say we would be bereft without you.”

“And you?”

Sheldon looked at the ground as his jaw tightened. 'All right Dr. Cooper, you’ve an I.Q. of 187. This is about as basic as it gets: subtractions, fractions, division, pi.' His blue eyes were clear and unwavering as his head raised to meet Penny’s stare. “I’m at a loss. In your absence my world has gone to pieces. I don’t want to be apart from you and I’d be infinitely happy if you came home.” She stood before him, mouth open in shock. “Please Penny, come home,” he whispered.

Reaching out, Penny placed her palm on his warm cheek and stepped close. She heard his breathing hitch as she raised herself on the balls of her feet.

“Sheldon.”

He closed his eyes and swallowed heavily. “I’m not ready.”

“It’s ok. I am.”

Her lips were soft as they gently pressed his own. Unlike with Beverly Hofstadter and Amy, Sheldon found this experience tantalizing as the kiss was neither rushed nor given under the influence of alcohol. As Penny set her feet back on the ground Sheldon found himself following her movement so as to maintain contact. He wasn’t sure exactly when and how he was supposed to breathe but at the moment he felt this was of secondary concern. Only when he felt her pull away did his lips apply any pressure, almost wincing at the stereotypical ‘smacking’ sound as they parted.

Penny bit her lower lip to keep from grinning as she waited for Sheldon to open his eyes.

“Sheldon,” she said softly.

He was shy as his eyes flashed across hers before looking away. Sheldon took a moment to go over his M-Theory equation, Klingon indefinite subjects, the fallout of DC’s Crisis on Infinite Earths, the origin of the spatula and the equipment list of his World of Warcraft Blood Elf Warlock persona. Satisfied that everything seemed in order his blue eyes again engaged her as a tentative
smile curled his lips. Penny’s eyes began to water and before he could prepare himself he felt her snuggle into his chest. His arms encircled her and he took a moment to pat her on the shoulder blade.

“There, there,” he said softly. Penny’s head popped up with an incredulous look on her face. “Bazinga,” Sheldon murmured as he pulled her into a hug.

He hoped he wouldn’t get engine grease on his Green Lantern shirt.

xTBBTx

“They’ve been out there quite a while,” worried Penny as she drummed her fingers on the kitchen table.

“Don’t worry about it. I heard two rifles going off so your boyfriend isn’t dead yet,” smiled Greg as he took a sip of water. “Of course after that ethanol talk this afternoon I thought Dad was going to take him behind the woodshed.”

Sheldon mentioned that the Brazilian version of ethanol used sugarcane instead of corn, thus providing a greater yield of oil per pound. More importantly, as the US food supply wasn’t as dependent on sugarcane it would also keep the cost of food down since the value of corn wouldn’t be inflated. Once Wyatt’s glare penetrated Sheldon’s consciousness he switched to another topic.

“Well Sheldon doesn’t always put a lot of thought into what he says sometimes,” Penny grinned.

“Really? I thought the problem was that he put too much thought into some things and disregarded other things like a person’s feelings on a subject.” Greg put a hand up to deflect Penny’s frown. “No don’t get me wrong, I get a kick out of the guy. I don’t know if he’s up Mom and Dad’s alley but if he grew on you I’m sure they’ll adjust. Besides, it’s not like he’s Kurt.” He moved his hands out of the way but Penny still managed to playfully slap his forearm.

“Be nice or I’ll tell Darlene you miss her.”

“We tend to go for the weird ones.” Darlene was all down with the sex stuff but when she wanted him to choke her during the climax he played the ‘see ya’ card. He never told a soul about what happened only saying that she was a little freaky.

“Think how boring our lives would be if we went for the normal ones,” Penny said as she heard footsteps on the porch. She looked up expectantly as the door opened and Sheldon stepped into the room. He slipped off his shoes and made a beeline to the washroom.

Greg started to chuckle as Penny leaned over the table with an impish glint to her eyes. He’d noticed how often Sheldon washed his hands and applied sanitizer.

“Don’t make me bring it,” she teased.

“Nobody here but us sheep,” he replied with a wink.

Sheldon stopped at the doorway and looked at the seating arrangements.

“What’s wrong, Sheldon?” Penny asked.

He gave her a twitchy smile. “Nothing.” After a moment’s hesitation he cut in behind and took the seat next to her. He fidgeted in an attempt to get comfortable although he found the oak seats unforgiving even with the padded covers. “Penny, can we switch places?” She rolled her eyes but
didn’t want to make a scene in front of Greg. He probably already thought Sheldon was a nut job and didn’t need any more ammunition.

“Nice to see you survived the gunside chat with Dad,” Greg said evenly to Sheldon as the physicist settled into his chair. Given the look on Penny’s face he knew better than to make a comment on their rendition of musical chairs.

“It’s been a while since I’ve used a real firearm so while my aim wasn’t to my usual standard it seemed to please Wyatt. He wants me to call him by name,” Sheldon added.

He cringed slightly as Penny rubbed his shoulder although she didn’t let it bother her. “That’s a good sign. The only other guy to call him by name was Leonard and we know what Dad thinks of him. So, what did he have to say anyhow?”

“We discussed a whole range of topics: hunting, archery, California, you, me, you and I—”

“Just give me from California on.”

“I extolled the merits of remaining in Pasadena and he agreed. Furthermore he wants you to go back to school and to this end he’s willing to pay for your upgrading and half your tuition once you start college.” Penny squealed in delight before hi-fiving her brother. Sheldon paused to give her time to recover. “However, there’s a stipulation to the money: you’re to follow a budget of my devising. Any deviation will result in loss of funding.”

“Well we can kiss that goodbye,” Penny said dryly. Sheldon eyed her questioningly. “We have different priorities, Sheldon. What you think is a waste I’ll probably consider a necessity.”

“I won’t just arbitrarily cut you off. I’ll need one month of bills and receipts to see how you spend your money. From there we’ll cut the fat and get you in shape for the upcoming academic year.” He hoped using an exercise analogy made his idea clear to her.

Penny was dubious. “Anyways, what else did you talk about?”

“He wanted to know about my background and what I did professionally although I had to set him straight when he commented on me being a physicist ‘just like Leonard’.”

“That bastard,” breathed Greg. To his credit he barely winced as Penny kicked him on the shin.

Sheldon pursed his lips. “Well not that I’d say it quite like that but the sentiment’s there. On a positive note if Leonard managed to impress him with his limited abilities I should have little difficulty with your father.” Greg and Penny looked at each other.

“So what about us?” asked Penny.

“The conversation revolved around stereotypical subjects like disrespecting you resulting in physical injury or death on my part and having patience for your transgressions and his expectation for grandchildren.” Sheldon appeared puzzled. “Oddly, I had to promise in no uncertain terms that in the event of cohabitation we’re to never live in a trailer.”

“Wait a minute. You’re supposed to be patient with me? Are you insane?” Penny sputtered.

“Of course not. My mother had me tested,” scowled Sheldon.

Greg hit his limit and began chuckling. “I need more water,” he said as he got up from his chair.
“Get me a glass?” muttered Penny as she continued to glare at her boyfriend.

“Sheldon?” asked Greg as he pulled out a second glass.

“I’ll have a diet Coke, please.” After reading the Environmental Working Group’s 2009 report ranking Omaha’s Metropolitan Utilities District ninety fourth out of one hundred water utilities serving populations greater than two hundred and fifty thousand he’d made it a priority to only drink canned refreshments or bottled water while in the State of Nebraska.

“Anyhow, these are details you can work out later,” Greg said diplomatically as he set out the drinks. “You have to look at it this way Pen, it’s not like Sheldon’s moving here.”

“Good Lord I should think not.” Sheldon took out a small package of disinfectant wipes from his pocket. At home he normally wiped down the cans and bottles before stacking them in the refrigerator but he doubted that was the protocol here.

“Nebraska’s not exactly clambering for physicists,” agreed Greg.

“I doubt there’s need for scientists who aren’t agriculturally-oriented.” Sheldon paused as a thought came to him. “I seem to recall Penny mentioning you were ‘a kind of chemist’. What kind are you?”

Penny nearly spit out her water. Greg couldn’t help but laugh.

xtBBTx

A/N Water Quality Study: Omaha World-Herald. Yeah, even I can’t believe I looked this up….

AA statistics: various passenger safety sites. My favorite was a site called ‘plane crash info’. Now there’s cheery for ya.
“Are you going to be ok?” Penny whispered to Sheldon as he nervously checked his lap belt.

“As long as we don’t crash I’ll be hunky-dory.”

“We’re not going to crash,” said Penny as she looked around to see if anyone was listening. The last thing she wanted was to get bumped from the flight since her dad paid the extra fee to move her ticket from tomorrow to today. Sheldon had to be at work on Thursday yet was reluctant to return without Penny.

“Let’s hope you’re right.” He could feel her looking at him so he put on a smile, albeit a twitchy one. Penny reached out and took his hand; while he didn’t pull away he did flinch.

“You know you’re going to have to do something about this,” said Penny in a light but serious tone. “I can’t have your first instinct be run away, run away every time I touch you.” She said ‘run away’ in a British accent, recalling Monty Python and the Holy Grail. Yes, she realized she was scoring high on the geek meter.

“Keep in mind it isn’t you per se but the germs you carry. Who knows what potentially lethal bacteria you’ve been exposed to simply by touching a doorknob or railing?”

Penny laughed. “Well as you’ve been with me nearly every step of the way I’d think you’ve been equally contaminated so we can always pull a Romeo and Juliet and die a romantic death.” She held up their clasped hands. “Although I think this’ll take a lot longer than poison.”

“I don’t have any plans for dying any day soon as long as we survive the flight,” Sheldon said with a scowl.

The plane began to move and Penny felt his hand tighten around hers. She reached over with her other hand and rubbed his arm, grinning all the while as she could practically feel his skin crawl.

After a quick inhalation of breath and a slight push back into his seat Sheldon remained stock-still as the plane rose into the air. Once it leveled out Penny gave his hand a little squeeze.

“See? Not so bad,” she said gently.

“It was a devious ploy on your part Penny,” he countered as he reached into his pocket for hand sanitizer.

“What are you talking about?”

“I spent so much time thinking about germs I didn’t worry about the plane taking off. Well done.”
Penny rolled her eyes. “That was my plan all along. Just think what you could do if I threatened to kiss you.”

“I survived one kiss,” he said softly as he cleaned his hands. “It’ll all come down to risk management.”

“Risk management?” Penny didn’t like the direction the conversation was taking. Things were starting to get over-analyzed and she didn’t want to get swept up in that kind of crazy.

“There are various sanitizing mouthwashes on the market in a variety of flavors. I myself prefer mint.” He offered Penny the sanitizer. She took it grudgingly; her hands really did feel kind of gross after Sheldon mentioned the germs in the airport. Damn him.

“So I’m to keep a bottle of Listerine on me at all times? Doubt it, mister. Of course, I could make it a habit to carry white rum,” she said with a smirk.

Sheldon made a sour face. “I’d rather you not. The smell of alcohol reminds me of my father and I somehow doubt you want him brought to mind every time we kiss.”

“Every time we kiss.’ Now that’s what I’m talking about.” She pumpkin grinned even as color came to Sheldon’s cheeks.

“I realize this relationship isn’t going to be as”—he paused. Somehow the words ‘pure’ or ‘sanitary’ didn’t seem right—“chaste as with Amy. You’ve demonstrated your carnal nature repeatedly over the past five years what with your relationship with Leonard and various other boyfriends.”

Now it was Penny’s turn to flush. “Yeah well what can I say? We keep it real in Nebraska.”

“No doubt because you witnessed Nature at her basest growing up on the farm: pigs fornicating, horses rutting, corn germinating.”

“Oh yeah. It definitely was the corn.” She took Sheldon’s hand and this time he didn’t run away. “At this rate we’re going to need the sanitizer by the gallon when we have sex. Not that I’m saying we’re there yet,” she added as she felt him tense. “God, Sheldon I just got you up to bat. I’m not expecting a home run.”

“Good,” he said at last. He took a peek at Penny out of the corner of his eye. “However there’s a risk of spillage when using a gel-based sanitizer in bed. I’d recommend disinfecting wipes.”

Penny couldn’t believe what she was hearing. “This isn’t from personal experience is it, Moonpie?”

“Don’t call me Moonpie,” he replied, though his tone was only half-serious. “I’m a physicist. We have to prove our theories work.”

“I thought Leonard was the experimental physicist and you, the theoretical?”

“Which means I’ve put more thought into this than Leonard ever did. I might be inexperienced but as I’ve excelled at everything else I imagine I’ll be a quick study,” he smiled smugly.

This had to be the weirdest conversation about sex Penny ever had even counting Leonard blurting out his bizarre factoids when he got flustered. Or maybe it was weird because this was Sheldon who was flirting with her. At least it sounded like he was flirting. With him it’s hard to tell.
“That makes me your teacher,” Penny said with an evil grin. “And you know what we do with naughty students, right?”

“Make them clean your erasers?” Sheldon was puzzled. How did a conversation about coitus turn into a lesson on classroom sanitation?

“I’ve never heard it called that before.” Penny planted a kiss on his cheek. “You really are something else, sweetie.”

After five minutes of fidgeting Penny gave the go-ahead for Sheldon to wipe his cheek. Come hell or high water he was going to get used to her, germs and all.

XxX

Sheldon should be easy to spot. Leonard practically bounced from one foot to the other in impatience. When he got the text from Sheldon saying that Penny was coming back to stay he nearly did cartwheels around the apartment. He texted the group and after sharing many words of jubilation and relief Leonard was practically tackled by Leslie, who planned to take advantage of every drop of his good mood. Besides, Sheldon was coming home later today so this was their last night alone in the apartment.

Leonard grinned to himself. And what a night it was. The nice thing about Sheldon seeing Penny was that there would be more alone time once he began staying over at her apartment. Well, that is if they get to that stage. Duh. This is Penny we’re talking about. If she could get Leonard to open up about his fantasies she should at least be able to hit a run of the mill home run with Sheldon.

Speak of the devil. Sheldon’s six foot two frame made an easy target in the crowd, especially since he was wearing a bright Red Lantern t-shirt. Of course where stood Sheldon there be Penny and sure enough Leonard spotted his blonde-haired neighbor walking alongside rolling her ‘Hello Kitty’ suitcase. It was as they approached that Leonard made a particularly intriguing discovery as the pair were holding hands. In the almost eighteen months Sheldon was with Amy never once did Leonard spot him holding her hand much less doing anything else more intimately.

“Hey you two,” grinned Leonard as Penny parked her suitcase and gave him a hug. “Nice to see you back,” he added.

“Nice to be back.” Penny gave him a kiss on the cheek before reclaiming her suitcase. She tried to do the same with Sheldon’s hand but found that he’d changed his flight bag to the other shoulder. Sighing to herself, Penny either had the option of switching her suitcase to the other hand and walking to his other side in order to again hold hands or else forget the whole thing and get home. The look on Sheldon’s face said he wasn’t worse for wear so this had to be a ‘she touched Leonard and was now contaminated’ moment. Good God but she was going to spend a fortune on sanitizer.

“So how was the trip?” asked Leonard as the trio made their way through the airport.

“We survived though for who knows how long.” remarked Sheldon. “A woman in 6C was coughing so I’ve no doubt I’ve been exposed to some kind of foreign agent. As demonstrated by Penny when she passed on her family flu I seem to have a lack of Cornhusker antibodies.”

“Well I guess Penny’ll have to work on that,” said Leonard with a wink. “What is it? ‘Circle circle dot dot. Now you have your cootie shot.”’ Penny giggled as Sheldon’s mouth opened to respond but was at a loss for words. He settled instead for a scowl.

XxX
“Let me just get this into my apartment and I’ll be over,” said Penny as she got to the top of the stairs.

“Actually could you come over first? I promised Amy no detours,” replied Leonard as he opened the door.

Amy let out a “Bestie!” as Penny and Sheldon entered the apartment and practically clung to the Nebraskan who could only smile as she returned the hug.

“Nice work Sheldon,” said Howard smoothly as he tipped his bottled water in tribute.

“There wasn’t much ‘work’ involved apart from stating my case,” replied Sheldon. “Although I admit the apprehension did tire me out.”

“Well the important thing is that Penny’s back,” gushed Raj as he set his wine cooler down on the kitchen counter.

“Now that we all agree I’m back I’d like to put my things away,” said Penny as she took up her luggage.

“I’ll give you a hand,” piped in Bernadette as the two ladies left the apartment.

Amy hesitated for a moment before crossing over to Sheldon and nearly crushed his chest in a hug.

“Thank you, thank you, thank you,” she repeated excitedly.

“Oh my God!” came Penny’s voice from the hall.

“Apparently she’s seen your handiwork,” said Amy to Sheldon. “Don’t worry I’ll do my best to put Penny at ease.” She flashed him a smile before practically running out of the room.

When she crossed the hall she found Penny in front of her couch gawking as she took in the apartment. The changes weren’t profound but they were plenty: dvds put away and those that didn’t fit in the drawers were stacked alphabetically; the kitchen practically shone it was so clean; her wall unit was completely reorganized with the key bowl sitting prominently where she used to just toss her keys; the entire apartment smelled lemony fresh.

“I think he even steam-cleaned the couch,” said an impressed Bernadette. “Boy did I marry the wrong guy.”

“Don’t give Sheldon a hard time about this, Bestie. His anxiety over your fight and subsequent flight to Nebraska kicked his OCD into overdrive,” explained Amy. “As a bright side it does demonstrate how much he thought about you.”

“How the hell am I supposed to keep this up?” breathed Penny as she plunked herself on the couch. “This is so totally not me.”

“I’m sure there’ll be some sort of compromise,” soothed Amy. Both Penny and Bernadette gave her an incredulous look. “Granted Rome wasn’t built in a day but nevertheless Sheldon has exhibited change since I’ve known him and in your case he’s got added motivation to accelerate the process.”

“Besides, I’m sure he’d help you,” said Bernadette as she patted Penny’s hand.

“You can always add it to the Relationship Agreement,” added Amy.
Penny cocked her head as she remembered the document Sheldon had presented Amy at the start of their relationship. “Crap on a cracker, I forgot about that. Well he’ll be in for a few surprises when he tries that on me.” She got up from the couch. “Just a second, let me get this away and clean up.”

Amy smirked as she sat down where Penny had been. “While he allows the use of an attorney I’d go straight towards mutual revision. Don’t let him bowl you over with his Texan charm.”

“Note taken,” said Penny as she wheeled the luggage into her bedroom. “So much for a corn-free day,” she said softly when she saw the silver box containing Sheldon’s water lily sitting in the middle of her freshly made bed. Was he really that sure they’d make up? If not, did he have any idea how badly this would have messed her up coming home to this? Probably not. The more she thought about it the more she realized this was his way of saying he didn’t want to see her sad and that he still cared about her. Physics and general crazy aside, at the end of the day Sheldon really was a simple guy at heart.

After refreshing herself in the washroom Penny rejoined her friends. They crossed over to the other apartment to find the guys in various stages of concentration as their hands worked the game controllers. Sheldon had changed from his bus-turned-airplane pants and stood next to Leonard as the two physicists sought to kill each other on the Halo battle ground.

“There’s a bottle of champagne in the fridge,” suggested Amy.

“I’ll pull out the glasses,” agreed Penny.

xTBBTx

Knock Knock Knock “Penny.”

Knock Knock Knock “Penny.”

Knock Knock Knock “Penny.”

“It’s open, Sheldon.”

There was a pause at the door before he entered the apartment. He had a slight frown as she hadn’t fulfilled her part of the ritual and opened the door. It wasn’t something he could give her a strike for or at least a verbal one. Sheldon did know a thing or two about spite given that he grew up with a twin who was stronger than her brother.

“How she go, cuppa Joe?” asked Penny as she poured herself a cola.

“Splendidly until my ears were assaulted by this affront on the English language.” He moved a throw pillow aside so he could sit on the couch, though he did look longingly at his chair before doing so. “Your day was satisfactory?”

“Enjoying the calm before the storm. Got a double to work tomorrow so I stuck around here. Want a pop?”

“No thank you.” Sheldon angled his body to face Penny and put what looked like a booklet on his knee. Penny didn’t think it was her imagination; Sheldon seemed excited about something. She looked at the document as she crossed over to the couch, thinking back to her conversation with Amy from the night before. Damn he’s quick.

“What’s that?” Penny asked innocently.
“I’m glad you asked,” Sheldon replied in a chipper tone. “During my break periods and tonight after dinner I managed to formulate our Relationship Agreement.”

“Ah yes,” said Penny as she rolled her eyes.

“I brought over a copy for you to peruse at your leisure although I’d appreciate it if you could sign it sooner than later.” He handed her the booklet.

“I don’t want any lawyer speak.”

“I assure you I made it a point to keep the language at a high school level for easy comprehension,” said Sheldon evenly. “The last thing we need after the past twelve days is a misunderstanding.”

“Eyah.” Penny flipped a few pages in and started to read. “‘Booboos and Ouchies’? Seriously?” A few more pages turn and she began to shake her head. “No way, Sheldon. We both need input into this thing if it’s going to work.”

“I realize that and am fully capable of compromise should it become necessary. However, I do believe you’ll find the document to be much more flexible than my agreement with Amy.” Sheldon clasped his hands and rested them on his knee.

“Knew I wouldn’t put up with it, huh?” grinned Penny as she turned a few more pages.

“Actually I didn’t think you possessed the wherewithal to respect much less uphold such a covenant.” He noted the sour expression on her face.

“Of course this is all irrelevant as it’s not the current document in question.” He gave her a twitchy smile for emphasis.

In seriously less cheer Penny went back to the Agreement and read. In some places her jaw dropped at Sheldon’s audacity but in others his freaky controlling nature was so whacked she couldn’t help but giggle. At those times Sheldon would frown. To his mind there wasn’t anything funny within the Agreement unless Penny was using the time to think about something else or was experiencing a psychotic break. After another chuckle Penny looked up to catch his glare.

“Ok, we’ve got to talk. There’s no way we need all these things spelled out. ‘Pet Names’? I’m to refrain from calling you anything other than ‘Sheldon’. In particular, I’m to avoid ‘Moonpie’, ‘Shelly’, ‘Honey’ and ‘Sweetie’.” Penny gave a crooked smile. “Dr. Whackadoodle it is.”

“Not what I was going for,” said Sheldon with a scowl.

“Well at least I’m acknowledging your education.” She thought for a moment. “Wait, what’s wrong with ‘sweetie’ and ‘honey’? You never had a problem with them before.”

“That was before our relationship changed.” He began picking off imaginary lint from his thigh.

“And? What so now you’re too good to be my sweetie? Everyone else takes it ok.”

“That’s the point,” Sheldon said quietly. “You call everyone ‘sweetie’. I’m not just anyone.”

“Aww Moonpie I’m sorry,” Penny said with a kindly smile.

“Penny—”

“‘Don’t call me Moonpie’. Yadda yadda yadda. Look I’ll work on the sweetie thing and I can’t really say I’ve called you Shelly since Missy left but no promises on Moonpie. What can I say? You really are nummie nummie.” She lowered her head to read more of the Agreement to avoid
the dark look on Sheldon’s face. Ok, and so he wouldn’t see her smile. Penny’s eyebrows nearly went off her forehead. “This has to be right out of Whackville. ‘Section Five: Handholding. Handholding is only allowed under the following circumstances: A. either party is in danger of falling off of a cliff, precipice or ledge. B. moral support during flu shots.’”

“There’s an addendum beneath concerning your penchant need for physical contact so long as you observe proper hygiene procedures and limit the amount of times and duration to those specified. When these impromptu hand hugs occur we’ll leave to whimsy.”

“Yay us,” Penny said in mock cheer as she flipped to the next section. “Hey now. Date Night is once a month? Not a chance. Every Thursday unless I’m working then it moves to Saturday.”

“But I do laundry on Saturday,” pouted Sheldon. Somehow he was beginning to lose control over the Agreement and he wasn’t happy. “Besides, what would we be doing that’s so important it’d require three additional nights a month to accomplish?”

“I’m so glad you asked that question, Sheldon. Got a pen?” He handed her his black Pilot pen. She flipped back to Section Five and made an arrow to the margin. ‘Sex’ she wrote and underlined for emphasis. “Sex shall commence at the conclusion of Date Night followed by ‘sleeping over’ and if time permits breakfast in the morning.”

Sheldon went crimson. “Penny,” he sputtered. “Section Five clearly states what constitutes an acceptable touch. Coitus is not—”

“Sex is not a touch. It’s an experience.”

Sheldon crossed his arms as his jaw trembled. Man, but he hated being cut off. “From what I know of the process touching is very much involved.”

“Sheldon, there’s a big difference if I put my hand here”—she touched his arm—“or there”—her eyes indicated his crotch.

Like a shot he was on his feet. “I can see you’re not willing to take this seriously,” he fumed.

Penny sighed. “Look, you’re making this more complicated than it has to be. You need a contract? Fine.” She flipped to the end of the booklet and wrote three sentences and signed her name and the date before handing it over.

Sheldon opened the back cover and read:

‘I really like you.
I promise I’ll never cheat on you.
I promise if I want out of the relationship I won’t string you along.’

“And the rest?” he said hoarsely.

“We wing it.” Sheldon looked at her dubiously. “It’s ok, Sheldon.” Penny twirled a strand of hair. “So, you got anything else on the agenda? After all it is Thursday.” She wiggled her eyebrows as his eyes widened.

“I have the notary in my room. I’ll provide you a copy of course,” he said hurriedly as he made for the door.
“Wait,” Penny said in an authoritarian tone as she got out of her seat. She put a hand on Sheldon’s chest and slowly slid it up until it rested on his cheek then raised herself onto her toes and whispered a “Goodnight Moonpie” before kissing him lightly on the lips. After a moment she released him and took a step back so he could leave. He was hesitant but discretion won out over valor and with a nervous smile he exited the apartment.

“This girl’s going hunting, baby deer,” Penny said as she licked her lips.

XxX

She heard the paper slide under her door. Getting off the couch, Penny padded over to see what was up.

The document was laminated and contained the same three sentences Penny had written only done in Sheldon’s own hand followed by his signature and date. Notarized of course.

She kept reading the first line over and over:

'I really like you.'

xTBBTx

Penny stepped through the door and was greeted with the sight of dozens of geeks hovering around various arcade games. Howard and Leonard had grins on their faces and she swore she heard Raj give a small squeal of joy. Only Sheldon appeared stoic although one look into his blue eyes and anyone could tell he was a bundle of excitement.

“Yes! They have Golden Axe,” Howard said and dove into the crowd. Raj gave a smile as he shrugged at the rest of the group before following his friend. Penny grabbed Sheldon by the arm.

“Just so we’re clear on something: this does not constitute ‘date night’,” warned Penny.

“Of course not,” agreed Sheldon. “‘Date night’ requires the couple spend ‘quality time’ to be determined by both participants. Howard found this retro arcade and suggested we come here for Vintage Game Night. You agreed to accompany us. There is no ulterior motive.”

“Fair enough. I’m just going to walk around. You two—go play!” She didn’t have to tell the boys twice and in a flash she was alone. The shouts of joy at the air hockey table caught her attention as did the players: unlike the rest of the clientele they appeared to be more of the frat boy type. The girls cheering on their boyfriends reminded Penny of herself at that age. 'Oh God what am I doing here that I need to say ‘at that age’?'

Feeling exposed she wove her way through the crowd in search of the guys. Occasionally she bumped into someone whose shocked expression at her being in a place like this took in every ounce of Penny but for the most part she was invisible due to the video game haze.

Fortunately even in a place like this Howard’s pants stood out like a sore thumb. Penny made her way over and stood to the side as she watched Howard’s dwarf persona go into a dive roll and end up sticking a goblin in the gut with his axe. She smiled to herself—after five years of hanging out with these guys and playing Age of Conan she could tell an orc from a goblin. Definitely not something she would have picked up in Nebraska.

After a while Penny got the itch to try out a game but was unsure as to which one. First thing was first though and she went to the booth in order to buy some tokens. The man in a Black Sabbath t-shirt, electric purple dress tie and top hat smiled as Penny handed him a five dollar bill.
“Do you have anything like Halo?” she asked over the noise.

He paused for a moment before a smile came to his face. “We have some old school first person shoot ‘em ups to the left. I thought you were picking up tokens for air hockey.”

She shook her head. “No, my boyfriend’s in the arcade losing himself instead of being at home losing himself on the Wii or Playstation or X-box. Oh wait, it’s Vintage Game Night so it’d be the Genesis, Dreamcast or whatever.”

“I hope you get your own night in exchange. Just a sec,” he said as a young man in a Spider-Man t-shirt and khaki pants came to the window and handed over forty dollars and retrieved his tokens.

“Wow, some of these guys are sure dedicated,” said Penny as she watched Sheldon’s Marvel double beeline for the Mortal Kombat machine.

“You’d be amazed at the—oh wait I guess you wouldn’t,” grinned the booth man.

Penny smiled in return and gave a little wave as she made her way to the machines.

“This one seems ok,” she muttered to herself as she watched a teenager with freckles pointing a plastic six-gun at the screen. “How do you play?” she asked the boy’s friend.

“Shoot the bad guys, don’t hit the innocent people and to reload point your gun at the bottom of the screen and press the trigger.”

She waited until it was her turn and picked up the blue gun. She popped in a token, selected one player and began the carnage. Right from the start everything her dad taught her about shooting came to mind: arms straight, exhale when pulling the trigger, return the gun to the center in preparation for the next shot. Minutes went by though how many she couldn’t be sure. At one point Penny died and there were a mass of groans behind her. Startled she turned to see about six guys smiling sheepishly at her.

Penny flashed a smile as she held up another token.

“Mind if I go again?”

Everyone acquiesced and she resumed. ‘Bad, bad, bad, bad, good, bad, good, bad, reload, bad—’

As Sheldon was cutting his way to the token booth he saw a cluster of guys to his right. He wouldn’t have thought anything of it until two teenagers cut in front of him heading towards the group.

“She can shoot and she’s hot,” said one to the other.

Knowing someone who fit that description to a ‘T’ Sheldon followed the boys and loomed over a short, fat guy and watched Penny rack up the points on the screen. The group was silent for the most part save for an occasional groan. The faster the bad guys appeared and the faster Penny shot the more intense the groans became until some of the guys started laughing.

Penny frowned. “What the frak’s so funny?” she growled.

“Look where you’re shooting,” said the fat guy.

Letting her eyes linger on her target after she shot she saw the bullet strike him in the testicles.

“Crap on a cracker! But I’m aiming for the head.” Too late she realized that was the wrong thing to say as the entire crowd erupted in laughter. Even Penny couldn’t contain herself and in a few
grizzly moments her game came to an end.

Noticing Sheldon, Penny holstered the gun and joined him. “Going or tokens?” she asked.

“Tokens,” he replied.

As they turned a voice called out: “Hey buddy, make sure she doesn’t play any ‘head’ games with you.”

Sheldon leaned over towards Penny’s ear. “Why would he warn against engaging you in an intellectual pursuit?”

She smirked as she held out her hand and wasn’t surprised in the least as she felt a bottle of hand sanitizer cross her palm.

xTBBTx

“So how come there aren’t more dinosaur bones from California? Wasn’t this like prime tropical paradise?” Penny asked as they exited the dinosaur exhibit.

“Actually very few fossils come from California. During the Triassic through Cretaceous periods most of California was underwater and as we know from our current problems with beach erosion any preservative sediments have long since washed away.” Sheldon checked his watch. “If you’d like we can go to the Textiles and Costumes Gallery.”

“Yes please.” Penny thought back to the exhibit. “The information plaque said we had a lot of duck-billed dinosaurs in the area.”

Sheldon nodded. “The information was accurate if not current. For instance while hadrosaur feet were webbed it’s been theorized that their feet had pads similar to that of a camel based on what we know about the structure of ornithopod feet.” He noticed Penny looking strangely at him. “Ornithopods are a grouping of bipedal herbivore dinosaurs.” His explanation still hadn’t removed the expression from her face so he decided to zip it.

“How do you know all this stuff?” Penny asked at last as they mounted the stairs. “I mean I know you’re a genius but did you read an encyclopedia or something?”

“Not word for word. I did look up various articles at grade school to pass the time, however. My knowledge base stems from my ability to absorb vast amounts of information in a short period of time and an eidetic memory.”

“That’s right Leonard said you had a photographic memory.” Penny couldn’t get over the Islamic mosaic ceiling in all its golden brilliance. She wished cameras were allowed.

“Not completely accurate. A photographic memory only refers to visual recall whereas eidetic memory calls upon visual, auditory, gustatory, tactile, and olfactory senses as well as other quantifying measures.”

Penny laughed. “And yet you keep locking yourself out of the apartment.”

“Yes well I never claimed I couldn’t be distracted,” Sheldon said haughtily.

“Well some of us are good distractions,” she grinned as she hooked his arm with her own, giving his arm a little shake to remind him to loosen up.
“When time and circumstance deem it appropriate,” he replied with a little smile.

“Let’s give you a test: you’ve known me five years so what have you learned?”

Sheldon took a moment to think before responding. “You snore; you don’t measure your laundry detergent; your mother smoked pot while you were pregnant; you mooch food and wi-fi; you have an unhealthy belief in the paranormal and astrology; you smell like vanilla; you double dip your egg rolls—”


“Or cheesecake.”

“Wow really?” she said with a raised eyebrow. “Maybe I should shower as soon as I get home from work.”

“Your eau de gateau fromage is acceptable. Perhaps Leonard’s lactose intolerance played a subliminal role in your ultimate breakup.” A twinkle came to his eyes. “Bazinga.”

Penny rolled her eyes in response. “Next.”

“You have the Chinese character for soup tattooed on your right buttocks.”

She tugged on his arm. “You know you still owe me for that.” He gave her an inquiring look.

“You peeked.”

Sheldon’s flush betrayed his even tone. “As I explained there’s been a long-standing tradition of heroes peeking.”

“You also said things don’t usually go well for the hero.”

“True. In the case of Actaeon he was turned into a stag and torn to shreds by a pack of dogs for stumbling across the goddess Artemis bathing in a vale.”

“Now that’s what I’m talking about,” Penny grinned. “What? I’m a farm girl. Back to nature and all that jazz, remember?”

“Indeed. Although I suppose I should be thankful you no longer practice human sacrifice to ensure the fertilization of the corn crop.”

“That’s right out of The Wicker Man.”

“Which borrowed the concept from human history when a king’s vitality was tied to the natural forces.”

Penny glanced at Sheldon. It was insane how much he knew. “Ok, sorry about the distraction. So what else about me?”

“You’ve uncanny accuracy in Halo; you fold People magazines at the page displaying the best and worst dressed; you don’t find me sexually attractive; you—”

She pulled on his arm to stop. “Wait a minute wait a minute. What? Where did this come from?”

“You told me when I asked you to stay away from Leonard while he was dating Dr. Stephanie Barnett. As I recall I asked if you could find some way to inhibit your libido to which you replied, ‘I could think of you.’”
“Sarcasm, Sheldon.” They resumed walking.

“You seemed sincere,” he said after a moment.

“You made me out to be a sex-starved nymphomaniac who couldn’t keep her pants on,” growled Penny.

“I see. So then do you find me sexually attractive?”

She turned crimson. “Of course I do.”

“Did you then?”

“Probably not. You were Sheldon. You know: Dr. Whackadoodle, Sheldor the Conqueror, Mommy’s lil Shelly.” He gave her a scowl. “If it makes you feel any better when I first met the two of you I thought you were cuter than Leonard.”

“So when did I become unappealing?” He took a glance at the eighteenth century American soldier statue as they passed through the entrance to the Textile and Costume Hall.

“I don’t know if I’d say unappealing but you definitely set off my whacko-meter when I sat in your spot—which in hindsight I can see you were being more than accommodating.” Her mouth opened as the dots were connected. “You liked me. Even back then.”

“I don’t know if I’d say ‘liked’ as I didn’t know you,” he said defensively.

“Let me rephrase: you ‘liked’ me,” she said in a sultry voice before licking her lips seductively.

“I was merely being courteous,” he muttered.

Penny smirked. “Oh yeah? How come you never gave your seat to Amy or Stephanie?”

“Amy would feel uncomfortable sitting in someone else’s nexus spot and Dr. Stephanie wasn’t my neighbor.” He frowned as he looked at the international clothing cases in the middle of the hall as they displayed their wares without consideration for geographic locale. How could one start the exhibit in North America and then transition to Asia without visiting South America first?

“So you let the transvestite sit in your spot?”

Sheldon sighed. “I can see the subject won’t terminate unless you get the desired response. Fine. When I first saw you I thought you attractive. I didn’t ‘give’ you my spot you took it and Leonard forced me to go elsewhere.”

“Uh uh. Dr. Sheldon Cooper doesn’t do anything he doesn’t want to. For instance, I want to kiss you but that doesn’t mean it’ll happen.”

“You could always get lucky.”

“I thought you didn’t believe in luck?”

Sheldon shook his head. “An illusion caused by an arbitrary arrangement of variables in support of causality. In your case the amicable nature of our conversation, your smile and my wanting to prolong the overall mood of the evening are all positive indicators—”

“Oh my God. Look at that fabric.” Penny walked open-mouthed to stand in front of a Chinese ceremonial robe. She read the placard indicating it came from the Qing Dynasty. The yellows and
oranges were covered in a series of embroidered motifs. “It must have taken months to embroider all that.”

“Not to mention the exactness of the detailing. An emperor was the Son of Heaven and as such had the twelve symbols of sovereignty on his robes: the red disc with the three-legged crow represents the Sun; the mountains below the right breast symbolize stability and the earth; the light blue—”

He raised an eyebrow as he noticed her pulling out some lip balm from her purse. “Penny, do you realize every time you apply lip balm from the same tube you’re spreading bacteria?”

“Yup,”

“And you’re also aware that by going on to kiss me you’re exposing me to said bacteria not to mention anything new you’ve contracted?”

“Yu-P.”

“We could limit some of the contaminants by… … … … Is that grape?”

“Yup.”

“Tasty,” Sheldon replied as he reached into his pocket for the antibacterial wipes.

“I’m surprised you lips haven’t shriveled from the alcohol,” Penny smirked as he wiped his mouth.

“I’m usually coated in lip balm shortly before. It’s my understanding it keeps my lips ‘nummie nummie’,” he replied evenly although there was a slight glint to his eyes.


xTBBTx

A/N: hadrosaur: Berkeley website

Qing Dynasty: powerhousemuseum
And so we come to the end of the third month. A most heartfelt thank you for reading my story and taking the time to post comments. ~Lynn

xTBBTx

“To a happy home,” said Raj as he raised his glass.

“A happy home,” everyone repeated and clinked their glasses in a toast.

“And a perfect segue to a little something for you,” said Penny to Bernadette as she handed over a box.

“Aw Penny, I said no gifts for the housewarming. Your company’s all we needed.”

“Nope. Every house needs a set of these so it’s non-optional.” Penny smirked at Sheldon, who didn’t catch the sarcasm.

“Sweet,” said Howard as he looked over his wife’s shoulder. Inside the box were a golden dragon and phoenix.

“You put them in the bedroom. In Feng Shui they promote marital bliss,” Penny explained. Sheldon rolled his eyes.

“Really Penny, Feng Shui? Why don’t we just consult the oracle bones so Howard and Bernadette can avoid disaster?”

Penny took a moment to glare at her boyfriend before continuing. “Anyways, make sure the dragon is no higher than eye-level. The best place to put them is facing your lucky direction which we can figure out later when we calculate your Kua number.”

“Kua number?” In spite of himself Howard was intrigued. Anything that promoted luck in the bedroom was worth pursuing.

“According to the Feng Shui school of Flying Stars there are two ‘energy’ groups: East and West. The Kua number determines your grouping by simply adding your birth year according to the Chinese calendar to a small formula based on your gender,” said Amy matter-of-factly.

“Exactly,” Penny said smugly. “Trust me guys, it works.”

Raj nudged Leonard. “Really?”

The curly haired man blushed. “Well there are different ways of interpreting data.”

“Sounds like we need to set up an experiment or two,” smirked Leslie. “Where’d you say you picked these up, Penny?”

“China Town. I can get you a set if you want.”
“Oh yes, let’s promote the hokum,” said Sheldon testily as he crossed his arms. “While we’re discussing superstitions your apartment number is extremely unlucky in Chinese numerology. The number four is associated with death. Similar to our avoidance of the number thirteen entire buildings in East Asia lack a fourth floor and even rooms with a four in its composition such as fourteen, twenty four, etcetera.”

“Thanks Sheldon,” growled Penny. “But like the number thirty I’m sure there are positive things about ‘four’.”

“Well if we use geometry to counter Feng Shui a four-sided plane figure is a quadrilateral or square—which is the basic shape of each room. Furthermore, the corners are reinforced as a circle divided by four makes right angles,” said Leonard helpfully as he returned Penny’s thankful smile.

“There are four cardinal directions and four seasons,” added Amy.

As one the group turned to Sheldon, who pursed his lips.

“Your mess to clean up,” warned Raj.

Sheldon sighed heavily. “Both special and general relativity regard nature as comprising of four dimensions: time and three dimensional space which are cumulatively referred to as spacetime. There are four fundamental forces: electromagnetism, gravitation, the weak nuclear force and the strong nuclear force and an alpha particle consists of four hadrons. Happy?”

“Extremely,” grinned Penny as she patted his leg. After a moment Sheldon slid his hand to his lap and tried to be inconspicuous as he wiped his pant leg.

“I see getting a girlfriend hasn’t stopped the cooties from calling,” observed Leslie as Sheldon shot her a dark look.

“Actually scientists are finding that disgust affects almost every aspect of human relations from food, disease, sexuality and even other people,” offered Amy.

“So there’s an evolutionary advantage to being paranoid like Sheldon?” said an astonished Raj. He needed an extra swig of wine to cap that thought.

“To the extent that it protects him from disease and parasites, yes. In terms of social norms, not really.” Amy paused. “Of course Sheldon all of this could stem from your childhood when ‘Shelly Cooper is a smelly pooper’ was thrust upon you on the playground. There is shame when one is ascribed a disgusting moniker which may contribute to excessive hand washing and antibacterial usage associated with obsessive compulsive disorder.”

“Not that anyone here is afflicted,” said a disgruntled Sheldon. His eyes flashed defensively at the incredulous stares.

“Of course not. I often put on a slinky La Senza biohazard suit for Leonard to set the mood.” Leslie shook her head before taking a drink.

“Actually, Sheldon might perform quite well in the bedroom as there seems to be three areas of disgust: disease avoidance, mate selection and moral judgment. There’s a chance his attraction to Penny will trump his desire to remain clean at all costs.” ‘There could be an experiment here.’ Amy mentally slapped her hand at the thought. Using humans in untested experiments was wrong even if one of them was an ex-boyfriend.

“Gee thanks for making me sound like the leper of Pasadena,” chided Penny before draining her
glass. The way the conversation was going it’d take several more glasses before she’d be in a good frame of mind.

“I should think not,” Sheldon said evenly. “If I was worried about contracting anything from your two hundred plus dates, thirty sexual partners and exposure to the general public at your place of work I certainly wouldn’t be dating you.”

Penny’s mouth dropped in shock. 'He so didn’t just say that out loud.' “Thanks a lot.”

“Help me find a place to put these,” Bernadette said quickly to Penny as she picked up the Feng Shui statuettes.

“Yeah, I suppose it isn’t good luck murdering someone at a housewarming,” murmured Howard.

“I shall join you,” said Amy as she got up. She looked inquiringly at Leslie who shook her head.

“Oh no, I’m staying for this one,” she said with a smirk.

“Sheldon what the hell are you doing?” seethed Leonard after the three ladies departed to the bedroom.

“What? I was reassuring Penny that my attraction to her was in no way impaired by her exposure to foreign agents. How is that wrong?” replied a puzzled Sheldon.

Before Leonard could reply Leslie patted his arm. “Let me handle this.” She looked Sheldon in the eye. “Dumbass you just told a room full of people how many men Penny’s slept with.”

Sheldon felt his stomach drop although he wasn’t completely sure as to why. “I meant it as a compliment on my part that I like her regardless, not as an indictment of her lifestyle. When we discussed her ability to initiate sex she quite freely admitted she was a ‘five’ out of—”


“Let me make this simple for you,” Leslie said as she sat forward in her chair. “You keep screwing this up she’ll dump you. Then Leonard and I won’t get any alone time which is why you’re going to listen to me very carefully. If you can’t determine whether a fact or anecdote about Penny should remain private—don’t say it. Ask her later if it’s appropriate and if so add it to your list of acceptable topics. I.E. Leonard told me she has a Care-Bear collection and watches too much reality television. He hasn’t mentioned her dress size or how good or bad she is in bed. Got it?” Sheldon nodded.

“So how long do you give these two?” Leslie asked aloud after he left the room.

“Depends on her patience,” replied Raj.

“Somehow Mother Theresa and Penny don’t get thrown together into the same sentence,” Howard added.

“What’s your pronouncement Nostradamus?” Leslie gave Leonard a nudge but her boyfriend said nothing.

XxX

Knock Knock Knock “Leonard.”

Knock Knock Knock “Leonard.”
Knock Knock Knock “Leonard.”

“What Sheldon?” said a groggy Leonard as he rubbed his eye. The door opened and his roommate entered.

“I can’t sleep.”

Leonard sighed. He adjusted his pillow to raise his head. “And why do you think that is?”

“My mind keeps going over what happened at Howard and Bernadette’s housewarming.” Sheldon shuffled his feet. “While my apology was accepted I’m disturbed I need to seek forgiveness as often as I do. Is this normal?”

“You’d be surprised,” Leonard said with a chuckle. “This is all a part of getting to know someone, Sheldon. There’s going to be a lot of mistakes.”

Sheldon was puzzled. “But I’ve known Penny for five years. I know she eats dumplings on Chinese food Fridays and her menstrual cycle is at the end of the month. There’s a lot more I could say but I believe I’ve illustrated my point.”

“There’s also the ‘Sheldon factor’ to take into account. You’re so blunt sometimes it’s brutal and subjects you consider open for discussion are not meant to be said in public.”

“I’m not good at hiding things,” admitted Sheldon.

“True, but that doesn’t mean you should volunteer information just because you’ve got intimate knowledge of the subject—especially if it’s Penny. For instance, telling me she likes dumplings is ok; surmising when she’s in menses is another matter entirely.”

“I see.” Sheldon stood in thought. “For once Leslie Winkle is right: I’m going to screw this up.”

“No you’re not,” Leonard said as he sat up against the headboard. He hoped he sounded more confident than he felt. “Look, Penny knows what she’s getting into with you. Mind you, this is going to be a hell of an adjustment period but you’re both too stubborn to just quit on each other.”

“Agreed. Only I find myself unsure as to how to proceed. My relationship with Amy Farrah Fowler moved at an acceptable pace whereas I find myself struggling to keep up with Penny and her expectations.”

“Sheldon, Penny and I had sex within the first week of seeing each other. There’s no time limit on
the commencing of sexual intercourse.”

Sheldon sat heavily on the end of the bed. He turned to his friend. “I’m not another notch on her belt, Leonard.”

‘Where the hell did this come from?’ “She knows that. Just relax ok? You’ll both know when the time is right.” Both men sat in silence. “Go to sleep, Sheldon.”

“Perhaps a mug of hot milk first. Goodnight Leonard.”

“Night.” Leonard took off his glasses after watching his roommate close the door. “Sheldon and coitus. Now there’s an association I’d never thought possible.” He smiled as he recalled Penny and their hours of lovemaking.

When it was time Sheldon would never know what hit him.

xTBBTx

“Penny we could use some help here,” said Leonard in a panic.

He held up his game controller but she walked by the chair until she stood behind Sheldon. With a sly smile on her face Penny leaned over and draped her arms loosely around his shoulders so as to not interfere with his gaming. Immediately Sheldon stiffened but was determined not to let her get the better of him. He spotted Leonard and fired off a few tracer rounds before wounding his friend in the leg.

Keeping her eyes on the screen Penny positioned her head almost cheek to cheek with Sheldon. His jaw involuntarily clenched and he took a deep influx of air with his nose. He was homo novus. He would not break.

“Raj I have Leonard pinned. Proceed to the burned out vehicle,” he muttered through his gritted teeth.

Penny opened her mouth as she turned her head and let her breath drag itself against Sheldon’s skin. There was no doubt he was blushing and a tremor of irritation passed over his lips.

“You will not prevail,” he said softly as he launched a grenade to flush out Leonard. Penny’s lips stopped by his ear and she began whispering. The more she said the deeper his flush and the more his right eye twitched. Still she talked until at once his hands dropped to his lap as he turned open-mouthed and wide-eyed to face her grin.

“Bazinga,” she cooed before she stood up.

Sheldon swallowed. “I should most certainly hope so.”

“Sheldon! Howard’s to my left!” Raj shot his partner a quick look. “Sheldon?”

In response Sheldon’s character turned and laid out a few rounds in Howard’s direction. He had to time this correctly so he could get back to Leonard and keep him at bay a few more seconds before —

“At least, ‘Bazinga’ for now,” Penny whispered into his other ear.

Sheldon’s avatar dropped to the ground as Leonard took him out with a bullet.

xTBBTx
Raj rang the doorbell and waited for the show.

“HOW-ARD! GET THE DOOR!”

“I HEAR IT MA! I’M NOT DEAF YOU KNOW!”

“WELL THEN WHY AREN’T YOU ANSWERING IT, MR. SMARTIPANTS?”

“BECAUSE I’M BUSY TALKING TO YOU!” He opened the door. “Hey Raj. I’m just about ready.” He stood aside to let his friend into the house.

“WHO IS IT?” came a call from the kitchen.

“IT’S RAJ!” Howard replied as the two men made for his bedroom.

“DOES YOUR LITTLE BROWN FRIEND WANT ANYTHING TO DRINK?”

Howard rolled his eyes and gave an exasperated sigh. “HE’S JUST HERE TO PICK ME UP!” He took the duffle bag from his bed and grabbed the NASA training manual off the desk. Bernadette had a major drug trial ending today so wasn’t available to drive him to the airport. It was easier for Raj to get him at his mother’s place than the apartment.

“So are you excited?” Raj asked with a grin. He noticed the words ‘Fruit Loops’ written in marker on the manual cover but chose not to mention it.

“I couldn’t sleep a wink last night. All I kept thinking of was seeing the earth from the station and I got so excited that”—here Howard blushed—“well let’s just say I’m hoping not to discover how seminal fluid disperses in zero-gravity.”

Raj led the way to the front door. “After the mishap with the zero-gravity human waste disposal system I think that’s the last thing people need on the space station. Actually, do you think they’ll put two and two together and realize it was you who designed the space-toilet?”

“Well there are a lot of Wolowitz’s. I’ll just have to fake ignorance until I’m back on solid ground.” Howard took in a lungful of air. “OK MA, RAJ AND I ARE OFF!”

“ALL RIGHT. NOW YOU PLAY NICE WITH YOUR NEW FRIENDS. I DON’T WANT TO GET ANY CALLS HOME FROM THE ASTRONAUT SCHOOL!”

“LEAVE IT ALONE MA!” Howard closed the door. “If something goes wrong with the reentry I wonder if we could angle the capsule so it takes out the house?”

“Well they say behind every great man there’s a woman,” offered Raj.

“I was assuming it’d be Bernadette.”

Raj thought back to the sound of Bernadette’s yell and how eerily similar it was to Howard’s mother’s voice. “Who knows? So is Bernadette ok with everything now?”

Howard got in the passenger’s side of the car and waited for Raj to get settled in his seat. “She’s nervous but is as upbeat as she can be I guess.”

“Don’t forget to call,” said Raj as he backed out of the driveway.

“I’ll see what I can do. I don’t think NASA allows a lot of personal calls from the ISS.”
Raj snorted. “I meant when you got to San Francisco.”

“Oh. Sure. I’ll text you,” Howard said awkwardly.

“And don’t leave it too late, Mister. You know I worry,” warned Raj.

Howard looked at the astrophysicist. He really needed to get Raj a girlfriend.

taxTTx

Leonard came down the hall to find Sheldon in his usual spot watching the end of Doctor Who. Knowing better than to disturb his roommate Leonard made for the coffee maker and poured himself a cup and added some lactose-free milk before settling quietly in the stuffed chair to watch.

“It’s too bad Amy’s married to Rory. Red-heads are amazing,” he commented as the credits rolled.

“There’s always Leila,” offered Sheldon as he grabbed his cereal bowl and stood. “Not only is she a red-head but for your appeal she also wears skimpy animal skin clothing as befits her ‘Sevateam’ savage upbringing.”

“Yeah, Leila was a pretty cool companion although I don’t know how comfortable I’d be dating a girl who could kick my butt or kill me with a knife-throw.” Leonard took a sip of his coffee.

“Penny could physically subdue or injure you and yet you didn’t have any qualms about dating her,” argued Sheldon as he washed his bowl and spoon before putting them in the drain rack. “I’d also bet the rent money Dr. Stephanie Barnett could hold her own as well.”

“Well unlike Penny and Stephanie Leila also carried a Janis Thorn that paralyzed and killed its victim in a couple of minutes. As red-heads are known for their temper I don’t think that’s a good combination.” Leonard raised his cup for another sip. “Besides I’ve never seen Penny throw a knife.”

“Given her Nebraskan upbringing and exposure to baseball at an early age I wouldn’t dismiss her abilities.” Sheldon gave a slight frown at the milk left out on the counter before returning it to the refrigerator. Good thing it was Leonard’s beverage as milk left outside a refrigerated environment lost the majority of its B vitamins in a matter of minutes.

“Well I won’t have to worry about her trying to kill me as long as you’re around,” smirked Leonard.

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Seriously? Come on Sheldon, I haven’t seen this much scheming to one-up the other since the last Coyote-Road Runner cartoon.”

In spite of himself Sheldon flashed a quick smile. “The sentiment’s appreciated although your allusion is incorrect as my sole pursuit in life isn’t the destruction of Penny.”

“Who says you’re Coyote? You might be classified as a genius but he’s a ‘soo-per-genius’,” Leonard grinned as he felt the glare aimed at his head.

“I’d need to drop thirty three IQ points to be a ‘genius’ Leonard and sixty three points if I wanted to work an ‘Apple Genius Bar’. I made for the hallway. Weekend or no there was a routine to be upheld and it was time to brush his teeth. “Your comparison is also incorrect as the Coyote continuously gets his comeuppance. Penny and I give as good as we get.”
“That is, until the kryptonite comes out,” Leonard reminded him.

“Yes, I wonder where she got my mother’s phone number?” growled Sheldon as he stopped to give his roommate a dark look.

Leonard did his darndest to keep his voice steady. “Life sometimes has its mysteries.” Again a grin broke out on his face—good thing his back was to Sheldon. “I notice she keeps it on speed dial.”

“Yes, well she was a member of the junior rodeo,” muttered Sheldon. “‘Always Be Prepared’.”

“I thought that was the Boy Scouts?”

“Apparently they don’t distinguish in Nebraska.” Sheldon closed the door to the bathroom and the conversation.

XxX

“Hello Mama, hello Papa,” said Raj amiably.

“Hello Rajesh. I hope you are well,” replied his father.

“You look fatter than last time. What did I tell you about eating American food?” tsked his mother. Raj scowled at the computer screen.

“I still weigh the same.” After his mother’s previous comment he bought himself a scale and kept track of his weight. While he was heavier than he was when he first got to California he was also older so it was expected that he fill out a little. Right?

“Well we don’t want you to turn into Lalita Gupta. It’s hard enough for you to find a girl without having a weight problem,” said Mrs. Koothrappali. “Speaking of which are you dating someone?”

Raj bit his cheek as he looked at the floor. “No.”

His father looked grim. “Rajesh, your mother and I have been talking. After the shame emanating from the botched introduction to the Gupta girl we decided that it’s best you return home for a proper marriage.”

“What? But Papa my work is here,” stammered Raj.

“We’re not saying you have to stay here, Rajesh. Once you’re married you can return to America with your bride and have your life,” soothed his mother.

“And children,” reminded his dad. “Your mother and I aren’t getting any younger you know.”

“I—I—what about Priya? Couldn’t she give you a marriage and grandchildren?” Raj nervously ran a hand through his hair as his brain spun its wheels trying to get himself out of the situation.

“Unlike you she is actually dating someone and it seems to be serious. But you are the son, Rajesh. You carry on the Koothrappali name.” His dad paused so he could get a hold of his emotions before continuing. “Look, even your Jewish friend got married. Surely you must see reason?”

“What if I find someone here?” Raj was starting to find it hot in his apartment.

His mother and father looked at each other. “It’s been five years and nothing to show for it,” said his mother.
“Mama, give me one more chance. I’ll put everything I’ve got into it, I promise.”

“Normally I’d say find some nice Indian girl but as things go as long as she’s healthy and smart we’ll be at peace,” sighed his dad.

His mother leaned in towards the camera. “One month Rajesh. We want to meet her and ask her questions. Understood?”

“Yes Mama,” Raj said glumly.

After his parents said their goodbyes he closed his laptop and flopped dejectedly against the couch. "Where am I going to find a girl in a month?"

xTBBTx

“Sorry I’m late. I was on the phone with Mom,” said Penny as she closed the door.

“I’m to take it that things went well?” asked Sheldon as he unnecessarily swept the cushion to his right.

“Yup. What a difference a few weeks make.” She plopped down next to her boyfriend and popped open a bag of Red Vines. “I owe you one,” she said as she offered the bag to Sheldon.

“Thank you. Your obligation has been met.” He pulled out a piece of licorice and began to chomp away.

“We ready to begin?” asked Leonard as he sat poised with remote in hand. Seeing confirmation in his friends’ faces he clicked ‘start’ and Battlestar Galactica Season Two came into view.

As the first episode progressed Sheldon quietly nudged Penny’s arm. Now that he got the taste for it he indicated the Red Vine package with his eyes. In response Penny slid it away from him and made ‘kissy lips’. Sheldon gave her a ‘get real’ frown. She batted her lashes before staring at him with widened eyes. He let out a little sigh. After a moment’s thought he grudgingly extended his cheek. Penny planted a kiss and then with a grin she offered him a Red Vine.

After a second exchange to ensure this would be the pattern all it took was a nudge from Sheldon for Penny to turn and smooch his proffered cheek before allowing him access to the licorice bag. Leonard couldn’t help but smile as Sheldon tried several times to discreetly wipe his cheek with his shoulder. If the act bothered Penny she didn’t let it show.

“Goodnight Moonpie,” Penny said with a quick kiss on the lips before she got up from the couch. Three hours was her limit for television watching as she had the early shift the next day. “‘Night Leonard.”

“‘Night Penny,” said Leonard as she closed the door. Now that they were alone he grinned at his roommate. “So?”

Sheldon gave him a puzzled look. “‘So’ what?” He wiped his lips with his sleeve.

“You know what she was doing all night, right?” Leonard felt so giddy he gave his arms a good stretch.

“I have a rather Pavlovian taste to my mouth yes,” Sheldon replied as he placed the dvd case on the table.
“So why did you let her do it?”

“Oh obviously I wanted the Red Vines.”

Leonard smirked. “Just the Red Vines?”

“Are you insinuating I wanted to be kissed?” Sheldon said haughtily.

“Are you telling me you didn’t?”

Sheldon opened his mouth to speak but as nothing came out he settled for a glare before rising from his seat.

“Goodnight Sheldon.” Leonard grabbed the remote and turned the channel. “Yeehaa,” he said softly.

xTBBTx

“Correct,” said Sheldon as he moved the top card to the back of the pack.

Amy gave a little smile. Of course she was right. “Forgive the chit-chat but I had a surprising call from Rajesh last evening.”

“Oh?” While it could be said that Sheldon Cooper didn’t engage in purely social conversation willingly he did find himself able to delve in such matters with Amy more than anyone else. Unlike most people she still made it a point to convey actual information in her asides.

“Apparently his parents called and pressed upon him the idea of procuring a girlfriend or else face a marriage in India.”

Sheldon raised an eyebrow. “And he called you? How could he think someone such as yourself could ever be interested in him?”

“I admit my standards are high—unless we’re talking about a purely physiological reaction such as when I found myself attracted to Zack. However, I feel such an instance shouldn’t count against me.”

“I should think not. There’s only so much we can do against physiology.” At this both of them stopped short as an awkward silence entered the room.

Amy held up a card. “In a world where fairy tale characters are real what do parents read to their children at night?”

“Human-centric stories,” replied Sheldon.

“Defend.”

“As this is a world where wolves can talk to little girls and pigs can build houses human beings had naturally become xenophobic towards nearly everything preternaturally afflicted. Consequently, to soothe their children’s fears parents had to come up with instances where human beings triumphed over the strange and unknown such as the heroic plight of early settlers or clever inventors who came up with science and technology-related advances for the betterment of mankind as a whole.

“For those who like a little taste of ‘ghouls and ghosties’, stories involving resourceful children like ‘Gretel’ or the defender against the wolves known mysteriously as ‘The Woodsman’ would be particular favorites.
“If you’d indulge me in a moment of whimsy I’d also say that in terms of comic books the X-Men would be considered villains because of their mutations and Iron Man and Bat-Man would be the prominent heroes because of their technological ingenuity.”

“Correct,” agreed Amy with a nod and moved the card to the back of her pack.

“So what did you tell Raj?” Normally he wouldn’t be so nosy but out of habit Sheldon still found himself protective of Amy.

“At first I was going to dismiss him outright but I then realized the pseudo-union could be of mutual benefit as my mother will soon commence with her demands that I date.” Amy paused to take a sip of her water. “I’ll be dining with Rajesh next week so we can begin to fabricate our dating history. While my mother was satisfied with just seeing you online I have to undergo some sort of quiz with the Koothrappali’s in order to prove the relationship isn’t a ruse.”

“I’ve no doubt you’ll concoct and execute a well thought out story.” Sheldon held out a card. “Shall I?”

“Please do.”

“In a world where ice hockey is played in water who would win the Stanley Cup?”

“The San Juan Marlins,” Amy said without hesitation.

“Defend.”

“Instead of Canada, Lord Stanley became Governor General of the Barbados. After seeing what was essentially a ‘pick up’ game stemming from the slapping of water with a stick to stun surface fish evolve into a more organized entity he offered the silver Cup as a reward for the winner.

“It was the Bridgetown Wahoos who captured the most Stanley Cups until the league was opened up to the greater Caribbean as a whole. Modern times has seen the shift to Puerto Rico where the current champions the San Juan Marlins reside. Not surprisingly the Dominican Republic has shown poor results despite its population advantage as most of their youth gravitate towards baseball.”

Sheldon thought over the answer. “Correct.”

xTBBTx

Howard grinned as he slowly pulled out a comic from the bin. “And here we are gentlemen: Green Lantern/Green Arrow volume two number seventy five.”

“Congratulations. I believe it completes your Denny O’Neil run on the series,” said Sheldon as he hoped to be similarly successful in his own hunt.

“Quite apropos considering this really is the year of the bow in Hollywood,” offered Raj.


“Princess Merida from ‘Brave’. It’s the latest Pixar film.”

Sheldon rolled his eyes. “Well let’s hope this isn’t another one of John Lasseter’s pet projects. I couldn’t go through a fairytale version of Cars 2.” He paused. “Or the original for that matter.”
“Goes to show what happens when a visionary gets too absorbed in his own world,” agreed Leonard.

“Star Wars Episodes One to Three anyone?” said Howard with a smirk. “'Oh mooey mooey I love you’,” he quoted in his best Jar Jar Binks voice. Sheldon gave him a withering glare.

“It makes you wonder what kind of plants they were raising on Skywalker Ranch,” mused Raj.

“Cannabis alone can’t account for Jar Jar. I’ll assume Lucas had some sort of brain injury from a blow to the head. That or he was forced to watch ‘Howard the Duck’ again. Sheldon moved to another row of comics.

“So who do you think’s the best archer?” asked Raj. His friends looked at him incredulously. “I mean aside from Legolas.”

“It’s hardly a competition since Katniss is a teenager and Hawkeye has been shooting for years,” said Leonard.

“Not to mention he’s the world’s best marksman,” offered Stuart as he made his way back to the counter to punch a customer through.

“Purported to be and only in the Marvel Universe thank you very much,” sniffed Sheldon.

“You know a better question of who’s the best would be Green Arrow vs Hawkeye vs Robin Hood,” mused Howard.

“Obviously it’d be Green Arrow,” said Sheldon.

“Why obvious? Hawkeye is trained at an early age by Trick Shot and the Swordsman to be a carnival marksman,” replied Leonard.

“Yes but he’s been more dependent on team dynamics to get him through. Oliver Queen has been on his own far longer and in far seedier locations than Clint Barton. Besides, Oliver’s costume is reminiscent of Robin Hood’s for a reason.”

Raj frowned. “Yes but by that rational Robin Hood would be the best archer because he is the model on which Green Arrow is based—he is an outlaw after all—and performs a multitude of trick shots at the tournament that would put Hawkeye to shame.”

“It’s difficult comparing legends to comic books,” shrugged Leonard. “If I just based it on reputation I’d give it to Robin but in comicdom I’d give the edge to Hawkeye.”

Sheldon stood up straight. “Then sir, we agree to disagree.” There was a pause as everyone save Sheldon mentally counted down from three. “Of course our agreement doesn’t dismiss the fact that you’re wrong.”

Leonard sighed. “Let me see if I get this right: as long as I disagree with you, you’re going to bring up the subject until I knuckle under?”

“Are you suggesting I’m being difficult?”

“I don’t think he’s suggesting,” smirked Howard.

“Poor Sheldon gets the ‘shaft’ again,” said Raj with a grin.

“‘Point’ taken,” Sheldon said darkly.
Penny sighed warmly as Uhura and Spock kissed in the turbo lift. Zachary Quinto might not be Leonard Nimoy but he did have his moments; besides there was something about him that reminded her of the Vulcan wannabe sitting to her left. She smiled as she stretched out on the couch. It had been an eventful afternoon shift at the Cheesecake Factory as a surprise family reunion nearly resulted in the police being called in to break up the crowd. Fortunately for the assistant manager he had Penny and her serving tray to back him up as he ordered the unseated family members out of the restaurant. She’d laughed when she told Sheldon the story but he was not as amused. He made her promise next time to refrain from entering the melee unless forced.

“Penny, what are you doing?” Sheldon had done his best to squish against the couch arm but he’d come to the end of how far he could go.

“Depends. Snuggling still freak you out?”

“Yes.”

“Then I’m stretching,” and with that she raised her arms and lay back so they rested on his shoulder and arm.

Sheldon closed his eyes and swallowed before commencing to count to a minute fifty. His normal reaction was to immediately remove Penny or himself from the scene of contamination but he knew he had to be more tolerant of her germs. To this end he began delaying his escapes a second at a time; a minute and fifty seconds might not seem to be anything but to Sheldon it was an eternity.

'Forty eight. Forty nine. Fifty.' He gently leaned his body to the right so as to sit Penny up.

“Not bad, Dr. Cooper. I’ve gone from being an electrical shock to a slow burn.” Penny’s smile was a little bitter compared to her upbeat tone but as her back was to Sheldon she didn’t hide it.

“As I said before it’s not panic,” replied Sheldon and left it at that.

The last time he clarified his feelings as stemming from germ revulsion he had to steady himself as Penny’s face reddened though she didn’t say anything to explain her emotions. He didn’t know if she was angry, upset, embarrassed, shocked or any combination of the above. It didn’t matter. He’d caused her discomfort and that was his own mea culpa.

She shifted so she sat away from him while allowing her legs to stretch. All this meant was that one leg hung over the couch arm while the other touched the floor. Sheldon didn’t approve of the lack of lumbar support. Moreover sitting in this particular position for a prolonged period could strain her sacroiliac joint.

Penny felt him move out of his seat. “Sorry,” she said. “I thought I was away from you.”

His stomach contracted. “Just give me a moment,” he said evenly as he handed Penny the remote.

Confused, she paused the movie and waited for him to return. She prayed he wasn’t going to the washroom to wash his hands. As she spent more time with Sheldon she noticed how pink his hands got by the end of the day from all of the scrubbing. It would be nice if he could get treated for this habit but as he ‘didn’t have a problem’ there was nothing to discuss.

A moment later Sheldon returned with a clean bed sheet and a pillow covered in a Superman motif.

“Scoot forward if you please,” he said as he fluffed the sheet to its proper length.
“Sheldon you don’t have to do this,” Penny began.

“It’s a solution that suits both our needs. You wish to recline against me and I want to accommodate you.” He sat in his spot and tucked the sheet in the seat cushion next to him and stretched the rest over himself. Placing the pillow on his lap he held up his arms to the side and looked at her questioningly. He arched an eyebrow.

Penny smiled as she shook her head. “Whackadoodle,” she breathed as she snuggled against him. She hesitated before she touched the pillow. “Is it ok if I move it?”

“Of course.” He’d launder it later along with the sheet.

Once she got comfortable Sheldon picked up the sides of the bed sheet and wrapped his arms around her.

“Thanks Moonpie,” Penny said as she resumed play on the movie.

“Don’t call me Moonpie,” she heard him mutter before feeling a soft pressure on the top of her head.

Her jaw dropped. ‘He didn’t just…’

A few seconds later she was pushed slightly to the right as his lips turned to meet his left shoulder. Penny grinned. “You’re only spreading the germs around.”

“As I change clothes and shower twice daily I can afford to be a little lax,” Sheldon replied amiably.

“I’ve got a better idea,” she said as she sat up and turned to lean against him face forward. “Next time you contract any Penny germs give them right back.”

Sheldon hesitated as he processed her words and close proximity. “And how should I do that?” he asked softly. In response she positioned her face so their noses nearly touched and waited. He swallowed as his eyes played in her mischievous green gaze.

It wasn’t an earth-shattering kiss by any stretch of the imagination but having Dr. Don’t-Touch-Me reach out to meet her lips all by his lonesome made it Penny’s most memorable.

“See? All back safe and sound,” Penny said with a wink.

“How do I know I haven’t just contaminated myself further?” Sheldon replied with a twitchy smile.

“Because that’s not how cooties work. The only way you’d get reinfected is if I did something like this”—she pressed her lips against his. She smiled at his amused expression. “You know what you have to—” Before she could finish her thought Sheldon’s mouth found hers. It took Penny but a moment as she cocked her head to the right in order to respond. Softly she tugged and sucked on his lips, all the while feeling his hands slide up her back until they rested on her shoulders. Penny wasn’t sure if he was bracing himself or getting ready to push away and frankly she didn’t care so long as he kept responding. Starting slowly, Penny could feel his lips tentatively clasp her own and lightly nibble. He froze as she moaned.

“What?” she said breathlessly.

Sheldon was flushed. “I hadn’t anticipated an auditory response.”
“Moonpie you haven’t heard anything yet.”

Again their lips met and Penny moved up so she could rest her hands on either side of his neck. With each kiss Sheldon’s grip tightened on Penny’s shoulders, feeling as if he needed something to anchor him to reality. He’d seen kissing in the movies—particularly the ones Penny brought over—but never appreciated until now the amount of cardiovascular stamina and coordination involved. The faster they kissed the sloppier the whole encounter became until in a fateful moment his tongue touched hers.

“Penny,” he gasped between kisses as he pushed on her shoulders.

“Had enough?” she said with a throaty chuckle. She planted a last lingering mark on his lips before she sat back. Penny had to admit she was floored when he slipped her the tongue so she wasn’t surprised the local germaphobe put the breaks on.

Sheldon’s face was a mix of emotions as he fought to put into context everything that had just occurred. He’d swallowed Penny’s skin cells, saliva and Lord knew what else. Her lips were soft and smooth. They’d touched tongues. She tasted like cinnamon. He’d never do anything as impulsive as this again. He couldn’t wait until the next time.

“You need to clean up before we continue with the movie?” Penny asked gently.

“I’ll be quick.” Sheldon scurried into the washroom and rinsed out a washcloth before wiping down his face and mouth. Once he patted himself dry he opened the bottle of mouthwash and poured himself a shot. He caught a glimpse of himself in the mirror: cheeks flushed and his eyes giddy with excitement. As he gargled he felt like Dr Jekyll returning to his docile demeanor after experiencing an exhilarating moment as Hyde.

Penny smiled as she heard him in the washroom. The first time she ever tongued someone she thought she was going to throw up. The moment she touched that squishy monster all she could think about was slime and other gooey things. Keep in mind she didn’t have a thing for germs like Sheldon. She was also fifteen.

When he returned from the washroom Penny pulled the bed sheet around her shoulders and he slid in behind.

“So we can swap spit but I still can’t snuggle up with you?” she teased as she settled into his arms.

“Relativity,” smirked Sheldon.

“Meaning?”

“The duration of the kiss is distorted by its ability to distract.”

Penny chuckled. “So you mean instead of getting a blankey the next time I want to snuggle I should just find a way of distracting you?”

“Perhaps it’s best not to put too much thought into it,” he admonished lightly as he took up the remote and hit the scene selection feature.

Of course Penny’s mind was already figuring out what to do next.

(black screen. end credits)
A/N I hope this doesn’t seem anticlimactic to you but Sheldon kissing Penny is a big deal for him and I wanted to keep his romantic endeavors realistic.

Last call for Wikipedia: number 4; Feng Shui
Chapter Summary

Welcome to Volume 2: The Relationship Paradigm.

I’m a little nervous about the whole thing given that it’s not as structured as Volume 1. As well Sheldon is more complicated to write given that I want him to change yet at the same time remain quintessentially Sheldon. I hope you approve of the compromise.

To reflect this change there are some entries that are more ‘M’ in subject matter if not description but I’ve done my best to warn in advance. As odd as this may sound it’s Sheldon’s germ-phobia that facilitates more intimate moments. ~Lynn

xTBBTx

Penny rubbed her temples as she tried to unglaze her eyes. “Ok, want to run that by me again?”

Sheldon pursed his lips. “You’re not taking this seriously.”

“Of course I am. Sweetie I had a late night last night and I didn’t expect you to be over so early.”

“Eleven thirty is early? I’ve given you thirty minute’s grace time over your usual eleven o’clock rising.” He flipped back the lid of the portable file folder. “Now remember, this will only work so long as you’re meticulous in detailing your transactions. For instance, while shampoo is typically procured during a pharmacy or grocery stop it would be much more useful making a note of the product, date and price and slipping it in the ‘Personal Items’ folder as opposed to lumping it into another category.”

“So let me get this straight: not only am I keeping track of all my receipts and writing down what I purchased and how I paid for it but now I’m supposed to make up receipts just to keep the ‘folder god’ happy?” Penny shook her head as she took a sip of her coffee. Sheldon had the warm mug in hand as she opened the door as consolation for being woken up. She would also be less inclined to punch him in the throat and risk spilling the precious nectar. Smart fella.

“Financial stability and divinity are two separate issues Penny, although in your instance both have been serviced through prayer alone. Now, folder one is where we put basic apartment-related expenses like rent, utilities and cable.”

“At least I save a fortune on wifi.” She took a sip of coffee. “As my financial advisor I’m sure you’d tell me to keep up the good work,” Penny pumpkin grinned.

A twitch flickered across Sheldon’s face as he glared. “The second folder will be for car-related expenses such as insurance, maintenance and gas. If we can get this area under control maybe we can address the ‘check engine’ light.”

Penny thought for a moment. “I could always charge for rides like a cab.”

“Unless one invokes ‘the favor’ clause which makes payment moot.”
“Favors don’t put gas in the tank, Moonpie.”

“But they do leave me at your discretion,” Sheldon said evenly.

“I need to go to Pottery Barn,” she said in a mock tone of her boyfriend. “After you drop your pants….” Penny grinned at his dark look. “Muah-ha-ha.”

“Again, if you don’t want to take this seriously then—”

“Oh come on Sheldon give me a break will you? This is already going to be a pain in the butt; I don’t need it to be all ‘doom and gloom’ to go with it, ok?” They stared at each other for a moment before Sheldon nodded his head.

“To make this easier for you to organize the receipts I’ve put all the kitchen-related subjects together under one heading. Along with cooking implements and storage containers I want you to put in your grocery receipts. It’s important to see just how much of your income goes towards home-cooked meals as opposed to take out.”

Penny looked over the remaining folder labels. “Where’s ‘miscellaneous’?”

Sheldon was insulted. “Penny, I’ve accounted for every possible situation.”

“What about items which cross more than one category? For instance, do I list my emergency bedroom chocolate chip cookies as a ‘kitchen item’ or ‘personal item’ since they’re not for daily consumption?”

Sheldon made a face. “You eat in the bedroom?”

“Only at certain times of the month,” Penny said defensively.

He thought about this for a moment. “As it’s food purchased at a grocery store I’d list it in the kitchen expenses. Menses occurs twelve times a year so the grocery budget has greater flexibility to accommodate multiple packs of cookies per month should they be warranted.” He paused. “In terms of maintaining the apartment I’d recommend limiting the number of places you eat. Bugs and other parasites have no quandary about invading the bedroom.”

“You mean to tell me you’ve never eaten in your bedroom?”

“Nev—” He stopped and blushed as he remembered the emergency rations he consumed the day after the wedding as well as all the times he had soup and toast when he was sick.

Penny laughed. “Aha! I knew it.”

“Minor transgressions do not trump a lifetime of habit,” muttered Sheldon.

“Ah yes, but do the little buggies know the difference?” At once the room was silent.

“This isn’t over, woman,” he growled as he stood up and made for the door.

xTBBTx

“I’ve finished eating, Penny. Ready to go when you are,” said Amy as she wiped her hands with a paper napkin.

“Where are you ladies off to?” asked Leonard with a slight pout. It had been two weeks since the housewarming when everyone was together. Well, not everyone as Leslie was at the lab tonight
using the free electron laser but the sentiment still applied. Since Howard was going to be away at astronaut training soon the opportunities for a gathering were waning.

“Penny asked Bernadette and me to aid in her course selection for the upcoming term at college,” elaborated Amy.

Sheldon looked accusingly at Penny. “I thought we were going to do that?”

“Yeah, well I thought it’d be better if I had some outside input,” replied Penny. “The courses you keep looking at are so math-oriented they make my head spin.”

He thought about it for a moment before nodding his head. “True. Given their employment in the softer sciences Amy and Bernadette would be much better suited to assist you.”

“Hey now, remember whose paradigm trumps the other and as a hint I don’t mean theoretically,” Amy smirked. Sheldon glared but said nothing.

“Yeah, and biology can’t have much of a soft side since we’re always disclaiming side effects in our test trial waivers,” agreed Bernadette.

“So what are you looking at taking?” inquired Howard as he gathered up Bernadette’s and his food containers.

“I’m not sure. I never really gave my schooling any thought growing up and I was all into acting at college so I’ve no idea,” admitted Penny. She handed over her empty container to Howard’s growing pile.

“Since she has a penchant for assembling machinery and Swedish furniture I thought about engineering. As Howard demonstrated one doesn’t need to get a doctorate to secure modest employment,” said Sheldon.

“It’s so hard to be humble around you, Sheldon,” growled Howard. “Might I point out that my Masters degree is from MIT and that it has snagged me a trip to the International Space Station? Your doctorate hasn’t even gotten you to see the Hadron Collider at Cern.”

Raj stretched out his arms and rested them behind his head while smiling broadly. The trip to Cern was lovely and he certainly appreciated the champagne and chocolates Leonard had so thoughtfully ordered for the occasion.

“Yes, well it’s just a one hundred meter tube. It’s best to maintain the separation between the scientific bourgeoisie and proletariat,” sniffed Sheldon.

Leonard looked at him. “What, so now experimental physicists are lumped in with engineers? Uh, no offence Howard.” The engineer rolled his eyes.

“Of course not Leonard, experimental physics is the common man’s physics whereas engineering is still the land of the Oompa Loompas,” corrected Sheldon.

Raj leaned over and whispered in Howard’s ear. They both chuckled.

“Apparently the bourgeoisie have been bypassed by the avant garde. Raj told me the Cern Collider has just welcomed its first artist in residence. So when was your invite put in the mail?” Howard asked Sheldon.

Sheldon was beside himself. “‘Artist in residence’? Good Lord people we’re witnessing the
“It’s an Arts student,” soothed Leonard. “It’s not like he or she’s the precursor to Sodom and Gomorrah.” Besides, Leonard had already been to the Collider so what was it to him who came afterwards?

“It’d be cool to see the accelerator,” Penny said. Of course it’d be cooler to see Swiss chocolate and French shoe stores but she needed to get the idea of a trip to Europe out in the open.

“Well apparently as an Arts major you’ll be in the right field of study for an invitation regardless of its insignificance to the world at large,” scowled Sheldon.

“Excuse me?” seethed Penny.

“Oopsie, time to go Bestie,” said Amy as she popped off the couch.

“Surely you have to concede that an Arts course holds no weight when compared to the sciences much less physics,” explained Sheldon patiently. He didn’t understand why Penny seemed so astonished at such an obvious fact.

“Looks like Penny’s about ready to introduce Sheldon to the martial ‘arts’,” grinned Howard.

“Now Sheldon gets his chance to experience a super collision first hand,” chuckled Leonard. His roommate gave him a dark look.

“You’re not helping,” Sheldon muttered.

“I think he’s helping just fine,” Penny growled as she followed Amy and Bernadette to the door. “Oh and here’s something else for you to think about.” She slammed the door behind her.

The room was silent. Sheldon turned to Leonard in a huff. “Well that’s rude. How am I to know what to think about when she closes the door before telling me?”

“Oh vey,” Howard murmured as he went to throw out the food containers.

“Dude, I just saw the most whacked show on Discovery where people fish with their bare hands,” Raj said as he shook his head. After meeting Sheldon he knew Americans could be eccentric but this really seemed to cross the line.

“’Hillbilly Handfishin’. Yeah that’s quite a show,” agreed Howard after taking a sip of his cola. “Some of those catfish can weigh as much as fifty pounds.”

“But sticking your arm in a hole in a muddy river bank and hoping a fish grabs hold of you is just unbelievable. I’ll never laugh at my cousin Sanjay’s idea of elephant trunk wrestling again.” Sheldon moved his wrapped utensils about an inch to the left so it lay in its usual spot. “’Noodling’ as the sport is called does have its hazards as alligators, beavers, snapping turtles and snakes will take over abandoned catfish lairs.”

“Huh,” said Leonard. “I take it by the name of ‘hillbilly’ that this is a Southern sport?”

“It’s prolific throughout Alabama, Arkansas, Georgia, Illinois, Kentucky, Mississippi, North
Carolina, Oklahoma, South Carolina, Tennessee and Wisconsin,” recited Sheldon. A smirk came to his face. “It should come as no surprise that it has since become legal in Texas. Lord knows rednecks ought to get out in nature to do more than joust with beer bottles.”

“‘Joust’?” asked Howard.

“The premise is quite straightforward,” said Sheldon as Penny arrived with the entrees. “Two men stand in opposing truck beds and as the vehicles ride past they throw empty beer bottles at each other.”

“Oh, you’re talking about ‘Catapult’,” said Penny. “At least that’s what we called it in Nebraska. The game always ended when someone accidentally threw a full bottle.”

“They can’t be going that fast,” Leonard said while placing his napkin on his lap.

“Oh, at least twenty-five meters per second,” corrected Sheldon.

Howard laughed incredulously. “That’s fifty-six miles per hour. How is it nobody gets killed?”

“Maybe the alcohol keeps the body loose,” offered Penny. “So, need anything else?”

“I believe we are satisfied at present,” answered Sheldon. “Are you coming straight home after your shift?”

Penny shook her head. “I promised Rebecca I’d give her a lift so I’ll be late.”

“I see. Give me a call when you’re on your way so I’ll have our tea at its optimal one hundred and eighty degree temperature.”

“Will do,” Penny said with a little smile before leaving to service another table. Sheldon took a moment to watch her go before rolling his eyes as Leonard gave him a knowing smile.

“It’s too bad I’m away at astronaut training this weekend. Seeing all the flyers for the Southern California Robot Fighting League Round Robin Invitational got me itching to build another robot,” said Howard before taking a bite of his pork chop.

“Yeah but it’ll never hold a place in our hearts quite like our Mobile Omnidirectional Neutralization and Termination Eradicator,” sighed Raj.

“M.O.N.T.E.,” all four men said sadly.

“It’s funny you should mention it as Kripke had emailed me asking if we were entering the competition,” Sheldon said.

Leonard put down his fork. “You’re still in contact with that guy?”

“Well he is a colleague. I can’t discriminate against him because I find him reprehensible as it would set a dangerous precedent considering I barely tolerate the rest of the faculty. If I ignored everyone who irritated me I’d find myself in veritable isolation.” Sheldon took a bite of his burger.

“I really can’t see a flaw to that plan,” Howard chimed in.

Sheldon glared at the engineer. “As much as I’d love to agree with you, Amy Farrah Fowler has pointed out that until such a time as when my consciousness is transferred into a robot body I am dependent on human beings. Therefore I must balance my relationships on a quid pro quo basis.”
“Quid pro quo?” scoffed Leonard. “You determine where we eat, what theaters to attend, what route we take to work—”

“What’s wrong with taking Los Robles Avenue? It avoids the speed bumps on Euclid—”

“Not the point, Sheldon,” Leonard sighed. “I just mean that relationships of any kind require both parties to make concessions.”

“And we do make them—at our weekly roommate meeting. Protocol shouldn’t be the victim of compromise Leonard,” replied Sheldon.

“Or sanity,” murmured Howard. Sheldon pursed his lips.

xTBBTx

“You know, I was watching ‘Iron Man’ the other night and it occurred to me that the target lock sound the armor’s Head Up Display uses is the same as the laser canon from Space Invaders,” said Leonard as his avatar exchanged his Battle Rifle for the more stealthy Beam Rifle.

“What I got a kick out of was that Tony Stark used a Lego robotic toy utility to download firmware into his armor,” replied Howard. “Gives me goose bumps every time I look at the robot on my bookshelf.” He had the feeling Raj was out there somewhere but didn’t know where so he stuck behind a partial wall.

“Ingenuity will always triumph,” said Sheldon. He took a moment to drink from his bottled water before taking up his game controller.

“Thank you very much Wiley Coyote,” grinned Raj, ignoring Sheldon’s glare.

“Actually I always compared myself to Reed Richards of the Fantastic Four. His grasp of physics and mathematics is formidable as are those of all members of homo novus,” Sheldon said as he narrowed his eyes. “Was that someone moving near the trees?”

“Yes but Reed was also known for his engineering and machine smithing. You couldn’t figure out how to open a tool box.” Leonard paused. “Come to think of it Iron Man also has an advanced degree in engineering.”

Howard grinned. “He’s also a graduate of MIT and note that no one ever calls him ‘doctor’ so he has no more than a Master’s degree.”

“Fine Howard, as soon as you come up with advanced power armor capable of flight complete with repulsor rays and an electromagnetic pulse generator I’ll hold your skills in higher esteem. At this point in time all I’ve seen you capable of destroying is a toaster oven and as much as I see the Machine Overlords utilizing multiple means of enacting their cruel regime I highly doubt they’d rely on kitchen appliances,” scoffed Sheldon.

“There are lots of beings with super-powered armor. What separates Iron Man from them is his JARVIS computer system although I’d make it stand for something more significant than ‘Just A Rather Very Intelligent System’,” Raj said. He’d thought he saw movement near the wall and slowly angled his way in to investigate.

“Something like a ‘Simulated Human Elevated Language Device Omni Network’ would do nicely,” Sheldon offered. Leonard dropped his hands as he gave his roommate an incredulous look.

“Why not? Sheldon’s smart, resourceful, articulate and concise—everything you’d want from interactive software,” said Howard.

“Yes, all he’d need to come up with is a personality and we’d be set,” grinned Raj.

Sheldon shot a dark look at the astrophysicist as the door to the apartment opened and Penny entered.

“Ran out of milk,” she said as she brought her mug to the counter and opened the refrigerator. “So how goes the battle?”

“A skirmish is imminent,” Sheldon said. All four players leaned towards the television in anticipation.

With her mug in the microwave Penny came over and leaned against Leonard’s chair and peered at the screen. “Ooo! Leonard, back! Back!” The physicist complied although he couldn’t see what it was that got her excited. “Over there!”

“Over where?” Leonard sputtered.

“I can’t say or else he’d know his cover’s blown,” Penny replied in frustration.

“Penny, aiding Leonard is not allowed,” Sheldon said with a frown.

Leonard smirked as he handed up his controller to Penny. “She’s not helping; I’m engaging my armor’s computer system aka ‘Proficient Enough Never (to) Need You’.”

Fingers furiously clicked away until Penny made a “Yeehaw” in triumph as she terminated her boyfriend much to Sheldon’s disgust.

xTBBTx

“Thanks for coming with me Sheldon,” grinned Penny as they walked through the crowd at the Pasadena Home and Craft Show.

“As it is ‘Date Night’ I can’t say I had much of a choice.” He suppressed a smile as she elbowed him lightly on the arm. “However I will invoke the compromise aka ‘tit-for-tat’ next week as we’ll do something I want to do.”

“Counting the minutes,” Penny said as she imagined herself playing with Sheldon’s toy train. At once the sexual innuendo entered her head and she snickered.

“What?”

“Nothing sweetie,” she said coyly, her tone convincing Sheldon that something was indeed amiss. He’d have to ponder this tonight in his Conversation Log.

As they neared the next booth Sheldon quickly moved to Penny’s other side so as to distance himself. Of course this immediately got her attention and she slowed to see what the fuss was about.

Standing behind a table of lit rock crystal lamps was a man whose coat was covered in what looked like mechanical bugs.

“Welcome to the Electronic Ouroborus,” said the man with a smile.
“What are you wearing?” Penny asked. He stepped towards her and in that moment Sheldon took a step back.

“They’re techno-bugs made from recycled circuit boards. Their eyes are LED lights which flash.” Penny peered at the assortment of spiders, dragonflies, beetles and scorpions.

“Leonard and Howard would get a kick out of them. How much?”

“Twenty dollars.”

“So much for Howard.” She turned to her boyfriend. “Which one should I get for Leonard?”

“How about ‘none of the above’?” replied Sheldon.

Penny frowned. “What’s with you?”

“I don’t want one of those things in my apartment. Oh it seems harmless enough but its technological construct screams ‘Machine Overlords’ and I for one don’t want to deal with a super bug thank you very much.”

The man looked questioningly at Penny. “Pardon me?” he said with a smile.

“Don’t mind him. He’s seen ‘The Matrix’ one too many times,” soothed Penny.

“Go ahead, mock me at your peril,” glared Sheldon. “Just don’t come to me when your ATM attempts to take off your fingers and Leonard’s bug scars you with battery acid.”

“Aren’t your trains mechanical? Couldn’t they be taken over?” Penny asked sweetly.

“Trains require a track. Note my trains are never set up in my bedroom,” replied Sheldon.

“Well like it or not I’m getting one for Leonard. How about the blue dragonfly?”

Sheldon folded his arms across his chest. “Certainly not. The last thing I need is to be strafed from above.”

“What about the scorpion?”

“They sting.”

“Spider?”

“They jump.”

“That leaves the beetle,” growled Penny.

“And have my body mistaken for carrion while I sleep? No thank you.”

Penny sighed. “I’ll take the red scorpion.” She turned to Sheldon. “Since you’re a Texan you should be used to them.” The man unclipped the bug from his jacket and checked to see that its eyes lit up.

“Don’t forget the ten-gallon hat ah’ve left at th’ coat check,” Sheldon muttered as Penny procured her purchase.

“Oh, all we need are candles and that’s that,” she said with a smile as they continued walking. She
was in too good a mood to let Sheldon affect her.

Sheldon raised an eyebrow. “You have lots of candles at home. I should know as I was the last one to organize them by size and color.”

“Yeah but I like to have a lot on hand just in case.”

“In case of what? It’s not like we have many power outages.” Indeed the last one that came to Sheldon’s mind was really a prank as some ‘mysterious figure’ flipped the switch in the main fuse box.

“Well maybe for you,” Penny said with a crooked grin.

At once comprehension dawned on Sheldon. “Your days of neglecting hydro bills are at an end.”

“I hope so”—here she looped her arm through his—“of course candles also provide excellent ‘mood lighting’.”

“A somber one if they’re Paraffin wax. As they’re made from petroleum they release human carcinogens similar to those found in car exhaust,” warned Sheldon.

Penny rolled her eyes. “Thanks for that. Actually I make sure my candles are made from beeswax or soy. They give off a more natural aura.”

Now it was Sheldon’s turn to roll his eyes. “As long as they come from a reputable company that is preferably US-based as some imported candles use lead core wicks which are banned here.”

When they arrived at the stall he grilled the vendor about her candles until she pointed out two shelves next to some Himalayan salt lamps.

“Wow,” grimaced Penny as she looked at the boxes. “They’re a dollar fifty more than my usual candles.” She picked up a candle and brought it to her nose. “The vanilla’s awesome.”

“I’ll cover the difference,” offered Sheldon while doing his best to avoid deep inhalations in order to lesson the assault on his nose. “I consider it a small price to pay for clean lungs given how my presence at your apartment seems to be increasing exponentially.”

“Too bad you live across the hall; if you didn’t we could have a lot of sleepovers,” Penny mused as she picked out her candles.

“Oh I don’t think so. There’s only so many nights you can sleep on the couch before your back succumbs to the lack of lumbar support,” he said earnestly.

“Sheldon, I wasn’t going to sleep on the couch.”

“Well I certainly can’t—oh I see.” He looked at her. “What a good idea Penny. An air mattress would solve things quite nicely.”

Penny closed her eyes and shook her head. Duh.

xTBBTx

“What are you doing, Sheldon?” asked Leonard with a touch of annoyance.

“Because Wolowitz is away at astronaut training and Raj is at the university doesn’t mean we have to forestall our Vintage Video Game night,” replied Sheldon as he plugged in the Super Nintendo.
“Hello. I’m here,” Leslie growled. Sheldon stopped to address the optical physicist.

“Don’t feel as though you’re pressured to play. I’m sure Leonard’s inept gaming skills will be amusing enough.” He paused. “Unless you see his defeat as an emasculating event. Leonard, perhaps Leslie ought to go to Penny’s.”

“I know someone who ought to be there,” Leonard said pointedly as Penny came into the living room after washing her hands in the bathroom.

“So, what’s the story morning glories?” Penny said as she registered the sour look on Leslie’s face.

“Well we were thinking of performing horizontal calisthenics to keep the waistline trim but we seem to have hit a snag,” said Leslie as she indicated Sheldon with her head.

“Ah. Come on Sheldon let’s go to my place,” Penny said amiably.

He stood up. “But Penny, tonight’s Vintage Gaming Night.”

“Well pick a machine and some games and we can play.” Penny brightened. “How about ‘Doom’?”

“I was thinking more along the lines of ‘Super Mario Brothers’ on the Super Nintendo,” retorted Sheldon. “If we played ‘Doom’ we’d also have to bring the Xbox. No, better to just play here.”

Penny’s eyes narrowed. “I guess there’s only one way to settle this.” As one Sheldon and Penny pumped their right fists three times before his hand made the Vulcan gesture of greeting and her, a flattened palm.


“This isn’t fair. It’s my apartment too. Besides, if Penny and I remain it will limit coitus to your room; that means tomorrow’s sanitization routine won’t be as labor-intensive,” pouted his roommate.

“Sheldon…. Leslie said in a low voice.

“There’s also the option of going back to your own apartment. That way you can be as boisterous as you desire when calling out Leonard’s name and”—with a sudden turn towards Penny Sheldon and she again pumped their fists three times. The same gestures were repeated.

“Drat,” he said in frustration.

“Grab the stuff and let’s go,” smirked Penny.

“I refuse to take both systems,” huffed Sheldon.

Hands pumped the air. On the second motion Penny flattened her hand even though they still had another pump to go. Sheldon dropped his own hand in disgust; there was a pause as he scowled at his girlfriend before turning and grabbing the Xbox.

xTBBTx

Raj cursed to himself as he got out of the car. He was late and now everything was ruined. Checking his watch he estimated Amy had been waiting for at least twenty minutes given that she shared Sheldon’s impeccable sense of timing; so much for the idea of getting a couple of drinks under his belt before her arrival.
He couldn’t believe how his fortune had turned since Friday. As he finished packing up to go home President Siebert arrived at Raj’s office to discuss a follow up to the People Magazine’s ‘30 (Visionaries) Under 30 (Years of Age) to Watch’ article. He wanted the astrophysicist to compile a report of his current research and submit it to him as soon as possible. Given the absolute failure of his research on the composition of trans-Neptunian objects he knew his time at Caltech was numbered.

Whispering a prayer to Lakshmi for luck he entered the restaurant and found the neurobiologist sitting alone at a table stirring her ginger ale with a straw. She straightened up as she saw Raj approach.

“Good evening Rajesh,” she said amiably. He smiled awkwardly and gave a small wave with his hand. A smirk came to Amy’s face. “It’s a good thing I’ve a penchant for topical and stimulating conversation since this looks to be one-sided.”

Raj opened his mouth to speak but found himself unable to utter a word. Shrugging his shoulders with an apologetic smile he held up a finger for Amy to wait and quickly left the table.

“Fascinating,” Amy said to herself. While Raj’s selective mutism was surely a psychological phenomenon she wondered what neurons fired in his head as he struggled to speak. Would a brain scan show him lit up like a Christmas tree?

“Forgive me,” Raj said as he returned to the table and sat down, placing his mint grasshopper on the drink coaster. “I was working on a report and lost track of time.”

“Apology accepted. At times I, too, am abnormally absorbed in my work; particularly when I get my grubby little hands on a brain tumor.” Raj gave a strained smile and took a long drink with his straw. “So have you come up with a proper back story detailing our courtship?”

“Well, I was thinking that we’d met through mutual friends. Though there was an attraction nothing was said until I expressed my fears of returning to India. Knowing you couldn’t live without me you told me how you felt and we started dating.” Amy opened her mouth to speak. “Oh, and I’m a stud in bed,” he added with a satisfied grin.

“Well at least we’ve established your imagination is vivid if not deranged.” Amy took a sip of her pop. “While I appreciate your opening statement I feel the additional content leaves a lot to be desired.”

“What can I say? You really dig me, baybe.”

Amy pursed her lips. If her mother hadn’t enquired last night about Sheldon she’d have second thoughts about pseudo-dating Raj. “I’ve a counterproposal: We met through mutual friends. As I was embroiled in my research I hadn’t noticed you silently pining for my attention. Once my paper on how cooperative long-term potentiation can map memory sequences and dendritic branches was made feature article and graced the front cover of ‘Neuron’ there was a grand celebration at my apartment. Everyone was there: Leonard and Leslie, Bernadette and Howard, Sheldon and of course Penny—wearing something low-cut yet tasteful. There was a joke about the two of us being featured in publications—although mine is more prestigious—and we shared our experiences with the process. Surprisingly, we found ourselves unable to contain our conversation to one encounter and set up a series of get-togethers where we strengthened our bond until it got to a point where you asked me for a more formalized relationship to which I agreed.”

Raj thought it over and nodded. “Sounds good to me. Oh, but I’m still your Indian prince in the bedroom.”
“We’ll get to that on page twelve of the ‘Relationship Questionnaire’,” she said as she handed Raj a small booklet. “If you’ll notice there’s a section on ‘distinguishable markings’ where you can detail any moles or birthmarks on your body.” She cocked her head. “Of course Rajesh it would be much simpler if I just saw you naked.”

He choked on his drink.

xTBBTx

Pop Pop Pop Pop

The sounds of paintball gunfire were heard in the distance as a group of camouflaged players stood in a wooden shack.

“Well it looks like they’ve split into two groups,” Leonard said while Sheldon crouched and started drawing out the battlefield in the dirt.

“Hardly a surprise,” the lanky man replied. “As biologists they’ve studied mitosis.”

“Why don’t we umm mitosis back at ‘em?” asked Penny.

“Sounds good to me,” Leslie said as she wiped the sweat from her goggles. “What do you think Raj?” The astrophysicist gave a sheepish shrug of the shoulders before nodding his head.

“There’s strength in numbers,” Leonard argued. Besides, he made for a small target and the more bodies around him the longer he’d last on the field.

“Leonard’s correct. Given our superior numbers and firepower”—here Sheldon’s eyes flashed at Penny—“we should prevail.”

Leslie smirked at Sheldon. “‘Should’? Maybe you should brush up on your math a bit since you’re too afraid to divide by two.” There was silence in the shack as he stood up; the two physicists glared at each other.

“Fine. We split up,” Sheldon said at last.

“Great. I’ll take Penny and Raj,” Leslie responded.

Leonard groaned. “Why do you get Penny?”

“Because we need someone who can shoot when we bail you guys out of whatever dumbass plan our fearless leader has concocted,” Leslie said simply, garnering another glare from Sheldon.

“Well I realize we need to strike out in teams of three and two but—take me instead!” pleaded Leonard.

“Sorry Leonard but Leslie and I made a women’s pact to stick together,” grinned Penny.

“It makes it less emotional if we take a teammate we haven’t slept with. Normally that’d leave Sheldon but as I’ve been screwing with him for years I thought to make an exception,” said Leslie.


“It was only once,” Penny blushed.

“Why he’s practically a virgin,” grinned Leslie.
“If we’ve finished discussing my girlfriend’s sexual exploits can we get on to the task at hand, i.e. capturing the flag?” said an exasperated Sheldon.

“I’d prefer a simpler goal—survival,” Leonard sighed.

“Ok, here’s the plan. Sheldon you take Leonard and make for the trees while we cover you. Then you give fire while we exit and head south around the building and into the covering,” Leslie said as she lowered the goggles over her glasses.

“What kind of plan is that? We risk being cut to ribbons,” spat Sheldon.

“You’re right, Sheldon. Better your girlfriend takes it in the gut while you watch from the doorway,” Leslie retorted.

“Personally I don’t have a problem with you going first,” Leonard winked at his girlfriend.

“Leslie and Raj can snipe from the trees while I swing around to provide ground cover for you to retreat,” offered Penny.

Sheldon frowned. He was the commander. “All right then we’ll try it your way Winkle, although I have serious doubts about the plan as it stands. Leonard when we exit the shack make for the right. Penny and Leslie will provide ground cover while we move.”

After a nervous count to three Raj opened the door and the two men charged out.

“You know,” Leslie said with a smirk as she raised her gun. “This plan’s too convoluted. Let’s simplify.”

Pop Pop

Raj let out an “Eep” as he watched his friends succumb to friendly fire.

“Amazon warriors unite!” Leslie yelled as she and Penny charged out the door. Raj hesitated, mouth opened to respond. After a moment a giggle escaped and with a satisfied smirk he followed after his cohorts.

xTBBTx

A/N Wikipedia: Noodling

Cern Collider website

Iron Man factoids: Internet Movie Database

Candle Facts: The Epicurean Table

Thanks for reading!
His roommate was abnormally quiet as Leonard drove to work.

“Something on your mind?” asked the smaller man.

Sheldon made to speak but stopped himself short. After a moment to collect his thoughts he turned to his friend.

“It’s come to my attention that it’s been one month since Penny and I altered our paradigm. While the time allotment seems miniscule I’m unsure whether to bring it to her attention.”

“Why Sheldon, I didn’t know you had it in you,” grinned Leonard.

Sheldon raised an eyebrow. “Had what in me? I only bring up the subject because I’ve learned of the aforementioned milestone on various sitcoms and the disastrous consequences when the male omits an acknowledgement.”

Leonard shook his head at his roommate’s denial but decided to let it pass. “Ok, so what are you going to do?”

“That’s the problem—I don’t know.” Sheldon thought for a moment before he gave up with a shrug. “I consulted the internet for advice and there seems to be two camps on the issue: one suggests an oral acknowledgment only while the other has me taking Penny to a restaurant or giving her flowers.”

“I see. Which do you feel comfortable doing?”

“The formal acknowledgment alone would be my preference but I’m quickly learning that what I find acceptable doesn’t necessarily go over well with Penny.”

“I’m sure whatever you do will be fine,” soothed Leonard.

Sheldon looked earnestly at his friend. “What did you do?”

Color came to Leonard’s cheeks. “We uh stayed in.”

“I see. I suppose I’ll have to endure a romantic comedy,” sighed Sheldon.

“Actually we never got around to watching the movie.”

“Of course,” Sheldon said quietly after a pause. “Now you see my conundrum. Alder463 on ‘Wiki Answers’ said she received a kiss and declaration and went on to show her satisfaction ‘later that night’. RainE87’s husband brought home wild flowers and again ‘a great night’ was had by all. I need to figure out the right balance so I’m reciprocated with a handshake or kiss alone.”

“A kiss and a verbal acknowledgement will be just fine, Sheldon,” said Leonard.

Sheldon looked relieved. “So I won’t have to sit through a romance?”

“Nope. Only make sure whatever movie you pick isn’t something she’s already seen or too sci-fi or else you might get that handshake after all”—he glanced at Sheldon—“and no, that’s not a desired
“Drat,” said the lanky man as he gazed out the side window.

XxX

“While its use of magical curses and transformations places the film in the category of ‘fantasy’ I’ll assume by your use of tissues that Ladyhawke sufficed as a means of marking our paradigm shift?” asked Sheldon as Penny returned to the couch after washing her hands. There was something to be said for dating a germaphobe as Penny’s hands had never been cleaner.

“Perfect,” she smiled. “I never knew you could watch a film like this without making comments.”

Sheldon pursed his lips. “Granted with Matthew Broderick as principle actor I’d have expected more of an adventure but the online reviews assured me this was at least a tolerable romance at six point eight stars out of ten.”

“That’s all? The romance is what made the movie. I’m serious,” she said as Sheldon rolled his eyes. “You can’t tell me you didn’t feel anything when Etienne and Isabeau saw each other before she transformed into the hawk.”

“Merely Hollywood’s ham-fisted attempt at pathos.”

“Well it worked. It was so sad they could love each other yet never touch.” Penny’s eyes flashed to Sheldon’s face. To the unfamiliar he seemed as normal but she wasn’t just anyone. She could feel the intensity of his stare at the blank tv screen.

Out of the corner of his eye he caught Penny’s concerned expression. “Of course there are more tragic love affairs,” he said in a conversational tone. “The Greek tale of Orpheus and Eurydice is a classic case of love lost.”

“What happened?”

“They were very much in love and were married with the blessing of the gods. At the reception she was fatally bitten by a snake. Distraught, Orpheus played and sang such mournful songs of deep loss he made the gods weep. Taking pity on him, they told him to go to the underworld and let his music soften the hearts of Hades and Persephone. They agreed to let Eurydice return to earth but only on one condition: Orpheus would walk ahead of her and not look back until both had reached the upper world. When he got to the surface he turned to see his wife but she hadn’t cleared the tunnel and so disappeared.”

“God that’s horrible,” said Penny.

Sheldon turned to face his girlfriend. “Etienne and Isabeau might not have had a physical relationship but there was no doubt each was for the other. That they didn’t touch meant he had to trust implicitly she was going to be there.” Sheldon’s expression was serious. “He can’t be afraid to turn around.”

“You don’t have to be,” she said softly. “I’m here, Sheldon.” Leaning in, her lips brushed his own as her green eyes met his blue. “I’m real,” she whispered. Over and over she placed soft kisses on his lips. “I’m real. … I’m real. … I’m real.”

xTBBTx

Raj let out a resounding sigh as he sat down across from Sheldon.
“Tired?” asked Sheldon while opening his dinner menu.

“No,” replied the astrophysicist. After a moment he sighed again. Sheldon had a look of concentration on his face as he peered at his friend.

“Sighing is a form of paralinguistic respiration used to communicate emotion. Are you relieved?”

“No.”

“Bored?”

“No.” A frown appeared on Raj’s face.

“Dissatisfied?”

Leonard arrived at the table, a concerned expression on his face as he saw his friend. “What’s wrong, Raj?”

Sheldon pursed his lips. “Dismay. Why didn’t I think of that?”

“‘Dismay’ doesn’t even begin to cover it. How about ‘doomed’ or ‘screwed’ or ‘John Carter-ed’?” Raj began to play with his wrapped utensils. “President Siebert came to see me on Friday about a follow-up to People Magazine’s ‘30 Under 30 to Watch’ article. He wants an update on my research.”

“You mean my research,” corrected Sheldon. “You’re assisting me in the experiment to look for the annihilation spectrum resulting from dark matter collisions in space.”

“That’s my point. I’ve gone from being a ‘visionary’ to a lackey in two and a half years. What if it’s not enough for Siebert and he fires me?”

“Won’t happen,” soothed Leonard. “You’ve been a big help to Sheldon. Hasn’t he?” He looked pointedly at his roommate.

“Oh yes,” Sheldon said with a start. “Your suggestions”—although they could rightly be called corrections in anyone’s mind but Sheldon’s—“have proved most useful throughout the course of the development phase.”

“I suppose.” Raj made to continue but stopped himself as Penny arrived at the table with their drinks.

“Hey guys. How’re you?” she asked cheerily.

“Not unhappy,” Sheldon said as his eyes scanned the menu. Raj tilted his hand from side to side with a sad smile.

“Aww, what’s with you sweetie?”

“He has to give the president of the university an update on his career for a ‘30 Under 30’ refresher article from People,” explained Leonard.

“And?”

“And he’s gone from discovering a planetary object beyond the Kuiper Belt to working for Sheldon.”
“Ah,” Penny nodded.

Sheldon was indignant. “‘Ah’? You’re making it sound like working for me’s analogous to working for Leslie Winkle.” He felt his friend’s glare. “I’m sorry Leonard, her coital activities may be good but her research is not.”

“Ok, so what’re you working on?” asked Penny.

“String theory implications of gamma rays from WIMP annihilations,” sniffed Sheldon.

“‘WIMP annihilations’?” she said, raising an eyebrow.


“So we have science geeks looking for space WIMPS. Gotcha.” Penny suppressed a smile as she caught Sheldon’s glare. “Well it sounds technical enough. So what’s wrong with that?” Raj leaned over and whispered in Leonard’s ear.

“It only accounts for a little over a year when he needs to fill two and a half,” Leonard interpreted.

“Guess it’s time for a little BWBS,” shrugged Penny as she wrote down Sheldon’s order on her pad. “The usual all ‘round?” Leonard and Raj nodded.

“I’ll have the barbecue bacon cheeseburger—barbecue sauce, bacon and cheese on the side,” Sheldon ordered as he handed Penny the menu.

“‘BWBS’?” asked Leonard.

“You know, ‘Baffle With BullShit’,” said Penny. “Just take what Raj’s done and write it up so it sounds exciting and new. I did it all the time for my essays in high school.”

“And we can see what boundless opportunities it opened up,” Sheldon responded, oblivious to Penny’s frown.

“No, no, it could work,” said Leonard. “What was the first thing you worked on?” Raj whispered in his ear. “Ok, instead of saying your research testing the predicted composition of trans-Neptunian objects ran into a dead end you can say it’s reached a critical juncture requiring further study.”

Sheldon shook his head. “A juncture means more than one option. Raj has no options save one—failure. Better to say that he’s made a preliminary discovery that’s altered the course of his research. While he continues to ponder the matter he’s working with—which in this case means working for but we won’t argue the semantics at present—the distinguished Dr. Sheldon Cooper in the pursuit of verifying the presence of Dark Matter.”

“Wow. That’s good sweetie,” said an impressed Penny. “You’re a natural BWBS-er.” Sheldon pursed his lips.

“No, she’s right Sheldon. You’re ‘BWBS’-ing all the time: Boring With Big Sentences,” grinned Leonard.

Sheldon glowered at his roommate while Penny walked away suppressing a smile.

“xTBBTx

“I still can’t believe how bad Spider-Man 3 was after the first two films,” sighed Leonard as he put
down the game controller. “I really looked forward to that film.”

“It was doomed for failure, dude. Any franchise that goes from the Green Goblin and Doctor Octopus to Venom by popular request is asking for trouble,” replied Raj before taking a sip of his water.

Sheldon grabbed his glass and walked to the refrigerator for more orange juice. “Especially since ‘popular request’ means ‘lowest common denominator’.”

“You’re just being pessimistic,” Leonard said before smacking himself on the forehead. “Who am I talking to? Occasionally good things rise to the top. It may have taken the Copernican notion of the earth revolving around the sun a few centuries to achieve proper validation in the popular imagination but it got there eventually.” His phone began ringing. “Eventually people realize the truth,” he concluded before answering. “Hello?...Yes this is…”

“They can’t handle the truth,” grinned Raj.

Sheldon closed the refrigerator door. “The X-Files are an excellent example of science versus popular hokum. How—”

Leonard sat straight up. “Oh my God yes…” At once his friends were silent. “Yes…. Is….. I’ll be there as soon as possible.” He hung up the phone and sat stunned. “Penny’s been in a car accident.”

At once Sheldon felt the blood drain from his face. “Where is she?” he asked in a steely calm voice.

“Huntington Memorial,” Leonard replied as he sprang out of his chair and went to the closet for a jacket. Sheldon immediately headed for the door followed by Raj.

“At this time of day Foothill Freeway will be overcrowded. I suggest Fair Oaks Avenue,” Sheldon said over his shoulder as he bounded down the stairs.

Leonard glanced at the apartment before closing and locking the door to make sure the television was off. He turned and for a moment stared at apartment 4B before racing down the stairs after his friends.

XxX

Raj spoke quietly to Sheldon in an attempt to calm the lanky man down. Upon arrival at the emergency room all three men had practically stormed the reception desk looking for information on Penny. The receptionist’s insistence she could only talk to Leonard was too much for Sheldon who demanded to see her superior. Fearing they were about to be kicked out Raj convinced his friend to let Leonard find out what’s what and grudgingly Sheldon complied.

After a few minutes Leonard returned to his friends. He knew what he was about to say would go over like a wet blanket.

“Ok, only one person can see her so I’ll let you know her status as—”

Sheldon couldn’t believe what he was hearing. “I don’t think so. I’m Penny’s boyfriend, not you.”

Leonard sighed. “She has me down as an in-State contact number on her insurance. I guess she never changed it. That’s the only reason why I can get in since I’m not family. Anyways, let me go see her and then I’ll see what I can do.”
"Unacceptable."

"Sheldon, just let him go. Someone has to check on Penny," said Raj in a soothing voice.

After a moment and with a scowl on his face Sheldon gave a curt nod. Leonard knew better than to waste time and quickly made his way to sign in at the security desk before disappearing behind the swing doors.

"Let’s sit down," Raj said gently, trying to get Sheldon’s attention as the taller man watched the swing doors slow to a halt. “Sheldon.” Blue eyes focused on the astrophysicist. After a moment Sheldon walked to the seating area and sat facing the doors to the emergency room.

As the minutes rolled by Sheldon found himself unable to formulate a concise course of action. He was starved for information; he needed facts to tabulate: in 2009 there were ten point eight million motor vehicle accidents in the United States. Closed head trauma ranging from concussions to —’What if she’s brain damaged or in a coma or’— Neck injuries were also cited from whiplash to —’She could be paralyzed or have cervical radiculopathy or’— Thirty five point nine people per thousand or thirty five thousand nine hundred people died within one year of a motor vehicle accident.

’What if she’s—’

Another voice quietly detailed the color of Penny’s hair and the angle of her lips as she smiled and the timbre of her voice when she laughed that high pitched laugh he found annoying though at this moment he’d give anything to hear…..

“Dr. Sheldon Cooper?”

Immediately Sheldon was on his feet and approached the security desk.

“I’m Dr. Cooper,” he said evenly.

“You’re allowed in,” replied the security guard. “Sign here. Thanks. When you go through the doors turn right and follow the signs to emergency.”

Sheldon stood in front of the doors and took a deep breath before stepping through. In a matter of moments his whole life was about to change. With each step he began to calculate all the time wasted in not telling Penny how he felt about her before—

As he never wanted to experience anything as horrifying as quarantine again he made doubly sure of the sign before he turned left and pushed open the door. Before him was a circular desk and several partitioned curtains which were closed off from view. The nurse raised an eyebrow.

“Can I help you?”

“I’m Dr. Sheldon Cooper. I’m looking for Penelope—”

“I’m in here Sheldon.” Immediately he turned towards the annoyed voice and in a few steps with a much lighter heart he reached the correct curtain.

As he entered the little ‘room’ he saw Leonard standing next to Penny, who was sitting on a gurney with her legs swinging in annoyance. Her wrist was bandaged. There was bruising on her cheeks and forehead but it was the scowl on her face, that beautiful, beautiful scowl, that allowed Sheldon to breathe.
“They don’t allow cell phone use in here so I had them call you personally,” said Leonard as a means of explanation. Sheldon nodded as he stood in front of his girlfriend.

“Are you all right?” he asked gently.

“Just a sprained wrist,” Penny replied.

“We’re awaiting the results of her MRI,” added Leonard. Penny glared at her friend.

Sheldon nodded. “Prudent. So what happened?”

Penny sighed. “I’d just dropped off Rebecca and was coming home when I was rear-ended into an intersection and hit on”—here she groaned. “Oh God, the car’s totaled.”

“Irrelevant.”

“Sheldon I can’t aff—”

“We’ll figure something out—once we know your status.” His fingers reached out but stopped short of touching her bruised face. “Air bag?” Penny nodded. “Better than the alternative.”

The curtain moved aside and a doctor in a white coat entered with a clipboard. “Penelope?”

“Yup,” she replied.

“We’ve got the results and it doesn’t appear you have any trauma to your head or neck which is great considering you had a side impact.” At the news Leonard visibly sagged in relief and Sheldon briefly closed his eyes.

“So I can go?” said a hopeful Penny as she slung her purse over her shoulder.

“I’ve some instructions and a prescription for you but aside from that you’re free to go unless you wish to remain here for observation,” said the doctor. He held out a small packet of papers which Sheldon took.

Penny immediately got to her feet. “No thanks. I need a shower and a good night’s sleep.”

“I’d recommend having someone stay with you for tonight just in case. I’m including a list of possible symptoms to watch out for over the next few days. If any of them become significant don’t hesitate to come back. Particularly if your headache doesn’t subside.”

Sheldon looked up from the papers to glare at his girlfriend. “You didn’t say you had a headache.” Penny rolled her eyes and sighed.

“Thank you Doctor,” said Leonard. The doctor nodded before departing to his next patient.

As they walked down the hall Penny took Sheldon’s hand and while he still inwardly cringed at the whole aspect of unsanitary touching his grip was firm.

Raj had a relieved smile on his face as he greeted the trio before proceeding with them to the car. Sheldon got Penny settled in the back seat before joining her. Penny’s arm linked through his and she leaned her head on his shoulder. Immediately Sheldon straightened her up.

“Seriously?” she said incredulously.

“Penny you have to stay awake until we get home.” He pulled out a bottle of hand sanitizer. After
cleaning himself he took an additional gob and proceeded to massage Penny’s undamaged hand.

“So how was your shift?” asked Leonard as he drove.

“Eh, you know. Same ol’ same ol’. The manager decided to screw with everyone’s schedule again. Poor Ray has to trade with Lisa so he can attend an audition.” Penny rolled her eyes. “I think he does that to Ray on purpose.”

As they talked Sheldon continued to rub Penny’s hand. The sanitizer had long been absorbed but he couldn’t stop himself. As his thumbs massaged the back of her hand her fingers curled to rest on his; it was difficult to discern who was doing the comforting.

Raj waived his goodbye when they got back to the apartment. He’d had enough excitement for the night and didn’t need to endure the battle of wills between Penny and Sheldon as they decided where she was going to spend the night.

“Sheldon, I’m fine,” she growled as she unlocked her apartment and entered, her boyfriend following closely behind.

“I’m relieved you’re feeling well at this moment but I’d like to be sure you remain this way.”

“Sheldon, I’m not spending the night on my couch.”

“I didn’t say you were,” he said calmly. “You’ll be in my apartment.”

Penny opened up her freezer. “Damn. Out of ice cubes.”

“Fortunately I’m well stocked and in possession of an ice pack.” He paused. “Your wrist?” he asked in a serious tone.

“A little bit.”

He held out his hand. “There are no heroes when it comes to wrist sprains, Penny.” She pouted but his hand didn’t drop. With a resounding sigh she walked over and out the door.

Leonard was in the middle of cleaning up the coffee table as Penny and Sheldon entered.

“Everything settled?” he asked.

“We’ve called a truce to tend to the wounded,” replied Sheldon as he walked to the linen closet for a towel.

“Hurts?” winced Leonard.

“I just need an ice bag, Tylenol, a shower and bed,” said Penny.

“You need to be under supervision for tonight,” Sheldon called from the hallway.

“You have my key. Just check in from time to time.”

“Insufficient. The doctor has advised treating your headache as concussion-like and that’s what we’re going to do.” Sheldon came into the kitchen and grabbed the ice pack from the freezer. “To this end you’ll be woken up every fifteen minutes for the first two hours, then every half hour for the following two hours, then hourly for the remainder of the night.”

“Get out of here,” Penny scoffed. She looked to Leonard for support but the short man gave an apologetic shrug.
“He’s right, Penny.”

“Aw, crap on a cracker,” muttered Penny. Sheldon arrived at her side, picked up her injured hand and gently applied the towel-wrapped ice pack. “Thanks Sheldon.”

“As soon as you’re able, get ready for bed. I’ll have the couch ready for you.”

“You’re not expecting Penny to stay out here are you?” Leonard asked incredulously.

“It’s more comfortable than her couch,” Sheldon replied.

“Why not give her your room?”

Sheldon was stunned at the suggestion. “No one can be in my room, Leonard.”

Leonard rolled his eyes. “For the love of—Fine. Penny, you’ll take my room and I’ll sleep on the couch.”

“Aw sweetie you don’t have to do that.”

“Penny, I’d be worried sick about you sleeping alone in your apartment.” A smirk came to his face. “Besides, you think Sheldon would let me get any sleep?”

Penny gave Leonard a kiss on the cheek. “Thanks.” She took the ice pack from Sheldon’s hand. “I’ll be over as soon as I’ve cleaned up.”

“Thank you Leonard,” Sheldon said in a relieved voice after Penny left the room.

“You know Sheldon, you’re going to have to make some compromises,” Leonard said as he got the spare blanket and pillow from the closet. “Don’t get me wrong: I don’t mind doing this but surely you know it should be you on the couch if you don’t want to sleep with Penny.”

Leonard noted the flush on Sheldon’s cheeks as the taller man left the room without saying a word.

XxX

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Leonard noted the flush on Sheldon’s cheeks as the taller man left the room without saying a word.

Penny opened her eyes to see Sheldon leaning towards her.

“Sheldon I sa—” Her protest was cut short by a perfectly timed kiss.

“I’ll see you in fifty nine minutes,” he whispered.

She fell asleep counting the seconds.

xTBBTx

Penny sat on a stool at the counter as Sheldon was flattening the freshly rolled dough in the pizza pan.

“I never knew you could cook from scratch,” she said, impressed.
Sheldon shrugged as he moved the pan to the stove so he could clean the counter. “I learned from observing my mother although I’ll admit to helping Meemaw in cookie production.” He flashed Penny a quick smile. “I make an excellent stirrer.”

“I’m sure you do,” she said with a responding grin. It wasn’t often Sheldon was so forthcoming with personal anecdotes about his childhood much less smile so freely. Penny absolutely loved it. “So what’s the reason for tonight’s treat?”

“Well for one thing we’re just shy of twenty four hours since your accident so I don’t want to go out.” He took the jar of organic tomato sauce from the refrigerator and brought it to the counter before fetching the pizza crust.

“Sheldon I’m fine.” After all the late night interruptions she’d napped in the afternoon on the couch while Sheldon spent the day working from home.

“Better to be safe than sorry and I’m nothing if not prudent.”

“Ok, so why aren’t we ordering in like always or is this a ‘Penny’s Alive’ celebration pizza?”

“While your survival is a welcome development”—here Penny stuck out her tongue, creating a twitchy smile on Sheldon’s face—“I thought in the spirit of your impending budget we should get used to eating in more often.” Done spreading the sauce he returned the jar to the refrigerator and grabbed the shredded parmesan cheese.

Penny was surprised. “‘We’? You mean you’re budgeting with me?”

Sheldon stopped in mid-sprinkling of the cheese. “My finances are secure, Penny. I’m hoping to impart my skills upon you within the next few weeks so you’ll be self-sufficient come the second full month of your budget.”

A crooked smile came to her lips. “The sooner I learn the sooner Dr. Cooper gets his delivery pizza with sausage, light olives and mushrooms.”

“Something like that, yes.”

