Apokalypsis

by songlin

Summary

There were things I never told you because I thought we had time. There is no time left in the world anymore.

Notes

Dedicated to the at least two people on my Tumblr who showed interest in this clusterfuck of a story. Thanks for being the best enablers.
The army, John thinks, was the perfect training for the end of the world.

He already knows how to trap water from the air, and how to purify it. That’s the crucial part, especially now, when every sip of raw water is a gamble: which will kill you first, the dehydration, the radiation, or the bacteria? Which can you survive? How much of each poison can you take?

He knows how to hunt for food, though military training focuses more on scavenging from the wilderness than from the pantries and broken refrigerators of abandoned houses, empty supermarkets with the doors blasted off by looters in the early days of the war.

What he knows—or hopes he knows—is how to rescue a comrade from behind enemy lines.

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Sherlock entirely missed the early stages of the war.

Everyone missed the earliest bits, to be honest. The world didn’t sit up and take notice until New Delhi and Mumbai went up in flames, and then possibly only because it was a slow news month.

“Christ,” John said, shaking his head at the news footage. “Jesus fucking Christ, eight million people.”

Sherlock looked up at the telly. “That’ll only be initial casualties. Over the long term, radiation sickness will claim at least that again.”

An odd look passed over his face, as if he had thought of something, and then he was blank again.

“Doesn’t matter. I’m deleting it.”

In the ensuing shouting match, John punched a hole through the drywall, came the nearest he’d ever come to leaving, and learned that sometimes, Sherlock’s “delete” function is put to purposes beyond the simply practical.

As complex as it might seem, the governing principles of Sherlock’s mind are simple. There are two things it cannot abide: not enough information and far too much.

“I can feel it rattling around my skull, it and everything it comes with, all the petty little power struggles between nations and departments and individuals—”

“--why they’re reporting on what they’re reporting and who’s stopping them and censoring them and censoring us--”

“--and that reporter is going to die of radiation poisoning in a month and she knows it but she’s working the job anyways because she’s got a clot in her brain and is functionally suicidal but figures
she might as well get in some good coverage before she dies--"

"--and see precisely how every one of those children in that dreadfully sentimental news byte died--"

"--that girl there, about four, with her lower half covered by a blanket, it's obviously hiding the fact that everything from her ribcage down is completely pulverized, and it's because they were evacuating, she and her family, but they were running too quickly and she tripped trying to keep up, and they couldn't stop, they would all die if they stopped, the father shouted it at them, most likely, and they kept running while she practically howled and tried to get to her feet and then the stairs collapsed--"

"I can't keep it, don't you see, John, it's not--I don't--I can't--I--I can't--"

After that day, John did not object when Sherlock turned away from the telly and covered his ears.

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Every morning, John rises an hour before the sun, packs his bedroll, collects the water from his dew trap and drapes his tarp over a branch to dry. Then he can begin the process of making the water drinkable.

Theoretically, dew and rainwater are supposed to be purified and distilled. But John’s not sure if that still holds when all the water sources are heavily irradiated and potentially contaminated with God knows what sort of biological weapons. Plus, there’s always the chance the tarp or container’s picked something up. So he goes through the steps, just to be safe.

First he checks it with his Geiger counter. (Sherlock could translate the pitch and frequency of the sounds it made to precise measurements in a second, but John’s had to mark “safe to eat” and “get the hell away” by making scratches on the glass over the numbers.) If it passes muster, he boils it over the fire for five minutes (one is all that’s necessary, but John is nothing if not safe), then lets it cool for half an hour.

While it’s cooling, he cooks his breakfast over the same fire. Most days, it’s beans and rice, or cup-o-noodles, or something else out of a tin or a plastic packet. John lived off the same during his years at uni. Eating them beside Sherlock felt oddly nostalgic, as if they’d been transported back together to John’s school days when John had been young and mischievous and unscarred.

But John eats alone these days.

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There were a few early alarmists. There have always been people who panic at the slightest hint of disaster, who gather tinned and dried goods, build their fallout shelters and rehearse getting into Hazmat suits. Look at the Cold War, the Y2K bug, the end of the Mayan calendar. They were paid little mind, those men who cried wolf.

All the same, John made sure to buy a little extra food at the shops every time he went and ordered a few supplies (Geiger counter, water purification tablets, ultralight hiking tent, tarp, bedrolls) over the internet. He ferreted it all away underneath his bed.

Just in case.

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Sherlock is alive.
John knows this to be true, because it must be.

He’s heard stories of people who start out running that sort of service getting lost and running out of food and water. Sometimes, the goods start to look like more than just a collection of lovely orifices to fill. And at the rate Sherlock was--

No.

John slings his pack over his shoulder and trudges down the road towards the town in the distance.

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They took their last case two weeks before the evacuation.

An entire government subcommittee had dropped dead in their coffees. Each member awoke healthy. By noon, they were dead.

For the first time, Lestrade gave Sherlock as much time as he needed at the crime scene. For the first time, Sherlock took five minutes exactly. He hardly said a word the whole time aside from a few short questions.

“Nothing?” Lestrade said, agog, as they were stripping off their biohazard suits.

Sherlock shrugged.

“You must have something.”

“Have your family gather your valuables and get out of the city,” Sherlock said shortly. “They’ll evacuate within a month. Six weeks after that, I’ll be surprised if there’s a government left.”

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John shields his eyes from the sun and squints at the small house coming up on his left. He’s still about fifteen minutes’ walk from the main part of the town, but the place might be worth checking out. Could be food or supplies. Or loo paper. Christ, what John would do for loo paper.

The lock is broken in. Earlier looters probably got everything, but John is slightly more clever than most. They could’ve easily missed something he won’t. He bumps the door open with an elbow, eying the room for traps.

He moves inside cautiously, one hand on the knife in his belt. (The gun is for emergencies only. Bullets are hard to come by these days.) It’s a small place, a living room with attached kitchen, a bedroom and a toilet. It was probably quite homey once. Less so now, with a clear inch of dust built up on every surface.

Now reasonably sure the house is free of booby traps, John rifles through the pantry. It’s mostly empty, but there’s a tin of condensed milk and a few boxes of spaghetti that no one’s taken yet. John scoops them up, sets them on the counter, and swings his back off his shoulder and onto the floor with a thud.

In the bedroom, someone lets out a strangled scream that cuts off suddenly.

John goes very, very still. Crouching low, he silently draws his knife and creeps into the bedroom.

The closet doors are flung open and the insides emptied but for a few lonely wooden coat hangers. There is nothing else in the room except a bed covered with a rumpled set of sheets. John breathes
slowly and deeply.

“I know you’re there.”

There’s a quiet gasp. Now that John’s aware of it, he can hear the breathing.

“Come on out. I’m not gonna hurt you.”

She crawls out slowly and gets to her feet, a girl of maybe eighteen or nineteen with long, straight, black hair, dark skin and dirty fingernails. She’s dressed in a short sundress that was once pale blue, or maybe lavender. Either way it’s filthy now. Her feet are bare, cracked and bleeding. Her wide brown eyes were probably captivatingly beautiful not too long ago. Now they just look sunken. Haunted. John suspects his own are not dissimilar.

“Drop the fucking knife,” she orders, voice trembling but sure, “or I swear to Christ I’ll scratch your fucking throat out.”

_Huh. American. What are the chances?_ John thinks, and drops the knife.

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Mycroft had the pull to get them both vaccinated. It was all very hush-hush. John didn’t want to know how the British government had access to a supposedly foreign biological weapon. He didn’t much care at this point. An echo of Dr Watson was furious that the vaccine wasn’t being mass-produced and distributed across the nation, but the soldier overruled him. The soldier was already working on how to survive.

A week before the evacuation, Mycroft appeared in their flat with two syringes, a suitcase and a proposition.

“This is a one-time offer,” Mycroft said.

“And this is my only answer,” Sherlock replied.

Mycroft raised his eyebrows towards John in silent appeal. John shook his head.

“We’ve decided,” Sherlock said, twirling his violin bow around his hand.

By then, there were bombs over China, Korea, Iran, Egypt, Turkey. America and Russia were a matter of time, and from then it wouldn’t be long before all of Europe was involved. On top of the bombs, there was the superflu. It had cropped up all over the Continent, but in Britain it had taken root and thrived. The hospitals were packed. Patients would be admitted in the morning and be dead by lunchtime. Everyone was pointing fingers and assigning blame and no one was taking credit.

“Sherlock,” Mycroft said, gentle but firm, “I believe you may have underestimated--”

“We have underestimated nothing, Mycroft,” Sherlock snapped. “I know precisely what would be in store for us in your _highly secure and well-stocked facility_ and believe me when I say that I would die before suffering that.”

Mycroft’s jaw tightened. “You very well may.”

“Goodbye, Mycroft,” Sherlock snarled.

Mycroft paused in the doorway. “Do take care, Sherlock.”
He turned his head just enough to see Sherlock’s stiff nod, pinched the bridge of his nose, and departed.

John did not speak until he heard the door click shut. “You okay?”

Sherlock shut his eyes. “Fine.”

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Her name is Mary Morstan. She tells her story over a dinner of tinned spaghetti that they cook over a propane stove.

“Propane won’t last forever. Might as well use it while we’ve got it, right?” she says.

She had been studying for her doctorate in piano at the Royal Academy of Music. She’s older than she looks—when John looks surprised that she’s in post-graduate work, she laughs.

“Babyface, right? I’m twenty-nine. I’ll probably still be getting carded when I’m fifty.” She sobers. “Well...I would’ve been, I guess. Not a lot of carding going on these days.”

When the superflu broke out, she and a few schoolmates headed to the countryside. Within days, her three friends were dead.

“I’m immune, I guess. They were saying something like thirty percent of people are.” Mary laughs again. “God, this is the plot of a Stephen King novel. This is literally the plot of a Stephen King novel.”

She’d spent two months hiding out in an abandoned library. But, as she put it, she hadn’t gotten the hang of covering up after herself, and a gang of traders found her.

“That’s what they’ve started calling themselves,” she explains. “Traders, because ‘slaver’ or ‘human trafficker’ or ‘pimp’ don’t sound as ominous, I guess.” She licks her spoon clean, looking far away. “The gang who had me got into a fight with another. In the mess, a bunch of us got away.”

John’s heart leaps into his throat.

“Listen, Mary,” he says, “were there any men with you?”

She nods. “A few.”

“What about one man in particular? Thirties, tall, very thin, dark, curly hair. Was probably...” Insulting his captors’ intelligence and talking about things he couldn’t possibly know, but that’s the old Sherlock. “...sort of...strange. Name of Sherlock Holmes.”

An odd look comes over Mary’s face. Several looks, really. There’s a small smile that goes a little sad, and then her brow sort of folds in and she bites her lip so that when her eyes come up to meet John’s, the expression she is wearing is unmistakably pity.

“Yeah,” she says softly. “Sherlock was there.”

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It was still fairly early when John and Sherlock left the city. People were making plans to come home when “it all passes over,” which general consensus seemed to agree would be in six months. Maybe a year. John and Sherlock had no such delusions.
They left London with no real destination in mind and only a vague plan: keep out of the major city centers, stay alive, stop someplace that looks safe enough and hunker down. Past that, they had nothing. To take public transportation was to take your life into your hands at that point, so they walked.

It took them less than two hours to pack.

“Bring the violin,” John said.

The case was open on the end table. Sherlock stroked a finger down the strings, head tilted to the side and lips slightly parted. Then he clenched his jaw shut, wrenched his hand away and shut the lid with a flourish. “No. Large, bulky, non-critical. Waste of space.”

“Bring it. You can always get rid of it later. You’ll want something to do.”

Sherlock clicked the latches of the case shut without a word.

“Oh, for fuck’s sake!” John snaps. “Call firewood if you have to! Bring the fucking violin!”

He reached out and snatched the handle. Sherlock attempted to tug it back, but John didn’t let go.

“Uh-uh, Mr Temper Tantrum. I’m not letting you smash it against the wall either.”

Sherlock shoved the violin case into John’s chest and threw himself off the sofa, flying into the kitchen in a whirlwind of wild gestures. “Useless!” he snarled. “All of it, utterly bloody useless!”

He picked up one of the chairs at the kitchen table and threw it across the room. It struck the wall and splintered apart with a crash that didn’t seem to satisfy Sherlock as much as he’d hoped it would, because he just sank to the floor, curled into a ball and hid his face in his knees.

And John realized that maybe this wasn’t about the violin. He pinched the bridge of his nose and missed Mrs Hudson.

“Sherlock,” John said. He set the violin down on the end table and moved to kneel beside him. “Hey.”

His heart beat wildly. Panic buzzed in his chest and hummed in his limbs, the offspring of the animalistic instinct to protect and survive and the soldier’s critical analysis of a situation, all of which was shouting: he’s half-broken and it hasn’t even started, we’re lost, it’s hopeless, we’re finished.

But John did not panic. Instead, he took Sherlock’s shoulders in his two steady hands and pulled him to his feet.

“Come on,” he said gently. “It’s okay. We’re alright. We’re gonna be alright.”

Sherlock sagged against him, boneless from the chest up, and breathed in and out, in and out, in small, shallow gasps. There was a quiet rasp in his exhalations, like the precursor to a cough. It quieted slowly as his breaths evened out and deepened until it was nothing at all, and he was merely breathing deeply and quietly. He sank forward and dropped his forehead into John’s shoulder.

“I don’t want to go,” he whispered.

John’s throat tightened.

“I know,” he said, and squeezed Sherlock’s shoulders. “I know.”
They were out of the city by sunset. They spent their first night in an abandoned car with their things in the driver’s seat. John pretended to sleep in the passenger’s seat and kept his gun within arm’s reach. Sherlock slept in the back, stirring with nightmares that made John’s heart clench.

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After Mary finishes her story, John wipes his cheek and realizes he’s not crying.

He feels like he’s crying. But it seems his body disagrees. It’s clinging to all the moisture it’s got. Every cell of his being is a survivalist, and not for the first time, John wishes it weren’t.

Mary tentatively takes his hand. “I’m sorry.”

John’s lips jerk into something resembling a smile. “It’s fine. I’m fine.”

She lets him hold her hand for a long time, waiting for him to catch his breath.

“Doesn’t change anything. Helps, really. Know where to look now.” He clears his throat, pats her hand and gets to his feet. “Come on, we’ve got work to do before bed.”

John sets up a trap by the door, just to have something to do, while Mary does the washing-up. He falls asleep on the couch and prays for dreams free of blank green eyes sunken in their sockets and thin, sallow skin stretched tight.

With Mary’s help, it takes half as long to get ready in the morning. All the same, John is careful to make sure the bottom of the pack is covered before he lets her put anything in.

He doesn’t know what she’d think of the violin.

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Sherlock had been right. It only took three months for the government to fall. By then, they were miles away, in the middle of the countryside, still looking for a safe enough spot to settle down.