“You’ve got to admit home made’s better.” Her stomach began to growl at the sight of Sheldon arranging the grilled chicken with basil on the pizza. While she considered herself vegetarian (except for the occasional steak) she’d lost the battle about the chicken after Sheldon tsked her protein habits. She didn’t know she had to take vitamin B-12 in lieu of meat and when she couldn’t name a complete vegetable protein combination he’d heard enough and fired up the ol’ George Foreman.

“I’m also buying convenience. I don’t have to waste time cooking when I can be productive,” Sheldon said casually.

“Reading comic books, playing video games,” Penny teased.

“You forgot resolving the origin of the universe—and paintball.” He set the temperature on the oven and carefully placed the sliced mushrooms on the pizza so as to ensure equal distribution. “Speaking of ‘my time’ I’m not counting this as a formal ‘date night’ hence all activities this evening are open for discussion. We’ll pursue my agenda next Thursday as agreed upon at the Home Show.”

“Fair enough. Though you are dictating what and where we eat without consulting me.”
“And you can return the favor when whimsy strikes you,” he said as he reached for the bowl of sliced olives.

A wry smile came to her face as she remembered the last meal she cooked for him: spaghetti with cut up hot dogs. “Sure.”

At her tone Sheldon looked up but Penny was already out of her chair and heading to the hall. Something he said had altered the mood, of that he was sure, but what precisely was another matter.

'Sheldon’s Log’, he began to compose in his head. 'Star Date 12711.2. At 17:24 the following statements were uttered…'

Raj was looking forward to the gaming night as a distraction. Earlier in the day he’d given President Siebert the update on his current research. Unless it was so bad that it warranted a call over the weekend he expected a response email sometime early next week.

He gave a knock at the door before opening it and spotted Sheldon sitting at his desk typing away.

“Hello Raj. Leonard won’t be joining us tonight I’m afraid as apparently ‘booty’ calls,” Sheldon said in an annoyed tone.

Leonard came into the room wearing a blazer over his t-shirt and jeans. Sheldon looked over his dress and shook his head in disgust as he recognized the clothes from Tuesday and knew his roommate hadn’t done laundry.

Leonard smirked at the inspection. “It’s not like I’m going to be wearing clothes for long so I might as well wear what’s already wrinkled.”

“I’m sure Leslie will appreciate the gesture,” Sheldon said drolly.

“What? I took a shower,” Leonard said as he took a set of keys from the bowl.

“Which was rendered pointless since you put on clothes you already wore.”

“Not everyone wears Petrie-pants like you, Sheldon.”

The physicist frowned. “My pants are far from a sterile environment. There’s plenty of action going on down there from a bacterial perspective.”

“Action where?” asked Penny as she entered the apartment.

“In Sheldon’s pants,” Leonard replied.

“Really?” she said with a raised eyebrow.

“Shouldn’t you be going?” scowled Sheldon to his roommate.

Penny looked over Leonard’s outfit. “Booty call?” He grinned. “Say hi to Leslie.”

“How did you know he was going to engage in coitus?” asked a puzzled Sheldon after Leonard had left.

“A blazer over wrinkled clothes? It’s obvious.” Sheldon waited for her to continue. “It’s like he’s a
horribly wrapped present with a shiny red bow. Just enough effort to get by: not too jazzy that Leslie’d want to go out but not too bummy that she’d be turned off.”

“Deplorable.”

“It’s how it is in the real world, Moonpie,” smiled Penny as she grabbed her bottle of pain medication from the table.

“Are you in distress?” he asked, indicating the bottle in her hand with a nod of the head.

“Been a long day at work and I’m sore from being on my feet. Guess the accident loosened me up in all the wrong ways.” She made to roll her left shoulder but winced. She noticed Sheldon’s sober look. “It’s ok. Just stiff.”

“Take your medication and lie down. I’ll grab some deep muscle heat rub from my personal supply.” He walked into the bathroom. “Do you have a hot water bottle?”

“Yup, though I was going to use the heating pad instead.”

“Moist heat is best,” said Sheldon as he returned to the room with a tube of cream and a pair of latex gloves.

“You’re sure about this?” Penny asked, giving the tube the once over with her eyes.

“Penny, it isn’t as if I’ve never touched you. Besides, I’ll be wearing gloves.” Sheldon opened the door for Penny. “I’ll put on the kettle while you locate the hot water bottle.”

The door closed.

The room was silent.

Raj sighed as he reached for the television remote.

What a blessing it was to have friends who could provide a much needed distraction.

xTBBTx

A/N Wikipedia: Sighing; Dark Matter; Heliocentrism

Internet Movie Database: Ladyhawke

Car Accident Statistics: All About Car Accidents; US Census Bureau
“So what do you want to do?” asked Penny as she dried a mug.

“Since we watched ‘My Week with Marilyn’ on Thursday I thought it only fair that I should choose tonight’s feature,” replied Sheldon as he sat on the couch.

“I suppose,” she said in a mock-pout. “Only I don’t feel like watching a cartoon.”

Sheldon rolled his eyes. “‘Anime’ Penny. Fair enough. You’ve a choice between ‘The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo’ or ‘The Muppets’.”

Penny laughed. “The Muppets’? Seriously?”

“Penny, the Muppets are an institution unto themselves what-with their physical slapstick, absurdist comedy and humorous parodies.”

“They also had that scientist guy with the glasses. What was his name?” She dried off a plate and put it in the cupboard.

“You’re referring to Dr. Bunsen Honeydew. He worked in the Muppet Labs with his assistant Beaker.”

“They’re kind of like you and Leonard: he wears glasses and you’re always talking about yourself. You know: ‘me me me me’,” she said in her best Beaker voice.

“The Discovery channel is also showing a documentary on the migration of army ants,” scowled Sheldon.

“No, no, ‘The Muppets’ are fine.” Penny hung the dish cloth over the oven door handle and came to the couch. “You know, I had a crush on Ernie in first grade.”

“Ernie is from Sesame Street.”

“I know. I just meant that I’ve got a thing for puppets too,” amended Penny.

“I don’t know if I’d consider my interest a ‘thing’ per se—aside from the Jim Henson Muppets and of course Yoda,” said Sheldon as he opened the dvd case.

“Don’t forget those Tribbles from Star Trek. They’re adorable.”

Sheldon looked incredulous. “Really Penny, there’s absolutely no artistry involved in manufacturing gobs of fur in mass quantities.”

“Yeah but they’re soft and they purr,” she gushed.

“So do cats.” Sheldon got up to put the dvd in the player.

“Yeah but I don’t have to scoop out Tribble clumps from a litter box.”

“Point,” he conceded. “Of course siding with the Tribbles makes you an enemy of the Klingon Empire.”
“Good thing I’m dating a Vulcan.”

“Net Nuq SoH buS.”

“Excuse me?” Penny laughed. “Want to translate that?”

“This’ll give you incentive to learn a new language,” said Sheldon with a twitchy smile as he made himself comfortable on the couch.

Penny rolled her eyes. “How did I ever get through life without Klingon?”

“SoH ‘oH ‘IH.”

“That better be a compliment, Mister,” she replied, a smirk on her face.

Sheldon’s eyes opened in surprise. “Oh, very good Penny.”

“Well?” she asked after a moment of silence. He looked at her questioningly. “What’s it mean?”

“I thought you didn’t need to know Klingon?”

Penny wiggled her fingers menacingly as she leaned over to her boyfriend’s side of the couch.

“Don’t make me bring it.”

“Perhaps ‘today is a good day to die’,” quipped Sheldon as he made a desperate attempt to grab Penny’s wrists.

xTBBTx

“Ooo I like this one,” Penny exclaimed as she used her hand to shield the sun so she could better look at the interior of the car.

Sheldon pursed his lips. “Never. The Mitsubishi Lancer has a side impact test rating of two out of five. The National Highway Traffic Safety Administration rating means that in a typical side crash, a front-seat occupant would have a twenty one to twenty five percent chance of an injury that would require immediate hospitalization and could be life-threatening.” There was no way he’d go through what he did with Penny last Wednesday at the hospital again if he could help it.

“Great,” sighed Penny as she began walking to the next vehicle. “You’ve shot down every single car in my price range.”

“You don’t have a ‘price range’ per se. Wyatt has offered you four thousand dollars towards a new vehicle; that doesn’t set your price at four thousand,” amended Sheldon as he continued to look up cars on his phone.

“If it costs more I don’t mind helping you out,” soothed Leonard. He knew spending the morning car shopping with Sheldon was a heck of a way to burn up a Sunday but as he was the only one with a car he became the designated chauffeur.

“Thanks sweetie but I’ve already got to pay for schooling this September. I couldn’t handle much more debt.” Penny looked at Sheldon. “Right, fearless accountant?”

Sheldon scrolled down the Motor Trend site for vehicle companies. “I’m sure Leonard would be amenable towards a long-term repayment plan. This isn’t like a shoe shopping spree. You need a car.”
“You need her with a car,” corrected Leonard with a grin.

“There is that, yes; hence the reason why I’m contributing a thousand dollars towards the purchase.”

Penny stopped. “No way, Sheldon. You’re already helping me with school.”

“I’m merely using your earlier suggestion. We’ll treat rides made solely for my own purposes like a taxi—albeit at a set fare.” He looked up and realized Penny wasn’t there. Turning around, he found her standing with arms crossed and a very sour expression on her face. He went over what he’d just said and found nothing that could account for her mood.

Leonard gave Penny a friendly nudge. “That you’d be responsible for chauffeuring him around more than makes up for my loan.”

“I guess,” sighed Penny as the three resumed walking.

“As a company Toyota offers a wide assortment of vehicles with superior safety ratings. Let me look up price ranges before we continue,” said Sheldon.

Penny and Leonard continued to walk across the lot, leaving Sheldon to work his phone.

“Spill it,” Leonard said quietly. “What’s wrong?”

“I don’t mind borrowing from you,” murmured Penny. “It’s just….”

“Sheldon doesn’t mind.”

“I mind. There’s already such a difference between the two of us. I don’t want him bailing me out all the time.” She kicked a rock and watched it skip.

“Penny, you do more for him than you realize.” Leonard gave her a meaningful look. “Don’t sell yourself short.”

“I believe a two thousand and two or three Corolla will suit our needs,” said Sheldon evenly. Both Penny and Leonard jumped at his voice as neither had heard him approach. Penny glanced awkwardly at her boyfriend but if he’d overheard the conversation he wasn’t showing it.

Leonard pulled out his own phone. “What about a Tercel?”

“Inadequate head room,” replied Sheldon.

“Echo?”

“Only a three star rating for side-impact.”

“A Camry would be—”

“Excuse me, but this is supposed to be my car,” said Penny with a smirk. Both men stopped.

“You’re right,” said Sheldon. “What car are you interested in?”

She twirled a strand of hair as she cocked her head to the side. “A red one.”

Sheldon rolled his eyes before returning to his phone. Leonard laughed as Penny gave him a wink.
“So how goes the ‘honeymoon bliss’?” asked Penny before taking a sip of her wine.

“I think it’s been a harder transition for Howard. His mother did just about everything for him so he’s not used to all the responsibilities at home,” replied Bernadette. She flashed a conspiratorial smile. “Did you know she still cut up his meat into bite-size portions?”

Amy plucked the side of her cheek in thought. “As he’s the product of a broken home it’s not surprising his mother sought to compensate for his lack of a father. Moreover her overindulgence could also be an indicator that she misses a male figure in her life.” She flashed a quick smile. “Oedipus-complex indeed.”

“A therapist would make a fortune at our building,” said Bernadette. “So far I’ve learned that being married doesn’t mean having to live together.”

Penny took a chip from the bowl. “You mean separated.”

“Oh no. They’re together,” Bernadette amended. “Vicki lives across the hall from us. When I first met her in the elevator she was on her way to see her husband. I thought it a weird way to say ‘going home’ but she’d pressed the fifth floor instead of the fourth. It turns out Gerry lives above us.”

“And they’re happily married?” Penny asked, astonished.

“Very.”

“Fascinating. Apartment living does mean a certain lack of privacy. A grand way to have resolved the issue.” Amy took a sip of her drink.

Bernadette laughed. “If you think that’s a great solution Mr. Drake on third has them beat. Apparently he got married a few days before he moved in and Vicki’s yet to see his wife. He’s almost always away on business trips and it turns out he met and married his wife on one of them. She lives in Chicago.”

Penny shook her head. “That’s just crazy.”

“Can’t make this stuff up,” Bernadette smiled as she topped up the wine in the crystal glass from the set Penny, Leonard and Sheldon had given her as a wedding present. Being the hostess meant she could indulge herself in a second glass.

Again Amy smiled. “Actually Bernadette you can. As we speak Rajesh and I have engaged in a pseudo relationship so that our parents will cease to badger us about ‘hooking up’ with a potential mate.”

“Oh oh. Aren’t you afraid Raj will act like a douche in front of your mom? You know he’ll be drinking,” warned Penny.

“Fortunately he won’t have to say much beyond a formal greeting and even then we might be able to get away with a simple wave,” replied Amy. “After hearing stories about Arman the miniature horse breeder and Sheldon yet never meeting either in person my mother’s expectations will be lowered as a sense of desperation grows.”

“Sounds like you’re pseudo-settling,” pouted Bernadette.
“Oh no, quite the opposite,” Amy said in a chipper tone. “I find Rajesh and his selective mutism extremely fascinating. In fact I’d love to run a series of tests on him while I have the opportunity.”

“Are you sure he’ll mind?” asked Bernadette.

“Rajesh seems amenable enough to most requests.” Amy paused. “Besides which, from what I understand guys love it when their girlfriends play ‘doctor’.”

“Naughty Amy,” laughed Penny.

The neurobiologist blushed and took another sip of her drink.

“How was Houston?” asked Leonard as he sat down at the lunch table.

Howard grinned. “Hotter’n a goat’s butt in a pepper patch. I moseyed my way to the Johnson Space Center and announced there was a new sheriff in town.”

Sheldon rolled his eyes but decided to keep eating. Perhaps if he ignored the Texas jargon Howard would drop the act.

“Howard was just telling me he needs his SCUBA certification ASAP,” said Raj. He turned to his best friend. “I thought you got rid of your wet suit?”

“No, no I still have it. Not a lot of people I know fit into a boy’s size large,” replied Howard.

Leonard grabbed his knife in order to cut his pickle into bite size pieces. “The last time you went scuba diving you had a panic attack. What makes you think anything’s going to change?”

“Well along side sheer determination I’ve decided to try hypnotherapy,” said Howard with a grin.

“Seriously?” scoffed Leonard.

Sheldon took his ‘hand napkin’ and began cleaning his fingers individually. “Actually Leonard a meta-analysis of the efficacy of hypnotherapy was conducted in 2003 and concluded that in fifty seven controlled trials, sixty four percent of the hypnotherapy group achieved success compared to thirty seven percent among untreated control groups.”

“I still wouldn’t want someone messing with my head,” shrugged Leonard.

“So why’d you get a girlfriend?” said Raj with a smirk. Leonard stuck out his tongue in response.

“Anyways,” continued Howard. “Along side the scuba qualification I’ve got to pass a swimming test: three lengths of a twenty-five meter pool without stopping, three lengths of the pool wearing a flight suit and tennis shoes and tread water for ten minutes in a flight suit.”

“Howard, you can’t do any of that in your birthday suit,” Leonard said with a shake of the head. “Hypnosis will only get you so far.”

“In fact hypnosis won’t do anything at all in regards to his swimming abilities,” agreed Sheldon. “Aside from alleviating general anxiety, tension and stress there isn’t much else it can do for him.”

“That’s why I’ve got some private swimming lessons at the local YMCA. Monica’ll get me swimming faster than a sway back mule,” said Howard with an eyebrow wiggle.
“What does that even mean?” asked Raj.

“It means Howard’s going to get his ass handed to him if he talks like this in Texas,” said Leonard before taking a bite of his sandwich.

Howard put down his pop. “I’m just trying to fit in. Hey Sheldon, know any Texan phrases I can use?”

“Technically every phrase I utter is a ‘Texan phrase’, ” Sheldon said drolly.

Raj frowned in thought as he turned to the lanky man. “You know I just realized you don’t sound like your mother or sister. What happened to your accent?”

“What, because I don’t ‘reck’n tuh fix anythan’ I’m suddenly not Texan?” Sheldon growled.

“He’s not sayin’ that, Shelly,” smirked Howard. “He just means you can put your boots in the oven but that don’t make ‘em biscuits.” Sheldon put down his fork and glared.

“That’s not what he’s saying at all. Good Lord, get your euphemisms straight,” he said indignantly. “And call me ‘Shelly’ again and I’ll jam your preserves.”

“‘Boots in the oven but that doesn’t make them biscuits’, ” muttered Raj to himself.

“Really Sheldon?” scoffed Howard. “Granted it’s been nearly twenty years but I got an awful lot out of my one and only karate lesson.”

“That’s enough you two,” said Leonard. “Look, you’re short circuiting Raj.” As one the group turned to face the astrophysicist.

“I’ll jam your preserves,” Raj mumbled to himself as he absentmindedly played with the lima beans on his plate with a fork.

“Don’t worry about it Raj. ‘Texan’ is its own language,” soothed Howard. “After all, how often does Sheldon say something nobody understands?”

“Maybe if you got your doctorate you’d be better prepared for my level of conversation,” sniffed Sheldon.

“Preparing for you is like a one-legged cat trying to bury turds on a frozen pond,” Howard retorted with a glint in his eyes.

Raj cocked his head as if he hadn’t heard Howard properly. “‘A one-legged cat—’”

Sighing, Leonard picked up his sandwich and did his best to tune out the conversation.

xTBBTx

Sheldon sighed as he walked along the university hallway. Gingerly he carried a paper bag in his hands. While it pained him to part with the object in question he knew it would place Wolowitz on retainer.

Not all Oompa Loompas worked for all the candy they could eat.

The physicist gave a quick triple knock even though the door was open and Howard could see the lanky man in the doorway.
“Come in and close the door,” Howard hissed. Quickly Sheldon complied. With sparkling eyes Howard nearly bore a hole in the paper bag. “Is that it?”

“Yes,” Sheldon replied sadly.

“Let me see it.”
Sheldon frowned. “Not until I see ‘Project Lux Stellarum’.”

“You doubt my work?” the engineer said testily.

“I want to ensure it’s to my specifications.”

Howard thought for a moment before grunting his assent. Crossing over to the cupboard he dragged out the footstool and stood to reach the long box on the top shelf. He cleared a spot on his worktable before setting down the box and opening the lid.

Sheldon peered into the box. It looked ordinary enough. But did it work?

Grinning, Howard removed the contraption and quickly set it up.

“Hit the lights,” he ordered. Sheldon obliged and the two men stood in the dark. “Initiating ‘Project Lux Stellarum’,” he said and turned the handle. Immediately the room was aglow. “To get the effect you want you click the handle a second time,” he demonstrated.

Eyes sparkling in the light, Sheldon was impressed. Granted it was a simple contraption and since he designed it he knew how it should look but nevertheless the result was spectacular. Of course he’d never admit it to the engineer. Lord knew Leonard was already under the delusion his work was groundbreaking. The last thing the group dynamic needed was another egomaniac.

“Satisfactory,” Sheldon said after a moment. Howard chuckled.

“From you I’ll take that as overwhelming applause.”

Sheldon hit the lights as the engineer clicked the handle to turn off the contraption. Howard quickly collapsed and returned ‘Project Lux Stellarum’ to the box and replaced the lid.

“And now?” he asked with a bounce.

“Take care of it,” Sheldon sighed as he handed over the bag. Gently Howard took it out of his hands and pulled out his payment from the package: Green Lantern number fifty nine. The first appearance of Guy Gardner.

“While some erroneously assume he was named after Guy Gardner the NASA astronaut he was in actuality named after fan Guy H. Lillian III and writer Gardner Fox,” said Sheldon as Howard veritably drooled over the comic. “Of course this means I can call upon you in future should I require your services.”

“Yes, yes,” Howard said absently.

Mouth trembling, Sheldon scooped up the box and exited the lab.

Perhaps he was wrong in calling Howard an ‘Oompa Loompa’ as clearly, save size, he had all the makings of a treasure-loving dwarf.

xTBBTx
Penny had to admit she was more than a little surprised to get a text from Sheldon saying she was to meet him after work at the Los Angeles County Arboretum. She pulled the rental car into the parking stall and killed the engine. Fortunately he’d warned her to be prepared to go out so she’d packed a change of clothes. When she’d asked what she should wear he said something comfortable. When she asked what he meant by that he went on to define the word. When she stopped him with a kiss his mind grasped what she had meant. ‘Shoes suitable for walking,’ he’d said. ‘And a light jacket or sweater in case we’re out later than expected.’

After she cleared the entrance she pulled out her phone.

‘I’m here. Where r u?’ she texted Sheldon.

‘Go right’, said his returning text.

Penny looked at the two paths.

‘Seriously?’ she typed.

‘Whose ‘Date Night’ is this?’

‘Going right.’

‘Pass the gazebo and cross the wooden bridge.’

While she wouldn’t admit it to him Penny got a kick out of his game. She walked by the gazebo, noticing a man snuggling his honey-bun as they looked over the landscape. ‘How long before Sheldon and I can do that?’ she wondered.

Her phone buzzed as she stepped off the bridge.

‘Keep walking until you reach a fork in the path. Go left.’

She liked the layout of the arboretum with beautiful flowers interspersed among the trees. Penny hadn’t been out in nature since her dad had taken the family off to the State park when she was fourteen but even then it wasn’t something this lush. And the smell! A mix of foliage and flowers greeted her at every turn. Thank goodness her allergies were to indoor dust.

‘Going left,’ typed Penny.

‘Now take the second left. It’s marked by the Acer rubrum.’

‘?’

‘Red Maple. There are signs posted.’

‘K’

Trusting her ability to count to two over reading Latin she turned down the second path. Almost immediately she was rewarded as she saw a flash of a red shirt along the trail. Sure enough she found her boyfriend staring at a bush. At the sound of her approach he turned to greet her with a twitchy smile.

“Hello Penny,” he said in a chipper tone.

“I have to say, this is a surprise,” Penny replied as she planted a kiss on his cheek.
He shrugged. “It’s been a while since I’ve been here. As they don’t have dinosaurs among the foliage it makes for a less interesting outing.”

Penny laughed. “Gee, thanks for sharing.” She went to take his arm but noticed the object in his hand. “An umbrella? I didn’t think it was going to rain.”

“I’m nothing if not prepared,” he said evenly although she thought there was an extra shine to his blue eyes.

They strolled along the path. Penny silently lauded Sheldon as it was several minutes before he tried to inconspicuously wipe his cheek with his shoulder. Not wanting the moment to become awkward she stepped to the side in order to look at a series of purple and pink flowers arranged in spikes.

“Lovely,” she said. “Do you know what they are?”

“Lupinus or Lupins. They’re from the legume family,” he answered. “Look for the yellow signs.”

Penny spotted the sign in the ground and read about the flowers. Over her shoulder Sheldon quickly scanned the information. He wasn’t particularly interested in botany but as they walked he noted every sign Penny stopped to read.

“It’s going to be dusk soon,” she said as she zipped up her hoodie.

Sheldon nodded. “Fortunately I came prepared.” He opened the umbrella, clicked a little switch and a series of multicolored lights appeared among the violet fabric.

“Oh my God,” Penny cooed, wide-eyed. “Sheldon it’s beautiful.”

In response she heard another ‘click’ and the lights began to slowly twinkle. She reached out and he gave her the umbrella. Grinning like a little kid she slowly spun the umbrella in her hand, watching the lights wink at her.

“If we’re to get out of here before midnight we should keep walking,” Sheldon said, the tone of his voice indicating he was very pleased.

Penny clasped his hand and leaned the shaft of the umbrella on her opposite shoulder.

“Where did you get this?” she asked.

“I’d seen versions online but had Wolowitz construct this one for me with brighter lights so as to be more practical for nighttime use.”

“You know, just when I think he can’t get any cruder he comes up with something like this,” Penny smiled. “Using your design of course,” she amended. “Down with the Machine Overlords.”

“Indeed; although I somehow doubt they’d waste their time on an umbrella,” responded Sheldon.

“But an LED scorpion?”

“Still terrifying.”

As they rounded the corner Penny found a bunch of striking red flowers.

“What are they?” she asked.
“I’m not sure,” Sheldon replied.

Looking for the sign she was surprised to see it was white and seemed to be made of cardboard.

“‘QaH’. Sounds Klingon to me,” Penny said.

“Who’d be daft enough to leave Klingon signs in an arboretum?” mused Sheldon.

Penny glanced at her boyfriend. “You didn’t.”

“You said you wanted to learn Klingon.”

Penny shook her head. “You’re something else. So what does ‘QaH’ mean?”

Sheldon reached over and took the umbrella from her hand. “I think it’s written on the sign.” He paused. “All I know is that someone could get in trouble if the sign was left here. Why don’t you be QaH and retrieve it.”

Rolling her eyes, Penny plucked the sign from the ground and as she did so she noticed a word written on the back side: ‘Helpful’.

“Ha. Ha,” she said with a crooked smile. Again she took his hand and they walked. Something told her to keep her eyes peeled and sure enough another white sign came into sight.

“‘Chong’,” she said out loud as she retrieved the sign. On the back it said ‘admirable’. She looked to Sheldon but all that appeared was his signature twitchy smile.

By the roses Penny learned that ‘yoH’ meant ‘brave’.

Next to the juniper tree she found another sign. In Klingon ‘may’ was the word for ‘fair’.

Her curiosity was getting the better of her as she picked up the latest sign.

“‘Nong’ means ‘passionate’. Ok what gives? These aren’t exactly helpful words in a Klingon bar,” she teased.

“Perhaps you’ll find yourself in a poetry bar. Klingons are quite fond of epic poetry—and opera,” smirked Sheldon.

Penny bit her lip as she scoured the landscape for another sign. To her left a white object caught her attention and she veritably skipped towards it. Sheldon made to call out that she’d missed one but he didn’t want to interrupt her obvious glee. Quietly he picked up the sign, folded it and put it into his pocket.

As soon as Penny read the back of the latest sign her mood changed. She waited for Sheldon to catch up.

“‘QoS,’” she said softly. “‘Sorry’.” She searched his face. “What are you sorry about?”

“As your friend I’ve failed you,” he said seriously. She waited for him to continue. “When we discussed your reasons for wanting to return to Omaha you said you wanted ‘to feel better’ about yourself. I told you I’d help you see your significance. I haven’t.”

Penny was shocked. “What are you talking about? You may be whacked but you make me feel wonderful,” she said to lighten the mood. Sheldon shook his head.
“Not according to what you told Leonard at the car lot.”

“Sheldon—”

“I don’t understand why you choose to see yourself in such a negative light, particularly now when you’re embarking on a new chapter in your life. I’m not ‘bailing you out’ I’m assisting you and believe me there’s a difference.” He flashed a quick smile. “I’d advise you not to compare yourself to me as most people rate rather poorly. Nevertheless you are quite something Penelope—even if it takes you learning Klingon to know it.”

Penny stepped in and wrapped her arms around his chest.

“Thank you Moonpie,” she whispered before covering his lips with her own. One kiss led to another and then she couldn’t help but smile. “May I?” she asked as her hand covered his on the umbrella’s handle.

“Of course—and don’t call me Moonpie,” he admonished lightly.

Taking the umbrella Penny ran a few feet ahead before raising it high into the air. With a Cheshire grin she slowly spun herself in a circle, staring at the twinkling lights all the while.

Sheldon smirked at his girlfriend, only taking his eyes off her to throw out the sign from his pocket as he walked past.

Within the bin the sign unfurled until a single word could be seen:

‘Beautiful’.

xTBBTx

“It looks like he’s doing half-assed jumping jacks,” smirked Penny.

“He’s stealthily traversing the dungeon corridor,” corrected Sheldon.

“Only if he’s Richard Simmons.” She continued staring at the computer screen to avoid her boyfriend’s glare.

“Didn’t you say you were going to call up Amy for a get-together tonight?” he said in an annoyed tone.

“And miss all this pulse-pounding action?” Penny said innocently. Before he could respond she planted a kiss on the top of his head. “Have fun Moonpie.”

“Don’t call me Moonpie,” he mumbled as Penny made her way to the door. Before she could open it Howard and Raj entered.

“Why hello lovely lady,” Howard said smoothly. “Going somewhere?” Raj gave Penny a wave and a little smile.

“Off to Amy’s,” she replied amiably. “Good luck with your ‘Zork’ or whatever.”

“It’s not ‘Zork’. We’re playing ‘Dunzhin: Warrior of Ras Volume One’,” corrected Sheldon. “‘Zork’ is a text-only game while ‘Dunzhin’ utilizes key commands to manipulate the limited graphics you saw and summarily dismissed.”

“You started without us?” Howard pouted.
“I was just checking for glitches,” soothed Sheldon. “As far as I can tell we have a clean copy.”

“Ok, well I better go before Raj has an aneurysm,” smirked Penny as she closed the door.

“Where’s Leonard?” asked Raj as he settled himself on the couch.

“Picking up dinner.” Sheldon checked his watch. “He should be here in less than a minute.” He paused as he counted the seconds.

Howard cocked his head but heard nothing. “You’re pulling my leg.”

The physicist was insulted. “It’s all a matter of regimented procedure. He picked up the preordered meal, stopped at the Korean grocery store for low sodium soy sauce and spicy hot mustard and took Los Robles Avenue South in order to avoid excess traffic lights. He knows I grabbed the mail so all he has to do is climb the stairs and”—Sheldon paused—“open the door.”

The door opened and Leonard entered.

“Damn him and his Vulcan hearing,” Howard grumbled.

“Remarkable,” said an amazed Raj.

“And, I may say, all done without an ‘abracadabra’,” sniffed Sheldon as he got out of his seat to wash his hands.

“What?” asked Leonard as he set the food down on the table.

“Sheldon knew to the second when you’d open the door,” said Howard as he tore into one of the bags.

“Maybe they’re ‘empathy roommates’,” offered Raj.

Howard grinned. “It would explain an awful lot: Leonard likes to suffer and Sheldon likes to oblige him by being Sheldon.”

Leonard’s jaw dropped in shock. “I do not like to suffer. What are you talking about?”

“Add up all of the crap Sheldon’s put you through over the years and give me a rational answer why you stayed,” said Raj as he took his food container from Howard. Leonard thought things over.

“I’ll give you a hint—Sheldon’s dating her,” said Howard in a hushed tone.

“I’m seeing Leslie,” stammered a blushing Leonard as he went to the refrigerator for a bottled water. Sheldon emerged from the hallway and spotted his roommate.

“You seem flushed, Leonard. Are you ill?” he asked nervously as he lifted his shirt collar over his mouth and nose.

The shorter man shook his head before taking a swig of water. “I’m fine. I just choked on something.” He glared at Raj and Howard as the two friends chuckled.

xTBBTx
A/N: Wikipedia: hypnotherapy; Guy Gardner; Dunzhin

Net Nuq SoH buS: ‘That’s what you think.’

SoH ‘oH ‘IH: ‘You are beautiful.’

‘Today is a good day to die’: a favorite saying of Lt. Worf.

Car stats: Motor Trend

Astronaut training: NASA
Amy stepped out of her apartment building to greet Penny. The two women proceeded to the visitor parking lot where, with a big smile on her face, Penny led them to a red Toyota Corolla.

“Ta da,” she said joyfully.

“Practical and attractive—a definite combination of Sheldon and you,” said Amy with a quick smile.

Penny pressed the remote to open the locks. “Well this baby sure had its growing pains. I thought we’d be tossed from the dealership with the way Sheldon haggled.”

“Did it work?” asked Amy as she opened the door.

“I think the agent cut an extra five hundred just because I interrupted Sheldon.”

“He is a tad tenacious,” said Amy diplomatically. “I see you upgraded your stereo.”

“Came with the car,” corrected Penny as she turned the ignition. “The original owner took the stereo with him so for an extra fee the dealership put in a USB port one. I wasn’t sure about it but Leonard thought it a cool idea and since I was borrowing the extra thousand off of him I thought to give him a say in the vehicle.”

After putting on her seatbelt the Nebraskan pulled out of the lot and onto the roadway towards the local coffee shop for a much needed iced mocha and a cup of tepid water.

“I’m surprised Sheldon agreed to the red color,” said Amy. “Statistically speaking, police pull over red cars at a higher rate according to insurance underwriters and brokers.”

Penny shrugged. “My Volkswagen was red and I didn’t notice any difference from when I was driving my dad’s truck in Nebraska.” She’d been stopped several times by the police in both States but that’s beside the point.

Amy smiled to herself. “You know Bestie I believe I’m being struck with a moment of whimsy. We should arrange a night with Bernadette and go for a drive in your new ‘wheels’.”

“Sounds good to me. Hey, there’s a martini lounge I wanted to check out in LA. We can relive Bernadette’s bachelorette party extravaganza.”

“Too bad we couldn’t get Devon. He was a scream,” said Amy as she straightened her skirt. She hoped Penny wouldn’t notice the slight color to her cheeks.

“Yeah, he was—wait a minute! He gave me his number.” Penny bit her lip as she thought over where it could be. She shook her head. “I’d have to look for it although I’m not sure it’s a good idea for me to call him since he was kind of interested in me.”

At this Amy snorted. “‘Kind of interested’. Penny mosquitoes are ‘kind of’ attracted to warm blooded creatures. Devon was wild for you.”

“Hmm. Maybe not such a good idea then.” Penny signaled left and waited for traffic to clear before turning into the strip mall.
“I’ve got an idea. Give me the number and I’ll call him. I’ll explain the situation that we’re all interested in a chaste encounter and if he’s up for it he’s more than welcome.”

Penny parked and killed the engine. “Sounds good to me.” She really liked Devon and hoped he’d come out. Maybe he’d bring a friend for Amy. At the very least she’d have to take the neurobiologist shopping for some appropriate clothes for the martini lounge. Somehow wool tweed never quite made the fashion list in LA. “Howard’s going to have a fit over the whole thing.”

Amy nodded. “Not everyone can have a cool head like Sheldon.”

“You got it, sistah,” Penny smiled as both women got out of the car. “Although it’d be nice to figure out a way to warm it up a little.”

“From what I learned at Cub Scouts before I was unceremoniously thrown out it takes gentle coaxing to get the spark to catch fire,” said Amy as she held the glass door open for Penny to enter. “In your case the spark’s already there and I dare say there’s a little flame. Keep adding fuel but don’t smother it and don’t blow too hard or you’ll put it out.”


“‘Baby deer’?”

“It’s a long story….”

xTBBTx

It was a pain in the ass getting up so early but as she had extra bills to pay this month in the form of car rentals Penny took the extra shift when it became available. Taking a last swig of coffee she was heading to the door when it struck her—the purse! She dashed into her bedroom and dug out the handbag she used at the bachelorette party. Sure enough she found the crumpled napkin with Devon’s number. With a smirk on her face she grabbed her current purse and headed for the door.

She’d call Amy on break and—At once Penny frowned. Looking for a spot she lifted up her key bowl and placed the napkin underneath. It’d remind her to call as soon as she got in.

Besides, she seemed to remember that Amy was going to be busy with Raj today.

XxX

“Do you mind?” Amy asked as she leaned into Raj. He swallowed nervously and shook his head. She flashed a quick smile. “You’re acting virginal. I’ve done this before and I’m sure you have at one point or another so stop worrying and come closer.” Tentatively Raj closed his eyes and obeyed.

“Baby,” Amy chided as she stuck a medical electrode to his temple. She peeled the backing of another and placed it on his other temple before attaching the wires. “Now this won’t record the full synaptic response but it will give us a look-see into that pretty little brain of yours.” She sat down and adjusted some controls before she turned on a voice recorder.

“Experiment four five three. Commenced on oh five, twenty second, twelve at thirteen thirty seven hours. Subject Rajesh Koothrappali. Age twenty eight.

“Premise: to explore the parameters of subject’s selective mutism towards women not related to him. Test one will be the control setting as there will be no alcohol-based stimulant.” Amy pulled out a set of cue cards. “The questions and statements are preselected. I shall begin with a salutation.
Hello Rajesh.”

The astrophysicist opened his mouth to respond but failing to make a sound he bashfully waved a ‘hello’.

“Subject has attempted and failed to respond. Coloration noted on cheeks. Increase in heart rate and —ooo boy. You’re thinking faster than a politician at a press conference.” She flashed a little smile. “At least we know you’re not deficient upstairs.” She glanced at her card. “Query section one: What is your full name and occupation?” Raj couldn’t meet Amy’s eyes. “Where is your place of work?” He looked at his hands. “What is your current area of research?” Raj gave an apologetic smile.

“All right Rajesh, we’ll switch to an argument format. Statement One: Star Trek is not a detriment to science. Defend.”

Raj’s eyes opened wide in surprise at the topic. He took in a breath of air only to let it out. He shook his head.

“Statement Two: Reading comic books isn’t a waste of time. Defend.” A frown crossed his brow but still he said nothing.

“Statement Three: Sex and the City mocks the idea of feminine bonding. Defend.” At this Raj veritably bounced in his seat.

“End of test one.” Amy turned and pulled out a bottle of rum and a shot glass from a paper bag. “Test two: subject will be given one ounce of rum and will be retested on preset queries.” She poured and set out the glass in front of Raj. Almost immediately he downed the glass.

“Hello Amy. My name’s Rajesh Ramayan Koothrappali. I’m an astrophysicist at Caltech University where I’m currently working with Dr. Sheldon Cooper on string theory implications of gamma rays from WIMP annihilations. Star Trek has brought forth many ideas to the real world such as communicators/cell phones, the advancement of artificial intelligence, matter-antimatter power generation and the idea that hot chicks can be respected scientists. As for comic books, they promote literacy and stimulate the imagination and prove that hot chicks can be respected crime fighters. As for Sex and the City if you haven’t laughed, cried and rejoiced with Carrie, Samantha, Charlotte and Miranda your heart is truly stone.” Raj let out a big breath to calm himself before clasping his hands on the table. “So, what else do you want to talk about?” he said with a suave smile. “Maybe dinner after we’re through here?”

“Fascinating,” remarked Amy as she wrote in her notebook.

xTBBTx

Knock Knock Knock “Penny.”

Knock Knock Knock “Penny.”

Knock Knock Knock “Penny.”

“Door’s open Sheldon.”

He turned the knob and stepped into the apartment. Immediately he frowned as he saw a bunch of magazines strewn about the coffee table and couch. Granted, he’d won one battle as she now put her clothes in the laundry hamper and hung them up immediately after being laundered but he still had a way to go before winning the war.
“Our dinner has arrived and you didn’t answer your phone,” he said.

“Ok, I’ll be done in a sec,” she replied from her bedroom.

‘Good Lord she’s left garbage on the stand.’ Sheldon made note to purchase a little garbage can to put by the door. With pursed lips he picked up the empty gum package although he refused to touch the Kleenex. He spotted a napkin under the key bowl and made to use it to grab the contaminated object.

“I hope you’ve gathered your costume for ComicCon this weekend. We’ll coordinate tomorrow evening after work…..” Sheldon said, voice trailing. ‘Odd.’ He noted the napkin had a man’s name on it. Even more peculiar was that it had a telephone number written underneath. Sheldon turned the napkin over and read the name of the bar.

“I swear if I have to kill everybody from the factory floor on up there will be a standard shoe size in America,” grumbled Penny as she neared her bedroom door. Sheldon quickly replaced the napkin under the key bowl and left the gum package next to it. “You guys have it so easy: standard clothes, standard shoes, standard pricing for hair cuts. It’s a conspiracy I tell you.” She crossed the room to her boyfriend and gave him a light kiss. She stood back and looked at him. “What’s wrong?”

“Our food is getting cold,” he said evenly. Penny rolled her eyes as she ushered him out the door with her hand.

“Got a question for you Penny,” said Leonard as the couple entered 4A. “Charlie Brown trying to kick the football held by Lucy: perpetual optimism or failure to calculate statistical data?”

“How ‘bout good ol’ stubbornness?” she replied as she sat down on the couch. “Like heck he’d let that witch get the best of him. I wouldn’t.” She took the food container from Howard. “Thanks.”

Leonard cocked his head to the side. “Never even considered that.” Raj whispered in Howard’s ear, causing the engineer to smile.

“Probably because on some level it requires a self esteem,” Howard interpreted. Leonard flashed Raj a sneer.

Howard passed Sheldon his chicken satay and mi krop. “For you.”

“Thank you,” Sheldon said in a quiet voice. He looked to his roommate. “Extra peanuts?”

“Of course,” replied Leonard.

“Napkin?” Penny asked as she held one out to her boyfriend. There was a pause before he took it.

“Well I still say Charlie Brown’s an optimist,” said Leonard as he opened his food container. “He knows success isn’t necessary as long as he’s striving to attain his goal.”

“You’d almost think he’s a perfectionist. It’d break his record if he ever did kick it,” smirked Howard. Again Raj whispered in his ear. “Of course we have a prime example of a perfectionist sitting in this very room.” Sheldon quit chewing as he felt four sets of eyes on his person.

“I most certainly am not,” he said defensively. “Perfectionists have a persistent compulsive drive toward unattainable goals and valuation based solely in terms of accomplishment. Furthermore they reject the constraints of human ability.” A pause. “My goals are not unattainable.”
“So tell me homo novus, have you found your unifying formula for the creation and structure of the universe while pursuing your Nobel Prize?” asked Howard innocently and received a glare in response.

“In Sheldon’s defense perfectionists tend to delay ambitious projects rather than fail,” offered Leonard. “He’s had setbacks and hasn’t let them get the best of him.”

Howard thought about it for a moment. “True, he did try to mount a campaign to save Firefly.”

“And cancel Babylon 5 at the end of Season One,” added Leonard.

“And won me over in spite of himself,” grinned Penny.

“It helps when he dials down the Vulcan—unless you’re into analytically detached sensuality,” said Howard to Penny before taking a bite of his noodles.

“As an assertive woman I’m sure if Penny were dissatisfied with me she’d confront me rather than seek solace elsewhere,” scowled Sheldon.

“Umm, that’s not what I meant,” Howard said awkwardly.

“Besides, where am I supposed to find someone better than you?” Penny said soothingly.

“They’re coming along with cloning technology every day,” quipped Leonard. “Sheldon’d be his own rival.”

The lanky physicist set down his food container. He began to wipe his hands with his napkin before stopping to regard the object. “Achieving a serial immortality like in ‘The Prestige’ is intriguing,” he admitted. “Although killing any incarnation of me would be a detriment to the human race.”

“Trust me, one Sheldon is more than enough,” said Howard. “I think the first person you’d clone is Leonard Nimoy. You still have that napkin, right?”

“Of course I do,” replied Sheldon.

“DNA’s all primed and ready to go,” grinned Penny as she remembered her boyfriend’s reaction to her Christmas gift. She knew she’d be hard pressed to ever top it.

“Indeed,” Sheldon replied although at this moment there was another napkin he’d extract the DNA from first.

XxX

Knock Knock Knock “Leonard.”

Leonard squinted at his clock.

Knock Knock Knock “Leonard.”

Twelve fifteen. It was definitely a twelve at any rate.

Knock Knock Knock “Leonard.”

“What is it, Sheldon?” The door opened and his roommate entered. “Let me guess, you can’t sleep.” Sheldon was still a moment before turning to go.
“I’m disturbing you.”

“Sheldon, I’m awake now. Tell me what’s going on,” sighed Leonard as he reached for his glasses. Again Sheldon froze, his hand on the door knob, before he faced his friend.

“I’m confused about something.”

“Uh huh,” coaxed Leonard.

“I’m correct to assume that Penny and I have established a formalized relationship?”

“Yes, though I believe ‘seeing each other’ is the colloquial term,” Leonard smirked as he propped up his head with his pillow.

“Then why would she need a man’s name and number on a cocktail napkin?”

The shorter man’s smile vanished. “What are you talking about?”

Sheldon shuffled his weight from one foot to the other, obviously uncomfortable with the topic. “I was at Penny’s and noticed what I took to be refuse under her key bowl. It turned out to be a souvenir from ‘Devon’.”

Leonard’s tongue rubbed the side of his cheek. “It must be old. I mean when has she had the chance to go out and meet anyone?”

“It wasn’t there before, of that I’m sure.” Again Sheldon paused. “Why would she keep it unless she was planning to call?”

“Ok, don’t panic. After all we don’t even know who this guy is. He could be a new coworker—”

“It’s written on a cocktail napkin.”

“Or old friend—”

“Who happened to be carrying a cocktail napkin.”

“Sheldon, what do you want me to say? Penny’s not cheating on you. She wouldn’t do that.”

“I never said she was,” the lanky man said indignantly. “I was just curious as to why she had the number in such a prominent place in her apartment.”

“Ri-ght. What was I thinking?” said Leonard as he rolled his eyes. “Look, she picked you ok? She came back because of you. Hell she left because of you to begin with. There’s nothing to be worried about.” He leaned on an elbow to sit himself up. “If it bothers you, talk to her.”

“I can’t do that,” Sheldon said at once.

“And why not?”

“I don’t want to sound as if I’m—troubled.”

Leonard sighed. “You are troubled by this.”

“You know what I mean,” muttered Sheldon.

“Look, this all boils down to one thing: do you trust Penny?” Leonard said seriously.
Sheldon straightened. “Of course I do.”

Leonard gave a little smile. “Then your insecurities are irrelevant.”

“I just wish I understood why they exist in the first place.”

“You like her. A lot. It’s scary stuff being that open to someone.” Leonard threw back the covers and slid his legs to a sitting position. “Any time you feel yourself panic just remember you trust her. Make it a mantra if you have to.”

Sheldon nodded. “I should get to bed. Goodnight Leonard.”

“’Night Sheldon.” Leonard ran a hand through his hair. “Glad one of us can sleep,” he muttered as he got up to use the washroom.

xTBBTx

Penny had a frown on her face as she paused her ‘Sex and the City’ dvd and looked at the VCR clock. Ten twelve.

“Where the frak is he?” she muttered to herself. She resumed the dvd although her mind was elsewhere. After stewing for an additional five minutes she again paused the dvd and got up. It had been over an hour since she’d gotten home. They were supposed to assemble their ComicCon costumes tonight. So where the hell was Sheldon?

She crossed the hall and tried the handle but the door to 4A was locked.

“Huh.” Penny knocked but no one came to the door. Her jaw jutted to the side as she thought about where Leonard and Sheldon could be. The gang had been at the Cheesecake Factory as per usual and her boyfriend didn’t say anything about going out afterwards.

Back in her apartment she grabbed her phone.

‘Where R U?’ she texted Sheldon.

Five minutes later she got an answer but not what she’d expected:

'I’m preoccupied so will talk with you tomorrow. Goodnight Penny.'

Penny dropped the phone on the pillow next to her and took up the remote. He hadn’t told her where he was. Not that he had to. It was just weird for him to cut a conversation short. She began chewing on her lip. He practically dismissed her. After she rushed home to work on their frakken costumes so he could cross it from his list of things to do. That did not sit well with her. At all.

It was a little after eleven when she heard the sound of keys jangling in the hallway. Scowl on her face she opened the door to find a surprised Leonard turning towards her.

“Hey Leonard. Where’s Sheldon?” she asked. She was aiming for a nonchalant voice but the best she mustered was mildly annoyed.

Leonard was confused. “At home. I assumed he was going to hang out with you tonight.” He quickly opened the door but instead of finding his roommate dead on the floor from a home invasion or heart attack the room was empty; the hall light was on as it always was when one friend had gone to bed while the other was out.

Relieved, he turned back to Penny. “I think he’s asleep.” Penny frowned.
“That’s weird.”

“Why’s that?”

“Because he texted me about an hour ago telling me he was ‘preoccupied’”—here she used finger quotes—“and that we’d talk tomorrow.” She folded her arms across her chest. “Why didn’t he just say he was tired?”

“Maybe he was too tired to say he was—tired,” Leonard said nervously. Immediately Penny’s eyes narrowed on her neighbor.

“What’s going on, Leonard?”

“What? You know how crazy Sheldon thinks sometimes. Once he texted me that he finally got the third ‘Matrix’ film. Pure madness.” He began cleaning his thumbnail with his key.

“Leonard….”

He raised his head. “Penny, if things were reversed and I was dating your roommate how comfortable would you be telling me something she said to you in confidence?”

Penny was stunned. She certainly hadn’t expected that to come out of Leonard’s mouth.

“What’s wrong?” she breathed. Suddenly she felt her skin grow cold. “He isn’t having second thoughts about us, is he?”

“God no,” Leonard said quickly. “Far from it, Penny. He’s feeling a little vulnerable right now. You know he’s only been in one other relationship and I don’t think we can call what happened with Amy exactly ‘typical’.”

“Can’t you at least give me a hint?” she pleaded.

Leonard was sympathetic. “Something happened and he isn’t sure how to interpret it.”

“What did I do?” Penny wracked her brains as she thought over the previous night.

“You didn’t do anything. It’s all him,” Leonard said.

“Crap on a cracker,” she muttered. “I can’t even buy a break.” Penny sighed. “Thanks for the heads up. And Leonard—I know you’d tell me if something was really wrong.”

He flashed a little smile. “There’s only so much loyalty I can give the ‘Roommate Agreement’.”

xTBBTx

The apartment door opened and Penny entered. With a determined stride she made her way to Howard on the couch and held out her hand.

“Give it,” she ordered.

“Yes, my queen,” he replied as he offered both the game controller and his seat. Penny settled in the spot and began playing Halo.

The room was silent save for the clicking of buttons. After a couple of minutes Leonard dared clear his throat to speak.
“You didn’t come over last night,” Penny said to the television screen.

“I was busy,” replied Sheldon who sat in his usual spot.

“You live across the hall not in Burbank.”

“I was at my whiteboard.”

“A long time ago in a galaxy far, far away. Yeah I get it,” said Penny through pursed lips.

Leonard logged off and nudged Raj with his foot. “Maybe we’ll go for a walk.”

Howard had some color on his cheeks as he looked from Penny to Sheldon. “But this is my first fight.” Raj frowned as he slapped his friend on the arm before standing up. “Fine, but I call dibs by the door.”

“We’ll just let you two—we’re just going,” stammered Leonard as he and the others made their way into the hall and closed the door.

“All right, what gives? You were all gung ho on Monday to get our costumes together last night and then you’re a no-show,” said Penny as her Halo persona changed weapons before moving towards the blown out tower where she knew Sheldon would be.

"I was preoccupied," replied Sheldon. He'd spent a good part of the day thinking about what Leonard had said and took the evening to map out why he felt threatened by a mere napkin. His 'worry' was not warranted yet it continued to persist; there was nothing wrong with his logic so this hollowness he felt in his chest had to be emotional in origin. He'd hoped to contact Amy tomorrow for advice but obviously that plan had fallen to the wayside. Instead he'd have to wing it. His avatar crouched behind a burned out wall and aimed his sniper rifle towards the tower. He knew Penny would think to look for him there.

"'Preoccupied’ enough to skip preparations for ComicCon? Hell no." Sheldon frowned but said nothing. ‘I’m asking you a second and final time: what’s wrong?’ She could sense him hesitate. “I swear Sheldon it’s probably not as bad as you think.”

“Who’s Devon?”

‘On the other hand….’ Penny’s jaw cocked to the left at the question but she kept her voice nonchalant. “He’s a guy we met at the bachelorette party.” She started moving her avatar to the left looking for Sheldon.

“I see.” Silence. “I noticed you kept his number.”

Penny paused the game. “Is there something you’re trying to say, Sheldon?”

“Not really. I’m sure there’s a completely logical reason why you kept the number of a man you only met once at a bar.” He resumed the game.

“Actually there isn’t. I totally forgot I had it until Amy brought it up.” Penny fired a few rounds at the tower and kept circling. “I left it out so I’d remember to call and give it to her.”

Sheldon was stunned. “Why would Amy want his number?”

“She has an itching to go out dancing again and wanted to invite him along. He’s a nice guy.”

“So far as you know given your inebriated state at the time you met,” he amended.
“I guess,” shrugged Penny. “When you meet someone you kind of have to go by feel, y’know?”

“As I have little experience with alcohol I’ll have to take your word for it.” Sheldon was getting antsy and began moving his character to the left. A tracer bullet zipped over his head and he turned only to get shot in the chest and shoulder. He glared at his girlfriend.

“I knew that you knew that I knew you’d be at the tower,” she said with a wry smile. “Leonard might have complained I wasn’t well-read but I can definitely read you.” She paused the game and put the controller on the table. “I’m going to count this one as a freebie, Sheldon. Next time you let something drag out like this I’m junior rodeo, got it?”

“Alright,” he said after a moment. Penny nodded and gave him a quick kiss before she stood.

She tried not to be annoyed as she heard a set of feet scurrying away from the door and down the stairs just as she was leaving.

Wolowitz was a dead man.

xTBBTx

Now that they were finished dinner Sheldon moved his whiteboard into a prominent position so the list could be easily read by the room’s occupants.

“Nothing like good, clean, wholesome, regimented fun,” grinned Howard. Sheldon gave him a glare.

“Please refrain from gibber-jabbering. There will be time for questions at the end of the presentation.” The lanky man grabbed a bundle of stapled packets and distributed one to each person. “As you can see I’ve laid out a structured itinerary for our weekend. Penny, you’ll note your package is edited since you won’t arrive at the convention until Friday evening.”

“A whole day of missed fun,” Penny said in mock pout. Leonard flashed her a quick smile.

“Don’t worry, we’ll have more than enough to do on the weekend proper.” He laughed at Penny’s eye roll.

“If we’re all finished,” said an annoyed Sheldon. “Right, page one details our route including designated rest stops so please train your bladder accordingly.” Here he looked at Raj, who blushed. “Further down we have registration details for both the hotel and the convention proper. Once we’re ‘official’ as they say, we can have lunch before familiarizing ourselves with the layout so we can operate on Saturday at maximum efficiency.”

Leonard sighed as he flipped through the itinerary. “Sheldon, we’ve been going for eight years. The layout doesn’t vary that much from year to year.”

“Yes Leonard, but the last thing I want is to miss a prime viewing spot for the Star Trek 2 presentation because of you dismissing that ‘much’.” Sheldon turned back to his whiteboard as Raj whispered in Howard’s ear.

“Maybe while we’re there we can exchange Sheldon for an authentic Vulcan,” Howard interpreted.

“You mean half-Vulcan,” corrected Sheldon.

“Wait, wait, you mean Zachary Quinto’s going to be there?” asked Penny, suddenly interested in the conversation. The chemistry his Spock had with Uhura made the first film that much spicier.

“Don’t forget the Q and A with the Next Generation cast,” reminded Howard.

“Aw man, am I going to miss that?” pouted Penny. Not that she was so much a NG fan as she liked to hear actors talk about their craft. She’d be all over the ‘Inside the Actor’s Studio’ were it not for that short balding guy with the glasses hosting.

Sheldon frowned. “People, you’re jumping all over the place. Time is linear and so is the itinerary. Penny as you can see the Star Trek presentations take place on Saturday. But I’m digressing since we’re still on Friday.”

“‘The Hobbit’ preview is later on in the afternoon,” Howard said, more to annoy Sheldon than to provide information.

Penny turned to Leonard. “You still have that ring?”

“So, Friday?” said a blushing Leonard. The ring was still a sore point among the guys.

Somehow Sheldon was losing control of the situation. “According to her schedule Penny will arrive around seven o’clock. At seven thirty there’s an interesting seminar on replicator technology.”

“Speaking of interesting seminars I want to go to the slasher flick one on Sunday,” said Howard. He noted Penny’s curious look. “It’s called ‘Fornicate and Die: Slasher flicks promote abstinence in young adults’.”

She thought this over and started to laugh. “That’s so true!”

“Penny!” Sheldon chastised.

“Sorry,” she blushed.

Sheldon closed his eyes and swallowed to control himself.

“Count me in,” she whispered to Howard.

“What, in the fornicating or the seminar?” he said with a grin. Penny stuck out her tongue.

“Guys, Sheldon’s about ready to have an aneurysm,” said Leonard as he indicated his roommate. Sheldon’s face was a series of twitches.

“Oh no, Leonard. Let’s let whimsy dictate our trip even though the convention runs on a regimented schedule,” he said hysterically. “While chaos reigns supreme we can buy Babylon 5 souvenirs at the vendors’ promenade and spend our nights praising Ben Affleck through rousing rounds of filking.” He stormed from the room.

“What’s ‘filking’?” asked Penny.

“Science fiction meets folk music,” answered Howard. He hadn’t expected Sheldon to leave like he did. The silence was unexpected—and nice.

“Ah,” she said as she got out of her seat. “Sheldon,” she called while walking down the hall. “Come on Moonpie.” Hearing nothing she knocked at his door. “Sheldon.”

“Go away,” came the response. Penny opened the door to find Sheldon sitting on his bed with a
scowl on his face.

“Come on sweetie. We’ll be good. I promise. Well maybe not for Howard,” she amended. Sheldon folded his arms over his chest and turned away. Penny sighed, “Unless you want me to violate your ‘no one can be in my room’ policy you better talk to me.”

“Penny, ComicCon is only once a year. I look forward to it and want to experience as much as possible. Just going willy-nilly means missed opportunities and I won’t stand for that.”

“Fair enough,” she said seriously. “I’m sorry.” At her tone he looked at his girlfriend. She held out her hand and smiled.

Silently Sheldon rose from the bed and let her lead him into the living room.
The May Pole Convention

Chapter Summary

I hope you enjoy ComicCon. ~Lynn

xTBBTx

Sheldon pulled back the sleeve of his black leather jacket and checked his watch. Penny had texted him from registration that she’d arrived and rather than have the gang retrace their steps it was decided they’d stay put and wait for her to catch up.

“This was such a mistake,” growled Howard as he readjusted his bow tie. “The chicks are all dialed in to the new Doctor Who. No one’s going to recognize me.”

Leonard pulled down on his multicolored scarf so he could talk. For the purposes of authenticity Sheldon had insisted he wear the standard length Tom Baker scarf which stood at fourteen feet. There were so many loops around his neck he felt like a peg in ‘ring toss’.

“You’re married. Besides, you’re forgetting we’re in a convention full of science fiction enthusiasts,” he said. “And you’re with the rest of us. Anyone would know you’re the Second Doctor.”

“Trust me dude, the haircut gives you away,” grinned Raj. Howard pursed his lips.

“And just tell me how you manage to pull off being David Tennant?” he scoffed.

“I’m Indian. It doesn’t matter who I play so I might as well pick the cool one,” smirked the astrophysicist. “Besides, I owned the trench coat and suit so all I had to buy were the tennis shoes.”

“Yeah well not all of us have a girlfriend who picks out our costume for us,” said Howard wistfully. “I’m lucky Bernadette allowed me to put up my robot collection in the spare room.” It had cost him his Halle Berry Catwoman poster but as he was now having sex with a real woman he couldn’t argue about the sacrifice.

“Penny did not ‘pick out’ my apparel; she accompanied me on my shopping expedition,” Sheldon said firmly. “All ‘Doctors’ have a distinct costume. In my case the Eccleston incarnation wore a V-necked shirt and a leather jacket.”

“And don’t forget his compulsory accessories: sonic screwdriver and sexy blonde,” Raj joked.

Sheldon snorted. “I hardly think Rose Tyler constitutes a necessary item, Raj. Apart from the fact she’s a sentient being she is merely a companion. The Doctor might enjoy her company but he doesn’t need….”

He was rendered speechless at the approaching Penny. With a playful smirk on her face she maintained the strut that befit her outfit: ankle high black leather boots and fishnet stockings that covered her legs all the way up to a body suit which scandalously left little to the imagination and a short leather jacket.
“Wow,” sputtered Leonard at last. Howard’s bug-eyes said it all for him while Raj pumpkin grinned and put his two thumbs up.

“Penny, you said you were coming as Rose. Now we don’t match,” pouted Sheldon.

“Sure we do,” Penny purred. “We’re both wearing leather jackets.”

Sheldon pursed his lips. “A tenuous connection at best. The Black Canary was a member of the Justice League not the Doctor Who universe. Consistency Penny.”

Penny raised an eyebrow as she made to look at the floor. “I could always change….”

“Dear God no!” blurted Howard. How he wished he’d packed his Robin Hood-now mentally turned Green Arrow costume.

“A change in your apparel is unnecessary as it would require a trip to the hotel. No, we shall suffer through the mismatch for tonight,” sighed Sheldon. Penny gave a slight pout. “Now if we hurry we can catch the symposium on the influence of replicator technology on space travel, commerce and art.”

“Also known in the twenty third century as the Wolowitz Human Waste Recycling System,” Leonard smirked. He noted the inordinate amount of stares at their group from the surrounding male population. “Maybe we should get going.”

As they made their way through the crowd Sheldon observed the attention Penny was garnering.

“What did I tell you? Your superhero costume surrounded by four Doctors makes you stand out like a sore thumb,” he tutted.

“It makes something stand out all right,” Howard murmured to Raj.

“Coincidently also the size of a sore thumb,” Raj whispered back with a smirk.

Howard gave Raj a withering look.

XxX

“Oh wow Sheldon look at the view,” gushed Penny as she put her overnight bag on the bed and went to the window. As it overlooked the ocean the early breeze would be spectacular; after going over the itinerary she knew that morning would arrive much earlier than it usually did at home.

“I’m glad it meets with your satisfaction,” said Sheldon as he picked up her bag and placed it on the lounge chair before smoothening out the bedcover. “I took the liberty of changing your sheets earlier in the day.”

“You mean you actually bought queen size sheets?” she asked incredulously. Penny had no idea why his penchant for cleanliness kept surprising her.

“Only one set. I had a previous one from the other year which I’m using on my own,” he explained. “I thought you’d also sleep better knowing your sheets were properly laundered.”

“Aw, thanks sweetie.” She took off her jacket and dropped it on top of her bag before crossing over to her boyfriend.

“You’re quite welcome.” He waited for the inevitable and Penny didn’t disappoint as she closed in and gave him a kiss. “Goodnight Penny,” Sheldon said with a twitchy smile before turning towards
the door.

“Uh uh,” Penny growled as she grabbed a hold of his arm. “You still owe me from Wednesday.”

“I suppose a hearty handshake wouldn’t suffice?” Penny stuck out her tongue. “Eloquently rebuffed.”

“Me Jane. You Tarzan,” she agreed as she snuggled close to him.

“Actually in this instance I’d be Lord Greystoffe since ‘Tarzan’ is the name given to him in the jungle and”—here Penny pulled him in for a kiss. The rule of thumb was the sky’s the limit with lips—one tongue found the other and it was game over. Penny took this as a challenge and found creative ways of sucking and nipping on his lips. “Ungawa,” gasped Sheldon as they parted for a breather.

“Ungawa,” she laughed. Penny knew in her heart of hearts she’d get flat out rejected but went with the flow regardless. “Jane knows a tree she’d like to climb.”

Sheldon took a moment to answer but what a moment it was as Penny saw his eyes widen and cheeks flush. “Maypole.” A tic toyed with the side of his mouth and he lowered his head as he looked away.

“Maple? Umm not what I was going for, Moonpie.”

“Not maple. Maypole: a long wooden pole stemming from Germanic paganism with the shaft representing either Yggdrasil the Norse world-tree or else a phallic symbol of fertility. In this case I’m obviously referencing the second meaning.”

“I see. So ya wanna tap the ol’ tree for some May-pole syrup?” Penny said as she wiggled her eyebrows.

Sheldon made a face at the pun. “Another sweetened topping that will never carry the right connotation again,” he sighed as he recalled the whipped cream conversation.

“You know what I think?” she purred as her hand began its slide down his chest and over his stomach.

“What?” he said hoarsely.

“I think someone’s stalling.” Her fingers stopped at his belt.

“I’m not stalling because that would imply that coitus is inevitable which it’s not. At least not in this instance because as Gallus gallus domesticus rightly puts it: bok bok bokaw.”

“Chicken or not you’re going to have to get over this at some point.” Penny took in his pleading stare and sighed. “So what’s the problem, doing it or doing it now?”

“Both. I need time to prepare,” he began.

“But then you over-think things and it gets complicated. Why not let things go with the flow?”

“Because liquids flow towards the lowest point.” He swallowed and glanced briefly at Penny. “Besides, I don’t want to be swept away.”

She smiled as she clasped his hand. “Sheldon that’s all a part of the magic. Good sex is called mind-blowing for a reason.” She smirked as she read the unconvinced look on his face. “Ok, how
about this: remember when I was dating Leonard and he needed to give twelve hours’ advanced notice if I was coming over to have sex? Well here’s my twenty-four hour notice that Sheldon Cooper is going to be spending tomorrow night in Penny’s room. Got it?”

Sheldon nodded. He couldn’t argue with protocol.

xTBBTx

Penny rolled her eyes as Sheldon extolled the virtues of the Mark II phaser over its predecessor.

“But they’re both fake,” she replied. Sheldon pursed his lips.

“That’s not the point, Penny. There have been many technological gadgets used on the program that have translated into real-world applications. Your cell phone is one of them. If Leonard ever works up the courage to have his eyes treated the laser is another.”

“Wait you forgot one.” She held up her hand in a Vulcan gesture to be greeted by several science fictiony dressed guys. “They also developed a nifty way to detect geeks at twenty feet.”

“The Vulcan salute is a blessing to ‘Live long and prosper’,” scowled Sheldon. “Your sentiment is not in concordance to the message.”

Penny placed a hand on the back of her boyfriend’s arm as they strolled to the next table. “I’m not saying it doesn’t have a valid New Age gist”—at this Sheldon’s eyes widened in shock as his mouth dropped.

“‘New Age gist’? I—‘New Age gist’? The greeting is based off the Middle Eastern expression Shalom Aleichem meaning ‘peace be among you’. As for the gesture itself, Leonard Nimoy adapted the priestly blessing performed by the Jewish Kohanim where both hands lined up thumb to thumb in this same gesture.”

“Come on Sheldon, it was the sixties. Remember that episode we watched where those hippie singers took over the ship? ‘Love and peace, man’,” she said in a druggy voice. “Notice how Spock was the one who really got it on with them?”

“As science officer it was his duty to engage with other species and cultures,” Sheldon said defensively.

“What? You mean Mr. Logic found a use for the ‘softer sciences’?” grinned Penny. “Gee, maybe you ought to take a page out of Spock’s book.”

“Again I stress the word ‘duty’. As a Starfleet officer he was ordered to do a lot of things he would have otherwise considered trivial.”

“Huh. Well don’t think I’ll forget that any day soon. I hear even one ‘As your boyfriend it’s my duty to’ nonsense and your ass is grass.”

“Rats,” he said half-seriously. He really had to learn to keep his mouth shut.

“Oh my God I love the slogan,” laughed Penny as she pointed to a Starfleet Academy t-shirt. “‘We’re looking for a few good men—and a lot of expendable ones’. You should get it.”

Sheldon raised an eyebrow. “When we meet Spock he’s already an officer in both the original and new versions of the franchise.”
“Yeah but as my boyfriend you’re going to do a lot of things you ‘consider trivial’.” She made an exaggerated blink. “Buy the shirt and you can change from ‘Moonpie’ to ‘cadet’.”

“Oh yes, so much better,” Sheldon scoffed as he rolled his eyes. “A ‘cadet’ is a trainee and I refuse to debase myself under such a label.” A twitchy smile came to his face as he spotted another shirt. “I’d much prefer a university and as we know, I am a ‘Doctor’,” he said with a drape of the hand to highlight his Eccleston outfit. “I’ll take that one in an extra large,” he told the vendor.

“Gallifrey University,” Penny read on the shirt. “All things are learned in time.’ Hey, is that the TARDIS on the logo?”

“Indeed. Gallifrey is the Doctor’s home world which was destroyed in the Time War,” said Sheldon as he paid the vendor and took his package.

“Eh, all I know is that the guy in the glasses and sneakers was kinda cute,” Penny shrugged. Sheldon sighed as they continued walking.

“Is there anything in particular you’d like to look at?” he asked as they passed a table of ‘Babylon 5’ memorabilia.

“It’s not really my kind of thing,” Penny replied. “Think of me taking you to a shoe sale.” At this Sheldon stopped in his tracks.

“Nothing can compare to that kind of anguish,” he said drolly. “There wouldn’t be one item of interest for me whereas for you there can be a thing or two.” Penny looked questioningly at him until he pointed out the next stall. Her eyes lit up.

“Tribbles!” she cried gleefully as she dragged her boyfriend to the table. “Oh my God Sheldon listen to them purr.” She picked up a chocolate brown one. “And it vibrates too!”

“Are you satisfied with your selection?” Sheldon asked as he took out his wallet. In response Penny nuzzled the Tribble against her cheek.

“Thank you Moonpie,” she said. “Hey, that’s what I’ll call it.” Penny held up the Tribble to her face. “Hello Moonpie,” she cooed.

Sheldon closed his eyes for a moment and sighed. “Lovely.”

XxX

“Someone’s not a happy camper,” LeVar Burton muttered to his companion as they sat at the autograph table.

“What?” asked Brent Spiner as he glanced at the crowd. One face stood out like a sore thumb with its familiar scowl. “Here we go again,” he sighed. LeVar shrugged his shoulders in confusion. “You remember that guy I told you about who freaked out at Wheaton’s party?”

LeVar looked at the lanky man in the black leather jacket and a smile appeared on his face. “You mean I get to meet the infamous Sheldon Cooper?” He paused as a thought came to him. Wasn’t this the same Cooper who invited him to a get-together complete with raffle only to have the event turn into some kind of whacked out karaoke session with a man in a bath towel and another guy singing like Elmer Fudd? Along side the gossip he spread that Jonathan Frakes grew his beard to hide his double chin, this encounter would go secretly to LaVar’s grave.

“Don’t worry he’s not dangerous. Wheaton gets a kick out of him because he’s so easy to rile.
Apparently he’s some kind of genius physicist,” said Brent.

LeVar gave out a low whistle. “The science geeks always amaze me. Here they are transforming how we see the world by day and arguing Ferengi rules of acquisition by night.”

“I’ve replaced Wil at number five on his ‘mortal enemies list’,,” grinned Brent. LeVar laughed.

‘Mortal enemies list’? What did you do, give away the secret location of the Bat Cave?”

“Even worse. I opened a Wesley Crusher action figure Wil was giving him.”

“You know better than that,” LeVar said as he smacked his friend on the arm. “These fanboys would kill their mothers before they’d sacrifice a collectable.” A convention employee opened the gate to begin the autograph session. “Looks like we’re starting. Good luck.”

Almost immediately a short guy wearing a scarf that was much too long for him was veritably shoved aside as Sheldon came to stand in front of the two actors.

“We meet again, Brent Spiner,” he growled as his eyes looked daggers.

“That we do, Sheldon,” Brent replied amiably. “Look I wanted to apologize to you for opening your doll. I—”

‘Doll’?” Sheldon sputtered. “That ‘doll’ as you call it was a signed limited edition Wesley Crusher action figure in mint condition given to me by my friend Wil Wheaton.”

“Sheldon, you’re going to get us kicked out,” muttered the scarf guy.

“Oh, don’t worry Leonard. I won’t do anything to jeopardize our convention status. I just wanted to let Spiner know I haven’t forgotten about him,” Sheldon spat.

“How could I ever forget about you?” Brent replied with a grin.

“Are you guys getting an autograph or what?” asked the employee with a concerned look on his face.

“Did Bat-Man ask the Joker for an autograph? Did Spider-Man and the Green Goblin stop their epic battle to exchange emails?” seethed Sheldon.

“Don’t worry. They’re friends of Wheaton just coming to say ‘hello’,” soothed Brent.

“Ok, we’ve got to keep the line moving,” replied the employee.

“Come on Sheldon,” said Leonard and dragged his friend over to LeVar to collect their autographed picture.

‘With my last breath I spit at thee,’” Sheldon said icily before turning to LeVar. “Through your portrayal of ‘Geordie LaForge’ you managed to make the field of engineering seem interesting and relevant—something which definitely requires a good amount of acting skill to pull off.”

“Eyah,” said LeVar with a tentative smile as he handed over his picture.

“Why Hel-Lo there,” Brent said as he raised his eyebrows at the beautiful figure standing in front of ‘Davy Jones’ and an Indian guy in a brown trench coat. “And what’s your name?”

“Penny, aka ‘The Black Canary’,” smiled the blonde.
“With the leather jacket I’d hoped you were attempting a Klingon look,” he said smoothly.

“Actually I’m learning Klingon,” she admitted sheepishly.

“Well I’d hire you as an interpreter,” smiled Brent.

Beyond the gate Sheldon was scowling. “What could Penny be saying to him?”

Leonard tried his best to hide his smile. “I don’t know about that but from the blush he put on her face I’d be more curious about what Brent said to her.”

“Spiner,” Sheldon growled with narrowed eyes.

XxX

Penny stood at the door. “Is it ok if I come in?”

“Of course. It’s a hotel room not my bedroom. No one’s allowed in there,” Sheldon reminded her.

“So sayeth the Crypt Keeper,” smirked Penny as she watched him gather his pajamas, housecoat and slippers. At once it dawned on her. “Hey, you’re not ready to go. You’re always ready to go.”

“I wasn’t sure of the protocol. Do I get ready for bed here and join you in your room or do I pack my necessary nighttime paraphernalia and change there? Your presence here suggests the latter.”

“What do you want to do?”

’Abort the whole encounter.’ “It would be more practical for me to ready myself here,” he said at last.

“Fair enough,” Penny said. “I’ll go get ready. See you in a bit.” As she turned to leave she almost ran into Leonard. She smiled at him and he flashed a knowing one in return. If there was anything Leonard knew about Penny it was that smile and all it promised of a night to remember.

“I take it I’ll have the room to myself tonight?” he said amiably. Sheldon took his pajamas and went to the washroom to change.

“Unless something disastrous occurs, yes.” The door closed.

Leonard sighed as he waited for his roommate to ready himself. There was literally no talking to Sheldon Cooper while he was in the washroom. ‘Might as well make myself useful.’ Leonard quietly stepped from the room to pick up an important piece of equipment.

Now in his pajamas Sheldon flossed his teeth. He cleaned one tooth then inched the line along so each tooth rubbed a fresh spot of floss. It might take four strands to get the job done but as he was thirty with not a single cavity to his name he wasn’t about to buck the system.

As he brushed his teeth he stared at himself in the mirror: white t-shirt under red plaid pajamas and housecoat. Normally it didn’t matter to him what he wore so long as the pajama suit corresponded with the correct day of the week. Tonight was different. On the one hand he was definitely a contrast from Penny’s previous lovers as he doubted they slept in anything more than boxers or briefs. After five years of seeing each other she was more than aware of Sheldon’s nighttime apparel so what he wore wouldn’t be a surprise. At the same time there was a part of Sheldon who wished he had something else in which to change. Something that wasn’t bulky and layered. Something that wasn’t his Saturday pajamas. He sighed. After tonight he’d need a new pair.
A frown crossed his face as he gargled. What was even more annoying was that he couldn’t have a designated pair of ‘coitus pajamas’ since the act apparently had a spontaneous aspect he didn’t anticipate. Granted ‘date night’ and the potential for having coitus was anchored on Thursdays unless Penny was working when it was switched to Saturdays. It was the unanticipated moments like now that were problematic. Again, he knew he wasn’t the most adept at reading emotions but in this instance he knew that refusing to comply with Penny’s official request for coitus would have consequences. After all, if she didn’t want coitus she wouldn’t have brought up the subject.

Sheldon did his best to ignore the rising feeling of panic. He hadn’t had his evening shower. Penny also hadn’t showered and to compound the issue she’d already slept in her bed thus leaving her skin follicles everywhere. ‘What was I thinking agreeing to this?’

He could kick himself for becoming involved in the sexualized conversation but he’d lost himself in a moment of whimsy. That was part of the problem: Penny was his kryptonite who—No, that wasn’t right. Penny was more a tantalizing adversary like Catwoman. Countless times Selina Kyle sought to lure Bat-Man with her heightened sexuality as she sashayed around in that skintight bodysuit made of latex or pvc or spandex or leather or— Good Lord haven’t writers heard of continuity? He spit out the mouthwash and rinsed his mouth.

Leonard was waiting for him as he exited the washroom.

“Nervous?” asked the shorter man with a smile.

“Resigned,” replied Sheldon.

“There’s nothing to be worried about,” soothed Leonard. “It’s just Penny.”

Sheldon pursed his lips. “I’m not really comfortable when it’s just myself.”

“Eyah,” said Leonard as he made a face. “So are you prepared?”

“I think so. I’ve completed my nighttime regiment and have the room key should I need a place to stay.”

Leonard smirked. “You forgot something.” He handed his roommate a foiled package. When Sheldon unfolded it he realized it was actually three packets joined together. He also found himself blushing profusely.

“Ah.”

“If you, um, don’t know how to put it—”

“Good Lord Leonard I’m not ignorant,” scowled Sheldon.


Sheldon made to go but hesitated as if a thought struck him.

“That book you gave me last year. It’s accurate?”

Leonard nodded. “We made sure of it.”

“‘We’?”

“Uh, Penny and I.” Sheldon rolled his eyes as he made for the door. “We thought it’d be for you and Amy.”
“Here’s hoping Penny didn’t pay much attention to ‘chapter nine’,” the tall man grumbled.

As he walked down the hall Sheldon realized that recalling the book was not the best thing to do. The warmth he felt in his cheeks seemed to extend to his groin and he knew if that region of his body started making demands he was in serious trouble.

“I am the master of my own body,” he murmured to himself outside of Penny’s door. “My mind shall prevail.” He raised his hand to knock but found himself unable to do so. At this moment he’d even consider filking with Howard and Raj if it got him out of this situation. "She followed protocol." He had his twenty four hours notice. There was no need to be nervous. Definitely shouldn’t feel scared. Panic? Who said anything about panic?

Knock Knock Knock “Penny.”
Knock Knock Knock “Penny.”
Knock Knock Knock “Penny.”

There was a pause until he heard the lock turn.

“It’s open Sheldon.”

He took a deep breath before entering, averting his eyes immediately after catching his token glimpse of the lower half of Penny’s buttocks as she walked towards the bed in a light blue teddy. His hands balled into fists and he was immediately horrorstruck as he heard the crinkle of foil. Quickly he stuck his right hand in his pocket in order to hide the condoms.

Penny sat down on the bed and waited for her boyfriend. When Sheldon didn’t move she patted the bed next to her.

“You don’t need that,” she indicated his housecoat with her eyes. He paused for a moment before disrobing and folded and placed it on the lounge chair.

His palms felt moist and he found himself drying them on his pant legs as he sat next to Penny.

The room was silent.

“What? No facts on ‘coitus’?” Penny teased to lighten the mood.

“Oddly enough I find myself at a loss to say much of anything,” he replied.

“Well now I know how to shut you up.” She smiled sympathetically as she took his hand, the contact causing him to flinch. “I’m not letting go,” she warned.

Sheldon nodded, his mind already having started the countdown to remove himself from her contact.

Penny placed her other hand on his cheek and brought his lips to hers. Tentative movements gave way to carnal desire, the sounds of smacking lips and little inhalations of breath filled the room. Sheldon released her hand and made to put it on the bed before remembering himself and set it on his thigh.

Penny smiled broadly as they parted while her boyfriend’s mouth was slightly upturned in amusement.

“If I didn’t know better I’d say you liked being kissed,” she said.
“Not completely accurate. As a whole the idea of kissing still repulses me. It’s kissing you that’s intriguing,” he amended.

Penny thought this over before nodding. “Acceptable,” she decided. “I can dig being the exception to your rule.” At this Sheldon gave a gaspy laugh.

“You’re the exception to so many rules it’s a wonder I have them.”

“You don’t have to y’know,” she said seriously. “The world won’t bite if you relax a little.”

“Perhaps,” he said. “But then again civilization as a whole could collapse due to the resulting anarchy.”

“Whackadoodle,” Penny smirked as she gave him another kiss. “So are you ready?”

“It depends. Is this where I’m supposed to beat my chest and give a ‘hell ya’ or does honesty play some part?” Penny rolled her eyes. He took a breath. “No, I’m not ready. In fact I’m far from ready. While I—enjoy—kissing you, the idea of pressing our naked bodies against each other I”—here he couldn’t quite repress the shudder. “Again it’s not you,” he said apologetically.

Penny pursed her lips. “You can’t hide behind your germ phobia forever, Sheldon.”

“I know,” he said softly. “It may not seem like it but I’m trying. I can hold your hand for six minutes and kiss you without needing to wash myself immediately with soap and water.” His blue eyes dropped to his lap. “I’m—sorry if it isn’t enough for you.”

Sighing, Penny took his hand and kissed it. “Ok, sex is off the table—for now. But I did book you for the night and by crikey we’re a-doin’ it. Now get into bed.”

Without a second word he made his way under the covers; he knew now wasn’t the time to request a moment to wash himself. Penny turned off the light and crossed to the other side of the bed. As her weight came down on the mattress Sheldon realized the last time he slept with someone was just over two years ago when he was piled among the guys in the Arctic. Granted they were naked but that was a matter of survival. He’d almost used up half his alcohol wipe supply right then and there in the morning cleansing himself.

Almost immediately he felt the warmth of Penny’s body against his. He held his breath as her arm crossed his chest.

“Comfy?” she asked.

In response Sheldon kissed his girlfriend on the head. While Mary Cooper never advocated lying outright she did say an omission or two wouldn’t hurt once in a while.

“Night Moonpie,” Penny said as she closed her eyes and gave a last snuggle.

“Goodnight Penny.”

Sheldon stared at the ceiling as he gently raised his free arm to wipe his lips with his sleeve. Barring a bathroom break he only had seven hours and thirty eight minutes until it was time to get up.

Relativity could be quite a bitch sometimes.

XxX
“In the time of Star Wars I was a Trekkie
Green in my veins so I’m out to cut the logic
With brow ridges, spray paint the Tribbles
Dog like Ferengi with the beef ribbed ears
Follow the dots, the Dax pleasure hole

“Yo cut it,
Dif-tor heh smusma
I’m a Trekker baby, so why don’t you kill me
Dif-tor heh smusma
I’m a Trekker baby, so why don’t you kill me….”

xTBBTx

He still had forty five minutes until it was time to get up but Sheldon had reached his limit. Indeed it had taken a Herculean effort to return to bed once he’d extracted himself for a washroom break in the night. What should have taken a few minutes turned into a half hour as he washed and rewashed his face and hands.

Slowly he lifted Penny’s arm off his chest as he slid out of bed.

“Where y’goin’,” she mumbled.

“Go back to sleep. It’s only six fifteen,” he said softly. Penny didn’t need any further encouragement.

Quickly, Sheldon put on his robe and slippers and departed. His feet couldn’t move him fast enough to his room. He bee-lined straight for the dresser and took out fresh clothing before disappearing into the washroom.

“Sheldon?” asked a groggy Leonard as he heard the door close. A moment later the shower was on. He gave a wide smirk as he stretched. “By Jove I think he got it.”

XxX

Howard and Penny were still chuckling as they joined the others in Leonard and Sheldon’s room.

“Your seminar was informative I trust?” asked Sheldon as his girlfriend met him with a kiss.

“Extremely,” she replied. “I learned that in a slasher flick I’d die half way through.”

“Normally her forwardness would have her offed second or third but her hotness factor means she has at least two semi-naked moments before the all-out sex scene murder,” grinned Howard.

“What about you?” Leonard inquired. Howard shrugged his shoulders as he looked to the ground.

“Before Penny,” he muttered.

“Howard would die after watching me dance topless around the camp fire. He’d somehow think he was about to ‘get it’ from me when he ‘gets it’ from Jason if you know what I mean,” Penny explained.
“Raj I’m sorry to say you’d be the first to go,” said Howard. At this the astrophysicist dropped his jaw in shock. “Nothing personal. It’s just that with your mutism you’d be the easiest to kill since you wouldn’t scream. Then the killer would pretend to be you as we all looked for you.” Raj whispered rather animatedly in his ear. “Yes I know Jason and Michael are guys. They’d just kill you where there were women in the vicinity so you wouldn’t call for help. They might be maggot-infested animated corpses but they aren’t stupid.”

“What about me?” asked Leonard with a smirk.

“Definitely near the end. You’re smart, resourceful and you slept with me—just the kind of guy who deserves decapitation,” Penny answered with a wink.

Leonard stuck out his tongue in response. “So where does that leave Sheldon?”

“Who else would see a weekend of unbridled debauchery as a brilliant time to do his physics homework?” Howard grinned. “Double wham the virginity clause and Sheldon comes out the sole survivor.” A pause. “That is if you still are one,” he said to the tall physicist. Leonard had stopped by the room last night to get some condoms from Raj. It wasn’t Sheldon’s glare as much as the accompanying blush that caused the engineer to laugh. “You dog.”

“Anyways, let’s check out of here and finish up the convention shall we?” Penny said overenthusiastically as her hand found her boyfriend’s and gave a supportive squeeze before she ushered Raj and Howard out the door.

Leonard grabbed his overnight bag and tossed it on the bed. “What about Amy? When would she die?”

“Amy would have read about the previous slayings and concurred it was too dangerous to attend,” said Sheldon as he packed his toiletries.

“And you’re saying you wouldn’t?” scoffed Leonard. “You don’t like bugs, you don’t swim and you don’t drink. Just exactly what reason would you have for going?”

“Someone has to make sure Penny fornicates so she’ll die half way through the film,” Sheldon said evenly before wiping his lips on his sleeve. Leonard stopped packing to gawk at his roommate.

“Bazinga,” smirked Sheldon.

xTBBTx


‘With my last breath I spit at thee,’: line from Moby Dick quoted by Khan in Star Trek 2.

Raj’s song: my poor parody of Beck’s ‘Loser’

Dif-tor heh smusma: Vulcan for ‘Live Long and Prosper’.
The Hitman Allotment

xTBBTx

“So Amy, tell us about yourself,” asked Dr. Koothrappali with a smile. He couldn’t believe he was actually talking to a girl in his son’s apartment. A real live girl. More importantly, one who referred to herself as Rajesh’s girlfriend.

“I’m a neurobiologist. My current area of research revolves around memory sequencing. Previously I worked on addiction in primates,” Amy replied evenly, her hands lightly clasping her knees.

“So you met Rajesh at the university?” said Mrs. Koothrappali in a tone that reeked of suspicion.

“Through friends actually. I’m acquainted with Bernadette and attended Rajesh’s celebration for his magazine article.” At this she turned to the astrophysicist and gave him a quick smile. Rajesh grinned like a fool and snuggled his hip against his ‘girlfriend’.

“So what was it about our son that attracted you?” Rajesh’s mother inquired as she did her best to read the neurobiologist’s features. As far as she knew Amy had spoken truthfully although with her deadpan delivery who could tell if she’d been lying?

“It took a little while for the attachment to form as he is quite shy. Once we established regular communication our conversations were both insightful and invigorating. We’d texted each other over the summer before meeting again.”

Mrs. Koothrappali frowned. “That’s nearly a year ago. Rajesh made no mention of meeting a girl.”

“Our relationship at that point was purely platonic,” explained Amy. “Indeed our initial dinner gathering was attended by his friend—now my Bestie—Penny. The evening passed quickly as we got to know each other and tabulated the number of sexual partners Penny had acquired over the years.” Raj kept the smile on his face but his eyes were curious as he turned to Amy.

“As the months went by we spent more time together. Our friends had noticed the attachment though Rajesh was ignorant of the matter. I, on the other hand, observed the difference in your son in terms of his actions. I can honestly say I never had as much fun; his humor is sharp as is his intellect.”

“So when did you decide to start dating?” asked Dr. Koothrappali with eyes sparkling. So far he hadn’t heard his wife ‘tut’ in disbelief so things were on the up and up.

Amy flashed a smile. “It depends. According to our friends we’d been dating for the last ten months based on our behavior. Officially it’s been three weeks. Your ultimatum got Rajesh thinking about his feelings for me and he suggested at the movies that we alter our paradigm to dating status. I, of course, agreed.” She took Raj’s hand. “I’m in your debt as I doubt he would have overcome his shyness at this point.”

“You’re not worried he’s using you because he doesn’t want to come home?” Mrs. Koothrappali asked with a grim smile.

“Above all else Rajesh and I are friends. He respects me and I know he’d never abuse our relationship. Faced with violating our commitment I’m sure he’d rather terminate and face your and my judgment. He is above all honorable and a gentleman.” Amy smiled at Raj. “Even if he is a little thick.”
“Any more questions?” Dr. Koothrappali tentatively asked his wife. Raj squeezed Amy’s hand.

A smile crossed the older woman’s face. “I find myself satisfied—for now.” Raj’s father breathed a sigh of relief. “Amy, my son can be obnoxious but really he’s thoughtful and kind.”

“Noted,” Amy replied.

“Well we’ll let the two of you continue with your evening.” Dr. Koothrappali was beaming.

“It was nice meeting you both,” Amy said demurely. The Koothrappali’s said their goodnights and logged off.

Raj took a swig of the beer that had been sitting off-screen. As part of the experiment Amy wanted him to try speaking in her presence without drinking. He wasn’t successful although Amy did hear a mumbled attempt at ‘goodbye’ to his parents.

“That went well,” Amy said with a satisfied smirk. She turned to Raj and noted the sad look on his face. “What is it?”

“That was Sheldon you were talking about,” he said quietly. “I’m sorry.”

“I should go,” Amy said as she rose. Raj stood with her.

“I had offered to take you to dinner,” he reminded her. She shook her head.

“Perhaps next time, Rajesh.”

“I won’t take no for an answer. You helped me out this evening and I won’t have you leaving upset because of it.”

After a moment Amy flashed a little smile. “I see your mother was correct.”

Raj grinned. “I’m obnoxious all right.”

“I was going to say thoughtful and kind but I’ll defer to your judgment.” At this Raj blushed.

“After you,” he said and turned off the lights before following Amy into the hall.

xTBBTx

Leonard came out of his bedroom to find the kitchen counter taken over with receipts. Sheldon sat at his computer with a stack in front of him.

“Number crunching day, huh?” Leonard asked as he picked up the phone to call in the order for Thai food.

“Unbelievable,” his roommate tutted. “So far Penny spent more on iced coffees than groceries. No wonder she’s unfocused and unusually perky.” He quickly read through the rest of the receipts before entering the information into the database.

“Come to think about it when we dated I can’t say we cooked much,” Leonard said. “Mostly it was snack food and wine at night and breakfast in the morning after uh, yeah.” He cleared his throat and prayed the restaurant would answer the phone. “Hello, I’d like to place an order for pickup.”

Sheldon had noticed a couple of purchases from the liquor store. While she didn’t drink at the rate his father had he still didn’t like the need for the biweekly trips. Perhaps with school and other
means of self-improvement Penny will find less of a need to imbibe.

Leonard checked his watch as he hung up. “Almost fooled them since our order was slightly
different because of Leslie’s food. It’s your damn ‘chicken diced not shredded’ and ‘extra peanuts’
that gets us every time.”

“I should think calling at roughly the same time on the same day would also contribute to revealing
our identity although I’m puzzled why this should be of concern.” Sheldon got up and put the
entered receipts in the bag for later shredding. Not all of the receipts had credit card numbers on
them but he felt more secure limiting who knew his shopping habits and in this case extended
Penny the courtesy. He took a fresh pile of receipts and sat back at the computer.

“True. I’d just like to get through one telephone conversation on friendly terms.” Leonard grabbed
a bottled water from the refrigerator. He stopped to look at the receipts on the counter as he drank.
Despite what Sheldon might think Penny really did try this month as there were no trips to the shoe
store or manicurist. How long she could hold out before she cracked was another matter entirely.
“So what are her chances?”

“Dismal without my help.” Sheldon finished entering the receipts and sat back to look at his
handiwork. “How she managed to survive this long without going bankrupt is beyond me.” He
wheeled his chair to the counter for another pile of receipts. He sighed as he flipped through them.
“I suppose I’d be more hopeful if she’d taken the time to file correctly.” He shook his head.
“Perhaps my mother’s tests were wrong—I must be insane to be dating Penny.”

“It’s called ‘opposites attract’,” grinned Leonard. Sheldon scowled as he resumed typing.

“I’m aware of the effect. It still doesn’t ease the sentiment. Penny is contrary to virtually every
aspect of my being: she’s nonsensical, carefree, outgoing—”

“And you love her for it.”

The apartment was silent save for the sounds of Sheldon’s typing. Leonard smirked and took
another sip of water. ‘Game, set, match.’

By the time Leonard was ready to pick up the order Sheldon had finished with the receipts and was
 crunching the numbers into an easy to read spreadsheet. The sounds of jangling keys in the hall
alerted both men to a certain Nebraskan’s presence.

“Hey Penny,” Leonard said as he closed the apartment door. “I’m just off to pick up dinner. Leslie
should be here shortly and they’ll need supervision if she’s left alone with Sheldon.”


“Fourteen twenty seven.”

“It’s your lucky day: I’ve exactly fifteen dollars to my name. Yay Penny,” she said in mock cheer
although she did have an amiable smile. “Speaking of which is Sheldon tallying the damage?”

“Just finishing up now I think,” replied Leonard.

“Yikes. I have great timing as always. Ah well, got to bite the bullet sometime. See you in a bit,”
she grinned before opening her door. She quickly showered and put on some comify capris and a
yellow tank top before donning her flip flops and making her way across the hall.

She opened the door to find her boyfriend working on his laptop. Not wanting to disturb him Penny
made her way to the couch and curled into her spot.

“I take it all of your bills have been accounted?” asked Sheldon after a few minutes.

“Right down to the bag of Cheetos I’ll have to run off this weekend,” Penny replied. “Oh, I owe Leonard fifteen bucks for tonight.”

“Fourteen twenty seven. Yes I have it.” He closed his laptop and spun around in his chair to face her. “You really have to become more exact in accounting for your money.”

“Better to overshoot than miss the mark,” she shrugged. “I’m usually short so it’s a treat every once in a while when I pay Leonard more than I owe.”

“He doesn’t ask you to do that.”

“I want to do that, ok?” she said defensively.

“Well you’ll have to curb your impulsiveness. In two day’s time you’ll be starting my budget and I assure you every last penny has and will be accounted for,” warned Sheldon.

Penny leaned back against the couch and stared at the ceiling. “Including this one,” she sighed. In a moment her view was blocked by her boyfriend as he stood in front of her.

“It’s not going to be as terrible as you think. A little structure will do you good.” A twitchy smile came to his face. “If your wanton abandon is good for me then my attention to detail should definitely benefit you.”

“The loose cannon meets the anally retentive. Sounds like a superhero team if I ever heard one,” Penny smiled. Sheldon made a face.

“I’m glad you’ve managed to retain your humor. At times it’ll take a superhuman strength of will to resist temptation.”

“Better make a big allowance for the emotional emergency cookies,” she replied with a smirk.

He nodded. “Duly noted.”

xTBBTx

“Is he for real?”

“Bestie calm down.”

“I am calm Amy. You should have heard me before I called.”

“I take it by your demeanor Sheldon’s given you your budget?”

“I knew something was up when he handed it to me at the restaurant along with a pack of chocolate chip cookies.”

“Are the cookies helping relieve tension?”

“A little.”

“Obviously he isn’t a sadist. Perhaps what you need is a distraction. I called Devon last night and he’s up for a get-together this Saturday.”
“I don’t know if I can go. I’ve got like twenty dollars in ‘discretionary funds’ per week. Per week. My allowance was twenty dollars when I was a kid.”

“I’ll provide a functional formula for the evening: less drinking and more dancing.”

“I suppose. Let me just see if the budget lord logs mileage too. … Huh. He has it down but only to track the oil change. Never imagined I’d be doing that.”

“Changing your oil on time?”

“Changing my oil, period.”

“I see. I take back whatever negativisms I imparted on your previous vehicle. That it managed to run as long as it had is truly miraculous.”

“Thanks Amy.”

“As to your funding issues I propose the following: since Bernadette and I will be ‘riding shotgun’ we’ll split the gas three ways. Each month we’ll take one Saturday on the town and our other get-togethers can be girls’ nights in.”

“That’s what you think. My alcohol budget’s been cut in half.”

“I imagine you have a grocery allotment. Purchase ‘munchies’ and you’ll be covered.”

“You’re sure about this?”

“Penny, Bernadette and I both have careers that provide monetary security. You’re going back to school this fall ergo your costs for the evening must reflect your financial reality.”

“Thank you.”

“You’re welcome Bestie. Now—”

“Holy crap on a cracker! One iced coffee a week? I have one of those a day. God even if I wanted to I couldn’t cover the extra coffees with my ‘allowance’. Ak!”

“You have a blender at home. All you need is ice and you’re set.”

“I know someone I’d like to put on ice. Wonder how much a hit man costs?”

“More than twenty dollars.”

“Damn. Well, now I’ve got incentive to start saving.”

“That’s the spirit! I’m sure as he lay dying in a bloody pool Sheldon would be proud of your tenacity to stick to his budget.”

“Gotta love him. … Uh, by that Amy I mean uh, you know—”

“Permission to remove foot from mouth—granted.”

“Aye, Captain.”

xTBBTx

Leonard sighed as he stared at a comic cover before putting it back in the bin.
“Something the matter?” asked Howard. “Leslie asserting her height advantage again?”

“Ha ha. No, I was just thinking about Joss Whedon’s attempt at getting a Wonder Woman movie to the big screen. I love how DC wouldn’t give it a chance and Marvel says ‘ok Joss, here’s a two hundred plus million dollar picture—direct The Avengers for us will ya?'”

“Well,” smirked Raj. “It only made a billion dollars in eight days. What would DC do with all of that extra money?”

“Hire proper script writers for one thing,” Sheldon said as he flipped through the comic bins. “I doubt I have the stamina to sit through one more Superman catastrophe or, I shudder at the memory, Green Lantern disaster.”

“Maybe they need a fresh start,” said the astrophysicist. “What about a Flash movie?”

“We can see how fast it’s pulled from theatres; marvel at the speed actors flee from the script; stand in awe at the quickness of DC executives as they distance themselves from yet another dismal project,” grinned Howard.

“What they need is a good launch vehicle. Time to bite the bullet and do a Justice League movie.” Leonard moved to another row of comics and continued browsing.

Howard laughed. “Since they can’t do origin movies like Marvel with Thor, Captain America, Iron Man and Hulk before producing a billion dollar team flick DC should get the disappointment over with in one shot? They’d never put out the money needed to make the characters believable.”

“They’d have to be selective,” mused Sheldon. “Don’t forget in The Avengers the more effective scenes were about character dynamics not battling Loki’s sub-par army.” He shook his head. “I must say I was disappointed Loki would debase himself to lead a campaign against earth with a mere army of aliens. He should have used the Cosmic Cube to his own advantage.”

Raj nodded. “Actually they really downplayed Thor as well. He’s supposed to be nearly as strong as the Hulk and controls the weather better than Storm. In the movie he was effective destroying the army as they came through the portal but then stopped the whirl wind to enter hand to hand combat.”

“Maybe they tried to make it a more balanced team,” reasoned Leonard. “Since Black Widow and Hawkeye have no super powers and even Captain America is dwarfed by Iron Man and Hulk they made Thor more down to earth if you know what I mean.”

“Humph. Sounds more like a cop-out to me,” Sheldon said with pursed lips. “Lord knows I chastise myself every time I dumb down explanations of my work.” He glanced at Howard. “Fortunately you’re blessed with a good memory so I don’t have to repeat myself.”

“Masters degree. MIT,” huffed Howard. “You’re telling me you argue string theory with Penny?”

Leonard looked up at the engineer with a frown. “This better not be going where I think it is,” the curly haired physicist growled.

Howard dropped a comic back in the bin and scowled. “Maybe I’m tired of being labeled as the dumb one. Penny thought fig cookies were named after Isaac Newton and I’m off to the International Space Station to assemble the telescope I helped design.”

“Penny has no interest in what I’m doing per se so I don’t discuss my research,” Sheldon said defensively. Howard snorted.
“And you’re satisfied with that? You and Amy talked all the time about each other’s projects. You’re telling me it doesn’t kill you not being able to share an exciting tidbit with your girlfriend?”

“Of course she’s not an engineer so there’s a chance she’d get it,” snapped Sheldon.

Both men glared at each other before they left the bins to opposite ends of the comic store.

“Avengers Disassemble,” mumbled Raj to Leonard.

Penny took a swig of water from her bottle as Sheldon wiped down the grocery cart handle with an antibacterial cloth. Now satisfied, he steered over to Penny.

“You have your list?” he asked.

“Yeah,” she replied with a sigh as she dug into her pocket. Feeling nothing she switched the bottle to her other hand and tried another pocket. Sheldon rolled his eyes as he pulled out his phone.

“Fortunately I have a master list.” Penny paused as she veritably gawked at her boyfriend.

“You carry a copy of my grocery list?” she sputtered.

“I didn’t want last night’s endeavors amounting to naught. Besides, it allows us to compare lists when we get home to see what items deviated from—”

“Are you kidding me?” Penny folded her arms across her chest and stood there. Yes, she was more than aware she must look like a spoiled child to the other customers but at the moment it was secondary.

Sheldon handed her his phone. “How else are we going to amass a list of ‘staples’ if we can’t compare your list to what you actually purchased?”

Grudgingly she took the phone and they started walking. “You know you’re starting to sound like those creepy controlling boyfriends who monitor every aspect of their girlfriends’ lives.”

“From a monetary sense I am monitoring every aspect of your life. The rest of your decisions are solely yours to make—including how you choose to react to my guidance,” he said evenly. Penny felt a flush cross her cheeks. “I ordered the list by product placement so we won’t have to circle back through the store,” he said as they arrived at the produce department. “Do you have any particular fruit in mind?”

“Four apples and two oranges,” Penny replied as she tucked the phone in her pocket and grabbed two clear bags from the roll. She procured the fruit—noting the pleased expression on Sheldon’s face as she selected Golden Delicious apples—and placed them in the cart.

They went through the rest of the produce aisles picking up what was necessary and amending dinner plans to accommodate what was on sale. As if having made a silent pact, both Sheldon and Penny quickly bypassed the vitamin display. Penny tried her best to convince him of the need but Sheldon refused to shell out money for ‘expensive urine’ when a balanced diet would bestow proper nutrition.

In terms of grains she was dubious but decided to try sixty percent whole wheat bread and Raisin Bran cereal. Her lack of breakfast on most days was another contentious issue, with Sheldon bombarding her with nutrition facts about the body’s caloric needs until she agreed to consume
something other than coffee. Indeed he’d noticed that she ate only if Leonard was eating when she came in for a cup of Joe. Since they were no longer going out there was less of an inclination to coordinate breakfast times to the second so she was left to her own neglectful devices.

“Ok that’s soup, pasta and sauce, garbanzo beans, pickles and coffee. That just leaves cookies, crackers and crap before we tackle the refrigerated stuff,” Penny said as she checked the list. She hated to admit it but Sheldon’s organization was saving her oodles of time in the store.

“Given your selections I’m at a loss as to how you separate ‘cookies’ from ‘crap’,” Sheldon said drolly.

“Unlike potato chips there’s nutritious value in Fudgee-o cookies. For instance,” she said, taking up the package in her hand. “It’s got fifteen percent of my daily iron for two cookies.” Sheldon grabbed another package off the shelf.

“And seventeen percent of your saturated and trans fats not to mention twelve grams of sugar,” he scowled.

“I need something to replace the iced coffees in my diet,” Penny grinned. “You might find out my secret that I’m not naturally upbeat.” She put the cookies back in the cart and reached for her favorite brand of chocolate chip cookies with extra chips. Sheldon noted the price.

“You might want to price compare—”

“These are the emergency cookies. Never mess with the emergency cookies,” Penny warned. Sheldon nodded and they moved on.

“So explain to me why women need to consume fatty carbohydrate snack foods when they gather?” he asked as Penny selected two bags of potato chips.

“I dunno. I guess it’s a time for us to kick back and get into the sin stuff. You know: a little wine, a few chips and rip roaring gossip.”

“I seem to recall Meemaw mentioning something about rodents being particularly rambunctious when the feline is absent. It was said in the context of Mother’s Saturday gatherings at the church.” He paused. “It had puzzled me why they didn’t procure another cat if the mice were so problematic.”

Penny smiled. “Aw, that’s cute.” Sheldon looked at her.

“What is?”

She waited to see if he was joking before reminding herself with whom she was talking. “Never mind, Moonpie.” A thought came to her. “Hang on a minute; when I come in on gaming night I see empty snack bowls on the table.”

“Don’t call me Moonpie and they were filled with popcorn and or low sodium pretzels. Not that I partake that often since I’m satisfied with my Goldfish crackers,” said Sheldon as they arrived at the cracker shelves.

“Let’s see how good these Goldfish are,” said Penny with a crooked smile as she grabbed a bag and began reading the nutrition label. “Huh. And you knock me for my cookies.”

“What are you talking about?” Sheldon said indignantly. “For thirty five crackers they contain five percent saturates, five percent fat and seven percent sodium,” he recited from memory. “Your
“Are you kidding? To get the fifteen percent of iron in my cookies you’d have to eat a hundred and five crackers which means…fifteen percent fat and fifteen percent trans fats and a whopping twenty one percent sodium.” Penny turned away to hide her smile as she could feel the tension rise. “Doesn’t sound too ‘healthy’ to me.”

“Did it ever occur to you that maybe Goldfish crackers aren’t my sole source of daily iron?” he snapped. “My cereal counts towards my iron intake. Whole Grain Total alone has in the common measure eighteen point—”

“How much are in the Honey Puffs?” Penny asked poker faced although her eyes did seem more than unusually sparkly.

Sheldon pursed his lips. “If I didn’t know any better I’d assume someone’s being intentionally antagonistic.”

“Naa, I’m just being a pain in the butt,” she said as she turned to go.

Sheldon rolled his eyes and followed.

xTBBTx

Leonard shook his hand and let the dice fall on the table.

“Seven,” he said and moved his cardboard figure to a ‘Plains’ square before drawing an ‘Adventure’ card. “Ha—a troll. Piece of cake.” He made the sound of a chainsaw and rolled two dice. “Ten plus strength four plus magic gloves, belt and chainsword equals eighteen. You’ll need an eleven plus to beat me.”

Sheldon rolled the dice and got a seven. “Drat. Here I was hoping you’d be killed off so you’d be stripped of that dastardly sword.”

“A chainsaw warrior without his chainsword? Blasphemy!” Leonard cried.

“Making the sound of a chainsaw every time you enter combat? Idiocy!” Howard mimicked.

“You’re just jealous,” Leonard said before popping a pretzel in his mouth.

“Doubt it dude,” scoffed Raj as he grabbed the dice and rolled. He moved the appropriate number of steps and drew two cards. Picking the one he liked he deposited the other in the discard pile. Being able to choose his own fate was just one of many bonuses to being the Prophetess. Having long tresses and a golden girdle were the icing and cherry on top.

“Didn’t feel like meeting the dragon, huh?” said Howard as he saw the discarded card.

“It would fry me to a crisp and take my Maiden follower. No thanks,” replied Raj.

“That’s why you need to be like Sheldon and have undead followers. Of course with his amiable personality that’d be the only type he could attract,” smirked Howard. Sheldon frowned.

“That’s not true. I also have the Tavern Wench who’s alive and well,” he replied tersely.

“I bet she smells like cheesecake,” grinned Raj. Leonard smiled in agreement as Sheldon picked up the dice and rolled.
“No one could ever explain why Sheldon the Ghoul fell for Penny the Tavern Wench. Perhaps she tasted great while being less filling,” Leonard offered. His roommate scowled as he moved his playing piece around the board.

“More likely she never gives him the cold shoulder—even when he’s late for dinner,” mused Raj. Howard smirked at his friend. “Raj, it’s obvious from the amount of gold he carries Sheldon’s a frugal guy. Taking her out to dinner would cost at least an arm and a—”

“I knew I should have picked the Assassin,” growled Sheldon.

“Yeah but then you wouldn’t be justified in wearing your Incredible Hulk hands between rolls,” Leonard reminded him. “Although I’m curious as to why the Ghoul’s green instead of white.”

“Maybe he tasted something funny when he ate a clown,” Raj offered with a shrug. Howard shook his head.

“That’s really bad. Like a nauseous Hannibal Lector bringing up his ex-girlfriends in front of his date bad,” he replied before rolling the dice and moving his playing piece. “Seven, eight, nine—yes! Hello Leonard. Your chainsword if you please.”

“Damn you Thief!” the curly haired man said in mock indignation as he flicked his chainsword card across the table. “Now how am I going to be a Chainsaw Warrior without the chainsaw?”

“I don’t know,” said Howard. “Sheldon?”

“Hulk unsympathetic,” the theoretical physicist said huskily as he held up the Hulk hands and grimaced.

“It’s like Mark Ruffalo himself entered the room,” commented Raj with a smirk. “Although I will say using a virtual-camera-motion-capture process made the Hulk much more believable in The Avengers than the computer-generated mess in his own movies.”

“Hulk was also portrayed in live action by two separate people,” Howard said.

“Bill Bixby and Lou Ferrigno as Banner and Hulk respectively,” added Leonard. “Though it was cool Joss Whedon used Ferrigno to voice the Hulk.”

“Puny god,” agreed Sheldon as he playfully punched Leonard on the arm. Getting the Hulk hands from Raj for agreeing to a second rendezvous with Abby and Martha more than made up for Martha spending the night in Sheldon’s room. It had taken him hours to sanitize his bedroom the next day as he had no idea what she might have touched.

Leonard rubbed his arm while glaring at the Hulk hands. “Down four words from the last movie.”

“‘Leave me alone.’ ‘Hulk smash.’ ‘Betty,’” growled Sheldon.

“See? He said ‘me’ so not everything’s ‘Hulk this’ or ‘Hulk that,’” observed Raj.


Sheldon deepened his voice. “To be or be not, Hulk thinks: suffer or smash puny humans.”

“While leaving a lot to be desired in his portrayal of Hamlet Hulk did at least outperform Keanu Reeves,” smirked Leonard as he picked up the dice and rolled. “Who knew he could find a stage company to perform ‘Hamlet’ in Winnipeg?”
“I don’t blame him for wanting to hide. Bruce Banner had to do that for years although after sitting through the last Matrix movie I’d guess Hulk was hiding in Hollywood as a scriptwriter,” said Howard while watching Leonard move his piece around the board. Sheldon growledwarningly at the engineer.

“Don’t get him angry. You wouldn’t like him when he’s angry,” smirked Raj.

“I don’t like this,” Howard mumbled while moping on the couch.

“So why’d you agree to it?” asked Raj as he reached for the bowl of pretzels.

“Because I didn’t want Bernadette to think I was jealous.”

Leonard sat up in his chair. “From the guy who was ready to ‘get crazy’ with me for inviting his girlfriend to watch an experiment? Level-headedness thy name be not Wolowitz.”

“Don’t forget the time you stole Stephanie from him and he treated you like you were dead,” grinned Raj. “Well until she set up the double date.” He paused. “That reminds me you never said what happened at the end of the date.” Leonard chuckled as Howard blushed.

“It’s not important now,” replied the engineer. He scowled at Leonard who was mouthing ‘I’ll tell you later’ to Raj. “What is important is this ‘Devon’ guy. Suppose he’s some smarmy guy in tight hoochie pants who continuously hits on women whether they’re in relationships or not?” Leonard and Raj looked at each other.

“I think the girls know how to deal with someone like that,” Leonard assured him as Sheldon came down the hall with his basket of laundry.

“Like what?” asked the lanky man.

“We’re just talking about Devon,” explained Raj.

Sheldon rested the laundry basket on the arm of the couch. “Penny assures me he’s ‘a nice guy’ and feels comfortable having him present.”

“But shouldn’t you be uncomfortable because she’s comfortable?” asked Howard.

“Why should I? It’s not like she’s going home with him,” replied Sheldon. Besides, he’d already come to an understanding with Penny regarding Devon: Sheldon had to ‘get a grip’. “While Penny, Bernadette and Amy are capable women I’m somewhat relieved they’ll have at least one man present should something go awry.”

Howard was about to respond but stopped short as the sounds of the aforementioned women filled the hallway. A moment later the door opened and in came Bernadette and Amy.

“Looking good,” Howard gushed as he approached his wife. “The skirt is short but not too short and the top is long although maybe a little tight around—”

“Howard, it’s fine,” warned Bernadette.

“Your anxiety is unwarranted,” soothed Amy. “We’ll be good girls.” She noticed Raj veritably gawking at her. They locked eyes and he smiled as he indicated her attire with his hand before giving her a ‘thumbs up’. She blushed as she unconsciously picked at the hem of her tan shirt.
Penny and Amy had gone shopping on Wednesday and the waitress picked out this number for her: brown slacks with a tan sleeveless top that ran to mid thigh and a light sweater. Adorning her feet were a pair of electric blue flats.

“Ready to go?” asked Penny as she stepped into the apartment. It was like the air got sucked out of the room as all eyes went to her and the clingy short purple dress she wore that made her legs seemingly go on forever.

“Ready for Freddy,” piped Bernadette before giving her husband a kiss.

Penny crossed the floor and stood before her boyfriend; her platform shoes so high they almost stared eye to eye.

“Have a good time,” Sheldon said.

“You betcha,” Penny grinned before she kissed him. “I’ll text you when we’re leaving.” Sheldon nodded.

“It’d be appreciated.” He gathered his basket. “I’ll walk the three of you downstairs.”

“So what’s on the menu tonight, Bestie? I took the liberty of looking up martini recipes and based on your penchant for butterscotch I thought you should try the Butterscotch Truffle martini,” said Amy as they descended the stairs.

“Mmmm…butterscotch,” Penny said in a Homer Simpson tone. “If we’re playing to each other’s weaknesses since you like white chocolate believe me you’re gonna love a ‘Long Kiss Goodnight’.”

“Length is irrelevant as long as it comes from you,” Amy replied evenly. Bernadette made a tutting sound as she playfully smacked the neurobiologist on the arm.

“There’s something to be said for short and sweet,” piped in Bernadette. “Especially when you add a little Mexican hoochie into the mix. Arriba!”

“Hey meister, is that a maraca in your pocket or are you happy to see me?” Penny joked to her boyfriend. Sheldon sighed internally as he rolled his eyes.

“Now would be the proper time to rile Sheldon’s loins since he hasn’t commenced with laundry,” said Amy with a little smirk.

“He might even have time for a warm pre-soak too,” winked Bernadette.

“I’ll do no such thing. As a protein-based fluid semen requires cold water for proper removal,” Sheldon huffed. Bernadette and Penny giggled while Amy grinned. “Good Lord,” he sighed as they stepped onto the landing.

“Night sweetie,” Penny said with a final kiss to her boyfriend before exiting the building.

Once in the laundry room Sheldon set his basket on a washing machine and looked at his watch. He waited one minute and thirty eight seconds until it was exactly eight fifteen before he started putting his laundry into the wash. As he picked up his housecoat he heard a crinkly sound and immediately froze. Even though he was alone in the room he looked around as he untangled the housecoat so he could access the pocket. Sure enough he pulled out the packet of condoms from the ComicCon trip. He set it on top of another machine and continued with his laundry until the machines were set and running. Picking up the condoms Sheldon was about to toss them into the
trash when he stopped himself. After a moment of deliberation he put them in his pants pocket and departed.

Xxx

Sheldon was in bed reading an article about Higgs bosons in the Electronic Journal of Particle Physics when his phone buzzed. He picked it up and read the message:

'Dropping off B.'

A while later he was typing out notes of interest when again the phone buzzed:

'Dropping off A.'

Now that Penny was back in Pasadena Sheldon closed his laptop and set it on his nightstand before turning off the light. He smoothed out the covers with his hands before placing them on his chest. In his mind he traced the streets between Howard and Bernadette’s and Amy’s apartments. He waited, as Penny must have, for Amy to enter her building before driving off. Minutes ticked by until his phone buzzed for a third time. He reached over and looked at the screen.

'Home. Nini mp.'

“Don’t call me Moonpie,” he whispered to the screen before setting the phone on the laptop and drifting off to sleep.

XTBBTx

A/N Avengers Disassemble: In the comic the unifying cry was ‘Avengers Assemble’.

Board game guys are playing: Talisman

Cannibal jokes: gotjokes

Hulk factoids: Internet Movie Data Base

Keanu Reeves: after being panned for Much Ado About Nothing he decided to prove himself capable of Shakespeare thespianism by playing Hamlet in a Winnipeg production.

‘You wouldn’t like him when he’s angry’: line from the Hulk TV show opening credits. Banner tells a reporter: ‘Don’t make me angry. You wouldn’t like me when I’m angry’.
Amy put down the green marker and held up the cardboard sign. “Satisfactory?”

“Indeed,” replied Sheldon while mounting the camera to the tripod. The neurobiologist cleared away the markers from the table before sitting down on the couch to arrange her signs. “I take it last night proved entertaining?” Sheldon asked after giving what he thought was the proper amount of time so to make his subject matter appear a casual topic.

“Yes. Both Bernadette and I approve of Penny’s new vehicle.” A ghost of a smile passed by her lips. “Unless you’re referring to something else?”

Sheldon shook his head. “Your prolonged exposure to Penny is corrupting you, Dr. Fowler.”

“I’m surprised you didn’t ask Penny herself before she went to work.” She cocked her head. “Unless the plan is to ‘pump me’ for information so as to appear disinterested regarding our encounter with Devon should she bring up the topic?”

A twitchy smile came to Sheldon as he adjusted the camera. “Curse your intellect.” He adjusted the focus. “Please hold up a sign…. Excellent.” Next he moved the whiteboard so it sat directly behind the couch. He took the camera’s remote from his pocket and set it on the table before sitting next to Amy. After a moment of silence he turned his head to regard the neurobiologist. “Feel free to enlighten me at your convenience,” he prompted.

“The evening was successful. We arrived at the martini lounge to find Devon and his friends Carl, Jason and Sylvia waiting for us. After a few rounds of alcohol and friendly banter we departed the establishment and went dancing. As always Bestie lit up the dance floor—though I can assure you her involvement with Devon was innocent,” she added quickly. ‘Best not to mention the number of unchaste thoughts she must have generated.’ “All in all it was a pleasant experience.”

Sheldon nodded as he smiled appreciatively before picking up the remote. “Ready?” Amy fixed a smile to her face. Sheldon clicked a button and set the remote aside. He cleared his throat. “Take one. … Hello, I’m Dr. Sheldon Cooper and welcome to episode eleven of Sheldon Cooper Presents Fun with Flags. Over the remaining forty one weeks you and I are going to explore the dynamic world of vexillology.”

“Sounds good to me Dr. C.,” piped in Amy. “Say what’s the salt for?”

Sheldon held up the shaker. “Eleven is the atomic number for sodium.”

“And you’re an old salt on the subject of flags.”

“Exactly. In episode ten we went over the relative uniformity of national flags. As we saw, many flags have three vertical or horizontal divisions each of a different or rotating color.” Amy held up a picture of the French flag. “France’s Tricolore has three vertical divisions or pales of blue, white and red.” Quickly Amy switched to another picture. “Hungary’s flag has three horizontal divisions or fesses of red, white and green. Similarly every country’s flag is a quadrilateral—”

“Every one?” asked Amy overenthusiastically.

Sheldon turned to her with a smirk. “I know you’re excited to learn but you have to let me finish.”
He addressed the camera. “Every country’s flag is a quadrilateral—except for one.” Amy held up a picture. “Nepal’s flag is shaped like two stacked triangles representing the Himalaya Mountains and the two religions of Hinduism and Buddhism.”

“Jeepers. That’s cool.”

“As Mt. Everest, its highest peak, stands at eight thousand eight hundred and forty eight meters above sea level I dare say it’s darn right cold,” Sheldon grinned awkwardly. “Now let’s be off to Europe where two more unusual flags are to be found….”

xTBBTx

“Howard.”

“We’re not going to talk about it Raj,” growled the engineer as they sat down at the lunch table. Sheldon sighed internally and hoped they wouldn’t involve him in what was obviously social chatter.

“Oh, I’m just saying you have to give it a chance to sink in your brain before you give up,” said Raj as he lifted his fork to get at his napkins.

“I’m the only thing that’s sinking,” snapped Howard. Raj sighed and turned to Sheldon.

“Sheldon help me out here. Howard’s had one session of hypnotherapy and has decided it’s junk because he’s still having trouble relaxing in the water. I say he has to give it time.”

“From what I understand the first effect Howard should feel is a sense of relaxation,” replied Sheldon. At this the engineer gave Raj a ‘see I told you’ look. “However your results will depend on the intensity of your session, frequent reinforcement with key words or phrases and a self hypnosis regime,” the lanky man said to Howard.

Howard sighed as he stuck his fork in the mash potatoes. “As long as I can swim in three weeks when I’m back in Houston I’m up to try anything.”

“Excellent,” grinned Raj. As long as Howard kept going to the hypnotherapist Raj could get his sessions for half price. He’d informed Amy he was going to try this to see if he could overcome his selective mutism and she adjusted her experiment accordingly. In fact the two of them had a ‘date’ for a hypnosis session this Thursday after work. Since the appointment was early enough perhaps they could catch a little dinner afterwards?

“So where’s Leonard?” asked Howard. It was quarter past and still no sign of the experimental physicist.

“Having lunch with Leslie in the lab. It’s a wonder their results aren’t contaminated by foreign food agents,” replied Sheldon before taking a forkful of brown rice with peas.

“I’m sure they’re professional enough not to get too close to the equipment,” said Raj.

Howard could only smirk as he remembered Leslie heating her noodles with a laser. “So I guess it’s getting pretty serious for them, huh?”

Sheldon shrugged. “That calls for conjecture and I don’t ascribe to that although I will say he’s spending more time at her apartment than he did when they were together only for the purposes of coitus.”
“I don’t know if I’m ready for another wedding so soon,” sighed Raj. “All of this togetherness is making me feel like one lonely boy in a sea of six billion people.”

“Seven billion forty five million one hundred and thirty eight thousand to be more exact.”

“Thanks Sheldon,” muttered the astrophysicist.

“You’re quite welcome,” Sheldon said amiably, oblivious to Raj’s grumpy tone.

“Aw, don’t worry about it Raj, you’ll find someone,” soothed Howard. “I mean look at me—who’d of thought I’d meet my wife through Penny given all the bars you and I’ve been to over the years.” He took a swig of his water. “Besides from what I hear you’ve got your time filled by Amy.” At this Sheldon stopped eating to regard the astrophysicist.

“True,” Raj said with a nod. “We’ve got another ‘date’ with my parents at the end of the month so we’ve been hanging out a lot more getting to know each other.” Here he grinned. “She’s really cool.”

“Amy is a delight,” amended Sheldon. “Her intellect is scintillating and her humor, more than entertaining. Count your blessings she’s made time for you Raj.”

“As a bonus she says she’s making progress with my problem talking to girls. If she cures me I’ll forever be in her debt,” Raj said excitedly.

“Not that you aren’t already for playing up to your parents,” smirked Howard.

Raj gave a satisfying smile. “That’s the great thing about Hinduism: not only can I owe her in this life I can also pay her back in the next so I don’t overtax myself. It’s our religion’s version of the perfect layaway plan.”

“In Texas we’d slaughter a prize pig and have it turned into loins, roasts, chops, sausages, ribs and hocks to give away,” said Sheldon. “Although my father would keep the hocks for himself. After the neighbor’s dog refused to eat it I vowed never to ingest one.”

“What is a pork hock—besides a Gentile bird of prey,” asked Howard.

“A play on the word ‘hock’ as also meaning ‘hawk’. Amusing,” replied Sheldon with a glint in his blue eyes. There’s a pause before he let loose with a gaspy laugh. “A ‘hock’ contains two round shank bones exposed at both ends and is usually prepared in liquid or braised.”

Raj picked up his dinner roll and cut it with his knife. “So what would you serve if you owed a Jewish friend?” Sheldon looked confused.

“Where would I find a Jewish friend in Texas?”

Howard laughed. “Oh come on Sheldon, we’re there. We’re the ones who can tell the difference between a steamboat whistle and a bull with a bugle up its butt.”

“Sarcasm?” asked Sheldon.

“Unless you ask my Uncle Isaac. He swears it’s Wolowitz Apocryphal.”

“So what is the difference?” Raj knew he’d regret asking but he had to know.

“Water vapor and methane, Raj. Need to brush up on your knowledge of steam and flatulence,” said Howard with a wink.
“I know someone who smells like bull pucky,” said Raj before taking a bite of his roll.

Thinking back to her childhood it was a toss up between the excess garbage bags of dirty diapers or little bits of Cheerios and other foodstuffs all over the place for worst thing about living in an illegal daycare.