“I suppose I ought to take up astronomy.”

The way Sherlock said it, it sounded like a niche fetish of some kind. John poked idly at their fire.

“Perhaps apiarism.”

“Api-what?”

“Beekeeping, John.”

“I swear to God, if you put bees in our house--”

Sherlock sort of--caved in on himself at that, and he launched himself sideways into the tent. John sighed.

“For the--”

“Ridiculous. Patently ridiculous.” It’s followed by a less muffled demand: “John, put that fire out and come to bed.”

John ground his teeth. Sherlock was right, though; it had gotten late. He stomped out the last of the flames, kicked off his boots, and climbed into the tent. Sherlock was already wrapped tightly in his
sleeping bag, face turned away. John crawled into his own sleeping bag and rolled onto his side.

“Good night, Sherlock.”

Sherlock hums in response.

Later, John will curse himself for not tucking that moment into his pocket for the days to come. Later, he will wish he had woken Sherlock up, tried to talk to him, before it was too late.

But in that moment, he simply shut his eyes and fell asleep.
Sometimes I Don't Talk for Days

Chapter Notes

This chapter dedicated to snogandagrope, for donating to my red panda fund!

Once, John dreamed of deserts, of sniper fire and explosions. Later, he dreamed of swimming pools and laser sights and green parkas with fur, and then of blood on pavement and matting in dark curls.

These days, there is only one nightmare, with many beginnings but the same end.

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There were maybe a few dozen of us in the backs of a couple of big trucks. Five or six men and everyone else. And one girl who couldn’t have been more than fifteen at the most, and one who was probably twelve. They might’ve been sisters. I don’t know; they kept the kids apart from the rest of us. Almost everybody had been there for a while and didn’t talk much by the time I got there. They--um, they had some trust issues. I don’t blame them.

He didn’t talk either. Just sat in the corner tapping and tracing patterns on the floor. They tried to tie him up once because the noise was making them crazy, but he bit the guy. Plus, they didn’t want to leave marks on him. He was...

--are you sure you want me to--

Okay.

He was a--a big earner. So they were pretty careful with him.

I would just like to say for the record that that man is unfairly pretty. Like, potentially inhumanly attractive. I am not an ugly girl, and I am saying that he is fucking beautiful specimen of humankind. We’re at the end of the world and he looks like a fucking--tragic Byronic hero. Ugh. Were you two…? Oh. God, I would’ve, if...anyways.

Nobody went close to him. Thought he was creepy. So I sat pretty close. Not all of the others were, um, friendly. It was good to be have something to keep them away.

It took me a while to notice what he was doing. I could see there were patterns and a rhythm, but it wasn’t until he got really bored that I could tell.

I took violin in school. There was this one Bach song my teacher would not let go, ever. I never forgot the fingering. It still gets into my head sometimes, and when something gets into my head I just sort of...play it, without even thinking.

That was it. It was the second movement of Bach’s partita number two in D minor for solo violin. He tapped the fingerings with his left hand and sort of--scraped his knuckles of his right like he was bowing. I didn’t know how to get his attention. He was sort of...out of it. So I started humming.

It was like I’d hit him or something. He straight-up grabbed me by the shoulders.
I hadn’t--

This was very early.

I hadn’t been there long, so…

Okay. What I’m trying to say is that they hadn’t traded my cunt for petrol yet, so when he grabbed
me, I didn’t jump the way I would’ve if it had happened two days later, and I wasn’t limp as a doll
the way I would’ve been if it had happened two weeks later.

He grabbed me and looked at my face and said, “May I look at you?” And I said he could.

He was excited when he heard my accent. He looked me over for maybe twenty seconds and then
told me...everything. Everything about me. What I’ve told you and more. It was...incredible.

How did you deal with that all the time?

I’d think you’d get sick of it.

Anyways, he did that, and then I asked if he could guess my name. He made this face like he was
trying not to call me an idiot, and said that if I knew what was good for me I’d choose another name.

“They give your name to the clients,” he said. “My name is Henry. Henry Sigerson.”

I said the first name I thought of. Indira Sharma. It’s my grandmother’s name.

He said, “That’s good. Ethnic sells better. Is that your real name?”

I said no, and that my real name was Mary.

He said, “Sherlock Holmes,” and “don’t scream the first time they fuck you.”

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“Why haven’t you left me?” Sherlock asked.

“Shut up,” John snapped.

He’d have stopped to hit him, but there was some kind of town a ways out and John wanted to make
it there before dusk. Stopping for a fight would lay them up for at least an hour.

Sherlock frowned. “Why? I’m of little use to you. It’s a valid question. Why won’t you dignify it
with an answer?”

“Because you’re not thinking straight right now, Sherlock, and the idea that you’re useless is the
biggest fucking load of bullshit I’ve ever heard.”

“I do nothing,” Sherlock said. Something dark was creeping into his uncannily precise tone. “I eat. I
slow you down.”

“There you go. That’s not nothing.”

“No. It’s worse.”

“Not having this conversation, Sherlock.”

And to his surprise, Sherlock stopped.
John let out a long breath. He was sure they’d come back to it, but it was dropped for now. He could live with that. They could live with that. They’d get to the town and see if there was anyone there and then work things out. They’d keep moving.

That night, Sherlock disappeared.

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You think you’re going to fight. But they drug you the first few times so you can’t, or they give you to someone who doesn’t mind a bit of--

Anyways.

After a while you just...can’t.

Anyways, they got two whole barrels of petrol and a whole new truck for me.

As a--reward, I guess, they let me have it. Ride in it, I mean. Just me. Or, it was going to be until they were loading it up the next day and Sherlock got in it too. They told him to get out, but he played up the crazy until they decided to just leave him.

I was kind of--you know.

Upset.

He left me be for a few hours, just sat in a corner and looked asleep. He was awake, though. Thinking. He does that.

Did.

They stopped for about two hours to give us lunch. I wasn’t eating. He finished his food and then brought mine over. I told him--well, didn’t tell him; I wasn’t talking yet, but I shook my head.

He said, “You won’t like what happens if you don’t eat.”

I said, “If I eat I’ll vomit on you.”

He said, “Fine. Eat.”

I ate.

When I’d eaten half my sandwich, I asked him why he was doing this.

“Allies are useful,” he said.

I asked why he didn’t pick any of the others.

He wrinkled his nose. “They’re...unwilling.”

They were terrified of him. Somebody tried to mess with him once, apparently. It didn’t go well.

He went on. “They don’t like you because you’re new. They’ll warm up eventually.”

I told him that was fucking comforting.

He said, “They see you as a threat, but they shouldn’t. You’re going to escape.”
I laughed at him.

He said, “No. You’re going to escape because I’m going to help you.”

I asked him if he could get out, why hadn’t he already?

He told me to finish eating.

He slept next to me that night. Said he knew there’d be nightmares and that it’s good to have someone next to you when you wake up.

It was. More than good, really. Necessary.

But you probably know that.

---

Sherlock’s things were still in the tent. His pack, clothes, bedroll, all undisturbed. He’d even packed it all away. John could think of only three plausible circumstances. One: Sherlock had left, intending to return, and while out had been taken. Unlikely; he would have made an almighty racket and John was a light sleeper. Two: he had left, intending to return, and had been injured while gone. Relatively likely. Three: he had left under his own power with no intention of returning.

John thought of their conversation yesterday. His stomach clenched.

John felt like he was going to be sick.

But there was no time.

He pulled on his shoes, not bothering with his coat, and charged out of the tent in the trousers and vest he slept in.