Bernadette sighed as she sipped at her mineral water and cranberry. It had taken her years and a lot of work to get herself through grad school. Of course she wasn’t begrudging the route she took as her working at the Cheesecake Factory did land her Howard; unlike Sheldon she never had every single academic expense covered so it made her appreciate where she was now.

While Howard wasn’t exactly a fan of the ocean she could afford to take the both of them on the trips of her dreams. Well, maybe not as spectacular as his trip to the International Space Station but at least she could show him the best time terra firma could offer.

She checked her watch and pulled out her phone. She told Howard to go to the restaurant without her as she had to work late. Normally she’d be bothered by this little bit of deception but she drew upon her Catholic upbringing to deal with the guilt.

“Hi Howie, how’s my cutie wootie?...Oh I’m ok. Just finishing a break before I get back to work so I thought I’d say ‘hi’.….No problem cutie. I’ll see you later at home.... I love you, too. Bye.”

Biting her lip as she set the phone on the table Bernadette again checked her watch.

‘Technically I’m not lying. I AM waiting for test results.’ She read over the instructions and nodded. She took a good gulp of her drink before she got up and marched to the bathroom door.

“This one’s for all the marbles,” she whispered to herself as she entered and took up the test wand to check the color.

As Raj and Howard are out with Amy and Bernadette respectively that leaves the two of us for Halo unless Penny decides to join us,” said Sheldon as he handed Leonard a controller.

“Fair enough,” replied Leonard. “Although with everything on tv having had their season finale I’m surprised she’s not here already.”

Sheldon set out another controller on the far end of the couch before sitting down with his own. “She said she had to ‘brush up on something’ and since I don’t know what that something is I can’t estimate a timeframe.” He initiated a two-player game. “Shall we make this interesting and wager?”

Leonard shook his head. “I’ve had to buy the communal condiments twice already. I know to quit when I’m ahead—or in this case far, far behind.”

“Very well,” Sheldon said with narrowing eyes. “Let the hunt commence.”

For the next thirty five minutes save the occasional shouts of surprise or zealous glee at the death of an opponent the apartment was quiet but for the clattering of buttons. Out of the corner of his eye Sheldon caught the door opening and Penny entering the room. Knowing she’d respect the code of silence he didn’t greet her although as she approached he did find himself growing more apprehensive. Sure enough she leaned on the back of the couch, her hands on either side of his
shoulders as she watched the television.

“We’ve passed a critical junction,” Sheldon said at last.

“By all means play away,” she said sweetly. At this her boyfriend renewed his concentration on the game whereas Leonard spared a glance at his neighbor. Her tone was too saccharine to be anything but deadly.

“So watcha doing?” he asked her.

“It’s payday so I’m going over my new budget,” she sighed.

“It’s the same budget as what you received at the beginning of the month. For convenience I thought to apprise you with biweekly updates coinciding with your paycheck so you can see where you stand,” Sheldon explained.

“Oh I know where I stand all right. I’ve incurred enough from you to know I suck at budgeting.” At the odd word choice Leonard cocked his head to regard Penny.

“You have some difficulties yes,” Sheldon agreed diplomatically.

“And I can’t afford to make a mistake,” Penny grumbled.

“I’ll be satisfied as long as you try your best.”

“Spare me. If I don’t manage to do this my ass is grass.”

Sheldon paused the game. “Your tenacity will be an asset once we get you focused on the task at hand. There’s no reason to despair.”

“So you think I can sustain this?”

“Of course I do.”

“Thanks for the support, Moonpie,” she said as she kissed her boyfriend on the top of his head.

“Don’t call me Moonpie,” Sheldon replied as he resumed the game. “Shall I visit you later?”

“You betcha,” she said with a smirk. “See ya, Leonard.”

“Bye Penny,” the curly haired physicist responded as she left the apartment. “Guess she’s frustrated over the budget,” he said after a few minutes. “I remember when she got mad she’d pull up the online thesaurus or dictionary and look up words to use on me.”

A little smile flashed across Sheldon’s face. “Then there’s an unforeseen benefit to budgeting: not only will it leave her financially secure but also expand her vocabulary.”

“If she gets frustrated enough I’m sure she’ll expand yours as well,” laughed Leonard.

Penny was relaxing on her couch drinking a glass of wine. All day at work she’d been thinking about her dilemma and hadn’t come up with a solution; it wouldn’t be so bad if she wasn’t running out of time—she needed an answer for tonight.

“Ok Moonpie, let’s see what we’ve got,” she said aloud.
Overall she learned two things about Sheldon: if forced he could handle her touching him through his clothing and skin to skin contact was to be avoided if she wanted to make the snuggling last.

She took a sip of wine. Not good. If she wanted sex before menopause she’d have to push things along….

XxX

Sheldon pursed his lips for the umpteenth time as he glanced at his watch. After being tricked into watching ‘The Lake House’ by Penny’s insistence it was a first for time traveling mail boxes he was more than dubious about tonight’s selection. Sure enough ‘Kate and Leopold’ didn’t fail to disappoint. The whole notion of a ‘gap in time’ at the Brooklyn Bridge was such a load of hokum it made the rest of the film nearly unendurable.

“So what did you think?” asked Penny as she turned off the television.

“It’s better than ‘The Lake House’. That’s sarcasm since both movies are deplorable.”

“This was cute,” defended Penny. “Besides Kate’s ex-boyfriend Stuart explained how the time traveling worked so it was kind of sciencey.” Sheldon rolled his eyes.

“Only if we discount non-relativistic classical mechanics where time is both a universal and constant; relativistic concepts which say time can’t be separated from the three dimensions of space; cosmology where—”

“Ok, ok my bad,” said Penny as she put her hands in the air. “Guess I’ll have to be more careful the next time I pick out a movie,” she said with a mischievous smile.

“Note that after this debacle you’ve two strikes so I’d tread carefully if I were you,” Sheldon warned.

“You’re giving me a strike on our anniversary? Seriously?” she pouted, making her green eyes large.

Sheldon regarded his girlfriend before giving out an exasperated sigh. “Anniversaries are yearly Penny. This is a two month milestone. That being said, given the symbolic nature of the night a goodwill gesture on my part is warranted. Your strike is rescinded.” He narrowed his eyes. “Keep in mind these monthly recognitions can’t continue indefinitely.”

“You’re cute when you’re annoyed,” said Penny as she leaned across the couch to kiss his pursed lips. “I know how to turn that frown upside down,” she said as she popped off the couch. “Just a sec.”

“Telling me I’m picking the next four movies is reason enough for me to smile. Make it eight movies and you’ll get a bona fide Texas ‘yeehaa’,” he called out to her before wiping his lips with his sleeve.

“Naa, this is better,” she said as she came out of the bedroom carrying two shoeboxes with bright red bows. She stood in front of her boyfriend and handed him the bigger package. “Happy not an Anniversary, Moonpie.”

“I can’t accept this,” Sheldon exclaimed in an excited voice. “Penny I thought our being together on this night was sufficient. I didn’t get you anything in return.”

“Don’t worry. It’s a gift for the two of us,” she purred.
Now curious, he set the box on his lap and removed the lid. He reached in and pulled out two
loofah mitts.

“They’re for you. Put them on.” She removed the box from his lap.

“Penny I don’t use loofah mitts. While effective as an exfoliate they’re impossible to clean after
even one use. ‘Rinse and let dry’ indeed,” he scoffed.

“Yeah but I use them,” she replied. He raised an eyebrow.

“So why did you buy them for me?”

Penny smirked and batted her eyes a couple of times to keep her tongue in check. “Logic time: I
like loofahs. I gave you two loofahs. It’s something we can do together.” Her smirk became an all-
out grin as his eyes widened. “A bonus clue: compare the number of hands you have to the number
of loofah mitts.”

“I—we can’t do that,” he sputtered as he thrust the mitts into Penny’s hands. “Your skin follicles
would be everywhere and—”

“You wouldn’t be touching them as long as you’re gentle where you rub. Besides, it’s not like I’m
asking you to be naked. You’re pretty well covered up,” she said, indicating his long sleeves.
Instinctively Sheldon wrapped his arms around his stomach to hide his hands. Penny shook her
head. “No dice huh?”

“I couldn’t be any less contaminated if I’d been swallowed into the Sarlacc Pit,” he said firmly.

Undaunted, Penny tossed the loofah mitts on the couch and grabbed the second box.

“Happy not an Anniversary,” she exclaimed again.

“They say sequels are never as good as the original,” he said as he eyed the box warily. “Unless
we’re talking ‘Superman II’ or ‘The Empire Strikes Back’ although in this instance I rather doubt I’ll
be as fortunate.”

“Just open the darn thing, chicken-licken.”

He opened the box and pulled out a furry chocolate brown mitt. “Really Penny?”

“Well I thought they were cute,” Penny said with a sigh as she took the mitts and tried them on.
“See? They look like Tribbles and they’re soft.” She stroked Sheldon’s cheek.

“Yes, well when I wish to adorn myself with Tribble carcasses I’ll be sure to let you know.”

“Whackadoodle,” Penny muttered as she pinched his nose. “Mmmm.” She held up the mitt to her
face and slapped her thumb against the main part of the mitt a couple of times. “I think it’s
hungry.” She gave Sheldon an evil grin. “Tonight on Fox: When Tribbles Go Berserk.”

His dive to the other side of the couch wasn’t even close.

xTBBTx

“And that’s when I remembered the tumor was in the prefrontal cortex,” Amy said with a smile.
Bernadette laughed while Penny gave a curious look. “The prefrontal cortex is located in the
forehead area of the brain and is a central region for working memory, Bestie.”
“Well this is a week I’d like to forget,” Penny sighed before taking a sip of her drink.

“Yeah, I hear ya,” piped in Bernadette.

“Dirt, dirt, dirt,” Amy chanted as she pulled on the hem of her skirt in excitement. Not much ever happened at the lab so she lived vicariously through her friends. “You first, Penny.”

“Why not?” Penny made herself comfortable on Bernadette’s new Bauhaus sectional couch. Though she’d never admit it to Sheldon it was kind of daunting having the freedom to choose where to sit. “So, where to begin…. Ok Thursday was our two month anniversary.” She paused. “And you know what I mean by ‘anniversary’ as opposed to telling me it only happens yearly.”

Amy closed her mouth and smiled awkwardly.

“Of course,” Bernadette giggled. “Being with Sheldon is sure educational.”

“Special educational sometimes,” Penny grinned. “Anyhoo, I thought to celebrate the night we could snuggle up or something—”

“Heavy emphasis on ‘something’,” winked Bernadette. Penny’s eyes sparkled as she laughed.

“Ah, I understand. You tried to get the freak on,” Amy nodded. “I’m surprised he managed to muster up the ability to resist such a titillating package as yourself.” She took a sip of her wine.

“I didn’t even get to show off my titillations,” grumped Penny. “Seriously I’ve gotten to the point where we can kiss— ’but no tongue’,” she said in mock tone of Sheldon—“and hold hands for what are we at now? Six minutes and fifteen seconds before he gets twitchy and distracted?” She ran a hand through her hair as she slumped against the back of the couch. “I booked a time for snuggling twenty four hours in advance, wash my hands more than a surgeon and carry a package of sanitizing wipes in my purse for those ‘moments of whimsy’.” She looked at her friends. “I’ve never been two months in a relationship without sex.”

“Perhaps this will provide you with ample opportunity to ‘get to know each other’ in other ways besides Biblical,” offered Amy. “I find Sheldon to be educational and entertaining unlike other scientists—scorching burn, Bill Nye.”

Penny’s brows furrowed. “We do talk. God all we do is talk and all we’re ever going to do is talk unless I push the envelope. The problem is I don’t know how without scaring him off.”

“Have you talked to him?” asked Bernadette.

“Avoidance is his usual modus operandi,” said Amy. “Bargaining is next followed by grudging acceptance. Nothing turns a girl on more than ‘your proximity is within tolerable limits’.” She held up her glass and Penny clinked it with her own.

“Baby steps Penny. It’s the only way,” said Bernadette while pouring herself another glass of wine.

Penny sighed. “I know that. The problem is I don’t know in which direction to walk.”

Amy sat a moment in thought. “You’re addressing the need for sexual attention but you’re not treating the root problem at its source—the germs.”

“I thought I had something there when I bought him some mitts so he wouldn’t have to touch me directly but that idea went out the window.” Penny rubbed the rim of her glass with her finger. “I’m grasping at straws, ladies.”
“What we need is a plan to circumvent his germ aversion,” Amy said seriously. “As ridiculous as this may sound the comeliness of your secondary sexual characteristics won’t be enough. Sheldon is a man of reason and will therefore respond to a methodical process.”

Bernadette brightened up at the challenge. “I get it. We have to separate Penny from the idea of touching yukkie germs so he’ll do the nasty with her.”

“Exactly Bernadette. What we need is some positive reinforcement and I have an idea about that I’ll share later. What’s a more burning issue is whether or not Sheldon wants to commence with sexual activity.” Both Amy and Bernadette turned to Penny who shrugged her shoulders.

“I assume so. We spent the night together at ComicCon. Even though we didn’t ‘do’ anything I couldn’t see us snuggling in the same bed without him being interested.”

“You know I think we’re missing the obvious piece of the puzzle,” Bernadette said excitedly. “What’s the smartest resource we have available?”

“Sheldon,” Amy replied.

“Exactly. We need to get his brain working on how to fix this but not in an obvious way or he’ll panic.” Bernadette sat back, pleased with herself. Amy was impressed with the ingenuity of the simple plan.

“A game. Brilliant.” She turned to Penny. “The game format will engage him to think about the problem at hand in a critical instead of personal manner. This will be an enigma to him and Sheldon loves puzzles.”

“Somehow I think this goes beyond ‘spin the bottle’,” Penny replied dubiously. “How am I supposed to engage Sheldon?”

“You utilize the one subject you’re light years more qualified in than he is,” Amy said matter-of-factly.

Penny was perplexed. “But I thought he wasn’t ready for sex?”

“Perhaps we’ll play a quick round of ‘Counterfactuals’,” Amy said. “In a world where touching is thought to be dirty how would people have sex?”

“You know,” Penny said with a little smile. “I think I might have the answer to that one—they’d ‘clean’ it up.”

Amy grinned. “Excellent plan. All in all a successful end to the week: I can begin slicing up my brain tumor on Monday, Penny can work on the rules for her game—”

“And I can breathe a sigh of relief I’m not pregnant,” said Bernadette.

“No way!” Penny sputtered.

“I took a test on Monday. I was a week and a half late and as I’m usually like clockwork I was really freaking out. Thankfully everything got settled yesterday when the cramps started,” Bernadette said while patting her abdomen.

“Tomenes,” Amy said, raising her glass. “If it were a queen may her reign be short and bloody.”

Bernadette and Penny looked at each other before raising their glasses in return.
Leonard was huffing and puffing as he sat down on a bale of hay. Raj grinned at the curly haired physicist.

“You’ve got to get more exercise than paintball, Leonard. Look at me: running around like a maniac yet not a sign of fatigue. I’ve my pilates classes to thank for that.”

“I’ll make a note—if I live,” gasped Leonard, bracing his hands on his knees. If things didn’t clear up soon he’d need his inhaler.

“He’s right Leonard. You’re becoming a liability to the team,” said Sheldon while he popped the lid off a canister to reload his gun.

“I thought this was played for fun?” Immediately Howard felt Sheldon’s glare. “Of course, what was I thinking?” He pulled out a cloth to clean his goggles. “Well if winning’s so important we should have grabbed Penny.”

“Dude,” groaned Raj even as a tic crossed Sheldon’s mouth.

“I think we’ve depended too heavily on Penny. It’s time we tighten our belts and get to the task at hand ourselves,” the lanky man said tersely.

“I see we’re still a little touchy after last time,” Howard smirked.

“‘Touchy’?” Sheldon said indignantly. “It was all-out mutiny.”

“Well Leslie, Penny and I did clear out the quadrant like you wanted,” countered Raj as he stood by the window to observe the outside. Leonard’s laugh came more as a cough.

“You should talk—following Salome and Delilah through the woods like some brainless lackey,” Sheldon said darkly. He clipped the ammo container to his belt.

“I wasn’t brainless I was indoctrinated,” Raj retorted. “After shooting you and Leonard in the back Leslie made a convincing argument to join her team.”

“Wait a minute, who’s calling my girlfriend Salome?” asked Leonard as he wiped his brow with his sleeve. Raj was right: he’d have to look at using the bike or treadmill at the university gym.

“Mark 6:21-29, Leonard. She called for the head of Sheldon Cooper and so it was delivered because of an error in judgment on my part,” Sheldon said.

Raj grinned at the tall man. “You mean you went out of your way to protect Penny from being shot. Very noble Sheldon.”

Sheldon pursed his lips. “As I walked off the field it dawned on me why I’d chosen to abstain from female companionship for as long as I had.”

“Na, that’s part of the fun,” said Howard. “I’ve some idea what Bernadette’s going to do or say but not all the time. It makes for some interesting situations which I’m sure you’ll discover when you and Penny live together.”

“Live together?” sputtered Sheldon. “I hardly think now’s the ti—” here he paused. “Ah, a ‘bazinga’.”

“Sure,” Howard said with a knowing smirk. He couldn’t wait until Sheldon’s anal retentive ass had
to accommodate Penny’s lackadaisical housekeeping.

“So are we ready?” asked Raj as he looked at Leonard. The experimental physicist nodded.

“Let’s lock and load.”

“You see anything Raj?” Sheldon crossed the room to stand beside his friend.

“All clear.” Raj held up his gun.

“Excellent.” Sheldon made for the door. “We’ll leave in fifteen second intervals and meet south of
the shack. I’ll go first.” He scowled at the astrophysicist. “I better not feel any surprises Rajesh.”
After checking his watch Sheldon called out “Go!” and rushed out the door.

“You know since he’s been dating Penny he’s less of a douche,” remarked Raj.

“No, no, he’s still a douche. Penny just makes up for him is all,” amended Howard. He glanced at
his watch before exiting the shack.

“Leonard?”

“I live with the guy so my opinion’s clouded. All I know is that it’s been a blessing having Penny
help keep him in check.” Leonard smirked more to himself than Raj. “She’s good for him. And I
think he’s smart enough to have figured that out.”

Raj opened the door so Leonard could run outside. After taking a moment to think over what
Leonard had said the astrophysicist smiled.

“Maybe Leonard won’t be next to go down the aisle,” Raj said before storming from the shack.

“I read in a magazine that Hollywood’s having a real thing with freakily smart guys at the
moment,” said Penny before munching on a bit of popcorn.

“Smart is the new sexy,” smirked Leonard who sat on the floor in front of the padded chair.
Feeling a light swat on his head he tilted back to look Leslie in the eyes and winked. “Tell me I’m
off base Dr. Winkle.”

“I’d have to reexamine your data first,” she replied with a sly smile.

“Penny’s right,” agreed Raj. “Just look at ‘The Avengers’: there’s Dr. Bruce Banner our gamma
ray specialist, Dr. Erik Selvig, astrophysicist”—here Raj gave the group a big grin—“and of course
our resident genius Tony Stark.”

“Who also holds the additional title of bodylicious delight,” Amy said evenly.

“I thought ‘bodylicious’ referred to a woman’s body?” said Howard.

“It just means ‘full of body’ and I hear ya sistah, Robert Downey Jr. has a serious hinnie,” said
Bernadette with an impish smile. Howard gawked at his wife. “You have a cute tushie too,” she
assured him. “You really play up those hoochie pants of yours.”

“You know who also has a cute butt—Matthew Gray Gubler aka Dr. Spencer Reid from ‘Criminal
Minds’,” added Penny. Sheldon shook his head.
“What kind of world is it when geniuses are judged not by their intellect and contributions to science but for their ability to fill a pair of jeans?” he tutted.

“They’re always saying they want more women in science,” said Amy with a slight smile. “If Dr. Reid taught mathematics would you attend class Bestie?”

Penny grinned. “Since there’s no way I’d pass I’d have to retake his class several times.”

“Score one for the Nebraska public education system,” Amy replied enthusiastically. Penny gave her best friend an elbow.

“Actually I find Spencer Reid an intriguing character since he holds multiple doctorates and degrees in a variety of disciplines,” mused Raj. “And he has a shy smile that adds to his cuteness factor.” Raj woke from his reverie to find the group staring at him. He casually reached for his beer and took a swig.

Sheldon put his bottled water on the table. “Attaining multiple doctorates at an early age isn’t difficult. All it takes is discipline, tenacity and genius.”

Penny bit her lip as she thought. “Doesn’t Reid also have something mental?”

“Asperger syndrome,” amended Amy. “It’s an autism spectrum disorder characterized by impaired social interaction and repetitive and extremely focused patterns of behavior and interests.”

“Unlike other types, people with Asperger’s tend to retain linguistic and cognitive development,” added Leonard.

“That’s for sure. Once Reid gets going he’s a mile a minute on any topic under the sun,” said Bernadette. As one the group turned to Sheldon, who glared before looking away.

“I know on the show Reid’s often awkward around people,” said Penny.

“A prominent feature of Asperger’s is an inherent difficulty in basic elements of social interaction. For instance, they often lack demonstrable empathy, which has often led others to suggest they are insensitive—which is not the case.” Amy pulled on the hem of her skirt.

“I remember Mother did a study on AS,” piped in Leonard. “What she found interesting was that in the lab AS people demonstrated a theoretical understanding of other people’s emotions but couldn’t act on them in real life situations.”

“No kidding,” said Penny. “Must be hard to make friends.”

“Indeed. A culmination of failed social encounters often numbs the childhood desire for companionship. More times than not they are victimized by others,” Amy said.

“By that last description ‘Nerd’ must be an offshoot syndrome,” Howard quipped to break the mood. Sitting where he was at the end of the couch he caught a glimpse of Sheldon’s face while looking at Amy. The physicist didn’t look pissed off but the color on his cheeks belied his poker-faced expression.

“Asperger people are also extremely anal about their routines. I looked it up because…it was a final Jeopardy,” Raj said, voice trailing.

“The big one though is language,” said Leslie as she looked unequivocally at Sheldon. “Particularly when it comes to their literalness and inability to get humor, irony or sarcasm.
Combine that with an ability to bore you to tears with long-winded explanations on the most boring topics and you’ve a recipe for disaster.”

“As I recall Dr. Reid has an IQ of one hundred and eighty seven and an eidetic memory. I’d hardly call that disastrous,” Sheldon said crisply.

“Neither result from Asperger syndrome,” corrected Amy. “Although in combination they do make most intriguing individuals. For instance, a tendency to obsess may have contributed to fundamental discoveries in the sciences.”

“Like OCD?” asked Penny.

Amy thought about it. “Of a sort. They can collect volumes of detailed information on the tiniest of subjects like weather data, star names—”

“Flags?” Penny turned to Amy, who nodded. The neurobiologist suddenly felt very uncomfortable.

“Train engines would be another example,” said Raj as he got up to put his beer bottle in the sink.

“As opposed to me, who’s interested in all aspects of trains,” Sheldon said defensively.

“Is it inheritable?” Penny said softly. It was as if all air was sucked from the room. “Amy?”

After a moment of silence Amy cleared her throat. “There’s evidence for a genetic link as it tends to run in families leading some to conclude AS has a stronger genetic component than autism.”

“Wow,” Penny said after a moment. “Wow.” She clapped her hands together and stood up. “What a night, huh: dinner, a movie then a science lesson.”

Howard also stood and offered a hand to his wife. “I think it’s time we got home.”

“Yeah, I’ve a date with a Group Three pathogen tomorrow,” Bernadette said. “The last thing we need is something like an Ebola virus spill—not that it happened.”

“I’ll walk you to the door,” Leonard said to Leslie as the optical physicist gave her boyfriend’s hair a playful rub.

Sheldon stood beside his girlfriend as Penny held out her hand to Amy.

“I’ve got to show you that blue top. It’ll go killer with your slacks,” said Penny.

“I drove here with Rajesh,” Amy replied.

“Oh I doubt he’d mind talking about women’s fashions,” Penny grinned. “Night all.” She turned to Sheldon and gave him a twitchy smile of her own and left the apartment with Amy and Raj in tow.

As Leonard said goodnight to Leslie Sheldon squared his jaw as he stared at the two physicists.

“I’ll see you tomorrow,” Leonard managed to get out between kisses.

Leslie made a playful kick of her leg. “Call me,” she sing-songed.

Leonard still had a smile as he closed the door but it quickly evaporated as he saw the stone look on his roommate’s face.
“Congratulations Leonard. As a group you may have succeeded in doing what you must have thought I’d have done by now,” Sheldon said icily with hands balled into fists.

“What’s that?”

“Scare Penny off.” Sheldon spun on his heel and marched into his room. He closed the door but couldn’t keep out the words that assaulted him. No one said they were talking about him but he’d be an idiot not to notice the similarities between fictitious Dr. Spencer Reid and himself.

Sheldon Cooper was far from stupid.

’Good Lord we even have the same IQ and eidetic memory.’ He crossed to his nightstand and took out his Conversation Log.

She didn’t say ‘goodnight’; only left him with a nervous? sad? horrified? smile.

If it took all night he’d figure out the look on Penny’s face.

XxX

”I’m such a bitch.” Penny felt sick to her stomach but she wouldn’t let the nausea get the best of her. All the talk about Asperger syndrome and Spencer Reid hit home like a ton of bricks and she found herself unable to look at Sheldon as she’d surely run from the room. Things only got worse after Amy and Raj left as she surfed the ‘net for information

’All my jokes and teasing and he literally can’t get it.’ Penny crawled onto her bed and pressed her pillow against the big hole that seemed to threaten her chest cavity.

Sheldon never said anything to her about her behavior. At least nothing she noticed although there was always that scowl she secretly thought was adorable. Perhaps he’d chosen to see past her discrepancies but she couldn’t. She didn’t even know where to begin apologizing. This was five years—five years!—of putdowns and snarky comments that stumped Sheldon every time he got so full of himself or insulted Penny (’God he can’t help that either’) or it just seemed right in making a joke. Making him a joke.

’I’m such a bitch.’ Penny pressed her cheeks against her pillow, wishing she could make her mouth disappear.

xTBBTx

A/N: Wikipedia: Spacetime; Asperger Syndrome

Vexillology facts: About com Geography

Population of the earth: worldometers World Population Clock

’a steamboat whistle and a bull with a bugle up its butt’: old joke

NOTE: re Asperger conundrum. The writers say Sheldon doesn't have AS. Saying that he has it would compartmentalize him which they’d rather not do. In contrast, Jim Parsons did some reading on AS and he can’t figure how Sheldon couldn’t have AS.
Leonard waited until Sheldon disappeared around the corner before leaning over to address the table.

“Sheldon’s really pissed about last night,” he said quietly. “He thinks we scared Penny.”

“Well no duh,” replied Howard. “She’d have to be an idiot not to see the similarities between Spencer Reid and Sheldon—particularly when some people have to provide all the gory details.” At this Leonard blushed.

“I didn’t think,” he mumbled. “I mean I’ve lived with Sheldon for nearly eight years and I’m used to his idiosyncrasies. Once I figured out the Asperger angle it made it a whole lot easier to understand Sheldon. I guess since we all put up with him I figured we were on the same page. Besides, it’s not like we were talking about Sheldon specifically.”

“Speak for yourself, Leonard. The smirk on Leslie’s face as she talked about AS people not understanding sarcasm etcetera told me three dollars to a dozen that she was playing up the parallels between Reid and Sheldon,” Howard said. Leonard put his arm on the table so he could lean his head in his hand.

“Terrific.” He’d have to talk to Leslie about this; usually whatever verbal sparring she and Sheldon did was their own business. Because AS was tossed around as a casual topic of interest she just jumped on her usual ‘deride Sheldon bandwagon’ and— Leonard sighed. No one was thinking last night. Well maybe except for Penny and God knew what was going on in her head.

He could kick himself for not realizing she wasn’t in the loop about Sheldon. It was a hell of a way to find out her boyfriend may be even more different than she thought.

“Amy didn’t have a problem with Sheldon’s quirkiness and Penny has dealt with him for five years,” offered Raj as he toyed with his drink coaster.

“There’s a big difference between eccentricity and genetic disorder,” replied Howard. He looked at Leonard. “He does have Asperger’s, right?” The physicist shrugged.

“It’s conjecture. Sheldon’s never mentioned a diagnosis and neither has his mother. She had his sanity checked—which is still miraculous he passed—and whatever tests he needed to get him into university at age eleven.” He picked at his wrapped utensils.

“Look how defensive he gets when we bring up obsessive-compulsive disorder,” said Raj. “We’re such asses.”

All three men made to look at their menus as Sheldon came back to the table. He, too, picked up his menu and began to read. After a moment Howard looked at Raj and Leonard before clearing his throat.

“So, ah, Sheldon, Raj tells me NASA’s Fermi Gamma-Ray Space Telescope didn’t pick up gamma rays in the range WIMPs were expected to annihilate.”

“Not all WIMP annihilation channels are excluded as of yet,” Sheldon replied. “I don’t count my chickens until they’re laid, incubated and raised.”
“And beheaded and plucked and cut up and put on a grill and into a bun. Sorry, thought I’d throw a little Mitch Hedberg in there,” Leonard quipped.

Sheldon pursed his lips. “Not everything’s a joke, Leonard.” He returned to his menu.

Howard gave Leonard a ‘way to go, blockhead’ look as Penny came to the table with their drinks.

“Hi guys,” she said, attempting to sound casual as she set out the drinks.

“Hey Penny,” said Leonard while Howard nodded and Raj smiled.

“Hello Penny,” Sheldon said, hazarding a glance at her face. Before Penny could say anything further he peered at the menu. “I’ll have the barbecue bacon cheeseburger—barbecue sauce, bacon and cheese on the side.”

“O-k,” she drawled as she looked to Leonard with a concerned expression. “The same all ‘round?”

Raj bumped Leonard’s arm and pointed out an item on the menu.

“Raj’ll have the fish and chips,” interpreted Leonard. Penny finished up writing on her pad.

“Ok then, I’ll be right back.” She mustered up a big grin and left the table. The walk back to the food ordering kiosk was awkward as Penny could feel Sheldon’s eyes on her the entire time. It was obvious they had to talk. The only thing was she didn’t know what to say. She sighed. When it came to Sheldon Cooper things were always complicated so why should she be surprised they’d hit another snag? Only this one couldn’t be compromised or apologized away. This was real.

Penny grabbed three glasses of water and went to serve a new table.

XxX

Once again Sheldon found himself outside Penny’s door contemplating whether to knock. She had sounded ok when she’d taken their orders at the restaurant but her glances at him were sidelong and fleeting as if she were unwilling to engage him more than necessary.

At least it was better than last night. Penny sat facing forward as the conversation devolved into a quick lesson on Asperger syndrome; only turning to face Amy when she asked if flags could be an obscure topic of interest for an AS person. Sheldon’s stomach dropped as he realized Penny was connecting the similarities between that cursed doctor from television and himself.

He found himself unable to breathe when she asked about the inheritability of AS—not that he had it of course. Up until this point Sheldon considered himself Homo Novus. ‘New Man’. Never did it dawn on him that there could possibly be something about him that was ‘imperfect’. He resented this feeling of inadequacy. It made no sense. He was Dr. Sheldon Cooper, B.S., M.S., M.A., PH.D, Sc.D. IQ of one hundred and eighty seven. Eidetic memory. Resolver of the Black Hole Information Paradox.

And yet for the life of him he was anxious.

“Suck it up, Cooper,” he said under his breath. He straightened his shoulders.

He wouldn’t go down without a fight.

Knock Knock Knock “Penny.”

Knock Knock Knock “Penny.”
Knock Knock Knock “Penny.”

After the shift she’d had all Penny wanted to do after her shower was crawl into bed. Sheldon had barely given her a glance when she took his order; she knew he was upset with her but was at a loss as to how to proceed. They had to talk, that was a given, but in the quiet of her apartment she hadn’t managed to get much father than ‘I’m sorry’ before words failed her. She needed time to figure out what she wanted to say. As she had only managed a couple of hour’s sleep she wanted to approach Sheldon when her brain wasn’t so fuzzy.

The instant she heard the knock and opened the door to Sheldon’s sober look she knew she was out of time.

“Hey,” she said softly.

“I was hoping we could talk,” he said as he shifted his weight from one foot to the other. Penny stood back and he entered the apartment.

“Do you want some tea?” she asked as he sat down on the couch.

“I believe a hot beverage is appropriate. Do you have chamomile?”

“Coming up.” Penny took out a box and two mugs, putting a bag of tea in each before she filled up the kettle and put it on to heat. “So how was your day?” she asked while she waited.

“Tedious,” he replied. “I found myself unable to concentrate—no doubt because I didn’t achieve a proper sleep cycle last night.” Sheldon was up well past midnight as he jotted down the night’s fiasco in his Conversation Log so he could study the implications of what was said in hopes of deciphering the look on Penny’s face before she left. He acknowledged the irony in trying to defend himself against the uncanny similarities between his idiosyncrasies and Asperger syndrome and his being unable to discern Penny’s emotional state. Needless to say he wasn’t exactly his best witness.

“Ah.” Penny swept a strand of hair behind her ear as she came around the counter to sit on the couch. “I know the feeling.”

Sheldon looked to the floor to gather himself before he addressed his girlfriend. “Much as I’d rather not I think we have to revisit what happened last night. As the evening concluded you seemed to leave the apartment in haste. I’m assuming the previous discussion regarding Dr. Spencer Reid and Asperger syndrome had in some way upset you. Discuss.”

“I didn’t mean for the conversation to go where it did,” she replied. “I was just curious about his character because it seemed…familiar.” She got off the couch and went to the kitchen. “I thought he was quirky because of the high IQ and the memory thing.” She pulled the plug on the kettle and poured the hot water into the mugs. “It never dawned on me there was something genetic.” She grabbed two spoons from the drawer and carried the mugs to the table.

“I see,” said Sheldon. “And did this make you reconsider your opinion of him?”

“Kinda,” Penny said. Sheldon’s posture stiffened at the response although his hand was steady as he squished the teabag with his spoon. “I mean I feel like such a bitch for laughing and making fun of him when he didn’t get a sarcastic comment.” Penny was mortified as she processed the information about Asperger syndrome; she grabbed Amy and Raj and got the hell out of apartment 4A before she opened her stupid mouth and said something insensitive. For a good chunk of the night Penny sat on her bed as she thought over her behavior when it came to Sheldon: how often
she teased him and the joy she took in his looks of bewilderment or that patented Cooper scowl.

“I’m sure he knows you’re not invective when you say the things you do,” he replied. “I imagine he’s heard more than enough comments from others to discern what’s meant to be hurtful even if other nuances of language continue to elude him.”

Penny sighed as she took up her mug. “It’s just that he’s so smart and sometimes he holds that over my head and acts like a complete jackass. Sarcasm is the only way I know how to fight back and now I find out I’m razzing an autistic person and I don’t know what else to do.” She took a sip of tea.

Sheldon frowned. “I’m not asking you to change, Penny. Besides I’d like to point out two things: one, Asperger syndrome is not autism proper and two, I’ve never been diagnosed with it so the whole conversation’s moot.”

Penny was incredulous. “I looked it up last night. It describes you to a ‘T’: you hate changes to your routines—”

“I’m adjusting.”

“—you don’t get jokes or sarcasm—”

“I’m learning.”

“—you don’t pick up on social clues and you use twenty dollar words and you go on and on about things and sometimes you don’t get what people are feeling.”

The room went silent.

“I see you’ve reached a conclusion,” he said quietly. “Is there anything I can do to make you change your mind?”

Penny was stunned. “Oh God Sheldon, I don’t want to dump you. I just don’t know how to deal with you.”

In response Sheldon took her mug from her hands and set it on the table.

“Don’t change,” he said sternly as they locked eyes. “You can’t. I won’t tolerate it.” Here a wry smile came to his face. “I don’t plan to stop being a horse-donkey hybrid any day soon so why should you be left defenseless? Hardly seems fair.”

“So you’ll know when I’m sarcastic that I’m reacting to what you say and do, not you,” Penny clarified.

He nodded. “You’re expanding my language base. For instance, I never knew ‘junior rodeo’ could be a verb.” Penny gave him a light slap on the thigh.

“So are we good?” she asked hesitantly.

“‘We good’,” Sheldon replied with a little smile.

Relieved, Penny snuggled against her boyfriend, his arms wrapped tightly around her. "I'm sorry, Sheldon. If I've ever hurt you I'm sorry."

“There, there.” He kissed the top of her head and held on.

xTBBTx
Penny could hear voices as she mounted the stairs.

“I’m telling you Sheldon it’s to the right.”

“Are you questioning my memory, Leonard?”

“Guys can we get back to the task at hand? Raj can’t hold the pause button forever.”

Now at the top of the stairs Penny debated whether to satisfy her curiosity or not. It was Halo night so obviously this had to be about the game.

“Not worth it,” she said to herself and made to turn away.

“Open your shirt. We can’t see enough of your chest.”

“What the frak?” When the hell did Sheldon ever want to see her chest much less someone else’s—and a guy’s for that matter. She opened the door to 4A and stopped dead as she took in Sheldon, Raj, Leonard and Howard in their paintball gear standing in front of the television with game controllers in hand. Leonard’s jacket was open to reveal his underlying t-shirt.

“Oh now take it from the top,” Sheldon ordered.

Leonard licked his lips. “‘Son of a bitch’s dug in like an Alabama tick.’” He made a spitting sound. “‘Jack us around all day’.”

“‘Hell, dude, we don’t have all day.’” Raj responded before he aggressively clicked the buttons on his controller.

“‘Shit! Pancho!’” Leonard cried. Raj and he made eye contact.

“What’s your problem, dude?”

In response a gigantic explosion was heard from the television. All four guys whooped it up in excitement at which time Leonard spotted Penny.

“Hey Penny,” he called out as he stepped away from the controller to go stand by his neighbor. “Guess you’re wondering why we’re dressed in our camo gear playing Halo,” he said sheepishly.

“I’ve given up questioning. Helps me sleep better at night,” she replied.

“The explanation is quite simple,” said Sheldon as he stood over Howard as the engineer sat to work away on the laptop. “We’re reenacting scenes from ‘Predator’ on the Halo 3 engine and the attire helps us get into character as it were.”

The waitress did her best to suppress a smile. “So who’s supposed to be Schwarzenegger?”

“Give me your clothes, your boots and your motorcycle,” Howard said in his best Ah-nold voice.

“So much for sleep,” Penny quipped.

“Howard, why are you quoting ‘Terminator’? Focus, man,” admonished Sheldon.

“There’s always time for classic Schwarzenegger lines,” Howard replied as he clicked away on the keys.

“Hasta la vista, baby,”” Raj said with a grin.
“And on that note,” said Penny as she repositioned her purse on her shoulder.

“Penny do you by chance have any Noxzema?” Sheldon asked as he looked over at his girlfriend.

“Should I even ask?”

“We’ve yet to reenact the scene where Dutch Shaefer aka Howard Wolowitz fools the predator’s thermal vision by coating himself in mud,” he explained. “As most mud masks have a gritty texture used in the exfoliating process I thought the Noxzema would have a better consistency.”

“Why not?” Penny said as she shook her head.

“Excellent.” Sheldon stepped to the kitchen counter and took up a tube of gel and opened the cap. “I’ll make the predator blood.”

“The glowy stuff? How’re you doing that?” asked Penny.

“The contents of a yellow glow stick mixed with KY jelly,” replied Leonard with a grin. “It looks really cool when the lights are out.”

Penny laughed. “I better leave before I get any more jealous.”

Leonard raised an eyebrow. “Of what?”

“I haven’t gotten Sheldon to play dress-up and fool around with glowy KY Jelly in the dark with me.”

“‘Get to de choppa!’” Howard said to Penny in a raised voice.

“I’m going I’m going,” she giggled as she exited the apartment. “Give me a few to settle in and ‘I’ll be back’ with the Noxzema.”

Howard began chuckling to himself.

“What?” asked Raj before taking a sip of his beer.

“Never in a million years would I ever think to be in a position where I get more action than Penny,” said the engineer. “Congratulations Sheldon you’ve managed to warp reality.”

Sheldon pursed his lips. “‘Remember when I said I’d kill you last?’” He scooped out a gob of glowing yellow goo and hurled it at Howard, hitting the engineer on the shoulder.

“He lied,” Leonard smirked as he went to the cupboard to grab the roll of paper towels.

“Leonard,” came Sheldon’s voice from the living room. “You’re sure you copied the formula correctly?”

“Yes for the third time,” Leonard muttered to himself as he pulled two t-shirts from the drawer and put them in the suitcase. A few moments later he heard footsteps in the hallway.

“What?”

“Leonard?”

“Yes Sheldon yes,” sighed Leonard. “I’ve got the formula in my book and on my hard drive and my flash drive and my ftp site and I’ve emailed it to Dr. Franklin. Ditto your supporting notes and
the background material from our previous experiment.”

Standing in the doorway with his hands clasped behind his back the lanky physicist nodded in approval. “Nice to see you being so thorough. Now if you could only maintain this level of professionalism during the experiment you’re bound to gather relevant data.”

“Gee thanks,” snapped Leonard, closing his sock drawer a little harder than he’d intended.

“I see you’re packing for your trip. You’ve certainly managed to fill your suitcase despite only leaving for sixty hours.” Sheldon stopped short at his friend’s glare. Instead he watched in silence as Leonard continued to pack. As the shorter man tucked in his socks, veritably smushing his slacks in the process, Sheldon’s eye began to twitch. “If you’d like I can loan you my RFID tags and wand to better organize your possessions.”

“I’m fine Sheldon, thanks.”

“I just want you looking respectable. Remember Leonard you’re not just representing the university you’re also representing me. Lacking my authority, stature and penchant for command you’re already hard-pressed to present my theory with any amount of credibility.”

Leonard shook his head as he closed his suitcase. “I’ll try not to bring shame to the family. I’ve packed my seppuku sword in case things don’t work out.”

“I appreciate your level of commitment,” said Sheldon. “Of course under ‘The Roommate Agreement’ I cannot be privy to or assist in any form of suicide, ritual or otherwise.”

“Unless I’m being turned into a zombie or have been impregnated by an Alien face-hugger, yes I know.” Leonard picked up his suitcase and set it on the floor before pulling out the handle. “I’ll be spending the night at Leslie’s so I’ll see you on Sunday.”

“But Leonard what about me?” sputtered Sheldon as his roommate moved past him and into the living room to grab the laptop. “How will I get to work tomorrow?”

“Ask Raj to pick you up or take the bus. I’m not coming back for you so you can forget that idea.” Leonard got his keys from the bowl and opened the door. “See you Sunday,” he said as he left his friend to pout.

XxX

Penny made a loud creaking sound as she opened the door to 4A.

“You rang?” she said in an imitation of Lurch.

“Ah, Penny. Thank you for coming over on such short notice,” Sheldon said brightly.

Immediately Penny’s instincts kicked into gear. “I’m just across the hall, sweetie,” she said in a guarded tone. “What’s up?”

“As you know I’ve contributed money towards the purchase of your vehicle. It was agreed that in exchange you were to make said vehicle available should I have use of it. Such a need has occurred.”

“As Leonard’s spending the night at Leslie’s he’s unavailable to take me to work tomorrow.”

Penny gave him a salute. “Consider yourself delivered—so long’s you pay the fee.” She sashayed over in her pajama pants and yellow tank top. “By the way we never discussed the price for ‘Penny’s Taxi’.”

Sheldon thought about this for a moment. “Considering the average price of taking a cab to and from the comic book store, barber shop and work I’d be comfortable paying ten dollars a ride.”

“That’s one hundred rides,” Penny calculated. “Fair enough.” She stepped into her boyfriend and wrapped her arms around his waist. “Of course we’re a flexible company and can take more than one form of payment.”

“I’ll make note,” Sheldon breathed as he took in the mischievous look in her eyes. “Although I’m not sure if I’m comfortable attaching a price tag to a kiss.”

Penny gave him a peck on the lips. “Look at them as securing your driving comfort.”

“Oh?”

“Say you want me to drive at the speed limit—drop me a kiss and we’re at the limit. Want me to leave my coffee cup in the holder until we arrive? Smooch and thy will be done.” She smiled sweetly as Sheldon’s mouth twitched.

“I should think safety is in your best interest as well,” he reminded her.

“I’ve every confidence in my ability,” Penny shrugged. “It’s you who’s a nervous wreck.”

“When you’ve read the US Census Bureau’s report on car accidents you’ll see that my fears are warranted and not the work of a ‘nervous Nelly’.”

“I’ve got something for your nerves.” She pulled him close and captured his mouth with her own. Lips smacked as her arms slid up Sheldon’s back; in return he gingerly embraced her, his hands immersed in her hair. Even though he’d later have to scrub like mad this moment of whimsy was worth it.

Penny leaned her head into his hands as she bathed in the blue of his eyes. Her smile took his breath.

“Well?” she sighed contentedly.

“You drive the speed limit tomorrow,” he said with a smirk.

xTBBTx

Sheldon gave a big sigh before he opened the door to the conference room. The annual meeting of the entire physics department was at hand and as much as he would’ve liked to avoid it the handwritten reminder left by Dr. Gablehauser on his door left him no excuse. Even worse, he’d have to suffer through this without Leonard, who was merrily on his way to MIT for his meeting with Dr. Franklin.

“No doubt this was planned,” Sheldon grumbled to himself as he did his best to spot Raj in the crowd. Fortunately he knew to scan the walls and sure enough found Raj doing his best to hide himself between the radiator and back wall.
The astrophysicist’s eyes lit up in relief as he saw Sheldon approach. He extricated himself and gave a short wave.

“Let’s go by the door so our emergency exit won’t be blocked,” said Sheldon as they made their way through the tables.

“Ladies and Gentlemen, if we could take our seats,” boomed Gablehauser from the front.

Caught in the middle of the floor in a physics game of ‘musical chairs’ Sheldon and Raj had no choice but to take whatever seats were available. As they neared a table Professor Goldfarb abruptly stood up and walked to the next available table. After listening to Dr. Cooper’s idiotic idea for a ‘new Jerusalem’ in the Mexican Sonoran desert he wanted nothing to do with him. It was obvious Cooper was cracking up like his predecessor Professor Rothman and the last thing Goldfarb wanted was another physicist peeing in the theoretical physics lab.

“Lovely,” sighed Sheldon as he sat next to Kripke and diagonal to Leslie.

“Yeah we’re peachy keen to have you too, sunshine,” Leslie replied. “I see Jay brought Silent Bob with him,” indicating Raj. The astrophysicist dropped his eyes to look at the cover of his notebook.

The chair between Kripke and Leslie slid back and in sat Dave Underhill. Immediately Raj rolled his eyes. It was like Batman and Robin sitting at the table with Catwoman and the Penguin and having the Joker take a seat. He glanced at his friend and wondered if Sheldon knew what was about to happen.

Gablehauser cleared his throat. “Now as you’re all aware the university is cutting its funding to several programs. Fortunately physics isn’t one of them”—there was applause and several exclamations of relief—“however there won’t be any increases to the budget either. With that in mind we have to be selective in what we purchase this year so the first thing I’d like to hammer out is what the department wants and see if it’s feasible.” Immediately there were shouts from all over the room. He put up his hands. “People, let’s do this in an orderly fashion. Come up with your top two choices at each table and we’ll correlate from there.”

“It’s obvious the university should provide funding for a linear accelerator,” said Sheldon.

“Except there’s no place to put it and it costs an arm and a leg,” replied Leslie with a smirk. “Let’s try something that won’t take the entire university budget and get an ultrafast laser.”

“I’d go fow that,” grinned Kripke. “It’s fowte is spwitting Coopah paiws.”

“Like we need a laser to fracture his brain,” Leslie snorted, garnering a glare from Sheldon.

“Yes, well, your glasses can only do so much for your myopia,” he sputtered. Kripke shook his head.

“Ooo the blood, the blood!” Leslie chortled as she held a hand to her arm.

Raj slid his notebook over to Sheldon and pointed out a sentence. The lanky man read it over and gave an exasperated sigh.

“I’m not even going to waste my breath proposing that, Rajesh.” With a frown Raj took back the notebook and doodled ‘Shelly Cooper is a smelly pooper’ in Hindi.

Leslie turned to the silent member of the table. “What about you, Dave? Got a particular toy in mind?”
“Some kind of oscillating field accelerator would be nice,” he said without looking up from his phone.

“That’s two votes for an accelerator although for brevity’s sake we’ll just file both under ‘linear accelerator’.” The task at hand completed, Sheldon pulled out his phone to text Leonard a rather fresh remark about leaving him in this situation.

“Nice try, dumbass. Since I’ve got a specific—and realistic—device in mind the ultrafast laser is top priority,” Leslie said as she folded her arms across her chest.

“Your delusion is appalling yet not unexpected given your adherence to loop quantum gravity,” Sheldon retorted.

Raj saw the fire in Leslie’s eyes and tried his best to warn his friend off with a subtle shake of the head.

“If anyone’s delusional it’s Penny for dating you,” she spat. At this Kripke’s jaw dropped as he gawked at Sheldon.

“You’re seeing Woxanne?”

“Penny,” Sheldon corrected. “Yes I am.” At this Dave looked up from his phone and smiled.

“No kidding?” he said. He took a moment to process the news. “This is your neighbor across the hall, Penny.”

“Yes that Penny,” agreed Sheldon. “Now on to the task at hand.”

“Woxanne is hot. Mowe than doable,” said Kripke.

Dave smirked. “That she is.” He looked at Kripke and wiggled his eyebrows.

“You dog,” grinned the plasma physicist.

“Obviously we should get the linear accelerator first as it has the most applications,” said Sheldon with a frown, choosing to ignore Kripke’s comment.

“You know that makes you the third physicist to bed her? Weww that is if Coopah’s gotten awound to that yet,” Kripke amended.

“Third?” inquired Dave.

“Hofstadtew.”

Now Dave laughed. “Seriously?”

“Careful now,” growled Leslie.

“Wow this really is quite the incestuous little group.” Dave looked at Raj. “Feeling left out of the mix are we?” Raj turned bright red and let his gaze drop. Dave burst out laughing as he clapped his hands. “I think you’re behind the times Barry. Someone else’s been on the ‘Woxanne Woundabout’.”

“Enough,” Sheldon said icily. He tried to speak further but found himself at a loss to express his indignation.
“The way you secure rides at the carnival it’s a wonder your wife hasn’t clipped your ticket,” Leslie said smoothly to Dave.

At this a wave of annoyance crossed his face. “So says the one who’s had sex with nearly every one in the science wing.” Leslie shrugged.

“I was single—as was Penny. Who we chose to have sex with was entirely our decision and didn’t impact anyone else—unlike some who still like to swing with a safety net.” Here Leslie’s eyes sparkled. “I guess keeping your wife shows you really must be a ‘Genius’ with the quantum numbers since you must have worked out you’d only have a fraction of a chance to find someone else gullible, dumb or indifferent enough to put up with you.”

“Go to hell.” Jaw fixed, Dave left the table and exited the room. Seeing this Gablehauser quickly made his way to the table.

“Is there anything wrong?” asked the department head.

“I think it was something he ate,” Leslie said pokerfaced.

Gablehauser nodded. “I see. Have you come up with something?”

“Ultrafast laser,” Sheldon said although his eyes were still on Leslie.

“Excellent. That’s the second vote for it.” At this Gablehauser wandered to the next table.

“So, let’s ‘wock and woll’” Leslie said. “Unless you’ve got something to say, Kripke?” The plasma physicist shook his head.

“My wips awe seawed.”

“Leslie—” Sheldon began.

“Let’s not and say we did,” she replied quickly.

He nodded. “We’re in agreement that the linear accelerator’s our second choice?”

xTBBTx

Her lips were swollen and red and Sheldon imagined his own couldn’t look much different. Penny sat back on her folded leg and smiled as he didn’t cringe when she ran a hand down his arm.

“Relativity,” she said.

“Relativity,” he agreed.

Penny stood up from her couch and extended her hands. Not sure where this was going Sheldon nevertheless took them and stood. There’s a whimsical look to Penny as she all but dragged him into her bedroom. Immediately Sheldon was in flux.

“Penny I—” She put a finger to his lips and shushed him. Penny crossed over to her dresser and tossed him a container of disposable alcohol sanitizing wipes. He stared at them in his hands, dumbfounded.

“I’ll be back,” she said as she stepped into the bathroom and closed the door. He heard the sounds of the shower.
He sat on the bed, wipes in hand and contemplated his situation. While he was no expert on the subject by any means he saw her actions as a precursor to coitus. He shuttered at the thought although he couldn’t tell if it was in revulsion or anxiety. Maybe he should leave? The only thing was he wanted to stay.

At the crux of it all he simply wanted.

The shower stopped and he swallowed heavily as the curtain was pulled aside. Through the opaque glass of the door he saw her naked body standing on a bath mat. Her movements were sure as the towel wove its way over her flesh and between her limbs.

There was a slight pause at the door before it opened and Penny stepped out wrapped in a towel.

“Kiss those pesky germs goodbye,” she said with a crooked smile.

Sheldon couldn’t speak as his eyes took in every inch of exposed skin in the glow of the bathroom light. Her thighs. The tops of her breasts. He chastised himself. It wasn’t like he hadn’t seen them before. She always wore shorts or skirts that rode to mid thigh at least. Her Wonder Woman outfit played up her upper ventral region.

This time it was different. She was there for him and him alone.

Penny could see the tension in Sheldon’s face. “Let’s play a game,” she said lightly as she stepped in front of him and dropped the towel to the floor. She heard him suck in a breath and his eyes almost lost their blue completely as he took her in. “Where are the wipes?” Subdued, Sheldon held out the container.

She popped the plastic cork and drew out a tissue. With slow deliberate strokes she cleared a spot on her belly before dropping the cloth to the floor.

Sheldon’s eye twitched as Penny took up his right hand and compelled his fingers to touch where she had cleaned. Her skin felt soft and warm from the shower. His knuckles moved in a circular motion as they lightly massaged themselves on her flesh.

“Your turn,” Penny said encouragingly. Immediately she began to wonder if this wasn’t a mistake because Sheldon wasn’t saying or doing anything.

His breathing was steady but fast; there’s a definite sensation in his genital region as his pants had a constrictive quality. Reaching for a wipe he slowly drew one out only to stop. His head began to shake from side to side.

“I can’t do this,” he said quietly.

“It’s ok Moonpie,” Penny said, trying to keep the disappointment out of her voice as Sheldon stood.

Stepping around the bed he picked up the little yellow trash can next to her nightstand with the disinfecting wipe and carried it back to where he was sitting. A giant grin came to Penny’s face as she processed what she was seeing: Sheldon picking up the wipe she dropped and putting it in the garbage; folding her towel and placing it on the nightstand; drawing out another wipe to do his hands.

Shaking her head but still with a smile on her face Penny stepped around him and crawled her way onto the bed and lay on her stomach. She gathered her hair and piled it high on her head so it didn’t obstruct her neck. She waited—only to giggle as she felt the cool wipe against her skin.

“God that feels cold,” she said.
“Actually the alcohol’s at the same temperature as your skin. What you’re experiencing is an endothermic reaction as the alcohol takes energy from your body in the form of heat and evaporates into the air.”

Starting at her neck Sheldon made a line down her spine before he took a sharp turn at her shoulder blade. He followed the defined curve although it wasn’t as stark as he’d observed on most Californian women of thin stature; the added muscle from Penny’s workout routine made for powerful shoulders reminiscent of an Alex Ross Wonder Woman.

Once he reached the top of her shoulder his fingers lifted only so they could trace the other side. Penny squirmed at the touch of coolness as he made his way along her blade before returning to her spine and continuing his descent until he reached her buttocks.

“You know the sense of ‘touch’ is a bit of a misnomer as it entails more than a tactile sensation,” he said softly as he transferred the wipe to his off hand before applying his fingers to the back of Penny’s neck. He could feel the downy wisps of her hair brush against his thumb as he marveled in the softness of her skin. How warm and pliant it was as it seemingly ebbed and flowed between his fingers.

“The somatosensory system is comprised of several receptors and processing centers that produce the sensory modalities such as touch, temperature, proprioception and nociception. Body position and pain as it were.”

He felt the bump bump as he traced her vertebrae.

“While most people equate the somatic senses with the skin the sensory receptors actually go beyond to cover skeletal muscles, bones, joints, internal organs and the cardiovascular system.”

“Oh huh,” Penny managed to say—her mind preoccupied by Sheldon’s hand making its way down her body.

“Information from the receptors uses sensory nerves to travel through tracts in the spinal cord and into the brain where it’s mainly processed in the primary somatosensory area in the parietal lobe of the cerebral cortex.”

She bit down on a growl for him to continue as his hand left her flesh. She heard another wipe leave the container and did her best to brace herself for the cool touch.

“Simply put, when a stimulus triggers a sensory neuron—in this case the wipe on your left thigh—a signal is sent to an area in the brain uniquely attributed to that area on the body so you feel my fingers where they actually are.”

“No gravitational lensing here.” There’s a pause before she heard a gaspy laugh.

“Playing off the idea of a distortion effect. Quite the bazinga.”

Penny smirked. “What can I say? I had a good teacher.”

Sheldon smiled to himself as he continued to cleanse and caress: behind her knee and along her calf; the bottom of her foot and each digit; his fingers kneaded themselves in her buttocks—his thumb tracing her crack until it had no where to go but between her legs.

Penny lost herself in the rhythm: the sound of a drawn wipe and a cool touch followed by inquisitive fingers. That’s what surprised her—the fingers weren’t hesitant. They knew where they were going as if traveling the route were a daily occurrence.
Deciding to vary the terrain she turned onto her back. Sheldon’s hand went to his knee as he waited for her to settle. Penny smiled lazily as she stretched. She knew he saw everything. Knew he’d soon know her more intimately. Reaching over she pulled a wipe from the container. She grasped his hand and took her time running the wipe across his palm and along the length of each finger. After cleaning his wrist she brought it to her mouth and pressed her lips. Sheldon’s breathing stopped as he felt her warm breath mix with the coolness of the alcohol’s evaporative touch on his skin. His fingers caressed the side of her face.

Sheldon took the wipe from Penny’s hand and dropped it in the garbage. Slowly he drew another from the package. There was a hesitation as their eyes briefly met. She didn’t dare move as he made a tentative wipe on the inner side of her left breast. A second trail started and his eyes followed his fingers’ slow orbit. With each pass he moved ever closer to the apex. He was intrigued at the various tactile sensations: how her breast was soft and smooth yet firm.

As the wipe continued its circle Penny gave an involuntary arch to her back. She heard him exhale through his nose and swallow loudly but his fingers maintained their steady pace. Her eyes flickered to his face and there was an expression of utter fascination. She felt like his whiteboard; oddly the idea didn’t seem derogatory as he pitted every ounce of his beautiful mind against the mysteries of the universe represented in dry-erase marker. There was no less attention on her. His fingers read every bump on her puckered areola. His eyes noted the red flush to her skin. How her mouth opened to release a rush of air as his thumb rolled over her nipple.

Penny’s eyes became slits as she watched his head lower to her breast, his lips ready to taste her secrets.

xTBBTx

Leonard was on cloud nine as he mounted the steps towards his apartment. Everything had gone without incident and Dr. Franklin accepted his proposal on the first pass. Now all they had to do was coordinate their times in order to book a date to do the experiment and everything was gold.

He unlocked the door and opened it to find Sheldon reclining on the couch watching television.

“Hey Sheldon.”

“Leonard.”

The curly haired physicist put his keys in the bowl and wheeled his suitcase to the hall.

“So how was your weekend?” he asked, hoping Sheldon would get the hint and ask him about how things went at MIT.

“Satisfactory,” Sheldon said evenly without looking up from the television.

“Uh huh,” Leonard said and waited but Sheldon offered nothing further. “Well my weekend went spectacularly thank you very much,” he said as he took his suitcase into his bedroom. “Your ‘Cooper constant’ fit like a glove and they’re going to do the experiment as designed. If this works out Sheldon this’ll have been a milestone weekend.”

“It most certainly was,” Sheldon said quietly, the corners of his mouth upturned.

XxX

“And let it simmer for about twenty minutes and you’re finished,” Amy said before taking a sip of her wine.
“Doesn’t seem too complicated,” Penny replied as she looked at the recipe on her phone. “Thanks for giving me the step-by-step. I really want to surprise Sheldon. I didn’t realize he was such a good cook.”

“Oh yes. He makes an excellent sour-dough bread and zucchini loaf.” Amy rinsed a bowl and some utensils in the sink before putting in the stopper and running dish water so they could soak. “He also made mention of a Mississippi Mud cheesecake but it never came to fruition.”

“I’ll be sure to ask,” Penny said as she took their wine glasses to the table for a refill. Amy followed and sat on the couch, adjusting the hem of her skirt while her best friend poured the drinks.

“Now that we have dinner on the go I can’t delay the topic of Saturday night any longer.” Amy took the glass and set it on her knee. “How was ‘Operation Clean Sweep’?” Penny grinned as she reclined against the couch.

“For a moment I thought he was going to walk out on me but once he got into the swing of things he was great.” Penny took a sip of wine and smiled at the neurobiologist. “Thanks for the tub of wipes. I swear we must have gone through a third of them last night.”

“So long as you cover the monetary cost I can purchase them in bulk ‘for the lab’,” Amy said using air quotes with one hand.

“I really want to thank you for helping me out,” Penny began slowly. “I know this can’t be easy for you.”

Amy smiled at her friend. “Bestie it’s easier than you think. Sheldon and I still spend adequate time together following our pursuits so it’s not like we aren’t involved in each other’s lives. Besides, I think this is good for him. He needs to extend beyond himself and engage the physical world.” Amy held up her glass. “I couldn’t envision a better guide than you.”

Two glasses came together in a toast.

xTBBTx

A/N: Wikipedia: Somatosensory system

Asperger Syndrom: Webmd

Fermi Gamma-Ray Space Telescope: Universe Today

‘Son of a bitch’s dug in like an Alabama tick.’ Et al: from ‘Predator’ script.

‘Hasta la vista, baby’: ‘Terminator 2’

‘Remember when I said I’d kill you last?’: ‘Commando’

Gravitational Lensing joke: Penny remembers the astronomy lesson from their meteor watch in chapter 4.
The Two Cushion Proximity

Chapter Summary

WARNING: this chapter ends on a high dose of whimsy which may not be suitable for all readers! ~Lynn

Fresh from her shower Penny donned some comfy clothing and flip-flops before trotting over to apartment 4A. She found Sheldon reading on the couch and didn’t want to distract him so she snuggled into the opposite corner and closed her eyes.

In less than a minute Sheldon lowered his book to regard his girlfriend.

“Why are you sitting over there?” he asked.

“Didn’t want to disturb you,” she murmured.

“I find it more ‘disturbing’ you’re not sitting in your spot.”

“I don’t have a ‘spot’ Sheldon. I just sit next to you. God, you make me sound like a dog.”

“I have my own spot yet don’t consider myself part of the canine species,” he said matter-of-factly. “My spot is the nexus point at which all things order themselves in my universe. Your position is most certainly not two cushions away.” That Penny didn’t blink twice at the odd nature of the compliment meant she was most certainly acclimatizing to Sheldon’s sense of normalcy.

“Thanks sweetie,” Penny smiled as she slid across the couch to sit beside her boyfriend. He freed his right arm so she could lean against him. “You sure? Oh wait. I had a shower.”

“There’s that,” he agreed. Penny caught the oddness of his phrase.

“Among other things?” she prompted.

“Indeed,” Sheldon said without his eyes leaving the page. She thought she could see a bit of color appearing on his cheeks but decided against bringing it up.

“What ya reading?” Sheldon showed her the cover. “‘In Search of the Multiverse: Parallel Worlds, Hidden Dimensions and the Ultimate Quest for the Frontiers of Reality’. So how is it?”

“Disappointing. The language is straight forward and there isn’t an equation in sight,” he tsked. “How this qualifies as ‘science’ is beyond me.”

“I don’t know, it sounds like its got potential: science without the boring sciencey stuff,” Penny said with a wink.

“How would you like it if you had to read about a ‘red carpet’ walk without pictures?” Sheldon asked.

“There isn’t a parallel world out there that’d do something like that,” Penny scoffed. “And you call
“Remind me why I put up with you?”

“Who else’d get rid of the ‘creepy crawlies’ in the apartment?”

“Point. Turn the page for me?” Penny obliged and settled in to read. She barely got in a quarter of the first sentence before he asked her to again turn the page. This time she scanned the page, counting the seconds until he made a third request. She didn’t even hit three seconds.

“Crap on a cracker you read fast,” Penny said in awe.

“Rather than read word for word I scan the pages. With my eidetic memory I remember everything,” he explained. “Turn please.”

“Wow. So how many words can you read a minute?”

“Twenty thousand give or take depending on my level of interest. Turn please.”

Penny was silent as she thought this over. What was the average number of words per page? She turned a page. Dividing into twenty thousand. She turned a page. Equals a crap load. She turned a page.

“Maybe it’d be easier if you did this yourself,” she said, feeling a tad self conscious.

“I thought you wanted to sit with me?” he asked as she moved off of him.

“I’ve got to hit the sack so call it a pit stop. What I actually wanted was to cordially invite you to dinner this Thursday at my place.”

“Spaghetti with cut up hotdogs in Mama Italia Marinara Sauce?” smiled Sheldon.

'Ouch.' “I was thinking of something a little more technical.”

“Oh,” said Sheldon in what sounded to Penny like disappointment.

“What? I thought after the dinner you made and the things you bake and the Chinese and Thai food you order you’d want something better.” In response Sheldon inserted his bookmark and regarded his girlfriend.

“Penny, I like spaghetti with hotdogs. My mother used to make that for me. It’s a treat when you make it; for some reason it tastes better than when I make it.”

“So you’re ok with that,” she said dubiously.

“I wouldn’t make the request if I didn’t like or desire it.”

Blue eyes met green.

“Fair enough,” Penny said with a crooked smile. “One tube steak dinner—Eye-talian style coming up.”

Sheldon beamed.
Penny sighed as she looked over her mail, causing Leonard to regard his neighbor.

“What’s up?” he asked.

“Nothing, only could you do me a favor and give Sheldon my bills? I don’t feel like seeing him at the moment,” she said while closing up her mail box.

“Umm sure,” Leonard replied, taking the proffered mail. Silently they both ascended the stairs with Leonard making a series of glances at Penny. “Is there something wrong?” he said at last.


“Normally when a pretty woman asks me a question I just agree. In this case you get an unequivocal ‘huh?’” he replied with a grin. “What’s going on?”

They reached their floor and Leonard followed Penny into her apartment and closed her door. Penny dumped her keys and purse on the kitchen counter before sitting on the couch with a resounding whump.

“Long shift?” Leonard asked as he sat at the other end of the couch.

“As a bright side I get killer calves without working out at a gym.” The room went silent. Penny looked at her nails as she gathered her thoughts. “Leonard, you ever do something and think ‘holy shit am I ever over my head’?”

‘Like when I tried asking you out?’ “Sure.”

Penny sat up and began loosening her bun. “It’s only been two lousy paychecks and I’m ready to throw in the towel with this ‘budget’. You know, it’s not like I had an extravagant lifestyle to begin with. I’m a simple girl who likes simple things like iced coffees,” she pouted.

—and shoes and manicures and cable and perpetually eating out and bear claws and”—“Go on,” Leonard prompted.

“You know I found ten dollars on my way home and I thought ‘woo hoo! Hel-lo iced coffee’.” She put the elastic on her lap before running her hands through her hair. “Then I felt guilty.” Penny closed her eyes and lay back on the couch. “I kept thinking how disappointed Sheldon would be. We’re not even going to get into my dad. Wyatt never said anything but Penny knew he was disappointed with her life choices. When she told her parents she was dropping out of college to go to California with Kurt and be an actress Wyatt never said a word; he went out to the barn and didn’t return to the house until nightfall.

Sheldon had negotiated a second chance for her to go to school and Wyatt was more than willing to provide her the financial opportunity so long as she was serious and followed Sheldon’s budget. Penny was serious; she just wasn’t sure if she was ready.

“Good fortune doesn’t come every day. Don’t kill yourself about it.” A pause. “So did you buy it?”

“Not yet.”

“Save it for an emergency. You know, ‘break glass for iced coffee’.” He smiled as she laughed.

“I think your roommate’s rubbing off on you.” Another pause. “I just don’t want to let Sheldon down, y’know? I could take him being angry at me but not disappointed.”
“You’re trying. It isn’t easy changing habits of a lifetime. I mean look at Sheldon: he’s got more rituals than a Freemason yet he’s trying to accommodate you. It’s give and take, Penny.”

A sad smile came to her face as she softly bumped Leonard on the arm. “I screwed up with you.”

“What?” Leonard said, feeling a flush start across his face.

She immediately caught his embarrassment. “Oh God I don’t mean it like that, Leonard. I mean I ran away both times we went out. Things got tough and I bailed. What if I do it again?” Penny covered her eyes with her hands and sighed heavily. “I haven’t even started school yet and already I feel pressured.”

“Don’t do anything extreme without talking to Sheldon. Believe me it’ll only make things worse.” Here Leonard fanned the letters with his thumb. “You know I never thought I’d ever say this but Sheldon and you make a great couple. The change in him has been amazing. Just yesterday he agreed to possibly think about a Babylon 5 viewing at some point in the future. I’ve never gotten anything so definite before.” He could see Penny was deep in thought. “Penny?”

“What if I’m not enough?” she blurted out. “With you I was a waitress with pie in the sky ideas of being an actress. Here I am getting my shit together and going back to school to become who knows what. Leonard he expects me to be someone I don’t know I can be.” She dropped her head.

“No way Penny. Uh uh. Nil. Nada.” Leonard slid over to take Penny’s hand. “When you almost left I was devastated. You brought so much joy to my life I can’t ever repay you. You changed all of us; Howard most of all. If you hadn’t come into our lives we’d still be in our apartment playing video games and watching Star T”—he took a moment to reflect—“ok maybe I’m not making the best point here.”

“Thanks Leonard,” Penny sniffled as tears slid down her cheek. He pulled her into a hug.

“You’re already wonderful Penny. Sheldon just wants you to be happy. We all do.”

Penny leaned back and smiled. “If she’s smart Leslie’s so going to marry you, Leonard Hofstadter.”

“Thank you.”

“You know it’s funny,” Penny said as she wiped her cheeks. “All the time we went out it never felt right saying it and now it does. I love you.”

“Does this mean we have sex now?” Leonard winked even as he braced himself for the punch to his arm.

Penny didn’t disappoint.

xTBBTx

“Sheldon,” growled Leonard as he looked at his whiteboard. He compared his numbers to the ones in his notes and there was no doubt the formula on his board had been changed. What was even more annoying was that Leonard had made a mistake: the alteration was a correction not an attempt to tamper.

Leonard crossed the hall and knocked on Penny’s door. “Sheldon.” Silence. He knocked again. “Sheldon I need to talk to you.”
A muted “Don’t move” from Sheldon was heard and in a moment the door opened far enough so the lanky man could fill its width. He looked positively annoyed. “What?”

Leonard was stunned as he took in the developments: Sheldon’s hair was a mess. His sleeves were pushed up to his elbows. There’s color on his cheeks. “You altered my formula,” Leonard said after a moment.

“There was an error. I simply corrected it.”

“If you keep doing that how will I learn where I went wrong?” sighed Leonard.

“You’re right. I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have touched your board.” Sheldon went to close the door.

“Wait a minute. You’re sorry? You’re never sorry when it comes to pointing out the flaws in my work,” sputtered Leonard as he put a hand on the door.

Now it was Sheldon’s turn to sigh. “I thought to curtail our conversation since we know it’ll consist of a banal turn of phrase on your part followed by my remarkably astute retort.”

“Curtail? You? What’s wrong with you?” At once it came to Leonard and he pumpkin grinned. He thought about all the times Sheldon and his mind numbing three-knock repetition had interrupted Penny and him making out. “Hi Penny,” he called over Sheldon’s shoulder in an overly enthusiastic tone. “Watcha doing?”


“I thought you didn’t like Criminal Minds?” Leonard asked his roommate. A twitch came to Sheldon’s face.

“Sheldon? Maybe you ought to give Leonard a hand,” said Penny.

“Leonard’s perfectly capable of doing his own calculations,” growled Sheldon as he glared at the experimental physicist.

“That’s right. After making a mistake in the preliminary research I’m sure I won’t screw up your ‘Cooper Constant’,” Leonard said innocently.

Sheldon closed his eyes for a moment as he swallowed his frustration. “I hate you,” he muttered before closing the door.

Leonard smirked as he waited for his roommate to excuse himself from Penny.

Payback was a bitch.

xTBBTx

“I still don’t see why we can’t play ‘Zork’,” pouted Sheldon as he sat in his spot.

“Different is good—as hard as that may be for you to believe,” replied Howard as he hooked up the joystick to the laptop.

“Besides, it’ll give you some more practice driving,” said Raj as he grabbed a handful of popcorn.

“I don’t need practice. I refuse to learn,” Sheldon sniffed.
“Maybe it’s a good thing,” said Leonard, trying to contain a smile. “I’ve never seen Mario Kart turn into such a bloodbath before.” He didn’t need to turn his head to feel Sheldon’s glare.

“Ok gentlemen, we’re up,” Howard grinned as Henry Mancini’s ‘Peter Gunn’ began playing from the speakers. “Who’s first?”

“You’re sitting at the desk so go for it,” said Leonard as he dragged a stool beside the engineer and sat.

Howard flexed his fingers. “Commencing ‘Spyhunter’. Delivery of the G-6155 Interceptor car complete and—off we go.”

“You know Sheldon maybe you should look at hypnotherapy for your driving problem,” suggested Raj as he went to stand at Howard’s right.

“The last thing a driver should be is sedated,” tutted Sheldon.

“He’s right,” agreed Leonard. “He makes it darn tough for me to relax when he’s in the car.”

“That’s not true,” Sheldon said indignantly. “We play games and discuss a myriad of topics. Our drives are both educational and constructive. They’re also within the realm of road safety when you keep a lead foot off the pedal.”

“I can’t see driving sixty in a fifty five zone makes much of a difference either way,” Leonard shrugged.

“I’d comment but Sheldon and I have an agreement that he’s to never ride my Vespa again and as you know we Jews take our covenants very seriously,” Howard said through gritted teeth as the car steered towards the bridge.

“Get into the boathouse,” Raj said excitedly. “I love it when you transform into a speedboat. It makes me relive the thrills and adventure of ‘Speed2’.” For a moment Howard’s eyes wavered before he hunkered down and steered the car into the boathouse.

“Also known by Sandra Bullock as ‘the biggest piece of crap ever made’,” Leonard laughed.

“Not true; it made its money back. ‘Green Lantern’ on the other hand lost one hundred and five million though I’m still stunned at how they managed to hide its two hundred million dollar budget as it didn’t show in its script, special effects or casting.” Sheldon got up and went to the refrigerator for a bottled water.

“Ah, damn helicopter,” cursed Howard as he set the joystick on the desk. “Gets me every time.”

“Actually the game’s developers were planning on a sequence where you could fly a helicopter but it was scrapped due to a lack of memory,” Sheldon said.

“Unlike DC comics who’s hoping we all have a lapsed memory before they release another Superman,” Raj smirked as he took Howard’s seat at the computer.

“At least their flops are getting more and more visually appealing,” mused Leonard.

“As has Lois Lane,” Howard said with a mental shout-out to Kate Bosworth.

Raj shook his head as the game commenced. “What was it with Kevin Spacey? His Lex Luthor reminded me of a bad Kurt Angle impression.”
“Wrestling Raj? Really?” scoffed Sheldon as he made for his bedroom. “Sometimes your taste in television truly appalls me.”

“What?” replied Raj. “Wrestling is a male soap opera. It has emotional highs and desperate lows —”

“—And nothing less than double ‘D’s,” laughed Leonard.

Raj said nothing; his crimson cheeks said it all.

xTBBTx

“Peddy!”

Penny put down her magazine and got off the couch.

“Looks like I’m up to bat,” she said to Leonard who was working on his laptop.

“Good luck,” he replied. After last night with Leslie this was a hell of a coming home present. He knew he was a dead man the very second he stepped into the apartment and heard Sheldon’s moan of ‘Ledard’. Of course Leonard’s first reaction was to call Penny; not only did she make an excellent nurse but as Sheldon’s girlfriend she was now on the front line. Leonard Hofstadter was always the gentleman when it came to paintball or taking care of Sheldon—he let women go first.

After washing her hands Penny went down the hall and knocked on Sheldon’s partially opened door before entering.

“Hi Moonpie. How are we feeling?” she asked.

“Bedder,” Sheldon sniffled as Penny came to the bed and put her wrist on his forehead.

“Your fever broke.”

“Peddy pudding your appendage on my forehead isn’t an accurate way to determine fever. I’ve got a thermomeder on my nightstand,” he said as he unconsciously snuggled into his pillow and blankets. Despite any feelings to the contrary about anyone being in his room Penny’s appearances during his illness and now apparent convalescence put both his mind and body at ease.

“I’m doing it frontier style,” she smirked. “It’s been hours since you’ve eaten. Can I get you some soup or something?”

“Do you have chicken soup wid little stars in it?” he asked hopefully.

“Crazily enough yes I do.” It had taken Leonard three grocery stores to find the soup but Penny figured he didn’t mind as it got him away from the apartment.

“Can I have homemade croutons?”

“Don’t push your luck,” Penny replied as she made to straighten out his blanket. “I’ll be right back.”

“Thank you for stay-ig,” he said earnestly.

“No problem sweetie.” Penny closed the door three quarters of the way and again washed her hands before going into the kitchen.
“How’s Typhoid Marvin?” asked Leonard.

Penny got a pot out of the drawer and set it on the stove. “Fever’s broken so let the fussiness begin.”

Leonard laughed bitterly. “‘Fussiness’. The ‘Princess and the Pea’ was fussy; Sheldon is downright dictatorial. This night’s going to be something else.”

“Well if things get rough you’ll know where I’ll be,” Penny replied as she opened the can and dumped the soup in the pot.

“Barricaded in your room behind two locked doors?” he said with a smirk.

“You betcha.”

“Ledard! Can you brig me a damp washcloth? Make sure it’s not too wet.”

With a sigh Leonard logged off and started for the bathroom.

XxX

“All set Moonpie?”

“Don’t call me Moonpie, but yes.”

“‘Soft kitty, Warm kitty / little ball of fur; / Happy kitty, Sleepy kitty / Purr Purr Purr’.”

“Good night Peddy.”

“Night sweetie.”

XxX

The plates sat on the table covered in the remains of dinner. There was a significant reduction in the volume of wine in the bottle. To the left of the cream colored couch was an army green jacket. A little farther a green t-shirt with a large ‘recycle’ symbol lay crumpled by a more feminine top. One set of pants seemed to embrace another as their legs intertwined before the open door. On the doorknob was a cotton bra. Inside the room was a set of boxers on the throw rug next to the satin panties. Orphaned socks scattered themselves on the floor.

There’s the sound of a wheezy exhaled breath followed by an inhaler pump. A soft chuckle filled the air.

“You ok there, Leonard?” Leslie asked as she settled back to rest her head on his chest.

“Oh yeah,” he gasped before letting out his breath. He smiled as he kissed the top of her head. “That was some use of the lever principle, Dr. Winkle.”

“I’m not just a pretty face,” she said as she playfully flipped a nipple causing Leonard to suck in a breath.

“No you most definitely are not,” he agreed. He swallowed heavily as the room became silent. “Leslie I—”

“This isn’t going to be one of those ‘vintage Hofstadter moments’ when you say something stupid and bring the mood we’ve spent all evening constructing to a crashing end is it?”
He licked his lips as he thought. “Actually in this case how this all turns out is up to you.”

“I’m in power. Well, that can’t be too bad,” chuckled Leslie. “Go for it.”

Now that he was supposed to speak Leonard felt his mouth go dry. He cleared his throat. “Well as we both know it’s been just over four months since we started seeing each other again. Don’t get me wrong it’s been wonderful.” At this he felt Leslie’s body stiffen. ‘Idiot!’ “Not that I’m saying it isn’t going to continue being wonderful.” He rubbed her shoulder, trying to get her to relax. “The first time we went out it was just for coitus. Then you broke it off. The second time it was because you wanted to settle down. That got nixed over a...difference of opinion,” he said, thinking back to their argument over string theory versus loop quantum gravity. “I was just wondering what this was.”

“What do you want it to be?” she asked after a moment.

“I don’t know if I’d say ‘want it to be’ because it makes this all seem like fantasy.” Leonard took a breath. “All I can tell you is what it is to me. Wonderful. Mind-blowing. Leslie I don’t want this to stop. Wait! I’m not saying what you think I’m saying so don’t get up.”

“So what are you saying?” Leslie asked as she leaned away to get a better look at her boyfriend.

“We’re getting to know each other. The more I see of you the more I like. I—want this to mean something more than just ‘seeing’ each other because it so does to me.”

Leslie was indignant. “You think this is just a booty call?”

“No! I”—here Leonard growled. “Why can’t I ever say anything right? I like you Leslie. A lot. For me we’ve hit a crossroads and I want to know where we go from here because I sure know where I want to be.”

“Leonard, Leonard, Leonard,” Leslie said as she put a hand on his flushed cheek. “You ascribe to string theory. What am I supposed to do with that?” She leaned over and gave a kiss to his tense jaw. “Guess I’ll just have to prove to you I’m right.” Leslie snuggled into him and began kissing his neck. “Oh and by the way we so passed that crossroads a while ago.”

“We did?” Leonard said with a goofy grin on his face.

“Uh huh.” She made little nips with her lips towards his ear.

In excitement he rolled over to regard her. “Leslie I—”

“Quit while you’re ahead, Hofstadter!” she admonished. Blushing, he nodded his head.

“Thank you,” he said as he moved a strand of her hair behind her shoulder.

Leslie gave a wicked smile. “Come here you magnificent beast and I’ll give you something to be truly thankful for.”

xTBBTx

Leonard tried the accelerator but the tires merely spun in the mud.

“You’re only making it worse,” Howard said. “Come on, let’s see if we can get the van unstuck.”

“I told you not to deviate from the map,” snapped Sheldon as he stepped gingerly from the van lest he got his sneakers soiled in the marshy conditions. “Come on Raj, we need as much weight out of
the ‘Machine as possible.’ After a moment a Great Dane bounded from the van and stood beside his friend.

“Let me get a sweater,” came a female voice before a long pair of legs descended from the van followed by a pair of high-cut shorts, red tank top that the more modest would consider tight and the most beautiful smile Sheldon had ever seen on this blonde in particular. For a moment their eyes met before he blushingly turned away.

It was as he looked behind that he saw the light in the distance.

“I believe there’s a house,” he said aloud.

“Good thing,” muttered Leonard as he tucked his cell phone back in his pocket. “No signal out here. Maybe they have a landline.” He shook his head. “I still can’t understand why that ‘detour’ sign was posted out there like that.”

Howard came from the back carrying a crowbar and a plank of wood. “Let’s get a start on. I don’t want to spend the night out here. Sheldon, go to the house and see if they can call AAA.”

“Why do I have to traverse through the dark on a marshy side road to talk to Lord knows who?”

“Your other option is to get down here in the mud and give us a hand,” growled Leonard. At this Sheldon gave thought.

“Come on Raj,” he said and the pair made for the house. As soon as they were out of earshot Raj shook his head.

“Wrut a night,” he sighed. “First we wrun out of snacks then we wrun out of road.”

“Indeed,” Sheldon said as he carefully picked out his steps beforehand with his flashlight. “I must admit I find it distressing to have been directed out here by that bogus detour.”

“Aw, it’s not that bad, Shehldon. At least there’s a howse here,” Raj said encouragingly.

“Out here?” scoffed Sheldon. “I imagine the condition of said lodgings to be nothing less than deplorable.”

Sure enough as the road entered a clearing he could see the house was in a state of disrepair; nevertheless the old plantation house still had a presence to it.

“I can’t say what I find more surprising: that I’m right about the state of the house or that I’m having a two-way conversation with a dog,” murmured Sheldon.

“Thanks a wrot,” growled Raj as the pair walked up the porch and to the door.

Swallowing heavily Sheldon raised a hand and knocked. Almost immediately the door swung open. No one’s there. Tentatively Sheldon and Raj entered the house.

“Hello?” Sheldon called out.

“Hewro?” echoed Raj.

Sheldon neared a table with a lone lit candle.

“Well someone’s got to be here,” he said. Before he could look around the room a sudden gust of wind blew out the candle. Immediately he’s stock still, his Vulcan ears doing their best to detect
the sounds of anyone else in the house. Sheldon had to choke down a yell as he felt something by
his leg.

“Sowry,” Raj said softly as his teeth clattered.

Suddenly a noise came from their left. Sheldon’s flashlight beam immediately shone on the source
of the sound—a very stocky man in what looked to be nineteenth century clothing.

That wasn’t the weird part.

The weird part was that the light didn’t seem to illuminate any feature of ‘his’ head.

No, Sheldon thought. I stand corrected. It isn’t weird at all. It’s downright frightening!

With a scream and a yelp both man and dog raced from the house only to encounter the rest of the
gang at the edge of the clearing.

“What’s with you two?” asked Howard.

“There’s a headless man in the house,” puffed Sheldon. He was most definitely not used to running
—much less for his life. Raj whined.

“Jeepers,” said Leonard as he pushed his glasses further on his nose. “How long’s he been dead?”

“As he was headless I didn’t have the chance to ask him. However apart from obvious decapitation
he seemed in good health as he was standing in the doorway,” Sheldon said with a shudder.

Howard rolled his eyes.

“Good grief. Look Sheldon, it’s almost midnight and it’s cold and damp. Keep the ‘bazingas’ to a
minimum, ok?” he said as the group made their way to the house. After deciding they’d rather not
be alone Sheldon and Raj quickly caught up.

Leonard knocked on the door which was immediately opened by a woman with long stringy hair
and glasses wearing a striped cardigan sweater.

“How long’s he been dead?” Sheldon asked.

Amy nodded. “It belonged to my uncle who willed it to me. He disappeared in the swamp going on
two years now. His neighbor Kripke was the last to see him.” She picked up a lit candelabra and
ascended the stairs.

“Nice place,” Penny said, unsure of what to say about the state of disrepair.

Amy nodded. “It belonged to my uncle who willed it to me. He disappeared in the swamp going on
two years now. His neighbor Kripke was the last to see him.” She picked up a lit candelabra and
ascended the stairs. “I’ve been cleaning upstairs so if you want you can clear out some of the better
bedrooms and I’ll see you in the morning.” One by one the gang went into a room until it was just
Amy, Sheldon and Raj in the hallway.

“Not that I’m partial to hysterics—indeed my mother had me tested for insanity—but I encountered
a most disturbing sight of a headless man in the house,” said Sheldon. Amy nodded.

“It could be the ghost of an old relative if the family legend holds true. I, of course, think it to be
nothing more than hokum. Perhaps your imagination got the better of you in this instance.”

“Indeed,” he replied before slipping into his room with Raj. “Ugh,” he muttered to himself—the
room was plastered in dust, spider webs and whatnot. There’s a wingback chair; perhaps he could
clean enough of it to sit there until dawn? He shuddered. No, he’d rather go sleep in the van.

While he’s thinking this out Raj was sniffing around the room. His nose wiggled as he approached
the closet. He opened the door to find the headless man carrying an axe. Quickly Raj closed the
door.

“Shehldon!”

The man turned. “What?” There’s a knock from the closet door.

“Wroo is it?” Raj asked.

“Raarrgh!”

“Wraarrgh wroo?”

The door split from the axe and Sheldon and Raj burst from the room, screaming all the way down
the hall. They tried a few of the doors but finding them locked they raced down the stairs. They ran
through the dining room to find themselves in the kitchen. Hearts racing, both man and dog began
to giggle hysterically as they thought they’d escaped the axeman. Suddenly they heard a noise
which unbeknownst to them was a mouse knocking against one of the dustpans. Like a shot the
pair were out of the room and into the grand hall; there’s flashlight beams and shouting coming
from the top of the stairs as Sheldon and Raj ran out the front door only to land smack dab into a
very surprised Kripke.

“What the heww?” sputtered the man. As one the rest of the gang arrived at the door.

“Kripke,” said Amy with a raised eyebrow. “What brings you here this time of night?”

“I found a van stuck in the mud at the stawt of youw dwive so I thought to check in to see if
evwything was aww wight,” he explained.

“I assure you everything’s perfectly fine,” said Amy. Sheldon was nearly beside himself.

“All right? All right? There’s an axe-wielding maniac in the house and you say everything’s ‘all
right’?”

Kripke laughed. “I see someone’s wun into the ghost.”

“I doubt an apparition would have made short work of my closet door if you’d be so kind as to
follow me,” growled Sheldon.

“As much as I’d wove to I’ve got to get back home.” Kripke turned to Amy. “I’ll see you water.”

After Kripke left everyone decided to go back to their rooms.

“So why is the headless ghost haunting the place anyways?” Howard asked Amy as they walked
down the hall.

An amused smile came to Amy’s lips. “It’s said there’s a treasure here and the ghost is guarding it
for the rightful heir.”
“There’s no way I’m going back in there,” Sheldon said adamantly as he stood outside his door.

“It’s ok Sheldon. You and Raj can stay with me,” said Penny. They followed her into her room and immediately Sheldon saw blankets from the van covering the bed. Penny lay down and began smoothing the blanket next to her. Sheldon cleared his throat and looked for a place to sit but everything was filthy.


Refusing to remove his shoes he nevertheless climbed onto the bed. His heart raced a million beats a second as he lay next to Penny. She smiled as she reached across and pulled a spider web from his hair.

“Must have been from your midnight jog,” she mused. Immediately his hands felt his head.

“And there any more?” he asked in a panicky voice.

“Bend down.” Penny leaned in and in that moment Sheldon realized his forehead and eyes were resting on her ample bosom. “All clear,” Penny said and he straightened up. He’s positively crimson. It took Penny a moment to register what happened. She laughed softly, albeit not unkindly. “Poor Sheldon,” she said. “You think I haven’t noticed you looking at me?”

“I’m sorry Penny I—”

“No you’re not,” she breathed. She leaned into his body. “I’m not.” He could feel her hot breath on his lips—and a solid nip on his left buttock.

“Ouch! What is it Raj?” he growled in an annoyed tone, angry the moment with Penny had passed. In response the Great Dane pointed towards the wall and made footstep sounds with his paws.

“Sheldon?” asked Penny.

“Raj heard a noise.” Sheldon got out of bed and cautiously approached the wall. He knocked, the wood sounding solid. He moved a step and tried again. Still solid. “Huh. So much for that,” he said as he leaned against the wall only to have the wall fall away as a secret door opened. Immediately Penny grabbed the flashlights and with Raj rushed over to pick up a sprawled Sheldon from the floor.

“Where do you think it goes?” Penny shone her light down both ends of the hallway.

“Conjecture at this point.” Sheldon pursed his lips. “Although I have the sinking feeling you’re going to suggest we investigate.” Raj whimpered in agreement.

“You betcha,” Penny winked before stepping into the secret passage. As they walked Penny and Sheldon found a few crowbars here and there along with a string of modern lanterns throughout. “Somebody’s looking for something.”

“Somehow I don’t think it’s our hostess,” Sheldon replied.

They turned the corner and came ‘face’ to face with the headless axeman!

Screaming, Penny, Sheldon and Raj raced through the passageways. Sheldon spotted a door and the trio exited, crossing into the next room closely followed by the axeman. They come out another room farther down the hall and again the axeman followed. Then they ran out the middle room in
the opposite direction. The axeman came out a different room altogether and ran in the opposite room.

At once Sheldon stopped in the hall with Raj and Penny crashing against him.

“This is theoretically impossible unless we’re stepping through a series of parallel dimensions.” The axeman came to stand in the hall. “Of course the possibility of encountering even a single parallel universe is astronomical much less several at one time.” Sheldon fell silent as the current predicament dawned on him. There’s a moment as both parties ‘looked’ at each other before Sheldon, Penny and Raj ran screaming down the hall with the axeman following closely behind.

They scrambled down the stairs. A rope was pulled taut at the top of the stairs and the pursuing ‘ghost’ was tripped up. Immediately Howard and Leonard ran down and tied up the groaning axeman.

“So much for our ‘ghost’,” said Howard as he pulled a hidden mask away to reveal the face of Kripke.

“It’s the neighbor,” said Penny in shock.

“How couldn’t it be—we’re rather short on cast,” said Sheldon wryly.

“I really have to thank you all,” Amy said. “Now I can rest.”

“Yeah it’s been a tiring night,” agreed Penny.

“What are you doing here?” As a group they turned to see Bernadette with a big flash light standing in the doorway. “What are you doing in my uncle’s house?”

“What’s your uncle’s house?” sputtered Sheldon. “It’s not your house it’s”—as one they look to Amy who smiled as she faded into nothingness.

In apartment 4A Sheldon bolted upright in his bed, heart pounding. He sat, his Vulcan ears listening for any sort of sound but there’s nothing. Relieved, he lowered himself to the pillow.

Next time he’s convalescing from an illness he won’t spend all day watching a Scooby Doo marathon.

xTBBTx

A/N: Wikipedia: Spyhunter

Sheldon’s reading speed: This is the speed Dr. Spencer Reid purportedly reads at.
Chapter Summary

Ok the following chapter has a ficlet with sexual content although it’s not graphic. Nevertheless I’ve decided to err on the side of caution and provide warning since my story to date has barely warranted a ‘T’ rating. ~Lynn

Reference to ‘The Adhesive Duck Deficiency’.

xTBBTx

As Sheldon read he couldn’t shake the feeling he was being watched and so glanced over his book to regard his couch mate.

“What?” he asked.

“What ‘what’?” replied Penny, who didn’t look up from her magazine.

He raised an eyebrow. “For the past ten minutes you’ve been staring at me only to look away when I try to meet your gaze. Such behavior usually indicates a desire to communicate.”

“Maybe I’m just oogling,” Penny said with a wink. Sheldon’s mouth twitched as he went back to his book. Penny stared at her boyfriend’s serious expression as he read; it amazed her how fast he turned the pages. She doubted she could skim that fast much less read every word. The sick thing was he could keep up the pace while multitasking. In fact she wanted to test that right now. She cleared her throat. “Let’s talk about sex.”

“Sex’ as in gender? Foreplay? Fornication? Copul——”

“As in, uh, ‘coitus’.” She couldn’t believe she was using the word. After this was over she’d need a stiff drink if she didn’t want to wash her mouth out with soap.

“Fornication it is,” Sheldon said evenly without missing a word on the page.

“I was reading in a magazine about athletes and how they go over the game in their minds before they play it so they’ll know what to do and what to expect,” Penny began.

“And I should indulge in sexual fantasies about us having intercourse in an attempt to ease into it so to speak? Penny, my problem lies with germs not you. To make use of your technique I’d have to visualize you devoid of bacteria for me to properly relax. As we both know that level of cleanliness is an impossibility I’ll have to come up with a strategy to overcome my fear.”

Penny smiled as she put the magazine down on the table. “And I have the very thing.”

“Oh?”

“We’ve just got to short circuit that pretty little brain of yours.” At once his eyes flashed incredulously over his book. “No, no, keep reading.” Penny slid across the couch until she sat next to Sheldon and his spot. “Let’s start with a little word game: how many words can we find for
“That’s supposed to suppress my faculties?” Sheldon scoffed as he turned a page. “Really Penny.”

“I’ll start,” she said with a smirk. “Coitus.”

“Fornication,” Sheldon sighed. He knew better than to waste time dissuading Penny once she got an idea in her head about something.

“Shwing.”

“Copulation.”

She put a hand on his knee and immediately felt him tense. “Shag.”

“Relations,” he replied in a controlled voice.

“Screwing.” Her fingers began to massage the top of his thigh. “I’ve got an extra word for ya in case you run out. It begins with ‘f’….”

“Intercourse. Highly unnecessary—and vulgar.”

“Action.” Slowly Penny slid her hand up his leg. In response Sheldon scowled and stared at his book.

“Coition,” he said testily.

“Bang.” She was surprised at how solid his leg felt. There’s definite meat on them thar bones. Her hand almost made the same leap to Sheldon’s organ as her mind had.

“Coupling.”

“Nooky.”

“Mating.”


“I am reading. Procreation.”

Penny grinned. “Then why hasn’t the page turned? Grind.”

“I’ve encountered an intriguing paragraph. Hokey pokey.”

“Read it to me,” she whispered in a sultry voice. “Pound.”

“Lovemaking. You wouldn’t be interested. ‘Boring sciencey stuff’ as you call it.”

“Quicky. I thought you wanted me to learn?” she said as her hand moved to his inner thigh.

“Perhaps another time when you aren’t distracted,” he breathed. “Whooppee.”

“Freaky. Who says I’m the one that’s distracted?” She smiled as her hand began its slide into his groin. Immediately her fingers were blocked off by the spine of Sheldon’s book.

“You win,” he said softly, his cheeks crimson.
“No. We both do,” Penny replied as she knocked on the book’s cover with her knuckle before removing her hand. “How thick’s the book?”

Sheldon held up the spine. “One point eight inches.” Penny stuck out her thumb and forefinger in an approximation.

“Almost there.”

“The only problem is that in your travels up my femur you’ve encountered millions of germs.” He made a face. “I’d rather not experience them on my genitalia, thank you.”

“I’ll keep that in mind,” Penny said as she slid to the other end of the couch and picked up her magazine. “One point eight inches. Now we know where I’ll start next time.”

“You wouldn’t dare,” Sheldon gasped.

“One point eight meet ‘Big Ol’ Five’,” she said with a sweet smile before lowering her eyes to read about the Kardashians.

xTBBTx

“The next time I get a grant I’m going to start Project ‘Quantum Leap’,” said Raj as he pulled a comic book from the bin and set it on his pile.

“That’s highly unlikely,” scoffed Sheldon. He moved to the last row in the bin and started flipping.

“What? Both special and general relativity leave room for the possibility of time travel,” Raj replied indignantly.

“I meant your chances of receiving another grant,” amended Sheldon.

“Very funny,” scowled Raj. “Just so you know I’ve been taking some time to reexamine my calculations for predicting the rate of composition of trans-Neptunian objects.”

“And?”

Raj picked up his comics. “They’re still wrong,” he muttered as he walked to the new comics wall.

“Well I for one would join Raj in a heartbeat,” said Leonard. “It’d be fun traveling through one’s own lifetime since that was the length of time Sam Beckett had to work in.”

Sheldon pursed his lips. “Unless we include the episode where he ‘leaped’ into the body of a Civil War ancestor. The continuity on the show was simply deplorable. It almost makes Babylon 5 seem comprehensible.”

Flabbergasted, Howard paused his comic search. “Babylon 5 had to be one of the most detailed science fiction shows on television. J. Michael Straczynski plotted out all five years before it even aired.”

“Including the abrupt departure of Commander Sinclair?” asked Sheldon, his eyebrow raised.

“What I don’t understand is why you like ‘Deep Space Nine’. It has basically the same plot as ‘Babylon 5’ and wasn’t nearly as well written,” said Leonard as he moved to another set of bins. Sheldon turned to address his roommate.

‘Leonard, ‘Deep Space Nine’ not only made mention of the planet Alderaan in homage to Star
Wars—the greatest Space Opera ever conceived—but also incorporated season two episode fifteen of the original series aka ‘The Trouble with Tribbles’.

“What was better incorporated was Terry Farrell in that Uhura outfit,” said Howard with a lecherous look to his face. “What I would give to be the one to draw the Trill dots on her body.”

“I’d much rather try to connect the dots,” Leonard said with a goofy grin.

“I bow to your sentiment,” said Howard with a tilt of the waist. Sheldon tutted and left the bins for the graphic novel section. Howard moved over to stand beside Leonard. “Speaking of Uhura I was wondering if you happen to have a costume?” he murmured.

“Nope. The only one I know who does is Raj.” Here Leonard smiled. “Planning on exploring the shuttle bay with Bernadette?”

“Raj has got an awful lot stuffed in his closet. It’s only a matter of time before some of it comes out.”

At once the smile faded from Howard’s face and Leonard looked embarrassed.

“Well if we do get ‘Quantum Leap’ up and running I know the first thing we’re going to do,” said Leonard. “Make sure this conversation never happened.”

“Raj has got an awful lot stuffed in his closet. It’s only a matter of time before some of it comes out.”

Leonard smiled grimly. “Ok maybe the second thing we do.”

xTBBTxMATURExTBBTx

Sheldon cursed under his breath as he heard the television on in the apartment. Nevertheless he opened the door without breaking stride and crossed through the living room without so much as a nod to Leonard. He grabbed his Thursday pajamas and a towel and proceeded into the washroom. Quickly he stripped out of his clothing and adjusted the temperature of the shower before stepping in and closing the curtain. As he didn’t wash his feet in the bowl beforehand he’d make sure to clean the tub thoroughly.

Standing under the nozzle Sheldon closed his eyes and let the water flow down his flesh and into every crook and cranny. Taking the soap in hand he began to lather himself. With every pass of the slippery bar he imagined thousands of skin cells and other unwanted bacteria scraping from his body and spiraling down the drain. The only thing was that the more he cleaned the dirtier he felt. He increased the hot water and really began to scrub his arms. The more he worked the more frustrated he got until a small growl escaped from his gritted teeth.
He had no idea what possessed him to do something this stupid.

That’s not true. He knew damn well why he did what he did and by doing so he’d ruined everything.

‘The mind governed by the flesh is death, but the mind governed by the Spirit is life and peace.’ Granted he no more believed in the ‘Spirit’ than he did Quantum Loop Theory but if he were to replace his mother’s deity with ‘Science’ he’d have the sentiment captured in a nutshell.

Again Sheldon increased the water’s temperature, seemingly ignorant of his skin’s lobster complexion. He put down the soap and reached for the shower gel. Pouring a liberal amount in his hand he slapped the liquid to his chest and began lathering in a lazy circle that brought to mind similar motions made by his girlfriend minutes ago. Once Sheldon made the association the floodgate opened and every detail fell before him in proper sequence.

Sometimes he positively loathed his eidetic memory:

**Mischievous green eyes sparkled as Penny’s hands made their way from his neck to his belt.**

“Are you ok?” she asked.

“This is the third time you’ve inquired into my wellbeing,” he said slightly out of breath. “Shall I prepare status reports?”

“You better prepare all right,” she laughed and came into his space to deliver a bona fide kiss.

His hands cradled Penny’s head as her hair fell like sunlit rays between his fingers. Still their lips met again and again until with a playful growl she tossed her head out of his grip and nuzzled his own head skyward to reveal his neck. Sheldon felt her breath before her lips touched his flesh. Almost immediately he closed his eyes to repress a shudder even as he reminded himself who was ultimately master of his body.

Slowly she worked her way underneath his jaw line and started towards his ear.

“Penny,” he whispered as he lowered his head to nestle against her cheek. Again he felt a shudder through his body when she took the tip of his earlobe into her mouth. His breathing stopped.

“You’re yummy,” she sighed into his ear before letting out a soft chuckle. Penny stood back to regard her boyfriend with a devilish smile. “So you want to grab a quick shower or can we just get giggy with it?”

Internally Sheldon was at war with himself. He knew she was joking; more often than not Penny made reference to coitus ‘just to get him used to the idea’. This time was different. He wanted to please her—hell he wanted to please himself—but a stern voice warned of impending disaster should he go any further: ‘You’re not ready.’

Blue eyes met green. Her arousal was undeniable as was his own. If he hesitated the moment would be lost.

He couldn’t disappoint her.

He wanted this too much.

“When you put it that eloquently how could I possibly refuse?” Sheldon replied, his mouth twitching.
Penny’s jaw opened in shock but she quickly recovered. “Let’s go to bed.” She slipped her fingers under his belt and began dragging him towards the bedroom.

“You were right,” he said as he cleaned his earlobe with his fingers before wiping his hand on his pants.

“What?”

“I never thought for a second you’d ever say that to me in the present context,” Sheldon said as Penny veritably hauled him onto the bed.

“I never asked you to bed,” she smiled as her hands slipped under his shirts and up to his chest.

A sharp inhalation of breath on his part was the only indication of her violation; he knew he couldn’t stop to think about the implications. “I believe your phrase was ‘Sheldon has to get me into bed,’” he said carefully. Penny’s mouth dropped.

“When did I say that?” she mumbled as she lifted his shirt with her forearms so she could drop a kiss on his belly.

“After I’d”—he gasped as his mind went to white static as Penny planted kiss after kiss. Fortunately his mouth was already engaged and his ramble continued even if it took on a higher pitch and a moderate Texas twang—“returned with you from the hospital when you’d dislocated your shoulder. In your drug addled condition you found the idea highly amusing.”

She slipped her hands free and sat the both of them up so she could take off his t-shirts. “God I sound like a bitch.”

“Actually you ended up paying me a rather convoluted compliment,” he said breathlessly. Danger! Danger! In the hope of maintaining some kind of control he grasped Penny’s wrists and pulled her in for a desperate kiss. She chuckled under her breath as she tackled him to the bed for his efforts.

“Oh?” Penny said as they began kissing in earnest.

“You…equated…me with…Wall-E,” he gasped between kisses. His heart raced and his body was uncomfortably hot and sweaty. If only he could have a moment—

She lay like a sphinx against his body as she thought this over. “A robot brimming with love.” Penny smiled as her fingers made little circles on his chest. “Although I’m not sure how accurate that is because you are most definitely a man.” She was angled in such a way that it took little effort for her hip to press into his groin.

Logically he knew that was the moment he was supposed to kiss her and claim Penny for his own. It wasn’t the time for his will to falter as he felt himself drowning under millions of foreign microbes.

He could no longer ignore the itching sensation on his throat where Penny’s bacteria-rich mouth had marked him and his stomach felt as if it’d been covered with wiggly maggots where saliva met skin. Sheldon closed his eyes and tried his best to shift under Penny’s weight. Instantly the movement brought a shudder and he paused.

Penny took this as a sign of nervousness. “It’s ok Sheldon. It’s just you and me.” She slid a hand down the front of his pants to his penis causing him to groan. It was like her arm left a trail of mucous down his body and now her hand—her dirty, filthy hand—was touching him.**
“Oh sure, now you’re awake,” he scowled as he washed his erect member.

**Penny’s smile left her lips as she saw the stricken look on Sheldon’s face.**

“What is it?” she whispered.

“I”—‘feel the bacteria from your hands and the knots in my chest hair and I want’—**

His hand briskly jerked away.

**’Your breath against my throat and my lobe in your mouth against your tongue, your lips moist with’—**

His breaths became more haggard.

**’Penny I”—He did his best to squirm out from under without touching her; his palms felt on fire they were that contaminated and the last thing he wanted to do was cover her in the filth.**

Recognizing his panic Penny moved off of him so he could stand up. “Sheldon,” she said as calmly as possible but the physicist was frantically arranging his shirts. “Look at me Moonpie. Sheldon.” She reached out a hand but he wriggled away.

“I’m dirty,” he hissed and rolled down his sleeves.

“I’ve got a shower right here. You don’t have to go,” she said evenly. “Please Sheldon.”

Her tone crushed him.

Sheldon pulled down his shirts and crouched before her. “Penny.” His hands came up to touch her knees but he stopped himself and from the look he gave his palms she knew better than to reach out to him. Swallowing hard he did his best to compose himself. “I’ve encountered some difficulties.”

“So I’ve noticed,” Penny said softly.

“Don’t confuse this for lack of desire. I just need to get past this,” he whispered.

“I know,” she said with a warm smile. “I’m still here, Sheldon.”

His mouth trembled. “Thank you.”**

He was a man all right. The shower washed the proof from his hand.

*XTBBTx*

He had three whiteboards in front of him but Sheldon might as well have had one or a million given how useful they were at the moment. Scowling, he paced in his office to transmute excess energy into something more useful. At one point he grabbed the red marker and circled parts of equations on each board that he deemed correct or at least intriguing enough to spare. He erased the other numbers then stood back and stared at the red blobs. If this was saying what he thought it was he’d somehow managed to paint himself into a corner.

“Drat.”

After carefully copying the equations onto one board he cleaned the other two. He took a breath to calm himself before starting again; the numbers danced across the flat surface, the marker seemingly hard pressed to keep up. Line after line appeared until his hand froze—his mind doing a
complex calculation—before continuing to write. Minutes ticked by as he calculated and recalculated until in complete silence he ceased his efforts and put the lid back on his marker.

It was wrong. All of it. He went from one proverbial corner to the other, leaving a trail of paint soaked footprints in his wake.

A sense of unease began to take hold as he looked at the whiteboard. The figures were correct and the result was elegant—a bonus—but it blocked him from continuing further.

“How can something so right be so wrong?” Sheldon murmured to himself. A sudden flash of insight brought a bitter twist to his mouth. ‘Very easily when you’re working with elegant constructs, Dr. Cooper.’

Particularly when she has an infectious smile.

Tantalizing lips.

He sat on the corner of his desk and began twisting the marker cap. All his life he’d been fueled by the desire to be the best. In all that mattered he was the best. Nothing he’d ever truly wanted was ever out of his grasp—until now? It didn’t make sense to him that gaining in one area of his life meant a reduction in another as if there were a finite reserve of happiness. Instead of a reversal of fortune, however, he found himself sucking at both: he was a boggled down physicist and an ineffective lover.

What was he supposed to do when he spent his work hours pondering his emerging yet trouble-filled love life and his dreams swamped him with countless whiteboards with nonsensical formulas?

‘What if I have to choose?’

He stared at the whiteboard.

XxX

Raj’s fingers were tapping on his chest to the sounds of Azam Ali as he lay back in his office chair. The morning had been more than productive; while Sheldon would never give out and out praise he would at least be ‘nominally impressed’ with Raj’s productivity.

Since last night when he got the congratulatory letter from People Magazine and an attached copy of his updated academic biography he’d been nothing short of ecstatic—not only for the article but also that his place at Caltech was once again secure.

He lazily clicked on the computer with one hand and scrolled to the aforementioned email. After opening the attachment Raj again looked over his biography. The editor wanted him to proofread it to make sure there were no errors. Quite to the contrary it looked absolutely spectacular. Following Penny’s ‘BWBS’ strategy worked like a charm; he vowed to apply its transformative powers to other aspects of his life but like any superhero knew a great power needed to be tempered with great responsibility.

Of course there were a few liberties taken but that was to be expected in supermarket journalism. All in all Raj was satisfied.

‘Looks A-Ok to me’, Raj typed.

He clicked ‘send’.
“‘Wait ‘til they get a load of me’,” he chortled to himself.

xTBBTx

It was eight fifteen and Sheldon was in the laundry room carefully sorting his clothes by color and fabric into the washing machines. It’s a task he’d done nearly every Saturday for over eight years. For the last five he’d had companionship on more Saturdays than enough to be labeled coincidence. When he looked at it from Penny’s perspective a Saturday laundry night was not the most practical since it was her night to ‘let loose’ on the town. Instead she started her evening in the basement of 2311 N. Los Robles Avenue with a whackadoodle neighbor. He never considered it odd. Neither did she. It just was.

Somewhere along the line it became more than just an opportune time to launder clothing. His journals made note of the change even though he failed to see the shift from ‘laundry night’ to ‘time with Penny’ and Penny herself from ‘frustrating nuisance’ to ‘intriguing challenge’. Indeed it was more of a challenge deciding how to proceed on nights when she didn’t appear with basket in hand and that smile she made just for him.

That’s the thing: he’d had people smile with him or at him but never for him.

Perhaps that’s when he ‘fell for her’ as the analogy went. It would take him five years to come to terms with himself and that smile but here he was—alone on a Saturday night doing laundry.

“Feeling sorry for yourself, Dr. Cooper?” he quipped to the empty room.

Tonight was the second of four evening shifts at The Cheesecake Factory. Penny hadn’t argued with the schedule since her manager gave her time off to register for school and attend class. She was surprised Scott had been as amenable as he had; when she told him why she wanted certain times free he smirked and said “About damn time” before approving her request. Sheldon made note to hold the manager in a higher esteem as obviously Scott had been waiting for Penny to discover her own worth and move on.

It seemed everybody knew who she was and what she could do but Penelope herself. She was her own paradox: a light in the lives of all save her own. If it took an entire lifetime he’d make her see her significance. Through her he knew laughter and silliness and such passionate rage! Never had someone stirred in him what she did with every look she gave and every word she said. She made Sheldon Lee Cooper change. Oh it was under threat most of the time but still she got him to move and for that she should be credited.

“Well played,” he said softly to himself as he carefully scooped, measured and poured the detergent into the machines.

He loved to win and normally a defeat was unacceptable unless it was for a noble cause—something which Wil Wheaton took full advantage of with that dastardly ‘dead Meemaw trick’. With Penny Sheldon hadn’t known what game they were playing much less the rules so it would be pointless to ask at what point everything changed. He had no idea if he was winning or losing or if in fact such separate states actually existed. All he knew was that he had to play—but at what cost?

He’d never be happy with science until he was satisfied.

He’d never be satisfied with his relationship with Penny unless they were happy.

Sheldon set the machines in motion and took his basket with him.
“Hello Amy.”

“Good evening Sheldon. I was going to ask the proverbial ‘how are you’ but your face says it all. You look terrible.”

“This hasn’t been the best seventy two hours on record. I seem to be stuck.”

“On what?”

“My work on perturbation theory isn’t wrapping up as neatly as I’d hoped. It’s become evident that expansion parameter ‘a’ in superstring theory needn’t be small as in the Feynman sum-over-histories approach. It has completely undermined the elegant mathematical expression that is ultraviolet finite. If I choose to ignore the finding I maintain the expression but there’s no way to proceed.”

“It’s all a matter of time, Sheldon. No pun intended of course. … Why don’t you take a break? I know a certain soon-to-be student who can teach you a thing or two about relaxation.”

“I haven’t seen Penny since Thursday. We’ve both been—busy.”

“Is this ‘busy’ as in conflicting schedules or ‘busy’ as in avoidance?”

“One fortuitously solves the other at present.”

“I see. May I enquire as to what happened?”

“I thought you’d already be in the ‘know’ given your social status as Penny’s ‘Bestie’.”

“Not everything that occurs between couples becomes common knowledge, Sheldon. I’m not meaning to pry; however your tone in the previous statement suggests you believe yourself to be in error. As your friend I’m ‘all ears’ if you need to talk.”

“… It’s irrelevant. It’s nothing more than…. What I mean to say is that I…. … Amy I don’t know what to do.”

…

“While it’s true I’m not experienced when it comes to sexual relations I never thought I’d have this much—difficulty.”

“Is this a matter of performance anxiety?”

“We’ll never know since I can’t get that far.”

“Ah. Your germ aversion has impeded your love life.”

“So it would seem.”

“Perhaps we should look at this from the perspective of a hypersensitivity disorder.”

“An allergy. Please continue.”

“You need a form of immunotherapy to make you less sensitive to Penny’s germs.”
“My exposure to Penny has increased dramatically over the past month. Duration of physical contact has increased over six hundred-fold. I’m not sure what more I can do.”

“Isolate and treat.”

“Explain.”

“A single shot for ‘Tree’ doesn’t treat all types of tree allergies. Immunotherapy is a tailor-made solution. What you need to do is isolate Penny’s germs from surrounding contamination and render them harmless.”

“I already said I’m in contact—”

“With Penny, yes. I mean with Penny’s germs, Sheldon.”

“Separate the two. I see. Intriguing.”

“As you feel comfortable—and I use that in a loose sense—with casual touches you must be willing to treat yourself at the source if you will.”

“Amy Farrah Fowler.”

“These are desperate hours, Sheldon. No time for being a prude.”

“But I—”

“Soiled apparel will suffice.”

“I know that. … I don’t know how comfortable I am with this.”

“If you’re content with the present situation then ignore my advice. If, however, you wish not to worship Penny from afar and instead partake of all she has to offer I’m telling you to suck it up and do what’s required.”

…

“There is always some measure of risk in love.”

“So I noticed. I’ll have to ponder this proposal of yours. Goodnight Amy.”

“Don’t wait too long. Goodnight Sheldon.”

xTBBTtx

Leonard glanced up from his laptop, the movement in his peripheral vision causing a moment of distraction. ‘Just Sheldon taking a slug of water.’ Of course that was a good sign; for nearly an hour the lanky physicist stood nearly stock still with bottled water in hand staring at his whiteboard. He was there before the gang showed up for Thai food—except for Penny who had to work—and was the reason for their early departure as they took note of his distracted nature and frequent glances at his board.

Checking his watch, Leonard shut down his laptop and put it in its carrier before he grabbed his glass and got off the couch. After rinsing the glass he made to stand next to his roommate and pondered the board.

“Elegant equation, if a little complex,” Leonard said softly.
“Aren’t they all,” Sheldon responded.

“So what seems to be the problem?”

“It’s too elegant. As its own construct it’s flawless but when I try to merge it into more generalized posits it grinds to a halt.”

“Wrong answers?” asked Leonard, now intrigued.

“Insufficient ones. I’ve a series of answers but I’m not satisfied with any of them.” Sheldon tried to suppress a yawn even as he sighed.

Leonard frowned. “You skipping out on sleep again?”

“Like the answer it has eluded me. By putting extra effort into my work I hope to solve both problems before long.”

“Just remember that ‘all work and no play make Sheldon a whack job’. Take a break. Penny’ll be home soon at any rate.”

“This doesn’t concern Penny,” Sheldon snapped. Leonard scrutinized his roommate.

“Of course it doesn’t. What was I thinking equating ‘relaxing’ with ‘Penny’?”

Sheldon shook his head. “I don’t need to relax Leonard I need to solve this. It’s imperative.”

“Cut yourself some slack,” Leonard said as he scanned the board. “You’re in new territory so you can’t expect yourself to be an instant expert.”

“When am I not an expert?” said Sheldon with a raised eyebrow.

“When it’s about driving or Penny.”

“Besides those, when am I not an expert?”

“Sheldon—”

“I must have order, Leonard. I can’t incorporate things willy-nilly and not have something else affected. This”—here Sheldon indicated his board with a disgusted toss of the hand—“is the result: pretty but ultimately worthless.”

For some reason Leonard’s face flushed and he felt his temper rising. “It’s not worthless. You just don’t know what to do with it. Just give it time.”

“I’m already thirty. I can’t give more time. I need an answer.”

“No, you need ‘the’ answer. If all you wanted was a solution well you’ve got one. Hell you’ve got several solutions to choose from but you haven’t. Why? They don’t give the result you want. You know what you want even if you can’t see it right now. You’d be an idiot to give up and you’re too smart to keep pounding a square peg in a round hole. Try something different,” Leonard added.

“Have you talked to Amy?”

“Of course. You know we converse every Sunday,” said Sheldon.

“Well maybe she’d have some suggestions.”
Sheldon shrugged. “She’s a neurobiologist not a physicist. I can’t really see how that’d be helpful.”

“It’s thinking outside the box. Maybe she can come up with an idea you’ve never thought of. It might even seem really off base but if it gets you moving in the right direction isn’t it worth it?”

Leonard took Sheldon’s silence as his cue to leave. “I’ll check in on you later,” he said as he made for his bedroom. “I’m packing you off to bed at eleven whether you’re finished or not.”

It took him a few minutes to decide but when he did Sheldon was quick to act. Quietly he lifted Penny’s emergency key from the bowl and slipped out of the apartment. He clicked on the light at Penny’s place and closed the door. For once her improved living conditions were a detriment to him as there wasn’t a stray garment tossed randomly around the room that he could snare.

He felt completely mortified by his actions but he was desperate. Looking at Penny’s bed—the scene of the crime—Sheldon knew he’d run out of options and if he wasn’t careful, time. There’s only so long Penny would put up with him before she’d grow weary of his failings.

The only thing was he didn’t want to be alone. No, that wasn’t precise. He wanted Penny and that was enough to make him open her laundry hamper and take what he needed.

xTBBTx

Sheldon closed his menu in a huff.

“We’ve been here twenty one minutes and all we have to show for it are our drinks,” he scowled.

“Well you did give the waitress a bit of a hard time,” replied Leonard as he played with the straw in his cola.

“No less than I give Penny every week which, I should add, she should be taking were it not for a disastrous conflict in scheduling.” Sheldon glared in the direction of the ordering kiosk but he couldn’t spot the waitress.

“God forbid Penny takes the night off so she can register for school,” Howard said with a smirk. “She should get her priorities straight.”

“While I regret the timing I don’t resent the occasion,” Sheldon said tersely. “Ah, here she comes.”

“Be nice,” hissed Raj. “I want to eat sometime tonight.”

“Sorry about that,” the waitress said nervously. “Sherri got behind schedule so I’m replacing her. I’m Julie.” There was something to her smile that indicated to Raj she’d rather be undergoing a root canal than be here.

“Waitressing is all about time-management. Surely the procedure for maintaining the inflow outflow of customers is covered in the orientation or are you picked based on your high score in ‘Diner Dash’?” said Sheldon without looking up from his menu.

“I’ll have the chicken fajitas without cheese or sour cream,” Leonard said with an exaggerated smile as he handed the waitress his menu.

“Double check to make sure before you bring his order. His lactose intolerance will make any ride home unbearable whether the windows are rolled down or not.” Sheldon turned the page of the menu.
“I’ll have the pork chop with baked potato,” Howard said smoothly. “You must forgive my friend here; he’s a little out of his element having to deal with change.”

“‘Change’ is what you get when you provide a larger denomination than what is required,” snorted Sheldon. “What we have here is a disruption in the natural order of things: it’s Tuesday. We’re at the Cheesecake Factory. The missing variable is Penny.”

“And you sir?” the waitress asked Raj. In response the astrophysicist held out his menu and pointed.

“He’ll have the fish and chips,” Leonard interpreted.

“Now that we’ve got the formalities over with it’s time to get down to the brass tacks,” said Sheldon, closing his menu with a snap. “I’ll have the barbecue bacon cheeseburger, barbecue sauce, bacon and cheese on the side. Note the order of presentation on the plate and maintain separation between all items. There should be enough barbecue sauce to adequately cover the burger but not so much it makes it difficult to pour. The bacon will be fully cooked but not too crisp and the cheese will be yellow cheddar only. I am flexible with the patty itself as long as it’s prepared between one hundred and fifty and one hundred and seventy degrees Fahrenheit. Now as we’ve been sitting here”—he checked his watch—“twenty four minutes I’ll assume our meals will be a priority.”

“Extra special extra fast. You got it,” said the waitress with a smile as she took his menu.

“I don’t want it ‘extra special’. I want my order exactly to my specifications,” Sheldon said matter-of-factly. Her smile faltered and she quickly left the table.

“Way to go Sheldon, you broke her,” said Howard.

“Too bad. She was kind of cute,” sighed Raj.

“All I ask for is competence,” Sheldon replied as he got up from the table. “I’ll return shortly so long as the restroom is properly sanitized.”

“You do realize we’re going to need a new place to eat if Penny’s classes are on a Tuesday,” said Raj sadly. “Too bad. For a chain The Cheesecake Factory really had an ambience—and made a darn good grasshopper.”

“We won’t have to worry about that for a while,” said Leonard before taking a sip of his pop. “Penny’s in upgrading right now and as it’s self-directed she picks her own days. Right now she’s off Monday and Friday evenings and every second Wednesday starting tomorrow.”

“So all we have to do is get through tonight. Perfect,” said Howard distractedly as he saw Raj pointing behind him.

“Hi guys. Hello cutie,” said Bernadette as she stood behind her husband.

“Bernadette, what are you doing here?” asked Howard. “Not that it isn’t great to see you.”

“Yeah well I got a desperate call from Penny. Apparently her coworker called and asked if she could return to work for an hour tonight between six and seven since the rest of the wait staff refuse to serve a particular table.”

“Gee I wonder which table that could be?” said Leonard with a grin.
“Yeah right,” Bernadette giggled. “Anyways she called me to see if I could cover for her and I said sure only that I would be leaving after work. I got delayed but better late than never.” She looked towards the kitchen. “There’s Julie. I’ve got to go. Love ya,” she said as she placed a kiss on Howard’s cheek.

“Un-believable,” said Leonard.

“This is Sheldon we are talking about,” Raj reminded him.

“All I know is the waitress better get a fat tip,” grinned Howard. “Daddy wants an expansion pack for his model rocket.”