“Sherlock!”

That was never going to work. Snarling, he picked the path of least resistance and set off.

There were trees surrounding the campsite on all sides, perhaps two miles from the road. They’d picked the spot for how far off the beaten path it was, a decision John was now fiercely regretting.

“Sherlock!”

He stormed through the underbrush without noticing or caring what sort of a mess he was leaving. A blind idiot could find their campsite at this point, but John absolutely did not care. He swiped savagely at a sapling in his way.

For all that Sherlock did not know about surviving, he understood leaving a trail, and how not to. He didn’t know how to find food or set a trap or treat an infection, but he knew how to disappear.

John’s train of thought spun out into wild calculations based on a thousand half-remembered statistics and formulas from medical school and his basic training, mostly revolving around how long a man of Sherlock’s weight and health could survive without food. And that was without factoring in human interference. There were stories John heard when they stopped in towns, of men with lorries who paid for their keep by renting people. Worse, he’d heard of men who’d gone Donner Party and didn’t want to go back.

He’d joked once that Sherlock was probably safe from hungry cannibals and poked him in the side.
It made him sick to think of it now.

John’s foot caught on a root and he stumbled. He caught himself on a tree and straightened, breathing deeply in a fruitless effort to slow his hammering heartbeat.

“John,” Sherlock said.

John stopped cold and looked up.

Sherlock was sitting on a thick branch a few feet above eye level, knees pulled to his chest and coat wrapped around him. John couldn’t see his face, but from the set of his shoulders he didn’t think he needed to.

“Come down,” John said quietly.

Sherlock shook his head.

“Fine. Then I’m coming up.”

“You’re six inches shorter than I. You won’t make it. You’ll hurt yourself.”

“Then you’d better get down.”

Sherlock shook his head again.

“Fine.” John grasped the lowest branch of the tree with both hands and pulled himself up.

Sherlock realized his bluff had been called. He unfolded his long limbs, swung down from his perch, and leaned back against the tree, studying the ground. John hopped down and took him by the shoulders.

“Are you alright?”

Sherlock didn’t answer.

John gripped him a little more tightly and shook him once, just hard enough to snap his head up and his eyes open for an instant. “Are you alright?”

“Yes,” Sherlock said.

He didn’t look it. He looked sort of--wasted. Atrophied. John’s throat tightened.

“I’m sorry,” Sherlock whispered.

John wanted to hit him.

He wanted to shake him until his teeth chattered.

He wanted to tie him down and lock him up somewhere safe.

Instead, he tipped his head the few inches it took to press his face into Sherlock’s chest.

“God, Sherlock,” he choked out, “you promised.”

Sherlock was silent and still.

“You promised you wouldn’t die on me again. You fucking promised. I couldn’t--I couldn’t even
think, Sherlock. Shit. Shit. You can’t—-you fucking can’t ever do that to me again, you hear me? I will not survive it, you hear? It will kill me. Or I’ll want it to.”

He breathed deeply, trying to swallow the hysterics in his chest.

“I—I need you, you understand? And don’t you dare tell me otherwise, don’t you fucking dare. Don’t you tell me I’m lying. Look in my pack if you want proof. I’ve got not a damn thing on me that’s not strictly for survival, and I brought you. Make your deductions.”

John pushed his face harder into Sherlock’s chest. The wool was prickly against his skin, but he welcomed the distraction.

A minute passed, maybe more. John’s breathing evened out. He squeezed Sherlock’s shoulders.

Sherlock gently cupped John’s face in his hands and tipped it up. John’s heart pounded.

“I understand,” Sherlock said softly.

John thought to himself that that shouldn’t make him feel like maybe the world wasn’t ending after all. Sherlock’s hands on his face and Sherlock’s shoulders under his palms and Sherlock’s breath on his lips should not make him feel as if he is completely and totally safe for the first time in months.

They don’t quite, really. It’s not safety he’s feeling. It’s more like...belonging.

Sherlock’s thumb strokes over John’s cheekbone. John’s heart throbs.

“Breakfast?” Sherlock asks.

John laughs. “Yeah.”

He almost says it then. Almost asks Sherlock to not let go, to never let go, and says it over and over until his throat is dry and sore.

Instead, he pulls away and coughs. “Better get back to the tent.”

Sherlock blinks slowly and nods.

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The kids were first.

The younger one had been sniffling for ages. She slept next to her sister every night, so it was only a matter of time before it spread. By the time it did, the younger one was shaking with fever.

They split us up, separated the ones who looked sick from the rest of us, but of course that didn’t do much. Incubation periods and the like. It was too late at that point.

We didn’t see the little girl die, but we heard her sister screaming.

Sherlock was weirdly okay with all of it. Kind of excited, actually. I sort of--lost it at him a little, after the girl died.

All he’d say was, “They’re not burning the bodies.”

---
After that, John slept between Sherlock and the entrance and with one hand on him. Just in case.

Anyways, it was comforting, to feel Sherlock’s pulse beating slow and steady beneath his fingers. John remembered his mother once mentioning how she couldn’t go to bed unless she’d checked him and Harry and was sure they were breathing, and thought that he could understand that a little now.

But he lost Sherlock well before they took him anyway.

---

He showed me what to do, how to cough right, look like I had a fever. It wasn’t like they were checking very closely. They were afraid to touch us at all. It worked like a dream. They put us in with the others after two days.

The tricky bit was knowing how long to be sick. I was--really worried about that, actually. Thought they wouldn’t believe it and we’d get found out.

He said, “Don’t worry, I’ve died plenty of times.”

---

First, he stopped arguing.

John told him to fetch some water to put out the fire, and he did it without a single word. John grinned and made a joke about it taking the end of the world to get Sherlock to do housework, but Sherlock didn’t laugh. He merely crawled into his sleeping bag and curled in on himself.

John fought to quell the sense of panic in his chest.

Slowly, Sherlock stopped being Sherlock.

He started speaking less and less until one day, he said nothing at all. He responded to questions in one-word answers and obeyed John when he gave him a direct order. He ate, drank, slept, and used the toilet. Apart from that, he simply did...nothing.

It was horrifying.

John went from sleeping next to Sherlock to sleeping against him, wanting to press his lips to Sherlock’s and breathe strength back into his lungs and settling for rubbing up and down his arm until his fingers went numb.

“I’m scared, Sherlock,” he whispered to his friend as he slept. “Come back. Please. Come back.”

---

We waited two weeks before we figured it was time. Nobody else died that quickly, but it--we were-done.

He had this little vial. Wouldn’t tell me where he kept it and I figured I’d better not ask. Some kind of rhododendron derivative. He said he’d used it before.

Right before we both took it, I asked him why he was helping me, and none of the others. He said something about it being suspicious if he involved too many people, something about them not trusting him, and I told him to shut it, because that wasn’t what I was asking. I wanted to know why he was helping me.
He just said, “You saw.”

We took the drug.

It makes you cry like a baby, get a fuck-awful headache and then pass out. I woke up in a ditch on the side of the road, alone.

At first I panicked. Thought maybe he hadn’t made it out. But I got up and there was a note in my pocket.

Here, I’ve got it.

Mary,

Forgive me for taking my leave. I believe it will be safer for you if I do so. If absolutely necessary, I can be found in the town of Felchurch, about two miles from this spot. I recommend you move, and quickly.

Be well.

Sherlock Holmes

---

John was inside of a chemist’s, raiding the drugs. He left Sherlock out front to wait.

“Stay here.”

No response.