Raj scrunched his nose. “That so doesn’t sound right, dude.”

xTBBTx

A/N: Wikipedia: Project Quantum Leap; Allergy

Internet Movie Database: Babylon 5; Deep Space Nine

‘Wait ‘til they get a load of me’: Jack Nicholson as Joker

Perturbation Theory: Caltech physics website

The mind governed by the flesh is death, but the mind governed by the Spirit is life and peace: Romans 8:6
The Pathogen Protocol

Chapter Summary

This chapter contains MATURE sexual content. ~Lynn

xTBBTx

One thing about Sheldon Cooper was that he hated not knowing which made him an excellent researcher. From libraries to online resources he knew his way around so as to maximize his time more efficiently. Given enough facts he could come to a decision that was both logical and correct. It’s the way it has always been for him.

But what if it’s wrong?

Sheldon still couldn’t completely wrap his mind around it as he read. For heuristics to apply meant that his orderly brain readily employed accessible, though loosely applicable, information to control problem solving. Why measure when an ‘educated guess’ would suffice? There’s a ‘rule of thumb’ for everything. He shuddered at the thought. What place was there for precision, order and logic in such chaos?

He clicked to another screen although it was unnecessary since he’d already read the information. In the psychology of decision making there was a process called anchoring when a specific piece of information heavily influenced an individual’s thought process.

Germs are a contaminant to be avoided.

Once the anchor is set, there’s a bias toward interpreting other information to reflect the ‘anchored’ information.

To touch or be touched by another person or object opens one to germ contamination and therefore must be avoided.

In effect the first information learned about a subject at an early age affected future decision making and information analysis.

The only thing was he couldn’t pinpoint when his mysophobia started. He remembered his father had a habit of leaving dirty Kleenexes around the house. When toddler Sheldon found one and put it into his mouth his mother was horrified. He felt himself lifted into the air and set on the edge of the sink before an adult finger invaded his mouth to take out the offending tissue. Again and again the finger, now joined by a second, scraped down his tongue and the walls of his mouth, his mother repeatedly saying, “Dirty. Dirty.”

He remembered crying as the taste of soap touched his tongue. He tried desperately to expel the fingers but his mother clamped his jaw with her other hand. “Cleanliness is next to Godliness, Shelly.” She scrubbed until he was sick.

Was that the reason why he reacted to germs the way he did?

He thought back to the ‘Arbage Game’ he played with his Meemaw as soon as he was walking.
Together they’d go from room to room at his house picking up ‘arbage’ as he called it. She’d pick up something particularly revolting and said things like “Yuck” or “Filthy.” It was worse when he recognized the offending item as something of value—a sock or handkerchief for example—as it literally transformed in front of his eyes into something disgusting.

Did his aversion start then?

He clicked to a third screen.

Allergen specific immunotherapy was the only treatment strategy which treated the underlying cause of the allergic disorder. Grudgingly Sheldon admitted Amy had something with her idea of a ‘germ vaccination’; the only problem occurring was his requirement for increasingly larger doses of germs. At some point Penny would notice something amiss with her laundry.

Sheldon took an unnecessary glance over his shoulder as he clicked to the fourth screen.

Like the bonobos the human female underwent a fairly quiet ovulation period so that both male and female partners usually didn’t know when she was fertile. While this didn’t make sense in terms of the genetic compulsion to procreate there was a plausible biological reason: formation of strong emotional bonds between sexual partners important for social interactions and long-term partnership.

Intimacy with Penny needed to be a priority for their relationship to progress at a normal rate. Sexual dissatisfaction was associated with increased risk of divorce and relationship dissolution. After all they’d been through to be together he’d be damned if he’d let that happen.

Clicking to a fifth screen revealed a diagram of a male and female engaging in coitus.

According to the article there were three common practices for intercourse: vaginal, oral and anal. Sheldon shivered. Like the last two would ever happen. He couldn’t imagine putting his penis in a rectal cavity much less inserting his tongue in—

“Done with Penny’s budget?” asked Leonard as he emerged from the washroom.

“Indeed,” said Sheldon as he closed his web browser before sending the spreadsheet to the printer. “I said I’d have time to tabulate since it’s only a biweekly update.” He closed his laptop and stood. “We should have enough time for a one on one grudge match before Howard and Raj get here.”

“Bring it,” Leonard growled as he unwound a controller.

Sheldon raised an eyebrow. “Consider it brought.”

XxX

Penny mounted the stairs, backpack slung across her shoulder. She hadn’t had to carry this many books since high school and even then it wasn’t like she’d been a brainiac who did her homework every night.

As she pulled out her keys the door to apartment 4A opened and Sheldon emerged before quietly closing the door behind him so the sounds of ‘Halo night’ wouldn’t travel into the hall.

“Hey sweetie,” Penny said with a smile.

“Hello Penny,” he replied as he crossed to her door. “How was school?”
“Just like how I remembered it: exciting to get all the ‘new’ textbooks and notebooks and pens and pencils then when it’s time to start working—yetch!” She entered the apartment, leaving the door open for her boyfriend.

“Perhaps we need to come up with another work-song for your studies,” Sheldon said with a twitchy smile. Penny laughed as she let the backpack slide to the floor at her feet before she sat on the couch.

“Somehow I don’t think they allow sea shanties being sung in the study hall.”

“Not sung no but you do possess an mp3 player. I’ll look into some appropriate music for Friday.” She indicated her bag with her foot. “I can’t believe how much these books weigh.”

“Oh I know. After carrying multiple university science texts in my Batman backpack I saw merit in obtaining a luggage rack.”

“You must have been cute to watch: an eleven year old carting his books around in his little red wagon.” She lay back on the couch as she stretched.

“More like constantly being trodden underfoot with his cart perpetually and sometimes quite purposely upset by others,” he replied with pursed lips. This made Penny stop and think.

“Was it really that bad for you?”

“The best of times and the worst. I was free to pursue my academic interests but my age and obvious intellectual superiority made me a target for others.” His jaw stiffened as he noted the sympathetic look on Penny’s face. “All in all it proved to be an acceptable tradeoff. I emerged none the worse for wear with the tools necessary to further my research.”

“My time at college was literally one big blur from one party to the next. This’ll be a new experience actually showing up sober.”

“And maintaining your sobriety during the week as you do your homework,” he reminded her.

“I’ll try to make you proud, dad,” she said with a smirk.

“‘Proud’ implies some form of judgment. I’m pleased for you, Penny. Your future awaits.”

“Thank you Moonpie.” It took Sheldon several tries to realize he was in the game much less up to bat but every once in a while he knocked one out of the park.

“Don’t call me Moonpie. I’ve brought you a copy of your biweekly budget so you can see where you’re at. In October I’ll collect your receipts every two weeks so you can get a better understanding of the dynamic ebb and flow of your cash reserves.” He handed her the sheet.

“Sounds exciting,” she said diplomatically. She tilted her head to regard her boyfriend. “Unlike tomorrow. I’ve got homework so I don’t think it’ll be much of a ‘date night’.”

“We’ll make it a ‘study date night’. I’ve some papers to work on and can be available should you require assistance.” At this Penny pumpkin grinned.

“Is that when I offer to take off my shirt if you help me with my homework?” Sheldon’s eyes narrowed. “Nice try. I shall overlook this affront on academia.”
“Let’s just take a makeup test right now,” she said as she got off the couch. Her arms slipped around his waist as she lay her head on his chest. “I’ve missed you.” In response his arms encircled her.

“As have I,” he said softly, the sound of his voice causing Penny to hug him closer. Sheldon was a bundle of surprises this week. Never in a million years did she expect him to take up her offer of sex; indeed her not so subtle ‘hints’ were a part of the game: she’d suggest and he’d find some artful way to decline.

Then he’d said ‘yes’ and her world changed.

‘Boy did it ever.’ From a prayer answered to a nightmare in a matter of minutes, things unraveled so fast she didn’t have time to think before Sheldon was crouched before her apologizing profusely. He was positively heartsick and she was unable to properly comfort him. Until now.

“Still here, Sheldon,” she said as she rubbed his back.

He nodded and lost himself to the embrace.

Sheldon glanced up from his laptop to see Penny balancing a pencil on her nose.

“I hadn’t realized you were doing physics,” he said drolly.

“Stress relief,” she said slowly. “It’s a trick I learned on a study website. It’s a form of meditation.”

“I highly doubt there’s a schoolyard yogi balancing rulers and pencil leads on his nose while searching for inner tranquility.” He continued typing. “I’m seriously hoping you’re not incorporating this into a philosophy paper.”

“But there yet. I spent yesterday testing and some of my skills are pretty rusty.” She grabbed the pencil before it fell. “Can’t run without first learning to walk. Now that’s philosophy.”

“That could also be a fortune cookie but I digress. It’s been minimally three minutes. We should get back to work.”

Penny snorted. “What’s this ‘we’ stuff? You haven’t stopped typing.” While shaking her head she took up her English textbook and sat herself on the floor in front of Leonard’s stuffed chair.

The silence in the room was a comfortable one. As Sheldon typed he heard the sound of page turning albeit not at the speed he was used to. Based on the reading formula for speed and comprehension he estimated Penny was average but that was to be expected since she hadn’t been an avid reader growing up and certainly hadn’t picked up a book as far as he knew since making her acquaintance. The magazines she usually perused didn’t cut the mustard in terms of stretching her reading muscle as in a lot of cases the grammar was deplorable.

As his mind quickly adjusted itself to rhythms the disruption in Penny’s page-turning caused him to look up. She grabbed her workbook, flipped to a clean page and took out a blue pen to write the date and title before grabbing her ruler and making a double line in red ink. A twitchy smirk crossed Sheldon’s face; he wondered whether Penny was one of those girls at primary school who spent more time making her page look pretty than actually working. Hopefully this time would be different.

Indeed she began scribbbling down notes in point form, verifying with the text before adding
another line. Sheldon found he liked the stroke of her writing: the curve of her letters and the closing of her loops. Her ‘o’s in particular looked smart with a distinct Charlie Brown hair curl in each one. She wrote with authority, her years of jotting down orders making the pen sit comfortably in her fingers.

At once he noticed she’d changed her nail polish from blue to violet. Not that he hadn’t not noticed it. A quick jog through his memory noted her nails were blue on Thursday and violet yesterday so the change occurred some time in the past six days. Regardless the new shade was pleasing and the tapering of the nail allowed his eyes to slide up her fingers, across her hand to her wrist. Quickly Sheldon’s eyes darted back to his screen as Penny set her notebook on the table and stretched. His peripheral vision caught her arms rising over her head and his eyes uncontrollably lifted to see her back arch and her upper ventral region protrude as a result. He took in the roundness of her breasts; how they filled her bra and were colored by her blue t-shirt. Sheldon never told her but he liked her in blue. It reminded him of the first time he saw her in that baby blue t-shirt with her hair cut bluntly with defined bangs, her green eyes bright and curious as she took in her new neighbors. She smiled at him and he’d glanced at the floor lest he be accused of gawking like his roommate. When Sheldon returned his gaze he found she still smiled at him; in her face he detected something he’d later define as kindness instead of the amusement he’d expected to see in someone so beautiful.

That was the subject of his first journal entry concerning Penny—her face. Beyond her naivety concerning her writing and acting ambitions and her ill-fated love with Kurt it was the moment she looked over his whiteboard in wonder that locked in his mind. Her eyes widened and the awe in which she regarded him brought forth something few rarely saw: a genuine Sheldon Cooper smile. The moment was fleeting however as Leonard called her away to look at his whiteboard as if she should be impressed with a derivative restatement of condensed matter posits. It was an insult to equate his board to Sheldon’s work. Taking Penny away was inexcusable.

However things worked out for the best and now she sat nearby, pencil moving in lever motion between her fingers as she again read from her textbook. It was so—intense—seeing her study; her concentration fully engaged in learning woke in Sheldon something akin to pride? Excitement? He couldn’t explain the warmth that seemed to pulse through him.

That is until he noticed the bulge in his pants.

Quickly he closed his laptop and stood, keeping the computer in a strategic place as he stepped behind Penny’s chair.

“I have to rectify something before I can continue working,” he said abruptly before darting to his room.

“Sure,” Penny said absently.

The door opened and Leonard entered the apartment.

“Hey Penny,” he said as he dumped his keys in the bowl. “How goes the studying?”

She yawned. “Ah, you know: nothing to get excited over.”

He knew Leonard was at Leslie’s but that didn’t curb his fear of being caught red-handed. Not that Sheldon hadn’t masturbated when his roommate was home; he was meticulous in how he prepared
for the task, private in his affairs and thorough in his cleanup.

This time was different. Actually every night this week had been different both in frequency of the act and the method. Amy said to treat it like an experiment. He had to admit to himself that it was difficult treating one’s genitalia as a scientific puzzle. Biological phenomenon yes; psychological study no. Perhaps it was the whole notion of there having to be a psychological assessment and procedure that had him disconcerted.

At the end of the day, however, he knew it all boiled down to the germs.

As habit dictated he drew an antibacterial wipe from a container and washed his hands before throwing it in the garbage. He drew another and cleaned his privates thoroughly. Again the wipe went to the garbage. It was a ritual with him: draw a wipe and clean his hands. Garbage. Clean his inner thighs. Garbage. Again with the hands. Garbage.

He closed his eyes and began to stroke himself. Immediate thoughts of Jadzia Dax in her ‘Trouble with Tribbles’ period dress came to mind albeit with her normal Trill coloration. He marveled at the patience involved in marking each dot of pigment on her skin. Too bad the makeup artist wasn’t more meticulous as the dots were not consistent from episode to episode. Perhaps Sheldon was the only one to notice such detail but he found it distracting nonetheless. In his fantasy, however, her dots were uniform and traveled to all the right spots as her outfit altered to her swim suit.

Sheldon settled into a rhythm as he pushed and pulled on his organ, riding the rushes of pleasure as he envisioned Dax’s legs becoming more muscular, the calves more shapely. Slowly his eyes followed the trail of dots as it bee-lined its way to her core. Only it wasn’t hers. Instinctively he knew who this was but his eyes still made their way up her body: over her belly to her nearly symmetrical breasts which were partially covered by flowing strands of blond hair; her well defined shoulders supporting the black straps of her bathing suit. But it was her smile that increased his breathing. So genuine. All for him.

It dawned on him that he hadn’t noticed the zipper that went down the front of her suit but a smaller voice said it didn’t matter. What he was almost hyper-aware of was her hand as it moved to the circular tab and began ever so slowly to descend. Still she smiled as breasts poured out from constricting fabric; her belly button peaked out from its hiding place and still the tab lowered.

Sheldon knew it was time and he opened his eyes to search for the object in question. Panting softly he reached out to Penny’s green tank top from the laundry hamper. As the fabric played through his fingers he thought about her and how much he wanted to touch her skin. Know her flesh through his lips and ultimately the length of him inside her warmth. He swallowed and thought about her lips and her breathy chuckle as she whispered into his— Immediately he frowned and called to mind Penny’s soft hands as they held up her breasts for him to see. (Amy was explicit that in no way was Sheldon to think about his own body—a task he found more difficult as time pressed on.) Slowly Penny started playing with her nipples and Sheldon felt the tension mounting.

His hand now thoroughly saturated with Penny he set the shirt aside and touched himself. Sheldon’s hand ran over his length as the fantasy Penny resumed with the removal of her swim suit. The zipper slid ever downwards until it revealed all of her. She smiled as the suit fell away.

Penny. Unabashedly, unapologetically so.

Pieced together by eidetic memory and imagination he could only summon but a fraction of her heat but it was enough to set him ablaze. Every movement from the rising and lowering of her
chest as she breathed to the curling of her fingers as they stroked her breasts pulsed through his hand as it beat against his shaft. Sheldon groaned as she licked her lips; knew she had the power to make or break him with that little mouth of hers.

She drew breath and he waited for her judgment.

“Simple Simon met a pieman, going to the fair,” Penny said teasingly as slowly her fingers stroked the length of her belly until the tips disappeared between her folds. “Said Simple Simon to the pieman.” A truly wicked smile came to her lips as she held out her fingers now slick with her wetness.

“‘Let me taste your wares’.”

The release was intense, his body awash in endorphins as his muscle continued to pulse and quiver. After he’d rested he carefully folded the washcloth and set it to the side. Indeed he’d barely had time to grab the cloth and cover himself with his other hand before he erupted but Amy didn’t want him in contact with anything save Penny’s clothing lest it distract him. Sheldon knew the logical course was to use her shirt but he couldn’t bring himself to do that. Lord knew this felt devilish enough sneaking pieces of laundry without soiling them further.

He lay back in bed and checked his watch. This was the most difficult part of the experiment: timing how long he could last before he grabbed a wipe and cleaned himself. As days went by the duration increased which was good news his discomfort wasn’t in vain.

Now if only he could stem his sudden craving for strawberry pie…. 

xTBBTx

Penny was boisterous on the phone. Sheldon could hear her as soon as he entered the hallway with laundry basket in hand. Perhaps it would be better to call on her later but it was eight fifteen.

Knock Knock Knock “Penny.”

Knock Knock Knock “Penny.”

Knock Knock Knock “Penny.”

Her voice got louder as she approached and then the door opened. She flashed Sheldon a smile then turned away to continue pacing in front of her coffee table.

“I know! ‘Becca and I worked like dogs the whole night and it didn’t even work out to a dollar per person. Twenty people and a fifteen dollar tip? That’s before it’s split between the two of us! … I know! … No way! ... Really?”

Sheldon felt himself twitch as he glanced at his watch. Laundry had to start soon or his schedule would be off. Of course he could do it without Penny but he didn’t want a repeat of last weekend. It was after all, ‘their’ night.

“Penny.”

For the first time she seemed to recognize the basket in his arm and held up a finger as she dashed into her bedroom.

“Uh huh…..Yeah….You tell it sistah!” Penny brought her own basket to the hamper and began digging out her dirty laundry.
It took her a minute to gather her clothes—yes Sheldon was timing—before she emerged from her bedroom with the basket. He was amazed at her dexterity as she continued to talk with the phone tucked between shoulder and ear while carrying her laundry and soap. She set them down on the floor by the couch and continued talking.

Again Sheldon checked his watch. There was no more time. Setting his basket on top of hers he lifted both and exited the apartment. As he made it to the second floor landing he heard the sound of someone bounding down the stairs until the familiar flip-flop smacking came up to him from behind.

“Sorry about that. Shop talk,” said Penny. “I can take that,” indicating her basket.

“I’ve made it this far without incident,” Sheldon replied evenly.

“You’re most definitely not as coordination-challenged as Leonard. Although he did have a talent for lifting large objects for pretty women,” Penny grinned.

“Ego est viribus,” said Sheldon. “‘Ego is its own strength.’” He stepped aside for Penny to enter the laundry room. “Check the washers,” he said as he set the baskets on the table.

“A-Ok to me.” Penny turned and was surprised to find Sheldon before her with her basket. “Thanks Moonpie.”

“Not referring to me as ‘Moonpie’ is thanks enough,” he said before attending to his own laundry.

“Well then let’s say I owe ya one,” she laughed.

“Penny, they don’t produce enough Red Vines in a year to keep up with your transgressions,” he said matter-of-factly.

“It’s called ‘water on a rock’.”

“More like perpetual annoyance.”

“Eh, potAto potAHto.” Penny set her machine in motion and waited for her boyfriend. “The point is I’ve grown accustomed to that scowl of yours. Anyone ever tell you it’s kinda cute?”

His hand paused on the coin startup. “I can’t say so, no.” He set the machine in motion. “Most people realize ‘cute’ is not the state I’m trying to convey.”

“Oh I know it’s not,” Penny said over the din of the washers as he started his other machines. “It’s still fun to watch, though.”

Sheldon pursed his lips. “You’re incorrigible.”

In response Penny wrapped her arms around his waist. “You wouldn’t have me any other way.”

“Although I’m sure I’d adjust to a quieter, more demur Penny,” he said with a smirk. “Bazinga.”

“Keep this up and you’ll be in need of an ‘adjustment’, Mister.” Lips met.

“I don’t know how kissing after making a sarcastic comment will deter me from making further comments.”

“They’re such a rarity they deserve a celebration,” Penny said with a wink.
“Sarcasm?” Sheldon asked as they left the room.

“Umm sure.”

“Is that sarcasm?”

“Only the Shadow knows,” Penny said in mock seriousness.

“You know what you need?” he said as they climbed the stairs. “Your own ‘bazinga’. Then your sarcasm would be obvious.”

“I’ve got my own ‘bazinga’,” she said with a smirk as her arm hooked through his.

“Sarcasm,” he said. It wasn’t a question.

XxX

With clean laundry in hand Sheldon entered his bedroom and closed the door. Before he began he wanted to remove the object that’d been burning a hole in his pocket for the last hour and forty five minutes. Taking out a plastic bag he stored in another plastic bag he fluffed it open before reaching into his pocket. In a move that would please Wolowitz’s magician sensibilities Sheldon had made a switch as he replaced Penny’s top in the laundry and sneaked another piece of dirty apparel into his pocket without her noticing.

His face blanched as he identified the offending item as a pair of Penny’s panties.

“This isn’t the sock I was looking for,” he breathed.

Forget Obi-Wan’s Jedi showmanship, Sheldon found himself ensorcelled by a power greater than the Force.

xTBBTx

“Sheldon are you nervous?”

“Yes.”

“Don’t be.”

“I wish it was as simple as following your command, Penny. Unfortunately my body has its own ideas.”

“Ok well let’s just snuggle here and relax.” She rested her head on his chest as the rest of her body curled against him on her bed. “Your heart’s racing a zillion miles a second. Just breathe.”

Silence save for the sounds of Sheldon’s deep breathing.

“I’m not calming down,” he said at last.

“Want me to move?”

“That’s a trick question since my body’s beginning to itch.”

“And your head?”

“Couldn’t imagine you anywhere else.”
Smiling, Penny snuggled against his chest, her finger slowly tracing the ‘Red Lantern’ symbol on his t-shirt. “Mind over matter, sweetie.”

Sheldon closed his eyes. “I am the master of my own body.”

“Does that really work?” Penny chuckled. She sensed a smile from her boyfriend.

“Not really. It gives me the illusion of control.”

Immediately Penny was all business as she raised her head to look at him. “Nothing’s going to happen that you don’t want happening, Sheldon.”

“I know,” he replied as his fingers tucked a strand of blond hair behind her ear. His eyes danced over hers as he looked away in what she could only call a moment of bashfulness. “I’m worried what I want to happen won’t either.”

“Before we get all out of control let’s simplify,” she soothed. “What do you want?” A not unkind smile came to her lips. “It’s ok, sweetie. You won’t freak me out.”

“I want to—touch you.” His eyes reached hers and in them was such longing. Something Penny prayed she’d see from Sheldon Cooper.

“Where?” she said evenly, trying to keep the moment light.

“Where wouldn’t I?” he asked in some puzzlement.

Penny stuck out her tongue. “Literalist.” She lowered her head to his chest and sighed. In response she could feel Sheldon’s hand rub lazy circles on her back. “I mean if you were to touch me where would you start?”

“Your shoulders.”

“Why there?”

He called to mind the first time he saw Penny standing in her apartment in a baby blue t-shirt. “They’re strong and well developed. There’s such a physicality to you that’s so primal I know I can’t match it.”

She giggled. “I vill break you like twig.”

“Very easily I imagine.”

“You’re not that fragile Sheldon.” She patted his stomach. “I can feel you under all the layers. You’re no Chris Hemsworth but you’re not a twig either.”

“I’m not sure how to take that.”

“It means you’re F-I-N-E fine”—her fingers walking up to his chest with every letter. She caught his pursed lips and grinned. “You’re cute when you blush.”

“Really Penny,” he chided lightly.

“I’m just saying.” She settled back to the task at hand. “Now you’ve touched my shoulders. What next?”

Silence.
“I don’t know how comfortable I am with this,” Sheldon said softly.

“Yeah but is this a ‘germy’ uncomfortable or a Southern Gentleman uncomfortable?”

More silence.

“You know Sheldon it’s ok to be sexual. And hot. And horny.” Again she raised her head to gaze into his blue eyes. “Hey. Listen to me. I see you in there Mister. Sheldon look at me. Behind your degrees. And big words. Underneath those t-shirts. I see you and you’re so beautiful….”

In a flash Penny was at his mouth, their breaths intermingling before lips joined in a motion that became more rhythmic as the seconds passed. Her hands slid through his hair as she drew Sheldon closer. In response he rolled her gently onto her back, raising his head to give her a slight smile before nuzzling her neck.

As Sheldon’s lips made their way to Penny’s ear he focused solely on her: the moans of pleasure; the softness of her skin. Each kiss was methodical and evenly spaced. The hesitation was perceptible only to Sheldon before his lips slipped past her ear lobe.

Around him he felt Penny’s hands rub against his sides and back. Trying to ignore the sensation he returned to her mouth and started the kiss anew. His tongue felt trapped but he wouldn’t let it venture from his mouth. He wasn’t ready for that. He—

Sheldon stopped his movement and turned his head, resting his forehead on Penny’s shoulder.

“Shel—”

“A moment,” he said through clenched teeth as he fought for control. 'In and out. In and out.' His breaths came through his nose slow and measured. He cursed himself for not thinking about his tongue in his preparations. Granted he wasn’t an expert at making out but Sheldon did realize a gag reflex would be a mood killer. He swallowed heavily and tried not to think even as his brain thrummed in the sensation of Penny’s hand soothing his back as her breath covered his neck.

Taking a deep breath, he held it before slowly releasing it through his mouth. Again he swallowed before raising his gaze to meet Penny’s concerned eyes.

“Crisis averted,” he said with a twitchy mouth.

Her responding smile took his breath.

Again their lips met, moving almost hesitantly as if they were just acquainting themselves for the first time. Slowly the kiss deepened until they parted in order to breathe.

Pushing on his chest to sit him up Penny grabbed the bottom of her shirt and pulled it over her head; her hair cascading around her face reminding Sheldon very much of the Light of Helios that adorned the gods. He wasn’t a religious man in any sense of the word yet if there was ever a moment he felt the presence of the divine this was surely it.

“Time to crack the safe,” Penny said with a smile as she took his hands and tucked them behind her bra.

Carefully orienting his fingers Sheldon deftly unhooked the clasps and dragged the bra away from her body. After a moment to take in the sight he lowered his mouth to just below Penny’s ear and left lingering kisses as he made his way down her neck and across her shoulder. A shiver went down his spine as Penny’s hand stroked the back of his neck. Apparently he had an erogenous zone
he wasn’t aware of until now. With each brushstroke her nails woke in him something he’d long kept contained. He felt butterflies in his stomach and a pulsing further down. Still her fingers kept moving in slow, maddening circles. He let out an involuntary gasp and rested his cheek against her breast, losing himself in her touch.

Her touch.

Over and over his brain recited the words. Relished each syllable. Translated it into a multitude of languages.

“Let’s do it,” she whispered to him as she kissed the top of his head.

“I—don’t know if I can,” he said honestly. “I’m sorry Penny.”

“It’s ok honey,” she soothed. “It was just a suggestion.”

“I’ve read and consulted and practiced and anticipated because I want this.” He sighed. “I need more time.”

“It’ll happen,” she said encouragingly. “Look at us now. We’re hunkered down and you haven’t shoved off. You’re still here. Believe me that’s a victory.”

“I’ll always be here, Penny.” Her hand froze for a moment before it continued rubbing.

“Absolute aside?” she said in a light tone she immediately regretted using. “Sorry. Bad time to be a smartass.”

“Sarcasm reduces stress,” Sheldon said quietly.

Again she kissed him. “Thank you, Moonpie. I know, I know—‘don’t call me Moonpie’.”

Sheldon licked his lips. “I don’t think Meemaw would mind.”

Penny was floored. “What about you?”

“If you could refrain from saying it publicly it’d be appreciated.”

“I’ll try to remember.”

“Which means you won’t alter your behavior,” he said with a smirk.

“I gotta be me,” grinned Penny. She became thoughtful. “You ever think we’d hit three months?”

“Of course.”

“Really?”

“I assure you I examined the available evidence thoroughly and knew once we altered our paradigm there was no going back.”

If Penny thought she was floored before…. “Wow.”

“Indeed.”

“You’re that sure?”

He raised his head. “Are you questioning my abilities?”
“I always leave the math to you, sweetie.”

“A wise decision,” Sheldon murmured as he settled against her chest.

“I’ve been known to have my moments.”

Contentment washed over Penny as her hand stroked her lover’s—her lover’s!—neck.

“Happy Anniversary.”

“Penny it’s not an—”

Again her hand stopped. “Work with me Sheldon,” she giggled.

“Keep rubbing and we’ll forget the incident entirely.”

“Whatever you say….”

xTBBTx

Amy took another bite of her sandwich as she thought. If she could get through examining the prefrontal cortex in the next hour or so she’d have enough time to call a friend who had a private psychiatric practice in Arizona for some input on Raj’s condition. Since Amy had had luck concocting a heuristic immunotherapy approach with Sheldon maybe something equally unorthodox would get the astrophysicist talking.

She picked up her phone and scrolled through the last few texts. Sheldon had reported modest success with her treatment but felt more time was needed to see if it could bring him fully into remission. Right now his difficulty lay with his tongue.

'Need to adjust to personal germs before adding Penny’s. Lick back of hand and refrain from mouthwash for as long as possible', she texted.

She flipped to the next message. Raj wanted to know if she’d be available for Thai night. If so, he’d offered to pick her up.

'I’d like that very much. I’ll expect you at 5:55.'

Penny’s text was a flurry of smiley faces and a big ‘AWESOME!!’ in response to Amy’s inquiry about Sheldon and Penny’s three month ‘anniversary’.

'Celebratory toast Sunday at my place. I’ll confirm with Bernadette.'

Bernadette’s message was more blunt: ‘Cat’s away Sunday. Let’s play.’ The boys were off on another paintball excursion thus leaving the three women a chance to chat unimpeded.

'My place. Sounds good. Will confirm with Penny.'

Amy tutted to herself when she caught the time. She had no idea how she’d ever become such a social butterfly especially since she rarely left the lab.

“This brain won’t slice itself, Amy Farrah Fowler.” She cleared her sandwich and prepared to operate.

xTBBTx
The Perturbation Postulate

xTBBTx

“We ought to do something as couples more than just movie night,” Penny said before taking a sip of her coffee.

“Leslie and I are game,” Leonard replied.

“Well I most certainly am not,” Sheldon sniffed as he washed his cereal bowl in the sink. “By defining the day or evening as something for ‘couples’ immediately excludes Amy and Raj from the activity. Were it a ‘double date’ or some other social coupling I’d be amenable, however.”

“Who says they won’t be a couple by the time we do something,” Penny grinned. Leonard raised an eyebrow.

“Holding out something on us?”

“Not something specific. I’ve just noticed that two single doctor friends of mine are spending an aw-ful lot of time together.”

“Well I can assure you their gatherings have been for the purpose of science as Amy is still in the midst of treating Raj for his selective mutism,” Sheldon said a tad crisply.

“Not all of them Moonpie. They’ve been going out to eat a lot and yeah, before you get all, ‘but Penny as living beings we all have to eat’ there’s a difference between eating at The Cheesecake Factory and eating at The Stella D’or,” Penny said.

“Wow. Yeah Sheldon look how long we’ve known each other and you’ve never taken me there,” Leonard said with a wink to Penny.

Sheldon put his bowl and spoon in the drain rack to join his glass. “You’ve never shown any inclination towards imbibing undersized portions set at appallingly high prices. If you wish to go I’m sure we can arrange a suitable evening.”

“Umm I think you’d be better off going with Penny,” Leonard said before taking a sip of coffee. Sheldon regarded his girlfriend.

“I hadn’t realized you’d wanted to dine there.”

Penny made her way to the door. “Na, I’m a simple girl with simple dreams. All I want someday is breakfast in bed.”

“The next time you’re ill I shall be at your disposal,” Sheldon readily offered.

“Not what I was thinking.” At this Sheldon blanched.

“Penny it’s a little premature to be considering parenthood. I—”

“Try again,” Penny said with a smile. “Thanks for the coffee Leonard.” The short physicist gave a wave as his neighbor departed.

“I suppose I could make her French toast for her birthday,” Sheldon thought aloud.
"You’re being too literal," Leonard said as he made his way to the hall.

Sheldon stood by the refrigerator in thought. ‘Breakfast in bed. Breakfast in be—’

“You get it yet?” asked Leonard from the bathroom. There was no response save for the quiet closing of a bedroom door. He smiled. “He got it all right.”

“All I’m saying is that it was pointless for DC to amalgamate the universes in Crisis on Infinite Earths because by its very nature the universe will continue to parallel and diverge,” said Raj as he, Howard and Sheldon mounted the stairs.

“I agree. There’s no way the multiverses could ever settle on a reality where George Clooney plays Bat-Man,” quipped Howard. All three men giggled, snickered and chuckled respectively.

“Well said Howard,” said Sheldon as he tried the handle on his door. It was locked. “Although to be contrary I can’t conceive of a world where Green Lantern beats The Avengers at the box office.” He unlocked the door and the trio entered.

“What if instead of Joss Whedon they got Joel Schumacher to direct The Avengers?” asked Raj.

“Guess it isn’t challenging enough taking out a lone ‘Caped Crusader’ when he could zap the penultimate billion dollar conclusion to four different Marvel franchises in one fell swoop,” Howard said as he sat on the couch.

“I thought you said Leonard had something to do at home?” Raj set his comic books by the door before sitting next to Howard.

“From what he told me. I’m not his social calendar.” Sheldon took his comic books down the hall to his room. A moment later he came back, a puzzled look on his face. “Odd, he’s not here. What could have been so important he’d miss new comic book ni—”

Both Raj and Howard turned to Sheldon; the lanky man’s gaze veritably bore a hole in the corner by the DNA model. In a shot he was out the door.

“What’s with him?” inquired Howard as he started going through his comics.

Raj smiled. “I think he realizes something else’s missing besides Leonard.”

Knock Knock Knock “Leonard and Penny.”

Knock Knock Knock “Leonard and Penny.”

Knock Knock Knock “Leonard and Penny.”

“Door’s open, Sheldon,” came Penny’s voice. He entered the room to find Penny on the couch surrounded by notebooks and various school supplies. Leonard was by the kitchen island standing next to his—

Sheldon was seething. “What’s that doing here?”

“Leonard was slowly killing a forest showing me what I was doing wrong on paper so he brought over his whiteboard.” Penny pumpkin grinned. “I gotta get me one of those.”

“Indeed.” Sheldon glanced at the Pythagorean Theorem nicely detailed on the board. “So aiding
Penny was your ‘something that came up’ that caused you to miss new comic book night?”

“She snagged me by the mailboxes. I said I’d give her a hand before Halo,” replied Leonard as he began twisting the marker cap.

Sheldon turned to his girlfriend. “Why didn’t you ask me?”

“You’ve been busy with your grand poobah theory. I didn’t want to disturb you,” said Penny.

“Penny when it comes to academics I’m always at your disposal,” Sheldon said in a hurt tone.

“You also said coming back to California meant access to five doctors and Howard. Leonard’s here tonight. Believe me Sheldon you’ll have so many nights of ‘knock knock knock Sheldon?’ you’ll regret ever offering to help me.”

“You’re finished?” Sheldon asked Leonard. The shorter physicist shook his head.

“Got another half hour or so.” At this Sheldon nodded.

“That’ll give Raj and I time to go procure Penny a whiteboard.”

Penny was puzzled. “I don’t need one tonight, sweetie. Leonard said I could borrow his as long as —”

“Oh he did, did he?” Sheldon spat. “Why isn’t that just noble of him to offer his services to a lady in distress?”

Leonard sighed. “Sheldon it’s no big deal. I wasn’t using the board and—”

“So you’d be pleased if this were reversed?” scowled his roommate.

The two men stared at each other before Sheldon turned to Penny with rather a stiff smile. “I’ll return shortly.”

“Ok, what the frak was that about?” asked Penny after Sheldon had left.

“I violated one of the cardinal rules,” said Leonard with slight smirk. “There are two things you need to understand about whiteboards: one, no one is to touch your board but you; two, never let your girlfriend use another man’s whiteboard.”

Penny giggled. “Seriously?”

“It’s a pledge we take before we’re given our first dry-erase markers,” Leonard said solemnly but with a twinkle in his eyes.

“Wow. You risked being tossed out of the Legion of Supergeeks for little ol’ me?”

“I’m a sucker for a pretty face.”

Penny smiled. “That you are. Say, is that a dry-erase marker in your pocket?”

Leonard laughed. “Back to work, missy.”

The sounds of two sets of feet ascending the stairs filled the landing until they turned the corner
and walked the last flight to their hall.

“Well here we are,” said Penny.

“Here we are,” agreed Sheldon.

A little smile came to her lips. “At this point I usually ask a fella in for coffee.”

“And I’d tell you I don’t drink coffee,” he replied.

“So then I’d offer you tea.”

“I’d say I was not sick nor in distress.”

“I’d think ‘cute, but clueless’.”

“I’d be wondering why you were frustrated as all I did was refuse a hot beverage. As far as I know it’s a social convention but not non-optional.”

“Then I’d sigh”—here she made a little sound—“and smile and say ‘Goodnight Sheldon’.”

“And I’d raise an eyebrow”—Penny giggled as he did so—“and enquire as to the status of our goodnight kiss.”

“I’d probably give a big ol’ grin and teasingly say, ‘I thought you weren’t interested?’”

“I’d adamantly refute that statement.”

“How would you do that?”

“First I’d state I’d made no such indication either in word or action that I wasn’t interested. Furthermore, in entering the social construct known as a ‘date’ I acknowledged there was a procedure to follow which concluded with a kiss should the evening have been sufficiently pleasing. From your words and actions during the night I decided you were satisfied with the turn of events and therefore expect a goodnight kiss.”

“I’m impressed.”

“Facts don’t lie.”

“So you kissing me is a fact?”

“Conjecture at this point, although I am hopeful.”

“I’d be hoping too.”

“For what?”

“For you to shut your pie hole and just kiss me.”

“There’s that.”

Her lips were soft and warm as he covered her mouth. Together they moved: gently, lightly and for a moment they were all they needed to know and where they needed to be.

“Not bad, Moonpie.”
Another kiss.

“Don’t call me Moonpie.”

One. Two more kisses and they parted. Penny fished out her keys from her purse and opened her door.

“Last call for coffee,” she said with a kindly smile.

“Goodnight, Penny.”

He waited until her door closed before letting out a deep but silent sigh. A moment longer and then he was across the hall and opening his own door.

“Hey Sheldon,” said Leonard from the kitchen.

“Leonard.” He dropped his keys in the bowl.

His roommate frowned. “You look pensive. Want a hot beverage?”

“I don’t want to be a bother.”

“It’s no bother. Just let me finish loading the coffee maker for tomorrow and I’ll put on the kettle.”

Sheldon gave a gaspy laugh.

“What?”

“And you say I don’t have a sense of humor,” the lanky physicist said as he went down the hall to prepare for bed.

xTBBTx

Sheldon sat on the corner of his desk chewing on a Red Vine as he glanced over his whiteboards. He still wasn’t getting the answer he wanted but at least he was quicker to discern when he’d lost track and so correct himself.

After five more minutes of contemplating he sighed and checked his watch. He was due for a break and he readily admitted he needed one. With a stretch he stood up and headed for the door. Sheldon had the sudden urge to go for a walk and he was never one to deny his body anything. Once out in the hall he nodded a greeting to Professor Webster before setting off around the corner and down a familiar stretch of hallway until he found himself outside his old office. Save for the name change to ‘Dr. Rajesh Koothrappali, Astrophysics’ the door looked the same.

Knock Knock Knock “Raj.”

Knock Knock Knock “Raj.”

Knock Knock Knock “Raj.”

“Come in,” said a familiar East Indian accented voice.

Sheldon immediately regretted not taking a deep breath before entering as the smell of sandalwood was extraordinary to his sensitive nose. Nevertheless he didn’t want to be disrupted so he closed the door.
“What brings you to my humble abode?” asked Raj with a friendly smile. It truly was a blessing not having to share an office with Sheldon; that glow-in-the-dark ant farm really gave him the creeps.

“Was in need of a break and while out on my constitutional thought to drop in on my good friend and see how he’s doing,” Sheldon replied with a twitchy smile. Raj was immediately suspicious.

“I’m not finished with the last set of numbers you gave me,” he said as a warning.

“I’m not expecting them before late next week. I’m working on my own project at the moment.”

“Ah.” Raj was immediately at ease. “How’s it going?”

“Slowly. Still Rome wasn’t built in a day.” Sheldon scanned the bookshelves, frowning at the mix of distinguished scientists and hackney romance writers. At least he managed to banish ‘Twilight’ from the office before he left. “How about you?”

“Hmm?”

“How have you been?”

“Quite good actually.”

“I see.” Sheldon glanced at Raj’s whiteboard. The equations were a little long-winded but the results were sound. He’d never tell another soul but having Raj as an assistant was moving the project for detecting WIMP annihilations ahead of schedule. “So Penny says you’ve been spending your leisure time with Amy Farrah Fowler.”

'So this is what this is all about.' “A good part of it, yes. All of you have girlfriends or a wife so I’ve more time on my hands.”

Sheldon nodded, trying to put out of his mind his mother’s phrase implicating the devil’s influence on idle hands. “It’s obvious why you’d want to see Amy: she’s charming, witty, fiercely intelligent—a superior woman in every way.”

“So why aren’t you dating her?” Raj asked as he put down his book to regard his friend.

“I was already—compromised—before I met her. I just hadn’t realized it until recently,” Sheldon said evenly.

“Amy was really hurt you know,” said Raj.

“It wasn’t my intent.”

“It never is. We all enter relationships with nothing but good intentions, Sheldon. Sometimes they work, sometimes they don’t. The only thing we can do is try to be faithful to our principles and let Kamadeva bless our hearts.”

Both men eyed each other.

“Be good to her,” Sheldon said at last.

“Sheldon we’re just friends.”

“Raj—”

“Besides, you don’t have to tell me that. She’s amazing.”
Again Sheldon nodded. “I should get back to my work.”

Raj shook his head as his friend closed the door. He couldn’t believe he’d gotten the Sheldon Cooper equivalent of ‘mess with her and I break your kneecaps’. Sheldon really had to be crazy to imagine Amy interested in Raj.

“What am I saying? Sheldon is crazy.” Raj chuckled to himself and went back to his book.

xTBBTx

Knock Knock Knock “Leonard.”

Knock Knock Knock “Leonard.”

Knock Knock Knock “Leonard.”

Leonard sighed. Times like this he was glad his vision was bad enough that he couldn’t read the time on his clock because if he could he was sure he’d murder Sheldon the minute the tall man entered the room. “Yes Sheldon?”

The door opened and Sheldon entered. “I hope I’m not disturbing you.”

Ok now Leonard wanted to know what time it was. He put on his glasses and was greeted by ‘two thirty five’ on his clock. “Why would you be disturbing me? I was only sleeping.”

“Fair enough,” Sheldon replied, oblivious to the sarcasm. “Leonard I’ve been reading about coitus from a variety of sources and while they’ve provided a clear outline for what to expect when things go right the information gets sketchy when it comes to bedroom faux pas. I was unsure how to proceed with the research until I thought of you and all your disastrous exploits.” He raised himself on the balls of his feet with his hands clasped behind his back.

“I need you to tell me what to do if coitus is less than satisfactory.”

“Gee thanks a lot.” Leonard rolled onto his back and put his hands behind his head. “There’s a lot that can go wrong before, during and after coitus. Can we narrow down a timeframe?”

“Perhaps we should go in chronological order.”

“Ok first thing is to make sure the mood is right.”

Sheldon raised an eyebrow. “What is this ‘mood’?”

“Your date—in this case Penny—needs to be in the correct psychological and emotional state for her to desire coitus,” answered Leonard.

“As her tendency is to initiate I’ve never had sufficient opportunity to ask her state of mind,” Sheldon shrugged.

Leonard smiled at his own memories of Penny. Sheldon was bang-on with his observation. “Ok, so she’s willing. The next thing is to see if you’re willing.”

“My pulse rate is usually elevated and my sweat glands are engaged as my body feels flushed. I find myself short of breath and my genitals feel constricted in—”

“That’s good,” Leonard said quickly. “We’ll say you’re interested. Ok, then it’s all about foreplay.”
“Kissing, licking, sucking, nipping,” Sheldon said matter-of-factly. “What if I have difficulties?”

“With what?”

“All of it.”

Leonard grinned. “Well that’s why you’ve got to keep communicating. Let her know how beautiful she is and how turned on you are and how much you’d like to please her.”

Sheldon was puzzled. “Whenever Penny and I engage in non-coital sexual behavior she likes silence or at least appreciates the quiet in lieu of listening to your continual moaning.”

“Did she say that?” Leonard sputtered.

“Not in so many words. I believe the phrase she used was, ‘Nice to see you can shut your pie hole unlike Leo—’”

“Ok ok. So you’re with Penny and she wants to have sex and you want to have sex. Here’s a crazy idea—have sex.”

“We’re skipping over the foreplay,” said Sheldon as he began to pace. “I need to know what to do should something go awry.”

“Since your entire game plan right now revolves around talking I can’t see how things could get any worse. Just tell her how you feel.”

The lanky man stopped to look at his roommate. “I don’t think that’s a good idea.”

“Why? People like to know they’re loved, Sheldon.”

“Unless one was to prematurely ‘reveal his cards’ as Wolowitz would say. You’re aware of the consequence,” Sheldon said seriously.

“Eyah.” Leonard paused. “Except in your case it’s different.”

“Explain.”

“Think about it Sheldon: you’re not having sex, you don’t wine-and-dine her, you don’t send her love notes or flowers or do things for her ‘just cuz’ and yet she’s still with you. Hell you act like ‘Sheldon’ and she’s still with you. Why would she be if she didn’t love you?”

“I’ve learned there are many layers to emotions even if I don’t grasp the subtleties,” admitted Sheldon. “I concur that Penny has a measure of ‘feelings’ for me but I can’t go so far as to surmise their intensity and act accordingly.”

“If you can’t show her and you can’t tell her she might assume you’re not serious. Normally the word is ‘interested’ but there’s no doubt you are; the question is really whether you’re prepared to act on your feelings. I’m not telling you to say, ‘I love you Penny’. Just let her know how you feel.”

After a brief moment Sheldon nodded. “You’ve given me much to ponder. Goodnight Leonard.”

“Night Sheldon.”

If he knew the incessant knocking wouldn’t drive him nuts Leonard would have looked into a better lock for the door long ago.
Bernadette leaned over to give Penny a whack on the back as the waitress choked on her wine.

“What?!” Penny sputtered.

“I’m just saying it would put him more at ease,” Amy said calmly.

Penny put down her glass and wiped the tears with her fingers. “And how am I supposed to tell him? ‘I had an STD test today pass the salt?’ Leave the results on the coffee table? Power Point presentation?”

“It would be preferable if you waited until the results came in so he wouldn’t have time to ponder the implications,” Amy replied.

“I was fine the last time I was checked so unless Leonard had contracted something and hadn’t told me I’m in the clear,” Penny said.

“‘Should’ be in the clear,” amended Bernadette. “I’m Catholic Penny. Technically I was still a virgin on my wedding night if you know what I mean,” she said with a wink. “You never know who’ll fall off the wagon.”

“This is Leonard we’re talking about,” Penny chuckled.

Amy raised an eyebrow. “Who’d ever have thought he’d land you?”

Penny looked to Bernadette who shrugged.

'Book time for STD test', Penny typed into her phone.

“So if the Cosmic Cube’s back in Asgard how’s Thor supposed to make it to earth for ‘Avengers 2’?” asked Leonard as he took the ‘Thor’ dvd from the machine.

“The comics didn’t say it was impossible to travel to earth without the Bifrost bridge only that it was difficult,” Sheldon replied as he studied his whiteboard.

Raj frowned. “All I know is he’d better meet up with Jane Foster this time. He returns from another world and no phone call? Not even a text? What a jerk.”

Howard tapped his best friend on the knee. “Speaking of messages Bernadette said to say, ‘congratulations’.?”

Leonard looked at the astrophysicist. “For what?”

“It’s nothing,” Raj said dismissively.

“O-K,” said Howard slowly. He didn’t know what was going on but he’d wait to consult with Raj before he went further.

The sound of footsteps in the hall preceded Penny’s entrance into the apartment.

“Hey all,” she said cheerily. “Raj! The man of the hour.”

He shook his head no. When he realized both Leonard and Sheldon were staring curiously at him.
he twirled a finger beside his head as he indicated Penny.

“Don’t be all blushy,” Penny went on. “Come on, let’s see it.”

“What are you talking about?” asked Leonard.

“Well I can tell you don’t subscribe. This week’s issue of ‘People’ is out. You know, the one with Raj’s article. Julie always brings her copy to work so I flip through them.”

“Congratulations,” Leonard said to Raj. “Although I don’t see what the big secret is.”

Raj thought for a moment before he widened his eyes and shook his hands in the air.

“Ah,” Leonard replied. “You wanted it to be a surprise. Sorry about that but you know what they say about news traveling fast.”

Sheldon turned away from the board to address the room. “It’s true. In fact Amy Farrah Fowler and I conducted an experiment where we issued two pieces of gossip and—”

“Oh, don’t worry sweetie I snagged Julie’s copy,” Penny said as she plunked her schoolbag on the arm of the couch and began searching for the magazine. Looking horrorstruck Raj shook his head adamantly as he tried to dissuade Penny from her course of action.

“It’s no big deal, Raj. God it’s not like you’re on the front cover or anything like that. Ah! Here it is.” She pulled out the magazine and began flipping through the pages.

“Still it would be nice to be in ‘People’,” said Howard.

Leonard was incredulous. “Howard, you’re going into space.”

“Yeah but how many hot chicks read my synagogue’s newsletter?” He winked as Leonard rolled his eyes.

“Oh, don’t worry sweetie I snagged Julie’s copy,” Penny said as she plunked her schoolbag on the arm of the couch and began searching for the magazine. Looking horrorstruck Raj shook his head adamantly as he tried to dissuade Penny from her course of action.

“It’s no big deal, Raj. God it’s not like you’re on the front cover or anything like that. Ah! Here it is.” She pulled out the magazine and began flipping through the pages.

“Still it would be nice to be in ‘People’,” said Howard.

“Here it is.” With shoulders lowered Raj moved aside so Penny could hand the article to the engineer.

“Nice picture,” Howard began. After a moment his mouth dropped open and he began chuckling.

“What?” asked Leonard, smiling because of the look on Howard’s face. The physicist scooted around to the back of the couch so he could read over Howard’s shoulder. At once Leonard started to choke as he did his best to reign in his laughter.

“It seems there’s amusement to be found in your article,” said Sheldon as he scribbled an equation on the board.

“Sheldon—” Leonard began but Howard quickly shut him up.

“No, no, let me do the honors.” He got up and crossed over to his tall friend and held out the magazine.

“No thank you,” Sheldon said. “If it were a scientific publication it would be another matter but as
“It’s just common tabloid stock I’ll skip it.”

“Too bad,” Howard drawled. “Because you’re mentioned in here and—”

“Give it to me!” At once Sheldon snatched the magazine and began to read. A split second later he glared murderously across the room at Raj, who was curiously standing in the open doorway. The astrophysicist was sheepish as he shrugged apologetically before turning and running down the stairs.

“You’re wrinkling the magazine,” Penny growled as she took a moment to pry it out of Sheldon’s hands. She glanced at the article. “I didn’t know you were in here?”

“It’s kind of subtle,” Howard chortled. “You know how humble Sheldon is.”

“Though I think the word ‘outraged’ is more applicable at the moment,” Leonard said with a bit of sympathy.

At once Penny’s mouth formed an ‘o’. She glanced at Leonard before reading the end of the article aloud: “‘So what’s next for our dashing doctor? He’s decided to take a break from Neptune and is assisting a colleague in searching for signs of the early universe known as dark matter. We know he’ll have a ‘Big Bang’ of a time doing it.’”

“‘Assisting a colleague’?” seethed Sheldon. “I’m the reason why he’s employed and still living in the country!”

“Don’t take it to heart sweetie,” Penny soothed. “They’re just fluffing up his story to make him sound better.”

“At my expense,” Sheldon grumbled.

“Well it’s not like they mentioned you by name,” said Leonard.

Sheldon put his marker on the whiteboard ledge. “So which is worse, Leonard: having my name out there as Koothrappali’s lapdog or having his name on the mouths of mainstream America’s lips whenever anything I discover about dark matter makes the news?”

“I thought you didn’t give a damn what ordinary folk thought?” Howard reminded him.

“I care about what I think,” Sheldon spat. “And I think this is a load of hooey.” He stormed down the hall. The three remaining friends winced at the sound of a slammed door.

“Sheldon,” Penny called as she crossed the room to follow her boyfriend. “Come on sweetie.”

“You think Raj knew?” Leonard said. Howard gave him a crooked smirk. “Yeah, silly to ask.”

The door opened and Leonard entered the room. He spotted Penny reclining on the couch reading a magazine while Sheldon stood as still as stone in front of his whiteboard. Carefully he closed the door without making a sound and gingerly placed his keys in the bowl. Creeping across the floor he stopped behind Penny and put his mouth close to her ear.

“How long’s he been like this?” he said softly.

She shrugged. “Since I came in at least.” Leonard nodded.
“He’s been struggling with this for over two weeks. I’ve offered to help but he’s dismissed me so I give up.”

“Except for the dark circles I’d be hard-pressed knowing he’s in a bad way.”

“That’s because he’s with you. You have an uplifting effect on people. You should see him at night sometimes,” Leonard grinned. “Like walking in a minefield.”

“If you’re quite finished with your chat about my mental state can we have some quiet?” Sheldon said stiffly without turning from the board.

“‘Kaboom’,,” Leonard said, gesturing with his hands the bomb’s explosion radius. Penny shook her head as she smirked before returning to her magazine. As for Leonard he got a bottled water from the refrigerator and stood behind his stuffed chair in order to get a good look at Sheldon’s equation.

“Clever use of the time constant,” Leonard said after a few minutes. “I see you’re trying to maneuver out from the elegant sequence to something akin to—”

“—The Feynman diagram, yes,” Sheldon agreed.

Both men stood in thought.

“Have you tried substituting the structural construct for—”

“I’ve made corrections and substitutions. I’ve used time dependently and independently. Multi-Parameter Case and Hamiltonian. I’ve even tried a Lorentz invariant field to no avail,” Sheldon grumbled.

“‘Lorentz invariant field’?” asked a puzzled Leonard. “How does that even apply?”

“It doesn’t.” A pause. “I just wasn’t going to let Dennis Kim be right a second time.”

“Ok then. How about—”

“Leonard I’m doing enough questioning of my own work without needing to backtrack to answer your ineffective ‘solutions’—and I put that term in very heavy quotes I may add,” Sheldon said testily.

“Forgive a guy for trying to help,” Leonard replied before taking a sip of water.

Sheldon turned to Leonard, his blue eyes icy. “When I have need for triviality I’ll be sure to give you a—”

“Sheldon, I need a hand with something,” said Penny as she got off the couch. There’s a moment when she felt she was the only breathing creature in the apartment. “Sheldon,” she tried again.

“With what?” he said at last.

“It’s in my apartment.”

“Penny I’m busy.”

“It’ll only take a few minutes then you can get back to discovering time or whatever,” she said as she made her way to her boyfriend. She stood between the two men and waved to get Sheldon’s attention. “Just for a moment. I’ll bring you right back I promise.”
His jaw clenched as he thought. “Don’t touch my board,” he said to Leonard. Penny took his hand and led him from the apartment, across the hall and into her own abode. She dragged him through the living room into the bedroom to the bed where she marched on her knees until she was up enough on the mattress to recline. The arm that held Sheldon’s hand went taut.

“I don’t have time for this, Penny,” Sheldon said with annoyance.

“I want to talk to you,” she said calmly.

“I can adequately converse from a standing position.”

“Well I’ve been on my feet all day so you’re ahead of me there,” she replied. She tugged his arm lightly. “I just want to be eye to eye with you, stretch. Work with me will ya?” He continued to scowl at her. “The talk is non-optional so the sooner you get down here the sooner it starts.” With a roll of the eyes Sheldon crawled onto the bed and lay down on his side facing his girlfriend.

“You may begin,” he said tersely.

“Not until you drop the pissy attitude. I’ve done nothing to deserve it so I’m not taking it,” she said back at him. He stared a moment before closing his eyes and nodding his head.

“I apologize,” he said quietly. Sheldon opened his eyes. “Please proceed,” he said with a poor attempt at a smile.

“What’s going on Sheldon? Leonard tells me you’re stuck on a problem again,” Penny began.

“Not that it’s any business of his but yes, I find myself at an impasse,” he frowned.

“See, it’s that ‘it’s not any of his business’ thing that’s got me involved. You’re not formulating the Caramilk secret, Moonpie.” He pursed his lips and started to speak. “Ok, ok, we’ll skip the sarcasm,” she interjected. “So what are you working on?”

“Penny I really doubt—”

“You’re smart enough to explain to me what you’re doing?” she asked with a little smile.

“You won’t let this drop will you?” he asked simply.

“Nope.”

Sheldon sighed. “There are some theories that can’t be solved exactly. That doesn’t mean we can’t study them; we instead compute power series expansions in a small parameter. For example, quantum electrodynamics has a small parameter, called the fine structure constant which is given by—well it doesn’t matter. Let’s say it equals ‘a’. Then if we want to look at a specific property—which we’ll call ‘T’—we use ‘a’ and ‘T’ repeatedly in a set formula—a whole whack of math—to come up with T (a)—an approximation.”

“I actually got some of that,” Penny said proudly. “Not enough to say I fully understand what the frak you just said but it’s a victory.” She squeezed his hand. “You know you’ve got a roommate who understands this stuff better than me.”

“I’m aware of that,” Sheldon replied.

“O-K. What about Raj? I’m sure he’d be—”

“No thank you.”
“Too soon huh?” She shook her head. “You help them out all the time. What’s wrong with having them return the favor?”

“I don’t need their help, Penny,” Sheldon said firmly and with a harshness to his voice.

They stared at each other in silence.

“You sound like an egotistical jackass, only you almost always sound like that when it comes to your work so that means this is something else altogether.” Penny gave his hand another squeeze. “Come on Sheldon, out with it.”

At first he seemed content to let the silence speak for him but after a moment his eyes flashed to Penny’s calm yet concerned expression.

“I don’t mind helping them out on any of their problems. If they come to me with an interesting proposition I’m more than willing to collaborate. But after the trip to the Arctic I’ll be damned if I let them go near my work again.”

Penny nodded. “That’s too bad you feel that way. Understandable though.”

“Before I found out my data had been falsified my entire world had changed,” Sheldon said softly. “By detecting the monopoles I would have surely garnered my Nobel Prize yet it was more than that. I’ve devoted twenty one years to understanding how everything came to be and why things work as they do. Sure I’m getting closer in solving the riddle but I admit there’s a cloud of apprehension surrounding me as the years tick by. To think for a moment that my life’s work had reached its apex and I was at the doorstep of knowing the structure of the universe only to have it be nothing more than a cruel ruse perpetrated by my ‘friends’. He looked at her. “You’re the only one who checked in on me to see how I was.”

“I’m sorry,” Penny said.

“In their defense they suggested their actions were better than their alternate plans of shooting me with a homemade crossbow or tearing me to shreds with teams of pack dogs.” Sheldon’s face turned thoughtful. “It’s taken me some time but I’ve come to understand I can be—difficult. I’ve always been the object of ridicule and frankly I didn’t care because my work was taken seriously. It’s taken me nearly three years to regain what academic standing I have now and I won’t risk my work.” His blue eyes were steadfast. “I can’t.”

Penny nodded. “We’ll get through this Sheldon. If it takes you working at the Cheesecake Factory or playing in the ball pit at the local Kid Zone to get this sorted out then so be it. Your work is you. I’m just along for the ride.”

Sheldon narrowed his eyes. “That’s not true.”

“Hey, I’m not saying that because I’m feeling sorry for myself. It is what it is. You’re here to solve the riddle of the universe and I’m here to remind you of your human heritage, Mr. Spock.” She raised Sheldon’s hand to her lips for a light kiss. “You really are a great friend, Sheldon.”

“Of course I am. As my mother would say: ‘Now Shelly, Jesus is all about forgiveness’. I quickly realized he said nothing about forgetting and as we know, I don’t forget. Leonard might be my best friend but in some respects that’s only in the context of his being the best of the lot; excluding Amy of course.”

“Gee thanks,” Penny grinned.
“I’m not counting you. You’re another category entirely.”

“And what would that be? Sassy-assed sidekick?”

“Necessity. You’re absolutely necessary Penny.” She blushed at the earnestness of his comment.

“Fascinating. Even though I have to say I don’t advocate the use of absolutes”—here Sheldon laughed at her words said in an imitation of Mr. Spock—“in this case I’m willing to make an exception.”

“Normally there’d be a rebuttal of ‘whackadoodle’ but as this is the most sensible phrase I’ve heard you utter in the past—” He never got to finish as Penny growled and moved into his comfort zone for a tactical and tactile response.

As it turned out, Dr. Sheldon Cooper was indeed ticklish.

xTBBTx


Perturbation Theory: Caltech site.

My Two Cents: For my story I’ve tried to adhere to the spirit of the show in its entirety so I’ve avoided the one glaring misstep the writers made (imo) until now—the faking of Sheldon’s monopole readings in the Arctic. The best way I could reconcile the event with the rest of the show is to have Sheldon compartmentalize his ‘friends’ and never put his core research at risk again. It’s the only way I can see show-Sheldon remaining friends with them without alluding to the idea that he’s at the mercy of idiot writers.
Here we are at the end of another three months hence the end of Volume Two. I'm currently in the midst of writing Volume Three but be forewarned I'm a slow writer. Thank you all so much for reading and reviewing my story. ~Lynn

This chapter contains mature sexual content.

Penny’s eyes were closed as her brain was lulled by the rocking of her body as both Sheldon and she kissed. Gently her hands were removed from his face and her boyfriend began nuzzling her neck.

“Mmmm,” she said, her toes curling. She turned her head to allow him better access to her earlobe. He always kissed it but maybe if she played her cards right she could get him to—

She felt Sheldon go stock still.

“Sheldon what—”

“I’ve got it!” He sat up, his mind a flurry of activity as it checked and rechecked his numbers.

“What?” Penny asked, somewhat annoyed his attentions had stopped.

“The problem with perturbation theory,” he said excitedly. “It completely misses important qualitative phenomena because there are non-perturbative contributions to many physically interesting quantities that have the structure ‘T (a)np ~ exp(c/a)’.” His eyes were all aglow.

“Go on,” she said with a sigh. Sheldon planted a kiss before he stood up.

“I can’t promise I’ll be back tonight.”

“Shoo!”

As he left she heard him squeal out an “I got it!” in the hallway.

“At least one of us got it,” Penny said with a smirk.

Sheldon rolled his eyes as he spotted Howard shuffling a deck of cards at the lunch table.

“Where’s Leonard and Raj?” the physicist asked as he sat down with his tray.

“Leonard got lured away by Leslie and Raj is busy getting his back patted by President Siebert,” replied the engineer. “He was in a publication of some sort from what I understand.”

“Ha ha,” Sheldon said with a sour look. “We’ll see how much time Raj has for milking his ill-
gotten accolades once he gets the list of posits I want him to run.”

“Revenge is a ‘matter’ best served in the ‘dark’,” Howard nodded with a smirk.

“Indeed.” Sheldon began cleaning his hands with a napkin. “According to social protocol as this is the first time I’m seeing you today I’m to pass on my best wishes for your birthday even though we’ll be celebrating it later tonight.”

“Thank you Sheldon.” Howard stared thoughtfully at his friend as he shuffled the cards. He never liked to admit to himself when he felt sorry for Sheldon given all the times the lanky man belittled his work. Nevertheless Sheldon seemed genuinely upset about Raj’s article. Perhaps Howard could cut him a break.

“Remember that card trick I showed you?” the engineer began. Immediately a scowl crossed Sheldon’s face.

“How could I not? I was grounded for a week by my mother for hacking into a government computer and trying to procure uranium on the internet.”

“How could she ground you? She lives in Texas.”

“A man’s only as good as his word, Howard,” Sheldon explained as he harpooned a cherry tomato with his fork. “My mother told me to mind her so I did.”

“I mind an awful lot what my mother says to me sometimes,” grinned Howard. “Anyways, back to the trick. In light of my birthday I thought I’d give you a gift and tell you how it’s done.”

Immediately Sheldon’s eyes lit up before he made an obvious effort to look disinterested. “Oh?”

“It’s bunk. I never knew what the card was. I’d call out any card and Raj, Leonard or Penny just agreed.”

Sheldon was silent as he processed the information. “So you’re saying I succumbed to the illusion of there only being one trickster when in fact I was being ‘hustled’ by the other participant.” He smirked. “Well played.”

“Thank you,” said Howard as his eyes drifted over Sheldon’s shoulder.

“Hewwo Howawd,” said Kripke as he stopped at the table. “Happy Biwthday.”

“Thanks Barry,” Howard replied. The plasma physicist turned to Sheldon.

“So Coopah, whewe’s youw boss? Waj know you’we on a bweak?”

“Raj is my underling. When I decide to have my lunch is up to me,” growled Sheldon.

“Funny, that’s not what I wead,” Kripke mused with devilish delight. He nodded towards Howard’s cards. “What you pwaying?”

“Oh I was just about to show Sheldon a trick,” Howard said slowly. He set the deck on the table. “Pick a card but don’t show me. Then put it back into the pack.”

“Alright,” Sheldon said with an exaggerated grin. He drew a card, peering at Kripke and Howard over the seven of clubs he held with sparkly eyes before replacing it in the deck. Howard started shuffling.
“Since it’s my birthday we’ll work the numbers as such: what does my date of birth add up to?”

“Nineteen eighty two plus nine plus twenty one equals two thousand and twelve,” said Sheldon enthusiastically.

“And add the digits together and we get?”

“Five.”

Howard counted out five cards, turning over the fifth. “This your card?”

At once Sheldon was on his feet. “I still hate you,” he hissed before storming off.

Howard gave a laughing Kripke a puzzled expression as his fingers tapped on the face of the seven of clubs.

xTBBTx

“Don’t even think about leaving,” Penny growled. Sheldon stood frozen with his back to her in the doorway of her bedroom.

“I’d rather be alone,” he replied tersely.

“Tough shit,” she snapped. “Time to get the big boy pants on so we can get your pants off. Now come here.”

With a sigh of exasperation Sheldon returned to stand in front of his topless girlfriend with his arms folded across his chest.

“Getting angry won’t alter the situation. Believe me,” he said.

“I’m not ang—” Penny stopped herself as even she felt her volume was a tad elevated. “I’m not angry at the situation, I’m frustrated. What I am angry about is you retreating into your room every time we hit a snag. That’s got to stop.”

“Emotional outbursts are your forte, not mine. Along with ‘if you can’t say anything nice don’t say anything at all’ Mother also told me: ‘Shelly, now don’t you go making a scene’,” he drawled.

Penny looked at the ceiling and sighed. “Getting angry doesn’t mean you’re making a scene. I’ve heard you angry with Leonard plenty of times and it’s Leonard who storms out and ends up sitting in my living room in a pissy mood.”

“I think our particular situation is more intimate than any altercation I’ve had with Leonard,” Sheldon responded.

“There’s that.” Penny took a moment to pop her shirt on. “But the only way we’re going to work through this is if we talk to each other. I need to know what’s going on in that head of yours.”

“Germs,” he spat. “When isn’t it about germs?” He stopped himself from saying more and gave an angry sigh.

“Go on,” she prodded but Sheldon stood silent. “Ok, let’s do it from my perspective. We were doing fine with the kisses and groping and you most definitely were into it when my shirt came off. I can put my hands up your shirt and slip my fingers behind your belt but as soon as I try to undress you, you….” She tilted her head for him to continue.
“Imagine myself covered in germs as I lay on your dirty sheets with you pressing against me flesh to flesh.” He grimaced as he tried to suppress a shudder. “Then there’s the saliva and sweat and eventual other bodily fluids to consider and it quickly becomes a chaotic situation.”

Penny bit her lip in thought. “Let’s keep this simple and start with the basics. Do you like me?”

“Yes,” Sheldon replied, not sure where this was going.

“Do you want to have sex with me?” Unknowingly she held her breath.

“Yes,” he said firmly.

Penny smiled. “Ok, those are the big ones out of the way. So what we need is a way to get you to relax before we add sex to the mix.”

Sheldon raised an eyebrow. “Perfect the formula before adding the sexual component. How do you propose we do that?”

“First thing’s first: we have to get you comfortable being naked,” Penny mused.

“Like that’s going to happen any day soon,” Sheldon scoffed.

“Ok, ok, bad word choice,” she said with pursed lips. “We have to get you used to being naked.” Penny snapped her fingers. “I’ve got it: sleep naked.”

“Penny, I hardly think sleeping in the nude will alleviate my anxiety,” Sheldon said, his cheeks flushing.

“Sure it will. Ya gotta love the germs ya know and this way the only things you’re tracking into that sterile pit known as your room come from you.”

Sheldon was dubious. “That still means outside contaminants make it into my bed. Oh Good Lord now I won’t be able to sleep tonight.”

Penny rolled her eyes. “Have a shower before you get into bed. Then all you’re bringing with you are apartment germs from the bathroom and hallway.”

Again Sheldon opened his mouth to interject but finding nothing to say he settled for scowling at his girlfriend.

“I get to keep my socks,” he said at last.

“Uh uh. Commando, bub.”

“What if I need to use the washroom or there’s a fire alarm?”

“Housecoat.”

“But it opens in the front. What if a sudden wind—”

“I don’t think you’ll encounter a tornado between your room and the bathroom.”

“But outside—”

Penny sighed. “Sheldon, just do it ok? You’re right, this might not work but let’s give it a try. God, I just want to have sex with my boyfriend.”
Green eyes met blue.

“Alright,” Sheldon said softly.

xTBBTx

Amy’s upbeat tone belied the pouty look on her face as she chatted with Penny on the phone.

“Of course….No I understand….Bestie it’s ok you have to finish your homework for tomorrow. I just thought maybe we could do it together. It’ll provide you with moral support instead of slogging away at it alone….Oh. I’ sorry I just assumed you’d be home….Well that was nice of your classmate to host your study group….I see….Yes. Have a good afternoon….Bye.”

After putting her phone on the receiver Amy got up from the couch and proceeded into the kitchen for a glass of cranberry juice cut with water. She took a sip before returning to the couch, remembering to grab a coaster from the little stand for her drink. Sitting back, she closed her eyes to empty her head of all the chatter. Her anxiety was rearing its ugly head as thoughts of ‘Penny’s found better friends’ circled her consciousness. She took a sip of juice.

Actually there was something else in the pit of her stomach but she wasn’t quite sure what it was. All Amy knew was that her stomach hurt the more she thought of Penny chatting with her study group about boys and hair products and red carpets. Only Penny, the non academic, could go back to school and instantly find a new posse with which to ‘hang’. Amy was by far the smartest at her high school and she couldn’t even get anyone to copy her notes. While she spent her nights studying girls like Penny were out getting their ears and hymens pierced.

She took another sip of her drink. Not that she wanted Penny to have a bad time at school—certainly not! Only, it didn’t seem fair that Penny’d have lots of friends and a bubbling social life twice in her academic career. Amy was lucky she had what she had now and even then her acceptance by the world was in large part due to Penny. Penny who took Amy dancing and out to drink and did her nails in pretty colors (which one day Amy’d have the courage to wear outside) and picked out trendy yet flattering clothes and just helped her enjoy life all that much more.

Ultimately Amy was glad she and Penny had a strong heterosexual relationship for if they were lesbians the neurobiologist doubted her possessiveness would let Penny out of the apartment. She had no idea how Sheldon could be so complacent about his girlfriend. If Amy had access to that blond-haired vixen she’d—

Amy blushed and took another sip of juice.

Before she could get out her laptop to continue writing her follow-up article for ‘Neuron’ her phone rang. Instinctively she checked her watch. It was too late to be her mother and Sheldon would wait until the evening Skype chat unless it was something dire. She picked up the phone and checked the incoming call. A smile came to her lips.

“Hello Rajesh….Grand. How about you?...It is pleasant outside yes. The barometer’s rising so we needn’t fear rain….I was just about to commence writing a new article….They also say articles don’t write themselves….True. We only do live once. All right you’ve convinced me….Oh is that right? You only think so Dr. Koothrappali….”

Amy’s even tone belied the excited look on her face as she chatted with Raj on the phone.

XxX

Sheldon’s Log. Star Date 12923.32
After consulting this evening with Amy Farrah Fowler it has been determined that Penny’s suggestion I ‘sleep naked’ is worth pursuing. To this end I proceeded to change my bed linen even though they were only changed the night before. I’m surmising further bed changes will violate the spirit of the experiment so until this Saturday I’m—trapped.

I shall proceed with my bath time ritual sans pajamas.

There can be no doubt I’m—fond—of Penny to be undergoing such a potential health risk.

End Log.

XX

Sheldon’s Log Supplemental. Star Date 12923.48

I have made it safely under the covers without incident. I felt terribly exposed beneath my housecoat. I could not have been more aware of my unclothed state had I been standing stark naked in the comic book store on new comic night. The texture of my faithful robe seemed alien as it pressed against me in a variety of new places. I had to tent it away from my groin lest I was stricken by a disastrous side-effect.

Once I had locked my bedroom door I proceeded to disrobe and got into bed. The covers were cool although not unpleasant. I believe night one shall be a success. Granted the real challenge will be tomorrow when I revisit these same sheets.

Courage, Dr. Cooper.

End Log.

xTBBTx

Sitting in his spot Sheldon sighed in disgust. “Only Hollywood would sweep aside an intriguing puzzle for romance.”

Leonard shut off the television with the remote. “Still, ‘Groundhog Day’ did have its moments.” He leaned his head back against Leslie’s knees. “Gives a man a new zest for life.”

“Oh please Leonard,” his roommate scoffed. “The last time you added ‘zest’ to your life it came by sampling Raj’s cheddar-ranch dip. Needless to say thanks to your lactose intolerance we all paid for your moment of insanity.”

“So what do you think caused Phil Conners to keep reliving the same day over and over?” asked Raj.

“He obviously slipped into a series of parallel worlds,” Leslie said as she absentmindedly ran a hand through Leonard’s hair.

“‘Obviously’?” Sheldon straightened up. “Based on the evidence it’s clear the weatherman became entangled in a closed timelike curve.”

“In your dreams,” Leslie replied tersely. “The bubble would be too small to incorporate everything that repeats. Parallel worlds explain his dilemma completely.”

“Once you explain how he managed to find a series of parallel worlds that know of his existence yet he, himself is absent maybe you’d have a point,” Sheldon rebuffed. “Of course such an
explanation will need to be within the bounds of possibility—I realize after reading a few of your papers that it may be an arduous undertaking for you but it would help strengthen your argument.”

“And obviously the timelike curve closed around your neck,” Leslie replied icily. “So much for homo novus and his intellectual sensibilities. Like any man you spend your time playing with your balls rather than see the big picture.”

“Circle. A closed timelike curve is analogous to a circle not a sphere,” Sheldon spat back.

“It’s also analogous to you: loop-de-loop.”

“Like one big, happy family,” Howard grinned.

“I’m just happy no one’s brought up loop quantum gravity or string theory tonight,” Leonard replied as his hands went to extract Leslie’s closed fist from his hair.

Bernadette turned to her husband. “So what would you do if you lived the same day over and over?”

“Spend each and every moment with you,” he replied before kissing her on the cheek.

“Of course he could spend the day in a room with high priced hookers and you’d never know the difference,” said Raj with a shrug. Howard blushed at Bernadette’s scrupulous stare.

“I would spend my time in the lab working on memory sequencing,” said Amy. “Since my memory is the only thing that’s immune to this time disturbance I’d be curious to note the differences between my brain and other test subjects.”

“Too bad you couldn’t conduct your own autopsy,” said Howard.

Amy flashed a quick smile. “Actually since one is awake during brain surgery it is somewhat possible to undergo a self-directed procedure.” She cocked her head. “Intriguing. I think I’ve found something else to add to my ‘bucket list’.”

The door opened and an exhausted Penny stepped through. She gave a partial wave.

“Hey all.”

“Hello Bestie,” said Amy. “I see class ended later than expected.”

“Yeah. A few of us went to study in the cafeteria. It’s easier going over the stuff when it’s fresh in your head, y’know?” Penny yawned as she dropped her backpack by the door and made her way into the room.

“Of course. Although I never had friends to collaborate with on projects,” mused Amy. “The closest I got was grade five when I was paired with Melissa Sullivan because she’d broken her arm and needed someone to write for her.”

“But you had to have done group work at university, right?” As Penny sat down on the floor between the couch and the stuffed chair she didn’t immediately see the entire room fix her with incredulous stares. “What?”

“Obviously you’ve never worked in college science labs,” said Leonard. “Your classmates aren’t classmates they’re ‘competition’ and everything’s fair game.”

Bernadette nodded. “I remember trying to do my biology lab and it was next to impossible if you
didn’t work in teams because people would study a specimen then hide it from the rest of the class so we couldn’t do our work. We had to send one person to each specimen right away to record information then we gathered together to share notes.”

“Wow. I thought cheerleading was cutthroat,” exclaimed Penny with a whistle. “I’d so totally go all Nebraska on his or her ass if I found out who stole a specimen.”

Raj nodded. “Better than my solution. I just popped caffeine pills and studied harder.”

“Stimulants aside, a prudent course of action, Raj,” said Sheldon. “Penny has to learn that not everything can be solved through violence no matter what ‘The Expendables’ claim to the contrary.”

“‘Give me your lab coat, your loafers and yeast spore specimen number three.’ Yeah, somehow Schwarzenegger loses a bit of his edge,” quipped Howard.

XxX

Sheldon’s Log. Star Date 12924.56

I’ve been standing here for twenty three minutes and cannot find the inclination to get into bed. I realize that the skin follicles and other bodily secretions on my sheets are solely mine but I find their presence daunting to overcome. Nevertheless my will shall prevail. It has to as tomorrow I add the Penny quotient as I masturbate with her undergarment.

I have had moderate success desensitizing myself to Penny’s germs on my hand. I need to ‘up the ante’ as it were and rub the garment against my genitals. If all goes according to plan on Star Date 12927 I shall attempt sleep after masturbation without disinfecting myself. This may seem too big a step forward but I find myself impatient even though my negative reactions validate my current pace.

Penny said I have to deliver a progress report on Star Date 12929. She said it’s a tactile presentation although I feel Power Point would provide clearer details. I asked her if there was to be an oral component to the presentation. “Only if I’m lucky,” was her response.

I’ll have Leonard look over my speech.

End Log.

xTBBTx

He had no idea how he’d managed to get in the middle but as he was, Sheldon would have to do his best to see things through to the end.

Knock Knock Knock “Penny.”

Knock Knock Knock “Penny.”

Knock Knock Knock “Penny.”

The door opened and a housecoated Penny with a towel wrapped around her hair beckoned her boyfriend inside.

“Penny, I was speaking with Amy Farrah Fowler on Sunday,” Sheldon said as he closed the door. “She said you’d canceled a ‘get-together’ so you could attend a study group.”
“Yeah. I hope she wasn’t mad,” Penny said as she sat down to continue drying her hair.

He folded his arms across his chest. “No. While you could have allowed more advanced notice that wasn’t the protocol you violated.”

She looked at him through her strands of hair. “What did I ‘violate’?”

“Amy had you booked first.”

“Ah.” She continued to dry her hair. “I didn’t have time to goof off and do homework. I settled for a goofy homework session.”

“I’m sure Amy wouldn’t have objected to assisting you. Indeed as we speak she’s working on a journal article so it’s not like she’d be idly twiddling her thumbs.”

Penny sighed and said nothing more.

Sheldon’s eyes narrowed as he reviewed the conversation. “Are you avoiding Amy?”

“God no! No. Don’t you dare tell her that, Sheldon.” She closed her eyes and sighed again.

“Penny you know I’m not good at this. You’re distressed and it’s late so unless you’re prepared to sit up as I guess your condition a little forthcoming on your part would be appreciated.”

Silence.

“Alright,” Sheldon said with a hint of a Texas twang as he sat down on the couch. “Are you sad? Angr—”

“Who’s the first person that ‘got’ you?”

He paused in thought. “Depends on the meaning of ‘got’. If you mean begot it’s my parents. If you mean harassment it’d be Missy.”

Penny tossed the towel onto the coffee table. “I mean who was the first person to see you for what you are: genius Sheldon Cooper?”

“Ah. Mr. Roberts. He was my grade five teacher. Had a deplorable singing voice yet his grasp of basic mathematics was sound. After the first month of school he convinced my parents to have me tested. As a result I attended university the following year.”

“And at university you got to meet more people that ‘got’ you.” She began running her fingers through her hair.

Sheldon shrugged. “I suppose; although people still tended to steer clear of me for the most part. I assume it was because of my vast intellect.”

“I’m sure it was,” Penny said with a little smile. “Still it must have been wonderful talking physics with people who really knew their stuff.”

“It’s the first time I felt anything close to belonging,” he admitted softly. “Knowledge is an elegant creature. I couldn’t give two pins about my colleagues but pure academics are a wonder to experience.”

“I know. I’m so pumped going back. I swear I’ve learned more in nearly three weeks than I did in all of high school. It’s like my brain’s decided it finally wants to learn.”
“Perhaps some of my work ethic has rubbed off on you.”

“Maybe. Or maybe it’s that I’ve found somewhere I belong.” She turned her body to face her boyfriend. “Here I am, nearly twenty six years old going back to school and I love it! But it’s more than the books; it’s the people. My classmates are amazing: Ron’s a delivery driver getting his high school diploma; Rene is upgrading his English and teaching me more cheesy comebacks to bad pickup lines it’ll make Howard’s head spin; Troy lost his football scholarship and while he’s in the college program he pops in from time to time for help. Then there’s Carla, Sally and Monique. We’re all—” Here she stopped herself.

“‘We’re all’?” Sheldon prompted.

“We’re all screw ups,” she said quietly. “At some point we chose wrong and ended up at dead end jobs or in sucky situations. Now we’ve banded together to make it through.”

“I see. Your shared failings have given you a sense of comradery.”


Sheldon cocked his head as he processed the conversation. “But I thought you were friends with Amy.”

“I am. It’s just that we’re…. She’s…..” A crooked smile appeared. “You’re going to make me spell it out aren’t you?”

“You see Amy as vastly superior to you in a multitude of ways,” Sheldon said evenly.

She knew it was true but it still hurt to hear. “Yeah. But it’s not just Amy. It’s all of you. I mean, God, I’m friends with five doctors—and Howard,” she said with a little smile. “Only ‘and Howard’ is going to the International Space Station. Outer space! I’ve never been out of the country and he’s going to be a spit shot from the moon. Compared to all of you I’ve done nothing with my life.” She cleared her throat. “When a topic comes up everyone has something insightful to add to the conversation. Everyone but Penny. Well maybe Penny’s finally realized she has something to say.

“When we get together to study we’re not talking about reality tv or what Lady Gaga wore to the Grammys.” She smirked. “Ok maybe a little bit but only at the beginning. Then we’re all business. It’s nice being able to talk about something and not feel like an idiot before I even open my mouth. We all discuss. We don’t lecture. No one’s breaking out the rulers so we can measure our brains to see who’s smarter. We’re all average. Sometimes it’s kind of nice hanging out with my own kind.”

Sheldon rolled his eyes. “Penny you’re far from ‘average’.”

“I’m not asking for praise Sheldon. Just tell me you understand.”

He gazed at her before giving a slight nod of the head. “Because of a perceived inequality between you and the group you wish to seek solace with those who share similarly unfulfilled backgrounds so you may struggle as a unified force towards a greater end.”

“Sure,” Penny said hesitantly.

“I appreciate the sense of accomplishment when I complete a task on my own. I also know when to seek consultation should I require additional details.”

“I promise you’ll be the first person I call if I get super stuck.”
His eyes were serious. “Just remember you don’t have to ‘go it alone’.”

“Thanks Moonpie.” She saddled over and put her arms around his neck.

“So what do I tell Amy?” he asked with a raised eyebrow.

“Tell her the truth: this baby’s gotta learn to leave the nest.”

At once his face soured. “I don’t know if I’m comfortable with that analogy. A baby bird takes further and further flights until she feels secure enough in her abilities to fly away.”

“Not in this case, Sheldon. I’ll always come back.” She brushed his lips with her own.

“Always is an absolute,” he reminded her.

Penny kissed him. “You’re wrong. Always is a promise.”

xTBBTx

Penny sighed as she grabbed the eraser and began rubbing out her formula from her notebook. There was no longer any doubt as far as she was concerned: she was getting progressively dumber the further she got into her math textbook. She’d hoped a little genius would rub off on her by working in apartment 4A but all she’d gotten was a mound of pink rubber on her paper.

Sheldon lowered his marker and turned to regard his roommate. “Do you know how ridiculous you sound?” Leonard gave him a glare. “At the same time why don’t you ask me the precise location of a wave on a string?”

“I’m not saying I buy into it all together,” Leonard snapped. “Dr. Jakobson had some interesting ideas is all.”

“Modernizing the Copenhagen interpretation by side-stepping Heisenberg’s uncertainty principle is not an ‘idea’ it’s pure and unequivocal hokum.”

“As long as we focus on the interpretation we’re stuck leaning towards a wave modality. All he’s saying is that if we give particles a fresh start then maybe we can better understand how they interact in the four areas of light.”

“Hokum.”

“Is that what I’m supposed to tell him: ‘yes I talked it over with Dr. Cooper and his professional opinion is your idea is hokum’?”

“‘Drivel’ would equally suffice but occasionally I do let a bit of the Texan in me come to the forefront,” Sheldon said with a thin smile. Out of the corner of his eye he saw Penny balancing her pencil on her nose.

“Great. Well I’ve got to come up with something to tell him,” muttered Leonard.

“Why not simply tell him the truth and be done with it? If he’s too stupid to see past his own error he truly does deserve his fate. All he has to do is ascribe to quantum field theory and he’ll be ‘flavor of the month’ as he resolves all the paradoxes.” Sheldon put down his marker and crossed to sit in his spot next to his girlfriend. He raised an eyebrow, causing Penny to wiggle the pencil off her nose and into her hand.

“I can’t get this,” she said with a pout.
Sheldon looked over the equation in the text before checking her work. “You’ve applied the wrong formula. See how this is a square number? Use the quadratic formula.”

“Why doesn’t it just say ‘use quadratic formula here’ instead of leaving it to guesswork?” Penny grumbled.

“You’re doing remarkably well given your prolonged absence from academics. Patience,” Sheldon said softly.

“I guess,” she sighed. “So who was sick enough to come up with this anyways?”

“Babylonian mathematicians as early as two thousand BC were solving simultaneous equations of —”

“I get it. Dead people know more about this than I do.” She began writing.

“Actually that’s an impossibility since dead people do not think,” said Sheldon. At this Penny smirked.

“So you’re saying at this point in my life I’m smarter than Einstein?”

“Well I recognize the logic of your statement I believe you’re violating the spirit,” Sheldon said with a hint of a smile touching his lips.

“You just can’t handle having a girlfriend smarter than you,” she replied.

“Being smarter than Einstein doesn’t mean you’re smarter than me.” He tucked a strand of Penny’s hair behind her ear before returning to his whiteboard.

“Alright Leonard,” Sheldon drawled. “I’ve given your dilemma some thought and I have a solution.”

“Enlighten me oh humble one,” said Leonard with a crooked smile.

As was her habit after finishing her shifts on a school day Penny dug out her phone from her purse and checked her messages as she sat in her car drinking a poor man’s iced coffee—literally cold coffee with ice cubes and heaps of sugar. The first few messages were from her classmates confirming their meeting time at the study hall. Penny quickly threw in her two cents’ worth including a gigantic ‘LOL’ at Rene for his ‘ten fingers need to cramp at once before I’d need you’ comment. Seriously, where was this guy five years ago when she needed ammunition against Howard?

The next message was from Amy and like the neurobiologist the message was succinct:

‘The eagle has landed. Rajesh has spoken.’

“Way to go Ames,” Penny grinned as she typed a reply:

‘Congrats. What he say?’

Penny remembered the absolute shock and joy she’d experienced when Raj first spoke to her. Of course she didn’t know he’d go on to be an absolute douche when drunk although Howard still assured her he’s also a douche when he’s sober.
The phone tweeted. Incoming from Amy:

'He said my name.'

Penny grinned and replied: 'Ooo sounds romantic.'

'Purely a response to our weeks of training, Bestie…'

Before Penny could type a response another message came in:

'…the kiss he gave me afterwards is where the romance came in.'

“Yes!” Penny shouted before resuming the conversation: 'So? What u do?'

'As it was the first kiss I’d ever received from a boy I’m still processing the ramifications. In the immediate aftermath Rajesh and I were embarrassed but we survived.'

'So what u think?'

'Insufficient data. We may have just been caught up in the moment. I’m testing that hypothesis next week as Rajesh has asked me to dine.'

'U like him???'

'He’s entertaining and thoughtful. I’ve enjoyed his company and at times anticipate future encounters.'

'We’ve SO gotta go shopping!'

'Bestie every occasion is reason for you to go shopping.'

'U know u luv it.'

'Off to school with you!' Penny laughed as she typed a ‘ttyl’. It was simply unbelievable. Wait until the gang—

“Maybe it’s supposed to be a secret?” Penny bit her lip as her finger tapped the side of her phone. To give credit where it’s due Penny did delay forty seconds before texting Leonard.

Penny grasped the towel around her head and gave it a squeeze to get the excess moisture from her hair. She didn’t know what else to do since the last two times she’d tried to exit the washroom were no-gos. With a flick of the wrist she hooked the towel over the shower curtain bar before heading to the door.

“We good, Sheldon?” she asked.

“Not yet,” came the quick reply. Penny sighed.

“You said that five minutes ago. I can’t stay in here all night.” She opened the mouthwash and poured herself a shot. Although she’d already brushed her teeth she thought a little more cinnamon couldn’t hurt things.

“Three and a half actually. You have a curious association with time: you grossly exaggerate
lengths and rarely show up at the appointed hour.”

Penny made a sound of disapproval before spitting out the mouthwash. “Hey now. I’m getting better.” She smiled to check her teeth.

“No thanks to me.”

“Yu-P.” She ran her hands through her hair. “Ok, I’ve got an idea to save time. Instead of asking if you’re ready I’ll just warn you when I’m coming out.” Hearing nothing from the bedroom she put her hand on the knob and opened the door. “Ready or not.”

Stepping into the bedroom Penny couldn’t help but smile at the transformation: in the fifteen or so minutes she’d spent in the washroom not only had the bed sheets been changed but the stuffed bears had been arranged in the order of red, orange, yellow, green, blue, indigo and violet and the top of the dresser cleared of bric-a-brac so as to make room for Sheldon’s folded clothing. The bed saw the only major addition as under the covers lay a six foot two Texan with hands folded across his chest.

Moving to her side of the bed Penny slid her naked form between the sheets and lay on her side with a crooked smile.

“Meditation or pretending to be asleep?” she asked.

“I’m attempting to ease my anxiety,” Sheldon said. “I know the sheets are clean and you’ve showered. It’s all up to me now.” He opened his eyes and regarded his girlfriend with a twitchy smile. “Hello Penny.”

She smiled warmly. “Hi Moonpie. You want to do this under the sheets or what?”

“I think it’s best if I see what’s going on so my imagination doesn’t get the better of me,” he replied and with that he cast the sheet to the bottom of the bed.

Immediately Penny frowned.

“What are these doing here?” she said as she stuck her finger in the waistband of his underwear and snapped it.

“As we’re not having coitus I didn’t think it mattered,” he said evenly.

“Like heck. Into your birthday suit, Mister. That or I help you take them off,” she warned as her hand made for his underwear.

“I’ll do it,” he said quickly and rolled away from Penny and sat up. Slowly he stripped, pausing for a moment before he folded his underwear and placed it on the nightstand. He tucked back in bed although this time he faced the wall.

“I thought you wanted to see me?” asked a puzzled Penny.

Sheldon hesitated before he spoke. “I hadn’t expected an immediate response to your close proximity.”

“Freaking out already?”

“Not exactly.” He rolled onto his back and in that moment Penny was more than aware of his mounting erection.

“Sheldon,” Penny cooed.
“Ignore it,” he said. “No fluids, remember?”

“I know. No kissing, no licking, no sex,” Penny rattled off. “So are you ready?”

“As much as I’m going to be at present. You may proceed.”

Penny snuggled her body closer before she sat up on her elbow. Taking her other hand she reached out and placed it on his stomach. Immediately she felt him tense so she was still as he adjusted to the sensation.

While her hand couldn’t have weighed more than three hundred and fifty grams Sheldon’s stomach contracted as if under external pressure. He mentally chided himself; while the human hand did carry a vast assortment of contaminants Penny had just emerged from the shower so her hands were relatively clean. Cleaner than the bed sheets he’d slept in. Cleaner than her underwear he’d masturbated with every night this week.

While the first undergarment was procured by mistake there was no misunderstanding when he claimed another pair on the following week. Things had progressed to the point where he found himself ejaculating into the fabric. Needless to say he had to time things right so Leonard was out of the apartment when Sheldon hand washed the garment and hung it to dry in his room. Every Monday was panty exchange at Penny’s laundry hamper. He hoped he hadn’t incorporated it into a routine or else he’d have to consult Amy yet again. She was, after all, the resident addiction expert even if it was in primates.

Sheldon took a breath and turned his head to face Penny. “You can move your hand.”

“Just making sure,” she replied as she made a circular motion on his belly. As she massaged she couldn’t help but compare skin tones as her hand looked positively Caribbean compared to his whiteness and Penny wasn’t exactly a sun worshipper. “When’s the last time you’ve been out in the sun?”

“Early childhood until I knew the risks of skin cancer. If a five year old can figure out the causal link between sun exposure and cancer Mother had no excuse for not covering Missy and me up when we were toddlers.” Sheldon took a quick inhalation of breath and held it as Penny’s hand slid onto his chest; her movements around his right pectoral muscle taking advantage of his sensitized state.

As her palm and fingers slid across his chest Penny had the déjà vu feeling of eleventh grade when she spread crimson and cream paint on her boyfriend’s body for the giant Cornhuskers party. She joked to him that she really must love him to be doing this at which they both laughed. Looking at Sheldon bite his lip as her fingers passed repeatedly over his nipple she wasn’t laughing now. Everything was much too surreal for that.

“No more,” Sheldon said as his arm came up only to have Penny press his bicep to the mattress. “Remember our other rule—no saying stop,” she chided him lightly. Sheldon grunted.

“What do you want me to do the other one?” Penny said as she drew a continuous line on his flesh with her finger.

Sheldon thought about it for a moment, weighing risk against desire. “Yes please.” As she lightly rubbed his opposite nipple air slipped from between his lips and to his horror a small groan. He hoped against hope she hadn’t heard but one look at the Cheshire grin on Penny’s face told him it was for naught.
Penny wanted terribly to kiss him but remembered the rules. She’d almost said ‘frak it’ and gone for gusto when Sheldon lost himself there for a second but the chances of him acting like any other guy on the planet and responding were slight or at least she didn’t want to risk losing what ground they’d gained by being selfish.

Instead she concentrated on what she did have: a lean body without excess muscle mass but not scrawny. Unlike with Kurt or Eric her hand didn’t glide between mountainous pectoral muscles making Sheldon seem more—what? Vulnerable? A smile came to Penny’s face. Genuine. If there was any way to describe Sheldon Cooper he was his own man. She could almost believe he was his self-proclaimed homo novus because she’d never met anyone like him. It wasn’t his idiosyncrasies but his integrity that made him exceptional to any man she ever met whether friend or something more.

Immediately she thought of his three-knock entrance and his ‘spot’ and the way he ate his food in a clockwise direction from his plate; ok he really was a whackadoodle but his sincerity was refreshing and the way he talked ‘with’ her instead of ‘to’ or ‘at’ her made traversing Sheldon Cooper’s world worthwhile.

“Psst Sheldon. It’s ok to breathe,” she said teasingly as her fingers traced his clavicle. In response he swallowed before exhaling sharply through his nose. Penny marveled at the rise and fall of his chest as her hand drifted to his neck. His tendons were taut and again he swallowed; her wrist rose with the bobbing of his Adam’s apple. Slowly her fingers traced his jaw line until she had him firmly in hand. Penny placed her lips next to his ear. “God you don’t know how much I want to kiss you right now.” In response his mouth opened for a quick inhalation of breath before clamping shut.

Needing to give her other arm a break Penny rose to her knees. As she positioned herself at his side she noticed his hand balled tightly into a fist. She took up Sheldon’s hand, opening his palm and extending each finger. He had what her grandmother called ‘piano player hands’. They were definitely a man’s hands but the length of his fingers with their soft exterior made Penny think they were designed for more sensual work. Given Sheldon’s adherence to hygiene and personal grooming he obviously used a hand lotion to combat all the sanitizer and soap he used.

“You’re sure firm,” she said as she ran a hand along his forearm which flexed lightly in response.

“Years of working out with dry-erase markers,” he replied in what he hoped was a casual tone. That Penny briefly paused in her exploration to regard him said he had obviously failed. After a moment her hand sculpted his bicep and he couldn’t help but wonder what she thought. He was definitely no Kurt but at the same token he was light years ahead of Leonard. Until this moment he never gave much thought to his physicality—so long as he was healthy he was happy. But this examination was one he’d never taken before. He hoped it wasn’t a pass/fail.

Penny set his arm aside and ran her fingers into his armpit. Sheldon squirmed.

“Ticklish?” she asked.

“You’ll be dragging my sweat all over my body.”

“Yeah but it’s yours. Friend germs, Sheldon. Friend germs.”

“I suppose,” he murmured and she continued down the side of his ribs. Now Sheldon flinched and tried to turn away. “Not allowed,” he hissed.

“Moving on,” Penny grinned. She knew from her tickle fight he was sensitive in this particular
area. “Scoot back and we’ll continue.” Knowing it was a bit devilish but not able to stop herself Penny slowly ran her nails over Sheldon’s hip bone and across his abdomen. He didn’t say anything but she noted the movement of his feet and the tightening of his belly. Ok, she noticed other movement but she didn’t want to think about that part of his anatomy.

At least not yet.

She massaged just above his groin until she reached his hip. Having to reposition herself Penny removed her hand and Sheldon let out a slight growl.

“How now brown cow,” Penny giggled. She reached out and traced her fingers over his thigh towards his knee. ‘Now for the delicate part.’ She lifted and flexed her own fingers before sliding them between Sheldon’s legs. Immediately he tensed. “Gotta open up for me, sweetie.” Penny could almost hear the internal debate before he complied. “A little wider…. Perfect.” She took a breath to steady herself. Hearing nothing from Sheldon she stopped to regard her boyfriend and was startled to see his blue eyes focused on her face. There was apprehension but also an anticipatory tension.

With the back of her nails Penny caressed his inner thigh. Immediately a groan slipped from Sheldon’s mouth as he closed his eyes. Over and over her fingers traced the length of his tender flesh causing him to shiver.

“No more,” he whispered.

“I’m not finished.” She continued to stroke, making sure to touch different parts of his flesh so he couldn’t acclimatize to the sensation. His legs made to close but froze when Sheldon realized he was pushing her hand into his penis. Penny exaggerated her movements to ensure the back of her hand brushed against his thick base as she massaged his thigh.

She felt fingers encircle her other wrist. Penny turned and caught the intense gaze of an all too human Sheldon Cooper.

“Please Penny.”

After a moment she nodded her head. “Maybe we’ll take a break.” Carefully she extracted her hand and lay down against his side. “It’s ok Moonpie,” she cooed.

“Don’t call me Moonpie,” he said shakily while his hand gently rubbed her fingers.

Penny chuckled. “Yup, you’re ok.” She gave his hand a squeeze. “I can’t believe how long we’ve been touching without the wipes—no, don’t tell me,” she added quickly. “I don’t want to know you’ve been timing because it makes this feel too clinical. This means too much to be clinical,” she said softly. In response Sheldon reached over and caressed her cheek. “So how are you feeling?”

“You were right about keeping me distracted as a good deal of my concentration focused on not ejaculating,” he replied. “As I’m not used to being touched my skin seems to be sensitive.”

“Yeah but how do you feel?”

“Hopeful,” he said before a little smile touched his lips. “Perhaps a tad invigorated.”

“A tad’ huh?” Penny smirked. “You’re something else, Dr. Cooper.”

He hesitated before continuing. “I have to stop. I need to relieve some tension.”
Penny grinned. “So I see. Need a towel?”

“It would be appreciated.”

Realizing he was getting up Penny grabbed his forearm; as Sheldon was unprepared for the contact he flinched. She couldn’t help but smile as she shook her head.

“Sheldon, Sheldon, Sheldon. What am I going to do with you? Lie back and I’ll get you a towel.”

Sheldon raised an eyebrow even as he followed her command. “But I don’t need the towel until after I’ve showered.” That stopped Penny short.

“But I thought you had to ‘relieve some tension’,” she said as she indicated his engorged penis with her eyes.

“While my body may be signaling otherwise I assure you masturbation is the last thing on my mind.” He smiled bravely albeit twitchily. “I—enjoyed—our session but I really need to cleanse myself and I’d rather do it with some semblance of control rather than scour myself raw under scalding waters.”

“Fair enough,” nodded Penny. “But before you go I’ve got a request.”

“That is?” he asked hesitantly.

“Since you have to get used to it I’d like to touch—it.” She wiggled her eyebrows.

“I don’t know if that’s such a good idea at present,” he answered.

“I won’t rub or tease, I promise.” The words hung in the air. Since he didn’t say ‘no’ there was a chance the answer was ‘yes’. Moving her arm slowly across his body she made her way below his waist and waited. Save his quickening breaths Sheldon didn’t make a sound. Hoping for the best Penny moved her fingers through his coarse curls until she found his penis. He swallowed and continued breathing.

Slowly her fingers traced a vein to the apex; she smiled to herself as a shiver passed through her boyfriend. She lifted a finger and pressed lightly on the tip while another caressed his ridge.

“I thought you said ‘no fluids’,” Penny purred as she felt his wetness.

“Penny,” Sheldon whispered hoarsely. She removed her hand.

He rolled out of bed and made his way into the washroom.

“I’ll be back,” he said huskily before closing the door.

“A taste of things to come,” Penny said to herself as she carefully licked her finger clean.

xTBBTx

“This has to be some weird parallel world where I’m staying home to study while you’re out at the paintball park,” Penny grinned as she watched her boyfriend check the compartments of his bag to make sure all of his gear was accounted for.

“There are also parallel worlds where I’m an aspiring actor-turned-waiter, a professional paintball player, a comics illustrator and, though I shudder at the thought, an avid whistler.”
“All these possibilities tied to one name.”

“Indeed.” He shouldered the bag and turned to his girlfriend as she wrapped her arms around his waist.

“It’s kind of funny: you collect all these letters after your name and I’m just plain ol’ ‘Penny’.”

“I assure you you’re not ‘plain’ by any stretch of the imagination,” he said with a twitchy smile.

“On some parallel world I would be.”

“Not to me.”

Blue eyes briefly met green before darting away.

Penny’s lips made a resounding smack against his own. “Have fun, sweetie.”

“I shall, K’diwa,” Sheldon said softly.

“Flattery gets you everywhere,” she said with a smirk.

“I assure you it’s not flattery—nor something offensive,” he quickly amended.

“Looks like I’ve got an afternoon with my Klingon translator.”

“You realize all this Klingon is so your indoctrination into the Trekker lifestyle can be complete,” grinned Leonard as he came into the living room from the hall.

“I could get me into one of those Uhura costumes,” Penny winked.

“Medical blue would much better suit your pallor,” Sheldon said evenly.

“Well anyways I’d better let you guys go.” She kissed Sheldon on the cheek. “Kadiwa’ to you too.”

She left before she could see Leonard’s mouth open in shock as he gawked at his roommate. For his part Sheldon adjusted the strap on his bag and left the apartment.

Penny got up from the couch to answer a soft knock at her door.

Leonard shuffled uncomfortably in the hall as he looked over his shoulder towards the steps.

“Leonard wha—”

“It’s Vulcan, not Klingon.” He gave her a shy smile before dashing down the stairs.

“Huh.” Penny bee-lined to the computer


She found it almost immediately and her jaw dropped. Never in a zillion years did she think he’d ever— That is, she knew Sheldon liked her but— Again she read over the definition:

K’diwa: Shortened form of address for beings who are each other’s k’hat'n'dlawa.

Her eyes drifted further down the page:
K’hat’n’dlawa: half of each other’s heart and soul.

A whisper of a smile reflected on the monitor screen.

“I love you too, Moonpie.”

(black screen. end credits)

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A/N: Wikipedia: Loop Quantum Theory; Wave Particle Duality; Quadratic Formula; Time Travel

Perturbation theory: Caltech site.

K’diwa; K’hat’n’dlawa: Vulcan Language Dictionary
As Jeff Winger sat down at a student desk he understood why he got his degree through correspondence. The first month at Pasadena City College was about as enjoyable as a bad blow job with all the homework and class work. Hell he didn’t do this much work when he was a lawyer. He pursed his lips. Six years practicing law and then one day the firm decided his degree from Columbia wasn’t good enough. Jeff didn’t see what the big whup was: Columbia was a legitimate country and besides, he’d proven over the years that he was a good lawyer. The partners at the firm agreed and said he was welcome back whenever he got a valid degree in the U.S.—any degree from any institution. Jeff smelled a loophole if there ever was one. A quick search of various student blogs led him to the school with the most bird courses in the vicinity. Unfortunately Pasadena City College didn’t fully disclose the hours of mind-numbing monotony in its seminars in the brochure.

At least Spanish was interesting. Well more like entertaining since the teacher was a real whack job. Senor Chang was as colorful as his Hawaiian shirts with his near-psychotic outbursts clashing with his normally calm demeanor. From day one he made it crazy clear that no one was to ever ask why he taught Spanish and no one did. Better to deal with Dr. Jekyll than Mr. Hyde.

Jeff settled himself into a slouch that didn’t wrinkle his crisp Holt Renfrew collared gray shirt but at the same time exuded coolness. Most important was to appear attentive yet unmotivated so as to not be called upon to answer anything in class. To everything in life there was an angle and the ex-lawyer made it his ambition to know as many as possible.

It was as he pulled out his phone for another rousing game of Bejeweled that he glanced at the door and his eyes widened as he took in a blond girl wearing platform shoes, tight jean Capri pants and matching short jacket over a yellow tank top entering the class.

‘Wow.’ He quickly lowered his eyes as she approached Senor Chang’s desk and handed the teacher a piece of paper. Jeff listened as Senor Chang explained to the hot chick that she had a month’s worth of work to catch up on and she readily agreed.

Through his lashes he watched her walk towards him.

“Excuse me,” she said to the lady sitting ahead of him. “Is this seat taken?” She indicated the seat
next to the black woman.

“It’s not assigned seating, sweetie,” said the woman. In response the hot chick flashed a devastating smile.

“Are you from Nebraska?” she asked as she sat down.

“California born and raised. Why?”

“We keep calling people ‘sweetie’ and ‘honey’—”

“And don’t forget ‘pumpkin’.” Both women laughed.

“I’m Penny,” said the blond.

“Shirley,” replied the other. “You’re new to the class.”

“Yup. I’m in the Start-Up program. They said I’m doing awesome and recommended I try a college level course to see if I’m ready for full immersion next semester. Spanish seemed the lesser evil of my choices although at this point I think I might have made a mistake,” she said as she indicated the stack of assignment sheets.

Jeff turned around to face a tanned-skinned student wearing a grey sweat jacket.

“What’s your name?” he asked.

“Abed,” replied the young man with what had to be one of the most poker faces Jeff had ever seen.

“Abed, want to be in a study group?”

The half Palestinian cocked his head. “Cool.”

Jeff spun to face the front just as Penny sighed.

“Hey,” he said and encountered a stunning set of green eyes. “You definitely didn’t make a mistake. You can join Abed and I’s study group. I’m Jeff. We meet in the library at six.”

“We do?” Abed leaned his upper body into the aisle to catch Jeff’s attention.

“That Abed, always a teaser,” Jeff said dismissively. “But the offer’s genuine.”

“Thanks,” Penny said with a smile. “The only day I can make it is Friday. Is that okay?”

“Coincidently that’s when we meet.”

“Since when?” asked Abed. Jeff’s laugh was loud and a little forced.

“Anyways we’re meeting tonight because of the test next week. You’re more than welcome to join.” He flashed the patented Jeff Winger smile.

“Can I come too?” Shirley asked.

“Two girls for the price of one. Can’t go wrong with that,” Penny added. It was still early enough to call Sheldon and skip Thai night. He’d understand; it was class-oriented after all.

’Playboy twins—true. Hot blond and forty something mom—not so much.’ “No we can’t,” he replied. “We’ll see the two of you in our usual study room at six.”
“Usual st—”

“Not now, Abed,” Jeff muttered.

Not a wrinkle of agitation at the blunt dismissal crossed Abed’s high brow. He cocked his head and thought over what had just happened. ‘Study group. Six o’clock. Library. Usual room.’ If he didn’t know any better he’d suspect that Jeff was using him as a cover for something. With a shrug he decided it wasn’t of concern. The intrigue would spic up his Monday night, something which was sorely in need since House finished.

Abed turned to his left. “Hey Troy, want to join my study group?”

The teenager frowned. “Since when did you know my name and since when did you have a study group?”

“Your name’s on your high school letter jacket and about two minutes ago.”

“Oh.” The young black man pursed his lips as he thought. Spanish was the only class he had where he wasn’t getting help from the Start Up program. Scoring help was a definite asset. “Sure. When and where?”

“In the library study room at six tonight,” replied Abed.

Catching Abed’s last sentence Jeff turned around.

“What are you doing?” he asked.

“Inviting Troy to our study group,” said Abed. “He’s also in my science class so it’s not like he’s unfamiliar. Of course it’s not like we’re exactly familiar since we’ve never met before but now this gives us a chance to meet so it’s an opportunity to become familiar.”

“We’ve already got four people in the group,” countered Jeff. Right now he had an even amount of people in which to split the group: hot chick plus Jeff and Abed and what’s her name. Adding another to the mix would spoil the number and as he knew numbers don’t lie. Or get laid unless they were really, really drunk.

“There’s plenty of room in our usual study room. That is if it’s the study room I’m thinking it is,” added Abed. “Troy can be our fifth so we can be like a Spanish boy band or the original X-Men.”

At the sound of Troy’s name Penny turned her head as she leaned back.

“Troy!” she beamed.

“‘Sup girl?” the former high school quarterback said with a wink.

Jeff raised an eyebrow. “Acquainted?”

“Troy comes to the Start Up class every Friday,” explained Penny. “He’s really nice.” She straightened to look at her friend. “You joining the study group too?”

“I asked him,” said Abed, “but Jeff said—”

“The more the merrier,” interrupted the ex-lawyer as he stared intensely at the younger man.

Abed was lost although he did achieve his objective so he’d figure things out later.
“Cool,” he said.

“Ok class,” Senor Chang said with a clap of the hands. “Hola y bienvenidos. Open your books to chapter five.”

Jeff set his phone aside and turned to the proper page. As the teacher explained the lesson Jeff’s eyes were on the hot blond named Penny.

He was finally paying attention in Spanish class.

XxX

“I don’t know how comfortable I am with this,” mumbled Professor Duncan as Jeff and he walked through the hall. “And keep your voice down for God’s sake. The last thing I need is for this conversation to go viral.”

“Look, you owe me,” the ex-lawyer reminded. “You’re here on a work visa and I got you off the DUI charge without a record.”

“But that was your job,” replied the professor tersely, his English accent accentuating the last word. “I could lose my job if I do this. And for what? So Jeffrey Winger can ace his Spanish course? Pfft.”

“I’m not asking you to be the next Wikileaks. I just need the answers to the tests for the semester.” Here the professor smiled.

“I’ve got a crazy notion: while you’re sitting in your seat listening to your teacher grab your pen and make notes. Or even more outrageous, read the material and do the assignments.”

“Ian—”

“Professor Duncan. We’re on school grounds.” Jeff pursed his lips. “Jeffrey, I know it’s hard for you to understand but in school there are rules and codes of conduct to follow and in this instance both come into play. Cheating isn’t allowed. You’re going to have to do this on your own.” Suddenly he brightened at an idea. “Why don’t you join a study group?”

“Funny you mentioned that,” Jeff said with a smirk. “I’ve just formed one.”

“Good for you!” The professor clapped him on the shoulder. “You can borrow notes and go over assignments.”

“That’s what I’m asking you for although the assignments haven’t been assigned yet. Call it academic forethought.”

“Good luck, Jeffrey,” and with that Professor Duncan escaped into the staff washroom.

“Terrific,” Jeff muttered under his breath.

“Hey buddy.”

Jeff turned to see a young man in his early twenties with brown hair, goatee and an eyebrow ring wiggle his finger at him. The ex-lawyer looked around as he casually approached.

“Looking for some test results?” the man asked casually.

“Spanish one oh one to be exact,” Jeff replied.
“Step into my office. I’m the second stall from the end,” he said as he entered the washroom.

Jeff’s tongue scraped along the side of his cheek as he thought. If he was going to make an impression in the study group—and with a particular blond with a nice ass—he needed to appear less clueless than he was, especially if he was going to offer Penny some one-on-one tutoring at his condo.

Taking a last look down the hallway in both directions he walked into the washroom. Two stalls were occupied, both one off the end. With a shrug Jeff picked one and knocked on the door.

“I need help with my homework,” he said.

“Who gives a crap?” came the reply from a strange voice.

“Psst!”

Jeff turned to see the other stall open and the man with the piercing waving him over.

“I said the second stall from the end,” he chided the ex-lawyer.

“There are two ends,” Jeff said crisply as the two men stepped into the stall and closed the door. “Next time know which one you’re speaking out of. In this case it better not be out your ass because frankly we don’t have the room. Now you said you could possibly do something for me?”

“Five hundred bucks.” Jeff scoffed.

“The course costs a hundred and fifty. I could fail it three times and still come out fifty bucks ahead.”

“Okay then. One hundred dollars. That’ll have you ahead fifty of repeating the course. Half up front.”

“And of course I know I’m not just giving you money for the sake of world peace because….?”

The man shrugged. “It’s up to you, Tex.”

Jeff’s jaw popped. “I need them for tonight.”

“Ooo, that’s a rush job. That’ll cost you another twenty. Up front.”

Jeff popped open his wallet. “I’ll give you sixty now and sixty when you give them to me.”

“Deal.” He checked his watch. “I’ll meet you outside the library at seven.”

“Make it seven twenty.”

“Fair enough. Nice making business with you…?”

“Lebron,” Jeff said with a smirk. The man laughed.

“That’s cool.”

XxX

As he stepped into the library Jeff spotted Troy and Abed heading in the general direction of the study room.
“Troy!” Jeff said in a loud whisper. Both men turned around as the ex-lawyer approached. “You’ve been in class with Penny. What’s her deal?”

“I dunno. She’s pretty cool for an older chick,” Troy said with a shrug.

“Terrific,” Jeff sighed. “Guess she remains a mystery.”

“Yeah I guess,” agreed Abed. “All I know is that she’s twenty five, birthday in November, has two older siblings one of which is ‘a kind of chemist’. She grew up on a farm in Nebraska and dropped out of college at eighteen to move to California with her now ex-boyfriend to become an actress. She’s played Anne Frank in a theatre located above a bowling alley and appeared in a hemorrhoid commercial riding on horseback. More often that not she’s ‘too Mid-Western’ for roles and bides her time working at The Cheesecake Factory until some big director sees her brilliance.” Jeff’s jaw dropped.

“Remind me to give you a call when I need a wingman,” he said in awe. In response Abed gave a very stiff and fleeting smile.

“Cool. Cool. I can be the Dan Aykroyd to your Bill Murray or Danny Glover to your Mel Gibson or your—” Jeff held up his finger.

“Hold that thought,” he said before turning and heading to the study room with Abed and Troy following behind. They guys paused at the door as within the room they counted three women: Penny, Shirley and a young woman with a sweater vest and very stiff back. Immediately Jeff compartmentalized her as a Type ‘A’ personality.

“This just keeps getting better and better.’ “Hey!” Jeff said with mock enthusiasm. “I see the dynamic duo has become the tremendous triplets.”

“I didn’t think you’d mind,” Shirley said with a smile. “Annie and I have worked together a couple of times and I thought to invite her since Penny and I are a part of the group.”

“So you’re with them,” Jeff clarified with the waitress.

“I’m with them,” she replied amiably.

“Bienvenido,” the ex-lawyer said to the newcomer as he pulled out a chair and sat down.

“Damn you look familiar,” Troy said as he crossed to the far side of the room.

“I should,” Annie said stiffly. “I sat behind you in Algebra.” Troy frowned for a bit as he thought before he brightened.

“You’re the girl who got hooked on pills and dropped out!”

“And you’ve come oh so far, too, Mister ‘I lost my football scholarship’,,” Annie spat back.

“Totally ‘Breakfast Club’,” Abed mused as he pulled out his Spanish text book.

“Hey guys, let’s chill,” soothed Penny. “It’s not high school anymore. Whole new start and all that jazz.” Both teenagers crossed their arms and glared at each other. “So, shall we—” She stopped talking as a man in his fifties wearing a turtleneck sweater, prescription sunglasses and a stone tethered around his neck with a leather cord knocked on the door and cleared his throat.

“Is this the Spanish one oh one study group?” he asked.
“No,” said Jeff at the same time Penny said “Yes.” The two looked at each other.

“Why not?” Jeff had a private chuckle. This had gone from an intimate tutorial to an outright academic orgy. “Close the door and have a seat.”

The man sat down next to Shirley, who stared at Penny with wide eyes expressing a veritable S.O.S.

“So,” he said. “My name is Pierce Hawthorne as in Hawthorne Wipes, the award winning moist towelette.”

Penny giggled. “No kidding? I’m a big fan.” Sheldon used Hawthorne Wipes; he claimed they were the only wipes sturdy enough to withstand the vigorous scrubbing of his hands. Penny was more than accustomed to the alcohol scent as he wiped his lips or cheek after contact with the ‘unclean’. She looked at Pierce and wondered if he’d ever been told his product worked wonders on a girl’s love life?

“Obviously the young lady here knows quality,” said a pleased Pierce.

“This is Troy,” Penny said as she indicated the ex-quarterback. “And this is Abed, I’m Penny, and this is Jeff, Annie and—”

“The ever lovely Shirley,” the older man said with a smile. For some reason the thought of Howard Wolowitz came to the Nebraskan’s mind.

“Oh. You know each other?” she asked.

“Everyone knows this beautiful creature,” he replied.

“Mmm mmm mmm mmm,” Shirley said through closed lips as she shook her head.

“Anyways,” Jeff said. “Welcome to Abed and I’s study group.” He stared at the young man to make sure he didn’t say anything. “Let’s get started shall we?”

XxX

Sheldon sat at his computer typing away as Leonard gave the coffee table a wipe with an antibacterial cloth.

“So what do you want to watch tonight?” asked Leonard.

Sheldon shrugged. “It’s not like anyone pays heed to my selections.” Leonard’s jaw dropped.

“Then explain to me why I’m always watching original Trek instead of Babylon 5?”

“Leonard, you know my digestive tract is sensitive to changes. But I’m putting the cart ahead of the horse. Dinner’s here.” He closed his laptop as the door opened and Amy and Raj entered.

“Howdy gents,” said Amy brightly. “Where’s the sunshine in everyone’s life?”

“At school,” Sheldon replied as he applied antibacterial cleaner to his hands. “Penny’s meeting with a Spanish study group to catch up on her work.” Amy raised an eyebrow.

“Another study group? It seems as though her return to school has transformed her social schedule to no end.” She sat down on the couch next to Raj who was in the middle of handing out the food packets.
“Sacrifices must be made for the greater good,” replied Sheldon as he took his mi krop and settled into his spot. “I’m pleased she’s managing to adapt to an academic lifestyle.”

Raj got up from the couch and went to the refrigerator. He took a bottled water for himself then paused as he realized it was rude of him not to ask if anyone else wanted a drink. Grabbing a diet coke he held up both beverages.

“Amy?” The neurobiologist looked over to see Raj.

“I’ll have water thank you.”

“I will as well,” piped in Sheldon.

Raj pulled two waters from the refrigerator and waited for Leonard’s request. When it wasn’t forthcoming he audibly cleared his throat causing the two men to regard him. Raj raised an eyebrow as he glared at Leonard.

“Oh. Water please,” Leonard said sheepishly. A moment later Raj returned and distributed the drinks. “You took me by surprise. Throat clearing new?”

Amy opened her water. “We have Rajesh’s allergies to thank for that. After realizing the world didn’t end from making a sound in my presence he took to throat clearing like bacteria on a bloated corpse.” She smiled briefly before taking a sip.

Raj grinned at Leonard before taking a bite of his Pad Thai. So far he had a vocabulary of one word —Amy’s name—but for him it was a cacophony of sounds. The throat clearing was a bonus as it allowed him a presence in the room as opposed to sulking in the background.

“So what are we doing after dinner?” asked Leonard between bites.

“As long as it isn’t Star Trek oriented I’m game,” replied Amy.

Sheldon stuck his chop sticks into his food and turned to his friend with a wounded look. “What’s wrong with Star Trek?”

“Besides the basic premise that humanity has developed faster than light travel and the celebrated ‘first contact’ captain is a womanizing brawler who can’t keep his uniform from being ripped off his rock hard body there is the observation that you repeatedly watch episodes despite the fact you have every one of them memorized. Even more disturbing is that my attempts to avoid the phenomenon altogether have proved useless as I must admit to knowing lines from several episodes.” She paused. “And you’ll be waiting a very long time before I recite them.” The air of expectation left the room.

Leonard shook his head. “Well how is it that you and Penny can talk makeup and shoes every time and that isn’t boring?”

“While our topics may be identical the content varies,” Amy said matter-of-factly.

Sheldon snorted. “Indeed. ‘Instead of buying the red open-toed sandals with the leopard-striped heel I think I’ll buy the blue ones’.” The three physicists snickered.

Amy pursed her lips. “Actually Penny and I were discussing flats which led to the purchase of the pointed-toe number I’m wearing tonight. I’ve yet to see tangible results out of your endless discussions on phaser technology.”
“I’ll have you know we’ve several makes of phasers in the apartment,” Sheldon replied.

“Unfortunately our insurance company doesn’t see them as the theft deterrent they are,” grinned Leonard.

“Never taunt a man with a trajectory weapon, Leonard,” said Sheldon with a glare.

“I’ll take that bet,” said Amy as she raised a forkful of rice to her mouth. “My shoes are worth twenty of your so-called phasers.”

“Seeing the price of female apparel on Penny’s bookmarked websites I shouldn’t doubt your statement in the slightest,” sniffed Sheldon.

“I was referring to our present topic—self defense. While your phaser might make an intruder leery at first, once he’s aware of its true nature he’d thrash you into next week.”

“And your shoe would do any better?” scoffed Sheldon. A moment later and his brows came together in pain as he felt Amy’s foot connect with the side of his shin. “Amy Farrah Fowler!” He swung his legs to his extreme left.

“I believe I made my ‘point’,” said Amy with a satisfied smirk.

XxX

“My brain is Jello,” moaned Troy as he rubbed his eyes. “I need a break.” Jeff checked his watch.

“It’s quarter after seven. Let’s take twenty minutes for some fresh air,” he said as he got up.

“Good idea,” Penny replied. She stretched her arms over her head and Jeff couldn’t help but notice the rather pleasant angle of her breasts.

“I’ll be back,” he said and left the room. Jeff checked his watch as he made his way through the turnstile and the exit.

“Jeff!” He stopped and waited as the Nebraskan caught up to him. “Since we’re going in the same direction we might as well go together.” She flashed a smile and he did the same. 'Definitely cute.' And well put together in a designer shirt over a Hilfiger t-shirt and tousled brown hair without excess gel.

“I just have to pick up my Spanish notes from a friend,” he said amiably as the pair made their way outside.

“Oh good. For a minute there I was afraid you were going for a smoke.”

“While I hear it’s all the rage carrying your own portable oxygen canister to breath I’m not one to succumb to peer pressure,” he replied as he spotted his man who simultaneously noticed him.

Penny laughed. “Yeah I can’t say I was much into sniffing gasoline back on the farm.” ‘Although we did have a meth cooker stashed away in Greg’s ‘work shop’….’

“Hey Jack,” Jeff said to the man who was busy checking out Penny.

“Lebron,” he said in passing.

“Lebron?” asked Penny.
“We play basketball together,” the ex-lawyer explained. “So Jack, have my Spanish notes you borrowed?” The man raised a pierced eyebrow as he looked between Jeff and Penny.

“Oh,” he said with a comprehending smile. “Of course. You got the sixty bucks you owe me?”

“Sure pal.” Jeff smiled at Penny as he took out his wallet and paid his ‘friend’.

The man handed over a brown envelope. “Enjoy,” he said and skated off on his board.

“So,” said Penny.

“So,” Jeff replied before taking in a big lungful of air. “Nice night. I’d be on my balcony if I were at home. Gotta love condos.”

“Lucky guy. I’ve got an apartment I can barely afford.”

“Well in the legal profession you can afford the extra things,” he said with a wink.

The waitress nodded thoughtfully. “I didn’t know clerks made that much money.”

Ouch. “I’m a lawyer. Was a lawyer. Big misunderstanding. Anyways long story short I need to upgrade my degree and here I am.”

“At Pasadena City College? No offence I’d have thought Caltech or UCLA would be ‘upgrading’. I mean, since you’ve been to law school and all.”

“Eyah.” He checked his watch. “I need to get a drink before we start.”

“Sure.” The pair stepped through the doors and Jeff went to the drink dispenser.

“Want anything?”

Penny looked over the various pops and juices on display even though she knew she wasn’t going to buy any. It had taken a lot of self-restraint to keep to Sheldon’s budget but if she wanted her dad to continue funding her schooling she had to be good. Still, it didn’t mean she couldn’t look.

“I’m good,” she said with a little smile. As Jeff made his selection Penny pulled out her phone and began typing.

XxX

Over in apartment 4A Sheldon picked up his phone to find a message from Penny:

‘What r u doing?’

His thumbs danced across the screen in response:

‘Playing Counterfactuals. Leonard is a poor sport. How was the study group?’

‘Still on.’

‘When do you expect to be home?’

‘9ish. I’ll call b4 I go.’

‘Please do.’
'Got2go. xxx'

The physicist tucked his phone in his pocket.

“Leonard, you’ve had more than enough time to come up with the answer,” he tutted. His roommate gave him a scowl.

“You know I’m not good at sports. Besides, it’s not like you know the answer.”

“Of course I do. It’s obvious.”


“In a world where there is no alcohol the nationality of the next winner of the Lady Byng for sportsmanship in the NHL would be Amish,” Sheldon said evenly.

“Of course.” The curly haired physicist rolled his eyes.

Sheldon went on to explain. “The Amish living in colder climates play hockey. With alcohol out of the arena some communities would allow their children to participate in leagues. Because the Amish do not promote ambition, competition and pride, sports are played as a means of exercise and enjoyment. There are no scores and everyone is encouraged to play.”

Amy sat up. “Correct.” She flipped to the next card.

Raj got up to whisper in Leonard’s ear.

“Raj wants to know how he got off the farm?”

“Torn between his passion to play and his family our hockey star chose to have himself placed as a ward of the State,” replied the neurobiologist. “With financial support from the scout-turned-agent to continue his dreams he was eventually drafted by an AHL team and went on from there. Sadly his family never got to see him play as he was ultimately shunned but they did take secret delight in reading about him in the newspaper.”

“Next time we play Star Wars Monopoly,” Leonard said firmly. Amy leaned over to Sheldon.

“Does he always pout like this?”

“Try to ignore it. He gets excitable if he doesn’t get his way,” said the lanky man.

Leonard and Raj looked at Sheldon incredulously.

XxX

“God, my head’s spinning,” Penny sighed as Jeff and she returned to the library. “I have no idea how I’m going to catch up to pass that test next week.”

“We could always do some extra sessions,” Jeff said slowly.

“I’m only on campus Mondays, Fridays and every second Wednesday.”

“That’s okay we can always meet off campus.” He brightened and snapped his fingers. “I know! My condo’s not that far from here. We can order a little dinner and hablan Espanol ‘til the cows come home.”
As she took in Jeff’s laid back sense of cool Penny realized having a partner meant not having to bother Sheldon and that meant a lot. She wanted to do this on her own. She also wouldn’t have to hit up Howard for lessons. Bernadette might have a lot of patience with the guy but she worried she’d come out of the lesson with about a hundred different ways to say puta.

“Shirley already offered to get together Wednesday. If you like I can ask if you could come over and we could have a potluck or something.”

Jeff racked his brain for a comeback. “Yeah but at my place we can go over my notes together. Less distracting since I’m guessing she has kids?”

“Two boys,” replied Penny. Jeff put out a hand to stop her just before the study room door.

“At my place it’ll be quiet. Well maybe a little soft jazz because it helps me study.” Penny raised an eyebrow. “I have notes we can use.” He wiggled the brown envelope.

“Annie and I are going to photocopy her notes after the group ends.”

“Yeah but these ones will get you through the test.” He put on a charming smile.

Penny might not know her cabeza from her nalga but from years on the bar circuit she sure knew that smile.

“Sounds like a plan,” she said with a smirk. “Only I can’t stay out too late since my boyfriend works in the morning.”

Jeff stopped dead. “I thought he was an ‘ex-boyfriend’?”

“Nope.” She eyed him. “Not that my sexual availability has anything to do with inviting me to your study group, right?”

“Of course not,” Jeff said with a shocked expression. “I was merely extending a courtesy.”

“Good. I’m not at a community college late at night because it’s a cool place to be. This is my second chance to make something of my life and I’m not going to screw it up. I can’t.”

“My thoughts exactly.”

“Glad we’re on the same page.” Green eyes met blue before Penny stepped into the study room.

Jeff checked his watch. ‘Well this has been a complete waste of time.’ Well maybe not a complete waste. Penny was funny and very accommodating to Abed’s strangeness which Jeff suspected was due to Aspergers. Basically she was a nice person who was very easy on the eyes. 'And off the market.' Still she’d make Spanish interesting and it’s not like he’d be spending his evenings cramming the ol’ textbook since he got the answers. He popped open the envelope and pulled out some pages. The first three or so looked about right for content but as he encountered blank pages behind them he immediately questioned their legitimacy.

“Son of a bitch,” Jeff muttered as he shoved the papers back in the envelope before returning to his seat.

Penny flashed him a concerned expression since he looked upset.

“Jack gave me the wrong notes and I really need them for the test,” he said as way of explanation. “Maybe I could get a copy of Annie’s notes too?”
“Sure,” said the teenager. “If there’s anything I learned from cheerleading it’s how to stuff a bra and be a team player.”

“And you?” he asked Penny.

“Just a member of the Corn Queen’s Court,” she replied with a shake of the head. “I wasn’t pretty enough for the top job.”

“Well at this point you’ve developed quite nicely—like popcorn.”

Penny chuckled. “Popcorn huh? Better not be because I’m air popped.”

“Unlike other people who are satisfied being a part of the cob you’ve broken away and fluffed into your own,” Jeff said amiably.

“That’s sweet.”

“Of course once a person gets a taste of your buttery goodness it’s hard to stop with just one,” he said evenly.

“It’s a good thing we’re both watching our waistlines,” she replied as she turned to a fresh page in her notebook.

“Well we can watch each other’s waistlines to make sure we don’t cheat.”

“I never cheat,” she said. She began writing down the section heading.

“Sometimes it’s hard to stick to a diet,” he countered.

Penny looked up. “Not if you like the food,” she said simply.

“Plain popcorn’s okay,” piped in Abed. “The buttery topping at the theater adds as much as three hundred and twenty calories.”

“I always preferred my popcorn to be caramel-coated,” Pierce said with a smile to Shirley.

Lord have mercy! she thought.

“I don’t think she’s into pink popcorn,” Jeff said matter-of-factly.

“Stale popcorn’s the worst,” Abed added. “It’s wrinkled and chewy and—”

“So, Spanish,” Pierce said a little loudly.

“Yes. Espanol,” agreed Penny. She eyed Jeff. “Want to start with the first question?”

“Why not?” he said with a smirk.

XxX

Penny knocked once before opening the door. It was a partial compromise to Sheldon since he deemed her ‘ barging in’ as uncouth. Whatever.

“Hey kiddies,” she said as she took in Sheldon and Leonard watching television. The theoretical physicist immediately muted the volume and clicked on closed captioning for his roommate.

“How was your study group?”
“Interesting,” Penny said cryptically. “I photocopied all the notes and class work I’ve missed.”

“Excellent. We can go over them if you’d like on Thursday.”

“Actually I’m going over to Shirley’s on Wednesday to study with her and Annie since we’ve got a test on Monday,” Penny replied.

“Oh.” Sheldon gave her a twitchy smile. “Well that’s alright.” Pause. “Although reinforcing on Thursday what you learned on Wednesday would assist you in your overall goal of ‘catching up’.”

“I’d like some ‘R and R’ time on Date Night. ‘All work and no play’ don’t you know. “Besides,” she said as Sheldon made to speak. “Physics plus comic books plus Halo equals?”


“Proposal: you complete your homework and in exchange we later watch a movie,” Sheldon offered.

Penny thought about it. “I pick the movie and it’s a deal.”

“Another sacrifice for education,” he sighed as he inwardly cringed at the thought of another romantic comedy.

“Your martyrdom is noted,” she grinned. “Anyways, I’m going to make a sandwich.”

“You mean you didn’t eat?” her boyfriend asked as he got up. “Penny it’s after nine.”

“I couldn’t miss the study group,” she countered.

“Nevertheless you should have told me and I would have ordered you some dumplings,” he tsked.

“It’s okay. I’ll pack something for next time.”

“Go freshen up and I’ll make you a soup and sandwich,” he said as he ventured into the kitchen.

“Thanks.” She went to leave before stopping and turning around. “I love your cooking,” she said seriously.

He put the pot on the stove. “Baking is more my forte,” he said as he went to the cupboard for a can of reduced sodium chicken soup.

“I’ll be back,” she said with a little smile and closed the door behind her.

xTBBTx

cbc.ca: Movie theater popcorn gets thumbs down.

ehow.com: what games do Amish children play?
As she got off work at a reasonable time for once Bernadette thought it was cause for celebration and treated herself to dining out with the boys at the Cheesecake Factory. She sat down at the end of the table with Howard and Raj on either side and waited for the astrophysicist to take a good sip of his Grasshopper before engaging in social chit-chat.

A moment later and Penny arrived at the table.

“Hi Bernadette,” she said in a chipper tone. “I’ve got the guys’ orders but I don’t know what you want to drink.”

“Sparkling cranberry, thanks.”

“Ok I’ll give you a few minutes to pick your poison,” said Penny before leaving. Sheldon tutted.

“Speaking of poison in an eating establishment. No wonder her tips are miniscule.”

“I doubt she talks that way to other customers,” replied Leonard. “We’re all friends, remember? Ha ha and all that?”

“Leonard, there’s nothing funny when it comes to the sanctity of one’s food supply. How would you like it if Penny joked about a little e coli in your spinach? Or salmonella in my beef hamburger? Now there’s a real knee slapper.”

“At the lab we played a game called ‘spot the botulism’ where we have the new assistant test samples from cans and choose which one she’d like to have for lunch,” piped in Bernadette.

“You didn’t actually use botulism, right?” said a shocked Raj. Bernadette blushed and closed her menu.

“Ok then, ready to order?” Penny asked as she returned and distributed the drinks.

“How are you the guest of honor?” prompted Howard.

“Excuse me but as the male guest of honor I believe my order goes first,” Sheldon said as he perused his menu.

Leonard raised an eyebrow. “How are you the guest of honor?”

Sheldon gave a condescending look. “Male guest of honor as designated by my position to the right of the Hostess. Your position to Penny’s left makes you the next most important male at the table.”

“I thought the head of the household sat at the head of the table?” said Raj with a wink in Howard’s direction.

“In most cases that’s true because the head of house is typically the Host or Hostess,” explained Sheldon. “As we are at a restaurant Penny becomes our de facto Hostess as she is entrusted by the Cheesecake Factory management to receive guests in an official capacity. Therefore her presence here beside me makes this the Head of the table thus leaving Bernadette at the Foot.”

“Oh, I order last,” Bernadette said to ease the tension.
“Not necessarily,” Sheldon interjected. At this Leonard rolled his eyes.

“For God’s sake Sheldon let it go.”

“It’s a matter of protocol, Leonard. The Head and Foot of the table are usually reserved for the Host and the Hostess with exceptions being if there is more than one table or there is just the Host or the Hostess. In either case the Foot is then reserved for the Guest of Honor and with the distinct title goes the privilege of ordering first.”

Howard’s jaw dropped. “She was going to order first.”

“Oh, but it has yet to be determined if Bernadette is the ‘Guest of Honor’,” Sheldon eyed Howard’s wife. “Have you done something extraordinary that warrants your position at the table?”

Raj lowered his menu. “If she kills you so we can order she’d be eternally honored.”

Sheldon scowled at the astrophysicist before returning to his menu. “Alright then,” he twanged. “Go ahead and partake in the feast like a bunch of barbarians. Maybe Penny ought to remove the forks so as to make the carnage more authentic.”

“I’ll have the House chicken salad with light Italian dressing,” Bernadette ordered.

Sheldon closed his menu and placed it in front of Penny. “I’ll have the barbecue bacon cheeseburger—barbecue sauce, bacon and cheese on the side.”

“And as a stab in the dark: lactose-free fajitas for Leonard, fish and chips for Raj and pork chop with baked potato for Howard?” asked Penny as she continued writing; the three men agreed.

Raj took a sip of his drink before addressing his best friend. “Are you sure about the meat? Don’t you have to keep your body mass down until you pass the swimming quotient of your astronaut training?”

Howard snorted. “If I could lift my own body weight—which I can’t—I’d just make the minimum strength requirements.” His eyes glanced at the cutlery. “For women.”

“How’s the SCUBA training going?” inquired Leonard.

“I can now walk around the bottom of the swimming pool,” Howard said proudly. “A few more lessons and I’ll be qualified for spacewalk training.”

“To Howard Wolowitz: from single geek to married astronaut” Raj raised his glass.

“Here here,” said Leonard as he and Sheldon raised their glasses in salute.

“Excuse me,” Bernadette said and abruptly left the table.

“What was that about?” asked a puzzled Howard.

“Perhaps Bernadette’s upset she’s no longer the Guest of Honor,” offered Sheldon as he separated his utensils from the napkin.

“Or maybe the excitement has affected her bladder. It’s been known to happen,” blushed Raj.

“I suppose,” murmured Howard who paused for a moment before taking a sip of his cola.

xTBBTx
The ride to the restaurant had been a quiet one for the most part; once Raj let off his entire vocabulary by greeting Amy by name at her door it was up to the neurobiologist to keep the ball rolling. There was, however, only so much to say about work although she did have a doozy of a story about a coworker who filed the brain slices out of sequence thus causing excitement over the discovery of a new malformation. The moral of the story was that drinking plus two hours sleep wasn’t the best way to greet the day at the lab.

“Of course alcohol has been known to put the brain out of sorts,” Amy said with a prim smile. For his part Raj grinned as he pulled into the parking lot at the restaurant. He loved how comfortable he felt around Amy. There was no pressure to speak although he felt that if he could speak to anyone it’d be her.

Once inside the restaurant Amy pretended to look at the patrons as Raj whispered his reservation to the male maitre d’. Both doctors were seated and Amy ordered a half bottle of white wine for the table. Raj was relieved as he felt the alcohol slip down his throat as now he could contribute to the conversation.

“I noticed your shoes this evening. Fluevog?”

“Why yes,” Amy replied, pleased he’d spotted her new pair of burgundy flats. Hanging out with her bestie had finally rubbed off on her as Penny turned her on to buying colorful yet comfortable shoes to offset her more conservative dress. Amy knew she should let Penny expand her wardrobe beyond the one outfit picked out for cocktail night but the neurobiologist liked to acclimatize herself to change one small alteration at a time. The coloring of her nails at Penny’s sleepover was overwhelming because Amy’s hands were continually in her field of vision. Her feet kept the flash of color out of both sight and mind.

“I hear the kale and mango salad is divine,” Raj said happily as he read the menu. Another bright side to dining with Amy was that her vegan eating habits brought out the vegetarian in him. Being continually surrounded by hamburgers and roast beef it had simply been easier to yield to temptation than endure the desire.

Raj realized a long time ago he’d make a piss-poor Jedi.

“Sounds lovely. I believe I’ll have the Moroccan stew with jasmine rice.”

Amy took a sip of wine as Raj made the order. Once he was talking there was a pleasant lilt to his voice and a polished air to him. She knew it was only a matter of time before her muted wallflower would become a vocal prince since his looks had never been his shortcoming. Indeed he was funny and intelligent and beyond thoughtful—something which she wasn’t used to experiencing in the gentle way it was delivered. It was through knowing Raj that Amy truly realized there was a special something missing from her relationship with Sheldon, something that neither of them with their vast intellect could figure out. The respect was there as was genuine affection only it never truly translated into the intimacy she now knew sparked and sustained a romantic pairing.

“So,” Raj said with a pleasant smile. “I just want to thank you again for all you’ve done for me.”

“Think nothing of it,” she replied. “Your case has proved most intriguing. Besides, I’m gaining the added benefit of knowing you better. You’ll be happy to know you’re not tedious like Leonard.” The astrophysicist laughed.

“I’m glad.” A shy smile crossed his face. “I really like spending time with you. You’re brilliant and entertaining.” Amy smiled and both took a sip of their wine.
“Now that we’re in the midst of our present encounter let’s cut to the gist. What was your intent with the kiss you gave me last week?” Amy asked matter-of-factly.

“I was just so happy I said something. I’m sorry if I offended you,” Raj said quickly.

“No offence taken.” Amy unconsciously rubbed the rim of her glass. “I was just unsure of the context. Now I see it was in response to your success.”


“Yay us,” Amy said evenly before taking another sip.

For once it wasn’t that Raj couldn’t speak, he just didn’t know what to say.

Knock Knock Knock “Penny.”
Knock Knock Knock “Penny.”
Knock Knock Knock “Penny.”

Venturing from her bedroom with hairbrush in hand Penny opened the door to find Sheldon standing before her in red plaid pajamas and matching housecoat.

“What up, Moonpie? I thought we said goodnight?”

“Don’t call me Moonpie.” He turned his head slightly even though his Vulcan hearing already told him no one was in the vicinity. “I’m here to return your movie.”

“That could have waited until tomorrow.”

“I assure you it couldn’t.” He held out the dvd at arm’s length. “The sooner it leaves my home the better.” Penny rolled her eyes as she took the case and backed away from the door.

“You know, it’s not my fault you’re a stickler for science. You’ve got to learn how to put that brain of yours in neutral and just enjoy the show.”

“Oh, I assure you prolonged exposure to your movie selections has taught me to relinquish my hold on plausibility and rationality,” he replied as he closed and locked the door.

“Well you have to admit Henry’s time traveling was different than using the ol’ police box.”

“Time travel as genetic mutation. Hokum. As I said before—”

“Time’s everywhere. Cornerstone of relativity. Excellent in spice cake.” Sheldon pursed his lips as Penny smirked before she returned to her bedroom.

Sheldon shut off the overhead light and followed. “Mock me if you will. However in this instance I attempted to focus less on the Time Traveler and more on his Wife and for the life of me I found her more transient than her husband.”

“Well we do see her at different times of her life so I guess it could be a little confusing.” She smiled to check her teeth in the bathroom mirror and gave her hair a couple more passes with her brush.
Sheldon’s mouth twitched. “I assure you the incomprehension occurs when the facts are laid out for analysis. For example, at first Clare is thrilled to be married to Henry even though she knows he’ll disappear, then a few vignettes—not years—later she’s berating him for the life they have. ‘Who would choose this life?’ she says as I recall. Then she goes on to get pregnant even while the prospect of her offspring inheriting Henry’s disorder is very real.”

“A woman wants what she wants.” Penny returned to the bedroom.

Sheldon took off his housecoat and hung it on the back of the door with a hanger. “Indeed. I’ve had to endure moments of irrationality during your menses so I suppose I should have known better.”

“Imagine how ‘irrational’ I’ll be when I’m pregnant,” Penny said with a wink.

“I believe my services may be of use on an Antarctic expedition,” Sheldon said dryly as he pulled back the covers and slipped into bed.

“What’s this? No commando?” she asked as she tucked herself into the bed sheets and turned off the lamp.

“I sleep with you naked on Saturdays. This isn’t Saturday.”

“Maybe we should make it a rule that you’re naked every time we sleep together.”

“My legs get cold,” Sheldon said after a pause.

“We could warm them up first,” Penny cooed.

“I refuse to do calisthenics before bed.”

“Frontier style, bub.” Her leg slid in between his as she rolled over to snuggle beside him. “You know, rub a stick to get heat.”

Immediately Sheldon shifted to the right in order to avoid inadvertent stimulation. “It requires two sticks or else a cord of some sort to achieve the proper friction needed to produce flame in a reasonable amount of time.”

“Needs—to—be—tied—up. Ok got it.” She could sense his scowl. “Once we get you uninhibited who knows what you’ll be into?”

“I assure you bondage has never been on my list of things to do.”

“Don’t knock it unless you’ve tried it.” She drew little circles around his pajama buttons with her fingernail.

“Yes well I’ve never tried fornicating with a cactus but I’m sure it’s a sensation I’d most gladly avoid,” he said quickly and with a bit of a twang.

“Screw a cactus? Is that what you guys do in Texas?”

Sheldon raised an eyebrow. “Such a comment from one whose forefathers procreated to ensure the virility of the corn crop?”

“Hey, corn is serious business. Cactus humping is whacked.”

“SolANUM TuberOsum, SOLanum TuberoSUM.”
“Meaning?”

“PotAto. PotAHto.”

Penny laughed. “You’re something else.” She snuggled against him and felt comforted by his hand as it encompassed hers on his chest. It was amazing how quickly she adapted to his presence in her bed and she knew tomorrow she’d miss him terribly even though Saturday was only a day away. When Penny suggested he begin staying at her place on Saturdays so they could continue with his desensitization regiment he readily agreed, saying something along the line that prolonged and frequent exposure was necessary for effective results. What surprised her was Sheldon ending tonight’s date night by returning in his pajamas and making it known by actions if not words that he had every intention of staying.

Maybe he’d been counting the moments since last weekend as well?

“What if ‘The Time Traveler’s Wife’ was about us?” asked Penny. “What if you kept popping in and out of time and we only had little bits of togetherness?”

“It’d be deplorable,” Sheldon said immediately, causing Penny to smile. “To appear at any time completely naked!” he shuddered. “Not to mention the wearing of strange clothes. I’d spend all of my adventures scrounging change so I could use a laundry mat.”

“I see,” Penny said in a huff. Sheldon eyed his girlfriend and let a small smile curl his lips.

“As for the second part of your posit I submit we are already under the subject of relativity.”

Penny smirked. “How didn’t I figure Einstein would be involved in our love life. Ok I’ll bite. How are we under relativity?”

“In explaining its essence Einstein stated the following: "When a man sits with a pretty girl for an hour, it seems like a minute. But let him sit on a hot stove for a minute and it's longer than any hour. That's relativity." In application it would mean that I already experience our time together in fleeting amounts.”

“Why Sheldon, are you saying I’m pretty?” Penny cooed.

“Not pretty so much as attractive.”

“What’s the difference?”

Sheldon stared at the ceiling as he thought. “Pretty is to be attractive in a delicate way without being beautiful whereas attractiveness appeals both to the eye and mind in a way that is quite breathtaking.”

Penny blushed. “Thank you sweetie.”

“You’re quite welcome.”

A comfortable silence.

“What does ‘beautiful’ mean?” she asked.

“Of a very high standard and pleasing to the senses.”

“That you are my bew-di.” A deliberate pause. “Well, when you don’t squawk.”
Sheldon’s eyes flew open. “Squawk? Stating my opinion doesn’t mean I—”

She raised her head and planted a kiss on his lips.

Penny chuckled as she returned to his chest. “‘Night Sheldon.”

“Indeed,” he replied before applying a kiss to her forehead.

XxX

It wasn’t until Penny rolled over and sensed the empty bed that her ears detected the sound of her running shower.

“Whackadoodle,” she mumbled before drifting back to sleep.

xTBBTx

“Thank you for clearing out the sporting goods store, Howard,” grinned Raj as he rolled the die.

“One—two—three—four and voila! Hello skateboard!” He put the ‘skateboard’ card down beside his character sheet and tokens.

“You’re welcome,” Howard growled. He’d taken two wounds but at least he recovered some bullets.

Sheldon picked up a city tile: a four way intersection. He scanned the board and decided that placing it near Howard would help expand the city where there was adequate table space. “Four zombies please.”

“Glowing or non-glowing?” asked Leonard.

“Oh what the heck, let’s be daring and go with radioactive,” Sheldon said whimsically.

“It’s funny that zombies are never created by mutating sludge,” mused Leonard as Sheldon rolled.

“The point of contact would be easily neutralized once the sludge had been detected.” Sheldon moved his plastic man three spaces and rolled again. “Aha! Die zombie!” He picked up the zombie figure and placed it beside his substantial pile of deceased undeceased. “Hence the reason why most modern zombie films use a viral catalyst.” For his last move he shuffled several zombies in the direction of Leonard.

“Gee thanks,” Leonard said with a smirk as he drew a tile card.

Howard took a sip of water. “They do vary the origin of the zombie plague. In ‘Zombieland’ it’s a mutation of ‘Mad Cow’ disease; in ‘Shaun of the Dead’ it’s caused by raging monkeys infecting a single person.”

“I’m glad Amy’s no longer working with primates,” Raj said with a shiver.

“Oh I don’t know,” mused Howard. “Working with you is kind of a regression since monkeys at least make a sound. You’re one less syllable off of ‘raarrgh’ much less ‘antidisestablishmentarianism’.” Raj stuck out his tongue while the other two chuckled.

“Besides it might not make much of a difference. Damn,” Leonard fired off two bullets to save his life as he failed his roll against the attacking zombie. “Remember in ‘The Walking Dead’ corpses just reanimate no matter what.” He moved again and dispatched the next zombie with ease. With furrowed eyes he scanned his roommate’s whereabouts so he could move the zombies in the
vicinity. Turnabout was indeed fair play.

“Poor Shane,” sighed Raj.

“Well gentlemen,” Howard said as he rubbed his hands. “As we’re at the last tile we all know what that is.” He flipped over the helicopter pad. Now where to put it? His eyes stopped at the corner with the video store. It was closest to his token and yet far enough to delay the others just enough. Hopefully.

“And nine zombies for you.” Leonard handed the engineer the figurines to deploy on the square.

“Look at them all,” breathed Raj. “Right out of Michael Jackson’s ‘Thriller’.”

“Yes, well if they start moving in tandem and thrusting their groins I’ll take my chances in the zombie city,” said Sheldon with pursed lips.

“Oh come awn!” Howard couldn’t believe his luck. He was down to one life and surrounded by the undead. The chances he’d kill five zombies in a row without losing a round were slim and he was already out of bullets. All he’d be doing was clearing the area of zombies so someone else could win. In that case, dying was the best strategy. He rolled again and was greeted with another failure. “Back to the central park I go.” As his last move he reinforced the zombies at the helipad as best he could.

“All right,” said Raj as he rolled the die. “Go Johnny! Go Johnny!” He doubled the number and his skateboarded character sailed across the tiles towards the helipad. “Eat my dust.”

“One thing I liked about ‘Zombieland’ was Columbus’ rules for survival as they’re really quite applicable to our scenario,” said Leonard as he ate popcorn. “For instance, rule one: good Cardio—we can see that as our characters run across the board.”

“Or rule three: beware of bathrooms. In this case it’s hospitals and fire halls,” added Howard.

“I always prefer rule twenty two: when in doubt, know your way out,” grinned Raj.” And this baby’s got a one way ticket out of here at the helipad.”

“Oh, I don’t know Raj,” Sheldon drawled. “I always preferred rule thirty three.” He rolled the die and killed another zombie.

Leonard was puzzled. “Columbus only had thirty two rules.”

“Which is why he’d fail in this scenario,” chided Sheldon as he rolled and killed again.

“Ok, so what is rule thirty three?” asked Raj.

“‘To keep ahead, count your undead’. I’ve thirty zombie kills, gentlemen. I win the game,” said a pleased Sheldon.

“No fair!” cried Raj. “It took me all game to be Marty McFly and now it’s over.”

“While all of you were so concerned with the emerging helipad I practiced rule thirty-two: enjoy the little things, and in this case it was killing zombies,” the theoretical physicist said.

“Yes but we were enacting rule seventeen: don’t be a hero,” argued Howard as he began picking up the zombie figures.

“Ah, but Columbus changed it to ‘be a hero’ once he decided to rescue Little Rock and Wichita,”
the lanky man reminded. “Obviously one of the rules not mentioned in the movie is ‘pay attention to the details.’”

“So while we were skulking our way around the board Sheldon barricaded himself like Tallahassee in the game booth at Pacific Playland and waited for the zombies to come to him. Ingenious,” remarked Leonard. “Who’d ever think Sheldon would play the ultra-hero?”

Sheldon was insulted. “Excuse me but don’t I take the point in paintball?”

“Yeah, well I noticed you stood at the back of the pack when I confronted Kurt about owing Penny money,” Leonard replied.

“Yes, well having the longest legs of the group I had the best chance for procuring assistance in the event Kurt embarked on a realistic depiction of Hulk smashing puny humans,” Sheldon explained as he added the last of the playing pieces to the box and closed the lid.

“But what about having minstrels singing about your heroic exploits?” asked Raj.

“They already have,” Howard smirked and began to sing: “Brave Sir Sheldon ran away. He ran, he ran he ran he ran—”

Sheldon scowled at the engineer. “Not funny.”

Leonard picked up his candy and tossed it to Howard who offered it to Sheldon. “Milk Dud?”

At once a smile came to the lanky man’s face. “Why I don’t mind if I do.”

xTBBTx

“Tonight we celebrate the birth of a prominent astrophysicist and the discovery of the Higgs boson all in a week,” grinned Raj.

“I highly refute the comparison,” sniffed Sheldon. “The hunt for the Higgs boson has been decades in length, hence worth the accolades the discovery has garnered. You, on the other hand—”

“Are valued by your friends and worth the tokens of friendship given to you tonight,” said Penny as she pointedly stared at her boyfriend.

“Happy Birthday,” Sheldon said with pursed lips and handed Raj an envelope.

“I sent him out to get it himself so though it’s from the both of us if it sucks it’s all Sheldon’s fault,” smiled Penny. Sheldon scowled at her as Raj opened the card.

“A gift certificate for the comic store. Thank you!”

“Good one, maestro,” Penny murmured to her boyfriend.

“Was there any reason to doubt?” he replied. “That I refuse the whole notion of gift reciprocity doesn’t mean I don’t know what makes a good gift.”

“Might as well open ours next,” said Howard.

Raj read the card and his mouth opened in joy. “Dinner for two at the New Jerusalem Restaurant.”

“Their vegan dishes are quite divine,” Amy offered as she straightened her skirt. “They serve six different types of hummus alone.”
“And it’s not like you’ll have to go into the Sonoran Desert to find it,” smirked Leonard.

Amy was confused. “Pardon me? I thought it was in Mexico?”

“Nevermind,” said Sheldon as he glared at his roommate. It was a mistake telling Leonard about his plans for a ‘New Jerusalem’ in Mexico in an attempt to garner a Nobel Peace Prize.

“I can’t wait to go,” gushed Raj as he looked at Amy. In response the neurobiologist nodded her head before taking a sip of her wine.

“I know our gift was more practical but it’s something you were going to do anyways,” said Leonard.

“Besides, anything that awards you the opportunity to learn something relevant is a-okay with me,” smirked Leslie.

The inscription on the card told him that his membership to the Museum of Natural History had been renewed.

“Excellent. Thank you Leonard. Leslie.”

“I have to admit that my gift is far from practical,” said Amy as she took out a wrapped present from a cloth bag. “Nevertheless it’s the sentiment that counts.”

As soon as it reached his hands Raj knew it was a hardcover book. Carefully he tore away the wrapping to reveal the cover to ‘Eat Pray Love’.

“Thank you,” he said with a smile. He already owned the book and the movie but that was for him to know.

“Open the cover,” Amy ordered. Raj complied and saw his name and ‘best wishes’ in a loopy scrawl followed by the author’s signature. His eyes were wide as he stared at his friend. “You’ll also note it’s a first edition. Not that I think it’ll replace Chaucer by any stretch of the imagination.”

“Thank you Amy,” Raj whispered. A smile flashed across her face.

“You’re satisfied?” she asked evenly, although her fingers did wrinkle the hem of her skirt.

Raj found himself unable to respond, instead he wiped his eye.

“Touchdown!” Amy exclaimed with a grin.

“That’s a score of six points when a player crosses the threshold into the end zone in American football,” Sheldon explained to Leonard. Leslie looked to her boyfriend.

“He’s joking you don’t know that.”

“Of course I know that,” Leonard stammered. “Penny and I used to watch football all the time, isn’t that right?” He looked at her pleadingly.

“Sure,” Penny said hesitantly before taking a sip of wine.

Raj brightened. “Maybe we can dine at the restaurant before we go to the party next weekend,” he suggested to Amy.

“What party?” asked Penny.
“The university is putting on a to-do celebrating the discovery of the Higgs boson,” explained Leonard.

Leslie took a sip of wine. “It’s more of a get-together for physicists and their spouses but anyone from the science department is welcome, hence short-stuff’s appearance.”

“There’s a half inch difference between Leonard and me,” growled Howard.

“Don’t let it bother you,” Bernadette said soothingly. “I’ve always had a thing for shorter men.” Howard leaned over and gave his wife a kiss.

“Well I myself can’t wait. Dr Dietrich is supposed to be there and I’ve so much to ask him,” Raj said excitedly.

“And to think we could still be in limbo if the evidence for the production of a neutral boson with a measured mass of 126.0 * 0.4 (stat) * 0.4 (sys) GeV wasn’t clear,” Leonard said.

“Don’t forget the observation of 5.9 standard deviations corresponding to a background fluctuation probability of 1.7×10−9 is compatible with the production and decay of the Standard Model Higgs boson so the experiment’s chances of error are remote,” added Leslie.

“Interestingly enough the CDF and DØ experiments at the Tevatron have also recently reported a broad excess in the mass region 120–135 GeV; using the existing LHC constraints, the observed local significances for mH=125 GeV are 2.7σ for CDF, 1.1σ for DØ and 2.8σ for their combination,” Sheldon said.

“I recall reading that the ATLAS experiments were still in full swing between April and June,” said Amy.

“In the 7 TeV data, the average number of interactions per bunch crossing was approximately 10; the average increased to approximately 20 in the 8 TeV data. The reconstruction, identification and isolation criteria used for electrons and photons in the 8 TeV data are improved, making the $H \rightarrow ZZ(\ast) \rightarrow 4\ell$ and $H \rightarrow \gamma\gamma$ searches more robust against the increased pile-up,” explained Sheldon.

“I think I’ll get some more wine,” said Penny as she rose from the couch. As she poured she half-listened to the conversation but it was all gibberish as far as she could make out. ‘God now even Bernadette’s asking relevant questions and she’s a biologist.’ Penny drained the glass and poured again.

She noted the animation in Sheldon’s voice and demeanor, the color in his cheeks as he refuted Leonard’s claim. ‘He really is in his element.’

Leslie let go with a series of letters and numbers garnering a glare from the lanky man.

“You’re just saying that to be deliberately contrary.”

“Now you’re paranoid,” Leslie countered.

“Paranoid?” Sheldon replied with an equally impressive string of incomprehensible gobbledy-gook.

“I agree with Sheldon,” Raj replied.

“You work with him so of course you would,” spat Leslie.

“Well you sleep with Leonard so that explains why you back him up,” Raj countered.
“Alright,” Sheldon drawled in excitement. “Time to reduce the variables so even the simplest of minds can understand.” He stood up and bounded to his whiteboard, taking a moment to look over his numbers before erasing them. “The Standard Model has been tested many times over the last four decades; however, the mechanism that breaks electroweak symmetry in the SM has not been verified experimentally,” Sheldon said as he scrawled out numbers at a dizzying rate.

“Oh hell no,” growled Leonard as he rushed to his own board and dragged it closer to the couch. There was no way he was going to let himself or anyone else go through physics baby talk one oh one without a fight.

Penny listened in as the four physicists were at each other with Howard, Bernadette and Amy looking on or occasionally adding in their two-cent’s worth. Grabbing the wine bottle from the counter Penny quietly made her way to the door as all eyes were riveted on the whiteboards and a rousing rendition of the Hofstadter-Cooper Lecture to notice.

“I’ve got a headache and—” Penny realized her lie was unnecessary. “Yeah.” She gently closed the door and left her friends to debate.

In her own apartment she turned on the television and grabbed herself a mug before settling on the couch. She poured herself some wine and clicked through the channels as she gulped.

“‘Reduce the variables’,” she muttered. Sip. “‘Simplest of minds’. Another three swallows and the mug was empty. She poured herself another.

“You’re wrong Moonpie, the simplest of minds can’t understand a damn thing you said.” She took a sip and thought about her friends across the hall. ‘What the hell am I doing with these people?’ Sip. ‘What are they doing with me?’ With a click the tv was off and she stood up with bottle and mug in hand and turned off the overhead light before making her way to her bedroom. If all went as planned and she killed the bottle she really would get that headache.

XxX

The four physicists were standing at the whiteboards still in the throes of heated debate. After forty five minutes Bernadette had reached her limit and glanced around the room. It was as her eyes settled on the full wine glass sitting on the counter that she realized someone was missing.

“Where’s Penny?” she whispered to Howard.

“I’m not sure,” he replied. The last time he’d seen the waitress she was on her way to the refrigerator for another bottle of wine and— He spotted Penny’s glass and gave his wife a puzzled look before standing and venturing to the door. He knocked at Penny’s apartment but there was no answer. He returned to 4A and closed the door, shaking his head as Bernadette frowned. She pulled out her phone.

Over in 4B Penny thought she heard someone knocking. Less than a minute later her phone rang. Penny closed her eyes and slept.

In the living room her phone buzzed at an incoming text then all was silent.

xTBBTx

Penny wasn’t sure if the groan started before she opened her eyes or whether the acts coincided. At this point it didn’t matter as headache one oh one galloped its way across her forehead and her stomach was officially feeling like dog’s breakfast. From all the drinking she’d done up to this point she knew better than to get drunk on white wine. Granted it wasn’t as bad as high school
when she spent the day home with ‘the flu’ after a night of Long Island iced teas but sweet wine
was not something to be taken lightly.

Actually they were meant to be taken lightly. Just not lightly.

'Too much light.' Penny squeezed her eyes shut and tried to get her brain to work right. First thing
was first: she needed a Tylenol and a shower. After taking a moment to gather herself she climbed
out from under the bed sheets and stripped before entering the bathroom in search of her headache
remedy. She popped off the cap and put a pill in her mouth before angling her mouth under the
running tap and taking a swig of water. The shower was long and by the end she felt more like
herself albeit smelling a lot like melon thanks to her shower gel.

After brushing her teeth and gargling twice she slipped into her pajama pants and red tank top and
gathered the evidence of her drinking from the bedroom and deposited them in the kitchen sink.
Her eyes caught the oven clock—nine thirty seven—and realized she could go back to bed. Eleven
o’clock, however, would come quickly and with that a three knock at her door she knew was as
inevitable as a shoe sale after having paid rent. Best she dealt with things on her terms. Penny
rinsed the bottle and put it beneath her sink before she washed her mug of the alcohol scent. If she
were honest she thought the whole apartment reminded her of a distillery and quickly lit a couple
of vanilla candles to freshen the air.

It was ten oh six by the time she had her apartment settled before she took her keys and made her
way across the hall. The door was open and she entered to find Sheldon in his spot watching
television although she was much more distracted by the smell of coffee emanating from the
kitchen. Thankful her headache was gone Penny put on a smile and passed to the left of the couch
and grabbed her cup of Joe.

Sheldon waited for a commercial before he acknowledged his girlfriend.

“What time did you leave last night?” he asked evenly and poker-faced.

“Early.” Penny put the milk back in the refrigerator. “Everyone was busy and I wasn’t feeling well
so—”

“You’re not sick are you?” Sheldon breathed. He looked ready to run from the room.

“Was just a headache, sweetie. A goodnight’s sleep and a pain reliever and it’s gone.” She smiled
into her cup as Sheldon visibly relaxed. “So without getting the blow-by-blow who ultimately
came out on top last night?”

“Is there any doubt?” A pleased smile pinched his lips even as he turned off the television with the
remote.

Penny took her cup and curled up in Leonard’s chair. Sheldon was disappointed.

“Why are you over there?”

“I just wanted to face you this morning,” she replied before taking a sip of coffee.

“But the acoustics for talking are far superior if you sit next to me in your spot,” he pointed out.

“I can hear you just fine.”

“What?” he asked, his eyes refusing to meet hers.
“You are spoiled, you know that?” She took another sip before she set her mug on the coffee table and stood. “By the way, you never told me how much I owe you for Raj’s present.”

“Twenty five dollars.” His mouth twitched. “Although like ‘Penny’s taxi’ I’m flexible in terms of payment.”

“Oh?” Penny smiled as she stepped over and straddled his lap.

Sheldon was stunned. “Penny, you’re in my spot!”

“No I’m sitting on your knees.”

“Semantics.”

“Oh no it’s not. Tell me there’s no difference in my sitting out here or if I slide my way towards—” At once Sheldon braced her shoulders to keep her from encroaching further on his lap.

“My sitting posture including leg and spinal positioning are harmonious with my ‘spot’ hence propping yourself on any part of my person is in violation of sector 0,0,0,0,” he explained rapidly.

“I know something I’d like to be in violation of,” she purred as her finger stretched to touch his chest.

“Yes, well, you were entitled to ‘get some of this’ last night. Unfortunately you were under the weather hence your next opportunity isn’t until the eleventh.”

“Seriously?”

“Seriously,” Sheldon said firmly. “Penny, you know we have a schedule: Thursdays and Saturdays are for the purposes of intimacy up to and including physical contact.”

“No exceptions for being sick?” she pouted.

“Contact is to be especially avoided until the source of illness has been identified and dealt with.” He took in her look of disappointment and bloodshot eyes. “I’ll allow a brief hug since you’re no longer…sick.” He relaxed his arms and Penny piled against him.

“Hello Moonpie,” she sighed happily as her head lay on his chest.

“Hello Penny,” he replied softly, his face stone save for the look of worry in his eyes.

xTBBTx

Imdb: Zombieland; Shaun of the Dead; The Time Traveler’s Wife

‘Brave Sir Sheldon’: parody from Monty Python and the Holy Grail

Game the boys are playing: Zombies!

Physics Talk: Physics Letter B: Observation of a new particle in the search for the Standard Model Higgs boson with the ATLAS detector at the LHC.

Thanks for reading!
Senor Chang tossed the chalk in his hand onto the ledge and turned to face the class. “Oh that reminds me, the Dean has asked me to coordinate the fire routes used in the language wing of the school. As if somehow I’d know how to move massive amounts of people just because there are one point three billion of us Chinese on the planet.” He began to pace. “Of course I’m a team player. Loyalty to the State is above all. So of course I’ll do my utmost to make sure most of you survive a raging inferno.”

‘Crap on a cracker!’ Penny wanted desperately to check the time on her watch but felt it would sign her death sentence if she took her eyes off the teacher.

“Those that choose not to listen to me in class will be the ones who die in the fire.” He glared at Jeff. “You hear me Winger? What about you, starburns?”

“I hear you,” glowered the tall man with star-shaped sideburns.

“What’s that?” Senor Chang said, putting a hand by his ear and straining to listen. “What are you saying?” He stood straight looking shocked. “A fire?” He turned to Annie. “And do you know what to do in case of a fire?”

“Follow your orders,” she said quickly.

“Corregir. And you, starburns. What will you do?”

“Follow you. And my name’s Alex.”

“Wrong. You’ll be screaming.” Senor Chang gave a blood curling scream, sending shivers down his students’ backs. “The fire! It burns! It burns!”

The room was silent.

“So,” Senor Chang said in a calm voice with a clap of the hands. “Next Monday we’ll have a series of presentations with phrases from chapters one through five. Those of you who listened to me and didn’t peel off the tape from their desk look at it now. Your partner has the same number. The word is what you have to use in your dialogue which needs to be a minimum of eight lines long.” Senor Chang smiled amiably. “Ok that’s it so what do we say?” As one the class gave a “hablamos hablar.”

Immediately students began calling out numbers.

“Seven,” said Penny. “Seven.”

“Seven!” squealed Shirley. The two women hi-fived each other.

“We are so going to kick ass,” Penny grinned.

She glanced over and saw an elated Pierce slap a much less enthused Jeff on the shoulder. The ex-lawyer glanced over and caught her eye and proceeded to walk over followed by Pierce.

“So, you and Shirley,” Jeff said amiably.
“Yup,” said Penny. “Although we got the word ‘washroom’. It won’t exactly be the most pulse-pounding of conversations.”

Jeff chuckled. “Maybe it’s because you’re how old?”

“Twenty five.”

“Ah, see, talks about the washroom come into play when you’re older.” He turned to Pierce. “Maybe it’d be better if you took the ‘washroom’ word. It’d make your conversation more realistic.”

The older man regarded Shirley. “I suppose we could do a skit on incontinence. I’ve got some props we can use at home.”

“Mmm mmm mmm mmm,” Shirley mumbled, wide eyed and head shaking.

“Naa I think we’re good,” Penny said as she rubbed her partner’s arm soothingly.

XxX

“It might be exciting but it’s still hokum,” said Sheldon before taking a bite of his cashew chicken.

“Ok so there wasn’t enough mud to hide Schwarzenegger’s body heat from the Predator’s vision, it still was a cool idea,” replied Howard.

“His eyes would have been a giveaway,” Leonard said between bites. “They really give off a lot of heat.”

“Unless his eyelids were full of mud and he kept his eyes closed,” offered Howard.

“Which he didn’t,” corrected Sheldon. “Two glowing dots at a fixed distance apart are a clear signal to any intelligent being that another life form is present.”

“Signal!” Penny placed her dumplings on the table. “Leonard I promised Abed I’d take a picture of your Bat-signal. Do you mind?”

“Sure.” Leonard set aside his food and together they went down the hall. Penny stopped in front of Sheldon’s door.

“I’ll be a sec,” she whispered.

“Ego sum non culpabilis,” Leonard replied before going into his room.

Even though Sheldon was busy nit-picking away in the living room Penny felt she was intruding as she stepped into the Sanctum Sanctorum. She crossed over to the bed, pulled out an envelope from her pocket and placed it on the pillow. As she turned to go she caught sight of a prescription for antibiotics. According to the date he filled it the day before he let her touch his body.

“Sheldon, Sheldon, Sheldon,” Penny muttered before exiting the room and joining Leonard in his.

“So am I setting this up for nothing or did ‘Abed’ really want to see it?” asked the physicist as he angled his Bat-signal towards the door.

“He didn’t ask but I’m sure he’ll love it,” Penny said with a blush. She crossed over and gave Leonard a kiss on the cheek. “Thanks Leonard. I’ll take the rap for this.”
“It doesn’t matter. Sheldon’ll probably think I’m in on it and give me a strike regardless.” He sighed. “I already have two strikes.”

“Crap Leonard. If you take any more classes you’ll have a B.A. in Sheldonese.”

Here he smiled. “Don’t you mean a ‘B.S.’?” They both chuckled as he turned on the Bat-signal.

XxX

As soon as Sheldon saw the letter on his pillow he frowned.

“No one can be in my room,” he muttered to himself as he picked up the envelope. His curiosity was piqued as he read ‘Destroy after reading please’ in Penny’s handwriting.

Inside was an official looking paper from the local medical clinic. Though he hadn’t asked her for a STD test he had to admit to himself he was relieved to see the results.

He tore up the paper and threw it into the garbage can.

A moment later and the bottle of antibiotics joined it.

xTBBTx

“Manganese,” said Leonard as he drove.

“Europium,” Sheldon replied as he looked out the side window. “You’re left with Mendelevium thus leaving me without an ‘m’ starting element. Well played.”

“Thank you, the shorter man grinned. So, are we going to carpool this Saturday or do Leslie and I meet you and Penny at the party?”

“We might as well go together as Penny isn’t coming.”

Leonard glanced at his roommate. “What are you talking about?”

“Over morning coffee Penny mentioned to me that she had a presentation next Monday and needed to stay home to work on it,” Sheldon replied.

“She has all week to work on it plus Sunday,” countered Leonard with a frown.

“I agree and informed her thusly. However she seemed quite adamant.”

“Did you tell her ‘too bad’?”

Sheldon raised an eyebrow. “Why would I say that?”

“Sheldon, don’t make the same mistake I made and keep science and Penny apart from each other,” Leonard warned as he stopped at a light.

“She said it didn’t matter, that she’d ‘probably be bored out of her skull anyways’.”

“And I wasn’t when we went shoe shopping or rollerblading at the park? Ok I was more frightened than anything else with that one but you get my drift.” The light turned green and he turned onto campus. “I went with her not only because I wanted to spend time with her but because I wanted to know her.”
“But I already know Penny,” Sheldon said in puzzlement. “Leonard you’re either being obtuse or employing subterfuge to confound me because you’re not making a concise argument. I don’t hide my interest in science from her but at the same time I realize it isn’t her ‘thing’.”

“Only because we’re usually talking way over her head. Look, this party gives her the perfect opportunity to step into our world without leaving hers. It’s cocktails and hanging out with friends, maybe meeting a colleague or two.” Leonard chuckled. “You get to show her off to the department as the real live girlfriend of Dr. Sheldon Cooper.”

Sheldon looked at his friend. “Why should I ‘show her off’?”

“I was joking about the improbability of you having a girlfriend. But I am serious about bringing Penny. She needs to know that she’s just as important to you as physics—or as close to it as humanly possible for you,” he quickly amended at Sheldon’s glare.

“She knows she’s important to me,” Sheldon snapped.

“Damn it Sheldon I was embarrassed,” Leonard snarled as he parked in his spot. He took a moment to compose himself. “Well, not totally. More like I was never satisfied with Penny. I always tried to make her better than she is, not in her best interest but mine. She’s beautiful but I also wanted her to be smart and funny and—”

“She is humorous and reasonably intelligent,” Sheldon said darkly.

Leonard sighed. “I’m not saying she isn’t. I—” He sighed again. “Sheldon it’s easy to tell someone she’s beautiful in private. Don’t allow her to hide away when everyone’s going to be at the party. Let her know she’s beautiful anywhere.”

Both men got out of the car and walked to the physics building in silence.

XxX

Knock Knock Knock “Penny.”

Knock Knock Knock “Penny.”

Knock Knock Knock “Penny.”

“Damn he’s good,” Penny said as she stepped to the door. She was just about to strip out of her Cheesecake Factory uniform and take a shower when Sheldon’s perfectly timed knock interrupted her.

“What’s up, buttercup?” she asked. “You’re here early tonight.”

“As you have class tomorrow I didn’t want to keep you up,” he replied. “So what I have to say shouldn’t take too long.” He clasped his hands behind his back and stood taller. “I’ve decided your attendance at Saturday’s party at the university is non-optional.”

“Oh really?” Penny said more in surprise than in defense. “I thought you didn’t like parties?”

“Normally I agree. However this is a group social outing I’m obligated to attend,” he explained. Penny was dubious. “I don’t know about this. I really should work on my presentation.”

“I’ll assist you—if you so desire. At the very least I’ll grant you as much ‘space’ as necessary between now and Saturday so you’ll have time to finish.” Penny opened her mouth to speak. “It
would please me if you came," he said with a twitchy smile.

With a sigh Penny nodded her head. “Okay.”

“Excellent. I’ll confer with you on Saturday if ‘Date Night’ is cancelled for this week.” He leaned in to kiss her on the lips. “Buenas noches mi belleza.”

“Night sweetie.” She waited until he crossed the hall before shutting her door. Immediately her face was grave.

“What the frak now, Penelope?” she muttered to herself as she stormed into her bedroom.

xTBBTx

Four game controllers were clicking furiously as the skirmish continued.

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xTBBTx

Four game controllers were clicking furiously as the skirmish continued.


“Oh yeah?” replied the physicist. “Then why’s Raj have me? And where’s Sheldon?”

“Muah-ha-ha,” chortled the tall man as his avatar wove its way through scattered debris to get a better shot.

“Where’s the Green Lantern Corps when I need them?” growled Howard. “At least they’d give me backup.”

“Hey!” snapped Leonard. “It takes a lot of effort dying in new and inventive ways.”

“You know what your problem is? Your characters don’t have something to go back home to,” said Raj as he stared at the screen. “My soldier, he’s got a wife and two kids he’s fighting for. It’s just like Hal Jordan fighting for Carol against Parallax.”

“Of course there’s nothing like the imminent destruction of the earth to motivate a man,” sniffed Sheldon. “For love of planet, yes. A woman? Indeed.”

“Nonsense?” Raj replied as his character switched weapons. “Hal is spurred on by his sense of duty and love for his beautiful, intellectually equal colleague. So says imdb.”

At this Sheldon gave a gaspy laugh.

“Intellectually equal’?” smiled Howard. “Political correctness is alive and well.”

“Carol is an accomplished fighter pilot and business woman,” explained Raj. “That puts her one ahead of Pepper Potts.” At once the game paused and he felt three sets of eyes on his person. “Yeah, even I know I sound crazy.” The game resumed.

“But still Carol could be Hal Jordan’s intellectual equal since he isn’t exactly the Bruce Wayne of the Justice League,” mused Leonard.

Sheldon opened fire, pinning his roommate against a tree. “Only if you can explain to me how after a pleasant conversation with Hal which included giving her an emerald necklace and flight around the city did she suddenly turn on him the moment they returned to her office? She rebuffed him and began weeping in the next room. Even Hal was at a loss.”

“We’ll call that a case of bad editing. Or at least I hope it is,” added Howard. He launched a grenade at Raj then ran for new cover so he could free Leonard.
“A lot of editing decisions were questionable,” Leonard said with a frown. “To the right, Howard. Sheldon’s behind the transport.”

“I remember reading that they were going to put in a Clark Kent cameo as the ring went searching for a worthy candidate but the filmmakers didn’t want to depend on another superhero for a success,” said Raj as he took time out to drink. He figured Sheldon had the others exactly where he wanted them so there was no hurry.

“Yes, better to stick with what they knew—abysmal failure,” smirked Sheldon. He strafed the area as he ran out and came quickly behind Leonard. “Boo.” A shot was heard and Leonard’s character dropped to the ground.

“Notice how they didn’t count the other characters from Green Lantern as ‘superheroes’. Alien discrimination,” said Raj as he took up his controller and began to smoke out Howard. “Bzzd is my favorite.”

“From planet Aplaton, sector 2261,” added Sheldon. “I much prefer Chaselon of planet Barrio III, sector 1416 or Stel from planet Grenda, sector 3009.” He took a moment to dry his hand on his pant leg. “I could never stand Voz. He looked too much like a bear.”

“I always thought Booddikka was ‘boodylicious’ with her pink skin,” Howard said with a wiggle to his eyebrows.

“Only Howard could cause fear in the heart of a Green Lantern,” chuckled Leonard.

“Mock me if you will,” the engineer said indignantly. “It’s not my ass kissing the dirt.”

“No, but if Bernadette finds out about Booddikka it’ll be your kisses on her ass,” grinned Raj.

“Believe me gentlemen, they’re already there,” replied Howard. He placed himself with his back in a corner and waited for the end. “Bernie’s been unhappy lately and the only thing I can think of is that she doesn’t want me going into space.”

Leonard finished munching on a pretzel. “Did she say that?”

“No.” A pause. “Kind of?” Howard shook his head. “I don’t know. Maybe it’s my own jitters talking.”

“You’ve got nothing to fear. They do launches all the time,” soothed Raj. “Just think: you’ll be going where none of us have been before.”

“I haven’t been to the bottom of the ocean,” mused Leonard.

“I haven’t been to Vulcan,” added Sheldon.

“I’ll be sure to say ‘hi’ to Spock while I’m up there,” Howard said dryly. He managed to hit Raj twice before the astrophysicist ducked behind the wall.

“Don’t be silly, Howard. Spock is in the twenty third century,” tutted Sheldon.

“As opposed to being a fictional character. Of course,” smirked Leonard.

“I find your lack of faith disturbing,” replied Sheldon while as one both he and Raj stormed the walls and took out Howard with a series of grenades and plasma shots.

“It’s still anagram, Sheldon,” said Howard. The theoretical physicist raised his eyebrow in
puzzlement. “A pile of Sith.”

xTBBTx

Sheldon remained in his spot absorbed in an intriguing book about hyperspace while Penny sat on the floor to his right doing her homework. She gave a big sigh as she yet again erased an answer. Algebra was just murdering her as she couldn’t tell which formula applied to which question. In the past hour she had done over twenty equations. If she counted how many were right she wouldn’t need all ten of her fingers.

Penny noisily turned the page of her notebook in order to get a fresh start and began writing out the next problem. As soon as it was done she took one look at it and realized she didn’t have a clue as to what to do.

Again Penny sighed and Sheldon looked up from his Kindle.

“Having difficulties?”

“You’d like that wouldn’t you?” she scowled.

Sheldon was puzzled. “Why would I wish you ill will?”

“Isn’t that why you’re here? Help Penny when she screws up?”

“I’m here because this is Thursday and Thursday is Date Night. As you have homework to complete it’s become a Study-Date Night based on the precedent set on September sixth. What?” He saw Penny begin to pack her things.

“I can’t do this with an audience.”

“Alright. However it’d be simpler for me to remove myself than have you go through the inconvenience of packing.”

“You always have to make it easy for me don’t you?” she snapped.

Sheldon was silent as he did his best to read his girlfriend. “I’m unsure what to say since anything I’ve offered to the conversation has only garnered negative comments,” he said at last.

“Now you know how I feel.”

He frowned. “No, I don’t because I don’t know why you’re angry with me.”

“I’m not angry with you, Sheldon,” Penny said while reading over her math question.

“Then why are we on the verge of arguing?”

She sighed. “We’re not arguing.”

“True. I’m not arguing but you are most definitely baiting.”

Pause. “You’re right Sheldon. Stupid Penny flubs it again.”

“Enough,” growled the physicist. “No more self-deprecation and no more attacking me. Tell me what’s wrong.”

“I don’t want to go to your stupid party!!!”
Sheldon was surprised. “Penny, it’s nothing more than a social gathering. I don’t see how an hour or two there can be any more disconcerting than when you dragged me out suit shopping.”

She leaned back on the couch. “You don’t get it do you?”

“Enlighten me.”

“I’ll be in a room full of scientists with my best waitressing smile because like hell I’ll be able to understand anything anyone says to me,” she said gruffly.

“Penny—”

“We’re going to celebrate the finding of the Higgs boson and I don’t even know what the frak a boson is much less a Higgs. I stood like an idiot at Raj’s party while everyone talked and I don’t want to experience that again unless there’s an open bar and I can’t get ripped because I’m your date and don’t want you to look bad.” She sucked in a breath to settle herself.

Sheldon took this all in before he replied. “Come here.”

“Sheldon I’m not finished,” she said, indicating her homework.

“Take a break,” he said calmly.

Penny sighed again and dropped her pencil on her notebook before pushing back the coffee table and standing. Sheldon patted the spot next to him and she veritably flopped into place. Reaching over he gently pulled her to his side and began rubbing her arm.

“Bosons are particles that are thought to be exchanged when forces occur. A force is defined as a push or pull. But that does not tell us what it really is or how it is mediated. Richard Feynman suggested that forces occur when two particles exchange a boson.”

“O-kay,” Penny said, a little unsure.

“If two people wear roller skates and one person throws a ball and the other one catches it, they will be pushed in opposite directions. In this analogy, the skaters are two particles we’re looking at, the ball is the boson and the repulsion is the force. In particles we see the force, the effect, but not the exchange.”

“We don’t see the ball.”

“Exactly,” said Sheldon.

Penny gave a little smile. “Ok, so what’s the Higgs boson?”

“The Standard Model for physics states there are twelve different matter particles and four fundamental forces. The forces are Weak, Electromagnetic, Strong and Gravitation. Each force has a corresponding boson that transfers it to matter.”

“A ball,” Penny said firmly. She was actually getting this!

“A ball,” agreed the physicist. “The Higgs boson is also a ball that’s used by the Higgs Field to give mass to matter.”

She glanced at her boyfriend. “Wait a minute, so nothing weighs anything?”

“Not without elementary particles passing through the Higgs Field and slowing down to become
mass. Elementary particles are the building blocks for everything in existence. The Higgs Field itself is spread across the entire universe,” Sheldon explained.

“Wow.” Penny leaned back against his shoulder. “So why call it Higgs?”

“It’s named after Peter Higgs who proposed in nineteen sixty four that such a massive particle existed and identified some of its theoretical properties.”

“Is that what you and Leonard do?” Penny asked shyly. “Think up things for others to prove?”

“Not Leonard. He’s an experimental physicist whose original work consists of testing assorted theoretical posits. I come up with the posits.” The corners of Sheldon’s lips turned upwards. “And no I don’t just ‘think things up’. Everything’s already there; it’s up to me to reveal them so we can understand the origins of the universe.”

“How do you do that?” Penny breathed. She knew there was a vast intellectual difference between Sheldon and her. At this moment she realized the difference was similar between Sheldon and nearly everyone else.

“Observation. Remember when we talked about Dark Matter when we stargazed in the desert? Professor Zwicky could see that there was something throwing off the orbital velocities of galaxies in clusters. He wasn’t sure what it was but from the behavior of the galaxies he knew it existed.”

“If it walks like a duck and swims like a duck and talks like a duck….”

“The more observations we garner the more obvious the solution because each new element not only describes what we want to know but it also filters out what we don’t,” he continued.

Penny thought about this. “If it swims like a duck it can’t be a horse.”

“Exactly.” Sheldon turned and gave her a soft kiss on the head. At this moment he was beyond pleased. As garbled as Leonard’s message was Sheldon had to admit his roommate was correct: he shouldn’t keep physics separate from Penny. Each was her own elegant construct and together they were as close to perfection as he was ever likely to experience.

Penny tapped his thigh. “How come you couldn’t be this clear when I asked you to teach me physics so I could talk to Leonard?”

“You weren’t specific,” Sheldon said evenly. “You asked for ‘a little physics’ and I couldn’t provide that without giving you proper context.”

“Uh huh,” she replied as she angled her head towards him. “Sweetie, you don’t know how much I’m hoping this attention to detail translates into sex.”

“Perhaps you shouldn’t place expectations on me,” he said with a twitchy mouth. “My experience with sexuality is limited to myself.”

“Nothing to be nervous about Sheldon. I’ll take you anyway you come.” She laughed out loud. “That so didn’t come out right.” She glanced up to see Sheldon’s narrowed eyes.

“I see you’ve recovered.”

“Yeah,” she giggled. She felt his arm hug her tightly.

“So you’re coming to the party?” he asked hopefully.
“If you are.”

Sheldon sighed. “Dr. Gablehauser intimated that my attendance was mandatory.” A little smile crossed his lips. “Misery would truly appreciate company.”

“Well when you put it that way how can a girl resist?” She sat up and gave him a kiss on the cheek. “With my brains and your looks we’ll knock ‘em dead.”

“Really Penny.”

“Are you kidding me? With the sexy number I’ll have you in you’ll be belle of the ball.”

“We are not going shopping again,” Sheldon said crisply. Penny slipped off the couch and brought the coffee table towards her. “I refuse.” She picked up her pencil and scanned the question before she began writing.

Though she could feel his scowl there was no way Penny was going to raise her head.

xTBBTx

“¡hola Penny.”

“¡hola Shirley.”

“¿cómo está.”

“Estoy bien. ¿puedo usar el inodoro.”

“¡por supuesto. El baño está al final del pasillo.”

“¡gracias.”

“Eres bienvenido.”

“¡Qué tenga un buen día.”

Both women laughed as they gave each other a hi-five.

“As ready as we’ll ever be,” Shirley said brightly.

“Sheldon’ll be happy to hear that. We’re supposed to go to a party this weekend at the university,” Penny explained.

“The university?” the older woman gushed. “Why does he work there?”

“Yeah,” Penny said quietly. “Don’t tell anyone but he’s a professor.”

“A professor! Shh! Shh!” Shirley said as she calmed down. Abed and Troy gave her curious stares before they resumed studying. ‘A professor’? she mouthed to Penny. “How did you manage that?”

“He’s my neighbor. Now mum’s the word.”

“Wow.” Shirley made a zip it gesture with her hand. She ‘unzipped’ her mouth and repeated her “Wow.” Penny smacked her on the arm. Shirley giggled as she checked her watch. “Well thanks for doing this early with me. Annie and I have a protest for the Mexican drug war going on in the quad at seven so I have to get the brownies ready.”
“Need any help?”

“Honey, we could all use some help,” Shirley said sagely.

The two women packed their belongings and exited the library study room.

“Penny!”

The Nebraskan turned to see Jeff bee-lining for her.

“I’ll be outside,” Shirley said with a knowing smile.

“Missed you at study group, Jeff,” Penny said casually.

“I’ve been working at not working with Pierce. Unfortunately he’s found me so it’s bootstraps time. Anyways—” He handed her a blue envelope.

“What’s this?” she asked as she opened the card.

“A fresh start,” he explained.

Her eyebrow raised as she looked it over. “Dad, may your day be filled with the happiness and joy you have brought to me. Not just on St Patrick’s day”—she opened the card—“but everyday.”

“Kind of gets ya where it counts,” he said with a smirk.

“Not the best thing on an empty stomach,” she quipped as she readjusted her back pack on her shoulder. “You didn’t know I had a boyfriend, Jeff. Don’t worry about it.”

“I know that,” Jeff replied quickly. “I just want things to be cool between us.”


“Definitely not frigid,” Jeff added.

“Be nice,” Penny smirked. “Ok, we can be cool. Have fun studying,” she said as she turned to go.

Jeff was stunned. “Aren’t you staying?”

“Not until the Mexicans are sick of brownies,” she said over her shoulder.

“What?”

“There’s another protest out in the quad,” said Abed from the room. “Shirley’s bringing brownies like last time.”

"Jeff!" At the sound of his name the ex-lawyer closed his eyes. "Jeff, I was hoping to catch you before study group," said Pierce as he came to stand beside his Spanish partner. "I've got the very thing for our presentation—"

"Brownies?" replied Jeff.

"Brownies," Pierce snorted. "Wrong ethnicity Jeffrey. It'd be 'wacky tobacky' if I was going for a narcotic. Besides, real hombres crave tequila." He patted his schoolbag.

"You're a voice of wisdom, Pierce," Jeff said as he clapped the older man on the shoulder.
"Permanecer sed mi amigo," the older man grinned.

xTBBTx

Corregir—Correct; dos—two; hablamos hablar—talk talk

Buenas noches mi belleza—Good night my beauty.

Permanecer sed mi amigo: Stay thirsty my friend. Line of world’s most interesting man.

Penny and Shirley’s dialogue: Hello Penny; Hello Shirley; How are you?; I am fine. Can I use your toilet?; Of course. The washroom is down the hall.; Thank you.; You’re welcome; Have a nice day.

Imdb: Green Lantern

How Stuff Works: Hadrons, Bosons and the Big Bang; What exactly is the Higgs boson?

Ego sum non culpabilis: I’m not to blame.
“So what do you think?” Penny asked as she twirled around in a long sleeved summer blue dress that measured to mid thigh and matching heels.

“Rraarr!” Amy growled. “The Higgs boson just became the second most talked about item of interest for the evening.”

“Yeah whatever,” Penny replied as she rolled her eyes. “All I want to do is get through this evening without looking or sounding like a bad case of ‘duh’.”

“Just stick with me, Bestie. Bernadette and I decided we can’t be eye-candy all evening so we’ve taken it upon ourselves to branch off on our own at some point.” Here a little smile flashed across her face. “As interesting as raw physics is, even I have a limit.”

“Amen sistah.” The Nebraskan finished packing her purse and turned to face her friend. “You really look awesome, Amy. Raj’ll love it.”

“I have no doubt he will since his opinion contributed to the outfit you see before you.” On Thursday after hypnotherapy and dinner Raj and Amy went shopping to find another light sweater to go with the blue top Penny gave her. As they passed the jewelry section the astrophysicist picked out a purple bauble necklace for her and decided it would accentuate her outfit—particularly if she got shoes to match. All in all it had proved to be a long and enjoyable night.

“Maybe we’ll both get lucky this evening,” grinned Penny as the women left her bedroom.

“It’s not like that, Penny. As I said before Rajesh and I have decided to be friends. I’d like to think we’re becoming very good ones. Not at the level of Sheldon and I of course, although….”

Penny stopped the both of them at the door. “Although?”

“I’d have to say there is a closeness between Rajesh and I that I never felt with Sheldon.” Amy gave Penny a light punch on the arm. “Don’t worry Bestie, he’ll never replace you. We bang on sistah?”

“We bang on.”

They crossed the hall and went into 4A where a good looking man in a crisp dark suit stood waiting. At the sight of the women Raj’s eyes widened and a smile crossed his face.

“Amy,” he said breathlessly. The necklace really did tie in the shoes nicely. After taking her in he glanced at Penny and cleared his throat as he raised his eyebrows appreciatively.

“Why thank you Raj,” Penny beamed before crossing over to the hallway. “Time’s ticking
In his bedroom Sheldon frowned as he looked in the mirror. “I’d feel more comfortable in my other suit,” he said grumpily as he adjusted his black and blue striped diagonal tie. Granted the shopping trip this afternoon wasn’t as painful as he’d anticipated as it was limited to finding him another pair of pants for the dark suit he wore now but still he could have avoided the experience altogether if his girlfriend allowed him to wear his plaid purple outfit.

“Not a chance, bub,” Penny called.

“Penny I—”

“¡hola Shirley. Estoy bien.”

“I hope you realize this is blackmail,” the physicist scowled as he turned off the light and stalked into the living room.

Penny was beside herself. “Wow,” she pumpkin grinned as she took in her boyfriend. For his part Sheldon looked put out although there was a definite blush creeping along his cheeks.

“Indeed.”

“We are so not going to waste this tonight.” She grasped his hand and together they made for the door.

“So, what should I expect at the party?” asked Penny in the hall as Sheldon locked up.

“It’s a social gathering of scientific intellectuals but the same protocol applies as to any other party: decorations and alcohol will be present as will a plethora of titillating conversation,” explained Amy.

“Oh believe me I’m prepared to be titillated,” the waitress smirked.

XxX

When Amy said ‘decorations’ Penny thought of a few balloons not a dizzying array of three dimensional atoms and moving colored wav frequencies. It was totally out of Star Trek and the fact that she came up with such an analogy made the Nebraskan realize she really had been inducted into the ways of the ‘Trek. She noted a few oddly dressed individuals in the crowd although she was sure Sheldon’s plaid suit would still have made him stand out especially in combination with his stature. She didn’t even want to get started on his demeanor.

After having met Bernadette and Howard at the entrance the group went in to find Leonard and Leslie already engaged in conversation with a couple of colleagues. Soon after other individuals came up to greet the group—although Penny quickly realized it was Leonard, Howard or Raj they came to see. Sheldon would, in most cases, get a polite nod and he returned the gesture before continuing his conversation with Raj.

At one point Sheldon noticed someone he wanted to meet and both he and Penny ventured over to see the visiting professor and his wife from the University of Toronto.

The bespectacled man’s face brightened. “Dr. Cooper! What a pleasant surprise.” He made to extend his hand before he pulled up short. “Forgive me, I forgot. So, an exciting night is it not?”

Sheldon shrugged. “The excitement occurred earlier in July when the announcement of finding the
Higgs boson was made. This is just a social gathering for the purposes of idle chit chat.” The professor’s wife laughed.

“Still as charming as ever Dr. Cooper.” She extended her hand to Penny. “I’m Dr. Marla Shepherd,” she said, a woman in her sixties with salt and pepper hair. “My husband, who so rudely didn’t introduce me, is Dr. Fred Lindsay.”

“I’m Penny,” she said with a smile more confident than she felt. And Leonard thought the acting lessons weren’t a good investment.

“My companion,” Sheldon added. Dr. Lindsay beamed.

“About time you fall victim to the feminine wiles. Gives us scientists a chance to catch up to you,” he teased.

“Unlikely,” the tall man replied. “My attentions are as focused as always.” His eyes inadvertently glanced at his date. “Well, for the most part.”

“It’s good for you to diversify,” Dr. Shepherd said amicably. “Doctor’s orders.”

“Ah, so you’re a ‘doctor’ doctor?” asked Penny.

“One of the best cardiologists around so she knows what she’s talking about when it comes to matters of the heart,” Dr. Lindsay replied with a wink.

“And in this instance I know Dr. Cooper hasn’t come over here for socialization. We’ll leave the two of you to talk,” said his wife.

Penny felt Sheldon’s hand slide into hers and give a little squeeze. In response she smiled slightly, thankful for the encouragement, before the two women departed.

“You’ve definitely worked wonders on him,” Dr. Shepherd said to Penny as they strolled by a stringed quartet softly playing music. “It used to be whenever we met he’d give me a curt nod before engaging in nearly unintelligible conversation about his research with my husband.”

“I like to think of him as a work in progress. A diamond in the rough,” Penny said in a pleased tone.

“I look forward to seeing what kind of diamond he is in the years to come.” At this Penny blanched.

“We’re only just dating, Dr. Shepherd,” she sputtered.

“Marla, please. And I assure you Penny, his introducing you as his ‘companion’ makes you a big deal.” She looked over the younger woman’s shoulder. “Now there’s a face I didn’t expect to see.” She returned to Penny. “I hope you’ll excuse me.”

“Nice meeting you,” the waitress replied. Marla smiled as she departed.

Realizing she had to use the ladies but having no idea where it was she looked for Amy and Bernadette, finding the pair standing near the wall.

“Hey ladies, you know where the washroom is?” Penny asked.

“I can show you,” Bernadette said brightly.
“You have to void?” Amy asked the shorter woman, who blushed.

“No,” she said hesitantly.

“Then I believe my predicament supersedes Penny’s as a single girl meeting up with a man she knew from graduate school merits the bigger friend pull than a washroom break.” She regarded her bestie. “Unless you’re having relationship issues, Penny?”

“No!"

At that Bernadette sighed before detailing the washroom’s whereabouts and resigned herself to accompanying Amy on her little adventure.

Penny exited the room and after a bit of searching found the facility. She couldn’t help but smile in the stall as she overheard gossip about ‘so and so’s hair/dress/line of research/husband/wife’. These women might be scientists but it was the same ol’ story in the john.

After freshening up her makeup Penny returned to the hall in search of her friends. She ventured past the punch bowl and inadvertently overheard two gentlemen in their fifties in mid-conversation:

“…my trip to Cern has been approved,” said a portly man in a well-fitted suit. “I look forward to seeing the results with my own eyes.”

“At least they’ve verified their findings before parlaying them to the world,” said his companion whose small stature seemed even more miniscule in the shadow of his bigger colleague. “Rather unCooper of them don’t you think?” Both men chuckled.

Immediately Penny recalled her aborted trip to Cern to see the collider thing with Leonard. The university had picked him to go and she remembered how green with envy Sheldon was since he wasn’t invited. She found it odd that as a senior physicist Sheldon had never been to Cern. But not as odd as that other statement.

‘UnCooper of them?’ Her mind was a whirl but before she could turn to ask Dr. Gablehauser tapped his glass and the room silenced.

“Ladies and Gentlemen,” he boomed. “Esteemed colleagues. Tonight we celebrate a monumental achievement made by our colleagues in Cern. After four decades the hunt is over and the Higgs boson is ours.” The audience gave a roar of approval. “Let us take a moment to remember those who are no longer among us who took up the quest for these elusive little devils. Their efforts were not in vain. In fact, boldly we go on.” He held up his glass. “To the next adventure.”

Penny smiled to herself as she watched the scientists toast each other. It brought her back to the Corn Queen Court and how it was all the pretty people who were there. Here it was the geek who prevailed and she was the odd man out. And yet she didn’t feel bad about it. For a lot of these doctors it was about damn time they got their due.

As he toasted with Dr. Lindsay Sheldon’s eyes were on the crowd looking for Penny. Politely he excused himself and began his search. When he spotted her standing off to the side he placed his still full glass of wine on a little table and went to join her.

After greeting each other with their eyes Penny looked to the model before them. “What is it?”

“A hydrogen atom. The large red ball in the center is the proton and the little blue ball orbiting it is the electron.” Sheldon reached up and gave the blue ball a tap; it didn’t disappoint as it spun around the proton.
“And to think I used to be impressed when a party had streamers,” joked Penny.

“How are you doing?” he asked softly. He remembered how nervous she was at coming.


“It’s just a social function. Now that I’ve made my presence known to Gablehauser we can go at any time.” Penny shook her head.

“No. It’s important for you to be here. It’s exciting stuff for you guys.” Besides, she got a kick out of Sheldon’s pleased look as he met with Dr. Lindsay. Perhaps he’d run into other people he knew.

Sheldon cocked his head as he regarded his girlfriend. He took her hand and gently tugged as he bade her follow him through the crowd until they found themselves at the corner where the stringed quartet quietly played. Placing his other hand around her waist, Sheldon drew in his girlfriend and slowly they began to dance.

Penny could sense people giving them space and even heard a gentle murmur or two.

“Sheldon, people are staring,” Penny whispered.

“Let them,” he replied. And with that Penny snuggled close.

His nose caught the slight hint of Lily of the Valley in her hair. Once he mentioned to her that his sense of smell was acute she did her best to pick less pungent lotions and shampoos. It was a little compromise but Sheldon knew a relationship was doomed without them. Excluding his mysophobia his various ‘eccentricities’ made him seem insurmountable to most everyone he met. Then he was gently teased by a blond haired firecracker across the hall. No ridicule. No malicious intent. Only an amicable prodding between two friends.

Truth be told Penny owned Sheldon Lee Cooper years ago. He just hadn’t known it until recently. Looking at the past five years their interactions were so intertwined he couldn’t even begin to extrapolate her from his life even if he wanted to. From Laundry Night to Thai food and the weekly Cheesecake Factory visit Penny was a permanent construct in his routine; indeed he doubted it would survive such an upheaval were Penny to leave.

Penny felt Sheldon pull her tighter and in response rubbed her hand along his back. Immediately he relaxed and she could feel his chin nestle her hair. If anyone had told her she would be at a university party with a physicist she’d have called them crazy. Add to that Sheldon Cooper as the physicist and it was crazy by bat crap.

No one ever told her that insanity could feel this good, however.

At last the ‘song’ was over—Penny had no idea what it was and frankly she didn’t want to know as it perfectly matched her relationship with Sheldon: undefined—and reluctantly they parted; it was as if by magic the rest of the hall suddenly filled with people.

“Thank you sweetie,” she said.

“You’re welcome Penny,” he replied with a twitchy smile.

“Now that you’ve fortified me for the rest of the evening—shoo! Go mingle and do the sciencey thing. I’ve got it here.”
“You’re sure?” he asked. She positively beamed in response.

“I’ll go find Amy and Bernadette and hang before I check in with you, boss.” Sheldon nodded.

“Fair enough. I’ve yet to encounter Dr. Dietrich. Once I find him we can go.” He hesitated as if he was going to kiss her but instead gave her a glimpse of a rare Sheldon Cooper smile and departed.

“I so can get used to this,” she sighed as she watched him weave his way into the crowd until he was out of sight. Her new objective was to find the girls and at this she was less than successful. As she again passed by the refreshment table she decided to indulge herself in a glass of punch. Before she got a chance to reach for a glass the portly man she had previously overheard had ladled out a cupful and presented it to her.

“For you mademoiselle,” he said with a toothy smile.

“Thank you,” Penny replied as she took the cup.

“It’s quite an evening is it not?”

“Can’t say I’ve ever experienced anything like it before,” she agreed.

“Most certainly.” He held up his cup and the two clinked glasses before taking a sip. “You’ve known Dr. Cooper a while?”

“Five years.” At this he grinned.

“Sly little devil to hide someone away as charming as you for so long,” he tutted.

“It’s not like that,” Penny corrected. “We’ve only begun to see each other more recently.”

“Ah. I see. You make an intriguing couple. Dr. Robert Beaulieu at your service,” he added with a nod.

“Penny,” she smiled. I like to think so. They sipped their punch. “I overheard you talking to your friend about going to Cern. Working with the collider?”

He raised a bushy eyebrow. “Merely observing at present. I’m part of another contingency assuring the accuracy of the findings regarding the Higgs boson.”

“But I thought they were sure? I mean we’re celebrating, right?”

Robert laughed. “If there’s one thing you need to know about science it’s that nothing’s an absolute.” He chuckled at his own jest.

“Yeah I hear that all the time from Sheldon,” smirked Penny. “So are you a theoretical physicist like him?”

“I assure you Penny no one’s ‘like him’.”

“There’s that.” She sipped her punch.

“But to answer your question, yes, I’m also a senior particle physicist.”

“I guess all you guys get a turn at going to Cern. I hear the shoe shops are to die for in Geneva.”

Again he laughed. “Were I to have dainty feet like yours I’m sure I’d agree. As it is I can only
recommend the chocolate. But as for the first part of your statement I have to correct you. This is my second venture to the collider.”

“Really?” said a surprised Penny. “I guess Sheldon’s area of research isn’t involved with the collider.”

“My dear, every particle physicist’s area of research is affected by the goings-on in that laboratory,” Robert amended.

“Oh.”

He raised an eyebrow. “‘Oh’ what?”

She shook her head. “I’m just surprised Sheldon’s never gone before now, what with him being a senior physicist and all.”

“Cern is an important research facility and with so much on the line concerning the finding of the Higgs boson they could not afford a mistake,” he said before taking a sip.

“Why would they think he’d make a mistake?” At once her stomach dropped as she recalled the conversation Sheldon and she had in her bedroom. “This doesn’t have to do with his Arctic experiment, does it?”

“Dr. Cooper showed he could get a little ahead of himself which isn’t a good thing.” Robert gave a polite smile. “Besides, his eccentricities are legendary.”

“He’s also brilliant,” Penny said defensively.

“There is no doubt. He’s done exceptional work. Toast of the university.”

Penny caught something in Robert’s tone she didn’t like.

“I’m gathering not everyone’s happy with that,” she said.

Robert began ladling out more punch into his cup. “Let me tell you a story. There was a man at the University of Chicago Anthropology department, quite brilliant yet even more an ass. He’d made his way up the ladder in quick fashion because of his work and dedication and had no trouble pointing out other people’s failings or his own merits. Well one day his old mentor thought to look in on his protégé’s work and what did he find? In the man’s breakthrough research into a particular tribe he’d mistakenly attributed the distribution pattern of artifacts to settlement patterns when instead the old mentor realized it was made as a result of a now dry river bed.” Here Robert gave a belly laugh. “The man was mortified when it came out. Probably what killed him too as the next year he succumbed to a heart attack.”

“Poor man,” Penny breathed as she inwardly regarded the big man in front of her with disgust.

“A lesson in hubris. Fortunately Dr. Cooper caught his error.” He signaled a refill with the ladle which the waitress declined.

“Not in time.”

“No. He proved he was mortal after all.” Here he smiled. “At the very least our faculty meetings are much more tolerable without hearing his voice all the time.”

Before Penny could respond the big man’s companion from earlier came to join them.
“Ah, I see you’ve cornered Dr. Cooper’s elegant companion. Dr. Wayne Horton,” he introduced himself.

“Penny,” she said with her best waitressing smile. “Well I’d best be off.” She set down her cup on the table. “Nice meeting you, Doctor and Doctor.”

She departed in a flash to find her boyfriend as she now desperately wanted to leave before she said something inappropriate. Things were already dicey for Sheldon without making more of a muddle by drowning Robert in the punch bowl. Back in Nebraska Penny had met her fair share of bullies; heck thanks to knowing Bernadette and Amy she came to realize her own bullying tendencies in high school. But in Robert and Wayne there’d been such a coldness to them despite their big smiles and nice words she found herself chilled to the bone.

“Penny!”

She turned to see Leonard give her a wave and, grateful to see a familiar body, she made her way over.

“So how are things?” he asked as he read the strange look on her face.

“Interesting.”

He smiled sympathetically. “Yeah, I know it’s not your kind of party.”

“I imagine she keeps being inundated with the topic of the night,” said Howard.

“Well, the Higgs boson is a big deal, dude,” Raj replied.

The engineer smirked. “I was referring to Sheldon showing up with a smokin’ hot babe on his arm.”

“Of course you’d know all about that with Bernadette right?” admonished Raj.

“Of course,” Howard said with a blush.

Penny looked around. “Where is Sheldon anyways?”

“The last time I saw him he was talking with Dr. Dietrich,” replied Leonard. At the mention of the name the astrophysicist smiled.

“We had our own champagne spritzer at the astrophysics office when his research group found evidence of dark matter filaments.”

Leslie snorted. “It’s a wonder Dietrich can put up with Sheldon’s”—at Leonard’s request she did her best to dial down the ‘dumbass’ nickname in Penny’s presence—“pleasant demeanor.”

Penny turned to Raj. “Aren’t you and Sheldon working on dark matter?”

“Yes. Confirmation makes our life easier as we can go ahead with our projected models.”

“It’s ‘promising’ not confirmed,” amended Leonard. “The last thing Dietrich wants to do is proclaim what he can’t substantiate.”

“I doubt he’d make such a miscalculation,” Raj scoffed.

“‘Miscalculation’. Call it what it would be—a complete brain fart,” smirked Leslie. “Here’s hoping
Cooper doesn’t rub off on him. ‘The sky is falling!’ ‘Monopoles have been detected!’”

There was a nervous laugh among the three men before Penny walked away.

“What’s with her?” sniffed Leslie.

Leonard sighed. “You’re beating up on Sheldon again.”

“If she plans on sticking with dumbass she’d better get used to people talking trash about her nut of a boyfriend,” the optical physicist replied before taking a sip of her wine.

’I should have let him wear his purple suit.’ Penny scoured the hall until at last she spotted Sheldon. As she approached she could see that the man he was talking with was doing his best to remain interested in the conversation but that his attention span was at an end.

“There you are,” Penny said brightly as she gripped Sheldon’s arm. She flashed a smile at the man. “Sorry to interrupt. Dr. Dietrich is it?”

“Not at all!” the man said quickly. “And yes, Hans Dietrich. Mrs. Cooper I assume?”

“Nope. Just Penny. So without getting too technical Raj said you work on dark matter?”

“He’d be the cat’s pajamas with his finding of a small enough galaxy cluster to reveal dark matter filaments were it not for the Higgs boson discovery,” Sheldon replied.

“It was a team effort. It helps to surround oneself with quality candidates like this one here,” Hans said with a smile.

“You’d be hard pressed to find better,” agreed Sheldon.

“So before I take my leave so you can get back to your companion let me say again that I’m interested in what you have proposed. I believe some of my findings will be of use to you.”

“Of that I’ve no doubt,” the lanky man said excitedly. “Just from your initial documentation I could—”

“Sheldon, maybe you should save that for the email,” Penny suggested gently. “Not everyone has an eidetic memory.”

“Yes,” Hans agreed as he looked at her thankfully. He extended his hand. “Es war schön, Sie kennenzulernen, Herr Doktor.”

There was a moment of hesitation on Sheldon’s part before he responded in kind and shook. “Und Sie, Herr Doktor.”

Immediately Penny clasped her boyfriend by the wrist as Hans drifted into the crowd. “Wait until he’s gone before applying the sanitizer.”

“I know,” Sheldon replied with a scowl as he reached into his pocket for the bottle. He gave himself a larger than normal squirt and took Penny’s hands in his. “After this evening we need a bath in antibacterial cleanser but until we’re home this’ll have to do,” he said as he rubbed.

“So are you about done here tonight?” Penny asked.

“I believe so.” He took her hand and together they walked towards their friends who were laughing at something Howard had said although everyone was looking at Sheldon and Penny. Thinking the
humor was at their expense Penny felt the color burn in her cheeks and turned away to see Doctors Robert and Wayne still together and looking at the pair with smiles on their faces.

Instinctively her grip on Sheldon’s hand tightened.

XxXMatureXxX

Penny and Sheldon made it up the last of the stairs before settling in front of her door for a much anticipated kiss. It was mutually decided they leave the party earlier than the others; Sheldon had reached his limit for social interaction and Penny needed time away to reflect on all she’d heard.

Lips smacked as the couple parted with Penny grinning as her hand brushed her boyfriend’s arm.

“You have to wear suits more often.”

“Really Penny,” he said with an incredulous look. “And while we’re at it I should drink my martinis shaken not stirred and overtly worship ‘the Man’.”

“Come off it,” she smirked. “You know you look good.” She tried to catch his eyes with her own but failed.

“I like to keep a dispassionate relationship with my body. It helps the mind focus.” At this the waitress chuckled.

“And what part of you is interested in me if not your body?”

“Penny, even if we were never to consummate our relationship I’d still be committed,” Sheldon said seriously. “You’re an enigma and I can’t turn away from a puzzle, especially when the reward is so tantalizing.” Again his lips were upon hers.

“Spend the night,” she whispered.

He cocked his head. “But we spent Thursday together.”

“Sheldon,” Penny said in playful earnestness. “The Higgs boson isn’t discovered every day.”

“Whackadoodle,” smirked Sheldon before kissing her pouty expression. “I’ll be over shortly.”

“Counting the minutes,” Penny said as she unlocked her door. As she heard his keys in the lock she suddenly turned to him.

“Sheldon.” Here he stopped to regard her. I love you. “Hurry up.” Sheldon smiled and entered his apartment.

As she stripped out of her clothes and stepped into the shower Penny’s thoughts were on the party. She was glad she went as it gave her a taste of university life. They could have it as far as she was concerned. She hadn’t been exposed to as much fakeness since her cheerleading tryouts; more to the point there was something sinister as she felt the scientists dissect everyone around them with their keen intellects.

Well there were some exceptions: Dr. Lindsay and Marla were down to earth. She loved the gentle way they interacted with Sheldon and wondered if he was aware how much they liked him. Dr. Dietrich was also pretty cool; granted she thought he looked at Penny with the fondness of a favored child for intervening in his conversation with Sheldon but there was no doubt each scientist had respect for the other. She made a mental note to tell Sheldon to limit his conversation to an
acceptable time limit and to recognize social cues better. As Marla said, he was improving and all
Penny had to do was steer him in the right direction and give him a gentle push.

Ok, maybe a prod or two of ‘encouragement’ but at least her heart was in the right place.

Penny closed her eyes as she dried herself with a towel. If she continued to date Sheldon she knew
there’d be other parties to attend and frankly she didn’t know if her blood pressure could handle
them. It angered her at how his university colleagues treated him and yet it amazed her how he
seemed to take it all in stride. He had to know they talked about him. And yet it didn’t phase him
—until the monopole incident. Humiliated, he resigned and returned home to Texas. What was it
that made the difference? It had been three years since then so of course Sheldon had grown. But it
was more than that. Sheldon didn’t care what others thought of him because he knew he was right.
As arrogant and frustrating as it could be to hear sometimes—ok a lot of times—when it came to
physics he knew his stuff. When he had to retract his claim about the monopoles a lot of people
must have loved to see him crash and burn.

And yet he returned. The guys may have gone to get him but he came back to the same university
to face the same colleagues and begin to fix his damaged reputation.

In her estimation Sheldon had more than enough guts to kick ass at the junior rodeo.

Knock Knock Knock “Penny.”

Knock Knock Knock “Penny.”

Knock Knock Knock “Penny.”

“It’s open Sheldon,” she called as she slipped into a purple teddy. After turning out the light she
entered the bedroom to find her blue plaid pajama clad boyfriend hanging his housecoat behind the
door. Unable to help herself she marched straight over and threw her arms around him in a big hug.

Sheldon waited patiently for this unexpected show of affection to subside but as the seconds ticked
by and still she hung on it became apparent to even him that this was a long time indeed for a hug.

“Penny?” She leaned back to look him in the eyes.

“Never forget you’re amazing.”

“An impossibility.” He kissed her on the forehead.

Left to their thoughts, the couple got in under the covers and Sheldon turned off the bedside lamp.
He straightened the blankets before lying back in the bed.

“Thank you for coming tonight,” he said.

Penny smiled. “Eh it worked out ok. I danced with this really hot scientist with the deepest blue
eyes I’d ever seen.”

Sheldon moved his arm so she could snuggle against him. “Oh him,” he said evenly. “I hear he’s
brilliant.”

“I was measuring something sweetie but it sure wasn’t his IQ,” she purred as her hand slid across
his stomach towards his groin.

“Penny, we’ll be sleeping in here,” he said quickly. She chuckled.
“Then don’t make a mess.”

“Really P—” His rebuttal turned into an indrawn breath as Penny’s hand slid under his pajamas and grabbed his penis. Wide-eyed he turned his face towards her and kissed her hard. He groaned into her mouth as she continued to stroke him, twisting her hand along his shaft until her palm slid over the head before reversing the process.

“It’s better if I watch you jerk off,” she said softly. “Then I can make this tailor-made. As it is you’ll just have to suffer.”

“I didn’t know you”—he gasped—“desired to see me masturbate.”

“Who better to introduce me to the boys than you? I need to know where you grip it.” She kissed him. “How long you stroke it.” Her mouth moved past his ear. “How tight you want it.” She moved aside his pajama and shirt collars and sucked on the base of his neck.

Sheldon was absolutely beside himself as his hand drifted to his penis and overlapped Penny’s, squeezing harder as her hand turned.

“Show me,” she hissed before returning her mouth to his neck. She moved her hand to let Sheldon stroke his shaft. Wanting to keep busy she turned her palm one way then the other against his head. She’s slick with precum as she slid her hand on his and enjoyed the ride.

Soon after there’s a jolt and he came with a grunt, a moment then a second stream finished coating his pants and belly. Penny’s silent as she struggled to hear his heart beat over his heavy panting.

“Shh,” she said softly. “I want to make sure you’re still alive.”

“Believe me I’m functioning,” he replied hoarsely. He felt the stickiness between his fingers and pursed his lips. “You ruined my pants.”

“They took it for the team.” Sheldon could sense her satisfied smile. Smug look. Normally he wore such an expression and it irked him when someone else had the audacity to even suggest superiority.

In this instance he was completely at her mercy.

“Penny I have to clean up.”

She slid away, drying her cum-slick palm against his pajama top much to his disgust. “I’ll keep the bed warm.”

Wearing a crooked smile Sheldon got out of bed and padded to the washroom. “Don’t think I’ll forget this, woman.”

Penny gave a loud snort as if woken up. “You say something?”

“Revenge will be mine.” He closed the door.

“That’s what I’m counting on, sweetie,” she said with a smirk.

Leonard opened the door to find Sheldon on the couch eating his cereal.

“Morning Sheldon.”
“Good morning Leonard.”

As the curly haired physicist passed by the couch to make coffee he noted his roommate’s choice of Honey Puffs for breakfast. Obviously with their leaving early last night Penny gave him something to celebrate, Leonard mused to himself.

“You really missed out on the later festivities. Dr. Rothman showed up in his birthday suit and almost relieved himself in the punch bowl. I thought Gablehauser was going to have a stroke.”

Sheldon tried to clear his mind of the image but to no avail; having been literally exposed to Dr. Rothman several times since he’d taken over the older man’s office Sheldon’s eidetic mind filled in the details quite nicely.

“Perhaps our retiring early was for the best,” the lanky man said between spoonfuls. “At any rate Penny seemed tired of the whole affair and I couldn’t get out of there fast enough.”

At once Leonard’s hand stilled while holding a spoonful of coffee grounds over the filter.

“Penny didn’t say anything about last night did she?” he said, suddenly feeling guilty about Leslie’s comments about the monopole experiment.

Sheldon was curious. “What would she say?”

“Uh, you know, about what kind of, uh, experience it was.” He added the coffee and slipped the filter into the machine before turning it on.

“Not as much,” Sheldon said as he picked up his bowl and glass and brought it to the kitchen. “We were more concerned with going to bed.”

“I’ll say,” Leonard said, wiggling his eyebrows. Sheldon pursed his lips as he washed and rinsed his dishes.

“And I’m sure Leslie and you played a rousing game of checkers when you got home,” he said haughtily.

“Yeah, well at least I don’t show and tell,” the shorter man said smugly before retreating to his room to change out of his attire.

“Remember it’s my time for a bowel movement so delay your shower,” Sheldon called after him.

Sheldon dried his hands with a paper towel before venturing into the washroom. After conducting his business he took an antibacterial wipe and touched the handle to flush the toilet before tossing the cloth into the bowl. He yawned as he crossed over to the sink; he pumped two gobs of antibacterial soap in hand and began to scrub his fingers. Exactly two minutes later he rinsed his hands under the hot water before drying them with his ‘Sunday towel’.

It was as he was reaching for his toothbrush that his eye caught something in the mirror. Cautiously he moved aside his t-shirt and housecoat to reveal his neck—and the most remarkable example of broken blood vessels he’d ever seen on his flesh.

“Penny,” he whispered.

XxX

“Hello Sheldon.”
“Hello Amy. I’m sorry I didn’t see you before Penny and I left.”

“That’s ok. Bernadette and I were engaged with an acquaintance of mine from Arizona who just happened to be in the area for a conference.”

“I see. Did your encounter go smoothly?”

“I’d say so. We exchanged comparisons between living with humans and primates. Aside from the occasional flinging of feces we both agree living with monkeys is much less stressful.”

“Indeed.”

“So how was your evening?”

“Thankfully very short although productive. I met with Dr. Dietrich whose work with dark matter filaments would be a welcome addition to my experiment with Raj. I’ve extended to him my contacts at Heidelberg. Perhaps it will mean a trip to Germany at some point.”

“I’m sure Penny will love it.”

“Amy it is a working venture not a holiday.”

“You’ve got to eat and sleep sometime.”

“Point.”

“It’s exciting when new opportunities open up. Going from one academic gathering to another in a short amount of time makes for a busy schedule.”

“Are you attending another function?”

“Penny has invited me to her ‘Open House’ at the college on the twenty fifth.”

“…She didn’t tell me about it.”

“I see…. Well I’m sure it slipped her mind what with school and last night’s party.”

“…At any rate Sheldon I’m sure it will be a most informative night as we’ll get to examine her curriculum firsthand. Perhaps meet some of Bestie’s classmates.”

“I’d like a few words with her teachers regarding her course of study. … Unless that’s the reason why she hasn’t mentioned her school’s showcase.”

“Conjecture gets us no where.”

“Agreed. Goodnight Amy.”

“Unless you’re planning to wear a turtle neck or scarf to work tomorrow you might want to put an ice pack on that hickey of yours. Goodnight Sheldon.”

“… Good Lord.”

xTBBTx

Es war schön, Sie kennenzulemen, Herr Doktor.-It was nice to meet you, Doctor.
Und Sie, Herr Doktor.—And you, Doctor.

Thanks for reading!
Sheldon thought he heard the sound of Penny’s voice in the apartment while packing his satchel. He slung it across his body and ventured into the living room to find his girlfriend already dressed for the day even though it wasn’t quite eight thirty.

“Thanks so much Leonard,” she said as she crossed over to the kitchen to grab the proffered cup of coffee.

“No problem. I always brew an extra cup in case you’re up,” he replied with a smirk as he rinsed the pot.

“Well this is a surprise. What’s the momentous occasion that could have raised you from your slumber?” Sheldon asked drolly.

“Morning to you, too, pumpkin,” Penny said as she leaned against the counter. “I’m meeting Shirley at school to go over our Spanish presentation before class.”

“So how did the writing go?” asked Leonard as he dried his hands.

“Ok for the most part. It’s the presentation itself that’s a little nerve-wracking.”

“Why? You’re prepared. With all of your acting classes you’ve learned how to memorize and enunciate,” Sheldon said evenly. “Look at this as an audition.”

“I wish I could.” She took a sip of coffee. “We get our test results today and I need this presentation in case I didn’t do so hot.”

“I’m sure you’ll do fine,” Leonard soothed.

“Thanks Leonard,” she said in a relieved tone. He grinned in response before he went to gather his things in his room.

Sheldon pursed his lips. “So how come I can talk all day and you remain unnerved but Leonard can say five words and you’re soothed?”

“Maybe it’s a cumulative effect,” she replied.

“Indeed.” He walked over to stand in front of his girlfriend. “You’ll be fine,” he said with a twitchy smile.

“Thanks sweetie.” Her eyes drifted to his neck. “So how’s the Dracula bite?”

“Healing,” Sheldon replied as his hand tried to pull up his shirt collar to no avail. “Why did you do that?”
“I’m staking out my territory,” she said with a wink. He raised an eyebrow. “It marks you as mine.”

“But I’m already yours,” he said with a bit of a frown. Penny sighed.

“Sheldon it was a mistake. I got carried away. I’m sorry.”

He nodded. “Apology accepted.”

“So what will you do at work?”

“I’m wearing my Tom Baker Doctor Who scarf.” Here he scowled. “Unfortunately thanks to a Tweet by Leonard, Raj and Howard are aware of my predicament and have already made light of the situation. I had to endure countless references to over zealous coital activities.”

Penny did her best to suppress her smile. “Guess I’ll have to make it up to you somehow.”

Sheldon tucked his hands behind his back. “That’s two strikes in one night.”

“Says you.”

“Of course ‘I say’. I just said it.”

“And what happens if I get a third strike? Three pages of the anatomy coloring book?”

“Laugh if you will,” he warned. “As it is our non-coital sexual relations would conclude until a sufficient amount of time has passed.”

Penny blinked. “You’re kidding.”

“I assure you I’m not,” he said with a bit of a twang as Leonard made his way down the hall.

“Just because you creamed yourself and got a hickey you’d stop making out with me?” Penny said hotly. Without missing a step Leonard reversed course and returned to his bedroom.

“I assure you I’m not happy about it but it’s important to follow protocol,” Sheldon replied crisply.

“‘Protocol’?” she scoffed. “What so I can’t be spontaneous?”

“It’s your more destructive behavior that needs to be curbed,” he amended.

“There’s nothing wrong with the curb,” she said coldly.

“I beg to differ.”

A wry smirk covered her mouth. “Listen bub, you’ve never been behind the wheel so don’t be making rules about how to drive.” He fixed her with a scowl. “Fine, just tell me you didn’t like what happened on Saturday and I promise I’ll never do it again.”

Sheldon paused before turning away to grab his scarf from the back of Leonard’s chair. “You’re impossible.”

“Nope, I’m determined. Whether you want to admit it or not, Dr. Cooper, you liked what I did. In fact I’m willing to bet you’re counting the seconds until we do something like that again.”

“I am not,” he said while looping the scarf around his neck.

“Pinky swear?”
Sheldon glared at his girlfriend. “Impossible.”

Penny smiled into her coffee.

xTBBTx

“Time,” Sheldon said as he dropped his pencil on the table and picked up his pad. “Leonard?”

“Let’s see,” said the shorter man as he perused his list. “I’ve got bIQ, bo, bop, boq, bor and bur.”

“Got them,” said Raj. “Also bI’res.”

“That clears me,” Howard said before taking a sip of water.

“That leaves me to claim the aforementioned as well as add bIQSIp and bIS’up,” Sheldon said with a pleased expression. He entered the points down on the scorecard while Leonard took up the Boggle box and gave it a shake.

“Vengeance will be mine,” he chortled as he set the box on the table. All four men looked at the new letters.

“And go!” Sheldon turned the sand timer and began scribbling words down like mad. Because he always finished before the others he was in charge of the time. Soon the last dregs of sand made their way to the bottom and he called a halt.


“Cleans me out.”

“There’s also ghIq and ghetwI’,” said Sheldon.

“It’s funny you brought up ‘vengeance’ since I watched Ghost Rider 2 the other night,” Raj said to Leonard.

“Ah yes, ‘Spirits of Vengeance’,” tutted Sheldon. “I’d want vengeance too if I’d paid money to see it at the theater.”

“Lots of people did,” Howard replied. “The first movie made over a hundred million.”

“How did the second one do?” asked Leonard. As one the group turned to Sheldon, who didn’t disappoint.

“It had a budget of fifty seven million and a profit of one hundred and thirty two million.”

“Not as good but still better than Green Lantern,” mused Leonard as he munched on popcorn.

“That’s like comparing fecal matter. Oh sure you might prefer working with a more solid solution but—”

“We get the picture Sheldon,” Howard growled as Leonard pushed the popcorn bowl away.

“Still, they must have known they wouldn’t make as much so they did their best keeping the budget down,” said Raj. “For instance we never see Johnny Blaze transform into Ghost Rider like in the first film. We see the before and after but not the transition.”

“Although they did make a cool alteration with his flaming skull by actually making it look
charred like it really was on fire,” offered Leonard as he took up the Boggle box and shook.

Raj cocked his head. “You know it just occurred to me: Klingons are really into pain. I wonder how effective Ghost Rider’s soul burn stare would be on them?”

“I think you just answered your own question since it’d be the soul that’s tortured, not the body,” replied Leonard.

“Gentlemen, the game,” Sheldon said, a tad perturbed.

“Yeah but will has to do something,” Raj continued. “I mean look at Worf when he went through his rite of passage and walked the gauntlet of pain sticks. Most of us would have given up after one much less do what he did.”

Sheldon sighed. “Of course what he did gave him the marks of a warrior on his body. We have no need for such barbarism on our person.”

“No kidding?” smirked Howard. “And what led you to that conclusion, oh wearer of the love patch?”

With pursed lips and flushed cheeks Sheldon grabbed the Boggle box from Leonard and shook.

“Now, now, let’s leave Sheldon alone,” soothed Raj. He held out his bag of smoke-flavored stick chips to the lanky man. “More Hickey Sticks?”

“Juvenile,” the theoretical physicist muttered as his friends chuckled.

xTBBTx

“So,” Amy said with a glint in her eye. “Truth or dare.”

“Dare,” replied Penny as she took a sip of wine. No way she was going to get caught truth telling again.

“Tell us the last time you had a sexual dream about someone you know, excluding Sheldon.”

Penny blanched as Bernadette giggled.

“Shh!” Penny took another drink.

“Out with it Bestie.” Amy pulled down the hem of her skirt as she repositioned herself to face her friend.

“Ok, but this goes no where,” the waitress warned. Both Amy and Bernadette held up their hands in solemn oath causing Penny to roll her eyes. She took a breath. “Ok there’s this guy at school—”

“OoOOoo,” her friends said in unison.

“Anyways, last week I had a dream about us, you know.”

“Doing the dirty?” Amy said matter-of-factly.

“Details. Name and measurements,” demanded Bernadette as she munched on a potato chip.

“His name’s Jeff. He’s tall with brown hair and blue eyes”—here her friends looked at each other with knowing smiles—“What? Oh get out of here! He’s not replacing Sheldon.”
“More.” Bernadette prodded.

Penny sat back in her chair. “He’s an ex-lawyer, always wears designer clothes although he looks cool, not preppy. Oh yeah and he’s charming as a snake and a complete egomaniac who—”

Again the girls giggled. Penny stuck out her tongue.

“I’m done,” she said in a huff.

“Sorry Bestie,” Amy said with a little smile. “But all kidding aside it sounds like you’ve found another Sheldon albeit with better fashion sense and social skills.”

“God. One’s enough in my life thank you very much.” Penny drained her glass and went for a refill.

“Still this is worth examining. In dream analysis dreams of infidelity often indicate issues of abandonment and neglect in a relationship.” Amy cocked her head. “Are you unsatisfied with your current relationship with Sheldon?”

“No!” Penny paused. “I mean”—both of her friends leaned closer—“don’t get me wrong it’d be nice if we upped the sex factor but he’s doing the best he can.”

“So you’re finally having sex?” asked Bernadette.

“No,” Penny sighed. “I can touch him now and he doesn’t freak out as much but—” She let her wine swirl in her glass.

“It’ll happen,” the short woman said sympathetically.

“I’d suggest upping the amount of times you pleasure yourself so as to ease your tension,” offered Amy.

“Amy!” Bernadette squeaked.

The neurobiologist shrugged. “Sexuality is part in parcel to being human. In Penny’s case given her scrumptious body sex must take up a lot more room in her life.”

“Anyways. Dare delivered,” Penny said with finality. “Truth or Dare, Amy?”

“Truth.”

“Do you like Raj?”

Amy nodded. “Of course. I find Rajesh entertaining.”

“I think she means do you *like* him, Amy,” amended Bernadette.

“Oh.” Amy paused. “My feelings on the matter are irrelevant since Rajesh and I clarified our paradigm boundaries up to and including friends, buddies, chums, pals—”

“It doesn’t matter what you said, it’s what you feel,” said Penny with a smirk.

“You wore down Sheldon,” Bernadette reminded her bespectacled friend.

“And we see how successful that was,” Amy snorted. “I seduced a man who lacked any form of romantic desire for me. For some reason I’m loathed to repeat the process.” She took a drink even
as Bernadette’s face flushed. “Truth or dare.”

“Truth,” said the microbiologist.

“Are you scared about Howard going into space?” asked Penny. “I’d be crapping myself if it were Sheldon.”

“It’s Howard’s dream,” Bernadette said after a moment’s hesitation. Both Amy and Penny looked at each other.

“But?” prodded the neurobiologist.

At once Bernadette was serious. “I don’t want him to go. I keep thinking something’s going to go wrong and just when we’re starting our new life together it’s going to come crashing down.” She put a hand to her mouth.

“It’ll be okay,” soothed Penny. “I’m sure they’ll do like a bazillion checks and whatnot.” She looked to Amy for help.

“Indeed in more recent history the Russian space agency has had a better safety rating that NASA. Believe me when I say we wouldn’t be hitchhiking on a Soyuz rocket if there were any glaring deficiencies,” Amy said evenly.

“I guess,” Bernadette said slowly. “I just wouldn’t know what to do if I lost Howard.”

“We’ll get you through this,” Amy said cheerily. “We stick together like the three witches in Macbeth.” She picked up the bottle and topped off Bernadette’s glass. “‘Fillet of a Fenny snake, In the Cauldron boil and bake.’”

“Maybe it’s a formula for an aphrodisiac,” Bernadette said with a little smile. “Want to try it out on Sheldon?”

The women cackled and drank.

xTBBTx

Penny put her pen down and took a minute to go over her idea. It was brilliant as far as she was concerned and Sheldon would most certainly agree to it since it’d be for school credit. She looked to the desk to see her boyfriend typing away on his laptop.

“Sheldon, tell me about the Day of the Dead.”

“Known in Mexico as Dia de los Muertos it takes place November first and consists of prayers and other festivities to remember the deceased.”

Penny clapped her hands. “Perfect! I’m going to have a ‘Day of the Dead’ Halloween style for extra credit.”

“And how will you do that?” he inquired.

“Party at my place,” she said as she sat back against the couch. “I’ll invite the class for a bunch of traditional Mexican games and food only we’ll be in costume.” Sheldon stopped and turned to stare at her. “Oh I know you’ll be at the comic store with the guys but you can always drop in a little later to say ‘hey’.”

“Will your study group be there?” he asked innocently. Sheldon felt they were not maximizing
their time based on the amount of Spanish homework Penny had to do on Sundays. Obviously they needed direction.

“I’m counting on it.”

“Then I will most certainly attend.” He paused as a thought came to him. Surprisingly, it didn’t fill him with as much panic as it might have previously. “Especially since the gathering will be here.”

Penny was stunned. “Are you sure?” She didn’t want a repeat of the last time Sheldon and Leonard hosted a large group of people. Sheldon was a veritable mess and the three of them spent hours after the bridal shower cleaning both apartments.

“I’ll have thirteen days to remove items of concern from the common room and prepare the washroom for whatever scourge passes through.” He caught Penny’s unconvinced look. “Your apartment lacks the room to accommodate such a gathering.”

“I suppose,” Penny said dubiously as she stood. “Only I don’t want you feeling uncomfortable about this.”

“I’ll be fine. Besides with the state of your apartment it’d be much easier to prepare my abode for company.”

“State of my apartment”? Hey mister it’s the cleanest it’s been.”

“I’m not refuting that. I was referring to its new designation.”

“Which is?”

“Your bedroom must be traversed in order to use the bathroom and that will not do,” he said casually. “I now sleep in your bed twice a week and as such would not relish a herd of elephants stampeding through with their taco-stained hands and tequila breath.” A pause. “No stranger can be in my room.”

“Your room”? said Penny with a raised brow. “How now brown cow. When did you get property rights?”

He resumed typing. “It has nothing to do with property as much as sanctity. I sleep better in a clean environment. I’m already giving clearance to your germs so it’s not like I’m not compromising.”

Penny came up behind and wrapped her arms around his shoulders. “You’re trouble you know that?”

“In following such a protocol you may be surprised to discover an improvement in your maintaining REM sleep.”

“Probably because I won’t have you fidgeting beside me the whole night,” Penny said with a crooked smile.

“Point. Although I’m sure it’d be several weeks before I stayed over just to make sure the environment was adequately sanitized.”

Penny rolled her eyes. “Weeks? Give me a break.” He said nothing. “Sheldon, sweetie, you’ve got to let all this go.”

Sheldon leaned back against the chair in order to immerse himself in Penny’s arms.
“You’re making me choose,” he said softly. “I can’t give you the answer you want at present. I’m sorry Penny.” Her response was a kiss on top of the head.

“I never claimed I wasn’t pushy.”

“I appreciate that quality in you—to a point,” he amended with a twitchy smile.

“Oi!” She gave him a playful swat.

“Overall your direction has had a positive impact on my life.”

“When hasn’t it?”

“Well there was the afternoon working on your ‘shoe app’ I’ll never get back.”

Penny gave a short laugh. “Two words for ya buddy: Physics Bowl.”

“Ah yes, my day of defeat at the hands of Leslie Winkle and the turncoats,” Sheldon said with a sour look. His eyes rolled to Penny’s face. “As I recall I never forced you into going; it was your attraction to Leonard that compelled you.”

“There’s that.”

His hand clasped her arm. “Fortunately sanity has prevailed and you’re with me.”

“Sanity equals you?” she teased. “Crap on a cracker! I’m doomed!”

“Ha ha,” Sheldon grumbled as Penny straightened up to let him back at his computer. “You know my mother had me tested.”

“She knew Sheldon passed his sanity test.

He never said by how much.

xTBBTx

Penny heard her name as she exited the cafeteria.

“Hey Jeff,” she said with a smile. “What brings you to this part of campus so late?”

“Had a test in geography. I figure I already know where I live so I’m good but apparently they want a little more detail,” he said casually as they began to walk. “So, any more protests this week? Saving the African tree slug?”

“I hope not,” Penny replied. “I don’t know if my pants could handle too many more weeks of Shirley’s brownies.”

“Well if you ever need help getting into or out of your pants I suppose I could make some time,” he sighed. Penny laughed.

“Some sense of self-sacrifice.”

“God works in mysterious ways, Penny. For instance, I understand why you’re here and I know why I am but for the life of me I can’t wrap my head around why the space-d patrol is here,” said
Jeff as he looked at a group of four guys playing hackey sack around what was collectively known as the ‘stoner tree’.

One of the players, a blonde and very well built fellow with no shoes and his t-shirt tucked into his back pocket, gave a wave.

“Hey Penny. Hi. ‘Sup?”

“Hi, Vaughn,” she replied, much to Jeff’s surprise. “How’s it going?”

“No worries,” the man said smoothly before returning to the game.

“No shirt, no shoes, no synapses,” Jeff muttered as they came to a fork in the path. “See you at study group?” he asked casually.

“You betcha. Oh! Doing anything for Halloween?”

Jeff raised an eyebrow. “I’m guessing I am now.”

“Just keep it open until study group. Bye!” And with that she walked off.

“There’s a lot of things I’m keeping open,” he said with a smile as he headed to class.

XxX

“Penny’s here,” said a confident Pierce. A moment later and she appeared in the study room.

“Whoa,” Troy said in astonishment.

“That’s the power of Ear-Noculars,” Pierce grinned.

“Or it could be that it’s time for study group and Penny’s the last one to get here so the chances of it being her were actually pretty good,” offered Jeff as he sat back in his chair.

“Believe you muggle,” Abed chided.

Penny sat down in her spot. “Ear-what?”

“Ear-Noculars,” explained Pierce as he tapped what looked like a Bluetooth ear piece with a mini satellite dish. “It’s for secret agents.”

“And they say Spanish class isn’t informative,” Jeff quipped.

“Speaking of which,” Penny said with a smile. “Before we begin I just want to float an idea and see what you think. As I was going over the notes Senor Chang handed out at the beginning of the semester I noticed a section for extra credit and I decided to do something.”

“Tequila shots at your apartment?” smirked Jeff.

“Close. I’m thinking of a Day of the Dead Halloween party at my place,” Penny said brightly. “We can have a sign in for the class so attendance can be marked and play some Mexican games and eat Mexican food.”

“I was going to do something like that,” pouted Annie.

“We could always do it together,” offered Penny. “You know, organize the activities and whatnot.”
Annie beamed.

“Gives us a chance to see where you live,” Jeff said in a creepy voice while rubbing his hands evilly.

“Nice try. It’ll be at my boyfriend’s place.”

“He lives across the hall,” Shirley said before her eyes widened and she clapped a hand over her mouth.

“Thanks,” the waitress said with a smirk.

“Spoiler,” Abed said evenly.

“What was that honey?” Penny asked.

“What Shirley revealed. Spoiler.”

The blonde put a hand on her classmate’s arm. “Abed, you do know that real life doesn’t have ‘spoilers’, right?”

He looked from Jeff to Penny. “Cool,” he said matter-of-factly.

“Well it sounds good to me,” Pierce said as he opened his notebook.

“It’ll give us a break from all this studying,” said Troy. “I can’t believe we have another test this Monday.”

“I’ll be a little late to the party since I’ve got to take the boys Trick-or-Treating,” added Shirley.

“The Day of the Dead isn’t until November first so I’m sure a few of us will be there to welcome it,” Penny reassured her.

“And we’re all to be in costume, right?” asked Pierce.

“That’s part of the fun,” Penny confirmed.

“Time to whip out that brownie mix,” Shirley said excitedly.

“I heard Vaughn makes good brownies,” Jeff muttered to Penny, who gave him a crooked smile.

“Don’t make me regret this, Winger.”

“Me?” he asked as he batted his baby blues. “Scout’s honor, I’ll be good. Well, you know if I was a Scout which I wasn’t but the sentiment’s kinda there.”

“Spoiler,” Abed said to no one in particular.

xTBBTx

His touch was light as Sheldon’s fingers lazily made their way down Penny’s naked belly, only deviating to the side as he encountered her nether region.

“You know it doesn’t bite, right?” Penny said serenely.

“Unlike some people I take the cleanliness of our bed quite seriously,” he replied softly while his hand skimmed across her buttock and up her back.
“I can shower.”

“You’re not wearing pants so your ability to ‘take one for the team’ is disabled.” His breathing hitched slightly as Penny reached out and gave a playful tug at his nipple. “That’s not very nice,” he chided.

“Sure it is,” she purred as she snuggled closer. “If you want ‘not nice’ I’d do something like this.” Her mouth covered his nipple and he felt the stroke of her tongue.

Sheldon gave a small grunt of pleasure even though he inwardly sighed. He was looking forward to spending—if things went according to plan—the whole night with Penny in his arms and now he knew his hopes were dashed because of a splash of saliva across his chest. Gingerly he pressed his hand against her shoulder and moved his girlfriend away.

“You realize I’ll have to shower at some point,” he sighed.

Penny closed her eyes. “Doh! Sorry about that Moonpie.” She gave him a kiss before a sly smile came to her face. “Of course since you’re already yukked up for the night we might as well get on with it.” Sheldon’s muscles contracted as the back of Penny’s fingers skated over his belly towards his groin.

“Penny,” he growled before rolling her onto her back. Silently save for their breathing they lay together before his lips lowered to hers. He took his time as he gently teased her with little nibbles across her mouth, lips that spread into a pleased smile.

“You think this is going to get you out of trouble every time, Dr. Cooper?” she said, their mouths so close he could feel her breath on his lips.

“So my results affirm thus far,” he murmured before kissing her neck.

“Mmm.” Penny’s toes curled as his mouth trailed to her shoulder.

“So,” he said between kisses. “I talked with Amy…and she said something…about an Open House…on the twenty fifth?”

“Mnhm,” she sighed.

“When were you going to tell me?” he asked softly. Sheldon waited but as no answer was forthcoming he turned his head to face his girlfriend.

“It’s just something the school’s putting on,” Penny said dismissively as her fingers danced across his back.

“Nevertheless, I need advanced warning should I need to revise my schedule even though the event occurs on Date Night.”

“You don’t have to go,” Penny said quickly, hoping Sheldon would continue his ministrations along her shoulder. “It’ll be pretty boring.”

Sheldon extracted himself from her and lay on his side. “You’ve invited Amy,” he said seriously.

“Yeah but she’s different,” she replied, her fingers tracing his hip bone.

“Explain.”

Penny could feel herself flushing. “It’s a girl’s night. Look, can we just drop it right now? It’s not
important.” She leaned over and began kissing his chest while Sheldon lay there with a frown on his face.

“I need a shower,” he said at last. Penny groaned.

“Now?”

“Now,” he said as he got out of bed. “I have an early start at the paintball field tomorrow,” he said as a way of explanation.

“Fine,” Penny said in a mock huff. “I’ll keep the bed warm.”

“Perhaps it’s best I return to my room so I don’t disturb you in the morning,” he said as he began putting on his pajamas.

“It’ll be okay.”

“We start at eight thirty.”

“Miss you,” Penny said as she rolled over and snuggled herself in the bed sheet.

Sheldon finished dressing in silence and left.

xTBBTx

Pop Pop Pop Pop

The door to the wooden shack opened and four bodies rushed in, with Raj closing it after them.

“That’ll teach those neurobiologists a thing or two about their ‘all encompassing paradigm’,” snorted Leonard as he sat on a bale of hay to recover.

“Especially when we’ve got Rambo over here,” smirked Howard as he glanced at the theoretical physicist. For his part Sheldon stood in the corner and began reloading his gun.

Raj sat beside Leonard and took off his goggles. “I’ve never seen someone reenact Zombieland’s ‘Double Tap’ rule on the field.”

“Sheldon likes to be thorough,” explained Leonard as he wiped his brow with his sleeve. “You know, like when he complained at the ‘Trouble with Tribbles’ exhibit that the Kirk actor was struck with twenty seven fewer Tribbles than Shatner.”

“I still don’t get how he calculated that out,” smirked Raj.

“Probably through extrapolation,” replied the curly haired man. “You know, the size of the portal, the size of each Tribble and the rate at which they fell.”

“Shh!” said Howard harshly. The room was silent. “Hear that?”

“What?” whispered Raj.

“It’s the sound of Sheldon not talking,” said the engineer with a smirk.

“He’s right. What’s up, Sheldon?” asked Raj.

“What makes you think anything’s ‘up’?” the lanky man said tersely.
“Your lack of input in a conversation about you,” said Leonard as he regarded his roommate more closely. If he wasn’t so fixated on getting coffee this morning Leonard might have noticed the tightness in Sheldon’s jaw or the precise way he moved.

“As you haven’t said anything contrary to my opinion there wasn’t a need.” The three friends looked at each other as Sheldon popped open another container of paint balls and began to pour into the reserve.

“Woman-trouble,” Howard said at last.

“How would you know?” snorted Raj. “It’s not like you’ve had a woman long enough to have ‘trouble’.”

“I’ve had my issues with Bernadette,” Howard sniffed. “Believe me the cold tone of a woman means an even colder night alone.”

“Hardly,” Sheldon snapped. “In fact it was I who terminated the encounter.”

“Why would you do a thing like that?” Howard asked in astonishment. In his experience as a single man he hadn’t encountered a situation where he voided an opportunity for sex.

Like there were many opportunities….

Sheldon flipped the cap closed and lowered his gun. “We had a discussion.”

“You mean a fight,” Leonard amended.

“No, a discussion.”

“Dude, never talk in bed. Trust me it works,” said Raj with a knowing look.

“So what did you ‘discuss’? Bacterial counts in saliva?” quipped the engineer garnering him a glare.

“If you must know Penny’s school is having an ‘Open House’ next week and she’s going with Amy Farrah Fowler,” Sheldon said in an annoyed tone.

“So?” said Leonard.