“Are you going to leave this spot before I come and get you?”

“No.”

“Are you going to leave this spot for anybody else?”

“No.”

John liked to phrase directions as questions, just to hear Sherlock respond. His voice was all wrong, but it was something.

They pulled up quickly. There was no rumbling of engines to serve as a warning, just the sudden screech of tires and men’s shouts. John dropped the bag of pills, vaulted over the counter and sprinted towards the door. Sherlock was fighting back viciously, but there were four of them, and they were armed. John reached for his gun.

“Look out!” someone screamed.

A gun fired. The side of John’s head lit up with pain. He crumpled backwards onto the ground.

Get up, he thought at himself fiercely, even as his vision darkened and his ears rang. Get up, get up, get UP--

When he woke up, he was concerned by the puddle of dried blood around his head and crusted in his hair. He was concerned about the depth of the bullet wound in the side of his head, which when all was said and done was just a graze. He was concerned about the likelihood of concussion and
shock and infection--thank God he was in a chemist’s.

But waking up alone, without his hand on Sherlock to feel his pulse? That utterly destroyed him.

---

There’s more you should know. I don’t think he’d want you to--he didn’t want me to--but--

I think he was sick.

He was coughing--not fake coughing, but the real kind, and sometimes there was...blood. He kept saying it was fine, but--I don’t know.

I don’t think he’s got much time, John.

---

Felchurch is a nice enough place to die, Sherlock thinks. Almost perfect.

It’s a small town, more of a village really, and completely abandoned. He’d held out a bit of hope that the chemist’s hadn’t been thoroughly raided, but when he got there the shelves had been emptied completely.

There was a bit of food, and the doors locked. That was good enough. And there was a chair on the porch where he could sit and think.

The thinking was brilliant. It had been ages, eons since he’d had anything to think on. There wasn’t much here, but there was enough. Like--protein bars for his intellectual malnourishment. He sits on the porch and reconstructed the lives and habits of the people who’d lived here before. Or should it be “Before,” with a capital B? It feels like it should. Sherlock resolves that it shall be.

Feeling substantially better, Sherlock opens his eyes. “John, we should--”

He stops short and shuts his mouth with a click.

Stupid. He scowls and pulls his blanket tighter around his shoulders. Stupid. He knows better.

All the same, his mouth shapes around a name, gives it to the wind.

Something sharp and painful is building in Sherlock’s throat. He coughs, and then coughs again, and again, until he’s bent double and can’t breathe. When it’s over, he spits red, gasps in a breath that catches in his throat and leans back into his chair with a wince. His head hurts, and his chest and his joints hurt and he’s fucking freezing even though he’s sweating through his clothes.

He is dying. He knows this. He is not even particularly upset about the fact, as he refuses to feel sentiment towards himself. He could die this very instant and almost not care. Almost.

But he does not die. Not yet.

He promised.
Want to See Some More?

John said he used to write a blog about the two of them. No more blogs these days, but I wanted to get their story down anyways. Journals will have to do.

Okay, a book. It’s handwritten, but it’s a book. By the time you take as many liberties as I have and go into third-person limited with shifting POV, you’ve crossed the line from memoir to novel.

Anyways, I wanted their last story told. It feels right, somehow. Necessary.

---

Mary is nice to have around. She sings as they travel, knows when to talk and when to be silent, and doesn’t mind when they walk through the night.

They share their nightmares. When John wakes up trying to grab for someone who isn’t there, Mary rolls over and lets him hold her. And when Mary wakes up screaming and fighting, John calls her name and doesn’t fight back until she quits swinging and goes limp and trembling.

It’s a mutually beneficial, symbiotic arrangement. And if John sometimes holds her and thinks of less wholesome sorts of closeness, he never lets on.

That’s an ugly road to go down anyways. After all, John doesn’t always dream of Sherlock dying.

---

*There are things I have never told you because I always assumed we had time.*

*There is no time left in the world anymore.*

---

There was a dead man lying facedown on the side of the road.

“Help me get the pack off,” Mary said.

The corpse was still in the late stages of rigor mortis, so there was some resistance as John pushed it up onto its knees and pried its arms away from its chest one at a time. Mary worked his pack off.

“He’s got something,” John noted. There was a long, thin wooden staff clenched in the corpse’s bony fingers.

“Get it. And check the pockets.” Mary dug through the pack. “Excellent. Hand sanitizer.”

“Keep it. We’ll wash up once we’re done with him. No knowing what he’s got.” John prized the cane from its fingers and set it aside. “Hollow. Huh.”

“No drugs, I’m afraid. And no food. Probably what killed it.”

John dug through the corpse’s pockets and came up with a small pouch. He opened it. “Darts.”

“Oh,” Mary breathed. “Oh, fuck me. It’s a blowgun. Dibs.”

“I’ve got a gun.”
“Yeah, and how many bullets? You can make blowgun darts an awful lot easier than you can cast bullets.” She plucked up the blowgun and sighted down it. “Would rather have a bow, but arrows are hard.”

“Easier than bullets.”

“Well, next time we find a corpse, make sure it’s got a bow and it’ll be yours.”

---

I didn’t fight them when they took me away. I’m sorry for that, but I’m not sorry that it brought me back to myself.

I wish it had happened earlier. Before.

I wanted to be like I was for you, but there wasn’t enough. I hadn’t the resources.

---

They set up a camp that night. John pitches the tent and builds a fire. Meanwhile, Mary carves a rough outline of a person into a tree with her knife and practices with the blowgun until she’s hitting it nine times out of ten.

“What’s dinner?” she asked. “Need a hand?”

“Didn’t get much from the dew trap this morning. Could use whatever you can get.”

“Can do.” She leans her blowgun against her makeshift target and grabs one of their water bottles. “If I find anything substantial I’ll come back for something bigger.”

“Keep within shouting distance,” he reminds, somewhat unnecessarily.

“Roger.”

She zips up her windbreaker and tramps off into the tree line.

John sighs heavily and prods at the fire with a long stick.

He’s trying not to count days. Which will give out first, his lungs or his brain?

Sherlock’s never had good lungs. Smoking, and before that, the drugs. John’s reasonably certain he preferred other methods of ingestion, but he can’t know for sure.

Damaged hypothalami, the biological thermostat. Fevers that spiral wildly out of control. Brain damage. Memory loss.

John stabs viciously at the embers. He needs to be angry. Anger would be good, might drown out the hot, tight feeling in his throat.

He’d always told himself it would be irresponsible. That he and Sherlock were compromised, that it would be the worst kind of unhealthy together. But in the present light, his excuses seem flimsy and lacking. They were always headed there anyway.

John had never told him.

Thinking of that makes his chest hurt, a burning, painful knot that coalesces in his throat. He tells him
every night now, as he crushes dark curls under his fingers and tastes the hollow at the base of his throat. In the morning he tries to forget it, but when it’s quiet he can’t. All that’s left of him is survival and Sherlock Holmes.

He squeezes his eyes shut and doesn’t say to the darkness, “I love you so much that being apart from you feels like bleeding out.”

He will say it later. When he finds him.

If he finds him.

“JOHN!”

The scream is cut short, but John’s already up on his feet, pulling his gun from the back of his waistband and sprinting into the woods. He has excellent night vision, but he was staring into the fire and it’s taking a moment to adjust. Mary screams again. There’s a loud crack. John blinks hard and now he can see, just shapes, three figures struggling in the darkness.

“Drop her!” he shouts.