“She’s not taking me. In fact was it not for Amy I never would have known about the ‘Open House’ at all.”

“Maybe she didn’t think it was a big deal,” offered Leonard. Sheldon pursed his lips.

“That’s what she intimated.”

“Well there you go.”

“I don’t buy it,” the lanky man said after a pause. His roommate rolled his eyes.

“Maybe she wants to be independent,” offered Raj. “Amy said Penny’s doing her homework by herself or in study groups.”

“Not all the time. We spend Thursdays together working on whatever’s given her trouble that week,” replied Sheldon.
“Maybe she’s embarrassed,” Howard tossed out.

“Of what?” Sheldon asked with a raised eyebrow. “We all know she attends Pasadena City College and participates in the ‘Start Up’ program to upgrade her skills. What’s to be embarrassed about?”

“I wasn’t talking about her school.” Howard’s eyes flickered to Raj for support. “I imagine all her school friends are going to be there.”

“Thus giving me the opportunity to meet them,” Sheldon replied evenly.

“Maybe that’s the point. I bet all her friends are going to be like Penny and you’re like, well, you,” explained the short man.

“I’m sure that’s not it,” Leonard said quickly as he glared meaningfully at the engineer.

“Indeed,” sniffed Sheldon. “The notion Penny finds me embarrassing. Hooey.” He lowered his goggles and made for the door. “Come gentlemen, the slaughtering awaits.”

“How nice it isn’t us on the receiving end for once,” smiled Raj.

XxX

Knock Knock Knock “Leonard.”

Knock Knock Knock “Leonard.”

Knock Knock Knock “Leonard.”

He really thought about not answering but knew Sheldon wouldn’t stop knocking until he did.

“What is it, Sheldon?” Leonard asked groggily. The door opened and his roommate entered.

“I’ve given thought to what was said this morning.”

“And?”

Sheldon cocked his head even as he shifted his weight from one foot to the other. “Am I embarrassing?” He continued before Leonard could respond. “I know the whole notion is ludicrous. I, Sheldon Lee Cooper with two doctorates, an embarrassment.” A pause. “However there are times when my genius is misunderstood.”

“Eyah,” Leonard said as he rubbed his eye.

“You seem to have an opinion, Leonard,” Sheldon replied with a slight frown. “You’re welcome to share it.”

“You’re eccentric and—”

“Just because I’m interested in a myriad of topics doesn’t make me ‘eccentric’,” Sheldon said using air quotes with his fingers. “It makes me multifaceted.”

Leonard thought about this for a moment. “No, I’d stick with eccentric. Maybe with a dose of ‘annoying’ sprinkled on top.”

“Well you’re no picnic either,” Sheldon scowled. “Your idiosyncrasies are part of the reason why you’ve had difficulties with social interactions.” Leonard’s jaw dropped. “In fact it’s taken some
careful doings on my part to untangle your messes from time to time.”


The room was silent and he waited for his roommate to leave.

More time went by.

With a sigh Leonard turned back. “What is it?”

“After knowing each other five years, five months and twenty one days Penny is aware of my—quirks,” the lanky man said quietly. “Why does it matter what community college upstarts think of me?”

“I’m sure it doesn’t,” Leonard said gently. “You’re making a bigger deal out of this than it deserves.”


It took the experimental physicist a long while to fall back asleep.

xTBBTx

“This was so needed,” Penny said as she patted her belly. “I missed Thai food.”

“No doubt your digestive tract missed it as well,” Sheldon added as he put some containers in the refrigerator. “Routine really is in your best interest for a healthy bowel movement.”

Penny closed her eyes as she smiled. “I’ll make a note.” After a little shake of the head she got to her feet. “I’ve got a double to pull tomorrow so I’m going to call it early.”

“I’ll just leave the two of you alone,” said Leonard quickly as he popped out of his chair. “You know, in case you want to talk—or not talk.” He felt Sheldon’s glare even as Penny’s brown furrowed in confusion. “I think I’ll call Leslie,” he said with a nervous smile before he departed to his room.

“O-kay,” Penny smirked. “That was weird.” She waited for Sheldon to finish wiping his hands with an antibacterial cloth before she encircled his waist with her arms. “Wanna make some noise to freak out your roommate?”

“Not particularly,” he replied. In response she stepped on her tip toes and kissed his nose.

“Suit yourself.” A moment, then she put her hand on his forehead. “You okay there, sweetie?”

“Why wouldn’t I be?” he stammered. “You’re here. I’m here. No one else’s here.”

“Perfect,” she purred as she went to kiss him. At the last second he raised his lips out of reach.

“Not that it matters if someone was here or not for us to put our affection for each other on display.”

“No,” Penny agreed, distracted as she tried to stand taller to catch his lips.

“Because our relationship is based upon mutual respect for each other as unique individuals,” he added.
“Sure.” She put her hands around the back of his head to pull him down.

“Because if there was a prob—” He didn’t finish as Penny clamped their mouths. After a moment his body relaxed and he kissed her tenderly before resting their foreheads together.

“You know I—care for you,” he said softly.

“I know,” she replied, equally as quiet. “I care for you too, Sheldon.”

“No matter what I say or what I do?”

Penny chuckled as she leaned back to regard her boyfriend. “Planning on doing something, are we?”

“Nothing more than usual,” he replied simply. He lowered his eyes and cleared his throat. “You know it’s been a puzzle as to why you hadn’t informed me about your ‘Open House’.”

“Good grief Sheldon it’s just an ‘Open House’. You’re making it sound like you’re missing something momentous.”

“Aren’t I?” he said with a twang. “It’s an introduction to your college and the courses you take so I can better understand your curriculum. As we speak your horizons are being broadened.”

“I never thought of it like that,” Penny admitted. “I didn’t think it was such a big deal.”

“It is to me,” Sheldon said in a tone so sincere her heart seemingly skipped a beat.

“I didn’t know.”

“When you learn you’re aglow with an excitement so infectious I can’t help feeling—” He cleared his throat and tucked a strand of hair behind her ear.

“Moonpie,” Penny said softly as she drew him into a hug. “You’re always welcome.”

“Thank you,” Sheldon whispered. He kissed her temple.

xTBBTx

Klingon words: new canonical klingon words

Amy’s dream analysis: Dream Moods

Fillet of a Fenny snake, In the Cauldron boil and bake: Act 4, Scene I Macbeth

Wikipedia: Day of the Dead

Hickey Sticks: I don’t know if this translates well but in Canada we have a chip (crisp) called ‘Hickory Sticks’ that we used to call ‘Hickey Sticks’ as kids.
Leg Warmer Anatomy

Chapter Summary

Reference to ‘Social Psychology’

xTBBTx

“Well, that is that,” said Leonard as he turned off the television. Until the new season started it was same old same old and if he wanted that he’d much rather watch shows on DVD sans commercials. He glanced over at his roommate who was busy reading something on his computer. Leonard set the remote on the coffee table and got up to stretch. After three hours in the same position nearly every muscle in his body rang out a clear ‘hello’. “Ah. I don’t know how you can sit there for hours like you do,” he sighed.

“I’m not just ‘sitting’. My body’s in constant motion,” corrected Sheldon without looking away from the screen. “For instance as we speak my buttocks are contracting merrily away. Then it’s only a matter of isolating other areas for targeted stimulation.”

“Move over Dr. Kegel,” mused the shorter man.

“Actually Leonard the ‘Kegel exercise’ is as beneficial to men as women as it strengthens the pubococcygeal muscle, maintains healthy hips, allows for stronger erections and greater control over ejaculation.”

“Huh. No kidding.”

Sheldon closed his window and turned in his chair. “Over the years I’ve noticed a difference as the exercise lifts up the testicles as well as strengthens the anal sphincter muscles and as we know without those puppies we—”

“Gotcha,” Leonard said quickly as he ventured to the washroom. “In fact I think I’ll test your theory right now.”

Sheldon raised an eyebrow. “It’s not a theory, Leonard. It’s commonly known that”—here he stopped as his nose wrinkled, realizing Leonard was about to utilize his own sphincter muscles. “Lavatory humor.” A pause before he gave a gaspy laugh. “Will wonders never cease?”

He returned to his computer and the article he was perusing. Normally he got answers in straight fashion but in this instance the more he learned the more questions he had. For instance, seventy to eighty percent of women achieved orgasm only through direct clitoral stimulation, though indirect stimulation might also suffice. From this he realized that to pleasure Penny meant he needed to know how to stimulate her clitoris. Fortunately the glans of the clitoris had more than eight thousand sensory nerve endings so an orgasm was relatively easier to achieve. The problem was technique and—at this Sheldon pursed his lips.

“The problem is germs,” he muttered to himself.

As far as the articles were concerned finger stimulation could achieve orgasm but the surefire method was cunnilingus. As he couldn’t even stick his tongue in her mouth he very much doubted
the likelihood of his literally sniffing around Penny’s nether lips.

His other option lay with the ‘G-Spot’ but again that would entail inserting his fingers into an orifice and even then it’d be no sure thing as the Spot’s location was inconsistent and in some cases absent entirely. Needless to say discussing the matter of its presence would surely get Penny’s curiosity piqued and the last thing Sheldon wanted to do was get her hopes up.

Picking up his phone Sheldon scrolled down his list of contacts until he found the neurobiologist.

'I require input into female orgasm', he texted.

He continued reading until Amy responded.

'Human?'

Sheldon tutted as he typed his affirmation. Obviously his association with Penny and her ‘folksy ways’ was finally catching up with him. He really had to be more precise in his language if he didn’t want to swap an East Texas accent for a mid-Western twang.

'I’m busy over the next few days so we can discuss intermittently or wait until Sunday when I can show you what a female orgasm’s all about', texted Amy.

'I believe I would get more out of a presentation.'

'Agreed. My friend and I will be there at two.'

'Friend?'

'We work best in tandem. Ttyl8r.'

“I see Penny’s war on the English language has claimed another victim,” Sheldon said with a sigh.

xTBBTx

“So Bat-Man finally topped a billion dollars in revenue,” said Leonard as he flipped through a comic bin. “Not as fast as The Avengers but still it’s a victory for DC.”

“Makes you wonder what they’re going to do since the trilogy’s finished,” replied Howard.

Raj pulled out a comic and set it on his pile. “Chris Nolan is involved in the Superman project. That should mean it won’t completely suck.”

“Then again one can always go back to the well one too many times,” warned Sheldon. “This is the company who thought Joel Shumacher’s job on Batman Forever warranted a second kick at the can with Batman & Robin.”

“Have faith,” soothed Raj. “Nolan passed the Sam Raimi test and managed to pull off a successful trilogy.” Leonard stopped flipping to regard his friend.

“Since when does Spiderman 3 constitute a ‘successful’ film?”

“No, no, Spiderman 3 did have its merits,” Sheldon interjected. “After all it did halt production on Spiderman 4.”

“Hey now,” Howard said as he moved to the next bin. “Anne Hathaway had been picked to play Black Cat. She’d of kicked ass filling the role—and that costume.”
“Fortunately Nolan selected her to play Catwoman,” said Raj.

“Yeah,” smiled Howard. “Although I don’t know what it says about your career if directors take one look at you and think, ‘pussy’.”

“Speaking of costume apparel Penny has tasked me with formally inviting you all to her Halloween party which is taking place at Leonard and I’s apartment,” Sheldon said evenly.

“I thought we were coming here for Stuart’s costume contest?” pouted Raj. Finally he was going to be in a competition where he didn’t have to portray sucky Aquaman. There’s no way he’d give up the opportunity without a fight.

“Penny’s aware of our previous engagement,” replied Sheldon. “She’ll be busy entertaining her Spanish class as they partake in Day of the Dead festivities for extra credit.”

“Here that buddy? College girls will be coming to you,” Howard said encouragingly with a nudge to Raj’s shoulder. In response the astrophysicist gave a polite smile but said nothing.

“I wonder if I could get Leslie to come out?” mused Leonard. “I don’t think she’d be into hanging with college kids. Neither would Amy for that matter.”

“Don’t underestimate Amy,” tutted the theoretical physicist as he resumed comic flipping. “When it comes to Penny she’s known to do wild and crazy things.”

“Penny seems to have that effect on ‘homo novus’,,” agreed Howard with a twinkle in his eye.

“Score one for homo sapiens sapiens,” grinned Raj.

“I think I’ll go as Frodo,” said Leonard. “Since The Hobbit is coming out this year people should know who I am.”

“I call The Flash,” Sheldon said quickly, causing Raj to pout.

“Fine. I’ll be Green Lantern,” he huffed.

“Captain America over here,” Howard said. “I wonder if I could get Bernadette to be the Black Widow?”

“If we can get Penny to be Catwoman we’d be the most kickass group of heroes,” said Raj. “Well, except for Leonard.”

“Hey, we rock it in the Shire,” the experimental physicist boasted. “Besides with the Ring I’ve got powers like the Invisible Woman.”

“True,” Howard chuckled. “You’ve been invisible to women for years.” Leonard scowled as his other friends snickered.

xTBBTx

“There’s a bit of a hoof between your two classrooms,” noted Amy as she and Penny walked down the hallway towards the Spanish room. “At least it’ll keep your calves shapely.”

“If all goes well next semester I’ll be in college full time so my calves are really going to get a workout.” Penny snorted. “Okay, like they don’t already working at the Cheesecake Factory.”

“As academics take on a greater role in your life you’ll have to ensure you don’t put on weight
what with the increasing hours of inactivity.”

Penny stopped in front of an open doorway, the sounds of mariachi music emanating from within. “As the chances of me getting a scholarship are zilch I think it’s safe to say I’ll be working my way through school.”

“Good stuff. A healthy work ethic and firm buttock are essential in academics.” Amy gave a quick smile while Penny’s brow furled slightly in confusion before both women entered the class.

“Here she comes,” sang Pierce as he spotted the Nebraskan. “Miss America.”

“Shush you,” Penny chided lightly.

“I was wondering when you’d get here,” said Jeff. At his words Amy cocked her head as she took in the ex-lawyer with his tousled chic hair and designer clothes. She couldn’t say he was a knockout to her hormones like Zack but he was handsome enough and he did have amazing blue eyes. ‘Although I have seen better.’ Amy cleared her throat.

“Oh, Jeff, this is my friend Amy.”

Jeff looked over the cotton and wool layered woman with stringy hair and glasses before returning his gaze to Penny, whose legs teased him in all the right places in that short skirt of hers.

“Intrigued,” he said amiably.

“Ah, so you’re in Penny’s study group,” Amy said evenly.

“Yeah. Although originally it was my study group. If anything Penny joined me. Part of the Cult of Winger—which is not affiliated with Scientology despite the rumors.” Penny gave him a ‘be good’ frown.

A pause, then Amy turned to her friend. “He’s trying to be funny,” she stage whispered.

“Ouch,” Jeff replied albeit with an amused look on his face.

“However his secondary sexual characteristics make him reasonably attractive. I can see why your dream had a heavy sexual comp—”

“Jeff!” called Pierce.

“What was that?” Jeff said to Amy as Penny turned about three shades of crimson.

Pierce chuckled as he came to stand beside his classmate. “Looks as though someone else is in need of Ear-Noculars.”

“Just a second Pierce I—”

“Boy I sure could use a drink right now,” Penny said in a high pitched tone.

“It is a tad warm in here,” agreed Amy. “Let us procure some beverages.”

“Jeff, it’ll just take a moment,” Pierce said amiably.

“But Penny and I were just talking about this dream she had,” Jeff said with an intrigued look.

“No we weren’t,” Penny said a little too quickly as she took Amy’s hand. “Later Winger.” Both
women sped off, Penny veritably dragging Amy through the crowd.

The two men gazed after them.

“There’s just something about a woman in a cardigan isn’t there?” smiled Pierce wistfully as he checked out the neurobiologist’s figure.

“Eyah,” replied Jeff. “So what was it that was so important you decided to ruin one of the most important conversations I’ve had at college?”

“Senor Chang thought the corner needed some pizzazz and I made a suggestion or two. He gave me his blessing and the key to the supply room and I need a hand gathering some materials.” He cupped a hand on Jeff’s shoulder. “I’ll have you back here clean as a whistle.”

“I think you mean ‘quick as a whistle’,” replied Jeff. Pierce laughed.

“Maybe you’re into blowing dirty whistles Jeffrey but I like mine shiny as new.” Jeff’s eyebrow nearly spiked into his hair line as Pierce tucked their arms together and began whistling.

XxX

He’d been out of high school for over a decade and yet Leonard couldn’t help but feel a little apprehension as he looked around Penny’s ‘Step Up’ classroom. Not that the work was ever a problem for him, no it was the interacting with his fellow classmates that garnered him unique experiences like being stuffed into his own cello case. He couldn’t even count the number of wedgies he’d undergone over the years.

Sometimes he wondered if things would have been easier for him were he to have gone to university at age eleven like Sheldon. At least the East Texan didn’t have to go through things like junior and senior proms and compulsory pep rallies. Leonard glanced over at his roommate as the lanky man was in discussion with one of Penny’s teachers. A check of his watch said Sheldon had been engaged for ten minutes so it was time to extract him from the conversation.

The older woman was patient as she went over the curriculum with the intensely curious yet odd individual before her. Clearly he was intelligent but was more than a little off-putting. Still, like the army, the ‘Step Up’ program took all kinds.

“All in all it’s a great program. You work at your own pace and teachers are available should you need us,” she concluded. The man seemed taken aback.

“You think this is for me?” he said incredulously as he lightly shook the handouts. “My dear woman I’ve two doctorates and—”

“Sheldon!” Leonard stepped beside his friend and gave a big smile to the teacher. “Since Penny’s not here and you’re finished talking—”

“No I’m not—”

“Yes you are.” The short man smiled at the teacher as he led Sheldon away. “Thank you.”

“Leonard, it’s a wonder Penny learns anything at all with this hippy-like ‘open concept’ derived teaching. She’d be far better off with me tutoring her,” Sheldon tutted.

“It’s not the same and you know it,” Leonard replied. “Penny has to do this on her own and she seems satisfied with the program.”
“She was also satisfied with ‘The Lake House’,” said Sheldon with pursed lips. Leonard raised an eyebrow. “Oh very well,” Sheldon blustered as he tucked the handouts into his satchel. “However I will have a list of questions for Penny to take to her ‘teacher’”—here he used air quotes with his fingers—“once I’ve read over the material.”

“Fair enough,” Leonard said diplomatically. “Hey, why don’t we take a look around the school?” At this Sheldon’s demeanor became more serious.

“Good idea. I’d like to go to her Spanish class so I can see the curriculum. It’ll help me to better assist Penny on ‘Date Night’.”

Leonard and Sheldon exited the building and began their trek across campus. The short man had reached for the map but Sheldon assured him with a raised eyebrow that he had it memorized and could lead them to the language building blindfolded.

A high pitched whine came over the speaker system, causing Sheldon to plug his ears.

“Excuse me. Sorry about that,” said the disembodied voice. “Dean Pelton here. I just want to welcome our students and honored guests to Pasadena City College—where learning right is a right and we have a right to write right. Anyways if—”

Sheldon rolled his eyes. “Good Lord.”

XxX

“I still don’t see the reason for embarrassment, Bestie. Sexually-charged dreams are common,” said Amy evenly as she and Penny walked into the cafeteria.

“Yeah but you don’t tell the person you had the dream about!”

“Why does it matter? It’s not like you’re going to have intercourse with Jeff. Really Penny you make such a big drama out of everything.” The waitress’s jaw dropped as Amy stepped to where a hunky blonde haired man with no shirt sat on a counter.

“Hi, what’s up, hey. I’m Vaughn. Those look like comfortable shoes.”

‘He has no idea how lethal his smile is.’ The neurobiologist took a moment to gather herself.

“Thank you. Yes. They’re Fluevog. Are you in line?”

“Naw, just chillin’. Hey you’re not going to pollute your body with carbonation are you?” he asked, suddenly concerned.

“Tepid water actually. Penny usually orders carbonated beverages. I see you’ve lost your shirt.” At the mention of her name Penny walked over to the pair.

“Hey Vaughn.”

“Hey Penny, how’s it going, ‘sup?”

“Not much. Amy and I are just getting something to drink.”

“Amy. Rad name. So are you two pretty tight?”

“Yup,” Penny replied.

“We’re not the only thing that’s pretty tight,” Amy said in a modestly excited undertone as her eyes
appreciatively glanced over his jeans.

“Maybe I’ll get a bottled water,” Penny replied. At once Vaughn looked pained.

“Aw, sis, no. Bottled water is so bad for the environment with all the plastic and stuff.”

“Not to mention a bacteria count that is over and above most municipal water facilities,” added Amy without taking her eyes off the man.

“You drink bottled water all the time,” Penny said with a smirk.

“Sheldon said the pipes in your building are questionable. Your water passed inspection when he had it tested but he still doesn’t trust it for ingestion without it first being boiled,” said Amy.

“So how does he brush his teeth?” asked Penny.

“Water purification tablets,” said Amy in a distracted tone as she smiled at Vaughn.

Penny rolled her eyes. Purification tablets. Of course.

“Speaking of pure,” said Vaughn as he got off the counter. “By the way, I like how you said that. Water purification. Water pure. That’s the only way.” He reached into his pocket and pulled out a folded piece of paper. “When I was in the quad yesterday I was chillin’ and then you walked into my head. It’s for you,” he said to Penny.

“Thanks Vaughn.” She unfurled the paper to see a hand-written poem:

I floated in the stream of blissful unconsciousness
Then awoke to the sound of laughter from you my sis
I looked around but you weren’t there
Just the green and the sky and the maple’s fresh air

Maybe we touched, a soft caress of the mind
Two kindred souls, all pureness and kind
You might not be here but that won’t make me sad
You left your footprints in my dreams, now that’s pretty rad.

Penny looked up with a smile. “Thanks so much.”

“No worries,” he said with a grin reminiscent of a young Brad Pitt.

“So what are you doing at the college?” asked Amy. “Besides enthralling the populace with your down home charm and oh my abs, I mean.”

Penny felt her phone vibrate. She scrolled to see a text from Leonard:

Sheldon. Spanish Room. Help!

“We’ve got to go,” she said as she grabbed a Lipton green tea iced tea from the counter.

“Right with you, Bestie.”


Amy’s knees went weak.
After the girls paid for their drinks they hurried to the language building.

“So let me get this straight you have Nature Boy with his six pack abs and folksy ways writing you poems and instead you’re dating Sheldon and having sexual dreams about Jeff?” Amy gave a little smile. “Clearly you’re insane.”

Penny laughed. “Maybe Sheldon’s mother should have me tested.”

XxX

Sheldon and Leonard followed the sounds of mariachi music to the source and entered the classroom. Immediately the theoretical physicist determined Penny’s absence. With a sigh he walked up to a young black man wearing a high school letter jacket.

“¿Usted ha visto a Penny,” asked Sheldon. The teenager stared at him with a blank expression.

“Good Lord Leonard she’s learning Spanish here!”

Troy felt a tingling at the back of his neck so gave his head a twitch to the side with a resounding crack. Granted he had no idea what the reedy guy had said in Spanish but he sure knew the tone of snooty derisiveness only a nerd could emit.

Sensing a disturbance in the Force only encountered when jocks and nerds collide Leonard quickly whipped out his phone and texted Penny.

“Who’s learning Spanish here?” asked Troy.

“Obviously not you,” sniffed Sheldon. Troy’s eye began to twitch.

Off to Leonard’s left Abed whispered something to Annie and Shirley, sending both women to Troy’s side.

Abed resumed filming with his camera. “Action,” he said evenly as he zoomed in on the group.

“Can we help you?” Annie said with pursed lips. She didn’t get how this guy in a Green Arrow t-shirt and plaid pants could be suicidal enough to bait her Troy like this but she’d be damned if she’d let it continue.

“We’re looking for Penny,” offered Leonard with an apologetic smile.

Troy frowned. “What do you want with Penny?”

“I’m her boyfriend,” Sheldon said evenly.

Pause.

Troy started laughing. “Seriously? No way.”

“You must be Sheldon,” Shirley beamed.

“Dr. Sheldon Cooper,” replied the lanky man.

“You’re a physician?” Annie said with a cynical look.

Sheldon looked down his nose. “Hardly. I had higher ambitions than that.”

Shirley was close to bursting with excitement. “So what’s your area of research?”
“We’re physicists,” said Leonard.


“Physics involves the study of matter and its motion through space and time, along with related concepts such as energy and force in order to understand how the universe behaves.” Troy blinked.

“We study things like galaxies to see how they work,” added Leonard. Sheldon rolled his eyes.

“My word. They should take away your doctorate for saying that. Why you might as well say quantum mechanics builds flea circuses.” His brow furrowed as he realized an Arabic man was filming him.

“Sheldon!” As a group they turned to see Amy and Penny enter the room. The Nebraskan was all smiles as she sidled up to Sheldon and tucked her arm through his. “I see you’ve met everyone.”

“No one’s been introduced,” said Shirley.

“Oh. Well this is Sheldon, my boyfriend, and Leonard, his roommate and our friend Amy.”

“Well I’m Shirley,” said the older woman with a genuine smile. “And these are Troy and Annie. And that little caramel angel with the camera’s Abed. We’re all in Penny’s study group.”

“I see,” said Sheldon as he glanced around the room.

“Where’s Jeff?” asked Annie.

Shirley shrugged. “I’m not sure.”

“Ah, he’s around somewhere,” Penny said with mock enthusiasm. “You know how he likes to socialize.”

“I’ll say,” piped in Abed as he filmed. “Especially when he says things like how much he likes your hot buttered pop—”

“Spoilers, Abed,” Penny said with a strained smile.

“What’s wrong with liking popcorn?” asked Sheldon.

“Nothing,” Shirley said quickly. “Popcorn’s a great source of fiber.”

“Actually if you want a better snacking fiber try a cup of raspberries,” said Amy. “They have over twice the amount as three cups of air popped popcorn.”

“Although air popped popcorn has less calories per volume,” Sheldon added.

“So why was Jeff so worried about watching both of your waistlines?” a puzzled Abed asked Penny.

Sheldon pursed his lips. “Dear Lord don’t tell me you’re thinking of restricting your caloric intake,” he said disapprovingly to his girlfriend. “You’re already in healthy proportion.”

“Jeff thinks so,” Troy said with a smirk garnering him an elbow from Annie.

It was absolutely amazing that even when he wasn’t there Jeff Winger could get into trouble.
“So Spanish,” Penny said desperately. “Here we are!”

“Indeed,” said Sheldon. “Although the mariachi music is playing at an uncomfortable decibel more than likely in an attempt to make up for its generic content. Here’s hoping your maestro isn’t as tone deaf when it comes to your lessons.”

“Senor Chang is—well he’s Senor Chang,” Shirley said with a little smile. “He’s an interesting teacher.”

“Yes, well, a black hole is also interesting but that doesn’t mean I want to traverse its event horizon,” replied the lanky theorist. “Of course from what I’ve seen of the College I imagine he couldn’t possibly do any more harm to the educational system.”

“Not that he’s saying that your school’s bad,” Leonard replied as he frowned at Sheldon. “I’m sure he realizes your willingness to proceed with your studies is what’s more important.”

“It’s this kind of ‘boo-yah’ mentality that maintains the mediocrity of the status quo, Leonard. You should know that when you mistake gosh-darn enthusiasm for so-called fundamental breakthroughs in your research.” Annie’s jaw dropped in shock.

“You let him talk to you like that?” she sputtered to Leonard.

“My statement is based on years of observation not personal slight,” sniffed Sheldon. “You’ll need to note the difference if you want to function in higher academia.”

“But every road begins with a step, Sheldon, and in this instance Pasadena City College more than suffices,” Amy said evenly. “Especially since we’re happy Penny has decided to rekindle her interest in learning and that she’s found a group of similarly like-minded individuals such as yourselves.” Both Sheldon and she locked eyes. “Isn’t that right?”

“Oh! Of course,” he said in mock enthusiasm, catching Amy’s drift. “Very happy. Of course we could be even happier were you to better organize your study group so as to maximize your learning.”

“You’ll have to speak to Jeff about that,” Annie said coolly. “It’s his study group.”

“And as he’s not here I guess we’ll have to do that some other time,” Penny said with a waitress smile as she squeezed her boyfriend’s arm. “Let’s go see some other classes so we can pick out what I’m going to take next semester.” She looked at Shirley. “I’ll see you at group tomorrow.”

“Wow,” said Shirley as the study group watched Penny and company leave the class.

“Where’s Jeff when you need him?” growled Annie.

XxX

“Help!” yelled Jeff as his fist beat against the door.

“Rest yourself Jeffrey. Someone will come to look for us eventually,” soothed Pierce as he sat on a box.

“I can’t believe you locked us in the stupid closet,” seethed Jeff.

“Well at least it gives us a chance to toot our own horns as we used to call it in my day.”

Jeff resumed pounding. “Please!”
“You seem flustered.”

“I am flustered. The whole reason why I came out here tonight’s out there having sexual dreams about me and instead I’m stuck here with you.” Pierce chuckled.

“Penny?”

Jeff walked over and flumped himself beside his friend.

“Jeff, I was a young man once. After seven marriages I know how the scent of a woman gets into your blood. Were Penny not a lesbian I’d most certainly be attracted.”

“Where did you get that from?” Jeff asked incredulously.

“It’s obvious. Haven’t you noticed her notes are printed and written? Really, you’ve got to learn to pick up on this stuff.”

“She has a boyfriend, Pierce.”

“‘Boyfriend’. I believe we’ve met this boyfriend of hers and believe me ‘Amy’ isn’t a name I’d call my son,” Pierce said with a wink.

A pause. “Get out of here,” Jeff scoffed.

“Did you see the way that cardigan vixen hovered around Penny? My God Jeff raise your blinders.”

'As if being trapped in a closet wasn’t bad enough I had to have Pierce with me.' “Wow.”

The older man clapped a hand on his shoulder. “You learn Little Grasshopper.”

xTBBTx

Leaned back in his chair as he was Jeff Winger was the epitome of cool as he waited for his study mates. He’d arrived early in order to gather dirt since apparently during his closet-time with Pierce he had missed something momentous—the unveiling of Penny’s boyfriend. Without Shirley—the woman really was a pot-stirrer—he never would have known Sheldon was a professor at Caltech so it was no surprise she texted him about last night’s visit. The only thing was, Jeff was unsure of what to do with Shirley’s depiction of the illustrious doctor as ‘different’.

Jeff twirled his pen as he thought about the Nebraskan and how she surprised him at every turn. She wasn’t just hot she had a great sense of humor and a genuine kindness to her that was so rare in Jeff’s former life in the legal system. He admitted he liked her—as a friend of course since she had a boyfriend and hitting on a woman with a boyfriend was so uncool even if she did push all the right buttons and—

“Easy Winger,” he mumbled to himself as Troy entered the room.

“Hey man,” the quarterback said as he touched fists with Jeff. “Where’d you go last night?”

“Pierce and I were talking about whistles. I heard Penny brought a special person to the class?”

“‘Special’ is right,” Troy said with a shake of the head.

“Details,” Jeff prompted as he sat up.
“He talks a lot and uses big words and is just one strange dude.” Troy thought for a moment. “In a way he’s kind of like Abed only Abed’s cool and he’s a real nerd.”

“Who’s a nerd?” asked Annie as Shirley and she passed through the door.

“Penny’s boyfriend,” said Jeff. “Thoughts?” Annie pursed her lips.

“You mean ‘I’m too good to be a medical doctor’ Dr. Sheldon Cooper?”

“Now Annie, Sheldon might be a little eccentric but—”

“He’s a jerk, Shirley,” the teenager replied. “The way he stood there looking all snotty in his plaid pants and cartoon t-shirt while Penny and his roommate did their best to curb his rants on the school and physics.”

“Physics?” Jeff was already typing in a search for ‘Sheldon Cooper’ on his phone.

“I looked him up when I got home last night,” Shirley said, wide-eyed. “He’s a big time theorist.”

“He’s still a jerk,” grumped Annie as she laid out her school books.

“Breakfast Club,” said Abed evenly as he bee-lined for his seat.

“If you want to experience him ask Abed, he filmed the whole thing last night,” offered Troy.

“Thing?” Abed blinked.

“Penny’s boyfriend.”


“Interesting,” said Jeff. He heard Pierce and Penny approach the room. “Well I’m just sad I missed him,” he said aloud.

“I missed you too, Jeffrey,” said Pierce sympathetically as he walked to his chair. “But there’ll be other times to bond.”

“You bonded over whistles?” Troy asked, confused.

Pierce beamed. “While we were locked in the closet we blew each other’s whistles all right.” The room went silent and all eyes turned to the older man. “What?”

Jeff leaned over to Penny. “So, have any interesting dreams last night?”

“No,” she said crisply. She really was going to kill Amy.

“Dreams like Roseanne’s last season or good dreams that turn into nightmares like on M*A*S*H?” asked Abed.

“Dreams where the wrong person is in the wrong place,” replied Penny as she got ready to study.

“Ah, Star Trek Nemesis. Gotcha.”

Penny’s eyebrows furrowed. “I’m not sure I get that.”
“Either do I,” agreed Jeff. “That was dream with an ‘s’, right?”

“Time to get started,” Penny said loudly and with a blush. She looked at the ex-lawyer. “It was one time. Like trying a cigarette. Not good for me.”

“But addictive,” he said with a smirk.

Penny stuck out her tongue and turned to the day’s assignment.

xTBBTx

Carefully Sheldon extracted his arm from between the laser beams. It had been a calculated risk but he knew if he was to slide his body through the opening he had to reposition his hand.

“Spider-Man would have been through this in like two seconds flat,” scoffed Raj as he leaned against the kitchen counter. “What’s a few lasers to a man with the reflexes of a spider?”

Leonard thought for a moment. “Actually, what are the reflexes of a spider? Peter Parker has the proportional strength of a spider but his arachnid qualities don’t necessarily translate into greater dexterity.”

“Black Widow is pretty flexible. I’d play a game of Twister with her any day,” smirked Howard.

“I think Hawkeye’s already her playing partner,” warned Raj.

“Hardly,” said Sheldon as he rested on his elbow. “The Avengers movie made Clint Barton much more dynamic a fighter than he is in the comics. In fact the Marvel Super Heroes game has him at a distinct fighting disadvantage without his bow.” He raised his hips and continued moving.

“Beast is pretty kick-ass,” said Howard as he got down onto the floor to make sure Sheldon didn’t touch a beam.

“Yeah but in X-Men: First Class they used Hank McCoy’s brains more than his gymnastic abilities,” Leonard reminded him. He checked his watch. If things continued at this pace it’d be midnight before they got past moving the pawns on the chessboard.

“That was disappointing,” agreed Raj. “Although Nightcrawler’s dad was just amazing teleporting all over the place.”

“But would you consider him truly agile or just incredibly adept at teleportation?” said Howard. “Cutting it close Sheldon. Better haul in that hinnie.” Sheldon obliged but it wasn’t enough and the beam broke. “Gotcha.”

“Drat,” pouted the theoretical physicist. “And here I was thinking I’d solved my problem by changing attire.”

Howard rubbed his palms as he prepared for his turn. “It’s not about wearing a suit but how you wear it.”

“Your small stature is also beneficial.” Sheldon quickly compared heights. “In fact, I’m the most disadvantaged of the group.”

“At least you admit it,” Raj quipped, garnering him a glare.

The apartment door opened and Penny, Amy and Bernadette stopped dead as if frozen as they took in the guys wearing skin tight spandex suits.
“Holy crap on a cracker!” gasped Penny.

“Fascinating,” grinned Amy, causing the men to quickly hide their privates with their hands.

“I thought you were supposed to be at our place?” sputtered Howard to his wife.

“Amy and I came to pick up Penny after work,” Bernadette piped in. “Great Halloween costumes by the way. I love The Blue Man Group.”

“These aren’t our costumes,” blushed Leonard. At this Bernadette’s brows furrowed in confusion.

“I’m not sure I understand.”

“Think of this as a ritualized form of competition,” explained Amy. “Their outfits signal a change from ordinary life to the spiritual world.”

“I dunno. It looks kinda hot,” Penny said as she took in every inch of her boyfriend.

“Penny, I’m taken,” blushed Howard. The waitress rolled her eyes.

“Maybe we should go,” said Bernadette. “I’m still not sure about this.”

“There are other aspects to consider,” said the neurobiologist. “For instance the homoerotic traits are——”

The door closed behind the women.

“Maybe we should take up checkers,” Leonard said quietly.


“And standing here in spandex suits isn’t?” asked Raj quietly. The men mulled before resuming their positions.

“And away I go,” muttered Howard as he tentatively angled his leg between the lasers.

xTBBTx

“What are the snacks for?” asked Leonard as he watched his roommate pull out bowls for pretzels and Goldfish crackers.

“Amy Farrah Fowler and a friend are coming over this afternoon to conduct a presentation.”

“Oh? On what?”

“How to produce an orgasm in a human female,” Sheldon said evenly as he dug into the cupboard for mugs.

Leonard’s jaw dropped. “I—what? Run that by me again?”

Sheldon sighed. “I was doing research on the female orgasm and had questions. Amy said she could demonstrate.”

“Did she say how she’d do that?” the shorter man asked hesitantly. Sheldon pursed his lips.

“She said it’d be visual with some tactile sensations.” There was a knock at the door and he went to
answer. “Of course I insisted on proper hygiene at all times. Hello Amy, come in.”

“Hello Sheldon,” replied the neurobiologist as she entered the apartment carrying a large cloth bag.

“Where’s your friend?”

“He’ll be here a little later. Don’t worry, we can begin the presentation without him.” She gave Leonard a small smile. “I’m glad you’re here. I require your assistance.”

“What?” sputtered Leonard as Amy dragged Sheldon’s computer chair over to Leonard’s seat and plunked her bag on it. “I don’t think I’m the best candidate for—”

“I realize your sexual repertoire is not profound but you have intimate knowledge of Penny which we’ll require.” Leonard made to speak. “Unless you’re saying you want Bestie’s sexual experiences to be less than satisfactory?”

“No,” he mumbled.

“Right, let’s get started. Hold out your hand and make a fist if you please.” Amy dug through her bag and pulled out a red sock and put it on Leonard’s hand. Next she produced a blue leg warmer and covered his arm to the elbow. She fussed with the placement of the legwarmer around the fist and altered the angle of the whole arm before stepping away.

“This is the clitoris,” she said evenly.

“Aw, no,” moaned Leonard as he made to take off the offending items.

“Leonard,” tutted Sheldon. “Quit being a baby and sit still.”

“Sheldon my arm is not a clitoris. I—” Leonard shook his head. “Couldn’t Amy just draw this out on the board?”

“If I wanted diagrams and pictures there are plenty on the internet,” Sheldon said matter-of-factly. “As it stands I have questions in need of answers and Amy has offered to provide them.”

“Sheldon—”

“I wish to invoke the ‘favor clause’ in our Friendship Agreement.”

The experimental physicist sighed. “A favor is driving you to the store not act as an anatomy lesson.”

“No, driving me places is a part of the Roommate Agreement,” said an exasperated Sheldon. “We’re talking friendship, Leonard. Please focus.”

“I—”

“Leonard, this will be my first time exploring a woman’s vulva and I need to anticipate as many variables as possible as I will be combating the added distraction of Penny’s germs.” Sheldon sighed in frustration at his friend’s dubious look.

“Fine,” pouted Leonard. “But this goes no where. The last thing Penny needs to know is that the three of us are talking about her female parts.”

“Agreed,” said Amy evenly. “Now back to the presentation.” She held Leonard’s arm by the wrist. “You are of course familiar with the parts of the clitoris?”
“Of course,” said Sheldon.

“Then we can proceed directly to technique.” She pulled out a round pillow and placed it in Leonard’s lap before draping a long scarf around his elbow and tucked it on either side of the pillow. “Now, the clitoral glans or shaft may be massaged in a variety of ways through the clitoral hood.” She fingered the leg warmer. “Usual techniques include an up-and-down, side-to-side and circular motion,” she said as she demonstrated each.

Sheldon got up and hovered over his roommate’s arm. “I see you’re stimulating the base of the clitoral hood and not the glans proper.”

“That’s correct,” replied Amy. “Direct stimulation is oftentimes too painful. Your best bet is to manipulate the clitoral hood to rub the shaft. Of course some women enjoy manual penetration of the vagina”—here she ran her hand around the edge of the pillow—“or having the entire area of the vulva caressed.” She brushed the scarf.

Sheldon was fascinated. “I see.” He glanced at his roommate. “Which does Penny prefer?”

Leonard blushed. “Um, you should figure that out for yourself. Seriously Sheldon, exploration’s all about getting to know someone.”

“I suppose.” The lanky man turned to his ex-girlfriend. “Do I wait for vaginal lubrication before engaging her?”

Amy cocked her head. “Typically. I recommend stimulation of the breast tissue and other erogenous zones to help things along.”


“Not that I recall. She uses a lot of other um—things.” He gave a weak smile.

“Not important,” Amy continued. “Penny will direct you as to pressure and intensity of the rub.”

“I still wish I had a tactile example to refer to,” Sheldon replied.

“Bing bong. Looks like my friend’s here,” Amy said as she dug into her purse.

“Friend?” said a curious Sheldon.

“Say hello to Gerard,” she smiled as she held up an electric toothbrush.

“Now seems like an odd time to perform oral hygiene,” said a puzzled Sheldon. “And since when did you start naming your personal products?”

“Only when I get to know them intimately,” Amy said with an impish smile.

Leonard was positively crimson.

xTBBTx

Wikipedia: Kegel; Orgasms; Clitoris; Vulva; Fingering
Ask Men: Fingering Techniques

¿Usted ha visto a Penny—Have you seen Penny?
The Boy Scout Declaration

Chapter Summary

A/N: In this chapter I begin my take on ‘Advanced Criminal Law’.

xTBBTx

“So,” said Señor Chang with a thick smile. “I suppose you’re all bouncing at the bit to get the results of last week’s quiz.” He gazed at the hopeful faces which suddenly turned fearful as the students watched his transformation from benevolent force to a demon. He reached into his Hawaiian shirt pocket and pulled out a small piece of paper. “Well not until I find out who wrote this.” He began to pace. “What is this you ask? A crib sheet with all the answers. I found it on the floor after the test. So who wrote it?”

The class was still.

Señor Chang shook the piece of paper. “The cheater has until Friday to come forward or everyone in the class gets zero. Clase terminada!” He stormed from the room.

XxX

“I can’t believe this,” Annie said in a near-panic. “I’ll never transfer colleges with a bad grade.”

Pierce tapped his pencil nervously. “So who do you think cheated?” As one the group turned to Jeff.

“Remind me never to call on any of you as character witnesses,” the ex-lawyer replied with a wry smile.

“Well somebody did it and Lord have mercy on him,” said Shirley grimly.

“What makes you think it’s a guy?” sputtered Pierce. “The printing would have to be pretty small to fit onto a scrap paper like that. Almost as if the culprit had lesbian hands.” He turned to Penny who rolled her eyes.

“There’s no way Señor Chang can fail all of us,” the waitress growled. “Isn’t there someone we can complain to?”

Shirley shook her head. “Not unless you’re planning to drop Spanish—”

“What she’s not,” Jeff said quickly.

“So what do we do?” pouted Annie.

“Walk on eggshells as we suspect each other of committing the crime,” said Abed evenly. “It’s like Clue only there’s no murder.”

“Oh there’ll be a murder all right,” said Penny with a frown. “I studied all week for that stupid test and if I find out who did it he’ll get a taste of the junior rodeo.”
Annie raised an eyebrow. “What’s that mean?”

“I can hogtie and castrate a calf in less than sixty seconds.”

“That’s messed,” hissed Troy.

“What’s with this ‘castration’ thing? Again you’re blaming a guy for doing it.” Pierce looked knowingly at Penny. “Given your alternative lifestyle your viewpoint isn’t a surprise but really you shouldn’t hate every man.” Penny’s jaw dropped.

“I’m not a lesbian!” she protested. “Not that there’s anything wrong with that.”

“It doesn’t matter,” Pierce said gently. “We’ve met your girlfriend and she’s lovely.”

“It all makes sense now,” mused Troy. “I knew that guy couldn’t be your boyfriend.”

“Remember when we used to talk about Spanish?” Jeff smirked to a flabbergasted Penny.

“Sheldon is my boyfriend!” She got up from the table. “I need to go to the bathroom.”

“Right with you honey,” said a sympathetic Shirley.

“Simmer down with the lesbianism, Pierce,” Jeff said seriously after the women left.

“So Penny’s not a lesbian?” asked Troy as he sought to keep things straight.

“No,” said Jeff even as Pierce said “Yes.”

The quarterback frowned. “Well either way it still doesn’t explain that guy.”

Jeff cocked his head at Abed. “You still have the footage from Thursday?”

“Of course.”

“I think it’s film night,” smiled the ex-lawyer as he leaned back in his chair.

Leonard spotted his roommate reading on the couch as he entered the apartment and deposited the keys in the bowl.

“One plus two plus four plus five plus twenty plus twenty six equals ‘fear’,” said Sheldon before turning a page. “One plus two plus five ‘b’ plus twenty six equals ‘surprise’.” Again he turned the page.

“What ya doing?” asked the shorter man.

“Memorizing the facial acting coding system.”

“I’m sure you have a reasonable explanation,” Leonard said with a little smile.

Sheldon put a marker in his book before setting it on his knee.

“It’s no secret I have difficulties discerning certain non-verbal cues. Up to this point I’ve managed but now I find myself desiring greater mastery,” replied the lanky man. Leonard nodded.

“Trying to figure Penny out, huh?” he said as he sat in his chair.
“Indeed. She’s surprisingly complex,” replied Sheldon. “For instance her vocal intonation is quite
dexterous when she employs sarcasm in an indirect, ironic manner. It’s easier for me to garner the
direct statement.”

“I—could always ask mother about the techniques they used at the Asp—at the clinic,” Leonard
said hesitantly.

“I’ve already consulted.” Here Sheldon pursed his lips. “Your mother, while a brilliant woman,
seems to have bypassed the scientific method and come at me with a broad-sweeping—and
unsolicited—diagnosis.” In typical Dr. Beverly Hofstadter bluntness she’d praised Sheldon’s
inquiry into Asperger syndrome as a positive step towards acknowledging and treating his
’shortcoming’. Indeed the more she spoke of his success despite his ‘condition’ the more indignant
Sheldon felt. The only thing was he knew she was not being malicious. She stated facts. Just like
Sheldon. While he appreciated her candor the East Texan did come to an epiphany of sorts as
Beverly highlighted all of the AS indicators she’d spotted in him: stating facts brought one closer
to truth but it also made for an annoying conversation.

“Yeah she can be blunt. I remember in kindergarten I got a star for a picture of a horse I drew and
all she could say when she saw it was that my motor skills were adequate although my sense of
proportion needed work.” Leonard sighed at the crushing of his spirit. It was when he was older
that he came to realize that he’d seen that wounded look through much of his life—on the face of
his father. “So she recommended the facial code?”

Sheldon nodded. “With my eidetic memory to remember the codifications she thought it ripe time
to see how well my—difficulties—could be addressed through facial muscle recognition alone.”

“Figures she’d turn this into an experiment,” said Leonard as he rolled his eyes.

“Actually I much prefer it as such,” countered Sheldon. “It allows me to remain objective. The last
thing I need to do is succumb to frustration. Lord knows Penny leaves me frustrated enough with
her folksy ways.”

Leonard smirked. “She might not get quantum mechanics but she can read people.”

“It’s her ability to read me that’s so—unnerving,” said Sheldon as he unconsciously thumbed the
pages of his book. At the heart of it all he realized that most people couldn’t be bothered getting to
know him on a more intimate level. Indeed the feeling was quite mutual since most people didn’t
measure up to his standards. In contrast he surpassed Penny in so many areas it confounded him
that they were so compatible. Again she broke the rules and without rules there was no order.

Without rules there was no protection.

“I never get over that part,” smiled Leonard. “With Leslie I don’t even have to say anything and
she knows.” Here he laughed. “Maybe that’s not such a good thing long term but I wouldn’t trade
this level of intimacy for anything. We ‘click’ and the whole is greater than the parts. Or at least
this part. Leslie’s terrific any way you take her.”

“I’ll defer to your judgment,” Sheldon said with a twitchy mouth. Leonard sighed.

“You think the two of you will ever get along or will you keep on with this childishness?”

“She’s stubborn, confrontational and opinionated. And she’s a big poopie head,” he added with a
pouty face. Leonard rolled his eyes as he got up.

“Five plus fourteen plus twenty three plus ‘M’ sixty eight. You’re puzzled.”
“Nope.” The experimental physicist made his way to his room.

“Exasperated?”

“You got it.”

Sheldon was pleased. “This isn’t so hard after all.”

xTBBTx

‘Not bad.’ Penny glanced around Sheldon’s apartment which was decked out in various skull motifs and marigolds. The centerpiece on Sheldon and Leonard’s desks was a Day of the Dead altar with candy skulls, one for every guest marked with his or her initials. Annie, Amy and Penny had prepped the skulls the previous night. The teenager was initially skeptical about Penny’s insistence on a work song but once the ladies got into the swing of things Annie saw that every ‘way hey’ got them closer to their goal.

What the waitress found the most pleasing about the night was that Annie and Amy got along. Between the teenager’s uptightness and Amy’s prim forthrightness they became a force to contend with when it came to getting their vision across for the party.

“I’ll grab the pan de meurt after I’ve changed into costume,” said Bernadette as she arranged the candied pumpkin on the plates.

“Sounds good,” replied Amy as she checked off another line on her list. “As this is a class party I’m expecting people to arrive early to attain their accreditation before jumping off to another function.”

“Annie will be here in about twenty minutes to set up the sign in book.” Penny dragged the DNA model closer to the bookshelf to make more floor space.

“It’ll be ok, Stuart hasn’t seen the Frodo outfit. We were at Penny’s party, remember?” said Leonard as Sheldon and he came down the hall dressed in their hero finery.

“It was a memorable night,” agreed his roommate as he thought of Leonard’s confrontation with an angry Kurt. “Of course every night to me is memorable.” He made to continue but stopped short as he caught sight of Penny in her Black Canary outfit. Immediately he pursed his lips even as Leonard smiled.

“Wow,” said the curly haired man. “Maybe I should have been a member of the Justice League after all.”

“I believe she still has her Wonder Woman outfit,” offered Sheldon. Penny shook her head.

“Nope. It’s at Zack’s but who knows if he kept it.”

“Odd, considering it didn’t fit him,” mused the theoretical physicist.

“I left it there after um—shouldn’t you be at the comic store?” blushed Penny.

“We’re going down to meet Howard and Raj,” confirmed Leonard as he adjusted his Hobbit feet.

“I still wish you’d wear a Halloween costume,” Sheldon said with a bit of a pout to his girlfriend.

“You think I wear this every day?” laughed Penny as she indicated her black fishnet stockings and scant body suit with her hand.
“Only in our dreams,” Amy said evenly while adjusting a bouquet.

“Anyways,” continued Penny after taking a moment to think about her best friend’s words. “I can’t afford to buy another costume and I have this one at the ready.”

“But it’s ComicCon regalia not a Samhain garment,” insisted Sheldon.

“I’ve got a better idea,” said Penny as she set out skull candles—permitted only if they remained unlit. “How about you say I look pretty, wish me a good party and go enjoy yourself at Stuart’s.”

“Have a good party and I shall attempt to enjoy myself,” said Sheldon as he made to follow Leonard out the door.

“Sheldon,” teased Bernadette, stopping the man. “You didn’t say Penny was pretty.”

He cocked his head. “Because she isn’t pretty. She’s stunning.” He gave a nod then raced out the door as befit his Flash costume.

“He’s a keeper,” the microbiologist said to a smiling Penny.

XxX

Pierce braced himself as he mounted the last flight of stairs towards apartment 4A. He’d almost decided not to come but realized he had an obligation to Penny and Annie since they were part of the study group. His study group. Putting on an amiable smile he knocked at the door and was greeted by Annie.

“Hi Pierce, sign the attendance book,” said the teenager in a skeleton outfit. “Just to let you know the punch is alcohol free because some of us are under age but there’s alcohol on the counter in case you want to mix some in your cup.”

“Sounds good.” He scanned the crowd of people for more of the study group, noting a Bat-Man clad Abed standing at the outskirts filming the gathering.

“I’m amazed at the turnout, all things considered,” said the young woman. Pierce cocked his head in confusion. “The cheating thing and Senor Chang’s threat.” Annie scanned the room with pursed lips. “Just think we could be entertaining the rat and not even know it. He could be anyone.”

“There you go again with the ‘he’,,” Pierce said in a high tone. He cleared his throat and smiled. “I assure you the cheater must have had her reasons for doing what she did so maybe we shouldn’t judge her until we know the facts. Well if we ever get to know them on the off-chance she doesn’t come forward but I’m sure she’s not that selfish because the guilt must be eating her alive.” He paused as he took in Annie’s weird look. “I think I’ll try that punch. Alcohol you say?” He ventured into the room.

XxX

The comic shop was decked out in a Bat-Man motif with Joker green and purple streamers, black balloons and a stuffed Scarecrow in the window.

“Not bad,” remarked Raj as the guys entered. “The streamers really bring out the green in my costume.”

Leonard raised an eyebrow. “Raj you’re the Green Lantern. Your entire costume’s green.”
“Isn’t this wonderful?” said a pleased Sheldon as he bee-lined to the comic wall display. “New comic book night and we get to dress up. All we need is to go to Raj’s to play Halo and the night would be perfect.”

“We’re not going to Raj’s,” Leonard replied while grabbing the latest Superman comic.

“Oh I realize that. We’ve got a horde of people at the apartment and as much as we’ve taken precautions I’d like to ensure the safety of our property.” Sheldon noticed a micro crack on the spine of the Flash comic and grabbed another copy.

“I remember one party got so out of control everything was either looted or trashed,” mused Howard. Raj was impressed.

“You were actually invited to a major party?”

“No, it was three doors down from the house. I got a ladder and hopped the fence once I figured everyone was drunk enough not to notice me,” the engineer said sheepishly.

“Well at least we get a proper party here first with candy and a costume contest and prizes before we subject ourselves to a cacophony of sounds and general wantonness,” said Sheldon as he took his small stack of comics to the cash.

“I suppose we’ll have to suffer with the sounds of music and drunk coeds,” replied Howard with a smirk.

XxX

“Jeff! Thank God!” Annie gushed in relief as the ex-lawyer entered the apartment. She knew a party could only be deemed a ‘success’ if the cool people were there. It was almost a shoe-in with Penny hosting but it was a slam dunk with Jeff Winger in attendance.

“Looks like the entire class is here,” he remarked as he scanned the crowd for the hostess. Spotting his target it was almost like a blow to his stomach as he took a breath to steady himself. He half-heard Annie’s speech about alcohol and gave her a nod before venturing towards Penny. Not lost to the dismissal Annie pursed her lips before closing the attendance book with a snap.

“Wow,” said Jeff as he came up to the waitress. “That’s some costume.” He noted her eyes dilate as she took in his attire: straight cut jeans, cowboy boots, white button down shirt and Stetson hat. 'Score one for the cowboy look.'

“Black Canary,” she said as way of explanation. “A super-hero in the DC universe.” ‘I can’t believe I know that.'

“Remind me to pick up a comic book,” Jeff said with a smirk. “I see your friend Amy’s here.”

“Yup. She and Bernadette offered to help me set up and keep the peace.”

Jeff raised an eyebrow. “You mean the host isn’t here?”

“Sheldon’s at—well he’s out,” she said quickly. “The guys will be here later.”

“Looking forward to meeting him,” he said with a wink. Penny wasn’t sure how to take his statement.

“Remember: boy scout.”
“Even brought some cookies. They’re in my car.” He turned his head to see a short blond woman wearing a black body suit complete with a red devil’s tail and horns and flat shoes.

“Bernadette, this is Jeff,” Penny offered as a way of introduction. The microbiologist smiled.

“Nice to finally meet you,” she replied.

“I never dreamed I was a topic of conversation,” he said with a laid back smile that encapsulated his whole demeanor.

’He’s a right pretty fellow’, thought Bernadette. “Oh we wouldn’t dare.”

Penny rolled her eyes. At this point she wasn’t sure if she’d be better off with Amy talking to Jeff.

Speaking of the neurobiologist, Amy noted Pierce standing by himself looking out the window. Remembering the online book of hosting etiquette she knew never to let a guest feel isolated and so went to remedy the situation.

“Good evening Pierce.” He glanced at her before slipping on a smile—the attempt at deception didn’t get past Amy.

“Ah, hello again Amelia.”

“Amy,” she amended. “Penny told me you’re the head of Hawthorne Wipes. I use them at the lab and must compliment you on the product for its durability.”

“Lab?”

“I’ve a doctorate in neurobiology.”

“You have an impressive family what with your brother being a doctor, too.” Amy was puzzled.

“I don’t have a brother.”

Pierce smirked. “Don’t try that one with me. From what everyone said there are so many similarities between you and Dr. Cooper it isn’t funny.”

“I assure you we’re not siblings. In fact Sheldon and I are former companions.”

“Ah, yes, like you and Penny are ‘just friends’,“ he chuckled.

Amy raised an eyebrow. “Our relationship is platonic. Penny is my ‘bestie’.”

“Ah, so that’s what they call it nowadays,” he nodded. “Far be it for me to judge. Come, let’s get a drink and join the festivities. Jeff’s here.”

The bespectacled woman spotted the ex-lawyer chatting with Penny and applauded his fashion sensibilities.

“Work it baby,” she murmured to herself.

XxX

“Wasn’t that terrific?” said Leonard excitedly as he got in the back of the car carrying his little trophy. “Score one for the Shire.”
“You just capitalized on the movie hype,” Sheldon said sourly.

“Still we all got candy so it’s a win-win,” grinned Raj. He started the car.

“So you say,” huffed the theoretical physicist. “There are Junior Mints in the bag. What kind of person buys that?”

“Someone who likes the minty ‘ahh’,” Raj said defensively. Stuart and he had spent the previous evening making up the candy bags. Since the comic store owner was a little short on cash Raj picked up the majority of the candy hence it was no mistake his favorites made it into the bags.

“Now on to the main event.” Howard rubbed his hands.

“You make it sound like you’re not married,” tsked Raj as he drove.

“A little eye candy does the cardiovascular system good,” soothed the engineer. “Besides I got a glimpse of Bernie’s outfit and let’s just say it’s devilishly hot.”

“Devil and skeletal masks are quite common at Dia de los Meurtos celebrations with townsfolk dancing in colorful costumes,” said Sheldon. “In Guatemala the celebration is culminated with the construction and flying of gigantic kites. If Penny’s determined to host another such gathering next year we should convene in the park and fly kites. Now that would be entertaining.”

“Somehow I don’t think they kite fight.” Leonard stroked the edge of the cup with his thumb. This was going to sit next to his Bat-signal.

XxX

“I should have brought my jacket,” Penny murmured as she climbed the last of the stairs and opened the door to the roof. Sure enough she spotted Pierce sitting on a concrete slab looking out at the stars.

“Hey,” she said brightly.

“Hello Penny,” he replied with what she readily recognized as a bold waitress smile. “What brings you up here?”

“You.” Annie mentioned to Penny that Pierce had left the party but instead of going down he went upstairs. Knowing he’d had a couple of drinks the waitress wanted to make sure he was alright.

“Ah,” he said with a half-smile. “That’s nice. My fifth wife was always concerned with knowing where I was. Of course I later learned it was because she was having an affair with her tennis instructor.”

“Ouch.” Penny braced herself for the cold as she sat next to him.

“I envy you all. You’re all at a special point where you’re ready to seize life by the horns and create your own destinies.”

“Every day we’re alive we do that Pierce. Even you.” Here he gave a bitter laugh.

“Even me.” His eyes drifted over the city. “You know I thought I had it all founding a successful company. I had money and social status.” He turned to Penny. “But at the end of the day all I have are seven failed marriages and alienated step-children. I can’t have children of my own. The doctors say I have something like hyperactive sperm.”
“No kidding,” Penny said with a neutral tone. She’d never heard anything like that before. She’d ask Amy about it later. “Sometimes success isn’t measured by knowing other people. Sometimes it’s knowing in your heart and wanting to improve yourself where it counts.”

Pierce slapped his thighs. “ Exactly! That’s why I thought to come back to college. Expand my mind. Impart some wisdom.” Here a weird look came to his face. “I never expected to find a bunch of people to care about. Study group is about more than just Spanish, Penny. It’s about genuine communication. Before each session we catch up on each others’ lives, experiencing the highs and lows together. Offering encouragement and sympathy when needed.”

“We’re pretty special all right,” Penny said with a little smile as she patted his arm. She knew the older man was kind of odd but she never realized how lonely he was. “Why don’t we go back to the party?”

“Because I can’t handle any more reminders of what I’m going to lose.”

“That’s crazy talk, Pierce. You’re not going to lose us.”

He cleared his throat. “I’m the one who cheated.” Penny was stunned.

“What? Why?”

“I wasn’t doing so hot in class and knew if I didn’t pull up my bootstraps I’d fail and be left behind,” he said with a sigh. “I’ve been left behind too many times by people I’d cared about. I couldn’t do it again especially since this was supposed to be a fresh start.”

Penny rubbed her arms for warmth. “So what are you going to do?”

“What else? Confess on Friday and be removed from class.”

“I’m sorry, Pierce,” she said sympathetically.

“Don’t worry about me.” Here he smiled. “Isn’t it funny that I wanted you all to look up to me. To respect me. And here I go doing something like this. Crazy.”

“Come on,” she said gently as Penny hooked his arm in hers. “Let’s get back to the party.”

“You’ve got spunk, my dear. Seize the day.”

“Thanks,” she smiled. “Now let’s seize the night.”

XxX

“Time for some Latina heat,” grinned Howard as the guys mounted the stairs. “Look out world because Rajesh Koothrapalli is in the building.”

“It’s a wonder anyone in the building can hear what with the music blaring,” tsked Sheldon. “There must be three parties going on tonight. What happened to Halloween being for children?”

Leonard cocked his head as he thought about the four of them wearing costumes and attending a Halloween party at a comic book store. Best to say nothing.

“Hi,” said Annie as the group came through the door. “Sign in for attendance.” She indicated a notebook where the key bowl usually sat.

“Why should I sign in to my own apartment?” sniffed Sheldon. At once Annie furrowed her brows.
“Oh it’s you.”

“I see your reputation precedes you,” Howard quipped to the lanky man, who scowled in return. Leonard smiled at Annie as he herded Sheldon into the room.

“Be nice,” he warned. “Remember this is for Penny’s class.”

“I’m aware,” Sheldon replied tersely as he glanced around the room to ensure his protective measures were in place: the clear vinyl sheets covering the book shelves were untouched as were the combination locks on the kitchen cupboards. He’d already cleared his desk and removed his telescope and whiteboard. Penny had to do a lot of pleading for him to keep the DNA model in the living room but at her insistence she’d clean each piece by hand he acquiesced. “Let me make sure the banditos haven’t invaded my Fortress,” he said as he bee-lined for his room.

“Hi cutie,” said Bernadette as she sashayed over to her husband, her devil tail swinging from side to side. “Can I tempt you with a kiss?”

“Of course.” Lips met. “You make every day a living hell,” the engineer quipped. Bernadette and Raj both swatted him on the arm.

At once the Caped Crusader complete with video camera swooped over to the group.

“Ah, more of the Justice League,” Abed said approvingly to Raj in a very husky voice. The astrophysicist looked at Bernadette before he gave Abed a nod and pleasant smile.

“Abed, this is Raj and my husband, Howard,” Bernadette said as way of introduction.

“Captain,” nodded Abed as he noted the engineer’s Captain America costume. “I thought your film was better than Thor.”

At this Raj frowned but said nothing. Realizing this was going to be a long night without it, he knew he’d have to hit the six pack of wine coolers he had in the refrigerator. Before he excused himself Amy appeared at his side with two cups of punch in hand.

“Good evening Rajesh. Berry and vodka?” Gratefully the astrophysicist took the cup and drank.

“I’m glad you came,” he said happily. “I’m surprised you’re taking part.”

Amy adjusted the satin devil horns on her head. Aside from Penny’s naughty little headdress the neurobiologist wore her standard attire of wool, cotton and striped cardigan.

“Well it is Halloween,” she said with a little smile. “Things always get a little ca-razy.”

“Speaking of crazy, now that we’ve got you speaking let’s get you mingling,” Howard said to his best friend.

“Howard, most of these girls aren’t even twenty four years old,” Raj reminded him. The shorter man raised an eyebrow.

“You’re from a culture that arranges weddings with child-brides.” Raj blushed as he acknowledged the comment with a shrug-like nod.

“I think I’ll get another drink,” said Amy evenly, giving a half-hearted smile before disappearing towards the punch bowl.

“Now let’s get you introduced my belle of the ball,” grinned Howard as he led Raj away.
Bernadette caught the astrophysicist’s glance at Amy before submitting to his friend’s whim.

“Interesting,” Bernadette murmured to herself.

XxX

Sheldon’s Flash cowl hid his creased brow as he returned to the living room. His room was secure though the bathroom was a complete write off. Indeed someone had taken down his sign regarding rules of urination he had carefully laminated and placed over the toilet. Perhaps he should ask Pierce if the Hawthorne company could come out with a general cleaning cloth? At the very least the physicist wanted to meet the man responsible for a superior moist towelette although Sheldon did have a suggestion or two regarding improvement….

“Jeff!”

At the name Sheldon focused on the woman he knew to be Shirley as she ventured towards a man wearing a cowboy hat. He hadn’t met Jeff at the Open House and he wanted to know all the variables in Penny’s study group.

“Nice to see you got here,” said Jeff with a smile. Shirley rolled her eyes.

“Lord if you could see the amount of candy the boys got tonight I swear they’ll be hyper until Christmas.”

“Exciting times all round,” said the ex-lawyer with a cryptic smile as he turned towards the approaching man wearing a Flash costume. From Abed’s video he noted the physicist’s tall and lean stature and this guy fit the bill. Jeff also made note of his excitable nature, literalness and extremely limited grasp of social cues. “Sheldon I presume?”

“Good luck,” said Shirley with a smile. As both men met up she could feel their gazes as each scanned the other.

“You’re Jeff?” Sheldon clarified with what Jeff noted as a bit of a Texas twang.

“And you are?” asked Jeff innocently.

“Dr. Sheldon Cooper,” he replied with pursed lips. Here the ex-lawyer grinned.

“Ah, our host.”

“Indeed. Although right now I come to you in the capacity of Penny’s boyfriend.”

Jeff held up his hands. “Look I didn’t—”

“From what I learned you’re the leader of Penny’s Spanish study group. I’m sure you realize it’s a place for serious study not social chit-chat.”

“Of course,” Jeff said evenly. It took him just a flash to process the information but what he gleaned was significant: Penny never mentioned their ongoing flirting to her boyfriend or else Sheldon was the coolest cucumber he ever met. Judging from the way the physicist’s eyes flashed in irritation while discussing homework schedules and better procedures for conducting group business Jeff somehow doubted he’d keep it together if he knew about the ex-lawyer’s transgressions. Interesting. “Although it’s kind of nice to take a breather every once in a while. You know, shoot the breeze. Bond.”
“Another reason why emotions are a detriment to academia,” tsked Sheldon.

“Oh? You mean you don’t have a passion for your work?”

“Curiosity drives me.”

Jeff chuckled. “You see? We have something in common because curiosity is what brought me here tonight. I had to meet someone who likes comic book heroes, theoretical physics and Penny. It’s an odd combination.”

“I assure you they compliment each other,” Sheldon said tersely.

“I agree wholeheartedly,” said Jeff as he spotted Penny and Pierce entering the room. The waitress took one look at her boyfriend and the ex-lawyer and headed over. “We’d never have had Penny in a Black Canary costume without you.”

“Penny’s more than—”

“Hey you two!” Penny said enthusiastically as she put a hand on each man’s arm. “How are you *boy scouts* doing?” She stared meaningfully at Jeff.

“I thought Sheldon here was going to read me the riot act for stealing cookies but it turns out he didn’t even know I was taking orders,” Jeff said with a smirk.

“Why would I accuse you of stealing?” asked a puzzled Sheldon.

“He didn’t steal,” Penny said with color on her cheeks. “He mistakenly thought the cookies didn’t belong to anyone. Now that he knows I’m sure Jeff knows better than to eat another person’s cookies.”

Jeff’s jaw dropped in shock. “‘Eat’? You mean you actually thought about me eating the cookies? Wow.”

“Mmm mmm mmm mmm,” said Shirley with thin lips before she walked away. Being a baker and mother of two she knew damn well what went into making a good cookie and she knew at this moment there were too many cooks in the kitchen.

“Jeff—” warned Penny.

“As fascinating as a conversation about carbohydrates is I believe we’ve deviated from the point,” said Sheldon as he noted Penny’s face approached the codification for anger. His Conversation Log was going to get a workout tonight.

“Sheldon’s right,” said Jeff amiably. “Who cares who’s eating who’s cookies? The point is some people eat dinner for the dessert while in this instance—”

“I’m not hungry,” Penny growled.

At once Jeff looked serious. “Penny I was only—”

“I know. Sorry.” The waitress let out a breath of frustration before she took Sheldon’s hand and dragged the two of them into the hall and around the corner.

“Are you—” Before Sheldon could continue Penny’s arms encircled his neck and she kissed him hard. He loosened her hands and straightened. “You’re upset.” Penny sighed.
“No. It’s been a long day.” She gave her boyfriend a waitress smile. “I’m usually not thrown by sarcasm but between going to school, working and prepping for the party I’m wiped.”

“I’ll speak to Jeff.”

“No!” Sheldon’s eyebrow raised at her tone. “Just leave things alone. I’ll deal with him at school.”

“I won’t see you distressed,” he said firmly.

“Sweetie, I need you to focus on being a good host and not Mr. Chivalry.” She took his hands.

“I disagree.”

“Sheldon please.” Blue eyes met green.

“Alright then,” he said with a thin smile.

XxX

Bernadette pursed her lips as she spotted a nearly drunk Amy in the kitchen.

“Looks like someone’s gotten into the spirit of things,” she quipped. The neurobiologist grinned.

“Vinum! Mulieres! Carmen!” She downed her punch.

“That’s Latin.”

Amy shrugged. “Close enough at this point.”

Following her friend’s gaze Bernadette spotted Raj chatting with a blond woman in a bunny suit.

“Amy, have you talked to Raj?” In response Amy rolled her head to look at the short woman.

“We talk all the time. We’re friends don’cha know.”

“I think he likes you.”

Amy set her cup on the counter. “He’s grateful. Thanks to my handiwork he’ll soon be free to walk the earth and seduce his beauty.”

“Amy—”

“I think I have to use the ladies.” Amy thought for a moment. “Nope, I’m sure now.” She dashed off.

“Hey Am—” said Penny as the neurobiologist passed her and Sheldon in the hall.

“Not now Bestie, I have to urinate.”

“I’ll see you in a bit,” the waitress said to her boyfriend before she ventured off to get Pierce out of the corner and back into the group.

Realizing he was reaching his limit for socialization Sheldon sought out his roommate who was in a conversation with Bat-Man. As he approached the men the Caped Crusader turned and flitted down the hall.

“Great party,” Leonard said with a grin. It wasn’t at the level of unbridled mayhem his surprise
birthday party was—from his understanding since he spent the night at the hospital with Howard—but nevertheless it was more exciting than a university social.

“The noise ordinance bylaw comes into effect in seventeen minutes,” Sheldon replied as he noted the time on the dvd player. “I’m sure Mrs. Vartabetian will alert the police.”

“I don’t think so. Penny talked to people in the building about the party and promised it would end by one o’clock.”

“Good Lord,” Sheldon sighed as he realized he still had two hours and seventeen minutes to endure. “I think I’ll retire to my room.”

“Go ahead,” said Leonard. “Penny and I’ve got things out here and besides the crowd’s thinned out somewhat.”

“So I—” Sheldon stopped short as he spotted Jeff sitting with Shirley and Annie on the couch. First the cowboy wannabe stressed out his girlfriend then turned around and sat in his spot. Intolerable.

Leonard realized where his roommate was going and quickly followed.

“You’re in my spot,” Sheldon said to Jeff.

“Sheldon,” whined Leonard.

Jeff cocked his head. Since his teasing backfired he decided to lay low until he could apologize to Penny. Now this.

“I didn’t realize it had your name on it.” He could see the agitation rolling off the physicist.

“Well now you’re aware.” The two men stared at each other.

“Mmm mmm mmm mmm,” murmured Shirley while Annie sat stock still.

“Should I bother moving or is ‘your spot’ the apartment as a whole?” asked Jeff.

“No it’s where you’re sitting. Seriously,” said Leonard. “We’ll be sanitizing the couch tomorrow. Just leave it be,” he said to his roommate.

“This doesn’t concern you, Leonard,” Sheldon said curtly.

“Actually it doesn’t concern me either,” shrugged Jeff. “I’m not the first or the last to sit here tonight.”

“We’ll see about that,” the lanky physicist replied as his gloved hands unconsciously curled into fists.

“Well this is what happens when you leave something precious unattended,” Jeff said evenly.

“I’m here now,” Sheldon growled.

“Sheldon could you get me another drink?” asked Bernadette as the microbiologist appeared and tucked her arm through his. “We’re out of glasses so I need you to unlock the cupboard.”

“You’re the only one who knows all the combinations,” Leonard reminded him. Sheldon pursed his lips.
“After he gets out of my spot.”

“Remember your Southern Gentleman training,” Bernadette said in a stage whisper.

“I’m leaving,” said Jeff gently as he got off the couch. Immediately Sheldon grabbed the seat cushion and departed to the kitchen, ignoring the stares and whispers from a few of the guests. He spotted the stack of plastic cups and glared at Bernadette.

“I want a mug,” she said with a too wide grin.

Sheldon was annoyed as he unlocked the cupboard and handed her Leonard’s mug before securing the door. He heard a bunch of people laugh, Penny and Leonard included, and turned to see a gathering around Jeff.

“And that’s how they do it in the Shire, right?” Jeff said, causing another peal of laughter and a look to appear on Leonard’s face that was simultaneously proud and blushy.

The theoretical physicist observed the mixture of college kids and his friends seemingly surrounding Jeff like he was a proton. The ex-lawyer had Penny in stitches and she gave out a “Stop it” as she rested her hand on his arm. Sheldon flashed Jeff a look of death which the man seemed to sense as his eyes flickered to the physicist as he smiled. The lanky man readily came up with the facial acting codification for ‘asshole’ and could immediately hear his mother scolding him for his language.

Bernadette noticed the grip Sheldon’s fingers were giving the cushion.

“Sheldon—”

“I’m not a child,” he snapped at her before storming through a group of people and down the hall. As he approached his room he saw a light on under the door. Now beside himself he opened the door in a fury to find Bat-Man in his room taking pictures of his action figures.

“What are you doing in my room? No one can be in my room!”

Abed stood, unruffled by Sheldon’s ire. “Leonard said he had action figures in his room I could look at and I thought this was it. Sorry.” He turned in a flurry, sending his cape in a ruffle of fabric and departed.

Sheldon closed the door and scanned the room before determining that nothing was missing. He realized with a sigh that he’d have to clean his bedroom tomorrow. Feeling what? angry? weary? sulky? he sat on his bed in a huff and set the couch cushion to the side. He pulled back his mask and took out a Hawthorne wipe from his nightstand to mop his brow. He knew his dislike of Jeff was irrational. Granted Sheldon was annoyed at his upsetting Penny but that didn’t account for the level of animosity he felt. After all he wasn’t in competition with Jeff. Penny had made her choice. ‘Where in the world did that come from?’ He took a breath. As much as he wanted to throw Jeff out of the apartment he knew Penny would object. Sheldon laughed mirthlessly. For someone who grew up on a farm Penny sure didn’t know anything about putting two males in the same room. He knew that were he to step back into the living room there would be words, maybe even—

A knock at the door.

“What is this, Grand Central Station?” growled Sheldon.

The door opened and Abed stuck in his head. “I left my lens in here. Mind if I get it?”
Sheldon sighed and glanced at his shelf. “It’s on the second comic bin.”

“Cool.” Abed came in and closed the door before grabbing his lens. He made to leave but instead cocked his head. “The party’s out there. Why are you in here?”

“I require solitude.”

“Cool, cool. The Caped Crusader understands solitude.” A pause. “Jeff can be a lot to handle in a prolonged session.”

“Pardon me?”

“Jeff is like Steve Gutenberg in Police Academy: he charms his way into everyone’s heart and always gets the girl but there’s a kind of smugness that gets to you after a while. You’re more like Brent Spiner from Star Trek: you understand the protocol but are unsure how to proceed in real life situations.”

“I always associated myself with Spock,” Sheldon said evenly.

“Umm no. Spock is cool. He’s had more than one girlfriend.”

“I’ve had two,” the physicist said with a scowl.

Abed cocked his head. “You and Penny are so different it means you connect on a major level.” He nodded to the corner. “I’ve seen the formulas on your whiteboard. You’re like Lon Chaney in The Phantom of the Opera working in your own laboratory until Christine’s voice captured your soul.”

“You’ve obviously never heard Penny sing,” Sheldon said drolly.

The young man raised an eyebrow. “I’ll make a note.” Another quick pause. “You really shouldn’t be insecure about Penny.”

“Insecure?” Sheldon drawled. “Why should I feel threatened by a barely speaking Spanish cowboy wearing second rate boots? After all it’s not like he’s stated an interest in Penny.”

“Actually he did. The whole reason why we have a study group is that Jeff wanted to get into her pants.”

Sheldon turned and stared at his comic bins. “I see,” he said quietly.

Abed shrugged. “Penny takes it in stride. Very Pepper Potts.”

“Tony Stark got her in the end,” frowned Sheldon.

“Only because she wanted it. Penny doesn’t. It’s like Star Trek where all the women are attracted to Riker because he’s cool except for Tasha Yar who’s got a thing for Data. He might be socially awkward but he’s also a wonder to her because of his vast intellect and innocent nature. Of course it also helps that he’s fully functional.” Abed flashed a smile.

“We’ve yet to consummate our relationship. I’ve a germ aversion.”

“Ah. That’s why she knew about Hawthorne Wipes.” The young man cocked his head. “Funny. So what does that have to do with Penny?”

“She’s covered in them.”
“And? I saw you touching her earlier.”

“That’s different,” explained Sheldon. “I expect to be contaminated and have already planned an extensive post-party cleaning.”

Abed was confused. “And you’re not expecting to be contaminated while having sex?” The physicist didn’t know what to say. “Don’t be afraid of your emotion chip. You might feel things like anger and jealousy and fear but you also get love and contentment.”

“I’ve had friends betray me,” Sheldon said slowly. “If Penny pulls away now I can gather some semblance of myself. If I let things continue I will be inconsolable if she….” He couldn’t continue.

“‘Do or do not, there is no try’.”

“I’m—unsure.”

“Are you really? Because coming through the door you seemed angry enough to have an opinion,” Abed said evenly.

Sheldon looked at the young man. “I’m afraid.”

“And that is why you fail. You must unlearn what you have learned. A Jedi’s strength flows from the Force. But beware of the dark side: anger, fear, aggression. If once you start down the dark path, forever will it dominate your destiny, consume you it will.”

Sheldon took a moment to process before he nodded his head.

“Wise words, Abed.”

“I’m not Abed—I’m Bat-Man.” The student gave an awkward smile before disappearing out the door.

Penny was in the midst of conversing with Jeff and company when a leather-clad arm caught her around the waist. Surprised she turned to see Sheldon in his Eccleston Doctor Who outfit from ComicCon.

“You changed,” she said.

“We match,” he replied.

Penny smiled and gave him a kiss before turning back to the conversation. Sheldon’s other arm wrapped around her and she leaned back into his embrace. Jeff noticed the physicist’s stance and the two men locked eyes. Slowly Sheldon lowered his head without losing eye contact and kissed the top of Penny’s head.

XxX

Raj smiled to himself as he listened to an inebriated neurobiologist humming away as they drove. Throughout the night he’d noticed Amy getting chattier—and drunker—and decided he’d be the designated driver for once so she could have a good time.

As for himself the evening was enjoyable but he realized that he must be getting older because the young coeds didn’t do for him what they used to. Granted there’s always time for perky breasts but there was something more to be said for stimulating conversation and goofing around. A mix of intellectual curiosity and playfulness. He inwardly sighed. For the guy who’s had the most number
of sexual partners it didn’t seem fair that he’d be the only one left alone. Well, that’s not completely true. Amy was single although the astrophysicist knew it was only a matter of time before another Sheldonesque man came along and swept her away.

Amy started patting her thighs to a beat only she could hear. It took Raj most of the drive to realize she’d been humming a mix of Danse Macabre and Ghostbusters.

“Well here we are,” she said with a grin as they pulled in front of her building. She unhooked her seatbelt with deliberate slowness to ensure success. At the loosening of the belt she looked up and grinned, causing Raj to giggle.

‘Is this what I’m like when I’m drunk?’ “Amy,” he said with a smile.

“You’ve got nice brown eyes,” she said huskily. “They’re really expressive.”

At once Raj was out of the car and around to Amy’s side to open the door. She took his proffered hand and got out of the vehicle and together they made it into the building.

“I believe the event was a success,” Amy said happily as she let their still clasped hands swing. Raj nodded his head and smiled. “Bestie really looked hot. I mean smo-ken.” The elevator opened and they got in. “It’s obvious why Sheldon fell for her. Just delicious.”

“Amy,” Raj said in a sympathetic tone as he squeezed her hand.

“No, no, not feeling sorry for myself,” she said with a smirk. “I’m a butterfly too don’cha know.” They exited the elevator and made their way around the corner to her apartment. “‘Who ya gonna call?’” Amy sang to herself as she unlocked the door. She stepped into the room and turned on the light. “‘I’ve some Yoohoo in the fridge. Help yourself.”

Realizing she didn’t hear the door close she turned to find Raj standing at the apartment’s threshold. “Not coming in?” He shook his head as he indicated a ‘watch’ motion on his wrist.

“Ah.” She ambled her way over. “Well I want to thank you for driving me home.” Raj smiled. “Although it’s of the comic book genre I must say I like your Green Lantern costume. Of course after seeing you in spandex I can say you really don’t need the polyurethane abs.”

“Amy,” blushed the astrophysicist.

“Just sayin’ it cutie,” Amy winked. “Of course you don’t speak so maybe I’ll just ‘say’ it in a way you understand.”

Her arms wrapped around his neck as she planted a kiss on his lips. Finding her footing she dragged him back until the door had room to close. Suddenly she was thrust forward against him as Raj leaned against the door.

What started as the pressing of lips became something so much more. More than Amy Farrah Fowler ever experienced. Ever dreamed really as even her imagination was curbed by a cutting voice of ‘as if that’d happen to me’. Up to this point the only man of no relation she’d kissed was Sheldon and it sure didn’t feel like this. Oh, the desire was genuine but there was no curling of the toes and an inherent desire to stick her tongue in his mouth as she did right now with Raj.

“Rajesh, make me a woman,” she hissed before closing the gap for another kiss.

At once the magnitude of what he was doing and who he was doing it with slapped the astrophysicist in the face.
“No,” he said firmly as he straightened.

Amy pulled back as she realized what she’d said and the finality of her friend’s answer.

“No, of course not,” she stammered as she turned away. “As if you’d be interested in me after bedding Penny. I’m sor—”

“Wedoitright.”

Amy turned back, stunned. “Rajesh….”

His eyes were serious and he did his best to speak but to no avail. Unfazed, he stepped close and caressed her cheek with his gloved hand. “Amy.”

“I have a little wine in the refrigerator,” Amy offered. Raj shook his head.

“We do it right,” she said to him with a smile.

Lips met.

xTBBTx

Wikipedia: Facial Acting Coding System

Abed’s Yoda Lines: Empire Strikes Back

Vinum! Mulieres! Carmen!: Wine! Women! Song!
“D-Day,” Jeff said to Penny as they walked into class. “Time to see if the culprit mans up.”

“I’m sure he’ll do the right thing,” Penny replied as her eyes took in a pale Pierce sitting at his desk. He looked so incredibly sad it broke her heart.

“The cheater better,” said Shirley as she watched the pair settle into their seats. “I need this credit if I’m going to continue in my business program next semester.”

“If things don’t go so well I’ll set up a meeting with Dean Pelton.” Jeff sat back and prepared for the show as Señor Chang entered the room with a look of malevolent joy.

“Just to let you know I received no letters of guilt under my door,” the teacher said. “Take a look around the room. Go on, look!” The class complied, each student looking at his or her classmate with apprehension. “Notice attendance is perfect. That means the cheater is here!”

Penny could see the fearful expression on Pierce’s face. The older man caught her eyes and pinched his lips in a tight smile.

Señor Chang crossed his arms in front of his chest. “Ten seconds to zero.”

As the seconds ticked by Penny could feel her heart beat faster. She made her glance at Pierce seem casual and could see the man was not well. He looked positively ancient.

Pierce cleared his throat, causing every eye in the class to fall upon his person. Penny recognized his look of defeat as coming from deeper within. Cheating on a Spanish test was the last straw on the camel’s back and Pierce was about to succumb to a fall she didn’t think he could take.

“Yes?” Señor Chang said expectantly.

“I did it.”

It took Penny a moment to realize the words came from her mouth.

“No,” Shirley gasped. Jeff’s jaw dropped.

“Pack your things missy and be gone from our sight!” the teacher said harshly. Blushing, Penny picked up her books and backpack and had barely made it past the door before he slammed it shut. “Basura.” He clapped his hands once. “So,” he said in a pleasant voice as he crossed over to his desk. “Turn to page sixty two.”

Jeff found a dejected Penny sitting on a bench in the quad looking into space. He plunked himself down beside her and paused a moment until she acknowledged his presence.

“You know I’m not adverse to a little deception from time to time but I seem to recall someone telling me that this was her chance to turn her life around,” he said slowly.

“I know,” she said quietly. Jeff narrowed his eyes as he measured her reaction.
“I actually believed that.”

Penny sighed. “Jeff, I….” ’Didn’t cheat.’

“‘I’?”

She shook her head as she pulled out a letter with the Pasadena City College logo at the top.

“I got called into the Dean’s office.”

“Yeah, I heard your name over the loudspeaker. So what did Pelton say?” Jeff asked gently.

“They’re going to have a disciplinary tribunal on Monday at two in the Portshore Hall.”

Jeff frowned in puzzlement. “That’s where the pool is.”

Penny glanced over the letter. “It’s Portshore Hall. Maybe they have a room there or something.” She slumped against the bench. “They’re going to expel me.”

“They need to convict you first,” said Jeff as he took the paper and began to read. With a smile he looked up. “It says here you’re allowed council. Fortunately for you, you know a lawyer.”

“Ex-lawyer,” Penny reminded him

“Through extenuating circumstances not because of my practice. Don’t worry, I can get you off.” She gave Jeff an incredulous smirk.

“Seriously Jeff? A sex joke?”

“What joke?” he asked, raising his eyebrow in confusion although his eyes sparkled.

The waitress clapped a hand to her forehead. “I am such an idiot.”

“We’ll get through this,” Jeff said seriously. Penny nodded her head although her eyes were on the ground. “Penny.” She looked up. “Trust me. I’m good.”

“I can’t pay you,” she said before a weak smile came to her face. “God now this is sounding like a cheap porno.”

XxX

“How’s it going?” asked Leonard as he looked at his roommate’s handiwork.

“Satisfactory.” Sheldon took up a wall piece from the Star Trek transporter pad and wiped it with a cloth in preparation for glue. “Three more pieces and we’ll be able to ‘energize’ with the best of them.”

The shorter man grabbed his bottled water and flopped into his stuffed chair. “It’s kind of funny how mainstream media works. Once we announced the finding of the Higgs boson they’ve been wondering what we can do with it. NBC suggested it could one day lead to transporter technology.” Sheldon snorted.

“Only if we heat up the Higgs field billions and billions of degrees—of course everything in the vicinity would be burnt to a crisp.”

“Then there’s that other question: how do you bring back into matter what you transformed into
energy?” Leonard checked his watch. There was still fourteen minutes left until ‘The Tick’ came on. Normally he’d switch the television to one of the Galaxy music channels until it was time for his program but after having the unfortunate incident when the world music channel featured a whistling act he decided against causing any potential turmoil. Sheldon was in a good mood and there was no way Leonard wanted to disrupt him.

“Odd,” said Sheldon as he cocked his head.

“What?”

“Penny’s home. She has her Spanish study group tonight.”

Leonard strained his ears until he picked up the sounds of footsteps in the stairwell and the jangling of keys. The sounds stopped in front of their door which, after a moment, opened.

“Hey,” said Penny. Leonard raised an inquisitive eyebrow. She sounded ‘off’.

“How are you?” he asked. He caught her eyes and could see she was distressed.

“Ah well, you know,” she said with a waitress smile.

“Actually we don’t,” Sheldon said as he put the transporter wall into place and held. “You’re home several hours early and you don’t appear to be ill. Study Group cancelled?”

Penny adjusted her backpack on her shoulder. “No. There’s no point in going to it anymore.”

“Agreed. You can get more accurate help at home.”

“I’m out of Spanish.”

Sheldon glanced at his girlfriend. “After subjecting my home to complete contamination for extra credit? Penny,” he tutted.


“‘Fail’,” tsked Sheldon. “Really, Leonard.” Slowly he removed his fingers. The wall held.

Penny closed her eyes and swallowed. This was really going to hurt.

“I was kicked out,” she said quietly.


“Because I”—here she paused as her eyes got caught up in the brilliant blue gaze of her boyfriend —“said I cheated.” She looked away, embarrassed.

“Why would you do a thing like that?” Sheldon sputtered.

“I don’t know,” she sighed.

“Your marks were adequate given what little time you had to ‘catch up’.”

“Sheldon—”

His eyes narrowed. “You said you’d come to me if you needed assistance.”

“And I did—”
“Obviously not,” he said as he wiped his fingers with a cloth. “Otherwise you wouldn’t have felt the need to cheat.”

“I didn’t cheat, ok?” Penny snapped.

“Ok, back up here,” said Leonard calmly. “Want to run that by us again? You admitted to cheating even though you didn’t?”

“Yes.”

“Are you insane?” Sheldon said excitedly. “Why would you do such a thing?”

“Señor Chang threatened to fail the entire class if the cheater didn’t come forward,” Penny shot back.

“Which could be easily overturned at the administrative level. When I first started I’d have loved to fail my students outright and get back to my work but I couldn’t without ‘valid reasons’ to substantiate the mark.” Sheldon stood up. “I don’t see why you feel the need to martyr yourself.”

“It’s complicated,” the waitress mumbled.

“I think I can handle it,” Sheldon said crisply.

Again Penny sighed. “Look, I found out who cheated and knew they’d never be able to live it down so I thought ‘what the hell’ and took the fall. I’ve got a disciplinary tribunal on Monday. Jeff’s offered to represent me and—”

“How did I guess he’d be involved,” Sheldon spat.

“He didn’t cheat.”

“Indeed.”

“Sheldon, this is the last thing I need right now,” said Penny with a frown.

“What you ‘need’ is to go to the Dean on Monday and retract your confession, give up the guilty party and resume your class.”

“I can’t do that. Besides Jeff says he can get me off and—”

“I won’t have you jeopardizing your future,” Sheldon said hotly.

“So I start again,” she spat back. “It’s not like I’ve come oh so far up the ladder.”

Sheldon was beside himself. “You don’t get it do you? Academic dishonesty is attached to your personal record which is available to any other potential school. Once they see you got expelled for cheating they won’t take you.”

Penny looked to Leonard for confirmation.

“Most likely won’t take you,” he amended to soften the blow.

“I’ll go with you on Monday to get things settled,” said Sheldon. Penny pursed her lips.

“I don’t need you holding my hand.”
“Obviously some kind of guidance is in order given your propensity for self-harm.”

“Don’t call me stupid,” she growled.

“You’re misguided. There’s a difference.”

“Whatever, Sheldon.” Penny exited and closed the door behind her before crossing the hall. Quickly she entered her apartment and dropped her schoolbag in front of her shelving unit and made her way to the bedroom. The last thing she needed was to be hounded by Sheldon’s knocks.

XxX

“She’s probably asleep and left the tv on,” said Leonard as his pajama and housecoat clad roommate grabbed Penny’s spare key from the bowl.

“It’s late and she has an early shift tomorrow,” Sheldon replied. “I have to make sure one bad decision doesn’t compound into two.”

“Ok. ‘Night.” Leonard took his glass of water and shuffled to his bedroom.

Sheldon crossed the hall to Penny’s door.

Knock Knock Knock “Penny,” he called softly.

Knock Knock Knock “Penny.”

Knock Knock Knock “Penny.”

Hearing no response he inserted the key into the lock.

“I’m coming in,” he said and opened the door.

Immediately he took in the scene and his jaw locked. Quietly he closed the door and stepped to the couch where a housecoat clad Penny slept surrounded by a host of crumpled Kleenexes. Spotting the box, Sheldon pulled out a tissue to protect his hand and carefully collected the dirty ones and deposited them in the garbage by the door.

After washing up in the bathroom he set her alarm clock and took up her comforter, bringing the blanket to the couch and gently lay it across Penny’s sleeping form. He shut off the television and took her mug from the coffee table and gave it a rinse before setting it in the sink. On his way out he grabbed the wine bottle off the table before turning off the lights and locking the door.

Once secure in his own apartment Sheldon poured out the remnants of wine and rinsed the bottle before inserting the cork and placing it in the recycling box.

He turned off the light and went to bed.

xTBBTx

“Hello Sheldon. This is a surprise.”

“Hello Amy.”

“Your tone suggests you’re unhappy. Care to share the load?”

“I assume you’ve heard from Penny.”
“Yes. Quite the pickle she’s gotten herself into. I told her I concurred with your suggestion to address the Dean and rectify the situation.”

“I don’t know what got into her.”

“Empathy. Apparently the culprit confessed to her and she feels compelled to protect him.”

“‘Him’?”

“Unnamed suspect although she did use the male pronoun repeatedly.”

“It must be someone from her study group.”

“Any suspects?”

“As Jeff assembled the group he’d be the likely candidate although Penny adamantly asserts it isn’t him.”

“I concur. Jeff might be conniving but I doubt he’d let Penny take the fall for him.”

“Given his interest in her.”

“You’re aware.”

“I was informed at the Halloween social. Had Penny said anything to you?”

“She’s mentioned Jeff in passing. Believe me you’ve got nothing to worry about.”

“Agreed. ... Amy, I’m not sure what to do if Penny’s expelled.”

“Explain.”

“Going back to school is part of the plan for her returning to California. Without an academic outlet she’ll be reduced to menial jobs for the foreseeable future. Such an outlook will most certainly impact her self esteem leading to destructive social behavior.”

“Has she harmed herself in the past?”

“Not in so dramatic a fashion. Before you met her she was an extreme extrovert. Her apartment was a revolving door of strange men and she kept even stranger hours.”

“Sounds like an attempt to mask feelings of worthlessness.”

“I won’t tolerate a return to a wanton lifestyle.”

“Sheldon, no one’s asking you— ... Rajesh is here.”

“Have a good evening.”

“You’ve forgotten Penny has one thing now that she didn’t have then—you. Goodnight Sheldon.”

xTBBTx

“So when Dean Pelton says anything about you cheating you....” Jeff took a sip of coffee.

“Deny, deny, deny,” sighed Penny. “I can’t believe what a big deal this is.”
“Academic honesty is its own virtue. Even at Pasadena City College, apparently.”

Penny chuckled. “And as we know Jeff Winger follows the rules to the letter.”

“And who’s on trial here?” Jeff grinned. “I’m sure they have pots and kettles in Nebraska.”

“Yeah, yeah.” Penny took a sip of coffee before leaning back on the couch. “I noticed you never asked if I was guilty.”

Jeff shrugged. “Irrelevant to the case. My job’s to get you acquitted. I never let anything like guilt or innocence direct my defense.”

A little smile crossed Penny’s mouth. “Thank you for doing this.”

“All part of my master plan,” he said with a smirk causing Penny to roll her eyes. “Actually I figure I owe you one from Halloween.” His eyes turned serious. “I shouldn’t have teased you in front of your boyfriend. That was childish and insensitive. I’m sorry.”

“It’s ok. I know what I’m getting when you’re around. I was just overwhelmed with work, school and the party.” She gave a crooked smile. “Well at least if I’m expelled I’ll have gone out on a high note on the social calendar.”

“Positive thinking.” Jeff cocked his head with a smirk. “Just do what you do when someone asks if you have feelings for me.”

“Deny, deny, deny,” Penny laughed.

Jeff smiled into his cup before taking a sip. It had taken him over an hour but he got what he wanted to hear—Penny laugh. From the moment he stepped in the door she was so apprehensive he had to calm her down before he could go over the proceedings. Slowly but surely the Penny he’d come to like had resurfaced.

In his day Jeff was a damn good lawyer whose cases were a lot more complex than this one.

He realized as he took in Penny’s dark circles under her green eyes that he’d never had a case more important.

XxX

“Lift your drink,” said Sheldon curtly.

Sighing, the curly haired physicist complied so his roommate could wipe the coffee table with an antibacterial cloth. Ever since Jeff arrived Sheldon had begun to clean the apartment even though the living room had been done the day before.

“Sheldon, I’ve already dusted. Remember I had to ask you to do the upper shelves of the bookcase for me?”

“Then why am I finding dust particulates in the air and on my cloth?”

Leonard shifted in his chair and clicked on the closed captioning for his program. “Probably because you’re anal retentive and could find fault even if you lived in a Petrie dish.”

A twitch crossed Sheldon’s face. “All I ask is you clean with a better sense of professionalism than you do your job.”
“Remind me why I drive you to work?” Leonard asked absently while reading the captioning.

Sheldon rolled his eyes. “It’s in the Roommate Agreement. Good Lord it’s not that complex a document.” He walked behind the couch and began straightening the throw blanket. “Much like Penny’s case. Simple.” He adjusted the corners of the blanket. “Take no time at all to go over the details.” Made sure it hung precisely ten inches over the back of the couch.

Leonard knew where this was going. “Sheldon, everything’s fine.”

“Then why is it taking so long?” the lanky man snapped. “Jeff has to submit a recanting of Penny’s guilt not reopen the Constitution.”

“I’m sure they’re going over everything with a fine tooth comb.” Sheldon snorted.

“Have you seen his hair? I doubt a comb’s run through it in years. I don’t know what I was thinking leaving all of this to an ex-lawyer whose idea of higher education is a community college degree,” he said as he tossed out the wipe and proceeded to cleanse his hands with sanitizer.

“Probably something like: ‘Staying out of this will keep me in Penny’s good books’, ” mumbled Leonard, garnering him a glare.

“I’ll check in on them to make sure they’re focused,” said Sheldon as he took a piece of paper off his desk and made for the door.

“Mistake,” said Leonard.

“No, a mistake would be assuming a job’s been done because it’s important. Certainty is best.”

As Sheldon entered the hall he could hear laughter from Penny’s apartment. Frowning, the physicist stood in front of her door and listened as Jeff made a comment about Dean Pelton followed by more laughter.

Knock Knock Knock “Penny.”

Knock Knock Knock “Penny.”

Knock Knock Knock “Penny.”

Inside the apartment Jeff looked at Penny with a bemused smile.

“Door’s open Sheldon,” said the waitress. Her boyfriend entered and immediately she took in his pursed lips as he stared at Jeff sitting in his spot on the couch. “What’s up?”

“Oh, not much,” he replied as he folded his arms across his chest. “I’m hoping the same can’t be said in here.”

“I think we’ve gone over everything,” Jeff said calmly.

“You ‘think’. Somehow I’m not comforted by that notion.”

“Sheldon, be nice,” Penny said stiffly. “Jeff’s gone over what to expect on Monday and what I should say.”

“I took the liberty of writing Penny’s formal retraction which you may peruse,” he said as he handed Jeff the paper.
“Thanks,” the ex-lawyer said as he set the paper down on the table without looking at it, causing Sheldon’s eye to twitch. “But the tribunal will get the gist of Penny’s innocence at the hearing.”

“I don’t understand,” frowned Sheldon. “Why would the hearing continue if Penny admits her confession was a lie and gives up the name of the true offender?”

Jeff turned to Penny. “You know who cheated?”

“Kinda,” Penny said before turning to her boyfriend. “Look everything’s fine. Just give—”

“Penny, he’s supposed to be your ‘learned council’ and he doesn’t even know the name of the culprit? What have you been doing in here besides indulging in chit-chat?” Sheldon said icily.

“We’ve been going over the case,” Penny growled as she got off the couch. “I don’t need you looking over my shoulder every two seconds.”

“I just want you to be aware of the magnitude of—”

“I’m aware! I know I messed up! Just trust me on this ok?” She stepped up to the physicist. Sheldon’s mouth twitched. “I’d be more comfortable if I were your council.”

“Sheldon, I’ve looked over the procedures and bylaws,” said Jeff smoothly. “Trust me, I’ll get Penny off.”

“You’d better.” Both men locked eyes.

“If you’re done measuring each other’s dicks I’d like to get back to business,” said Penny. “I’ll see you later, Sheldon.” She stepped into his line of sight. “Later.”

“I’d like to stay.”

“You can’t.”

With a last glare at the ex-lawyer Sheldon exited and returned to his apartment.

“That wasn’t so bad,” he said as he closed the door. “I made sure the two of them were on track.” He crossed the living room and ventured down the hall. “Now that that’s settled I can continue with my day.” He entered his room and closed the door.

“Mistake,” Leonard said softly as he watched his program.

“So what if Penny and Jeff laugh while talking over her testimony for her hearing,” Sheldon said to himself as he sat on his bed and regarded his shelving unit. “I’m sure they understand the direness of the situation and the consequences.” He got up and adjusted the angle of the Star Trek transporter that sat next to his Flash figurine. “The case isn’t complicated, even for an ex-lawyer.” He turned the transporter to the other side. “Penny will be fine.”

In one motion Sheldon picked up the transporter and smashed it against his far wall.

Leave Penny’s future to Jeff Winger.

Like hell.

xTBBTx
“Let’s convene with the tribunal,” said Dean Pelton as he banged his gavel on the impressive looking table complete with three microphones. “For the record the tribunal consists of myself—Dean Pelton, Professor Duncan and Señor Chang.”

“Once again I object to Señor Chang’s place on the tribunal,” said Jeff as he adjusted the sleeve on his Armani suit.

“Isn’t Duncan your drinking buddy?” Chang retorted.

“Gentlemen,” the Dean said smoothly. “If we could keep to the case at hand. I’d—oh hello.”

As one the group turned to see Sheldon approach wearing his purple plaid suit and carrying a briefcase.

“What the hell?” gasped Señor Chang.

“Gentlemen, forgive my tardiness. I had to get directions to our—chambers,” Sheldon said as he stepped carefully on the tile walkway so as to avoid the wetness from the pool water. At first he thought he’d been pranked by the secretary when she said the Dean was in the Portshore Hall and he saw that it was a swimming pool but after assurances at the administration desk that the Dean was, in fact, in the building Sheldon ventured into the swimming area and spotted Penny and company.

“And you are?” asked the Dean politely.

“Dr. Sheldon Cooper. Penny’s co-council,” he replied as he placed his briefcase on the defendant’s table.

“She can’t have two representatives,” Señor Chang said.

“Actually from what I read in the school bylaw on the way over here it makes no mention of the number of council a defendant can employ,” corrected Sheldon. Penny looked to Jeff.

“He’s right,” said the ex-lawyer. “Can we have a minute?” he asked the Dean.

“Sorry, we’ve already commenced. The case begins with the testimony of Señor Chang,” As the man got up to go to the witness chair Sheldon stood up.

“Objection. How can a judge be the accusatory witness?”

“Already been over that,” replied Jeff. “No dice.”

“But this is prejudicial. How’s Penny supposed to get a fair hearing?” Sheldon sputtered.

“Ahem. I assure you Dr. Cooper while there is bias on either side I’m impartial,” said the Dean calmly. “Señor Chang, you may proceed.”

The Spanish teacher cleared his throat. “It was a typical day. I got up at six thirty, had a shower and then made breakfast. I had two waffles—”

“Sheldon, what are you doing here?” Penny whispered as her boyfriend sat down beside her.

“Aiding in your defense,” he whispered back.

“I don’t need your help.”
“I disagree. Now let me listen to the testimony.”

Penny looked over to Jeff only to see the man doodling a picture of a dog peeing on a car tire. She closed her eyes and sat back in her chair. ‘This can’t be happening….’ As time ticked by and Señor Chang kept talking she thought briefly about recanting her confession but knew she couldn’t rat out Pierce. She was stuck and had to rely on Jeff and Sheldon to get her unstuck.

“—then I sent her from the room and continued my class,” concluded the Spanish teacher.

“Questions?” asked the Dean. Jeff shook his head.

“You said you had two waffles for breakfast. Did you butter them?” Sheldon asked Señor Chang.

“Margarine actually,” the teacher replied.

“I see. What’s your brand?”

“I don’t have one. I just choose whatever’s on sale.”

“What are you using right now?”

“…I don’t know.”

Sheldon shook his head. “And yet we’re to assume your recall is correct a few hours later.”

“What does what I eat have to do with anything?” Señor Chang blasted.

“You offered your morning routine into evidence so therefore it must be relevant to the case at hand,” the physicist said evenly.

“Need I remind co-council that the witness is also a judge?” Jeff said as he sketched a brick wall.

“Given that his ability to recall is suspect it’s a wonder he’s been tapped to do two things at once,” Sheldon said with a shake of the head as he sat down. At this Professor Duncan chuckled.

“If that’s all from the accusatory I’d like to call Dr. Sheldon Cooper to the stand,” said Jeff calmly. Though a little surprised Sheldon complied and took a seat.

Jeff dropped his pen and stood up.

“For the record could you state your occupation?”

“I’m a senior particle physicist at Caltech.”

“And how long have you known Penny?”

“Five years, six months, five days,” Sheldon said matter-of-factly. Jeff made to stand in front of the defense table.

“And yet you only began dating her recently,” he stated.

“Four months, twenty six days.”

“Why the wait?”

“I hadn’t realized until recently that our paradigm had shifted,” replied Sheldon.
“It took you over five years to realize that Penny is a remarkable woman?” said Jeff in mock surprise.

Sheldon frowned. “We wouldn’t have been friends if she wasn’t.”

“So your relationship is conditional.”

“It’s secure.”

Jeff narrowed his eyes. “Do you love her?”

A pause. “I care for her deeply.”

“Sounds like some wriggle room there,” Jeff said with a smirk.

The Dean shook his head. “I fail to see the relevance.”

“Goes to state of mind,” said Jeff as he casually crossed his arms.

“Mine or yours?” growled Sheldon.

“I’m going to treat the witness as hostile,” said Jeff.

“But he’s your witness,” said a confused Professor Duncan.

“Dr. Cooper,” said Jeff as he began to pace. “Do you consider Penny to be an honest person?”

Sheldon paused as he thought about the WiFi situation. “For the most part.”

“Sounds like guilt to me,” snorted Señor Chang.

“Penny is straightforward,” Sheldon retorted crisply.

Professor Duncan leaned forward in his chair. “But you do know of times when she’s been dishonest.”

“Objection,” countered Jeff. “We all have times when we’ve been more than a little dishonest. For instance,” he turned back to Sheldon. “Since you started your relationship have you ever lied to Penny?”

“No,” the physicist said adamantly.

“Have you omitted things?”

“Jeff….” warned Penny.

The ex-lawyer stopped pacing. “When Penny told you she didn’t cheat did you believe her?”

“Yes,” Sheldon said firmly.

“Have you ever cheated?”

“Jeff!” snapped the waitress.

“No. In either connotation,” Sheldon said with a glare.

Jeff stood calmly in thought as he regarded the lanky man who sat with hands balled into fists. “I
call Penny to the stand.” He waited as Sheldon and she traded places. “Penny, did you write and use that crib sheet?”

“No,” she said firmly.

“But she confessed,” hissed Señor Chang.

The ex-lawyer turned accusingly at his Spanish teacher. “Because you threatened to fail everyone in the class if someone didn’t come forward.”

“You didn’t!” gasped the Dean. Señor Chang shrugged dismissively. The Dean raised his hands in a placating manner and took a breath. “So her confession, which she’s now recanted by the way, comes as a result of coercion?” He shook his head. “I’m afraid I’m going to have to rule—”

“Well someone wrote that crib sheet,” growled Señor Chang. He narrowed his eyes at Penny. “Do you know who?” The waitress looked away. “I said do you know?”

“Objection!” said Jeff even as Sheldon stood up with an “Irrelevant!”

“Penny,” said the Dean gently. “We here at Pasadena City College are models of integrity. Let me remind you that you’re under the oath.”

“Objection. No one recited an oath,” protested Sheldon. The Dean rolled his eyes.

“I meant she was under the oath.” They all looked up to see the school crest and motto. “This school may not be Caltech but it is a place of higher learning and as such deserves to be respected.”

Sheldon snorted. “We’re convening in a swimming hall.”

“Olympic-sized swimming hall,” amended the Dean as he straightened in his seat.

“Oh yes much better. And while we’re at it let’s discuss budgetary issues in spin class and hold board meetings between pilates participants,” the physicist said drolly.

Jeff cleared his throat. “Strike co-counsel’s comment from the record. Obviously his Aspergers has impeded his ability to refrain from inappropriate commentary.”

“Jeff!” Penny said angrily.

“My comments on this ‘institution’ are based on our current predicament,” Sheldon said curtly. “As for your unsolicited diagnosis I suggest you keep your opinions to misapplying the law.”

“As a psychologist I can diagnose your condition, Dr. Cooper,” said Professor Duncan. “Granted it’d take a few sessions to determine but based on your verbosity and social awkwardness I’d say the chances—”

“I did it,” Penny said in a rush.

The Dean turned to the waitress. “Hmm?”

“I cheated.”

Jeff’s gaze nearly bore a hole into Penny. “My client did not cheat.”

“Yes I did,” she said defiantly.
“Penny, while your attempt to deflect the conversation is commendable like your willingness to take the fall for a fellow classmate now is not the time to do so,” Sheldon said sternly.

“Yes, back to the case at hand,” said Dean Pelton. “As long as she comes forward with the name of the student I think we can wrap this up.” All eyes were upon Penny.

“It was me,” she said simply.

Jeff clapped his hands once. “Sounds like a good time for a recess.”

“We don’t have recesses at a tribunal,” replied the Dean.

“I’m hoping in this case you’ll make an exception. Obviously my client’s cracking under pressure and is saying whatever she thinks people want to hear.” He smiled at the waitress. “Dinner at my place?” Penny rolled her eyes.

“Objection!” said Sheldon with a heavy twang. “Co-council is courting my girlfriend.”

“Dean, Penny’s silence may be an indication that she knows the guilty party,” Jeff said slowly. “Can you at least give me five minutes to see if I can get it out of her or at least make her see reason before she tanks her future?”

The Dean nodded. “Five minutes.”

At once Jeff stepped forward and took Penny’s arm, leading the waitress to the female locker room. After ushering her inside he turned to Sheldon and blocked the entrance.

“She’s my client,” he said brusquely.

“She’s my girlfriend,” Sheldon replied equally as blunt.

“Look, you might be a kick-ass physicist but I’m a lawyer. Was a lawyer. If you want to stoke your ego keep it up but if you truly want what’s best for Penny you’ll let me do my job.”

Sheldon took a moment to think before he gave a curt nod. Jeff entered the change room.

“What are you doing in there?” he asked a pacing Penny.

“What am I doing in there? What are you doing cross examining Sheldon? And you’re still hitting on me in front of him. What the hell, Jeff?”

He was stunned. “Penny, I made the dinner joke because you were committing suicide and I needed you to snap out of it.”

“And what about Sheldon?”

“He was killing my case and I needed him to shut up for a minute. Although it’s interesting that he denied his condition.” Penny made to speak. “I know, ‘shut up Jeff’. Let’s just cut to the chase here. At this point I don’t give a crap whether you give me the name of the cheater or not. What I need you to know is that I think you’re cool. You’ve taken my volleys and slammed them right back at me. You’re fun. And sassy.” Here he shrugged. “I just needed to see for myself that Sheldon knows how lucky he is to have you.”

“Huh.”

“What’s huh? He knows, Penny.”
The waitress sighed. “Even though I know better there’s still a part of me that can’t get over the fact that he likes me. When we met I made it sound like I was a hot-shot aspiring actress but let’s face it I was a college drop out turned waitress who spent her time drinking and partying. I kept dreaming about caviar life when I couldn’t afford to pay rent. All of my good friends are successes while I spent my time screwing up.” She smiled wryly. “Obviously I’m still screwing up or we wouldn’t be here.”

“You don’t owe Pierce anything,” Jeff said seriously. Penny’s eyes widened.

“How did you know?”

“I might not have a degree but that doesn’t mean I’m not good at what I do and what I do is read people. The last time you had contact with the group was Halloween and Pierce’s demeanor was less dynamic than normal.”

“He just wants to be looked up to and liked.”

“So what does this have to do with you?” asked a puzzled Jeff.

Penny’s eyes took in her feet as she spoke. “He talked to me because he felt like he could and it made him feel less worthless and believe me I know what worthless feels like. I couldn’t let him take the fall, Jeff, because I don’t think he’d survive the landing.” She shrugged. “Every instinct I have seems to put me further down the shitter but at the same time I couldn’t imagine myself not doing what I do.”

“Time’s up,” Sheldon said evenly as he rounded the corner. He held out his hand and Penny stood and took it.

“I can’t sell him out,” she warned Jeff.

“Trust me I don’t need him,” he replied.

They returned to the table and Penny smiled shyly at Sheldon while Jeff took his position in front.

“Gentlemen,” he said in a clear voice. “My client admits to knowing who the cheater is but refuses to name him or her.”

“You made her aware of the consequences?” warned the Dean.

“I have. And she made me aware of a few things too. Even though by admitting to the crime she faces expulsion she still took it upon herself to protect a fellow classmate. Why? She’s got nothing to lose because she thinks she’s a loser.” Here Penny’s jaw dropped.

“Objection!” she cried and turned to Sheldon for help.

“Overruled,” he replied softly, his blue eyes taking in her shock. He stood up and addressed the tribunal.

“She’s a twenty five year old community college dropout cum failed actress whose waitressing job barely pays the bills. As Penny pointed out to me it isn’t like she’s climbed ‘oh so far up the ladder’ so what does it matter if she fails again? In this instance she virtually guaranteed she will fail”— he looked at Señor Chang—“unless you show her that her decision to return to school wasn’t a mistake and that she does deserve a second chance to redefine herself.”

“Pasadena City College is by its very nature a second-chance institution,” Jeff added. “How can we
cast out someone whose heart’s in the right place even though her mind’s out to lunch?” He nodded his head towards Sheldon. “Look at Dr. Cooper here. Granted he’s eccentric but he’s also one of the top minds in physics. He studies the origins of the universe one particle at a time and yet he’s dating a waitress at The Cheesecake Factory. Why? Because after spending years looking at quantum states he knows it isn’t what she looks like or what she does that counts. It’s Penny, herself, who’s so amazing.”

“Five years, six months and five days ago I met this woman at our building,” Sheldon said clearly. “I admit to being intrigued by her appearance and was embarrassed when she caught me staring. Being as lovely as she was I expected her to laugh or to see ridicule in her eyes at my awkwardness but as I glanced at her face all I saw was kindness. It’s Penny’s openness to others that’s at the heart of her beauty. Please don’t make it her downfall.”

“She’s willing to take the fall to protect an insecure and terrified classmate who confided in her and bury her chances even further with the tribunal by confessing again in order to save her boyfriend public embarrassment,” said Jeff. “Dean, you talked about wanting personal integrity at our school. Penny has that in spades. See the worth in her that she fails to see in herself.”

Silence save the sound of lapping pool water.

“All in favor of an acquittal?” asked Dean Pelton. All three judges raised their hands and verbally agreed.

Penny’s mouth opened in shock before she stood and hugged her boyfriend. Jeff had a satisfied grin as he watched the couple embrace. The physicist glanced over and the two men locked eyes, the look of relief evident on Sheldon’s face.

Jeff gave him a wink and proceeded to pack his belongings.

“Pierce, what are you doing here?” asked Penny as he approached the table.

“I couldn’t let you do this—”

“Without moral support,” Jeff interjected as he indicated the Dean with his head. The older man made to speak. “Pierce, she won. She’s back in class and the study group and everything’s ok.”

“Let’s just forget all about this,” Penny said as she crossed over to give her classmate a hug.

“I never will,” Pierce whispered. “Thank you.”

xTBBTx

NBC news: Will Higgs lead us to Star Trek transporter?
Apocalyptic Fluctuations

Chapter Summary

Reference to ‘Home Economics’.
Reference to ‘The Electric Can Opener Fluctuation’.
This chapter contains Mature sexual content.

xTBBTx

“I always get a kick out of Kirk saving mankind from peace and serenity,” smirked Raj before taking a sip of beer.

“Without struggle there’s no innovation,” replied Sheldon as he glued the last two walls of his transporter.

Leonard chuckled as he put in a dvd. “My favorite was ‘Return of the Archons’ where he destroys the computer Landru which has been regulating the Betian’s lives for generations and gives them a ‘don’t thank me’.”

“The expulsion from Paradise is a major theme in the original series,” said Sheldon. He sat back and removed his latex gloves. “The spores in ‘This Side of Paradise’ brought perfect health and serenity until Kirk destroys them with negative emotion; ‘The Apple’ has him again destroy a society-controlling machine and congratulating the people on attaining freedom.”

“It’d be interesting if they made update episodes on what happened to these people,” mused the astrophysicist. “I wonder how many of them survive?”

“Oh, no doubt there’d be chaos, war, murder.” Sheldon sat in his spot on the couch and washed his hands with sanitizer.

“What a great gift,” said Leonard with a smirk as he snuggled into his chair and took up the remote. “Kirk definitely wouldn’t get a job at Hallmark.”

“It’s like Pandora’s Box,” the theoretical physicist explained. “Alongside the ills of mankind springs hope of a better day.”

Raj was incredulous. “But they did have a better day. They were living in Paradise!”

“They were stagnant,” sniffed Sheldon.

“They were happy!” Raj retorted. The lanky man snorted.

“What’s happiness compared to the boundlessness of scientific exploration?”

“Now, now, neither is mutually exclusive,” countered Leonard. “Suppose one of the Betians was happy doing physics? With everything being so peaceful and idyllic he’d have all the time he needed to think.”
“Landru didn’t allow physics,” said Sheldon with pursed lips. “Besides, the Betians had to deal with the ‘Festival’ when absolute anarchy reigned supreme—a time of violence, destruction and sexual aggressiveness.”

“See? Even a soulless computer knows humans need sex,” grinned Raj.

“There’s hope for you yet, Sheldon,” winked Leonard, garnering him a scowl.

“What movie are we watching tonight?” snapped his roommate.

“The Motion Picture,” said Leonard as he pressed ‘play’ on the remote.

“Lord. This night’s going slow enough without Roddenberry’s answer to Einstein relativity,” sighed Sheldon as he opened his bottle of orange pop.

“True, it’s mind-numbingly slow but we do get a sonic shower scene with a robotic Lieutenant Ilya.” Raj lay back against the couch and sighed at the memory. Sheldon rolled his eyes.

“And Kirk remedies the situation by replicating a robe to mid thigh and high heeled shoes—the perfect outfit for a mechanized humanoid.”

“That was probably the only time the audience registered a pulse,” murmured Leonard.

“Well the whole premise of Star Trek is to ‘Boldly go where no man has gone before’, said Raj. “I know I’ve never been more bored in my life than when I first watched this film.”

“And now?” asked his curly-haired friend.

“It’s kind of fun. Like a slow mind massage by a telepathic Orion slave girl.” Raj’s friends stared incredulously. “You’re telling me you didn’t feel—”

“Language, Rajesh!” scolded Sheldon.

“I was going to say ‘funny’, replied Raj in shock.

“I think Sheldon’s word is better,” smirked Leonard.

xTBBTx

Sheldon sat on the couch with a pout on his face. With his Vulcan hearing he could hear his roommate humming in the bedroom. A few minutes later and Leonard came down the hall wearing a suit jacket, slacks and a moderate amount of hair gel.

“I still don’t see why it has to be tonight,” scowled Sheldon.

“Like I said before this is the only night I could get tickets to the play. Leslie’s been talking about it all month.”

“It figures Winkle would be the root cause,” said his roommate with pursed lips. Leonard rolled his eyes.

“Look she’s been busy with a major project and it’s hard enough getting together as it is. She specifically took this night off so we could be together and I’m not wasting a second.” He adjusted his tie. “Besides, nothing says you still can’t play Halo tonight.”

“Oh yes, why not have a rousing game with Howard—oh wait he’s in Houston; Raj—that’s right
he’s out with Amy—nope, late shift at the Cheesecake Factory. You’re right Leonard my night’s a plethora of possibilities,” huffed Sheldon.

“Here’s an idea: do something different.”

“You know I ascribe to homeostasis.”

Leonard grinned. “You’re accommodating Penny.”

“That doesn’t mean the rest of my life should be in turmoil,” Sheldon replied with a bit of a twang.

“There’s only so much change a man can tolerate.”

“Sheldon, life goes on and if you haven’t noticed for the first time all of us have lives. This is an opportunity for you to grow.”

“No, puberty was my time to grow. Now’s the time to seek comfort and stability.” His blue eyes met his roommate’s gaze. “I’ve adjusted my patterns to amalgamate you into my routine.”

“Maybe we can play a round of Halo when I get back,” Leonard said amiably.

“I’ll have eaten by then. You know we don’t play after we’ve eaten,” reminded the lanky man.

Leonard tossed his hands in the air. “I tried.”

As he closed the door he heard Sheldon’s quiet voice:

“I’m trying, too.”

Out in the hall the curly haired man sighed heavily as he checked his watch. He didn’t have time.

He pulled out his phone as he descended the stairs.

'Sheldon’s alone', he texted Penny.

“God, it’s like finding a baby sitter,” he murmured to himself.

At this moment Leonard realized he was in for a hell of a ride if he became a father since leaving Sheldon alone left him feeling like the world’s shittiest dad. Normally he had no problems leaving Sheldon to his own devices. Leonard never thought twice about going over to eat at Raj’s when Priya was there. Something was different.

Sheldon was different.

He still had his spot and chicken satay with extra peanuts and did his laundry at eight fifteen on Saturdays but there was a change to the lanky man.

A little smile came to Leonard’s lips. “Looks like Pinocchio’s a real boy after all.”

xTBBTx

“What a great evening. No homework for once,” Penny grinned as she munched on popcorn.

“Now if only we could have celebrated with a better movie,” tutted Sheldon as he squirmed in his seat.

“Be nice,” she chided lightly.
“Unlike the title suggests tonight’s feature isn’t serendipitous. In fact I’d say on the scale of—”

The power went out and the pair sat in the dark.

“I swear I paid my bill,” Penny said as she set the popcorn bowl on the table.

“Look out the window. The streetlight’s not on either,” Sheldon said excitedly.

“Great. Let me get the candles going.” Penny got off the couch and stepped over her boyfriend’s feet as she ventured to the shelving unit.

“Candles are a fire hazard,” said Sheldon as he made his way to the door. “I’ll get a lantern.”

“Are you going to be ok out there?”

“Of course. Eidetic memory. I know where everything is. Now lock the door after I leave. Only open it after I’ve identified myself.” He slipped out and closed the door.

“Click,” Penny said with a smirk.

“I heard that,” Sheldon called out from the hall.

Penny chuckled as she lit a vanilla scented candle and set it in a glass holder on the kitchen table. Beyond her window the city was a veil of blackness. She went into her bedroom and turned off the air conditioner. California was having a freaky November with the past three days’ temperatures reaching eighty six degrees. Sheldon warned her to expect more fluctuations as climate change gained steam but as long as her little unit blasted cool air she was more than a match for Mother Nature.

Knock Knock Knock “Penny.”

Knock Knock Knock “Penny.”

Knock Knock Knock “Penny.”

“Who is it?” she smiled as crossed over into the kitchen.

“It’s Sheldon.”

“Shepherd who?” She opened the cupboard and took out two glasses.

“Shepherd Cooper.”

“Sarcasm Sheldon.” There’s a pause before the door opened. “Your batting average for sarcasm’s —what the frak?” Penny turned to watch her boyfriend set down a gigantic duffle bag beside the couch before closing and locking the door. “Moving in?”

“Hardly. This is my portable emergency disaster kit,” Sheldon replied. He set his LED lantern on the coffee table and undid the zipper of the duffle bag. “Fortunately I’ve updated its contents since the altering of our paradigm so there’s enough supplies to cover you as well. We’ll move to my apartment should the unthinkable happen and the apocalypse begins.”

“Thanks sweetie,” Penny said as she poured orange juice into both glasses before quickly returning the carton into the refrigerator. Noting he had his back to her she opened the bottle of vodka and poured a helping into each glass. Who says we can’t have our own apocalypse? “When you’re finished can you bring the lantern over here for a second? I need to find the ice cubes and I don’t
want my freezer open too long.”

Sheldon pursed his lips as he came to his girlfriend’s side. “This is your first act after a potentially apocalyptic disaster ensues? Make drinks?”

“We have to do something before the ice cubes melt,” Penny teased as she loaded the glasses with ice. Before she closed the freezer door she scraped a bit of frost from the side and spritzed it in Sheldon’s hair. “Snowball frenzy.”

“Really Penny?” he mumbled as he dusted his hair.

“It’s the best I can do. We don’t get snow here like we do in Nebraska,” she said while grabbing the drinks.

“Galveston only sees intermittent dustings of snow that rarely last a single day,” he shrugged.

“No snowball fights?” Penny said sadly.

“I’ve had several actually.” He held up the lantern to light their way to the couch.

“Where was that?”

“The Arctic.”

There’s a silence as they returned to the couch; Sheldon moved aside the coffee table and set the lamp on it.

“What are you doing?”

“Penny, in an apocalypse people don’t just sit on the couch and drink orange juice,” admonished Sheldon. “You want to keep out of the window so the zombies, aliens or Canadians will think no one’s here.”

The waitress raised an eyebrow. “Canadians?”

“They compete in extreme sports, live with bears and eat poutine. Obviously universal healthcare has made them capable of anything.” He took the comforter from the couch and laid it on the floor.

Penny set the glasses on the table. “I’ll go get some pillows.”

“Not from the bed!” Sheldon squawked, horrified.

“Sheldon, it’s the apocalypse,” she reminded him.

“That doesn’t mean we should devolve into senseless barbarism.” Penny rolled her eyes as she sat down. Sheldon did the same and began riffling through the duffle bag.

“What are you looking for?”

“I’m just locating my knife in case we need to defend ourselves,” he said as he pulled out a bowie knife.

“Just a knife?” Penny grinned. “I thought you’d pull a ‘Dead Calm’ and put a crossbow bolt through my door.”

“Not a crossbow, no,” he replied after a moment.
Penny grabbed the two glasses off the table and bumped his elbow. He took the glass and they clinked rims.

“To apocalypse night and the Dynamic Duo,” Penny toasted. They drank.

“Actually Penny in a true apocalypse it would be more akin to ‘There can only be one.’”

Penny dropped her jaw. “You mean to tell me if it came down to you and me you’d kill me?”

“If I were a zombie I’d have no choice but to eat your brains,” he shrugged.

“Well ya gotta start somewhere I suppose,” she pumpkin grinned. Sheldon gave a twitchy smile and took a drink. Penny heard the clink of her ice cubes as she swished her glass. “So what’s the Arctic like, anyways?”

“Warmer than you’d expect. The temperature averaged between twenty five and fifty degrees Fahrenheit in July although the sky was predominantly overcast.”

“See any polar bears?”

“At a distance, thankfully. I believe Howard has some photographs.”

“He never told me,” Penny pouted. “I’d love to see them.”

“Yes, well we don’t really discuss the trip.” He noticed Penny looking strangely at him. “Of course we were at the north magnetic pole,” Sheldon rattled off as he stared at the blank television screen. “Interestingly enough the magnetic pole is continually moving towards Russia at between thirty four and thirty seven miles per year. When we went it was still situated within the Canadian Arctic territorial claim but it’s expected to move beyond Canada some time this year.”

“So this is different from what we call the North Pole.”

“That’s the Geographic North pole. The North Magnetic Pole is the point where the Earth’s magnetic field points downwards. If I had a globular compass the needle would be pointing straight down.”

“Huh.” Penny took a sip of her drink. “So what was your experiment about?”

Sheldon glanced at his drink as he gave it a small shake. “I was searching for slow-moving monopoles.”

“Which in English means….”

He turned to his girlfriend. “Many Grand Unification Theories of the universe postulate the existence of a magnetic monopole—a stable particle that carries a single magnetic charge. It’s too massive to be formed in a particle accelerator like at Cern and has been highly elusive due to its predicted extreme scarcity. If I found it I would have proven String Theory.”

“No wonder you were so excited when…you know.” As one the two of them took a drink. “But still it was a long shot to find it.”

“Penny, I’ve succeeded at every scientific pursuit I’ve undertaken,” Sheldon chided.

She raised an eyebrow. “What about Snowball and the CAT scanner?”

“It worked—just not very long,” he said dismissively. “Besides I could only utilize what was
available around the house.” He took another drink. “From what Gablehauser said there were a variety of qualified candidates to assist me in my experiment but I couldn’t be bothered interviewing them; especially since I knew of three reasonably capable people who were familiar with my regiments and procedures.”

“And?” He glanced at her from the corner of his eye and pursed his lips.

“I wanted them to come.” He finished off his drink. Penny took the empty glass and got up.

“Let me make you another one,” she said amiably as she went to the refrigerator.

“If you could marginally decrease the vodka amount it’d provide a more palatable alcohol to orange juice ratio.” Penny looked at him in shock. “My father was an alcoholic. You really think I couldn’t smell and taste the alcohol in my ‘virgin’ Cuba Libres?”

“You never fail to surprise me, pumpkin,” Penny grinned as she continued making drinks.

Sheldon leaned against the couch as he watched his girlfriend. “You know I was really annoyed with you at one point because you gave Leonard second thoughts about going.”

“Really?” laughed Penny. “I thought I was careful with my feelings.”

“It was the blanket with the sleeves in it,” scowled Sheldon.

Penny returned to the couch with a smile on her lips and handed Sheldon his glass.

“Two years of friendship down the drain over a Snuggee? Tough crowd. Fortunately common sense won out.”

“Too bad it didn’t win the day,” mused the physicist. They clinked glasses and drank. “Until I met Leonard I had no inclination towards making friends. The whole concept was a social convention that had no place in science. Colleagues I understand—necessary evils who compete with me for limited research dollars to fund trivial and ultimately forgettable experiments.” He took a drink. “I remember in grade school how Jonathan Taylor duped me into thinking he wanted to be friends with false kindness that ultimately led to open ridicule and embarrassment. I vowed never to leave myself so exposed again.” An amused smile crossed his face. “And then came Leonard who shared my interests in comic books, video games and science fiction. Who knew that original Star Trek was superior to Next Generation but Picard trumped Kirk. He signed the Roommate Agreement and followed codes of conduct regarding our relationships as roommates and friends. He agreed to make me his sidekick should he develop superpowers.”

“That would have to be a hell of a lab accident to make Leonard super anything,” quipped Penny.

“Having observed his skills firsthand with the rocket fuel mishap I have no doubt should he apply himself he could come up with something much more spectacular than a downed elevator.” Penny laughed. “Leonard is far from perfect. He laughed when Kripke sabotaged my radio interview and did violate the Roommate Agreement by choosing to take you instead of me to see the Hadron Collider.”

Penny placed a hand on his thigh. “Sorry about that.”

“Not your fault. It wasn’t your decision to make.” Sheldon became thoughtful. “It’s funny but the more I think about this the more I see that Leonard functions admirably as a friend unless anything physics related is brought up. Then he’s a—douche?” he asked, eyebrow raised.
“Douche,” Penny confirmed.

“In this light no wonder he sabotaged my experiment. It might have been mutually agreed upon but the original plan was Leonard’s. He’s the most culpable. Traitorous.” His blue eyes held her breath. “He was supposed to be my friend.”

“Oh honey, I’m so sorry.”

Silence.

“Why didn’t you just tell the university that the guys messed with your experiment?” She asked softly. He shook his head.

“They’d have faced serious reprimand if not termination of employment resulting in their being unable to procure work in their chosen fields. Consequently Raj would have faced deportation to India.”

“But what about you?”

“‘The needs of the many outweigh the needs of the few or the one,’” he said as he dropped his eyes.

“Even if ‘the many’ stab you in the back?” Penny said incredulously.

“I didn’t know what to do. I’d never been in that situation before,” Sheldon said quietly.

“Having someone screw with your experiment?”

“Having friends screw with me. I—didn’t know the protocol.”

Penny pursed her lips. “The ‘protocol’ was junior rodeo.”

“No,” Sheldon said firmly. “Leonard would have moved out and because of your amorous attachment you would have gone with him. Not acceptable.”

“Sheldon, no one is worth what you went through.”

He looked at her sternly. “I never know if you say things like this because of a low self esteem or that you doubt my feelings for you.”

“Neither. I just want you to shine, Moonpie.” After a moment spent scrutinizing her face Sheldon nodded.

“In the succeeding weeks and months as I struggled to regain some shreds of academic credibility and come to terms with my own mortification I also came to terms with something more personal. I’ve now more than enough data to conclude that a friend respects, even encourages, life-long passions. A friend is concerned for your personal wellbeing in all its aspects and does one’s best to console if not able to rectify transgressions. More importantly a friend is not afraid to address your faults, to confront you when you’re wrong not in order to belittle but to better. A friend laughs with you and awakens feelings of whimsy that lighten your step even though you outwardly disapprove such ‘wastes of intellectual resources’.

“My abilities have afforded me many opportunities to meet people the world over and of them I’ve a select few friends. As all things not being equal there is one that supersedes all in terms of loyalty and genuine comradry and in my case I chose Leonard as the one friend above all. My ‘best
friend’.” He smirked. “You’d think with an IQ of one hundred and eighty seven I could have
realized that Leonard’s not my best friend by any stretch of the imagination. It’s you.”

“Me?” said Penny, eyes wide. Long fingers entwined with her own. “Thank you sweetie.”

Sheldon shrugged. “No need for thanks. Given your conduct towards me it’s the only logical
conclusion I can make. You’re ‘there for me’.”

“I do my best. I can’t even begin to understand you,” she said shyly.

“No one does. The point is Penny, you try.”

Penny leaned forward and placed a lingering kiss on his cheek.

“That was non-optional,” she sniffled. At once Sheldon was horrified.

“I hadn’t meant to upset you,” he exclaimed.

“I’m not upset Sheldon. I’m honored.” Blue eyes met green.

Sheldon’s head cocked ever so slightly to the left to receive Penny’s kiss, processing what was
happening and determining the implications as he did so. He’d always marched to the beat of his
own drummer regardless of what others thought of him. Encounters with people were battles of
endurance to see which party could stand the other long enough to conduct a transaction before
retreating. Only when a colleague was truly desperate with his work was Sheldon warmly
welcomed. No one actively sought out his friendship much less thanked him for it.

“I can’t officially remove Leonard as my best friend as I’d violate the Roommate Agreement,” he
said with a twitchy smile as they parted.

“Our little secret,” grinned Penny. She put her hand on Sheldon’s forehead. “You’re hot.”

“Well we are without air conditioning. Combine that with your close proximity and perspiration is
the result.”

“I can fix that.” She set their glasses on the table. Reaching into her glass for an ice cube Penny
then put it to the back of his neck. Immediately Sheldon’s back stiffened as he leaned forward to
escape the cold.

“Penny! My shirt!”

“It’s just water, crybaby.”

“The cube has been sitting in orange juice and vodka. I—” He stopped and watched in horror as
Penny popped the cube in her mouth. Her eyes rolled from one side to the other as she sucked on
the cube in deliberate exaggeration. A moment later and the cube emerged from her mouth into her
hand.

“That’s that. Take off your shirt.”

“I don’t think so,” he said indignantly as he wiped the back of his neck with his hand.

“It’s the apocalypse, Sheldon,” Penny reminded him. “To hell with protocol.”

“Language Penny.”
“No more teachers.” She straddled his lap and put her hand under his t-shirts; Sheldon felt the ice cube cut a line across his belly towards his chest. “No more books.” She moved the cube over his shoulder even as she pulled him in for a kiss. “No more Shelly’s dirty looks.” She winked even as he scowled.

“You’re stretching my shirts,” he growled.

“Then take them off,” Penny said with an innocent smile.

“Extract yourself first.” Penny complied and a moment later Sheldon was folding his shirts and placing them on the couch.

“Now lie down.”

“I fail to see how this will cool me down as I feel my arrhythmic function—” He hissed as the ice met his nipple. Penny giggled. “Quid pro quo.”

“Meaning?”

“Lose the shirt, woman,” he said adamantly.

He lay down and Penny was quick to comply, tossing her shirt and bra on the couch before settling herself on his hips. She traced the cube counter clockwise through his chest hair.

“Hard Cubie, Cool Cubie, Little glob of ice / Happy Cubie, Slippy Cubie, nice nice nice.”

“Very funny,” he said with a crooked smile.

“I think so,” Penny said lightly. She slid the ice around his nipple before her mouth covered it and began to suck. Sheldon closed his eyes and lost himself to the sensation. Penny stopped and placed her wet hand at the side of his neck. “I’m running out of cube.” She reached over and dropped the diminished piece on the table before grabbing another ice cube from her glass. She popped it into her mouth then moved her hair aside with her hand as she lowered her head to his throat. Sheldon felt the ice cube slide over his Adam’s apple before veering behind his ear. Penny sat up and took the cube from her mouth.

“Let me get that for you,” she said before she retraced her path, her bottom lip sliding along the wetness. Sheldon’s toes curled as she nuzzled his flesh. Penny leaned back and smiled as she could feel his arousal beneath her even as the look of desire covered his face. She dotted his nose with the cube before planting a kiss. Sheldon’s hand found her own.

“My turn.” He took the cube and traced below her clavicle. Penny’s face was serene as she leaned into his touch. His hand slowly spiraled around her breast until the cube’s touch on her nipple caused Penny to shiver. Transferring the cube to his other hand Sheldon gently massaged the cool water into her skin before turning his attention to her other breast and repeating the process. In appreciation Penny ground her hips causing Sheldon to take a sharp breath.

“Naughty,” he said as he touched the cube to her belly button, causing her to squeal. Again she shifted on his pelvis and he curbed his impulse to thrust in return.

“Let me dry off,” she purred and slid herself across his belly until her arms wrapped themselves around his neck. In response his arms went to her back where he let the ice cube spread its wetness on her flesh. Again Penny shivered as her back arched against the sensation. Her eyes were wide and ravenously scanned his lips before her mouth crashed into his. Lips sucked and toyed with each other and before she knew it Sheldon had rolled her onto her back. His hardness was almost
obscene and she encircled him with her legs.

Sheldon broke the kiss to breathe. Shifting his weight to his other arm he brushed her cheek with
his free hand. His fingers traced her throat, his tips afire as she felt her skin’s smoothness. As she
let a slow moan slip from her mouth his pectoral muscles contracted. He’d never made anyone make a
sound like that before. It scared him and exhilarated him. He cupped her neck and ran a thumb over
her before he lowered his mouth to make her his own. Little kisses walked their way to her chin
and then beneath her jaw line. He couldn’t stop himself. The more he kissed the greater the desire
to consume her whole. What surprised him the most was the absolute clarity of mind as he gently
nudged her head to the side so he could access the crook of her neck. Granted his heart rate was
elevated and he was sweating but for all that he felt cold next to her heat. Every movement on her
part increased the feeling in his chest that he recognized as his longtime companion. Five years had
gone by and this feeling had nestled itself, waiting for him to take notice. Slowly—and for Sheldon
Cooper the slowness was intolerable to even begin to contemplate—his heart became aware of the
troublemaker across the hall.

“It was always you,” he said softly into her ear. “My confidante.” She whispered his name and he
growled before clamping his mouth against her throat. To have heard his name—his name!—on
her lips, felt her hand as it searched his hair for the back of his neck. The pulse of his groin as
electric jolts at her touch stirred him to suck deeply.

Unwillingly he pulled away, licking his lips as his all too blue eyes sought to convey all that he felt.
“Penny, I…” Relativity struck as time came to a grinding halt. There was only her. His one
constant. His k’diwa. His mouth covered hers and he kissed her as he never had. He was desperate
to taste and touch and before he knew it his tongue brushed her lips before sliding in between. He
was terrified. He was surrounded by Penny. Lost in her world. His spine went rigid as his tongue
briefly encountered hers. Penny’s head moved ever so slightly but the effect essentially deepened
their level of contact. As she made a tentative lick down his length he pulled away. Slowly he
reentered and their tongues reacquainted themselves. Little caresses that became so much more,
causing him to groan.

He was Dr. Sheldon Cooper. He had two PHDs and resolved the black hole information paradox.
He was a shining example of homo novus.

And utterly in love.

Their lips parted and they stared at each other. An eye twitched and suddenly Sheldon was off her,
bounding away like a hound untethered towards the washroom. He barely lifted the lid of the toilet
before a mix of orange juice, vodka and his earlier spaghetti and hot dog dinner soiled the water.
Panting, he tried desperately to get a hold of himself but the taste in his mouth combined with the
feel of his tongue sent him heaving.

After he was sure he was finished Sheldon slowly stood and flushed the toilet. He crossed over to
the sink and dropped the remnant of the ice cube before reaching for the bottle of mouthwash. As
he swished he was glad there was no light in the bathroom because the last thing he wanted to see
was his reflection. Timing two minutes with his luminous watch he spit out the mouthwash and
washed his hands. Remembering Penny’s mouth on his body he pumped some more soap from the
dispenser and cleaned his chest and neck.

With slumped shoulders he returned to the living room to find Penny on her back albeit in her shirt.

“Hey,” she said as he sat beside her.

“‘Hey’ what?” he asked dejectedly.
“No ‘what’. Just saying hello.”

“Oh. Hello Penny.”

She chuckled softly. “That was—”

“Unexpected,” Sheldon said quietly.

“I was going to say awesome.” A not unkind smile came to her lips as she regarded her lover. Blue eyes stared incredulously back at her until he exhaled sharply through his mouth in relief.

Sheldon reached over for his Hawkman t-shirt and slipped it on before lying down in Penny’s arms.

“Don’t let go,” he whispered.

She kissed the top of his head. “Never.”

xTBBTx

“Fancy meeting you here,” said Jeff as he sat next to Penny on the bench.

“It’s a nice day so I thought to have a quick bite outside before study group,” she replied brightly as she munched on her Golden Delicious apple.

Jeff observed five guys playing hackey sack, recognizing Vaughn by his shirtless and shoeless appearance. And the killer abs. Blond locks.

“Enjoying the scenery I see,” he quipped. Penny laughed.

“Everything’s about sex with you, isn’t it?”

“Excuse me, but who demonstrated expert legal skills on Monday?” He took a sip of his coffee.

“Amazing skill,” Penny agreed. She tossed her apple core into the garbage can to her right.

“Nice shot,” said Jeff. “Between you and Troy we’ve got an ass-kicking study group.”

“It’s cool he’s quarterbacking again. Guess Annie and I will have to get our pompoms ready—insert Jeff Winger sex joke here,” she said with a smirk.

“Why Penny, I have no idea you thought me so crass.” Jeff watched Vaughn mosey his way over.

“I see Tarzan wants to have a word with you.”

“Vaughn’s sweet,” Penny countered. “And a lot more talkative than Tarzan.”

“He greets people in threes. What’s with that?”

“Hey Vaughn,” Penny said kindly after giving Jeff a ‘Be nice’ stare.

“Hi, hey, how’s it going?” he replied with a laid back smile.

“Can’t complain. Off to study Spanish in a few minutes.”

“Cool.” He reached into his pocket and pulled out a piece of paper. “I had a dream about you on the weekend.”
“Before or after inhaling?” said Jeff. Penny elbowed him in the side.

“Anyways I just wanted you to have this,” the blond man continued as he handed Penny the paper.

“Uh, thanks,” Penny said. She unfolded it and began reading.

“Fair trade coffee?” Vaughn asked Jeff. The ex-lawyer nodded.

“Of course.” Actually Jeff had no idea where his coffee came from. As long as the cup of Joe was fresh and hot he was a happy man. He cocked his head. That actually applies to my women as well.

“Good for you, brah.”

“Wow,” said Penny before clearing her throat. “That was—wow.”

Jeff raised an eyebrow as he took in the waitress’ flushed complexion. Leaning over he glanced at the paper only to have Penny quickly fold it away. Granted he only got a peek but he recognized hippie porn when he saw it with its ‘purple-headed warriors’.

“Nice,” said Jeff. “I’m sure her boyfriend’ll get a kick out of that.”

“No worries brah,” smiled Vaughn. “The dream only reflects Penny’s inner loveliness. She’s totally cool.”

“I would have sworn you’d say totally hot.”

“Thanks Vaughn,” Penny said gently. “But you don’t have to give me notes. Sometimes our private thoughts need to stay private.”

Jeff’s face was stern. “In other words, if she wants to think about thrusts into her ‘quivering mound of love pudding’ it’ll be with Sheldon not anyone else. Brah.”

Vaughn wrinkled his nose. “That’s not hip, dude. Talking porn is so uncool.” He looked to Penny. “No worries sis. I’ll see you around.”

“See ya.” Penny waited until the man was out of earshot before turning to Jeff. “You defended my honor.”

“That’s what friends do,” Jeff said with a smirk. Penny smiled as she got up.

“Coming?”

“Just give me a sec. Got to check my messages,” he replied.

“Ok. I’ll hit the ladies and meet you in the library.” Penny slung her backpack over her shoulder and left.

Jeff pulled out his phone and answered his messages before a thought struck him. Shifting to his contacts he scrolled through a long list of ‘Hot girl’ plus a location until he got to ‘Hot Girl Spanish’. With a few keystrokes he erased the heading and replaced it with ‘Penny’.

That’s what friends do.

xTBBTx*Mature*xTBBTx

Two naked forms sat kneeling on the bed, one slightly behind the other.
“I’m usually on my back when I do this,” Sheldon said with a soft twang to his voice. In response he felt a kiss on his shoulder.

“It’s easier for me to get what you’re doing if we do it like this,” Penny replied. Her hand slid down his arm until she deviated onto his thigh. She raised herself so her lips neared his ear. “Show me,” she purred.

From his exposure and proximity to Penny Sheldon was already half hard so it didn’t take long to strengthen his erection, particularly when her fingers lightly rubbed his inner thigh.

“Ok, my turn.” She gripped his penis and waited for an objection. Aside from his shoulders straightening Sheldon didn’t react. “Let’s work on tightness first. Is it ok? Too much?”

“Harder,” he said matter-of-factly. “There.”

“Now let’s get the rhythm. Shall I get some lube?”

“Normally I use Vaseline Intensive Care. It keeps the foreskin supple.” Penny laughed.

“Now that’d make a great commercial,” she said as she began to rub. “‘Vaseline Intensive Care: not just for hands.’ Maybe they can make a type specifically for men. You know, have a musk scent or something like that.” Here she grinned “Of course they already have coconut.”

Sheldon shifted to allow her better access. “I won’t dignify that with a retort. I’m more concerned about the content than the odor—so long as it’s not perfumey. For instance—grip harder as you near my glans—I’m currently using a total moisture compound for multi-layer moisture and hydration.”

“We’ve so got to go to the Body Shop,” grinned his girlfriend. In response the physicist wrinkled his nose.

“I’ve already subjected my olfactory senses to the smells of feminine soaps, creams and oils when I procured your—use your fingers and thumb to stroke the tip—Christmas gift. …Now turn your palm slightly and increase the pace.”

“I think I need to see this,” Penny replied as she moved aside so he could take up his member and resume stroking.

They took their time as he showed her his masturbatory routine before letting her have a go. Granted Penny’s actions could never compare to self-pleasure, however her very presence more than made up for any lapse in technique. Sheldon closed his eyes and lost himself to her touch. Occasionally his hand covered hers if she lost pressure or, even more frustrating, slowed her movements.

“Chug-a-chugga, chug-a-chugga,” she said slowly as she pumped his organ before suddenly moving her hand at a frenzied pace. She felt him tense so she stopped moving. “Chug-a-chugga, chug-a-chugga,” she repeated with a slight chuckle to her voice as she again resumed her maddeningly slow strokes.

“Very funny,” he chided lightly.

“I thought you liked trains?” she asked innocently.

“In this instance modern diesel over steam would be appreciated.”
“So speaks the ‘cumductor’.”

“Really Penny.”

In response the Nebraskan chuckled. “Okay, back to work.”

She was really impressed with his control. When she teased Leonard like this his impatience quickly overrode his sense of play. The short man preferred pleasing her to being touched and she wondered if that had to do with the feelings of inadequacy he had after they had sex.

Such was not the case with Sheldon. He lacked experience not confidence. His voice, though at times lost to panting or an occasional moan of pleasure, was for the most part steady and his directions, clear.

“Now for the piece de resistance,” she purred as she relinquished control of his shaft. “You sure you don’t want me to finish you off orally?”

“Quite sure,” he replied as he squeezed and quickened his tempo.

Penny always got a kick out of watching a man whack himself because it always looked like he was going to pull his dick out of its socket when he was on the verge of climax. Sheldon was no different although he was quick with his other hand to grab the towel before he came with a grunt. She wrapped her arms around his waist as he leaned back to gather himself.

“Cool stuff, McDuff,” she quipped before giving him a kiss on the back of the neck.

“That’ll teach them nasty germs.” She kissed him again before crawling past and flopping on her back. “When you’re ready it’s my turn to show-and-tell.” She slowly dragged her fingernail, causing her areola to pucker. “Your turn.”

Sheldon climbed over until he rested lightly on her hips. He took a finger and made a circle around her breast. Moving about half an inch he repeated the process, this time using his nail. He noted Penny’s grin and decided to continue, making loop after loop around her breast. She closed her eyes and purred even as his finger detected a firming of her breast tissue as he neared the tip. Remembering her words Sheldon moved to the other breast and repeated the process only this time he didn’t stop and swirled his way to her swollen nipple.

“Squeeze it gently and twist it back and forth,” she said calmly and he complied. “Mmmm,” she said as she squirmed. He moved from one nipple to the other, varying the pressure and tempo of his turns, making note by the expressions on Penny’s face what felt good.

As one her hands came up and supplanted his own as she began to pleasure both breasts. “Now I do both until I feel myself ready to go downtown. Fortunately for you I was more than ready watching you whack off. Now move back and I’ll introduce you to my little friend.”

Sheldon complied and Penny’s hand slid down to her nether lips and revealed their contents. Immediately he realized that no video or leg-warmer simulation did the female vulva justice. He swallowed as he watched Penny’s fingers caress either side of her clitoris.

“Come say hello,” she said encouragingly. Tentatively he reached out and felt her velvety softness.
“There are many similarities between male and female genital anatomy,” he began. “Both the penis and clitoris stem from the genital tubercle and—”

“Not now Sheldon,” Penny laughed.

“No, I suppose not,” he agreed as he rubbed her inner lip between his fingers.

“Soft, huh?”

“Unbelievable.” He continued to stroke until his fingers encountered a sticky substance and he recoiled.

“Gotcha.”

“Indeed,” he muttered as he wiped his hand on his towel.

“Now don’t be like that.” She dipped her fingers and brought them to her mouth.

“If you lick your fingers please refrain from touching me,” he warned; in response she wiped her hand across his belly and chuckled as he toweled himself off.

“Next time we’ll start down below so you can feel your way around. As it is I’m pretty slick and would really like to get down to business.”

Penny’s hand slid below and began its rhythmic motion. Curious, Sheldon shifted his position to see what she was doing. He noted she stimulated the side of her clitoris, seemingly avoiding the tip. Her movements were moderate and relaxed, quite unlike the motions he imagined ‘Gerard’ would cause.

“Do you employ mechanical stimulation to your genital region?” he asked quietly.

She took a moment to process. “Vibrators? Not really. I mean I did when I was younger but I noticed it got harder for me to get off manually so I stopped.” Here she smiled. “Besides if I need help I much prefer the breathing kind. Now shush!”

Sheldon closed his mouth and let Penny refocus. There was so much he wanted to ask: did she always start rubbing from the left? Did her vaginal secretion enhance her pleasure as she stroked? Taking a strong breath through his nose he steeled himself before he lightly brushed her outer labia. Trying hard not to think of the stickiness his forefinger lightly pressed on the clitoral head. He repeated the movement and she groaned. Feeling empowered and more than a little turned on he continued until her hand shifted to block his access.

“Let me in,” he whispered and slid his fingers overtop hers. He rubbed against her little shaft as he followed Penny’s directions. Normally what Sheldon Cooper did was for his own gratification or expansion of his knowledge base. As he watched Penny squirm and moan under his touch he knew this was more than simple biology at work. Until this moment he’d never wanted to please anyone as much as he did now.

Deciding to do a little exploration Sheldon traced the vaginal river to its source and stirred his finger at the entrance.

“More,” Penny groaned as she caressed herself.

He continued his motions as his forefinger entered. Immediately he was awash in a variety of sensations as he’d never been inside anyone before. Hell if it wasn’t for flossing he’d never stick
his hand in his own mouth. Remembering Amy’s tutorial he began his search for the Gräfenberg Spot; while Leonard couldn’t reveal its precise location on a diagram he did acknowledge Penny’s sensitivity in the area.

Penny stretched as her face contorted; her breathing increasing even as Sheldon’s stopped. Her hips rocked repeatedly and before he knew it her body was stroke stiff save for her moving fingers. There was a moment of rest then Penny’s hand shifted and again she bore down. Again Sheldon felt her tense.

“Fascinating,” he breathed.

“Show’s over, class,” Penny said in a dreamy voice.

It took Sheldon a moment before he realized he was still inside and quickly extracted his finger. He brought it to his nose and the scent was musky but not unpleasant.

“It’s not poison you know,” she teased.

“I’ll take your word for it.” He made to reach for his towel before he stopped. Taking a breath to steady himself Sheldon brought his contaminated hand to his very erect penis and began stroking. It didn’t take him long before he felt his climax.

“Just let it out,” Penny said, reading the tension on his face. He shook his head, no. “It’s ok, Sheldon.” She didn’t say a word as he desperately grabbed the towel and promptly came.

“You know I can’t stand messes,” he gasped. Penny smirked as she reached to pull him to her chest. “Penny, we have to change the sheets.”

“I know,” she said softly before gently kissing the top of his head.

“I need to shower,” he replied as he felt her hand through his hair.

“Just lie here for a moment and breathe.”

He closed his eyes. “Penny,” he sighed.

“Just breathe.”

xTBBTx

Wikipedia: North Magnetic Pole; Climate of the Arctic

Monopoles: A search for slow moving monopoles below the Parker bound—thesis.

‘Purple-headed warrior’; ‘Quivering mound of love pudding’: The Naked Gun 2½

‘The needs of the many outweigh the needs of the few or the one’: Wrath of Khan
“This is amazing!” gushed Raj as he poured over the data. “I can’t believe our grubby little hands got a copy of this before it’s published.”

“Dr. Dietrich said he welcomed my input before he put forth his second publication on Dark Matter filaments,” said Sheldon as he wrote on his office’s whiteboard. “Naturally we’ll use the data to further my own research as well.”

“I still can’t get over the filament’s length: fifty eight million light-years.” Raj leaned back in his chair. “Incredible.”

“Yes, well, it’s not like we have to walk its perimeter to garner what we need,” tutted Sheldon.

“I wonder if there’s a Nobel Prize in the works?”

“Unlikely. It was pure happenstance Dietrich and his team stumbled upon two galaxies matching their model out of forty thousand. They might as well have had a monkey throw a dart at a star chart.”

“I suppose,” Raj shrugged. “Of course not a lot of things occur without chance.”

“Luck is arbitrary,” sniffed Sheldon. He took a moment to calculate variables before he continued writing. “Whether the two galaxies were spotted first or twenty thousandth they still would have been found.”

“Destiny,” Raj smiled.

“Inevitability,” the lanky man countered.

“You need to be more of a romantic, Sheldon. There’s a mystery to the universe—”

“Which I’ll solve.”

Raj balanced a pencil on its eraser. “Yes but sometimes things just come together without rhyme or reason and it might be inevitable but I say it’s still magic.” Sheldon rolled his eyes.

“Next you’ll be getting your palm read with Penny.”

“Hey, we already exchange daily horoscopes.”

“Encouraging her delusion is not helpful, Rajesh,” Sheldon scowled.
Raj smirked. “So you’re telling me it was inevitable that a woman would come from Nebraska to California, move in across the hall and become your girlfriend?”

“No. It was the culmination of variables. If she’d never left Nebraska we never would have met.”

“And why did she leave Nebraska?”

“To seek her fortune in California as an ‘actress,’” replied Sheldon, his voice intonating the quotes around the word.

“No, Sheldon, she followed a dream. Like your dream of winning the Nobel Prize.”

“Aspiration.”

“Like my dream to talk to Amy,” Raj said softly.

Sheldon checked his earlier work on another whiteboard. Frowning, he made a correction.

“Ah yes, so how goes the grand experiment? I have every faith Amy can remedy your affliction.”

“I hope so,” said the astrophysicist. “I have a lot to tell her.”

“Hopefully not New Age hooey. She’s of an analytical mind and doesn’t ascribe to such nonsense.”

“Just like you,” Raj grinned. “And yet you ended up with Penny. Maybe analytical minds need a touch of the sensual after all. You like American born and bred while Amy likes a little Asian mystery.”

Sheldon stopped writing.

“And where precisely would Amy find her Asian conundrum?” he asked in a tone that sounded too heavy to be casual. Receiving silence, the lanky man capped his marker and turned to face the astrophysicist. “I believe I asked you a question.”

“Amy and I are seeing each other.”

“I see.” A twitch passed over Sheldon’s face. “You said you and Amy were just friends.”

“That’s because I never thought she’d be interested in me,” shrugged Raj. “I mean I’m an okay astrophysicist but I’m no Sheldon Cooper.”

“True.” Sheldon pursed his lips in thought. “It never occurred to me that my dating Amy would pale any future encounters with men. I really must apologize.”

“Believe me, she’s good,” replied Raj, thinking about their kiss.

“No Raj, she’s great.”

“So’s Penny.” Raj gave a little smile. “I don’t care what you say, Sheldon, we’re two of the luckiest men on the planet.”

“Using your notion I’d say Penny’s extremely fortunate to have found me,” sniffed the lanky man.

“Sheldon,” Raj said with an amused tone. “You’re so whipped it’s comical.”

“I am not,” the physicist said haughtily as he returned to his whiteboard. “I suggest if we’d like to
get out of here at a reasonable hour we quit chatting like ladies at a social and get back to work.”

“Yes boss.” Raj picked up the papers from the desk and resumed reading.

To his credit he waited a full minute before making a whip noise with his phone app.

XxX

Penny entered the apartment to find Leonard sitting on the couch with a pleased smile on his face as he enjoyed an episode of Babylon 5.

“I see you’re taking advantage of every second Sheldon’s away,” she said amiably.

Leonard pumpkin grinned. “It’s like risking getting caught with a dirty magazine by your mother.”

Penny sat on the couch next to him and spent the next few minutes watching the program. She didn’t know why Sheldon was so vehemently against Babylon 5. Granted she felt most of these science fiction programs copied from each other so what would she know about the finer nuances.

“I was talking to Sheldon the other night and he said you guys had pictures of polar bears from the Arctic,” Penny said.

“Yup. We were all giggling like idiots when Dr. Svenson pointed out the mother and cubs in the distance. Howard and Raj snapped pictures while Sheldon and I took turns with the telescope.” Leonard glanced at his neighbor. “Yes, even Sheldon was excited to see them despite his reminding us every five minutes of the protocol for dealing with bears.”

“So what was it like in the Arctic?” she asked innocently.

The physicist hesitated for a moment before answering. “Magical and hell on earth.” He brightened. “You should have seen the June solstice: the sun didn’t set at all.”

“You guys must have enjoyed that.” Penny angled herself to face her friend.

“Raj was tickled by the whole thing; as for the rest of us after ten minutes of enjoying the sun we went back inside and continued watching ‘The Thing’.”

Penny was incredulous. “You mean to tell me that you guys spent your time watching movies when you could have been exploring?”

“It was exciting for the first two weeks but after a while it was rocks, snow and ice—with the occasional bear of course.” Leonard thought for a moment before shrugging. “We just fell into a routine of sleep, work and movies.”

Penny snorted. “Sounds like here.”

“Can’t even escape Sheldon’s crazy even at the magnetic North Pole,” smirked Leonard. “Did you know he even had freeze-dried Thai food for Monday nights?”

“It was Sheldon you were traveling with. What did you expect?”

“True.” They continued to watch the program.

“He also told me about his experiment. Sounded pretty important,” Penny said as she stared at the screen.
“If he’d found the monopoles he’d have changed the face of physics,” Leonard said slowly.

“No wonder he was so excited when he thought he’d done it,” Penny replied evenly.

“Yeah,” Leonard said, face reddening.

“Leonard—”

He turned off the television and dropped the remote in his lap. “You don’t understand what it was like!” he said excitedly. “Sheldon was driving us nuts and there was literally no where to go. It was a matter of survival.”

“At Sheldon’s expense? What about his career?”

“I didn’t expect him to email his results as fast as he did. I guess he was excited,” he said sheepishly.

“Ya think?”

Leonard’s fingers toyed with the remote. “Are you mad?”

A crooked smile came to her mouth. “You know Leonard, if it was my experiment you’d screwed with I’d have beat the living hell out of you and never talked to you again. Don’t ask me why he stayed your friend, still considers you his best friend. But he does.” Penny shook her head. “Damn Leonard you’re so much better than this!”

“How. He said his expectations for me were low.” Leonard glanced at Penny. “Guess I met them.”

“You don’t get it do you?” she said with a shake of the head. “Leonard if we take it at face value that Sheldon didn’t think you’d be able to help him with his experiment then why the hell did he take you? Why were you so damn important that he wanted you to go? All of you to go? And if you say ‘to gloat when he found the monopole’ I’m so going to lose it on you.”

“I screwed up. I’m sorry.” He slouched into the couch.

“Not the one who needs to hear it, bub.”

“I know.”

Penny sighed. “It’s not completely your fault. I was such an idiot to think it was a little lie to make the best of a bad situation or something like that.” She leaned against the back of the couch and stared at the ceiling. “God, I said Sheldon’s problem was like the Star Trek movie. This so totally could have tanked his career and all I was worried about was getting into your pants. Some friend.”

“I know.” Leonard cocked his head. “What absolutely floors me is that he didn’t say what had happened to anyone. His retraction was brief.”

“And humiliating.”

“And humiliating,” he agreed.

Silence.

“How bad was it for him?” Penny asked.

The physicist shrugged again. “You know how Sheldon is: his declaration of success was anything
but humble. When he had to recant he was the laughing stock of the science wing. I remember walking with him down the hall and people would look at him and whisper or else outright snicker. Kripke was terrible.”

Penny frowned. “What is it with that guy anyhow? He’s really got it in for Sheldon.”

At this Leonard straightened up. “You have to understand Sheldon’s arrogant and even though we’re not in his league we’re not stupid,” he said stiffly. “We’re competent and contribute to our individual fields. Some colleagues choose to avoid Sheldon altogether while others like Kripke like to take him down a peg.”

Penny thought for a moment. “You know there was this girl who worked at the Cheesecake Factory I really couldn’t stand. She was a wannabe actress—zip it you—who thought she was such hot shit and did her best to let me know. But, and this is a big b-u-t, even though she got more acting jobs than I did and I wished her face would break out before every audition I always passed on her messages to her and congratulated her on her successes.”

“Well?” asked Leonard.

“Yu-P. There were some nights I cried myself to sleep thinking about how it was all so damn unfair. I did the acting classes and the dancing classes and prepared for auditions and slogged my way through a dead end job just to keep the dream alive and yet here she was doing what I was doing—only she made it work.”

“So what happened to her?”

“Got caught on a casting couch by a jealous wife,” Penny said with a satisfied smirk. “She quit the Factory soon after and went out east to lay low.”

“So you understand,” nodded the short man.

“Leonard, I didn’t do anything to her. She crashed and burned all on her own.” Green eyes met brown. “What you did in the Arctic was probably the worst thing anyone’s ever done to Sheldon. And as bad as Kripke is for the birthday ‘jokes’ and all the teasing he never sabotaged Sheldon’s work. Same with Leslie. That’s a line they never crossed. You did. And to make it even worse he covered for you. Your career should be over and yet in spite of what happened Sheldon took it in the gut for you.”

“I know.” Leonard lowered his head.

“Do you?” she snapped. “Do you really get what you mean to him that he’d do something this selfless?”

“I guess since we never talked about it the whole thing kind of blew over. Not that I’m saying it resolved itself,” he said to Penny’s angry stare. “It was a moment we’d unconsciously decided should remain buried.”

“Believe me Leonard it’s not healed. It was hard for him to talk about it. Sheldon needs to talk about it.” Penny sighed and put a hand on his thigh. “You’re not the only one who has to eat his own shit. I screwed up too. If I’m lucky I’ll have a lifetime to try and make it up to him.”

“You love him,” the physicist said.

“I love him,” agreed the waitress.
Leonard slowly nodded. “I’ll talk to him.”

xTBBTx

Pop Pop Pop Pop Pop

The sounds of paintball fire sounded in the distance as four camouflaged bodies entered the wooden shack.

“Leonard, what were you doing out there?” Sheldon seethed as he took off his goggles. “You’re even more inept than usual.”

“Sorry,” the curly haired man said as he slumped on a hay bale.

“What a way to mark my return—getting lit up by ‘Little Johnny’s’ fourteenth birthday party,” chuckled Howard as he took his usual position by the window and proceeded to reload his gun.

Raj wiped the dirt from his goggles. “It keeps us humble.”

“And Bernadette, Amy and Penny knowing we own our own Star Trek uniforms doesn’t?” retorted Howard. The astrophysicist conceded the point with a shrug.

Sheldon knelt and began sketching out a map.

“Perhaps a visual aid will help with basic comprehension,” he said.

“Maybe it’s the plan itself,” Howard replied.

“If you’d been here for Friday’s paintball meeting you’d have been better prepared to execute,” scowled Sheldon.

“Oh we’re being executed all right,” sighed Raj.

“I still say the plan’s too over the top,” shrugged Howard. “What do you think, Leonard?”

“Hmm? Oh. The plan’s ok,” replied the experimental physicist in a subdued tone.

“At last a voice of reason,” Sheldon said haughtily. “Now we’ll have to make some alterations to plan ‘Alpha Destruct’.”

“Self-destruct, you mean,” quipped Howard.

“I still prefer the title plan ‘Angry Ewok’,” mused Raj before taking a drink of water from his cantina.

“Oh yes, that’ll strike fear into our opponents,” said Sheldon through pursed lips.

“How about plan ‘Whimsical Wookie’?” the engineer said with a grin. Sheldon rolled his eyes.

“Gentlemen, can we get back to the task at hand?”

“I still say we should have a vote on the name,” said Raj.

“This isn’t a democracy this is war,” seethed the lanky man.

The astrophysicist turned to Leonard. “What’s your vote?”
The shorter man looked up. “Whatever Sheldon wants,” he mumbled as his fingers unconsciously fiddled with his gun sight.

Howard and Raj looked at each other.

“Come take a look,” Sheldon said. The other three complied and circled the map. “Now Raj will provide cover fire while Howard, Leonard and I exit the shack.”

“Why’s it always me?” pouted Raj.

“Because next to me you’ve got the best shot,” replied Sheldon as he made an ‘x’ behind a group of trees. “I’ll provide cover fire for Raj while you two regroup at the big pine. Then we’ll spread into ‘Warbird’ formation and travel in a north-westerly direction towards the tower.”

“How there?” asked the astrophysicist.

“Because children like playing in fortresses,” replied the theoretical physicist. Raj glanced around the shack but said nothing. “Now do you all have that?” He turned to his roommate. “Leonard?”


“The plan’s suicide. They’ll have the tower fortified.”

Sheldon stood up. “If laying siege were our goal—which it isn’t. By attacking with a few volleys of paint the children’s cries will call their cohorts back to the tower while we move onward to capture the flag.”

“That’s brilliant,” said Raj after a moment.

“Learn from me if you wish to live,” sniffed Sheldon.

Raj cocked his head. “Isn’t that from ‘Highlander’?”

“No,” replied Howard as he pulled down his goggles. “Connor McCloud said, ‘Come with me if you want to live.’”

“Kind of ironic for a game where there could only be one winner.” Raj made for the door and readied his gun.

“Here we rely on each other,” reminded Sheldon.

Leonard winced but said nothing.

xTBBTx

“Hey Howard.”

“Umm hi, Penny. Want to talk to Bernadette?”

“No, it’s ok. It won’t take long. I won’t be able to come over today. I got a crap load of Spanish homework emailed to me and I don’t have a prayer of finishing unless I start now.”

“You need any help?”

“Naa. You just got back. Spend time with your wife. She missed you. I’ll send the fruit salad over with Leonard. Have fun tonight.”
“I’d say the same but you know….”

“Boy, do I ever. Bye.” Penny hung up and slumped against her couch. After taking a moment to feel sorry for herself she got up and took the bowl of fruit from her refrigerator and ventured across the hall.

“Hey,” said Leonard as he looked up from his book.

“Wow, it smells amazing in here,” she replied as she made her way to the kitchen.

“Sheldon baked this morning. Date loaf and zucchini bread.”

“Tell him to save me a piece of each. She made room in the refrigerator for her fruit.”

“Why not have a piece there?”

“I’m not going,” Penny sighed. Leonard inserted his bookmark as she returned to the living room. “Señor Chang went mental last night and emailed the class a whack of homework. I’ll be lucky if I even get half of it done,” she pouted. “Anyways I need you to take the fruit salad over. I already told Howard I’m not coming.”

“You sure you don’t need any help?” he asked.

“Howard already offered. Let me see how it goes first. Besides, all work and no play make scientists dull girls and boys.” Here she chuckled. “God, with all the playing I did I have a decade of solid work ahead of me.”

“It won’t be that bad,” soothed Leonard. “After the first three years it’ll all become so monotonous you won’t know what day it is.” Penny stuck out her tongue as he smiled. He checked his watch. “I’m picking up Leslie in a half hour. Good thing Sheldon’s at Amy’s. I don’t think I could handle a trip out to Howard’s with the two of them in the car.”

“Veterans fought for peace. Let’s respect that today,” agreed Penny. “Have fun.”

She returned to her apartment, dragged out her back pack and began setting up her workspace at the coffee table. Deciding she needed a little something to cheer her up she lit a scented candle before popping the cork on a bottle of strawberry zinfandel. She grabbed a box of vegetable crackers from the cupboard, took out a wineglass and brought the items to the table.

Penny sat amongst her spread and poured herself a glass of wine. She took a sip and sighed as she looked over the printout of her homework assignment. This’ll take forever. Taking up her phone she flipped through her contacts and dialed.

“Hey Bestie.”

“Hi Amy. Can I speak to Sheldon?”

“He’s preparing the biscuit batter at present. Since we’re eating chili he thought it appropriate.”

“Save me a bowl, will ya? I got swamped with homework so I won’t be going.”

“That’s unfortunate. Shall I have Sheldon call you?”

“It’s ok. Just tell him to drop in later when he gets home. I’ll need the break—or talked off the ledge.”
“Noted. Study wisely.”

Penny said goodbye and hung up. She felt overwhelmed as she again looked over her homework. She took another sip of wine and let the smell of lilac from the candle sooth her.

XxX

Knock Knock Knock “Penny.”

Knock Knock Knock “Penny.”

Knock Knock Knock “Penny.”

Sheldon heard a noise in the apartment before the lock turned and his girlfriend opened the door.

“What are you doing here?” she asked, surprised. In response he held out two Tupperware containers.

“As you requested: a serving of chili and whole wheat biscuits.”

“Yeah but I meant after you went to Bernadette’s,” she said as she took the containers and brought them to the kitchen.

Sheldon stepped into the room and closed the door. “Amy said you were ‘swamped’ with homework so I thought to make myself”—here he paused as he spotted the bottle of wine on the coffee table—“available.”

“Sweetie, you don’t have to. Most of it’s stuff I get. It’s just a lot of work.” She settled into her spot on the couch. “Besides I’ve made myself a little nest to work from.”

“So I see,” he said with pursed lips. “Only I have a suggestion to make your homework easier to comprehend.”

“Besides a brain transplant?” she quipped. Her good humor turned to confusion as Sheldon took the wine bottle from the table and placed it on the counter. “I was drinking that.”

“No, you’re not. You’re doing homework,” he countered as he returned to take her glass.

“Sheldon, what the frak? I’m just relaxing while I work. It’s not a crime,” she said testily.

“No on my watch.” He poured the wine down the drain and rinsed the glass. “Prior history should have taught you that academics and alcohol don’t mix.”

“I’m not planning on getting drunk,” she scowled as she crossed her arms.

“Imbibing alcohol causes temporary cognitive impairment. You need all your faculties at hand.”

“Gee thanks,” Penny growled.

Sheldon came to stand in front of the television. “I can show you studies that—”

“You know this isn’t exactly helping me get my homework done,” she snapped. “Go to Bernadette’s. I’ll be fine.”

“No,” he said firmly. Penny’s eyes widened in surprise. “I’m bringing over my laptop and we’re going to work on our individual tasks.”
“Sheldon, what the hell’s gotten into you?”

They stared at each other.

“I don’t want you drinking by yourself,” he said evenly. “In fact if I had a choice I would see you abstain altogether.”

“Is this about the vodka? Look, I’m sorry. I should have asked you.”

“I knew what I was doing—even though it was against my better judgment.” He shook his head. “I didn’t want you drinking alone and I didn’t have an alternate plan.”

“You’re making me sound like an alcoholic,” Penny said angrily. “Since school’s started I’ve been good.”

“You’ve been intoxicated twice.”

“That works out to once a month. Better than I used to be.” She narrowed her eyes. “How come you never said anything when I used to party all weekend?”

“That was your decision to make.” Penny’s jaw dropped.

“What, so now you’re making decisions for me?”

“Actions that affect our relationship require communal input,” he explained. “For instance, I’ve consulted Amy Farrah Fowler for assistance with my mysophobia and have kept you apprised of the situation.”

“So how’s my having a drink once in a while such a major disaster?” asked Penny.

Sheldon’s jaw tightened. “Need I remind you my father was an alcoholic.”

“Sheldon—”

“I’m not saying you can’t have a drink when we’re out with friends or at a restaurant. I just don’t want you drinking when we’re at home or you’re by yourself,” he said earnestly. “You don’t need anything to stimulate your sense of worth. Good Lord, woman, I like you. Obviously you’re exceptional or else I wouldn’t waste my time.”

She took in his grave stare.

“I think I could use some help after all,” she said gently. He nodded and turned to go. “Sheldon, you’re forgetting something.” She indicated the counter with her head. Sheldon walked over and grabbed the wine bottle.

“You won’t regret this, I promise,” he said seriously.

“I don’t want to hear any more comments about how much gum I’m chewing,” she warned.

“I’d recommend sugar-free.” He opened the door. “I’ll return shortly.”

Penny cocked her head as she thought over what had just transpired. She didn’t need to give him the wine but it seemed the dramatic thing to do. The right thing to do if his grip on the bottle had anything to say on the matter.

“He better not have a problem with chocolate,” she said grimly.
Leonard entered the apartment with his laundry in hand.

“What ya doing?” he asked as he observed his roommate writing what looked like a ledger on his whiteboard.

“It’s mid-month so I’m estimating Penny’s expenditures.” Sheldon continued writing.

“Why not do it on the computer? You have to transfer it there anyways if you’re going to print a copy for Penny,” the curly haired physicist suggested as he went to his room.

“I’m not giving it to her,” Sheldon called out. “This is the first month she’s budgeting on her own. I won’t know the results until the first.” Beside ‘Allowance’ he jotted down forty dollars.

Leonard tucked his t-shirts in the dresser drawer. “So where did you get your data from?”

“Observation and assessment of behavioral patterns: she refreshes her weekly spending money on Mondays; does her laundry on Saturdays; pays her electric bill on the first Monday of the month; shops for groceries on Fridays since the flyers come out the day before—”

“You have to be the only couple I know who start their ‘Date Night’ writing out a grocery list,” chuckled Leonard.

“Just because it’s ‘Date Night’ doesn’t mean her nutritional needs should fly out the window,” replied Sheldon as he tallied his numbers.

“It’s a wonder you don’t keep track of her fiber content.” Leonard put his detergent in the hall cupboard and went to wash his hands.

“I do my best but she’s not cooperative,” the lanky man sighed. “I keep telling her a healthy colon is a happy colon but she doesn’t want to get with the program.”


“Yes, well, she’ll get no sympathy from me the next time she finds herself constipated.”

“So how’d she do?” asked Leonard as he came into the living room and flopped into his chair. Sheldon scanned his board. “Fairly on track as far as I can tell—unless she’s shopping online.”

“Now there’s trust for you.”

“As you’re well aware the woman has a shoe addiction.” Sheldon picked up the eraser and began cleaning his board. “She has more shoes than Elmer Fudd has bullets in his rifle.”

“Clothes are important to a woman,” explained Leonard. “Not everyone can buy their wardrobe at a comic book store.”

“That’s unfortunate,” said Sheldon as he washed his hands in antibacterial cleanser. “I find t-shirts say a lot about what kind of person the wearer is. It’d be so much simpler dealing with people: ‘Get out of the way, he’s feeling Hulky today’; ‘Look at that guy—thinks he’s so Superman’.”

“Yeah but you wear specific shirts based on what day it is,” Leonard pointed out. “Kind of throws your idea out the window.”
“That’s because you’re not observant,” sniffed Sheldon. “For instance, I wore a Bat-Man t-shirt on Stardate 120512 instead of Green Lantern.”

“How could I not have put that on my calendar,” quipped the shorter man.

Sheldon tutted. “With the way you track details it’s a wonder you haven’t burnt your fingers off with the laser.”

“The day I need to know what you’re wearing to do my job I’ll be Professor Rothman.”

“I highly doubt that, Leonard,” Sheldon said with a twitchy smile. “Obviously the last thing on Professor Rothman’s mind is clothing.”

Leonard laughed.

xTBBTx

“‘Another vis-e-tor’,” said Raj as he flexed his fingers. “‘Stay a while…. Stay forever!’”

“Muah-ha-ha,” chortled Sheldon.

“Now, now, we better focus. We’ve only got six hours of game play to finish off Professor Atombender,” said Howard as he settled into a chair to Raj’s right.

“You know I always looked up to Professor Atombender,” said the theoretical physicist. “His name alone sends shivers of delight up my spine.” There was a pause before he shuddered with a smile.

“It was cool that he was wanted for hacking the national security computers considering when ‘Impossible Mission’ came out.” Raj moved his secret agent down the hall into another robot-filled room looking for code pieces.

“Nineteen eighty four is late,” scoffed Howard. “In the sixties MIT students wrote machine language programs to delete all other programs and seize control of the school’s mainframe computers.”

“Yes, but how many of them went on to build a secret lair and fill it with electrified robots and a floating black ball of death?” sniffed Sheldon before taking a sip of water.

“I bet Atombender used Unix,” smiled Raj. “Ok I’ve got a robot ‘snooze’ code. Which room had the computer I couldn’t get to?”


“Thanks.” Raj put the robots to sleep, searched the computer and exited the room. He watched the secret agent jog into the elevator. “You know it’s amazing how much cardiovascular stamina this guy has. I use a treadmill four days a week and couldn’t do that.”

Howard cocked his head to regard his friend. “Of course you’re not exactly a game character.”

“How do you know?” shrugged the astrophysicist.

“How do you know?” shrugged the astrophysicist. “Maybe we’re in the Matrix and all of reality as we know it is nothing more than code in a giant machine?” He looked in awe at the computer monitor. “And here we are, computer simulations playing a game with a simulated character who’s hacking computers.”

“Quiet,” snapped Sheldon. “Hollywood is so desperate for content they could use that ridiculous idea for another Matrix film.”
Howard sucked the air between his teeth. “I dunno about that. I mean it’s been thirteen years since the first film. Carrie-Anne Moss’s breasts can only look perky for so long.” Sheldon rolled his eyes.

“I wonder if they’d use the plot idea from ‘The Matrix Online’ and bring her back from the dead?” mused Raj.

Sheldon pursed his lips. “Why not? The Matrix Four has all the makings of a good zombie picture with Keanu Reeves and the franchise trying to resurrect past successes.”

“That’s not fair,” pouted Raj. “I thought his portrayal of Alex Wyler in ‘The Lake House’ was sensitive yet powerful.”

“Are you out of your mind? His ‘acting’ ability”—here Sheldon used air quotes with his fingers—“was one of the downfalls of the film along with plot and direction.” Howard chuckled.

“You mean you actually saw it?” The lanky man flushed slightly as he cast his eyes downward. “Wow. And you call me whipped.”

Raj grinned. “I already gave him the big ‘woo-pah’ but Sheldon still denies it.”


“Why don’t you count the number of science fiction movies I’ve seen?” Sheldon said with a twang.

“The Butterfly Effect,” Howard replied.

“Or fantasy?”

“Ladyhawke.”

“I’d recommend Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind for your next movie night,” Raj told the physicist. With pursed lips Sheldon got up from his chair and went to the washroom.

“Good one,” Howard laughed. His best friend frowned.

“I wasn’t kidding.”

The engineer’s smile faded from his face.

xTBBTnx

“I can’t wait to see The Cranberries,” Penny squealed as Sheldon and she neared the school gymnasium.

The physicist was unimpressed. “Here’s hoping they look better than they sound.”

“Oh come off it. I saw your hand tapping to the beat.”

“You better not have,” Sheldon said with a bit of a twang. “You were driving.”

Penny raised an eyebrow as she cocked her head. “That’s what you get for not giving me the ‘pay attention to the road’ kiss.”
“Maybe I should look into Leonard taking over your taxiing duties,” he mumbled.

“Now, now we have a Car Agreement,” she tsked. “Are you saying you don’t want to honor a contract?” Sheldon’s mouth twitched.

“You still get to keep the car.”

“Sheldon, it’s the principle of the thing.”

He was incredulous. “Since when do you adhere to the letter of a document?”

“When it’s annoying,” she sweetly before giving him a playful bump with her shoulder. “Besides, we’re not staying out too long. I’ve got a date with Howard tomorrow to finish off my Spanish homework.”

“So I’m to understand that my ‘date’ with you is coming to a school dance while Howard’s is a Spanish tutorial?” Sheldon shook his head. “As your boyfriend I should have had first choice.”

“Very funny,” said Penny with a crooked smile. Sheldon blinked at her.

“What is?”

Hand-in-hand the pair entered a dimly lit gymnasium with colored balloons and streamers hanging from the walls. Penny smiled to herself; Pasadena City College might not be Caltech but at least it knew a party wasn’t a party without paper streamers. 'Yeah right, Penelope.'

Sheldon stuck his free hand in the pocket of his tan and white jacket. The last thing he needed was to contract a staph infection or some other insidious contaminant. As he looked around he realized he only had one good memory associated with a gymnasium—using his ability to bounce a ball higher than Kripke in order to win the office. All other moments in the living hell that was ‘physical education’ were a series of humiliating events stretched throughout his preadolescent life. Lord knew what he would have gone through if he had to endure high school.

“There’s Abed and Troy,” Penny said and gave a wave. A moment later and her classmates came to her side. “Hey guys,” she said amiably.

“Hi,” Abed said with a raise of the eyebrow and poker face. “Fievel made it to the next round of experiments.”

“You guys aren’t going to cut Fievel up after are you?” winced Penny. She’d learned after making a horrible mistake not to get too attached to Amy’s lab animals.

“Fievel?” asked Sheldon. “As in Fievel from ‘An American Tail’?”

“Fievel’s our lab rat. Our first experiment was to train him to come to us when we sang a particular song,” explained Abed. “In our case it was ‘Somewhere Out There’. Troy makes an awesome James Ingram.”

“A Nobel endeavor if ever I’ve heard one,” Sheldon said. Penny squeezed his hand tightly.

“It’s not like our school can afford lasers,” she reminded him.

At this Abed brightened. “Caltech has lasers?”

“A wide variety actually,” said Sheldon. “The latest is an Ultrafast laser which should be operational in the new year.”
“Cool. Cool. I’d love to film some of them in action.” Abed turned to Troy. “The effects would improve our ‘Kickpuncher’ project.”

Sheldon raised an eyebrow. “‘Kickpuncher’ as in the low budget series starring Don ‘The Demon’ Donaldson as a police officer who has been cybernetically enhanced, so that his punches have the power of kicks?”

Troy grinned. “Exactly.”

“Should I even ask?” smirked Penny.

“Troy and I did a fanvid. It’s on YouTube,” said Abed.

“I’ll have to look for it,” the waitress said diplomatically as she spotted Annie and Jeff approach. “How’s it going with the homework?” she asked the newcomers.

“Finished,” said Annie. “I just have to print it up tomorrow.”

Jeff gave a wry smile. “I could say ‘finished’ too although it would apply more to my general state of mind as opposed to my homework.”

“Don’t sweat it,” said Penny. “I have the afternoon booked with Howard, who knows Spanish. We can go over to his place and work together.” Jeff hesitated as Sheldon and he locked eyes.

“I’m sure Howard won’t mind,” said the physicist evenly.

“I’m glad,” replied the ex-lawyer with a little smile as the stage lights shone and the curtains opened to reveal brown-haired Dolores O’Riordan and her Celtic band mates ready to rock the place. “So, who’s up for a little dancing?” he said with a grin.

“I’ll go procure some beverages,” said Sheldon.

“One dance,” grinned Penny as she took his other hand and attempted to pull him forward.

“Oh I don’t think so,” he said adamantly.

“I’ll make it worth your while,” she said coyly.

“We go to the Los Angeles Live Steamers Railroad Museum for our next ‘Date Night’.”

A pause. “Well played, Sheldon,” she said as she let him go. “I’ll have a diet Coke.”

The physicist took his smug face and went to find the cantina.

xTBBTx

Community Wiki: Kick Puncher

Wikipedia: Impossible Mission; Trinity

Windowsecurity: Computer Hacking: when did it start?
Leonard took a deep breath and entered the apartment. He set his keys in the bowl and turned the lock on the door before crossing over to the couch and sat on its arm. Sheldon was at his computer writing away and Leonard knew he hated it when he was disturbed but for the shorter man it was now or never.

“Sheldon? Can we talk?” Sheldon turned away from his computer and Leonard felt the full weight of his blue eyes. “I just want to say that you’re my best friend.”

“I also hold you in high regard,” replied his roommate.

“The only thing is I haven’t always acted like a best friend. Or friend for that matter.”

A pause. “I can’t disagree, no.”

Leonard sighed as he nervously rubbed his thumb. “You ever do something so stupid you wish you could take it back?”

“Not telling Penny how I felt contributed to her leaving Pasadena,” replied Sheldon. “My hesitation almost cost me dearly.”

“Yeah but you went after her.”

Sheldon shrugged. “It was non-optional. My work drives me but I’ve come to recognize that human relations are also relevant. Even if sometimes they’re uncomfortable.”

“Sheldon, I’m sorry,” Leonard said softly. Sheldon turned back to his computer.

“What’s done is done. I’ve moved on.”

“It still doesn’t mean you shouldn’t hear an apology,” countered the shorter man. “I betrayed your trust. I tampered with your research. Hell I even plotted to kill you four times.”

Sheldon paused in his typing. “I only heard about three.”

Leonard was sheepish. “Yeah well the last one involved a reenactment of Han Solo and the Tauntaun sleeping bag trick.”

“I see.”

“I think I’ve lost focus here.”
The lanky man swiveled his chair to face his roommate. “Leonard, I appreciate your acknowledgment of guilt and subsequent apology.”

“I’m just amazed we kept on being friends,” Leonard said with a little smile.

“I didn’t have a choice,” Sheldon said quietly.

“What do you mean?”

Sheldon stared at his hands. “I was the Beyonder. My own universe. Then you came into my life and pierced a hole in the fabric of reality with your movie nights and paint ball adventures and gaming nights. At first I kept to myself but like the Beyonder I grew curious enough to look through that pinhole and watch you and Howard and Raj engage in social interaction. It was puzzling. Irritating. Yet I couldn’t stop watching until I found myself crossing through the hole into your universe and involved in your outings and activities. They became part of my routine not because of a non-optional social convention but because they were fun. I’d never experienced anything resembling friendship before but you all opened my eyes to the possibilities.”

“Oh God, Sheldon,” Leonard groaned.

The tall man regarded his roommate. “I knew how I responded to your betrayal would have long-lasting and irreversible consequences. Telling you to go to hell would mean more than just you moving out of the apartment. It would mean the end of vintage gaming night and comic book Wednesdays. It would mean I’d be alone again and I couldn’t have that. It was perhaps my greatest moment of weakness. I, too, betrayed myself because I should have defended my work. I didn’t. I ‘dealt with it’ and let the moment pass all because the great Sheldon Cooper was too afraid to be alone,” he said in a self-deprecating voice.

Leonard was heartbroken. “I’m sorry Sheldon.”

“According to the Friendship Clause of the Roommate Agreement as well as my limited understanding of the whole friendship paradigm your actions were contrary to the notion of comrades in arms. I never suspected you capable of such a deception. I’m still at a loss to understand your actions.”

The curly haired man sat up on the couch arm. “You were a tyrant. The longer we spent out there without positive results the more impossible you became.”

“Why didn’t you talk to me?”

Leonard rolled his eyes. “It’s impossible to confront you when it comes to your work. When you’re that obsessed you’re impenetrable.”

“You know my work comes first,” scowled Sheldon.

“Beyond reason. Beyond everyone else.”

“It’s not like I hid this side of me, Leonard. My drive to know demands my level of commitment. No more. No less. I realize you aren’t as focused in your work and frankly your career reflects this. Your result is solely of your own making.” Sheldon’s eyes were ice. “I can no longer say the same.”

Leonard nodded. “After I got Penny out of my immediate train of thought I realized it took a hell of a lot of guts for you to come back.”
“I didn’t have anywhere else to go,” admitted Sheldon. “In Galveston I would be Mary Cooper’s heathen son talking gobbledygook about the earth revolving around the sun and other such devilish notions.”

“It’s not that bad there, is it?” asked Leonard. Sheldon snorted.

“My own mother’s a Creationist. If I can’t convince her of the universe’s origins I doubt I’d have any better fortune with her church group.”

“You can’t even convince Leslie about String Theory.”

Sheldon frowned. “Her stubbornness on the entire subject either indicates an inherent irrationality or else a burning desire to be contrary to me at all cost.”

“She could also believe she’s right.”

“Do you think she’s correct?”

“I don’t see how that’s relevant,” said Leonard. Sheldon sat up in his chair.

“Do you deride her for believing in loop quantum gravity? Once it’s proven false will you gloat?”

“Of course not. Well at least not to her face,” Leonard said sheepishly.

“And yet when it comes to me you’re not as accommodating,” Sheldon said evenly. “When Kripke sabotaged my radio interview you laughed. You passed me over for Penny to attend the Hadron Collider even though I’ve longed to see it and moreover would have appreciated its significance. You let me feel the exhilaration of success with my experiment for your own nefarious purpose. I don’t understand. Are we in competition?”


Sheldon cocked his head. “Most people are inferior to me. You shouldn’t take offence.”

“Well I do. We all do. You continually rub it in our faces,” Leonard said crisply. “Yeah, we didn’t go to university at eleven and yeah we didn’t win the Stevenson at fourteen.”

“And a half.”

“Whatever. The point is we don’t deserve to be treated like we are.”

Sheldon was silent. “So you’re saying I deserved to be treated as I was in the Arctic?” His roommate sighed.

“No. No you didn’t. I can’t even explain it to myself why I did it. I mean I know why—you drove us crazy—but we should have had it out with you not at your expense. I lost sight of where we were and what we were doing.” Leonard looked at the floor. “I forgot we were first and foremost scientists and let things regress to the dynamic we had at home: Raj, Howard and I against you.”

“I hadn’t realized we were adversaries.”

“We’re not. We’re friends.” Here Leonard gave a self-deprecating smile. “Maybe I’m a lousy one but I still am your friend. I should have apologized earlier.”

Silence.
“Raj expressed his regrets to me a week after our return. Beyond the communal ‘we’re sorry’ Howard has said nothing on the matter and as an acquaintance I expect no less; hence the reason why he shall always remain distanced from me.” Sheldon leaned forward to look Leonard in the eyes. “Make no mistake we’re still friends because I’ve decided we are,” he said matter-of-factly.

“Thank you,” the shorter man said meekly.

“You’re a conundrum to me Leonard. Knowing you has almost cost me my career and yet if not for your persuasions I never would have gone after Penny. Karmic balance as Raj would say.” Sheldon narrowed his eyes. “You’ve got a second chance to define yourself. Don’t blow it.” He turned back to his computer and continued typing.

Leonard was almost in a daze as he walked to his room, his relief so profound he felt lightheaded. He closed the door and lay on his bed. His mind was a whirl of memories as he thought of the first time Sheldon Cooper opened the door to apartment 4A and asked him what was the sixth noble gas. How the lanky man made minimal eye contact and spoke more to his clipboard than Leonard. How positively clueless he was to even the basics of social interaction.


“Still describes Sheldon,” Leonard said with a little smile although he knew he was being unfair. When he really thought about it he realized his roommate had truly bloomed over the years as Sheldon now laughed and joked and loved. And forgave.

It wasn’t until this moment that Leonard truly realized what Sheldon meant to him. As much as his roommate drove him nuts there was a sense of kinship between them that he found lacking in his own family. Sheldon might share similar traits with his mother but there was a fundamental difference between the pair when it came to Leonard: Beverly only voiced disappointment while the physicist showed genuine concern. Sheldon might have been an ass when he suggested the experimental physicist give up researching for teaching but that didn’t stop him from collaborating on projects that helpedpad Leonard’s résumé.

What it all came down to was that Sheldon took a pantsing just so his roommate could impress a girl they just met. He wasn’t just Leonard’s best friend; he was the best part of friendship.

Sheldon Cooper was truly once in a lifetime. He made Leonard a better physicist.

His forgiveness showed him how to be a better man.

xTBBTx

“I’ve got the perfect accessory for when you contact central command from the space station,” Leonard grinned to Howard. He reached behind his chair and pulled out a white cardboard with a red reflective light in the middle. “Hello Dave. ‘I’ve just picked up a fault in the AE35 unit. It’s going to go 100% failure in 72 hours’.” The guys chuckled while Penny and Bernadette were puzzled.


“The space station doesn’t have anything like that up there does it?” asked Penny. Leonard shook his head.

“H.A.L. is an advanced artificial intelligence. Our technology isn’t that far ahead.”
“The only thing the crew has to worry about malfunctioning is Howard’s space toilet,” giggled Raj. The engineer glared.

“Zero-Gravity Waste Disposal System,” thank you very much, he grumbled. Bernadette put a comforting hand on his thigh.

“It’s still an art,” she said. “It’s all magic when you really think about it.”

Sheldon looked at her incredulously. “Really Bernadette? And you call yourself a scientist.”

“Now Sheldon,” said Amy, “despite the cramped conditions and drinking your own recycled urine there still is a romance associated with space travel.”

“There’s nothing ‘romantic’ about it. Space travel’s still fraught with dangers no matter the level of technology. If you recall, crewmembers died in the first Star Trek movie in a transporter mishap,” said Sheldon.

“I somehow think that won’t be a problem,” smirked Leonard. “The Russians might have us beat at the moment with their Soyuz rockets but I don’t think they’ve solved matter to energy to matter conversion quite yet. The only thing the station has to watch out for is orbital decay and the likelihood of letting that happen is remote.”

“You forgot space debris,” reminded Raj. “It’s a sad day when mankind can’t even pick up after itself in space.” He shook his head disapprovingly as he sipped from his beer.

“Maybe Howard can set up a satellite recovery and recycling business,” suggested Leonard. “Just think about all the cool things he could pick up on space walks.”

“Not for me,” said the engineer. “The last thing I need is to float away. I had problems staying down at the bottom of the swimming pool for God’s sake.”

“Don’t worry about that,” replied Sheldon evenly. “Eventually your gravitational orbit will decay enough that you’ll return to earth. Well indirectly as you’ll burn up upon reentry but the idea’s there.”

“Thanks Sheldon, you’re such a comfort,” the engineer said wryly.

“Merely stating the facts. How you choose to interpret them is solely up to you,” shrugged the lanky man.

“Well I say we look at the positive,” said Bernadette brightly. “Nothing’s going to go wrong.”

“Actually, there hasn’t been a trip to the space station that hasn’t had some sort of minor—”

“Not now, Sheldon,” murmured Penny.

Bernadette looked at the theoretical physicist who put on an absurdly exaggerated smile. XxX

“I can’t believe how much dirty laundry you make when you’re away for a week,” said Howard as his wife drove the both of them home. “Ma had to do three loads to catch up.”

Bernadette flushed. “I still can’t believe you took your laundry to your mother’s.”

“It makes her feel like she’s taking care of her baby,” he replied. “Besides she has to use up the rest
of her hypoallergenic detergent.”

“Still, if you can’t take care of the basics just going to Houston how will you do that hundreds of miles in space?”

“It’s not like we have a laundry mat,” Howard chuckled. “We’re tight for space just washing ourselves.”

“So you don’t need anything?”

“Just some clothes and your star pendent. I promised I’d bring you back a piece of the universe.” Bernadette signaled and turned onto a side street. “Where are we going?” he asked, confused. In response his wife pulled alongside the curb and put the car in park. “Bernie?”

The microbiologist burst into tears.

“I don’t want you to go,” she sobbed. “I don’t want you murdered by killer machines or falling into our atmosphere or losing your oxygen or—”

“Bernadette,” Howard said softly as he popped his seatbelt and snuck an arm around her shoulders. “I’m going to be fine.” ‘God willing.’

“It’s just that we’re just starting our life together and I don’t want anything to happen to you.” She leaned into her husband. “How can I take care of my Howie when he’s all the way up there?”

“You just save up all of that loving until I get back,” he said. “Well unless you want to send some topless photos of yourself,” he chuckled. Bernadette smacked him in the belly.

“Be good,” she said with a little laugh.

“Actually that’d be a bad idea since it’d be seen by everybody at NASA and I don’t want to share you with anyone else.” He paused, suddenly feeling awkward.

“You won’t,” she said as Bernadette kissed him on the cheek. “I’ll be counting every day until you’re home.”

“It’s kind of funny. Going into space has always been my dream and yet when I get the opportunity to go all I can do is count the moments until I’m back on earth.”

Lips met and suddenly the couple felt a desire to relive their sexual exploits—Toyota style.

“Are you sure?” asked Howard. “We don’t want to get caught.”

“That’s true,” Bernadette said as she straightened her seatbelt. “Now that you’re taking those pills you’re not as fast on the trigger.”

“Eyah.” Howard snapped on his belt. So far all was going well with Bernadette’s drug trial on premature ejaculation.

“You’re still my little space cowboy,” his wife said as she started the car.

“I’ve got sperm that jingle jangle jingles,” the engineer sang.

Bernadette shook her head although she did smile. The joke wasn’t particularly funny but she couldn’t get enough of the pleased look on Howard’s face.
He really did light up.

“I want to renegotiate our contract,” Penny blurted out as she dried her hair. Perhaps this wasn’t the best time to be doing this given her long shift at work but she was desperate and as everyone knew that called for extraordinary measures.

“Which contract is this?” replied Sheldon as he put down the remote and shifted awkwardly on Penny’s couch. “As you know we have several: Friendship, Relationship—”

“Let’s talk budget.” At once he pursed his lips.

“Non-negotiable.”

“Just hear me out,” she said, putting her towel on the arm of the couch. “School’s been getting more stressful and I’m spending longer in study groups. I need more money so I can buy something to drink.”

“You can always bring something from home,” he said evenly.

“Yeah but by the time group’s on the pop’s warm or the coffee’s way strong and cold,” she pouted.

“I thought you liked your coffee cold?”

“Only when it comes with whipped cream and caramel drizzle.” Sheldon rolled his eyes.

“And costs five dollars a cup. But I digress. Perhaps we can solve your dilemma by looking into a thermos.”

“Why not take five dollars out of my grocery money?” Penny asked. “I’ve got more than enough food.” Immediately her boyfriend’s face darkened and he folded his arms across his red plaid housecoat.

“We’re not sacrificing nutritional requirements for caffeine-laced beverages,” he growled.

Penny shuffled over and snuggled. “Please?” she purred, widening her green eyes.

“No.”

“Pretty please?” she whispered into his ear as her hand drifted to his groin.

At once Sheldon gripped her wrist and moved her off.

“Sexual manipulation?” he asked with a raised eyebrow. “You must have me confused with Leonard.”

“Of course not,” Penny said in exaggerated shock. She massaged Sheldon’s forearm with her other hand. “You’re much too smart to fall for something like that.”

Sheldon cocked his head. “Your reverse psychology won’t work either.”

Penny sat back in a huff. “I thought we were supposed to negotiate things in our relationship?”

“This isn’t a relationship issue, it’s business.”
“Then I have a formal proposal.”

“I’m listening,” replied the physicist.

“We set up a one-time slush fund for each semester of twenty dollars for drinks only. Once it’s gone it’s gone and I’m out of luck,” offered the waitress.

“Twenty dollars per academic year,” Sheldon countered. Penny snorted. “It will make you choose your extra drinks wisely.”

“Make it twenty five and we’ve got a deal.” It’d give her two extra coffees a month plus four dollars float for emergencies.

Sheldon looked to the ceiling as he mulled. Penny chuckled.

“You can always take advantage of my vulnerability,” she stage whispered.

“Shortly,” he replied with a crooked smile. “You’ve yet to address how you’ll come up with the extra money.”

“I do one extra shift at the Cheesecake Factory every school year to make up the difference.” She leaned her head against his shoulder. “This is where you’re supposed to be less of a hard-ass.”

Sheldon nodded. “As long as the extra shift takes place in the month prior to the commencing of your academic session I’ll concede to you all profits after taxes and fuel expenses. That should provide you with more than twenty dollars.”

“Done!” grinned Penny.

“I’ll draw up the contract amendment for you to sign.” Here he smiled. “See? Things run much more smoothly when negotiations are conducted according to formalized procedure.”

“Ah,” she said as she got off the couch. “And here I was going to celebrate by making out. How unprofessional.”

“Technically we’ve concluded our proceedings,” Sheldon said with a twitchy mouth.

“Yeah but it’s not Thursday or Saturday,” Penny warned.

“I want to renegotiate our contract,” he said as he stood.

His girlfriend smirked. “Give me a written proposal and I’ll look at it at my earliest convenience.”

“Fair enough.” He made to leave.

“Sheldon, where are you going?”

“To write up the proposal,” he said seriously. “I’ll have it for you tomorrow.” He delivered a quick kiss before disappearing from the room.

Penny chuckled. “What am I going to do with you, Moonpie?”

xTBBTx

Raj chuckled to himself as he flipped through the comic bins. Leonard raised an eyebrow.
“Something funny?”

“I was just thinking about the other night when we were talking about space and Howard’s toilet. It brought me back to the blueprints for the Enterprise 1701-D and how they only had two washrooms detailed on the entire ship,” smiled the astrophysicist.

“They couldn’t be bothered graphing in every washroom. They’re irrelevant to running a ship,” Sheldon countered.

Raj put a comic on his pile. “I object. If I’m on the bridge and have to go boom-boom I need to know where the public washroom is.”

“Main engineering,” offered the curly haired man. “Have a nice walk.”

Sheldon pursed his lips. “You can always go back to your quarters.”

“Too time-consuming,” said Leonard. He raised an eyebrow as a thought came to him. “Although it was interesting that the architectural draftsman noted the washroom in Picard’s quarters.”

“You can’t have a captain without his chair,” quipped Raj.

“I wonder if Picard said, ‘Engage’ to work the flushing mechanism?” winked Leonard.

Sheldon moved to another set of bins. “Actually you have to credit Star Trek for tackling the topic of waste extraction systems. As you recall on ‘Enterprise’ chief engineer Trip Tucker is given the duty of answering Molly McCook of Worely Elementary School in Kenmare, County Kerry, Ireland concerning what happens to waste once the proverbial toilet is ‘flushed’.”

“The bio-matter resequencer sterilized and broke down waste matter so it could be used to manufacture storage containers, boots and other things,” explained Leonard.

“Can you see Penny walking into a shoe store asking for a pair of ‘Hush Poopies’?” giggled Raj.

“God knows after blowing an afternoon shopping for shoes I felt like crap,” laughed Leonard. “Bet you’re counting the minutes until you’re up to bat,” he teased Sheldon.

“Why on earth would I consent to spend any amount of time shoe shopping with Penny?” Sheldon shook his head. “Madness.”

“You’ll be surprised what you’re capable of when it comes to procuring coitus,” replied his roommate.

“That’s because you didn’t have a formal arrangement,” sniffed Sheldon. Leonard cocked his head.

“Aw Sheldon, you didn’t make Penny sign a Relationship Agreement did you?”

“Of course,” replied the lanky physicist. “It’s all encompassing in nature although amendments can be made either physically or orally.”

Leonard and Raj looked at each other before bursting out laughing.

“What?” asked Sheldon. “I don’t see what’s so funny about employing a formalized procedure. Having a comfortable position from which to work allows for greater flexibility and—”

Raj guffawed as he picked up his comics and ventured to the graphic novel section.
Sheldon tutted. “Here’s hoping Raj is more attentive than this when it comes to addressing Amy’s needs.”

“Ok, now you’re pulling my leg,” said Leonard.

“Pulling it how?”

“Never mind,” shrugged the shorter man as he went back to peruse the comic bins.

“Wow,” said Penny as she opened the door to apartment 4A. “The turkey smells terrific.”

Sheldon closed the oven and placed the meat thermometer in a bowl.

“We’re almost at one hundred and seventy six degrees and the juices are running clear,” he said. “The turkey will be ready for six o’clock. How goes the mashed potatoes?”

“Boiled and ready for a beating—just like the Cowboys,” she sighed. “Anyways, I need Leonard’s soy milk, she said as she grabbed it from the refrigerator.”

“Remember only do half,” the physicist warned. “Mashed potatoes require cream and butter or else they’re merely smushed potatoes.”

“Agreed,” she said with a kiss on the cheek. Immediately Sheldon pursed his lips.

“Refrain from spreading saliva when food is present,” he tsked. “What did they teach you at the Cheesecake Factory?”

“They didn’t cover ‘working with a paranoid germaphobe’ in the manual,” she replied sweetly.

“You may scoff,” Sheldon said as he poured some antibacterial cleanser on a paper towel and applied it to his cheek. “But saliva can be the source of many illnesses like mononucleosis and streptococcus. Don’t forget that as we speak we’re expelling minute traces of saliva into the air.”

“So much for ‘say it, don’t spray it’, Penny said with a disgusted look.

“An impossibility.” He threw the paper towel in the garbage and proceeded to sanitize his hands. “If I had it my way there’d be no conversing during food preparation.”

Penny cocked her head as a thought struck her. “How come you eat so much takeout then? How do you know someone hasn’t tampered with your mi krop or dropped a mushroom or two from your pizza?”

“For one thing I research my restaurants thoroughly and conduct inspections every six months,” Sheldon explained as he pulled the homemade pumpkin pie from the refrigerator so he could access the cranberry sauce.

“I can put the pie in my fridge,” offered Penny.

“My pie will go no where near Amy’s monstrosity,” Sheldon said tersely. “Pumpkin Pie without eggs. Meemaw would have a fit.”

“Still I’m going to try a piece. It’ll be interesting.”

“No lips that taste inauthentic pie shall touch me until properly washed and mouth sanitized,” he
sniffed. He poured the sauce into a bowl and put saran on top as Leonard and Leslie came through the door.

“Hey-o,” said Leonard. “Where do you want the salad?”

“My place for now,” said Penny. “Sheldon’s got to take out the turkey.”

“I suppose,” Leonard said hesitantly as he looked from Leslie to Sheldon. “I’ll be quick,” he said to his girlfriend.

“No, no, take your time,” Leslie said sweetly. “I’m sure Sheldon and I can go over the inaccuracies on his whiteboard while we wait.” The theoretical physicist stood tall and glared in response.

“Well,” said Penny as Leonard and she crossed the hall. “Can’t say this holiday will be boring.”

“I’ll just be thankful if we get through this in one piece,” sighed Leonard. “Still they are improving; just a year ago we’d be hearing—”

“Of course I know how to use a thermometer,” said Sheldon in a loud voice. “As can be seen by your work I obviously have more skill with precision instruments.”

“I agree,” replied Leslie in an equally boisterous voice. “It’s miraculous how you can hit the urinal every time. Must be like watching your equations go down the drain.”

Leonard set the salad on Penny’s counter.

“I suppose I should get back there,” he said.

Penny shrugged. “Or you could crack open a root beer and watch the game while I make mashed potatoes.”

The physicist paused to think.

“You’re just angry I’m right,” barked Sheldon.

“You mean incredulous,” snapped Leslie. “Of course your belief in string theory shows you’re good at guesswork.”

“Guesswork?!”

“What the hell,” Leonard said as he closed Penny’s door and headed to the refrigerator for a drink. “Go Team Blue!”

“Cowboys,” smirked Penny.

“You could call them Star Troopers and I wouldn’t know the difference,” laughed Leonard.

“You mean like when I had to explain to you who the L.A. Lizards were?” Penny asked innocently.

“Exactly.” Leonard flopped on the couch. “Although to be honest I really don’t get the ‘Lizards’ thing. What does a lizard have to do with basketball?”

“It’s sports, Leonard. It’s not made to make sense,” his ex-girlfriend said with a smile.

The curly haired man nodded and watched the game.
Amy pulled down the hem of her wool skirt as she made herself more comfortable on her couch.

“Ready?” she asked. To her left Raj nodded and smiled. The neurobiologist clicked on the digital recorder. “Session twenty seven. I will attempt to engage subject in dialogue by using sexually charged phrases as catalysts.”

“Amy?” Raj said, wide eyed. When she said tonight’s exercise involved the playful part of his brain he didn’t think it was the boom-shaka-laka-boom-boom part.

The neurobiologist pushed her glasses up her bridge and gave a twitch of a smile. She cleared her throat.

“My eyes dilate taking in every inch of your melanin-enriched goodness,” she said evenly. A pause. “Your turn.”

Raj blushed and his mouth felt suddenly dry. “Amy….” His eyes glossed over her pale skin and high forehead. Her hair: brown, long and lustrous framed her face. He smiled shyly.

Amy moved closer. “I’m hot, Rajesh. My axillas are dripping and I’m panting like a bitch in heat.”

In response he leaned away. “Amy,” he said pleadingly.

“Yes?” she asked, eyebrow raised.

“Iahhh….” He clamped his mouth shut. Again Amy inched her way over.

“Enflame my loins. Come relish in the softness of my labia minora as it flushes in crimson delight.” She put her hand on his knee, garnering an “Eep” from her boyfriend, before leaning close to his face.

“Rub your engorged phallus next to my vulvic temple, my Asiatic prince.” She wiggled her eyebrows and smiled.

“Amy, I….”

She unbuttoned her collar. “Feast your eyes upon my bosom with nipples thrusting like ro—”

In a desperate bid Raj covered her mouth with his and kissed for all he was worth. After a few moments Amy sat back for a breather.


“Yes,” he managed to pop out between kisses. “Yes,” he said again. Suddenly it occurred to him that he was speaking. “Yes!” He put his hands on Amy’s shoulders and pushed her back. “Yes!” he said again in excitement.

“A new word,” smiled Amy.

“Yes!”

“We need to celebrate.”

“Yes!”
“Let’s shed and do the nookie,” she said with a wink.

“Uh…no.”


The astrophysicist stuck out his tongue.

Penny sat on the couch flipping through the channels as she waited for her boyfriend.

The toilet flushed.

'House. Repeat, no.' CLICK 'Discovery channel documentary. Nope.' CLICK ‘Jersey Shore’. Didn’t like this episode.’ CLICK

The sounds of gargling and spitting.

'Maybe we can watch ‘Fifty First Dates’?' CLICK 'Sure feels like that sometimes.' CLICK

Sheldon returned to the living room and sat beside Penny.


“You know maybe French kissing isn’t for you,” she said evenly. “Just putting that out there.”

Sheldon nodded as he watched the channels flick by.

Knock Knock Knock “Penny.”

Knock Knock Knock “Penny.”

Knock Knock Knock “Penny.”

“‘Sup Sheldon?” Penny asked as she opened the door. “You finally going to tell me what all the pouty faces at dinner were about?” In response the sucky look on his face became stern.

“I’m not being a ‘pouty face’,” he replied. “I’ve been processing disturbing news I received this morning from Gablehauser.”

“What happened?” Penny asked with concern.

“Apparently Dr. Turner has been called away this week on ‘personal business’”—here he used his fingers to make quotes—“thus leaving me to teach his class on Thursday,” said the very unimpressed physicist.

“Ah. Not looking forward to another night of ‘KMN’, huh?”

“I don’t want to teach these poopy heads!” Sheldon snapped. “Their ignorance is dwarfed only by their absolute lack of enthusiasm for quantum physics.”

“Quantum physics—oh boy!” Penny cheered as she shook her fist.
“You’re not helping,” scowled Sheldon.

“I’m not sure what you want me to do,” the waitress said as she turned from her door and went to the kitchen.

“Email Gablehauser and tell him I’m sick,” he replied as he closed the door.

“Lying Sheldon?” Penny tsked. “First I cover for you playing hooky then it’s giving an alibi when Kripke’s body is found floating in the bay. It’s a slippery slope.” She took a mug out of the drain rack and poured herself a glass of juice.

“I’m not playing ‘hooky’,” Sheldon said tersely. “I’m a grown man.”

“So tell Gablehauser yourself.”

A pause.

“If you don’t want to help me just say so,” Sheldon snapped.

“I’m not saying that,” Penny sighed. “Look Sheldon you’ve got to get over this. I mean, someday you’re going to be teaching full time, right? Leonard said you guys did that after you finished researching.”

“Nice to see you’ve got my career path set before me,” glared Sheldon.

“That guy you like, what’s his name…Stephen Hawking. He was in town for a lecture and he can’t even talk!” She crossed over to the couch and sat. “You’ve got to shake this and better now than later when you’ve got an auditorium full of people.”

“I’ve already taken up Amy’s suggestion and consulted you on ‘acting’”—here Penny pursed her lips at his tone. “I’ve no other alternative than calling in sick.” His girlfriend patted the seat cushion next to her.

“You can go over the physics stuff with me.”

Sheldon gave her a double look before he snorted.

“And afterwards you can quiz me on Billboard’s Top One Hundred.”

“Sheldon—sit,” Penny said sternly. He obliged. “Now, talk to me about physics.”

He gave a sigh. “The lecture is on the Einstein-Podolsky-Rosen paradox or why Einstein was a poor loser. He couldn’t get over the lack of deterministic causality and—”

“Blah, blah, blah,” said Penny as her thumb and fingers flapped together. “Don’t tell me about it, talk to me about it.”

“I was talking about it until you interrupted.”

“No, you were telling me about Einstein and his paradox thingie. I want you to talk to me about it.”

“I don’t know what you mean,” Sheldon said after a moment. “How am I not talking if I’m telling you something?”

Penny put her glass on the table and turned towards her boyfriend.
“Talk to me about physics,” she said simply.

“Physics comes from the ancient Greek word physika.”

“Telling.”

“Physika means the science of natural things,” Sheldon said with a frown.

“Telling.” Penny checked her nails.

The lanky man paused. “It’s a warm summer evening in ancient Greece, you’ve finished your shopping at the local market, or agora, and you look up at the night sky,” he said with an air of sarcasm.

“Telling,” Penny said with a little smile. That was one physics lesson she’d never forget. Fig Newtons indeed.

“I don’t know what you want from me,” growled Sheldon. “Am I to include interpretive hand gestures and facial cues?” He gave an exaggerated smile before sitting back in a huff, arms folded.

Penny took a breath. “Why did you go into physics?”

He looked at her. “Why not chemistry or biology?”

“Chemistry means spending half your time doing dishes in the lab and biology is the study of slimy things,” he replied.

“Let me start again. Why aren’t you a train conductor or flag guy?”

“Flag guy? You’re making vexillologists sound like the signalmen on airplane tarmacs,” he snorted.

“You want my help?” Penny said with a raised eyebrow.

“Fine.” A pause. “Both of them are hobbies.”

“And physics isn’t?”

“Of course not. It’s my career.”

“Why?”

“It interests me.”

“So do trains.”

“Trains are different. They employ a mix of motive technologies and adaptations making them suitable for a wide variety of tasks—and they make an adorable chug-a-chug sound and have whistles,” he said with a smile.

“And physics?”

“Satisfies my need to know.”

“Why not just read about it?”

“I want things solved within my lifetime.”
“So the only reason why you’re in physics is because you want to know things?”

“Wrong. I want to know everything—that’s why I’m in physics.” Sheldon amended.

“You’re telling me there’s no passion there? Nothing that gets your heart pounding and blood racing?” Penny asked incredulously.

Sheldon cocked his head. “When I’m close to a breakthrough I get antsy but I find if I chew on a Red Vine it calms me down.”

Penny sighed. “Ok, maybe all this Spockism is great for research but it makes for a crappy teacher.”

“Exactly my point. I’m genetically incapable of lecturing.” Sheldon pulled out his phone. “Now that we’re agreed you can call Gablehauser and—”

She pushed his hand down.

“Let’s play a game.” Sheldon rolled his eyes. “Work with me,” Penny smiled. “Ok, if physics were a color it would be….”

“Polychromatic.”

“What?”

“Nearly every light source is polychromatic.” Sheldon noted Penny’s blank look. “You’ll recognize monochromatic frequencies by their common names: red, yellow, orange, green, blue and violet. Each ‘color’ consists of one frequency. Polychromatic light consists of many different frequencies.”

“Sheldon….”

“White light is polychromatic.” Penny raised an eyebrow as she cocked her head. “White,” he murmured as his lips twitched.

“Ok, and aside from it being polychromatic you chose the color white because….”

“In terms of light white is a culmination of all colors within the visible spectrum.” Penny shook her head.

“Un-believable.”

“I assure you it’s not,” replied the physicist. “In the seventeenth century Isaac Newton discovered that—”

“Stop!” Penny kept her hands in the air as the room fell silent. “You’re telling me there’s never been a moment where you’ve been blown away by physics? That there’s never been a moment when you were so in awe you didn’t know what to do with yourself?”

Sheldon gave a crooked smile. “The first time I read Feynman’s ‘QED: The Strange Theory of Light and Matter’. Mind you I was seven so was obviously impressionable but nevertheless the way he illustrated the differences between classic and quantum physics totally dazzled me. Beyond the chaos of atoms in continuous states of collapse in a vat of electromagnetic radiation lies, with a mere increase in the size of Planck’s constant from zero, stable atoms capable of forming molecules. It showed me the universe, raw, naked before me.” He looked incredulously at his
“Most girls compete with their boyfriend’s ex-girlfriends. Me? I’ve got to contend with the whole fracken universe,” Penny said with a grin. “Still it gives me an idea. You know the trick about pretending that the audience’s naked?”

“Tom-Foolery.”

“What if instead of the audience being naked you thought of the universe being naked?”

“That’s a preposterous idea,” he said with a twang.

“Then why are you blushing?” she asked. Suddenly her eyes widened. “Wait a minute. You do see the universe naked all the time. Every time you look at that whiteboard of yours you’re oogling her quantum assets, sultry strings and quivering quarks.”

“Stop that,” Sheldon sniped, his cheeks growing a deeper crimson.

“And those long equations you roll out like a centerfold—”

“It’s not like that!” he snapped. “It’s elegant and multifaceted and breathtaking. Physics expresses that beauty and if you have to ask me why my numbers are beautiful I can’t tell you because the answer is obvious: if they aren’t beautiful, nothing is!”

“Now you’re talking,” Penny said softly. She reached out for Sheldon’s hand. “Keep talking and you’ll be fine.”

“I—don’t know if I can,” he replied, equally as quiet.

“I’ll help you. We’ve got time.”

“Four days,” he said dubiously.

“You won’t be ‘Dead Poet’s Society’ caliber but I promise you’ll be better than before.” She squeezed his hand. “You’re not alone, Sheldon.”

His tight mouth relented as a twitch of a smile passed over his lips.

xTBBTx

Wikipedia: Quantum Mechanics; Mathematical Beauty

Physics Info: Light

CSICop: Why Quantum Mechanics Isn’t So Weird

Imdb: 2001-A Space Odyssey

Memory Alpha-the Star Trek Wiki: Toilet; Biomatter Resequencing

About com: Kissing diseases
“Just a sec. Let me see if I have this straight,” said Penny as she swept her hair to her right shoulder before snuggling against her boyfriend on her couch. “The colors we see in rainbows are found in the visible spectrum.”

“Correct,” replied Sheldon.

“And the visible spectrum is only a part of electromagnetic radiation.”

“Electromagnetic spectrum consisting in order of increasing frequency and decreasing wavelength: radio waves, microwaves, infrared radiation—”

“How the Predator sees.”

“Correct. –Visible light, ultraviolet radiation, X-rays and gamma rays.”

“Okay, and electromagnetic radiation is an energy given off by particles.”

“Charged particles, which also absorb as well as emit EMR, which exhibits wave-like behavior as it travels through space.”

“And that, yeah,” Penny said with a smirk. In response she felt a kiss on the top of her head. “Ok kimosabe, lead on.”

“Electromagnetic radiation has both electric and magnetic field components, which stand in a fixed ratio of intensity to each other and which—”

“Whoa there. Back up.”

“Magnetic fields influence electric currents and magnetic materials. Electric fields surround electrically-charged particles and time-varying magnetic fields.”

Penny batted her eyes. “Not getting it.” Sheldon took a moment to think.

“In a radio there are passive two-terminal electrical components called capacitors and inductors. Both are used to store energy but a capacitor does so in its electric field and an inductor, in its magnetic field. In the case of an inductor, a voltage is produced from the magnetic field forming around a current-carrying conductor, which for this example we’ll use copper. A capacitor is a little more complex: it consists of two conductors separated by a non-conductive region. It’s assumed to be self-contained and isolated with no net electric charge and no influence from any external electric field.”

Penny laughed. “You know the only thing I got out of that? Inductors have sex while capacitors
“I assure you capacitors participate in coitus. For example, they often copulate with inductors.”

“Of course. Us promiscuous inductors have to show you capacitors how it’s done,” she said, wiggling her eyebrows.

“Oh really?” he said with an amused expression. “Obviously you haven’t heard about Micro Farad and his exploits.”

“Do tell.”

“One evening, with his charge at full capacity, Micro Farad decided to get a cute coil to discharge him.” Penny looked up at her boyfriend, mouth open. “He went to the Magnet Bar to pick up a chip called Millie Amp. He caught her out back trying self induction; fortunately, she had not damaged her solenoid. The two took off on his megacycle and rode across the Wheatstone Bridge into a magnetic field, next to a flowing current, to watch the sine waves.”

“You’re making this up.”

“Be my guest if you want to look it up,” shrugged Sheldon. “You want me to continue?” Penny settled down and closed her eyes. “Now Micro Farad was very much stimulated by Millie's characteristic curve. Being attractive himself, he soon had her field fully excited. He set her on the ground potential, raised his frequency, lowered her resistance, and pulled out his high voltage probe.”

“I’ve so got to remember this,” Penny chuckled.

Sheldon began gently stroking her hair. “When he inserted it in parallel, he short-circuited her shunt. Fully excited, Millie cried out, "ohm, ohm, give me mho".” Penny laughed out loud. “As he increased his tube to maximum output, her coil vibrated from the current flow. It did not take long for her shunt to reach maximum heat.

“Now with the excessive current shortening her shunt, Micro's capacity rapidly discharged – every electron was drained off. But that was not the end of it. Indeed, they fluxed all night, tried various connections and hookings until his bar magnet weakened, and he could no longer generate enough voltage to sustain his collapsing field. With his battery fully discharged, Micro was unable to excite his tickler, so they went home.”

Penny turned and wrapped her arms around his neck. “That has to be the dirtiest thing I’ve ever heard you say,” she purred.

“Now I know how to get your attention when we talk science,” he said with a twitchy smile. Lips met.

“Ohm, ohm, give me mho!” Penny cried desperately. She took in the genuine Sheldon Cooper out-and-out spontaneous grin—the first for her!—before returning her mouth to his. Breaths were fused as lips smacked repeatedly, rhythmically until foreheads met signaling a break. “You should smile more often,” she gasped. Sheldon leaned back to regard his girlfriend.

“I do smile.” A little smile crossed his face until it was interrupted by a twitch.

“Nice try,” Penny smirked. “That’s just thirty some facial muscles at work.”
“The face typically has forty three although some people have more and others up to forty percent less thus varying the level of facial expression.”

“That’s not your problem. God, I must have seen you scowl at me fifty different ways,” she chuckled before planting a kiss on his nose, which wriggled in protest. “You have a beautiful smile you know. It’s like spotting a rainbow.”

Sheldon raised an eyebrow. “Which means—?”

“It’s in the visible spectrum,” she said before sticking out her tongue.

“Excellent,” Sheldon said evenly although his twinkling blue eyes gave his pleasure away.

“At the end of the day, Loop Quantum Gravity makes definite predictions so it can be tested well before your make-believe bedtime story,” Leslie said with a glint in her eye.

“I could also make predictions with tea leaves but that doesn’t mean they’re true,” fumed Sheldon. He looked accusingly at Leonard. “Why did you bring her here?”

“I wanted to eat out with her for once and it’s Tuesday,” replied Leonard.

“Umm, Leonard, technically Sheldon’s the habitual Cheesecake Factory patron not you,” Howard reminded. The curly-haired physicist thought for a moment.

“You’re right. Now I’m going crazy.” He shook his head before taking a sip of his pop.

Penny pulled out her writing pad as she arrived at the table. “Ready to order?”

“I’ll have the barbecue bacon cheeseburger, barbecue sauce, bacon and cheese on the side,” said Sheldon as he handed over his menu.

“Lactose-free fajitas, fish and chips and pork chop with baked potato for the rest?” Penny asked with a smirk. The guys readily agreed.

“Boy the spontaneity in this group’s at an all-time low if Cooper’s the only meal she can’t predict,” scoffed Leslie. “I’ll have the roast beef and baked potato, gravy on the side.” She looked at a giggling Raj as she handed over her menu. “What’s got Silent Bob in a tizzy?”

“Just your comment about Sheldon,” smiled the engineer. “Since day one he’s only ever ordered the barbecue burger.”

“Barbecue bacon burger with cheese;” amended the lanky man.

“I see,” nodded Leslie before turning to her boyfriend. “You’d better watch it; the ‘Cooper Field’ is slowing down your elementary meal selections until eventually every one will be a lactose-free fajita.” She smiled coolly at Penny. “Be a good boson and get me another glass of water?”

“Of course,” Penny replied with a waitressing smile and left.

“Speaking of boson I heard that Dr. Beaulieu’s off to Cern again,” Leonard said with pursed lips. “This is what, the second time in three years?”

“I hardly see why he should,” Sheldon replied haughtily. “It’s not like his work’s that important. Still I suppose he’ll do whatever he can to make himself believe what he’s doing isn’t derivative.”
His blue eyes flashed to Leslie. “You must know what that’s like.”

“Yeah my work’s boring compared to yours since I have to stay within the bounds of reality,” she retorted as Penny arrived with her water. “Not everyone can make claims about spotting Slo-Mo the Monopole.” Here Leslie flashed a sweet smile. “You see dead people, too?” In response Sheldon’s jaw tightened as he glared.

“Anyways,” Leonard said gently. “Let’s just move onto another subject, shall we?” He looked pleadingly at his girlfriend. Leslie shrugged.

“I’ll go freshen up,” she said as she stood. “Nothing stimulates the body like a good ass-kicking.”

“You did not ‘kick my ass’,” countered Sheldon.

“Better watch what you say, Sheldon. You don’t want to type out another retraction.” The female physicist smirked as Sheldon turned away to stare at the tablecloth, his face a sea of twitches.

Leslie chuckled to herself as she entered the ladies’ room. Teasing dumbass was like shooting fish in a barrel but she really couldn’t help herself. In face it was kind of a civic duty to keep him at bay.

She looked into the mirror as the washroom door opened and saw Penny enter the room.

“I heard what you said to Sheldon,” said the waitress.

“What, so now he’s got you fighting his battles for him? Sad.” Leslie began washing her hands.

“He doesn’t know I’m here,” Penny corrected. “Look, I know you guys argue all the time and hey, I’m cool with that. Call me guilty for teasing him. I just wish you’d stop it with the monopole thing.”

“If he can’t take the heat he should stay out of the kitchen.” Here Leslie gave a short laugh. “How ironic since that’s where he told me I should be.”

“What?”

The physicist turned off the tap and reached for a paper towel. “I only knew Cooper by reputation until I encountered him in Dr. Falstaff’s office. I asked about using the laser for my project and ol’ dumbass piped in that he wanted the laser himself and that his experiment was more important. Then he went on to say that I should abandon my work with high-energy particles for laundry and childbearing.” Penny was stunned.

“Wow.”

“That’s the only reason why I joined that stupid ‘physics bowl’ team: to shut Cooper up.” Leslie smiled. “It was magic.”

“I never knew he said that to you,” Penny frowned.

“There’s a lot you don’t know about Sheldon. Before he met Leonard no one wanted to go near that sexist egotistical jackass.” Leslie folded her arms across her chest. “Believe me, you think he was odd when you met him you only experienced the dim version. At least with Leonard and the two Mouseketeers Sheldon’s managed to put together some semblance of humanity.”

“He’s getting better,” Penny said defensively.

“Humility helps. The monopole experiment took the swing out of his step. Whenever he thinks
himself so above us mere mortals I like to remind him he’s not so far ahead.”

“I thought it was hard to detect the monopoles?”

“Next to impossible in my estimation.”

“So then his experiment was doomed before it even started.”

“That was to be expected. The best he could achieve was the elimination of a frequency or two at which the monopole could be detected. How mundane for someone like the great Sheldon Cooper,” smirked Leslie. “No, he couldn’t settle for anything less than finding the monopole. That’s what made his retraction all the more sweet. From infallible to ridiculous. I have it framed in my office.”

“What if he didn’t make a mistake?” Penny said coolly. “What if instead of the real data he was fed other data?”

Leslie narrowed her eyes. “What are you talking about?”

“Sometimes things aren’t funny no matter how you look at them.” Penny regarded the physicist. “Drop the monopole comments. Sheldon might put up with them but I won’t. And believe me I might not have fifty degrees after my name but you don’t want to mess with me.” The Nebraskan checked her watch. “Your dinner should be ready.” She put on a waitressing smile and left.

Leslie turned to the mirror and waited for the flush on her face to fade before returning to the table.

xTBBTx

She opened the door to find Sheldon at his computer. Penny was later than usual since she had a Spanish project to complete. Crossing the floor in her housecoat and slippers she stepped behind her boyfriend and put her hands on his shoulders. Peering at the screen she found herself lost in a sea of math symbols and twenty dollar words. She couldn’t get over that Sheldon read and understood this stuff much less wrote up responses.

This was a part of him she’d never know. Oh, Penny got the emotional content: his joy and frustration as he puzzled over the numbers could be seen in his stance. How he held his dry-erase marker. Whether he pursed his lips or pushed his tongue into his cheek.

He was a proud man. Arrogant really. But with so much potential at an early age how was Sheldon supposed to be any different? He built a CAT scanner out of household items for goodness’ sakes!

And here he was now thirty years old and on the verge of solving the universe. Wearing his Wednesday pajamas and plaid housecoat. She saw the Hawkman logo on his white t-shirt.

Sheldon really was a wonder as his Beautiful Mind made room for physics and superheroes. Neither belief canceled out the other; in fact Penny was sure they fed off each other. She didn’t get all the nuances of comic books but from overhearing about a zillion conversations on the subject at apartment 4A she knew that at the heart of it all—beyond Superman’s Kryptonian origin, beyond Bat-Man’s tragic loss—a superhero was someone who dared to stand up and make a difference. Someone who used his extraordinary talents to do extraordinary things. Things people like Penny couldn’t even begin to imagine.

Yes they were cheered when they did something monumental but at the core there was always something about a superhero that the citizens he protected feared. He was always the Other. A freak. Crazy because he was assumed to be fearless.
Sheldon wasn’t fearless. He feared a lot of things: dogs, bears, getting sick. Germs. Penny would never forget the look on his face when he freaked over her touching him.

But he fought. Was still fighting. For them. For himself.

Amy had once told Sheldon that his interest in comic books was ‘lame-o’. That a brilliant man like him should have a vice worthy of his stature.

She couldn’t be more wrong.

Each day through his whiteboard he traveled to the far reaches of time and space, reconstructing the universe’s origin particle by particle. His thoughts were big so his dreams had to be even more grandiose to keep up.

Like the Last Son of Krypton Sheldon possessed gifts that put him above ordinary men. Unlike the Man of Steel, however, he refused to put on a suit and glasses and pretend to stumble blindly so as to fit in. He stood out. Moreover he willingly stood apart. Eleven years old and he entered university, fleeing the neighborhood bullies and an imploding home life.

Penny knew from the moment she saw his board and took in his smile that Sheldon was Beautiful. She could feel the weight of his concentration on her body as they talked; his face a contrast of pale skin and piercing blue eyes that she later swore could sometimes see through walls.

She would never truly understand Sheldon Cooper but what she did know was that behind all his big words and ideas was a young boy who dreamt he could fly and never looked back.

Eat your heart out, Superman.

Noticing his empty water bottle Penny took it and went to the refrigerator for another one. She placed it on the coaster without disturbing Sheldon and gave the physicist a kiss on the head before quietly departing.

xTBBT

“…Of course part of the reason why the EPR paradox fails lies in Einstein’s refusal to abandon his rigid definition of locality. Serves him right for calling quantum mechanical predictions ‘spooky action at a distance’.” A gaspy laugh.

Silence.

Sheldon turned his head away from the class to glance to his open briefcase and the dozen or so Post It notes stuck to the liner.

‘Relax’ said one in Penny’s curvy print.

The physicist took a breath.

“Given your status as the university’s academic cream of the crop I’m sure you’re all familiar with Bell’s derived inequality which showed a testable difference between the predictions of quantum mechanics and local hidden variables theories?” He cocked his head. “Shall I take the silence as an indicator of ‘yes’ as opposed to stunned ignorance?”

A glance. ‘Don’t belittle’

“At the end of the day does it tell us anything about nonlocality?” he began again.
“It depends on the interpretation of quantum mechanics,” said a blond-haired student.

“Such as…?” Sheldon pursed his lips. “Come on people, think!”

“In the standard interpretation the wave function is still considered a complete description so the nonlocality is generally accepted,” replied a woman as she busily typed away on her phone.

“Of course there’s still debate over what this means physically. For instance we could say that—” Sheldon paused.

‘Talk don’t tell’

“Well let’s just forget what they say and just do.” He picked up a marker and began writing on the board.

‘Don’t turn your back longer than five seconds’

He glanced over his shoulder, pretending to look at his reference sheets on the podium, before returning to his equation. Line after line appeared on the board until Sheldon stepped back to scan his work.

“Now wrap this around your sweet patootie,” he said as he returned to the podium.

“That’s not possible,” said one student. “The rules of quantum theory don’t allow us to violate Tsirelson’s bound of 2*2 even if we exploit measurements of entangled particles.”

“If you want to stay constrained I’m sure you’ll make someone a great science teacher,” Sheldon replied. “I’m interested in conversing with physicists.” He wrote another equation. “Note the explicit set of non-signaling correlated measurements.” Again he stood back. “And all this means?”

“Parts of Nature violate the predictions of quantum theory,” replied a young man as he typed furiously on his iPad.

“Drastically violate,” amended Sheldon with a satisfied smirk. “Show me how.”

XxX

“Here’s one,” said Leonard as he scrolled his phone. “‘Dr. Cooper’s crazy. QM only sees partial violations when’—”

“‘QM’?” asked Penny before taking a sip of juice. She leaned over to read more of the post.

“‘Quantum mechanics’,” her neighbor answered. “She’s responding to the lecture.” He scrolled to the next posting. “‘Dr. C: What up with the jacket?’”

“I couldn’t talk him out of the plaid,” Penny sighed. “He was anxious enough without having something else to worry about.” She read further: “‘Dr. Cooper’s class: zzzzWTF!zzzz’.”

“That’s something I’ve never seen before,” said Leonard. Penny raised an eyebrow.

“You’re kidding. ‘WTF’ is ‘what the fu—’”

“I know what that means,” smirked Leonard. “I meant I’ve never seen a registered pulse during a Sheldon Cooper lecture.”
“This cat’s definitely alive,” the waitress said excitedly.

“Technically I think life requires a sustained heartbeat,” began Leonard before taking in Penny’s teasing glare. “But I suppose we can’t be too picky,” he said with a wink before a maniacal look came to his face. “‘It’s alive! It’s alive! It’s alive!’”

Penny giggled. “Didn’t you say something like that when we were having sex?”

“Yeah, I was kind of referencing the Frankenstein quote although it becomes clear to me now that shouting out ‘She’s alive!’ in the middle of sex is kind of—”

“Creepy.”

Leonard nodded slowly. “Creepy is a word. Not the one I was going for but an acceptable answer.” Penny kissed him on the cheek.

“Maybe you should make it multiple choice next time.”

He knew it was suicide but couldn’t help himself.

“You mean something like: Leonard’s penis penetrates which orifice—(a) mouth; (b) vag—”

Penny creamed him with a pillow.

xTBBTx

“Thank you guys,” Penny gushed as she gave Amy a hug. “It’s been so long since I’ve had my nails done.” The neurobiologist smiled.

“Rajesh says his manicurist is the best,” she said evenly.

“Your cuticles won’t know what hit them,” smiled Raj as he gazed at his hands.

“We seem to be on the same wavelength as we’re taking care of another body part,” smiled Leonard as he handed his ex-girlfriend a card. “Happy Birthday.”

Penny opened the envelope to find a gift certificate for ‘Shoes 4 Less’.

“Shoes!” she squeaked as her arms thrust into the air. “My feet thank you.” Penny looked to Leslie. “Both of you.” The optical physicist nodded as she took a sip of her wine.

“Howie and I have been so proud of you,” said Bernadette. “You’re working so hard we decided you need a night off to kick back and relax so we’re giving you a girls’ night on the town.”

“After the school year has concluded,” Sheldon added.

“You heard Coach,” Penny grinned.

“Yes, well, someone has to remain practical.” He shook his head. “Shoes and nights of revelry? At least Amy and Raj’s gift has some medical benefit.” The lanky man pulled out an envelope and presented it to his girlfriend.

“It better not be a Staples gift card,” Bernadette admonished.

“I hadn’t thought about that,” Sheldon replied. “I’ll keep that in mind for Christmas.”
“Thanks Bernie,” Penny said with a smirk as she pulled out a card with a picture of a cat playing with a ball of string with the caption ‘String Theory. I Haz It’. She patted Sheldon on the knee. “I knew you secretly liked LOLcats.”

“Yes and let’s keep it secret by never discussing or showing me a LOLcat ever again,” he said drolly.

“A Starbucks gift card! Hel-lo iced coffees!” Penny gave him a kiss on the cheek.

“Stimulants, Sheldon? What kind of example are you setting?” tsked Leonard with a smirk.

“Normally I’d agree but speaking as her financial advisor the caffeine card is beneficial to her budget,” replied the theoretical physicist. “Besides, it keeps her perky.”

“Gee thanks,” Penny said as she read the card:

‘Learning has always come easy to me so I have to admit it’s difficult watching you struggle in your studies. My first instinct is to rush in and give you the answer but I know I can’t.

This is your dragon to slay not mine.

Let me provide you fresh arms in the form of one free class plus books.

I’m in awe of your bravery, my Queen P.

Ever yours, Dr. Sheldon Cooper’

Her green eyes flashed to her boyfriend’s face.

“Thank you, Sheldor,” she said softly.

“You’re welcome,” he said with a little smile.

xTBBTx

“Almost there,” Leonard murmured into Leslie’s unruly hair. In response the female physicist smiled and ran her hand over his bare chest.

“You mean your objective wasn’t to climax?” she asked.

“I want it to be more of a marathon than a quick jaunt through the apartment,” her boyfriend replied.

“That’s why you overcompensate with the foreplay, yes I know.” She patted his stomach. “At least once you get yourself paced properly you’ll give me the best of both worlds.”

“I want to.” He kissed her head and settled in beside her with a contented sigh.

“So anyways I had an interesting run-in with Princess Buttercup the other day,” Leslie said after a while.

“Where? At the restaurant?” As far as Leonard could remember Leslie spent the entire time at the table and Penny was working so he just didn’t see how it was possible.

“The washroom to be more precise. She followed me in.”
“Penny is a hands-on kind of girl.” Here he smiled. “Did I tell you she rebuilt a tractor when she was twelve?”

“Great. I’ll save a fortune on AAA,” Leslie quipped, making Leonard chuckle.

“So what did she say?”

“At first I thought it was a simple case of protecting what she owned but the more she talked the more I understood it wasn’t that I rode dumbass but the subject matter.” A pause. “Apparently she doesn’t like magnetic monopoles.”

“Oh?” Leonard squeaked, his body stiffening. “That’s too bad because they’re quite interesting. You know, if you like hypothetical particles.”

“I know dumbass sure did. I knew it was a waste of time going to the Arctic but I figured having him several thousand kilometers away from Pasadena was a win. I’m surprised your name wasn’t mentioned at the Nobel Peace Prize nomination,” she chuckled.

“Yeah it got pretty tense up there sometimes,” mumbled Leonard. “Still we got through it.”

Leslie turned her head to face her boyfriend. “Leonard, did something happen with Sheldon’s experiment?” she asked seriously.

Leonard stared at the ceiling. “The data he submitted in his report was correct.”

“So he just misread his numbers when he thought he’d detected a monopole,” Leslie clarified.

“I guess.”

“Huh. It’s kind of funny.”

“What is?”

“I kept his preliminary email. I figure it and his retraction are kind of a matched pair. For shits and giggles I decided to look at his published data and it was amazing how different the numbers were from his initial report.”

“The lighting wasn’t that good at the survey station,” Leonard said nervously.

“Sheldon might be an egotistical dumbass but even he couldn’t misread the data that badly. It’s almost as if he were reading from another set of numbers altogether.”

Silence.

“Leonard, please don’t tell me you tampered with Sheldon’s experiment,” Leslie said quietly.

More silence.

“You idiot!” she roared, punching him in the side as she pushed herself away. “What the hell were you thinking?”

“I wasn’t,” he winced as he rubbed his ribs. “None of us were. We were sick of Sheldon and the only way we could keep him in a good mood was by”—here his voice dropped—“feeding him false data”—Leslie groaned so he sped up—“but we kept his original data safe and secure.”

“Does Gablehauser know? No, of course not. He’d have fired your sorry ass if he did,” snapped
Leslie. “So Tweedle Dee and Tweedle Dumb were in on this too?”

“It was my idea,” Leonard said, refusing to implicate his friends.

“Idiots,” the female physicist growled.

“I apologized to Sheldon. He wasn’t happy about it but”—again Leslie punched him in the side. “Ow! I said I was sorry,” he whined.

“And he just forgave you lickity split?” Leslie asked incredulously.

“It’s complicated,” Leonard said as he thought back to his conversation with his roommate.

“I thought he was your best friend?”

“He is.”

Leslie gave a short laugh as she clapped a hand to her forehead. “Wow. I sure know how to pick ‘em.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Of all the lovers I’ve had yours is the sorry ass I fell for.”

“I’m so—wait. You love me?” gasped Leonard.

“I must be as loony as Cooper.”

“I love you too.” Leonard turned to face her. “I’m sorry, Leslie.”

“Sheldon going to keep this quiet?”

“Yeah.” He cleared his throat. “So are we still ok?” In response Leslie leaned over and gave him a kiss.

“I still love you; I’ll just never work with you,” she said seriously before rolling over and settling herself.

Leonard lay on his back and stared at the ceiling.

xTBBTx

“Good evening Amy.”

“Good evening Sheldon. I’ve looked over the images you sent me. They’re all nice.”

“I’ve spent hours whittling down my selection. Your input would be welcome.”

“What’s the timeframe?”

“Next Sunday by the latest.”

“That doesn’t seem sudden to you?”

“Have you found fault with my conclusions? You have to tell me if you have.”

“I don’t believe you’re in error, Sheldon. It’s your timing that’s thrown me.”
“There really isn’t a point delaying what’s inevitable. You know I don’t like wasting my time.”

“Video games and comic books aside—I concur. … What about number four?”

“I wondered if it wasn’t too busy. I don’t see what the point is having a cluster of two magnitudes if the end result is still a negative twenty six.”

“All right. What about number seven?”

“I don’t know how comfortable I am having May only a hair’s breadth from November.”

“What about nine?”

“Too astrological. I want to convey the cosmos not Professor Trelawney’s class syllabus.”

“That rules out eleven and sixteen. … Perhaps we’re going about it wrong.”

“Explain.”

“You may have something there with Professor Trelawney—here me out first! I mean in terms of making the cosmological more personal. In this case, what it means to you.”

“… One or four.”

“Either would be acceptable. Will you still require Rajesh next weekend?”

“He is an astrophysicist. It’ll make things go faster. Besides he has a car. … Amy?”

“Yes?”

“I’d like his opinion. Show him the pictures.”

“He’ll be tickled you included him.”

“Not a word to anyone about this.”

“Mum’s the word. … You really are a ‘sweetie’ you know.”

“So I’ve been told. Goodnight Amy—and thank you.”

“Whatever choice you make will be the right one. Goodnight Sheldon.”

xTBBTx

Knock Knock Knock “Penny.”

Knock Knock Knock “Penny.”

Knock Knock Knock “Penny.”

Here we go. “It’s open, Sheldon,” Penny called as she continued to unload her school books from her backpack.

Her boyfriend entered with a paper in hand.

“How was school?” he asked as he sat down on the couch.
“I’ve finished English and history. The only brutal ones left are math and the Spanish final,” she sighed.

“I have to go to the university this weekend but we’ll make time Saturday evening to go over your math in addition to our usual Study Date Night.”

“Thanks sweetie.” Penny moved her backpack to the floor. “So, what’s the story, morning glory? Am I grounded?” She indicated the paper with her eyes.

“No, but I do have some questions.”

“Shoot.”

“You gave me a receipt for eighty seven dollars and nineteen cents from ‘Shoes 4 Less’ dated Friday November ninth yet it isn’t entered into the ledger.”

“That’s because I returned them the next day,” she explained. “I needed the stress relief.”

“You do realize if you’d been unable to return them you’d have been over-budget by seventy eight dollars and sixty three cents?” Sheldon tsked.

“Trust me, I’m an old pro at air walking.”

“Air walking?”

Penny lay down on her back with her head on Sheldon’s lap and thrust her feet in the air.

“Air walking,” she said cheerily. Her boyfriend rolled his eyes. “It allows me to see the shoesies on my feeties in the privacy of my own home.”

“It’s too risky,” Sheldon said firmly. “You have to find some other cost-effective catharsis to alleviate stress.”

“Good idea. I’ll take you shoe shopping,” she said as she touched his nose with her finger.

“I have shoes,” he huffed as he rubbed his nose.

“Yeah but they’re always the same.”

“I only have one pair of feet,” he shrugged. “I’ve found a comfortable style. Why should I change?”

“Well you only have one body and yet you wear seven pairs of pajamas a week,” she reminded him.

Sheldon ran his fingers through her hair. “You’ll note that I’ve a drawer full of socks. Like my pajamas I wear clean ones daily so as to cut down on contamination. Shoes are meant to be in contact with filth so there’s only so much I can do such as spraying them nightly with Lysol disinfectant.” Penny laughed.

“You must cringe when I wear flip-flops in public.”

“That you haven’t contracted some sort of infection at this point I attribute to your Nebraskan ruggedness,” he replied drolly. “But back to the topic at hand: you need to find another way to handle stress.”
“When I was younger I used to do something sporty,” said Penny. “But I go jogging every Saturday so it’d mess up my schedule.” Here she smacked her forehead with her hand. “God, now I sound like you!”

“You’re more than welcome to borrow our Wii,” offered Sheldon.