John brings up his gun. The men don’t seem to hear him. One of them’s got Mary in a chokehold, arm round neck and hand on mouth, and the other’s trying to tie her ankles. She’s kicking and thrashing and screaming into the first man’s hand. Judging from his angry shout, she’s biting too.

John doesn’t have the bullets to fire a warning shot. He aims at the man holding Mary.

“Put her the fuck down!”

It’s useless. The man laughs, high and thin. His arm tightens around Mary’s neck. Her scream cuts off, eyes bulging out with panic.

John’s gun cracks. The man drops.

Mary gasps and rolls to the side, coughing. The other man howls a curse and grabs her by the hair. John is still weighing the likelihood that he’s got a knife and is about to slit her throat when Mary reaches into the back of her waistband and slashes up. She scrambles to her feet. The man tosses her long braid of hair aside with a curse and blunders after her again. Mary thrusts her knife home. The man makes a gurgling sort of scream and crumples.

Mary shakes out what’s left of her hair. She combs her fingers through it, feeling for where it stops, and makes a face.

“More practical,” she says, but she still sounds disappointed. “Give me a hand.” She kneels by the man she knifed and starts rifling through his pockets.

John bends to search the other man. There’s not much. A multitool, a few batteries (probably dead, but John’ll test them just in case), a pen, a tangled knot of twine. In his inside pocket he finds a wallet containing two pounds, a driver’s license belonging to Harold Bork, and a number of photographs. In pride of place is one showing a smiling blond man in a suit with his arm around a plump lady in a floral housedress. Seated around them are about a dozen children. Two are black--definitely adopted, John thinks. One is in a wheelchair. The youngest is an infant in the arms of a skinny teenager who’s grinning widely despite his extensive dental braces. John looks back down at the body, at the neat red hole in his head. His mouth has fallen open. Even in the darkness, John can see stainless steel wires glinting on the dead boy’s teeth.
He drops the wallet.

Mary whistles. “I’ll be damned.” She holds up a plastic baggie of pills. The label on it is partially faded, but it’s still readable as “DEXEDRINE.”


“Like Adderall?”

John nods. “Takes a hell of a lot to make a man...like that, though.”

Mary holds up another baggie, and another. “They had help.”

John’s head feels suddenly light. He hasn’t seen anything stronger than a paracetamol in months. He’d had more once, but by now it was all bartered, stolen or used up.

If these boys could get ahold of that substantial an amount of a Class B substance...

“What else have they got?”

---

I didn’t fight when they raped me either, until I thought of your face if you knew.

Later, when I had to stop fighting, I tried to think of you instead of them, and that made it bearable.

I imagined how you would be.

Gentle.

Sure.

You would ask how it was for me and if it was good, and it would be. You’re good, always good.

---

There are varying quantities of other amphetamines in addition to opioids, benzodiazepines, barbiturates and miscellaneous stimulants. An addict’s Christmas stocking.

Useless. He’d throw the lot out if it weren’t worth a fortune.

Anyway, there are thirty-four grams of pentobarbital, and he’s got some prochlorperazine left. John thinks of what the right to die groups call mixtura nontherapeutica pentobarbitali, a 100-milliliter cocktail of sugar, ethanol and Nembutal preceded by an antiemetic.

He’s been surviving a long time. He likes to know how to stop, if the situation requires.

---

I am trying to wait for you.

It’s more difficult than anticipated. The waiting. And the breathing. I was wrong before; it’s not boring at all. At least, it isn’t now.

I need you.

---
When they emerge from the woods the next morning, there is a sign by the side of the road reading “Felchurch: 32.”

“We can make that by noon,” Mary says.

John nods tightly. “Yeah.”

He has until noon.

He’s got to.

---

I doubt that I will write again. It is ever more difficult.

If you are too late, know that I am sorry.

It’s alright.

Live, John.

---

Felchurch is a small town, and entirely abandoned, and much too fucking big for John’s liking. He grinds his teeth together in frustration. It isn’t fair that he can be this close and still not close enough. He wants to kill something, just on the off-chance that it’ll get the jittery feeling out of his chest and head.

“Sherlock!” he shouts, and doesn’t care if anyone hears. He will shoot them, he absolutely will.

“He’d leave you some kind of mark, wouldn’t he?” Mary says. Her hand flutters up like she’s considering putting it on John’s shoulder, before she reconsider and rests it on the strap of her pack.

John nods tersely.

“What exactly--”

John halts cold. Mary’s question is drowned into silence by the sudden roar in John’s head.

Scratched into the front step of a little run-down townhouse, faded but visible, is a smiley face, with X’s for eyes.

---

You were the only thing worth being selfless for.

---

John is running up the stairs before he can explain. Mary follows without question. He should thank her for that--later, later, when everything is--

He shoulders the door open. “Look upstairs,” he snaps, though he doubts it’ll come to anything.

Then he hears something, barely audible, but the town is so quiet otherwise that it’s a tiny red flag that makes John’s blood run cold. It isn’t a name, or even a word at all. Just a short, strained gasp. Just enough.
“Down the hall,” he says. He doesn’t recognize his voice.

*Please. Oh, God, please.*

He stumbles into the room and takes it in.

“Sherlock,” he whispers, and falls to his knees beside the bed.

Sherlock’s eyes are hazy, but he blinks in acknowledgment and smiles.

“John.”
Enough for a Lifetime

Sherlock is cold.

He is cold, and he’s sticky with sweat. His entire body hurts, but his head and his chest and throat ache so terribly he could positively tear them out. When he inhales, it’s shallow and unsatisfying and strained, and sometimes it catches in his throat halfway down and turns into a coughing fit that leaves him gasping. When he exhales, it’s loud and painful and tinged with the ever-present fear that he’s releasing his last breath.

But all of this is eased by the warm hand on his, and the knowledge that if he falls asleep, it will be there when he wakes up.

---

Mary is in the kitchen, purifying all the water they’ve got on the propane stove. John is taking Sherlock’s vitals. He’s still got his stethoscope and an old-fashioned mercury thermometer that doesn’t need batteries. They’ll have to do. He’d kill for a proper lab, but they’re in rather short supply lately.

Temperature: 39.4, heart rate: 112, respiratory rate: 32 and much too fucking shallow. John swallows hard. Sherlock was shivering violently when they came in, but he’s stiller now. John’s been through that particular cycle of fever and chills a few times and can remember all too clearly how abjectly miserable it is.

He realizes he’s let his hand rest by Sherlock’s head. His thumb is stroking absently over a damp curl on the pillow. He pulls it back and busies it with getting out the bag of drugs in his pack.

“Tell me, Doctor,” Sherlock rasps. “Is it serious?”

John laughs. Not because anything’s funny, but because what he really wants is to clutch Sherlock close and weep.

He holds up two paracetamol tablets. “Take these and call me in the morning.”

Sherlock grins and tries to take the pills from John’s hand, but his fingers slip and he knocks them onto the bed. He grimaces.

“Would you mind…”

Wordlessly, John plucks the pills up and drops them into Sherlock’s open mouth. He tips his head up and presses a water bottle to his lips. Sherlock swallows with an audible gulp.

“You have my everlasting gratitude,” Sherlock says with a sigh, settling back onto the pillow.

John grimaces.

“Got a decent liter of water cleaned,” Mary says, “and an extra-special surprise. The fridge is hooked up to a gas-powered generator, and by some miracle there’s still fuel. Couple cans of petrol too.”

“Fantastic. Put some of the water in the freezer. We could use the ice.”

Sherlock rolls his head sideways. “Ah. Mary. Pleased, as always.”
She smiles. “Nice to see you lucid and chatty.”

That hurts John and he’s not quite sure why. Then he remembers Sherlock on a case, the kind that made his eyes light up and his face draw tight with concentration, and how once he got on a roll you couldn’t make him shut up for love or money, and he has to choke down the impulse to reach out and stroke his hair again.

“Lucid here being a relative concept,” says Sherlock.

Mary chuckles. “Yeah, well, you know. Talking. Talking sense, even. All of the time. Huge improvement.”

Sherlock rolls his eyes. “However have I survived without your approval?”

Mary makes a face at him. “Watch it, Holmes. I’ll smother you in your sleep if you’re rude.”

He lets the petty threat slide and narrows his eyes to look her over. “You’re...well,” he says.

Mary soberes. “Yeah,” she says quietly.

Sherlock nods. Mary nods back.

“I’m going to make a metric fuckton of ice,” she says, and shuts the door on her way out.

---

Mary has put on at least three pounds of muscle since Sherlock first saw her, which is no mean feat in these circumstances. She’s lost the slack-faced look of a broken woman. She’s more alert, more...deadly-looking. Sherlock wonders if it was a latent quality that had been diluted by fear and self-doubt or if it had to be learned. He can respect it either way. Some people were always prepared for the end of the world. Some people learned to be.

Others...

“Get up,” she says, tapping him on the shoulder. “You’re taking a bath.”

“No thank you.”

“Uh-uh. I made you a lovely bath and you’re going to take it.”

She gets an arm under his and hauls him to a sitting position. He coughs, swallows back a coughing fit with sheer force of will, tries to lurch to his feet and immediately falls back onto the bed.

“Hell,” he says, staring at the ceiling.

“I'll get John,” Mary threatens. “Interrupt his dinner and everything.”

Sherlock grits his teeth and tries again. Mary takes more of his weight this time. He wobbles a moment, but stays upright. They’re able to make it into the bathroom with the assistance of the wall.

“How’s it going?” says John from behind them.

“Finish your dinner,” Mary says.

“Finished. Let me--”
“With your fat ass in the mix, we’ll never fit through the door. We’re okay.”

Sherlock feels a small, steady hand settle on his back all the same. It doesn’t support him, but it’s encouraging.

There’s no point stripping off his pants, so he doesn’t bother. He hisses in a sharp breath as he steps in.

“Cold.”

“Pretend it’s Titanic,” Mary says. “You’re the king of the world.”

“He’s never seen Titanic.”

“Of course he hasn’t.”

The banter is helpful. Distracting. It keeps Sherlock’s mind from the mind-numbing cold he’s sinking down into, over hips, waist, stomach, ribs. He knows it’s only lukewarm, really, about room temperature, but it feels like it’s fucking freezing.

When he’s submerged up to his armpits, he settles back and rests his arms on the rim of the bathtub. He’s shivering, but as the shock dulls he can appreciate the promise of relief.

“I’m going to eat dinner,” Mary says. “Never let go, Jack.”

John half-smiles.

Sherlock hugs his arms over his chest and shivers. “Not that I’m c-complaining,” he says, teeth chattering, “but wouldn’t ice…”

“Lowers your temperature too quickly,” John says. “You shiver, it ends up even higher than before.”

“I’m shivering now.”

“It could be worse.”

Sherlock raises an eyebrow. “Tempting fate, isn’t that?”

John laughs. Then he stops, like he’s caught himself, and rubs a hand over his face. He sits down on the toilet seat and leans forward, bracing his knees against his elbows.

Sherlock blinks slowly at him, absorbing the tired lines around his eyes and forehead, and feels suddenly, crushingly guilty.

This wasn’t meant to happen, he thinks. I was never meant to hurt him this badly.

“John,” Sherlock says.

John raises his head. His face is inscrutable. “Sherlock?”

If I can’t live with you, I’m glad I can at least die with you.

“Thank you,” he says.

---

There is a storm that night.
Storms these days aren’t the old dreary two-day downpour that besieged London every October. They come without warning and with devastating force before dissipating in minutes, leaving little rivers in the streets and smoking trees in their wake.

John jerks awake at the first loud thunderclap. Realizing there’s no getting back to sleep in this, he throws off his blanket, sits up and stretches. Mary had talked him onto the sofa and taken the floor for herself. She had cited concerns about the questionable state of the upholstery, but John suspects her real motivations have to do with the distinct stiffness he’s getting in his shoulder.

Her bedroll’s empty, though. She’s sitting in the doorway to the bedroom, leaned against the doorframe with a notebook and pen.

“Couldn’t sleep?” she says without looking up. “I’ll be up to watch if you want to use the earplugs.”

“No, I’m--what are you doing up?”

She shrugs. “Breathing.”

John almost smiles. “Good choice. Recommended by nine out of ten physicians.”

Mary squints out the window. “I think I might sit on the porch for a bit.”

John raises an eyebrow. Mary grins.

“You’re insane.”

“The rain can only improve my smell,” she says dourly. She tucks the notebook under her bedroll on her way outside and takes her blowgun from by the door.

In the next room, John can hear labored breathing. His stomach twists with concern. He climbs to his feet.

Sherlock, on the rare occasion that he slept, had always been a heavy sleeper. That, blessedly, seems unchanged. When John creeps in and perches on the side of the bed, Sherlock is still fast asleep, his chest rising and falling with strained, uneven breaths and his whole body faintly quivering.

*Fever’s not broken, then.* John cautiously touches the back of his hand to Sherlock’s forehead.

By some terrible luck, his hand makes contact at the exact same moment that a bolt of lightning cracks loudly enough that even John jumps. Sherlock wakes in an instant. He grabs hold of John’s arm, eyes wide with confusion and panic.

“Sherlock, it’s me!”

There’s another roll of thunder followed by a flash of lightning that washes the room in stark white, and for a brief moment John can see Sherlock’s face as he must have been when he fought back: wild-eyed, lips curling back in a snarl and baring tightly-clenched teeth.

“*Sherlock!*”

Sherlock must see something in John’s face too, familiar enough to give him pause. His grip on John’s arm eases.

“There you go,” he says, voice calming. “That’s it.”

Sherlock falls limply back with a sigh. His eyes drift half shut. For a moment, John thinks he’s gone
“Apologies,” he says. His voice is really nothing like it should be. It’s too hoarse and cracked, when it should be deep and rich like dark chocolate.

John squeezes his shoulder. “I’ll--let you be. You should get some sleep.”


John’s heart pounds. “Are you--”

Sherlock nods. “Please.” He rolls onto his side to make room.

John climbs into the bed. It’s not large. There’s only the barest distance separating his front from Sherlock’s back. He shuts his eyes and breathes deeply.

From this distance, he is hyper-aware of the little signals that all is not well. Sherlock’s much too warm, for instance. John shouldn’t be able to feel that much body heat from this far. He can hear Sherlock’s harsh breathing and detect the fine trembling that indicates he’s about to go through another spell of chills.

“You can sleep,” Sherlock says.

“Okay,” says John.

“You’re humoring me.”

“Yeah,” says John. Then he grins, wide as the Cheshire Cat, because that tone of dignified disdain? It’s one hundred percent Old Sherlock, the same tone in which he pronounced “idiot” and “obvious” and “boring.” And God, but he’s missed it.

Sherlock’s jaw clicks. He’s shivering hard enough for his teeth to chatter. “G-God it’s cold,” he stammers.

John closes the gap between them, presses his body flush against Sherlock’s, wraps his arms around him and pulls him in tightly. Sherlock balls the blanket in his hands and stuffs it up under his chin.