“Naa, it’s not the same.” Suddenly she brightened. “I know! I need the blood coursing through my veins as my adrenaline pumps like Hans and Franz.” She looked into her boyfriend’s blue eyes. “We can arm wrestle!”

“Yes and afterwards we can crush empty beer cans against our foreheads,” Sheldon sighed.

“We could always have sex.” A pause.

“So who’s up for a little wrasslin’?” twanged Sheldon. Penny rolled her eyes as she sat up.

The pair made their way to the kitchen and stood on either side of the island.

“Let’s bring it,” Penny growled as she put her elbow on the counter.

“According to the USAA rulebook competitors’ shoulders must be square to the table before the match begins.” Sheldon took in Penny’s smirk. “Or we can dispense with the technicalities and go for it.” They clasped hands. “The call is ‘ready…go’. Ready?”

Blue eyes met green.

“Go!” he snapped.

Slowly but surely he lowered her hand to the table.

“Beginner’s luck,” Penny pouted as she flexed her wrist.

“It’s all a matter of angles. We’ll have to go over levers on our next physics night,” Sheldon said evenly albeit with a twinkle to his eyes. His girlfriend slammed her elbow on the table.

“Again,” she said.

“You’ll lose,” he replied. Penny wiggled her fingers. Sheldon took up her hand. “Ready? Go!”

He pinned her again.

“The key angle is the elbow,” he explained as he bent his forearm. “The smaller the angle the more strength I can bring to bear.”

“Again,” Penny said. “Only this time I say when we go.”

“Einstein said doing the same thing over and over and expecting different results is the definition of insanity,” Sheldon warned as he set his arm up.

“It’s all about a lick of the wrist,” Penny said. “Ready?”

“‘Flick’ of the wrist,” corrected Sheldon.

Penny licked her palm and slapped their hands together. “Go!” The physicist recoiled in disgust and Penny easily brought his hand to the counter. “Yes!”
Sheldon glared at her before racing to the washroom.

“Ok Howard, what’s it going to take for you to change your mind?” said Penny with narrowed eyes.

“Oh sure, now you say that now that I’m married,” he laughed although there was color on his cheeks.

“I’m serious.”

He cleared his throat as he leaned against her door. In a matter of minutes he’d been invited into Penny’s apartment—just the two of them—and she’d offered herself. Okay, maybe she didn’t offer offer but it could sound like that if he had a dirty mind. And he was Howard Wolowitz after all.

“I won it fair and square,” he sniffed. “Sheldon was being an arrogant jerk and I put him in his place.”

“Technically I think the cricket did it,” she said with a smirk. “Come on Howard.” He folded his arms across his chest.

“Did Sheldon put you up to this?”

“No. I want to surprise him.”

“There’s a new Star Wars Lego set. That’d surprise him.”

Penny sighed. “Look maybe I can buy it off you. How much is it?”

“In this condition, about twenty two hundred.” Penny’s jaw dropped as she sat back on the couch.

“For a stupid comic?”

“It’s in great shape for something published in nineteen sixty one.”

“I guess.” Penny sighed again. “So how much was that Star Wars set?”

“About seventy bucks,” Howard replied. At this she laughed.

“God I can’t even afford that!” She put a hand to her forehead. “Man this is so going to suck this year.”

Howard cocked his head. “Maybe we can work something out.”

“Really?” Penny said hopefully.

“We want the same thing: to make our partners happy.” His blue eyes were clear as he gave a little smile. “I don’t know if Bernie told you but she’s having a little difficulty with my going into space.”

“I know,” nodded Penny.

“I didn’t. I was too busy doing the astronaut training to notice.” He hooked his thumbs in his belt loops. “Going into space is the biggest thing to happen to me but it’s not the best. Bernadette is. I don’t want to screw things up with her.”
“You haven’t so far.” He looked at her. “Well not that badly,” she said with a shrug.

“And it’s not going to happen—because I’ll have a mole.”

Penny raised an eyebrow. “Let me get this straight: I snitch to you whenever Bernadette complains about something you did and in exchange I get the comic book?”

“Exactly.”

“For how long?”

“Twenty two hundred dollars,” he reminded her.

“Two years,” she said firmly. “Eleven hundred per year.”

“And in exchange you make me the best husband in the world,” he replied happily.

Penny gave a short laugh. “Trust me hon, it’d take a lot more than two thousand bucks.”

“Then work within my budget,” he smirked.

“How about the opportunity for great makeup sex with your wife?”

“Deal,” said Howard. They shook hands. “Just think: you’ll be putting all your effort figuring out ways to get me laid.”

“Never thought about it like that,” Penny said with a fixed smile. And never will again.

“Hello Mother.”

“Hello Shelly. How’ve you been?”

“Well. I have the flu shot and a cleaning regiment to thank for that. How are you?”

“As we’re nearly two and a half weeks away from celebratin’ the birth of our Lord I’ve been busier than St. Peter on Judgment Day so I don’t have time to waste. That bein’ said I’ve an understandin’ from your Meemaw that you’re not comin’ home this year?”

“No. I’ve been invited to Nebraska for the holiday.”

“Isn’t that where Penny’s from?”

“Outside Omaha, actually.”

“At least she’s not from that heathen State you’re in. … You’re spendin’ the holidays with her?”

“Yes.”

“That’s nice, what with the two of you bein’ friends and all.”

“…Actually we’ve decided to alter our paradigm.”

“What are you sayin’? And Shelly I want it plain now, you hear?”

“Penny and I are dating.”
“Oh Lord have mercy. … How long?”

“Six months on Sunday.”

“Six months. Sweet Jesus. I knew I should have had words with you about her.”

“Not that it’s any of your concern.”

“None of that tone with me, young man. Now Shelly, I’m not sayin’ she isn’t nice. She’s a lovely girl with an open heart who happens to wear jeans tight enough to see Lincoln smilin’ on the penny in her pocket.”

“I fail to see the relevance.”

“You’re male and breathin’. I think you more than see the relevance. … You’re not livin’ in sin are you?”

“You know I don’t ascribe to such a state.”

“And you know Jesus still loves you. But that doesn’t mean I won’t whup you if you don’t treat her right. You mind me now, Shelly. The poor girl’s spent her life traipsin’ around in cutoff shorts and clingy tops thinkin’ no one’s gonna look if she don’t show. You’ve got to be better than that.”

“I’ve encouraged Penny to go back to school. Mind you it’s only community college but nevertheless it’s a positive step.”

“All journeys begin with one.”

“I assure you this isn’t a ‘booty call’. … I like her.”

“And there’s a lot of her to like.”

“Mother….”

“Baby, you don’t know how much I’ve prayed to hear you say that about someone. Granted I thought we’d be havin’ this conversation about Amy but the Lord works in mysterious ways.”

“Indeed.”

“I’ll send you some molasses cookies next week. You take care, Shelly, and remember I love you.”

“I love you, too. Goodbye Mom.”

xTBBTx

Wikipedia: Electromagnetic radiation; Magnetic fields; Electric fields; Inductor; Conductor; Action at a distance; Quantum nonlocality;

howstuffworks: How many muscles does it take to smile?

Physforum: Arm wrestling

Jupiterscientific: Micro Farad Joke

Explanation--A capacitor is an electronic device that stores charge. An inductor is a coil of wire
that creates an electromagnetic force (emf) or voltage potential when a changing current goes through it. When the emf affects the inductor itself, it is called self inductance. A solenoid is a cylindrical coil of wire and the main component of an inductor. A megacycle is a million cycles per second. The Wheatstone bridge is a setup of resistors in a diamond-like circuit configuration that can be used to measure the resistance of an unknown resistor. A sine wave is a curve that goes up and down in the shape of the trigonometric sine function. A microfarad is a unit for capacitance. A milliamp is a thousandth of an amp, an amp being a unit of electric current. A characteristic curve is the most typical, essentially defining shape of a plot of the output of something. Fields, like the electric field and the magnetic field, are forces that spread throughout space. A potential that is attached to the surroundings is called a ground potential. Frequency is the number of times something oscillates per second. Resistance is the property of an electric device to retard the motion of charges. Voltage is the impetus causing charges to move through a circuit. Two electronic components can be joined in parallel by having a wire split in two and having the wire rejoin; electronic components joined in series are located on a single wire one after another. A shunt is a resistor inserted in parallel to reduce the current in a wire; it can be thought of as partial short-circuiting. An ohm is a unit of electrical resistance. Mho is the reciprocal unit of an ohm. A capacitor discharges when its stored charge is removed. To flux is to flow. A tickler is a small coil used in old vacuum tube amplifiers
Sheldon sat on the corner of his desk, Red Vine in mouth and frown on his face. For two hours he’d been attempting to incorporate Dr. Dietrich’s data into his own calculations but they seemed incompatible. He’d sent Raj home since there wasn’t any point to the astrophysicist being there; he might as well enjoy his evening with Amy. Besides, Sheldon needed his friend in a good mood if he expected Raj to work at peak efficiency tomorrow.

A thought suddenly struck the lanky physicist and he sprang to the whiteboard however his enthusiasm dropped even before he got the cap off his marker.

“Planck shift. What are you thinking, Cooper?” he tutted. “Still it wouldn’t hurt to try.”

Succinct numbers and symbols flowed through his brain and onto the board. He really was at his happiest when he was working. It was a challenge and he appreciated that answers weren’t easy to come by. Being as intelligent as he was he succeeded in most things on a minimum of effort—he still wouldn’t acknowledge driving as a skill worthy of merit—so it was things that challenged his intellect that got his attention. It’s what got him interested in physics. It’s why Amy and he got along so well although their friendship would be more palatable if the neurobiologist wasn’t always arguing or questioning his intellectual authority.

With a slight smirk Sheldon noted that, while not on the raw intellectual level as Amy, Penny, too, was always pressing his buttons. Made him ponder consequences to things he’d considered irrelevant. Knowing the waitress had moved his friendship with Leonard to the next level as he became less awkward with social convention and more attuned to things such as ‘feelings’ and ‘compassion’.

It struck him as ironic that his dearest friends were women given his earlier notion that females were best suited for maternal tasks. Granted, Penny and Amy did administer to his emotional needs but he realized it was their insight that he found most valuable.

Indispensable really.

All in all they contributed to who he was today. If three years ago he’d considered himself homo novus what was he now? He thought about movie nights and Counterfactuals and the way Penny’s breath teased his lips before they kissed and realized how mundane these actions were.

How human.

“Now I’m being ridiculous,” Sheldon snorted as he stood back from his board.

“Admitting it is the first step.”
At the sound of Leslie’s voice the lanky man spun to face his open door.

“Of course if we could get you to admit you’re an ass we’d really be cooking with fire,” she said with a smirk.

“What do you want,” scowled Sheldon as he capped his marker.

She leaned against the doorframe. “Leonard called and said he was picking you up. He was already picking me up so I thought I’d find out what time you were thinking of leaving so I’d know if I’d have time to run another test.”

“I’m sure your findings will be as inconsequential as the rest of your experiment so I doubt it’d matter if you delayed,” he sniffed.

“Be that as it may I still need an answer.” She thought she detected a slight slump to his shoulders.

“I’m not sure,” he said seriously. “I’m having difficulties correlating Dietrich’s data with my formula.”

“Mind if I take a look?” she asked.

“I doubt you’d understand,” he replied. “Raj had difficulties grasping what I was doing.”

“Maybe what you’re doing’s cracked,” Leslie shrugged. Sheldon shook his head.

“There’s something to it. I know it.”

“Then maybe you’ve misread the data.”

“I didn’t misread the data!” Sheldon snapped. He faced his board.

“I believe you, Sheldon,” Leslie said seriously. “And I doubt Dietrich made a mistake although they’re easy to do when you think you’ve made a paradigm-confirming discovery.”

“From what I understand,” Sheldon said quietly after a moment’s pause.

Leslie folded her arms as a frown came to her face. “It’s kind of funny. We spend our entire lives researching and learning but it all comes down to the data. No matter what we think it’s always the numbers.”

“The numbers are never wrong, it’s the query that’s flawed,” the theoretical physicist replied.

“But you and I know there are exceptions.” Sheldon’s back stiffened. “Sometimes our query is right and the resulting numbers fall into our prediction and yet somehow we’re wrong. It’s a bad position to be in. Even worse when it happens in public. People laugh. Colleagues begin to question our abilities. And it sucks because we know we didn’t mess up. We want to shout that it wasn’t a mistake but we don’t. Instead we live with it and take the consequences. We never think one of them would be doubting ourselves.” She stared at the physicist but he was stone still. “We know what we’re capable of and yet we almost burn out trying to solve the universe in three years to prove we’re the real deal. The only thing is, Sheldon, there’s nothing to prove.”

“For once in my life I wish you were right,” he said in a voice that was strange to Leslie. It sounded tired.

“You really have to give people more credit for brains than you do,” she said.
He turned to face her. “You make fun of me.”

“You’re condescending and arrogant. I’m doing you a favor.”

“Oh really?”

“You don’t want to sound too conceited when you accept your Nobel Prize.” The two physicists locked eyes.

“Don’t mock me,” he whispered.

“It only goes to the best, Sheldon. Even if he is a dumbass.” Leslie gave a little smile before checking her watch. “I’ll give you two hours. Send Leonard a text if you’re finished earlier,” said the optical physicist as she departed.

Sheldon returned to his board and began to read only to find his vision unexpectedly clouded. He closed his eyes and breathed deeply—deeper than he had in three years—before mopping his damp cheeks with his sleeve.

xTBBTx

“This was a great idea, thanks Amy,” Penny said as she sucked on an iced coffee—God she loved her gift card.

“When my Bestie has to blow off steam I’m always there,” the neurobiologist replied as the pair strolled through the Glendale Galleria. Penny sighed.

“Look I know Sheldon’s work comes first. I just never thought that he’d be working tonight. I mean seriously? He was gone even before you called.”

“To be fair I did call at eleven thirty,” Amy said with a little smile. “The world’s been known to function in the hours prior to that.” The waitress stuck out her tongue. “All kidding aside Sheldon is trying his best. In fact both he and Rajesh left this morning so he’d have a good shot at getting back early this evening.”

Penny checked her phone. “It’s after seven.” She also noted no messages. “We won’t have time to do anything,” she said with a pout.

Amy put her hand on her friend’s arm. “Heck with it. Penny, the reason why I called and dragged your luscious hinnie all over Los Angeles is because Sheldon wanted me to.”

“Really?”

“He felt bad that he had to work and wanted you to enjoy the day. To that end you don’t owe me anything for dinner. It’s on his tab.”

“No wonder you said to try the mango tarts,” Penny teased. Amy merely grinned and said nothing. “So what do you want to do now, anyways?”

“Well we could always—” Amy paused as her phone tweeted. “Just one moment.” She checked her incoming text. “Apparently Rajesh and Sheldon are finished and are heading home after they stop in for something to eat.” She pursed her lips. “Here’s hoping it isn’t Big Boy.” It seemed the minute her boyfriend was out of her sight he was mawing down on meat.

“If we hurry back maybe Sheldon and I can see a movie or something,” said Penny as the pair
made their way to the parking garage.

“You can always borrow my Travel Twister,” Amy quipped.

“I’m waiting for the home version,” Penny laughed. “Seriously though, I can’t thank you enough for what you’re doing for Sheldon.” The neurobiologist shrugged.

“All I’m doing is offering suggestions. He’s doing the heavy lifting.” They got into the car. “I’m actually not surprised he’s coming along. As I said before he’s quite remarkable. All he needed was the proper motivation.” Amy looked at Penny and wiggled her eyebrows.

Singing away to the radio as they drove the two friends laughed and applauded each other for their vocal achievements. Although Amy didn’t say anything she did note she had the better singing voice—not that she’d tell her Bestie.

“Thanks for everything,” Penny said as they arrived at her building. “I’ll message you from school.”

“I will—and Penny, congratulations.” They hugged and Penny got out.

Again the waitress checked her messages as she climbed the stairs. Nothing. No doubt Sheldon thought Amy’d tell Penny about Rajesh’s message so there was no need for him to send one. It made sense since the women were together.

“Sense, schmense;” Penny muttered as she arrived at her floor. She noticed as she approached her door that the lights were on in her apartment. A grin came to her face.

Knock Knock Knock “Sheldon.”

Knock Knock Knock “Sheldon.” She saw the shadow of his feet from under the door.

Knock Knock Knock “Sheldon.”

The door opened and he stood before her with a bemused look on his face.

“I suppose this is your attempt at humor?” he asked.

“Just checking what it’s like from the other side,” she replied. “Great acoustics out here.” She kissed her boyfriend and entered the apartment. “What time did you get back?” Penny asked as she went to wash her hands.

“A while ago,” he replied. “Although Raj just left.”

“That’s good. Amy’s expecting him.” Penny took a swig of mouthwash. “Although you should have texted me,” she said after she spat and rinsed the sink.

“I was just finishing up,” he said as she returned to the living room.

“So.” She clapped her hands. “It’s seven thirty seven. Want to catch a movie?”

“You have school tomorrow,” he reminded her.

“I suppose we could always stay in and snuggle,” she said with a grin as Sheldon pulled a bottle out of the refrigerator.

“Sparkling grape juice,” he explained as he grabbed a pair of wine glasses from the cupboard.
“Californian of course.”

“You pour while I go get comfy,” she replied as she darted into her bedroom for her Hello Kitty sleep top and pink fleece pants.

When she returned Sheldon was on the couch; she gave him a kiss on the head before she walked around to the front and sat. He handed her a glass.

“So how was your day?” she asked.

“Productive,” he replied. “There were some disagreements but eventually Raj and I came to terms and completed this phase of the project.”

“Ex-cellent,” she said in a Mr. Burns voice before taking a sip of juice. “As for me, I had a wonderful day with Amy. We went shopping and had dinner”—here she raised her glass in toast—“thank you very much.”

“It was the least I could do,” Sheldon said with a twitchy smile.

“At least you didn’t forget,” she said amicably.

“Penny, I don’t forget,” he chided lightly.

“And that’s why you’ve locked yourself out of your apartment how many times?” she grinned. He pursed his lips and took a sip of his drink. “Ah don’t worry, your secret’s safe with me.” She took a sip before setting her glass on the coffee table. “So,” she said. “How do you want to play this out? Make out a little then shower then celebrate or shower first and then get things started?”

“Actually I’m glad you brought that up because I’ve been doing some thinking,” he began as he placed his drink beside hers.

“Yes?” she asked with a smile.

“I’m concerned we’re moving too fast.”

Penny blinked. “’Bazinga’ right?”

“I realize at some point we’ll engage in coitus.” A pause. “Have sex,” he amended. “I just want it to be for the right reason.”

“Oh, honey, it’s okay,” she said gently. “It’ll be your first time. Of course you want it special.”

“It’s you I’m thinking about,” he said.

“Me?” Penny was confused. “Sheldon I was born ready for this.”

“That’s my point.”

She sat back. “You better not be saying what I think you’re saying.”

“I just want you to know that we don’t have to have sex and I’ll be fine with that,” he said.

“Well I won’t,” she replied with a frown. “Sheldon, I’ve been patient but damn it Moonpie it’s gotta happen.”

Sheldon sighed. “I’m not disputing that, Penny. I’m just saying that…. Look, I’m sure you’re more
than aware that your secondary sexual characteristics are stunning.”

“So Amy keeps telling me.”

“And I’m sure you’ve been told that countless times by the two hundred and nine plus or minus eight men you’ve dated before me,” he said as his eyes flickered between Penny’s face and the couch seat.

“Still disputing the number but go on.”

“I need you to know that when I say it I’m not attempting to flatter you into a roll in the hay,” he said seriously. Penny cocked her head as she took this in.

“You’re worried I might think you’re into me for the sex?” Penny chuckled. “Sheldon you’d be the last person on the planet I’d expect to do that.” She reached across and took his hand. “Of anyone, anyone, I’ve ever met you’ve been the only one to treat me as more than a pretty face. You’ve been my friend. Even though I stole an onion ring.”

“That’s still a strikeable offence,” he warned as he rubbed her fingers with his thumb.

“When Leonard and I were no longer dating he admitted to me he pretended to like all sorts of things I did just to have sex with me.” She smiled. “Like watch sappy love stories.”

“Couldn’t imagine that,” Sheldon said with a bit of color to his cheeks. In response Penny slid over to his side.

“You know how I know you like me in the right way? You watched ‘The Lake House’ and went on to bash it into next week.”

“It’s deplorable,” he said with a smirk.

“Leonard never said that. I really had to sit down and think about everything between the two of us. Wondered when he was honest and when he was just agreeing to get into my pants.” She kissed Sheldon’s hand. “I’ve never had to guess about anything with you. You like something, you like it. You don’t, I never hear the end of it. I know that’s not going to change if we have sex. You’ll still be you and I’ll still be me. I promise.”

Before she could continue Sheldon’s lips were on hers and moved with desperate vigor. Gently his fingers reached for her cheek but stopped just shy before curling into themselves as if fearing her heat. His mouth had no such trouble as he trailed Penny’s lips, leaving their mingled breath in his wake as he adjusted his angle to deepen the kiss. There was no hesitation as his lips captured every last drop of her strawberry gloss.

Her hands slid behind his neck and she tried to pull him closer but he resisted. Slowly Sheldon extracted himself from Penny, both left breathless by the encounter. Penny’s eyes were wide as she took in her boyfriend’s intense stare as he gasped for air.

“Let’s see the stars,” he said as he got off the couch and went to the door.

“Now?” Penny said. “I’m in my pajamas.”

“So? It’s not like anyone’s going to see,” he admonished lightly. Penny rolled her eyes.

“Let me get a sweater,” she said but before she got to her bedroom the lights went off.
Immediately her eyes went to her ceiling and the hundreds of glowing stars that lit the room.

“Oh my God,” she breathed. “Sheldon, what did you do?” Her boyfriend came over and took her hand, moving her into the center of the room.

“I said I wanted to see the stars,” he said gently.

“We could have gone to the roof,” she said in wonder as she gawked.

“I’m not interested in seeing tonight’s stars. I wanted to revisit these ones.”

“‘Revisit’?”


“The night we were in the desert.”

“Indeed.” Sheldon put an arm around her waist and turned her towards the television. “Now let’s see what you remember.” He pointed to a place on the ceiling. Penny wasn’t sure what she was looking for until it hit her that, like the real sky, the glow-in-the-dark stars were of varying sizes. Her jaw dropped.

“The Big Dipper!”

“And over there’s the House of Cephus and—”

“Oh my God where’s Taurus?” Penny squealed in delight as he pointed out the constellation.

“Although we didn’t see it I had Raj put in Sagittarius in its general locality.” He felt a hand on his cheek and so lowered his head to see his girlfriend’s face.

“How’d you do this?” she whispered. “Why?”

“I remembered what we talked about and had Raj help me put up the stars as they were on the night we saw them. It’s the first time his astrophysics doctorate’s been indispensible to me.” He cleared his throat. “As to why, through your insistence on celebrating these milestones I’ve come to see their merit although I disagree with the date.”

“But we started dating on the ninth,” she reminded him.

“Perhaps, but a milestone’s meant to mark something momentous. The commencement of ‘dating’ isn’t sufficient. This is.”

“And what’s this?” Penny asked breathlessly.

“The night I changed,” he said seriously. “The night I knew.” A twitchy smile came to his face. “Not that I was aware. I didn’t recognize what had happened until a week later. When I did I was flabbergasted.”

“Gee thanks,” Penny smirked.

“I said you always manage to confound me,” he replied as he took her hands. “I just never expected you to enthral me.”

Tenderly their lips met.
“So how long have you been with me?” she asked as she wrapped her arms around his waist.

“Seven months twenty three days.”

“Great. I get a second milestone this month.”

He rolled his eyes. “Haven’t I done enough?”

She stood on her toes and kissed his nose.

“More than enough. It’ll be a quiet affair I promise.” Again her lips brushed his. “But you’re right: it doesn’t matter when we started going out. This is what’s important.” She put her hand over his heart. “This right here.” A pause. “I love you, Sheldon.”

Their eyes met and he could see she was expecting something. Moments passed before her face twisted into a bitter smile.


“I always thought actions spoke louder than words,” he said softly.

“True. Only it helps to say it every once in a while—just so it’s out there,” she said hopefully.

“I see.” His brow furrowed slightly. “I’m not sure I’m comfortable with the statement.”

“Oh.” She felt herself flushing.

“To say ‘I love you’ would mean I currently have feelings for you when the fact is I’ve cherished you as a friend and confidante for years and now as a companion. The phrase isn’t as encompassing as I’d like it to be,” he explained.


“Granted, popular sentiment leans—”

She rolled her eyes. “Sheldon….”

“You complete me, Penny,” he said simply.

Again their eyes met, and Penny found herself immersed in the blue only this time she wasn’t lost. She was home.

xTBBTx

Leonard sat in his chair with his leg over the arm clicking through the television channels while Sheldon read a comic book in his spot.

“I can’t believe how many bug movies they’ve made,” the curly haired physicist said. “They’ve got Starship Trooper playing tonight.”

Sheldon looked up. “To be fair Starship Trooper isn’t a ‘bug movie’ from a purist’s perspective as the creatures are extra terrestrial.”

“So something more along the lines of Mimic?”
“Mutant cockroaches will suffice.” He rested his comic on his lap. “If you look further down that line there’s also ‘Bug’ which has mutant cockroaches with the ability to start fires.”


“I hardly think the word ‘classic’ applies here,” sniffed Sheldon. “If you mean in the context of it being a bad movie might I suggest ‘Kingdom of the Spiders?’ Not only are the special effects deplorable but we also experience the excruciating performance of Bill Shatner as he over-dramatizes the dialogue. About the only thing serious about the movie is his hair piece.”

“I don’t think there’s an insect that hasn’t been mutated to gigantic proportions.” Leonard turned off the television. “They even did a praying mantis for God’s sake.”

“The mantis was prehistoric not mutated,” his roommate amended. “It was freed from arctic ice.” A little smile crossed his lips. “Something else we have to look forward to as climate change occurs.”

Both men snickered as the bathroom door opened and Penny emerged wearing her Cheesecake Factory uniform and a smirk.

“Okay my dainties the big, ol’ creepy crawly has bit the biscuit.”

“Did you flush the toilet?” asked Sheldon.

“Yup.” Penny kissed her boyfriend on the head. “Bathroom’s all yours my brave little warrior.”

“Dibs!” Sheldon said excitedly as he bolted into the washroom.

“What would you guys have done if I was already at work?” she asked Leonard.

“Obviously I would have to man up and do the deed.” Penny snorted.

“Or use the bathroom at the gas station.”

“I wouldn’t do that!” her ex-boyfriend said in mock indignation. “Not while I have the key to your apartment at any rate.”

Penny rolled her eyes as she walked out the door.

xTBBTx

“Nope,” Penny said as she clicked away from the Health Sciences webpage back to the main screen. After working for eight years at the Cheesecake Factory cleaning up after people the last thing she wanted to do for a career was clean up after sick people.

Her eyes glanced over the Performing and Communication Arts link. ‘Been there. Done that.’ She didn’t think she had any advice to impart on future thespians save one—don’t quit your day job.

Thinking over her life Penny realized that she was more into doing than sitting around at a desk all day. Of course she hadn’t really done anything that interested her up to this point so her assessment could be wrong.

That’s not true. She did enjoy making her Penny Blossoms. Too bad it didn’t generate the income she needed to quit her job.
Penny clicked on Business and Computer Technology.

“Fashion!” she squealed. Her enthusiasm was short-lived, however, as she quickly realized it was all about design and sewing. The Nebraskan spent her time rebuilding tractors not sewing in the backroom with her mother.

“Look at all this math,” she sighed as her cursor drifted over the links for Accounting, Banking and Finance, Computer Science and Statistics. About the only choice she had was General Business but she wanted something that would give her a career.

For shits and giggles she clicked on Marketing, more to see what it was than for any particular interest.

Immediately she felt her heart jump as she read the course descriptions:

Marketing Management: An introductory course to acquaint students with the business practices involved in the activities of moving goods and services from the producer to the ultimate consumer. Additional areas of interest include retailing, wholesaling, new product decisions, pricing, marketing research. Total of 54 hours lecture.

This was the stuff Sheldon taught her as they made Penny Blossoms!

Other classes included Personal Selling, Advertising, Merchandising, Retail Display. It was all about shopping from A to Z!

Penny closed her eyes and imagined herself being paid to pick out trend-setting shoes.

“Better get Sheldon working on my shoe app again,” she chuckled as she bookmarked the page.

Penny stepped into apartment 4A to find two bleary-eyed though happy physicists in the midst of their morning routines.

“So how was it?” she asked as she passed by Sheldon at his desk to get a mug of coffee from Leonard.

“Wonderful,” the curly haired man sighed. “The cinematography, the casting. Perfect.”

“Not ‘perfect’,” sniffed Sheldon as he read an online newspaper. “Don’t forget what happened on Gandalf’s wanderings is comprised more on Peter Jackson’s imagination than the words of J.R.R. Tolkien. Who knows what the omitted scenes were supposed to be like.”

“Besides overly detailed to the point of OCD?” smirked Leonard before taking a sip of coffee. Sheldon pursed his lips and kept reading.

“When you’re done flip to the horoscope section will ya?” asked Penny.

“Good Lord yes. And afterwards I can check the oracle bones for today’s weather.”

“Keep this up and they’ll be using your bones, bub,” Penny replied, causing Leonard to chuckle.

“This is a part of romance I love: the friendly banter over a morning cup of coffee,” he quipped.

“Maybe the problem’s that he doesn’t drink coffee,” Penny said with a little smile. “Give him a little caffeine for stimulation and watch him go.”
“Obviously you never saw him the time he accidently took a sip of Red Bull,” replied Leonard. “We had to practically talk Sheldon off the wall.”

“Gives a girl a few ideas,” Penny said with a wink. “What do you say Sheldon, want to make out on the ceiling?”

He didn’t respond, his focus solely on the article he was reading.

“You could always consult Howard. He did build a glorified space shelf. The technology could always be applied to your bed frame,” offered Leonard.

Penny moseyed over to her boyfriend. “There’s a payload I’d love to receive,” she grinned as she put her hands on Sheldon’s tense shoulders. His head jerked up in surprise and he quickly clicked to the horoscope section.

“You may peruse,” he said as he got up.

“Mighty nice of you,” she said as she sat down. “Are you sure it isn’t going to mess up your physics work?”

“I’ll erase the browser history later,” he said evenly and gave a tight smile before heading to the washroom.

“Wait, don’t you want to hear your horoscope?” she called after him. Penny scanned the page. “Taurus: Your conservative nature — which may or may not have anything to do with your politics — is making you grouchy today. You don’t like some new change that was just announced, but you should give it a whirl.”

“Hokum.” Sheldon closed the door.

“So what’s mine?” Leonard finished his coffee and proceeded to rinse the mug.

“Let’s see. Gemini: Your passion is engaged today — it may be a political cause, a charity or just a friend in need, but you are there, doing all that you can. If you don’t know yet what’s needed, ask around!” Penny grinned. “So what’s your passion today?”

“If trying to stay alert enough to not burn a hole through my hand with the laser isn’t passionate enough I’ll have to fake it with more coffee.”

“Speaking of which, thanks again.”

Leonard smiled. “No problem.” He ambled down the hall towards his bedroom.

Penny read over her horoscope, heeding the warning to keep people in the loop. Before she shut the laptop a thought came to her and she clicked the browser’s back button, putting her in the ‘front’ section of the ‘newspaper’. Skimming through the headlines she didn’t see anything out of the ordinary: politics, suicide bombings, debt crisis, blah, blah, blah. Her eyes flickered to the lower right of the screen under the ‘Most Read’ heading and noticed a little blurb: Autism redefined for clearer diagnoses.

She clicked on the link.

‘Absorbing Asperger’s syndrome will mean faster access to more treatment options.’ Tanya Talaga, Staff Reporter. ‘The diagnosis of Asperger’s syndrome, considered a “higher functioning” form of autism, will disappear once the new criteria for identifying the disorder come out in May
2013.

Penny continued to read.

XxX

“Hey,” said Jeff as he gave Penny a light bump on the arm as they walked.

“Oh. Hi,” she replied, sounding distracted.

“You seem a little out of it today which is impressive I noticed given we just got out of a class where ‘near coma’ describes the natural state of things.”

“Got a lot on my mind,” she said with a little smile. They exited the language building and descended the stairs.

“Go on,” he prodded.

“It’s okay Jeff. You’ve got class.”

“And you’ve got a problem. Friends trump class. Winger Rule Number sixteen.” He indicated the quad with his head. “Step into my office.”

“What do you know about Asperger’s syndrome?” Penny asked as she sat on a bench.

“It’s a higher functioning form of autism. People with it have problems interacting with others because they have difficulties buying social clues.” Jeff gave the waitress a once over with a lawyer’s eye. “Something up with the boyfriend?”

Penny kicked out a foot and stared at her open-toed sandal. “There was an article in today’s paper about it. They’re getting rid of Asperger’s and just calling it autism.”

“Waiting for the deal here.”

“Sheldon’s never been diagnosed.”

Jeff raised an eyebrow. “You can’t seriously be telling me he hasn’t figured this out. He’s practically a poster boy for symptoms.” Penny nodded.

“I know. I looked them up.” She sighed. “It’s just that he’s always seen himself as being gifted so it’s like it never dawned on him there’s something wrong with him.” The ex-lawyer shrugged.

“He seems to be functioning well, regardless. Again I’m not seeing the deal.”

Penny caught her friend’s tone. “Just to make it clear there’s no deal with me. It’s him. When we had a talk about his quirks he made it quite clear that Asperger’s wasn’t fully autism, kind of like saying it wasn’t as ‘serious’. Now they’re saying it is autism. No difference.” She faced Jeff with a grim smile. “I don’t know how he’s taking this.”

“He knows?”

“He read about it first.”

“Did he say anything?”

“No, but he usually doesn’t if it’s something really serious.”
“Well,” said Jeff. “As I see it you have two options: you can say ‘Sheldon’s autistic, walk on eggshells around him’ or ‘Sheldon’s got autism pass the salt’. Speaking closer to home I don’t treat Abed any differently than I do anyone else. I know I have to make sure we’re clear on things since he’s a little too literal sometimes but all in all we’re usually cool. And you know why we are? Because he is. He doesn’t just pass the salt he hands me the pepper and the bowl of soup to boot. Abed’s cool. From what I’ve seen of Sheldon he’s definitely unique—autism aside. You love him the way he is. He knows that so there’s no deal.”

“And if he’s worried it’s a deal?” Penny asked.

“Ask him what type of soup he likes,” Jeff said with a smile. The Nebraskan laughed.

“Thanks Jeff.” She kissed him on the cheek.

“Anytime,” he replied.


“Well I don’t care what you say I think it’d be cool hanging out with a six foot tall invisible rabbit,” Penny grinned as she checked her teeth in the bathroom mirror. “What is Harvey again?”

“A pooka,” Sheldon replied. “A mischievous shape changing fairy creature in Irish and Welsh mythology.” He folded his pajamas and white shirt and placed them on top of her dresser before slipping his naked body under the covers. “Oh, and Harvey’s six foot three and a half.”

Penny shut off the light and ventured to the bed. “I bet he has blue eyes.”

“What makes you think that?” Sheldon moved the blankets aside so she could get in.

“It’s the same reason why I thought he wore a bow tie. It fits.” She put an arm across her boyfriend’s chest. “He’s a Gentlebunny of Leisure.”

“Indeed.”

“It’s a sweet film. I like it that they didn’t change Elwood.”

Sheldon nodded. “Elwood P. Dowd’s eccentricities prove more desirous than being ‘just a normal human being’.”

Penny raised her face to his. “I couldn’t agree more.”

Lips met and she settled back in the crook of his arm.

“His mother had a rather apt philosophy: one must be ‘oh so smart or oh so pleasant’. I couldn’t agree mo—” He hissed as Penny flicked his nipple.

“Guess I’m being ‘smart’ right now,” she giggled.

“Smart patootie.” His brows met as her finger flicked again. “Having fun?”

“Yup. Just give it a chance and you’ll find it pleasant.”

“And here I was thinking I was in bed to sleep,” he tsked.

Flick. “I suppose we could do that too.” Flick.
“That’s it your privileges are cut off,” said Sheldon as he turned over onto his side. “I’ll blame you if my back gets cold.”

“Sucky baby.” Penny ran a hand over his shoulder and arm before snuggling against his back.

“Goodnight Penny,” he said in a huff. His nipple was throbbing nicely and he realized with an internal groan that he felt more than a little aroused.

“Night sweetie.”

Silence.

“I want to thank you again for the stars,” Penny said softly. “I slept every night this week on the couch.”

“I have some left over that I can put in here if you’d like.”

“No, it’s okay. I like it that there’s so many out there. It makes me feel like I’m at the top of the world.” She kissed his shoulder blade and gave him a hug. A hand covered hers and she prepared to move it but paused as Sheldon began to stroke her fingers. She captured his fingers and gave them a light squeeze and was secretly thrilled when he squeezed back. Slowly her hand slid up until she felt a light kiss on her fingertips.

“You’re welcome, Penny,” he replied.

Sheldon was surprised when she removed her hand. From what he’d learned about social protocol his actions should have kept them together not move her body away from his and—

He felt her hand slide up his back and through his hair. Sheldon’s mouth involuntarily opened and he gasped. Penny retreated across his shoulder and down his arm until her hand was over his but moved on before he was able to catch it. He was absolutely still as she rubbed his belly in soothing circles.

“You are so beautiful,” Penny purred.

Her hand traveled down his side to his hip. There’s a moment when her fingers linger before she grabbed a hold of his buttock.

“Penny,” he said hoarsely.

“Shhh. Shhhh.” She massaged his ass. Sheldon groaned as she kneaded deeply into his flesh. His head slowly arched back and she could hear his breaths. Penny was beginning to feel warm. Perhaps a little too warm as she could feel a closeness emanating from her core. “Turn around.”

“I’m erect,” he warned.

“It’s only you and me Sheldon.” She dragged her nails from his buttock to his waist. His grunt was a contrast to the silence of the night. “It’s okay.”

Again her hand slid to his stomach and before he quite knew what he was doing he was turning over and his hand was on her arm and—’Oh Lord’—his penis against her belly and—

Sheldon felt the warmth of her breath as it teased his lips before her mouth covered his and began to move in rhythmic motion. Her lips tugged on his lower one, inviting it to play and slowly but surely he began to respond. Before he knew what was happening he’d pulled Penny close and
opened his mouth. Immediately her tongue licked his entrance and he felt a hunger he’d never known overtake him as he lowered his head to deepen the kiss. Her hands were immersed in his hair; Sheldon groaned in her mouth as her nails inadvertently caressed the back of his neck. Chills ran through his body and he leaned into her touch wanting desperately to increase the contact.

At once Penny broke away, leaning back so each could take in the other. Sheldon inclined his head towards her and again she wiggled herself backwards, only this time he noted her Cheshire grin.

“Don’t make me chase you,” he smirked as he reached out to stroke her cheek. Penny clasped his hand and dragged it to her mouth, planting a kiss on his palm.

“You’ve already caught me,” she said softly before she snuggled into him and began leaving soft kisses on his chest.

Sheldon swallowed heavily, feeling his temperature rise. He closed his eyes and tracked her movements across his body until her lips found his nipple and sucked and teased. Slowly his hands wove their way through her hair, losing himself in the sensation of silken fibers between his fingers. For the first time in his life he felt the need to touch someone. No amount of inadvertent contact on Penny’s part as she sat next to him on the couch or pushed his shoulder in amusement at a particular comment could even begin to compare to this level of intimacy.

Connection.

His belly contracted as Penny’s head went down until she veered to his left and playfully nipped his side.

“Stop that,” he giggled. Again she teased and he squirmed. He laughed, genuine and pure, as she tickled and Penny’s heart was in the stratosphere. Sheldon was always restrained; his usual laugh more like a gasp than a ‘coming from the gut’ kind of giggle. At this moment she realized she’d never really heard Sheldon as he was now. She wondered if he’d ever heard himself this open. This free.

Sheldon managed to hook Penny’s arm and tug her away from his side. Immediately she straightened and planted a kiss on his nose before smiling mischievously. He felt a wave of butterflies flutter in his belly as he gave a hesitant smile in return. Penny’s expression changed and she cupped her hand to his cheek.

“I love you,” she said softly.

They kissed and kissed heavily, mouths seemingly melded together. Again Sheldon groaned as he felt Penny’s hand on his hot penis begin to squeeze and twist. It didn’t take long before pre-cum made its presence known. As good as it felt he didn’t want to soil himself like this much less Penny. He broke the kiss and settled his forehead on her shoulder and breathed heavily. He wanted to stay. A shudder passed through his body and the thought of Penny’s shower came to mind. ’Sweet Jesus I want to stay.’

“Penny,” he hissed as his mouth came to her ear. “I’m going to climax.”

“Want me to stop?” she asked breathlessly.

“Yes,” he replied and instantly her hand was gone.

Sheldon did his best to get himself under control. His skin was afire and he bit his lip in an unsuccessful attempt to repress a groan as Penny’s hand lightly caressed his hip. Her motion was something she’d done countless times before but in this instance the sensation was unlike anything
he’d ever felt. He was anxious but in an anticipatory way as if his mind and body were teetering but on the brink of what? All of his life Sheldon maintained a separation between himself and the germy world. As he lay naked in his lover’s—his lover’s!—bed he realized that Senator Palpatine was right: fear was for the fearful.

He was tired of being afraid.

Sheldon took a few breaths to steady himself before he gave her head a playful nudge with his own to get her attention.

“I didn’t say I wanted *this* to stop,” he amended, his blue eyes bright.

For Penny, it was like the air became weightless. Her heart beat rapidly as she took in his face.

“No Bazinga,” she said and held her breath.

“No Bazinga,” he replied softly.

“I have condoms in my drawer.” Their lips smacked and she leaned away and gave him a big smile before turning to grab a foiled package from her nightstand.

“You’re more than prepared,” he noted.

“Sweetie, they’re even in my utensil drawer,” she grinned. “When the moment came and you said you were ready there was no way I wasn’t going to be.” She tore it open and returned to his side, condom in hand. “Let me,” she said and heard Sheldon’s intake of breath as she rolled the protective layer on his hardness.

Sheldon’s chest rose and fell rapidly as Penny climbed over his legs. She bent over to kiss his belly and her breasts were on either side of his penis and he closed his eyes and recited the periodic table of the elements in reverse alphabetical order.

“Are you ready?” she said.

The physicist raised his head and took a breath to steady himself. He had a condom so there would be no direct contact and little chance of pregnancy. Penny had no sexually transmittable diseases. He was safe.

More importantly, he was sure.

Penny read the answer in his eyes and smiled beautifully as she positioned herself onto his stiff shaft.

Sheldon wasn’t prepared for the warmth and tightness as he entered her. He had to fight the urge to come right then and there as the magnitude of what he was doing nearly overwhelmed him.

Penny was stone still as she scanned her lover’s face. His mouth was open as he breathed and his eyes were solely on her.

Before he knew what he was doing Sheldon’s hand was on Penny’s breast and he ran a finger around her puckered areola. In response Penny began to slowly rock and he moaned softly.

“That’s right,” she purred. “Feel me.”

His thumb swept over her nipple repeatedly and Penny gave out a little groan of her own.
“Feel me,” she whispered again and suddenly she found her center of gravity shift as she was rolled onto her back. “Or do that,” she said with a short laugh.

Sheldon just smiled as he repositioned himself inside her. The urge to thrust for all he was worth was incredible but he didn’t obey. Instead his first strokes were slow and deep as he took note of his length inside her. He felt Penny squirm beneath him and he stopped moving.

“Am I hurting you?” he asked, his voice full of concern.

“You’re doing fine, Sheldon,” she said reassuringly. “I’m just getting into a better position.” He nodded and continued his ministrations.

As his lips kissed Penny’s jaw line Sheldon thought about the six flavors of quarks in the realm of subatomic particles. He knew the taste of Penny’s flesh and the citrus of her lip gloss. What other flavors did her body hold?

Nice one Cooper, he growled to himself as he fought for self control.

Working his way from her neck with a series of kisses he found himself unable to resist her shoulder’s curve. Penny groaned softly into his ear and a second list of subatomic particles entered his head.

The positron was the antiparticle of the electron; they were identical save that they carried electrical and other charges of the opposite sign.

Yin and Yang. Feng Shui.

“Do that again,” Penny whispered.

Again his mouth descended on her tender flesh and he felt her body quiver. He kissed her, sweeping caresses over her neck and breasts that curled her toes and brought a groan from her lips.

Sheldon closed his eyes and quickened his pace. Now that he was here he didn’t want to neglect a single part of her, from the lushness of her breasts to the softness of her elbow’s crease.

“Taluhk nash-veh k’dular,” he said softly before nibbling on Penny’s earlobe.

He marveled at their bodies as they rocked rhythmically, understanding that Penny had altered her cadence to accommodate his motion. There wasn’t anything to be embarrassed about—of the two she had more experience. Given time he’d have the skill.

He took note of Penny even as she sucked at his neck. How she made slight changes to her position to create whole new angles and sensations. Her hands were always busy, whether in his hair or caressing his back or—‘Good Lord!’—teasing the back of his—

Sheldon let out a growl. Things were rapidly descending into chaos and he was not ready to let go.

When an electron collides with a positron both particles either scatter off each other or are totally annihilated.

He felt her arm slide between them down, down. As his abdomen felt her hand moving in a circular motion Sheldon’s brows furrowed for a moment until he realized with a flush what she was doing and in that moment he was undone.

His abdomen contracted as a tingly feeling stretched from his testicles and penis to the rest of his
Penny smiled knowingly as she heard her lover gasp, the first contraction hitting him hard; the strain on his face morphing into something so essentially Sheldon it left her breathless.

It was a moment where the beat of the universe was drowned out by the hammering in his chest and the pulsing of his groin.

Spent, Sheldon collapsed on Penny who took him into her arms and stroked the back of his sweat-soaked neck. With an effort he slid off onto his back and closed his eyes as he relished in the rush of endorphins that lit up his mind and body.

“I didn’t anticipate you masturbating during intercourse,” he said finally. “It was a distraction.”

“It’s ok,” Penny said with a smile while her finger lazily traced a circle through his chest hair.

Sheldon frowned. “No it’s not. I’ve climaxed but you haven’t.”

“It’s hard getting the proper stimulation from below without help,” she said simply. “So if I want to stay down there and come with you I work myself—” Penny stopped talking as she took in the intensity of Sheldon’s eyes.

“Let me,” he said. He rolled onto his side and his hand massaged her center, his fingers teasing her open before sliding between her folds. “Look at me,” he said softly and she did her best to comply but she was close and wanted to concentrate on his movements. Her pelvis thrust against his hand even as her fingers drew circles around her breasts. Taking his cue Sheldon nudged her hand out of the way with his head and licked his mouth.

Penny sighed as his lips sucked her nipple. She hadn’t realized until now how long she’d been waiting for this—and not just the six months they’d been dating. No, it was the feeling of a lover who wanted to know her. One she wanted to know when they were old.

“I love you,” she whispered into his hair. In response Sheldon’s lips met hers. Feeling herself on the edge but unable to seal the deal Penny slid her fingers between his and stroked herself vigorously. Realizing he was more of a detriment Sheldon removed his hand and began caressing her breast. Penny felt herself unraveling and came with a groan before her body relaxed itself.

Sheldon marveled in her serenity and vowed to please her like this if it took every Date Night to practice and every Sunday studying Leonard’s clitoral arm to do so.

Penny sighed deeply and smiled before opening her eyes. Sheldon seemed unsure of what to do with his sticky hand and began to fidget.

“Might as well use the blanket since we’ve already christened it,” she smirked.

“In a moment,” he said as he removed and tied off the condom. He reached across her and deposited it in the little yellow trash can by the bed before lying back in his spot.

“You ok, Moonpie?” Penny asked as she stretched.

“I’m—not sure.” He gave an apologetic smile. “I can’t stay,” he said softly.

Lips gently brushed each other before Sheldon got out of bed and went to the washroom. “I’ll give
you a hand shortly.”

“Yeah I guess the Sanctum’s a little gross,” Penny smirked. “I’ll bundle up the blankets while you’re showering.”

“Appreciated. I’ll wash them tomorrow.” A twitchy smile passed over his face and he was gone.

Penny hummed to herself as she stripped the bed.

xTBBTxx

Sheldon noted the change in Penny’s breathing.

“Good morning, Penny.” In response the waitress rolled over and snuggled his chest.

“Morning,” she mumbled before taking a deep breath. “What time is it?”

“Late for me. Early for you.”

Penny stretched, enjoying the feel of his leg between hers. “Damn compromise.”

“Yes, well, a compromise only works when both participants agree on the terms. We just happened to wake up when we did,” he countered.

“What? No protocol?” she said in mock horror before giving Sheldon a kiss on the cheek.

“I blame you,” he replied.

“Oh no you don’t. We’re both to blame for last night.” Here she grinned. “So who gets spanked first?” Sheldon sighed although he did cover her hand with his own. “You said something to me last night,” she continued.

“I said a lot of things last night,” he countered. Penny stuck out her tongue.

“It was in another language.”

“Vulcan.” She shook her head and sighed although there was a smile on her face.

“You’re something else.

“As of October thirteenth we confirmed I was ‘amazing’,” he said with a twitchy smile.

Penny kissed his shoulder and snuggled closer. “So what’s it mean?”

“It’s a declaration of love between bondmates that is acceptable by Vulcan society.” He stroked her fingertips with his thumb. “It means, ‘I cherish Thee’.”

“It’s funny that people who hide their emotions have so many love terms,” said Penny as she rubbed his shoulder with her cheek.

“They still feel them. There’d be nothing for them to suppress if they didn’t,” replied Sheldon. “Besides it all comes out in the Pon Farr.”

“Which is?”

“Every seven years a Vulcan essentially goes into ‘heat’ and has to mate or else participate in a ritualized combat or he or she will die.”
She squeezed his hand. “If you think after this we’re good for seven years you’re wrong, Mister.”

“They have sexual relations outside of Pon Farr,” soothed her boyfriend. “The Pon Farr experience is psychophysical in nature and consists of several days of continuous fornication—with stoppages for food and sleep of course.”

“Wow. Now that has some definite possibilities,” chuckled Penny. Sheldon snorted. “Hey, I thought you were all for the Star Trek experience? If Spock does it, shouldn’t you?”

“Spock also mind-melded with a whale,” Sheldon countered.

Penny kissed his shoulder. “You go anywhere near Shamu and you’re grounded.”

“I’ll make a note,” he said with a little smile.

“So what was the Vulcan line again?”

“Taluhk nash-veh k’dular.”

“Kinda just rolls off the tongue,” Penny quipped.

“Doesn’t it?” He felt a kiss on his chest. “Oh. Sarcasm.”

“At least it’s less flemmy than Klingon,” Penny shrugged.

“Bang.”

“What?”

“It’s a Klingon term of affection,” Sheldon explained. “‘Bang’ means ‘beloved’.”

Penny laughed. “I see. So you’re telling me I banged my bang last night?”

“So it would seem,” he said with a twitchy smile.

“You can be my ‘bang’ and I can be your ‘k’diwa’.” She began to sing. “He bang! He bang!”

“You’re making me rethink the language lessons.”


“MajQa’,” he said with a kiss to her forehead. “‘Well done’.”

“Thank ya,” Penny gushed. “So how do you say ‘I love you’ in Klingon?”

“QamuSHa.”

“And Vulcan?”

“Wani ra yana ro aisha.”

“And English?”

Sheldon leaned over and lightly brushed her lips with his own.

“You know Dr. Cooper I think you’re wrong,” Penny said as they touched noses.
“Oh? About what?”

“Saying that you changed eight months ago today because when I think of you, you haven’t changed as much as you’ve opened up. A genuine Sheldon Blossom.”

“Perhaps,” he said evenly. “All I know is that I hadn’t the inclination to do anything different until I met you.”

Penny smiled widely. “You gave me your ‘spot’.”

“No, you took it,” he amended. “I really should have seen that as a sign of things to come.”

“Trust me, Sheldon, no one could have predicted this.” Penny made a resounding smack with their lips.

“I’m glad you’re here,” he said seriously.

“Me too.” Another kiss and then Penny rested her head on his shoulder. “So, got anything planned for today?”

“I’m not sure,” he said lightly. “It’s not eleven o’clock. I can’t get out of bed until then.”

“That’s my line, sweetie,” she teased.

“And as long as you’re in bed I’m not going anywhere.”

Penny sighed contentedly—and then felt herself being moved aside.

“After I use the washroom,” Sheldon amended as he scampered out of the room and closed the door.

xTBBTx

Wikipedia: Pon Farr; Harvey (movie)

Klingon translations: Klingon Pocket Dictionary; Learn Klingon!; geekosystem

Nuq Daq Yujda’pol: Where’s the chocolate?

Redradar net: Vulcan-English Dictionary

Imdb: A list of killer bug movies.

Asperger Article: Toronto Star

Penny’s course: Pasadena City College course book
The Hasta La Vista Provision

xTBBTx

Sheldon smiled as he looked over his mail before mounting the stairs. Seeing Meemaw’s handwriting always did that to him. While he fusssed about people sending him anything for Saturnalia he’d come to expect two things: his mother’s card with a picture of the Baby Jesus (never the Three Wise Men—they weren’t Christian) and a card with wrapped presents on the front (‘To Sheldon’ was printed on several in black ink) from his Meemaw. They knew he wouldn’t send anything in return, that he’d only mention they have a ‘healthy holiday’ in a phone call or letter. That’s just the way he was.

Until this year.

Penny had bamboozled him into sending his family Christmas cards. The motivating factor his girlfriend needed to string up a line in the apartment on which to hang Christmas cards was the Hallmark-stamped card from his mother. He’d objected on the principle of the thing but was overruled—reciprocity rules applied, apparently:

*Grudgingly he produced the addresses which Penny wrote on the envelopes. All he had to do was sign the cards. He opened one and immediately noted Penny’s looping handwriting.

“‘Merry Christmas’? Really?” Sheldon read with a roll of the eyes.

“Lighten up a little will ya?” She batted her green eyes.

With a scowly sigh he took up the pen and neatly scrawled ‘Dr. Sheldon Cooper’.*

Sheldon opened the apartment door and dumped his keys in the bowl. Leonard was at his desk booting up his laptop. The tall man took out a couple of letters and plunked them beside his roommate before venturing to his room after a quick trip to the washroom to wash his hands.

He took off his messenger bag and sat on the bed. Taking up the card he carefully unsealed the envelope and slipped out its contents. He spotted his name on three different presents. The bright side to having a moderately lengthy name was that he got the bigger boxes. He opened the card and was surprised to see a little note. Moving aside the paper he read Meemaw’s Christmas wishes and counted the three ‘x’s—one kiss for each cheek and an ‘Eskimo rub’ for the nose.

Unfolding the stationary, Sheldon read carefully:

Dear Moonpie,

I was pleasantly surprised to receive a Christmas card from you. Of course I was even more surprised to see a woman’s handwriting inside. Penny, I assume? Your mother told me you’ve been seeing your neighbor across the hall.

Good for you!

I admit I was a little heartbroken when you broke off your relations with Amy but it’s nice to see that you’re still open to the idea of ‘pair bonding’. Not so ‘ugh’ an idea now, is it?

I wish Penny and you a very Merry Christmas and New Year.
Love, Meemaw

PS, I’ve watched enough episodes of Dr. Phil to know what ‘seeing’ someone means.

Wear a condom.

Flushing, Sheldon placed her letter with the others and closed the drawer.

xTBBTx

Knock Knock Knock “Penny.”

Knock Knock Knock “Penny.”

Knock Knock Knock “Penny.”

Penny opened the door. “Yeeos?”

“I was just checking to see if you’ve finished packing. As you know we have to be at the airport by eight thirty to check our baggage. You don’t function well early in the morning so it’s best to be prepared tonight.”

“All ready for Freddy,” she replied cheerily. “Except I need you to pack a couple of things for me.” Sheldon rolled his eyes as she let him enter the apartment.

“What did I tell you about over-packing? We’re going for six days including travel. It’s not like you have to bring your entire wardrobe.”

“It’s not clothing, smartiboots.” Penny went into her bedroom while Sheldon had a seat on the couch.

“If you’d like I can repack your suitcase to better accommodate your items,” he offered.

“No thanks. It took a lot to get that puppy closed. I’m not opening it again until we hit Omaha.”

Sheldon sighed. “Remind me again why we’re compatible?”

“You love bringing order to chaos.”

“Unless we’re talking about your closet. I’ll leave that to the truly dedicated,” he said drolly as Penny reentered the room.

“You’re right, maybe it’s best if I left these things here.”

“Excellent show of discipline. I knew my conditioning would eventually—” He stopped talking as his girlfriend reached over his head and plopped two wrapped boxes on his lap.

“Merry Christmas!” She sat down on the couch and angled herself to better see his face.

“But it’s not Christmas,” he countered. “Besides, I thought I made it clear to you three years ago that I don’t celebrate Saturnalia.”

“Well I do,” she said as she crossed her arms. “This is a relationship compromise that won’t be compromised.”

“Ho, ho, ho, to you too,” he grumbled as he began unwrapping the first box. Secretly his heart was
pounding in anticipation but there was no way he’d ever admit it. Inside he found five glittery flowers on stalks.

“I’ll have a full bouquet of ‘Penny Blossoms’ at this rate,” he said with a smirk.

“They’re not ‘Penny Blossoms’,,” Penny amended.

Sheldon looked more closely and saw that in the center of each flower was a superhero logo which corresponded with the color of the flower: red for the Flash, blue for Superman, green for Green Lantern, yellow for Hawkman and black for Batman.

“You’re looking at the first batch of freshly sprung ‘Sheldon Blossoms’.” She leaned over and they kissed. “They’re extremely rare.”

“Unique,” he replied with a twitchy smile. “Thank you.” He placed the box on the coffee table and tackled the second gift. His breathing hitched as his eyes took in Flash comic number one twenty three. “Penny,” he whispered as he carefully picked it up. “This is ‘The Flash of Two Worlds’. ” He glossed over the spine and saw a familiar crease. “This is my ‘Flash of Two Worlds’.”

Penny grinned at the look of pure joy on her boyfriend’s face.

Sheldon’s eyes met hers. “How?”

“Believe in Christmas now?”

“I’ve nothing to give you in return,” he said apologetically.

“You’ve given me a lot already, Sheldon: the free course, your help with homework—can you put that thing down so I can hug you? I’d have to sell my car to get you another one.”

Sheldon set the comic and box on the table before opening his arms to Penny’s embrace.

“I’d do anything to assist so long as you try, Penny,” he said seriously. “I want you to succeed.” He gently moved her back so he could see her face. “Merry Christmas, K’diwa.”

“Merry Christmas, Moonpie.” Gently their lips touched. “Wanna get a little frisky?” she asked with a grin.

“We need to go to bed early,” he reminded her.

“That’s what coffee’s for,” she said as she wrapped her arms around his neck.

“Need I also remind you that tonight is neither Date Night nor Saturday?”

“Protocol shmotocol. It’s Christmas,” she whispered before nuzzling behind his ear.

“It’s not the twenty fifth,” he breathed as he massaged her sides.

“That’s Saturnalia,” she murmured. “I mean Christmas.”

“I have some work to complete before we go,” he sighed. “If I’m to retire at a decent hour I have to go.”

Penny sat back. “Dumped for the universe again.” She kissed him before he could protest. “Now you know what you can give me in return,” she said with a wink.
“You’re suggesting I trade sex for gifts?” he said with a raised eyebrow. “That would make you my ‘sugar mommy’.”

“Oh I’ll give you sugar alright.” Penny put her hand on Sheldon’s cheek as she closed in for a kiss. Sheldon licked his lips. “Sweet.”

“It’s the lip gloss,” Penny said with a smirk.

“I disagree.” He lightly nibbled on her lips with his own. “Definitely the lips.”

“If you don’t want to turn this into a sexcapade you better go,” she mock sighed.

“I suppose,” he said as they got up. “Goodnight Penny.” He kissed her again.

“Oh I’m not going to bed just yet,” she said with a sly grin. “After that kiss I’m all friskied up.” Sheldon thought about this for a moment before a flush covered his cheeks. “Happy typing, pumpkin.”

“Indeed,” he said as he exited the room. Out in the hall he stopped and took a breath. After he finished his project Penny might not be the only one to get a little frisky.

xTBBTx

“Greg!” Penny waved. Her brother approached and they hugged.

“How is my girlie?”

Sheldon turned to his girlfriend. “At least you come by your folksy ways honestly.”

“Shucks yeah,” Greg quipped, causing the lanky man to purse his lips. “So how was the trip?”

“Here we go,” Penny sighed as they traversed through the terminal.

The physicist got huffy. “First we dealt with a ticket agent who had no sense of professionalism; then I almost didn’t make it through screening—”

Greg suppressed a smile. “I couldn’t imagine why.”

“It’s not what you think,” Penny said. “Sheldon has a Mexican peso permanently wedged up his nose.” Her brother laughed.

“No kidding?”

“Why would I kid about something like that?” snapped Sheldon.

“You’re right,” Greg replied. “After spending time with you you’d think I’d know better than to question.”

Sheldon nodded to Penny. “You should be more like your brother.”

“Oh parole?” she replied sweetly. Again Greg laughed.

“Let me get you guys home. Mom has dinner ready.”

“Oh dear,” Sheldon said as they exited into the parking lot. “I was hoping we could go over the
criteria before she ordered although I suppose we’re rather limited by Omaha’s selection of Chinese restaurants.”

“We’re not eating Chinese,” said Greg. Sheldon turned to Penny.

“But it’s Friday. You know we eat Chinese on Fridays.”

“Sheldon, honey, we’re going to be eating home-cooked meals for a few days. It’ll be good I promise,” Penny said soothingly.

“Of course.” Sheldon stuck his suitcase in the back of the truck. “We’ll have to stop at a drugstore for antacids before we head to the farm.”

“Sheldon—”

“Penny you know I’m nothing if not prudent,” he said as he got into the truck. “Now let’s skedaddle; it’s cold out here.”

“Five bucks says Dad has another ‘gunside chat’ with him,” murmured Greg.

“You’re on,” Penny grinned.

xTBBTx

Sheldon woke up as Penny was slipping out of bed. It was early so he knew she’d be back. After a seven hour flight filled with anxiety and lack of ample leg room he was still a little sleepy. He closed his eyes.

A few minutes later the bedroom door closed. He turned over and stretched.

He opened his eyes to see Penny standing at the foot of the bed with her phone in hand.

“What are you doing?” he yawned.

“Nothing,” she said with a wide grin.

“My mother better not see this,” he said as he covered his bare chest with the blankets.

“It’s perfect for next year’s Christmas card insert.”

“And that better be sarcasm,” he replied as he rolled onto his side and again stretched his limbs before relaxing with a little sigh.

“Penny enough.”

“Just another one for posterior-ity,” she said lightly. “Last one for now.”

“For now,” Sheldon snorted as he gazed at his girlfriend with narrowed eyes. “I’m not some kind of ‘cheesecake’. I’m a future Nobel Prize laureate.”

“Whatever Moonpie. You don’t need to see them.” She tapped on her phone a few times. “I’ll just put them where I can enjoy them.”
“Until I get my hands on them,” he warned.

“I’ve got a good hiding place. And they’re off.” She set her phone down on the dresser and went back to bed.

“You think I can’t track them?” Sheldon asked as he pulled her towards his body to warm her up.

“I had Leonard help me.”


“All I know is that if you’re threatening my collection—yes you heard me, ‘collection’—I’m to initiate the ‘Hasta la vista’ protocol.”

Here he looked at her, face flushing. “Penny I hope Leonard explained to you the severity of—”

“Look none of this would even be happening if you didn’t look so cute. Not my fault,” Penny murmured as she closed her eyes.

“I don’t know if I’m happy with this,” he said with an air of annoyance.

“Fair’s fair. You can take pictures of me.”

Sheldon frowned. “I don’t have to take picture of you. Eidetic memory, remember?”

Penny opened an eye. “Something which I don’t have. This evens the playing field.”

“Except my nudity is on the web,” grumbled Sheldon.

“Just for now,” she said soothingly. “I download them and delete.”

“‘Them’. Just how many pictures do you have?”

“Well you weren’t exactly putting out, sweetie. I needed something to ease the tension.”

Sheldon thought about this for a moment.

“So if we engage in regular intercourse the pictures will cease?”

“Like I said: only if you quit being cu—” She squealed as he tickled her side.

“What was that?” he asked with a bit of a twang.

Penny couldn’t stop laughing as he was merciless in his attack.

“Sheldon! Everyone’s sleeping!” she gasped.

“So then quit laughing.”

“Sheldon!”

He stopped tickling and leaned over to cover her mouth with his own. Penny moaned and did her best to respond while at the same time catch her breath.

“Well?” he asked as he pulled away.

“Ten?” he said, shocked at the number. How many did she take? He swallowed and composed himself. “Counterproposal, delete them all and I’ll make it ‘worth your while’.”

“Final proposal: I delete one picture every time we have sex,” Penny said with a smirk.

“Done,” Sheldon said firmly. “So how many pictures did you take?”

“I’ll let you know when you’re off the hook,” she said as she again snuggled against him, feeling a warm inner glow as he wrapped his arms around her body.

Penny would tell him that these were the only two pictures she’d taken of him in bed.

…At some point.

xTBBTx

“I’m so proud of you,” Penny gushed as she drove the family pick up truck down the highway. Sheldon snorted.

“It wasn’t like I was completing the twelve labors of Heracles. Although there was an element of danger to my person.” He angled his feet so his boots were directly under the heater.

“Yeah nothing like having your toes pecked off by a bunch of feeding chickens.” She signaled and turned left off the highway onto an old paved road.

“Chickens prey on the weak. They must know I have sensitive feet by the way I step.” Sheldon looked out the side window to see a little community center and an ancient swing set.

“I’ll have dad dry out some bones so you can make your own set of oracle bones,” Penny grinned.

“Oracle bones were made out of tortoise shell,” he corrected. “Besides, if I want chicken bones I can always go to KFC.” They passed a small group of houses before the road changed to gravel.

“Where are we going?”

“Down to the lake. I haven’t been there in ages.” Sheldon wrapped his arms around his chest.

“Yes I often think December twenty fourth is the best time for a picnic at the beach. Why not have a little dip too while we’re at it?”

“Keep it up and one of us might,” she replied.

“Somehow threats of violence don’t fall in accordance with the season.” He glanced at the speedometer. “You seem to be going a little fast for the conditions.”

“Do I tell you how to do physics?”

“No.”

“Well then?” she said as they went around a sharp bend in the road.

“I gave you a kiss before we left and you’d said you’d drive ‘safely’ and reducing your speed on snow and gravel is part of that,” he said in a huff.

“That’s why I’m not doing slip slides in the snow.” Penny took in his rigid posture. “Plain ol’ driving,” she said soothingly.
They continued to ride in silence although for the sake of peace she did decrease her speed by five miles. Sheldon noted a clearing in the distance and Penny down shifted and pulled the vehicle to the side and parked.

“Grab the binoculars,” she said as she reached behind the seat for her purse. She took out her father’s camera and tucked it in her pocket.

“At least this is a popular enough spot,” remarked Sheldon as he stepped onto the snow-packed ground. “It somewhat increases our chances of survival should the vehicle not start.”

“Come on,” she said as she took his mitten covered hand. “UPR Bay is just down the hill.”

“‘UPR’? Interesting considering Nebraska is the home of Union Pacific Railway. In fact Bailey Yard is located between Omaha and Denver and is the world’s largest railroad classification yard. Next time we’re here we have to go.”

“Counting the moments,” she said with a roll of the eyes.

“And quite right you should,” he said cheerily as the walked. “It has a custom built one-of-a-kind ultrasound wheel defect detector and it sorts, services and repairs locomotives and cars headed all across North America. The yard covers two thousand eight hundred and fifty acres and has two hundred separate tracks totaling three hundred and fifteen miles of track, nine hundred and eighty five switches, seven hun…dred….”

He stopped talking as the clamping sound that only several tonnes of metal on wheels could make echoed around them. Eyes wide, Sheldon quickened his pace.

“Oh my,” he breathed as they came upon the small rail yard across the slim lake.

“Knock yourself out,” Penny smiled. She handed him the camera and ventured to the shoreline.

Sheldon put the camera in his pocket and raised the binoculars to his eyes, scanning the various railcars.

“You know there are eleven different classifications for freight cars,” he said. “The class ‘F’ flat car, class ‘G’ gondola, class ‘H’ hopper car, class ‘L’ special car—a modified version of any of the other ten, class ‘M’ training unit, class ‘N’ cabooses, class ‘R’ refrigerated car, class ‘S’ stock car, class ‘T’ Tank car, class ‘X’ box car and class ‘MW’ maintenance of way equipment.”

“Mmhm,” Penny said absently.

“The large freight is leaving. Note that there are three locomotives at the front.”

“One, two three. Yup, you’re right.”

“It’s not that uncommon to find more than one engine. For instance, a train with a locomotive attached at each end is described as 'top and tailed'. This is typically done when there are no reversing facilities available.” Sheldon followed the train until the last of the cars exited the yard.

That’s when he spotted a bright yellow and blue locomotive.

“My Lord,” he said quietly. Penny turned at the sound.

“What is it?”

“I don’t believe it. But it is! It’s a GTEL locomotive!” Penny walked over and he took the
binoculars from around his neck and handed it over to her. “It’s the big yellow one in the back. Do you see it?”

Penny looked. It’s big. It’s yellow. It’s a locomotive. “Yup.”

Sheldon pulled out the camera and took a few shots. “Penny we have to get closer.”

“No allowed to trespass on the rail yard.”

“We’re not trespassing. We’re just taking a look,” Sheldon said excitedly as he grabbed his girlfriend’s hand and practically dragged her up the slope towards the truck.

Penny put the key in the ignition and turned to Sheldon. “If we go you have to be good. If you hear me say your name it means ‘zip it’ and if I say we have to go we go. Got it, Sheldon?” He opened his mouth to speak before clamping it shut and nodding.

The drive back to the main highway was quiet although Sheldon’s foot tapped impatiently and he did fidget with his seatbelt a little more than usual.

“You can talk until we get there, you know,” Penny said.

Sheldon let out a breath of air.

“We really are in for a treat. The GTEL or gas turbine-electric locomotive is a rare thing to see. It was first experimented with in nineteen twenty but reached its peak in the nineteen fifties and sixties. In fact Union Pacific had the largest fleet in the world, and was the only railroad to use them for hauling freight in regular service,” he burbled happily.

“What happened to them all?” asked Penny as she signaled and turned onto a gravel road.

“After the nineteen seventy three oil crisis and the subsequent rise in fuel costs, gas turbine locomotives became uneconomical to operate, and many were taken out of service,” he explained. “Moreover, Union Pacific’s locomotives required more maintenance than originally anticipated, due to fouling of the turbine blades by the Bunker C oil used as fuel.”

“I see,” said Penny. She pulled in beside two other Ford trucks which were parked in front of an old stone building. “Okay now remember—”

“You say my name I stop talking. You say we have to go we go,” he reiterated as he got out of the truck. He walked to the building and held the door for Penny to enter.

“Hi,” she said brightly to the two guys lounging behind a wooden counter.

“Can I help you?” asked the younger one as his eyes gave her the onceover.

“We were wondering if we could take a look around the yard,” she inquired. The bearded man shook his head.

“Sorry. Private property. You can see it from across the bay. There’s a side road about a mile west.”

“UPR Bay, yeah I know. We were just there. My boyfriend and I are here from California visiting my folks and he’s really into trains and—”

“Please let me see the locomotive,” Sheldon said quietly.
The older fellow chuckled. “Ya saw her did ya?” Sheldon nodded. The man regarded the lanky Californian bundled up in layers meant for temperatures at least ten degrees colder. He dropped his pencil on the desk and got up. “What the hell. It’s Christmas.” He took up his jacket and indicated the couple go outside.

Penny smiled. “Thanks so much umm….”

“Gabe,” the man replied as he donned his gloves. “Two rules: keep your eyes open at all times and do what I tell you to do. It’s dangerous out here.”

The trio walked along the gravel and slowly made their way across the multiple tracks towards the locomotive.

“Why is she here?” asked Sheldon.

“We used to be an old depot. She ran into a little engine trouble and was taken off. The fuel wasn’t the best back then. Kept bugging things up,” explained Gabe.

“Why didn’t she go to North Platte?”

“I think she was supposed to. Just never did. She’s been here since ‘eighty four.” Here Gabe smiled. “The paint’s still good on her as long as you don’t look too closely. Lotta rust on her now.”

“She’s magnificent,” Sheldon breathed as they approached the massive engine. He stepped up to the locomotive, took off his mitten and placed his hand on its yellow side.

Penny smiled as she watched her boyfriend slowly circle the locomotive, knowing that his brain was cataloguing every detail to memory.

“So he’s really into trains, huh?” asked Gabe. The waitress smiled.

“Hey Sheldon,” she called, “what’s so good about this engine anyways?” There was silence save the crunching of snow as he came around the back.

“There are distinct advantages over a piston engine,” he said as he pulled out the camera and started a second lap around the locomotive, this time taking pictures. “The number of moving parts is much smaller and the power-to-weight ratio is much higher. A turbine of a given power output is also physically smaller than an equally powerful piston engine, allowing a locomotive to be very powerful without being inordinately large.”

“The problem may be getting him to shut up about trains,” she said to Gabe.

Fifteen minutes later Sheldon made his way back, a grin on his face. Penny couldn’t help but smile in return. His joy was positively timeless. Beyond thrilled. She realized come hell or high water that next time they were in Nebraska they were going to the railroad yard to see the wheel thingie.

“Almost done,” Penny said as she stuck out her hand for the camera. “Get over there and I’ll snap one with you and the ol’ loco.”

“GTEL,” corrected Sheldon.

Penny stepped back a few feet so she could get the nose of the massive engine into the camera’s frame. Sheldon looked positively tiny next to its bulk. She thought of the Clifford the Big Red Dog books she read as a child and the picture of the proud boy standing next to his gargantuan pet.
“All done,” she said.

“Give Gabe the camera and come here,” replied the physicist. Penny obliged and went to her boyfriend.

“Shall I show a little caboose?” she teased.

“A smile is all you require,” he replied with a smirk.

His arms enfolded her body and she leaned against him and was suddenly glad she brought the camera. She didn’t want to forget the day she saw Sheldon tromping through the snow around his beloved locomotive and realized she wanted to give him a little Shelly Cooper. She could see him showing his son the wheels on the track or lifting his daughter onto his shoulders so she could touch the side of the train.

“Thank you so much for this,” Penny said to Gabe as the trio returned to the building. “You have yourself a Merry Christmas.” She looked to Sheldon.

“Yes, thank you very much—and wash your hands frequently and thoroughly. It’s cold and flu season after all.”

Penny laughed as she got in the truck. “Love the Christmas greeting, Dr. Cooper.”

“I wished the man good health. What more could he want?” he replied as he put on his seatbelt.

“And hand sanitizers were had by all good boys and girls.”

“I’d like to point out that Santa wears gloves,” sniffed Sheldon.

“Ho, ho, ho to you, too,” Penny said with a smirk as she put the truck in gear and exited the lot.

xTBBTx

One pair of shoes. (Not to exceed $100.00. SC is not to be forced into shopping.)
Movie Night—Your choice. (No repeats unless it’s Star Wars Episodes IV-VI.)
One free game of paintball. (No siding with Leslie Winkle.)
Cancel one ‘strike’. (Not valid when emailing LOLCats to s.cooperphd at yahoo dot com.)
One outdoor astronomy lesson. (Not astrology. That’s still hokum.)
One home cooked meal. (Nothing canned or prepackaged.)
One ‘we agree to disagree’ compromise. (Unless you say Star Trek blows. That’s war.)
One package emergency Belgian chocolate. (No experiments will be conducted.)
Assistance with spring cleaning. (Must take place no later than May 31, 2013)
One free order of dumplings. (Touching SC’s food still a strike.)

Penny closed the little booklet.

“I realize there’s an imbalance in reciprocity,” Sheldon began. “Your gift far outweighs my effort.”

“It’s perfect.” She gave him a kiss and he nodded although the tips of his mouth were curved upwards.

“What he give you?” asked Greg.

“‘Cooper Coupons’, ” his sister said as she handed them over. “They’re like supermarket coupons. He even has little disclaimers. It’s cute.”
“‘One free load of laundry. (Offer valid Saturdays at 8:15 only.)’” Greg read aloud. “Why eight fifteen?”

“That’s when I do laundry,” Sheldon explained.

“So if Pen came to you with laundry at eight twenty….”

“The coupon specifically states eight fifteen and therefore would be invalid.”

“Of course.” Greg flipped to another page. “‘Conversation over iced latte and hot chocolate. (Valid only in months containing an ‘R’.)’” He regarded the physicist. “And the reason for this is?”

“Not everything needs a reason, Greg. Sometimes you have to give in to whimsy.”

Greg grinned but kept silent as he continued reading through the booklet.

“I have to get me one of those books,” quipped Penny’s mother, Anne. “‘One night away from dishes’ would be nice.”

“You don’t need a coupon for that, hon,” said Wyatt. “You can have one whenever you want.” His wife gave him a kiss. “Just clean up the next day is all,” he winked.

“That’s either sarcasm or Wyatt’s last words,” Sheldon said evenly.

“Could be both,” Anne said with a smirk as her arm slid around her husband’s throat.

XxX

It was still cold outside but Sheldon seemed to be adjusting. As he walked in the yard he set each boot down in a methodical fashion that made a satisfying crunch in the snow. Galveston had snow from time to time but nothing this packed. The snow was a part of the landscape; it blanketed the fields and decorated the tree limbs. There was a quietness that Sheldon liked. Certainly it was better than being indoors where the sounds of NBA basketball echoed in the halls. Wyatt, Greg, Penny and her brother-in-law and nephew were watching the Christmas Day marathon of games while Anne and her daughter Catharine busied themselves in the kitchen. Catharine had blond hair and her eyes were blue. She was outgoing but not as vivacious as her younger sister. Nobody shone like Penny.

There was such a laid back comfort to Penny’s family unlike his own. Even at its most civil there was the static of hostility at the Cooper residence that stood the hairs on the back of his neck. Not that his dad was ever violent—the shooting of Mary’s Franklin Mint collectible plates aside. George Cooper was a man who was dissatisfied with his life but was unwilling to change either himself or the situation.

This was part of the reason why Sheldon was so driven: he wasn’t going to be like his father. He wasn’t going to spend what years he had on the planet in drinking establishments picking up barmaids. Moreover he wasn’t going to have a wife and a house full of kids altering his behavior. Sheldon Cooper was going to do what he wanted to do and no one was going to tell him any differently.

Well except for his mother and Meemaw. And Penny.

“Penny, Penny, Penny,” he murmured to himself. Sheldon couldn’t thank her enough for yesterday. Not only did he get to see his beloved GTEL locomotive but it also removed him from a household
of visiting relatives. It wasn’t until they were snuggled in bed did it occur to Sheldon that he was a little apprehensive when Penny took him for a drive because it wasn’t the first time he’d been taken somewhere mysterious on Christmas Eve:

*He was eleven, home for Christmas from his first year at university, and feeling on top of the world. He was engaged academically if not always challenged. His room at Professor and Mrs. Dunkin’s house was his first true Fortress of Solitude as he didn’t have a pesky twin sister to contend with. Sheldon had found his intellectual home.

Still he knew he had family obligations and so at the Dunkin’s insistence he returned to Galveston for the holidays. Besides, he wanted to see his Meemaw. She’d written to him as often as he did her which was quite frequently as he adjusted to his new surroundings. No matter how far away he was he was still her ‘Moonpie’ and nothing was going to change that.

Home was a little different. Mary had decked out the place with a Manger scene, angels and anything else Christian in nature. Sheldon had tried to tell her that Christmas trees were pagan in origin:

“Well, then I guess there’ll be no presents since there’d be no tree to put ‘em under,” was her response.

“Actually the idea of gift exchanging originates with Saturnalia: a Roman custom where—”

“Enough of that Shelly.”

“It’s true,” he said in a huff.

“There’s a difference ‘tween what’s true and what’s right. Now’s the time to do what’s right and what’s right is tuh zip it and help your father with the Christmas lights.”

After the lights were strung around the outside of the trailer George aligned the plug to the plug-in but didn’t join the two.

“Looks like we’ve gotta hit the hardware store for a couple of bulbs,” he said as he finished his beer.

“But yuh haven’t plugged in the lights. How do yuh—”

“Mind me now Shelly,” his father growled. Sheldon was silent.

The pair entered the kitchen where Mary and Missy were in the midst of baking sugar cookies.

“We need some bulbs. Ah’ve gotta hit the hardware store ‘fore they close,” said George. Mary pursed her lips. “Ah’ll take the boy with me,” he continued as he slapped a meaty hand on Sheldon’s shoulder. The boy inwardly cringed but knew enough to keep still.

Husband and wife locked eyes.

“We’ll be back,” George said and steered Sheldon out of the house. “Get in the car. Ah’ll be right back.” He headed off to the shed.

Sheldon got into his seatbelt and waited. As far as he was concerned his hands were caked with bacteria. He reached into his pocket and pulled out a little plastic bottle of rubbing alcohol to do his hands.
“Damn Shelly yuh always smell like a hospital,” his father said as he got in the car, setting a small box with a bow on it between the seats. He turned on the radio much to Sheldon’s chagrin and drove off.

“So how’s school?” George asked.

‘Exciting, intriguing, informative, not everything I thought it’d be but better than here.’

“Goin’ well,” Sheldon said evenly as he looked out the window.

“That’s good.”

This was the last time in Sheldon’s life his father ever asked him about school.

As they entered the downtown core Sheldon noted they were turning left at Elgin Street instead of right towards the hardware store.

“Where are we goin’?” he asked.

“Just got a pit stop tuh make first,” said George.

They parked in the side lot at the Sweet Rose Tavern and Mr. Cooper grabbed the gift box and got out.

“Ah won’t be long. Stay in the car.”

Five minutes turned into twenty five and still George hadn’t returned. Sheldon put his mittened hands into his pockets and did his best to keep warm in the cooling car. After forty five minutes he got out and began walking around the parking lot to warm himself.

At the one hour mark he locked his door and ventured to the tavern.

“You c’aint go in there, kiddo,” said a woman with stringy hair and too much makeup who was standing near the entrance smoking a cigarette.

“My father’s in there,” Sheldon replied.

“Who’s that?”

“George Cooper.” At this her jaw stiffened.

“Ah see.” She dropped her cigarette and snuffed it with her boot heel. “Ah’ll go see what’s keepin’ him. You come have a seat in the landin’.”

Sheldon stepped in the door and was immediately overwhelmed by the smell of cigarette smoke and beer. There was a crunching beneath his shoe and he lifted it to see a peanut shell. The woman pointed to a chair and he sat.

Over the country music he heard his father’s loud baritone voice:

“Ah’ll be out when I’m done.”

“Yur son’s waitin’ in the cold for yur cheatin’ ass to take him home,” snapped the woman.

“Clare, the day you stop whorin’ is the day I listen to yuh!”
A few minutes later the inner doors opened and Clare emerged to find Sheldon huddled in the seat with his hands covering his ears.

“Yur father’s gonna be a few minutes yet, hon,” she said gently. “Here’s a lil somethin’ tuh tide yuh ’til he’s done.” She handed him a box of Red Vines.*

Sheldon found a clear span of fallen snow and carefully began crunching out the molecular structure for a snowflake’s water-ice lattice with his foot. He couldn’t even begin to imagine what his life would be like if he hadn’t been so gifted. More likely than not he’d still be in Galveston like the rest of his family, the peculiar Cooper child who obsessively cleaned his hands and knocked in threes and read about flags and trains.

He’d still have Asperger’s.

Sheldon sighed. He hadn’t gone for a diagnosis because his quirks, while sometimes inconvenient, were not detrimental to his studies. Now that AS was going to be swept under the blanket of autism he would never seek professional assistance. He didn’t want anything to tarnish his accomplishments. He wasn’t going to be the answer to the trivia question: who’s both a Nobel Prize laureate and autistic? The physicist had made it thus far through his life without many complications so he was ready to—

“Hey Cooper!”

Something hit him square between the shoulder blades.

Sheldon turned to see Penny in the midst of scooping up more snow into her hands. With a wide grin he bent down and did the same.

As she washed and scrubbed the potatoes Anne watched her daughter and eccentric boyfriend conduct their snowball war before starting on a snowman. It had been a long time since she’d seen Penny so happy even if it was with the quirkiest man Anne ever met. She’d never seen a person so passionate about food preparation. Sheldon extolled the virtues of meat thermometers and properly sanitizing the turkey and wanted to know whether the potatoes were big ones chopped small or little whole ones as it altered the boiling time. Oh, and for some reason he also wanted to know if they were red or white. Anne thought she’d have to chase him from the room with a frying pan if Penny hadn’t come to collect him.

That’s when it struck her: Penny had finally grown up. She watched her daughter quickly diffuse the situation with gentle teasing and assurances that Anne wasn’t going to poison the family. It was like watching an old married couple, they were that comfortable. They complimented each other despite their differences. More importantly, neither would put up with crap which was needed since Sheldon was stubborn and her daughter, mule-headed.

Although Anne thought Sheldon peculiar she realized Penny could have done a lot worse. He was educated, had a good job, didn’t drink or do drugs.

And he loved her so.

He wasn’t all mushy gushy about it but it was obvious in the way he talked with Penny—*with* Penny—not to her or at her and he listened. Sheldon might not agree but he gave her the opportunity to express herself, something which Penny’s previous boyfriends seemed disinterested in doing. Anne knew that the Penny he saw was fiery and determined and a force to contend and that he’d do anything to ensure his girlfriend never forgot her worth.
If he wasn’t so damn germ phobic Anne would have planted a big ol’ kiss on his cheek.

“How are things?” asked Wyatt as he came into the kitchen for another beer.

“ETA for supper is still six o’clock,” Anne replied.

“Wonder if that’ll be good enough for Sheldon?” Wyatt chuckled.

“Penny’s got him good and distracted at the moment.”

Wyatt came to the window to see Sheldon attach a second head to the snowman.

“He’s an odd duck,” he said.

“But a keeper,” Anne replied.

“You’re the cook,” her husband said as he kissed her on the cheek.

XxX

“You haven’t checked the temperature,” Sheldon said excitedly.

“It weighs sixteen pounds and it’s been roasting four hours. It’s done,” Anne assured him.

“You’re just guessing.”

“I’ve been cooking turkeys for over thirty years.”

“And it’s amazing no one’s been poisoned with your haphazardness.”

“Sheldon,” said Penny as she entered the kitchen. “Time to go wash up.”

He stared at the turkey with pursed lips.

“Nothing like washing up before entering the leper colony,” he drawled before preceding Penny out of the room. “I distinctly heard the sound of a can opener earlier. I thought you said we were having cranberry sauce not jelly?”

Anne looked out the window as she took a breath and spotted the two-headed snowman with four twig arms.

With Dr. Cooper in the family things would be anything but boring.

xTBBTx

“That’s inaccurate,” Sheldon said.

“Shh!” hushed Penny. “Movie now. Discussion later.”

“There’s nothing to discuss,” he whispered. “Clark says he has twenty five thousand lights on his house. These are the old-fashioned bulbs that draw seven watts each; thus, Clark would be drawing one hundred and seventy five thousand watts of power, or one hundred and seventy five kilowatt-hours continuous draw, far more than can be delivered to a single-family dwelling using the U.S. standard one hundred and twenty volt electrical system. Therefore, Clark's main breaker would have instantly tripped the second he would have plugged in all the lights at once, not counting the lights on his Christmas tree and everything else electrical in his house.”
Wyatt cleared his throat. The room was silent as they watched.

A few minutes more and Sheldon shook his head and tutted.

“The assertion that ‘if one goes out the whole thing doesn’t work’ about the Christmas lights on the roof is hokum.”

“Sheldon,” Penny warned as she glanced at her Dad. This was Wyatt’s favorite Christmas movie.

“While this is the case for lights on a serial circuit, the lights Clark puts on the roof are on a parallel circuit. If one bulb went out on these lights it wouldn’t affect the rest of them,” explained the physicist.

“Zip it!”

Sheldon zipped his mouth only to ‘open’ it again. “Of course I shouldn’t expect them to get basic electricity correct considering the camera shot from the power company has the word ‘Auxiliary’ spelled incorrectly.”

At once Wyatt stood up.

“Sheldon, let’s you and me go shoot some rifles,” he said in a rumbly voice.

“Alright,” the lanky man replied. “If it gets me out of watching this deplorable movie I’m game.”

“That’s what I’m afraid of,” Penny said nervously.

“Penny, I know my way around rifles. I’ll be fine.” He gave a twitchy smile and followed Wyatt from the room.

Greg watched the two men get dressed and tromp out into the snow. When Penny entered the kitchen he stuck out his hand and didn’t say a word as she crossed his palm with a five dollar bill.

xTBBTx

With a frown on his face Sheldon checked his phone.

“Still don’t see her,” Penny said tiredly as she scoured the airport terminal. “You sure you told her the correct time?”

“Of course I did,” Sheldon snapped. “I also said I’d text her before we went to claim our luggage.” He scrolled through his phone contacts and pressed Amy’s number. He’d expect something like this from Leonard but not Amy. His stomach was in knots as the phone rang. Please pick up. Please pick up. Please pi—

“Hel-lo there.”

“Amy?”

“Sheldon! Your plane has arrived?”

“On schedule. Where are you?”

“I’m at home.” (giggle)

“I don’t see what’s so funny about the situation. Penny and I have spent the last seven hours on a
plane and we’re tired and you said you’d pick us up and—"

“Stop it!”

“Stop what?”

“Not talking to you, cuddles. Let me get myself together and I’ll be out shortly.”

“Very well. And I must add that I’m very disappointed in you, Amy.”

“I’m sorry Sheldon. Be there in a pinch.”

“Is she okay?” Penny asked.

“Apparently she forgot,” Sheldon replied as he tucked his phone in his pocket.

XxX

Amy set her phone on her nightstand before returning to Raj’s arms.

“Sheldon and Bestie are waiting for me at the terminal,” she said evenly.

“No,” Raj replied lightly before kissing her. Amy felt his erect member brush her belly.

“Of course I’m late already,” she murmured.

“Mmhm,” Raj said as he placed little kisses across her clavicle.

Amy smiled. “I’ll just tell him that something came up I couldn’t ignore.”

Raj raised his head and giggled. “Amy, Amy, Amy.”

The neurobiologist closed her eyes. “Keep saying my name.”


xTBBTx

Wikipedia: Bailey Yard; Gas Turbine-Electric Locomotive; Train

Jaanu: Hindi for ‘beloved’

About com: Oracle bone

Trains Magazine: Freight car classifications

Imdb: Christmas Vacation
And so concludes ‘Daily Occurrences’.

I now feel that I’ve explored what I needed to my own satisfaction. I miss the fun exhibited in the first two seasons of The Big Bang Theory and I wanted to show that it is compatible with romantic exploration and character development. I feel that all the characters deserve so much more than they’ve been getting and I tried very hard to make them shine, to do them justice.

This is the longest fiction I’ve ever written and I thank you all for taking the time to read and comment. In particular I’d like to thank TheGreebo who not only wrote my Summary (because my attempt sucked so horribly!) but also set me straight in treating this story with respect. You gave me the courage to continue when things looked grim in the early days.

I hope you enjoyed my indulgence. Thank you again for reading. *Lynn

Reference to ‘The Agreement Dissection’; ‘Pilot’

This chapter contains ‘Mature’ sexual content.

xTBBTx

“Thank you for bringing me along,” Amy gushed as Sheldon held the store’s door open for her to exit.

“You drove,” he replied.

“Your literalisms are amusing.”

“I’m trying to widen my humor repertoire,” he said as they walked down the sidewalk. “There are times when I converse with Penny that I find myself at a loss.” The neurobiologist nodded.

“She’s good for you.” Amy cocked her head. “Actually she’s good for the both of us. It’s funny that two overachievers could miss what’s really important in life. So much for smarts.”

Sheldon regarded his friend. “I take it relations between Raj and you are progressing?”

“Sheldon, if I’d known what coitus felt like earlier I would have pinned you to the couch the first time we snuggled.” She wiggled her eyebrows as his cheeks colored and eyes widened.

“So much for a ‘relationship of the mind’,” he said drolly.

“Oh I still respect you for that—among other things.”

“Amy Farrah Fowler,” he tsked.

“Penny and I agree you have a cute tush.” She bumped her friend’s elbow as she could feel his
unease. “And you think all we talk about are shoes.”

“Cigars, alcohol, ravaging men with your eyes—”

“You forgot abundance of friends, a boyfriend, a social life.” A pause as they waited at the lights. “This wasn’t supposed to happen to me.”

“What do you mean?”

“I’m Amy Farrah Fowler,” she said with a wry smirk. “Brainy but friendless. Frumpy and undesirable.”

“You’re not undesirable,” the physicist said with a frown. “I desire you as a friend and Raj, even more so.” They crossed the street.

“As we had coitus I kept having to remind myself that it was actually happening.”

A little smile came to Sheldon’s face. “You’re better than me. I wasn’t thinking at all.”

“How did you feel afterwards?”

“Elated. Relieved. Of course I had to shower immediately after but I’m happy to say I didn’t scrub myself raw.” His eyes rolled to his friend. “I really have to thank you.”

“No need.”

“If there’s anything I can do for you, you need only ask,” he said seriously.

“Friendship is about more than reciprocity, Sheldon. It’s mutually giving to each other without expectation of return. I want you to be happy and if my actions can contribute to that happiness I’m more than willing to oblige.”

They continued walking in comfortable silence.

It was as they were passing Macy’s that she felt his hand slip into hers.

“You’re a treasure, Amy Farrah Fowler,” he said softly.

xTBBTxMaturexTBBTx

Sheldon was in the middle of watching television when the door opened and Penny entered.

“Hey Sheldon,” she said as she made her way to the back of the couch so she could plant a kiss on his head. “Next Generation?”

He rolled his eyes. “Deep Space Nine, Penny. The uniforms should be a dead giveaway since their color insignias of red, blue and gold are worn on the shoulders whereas it’s on the upper body on the ones worn on Next Generation.”

“Be happy I know who Spock is.”

“Duly noted,” Sheldon replied as he watched her cross over to the kitchen for a bottled water. He also noted that she wore no underwear under her green shorts and her hair was slightly curled at the ends as it dried after her shower.

“So, what are we going to do this afternoon?” Penny asked as she sat down in her spot.
"As Leonard’s off at Leslie’s until Sunday we have the apartment to ourselves,” grinned her boyfriend.

"Give you any ideas?” she asked coyly.

"Well we can watch what we want without recourse as the Roommate Agreement stipulates television usage must be booked for exclusive personal use at the weekly meeting.” He noticed her look and muted the tv. “What?”

"Sheldon, what do you think Leslie and Leonard are doing right now?”

He thought for a moment. “Given the time of day I’d imagine not a lot as it’s only been an hour since lunch.”

“I don’t think they’re going swimming,” Penny smirked. “Although you’re right in guessing something physical.”

Sheldon pursed his lips. “Conjecture. You have no way of knowing what they’re doing.”

“Not true,” she said softly as she turned to face him. “You see it’s all about dark matter.”

“Oh really?” he said with a twitchy smile. “Do tell.”

“Well I’m not that good on the science since that’s your department but from what I understand dark matter is something that can’t be felt”—here she put a hand to Sheldon’s cheek—"or tasted”—she leaned in and slowly pressed her lips to his. She smiled as he closed his eyes and swallowed. “It can’t be smelled or heard. And yet….“ Sheldon was absolutely still.

“And yet?” he whispered.

“The attraction is so strong. So undeniable.” Her mouth returned to his and he kissed her softly. “And you say I don’t listen to you when you gibber-jabber about sciencey stuff,” she smirked. 

“I’ll have to amend Professor Zwicky’s formula because there’s no doubt I see you.” Sheldon rubbed a strand of Penny’s hair with his fingers. “I feel you and smell you and taste you.”

“You’re sure it’s not a bad case of, what did you call it, gravitational lensing?”

A smile crossed his face but it was his determined gaze that caught her breath. She knew that look and it was something she loved to see in her lover’s eyes—Want.

“There’s something I have to show you,” he said softly as he got up.

“Oh?” Penny said as she joined him.

“It’s in my room,” he said as she backed him into the hallway. “Let me get—”

“Perfect,” she purred before she pinned Sheldon against the wall. Her hands moved from his shoulders to either side of his neck and she pulled him towards her waiting mouth. Save their breaths and the smacking of lips all was silent in the apartment. There was nothing to distract Penny from the warmth under her fingers as his body responded to her kiss. Nothing to hide the bulge in his pants that pressed against her hip.

Sheldon felt her rubbing against him and in that moment decided to assert himself and angled his hips until he slid from under her weight. Smiling softly, Penny grabbed both of his hands and led him around the corner. Again she stepped into his personal space and let his breath come down
from above as she raised her head to feel his lips on hers.

“Penny,” he said between kisses. “We’re at my room.”

“Mmhm.”

“No one can come in my room.”

He could feel Penny’s Cheshire smile against his lips. “Wanna bet?”

Sheldon found the handle and opened the door.

Penny’s mouth was fused to his as she seemingly pushed him to a sitting position on the bed. Their mouths opened and lips clambered over each other until Penny broke the kiss and smiled. She stood up and took off her shirt. Her breasts were free and beautiful and she reveled in Sheldon’s stare since she knew he hadn’t missed a moment: not her nipples hardening after the fabric of her shirt rubbed against them; not her hands as they swept her hair up and out of the way so he could see her breasts unimpeded.

She took a moment to rub his chest before linking her hands behind his head; with a tug Penny forced his mouth to her lips only to stop before kissing him. At once they were still: only their breath caressed as green eyes met blue.

Sheldon’s stomach tightened as Penny unclasped his belt; his breath hitched as his pants were unbuttoned and the zipper drawn. He closed his eyes and inhaled sharply while she snuck inside and rubbed against him.

She removed herself and stood, hooking her thumbs into her shorts and sliding them down until gravity took over. Penny grinned as she stepped into Sheldon and pressed him into the bed as their lips met. He wrapped an arm around her waist and hauled the two of them further up the mattress. As soon as he settled Penny put a hand on either side of his pants, Sheldon raising his hips as she pulled. He settled his bare buttocks on the bed and reached out for her. At once she crashed against him and found his mouth. Sheldon’s hand wove itself through her hair and in a swift motion turned their bodies so she lay beneath him. Putting his weight on one elbow he used his other hand to free his legs from his pants and underwear even as he kicked off his shoes. Penny took this moment of distraction to kiss her way to the crook of his neck. He groaned as she began to suck; his nostrils taking in the lingering hints of vanilla scented oil as his cheek brushed the side of her face.

Sheldon was hot and mentally cursed himself for not removing his shirts but he sure wasn’t going to stop Penny so he could strip. Besides it left him with less flesh to hold against her and it was as if his body worked to compensate. His palm tingled in its heat as he pressed on her shoulder blade in an attempt to bring her closer to him. In response Penny reared her head and moved her mouth to his throat and kissed and sucked. Sheldon’s head rocked from side to side until he could stand it no longer and brought his lips to hers.

A shiver wound its way down Penny’s spine and she wanted to return the favor. Her hand went to her lover’s side and she gently dragged her nails across the hip towards his very erect member.

“Penny wait,” Sheldon gasped.

“Oh God, Sheldon, you’re not bailing on me,” she moaned.

“Hardly. The condom’s in my nightstand.” He leaned away and Penny could hear the drawer open. She knew it was a heck of a time to put her hand under his shirt and rub her slickened palm over his nipple but she couldn’t help it. Penny chuckled as she heard him suck in a breath; his search in the
drawer sounded more frantic until his hand returned to his chest with a line of condoms.

“Want me to put it on?” asked Penny.

“Not unless you want this to end prematurely,” he hissed as he ripped along the perforation and took out the condom, letting the rest drop to the floor. He pinched the end and rolled the rubber down his shaft. To Penny’s surprise he again went for his nightstand.

“What are you doing?”

“The lubricant is—”

“Trust me you don’t need it.”

Her answer had the very effect she wanted as he ended his pause by crushing his lips to her breast. He planted kisses on either side before taking up the nipple.

“Sheldon,” Penny groaned.

Her legs opened; she had him quick and dirty and there was no way she’d let the opportunity pass. She grabbed his hair and pulled. With a grunt the physicist arched his neck.


She let out a gasp of surprise as Sheldon scooped her legs onto his shoulders.

“This should work,” he said before he plunged his length into her. With each thrust he drove up and in causing Penny to groan repeatedly.

“Don’t stop!” she almost shrieked as he freed one of his arms to snatch the pillow from under her head and rammed it under her lower back.

Now that she was better supported it took the pressure off his arms so he could concentrate on maintaining the proper angle to stimulate her vaginal wall. Once he understood the objectives it was merely a matter of calculating the proper angles to achieve them. He didn’t anticipate how quickly the whole process was tiring him, however. It was dreadfully obvious he had to pick up Wii Fit if he was to continue his coital activities. There was, after all, so much to try.

A growl slipped between his lips as he continued his strokes. He felt like, well he didn’t know what, really. Carnal. Possessive. His thoughts were on determining the fundamental resonance of the mattress so as to calculate the optimal pace of their rhythmic bounces. Driving the oscillator as they said in the physics world.

Fucking her into next week, in English.

“Oh God! Oh God!” Penny gasped as her hands dug into the blankets.

Her eyes were closed and Sheldon realized he’d give anything to see them. He glanced at her heaving chest, her breasts coiled like springs moving in accordance with their resilience and mass.

“Penny,” he hissed.

“Almost!”

Sheldon desperately grasped at the first thing that came to mind and began calculating a pendulum’s period of oscillation. The period of swing of a simple gravity pendulum depended on
its length, the local strength of gravity and to a small extent on the maximum angle that the pendulum swung away from vertical. For instance when Penny was topless above him on her hands and knees and began grinding their pelvises her breasts began to sway as a result of her motions, their resonances determined primarily by the length they extended from her chest which he estimated at—‘Drat!’—When surfaces in contact move relative to each other, the friction between the two surfaces converted kinetic energy into heat. Friction was not itself a fundamental force but arose from fundamental electromagnetic forces between the charged particles constituting the two contacting surfaces like in the case of fluid friction where two solid surfaces were separated by a fluid such as Penny’s wet, dripping pus—

“Penny!”

“Oh God! Oh God! Oh Go—” She let out a grunt and Sheldon could feel the contractions around his penis before he was slammed by his own release.

After riding the moment he sat back and did his best to catch his breath. Penny slid her legs off his shoulders and took in the sight of her lover on his knees before her. Vulnerable. Powerful. Hers.

“Come here,” she said and he slid beside her and she felt his arms around her and she reveled in his touch. “I think you’re getting the hang of this,” she said with a little laugh.

“Mmhm,” he said tiredly.

“I’ll give you a hand with the room but if you say we have to do your shelves because of flying skin particles or whatever you’re on your own.”

Silence.

Penny listened to Sheldon’s breaths and smiled to herself. He’d probably freak over the germs when he woke up but that was later and this was now.

This was perfect.

xTBBTx

Pop Pop Pop Pop

“They’re going by the cabin,” Howard said as he peeked through the window.

“Good,” Leonard said as he raised his goggles to his forehead. “I don’t know how much longer I can outrun those kids.”

“Tell me about it,” Raj said as he reloaded his gun. “I thought they were supposed to be getting fatter from inactivity?”

“Not like us when we were young,” said Leonard. Sheldon looked at him incredulously.

“We were in school, at our computers or working on experiments. Just exactly when were we athletic?”

“Well I don’t know about you but I got a lot of cardio running from bullies,” replied the experimental physicist.

“There’s that,” Sheldon conceded as the other two concurred.

Leonard cleared his throat. “Hey Howard I’ve got a question for you.”
“Shoot.”

“When did you know it was right to propose to Bernadette?”

All eyes were on Leonard.

“Whoa buddy, are you saying you want to marry Leslie?” Howard sputtered. “Isn’t this a little soon?”

“It’s not too soon if it’s meant to be,” countered Raj with a frown.

“I don’t mean right now,” Leonard assured the group. “It’s just that…. When I told Penny I loved her I thought I meant it.” He shook his head. “I did mean it but it wasn’t like this. It’s like I didn’t know what love really was. With Leslie it’s different. From the moment she said she loved me it just seemed—right.”

“Who knew Leslie had a heart under all that snarkiness?” quipped the engineer.

“You’d be surprised,” Sheldon said evenly. Now everyone stared incredulously at the lanky man. “Merely an observation.” He continued to adjust his gun sight.

Raj leaned against the wall. “Amy and I are blessed.” He felt Sheldon’s eyes. “Don’t worry we’re taking things day by day.” A little smile came to his face. “But I know I’ve stopped looking. My parents like her. I like her. And she likes me too. No hiding my Star Trek uniforms or my romance novels. It’s amazing.”

“It is,” Howard agreed. “And you’re right. The moment I met Bernie I stopped looking. She was the one. Even though we were having some rocky times I knew she couldn’t say no.” He looked to Sheldon. “What about you?” The physicist shrugged.

“Penny and I have altered our paradigm. Marriage is the logical progression.”

“Just what the world needs: a flock of little Shelly Coopers,” grinned Leonard.

“Don’t forget our progeny will share in Penny’s genetic code,” Sheldon replied. He looked at his roommate with a twinkle in his eyes. “Our babies will be smart and beautiful.”

“I can’t believe we’re at the end of the year already,” gushed Penny as she dumped the bag of microwave popcorn into the bowl. “I know, I know, relativity.”

“That and time flies when you’re having fun,” Sheldon replied while typing away on his laptop.

“Makes one wonder what other faster than light experiences Sheldon’s provided,” added Leslie. Sheldon turned to the stuffed chair to glare at the optical physicist who smirked in return.

Leonard paused in laying out crackers on a plate. “Anyways,” he said. “I’m sure Sheldon’s working knowledge of forces comes in handy. I know I’ve found it indispensible.”

“Yes, but you’re experimental. Sheldon’s theoretical,” his girlfriend pointed out.

“Meaning that you work on trial and error while I actually put thought into it,” snapped Sheldon. He finished and saved his work.

Leslie took a sip of wine. “Now if you could actually do that with your research you’d be ahead of
“At least my research is original,” sniffed the lanky man. “I’m surprised you haven’t been retesting Newton’s Law of Universal Gravity.”

“All objects attract each other with a force of gravitational attraction—kind of like how your brain attracts wrong answers or as you call them, working theories,” Leslie said sweetly.

“So much for Sheldon winning the Nobel Peace Prize,” Penny quipped to Leonard as she set the glasses on the counter.

“They may have better luck with the Middle East crisis first,” her ex-boyfriend replied as Leslie and Sheldon continued to snip and snap at each other.

“Maybe we should let Gablehauser decide,” Leslie said testily.

“The man hasn’t published in years. Good luck on his being able to understand the nuances of my work,” said Sheldon.

“I don’t know, Sheldon, your work seems straightforward to me: one fish, two fish, red fish, blue fish.”

“And that’s the end of round seven,” Leonard said with a clap of the hands. “Maybe we should take a break.” He looked at Penny and indicated the door with his head.

“Sheldon let’s go to my apartment for a bit,” Penny said brightly.

“We’re not finished setting up,” he responded although he stood. “Everyone will be here in half an hour.”

“It’s ok,” the waitress said as she took her boyfriend’s hand and led him away.

“If Leslie poisons me I’m blaming you,” he said as they ventured across the hall into Penny’s apartment.

She rolled her eyes as she sat down on the couch. Sheldon turned off the lights and went to join her. Both sat back to look at her starry ceiling.

“What a year,” Penny sighed. She turned her head and smiled. “Thank you.”

“The feeling’s mutual,” Sheldon said evenly. “Although the year isn’t over for another four hours and nineteen minutes and I am sharing a room with Leslie Winkle so perhaps I’m being premature.”

“Immature is more like it,” Penny laughed.

Sheldon cocked his head. “You know it just occurred to me that it’s the last Monday of the month. Time for a physics lesson.”

“Now?”

“It is the last Monday of the month.”

“Can’t we take a break for the holidays?”

He tugged on her arm. “Penny as we speak physics is happening all around us. Don’t you want to
know how and why?”

Penny snuggled against him. “Actually, since we’re on the verge of a new year talk to me about it.”

“Alright,” he said as he rubbed her arm with his thumb. “The practice of celebrating the New Year stems back to Babylonian times when they celebrated the first new moon following the vernal equinox—the day in late March with an equal amount of sunlight and darkness.

“Julius Caesar instituted January first as the first day of the year, partly to honor the month’s namesake: Janus, the Roman god of beginnings, whose two faces allowed him to look back into the past and forward into the future. Romans celebrated by offering sacrifices to Janus, exchanging gifts with one another, decorating their homes with laurel branches and attending raucous parties.”

“Been to a few of those,” Penny chuckled.

Sheldon continued. “Our New Year occurs on January first as determined by the Gregorian or Western calendar which was established by Pope Gregory on February twenty fourth fifteen eighty two. As you know there are three hundred and sixty five days to a year with a bissextile or Leap Year occurring in years that are integer multiples of four. Each day consists of twenty four hours which is the length of time it takes for the earth to complete a revolution from the point of view of the sun and once every twenty three hours fifty six minutes and four seconds from the point of view of the stars.”

“Why does the earth spin?” asked Penny as her finger traced the logo of his Superman t-shirt.

“The Earth formed out of a collapsed nebula. As the nebula collapsed it began rotating, which may seem odd, but actually not rotating is far stranger than rotating. The Earth's rotation comes from the initial tendency to rotate that was imparted on it when it formed, and there is nothing—other than the tidal forces of the Moon, which are weak—to slow it down.”

“That’s crazy.”

“A nebula is quite fascinating. It’s an interstellar cloud of dust, hydrogen, helium and other ionized gases where stars form such as the Eagle Nebula.”

“How?”

“In these regions the formations of gas, dust and other materials ‘clump’ together to form larger masses, which attract further matter and eventually will become massive enough to form stars. The remaining materials are then believed to form planets and other planetary system objects.”

Penny looked up at her starry ceiling. “As we’re talking stars and planets are being born.”

“Yes.”

“Amazing.” Sheldon kissed her lightly on the head.

“Stars range in size from neutron stars, which vary anywhere from twenty to forty kilometers in diameter to supergiants like Betelgeuse in the Orion constellation which has a diameter approximately six hundred and fifty times larger than the Sun.”

“Is it on the ceiling?”

“No. It’s below Taurus so would be where Amy’s forehead is on the painting.”
“Ah.”

“Research suggests that many stars are part of a binary star system consisting of two stars orbiting around their common center of mass.”

“Are there any in this neck of the woods?”

“Alpha Centauri. It’s located in the constellation of Centaurus which is in the kitchen between the refrigerator and the table.”

“I’ve got to see this,” Penny said as she got off the couch and walked to the spot. “Come show me.” Sheldon followed and pointed out two glow-in-the-dark stars of differing sizes overlapping each other.

“The big one is Alpha Centauri A and the other is Alpha Centauri B.”

“And there they are.” She stood on her toes and kissed his nose. “You are amazing.”

“Turn on the light while I get your whiteboard,” he replied excitedly.

“Lesson time,” Penny grinned as she clicked on the light and settled on the couch.

Sheldon drew two circles beside each other.

“The term ‘double star’ may be used synonymously with ‘binary star’, but more generally, a double star may be either a binary star or an optical double star which consists of two stars with no physical connection but which appear close together in the sky as seen from the Earth. Think of them as friends,” he said as he drew stick bodies onto the circles and added eyes and smiley mouths. “They’re always seen together but there’s no physical intimacy.”

“Double stars are friends. Got it.”

He drew two more circles beneath his figures.

“True binary stars are often detected optically. The brighter star is called the primary and the other is its companion.”

“Sounds serious,” Penny chuckled.

Sheldon nodded. “Very. Binary stars are important in astrophysics because calculations of their orbits allow the masses of their component stars to be directly determined, which in turn allows other stellar parameters, such as radius and density, to be indirectly estimated.”

“Which also means…”

He made two more stick figures only these were holding hands.

“Because they’re always touching each other it’s easy for others to see that they’re together and surmise what else they do as a couple like go out to the movies or dine.”

“Mind blowing sex.” Penny wiggled her eyebrows.

“There’s that,” Sheldon said as he put the cap back on the marker and set it on the ledge before returning to the couch. “If components in binary star systems are close enough they can gravitationally distort their mutual outer stellar atmospheres. In some cases, these close binary systems can exchange mass, which may bring their evolution to stages that single stars cannot
“There you go with all that romantic talk again.” Penny leaned over and planted a kiss on his lips. “The transformative power of love.”

“Physics is the language of the universe,” Sheldon smirked.

“You make it seem so easy.”

“It’s logical. For instance it’s also possible for widely separated binaries to lose gravitational contact with each other during their lifetime. The components will then move on to evolve as single stars.”

“That’s terrible,” Penny said sadly.

“Indeed. But there are pairs where the two stars are of equal brightness. In this way they’re like identically cut allotropes of carbon, where carbon atoms are arranged in a variation of the face-centered cubic structure.” Penny shook her head.

“Shooting blanks sweetie.”

“Perhaps it’s best if I give you an example.”

He reached into his pocket and Penny’s breath hitched as he produced a white box. Her eyes found his.

“I doubt I’m doing this correctly,” Sheldon said quietly. “Of course it’s not like I’d ever thought I’d be doing this at all.”

He opened the box and Penny saw a ring with two equally-sized diamonds twisted together in a golden swirl.

“Given our relatively short period of time since we altered our paradigm protocol suggested a token of affection akin to a ‘promise ring’. After much thought I came to the conclusion that a ‘promise’ alone doesn’t encompass everything I feel.” His blue eyes were steadfast. “I need you to understand that I am most serious when I say I love you, Penelope.”

“I love you too, Sheldon,” she whispered.

“You have your education to complete so this ring is in no way meant to hurry you along. If anything it’s meant to provide you a point of consistency. Your own 0,0,0,0 coordinate on the Cartesian system.”

“My own spot.”

“Is at my side,” he said simply.

Penny nodded and held out her hand. Sheldon let out a breath and slid the ring onto her finger. Gently their lips met.

“I love you Moonpie,” she whispered, her eyes glistening.

“Always,” he replied before returning his mouth to hers.

XxX
Inside apartment 4A the gang was sitting comfortably around the coffee table munching on snacks.

“I always get so anxious waiting for the ball to drop,” gushed Bernadette.

Howard leaned back against his wife’s knees. “Now you’re starting to sound like Leonard,” he said with a smirk. In return the curly haired physicist glared.

“And you’re telling me you haven’t had pieces of anatomy shift out of position?” he asked. The engineer shrugged.

“I’ve dislocated a shoulder and sprained some fingers. Never lost track of a testicle.”

“Actually it isn’t uncommon for men to experience testicular retraction into the inguinal region,” said Amy. “Having extra strong cremasters means your body’s more sensitive to stimulation such as cold, ejaculation and a response to fear.”

“Or in Leonard’s case a size ten shoe.” Raj glanced at the apartment door before taking a small sip of wine. ‘What’s taking so long?’ He felt a hand on his shoulder and he looked up to see his girlfriend flash a comforting smile.

“Sometimes being able to fit in one’s own cello case is advantageous,” Leonard said with a bit of a flush.

“Too bad you don’t fit now,” Leslie smirked.

Leonard leaned his head onto her knees and made big brown eyes. “You’d cram me in there?”

“Like Amy said: retraction occurs from fear,” grinned Howard. “I’m sure Leslie could put the fear of God into you so that your cremasters sucked up the rest of you like a Dyson vacuum.”

“That’s ridiculous. I’m not afraid of Leslie,” scoffed Leonard, who suddenly stiffened as he felt her hand at the back of his neck. Howard made a sucking sound.

“And we have liftoff!” he quipped.

“Be nice, Howard,” chided Bernadette. “Or I’ll borrow that cello case.”

“Given your short stature and slight build you should have ample shoulder room,” Amy said helpfully.

“Madam, if there’s anything I’m good at it’s fitting into tight spac—” A blushing Bernadette slapped a hand over his mouth.

The sounds of a door closing in the hallway silenced the group. A moment and then the apartment door opened and Penny came into the room followed by Sheldon. There’s a pause and then she held out her hand to show off her ring. Bernadette, Amy and Raj squealed in delight and popped off the couch to join her.

“Let me see,” sniffed Raj as he took Penny’s hand and kissed it before studying the ring. “Just beautiful.”

“Congratulations,” Howard said to Sheldon.

“Congratulations Sheldon,” beamed Leonard as he shook his roommate’s hand.

“Thank you, Leonard, Howard,” was his even reply although it was evident that he was pleased.
“So when’s the lucky day so I can book time in the lab?” asked Leslie with a little smile.

“Not until Penny finishes with her schooling.” A pause. “However, as it will be a group social outing your attendance is non-optional,” Sheldon added. The two physicists briefly locked eyes before Leslie made room for Amy and Bernadette.

“Congratulations Sheldon,” Bernadette squeaked as both she and Amy gave him a hug.

Amy nodded. “You’re the luckiest person on the planet to have landed such a scintillating beauty.” She clapped Sheldon on the arm. “We’ll all live vicariously through you.”

“We need to celebrate,” Raj said as he wiped his eyes with a tissue.

“Game time!” Amy said cheerily. “Girls against boys.”

“Oh I don’t think so,” Sheldon replied with a frown. “If anything it should be couples pairing together.”

“You’re just worried we’ll kick your hinnie,” Bernadette grinned.

“No, he’s sure you’ll kick our hinnies,” Leonard chuckled.

“Don’t take it too badly sweetie,” Penny said as she slipped her arms around Sheldon’s waist. “It’s just putting you guys in your place. You should be used to it.”

Blue eyes met green.

“Bring it, woman,” he said crisply.

XxX

“Come on you little wildebeest bend it like Beckham,” ordered Amy.

“I’m trying,” gasped Bernadette as she was in the middle of shimmying her body under the limbo stick. “But the girls aren’t cooperating.”

“I never thought I’d see a day when I’d curse an ample bosom,” the neurobiologist sighed. She looked to Penny and smiled. “Not everyone can have proportionate cupcakes like you.”

“Thanks,” Penny murmured with a blush before taking a sip of her juice.

XxX

“Queen Elizabeth!” said Amy.

“Princess Diana!” piped in Bernadette.

Penny shook her head and made a book reading gesture.

“Fairytale?” guessed the neurobiologist. The waitress nodded emphatically.

“Cinderella!” Leslie said excitedly.

“Yes!” clapped Penny.

“Time: nine seconds,” Leonard said as he reset his watch.
“Beat that sweetie.” Penny smiled at Sheldon as he made his way to the front.

“Alright,” said the lanky physicist. “I’ve got a person in mind.”

Amy took Leonard’s watch. “And three, two, one—go!”

“Spock,” Leonard, Howard and Raj said at once.

“One second,” Amy reported.

“Muah-ha-ha,” Sheldon chuckled as he looked to Penny.

XxX

Howard, Sheldon, Leslie and Raj sat on their knees around the coffee table with individual mixing bowls in front of them.

“The object of the game is to eat the cherry without touching it with your hands,” said Leonard as he dropped a maraschino cherry in each bowl.

“I’m a natural at that,” quipped Howard. Sheldon rolled his eyes.

“Sounds simple enough,” Leslie replied as she tied her hair with a scrunchie.

Leonard, Bernadette, Penny and Amy all looked at each other with big grins.

“Just one thing,” Penny said sweetly before each pulled out a can of whipped cream and filled the bowls of their significant others.

Sheldon looked betrayed. “My shirt.”

“Just a second,” Penny replied as she tied a towel around his neck. She pulled the towel taut and tucked the sides into his hands before kissing him on top of the head. “Make me proud.”

“Explain to me why it’s me again?” Leslie asked.

“Lactose intolerant,” Leonard said with a smile. “Who knew flatulence could work to my benefit?”

“On the count of three,” said Amy. The contestants readied themselves as the observers readied their camera phones. “One, two, three!”

Four faces dove into the bowls. Seconds ticked by until Leslie sat up and spit the cherry pit in the air.

“Leslie wins!” Leonard said excitedly as he handed her a towel. The rest of the guys sat up, their faces full of cream.

“I can’t believe I lost,” sighed Howard. “It’s so much easier doing this in the bedroom.”

Bernadette shoved his face into the bowl.

XxX

Amy pulled out another card.

“Okay Sheldon, what fits neatly between your breasts, works best when tugged, gets longer as it’s pulled and inserts neatly into a hole?”
“A seatbelt,” replied the physicist.

“What starts with a C and ends with a T, is hairy, oval, delicious and contains thin, whitish liquid?”

“A coconut.”

“What goes in hard and pink then comes out soft and sticky?”

“Bubblegum.”

“You stick your poles inside me. You tie me down to get me up. I get wet before you do. What am I?”

“A tent.”

“You know it dawns on me why Sheldon’s been a virgin for thirty years,” grinned Leonard.

“It just took Penny to speak his language is all,” replied Howard. “Using her knowledge of G-String Theory she’ll use Sheldon’s supercollider to collapse her wavefunction in order to achieve superpositioned eigenstates.”

“Really Howard?” Sheldon said albeit with color on his cheeks.

“Don’t worry, sweetie. You can short circuit my shunt anytime,” Penny grinned causing the engineer to laugh.

“Someone’s been wooed by the exploits of Micro Farad,” he said.

“‘Ohm, ohm, give me mho’,” Penny moaned aloud.

“This better not be counting against my time,” scowled Sheldon.

XxX

As the television counted down the gang took up their champagne glasses.

“Happy New Year!” they all said aloud before touching glasses and singing ‘Auld Lang Syne’.

“To the best friends I’ve ever had,” Leonard said with emotion. “To Boldly Go.”

The four men clinked glasses.

“I win!” squealed Penny. Sheldon gave her a questioning look. “I bet less than five minutes into the new year before a Star Trek quote is mentioned,” she explained.

“I’m stealing your lunch money to make up the difference,” Leslie murmured to her boyfriend.

XxX

The apartment was empty save for two couples who stood by the door.

“We’re just over two hours in but I already know it’s going to be a great year,” Raj gushed as he helped Amy into her jacket.

“How can it not?” Penny grinned as she leaned against her fiancé—her fiancé! “I want to thank the both of you for everything you’ve done for Sheldon and me.”

“You know you’re going to be my Maid of Honor, right?”

“I know the perfect little Native American sweat lodge.” A little smile passed over Amy’s lips.

“Spoilers, Amy,” Penny said diplomatically.

The couples stepped into the hall and said their goodnights.

Penny unlocked her apartment and went in. She ventured into the bedroom and stripped out of her clothes.

A few minutes later Sheldon entered the apartment carrying his pajamas, housecoat and slippers.

“I thought you were showering?” Penny asked.

“I was going to but then I realized we weren’t under attack by water-soluble aliens,” he replied as his fiancée traipsed naked into the living room. Sheldon set his apparel on the back of the couch.

“Should I even ask?”

“Under the Roommate Agreement the shower has an agreed upon occupancy of one unless we’re invaded—”

“By water-soluble aliens. Right.” Penny wrapped her arms around his waist. “Why Dr. Cooper, are you telling me you want to share my tub?”

“I realize it’s only Monday but I was hoping you wouldn’t mind if we treated it like a Date Night.”

Penny rolled her eyes in mock thought. “Hmmm. Is this worth shirking protocol? Let me think.”

“Protocol, shmoprotocol,” Sheldon whispered before kissing her earlobe.

“Careful, I’m covered in germs,” she giggled.

“Germs, shmerms.” He kissed the crook of her neck, making her toes curl.

“This is perfect,” she breathed. Sheldon straightened to look at her.

“I still haven’t solved the universe,” he said.

“You will,” she replied.

Sheldon grinned before scooping Penny over his shoulder with a growl.

“Sheldon!”

“Penny, it’s after two. Please observe the noise ordinance,” he said drolly as he walked into the bedroom.

“Whackadoodle,” Penny laughed as she closed the door behind them.

(black screen. end credits)
Wikipedia: Gregorian Calendar; Earth’s Rotation; Nebula; Star; Binary Star; Stellar Classification; Diamond; Pendulum; Friction

The Physics of Sex: Sexual Rhythms

History com: New Year

Curious about Astronomy: Earth rotation

Yahoo! Answers: Dirty Minds Game Q & A

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