Sherlock’s breathing in sharp little rasps through his nose. His jaw is clenched shut and he’s curling into fetal position. (Instinctive bodily reaction--the system hoodwinked into believing it’s going into hypothermia, makes all effort to raise a core temperature that’s spiraling out of control.) John curls with him, wrapping himself around Sherlock, aiding his body’s futile attempts at self-preservation.

“I wrote to you,” Sherlock says, when he can safely unclench his jaw. He’s still shivering a bit, little tremors quivering through his muscles. “Letters. For--after.”

John’s not sure if it’s the storm setting his nerves on edge, or the concern that Sherlock is literally dying beneath his hands, or just that he’s fucking tired of this goddamn dance they’ve been doing since the day they met, but he opens his mouth.

“What if I don’t want to wait?”

Against his chest, Sherlock has gone suddenly, deliberately still.
John doesn’t give himself time to regret and charges on. “Jesus, Sherlock, if there’s one good thing that’s come of all of this, it’s that we know there is no time to wait for the ‘right moment’ anymore. There is never going to be a right moment.” He grits his teeth a moment, steeling himself. “How long have we been waiting now? Since they took you? Since the end? Since the hospital? I--I can’t wait, Sherlock. And maybe you don’t want me to read those letters until--later. Fine.” He shuts his eyes and winces. “But--don’t try to make me keep pretending we don’t feel the way we do. I can’t. I’m not watching you die without you knowing I need you like air. I’m not.”

There is a long silence, broken only by the sound of Sherlock’s strained breaths and John’s heart hammering in his ears.

“I’ve buggered it. Scared him off. He’ll try to spare me, do some stupid, noble thing, like cats curling up under porches to die alone.

“When you shot the cabbie,” Sherlock says at last.

John blinks. “What?”

“When you shot the cabbie, and said I was an idiot. That was when.”

John feels as if Sherlock is not the only one having trouble breathing. He wants to say something, but doesn’t quite feel capable of words. So he just says, “Oh.”

“The--rest, when we were at the swimming pool. I had the gun on Moriarty, and I looked at you to make absolutely sure you were alright with what I was about to do next, and you nodded, and I could not stop thinking that I was going to die without telling this man that he was the most singularly extraordinary person I had ever had the fortune of knowing. Then I--after that, I--I understood why people kill themselves in the name of unrequited love.”

Something hot and tight and suffocating is gathering in the base of John’s throat, or at the top of his chest. He bites his lip.

“I almost said it when--on the rooftop. But that wasn’t--the time. I couldn’t leave you with that when I knew I’d be coming back, couldn’t drop the words and disappear. I knew if I--if I said it, that our lives would be inexorably bound.” He pauses for a long moment. John almost thinks he’s finished, but then he goes on. “Then I was back, and you were angry, and we were...different. I kept telling myself that a time would come.” He coughs, just once, and then takes a long, slow, steady breath. “But then…”

“The end.”

Sherlock nods. “And there was no more time.”

John blinks hard. He realizes there are tears in his eyes. He wonders if Sherlock is crying too. All of a sudden, he wants very badly to see Sherlock’s face, and says as much.

“Sherlock will you--turn over. I want--please.”

It’s stilted, but the message gets across. Sherlock turns over.

What do you know? He is.

John touches his cheek, wiping a tear away with his fingertip. “I’m sorry.”

Sherlock shakes his head. “No.”
“Sherlock, I--”

“No. You, of all the people I have ever known, have nothing to apologize for.”

John’s face twists. “No? Not letting you go half-mad in those days after the end? Not letting—those people take you? Not ever saying--”

Then Sherlock is kissing him, and John isn’t even thinking anymore, because Sherlock’s hand (God, it’s still trembling, still) is on his face, parting John’s lips so Sherlock can lick into John’s mouth. John opens gladly. Sherlock tastes of blood and heat and so very little of what John knew he should taste of that it makes him sob. Sherlock swallows it down with a little sigh and fists one hand in the front of John’s shirt. It’s so good, God, so very, very good and John doesn’t want it to end ever, but then Sherlock tries to gasp and it catches in his chest and he has to twist away and to the side to cough helplessly into his shoulder.

John would talk him through it, soothing little doctor phrases and murmured encouragements. But he doesn’t trust his voice to get past the hysterics in his throat, so he just buries his head in Sherlock’s shoulder and strokes his hair.

When the coughing fit passes, Sherlock sags back down into John with a little sigh and closes his eyes.

“It’s not fair,” he says quietly.


John holds him until he falls asleep, just as the storm is passing, and then whispers to him in the darkness until his voice gives out.

John presses his ear against Sherlock’s chest. He listens to the slow rasp of his respiration, accompanied by the quick thump-thump of his heartbeat. He imagines every cell in Sherlock’s body, alight with the words John has whispered to them, humming with energy and purpose. John shuts his eyes.

The dawn light through the window falling across his face wakes him. He pets his hand down Sherlock’s side and smiles.

“John.”

It’s Mary. John opens his eyes.

Mary is standing on the other side of the bed, her hand over her mouth and her eyes wide and shining.

“God, John, I--I’m so sorry,” she whispers.

---

We buried him under the tree in the front yard. There’s a marker. It’s just his name and a note from John. I haven’t read it.

John doesn’t talk much, but I get the feeling he’s tired of running. Can’t hardly blame him.

We’re thinking about staying here, maybe trying to find others and settle. People aren’t meant to live like we’ve been living. It’s time we stopped.
I don’t know what I’ll do with this, or why I wrote it down. Maybe it’s because stories are important, the telling of them and the hearing. They make us feel and remember. Maybe it’s because they just help us think the world through. Maybe it’s just because sometimes we need to live someone else’s life to get us out of our own. I don’t know for sure.

In any case, I want to know that this story is told and keeps being told. It’s not really mine anymore, not after the changes I’ve made. Hell, it’s barely even true. But the basics are real, and the people are real, so the story is too.

So now you’re finished, give it to someone else. Keep it going. Tell the stories. They’re what we have.

---

You were the best and wisest man I ever knew.

J.H.W.

---

John is sitting on the front porch, shelling peas. Mary watches him from the doorway.

“Almost done? I’ll need to put them on soon if we’re going to eat them at the same time as the beans.”

John sets down the basket and stares at the poplar tree in the yard. It’s starting to bloom. It will be spring in earnest soon.

“I read the story,” he says.

Mary doesn’t say a word. She kneels down behind him, winds her arms around his chest and hugs him tightly.

“What do you think...” he starts, and then stops to swallow. “Do you think it would’ve...if we’d...” He stops and swallows again. “If we’d made it in time?”

Mary shuts her eyes.

She thinks back to finding the house, to John breaking the door down, of the wild hunt through the house and the gasps that led them to the downstairs bedroom. She thinks of the small, wrecked sound John made as he fell to his knees beside the bed and took Sherlock’s hand, and the devastation in Sherlock’s face as he turned his head and looked into John’s eyes as he struggled to speak words he never managed to say.

“It could have been,” she says. It’s not a lie.

John’s hand goes to his pocket, where Mary knows he keeps the seven notes that were neatly laid out on the bedside table next to him.

She doesn’t tell him that Sherlock knew. Most of all, she does not tell him that in the end, that extra day and the night and the storm and the kiss would have only been formalities, a coda to a long life of unspoken words that resolves but does not satisfy.

Instead, she holds him until the kettle inside whistles, and then they take themselves inside and eat their dinner. After sunset, they go to bed.
There is more to do in the morning.

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